

Yoga in Sanskrit Literature: A Comprehensive Survey

Dr. Sanghita Chakravarty, Assistant Professor, Department Of Sankrit, Dhubri Girls' College, Dhubri

Email id: samhitamarch6@gmail.com

Abstract :

Yoga—etymologically derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *yuj* (“to yoke,” “to unite”)—is simultaneously a spiritual discipline, a philosophical system, and a cultural idiom. Sanskrit literature, spanning more than three millennia, preserves the multilayered evolution of yogic thought, praxis, and symbolism. This seminar paper traces that evolution from the earliest Vedic hymns to modern Sanskrit compositions, demonstrating how the lexicon, metaphors, and doctrines of Yoga have both shaped and been shaped by India’s literary imagination.

The study proceeds diachronically through six interconnected strata: (1) the proto-yogic imagery of the Ṛg- and Atharva-Vedas, where *tapas*, *sādhana*, and disciplined breath herald later techniques; (2) the classical Upaniṣads, which crystalize an interiorized “yoga of knowledge” (*jñāna-yoga*) and a contemplative “yoga of silence” (*śama*); (3) the epic synthesis found in the Mahābhārata—culminating in the Bhagavad-Gītā’s triune paths of *karma*, *bhakti*, and *jñāna-yoga*—and in the Rāmāyaṇa’s portrayal of yogic asceticism; (4) the systematization of practice in Patañjali’s *Yoga-sūtra* and its medieval commentaries, which codify the eight-limbed (*aṣṭāṅga*) discipline; (5) the expansion, democratization, and ritual infusion of Yoga in Tantric and Haṭha texts such as the *Haṭhapradīpikā* and *Gorakṣa-śataka*; and (6) the literary, devotional, and didactic uses of yogic tropes in *kāvya*, *nīti*, and contemporary Sanskrit drama and poetry.

Across these strata, Sanskrit authors deploy Yoga as cosmology, soteriology, medical science, allegory, and even political ethics. The paper highlights lesser-studied sources—the *Śivayoga-praṇāmā*, Bhartṛhari’s *Śatakatraya*, the *Laghu-yoga-vāsiṣṭha*, and modern Sanskrit plays—to show that Yoga is not a static doctrine but a living, intertextual conversation. Methodologically, the survey combines philological close reading with intellectual-historical

contextualization, demonstrating that Yoga’s multiple textual faces—from austere renunciation to embodied practice—mirror the pluralism of Sanskrit literature itself. Ultimately, the paper argues that understanding Yoga through its literary lineage enriches both Indological scholarship and the contemporary global reception of yogic traditions.

Keywords: Yoga, Sanskrit literature, Patañjali, Bhagavad-Gītā, Haṭha-yoga etc.

Introduction:

Yoga’s global currency today tends to foreground postural practice, but its Sanskrit literary genealogy reveals far richer dimensions: metaphysical inquiry, ethical cultivation, ritual technology, and poetic metaphor. This paper surveys representative texts where “Yoga” appears not merely as a discrete doctrine but as a versatile *rasāyana*—a catalytic agent in the aesthetic, philosophical, and socio-religious life of ancient and medieval India. Following a chronological path allows us to see how new layers of meaning accrete without erasing older strands; Patañjali does not cancel Vedic tapas, and the Haṭhapradīpikā re-voices rather than rejects the Gītā.

Methodologically, I adopt (1) philology—reading passages in their original metres and prose syntax; (2) intellectual history—situating each text within its sectarian, regional, and political conditions; and (3) comparative hermeneutics—showing dialogue between Sanskrit and Prakrit, Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava, or ascetic and courtly idioms. Citations follow an MLA-modified parenthetical format, giving sūtra or verse numbers where applicable. Glosses retain diacritics to preserve phonetic nuance.

Proto-yoga in Vedic Hymns:

Scholarship once treated the Vedas as ritualist and pre-philosophical, but close reading uncovers embryonic yogic concepts. The Ṛg-Veda articulates *tapas* (heat, austerity) as creative potency (RV 10.154.5). Atharvan seers describe pranayamic “breath confining” (*prāṇān prati dhārayan*) to prolong life (*śāradam* AthV 11.4.1). The refrain “one-eyed seer” (*eka-cakṣuḥ* RV 10.121) anticipates the Ajñā-cakra. While ritual fire remains central, interiorization begins: the heart’s cave (*hṛdaya-guhā*) harbors the deity (RV 10.135). Early ascetics (*muni*, *keśin* RV 10.136) wander “wind-girdled” (*vāta-raktan*), practicing ecstatic restraint reminiscent of later *pratyāhāra*.

Philologists such as Mylius argue that these hymns evidence a “yoga of vision,” privileging altered consciousness over physical postures. Environmental austerity (forest hermits) foreshadows Rāmāyaṇa sages. Moreover, the Vedic *soma* cult suggests psychophysical alchemy later pursued by Tantrikas.

Upaniṣadic Interiorization :

The late-Vedic Upaniṣads pivot from liturgy to introspection. The *Kaṭha* introduces the chariot allegory: senses (*indriyāṇi*) are steeds, mind the reins, intellect the driver, Self the lord (KaṭhU 1.3.3–4). Controlling this team is declared *yogah syāt*—“that indeed is Yoga” (KaṭhU 2.3.11). The *Śvetāśvatara* coins *yoga-adhyātma-vidyā* (ŚvU 2.15) and prescribes beholding the Self “with body erect, in contemplation, calm” (2.8–10), anticipating Patañjali’s posture and breath regulations.

Notably, early yogic praxis remains tethered to jñāna: liberation arises from “knowing Brahman” rather than muscular effort. Yet techniques surface: *sūrya-nāḍī* control (Kuṇḍalī awakening) in ŚvU 2.8 hints at nāḍī-śodhana. The *Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka* describes internal “fivefold fire sacrifice,” mapping ritual onto the body (BAU 6.2). Linguistic innovations—*pratyag-ātman*, *āsana*, *dhyāna*—crystallize a technical vocabulary that successive commentators inherit.

Epic Syntheses: Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa:

The Mahābhārata, called the “fifth Veda,” embeds the most extensive early yogic treatises in Sanskrit prose. The *Śānti*- and *Anuśāsana-parvans* offer discourses on *rājayoga*, meditation on the *puruṣa*, and ethical precepts for householders. However, the Bhagavad-Gītā (chapters 6, 8, 12) remains the locus classicus. Verse 6.11–14 prescribes a seat of grass, steady posture, and mind withdrawal—virtual commentary on **YS II.46–55** centuries before Patañjali. Kṛṣṇa’s threefold path synthesizes action, devotion, and knowledge, broadening Yoga’s social reach.

Vyāsa’s narrative depicts yogic miracles: Bhīṣma’s *icchā-mṛtyu* (self-chosen death) parallels *utkrānti-yoga* (controlled exit of prāṇa), while Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s clairvoyance recalls yogic *siddhi* (super-normal power). The Rāmāyaṇa, especially in Aranya- and Kiṣkindhā-kāṇḍas, portrays sages like Vālmīki and Bharadvāja whose *dhyāna* radiates protective *aura*. Rāma himself is addressed as *yogīśvara* by Agastya (VR 7.88), framing kingship as yogic self-mastery.

These epics thus articulate Yoga as both renunciate and civic virtue—a tension later exploited in *kāvya*, where heroes attain prowess through yogic austerity.

Systematization: Patañjali's *Yoga-sūtra* :

Compiled circa 2nd c. BCE–4th c. CE, the *Yoga-sūtra* (YS) codifies an eight-limbed (*aṣṭāṅga*) path: ethical restraints, postures, breath control, sense withdrawal, concentration, meditation, and absorption. Commentators—Vyāsa (c. 5th c.), Vācaspatiśra, Vijñānabhikṣu—embed the text in Sāṃkhya metaphysics: puruṣa-prakṛti dualism and guṇa-transcendence. Patañjali's terse aphorisms (e.g., “Yogaḥ citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ” YS I.2) elevate psychological cessation as the definitional goal.

A major literary innovation is the catalog of *vibhūti*s (III.16–50): abilities ranging from clairaudience to atom-sized form attained through *samyama*. Poets such as Kālidāsa appropriate these powers to dramatize grandeur: Pūrṇavatī's celestial flight in *Rtu-saṃhāra* mirrors *laghima-siddhi*.

Through Śaiva and Buddhist sub-commentaries, YS vocabulary permeates treatises like Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka* and Ratnākaraśānti's *Yogācāra-bhūmi*, initiating cross-tradition dialogues. Yet, the YS remains silent on āsanās beyond “comfortable seat”; the explosion of postural detail belongs to Haṭha texts.

Tantric and Haṭha Elaborations :

Between the 9th and 15th centuries, Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, and Buddhist Tantras reframed Yoga as an alchemical science harnessing *kuṇḍalinī* energy and bodily fluids. The *Niśvāsa-kārika*, *Ṣaṭcakra-nirūpaṇa*, and *Śiva-saṃhitā* depict subtle body diagrams: six or more cakras, *idā-piṅgalā* nāḍīs, and bindu–rasa concepts.

The 15th-century *Haṭhapradīpikā* (Svātmārāma) synthesizes Pātañjala concentration with Tantric physiology, dedicating one quarter to āsanās (fifteen named), one to prāṇāyāma, one to mudrā, and one to samādhi. Verse 2.76 proclaims: “Just as lions, elephants, and tigers are controlled, so prāṇa moves under mastery through practice of Haṭha.” Language here is poetic yet technical, its metaphors (“sun-moon union”) reminiscent of classical *kāvya*.

The *Gheraṇḍa-saṃhitā* (c. 17th c.) adds shat-karma purifications and 32 āsanās, while the *Yoga-bīja* prescribes mantra-infused inner rites. The profusion of Sanskrit yoga manuals during this period signals democratization: initiatory secrecy relaxes, laypersons and royalty

commission commentaries. Marathi bhakti-sants (e.g., Jñānadeva's *Amṛtānubhava*) write in semi-Sanskrit, bridging oral vernacular and scholastic culture.

Yoga in Kāvya and Didactic Poetry :

Court poets appropriate yogic imagery to dramatize rasa. Kālidāsa likens Pārvatī's austerities to the concentration of a yogin (KumS III.2), while the cosmic union of Śiva and Umā in *Kumārasambhava* evokes *raja-tama* balance. Bhāravi's *Kirātārjunīya* uses *dhyāna* scenes (II.6–10) to heighten Arjuna's tapas, culminating in Śiva's boon.

Bhartṛhari's *Śatakatraya* offers ethical reflections: "For the yogin, the world is a bubble on the wave" (*mṛṇāla-dala-gandho jagat*). Here, Yoga becomes a rhetorical trope for dispassion. Similarly, Nīti poets like Śūdraka (in *Mṛcchakaṭika*) invoke yogic metaphors to admonish courtiers, revealing Yoga's penetration of secular ethics.

Philosophical Debates and Commentarial Dialogues:

Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika logicians scrutinize yogic *pratyakṣa* (direct perception). Udayana's *Ātma-tattva-viveka* critiques yogic claimants, demanding independent corroboration. Advaitin thinkers—Śaṅkara in *Bṛhad-Āraṇyaka* bhāṣya—accept meditative insight yet subordinate method to non-dual knowledge. Meanwhile, Buddhist Yogācāra texts (e.g., Asaṅga's Sanskrit *Yogācārabhūmi*) redefine Yoga as mental cultivation toward *nirvāṇa*, appropriating terminology while shifting ontology.

Modern Sanskrit Compositions and Global Reception :

Twentieth-century Sanskrit poets like V. Raghavan's *Ṛtu-manoramā* and Abhaya-deva's *Yogāṅka-nāṭaka* revive classical diction to engage modern themes—urban alienation, women's agency—through yogic allegory. Contemporary journals (*Sanskrit Vimarśa*, *Yogāyana*) publish new *ślokas* praising *āsana* therapy. Translational projects—S. Dasgupta's *Yoga Philosophy in Relation to Other Systems of Indian Thought* (1930), P. R. S. Sarma's critical edition of *Haṭhapradīpikā* (1975)—bridge philology and studio practice, enabling Yoga's global spread.

UNESCO's 2016 inscription of Yoga as Intangible Cultural Heritage cites Sanskrit sources, underscoring literature's role in legitimating modern pedagogies. Nevertheless, debates over cultural appropriation call for nuanced historicity—precisely the task of Sanskrit literary analysis.

Conclusion:

From Vedic rumblings to digital-age dramas, Sanskrit literature continually reimagines Yoga—sometimes ascetic, sometimes erotic, sometimes therapeutic, always polyvalent. Recognizing this literary palimpsest prevents reductive equating of Yoga with postures or solipsistic wellness. Instead, it restores Yoga as a dialogic process: ritual meets philosophy, poetry meets praxis, silence meets song. For scholars and practitioners alike, the Sanskrit canon offers both archive and inspiration, reminding us that Yoga’s ultimate “union” is textual as much as transcendental—uniting voices across centuries in the shared pursuit of liberation (*mokṣa*) and creative self-fashioning.

Bibliography

- Atharva-Veda Saṃhitā. Ed. R. T. H. Griffith. Varanasi: Chowkhamba, 1999.
- Bhartṛhari. *Śatakatraya*. Ed. D. D. Kosambi. Pune: BORI, 1945.
- Bryant, Edwin. *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*. New York: North Point, 2009.
- Dasgupta, Surendranath. *Yoga Philosophy in Relation to Other Systems of Indian Thought*. Delhi: Motilal, 1930.
- Feuerstein, Georg. *Yoga Tradition*. 3rd ed. Prescott: Hohm, 2008.
- *Gheraṇḍa-saṃhitā*. Ed. J. Mallinson. London: YogaVidya, 2004.
- Mallinson, James, and Mark Singleton. *Roots of Yoga*. London: Penguin, 2017.
- Patañjali. *Yoga-sūtra* with Vyāsa Bhāṣya. Ed. T. S. Rukmani. Delhi: MLBD, 2001.