

FROM PATANJALI TO THE BRAHMA KUMARIS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Purity is the soul's birthright. Let thoughts, words and actions be filled with this.

- Brahma Kumari

Yoga: An Introduction

Yoga is an inescapable and indispensable form of art which has gained recognition in recent times. The discipline of Yoga comprises a set of practices which heals an individual at several levels. Essentially, Yoga is multidimensional in nature as it works on physical, mental, emotional level and spiritually uplifts an individual from the sludge of life. In the Indian philosophical system, Yoga has been a vital part since time immemorial. The philosophy of Yoga is rooted in ancient scriptures like the Vedas and the Upanishads and epic the Mahabharata, for the most part in *The Bhagavadgita*.

The Sanskrit word Yoga comes from the verb root 'Yuj', which means 'to link' or 'to connect'. The word "connection" implies that there must be two different entities separated from one another, and they need to be connected. The ancient text *The Bhagavadgita* explains that these entities are the individual consciousness and the universal Supreme consciousness. Yoga or divine union with the Supreme does not mean that one merges into the Supreme and become one with Him. The *Bhagavadgita* explains that he or she does become one, but in quality and not in quantity. This oneness is spiritual, not physical. The perfect divine union means that one does not lose his or her individuality, but he or she becomes united with the Supreme.

The system of Yoga has been categorised into various types. The dominant types of Yoga include Karma Yoga, Raja Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Jnana Yoga. The object of concentration and method of functioning vary in the systems but the ultimate goal is the same i.e., liberation of the soul from the shackles of the body.

Karma Yoga is the path of selfless action which one should perform. Lord Krishna says, "You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty" (*The Bhagavadgita* 2.47).

Bhakti Yoga is the path of devotion in which the *yogi* devotes himself and all his actions to the Almighty. Lord Krishna says, "Whoever offers Me with devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit or a little water - that, so offered devotedly by the pure-minded, I accept" (*The Bhagavadgita* 9.26).

Jnana Yoga is the path of knowledge, wisdom, introspection and contemplation. Lord Krishna says, "When a man puts away all the desires of his mind, O Partha [Arjuna], and when his spirit is content in itself, then is he called stable in intelligence" (*The Bhagavadgita* 2.55).

Raja Yoga is an ancient system of meditation and spiritual understanding. It is one of the types of Yoga which restrains the mental modifications through the practice of *Ashtanga* Yoga. Lord Krishna says, "For him who has conquered the mind, the mind is the best of friends; but for one who has failed to do so, his mind will remain the greatest enemy" (*The Bhagavadgita* 6.6).

Ashtanga Yoga refers to the eight limbs of Yoga propounded by Patanjali which comprises eight

steps for ascending the yogic ladder. The steps are enumerated as *yama* (“self-control”), *niyama* (“ethical observances”), *asana* (“postures”), *pranayama* (“regulation of breath”), *pratyahara* (“withdrawal of senses”), *dharana* (“concentration”), *dhyana* (“meditation”) and *samadhi* (“complete union”). The initial five steps are practiced for withdrawing the mind from the exterior world of sensual activities and the last three steps are required to focus inwards. The eight-fold method of Raja Yoga enables the mind to return to the state of cosmic consciousness which kindles the soul's original qualities and virtues. It breaks the materialistic shackles and opens up a pathway to attain the true purpose of mind.

The reverend sage Patanjali had propounded the systematic structure of Yoga and had presented the methodical structure of Yoga philosophy in his treatise *Yoga-Sutras*. The sage has compiled the theory in the aphoristic structure comprising four chapters. The word '*sutra*' alludes to 'thread'; hence, Patanjali is accredited for weaving 193 beads (aphorisms) into the thread. According to Patanjali, the incessant and sincere practice of Yoga results in the restraining of mental modifications. It endows the peace and tranquility to the mind which helps an individual in expanding his journey towards the Ultimate Realisation. Patanjali laid the foundation of the philosophy which was further commented and developed by various scholars and writers.

In the twentieth century, a spiritual cult entitled 'Brahma Kumaris' emerged which gained recognition for its principles and Rajayogic meditation. This group of institution lays importance on value-based education and universal brotherhood. Two other institutions established under this movement are Raja Yoga Education and Research Foundation and Brahma Kumaris Academy. The institution teaches to build up the inner strength, to grow the inner values and above all to teach Raja Yoga, a practical method of meditation, emphasizing on the growth of mental abilities to discover the true meaning of life and attain salvation.

The present paper attempts to draw parallelism and contrast between Patanjalian and the Brahma Kumari system of Raja Yoga. Also, the paper aims to situate that the *Yoga-Sutras* of Patanjali is the foundation of all the further groups and systems associated with Yoga. The paper will explore and examine the similarities, divergence and difference between both the philosophical systems. It can be inferred that the philosophy of Yoga in any form has uplifted the status of humanity.

The Brahma Kumaris: An Emerging Spiritual Community

The Brahma Kumari is a Hindu religious and spiritual movement. The movement was established by Lekhraj Khubchand Kriplani, a businessman in Hyderabad during 1937. It was originally named as “Om Mandali” and was chiefly used for delivering religious discourses also known as *satsangs*. The *satsangs* were primarily the profound discussions and contemplations on the holy book of the Bhagavadgita. Lekhraj was gradually renowned as 'Sadhguru' who led the movement and manner of discourses. He illuminated the public with the aims and features of the movement. He experienced a series of spiritual and transcendental visions which were the basis of his discourse. Subsequently, the reins of the movement were handed over to women by Lekhraj. Radhe Pokardas Rajwani, a 22-year-old woman, then known as "Om Radhe", was named as its president, and her management committee was made up of eight other women. This bold initiative was groundbreaking for Indians in the 1930s where women had no voting power and were subdued in every arena. The movement advocated a woman's right to remain unmarried and celibate which exasperated the patriarchal setup of the society. After facing severe revolt and opposition from the government, Om Mandali shifted its headquarters to Mount Abu, Rajasthan in the 1950s. The organization renamed itself as 'Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University' and emphasized spiritual education instead of religion.

Identical Visions of Patanjali and Brahma Kumaris

Swami Vivekananda in the book *Conquering the Internal Nature: Raja Yoga* says that “Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this divinity within, by controlling nature, external and internal.

Do this, either by work or worship, or philosophy By one, or more, or all of these - and be free” (4). The philosophy of Yoga is one such system which enables an individual to conquer the mind and helps him in manifesting the Divinity which is hidden in his soul. Honourable sage, Patanjali, propounded the system of Yoga with the aim of realizing the soul as the pure entity distinct and autonomous from the mind. The mind assumes itself to be the Pure entity rather than a material entity. It becomes the seat of ignorance and bondage and obstructs the Ultimate Realisation of Soul. The objective of Yoga is to extricate the pure consciousness from the embroilment of the mind as well as the external senses of the body.

Similarly, the Brahma Kumaris, through the medium of Raja Yoga, helps the people in acknowledging the intrinsic spirituality within them and helps them in rediscovering the innate goodness within them. It also lays emphasis on the purification of mind and freedom from inner turmoil. The institution of the Brahma Kumaris promotes and facilitates the development of spiritual awareness through a process of lifelong learning. The institution visualises a harmonious world with peace-loving people. It also aims to strengthen individual awareness by awakening the slumbering inherent worth of the human being through the medium of Yoga.

Definitions: Perspectives on Yoga

Patanjali, in his treatise *Yoga-Sutras*, has defined Yoga “Yoga is the stilling of the changing states of the mind” (I.2). The practice of Yoga restrains the incessant permutations and combinations of activities and thoughts. The words *chitta* and *vritti* refer to the 'mind' and 'sequence of cognitive thoughts' respectively. The definition of Patanjali suggests that the system of Yoga alters the incongruous functioning of mind by balancing the *gunas* (sattva, rajas and tamas).

The website of the Brahma Kumari defines Raja Yoga as “the Supreme Yoga through which the Soul becomes master (a Raja/King) of all its senses (organs, mind, intellect) by simply remembrance of the Supreme Soul” (<https://www.brahmakumaris.org/>). The system of Brahma Kumari aims to situate the link between the Self and God. The process of establishing this link begins with a journey into one's inner world to discover one's true, spiritual identity. Yoga is the process through which one delves deeper and experiences the luminous spiritual entity, termed as Soul. This connection and realization empower the being by silencing the inner turmoil and turbulence.

It can be inferred that both Patanjali and the Brahma Kumaris share similar views regarding the philosophical system of Yoga. Both the systems aim to purify the senses of the *yogi* by making him realize the true essential nature of his Soul.

Supreme Soul: Object of Concentration

In Patanjalian system of Yoga, there is no particular object for concentration while meditation. The sage says that concentration can be focused on anything in which the *yogi* has faith in. The object can vary from the tip of the tongue or nose, the serene sky, an idol or even the wall in front of him. He has referred God or *Ishwar* as one of the objects of concentration as *Ishwar* is free from all the bondages and attachments. He is the Supreme Being or the Divine Power who is untouched by the deposits of sensory impressions, fructification of Karma, or the obstacles like ego, aversion and the clinging to life. Patanjali says “The Lord is a special soul. He is untouched by the obstacles [to the practice of Yoga], karma, the fructification [of karma], and subconscious predispositions. He is not limited by Time” (*Yoga-Sutras* I.24). In the Brahma Kumaris' system of Raja Yoga, God is an indispensable part. He is the Supreme Soul and the only means of attaining concentration. For the Brahma Kumaris, God is the embodiment of all Divine virtues who is eternal and ethereal. Like Patanjali, Brahma Kumari also advocates similar notion which says that God is free from the cycle of birth and death and He is the unconditionally loving Father of all souls, irrespective of their religion, gender, or culture. Shiva Baba, the god of all religions, is considered as a spiritual guide of Brahma Kumaris, whose objective is to awaken humanity and remove evils. Shiva Baba is a supreme soul and a point of light. Followers of Brahma Kumaris believe that Shiva Baba speaks

to humanity through the spirit of Brahma Kumaris. One of the books published under the publication of Brahma Kumaris writes:

The BK meditate on an elliptical golden-red light, said to be the original home of the soul. Residing here is the Supreme Soul, or God, also in the form of a point of light, infinitesimal in size but unlimited in qualities. They meditate thus, "I am peaceful, calm energy. I am light. Flying beyond this physical world I enter a region of subtle golden-red light. This is my original home, where God, my Father/Mother, also resides. In this, my silent home, I absorb God's vibrations and I am able to express and share these pure vibrations with others."

(<https://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=3415>)

It can be noted that both the systems of Raja Yoga differ at this point. Patanjali has not listed *Ishwar* as the only essential prerequisite to meditational Yoga. The object of concentration is only the means to cease the wandering mind and in Patanjalian system of Yoga, *Ishwar* is one of the paths to attain enlightenment. But, in the Brahma Kumaris system of Raja Yoga, Yoga without God is no Yoga.

Comparing the Canons

The manifestation of Raja Yogic principles requires specific lifestyle which is malice-free and sattvic. In the Patanjalian system, the *yamas* and *niyamas* are the initial steps of *Ashtanga* Yoga suggested by Patanjali which are the preliminary steps for an aspiring yogi. *Yamas* are the abstentions or the refrain practiced by an individual for commencing the unadulterated lifestyle. Patanjali has further categorised *yamas* into five types. "The *yamas* are nonviolence, truthfulness, refrainment from stealing, celibacy, and renunciation of [unnecessary] possessions" (*Yoga-Sutras* II.30). Patanjali also says that "[These *yamas* are considered the great vow. They are not exempted by one's class, place, time or circumstance. They are universal" (*Yoga-Sutras* II.31). The system of Yoga aims to liberate an individual from the materialistic shackles and takes him near to the Divine entity. It is categorised as a moral system and cannot be attained through immoral means. Hence, the practitioner must adhere to all the necessary refraining and renunciation which promotes his spiritual growth. *Niyamas* are the ethical observances which are centered on one's own practice and discipline. "The observances are cleanliness, contentment, austerity, study [of scripture], and devotion to God" (*Yoga-Sutras* II.32). External cleanliness pertaining to the body and internal cleanliness pertaining to mind are essential pre-requisites for beginning the personal chastisement. Cleanliness is followed by the next factor, contentment which is defined as disinterest in accumulating more than one's immediate needs of life. Patanjali says that inculcation of austerity teaches an individual to endure extreme hunger, heat or cold. Study and devotion allude to the sacred scriptures and allegiance to Almighty of one's respective culture and religion.

The Brahma Kumaris also pertains to pure and untainted lifestyle for achieving control over physical senses. The institution advocates two main lifestyle disciplines. First, a sattvic diet is a vegetarian or vegan diet. It contributes to general well-being and helps in developing clarity and concentration. It also refrains the usage of any kinds of drugs, alcohol or tobacco.

Second, celibacy is seen as an essential requirement for maintaining discipline and detachment. This choice can make people stronger in themselves, more autonomous and more self-confident. It liberates both genders from their over-reliance on each other and supports greater equality. The group does not discard the institution of marriage totally, but, considers it as a hindrance in the path of self-realisation and to recreating a loving relationship with God and to creating a culture of peace and non-violence. Kahlil Gibran, in his poem *Marriage*, writes about the Divine relation which a couple shares post-marriage:

Give your hearts, but not into each
other's keeping.

For only the hand of Life can contain your
hearts.

And stand together yet not too near
together:

For the pillars of the temple stand apart,

And the oak tree and the cypress grow not
in each other's shadow. (26)

The Brahma Kumaris permits the Divine bond which the couple shares. Further, the group recommends “Spiritual study and practice underpin an individual's spiritual journey. It is the responsibility of each person to discern and choose what lifestyle disciplines they are ready to implement and at whatever pace suits them” (<http://www.brahmakumaris.org/about-us/faqs>).

However, Patanjali has explicitly discussed everything in detail whereas the institution of Brahma Kumaris generally insinuates the ascetic lifestyle. It can be reckoned that the Brahma Kumaris are influenced by the Patanjalian system of Yoga and has adopted the traits and features suggested by the reverend sage.

Meditation: Key to Liberation

Meditation plays a pivotal role in the philosophy of Raja Yoga. The sage Patanjali has explicitly described the stages of *Samadhi* in his treatise *Yoga-Sutras*. The last three limbs of *Ashtanga* Yoga (*dhyana*, *dharna*, and *Samadhi*) discuss the mounting stages of meditation enumerated by Patanjali for attaining *Samadhi* (complete union with Divine Power). Patanjali says “Meditation is the one-pointedness of the mind on one image” (*Yoga-Sutras* III.2). When the same object of concentration shines forth as the object alone and the mind is devoid of its own reflective nature, then that particular stage is termed as *Samadhi*. It is the highest state of consciousness that a human can reach in life. It is the goal of our spiritual journey on earth.

Further, Patanjali has categorised *Samadhi* into *Samprajnata* and *Asamprajnata* *Samadhi* on the basis of the object of concentration. *Samprajnata* *Samadhi* refers to conscious or concrete meditation where the *yogi* is aware of the object of concentration, whereas *Asamprajnata* *Samadhi* refers to unconscious or abstract meditation. Swami Vivekananda says “There is another *Samadhi* which is attained by the constant practice of cessation of all mental activity, in which the *Chitta* retains only the unmanifested impressions. This is the perfect superconscious *Asamprajnata* *Samadhi*, the state which gives us freedom” (168).

Meditation is vital in the Raja Yoga of the Brahma Kumaris for being one with the Divine. But the institution has not adhered to the classical rules pertaining to meditation laid by Patanjali. The website of the Brahma Kumaris defines meditation as “the journey inwards, a journey of self-discovery or, in fact, re-discovery. Meditation is time taken for quiet reflection and silence, away from the hustle and bustle of daily living” (<https://www.brahmakumaris.org/meditation/raja-yoga-meditation>). For Brahma Kumaris, the name Raja Yoga is only the name of a specific way which is to be travelled. The central idea behind Raja Yoga is that one arrives at a connection with the Supreme Soul and with the highest in oneself. The meditation strengthens this understanding, increases one's knowledge and strengthens the connectedness. The meditation and the knowledge of Ultimate Truth lead to the formation of a virtuous character of a human being. Meditation transforms a person internally and personally who further inspires and motivates others to follow the same path. Raja yoga also entails a 'spiritual lifestyle'. The meditation practice of the Raja Yoga consists of sitting properly, eyes open but directed internally, possibly listening to a text or music. There are different stages in the meditation: first, 'relaxation' in which the body is brought to the

state of peace by letting go off of all the worries and tensions. Relaxation is followed by second step which is 'concentration'. The practitioner has to focus on something which curtails the wandering of the mind. Concentration can be applied on flow of breath, on a point, on the word Shanti, counting backward, etc. Concentration is followed by 'contemplation' in which practitioner reflects on eternity, true self, or source of light. After contemplation, profound 'realization' dawns upon about love, pure light and shifting of soul. The last step is 'meditation' in which the practitioner focuses on thought and remembers the eternal identity and re-awakens the wonderful state of well-being. Dadi Prakashmani, an esteemed member of the community of the Brahma Kumaris has stated the significance of meditation in an interview. She says:

Rajayoga meditation taught by the Brahma Kumaris is simple and practical. It does not involve a physical posture, breathing exercises, chanting or devotion to any human guru. This Rajayoga meditation is done with the eyes open and, with practice, one can be able to meditate anywhere, anytime. The meditation begins with learning to focus our thoughts. It is important that the thoughts we contemplate are only positive ones. The nature of the human soul, God and the relationship between the two is explored while meditating. This helps to focus the mind at the highest level and one is able to communicate with the Supreme Being. This communication is known as "Rajayoga Meditation," which helps the individual to develop positive thinking, willpower and harmony between mind and body and nature.
(<https://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=3415>)

It can be inferred that both the systems of Yoga have placed mediation at higher pedestal. But Patanjali, being the architect of the philosophy has delved deeper into the details. He has given various categories and sub-categories which renders his philosophy descriptive and explicatory. Whereas, the stages of mediation specified by the Brahma Kumaris pertain to broad and general spectrum. Patanjalian system of Yoga conquers the internal nature of *yogi* by suggesting him the path through eight limb process. But the institution of Brahma Kumari promotes to attain the path through meditation. Unlike Patanjali, BKWS have not explicitly explained the step-by-step procedure to attain the enlightenment.

Conclusion

Yoga is essential in maintaining mental equilibrium in today's world. Thus the comparative perspectives of Raja Yoga explored in the paper bring to fore that the Brahma Kumaris is, in fact, a new spiritual cult, originating from Patanjalian yogic structure but going its own way. The insights projected by Patanjali are roughly adopted by the Brahma Kumaris. Both the systems bars no caste, religion and sex and motivate people to adopt Yoga in their daily routine as it is physically, mentally and spiritually elevating. It can allude that both the systems are practical in approach and emphasizes on the purification of mind and body. In the end, both the systems treat the mental afflictions and deal with growing issues of anxiety, depression and agony and suggest the path of spiritual transformation.

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