



A Scoping Review of Yoga in Western Contexts: Historical Transmission, Cultural Critiques, and Socio-cultural Impacts

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Abstract

Yoga, an ancient practice originating from the Indian subcontinent, gained immense popularity in Western societies over recent decades. This research paper critically examines the cultural appropriation, commercialization, and transformation of yoga in Western contexts. It delves into the historical, philosophical, and socio-cultural dimensions of yoga's integration into Western lifestyles, addressing issues of authenticity, commodification, and spiritual appropriation. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives, including cultural studies, anthropology, and philosophy, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the complex dynamics surrounding the adoption and adaptation of yoga in Western reference. Yoga a multifaceted practice with origins in ancient Indian philosophy, witnessed a remarkable surge in popularity within Western societies over the past several decades. Initially viewed with curiosity or even scepticism, yoga transcended the niche status to become a mainstream wellness practice embraced by millions. This paper critically examines the historical trajectory of yoga's integration into Western culture, exploring its interpretations, adaptations, and evolving significance.

Keyword- Yoga, Westernization, Spirituality, Decolonization, Authenticity,

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Introduction

Yoga, originating from the Indian subcontinent encompassing physical, mental, and spiritual practices aimed at achieving unity of body, mind, and spirit. Its origins can be traced back to ancient India, with its roots deeply embedded in the Vedic traditions of Hinduism. The term "yoga" derives from the Sanskrit word "yuj," meaning "to yoke" or "to unite," reflecting its fundamental goal of union and integration (Feuerstein 2003). The key aspect of Yoga is the use of intention or Sankalpa, where practitioners are invited to set a positive affirmation or resolve. This intention is typically stated at the beginning and end of the practice, and it is believed to have a profound impact on the subconscious mind, helping to manifest positive changes in one's life. Yoga has been found to offer a wide range of benefits, both physical and psychological. Physically, it can help to reduce muscle tension, lower blood pressure, and improve sleep quality. Psychologically, it can promote stress reduction, enhance emotional well-being, and foster greater self-awareness and introspection. Moreover, Yoga practices are accessible to people of all ages and fitness levels, making it an inclusive practice that can be easily incorporated into daily life. It can be particularly beneficial for individuals dealing with chronic stress, anxiety, insomnia, or other mental health concerns. Yoga offers a simple yet powerful tool for deep relaxation, self-exploration, and inner transformation (Askegaard and Eckhardt 2012). By tapping into the body's innate ability to relax and heal itself, it empowers practitioners to cultivate a deeper sense of peace, balance, and well-being in their lives.

Contemporary Forms of Yoga: Yoga encompasses a wide range of practices tailored to individual needs and inclinations. Asanas, or physical postures, are perhaps the most well-known aspect of yoga in the West. These postures are designed to cultivate strength, flexibility, and balance in the physical body while also promoting mental clarity and emotional well-being. Pranayama, the practice of breath control, is another essential component of yoga, focusing on regulating the breath to calm the mind and energize the body (Coward 2010). Meditation, mindfulness, chanting, and self-inquiry are additional practices that form integral parts of the yogic tradition, each serving as pathways to inner peace, self-awareness, and spiritual awakening (Hasselle-Newcombe 2005).

Throughout its long history, yoga comes undergone numerous transformations and adaptations, evolving in response to changing cultural, social, and religious contexts. While its ancient roots remain deeply revered and influential, yoga continues to thrive as a dynamic and ever-evolving tradition, continuously modifying itself to fulfil the varied requirements and spiritual goals of individuals worldwide (Michelis (2005).

The emergence of yoga in the West marks a fascinating chapter in the globalization of ancient Eastern spiritual practices. While ancient roots in India, and introduction to the Western world can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Jain 2015). The historical overview of yoga's journey to the West is characterized by a confluence of factors

including colonialism, cultural exchange, the quest for spiritual enlightenment, and the rise of globalization (Ito 2024). Askegaard and Eckhardt (2012) did an influential study in this field exploring the reappropriation of yoga in India through qualitative interviews with yoga studio owners in Nepal and middle to upper-middle-class yoga consumers in India. Findings revealed diverse interpretations of yoga in India, reflecting negotiations between traditional yoga practices and contemporary discourses on body and health in modern lifestyle and science contexts.

1.1 Historical background: Origin of Yoga

The history of yoga dates back thousands of years, with its earliest references found in ancient texts such as the Rigveda, which dates back to around 1500 BCE. Throughout history, this discipline continuously developed, giving rise to diverse traditions and methodologies that focus on distinct dimensions of the yogic experience.

Philosophical Foundations: Yoga philosophy is articulated in foundational texts known as the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, believed to have been compiled around the 2nd century BCE. Patanjali's systematization of yoga consists of eight limbs, known as Ashtanga Yoga, which provide a comprehensive framework for spiritual growth and self-realization (Altglas 2005). This comprehensive framework encompasses moral guidelines (Yamas and niyama's), bodily alignments (asanas), and the regulation of respiration (pranayama), sensory withdrawal (pratyahara), concentration (dharana), meditation (dhyana), and union with the divine (samadhi) (Coward 2005).

Colonial Encounters: The colonial era played a pivotal role in facilitating the transmission of yoga to the West. British colonial rule in India exposed Westerners to Indian culture and spirituality, sparking interest in Eastern philosophies and practices. Scholars, missionaries, and explorers returning from India brought back tales of yogis, ascetics, and mystical traditions, piquing curiosity among intellectuals and spiritual seekers in Europe and North America (Coward 2005). Yoga started in the Indian subcontinent as a spiritual practice to alleviate suffering and achieve enlightenment through self-discovery (Mallinson & Singleton 2017). According to Newcombe (2017), early yogic traditions emphasized meditation and mantras to promote interior investigation and self-realization.

Yoga evolved over time, encompassing physical postures, breath control, and energy flow (Mallinson & Singleton 2017). According to the books, Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu spiritual leader, was the first to present yoga to a Western audience at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair (Askegaard & Eckhardt 2012), marking the beginning of yoga's popularity in the West as a means of spiritual and physical well-being. Yoga spread to Western civilizations in two paths during the twentieth century. One trend centred on scientific research proving yoga's health advantages, such as stress reduction, greater flexibility, and mental well-being, and helped to mainstream yoga as a holistic practice for physical and mental wellness (Antony 2014). Another movement was influenced by the hippie subculture of the 1960s

and 1970s, which promoted Indian spirituality and ideologies. Hippies promoted yoga as a means of self-discovery, inner calm, and connection to higher consciousness by combining Eastern spiritual traditions with Western ideas of freedom and self-expression (Strauss 2004).

Transcendental philosophy and Orientalism: The transcendentalist movement in 19th-century America, spearheaded by figures like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, embraced Eastern mystical teachings and sought spiritual renewal through communion with nature and self-exploration. Concurrently, Orientalist scholarship in Europe fuelled a fascination with Eastern cultures and religions, shaping Western perceptions of yoga as exotic and mysterious.

The Theosophical Society Founded in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the Society promoted the synthesis of Eastern and Western spiritual teachings, serving as a bridge between Eastern esoteric wisdom and Western occultism. The Theosophical Society played a crucial role in popularizing yoga and Hindu philosophy in the West, influencing subsequent generations of spiritual seekers and intellectuals (Tingley 1921). Swami Vivekananda, a prominent Indian monk and disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, made a significant impact on the dissemination of yoga in the West through his historic speech at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Vivekananda's articulation of Vedanta philosophy and yoga principles captivated Western audiences, sparking interest in Indian spirituality and yoga practices (Baier 2019).

2. Pioneers of Modern Yoga

In the early 20th century, influential yogis such as paramahansa Yogananda, Swami Sivananda, and Krishnamacharya began establishing yoga schools and ashrams in India, attracting Western disciples and propagating yoga teachings internationally (Foxen 2017). Yogananda's "Autobiography of a Yogi" (1946) and Sivananda's "Integral Yoga" system played instrumental roles in popularizing yoga in the West and laying the groundwork for the modern yoga movement.

2.1 Popularity Surge:

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a surge of interest in Eastern spirituality and alternative lifestyles in the West, fuelled by countercultural movements, psychedelic experimentation, and disillusionment with mainstream institutions. Yoga became synonymous with the quest for inner peace, self-discovery, and holistic well-being, attracting a diverse array of practitioners ranging from hippies and bohemians to celebrities and intellectuals (Strauss 2004). **Commercialization and Mainstream Adoption:** The late 20th and early 21st centuries saw the commercialization and mainstreaming of yoga, with yoga studios, fitness centres, and branded merchandise proliferating across urban centres worldwide. Yoga's integration into Western consumer culture led to the commodification of yoga as a marketable product,

raising questions about authenticity, cultural appropriation, and the dilution of yoga's spiritual essence (Munir et al., 2021).

The emergence of yoga in the West reflects a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and socio-political forces, illustrating how ancient traditions undergo transformation and adaptation in response to changing contexts and human aspirations. While yoga's journey to the West facilitated cross-cultural exchange and spiritual exploration, it has also raised concerns about cultural appropriation, commercial exploitation, and the preservation of yoga's authentic teachings amidst modernization and globalization. Cultural appropriation refers to the adoption, appropriation, or use of elements of one culture by members of another culture, often without proper understanding, acknowledgment, or respect for the cultural significance and context of those elements. In the context of yoga, cultural appropriation involves the appropriation and commodification of traditional yogic practices, symbols, attire, and aesthetics by individuals and industries in Western societies, often divorced from their original cultural and spiritual context.

2.2 Cultural Appropriation of Yoga:

Cultural appropriation in the context of yoga encompasses a range of practices and behaviours, - Adopting yoga as a fitness trend or lifestyle choice without engaging with its philosophical and spiritual dimensions (Bartholomew 2020). Misrepresenting or exoticizing aspects of Indian culture, such as Sanskrit chants, Hindu deities, or traditional yoga attire, for commercial gain or aesthetic purposes. Using yoga practices or symbols in ways that perpetuate stereotypes or reinforce power imbalances, such as the fetishization of "exotic" yogic practices or the erasure of yoga's South Asian roots (Godrej 2017). Appropriating and profiting from traditional knowledge and practices without providing fair compensation or recognition to the communities and cultures from which they originate. The yoga industry in the modern culture transformed yoga into a lucrative market, with yoga studios, clothing brands, retreats, and wellness products capitalizing on its popularity. This commodification often results in the distortion and commercialization of yoga's spiritual teachings, reducing them to superficial trends and consumer products (Fish 2006).

2.3 Misappropriation of Symbols and Practices:

Western depictions of yoga often focus on physical postures (Asanas) while neglecting or distorting the broader philosophical and spiritual aspects of the tradition (Bartholomew 2020). Additionally, the use of Sanskrit mantras, Hindu deities, and sacred symbols in yoga classes, apparel, and branding can perpetuate cultural stereotypes and misunderstandings.

2.4 Erasure of South Asian Voices and Contributions:

The mainstream representation of yoga in the West often marginalizes or erases the contributions of South Asian yoga practitioners and scholars. By dissociating yoga from Indian origins, Western narratives of yoga can reinforce colonial power dynamics and cultural hegemony (Lea 2009).

2.5 Appropriative Language and Discourse:

The appropriation of yoga is sometimes accompanied by appropriative language and discourse that exoticizes or romanticizes Indian culture, reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes and reinforcing racial and cultural hierarchies. Addressing cultural appropriation in yoga requires a nuanced understanding of power dynamics, historical context, and the ethical implications of cross-cultural exchange. It involves fostering dialogue, respect, and reciprocity between practitioners, teachers, and communities across cultural boundaries, as well as advocating for greater awareness, accountability, and cultural sensitivity within the yoga community and industry (Brown 2019).

3. Social Dimensions: Commercialization and Market Dynamics

The appropriation of yoga in Western societies manifested in various ways, ranging from the commercialization of yoga as a fitness trend to the misrepresentation and commodification of its spiritual teachings. Here's an examination of how yoga has been appropriated in Western societies.

3.1 Fitness and Wellness Industry:

One of the most prominent forms of appropriation is the enterprise of yoga within the fitness and wellness industry. Yoga is often marketed as a physical fitness practice, focusing primarily on its benefits for strength, flexibility, and stress reduction, while downplaying or omitting its spiritual dimensions. Yoga classes in gyms and fitness centres may prioritize physical exercise over meditation, breathwork, and philosophical inquiry, reinforcing a narrow understanding of yoga as merely a form of exercise (Pingatore 2021).

3.2 Yoga Apparel and Merchandise:

The commercialization of yoga extends to the sale of yoga-related apparel, accessories, and merchandise. Clothing brands often appropriate yoga's cultural symbols and imagery, such as Sanskrit symbols, Hindu deities, and Om symbols, for aesthetic purposes without regard for their sacred or cultural significance (Singleton and Byrne 2008). Additionally, the production and sale of yoga mats, blocks, and accessories contribute to the commodification of yoga as a consumer product (Warrier 2016).

3.3 Yoga Retreats and Tourism:

The popularity of yoga retreats and wellness tourism led to the commodification of yoga as a leisure activity and travel experience (Jain 2014). Yoga retreats in exotic locations often package yoga classes, meditation sessions, and spa treatments as luxury amenities, catering to affluent consumers seeking relaxation and self-improvement (Antony 2018). While these retreats may offer genuine opportunities for self-reflection and personal growth, they also risk reducing yoga to a commodity and reinforcing cultural stereotypes.

3.4 Social media and Influencer Culture:

The rise of social media platforms facilitated the dissemination of yoga imagery, lifestyle content, and influencer culture. Instagram influencers, bloggers, and celebrities often promote yoga as part of a glamorous and aspirational lifestyle, showcasing perfect poses, trendy active wear, and picturesque yoga retreats (Morley 2001). While social media can serve as a platform for sharing inspiration and building community, it also perpetuates unrealistic beauty standards, consumerism, and cultural appropriation within the yoga community.

3.5. Corporate Wellness Programs:

Many corporations and workplaces offer yoga classes and wellness programs as part of their employee benefits packages. While corporate yoga programs can promote employee well-being and stress reduction, they may also instrumentalize yoga as a productivity tool or branding strategy, divorcing it from its ethical and spiritual foundations (Nagarajan 2023). Furthermore, corporate yoga classes may lack cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, reinforce dominant power structures and exclude marginalized voices within the yoga community.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In summary, the appropriation of yoga in Western societies is characterized by its commercialization, commodification, and misrepresentation within the fitness, fashion, tourism, media, and corporate sectors. While the popularity of yoga contributed to its accessibility and mainstream acceptance, it also raised concerns about cultural authenticity, spiritual integrity, and social justice within the global yoga community (Antony 2016). Addressing these issues requires critical reflection, ethical discernment, and collective action to promote a more inclusive, equitable, and culturally sensitive approach to yoga practice and dissemination. The commodification and commercialization of yoga in Western societies have sparked significant critique from various quarters, including scholars, practitioners, and cultural critics.

4.1 Reducing Yoga to Physical Exercise:

One of the primary criticisms of yoga's commodification is its reduction to a purely physical exercise regimen (Strauss 2005). By emphasizing asanas (physical postures) over other aspects of yoga such as meditation, breathwork, and ethical principles, the commercialization of yoga promotes a shallow and narrow understanding of this ancient tradition. Yoga becomes synonymous with fitness and weight loss, overlooking its profound spiritual, philosophical, and psychological dimensions.

4.2 Capitalizing on Spiritual and Cultural Symbolism:

The commercialization of yoga often involves the appropriation and commodification of

spiritual and cultural symbols, imagery, and practices. Yoga apparel brands, wellness retreats, and lifestyle products frequently use Sanskrit mantras, Hindu deities, and sacred symbols for aesthetic purposes, divorcing them from their original cultural and religious context (Brown 2019). This appropriation not only trivializes and commodifies sacred symbols but also perpetuates cultural stereotypes and misunderstandings.

4.3 Creating Exclusive Spaces and Communities:

The proliferation of yoga studios, retreat centres, and branded merchandise creates exclusive spaces and communities that cater to privileged and affluent individuals (Newcombe 2017). The high cost of yoga classes, retreats, and branded apparel can exclude marginalized communities and reinforce socio-economic disparities within the yoga community. Additionally, the emphasis on physical appearance, flexibility, and athleticism in yoga culture can alienate individuals who do not fit the stereotypical image of a "yogi."

4.4 Commercial Pressure and Marketization:

The commercialization of yoga subjects it to market pressures and consumer demands, shaping yoga trends, styles, and practices according to capitalist principles. Yoga studios and teachers may prioritize profitability over authenticity, compromising the integrity and depth of the practice. Furthermore, the commodification of yoga as a consumer product encourages competition, branding, and market segmentation, detracting from its essence as a path of self-discovery and liberation.

4.5 Ethical Concerns and Cultural Appropriation:

The commodification of yoga raises ethical concerns related to cultural appropriation, intellectual property rights, and fair compensation. Western individuals and industries profit from the appropriation of traditional yogic knowledge and practices without acknowledging or compensating the communities and cultures from which they originate (Syman 2010). This exploitation perpetuates power imbalances and colonial legacies, reinforcing patterns of cultural hegemony and erasing the contributions of South Asian practitioners and scholars to the global yoga community.

Addressing these critiques requires a revaluation of yoga's relationship to capitalism, consumerism, and cultural appropriation, as well as a commitment to reclaiming its roots as a transformative practice of self-awareness, compassion, and social responsibility. The deep relaxation induced by Yoga can help alleviate physical tension and promote overall well-being, contributing to a more positive outlook on life and a reduction in fear of diseases. Overall, the therapeutic effects of Yoga on decreasing death anxiety among aged persons highlight its potential as a valuable tool for promoting emotional resilience and improving quality of life in later stages.

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