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Sriharisukesh N

Department of Yoga Studies,  
Central University of Kerala,  
Kasaragod, Kerala, India

Subramanya Pailoor

Department of Yoga Studies,  
Central University of Kerala,  
Kasaragod, Kerala, India

## 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 Nayanar*. *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 *Ashtanga Yoga*. Also the Agamas like *Ahirbudhnya 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 Uttara 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 *Hathayoga* stream is currently the most popular<sup>[1]</sup>.

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<sup>[2]</sup> 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.

Correspondence

Sriharisukesh N

Department of Yoga Studies,  
Central University of Kerala,  
Kasaragod, Kerala, India

**The Aim of Asanas**

The *Pathanjali Yogasutra* declares that regular practice of Yoga *Asana* will overcome the dualities at both levels: mental and physical [3]. 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 *Vyadhi*. When there is an imbalance in the homeostasis of the *Thridoshas*, it creates *Vyadhi 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 [1, 4]. This impact is being validated through research studies in this area.

**The Number of Asanas**

The *Yogathathwopanisat* defines the number of *Asanas* as equal to the number of species existing in this universe [5]. “*asanani ca tavanti yavantyo jivajatayah*”. The *Rudrayamala Uttara Tantra* puts it at 100 crores [6], (*shatalaksha sahasrani asanani mahithale*). 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 *Hathapradeepika* delineates on 84 *Asanas* [7] as advised by Lord Shiva. The *Thirumandiram* written by *Thirumoola Nayanar* mentions 126 important [8] *Asanas*. *Hatharathnavali* also mentions the names of 84 *Asanas*, but describes in detail about 31 *Asanas* only [9].

**The Ancient Texts as the source**

Many Hathayogic texts have been found and these explain about the various methods of practice of *Yogasanas*. *Hathapradeepika* is the most often referenced text. The *Gheranda Samhitha* and the *Hatharathnavali* provides more information about quite a number of *Asanas* and how to practice those *Asanas*. While the *Hathapradeepika* explains 15 *Asanas* the *Gheranda Samhitha* describes 32 *Asanas* [10]. The *Hatharathnavali* dwells on 31 *Asanas*. Apart from these, there is *Vasishtha Samhitha*, *Yoga Yajnavalkya*, *Ahirbudhnya Samhitha*, etc.

In Thantrik literature, the *Rudrayamala Uttara Tantra* contains information about multiple *Asanas*. Here, various methods of *Asanas* are explained in relation to secret tantric practices, besides which 54 *Asanas* linked to Hatha Yoga Tradition can be found [6]. Surprisingly these are the *Asanas* that have no manuscript reference for them though currently in practice in the Yoga *Asana* scheme. Details are given below.

**Asanas in Hatha Pradeepika.**

*Swasthikasana*, *Gomukhasana*, *Virasana*, *Kurmasana*, *Kukkutasana*, *Utthanakurmasana*, *Dhanurasana*, *Mathsyendrasana*, *Mayurasana*, *Pashcimottanasana*, *Shavasana*, *Siddhasana*, *Padmasana*, *Simhasana*, *Bhadrasana*. Total of 15 *Asanas* [7]

**Asanas in Gheranda Samhitha.**

*Siddhasana*, *Padmasana*, *Bhadrasana*, *Mukthasana*, *Vajrasana*, *Swasthikasana*, *Simhasana*, *Gomukhasana*, *Virasana*, *Dhanurasana*, *Mrthasana*, *Gupthasana*, *Mathsyasana*, *Mathsyendrasana*, *Gorakshasana*, *Pashcimoththanasana*, *Uthkatasana*, *Samkatasana*, *Mayurasana*, *Kukkutasana*, *Kurmasana*, *Utthanakurmasana*,

*Utthanamandukasana*, *Vrkshasana*, *Mandukasana*, *Garudasana*, *Vrshasana*, *Shalabhasana*, *Makarasana*, *Ushtrasana*, *Bhujangasana*, *Yogasana*. Total of 32 *Asanas* [10].

**Asanas in Ahirbudhnya Samhitha.**

*Chakrasana*, *Padmasana*, *Kurmasana*, *Mayurasana*, *Kukkutasana*, *Virasana*, *Swasthikasana*, *Bhadrasana*, *Simhasana*, *Mukthasana*, *Gomukhasana*. Total of 11 *Asanas* [11].

**Asanas in Rudra Yamala Uttara Tantra.**

*Mundasana*, *Padmasana*, *Baddhapadmasana*, *Swasthikasana*, *Karmukasana*, *Kukkutasana*, *Khagasana*, *Lolasana*, *Utthamangasana*, *Parvathasana*, *Yonyasana*, *Baddhayonyasana*, *Mahabhekasana*, *Khecharasana*, *Pranasana*, *Apanasana*, *Samanasana*, *Grandhibhedasana*, *Sarvangasana*(Shoulder Stand Posture), *Mayurasana*, *Jnanasana*, *Garudasana*, *Kokilasana*, *Anandamandirasana*, *Khanjanasana*, *Pavanasana*, *Sarpasana*, *Skandhasana*, *Kurmasana*, *Kumbhirasana*, *Mathsyasana*, *Makarasana*, *Kuncharasana*, *Vyaghrasana*, *Bhallukasana*, *Kamasana*, *Varthulasana*, *Mokshasana*, *Malasana*, *Divyasana*, *Adhordayasana*, *chandrasana*, *Hamasana*, *Suryasana*, *Yogasana*, *Gadasana*, *Lakshyasana*, *kullyasana*, *Brahmanasana*, *Kshathriyasana*, *Vaishyasana*, *Jathyasana*, *Pashavasana*. Total of 54 *asanas* [6].

**Asanas in Yoga Yajna valkya.**

*Swasthikasana* (Two variations), *Gomukhasana*, *Padmasana*, *Virasana*, *Simhasana*, *Bhadrasana*, *Mukthasana* (Two variations), *Mayurasana*. Total 8 types of *Asanas* [12].

**Asanas in Vasishtha Samhitha.**

*Swasthikasana*, *Gomukhasana*, *Padmasana*, *Virasana*, *Simhasana*, *Mayurasana*, *Kukkutasana*, *Kurmasana*, *Bhadrasana*, *Mukthasana*. Total of 10 *Asanas* [13].

**Asanas in Hatharathnavali.**

*Siddhasana*, *Bhadrasana*, *Simhasana*, *Padmasana*, *Mayurasana* (*Dandamayurasana*), *Parshwamayurasana*, *Pindamayurasana*, *Ekapadamayurasana*, *Bhairavasana*, *Kamadahanasana*, *Panipathrasana*, *Dhanurasana*, *Swasthikasana*, *Gomukhasana*, *Virasana*, *Mandukasana*, *Markatanasana*, *Mathsyendrasana* two variations, *Niralambanasana*, *Saurasana*, *Ekapadasana*, *Phanindrasana*, *Pashchimatanasana*, *Shayitha* *Pashchimathanakam*, *Vichithrakaraninamasana*, *Dhoonapithasana* (*vidhoonanam*), *Padapidanasana*, *Kukkutasana*, *Utthanakurmasana*, *Vrshchikasana*, *Shavasana*. Total of 31 *Asanas* [9].

**Asanas in Thrishikhi Brahmanopanishat.**

*Swathikasana*, *Gomukhasana*, *Virasana*, *Yogasana*, *Padmasana*, *Kukkutasana*, *Utthanakurmasana*, *Dhanurasana*, *Simhasana*, *Bhadrasana*, *Mukthasana*, *Mayurasana*, *Mathsyasana*, *Siddhasana*, *Pashcimathanasana*, *Sukhasana*. Total of 16 *Asanas* [14, 5].

**A Brief Comparative Study of Select Asanas**

The scale of Yogic 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<sup>[7, 10]</sup>. 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 *Ahribudhnya Samhitha*; that one must hold the hands each other from their back side<sup>[11]</sup>.

### 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<sup>[10]</sup>. 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<sup>[6]</sup>. 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<sup>[10]</sup>. It promises to awaken the *Kundalini*.

The *Rudrayamala* describes the same asana as the *Sarpasana* 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<sup>[6]</sup>. 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 refernce *Mayurasana* describe the technique of executing the Asana in the same manner except for the *Hatharathnavali*.

In *Hatharathnavali* five variations are explained<sup>[9]</sup>. These are *Dandamayurasana*, *Parshvamayurasana*, *Padmakeki*, *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 *Padmakeki*. In *Pindamayurasana* one has to stretch one leg straight forwards and other leg should stretch backwards.

All the texts recommend 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*<sup>[6]</sup>.

### Mathsyendrasana.

*Mathsyendrasana* is explained in *Hathapradipiika*, *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*, *Matsyendrasana* 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<sup>[7, 9]</sup>. In *Gheranda Smhitha* 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 *Bhrumadhya*<sup>[10]</sup>. 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<sup>[7, 9]</sup>.

### 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<sup>[10]</sup>.

In *Hatharathnavali* there is one more variation of the *Pashchimottanasana*. It is called *Shayitha Pashchimottanasana*<sup>[9]</sup>. The method describes executing the Asana in a supine position while doing the procedure of *Pashchimottanasana*. The benefits of *Pashchimottanasana* 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 impact, the benefits delivered from regular practice of these Asanas but do call out the need for focussed research on the same.

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