
Examining the Social and Political Significance of Proto-Yogic Practices in Harappan Civilization

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the potential role of yoga within the social and political spheres of the ancient Harappan civilization. Although yoga as a formalized discipline, most commonly associated with the codification of its principles by Sage Patanjali, its conceptual and practical foundations extend far deeper into the prehistoric cultural landscapes of the Indian subcontinent. Emerging archaeological discoveries—including terracotta figurines, seal iconography, and urban spatial arrangements—have prompted scholars to reconsider the possibility that proto-yogic practices may have existed in the Harappan world. While definitive evidence remains limited and subject to based on the analysis, the results indicate that embodied disciplines resembling meditative postures, breath control, or ritualized bodily practices could have been incorporated into daily life, religious expression, or elite cultural codes. This study examines the ways in which proto-yogic traditions, if present, might have contributed to regulating social order and facilitating political stability in Harappan society. It explores the hypothesis that yoga-related practices could have served as tools for cultivating mental discipline, communal identity, and social cohesion, thereby supporting the civilization's highly organized urban systems and relatively conflict-free environment. Furthermore, the study considers how ritual specialists, leaders, or social groups may have employed meditative or ascetic practices to legitimize authority, reinforce hierarchical structures, or navigate communal decision-making. Through a multidisciplinary approach that draws on archaeology, anthropology, comparative ancient studies, and early South Asian textual traditions, this paper aims to deepen our understanding of the minor yet possibly impactful manner in which yoga may have shaped the social fabric and political ethos of the Harappan civilization.

Keywords: ancient history, archaeology, evidence, Harappan civilization, Yoga

Introduction

Across the course of human history, countless intellectual, cultural, and spiritual achievements have shaped civilizations. Among these contributions, yoga emerges as one of the most influential and enduring traditions. In the present era of globalization—marked by accelerated

technological innovation, expanding global markets, and unparalleled communication networks—humanity has made extraordinary progress. Yet, despite this external development, inner calm and emotional stability have steadily declined. Modern life, dominated by constant motion and psychological pressure, has intensified anxiety, restlessness, and mental fatigue. As a result, practices that strengthen psychological balance and physical well-being have become increasingly essential. In this environment, yoga holds a unique and unmatched position.

Yoga provides a comprehensive approach to nurturing both body and mind. It represents a spiritual and cultural inheritance handed down through generations. Traditionally, yoga is interpreted as the discipline of controlling mental activity and thought processes. Historically, the practice was not confined to a single faith or sect; rather, it evolved as a broad philosophical system that influenced multiple cultural spheres (Feuerstein, 2001). Although the formal structuring of yoga is most frequently credited to Sage Patanjali, archaeological records imply that yogic methods may have existed long before his written work. Evidence suggests that early forms of yoga may have originated in the Harappan or Indus Valley civilization, a highly advanced urban culture flourishing between approximately 2600 and 1900 BCE (Possehl, 2002). Excavations from this period include seals and other materials that appear to depict figures in meditative or disciplined bodily postures. The most notable among them is the famous Pashupati Seal discovered in Mohenjo-Daro. This artifact portrays a horned deity sitting cross-legged in a posture many scholars identify as an early yogic pose (Marshall, 1931; Parpola, 2015). Although interpretations differ, the seal at minimum indicates symbolic understanding of meditation, concentration, and controlled posture concepts later central to the yogic tradition.

In addition to this seal, numerous other Harappan carvings present figures arranged in practices of physical steadiness and meditative composure. Some researchers describe these as “proto-yogic motifs,” implying that the civilization may have valued bodily discipline and mental regulation. While no direct textual proof confirms a structured system comparable to Hatha Yoga, these artworks suggest that Harappan society was familiar with practices centered on physical cultivation, ritual focus, and mental clarity. Moreover, the strong posture and muscular design seen in human figurines from the region further imply that people may have participated in disciplined physical routines to develop endurance and strength (Wright, 2010). A striking

characteristic of the Harappan civilization is the absence of massive palaces, royal burial sites, or monumental architectural expressions commonly associated with highly stratified societies. This lack of elite structures has prompted many scholars to suggest that the Harappan worldview may have been relatively egalitarian, emphasizing cooperation, community integrity, civic responsibility, and personal discipline over displays of power and wealth (Possehl, 1998). Within such a worldview, early yogic practices may have functioned not merely as spiritual paths, but as strategies for social unity, emotional composure, and identity formation.

Against this historical backdrop, it becomes reasonable to infer that the inhabitants of the Indus Valley practiced early forms of physical–mental training—now referred to by some scholars as proto-yoga. These practices may have been used to cultivate physical health, psychological resilience, and spiritual courage. Although these methods were not systematically recorded in written form, they likely contributed to the foundational layers upon which later South Asian yogic traditions developed. The present research seeks to examine a range of Harappan artifacts to evaluate their relevance as evidence of early yogic activities. Through this inquiry, the study aims to deepen understanding of yoga’s ancient roots and highlight how these origins contribute to yoga’s ongoing global significance in the modern world.

Yoga and the Harappan Civilization: Tracing the Ancient Roots

Although earlier understandings of yoga often linked the practice primarily with formal religious rituals, today the term “yoga” carries a far broader and more inclusive meaning. Like any discipline rooted in experience, yoga evolves from direct sensory engagement and embodied practice. In contemporary society, many people approach yoga as a method for enhancing physical fitness, mental stability, and emotional resilience. Yet traditionally, yoga has also aimed at deeper objectives: self-restraint, the harmonization of the Jīvātman (individual self) with the Paramātman (universal Self), and preparing the mind for spiritual realization and liberation (Feuerstein 2001). The very word “yoga,” derived from the Sanskrit root yuj, means “to yoke, join, or connect,” reflecting this union of body, mind, and spirit (Bryant 2009). In a fast-paced modern life marked by stress and disconnection, yoga has developed into an essential element. Practice for well-being. It is remarkable to consider that thousands of years ago, humanity’s ancestors developed a method to calm the mind, cultivate

happiness, and strengthen the body—a method we now refer to as yoga. As Patañjali famously states in the Yoga Sūtra, “Yoga is the restraint of the fluctuations of thought” (Patanjali,1990) While Patañjali’s codification remains central to classical yoga philosophy, the historical roots of yoga extend far deeper into the ancient past.

Among the world’s earliest urban civilizations, the Harappan or Indus Valley Civilization stands out as a sophisticated cultural centre that may have played a major role in contributing to the origins of yogic thought and practice. Although definitive textual evidence is absent, archaeological materials invite speculation about proto-yogic traditions. The Indus–Sarasvati civilization, which began around 3500 BCE, comprised systematically designed urban centres, sophisticated sewage networks, and uniform measurement systems. Weights and a flourishing trade network connecting regions as far as Mesopotamia. Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were among its most developed urban centres, and the civilization at its height may have supported a population of around five million people (Coningham & Young 2015).¹ Archaeologists from India, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom have excavated hundreds of sites, contributing diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations of Harappan social, religious, and political life (Kenoyer,1998). One of the most remarkable findings so far is the absence of large palaces, monumental temples, or royal graves—features common in other ancient civilizations. Indicates that the Harappan civilization might have possessed been relatively egalitarian, emphasizing collective wellbeing, social harmony, and internal regulation rather than centralized displays of power. Such a cultural environment could have supported practices centered on self-discipline, bodily regulation, and meditative awareness. The civilization’s decline around 1900 BCE remains a subject of scholarly debate. While early theories suggested invasion or warfare, little material evidence supports large-scale conflict. Instead, archaeologists propose environmental stresses, river shifts, overcrowding, or catastrophic flooding as possible explanations. ² Excavations conducted during British rule During the first decades of the 1900s astonished scholars Because of the cities’ sophisticated sanitation systems, advanced architecture, and overall social organization—achievements that point to a highly disciplined and coordinated populace. Within this historical and archaeological context, it becomes increasingly plausible that practices resembling early forms of yoga—focusing on physical strength, mental discipline, and inner harmony—may have been integral to Harappan life (Possehl,2002). Understanding In what ways these traditions could have functioned

socially and culturally offers an important new lens for studying the origins and evolution of yoga.

Yoga and Political Stability in the Harappan Civilization: Tracing the Proto-Yogic Roots of Indian Philosophy

Many philosophers believe that the beginnings of yoga philosophy can be traced back nearly 5,000 years, while others argue more conservatively that the origins of yoga as a formalized system emerged approximately twenty-five centuries ago, with the philosophical advancements within the Upanishads. Prior to these textual traditions, groups of early humans settled along the Indus and Sarasvati rivers in what is now northern India and Pakistan. These communities—often identified as Dravidians in early scholarship—formed the core originating from the Harappan era, considered among the earliest advanced urban societies sophisticated ancient cultures. Material findings uncovered through excavations from this civilization has prompted scholars to examine whether the roots of yoga could have existed far earlier than the classical period. A particularly significant artifact in this debate is the famous Pashupati Seal discovered at Mohenjo-Daro (Gray, 1940). The emblem illustrates a horned figure positioned in a seated posture within a posture that resembles *mūlabandhāsana*, or a lotus-like meditative pose. Certain researchers view this image as an early form of the Hindu god Shiva, often called “Yogeshvara,” the Lord of Yoga. Others suggest that it represents an early form of yogic practice rather than a deity. Although the posture appears clearly on the seal, similar asanas are not documented again in the historical record until the medieval period, around the 13th century CE. This gap complicates, but does not invalidate, interpretations of the seal as evidence of early yogic traditions.

Several other seals from the Indus Valley show figures in disciplined or meditative positions. Sujoy Rao Mandavilli has studied these artifacts extensively and has published research proposing that the civilization may have practiced early forms of bodily discipline similar to yoga. Another seal depicts a woman grasping a tree branch—an image that later appears in the 2nd-century BCE sculptures at Sanchi. Such visual continuities raise questions about the persistence and transformation of symbolic postures across millennia. Ramprasad Chanda, an important early scholar who supervised major excavations belonging to the Harappan cultural system observed that “not only the seated deities on some of the Indus seals are in yoga postures and bear witness to the prevalence of yoga in the Indus Valley Civilization in that remote

period, the standing deities on the seals also show *kayotsarga* (a meditative standing posture).” This view is echoed by archaeologist Gregory Possehl, who argued that certain seals represent “a form of ritual discipline, suggesting a precursor of yoga.” More recent and controversial interpretations even propose That the Harappan society of the Indus region may be older than previously thought—perhaps more than 10,000 years—and could represent a foundational source of yoga. Although this view is not universally agreed upon scholars, it demonstrates the growing interest in re-evaluating the chronology of yogic traditions. The culture is also thought to have developed interacted with early Vedic Brahmanism around 1500 BCE, raising the possibility of cultural interactions that might have influenced later yoga philosophy. Although numerous researchers theorize regarding connections between Indus Valley iconography and later yogic and meditative traditions, there is still no definitive evidence. However, the recurring symbols of controlled posture, ritual discipline, and contemplative figures strongly suggest that the inhabitants of the Indus region may indeed have practiced forms of proto-yoga or early meditation. These finds highlight the remarkable depth and antiquity of the practices that evolved into what we now call yoga—one of humanity’s most enduring contributions to spiritual and physical well-being.

Role of yoga for maintaining Social Stability

The connection between yoga and political stability within the Indus Valley society exists an intriguing topic, albeit one that requires some speculation due to the scarce primary archaeological data recovered from that time period.

Yoga in Ancient Contexts: Yoga, as a practice, has ancient roots in Indian civilization, with its origins possibly dating back to the pre-Vedic period. While the exact forms of yoga practiced during the Harappan civilization (c. 2600–1900 BCE) are not well-documented, it is plausible that some proto-yogic practices or early forms of meditation and bodily discipline existed.

Potential Influence on Society: Yoga, even in its early forms, likely had a role in shaping social and spiritual life. Practices that enhance bodily well-being, cognitive balance clarity, and discipline could play a role in the overall well-being of individuals within a society. In turn, a populace that is healthier, more disciplined, and mentally focused could potentially contribute to political stability.

Speculative Influence on Leadership: It's speculative but conceivable that leaders or rulers in the Harappan civilization might have utilized early forms of yoga or meditation to maintain personal well-being, clarity of mind, and perhaps even to enhance decision-making abilities. A stable leadership, benefiting from such practices, could contribute to political stability by fostering continuity and effective governance.

Cultural and Social Cohesion: Practices like yoga could also have served to create a sense of cultural and social cohesion among the people of the Harappan civilization. Shared rituals and practices often strengthen social bonds and emotional connection, both essential for preserving stability within a society.

Archaeological and Iconographic Evidence: While direct archaeological evidence specifically linking yoga to political stability within the Indus Valley society remains scant, the existence of inscribed emblems and figurines depicting possible yoga-like postures or meditative stances suggests a cultural familiarity with such practices. These artifacts hint at a society that valued physical and possibly spiritual well-being.

In conclusion, while direct evidence is limited, the potential role of yoga in fostering personal well-being, social cohesion, and possibly influencing leadership across the cultural landscape of the Harappan era could have indirectly contributed to political stability. It highlights the significance of interconnectedness of traditional customs and societal behaviors societal stability in ancient civilizations.

The Indus Valley culture, commonly referred to as the Harappan society/civilization, flourished from approximately 2600 to 1900 BCE. Evidence directly linking yoga as we understand it today to this early urban society is sparse due to the limited understanding regarding their spiritual traditions and spiritual practices based on available archaeological findings. However, there exists a few aspects that scholars have speculated upon regarding yoga-like practices or related cultural elements:

Seals and Figurines: Archaeological discoveries from Harappan sites, such as Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, have unearthed engraved emblems and sculpted icons depicting human figures in various postures. Some of these postures resemble what could be understood as yoga

poses or meditative stances. As an illustration, the "Pashupati Seal" unearthed at the site of Mohenjo-Daro shows a figure seated cross-legged in a position that certain researchers propose could be a proto-Shiva or yogic deity.

Bathing Platforms and Great Bath: The Great Bath at Mohenjo-Daro, along with bathing platforms found in other Harappan sites, suggests a culture that placed importance on physical cleanliness and possibly ritual purification. While not directly yoga-related, these practices of cleanliness and ritual purity can be seen as precursors to the physical and mental purification emphasized in later yogic traditions.

Script and Symbols: The script utilized by the ancient Harappan culture is still undeciphered, which limits our comprehension of their written records and religious texts, if any. Symbols found on seals and other artifacts, however, hint at a complex religious and ritualistic life which may have included practices conducive to later yogic traditions.

Cultural Continuity: It is believed that some elements of Harappan culture, such as certain religious practices and symbols, continued to influence later Indian civilizations. This cultural continuity indicates the possibility that there existed foundational practices or beliefs that evolved into aspects of later Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions, which include yoga.

While concrete evidence directly linking modern yoga practices to the ancient Harappan culture stands as lacking, the existence of figurines and seals depicting potential yoga-like postures, together with a culture that valued physical and possibly spiritual well-being, indicates that there might have existed proto-yogic practices or related disciplines. These practices likely evolved over millennia and eventually became more formally recognized in the classical and post-classical periods of Indian history. Therefore, while we cannot definitively claim that yoga as we know it today was present during the Indus Valley culture there are tantalizing hints that suggest the existence of early forms or precursors to yoga-related practices. Furthermore, the Harappan lifestyle—characterized by remarkable urban planning, sanitation systems, standardized weights, and evidence of social organization without overt displays of authoritarian rule—implies a community that valued order, discipline, and collective well-being. These traits align with what later traditions would articulate as essential qualities of yogic practice, such as self-regulation, mental discipline, and harmony within

society. Although we must avoid projecting later philosophies directly onto earlier cultures, it is logical to consider the possibility that such a well-structured society may have incorporated practices aimed at cultivating inner and outer balance. Over millennia, these early cultural elements may have filtered into or influenced subsequent traditions that later developed into the classical systems of yoga found in the Upanishads, the Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali, and later tantric and hatha-yoga texts. The evolution of yoga was undeniably complex—shaped by Vedic rituals, Śramanic movements, ascetic practices, and philosophical developments—but the Indus Valley society might represent one of the most ancient layers in this long continuum. Thus, while we cannot definitively claim that yoga existed in its modern or classical form within the Harappan world, the archaeological record offers tantalizing hints. These suggest that precursors to yogic discipline—proto-yogic practices grounded in bodily awareness, symbolic posture, and perhaps spiritual significance—may have played a place in the everyday or ritual life belonging to this old culture.

Yoga and Social Organization

Yoga in the context of the Harappan Civilization offers a deeper understanding of how physical postures, discipline, and spiritual practices may have influenced daily life and social systems. The highly organized nature of Harappan cities—seen through their grid-like streets, standardized bricks, and advanced drainage systems—reflects not only technological achievements but also a collective mindset rooted in order and balance. This architectural precision suggests that discipline was not confined merely to construction or governance but may have extended into the lifestyle and belief systems of the people. The same principles that structured their cities might also have shaped their moral values, behavior, and social relationships. Yoga, in its earliest form, may have served multiple purposes beyond physical fitness. Emotional stability was likely one of its roles. In societies where cooperation and coexistence were essential for survival, practices that helped people manage stress, develop self-control, and maintain calmness would have contributed significantly to social harmony. The meditative nature of proto-yoga may have enabled individuals to cultivate inner peace, reducing conflicts and fostering a peaceful environment. The presence of seated figures in yogic postures on seals supports the idea that mindfulness or meditation played a role in their cultural life(Rajani, 2025).

Another important function of early yogic practices could have been enhancing social cohesion. A shared cultural or spiritual practice naturally strengthens community bonds. When individuals participate in collective rituals—whether physical, spiritual, or social—they develop a sense of belonging. Yoga may have served as a unifying practice, allowing people to come together regardless of occupation, status, or background. Such shared practices help reinforce common values, mutual respect, and collective responsibility, which are essential components of a stable society. Furthermore, early forms of yoga may have promoted the idea of collective identity rather than individual superiority. The Harappan Civilization shows little evidence of large-scale monuments or grand statues dedicated to rulers, unlike civilizations such as Egypt or Mesopotamia. This absence suggests a society where power was shared and community welfare was prioritized over personal glory. If yoga was indeed practiced in this cultural environment, it may have reinforced humility, self-discipline, and the idea that each person was part of a larger social and natural order. The philosophical basis of yoga aligns with these values, emphasizing self-awareness, balance, and unity rather than domination or hierarchy (Rajani, 2025).

An important implication of this interpretation is that proto-yoga was likely not confined to elites, priests, or rulers. Instead, it may have been accessible to everyday people. The presence of numerous seals and figurines depicting possible yogic postures across various excavation sites indicates that the practice was widespread rather than restricted. If only a select group practiced yoga, its symbols would likely appear only in specific religious or ceremonial contexts. Instead, their general distribution suggests that yoga—or at least the conceptual foundation of it—was part of daily life and identity.

Yoga and Political Governance

The political organization of the Harappan Civilization remains one of the most debated aspects of its archaeology. Unlike other ancient civilizations such as Mesopotamia or Egypt, the Indus Valley region shows no clear evidence of kings, royal tombs, or palatial structures (Green, 2020). This absence suggests that Harappan governance may not have been monarchic or centralized. Instead, scholars propose a decentralized, cooperative, or collective political system where authority was distributed rather than concentrated (Kenoyer, 1998). Given this model, practices resembling early forms of yoga—particularly meditation, mental discipline, and structured behavioral control—may have played a role in sustaining political order and

social stability. If discipline was a cultural value, it could have supported **decision-making** processes where community consensus, rather than individual rule, guided governance. Meditation or contemplative practices may have enhanced clarity, patience, and emotional regulation, support balanced leadership and reduce impulsive or authoritarian decision-making (Flood, 1996).

Similarly, yoga-like discipline may have contributed to conflict resolution. In societies without coercive rulers or militarized enforcement, community harmony would require shared ethics, restraint, and calm negotiation rather than force. Practices encouraging emotional balance and non-violence could help manage disputes within dense urban environments, where cooperation was essential for functioning water systems, trade, and daily life (Possehl, 2002). The same cultural framework may also have assisted in maintaining social order. The Harappan standardized weights, architecture, and city planning systems reflect not only technical advancement but also a strong cultural emphasis on regulation, uniformity, and discipline (Wright, 2010). If yoga promoted inner discipline, responsibility, and restraint, it could have reinforced compliance with communal norms without reliance on hierarchical authority.

In this interpretation, yoga may be viewed as more than a spiritual or physical tradition: it may have functioned as a political philosophy. Its core values—self-control, ethical duty (dharma), harmony with others, and cooperation—align with the archaeological picture of a well-organized, egalitarian, and stable civilization. Rather than emphasizing personal dominance or power, such a philosophy would support collective identity and shared responsibility, which align with the archaeological absence of elite symbolism or centralized rule. Although there is no definitive evidence linking yoga directly to political governance in the Harappan context, the consistency between social structure, cultural artifacts, and later South Asian philosophical traditions suggests that discipline-based worldviews may have been embedded in early society. Therefore, yoga may have served as a subtle cultural mechanism supporting governance, social cohesion, and civic order in one of the world's earliest organized civilizations.

Conclusion

Archaeological evidence strongly suggests that yoga was closely intertwined with the lifestyle and cultural practices belonging to the inhabitants of the Indus Valley Civilization. Although the precise chronology belonging to this ancient society remains debated among scholars, one fact is undeniable: while the Indus urban system eventually declined, the philosophical and experiential traditions that resemble early yogic practices survived, transformed, and matured over centuries. These proto-yogic elements were later refined and systematized by luminaries such as Rishi Patanjali, whose *Yoga Sūtra* provided a structured philosophical framework for understanding the mind, consciousness, and spiritual liberation. Within the Indus cultural context, yoga was likely far more than a physical activity—rather, it represented a holistic mode of living encompassing bodily discipline, mental clarity, spiritual aspiration, and social harmony. In contemporary times, yoga's capacity to foster physical and mental well-being is widely recognized, but its broader societal significance is often overlooked. The discipline of yoga cultivates virtues such as self-restraint, inner balance, empathy, and mental discipline—all of which are indispensable for maintaining social order. By guiding individuals away from impulses rooted in ego, greed, or competitive aggression, yoga contributes to a more harmonious social environment. This is particularly relevant today, where conflicts over power, property, and identity continue to destabilize communities. In this sense, yoga functions not only as a personal spiritual practice but also as a cultural mechanism for promoting ethical living and social cohesion. Although the Indus Civilization has faded into history, its cultural legacy—especially the seeds of early yogic discipline—continues to exert influence. These ancient insights form part of a continuous lineage within Indian civilization, nurtured by saints, scholars, and practitioners across centuries. Swami Vivekananda, in particular, played a transformative role by introducing yoga to the global stage and articulating its universal message. Today, as yoga is practiced across continents, understanding its historical foundations becomes even more essential. Deepening research into its ancient origins, especially its potential connections with the Indus Valley, will not only enrich historical knowledge but also illuminate yoga's enduring relevance as a tool for personal growth and societal well-being.

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