

Yoga - UPSC Notes

Yoga is one of the most prominent cultural exports of India. It is more than just poses and meditation. In this article, you can read all about Yoga, its history, uses, and more importantly from a [UPSC](#) perspective, how Yoga is harnessed as a soft power by the Indian establishment.

What is Yoga?

Yoga is a set of spiritual, physical and mental practices that originated in ancient India. The literal meaning of the word Yoga is union.

- Yoga combines physical exercises, poses (asanas), meditation, breathing exercises and techniques.
- The word itself means 'yog' or union of the physical with the spiritual within oneself. It also symbolises the union of individual consciousness with that of the Universal Consciousness, indicating a perfect harmony between the mind and body, human & nature.
- Yoga is also the name of one of the six schools of Hindu philosophy, the other five being Sankhya, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa and Vedanta.
 - Like the Sankhya school, the Yoga school relies on three of the six Pramanas (proof or means which leads one to knowledge) namely,
 - Pratyakṣa (perception)
 - Anumāṇa (inference)
 - Sabda (Āptavacana, word/testimony of reliable sources)
 - The Yoga school conceives the world as composed of two realities, the Purusha (consciousness) and the Prakriti (matter).
 - The Purusha is bonded to Prakriti in a living being (Jiva) and the end of this bondage is called Moksha.
- The practice of Yoga is mentioned in the Rig Veda and the Upanishads also.
- **Patanjali's Yogasutra** (2nd Century BCE) is an authoritative text on Yoga and is considered a foundational text of classical Yoga philosophy.
- During modern times and especially in the West, Yoga largely means physical exercise along with meditation and poses. However, the purpose of Yoga goes beyond having a healthy mind and body.

Yoga Origins

There is no consensus on an exact time period on the origins of Yoga.

- Some researchers believe that it originated during the Indus Valley Civilization period, others say it originated from the pre-Vedic age in eastern India.
- Some experts believe it to have originated in the [Vedic Age](#). Yet others point out to the Sramana traditions.
- The Pashupati seal excavated from Mohenjo Daro suggests a figure sitting in what is presumably the Mulabandhasana (a sitting pose in Yoga), and so a few researchers give this as evidence of Yoga having an Indus Valley origin.
- The first use of the word Yoga is from the Rig Veda in a verse to the rising Sun God in the morning.
 - However, the Rig Veda does not refer to what the Yogic practices were.
 - One of the earliest references to the practice of Yoga can be found in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, one of the first Upanishads.
 - However, the word Yoga with the same meaning as contemporary times can be found in the Katha Upanishad.
- Systematic texts of Yoga started to emerge in the early Buddhist texts, the middle Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, etc.

- In the modern era, Gurus such as Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Paramhansa Yogananda, Swami Vivekananda, Ramana Maharshi, etc. contributed to the development and popularising of Yoga all over the world.

Patanjali's Yoga Sutra

Yoga Sutra is a collection of about 195 sutras or aphorisms written in Sanskrit.

- It was composed by the sage Patanjali drawing upon the previous works and older traditions on Yoga.
- It is dated between 500 BCE and 400 CE.
- In the treatise, Patanjali describes Yoga as having eight limbs (Ashtanga). They are yama (abstinences), niyama (observances), asana (yoga postures), pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation) and samadhi (absorption).
- During medieval times, it was translated into about 40 Indian languages and also into Arabic and Old Javanese.
- The Yogasutra was almost forgotten in modern times until [Swami Vivekananda](#) resurrected it and took it to the West.

What is Hatha Yoga?

Hatha Yoga emerged during the Middle Ages (500 - 1500 CE). It was during this period that many satellite traditions of yoga emerged.

- Hatha means force and what is practised in modern times is essentially this form of Yoga with the focus on physical exercise, asanas and breathing exercises.
- Hatha Yoga is a preparatory process of Yoga so that the body is capable of sustaining higher levels of energy.
- The oldest text describing Hatha Yoga is the Amritasiddhi (11th century CE), although the term itself is not mentioned in the work.

Yoga as Soft Power

In 2014, the United Nations General Assembly declared the 21st of June to be observed every year as '[International Yoga Day](#)'. This was initiated by India and is seen as the projection of India's soft power.

- Other aspects of India's soft power have been Bollywood, Ayurveda, Vedanta, classical arts, Indian handicrafts, cuisines, etc.
- The projection of Yoga has been largely successful which is reflected in the fact that the proposal received support from more than 170 countries.
- It also showed the popularity of the ancient Indian practice of Yoga all over the world.
 - Currently, there are over 300 million practitioners of Yoga worldwide.
 - Around 50% of the practitioners are Indian-origin.
 - Yoga is popular in countries as varied as Spain, the US, Portugal, Indonesia, Morocco, the UK, Costa Rica, Italy, and so on.
- The government is trying to harness the popularity of Yoga and its benefits to project India's contributions to the world in the field of health and well-being and also spirituality.
- It can also be a big tourist boost for the country with many people visiting the country especially with a focus on learning and practicing yoga in its birthplace.
- The idea behind the Yoga day celebrations and the government's efforts in this direction is that humanity should acknowledge and celebrate Yoga - India's gift to the world.

