A review of asanas referenced in ancient texts and a brief comparative study of selected asanas

Sriharisukesh N and Subramanya Pailoor

Abstract

Yoga is a classical philosophy and a way of life that is designed to enable attainment of well being and spiritual perfection in our lives. The well being and spiritual perfection still continues to be in the realm of subjective realisation, there is more requirement of research and study in the documentation on Yoga in various aspects. The antiquity of the yogic tradition is difficult to calculate, but from the data currently available, it has been established that it was prevalent during the early Vedic period. Even though no direct explanation have been discovered to date on the method of Ashtanga Yoga, the concept of yoga is explicitly dwelt on in the Vedic Literature. Hatha Yoga is one of the important stream of yogic tradition where Asanas find prominence and is defined as the tool to maintaining the body fit, healthy and immune to diseases. The main source for these Asanas are the Hathapradeepika, the Gheranda Samhita, and the Hatharathnavali; texts that describe various types of Asanas. There are references to, and information about, Hatha Yogic practice in Thirumandiram which is a Tamil script written by Thirumula Naymar. Yoga Rahasya of Nathamuni mentions the names of multiple Asanas, but doesnot elaborate on the method of practicing. Amongst the Puranas, Agni Purana has explained the significance and importance of Asthanga Yoga. Also the Agamas like Ahirbudhya Samhitha has mentioned the importance of Asthanga Yoga in following a Spiritual life. Other than Hatha Yogic texts another remarkable source for Asanas is the Rudra Yamala Uutta Tantra. This present review of the literature explores the scriptural evidence for Asanas, the procedures described therein, and a brief comparative analysis of a few Asanas. There are still more texts to be studied, explored and reviewed to understand the actual antiquity of Yoga and the procedure for various Asanas and their impact.

Keywords: Yogasanas, ancient texts, hathayoga

Introduction

In Yoga, it is laid down that regular Asana practice promises to deliver the capability to overcome dualities in our life. So what is this Asana ? The Patanjali Yoga Sutra defines Asana as the posture that gives stability and comfort “sthiram sukham asanam”. And this is possible through “prayathna shaithilya and anantha samapatti which suggests practising asanas, with minimum effort and focussing on contemplation of the infinite. Except for Hatha Yoga, all schools of Yoga uses Asanas are mainly intended to the advanced state of meditation. Hatha yoga uses Asanas as a technique to prepare the body to do an advanced state of Pranayama, and to balance the “Thridosha” to prevent all diseases. From amongst the multiple schools of yoga prevalent today, the Hathyogya stream is currently the most popular.

As explained in the “Shivayogadeepika” written by Sadashiva Brahmendra, an important benefit of practicing Hatha Yoga is that it will eliminate all the morbidity from the body, so that diseases can be prevented. A healthy body is the fundamental requirement to attain spiritual realization. Therefore it follows that it is important to practice multiple Asanas to prepare the body to actualise its potential.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the present study is to review the ancient texts and find out the original text reference for the Asanas. Also to do the comparative analysis of the procedure of selected Asanas based on textual reference.
The Aim of Asanas
The Pathanjali Yogasutra declares that regular practice of Yoga Asana will overcome the dualities at both levels: mental and physical. To realise the maximum impact of Yoga through the physical aspects of Asana, the procedure should be done with minimum effort and to attain the mental steadiness infinite contemplation must be practised with ease. One of the primary obstacles to Yoga is Vyādhi. When there is an imbalance in the homeostasis of the Thridoshas, it creates Vyādhi or disease. The stream of Hatha Yoga recommends multiple types of Asanas and Kumbhakas to purify the body and subtle energy channels in our body. So it follows that when we regularly practise Asanas our body develops immunity and resistance. This impact is being validated through research studies in this area.

The Number of Asanas
The Yogadharmopanishat defines the number of Asanas as equal to the number of species existing in this universe, “asānani ca tavanti yavantyo jīvajatayah”. The Rudrayamala Uțtara Tantra puts it at 100 crores, (shatālakṣaṇa sahasraṇi asānani mahiḥtale). But of course, so many Asanas cannot be practiced in one’s normal lifespan. Therefore the significance of the Hatha Yogic texts that have captured a condensed repertoire of the main Asanas. The Hathapradēepikā delineates on 84 Asanas as advised by Lord Shiva. The Thirumandiram written by Thirumoolo Nayanar mentions 126 important Asanas. Hatharathnavali also mentions the names of 84 Asanas, but describes in detail about 31 Asanas only.

The Ancient Texts as the source
Many Hathi Yogic texts have been found and these explain about the various methods of practice of Yogasanas. Hathapradēepikā is the most often referenced text. The Gheranda Samhitāh and the Hatharathnavali provides more information about quite a number of Asanas and how to practice those Asanas. While the Hathapradēepikā explains 15 Asanas the Gheranda Samhitā describes 32 Asanas. The Hatharathnavali dwells on 31 Asanas. Apart from these, there is Vaisishtha Samhitā, Yoga Yajnavalkya, Ahirbudhnya Samhitā, etc.

In Thridonk literature, the Rudrayamala Uțtara Thāntra contains information about multiple Asanas. Here, various methods of Asanas are explained in secret tantric practices, besides which 54 Asanas linked to Hatha Yoga Tradition can be found. Surprisingly these are the Asanas that have no manuscript reference for them though currently validated through research studies in this area.

Asanas in Hatha Pradēepikā.
Swasthikasana, Gomukhasana, Virasana, Kurmasana, Kwukkutahasana, Uttanakurmasana, Dhumaraṇasana, Dhanurasana, Mathsyendrasana, Mayurasana, Padmasana, Pashchimottanasana, Baddhayōnasana, Mahābhukasana, Khecarrasana, Prananasan, Apananasan, Saṃmanasana, Grandhihbedasana, Sarvangasana(Shoulder Stand Posture), Mayurasana, Jñananasan, Parvathasana, Vāyuḥrasana, Bhallukasana, Kamasana, Varthulasana, Mokshasana, Malasana, Divyasana, Adhodayasana, Chandrasana, Hamsasana, Suryasana, Yogasana, Gadasana, Laksyhasana, Kalyāṣasana, Brahmaṇasana, Kṣathriyayasa, Vaishyasana, Jathyasana, Pashavasana. Total of 54 asanas.

Asanas in Yoga Yajna vallka
Swasthikasana, Padmasana, Bhadrasana, Bhadrasana, Virasana, Swasthikasana, Bhadrasana, Mukthasana, Gomukhasana, Virasana, Mathsyasana, Mathsyendrasana, Gorakshasana, Pashchimottanasana, Utkatatasana, Samkatasana, Mayurasana, Kukkutahasana, Kurmasana, Uthtanakurmasana, Utthanamandukasana, Virkhasana, Mandukasana, Garudanasan, Vrhhasana, Shubhahasana, Makarasaṇa, Uṣhrasana, Bhujangasana, Yogasana. Total of 32 Asanas.

Asanas in Aḥirbudhnya Samhitā
Chakrasana, Padmasana, Kurmasana, Mayurasana, Kukkutasana, Virasana, Swasthikasana, Bhadrasana, Simhasana, Mukthasana, Gomukhasana. Total of 11 Asanas.

Asanas in Rudra Yamala Uttara Tantra
Mundasana, Padmasana, Buddhaipadmasana, Swasthikasana, Kārmukasana, Kukkutasana, Khaghasana, Lolasana, Uththāmangasana, Parvathasana, Yoniyasana, Baddhayonyasana, Mahābhukasana, Khecarrasana, Prananasana, Apananasana, Sammanasana, Grandhihbedasana, Sarvangasana(Shoulder Stand Posture), Mayurasana, Jñananasana, Parvathasana, Sarpasana, Skandhasana, Kurmasana, Kumbhikarasana, Mathsyasana, Makarasaṇa, Kuncharasana, Vyāgirasana, Bhallukasana, Kamasana, Varthulasana, Mokshasana, Malasana, Divyasana, Adhodayasana, Chandrasana, Hamsasana, Suryasana, Yogasana, Gadasana, Lakṣyhasana, Kalyāṣasana, Brahmaṇasana, Kṣathriyayasa, Vaishyasana, Jathyasana, Pashavasana. Total of 54 asanas.

Asanas in Vaisishtha Samhitā
Swasthikasana, Gomukhasana, Padmasana, Virasana, Simhasana, Mayurasana, Kukkutasana, Kurmasana, Bhadrasana, Mukthasana. Total of 10 Asanas.

Asanas in Hatharathnavali
Siddhasana, Bhadrasana, Simhasana, Padmasana, Mayurasana (Dandamayurasana), Parshwamayurasana, Pindamayurasana, Ekapadāmayurasana, Bhaivrassana, Kamaḍahahasana, Panipithrasana, Dhanurasana, Swasthikasana, Gomukhasana, Virasana, Mandakasana, Markatasaṇa, Mathisyendrasana two variations, Niramalabanacana, Saurasana, Ekapadāyasana, Pānhrindrasana, Pachshimatanacana, Shayitha Pascimathanakam, Vichīṭhrakaranīnasana, Dhōoanapīthasana (vidhoonanam), Padapidanasana, Kukkutasana, Uthtanakurmasana, Vṛṣṭhikasana, Shavasana. Total of 31 Asanas.

Asanas in Thrishihki Brahmanopanishat
Swasthikasana, Gomukhasana, Virasana, Yogasana, Padmasana, Kukkutasana, Uthtanakurmasana, Dhanurasana, Simhasana, Bhadrasana, Mukthasana, Mayurasana, Mathisyasana, Siddhasana, Pachchimathanasana, Sukhasana. Total of 16 Asanas.

A Brief Comparative Study of Select Asanas
The scale of Yogiic Science is so vast that a comprehensive study of all Asanas is a tremendous exercise which calls for a more focussed and long term research. However an attempt has been made to carry out a comparative analysis on a few selected Asanas; the Asanas that are in common practice today.
Gomukhasana

Gomukhasana as explained in the Hathapradipika and the Gheranda Samhitha etc describes the method s: Place the right heel on the left side of the buttock and left heel on the right side of the buttock so as to resemble the face of a cow [7, 10]. But at present we do this Asana by holding of hands from our back. In fact many consider this method as a modification of the actual Gomukhasana. But in this present review we found that the current form practice of the Gomukhasana is as described in the Ahirbudhnya Samhitha; that one must hold the hands each other from their back side [11].

Garudasana

In the case of Garudasana two references have been observed. Gheranda Samhitha and Rudrayamala explain Garudasana. As per Gheranda Samhitha it is a seated asana, performed by placing the ankle and the thighs on the floor firmly, placing both palms on the knee joints [10]. However, the current practice is entirely different from above explained method. The Garudasana explained in the Rudrayamala puts it thus: Place one leg on the opposite thigh, stand erect on one leg and hold the Samharamudra and meditate on the Lord of Yoga [6]. This practice of placing one leg on the other thigh and standing erect is more in line with the present practice of Garudasana. Of course, in the traditional method one should hold the hand on the back in Samharamudra.

Bhujangasana

The procedure of Bhujangasana is explained in both the Gheranda Samhitha, and the Rudrayamala. In the Gheranda Samhitha it is termed as Bhujangasana whereas in the Rudrayamala it is termed as Sarpasana. The Bhujangasana in Gheranda Samhitha is done thus: Place the body in prone position from the toes up to the naval region (facing down) and then hoist up the upper part of the body by placing the palms on the ground, like a hooded snake [10]. It promises to awaken the Kundalini.

The Rudrayamala describes the same asana as the Sarapasana executed by placing the body straight like a stick (in prone position), join the feet, hoist up the upper part of the body on palms, adopting the position of a lifted hood. By doing, it is said, one will experience the Kundalini in an adorned form [6]. It also mandates that this asana should be practiced at night. Both the texts declare the main benefit of Bhujangasana / Sarpasana as awakening of the Kundalini.

Mayurasana

It can be noted that in the literature available, Mayurasana is a significant Asana done to detoxify the body and prevent diseases. All of the texts that reference Mayurasana describe the technique of executing the Asana in the same manner except for the Hatharathnavali.

In Hatharathnavali five variations are explained [9]. These are Dandamayurasana, Parshvamayurasana, Padmakeli, Pindamayurasana, and Ekapadamayurasana. The common method of doing Mayurasana that is done by maintaining the body straight as a stick horizontally while resting on the elbows is identified as Dandamayurasana. When in the same position, the legs are turned towards the sides it is called Parshvamayurasana. Same way Mayurasana done by placing one leg on the shoulder and other leg maintained straight like Mayurasana is called Ekapadamayurasana. Doing Mayurasana by adopting the Padmasana is called Padmakeli. In Pindamayurasana one has to stretch one leg straight forwards and other leg should stretch backwards.

Reference Practice of Mayurasana for overcoming the digestive disorders and detoxifying the body. The Rudrayamala describes the Mayurasana as one of best Asanas for purifying all the Nadis [10].

Mathsyendrasana.

Mathsyendrasana is explained in Hathapradipika, Gheranda Samhitha and Hatharathnavali. However there is some difference in the execution of this Asana as described in the Gheranda Samhitha as compared to what is explained in the Hathapradipika and the Hatharathnavali.

As per the Hathapradipika and Hatharathnavali, Mathsyendrasana has to done by placing the right foot at the root of the left thigh, place the left foot across the right knee, and holding the left feet while turning towards the right [7, 9]. In Gheranda Samhitha it is described as twisting the abdomen towards the back, while folding the left leg and placing it across the right knee, placing the elbow on the left leg while keeping the palm below the face, and then concentrating on the Bhramadihya [10]. With regard to the benefits of Mathsyendrasana, both Hatharathnavali and Hathapradipika agree that it will improve digestion, purify the body, awaken the Kundalini and is an arrow that targets destruction of diseases [7, 9].

Pashchimottanasana

Pashchimottana as explained in the Hathapradipika, Gheranda Samhitha and Hatharathnavali, is about placing both legs straight on the floor, and then touching the forehead to the middle of the lower knee joints, while hold the big toes with respective hands and maintaining this posture. However in Gheranda Samhitha, it has to be done thus: One should stretch while keeping both legs straight (while standing) on the floor and place the forehead in the middle of the lower knee joints and then hold the feet (not toes) with respective hands, with effort [10].

In Hatharathnavali there is one more variation of the Pashchimottanasana. It is called Shayitha Pashchimottanasana [9]. The method describes executing the Asana in a supine position while doing the procedure of Pashchimottanasana. The benefits of Pashcimottanasana described in both the Hatharathnavali and the Hathapradipika are the same.

Conclusion

It is evident from the brief review above that as far as references to Yoga Asanas in ancient manuscripts there is scope for much more research and exploration. While there are a number of Asanas mentioned in the ancient manuscripts, the description for the technique itself do not match the numbers and only a mere 84 Asanas have been touched upon so far. It is also clear that as we add to the repertoire of Asanas from different Texts, there is a need for a comparative analysis and detailed understanding of the contexts. This review while briefing mentioning benefits, doesnot detail the analysis and detailed understanding of the contexts. This review while briefing mentioning benefits, doesnot detail the analysis and detailed understanding of the contexts.

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