

Decolonizing Yoga: Women's Voices and Empowerment in India

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Abstract—Yoga is globally celebrated as a system of health and well-being, yet its contemporary representations often obscure the cultural, philosophical, and social contexts from which it originates. Through processes of colonial reinterpretation, globalization, and commercialization, yoga has frequently been reduced to a depoliticized physical practice, while the voices of Indian women—especially those from marginalized backgrounds—remain underrepresented. This paper approaches yoga from a decolonial feminist perspective, examining how Indian women reclaim yoga as an embodied practice of empowerment, resistance, and spiritual self-definition. Drawing on qualitative insights, indigenous philosophical concepts, and critical feminist scholarship, the study foregrounds women's lived experiences across rural, urban, spiritual, and community-based settings. The findings suggest that yoga enables women to assert bodily autonomy, heal intergenerational trauma, reclaim indigenous spiritual knowledge, and negotiate new forms of social and economic agency. Central to this process is the reawakening of *Shakti*, understood not only as divine feminine energy but as lived inner power. The paper argues that decolonizing yoga requires moving beyond Westernized, market-driven frameworks and centering women's voices, ethics, and community-oriented practices. When rooted in indigenous epistemologies and social justice, yoga emerges as a transformative Indian tradition capable of fostering gender dignity, cultural continuity, and collective empowerment.

Keywords—*Decolonizing Yoga; Women's Voices; Empowerment; Shakti; Feminist Spirituality; Indigenous Knowledge; India*

I. INTRODUCTION

Yoga is often presented in global discourse as a universal, neutral practice focused on physical fitness and stress management. However, such representations are deeply shaped by colonial histories and contemporary market forces that detach yoga from its philosophical depth and social context. In this process, Indian women—particularly rural, lower-caste, and non-elite women—have been

rendered largely invisible, either portrayed as passive bearers of tradition or excluded altogether.

Decolonizing yoga involves questioning whose knowledge is recognized, whose bodies are visible, and whose voices are heard. For Indian women, yoga has increasingly become a site of reclamation—of the body as sacred, of spirituality as accessible, and of identity as self-defined rather than imposed. This paper explores yoga as a living, embodied practice through which Indian women challenge patriarchal norms, resist colonial distortions, and articulate alternative pathways to empowerment.

II. DECOLONIAL FEMINIST FRAMEWORK

Decolonial feminism emphasizes the recovery of indigenous knowledge systems and critiques power structures that privilege Western epistemologies. Applied to yoga, this framework exposes how colonial interpretations redefined yoga as either mystical spectacle or bodily discipline, stripping it of ethical, communal, and spiritual dimensions.

For women, decolonization is inseparable from embodiment. Indian philosophical traditions—particularly Tantra and Bhakti—affirm the body as a site of spiritual knowledge rather than sin or impurity. The concept of *Shakti* situates feminine energy at the center of cosmic creation, offering women a spiritual vocabulary for self-worth and authority. This study uses decolonial feminist thought to analyze how women reclaim yoga as an embodied, ethical, and culturally rooted practice.

III. WOMEN IN INDIGENOUS YOGIC AND DEVOTIONAL TRADITIONS

Although classical yogic texts largely marginalize women, Indian spiritual history contains rich counter-traditions. Bhakti saints such as Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi, and Lalleshwari rejected social hierarchies and expressed liberation through

devotion, song, and embodied spirituality. Their practices challenged caste, gender norms, and ritual authority.

Similarly, Tantric traditions recognized the feminine as a source of spiritual power, emphasizing internal awakening rather than external renunciation. These indigenous pathways demonstrate that women's spiritual agency was never absent—it was simply excluded from dominant narratives. Contemporary women practitioners often draw inspiration from these traditions to reinterpret yoga as inclusive and liberatory.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in feminist and decolonial epistemology. Data sources include:

- In-depth conversations with women yoga practitioners and instructors
- Narrative reflections from rural and urban community yoga programs
- Observations of women-led yoga sessions, retreats, and training workshops

Participants ranged from 21 to 62 years and included students, homemakers, rural trainers, trauma survivors, educators, and spiritual seekers. Emphasis was placed on listening to women's own interpretations of yoga rather than imposing external theoretical frameworks.

V. FINDINGS

A. Yoga as Reclamation of the Body

Many participants described yoga as the first space where they felt ownership over their bodies. Unlike environments shaped by surveillance, judgment, or productivity, yoga allowed women to move, breathe, and rest according to their own rhythms. This embodied autonomy was often the foundation for broader empowerment.

B. Healing and Emotional Liberation

Women who had experienced domestic violence, social control, or emotional neglect reported that yoga helped them reconnect with suppressed emotions. Practices such as conscious breathing and meditation supported nervous system regulation and emotional release, offering healing beyond verbal therapy.

C. Reclaiming Indigenous Spiritual Identity

Participants frequently framed yoga as a return to cultural roots rather than adoption of a foreign wellness trend. Chanting, meditation, and philosophical reflection fostered a sense of continuity with indigenous spiritual traditions, strengthening cultural identity and self-respect.

D. Social and Economic Agency

In rural contexts, women trained as yoga instructors gained public visibility, respect, and income. Teaching yoga enabled role reversal within families and communities, positioning women as knowledge-holders and leaders rather than dependents.

VI. DISCUSSION: YOGA AS DECOLONIAL EMPOWERMENT

The findings suggest that yoga, when reclaimed by women, functions as a decolonial practice that challenges both patriarchal control and epistemic domination. By centering lived experience, ethical self-discipline, and collective well-being, women resist the commodification and depoliticization of yoga.

Decolonizing yoga is not about rejecting global exchange but about restoring balance—acknowledging indigenous roots, ethical foundations, and women's authority. When women interpret yoga through *Shakti*, empowerment emerges from within rather than being granted externally.

VI. CHALLENGES AND CONTRADICTIONS

Despite its potential, yoga remains unevenly accessible. Structural inequalities related to caste, class, geography, and language persist. Additionally, the commercialization of yoga often reproduces exclusionary standards of beauty and consumption. Decolonization therefore requires conscious efforts to create inclusive, community-based, and ethically grounded yoga spaces.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This study affirms that decolonizing yoga is inseparable from amplifying women's voices. Indian women are not merely participants in yoga's revival—they are reshaping its meaning, purpose, and future. Through embodied practice, spiritual

reflection, and community engagement, women reclaim yoga as a source of dignity, healing, and empowerment.

When rooted in indigenous philosophy and guided by feminist ethics, yoga becomes more than a personal practice; it becomes a cultural and political act of restoration. In this sense, yoga offers Indian women not escape from reality, but a grounded pathway toward self-realization and social transformation.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Center women's voices in yoga education and research
2. Promote community-based, low-cost yoga programs
3. Integrate decolonial and feminist perspectives in teacher training
4. Resist purely commercial representations of yoga
5. Encourage further research on marginalized and intersectional identities

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