

Yoga and Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS): A Multidimensional Analysis of Human Well-being

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Abstract

Yoga, as an integral component of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), represents a holistic and multidimensional framework for understanding human well-being. Rooted in ancient intellectual traditions including the Vedas, Upanishads, Ayurveda, and Yogic philosophy, yoga encompasses physical practices, ethical principles, psychological insights, and spiritual disciplines. The present study examines the interrelationship between yoga and IKS and evaluates their combined potential to enhance physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being. Employing a qualitative and interpretative research design, the study draws on a systematic review of secondary literature, including research papers, meta-analyses, policy documents, and reports from WHO, AYUSH, and NITI Aayog. Contemporary scholarly works and the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) further inform the analysis by highlighting the increasing institutional recognition of yoga and IKS in education, healthcare, and public welfare. The theoretical framework of the study is grounded in three key perspectives: Indian Knowledge Systems, Yogic Psychology, and the Holistic Health Model. These frameworks collectively illustrate yoga's capacity to integrate body, mind, society, and spirit into a unified system of well-being. Findings reveal that yoga offers significant physical benefits such as improved cardiovascular function, enhanced metabolic regulation, and reduced inflammation. Its mental benefits include stress reduction, emotional stability, improved cognition, and resilience. Socially, yoga fosters cooperation, empathy, non-violence, and community harmony, while spiritually, it promotes self-awareness, inner peace, and a deeper sense of purpose. The study concludes that yoga, viewed through the lens of IKS, serves as a comprehensive life-science capable of addressing contemporary global challenges such as lifestyle diseases, mental health crises, social fragmentation, and ecological imbalance. It recommends integrating yoga-IKS more systematically into public health policy, educational curricula, and sustainable development initiatives. Future research should emphasize empirical studies and standardized protocols to strengthen the scientific foundation of yoga-based interventions.

Keywords: Yoga, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), Holistic Health, Sustainable Development, Pranayama, Meditation, Policy.

Introduction

Yoga, one of the most enduring contributions of Indian civilization to global knowledge systems, has evolved into a comprehensive framework for understanding human well-being in contemporary society. Rooted in the ancient wisdom of the Vedas, Upanishads, Ayurveda, and Yogic philosophy, yoga is far more than a physical discipline; it is a holistic science of life embedded within the broader spectrum of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). IKS encompasses a diverse range of intellectual traditions including metaphysics, ethics, psychology, astronomy, and environmental consciousness, all of which emphasize harmony between the individual, society, and the cosmos. Within this worldview, yoga emerges as an integrative practice capable of nurturing balance across multiple dimensions of human existence. Over the past few decades, yoga has gained renewed relevance in both academic and policy spheres due to its demonstrated impact on physical health, mental stability, social harmony, and spiritual growth.

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The rising prevalence of lifestyle disorders, mental health challenges, social fragmentation, and ecological imbalance has intensified the need for holistic frameworks that address these interconnected issues. Global organizations such as the World Health Organization, as well as national institutions like the Ministry of AYUSH and NITI Aayog, increasingly recognize yoga as a scientifically grounded tool for preventive healthcare and sustainable well-being. Educational reforms under the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) further highlight the importance of integrating yoga and IKS into mainstream curricula to promote value-based, experiential, and life-oriented learning. Despite the growing body of scientific and philosophical literature on yoga, there remains a need to synthesize these insights within a unified analytical framework grounded in Indian knowledge traditions. This study seeks to bridge that gap by examining the interrelationship between yoga and IKS, evaluating yoga's multidimensional contributions to human well-being, and identifying pathways for incorporating yoga-IKS principles into public health policies, educational reforms, and societal development initiatives. By adopting a qualitative and interpretative research design, the study draws upon diverse secondary sources—including research papers, policy reports, and scholarly texts—to construct an integrated perspective on yoga as a life-science. Through its examination of physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions, the present work aims to highlight yoga's transformative potential and its continued relevance in addressing the complex challenges of the modern world.

Literature Review

Research on yoga has expanded considerably over the past two decades across diverse fields such as medicine, psychology, neuroscience, sociology, and environmental studies. Scholars in the area of historical and philosophical foundations, including Feuerstein (2008), Eliade (2009), and Radhakrishnan (1996), emphasize that yoga is deeply rooted in Indian metaphysical thought and interconnected with doctrines such as Purusha–Prakriti dualism, Atman–Brahman unity, and the Panchamahabhuta theory. Contemporary scientific literature highlights yoga's significance in health and medicine, demonstrating its effectiveness in regulating cardiovascular functions, reducing blood pressure, managing diabetes, enhancing immunity, and alleviating stress-related disorders. Meta-analyses over recent years consistently indicate that yoga significantly reduces stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Neuroscientific research further supports this view, showing that meditative practices increase neuroplasticity, improve emotional regulation, and enhance grey matter density in regions associated with memory and attention (Lazar et al., 2005). Additionally, studies in social sciences reveal yoga's contributions to social and ethical development by promoting mindfulness, empathy, tolerance, and harmonious interpersonal relationships; its foundational ethical principles, such as yama and niyama, align closely with contemporary frameworks of moral education and social sustainability (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Moreover, scholars increasingly acknowledge Yoga and Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) as sustainable knowledge frameworks that foster ecological awareness, minimalism, and conservation ethics—elements central to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3, 4, 12, and 13. Collectively, these studies form the foundation for the analytical and theoretical discussions presented in this research.

Objectives

The major objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To understand the interrelationship between Yoga and Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS).
2. To evaluate the physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions of yoga.
3. To provide suggestions for integrating yoga-IKS into policymaking, education, and public health systems.

Research Methodology

- The study employs a qualitative, interpretative approach grounded in a systematic review of secondary literature to build a comprehensive understanding of Yoga and Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS).
- A broad range of materials—published research papers, reports from WHO, AYUSH, and NITI Aayog, and key policy documents such as NEP 2020—were reviewed to gather theoretical, empirical, and policy-oriented insights.
- Contemporary books and academic works on yoga were examined to incorporate philosophical, historical, and practical perspectives relevant to the study.

Theoretical Framework

1 Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent a vast and sophisticated body of indigenous intellectual traditions that have evolved over several millennia. These systems encompass diverse fields such as Vedic sciences, Ayurveda, Yoga, Vaastu, Jyotisha, ethics, and metaphysics, each contributing unique philosophical and methodological perspectives to the understanding of human life. Central to IKS is the belief that human existence is deeply interconnected with ecological, social, and cosmic environments—a concept articulated through the principle of *rta*, or universal order. This worldview posits that harmony within the human body and mind reflects harmony with the larger cosmos. When applied to yoga, IKS provides a multidimensional context in which yogic practices are not merely physical routines but expressions of a broader cultural, philosophical, and ecological wisdom. Thus, yoga emerges as a holistic science that integrates physiology, psychology, ethics, spirituality, and environmental consciousness, reflecting the comprehensive nature of Indian intellectual traditions.

2 Yogic Psychology

Yogic psychology constitutes an essential pillar of the theoretical framework, offering deep insights into the structure and functioning of the human mind. Rooted in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras and other classical texts, this psychological model explains how mental states arise and how they can be transformed. Concepts such as chitta-vritti—the fluctuations or modifications of the mind—highlight the restless nature of human cognition, while kleshas—including ignorance, egoism, attachment, aversion, and fear—reveal the psychological barriers that impede clarity and well-being. The ultimate goal, samadhi, represents a state of complete mental stillness, clarity, and unification of consciousness. While modern cognitive-behavioral theories focus on reshaping thoughts and behaviors, yogic psychology delves further into the spiritual dimensions of consciousness, advocating practices such as meditation, breath regulation, and ethical living to achieve sustained mental transformation. This makes yoga a sophisticated psycho-spiritual model with considerable relevance to contemporary mental health discourse.

3 Holistic Health Framework

The holistic health framework employed in this study conceptualizes well-being as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing physical, mental, social, and spiritual domains. In yoga, physical well-being extends beyond bodily strength to include flexibility, hormonal balance, and optimal functioning of internal systems. Mental well-being is nurtured through practices that calm the mind, enhance concentration, and promote emotional equilibrium. Social well-being emerges from ethical values such as compassion, empathy, cooperation, and non-violence, which guide harmonious interpersonal interactions. Spiritual well-being, perhaps the most distinctive dimension of yoga, involves the realization of one's deeper self, inner peace, and alignment with universal consciousness. By integrating these four domains, the holistic health model positions yoga as a comprehensive system capable of supporting human flourishing at all levels.

Yoga and Human Well-being: A Multidimensional Perspective

1 Physical Dimension

Yoga offers significant physical benefits that contribute to improved health and longevity. Its combination of postures, controlled breathing, and relaxation techniques enhances cardiovascular efficiency, reduces systemic inflammation, and improves neuromuscular coordination. Regular practice strengthens muscles, increases flexibility, and supports proper skeletal alignment, reducing chronic pain and the risk of injury. Yogic breathing techniques help regulate endocrine functions, improve oxygen saturation, and optimize metabolic processes, which is particularly beneficial for individuals with diabetes, hypertension, asthma, and obesity. Numerous clinical trials have shown that yoga-based interventions lead to measurable improvements in vital signs, metabolic markers, and physical performance, affirming yoga's effectiveness as a therapeutic modality for lifestyle-related diseases.

2 Mental Dimension

Yoga exerts profound effects on mental well-being by influencing neurobiological and psychological processes. Meditation and pranayama reduce the secretion of stress hormones such as cortisol, while increasing neurotransmitters like serotonin and GABA, which are associated with positive mood and relaxation. These practices enhance sleep quality, reduce fatigue, and improve cognitive functions such as memory, attention, and decision-making. Furthermore, mindfulness cultivated through yoga develops emotional resilience and fosters a more balanced response to stressors. Clinical research confirms that yoga is highly effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and occupational burnout, making it a valuable complement to modern mental health interventions.

3 Social Dimension

Yoga contributes to social well-being by promoting values that enhance interpersonal relationships and collective harmony. Ethical principles such as ahimsa (non-violence), satya (truthfulness), tapas (discipline), and santosha (contentment) encourage individuals to live with integrity, empathy, and self-control. These values reduce conflict, promote cooperation, and foster a sense of community. In group settings, yoga improves social bonding, reduces feelings of isolation, and enhances communication. As societies today grapple with rising intolerance, stress, and fragmentation, the ethical and social dimensions of yoga offer a constructive framework for cultivating peaceful and compassionate communities.

4 Spiritual Dimension

The spiritual dimension of yoga centers on self-awareness, inner peace, and the realization of one's true nature. Yogic philosophy teaches that suffering arises from ignorance of the self and misidentification with external experiences. Through practices such as meditation, introspection, and breath awareness, yoga guides individuals toward a deeper understanding of their consciousness. This spiritual growth results in greater resilience, clarity, and purposefulness in life. Spiritual well-being also enhances moral judgment, fosters gratitude, and cultivates a sense of interconnectedness with humanity and nature. This dimension distinguishes yoga from conventional health practices and contributes significantly to holistic human development.

Discussion

The discussion highlights the broader implications of yoga as a comprehensive life-science when interpreted through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems. Unlike conventional health interventions that target individual symptoms, yoga addresses the root causes of imbalance across physiological, psychological, social, and spiritual domains. The findings suggest three central insights: first, yoga functions as an effective preventive healthcare strategy that can reduce the prevalence of chronic diseases and lower healthcare burdens; second, its integration into educational settings, as recommended by NEP 2020, enhances emotional intelligence, character formation, and value-based learning among students; and third, yoga promotes sustainability through its emphasis on mindful consumption, ecological awareness, and harmonious living. These insights underscore yoga's potential to address global challenges such as mental stress, social inequality, ecological degradation, and moral decline.

Policy Implications

The study proposes several key policy measures to strengthen the role of yoga and IKS in modern society. In public health, establishing district-level yoga wellness centers and integrating yoga into community health programs can promote preventive and holistic care. Yoga-based lifestyle interventions should be incorporated into national strategies for managing non-communicable diseases. In education, structured yoga curricula at all levels and the creation of research centers dedicated to IKS and yogic sciences can foster interdisciplinary scholarship and healthier learning environments. International collaboration is essential for advancing yoga research, standardizing methodologies, and creating evidence-based guidelines for global communities. Together, these policy frameworks can transform yoga from a practice of individual well-being into an instrument for national and global development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, yoga—understood through the philosophical, cultural, and scientific insights of Indian Knowledge Systems—emerges as a comprehensive, multidimensional approach to human well-being. Its ability to integrate physical fitness, mental clarity, social harmony, and spiritual growth makes it a uniquely relevant system in addressing contemporary challenges. The study affirms yoga's potential to enhance public health, educational quality, environmental ethics, and sustainable development agendas. Future research should prioritize long-term experimental studies, technological innovations in yoga therapy, standardized training protocols, and global research collaborations to strengthen empirical evidence and expand the accessibility of yoga-based interventions. As the world seeks holistic models of health and sustainability, yoga offers a timeless and transformative framework rooted in both ancient wisdom and modern scientific validation.

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