

PROGRAM AND PANELS

YOGA AND MUSLIM SOCIETIES: TRANSREGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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PANEL 1.

TEXTS AND PRACTICES IN PERSIANATE SOUTH ASIA

Jason Birch (SOAS, London), “Textual and Postural Exchanges between Yogis and Sufis”

This paper will examine parallel passages between the Persian work called the *Baḥr al Ḥayāt* and an unpublished Hindi work referred to as the *Pavanavijayasvarodayabhāṣānibandha* in its colophons. Both works describe a collection of twenty-two yogic postures (*āsana*), some of which are also in two Sanskrit texts that date to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The parallels between the Persian and Hindi are so close that they shared the same source. The collection of *āsanas* in question appears to have been known by ascetic traditions of the Mewar and Dhundhar regions of Northwest India, and was attributed to Mohandās, who was a direct disciple of Dādū, the founder of the Dādūpanth. This paper will provide examples of how these postures were adapted for a Sufi audience and will propose two scenarios that may explain the direction of borrowing. It will conclude by pointing to other shared topics within the *Pavanavijayasvarodayabhāṣānibandha* and *Baḥr al Ḥayāt* that are likely to be important for further research.

James Mallinson (SOAS, London), “Inverted physical postures in premodern Hindu and Muslim religious practice”

The headstand has become an iconic image of yoga practice, in particular in its recent global manifestations. Within the Sanskrit textual tradition, it becomes well established relatively late, in the second half of the second millennium CE. There are ancient precedents for the use of inverted postures by Indian ascetics, however. The oldest of these is the “bat penance”, hanging upside down, usually from a tree. This is mentioned in the Pali Canon and was practised widely until the end of the 19th century. It is also attested in China and Java. In this paper I shall make a preliminary comparison of this ascetic technique with a similar practice from the Islamic tradition, known as *chillah-i ma’kūs*, in which the practitioner is suspended upside down in a well. Its best-known Sufi practitioner was Shaikh Faṛīd al-Dīn Ganj-i-Shakar (1175–1265). Other

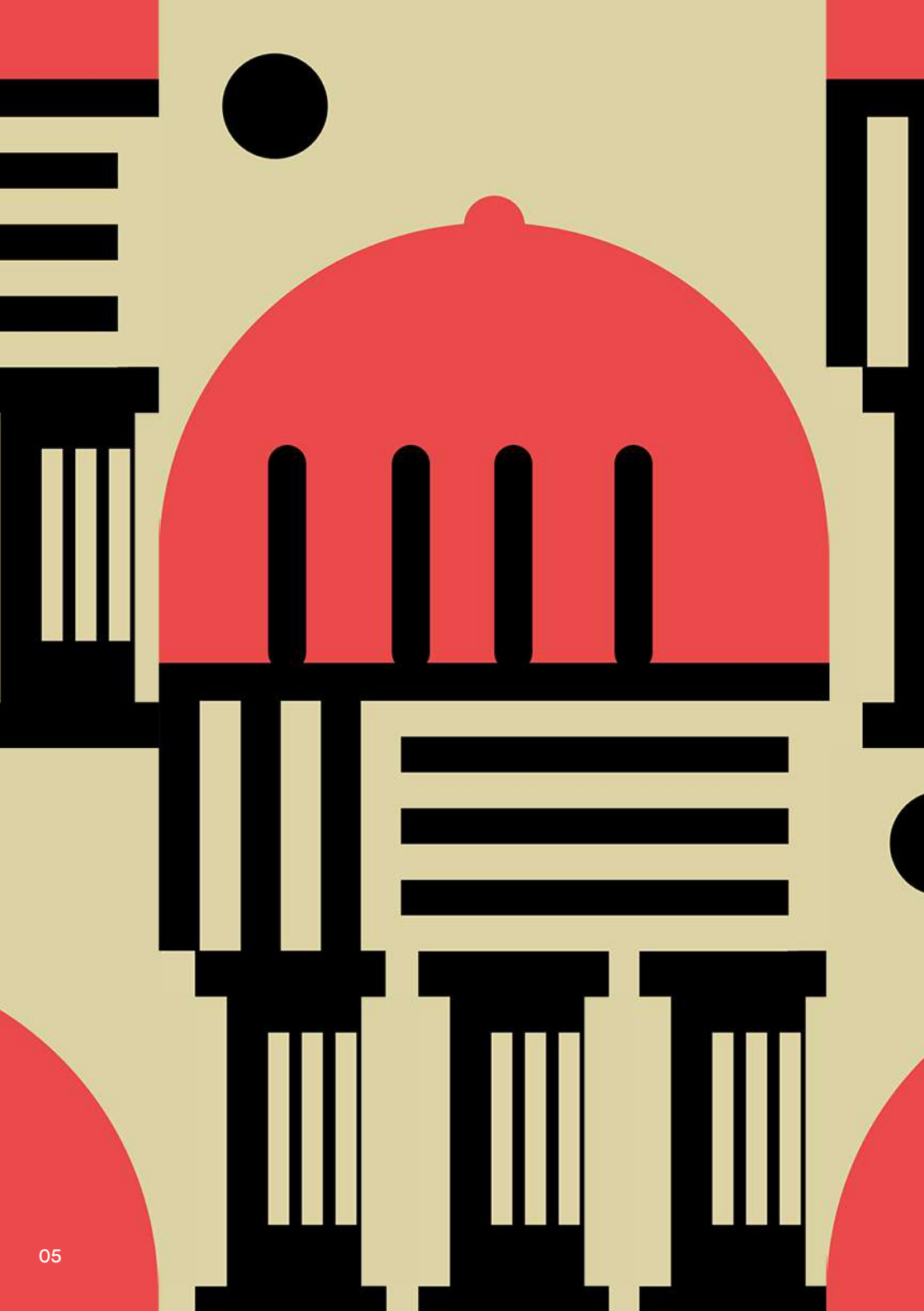
Sufis are said to have practised it too, including Abū Saʿīd (b. 967) in Persia, and my ethnographic enquiries indicate that it is still practised, albeit in secret. The motive for its practice by Sufis will be analysed in the light of the alternative modalities of inversions practised by Hindu ascetics, which can be a method of tapas, self-mortification, as well as a technique of yoga used to rejuvenate the body.

Carl W. Ernst (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), “Who are the Siddha Jogis in Muhammad Ghawth’s Bahr al-hayat?”

One of the most important sources for understanding Sufi engagement with yoga is the Bahr al-hayat, written in 1550 by Muhammad Ghawth. This text, an expanded version of a previous Persian translation of the Arabic Hawd al-hayat, contains frequent references to siddha jogis and their practices and teachings, but it provides no direct information on who these people were or how the Sufi master knew them. In this paper, I will summarize the key points that Muhammad Ghawth makes about the identification of these jogis, and in connection with some autobiographical remarks that he makes in another writing, I will suggest what kind of jogis he had in mind.

Jean Arzoumanov (University of Chicago, Chicago), “‘A chain of jōgīs’: Persian descriptions of Yogis from the Mughal to the Colonial period”

Building upon Simon Digby’s and Carl Ernst’s seminal studies on the transmission of Yoga and the depiction of Yogis in Persian sources from India, this paper will present several Persian texts ranging from the 16th century to the 19th century. Already at an early period, Yogic teachings and Yogis had become part and parcel of the Persian literary culture produced in India. Described in poetical works such as that of Amir Khusraw Dihlavi (1253-1325), Yogis were typified as ascetics yielding supernatural powers. The first part of the paper will concentrate on the Haft aḥbāb and the Ruṣd-nāma, two Persian texts associated with the Indian Sufi shaykh ʿAbd al-Quddūs Gangōhī (d. 1537), which display a distinct influence from Yogic practices. Remarkably, these two works, devoted for the first to alchemy and for the second to Islamic religious practice,



feature several couplets in vernacular Hindavi from the Nath Yogi tradition. The second part will give an overview of several Indo-Persian texts which describe «jōgīs» amongst other Indian religious groups. The latest of a group of texts composed for British colonial officials is the Tašrīh al-aqvām (1825) commissioned and/or composed by the Anglo-Indian military officer James Skinner. This fascinating ethnographic text gives a long description of Nath Yogis' doctrine and practices based on the oral testimony of Amrit Nāth Jōgī.

Torsten Tschacher (Heidelberg University, Heidelberg), “Speaking the Lord in the Tongueless Lotus: Yogic Anthropology in Tamil Islamic Poetry”

Beginning in the seventeenth century, a genre of writing developed among Muslims in the Tamil-speaking regions of South India and Sri Lanka known as “songs of gnosis” (Tamil: meyññāṅappāṭal), nowadays often, and somewhat misleadingly, dubbed as “Sufi poetry”. Islamic “songs of gnosis” combined cosmologies and anthropologies current in Sufi traditions with a terminology derived from local Śaiva siddha poetry and practices associated with Yoga. While the heyday of these “songs of gnosis” lay in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they are still popular and regularly republished and recited not only among sections of Muslim society, but also among Hindus in the region. Scholarship has tended to emphasize either the “Hindu” aspects of this poetry, reading “songs of gnosis” as the product of accommodation or ignorance in a convert society, or it has highlighted connections to Sufism over the local elements and terminologies. Both approaches necessarily ignore important aspects of these songs and the social context from which they emerge in order to be able to read them as either fundamentally Yogic or Sufi.

In this paper, my aim is to gain a better understanding of how supposedly “Hindu” elements in these “songs of gnosis” operate within a self-identified Muslim environment. For this purpose, I will trace one central element of yogic anthropology in Tamil Muslim “songs of gnosis”, the notion of the “circles” (cakras) forming energy nodes located along the spinal cord. How were the cakras conceptualized and integrated into the larger anthropology presented by the “songs of gnosis”? Is it possible to trace changes in this conceptualization over time? How is the adoption of an element of Yogic anthropology in the “songs of gnosis” reflected in other

Islamic writings in Tamil? And finally, how can the presence of the cakra, and by extension other Yogic elements, in a self-identified Muslim poetic genre itself be conceptualized without privileging “Yoga” over “Sufism” or vice versa.



PANEL 2.

ETHNOGRAPHY OF YOGA IN MODERN JAVA AND BALI

Annette Hornbacher (Heidelberg University, Heidelberg), “Yoga reloaded: from esoteric practice to sports. Ethnographic glimpses of yoga in the Indonesian state”

In recent decades, modern postural yoga has become a global commodity attracting seekers of spiritual enlightenment as well as consumers of wellness in virtually all secular Western countries. But how is yoga received in the world’s most populous Muslim country, Indonesia, with its classical Saiva-Buddhist heritage in Java and Bali? My paper explores how the global marketing of yoga relates to the Indonesian politics of religion in general, and to the Hindu island of Bali in particular, where two largely disconnected traditions of yoga coexist: On the one hand, yoga is sold as a modern postural practice in tourism centers, while on the other hand, it still exists as a meditative or transfigurative practice.

Patrick Vanhoebroek (Independent scholar), “Yoga among contemporary Muslim practitioners: Topo Broto, Lelono Broto & the various austerity fasts comprised under the Tarak Broto”

Following anthropological methods of inquiry, the author queried about the practices and transmissions of Yoga amongst Javanese communities of mystical and spiritual practitioners. In this very polarized yet pluralistic theological world of Java, it was found that yoga means several things to these different practitioners yet certain foundational interpretations were admittedly shared throughout. Within spheres of pure kejawen and kebatinan as well as Hindu Buddhist Tantra followers, the yoga word is intrinsically linked with the paths to the esoteric union of microcosmic mind with its divine creator behind the macrocosm of universe, all agreeing

on the term Manunggaling Kawulo Gusti. Indeed, yoga here is understood as tools for a human to realize its subsequent layers of etheric and energetic bodies along the esoteric paradigm proper to the cakras systems. To be precise, Javanese informants link yoga to the archetypical Bhima genesis and process of self-realization along ancestral texts such as Sanghyang Tattwajñana and Serat Nawaruci / Dewaruci, whereby a mastery of tapa, brata, Samadhi and Paryogasandhi steps is invariably suggested. These are steps of attainments which can still be seen to be taught, transmitted and trained in by a variety of aliran or mystical oriented groups in Java. The fact that this takes place within a Muslim dominated religious national sphere and that many practitioners carry an Islamic affiliation on their identity card doesn't seem to affect the success and even renewed surge of these spiritually oriented endeavors.



PANEL 3. YOGIS AND SUFIS IN BENGAL

Carola Erika Lorea (Universität Tübingen), “Samājer cāp and shared Bengali songs: Discussing techniques of the yogic body under the pressure of majoritarian religiosities”

Whether in Hindu or Muslim-majority areas of Bengal, people on the path of Bauls, Fakirs and other esoteric movements sing the same “songs of sādhanā” (sādhanāsaṅgīt) during shared performance occasions. Bhaba Pagla (1902-1984), a Kali-worshipping avadhūta from a Bengali Hindu family, wrote songs in the Islamic esoteric jargon, which his followers edited and published as Islāmī Bhābāpanna gān (songs in the Islamic mood). The Muslim devotees of Bhaba Pagla in Bangladesh sing his songs dedicated to the goddess of Yoga (Yogeśvarī). Next to Bhaba Pagla’s ancestral home is a Muslim shrine where I collected the songs of the coeval composer Gofur Shah, descendant of the Qadiriyya Sufi saint who is buried in that mājār. These texts resonate with the language and the onto-cosmology of Bengali “Islamic Yoga” and “Yogic Islam” (Haq 1975), a label that has been used to discuss the Bengali Sufi texts that show a broad incorporation of Yogic / Sahajiyā terminology, concepts and beliefs (for example Jñān Sāgar [see Cashin 1995], and Yog Kālāndār [see F. Bhattacharya 2003]). Similar texts and oral

literatures have been produced profusely also in the 20th century, while upper class elites were busy producing polarised communities and Hindu-Muslim encounters became increasingly defined under the rubric of 'communalism' (Aniket De 2022).

To understand the esoteric interpretation of these songs, my guru sent me to his octogenarian friend, the Cistiyya Sufi teacher Aziz Baba, in West Bengal, so that I could learn techniques of visualization and meditation along with his exegesis. I discussed the same lyrics with my friends Hriday and Adhara, a couple of consorted Fakirs who live in Kushtia (Bangladesh), by the shrine of their lineage founder, Lalon Shah. Jumping from songs' exegesis to embodied *sāadhanā*, they underscored the importance of yogic techniques of body, health, longevity and sexuality; they also complained about the innumerable circumstances whereby it became increasingly difficult to protect their traditional knowledge in a Shariati Muslim environment.

To contribute to the under-researched field of yoga in Muslim societies, this paper will combine disparate sets of ethnographic data collected over the course of 12 years doing research with Bengali esoteric and heterodox traditions in West Bengal and Bangladesh, with textual sources on the *sāadhanā* of Muslim Fakirs and Marphati practitioners. These sources include primary texts, i.e. the doctrinal manual *Sāadhanāmṛta* from Aziz Baba's guru and collections of Fakiri songs; and ethnographies of contemporary lineages, like Morris Lee's "Study of Marphati Beliefs in an Area of Rural Bangladesh" (2018), and Surojit Sen's *Fakirnāmā* (2009).

Two interwoven common threads will emerge from this analysis. First, the use of tactics of secrecy and ambivalence to discuss yogic techniques (particularly breathing, *kuṇḍalinī*-awakening and seminal retention exercises), manifested through a highly metaphorical jargon whose meanings remain hidden to the outsiders. Second, the discontents and the compromises arising from *samājer cāp*: pressures from the dominant culture, majoritarian religiosities and mainstream society.

Lubomír Ondračka (Charles University, Prague), "The Middle Bengali Ādyapariçayā by the Sufi Śekh Jāhid: a text on Tantric Yoga"

Ādya-pariçayā is a rather brief treatise composed in Middle Bengali by Śekh Zāhid. We have no information about this author and the place and time of composition are also unknown (the usually accepted date, the end



of the 15th century, is far from certain and I assume that the text is later). The poem, obviously intended to be sung, is divided into eight parts. It begins with a presentation of cosmogony, but the rest of the work is devoted to the human body. Individual chapters describe the process of conception, embryology, the astronomical implications of the moment of birth and the anatomical composition of the body. The concepts presented here are predominantly Hindu (the influence of tantrism and yoga is particularly strong); Sufi ideas are sparse. In my presentation, I will focus on the yogic concept of the body that Śekh Zāhid presents in his work. I will try to identify from what milieu these ideas about the body originate and whether their source is really the Nātha doctrine as it is generally claimed. Further, by comparing this work with similar yoga Sufi texts composed in Middle Bengali, I will ask whether we can learn anything about the social and religious background of their authors in general and Śekh Zāhid in particular. Finally, for a better understanding of the mechanism of interaction between yogis and Sufis that led to the creation of this text, it would be useful to know the historical and geographical background. For this purpose, I will briefly take a closer look at the specifics of the Ādya-ṛicaya language.

Ayesha Irani (University of Massachusetts Boston), “Yoga for the Bengali Darveś: Prescriptions of the Jñāna Pradīpa, a Seventeenth-Century Sufi Practice Manual”

The history of tantric yoga, for the last seven centuries at least, has seen the adaptation of its bodily technologies by religious sects other than the Śaiva practitioners who originally pioneered these. Like the Buddhist and Vaiṣṇava practitioners who adopted tantric yoga’s techniques in pursuit of their respective esoteric goals, the darveśes, kalandars and phakirs, as the Muslim spiritual seekers of early modern Bengal variously referred to themselves, were also persuaded by the efficacy of such techniques in strengthening their own devotional and esoteric regimes. Initially, the ground for such assimilation of yogic praxis into the darveś’s contemplative and bodily practices may have presumably been laid by the perceived resonance of certain darveśī contemplative practices with specific yogic techniques of meditation, as for instance in the case of Islamic zikr (Per.) and yogic mantra incantation (japa). Yet the process of experimentation with new techniques and the sustained interaction of the darveśes with haṭha yogis, many of whom had Nātha affiliations,

also led to the Bengali darveś's goals being modified to embrace distinctly Nātha goals, such as immortality. Through a detailed analysis of one such Bengali darveśī practice manual, the Jñāna Pradīpa, "The Lamp of Knowledge," ascribed to Saiyad Sultān (fl. 1615–1645), this paper provides a window into the doctrines, practices, and devotional life of these early modern Muslim adepts, who lived on the Islamic frontiers of eastern India.



PANEL 4.

YOGIS AND YOGA IN CENTRAL ASIA AND TURKEY

Xavier Hermand (Independent scholar), "Ratan Baba: a Yogi figure of the Afghan trade"

Devotees of a yogi called Ratan, or Ratannāth, arrived in the Kabul River valley toward the end of the 16th Century to settle close to an immense garden. Three centuries earlier, Muslims scholars were already spreading tales about the marvels of Ḥājī Ratan from North India to the Middle East. Presented as a companion of the Prophet of Islam and a transmitter of Hadith, the yogi was then renowned for helping miraculously several centuries later an Afghan conqueror in a battle next to Bhatinda. A shrine dedicated to him in this city still attracts many visitors mostly Muslims. But his devotees in Afghanistan, who are all Hindus, seem to be following a different tradition which goes back to Nepal. During an ethnographic survey among the artisans of Jālālābād, in the East of Afghanistan, I discovered that some of them used to take part in celebrations on his mausoleum that, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs wanted to be theirs. Religious texts, chronicles, pictorial representations, helped me identify the religious authorities that competed, between the 16th and the 17th Centuries, to control the mausoleum, located on a water spring that used to supply the Garden of Purity (Bāgh-Safā), one of the most ancient and famous sites built by the Moghols in Afghanistan. The Hindus and Sikhs communities in Afghanistan rose from this competition for access to the resources of the Kabul area (notably fresh and dry fruits) in which the yogi Ratan has remain a central figure until recently. Who were his Afghan devotees? From where did their tradition arose? How could their community develop in the Muslim society?

Chander Shekhar (Delhi University, New Delhi), “Yoga: A Bridge between Indic and Islamic cultures in Uzbekistan”

Until the 19th century, Persian was the lingua franca of the greater Khusan region, which includes present-day Eastern Iran, Afghanistan, some parts of Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Local scholars were interested in India, and many migrated to South Asia. The manuscripts kept at the al-Beruni Institute in Tashkent reveal that many Persian works composed in India arrived in Uzbekistan and among them, Persian translations of the Yogavāsishtha, the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa. Indian culture remains popular today in Uzbekistan. Rama Nand Sagar’s serial on the Mahābhārata has been translated into Uzbek and telecasted on television, and in 2022, the Mahābhārata was staged by Uzbek university students.

The practice of yoga has become a widespread phenomenon in Uzbek society. The Lal Bahadur Shastri Center for Indian Culture in Tashkent offers various yoga courses, which a thousand persons attend annually. In other cities like Kokand and Bukhara, mostly Uzbek trainers teach yoga to local students. In 2018, the Yoga Federation of Uzbekistan was established in Tashkent at the initiative of the President of the Republic. In 2021, the Yoga Federation of Uzbekistan invited a yoga master from India — through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations — to train Uzbek yoga instructors. Yoga teaching has become a profitable profession. Yoga courses have been introduced in schools, in some cases as a mandatory activity. Many people, such as those suffering from chronic and seasonal diseases, practice yoga as a therapeutic tool. Uzbek women are significantly involved in yoga practice. During the International Day of Yoga, events related to yoga take place in almost all major cities of the country. Hundreds of persons join these events or perform yoga by watching videos on local channels. Uzbek yoga practitioners have translated books on yoga into Uzbek and created videos to teach yoga techniques and their benefits. The popularity of TV programs and videos on yoga increased remarkably during the pandemic period. On the other hand, some adverse reactions emerged. In the Fergana Valley, Islamic religious circles have criticized the promotion of yoga as a form of Hindu religious propaganda.

Alexandre Toumarkine (INaLCO, Paris), “Does Yoga in contemporary Turkey have anything to do with religion?”

This paper will first present a periodization of the introduction and development of yoga in contemporary Turkey. We'll distinguish here between the founding years (the 60s and 70s), and their context of reception, and those of a much wider diffusion in the 1990s and 2010s. For both periods, the emphasis will be on intermediaries and niches, as well as on the centers this transmission, in Asia and the West ; and finally on the reception environments in Turkey, initially secular and open to the Western influences. We'll explain why the spread of yoga to more Islamic circles has proved complicated, Then, one will emphasize that yoga, like other Far Eastern knowledge and practices, first served somehow as a substitute for Islamic spirituality for very secular people, or as a complement to it. We'll then explain why the spread of yoga to more Islamic circles proved complicated, and how the idea developed that Turkish Islam, in its Sufi dimension, was and remains staged as providing practices and notions both like and alternative to yoga. Finally, we'll focus on the institutions of official Islam (in particular the Presidency of Worship), and even more so on non-religious institutional actors (in the fields of sport, health, education, but also public order). We will examine the way in which they have implemented not a policy of containment of yoga or prohibition of the expression of its spiritual dimensions, but a genuine policy of supervision and control of its practices.

Organized :

by Fabrizio Speziale (EHES) and Andrea Acri (EPHE)

Contact :

Fabrizio Speziale
[fabrizio.speziale@ehess.fr],
Andrea Acri
[andrea.acri@ephe.psl.eu].

With the collaboration of Raffaello de Leon-Jones Diani (EHES) and Lingli Li (EHES - University of Göttingen).

Venue : École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales/School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, Centre de la Vieille Charité, salle A (2nd floor), 2 rue de la Charité, 13002 Marseille.

