

Decolonizing Yoga Through an Intersectional Analysis in the Indian Diaspora: A South African Story

Firdose Moonda
University of Cape Town

Introduction

“You.”

Sixteen pairs of eyes and as many index fingers pointed at me. I was chosen – the only person of South Asian origin in the group – as the one who would have an “insider” perspective on yoga. None of the students or the other teachers in the 200-hour yoga teacher training (YTT) I was working on had an ancestral connection to South Asia so they identified me, a woman of Indian heritage, as the one closest to the culture of yoga. Crudely, that was correct but broadly, it was far more nuanced than that.

I am a third-generation Indian of Muslim background, living in South Africa, a yoga asana practitioner for the last 10 years, a sports journalist, and I hold a master’s degree in the Traditions of Yoga and Meditation from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Those were the biographical details I gave to the cohort I was teaching. From the first bit – “Indian” – they positioned me as an emic practitioner of yoga and themselves as etic scholars (Harris 1976).

The simplicity of my students’ conclusion continues to fascinate me as I situate myself in yoga and grapple with ideas of identity personally and as a scholar-practitioner. As discussions and debates around cultural connections and appropriations increase, there have also been pockets of awareness around the roots of a living culture like yoga. Though widely practiced in the Global North as a form of exercise and holistic wellbeing, yoga traces its origins and early philosophical to the Indus Valley in the Indian subcontinent – in what is today Pakistan – and so people of Indian heritage are seen as closest to the birthplace of the practice. That’s a lot of people. The population of India is 1.4 billion; the diaspora and those of Indian ancestry are an estimated 32 million people spanning different geographies, religions, languages, and political views, which complicates the question of who can lay claim to yoga. Furthermore, the early literature of the Vedas and Upanishads tells us that only men from the three highest castes were involved in the earliest expressions of yoga, which begs the question: do women, especially women who may identify as Hindu, have any historical links to yoga? Are they – and am I – really insiders or is labelling them/me thus too essentialist? In this essay, I attempt to unpack some of these issues and to present a multi-layered view of what it means to be Indian, how that ties in with being linked to a lineage of yoga, and whether there are other lenses through which to view this topic.

Background and Family History

As a child of the late Apartheid era, I grew up with a clear, negatively defined understanding of what I was: non-white. Though non-whites were subdivided into three other

categories: Black (the term used to describe those of Black African origin), Coloured (a non-derogatory and self-identifying race of people who were descended from either the first nation Khoe-Sān, Malay slaves, or those who were mixed race or some combination of any of these), and Indian (anyone from the South Asian subcontinent). Those of us in politically-engaged families also chose to call ourselves Black as a form of solidarity with the oppressed



Figure 1 – I Have and Am Still Trying to Find Ways to Connect Prayer and Practice with Physicality and am Slowly Reconnecting to the Roots of Some of my Religious Upbringing to Better Understand Who I Am (Photo Credit: Nel Wessels)

masses and as a way to present a unified stance against whiteness. Like Russian dolls, we saw ourselves as both part of an oppressed majority and a religious minority, and the intersections of our difference kept unfolding.

My family existed culturally in the space in-between the political left and the religious right because as much as our social outlook was steeped in what we then called non-racialism (these days we call it anti-racism), our private lives were run around the rituals of our faith. As a child, I attended a Madrassa and by-hearted (memorized) much of the Quran. I prayed (albeit seldomly five times a day), fasted during Ramadan, and dressed modestly. We were observant of the customs of Islam even if we were not accomplished devotees as our day-to-day was a mix of South Asian-Muslim (distinct from Muslims from the Middle East because of our acceptance of music, for example) and South African Indian, which meant I also lit lamps on Diwali, danced on Kali *puja*, and shared food with our Hindu neighbors.

The inter-religious mixing among Indians was one of the consequences of how the Apartheid government controlled the land. They created designated areas for each of the racial groups with the best, most urbanized land for whites and the worst, least resourced area for Black Africans. Indians fell in-between with reasonably well-located land in semi-

urbanized areas. Because the government dictated that people of the same racial group had to live in the same area, they were thrust together, Muslim and Hindu, living cheek to jowl in an example of what scholars such as Ashwin Desai (2014) see as a model for contemporary India. I cannot remember any mention of yoga in this community, in philosophical or physical form, but I do recall religious tolerance, shared practice, and common humanity albeit forced upon us.

In creating a geographically-segregated country, the Apartheid government stripped people of their connections to the land through forced removals and displacement. We did not see the land we lived on as ours or anyone else's because we were arbitrarily placed there. Today, South Africans of color who move into formally whites-only areas see that act as a reclamation, even if their ancestors did not come directly from that area. The issue of land redistribution remains one of the most pressing questions in this country, and land is among our most contested spaces. As a member of a minority group who does not trace my ancestral connection to Africa, I understand that I have no claim on land on the continent. However, I also do not have any links that allow to make a claim on land in India. As such, this leaves me in no-man's land, so to speak.

Searching For Myself

All four of my grandparents are from India's western state of Gujarat and moved to South Africa in the 1950s, though their migration, and the reasons for it, was never spoken about and I am not in possession of any documentation to substantiate their pasts. My understanding is that three of them arrived in South Africa post-partition as part of trading families, most likely textile traders, and the fourth, my paternal grandfather was a stowaway on a boat bound for Mozambique, South Africa's eastern neighbor. He is my most mysterious ancestor; he died before I was born and is untraceable because he changed his name. The man we called Papa and who I assume was named Mohammed Moonda does not exist, and I do not know what his official names were. Two of my father's brothers carry the surname Joosub but my father is a Moonda. I have found no record of Moonda, by that spelling, in Indian archives.

My maternal great-grandmother, who came to South Africa with her grandchildren, had the surname Jhaveri (also spelt Zaveri) which indicates she was from a family of jewelers. I have done some independent and rudimentary research into Muslims from Gujarat. I found that many are thought to have been from a Buddhist Ksatriya background and were converted to Islam around the 12th century. Some members of my family have Iranian heritage and a distant cousin's DNA test confirmed this. My grandparents did not speak of any of this but were proud of the country of their birth and its cultural legacies, particularly the growing strength of its cricket team and the popularity of its musical and film industry, Bollywood.

The day before I was born, January 25, 1987, India's state broadcaster, Doordarshan began the first of 78 episodes of the Ramayana, which was followed by a 94-part television serial of the Maharabharata that ran until June 24, 1990. I was three at the time, and the television programs had come to South Africa via a segment called Eastern Mosaic – a three-hour Sunday morning program with content aimed at the diaspora – and I remember religiously watching the weekly shows. I learned about Ram, Sita, Hanuman, Arjuna, and Krishna, and I accepted them as part of a pantheon of gods I was not taught to worship but could still engage with and learn from. For me, the Epics were a bridge between my faith and that of the Hindu children I was growing up with, but a continent away the same screenings were contributing to simmering social division. The Doordashan shows coincided with an upsurge in Hindu nationalism in India in the early 1990s resulting in events like the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid, a mosque which was built between 1528 and 1529 by the

Mughal Emperor Babur (Cusack 2012), which I would only learn about as a politically-conscious adult. The seeds for that were planted in my youth, where I learned to sing the complete version of Enoch Sontong’s Nkosi Sikelele iAfrika, the first four verses of which became part of South Africa’s democratic anthem, complete with political slogans at the end. “Viva Mandela Viva; Viva ANC Viva,” I would chant, with my right fist tightly clenched in a Black power salute at the end of my extended arm. My father was dedicated to the anti-Apartheid struggle, and the values he instilled in me – Marxist and Chavista influences – never left me.

Situating the Brown Body in South Africa and Yoga

I was six when we moved into a white area, the year before the official end of the Apartheid regime, as part of a wave of people of color who were attempting to manufacture social integration. Our new neighborhood was largely Portuguese and they regarded us with a mix of suspicion and fascination, which I can now recognize as Orientalizing (Said 1978). For the first year, I was the only child of color at my school and ashamed of my difference. I asked my mother not to prepare roti for my school lunch but to give me white-bread



Figure 2 – In Attempting to Make Yoga More Inclusive, I Volunteered at Various NGO Projects in London during my MA. This was a One-Off Session for Young High School Men Learning to Understand Their Bodies Better (Photo Credit: St. Margaret’s House).

sandwiches and not to wear a headscarf when she picked me up from school because I was embarrassed of traditional food and clothing. While I did not see us as dangerous, I was aware that some people thought we were because at least three families removed their children from the school. We later discovered it was because they were unhappy with

children of color being in the same space. In the third grade, I was selected as the narrator for the school play *Robin Hood*, which gave me the most lines but the least action. I began to understand this as my body not being as capable as my mind. I did not play sports and sunk into the idea that Indians, especially Indian girls, could be clever but that sport was not part of our culture (Main et al. 2018). This was the beginning of a period of disembodiment, which only ended when I discovered the power of physical exercise in my 20s.

By then, I had already made my first trip to India, solo and with almost no money. I traveled in the dual hope of finding myself and a job. The company I was interested in working for (a cricket website) was based there (side note: I only succeeded with the latter). My future colleagues recommended that I take a day trip to Mysore, 150 kilometers outside Bangalore, and considered the birthplace of Ashtanga-Vinyasa yoga. The palace museum was undergoing renovations when I visited but it piqued my interest in things that were pioneered in India. Although I had entirely distanced myself from the Indian community of my upbringing and was living very much a coconut (brown on the outside, white on the inside) lifestyle, there was the faintest of pulls to know more about my culture of origin.

I did not pursue my interest any further until half a decade later when I was deep into a running practice (250 kilometers a month, every month), a desk job, and I was beginning to get injured. My first proper encounter with yoga *asana* was through shoulder injury. I was looking for improved mobility but was also on a sharp weight-loss curve and more than likely suffering from an eating disorder (never diagnosed) as body image had come to occupy a central part of my life. My interest in yoga grew quickly and after two years of sporadic practice, I discovered I could enroll in a month-long intensive teacher training, which I did. I was the only participant of South Asian heritage at the training and all the facilitators were white but that did not initially strike me as problematic even though some of the material was confusing. The information on the seven-rainbow-color chakra system, which linked areas of the body to emotional states, was particularly disconcerting for me. I began to associate my weak and tight hamstrings with the emotional distress of being disowned by my parents (a result of my schism from the Islamic faith), any stomach pain to a lack of self-worth, and my lack of mobility in my thoracic spine to an inability to speak my truth. All the time, I wondered whether Hindu doctrine had really made such intricate links between psychological states and energy centers since I had never heard of that in my formative years but accepted it as something the teachers knew which I didn't.

A few months after my training, at a different studio, I first heard a teacher mention the characters from my childhood – Hanuman, Ram and Sita – in a yoga class as part of what she called “Bhakti Yoga.” Essentially, she choreographed movement to mythology and music and even used a harmonium to chant mantras. At first, I was excited that a long-buried part of the culture I grew up was emerging in a totally new context and that it did not give me cause to feel ashamed but that soon gave way to anger. I was sure some of the details of the story the teacher told were incorrect, and she did not seem open to hearing about my history with the Epics. I felt purposefully excluded from something I knew more about but I was still enjoying the physical yoga journey so I kept going.

Despite my dedication to yoga classes, I was never offered a teaching spot at any of the studios in my area and I started to wonder if there was race and body shape discrimination at play. All the teachers at the studios I was at were white as were the vast majority of the yoga practitioners. The teachers were mostly slim and flexible, equally capable of getting into the splits as doing a handstand. I could do neither of those poses. I had also gained weight and had a different body shape to the other, mostly slender teachers. I think this was the start of my reckoning with the whiteness of commercial yoga, and I began to develop a dislike for those who only practiced for the physical benefits and did not embark on further study. In the hope that I could offer something different in the yoga environment, I embarked on my MA,

with a view to teaching the history and philosophy module at YTTs, once again subscribing to the notion that I, as someone of Indian heritage, could offer my brains, not just my body. I self-funded the degree using my savings, which involved taking an unpaid sabbatical from my job and moving myself and my husband from South Africa to London where we lived for 15 months.

Having been out of academia for a decade, I doubted my ability to succeed at what I considered to be an elite institution and I spent all my time reading, researching, and studying. I noted, but was not entirely surprised, that all the lecturers were white. My Indian colleagues at work pointed out that it was strange that I went to the United Kingdom to study an Indian practice, and I was one of only two students of color in a 20-person group. I was also the only scholar from outside Europe, which only made me more desperate to do well.



Figure 3 – While in London, I Earned Money Teaching 20 Classes/Week in the East End, including at a Wellbeing Hub at St. Margaret’s House, an Organization that Promotes Community and Social Wellbeing through the Arts and Wellness. Their Classes are Affordable (Photo Credit: St. Margaret’s House).

During the first term of my studies, an incident occurred in the yoga community in Cape Town. A white Afrikaans male yoga teacher asked his Black female colleague to fan him “as though they were on a plantation” while they were standing at the reception desk of their studio on a particularly hot day (Maroga 2018). He believed he was making a joke but the female teacher, who traces her heritage back to West Africa where the Atlantic slave trade took place, did not. The female teacher complained to the studio owner, who chose not to renew her contract while keeping the male teacher on the staff. The incident made its way onto social media, where some yoga teachers from the Cape Town yoga community supported the white teacher and accused the Black teacher of exaggeration but most chose to stay silent. This incensed me. I sent messages to teachers at the studios I had relationships with and asked their opinion on the situation. Those who replied said they did not want to get involved. I interpreted this as yoga inaction and began to develop theories around how the perception of yoga as an ethical exercise rooted in the principle of non-harm allows a certain

kind of practitioner to exercise the privilege of the apolitical. This was further reinforced by the work I was doing for my dissertation volunteering at a yoga project for refugees in London. I was the only teacher of color in the project and noticed a significant divide between the teachers and the refugee participants, who were mostly of color. My supervisor encouraged me to use critical race theory (Taylor 1998) to study yoga through the lens of the race and class differences between teachers and students, and I found that the efficacy of such a yoga program could not be effectively measured (Moonda 2021). This changed my outlook on my position in the practice entirely.

Teaching Yoga as Decolonial Pedagogy

I returned home to Cape Town and to my job and started teaching yoga history and philosophy at teacher trainings shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. When it did and we were locked down, my section of the training was the easiest to take online (as it was more theoretical than practical) and my work grew. In May 2020, George Floyd was murdered by a white police officer in the United States, the Black Lives Matter movement (which had been a part of me by other names throughout my life) resurged and discussions around cultural appropriation and cultural colonization of yoga by white, able-bodied elite abounded. My involvement was a mixture of observation and participation. I noticed people of Indian-origin in the United States and United Kingdom attempting to reclaim yoga while also essentializing it into more than what my studies had taught me it was. “Yoga is Social Justice” was one of the slogans I saw but I knew it could not be true. The history of yoga is steeped in elitism and casteism (Thakur 1982) long before Western appropriation and that is how I taught it. Ironically, my lecture on debunking the ancient roots of the seven-rainbow-color chakra system was among the most popular. My research into its creation confirmed my suspicions: it was very much made up, a by-product of the New Age movement and an easily sellable commodity that created an irresponsible pathologizing of modern yoga practitioners. The concept of a chakra system was transmitted West by a variety of scholars including the Theosophical Society and the foundations were laid by a book written by the clairvoyant C.W. Leadbeater, whose 1927 book *The Chakras*, contained illustrations. Concurrent to this, psychologists including Carl Jung were looking at the chakras and linking them to emotional states. In 1977, Ken Dycwtwald wrote an article titled “Body-Mind and the Evolution to Cosmic Consciousness”, which detailed the seven rainbow-colored chakras and their associations with levels of consciousness for what is thought to be the first time. Kurt Leland’s *Rainbow Body: A History of the Western Chakra System from Blavatsky to Brennan* details this history (2016).

I began research into the history of yoga in South Africa, although my research is in its infancy. The documented history of yoga starts with the formation of the Divine Life Society in 1936, an organization primarily concerned with the spirituality of yoga, including *kirtan* (chanting) and *seva* (service) charity work. Iyengar Yoga is understood to have come to South Africa in the 1960s when a woman called Joyce Stuart came across Iyengar’s book *Light on Yoga* (1965) while in the United Kingdom (Coan 2008). Stuart lived in Pietermaritzburg, in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province, which was the location of the largest Indian diaspora outside of the subcontinent due to the large number of indentured laborers who were transported to work on the sugar plantations. At the time, the political relationship between South Africa and India was hostile as the Indian government was the first to sever trade relations with South Africa and recommended sanctions at the United Nations. Travel between the two countries was limited and difficult so Stuart organized to meet Iyengar in the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius with 10 fellow yoga enthusiasts, all white women. Over the next few years, they arranged classes with Iyengar in other neighboring countries such as

Malawi and Swaziland. I interviewed one of the woman, Pat Deacon, who went on a Swaziland trip, accompanied by a woman of color. The pair drove from Pretoria to Mbabane and could not eat at the same coffee shop when they stopped for refreshments along the way. Deacon claimed that was the first time she considered the practical differences of living as a white woman to living as a person of color. While she said she disagreed with segregation, she was not prompted to become an activist and instead continued with her suburban life as a housewife and yoga teacher. All her students were also white.

There is some evidence of anti-Apartheid activists, including the jailed and murdered lawyer doctor Neil Aggett, practicing yoga while imprisoned. Among his possessions was a copy of *Light on Yoga* (1965; Historical Papers Research Archive 1982). Though Indian migration into South Africa started in 1860, I have yet to find evidence of members of South Africa's 1.5 million strong Indian community practicing yoga in their homes or community spaces. My working theory is that if there was an oral history of this, it has been lost, or that these people engaged in practices they did not call yoga but rather chanting or worship; we may recognize it as yoga today.



Figure 4 – Clifton 3rd Beach, a Historically Segregated All-White Beach, is Currently Considered One of South Africa's Premier Destinations in an Elite Part of the Western Cape. Since 2017, I Have Taught Outdoor Classes and at an Accessible Price as an Effort to Reclaim Public Space (Photo Credit: The Om Revolution).

As someone of Indian heritage, the desire to connect the dots between yoga and myself runs deep but I am cautious not to romanticize and fictionalize the narrative, especially by placing emphasis on the roles of Muslims in yoga. However, I am aware that research into yoga and Islam is minimal and decreasing in the presence of a Hindu nationalist government. Since this is my heritage, it is also my main area of interest. I see this as my way of decolonizing yoga, not simply from whiteness but also from Hindu essentialism.

In the last four years, the words “decolonize yoga” went from a hashtag to a placeholder for body positivity and inclusion, anti-fatphobia, LGBTQI+ rights and a move away from gender binaries, and creating a space for Indigenous wisdom-keepers. The students at my training believe one of them to be me, even as I know that is unlikely and there is an inherent discomfort in acknowledging that. For me, this is the true work of cultural decolonization. It is the recognition of the multiplicity of yoga’s roots, including those long erased. Practically, that means an acknowledgement that the only language of yoga cannot be Sanskrit, the only textual sources cannot lie in Patanjali and the Epics, and the only philosophical basis cannot be Vedic. We have to explore beyond that, beyond casteism and religious monopolization.

Cultural decolonization cannot be a return to precolonization or indeed a Modi-esque fascism, but, in my view, must follow Franz Fanon’s method as a being rooted in the “creation of new men” (1963, 35). It is both a remembering and a reimagining. It is about, as Fanon wrote, “a new language and a new humanity” (35). Living with the intersections of my own social make-up calls on me to recognize my privilege: as Indian but not Black in South Africa, as heterosexual in a country of extreme LGBTQI+ phobia and as middle-class in the most unequal society on earth. It also forced me to confront that I am not an emic practitioner because I am of Indian origin but, if I am to consider myself an insider of the culture, it is because I am constantly engaging in a process of questioning with the intention of developing greater understanding.

References

- Coan, Stephen. 2008. “A Life’s Journey Through Yoga.” *The Witness*. February 14. <https://www.news24.com/witness/archive/a-lifes-journey-through-yoga-20150430>
- Cusack, Carole M. 2012. “The Gods on Television: Ramanand Sagar’s Ramayan, Politics and Popular Piety in Late Twentieth-century India.” In *Handbook of Hyper-real Religions*, Volume 5, edited by Adam Possamai, 279-297. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004226944_016.
- Desai, Ashwin. 2014. “Indian South Africans and the Black Consciousness Movement under Apartheid.” *Diaspora Studies* 8, no. 1: 37-50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09739572.2014.957972>
- Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Harris, Marvin. 1976. “History and Significance of the EMIC/ETIC Distinction.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5, no. 1: 329-350. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.05.100176.001553>
- Historical Papers Research Archive. 1982. “Translation of the Inventory Made by Captain C J A Victor and One J C Pretorius of Cell No 209, John Vopster Square.” Collection Number: AK2216. Johannesburg.
- Iyengar, B. K. S. 1965. *Light on Yoga: The Bible of Modern Yoga*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Leland, Kurt. 2016. *Rainbow Body: A History of the Western Chakra System from Blavatsky to Brennan*. Newburyport, MA: Ibis Press.
- Main, Luana, Rowe, Katie, Schoenberg, G, Gastin, Paul, and Juia Walsh. 2018. “Women in Sport: Challenges and Solutions in India.” *International Journal of Sport Exercise and Health Research* 2, no. 1: 81-82. <https://doi.org/10.31254/sportmed.2101>
- Maroga, Kopano. 2018. “Racism in the Cape Town Yoga Community: One Instructor’s Story.” *Mail & Guardian*. August 28. <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-08-28-how-much-time-do-you-want-for-your-progress/>

- Moonda, Firdose. 2021. "Pedagogy of Movement: Yoga in Migrant Projects from a Race and Class Perspective." In *Practicing Yoga as Resistance: Voices of Color in Search of Freedom*, edited by Cara Hagan, 83-105. London: Routledge.
- Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.
- Taylor, Edward. 1998. "A Primer on Critical Race Theory." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 19: 122-124. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2998940>
- Thakur, V. 1982. "Social Roots of the Bhagavad-Gītā." *Indologica Taurinensia* 10: 289-300.

Firdose Moonda (she/her) is a scholar of Indian-heritage based in South Africa. She holds an MA in Traditions of Yoga and Meditation from the School of Oriental and African Studies and is currently pursuing doctoral work provisionally titled, "Yoga, Politics and Possibilities for Social Justice." Her research interests include embodiment, body politics, cultural politics, decolonization, comparative religions and practice, and migrant studies. As a member of the minority in her country, her profession and her scholarship, Firdose recognizes the need to amplify voices on the margin and seeks to use research as activism towards a more just means of education.