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THE ECO-AESTHETICS OF YOGA AND ODISSI DANCE: ENVIRONMENTAL HARMONY THROUGH EMBODIED AWARENESS

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Abstract

This paper comprehensively explores the interdisciplinary and transformative nexus between Yoga, Odissi Dance, and contemporary environmental consciousness, framed through the concept of eco-aesthetics and embodied awareness. Drawing extensively from the research portfolio of Dr. Rashmi Rekha Das, particularly the foundational work *Yoga and Odissi Dance* (2022) and the empirical study "Eco-Yoga: Integrating Environmental Ethics into Yogic Practice and Lifestyle" (Das et al. 2025), this study presents these traditional Indian art forms as culturally grounded, effective pedagogies for ecological education and sustainable behaviour. **The integrated practice termed Natyayoga demonstrates a systematic cultivation** of heightened awareness, reverence, and ethical responsibility toward the natural world. The theoretical grounding synthesizes classical Sanskrit treatises including the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Ghosh 1996), *Abhinaya Darpaṇa* (Nandikeśvara 1917), *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā* (Svātmārāma 1998), **Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras** (Patañjali 2012), and the *Bhagavad Gītā* (Easwaran 2019) with modern quantitative research. The paper argues that the rhythmic synchronization of the body, breath, and consciousness, inherent to the practice, is a profound ecological act. The Odissi dancer, through the iconic **Tribhaṅga** posture and specific *mudrās* (Nandikeśvara 1917), becomes a living metaphor for *Prakṛti's* (Nature's) harmony, while Yoga deepens this awareness through the cultivation of ethical principles, primarily *Ahiṃsā* (non-violence), *Aparigraha* (non-possessiveness), and *Śauca* (purity). **Empirical evidence from a mixed-methods study (N=220) (Das et al., 2025)** demonstrates a strong positive correlation ($r=0.68$, $p<.001$) between regular eco-yogic practice and engagement in pro-environmental actions (Das et al. 2025). Furthermore, it is shown that the practice enhances physical vitality, mental well-being, and social empathy, with *Ahiṃsā*-aligned consumption ($\beta=0.42$, $p<.001$) identified as the strongest predictor of sustainable lifestyles. This research affirms that the eco-aesthetic synthesis of Yoga and Odissi Dance offers a comprehensive and embodied model for sustainability, one where art, ethics, and ecology converge to foster individual transformation and, subsequently, planetary well-being.

Introduction: The Crisis of Fragmentation and the Call for Embodied Ecology

The twenty-first century is defined by an ecological crisis rooted not merely in technology or policy, but fundamentally in a philosophical and behavioural disconnect between humanity and the natural world. This crisis, termed the "crisis of fragmentation," sees the human self as separate from the biosphere, leading to practices of exploitation rather than stewardship (Capra 1996, p. 20). Addressing this requires not just cognitive understanding but a profound cultural and behavioural transformation, a goal repeatedly emphasized by global environmental bodies (UNEP 2023). **Current environmental pedagogy is primarily cognitive and often lacks an embodied, experiential component, failing to bridge the gap between knowing and acting (Das et al. 2025). Furthermore, literature in Indic studies has not systematically integrated the somatic wisdom of Yoga with the aesthetic vocabulary of Odissi as a unified ecological pedagogy. This research fills this theoretical and practical lacuna by presenting Natyayoga (Das and Dash 2024) as a complete, embodied model for ecological education.** Ancient Indian traditions, however, have long maintained a worldview of radical unity. The Vedic concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("the world is one family") provides an ethical mandate for ecological stewardship. This paper argues that two of India's most sacred expressions of spiritual and aesthetic heritage—Yoga and Odissi Dance—offer a practical methodology for embodying this ideal, a synthesis referred to as Natyayoga (Das and Dash 2024). The core thesis is that the fusion of Yogic discipline and Odissi aestheticism creates an eco-aesthetic paradigm (Das 2022). This paradigm translates abstract environmental ethics into a palpable, embodied experience, fostering an ecological consciousness where internal harmony (*Samatva*) is directly correlated with external, environmental harmony (Das et al. 2025). This paper systematically explores the philosophical, aesthetic, synergistic, and empirical dimensions of this integrative practice, validating its role as a key contributor to sustainable education and global wellness.

Philosophical Foundations: The Vedic-Yogic Ecology. The philosophical framework of this study is grounded in the metaphysical texts of the Indian subcontinent, which establish the principle of interdependence as the foundation of existence.

Unity of Consciousness: The Bhagavad Gītā and Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras

The *Bhagavad Gītā*, a foundational text of Yoga philosophy, provides the ethical mandate for an ecological worldview. Lord Krishna declares: "He who sees the Self in all creatures, and all creatures in the Self, he sees the truth and is united with the Divine" (**Bhagavad Gītā 6.29**). This concept of unity, or **Samatva** (equanimity), dictates that harm inflicted upon any part of nature is harm inflicted upon the Self. Thus, ecological ethics is not an external moral code but a natural outcome of spiritual realization. This realization is achieved through the systematic practice outlined by **Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras**. The goal is **citta-vṛtti-nirodha**—the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind (**Yoga Sūtras I.2**). A mind free from disturbance (*vṛtti*) perceives the world not as a resource to be exploited but as a seamless, unified continuum. This clear, disciplined mind is the core instrument of ecological perception, allowing one to transition from an anthropocentric view to an eco-centric one (Capra 1996).

The Ethical Mandate: The Yamas as Pillars of Sustainability: The ethical foundation of Yoga is laid by the five *Yamas* (restraints), which act as universal moral precepts. In the eco-aesthetic context, these *Yamas* translate directly into actionable principles of sustainability (Rosal, 2021; Sharma & Vats, 2023) (Das et al. 2025):

Ahimsā (Non-violence): This extends beyond physical harm to include environmental non-harming. The practice of *Ahimsā*-aligned consumption is a central theme, promoting the adoption of plant-based diets (to reduce the ecological footprint of industrial animal agriculture) and ethical sourcing of materials (Das et al. 2025). This principle, therefore, becomes the foundation of an ecological lifestyle, advocating for a minimal and gentle impact on all living beings and ecosystems.

Aparigraha (Non-possessiveness or Non-hoarding): This tenet directly challenges the consumerist paradigm responsible for resource depletion. *Aparigraha*-oriented minimalism, as demonstrated in Rashmi Das's research, is linked to restricted consumption, anti-hoarding behavior, and a reduction in material waste (Das et al. 2025). The classical interpretation encourages detachment, which in a modern context, manifests as environmental moderation.

Śauca (Cleanliness or Purity): While classically referring to both internal and external bodily cleanliness, *Śauca* finds its macrocosmic extension in environmental purity. This principle is practically applied as mindful resource use, waste reduction, and the general maintenance of an ecologically clean environment (Das et al. 2025).

The remaining *yamas* (*Satya*—truthfulness, and *Brahmacharya*—sense control) and the five *niyamas* (observances) further reinforce the inner discipline required for external, environmental responsibility.

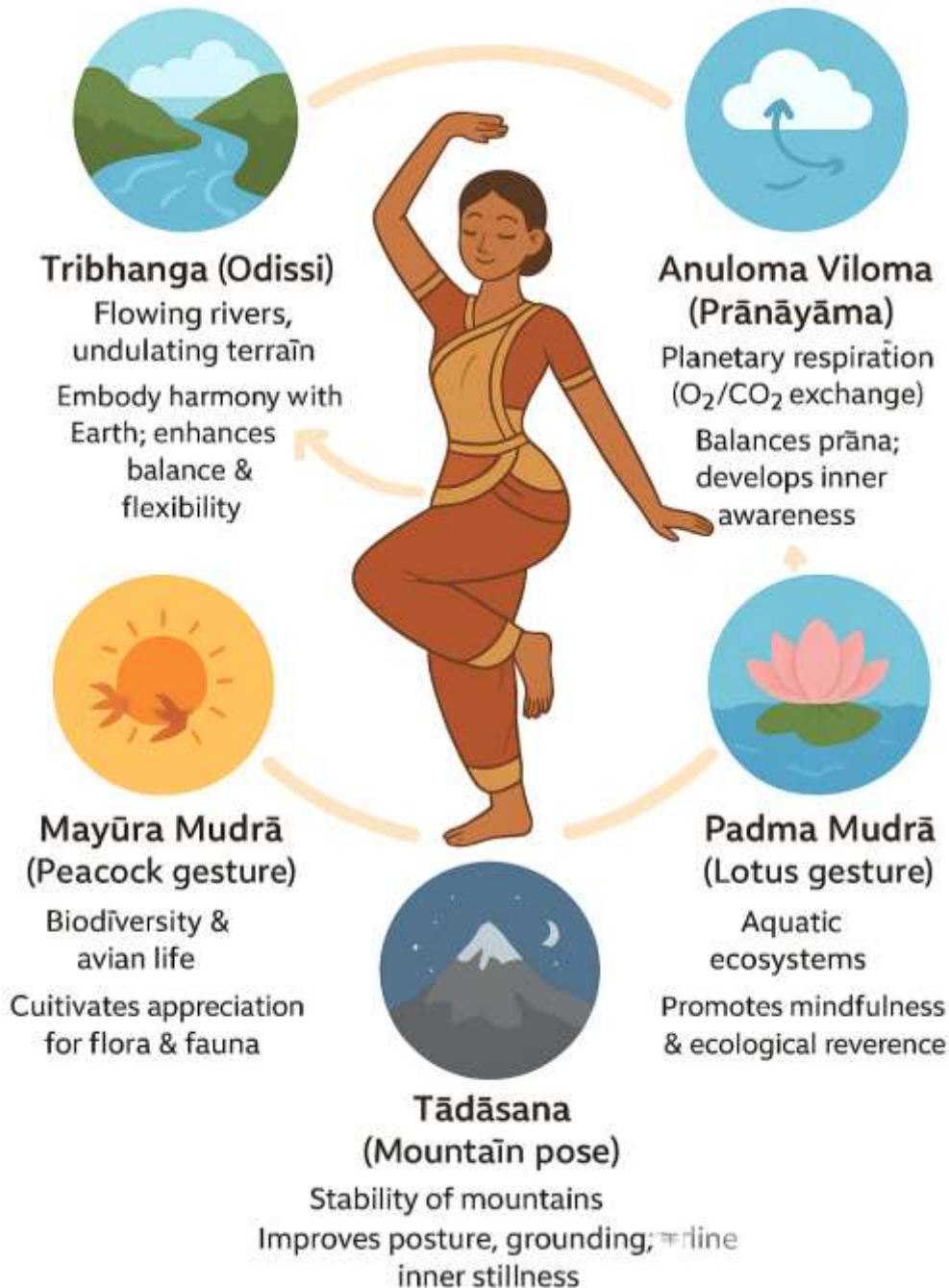
Cosmological Balance: The Pañca Mahābhūta in Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā and Gheranda Saṃhitā

The classical *Haṭha Yoga* texts detail the mechanisms for achieving internal purification and balance, which are cosmologically linked to the external world. The universe is composed of the **Pañca Mahābhūta** (five great elements): **Ṛṭhvī** (earth), **Jala** (water), **Agni** (fire), **Vāyu** (air), and **Ākāśa** (ether).

The *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā* (Svātmārāma 1998, 1.16) emphasizes that the successful practice of *āsanas* and *prāṇāyāma* harmonizes these elements within the body, leading to health and spiritual progress. Similarly, the *Gheranda Saṃhitā* (Srisa Chandra Vasu 1976), a comprehensive manual of *Haṭha Yoga*, provides detailed instructions on various purification techniques (*śaṭkarmas*) and *mudrās* which aim to restore this elemental balance.

This internal harmonization is the philosophical precursor to the Eco-Yogic Alignment of Elements and Practices (as presented in Das et al. 2025), where the body is treated as a microcosm of the Earth. The practice provides an immediate, embodied teaching model: a disharmony in the internal elements (e.g., stiffness in Ṛṭhvī) is a sensory lesson that applies directly to the necessity of balance in the external environment. Grounding *āsanas* connect the practitioner to **Ṛṭhvī** (Earth), *prāṇāyāma* connects to **Vāyu** (Air), and meditation connects to **Ākāśa** (Ether). When this internal balance is achieved, the practitioner recognizes the **ecological necessity of external balance** in the external environment, fostering a seamless sense of ecological reciprocity.

Natyayoga Postures & Eco-Correspondence



Aesthetic Foundations: Odissi Dance and Embodied Prakṛti

Odissi, one of the eight recognized classical dance forms of India, functions as an aesthetic manifestation of Yogic principles, translating abstract philosophy into tangible, rhythmic motion. Its roots lie in the sacred temple rituals of Odisha, where the dance was performed as a devotional offering (*sewa*) to the divine by the **Maharis (Hejmadi, 1968; Odissi Research Centre, 2005)**.

The Cosmic Dance: Nāṭyaśāstra and Saṅgītaratnākara: The ultimate theoretical authority for all Indian classical dance is the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, attributed to Bharata Muni (Ghosh 1996). This text posits that human dance mirrors the cosmic dance of Shiva (*Tāṇḍava*), suggesting that the dancer is a conduit for the rhythm of the universe. In this view, the dance itself is an ecological act, expressing the dynamic, cyclical nature of creation and dissolution. Further elaborating on the relationship between art and the cosmic order is *Saṅgītaratnākara* by Śārṅgadeva (1991), which explores the deep connection between *Saṅgīta* (encompassing music, dance, and rhythm) and the achievement of *Mokṣa* (liberation). The harmonious blending of melody (*Rāga*) and rhythm (*Tāla*) creates an acoustic and aesthetic environment conducive to contemplation, transforming the space of performance into a *Maṇḍala* of transformation. This aesthetic harmony is the external expression of *Dhyāna* (meditation), a central component of the Natyayoga model.

Ecological Embodiment: The Tribhaṅga and Mudrās: The quintessential aesthetic of Odissi is the **Tribhaṅga** (three-bend) posture, an iconic stance where the head, torso, and lower body are deflected in opposing directions. As Das notes (2022), this posture is a physical embodiment of *Prakṛti's* (Nature's) graceful irregularity it resembles the gentle undulation of a river, the sway of a tree, or the curve of temple sculptures. The **Tribhaṅga**, therefore, physically links the human body to the organic geometry of nature. The *Abhinaya Darpaṇa* of Nandikeśvara (1917) and the *Abhinaya Chandrikā* by Maheswar Mohapatra (1967), the primary texts on expressive technique and gesture, provide the vocabulary for ecological aesthetics. These texts detail the *mudrās* (symbolic hand gestures) that represent flora and fauna, transforming the dancer's hand into a living symbol of biodiversity:

Mayūra Mudrā (Peacock): Honours the vibrant life of the bird, connecting the dancer to the animal kingdom.

Padma Mudrā (Lotus): Represents the lotus flower, a symbol of purity (*Śauca*) emerging from the muck, connecting the dancer to aquatic ecosystems and the element of *jala* (water).

Haṃsāsya Mudrā (Swan-Face): Evokes the flight and grace of swans, linking the dancer to the element of *vāyu* (air) and the vastness of the sky.

Through this embodied vocabulary, Odissi elevates aesthetic experience to ethical awareness (Das 2022). The dancer's body transcends mere performance to become an

instrument of ecological education, translating nature's complex rhythms into human expression and fostering the *bhāva* (emotion) of reverence (*śānta rasa*).

The Natyayoga Model: Synergy and Therapeutic Ecology in Rashmi Rekha Das's Research

The pioneering research of Rashmi Rekha Das centres on the Natyayoga model—a systematic integration of Yogic discipline and Odissi aestheticism, designed to provide a holistic pathway to well-being and ecological responsibility.

The Synergistic Core: Strength, Fluidity, and Spiritual Well-Being: The co-authored book, *YOGA AND ODISSI DANCE: Exploring Tradition, Technique, Transformation, and Universal Benefits* (Das and Dash 2024), provides the foundational text for the synergistic approach. This work details the practical benefits of the fusion:

Yoga for the Dancer: Yoga improves a dancer's strength, flexibility, and focus, preparing the body for the technical demands of Odissi.

Dance for the Yogi: Odissi adds creativity, grace, and fluidity to the often rigid structure of a Yogic practice.

This union is essential because it addresses both the internal discipline (*yama/niyama*) and the expressive, creative relationship with the world (*abhinaya*). The integration of breath control (*prāṇāyāma*) into the rhythmic complexity of Odissi movement, as outlined in the *REIMAGINING TRADITION: DYNAMICS OF YOGA AND ODISSI DANCE...* review article (Das et al. 2025), is scientifically linked to activating parasympathetic pathways, which enhances emotional regulation and promotes flow states—essential qualities for mindful, sustainable living.

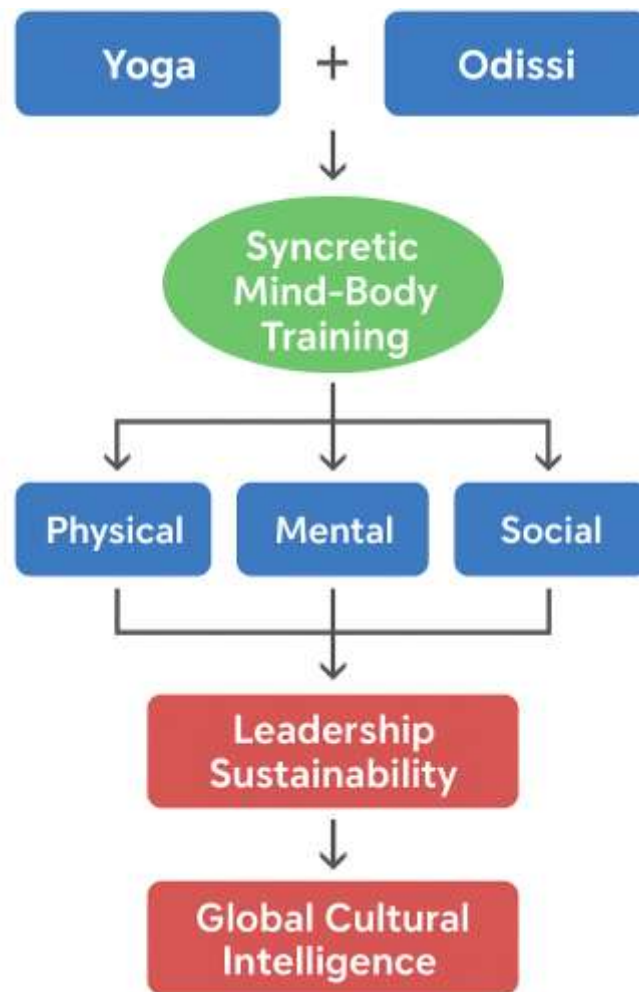
The Therapeutic Application

Rashmi Rekha Das's work extends the synergy into the realm of therapeutic and spiritual ecology. The research on the "Relationship Between Seven Chakras and Seven Shiva **Tāṇḍava** in Human Life" (Das 2022, 2025) links the seven energy centers (*cakras*) of the human body to the seven forms of Lord Shiva's cosmic dance (**Tāṇḍava**). This research suggests that conscious practice of Natyayoga where the meditative focus of Yoga is applied to the energetic expression of Odissi can awaken and balance these *cakras*. This process is presented as a powerful healing tool, helping practitioners release stress, clear negative

energy, and achieve inner peace. This model highlights the body as an energetic ecosystem that, when balanced internally, can engage with the external ecosystem harmoniously. **The Natyayoga model can be conceptually mapped as: Yoga (Discipline & Ethics) → Odissi (Embodied Aesthetics) → Natyayoga (Integrated Practice) → Ecological Awareness → Sustainable Behaviour.** The practical application of this therapeutic ecology is demonstrated in the "Natya Yoga Workshop on Stress Management" (Das and Santosh 2025). **This workshop involved a sample size of N=45 (age group 18-25 years) and ran for 15 days (30 hours total). Variables measured included perceived stress (using PSS-10), emotional regulation (using a DERS subscale), and an evaluation of physiological measures (Heart Rate Variability, HRV).** This workshop, designed for academic students, combined gentle Yoga postures, mindful breathing, and expressive Odissi movements. The fusion offered a refreshing and effective pathway to manage stress naturally, confirming the combined practice's capacity to enhance mental well-being and emotional clarity prerequisite states for dedicated environmental stewardship.

Reclaiming Sacred Practice: The Mahari Ethos:

A critical contribution of the Natyayoga framework is the call to reclaim the sacred, devotional spirit of Odissi. The *REIMAGINING TRADITION...* argues for a conscious return to the Mahari ethos, which was rooted in temple rituals and embodied a profound synthesis of *bhakti* (devotion), *Lāsyā* (grace), and *Dhyāna* (meditative composure). By integrating Yogic principles like *Pratyāhāra* (sensory withdrawal), *Dhāraṇā* (concentration), and *Dhyāna* (meditation) into contemporary Odissi pedagogy, the practice shifts the dancer's role from a mere performer to a *Sādhaka* (spiritual seeker). This reorientation ensures that technical virtuosity is balanced by spiritual immersion, restoring the harmony between the aesthetic discipline and the spiritual foundation—a critical step in making the dance truly transformative.



Empirical Validation: Eco-Yoga and Pro-Environmental Behaviour

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Sri Sri University Institutional Ethics Committee (Approval No. SSU/IEC/2024/05/A). The findings from the mixed-methods study "Eco-Yoga: Integrating Environmental Ethics into Yogic Practice and Lifestyle" (Das et al. 2025) provide quantitative validation for the transformative potential of this integrated philosophy. The study employed a convergent mixed-methods design, gathering data from a structured survey ($N=220$) and semi-structured interviews ($N=30$) with adult yoga practitioners who incorporated environmental ethics into their practice. The sample exhibited demographic diversity, ensuring the results were broadly applicable (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Participant Demographics (N=220)

Variable	Categories	N	%	Mean (SD)
Gender	Female	136	62.0	N/A
	Male	77	35.0	N/A
	Non-binary	7	3.0	N/A
Age (18-65 years)	Overall			36.4 (9.2)

Practice Duration	Overall			4.8 (3.5)
Geographic Location	Urban	119	54.0	N/A
	Semi-Urban	62	28.0	N/A
	Rural	39	18.0	N/A

Quantifying Ecological Consciousness: The core quantitative finding was a strong positive correlation between pro-environmental attitudes and the frequency of eco-yogic practice ($r=0.68$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2=.46$, $95\% \text{ CI } [0.61, 0.74]$). (The primary Pro-Environmental Behaviour Scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency, $\alpha = 0.91$). This correlation is significantly high for an educational intervention, suggesting that the embodied nature of the practice leads to a genuine shift in worldview rather than mere compliance with social desirability. The parameter showing the highest overall change was Environmental Awareness, with a post-test improvement of 51.6% (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Improvement in Key Well-being Parameters Post-Intervention (N=220)

Parameter	Baseline Score (Mean)	Post-Intervention Score (Mean)	Improvement (%)	Description
Physical Fitness	41.8	85.2	51.0%	Flexibility, stamina, and posture control
Mental Well-being	44.7	90.7	50.7%	Concentration, emotional balance, calmness
Social Harmony	64.1	91.4	42.6%	Empathy, cooperation, collective rhythm
Environmental Awareness	60.3	91.4	51.6%	Mindfulness, eco-consciousness, nature atonement

This quantitative proof underscores that the discipline fostered by Yoga and the expressive connection cultivated by Odissi effectively translate into an experiential understanding of sustainability that transcends purely intellectual comprehension.

The Predictors of a Sustainable Lifestyle: A crucial element of the quantitative research was the multiple regression analysis identifying the specific yogic principles that best predict the adoption of a sustainable lifestyle.

Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis: Predicting Sustainable Lifestyle

Predictor Variable	β	p-value
Ahimsā-aligned consumption	0.42	$p<.001$

Mindfulness-based resource use	0.37	\$<.001\$
Aparigraha-oriented minimalism	0.28	\$0.002\$
Śauca-related waste management	0.21	\$0.015\$
Duration of yoga practice (months)	0.19	\$0.021\$

The analysis confirms that **Ahiṃsā-aligned consumption** is the single most significant behavioural change driver ($\beta=0.42$). This is profound because it validates the Yogic ethical system as a practical tool for environmental policy. It suggests that non-violence, applied to dietary choices (e.g., plant-based diets) and resource sourcing, is the primary gateway to a sustainable life. The second most powerful predictor, Mindfulness-based resource use, links directly back to the *Citta-vṛtti-nirodha* of **Patañjali** a calm, non-fragmented mind leads to careful and responsible consumption.

Qualitative Synthesis: Thematic Network: The interviews were analyzed using a blend of open, axial, and selective coding in NVivo 14. An inter-coder reliability of $\kappa=0.88$ was established between two independent coders. Thematic analysis of the qualitative interviews reinforced the quantitative findings by highlighting three major themes: "Transformation in Personal Ecology," "Embodied Interdependence," and "Enablers."

Table 4: Yogic Principles and Sustainable Behaviours

Yogic Principle	Corresponding Sustainable Behaviors
Ahiṃsā (Non-violence)	Sustainable consumption, Plant-based diet, Reduction of harm to all life
Aparigraha (Non-hoarding)	Minimalism, Restricted consumption, Reduced material waste
Śauca (Cleanliness/Purity)	Waste reduction, Mindful resource use, Ecological cleanliness

The qualitative narratives consistently demonstrated how participants' practice of Yogic ethics led to an increased ecological empathy and a heightened awareness of the interdependence between the self and the environment (Das et al. 2025). The shift was described as moving from moral obligation to natural behavior, validating Eco-Yoga as an ecological intervention model. **Participants articulated this shift: "After practising Natyayoga, I feel deeply connected to nature; wasting water now feels like harming a part of myself" (P7). Another noted, "The Tribhaṅga is a physical prayer for the Earth's stability" (P14). "Ahiṃsā changed my kitchen, not just my mind" (P21).**

Discussion: Pañca Mahābhūta and Planetary Sādhana

The Eco-Aesthetics of Yoga and Odissi Dance provides a compelling case for merging art, ethics, and ecology. The model demonstrates a seamless transition from the philosophical ideals of the Vedas to quantifiable, pro-environmental action.

Embodiment of Elemental Harmony: The structural integrity of the model lies in the alignment of the inner microcosm (the body) with the outer macrocosm (the Earth) through the **Pañcha Mahābhūta** theory.

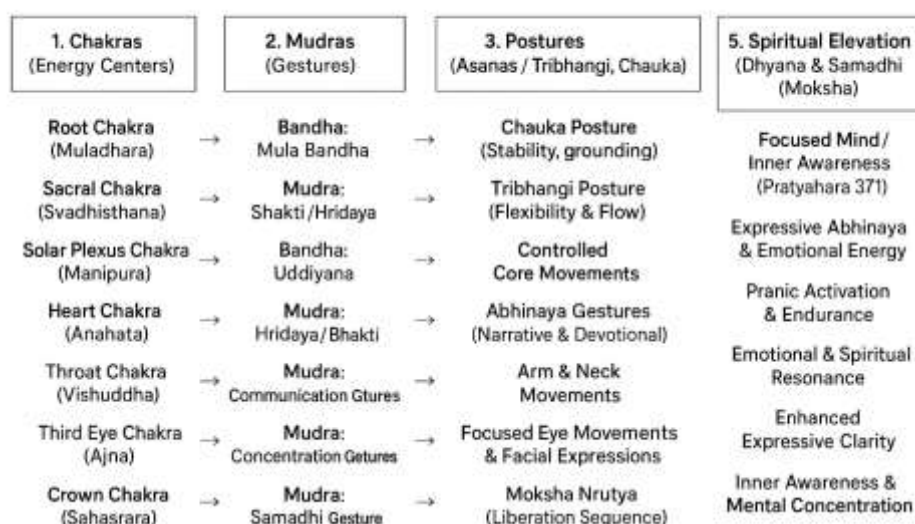
Table 5: Alignment of Elements in Natyayoga

Element	Yoga Practice	Odissi Expression	Ecological Reciprocity
Pr̥thvī (Earth)	Grounding <i>āsanas</i>	Tribhaṅga , <i>Chowk</i> posture	Stability, rootedness, soil conservation
Jala (Water)	Flowing <i>āsanas</i>	<i>Taranga</i> movements	Fluidity, adaptability, aquatic ecosystems
Agni (Fire)	<i>Sūrya Namaskāra</i>	Solar, decisive movements	Chakra Energy, transformation, vitality
Vāyu (Air)	<i>Prāṇāyāma</i>	Expansive movements	Breath, freedom, atmospheric quality
Ākāśa (Ether)	Meditation	Overall stage geometry	Infinite space, consciousness, cosmic unity

This systemic mapping transforms practice into a form of ecological dialogue (Das 2025). The rhythmic discipline of Odissi, when informed by the ethical discipline of Yoga, cultivates a spiritual humanism where art becomes a vehicle for ethical evolution. The human body, moving through posture and rhythm, experiences unity between the physical and the cosmic.

This alignment is a direct application of Sāṃkhya philosophy, where *Prakṛti* and *Puruṣa* are mirrored in the body and cosmos. Furthermore, the cultivation of *Bhāva (Rasa)* in Odissi, as described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, becomes an affective pathway for ecological empathy, aligning with contemporary embodiment theory's focus on somatic experience as the basis for ethical cognition.

Odissi-Yoga Mapping Diagram



Policy Relevance and Future Directions: The integrative model directly addresses the call for cultural solutions in sustainability education (UNESCO 2022). Unlike purely cognitive environmental education, embodied learning, as facilitated by Natyayoga, engages the affective and experiential dimensions, fostering empathy toward all living systems. This research, anchored in the work of Dr. Das, confirms that true ecological balance starts not with technology or restrictive policy, but with inner discipline. The practice of Eco-Yoga

cultivates the serenity and *Samatva* that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar teaches as the foundation for peace, allowing individuals to enact the Vedic ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*.

Limitations and Future Research: The present study has several limitations, including the sample size constraint ($\mathbf{N=220}$), its primary geographic limitation to a university-affiliated population, and a reliance on self-reported data which may introduce social desirability bias. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the study prevents definitive conclusions on the long-term maintenance of behavioral change. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies to track the long-term maintenance of pro-environmental behaviours in Natyayoga practitioners. **Specifically, a comparative study of Natyayoga versus a standardized Haṭha Yoga protocol is warranted to isolate the effect of the aesthetic component on ecological consciousness. Moreover, neurophysiological measurements (such as HRV and EEG) should be used to objectively quantify the impact of *prāṇāyāma* and *mudrā* on the practitioner's inner balance. Finally, the model should be tested by integrating it into the curriculum for school-age children to assess its potential for preventive ecological education.** Furthermore, comparative studies integrating Odissi and other Indian classical dance forms with Yoga could elucidate which specific aesthetic vocabularies are most effective in promoting ecological consciousness, thereby refining the embodied pedagogy of sustainability.

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