

Historical Background of Yoga (Vedic, Medieval and Modern)

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Abstract—Shri Shri Ravi Shankar says, “Yoga is not just exercise and asans. It is the emotional integration and spiritual elevation with a touch of mystic element, which gives you a glimpse of something beyond all imagination.

As per yogic scriptures, practicing yoga leads to union of individual consciousness with that of universal consciousness, indicating a perfect harmony between the mind and body, man and nature. Historical evidences of the existence of yoga can be seen in VEDIC PERIOD (2700 B.C.)-till Patanjali’s period. We can get information about yoga practices and their literature from – Vedas, Upanishads, and Smritis, teaching of Buddhism, Jainism, Panini, Epics and Puranas. SHIV is seen as the first yogi or Adiyogi in the yogic core.

In Medieval Period there was enrichment of many satellite traditions of yoga and Hatha yoga was one amongst them. Hatha yogis in medieval time thought of yoga as a practice of becoming god like or god’s equal while in your body either by alchemical means or by practicing yoga. The ideals of meditation espoused by Buddha during 15th century considered good by many yogis but at the same time they also felt that there is a need for focusing more on preparatory practicing such as working on physical body and on breath. Yoga as we know today saw revival throughout India. Bhakti yoga was also practiced in medieval India by adept such as Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Literature of medieval period was dominated by Tantras. Tantras has the origins of most of Hatha- yoga Pradipika, Gheranda Samhita and Siva.

The history of modern yoga is thought to begin with Parliament of Religions held in Chicago 1893. Elizabeth De Michelis says ‘yoga is compared to building to understand it is to be able to describe its architecture.’ Yoga is now not only related to its performing arena but also the class modern day complexities. It is an important living tradition which takes over boundary between the religions intersection and secularism. Yoga practice has transcended the difference of language

dichotomy, philosophical and theological issues by connecting the soul to the body.

1. VEDIC PERIOD

Yoga is as old as the Universe, for it is both the Path and the Goal. The Goal is realization of the innate nature of the Universe. We can describe its essence by the Highest Being which are—*Atma*, *PURUSHA*, Shiva, Devi, Sat. In Yoga, that highest being is *PURUSHA* and the manifestation of that spirit in the world of matter is called *PRAKRITHI*. In this manifested world, or *PRAKRITHI*, the *JIVA*, individual soul, returns to *PARAMATMA* or the Universal Soul. Therefore, *PURUSHA* & *PRAKRITHI*, are one and the same: *PURUSHA* is the Goal and *PRAKRITHI*, the path to that Goal.

Yoga is derived from a Sanskrit word ‘*YUJ*’, which means to join together, to integrate, therefore, Yoga can be correctly said as union or reunion. As Upanishads says, ‘that which was one became the many’. Therefore in this cosmic drama, the sense of *Dwaitam*, the sense of separateness rose and from this *Dwaitam* or duality (two-ness) rose *Bhayam*, that is fear and as Upanishads says, ‘where there are two, there is fear’ and therefore this far which is the root cause of all the man’s sufferings rises from sense of separateness. This fear can be removed when we achieve highest sense of oneness. The sages call this *Moksha*, which is *REUNION* and this is the true goal of yoga.

1.1 ORIGIN OF VEDAS

According to Hindu Tradition, Vedas are as old as 10,000 years, but their originality is lost in antiquity. Vedas were ancient hymns, which were originally sung and are not

put in written form. They were sung by the Rishis who lived ascetic lives in hermitages. The word yoga was occasionally used in reference to homas and fire ceremonies, in this Vedic Period. The performance of Homa was done by sages who used to sit immobile for days, weeks and months in *Asanas*, straight and still sitting position of body. They used to chant Mantras which require breath control (*Prayanama*). The senses had to be controlled and therefore this ritualistic accuracy and purity required *Dharna* (concentration). Therefore without formalizing the potential aspects of Yoga, it was part and parcel of yoga of Vedic seer's of life.

The word YOGA has its appearance in Vedas. Dr. K.H. Kumar Kaul, author of 'Yoga in the Hindu Scriptures', has given us significance of yoga in different Veda we had. According to him in the Rig Veda, the Rishis advice to follow the path of yoga to the aspirant for obtaining energy from 'DIVINE PERSON'. In Yajur Veda, reference like 'Yajita man...' of Rig Veda is found which puts emphasis on mental yoga. In Atharveda, the reference is found to Paraná (the vital energy of universe) and Chakras (8 chakras in pranic body and mine apertures' in the body).

***"Astachara navdara drvanam pruayodhya tasyam
hiranyayuh kosha o kosha svargo jyotisavrth"***

Pranvidya (science of prana) is referred in Atharveda which says that Paraná is the essence of Universe . In Atharveda, significance of practice of Yoga has been given. Therefore, all four Vedic Samhitas refer directly or indirectly to Yoga System or Yoga Tradition.

THE WRITTEN TRADITION The written traditions like RAMAYANA, MAHABHARTA are considered as 'practical yoga manual' or 'yogic allegory' of Hindu Literature showing mankind how to live in spiritual life. BHAGVAD GITA which is embedded within Mahabharata is the ultimate text book of Yoga. It has eighteen chapters and discourses between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, the proper 'Yoga Bhava' or 'Yoga attitude' towards human sufferings and crisis is given. The famous yogic concepts of Gita include "Yoga Karmasu kaushaam" (yoga is still in action) and "Yoga Uchayati Samatva" (yoga is equal mindedness in all circumstances). The concepts such as *Karma Yoga* , *Bhakti Yoga*, *Janana Yoga*, *DHYANA Yoga* which were very much part of Hindu culture from Vedic times were

codified and elaborated in systematic way for the first time in Bhagwat Gita. The emphasis was given on Viveka or discrimination or Vairagya or detachment. No practical instruction was given at that time to sit straight with head and neck erect. Even the word ASANA was only used to refer "seat" where yogi would sit and meditate.

Maharishi Ved Vyasa in his magus opus, the Bhagwat Gita gives the concept of Yoga as an attitude towards living could embrace the entire spectrum of man's existence. The contents of Gita dialogue are described as Brahma Vidya (science of ultimate reality, Para Vidya (spirituality), Yoga Sastra (Treatise on yoga practice), each chapter is referred to in the same colophon as describing a particular yoga or more correctly, a yogic path. Yoga is generally to mean a state of union or integration or coherence that is union or merger of human consciousness with cosmic or divine consciousness or complete integration of physical, mental, intellectual and transcendental aspects of individual or human personality.

It is reasonably obvious that the yoga tradition or the meditative practices associated with the advanced stages of yogic discipline were very established in India long before. The excavation of seals portraying deities in meditative posture in the sites at Mohenjo-Daro and Indus Valley Civilization period strongly suggest that Yoga tradition is not only 4,000 years old but have had its place in Indian society well before the Vedic period.

2. MEDIEVAL PERIOD

During 15th century, as many yogis felt that the ideals of meditation espoused by Buddha were good, they also felt the need for preparatory practices such as working on physical body, on breath. And thus, "*HATHA YOGA PRADIPIKA*" written by Swami Swatmarama became an influential text .Many people thought that the practice of yoga is restricted to *Hatha yoga* and *Asanas* or postures only where as in Yogasutra, only three sutras were dedicated to *Asanas*. Fundamentally *Hatha yoga* is a preparatory practices by which body sustain higher level of energy. This preparatory process begins with the body and then breath and then mind and then the inner self.

Hatha yogis in medieval India believed that yoga was about becoming god like or god's equal while remain in body -either by Alchemical means or by *Hatha yoga*

practices which we recognized today as breath work/Pranayam and physical postures/*Asanas*. Around 8th century in Buddhist text, *Hatha yoga* appeared and it emerged from "Tantra". it is commonly known as "Psychophysical yoga" which is a combination of bodily postures ,breathing and meditation. These postures in *Hatha yoga* referred as *Asanas*-which in today's time in their English term known as -cat pose, and warrior 1 pose.

There were different schools or forms of yoga which emerged during medieval era. Some of the important one's are –Bhakti yoga, Karma yoga, Jnana yoga, Hatha yoga.

BHAKTI YOGA- In Sanskrit, Bhakti means devotion. It is particularly taken as the easiest form of yoga-the yoga of the laity. Bhakti yoga seems to spring from the experiences of human insufficiency which accompanied by a belief in the omnipotence of a higher power. A Bhakti yogin is a person whose mind is turned away from the path of achievement and the one who knows that the real happiness is the outcome of a complete merger of his sense of individuality into the supreme reality.

KARMA YOGA-It is argued that the individual is not bound by an act itself rather it's the intention or the attitude which involved in performing act that has the binding effect. Thus, karma yogin expected to look equally at the failure of what he does.

JNANA YOGA-unlike Bhakti yoga and karma yoga, Jnana yoga believed to be yoga of few which followed by men of superior abilities and intellect. In Sanskrita, Jnana means knowledge. It concerned with knowledge that liberates an individual from ignorance and sufferings. Jnana yoga based upon the fact that mind which has been purified by clearing out all impurities like desires, cravings, passions, fears, etc. is capable to understand the real nature of things including self.

HATHA YOGA-this word, technically indicates a union of what are called the sun and the moon in our body. According to traditional texts the moon is situated in a region between the hard palate and the basal portion of brain whereas the sun situated at a region near naval and which was supposed to swallow up the fluid that exudes by moon. And it is because of this swallowing up of this elixir by sun that we are believed to suffer from old age and death. The way to tackle both

the sun and the moon in our body is Hatha yoga. But unfortunately the modern scientific approach gave no explanation about these two concepts.

Maharishi Patanjali, in his famous work THE (YOGA SUTRA) gave first complete, detailed, technical presentation of practical yoga as SCIENCE OF SPIRITUALITY. Yoga sutra believed to be at least 2500 years old, around 600 BC to 800 BC. Maharishi Patanjali's The Yoga Sutra became the most authentic scripture which explains the principles of ASHTANG YOGA. The Yoga Sutra constitutes 196 Sutra which covered entire gamut of Yogic spiritual life in relation logical fashion. It can be divided into four chapters-

**(a) SAMADHI PADA, (b) SADHNA PADA,
(c) VIBHUTI PAD, (d) KAIVALYA PADA.**

Yoga sutra gave us an analysis about the problems that are inherent in "human condition" and which shows how man rise above the contradictions in his nature. Maharishi Patanjali in his book 'YOGA SUTRA' enumerates eight stages of yoga-

- (1) *YAMA*-morality,
- (2) *NIYAMA*-disciplined,
- (3) *ASANAS*-physical exercise,
- (4) *PRANAYAMA*-breath control,
- (5) *PRATYAHARA*-detachment,
- (6) *DHARANA*-concentration,
- (7) *DHYANA*-meditation,
- (8) *SAMADHI*-self realization.

Literature of medieval periods was dominated by Tantras. Tantra was a genre which appeared around 5th century. It emerged in medieval Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu traditions and some most important texts are *Hatha yoga Pradipika*, the *Gheranda Samhita*, *Shiva Samhita*, and *Goraksasatakam*. These scriptures were commonly known as "*Hatha yoga* Scriptures".

GORAKSASATAKAM- This scripture constitute 100 verses and was composed by rishi Goraksha. He represents Natha School and preached "SAMARADHA". Goraksasatakam describes how the limbs may be achieved. According to Rishi Goraksha there were 84 lakh of *Asanas* among them *SIDDHASANA* and *KAMALASANA* are important. He called yoga as "SHASTANGA" or limbs.

The SHIV SAMHITA- According to this scripture, the particular forms of each living creature is an '*ASANAS*'. As in his cosmic dance, lord Shiva, holds still for a moment creating 84 lakhs of species. And thus, Shiva enumerates 84 important *Asanas*.

THE GHERANDA SAMHITA- It is in the form of dialogue between the preceptor Gheranda and the disciple, Chandakpali. As the Indian spirituality based upon the negation of Ahamkara, the greatest works of art in temple, scriptures and author is not known. Gheranda Samhita embrace all of them. Unlike Maharishi Patanjali who called yoga as ASHTANG or Rishi Goraksha who calls yoga as SHASTANGA rishi Gheranda enunciate 'seven limbs of yoga which he called yoga.

HATHA YOGA PRADIPIKA- It was written by Swami Swatmarama Suri about 500-700 years ago. *Hatha yoga* pradipeka even in contemporary times considered as source book of instruction by many yoga teacher. It is divided into 4 chapters –

- (1) *ASANAS*,
- (2) *PRANAYAMA*,
- (3) *MUDRAS*,
- (4) *SAMADHI*.

It appears to give quite detailed explanations about *Asanas*, mudras, *PRANAYAMA*, and dhyana but in reality it forced the aspirants not to rely on text and to seek guidance of a yoga master.

3. MODERN PERIOD

The concept of Yoga as a way of life is understood in multiple ways by various people. Is it something that helps you to improve your mental strength and physical strength or is it a practice with which you can help others around you? Or is it entirely something else? Let's try to find the answers to such curiosities.

3.1 Yoga and You

If we look back to the history we know that the practice of yoga originated hundreds of years ago in this world. We also know that it allows us to push pause on our chaotic lives. Yoga is a way to balance your mind and body. Many have even found a better connect with the environment, thus gaining higher clarity with those around them.

Yoga is an ever changing entity where each teacher and student respectively teaches and learns it differently. Let us see why.

3.2 History of Modern Yoga

Very few know the fact that ancient and modern yoga are not identical or similar in practice anymore. Modern yoga is comparably the shorter version of the ancient, pure practice. Hundreds of years ago, ascetics used yoga to improve their physical and spiritual strength but with their focus on the divine power as their final goal. The physical aspect was just a smaller part of this vast subject.

In the 1900s Modern yoga originated with 'Hatha Yoga' as its base. *Hatha yoga* is one of the eight branches that focus primarily on *Asanas*. People like Swami Vivekananda and Krishnamacharya who were historically significant played a role in introducing yoga to others. Swami Vivekananda taught spirituality through yoga and Krishnamacharya encouraged building physical strength and endurance.

With a passage of time, yoga transformed into the present day modern style yoga. Modern yoga is associated with western gymnastics and has no link to divinity like before.

3.3 Importance of Yoga in Modern Life

Despite the changes, the benefits of modern yoga are unchallenged. Yoga plays an important role in our lives in numerous ways.

Yoga,

- It Connects you with your true emotions
- It enables you understand your inner self
- Brings happiness in a hectic life
- Improves flexibility, strength, endurance
- It helps in Reducing stress
- It's a way of being fit in the modern era
- It helps in reducing weight

One cannot ignore the fact that the practice of yoga in our day-day life brings enormous amount of positivity.

3.4 Relevance in Modern Life

In the modern world yoga, is an art, which is changing continually. The *Asanas* that balances our mind and bodies tackle the modern issues at the root level. Do you have any health issues? Yoga can gradually make you feel better. Are you obese? You can lose weight by practicing yoga consistently. Are you stressed? Yoga is the solution. Different types of yoga targets specific problems. The meditational version brings out ones spirituality from within. Then there is the physical yoga

that is much preferable than any gym routine these days for being fit.

Modern lifestyle has increased many options in our life but gives us very less satisfaction. To restore our energy in this technological and hectic life, yoga is accessible to all of us through videos, books, yoga gurus etc these days. Millions of people have already made yoga their way of life to lead a healthy, happy life.

3.5 Global Presence of Yoga

As mentioned earlier, yoga is not just about helping yourself and others. It is so much more. It is a growing, living, and breathing industry. It is estimated that nearly \$10.3 billion is spent on yoga and is practiced by more than 20 million people in the US alone. An increasing number of people are also teaching yoga as a career.

In the past 30 years, modern yoga has taken the world by storm. Anyone including Christians, Jews, and even atheists can practice it. In recent times, the practice has morphed into a global phenomenon that has very little to do with the Hindus alone.

We should make modern yoga a part of our life too to find the calm among the chaos.

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