

# Challenging Western Appropriation of Yoga

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Can the Indian National Education Policy 2020 help?

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# THE ARGUMENT

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1. *Yoga* - from the Sanskrit root 'Yuj', meaning "to join" or "to yoke".
2. Nowadays, Euro-American practitioners are trying to appropriate yoga. Nadia Gilani: "Yoga has become the latest wellness practice to fall victim to cultural appropriation ... the practice has been pulled from its roots." (2023)
3. Reason – Yoga is a billion dollar industry:
4. Unite or divide – Yoga is leading to a dispute between India and the West.
5. NEP 2020 – through public awareness and further research it can contest Western appropriation of Yoga.

# METHODOLOGY

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- Consideration of the historical background.
- Analysis of historical and contemporary data to highlight Western appropriation of yoga.
- Through analogy, showing why such appropriation can be worrying.
- Reading the NEP documents to show how it promotes yoga.
- Consideration of possible outcomes.

STOP AND THINK

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WHAT IS YOGA?

# MANY YOGAS

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1. Mallinson and Singleton: “Yoga is a particularly polyvalent Sanskrit word, which, in ordinary usage, may signify joining or attaching, a means or method or way, profit or wealth, a trick or deceit, an undertaking or business, mixing, putting together or ordering, suitability, diligence or magic.” (2017: 3).
2. Main Indian types: Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, tantric and hatha yoga.
3. A goal or a practice?
4. Western Yoga: Mainly postural.

# YOGA AND THE WEST: BACKGROUND

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- 1. Ancient Greek – Ambivalent. The Gymnosophists or naked wise men. Alexander and Strabo – approving.**
- 2. Pre-colonial and colonial Western responses to yoga – Initially Deprecatory.**
- 3. Fear of yogis – yogis as self-mortifying religious fanatics; yogis as tricksters or charlatans; yogis as warrior ascetics; yogis as spies. .**
- 4. Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" of 1835.**
- 5. Dehumanization of hatha yogis – Yogis as subhuman.**
- 6. Vivekananda's contribution – Raja versus hatha yoga.**

# VIVEKANANDA'S CRITICISM OF HATHA YOGA: FROM *RAJA YOGA* (1896)

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1. “Hatha Yoga ... deals entirely with the physical body ... its practices are very difficult ...do not lead to any spiritual growth.” (2020: 24)
2. “*Hatha Yogi*... He lives long; a hundred years is nothing to him ... A *Banyan* tree lives sometimes 5000 years, but it is a *Banyan* tree and nothing more. So, if a man lives long, he is only a healthy animal.” (2020: 24)



# YOGA AND THE WEST: AWAKENING OF INTEREST IN YOGA

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1. Vivekananda's influence – “The publication of *Raja Yoga* ... immediately started something of a ‘yoga renaissance’ both in India and in the West.” (Michelis 2017: 182)
2. The appearance of performing hatha yogis in the West – the “carnival ‘swami’ or ‘fakir’”: the live burials of Bhimsen Pratap and Gopal Krishna at Budapest in 1896; ‘contortionist’ Bava Lachman Dass in London in 1897.
3. The influence of the Theosophy – “Theosophical constructions of yoga were profoundly influential in shaping contemporary ideas [about yoga].” (Singleton 2010: 77)
4. The influence of “holistic” (as opposed to “bio”) New Age medicine. (Michelis 2017: 184)
5. The hippies travel to India and the gurus travel to the West. (Michelis 2017: 191 – 192)
6. The Iyengar School – B. K. S. Iyengar.

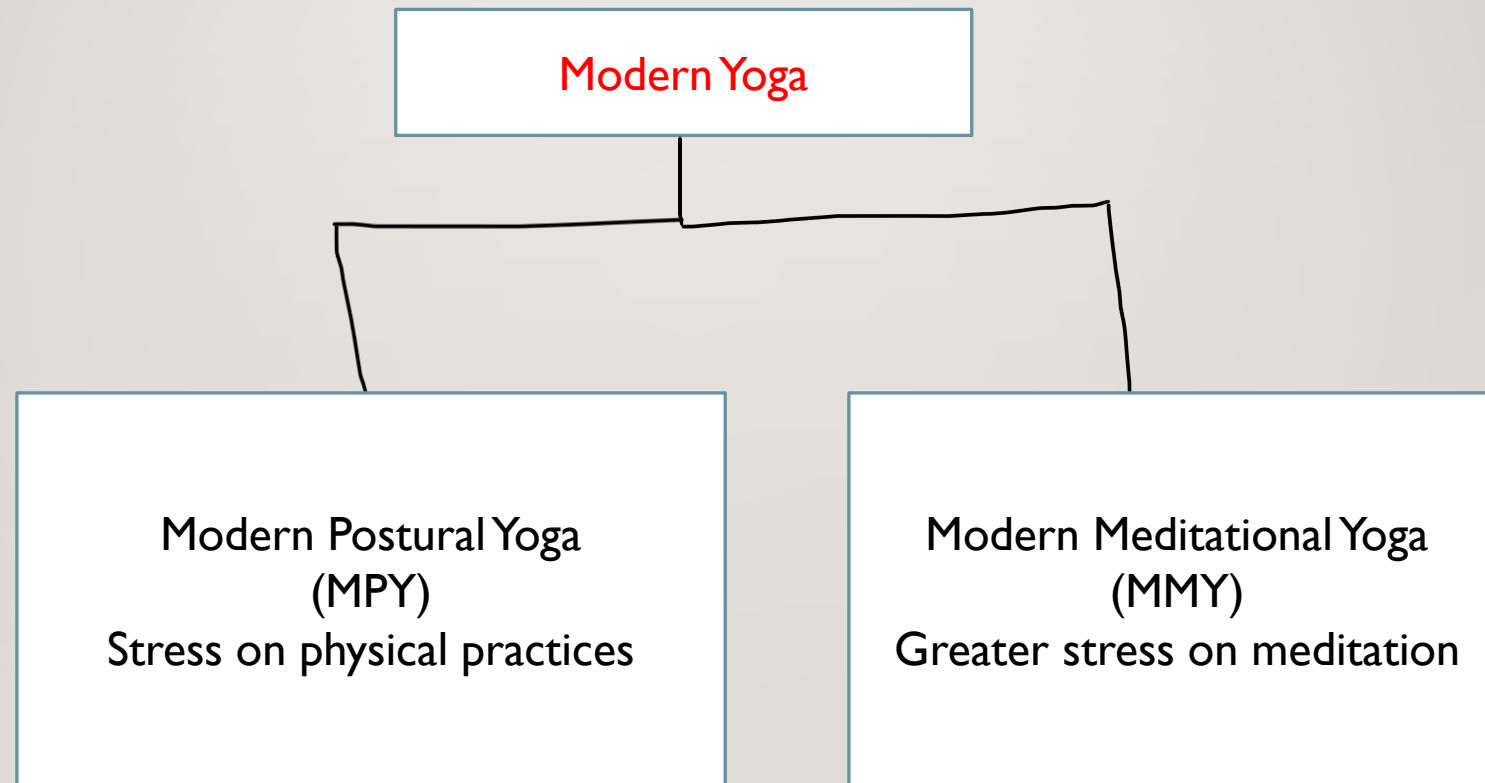
# WHY THE WEST IS TRYING TO APPROPRIATE YOGA?

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1. Yoga sells well - “In 2019, the global yoga industry was worth an estimated \$37.46 bn (£30.53bn).” (Khomami 2022)
2. Appropriation will allow easy patenting.
3. Colonial mindset and feeling of racial superiority.
4. Most foreigners are not interested in yoga’s spiritual, philosophical or cultural aspects.
5. It is ‘postural yoga’, which the West is trying to appropriate.

# MICHELIS' CONCEPTUALIZATION OF "MODERN YOGA" [FROM A *HISTORY OF MODERN YOGA*, P. 188 ]

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# HOW THE WEST IS TRYING TO APPROPRIATE YOGA: I. REALM OF PRACTICE

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1. Two dimensions – a. Praxis

b. Ideology

2. Realm of Practice – Western teachers of Yoga ignore its Indian roots.
3. Yoga teacher Nadia Gilani: “What especially annoys me is when Sanskrit words like ‘namaste’ get emblazoned on T-shirts, images of Hindu (G)ods are turned into tattoos, or ‘om’ symbols are printed on yoga mats. It’s cultural appropriation and it’s offensive.” (cited in Khomami 2022)
4. Yoga teacher Vikram Jeet Singh: “in the west yoga has been “stripped of any kind of cultural background.” (cited in Khomami 2022)
5. The issue is so pertinent that the Wikipedia has an entire page dedicated to it. It is called “Yoga and Cultural Appropriation”.

# HOW THE WEST IS TRYING TO APPROPRIATE YOGA: II. REALM OF IDEOLOGY

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1. Some Western scholars have tried to rewrite the entire history of yoga by suggesting a Western origin for it.
2. Others have tried to show that there is a rupture between premodern and contemporary idea of yoga. The 'modern yoga' is conceptualized as being a product of cross-fertilization between Indian and Western theories and practices.

# IS 'MODERN YOGA' REALLY INDIAN?

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1. Many contemporary Western Yoga scholars, like Mark Singleton, argue that modern postural yoga is not exclusively Indian in origin but is an amalgamation of Indian hatha yogic exercises and Western systems of exercises like gymnastics and Sandow. (2010: *sic passim*)
2. Yoga evolves with age and the West has also contributed to its development. Andrea Jain: “there is, in reality, no single yoga, only *yogas*.” (2015: xviii)

# SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH APPROPRIATION?

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1. Patent – We might have to pay: “Many individuals and corporations have ... registered thousands of intellectual property claims on yoga products and services ...” (Jain 2015: xvii)
2. Distorted perception of history - India will not get credit as the inventor of yoga.
3. Offending Hindu religious sensibility – body tattoos of Gods and sacred symbols, Strippa Yoga etc.
4. Others may profit from Indian inventions, while the Indians themselves will fail to profit from these. Analogous cases as examples:
  - a. The technique of facial plastic surgery had originated very early in India, but the Indians have themselves forgotten about it. The West, however, has appropriated and developed this technique. (Yalamanhili et al 2008)
  - b. The game *Snakes and Ladders* was invented by the Indian *bhakti* saint Jñāneśvara as *jnanapatta* (also called *gyan caupar*). But today it is “known mainly in its modern, Westernized form.” (Topsfield 2006: 143)

# WHAT THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020 CAN DO ABOUT IT?

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1. By introducing Yoga in curriculum across India, the NEP has ensured active scholarly engagement with the topic.
2. So far, India has produced only a few researchers on yoga. Most contemporary yoga scholars are either Western in origin or are located in the West.
3. Increase in yoga researches from India will ensure that the Indian viewpoint will be well represented in Indian and foreign academy.



# FROM THE NEP DOCUMENT: REFERENCES TO YOGA

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Seven references:

1. Yoga as a world heritage – p. 4.
2. In context of the IKS as a part of the school curriculum – p. 16.
3. Yoga clubs to foster student talent – p. 19.
4. Yoga as one of the means to “attract greater numbers of international students, and achieve the goal of ‘internalization at home’” – p. 39.
5. AYUSH – Yoga as alternative medicine – “all students of allopathic medical education must have a basic understanding of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy, and vice versa” – p. 50.
6. Yoga as India’s cultural capital or “cultural wealth” – p. 53.
7. Linking yoga with Sanskrit education – p. 55.

# ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

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1. Introduction of yoga at the school level. This will create awareness about yoga among students from a very young age.
2. NEP 2020 seeks to attract foreign students, and thereby ensure foreign investments in Indian education. Yoga will serve as one of the attractions. (Ranade and Nikam 2023: 192)
3. Application of yoga in the health sector to improve public health. Costly treatments can be avoided.
4. NEP 2020 envisions Yoga as one of India's gifts to the world. It thereby seeks to instill a feeling of pride among the citizens of India.
5. By creating greater awareness about yoga among the populace, NEP 2020 ensures yoga's entry into academic and popular discourse in India. It will no longer remain an esoteric philosophy or practice.
6. Greater awareness will ensure that Western attempts at appropriating yoga will not go unchallenged.

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