

Time Table of Yoga

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

PART 1: THE PRE-CLASSICAL PERIOD

Much of early Indian chronology is purely conjectural. It has often been remarked that the first secure date for ancient India is that of Alexander the Great's invasion of the peninsula's north. Western scholars have by and large tended to distrust native Indian traditions (notably the king lists of the *Purânas*), seeing in them little more than fanciful constructions of imaginative pundits. However, some researchers, such as F. E. Pargiter and R. Morton Smith, have taken the trouble to study this complicated subject more deeply and have found that the Indian historical traditions are far more reliable than has generally been assumed. Although it is difficult to find firm or in many cases even plausibly close dates for people and events, their relative sequence is generally known.

After years of diligent investigation, Pargiter observed that Indic tradition is "not an untrustworthy guide."¹ He added: "In ancient times men knew perfectly well the difference between truth and falsehood, as abundant proverbs and sayings show. It was natural therefore that they should discriminate what was true and preserve it; and historical tradition must be considered in this light."² In particular, the genealogical tradition, as embodied in the *Purânas*, which were Pargiter's specific area of expertise, must, contrary to earlier scholarly opinion, be deemed a valuable source of chronological and historical information. As Pargiter noted:

It is absurd to suppose that all the genuine kshatriya tradition has been lost or utterly corrupted, and that the traditions which we have now are spurious. If the brahmans could and did preserve their religious compositions with the most scrupulous care and fidelity, it is absurd to suppose the opposite about kshatriya tradition, when [. . .] there were men whose business it was to preserve such tradition. The general trustworthiness of tradition is the fact demonstrated, wherever it has been possible to test tradition by the results of discoveries and excavations, and we should distrust scepticism born of ignorance. The position now is this—there is a strong presumption in favour of tradition; if any one contests tradition, the burden lies on him to show that it is wrong; and, till he does that, tradition holds the field.*³

Working two generations after Pargiter, Smith similarly concluded:

It is true that we do not expect archaeological corroboration to be possible (though it is conceivable that the Indus script might provide some), and therefore, we cannot claim certainty. But it seems to us irrational to assume or assert that the *Purâna* king lists are all fabrication without producing proof or evidence, or the explanation that then becomes necessary."⁴

While Smith's dating of the Vedic literature is wrong, he has contributed significantly to clarifying chronological sequences of kings and events mentioned in the *Purânas*.

Regrettably, Pargiter's and Smith's findings and appraisals have not yet penetrated the more conservative quarters of the academic establishment. Thus, even when certain

dates have been demonstrated to be wrong (notably the date for the Vedic *Samhitās*), or even when certain theories (such as the idea of an Aryan invasion into India between 1200 B.C.E. and 1500 B.C.E.) stand exposed as imaginative fiction, many scholars are reluctant to abandon long-cherished notions.

When Smith wrote his book *Dates and Dynasties in Earliest India*, he did not yet have the satellite photographs that revealed that there once flowed a mighty river through the Thar Desert and that on its banks were numerous settlements, and that this river dried out long after the *Vedas* had been composed. But even he conceded that we “need a flexible rather than a rigid conception of the Aryan invasion.”⁵ Today we know that this entire hypothesis is redundant. If anything like an Aryan invasion ever happened, it occurred not three thousand but nine thousand or more years ago.

For millennia, the Hindus transmitted their sacred knowledge orally, necessitating tremendous feats of memory. Even today, there still are brahmins who can flawlessly recite one, two, or even three of the Vedic scriptures and some of their commentaries comprising tens of thousands of verses. Others can recite the entire *Mahābhārata* epic, which is bigger than the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined. Regrettably, the traditional art of memorization is rapidly being lost as a result of the widespread use of printed editions of the sacred texts. Long ago, the Druids maintained that books undermine memorization and oral tradition. The ancient Greeks thought similarly.

Given the advanced mnemonic technology in ancient India, why would we not also take their genealogies of kings and sages seriously? Admittedly, the *Purānas* are not counted among the revelatory literature (*shruti*) and therefore may not have been transmitted as faithfully as the *Vedas*, the mnemonic technology behind their transmission through the ages was essentially the same as that which has preserved the Vedic texts with astonishing accuracy. That the Purānic king lists should contain errors and omissions does not negate their value as chronicles.

The following chronology is proposed as an alternative model based on recent research and thinking rather than the highly conservative ideas of scholarly textbooks. The academic establishment is only slowly beginning to accept that we must completely reconsider the history of ancient India. Needless to say, the present chronological reconstruction is intended only as a thumbnail overview serving as a broad frame of reference. Yet, it has the advantage of giving the native Indian traditions proper weight and also taking into account up-to-date research. In particular, the discovery that the mighty, 1800-mile-long Sarasvati River, which once flowed through and fertilized the heartland of the early Vedic civilization, had run dry by around 1900 B.C.E. represents a significant chronological marker. It helps us fix antecedent and subsequent cultural developments in a more credible manner than has hitherto been possible.

It is convenient to think of the cultural developments prior to this watershed event as the Vedic Age, which is the time of the composition of the earliest revealed literature (the four Vedic *Samhitās* and the oldest *Brāhmanas*). Following it, we have the Post-Vedic Age with the *Āranyakas* (special ritual texts for forest-dwelling ascetics), the *Upanishads* (the conclusion of the revealed literature), and then an ever-growing stream of nonrevelatory literature (such as the *Sūtras* and *Shāstras*), and not least the two great epics of India, the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata*, as well as the many *Purānas*.

The following chronology is calculated on a generation lasting 17.6 years.

B.C.

6500 Beginnings of the town of **Mehrgarh** (now in Afghanistan), showing a remarkable cultural continuity with the Indus- Sarasvati civilization and later Hindu culture. By the fifth millennium B.C.E., Mehrgarh had grown into a settlement of around 20,000 people (the size of the twentieth-century university town of Stanford, California).

4000-3500 This is the period of **Manu Svayambhuva**, the first Manu (who is credited with the authorship of the *Manu- Smṛiti*), as well as the next five Manus. Contemporaries of the first Manu were the seven great seers **Marīci, Angiras, Atri, Pulaha, Kratu, Pulastya,** and **Vasishtha**. This is also the time of the wicked King **Vena**, who was killed by the power of *mantras*, and his sagely successor **Prithu**, who was a great visionary emperor ruling benignly over the people of India (Bharata).

Feb. 18, 3102 Traditional but unverified Hindu date (according to the later *Purānas*) for the beginning of the Dark Age (*kali-yuga*), which, according to some pundits, coincides with the end of the great war chronicled in the *Mahābhārata*. Others think that this date coincides with the reign of **Manu Vaivasvata**, the seventh Manu and the first ruler after the great flood reported in some Hindu scriptures. His son **Ikshvaku** founded the solar dynasty of North Indian kings to which the God-man Rāma belonged (see see under 2380 B.C.). His grandson **Candra**, son of the sage Atri, founded the lunar dynasty to which the God-man Krishna belonged (see under 1450 B.C.). This is the era of the seven great seers **Vasishtha, Kashyapa, Atri, Jamadagni, Gautama, Vishvamitra,** and **Bharadvāja**. Also the venerated sage **Bhrigu** lived at this time. Many later sages adopted their names, which has caused some confusion.

3000 Beginnings of the urban centers along the Indus River, which were part of the sprawling Indus- Sarasvati Civilization, extending over an area of approximately 300,000 square miles. Since the earliest archaeological layers of Mohenjo Daro are under water, the date could be several centuries earlier. This is also the age of the bulk of the *Rig-Veda* and perhaps also the other three *Vedas* (revelatory literature) and the original *Purāna* ("Ancient Lore") as well. This very probably was also the time of the reign of King **Sudas**, famous for his Battle of the Ten Kings, and the great sages **Vasishtha** and **Vishvamitra**. (There have been many other Vasishthas and Vishvamitras in earlier and later times.) This was also the era of **Parashu-Rāma** ("Rāma with the Axe"), the first human incarnation of God Vishnu and not to be confused with the later **Rāma**. He is remembered as having reestablished the sacred authority of the brahmins over the warrior estate. Parashu-Rāma is traditionally said to have lived only four generations removed from Bhrigu (see under 3102 B.C.).

2600-2000 Golden age of the Indus-Sarasvati Civilization, with extensive export of goods, notably wood, to Sumer and other Middle-Eastern cultures.

2500-1800 Probable era of King **Sudās** (who lived 34 generations after Manu), a namesake of the earlier ruler. Trade with Mesopotamia was firmly established by this time.

This also is the period of the creation of the major *Brâhmanas* (ritual texts), in approximate chronological sequence: *Pancavimsha* (Sarasvati and Drishadvati Rivers are still prominent; this text also does not refer to Kuru-Pancalas as yet), *Taittirîya* (refers to united Kuru-Pancalas), *Jaiminîya*, *Kaushîtaki*, *Aitareya*, *Shatapatha*, and *Gopatha*. This also is the era of the beginnings of Ayurveda (Northern India's medical tradition).

2400 Possible date for the fierce sage **Kapila**, who is said to have killed the sixty-thousand sons of King **Sagara** (40 generations after Manu) by his curse. He is traditionally said to have invented the Sâmkhya philosophy, but Hindu tradition knows of many Kapilas who were sages. Kapila's main disciple was **Âsuri**, who was fond of rituals. Both are mentioned in the *Shatapatha-Brâhmana* (c. 2000-1800 B.C.). This is also the time of the royal sage **Bhagiratha**, the great grandson of Sagara. According to the controversial research of the British scholar L. A. Waddell, *Sagara* is the Sanskrit version of the Sumerian Emperor Sargon's name. Sargon's date is given as 2371-2316 B.C.); this ruler of the city of Agade apparently spoke a Semitic language, had a permanent army of 5,400 soldiers, which allowed him to conquer the neighboring city-states one after the other.

2380 Traditional date of the God-man **Râma**, hero of the *Râmâyana* epic. A genealogically more plausible date is c. 1975 B.C.E.

1994 Dasharatha (63 generations after Manu), the father of **Râma**. He is mentioned in a Hittite inscription dated c. 1400 B.C. together with Indra, the Nasatyas, and the Ashvins, showing that in the intervening time, Dasharatha had been thoroughly mythologized. Râma's reign was a golden age for the ancient kingdom of Ayodhya in the north of India. His wife Sîtâ was abducted by Râvana, the demonic ruler of Sri Lanka (former Ceylon). With the help of the wise monkey-headed demigod Hanuman, he succeeded in rescuing Sîtâ, who embodies the principle of fidelity. The Vedic people are known to have been experienced seafarers, and crossing the ocean to the island of Sri Lanka would not have been difficult for them.

1950 Creation of the original *Râmâyana* (much later expanded into its present poetic version).

1900 A tectonic cataclysm resulted in the drying up of the mighty Sarasvati River, whose fertile banks were once the central home of the Indus- Sarasvati Civilization, leading to its relocation at the Ganges River. Possible date for some of the later portions of the *Shatapatha* ("Hundred Path")-*Brâhmana*. According to several researchers, this is also the date of the Bharata war, but this may be several centuries too early, particularly when we consider the royal genealogies transmitted in the *Purânas* (see under 1450 B.C.).

1900-1700 Creation of the *Âranyakas* (ritual texts for forest-dwelling ascetics).

1800-1200 Revised date for the earliest teachings in the oldest *Upanishads*, specifically the *Brihad-Âranyaka*, *Chândogya*, and *Taittiriya-Upanishad*. **Yajnavalkya**, the greatest teacher of early Upanishadic times, some of whose teachings are preserved in the *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad*. He was presumably different from the Yajnavalkya mentioned in the earlier *Shatapatha-Brâhmana*. This is the time of the fabulously wealthy King **Janaka**, a disciple of Yajnavalkya.

1500-1200 Alleged invasion of the Sanskrit-speaking Indo-Aryan tribes from the Russian steppes. This historical model stands refuted by recent evidence, as discussed in the book *In Search of the Cradle of Civilization* by Georg Feuerstein, Subhash Kak, and David Frawley. The Sanskrit-speaking Aryans appear to have settled on the Indian subcontinent long before then and can be associated already with the town of Mehrgarh (see under 6500 B.C.).

1450 Date of the submerged archaeological site of Dvâraka in Gujarat, which has been identified by some researchers as the home town of the God-man **Krishna**. The mid-fifteenth century B.C. seems an appropriately conservative date for the Bharata war, and it is assumed in the present chronological reconstruction. Some researchers, however, consider this date too late for Krishna, who might have lived around 1900 B.C. In that case, Krishna could be associated with the earlier city whose ruins some researchers believe to have discovered beneath the remains of Dvâraka under the waters of the Gulf of Kutch. According to Puranic tradition, Kushasthali is the name of the island upon which Dvâraka and the earlier city were built. It was King **Revata**, the great grandson of Manu Vaivasvata, who built the first city, or, according to some accounts, the first forts, on the island. After a short span of time, Revata's city became submerged, and subsequently Krishna built Dvâraka, though his city too met with the same fate, apparently shortly after his death. Interestingly, according to Tamil tradition, the second Sangam (Learned Congregation) lasted for 3,700 years until its headquarters at Kavatapuram were swallowed by the ocean. Since the third and last Sangam is thought to have lasted for 1,850 years ending c. 300 A.D., the collapse of the second Sangam must have occurred around 1550 B.C.—close enough to the date of 1450 B.C. for the submergence of Dvaraka. This synchronicity is doubly interesting since we know that among the members of the second Sangam was **Thuvurai Koman**. Thuvurai apparently is a synonym for Dvaraka, while Koman means “Lord.” This appellation points to none other than Lord Krishna.

1424 According to some authorities, relying mainly on astronomical data, this is a possible date for the great war between the Kurus and Bhâratas, as reported in the *Mahâbhârata* epic. If correct, this would of course also be the era of **Krishna**, an incarnation of God Vishnu, and Prince **Arjuna**. This is also the time of the great sage **Vyâsa**, who arranged the Vedic hymns into the four collections known today and is also credited with reporting the events of the great war in the original *Mahâbhârata* (much later expanded over many centuries into its present form). According to Puranic tradition, the war occurred 95 generations after Manu Vaivasvata (which, reckoned at a plausible average of 17.6 years per dynastic generation, gives 1672 years, yielding a date of c. 1430 B.C., close to the astronomically derived date). Vyâsa is also said to have divided the one original *Purâna* (ancient lore) into the eighteen great *Purânas* known today. The name Vyâsa means “Arranger” and is an eponym of many individuals specializing in the transmission of the sacred literature.

1200 Possible date of the semi-legendary **Rishabha**, the first “ford-maker” (or enlightened teacher) of what came to be Jainism.

1000 Beginnings of the so-called “second urbanization” along the Ganges River.

900 **Yâska**, a famous Sanskrit grammarian and composer of the *Nirukta* (“Etymology”), who is mentioned in an early portion of the *Mahâbhârata*.

700 Pânini, India's most famous Sanskrit grammarian, who composed the *Ashtâdhyayî*, a grammatical textbook that served nineteenth-century Western philologists as a model for their own grammatical theories. Some Indian historians place Panini earlier.

600 Kânâda Pippalâda, author of the *Vaisheshika-Sûtra*, the principal work of the Vaisheshika school (of natural philosophy) of Hinduism. He may be identical with the Pippalâda who teaches six contemporaries in the *Prashna-Upanishad*. Among his students is a certain Sauryayânin (Astronomer) Gârgya, who may be one of the two Gârgyas listed in the old *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad*. Another of his students, Kabandhin Katyayana appears to be frequently mentioned in the early Buddhist literature under the name Kâkuda Kâtyayâna (Pakudha Kâccayana) and as an older contemporary of the Buddha. The mid-sixth century B.C. is probably also the time of **Gautama**, founder of the Nyâya school (of logic) and composer of the *Nyâya-Sûtra* (which mentions Yoga).

Possible date of the composition of the *Katha-Upanishad*, which defines Yoga as "steady sensory control" (*sthîram indriya-dhâranam*), which corresponds to the early understanding of the yogic process.

599-527 Vârdhamana Mahâvîra, founder of historical Jainism. Like Hinduism and Buddhism, Jainism is concerned with the spiritual liberation of the individual.

563-483 Siddhârtha Gautama, of the Sakya clan of what is now Nepal, founder of Buddhism, attained enlightenment in his thirty-fifth year. He is known to have studied with two teachers, **Alâra Kamala** and **Udraka Râmaputra**, who probably taught him a form of Yoga. He was fond of meditation and very skilled in it.

550 Maskarin Goshala, the third and last *tîrthankara* ("ford-maker") of the Ajîvika sect of wandering ascetics, which was very prominent and was criticized by the Buddha especially for their doctrine of fatalism. For six years, he studied with Vârdhamana (see under 599-527 B.C.).

Composition of the extant version of the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ*, which is a part of the present edition of the *Mahâbhârata*, and the oldest full-fledged Yoga scripture of which we have knowledge. The *Gîtâ* is presented as a dialogue between the God-man Krishna and Prince Arjuna, who lived much earlier. It emphasizes the Yoga of devotion (*bhakti-yoga*). According to the consensus of Western scholarly opinion, the *Gîtâs* it is extant today is a product of the early post-Christian era. Also possible date of the *Shvetâshvatara-Upanishad*.

483 Probable date of the First Council at which the Buddha's senior disciples systematized his teachings.

450-350 Probable date of the *Dhamma-Pada* written in the Pali language, which can be looked upon as a textbook of Yoga not unlike the Hindu *Bhagavad-Gîtâ*.

383 Probable date of the Second Council of the Buddhist monastic community at which sermons and poems by monks and nuns were officially added to the canonical scriptures. At that time, the community split into Theravâdins and Mahâsânghikas (whose thinking subsequently gave rise to Mahâyâna Buddhism).

350-100 Council of Pataliputra, after which the Jainas split into Digambaras (nude followers) and Shvetâmbaras (followers dressed in white). Composition of important philosophical passages of the *Mahâbhârata* epic, notably the *Moksha-Dharma*.

327-325 Invasion of Northern India by **Alexander the Great**, which barely affected India's civilization.

300-250 Composition of **Jaimini's** *Mîmâmsâ-Sûtra*, the authoritative text of the Mîmâmsâ school (of ritualism) of Hinduism. Hindu tradition regards him as a disciple of Vyâsa (see under 1450 B.C.), but this date seems far too early for the work itself.

269-232 Emperor **Ashoka**, who, after his conversion, greatly furthered the dissemination of Buddhism.

200 B.C. - 200 A.D. Era of the greatest influence of Buddhism in India. Probable date of the composition of the *Tirumurai*, the Tamil equivalent of the Sanskrit *Vedas*. The *Tirumurai* was collected as an anthology by Nambiandar Nambi in the eleventh century A.D.

150 Patanjali, the grammarian, who is traditionally regarded as the author of works on medicine and of the *Yoga-Sûtra* (but see below under 150-200 A.D.). This is also the probable date of **Lakulin** or Lakulîsha, the semi-legendary founder of the Yoga-practicing Pâshupatas and author of the *Pâshupata-Sûtra*.

100 The rise of Mahâyâna Buddhism; composition of the earliest *Mahâyâna-Sûtras*, such as the *Ashtâ-Sâhasrikâ*, the *Lankâvatâra*, and the *Sad-Dharma- Pundarikâ*.

A.D.

50 Buddhism arrives in China.

100 Probable date of **Caraka**, a great authority on Âyurveda, and of the Buddhist adept **Nâgârjuna**, founder of the Madhyamika school. This also is the period of the renowned Buddhist teachers **Âryadeva**, **Ashvaghosha**, and **Candrakîrti**.

150-200 Composition of the *Yoga-Sûtra* of **Patanjali** (who very probably is different from the grammarian by this name) and of the *Brahma- Sûtra* of **Bâdârayana**, one of the fundamental works of the Vedânta tradition. This is also the period of the final editing of Manu's ancient *Dharma-Shâstra* (also known as the *Manu-Smriti*), which contains a chapter on the duties of forest-dwellers and ascetics and also mentions Yoga. Composition of the *Hari-Vâmsha*, an appendix of the *Mahâbhârata* telling Krishna's lifestory.

300-400 Emergence of Buddhist and Hindu Tantra as an identifiable tradition.

350 Final composition of the *Mârkandeya-Purâna*, one of the earliest works of this literary genre, which describes a form of ritualistic Yoga.

Probable date of the great Buddhist teachers **Vasubandhu** and **Asanga**, who were brothers. The former established the Vijnânavâda school and the latter founded the Yogâcâra school of Mahâyâna Buddhism. This also is a likely date for the composition of **Îshvara Krishna's** *Sâmkhya-Kârikâ*, the source text of Classical Sâmkhya.

(A more detailed time table is given in Georg Feuerstein's [The Yoga Tradition](#).)

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