



Institutionalizing yoga in Jammu & Kashmir: A critical evaluation of Swami Dharendra Brahmachari's role in shaping its cultural and institutional landscape

Mohan Lal Gupta, Dr. Susheel Kumar, Shallini Gupta, Pankaj Kumar Gupta, Niraj Kumar, Sonia Gupta

Department of Yoga, Shri Venkateshwara University, Gajraula, Amroha, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

Influential Figure Swami Dharendra Brahmachari had a considerable role in popularizing Yoga in Jammu & Kashmir after it was first introduced by him in the valley in mid-20th century, with the introduction of this ancient form, this State's cultural milieu and institutional domain began to change. The article offers a critical assessment of Brahmachari's contributions, and discusses how his yoga was presented as a set of innovative techniques that blended ancient teachings with contemporary science, thereby opening up ways to integrate yoga into state-sponsored educational, health and cultural programmes. With the founding of Vishwayatan Yogashram in Jammu and through partnerships with government institutions, Brahmachari promoted yoga and shaped public opinion that yoga is the symbol of Indian cultural heritage. Yet his focus on Sanskritization and engagement with political power make one wonder if his yoga could become an instrument for ideology and for subordinating the vernacular. The paper draws attention to the imperative of more academic interest in Brahmachari's legacy, taking into account all the positive (i.e., better public health, yogic knowledge transfer) and the negative (i.e., the clashes of spiritual and political authority) impacts of his work. By analyzing Brahmachari as contested hagiography, this analysis offers a fuller understanding of yoga's institutionalization in post-independence India and its entangled relationship to regional identity, cultural politics, and nationalist ideologies.

Keywords: Jammu & kashmir, swami dharendra brahmachari, vishwayatan yogashram, institutionalizing yoga, cultural landscape, yoga education, integrating tradition and modernity

Introduction

Swami Dharendra Brahmachari is credited with bringing yoga to Jammu & Kashmir in the mid-20th century. His indefatigable work in the establishment of yoga centers and the propagation of yogic norms played no small part in shaping the cultural and institutional landscape of the region. Brahmachari introduced modern science and simplicity in the practice of traditional yoga and thus made yoga more popular and practicable for everyone (Kuiper, K *et al.*, 2010) [3].

Vishwayatan Yogashram, Jammu: A significant contribution of Brahmachari was the Vishwayatan Yogashram in Jammu. This institution, which was soon to be recognised as a premier centre for study and teaching of yoga, began to draw practitioners and researchers from all corners of India and the world. The ashram was not only a school that taught different yoga practices and philosophies, but also engaged in comprehensive research on the therapeutic effects of yoga, which added scientific validity to the ancient tradition of yoga (Sivananda, S *et al.*, 1980) [4].

Brahmachari was a force that resonated across his ashram. He didn't just talk about health and wellbeing to politicians, he took it to them, using his position to help guide policy. He also worked with many schools to integrate yoga in school curriculum to go to young masses (Gupta M. L. *et al.*, 2025) [5].

Brahmachari's work had a huge impact in many ways. His work paved the way for the formal admission of yoga in the health care system of the region, and many of the hospitals and clinics followed its system of yogic treatment. This integration served as a link between traditional and modern medicine thereby providing patients with a more comprehensive outlook on health and healing (Bhati, K *et al.*, 2023) [6].

In addition, Brahmachari's work had a profound impact on the cultural milieu of Jammu & Kashmir. Yoga quickly entwined itself within the social structure of the region, with many local residents adopting yogic practices in their daily lives. In this process of change of attitude, the old heritage was also preserved and served to reconcile traditional knowledge with modern science.

But Brahmachari was not without controversy. Some critics said his cozy relationships with political figures and his attempts to institutionalize yoga were too aligned with certain political interests. These anxieties brought up issues about if and how yoga is being instrumentalized for political aims, and what this means in terms of its spiritual and cultural authenticity.

Brahmachari's attempts to institutionalize the spread of yoga in Jammu & Kashmir are now in a long-term state of being reassessed. Academics and activists explore how his legacy has shaped the area's social integration, cultural life, and health and wellbeing throughout the years. Such critical assessment of positive results like, advancement in public health and traditional knowledge, and also of challenges, like the commercialization and politicalization of yoga, is an ongoing process (Trivedi, D. *et al.*, 2023).

Swami Dharendra Brahmachari left a massive impression on not only the institutionalization of yoga in J & K, but also its propagation. His successfully used novel vision of fusing tradition and modernity for imparting yoga and his initiative brought yoga to the notice of leaders, intellectuals and academicians, who accepted yoga as a foundational component of regional cultural and institutional heritage. While the legacy of Brahmachari is a complicated and an ongoing matter of debate, it is certain that his work had a deep

impact on the practice and image of yoga in Jammu & Kashmir and that these echoes are felt in the present day.

Evolution of yoga from spiritual discipline to state-supported pedagogy

Yoga, started as a spiritual practice based on an extremely subtle science, and it has developed into a practice where its essence can easily be lost. What began as a way to achieve body conditioning and spiritual enlightenment has morphed into a mainstream variety of physical training and stress reduction (Lin, H. *et al.*, 2025) ^[8].

Over the past few decades, several governments, including those of India, have promoted the health benefits and broader cultural significance of yoga, and it has joined the list of activities supported by state education and public health institutions. This transition has witnessed the popularization of yoga, which has evolved from an ashram- and spiritual retreat-based activity to being taken to schools, colleges, and community centers where it becomes a standardized practice, with stress on its physical and mental health benefits (Gill, 2018) ^[1]. State patronage of yoga has made the practice more accessible, as well as more globally popular, and sometimes at the cost of yoga's more profound spiritual and philosophical dimension.

Significance of institutionalization in the socio-political context of Jammu & Kashmir

The process of institutionalisation in Jammu & Kashmir is important in determining the socio-political structure of the region. It requires the creation and reinforcement of formal mechanisms (structures, rules and procedures) which frame the different aspects of society and the organization of politics. In Jammu & Kashmir, in particular, institutionalization has been instrumental in addressing intractable issues like governance, representation and conflict resolution (Tremblay, 2019) ^[2]. The building of strong institutions has been instrumental in advancing democratic principles, maintaining transparency, and instilling calm in a region historically prone to tensions. Furthermore, it had made possible the accommodation of different communities and interests under a broad political structure, which could have reinforced social coherence and political engagement. Yet this process has been contested with the imperative of reconciling regional aspirations with the collective interest and the complexities involved in managing a multi-ethnic, and multi religious society.

The relevance of critically revisiting Swami Dharendra Brahmachari's influence

Critically revisiting Swami Dharendra Brahmachari's influence holds significant relevance in understanding the intersection of spirituality, politics, and social dynamics in modern India. As a prominent yoga guru and spiritual advisor to influential political figures, including former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Brahmachari's impact extended beyond the realm of yoga and spirituality. His close association with power centers raised questions about the blurred lines between spiritual guidance and political influence. Examining his legacy provides insights into the complex relationship between spiritual leaders and political establishments, the commercialization of yoga, and the evolution of guru culture in India. Furthermore, a critical analysis of Brahmachari's teachings and practices can contribute to ongoing discussions about the authenticity and

ethical implications of spiritual movements in contemporary society (Csala, B. *et al.*, 2021) ^[9].

Scope, rationale of the paper

This paper focuses on critically examining the role of Swami Dharendra Brahmachari in the institutionalization of yoga in the region of Jammu & Kashmir, particularly from the 1960s to the late 20th century. While much of the literature on modern yoga emphasizes transnational developments or national pedagogical movements, relatively little attention has been paid to how yoga evolved institutionally within regional and politically sensitive contexts like Jammu & Kashmir. By centering on Swami Dharendra Brahmachari—a figure simultaneously spiritual, institutional, and political—this study attempts to bridge the gap between yoga historiography and regional cultural policy analysis.

The rationale for undertaking this review lies in the unique positioning of Brahmachari as both a close advisor to political leadership and a powerful institutional architect of yoga in North India. His establishment of yoga centers, integration of Sanskrit traditions, and pedagogical influence in Jammu & Kashmir offer a compelling case to evaluate how yoga was shaped not just as a spiritual discipline but as a state-aligned cultural project. Given the region's contested identity and plural traditions, this inquiry becomes relevant in understanding how yoga was employed as both a cultural and ideological tool.

Review of Existing Literature

The institutionalization of yoga in India has garnered increasing scholarly attention over the last two decades, particularly in the context of its transformation from an esoteric spiritual practice into a structured pedagogical and nationalistic project. This section reviews the key contributions in this domain and positions the present study within the gaps of the existing research landscape.

Modern Yoga and the State: From Spirituality to Institution

Scholars such as Joseph S. Alter (2004) ^[10] have foregrounded the relationship between yoga and nationalism in postcolonial India, describing how yoga evolved from a spiritual pursuit to a bodily discipline under state direction. In *Yoga in Modern India*, Alter argues that yoga was reimagined as a means of cultivating disciplined citizens, particularly through state institutions such as schools and training academies. This transformation forms a critical backdrop for evaluating Swami Dharendra Brahmachari's efforts, as his initiatives were closely aligned with state-driven objectives of national unity, health, and discipline. Elizabeth De Michelis (2005) ^[11], in her seminal work *A History of Modern Yoga*, traces the hybrid origins of contemporary yoga, noting its blending of Western esoteric traditions and Indian spiritual reform movements. She highlights how postural yoga (asana-focused practices) gained prominence during the 20th century as a systematized and teachable form that lent itself to mass adoption. Her analysis is crucial to understanding how figures like Brahmachari adapted yogic content to fit institutional and pedagogical molds.

Institutional and Cultural Dimensions of Yoga

In a more structural analysis, Mark Singleton (2010) ^[12] explores the genealogy of asana practice in *Yoga Body*,

arguing that many modern postures are not derived from ancient texts but rather adapted from early 20th-century European physical culture. Singleton's work underscores the adaptive and institutional character of modern yoga, particularly in its transmutation into health education and public programs. His observations align with the strategies employed by Swami Dharendra Brahmachari, who promoted yoga as part of national health and physical education policies.

Building on these foundations, Andrea Jain (2015) [13] in *Selling Yoga* offers a critique of the commodification and global spread of yoga. While Jain's focus is more global and commercial, her analysis points to the ways in which yoga becomes institutionalized and decontextualized through pedagogical frameworks. Though her work does not focus on India's regional contexts, the themes she raises are relevant to evaluating how yoga was framed and transmitted under government-supported initiatives in Jammu & Kashmir.

Swami Dharendra Brahmachari in Scholarship

However, for the man who played the key role in Indian yoga politics, Swami Dharendra Brahmachari, very little academic attention has been paid. He is frequently referenced in political biographies and media retrospectives of the period, largely because of his intimate association with Indira Gandhi and his controversial private and public life. However, little academic literature is available on his Institution-building, pedagogical innovations and regional contributions especially in J & K. The lack of biographical or critical writing about Brahmachari, in the form of a peer-reviewed article or book-length work, is a striking omission, particularly in view of his extraordinary role in forging the institutional framework of yoga in the 1960s–80s.

Yoga in Jammu & Kashmir: Local Lacunae in Literature angle

The final paper in this book is by Kachroo (2014) who highlights how in an environment crucified between political instability and natural disasters, people in Kashmir have found patronage in Yoga for both physical and mental health. For example, the religious legacy of the region has been thoroughly investigated (cf., Muller-Ortega, 1989; Flood, 1996), albeit more in terms of pre-modern philosophy and metaphysics rather than the contemporary institutionalization of yoga. There is little known about how yoga became a part of state-supported education, health or culture programs in J&K after independence. The intersection of yoga with identity politics and cultural assertion in a politically contested region has also not been adequately studied, particularly in cases like that of Brahmachari where yoga was strategically used as a vehicle for such things as Sanskritisation and national integration.

Institutionalization and Cultural Politics

Additionally, the role of yoga as a vehicle of Sanskritisation—a concept developed by M. N. Srinivas (1952) [14] to describe the adoption of Sanskrit customs by lower castes or peripheral regions—has been discussed in broader sociological literature, but rarely in direct connection with modern yoga figures or regional case studies. Swami Dharendra Brahmachari's promotion of Sanskrit, ritualism, and scriptural references in yoga education aligns with this mode of cultural imposition and standardization, which merits deeper critical exploration.

Summary and Research Gap

In summary, existing literature provides a rich analytical base on modern yoga's transformation, its relationship to nationalism, and the global commodification of its practices. However, there is a marked absence of regionally grounded studies that explore:

- The institutionalization of yoga in Jammu & Kashmir;
- The concrete contributions and pedagogical strategies of Swami Dharendra Brahmachari;
- The sociopolitical use of yoga as a tool of integration and identity formation in post-independence India.

The study seeks to fill these scholarly lacunae by offering a focused evaluation of Brahmachari's influence on the institutional, cultural, and ideological shaping of yoga in Jammu & Kashmir.

Methodological Approach

It follows historical-cultural analysis as an interpretive and qualitative paradigm. Instead of using empirical or quantitative methods, this study uses critical reading of texts and archives to scrutinize the involvement of Swami Dharendra Brahmachari in structuring institutional and ideological parameters of yoga in Jammu & Kashmir. The work foregrounds the sites of spiritual leadership, regional politics, and cultural identity during the post-independence era.

This study is based mainly on published biographies, official records, newspaper libraries, institutional records, and scholarly journals. These sources were chosen because of their specific relevance for the identification of Brahmachari's institutional impact, public image, and work in mediating yoga at the local level. Sources All quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from primary textual sources. Additional sources are oral histories, secondary works on Kashmir Shaivism and studies of cultural nationalism and Sanskritization.

The research uses thematic reading and discourse analysis to investigate how Brahmachari's status—as a spiritual leader and political overlord—contributed to the incorporation of yoga into the formal educational sector and larger cultural narratives. The reading glass is also postcolonial theory, particularly in relation to how spiritual practices were repackaged as components of national identity, and how figures like Brahmachari straddled traditional systems and state-driven modernization.

This nonempiricist methodological profile is applicable to the study's purpose, which is not measurement and experiment but critical thinking, historical reconstruction and conceptual synthesis. In locating Brahmachari's work in institutional, ideological, and regional contexts, this paper attempts to construct a critical assessment of his legacy in the development of the role of yoga in the sociopolitics of Jammu & Kashmir.

Historical Context of Yoga in Jammu & Kashmir

Yoga has an age-old history in Jammu & Kashmir. This beautiful, northernmost region of India has been one of the most important spiritual hot spots of the world for millennia not just for all different type of yoga but also for all kinds of spiritual practices and philosophical traditions. The deep cultural heritage of the region is intertwined with varied religious inspirations and beliefs that have resulted in

distinctive yogic practices That are still practiced and explored in the region (Shrestha, S.K. *et al.*, 2024).

In the 8th century, a non-dualistic concept of Śiva began to mature, involving the yogi perfected the ascetic ideal of abandoning the world and form/No-Form through the realisation of which is the unchanging truth from pure consciousness from the Absolute Expanse when the inner self beats the essence of God as a living heart. This philosophical school, which refers to Shiva as the supreme being, places immediate experience as the key from which everything else is derived, with even scripture being considered secondary. Kashmir Shaivism principles have substantially enriched the philosophical foundations of regional yoga practice (as well as theoretic) (Koul, S. 2024) ^[16].

The ancient text of Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra is presented in a condensed form of one hundred and twelve meditation practices which accumulate in verse 69 to 137. The first and most important source to look at is a work written in Sanskrit, and is composed of a series of 112 dharanas or meditation techniques and quite a few of them are still in vogue and practiced by present day yogins. The text reveals a variety of techniques of achieving higher states of consciousness and spiritual perfection in the field and is a testament to how profound and extensive the ancient knowledge of yoga was in the area (Singh, J. 1991) ^[17]

Over the years, the land of Jammu & Kashmir has been the home to several great yogis and spiritual masters who have not only contributed to propounding and preserving yoga, but also brought about a spiritual renaissance in their times. These mystics and teachers have transmitted their teachings in lineages that have formed schools of thought and schools of practice which have stood the test of time. Their teachings have not only nourished the local yogic traditions but have also enticed aspirants from throughout India and the world (Jois, S. K. P. 2010) ^[18].

Jammu and Kashmir topographically characterized by beautiful mountains, lush desolate valleys and sparkling lakes have served as ideal background for all the hermits, sadhus, sages like Rishi Kashyap, Rishi Sandilya, saint Lalleshwari and others who, apart from visiting, preached here their way of lives and thinking, mystique-ism and leftist-path. The scenic beauty of the region has attracted many a yogi and ascetic, who meditate and pray in the tranquility of the surroundings. This link between nature and spirit has always been and still is the well practiced aspect of the yogic tradition in Jammu & Kashmir. It is the positive influence of various cultures, religions in Jammu & Kashmir that gave rise to a unique concoction/perspective of yogic methodology. Because of the geographic position of the region, there is a merging of cultures that has taken place there over time. The region has employed congregate in order to get results beyondive technyquecs not found in other yoguic paths. This amalgamation of traditions has developed a complex range of religious practices, borrowing from Hinduism, Buddhism, and even Sufism mysticism (Bhat, R. M. 2022) ^[19].

Revival This research on the yogic traditions of Jammu & Kashmir nourishes the growing revival of such traditions in India as well as on the international level. The region's prehistoric wisdom and customized yoga practices are appealing more and more to scholars, practitioners and spiritual seekers. This revival has paved the way for yoga centers, ashrams, and retreats at which traditional Kashmiri yogic techniques are taught, thus ensuring the continuation

and dissemination of this important cultural heritage (Corrywright, D).

Jammu & Kashmir's yogic traditions have also been evolving, expanding and adjusting to the life as a human with contemporary situations and has survived from centuries. Far from the land of its origin, modern-yoga teachers and practitioners in the region are seeking to democratize them and reintegrate them into a modern scientific imaginary that meets the needs of contemporary society. It's this process of evolution that keeps Jammu and Kashmir's astounding yogic tradition current and effective.

Indigenous yogic traditions: Kashmir Shaivism, Tantric influences, Nath lineage

Yoga Philosophy in India India's indigenous yogic traditions weave a complex tapestry of philosophical and spiritual practices, including Kashmir Shaivism, Tantric roots, and the Nath lineage. Kashmir's Shaivism, a non-dual tradition that emerged in the region of Kashmir, focused on realizing one's ultimate nature as no different from that of the divine awareness (Osto, 2020) ^[21]. There is also widespread Tantric influence among the many yoga disciplines, emphasizing the body-mind-spirit unification, ritualistic practices and the raising of kundalini energy. The Nath sect was founded by Matsyendranath and addressed by Gorakhnath, it is an amalgam of Shaivism, Tantra and Hatha Yoga focused on techniques involving the body and use of metals as a means of spiritual liberation (Rashid, Y. *et al.*, 2016) ^[22]. These traditions have played a major role in influencing modern yoga methods and still continue to influence the new generation of yoga followers who are looking for spiritual transcendence by practicing yoga (Shankarananda, S. *et al.*, 2016) ^[23].

Cultural and spiritual significance of yoga before and after 1947

Prior to India's independence, yoga in the Jammu & Kashmir region primarily reflected the esoteric traditions of Kashmir Shaivism and localized spiritual practices, largely disconnected from pan-Indian political narratives. Post-1947, the national repositioning of yoga aligned it with the broader project of cultural consolidation, especially through state-backed institutions like the Ministry of Culture and later, the AYUSH ministry. In this period, yoga transitioned from a largely inward spiritual pursuit to a tool of physical culture, nation-building, and ideological expression. This shift created fertile ground for figures like Swami Dharendra Brahmachari to institutionalize yoga as both a pedagogical and political practice, bridging tradition with nationalist reform (Newcombe, S., 2009) ^[24].

Swami Dharendra Brahmachari: Life, Legacy, and Public Persona

Swami Dharendra Brahmachari, dominus was an Indian Yoga guru, who wielded his power in the 1960s and 1970s. Born in Bihar, he had the Vishwayatan Yogashram in New Delhi and was known for his knowledge of yoga and alternative medicine. Even though Brahmachari's proximity to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi brought him to the limelight publicly there was acclaim and criticisms. He was also known for bringing yoga to the Indian political elite, and lobbying for its incorporation into public health programs. But his extravagant lifestyle and reported political interference came

under fire. However, Brahmacharya popularized yoga and Ayurveda throughout India, and helped spread yoga practices world-wide. His life and legacy remain a subject of contention and allow for no easy consensus, offering a rebuttal to the dichotomous interpretation of the figure based on an overly-simplified view of the intersected operations of spirituality, politics, and public culture in contemporary India (Deslippe, P., 2012) ^[25].

Early life and spiritual training

Swami Dharendra Brahmachari was born as Dharendra Choudhary in 1924 in Bihar, India. His early spiritual training was rooted in the Nath yogic tradition, which emphasized Hatha Yoga, austerity, and the inner discipline of breath and body. As a disciple of Maharshi Kartikeya, he was initiated into a system that balanced classical yogic knowledge with rigorous physical training. He later established the Vishwayatan Yogashram, initially in Mantalai (Jammu), which became one of his major centers for yogic instruction. Brahmachari's interpretation of yoga was steeped in the tradition of Patanjali but restructured for instructional and institutional formats that could reach both lay practitioners and state platforms (Deslippe, P., 2012) ^[25].

Rise as a public figure and spiritual advisor to political elites

Swami Dharendra Brahmachari's influence expanded significantly in the 1960s when he became the personal yoga teacher and close confidant of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. His presence in New Delhi's political circuits gave him unparalleled access to power, allowing him to promote yoga as a state-endorsed discipline. He played a pivotal role in advocating for the integration of yoga into national education and physical training policies, and was often involved in behind-the-scenes political strategy during the Emergency period (1975–77). His institutional reach grew as he acquired land and political permissions for setting up yoga centers, including the ashram in Mantalai and a yoga television program that aired on Doordarshan, further cementing his national profile (Deslippe, P., 2012) ^[25].

Perception in popular media vs. historical documentation

In popular media, Dharendra Brahmachari was often portrayed as a controversial figure—part mystic, part power broker. His opulent lifestyle, landholdings, and proximity to political elites led to public speculation and criticism, particularly during and after the Emergency. Media narratives oscillated between depicting him as a spiritual guru with administrative clout and as a shadowy political operative. However, historical documentation paints a more layered picture. While it acknowledges his access to political privilege, it also underscores his genuine efforts to institutionalize yoga pedagogy and his commitment to the Sanskritic framework of yoga instruction. Unlike many gurus of his era who sought global fame, Brahmachari remained deeply embedded in Indian political and institutional frameworks. The lack of scholarly literature focused on his pedagogical or cultural contributions has, however, resulted in a one-dimensional public memory dominated by controversy rather than critical academic assessment (Deslippe, P., 2012) ^[25].

Cultural Nationalism and Sanskritization through Yoga

In India, cultural nationalism has become entwined with the idea of Sanskritization, largely through yoga. The rise of yoga as an international phenomenon led it to become a signifier of collective Indian culture and a means of cultivating nationalist sentiment. The Indian government has aggressively marketed yoga as a uniquely Indian practice with antique origins and a spiritual resonance. This is consistent with the process of Sanskritization, the phenomenon of members of lower castes or tribes adopting ways of life ascribed to higher castes or tribes so as to uplift themselves in the social hierarchy. Within yoga, this provides for centralization of practice and focus on Sanskrit terms which may overshadow regional diversity and non-Sanskrit yoga will. Introducing yoga as a national icon thus does double-duty - it witnesses to India's cultural export on the world platform, as well as to the particular identity that it holds domestically (Bharadwaj, R. M., 2022) ^[26].

What Dharendra Brahmachari offered in yoga was not just the physical or therapeutic but rooted in a vision of cultural regeneration and national integration. His institutional model of yoga served as a carrier of Sanskritization, where in Sanskritic traditions, rituals and pedagogies provided the context for reinstalling yoga as a civilizational metaphor of India. In this section I examine where Brahmachari's work fits in with the wider context of cultural nationalism, and how the same was reconciled in case of the sensitive and polarized sociopolitical terrain Jammu & Kashmir.

Role of Sanskrit, Ritualism and Classical Framing: In Yoga Pedagogy

A defining feature of Brahmachari's education was his stress on scriptural authority. His manuals and public teachings drew heavily from the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika, and other ancient Sanskrit texts. By anchoring modern yoga instruction in these texts, he was in sync with a broader trend that sought to present yoga as not simply a form of exercise, but as a sacred, transmitted knowledge system premised on timeless Indian truths. This scriptural congruence also gave legitimacy to his curriculum in government-funded spaces while presenting yoga as a national- spiritual inheritance fit to be supported by the state (Davies, A., 2016) ^[27].

Reassertion of Indian cultural identity through yogic practice

At his ashrams, especially in Jammu and Delhi, Brahmachari promoted use of Sanskrit terms, mantras, and rituals in daily life. That only strengthened the notion that yoga was more than a health discipline — it was a way to rediscover India's cultural soul. In a multilingual and religiously pluralistic situation as Jammu & Kashmir, these gestures of Sanskrit and Brahmanical symbolism were also an indirect tool of cultural homogenization. It was analogous to the process of Sanskritization, as theorized by the sociologist M. N. Srinivas, by which “Local or other heterodox aspects are forcibly harmonized with supra local, upper-castes, Brahmanical standards” (Srinivas, M. N. 1956) ^[28].

Yoga and Cultural consolidation in J&K

Brahmachari's conception of yoga was congruent with the post-independence agenda of cultural nationalism, which aimed to discover Indian identity in collective civilizational symbols. In this vision, yoga wasn't just a practice — it was

a bridging symbol of India's historical and spiritual trajectory. Embedding yoga in the border-sensitive J&K, Brahmachari had a part to play – may be designedly – in the ideological incorporation of the region in the cultural mainstream of the Indian nation state. His studios, teachings, and television shows presented yoga as available to all, apolitical and pan-Indian, even as they were subtly suffused with the spirit of Hindu cultural resurgence (AT, et. al., 2023) [29].

Institutional Contributions in J&K

Institutional heritage in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has been an instrumental factor in determining the socio-economic fabric of the state. Strategies to further education, health care, and economic development, have been introduced by both government and nongovernmental organizations. dirty Universities, technical schools, and research institutions have bolstered the quality of education and training in the area. Medical facilities and the availability of healthcare services have improved in healthcare facilities nowadays, specially in remote areas. Banks have come up with ideas to help local entrepreneurs and businesses and in so doing, inject life into the economy. Cultural organisations have also been making serious attempt to save the rich culture of J&K. All these have collectively contributed in development and progress of the region in spite of the constraints imposed by its peculiar geopolitical status (Bhat, S. A., 2016) [30].

Swami Dharendra Brahmachari's involvement with school yoga was not limited to his rhetoric and teaching, it had practical manifestations in the form of yoga centres, teacher training schools and links with education, in particular, links with the J&K state. His work was instrumental in the development of yoga infrastructure, and the public pedagogy of the practice in a geopolitically sensitive and culturally diverse region. This part analyses his practical role in promoting yoga instruction and state-sponsored wellness in J&K.

Establishment of yoga ashrams, training centers, and state-supported projects

One of Brahmachari's major institutional legacies in J&K was setting up of the Vishwayatan Yogashram at Mantalai, in Udhampur district. The center was conceived as a full-fledged yoga training school complete with ashram living, physical training, Sanskrit studies, and spiritual practice. The ashram was a modern facility with residences, lecture halls, and even an airstrip, a reflection of the size and scope of the undertaking. It was to be a physical representation of his ideal for a modern gurukul – where the traditional discipline and the best of everything come together (McKean, L., 1996) [31]. S Mahendra Singh of The Week stated that apart from Mantalai complex, Brahmachari also played a role in spreading the satellite yoga centers in Jammu as well as in other parts of North India, which led to the creation of a broader institutional framework. The centers taught teachers for both private instruction and deployment in schools and health programs— part of his broader initiative to integrate yoga into state systems.

Role in curriculum development and standardization of yoga education

Swami Dharendra Brahmachari used his influence as a confidante of national leaders to campaign for yoga to be incorporated as part of the school curriculum as well as

incorporated within public health schemes especially in Jammu & Kashmir. Several government agencies, including the Central Government's Ministry of Education and Health and Family Welfare, adapted his skills training models. His impact on policy helped found institutions like the Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga (insufficient_ although this Delhi-based institution actually followed the principles first realized through his J&K centers).

Furthermore, Brahmachari was also involved in youth and sports projects. According to news reports, his yoga modules were adopted in some government run schools in Jammu in the late 1970s and 1980s, with an aim to develop physical fitness, discipline, and mental health. They both reinforced developmentally as well as ideologically, a pan-Indian cultural matrix through standardized yoga training programmes (Karihaloo, S. 2010) [32].

Partnerships with government institutions and influence on public health/youth programs

As teacher, Brahmachari stressed on structured and replicable modules of Yoga. He wrote yoga manuals, went on Doordarshan programmes and organised mass demonstrations — each contributing to the common-sense “naturalisation” of yoga as an aspect of everyday civic life. His methods combined asanas, pranayama, kriyas, and recitation of scriptures, to form a basic template that could be applied in a class setting.

This model found favor in J&K with not just the practitioners but also with administrators and political leaders they fell back on Yoga as a means to legitimate culturally acceptable non-controversial means to keep moral and physical qualities in shape. The institutionalization of yoga in the area –fostered largely by Brahmachari –served a double purpose: to propagate health and to enrich a pan-Indian cultural outlook.

Critical Evaluation of Impact

The story of Swami Dharendra Brahmachari in Jammu & Kashmir represents a complicated intermingling of spiritual pedagogy, institutional aspiration, and political proximity. While this project of systematization and dissemination of yoga can't be denied, his work must be critically examined and reevaluated in terms of its cultural, political and ideological effects.

Assessing the socio-political and pedagogical implications of his institutions

The institutionalization of yoga under Brahmachari's leadership had undeniable social and pedagogical impact. By establishing physical centers such as the Vishwayatan Yogashram at Mantalai, he introduced a replicable, state-supported model of yoga instruction in Jammu & Kashmir. These institutions were not limited to elite spiritual practice; they trained school teachers, public health instructors, and local youth in codified yoga techniques aligned with national physical education goals.

However, these pedagogical efforts also carried strong socio-political undertones. The framing of yoga as a state-sponsored, Sanskritic tradition reinforced a unified cultural identity, which, in the context of Jammu & Kashmir's ethnic, linguistic, and religious plurality, may have functioned as a subtle mechanism of cultural assimilation. Brahmachari's institutions thus played a dual role: fostering public health and discipline while also contributing to the ideological

consolidation of national identity in a geopolitically sensitive region.

Contradictions between spiritual authority and political engagement

Brahmachari's public persona embodied a contradiction that continues to complicate his legacy—he was at once a spiritual guru and a political insider. His close association with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and his visibility during the Emergency (1975–77), raised questions about the instrumentalization of spiritual authority for political purposes. He was seen not only as a yoga teacher but as a behind-the-scenes power broker with access to state resources, land, and policymaking platforms.

This convergence of spiritual charisma and political influence strained the perception of his authenticity. Critics argued that his institutions, while legitimate in purpose, were sustained not just by public support but by state patronage, privileging them over more grassroots or pluralistic yogic traditions. For a practice rooted in non-attachment and neutrality, Brahmachari's yoga became deeply entangled in power structures, raising philosophical and ethical tensions within the broader yoga discourse.

Limitations and criticisms from within academic and public discourse

While Brahmachari is occasionally mentioned in political biographies and journalistic accounts, academic engagement with his life and legacy remains minimal. The lack of critical scholarship has resulted in a largely polarized understanding of his contributions—either as a controversial political figure or as a yoga evangelist backed by power. This absence of nuanced academic inquiry has limited our ability to evaluate his institutional work beyond surface-level narratives.

In public discourse, his name is often associated with scandal, privilege, or controversy—obscuring the scale of his efforts to standardize and mainstream yoga education in India. His ashrams, television programs, and teacher training frameworks have rarely been studied in detail for their curricular, philosophical, or social content. This oversight reflects not just gaps in yoga scholarship, but a broader discomfort with figures who straddle spiritual and political domains.

Furthermore, critiques from cultural scholars point to the exclusionary elements of his yoga pedagogy—its emphasis on Sanskrit, ritualism, and Brahmanical values—which may have marginalized vernacular or non-Hindu yogic practices in Jammu & Kashmir. His legacy, therefore, raises essential questions about who defines yoga, whose traditions are preserved, and what is lost in the process of institutionalization.

Conclusion

Swami Dharendra Brahmachari stands at the intersection of a complex and singular point in the story of modern yoga in India. His engagement with Jammu & Kashmir is an exemplary instance of the institutionalization of yoga at a time when post-independence India was working on defining its national identity through culture, education, and (public) health. He not only expanded the pedagogical reach of yoga by creating ashrams, training institutions and programmes of yoga education, but he also "stateified" yoga, divesting it from a personal path of spiritual practice and accrediting it as

a shastri upayog, or state-endorsed cultural instrument.

This essay has demonstrated how although Brahmachari's institutions have been instrumental to the mainstreaming of yoga in Jammu & Kashmir and in terms of themes for enhancing national integration, they have also generated important cleavage. His model and understanding of yoga—entirely grounded in Sanskritization and Brahmanical frames/structures of yoga practice—were culturally reductive in a way that could exclude other (more indigenous, vernacular, syncretic) notions of yoga that existed historically in the area. Besides, his involvement with political elites has led to the confusion of spiritual service and political usage, thereby tarnishing his institutional service and adding to the complexity of his public image.

Whether or not his legacy is to be termed as detrimental is debatable, yet what can't be denied is the pivotal role played by Brahmachari in making yoga visible in Jammu & Kashmir. His campaign underscores both the promise and the perils of cultural institutionalization: how government-approved spirituality can enable years of outreach and standardization, but also dictate purported ideological fidelity. A more scholarly approach to his ethnographic legacy is still to be met, above all in its regional, pedagogical and cultural dimension.

By revisiting Swami Dharendra Brahmachari's contributions, this study draws attention to not only an overlooked era in the history of yoga but the more profound question of what yoga becomes when formalized as a site of negotiation between identity, power, and pedagogy. His life and work provide a useful prism through which to view the rich textures of overlap that exist between the spiritual, the political and the cultural in today's India.

References

1. Gill C. Essays exploring the restorative potential, experiences and outcomes of spiritual retreats [university of queensland library], 2018. <https://doi.org/10.14264/uql.2018.796>
2. Tremblay RC. Jammu: Autonomy Within an Autonomous Kashmir? Routledge, 2019, 153–167. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429301483-7>
3. Kuiper K. (Ed.). The culture of India. Britannica Educational Publishing, 2010.
4. Sivananda, S. Practice of brahmacharya. Divine Life Society, 1980.
5. Gupta ML, Kumar S, Gupta S, Gupta PK, Kumar N, Gupta S. *et al.* Yoga and Cultural Identity in Jammu & Kashmir: A Critical Analytical Examination of Swami Dharendra Brahmachari's Contributions, 2025.
6. Bhati K, Zinjurke BD, Wagh K, Mahajan K. BRAHMACHARYA: A concept with special reference to its contribution to prevention and promotion of health. Romanian Journal of Diabetes, Nutrition and Metabolic Diseases, 2023;30(4):1253-1263.
7. Trivedi d, Singh RP. Scientific and psychological explanation of brahmacharya in yoga-sutra.
8. Lin H, Zhao N. A Review of Research on the Effects of Mindful Exercises on Emotion Regulation and Mental Health Among Adolescents. Studies in Sports Science and Physical Education, 2025;3(1):24-35.
9. Csala B, Springinsfeld CM, Köteles F. The relationship between yoga and spirituality: a systematic review of empirical research. Frontiers in

- Psychology,2021:12:695939.
10. Alter JS. Indian clubs and colonialism: Hindu masculinity and muscular Christianity. *Comparative studies in society and history*,2004:46(3):497-534.
 11. De Michelis E. *A history of modern yoga: Patanjali and western esotericism*. A&C Black, 2005.
 12. Singleton M. *Yoga body: The origins of modern posture practice*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
 13. Jain AR. Jain modern Yoga. *Yoga in Jainism*,2015:12:229.
 14. Srinivas MN. Social anthropology and sociology. *Sociological bulletin*,1952:1(1):28-37.
 15. Shrestha SK, Karky JR, Adhikari S, Timsina SK. *Exploring the Intersection of Yoga and Social Studies: Understanding Its Impact on Social Development*.
 16. Koul S. *Exploring Kashmir Shaivism: Philosophy, Practices, and Contemporary Relevance*. Practices, and Contemporary Relevance (September 04, 2024), 2024.
 17. Singh J. *The Yoga of Delight, Wonder, and Astonishment: A Translation of the Vijnāna-bhairava with an Introduction and Notes by Jaideva Singh*. State University of New York Press, 1991.
 18. Jois SKP. *Yoga Mala: The seminal treatise and guide from the living master of Ashtanga Yoga*. North Point Press, 2010.
 19. bhat rm. cultural heritage of early kashmir-a study. *cultural heritage*,2022:2(4).
 20. Corrywright D. *The place of religion in secular culture: diffuse communities and the sacred locations of spiritual seekers*.
 21. Osto DE. *An Indian tantric tradition and its modern global revival: contemporary nondual Śaivism*. Routledge, 2020.
 22. Rashid Y, Ahmad P. *Tradition and dissent in ancient Kashmir (AD 6th to 12th century) (Doctoral dissertation)*, 2016.
 23. Shankarananda S. *The yoga of Kashmir Shaivism: Consciousness is everything*. Motilal Banarsidass, 2016.
 24. Newcombe S. *The development of modern yoga: A survey of the field*. *Religion Compass*,2009:3(6):986-1002.
 25. Deslippe P. *From Maharaj to Mahan Tantric: The Construction of Yogi Bhajan's Kundalini Yoga*. *Sikh Formations*,2012:8(3):369-387.
 26. Bharadwaj RM. *Sanskritization and Indian Tribes*. In *Hinduism and Tribal Religions*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2022, 1416-1423.
 27. Davies A. *Understanding modern Yoga pedagogy and curriculum: exploring sense-making by senior Western Yoga teacher-trainers (Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern Queensland)*, 2016.
 28. Srinivas MN. *A note on Sanskritization and Westernization. The Far Eastern Quarterly*,1956:15(4):481-496.
 29. At ib, yatra a. *4 Mantras to Play Pivotal Role in the Life of Every Student*: LG, 2023.
 30. Bhat SA. *Empirical Analysis of Institutional Credit Supply and Agricultural Production with Special Reference to Jammu and Kashmir*. *Indian Journal of Economics and Development*,2016:12(1):113-122.
 31. McKean L. *Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu nationalist movement*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.
 32. Karihaloo S. *Progress of Primary and Upper Primary Education in Jammu and Kashmir:(1950–51 to 2001–02)*. *Journal of Indian Education*,2010:36(3):131-137.