

Disrupting Monoliths: Yogi Haider's Localization of Yoga in Pakistan

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Abstract

Yogi Haider, a contemporary yoga teacher from Phalia, Punjab, now based in Islamabad, offers a compelling example of what teaching yoga in Pakistan entails. Despite the shared cultural heritage between India and Pakistan, post-Partition tensions have made yoga a controversial practice in Pakistan. This study explores how Yogi Haider's individual narrative challenges stereotypical portrayals of Pakistan and reveals yoga's often overlooked presence in the country. It provides an alternative perspective that situates yoga within Pakistan's cultural, religious, and political landscape, countering its exclusive association with Hindu and Indian identity. This paper argues that Yogi Haider strategically uses social media to display how he localizes his teachings by incorporating poetry, spatial markers, and historical elements. In doing so, he challenges both Pakistan's global image and India's sole claim to yoga. His work highlights how yoga in Pakistan is under-represented in academic and media discourse due to prevailing biases. To analyze how Yogi Haider frames his teachings for a Pakistani audience, this study employs digital ethnography and discourse analysis of his public content on Facebook and YouTube posted in both Urdu and English. Digital ethnography enables immersion in his online community to observe how he constructs his persona and represents himself. Discourse analysis offers insight into his language and intertextual references revealing how he positions yoga within the Pakistani context and disrupts dominant narratives linking it exclusively to India and Hinduism.

Keywords: Digital Ethnography; Transnational Yoga; Yoga and Islam; Yoga in Pakistan

Introduction

Yogi Haider, a contemporary yoga teacher from Phalia, Punjab, based in Islamabad, provides a concrete and timely example of what teaching yoga in Pakistan looks like and involves. While studying Hindi and Urdu at university and being interested in yoga research, I asked myself if there were people teaching yoga in Urdu, which is how I came across Yogi Haider's YouTube channel.¹ As he received attention from several Indian media outlets,² I wondered why he attracted attention.

Despite their shared cultural history, India and Pakistan's post-Partition hostility and political tensions have made engagement with yoga controversial in the country. This study

highlights how individual narratives, like Yogi Haider's, challenge stereotypical portrayals of Pakistan and reveal yoga's overlooked presence in the country. It offers an alternative perspective that situates yoga within Pakistan's cultural, religious, and political context, countering its exclusive association with Hindu and Indian identity. Stereotypical portrayals are due to several reasons, namely colonial history, global media representation, and geopolitics, and do not show the complexity and diversity of Pakistani society. Centring on local narratives, such as that of Yogi Haider, helps to resist stereotypes, challenge simplistic images, and also bring to light the country's cultural ties with yoga.

To this aim, I argue that Yogi Haider's use of poetry, space and history, as well as strategic displays on social media, grounds his teachings in a familiar sociocultural context, and challenges Pakistan's global image and India's sole claim to yoga. Moreover, Haider's social media presence highlights that yoga in Pakistan is under-studied due to prejudices against the country, such as discursive associations with extremism, instability, backwardness, monolithic identity, and economic underdevelopment. Haider's social media presence highlights that yoga in Pakistan is controversial due to religious oppositions because yoga is perceived as a Hindu practice incompatible with Islamic beliefs. Suggesting an alternative view of yoga that questions Hindu- and Indian-only representations reveals that yoga is part of the cultural framework of Pakistan and yoga intersects with religious and political dynamics in South Asia.

Data and Methodology

To examine how Yogi Haider uses social media to localize his teachings to fit the Pakistani context, I use digital ethnography and discourse analysis of his publications on Facebook and YouTube where he publicly shares content in Urdu and English. In this article, only content in English is used, but an analysis of some content in Urdu has been done during my Master's thesis (Charmey 2021). Overall, Yogi Haider mainly uses English on his social media accounts but Urdu as the language of instruction in Haider's YouTube videos. Digital ethnography allows me to immerse myself in his online community to understand how he builds his online persona and represents himself via social media; discourse analysis lets me analyze how Haider constructs his discourse on yoga to challenge how Pakistan is currently globally represented. Additionally, through discourse analysis, I can look at how yoga is predominantly connected to India and Hinduism. The research was conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic as it was not possible to travel. The study uses publicly available Facebook and YouTube content. No restricted or private posts are accessed. It is not anonymized due to the public nature of the data and for full transparency and accuracy of the research. Consent by Yogi Haider has been received regarding the publication of an article on his work.

As there is no academic research concerning Yogi Haider, this work focuses on his publications on Facebook and YouTube, the social media he uses the most and regularly to promote his teachings. My analysis looks at the period from 2015 to 2025, starting with the onset of his media visibility. On Facebook, I studied posts from 2015 to 2025. On YouTube, I selected videos according to their promotional content published from 2016 onwards (start of the earliest publications available) and studied them as texts to focus on his discourse, leaving aside the visual content to narrow down the analysis. That is, I use the content published on the platforms, namely the texts written in posts, written on images published, spoken in videos, but no yoga classes are analyzed. Regarding media publications, I gathered around 30 online articles in Hindi and English on Yogi Haider published from 2015-2025. The study focuses only on the posts

made by Yogi Haider, not his outreach and the response he gets from his audience, but more research on this is needed.

Tools from digital media studies help to shed light on Yogi Haider's use of social networks. Here, social networks, or "social media", are defined as digital Internet technologies that enable users to communicate and collaborate, which include platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp. They can take the form of mobile applications, websites, or software (Burgess et al. 2018, 3). Digital ethnography allows one to immerse oneself in virtual culture and observe the issues debated on interactive websites and virtual communities (Browne 2010, 1). The idea is to immerse oneself in Yogi Haider's Facebook and YouTube accounts, observe what he posts, and report on his use of these two social networks.

Discourse analysis is used to study Yogi Haider's discourse on yoga. Discourse is understood here as "the activity of subjects inscribed in determined contexts, producing statements of an order other than that of the sentence" (Maingueneau 2009, 44, my translation). By analyzing textual publications, descriptions accompanying an image or video, and transcriptions of YouTube videos, one gains insight into Yogi Haider's discourse as a yoga teacher. Studying his use of language and references sheds light on how he presents himself and talks about yoga. The notion of intertextuality is particularly useful in revealing Yogi Haider's frames of reference.³ Moreover, intertextuality also has a social impact that offers insight in the case of Yogi Haider, namely because

intertextuality is essentially a *social* process through which people not only create linkages between texts, but also create relationships between themselves and other users of texts, showing themselves to be competent members of particular communities by using the conventions of intertextuality of those communities (Jones et al. 2015, 7).

Thus, social networks in general, and intertextuality in particular, enable "particular social goals, enacting particular social identities, and reproducing particular sets of social relationships" (3). The essay will look at how these points are reflected in Yogi Haider's teachings and the construction of his persona.

The essay will first present Yogi Haider and the central components of his teachings. Then, it will look at the three main axes he uses to ground his teachings in the Pakistani context, namely his use of poetry, space, and history, to argue that he uses these to challenge Pakistan's global image and India's sole claim to yoga.

Literature Review

As a white, upper-middle-class yoga student and beginner researcher from Switzerland who holds a master's degree in South Asian studies, I am striving to be accountable to Muslim and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. I aim to consider my own prejudices regarding Islamophobia and racism in yoga settings and research as well as my position as a white scholar researching yoga in Pakistan. This entails recognizing the Orientalist and colonial biases present in the discipline in which I was trained. It also involves acknowledging what it means to be from Switzerland, namely having the privilege of a seeming neutrality while Switzerland has a history of racism and colonialism that is not yet sufficiently addressed.⁴

This project aims to rely on decolonial and critical yoga studies, as carried on by the *Race and Yoga Journal* (2016-present), Sheena Sood (2020a, 2020b, 2023), Shameem Black (2021,

2023, 2024), Andrea Jain (2014, 2020, 2021), and Rumya Putcha (2020), among others. I am indebted to their works, as well as those of Theo Wildcroft and Harriet McAtee (2024), Cara Hagan (2021), and Beth Berila et al. (2016), to name non-exhaustively some of the publications I am leaning on to constitute this project's framework. Their approaches and reflections directly influenced the way this article was written by helping me point out how my biases, privileges, and blinders shape my research. I try to represent a history that is left aside by bringing to the forefront Yogi Haider's viewpoint while also centering previously excluded narratives, namely research on Pakistan in Yoga Studies. Nevertheless, being aware of colonial context and power structures, I try to speak with, rather than over; therefore, I aim to center Yogi Haider's knowledge and perspective throughout the essay.

Nowadays, over 300 million people worldwide practice yoga, contributing to a global industry valued at over \$115 billion (EMR 2024; Heilbron 2021). While scholars have examined yoga's entanglements with neoliberal capitalism (Jain 2014; Jain 2020; Jain 2021), this project focuses on its political dimensions in 21st-century South Asia, particularly yoga's alignment with Hindu nationalist ideologies (Black 2021; Black 2023; Black 2024; Sood 2020a; Sood 2020b; Sood 2023). A turning point in yoga's global prominence was the 2014 election of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who promoted yoga internationally through the UN-recognized International Day of Yoga and domestically via institutions like the AYUSH Ministry, integrating yoga into public health policy.

Yoga's meanings and uses have been diverse throughout history. Suzanne Newcombe (2017) calls it a "multivalent term," encompassing "diverse collection of ideas and practices [...] a religious ideal, as well as an activity that can promote health and wellness [...], nationalistic ideology, international gurus, evidence-based biomedical health benefits, secular physical culture, and purely individual aspirations for *mokṣa*" (sec. 8). Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne (2008, 5) note yoga's historical adaptability, while James Mallinson and Singleton (2017, xxi) highlight the impact of globalization and modernization, especially for the practice of *hatha yoga*.

Joseph Alter (2000; 2004; 2006; 2008; 2017; 2018; 2020) and others (Khalikova 2017; Newcombe 2017) furnish evidence of yoga's link with public health and nationalist projects. Articles such as Anusha Lakshmi (2020), Amara Miller (2020), and Stefanie Kemmerer (2022) show how, under Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, yoga has become a vehicle for Hindutva ideology and cultural soft power, while Stuart Ray Sarbacker (2013) and Bhuvi Gupta and Jacob Copeman (2019) highlight how prominent figures like Swami Ramdev and Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev are linked to nationalist agendas. My research situates these dynamics in Pakistan, where, to my knowledge, no academic work exists on yoga or Yogi Haider.

Though much yoga scholarship focuses on India, Europe, and North America, recent work is expanding the field in South Asia, such as AyurYog and the Hatha Yoga Project (2015-2020), which highlight, respectively, yoga's historical entanglement with health and the history of the physical practice. The *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies* (2021) edited by Newcombe and Karen O'Brien-Kop brings together the latest studies on yoga and meditation. In this volume, Patrick D'Silva (2021) tackles the subject of yoga in Muslim communities, without mentioning Pakistan and focuses on the premodern and early modern period in South Asia. In addition, Carl W. Ernst (2016) explores the interactions between Sufism and yoga. Nile Green (2008) focuses on breathing in India in colonial times, addressing both yoga and Sufism. Green discusses the case of Muslim yogis of the period, whose existence is said to have been completely dismissed as transgressive by both Hindu and Muslim public figures. Mukesh Kumar

(2022) examines religious conversion and identity formation among a Muslim Jogi community. These works evidence and retrace the exchanges between yoga and Islam to date while leaving aside yoga's presence in Pakistan.

Several studies also discuss the use of the internet with yoga, particularly in *Gurus of Modern Yoga* edited by Singleton and Ellen Goldberg (2013), including Maya Warriar (2013), who looks at the form online bhakti yoga takes within the context of a transnational movement centered around the guru Mata Amritanandamayi, and Joanne Punzo Waghorne (2013), who analyzes the use of technology in the yoga teachings of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev. Yogi Haider, though not on the same scale and not with the same political agendas, also uses technology and some sort of entrepreneurial branding to promote his teachings and build an online community. However, his specific use of Urdu in addition to English and localized references attests to his desire to primarily speak to a Pakistani audience. Indeed, Urdu plays a role in the building of national identity where it is used as a tool for homogenization. However, its use is not meaningless because it leaves aside regional languages, thus ethnic and cultural identities are marginalized.

The Context of Pakistan

In Pakistan, the government's support of the International Day of Yoga on Twitter was denounced in public discourse as an "Indian s̄azish (conspiracy)" (Ahmad 2019), and an Art of Living center was attacked in Islamabad (Naeem 2014). While government and public responses seem mixed, reflecting both acceptance and contention, further research is needed. Although Pakistan and India share a common history and culture, the Partition of 1947, and the wars and conflicts that followed, led to an antagonistic relationship between the two countries. Nowadays, Pakistan is described in the world's media as a place pervaded by terrorist ideologies and religious violence (Jalal 2014, 9), whereas yoga is associated with mindfulness, spirituality, and health (United Nations 2021). In addition, yoga is usually perceived as Indian and Hindu, especially due to its current revitalization and incorporation into the Hindu nationalist rhetoric of the Indian government (Lakshmi 2020, 43-4).

Both the nation-states of India and Pakistan were created at the end of British colonial rule over British India, which culminated in the subcontinent's partition in 1947. It caused major displacements, and its trauma still haunts people on both sides of the border (Bose and Jalal 2023; Butalia 2000; Chawla 2014; Menon and Bhasin 1998). The region of Punjab, which was separated in 1947 on both sides of the border (Jalal 2014; Ganguly 2001; Talbot 2016), continues to share cultural, linguistic, and literary traditions that are still well alive today. Sara Kazmi's work (2017, 2018, 2019) is particularly relevant as it focuses on how Punjabi literary movements, over various historical periods, question and resist the construction of the border between the two nation-states. Moreover, scholarship on Punjab's cultural history has also emphasized how central it is to question religious boundaries between Sikhs, Muslims, and Hindus in the region (Grewal 2011; Malhotra and Mir 2012; Mir 2010; Snehi and Baghel 2018; Snehi 2019).

More specifically, research shows the prominent role of Sufi Punjabi traditions in the popular culture and for the construction of identity in Punjab (Matringe 1995, 2006; Rahman 1996, 2002; Shackleton 1970, 2000). Indeed, these specific traditions are directly linked to the history and development of yoga in the region: accounts of yogic figures are present in Punjab's culture and history as in the romance of Hir-Ranjha.⁵ The region is also considered the birthplace

of Gorakhnāth, founder of the Nāth order known for popularizing the practice of *hatha yoga* (Mallinson 2013), nowadays commonly associated with modern yoga. Yogi Haider’s use of history, which will be discussed later, shows how he makes use of these continuities and interactions to legitimize and promote his teachings.

Background: Yogi Haider and His Teachings

Yogi Haider, born Shamshad Haider in Phalia, Punjab, now lives in Islamabad and is mainly active in Rawalpindi. According to his publications, he presents himself as a yoga and meditation trainer who leads three organizations: *Yoga Pakistan*, a digital initiative (Yoga Pakistan 2025); *Way of Nature*, which conducts classes in public parks like Ayub National Park in Rawalpindi (Way of Nature 2025); and *Healthy People of Phalia*, which offers classes outdoors in Phalia (Healthy People of Phalia 2025). He is married to Yogi Shumaila, who teaches yoga to women and children (IANS 2016). Before teaching in Pakistan in the 2000s, he studied yoga and meditation throughout South Asia in the 1990s (Baruah 2016; IANS 2016). His training includes time with Satya Narayan Goenka in Vipassana meditation (IANS 2017) and Guru Nikam in *hatha yoga* and naturopathy (Pasha 2015), and travels to Nepal, Tibet, and India (IANS 2016). On Facebook he describes himself as follows,

Learn a unique blend Yoga & Meditation to achieve self insight ,mind & body harmony & absolute cure of all physical and psychological disorders by Yogi Haider Yogi Haider has spent past several in Tibet, Nepal &India in learning the art of Yoga ,meditation &ancient eastern remedies. His expertise covers all forms of Yoga including hatha Yog ,Kundalini Yog ,meditation & pranayam Yog.Yogi Haider is trained in Meditation by internationally renowned vipassna meditation teacher S.N Goenka.He has also spent ample time with Yogis of Himalaya.He is the founder of YogaPakistan ,an organisation Yoga and Meditation classes all over the country for last many years [*sic*] (Haider 2025b).

This paragraph summarizes how Yogi Haider presents himself to his audience: he sees himself as an expert teacher of yoga and meditation, and his three main tools for physical and mental health are yoga, meditation and “ancient and eastern remedies.” He teaches different styles of yoga as well as Vipassana meditation. Yogis of the Himalayas and the renowned teacher S.N. Goenka give him credentials in addition to the outreach and longevity of his organizations.

Here, intertextuality shows how he creates linkages between himself and other important yogic figures (e.g. Goenka and “Yogis of the Himalaya”) and establishes himself as a competent member of the community by naming the types of yoga he teaches, going to places where yoga is known to be taught. The target audience seems to be primarily Pakistani, as emphasized by the name of his organization *Yoga Pakistan*, but not exclusively since his channel is freely accessible to all. It is, however, aimed at people who understand Urdu, as few videos have English subtitles. Two aspects stand out in his YouTube videos: the way Yogi Haider emphasizes his commitment to his mission; this is shown through his promotional video titles such as “A Special Message of Yogi Haider” focusing on the health benefits of yoga (Haider 2021b); “World Yoga Day Message by Yogi Haider” (Haider 2021a); and “Introduction of Yogi Haider & WON Foundation” (Haider 2020b); and the potential he believes yoga has for his audience, e.g., with titles such as “How to Get Rid of Miseries of life ? Yogi Haider” (Haider 2022); “Simple Exercises to Stay Healthy” (Haider 2020a); and “How To Overcome Stress, Anxiety & Depression | Haider” (Haider 2025a). These descriptions both legitimize his enterprise and

promote his teachings by inviting the audience to join his courses due to their health benefits. He uses social media strategically as an extension of his teachings in-person and as a means to promote his message as the benefits of his classes are at the forefront.

Yogi Haider's Facebook posts provide more information about his daily life and how he presents himself. Two accounts are associated with him: *Yogi Haider* and *Yoga Pakistan*. *Yogi Haider* is a personal account, while *Yoga Pakistan* is an account for his organization. As my aim is to study his personal image, I concentrate on the *Yogi Haider* account. It features more personal information, such as his place of origin, Phalia, and his current residence, Islamabad. It says that he studied at the Peer Yaqoob Shah Degree College in Phalia, suggesting that he grew up in the region of Phalia in Punjab. He presents himself as the chairman of *Way of Nature Foundation, Yoga Pakistan, and Yogaislamabad*. He is currently just over 55 years old (Haider 2015b). Little is known about his private life.

Further information about Yogi Haider can be found in articles published about him and on other online platforms from international, Pakistani, and Indian sources. Yogi Haider is mentioned in an article published by *Dawn* in 2011; he came to give a yoga class at Lahore College for Women for International Health Day during which he taught various postures and breathing exercises (Mansoor 2011). In an interview for *The Statesman*, journalists report that Yogi Haider refers to S.N. Goenka as his inspirational role model and he attended Goenka's classes in India. It is also stated that he trained with Guru Nikam⁶ in Maharashtra (IANS 2017). Articles in Indian media report that the origin of his interest in yoga stems from a problem with his appendix that occurred while he was working in the 1990s in Saudi Arabia in the family construction business (Bajwa 2015; IANS 2016). According to *The Asian Age*, his stays in Nepal are said to have taken place in 1994 or 1996, those in India in 1997. He returned to Pakistan in 2004 and began teaching in 2004 or 2006 (Baruah 2016). Moreover, *The New Indian Express* mentions that his classes were free until 2013 (Bajwa 2015).

This section focuses on his teachings. Regarding Yogi Haider's discourse, the notion of healing is central to his message. As he describes on YouTube, he immediately links yoga to health:

Yoga & Meditation is a way to achieve self Insight, Mind & Body Harmony & absolute cure for all Physical & Psychological disorders. You Can improve your heart and lung functioning with these simple exercises & Get rid of Obesity, Depression, Anxiety, Fears, Phobia, etc. Subscribe to our Channel to Learn Yoga Exercises, Meditation Practice & Holistic Health Guidance [...]. [*sic*] (Haider 2024).

Indeed, his mission is to achieve individual and societal healing through yoga is explained in the text that accompanies the video:

Yogi Haider is the founder of Yoga Pakistan and has been conducting sessions all over the country since the last ten year on Health, Yoga and meditations. He has recently founded a non-profit social welfare organization, namely: Way of Nature (WON). Under the WON umbrella, Yogi Haider vows to work for promotion of Yoga across Pakistan as well as in the South Asia Region as he believes that Yoga can help spread health in the society, relieve individual stress, societal problems and violence from the society. His vision is to see this land a better place for the future generations. Yogi Haider says if we want to change the fate and destiny of this country, we will have to create a stress-free society and stop being pessimistic. Yogi Haider believes that spirituality enhances all positive human values. In Yogi Haider's view, "Violence-free society, disease-free body, quiver-free breath, confusion-free mind, inhibition-free intellect, trauma-free memory,

and sorrow-free soul are the birth right of every human being. He has introduced a number of programs for different sections of society. He conducts workshops that can bring phenomenal changes in the attitude of people of Pakistan. [*sic*] (Haider 2023).

According to Yogi Haider, yoga brings health and thus relief from individual stress, societal problems and violence in society, which links yoga directly to the well-being of Pakistani society. Yogi Haider's aim is to offer his audience the opportunity to heal through yoga, not only the physical and mental health of the individual, but also on a societal scale. Indeed, his mission is to promote harmony and peace in Pakistan through the techniques of yoga and meditation:

The main benefit and effect of yoga is to create a peaceful, responsible and blissful human by uprooting violence from deepest levels of mind. [...] we are trying to create a more harmonious, happy and blissful Pakistan by teaching the timeless techniques of yoga and meditation. Also under banner of yoga Pakistan various modernists, thinkers, intellectuals and social activists are working for promotion of peace and harmony in Pakistan [...] I am also trying to increase the number of meditators in Pakistan – to achieve the critical mass of meditators required for inducing peace waves at Quantum level [...]. [*sic*] (Haider 2015d).

He seeks to create a national movement of peace and harmony through people practicing yoga and meditation so that it influences the way society functions. He believes that Pakistani society has everything to respond positively to his mission. He writes, “Pakistan is a very liberal, dynamic and progressive society by its very nature that’s why through yoga I am able to involve and mobilize even members of extremes organizations in Yoga practices and able to create a kind of paradigm shift in those people by making them more peaceful, harmonious and holistic. [*sic*]” (Haider 2015d). Aware of the prejudices facing Pakistan, he also appeals to the international public for recognition of his initiative, “I also request to support and mention more of our peace and yoga activities in India and world level by supporting our peace initiatives in Pakistan [...] by which not only age-old unnecessary conflict and hatred between the two neighboring countries would be resolved [*sic*] (Haider 2015d). This statement is important because it places Yogi Haider's initiative in the broader context of relations between Pakistan and the rest of the world, particularly India. He also addresses the conflicts between India and Pakistan, pointing out that peace initiatives like his are taking place in Pakistan showing that better relations could be possible. His initiative for peace and a better life through yoga can therefore also be seen as a response to these prejudiced views of Pakistan; he demonstrates a desire to change his country's image, both towards India and internationally.

To this end, he states that yoga is a “great gift from the Indus civilization” (Haider 2016a) and that yoga is a heritage of the Indo-Pakistani region that comes “even before Hinduism and Islam.” He then clarifies that it is “our common cultural heritage” and that “any efforts to give it a religious color should be avoided” (Haider 2016d). He also shares a Facebook post regarding the origins of yoga which speaks of exchanges between the “three great yogic traditions of Hindus, Buddhists and Jains” (Haider 2015c). The post also mentions the famous Mohenjo-daro yogic seal, an ancient artifact depicting a seated horned figure in what is now Pakistan to emphasize how ancient yoga is. However, the post is actually a text cited by Yogi Haider that uses these arguments to emphasize the continuity between the Indus civilization and “today's Hindu society and culture,” which is the opposite of Yogi Haider's vision. Indeed, the reason for this choice of text is unclear, except that the article attests to the millennia-old presence of yoga in Pakistani territory and its common origin in India and Pakistan from the Indus Valley civilization. As Singleton reminds us, concerning yoga's contested origins,

some scholars have found evidence of early yogic practice in the archaeological artifacts from the Indus Valley civilization in Sind, which developed from about 2500 BCE. [...] Among the artifacts unearthed was the ‘Paśupati seal,’ so-called because Marshall believed that the horned figure surrounded by animals which it depicts was the prototype of Śiva, [...] seated in a yoga posture. [...] Although the links of this (and other seals) with *yogāsana* are highly speculative, they have continued to be cited as an instantiation of postural yoga’s ancient roots (Singleton 2010, 25).

Yogi Haider uses this argument to contradict the idea that yoga is solely Indian in origin but rather comes from a common heritage. Thus, Yogi Haider constructs an alternative view of yoga and Pakistan to what is usually portrayed by international media.

Yogi Haider’s Use of Poetry

To localize his teachings and use common frames of reference, Yogi Haider refers to important poets in Pakistan, including the two most iconic poets: Muhammad Iqbal and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Iqbal is referenced at least seven times more on Yogi Haider’s Facebook page than Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Qabil Ajmeri (e.g. Haider 2015a). Citing Iqbal is strategic. Iqbal is considered to be the father of Pakistan for his role in advocating a separate Muslim state during British India. Citing him is a way of aligning with public and government opinion. Yogi Haider usually cites poetry to accompany his yoga teachings at the start or during the class. They can therefore be used to support the teachings he transmits. When he quotes Faiz Ahmed Faiz, he immediately categorizes him as a revolutionary poet (Haider 2016b). We can see that he aligns himself with the popular vision of this poet because of the latter’s left-wing political stance and progressive poetry. Among other Pakistani Urdu poets, he also mentions Qabil Ajmeri (Haider 2017a).

Yogi Haider also cites famous Punjabi Sufi poets. A video posted on YouTube is dedicated to Bulleh Shah, in which he explains the meaning of his poetry without delving into interpretation. He recites the Punjabi version and explains it in Urdu (Haider 2017b). As the video containing this recitation is only an extract from a lecture, it is not possible to know whether Yogi Haider has given any further explanation of his interpretation of the poem or of the message he wishes to convey by reciting it. Nevertheless, it is a reminder of the place he gives to Punjabi Sufi poets in his teachings. These include Sultan Bahu, a 17th century Punjabi Sufi poet, and Mian Mohammad Bakhsh, a 19th-20th century Punjabi Sufi poet. Other poets he cites are Kabir and Majrooh Sultanpuri. Given literature’s centrality to the culture, offering such a space to poetry is a means for Yogi Haider to inscribe his teachings onto the Pakistani landscape and evoke a familiar frame of reference for his audience.

Yogi Haider’s Use of Places

In addition to centering poetry, Yogi Haider’s use of space is strategic. Yogi Haider’s Facebook and YouTube content attests to the various places where he has taught yoga classes. Here is a list of some of the locations that have been identified by consulting his Facebook and YouTube posts.

Table 1: Sample locations visited by Yogi Haider for yoga and meditation sessions (non-exhaustive list)*

* This table serves only to illustrate the variety of places visited. It does not account for all of Yogi Haider's events or classes.

** This date reflects when the activity was published on Facebook/YouTube and does not represent the entirety of related activities.

City	Place	Time of publication**	Type of publication
Rawalpindi	Safari Gym, Bahria Town	10.09.22	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Rawalpindi	Venue Mini Golf Club.	16.05.15	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Rawalpindi	Way of Nature Foundation in Bahria Town, Phase 8.	04.04.15	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Rawalpindi	Liaquat Bagh Sports Complex.	01.06.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Rawalpindi	The Wonderful Club.	29.07.24	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Rawalpindi	Race Course Ground	23.11.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Rawalpindi	Ayub National Park.	08.11.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Islamabad	Islamabad Sports Complex.	15.12.15	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Islamabad	Yoga and meditation center at Adil Plaza.	20.06.11	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Islamabad	Trim Gym Sports Complex	23.11.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Islamabad	Kuch Khas F-6/4	15.05.15	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Islamabad	Islamabad Chamber of Commerce and Industry	12.12.15	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Islamabad	Jacaranda Family Club Phase II, Defence Housing Authority	23.11.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Islamabad	MTC Yaseen Plaza, Blue Area	23.11.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Islamabad	Smart Health Club	15.05.15	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Lahore	Faiz Ghar, Model Town.	16.06.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Lahore	Gym Khana Club	23.11.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Lahore	Ranai Health Club, Defence Housing Authority	23.11.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Lahore	Lawrence Gardens (Bagh-e-Jinnah).	16.06.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Lahore	Shad Bagh.	16.06.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Lahore	Rose Garden.	08.11.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Lahore	Maqbra-e-Jehangir	10.08.17	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Lahore	Cloud9 Wellness studio.	26.12.17	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Lahore	The Wonderful Club.	30.07.20	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Lahore	Minar-e-Pakistan, Iqbal Park.	28.03.22	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Lahore	Sabzazar Stadium.	28.10.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Phalia	Saifen Maghopindi, in his hometown with the "Healthy people of Phalia" group.	04.02.17	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Gujranwala	Judges'course at Sessions House.	01.06.17	Yogi Haider [YouTube]
Sheikhupura	Hiran Minar Park.	18.01.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]

Based on this data, Haider teaches mainly in sports centers (i.e. private, paying venues) as well as in parks where classes are public and free. The fact that his classes take place in so many sports and wellness centers is a reminder that yoga is presented as a means of maintaining good health and taking care of the body. Many of these venues are in upscale city districts, such as Model Town or Bahria Town, underlining that the target audience is probably the upper and upper-middle class. What's more, the places where he teaches clearly show his foothold in Pakistan, in the Punjab region and Islamabad specifically. This is also consistent with his many references to local Punjabi culture, particularly through Sufi poetry.

Some of the events he organizes are strategically staged to bring visibility to his teachings. An example is when Haider teaches a yoga class focusing on its practice and health benefits in Iqbal Park in front of the Minar-e-Pakistan in Lahore in November 2015. Around 3000 people attended, and the guest of honor was Pakistan's Minister of Health, Saira Afzal Tarar (Haider 2015e). This event enabled him to bring together several symbols, such as government approval, proof of the importance of yoga for health, and the inscription of yoga in public space. Indeed, this monument commemorates the Lahore Resolution, which was adopted in 1940 by the Muslim League to call for the creation of Pakistan. It is therefore a highly significant place in the country's history. In this way, Yogi Haider links his teachings to notable Pakistani geography and history. In addition, organizing events of this kind in famous parks also enables him to reach out to a middle-class audience who does not necessarily have access to private lessons in the centers mentioned earlier, which is important for Yogi Haider's promotional mission. Moreover, this begs the question of whether he is looking for government approval and for the representation of a Pakistani identity as expected by the state. Further research is needed on this topic.

Yogi Haider's Use of History

Another way in which Yogi Haider makes use of the space and history is through the outings he organizes with his yoga students. Some of the activities listed in his publications are as follows:

Table 2: Outing locations visited by Yogi Haider (non-exhaustive list)*

* This table serves only to illustrate the variety of places visited. It does not account for all of Yogi Haider's events or classes.

** This date reflects when the activity was published on Facebook and does not represent the entirety of related activities.

States	Place	Infos (given by Yogi Haider, reformulated)	Time of publication**	Type of publication
Kashmir, Pakistan	Sharda Peeth	where the remains of a yogic university built by Kanishka are said to lie.	06.07.15	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Kallar Khar, Pakistan	Chilla Gah, towards the Hindu Katas Raj temples	caves where Sufis and yogis such as Baba Farid would go.	14.07.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Punjab, Pakistan	Tilla Jogian	said to be a historic yoga site.	09.09.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Kashmir, Pakistan	Toli Peer	where Sufi Shah Hamdan is said to have meditated.	20.07.16	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Naran, Pakistan	Shiv Gran	in the Kaghan Valley of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province.	28.06.15	Yogi Haider [Facebook]
Kasur, Pakistan	Bullhe Shah's tomb	visit to this place	07.07.15	Yogi Haider [Facebook]

Yogi Haider chooses important Sufi and yoga sites for his group outings. In this way, he establishes continuity with much older places and figures, enabling him to reappropriate regional narratives linked to yoga and Sufism to legitimize and promote his teachings.

His visit to Tilla Jogian is a case in point. Tilla Jogian is an archaeological site containing the ruins of an ancient monastery attributed to Gorakhnāth, a yogic master considered, along with his predecessor Matsyendranāth, to be the founder of the Nāth tradition to which the kānphata yogis mentioned in the extract below belong (Johnson 2009). Various legends are attributed to this place, especially regarding the story of Heer Ranjha (Rashid 2012; Zaman 2005). For this reason, Yogi Haider evokes Tilla Jogian when speaking of continuity of thought in the Facebook post reproduced below:

Continuity of thought: IQBAL , Waris Shah, Bhartri-Hari & Tilla Jogian

Tilla Jogian is ancient place of scholarship in the Punjab and it is considered ancient sufi place & Center of yogi/Jogi traditions much before UCCH in our part of the world. The place is in Pakistani Punjab yet needs extra care. In this piece u will hear about Bhartri-Hari, a poet philosopher and expert of Grammar who was like Bal Nath, among the pupils of Gorakh Nath. Bhartri-Hari Smadh is still at Tilla Jogian. [...] Here he not only visited Tilla, Smadh of Hari but also saw the place where Ranjha beptimized. Yah, the place is known as 'kan Phatta' Yogies/jogies. Wearing wrings in the ears is an old tradition which is still prevelent in our times.

In 1935, in a book, another poet philosopher recorded Bhartri-hari verse, translated in URDU, either from him or from someone else. It is matter of research. The book which recorded or revives Bhartri was Bal e Jibreal by Allama Iqbal. [...] [*sic*]

(Haider 2016c).

Through the Tilla Jogian site, Yogi Haider connects with Iqbal, Waris Shah, the famous Sufi poet and author of Heer Ranjha, the Sanskrit poet Bhartrihari, and the Nāth yogis. Showing up in such a place and evoking these figures allows Yogi Haider to signify that yoga has a history in Pakistan as these archaeological traces attest. By reappropriating these places and narratives, he establishes his yoga teachings in the geography of Pakistan, just as he does by giving classes in numerous parks, sports, and fitness centers in major cities such as Lahore, Islamabad, and Rawalpindi.

Conclusion

Focusing on Yogi Haider allowed me to sketch his portrait and explore how he constructs his public image through social media. Analyzing his publications provided insight into his vision of yoga and his approach to sharing it. As a contemporary yoga teacher, Yogi Haider uses mass media – particularly social networks – to promote his teachings, which reflect both a deep engagement with the Pakistani context and an awareness of global debates around yoga, especially those related to India.

This study, centered on how Yogi Haider crafts and communicates his teachings, highlights yoga’s contested yet undeniable presence in Pakistan. To convey his vision, he grounds his message in everyday Pakistani life, geography, and history. He situates yoga within a regional culture shared by India and Pakistan. According to Haider, yoga can heal individuals and society on both physical and psychological levels. He presents it as a tool for peace and harmony, rooted in a cultural heritage that predates the tensions between India and Pakistan and between Hinduism and Islam. To localize yoga, he draws on Punjabi Sufi culture and familiar symbols, figures, and concepts, reappropriating places and narratives to align his teachings with the Pakistani context.

This study highlights how yoga intersects with Islamic culture, religiosity, and history through the example of Yogi Haider and the way he grounds his yoga teachings in a familiar sociocultural context. It shows how the tensions between Muslim and Hindu identities impact his teachings and his discourse on yoga, namely by the way he takes part in the debates on yoga’s origin and whether it is related to religion or not. His teachings advocate for a common South Asian shared heritage as the origin of yoga, thereby opposing initiatives that claim a solely Hindu-Indian origin and exclude all other forms and histories of the practice. Furthermore, this study demonstrates how personal narratives – such as Yogi Haider’s – challenge the dominant, one-dimensional portrayals of Pakistan often found in international and Indian media. It also reveals how yoga in Pakistan remains an underexplored subject of academic research; Yogi Haider’s initiative clearly demonstrates the potential of such studies. Thus, the study presents an alternative perspective on yoga that contests its exclusive association with Hindu and Indian identities. In doing so, it positions yoga as an integral part of Pakistan’s cultural landscape and explores its intersections with the region’s religious and political dynamics. While this article focuses on one example only (Yogi Haider’s teachings), further research is needed on the overall yoga landscape in Pakistan, especially using sources other than exclusively English, as it offers wider views of local people’s concerns.

Notes

¹ I exchanged emails with Yogi Haider to obtain his permission to write an article about his work.

² Numerous Indian media outlets published on Yogi Haider, such as Anas 2015; Bajwa 2015; IANS 2016.

³ Intertextuality “refers either to a constitutive property of any text, or to the set of explicit or implicit relations that a given text maintains with other texts” (Maingueneau 2009, 78, my translation). Gérard Genette prefers the term transtextuality, which includes intertextuality, which he defines as “a relationship of co-presence between two or more texts [...] most often through the effective presence of one text in another,” including quotation, plagiarism, and allusion (1982, 7-8, my translation).

⁴ See for example Musée national suisse (2024) or Rossineli (2022).

⁵ In Waris Shah’s *Hir-Ranjha* romance (18th c.), the hero Ranjha is initiated as a Nāth yogi (Snehi 2019, 15–16), see also Kaur (2019).

⁶ Shri Pundalik Ramchandra Nikam (1917-1999), also known as Guru Nikam, founded the Shri Ambika Yoga Kutir in Thane, Maharashtra, where he taught *hatha yoga*, naturopathy, herbal medicine and urinothrapy. He is not

mentioned directly by Yogi Haider on social networks where he speaks only of Himalayan yogis, but in journal interviews instead.

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