

Yoga as Cultural Heritage of India

Abstract

Yoga is a part of Ancient Cultural Heritage of India which aims at the complete well being of person. It has performed since ages for the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual upliftment of the human being. with time it has passed through several stages and has evolved as a relevant means of well being in the contemporary times.

The various schools of yoga may be different in approach and techniqe but aim at the same objetive i.e well being and upliftment of man. The paper deals with the origin and evolution of yoga through diffrent ages.

Keywords: Yoga, Ancient Heritage, Different Schools.

Introduction

India's intangible cultural heritage flows from her 5000 year old culture and civilization. Dr. A.L. Basham's "Cultural History of India", has noted that "While there are four main cradles of civilization which, moving from East to West, are China, India, the Fertile Crescent and the Mediterranean, specially Greece and Italy, India deserves a larger share of credit because she has deeply affected the religious life of most of Asia. She has also extended her influence, directly and indirectly, to other parts of the World."¹ Symbolic of this great religious and spiritual heritage was the development of Yoga which existed from the most ancient times. Yoga is a way to learn and understand the spiritual India. Also, yoga is associated with the culture and heritage of India. Yoga is one of the most ancient cultural heritages of India. The word yoga in Sanskrit means "to unite" and so yoga can be said to connote a unitized discipline. In this sense it is an exercise in moral and mental cultivation that generates good health (arogya), contributes to longevity (chirayu), and the total intrinsic discipline culminates into positive and perennial happiness as well as peace. Therefore, yoga is said to be indispensable of the ultimate accomplishment in life. It is a science that affects not only the conscious self but the subconscious as well. It is a practical physiological training (kriya yoga), which if practiced, can exalt man to the 'supra mundane level.

Origin of yoga

The origin of yoga is considered to be as old as human civilization. But there is no strong evidence to validate this statement. In spite of extensive research in this field, there are no concrete findings regarding the origin of yoga. It is believed that yoga originated in India about 5,000 years ago. Earlier many Western scholars used to believe that it was not 5,000 years ago but in the period of the Buddha (around 500 B.C.) when yoga came into existence. During the excavation of the earliest known civilization of Indus Valley, very astonishing facts came forward. The soapstone seals that existed during that period have been found engraved with figures resembling that of a yogi seated cross-legged poses, and symbols later associated with a yoga-like posture.² Originally, yoga started for the betterment of a community rather than the self. Symbolic of this great religious and spiritual heritage was the development of Yoga which existed from the most ancient times and is also known as part of India's tantric civilization. Evidence of the practice of Yoga has been found in pre-Vedic times at Harappa and Mohenjo daro and across Northern India. According to mythological traditions, Shiva is said to be the founder of Yoga and Parvati his first disciple. Yoga was a daily activity for everyone in ancient India. Yoga was used as an approach of improving personal mind and body.³

Vedic Yoga

As per the Vedas, the Vedic Period is the origin of yoga in India. The oldest known yogic teachings are known as Vedic yoga or archaic yoga, and can be found in four Vedas – Rig Veda, Yajur-Veda, Sama-Veda and Atharva-Veda. Rituals and ceremonies were also associated with Vedic yoga. Vedic yoga attempt to beat the restrictions of the mind. Hence, it was closely connected with the ritual life of people at that time.

S.S. Suri

Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of Physical Education,
M. M. College,
Modinagar

Vivek Sheel

Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of Histroy,
M. M. College,
Modinagar

Vipin Kumar

Research Scholar,
Deptt. of Histroy,
M. M. College,
Modinagar

Rajendra Kumar

Lecturer,
Deptt. of Physical Education,
M. M. College,
Modinagar

Yoga was considered as a way to connect with the invisible world and revolved around a sacrifice— a sacrifice of the self. Sacrificers, for a prolonged period of time, used to focus on just one thing similar to meditation. Thereby, Vedic yoga is considered a root of yoga. A master of Vedic yoga was known as a *Rishi* in Sanskrit.

Pre-Classical Yoga

It was the period of pre-classical yoga that was marked with the creation of Upanishads. Approximately 2,000 years are covered in this period that lasted until the 2nd Century A.D. There are many forms of pre-classical yoga, but most of the initial yoga in this period was associated with Vedic yoga. Teachings of Vedas have been explained in Upanishads along with three subjects – the final truth (*Brahman*), the transcendental self (*atman*), and the connection between the two – and so the yoga came with the Upanishads. The *Bhagavad-Gita* is one of the outstanding yoga scriptures of this period. Also the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* comprised of yoga⁴. Pre-classical yoga consists of many techniques of deep meditations to surpass the body and mind and get connected with the divine powers to discover the true self. Yoga of this period is connected both to Hinduism as well as Buddhism as Lord Buddha in the sixth century B.C. had started teaching the importance of meditation.

Classical Yoga

The greatest classical text from the yoga school of Indian philosophy is the **Yoga Sutra** (first book of Yoga) by Patanjali around 2nd century. It standardized the Classical Yoga and marks the creation of the classical period.⁵The word *sutra* means 'thread,' it means 'thread of memory' in which Patanjali scholars retain the knowledge and wisdom of Patanjali. 195 aphorisms or *sutras* make the eight-fold path of Yoga, it "encompass the whole human behavior from personal conduct, posture, breathing and control of the senses to an understanding of the mind or self realization".⁶ It consists of *yama* (ethical values), *niyama* (personal observance of purity), *asana* (physical exercises), *pratyahara* (preparation for Meditation), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation) and *samadhi* (ecstasy). Patanjali believed that each individual is made up of matter (*prakriti*) and spirit (*purusha*). Through yoga, these two can be separated and spirit is restored in its pure form, which is the state of 'Moksha'.

Post-Classical Yoga

Post-classical period of yoga had a focus on the present times. It consists of all the schools of yoga that came into existence after Patanjali's '**yoga-sutra**'. Post-classical yoga, unlike Classical yoga, focuses on the ultimate unity of everything. Yoga took an interesting turn during this period in which the hidden potentials of the body were probed. So, a system of practices was designed by Yoga masters to rejuvenate the body. It led to the creation of **hath-yoga** that is an amateur version of present day yoga.

Modern Yoga

Modern yoga is believed to begin with the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. There young and dynamic Swami Vivekananda made

a lasting impression on the American public. He then attracted a large number of students of yoga and Vedanta.¹¹ After him, another popular yoga teacher was Paramahansa Yogananda, who further popularized yoga in modern times, B.K.S Iyengar has been a prominent exponent of yoga who has contributed greatly to its propagation in India as well as the western world. Now, Swami Ramdev of Patanjali Yoga Peeth Trust has managed to spread yoga in each and every house of India as well abroad. He has made yoga accessible to a common man.

Presently yoga has several styles such as Bikram yoga, Ashtanga yoga, Lyengar yoga etc. Ashtanga yoga is a form of Hath yoga that provides people more workouts by using powerful movements and postures rather than remaining in separate, static poses. Lyengar yoga is also a type of Hath yoga, which allows people with physical limitations to use other support, such as tools, blocks, and belts.⁷ Further push to yoga has been given recently with the inauguration of Lakulish Yoga University in Ahmadabad, Gujarat. It is a self funded private university that has been set up in Surendranagar-based Life Mission Trust. Three years degree will be awarded to the students after completing their studies in Ashtang Yoga, karma, knowledge, Bhakti Yoga, philosophy, psychology, anatomy, ayurveda and naturopathy.

This living cultural and religious heritage of India needs to be widely disseminated to the international community. There is increasing acknowledgment and recognition that such International Cultural Heritage helps to maintain a cultural and civilizational dialogue between peoples, societies and cultures. This in its turn becomes a powerful level for renewing the international community's strategy towards development and peace. Prime Minister, Narendra Modi addressed the 69th Session of the United Nation General Assembly. In his address he suggested that henceforth United Nations should celebrate 21st June as World Yoga Day.⁸ It is expected that the General Assembly would endorse and approve Prime Minister's suggestion on 11th December, 2014 and designate 21st June as the International Yoga Day. This would also strengthen India's case for recognition and inclusion of Yoga in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List.

Thus we can say that Yoga indeed is an integral part of Indian culture and changes in the same have been observed in each period of history. It is a comprehensive system linking body, breath, mind, intelligence, wisdom and spirit. Yoga can also be said to be a collection of knowledge encompassing many areas such as mental and physical health, nutrition, art, history, science, nature and philosophy. So be a part of true India and learn yoga for the betterment of body and soul. "योग मनुष्य का सकारात्मक चिन्तन के प्रशस्त पथ पर लाने की एक अद्भुत विद्या है, जिसे करोड़ों वर्ष पूर्व भारत के प्रजावान् ऋषि मुनियों ने अविष्कृत किया था। महर्षि पतंजलि ने अष्टांग योग के रूप में इसे अनुशासनबद्ध सम्पादित एवं निष्पादित किया। उनका निष्कर्ष है कि स्वस्थ व्यक्ति और सुखी समाज का निर्माण केवल योग की शरण में जाकर ही हो सकता है।⁹ Yoga is a mechanism to build international

confidence, inter-cultural dialogue and peace through the removal of these clouds of ignorance.¹⁰ Yoga is not a religion or a culture. It is a 5000 year old exercise system used by the ancient peoples to achieve higher levels of physical and mental fitness.

Thus we can successfully conclude that yoga, India's cultural heritage is its greatest contribution to the world.

Reference

1. Dr. A.L. Basham, "Cultural History of India".
2. Jones, 2000, Beck1996.
3. The *Bhagavad-Gita*.
4. Phoenix 2007.

5. Sanderson Back, 1996.
6. Yoga benefits the mind and the body, 1999, Stiles, 2003.
7. Times of India, Sept. 19. 2014.
8. Sharma and Singh 2001 Frons 2005.
9. "योग साधना एवं योग चिकित्सा रहस्य" –आचार्य बालकृष्ण
10. From, the report of a former diplomat who was a Permanent Representative of India to UNESCO (2004-2010).
11. New York Herald, September 11, 1893.