

Twisted Tales: Spurious Claims of Postural Yoga in Ancient India

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Steve Farmer, Ph.D.

Abstract

Claims are common in popular and even scholarly studies that postural yoga or *asana* practice can be traced back thousands of years to early Vedic or even Indus culture, the latter flourishing from roughly 2600 to 1900 BCE. Last year V.K. Gupta, head of the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library, an official agency of the Indian government, in fact made global headlines when he claimed that his agency had catalogued more than 900 yoga poses supposedly culled from ancient texts by experts from nine Indian yoga traditions; the aim of the catalog, Gupta is quoted as telling the Washington Post, was to deter anyone from claiming for private gain that he had invented “a yoga posture which was already created in 2500 B.C. in India.”

The widespread misconception that postural yoga arose in ancient India persists despite a large body of recent research that confirms that postural yoga was unknown in India before the middle ages — and, even more importantly, that most of what are commonly viewed as “ancient” *asanas* and all *asana* sequences are modern inventions, arising in late colonial times from fusions of Indian and Western practices, including European body building and gymnastic traditions that were wildly popular in India as well as in the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most of what is known today as “traditional yoga,” ironically even those styles practiced with nationalistic fervor in Hindu yoga camps throughout India, cannot be traced back further than the 1920s and 1930s, and owe as much to Western as to Indian traditions.

The story of the emergence of modern “transnational” postural yoga has been ably described in recent studies by Sjoman, De Michelis, Alter, Singleton, and others. This paper focuses instead on how misuses of textual and iconographical data of a type common in studies of comparative mythology have enabled the backdating of *asana* practice to 3000 years or more before its first appearance in India. Special stress is placed on the misdating of a large body of early-modern yoga texts by 2000 years or more by one of the twentieth century’s best-known comparative mythologists, Mircea Eliade, whose studies from the 1930s remain influential even today in popular histories of yoga; and on gross misreadings of mythological images from the Indus Valley that have not only contributed to popular distortions of that history but have equally obscured key facets of Indus myths critical to understanding India’s earliest urban civilization. The paper argues that the twisted tale of postural yoga provides an instructive case study of methodological problems in comparative mythology, in which far-reaching conclusions are often drawn from unreliable data and grossly misdated sources, as discussed in Edinburgh in the first official conference in this series ([Farmer 2007](#)). Striking (if equally spurious) pictorial evidence is shown from ancient Egypt, China, and Mesoamerica that ironically could be used to argue far more persuasively than any suggestions from the Indus Valley that postural “yoga” appeared elsewhere in the world thousands of years before it did in India. Recent neurobiological and physiological studies are reviewed that explain why we should expect the early and independent development of such practices in widely separated ancient civilizations even in the absence of direct or indirect cultural contact.