

Yoga and the West

Early Encounters between Yoga and
European Travelers and Intellectuals

Learning Objectives

- Situate European Understanding of yoga with the history of India's interactions with outsiders.
- Identify themes in early European understandings of yoga
- Analyze how the political context influenced perceptions of yoga.

Colonialism

- Large complex of power
 - economics
 - politics
 - social
- Caused an imbalanced exchange of ideas/practices

India and outsiders

- Aryan migration (c. 1500 BCE)
- Greek influence (4th century BCE-2nd BCE)
- Exchange with Persia
 - e.g. zero (6th century CE)
- SE Asia
 - Cambodia Khmer Empire



History of European Encounter (1 of 3)

- Christopher Columbus
- Vasco de Gama (1498)
 - Portuguese Colonies
 - SW India (Kerala/Maharashtra)
 - Treaty of Tordesillas
 - Jesuits (St. Francis Xavier)



History of European Encounter (2 of 3)

- Dutch
 - VOC- East India Company
 - Extends colonies around coast
 - Business prioritized
 - Indentured servitude



History of European Encounter (3 of 3)

- British
 - British East India Company
 - First corporation (1600)
 - Supplanted Portuguese and Dutch
 - Military and Missionary
 - Treaties with rulers
 - 1857



Early European Encounters with Yoga

- Overall, these perceptions were negative
 - black magic
 - perverse
 - impure
 - lazy
 - charlatans
- This was internalized by Indians



The Folly of Yogis (1 of 2)

- European privilege of belief
 - Rooted in Protestant/Catholic debates
 - Enlightenment Philosophy
 - Greek thought
 - Cartesian duality
- François Bernier
 - “vegetative rather than rational beings”



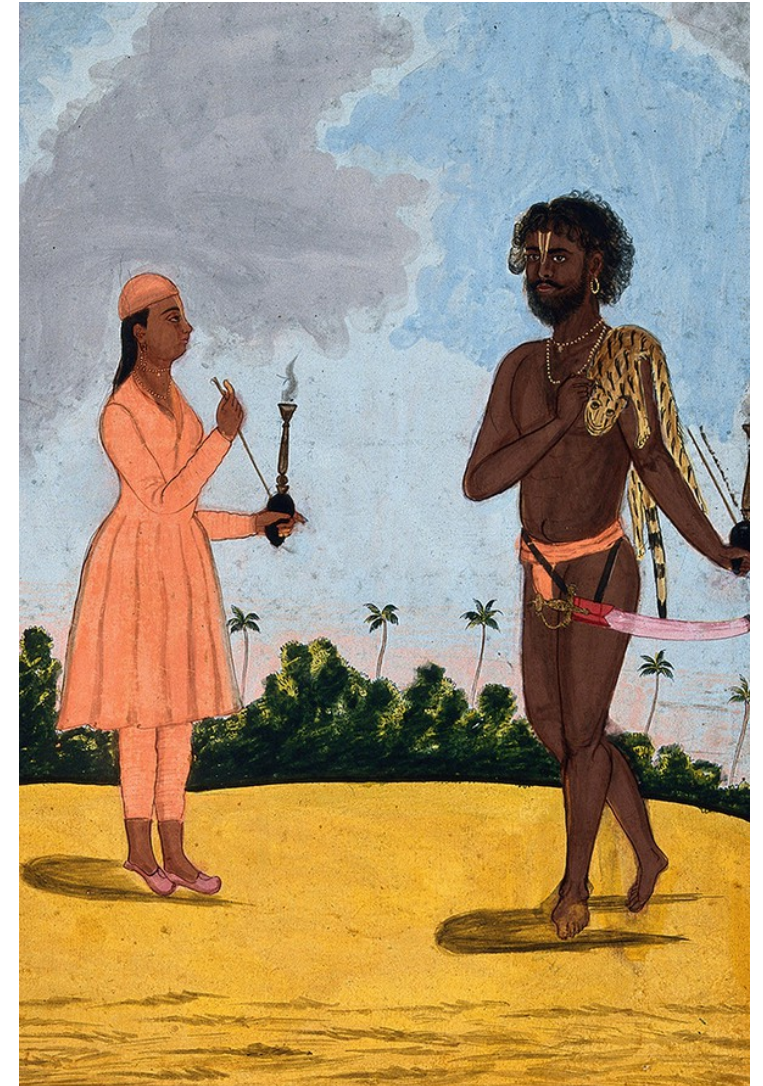
The Folly of Yogis (2 of 2)

- John Ovington
 - [Possessed by] the delusions of Satan [remain in] such and such kind of postures all the days of their lives.”
- A lower form of religion



The Militant Yogi

- Armed Ascetics
 - Nāth tradition
 - increasingly common
- Roamed trade routes
- British banned wandering yogis
- Martial identity precursor to modern physical yoga



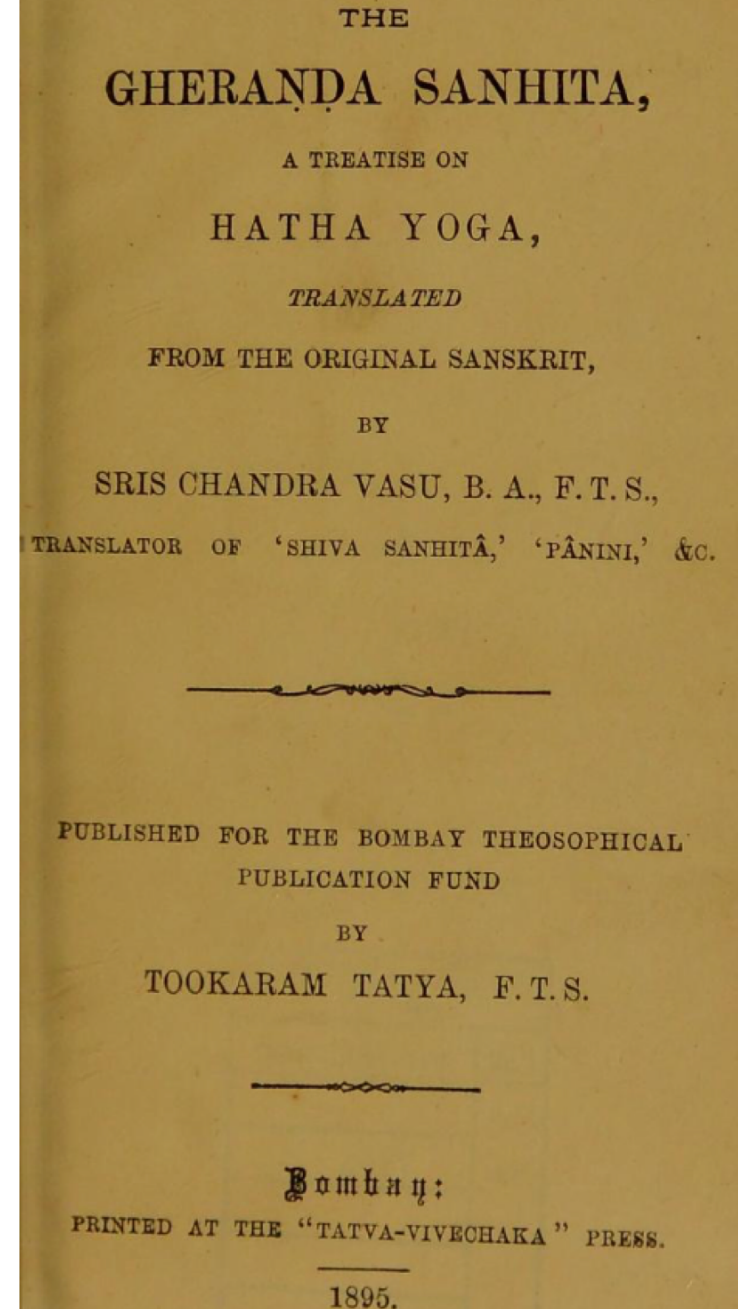
Real v. Fake Yoga (1 of 2)

- Classical Yoga
 - Philosophical tradition
 - sought “true” religious goals
- Physical Yoga
 - debased religion
 - magic and tricks



Real v. Fake Yoga (2 of 2)

- Science and Religion
 - Anatomical body v. Yoga Body
 - Dayanand Saraswati (Arya Samaj)
- SC Vasu
 - Translated Yoga texts
 - early texts *haṭha* yoga is good
 - later, it is bad



Questions for Reflection

- What was the history of India's interactions with outsiders?
- How did early European writers characterize yoga and yogis?
- How did the religio-political context of Europe and colonial India influence their perceptions of yoga?

Sources for photos

- <https://wellcomecollection.org/articles/WjK0mSsAAJCEh4A1>
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