



“Yoga is for lazy people.”

So declared Karnataka Social Welfare Minister H. Anjaneya (Indian Express, 18 June 2015) on the eve of Modi’s Yoga Day bash. Yoga was for people who are into lavish lifestyles and are otherwise lazy, the minister explained, adding that farmers, labourers and others who work hard do not need to worry about their health and remain physically and mentally fit. Children, he declared, should be encouraged to take up sports instead of yoga.

This is not the first time someone has commented on the social base of yoga. D D Kosambi has said something similar if a bit more mildly in *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline* (2000, page 105): ‘Yoga within limits is a good system of exercise in a hot climate for those who do not live by muscular exertion and hard physical labour.’

The media did not like Anjaneya’s comment however, calling it strange and even bizarre. Some even accused him of getting his foot in his mouth, before forgetting the whole thing and going back to their impassioned debates on whether yoga was Hindu or pan-Indian, and how the support of world leaders for the Yoga Day is the best thing for ‘brand India’, etc.

But what Anjaneya said is undeniable. Yoga belongs to the well-off and sedentary lifestyle of the upper castes/classes in India, not to those who labour. And while it is not surprising of course that the socially-privileged do not want to exert themselves physically beyond some light health-oriented exercise, the twisted genius of South Asia’s caste system has been to see this lack of exertion – or laziness – as a virtue. So yoga teachers are ‘gurus’, while football coaches are just coaches.

But surely you can’t equate yoga and football, someone might ask. One is just a sport, while the other is a profound and ancient Hindu spiritual tradition going back to the Vedas, right?

Wrong, according to quite a few historians. Today's yoga, they say, is neither Hindu nor ancient, nor even fully Indian. It is true that there has been something called yoga for a very long time, which did refer to some physical exercises among other things, but this old yoga was very limited compared to what goes by the name today. According to Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya (*Indian Philosophy*, reprinted in 2000), ancient yoga was a collection of primitive exercises and other practises from pre-Vedic times. The text known as the *Yoga Sutra*, composed either in the 2nd c BCE or 5th CE according to different sources, briefly mentions some physical techniques but spends much more space explaining their magical powers. According to Chattopadhyaya, primitive magicians probably used such means to achieve hypnotic and cataleptic states in which they believed they had the power to change size, see the past and future, converse with the dead, etc. These practises with their purported powers – including the later goal of 'pure consciousness' — came to be discussed in Buddhist and Jain texts, also in the Bhagvad Gita, and were famously popular with Shaivite sadhus.

But this is not today's yoga.

According to science historian Meera Nanda (*Not As Old As You Think*, 2011, and *How Modern are We?*, 2007), ancient yoga — already modified by additions from Chinese Taoism and Shaivite ascetism — was completely re-invented in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As taught today by people like Baba Ramdev, B K Iyengar, Bikram Choudhary, etc., it largely comprises a multitude of stretching, bending, and breathing exercises, or *asanas*, which were invented by mixing European ideas of physical fitness, including gymnastics and body-building, into older practices. The chief inventor was Swami Vivekananda who felt that Indians, or Hindus, were weaklings who needed a dose of European-style strengthening. 'Anyone who goes looking for references to popular yoga techniques like *pranayam*, *neti*, *kapalbhati* or *suryanamaskar* in classical Vedic literature will be sorely disappointed.' (Nanda, 2011).

So how did the 3 sutras on exercises (out of 195) in the *Yoga Sutra*, or the 15 *asanas* described in the 14th century *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, become the 200 *asanas* in B K Iyengar's *Light on Yoga*? Through this 19th century invention.

The new yoga was aimed at strength and health, but also became credited with mystical powers of a new pseudo-scientific type, like Baba Ramdev's unsubstantiated promises of cures for cancer and other ills. This is not surprising. The Indian upper castes have never been truly modern at the best of times, says Nanda; they appropriated the products of the European Enlightenment like modern science and a constitutional government, but without its fundamental challenge to faith and tradition. Respect for the supernatural and mystical, especially the traditions of Hinduism which upholds the caste system and their own dominance in it, thus remains strong among educated savarnas.

But this superstition is couched in scientific jargon. So the Vedas are authorities on everything from maths to nuclear bombs, Vastu Shastra is about climatology and magnetism, and astrology is akin to astronomy, even as official delegations of scientists worship at Tirupati before launching satellites into space, and hydraulic engineers organise yagnas to invite rain. And yoga is the best of all since, packaged as ancient Indian knowledge – instead of the recent mix of ideas from India, the UK, the US, Sweden, etc. that it really is – its worldwide popularity 'proves' the greatness of Hinduism for the ignorant and gullible.

Where, in this history-inventing and superstition-glorifying culture, would there be space for reason, dissent, or difference? Hence the surprise, even shock, that greets someone talking in a rational manner about the social base and health limits of yoga. The physical laziness of the Indian elites, which Anjaneya criticised, is really nothing compared to their mental state.

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