Imparting Yoga Texts in Saṃskṛta: A Teaching Experiment and Its Outcome

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Abstract

Currently, Yoga texts in the Saṃskṛta language are taught worldwide through the medium of other languages. Scholars and teachers would agree that knowledge of Saṃskṛta is essential for better appreciation of yogic wisdom. In such a situation, can an attempt be made to teach Yoga texts in a time-bound manner, with maximum possible usage of Saṃskṛta, without getting into the nitty-gritty of Saṃskṛta grammar, even for a learner without Saṃskṛta background? A two-day international workshop on the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* was organized at the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram in August 2017 to attempt an answer to the above proposition. There were 97 registered participants in the workshop (India, 89; other countries, 8). This paper, which is about this experiment, is in two parts: A) The description of the teaching experiment, and B) its outcome as revealed by the analysis of the written feedback forms.

Part A. The workshop content consisted of 34 Saṃskṛta verses belonging to the first chapter of the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* on fifteen *āsana*s. At the outset, core words in these verses that had been identified and categorized earlier were practiced interactively. With this syntactical basis, verses were analyzed and paraphrased. The verses were chanted to increase textual familiarity. Participants saw "texts in action" with the demonstration of the āsanas as per the text. *Part B.* 79 participants offered their input through structured feedback forms containing qualitative (descriptive) and quantitative responses. Apart from encouraging response to this workshop, analysis of the descriptive responses offers useful insights and themes for further exploration regarding utilizing Saṃskṛta in Yoga textual teaching. The paper concludes that, in an era where knowledge of Saṃskṛta and the study of Yoga texts seem like islands apart, experiments such as this should be attempted to bridge this gap and also to arrive at methods leading to an immersive teaching learning experience of Yoga texts.

Keywords: Yoga Texts, Teaching, Methodology, Saṃskṛta (Sanskrit).

Structure of the Paper

This paper has four parts:

1. The Desideratum
2. The Experiment
3. The Outcome
4. Discussion and Conclusion

1. The Desideratum

Yoga is taught and practiced worldwide. It is a Śāstra. Ancient and fundamental texts of Yoga, like the *Yogasūtras* and the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*, are written in the Saṃskṛta language. But it can be seen that in the teaching and learning processes of Yoga texts, Saṃskṛta is not adopted across the globe. It is not the case even in its birthplace, India. The teaching of Yoga texts everywhere is in English or various other languages. This is the situation, despite everyone being aware of the limitations of translations. There is an expression even – "lost in translation." On the other hand, reading the texts in Saṃskṛta gives access to the originals. It also empowers a person to consult the source and insulates him from being misled. Hence there is a natural need to introduce the study of Saṃskṛta during yoga studies.

Three examples of the limitations of translations

Three examples are presented below to show the limitations or loss of meaning due to excessive use of translations of in place of Samskrta originals.

✳ *Example 1.*

Vīrabhadrāsana is a popular *āsana*. It is translated as "warrior pose." A simple search in the worldwide web will reveal it. The following comment of Sri Krishnamacharya on Vīrabhadrāsana is to be noted in this context:

> As you do the Vīrabhadrāsana *vinyāsa*, keep in mind that you are in the service of the Divine. As you extend your arms and look down, bring the feeling that you are above the world and its various concerns but close to the Divine. (Mohan & Mohan 2018).

On this A. G. Mohan comments that

> This is an example of an āsana name that suggests the psychological feeling that can accompany the practice. Virabhadrasana is an assertive stance that can produce an energetic feeling. While doing the warrior vinyasa, Krishnamacharya recommended that we bring into our mind a feeling like that of a bird. This is particularly appropriate in the devotional tradition of Vaishnavism, in which a principal devotee of the Divine, in the form of Lord Narayana, is depicted as an eagle named Garuda. The eagle Garuda also functions as a vehicle, bearing Narayana on his back. (Mohan & Mohan 2018).

Such import might be lost by mere usage of the translation, "warrior pose." Further, in certain societies, words associated with war and warrior bring to mind not so pleasant memories. On the other hand, if the āsana's name is retained as Vīrabhadrāsana, there is every possibility of an enquiry into the meaning and the associated intricate aspects of Yoga practice.

✴ *Example 2.*

In the same lines, Bhagīrathāsana is translated as "tree pose." Let us consider the view of Sri Krishnamacharya on Bhagīrathāsana:

> When doing Bhagirathāsana, keep the great Bhagiratha in mind. Bring tireless perseverance and steadfast concentration to your practice. (Mohan & Mohan 2018).

On this statement we find the following comment from AG Mohan:

> Bhagiratāsana is another. It is widely known as "tree pose" (vrkshāsana). My guru, the legendary Yogi of the last century, T. Krishnamacharya used to call the tree pose Bhagiratāsana. Bhagirata was supposed to have meditated for several years standing on one leg!" He further adds "Some āsanas are named after ancient sages or derive from mythology, with uplifting stories behind them. (Mohan & Mohan 2018).

Such "uplifting" ideas are missed out from merely translating Bhagīrathāsana as "tree pose."

✴ *Example 3.*

Is Hanumadāsana the "monkey pose?" This is the popular translation of this āsana. From a yogic perspective, it is a commonplace knowledge that monkey

stands for fickleness. Expressions such as हृदयकपिमत्यन्तचपलम् "The mind which is extremely fickle, like a monkey …" (शिवानन्दलहरी 2.20) are very well known. In direct contrast to this, *āsana* is defined in the *Yogasūtras* as being स्थिरसुखमासनम् (2.46) - "firm and comfortable." Moreover, the *Jyotsnā* commentary on the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* states, आसनेन रजो हन्ति (1.17) – "the āsana mitigates *rajas*." By translating this as "monkey pose," what kind of *cittavṛtti*s are intended to be kindled in the mind of the practitioner?

If, as these examples indicate, by merely retaining Saṃskṛta terms one might get such insights on the practices, then one can imagine the effects of introducing the learning of Saṃskṛta in the context of understanding Yoga texts.

Difficulties in Integrating Saṃskṛta with Yoga

When an attempt is made to integrate Saṃskṛta with Yoga there might be some practical difficulties. Yoga training with a reasonable level of depth requires a solid investment of time and effort. Saṃskṛta also requires time and effort. In such a situation a question may arise as to how to surmount this difficult proposition of teaching Yoga through Saṃskṛta.

While it is true that nothing worthwhile is achieved without putting in the effort that is required, attempts should also be made to facilitate the coming together of Yoga and Saṃskṛta. Attempts should aim at creating interest and evoking respect regarding the depth of understanding that one can gain by learning Saṃskṛta in the context of Yoga. It is to address this desideratum that the experiment to teach a Yoga text through Saṃskṛta was attempted.

2. The Experiment

Objectives of the Teaching Experiment

Keeping in view the above desideratum, a teaching experiment was envisaged with the following objectives:

* ✳ Yoga texts are to be taught through Saṃskṛta,

* ✳ Without getting into the grammatical nitty gritty,

* ✳ In a time-bound and interesting manner,

* ✳ Without diluting the content,

* ✳ Even for the uninitiated in the language.

Details of the Teaching Experiment

The following are the details of the experiment. It was conducted in the form of a workshop:

* ∗ It was titled "Textual Immersion: An International Workshop on *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*, with Focus on Āsanas."

* ∗ The dates of the workshop were August 4-5, 2017 (9.30 am - 4.30 pm).

* ∗ It was held at the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, Chennai.

* ∗ Ninety-seven participants registered for the workshop (Indian and international)[1]

Stages of the Experiment

The teaching experiment had three stages: a) Planning, b) Preparation, and c) Execution.

Planning

Thirty-four verses of the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* that describe the procedure of performing āsanas (1.17-54) were selected for this workshop. Other verses from this chapter that detail prerequisites and other such general matters were not considered in order to maintain homogeneity of the subject matter for the workshop). The fifteen āsanas covered in this workshop are: Svastikāsana, Gomukhāsana, Vīrāsana, Kūrmāsana, Kukkuṭāsana, Uttānakūrmakāsana, Dhanurāsana, Matsyendrāsana, Paścimatānāsana, Mayūrāsana, Śavāsana, four variations of Siddhāsana, three variations of Padmāsana, Siṃhāsana, and Bhadrāsana.

The number of Sessions and the nature of the handouts were also planned. Apart from the introduction, valediction, and two yoga practice sessions (one per day), 8 textual immersion sessions were planned.

Preparation

The teaching materials, prepared in the form of a structured handout, had two stages.

Stage one was the *Padasaṅgraha* (collection of words), in which the words from the target verses were analyzed and segregated. There were three major types of terms in connection with āsana practice. The words connected to a) the limbs of the body, b) the sides and directions, and c) the words indicating actions.

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[1] It was also web-streamed. See: *https://goo.gl/cvDLAq*.

Table 1. The Padasaṅgraha table from the handout.

1A) **Upper part of the Body**		sīvanī	"perineum"		
bhrūḥ	"eye brow"	meḍhra	"genital region"	nirudhya	"pressing"
rājadanta	"front teeth"	guda	"anus"	niveśya	"inserting"
nāsāgra	"tip of nose"	vṛṣaṇa	"scrotum"	sambadhya	"connecting"
cibuka	"chin"	pṛṣṭha	"back"	gṛhītvā / pragṛhya	"holding"
kandhara	"neck"	**2) Directions/sides**		prasārya / samprasārya	"spreading"
vakṣaḥ / hṛdaya	"chest"	dakṣiṇa / dakṣa	"right"	avaṣṭabhya	"supporting"
dos	"shoulder"	savya / vāma	"left"	dhṛtvā	"holding"
kūrpara	"elbow"	antaḥ	"inside"	uttambhya	"locking"
kara / hasta / pāṇi	"hand"	bahiḥ	"outside"	utthāpya	"arousing"
aṅguli	"finger"	antare	"in between"	baddhvā	"assuming, binding"
aṅguṣṭha	"thumb"	upari	"above"	**3B) While**	
kaṭi	"waist"	pārśva	"side"	protsārayan	"pulling up"
1B) Lower part of the Body		uttāna	"on the back / facing upwards"	nyañcan	"pulling down"
pāda / caraṇa / aṅghri	"foot"			**3C) Should**	
pādāṅguṣṭha	"big toe"	**3) Actions**		niyojayet	}"place"
pādatala	"sole"	**3A) After**		vinyaset	
gulpha	"ankle"	kṛtvā	"doing"	bhavet	"be"
pārṣṇi	"heel"	nikṣipya		kuryāt	"do"
jānu	"knee"	vinyasya	}"placing"	vaset	"stay"
jaṅgha	"shin region"	saṃsthāpya		paśyet / ālokayet	"see"
ūru−thigh		nidhāya			

Let us consider an example from the text: वामोरूपरि दक्षिणं च चरणं संस्थाप्य … (1.44). In this portion of the verse,

* *Ūru* and *caraṇa* are words connected to the limbs of the body.

* *Vāma* and *dakṣiṇa* indicate the sides.

* *Saṃsthāpya* is a word associated with actions.

All such words from the earmarked portion were collected, and they were organized into a table (Table 1). Their meanings in English were also given. With regard to the words connected with the actions , the usage of the words with *ktvā*, *śatṛ*, and the *vidhiliṅ* forms were noted in the selected portion of the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*, and they were categorized separately but without mentioning their grammatical aspects or nomenclature in the handout. This was done to avoid jargon. As can be noted from the table above, the sub-headings of these action-indicating words simply read "After" (*ktvā*), "While" (*śatṛ*) and "Should" (*vidhiliṅ*).

The second stage of preparation was *anvaya-racanā* – paraphrasing – of all the 34 target *ślokas*, which were prepared with blank spaces opposite them so that the students can fill up the meanings during the interactive sessions.

Execution

It was mentioned that this textual immersion spanned eight sessions. These eight sessions were further divided into two parts, *pada-paricaya* (introducing the words) and the study of the verses of the text.

Pada-paricaya: In the two *pada-paricaya* sessions, the *padasaṅgraha* portion of the handout was extensively used. The two sessions were aimed at acquainting the participants with the terms in the target verses. It was done in an interactive manner. The words in the list were pronounced. The participants were made to recite the words and touch their own limbs to connect the Saṃskṛta word with meaning. Various word-based games were also used to joyfully introduce the terms. The translations of the terms were also given to each of the terms thus interactively learnt to facilitate future reference.

Study of the verses of the text: The textual study sessions were conducted in five parts:

1. *Reciting and repeating the verses.*
   The teacher recited the verses, part by part and gradually the full verses. The students followed and repeated. By this the students became acquainted with the verses.

2. *Splitting the words of the verses.*
   The teacher introduced the individual words from the verses by splitting the conjunctions. The students practiced splitting the words with the teacher. This facilitated the recognition of the words that they already learnt under *pada-paricaya* activity.

3. *Anvaya (paraphrased text).*
   This already existed in the handout. The students were now asked to fill up the meanings of the terms that they know based on their *pada-paricaya* practice and also with the help of the *padasaṅgraha* which formed part of the handout with the English translations. Wherever new words existed the faculty facilitated.

4. *Inputs from the commentary.*
   The teacher presented insights and inputs from the Jyotsnā commentary of the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā*. This helped the students to grasp the technical and intricate details regarding yogic practices.

5. *Demonstration segment (text in action).*
   An adept yoga practitioner was at hand to do the āsana. While the āsana was being performed the participants recited the verse bit by bit as if they were giving instructions in Saṃskṛta to the āsana demonstrator. This really evoked a lot of enthusiasm in the participants that they were able to give instructions already in Saṃskṛta.

For example, in the case of Paścimatanāsana, the corresponding verse from the *Haṭhayogapradīpikā* (1.28: प्रसार्य पादौ भुवि दण्डरूपौ) was chanted when as the practitioner spread his leg straight. Then दोर्भ्यां पदाग्रद्वितयं गृहीत्वा – when this was chanted the demonstrator held the big toes.

Thus most of the thirty-four verses that were targeted for this workshop was covered in these five steps, which saw enthusiastic participation. In this process, there was a minimum intervention of other language and maximum participation from the participants with facilitation from the faculty.

3. Outcome

An attempt was made to understand the impact of the experiment through a feedback form. From the ninety-seven participants, seventy-nine completed feedback forms were obtained. Responses to three questions from the feedback form are presented and analyzed hereunder. The three questions were given to

elicit objective type and descriptive responses about the workshop. Other questions were about the infrastructure, etc.

Questions for objective type response:

1) The relevance of the attempt (This had three options: Highly relevant, Relevant, Not at all relevant)

2) Would you like to attend such a workshop in future? (This had three options: Definitely, Possibly, Not likely)

Questions for descriptive response:

How has this workshop been useful to you?

Objective Type Response

Regarding the objective type response from the objective question, the following is the result:

1. **On the relevance of the workshop of the 79 responses:** 59 stated this to be highly relevant and twenty as relevant. It is to be noted that none has stated this attempt to teach Yoga through Saṃskṛta as irrelevant.
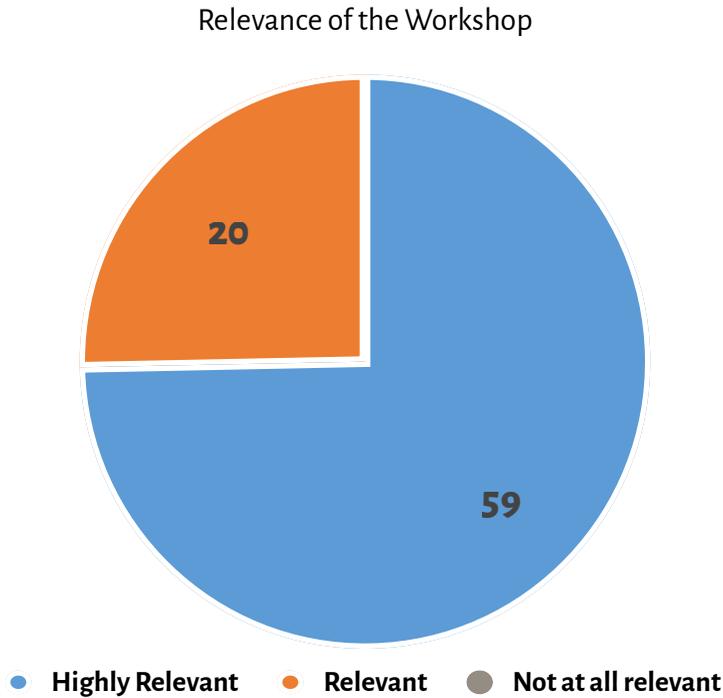
Relevance of the Workshop

Figure 1. Responses on the relevance of the workshop.

2. **The responses to the second question:** Of the 79 responses, 56 stated that they would definitely like to attend such workshops in the future, while 21 have stated that it is likely that they would attend. This question was not responded to by two respondents. No one said it is not likely that they attend such a workshop in future.

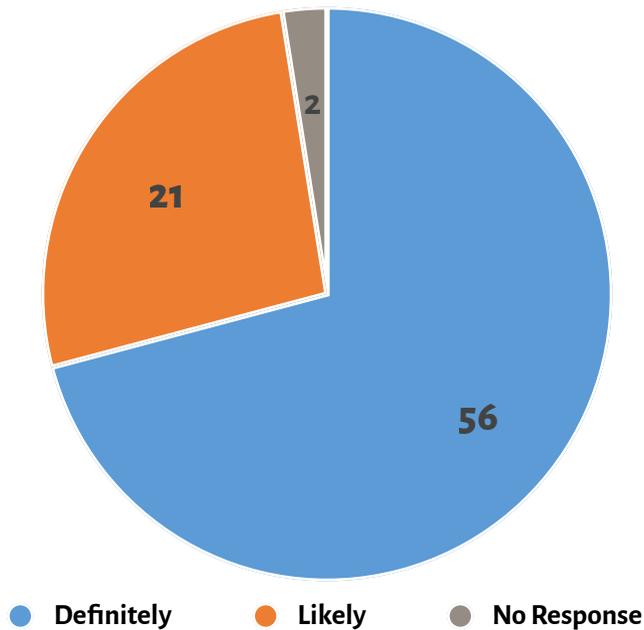"Would you like to attend such a workshop in the future ?"

Figure 2. The future likeliness of the participants in attending such a workshop.

This response goes to show that the participants perceive that there is a good future for such an attempt.

Descriptive Response (Q.: "How has this workshop been useful to you?")

The following is the analysis of the data on descriptive feedback: Of the 79 filled-in feedback forms, four did not have any data on this question. 44 respondents had simply given general comments and words of encouragement, like "Really very useful" (63),[2] "Very useful" (9, 18, 23), "Useful" (72), "Good and informative" (26), "Ex-

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[2] The numbers in paranthesis indicate the serial numbers of the respondent in the database.

cellent work" (34), etc. This may be taken as an indication of the enthusiasm generated by the workshop. Only 32 gave specific responses that gave qualitative data to analyze. These responses can be organized in three sets:

＊ Twenty two had written about learner outcomes (*adhyetṛ[ā]*)

＊ Five had written about methodology and tools (*adhyayana*)

＊ Five others had written about the content/text (*adhyeya*)

The *tripuṭī* of learning – *adhyetā*, *adhyayanam*, and *adhyeya* – were covered by these 32 responses. This was just like the *dhyātṛ* (meditator), *dhyānam*, (process of meditation), and *dhyeyam* (object of meditation).

Adhyetṛ(ā) (learner) related or the outcomes:

The 22 learner outcomes can be organized in six sets:

1. Four respondents had expressed that **their confidence increased** in the study of Saṃskṛta texts. (7, 14, 19, 50)

2. Four other respondents had stated that now **their approach to the text** has become easy. (1, 3, 76, 47)

3. Six respondents stated that **their interest has been kindled to study more** such texts. (8, 12, 58, 56, 65, 74)

4. Five respondents had stated that **they felt empowered** that now they have access to the original text. (20, 25, 27, 43, 66)

5. Two respondents stated that the sessions were **enjoyable**. (28, 31)

6. One respondent stated that it gave **positive energy**. (37)

Feedback on methodology / adhyayana (process of learning):

The five responses on this include:

1. **Immersive / well-thought-out** approach / **research based strategic teaching and learning** procedures. (41, 15, 38)

2. A research based approach which helped the participants **decode the meaning of the verses themselves**. (16)

3. Handout ... well designed and presented. (68)

Feedback on textual knowledge – adhyeya (the subject being learnt) –

The five responses in this regard were as follows:

1. **Practical** information was gained. (69)

2. Helped understanding **intricacies** of āsanas. (6)

3. Got more **insights** about āsanas and their benefits. (17)

4. **Correct placement** of limbs / **precision** of details. (36, 33)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

From the above objective type and descriptive feedback, it is apparent that this teaching experiment has been received favourably. It has increased confidence levels in the learners and also instilled a sense of joy in learning. The efficacy of the methodology has been noted and the text has been made more accessible. But the above experiment has its limitations. Just one portion of the *Haṭhayoga-pradīpikā* was covered: the āsanas. Portions on *prāṇāyāma*,[3] *mudrā*s and *nādānu-sandhāna* were not covered. This experiment has to be tried with other portions of the text and difficulties are to be identified. Based on that, the methodology has to be refined. And just one type of text was tested. Other types of Yoga texts should also be taken up especially the *Yogasūtra*s, which are in the form of short statements. A methodology to read the Saṃskṛta commentaries should also be attempted.

However, In the context of this experiment, the following observation of Prof. Ashok Aklujkar is worth noting-

> Because of poor teaching materials and procedures, it has come to be believed by some that Sanskrit is a difficult language to learn. Actually, Sanskrit is not more difficult than any other language that has been a vehicle of advanced culture. If proper methods are followed, Sanskrit is, in fact, an easy language to interpret because of its perspicuity, the regularity of its fundamental features (agreement of noun and adjective,

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[3] At the time of completing the article, the workshop on *prāṇāyāma* was also conducted at Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram (February 16-17, 2019), following the same methodology with 91 participants from India and abroad. The *prāṇāyāma* workshop also received the same encouraging response.

agreement of subject and verb, case usage) and the systematization it has received at the hands of gifted grammarians. (Aklujkar 2005: *xviii*).

It is because of these "poor teaching materials and procedures" that prejudices have been created in the minds of Yoga teachers and practitioners with regard to Saṃskṛta. Probably due to exposure to unsystematic teaching methods adopted in teaching Saṃskṛta, some Yoga teachers even go to the extent to state that "Practicing the true aim of yoga — to calm and control the mind — does not require a knowledge of Sanskrit" (Mohan & Mohan 2018).

The fact that experiments such as the one discussed seem to be the way ahead is reflected from the following quote:

> Samskritam should not be forced down the throat of each and everyone who wants to learn Yoga. However, prejudice or bias should not be created against Samskritam. Gradually, teaching methods should be evolved in the field of Yoga that is Samskrita friendly, for the benefit of the practitioner to guide him towards the true aim of yoga. (Janih 2018).

Thus, if such teaching experiments are conducted more often with various kinds of audience and texts of Yoga, then a well-rounded methodology can be developed to teach Yoga texts which will help overcome the current unfortunate divorce between Saṃskṛta and Yoga and lead towards immersive comprehension of Yoga texts.

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