



## YOGA AND VYĀYĀMA IN NEW BENGALI SOURCES

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### Abstract

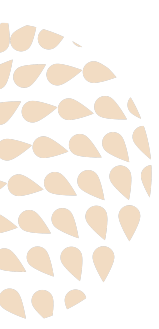
This paper examines yoga *āsana* and *vyāyāma* instruction from Bengal in the twentieth century. It focuses on three themes as they appear in materials prior to the 1960s. These themes are the focus on yoga for health, the inclusion of *vyāyāma* in Bengali language sources and the introduction of women to yoga.

### KEYWORDS

Yoga, *Āsana*, Body Culture, *Haṭhayoga*, Bengal, Modern Postural Yoga, *Vyāyāma*

### 1. Introduction

This paper examines Bengali yoga manuals from the twentieth century. While scholarship on modern yoga repeatedly looks to areas like Mysore and Pune, Bengali *āsana* manuals have not received the same attention. Furthermore, there is very little material published that highlights the work of female authors. Here I will begin to consider five books and forty-one newspaper columns published between 1930 and 1957. This material all comes from two locations in North Kolkata: Ghosh's College of Physical Education and Ironman Health Home & Yoga Therapy. Due to the scope of this paper, I will broadly highlight three main themes contained in this material. Future examination will be necessary to detail closely both the contents of the material, as well as to contextualize it further. However, any attempt to do that now would suffer from a lack of foundational analysis. This foundation is what I aim to present here.



The first theme is the health of the physical body. The Bengali material emphasizes the development of muscular strength. Bodybuilding and weightlifting practices have a strong presence in the earliest of the sources considered here. While maintaining a focus on muscle development, the materials evolve to incorporate “internal” health. This results in yoga postures (*āsanas*) as a means to cure physical ailments or prevent poor health.

The second theme is “*vyāyāma*.”<sup>1</sup> *Vyāyāma* (ব্যায়াম) refers to physical exercise. These practices often do not have specific names. They are usually done in motion, which is in contrast to *āsanas* that are held in stillness. I focus on *vyāyāma* because it appears at length in the material being examined here. More specifically, it is included in the Bengali language manuals and is notably absent from the English language manuals. This is the case even when the authors of the sources originate from the same institution. The term *vyāyāma* is used on its own or in conjunction with other terms. For example, “*yoga-vyāyāma*” refers to yoga postures.

New research suggests the influence of *vyāyāma* on modern *āsana* systems. Jerome Armstrong (2023) suggests that the intersection of *vyāyāma* with *haṭhayoga* gave way to popular *āsana* systems for practice, including *sūrya namaskāra*, Bikram Yoga, and *vinyāsa*. In this paper I will only examine the instruction for practising *vyāyāma* in the Bengali sources, not its long-term effect on shaping modern-day practices as Armstrong does.

I leave *vyāyāma* untranslated in this paper. Like *āsana*, *vyāyāma* refers to physical positions native to India. *Vyāyāma* can appear identical in form to callisthenics or gymnastics, which originate in Europe. The focus here is not on those similarities or examining where the true origin lies. Rather, the purpose here is to explore what role *vyāyāma* plays within the Bengali sources. *Vyāyāma* was practised in clubs and gyms often with the mission to enhance nationalism. For this reason, I will use the term *vyāyāma*.

The third theme in this article is women in yoga. In *haṭhayoga* texts, women were not included in the practice of yoga. Today, women frequent yoga studios more often than men. They also represent yoga in the modern age. Take *Yoga Journal* as an example. A man appeared on the cover of the magazine only three times in the one hundred and twenty issues printed since 2006.<sup>2</sup> The developments in early twentieth-century Bengal serve as a microcosm to illustrate this shift. Women began to be championed as yoga

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<sup>1</sup> The term is transliterated as “*byāyām*,” “*byāyāma*,” and “*bayam*” within Bengal.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to the publications of *Yoga Journal* available at: <https://www.yogajournallibrary.com/browse/>.

teachers and practitioners. They were called on to take up the practices of yoga and *vyāyāma*. The work of Labanya Palit displays this. Her writing is far more extensive than that of her male colleagues. I do not claim that what happens in Bengal is the sole catalyst for women taking up yoga on a global scale. Rather, the Bengali materials offer a clear picture of how women were brought into yoga in one particular region. This illuminates how the status of women in yoga changed drastically in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Bengali yoga sources included in this paper originate from two institutions in North Kolkata: Ghosh's College of Physical Education, founded by Bishnu Charan Ghosh in 1923, and Ironman Health Home & Yoga Therapy, founded by Nilmoni Das in 1933. Research into the history of Ghosh's Yoga College as an institution and the life of Ghosh himself appears in *Calcutta Yoga* by Jerome Armstrong (2020). His publication also illuminates the life of Paramahansa Yogānanda, Buddha Bose, along with a wide survey of Ghosh's students. My goal in this paper is to examine texts on the practice of *āsana* and *vyāyāma*, not to present a biography of their personal lives as Armstrong does. Furthermore, I will focus on sources not examined in Armstrong's work, such as Labanya Palit's publications and the manuals of Nilmoni Das.

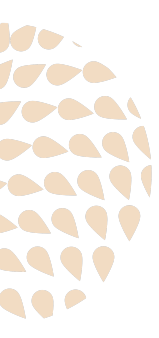
Nilmoni Das authored books and published charts on physical practice. His books are written in Bengali. These manuals include *Vyāyāma and Health* (ব্যায়াম ও স্বাস্থ্য), *Illustrated Yoga-Vyāyāma* (সচিত্র যোগ-ব্যায়াম), and *Women's Vyāyāma Health and Beauty* (মেয়েদের ব্যায়াম স্বাস্থ্য ও সৌন্দর্য). *Vyāyāma and Health* came out in 1950, *Women's Vyāyāma Health and Beauty* (WVHB) in 1954 and *Illustrated Yoga-Vyāyāma* (IYV) in 1957. All of these books have undergone further editions and printings. Das's charts are posters which illustrate around twenty positions each, with short captions for each position.<sup>3</sup> I focus on Das's books as they provide more detail than the charts.

A fourth book, *Dumbbell-Barbell Vyāyāma* (ডাম্বেল-বারবেল ব্যায়াম) from 1962 displays how bodybuilding, weightlifting and muscle control were important elements of Das's teaching. *Dumbbell-Barbell Vyāyāma* (DBV) expands upon Das's "Barbell Exercises" chart which was first published in the 1930s. DBV does not contain *āsana*, nor does it focus on yoga. It is relevant in this paper only to illuminate the importance of muscle-building within Bengali material.

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<sup>3</sup> Das's charts include "Free Hand Vyāyāma," "Barbell Exercises," "Step By Step Yogāsana," and "যোগিক আসন (Yogic Āsana)." "Free Hand Vyāyāma" was first published in Bengali in 1935.





Bishnu Ghosh did not write as prolifically as Nilmoni Das. He produced two texts about physical practice. *Yoga Cure* was published in English in 1961. His earliest book is *Muscle Control and Barbell Exercises* (1930). This does not contain *āsana* but includes some elements of *haṭhayoga* that were repackaged as “muscle control.” Like Das’s DBV, it shows the importance of muscular health in the publications from this time period.

Two of Ghosh’s students wrote material included here.<sup>4</sup> Buddha Bose wrote *Key to the Kingdom of Health Through Yoga* (Vol. 1), published in 1939. This is an *āsana* manual written in English. *Path of the Body* (শরীরম্ আদ্যম্) was written by Labanya Palit and published in Bengali in 1955. Prior to the publication of her book, Palit wrote extensively in the Bengali newspaper *Jugantar* (যুগান্তর). Her columns were printed in the section “World of Women” (নারীজগৎ) from October 1952 into 1954. She published forty-one columns during this period.<sup>5</sup> These columns include photos and instructions for *āsana* and *vyāyāma*. They also include discussion about how and why women should practise.

I provide my own translations of these materials.<sup>6</sup> As the material covered is textual, I have sanskritised the transliteration for consistency. Where the sources use English characters, I maintain the source’s spelling.

All of the materials originate in Bengal, but there is a distinction between English language sources and Bengali language sources. The first theme of this paper—health through yoga—appears in the sources regardless of the language of their publication.

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<sup>4</sup> There are other notable publications from students of Bishnu Ghosh. I will not focus on these materials. They were either published outside India and geared towards a different geographical audience, or not published until later. They are worth noting here for documentation and to display the reach of Ghosh’s College students. They include Gouri Shankar Mukerji’s work *Yoga und Unsere Medizin* from 1963. This was published in Germany. There are also the works of Bikram Choudhury—the best-known link to Ghosh outside Bengal—but his first publication, *Bikram’s Beginning Yoga Class*, was not released until 1978 and was published in the United States. His second book *Bikram Yoga* was published in 2007. Two other books are currently in print in Bengal. They are *Cream of Yoga* by India’s first Mr. Universe, Monotosh Roy, (published in 1997) and *Yoga Panacea* by Dr. P. S. Das (published in 2004). With the exception of Mukerji’s German work, all of these are in English. Lastly, there are several works by Jibananda Ghosh which were published in Japanese. I have only seen reference to these.

<sup>5</sup> These archives are available via the British Library as part of the Endangered Archives collection, in tandem with the Centre for Social Sciences in Kolkata. The archival dates have all been entered incorrectly. I will refer to the actual date that the newspaper article was published on.

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Aritra Basu and Reeswari Chatterjee for checking the translations and offering small edits where appropriate.



The other two—*vyāyāma* and women in yoga—appear in the Bengali language sources only. I believe this is, at least in part, due to their positioning within Indian nationalism.

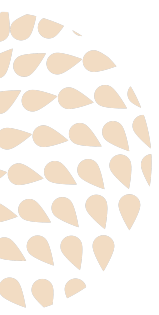
### 1.1 Innovation In Bengal

Health is a primary focus in all Bengali materials considered here. Therefore, the sources describe particular health benefits associated with the practice of each position. The Bengali sources describe each *āsana* by explaining which muscles are required. While yoga as a health practice is common today, the focus on *āsana* for physical health was a key innovation of the twentieth century. This concept was pioneered not only by those in Bengal but by other figures such as Kuvalayānanda and Yogendra, who both worked near or in Mumbai.

The works of Ghosh, Das, Bose and Palit focus on health through *physical* yoga. Before considering the theme of yoga as a method for health, it is important to establish another point of innovation in Bengal: *spiritual* yoga. In yoga, the dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual is imperfect. Sources may refer to yoga as a practice to develop both physically and spiritually. However, it is useful here to differentiate between those which *primarily* focus on self/God realization and those which focus on the development of the physical body. The Bengali sources I consider in detail here primarily focus on physical development, yet Bengal was a place of spiritual innovation in yoga as well.

Elizabeth De Michelis (2004: 51) outlines what she calls the “religious foundations of Modern Yoga.” Figures who played a role in establishing this religious foundation include Ramakrishna, Rammohan Roy, Debendranath Tagore, Keshubchandra Sen and Swami Vivekananda, all of whom are Bengali. Both De Michelis and Singleton (2010) highlight the importance of Vivekananda in particular. De Michelis explains that Vivekananda was “the inheritor of the intellectual tradition of the Brahmo Samaj.” The Brahmo Samaj began as a means to “revive the Vedānta of the Upaniṣads from oblivion and to identify in it a religion that could both answer the challenges of modernity and provide new norms of collective identity” (Hatcher 2006: 62). From 1820 to 1930, they shaped religious, social and political movements in India. They were social reformers and pioneers of liberal politics and Indian nationalism (Kopf 1979). Vivekananda used the foundation of the Brahmo Samaj to start experimenting with yoga. This led him to produce “the earliest formulation of Modern Yoga in his *Rāja Yoga* (1896)” (De Michelis 2004: 12–13). Singleton echoes the importance of Vivekananda: “In the late 1800s, a mainly anglophone yoga revival began in India, and new syntheses of practical techniques and theory began to emerge, most notably with the teachings of





Vivekananda (1863–1902)” (Singleton 2010: 4). Vivekananda is a figure recognized globally. Yet he is not known for teaching *āsana*.

In his article “Uncovering Vyāyāma in Yoga: How Vyāyāma Intersects with Haṭha Yoga, and Foreran the Modern Yoga Formations of Sūrya Namaskāra, Bikram Yoga, and Vinyāsa” Jerome Armstrong (2023) writes about the attempt to revive indigenous exercises and bolster physical health in the nineteenth century. He explains that the first national gymnasium was founded in 1866 by Kolkata’s Nabagopal Mitra. This institution promoted health-based practices such as wrestling, martial arts and vyāyāma. The club’s location in North Kolkata was frequented by Vivekananda.

Health was of the utmost importance. Buddha Bose writes in *Key to the Kingdom of Health Through Yoga* (Vol. 1) (KKHTY) that “by mastering [the āsanās] the student will be rewarded by abundant health and long life” (Bose 1939: 8). It is the reward gained through yoga. Bose continues:

Good health is men's and women's greatest asset, their most valuable possession; with it, they find joy in the breeze and the blue sky, in all nature and in every phase of life, spiritual or material (Bose 1939: 9).

Nilmoni Das writes about the importance of keeping the body healthy. In IYV he states that if the body is not healthy, even saints and sages are unable to progress:

There are many ancient stories of saints and sages who went to worship God but saw that, without a healthy body, their mind collapsed and they were unable to reflect on God. Therefore, they began the ‘doctrine of the body as the path,’ the custom of practising many postures and *mudrās* for keeping the body healthy and able. In modern times, Svāmī Kuvalayānanda and Śrī Yogendra from Bombay preach this *āsana-vyāyāma* (Das 1957: 13).

সে আজ অনেক দিনের কথা—মুনিষাষিরা ভগবানের আরাধনা করতে গিয়ে দেখলেন যে—শরীর নীরোগ ও কর্মক্ষম না হলে ভগবানের চিন্তা কেন, কোন কাজই করা যায় না—তাদের মনে পড়ে গেল ‘শরীরমাদ্যম্ খলু ধর্মসাধনম্’ তাই তাঁরা তখন শরীর নীরোগ ও কর্মক্ষম রাখবার জন্য কতকগুলি আসন ওমুদ্রা অভ্যাস করতে আরম্ভ করলেন। আধুনিক কালে আমাদের মধ্যে যারা এই আসন-ব্যায়ামের প্রচার করেন—তাঁরা হলেন—বোস্কাইয়ের স্বামী কুবলয়ানন্দ ও শ্রীযোগেন্দ্র। (দাশ ১৯৫৭: ১৩)

Beyond the focus on health, there are two important points in this passage. Firstly, Das speaks of a “doctrine of the body as the path.” This is the same phrase that Labanya

Palit uses for the title of her book and newspaper columns: শরীরম্ আদ্যম্ (*śarīram ādyam*). It is also the name of one of the three branches of “yoga-science” according to Swami Shivananda Saraswati of Assam (1957: 2).<sup>7</sup>

The second important element in Das’s passage is his reference to the work of Kuvalayananda and Yogendra. As noted previously, their institutions are both near or in Mumbai and not in Bengal.<sup>8</sup> Yet, they influenced Bengali yoga. Swami Kuvalayananda conducted scientific research on the benefits of yoga *āsana*. His goal was “to teach and train young people to practise Yoga in order to maintain *health*” (Alter 2004: 85, emphasis added). Kuvalayananda founded Kaivalyadhama, a school and research laboratory. Das received his formal education in yoga *āsana* from this institution shortly after Indian Independence in 1947.<sup>9</sup>

Kuvalayananda writes about the importance of scientific experimentation:

Swami Vivekananda and others, indeed, tried to explain some of its principles in the light of modern sciences. But as they never took to experimentation, it again remained exclusively subjective and they could not add the objective side to it (*Yoga Mīmāṃsā*, October 1924).

Vivekananda is acknowledged for bringing ideas of yoga to the public. Yet, the passage displays the shift toward the perceived importance of scientific analysis. Kuvalayananda’s publication states:

Although Yoga is mainly spiritual, it has two important minor aspects. It teaches excellent systems of physical culture and therapeutics (*Yoga Mīmāṃsā*, October 1924).

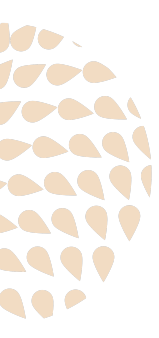
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<sup>7</sup> Though Shivananda Saraswati’s work is not the focus here, his ashram is also in North Kolkata. This is an area for further research. Shivananda Saraswati (different from Sivananda Saraswati of Rishikesh) founded “Yoga Training Centre” in 1932 in Kamakhya, Guwahati (Assam). According to a promotional packet for the ashram, his centre was the first of its kind. A second branch called “Shivananda Yogashram & Yogic Hospital” is in Baranagar, Kolkata. His publications, which were of a vast number, cover topics such as “yoga therapy, yogic diet, yogic *vyayam* and yoga science.” His publications are in English, Hindi, Bengali, Assamese and Odia.

<sup>8</sup> Kuvalayananda’s Institute is called Kaivalyadhama and is in Lonavala (in Maharashtra). Yogendra’s centre, originally located in Versova, in Mumbai, is called The Yoga Institute. It later moved to Santa Cruz, also in Mumbai.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Swapn Das, 21<sup>st</sup> July, 2020.





These “minor aspects” become a major catalyst for yoga in the twentieth century. Ghosh writes in the introduction to KKHTY, “Yoga exercises combine the basic laws utilized by the ancient Yogis with the discoveries of modern physiological science” (Bose 1939: 1). Physical culture and therapeutics become the focus of Das, Ghosh and Ghosh’s pupils.

Nilmoni Das also mentions Yogendra as a leader of yoga. He writes in IYV:

Today *āsana-vyāyāma* has become widely practised in our country. Its leaders are Swami Kuvalayananda, Shri Yogendra, Shyam Sundar Goswami, Swami Sivananda Saraswati and Bishnu Charan Ghosh (Das 1957: 13).<sup>10</sup>

আজ যে আমাদের দেশে আসন-ব্যায়ামের এত প্রচলন হয়েছে তার মূলে হচ্ছেন—স্বামী কুবলয়ানন্দ, শ্রীযোগেন্দ্র, শ্যামসুন্দর গোস্বামী, স্বামী শিবানন্দ সরস্বতী ও বিষ্ণুচরণ ঘোষ ।  
(দাশ ১৯৫৭: ১৩)

Like Kuvalayānanda, Shri Yogendra focuses on “providing scientific corroboration for the health benefits of yoga and with creating simplified, accessible *āsana* courses for the public” (Singleton 2010: 117). Yogendra writes:

Yoga, interpreted in rational synthesis, represents the way of life which endows perfect health—physical, mental, moral and spiritual—so that what is ignoble in man is sublimated to what is most noble in him (Yogendra 1928: 20).

Yogendra reframes yoga as a physical practice. He says that “ancient yogis of India” used physical education for health:

But the first to correlate physical education with health, hygiene, therapy, ethics, meditation, and higher purposes of life so as to associate such training with medical, social, mental, moral and physic education were the ancient yogins of India (Yogendra 1928: 34).

Setting aside whether or not this is an accurate historical statement, yoga continues to be framed as a historic practice today. The practice is backdated in order to provide a sense of authenticity or tradition.

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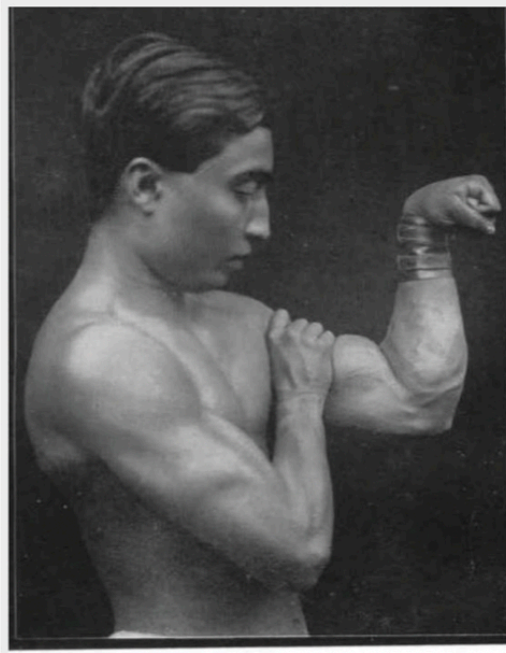
<sup>10</sup> Das is likely referring to Shivananda Saraswati of Assam, not to be confused with Sivananda Saraswati of Rishikesh, who is more widely known today.

Alongside Kuvalayānanda and Yogendra, Ghosh appears on Das's list of leaders in the field. Swapan Das, son of Nilmoni Das and heir to the Ironman institute, explains that Ghosh was a good friend of Nilmoni Das. Early in the 1940s, Ghosh convinced Das that the practice of *āsana* was essential for the health of the internal body. After returning to Kolkata from his studies at Kaivalyadhāma, Das taught and wrote about *āsana* more prominently (Interview, Swapan Das, 21<sup>st</sup> July, 2020). This shift toward *āsana* was significant for Das who, like Ghosh, started out as a weightlifter and bodybuilder. In their earliest works, Das and Ghosh focus on health through muscular development.

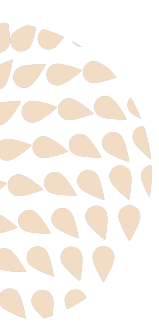
### 1.2 External Health Through Muscle Building

The earliest publication of Bishnu Ghosh is *Muscle Control and Barbell Exercises* (MCBE). It was co-written with Keshub Sen Gupta in English and published in 1930. It depicts muscular men (no women are included) doing weightlifting exercises and muscle isolation practices. It does not include *āsana*.

Bishnu Ghosh (1903–1970) was born into a family of Kriya Yoga practitioners (see Armstrong 2020). He was influenced by his older brother Mukunda Lal Ghosh, later known worldwide as Paramahansa Yogananda. Aside from his brother, Ghosh was inspired by popular physical culturists of the early twentieth century. In MCBE Ghosh writes:



**Figure 1:** Bishnu Ghosh showing “Isolation of the forearm muscles” (MCBE: Fig. 10).



I learnt muscle-controlling before all this, when I was very young, from my beloved elder brother, Swami Yogananda Giri B. A., the founder of the Yogoda system of physical culture [...] At the time when my brother was here, I was very young and thin and would never practise it. But after Thakurta's system had improved my health, one day I chanced to see Mr. Chit Tun controlling his huge and shapely muscles (Ghosh 1930: 52).

Ghosh saw the Burmese weightlifter Walter Chit Tun perform. Soon after, he began training with Prof. R. N. Thakurta at City College in Kolkata (Armstrong 2020: 57–60). This training improved his health. MCBE emulates the work of German bodybuilder Maxick. The titles of Maxick's *Muscle Control* from 1911 and Chit Tun's 1926 *Barbell Exercises* merged to yield Ghosh and Sen Gupta's *Muscle Control and Barbell Exercises*.

Nilmoni Das (1911–1990) started training in clubs and gyms as a young man. He gave public demonstrations of barbell exercises at shows and *pūjās*. This caught the attention of two figures. The Indian revolutionary Pulin Behari Das (1877–1949) bestowed upon



**Figure 2:** Portrait of Nilmoni Das “The author at 45 years of age” (লেখক ৪৫ বৎসর বয়সে).

him the title “Ironman.” Jaladhar Sen (1860–1939), who edited various newspapers, including *Monthly India* (মাসিক ভারতবর্ষ), encouraged Das to publish materials on physical training. He suggested that Das should include photographs of the exercises along with his written instruction. Photography was very expensive at the time. Das’s father was a teacher, the family was middle class. Without enough money to produce the photographs, Das’s aunt agreed to sell off her jewellery to pay for the photos. The first publication was a chart of barbell exercises. It quickly sold all 3,000 copies from the initial printing and was deemed a success (Interview, Das, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2020). The first edition of the Barbell Exercises chart came out in 1933, followed in 1935 by Dumbbell Exercises.<sup>11</sup>

Das’s earliest book, *Vyāyāma and Health* (ব্যায়াম ও স্বাস্থ্য), also focuses on muscle development. It contains dumbbell exercises, barbell exercises, plus ring and bar exercises. *Vyāyāma and Health* was released in 1950 and did not contain *āsanas* in its first printing. However, *āsanas* were added to the second edition in 1954. When pressed for why *āsanas* were absent in the first volume, Das’s son and grandson explained, “Yoga wasn’t very popular at that time.”<sup>12</sup>

In their early publications, both Das and Ghosh are concerned with developing strength. Das writes on the Barbell Exercises chart that “Exercise with a barbell should not be called weight-lifting. It is a muscle-building and strength-producing exercise.” This distinction is clearer coming from Ghosh. Ghosh focuses on practices of “muscle isolation” and “muscle control.” He explains the latter:

Muscle-controlling makes the muscles shapely and increases the power of application of strength. But I would like to call it the second stage of development, for one should have big muscles before he starts controlling. Much has already been said about the development of muscles in the previous part [on barbell exercises] and to follow them closely is what is required (Ghosh & Sen Gupta 1930: 52).

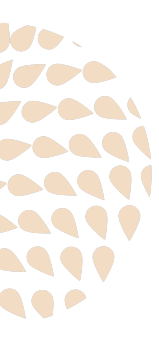
The focus on musculature continues into *āsana* instruction. In 1939, Buddha Bose writes about the specific muscle engagement of each posture. In the cobra position (*bhujangāsana*), the practitioners lie on the floor face down. They then lift their chest

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<sup>11</sup> This information came from an interview with Swapan Das (son of Nilmoni Das), 21<sup>st</sup> July, 2020. Due to Covid-19, Swapan Das was unable to double-check the dates of the original charts and books which reside at his office and not at his home where I was able to reach him by phone.

<sup>12</sup> Correspondence with Soham Das, grandson of Nilmoni Das, 30<sup>th</sup> July, 2020 (WVHB: 4).





and bend their spine backwards. The position looks like a snake, hence its name. Bose lists the “muscles exercised” in this *āsana* as “Trapezius; Rhomboids-minor and major; Latissimus; Serratus posterior inf. Pectoralis major Gluteus Maximus” (Bose 1939: 20).

The focus on musculature continues in publications of Ghosh’s students well beyond the 1930s. For example, in 1963, Gouri Shankar Mukerji describes the muscles used in *Bhujāṅgāsana*. He writes that the back muscles engage and the abdominal muscles stretch: “Alle dorsalen Muskeln. Die Bauch-Muskeln werden gedehnt” (Mukerji 1963: 27). Bikram Choudhury writes in 1978 that “The Cobra strengthens the deltoids, trapezius, and triceps” (Choudhury 1978:125).<sup>13</sup>

Das does not focus on muscle use. Yet, he emphasizes strength. In regard to Cobra he writes:

This posture strengthens the spine and makes it flexible. It gives the spine plentiful blood and energizes the spinal nerves (Das 1954: 111, 1957: 75).

এই আসন মেরুদন্ডের কাঠিন্য দূর ক’রে একে নমনীয় করে এবং মেরুদন্ডের অধিক রক্ত পাঠিয়ে স্বাযুমন্ডলীকে সতেজ করে। (দাশ ১৯৫৪: ১১১, ১৯৫৭: ৭৫)

Strength is a common focus in the Bengali sources. Strength and muscle control often work in tandem. Specific muscles are isolated to create specific muscular engagements. This concept ties in with the practice of *navli*. *Nauli* is included in all of the sources examined here as well as in *haṭhayoga* texts.

### 1.3 The Evolution Of Nauli And Uḍḍiyāna

*Nauli* and *uḍḍiyāna* are abdominal control practices. *Nauli* is performed with the breath held out. The practitioner engages the muscles of the ribs to lift the chest. This creates a cavity in the abdomen. If the practitioner stops at this point, it is called *uḍḍiyāna*. If they continue, they then isolate and engage specific abdominal muscles. If they engage the rectus abdominis, the middle segment of the abdomen sticks out. Alternatively, they can engage the external obliques, so the sides of the abdomen stick out. This is difficult to achieve. Ghosh, Das, Bose and Palit all teach both *navli* and *uḍḍiyāna*. Both also appear

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<sup>13</sup> Bikram Choudhury went on to found “Bikram Yoga” which became popular worldwide. He grew up in Kolkata and studied with Ghosh for a short period of time. His system includes postures from the Bengali sources and a health-based approach. However, “Bikram Yoga” is a set sequence of postures which never changes and is practised in a heated practice room. The method of practice in Bengal is individual, not set sequences for group practice. For more on this, see Armstrong (2020).



**Figure 3:** Buddha Bose performing *uḍḍiyāna bandha* (Bose 1939: 67).

in *haṭhayoga* texts and in experiments Kuvalayānanda conducted. These sources label them as seal (*mudrā*), lock (*bandha*), purifying *ṣaṭkarman*, *āsana* or muscle control.

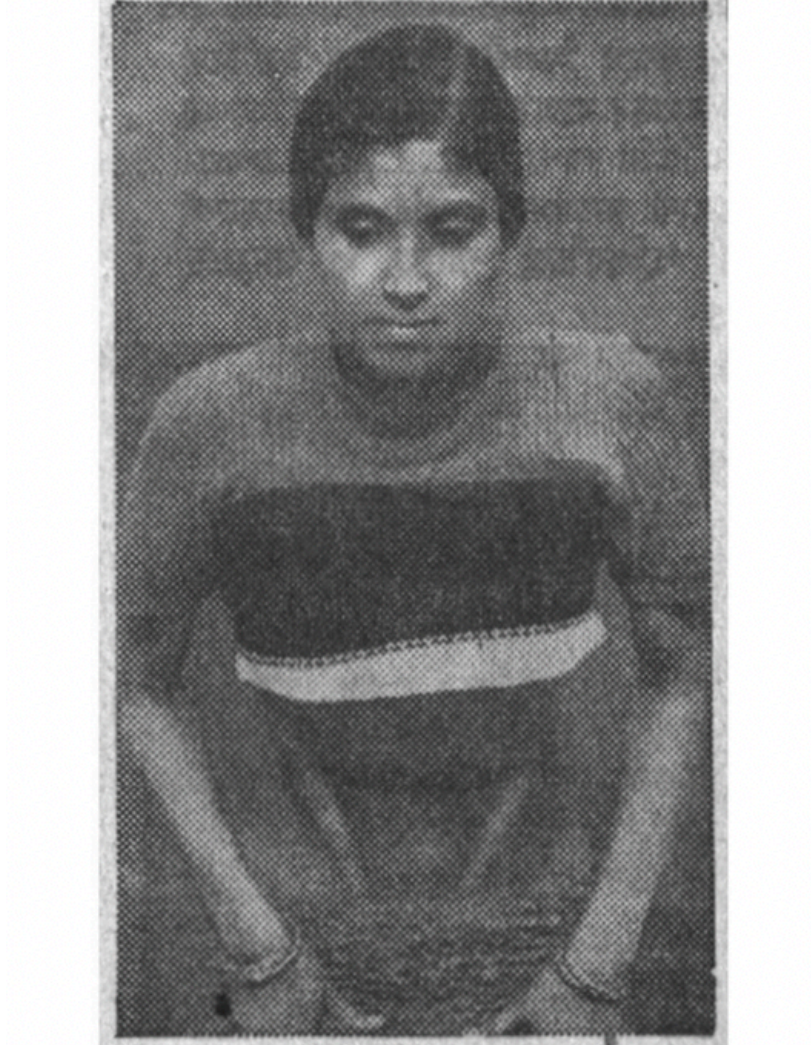
In MCBE there are three photos of Buddha Bose in different variations of *navli*. Though they are called “muscle control,” the focus is health: “All these kinds of abdominal controlling is a sure cure to dyspepsia and improves the digestive power of a normal man” (Ghosh & Sen Gupta 1930: Fig. 23). Bose instructs *uḍḍiyāna* in KKHTY:

Stand erect, relaxing all the muscles.....The abdomen should be relaxed. Then exhale thoroughly and suck in the upper part of the abdomen as much as possible, fixing the gaze on the abdomen (Bose 1939: 66).

This is standard instruction. In 1955, Labanya Palit’s is similar:

First, stand and relax your muscles. Bending over slightly, exhale as much as possible. Drag the upper part of the abdomen in (Palit 1955: 77).

প্রথমে শরীরের মাংসপেশীগুলিকে নরম করে ছবি অনুযায়ী একটু নীচু হ'য়ে দাঁড়ান। যতটা পারেন নিঃশ্বাস ছেড়ে দিন, এই সবস্থায় পেটের ওপর দিক্টা ভেতের টেনে নিয়ে পেটটা খালি করুন। (পালিত ১৯৫৫: ৭৭)



**Figure 4:** Labanya Palit in a variation of nauli. “Nauli - Ultimate Development” (নৌলি - চরম উন্নতি) (Palit 1955: 80).

Das instructs:

With the breath completely out, pulling the stomach cavity in is called *uddiyāna*. Practice *uddiyāna* in this way, as displayed in the image. It is better to learn this exercise by watching someone do it. Practise this

*āsana* in the morning with an empty stomach and you will easily progress (Das 1954: 140).

দম সম্পূর্ণ ছেড়ে দিয়ে পেট ভেতরে টেনে নিলে পেটের মধ্যে যে গর্ত হয় তাকে চলতি কথায় উড্ডীয়ান বলে। উড্ডীয়ান কি ভাবে অভ্যাস করতে হয়, বলা ও লেখার চেয়ে দেখান সহজ। সম্ভব হলে এই আসনটি কাহারও কাছ থেকে দেকে শিখে নিলে তাড়াতাড়ি ও সহজে শেখা যায়। ভোরবেলা খালি পেটে এই আসনটি অভ্যাস করলে সহজেই আয়ত্তে আনা যায়। (দাশ ১৯৫৪: ১৪০)

Das is aware that *uḍḍiyāna* and *navli* appear also in *haṭhayoga* texts. In a passage on *uḍḍiyāna* (উড্ডীয়ান) in WVHB, he quotes the *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā*. In another passage on *navli* (নৌলি) he quotes the *Haṭha [Yoga] Pradīpikā* (Das 1957: 121, 123).<sup>14</sup>

*Navli* and *uḍḍiyāna* are the focus of Kuvalayananda's first *Yoga Mīmāṃsā* publication from October 1924. To perform *uḍḍiyāna*, *Yoga Mimamsa* states:

The exercise of *uḍḍiyāna* starts with a complete exhalation. The muscles of the abdomen are then fully relaxed and pushed well under the ribs (*Yoga Mīmāṃsā*, October 1924).

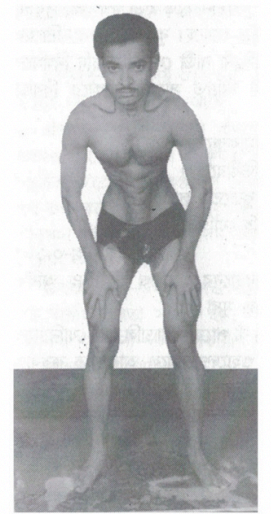
The abdominal control practices are present in many arenas. They serve as links between *haṭhayoga*, muscle control and the teaching of Das, Ghosh, Palit, Bose and Kuvalayananda.

#### 1.4 Internal Health Through *Āsana*

By 1939, a distinction had grown between health and strength. The focus shifts toward internal health and disease. Ghosh asks, “Do you want strength? Do you want health? Your answer, ‘I want both.’” (Bose 1939: 4). This draws attention toward internal health and brings *āsana* into the limelight.

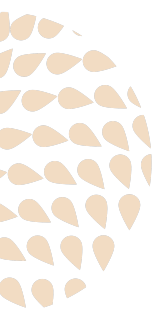
Ghosh explains that “a person may have cultivated great strength in his limbs or in certain muscles by the use of mechanical appliances, but he still may not have good health” (Bose 1939: 2). Even if a person has muscular strength, internal disease can occur. Ghosh writes:

<sup>14</sup> Das does not specify the editions he is referencing of the *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā* or the *Haṭha [Yoga] Pradīpikā*.



**Figure 5:** Practitioner displaying *navli* in IYV. “*navli*” (নৌলি) (Das 1956: 123).





What is more desirable in body culture is the harmonious development of power over the voluntary action of muscles and the involuntary processes of heart, lungs, stomach and other organs and important glands. This is what gives health, and is the scientific principle underlying the Yoga exercises (Bose 1939: 2–3).

What is the benefit of *āsana* over other forms of exercise? Bose writes that “proper practice of Yoga *Āsanās* or postures does not entail any loss of energy, hence longevity is increased” (Bose 1939: 7). Furthermore, *āsanas* are a “non-mechanical, scientific and natural means for the strengthening of all living or atrophying muscle fibres and tissues” (Bose 1939: 2). Medicalised language is commonplace in these sources, regardless of the scientific validity of the claims. *Āsanās* become a means to both internal and external health.

In Leg Lift (উত্তীত পদাসন, Skt. *utthita padāsana*), the practitioner lies on the back and lifts the legs in the air to 45 degrees. Bose says this position: “Strengthens the abdominal muscles and prevents Hernia, removes gas from the intestines. Helps to cure indigestion. It also strengthens the legs” (Bose 1939: 22). Das agrees:

This *āsana* helps to decrease fat around the abdomen. The stomach muscles grow stronger and prevent hernia (Das 1954: 126).

এই আসন পেটের চর্বি কমাতে সাহায্য করে। পেটের পেশীর শক্তি বৃদ্ধি হওয়ায় এই আসন অভ্যসকরিণীর কখনও হার্নিয়া হয় না। (দাশ ১৯৫৪: ১২৬)

Firm pose (বজ্রাসন, Skt. *vajrāsana*) is a seated posture. The practitioners sit on their heels with the knees fully flexed. This posture occurs in all of the Bengali sources and is also found in *haṭhayoga* texts. Palit instructs this pose as follows:

Place the two knees on the ground and sit in a kneeling position. Make the back and neck straight and gaze forward. Exhalations and inhalations are easy in this position. At first stay up to thirty seconds. With good practice, one can stay for as long as half an hour. Do this *āsana* three times each day. (Palit, *Jugantar*, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1952 BLA: Vol. 16; Issue 34, 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1952).

হাঁটু দুটি মাটিতে রেখে হাঁটু গেড়ে বসুন। পিঠের শিরদাঁড়া, ঘাড় সোজা করে সামনে তাকান। নিঃশ্বাস প্রশ্বাস সহজ সরল থাকবে। এই অবস্থায় প্রথম প্রথম তিরিশ সেকেন্ড অবধি থাকুন, ভাল করে অভ্যেস হয়ে গেলে ক্রমশঃ আধঘন্টা পর্যন্ত বজ্রাসনে বজ্রাসনে থাকতে পারেন। নিয়মিত সকালে এই আসনটি ওবার করবেন। (পালিত “যুগান্তর” ২৬শে অক্টোবর, ১৯৫২)

This is a simple posture. However, Bose, Palit and Das agree that it has health benefits despite its simplicity. Bose writes that, “This *āsana* aids digestion, removes flatulence and helps to cure myalgia in the toes, calves, knees and thighs and also helps to cure sciatica” (Bose 1939: 14). Palit says it helps with relaxation:

The resting *āsana* (*śavāsana*) is the same as this *āsana* in the sense the body becomes completely relaxed as though one is lying on one’s back. The body is as loose and relaxed as possible. (Palit, *Jugantar*, 26<sup>th</sup> October 1952, BLA: Vol. 16; Issue 34, 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1952).

প্রত্যেক বারই ‘শবাসনে’ শয়ে বিশ্রাম নেবেন। শবাসন অর্থৎ বিশ্রাম নেবার আসন। (পালিত “যুগান্তর” ২৬শে অক্টোবর, ১৯৫২)

Das says it helps with digestion:

Practise of this *āsana* prevents sciatica and arthritis of the feet. If you practice this *āsana* for 5–10 minutes after meals, it will become easy. Practising this *āsana* is beneficial for easing indigestion after meals (Das 1957: 62).

এই আসন অভ্যাসে সায়টিকা, পায়ের বাত ইত্যাদি হয় না, আহারের পরে এই আসন ৫/১০ মিনিট অভ্যাস করলে ভুক্তদ্রব্য সহজে পরিপাক হয়। অজীর্ণ রোগীদের আহারের পর এই আসন অভ্যাস করা ফলপ্রসূ। (দাশ ১৯৫৭: ৬২)

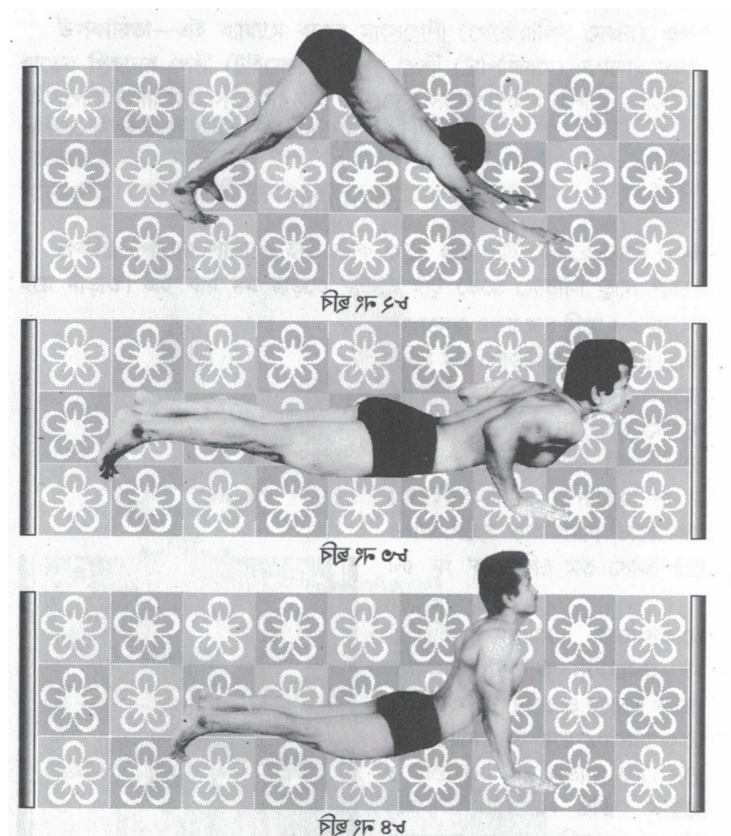
Das refers to the *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā* (GS) when he writes about Firm Pose. Yet, the benefits of Firm Pose are different in the GS. One would expect similarity since the GS is relatively late when compared to other *haṭhayoga* texts, and probably originated from or near Bengal (Mallinson 2004: xiii). In the GS, Firm Pose (*vajrāsana*) “bestows success upon yogis” (Mallinson 2004: 18). Benefits to other *āsanas* in the GS include “break[ing] open the door to liberation” and “destroy[ing] all diseases” (Mallinson 2004: 17–18). Disease is mentioned, though not in any detail. The modern Bengali material gives far more detail. *Āsanās* cure diseases or prevent physical ailments. They strengthen muscles. They affect organs or glands. The difference displays the physicalization of *āsana* in the twentieth century. The goal of *āsana* in the early-mid twentieth century Bengal is health.

## 2. Vyāyāma in Bengal

Vyāyāma is an important element in our Bengali sources. Vyāyāma is a general term that means “exercise.” It often consists of physical positions set in motion. These positions

rarely have specific names. Typically they are numbered and grouped together under the title “vyāyāma.” Vyāyāma is also likened to other practices. For example, āsanās appear under the heading “Yoga-Vyāyāma” (যোগ-ব্যায়াম). These however, are not positions done in motion. Rather, they are held in stillness. Vyāyāma is not included in the English language manuals from Bengal, though it comes up consistently in the Bengali language manuals. I believe this, at least in part, springs from the role of exercise in Indian nationalism.

Physical training became popular in India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1882, the Indian Education Commission recommended that “physical training be promoted in the interest of the youth by encouragement of native games, gymnastics and other exercises suited to each school” (Alter 2007: 1158). This coincided with the perception of a degenerate Indian individual and society at large (Singleton 2010: 95). To promote physical training and counter the idea of a weak society, physical training was put into practice in various ways. English schools included sports programs. Missionary groups organized competitions. Mass training drills were



**Figure 6:** Vyāyāma practitioner going through the movements of *daṇḍ*.  
In IYV it is labeled as Vyāyāma No. 6 (Das 1956: 151).

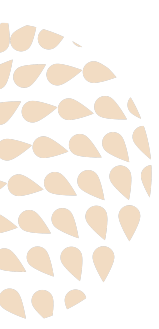


incorporated into nationalist organizations. *Rājas* and *mahārājas* promoted clubs for both indigenous and non-indigenous sport (Alter 2007: 1158). In Aundh (Pune) Bhavanarao Pant Prantinidhi popularized *sūrya namaskāra* for both individual and *national* health (Goldberg 2016: 200). Krishnamacharya developed gymnastic-based yoga under the Rāja of Mysore (Ibid.: 212). Both of these had an immense impact on modern yoga (see Armstrong 2023).

Beyond the promotion of *vyāyāma* by royalty, two additional approaches to integrating physical training impacted yoga in Bengal: secular nationalism and the prominence of gymnasiums.



**Figure 7:** Reba Das showing *vyāyāma* 1. This is included in the Free Hand *Vyāyāma* section of WVHB (Das 1954: 55).



Indian secular nationalism sought to reframe physical practices. Alter explains: “Kūvalayananda in particular sought to modernize indigenous sports and turn postural yoga into a modern form of traditional Indian physical culture” (Alter 2007: 1159). These practices needed to be indigenous to India, at least in name if not also in form. *Āsana* and *vyāyāma* were perfect. To modernize these practices, health benefits were incorporated and specific muscular anatomy was emphasized. They served as a cure for physical ailments.

Secular nationalism found a home in *akhārās*.<sup>15</sup> These meeting grounds fostered community, accountability and political and social organizing. Both Ghosh’s College of Physical Education and Das’s Ironman Center started during this period. Secular nationalism appears in Ghosh’s dedication of MCBE. He dedicates the work to “Young Bengal,” a group which emerged in the 1830–40s ideologically opposed to orthodox Hinduism (Falk 2002: 141). Members of Young Bengal made their way into Brahmo Samaj. Vivekananda and his “proto Modern Yoga” are greatly indebted to the Brahmo Samaj (De Michelis 2004: 49). Das got his start from Pulin Behari Das who led the *Anusilan Samiti* (অনুশীলন সমিতি) or “bodybuilding society.” Pulin Behari Das emphasizes the need for a healthy body and strength of character. He felt physical training was linked to intellectual development (Rosselli 1980: 131).

The *Simla Vyāyāma Samiti* began in north Kolkata in 1926. This club existed in the same neighborhood as Ghosh’s College, Ironman Centre and Vivekananda’s ancestral home. It promoted three forms of *vyāyāma*.

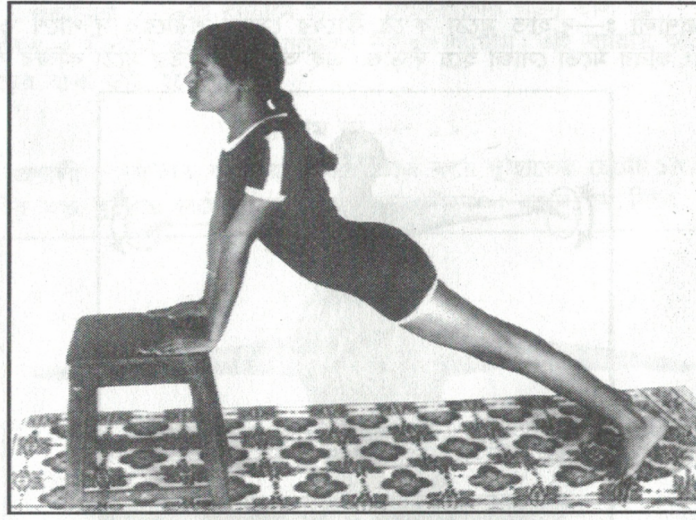
The goal of the club was to develop healthy youth within a nationalist frame:

The main aim of establishing *Simla Vyāyāma Samiti* was to build healthy and morally courageous Bengali youths, so that they could at any time plunge for the freedom movement of the motherland and they could extend their help to the weak and miserable people.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Akhārā* (originally a Persian term) refers to a gymnasium. Gymnasias are found throughout India. They are places where wrestling, physical exercises and martial arts are practised by both professionals and non-professionals. Some young men in metropolitan cities train in *akhārās* simply to get fit. Also, fighting ascetics (*nāgās*) are organised into thirteen different *akhārās*. *Nāgā* members of the *akhārās* go to training arenas (*akhārās*), usually in the early morning, to train in the use of various weapons and in hand-to-hand combat.

<sup>16</sup> See *Simla Byayam Samity* retrieved from: <http://simlabayayamsamity.com/history.html#history>.



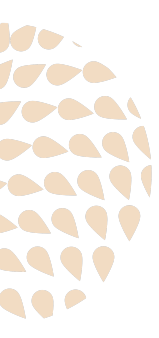
**Figure 8:** *Jugantar* 30<sup>th</sup> August 1953.  
Vyāyāma practitioner in *daṇḍa* with a stool. In WVHB it is labeled as  
Vyāyāma No. 13. (Das 1954: 66)

This club encouraged physical development through “training for wrestling, exercise, and training for fighting with sticks.”<sup>17</sup> In Joseph Alter’s analysis of *Subaltern Bodies and Nationalist Physiques*, he describes two exercises commonly used for wrestling training. He calls these “jack-knifing push-ups,” and “a bouncing deep knee bend” (Alter 2000: 52). Both of these exercises are in Das’s books.

Vyāyāma features extensively in Bengali language material. Consider the titles of Das’s books: *Vyāyāma and Health*, *Women’s Vyāyāma for Health and Beauty*, *Yoga-Vyāyāma* and *Dumbbell-Barbell Vyāyāma*. Yet, it is entirely absent in English sources. Given the relationship of vyāyāma to nationalism, one could expect vyāyāma to be absent from the English language material. Vyāyāma is missing from Bose’s manual in 1939, Ghosh’s 1961 *Yoga Cure* and even Gouri Shankar Mukerji’s *Yoga und Unsere Medizin* from 1963. Yet Palit, a student of Ghosh and contemporary of Bose and Mukerji, includes vyāyāma in her columns and her book.

Both vyāyāma and āsana can be interpreted as indigenous forms of physical exercise. Scholars have probed the similarity of āsana, in form, to other Western practices. This same approach could be applied to vyāyāma. It would be of interest to explore why āsana makes its way into the English-language while vyāyāma does not. It is possible that the

<sup>17</sup> See *Simla Byayam Samity* retrieved from: <http://simlabayayamsamity.com/history.html#history>.



peaceful undertone of *āsana* perpetuated it on a global scale. Perhaps this was enhanced by Gandhi's presentation of spiritual and moral force as superior to physical force (Howard 2011: 200). It is also possible that the funding sources propelled *āsana* but not *vyāyāma*. Further research is needed to address this. However, Bengalis were interacting with each other in their own language differently than they were in with English speakers. *Vyāyāma* is an example of this.

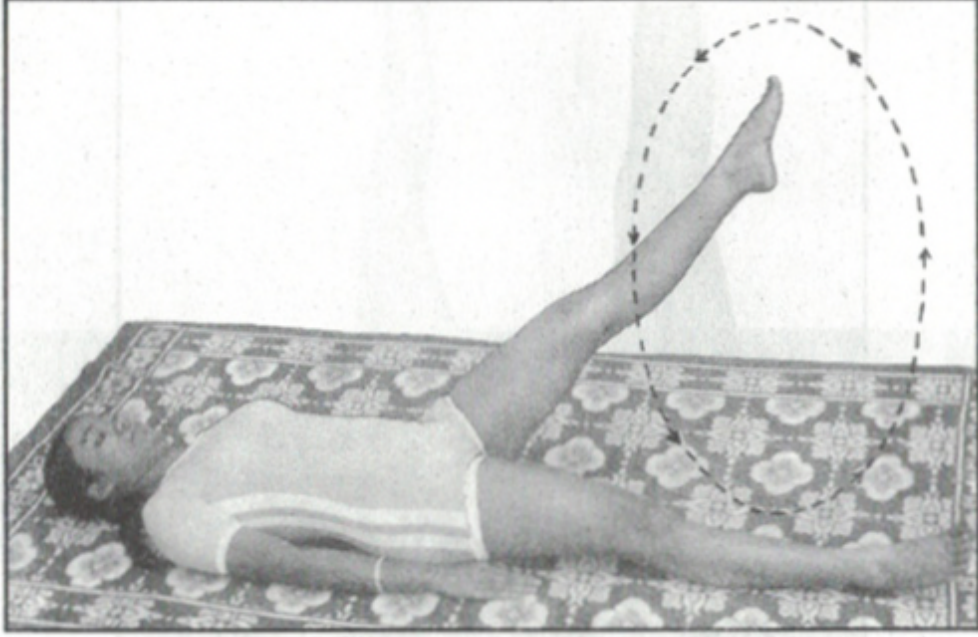
### 2.1 *Vyāyāma As Taught By Palit And Das*

Das draws on many terms to refer to different *vyāyāma* practices. Some of these are self explanatory. There is ডামবেল নিয়ে ব্যায়াম (*dumbbell niye vyāyāma*), which means “*vyāyāma* with dumbbells,” বারবেল নিয়ে ব্যায়াম (*barbell niye vyāyāma*) or “*vyāyāma* with barbell,” পারালেল বারে ব্যায়াম (*parallel bare vyāyāma*), meaning “parallel bar *vyāyāma*,” হেলান বারে ব্যায়াম (*helano bāre vyāyāma*) or “slanted bar *vyāyāma*,” রোসান রিংয়ে ব্যায়াম (*Russian ringe vyāyāma*), meaning “Russian ring *vyāyāma*,” and নীচু বারে ব্যায়াম (*nichu bare vyāyāma*), meaning “low bar *vyāyāma*.” These represent strengthening exercises using barbells or dumbbells, or gymnastics movements using apparatus like bars and rings.

Both Palit and Das use other terms to represent practices without equipment. These are what we would consider yoga *āsana* today. They are the practices of “free hand *vyāyāma*” (খালি হাতে ব্যায়াম or *khālī hāte vyāyāma*) and “yogic *vyāyāma*” or “yoga-*vyāyāma*” (যৌগিক ব্যায়াম). Under the *yog(ic)-vyāyāma* heading are specific *āsanas*.

In WVHB, there are thirty-six positions in the “yogic *vyāyāma*” section, all of which are named as *āsanas*. Some of them have a pre-modern origin. Das includes positions such as Lotus (পদ্মাসন, Skt. *padmāsana*), Stretching (পশ্চিমোত্তাসন, Skt. *paścimottānāsana*), and Corpse (শবাসন, Skt. *śavāsana*). These postures appear in the *Haṭha [Yoga] Pradīpikā*. In IYV, Das includes practices that do not fall under the heading of *vyāyāma*. (Though the book itself is broadly called *vyāyāma*.) These include *mudrā* (মুদ্রা), *ṣaṭkarmāni* (ষট্ কৰ্মাণি), *prāṇāyāma* (প্রাণায়াম). These too feature in *haṭhayoga* texts.

Das then introduces twenty-four free-hand *vyāyāma* (খালি হাতে ব্যায়াম) in WVHB. He teaches moving the arms up and down, push-ups, supine leg lifts, leg circles, sit-ups, and squatting. In IYV, there is also a section on free-hand *vyāyāma* which contains twelve movements. Palit includes nineteen positions in her book. She calls them “women’s free hand *vyāyāma*” (মেয়েদের খালি হাতে ব্যায়াম). Both Das and Palit explain this term. Das writes:



**Figure 9:** Practitioner showing Single Leg Circles in WVHB.  
Labeled as *Bāyām* No. 16 (ব্যায়াম নং ১৬) (Das 1954: 69).

Another form of movement to present for women is *vyāyāma*. Young children love jumping and running so they too are in favor of this excellent *vyāyāma*. It also enhances blood circulation by developing the posture of the body and decreasing stiffness. Free-hand *vyāyāma* can be understood as various poses in movement (Das 1954: 54).

এই মসয় প্রকৃতি তাদের ব্যায়াম শিক্ষক। ছোট ছোট ছেলেমেয়েরা লাফালাফি ছোট্টাছুটি করতে ভালবাসে। তাদের পক্ষে ইহাই উত্তম ব্যায়াম। খালি হাতে ব্যায়াম বলতে কি বোঝায় এ সম্বন্ধে বলতে গেলে বলতে হয়—হাতে কিছু না নিয়ে শরীরকে বিভিন্ন ভঙ্গিমায় অঙ্গ সঞ্চলনের মাধ্যমে শরীরের জড়তা দূর করে শরীরে রক্ত সঞ্চলন বৃদ্ধি করাকেই খালি হাতে ব্যায়াম বলে। (দাশ ১৯৫৪: ৫৪)

Das emphasizes that the positions are carried out in motion. Palit agrees. She offers a similar definition for free-hand *vyāyāma*:

It is very beneficial for women to do free-hand *vyāyāma*. It is advisable to give free-hand *vyāyāma* according to the body structure of women. The difference between *āsana* and *vyāyāma* is that to do free-hand *vyāyāma*, the feet and limbs move, but *āsanas* are motionless. After an *āsana* you





should sit down or take *śavāsana*. After a good *śavāsana*, you proceed on. Both inhalation and exhalation should be done well. (Palit, 30<sup>th</sup> August 1953, *Jugantar* BLA: Vol: 16; Issue: 34.1 27<sup>th</sup> August 1953).

মেয়েদের জন্যে খালিহাতে ব্যায়ামও যথেষ্ট উপকারী। তাই বিভিন্ন শরীর বুঝে, আসন ও খালিহাতে ব্যায়াম দেওয়া কর্তব্য। খালিহাতে ব্যায়াম অর্থাৎ মুভমেন্ট দিয়ে ব্যায়াম করান। আসন ও খালিহাতে ব্যায়ামের বাহ্যিক পার্থক্য এই যে, খালিহাতে ব্যায়াম করবার সময় হাত, পা বা অন্যান্য অঙ্গপ্রত্যঙ্গ নড়াচড়া করে, কিন্তু আসনের সময় স্থির হয়ে বসে বা শুয়ে আসন করতে হয়। শ্বাস-প্রশ্বাসের কাজ দুটির বেলাতেই ভাল করে চলবে। (পালিত “যুগান্তর” ৩০ আগস্ট, ১৯৫৩)

Palit praises the health benefit of *yoga-vyāyāma*. In her column from 17<sup>th</sup> January 1954, she writes:

All the free-hand *vyāyāma* can be useful to women. Of these, I have published about a few. If these *yoga-vyāyāma* are excluded from publication, they will not be done. But they should immediately be practised.

I have spoken to you before about other *yoga-vyāyāma* and now I will discuss various others. Those people who have become a little overweight should do all of the *yoga-vyāyāma* every day.

After the *vyāyāma* are presented here, you will be able to practise them (Palit, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1954, *Jugantar* BLA: Vol: 17; Issue: 147, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1954).

খালি হাতে যে সকল ব্যায়াম করা যায়। মেয়েদের উপযোগী সে সকলগুলির মধ্যে আমি কয়েকটি আগেই প্রকাশ করেছি। এগুলি করলে যোগ-ব্যায়াম বাদ দেবেন তা নয়; তবে যোগ-ব্যায়ামের সঙ্গে সঙ্গে এগুলি অভ্যাস করবেন। আমি সকলকেই খালি হাতে ব্যায়াম অভ্যাস করতে বলিছ না।

তাই আমি এর আগে আপনাদের যোগ-ব্যায়াম সম্বন্ধে বলেছি, তারপর নানা রকম আনুষঙ্গিক ব্যায়ামগুলি সম্বন্ধে আলোচনা করছি। যাঁরা একটু মোটা হয়ে পড়েছেন তাঁরা অবশ্যই যোগ-ব্যায়ামের সঙ্গে এই সমস্ত আনুষঙ্গিক খালিহাতে ব্যায়ামগুলি অভ্যাস করবেন রোজ।

আজ যে ব্যায়ামগুলি কথা বলছি সেগুলি আপনারা অভ্যাস করে দেখতে পারেন। (পালিত “যুগান্তর” ১৭ জানুয়ারী, ১৯৫৪)



**Figure 10:** Palit in “Vyāyāma No. 1” (*Jugantar*, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1954)

Most of the *vyāyāma* lack specific names. One exception is *daṇḍa*, the jack-knife push-ups discussed earlier. Others possess generic names such as পায়ের ব্যায়াম (*pāyer vyāyāma*) translated as “leg *vyāyāma*.” Often they are simply numbered. To this end, photos serve to bring further clarity to written instructions. In one photo from 17<sup>th</sup> January 1954, Palit is seated with her legs out to the sides, leaning with her head toward her right knee and her left arm reaching toward her right foot. She writes:

First, sit with your legs in front, straight like a stick. Like in the picture, make a gap between your legs, bringing them out to the sides. Now, having taken the left hand over your head, bend to the right and immediately bring your head in that direction. Then having taken the right hand over to the left, that is, the right hand in the direction of your left leg. Take your arms in this way, as shown in the picture. In this manner, one at a time, lean to the right and then to the left ten times (Palit, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1954, *Jugantar* BLA: Vol: 17; Issue: 147, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1954).

প্রথমে সোজা হয়ে সামনে পা ছাড়িয়ে বসুন। এবার ছবি অনুযায়ী দুটি পা ফাঁক করে তফাতে রাখুন। এখন বাঁ হাতটিকে মাথার ওপর নিয়ে যান, সঙ্গে সঙ্গে মাথাটি ডান দিকে বেকিয়ে আনুন। তারপর ডান হাতটি বাঁ হাঁটুর ওপর নিয়ে যান অর্থাৎ ডান হাতের আঙ্গুলগুলি বাঁ হাঁটুর ওপর দিয়ে দিন। এবার মাথাটি ডান হাঁটুর দিকে নামিয়ে আনুন পাশাপাশিভাবে। বাঁ হাতের আঙ্গুলগুলি যেনো ডান হাঁটুর কাছে যায়। হাতের ভাবটি ছবি দেখলেই করতে পারবেন। এইভাবে একবার ডান দিকে মাথা হেলিয়ে আর একবার বাঁ দিকে মাথা হেলিয়ে ১০ বার করতে পারেন। (পালিত “যুগান্তর” ১৭ জানুয়ারী, ১৯৫৪)



Palit explains the health benefits for the previous *vyāyāma*:

The benefit of this *vyāyāma* is that it decreases fat along the waist. The kidney and bladder function well. This *vyāyāma* makes any stomach illnesses go away immediately (Palit, 17<sup>th</sup> January 1954 *Jugantar* BLA: Vol: 17; Issue: 147, 14<sup>th</sup> January 1954).

পেটের ভেতর ছোট বড় পেশীগুলিতে আংশিকভাবে চাপ পড়ে বলে সেগুলির ব্যায়ামও হয়ে যায়। কাজেই পেটের ভেতরের অসুস্থতা দূর করতে আসনের সঙ্গে সঙ্গে এই ব্যায়ামটের দরকার। (পালিত “যুগান্তর” ১৭ জানুয়ারি, ১৯৫৪)

Health benefits are a part of *āsana* instruction. They are also connected to *vyāyāma*. Developing health through “indigenous” exercise serves two goals: to build individual health and national health. Terminology is important for the latter especially. Terms like *vyāyāma*, *yoga* and *āsana* have geographical roots. This is summarized succinctly by Palit:

Yoga is the practice of national health. Yogis have prioritized *yoga-vyāyāma* as their primary and dominant form of practice, because by doing this they could survive in extremes of heat, cold, and other adverse situations.

This form of caring for the body was known as “*yoga-vyāyāma*.” Unfortunately, due to political turmoil in India, this trend has vanished. We owe it to the ancient system to bring it back. (Palit *Jugantar*, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1952, BLA: Vol 16; Issue 20, 9<sup>th</sup> October 1952).

যোগীরা এই জাতীয় দেহ-চর্চাকে ধর্মসাধনের প্রথম ও প্রধান ভিত্তি বলে গ্রহণ করেছিলেন, কারণ এই জাতীয় শরীর-চর্চার ফলে তাঁরা দেহকে অরণ্যে হোক, তুষার-পর্বতে হোক, উপবাসে হোক, স্বপ্নাহারে হোক, যে কোন প্রতিকূল অবস্থার মধ্যে নিরাময় ও স্ববশে রাখতে পারতেন। এই শরীর-চর্চাই যোগ-ব্যায়াম নামে পরিচিত ছিল। কিন্তু আমাদের দুর্ভাগ্যবশতঃ রাজনৈতিক উত্থান-পতনের আবেগে ভারতীয় বহু প্রাচীন ধারার মতন, এই শরীর-চর্চার ধারাও বিস্মৃষ্ট হয়ে যায়। (পালিত “যুগান্তর” ১২ই অক্টোবর ১৯৫২)

Palit refers to ascetic practices associated with yoga-like fasting and surviving extreme cold. If yogis were able to endure hardship before, they can endure political hardship now. *Yoga-vyāyāma* is the way.

Both Palit and Das write about nation-building. They both write about the importance of exercise for women and heavily campaign for women to take up physical practice. But it is important to reflect that Palit—a woman—is writing at all. Women were disparaged and deemed not fit to practice yoga prior to the twentieth century. This is

frequently attested to in *hathayoga* texts. Furthermore, they rarely received formal education. By the mid-twentieth century, Palit was teaching and writing publicly. This shift derives from the role of both women's reform and yoga in Indian nationalism.

### 3: Introducing Bengal's Women to Yoga

Prior to the twentieth century, texts on yoga were written from a male perspective (Mallinson & Singleton 2017: 53). We do not have documentation of postural yoga as a practice for women to any significant extent. Yet, in the twentieth century, women emerge as authors, teachers and practitioners of yoga. By 2017, 82.2% of postural yoga practitioners in America are women.<sup>18</sup> If we look at yoga in isolation, this transition does not make sense. Yet, if we consider the relationship between social movements and women's reform, yoga emerges as a female practice.

Since this paper is about Bengal, social reform and women in Bengal are the focus here. However, the development of physical training for women was not confined to this region. For example, in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain, women began participating in fitness classes and physical training. Like in Bengal, the methodology was shaped by "social and medical discourses" and "often constrained by distinctions of class and gender" (Macrae 2016: 19–20). The participation of women in physical training, be it yoga or otherwise, exists within a wider social discourse.

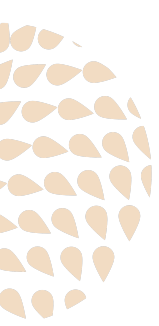
We know very little about the lives of women in India prior to the nineteenth century. Surviving records state that "most were denied men's opportunities to acquire knowledge, property and social status" (Forbes 1996: 19). Then, in the nineteenth century, British rulers came to question many Indian customs involving women. This criticism was a catalyst for reform. In Bengal, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshub Chandra Sen, and Swami Vivekananda all publicly addressed women's low social status and lack of opportunity in education (Forbes 1996: 20). These individuals, and organizations like Young Bengal, worked to improve the status of women in India.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See *Yoga Journal* (2021) retrieved from: <https://www.yogajournal.com/blog/new-study-finds-20-million-yogis-u-s>.

<sup>19</sup> This section focuses on what *men* say about *women* in yoga. Forbes (1996) describes this approach for her own work: "I begin this work with male reformers in nineteenth-century India. I have chosen to proceed in this way because patriarchal systems offer women few opportunities until men decide it is time for change" (1996: 6). Her work is not about yoga; however, the Bengal yoga sources support Forbes's approach.





The British directed criticism at social or ritual practices, not directly at yoga. However, *haṭhayoga* texts contain traces of these views. The British saw the seclusion of women (*purdah*) as a justifiable reason for evangelistic motives (Falk 2002). While it is not called *purdah* in *haṭhayoga*, the concept is present:

The Vedas, Shastras, and Puranas are like common courtesans; this Śāmbhavī mudrā is kept hidden like a lady of good family. (GS 3.54: 78)

Strive to keep them secret, as if they were a box of jewels. Like sex with a respectable woman, don't talk about them to anyone. (HYP 3.9: 54).<sup>20</sup>

High-caste brahmin men marrying many young girls (*kulin*) was another area of criticism. Like *purdah*, the term *kulin* does not appear in *haṭhayoga*. However, the act of taking multiple sexual partners is. The Śīva Saṃhitā (SS) states:

The semen of the yogi who practices daily for six months according to his guru's instructions is never lost, even if he enjoys a hundred women (SS 4.103: 101).

If women practised yoga, it is not documented. In fact, women were listed as a hindrance to progress in yoga:

Women, lying about on beds, clothes, money, kissing on the mouth, chewing pan, drinking, kingship, heroism, wealth, gold, silver, copper, gems, fragrant aloe wood, cows, scholarship, Vedic treatise, dancing, singing, jewelry, flutes, lutes, drums, riding on elephants and tall horses, wives, children, and sensuality: these are said to be obstacles. (SS 5.3-5: 105).

Passages in the HYP, *Haṭharatnāvalī*, the 18th-century *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati*, as well as the *Amaraughaprabodha* all say that women should be avoided as they are obstacles in yoga.<sup>21</sup> From this standpoint, why would yoga shift so dramatically from a male-

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<sup>20</sup> Also in HYP: "The Vedas, Shastras, and Puranas are like common courtesans. Only one, Shambhvimudra, is protected like a respectable woman" (HYP 4.35: 92).

<sup>21</sup> "Even for those who are devoted should avoid in the beginning contact with fire, woman and taking a long walk, which is beneficial." (*Haṭharatnāvalī* 2.50: 60).

"Look at the widened-eyes sky, in hot season the grace of the moon, ladies, Vaiṣṇava idols and faces etc. until tears come in the eyes. See the faces of the ladies with the idea that addiction to such things should be abandoned." (*Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati* 92: 74).

"[The yogin] should avoid at first frequenting fire, women and roads." (*Amaraughaprabodha*: 24).



dominated practice to a female one? Why would yoga become a tool for change in women's social status?

Partha Chatterjee is an Indian political scientist and anthropologist. In his 1989 article “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women” he outlines the separation between *material* and *spiritual*. He does not directly address yoga or women in yoga. Still, I shall summarize his ideas because they help to understand this change.

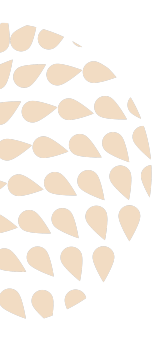
Chatterjee analyzes the dichotomy between colonialism and nationalism. He views the material world as *external* and ultimately subject to the colonizer's demands and innovations in science, technology, and rationalism. However, the spiritual domain—which is internal and therefore not affected by external innovations—remains untouched by colonization. In India, the spiritual domain was superior to that of the West. Chatterjee explains:

It followed that as long as India cared to retain the spiritual distinctiveness of its culture, it could make all the compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt to the requirements of a modern material world without losing its true identity (Chatterjee 1989: 624).

Indians could embrace yoga as “traditional” since it was both *spiritual* and *Eastern*. At the same time, yoga had to incorporate women to meet the demands of the twentieth century and respond to British criticism. The result was twofold. Indian reforms updated their treatment of women. At the same time, they embraced yoga. Women were championed as both practitioners and teachers of yoga.



**Figure 11:** Reba Das bending an iron rod in 1936. “Wife of author Shrimati Reba Das” (লেখকের স্ত্রী শ্রীমতী রেবা দাশ) (Das 1954: 5)



In 1936, Nilmoni Das writes about physical fitness in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*. The photos are of his wife, Reba Das, bending an iron rod, flexing her biceps while dressed in a *sārī*. Das writes:

A nation's wealth is the sum total of its health, masculine and feminine. The learned physical culturists of the past and the present have done much and are still doing much for the physical uplift of the youths of Bengal, but there is hardly any movement for the physical improvement of our mothers, sisters, and daughters. Among the growing needs of the country, physical culture for girls and women has been found to be one. 'Mens Sana in Corpore Sano'— Sound mind in a sound body. Therefore culture of health on the part of girls is no discredit, rather it is a great asset (Das, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 17<sup>th</sup> May, 1936; BLA, Vol. 68, Issue 121, 11<sup>th</sup> May 1936).

For Das, the physical culture movements did not do enough to uplift women and develop their health. A prosperous nation must embrace the well-being of both men and women.

Below, Bishnu Ghosh introduces Palit's *Path of the Body*. He writes about the importance of her work. Like Das, he illustrates the growing perspective that it is necessary for women to teach yoga:

Dearest Labanya, I am extremely happy to hear about the publication of your "women's *vyāyāma*" book. You have listened to my advice, and I know that women benefit from *vyāyāma*. For so long you have practised and your students can learn so much from you. I myself do not have the experience to teach women, because I am not a woman. You, of course, have that experience and can teach beyond what I am able to do. The renowned poet Rabindranath also gave you his blessings after having read your early writings.<sup>22</sup> I am pleased that your countless writings in Bengali in this book, and also your columns in *Nari Jagat*, will reach any educated woman and even man. Know that my blessings are with you and I hope immediately you are successful (Palit 1955: introductory page).

স্বহের লাবণ্য, তুমি "মেয়েদের ব্যায়াম"-এর বই প্রকাশ কচ্ছ শুনে আমি অত্যন্তখুসী হয়েছি-কারণ এতদিনে তুমি আমার কথা শুনেছো । আমি ত জানি যে মেয়েদের

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<sup>22</sup> Palit was also a poet. Her poetry is included in the *Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta*. Nolini Kanta Gupta was the premiere disciple of Śrī Aurobindo.

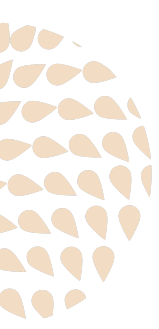
উপযোগী এমন কোনও ব্যায়াম নেই যা তুমি নিজে অভ্যাস করেনি এবং তোমার বহু ছাত্রীদের শিক্ষা দাওনি। তোমার নিজে করা ও শেখানো-দুটো অভিজ্ঞতাই আছে-যা আমারও নেই, কারণ আমি ত মেয়ে নই যে মেয়েদের ব্যায়াম মেয়েদের কেমন লাগে সে অভিজ্ঞতা নিজে অনুভব করি; শেখানোর অভিজ্ঞতা নিশ্চয় আছে যখন তোমাকে আমার পুঁজি নিঃশেষ করে শেখিয়েছি। তা ছাড়া তোমার কত ছোট বয়সের বাংলা লেখা পড়ে কবিগুরু রবীন্দ্রনাথও তোমাকে অশীর্বাদ করেছেন। অনেকের শিক্ষা থাকে-শেখানোর অভিজ্ঞতাও থাকে কিন্তু লেখার ভিতর দিয়ে অভিজ্ঞতা প্রকাশ করার ক্ষমতা থাকে না বলে তাঁদের লেখা বই সাধারণের উপকারে আসে না। ব্যায়াম বিষয়ে তোমার অগণিত লেখা পড়ে তৃপ্ত হননি বাংলায় এমন কোনও শিক্ষিতা নারী কেন, শিক্ষিত নরও আছেন বলে আমার মনে হয় না। তাই তোমার লেখা “শরীরম্ আদ্যম্” আমাদের দেশের এক বিশেষ অভাব পূর্ণ করে নারি জাতির যে প্রভূত বল্যাণ করবে সে বিষয়ে আমার কোনও সন্দেহ নাই। আমার আশীর্বাদ বাণী চেয়েছো-আমি তোমায় জানাচ্ছি যে, আমার আশীর্বাদের সঙ্গে সঙ্গে ভগবানের আশীর্বাদও তোমার প্রাপ্য হবে। (পালিত: ১৯৫৫)

Instructions in *haṭhayoga* texts are not aimed at women. By 1936, Das is writing about the importance of women’s physical education. Twenty years later, Ghosh commends Palit as a more accomplished teacher for women than he *because* she is a woman. This is a significant change.

This was not only a phenomenon in Bengal. Yogendra, who exported innovations that he had introduced in modern yoga out of Santa Cruz (Mumbai), married Sita Devi. In 1934, she published *Easy Postures for Woman*. Yogendra wrote the introduction, much like Ghosh did for Palit. In it, he reinterpreted the historic role of women in yoga. Yogendra acknowledges that, in the early times of Aryan culture, women would have to be reborn each time in a successively higher caste in order to eventually be born for the fifth time as a male brahmin. This idea appears in the *Yoga Yājñavalkya* (YY), an early *haṭhayoga* text:

For the fourth division and women, who perform their duties and control their senses, listening to the Purāṇas (other sacred texts which explain philosophy mixed with stories and parables) is said to be *siddhāntaśravaṇa* by the wise (YY 2.8–10, 18).

Elsewhere, Yogendra writes that even if a woman were to be reborn as a brahmin male, salvation was not promised. Old age and disease could prevent liberation. Therefore, “*Haṭhayoga* took up this challenge and came to the rescue of those who desired to attain salvation during this very life” (Devi 1934: 10). Yogendra says it is a misunderstanding



to believe that women cannot do yoga. “Yoga can be undertaken successfully by one and all, and that at any rate there is no bar against a woman, or even a married woman or notwithstanding even a harlot” (Devi 1934: 13). Here Yogendra interacts with ideas in *haṭhayoga* and attempts to re-interpret them. He says, “that there have not been many women well acquainted with Yoga is no excuse for limitations, since, as in every other art and science, women have been victims to men’s greed for power in every age, country and community” (Devi 1934: 14).

*Haṭhayoga* texts are not intended for women. Yet yoga is popular with women today. How did this shift occur? If we constrain our inquiry to yoga texts, the answers are sparse. Answers begin to emerge when we examine the role of women in social reform movements of the twentieth century.

## Conclusion

Today, yoga is a health practice popular around the world. It is particularly popular with women. At the beginning of the twentieth century, yoga was not about health nor was it practised by women. Yet the works of Ghosh, Das, Palit and Bose illuminate the very traits common in yoga today—yoga for health and as a practice for women. As yoga evolved in the twentieth century, our Bengali sources disseminated it for its impact on health well before the global community perceived it as such.

*Āsana* and *vyāyāma* sprang into public awareness in twentieth-century India, amidst the boom of gymnasiums and clubs. Ghosh and Das, both bodybuilders, led this trend in Bengal. They founded their respective institutions and published materials easily available within their community. Written in Bengali or English, their materials were not exclusive like Sanskrit-based yoga texts. Rather, they were intended to teach yoga to the general public. Today, yoga is an accessible practice. The Bengali sources helped thrust yoga into the mainstream.

By the mid-twentieth century, Ghosh, Das, Palit and Bose all disseminated *āsana* instruction to develop health and strength for the individual. Beyond physical strength, the sources recognize the importance of curing or preventing physical ailments and disease. To this end, they list the muscles required for each position. This is followed by specific physical benefits. Today, we do not think twice about yoga for health. A 2017 study listed both *wellness* and *health* as the top reasons Americans practise yoga. In many respects, the Bengali materials represent what yoga has become today.



Since scholarship focuses on physical yoga in the twentieth century, it is important to go beyond anglophone sources. In India, aside from over 19,000 regional dialects and one hundred and twenty major languages, there are twenty-two official recognized languages.<sup>23</sup> (Although English is not one of them, it has become, *de facto*, an Indian language.) As examined here, the entire practice of *vyāyāma* is missing from the English-language sources in Bengal. Elements of nationalism appear in the Bengali material more than the English. Das and Palit's writing in Bengali provides a broader understanding of yoga than the English sources. Furthermore, it is only when we examine English and Bengali sources side by side that differences come to light.

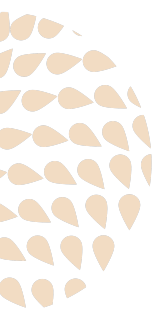
Das and Palit, writing in their native language, incorporated both *āsana* and *vyāyāma*. Their use of “indigenous” practices linked individual health with national health. This resulted in the Bengali innovation: “*Yoga-vyāyāma*.” The large amount of material—Das's multiple volumes on practice, Palit's book, and her forty-one columns—illuminate the high demand for this material. Furthermore, Palit represents the shift toward yoga as a female practice. This was not an accident, nor did it happen by chance. It was carefully thought out. Women were brought into yoga by way of Indian reform movements. Das and Ghosh advocated for women in yoga, starkly in contrast with *haṭhayoga* materials. They proclaimed that the strength of a nation depends on the health of both men and women. As this idea established itself, women began to practise and teach. Today, women around the world are yoga teachers. Early teachers like Palit represent this change.

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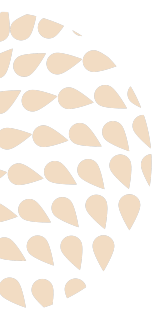
<sup>23</sup> See Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, Language Division, 2011. Retrieved from: [https://censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/C-16\\_25062018\\_NEW.pdf](https://censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/C-16_25062018_NEW.pdf).





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