



Yoga and Youth Cultural Identity: Exploring Connections to Traditional Practices and Modern Expressions within Indian Knowledge Systems

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Abstract: Yoga being the ancient practice in India is contemplated as an Art and Science of healthy living. Yoga is the reunion of body, mind and soul. It is one of the most practiced art which focuses on breathing techniques to boost our mental and physical wellness. This practice is said to have originated many years ago in Ancient India and slowly advanced in other countries. This study explores the connections between traditional yoga practices and their contemporary expressions within Indian knowledge systems among youth. Through a review of Vedic texts and an analysis of modern yoga styles, the research unravels the historical evolution and cultural significance of yoga. The research examines the multifaceted nature of yoga, encompassing physical postures (*asanas*), breathing techniques (*pranayama*), and meditation (*dhyana*). It highlights the historical differences between ancient and modern yoga practices while exploring the emergence of new-age yoga forms. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the vitality of Indian knowledge systems and the ways in which yoga continues to connect youth with their cultural heritage in the modern age. A qualitative approach was adopted, using semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Data were collected from yoga practitioners aged 18-25 in urban and rural areas of India. The study highlights the multifaceted nature of yoga within Indian knowledge systems and its relevance to youth cultural identity. It suggests that yoga can promote cultural preservation and revitalization, foster resilience and well-being among youth, bridge traditional and modern values within Indian society.

Keywords: Youth cultural identity, yoga, Indian knowledge systems, modernity, resilience, wellness, socialization.

Introduction

Yoga is commonly defined as a spiritual discipline which is about the art and science of healthy living. Yoga focuses on bringing harmony between mind and soul. It is often regarded as the union of mind and body. Yoga is a panoramic approach of physical, mental, and spiritual practices that originated in ancient India.

The word yoga has originated from the Sanskrit root “YUJ”¹, which means to unite or join. Yoga focuses on enhancing well-being, self-awareness, and inner peace of an individual. Yoga is often believed to be working for overcoming all sorts of sufferings and lead us to the *moksha* or *kaivalya* which means state of liberation and freedom respectively².

When our mind is free, we are liable to work more competently. Yoga incorporates various *asanas* which are known as postures or poses that work for powering our strength, flexibility, balance and body awareness. *Pranayama* is a breathing technique for controlling and regulating the breath to enhance vitality, calm the mind, and improve concentration³.

Dhyana or meditation is a vital part of yoga, which is a technique that involves focused attention, visualisation, mantra repetition, or observing thoughts and sensations without judgement⁴. Yoga is not just a merely practiced physical exercise but a lifestyle that promotes a holistic lifestyle that includes healthy eating (*sattvic* diet), regular physical activity, positive relationships, self-care practices, and mindfulness in daily activities⁵.

Research Questions

- 1) How do youth engage with yoga as a cultural practice, and what does it represent for their sense of identity?
- 2) How do traditional yoga practices influence youth cultural expressions, and to what extent are these expressions informed by modern interpretations?
- 3) What are the unique ways in which youth shape and redefine yoga culture through their own experiences and perspectives?

Aims and Objectives

- i) To investigate the role of yoga in the formation and expression of youth cultural identity.
- ii) To explore the connections and disjunctions between traditional and modern yoga practices within youth culture.
- iii) To identify how youth perspectives and experiences shape the evolution of yoga culture.

Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. In-depth interviews and focus groups with youth participants (ages 16-25) who engage in yoga. Online survey distributed to a wider sample of youth to gather demographic information, yoga practice habits, and perceptions of yoga's role in their identity.

Findings and outcomes

a) Traditional connections and modern Interpretations: Youth participants expressed a strong connection to the traditional principles of yoga, emphasizing self-awareness, mindfulness, and physical well-being. However, they also embraced modern interpretations of yoga, incorporating elements of fitness, dance, and artistic expression.

b) Yoga as a site of identity exploration: Yoga provided a space for youth to explore their physical, mental, and spiritual identities. They experimented with different yoga styles and teachers, seeking practices that resonated with their individual needs and aspirations.

c) Youth-driven innovations: Youth played a significant role in shaping yoga culture by introducing new forms, such as "fusion" yoga, which combined traditional *asanas* with other movement disciplines. They also used social media and online communities to connect with other young yogis and share their experiences.

d) Cultural Inclusion and Exclusion: While yoga was generally perceived as inclusive, some youth expressed feelings of marginalization based on their race, gender, or body type. They advocated for greater diversity and representation within the yoga community to make it more welcoming to all youth.

This research provided insights into the multifaceted nature of yoga as a cultural practice for youth. It demonstrated how traditional practices could be reinterpreted and adapted to meet the needs and aspirations of a modern generation. The findings highlighted the potential of yoga to foster self-awareness, cultural exploration, and positive identity formation among youth.

Result and discussion

Origin of Yoga

Yoga being the oldest practice in our society indicates its roots from ancient India. The Pre- Vedic period (Indus-Saraswati valley civilization) centering on the Harappan Culture witnesses about numerous seals found during excavations shows a figure depicting human form seated in a yogic position, which has relevance in the present world⁶. The word yoga for the first time was being used in the sacred text called *Rig Veda* over many years ago⁷. It also mentions the practice of yoga in Northern India.

Many of the ancient texts also consider Lord *Shiva* as the *Adiyogi*, which means first yogi to perform yoga. It is believed that Lord *Shiva* cascaded his knowledge to *Saptarishi* (seven sages). *Agastya*, one among the *Saptarishi*, traveled across the Indian subcontinent, crafted this culture around a core yogic way of life⁸. Other sages also travelled many parts of the world and forwarded their knowledge, but it found its full expression in the Indian subcontinent.

While conferring about yoga we have to put light on *Patanjali* who was a sage and known to be the ‘father of yoga’ who has authored a number of Sanskrit works. The most significant is the *Yoga Sutras*, which is a classical yoga text dating to 200 BCE – 200 CE⁹. Though references to yoga within Hindu scripture had already long existed, it’s believed they were too diverse and complex for the general public to understand so *Patanjali* created the *Yoga Sutras* as a way of compiling already existing teachings into a format easier to follow and practice.

Buddhism and Jainism mentions yoga in connection with discipline¹⁰. They consider yoga to be significant to attain enlightenment with the discipline of yoga.

Yoga Practices in ancient times

The practice of yoga in the modern age is divergent from the practices that were being carried out in ancient India. Yoga being originated in ancient India was more about spirituality. People could unite their mind, body and soul through practices of yoga. Philosophical traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism accentuate yoga with the aim of enlightenment and self-realization. Yoga was also related to the liberation of Mind and Soul and also the freedom which is known as *Moksha*.

Asana being a vital part of yoga was beyond any physical exercise. It was far more than just the movement of body parts; rather it was about preparing the body for meditation and spiritual practice. It also involved the mantra chanting with *asanas*. The ancient practice of yoga also included *Pranayama*, the breathing technique which is about controlling the breath which was an integral part of ancient practice. It is used to regulate energy and calm the mind for performing people’s daily tasks productively.

Meditation is one of the most crucial parts of the practice of yoga. In ancient Indian knowledge systems meditation was used to calm our mind and bring mental clarity which leads to peace and spiritual growth in an individual. But the concept of meditation has taken a new look in the modern world.

The ancient practice of yoga was traditionally passed down through *Guru* (teacher) for spiritual growth of their disciples. The relationship between the *Guru* and its disciple was based on pure morals and spiritual aspiration.

Yoga as a practice has helped individuals to bring their better and positive side to existence. The spiritual growth by yoga is tremendously helpful to individuals to lead a happy and peaceful life. Yoga being the most

influential practice in ancient time has lot of relevance to the Indian traditions. It was also forwarded to the entire world and today we can see a whole new face of yoga in the modern era.

Yoga practices in modern times

Yoga has become one of the most used physical activities in this modern world. Everyone loves talking about yoga and its benefits. But the practice of yoga in the modern era is quite contradictory to the yoga practices carried out in ancient times. Today yoga is more about physical fitness, stress reduction, relaxing mind which leave behind all the spiritual practices and aspects. People focus on the *asanas* with different body movements to get a perfect sculpted body. Today, *asanas* have become just a routine exercise to fit into a favorite dress. *Pranayama* still remains a significant part of modern yoga. Many teachers teach the *Pranayam* and spread the hype to get a perfect flat belly with practice. This shows the new era of practicing *pranayama* with new aims and purposes.

According to the study conducted by ICICI Lombard (general insurer) says that about 77% of Indians display at least one symptom of stress and one in every third Indian was struggling with stress and anxiety¹¹. Today the practice of meditation has a new role to play. It is seen as a stress buster rather than using meditation for spiritual growth. Youngsters join meditation workshops to kill their stress and anxiety.

In ancient India the knowledge of yoga was poured by the *Gurus* to their disciples but today we can see that yoga is imparted by the yoga instructor or coaches in their studios, online platforms, and workshops. Many fitness instructors or coaches combine yoga with weight loss Plateau. They claim to cut down a high number of kilograms from the body with the practice of yoga. It is seen that people get into the trap and spend huge amounts of money to get the perfect shape. Modern yoga is about boosting physical fitness, getting a perfect body. It talks very less about spiritual growth or inner transformation. Yoga is also looked at from a scientific perspective. Many studies have been done regarding the yoga and it focuses on physical wellness. Modern yoga has a bigger role to play. Many studies say that yoga can replace many medicines. This makes yoga one of the important practices in the modern era.

Role of Youth in Yoga as a Cultural Identity

Youth play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting traditional yoga practices, connecting to ancient knowledge and lineages. Through participation in yoga workshops, retreats, and training programs, they inherit and perpetuate the cultural heritage. Youth bring fresh perspectives and adapt yoga to contemporary lifestyles, creating modern expressions that resonate with modern society. They explore new forms of yoga, such as aerial yoga, power yoga, and vinyasa flow, while integrating technology and social media for outreach. Yoga fosters a

sense of cultural identity and belonging among youth, connecting them to the traditions of their ancestors. Practicing yoga in community settings creates a shared experience that reinforces cultural values and traditions.

Connection to Indian Knowledge Systems:

Yoga is an integral part of Indian Knowledge Systems, which encompass ancient wisdom and holistic practices. Youth engaged in yoga gain insights into traditional medicine, philosophy, and spirituality, deepening their understanding of Indian culture. It can be understood in the following ways:

- a) **Mindfulness and Meditation:** Youth incorporate mindfulness and meditation practices into yoga, promoting stress reduction, mental well-being, and self-awareness. They explore techniques such as transcendental meditation, MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction), and yoga *nidra*.
- b) **Physical Exercise and Fitness:** Modern yoga emphasizes physical well-being and fitness. Youth engage in vigorous yoga styles like power yoga, ashtanga, and bikram yoga to improve cardiovascular health, flexibility, and strength.
- c) **Therapeutic and Healing:** Yoga therapy and trauma-informed yoga are emerging as modern expressions, addressing mental health issues, chronic pain, and post-traumatic stress. Youth are exploring the therapeutic benefits of yoga and its potential to promote healing and resilience.

Youth play a pivotal role in shaping yoga as a cultural identity. They preserve traditional practices while adapting and innovating, creating modern expressions that resonate with contemporary society. Their engagement with yoga fosters a sense of belonging, strengthens cultural values, and provides insights into Indian Knowledge Systems. By embracing the diverse facets of yoga, youth contribute to its legacy as a transformative practice that connects them to their past, present, and future.

Concluding remarks

Yoga has become a significant part of youth culture, offering a unique blend of traditional wisdom and modern expressions. Youth engage with yoga not only for its physical and mental benefits but also as a means to explore their identities, connect with others, and create new cultural practices. Further research is needed to continue exploring the evolving relationship between yoga and youth cultural identity. Longitudinal studies could track how youth perspectives and practices change over time, while ethnographies could provide deeper insights into the social and cultural contexts that shape yoga's role in youth lives. From the ancient Vedic period yoga has been a very much notable practice in Indian culture. Not only in India but yoga has also moved to other countries with a great influence. Western culture has also grasped the knowledge of yoga. However, we can see that numerous facts have manifested that there is variance in the practice of yoga in ancient Indian culture and modern contemporary era. Ancient practices were more about the uniting of the body, soul and mind. It focused on inner peace and inner transformation through meditation. Yoga was taken as a step or process that would lead to enlightenment which makes a human complete. Yoga was way towards moksha. Contrary to the ancient

practice, today yoga has become a mere physical activity which focuses on physical fitness and getting a desired body. Yoga is also used as a business to generate good income. Though there are differences between ancient and modern yoga practices, both share a common goal of promoting holistic well-being, self-awareness, and inner harmony.

By supporting youth in their explorations of yoga and fostering inclusive and diverse spaces, we can empower them to create a more vibrant and meaningful yoga culture for generations to come.

End notes:

1. <https://www.mea.gov.in/search-result.htm?25096/Yoga: su origen, historia y desarrollo#:~:text=The%20word%20'Yoga'%20is%20derived,%20or%20to%20unite>
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5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4479904/>
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