Understanding Patanjala-Yoga-Sutra on ‘Asana’ From Sanskrit Commentaries

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Abstract:

A critical study of twenty-one easily available Sanskrit commentaries on Patanjala-Yoga-Sutras by seventeen commentators from different walks of life has thrown light on the acceptable as well as controversial points and has indicated areas for further studies, viz., ‘Asana’ as envisaged by Patanjali has a strong ‘experiential base’.

2. The concept of ‘asana’ will have to be taken at the level of the citta to understand and follow its experiential nature.

3. As none of the Sutras dealing with ‘asana’ have any instructional verbs, they cannot be treated at the level of doing” or ‘to be done’ only, but they require to be understood in the light of ‘What is happening?’ also.

4. The concept of ‘ananta-samihpasti’ as interpreted by the commentators does not give adequate practical and educational approach to its understanding.

5. Likewise, interpretation of the concept of ‘dvandva nabhihathah’ by the commentators also seems to be inadequate.

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Introduction:

Most of the recent literature on yoga is based on Hathayoga, and that too, with a lot of emphasis on Hathayogic āsanas. Generally, these āsanas are presented as a system of physical exercises meant for keeping fit and healthy. While highlighting the theoretical foundations of the subject, the authors (e.g., K. T. Behanan, 1938; James Hewitt, 1960; Swami Kuvalayananda and Dr. S. L. Virekar, 1963; B. K. S. Iyengar, 1968; James McCartney, 1969; Pandit Usharbudh Arya, 1977) are seen to refer to Pātanjala-Yoga-Sūtras which is widely accepted as the source-book on Yoga.

A direct reading of the Pātanjala-Yoga-Sūtras-II 46, 47, 48 related to ‘Asana’ does not overtly or covertly convey any meaning emphasizing the exercise aspect of ‘āsanas’ relating it to health and fitness. On the other hand, ‘āsana’ is described as a ‘Yogāṅga’ to be followed as an ‘anuśṭhāna’ for the purification of the citta (PYS II 28).

Therefore, it was decided to scrutinize the Sanskrit commentaries on PYS to get the view-points of the commentators on the subject-matter and the findings are presented here.

Material and Methods:

Twenty-one easily available Sanskrit commentaries by seventeen authors related to PYS were scrutinised for this study. They are listed below in the alphabetical order of the authors.

* (PYS = Pātanjala yoga sūtras)
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*(The Sr. Nos. appear in brackets as References hereafter.)*

The salient points, expressions and statements by the commentators to explain the Sūtras II/46, 47 & 48 related to ‘āsana’ were studied in detail to understand their significances and were rendered into English with the help of dictionaries and other source materials, keeping in view ‘the practical and experiential nature of yoga’. Certain points were discussed with yoga-practicants also.

The observations were analysed further to come to the conclusions.
Observation and Comments:

I. General:

1. It is very difficult to determine conclusively the chronological order of these commentaries. It is commonly agreed that Vyāsa-bhāṣya (17) is the oldest available commentary followed by Vācaspati’s ‘Tattvavaiśāradī’ (14). However, the recent discovery of a commentary claimed to be authored by Ādi (the First): Śāṅkara-cārya (13), if proved genuine, will be earlier than that of Vācaspati.

2. Most of the commentators do not seem to be Yogis, nor Yoga-practicing yogis in the strict sense of the term. They seem to be either grammarians, or proponents of Nyāya, Śāmkhya or Vedanta Darsanas, or Vaiṣṇavaiteś, etc., as can be postulated from the manner in which they have treated the Yoga-sūtras in their commentaries, or from other works to their credit.

3. Vallabhācārya (15a) and Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha (9a) have extensively quoted various Hathā texts in their commentaries along with the various concepts of Hathayoga which refer to the health and fitness aspects of the ‘āsanas’. However, they fail to give us the right type of insight into Patanjali’s Sūtras on ‘Āsana’.

II. Observations in respect of individual Sūtras related to ‘Āsana’:

PYS-II/46: “STHIRA-SUKHAM-ĀSANAM”

‘स्थिरसुखभावानम्’

Observations:

A. According to some commentators, this Sūtra indicates the characteristics or attributes (i.e., ‘Lakṣaṇa’) of ‘āsana’ (3, 9b, 10, 11, 14 & 15).
B. The expressions used by different commentators to convey their understanding of this Sūtra are as follows:

1. ‘avayava-vyathā-anutpatti-lakṣaṇayam’ (12).
   अवयव-व्यथा-अनुत्पति-लक्षणम्
   i.e., “A condition in which there is no disturbance from any part of the body”.

2. ‘deha-calana-rūhitya-lakṣaṇayam’ (12)
   देह चलन रूहित लक्षणम्
   i.e., “The absence of body movements”.

3. ‘níscōta’ (2,11) ‘निस्कल्पं’ ‘nískampani’ (1,6)
   ‘निस्कल्पं’ i.e. without movements

4. ‘sthiram’ (1, 3, 6, 7a, 8, 9a 10, 13 & 14).
   स्थिरम् i.e., “Steady”.

5. ‘sthira-sukham’ (15a, 17).
   स्थिरसुखम् i.e., “Comfortable steadiness”.

7. ‘sukham-anudvejaniyam’ (6)
   सुखम् अनुद्वेजियम्
   i.e., “Comfort-undisturbed.”

8. ‘sukha-pradātve-sati-karjra-vṛtti-sthiratvam’
   (15a).
   सुखप्रदात्वसती-कर्ज्र-वृत्ति-स्थिरत्वम्
   i.e., “Comfortable feelings leading to steadiness in body behaviour”.

9. ‘sukhāvahāni’ (3, 7a, 7c, 9b, 11 & 14)
   सुखावहाम्
   i.e., “Feelings carrying comfort”.
Comments:

(1) A good study of these expressions makes it clear that 'an experiential aspect' is indicated by them rather than any particular kind or type of 'positioning or position of the physical body only'.

(2) Some commentators like Bālarāmodāsina, Vijñānavibhikṣu, Sankaracārya, Vacaspati Misra and Vyāsa have even advocated the use of 'a belt' ('yoga-pattakam'), or leaning against a pillar or wall ('stambha' or 'sopāṣāraya') to achieve this 'experiential dimension of āsana'.

(3) However, it is commonly seen that many of the modern writers try to explain the concept of āsana as mere 'position or positioning of the body', completely neglecting and overlooking the 'experiential aspect' so clearly brought out in this Sutra by various commentators.

PYS-II/47: "PRAYATNA-SAITHILYA-ANANTA-SAMĀ-PATTĪBHYĀM"

'प्रयत्न-साइथिल्या-अनान्त-समापत्तिभ्यां'

Observations:

A. Most of the commentators (1 to 16 except 4 & 15) refer to this Sutra as 'the Means' (i.e., 'Upāya') to accomplish āsana. Even though Vyāsa has not used this very term 'upāya' specifically in his 'Bhāṣya', the same meaning is implied in his commentary (17).

B. This Sutra has generally been divided into two components, viz.,—
(46)

(i) PRAYATNA-ŚAITHILYA” प्रयतन-सैथिल्यं
and
(ii) “ANANTA-SAMĀPATTIḥ”-अनन्त-समापत्ति.

C. In respect of “PRAYATNA-ŚAITHILYA”

प्रयतन-सैथिल्यं,

we come across the following expressions in different commentaries –

C1. ‘a-klēṣena’ (1,6) 'क्लेषोऽन'
i. e., “Without any pain or distress”.

C2. ‘bahula-āyāsa-nivrttiḥ’ (5, 8).
बहुः-आयास निवृत्ति:
i. e., “Without much of a strain”.

‘बहुः-व्यापर-अभावः’
i. e., “Absence of excessive effort”

C4. ‘gamana-grhokṛtya-tīrthasānadī-vasayo yah
prayantno mānasa utsāhah-tasya-śaithilyaṃ
prayantno mānasa utsāhah-tasya-śaithilyaṃ’
(12).
‘गमन-ग्रहोकर्त्या-तीर्थसानादी-विस्तयो योः प्रयत्नो मानस
उत्साहः-तस्य सैथिल्यम्’
i. e., “Indifference towards the activities
connected with tours, household duties,
pilgrimage, etc.”

C5. ‘mṛtavat-sthitireva’ (7a, 7b, 7c).
‘मृतवत्-स्थितिरेव’
i. e., “Staying totally unconcerned like a
corpse”.

C6. ‘prayatna-uparamāt’ (4, 9a, 9b, 11, 13, 15a,
15b & 17).
‘प्रयतन-उपरभास’
i. e., “Effort or exertion getting reduced or
diminished”.


   ‘svabhāvika–prayatna–kāthilyam’
   i. e., “Natural relaxation of effort/exertion”.

C8. ‘yādā yādā–asānāṁ bandhānī–iti–ičhāṁ karoti
   prayatna–kāthilye–api a–klesenaiva tadda tadā
   āsānāṁ sampadyate’ (6). ‘yādā yādā–āsānāṁ
   bandhānī–iti–ičhāṁ karoti prayatna–kāthilye–api
   a–klesenaiva tadda tadā āsānāṁ sampadyate’.
   i. e., “The āsana gets accomplished whenever
   the desire to perform it is without distress
   and with relaxation of effort”.

D1. With reference to the second component,
   ‘ANANTA–SAMĀPATTI’, we find another
   reading given by Anantadeva (1) Ananta Pandita (2),
   Bhoja Rāja (6) Hariharānanda Āraṇya (7a) and Śaṅkarācārya (13) as–
   “ANANTYA–SAMĀPATTIH”.

D2. The following expressions are found in
   various commentaries related to this compo-
   nent of the Śūtra–

(a) ‘Ananta’ being taken to represent the
   “Limitless Universe” :

   i. ‘anantaṁ viśva–bhūvam vyāṣṭya sthitam
      cittam’ (13).
   ‘anantaṁ viśva–bhūvam vyāṣṭya sthitam
      cittam’
   i. e., “Let the awareness of ‘Limitless
      Universe’ fill and stay in Citta”.
ii. ‘ākāśādī-gata ānante cetasaḥ samāpattiḥ’
(1,6).
‘अकाशाति—गते आनंदे चेतसं समापति.’
i. e., “Let the absolute awareness develop sky-like ‘Limitlessness’”.

iii. ‘ananta-ākāśam-asmi-itti īhāvanāḥ... samāpattiḥ’ (7b, 7c).
‘अनंत-अकाशम्—अस्मि—इति इहावनात्... समापति.’
i. e., “Develop or merge into such a feeling that ‘I-am-the-limitless-space!sky’”.

(b) The mythological figure “Śeṣa Nāga” (the king of serpents) is taken to represent ‘ananta’:

i. ‘anante nāganāyake sthiratara-phanaśa-hasra-vidhyā-viśvāngharāṃmandale samā-pannaṁ tadāhāranyā tadātmāpannaṁ’
(3, 9b, 11, 14).
‘अनंते नागनायके स्थिरतर-फ्नास-हस्र-विध्या-विश्वानघरांमण्डले समाध्यात तदाहराणया तदात्मात्मायान्म’
i. e., “Identifying oneself with the steadfast thousand-hooded Lord Ananta, the King of serpents, sustaining the Universe”.

ii. Versions conveying similar sense have been given by other commentators who use the word ‘prthivi’ (Earth) instead of ‘viśva’ (Universe). (5, 8, 9a, 10, 12, 15a, 16).
(49) 

(c) 'Ananta'—defined as 'Mahat':

'Anantye-parama-mahatve vâ samâpannoṁ' (7a).

'अनन्तेये-परम-महत्वे व सामापन्नः'
i. e., "Merging with the 'ANANYA', that is, 'parama-mahat' which may be
the first evolute of Prakṛti.'

(b) 'Ananta' is not defined, but indicates a
particular condition of the Citta:

'anante-vâ samâpannoṁ cittaṁ' (17).

अनन्ते व 'सामापन्नः किलक्षः'
i. e., "Citta becoming one with
'Limitless'.'

(c) Some commentators relate 'ananta-samâ-
patti' with the 'absence of awareness
connected with the body':

'deha-ahankāra-abhāvāt' (6) or

'देह-अहंकार-अभावात्'

'deha-abhimāna-abhāvena' (11)

'देह-अभिमान-अभावेन्'
i. e., "Absence of the 'I-am-the-
body' consciousness.

(f) Bālārāmodāsīna (4) does not provide
any explanation for these terms.

Comments:

(1) Most of the commentators as mentioned under
D2 (b) ii., seem to prescribe 'Visualization of Lord Ananta
steadily supporting the Earth'. For many people, this
prescription will mean an 'exercise in imagination' only,
particularly for those who have been educated in modern
science. For, they know that the earth is neither static, nor it is supported by any snake as claimed by the Hindu Mythology. For them, this indicates a fictitious notion amounting to ‘vikalpa’ in Patanjali’s terminology.

(2) Similarly, ‘visualization of the ‘Infinite’ nature of the Universe’ may also be difficult for some persons.

(3) The term ‘Ananta’ has other meanings also, like, ‘Viṣṇu’, ‘Brahma’, etc.

(4) Like that of the earlier Sūtra (i.e., II/46), the contents of this Sūtra also indicate a strong ‘experiential dimension’ referring to certain happenings inside the body and mind of the individual. This experiential aspect based on the inner-happenings have been brought out by the commentaries of Bhojarājā, Rāmānanda Yatī and Vyāsa (6, 11, 17).

PYS-II/48 : “TATAH DVANDVA–ANABHIGHĀTAH”
‘तत:-द्वन्द्व-अनभिप्रात्’

Observations :

A. It is clearly mentioned by most of the commentators that this Sūtra indicates the ‘result’ (‘phala/siddhi’ फल/सिद्धि) of ‘āsana’ (1 to 16 except 4 and 13).

B. The following expressions are used to explain the concept of ‘dvandas’ –

i) ‘Śītosnādi’ (1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9a, 9b, 10, 11, 13 & 17).

‘शीतोस्नादि’ i.e., “Cold and heat, etc.”
ii) ‘sitosa-ksut-teṣnādi’ (6. 7a, 7c).

“Śītāśa-raśhā-mahāgarāti”
i. e., “Cold and heat, hunger and thirst, etc.”

iii) ‘sitosa-sukhadhā-kṣa-māmānādi’ (12, 15b).

“Śītāśa-gūrū-pāśa-māmānādi”
i. e., “Cold and heat, pleasure and pain, respect and dis-respect, etc”

iv) ‘sitosa-kāmakrodhādi’ (15).

“Śītāśa-kāmakrodhādi”
i. e., “Cold and heat, lust and anger, etc.”

v) Bālarāmodāsina (4) does not provide any explanation for the term ‘dvandva’.

C. The following expressions are found in respect of the concept of ‘anabhīghātah’ ‘अनभिघात:’

i) ‘anabhīghātah-cittālambanan’ (5).

अनभिघात:-‘विचित्राल्पम्’
i. e., “The citta resting (on ‘ananta’) is not struck (by the ‘dvandvas’).”

ii) ‘atōdanam’ (9b, 11).

अतोदनम्
i. e., “Not beaten (by the dvandvas).”

iii) ‘na-abhībhyate’ (3, 7a, 10, 13, 15, 16, 17).

‘न-ध्विलम’
i. e., “(The ‘dvandvas’) do not sprout up at all.”

iv) ‘na-abhīhanyate’ (1, 6, 12).

‘न-ध्विलम’
i. e., “does not suffer (from the dandvas)”.
v) 'apīdanaṁ' (9a)
   'अपीदनम्'
i. e., "(The dvandvas) do not cause trouble"

vi) 'nāśayet' (7b, 7c).
   'नाशयेत्'
i. e., "(The dvandvas) get annihilated".

viii) Bālarāmodāsīna (4) and Nāgojī Bhāṭṭa (8)
do not provide any explanation to this term
   'anabhīghātāḥ'.

D. According to Bhāva-Gāṇeśa (5), the concept of
   'dvandva-anabhīghātāḥ' gets directly related
to citta.

Comments:

(1) The various terms used by the commentators to
indicate the nature of the 'dvandvas' are the phrases
traditionally used in the Sanskrit Literature. But, for a
student of yoga, their implications at the practical and
experiential level look to be somewhat problematic, if not
impossible.

(2) It is felt that no commentator has tried to
explain the term 'dvandva' in a convincing manner having
a direct relation to 'āsana'.

PYS-II/49: "TASMIN SATI ŚVĀSA-PRAŚVĀSAYOH-
GATI-VICHHEDAH PRĀNA YĀMAH"
'tāsmin tati śvāsa-prāśvāsayoh: gati-vichhedah: prāṇayāmaṃ.'

Observations:

A. All the commentators relate 'tasmin-sati' with
   'āsana'
B. Vyāsa (7) correlates *tasmin-sati* (तस्मिन् सति) with ‘āsana-jaya’ (आसनजय) which is again related to ‘dvandva-unabhīghataḥ’ by using the expression—‘sati-āsana-jaya’.

C) Anantadeva (1) mentions ‘tasmin-sati’ as ‘asana-shālana’ (आसनशालन), thus connecting it with ‘prayatna-kāśitaḥ’ (प्रयत्न काशित्य) and ‘anantā-samāpattiḥ’ (अनंत-समापति).

D. Some commentators (7b, 9b, 11, 12, 13, 17) are seen to describe ‘prāṇāyāma’ (प्राणायाम) as an outcome (*pariṇāma*/*phala*/‘siddhi’—परिणाम, फल, सिद्ध) of āsana and describe this Sūtra as the indicator (*lakṣaṇa—लक्षण) of ‘prāṇāyāma’.

Comments: Nil.

Discussions and Conclusions

1. The contents of the commentaries on the three Sutras—11/46, 47 & 48 related to ‘āsana’ strongly indicate its ‘experiential’ nature. However, an enquiring mind with the background and approach of modern scientific thinking looking for the practical guidance and aspiring for a personal experience, fails to get adequate information and understanding from them. This necessitates the need for re-interpretation of these Sūtras from a modern educational and psycho-physical viewpoint. This might have already been attempted by commentators writing in languages other than Sanskrit (Hirosi Motoyama, 1981; P. V. Kambalakar, 1986; Rohit Mehta, 1975; Swami Digambarji, 1985).
2. Even though the Sutras themselves do not contain any instruction verbs, no commentator has tried to high-light on this aspect. However, due to the very nature of the Sutras themselves 'asana' cannot be treated 'at the level of doing' or 'to be done' only but it requires to be understood in the light of 'What is' or 'What is happening' as a phenomenon or a process also. Practical help and guidance from living teachers and guides become a "must" for this.

Interestingly, commentators like Narayana Tirtha (9a, 9b) and Vallabhacarya (15a, 15b) and others have extensively referred to techniques from Hatha-yoga, probably to indicate suitable practices to trigger-off these processes in due course of time. Moreover these commentators have discussed the health and fitness aspect of asanas as is done by Hatha texts and modern writers on Yoga.

3. It is felt that the concept of 'ananta-samapatti' as interpreted by the commentators does not give an adequate practical and educative approach to its understanding under the changed socio-cultural environment.

4. Likewise, interpretation of 'dvandvamabhigataH' also seems to be inadequate requiring re-interpretation.

5. From the present study it is felt that study of other commentaries by people from different walks of life and socio-cultural backgrounds (like Hiroshi Motoyama, and many others as quoted above) becomes a necessity to develop an adequate understanding of the practical nature of 'asana as a Yoganga'.

Acknowledgements:

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(These have been listed according to the alphabetical order of the texts.


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4. “Kiran on Bhajavriti” of Vallabha-carya: In YOGADARSHANAM edited by Swaminarayana Sastri (details same as in No. 2 above); pp. 346.


7. “Pradipika” of Bhav-Ganesa: In YOGASUTRAM OF MAHARSI PATANJALI (details same as No. 3 above); Pp. 105–107.

8. “Patanjala-Rahasyarun” of Raghavananda Saraswati: In THE SAMGA YOGADARSANA (details same as in No. 1 above); Pp. 266–268.


10. “Rajamaatanda” of Bhojaraja: In YOGASUTRAM OF MAHARSHI PATANJALI (details same as in No. 3 above; Pp. 104–106.

11. “Sarala-tik of Yoga-karika” of Hariharananda Aranya: In SAMGA YOGADARSANA (details same as in No. 1 above); Pp. 29–30 of Appendix-I.

13. "Tattvavaiśāraṇī" of Vācaspati Miśra: In THE SĀṀGA YOGADARŚANA (details same as in No. 1 above); pp. 266–269.


15. "Vṛtti" of Nāgojibhatta: In YOGASUTRAM OF MAHARŚI PATAṆJALI (details same as in No. 3 above); pp. 105–107.


17. "Yoga-Kārikā" of Hariharānanda Āraṇya: In THE SĀṀGA YOGADARŚANA (details same as in No. 1 above); pp. 29–30 of APPENDIX-I.

18. "Yoga-Prādīpikā-Vṛtti" of Baladeva Miśra: In THE YOGASUTRĀM BY MAHARŚI PATAṆJALI edited by Dhuṇḍirāja Śāstri (The Kashi Series No. 85); The Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, Benares City (India), 1931; pp. 42–43.

19. "Yoga-Siddhānta-Candrikā" of Nārāyaṇa Tīrtha In YOGADARŚANAM (details same as in No. 11 above); pp. 82–89.

20. "Yoga-Sudhakara" of Sadāśivendra Sarasvatī: In YOGASUTRĀM OF MAHARŚI PATAṆJALI (details same as in No. 3 above); pp. 105–107.

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