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From Sādhanā to Seminar Room: The Epistemological Cost of Western Yoga Scholarship — A Case Study in Occidental Misreading of Indic Traditions

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical response to Ruth Westoby's draft article "Sexed Bodies and the Significance of Yonis in Premodern Yoga" (2026), presented at the 42nd Sanskrit Symposium, at Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. While acknowledging its philological competence, the response identifies three principal concerns: internal interpretive tensions in Westoby's argument; the problem of representational distortion arising from the selective foregrounding of esoteric sexual practices; and, most fundamentally, the epistemological incompleteness of a methodology that relies exclusively on philological inference (ānumanā) while foreclosing access to āgama (living tradition-transmitted understanding) and dhyānābhyāsarasa (experiential meditative knowledge). Drawing on Vyāsa's Bhāṣya on Yoga Sūtra 1.48, the Yoga Vāsiṣṭha, and the Yoga Yājñavalkyaṃhitā, the article argues that the tradition's own epistemological standards constitute a standing challenge to scholarship that presents partial analytical findings as adequate accounts of what Yoga texts contain and transmit. The article concludes by calling for a more integrative scholarship that is both philologically rigorous and accountable to the soteriological purposes of the tradition.

Keywords: Yoga epistemology; Haṭhayoga; āgama; dhyānābhyāsarasa; Occidental scholarship; Vyāsa; representational distortion

Introduction: The Real Character of the Vedic Gods

The global proliferation of Yoga over recent decades has produced two broadly divergent intellectual responses. The first, rooted in clinical and neuroscientific research, investigates Yoga as a therapeutic and psychophysiological discipline with measurable benefits for human well-being. The second, emerging from contemporary humanities, approaches Yoga through frameworks borrowed from gender theory, discourse analysis, and medical humanities. Ruth Westoby's draft[1] article "Sexed Bodies and the Significance of Yonis in Premodern Yoga" (2026),[2] associated with the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies and for the 42nd Sanskrit Symposium (Trinity College, Oxford, May 2026), is an exemplary instance of the latter. The article offers careful philological analysis of gendered anatomical terminology—principally the term *yoni*—in a selection of premodern Haṭhayoga texts, bringing this material into conversation with Thomas Laqueur's "one-sex model" of the body and its critics.

The following response does not contest the philological competence of Westoby's work. Nor does it argue that historical texts ought to be insulated from critical scrutiny. The concern raised here is of a different order: it bears on the epistemic and representational consequences of an increasingly dominant scholarly tendency to foreground sexuality, reproductive symbolism, and gendered body politics as the primary analytical lens through which Haṭhayoga is approached. Three specific problems are identified. First, Westoby's paper contains internal interpretive tensions that undermine its stated conclusions. Second, the methodology risks representational distortion through the selective foregrounding of esoteric and marginal textual content. Third, and most fundamentally, the paper exemplifies a growing divorce between Yoga scholarship and the lived, transformative traditions it purports to study—a divorce with real epistemic and cultural consequences. This last concern, as Section IV will argue, is not merely a matter of scholarly taste but is legible as a problem from within the Indic tradition's own epistemological self-understanding.

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[1]Circulated for registered participants of the lectures.

[2]Later the title was renamed as "An argument from silence: female practitioners in premodern Haṭhayoga" when public objections were raised.

Internal Tensions in Westoby's Argument

Westoby acknowledges at the outset that "reproduction and the sexed nature of bodies are not at the forefront of the topics presented in premodern textual sources on yoga" and that "celibacy is either presumed or presented as a preliminary practice" (p. 2). This is a frank concession confirmed by any fair-minded reading of the corpus. The *Amṛtasiddhi*, *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*, and related texts frame themselves explicitly as instruments of soteriological transformation: the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* opens by declaring *haṭavidyā param gopyā yoginā siddhimicchatā*—"the science of Haṭha, greatly to be kept secret by the yogin who desires success" (HP 1.11)—and its culminating verses (HP 4.103–104) describe *unmanyavasthā*, the state beyond mind, as the telos of the entire system. Gender and anatomy dissolve entirely at this culminating register. Yet having acknowledged the texts' own stated priorities, the article proceeds to place sexed anatomy and reproductive symbolism at the analytical centre of its inquiry. The resulting argument is in structural tension with its own textual premise.

A related tension concerns the treatment of misogyny. Westoby writes that "the texts demonstrate a dismissal of women bordering on misogyny" (p. 4) but is careful to note that this misogyny may reflect "a preoccupation with embryology and procreation as driving principles of the body—and how yoga works" rather than "mere repetition of cultural patriarchy" (p. 6). This is an intellectually subtle distinction. However, having drawn it, the paper does not consistently apply it. The repeated citation of passages characterizing women as defined by "sexual availability or reproductive capacity" (p. 4), and the summary judgment that such texts constitute "a hostile environment for female practitioners" (p. 7), risk functioning rhetorically in ways that the paper's own more nuanced analysis does not warrant. A reader without philological context will retain the rhetorical charge rather than the qualified scholarly interpretation.

Furthermore, Westoby's central thesis—that Haṭha yoga texts adhere not to Laqueur's one-sex model but to something closer to Charlotte Furth's androgynous model—remains underspecified. The paper acknowledges that "the male is the paradigmatic practitioner" and that women appear only where "genital differences from men require specific instructions" (p. 7). This is more consistent with a qualified normative-male model than with genuine androgyny. The theoretical conclusion appears to outrun the textual evidence assembled in its support.

The Problem of Representational Distortion

A persistent methodological concern arises from the paper's handling of esoteric practices. Westoby devotes substantial analytical attention to *vajrolīmudrā*—the suction of sexual fluids upwards through the genital organs—as well as to *yonibandha*, *yonimudrā*, and related techniques engaging explicitly with sexual morphology. This is legitimate textual scholarship. However, these practices occupied a highly restricted and contested position even within traditional Haṭhayoga lineages. The *Dattātreyayogaśāstra* and *Haṭhapradīpikā* are among the very few texts to include separate instructions for female practitioners of *vajrolī*—a point Westoby acknowledges (p. 4). The practice is initiatory in character and largely absent from both the textual mainstream and living pedagogical contexts.

The scholarly decision to foreground such practices—however carefully contextualized—participates in a broader pattern whereby the exceptional and controversial becomes disproportionately central to academic representation. The overwhelming content of Haṭhayoga literature concerns *āsana*, breath-retention, mental concentration, ethical conduct, and the cultivation of *kuṇḍalinī* energy through non-sexual means. A scholar approaching the Haṭha corpus through Westoby's article alone would receive a significantly skewed picture of what these texts contain and transmit.

There is also a broader issue of intellectual proportion. The premodern Haṭha texts were composed primarily for male renunciants within Śaiva and Vajrayāna lineages. Their concern with celibacy, non-ejaculation, and the retention of *bindu* is embedded in a specific soteriological logic: the conservation and sublimation of vital energy for spiritual liberation. Reading these texts through the lens of reproductive politics risks mistaking a soteriological grammar for a social programme. When the *Amṛtasiddhi*'s formulation that "the falling of *bindu* leads to death while life results from its retention" is read primarily as reproductive discourse, its ascetic and metaphysical registers are compressed or lost. The *Bhagavad Gītā*'s doctrine of *paramparā*—that this supreme knowledge is received through an unbroken chain of teacher-to-student transmission (*evaṃ paramparā-prāptam*, BG 4.2)—further reminds us that access to a manuscript is not equivalent to access to the knowledge it encodes.

The Divorce of Scholarship from Sādhanā: A Yogic Epistemological Critique

The deepest concern raised by Westoby's paper is symptomatic rather than individual. It reflects a broader institutional tendency within contemporary humanities scholarship to approach Yoga as an object of ideological analysis rather than as a living transformative discipline. Crucially, this limitation can be identified not merely from outside the tradition—by appeal to clinical science or contemporary practitioner communities—but from within Yoga's own epistemological framework.

The most precise and contextually appropriate classical warrant for this critique is provided by Vyāsa's

Bhāṣya on Yoga Sūtra 1.48, where the commentator specifies the three instruments by which *prajñā* (wisdom) is cultivated and *uttama yoga* (the highest yoga) attained:

आगमेनानुमानेन ध्यानाभ्यासरसेन च ।
त्रिधा प्रकल्पयन्प्रज्ञां लभते योगमुत्तमम् ।।

āgamenānumānena dhyānābhyāsarasena ca .
tridhā prakalpayanprajñāṃ labhate
yogamuttamam ..

"By *āgama* (authoritative scriptural testimony), *anumāna* (inference), and *dhyānābhyāsarasa* (the relish of meditative practice)—cultivating *prajñā* through these three, one attains *uttama yoga*, the highest yoga." (Vyāsa, *Bhāṣya* on YS 1.48)

Vyāsa's formulation is both epistemologically precise and directly applicable to the problem at hand. He identifies three constitutive instruments of Yogic understanding: *āgama*—the testimony of authoritative tradition, transmitted through living *paramparā*; *anumāna*—inference and reasoning, including textual analysis; and *dhyānābhyāsarasa*—the experiential "relish" or *rasa* that arises through sustained meditative practice. The key word is *tridhā*—"through all three": not one instrument alone, but their integration. Westoby's methodology is almost exclusively *anumāna*—philological inference and theoretical reasoning. It operates without *āgama* in the classical sense (engagement with living *paramparā* and *ācārya*-transmitted understanding) and entirely without *dhyānābhyāsarasa* (the experiential dimension). By Vyāsa's own standard, *anumāna* alone—however meticulous—cannot yield *uttama yoga*; it yields only a partial and therefore potentially misleading account of what these texts contain.

This is not a dismissal of philological method. Vyāsa does not disparage *anumāna*; he insists that it be integrated with the other two instruments. The scholarly relationship to Yoga texts that operates through *anumāna* alone is in this sense structurally incomplete by the tradition's own epistemological standards—and not merely by the standards of modern contemplative studies or practitioner communities.

The broader Indic tradition elaborates the same point at different registers. The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (1.1.4–5) distinguishes *parā vidyā*—higher knowledge, by which the imperishable is directly known—from *aparā vidyā*, which encompasses all textual and linguistic disciplines, however refined. The *Bṛhadraāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (4.4.21), in a formulation repeated at *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.2.23 and *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.3, states: *nāyam ātmā pravacanena labhyo na medhyā na bahu nā śrutenā*—"The Self is not attained by instruction, nor by intellect, nor by much hearing." These classical sources converge on a single epistemological insistence: textual knowledge *about* Yoga and knowledge *of* Yoga are categorically distinct, and the former cannot substitute for the latter.

Terms such as *yoni*, *bindu*, *rajas*, and *meḍhra* function simultaneously in anatomical, cosmological, metaphysical, and meditative registers within the texts under examination. An analysis confined to morphological and discourse-theoretical categories will capture some dimensions of these terms while rendering others invisible. This is a structural feature of any methodology that has no hermeneutic access to the *dhyānābhyāsarasa* register in which these terms simultaneously operate.

Women, Yoga, and the Tradition's Own Evidence

One of the most significant concerns arising from the paper is the selective reading of the textual tradition on which its conclusions about women and Yoga are based. Westoby's methodology, understandably shaped by the misogynist surface of the Haṭha corpus, draws on texts that speak *about* women in a context structured by celibate male renunciation. But the broader Yoga tradition contains substantial counter-evidence that her framing does not engage: textual instances in which women are not merely subjects of patriarchal discourse but authoritative *sādhakās* and teachers.

The *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*'s *Līlā Upakhyāna* (Book II, *Utpatti Prakāraṇa*) is among the most striking examples. Here it is the wife, Līlā, who initiates and guides the Yogic *sādhanā* and whose mastery of consciousness is demonstrated before and beyond that of her husband. The text does not present her guidance as exceptional or paradoxical; it presents it as the natural function of a realized practitioner. This is not a marginal passage: the *Līlā Upakhyāna* is one of the principal narrative vehicles through which the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*—itself one of the most philosophically substantial Yoga texts in the Sanskrit tradition—develops its account of consciousness and liberation.

Similarly, the *Yoga Yājñavalkyaṃhitā* (c. thirteenth century), a Yoga text of considerable historical importance, is structured as a dialogue in which Yoga is explicitly taught to Gārgī—one of the most distinguished female intellectual figures in the Vedic tradition. The teaching encompasses *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *pratyāhāra*, *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna*, and *samādhi* within an aṣṭāṅga framework, and engages the subtle body and kuṇḍalinī. It does not include the *ṣaṭkarma* purifications or the *mudrā* practices involving sexual-fluid retention—such as *vajrolī*—that belong to the later and more restricted Haṭha corpus. This is precisely the point: what is transmitted to Gārgī is the substantive yogic curriculum, the very practices that constitute the heart of the tradition, unburdened by the esoteric sexual techniques that Westoby's article foregrounds. That such a text should frame this transmission as natural and authoritative is not a detail; it is an interpretive challenge to the conclusion

that the Yoga corpus constitutes—categorically and irremediably—"a hostile environment for female practitioners" (p. 7).

Furthermore, Patañjali's definition of Yoga itself—*yogaś citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ* (YS 1.2)—contains no gendered pronoun and no anatomical qualifier. The entire programme of *kriyāyoga* outlined in YS 2.1—*tapaḥ svādhyāyeśvarapraṇidhānāni*—is framed universally. The misogyny of specific Haṭha texts reflects the social conditions of their composition and the institutional context of male-dominated culture; it does not exhaust the tradition's own relationship to gender, as the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* and *Yoga Yājñavalkyaṃhitā* make clear. A scholarship that treats the misogyny as the primary finding while passing over these counter-instances is itself guilty of the selective reading it implicitly charges the tradition with.

This concern becomes particularly acute given contemporary Yoga demographics. Modern Yoga practice is sustained predominantly by women, who constitute approximately 72–74% of practitioners globally (Yoga Alliance, 2016). At a moment when women are the principal carriers of living Yoga tradition, presenting the historical roots of that tradition primarily through frameworks of misogyny and reproductive constraint—without attending to the textual evidence for women as teachers, initiates, and authorities within that same tradition—risks a representational injustice toward the very communities most committed to its transmission.

Toward a More Integrative Scholarship

The preceding critique is not a counsel against philological inquiry into the Haṭha corpus. The Sanskrit textual tradition contains enormous quantities of material—on the precise mechanics of *āsana* and *prāṇāyāma*, on the mapping of subtle body structures, on the relationship between different *nirodha* states and particular techniques—that remains insufficiently studied, poorly understood, or inaccessible to practitioners who lack Sanskrit. Rigorous philological scholarship directed toward clarifying these practices, resolving variant readings, and illuminating the conceptual frameworks within which they operate would serve both scholarly and practitioner communities. Scholarship of this kind constitutes a *prayojana*—a purposive contribution—aligned with the tradition's own stated aims.

What is needed, in other words, is not less textual rigour but a different orientation of that rigour: toward what the texts are trying to accomplish and toward those who continue to engage with that accomplishment in practice. A more integrative scholarship would bring philological and discourse-analytical tools to bear on historical sources while remaining accountable to the soteriological purposes for which those sources were composed. It would engage with the scientific literature on Yoga's effects—consistently documenting benefits for stress reduction, trauma recovery, cardiovascular health, and psychological integration (Khalsa and Cope; Clarke et al.)—in order to understand what living practitioners are actually accessing through these practices. And it would attend to the consequences—for practitioner communities, for public understanding, and for the traditions themselves—of the representational choices made in academic writing.

Vyāsa's threefold framework—*āgama*, *anumāna*, *dhyānābhyāsarasa*—does not counsel the abandonment of *anumāna*; it insists on its integration with the other two. Textual analysis is indispensable and irreplaceable in its domain. The question raised by this critique is whether Yoga scholarship can claim adequate authority over its subject when it systematically forecloses access to the *āgama* and *abhyāsa* dimensions—and when it presents the products of *anumāna* alone as if they constituted a complete account of the tradition.

Conclusion

Ruth Westoby's "Sexed Bodies and the Significance of Yonis in Premodern Yoga" is a work in the field of gender and sexuality studies. Its philological research and engagement with comparative theoretical literature—Laqueur, Furth, Ragab, Wu—demonstrates scholarly breadth. Nevertheless, the article exemplifies broader tendencies in contemporary Yoga humanities scholarship that warrant critical reflection: the selective foregrounding of esoteric and sexually coded material; the structural tension between a paper's own concessions and its analytical priorities; the neglect of textual evidence for women's authoritative role within the very tradition under study; and the growing distance between academic representation and the transformative reality of living Yoga traditions.

The tradition's own epistemological frameworks—most precisely articulated in Vyāsa's requirement that *āgama*, *anumāna*, and *dhyānābhyāsarasa* be held together in any adequate Yogic inquiry—constitute a standing challenge to any methodology that proceeds by *anumāna* alone. These are not romantic or traditionalist objections to critical scholarship; they are epistemological claims embedded in the very sources that Yoga scholarship studies. An academically adequate response to this body of work must engage seriously with the tradition's own account of what kind of knowledge Yoga requires and what kinds of partial inquiry it cautions against.

The International Day of Yoga, recognized by the United Nations and endorsed by the World Health Organization as a celebration of Yoga's contribution to global well-being, represents a moment of heightened public attention to what Yoga is and what it offers. At such a moment, scholarship that foregrounds obscure esoteric

practices and patriarchal textual statements as the primary findings of Yoga studies risks a disservice to both the tradition and to the millions of practitioners who engage with it in good faith. The scholarly community bears a responsibility to develop frameworks adequate to both the critical analysis of historical texts and the living significance of what those texts have transmitted—scholarship that is, in the fullest sense of the Sanskrit term, *prayojana-sādhaka*: oriented toward genuine human benefit.

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