

PATANJALI'S YOGA SUTRAS AND POST-MODERN SPIRITUAL REVIVAL

Shristi Malkoti

Research Scholar, Department of English, Gurukul Kangri (Deemed to be) University

ABSTRACT-

The contemporary society is marked by a period of rapid materialisation, as people are reduced to commodities, the humanity is suffering from moral and ethical deprivation and is on verge of a breakdown. The loss in faith, hopelessness and existential dilemma the masses are suffering from is due to the dreadful, monotonous, meaningless daily routine. The technological development has further isolated individuals, rather than bringing them together. The world is moving fast towards its demise as it stands on the brink of becoming a wasteland of broken hopes and dreams of a once glorious civilization which held one of the brightest minds to ever exist.

Spirituality to the post-modern world offers solace and more than anything answers to their moral dilemmas caused due to the troubled, restless existence. It provides humanity with solutions that would help them escape misery and find peace within, even though the world around them is in shambles.

This research article will talk of the past centuries during which the materialistic and hedonistic society gained prominence, which caused the decline of spirituality and its further evolution in the post-modern era when it was sought after as being the saviour of the humanity. With reference to Yoga philosophy stated in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, a classical text compiled by the yogic sage Patanjali which consists of the holy grail for humanity as it talks about how a human can escape the illusionary world of *Maya* and realise the glory of the true Self by conquering the ills of alienation and Ignorance. It will provide one with facts regarding how implementing spiritual studies can improve the quality of human life and help him conquer his mind and lead a peaceful existence.

Keywords- Spirituality, *Karma*, *Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali, alienation

INTRODUCTION

The world today is advanced, fast paced, materialised to its core, humanity is in shackles, bound to societal, economical, man-made rules and no one is actually free and this is what Swami Vivekananda, the proponent of Yoga in the West states is the problem of mankind. "Our main problem is to be free." (Vivekananda, *The Complete Book of Yoga* 11)

There is an anxiety, a hopelessness, a paranoia that has taken over the world, everyone is fearful of losing something or other and live in a constant state of fear which was evident through the literature of that time which included writers like Albert Camus. Camus, in his widely acclaimed essay *Myth of the Sisyphus* (1942), states the problem of human condition, he explains that a man's existence is of anguish and absurdity (Siuli 3). Jean Paul Sartre an existential philosopher, who is, said to be the one who initially represented the theory of existentialism, through his works (Hoffman 2). Existentialism wasn't really a philosophy, but a cultural movement and is what perfectly describes the human condition of the modern world, that is caused due to the self- alienation and detachment, which ultimately lead to the numbing of emotions and left a man feeling nothing.

The aim of this research paper is to dive into the meaning and importance of spirituality in the world of a modern human to find a solution of the situation of spiritual doom encompassing the society with the help of ancient Yogic scripture of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*.

THE HUMAN CONDITION

Humankind is suffering, and is trying to search for a meaning of his existence and this frustration leads to depression and losing the will to live, because the mind isn't enlightened to the true reality of life. Camus in his work *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) states that the purpose of philosophy is to provide a suffering mind with the will to live in the midst of this absurd, meaningless world and provide comfort. "Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest— whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories— comes afterwards." (Camus 4)

There is Ignorance residing within, so deep rooted, that has completely taken over the human mind, that he cannot see anything beyond it. This Ignorance is making humanity lose their own identity and sense of self, which adds to the suffering. Due to this a human is unable to get the wisdom of the universe, it stays concealed because he is so entrapped by certain illusions of *Prakriti* (Nature). According of the existential scholars, alienation causes the separation of a man from himself (Anjum 11). "The central definition of alienation is that man loses his self-identity and selfhood. Many thinkers who explain the problem of self-alienation assume that in each of us there is a real self which we are prevented from achieving." (10)

A human is a puppet of his desires and acts to fulfil them, that is his only drive, his only form of motivation. This hedonistic lifestyle gained prominence in the Enlightenment Age (1685-1850) particularly in West, where the core of the society became materialistic, and humans started relating happiness to overconsumption and hoarding of goods. (Aydin, Manusov 252). The effect of making materialism as a source of happiness was that the human was now devoid of spiritual experiences and chased after the temporary sensual pleasures, accumulation of wealth, assets instead of spiritual happiness. (252). Thus, it is evident that excess of materialism caused man to lose touch with the Self, and the spiritual experience was neglected as a way to achieve happiness rather the material pleasures became the source of happiness to the society (252) which rapidly led to formation of a spiritually hollow, alienated society.

The Indian philosophy and spirituality of Hinduism values psychological evolution of the world rather than the material development. It is believed that one should work towards the betterment of their own internal state of being and establish empathy within which will do more for the evolution of humankind and a nation than several policies being implemented by secular nations. The difference between an animal and a human is that a human is able to rise into awareness, which humankind is unable to do as it is so intertwined in the man-made artificial world, which is busy evolving the world by building sky-touching towers while ruining the world day by day. Pattnaik in his work *Faith* says "When humans seek to dominate and control other people for self-aggrandizement, it is *aham* at work. When we enable people to empathise with each other, and seek to delight, rather than defeat and control others, then *atma* is at work." (5)

The humanity lacking wisdom accustomed to a materialistic society, indulges in it, as they are under the illusion that this is the only reality. The meaningless, monotonous existence brought about by the materialism which has turned a human into a machine, as he isn't aware of his own life's essence or motive and is living in a loop of misery unaware of the cause of

his suffering. Studies show that materialism results in decrease of happiness rather than its increase, the current state of society is depreciating due to excess materialism. "Therefore, those who embrace materialistic values seek happiness through material possession and consumption instead of spiritual experience. Paradoxically, an increase in materialism can result in a decrease in happiness. Once basic needs such as food and shelter are met, increased wealth has very little impact on happiness" (252). This is where the society went wrong, basing their happiness upon material and sensual pleasure instead of seeking spiritual pleasure which certainly results in bliss that originates from within and lasts.

HUMANKIND ENTRAPPED IN MAYA OR ILLUSION

The humankind is entrapped in *Maya* (illusion) it has a really strong grasp over a modern human because of how unsynchronised one is with their spiritual self. Vivekananda describes the effect of *Maya* on the world and how its entanglement leads to suffering "Thus, with us all in this *Maya*, this dream world, where it is all misery, weeping, and crying, where a few golden balls are rolled, and the world scrambles after them. You were never bound by laws, nature never had a bond for you." (79)

Yogis believe that there is a reality, a truth, beyond the grasp of human perception which is the One True Reality known as *Atman/Brahman* (Supreme Soul, Universal Soul) and becoming one with the Atman brings out Enlightenment and this causes a state of Eternal Bliss, which is superior than any happiness materialistic things can ever provide. (Kumar 5)

What is happiness? If one questions. Since the time of ancient Greek it means leading a simple life of a mean, not indulging in excess of anything, which would lead to suffering, avoiding the extremes is the way to live a happy, prosperous life according to Greek philosophers like Socrates and Aristotle. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* talks about his philosophy of happiness and that is, to follow the rule of the Golden Mean and avoid the extremes (Aydin, Manusov 253).

Enlightenment Age of the eighteenth century can be seen as the era planting the seeds of modern thought into humanity and also decline of traditional religious values, as it is marked by the dominance of rationality and scientific endeavour. It is said to mark the beginning of the modern thought along with the technological advancement caused due to Industrial Revolution of eighteenth century which changed the world and the society started moving towards materialism rapidly. The twentieth century was suffering from moral, economical, spiritual crisis which is the direct cause of the technological advancement, a main aspect of modernisation. "Technological rationality that has grown up in modernity movement gradually occupies the core position of western culture, intrudes into every side of contemporary social structure, and dominates every field of modern social life" (Zhang 182).

Moving onto the post-modern era and the development of new found spirituality, one needs to understand the essence of the post-modern era and what was the world going through. During the post-modern, after-war age, the attitude of the society, their fear, the anxieties they faced and what was the cultural atmosphere during the time caused this shift and evolution of an increased interest in the exploration of ancient spirituality.

"In a world of Cybernetics, the global village and global economy, computers, lasers and virtual reality, of corporate plans and multinational corporations, older ways seem to be coming to an end. It is no longer a world, for instance, in which talk of love, truthfulness, belief, loyalty and so on has much meaning. It is governed instead by efficiency, success and technological rationality. These generate power and material abundance beyond previous dreams, it is true, yet also loneliness, anomie and the threat of annihilation. It is also a world

of ceaseless change. New models replace the old, constantly and seemingly inevitably, as the system seems to function automatically without need of people or without human decisions” (Brady 180).

The above extract explains how there was a stark shift of societal values in the post-modern era which added to people feeling alienated and miserable. The excess materialism causes suffering which is evident clearly in the post-modern age.

SPIRITUAL REVIVAL

Post-modern era was the time of rejection of the traditional values and opinions regarding institutionalised religion and spirituality and a shift towards new forms of spirituality which focuses on the personal development, is fluid and undogmatic. The depthless and fragmented psyche of the twentieth century, found relief in this new evolved spirituality.

This was the era when the beliefs and order within the society started crumbling down. People were hopeless, faithless, they had lost belief in God, religion even rational thought. The youth was struggling, trying to find a way out of the existential dread they had been facing, the sense of alienation, loss of self, throughout the society could be witnessed in the temperament of the people. The world was in chaos, there was mass destruction everywhere, bloodshed, wars, loss of innocence marked the post-modern era. “Despite the stark realities present to us every day - the threats of disaster implicit in the wars and rumours of wars, the growing gap between rich and poor and the devastation of the environment which is part of it - the world can seem strangely insubstantial, almost like a collective dream”. (Brady 181)

People saw how no God, sovereign or government can protect and be their saviour and there was a state of distress and anxiety that lead the society into a coma of hopelessness as they didn't know what to do, or even, how to go on. They realised how fickle the material world is as everything they worked hard for could be taken away from them in a blink of an eye and there was a paranoia, a fear shadowing the humankind, the absurdity of the meaningless existence and alienation caused further separation from Self. “The central definition of alienation is that man loses his self-identity and selfhood. Many thinkers who explain the problem of self-alienation assume that in each of us there is a real self which we are prevented from achieving.” (Anjum 10)

T.S Eliot's works like *The Waste Land*, *Hollow Men*, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* portrays the sentiments of disillusioned, troubled, isolated, hollow humankind. “*The Waste Land* depicts a picture of the desolation of man. Man's individuality is lost in the godless universe but Eliot is however searching for truth and freedom” (Siuli 338).

As Eliot predicted in one of his work *Hollow Men* “This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper.” The line sums up the current state of the world, that the humanity has accepted its fate of futile, empty existence and is too comfortable to do anything about it and is slowly leading towards its own demise. Two decades after the modernist works of T.S Eliot came the evolution of spirituality in the post-modern era after the second world war, due to the chaos, political upheaval, societal unrest there was a hope and thirst for spiritual revival.

Spiritualism led to be the saviour of a whole deteriorating generation of restless youth. Many writers started incorporating spirituality of Zen and Yoga philosophy into their works as a mean to show the state of the society, as the humanity was going through a huge spiritual crisis. Talking about post-modernism and the renewed sense of post-modern spirituality, Brady states-

“A postmodern spirituality, then, may be the hope of the world, not a mere projection of our human needs but God's challenge to them. It calls us to renounce the power which is in danger of destroying us, and to return to a humble faith in God, who is always coming towards us and going before us. It is in this patience, this humble acceptance of the One whose presence we long for, that the postmodern world may be transformed”. (186-187)

Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, talks about the writer's spiritual journey and clearly demonstrate the spiritual lifestyle of their generation. People who wanted an escape from the materialistic, consumeristic culture of their time and aimed to achieve spiritual freedom and obtain solace. “It was a non-violent resistance to emerging ideologies which, in Kerouac's view, stripped America of individuality and creativity”. (Baratta 4)

Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* talks about how one can transcend beyond, into a spiritual realm of reality, if one decides to look past the material world and work towards their own self-development and push their boundaries to achieve something they really want. It is a fable about how one needs to embark on their own journey and not conform to the societal rules and should dare to walk alone to achieve greatness. “Jonathan Seagull is a story for one who knows that somewhere there's a higher way of living than scuffing the tracks of others, someone who yearns to fly the way their own heart yearns to fly”. (Chenbasu 57)

Many authors of the modern age rebelled against the post-war advancements and possessed post-modern sensibilities, therefore are regarded as precursor of post-modernism. T.S Eliot, W. B Yeats two of the most prominent writers, who talked about the spiritually desolated state of humanity, obtained inspiration for their works from Indian ancient spiritual texts like *Bhagavad Gita*, *Puranas*, *Upanishads* and Vedantic philosophies. Such poets talked about the state of the post-war effects on humanity, trying to warn them of the impending doom towards which the society is headed.

The ancient Indian texts of Yoga and Buddhism provided humanity with solace, with answers. The most common fear among people after seeing such atrocities, was the fear of death, the paranoia surrounding the fragility of life had created a muffled panic within the society which was painted over by the boon of industrialisation and technological advancement. This led to a mass movement of people away from the monotonous, aimless existence striving for American Dream to a world of self-discovery and calm of spirituality, which provided the humankind a reason to slow down and forget about the anxieties of the future and past and live in the present. It also helped people come to terms with their own fragile existence.

Spirituality helps one realise how insignificant the material world actually is and look beyond the sense of 'I'. It makes one see that there is a world beyond this which is superior and that there is something greater to our existence than the fruitless life one is accustomed to. (Sharma 45)

YOGIC SPIRITUALITY

The philosophy of Yoga states that there is a power beyond our sensory perception, that a human need to strive for, providing them with a higher purpose and a way to perceive the true reality and “experience the ultimate truth about human beings and the world” (44). Sharma states that the Vedic rishis were able to experience enlightenment due to intense yoga practices and discover the concealed divine truth of the universe, as they were able to unite with the Supreme Soul or *Brahman/Atman* which is the divine universal consciousness. (44)

Yogic spirituality and its ancient philosophy given by Maharishi Patanjali in *Yoga Sutras* was one of the spiritual philosophies that perfectly aligned with the need of the society during that

time and it even didn't preach bowing down to a God, but only talked of a Supreme Soul or *Purusha*. The nature of *Purusha* is that of constant bliss and an ignorant mind is crowded with mental fluctuations, which is why the true nature of *Purusha* is not visible, and when these fluctuations are tamed and the mind is calm, the true nature of *Purusha* shines. *Yoga Sutras* 1.3 describes this "*tada drastuh svarupe- 'vasthanam*" which is further translated by Swami Vivekananda as "At the time (the time of concentration) the seer (the *Purusha*) rests in his own (unmodified) state." (17)

Yoga philosophy provided the lost generation of post-modern age with answers and provided them with a purpose to life. It showed humanity a simple way to achieve happiness that lasts, while the world was in a state of chaos and disorder. It showed them the true reality behind their suffering, and how life is meant to be a two-way street, one pays for their past *Karma* and taught the importance of good *Karma* to avoid misery. Vivekananda in *The Complete Book of Yoga* says "Our *Karma* determines what we deserve and what we can assimilate. We are responsible for what we deserve and what we can assimilate. We are responsible for what we are; and whatever we wish ourselves to be, we have the power to make ourselves" (21)

Even the soul, the pure souls they were born with, through which once the glory of the *Purusha* used to shine through, is now corrupted and morally degraded. The humankind is in the grasp of *Maya* and the excess materialism has reduced the identity of human being from spiritual beings to shallow shell of beings who are defined by the commodities they possess.

Spirituality opposes everything materialism stands for and a materialised society can never know peace and will remain miserable until they start practicing spirituality. Sharma talks about how materialism has taken over the society and states "In a society devoid of spirituality and totally guided by materialism, spirituality becomes much more abstract. They forget that in every human being there are certain aspects that cannot be explained by modern science and materialism". (49)

Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* details how one should know of the true reality of the world and lift the mask of illusion and ignorance from their consciousness. In Yoga, the material world stands for *Prakriti*, it is the nature, the ever-changing, enchanting, temptress, but a Yogi has wisdom enough to not let it entrap him so he is always free. If, one is engrossed with *Prakriti* he will never be able to perceive the true reality, which is the *Param Atma* or Supreme Soul. According to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* the human has an *Atma* or soul which is a part of the *Purusha* or the One True Reality and it is the destiny of a soul to unite with the *Purusha* this is the final destination for every soul, that is, to achieve freedom. "Literally the word yoga means "union", the union of the finite with the infinite." (Kumar 5)

Kumar explains "Yoga signifies the essential unity that is the basis of life. In the highest sense, yoga as spiritual union signifies the soul's union with God" (6)

Patanjali in *Yoga Sutras* 1.2 defines Yoga as "*yogas-citta-vrtti-nirodhah*", which is translated by Swami Vivekananda as "Yoga is restraining the mind-stuff (*Chitta*) from taking various forms (*Vrttis*)" (13). Kumar describes the meaning of the above Sutra and states "As the reflection of the moon on the sea is broken or blurred by the waves, so is the reflection of the Atman the true self, broken by the mental waves. Only when the sea is stilled to mirror-like calmness can the reflection of the moon be seen, and only when the "mind stuff", the *citta*, is controlled to absolute calmness, is the self to be recognized" (7).

The mental turbulence or *Vrittis* in the mind-stuff or *Chitta*, which causes one to stay ignorant to the true nature of the *Purusha*. Therefore, a mind remains Ignorant and stuck in the loop of birth-rebirth, as to escape this one needs to enlighten their mind to the True Reality and

become one with the Universal Soul of *Purusha*. “The one with uncontrolled mind and lack of understanding remains on the cycle of rebirth; he who has understanding and control over his mind (and who is “pure”) reaches the “final step from which he is not reborn again” (Sharma 46)

Yoga Sutras 2.3 names the five *Kleshas* (pain causing obstructions) that causes one to suffer “*avidyasmitta-raga-dvesabhinivesah klesah*”. They are Ignorance (*avidya*), Egoism (*asmita*), Attachment (*raga*), Aversion/ Jealousy (*dvesa*) and Clinging to Life (*abhinivesah*). These are the pain causing factors that make humanity suffer and *Yoga Sutras* teaches, how to reach the highest goal after eradicating the mind of these *Kleshas*.

Today the western society has reduced Yoga to just a form of physical practice and has totally ignored the spiritual aspect of it which does little justice to this ancient practice. The Yoga being practiced today is focused on the wellbeing of the body but neglects the spiritual wellbeing. The Yoga rooted in the Vedic tradition states that yoga focuses on the holistic wellbeing of a human, focusing on restraining the mind to cause fluctuations so that the Universal Truth can be visible (Sharma 44). This is what the society needs to go back to really experience the effects of the mystical science of Yoga, there needs to be shift from the obsession over the physical to the mental and spiritual wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

The Indian philosophy of Yoga in *Yoga Sutras*, contains all of the solutions of a modern day problem, therefore it is considered the holy grail for the collapsing twenty-first century. Patanjali, a sage and the compiler of the first Yoga philosophy, intended for the spiritual practice of Yoga to be transmitted and practiced by the humankind. His purpose behind this was to instil in humanity the ability to discern the truth and break free from *Maya's* hold, which, in the words of Yoga, is the root cause of all misery because it traps people in worldly pursuits and causes them to lose sight of their true calling in life.

Yoga Sutras shine out to be a ray of hope for the humanity that makes them believe that there is a way out of their fear, provides them with hope and makes them realise there is actually a higher reality and enlightenment is necessary to come face to face with the divine knowledge of the *Purusha*. This mysterious force of nature, the *Purusha*, is the ultimate destination for every soul, it can be defined as a huge sea in which all the other souls merge together to go back to their origin. *Yoga Sutras* present with this theory of the origin of souls and how the purpose of every soul is that it must strive to go back to the *Purusha* and that is the destination and highest goal of a liberated human soul.

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BIO NOTE

This is Shristi Malkoti, Research Scholar, from Gurukul Kangri (Deemed to be) University. She has qualified UGC- NET, and is pursuing PhD research work rooted in the ancient spiritual philosophies including Yoga, Zen Buddhism, Taoism, et cetera. Along with PhD she is has been working as a teaching assistant in her own institute since two years. She chose

this particular area to conduct her research work due to its interdisciplinary approach as it provided her with the benefit of working on some exceptional philosophies given by the wisest saints and also study some of the finest spiritual, ancient texts ever written that are said to hold the truth of life.

PUBLICATIONS-

1. **Poetry Anthology-** “*The Voyage of a Moon Nymph*”.
2. **Research paper-** “Appraising the Zen Narrative in Ruth Ozeki’s *The Tale for the Time Being*” published in UGC Care listed journal “Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute”.

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1. Chapter titled *The Ideology of Ancient Indian Literature* published in “Echoes of Expression: Tracing Language through Literature”, 2024.
2. Chapter titled *Spiritual Advantages of Dhyana or Meditation* in “Indian Knowledge Texts Psychological And Literary Perspectives”, 2024.