Patañjali in Contemporary India: Role and Representations

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Patañjali was the name of a premodern Indian sage to whom important works on Sanskrit grammar, yoga philosophy and the medical system of Āyurveda are ascribed. In recent decades increasing attention has focused on Patañjali as the authority on and figurehead of yoga. Some authorities now also consider Patañjali a patron of music and dance, and in South Indian traditions he sometimes features as one of the Siddhas, physician-alchemists believed to possess tantric attainments or perfections (siddhi).

Believed to be the author of the Yogasūtras, which has attained canonical status in many yoga traditions, Patañjali has been appropriated by various contemporary authorities, yoga centers and Āyurvedic institutions. This development has led to the creation and installation of different types of visual representations, a process that is still ongoing. The modern engagement with Patañjali's visual form appears to have begun in the 1980s in South India and includes statues and paintings. Yoga guru Swami Ramdev has popularized Patañjali's name as an authority on Yoga and Āyurveda throughout India. He adopted the name for a line of products marketed as Patanjali® and Patanjali Ayurved® and named a network of educational institutions in India after the sage. He installed a large Patañjali statue on the premises of one of these institutions, the Patanjali Yogpeeth, in 2006. It is only one of several statues of Patañjali placed in public spaces in contemporary India, the Patañjali shrine in the Dhyānaliṅga temple complex at the Isha Yoga Centre inaugurated in 1999 perhaps being the oldest. This paper surveys visual representations of the sage in various parts of modern India and examines their function and significance.

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