

HARD BODIES, SOFT POWER

The life coaches of a burgeoning business get a state-powered boost

By Kaveree Bamzai

The last time any government used the state to promote yoga, Indira Gandhi was prime minister, the yogi of choice was the shadowy Dhirendra Brahmachari (described by the November 1980 INDIA TODAY cover story as a man with “no official standing but awesome power”) and the result, among other things, was a regular programme on state broadcaster, Doordarshan. Forty years later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the star of a renewed bid to reclaim yoga and the stage is global.

When Modi urged the United Nations in September last year to declare June 21 as International Yoga Day, few would have expected anything to happen. Things did. Very quickly. Even as Modi tweets a yoga pose almost daily, gurus from across various schools of yoga are emerging to bask in their share of the spotlight. India has learnt more about the benefits of yoga in the past few weeks than it has since Independence—especially central government officials who were forced to learn, ironically, from instructors at the Morarji Desai National Institute of Yoga, founded by Dhirendra Brahmachari and now part of the newly created Ministry of AYUSH.

Predictably, there has been controversy, the primary being: is yoga Hindu? Why not, asks Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, but the purpose of Hinduism itself is to seek *mukti*, freedom, from everything, including God. So yes, yoga is Hindu inasmuch as karma yoga is the yoga of works, jnana yoga is the yoga of knowledge, bhakti yoga is the yoga of devotion, and kriya yoga is the yoga of energy. The controversy on whether yoga is religious is a holdover from Macaulayism, says Vedic scholar Subhash Kak. “Its critics see it as the opening that will be used to push through more elements of the ‘retrogressive Hindu religion’.”

So the questions continue: should the *surya namaskar* be practised in school? If yoga is taught, who is to decide the curriculum? How many schools of yoga are there and which one should the seeker follow? A largely somnolent AYUSH ministry, headed by lifelong RSS swayam-sevak Shripad Yasso Naik, who is using the occasion to strike poses for international media, has done little to tap into the possibilities of yoga and skill development for a burgeoning youth population. As Sadhguru says, what is good hesitates to market itself. What is bad, say carbon dioxide trapped in a bottle and pretending to be an aerated beverage, becomes a cultural phenomenon.

Yet yoga's soft power has been recognised and utilised by a band of eclectic yogis—call them the GPSs (Guru Positioning Services)—who have taken the medium and the message far and wide. They have vast empires of land, armies of volunteers, schools, even colleges, and a phalanx of celebrity devotees. They are the hard bodies behind India's soft power. They have ensured the world appreciates the gift of yoga. Now it is time for them to turn the light inwards. One breath at a time.

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✿ THE INTERNAL ENGINEER | SADHGURU JAGGI VASUDEV, 58, Isha Foundation, Coimbatore

HIS FIRST YOGA CLASS was with seven participants in Mysore in 1983. Since then, the Isha Yoga Centre has become a magnet for seekers of various persuasions, some powerful, some famous, some neither. With his Project GreenHands which has planted 25 million trees in Tamil Nadu in the last 12 years, the Action for Rural Rejuvenation, which works in villages, and Isha Vidhya

which runs seven schools and has adopted 26 government schools, Sadhguru has become a brand with total recall. Master of the epigram, particular about his surroundings (from where he sits to how he drinks water), and fond of telling stories, Sadhguru likens himself to a sherpa. “Just as you need a sherpa to guide you in difficult terrain, you need a guru to help you negotiate every new dimension of

Photograph by ROHIT CHAWLA

SADHGURU JAGGI
VASUDEV

USP

Inner engineering which is a combination of meditation, *pranayam* and *Shambhavi Mahamudra*, a simple but powerful 21-minute-long *kriya* which provides individuals with the tools to optimise all aspects of health, inner growth and success.

Followers

Isha Yoga is transmitted, not taught, says Sadhguru. But he has 4,000 full-time volunteers and over three million part-time volunteers.

What can yoga do

Create unity of polarities, of mind and body, left brain and right brain.



YOGA POWER,

consciousness,” he says.

Yoga, which he calls a science in its fundamental form, is manifested in several technologies—which is the many schools of yoga. “It’s like the various phone brands. You can be Samsung, Apple or Sony. But all of us can WhatsApp.” He says a human being comprises four elements: body, mind, emotions and energy. How you combine the proportions makes each unique being? “You can use your mind to create hell or wellness,” he says.

A former businessman who saw the light atop Chamundi Hill in 1982 at the age of 25, Sadhguru believes International Yoga Day is remarkable—“So far our leaders have focused on material success and economic well-being. This is the first time they are talking of internal wellbeing. World peace has always been a slogan, not a possibility.” He is a firm believer in the power of yoga to re-engineer one’s genetic code and believes that in five years, its practice can transform India into a phenomenal force by firing up youngsters.

“Only this can prevent our demographic dividend ending up as a demographic disaster,” he says. It’s the only way India can become a superpower of inner development. “The Prime Minister realises the hopeless nature of his job. He knows the only way he can take the nation anywhere is to enthuse its people. Yoga will do it.” And with that, he believes India can attain the impossible—move 600 million Indians out of poverty without the use of forceful means.

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