Need for Global Standards in Yoga Training

Yoga has been practiced as self-discipline to attain physical, mental and spiritual well-being from time immemorial. The declaration of June 21st as the International Day of Yoga by the United Nations Organization gave the most needed global recognition for Yoga in recent years.[1] Yoga, as an ancient Indian tradition, has also been inscribed as the 13th intangible cultural heritage in UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of humanity during the 11th session of the Intergovernmental Committee held in 2016.[2] However, the evidence-based approach is also responsible for an increased scope of its applications, including health and disease.

With the increasing demand for Yoga instructors and therapists, there is a sudden surge in individuals and institutions offering training programs in Yoga. With no regulatory process in place, the diversity and flexibility in designing and delivering such Yoga programs have become the primary reason for compromised quality education.

There has been a paradigm shift in professional Yoga education in the last two decades concerning curriculum, duration and the proposed carrier prospects. This new understanding has changed the perspective of Yoga education resulting in individuals moving from short-term training programs to a full-fledged University-based programs. However, the minimal standards concerning core topics, duration, comprehensive curriculum and appropriate evaluation methods are less defined globally.

India has the distinction of bringing Yoga to higher education, providing multiple training options ranging from a certificate program of 6 months to an undergraduate, postgraduate, and a full-time doctoral program. India follows a three-tier approach with (i) a structured framework along with defined standard processes as per the affiliated / degree offering University, (ii) regulated by the University Grants Commission (UGC) and (iii) assessed and accredited by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). With the introduction of the National Education Policy 2020, offering Yoga-based credits under interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches in education is expected to increase substantially.[3]

Unfortunately, there is no reference standard at a global level either for curriculum development or teaching-learning methods or for an evaluation concerning Yoga training.

The World Health Organization has developed standards for training in various traditional, complementary and integrative medical systems that originated and evolved in their native countries worldwide. Such benchmark documents are available for Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine, Naturopathy, etc., and it is a welcome sign that WHO has initiated the process of creating a benchmark document for minimum standards in Yoga training. Benchmarks intend to serve as a reference document which would address issues related to minimum standards for professional training & practice of Yoga with a particular emphasis given to health systems, ensuring professional training and patient safety. It is the need of the hour that a reference benchmark document is prepared and made available for the governments, policymakers, training institutes in Yoga, and individuals hoping to join such training programs.

In a training program, it is essential to bring grosser and subtle dimensions of Yoga about traditional and classical approaches, supported by scientific evidence, to provide the trainee with the required knowledge based on the desired objectives. Though asanas (physical postures) have become the face of Yoga in recent times, an integrated approach combining pranayama (regulated breathing), relaxation, meditation, and kriyas (internal cleansing practices) along with the moral, ethical and lifestyle-related injunctions, i.e., Yamas (restraints) and Niyamas (observances) is mandatory to provide comprehensive and professional training in Yoga. The Philosophy of Yoga which is generally neglected forms the foundation and hence plays an important role. Cultural differences should be considered while designing curricula and generalizing practical techniques.

Moving towards digital and open learning methods, the use of technology for course delivery and evaluation can facilitate global outreach. However, online training can never be considered a replacement for classroom-based in-person training. Blending physical (in-person) training with online methods can provide a better solution while offering Yoga based training programs. It is more relevant while offering Yoga therapy-based programs, as the trainees should receive hands-on training in a clinical set-up.

Hence, it is essential to have global standards in Yoga training which can promote both Yoga philosophy and practice, which are traditionally rooted and scientifically validated.

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