

Contested Poses: Reflections on Yoga, Secular Muslim Identity, and Belonging Across Borders

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Introduction

“Close your eyes,” the instructor said gently, “and visualize light entering your body through your crown and flowing out through your fingertips.” I could feel the tension in my shoulders as I tried to comply, but my internal monologue interrupted the process. The suggestion to visualize light was innocuous enough, but at that moment, I felt my difference. What does it mean to visualize light when one’s body is constantly surveilled? What does it mean to imagine radiance when your body is read as foreign or Other? The metaphor of light felt heavy to me because my visibility and invisibility were fraught; as an immigrant in the US, my presence was never neutral. I remember opening my eyes slightly, watching others who seemed lost in meditation, and wondering what they felt. That ordinary moment, so typical of a yoga class in the US, revealed the distance I had to navigate. This was supposed to be a calming space, a place for connection. Instead, it became an invitation to inhabit a space where I did not feel I belonged. In that moment, meant to invoke stillness, I felt unsettled. Perhaps this was the beginning of my ambivalence about my positioning and about practicing yoga in the US.

I grew up in India and lived in Bombay (now Mumbai), a large metropolis, as well as in a small town in north Gujarat. I moved to the US in 2004 for graduate study; I am still living in the US. I learned yoga as a young person and practiced intermittently over the years. My physical familiarity with the poses was real. However, yoga in the US meant expensive studio classes, wellness discourse, and spiritualized assertions, all of which felt alienating. I was uncomfortable with the rituals one is expected to perform in these spaces. In exploring the broad scholarship around yoga and its entrenchment within capitalist systems, we learn that yoga “arrived in earnest on American shores in 1893,” and this “ascetic, spiritual, and anti-consumerist yoga movement transformed into an \$80 billion global market” by 2016 (Munir 2021, 855). Even though I could not fully articulate it at the time, the framing of yoga as a path to inner peace, a “lifestyle choice,” and a disciplinary practice for physical and emotional well-being made me uneasy because this framing erased more than it revealed.¹

This essay is a reflection on that ambivalence. Through postcolonial, transnational feminist, and Black feminist theory, I have come to analyze and better understand my experiences with yoga. I contend that yoga is not inherently liberatory. In the Global North, it is a borrowed and deeply politicized and commodified practice. It is shaped by histories of colonialism, global commodification, rampant sexism, and racialized and casteist exclusion (Diamond-Lenow 2023; Patankar 2014). In both India and the US, yoga becomes a site where complex political dynamics unfold – and in both, I find myself uncertain of where I belong.

As a politicized practice, yoga holds flexible meanings; it is both ancient and modern, gentle and strenuous, secular and religious. In attempting to engage with yoga's plural meanings and effects, I first attempt to explore what it means to practice or not practice yoga as a secular Indian Muslim woman, someone who is perceived as both an insider and an outsider. Next, I draw on interdisciplinary scholarly work to examine my embodied experiences in yoga spaces. These theorizations help me interrogate yoga's dual role: as a politicized symbol of Hindu supremacy in India and a commodified form of wellness in the United States. I examine how yoga is marketed as a personal cure for systemic inequities and deployed as a form of Hindutva soft power. I engage with the contradictions of yoga to consider what they reveal about religion, migration, and belonging. Finally, I offer my feminist reflections as a Muslim immigrant in the United States as a form of engagement that embraces ambiguity and contradiction, resists simplification, and demonstrates a commitment to solidarity.

Yoga and Belonging in India and the US

I grew up in India and learned yoga in middle school as part of my physical education (PE) class in a small town. The same teacher who taught Hindi was also our PE instructor. Looking back, I realize that my school lacked resources for sports activities, but since yoga required minimal equipment, students were able to learn it on the school grounds with jute and cotton carpets. There were no individual mats; instead, we jostled for space on the shared carpet and typically tried to avoid the front rows. Our teacher called out the *asanas* in Sanskrit and offered corrections to our poses. There was no incense or mirrors, just our bodies and breath. The yoga I learned in the early 1990s in India was not framed as spiritual or religious. It was simply a physical activity about discipline, flexibility, and routine. I remember being proud when I could hold *Chakrasana* (Wheel pose) and enjoyed showing off to my family at home.

The PE requirement fell away as we moved into high school, and I stopped doing yoga. However, several years later, after my undergraduate graduation, I began attending yoga classes again while living in Bombay (now Mumbai). Several of my family members, including my sister and sister-in-law, also took classes along with me. These sessions were led by an older woman (whom we all just called Aunty) who held informal classes in her living room. She practiced for decades and took joy in teaching yoga and meditation. The room could accommodate five or six people at most, and most participants were married, middle-class women from the neighborhood. The pace of the classes was slow. Before starting yoga, the conversations in the room were fluid, drifting between food, weather, household routines, and marriage. I was one of the few "younger" and unmarried women in the class, and I recall several uncomfortable conversations (couched as well-meaning advice from Aunty) about my skin color (how I might lighten my complexion), and body size (how I could lose weight) to attract a suitable boy. The language of health, beauty, and femininity became part of my yoga classes. Thinking back to these unsolicited comments reminds me that yoga, even in informal community settings, comes wrapped in deeply gendered, classed, and colorist assumptions. Other forms of social discipline were now part of the practice that had once given me pride in my physical abilities.

These neighborhood classes, which I took in the early 2000s, blurred the line between care and control. On the one hand, these spaces were important for married women to leave behind their household chores and duties, but on the other hand, they ended up making room for increased policing of each other's choices and appearances. While the environment was not

overtly sectarian, and Hindutva as a political force was still emerging, these interactions underscored prevailing norms of femininity and desirability; they reminded me that I did not fit within those standards. This discomfort accompanied me to the US and shaped how I later encountered yoga in the United States. While the settings were entirely different, the underlying ideologies of discipline, self-regulation, and bodily improvement felt familiar. In both India and the United States, yoga is saturated with assumptions about who belongs and who must be transformed.

I was often encouraged to practice yoga in the US. These suggestions and encouragements came from friends, classmates, and well-meaning colleagues who had discovered yoga to be helpful and perhaps transformative. They saw it as a mechanism to deal with stress and anxiety a daily ritual that was part of their “self-care.” Their invitations to join yoga classes emerged from a genuine place. They were often gestures of care, the suggestion that I, too, might benefit from moving onto the mat. Nevertheless, I felt reluctant; I smiled, nodded, and tucked their advice away. Why, I wondered, did this seemingly gentle, neutral practice elicit such tension in me?

My first experience with yoga in the United States came not through curiosity but through grief. I was in graduate school at Indiana University – Bloomington when my father passed away. I lost my mother eight years prior and thought that I knew how to navigate my way through this loss. I felt unmoored by my father’s death. The sorrow I felt was overwhelming. A friend, concerned and caring, invited me to attend a yoga class with him. It would be low-pressure, he said; it might help, he offered. I agreed, more out of resignation than conviction.

The class was held at the campus recreational sports center, taught by a student instructor, and attended by a mixed group of students, staff, and faculty. Everyone brought their mats and their reasons for being there. I rolled out my mat, uncertain about beginning, as I had to watch the instructor or other participants before moving my body into those poses. The names of the poses were tricky because my brain tried to first translate “downward dog” into its Sanskrit name before I could move my arms. It took me a bit to realize that child pose means *Balasana*. I was amused because it felt like I needed this translation, but I do not think in Sanskrit and don’t use it so this was an unexpected trick of my mind, of memory. Eventually, my body began to move through postures it had not performed in a long time, and the rhythm of breath and movement was comforting.

As I continued to attend classes at both the University sports center and the local yoga studio, I began to notice other tensions. Yoga was treated as a spiritual practice but not a religious one (yet Hindu deities adorned the walls alongside Buddhist symbols), ancient yet accessible (the Sanskrit names of poses were invoked, but I could not understand the pronunciation), Indian yet also global. My participation as an Indian was assumed. I was asked for clarification on a pose name or a philosophical idea, and there was disappointment when I did not demonstrate the cultural knowledge expected of me. However, my Muslim identity was not acknowledged and not legible in that space. This complex visibility, of being seen and unseen at the same time, is not unique to me. It is, as Farha Ternikar (2021) writes, a common experience among South Asians (desis) in white American yoga spaces. Ternikar describes how Indian and, particularly, Muslim practitioners are often expected to be cultural authorities or blend in without complaint. The expectation is not simply to participate, but to participate silently. Stretch, breathe, and assimilate?

For me, I am always trying to navigate this tension. I now only practice yoga at home. I value yoga not because I believe in its purity or transcendence, but because the poses, the rhythm

of breath, and the practiced stillness are all helpful. However, I also find myself resisting the narratives that accompany yoga – that yoga is this magical balm, that it is an unchanged ancient practice, that it is about “self-care.” Yoga, outside of its context, cannot be a practice of liberation. It is, like most other things, shaped by culture, by structure, and by history. In the US, it is entangled with capitalism, whiteness, and the wellness industry. In India, it is a tool of ancient pride, nationalist goals, and religious supremacy. In both cases, yoga is the site where these politics are played out. And in both of these sites, I am unsure where I fit in.

Mobilizing Yoga: Nationalism and Religion

My ambivalence around practicing yoga in the US has little to do with cultural appropriation, tokenism, or even racism. While these are valid critiques, and I, too, have experienced some of these, I believe that we need to complicate and contextualize yoga further. Andrea Jain, a scholar of religious studies, writes in her insightful article “Who Is to Say Modern Yoga Practitioners Have It All Wrong? On Hindu Origins and Yogaphobia” (2014) that yoga is not an ancient, uninterrupted tradition, but rather a “construct” shaped by religious adherents, colonialism, nationalism, and consumer capitalism. According to Jain, attempts to define yoga and claims of authenticity ultimately perpetuate ahistorical ideas – we might not claim authentic yoga, since what we have are yoga practices that have always been contested, evolving, and strategic.

Jain’s critique is beneficial for understanding my positioning. In many yoga studios, I am presumed to possess insider knowledge since I am Indian. But this assumption flattens my identity. It imagines Indianness as Hindu. And perhaps it also renders Muslim identity either irrelevant or oppositional to yoga’s presumed ethos. Jain challenges the idea that authenticity in yoga is grounded in a single religion, Hinduism.

Similarly, Prachi Patankar, in a powerful essay “Ghosts of Yogas Past and Present,” critiques the diasporic refrain around “appropriation of yoga” and discussions of a static Indian “culture” (Patankar 2014). She argues that this simplistic rhetoric obscures the fact that this argument about who can claim yoga is often made by upper-caste communities that “claim yoga as their homogenous culture—in ways that obscure the caste, class, and religious diversity and injustices among South Asians” (Patankar 2014). The author was writing at a time when the BJP and Narendra Modi were ascendant in Indian politics, and her short piece tracks how yoga was part of the strategy in the Hindu Right’s cultural manipulation in both India and the United States. The “take back yoga” campaigns in the United States, according to Patankar, are part of the Hindu right’s Islamophobic agenda to “appeal to white-liberal guilt, in order to get major play in the mainstream US media” by groups like the Hindu American Foundation (2014). Yoga becomes a cultural product of Hindu nationalism – a claim to global superiority, moral strength, and timeless heritage. Thus, both Jain and Patankar’s work pushes back against any claims of a monolithic yoga as a Hindu practice.

India has been under the rule of a right-wing government since 2014. As a result of this far-right government, secular democratic principles have eroded while Hindu majoritarianism, the targeting of minorities, and gendered citizenship have thrived. When I was in India for dissertation research that year, I saw the billboards and banners announcing International Yoga Day. Yoga, I realized, had become a national theater, a performance of discipline, heritage, and unity. I felt discomfort in those moments in India. It was not just that yoga was being politicized. It was being weaponized. Many members of my family still live in India, and several of them

have practiced yoga in the same settings for over two decades. My sister and sister-in-law live in suburban Bombay and attend yoga classes either with individuals (the same Aunty) who teach from their homes or as part of the gym near their apartment complexes. They shared experiences after the deployment of yoga by Narendra Modi, where their Muslim identity was remarked upon in yoga classes where they were the only Muslim women. My family's middle-class status often provides refuge against blatant Islamophobia, but in these instances, they were targeted as part of the intolerant Muslim Other.

Anusha Lakshmi (2020) and Sheena Sood (2015) reveal how Modi's promotion of yoga on the global stage is not about wellness but about optics. It is a strategy to obscure state violence and to distract from the mishandling of the COVID pandemic, the erosion of democratic rights in India, the targeting of minorities, and the intensification of casteism and Islamophobic policies. Their analysis clarifies how yoga projects an image of India that emphasizes peace, harmony, and spiritual wellness, which ultimately obscures the violence against and exclusion of religious minorities and lower-caste communities. In this reading, yoga is not merely co-opted; it becomes a cloak for repression.

My family members also noticed the increasing ways in which yoga was perceived as un-Islamic by certain Muslim religious leaders. Because yoga is being associated with a Hindu tradition and religious practice, Muslim clerics claim that when you chant *Om*, you are calling a Hindu God, or the *Surya Namaskar* (sun salutation) is essentially a prayer to the Hindu sun god. In the face of these developments, we see hardline right-wing leaders in India tracing the similarity between *namaz* and *Surya Namaskars* and arguing that promoting yoga is not Islamophobic (Scroll Staff 2017).

Ambivalence and Feminist Possibility

To understand the racialized and gendered nature of yoga in the United States, I found Shefali Chandra's work to help illuminate the market logics, nationalist scripts, and identity politics involved in yoga. In her article "India Will Change You Forever," Chandra argues that the Western embrace of upper-caste Hindu-inflected spirituality is not benign (2015). Still, rather, it is a racialized, gendered practice of consumption, and not one of saviorism or rescue. Her analysis of different post-9/11 memoirs contends that India is constructed as Hindu and as a space of healing and regulation, where white women travel as seekers and the land and people of South Asia provide the spiritual landscape. Chandra highlights how this consumption is framed as empowering, even feminist, but is built upon othering Muslims and Islam. In this neo-imperial logic, Muslim women are viewed through the structures of tradition, patriarchy, and compliance. Chandra's analysis helps me understand why, in Western yoga spaces, I often feel like a contradiction. I am Indian, yes, but not the kind they expect. I am secular but seen through a religious lens. I am a woman but not a calming presence. Using Shefali Chandra's triangulation of Hinduism, Islam, and whiteness, it is hard to be a Muslim yoga practitioner. This is the heart of my ambivalence. Yoga offers moments of connection, even healing. However, it also reproduces the very structures that mark my body as "Other."

Feminist scholarship has been instrumental in helping me understand this space as a terrain in which politics unfolds through the body. Suzanne Bost, in her experimental and poetic essay "Practicing Yoga / Embodying Feminism / Shape-Shifting," brings together Gloria Anzaldúa's theories and describes yoga as a feminist method grounded in bodily fluctuation, imperfection, and uncertainty (2016). Postcolonial feminist theorizing embraces ambiguity and

discomfort, and I appreciate this insight, as I experience these tensions and contradictions as both an Indian and a Muslim, as a woman, and as an immigrant. I have faced many moments when my national allegiance to India was questioned because of my religious background. In the US, my body was too different. In both places, yoga became a way to define who belongs and who does not. And in both locations, my relationship with yoga remains unstable. By leaning into this instability, I begin to see ambivalence itself as a practice of solidarity, one that acknowledges competing histories and unequal power. And that lens has pushed me to imagine new forms of connection – ones that do not rely on cultural purity or ownership. I propose that we see solidarity not as agreement or purity but as the ability to remain with discomfort, to hold contradictions without completely resolving them. Yoga, in this sense, is not a product to consume or a tradition to defend. It becomes a space where ambivalence is allowed, where care emerges through vulnerability, and where community is shaped through imperfect solidarity rather than identity-based belonging.

Notes

¹ There is extensive academic literature on the commercialization of yoga in the Global North, which documents its appropriative qualities and the experiences of South Asians in yoga spaces. This interdisciplinary scholarship encompasses religious studies, political science, feminist and gender studies, and the formation of critical yoga studies. Munir et al. discuss the contributions in *Yoga Journal*, which began in 1975, and how the journal's issues have tracked the debates and changes in yoga particularly within the United States. I also found the issues of the journal *Race and Yoga* to constitute a rich body of scholarship.

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