From Seclusion and Solitude to Social-Media: The Shifting Landscape of Yogic Lifestyle and Its Philosophical Basis

Nanepalli Hari Ramakrishna[1]
Ashutosh Shukla[2]
Doli Rani Hansdah[3]

Abstract

This paper explores the drastic transformation in yogic lifestyles from ancient seclusion to modern social immersion, particularly through digital platforms. Observing how contemporary yogis heavily rely on social media for communication with limited personal or face-to-face interaction we were drawn to examine the contrasting way of life led by ancient yogis, who chose seclusion in forests, mountains, and hermitages, away from societal involvement. This contrast stirred a deeper inquiry into the philosophical, biological, and spiritual reasons behind these divergent lifestyles. Ancient yogic life, rooted in principles such as vairāgya (detachment), tapas (austerity), and mauna (silence), was further supported by the broader social framework of varṇāśrama dharma, where individuals transitioned from the householder stage (gṛhastha) to vānaprastha and eventually to sannyāsa. In the modern context, these stages have largely disappeared, with most individuals and even yogis remaining within an extended or modified gṛhastha mode centered on worldly and social engagement. This paper investigates the philosophical, biological, and spiritual imperatives for both seclusion and sociality, while also analyzing the erosion of traditional life stages. Drawing from scriptural sources and moral reasoning, the study reflects on whether this evolution of yogic lifestyle deepens or distorts the essence of yogic living. This study draws on scriptural teachings and moral reasoning to investigate whether this evolution of yogic life has deepened its reach or diluted its essence.

Introduction

The figure of the yogi has held a central place in the spiritual imagination of the Indian subcontinent for millennia. Traditionally, yogis have been known not only for their meditative practices and inner discipline but also for their physical withdrawal from society. Whether in the forests of the ṛṣis, the monastic caves of the Himalayas, or the silent interiors of ancient āśramas, yogis have long pursued a lifestyle of solitude, silence, and detachment. This lifestyle was not merely an individual choice but a cultural, ecological, and philosophical response to the conditions of the world. Rooted in traditions such as Sanātana Dharma, Jainism, and Buddhism, this choice of seclusion was seen as necessary for the pursuit of mokṣa, nirvāṇa, or kaivalya a final liberation from the entanglements of worldly existence. In the Hindu context especially, this movement into solitude was systematized through the doctrine of varṇāśrama dharma. Upon completion of one's household duties (gṛhastha), the individual was encouraged to enter vānaprastha a life of forest-dwelling and spiritual reflection before eventually embracing sannyāsa, the life of full renunciation. During the vānaprastha stage, aspirants often met with yogis and sannyāsīs, receiving spiritual instruction and guidance. This process of gradual detachment allowed for the natural withdrawal of the senses, the cultivation of inner clarity, and the conservation of vital energy essential conditions for deep sādhana.

From an ecological and psychological perspective, this withdrawal made profound sense. Human beings must constantly acclimatize to their surroundings, and adapting to anthropogenic changes social pressures, cultural fluctuations, expectations, and obligations requires immense mental and emotional energy. Ancient yogis chose seclusion not because they despised society, but because they recognized the energetic cost of remaining entangled with it. In contrast, nature offered a slower, cyclical, and less demanding rhythm making it more conducive to sustained inner work. Forest life required adaptation too, but it demanded adjustment only to the natural elements, not to the ever-changing psychological currents of human society.

In the modern world, however, this model has shifted significantly. The stages of vānaprastha and sannyāsa have largely disappeared from social life. Instead, people transition from household responsibilities directly into digital spaces most notably, social media. Here, they encounter yoga not in the sacred stillness of hermitages, but through curated content, wellness brands, brief teachings, and motivational quotes. While this exposure can initiate spiritual curiosity and even draw seekers toward āśramas, it often lacks the depth, discipline, and immersion necessary for true transformation. The spiritual "information" available online is frequently disconnected from the adhikāra (preparedness) of the seeker, and repeated exposure to fragmentary teachings often leads not to deep inquiry but to resistance,

[1] Postgraduate Scholar, University of Hyderabad
[2] Postgraduate Scholar, University of Hyderabad
[3] Postgraduate Scholar, University of Hyderabad

confusion, or desensitization.

Even the process of spiritual transmission a cornerstone of the guru-śiṣya tradition faces new challenges in the modern context. Based on careful observation, it becomes clear that the transmission of spiritual realization from teacher to disciple is a rare and difficult occurrence. Even great figures like Krishna and the Buddha found it hard to produce successors who embodied their realization. Yet, the example of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and Swami Vivekananda offers a luminous exception: here, a spiritual seed found fertile ground in a receptive disciple, aided by the right environment, deep trust, and sustained training. Their example reminds us that the making of a true yogi requires not just teachings, but time, ecosystem, and grace.

Modern yogis, while often socially engaged and publicly active, draw on philosophical justifications from texts such as the Bhagavad Gītā, Advaita Vedānta, and Bhakti traditions to support their roles. Concepts like karma yoga, lokasaṅgraha, and non-dual awareness offer frameworks for action without attachment. However, in practice, this balance is difficult to maintain. Social media, by its very nature, encourages performance, validation, and ego projection the very obstacles that classical yoga seeks to transcend. When yoga becomes a brand or product, its spiritual essence risks being commodified. The inner sannyāsa becomes confused with outer appearances, and true vairāgya is substituted with performative detachment.

This paper explores the shifting landscape of yogic life from the solitude of ancient forests to the connectivity of modern platforms. It examines the philosophical, ecological, and spiritual rationales for solitude in ancient traditions, investigates the justifications and contradictions in today's socially active yogic lifestyles, and questions whether spiritual transmission can still take place in this digitally saturated age. Ultimately, it asks: Can a yogi remain truly inward while being fully outward? And if not, what must we reclaim from the wisdom of the past to make yoga once again a path of freedom, not performance?

Chapter I: Yogic Lifestyles Across Traditions

The ideal of a yogic lifestyle has long been central to Indian spiritual traditions. Whether in the form of a forest-dwelling ṛṣi, an ascetic sannyāsī, or a meditative muni, the yogi has been a cultural and philosophical symbol of renunciation, inner purity, and spiritual discipline. Across Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions, this lifestyle is marked by simplicity, detachment, and intentional seclusion (ekānta). In the framework of Sanātana Dharma, the yogic path was integrated into the āśrama system. Following the completion of duties in the gṛhastha (householder) stage, one would enter vānaprastha, gradually withdrawing from society. This was often a time for moving into the forest or a hermitage, not only for reflection but to seek guidance from practicing yogis. Eventually, if the seeker matured spiritually, they would formally adopt sannyāsa, renouncing all possessions and identities in pursuit of the Self (Ātman). The Bhagavad Gītā affirms this ideal: "Let the yogi try constantly to keep the mind steady, remaining in solitude, alone, with controlled mind and body, free from desire and possessions" (6.10, Sargeant). In Vedānta, solitude is philosophically essential. The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad (1.2.12) advises the wise one to renounce karma-bound pursuits and turn inward.

The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad goes further, identifying the fourth state of consciousness (turīya) as pure awareness, which can be realized only through deep silence and meditation. Similarly, in Rāja Yoga, Patañjali defines yoga as "citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ" (Yoga Sūtras 1.2)—the cessation of mental fluctuations. This stillness is only possible through progressive detachment, solitude, and meditative absorption (dhyāna). Bhakti and Tantra traditions, though more socially engaged, still emphasize internal solitude. Saints like Mīrābāī and Tukārām lived amidst society yet maintained unwavering focus on the Divine. The Bhagavad Gītā (5.10) reflects this balanced detachment: "He who acts without attachment, surrendering the fruits of action to the Lord, is untouched by sin, as a lotus leaf is untouched by water". Jain and Buddhist traditions also regard solitude as essential. Jain ascetics avoid all violence (ahiṁsā) and speech, preferring forest environments where karmic accumulation is minimized. The Uttarādhyayana Sūtra recommends that the wise should wander alone, treating all creatures with compassion. Buddhist monasticism encourages physical and mental seclusion to develop mindfulness (sati), insight (vipassanā), and dispassion (upekkhā). The Dhammapada (verse 305) notes, "He who delights in solitude, delights in the Dhamma." Thus, in each tradition, the yogic lifestyle represents an intentional withdrawal from distraction and attachment either as a complete renunciation (sannyāsa) or an internal redirection of focus.

Chapter II: Philosophical and Ecological Rationales for Solitude

The ancient yogis' preference for solitude was not accidental or culturally arbitrary. It was a conscious and strategic decision rooted in deep philosophical, psychological, and even biological understanding. The core rationale is simple: one cannot hear the inner Self

in the noise of society. In the Upaniṣads, liberation (mokṣa) is tied to the realization of the Self. This realization is not accessible through intellectual study alone, but through silence, detachment, and contemplation. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (4.4.21) instructs that the wise should engage in meditation to know the Self, not merely external instruction. The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad adds: "Having examined the worlds gained through action, the wise become dispassionate" (1.2.12). Dispassion naturally leads to solitude, where the distractions of societal roles, ambitions, and expectations can be abandoned. Philosophically, in Advaita Vedānta, solitude supports the disciplines of viveka (discrimination) and vairāgya (dispassion), which are necessary for knowledge of Brahman. The Vivekacūḍāmaṇi (verse 52) recommends withdrawal from family and social duties for the seeker of Self-realization. Here, solitude is not escapism it is metaphysical readiness. In Rāja Yoga, solitude is equally critical. Patañjali warns of mental distractions (vikṣepa) and identifies attachment to people and sensory objects as major hindrances to samādhi (Yoga Sūtras 1.30). True absorption requires an environment free of interruptions, where breath and thought can be disciplined inwardly.

Importantly, your observation brings in a unique dimension: the yogi's retreat from society is also an ecological decision. Human beings constantly adapt to their environments. However, adapting to societal (anthropogenic) changes norms, politics, fashions, relationships require far more psychological energy than adapting to natural environments. Even in ancient times, societies underwent shifts that demanded ongoing mental recalibration. To avoid this energetic drain, yogis chose to dwell in forests, where change was seasonal, cyclical, and less cognitively demanding. This allowed their energy to be conserved for inner transformation (tapas), rather than spent on social conformity.

Furthermore, this transition was ritually supported by the āśrama dharma system. During vānaprastha, the seeker often resided near sages and hermitages, gradually detaching from worldly identity. Only after this stage, when the mind was ripe and purified, was sannyāsa undertaken often under the guidance of an elder yogi. The Manusmṛti (6.2–6.3) instructs that after fulfilling one's debts (to gods, ancestors, and teachers), one should leave for the forest and seek Self-realization. In this way, solitude was not a social rejection but a spiritually cultivated maturity, enabled by tradition and preserved through disciplined ecosystems of withdrawal.

Chapter III: The Emergence of Socially Active Yogis and Their Philosophical Justifications

In the contemporary world, the yogic figure has undergone a profound transformation from a secluded seeker of silence to a socially engaged, often publicly visible practitioner. Modern yogis are frequently seen not in caves or forests, but on screens, stages, podcasts, and social platforms.

They function as teachers, influencers, healers, and wellness entrepreneurs, extending yoga beyond the mat and into the domains of mental health, activism, and digital culture. In contrast to the ancient model of vānaprastha and sannyāsa, where renunciation followed the completion of household duties, many modern yogis continue within an extended gṛhastha framework, integrating yogic values into worldly living rather than retreating from it. This shift invites us to ask: *Is this new model of engagement philosophically justifiable? And more importantly, is it spiritually effective?*

The most frequently cited justification for socially engaged yogic life comes from the Bhagavad Gītā, particularly the doctrine of karma yoga. According to this view, a yogi can perform action (karma) in the world without attachment to its outcomes (phala). As Krishna instructs: "Your right is to action alone, never to its fruits" (Gītā 2.47). In this model, engagement is not inherently a distraction, but a field of practice provided one acts without ego, desire, or possessiveness. Further justification is drawn from the *Gītā*'s concept of lokasaṅgraha, the welfare of the world. Krishna says, "Whatever a great man does, others follow; the standard he sets becomes the standard for others" (3.21). In this light, the socially active yogi is seen not as compromised, but as a necessary exemplar leading, teaching, and uplifting others.

This justification is further expanded within Advaita Vedānta, which holds that the world is not separate from Brahman. Engagement with the world is therefore not in conflict with realization, so long as one maintains non-duality and inner detachment. A similar view appears in certain Bhakti and Tantra traditions, where all of life is embraced as a manifestation of the Divine. In these systems, worldly action is sanctified when performed as devotion or awareness, not ego. However, while these frameworks offer philosophical permission for engagement, the question remains: Are these principles truly being embodied in modern yogic life? Today's social yogis operate in a landscape shaped by visibility, branding, and performance. Teaching has become a profession, and the line between service and self-promotion is increasingly blurred. Digital platforms reward frequency, personality, and aesthetics not silence, austerity, or internal stillness. Thus, what begins as karma yoga may

easily slip into spiritual performance or ego maintenance. The outer appearance of non-attachment may mask deeper psychological entanglements with identity, attention, and validation. Moreover, the very conditions that allow for widespread yoga dissemination marketing, monetization, popularity may also dilute its essence. The risk is that yoga becomes commodified: sold as lifestyle, marketed as identity, and practiced for external affirmation. The depth of sādhana, the disciplines of mauna (silence), brahmacarya (containment), and tapas (austerity), may be lost or substituted with curated experiences. In such cases, the modern yogi is not transforming society through yoga, but being transformed by society's values especially those of productivity, consumption, and constant engagement.

Chapter IV: Can a Yogī Be Socially Active and Inwardly Detached? The Tension Between Ego and Renunciation

The central tension that arises from the modern yogi's lifestyle is this: Can one be truly social and yet inwardly detached? Can the ideals of samādhi, vairāgya, and ātma-jñāna be authentically preserved within a life of constant connection, public expression, and social action? Traditional texts offer both warnings and wisdom in response. The Bhagavad Gītā suggests that it is possible through mastery of mind and renunciation of outcomes to act in the world without being bound by it. "He who acts without attachment, surrendering the fruits of action to the Lord, is untouched by sin, as a lotus leaf is untouched by water" (5.10). This poetic image captures the ideal state of the engaged yet detached yogi. However, the inner work required to maintain this state is substantial and subtle. It is not merely about acting; it is about how one acts and from what place within.

This inner dimension is precisely what the Yogavāsiṣṭha Hṛdayam and Yogavāsiṣṭha Ratnākara illuminate. These profound texts emphasize that detachment is an internal condition, not defined by outer circumstances. The Yogavāsiṣṭha Hṛ dayam declares, "Even amidst action, the mind of the knower of truth remains untouched as the sky remains unaffected by the clouds" (I.20). Here, solitude is redefined: not as physical isolation, but as non-involvement of the ego. This view offers a powerful reinterpretation of yogic seclusion one that allows for social presence, provided there is no internal entanglement.

Yet the Yogavāsiṣṭha also issues subtle warnings. It reminds us that even the idea of liberation can become an ego identity. "He who thinks 'I am liberated' is still bound by the notion of 'I'" (II.18). In modern contexts, this insight is striking. Public declarations of being "awakened," "realized," or "detached" can in fact reinforce the very ego structures that yoga aims to dissolve. The socially active yogi, unless deeply vigilant, may fall into these traps performing detachment while remaining subtly bound by recognition and role. The commodification of yoga compounds these risks. When yoga is marketed as a product packaged, branded, and sold it ceases to be a path of ego dissolution and becomes a tool for ego affirmation. This is not merely a superficial critique. The very nāma-rūpa (name-form) of yoga is altered. The Yogavāsiṣṭha Hṛ dayam warns: "Renunciation is not of action, but of clinging" (III.7). In other words, it is not what we do, but how tightly we grasp it. The modern yogi must constantly ask: Am I holding yoga or is yoga holding me?

Despite these challenges, a middle path is possible. The true yogi ancient or modern is not defined by setting but by sthita-prajñā, the state of unwavering wisdom. The Bhagavad Gītā describes such a person as "unmoved by pain or pleasure, free from attachment, fear, and anger" (2.56). In this spirit, it may be possible for the modern yogi to live socially, teach, serve, and create while maintaining an inner solitude that is undisturbed by praise, presence, or pressure.

This requires viveka (discernment), ongoing self-inquiry, and a return to silence even amidst speech.

Ultimately, the question is not whether a yogi can be socially active, but whether they remain inwardly free while doing so. It is a delicate balance between outer connection and inner renunciation. The test of a true yogi in this age may be not whether they disappear into the forest, but whether they can walk through the world like a lotus rooted in the mud of society, yet untouched by its waters.

Conclusion

This study began by observing the contrast between the secluded lifestyle of ancient yogis and the socially immersed lives of modern practitioners. In ancient times, yogic life evolved naturally within the framework of varṇāśrama dharma, where one transitioned from gṛhastha to vānaprastha, eventually seeking sannyāsa under the guidance of forest-dwelling yogis. This shift into solitude was not merely cultural but philosophical and ecological. Ancient yogis recognized that adapting to anthropogenic changes in society drains energy needed for sādhana. Hence, they chose to live close to nature, where inner discipline could flourish without societal disturbance. In contrast, today's seekers often bypass vānaprastha, turning instead to social media. While this platform may offer basic teachings and draw attention toward

āśramas, it rarely offers the deep environment necessary for spiritual transformation. Transmission of true spiritual knowledge remains rare and difficult. Even great teachers like Krishna and the Buddha struggled to create true successors. However, the case of Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and Swami Vivekananda stands as a rare success—proving that when the right environment and preparedness align, transformation is possible. Yet, most modern yoga shared through media is fragmented. Repeated exposure to small ideas can create resistance, and seekers may eventually lose interest or crave superficial inspiration. Social media helps a few, but risks hurting many. True renunciation cannot emerge without gradual detachment from society, family, and ultimately ego. If one cannot renounce society, can one truly renounce the self? Spiritual transformation demands not just inspiration but immersion. And as the sages knew, a seed will only germinate where the soil, season, and silence are right.

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