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An Exploration of its Application and
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Yoga in *Ṛgveda*: An Exploration of its Application and Meaning

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Abstract

The article explores the semantics and application of yoga in *Ṛgveda*. It evaluates the validity of yoga referring to a literal yoking of horses by providing an overview of its uses in *Ṛgveda*. This is compared with the middle (*Kaṭha* and *Śvetāśvatara*) *Upaniṣads*' treatment of yoga, to assess whether they signify the inception of a spiritual understanding, which includes the employment of horses and chariots as metaphors. In *Ṛgveda*, there are mantras where the yoking of horses is achieved via the mind and, therefore, is not literal. The implications are that the *Upaniṣads* reflect a continuation of *Ṛgveda*'s understanding of horses and chariots and their role in yoga. In the literature stating that it is literal, there is an absence of a critical analysis of yoga's application in *Ṛgveda* and, most importantly, supporting evidence.

Keywords: yoga, horses, yoking, *Ṛgveda*, chariot, application.

Introduction

Yoga in *Ṛgveda* is seen as “archaic”, referring to yoking horses to chariots and having a “generic meaning, unrelated to any spiritual praxes” (Foxen and Kuberry 2021: 103; Harimoto 2021: 66). When it has been examined for its relation to spiritual praxes, yogic themes are the focus, rather than the application of yoga itself.¹ In considering it a literal yoking, its contribution is mentioned in passing in yoga’s history, providing no examples as evidence of this use.² Looking at specific mantras in which the word features in *Ṛgveda* has been deemed unnecessary for conducting a systematic study of yoga and its semantic evolution.

What we mean by ‘yoga’ refers to the soteriological practice, whose origins are attributed to the middle *Upaniṣads*,³ where we also find the first definition.⁴ This contextualises the attitude towards yoga in *Ṛgveda* and the *Vedas* in general as spiritually insignificant.⁵ Unlike most yoga texts, they do not include definitions or systematised practices and are neither philosophical treatises nor manuals. Consequently, scholars have been unable to draw the same conclusions or understandings of yoga from the *Vedas*.

A closer examination of yoga in *Ṛgveda* is required. One which evaluates and analyses the meaning of yoga and assesses the validity of it describing a literal yoking. To this end, this is the aim of this article. Yoga’s application in *Ṛgveda* is explored to assess the legitimacy of a literal yoking of horses.⁶ Its application is then compared with yoga in the *Kaṭha* and *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣads* to determine the extent of their semantic similarity and whether a soteriological understanding exists in *Ṛgveda*.

Yoga in *Ṛgveda*

There are 21 mentions of the word yoga in *Ṛgveda*.⁷ The first appears in RV 1.5.3,

He will yoke us towards becoming possessors of this wealth and wisdom.
Approaching attaining this, our reward.⁸

¹ See Werner 1975 and 1977, which is a study of the Keśin Hymn (RV 10.136). Yoga in both papers refers to yogic themes rather than the application of the word itself, which does not feature in the Keśin Hymn.

² See White 2012: 3; Singleton & Mallinson 2017: xii-xiii; Harimoto 2021: 66. This is also extended to the general application of yoga in the Vedas. For example, Sarbacker 2022: 31.

³ KU and ŚU.

⁴ KU 6.10-11.

⁵ It explains why, as Gibbons 2020: 29 remarks, “little attention has been paid to the pre-Upaniṣadic history of the word.”

⁶ All RV translations are my own.

⁷ These are: RV 1.5.3, 1.18.7, twice in 1.30.7, 1.34.9, 1.56.1, 1.186.7, 2.8.1, 3.27.11, 4.24.4, 5.37.5, 5.43.5, 7.54.3, 7.67.8, 7.86.8, 8.58.3, 10.30.11, 10.35.9, 10.39.12, 10.89.10 and 10.114.9.

⁸ RV 1.5.3: *sa ghā no yoga ā bhuvat sa rāye sa puram̐dhyām | gamad vājebhir ā sa naḥ ||*.

Taking this literally, the wealth which is possessed is material and the mantra expresses the desire to acquire riches. Such an interpretation does not explain how one attains “this” material reward through being yoked, who is yoking, nor how one is yoked. The next mention of yoga occurs in RV 1.18.7.⁹ Like RV 1.5.3, there are no chariots or horses. Similarly, the yoga discussed is one which entails mastery or seizing of the intellect (*dhī*).¹⁰ This is achieved through assistance and, without it, even the worship of the wisest people is not perfected.

RV 1.5.3 and 1.18.7 reflect an application of yoga outside of the context of yoking horses to chariots. They demonstrate the importance of attaining wisdom and a stronghold of the intellect through the assistance of the one performing the yoking. This is regardless of whether there are soteriological connotations. The first mention of yoga in the context of horses and chariots is unclear, as words for horse can denote ‘speed’ or ‘swiftness’, such as *vājīn*.¹¹ Similarly, the meanings of *hari* include: horse, a ray of light and a yellow or reddish-brown colour.¹² It features in RV 1.56.1,

Like a restless horse mounting a mare that is supported, he quickly drinks this *Soma*. It flows and, with great strength, the turning of their golden chariot is stilled by yoking [*yogam*] the determined horses [*hari*].¹³

In addition to the wisdom and mastery of the intellect in RV 1.5.3 and 1.18.7, here we see the attainment of yoga of drinking *Soma* upon yoking the horses and halting the turning of the chariot’s wheels. By interpreting this literally, we have no context for what the correlation is between horses being harnessed to their chariot and the flowing and drinking of *Soma*. We see this same connection in RV 5.43.5.¹⁴ The mantra introduces Indra¹⁵ and their role in yoga as drinking the *Soma* and yoking horses. The yoking occurs upon the worshipper invoking Indra, for whom they pour out the *Soma* to enjoy.

⁹ RV 1.18.7: *yasmād ṛte na sidhyati yajño vipascitaś cana | sa dhīnām yogam invati ||*.

¹⁰ See Miller 1974: 50-51 and Gonda 1963: 202-208 for an analysis of ‘*dhī*’.

¹¹ For example, RV 1.34.9: *kva trī cakrā trivṛto rathasya kva trayo vandhuro ye sanīlāḥ | kadā yogo vājino rāsabhasya yena yajñam nāsatyopayāthaḥ ||*.

¹² Monier-Williams 1960: 1289.

¹³ RV 1.56.1: *eṣa pra pūrvīr ava tasya camriṣo 'tyo na yoṣām ud ayamsta bhurvanīḥ | dakṣam mahe pāyayate hiraṇyayaṃ ratham āvṛtyā hariyogam ṛbhvasam ||*.

¹⁴ RV 5.43.5: *asāvi te jujuṣānāya somah kratve dakṣāya bhate madāya | harī rathe sudhurā yoge arvāg indra priyā kṛnuhi hūyamānaḥ ||*.

¹⁵ Whilst Indra is mentioned in this mantra, it is worth noting they are identified as the *devatā* in RV 1.5.3 who is worshipped and invoked for the yoking, in addition to the previous (1.5.2) and subsequent (1.5.4) mantras. This is documented in the RV *Anukramaṇī* and BD 1.139.

The next yoga reference featuring a chariot is in ṚV 10.39.12.¹⁶ Rather than horses, it is the Aśvins who are yoked. Their yoking births “heaven’s daughter” and Vivasvat bringing day and night, the “two beautiful days”. Taking this literally leaves us lost as to whom the Aśvins are, how their chariot is “swifter than thought”, who the Ṛbhus are, how they made it and it births heaven’s daughter, who she and Vivasvat are, and how they bring the beautiful day and night.¹⁷ This suggests it refers to more than the simple yoking of a chariot, where these components do not feature.

The last reference to yoga occurs in ṚV 10.114.9.¹⁸ The mantra features horses as typically understood by references to yoga in *Ṛgveda*. However, it is not they who are being yoked, but the metres of the verse itself. Further, there is no mention of a chariot. Whilst it presents a different understanding of yoga, we still find a correlation between its application and the presence of horses. As in the context of yoga in ṚV 5.43.5, the horses belong to Indra. These shared elements in yoga’s application across mantras indicate that there is a connection between Indra and what is ‘yoked’; whether it is the horses or metres being yoked, Indra is present.

Notably, there is a shift from the first mention of yoga, in ṚV 1.5.3, where the attainment is not specified, to it being described: for example, drinking *Soma*¹⁹ (ṚV 1.56.1; 5.43.5) and the birth of heaven’s daughter and the day and night via Vivasvat (ṚV 10.34.9). Whilst there is no attainment in ṚV 10.114.9, it, nevertheless, provides the clearest depiction of yoga: yoking the metres by chanting and the association with observing Indra’s horses. It potentially contextualises yoga in ṚV

¹⁶ ṚV 10.39.12: *ā tena yātam manaso javīyasā ratham yaṃ vām ṛbhavaś cakrur aśvinā | yasya yoge duhitā jāyate diva ubhe ahanī sudine vivasvataḥ ||*.

¹⁷ Raddock 2011: 225 says the Ṛbhus “created many marvelous things, such as the chariot of the Aśvins.” In N 12.10, the Aśvins are identified as the offspring of Vivasvat, the Sun (*āditya*). Earlier examples of the association between Vivasvat and *āditya* include: ṚV 8.67.20; TS 6.5.6.5, VS 8.5; ŚB 3.1.3.4 and 10.5.2.4. Citing ŚB 10.5.2.4, Goswami 2019: 81 says, “it is clearly stated that Vivasvat is Āditya and it illumines the day and night.” Macdonnell’s (1904) translation of BD 4.37-38 also considers Vivasvat as the Sun. According to Spess 2000: 52, there are three Ṛbhus, who “originally fashioned the chariot for the Aśvins from the lotus plants.” They identify heaven’s daughter as Uṣas, who is the passenger in the Aśvins chariot. Jamison and Brereton’s (2014) translation of ṚV 10.39.12 also identifies her as “Dawn”, an English rendering of Uṣas. It is explained, in ṚV 1.113.1, that Uṣas comes after the night and gives birth to the Sun, *savitṛ*. ṚV 1.48.1 calls Uṣas heaven’s daughter (*duhitar divaḥ*), indicating it is a synonym for her.

¹⁸ ṚV 10.114.9: *kaś chandasām yogam ā veda dhīraḥ ko dhiṣṇyām prati vācam papāda | kam ṛtvijām aṣṭamam śūram āhur harī indrasya ni cikāya kaḥ svit ||*.

¹⁹ Though it features in its application, as the focus is yoga, the semantics of *Soma* is beyond the scope of this article.

5.43.5, as it implies that their restraint is achieved through speech and the yoking of the metres of mantras.²⁰

Assessing whether yoga’s soteriology begins with the *Upaniṣads*

Like with *R̥gveda*’s references to yoga being generally in the context of yoking horses to chariots, it is maintained that the *Upaniṣads* used the same imagery as the basis for their soteriology (White 2009: 73). In *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*’s chariot metaphor, the chariot is the body (*śarīra*), horses (*haya*) are the senses (*indriya*) and their paths are the sense-objects.²¹ Not having the mind and senses controlled is like ‘bad horses’ (*duṣṭāśvā*) of a charioteer which have not been yoked.²² In contrast, a restrained mind and senses are likened to ‘good horses’ (*sadaśvā*).²³ One without restraint is trapped in *Saṃsāra* and reborn, whereas one who has control over the mind and senses is liberated from rebirth.²⁴

In the same vein, we observe in *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* that one should “control the mind as a chariot yoked to bad horses.”²⁵ Both *Upaniṣads* liken controlling the mind to yoking badly-behaved horses to chariots. If yoga’s soteriology is born out of such imagery, it is not clear why these *Upaniṣads* chose the Vedic backdrop of horses and chariots to expound upon it. Further, following a literal interpretation, we have no context for why the senses are called *indriya* or how they relate to Indra.

In yoga’s application in *R̥gveda*, Indra is invoked for achieving the yoking of their horses. Reading *indriya*²⁶ as Indra’s horses contextualises their role in yoga, suggesting that their yoking indicates sense-restraint. It also explains why *indriya* refers to the senses and *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* associates them with horses. In its definition of yoga, the connection with Indra and the senses deepens, stating that it is stilling

²⁰ Similarly, Gibbons 2020: 32 summarises yoga’s application in *R̥gveda* as “harnessing the mind” through reciting mantras. The subject of the ‘yoking’ of the metres is the chanter, who is fully concentrated on the mantra’s recitation. Therefore, they are ‘yoked’ to them.

²¹ KU 3.3-4.

²² Ibid 3.5.

²³ Ibid 3.6.

²⁴ Ibid 3.7-8.

²⁵ ŚU 2.9.

²⁶ On the meaning of *indriya* as senses, the reasons Pāṇini provides in *Aṣṭādhyāyī* include being ‘seen’, ‘created’, ‘wished for’ and ‘given by Indra’ (5.2.93).

the mind and controlling the senses (*indriyadhāraṇām*).²⁷ This supports Indra harnessing their horses in *Ṛgveda* as describing the same process.

Danino (2019: 15) identifies occasions where the yoking in *Ṛgveda* is not literal:

This happens when we are told of the two Aśvins’ “mind-yoked horses” (5.75.6), or when they accompany Dawn with their “mind-yoked chariot” (8.5.2). The horses (99 of them) that draw Agni (1.14.6) or Vāyu’s chariot (4.48.4) are also “yoked by the mind”. The word common to those “mind-yoked” horses and chariots is *manoyuja*, which occurs at least seven times in the hymns.

With this context, references to horses and chariots become nonsensical, as the yoking in ṚV 5.75.6, 8.5.2, 1.14.6 and 4.48.4 is achieved mentally (*manoyuja*). In these examples, the horses are analogous; the mind’s yoking is likened to that of horses, as seen in the *Upaniṣads*.²⁸ This demonstrates that the association between controlling the mind and yoking of horses existed pre-*Upaniṣads* and refutes the literalist narrative of yoga in *Ṛgveda*.²⁹

Referring to the ‘mind-yoked’ horses and chariots in ṚV 5.75.6 and 8.5.2, where the Aśvins and ‘Dawn’ (Uṣas) feature, could contextualise their position in ṚV 10.39.12. If we are to understand yoga as being achieved mentally, the birth of Uṣas as “heaven’s daughter” takes on an altogether different meaning. The chariot “swifter than thought”³⁰ also becomes symbolic, indicating that it denotes activity and the Aśvins being yoked to it a stillness of the mind. Similarly, Danino (ibid: 5) argues that the interpretation of *aśva* as horse in *Ṛgveda* cannot be maintained and a “dual meaning” has been “suppressed”, even in the mantras where it “cannot refer to the actual animal”. In support of this, we find, in *Ṛgveda*, yoking horses to a

²⁷ KU 6.11.

²⁸ KU 3.4-6 and ŚU 2.9.

²⁹ We find the same understanding in another of *Ṛgveda*’s twenty-one references to yoga, ṚV 1.186.7: “our minds yoked like horses” (*uta na īm matayo ’śvayogāḥ*). Though the mantras Danino cites do not literally mention ‘yoga’, the word signifying the yoking is its root, *yuj*. This is also seen in ṚV 5.81.1 (*yuñjate mana uta yuñjate dhiyo viprā viprasya bṛhato vipaścitaḥ*), where both the mind (*mana*) and intellect (*dhiyo*) are yoked (*yuñjate*).

³⁰ Notably, the phrase “swifter than thought” (*manaso javīyasā*), in ṚV 10.39.12, appears in ĪU 4 (*manaso javīyo*), where it refers to the Self, as clarified by ŚĪUB 4. Additionally, it is the subject of AĀ 2.3.8: “There is a chariot of the gods which destroys desires ... the Breath mounts upon it” (*anakāmamāro ’tha devarathas ... tad ayaṃ prāṇo ’dhitiṣṭhati*). An excerpt of ṚV 10.39.12 is then cited as an example: *ā tena yātaṃ manaso javīyasā*. Majcher 2015: 153 identifies *anakāmamāro ’tha devarathas* as a “soteriological realization”. It does not seem far-fetched that ṚV 10.39.12 conveys a shared or similar meaning.

chariot as allegorical for restraining the senses and mind. Such instances have been overlooked in documenting the application of yoga in *Ṛgveda*. As a result, its meaning and praxis has been reduced to a primitive and literal interpretation.

Conclusion

The dominant narrative that yoga in *Ṛgveda* refers to yoking horses to a chariot is more nuanced than has been documented. Even when maintaining a literal understanding, we find references where the yoking is accomplished via the mind. This indicates an understanding similar to the *Kāṭha* and *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣads*, where the horses are the senses or mind and the chariot is the body, the vehicle of movement. It suggests that yoga as a soteriological practice has its roots in *Ṛgveda* and the two *Upaniṣads* signify the continuation of a symbolic interpretation of yoking, horses and chariots.

The association between the intellect and yoga in ṚV 1.18.7 resembles KU 6.10-11, as it is also what is 'yoked' or restrained. It suggests that the first definition of yoga as stilling the activity of the senses, mind and intellect, is a condensing of its application in *Ṛgveda*. By understanding the yoking is mental, the presence of Indra indicates the achievement of sense-restraint. In the context of KU 3.4, where the senses as *indriya* are horses, Indra being requested to yoke his, such as in ṚV 5.43.5, indicate that his horses denote the same. Yoga in ṚV 10.114.9 referring to the yoking of the metres gives us a clue as to the function, purpose, and practise of yoga in *Ṛgveda*, suggesting that the chosen means for its attainment is mantra recitation.

Exploring yoga in *Ṛgveda* highlights recurring themes which require further study. Though there is evidence horses and chariots denote the activity of the senses, mind, and body, it is by no means conclusive. It is necessary to conduct a broader examination of their application throughout *Ṛgveda* to identify their significance in yoga. This entails reviewing the words for horse and chariot, their etymology and how it relates to their use in *Ṛgveda*. Whilst there is an association between *indriya*, Indra and their horses, a more comprehensive study is required to establish what they all symbolise.

This also applies to *Soma* and the *Aśvins* who, along with Indra, feature multiple times in yoga's application in *Ṛgveda*. A deeper look at the role of mantra in *Ṛgveda* and, more specifically, in its practise of yoga, is necessary to contextualise references to speech and metres such as ṚV 10.114.9. *Ṛgveda*'s application of yoga raises the question whether this is consistent throughout the *Samhitās*, *Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas* and *Upaniṣads*. Such an investigation will further contextualise the Vedic contribution to yoga, its place in the middle *Upaniṣads*, and its precursors.

Abbreviations

AĀ	<i>Aitareya Āraṇyaka</i>
BD	<i>Bṛhaddevatā</i>
ĪU	<i>Īśā Upaniṣad</i>
KU	<i>Kaṭha Upaniṣad</i>
N	<i>Nirukta</i>
ṚV	<i>Ṛgveda</i>
ŚB	<i>Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa</i>
ŚĪUB	<i>Śaṅkara's Īśā Upaniṣad Bhāṣya</i>
ŚU	<i>Śvetaśvatara Upaniṣad</i>
TS	<i>Taittirīya Saṃhitā</i>
VS	<i>Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā</i>

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