

**COMMERCIALIZATION AND COMMODIFICATION OF YOGA: A DRIFT FROM ITS
TRUE ESSENCE****Manorama Panigrahi***

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the historical trajectory and contemporary commodification of yoga, tracing its transformation from an ancient Indian spiritual discipline into a globalized wellness industry. Rooted in Vedic philosophy and codified in classical texts such as the Yoga Sutras of Maharshi Patanjali, yoga traditionally emphasized on ethical discipline, meditation, and self-realization, with physical postures serving primarily as preparation for meditative practice. Over centuries, yoga evolved through Hatha traditions, modern adaptations, and international dissemination, culminating in posture-based modern yoga. However, in recent decades, globalization, consumer culture, and digital media have reshaped yoga into a multi-billion-dollar market. Mechanisms of commercialization include trademarked styles, franchised teacher trainings, branded merchandise, influencer-driven social media, corporate wellness programs, and wellness tourism. While these trends have broadened access, they often detach yoga from its philosophical roots, raising ethical concerns about cultural appropriation, loss of authenticity, economic exclusivity, and spiritual bypassing. Case studies, including Bikram Yoga controversies, Instagram yoga culture, and India's retreat tourism, illustrate the tensions between tradition and market forces. To counterbalance these challenges, the paper proposes strategies for preserving authenticity by integrating philosophy into training, promoting cultural sensitivity, ensuring accessibility, establishing ethical guidelines, and fostering mindful innovation. The findings highlight the urgent need to reconcile yoga's spiritual heritage with its contemporary global presence, ensuring that modernization serves as a means of enrichment rather than dilution.

KEYWORDS: Yoga history, commodification, commercialization, cultural appropriation, authenticity, wellness industry, ethics in yoga, spiritual heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Yoga, one of the most profound spiritual and philosophical systems originating from India. It has been practised for millennia as a means of self-realization, holistic well-being, and union of the individual consciousness with the universal consciousness. Rooted in the Vedic tradition and elaborated in classical texts such as the Yoga Sutras, Hatha Pradipika, Gheranda Samhita, and Bhagavad Gita, yoga is far more than a physical exercise—it is a lifestyle, a moral discipline, and a spiritual path (Feuerstein, 2003). Traditional Yoga always had given emphasis on meditation (dhyana), breath control (pranayama), moral discipline (yamas), and self-discipline (niyamas) (Niranjananada, 2012) (Dr. Karambelkar P.V., 2011-2012). Physical postures (asanas) were secondary and designed to prepare the body for long hours of meditation. Based on experiential knowledge and philosophical texts, its relevance and advantages were understood through spiritual insight and

anecdotal evidence.

In recent decades, however, yoga has undergone a significant transformation, particularly in Western societies but also increasingly in India. This transformation is largely driven by the forces of globalization, commercialization, and consumer culture. The ancient discipline is now often marketed as a commodity—detached from its philosophical roots and rebranded as a fitness regime, stress-relief method, or wellness product. While this has contributed to the global popularity of yoga, it has also led to concerns about dilution, misrepresentation, and exploitation of the tradition (Jain, 2015) (Singleton, 2010).

Commercial yoga studios, teacher training courses, branded yoga merchandise, and online platforms have created an industry worth billions of dollars worldwide. The 2016 Yoga in America Study reported that over 36

million Americans practiced yoga, contributing to a multi-billion-dollar market. Similarly, in India, the promotion of yoga as part of health tourism has expanded rapidly, particularly after the United Nations declared 21 June as the International Day of Yoga in 2015.

The commercialization of yoga challenges its ability to retain authenticity in a market-driven context. Modern adaptations significantly influence and, in some cases, dilute its spiritual and philosophical dimensions by turning this spiritual practice into a commodity, and presents complex ethical implications. This study critically examines these issues by exploring the historical backgrounds of yoga, the modification and development of the global yoga market, the mechanisms of commodification, the associated ethical dilemmas, and the resulting consequences for both the practitioners and society.

Historical Overview of Yoga and Its Transformation

1. Origins and Traditional Purpose of Yoga

Yoga originated more than 3,000 years ago, with its earliest references found in the Rigveda, where it was associated with disciplined meditation and breath control (Feuerstein, 2008). The Upanishads (c. 800–400 BCE) deepened the philosophical framework, emphasizing the union of Atman (individual self) and Brahman (universal consciousness) through meditative discipline. The Bhagavad Gita (circa 2nd century BCE) further expanded yoga into a practical spiritual philosophy, presenting Karma Yoga (discipline of action), Bhakti Yoga (discipline of devotion), and Jnana Yoga (discipline of knowledge) as complementary paths to liberation (Sivananda, 2012).

2. Codification: Yoga Sutras of Maharshi Patanjali

The Yoga Sutras of Maharshi Patanjali (circa 2nd century CE) systematized yoga into the eight-limbed Ashtanga path: ethical precepts (yama and niyama), postures (asana), breath regulation (pranayama), sensory withdrawal (pratyahara), concentration (dharana), meditation (dhyana), and ultimate absorption (samadhi) (Prajnananda, 2012). Here, asanas were minimal and functional, intended as stable seats for meditation, underscoring that yoga was primarily a mental and spiritual discipline rather than a physical exercise regime.

3. Medieval Evolution: Hatha Yoga and Tantric Influences

Between the 9th and 15th centuries, Hatha Yoga emerged as a distinct branch, with seminal texts like the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and Gheranda Samhita detailing physical postures, cleansing techniques (shatkriyas), and energetic concepts such as chakras and nadis (Mallinson, 2017). Tantric traditions during this period contributed ritual, mantra, and Kundalini practices, reimagining the body as a vehicle for spiritual transformation and merging esoteric physiology with meditative absorption.

The main objective is to create an absolute balance of the internal activities at the physio-psychological level. When this balance is created evolution of the human consciousness takes place.

4. Renaissance and Global Transmission

The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a turning point as yoga entered the global stage. Swami Vivekananda's presentation at the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions introduced yoga's philosophical dimensions to Western audiences. While Vivekananda (1893) emphasized its philosophical dimensions, later teachers adapted yoga to fit Western fitness and health paradigms, focusing more on asana and less on meditative or philosophical elements (Alter, 2004). Teachers such as T. Krishnamacharya, Shri Yogendra, and Swami Kuvalayananda blended traditional Hatha techniques with elements of modern physical culture, resulting in the foundation of posture-based modern yoga. Krishnamacharya's students—B.K.S. Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois, and T.K.V. Desikachar—pioneered styles like Iyengar Yoga, Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, and Viniyoga, emphasizing alignment, flow, and therapeutic adaptation (Singleton, 2010).

5. Contemporary Landscape and Shift Toward Commodification

In the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st, yoga underwent a profound transformation into a global wellness commodity. While this expansion broadened accessibility, it also shifted emphasis from spiritual liberation to physical fitness, stress management, and lifestyle branding (Jain, 2015). The emergence of commercial yoga studios, franchised teacher training programs, branded apparel lines, retreats, and online classes packaged yoga for consumer markets. Variations such as Power Yoga, Hot Yoga, and Aerial Yoga were marketed for novelty and competitive appeal, often detached from their philosophical moorings (Singleton, 2010).

Social media further accelerated this commodification, with yoga increasingly represented through idealized body imagery, influencer endorsements, and corporate sponsorships (Carrette & King, 2005). This process aligns with what scholars describe as the "silent takeover" of spiritual traditions by market forces, where ancient practices are reframed as lifestyle products for sale. Critics argue that such trends risk diluting yoga's ethical precepts (yama and niyama), meditative essence, and teacher-disciple transmission models in favor of a mass-market fitness culture (Strauss, 2005).

Mechanisms of Commercialization and Commodification

The commercialization of yoga functions through multiple interconnected mechanisms that collectively reshape it from a spiritual discipline into a consumer-oriented product.

Branding and Proprietary Styles

The creation of trademarked yoga systems, such as Bikram Yoga's 26-posture sequence, exemplifies the transformation of shared cultural knowledge into proprietary intellectual property for exclusive profit (Jain, 2015). These legal protections limit access, commodifying what was historically a freely transmitted tradition.

Teacher Training as a Revenue Model

The proliferation of 200-hour teacher training certifications, often priced at premium rates, has turned pedagogical processes into lucrative business ventures. In some cases, the emphasis shifts from rigorous spiritual mentorship to standardized, marketable credentials designed for rapid monetization (Park, 2021)

Yoga Merchandise Economy

The global yoga market includes a vast range of consumer goods, from mats and props to luxury apparel and branded supplements. This merchandise often promotes exclusivity and lifestyle identity, reinforcing yoga's alignment with aspirational consumer culture (Lu, 2019)

Social media

Platforms such as Instagram and YouTube have reframed yoga as a visual performance, prioritizing photogenic postures and influencer branding over inner discipline and philosophical inquiry (Cushman, 2022). This shift privileges spectacle over substance, appealing to algorithmic popularity metrics rather than authentic practice.

Wellness Tourism and Retreat Culture

Yoga is increasingly embedded within global wellness tourism, where retreats and spa resorts package it alongside leisure activities. While appealing to international clientele, these experiences often dilute traditional *sādhana* in favor of marketable, recreational encounters (Smith, 2020).

Corporate Yoga Integration

Corporate wellness programs employ yoga as a tool for enhancing employee productivity and stress management. Although beneficial for workplace health, such initiatives risk reframing yoga primarily as an efficiency-enhancing service, subordinating its holistic aims to organizational performance goals (McCartney, 2021).

Collectively, these mechanisms demonstrate how contemporary yoga is increasingly structured around market imperatives, commodifying both its physical techniques and cultural identity to align with global consumer trends.

Ethical and Cultural Implications

1. Cultural Appropriation

When yoga is extracted from its historical, philosophical,

and spiritual roots and repackaged for mass consumption, it risks becoming an act of cultural appropriation. This occurs when elements of a historically marginalized tradition are used by dominant cultures without due respect, acknowledgment, or reciprocity (Sharma, 2015); (Jain, 2020). Such appropriation not only erases the contributions of Indian spiritual lineages but also reframes yoga as a neutral, decontextualized fitness trend, severed from its Indic heritage.

2. Loss of Authenticity

Market-driven yoga frequently marginalizes core philosophical teachings, particularly the *yamas* (ethical restraints) and *niyamas* (observances), reducing the practice to a series of physical exercises (Singleton, 2010). As a result, the holistic aim of yoga—as a path toward self-realization and liberation—is overshadowed by its portrayal as a wellness commodity. This dilution undermines the integrative relationship between body, mind, and spirit that is central to traditional yogic philosophy (De Michelis, 2004).

3. Exploitation and Inequality

The commodification of yoga has created socio-economic barriers, with high-cost classes, teacher trainings, and international retreats becoming accessible primarily to affluent demographics (Park, 2021). This economic exclusivity contradicts yoga's universalist ethos, which historically emphasized accessibility and inclusivity regardless of caste, class, or gender (Feuerstein, 2008). In some cases, commercialization channels wealth away from Indian communities that have preserved the practice for centuries, perpetuating structural inequities.

4. Spiritual Bypassing

In its commercialized form, yoga is often promoted as a quick solution for stress relief, aesthetic enhancement, or personal branding. This marketing approach can encourage spiritual bypassing—the use of spiritual practices to avoid confronting unresolved emotional, psychological, or ethical challenges (Cashwell, 2022). When yoga is positioned primarily as a mood booster or beauty aid, its transformative potential as a discipline of self-inquiry, ethical engagement, and inner awakening is diminished.

Case Studies of Misuse and Market-Driven Trends in Yoga

1. Bikram Yoga Controversies

Bikram Choudhury, the founder of Bikram Yoga, transformed a standardized sequence of 26 postures and two breathing exercises into a trademarked, globally franchised product. He actively pursued legal action against instructors and studios replicating his method without authorization, thereby asserting proprietary control over what had historically been shared knowledge (Jain, 2015). Beyond intellectual property disputes, Choudhury faced multiple allegations of sexual

misconduct, workplace harassment, and abuse of power (Goldberg, 2019). These scandals not only tarnished the brand but also exposed how concentrated commercial authority in yoga can facilitate exploitation and ethical violations.

2. Instagram Yoga Trends

The proliferation of “Insta-yoga”—yoga content curated for platforms such as Instagram—has reframed the practice as a visual spectacle. Complex postures, often staged in exotic or luxurious settings, serve as social capital for practitioners seeking online visibility (Cushman, 2022). While these images can inspire physical practice, they tend to privilege aesthetics over introspection, fostering a competitive culture that contradicts yoga’s non-egoic ethos. The result is a performative form of yoga that caters more to algorithmic popularity and influencer branding than to spiritual engagement.

3. Yoga Tourism in India

India’s yoga hubs, notably Rishikesh and Goa, attract thousands of international students annually, contributing significantly to the wellness tourism economy (Smith, 2020). While this influx generates economic benefits, it has also led to the proliferation of commercially oriented retreats prioritizing profit over authentic transmission. In some cases, underqualified instructors—motivated by market demand rather than deep training—conduct teacher certification programs that dilute pedagogical integrity (Remski, 2020). This trend risks transforming historically sacred learning spaces into transactional service hubs catering to consumer expectations rather than disciplined practice with a balanced approach by preserving authenticity while embracing the modernity.

Strategies for Preserving Integrity in a Globalized Yoga Landscape

To counterbalance the excesses of commercialization of yoga while accommodating the realities of a globalized and interconnected world, a set of deliberate and ethically grounded measures is required.

1. Integrating Philosophy and Practice:

Comprehensive teacher training programs must embed philosophical study, ethical precepts (yamas and niyamas), and meditation practices alongside physical postures (asanas). This integrated approach ensures that trainees engage with yoga as a holistic discipline rather than a purely physical regimen (Singleton, 2010) (De Michelis, 2004).

2. Cultural Sensitivity: Marketing, teaching, and institutional frameworks should explicitly acknowledge yoga’s Indian origins, spiritual heritage, and historical evolution. Respectful representation fosters cultural continuity and helps prevent the erasure or distortion of its roots (Sharma, 2015); (Jain, 2020).

3. Accessible Yoga: Expanding community-based

programs and offering affordable or donation-based classes can counter the economic exclusivity produced by market-driven models. Such initiatives align with yoga’s universalist ethos and broaden participation across socio-economic groups (Feuerstein, 2008).

4. Ethical Guidelines: Professional associations and certifying bodies should establish clear, enforceable ethical standards for instructors and institutions. These guidelines must address issues such as consent, teacher–student boundaries, and intellectual property disputes to prevent exploitation and abuse (Park, 2021) (Remski, 2020).

5. Mindful Innovation: While modernization and adaptation are inevitable in a globalized context, innovations should enhance rather than distort yoga’s foundational aims. Practices should be evaluated for their alignment with yoga’s holistic vision of self-realization and ethical living, rather than their market appeal (Lu, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The commercialization and commodification of yoga present a paradox, i.e., while market forces have made yoga accessible to millions worldwide, they have also diluted its depth and sometimes distorted its meaning. By consciously preserving its philosophical roots, ensuring ethical practice, and fostering inclusivity, yoga can thrive as both an ancient spiritual discipline and a relevant modern wellness practice.

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