

The Philosophy of Yoga in Contemporary American Fiction

The Philosophy of Yoga in Contemporary American Fiction:

*Bellow, Salinger, Updike,
Vonnegut*

By

Sukhbir Singh

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Dedicated
to
Shri Pyarelal Khrub
my English teacher in school

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From Ajit Mokherjee's *Kundalini: The Arousal of the Inner Energy*
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INTRODUCTION

One can get the higher goals of spirituality by committing oneself to Yoga exercises.

(*Yajur Veda* 27: xxix)

Yoga is cessation of the mental fluctuations.

(*Yogasutras* I: ii)

This book falls within the tradition of the British and American writers' projections of India and the consequent critiques of their attitudes by both the Eastern and Western scholars. In adherence to this tradition, the book offers an appraisal of fictional discourse on yoga in America after the Second World War. The subject-matter comprises the detailed analyses of four Postwar/Postmodern American novelists' aesthetic transmutations of different yoga philosophies in the narratives of their four prominent fictions. The works chosen for the critical inquiry are Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970); J.D. Salinger's "Teddy" (1953); John Updike's *S.: A Novel* (1988); and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969).

What actually necessitates the elucidation of the above four works in the light of the yoga doctrines is their unique literary qualities. An analysis of the distinctive aesthetic features of these four prominent fictions, with an enhanced awareness of yoga contexts from the ensuing discussion, would yield an innovative and unconventional reading of their texts. It would also add a new dimension to the interpretation and understanding of the twentieth century American literature in general and contemporary American fiction in particular. Besides, the textual study would explore the so far unidentified vistas of comparative/interdisciplinary study of the Western literature in view of the Indic and other Eastern doctrines. It may further help comprehend the Eastern metaphysical philosophies from new perspectives, as seen through the eyes of the Western writers, and thereby enrich the readers' knowledge of the two fields on both sides.

In the course of inquiry, the book attempts: (i) to explicate the four texts in the light of the yoga doctrines interwoven in their narratives for the reader's deeper appreciation of the underlying metaphysical principles and patterns; (ii) to examine whether these novelists have added any new dimensions to yoga by their keen artistic perceptions and transmutations or they have

manipulated yoga to suit their personal ends and populist literary trends; (iii) to assess what a European or American reader who is new to yoga would learn and how an Eastern reader who is well acquainted with yoga would gain from the explorations of these four yoga fictions; (iv) to examine whether yoga has retained its native spirit in the fictional adaptations of the above mentioned American writers, or they have subverted and appropriated it in compliance with the postwar neo-colonial agenda of the United States.

Before embarking on the above mentioned four-pronged explication, it would be more rewarding to situate the yoga systems incorporated into the textures of the chosen four fictions—*Karma* Yoga, *Jnana* Yoga, *Kundalini* Yoga, and *Dhyana* Yoga—within the larger historical and philosophical contexts. It would unveil their growth as philosophy, religion, and a remedy for the physical and psychic ailments of the humanity at large. The contextualization is also necessary in view of the fact that contemporary yoga in its various forms and functions owes much to the ancient cosmological assumptions and conceptual formulations couched in the Hindu scriptures. In fact, it would be difficult for the reader to appreciate and enjoy these four yoga fictions without knowing the metaphysical substructures underlying their narratives. The reader's knowledge of the subsurface mystical motifs would lead to a deeper comprehension of the fictional transmutations of the four yoga systems and thereby facilitate unusual critical perspectives on the chosen fictional works.

The following chronological account of the history and philosophy of yoga would demonstrate the causes and conditions, forces and factors, responsible for the origin and growth of yoga in general and the above mentioned four yoga doctrines in particular.

Yoga is the greatest gift of Hindus to mankind. In the course of its history, yoga has traversed a long journey fraught with frequent ups and downs. It has slowly come of age and encompassed the entire world in its fold. It would indeed be profitable to examine the genesis and genealogy of this enchanting phenomenon—what we call Yoga—from the pre-*Vedic* period to the present day. How it has come to capture the universal consciousness, mesmerize millions, and magnetize the minds and bodies of the tough and tender alike? What stages and phases it has passed through and vicissitudes it has crossed over? Which influences and confluences it has undergone and alterations and adaptations it has absorbed during its passage from the steppes of Central Asia to the gymnasias of the modern world? Besides, it is crucial to examine whether yoga that millions practice today for mental peace and physical wellness has come down in the original form as it was

envisaged by the sages of yore. Actually, in my opinion, the above queries warrant serious attention because today many people do yoga enthusiastically and regularly in order to garner certain temporal benefits. But they hardly have any idea about how it developed from a lofty panacea for *moksha* or emancipation into a sporty dalliance for beauty and longevity. They don't even know how over the centuries its real objective metamorphosed into an illusory obsession for power and prosperity. Hence, it entirely befits the current context to trace the lineage of yoga from the pre-*Vedic* period to the present age. But it would be appropriate to first briefly examine the etymology and meaning of the seductive word "Yoga."

What is Yoga?

What, after all, is yoga—a philosophy, a religion, or merely a physical phenomenon? Actually, yoga assimilates all this and much more. The purpose and practice of yoga are known to millions in the yoga-stricken world today. But it is still not known to many with any certainty where, when, and how yoga as a discipline actually originated. Etymologically, the multivalent *Sanskrit* term yoga stems from the root word "yuj" which means to yoke, unite, add, hitch or bring two objects, concepts or ideas together. Historically, the Indo-Aryans, who spoke *Sanskrit*, first used the word "yoke," "yoge" or "yoga" several thousand years back. They originally lived in Central Asia but later moved over to the neighbouring Persia, Turan, and the proximal surrounding regions. The movement was necessary to escape religious persecution by their rival *Asurs* under the kingship of the mighty Yim (Yam).¹ In Central Asia, they were known as *Manavs* (children of Manu) or *Devs* (worshippers of *Devs* or gods). The Indo-Europeans or Aryans in Central Asia were semi-nomads and originally belonged to one large tribe comprising of nearly ten subgroups. They lived together peacefully for centuries and believed in one single cosmic power, *Tvasta*. Initially, the Aryans considered them as the progeny of Prajapati which Hindus continue to do even today. Besides, they were aware of the human soul and also of the Super-soul who in their view constantly held sway over the human affairs in the temporal universe. The Aryans would perform sacrificial rites and offer cooked food to the fire or *Agni* as oblations to the deities of the tribe with a view to seeking the desired boons. During the ritual, the priest(s) would merely hold the containers of food to the fire in a symbolic gesture of offering to the gods sojourning in the cosmos. Subsequently, the priest(s) would distribute the food among the attendees to sanctify them as the rightful recipients of the divine boons. Later, a faction of the Aryans started consigning offerings into the fire on the advice of the

seven Angiras *rshis* or sages. As a result, they split into two blocs of five subgroups each in disputation over the new practice. Those who put libations into the fire were known as *Devs* or *Manavs*. And, those who stuck to the old custom were known as the *Asurs*. The *Manav* was a dirty word for the *Asurs*, and the *Asur* was a filthy word for the *Manavs*. The *Manavs* faced severe hostility from the *Asurs* who favoured the old practice and were severely opposed to the consignment of food into the fire. As a result, both groups became sworn enemies and fought wars with each other for land, water, cattle, and the superiority of their respective religious practices. While going to wars, they would “yoke” (“yog” or “yoge” in *Sanskrit*) horses to their bay chariots of different designs and denominations. Possibly the *Sanskrit* speaking *Manavs* or *Devs* grew distinctly conscious of the nature/soul and Super-nature/Super-soul while staying in Persia. There they might have sensed a mystical consonance between the two (soul and Super-soul) and contemplated their “conjugation” for prosperity, victory in wars, physical strength or even spiritual exaltation (since they lived by faith). The word “yoge” or “yog” might have come handy to denote the process of communion between the nature/soul and the Supernature/Super-soul. Perhaps, in this way, yoga made an entry from the social parlance into the religious or spiritual arena. The vestiges of the supposed transference are extant in the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavadgita* (also written as the *Bhagavad Gita*) even after many millennia: “Know the atman to be the master of the chariot; the body, the chariot; the *buddhi* [intellect], the charioteer; and the mind, the reins.”² Besides, the images of the chariot wheel, spokes, nave, and felly are rampant in several other *Vedic* scriptures as well.³

One cannot even deny the possibility that yoga as an ancient tradition might have, on its own or as the constituent of an archaic soteriology, “exercised some important influence on the development of ancient Indian religious principles and practices.”⁴ It arouses two tentative speculations based on a common perception. First, it might be that both contemplative (yoga) and ritualistic (religions) modes of mystical propitiation grew up independently. The two might have originated separately in a common climate of spiritual fermentation among the Indo-Europeans in Central Asia and indigenous population in the Indus-Saraswati regions. Later, following the migration of the *Devs* or Indo-Aryans to the Indus basins, the two streams might have joined due to their common aims and affinities. Secondly, it might as well be that the yoga practice grew separately, in isolation of the propitiatory ritualism, out of man’s common quality of contemplation and infatuation with the mystical. Right from the inception man has been curious to know what lies beyond, behind or beneath the visible phenomena of the universe.

His primal curiosity has actually manifested consciously or unconsciously as a dual search— inside the unfathomable depths of his own self and outside into the infinite stretches of the cosmos. Man's probes into the mysteries of the outer cosmos might have resulted into the creation of various myths, rituals, and religions. And, his plunge into the inner recesses of the self might have resulted into the birth of yoga. However, their shared objective to know the *anajnata* (unknown) or to see the *adrshita* (invisible) in the microcosm and macrocosm respectively might in time have come closer and subsequently merged with each other. The speculation finds support from Karel Werner's stout affirmation that two crucial techniques of yoga discipline—*tapas* (austerities or latent "creative heat" in the body) and *dhyana* (meditation/*samadhi*)—grew outside of the orthodox religious domains. In his view, "First there must have been reached the psychological experience, accompanied by certain degree of awareness of what was going on, of a state of mind which came about as a result of some conscious or even calculated effort made in order to achieve some results, and this experience must have been accompanied by a sense of 'inflaming.' Only then could it have been elaborated into a religious concept and projected into the cosmic dimension as the original force which gave birth to 'That One' or through which 'That One' self-generated itself."⁵ Keeping in view the purely philosophical concern of the oldest *Upanishads* such as *Brihadaranyaka*, *Chandogya* and *Aitareya*, Werner further informs that the yogic concept of *dhyana* (meditation/*samadhi*) "has nothing to do with a mythological line of thought" and it originated from "an independent Yoga tradition outside the orthodoxy and philosophical circles."⁶ The *tapas*, meditation, and other yoga implements might have gradually attained eminence as a contending force against the popular soteriology or the emergent proto-religions of the period. The *Brahmanical* (priestly) class and believers in other archaic religious cults might have felt infatuated or intimidated by the acclaim of yoga. In that case, they might have got impelled, out of choice or panic, to integrate the ingredients of yoga with orthodox ritual practices in order to bolster the credibility and clientele of their respective sects. The significance of yoga as an ancient regimen for physical, psychic, and spiritual wellness (which is also the objective of the prominent religions) might have further ushered in its merger with other budding belief systems. Werner has therefore aptly noted that the "specific and efficacious Yoga techniques [such as concentration] were being introduced into the religious rituals in the hope that the latter would thereby be made effective."⁷

Yoga has taken diverse routes through differing ideological and metaphysical systems both orthodox and heterodox. For that reason, yoga has been

variously defined in physical, spiritual, and physio-mental terms. One of the earliest descriptions of yoga in physiological terms is available in the *Katha Upanishad* where *Yama*, the *Vedic* god of death, acquaints the new comer Nachiketas with what happens to the human soul after death: “When the five instruments of knowledge stand still, together with the mind, and when the intellect does not move, that is called the Supreme state. This, the firm control of senses, is what is called yoga.”⁸ The *Mrgendrat Tantra Yogapada*, a later day *Tantric* text, gives an equally terse but slightly advanced description of yoga: “When a person has controlled his senses, their objects, the subtle elements, and his mind, he becomes free of all desire and melts into his ultimate identity [it is known as yoga].”⁹ Lord Krishna in the *Bagavadgita* marks further improvement over the above definitions in his physio-mental delineation of yoga. He tells his disciple Arjuna, “The one fixed in equanimity of mind frees oneself in this life from vice and virtue alike; therefore, devote yourself to yoga; work done to perfection is verily yoga.”¹⁰

Hindus believe that God has endowed each entity or individual with unique physical, intellectual, spiritual, and moral resources. Much of these innate assets remains unrealized under the mist of *maya* or *avidya* (primordial ignorance) in normal circumstances. Because of people’s passionate engagement with the world, the three *gunas* or cosmic attributes of nature or *Prakriti*, i.e. *sattva* (pleasure/buoyancy), *rajas* (pain/action), and *tamas* (delusion/sluggishness), frequently manifest as the vicious *kleshas* (afflictions) of *avidya* (ignorance) in the form of desires, ego, and selfishness. The *kleshas* cause them immense suffering in the present life and rebirth in the next. They obstruct the ordinary person’s attempt to attain *vairagya* (dispassion or renunciation) necessary for deliverance. The supreme yogi, Lord Krishna, therefore tells Arjuna in the *Gita*, “The embodied one having crossed over these three Gunas out of which the body is evolved, is freed from birth and death, decay and pain, and attains to immortality.”¹¹ The yoga eliminates these vices and unplugs the submerged spiritual spouts in the *sadhaka*’s (practitioner’s) self. As yoga is practiced “more and more, so is the impurity more and more attenuated. And as more and more of it [impurity] is destroyed, so does the light of wisdom go on increasing more and more.”¹² Different yogic practices are meant for different physical and spiritual benefits. The seekers of salvation employ them to efface the boundaries of the physical and metaphysical, and *atman* (embodied soul) and *Paramatman* (Super Soul). The supreme objective of yoga is to break the *karma-guna-maya* nexus and thereby unite the human soul with the Supreme-soul. The union brings *sukha* (eternal joy), *shanti* (peace), and *nirvana* (liberation).

Central Asia: Early Yoga Speculations

Almost all historians unanimously agree that yoga originated in Central Asia and blossomed in the Indus-Saraswati regions of the North-Western India. Slowly, it spread out its rhizomes across the wider cultural domains in the North-Western and North-Eastern parts of India. Subsequently, the Buddhist monks carried yoga to China (*jhana/ch'an/dhyana*) and from there it sailed the choppy waters over to Japan (*ch'an/zen/dhyana*). As Buddhism spread across the other surrounding countries such as Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar, yoga too expanded its regime simultaneously. The Indo-Aryans migrated from Persia to the Indus Valley, and later from the Valley to the Northern and Western Europe (mostly for trade purposes). They carried yoga with them and therefore today it appears in many *avtars* such as *yoke* in Britain, *joug* in France, *joch* in Germany, *zugous* in Greece, *yugo* in Spain, and *igo* in Russia. "This is a process," observes David Gordon White, "that has been ongoing for at least two thousand years. Every group in every age has created its own version and vision of yoga. One reason this has been possible that its semantic field—the range of meanings of the term 'yoga'—is so broad and the concept of yoga so malleable, that it has been possible to morph it into nearly any practice or process one chooses."¹³ The historians may be largely correct in view of the recent evidences that have emerged from the archaeological excavations in the Indus-Saraswati basins. According to some scholarly speculations, the proto-*Upanishadic* traditions, proto-*Sankhya* ideas, and Sufism already existed among the Indo-Europeans in Central Asia.¹⁴ There the ancient seers discovered the "hidden light" and "generated the dawn" by their sincere prayers. Hence, it is probable that yoga evolved among the *Manavs* either as an alternative or an addendum to Sufism. Or, maybe, it grew independently and drew its ascetic ideas from the same source as Sufism. Harsh Cairae remarks, "The near identical spiritual practices of the Sufis and the Yogis point to their common origin."¹⁵ Cairae may be correct in the sense that philosophies of both the systems aim at *moksha* or liberation. It possibly happened after the separation of the *Manavs* from the *Asurs* and their subsequent stay in Persia. But it took place before the *Devs* or Indo-Aryans migrated from Persia to India because of religious persecution by the mighty Vistasp. Later, the Indo-Aryans moved to the Indus Valley with a prior knowledge of the proto-yoga and its archaic practices. Hence, yoga could be a pre-*Vedic* phenomenon or it could be at least as old as the *Vedas*. The *Yajur Veda* thus speaks about the later, mature form of yoga: "Whenever one gets accomplished in the observance of Yog, he is endowed

with both the powers, physical and intellectual, like the two hooves of a cow.”¹⁶

It is therefore possible that the earliest yoga speculations of the Indo-Aryans, which the faith-loving *Manavs* perhaps conceived in Persia, merged with the contemplative or propitiatory rites of the indigenous population. The Indo-Aryan word yoga might also have expressed equally appropriately the nature of the native contemplative procedures and therefore it might have found an uninhibited entry into the *Vedic* theology. It might as well have forged a link between the indigenous spiritual practices and Aryan soteriology. The *Sanskrit* word “yoge” or “yogam” finds its first mention in the *Rig Veda*, but it does not imply there what we know about it today. In the *Rig Veda*, it simply means “conjunction” (of “thoughts” or “metres”).¹⁷ However, it is not so very different from what it signified (yoke/yoge) to *Manavs* or *Devs* in Central Asia. Nevertheless, yoga slowly acquired spiritual connotations and in the later *Vedic* scriptures it conveyed what one presently knows about it. The current knowledge of yoga comes mainly from the ancient sources such as the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavadgita*, and *Yogasutras* (also written as *Yogasutra* or *Yoga Sutras* or *Yogadarshana*). However, prior to these scriptures, the *Yajur Veda* thus echoes the essence of *Yoga-Vedanta* mysticism: “It [God] moves, it is motionless. It is far distant, it is near. It is within this all, it surrounds this all externally.”¹⁸ Also, the *Atharva Veda*, subsequent to the *Yajur Veda*, strikes a similar note on the nature of the “One: ” “He who may know the stretched-out thread (*sutra*) into which these creatures are woven, who may know the thread of the thread, he may [indeed] know the great *brahman*.”¹⁹ The belief in the pervasion of the same Supreme-soul (“thread of the thread”) in all creatures subsequently became the seed source of the *Advait* (non-dual) philosophy in *Vedanta* and also Kashmir *Shaivism*. Both these spiritual systems have yoga at the heart of their religious principles and practices.

Indus-Saraswati Civilization: Pre-*Vedic* Proto-Yoga Speculations

The early 20th century archaeological excavations in the Indus-Saraswati Valley have unveiled the ancient remnants of the pre-*Vedic* proto-yoga prevalence. Such illustrious archaeologists as Sir John Marshall, E. Mackay, M.S. Vats, and Ramprasad Chanda diligently carried out the excavations. They excavated at Mohenjo-daro, Harappa, Kalibangan, Mehargarh, and several other sites across the Indus Valley regions.²⁰ Later, they showcased their findings in print and unveiled the existence of a highly advanced

civilization unmatched until then to any other on the earth. The excavated cultural artefacts such as steatite seals, stone statuettes, terracotta tablets, amulets, and a host of other baked clay figurines amply indicate that the contemplative tradition possibly pre-dated the *Vedas*. And, it was already in vogue among the indigenous people before the Indo-Aryans arrived the Indus-Saraswati Valley. Among the artefacts, two of the “Proto-*Shiva*” seals (# 420 & 222) specifically display three-horned male and female deities surrounded by animals, plants, trees, and various other indecipherable pictographs. They are shown sitting in yogic *asanas* or postures and *dhyana* or meditative moods.²¹ In addition, some other baked clay figurines bear the prayerful and postural shapes found in the actual yoga practices today. Of all the available material, these two seals have attracted the marked attention of Marshall, Mackay, Vats, and some other well-known archaeologists. In their opinion, the deities engraved on these two seals point to the existence of early yoga practices in the Indus Valley. However, the historians are divided in their views about the genders, types of postures, number of faces, shapes of the headgears, and some other minor features of the figures.²² Here, it would be safer to go with the majority view out of many.

According to the settled opinion, these two proto-*Shiva* seals and some other similar artefacts indicate that the *Shiva-Shakti* worship, which later bloomed into the dominant *Shaiva* and *Shakta* sects, pre-existed the Aryan migration to the Indus Valley. The seal # 420 (Mackay) supposedly depicts a three horned male divinity squatting folded legs on a low platform. The figure sits in a ritual posture and contemplative mind. It is surrounded by various beasts such as a lion, water buffalo, elephant, and rhinoceros. Two small deer or antelopes support the platform from below. Above on top are visible six pictographs and one “human stick figure.” The deity *vaguely* displays an erect phallus with two testicles visible on its both sides.²³ On this basis, Marshall analyses the “five-faced” (of which only three are visible) divinity as an “ithyphallic god” and tentatively identifies it with the *Vedic* deity Rudra and post-*Vedic* god *Shiva*—the god of procreativity and *pashupati* or the lord of the animals. In his view, “[T]he figure is in a typical *yoga* attitude, and Shiva was and still is, regarded as *Mahayogi*—the prince of *Yogis*.”²⁴ The archaeologists and researchers have so far ignored another significant implication of the three horned headgear and the bucranium head painted on the water-pot from Kot Dijian. If tilted *vertically*, they resemble the syllable *AUM* which is the primal creative sound in the *Rig Veda*. Hence, it is quite possible that the pre-*Vedic* proto-yogis chanted *AUM* while practicing concentration and it entered the Indo-Aryan soteriology due to the intermixing of their religious practices. The speculation gains credibility from the fact that the chant of *AUM* has been equally sacrosanct to both the

Vaishnavas and *Shaivas*. The upper end of *Shiva's trishul* or trident, which the scholars relate to the three horned headdress of the Indus deities, also resembles the sacred syllable *AUM*.²⁵ Besides, the Rudra or *Shiva* worshipper Vratyas in the *Atharva Veda*, who were the non-Aryan descendants of the Indus aborigines,²⁶ knew the secret of *AUM*. The scriptures inform that the "divine Vratya" named Vena taught the secret to the great *Vedic* saint King Prithu, a descendant of the mythical Dhruva *Bhakt* who was a reincarnation of Lord *Vishnu*.²⁷

The other seal # 222 (Mackay) has generated equal interest among the yoga historians. It depicts a female deity again sitting on a low platform in nearly the same posture as the horned divinity on the seal # 420. She wears a headdress of the fig leaves and a plant-like object protrudes from her womb. This possibly suggests her as the goddess, or "Mother Goddess,"²⁸ of the human and agricultural fertility. Both these seals relate to the crucial aspects of life in the Indus-Saraswati basins, where the chief preoccupations of the inhabitants were cattle breeding and agricultural farming. Their prosperity depended on fertility in both these domains. And, maybe, they performed some archaic rites to propitiate the god of animals and goddess of fertility for more children to toil on the farm, sufficient rains, a rich crop, and enhanced growth of the cattle. The cult of the female as fertility goddess or "Mother Goddess" has continued from the earliest times when women did agriculture and men stayed back home to take care of the children. In the beginning of the sowing season, the farmers of certain tribes and their female counterparts would perform a fertility rite. They would stall a piece of stone or a lump of soil in the field and smear it with vermilion, symbolic of the menstrual blood, to appease the fertility goddess for a rich crop.²⁹ In this context, Bhattacharya says, "As vermilion stands for menstrual blood, the act of smearing it on the stone implies the infusion of productive energy into the earth. Most of the figures of the Mother Goddess, such as the Venus of Willendorf, are painted red."³⁰ The female depiction on the seal recalls to mind the later *Tantric* symbolism of *linga* (phallus/tree) and *yoni* (vagina/womb) of the *Shiva-Shakti* cult in the Northern and North-Eastern parts of India. *Tantra* yoga prospered in these regions (Kashmir, Assam, Bengal and Odisha) in the early centuries of the Common Era.

On the contrary, commentators such as Sullivan, Srinivasa, Hildebeitel, and others have disagreed with the above interpretations of Marshall and others. They contend that the identification marks by which the engravings are interpreted as divinities coincide with similar expressions in other cults, sects, and religions of Europe and Asia.³¹ Their dissensions notwithstanding,³² it is very likely that there was a proto-religion in the Indus Valley and the

practice of postural concentration was prevalent among the pre-*Vedic* people. From the latest excavation of the conch shell (Harappa), shell ladle, fire pits (Kalibangan), one can further infer that the procedures of postural contemplation and fire ritual oblations to the indigenous divinities were the pre-Aryan forerunners of the later *Vedic* sacrificial rites and yoga disciplines. The speculations that these artefacts arouse are audible in sonorous and sacred strains from the ritual worship of the *Rig* and other *Vedas* of the Indo-Aryans.

Shamanism and Yoga: Correlation

While tracing the origin and growth of yoga from the ancient antiquity, one cannot ignore the close proximity of the Indus contemplative techniques with the shamanic practices. Shamanism flowed down from Siberia and soaked the soft soils of Mongolia, Northern India, and Tibetan plateau in the Himalayas. It is supposed to be much older (20,000 to 30,000 years) than the Indus Civilization and *Vedic* ritualism with its roots extending as far back as the Stone Age. The shamanic cults originated diversely in the aboriginal societies across the length and breadth of the pre-historic world. Though some core shamanic practices are common everywhere, many others vary from place to place and people to people. But they all share the standard practices of soul healing, flights through the ethereal abodes of the spirits, propitiatory incantations (mumblings), séance, sorcery, trance, hypnosis, and exorcism of the rogue spirits. They are germane to almost all forms of shamanisms in various primitive societies across the globe. The shaman adopts some of these measures to pass into the paranormal domains of the astral spirits. Feuerstein therefore says, “Shamanism is the sacred art of changing one’s awareness in order to enter non-ordinary realms of reality, which are experienced to be populated by spirits.”³³ The shaman “specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld.”³⁴ He is a “specialist in the human soul; he alone ‘sees’ it, for he knows its ‘form’ and its destiny.”³⁵ Yoga and shamanism closely correlate in the employment of the above tools, techniques, and philosophy—to alter the human consciousness and thereby mark a “radical shift in perceptual field.”³⁶ The shamanism is much older than yoga and Siberia is relatively closer to Central Asia. Keeping in view the ancient ancestry of shamanism, it would not be incorrect to speculate that the Indo-Europeans in Central Asia knew about the soul and the nether world or paranormal domains from the shamanic healing practices. It might as well be that the shamanic rites initially influenced *Manavs’* yoga practices and subsequently yoga grew larger due to the

spontaneous absorption of the proximal ingredients from other cults and cultures. Though there are several interlinks between shamanism and yoga, the following few are of paramount interest.

One of the foremost tenets of certain shamanisms is the symbolic initiation of the future shaman into a “new life” by “Dismemberment,” “Death,” and “Resurrection.”³⁷ It is a part of the miraculous “rope trick” which involves “ascent into the sky.” In this artifice the “demons” or “spirits” chop the novice’s body into pieces (dismemberment), scatter the severed limbs all around (death), and then they feed on the flesh and drink the blood. Later they reassemble the hacked parts and cover them with flesh to revive the neophyte back into a new life (resurrection). The new shaman thus acquires a “new body” and a “new life” after his initiation. Similarly, in yoga the *sadhaka* (practitioner) symbolically undergoes these three stages consecutively. First, he withdraws his five knowledge senses (*jnana indriyas*) inward, particularly the sexual organ, for the retention of the vital libidinal energy by continence or *pratyahara*. The withdrawal of senses induces dispassion or an attitude of “disengagement” toward the temporal world (dismemberment/castration). Next, he mortifies his old self, exhumes it in the inner heat of austerities or *tapas* generated by the constant practice of deep meditation or *samadhi* (ontological death). And, finally he is reborn into a “new life” or new consciousness of total freedom (*moksha*) from the tribulations of the temporal existence or *samsara* (resurrection). Secondly, the shaman or spirit healer sits cross-legged³⁸ in a séance during the process of ritual healing. He simultaneously chants or mumbles incantations to pass into the astral realms. There he captures the demonic spirit that has fled with the patient’s soul. The shaman retrieves the abducted soul from the rogue spirit and restores it to the patient. The cross-legged or lotus posture (*padmasana*) has been an inalienable aspect of the yoga practice since its inception. In this *asana*, the yogi sits “with the right foot resting on the left thigh and the left foot crossed over the right leg.”³⁹ In normal life, the *prana* or vital energy flows inequitably through various parts of the body. The *padmasana* provides “a stable triangular base which sustains the ‘closed circuit’ of the energy field.”⁴⁰ This posture facilitates a smooth and equitable flow of the vital energy (*prana*) through all parts of the body. It is the substratum of almost all other *asanas* practiced in the *Hatha* or postural yoga across the world today. Yogi Swatmarama terms *padmasana* as the “destroyer of all diseases.”⁴¹ He further comments, “The Yogi who, sitting with Padmasana, can control breathing, there is no doubt, is free from bondage.”⁴² In shamanism, concentration or meditation is as significant as in yoga technology. The practice is supplemented with the sounds of drums, click sticks, and rattles. These sounds intensify the concentration and

thereby facilitate the meditating shaman's entry into the non-normal states of consciousness. Likewise, in yoga the holy chant of the chosen *mantras* or *Pranav AUM* or the sacred sound of a conch shell or a metal bell transports the meditating yogi into the transcendental states of consciousness: "The mind is like a serpent, forgetting all its unsteadiness by hearing the nada [sacred sound], it does not run away anywhere."⁴³ For that reason, many Indian yogis and fakirs carry various musical instruments. They dance and sing holy songs to the accompaniment of music which expedites their passage into the state of a shaman-like ecstasy. Furthermore, the shaman wields a "mastery over fire" outside and a control over "heat" inside the body. In the "heat" induced ecstasy, he can touch "white-hot iron, swallows burning coals, because he cannot do otherwise; he is obliged to test the new, superhuman condition to which he has now attained."⁴⁴ By producing the inner heat magically ("magical heat"), the shaman performs miracles—he transcends the physical laws and "create[s] new conditions of existence in the cosmos."⁴⁵ Likewise, in yoga the *sadhaka* monitors the interior temperature by ascetic means, i.e., meditation, *tapas*, control over senses (*pratyahara*), and regulation of breath (*pranayama*) and mind. The yogi can increase or decrease the inner heat to the desired degrees. By this, he can endure the extreme heat and cold (*titiksha*)—sit naked for hours in front of or surrounded by the burning shoals. He can as well meditate for a long period in the sub-zero temperature of the Himalayas. The Tibetan Naropa's yoga of "psychological heat" or "*tum-mo*" is a burning example of the inner heat management. Eliade writes, "Some Indo-Tibetan initiatory ordeals consist precisely in testing a candidate's degree of preparation by his ability, during winter night snowstorm, to dry a large number of soaked sheets directly on his naked body."⁴⁶

In the yoga paradigm, the *samana* wind, one of the five vital airs in the human body, stays around the navel and assimilates *prana* (life energy) to the food. The *samana* facilitates an easy digestion of the food and its equitable distribution in all parts of the body. Patanjali informs in the *Yogasutras* that the yogi can master over *samana* by meditating over it: "*Samanajayajjvalanam*" (By mastery over the vital force called Samana, the vital fire [of energy]).⁴⁷ The control over the *samana* wind enables the *sadhaka* to monitor the inner fire for the extraction of maximum energy from the food. The *tapas* or inner heat incinerates the yogi's *karmic* impurities (negative *samskaras*), carried from the earlier lives. The latencies do not germinate again like the roasted seeds and consequently the yogi attains liberation from *dukkha* or suffering in the present life and *punarjanma* or rebirth in the next. The shaman or witch doctor leaves his body and takes an "ecstatic flight" into the astral domains inhabited by the

ancestral souls or evil spirits. There he chases the wicked spirit that has hijacked the sick person's soul in the non-ordinary subterranean realms. Actually, this is the primary motive of the shaman—"to abandon his body and rise to heaven or descend into hell—not to let himself be 'possessed' by his assisting spirits, by demons or souls of the dead; the shaman's ideal is to master these spirits, not to let himself be 'occupied' by them."⁴⁸ Likewise, in yoga, according to Patanjali, the practitioner ascends eight steps on the ladder (rope in the case of a novice shaman) of meditation from the *Samprajnata* (*sabija* or with seed) *samadhi* to *Asamprajnata* (*nirbija* or seedless) *samadhi*, and further on to *Dharma Megha* ("Cloud of Virtue") *samadhi*. In the last stage of *Kaivalya* ("Absolute Oneness"), the yogi enjoys the spiritual bliss (*ananda/ecstasy*) of total liberation (*moksha*). His ego melts in the heat of *tapas* and his contact with the world gets burnt up. In that state, the yogi enjoys the capability to abandon his body and ecstatically roam in the timeless realms of pure consciousness, knowing all that *was*, *is*, and *will be*. Besides, the celestial flights of gods and goddesses, their disappearance at one place and appearance at another, are common in the Hindu epics and *Puranas*. For instance, *Veer* Hanuman in Valmiki's *Ramayana* and *Devrshi* Narada in Vyasa's *Mahabharata* undertake aerial flights to the far-off Himalayas and Mount Meru respectively. In this context, Eliade aptly observes, "This macranthropic experience, which is rooted in shamanic ecstasy, persists in Buddhism and has considerable importance in Yogic-tantric techniques."⁴⁹ According to Patanjali, a yogi can acquire similar *siddhi* or paranormal power of "magical flight" by doing *Samyama* [*dharna/concentration-dhyana/meditation-samadhi/deep meditation in succession*] on five elements of the matter, i.e., ether, air, fire, water, and earth. As a result, he can become smallest (*Anima*), tallest (*Mahima*), lightest (*Laghima*), heaviest (*Garima*), walk on the water, and fly in the air (III: 42, 44-45).⁵⁰ The shaman can also appear and disappear physically (without leaving his body behind) as a part of the ritual practice. Similarly, the yogi in the higher stages of transcendence can acquire such *vibhuti* or *siddhi*. Patanjali further conveys in the *Yogasutras*, "By *Samyama* on the body form (follows) suspension of perceptible waves thereof, thence disconnection with the light of the eye, and invisibility."⁵¹ The affinity between the shaman, yogi, and the technologies they both employ in their respective vocations testify to the transfer of ideas and attributes from the shamanism to yoga.

Vedic Proto-Yoga Motifs

The four *Vedas*—*Rig Veda*, *Sam Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*—are collectively known as *Shruti* (revealed in ecstatic visions and transmitted orally). They emerged from the *Vedic* seers' or *rshis*' mystical union or yoga with the cosmic spirit(s) in "visionary meditation." The conjunction facilitated revelations of the metaphysical truths in their visions and they expressed them through the melodic poetry of the sacred *mantras* (holy chants). Nevertheless, the *Vedic* rites, hymns, and sitting postures of the *hotrs* or priests during the sacrificial ritual resonate with the echoes of the shamanic practices. The shamanism possibly made inroads into the *Vedas* following the merger of the homogenized meditative practices of the Indo-Aryans with the indigenous contemplative procedures of the Indus Valley aborigines. As discussed above, the shamanic ideas supposedly influenced the archaic practices on both sides (Aryan and tribal). For instance, the *Vedic* rites played more or less the same purificatory and propitiatory role as the shamanic observances, incantations, and flights into the ethereal domains. Therefore, Shearer says, "[T]he sounds of the *mantras*, irrespective of any translated meaning they may have, are credited with a potent resonance that purifies, heals and enlivens the physiology at various levels."⁵² The *Rig Veda* carries many instances of the shamanic healing of the dying or sick by "calling back" or retrieval of the patient's "fugitive soul."⁵³ The "long haired" *keshin* in the "Keshin Sukta" of the *Rig Veda* (X. 136), "girdled with wind," "rode to the wind" in the "intoxication of ecstasy." The "long haired" is not only reminiscent of the flying shaman but also of the "Ekavratya" in the *Atharva Veda* and the later *Tantric siddhas* (adept yogis) such as Matsyendranath and Gorakshnath who were capable of doing the similar miraculous feats. Besides, the shamanic "World Tree" or "Sky Pole" at the "Centre of the Earth" is identical with "Sakamba" in the *Atharva Veda* and the numbers 3, 7, 9, and 33 are sacred in both the *Vedas* and certain North Asian shamanisms. The shamanic practices have personal and social welfare in view. The shaman is not only an individual healer but also a community physician. Similarly, the *Vedic* sacrificial ceremonies *griha* or *homa* benefits a family and *shrouta* or *yajna* profits the whole community. As Sjoberg states it succinctly, "The chief purpose of the sacrifice was to please the gods and thus obtain special favors from them. The rituals and the formulae that could attract the deities to the sacrifice and induce them to grant such boons were known only by the priests."⁵⁴

However, the *Vedic* sacrificial rituals have much deeper cosmological meaning, unlike the shamanic rites. They cannot be dubbed as mere

“shamanic ecstasy” or “shamanic technique.” The *Vedic* seers were no magicians or shamanic witch doctors. They are compared in the *Vedas* with “light” which “has always been a symbol of higher spirituality, purity and intelligence.”⁵⁵ The shaman’s physical disappearance, if at all it actually happens, may be due to an archaic artifice or shamanic *siddhi* similar to the ones Patanjali mentions in the *Yogasutras* (III). But, the “long haired” *muni*’s foray far into the air “is not a physical event, but a psychological one. It is an inner journey with a vision of ‘all forms’ (*visva rupa-eva cakasa*), an archetypal experience of a high spiritual significance which cannot be dismissed by saying that it points ‘rather to a shamanic technique’ as ELIADE does.”⁵⁶ Besides, the *Vedic rshis* were visionary ascetics, mystic poets, “whose wisdom burst forth [during those visionary moments of inner illumination] in rhythmic poetry and highly symbolic language: the astounding hymns of the *Vedas*.”⁵⁷ They “won their sacred visions by their own hard work—their austerities and their deep impulse toward spiritual enlightenment.”⁵⁸ The *Vedic* ascetics were the seers (*rshis*) and sages (*munis*) whose visions and wisdom revealed the mystical truths to the common people which were otherwise hidden from their minds and eyes. The above *Vedic* sacrificial rituals have the fundamental ingredients of yoga deeply entrenched in their compositions and performances which resurface in the subsequent yoga technology. In this context, Karl Werner rightly affirms that “it has been more generally accepted that the Vedic ritual contained elements which coincided with the ‘later’ Yoga practices and were then developed and elaborated. Some of these elements are supposed, as stated, have originated in the shamanist rites accompanied by ecstatic trances.”⁵⁹

The head of the family and his wife would perform the *griha* or *homa* ritual every day before the sunrise and after the sunset. All members and guests of the clan would attend the ceremony. It would appease the family deities who would in return bless the householders with good health and lasting happiness, longevity and prosperity. The couple would imbibe the family deity through contemplation aided by the recital of the *Vedic mantras* and offerings to the fire. The oblations would normally be the vegetarian items such as *soma* (extract of a certain creeper), barley, cooked food, clarified butter (*ghee*), and milk mixed with water, etc. The sacrificer or *yajman*, his wife (*yajmani*), and other participants would get divined by the propitiation and absorption of the cosmic power(s). It would facilitate a coalition or yoga of the inner selves of the performers and the beneficent cosmic force(s) of their invocations. The performance of the *shruta* or *yajna* sacrificial rituals such as *Soma-sacrifice*, *Jyoti-stoma*, *Rajasuya*, and *Ashva-medha* would take place outside in the open amidst a gathering of the native folk. There

were no temples for the deities in the *Vedic* period. The sacrificer and his wife (*bharya*) would observe austerities (purification, fasting, meditation, and silent chants or prayers, etc.) before the ritual to stimulate *tapas* or “curative heat” in their bodies for the intrinsic purgation. The observances would facilitate the deity’s easy absorption into their minds and hearts during the ceremony. The *hotr(s)* or priest(s) would build the fire altar(s) according to the *Vedic* cosmological injunctions, i.e. length, width, height, layers, and location. They would simultaneously chant the necessary *mantras* from the four *Vedas*. The priest would burn the fire and consecrate it with the designated *Vedic* hymns. The holy fire would act as a courier of oblations to the deity of the tribe. In this case, the oblations or the deity’s share (as it was called), conveyed in the form of fire offerings, would be mostly the same as in the *griha* ritual, except the *mansa* or meat of the sacrificial animal. The priest would recite the allotted *mantras* in varying tonal rhythms by regulating his breath accordingly. “A mantra is,” says Agehananda Bharati, “composed of certain letters arranged in a definite sequence of sounds of which the letters are the representative signs. To produce the desired effect mantra must be intoned in the proper way.”⁶⁰ In the process, the priest, sacrificer, his wife, and other participants from the community would visualise the deity mentally (“visual meditation”) for its fusion or yoga with their embodied souls. The rite would last from a day to many months or a year. The mystical purpose of the sacrifice in both the rituals would be to re-establish *ṛta* or order in the cosmos and correspondingly in the bodies of the sacrificer, priest, and other attendees.

The ideas of immortality and transmigration were known to the *Vedic* sages. These concepts became the paramount objective of all the later yoga disciplines. The primary motive of the *Vedic* sacrifices was a life of one hundred years, blessed with prosperity, free from suffering, all in compliance with the cosmic order as envisioned by the *Vedic* seers in their profound contemplations. Beyond this, the sacrifice was meant to seek from the deity a boon of stay in the heaven with gods after death or endowment of the divine qualities of a god in the next life. In this regard, Jean Miller observes, “The quest of [immortality] was ultimately the quest of every mortal. In the meanwhile, the ordinary man was content with a full life of a hundred years of vitality, a boon for which one finds many a prayer, hence, one step at a time sums up the attitude: enjoyment of this earthly life first, then the heavenly reward.”⁶¹

There was actually no obvious adherence to the regular yoga procedures in the *Vedic* sacrificial ceremonials. Nevertheless, the observances of asceticism, austerities or *tapas*, sitting posture (*padmasana*), “visual meditation”

(*dhyana*), and breath control (modulation) while chanting the holy hymns or *mantras* in varying intonations (*pranayama*) paved the way for Patanjali's *Ashtang* Yoga. In addition, the mental conception of and harmonization with the deity during deep meditation (*dirghadhyana*) and performance of the liturgy with full piety and perfection blended with the later *Vedanta*, *Tantra* and other yoga doctrines as their vital philosophical and performative ingredients. The practice of preliminary austerities, holy chants, and "visual meditation" also became the inalienable aspects of the Buddhist and Jaina yogic practices.

Sacred Vratyas: Early Pioneers of Yoga

No consistent and credible account of the Vratyas' origin and religions is available today except in the "Vratya Kanda" of the *Atharva Veda* (XIV-XV). This Kanda reveals that the Vratya ascetics gave a powerful push to the advancement of the yoga metaphysics in the post-*Vedic* period. The available details inform us that the Vratyas were a "martial brotherhood" of the wandering nomads. They roamed in rickety horse carts over a vast territory of the Northern and North-Eastern regions of India for a long time. They finally settled in the Magadha region, presently known as the state of Bihar in India. The Vratya man supported a long beard and matted hair; he could be identified by his peculiar clothing ensemble. It consisted of a black turban, black dress with red borders for the upper garment, and two pieces of deer skin double-folded and tied together for the lower garment. Two pieces of black and white skin of a ram or a deer slung over his shoulders, sandals in the feet, silver rings in the ears, and the necklaces of multi-coloured beads around his neck. He carried an "unstrung bow" and a spiked (lance type) stick in his hands.⁶² The bow and the stick were the early versions of the staff that the *Ajivikas* later carried and the monks of certain orders in India bear even today. The Vratyas moved either in single or in groups of thirty-three and lived in make-shift settlements on the fringes of the *Vedic* society. They chose the ancient Magadha for the final settlement because in this region the native population was dominant and the *Brahmanical* influence was minimal. Therefore, the people of this region were more tolerant to the Vratyas' transgressive rituals and heterodox ways of living than the Indo-Aryans elsewhere. (Possibly for the same reason Buddha chose Magadha for his enlightenment and religious activities which were not in consonance with the *Vedic* ritual practices.)

The paucity of information about the Vratyas might be for the reason that the Aryans in India, who disliked them for their heretical ways of living,

obliterated the records of their soteriology. Being a splinter group of the pre-*Vedic* population in the Indus Valley, the Vratyas had allegiance to the native cults, rituals, customs, and other practices of the Valley aborigines. They dissented with the Indo-Aryans and rejected their sacrificial rituals in defiance to the authority of the *Vedas*. The opposition mainly arose from their distaste for the animal sacrifice in the *Vedic* rituals. Some historians even believe that the Vratyas clashed with the Indo-Aryans to prevent their migration from Persia to the Indus Valley.⁶³ Their primitive beliefs and errant practices as available in the *Atharva Veda* exhibited the traces of the shamanic rites and pre-*Vedic* archaic rituals. On that count, the Indo-Aryans detested them and pushed the entire Vratya community to the margins of the mainstream *Brahmanical* society. However, the Vratya metaphysics did not remain completely untouched by the Aryan ritual practices. Some of their ceremonies indeed reflected the influence of the *Vedic* religion notwithstanding their avowed aversion to *Vedism*. The presence of the *Vedic* elements in the Vratya ceremonial could as well be for the reason that both hailed from the same cultural milieu in the Indus Valley and shared some of the native gods, goddesses, beliefs, and ritual practices. It might also be possible that the Vratyas consciously included the *Vedic* element in their soteriology to strike a competitive equality with the *Vedic* ritualism. Or, it might as well be the conscious endeavour of the Vratyas toward a slow merger of their religious principles and practices with the *Vedic* theology. This fructified subsequently with the acceptance of the *Atharva Veda* as one of the four *Vedas* and inclusion of certain Vratya transgressive performative techniques in the *Shaiva* and *Shakti Tantras*. The admiration of the Vratyas in the *Atharva Veda* (which was possibly composed in the Magadha region) singularly pointed to the significance of their community and cosmology in the regions of their habitation. Perhaps for this reason, the Indo-Aryans devised a “fourfold” purificatory ritual known as *Vratyastoma* to ceremonially include the “holy Vratyas” into the mainstream the Aryan society.

The Aryan priests performed *Vratyastoma* differently for the people of different age groups and economic status. This initiatory/purificatory ritual led to the acceptance of their beliefs and rituals by the *Brahmanical* orthodoxy. Consequently, their cosmology and ceremonial were included in the *Vedic* religion. However, even after their conversion, the Vratyas were not satisfied with the *Vedic* sacrificial ritualism and continued their speculations “on the inner meaning of the sacrifices and [their] bold speculations led to the theories of creation, theories about the soul, material body, senses, organs of senses, organs of action. About vital airs, about the elements of matter, about nature of the earth, heaven, gods, unity of

godheads, unity of spirit and matter...The extra sacrificial ideas of the *Aranyakas* and the *Upanishads* may be attributed to this grand fusion of the Aryans and the Vratyas.”⁶⁴ Some scholars even believe that the *Vedic* Aryans did not know the concepts of “*Karma*” and “Reincarnation.” They learnt them from the Vratyas and other indigenous people of the Indus Valley and Gangetic plains.⁶⁵

A class of the “heterodox holy men,” the Vratyas practiced “sympathetic magic, exorcism, ritual dancing and cursing their opponents.”⁶⁶ Their chief deity was the *pre-Vedic/Vedic* god Rudra “essentially a mountain deity, wearing braided hair, whose colour is brown and red. He is clothed in skin, he is an archer, fierce, destructive like a terrible beast, a malevolent destroyer.”⁶⁷ The leader of a Vratya herd was known as the “Ekavratya,” a prototype of Rudra who later “developed into Siva.” Eliade has noted that “in some commentaries Rudra is called *vratya-pati*, and the *Mahabharata* still uses the term *vratya* to designate the Sivaistic bacchantes.”⁶⁸ While roaming around prior to their settlement, they used the carts as altars for the performance of their sacrificial rituals. Each group was bound by a *vrat* or an oath which fostered among the members a deep sense of togetherness and strict allegiance to the values, customs, and conventions of the community. The hallmarks of their conduct and belief were celibacy and devotion to the *Vedic* gods Rudra, Agni, and Vayu. They knew the secret of *AUM* (*Vedic udgitha*) and three winds or vital energies: seven *prana*, seven *apana*, and seven *vyana*.⁶⁹ The *Brahmanical* sages or the *Upanishadic* saints later included the *samana* and *udana* winds in the above set of three. Every year the Vratya communes would perform a midsummer fire ceremony known as *Mahavrat* or “Great Vow.” In this ceremony, the Vratya priest or *hotr* would conduct the sacrificial rite and the “sacred prostitute” known as *pumshchali* (“man enchantress” or a proto version of the *Vedantic maya* or *Prakriti*) and the celibate *magadha* (“world creator” or a proto form of *Purusha*) would enact the ritual sex to symbolically mark the “cosmic creative union” of the god (*Purusha*) and goddess (*Prakriti*). The occasion would also be marked by railing, profane gestures, obscene dialogues, and the archaic fertility ritual of the priest’s going up and down on a swing. The priest would mumble sacred words or a prayer on the swing referring to the three winds (*apana*, *prana*, *vyana*). The Vratyas believed in the ascendance of the soul to heaven and they assumed the swing as the “ship bound for heaven.”⁷⁰ Their symbolic journey to the heaven is reminiscent of the shaman’s ecstatic flight into the ethereal world of spirits and the *keshin*’s rapturous ride on the winds in the *Rig Veda*.