

The Evolving Landscape of Yoga in India: A Review of Awareness, Practice, and Research

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Abstract

Yoga, an ancient practice originating in India, has evolved from a spiritual discipline into a globally recognized system for promoting physical, mental, and holistic well-being. This review paper studies yoga awareness, practice, and research in India, identifying key influencing factors, government initiatives, and existing challenges.

Yoga awareness in India is remarkably high across diverse population groups, largely driven by cultural traditions, educational exposure, and government-led initiatives such as the International Day of Yoga and programs under the Ministry of AYUSH. However, despite widespread awareness, regular practice remains relatively low, with only a limited proportion of individuals engaging consistently. Variations are evident across age groups, with older adults demonstrating higher levels of regular practice, while younger populations show high awareness but lower adherence. Urban–rural disparities further influence participation, as urban populations have better access to infrastructure, trained instructors, and wellness programs compared to rural communities. Government initiatives, healthcare integration, and educational interventions have contributed positively to promoting yoga as a preventive and complementary health strategy. Additionally, yoga research in India has expanded significantly, emphasizing clinical validation, interdisciplinary approaches, and technological advancements. Despite these developments, challenges such as inconsistent practice, limited holistic understanding, socio-economic disparities, and gaps in rigorous research persist. Overall, yoga in India is transitioning into a mainstream public health and scientific domain, requiring sustained policy support and collaborative efforts.

Keywords: Yoga, meditation, wellbeing, awareness, practice, research trends.

1. Introduction

Yoga is believed to have originated thousands of years ago and associated with the lord of supreme, Shiva, who is also known as *Adi Yogi*; the personification of Lord Shiva as a *yogic guru* who paved the path of spiritual enlightenment through yoga is meticulously scripted in the Indian mythology (Basavaraddi, 2015). Bhagavad Gita scripture contain information about Lord Krishna defining yoga as “*Samatvam Yoga Uchyate*” in meaning a balanced state (between mind and body of an individual), and “*Yogah karmasu kaushalam*” in Sanskrit signifying skilled action (perfect action that do not harm the physical or mental state of an individual) (Agoramoorthy 2014). India is the pioneer of yogic tradition in the early civilizations that has gradually extended to its neighbouring countries and different parts of the world through ages (Newcombe, 2009). It is reported the Rig Veda and the ancient Hindu scripts have written about “Yoga” over a million of years ago (Swamy et al., 2022; Pradhan and Pradhan, 2015). The word

yoga is derived from a Sanskrit word, “Yuj” which means “to join” or “to yoke” or “to unite,” the main emphasis of yoga is to unite and balance the mind, body, and soul of an individual through asanas, sadhanas and pranayamas in a systematic way (Singh and Reddy, 2018). Traditional yoga has evolved from ancient practices to modern variations with scientific and therapeutic approaches; over the years, yoga has been successfully practiced by individuals to create a sustainable balance between the mind and the body, and attain a holistic wellbeing i.e., physical, mental, spiritual and social benefits collectively (Tessema, 2017).

Yoga has been widely recognised for its physical and psychological benefits. Research shows that yoga improves cardiovascular health, flexibility, and mental well-being (Ross & Thomas, 2010; Cramer et al., 2013). It also plays a significant role in reducing stress, anxiety, and lifestyle-related disorders such as hypertension and diabetes (Li & Goldsmith, 2012; Pascoe et al., 2017). Furthermore, yoga interventions have been associated with improvements in emotional regulation and overall psychological resilience (Gard et al., 2014). Recent studies highlight its therapeutic applications, including improved recovery outcomes in clinical conditions such as cardiovascular diseases, chronic pain, and mental health disorders, along with enhanced overall quality of life (Woodyard, 2011; Büssing et al., 2012). Additionally, yoga-based interventions are increasingly being integrated into healthcare systems as complementary and integrative therapies, reflecting growing acceptance within evidence-based medical practice (Cramer et al., 2016).

Yoga practice and its regulation vary significantly across other countries, reflecting differences in cultural integration, public demand, and government involvement. The United States exhibits minimal federal involvement, with yoga largely driven by private organizations and market demand. Public interest is very high, though yoga is practiced in a largely secularized form. There are no federal regulations, and certification is typically managed by private bodies. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, yoga is widely practiced and recognized for its mental and physical health benefits, yet there is no centralized regulatory policy (Singleton, 2010).

Australia promotes yoga as part of wellness and complementary therapy initiatives, with growing public interest. Regulation remains informal, relying on self-governance through organizations. In China, yoga is increasingly incorporated into fitness and wellness programs, with moderate but rising popularity; however, it is not formally regulated (Chen, 2020).

Canada shows strong engagement, especially in urban areas, where yoga is integrated into community wellness and mental health programs. Like many Western countries, it lacks formal regulation, though optional certification systems exist. Germany stands out for its structured approach, recognizing yoga as a complementary treatment, with some insurance providers reimbursing yoga therapy, particularly in urban regions (Bäumer, 2013).

In Japan, yoga has gained traction since the early 2000s, with moderate but expanding interest. While there is no national policy, it is increasingly integrated into the broader wellness culture (Saso, 2017). Brazil reflects a growing trend, with some states incorporating yoga into public education and healthcare systems, though regulation remains minimal (Oliveira, 2019). In the UAE, yoga is promoted through international cultural events and enjoys moderate to high popularity, especially among expatriates (Gulf News, 2022).

Based on recent national surveys, scientific literature, and policy reports, this review paper highlights awareness, practice and research of yoga in India.

2. Yoga Awareness in India

In India, yoga is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric and has received strong institutional backing. The Indian government established the Ministry of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy) to promote traditional health practices. The International Day of Yoga is observed every year on June 21 to celebrate and promote the practice of yoga across the globe. It was officially recognized by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in December 2014, following a proposal by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who highlighted yoga's holistic approach to health and well-being during his address to the UN. The date June 21 was chosen as it is the summer solstice, the longest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere, which holds special significance in many cultures and yogic traditions. The International Yoga Day also serves as a platform for India's cultural diplomacy, strengthening global ties through a shared appreciation of wellness and mindfulness practices (Press Information Bureau, 2023). Yoga awareness in India has increased substantially across different population groups due to government promotion, educational integration, and growing public health interest. The International Day of Yoga has amplified awareness, transforming yoga into a mass movement. Government-led campaigns and large-scale participation events have contributed significantly to making yoga accessible and visible across both rural and urban populations.

However, awareness and participation vary based on age, gender, education level, and place of residence (urban vs rural), reflecting important social and demographic differences. National-level surveys highlight strong awareness and acceptance of yoga as part of traditional healthcare systems under AYUSH (National Sample Survey, 2022–23). Among older adults and middle-aged populations, yoga awareness and practice are relatively high, particularly in urban areas. A national-level analysis found that urban residents are more likely to engage in yoga and mindfulness practices compared to rural populations, largely due to better education, access to wellness facilities, and higher health awareness (Sahoo et al., 2023). This suggests that while yoga is widely known across India, consistent practice is still influenced by socioeconomic and regional factors.

Among young adults and students, awareness of yoga is generally high, largely due to school-based physical education, media exposure, and International Yoga Day campaigns. A study on school students found that over 99% recognized the benefits of yoga, indicating widespread awareness even among younger populations (Verma, 2024). A nationwide survey by the Ministry of AYUSH reported that awareness of yoga is particularly strong among individuals aged 18–24 years, although regular practice is more common in older age groups (Ministry of AYUSH, 2025). This indicates a gap between awareness and habitual practice among youth, where academic pressure and lifestyle constraints often limit regular engagement.

In the case of adolescents, yoga awareness is increasingly being integrated into educational systems. Studies from northern India show that adolescents possess moderate to high awareness of yoga concepts, though practical knowledge and consistent practice remain uneven depending on school resources and curriculum implementation (Nadda & Bhagta, 2023). This highlights the role of schools in shaping early awareness but also points to the need for more structured yoga education programs.

For rural populations, awareness levels are generally high due to cultural familiarity with traditional health practices, but actual participation tends to be lower compared to urban areas. Research indicates that rural residents often face barriers such as lack of trained instructors, limited infrastructure, and lower exposure to organized wellness programs (Sahoo et al., 2023). Despite these limitations, national surveys show that

a large proportion of rural adults are still aware of yoga and recognize its health benefits (Ministry of AYUSH, 2025).

Among women, yoga awareness is particularly strong, as it is often associated with stress reduction, flexibility, and preventive healthcare. However, participation may be influenced by household responsibilities and access to community programs. Evidence suggests that women are more likely to adopt yoga for health maintenance, especially in urban and semi-urban areas where wellness initiatives are more accessible (Sahoo et al., 2023).

3. Patterns of Yoga Practice in India

Despite high awareness, regular yoga practice in India remains limited. Government initiatives such as International Yoga Day and AYUSH campaigns have played a crucial role in strengthening nationwide awareness, but disparities in access and lifestyle continue to shape actual engagement patterns.

3.1 Overall pattern of practice

Large-scale survey evidence suggests that yoga practice in India is not universal despite its cultural origins. A study found that only about 35% of Indian adults have ever practiced yoga, while the majority reported never practicing it (Pew Research Center, 2021). Similarly, a recent Ministry of AYUSH national survey reported that only 11.2% of respondents practice yoga regularly, while 75.5% do not practice it at all (Ministry of AYUSH, 2025). These findings highlight a persistent gap between awareness and sustained engagement. At the same time, more recent evidence suggests increasing adoption. The AYUSH national survey (2025) reported that over 41% of respondents have incorporated yoga into their lifestyle to some extent, reflecting a gradual shift toward mainstream wellness behavior (Ministry of AYUSH, 2025). This indicates that yoga is increasingly being integrated into preventive health practices rather than purely traditional or spiritual frameworks.

3.2 Age-based patterns

Yoga practice varies significantly across age groups. The AYUSH survey (2025) shows that awareness is highest among young adults (18–24 years), but regular practice is more common among older adults, particularly those aged 65 and above, who reported the highest participation levels (Ministry of AYUSH, 2025). This pattern suggests that younger populations are more exposed to yoga but less consistent in practice, whereas older individuals are more likely to adopt yoga for health maintenance.

3.3 Urban–rural differences

Studies consistently show an urban advantage in yoga practice. Urban populations are more likely to engage in yoga due to better access to wellness centers, fitness culture, and health awareness (Sahoo et al., 2023). In contrast, rural populations show lower practice levels despite comparable or high awareness, largely due to limited infrastructure and fewer trained instructors (Sahoo et al., 2023). However, national data also show that AYUSH awareness (including yoga) is extremely high in both rural (95%) and urban (96%) areas, suggesting that the barrier lies more in practice than awareness (PIB, 2024).

4. Factors Influencing Yoga Practice in India

4.1 Government Initiatives

Government initiatives have played a crucial role in expanding yoga practice in India by transforming it from a traditional cultural activity into a structured component of public health and wellness policy. The Government of India, primarily through the Ministry of AYUSH, has systematically promoted yoga at national and international levels, positioning it as a preventive healthcare practice as well as a tool for

holistic well-being. The International Day of Yoga has evolved into a large-scale global and national event. Since its inception, it has been used to encourage mass participation across schools, institutions, and communities, with recent national celebrations reporting participation from millions of citizens across thousands of locations in India (Ministry of AYUSH, 2025).

In addition to mass events, the government has strengthened institutional support for yoga through the Yoga Certification Board (YCB), which standardizes training and certifies yoga professionals to ensure quality and consistency in teaching. This initiative has helped formalize yoga education and improve its credibility both within India and internationally (Ministry of AYUSH, 2024). Alongside certification, the government has launched widespread awareness campaigns such as Yoga Utsav and Yoga Sangam, which are designed to integrate yoga into everyday life by encouraging community participation and promoting regular practice. These campaigns are further supported by digital outreach strategies, including online training modules and multilingual resources, making yoga more accessible to rural and remote populations.

Yoga has also been integrated into India's public healthcare system through AYUSH Health and Wellness Centres, where it is used as a complementary intervention for conditions such as stress, hypertension, diabetes, and mental health disorders. This integration reflects a broader policy shift toward preventive healthcare, where yoga is increasingly recognized as a low-cost and effective wellness intervention (Ministry of AYUSH, 2024). Several state governments have also contributed to this effort by implementing regional policies and programs. For example, Uttarakhand has introduced a dedicated yoga policy aimed at promoting the state as a global hub for yoga and wellness tourism, including support for yoga institutions and research initiatives (Drishti IAS, 2025).

Furthermore, yoga has been incorporated into educational systems to promote early awareness among students. Schools and universities are encouraged to include yoga in physical education curricula and extracurricular activities, thereby fostering long-term adoption among young people. These combined efforts reflect a coordinated national strategy that not only promotes awareness but also seeks to institutionalize yoga practice across different sectors of society.

4.2 Health Awareness

Growing awareness of physical and mental health has motivated individuals to adopt yoga. Studies indicate that yoga contributes to improved fitness, stress reduction, and overall well-being (Ministry of AYUSH, 2025).

4.3 Accessibility and Convenience

Simple practices such as breathing exercises and meditation are more widely adopted due to minimal space and physical requirements. This makes yoga accessible across socio-economic groups.

4.4 Socio-Demographic Factors

Age, education, and urbanization influence yoga practice. Urban populations often have better access to yoga facilities, while rural participation may depend on awareness and availability of trained instructors.

5. Trends in Yoga Research

Yoga research in India has expanded rapidly in the last decade, shifting from mainly philosophical and traditional descriptions toward clinical, experimental, and evidence-based scientific studies. Recent bibliometric and systematic reviews show that India is now one of the global leaders in yoga research output, particularly in areas related to health sciences, psychology, and chronic disease management.

There is a strong increase in clinical trials and biomedical investigations. Analysis of the WHO International Clinical Trials Registry shows that thousands of yoga-related trials have been registered globally, with India contributing the largest proportion of registrations. Most of these studies focus on chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, obesity, anxiety, and depression, highlighting yoga's growing role as a complementary therapeutic intervention in healthcare systems (Mondal et al., 2025). This reflects a major shift toward integrating yoga into mainstream medicine rather than treating it solely as a traditional practice.

There is a rapid growth in scientific publications and bibliometric expansion. Systematic literature reviews indicate that yoga-related publications have increased nearly threefold in the last 10–12 years, with India consistently ranking among the top contributors globally alongside the United States and Canada (Sharma et al., 2025). India alone accounts for a substantial proportion of global yoga studies, particularly in clinical and applied health research (Sharma et al., 2025). This shows that India is not only the origin of yoga but also a major hub for contemporary yoga science research.

There is an integration of modern technology with yoga research, especially in the fields of artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, and digital health. Recent studies have developed deep learning models for yoga posture recognition and automated correction systems using computer vision techniques, improving accuracy in yoga training and injury prevention (Mohiuddin et al., 2025). Such studies demonstrate how yoga research in India is increasingly interdisciplinary, combining traditional knowledge with computational sciences.

In addition, there is growing interest in the mind–body and psychoneuroimmunology aspects of yoga. Bibliometric analyses show that yoga research is increasingly linked with mental health, stress reduction, and immune system regulation, positioning yoga as a scientifically studied tool for psychological and physiological well-being (Dhanasekar & Mathangi, 2025). This reflects a broader global trend where yoga is being validated through neuroscience and behavioral medicine frameworks.

Another significant trend is the institutionalisation of yoga research under government bodies, especially the Ministry of AYUSH and its research councils such as the Central Council for Research in Yoga and Naturopathy (CCRYN). These institutions have strengthened India's research ecosystem by funding clinical trials, developing standardized yoga protocols, and promoting evidence-based studies in collaboration with medical institutions (Mondal et al., 2025). This policy-driven approach has contributed to the steady increase in high-impact publications and international collaborations.

Overall, yoga research in India is evolving in three major directions: clinical validation of therapeutic effects, technological integration, and interdisciplinary expansion into neuroscience and psychology. The literature clearly indicates that India is transitioning from traditional knowledge systems to a globally competitive research environment where yoga is studied as a scientifically measurable intervention. However, scholars also emphasize the need for more large-scale randomized controlled trials and standardized methodologies to strengthen evidence quality and global acceptance.

6. Challenges and Gaps

Despite high awareness, several challenges persist in terms of yoga practice:

- Low consistency in daily practice
- Limited understanding of yoga's holistic philosophy
- Regional and socio-economic disparities
- Lack of standardized training and certification systems

These gaps highlight the need for integrated policies and educational interventions. Limited interdisciplinary collaboration is a major gap in yoga research. Although recent trends show increasing integration with neuroscience and digital health technologies, much of the research remains fragmented across institutions. Experts emphasize the need for stronger collaboration between medical researchers, public health experts, and traditional knowledge systems to improve research quality and global credibility (Sharma et al., 2025).

Overall, the challenges in yoga awareness, practice, and research in India reflect a transition phase where yoga is moving from a traditional cultural practice to a structured scientific and public health discipline. While government initiatives have significantly improved visibility and institutional support, gaps remain in sustained practice, equitable access, and high-quality scientific validation.

7. Conclusion

Yoga in India represents a unique convergence of cultural heritage, public health practice, and emerging scientific inquiry. The findings of this review indicate that yoga awareness is widespread across diverse population groups, largely supported by strong government initiatives, educational integration, and global recognition through platforms such as the International Day of Yoga. Despite this high level of awareness, regular practice remains inconsistent, highlighting a significant gap between knowledge and actual adoption. Variations in practice patterns across age groups, gender, and urban–rural settings further emphasize the influence of socio-economic and infrastructural factors on engagement.

Government efforts through the Ministry of AYUSH, healthcare integration, and institutional support have played a pivotal role in promoting yoga as a preventive and complementary health strategy. At the same time, yoga research in India has shown substantial growth, with increasing focus on clinical validation, interdisciplinary approaches, and technological advancements. However, challenges such as limited consistency in practice, unequal access, insufficient understanding of yoga’s holistic dimensions, and gaps in rigorous research persist.

Yoga in India is undergoing a transition from a traditional practice to a structured public health and scientific discipline. Sustained progress will require integrated policies, improved accessibility, standardized training, and stronger interdisciplinary research collaborations.

Acknowledgments

The author acknowledges affiliating institute for research support.

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