

Yoga for a new generation

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Yoga has a long religious history in India, but modern Indians are taking cues from the West and replacing spirituality with weight-loss and Instagram selfies. This once 'uncool' practice is fast becoming big business - but some fear the 'real' yoga is being left behind.

AUTHORS

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LOCATIONS:

INDIA
UNITED STATES

GENERATIONS:

GEN X (BORN
1967-1981)
GEN Y (BORN
1982-1996)

SECTORS:

HEALTH AND FITNESS
TRAVEL AND LEISURE
PHYSICAL HEALTH
BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCES



SCOPE

It originated from India, but in the '80s and '90s, yoga had fallen out of favour with the Indian youth as a product of ancient times – something their grandparents once practiced. It was slow, boring and practiced in neighbourhood parks or small community centres, led typically by retired volunteers. If there was a yoga session on, Gen X was usually nowhere to be found.

But in the '90s, America discovered yoga – partly due to Bikram Choudhury's efforts – and took to it in droves. In India, too, yoga centres started appearing – and they didn't look so drab and uninviting. The private practice of yoga, taking inspiration from the US, was becoming public. As Californians made yoga their own, Indians inspired by the West also started to see value in their culture.

Today, India is seeing a comeback of spirituality and yoga – but this time through a modern avatar. Hip Indians influenced by their American counterparts are taking to a different form of yoga that's less to do with religion, and more to do with finding yourself. It replaces white-haired old men with sexy yoga pants and colourful mats. And rather than searching for a higher power and purpose, it concentrates on losing weight, getting fit, and posing for Instagrammable selfies. Yoga in India today is quickly becoming big business. And like in the West, some fear the 'real' yoga is being left behind.

WHAT IS 'REAL' YOGA?

More than 20 million Americans practice yoga. In 2012, the American yoga industry – including clothes and gear – was worth \$10.3 billion. [1] Meanwhile, in the UK, there are around half a million practitioners of yoga, with the number of teachers growing by around 10% every year. [2] And in India, yoga is increasingly becoming a tool for fitness and good-looking bodies. Yet very few people truly understand the religious or Hindu roots of their asanas. The omission, some insist, is intentional. Why bring in religion into a multi-billion dollar industry that can only profit if it remains secular and is built on the foundations of healthy minds and perfect bodies?

For religious Westerners, new strains of yoga are beginning to appear. Yoga isn't only accessible to Hindus, spiritualists and atheists – now, there are variants like Christian or Jewish yoga. In India, even as early as a decade ago, yoga was practiced not in studios but in homes, in public parks, and ashrams. But today, following the latest trends in the West, yoga is being practiced more by young, spandex-wearing men and women in the city than it is by swamis in ashrams. And just like in the West, there always new strands of yoga making their way into the mainstream; power yoga, nude yoga, laughing yoga, acro-yoga, contemporary yoga, competitive yoga, and even yoga for dogs – or 'doga'.



Contemporary adaptations of yoga are no less 'real' than their predecessors

DeAnna Smothers and Jennifer Zach, Yahweh Yoga

"Contemporary adaptations of yoga are no less 'real' than their predecessors," claim Yahweh Yoga's DeAnna Smothers and Jennifer Zach. "It's slightly ironic that while one of the bedrock foundations of Hinduism is the belief that there are many paths to God, when it comes to yoga, there seems to be a claim to exclusivity." [3]

But others disagree. "Unless we accept the incorrect definition that yoga is merely physical exercise, then there are many teachings in yoga that would cause conflicts or the average Catholic or Protestant, [let alone] Evangelical," says

Jeffrey Armstrong, a practitioner and teacher of the Vedas. “Currently, a large percentage of non-Indian yoga teachers are keeping a commercially safe distance from yoga philosophy, the Vedas and the modern Hindu culture of India, but that separation can only last for a few years while the market is ignorant of the historical reality.” [4]



Traditionalists argue that spirituality and religion are intrinsic parts of yoga

The Yoga People, Creative Commons (2014)

CHOOSING A PATH

From India to the West, today's yoga guru now comes in a new avatar: upmarket, driven, goal-oriented, modern, and devoid of any religious or spiritual affiliation. But that doesn't mean India has let go of its history. It's straddling both versions of yoga – the modern and the traditional – with growing numbers of practitioners in each. While there are increasing number of fitness-based approaches to yoga that appeal to a younger generation, spiritual figure Baba Ramdev has made it available to the housewife, the elderly, and the religious. His daily morning show on TV channel Aastha reached people in small towns and cities across India, and viewing statistics indicate that he's the most widely-watched figure on television. [5] But Ramdev doesn't appeal to everyone. Younger practitioners in particular oppose his strong conservative beliefs, including his unfounded claim that homosexuality is a 'disease' that can be cured by yoga. [6]

Other practitioners disagree with the secularisation and commercialisation of yoga. “Any sincere yoga practitioner is certain that the words ‘yoga’ and ‘competition’ should never occur in the same sentence,” says Armstrong. “Competitions these days are, even in the world of sports, mostly about making money. With yoga, this is even more the case.” [4]

The profit question is at the heart of what is really going on in the yoga marketplace, says Armstrong. He claims that as yoga has become profitable, its very nature has been altered – with studios even becoming spa-like in a bid to attract new members. And Armstrong is also concerned by the growing number of yoga teachers who are trained solely in asana – the physical side of yoga – rather than its spiritual roots. “These young people are defining yoga as without philosophy or religion because it excuses them from needing to be qualified in the actual knowledge of India and the Vedas,” he claims. Armstrong recognises that not all yogi omit the Hindu and Vedic roots of the practice, but he feels this traditionally-focused group is in the minority – and is seen as a liability to the commercial sale of yoga. [4]



Western brands like lululemon are capitalising on the modern yoga trend

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YOGA 2.0: A MARKETER'S DREAM

But despite Armstrong's claims, yoga isn't a highly profitable trade for instructors, aside from experts like Bikram Choudhury and celebrity instructors like Many Ingber. The real beneficiaries of the yoga trend are the people, brands and products on the periphery of the trade. Most gyms across the UK and US now offer yoga as an addition to their fitness class repertoire. As yoga turns into a symbol of 'cool', connected to a healthy and body-conscious way of life, fashion retailers have been quick to cater to the new, young yoga tribes – even building new brands around the practice.

People aren't satisfied with taking part in sports or athletic activities – they want people to know about it. And what better way to show their dedication than through clothing? Self-described 'yoga-inspired' [lululemon](#) sells athletic apparel alongside classes at its modern studios, while Urban Outfitters has launched sports brand [Without Walls](#) to provide clothing 'cool' enough to wear on the street as well as in the gym. Gap's [Athleta](#) line sells performance apparel and gear, and Nordstrom has created its own in-house yoga brand, [Zella](#). Even Victoria's Secret is getting in on the act, with yoga offerings in its [VSX](#) and Pink lines.

In India, yoga-specific money-making brands are almost non-existent, with yoga-wear relegated to general sports apparel stores. But this doesn't mean there's no room for them in the future. While fitness-fashion brand [YOGASMOGA](#) is based in New York, it's passionate about addressing both old- and new-world yoga concerns – and it's keen to express that it "honours the tenets" of yoga. "I feel like the lululemons and Athletas are clothing companies that are taking advantage of yoga," says company founder Rishi Bali. "We're different. I want to be a yoga company. And I want to do everything [clothing-wise] at a higher level." Although it's technically American, the company has true Indian roots; Bali grew up in India in the Upper Ganges Plains. "I understand the culture and have been around yoga my whole life," she explains. [7] Culturally-aware 'hybrid' brands like YOGASMOGA may be the first step towards introducing yoga-specific brands to India.



The future of yoga could be a mixture of modernity and tradition

Jesse Warren, Creative Commons (2013)

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

“I don’t see why it has to be an either-or situation,” says Mansi Batra, a 27-year-old advertising professional from New Delhi. “Sure, I’ve been familiar with yoga all my life, but I’d never been interested because huffing and puffing with old men in a park was just never going to be my thing. If the yoga studios help you achieve the results of yoga – physically and spiritually – while making it fun and interesting, I don’t see a problem with that.” [8]

❗ The fact that some people may do yoga postures in a competitive way does not mean that everyone has to – or will

Ruchi Madan, yoga instructor

The resurgence of yoga in India is happening on a large scale, and the way it’s practiced is as individual as the person or organisation itself. Indian pre-schoolers are practicing yoga in their day-care centres, managers and executives are fitting it into their office hours, and housewives are using it to unwind at home. “Isn’t it better than we practice some form of yoga, whichever aspect of it that appeals to us and makes us comfortable, than ignore it entirely because it’s remained bland, boring, and steeped in the past?” asks Batra. [8]

Indeed, for many young Indians who grew up ignoring yoga, its new avatars offer a convincing case for the practice that tradition has largely been unable to make. “I think that every personality is drawn to different things,” says yoga instructor Ruchi Madan. “The fact that some people may do yoga postures in a competitive way does not mean that everyone has to – or will. You can make it what you want, and that’s a very positive thing.” [9]

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