

Yoga: A New dimension in fostering India-Africa engagement

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ABSTRACT

Yoga has been a practice of self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-actualization for wellbeing of human at physical, mental, emotional, behavioral, spiritual and psychological level, since 300 BCE or even earlier. Its practices are thought to date back to pre-Vedic Indian traditions, possibly to the Indus valley civilization. The objective of this research paper is to explore how the practice of yoga is being a new domain of cooperation between India and Africa. Yoga is helping India to strengthening its ties with African nations. Similarly, yoga is helping African countries in not only to lead a healthy life but also helping African countries in empowering them economically and socially. For analysis of these research objectives, I will be using secondary sources and descriptive method of study, which would be concluded by exploring all the possible dimensions of how yoga is contributing in fostering India-Africa cooperation.

KEYWORDS: - Yoga, Africa, India, Strengthen Ties, Covid-19

Conceptual Framework

Noble (2022, p36) has associated the origin of the term ‘yoga’ from the Sanskrit root “*yuj*” which means to yoke, link and unite, which symbolizes the union of individual’s mind, soul and body. It is an ancient Indian spiritual and mental development concept practiced over thousands of years ago. Noble (2022, p36) has claimed that “the original Yogic texts were in Sanskrit which is an ancient Indo-Aryan language that is the classical language of India and Hinduism which considered being one of the oldest languages in the world”. While exploring the true sense of linking individual’s mind, soul and body, he has associated it as the union of *Purusa* (the creator; and masculine) and *Prakrti* (the creation: the feminine), which indicates the unification of the individual self with the universal soul. It is widely believed that Yoga is an ancient mental, physical and spiritual practice that has originated in India.

Alston (2012, p21) has acknowledged yoga as a science, an art, a discipline, a technique of moral integrity and spiritual renewal. Yoga means unity. He has argued that if yoga is practiced regularly, it will bring wellbeing at physical, mental, emotional, behavioral, spiritual and psychological level. In similar sense to Noble and Alston, Patil (2018, p1) has argued that yoga directs individual consciousness to supra-intellectual to supersensory experience. Giving meaning to the life of human, Patil also mentions that yoga gives spiritual value to life which fully or partially transforms and deepens the knowledge and understanding of reality and of him as well.

The Conversation (2017) informs that

“Yoga is a 5,000-year-old physical mind and body practice. Most present day practices share some variation of yoga poses (asana), breathing exercises (pranayama), relaxation, and meditation”.

While such mentioned positive effects, yoga has become a powerful tool to regulate the effects of today's lifestyle, which is unhealthy and stressful. According to the Conversation (2017) various researches which notify that nowadays the most powerful effect of yoga is to regulate the effects of stress as it focuses on the behaviors which associates the well-being – such as healthier eating, improved sleep cycle and more focus on increased socialization, which corresponds with the Nobles idea of the unification of *Purus* and *Prakriti*. With such positive effects, it evidently decreases behaviors – such as smoking or substance abuse – that are associated with non-communicable diseases. Additionally, Benefits including increased flexibility and strength, enhanced awareness and integration of the body, mind and emotions helps an individual to achieve more self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-actualization at physical, mental, emotional, behavioral, spiritual and psychological level.

It is said that the spread of Indian yoga was due to human interactions and movements across the world. With the increase of interaction between Africa and Middle and Far East back to the 7th century, further expanded the practice of yoga across the continent. More trade and project interactions between Africans and Indians have intensified the spread of Yoga and its operations. Just like in India, Yoga has also been practiced in Africa especially Egypt many years ago. Kwesi & Akhan (2012, p37) have argued that “yoga has been practiced in ritual songs, ritual dances, ritual prayers, ritual chanting, ritual clothing, ritual sacrifice, ritual foods, ritual offerings, ritual architecture, ritual chanting, ritual warfare and ritual movements of Egypt”. Noble (2022, p37) has distinguished between the Indian and Egyptian practices, stating that the science, philosophy, and principles of ancient Egypt served as the foundation for what became known as Kimetic Yoga. These elements were comparable to those of Indian yoga, but with an emphasis on geometry and tongue connection. On the other hand, Indian yoga combines meditation, deep breathing, and physical movement. It places a lot of focus on breathing techniques, the theories of self-improvement and self-discovery, and mind-body-spirit healing. Kemantic yoga, however, is not the topic of this paper.

Importance and Recognition to Yoga

Yoga is now practiced everywhere in the world. Its practices have influenced number of people from different ages and gender. The number of people who practice yoga has been increasing day by day. For instance, in the United States, the number has increased from 4 million in 2001 up to 37 million in 2016 as mentioned by Shearer (2020, p1). Along similar lines, the number of people who are practicing Yoga exceeds 3 million. Mukharji (2016) mentions that Knowing the universal appeal and practice of yoga, Narendra Modi, the current prime minister of India, has made an appeal for the adoption of “an International Yoga Day”, at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on September 2014. Further he also emphasis that the major procedural consideration for UN to declare an ‘international day’ was to make sure that it met the UNGA’s guidelines. According to which, the assembly in 1980 had decided that such proposals should be “of priority concern to all or the majority of countries and should contribute to the development of international cooperation in solving global problems, in particular those affecting developing countries”.

In accordance to procedural consideration of UNGA, the prime minister has emphasized on the contribution made by yoga to health and climate change in order to ensure that the proposal to be designated as an International Yoga Day, Mukharji (2016) said that

“It was decided to table this proposal under the “global health and foreign policy” head of the UNGA’s already adopted agenda. Doing so has directly linked this proposal to two ongoing processes in multilateral negotiations – the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be adopted by Agenda 2030 in September 2015 in New York, and climate change negotiations scheduled to conclude at the Conference of Parties meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Paris in December 2015”

Venkatachalam and Banik (2022) have said that there Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has considered that yoga is not just an exercise, rather it is a way of living a healthy sustainable life which takes care of our environment. He further added that by changing our lifestyle and creating consciousness, it can also help us deal with climate change. It was considered that yoga for the well-being of the body, mind and soul, and our coexistence is in harmony with nature. By adopting resolution 69/131 on December 11, 2014, the United Nations declared June 21 to be the International Day of Yoga due to the widespread acceptance and practicality of yoga.

This resolution has enjoyed the support of a majority of the UN’s 193 member states for consideration of international day. It had the support of almost all major African countries. However Estonia, Namibia, Swaziland, Switzerland, Monaco, Solomon Islands and Zambia did not join the 177 co-sponsorship for the resolution of international Yoga day, probably for internal technical reasons. Countries like Mozambique, which is located along the Indian Ocean coastline, were among the first African co-sponsors, according to Ismail (2019). He also highlighted the involvement of Latin American nations, whose yoga schools had been fostered by well-known Indian yoga gurus, as well as those with sizable Indian Diasporas in Africa, Asia-Pacific, and the Caribbean. These nations eagerly co-sponsored the event.

Yoga: A Relief in Pandemic

Yoga has become more firmly rooted in individual fitness practices. Noticeably, during the time of pandemic, yoga (through popularity) has become a useful tool to fight not only against the virus but also in having a good healthy, sustainable way of living. It is helping people to get out of physical and psychological trauma which they have during COVID period and post COVID period. Thus, yoga has emerged as a powerful tool to help individuals, communities, and nations to combat the post COVID-19 pandemic effects. In Africa, where the pandemic has had a significant impact, yoga has been utilized to provide relief and support for those who were affected. The practice of yoga has helped practitioners to strengthen their immune system, which was crucial in fighting off infections of COVID-19. In Africa, where many people have limited access to healthcare and vaccines, yoga offers a natural and accessible way to boost their immunity for staying healthy.

As the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic situations have brought the unprecedented levels of stress and anxiety. Yoga is known to help alleviate these conditions by promoting

relaxation and mindfulness. In Africa, where many people are dealing with the economic and social impact of the pandemic, yoga provides a much-needed respite from the stresses of daily life. Though Yoga is not as widespread in Africa as it is in other parts of the world, but there are still many yoga schools and studios across the continent that offers classes in various styles of yoga. As the popularity of yoga continues to grow, it is likely that more yoga schools will open up in Africa, making this ancient practice accessible to more people on the continent in which India's support and guidance would help in not evolving this mindful, physical and spiritual practice but also in strengthening the ties between Africa and India.

Yoga in Africa: Empowering the Region

Though, the health benefits, both physical and mental, of yoga are fairly well known to everyone. However, apart from the health issue, the benefit of Yoga was emphasized by Indian Prime Minister Modi by saying that yoga could also be helpful to ensure economic and sustainable development. So, this ancient practice of Yoga can now be seen to benefit the poor in economic sense. In Africa, "the Africa Yoga Project" is using yoga as a means to improve the well-being of impoverished communities while also giving its members steady streams of income. Yoga has become more popular over the continent because to this endeavor. Yoga has extended, empowered, and educated the youth of 15 African countries since 2006, including Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Mali, Namibia, Botswana, Nigeria, South Sudan, Ghana, and Somalia, according to The Conversation (2017). In spite of the difficulties the Kenyan people were suffering, this project has proven to be an opportunity. Additionally, it states that the project has trained 244 youth in Kenya to date, seen over 200 of them get salaries, and delivered over 300 free community outreach workshops to 6,000 individuals in 80 locations—from jails to schools. We can confidently state that yoga is a beneficial route to wellbeing that transcends geographies, cultures, and life experiences as the corpus of research on the practice expands.

For the case of healing, Yoga projects has been extremely helpful to treat people who has suffered during civil wars or other extremity/catastrophes in their region such as wars, rape, draught etc. For instance, Project Air was launched in Rwanda by UN in 2007, to help people to cure physical and psychological trauma among Rwandans during the genocides of 1994. Ismail (2019) says that this 'Project Air' has included counseling session and yoga exercises to help the victims. Female of Rwanda, who have experienced genocidal rapes, sexual violence and HIV/AIDS were asked to follow the counseling session of yoga which subsequently, helped them in improving their sleep cycle and appetites. Hereafter, the success of regular mediation and exercise based on the breathing techniques of yoga has helped the victims to come out of such devastating experience and motivated them to lead a normal life. With such success, same kind of projects is being introduced in other regions of Africa such as Eastern Congo and Uganda.

Joe Kitaj, by highlighting Kenya Yoga project, has mentioned that as yoga instructors,

"Kenyan young people not only have a new means of income and economic empowerment, but they also become leaders in their community promoting healthy living. Eighty percent of Kenya's unemployed population is made up of young people...Africa Yoga Project seeks teachers in to earn a stipend of \$100 USD per month and is employed as private for-hire

instructors by Africa Yoga Project upon completion of their 200-hour training. The project sends its teachers out to hospitals, orphanages, HIV centers and even jails.”

The project in Kenya was proved a great success that made many observers to initiate the same operations in South Africa, Uganda and Rwanda. In addition to this operation, yoga has also become a mechanism to promote peace-building, heal trauma and provide economic opportunities in countries with long histories of severe violence and poverty. Yoga could also create an opportunity of Yoga tourism, which will give a new picture of African states in the world. Ismail (2019) mentions that *‘Ilwad Elman’*, who returned to Somalia from Canada in 2010, established a centre that integrates the healing effects of surfing and yoga for victims of sexual violence and previous child soldiers. In order to assist young men and women in overcoming their traumatic experiences, the center hosts waterside meditations, yoga, water activities, and sharing circles—a practice known as "Ocean Therapy." This further opens the way for yoga tourism. Yoga retreats and wellness centers have become increasingly popular in many parts of the world, and Africa has the potential to develop a thriving yoga tourism industry. By promoting yoga as a tourist attraction, African countries can attract visitors and generate revenue, which can support local economies. For example, yoga tourism retreats along the Indian Ocean coastline of Mozambique is one of such examples.

Yoga is being shown now as to promote physical and mental health, which can have a positive impact on economic development in Africa. By practicing yoga, individuals can improve their physical fitness and reduce the risk of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. This can reduce healthcare costs and increase productivity as individuals are less likely to take time off work due to illness. Additionally, yoga can help to reduce stress and anxiety, which can improve mental health and increase job satisfaction and productivity. There are many economic advantages of learning and doing yoga. Apart from being a physical activity in keeping a low maintained health care form various diseases, it also economically empowers various sections of society such as- Empowering women and youth.

Yoga can also be helpful in fostering creativity and innovation, which are important drivers of economic development. By practicing yoga, the youth can develop mindfulness and focus, which can help them to approach problems in new and innovative ways. Additionally, yoga can help to develop intuition and imagination, which are important skills for entrepreneurs and innovators. They can be Yoga tutors, which is in demand in the world.

Exploring the areas of cooperation between India and Africa

Xinfeng and Chunying (2022, p221) has commented that the recent formation of Ministry of Yoga and Traditional Medicine has increased friendship between the Indians and Africans. People from Africa are integrating with Indians. Similarly, Venkatachalam and Banik (2022) have claimed that India’s civilizational wisdom in the form of yoga and indigenous medicine has also received a fillip in Africa in recent years. According to them, the recently formed AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy) ministry aims to spread awareness of Indian traditional medical systems around the world. According to them, this ministry offers several undergraduate and graduate scholarships to African students, and leaders from African nations have been asked to participate in seminars on AYUSH systems. These actions suggest that India's identity is being reshaped as a rising power that skillfully—

and frequently contradictorily—combines its expertise in contemporary science with its traditional knowledge.

The formation of Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has increased cultural interaction leading to the formation of strong friendship (tie) between Indians and the Africans. For instance, on June 21, 2022 during the International Yoga day, the ICCR organized a visual program “yoga for universal being” which aimed to explore the indigenous knowledge systems to do with healing and well-being with regard to India and Africa. Many African scholars are being sponsored by ICCR to pursue their different levels of education in India something which contributes to cultural interaction and friendship. People do share and exchange music, dances and tradition meditations. This has brought attention to many African countries to maintain their cultures as a string weapons towards development.

The positive effect of Yoga has been a greater tool of increasing friendship between Indians and Africans. Along similar lines, Yoga has extended education to many Africans through yoga schools. Number of schools has been built and many teachers have been sending there to facilitate classes. Briggs and McIntyre (2013, p407) have said that the Yoga school in Zanzibar which was established in 2009 has contributed to the development of relations between Africans and Indians by using the similar way. Thus, in that way the ties between Africa and India are deepening in new directions. Though, this area is a new area of cooperation, where a lot of potential elements could be used by the leadership of both the sides, which will surely explore new possible way of engagement.

Conclusion

Yoga is a physical, mind and body practice, which includes breathing exercises (pranayama), relaxation, and meditation. Many Researches have shown yoga as most effective way to regulate the effects of stress. Its regular practice helps in better living. India, as being a practitioner, responsible spokesperson, has championed the cause of making it helpful for entire mankind. Africa, a region where uncertainty, poverty (greater abuser of mankind) low development exist, yoga has proven an effective and not so costlier remedy in social, economic development of region. Yoga, like other developmental technology, is being a new tool of cooperation between India and Africa. Yoga can be helpful in ensuring economic development in Africa in a variety of ways. By promoting physical and mental health, empowering women, promoting tourism, fostering creativity and innovation, and encouraging sustainability, yoga can help to build strong and resilient economies in Africa. However, it is important to note that yoga is not a panacea and should not be seen as a substitute for other important economic development strategies. Rather, it should be seen as a complementary tool that can help to support and strengthen existing efforts to promote economic growth and development in Africa. Africa can seek guidance of India in this matter, which will ensure more deepened ties of India and Africa.

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