

International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies



ISSN Print: 2664-8652
ISSN Online: 2664-8660
Impact Factor: RJIF 8
IJAHSS 2025; 7(1): 361-363
www.socialstudiesjournal.com
Received: 07-12-2024
Accepted: 09-01-2025

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Yoga in modern India: The body between science and philosophy

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26648652.2025.v7.i1e.188>

Abstract

Yoga, an ancient Indian discipline, has undergone significant transformations in modern India, particularly in its interplay with science and philosophy. While traditionally rooted in spiritual and metaphysical frameworks, modern yoga increasingly aligns with scientific discourses in health, psychology, and physiology. This article explores the evolution of yoga in modern India, tracing its adaptation from a philosophical and spiritual practice to a scientifically validated wellness regimen. The paper examines the scientific rationalization of yoga, its medicalization, and its philosophical continuity, highlighting how these dimensions interact in contemporary Indian society. Additionally, it discusses how globalization and commercialization have impacted yoga, leading to both opportunities and challenges in its modern practice.

Keywords: Modern yoga, scientific rationalization, yoga evolution, medicalization of yoga, globalization and commercialization

Introduction

Yoga has been integral to Indian culture for millennia, deeply intertwined with Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions. Historically, yoga was primarily a spiritual and philosophical pursuit, emphasizing self-discipline, meditation, and self-realization. However, the past century has witnessed a significant shift in its perception and practice, particularly in modern India, where it is increasingly regarded as a scientific and therapeutic discipline. This transition has been driven by various factors, including government policies, medical research, and the global wellness movement.

The Government of India has played a crucial role in promoting yoga on both national and international platforms. The establishment of the Ministry of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy) in 2014 marked a significant step in institutionalizing and standardizing yoga practices. The ministry oversees the promotion and regulation of yoga education and therapy across the country. Furthermore, the declaration of June 21 as International Yoga Day by the United Nations in 2015, initiated by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has significantly contributed to the global recognition of yoga. Government-funded research institutions, such as the Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga (MDNIY) in Delhi, conduct scientific studies on the benefits of yoga, ensuring its integration into healthcare and educational systems.

The fusion of science and philosophy in yoga has led to its recognition in medical research, lifestyle management, and global wellness culture. Research studies supported by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and other health organizations have demonstrated yoga's efficacy in managing chronic illnesses such as hypertension, diabetes, and mental health disorders. Additionally, the inclusion of yoga in school curricula and corporate wellness programs reflects its growing acceptance as a holistic health practice. This paper analyzes how yoga balances its ancient philosophical roots with modern scientific interpretations while exploring the role of government policies in legitimizing and institutionalizing its practice.

The Philosophical Foundations of Yoga

Yoga's foundations lie in ancient Indian philosophy, particularly in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, Vedantic thought, and Tantric traditions.

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The classical eightfold path (Ashtanga Yoga) emphasizes ethical disciplines, meditation, and self-realization. The Bhagavad Gita also presents different paths of yoga—Karma Yoga (path of action), Bhakti Yoga (path of devotion), and Jnana Yoga (path of knowledge). These philosophical tenets continue to influence modern yoga, albeit in modified forms, as contemporary practitioners seek both spiritual enlightenment and physical well-being. However, the increasing focus on the physical aspects of yoga has led to debates on whether modern yoga remains faithful to its original philosophical ideals.

The Scientific Rationalization of Yoga

The modern era has seen yoga being studied through empirical research and scientific methodologies. Medical science increasingly validates yoga's efficacy in managing stress, improving cardiovascular health, enhancing respiratory function, and boosting mental well-being. Studies have shown that practices such as pranayama (breathing techniques) improve lung function and reduce stress-related disorders. Additionally, neuroimaging studies have demonstrated that meditation and mindfulness, integral components of yoga, can enhance brain function, emotional regulation, and cognitive abilities. Institutions such as the Ministry of AYUSH (Government of India), the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), and various global research organizations have undertaken

studies to examine yoga's physiological and psychological benefits, contributing to its integration into therapeutic and clinical settings. Yoga is now recognized as an effective intervention for mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Funding of the Indian government

The Indian government has significantly increased its investment in yoga research and promotion over the past decade, recognizing its potential for public health and well-being. The establishment of the Ministry of AYUSH in 2014 marked a turning point, leading to structured efforts in funding scientific studies on yoga. Between 2015 and 2024, government funding for yoga research has grown steadily, with allocations rising from ₹50 crores in 2015 to ₹300 crores in 2024. Institutions such as the Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga (MDNIY) and the Central Council for Research in Yoga & Naturopathy (CCRYN) have received substantial grants to conduct clinical studies and integrate yoga into mainstream healthcare. Additionally, government-backed initiatives such as the International Yoga Day celebrations, yoga certification programs, and collaborations with medical institutions have expanded the scope of yoga research. The rise in funding reflects the government's commitment to positioning yoga as both a scientific discipline and a cornerstone of holistic health policies.

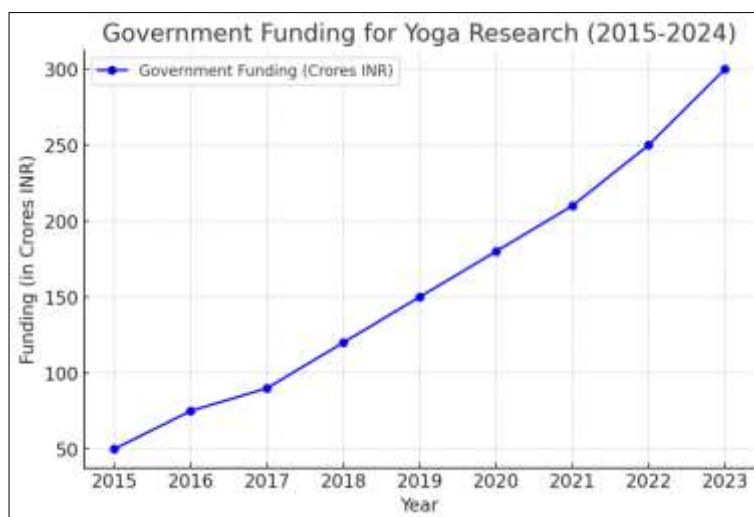


Fig 1: Here is a graph showing the Indian government's funding for yoga research from 2015 to 2024.

Medicalization and Institutionalization of Yoga

The 20th and 21st centuries have seen yoga transition from a spiritual pursuit to a medically endorsed practice. This shift has been driven by institutions such as the Bihar School of Yoga, the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, and the Indian government's promotion of International Yoga Day. The global recognition of yoga, including its acceptance by organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO), has led to its incorporation into healthcare programs. Yoga's inclusion in hospitals, rehabilitation programs, and corporate wellness initiatives illustrates its growing medicalization. In India, initiatives such as yoga therapy programs in hospitals, the integration of yoga in school curriculums, and government-backed research on yoga have reinforced its legitimacy as a health-promoting discipline. Additionally, universities now offer specialized courses in yoga therapy,

further establishing its credibility in scientific and academic circles.

The Impact of Globalization and Commercialization on Yoga

While yoga has gained global recognition, its commercialization has raised concerns about authenticity and cultural appropriation. In the West, yoga is often marketed as a fitness regimen, with an emphasis on asana (postures) while overlooking its meditative and philosophical aspects. The rise of yoga-related industries, including teacher certification programs, yoga retreats, and wellness tourism, has contributed to the commodification of yoga. This shift has sparked debates about whether modern yoga still aligns with its traditional roots or has been transformed into a commercial enterprise. Some scholars argue that the commercialization of yoga has made it more

accessible to diverse populations, while others contend that it has led to a superficial understanding of the practice, stripping it of its spiritual depth.

Challenges and Controversies

Despite its widespread acceptance, yoga's transformation has sparked debates. Critics argue that the scientific framing of yoga risks diluting its spiritual essence. Others contend that the commercialization of yoga has led to its commodification, detaching it from its philosophical underpinnings. Additionally, debates continue over the authenticity of modern yoga practices vis-à-vis their historical origins. There are also concerns about the potential for cultural appropriation, particularly in Western contexts, where yoga is sometimes divorced from its Indian heritage. Furthermore, the rise of competitive yoga and the focus on extreme flexibility in social media portrayals of yoga have contributed to misconceptions about its true purpose.

Conclusion

Yoga in modern India stands at the crossroads of science and philosophy, adapting to contemporary needs while retaining its ancient wisdom. As it continues to evolve, striking a balance between scientific validation and philosophical integrity remains crucial. The future of yoga depends on maintaining this harmony, ensuring it serves both as a tool for holistic well-being and as a profound spiritual practice. To preserve its authenticity, there is a need for increased awareness of its philosophical dimensions alongside its scientific benefits. Institutions, practitioners, and policymakers must work together to ensure that yoga remains a discipline that transcends mere physical fitness and retains its holistic essence.

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