

Yoga and the Traditional Physical Practices of India: Influence, Entanglement and Confrontation

8th- 10th November 2019, SOAS University of London

Body practices such as physically-demanding āsanās, mudrās and śatkarmas did not emerge out of nowhere. Many of them likely predate the later synthetic, and profoundly influential, texts of haṭhayoga from the fifteenth century onwards. For example, the Haṭhapradīpikā (c. 1450) describes fifteen āsanās of which eight are non-seated, and later haṭha texts describe many more. But new archaeological and art-historical evidence, such as the 13th century Mahudi Gate in Dabhoi, shows that non-seated, complex postures predate these later texts of haṭhayoga by at least two centuries.

Furthermore, postures represented on temple pillars in Hampi suggest that the artists were inspired by other body-practitioners alongside yogis/fakirs (e.g. acrobats, wrestlers and dancers). If, as such sculptures suggest, these various figures shared the temples' spaces (perhaps especially during festival times), with yogis, it is possible that the yogis learned postural practices from other classes of practitioner, and introduced them into their own repertoires as yogāsanās or mudrās, either for pragmatic reasons (i.e. to catch the attention of pilgrims) or spiritual ones (i.e. to push their bodies further into extreme forms of tapas). Similarly, wandering sadhus are likely to have come into contact with other physical disciplines, such as martial arts and military training, especially around the time of the emergence of militarized yogi ākhāras.

Could it be that the yogic physical practice, in its development from the eleventh to the nineteenth century, drew widely on a variety of extra- or para-yogic body disciplines? Are the advanced āsanās, bodily mudrās, ṣatkarmas, and other innovative physical practices, the product of bodies of knowledge and practice that are not themselves strictly 'yogic'? Conversely, are analogues to, or borrowings from practices apparent in other yogic and non-yogic traditions? For example, did the contortions of acrobats have soteriological or therapeutic purposes, beyond entertainment? Did martial arts like kalaripayattu and varmakalai incorporate yogic physical practices into their training, combat or therapeutic aspects? And beyond coincidences of physical shape or questions of direct causal influence, can we point to a shared South Asian environment of 'techniques of the body' within which a range of disciplines, may have developed?

This workshop aims to bring together specialists on the various traditional physical practices of India. We are seeking papers that offer textual, historical or anthropological analysis of physical disciplines such as kushti; mallakhamb; silambam; kalaripayattu and other martial arts; military training (including Persian/Mughal); various Indian dances; acrobatics and contortionism; and any other traditional forms of Indian body disciplines, from the oldest evidence of physical training in the Dhanurveda and the Viṣṇu and Agni Pūrāṇas, to early-modern and contemporary body practices.

The workshop will have two keynote speakers (to be confirmed). Each speaker will have 30 minutes for the

presentation and 15 minutes of discussion. The conference will end with a public roundtable discussion. Travel, accommodation and meals will be covered by the Hatha Yoga Project.

Please send proposals of 500 words and a list of relevant publications to Daniela Bevilacqua (db28@soas.ac.uk) and Mark Singleton (ms156@soas.ac.uk).

Deadline for proposals: October 31st, 2018.