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From Asanas to Academia: Mapping the Current State of Yoga Education in India

Abstract

This research article delves into the current state of yoga education in India, navigating the dynamic intersection of tradition and modernity. The study begins with a historical overview, tracing the roots of yoga pedagogy from ancient texts to its contemporary manifestations. It explores the diverse landscape of yoga education today, examining emerging schools, innovative approaches, and the role of technology. The curriculum is meticulously mapped, scrutinizing program structures and content. Challenges and opportunities are discussed, addressing cultural nuances, holistic integration, and the importance of accreditation. The article also highlights innovative pedagogies and their impact on students and society. Concluding with insights into future directions and recommendations, this research aims to contribute to the on-going dialogue on cultivating a harmonious relationship between traditional wisdom and modern education in the realm of yoga.

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Introduction

The importance of understanding the current state of yoga education in India lies at the intersection of cultural heritage, holistic well-being, and modern pedagogy. With yoga gaining global recognition for its physical, mental, and spiritual benefits, it becomes crucial to examine its integration into contemporary educational systems. This understanding is significant for various reasons:

1) Preserving Cultural Heritage: Yoga is deeply rooted in Indian cultural and spiritual traditions, and studying its current state in education helps preserve and transmit this rich heritage (Maina, 2012).

2) Holistic Well-being: Yoga promotes holistic well-being, including physical health, mental clarity, and emotional balance. Exploring its incorporation into education allows for an examination of how these benefits contribute to individuals' overall development (Desikachar et al., 2005).

3) Educational Innovation: Integrating yoga into education brings innovative pedagogical approaches. Understanding current practices identifies how educators are incorporating yoga into the curriculum, fostering a balanced learning experience (Guimei, 2020).

4) Cultural Sensitivity and Nuances: India's cultural diversity means different regions may have unique approaches to yoga education. Understanding the current state appreciates regional variations, ensuring culturally sensitive and inclusive educational practices (Nichter, 2013).

5) Impact on Mental Health and Stress Reduction: Yoga's potential in addressing mental health and stress is significant. Studying its current state evaluates the impact of yoga programs on students' well-being (Peter & Manickam, 2016).

6) Global Influence: As yoga gains global popularity, insights into its education in India inform global systems seeking to integrate yoga, contributing to the global dialogue on holistic education (Klepinger-Mathew, 2013).

7) Accreditation and Standardization: Assessing accreditation and standardization practices ensures the quality and consistency of yoga education across institutions (Standardization of Yoga Can Enhance Its Global Reach & Export - India Business and Trade, 2022).

Contemporary yoga's therapeutic commodification underscores the importance of understanding its teaching within educational contexts, where its transformative potential can benefit individuals and societies (Singleton, 2010). This article aims to map the current landscape of yoga education in India, shedding light on diverse approaches, challenges, and opportunities. Understanding the dynamics between traditional teachings and modern pedagogical practices fosters a balanced educational experience, contributing to a deeper understanding of yoga's transformative potential.

Yoga through the Ages

Yoga, spanning across millennia, unfolds as a profound tale of human evolution and spiritual quest. Emerging from the depths of the ancient Indus Valley Civilization, yoga's nascent practices whispered of a profound connection with the cosmos, laying the foundational stones for its emergence. Within the sacred verses of the Vedas, echoes of yoga reverberated, signaling a time of deep reverence for the mysteries of existence (Singh et al., 2010). The Upanishads, composed during the Pre-Classical Period, provided a philosophical framework for the exploration of yoga's deeper dimensions, igniting the flames of self-realization and liberation amidst the contemplative musings of sages (Singh et al., 2010). As Buddhism and Jainism rose, yoga underwent further refinement and diversification, integrating into their spiritual paths as a means of attaining enlightenment through meditation, mindfulness, and ethical living (Singh et al., 2010). With Patanjali's Yoga Sutras in the Classical Period, yoga witnessed a pivotal moment of systematic codification, guiding seekers on a journey of self-discovery and spiritual awakening through its eightfold path (Singh et al., 2010). In the Post-Classical Period, Hatha Yoga emerged, placing emphasis on the union of body and mind through physical postures and purification techniques, catalyzing inner transformation and spiritual realization (Singh et al., 2010). The Bhakti Movement enriched the tapestry of yogic traditions, emphasizing the power of love and devotion as a means of attaining union with the divine (Singh et al., 2010). Amidst the shifting sands of empires and kingdoms in the Medieval Period, diverse sects and traditions of yoga flourished, permeating every facet of life and offering solace to seekers on their spiritual odysseys. In the Modern Period, globalization propelled yoga onto the global stage, where visionaries like Swami Vivekananda, Sri Yogendra, and Swami Kuvalayananda ushered in a new era, blending ancient wisdom with modernity (Bjornes, 2018). Throughout this saga, yoga's pedagogical approaches evolved in tandem, showcasing its resilience and adaptability in meeting the changing needs of humanity. From oral transmission in guru-disciple relationships to structured teacher training programs and academic degrees in yoga studies, yoga pedagogy continues to inspire and transform lives, offering a timeless path to self-realization and spiritual awakening. This narrative intertwines with the broader journey of yoga through time, underscoring its enduring relevance and profound impact in the quest for enlightenment and inner fulfillment.

Evolution and Integration in Yoga Education

The history of Yoga Education, while deeply rooted in ancient practices, witnessed a significant shift in 1918 with the pioneering efforts of Sri Yogendra (Manibhai Haribhai Desai). Unlike his predecessors, Yogendra rejected the conventional guru-disciple relationship he was groomed for by Paramhansa Madhavdas¹ji, opting instead to redefine himself as a yoga teacher (Goldberg, 2016). In this new role, Yogendra aimed to democratize yoga, offering instruction to ordinary individuals seeking to improve their health. By day, he imparted yoga exercises to his worldly students, yet by night, he retreated to the familiarity of his own home (Goldberg, 2016). This departure from traditional guruship not only reflected Yogendra's desire to integrate yoga into everyday life but also underscored his recognition of the isolation inherent in the guru-disciple paradigm.

In addition to Sri Yogendra's ground-breaking efforts in redefining yoga education, his establishment of The Yoga Institute²ii in Santacruz marked a pivotal moment in the intersection of yoga and modern life. While traditional yoga practices were often associated with spiritual enlightenment and were primarily accessible to a select group of spiritual seekers, Yogendra's vision extended far beyond these boundaries. By founding The Yoga Institute, Yogendra sought to democratize yoga, making it accessible to a wider audience, including the educated elite class. This shift in perspective on yoga's purpose and audience resonates with the philosophical underpinnings of Gurdjieff's³iii "fourth way." Gurdjieff, a spiritual teacher and mystic, proposed the concept of the "fourth way" as an alternative path to spiritual awakening that didn't require the seclusion of monastic life, the hardships of asceticism, or the emotionalism of religious devotion. Instead, the fourth way advocated for a conscious approach to everyday life, emphasizing self-awareness, self-discipline, and practical action as the means to inner transformation. The parallels between Yogendra's approach to yoga and Gurdjieff's teachings are striking. Both sought to bridge the gap between the spiritual and the worldly, recognizing that true enlightenment could be attained not through renunciation of the world but through active engagement with it. Yogendra's emphasis on yoga as a tool for physical health and mental well-being, rather than solely a spiritual practice, aligns closely with Gurdjieff's vision of conscious living. By establishing The Yoga Institute as a space where individuals could integrate yoga into their daily lives, Yogendra embodied the principles of the fourth way, offering a

practical path to self-realization amidst the complexities of modern society. Furthermore, Gurdjieff's emphasis on self-awareness and self-discipline finds resonance in the practice of yoga, which encourages practitioners to cultivate mindfulness and discipline in their thoughts, actions, and habits. The integration of yoga into everyday life, as advocated by Yogendra, thus becomes a practical manifestation of the fourth way, providing individuals with the tools to navigate the challenges of modern existence while remaining grounded in their spiritual quest. In this light, Yogendra's pioneering efforts in yoga education not only transformed the landscape of yoga but also contributed to a broader cultural shift towards conscious living. By democratizing yoga and making it accessible to all, regardless of spiritual inclination or social status, Yogendra paved the way for a more holistic approach to health and well-being that continues to resonate with contemporary practitioners seeking balance and harmony in their lives.

The emergence of yoga practices in the early 20th century was primarily rooted in the lives of the educated elite rather than ordinary people. This shift was spearheaded by figures like Sri Yogendra (Manibhai Haribhai Desai) and Swami Kunalayananda^{4iv}, disciples of Paramahansa Madhavdas, who sought to redefine the role of yoga in society. While the specific decision-making process behind Madhavdas's selection of his disciples is not widely documented, both Yogendra and Kunalayananda played significant roles in propagating yoga practices. They aimed to integrate yoga into the lives of the educated elite, offering instruction that emphasized physical health improvement and scientific authenticity. This effort to promote yoga as a cultural initiative against colonial influences reflected a broader trend of embracing indigenous practices among the educated classes.

The contemporary landscape of yoga education in India reflects a dynamic blend of tradition and modernity, characterized by emerging schools and approaches that cater to diverse interests and preferences (Newcombe, 2018). While traditional practices remain foundational, newer styles such as Vinyasa, Power Yoga, and Yin Yoga have gained popularity, alongside specialized schools focusing on therapeutic yoga and yoga for specific populations. This proliferation of educational offerings reflects the evolving needs of practitioners and underscores the adaptability of yoga in addressing diverse wellness goals and lifestyles (Newcombe, 2018).

At the heart of this evolution lies the integration of traditional wisdom with modern academic frameworks and technological advancements. The introduction of post-graduate

programs in yoga at Gurukul Kangri Vishwavidyalaya, spearheaded by Prof. Ishwar Bhardwaj's efforts, exemplifies this intersection. By offering Master of Arts (M.A.) and Master of Sciences (M.Sc) programs in Yoga, the institution bridges ancient wisdom with contemporary educational standards, ensuring accessibility and relevance to a diverse audience (2022). Moreover, technology has played a pivotal role in expanding access to yoga education, with online platforms offering a plethora of digital resources and communities. While these advancements enhance accessibility, they also raise questions about authenticity and quality control, challenging the role of traditional instructors and prompting ethical considerations. Thus, the sector must navigate these complexities, balancing technological innovation with the preservation of traditional teachings and individualized guidance to ensure the integrity and efficacy of yoga education in the digital age.

Navigating Challenges and Seizing Opportunities in Yoga Education

The landscape of yoga education in India presents a myriad of challenges and opportunities that shape the trajectory of the field, demanding strategic navigation to ensure its advancement and sustainability. Addressing cultural, religious, and caste variances is paramount, given the significant diversity in practices, philosophies, and traditions across the country. Educators must respectfully navigate these variations while developing culturally sensitive and regionally relevant curricula to foster inclusivity and accessibility. Moreover, incorporating holistic approaches into yoga education presents another challenge, requiring educators to address the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of human well-being. While yoga traditionally emphasizes physical postures and breath control, integrating meditation, mindfulness, and ethical principles is essential for providing students with a comprehensive and balanced education that supports overall health and vitality. Furthermore, the role of accreditation and standardization cannot be overstated in ensuring the quality, credibility, and consistency of yoga education programs. Accreditation bodies such as the Yoga Alliance and the Quality Council of India have set benchmarks for teacher training programs, curriculum development, and teaching methodologies, yet educators must navigate the delicate balance between standardization and preserving diverse yoga traditions and teaching styles.

Innovative pedagogies are pivotal in enhancing the learning experience and integrating theory with practice in yoga education. Experiential learning, in particular, has gained

traction, emphasizing hands-on practice and personal exploration over theoretical instruction. Through activities like group discussions, partner exercises, and reflective journaling, students deepen their understanding of yoga principles and develop practical skills applicable to their lives. Additionally, examining case studies of successful implementations offers valuable insights into effective teaching strategies and student outcomes, fostering a culture of innovation and continuous improvement in yoga education.

Impact of Yoga Education on Students and Society

Yoga education in India significantly impacts both individuals and society, influencing various aspects of physical, mental, social, and cultural well-being. Through yoga education, students experience improved physical fitness, including enhanced flexibility, strength, and cardiovascular health, alongside mental well-being characterized by reduced stress, anxiety, and depression (Breedvelt et al., 2019). This holistic approach to wellness extends beyond individual benefits, fostering social cohesion and cultural understanding within diverse communities. By promoting unity and tolerance, yoga education contributes to social harmony while positioning India as a global hub for yoga tourism, thus enriching the country's economy and cultural diplomacy efforts (Öznlbant & Alvarez, 2020).

Controversies and Diverse Perspectives on Yoga Practice

In recent decades, there has been a noticeable proliferation of purpose-built yoga centers in developed and cosmopolitan areas worldwide (Newcombe, 2018). These centers often feature white walls, wooden floors, and high ceilings, reflecting a modern aesthetic. However, yoga is practiced in a variety of settings beyond these centers, including ashrams, gyms, Hindu temples, schools, homes, and even unconventional places like surfboards, prison cells, and hospital beds (Newcombe, 2018). This widespread adoption of yoga underscores its universal appeal and adaptability to diverse environments. Despite its popularity, controversies surrounding the cultural and philosophical context of yoga persist. The removal or minimization of yoga's historical Indian religious and philosophical context is a source of contention for many Hindu activist groups^{5v}, who view it as diluting the essence of yoga. Additionally, concerns about the commercialization, commodification, and sexualization of yoga have been raised by both secular practitioners and Hindu activists. Some Christian groups and Muslim clerics have also voiced objections

to yoga practices, viewing them as potentially conflicting with their religious beliefs. Moreover, within the yoga community, there are disagreements between followers of different gurus, with some rejecting the insights of others, despite employing similar practices. These tensions underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of yoga as it intersects with various cultural, religious, and philosophical contexts (Newcombe, 2018).

Future Directions and Recommendations for Yoga Education in India

The future of yoga education in India hinges on effectively bridging the gap between tradition and innovation while implementing proposals for enhancement. To achieve this, educators must integrate traditional teachings with modern advancements, leveraging technology and multidisciplinary collaborations to meet the evolving needs of students. Standardized accreditation processes and quality assurance mechanisms are essential to ensure consistency and excellence across yoga programs, while efforts to expand access to underserved communities through outreach programs and teacher training initiatives are crucial. Additionally, investing in research and development initiatives can advance our understanding of yoga's therapeutic benefits and scientific principles, enhancing its credibility and relevance in educational settings.

Conclusion

The examination of yoga education in India reveals a complex interplay between tradition, modernization, and individual motivations. The analysis of the contemporary landscape underscores the diverse approaches and evolving trends shaping the practice and dissemination of yoga. From its origins as a spiritual pursuit guided by revered gurus to its contemporary manifestations catering to physical and mental well-being, yoga education reflects the dynamic nature of societal needs and aspirations.

The insights presented highlight the evolving motivations driving individuals towards yoga practice, ranging from spiritual enlightenment to the pursuit of health and career opportunities. The increasing professionalization of yoga education underscores its growing recognition as a therapeutic discipline embedded within mainstream society. However, amidst these developments, the inherent somatopsychic effects of yoga often propel practitioners towards deeper spiritual inquiries, blurring the boundaries between personal wellness and spiritual quest. Navigating these shifts necessitates a careful balance

between individual aspirations and societal expectations. The tension between spiritual liberation and social conformity prompts critical reflections on the interplay between personal fulfillment and communal obligations. Ultimately, the transformative potential of yoga education extends beyond physical and mental well-being to encompass deeper self-awareness, introspection, and connection with the divine.

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2. *The Yoga Institute, located in Santacruz, Mumbai, is one of the oldest and most renowned yoga institutions in India. It was founded by Shri Yogendraji in 1918 and has since been instrumental in promoting yoga education, research, and holistic wellness practices.*
3. *Gurdjieff was an early 20th century spiritual master who became very famous in Europe.*
4. *Swami Kuvalayananda, born as Jagannath Ganesh Gune (1883–1966), was an Indian yoga guru known for his pioneering efforts in scientific research on yoga and for founding the Kaivalyadhama Yoga Institute. He played a significant role in popularizing yoga as a scientific discipline both in India and internationally.*
5. *Refer to the Hindu American Foundation's (HAF) Take Back Yoga campaign, initiated in 2010 ('The Hindu Roots of Yoga', 2024), for further insights.*

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