

# The Original in the Translation of the Yogic Subject: Implications of 'Isolation' in the *Yogasūtra*

Tarinee Awasthi  
Cornell University, Ithaca

'Of course, this politics is agonizingly worrisome. It is replete with relations of exploitation or domination...And it is here, maybe, that some tasks of the radical historian lie...in dreaming, with trepidation and hope, of different pasts and futures.'

Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*

## Introduction

The *Yogasūtra* (YS) is a Sanskrit text from the early part of the first millennium CE and its final concern is *kaivalya*, the isolation of pure consciousness from the phenomena that inflect it. The question I try to answer in this essay is why, and in what way, we might think about this text in 2021. There is of course the historian's interest – it is a useful text to know if one is a historian of Indian religion, whether premodern or contemporary. Then, it is a text read in contemporary Yoga contexts of various kinds,<sup>1</sup> and to different ends – that phenomenon has also been an object of academic inquiry.

However, the YS makes claims about human nature, and posits a reality that it says underlies normally visible human behaviour. This reality, it holds, can be experienced for oneself through the means described in the text. I consider here the implications of this last claim. The constructivist position on religious experience holds that all such experiences are conditioned, while this underlying reality is posited by the YS precisely as that which is not conditioned. While applying a constructivist understanding to the YS may yet be possible, it can only be done by bracketing off, if not outright rejecting, the validity of the YS claim. While such a reading may be a sound and necessary historical exercise, it does not preclude other kinds of engagement with a text like the YS.

Most of this essay builds up the logic which might inform an alternative approach to the YS. To this end,

the first three sections discuss the issues of experience and translation, religious experience, and time and self in postcolonial theory, respectively. The YS will only reappear in the fourth and last section, where we sketch out a direction to place it within the conversation curated in the first three parts, regarding its orientation towards *kaivalya* as an intervention. Thus, rather than offering a detailed study of the YS, I set up the space for a certain kind of reading, and try it out with the YS.

## Representation and Experience

Joan Scott argues that the 'evidence of experience' is in a paradoxical relationship with history. It is only *evidence* in so far as it is embedded within a narrative, but its validity depends on a relationship with reality. If we insist that it is possible to access experience transparently in narrative, we no longer interrogate the system which produces that experience but instead, perpetuate it. The heart of the problem is that the 'evidence of experience' presumes an experiencing subject, whereas Scott holds that 'it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience'.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Scott seeks to privilege the necessarily *discursive* character of experience, a refusal to separate experience and language.

However, Scott's sharp critique of 'experience' does not necessarily get us out of the problem of presuming direct access to *something*, holding something up as a foundation. Instead of believing that experience is a transparent apprehension of reality, we hold that we can access, through historical analysis, the process whereby the experiencing subject came to be constituted. The epistemological problem remains unresolved.

Tejaswini Niranjana's questions in *Siting Translation* are similar to Scott's, although she resolves them differently. Niranjana examines the way translation,

imperialism, and western metaphysics are closely connected, and proposes an alternative mode fit for the postcolonial translator-critic. She draws attention to the way the classical notion of 'translation' as rendering a text comprehensible, 'diaphanous', relies upon western philosophical notions of 'reality' and 'representation', which, in turn, developed in the context of imperial perspectives on the 'other'. Colonial translation, in this view, fixed the colonial 'other', allowing her to be read and 'subjectified'.<sup>3</sup> This constitution of the colonized subject was necessarily essentialist and the postcolonial predicament is that the postcolonial subject can neither reject history, nor continue to write it. This leads to a re-writing, which is inspired, also, by a desire to re-translate, according to Niranjana.<sup>4</sup> However, this re-writing or re-translation is not inspired by an attempt to somehow recover a monolithic 'original', but rather to demonstrate that it is fissured, 'disrupted'.

The central question in Scott and Niranjana is of the apprehension of a subject which is necessarily constructed, and/or fissured. While Scott finds her answer in genealogy, Niranjana's response draws upon a more critical relationship with history, even if she is not willing to abandon history completely. Her way out appears to be to recognize the desire to re-write history, but not to re-write for greater *accuracy*, but rather with an attempt to express a greater complexity of our 'self'. We will address this problem of the 'self' in the discussion of postcolonial theory further on in the essay.

We may cull out of these already provocative works an alternative set of questions: is it ever reasonable to posit a (human?) subject prior to experience? Is experience ever non-discursive? Is there any way for history to comprehend a non-discursive experience, if such a thing even exists? Is it *desirable* for history to do so?

### The Mystical Experience

Richard King,<sup>5</sup> among others, exhorts us to think about the mystical in close connection with questions of power, since the very idea of the mystical, and the mystical as distinct from 'power' in modern contexts, implies a certain political choice. Going back a few decades, we encounter Steven T. Katz's assertion that there is no such thing as an unmediated experience, quite in line with Scott's statement to similar effect just over a decade later. In 1992, Katz wrote that he had found no reason to change his opinion that experience is necessarily mediated by language since he first argued it in 1978.<sup>6</sup> As the reader eagerly reaches for the 1978 piece, however, one is sorely disappointed to find '...let me state the single epistemological assumption ...: *There are NO pure*

*(i. e. unmediated) experiences* (emphasis original)'. A couple of sentences later, this turns into an 'epistemological fact' which 'seems' true to Katz 'because of the sorts of beings we are'.<sup>7</sup> It is not entirely clear what the *argument* is.

One aspect of Robert K. C. Forman's response<sup>8</sup> to this focuses on tracing the roots of the constructivist position to such thinkers as Kant, Brentano and Husserl; and the other re-centres the report of the persons who actually experienced the 'pure consciousness event' as unmediated, and the interpretation of adepts within meditative traditions of that pure consciousness event.

As expected, this dispute proved impossible to resolve, primarily because both sides based themselves on sets of presumptions, and it is impossible to disprove a presumption. And so, years later, we find something of an impasse. There have been various kinds of responses (not resolutions) proposed to this impasse. One of the richest comes from Ann Taves, who offers a framework within which to study religious experience. Taves argues that religious studies are concerned with the conditions under which an event might be attributed to God rather than when God would influence an event (more properly the scope of theology). Further, the researchers' attribution of an explanation does not suggest that the respondents' attribution is wrong, but that it needs to be attributed alongside others.

It seems that the same basic tendencies we saw in 'Representation and Experience' inform the critique of the 'mystical experience' that developed in the latter half of the twentieth century. Part of it was the mistrust of the category of 'religious' or 'mystical' when it appeared that the 'religious' as a universal domain only developed in the context of (colonial) modernity. Further, the isolation of a specific kind of 'experience' as somehow non-discursive or 'ineffable' seems to create the same problems that critiques of experience as *sui generis* seek to counter.

There are two kinds of questions which frame this section – whether there is such a thing as 'religious' or 'mystical' experience which may be studied differently than other kinds of experience, and what do we do with experiences termed 'religious'. On the first, the critique of colonial modernity often translates into a critique of all categories that appear to emerge during it. The issue is not unrelated to what we discussed in 'Representation and Experience' – if we reject the idea of a unitary 'original', then the translation – whatever its form – becomes all that there is. And if we have found the translation wanting, we have no reason to try and recover an original. Taves' approach is consistent with this logic. As Taves rightly points out, the study of the detail of the first kind of question is better suited to theology. However, to simply shift focus to the second question is not as simple

as it may appear, as we shall see at the end of the last section.

We may ask an augmented version of the first question: if we were to allow for such a thing as an unconditioned experience, how would we then view other systems which admit of it?

### **The Postcolonial**

The postcolonial turn shared the same impulse we observed in the first two sections. There are three closely related issues we examine in this section. In the first place, we will focus on 'anachronism' and how it came to inform the Subaltern Studies (SS) project and certain strands of postcolonial theory. It holds a close connection with the problem of history more generally, and to that extent, allows us to tie this discussion up with the engagement with translation that we have already initiated in 'Representation and Experience'. Secondly, while the question of consciousness comes up in the South Asian strand of postcolonial theory, it rarely received extensive treatment, at least in the early years. The attempt here is to explore its possibilities as they have emerged in the past couple of decades. It had been hinted at, of course, in Spivak's reading of SS, but more pertinently for our purposes, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's delineation of a 'translation' paradigm. Finally, while the question of other 'life-worlds'<sup>9</sup> emerged in the context of the 'subaltern', as Chakrabarty clarifies, the theoretical implication can be used elsewhere. So, in preparation for the last section, I try to explore some strategies of setting the terms of translation.

We shall return to the problem of 'experience' and 'the mystical', then, through some of the strategies of negotiation formulated in the context of postcolonial studies. The exploration of the question of the 'subject' and of 'temporality' we have seen since the 1990s was facilitated by the project of Subaltern Studies in interesting ways, which have been documented, in part, by those who were part of the collective.

Dipesh Chakrabarty's careful reading of Ranajit Guha and the early stage of the Subaltern Studies project clarifies the points we are attempting to explore here. In insisting that the struggles of the peasants were necessarily political, even as they invoked gods and spirits and Thakur, Guha 'pluralizes' the political, and this characterizes for Chakrabarty the more promising aspect of Guha's engagement with anachronism. In Chakrabarty's reading of Guha and the early SS, the 'two incommensurable logics of power' brought together in South Asian political modernity are both modern. One is the secular, liberal civil society, and the other is the domain where elites and subalterns interact in a less than

secular framework. For Chakrabarty – and in a certain way for Guha – to read the latter as a mere vestige of the premodern is to fall into the trap of a stagist reading of history. Chakrabarty proposes to treat the gods and spirits as 'coeval' with humans.<sup>10</sup>

There are certain problematics Chakrabarty engages which offer helpful points of entry into the present attempt. The first one of these is his idea of 'transition' as 'translation'. Chakrabarty posits that the history of the transition to capitalist modernity, which has informed so much of the existing historiography of South Asia and elsewhere, is just as much a problem of *translation*. He proposes to produce a translucency, a partial opacity, rather than transparency, in the process of translation.<sup>11</sup> In 'Translating Life Worlds into Labor and History', Chakrabarty expresses the problem in this way – there is the disenchanting, secular narrative which history claims as its own, and there is the world where labour and work are never quite secular, uninflected by spirits. Usually, the former translates the latter into itself. He holds up as one kind of exemplar the practice of translation in premodern South Asia where cross-cultural translation was possible without mutual reducibility as also without going through a universal<sup>12</sup>.

Chakrabarty's insistence on the idea of historical consciousness for the subaltern is premised on his belief that the Marxist-Subaltern project has a very real ethical investment in the production of a more just world, and to not make historical consciousness 'available' to everybody is ethically problematic.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, he finds himself unable to abandon history as a mode. At the same time, the presumption of secular time sets definite limits to what is proper for the narration of history. As one of his ways out, he draws upon the nonmodern forms of translation he points attention to before, and reads the ideas of 'precapitalist' and 'commodity' in interesting ways. The 'pre' in his reading ceases to stand for a mere chronological or logical priority but stands in for something that exists in necessary connection with the capitalist and potentially disrupts it.

In 'Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts', Chakrabarty draws a distinction between the idea of minority histories and subaltern pasts: whereas the former are narratives which are added to history in some kind of an attempt to make it more comprehensive, almost fairer, the latter are relationships with the past which cannot be claimed by the historian as her own. The idea of the colonial subject itself raises some questions about the relationship between subjectivity and its conditioning by history.

In 'Two Histories of Capital', Chakrabarty thinks about how the idea of two histories in Marx – the one posited by capital and the other not belonging to its 'life-world' – may be used to disrupt the idea of the logic of

capital subsuming difference unto itself. What do these two different histories mean? The first is that which, once capital comes into being, is subsumed by it as its antecedent, by its past. The other is the history which is encountered by capital but not as part of its own narrative. This second kind of history does not exist in complete separation from capital, but is rather coeval with it, *while* interrupting it. The History 1-History 2 problematic is what informs Chakrabarty's idea of the way minority histories and subaltern pasts relate as well. History 2 cannot be necessarily incompatible with capital, and is instead embodied by the subject participating in capital in a contemporary fashion.

Chakrabarty, describing History 1 as analytical and History 2 as affective, argues that the question of translation has two different implications, depending on where we approach it from. Approaching it from the perspective of History 1 implies a necessary middle term, whereas if we approach it from the perspective of History 2, we have instead a transaction where the middle term is no longer needed.<sup>14</sup>

As Spivak, in her introductory essay to *Subaltern Studies: Selections*, draws attention to the relationship between the twentieth century critique of humanism and the SS project, the predicament of the colonial subaltern can be read in a certain sense as the predicament of all thought. Spivak brings into the discussion the idea of a 'subject-effect', suggesting that the mutual interaction of texts, etc., does not necessarily have as its basis what we may perceive as a 'subject', but the predilections of our consciousness cause us to perceive them as singular and therefore impute a homogenous subject to them.<sup>15</sup> In the work of the SS collective, Spivak understands the imputation of the 'subaltern' as 'strategic essentialism'. Spivak's exploration of the idea of consciousness in the context of Subaltern Studies is instructive in that it allows for seeing their use of 'consciousness' essentialized in this way even though the force of the critique they mount relies on a tradition which has deconstructed consciousness in a radical way. While this tendency within SS is partly due to their Marxist inclinations, it allows us to take the issue in a somewhat different direction.

At this point, I turn to two projects which are influenced by the postcolonial impulse to demonstrate some of the tendencies which I find useful to emulate in working out my own strategy regarding premodern texts: Ajay Skaria's *Unconditional Equality: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance*, and Leela Gandhi's *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-De-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*.

Ajay Skaria emphasises the potential of Gandhi's thought while retaining its tensions and complex genealogies. In Skaria's reading, we find an attempt to engage an anticolonial thinker in the present, as well as

an articulation of a possible direction for the postcolonial through this thinker. Skaria reminds us that in liberal traditions, citizens have sovereignty over themselves, and they give their law unto themselves. At the same time, in that sovereignty being equally divided among citizens, citizens also submit to measure. This split is the moment of the origin of the political, and this 'apotheosis of general responsibility',<sup>16</sup> where the citizens are equal and autonomous, is what characterizes liberal democracy. The Reader in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* is not willing to buy into the imperial logic of waiting for equality and wants it immediately. The Editor, on the other hand, refuses the violence of domination as well in the refusal of subordination. Further, this equality is not conditional upon the exercise of reason. To Gandhi, his religion leads the way to this other way of thinking about freedom and equality<sup>17</sup>

The equality Gandhi seeks must be 'equality with the minor'.<sup>18</sup> The rule of the major is inherently violent. The minor, here, implies a community which does not submit to majority or sovereignty, but does not claim sovereignty either. Gandhi's equation of the Gujarati word *vinay* (usually 'humility') with equality in English suggests that humility can only be 'offered by equals'. This exemplifies 'surrender without subordination' for Skaria.<sup>19</sup> The most important component of *Unconditional Equality* for our purposes, is an alternative conception of the subject, which is not given, but to be achieved.

Skaria locates his project in provocative and productive ways in connection with both Chakrabarty and Spivak. He emphasizes the dissolution of the centre as closely related to the idea of equality with the minor. The centre must be undone in such a way that the margin does not become a new centre – there must be 'surrender without subordination', in his profound turn of phrase.

Chakrabarty speaks of the provincializing of the European centre 'only in an anticolonial spirit of gratitude'. Skaria articulates his position more evocatively, and perhaps more radically, 'to provincialize is to bring about that end (of European imperialism) in a distinctive way – not by claiming autonomous reason, but by exiting the problematic of that reason...' There is good reason to emphasize this augmentation in Skaria, for unlike Chakrabarty, he makes Gandhi, and even Ramanama, his contemporary. His *shomoy-granthi* (*shomoy* – 'time', *granthi* – 'joints of various kinds'<sup>20</sup>) is not so much a knot as it is an entwinement or wrapping.

In Leela Gandhi, we find a cogent reading of subjectivity in the post-Enlightenment context, which is worth following with some care. She argues that the disruption of the subject in the post-modern may be seen in part as a reaction to the Kantian ethical agency clubbed with Marxist political agency. This leads to

what she terms (following Bataille) a 'renunciatory inheritance'. Postmodernism lets in desire instead. To replace the 'austere...subject of Kantian deontology', Gandhi writes, postmodernism 'raises a spoiled child, attentive only to the insatiability and availability of its own desires'. From excess, she traces the movement of postmodern thought into 'insufficiency', where the idea of communication and community begins to become important.<sup>21</sup> The problem, to her, is that the idea of the community is always in danger of falling prey to the problem of a limited sense of 'one's own'. She seeks, instead, an 'anti-communitarian communitarianism', which is impelled by a notion of a subject that moves from individuality to 'singularity', which is 'marked by an irreducible difference which renders it inassimilable within any system of resemblance'.<sup>22</sup> The penultimate note in Gandhi's chapter is a provocative one, as she refers to the Buddha and Arjuna, both having abandoned the filial to apprehend the 'unknown and terrifying promise of impartial compassion' and 'an as-yet indefinable and unknowable capacity to pluralize the Self and apprehend it in/as all creatures...'<sup>23</sup> In a sense, Gandhi provides one kind of opening into the attempt that marks the last part of this paper.

Chakrabarty has already demonstrated a commitment to history, which is driven by sound ethical and political concerns. However, he is obviously sensitive to the possibility of other projects his work facilitates. The idea of anachronism as it informs Guha (despite his protests against the category of the 'pre-political') has been utilised in interesting ways by Chakrabarty. However, while the Marxist-Subaltern project may have certain commitments to history for the reasons he describes, just as he himself takes the critique articulated therein in a different direction in the latter half of his book, it may be possible to explore the possibilities he has opened up. Guha's radical reading of the archive is supplemented by Chakrabarty's willingness to momentarily slip into temporality most fit for the radical reading the former proposes. The latter seems to allow an inflection of History by history, if only briefly.

The problematic of consciousness in the SS project on the one hand, and in the studies of religion and mysticism on the other, can be brought productively in conversation with one another. At the same time, the question of temporality raised by Chakrabarty in 'Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts' offers a different kind of possibility of bringing these two vaguely connected but still distinct discursive domains into conversation with one another. While King's analysis of the use of the 'mystical' in the modern context problematizes the mystical, and while Scott tries to work out a genealogy of the idea of 'experience', we remain hopelessly caught within

history. Indeed, despite Scott's attempt to reject the foundationalism of 'history', historical time becomes her foundation. If we take Chakrabarty's suggestion in 'Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts' in a direction that he explicitly warns us against, we may be able to find the opening we are looking for.

As de Certeau points out,<sup>24</sup> the emergence of 'the mystical' as a category was necessarily accompanied by the scrutiny of the mystical by those who did not subscribe to the positions inherent to the mystical worldview. Chakrabarty's proposition would be to recognize in our consciousness that which is common with that of the mystic and then step out of it to produce history which does not reduce the historian's consciousness with that of the mystic's. However, the modern break was somewhat incomplete. I intend this statement to mean two closely related things: one, that the intellectual break that Chakrabarty reads in contemporary academic practice need not be complete and the only way out of it is not some nativist reversal (or postcolonial revenge), and two, that the worldview that populates 'the mystical' may seem marginalized from some quarters, but remains profoundly real – indeed, those subscribing to it may even find their way into the academia. This being the case, we have the possibility for doing something more than simply revelling in the *shomoy-granthi* of Chakrabarty – we may resolve it the other way.

The categories of the 'mystical', 'religious', or 'experience', in the way their modern notions emerged, as well as the critique of the process whereby they came about, are equally shaped by seemingly inescapable ideas about history. Is the translation proposed by Niranjana, or Chakrabarty, our only option? Niranjana dismisses what she terms the 'nativist' impulse by saying that it ignores the extent of the break effected by colonial modernity. However, the pervasiveness of this break can be exaggerated.

The YS will claim that subjectivity as we know it – or as we construct it (both in the sense Niranjana or Scott or Spivak mean it, or in the way YS means it) – is a mistake, but also that we can remove the conditionings to experience intransitive consciousness. This intransitive consciousness resists history, by definition. To claim that the practice of (this kind of) Yoga is also irrecoverably transformed by the colonial break is to claim that 'capital', or 'power', as *real* forces (and not just concepts) somehow trump the efficacy of what I call here, provisionally, spiritual practice. I propose, instead, to take the claim of the YS seriously, and see what possibilities it may lead to.

One objection that may be raised in response to this attempt is with reference to what Partha Chatterjee calls the 'nationalist problematic of the material and spiritual'.<sup>25</sup> There is a way in which the idea of pure

consciousness untainted by external influence starts to appear dangerously like a desperate attempt to retrieve something from the clutches of 'history', 'modernity' or 'colonialism' and hold it up as the real essence of things, from which authority may be drawn. Why this would seem dangerous seems clear in the light of the fraught genealogies of essentialisms and nationalisms of various kinds that we have observed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Without claiming to resolve this problem, we may think of two kinds of responses. The weaker, which relies on history, may argue that if a claim is being made in premodern textual and practice traditions, it is difficult to claim that colonial modernity, at the very least, is the only context for such a shift. The problem with this is that similar processes of preserving something of the transcendental in the face of political subjugation can certainly be traced in premodernity. While this upsets the uniqueness of all aspects of colonial modernity, it does nothing to counter the larger argument at stake.

The stronger response, however, is that to take seriously a certain kind of experience of consciousness, which effects a shift in (or more precisely, dissolution of) various impulses and desires, contains possibilities that are both profoundly destructive as well as positive<sup>26</sup> – as does history. As Skaria says<sup>27</sup> in *Hybrid Histories*, 'a politics of hope would lie in constantly challenging and undermining the relations of domination involved in them...'

### The *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali with the Commentary of Vyāsa<sup>28</sup>

Chakrabarty would have the historian recognize the possibility of embodying an alternative temporality but return to write from her own, in order to produce better histories, for the subaltern past is that relationship with the past which the historian can never claim as her own. While the text this section is concerned with is by no means 'subaltern' in the technical sense of the term, it does presume an understanding of consciousness that is alien to everyday notions, modern or premodern. However, to take seriously the end around which the *YS* is composed, and to really claim it as one's own, one is led to other kinds of possibilities than simply returning to one's temporality to write.

Written in the wake of postcolonial studies, this section owes to that scholarship the possibility of not reducing views of consciousness to history. However, rather than simply taking issue with the 'always' part of 'always historicize', as Chakrabarty does, this section tries to embrace the possibilities opened up by the isolation of pure consciousness which forms the basis for the method

of the *YS*. We found that disavowals of foundations are not so much rejections as they are theorisations of new foundations. Rather than rejecting all foundations, then, I take *kaivalya* as the foundation here. In that sense, I am taking our cue chiefly from the Skaria of *Unconditional Equality*.

The discussion of the *YS* will not invoke the category of the mystical, since it only makes sense outside of the worldview in which the mystical is normal. It will speak, instead, of *samādhi* (Absorption) or *kaivalya* (Isolation) – indeed the *YS* has no need for 'mysticism'. This gesture is similar to the slipping in and out performed by Chakrabarty's historian, but may be marked by a different directionality – that is, it is more a case of speaking of the 'mystical' in a context where it is denormalised, while not having the need for it oneself.

The question of the mystical experience as evidence for anything at all is closely tied up, as we have seen, with whether any notion of non-discursive experience can have validity as evidence. The *YS* deals with the issue of evidence in a particular way, and as I shall demonstrate, it is oriented towards a specific experience. While we will return to the 'experience' itself, we need to first work out the status of the worldview the *YS* is offering us. There are several ways to read the *YS*: there are interesting historical projects which trace its afterlife as a text in both the premodern and modern contexts, and scholars have produced interesting studies of the influences which shaped the *YS*, its commentarial tradition and so on.

However, that does not exhaust what can be done with the *YS*. If the *YS* offers us a perspective on the mechanism of an individual's relationship with the phenomenal world, quite apart from being an interesting object for historical study, it is also just that – an alternative perspective on an individual's relationship with the world. Rather than thinking about how such a perspective may inflect Eurocentric thought in general, and if it needs to do so at all, we shall bring it to bear upon some of the questions that have emerged so far: How do we understand proofs of valid knowledge? How does the notion of *samādhi* shape the positions taken up in the rest of the *YS*? Can or should *samādhi* be studied as mystical experience? And finally, what kind of a subject does the *YS* posit, and how might be that brought to bear upon the postcolonial predicament?

One of the reasons to pick the *YS* rather than texts more grounded in scriptural hermeneutics is that it allows us, for the moment, to circumvent the complexity of the relationship between text and experience. On the other hand, the *YS* has been picked rather than more immediate descriptions of the mystical experience because it is meant to be comprehended intellectually, even if the state it is oriented towards is not an object of the intellect.

The subject of the *YS* is stated right at the beginning, in the commentary and the text. In the commentary on the opening *sūtra*, *yoga* is glossed with *samādhi*, which we will be referring to as Absorption here. There are two broad types of Absorption, described by Vyāsa in 1.1: the cognitive (*samprajñāta*) and acognitive (*asamprajñāta*).<sup>29</sup> The distinction, as stated there, is that the former is the one which is attained in the mind when it is one-pointed, causes the afflictions of the mind to diminish, loosens the bonds of *karma*, and brings cessation close. The acognitive comes about after the cessation of all mental modifications. The former is said to be ‘cognitive’ because, in its four subdivisions, it accords with the apprehension of various kinds of objects. The most basic of them contains all four, and then each subsequent stage drops one of them. The acognitive Absorption is said to be preceded by the practice of an objectless cognition.

Each stage of Absorption involves the suspension of some mental movement, but even the highest of the cognitive Absorptions contains some movement – it is described as the one which illuminates the real object in the one-pointed mind, causes the afflictions to perish, loosens the bonds of *karma* and brings cessation close.<sup>30</sup> When this cessation is achieved, the Viewer resides in his own form, according to the third *sūtra*.<sup>31</sup> This echoes the very last *sūtra* of the chapter on *kaivalya*, which says that the reversal of the *guṇas* (qualities which constitute the world), devoid of any purpose with reference to the *puruṣa* (the conscious being), is *kaivalya* (Isolation) or the consciousness-capacity stabilized in its own form.<sup>32</sup> In other states than Absorption, the Viewer has a form similar to the movements themselves<sup>33</sup>.

The mental modifications are of two kinds: afflicted and unafflicted.<sup>34</sup> One of the things the cognitive *samādhi* is supposed to do is to loosen the afflictions. The afflictions are listed as: one, false belief in objects that are non-eternal, impure, painful, and non-self as being eternal, pure, pleasurable, and self; two, the false identification of the seer with the capacity to see; three, attachment; four, aversion; and five, the desire for continued existence.<sup>35</sup> Of these, the first one, the false belief in non-eternal, impure, etc., objects as being eternal, impure etc., is said to be the cause of the rest. The achievement of Isolation, then, presumes that the *mistaken* identity with the experiencing subject has been undone.

The mental movements are ‘means of valid knowledge, false knowledge, verbal awareness, sleep, and memory’.<sup>36</sup> That the question of evidence comes up in the *YS* is not surprising when one thinks of Indian philosophical traditions – what is unusual is its context. Rather than being the focus of the text, or the basis on which the validity of the text is established, it comes up as a *citta-vṛtti*: a mental movement that must eventually

be caused to cease. By listing it in this manner, it is not being denied that these means (‘perception, inference and verbal testimony’<sup>37</sup>) produce valid knowledge – or at least knowledge as it is valid in the world – but it is certainly being dismissed as being a hindrance to the ultimate aim.<sup>38</sup> The *YS*, in addition, seems to make little effort to establish the validity of the knowledge it is itself offering. While Vyāsa will, on occasion, quote verses to emphasize certain points, they seem to serve the purpose of summary or reiteration rather than authorization. Even though verbal testimony is cited as a means of valid knowledge, Vyāsa does not try to insist on the validity of either *YS* or any other foundational text of Yoga as being valid for that reason, even though he would probably assume that the audience understands implicitly that Patañjali is, indeed, a reliable speaker.

What other kinds of knowledge are available to us, which are not listed among these mental movements that must be caused to cease? While the final state of Isolation is preceded by the cessation of *all* modifications, there are intermediary stages with various kinds of access to knowledge which are described. At one point in the cognitive *samādhi*, the practitioner reaches the state which Vyāsa describes as entailing the clear illumination of knowledge which is accurate and unencumbered by sequence.<sup>39</sup> In this state, the knowledge produced is supposed to be ‘truth-bearing’ (*ṛtambharā*).<sup>40</sup> This knowledge cannot be contradicted by any other.<sup>41</sup> This knowledge is distinct from the knowledge attained through inference or verbal testimony because it pertains to particulars.<sup>42</sup> The impressions produced in this state are of a different kind than the afflicted impressions which prevent Isolation. The acognitive Isolation towards which the entire endeavour is oriented comes about as a result of these new kinds of impressions, which block the prior ones, and the acognitive Isolation is a result of the cessation of even these impressions.

It appears that not only does the *YS* have hardly any interest in means of knowledge in general, but it also doesn’t care, beyond a limited extent, to prove even the validity of the system it propounds itself through any standard means of valid knowledge. There is hardly any reference to textual authorities, and no attempt whatsoever to proving how or why such practices produce specific results. Nor is the *YS* arguing that the state that is ultimately aimed towards will produce any special knowledge applicable to the world (whatever intermediary powers one may attain). What is the relationship between the Isolation of the consciousness-capacity and the mystical experience?

It seems clear that the *YS* does not think that the experience of intransitive consciousness is impossible – indeed, it is aimed at precisely that. However, Patañjali

would agree (unflatteringly) that the experience of intransitive consciousness, the establishment in its own form of the consciousness-capacity, is impossible *for me*. Why would it be so? Because what the YS offers is not a description of matters as they are, but the procedure whereby it may be caused to cease. Nor do we find in the YS rapturous statements revelling in the mystical paradoxes. We find a method, and we find a rather terse indication of its result. What is equally interesting is that the YS suggests that the practitioner systematically dismantle all the conditionings that could be thought of as 'constructed', and insists on the abandonment of even those conditionings which are produced by earlier stages within the process. The end of the YS seems to be unamenable to the kind of inquiry Ann Taves proposes<sup>43</sup> – indeed, there is some controversy over whether the end of the YS does not simply imply the cessation of physical-historical existence anyway,<sup>44</sup> rendering the question moot.

In what way might a reading of the YS intervene in the postcolonial projects? Returning to the question of anachronism, which, as we have seen, informs the work of Guha and Chakrabarty, and the process whereby a subject comes to be rendered into history, what might we say about the YS? There is a certain sense in which the ultimate subject posited by the YS resists being written into history. Indeed, the commentary says explicitly that the isolated consciousness is not subject to any transformations, and the only reason we seem to think of it as existing in time is linguistic necessity.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

We can now try to bring together the components of this paper. When we think about experience, either generally or in terms of 'religious experience', we are implicitly relying on a certain kind of epistemology and subject (even if the subject is characterized by its indeterminacy). Through the postcolonial intervention, particularly through the idea of alternative temporality (Chakrabarty) and the subject embodying singularity (Gandhi and Skaria), we have the option of thinking about the subject (and therefore, of experience) in a different way. Parting ways with Chakrabarty at this point, but staying with Gandhi, and particularly Skaria's reading of *satya* as existence 'to-be-realized', we have an opening into reading the YS which responds to and draws upon what we have spoken of on the one hand, and promises to inflect our understanding of the subject on the other.

The state indicated in the YS is certainly, like Skaria's reading of Gandhi's *satya*, to-be-achieved. The 'to-be-achieved' matters, because it is neither the given

consciousness which an 'individual' may act from, nor the constantly inflected and produced subject. Further, there are ways of moving from inhabiting a subjectivity which is characterized precisely by the kind of constructed subject of which Scott speaks (if phrased in terms of the fivefold affliction we referred to before), to inhabiting a subjectivity that is characterized by the experience of intransitive consciousness.<sup>46</sup>

## Acknowledgements

I'm deeply grateful to Prof Anne Blackburn and Prof Daniel R Gold who read earlier versions of this paper and commented on it.

## Notes

1. See David Gordon White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014) for a history of the uses of the *Yogasūtra*.
2. Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 778–79.
3. Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 1–4.
4. Niranjana, 172.
5. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and the Mystic East* (London: Routledge, 1999), 9–10.
6. Steven T. Katz, 'Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning', in *Mysticism and Language* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 5.
7. Steven T. Katz, 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism', in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 1978), 26.
8. Robert K. C. Forman, *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).
9. I am limiting myself to Chakrabarty's usage of the term, and leaving alone for the moment its Husserlian antecedents.
10. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, New ed. (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 14–15.
11. *Ibid.*, 17–18.
12. *Ibid.*, 83.
13. *Ibid.*, 86–87.
14. *Ibid.*, 71.
15. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Introduction-Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in *Subaltern Studies: Selections* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 12.
16. Ajay Skaria, *Unconditional Equality: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 7.
17. *Ibid.*, 9–10.
18. *Ibid.*, 9; Cf Chakrabarty's discussion of 'minority'.
19. *Ibid.*, 9–10.
20. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 112.



21. Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-De-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 21–23.
22. *Ibid.*, 26.
23. *Ibid.*, 32.
24. Michel de Certeau and Marsanne Brammer, ‘Mysticism’, *Diacritics* 22, no. 2 (1992): 11–25.
25. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 48.
26. See Srinivas Aravamudan, ‘The Hindu Sublime’, in *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language* (NY: Princeton University Press, 2005) and the idea of ‘radical conservatism’ in *Unconditional Equality*.
27. In the slightly different context of subaltern identity
28. This section treats the *sūtra* and commentary as a single text. While there has been some debate over the extent to which the commentary attributed to Vyāsa may have inflected the reading of the *sūtras* unnaturally, the recovery, or not, of the original *Yoga-sūtra* is irrelevant to our attempt here.
29. ‘Cognitive’ and ‘Acognitive’ are Bryant’s translations. Edwin F Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary with Insights from the Traditional Commentators* (New York: North Point Press, 2009).
30. *yogaḥ samādhiḥ. sa ca sārvoabhaumāś cittasya dharmāḥ. kṣiptaṃ mūḍhaṃ vikṣiptaṃ ekāgraṃ niruddhaṃ iti cittabhūmayāḥ. tatra vikṣipte cetasi vikṣepopasarjanībhūtaḥ samādhir na yogapakṣe vartate. yas tv ekāgre cetasi sadbhūtaṃ arthaṃ pradyotayati kṣi. noti ca kleśān karmabandhanāni ślathayati nirodham abhimukhaṃ karoti sa samprajñāto yoga ity ākhyāyate. sa ca vitarkānugato vicārānugato ānandānugato ‘smitānugato ity upariṣṭān nivedayiṣyāmaḥ. sarvavṛttinirodhe tv asaṃprajñātaḥ samādhiḥ.* Vyāsa’s commentary on 1.1, *Pātañjalayogasūtrāṇi*, 1-3  
‘Yoga is *samādhi*. And that is a property of the mind in all planes. The planes of the mind are disturbed, deluded, distracted, one-pointed and restrained. Of these, the Absorption directed towards distraction when the mind is distracted is not part of Yoga. The one which illuminates an existent object in the one-pointed mind, diminishes the afflictions, loosens the bonds of *karma*, and brings restraint near is called the ‘cognitive Yoga’. And we shall explain later, that is [of the kind which] follows reasoning, examination, bliss, and a sense of the self. The acognitive Absorption, on the other hand, is when there is the cessation of all (mental) movements’.
31. *tadā draṣṭuḥ svarūpe ‘vasthānam* 1.3, *Pātañjalayogasūtrāṇi*, 7.
32. *puruṣārthasūnyānāṃ guṇānāṃ pratiprasavaḥ kaivalyaṃ svarūpapratiṣṭhā vā citiśaktir iti* 4.34, *Pātañjalayogasūtrāṇi*, 207.  
‘Isolation is the withdrawal of the *guṇas* which are devoid of any effort, or the consciousness-capacity established in itself’.  
*Guṇas* are the stands/qualities of which the manifest world is constituted.
33. *vṛttisārūpyam itaratra* 1.4, *Pātañjalayogasūtrāṇi*, 7.  
Elsewhere, there is similarity to the form of the movements.
34. *vṛttayaḥ pañcatayyaḥ kliṣṭākliṣṭāḥ* 1.5, *Pātañjalayogasūtrāṇi*, 9.  
The five kinds of movements are afflicted and unafflicted.
35. *avidyā’smitā-rāga-dveṣā’bhinivoeśāḥ kleśāḥ* 2.3, *Pātañjalayogasūtrāṇi*, 59.
36. *pramāṇa-viparyaya-vikalpa-nidrā-smṛtayaḥ* 1.6, *Pātañjalayogasūtrāṇi*, 10.
37. *pratyakṣānumānāgamāḥ pramāṇāni* 1.7, *Pātañjalayogasūtrāṇi*, 10.
38. The idea of provisional and ultimate truth is a common one in premodern Indian philosophy. For more, see Sonam Thakchoe, ‘The Theory of Two Truths in India’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2017 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/wotruths-india/>.
39. *Sphuṭaḥ prajñālokaḥ*; Vyāsa on YS 1.47.
40. *Ṛtambharā tatra prajñā* YS 1.48; *Pātañjalayogasūtrāṇi* 51.
41. *na ca tatra viparyāśajñānagandho ‘py astīti*; Vyāsa on YS 1.48. *Pātañjalayogasūtrāṇi* 51.
42. *śrutānumānaprajñābhyām anyaviṣayā viśeṣārthatvāt* 1.49; *Pātañjalayogasūtrāṇi* 52.  
‘It has a different scope than knowledges from testimony and inference, because it has as its object a particular’
43. Ann Taves would suggest that the kind of reading of YS suggested here is, in fact, theology. While careful distinctions certainly need to be drawn between what constitutes religious studies and what does not, and indeed can be objectively drawn, because they depend on the perspective of the scholar towards the object of her study, that a study would be labelled ‘theological’ in the religious studies/theology dichotomy does not preclude it from also being a comprehensive worldview. Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*. (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).
44. Mikel Burley, *Classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga: An Indian Metaphysics of Experience* (Routledge, 2007), 140.
45. *dvayī ceyam nityatā kūṣṭhanityatā pariṇāmīnityatā ca. tatra kūṣṭhanityatā puruṣasya. pariṇāmīnityatā guṇānām. yasmin pariṇamyamāne tattvaṃ na vihanyate tan nityam. ubhayasya ca tattoānabhighātān nityatvam. (...) kūṣṭhanitye. sv svarūpamātrapraṭiṣṭheṣu muktapuruseṣu svarūpāstītā krameṇaivānubhūyata iti tatrāpy alabdhaparyavasānaḥ śabdaprṣṭhenāstikriyām upādāya kalpita iti.* Commentary on 4.33, *Pātañjalayogasūtrāṇi*, 205.  
‘And this eternality is of two kinds, unchanging and changing. Of these, unchanging eternality is of the *puruṣa* [the subject to be isolated] and the changing eternality is of the strands/qualities. The eternal is that whose essence is not destroyed upon its transformation. The eternality of both is because of the non-destruction of the essence (...) (In the statement) ‘the existence of [their] own form is experienced through (temporal) sequence’ with reference to the liberated *puruṣas*— which are the unchanging eternal, and firmly established in their own form alone— the termination, which is not (actually) attained is imagined, having included the verb ‘is’ through reliance on language’.
46. Although this hasn’t received detailed treatment here, the possibilities of the other tradition Chakrabarty referred

to are pertinent to what we attempt. While it would be interesting to see how Ricoeur's exploration of time and narrative may further problematize Chakrabarty's History 1 and History 2 (by introducing the question of experience and narrativity, etc.), his observations in 'Existence and Hermeneutics', and the broader project they suggest, may also pave the way for a sustained engagement with the view of the subject we found the in the YS.

## Bibliography

- Bryant, Edwin F. *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary with Insights from the Traditional Commentators*. New York: North Point Press, 2009.
- Burley, Mikel. *Classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga: An Indian Metaphysics of Experience*. Routledge, 2007.
- Certeau, Michel de, and Marsanne Brammer. 'Mysticism'. *Diacritics* 22, no. 2 (1992): 11–25.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. New ed. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Forman, Robert K. C. *Mysticism, Mind, Consciousness*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Gandhi, Leela. *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-De-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Guha, Ranajit. *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Oxford University Press, 1983.
- . 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India.' In *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, 1–8. Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. *Captain Swing*. [1st American ed.]. New York: Pantheon Books, 1968.
- . *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1965.
- Katz, Steven T. 'Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism'. In *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, 22–74. Oxford University Press, 1978.
- . 'Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning'. In *Mysticism and Language*, 3–41. Oxford University Press, 1992.
- King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and the Mystic East*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Niranjana, Tejaswini. *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Scott, Joan W. 'The Evidence of Experience'. *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 773–97.
- Sells, Michael Anthony. *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Skaria, Ajay. *Unconditional Equality: Gandhi's Religion of Resistance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 'Introduction-Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography'. In *Subaltern Studies: Selections*, 3–35. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Taves, Ann. *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Thakchoe, Sonam. 'The Theory of Two Truths in India'. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2017. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/wotruths-india/>.
- White, David Gordon. *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014.