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# DECOLONISING YOGA

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### **Why decolonise?**

Does modern yoga need decolonising? And can modern yoga assist with larger projects of decolonisation? The answer to both questions – simultaneously – may be yes. Grappling with yoga through the lens of postcolonial critique can expose the ways in which yogic practice can develop in complicity with imperial configurations, while it can also shed light on how the practice might support emancipatory social projects. Ironically, it is sometimes the very desire to decolonise the practice that can reinscribe yoga within alternative forms of hierarchy. No practice is solely emancipatory, yet no practice is bereft of the potential to liberate. These ambivalences continue to shape yoga today.

This essay addresses three concerns that have acquired increasing salience in the twenty-first century. First, to what extent is the construction of modern yoga a colonial production of orientalist discursive domination? Second, to what extent does the modern practice of yoga beyond South Asian borders constitute a practice of cultural appropriation? Finally, how might the resurgent nationalist Indian interest in yoga decolonise the practice? I address the first question in the section ‘Knowledge, body, empire’; the second in ‘Travel, positionality, power’; and the third in ‘Nationalism, decolonisation, recolonisation’. I end with an invitation for yoga studies scholarship to continue its experiments with decolonising cultural critique in an era of neoliberal globalisation.

In this chapter, yoga signifies a diverse constellation of practices that people call or have called yoga in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, rather than practices that conform to a foundational philosophical definition. I focus primarily on legacies of British colonialism and India’s engagement with western Anglophone countries, where these questions have grown particularly urgent. ‘Decolonial’, as used in this chapter, refers to the active practice of contesting specific hierarchical configurations of power. A more transformative approach to decolonising yoga would investigate complex histories of yoga, hierarchy and emancipation in other parts of the world, taking us beyond the Eurocentric boundaries reaffirmed by the concept of ‘post-colonial’. The need for such scholarship constitutes a key future direction for yoga studies.

While particular presentations of yoga sometimes cultivate an image of being outside regimes of power, the practice has long played diverse political roles. In the twenty-first century, the practice has gained new political vitality. Precisely because yoga has taken on a role as a person-making project and a mode of state theatrics, it becomes important to ask what yoga’s rising popularity means for a current understanding of imperial and neo-imperial power relations. By acknowledging more fully how yogic practices have emerged in dialogue with hierarchical

formations, we can best cultivate yoga as a practice that challenges, as well as instrumentalises, the neo-imperial projects of our day.

### Knowledge, body, empire

The twenty-first-century scholarly mapping of yoga's modern history from the sixteenth century to the present has revealed that yogic practice communities have long been political. David Gordon White's extensive work in South Asian folkloric traditions exposes the yogi not as a peace-loving practitioner of *āsana*, but instead as a sinister soul-stealer who works close to kingly might (White 2009). Mughal emperors, aiming to bolster support among their Hindu subjects, demonstrated keen interest in yoga and commissioned visual representations of yogic communities (Parikh 2015: 227). Paintings from this era suggest how closely those communities were watched as a potential resource for – and possible threat to – imperial control. Yogic mercenaries, as William Pinch shows, became power brokers in a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century India shaped by British imperial incursions. These groups of organised armed ascetics, knowledgeable in a wide range of military technologies, 'would apply these skills *against* the British in late eighteenth-century Bengal ... and *for* the British in Bundelkhand after 1800' (Pinch 2006: 255). This uncertainty around yogic political allegiance leads us to question how yoga has historically been co-created within diverse imperial frames: if not exactly a product of empire, then certainly a product *within* and *through* empire.

Common conceptions of yoga are indebted to modes of knowledge production and social ideologies that emerged in dialogue with nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial norms. Archival scholarship shows how yogis were often recorded in British and European accounts as exotic contortionists who sat outside western conceptions of respectable life (Singleton 2010). This understanding was shared by Indian intellectuals, such as Swami Vivekānanda, who rehabilitated yoga to align with neo-Hindu reform movements and to appeal to a bourgeois western audience. Many key Indian spiritual leaders who popularised such texts as the *Yogasūtra* were influenced by western groups who produced particular ideas of Indian religiosity for their own purposes (White 2014). Histories of breath control in this period reveal how yoga could be constructed both in opposition to and in concert with British ideals of physical cultivation (Green 2008). Yoga thus emerges as the paradoxical product of colonial modernity, transcultural engagement and broader global exercises of western power.

This rehabilitation process made yoga available as an anti-colonial resource to produce indigenous masculinity. The anti-colonial nationalist Aurobindo Ghose, for instance, reimagined the colonial jail cell as a 'revolutionary ashram' (Wolfers 2016: 525). Others, like the Maharaja of the Mysore Palace, saw in yoga the potential for a physical vocabulary that would strengthen the nation's young men. This project appealed to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), where yogic postural practice became aligned – sometimes ambivalently and paradoxically – with the project of making pure, militant and specifically Hindu Indian male bodies (Alter 2004).<sup>1</sup> Hindu nationalists such as V. D. Savarkar drew on articulations of *karma-yoga* in the *Bhagavad Gītā* to develop a Hindu call to arms (Chaturvedi 2010). Framing the practice in opposing terms, Gandhi situated yoga between nonviolent anti-colonial resistance and biomoral public health reform (Alter 2000). These political projects, in all their diversity, used yoga to reimagine anti-colonial masculinities.

Yoga was also to a varying extent supported by western authorities in India. The YMCA was a famous promoter of postural practice, indicating that yoga could be remodulated to serve muscular Christianity and its investment in the ideals of the British empire (Singleton 2010). The yogic body was reshaped in the colonial period in ways that conformed to western ideals

of pleasing bodies, featuring sculpted musculature rather than ash-rubbed skin. The practice was sometimes taken up by the British themselves as a supposedly Aryan mode of regenerating imperial masculinity at a time of crisis for the empire (Imy 2016).

More generally, many ideas of yoga in late-nineteenth and twentieth-century Anglophone circuits reaffirmed the orientalist construction of India as a land of exotic religiosity. When defined as India's core strength – a project endorsed by numerous Indian intellectuals, such as Paramahansa Yogananda (Yogananda 1946) – this emphasis on spiritual seeking could be used to justify India's inability to self-govern. This construction of yoga further positioned India as a place ready and willing to save alienated westerners from the failures of industrial capitalist modernity. Western cross-cultural practices of yoga, thus, have emerged within a larger field of knowledge about an imagined 'India' that resonates with Edward Said's emphasis on exotic alterity and political weakness in relation to the West (Said 1979).

While the development of yoga in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries cannot be said to be a purely colonial invention or a naked tool of empire, neither can it be understood as a phenomenon divorced from imperial configurations of knowledge and power. The empire perpetuated fantasies of India as an inexpensive source of spiritual raw material for western projects of personal self-development. At the same time, the empire allowed yoga to become useful as an anti-colonial project. This paradoxical genealogy forms one condition of possibility for the practice today.

### **Travel, positionality and power**

In 1991, India published a series of postage stamps with pictures of *āsana*. This series serves as a fitting emblem to reflect on the twentieth century, an era in which new portraits of yoga began to circulate around the globe with increasing speed. In this century, yoga experienced a mobility sometimes greater than that available to Indians. If the British empire enabled transnational movement for Indians in the nineteenth century, facilitating large migrations to the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, the Pacific and Africa, the twentieth century also witnessed key contractions. Mid-century racially-exclusive immigration policies in places like Australia (the White Australia policy) and the United States (The Immigration Act of 1924) made it challenging for Indians to take up residence in such countries. After World War II, Britain took in large numbers of Indians, but it sharply limited this migration in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> The Indian state also exercised its own forms of control, since Indians were not guaranteed the right to a passport until the Passport Act of 1967.

This context, in which practices and ideas could travel in ways that sometimes people could not, helped to reshape the politics of yoga by transferring key reproductions of the practice away from Indian communities towards communities associated with privilege and mobility in other countries. To be sure, exceptional figures from India could travel to parts of the West to teach yoga, and they were often highly influential. But the broader restrictions on Indian migration meant that in some parts of the world, relatively few people of Indian descent could shape the practice as it was reconfigured in the West. As Americans and Europeans began to travel in greater numbers to India, their mobility has been seen as crucial to the western popularising of yoga (Goldberg 2015 and 2010). This transformation drew strength from increasingly powerful neoliberal logics that encouraged access to spiritual practices through an open marketplace (York 2001). Under these circumstances, Indian culture could become fetishised in a global market, while privileged communities could freely engage with cultural practices – even and often in respectful ways – without substantial attention to the hierarchies potentially constraining Indian people.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, yoga moved to the mainstream of many parts of the world (especially the West). It did so, as Andrea Jain has argued, by effectively linking religious transformation, personal self-development and ideal body cultivation to capitalist modes of reproduction and emerging norms of personal wellbeing (Jain 2015). As yoga became more popular, many western countries – such as the US, the UK, Australia, France and Germany – began to encourage migration from India. Both of these phenomena emerged within a context of ‘expanding Orientalisms’ that shaped public culture for migrants and ethnic minorities in the new millennium (Ramaprasad 2018). These patterns have given rise to contemporary concerns in South Asian studies, critical race theory and ethnic studies. First, how do we understand yoga as a South Asian cosmopolitan practice in countries where people of South Asian descent are ethnic minorities? Second, how does the practice of yoga in multicultural societies work to confirm or complicate pre-existing racial, ethnic or gender hierarchies?

A key rhetoric that has risen in urgency in the twenty-first century is whether yoga practised by people who are not of South Asian descent constitutes cultural appropriation. Some of these questions have emerged in popular culture as forms of cultural policing, especially in light of broader demands from conservative Hindu groups for recognition in a transnational public sphere (Ramachandran 2014). These initiatives have tended to focus on socialising new participants into norms of acceptability (how to practise yoga respectfully, for instance) and on consolidating community borders around normative ideals (such as what it means to be a proper Hindu).

Here I focus on a different approach to the question of cultural appropriation within leftist activism that takes decolonising yoga as a political ideal. In these discourses, cultural appropriation is most usefully understood as a term animated for critical purposes when there appears to be a strong inequality between the valuation of cultural practice and the valuation of people associated with that practice. Such an uneven valuation between Indian culture and South Asian people shapes yoga in many parts of the West. Yoga has enjoyed high popularity in the United States, for instance, in a post-9/11 era when many people of South Asian descent face heightened levels of xenophobia, hate crime, state surveillance and detention (Maira 2009). Seen in this context, some members of the Indian diaspora have begun to question why yoga appears more welcome than they are. Critiques of this nature seek to provoke reflection on this broader context, so that individuals may apprehend how their own practices may bolster troubling social patterns that they do not personally endorse. Seen in this light, the question of ‘cultural appropriation’ is not a call for essentialism or exclusion, but instead an attempt to analyse the place of yoga within larger structures of material privilege, state power and dominant norms.

Theorists of Indo-Chic have argued that the problem posed by cross-cultural practice is that signs of difference, which are often costly for ethnic minorities, are extracted and commodified into signs of cool, which create value for majoritarian subjects. As Anita Mannur and Pia Sahni contend, ‘Indianness becomes the simulacrum through which a mainstream American can establish individuality while allowing an embrace of difference on one’s own terms’ (Mannur and Sahni 2011: 183). Related patterns can also be found in multi-ethnic Europe (Altglas 2014). Yoga analysed in light of Indian global labour markets suggests that political benefits of the practice, once enjoyed mostly by Indian masters, can be widely dispersed to a wide range of cultural positions, yet negative signs remain firmly tethered to Indian subjects (Black 2016). Shreena Gandhi and Lillie Wolff argue that yoga has become desirable because it promises to fix the meaninglessness that emerges when the nourishment of ethnic cultural traditions is traded away for the material benefits of whiteness (Gandhi and Wolff 2017). Seen in this light, yoga may ironically alleviate anxiety for those who benefited the most from settler colonial and imperial enterprises, perfecting the colonial project. Its embrace as a marker of cosmopolitan openness

can support neoliberal modes of self-making without cognisance of the politics of race, ethnicity, gender and class (Luhr 2015; Markula 2015). Without stronger critical attention to this condition of possibility, yoga carries the capacity to mask a larger accounting with history.

Diverse new voices in art and activism have emerged to challenge these cultural logics. Chiraag Bhakta, an Indian American visual artist who goes by the working name of \*Pardon My Hindi, created a powerful installation, *#WhitePeopleDoingYoga*, to critique the commodification of yoga in the West. His artist's statement declares:

Brands like Lulu Lemon and Nike have started appropriating and trade-marking phrases, moves and clothing – aligning and embedding themselves in our understanding of yoga, while the South Asian face and voice is relegated to an exotic caricature – cartoons, adoption of South Asian names by white westerners, mystical creatures, Hindu gods.

(\*Pardon My Hindi, n.d.)

The uneven flow of benefits described in the statement creates a larger context within which the practice of yoga can seem to need decolonising. New initiatives have emerged to argue for South Asian stewardship over yoga in the West to promote positive forms of South Asian visibility (SAAPYA, n.d.). These groups have themselves been critiqued for enacting diasporic dominance and for ignoring yoga's reinforcement of caste and class hierarchies within South Asia (Patankar 2014). These debates suggest how the goals of ethnic and postcolonial activism may be in tension over what decolonising needs to occur.

Ethnic studies has also initiated key conversations around decolonising yoga to explore how yoga makes meaning for other minorities and indigenous peoples. In these analyses, which often join forces with gendered critiques of exclusionary norms (Berila et al. 2016; Horton and Harvey 2012; Klein and Guest-Jelley 2014), one major source of focus is yoga's accessibility. If South Asian studies has critiqued how yoga may be too readily accessible for subjects in positions of privilege, scholars in ethnic studies point out that the benefits of the practice have not been accessible enough for those whose bodies do not fit social norms around a twenty-first-century ideal yoga body. Many ethnic minorities feel isolated, criminalised or fetishized in yoga, and must work to claim space and legitimacy (Manigault-Bryant 2016; Panton and Evans 2017). These emotions speak to racial economies of feeling that enmesh contemporary yoga within broader legacies of slavery, discrimination and the destruction of indigenous communities (Blu Wakpa 2018). Decolonising yoga in this light requires practice communities to confront legacies that go well beyond India's specific histories of colonialism.

As ethnic and feminist studies critique the dystopian use of racial hierarchies, critical race studies has also advocated embedding yoga more deeply within a broader range of social and cultural norms. New initiatives, such as recalibrating yoga as part of the Black Lives Matter movement (Wortham 2016) or mestiza consciousness (Bost 2016), indicate how the practice can be used to confront traumatic hierarchies that govern everyday life for many people. In this respect, decolonising yoga can indicate an alliance project anchored in the specific political concerns and felt needs of minority communities.

### **Nationalism, decolonisation, recolonisation**

In the twenty-first century, the Indian state has lavished attention on yoga as a vehicle for its soft power aspirations. While this attention may in some respects constitute a project of decolonisation, it also often resembles a process of recolonisation in which nationalist political projects serve very selective parts of India.

Decolonisation, from the perspective of the Indian state, has most powerfully looked like a material project of aiming to protect the economic benefits of yoga for governmental control. India has designated yoga within the category of traditional knowledge subject to protection under the World Trade Organisation by creating a Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) in 2001. This process creates new modes of authority-making over yoga (Fish 2014; Sidhu 2017). Through what Anjali Vats has called ‘dewesternizing restructuring’, the TKDL aims to decolonise yoga by challenging Eurocentric intellectual property classifications and protecting ideals of collective ownership against privatisation (Vats 2016). Economically, India’s Ministry of Tourism has singled out yoga as a promising source of revenue within the category of wellness tourism (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, n.d.). India has thus promoted the monetising of yoga through lifestyle industries. The religious entrepreneur Baba Ramdev, for instance, has encouraged Indians to become yogis and then seamlessly created lifestyle products for them to buy. These practices have aimed to reclaim yoga for Indian legal and economic benefit.

Ironically, this legal and economic decolonisation strategy – one that resonates to some degree with Gandhi’s *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency) movement and Nehru’s import substitution policies – has also gone hand in hand with a potentially recolonising Indian embrace of western stereotypes about India. While the idea of an exotic spiritual East has been widely bemoaned for decades, Indian government agencies appear to have embraced this stereotype in the hopes of monetising it. In this sense, they draw upon strategies deployed by twentieth-century Indian religious figures who strategically traded on orientalist perceptions of their mystical power (Mukherjee 2017). The long-running twenty-first-century Incredible India campaign has featured yoga in idealised spiritual terms. Taking control of this longstanding western fantasy, India’s nation-branding self-orientalises as a marketing strategy.

The second recolonising impulse can be found within the strong and growing link between yoga and Hindutva. Entrepreneurs such as Ramdev are often understood to promote Hindu-centric ideologies through personal self-care (Chakraborty 2007), while social service organisations such as the Vivekananda Kendra enmesh yoga within Hindu nationalist ideals (Pandya 2014). These projects sometimes seek to evacuate India of minorities, to justify caste hierarchies and discrimination based on work and descent and to create a model for aspirational world power. In these projects, yoga can become a tool to assert dominance over specific parts of India’s citizenry. The ascendance of Yogi Adityanath as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh signals such a symbolic utility for yoga. Leader of the Gorakhnath Math, Adityanath is notorious for inflammatory comments that allow the ruling party to benefit from Hindutva appeals while protecting national leaders from the stigma of extremism (Kaul 2017). These trends place yoga centrally within concerns that India, celebrating seventy years of democracy, has become increasingly majoritarian and resistant to minority rights (Jaffrelot 2017).

Yoga also potentially gives Hindu nationalist voices a platform within Indian diasporic outreach. In recent years, the Indian state has developed a ‘yoga diplomacy’ that merges Hindutva-inspired ideals with Nehruvian cultural nationalism (Gautam and Droogan 2018: 19). Organisations such as Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s Art of Living Foundation and the Hindu Students Council in the United States have also pushed such agendas (Sood 2018: 14). In these contexts, yoga can become a vehicle for social groups to promote Hindutva globally as part of consciousness-raising for ethnic minority groups. It can also promote hierarchical and idealised narratives about Hinduism that often rely on the erasure of minority groups (especially Muslim ones) in the post-9/11 war on terror (Chandra 2015). Yoga thus plays a role as a potential and sometimes unwitting conduit for a globalising Hindutva.

The third potential form of recolonisation happening in India reflects the trend that many urban middle-class practitioners take up yoga as a western-legible form of modernity. The external validation that yoga has received around the world has increased its cache domestically. Indeed, this external popularity is at the heart of major government initiatives to capitalise on yoga: the state fears that the material benefits of yoga will be captured by other countries. International validation has made yoga more attractive for some Indian practitioners, while for others, the global popularity of the practice has inspired critical desires to reclaim and reassert an alternative Indian set of traditions (Askegaard and Eckhardt 2012).

While India's intensified interest in yoga in the twenty-first century has brought important decolonising impulses, the nationalist and religious agendas that have woven their way into the promotion of the practice also invite us to consider how diverse forms of yoga remediate influential articulations of hierarchy and control. As Indian governments, teachers and practitioners engage with the practice as a diverse and globalised one, these efforts have the potential to associate the transformative promise of yoga with selective agendas that rely on old and emerging social division. Decolonising yoga, thus, is no simple matter. What looks like 'decolonising' from one point of view may seem, from another angle, like a new imperial configuration.

### **Conclusion: towards yoga as critique**

For scholars working from postcolonial perspectives, one of the most promising capacities of yoga is its potential to offer not simply an object of knowledge, but a knowledge modality useful for decolonial aspirations. If we conceptualise yoga in hopeful terms as a practical philosophy of transformation that promotes an expanded apprehension of reality, one of the most exciting possibilities is that yoga can give us the tools for better constructive critique. Postcolonial studies is well known for its ability to expose injury and injustice. It is less well known for its ability to articulate a viable way forward.

Yoga alone is unlikely to decolonise habits of thought and action. But, enmeshed with analysis and activism, it offers the possibility for embodied critique. One important twenty-first-century trend links yogic practice to demands for progressive collective action (Training Leaders Worldwide in Social Change, n.d.). While many 'off the mat' actions perpetuate missionary imperialism, it may still be possible for yoga to promote conscious reflection on the larger political orders that shape the world. Farah Godrej suggests that yogic methods can 'encourage attitudes and behaviors that directly counteract neoliberal subjectivity: cultivating a truthful inward gaze that reflects on and problematises the construction of one's own needs, desires, and self-image' (Godrej 2017: 788). To understand how this critical project might take shape, we as scholars need to examine more closely how practices of yoga interweave themselves with analytical and activist frameworks.

Yoga as an alternative form of knowing shapes important ongoing experiments in growing university fields of contemplative studies, where critical first-person pedagogies reanimate yoga's histories of self-experimentation for contemporary knowledge work. Such projects aim to decolonise the traditional Eurocentric scholarly forms of knowing at the heart of the modern university. Yet the price of admission for such decolonising work can be the severing of such contemplative practices from religious and devotional frameworks, so that secularity within a neoliberal paradigm becomes the new master narrative and condition of possibility that shapes yoga's legitimacy. As we as scholars work to cultivate yoga as a critical source of illumination in our writing and our teaching, we do so through intimacy with our own hegemonic forms.

I suggest it is through – not beyond – such uncomfortable intimacies that yoga offers us valuable ways of perceiving the world. Practicing yoga in critically self-reflective ways, in dialogue

with analytical and activist voices, can invite us to perceive the invisible layers of power that configure individual subjects and broader social landscapes. Such inquiry can potentially expose, if not escape, the diverse normalised hierarchies that have long shaped the conditions under which yoga transforms lives. Though decolonial projects may never be complete, full or perfected, there is value in their practice.

## Notes

- 1 The RSS is a large Indian volunteer organisation associated with the promotion of Hindutva, or 'Hinduness', and it is often seen as aligned with the political goals of Hindu fundamentalism.
- 2 This brief sketch is of course incomplete and does not address key movements, such as the substantial migration of Indians to Gulf states. A welcome direction for future scholarship would investigate further the cultural politics of yoga in the Middle East.

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