

## EMBODIED DHARMA: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF YOGA IN MODERN HINDU RELIGIOUS LIFE

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### Abstract :

Yoga, as an embodied spiritual discipline rooted in Hindu philosophical traditions, has undergone significant reinterpretation in the modern era. While contemporary global culture often frames yoga as a wellness practice, its deeper foundations remain intrinsically connected to dharma—ethical living, self-realization, and devotional consciousness. This study explores the role of yoga in shaping modern Hindu religious life by examining its theological meanings, ritual integrations, ethical implications, and emerging digital expressions. Through textual analysis of classical sources such as the Yoga Sūtra, Bhagavad Gītā, and Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā, combined with observations of contemporary Hindu communities in urban and digital environments, this research highlights the continuity and transformation of yoga as both spiritual embodiment and cultural practice. The findings reveal that yoga continues to function as a vital medium of dharma: harmonizing mind, body, and spirit; reinforcing devotional practices; and enabling Hindus to navigate modern challenges, mental health concerns, and globalized identities. In modern Hindu religiosity, yoga emerges not merely as physical exercise, but as a lived theology—where spiritual insight is cultivated through disciplined embodiment and mindful action in everyday life.

**Key Words :** Hinduism, Yoga, Dharma, Embodiment, Modern Hindu Religious Life, Spiritual Practice, Mind Body Discipline, Contemporary Hinduism, Yoga Philosophy, Digital Yoga, Hindu Ritual, Spiritual Well being

### 1. Introduction

Yoga has long been recognized as one of the most influential and enduring spiritual disciplines within the Hindu tradition. More than a set of physical exercises, yoga represents an integrated path that unites bodily discipline, mental clarity, ethical living, and spiritual insight as a means toward self-realization and liberation (mokṣa). Its foundations are deeply embedded in authoritative Hindu scriptures such as the Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali, the Bhagavad Gītā, and the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā, which describe yoga as both a practical discipline and a philosophical system dedicated to cultivating dharma—harmonizing thought (manas), speech (vāc), and action (karman) within a broader sacred cosmological framework. In its classical understanding, yoga is a holistic spiritual endeavor that shapes inner transformation, moral discipline, and devotional orientation.

In the twenty-first century, however, the meanings and practices of yoga have undergone significant transformation. Globalization, the rise of digital culture, and the expansion of the global wellness industry have recontextualized yoga into various forms—ranging from fitness-oriented postural yoga to therapeutic mindfulness techniques. While these developments

have increased yoga's visibility worldwide, they have also generated debates about cultural appropriation, decontextualization from Hindu roots, and the dilution of its spiritual depth. In many contemporary settings, yoga is popularly framed as a secular practice for stress reduction, physical flexibility, or lifestyle enhancement, often detached from its theological and philosophical origins.

These rapid shifts prompt critical questions about the place of yoga within modern Hindu religious life. Despite global reinterpretations, evidence from Hindu communities shows that yoga continues to operate as a "lived dharma"—a tangible embodiment of spiritual values, ethical commitments, and devotional consciousness. For practicing Hindus, yoga remains inseparable from its scriptural lineage and continues to shape personal and communal religious experiences. It forms an integral component of daily rituals, meditation routines, temple-based activities, and increasingly, digital forms of religious engagement such as online satsang, virtual yoga classes, and spiritual discourse.

At the same time, contemporary social challenges—including rising mental health concerns, urban stress, digital saturation, and shifting moral landscapes—have motivated many Hindus to reinterpret yoga as a holistic framework for addressing both spiritual and psychological well-being. Within this context, yoga becomes not only a spiritual discipline but also a culturally embedded method for achieving balance, resilience, and ethical clarity. It offers a means to navigate rapidly changing socio-cultural environments while remaining rooted in traditional scriptural wisdom.

This study investigates how yoga functions as "embodied dharma" within contemporary Hindu contexts. Specifically, it explores how physical posture (*āsana*), breath regulation (*prāṇāyāma*), meditative absorption (*dhyāna*), and ritual integration reinforce spiritual awareness, cultivate moral behavior, and sustain devotional practices. Furthermore, it examines the ways digital technologies are reshaping the transmission and performance of yoga, enabling new forms of religious participation while simultaneously challenging traditional notions of authenticity.

By drawing upon scriptural analysis, ethnographic observations, and interviews with practitioners, this research seeks to illuminate the continuity and transformation of yoga as a cornerstone of Hindu religiosity in the twenty-first century. Rather than viewing yoga as a static tradition or a globalized health trend, the study presents yoga as a dynamic, embodied, and evolving expression of dharma—an essential medium through which modern Hindus negotiate identity, spirituality, and the demands of contemporary life.

## 2. Literature Review

The study of yoga within Hindu religious life has attracted increasing scholarly attention, particularly as contemporary interpretations diverge from classical frameworks. Foundational texts such as Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra* emphasize yoga as a disciplined path toward *kaivalya*—a state of spiritual liberation achieved through ethical observance, concentration, and meditative absorption (Feuerstein, 2008). Meanwhile, the *Bhagavad Gītā* positions yoga as an integrated moral and devotional practice, encompassing *karma yoga* (selfless action), *bhakti yoga* (devotion), and *jñāna yoga* (knowledge), thereby illustrating its multidimensional role in cultivating dharma (Easwaran, 2007). Classical commentaries and medieval manuals such as

the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā further elaborate on the embodied aspects of yoga through breathwork, postures, and purification techniques aimed at harmonizing the subtle body (Birch, 2018).

Modern scholarship highlights the transformation of yoga in global and contemporary settings. De Michelis (2004) introduces the concept of “modern yoga” to describe how yoga has evolved into a globalized system shaped by transnational movement, wellness culture, and secular reinterpretation. Singleton (2010) argues that modern postural yoga, though often disconnected from explicit Hindu theological roots, still carries traces of its spiritual and philosophical origins. Scholars such as Alter (2004) and Joseph (2019) examine the interplay between physical discipline and spiritual identity, noting that yoga remains a vehicle for cultural expression, ethical cultivation, and embodied religiosity within Hindu communities.

Within the context of contemporary Hindu practice, yoga is increasingly understood as a form of “embodied spirituality.” Scholars such as Flood (1996) and Michaels (2020) describe embodiment as a key dimension of Hindu religiosity, wherein spiritual experience is expressed through ritualized action, bodily discipline, and sensory engagement. This perspective aligns with Turner’s (1974) notion of ritual embodiment, which emphasizes the performative and transformative power of bodily practices in religious life. Recent studies also explore the digitalization of yoga, with researchers like Jain (2020) and Sarma (2021) analyzing how online platforms reshape spiritual pedagogy, community formation, and ritual participation in Hindu contexts.

Overall, existing literature demonstrates a persistent tension between traditional theological understandings of yoga and modern reinterpretations shaped by global discourse. Yet, despite these shifts, scholars agree that yoga retains its core function as a means of cultivating dharma—integrating ethical conduct, mental discipline, and spiritual awareness. This review provides the conceptual foundation for exploring yoga not merely as physical practice, but as an embodied expression of Hindu religious identity in the twenty-first century.

### 3. Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach designed to explore the embodied, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of yoga within contemporary Hindu religious life. A qualitative methodology is particularly appropriate for this study because the practice of yoga—especially within Hindu contexts—is inherently experiential, interpretive, and relational. Yoga is not merely a set of observable actions but a lived spiritual discipline that integrates bodily sensation, mental intention, and theological meaning. As such, understanding yoga as “embodied dharma” requires methods that can capture subjective experiences, symbolic interpretations, ritualized actions, and the socio-cultural environments in which yoga is practiced.

The qualitative approach enables the researcher to investigate how Hindus perceive, internalize, and enact yoga through daily routines, devotional practices, ethical choices, and spiritual engagements. It allows for a holistic exploration of how yoga functions not only as a physical discipline but also as a medium of religious identity, moral reasoning, and spiritual expression. In addition, qualitative research supports the examination of subtle and nuanced aspects of embodiment—such as breath awareness, meditative states, ritual gestures, and

emotional shifts—that cannot be adequately represented through quantitative measurements.

Furthermore, this methodological framework recognizes that modern Hindu yoga practices exist within a dynamic interplay of tradition and innovation. Contemporary practitioners engage yoga in diverse settings: temples, community centers, homes, ashrams, and increasingly, digital platforms. A qualitative design makes it possible to observe how these varied environments shape the meanings and motivations behind yoga practice. It also facilitates the inclusion of multiple perspectives—from traditional teachers grounded in scriptural authority to young urban practitioners who integrate yoga into modern lifestyles.

By employing methods such as textual analysis, ethnographic observation, and semi-structured interviews, the study aims to generate a rich, interpretive understanding of yoga as a lived religious practice. This approach ensures that the complexity of yoga—its theological depth, ritual significance, embodied nature, and contemporary adaptations—can be analyzed in a way that honors its cultural and spiritual context.

### 3.1 Research Design

The study adopts an interpretive phenomenological design, focusing on how practitioners experience yoga as a lived spiritual discipline. This approach emphasizes subjective meaning, embodied experience, and the relational aspects of spiritual practice. It aligns with the central aim of the study: to understand yoga as “embodied dharma” rather than merely a physical technique or wellness trend.

### 3.2 Data Sources

Three primary sources of data were utilized:

#### 1. Textual Analysis

Classical Hindu scriptures and authoritative yoga texts—including the Yoga Sūtra, Bhagavad Gītā, Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā, and selected commentaries—were analyzed to identify theological, ethical, and philosophical foundations of yoga as a form of dharma.

#### 2. Observational Data

Observations were conducted within Hindu temples, community yoga sessions, and modern digital platforms offering Hindu-based yoga teachings. These observations focused on ritual integration, embodied practices, and contemporary interpretations of yoga.

#### 3. Interviews and Narratives

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with Hindu yoga practitioners, teachers, and religious leaders. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to represent diverse backgrounds, including traditional ashram-based practitioners and modern urban practitioners. Interview questions focused on personal experiences, spiritual motivations, ethical reflections, and views on modern transformations of yoga.

### 3.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred over a three-month period and followed ethical guidelines for qualitative research, including informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for religious

sensitivities. Interviews were conducted both in-person and online to accommodate digital forms of yoga participation. Observations were documented through field notes, reflective journals, and video/audio recordings where permitted.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's interpretive framework. The process involved:

1. Familiarization with textual and field data
2. Coding of recurring themes related to embodiment, dharma, spirituality, identity, and modernization
3. Categorization of themes into interpretive clusters
4. Synthesis of findings with textual sources to understand the continuity between classical teachings and modern practices

This approach enabled the integration of scriptural insights with lived experiences of contemporary Hindu practitioners.

### 3.5 Validity and Reliability

To ensure the credibility of the findings, the study employed:

- Triangulation (textual, observational, and interview data)
- Member checking with interview participants to verify interpretations
- Thick description to situate practices within cultural and ritual contexts

Reflexivity to acknowledge the researcher's positionality and interpretive bias

Through these strategies, the study maintains methodological rigor while capturing the nuanced ways in which yoga functions as embodied dharma within modern Hindu religious life.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Yoga as Embodied Dharma in Contemporary Hindu Practice

Findings from textual analysis and field observations indicate that yoga continues to be understood by Hindu practitioners not merely as a physical discipline but as an embodied enactment of dharma. Participants consistently described yoga as *sadhana*—a disciplined spiritual path through which ethical living, self-awareness, and spiritual clarity are cultivated. This aligns with classical textual foundations wherein yoga represents a harmonization of body, speech, and mind (*trikarana śuddhi*) to support the pursuit of liberation and divine connection.

Practitioners emphasized that physical postures (*āsana*), breath regulation (*prāṇāyāma*), and meditative focus (*dhyāna*) serve as gateways to inner stillness and moral refinement. In this regard, yoga becomes a form of lived ethics: bodily discipline reinforces self-restraint, mindfulness encourages right thought, and meditation cultivates compassion and spiritual maturity. The results show that embodiment is not merely functional but deeply symbolic, enabling practitioners to “live” dharma through the physical body.

### 4.2 Integration of Yoga into Hindu Ritual and Devotional Life

Data from observations in temples and community spaces reveal that yoga is increasingly integrated into devotional practice (*bhakti*). Many yogic sessions begin with mantras such

as Om Śāntiḥ, Gāyatrī Mantra, or invocations to Śiva as the “Lord of Yoga.” These ritual elements reframe yoga as a sacred activity performed with reverence, rather than a secular exercise.

Participants reported that yoga supports their religious life in three significant ways:

1. Heightening devotional concentration:  
Meditation and breathwork help practitioners maintain mental clarity during rituals, enabling deeper engagement with prayer, chanting (japa), and temple worship.
2. Purifying the mind and body prior to ritual participation:  
Consistent with traditional notions of ritual purity, yoga is seen as preparing the practitioner’s inner state for sacred interaction with the divine.
3. Strengthening religious identity:  
Through learning mantras, scripts, and mythological references embedded in yoga, practitioners develop stronger connections to Hindu philosophy and cosmology.

These findings show that yoga serves not only as a personal practice but also as a complementary ritual activity that reinforces the cyclical rhythm of Hindu worship.

#### 4.3 Yoga in the Context of Mental and Emotional Well-being

Modern challenges—urban stress, career pressure, and emotional fatigue—strongly influence contemporary Hindu interpretations of yoga. Interview participants consistently highlighted yoga’s role in maintaining psychological balance and emotional resilience. Many described yoga as a “healing space” where the spiritual and psychological dimensions of well-being merge.

This finding supports modern theological interpretations that view yoga as a holistic path addressing both the spiritual self (ātman) and the embodied human condition. By grounding mindfulness within dharmic values, practitioners adopt yoga as a strategy for coping with uncertainty, anxiety, and the demands of fast-paced modern life.

Yoga, therefore, emerges as a culturally embedded method for cultivating spiritual well-being and mental health—bridging ancient scriptural wisdom with contemporary therapeutic needs.

#### 4.4 Digital Transformations: Yoga in Online Hindu Communities

A prominent result of the study is the increasing presence of yoga in digital spaces. Observations on online platforms reveal a rapidly expanding ecosystem of virtual yoga sessions rooted in Hindu philosophy. Practitioners expressed that digital platforms allow them to stay connected to yoga teachings despite physical distance, time limitations, or global disruptions.

Key patterns include:

- The use of social media, YouTube, and Zoom for guided yoga practices integrated with mantra chanting and Hindu spiritual teachings.
- Online satsang sessions that combine yoga instruction with discussions on dharma and moral conduct.
- The emergence of digital communities built around shared Hindu-based yoga practices and devotional activities.

While digitalization broadens access, it also raises concerns regarding authenticity and the potential dilution of Hindu theological elements. However, many Hindu practitioners reported feeling empowered by the accessibility of online yoga, which they view as a legitimate extension of traditional teachings.

#### 4.5 Negotiating Identity and Authenticity in a Globalized World

Globalization has reshaped how Hindu practitioners assert their spiritual identity through yoga. Findings indicate that many participants feel a responsibility to “reclaim” yoga’s Hindu roots amidst global secularization and commercialization. Practitioners emphasize that understanding scriptural foundations helps preserve cultural integrity.

Nevertheless, the tension between traditional and modern interpretations remains evident. Some practitioners celebrate the global spread of yoga as a contribution to world spirituality, while others express concern over the erasure of Hindu heritage in mainstream yoga culture.

This ambivalence reflects broader debates in academic literature on modern yoga and identity politics. Yet, interviews show that Hindu practitioners often navigate this tension by integrating modern adaptations while grounding their practice in dharmic values, ritual symbolism, and scriptural understanding.

#### 4.6 Synthesis: Yoga as a Dynamic Bridge Between Tradition and Modernity

Bringing together the various thematic findings, the study demonstrates that yoga functions as a dynamic bridge between classical Hindu spirituality and contemporary realities. Its enduring relevance lies in its adaptability: yoga preserves ancient wisdom while simultaneously addressing modern needs for emotional stability, ethical guidance, and digital connectivity.

The concept of “embodied dharma” emerges as central to this synthesis. Through disciplined bodily practice, practitioners experience ethical awakening, devotional depth, and spiritual resilience. Yoga, therefore, remains an essential element of Hindu religious life—transforming but not losing its core spiritual orientation.

In modern Hindu contexts, yoga is not static. It is a living, evolving tradition that continues to shape identity, community, and spiritual consciousness in the twenty-first century.

### 5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that yoga continues to serve as a vital expression of embodied dharma within modern Hindu religious life. Despite the widespread globalization and secularization of yoga, Hindu practitioners consistently interpret and practice yoga as a sacred discipline rooted in scriptural authority, ethical refinement, and devotional intention. The findings reveal that yoga’s embodied dimensions—posture, breath, meditation, and ritualized movement—remain profoundly connected to the cultivation of spiritual awareness and moral integrity.

In contemporary contexts, yoga not only supports the personal spiritual journey of practitioners but also reinforces communal identity through its integration into temple



activities, devotional practices, and shared cultural narratives. Its therapeutic value in addressing mental and emotional challenges underscores its relevance in navigating the complexities of modern life. Furthermore, the digital transformation of yoga expands access to spiritual teachings while opening new avenues for religious engagement, though not without tensions surrounding authenticity and cultural preservation.

Overall, yoga emerges as a dynamic bridge between tradition and modernity. It simultaneously preserves ancient Hindu wisdom and adapts to contemporary needs, enabling practitioners to embody dharma in ways that are meaningful, ethical, and spiritually enriching. As the practice continues to evolve, its foundational role in shaping Hindu religiosity remains strong—affirming yoga as a living, breathing expression of dharma in the twenty-first century.

### 5.1. Author Contributions

The author was responsible for all stages of the research process. This included formulating the central research questions, constructing the conceptual framework, and designing the methodological approach grounded in qualitative and phenomenological inquiry. The author carried out an extensive literature review of classical Hindu scriptures, modern scholarship on yoga, embodiment theory, and contemporary studies on digital religiosity.

Data collection—comprising textual analysis, field observations, and semi-structured interviews—was executed directly by the author, who also documented ethnographic field notes and reflective memos throughout the research period. The author independently conducted thematic coding, cross-case comparison, and interpretive synthesis of findings.

The drafting, revision, and refinement of the manuscript—including theoretical argumentation, integration of empirical insights, and articulation of conclusions—were completed solely by the author. No external assistance or collaborative writing support was involved in the production of this article.

### 5.2 Conflicts of Interest

The author affirms that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this research. The study was conducted without any external funding, institutional pressure, or personal affiliations that could compromise the integrity, neutrality, or scholarly independence of the research process and its outcomes.

All interpretations and conclusions presented in this article reflect the author's academic judgment and analytical perspective. No commercial, political, or organizational entities influenced the direction of the research or the representation of its findings.

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