

# THE ETHICS OF YOGA AND THE SPIRIT OF GODMEN

Neoliberalism, Competition, and Capitalism in India

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**Abstract:** Drawing on Weber's classic study of religion, salvation, and the motivation to be a successful capitalist, this article problematizes the relationship among competition and the embodiment of success in the practice of yoga in modern India. Contemporary postural yoga has been popularized in ways that fetishize the body and the relation between the body and enlightenment. It has become a sign of self-realization in a mode that reflects the possibility of transcendence. So-called godmen in India, who embody this possibility, popularize yoga in different ways. Contrasting Swami Sivananda's brand of twentieth-century yoga in the context of Nehruvian modernity with Baba Ramdev's yoga as an expression of free market religious nationalism, this article examines the work that embodied competition does in different ideological contexts.

**Keywords:** asceticism, Baba Ramdev, capitalism, godmen, nationalism, sport, Swami Sivananda, Weber

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber ([1930] 1958) does not appear to be explicitly concerned with competition. His focus is on the contradiction between religious values and economic interests and how one signifies the other. Nevertheless, his argument hinges on how the idea of salvation, conceptualized in terms of predestination, produces a worldview in which the saved and the damned are winners and losers. This worldview would seem to render competition pointless and meaningless since the elect are chosen by God. And yet, what Weber shows is that a competitive ethic of hard work that demonstrates election is deeply internalized and performed. As such, predestination opens up an arena where the performance of salvation through competitive



capitalism suggests a more complicated, nuanced, and fraught articulation of competition in social practice and self-development. The relationship between salvation and economic success encompasses the problem of what signifies proof of salvation and questions about how and for whom embodied proof is meaningful and convincing.

Focused on the rationalization of economic interests and ethical values in terms of the 'spirit' of capitalism, Weber's argument is inspired by two primary concerns that are important for understanding competition in this context. First is theodicy and the logical problem of reconciling absolute faith in an all-powerful, impersonal, omnipotent God, on the one hand, with the agency of self-determination and free will in the context of modernity, on the other. In Weber's formulation, there is a profound tension in the Protestant ethic between absolute faith in God and the desire to prove, through hard work, that one is among the elect. Second, and perhaps less obvious, is the problem of symbolic mediation, including questions concerning the materialization of signs that reflect God's will, and the complex, multi-dimensional dynamic of fetishization.

Weber does not theorize fetishization. But his analysis of how the Protestant work ethic is manifest in the embodied signs of material success provides an important perspective on the fetishization of salvation. He claims that success in the domain of business, which entails competitive entrepreneurialism, is not a means to the end of ever-greater wealth, much less a kind of reformed moral economy of indulgences. Economic success, and the work of competition that makes a person successful, *signifies* salvation. As Weber ([1930] 1958: 172) puts it:

The religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling, as the highest means to asceticism, and at the same time the surest and most evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith, must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of that attitude toward life which we have here called the spirit of capitalism.

The 'leverage' to which Weber refers in this key passage is, in essence, "the formal mechanism of fetishism ..., whereby the signifier depends upon yet erases its signification" (Taussig 1993: 225). Weber's purposefully suggestive reference to a 'spirit' of capitalism, rather than the more obvious spirit and spirituality of Protestant theology, evokes the mystical power of dependent erasure: commercial success evidences religious salvation even though the former is also a product of self-motivation and social status.

Whereas Weber's concern is with worldly asceticism in the context of Protestant religiosity, his analysis of the fetishized relationship between wealth and salvation can be extended to cases in which claims to enlightenment stand in a similar but more intimate relationship to the embodiment of individual success.

When sagely wisdom is thought to reflect the power of spiritual insight, the fetishization of divine power factors into competition in ways that complicate the 'spirit' of capitalism. It is productive, therefore, to reconsider Weber's argument by way of an examination of self-discipline and personal accomplishment in contexts that problematize the relationship between competition and ascetic self-realization. This is particularly important when considering practices of embodiment where means and ends are deeply intertwined, such as yoga by which transcendence is achieved in part through embodied practice. When the logic of transference involves physical signs of transcendental consciousness, not just wealth as a material sign of being among the hard-working elect, how should we understand the power of self-motivation as an affordance of competition and as a feature of middle-class modernity and upward mobility?

Because enlightenment does not depend on the idea of divinity, self-realization is more deeply self-centered in soteriological practice than the idea of salvation. Consequently, enlightenment can become a powerful sign of ultimate, personal achievement. It can become a symbol of self-motivation, personal ambition, hard work, and self-discipline, while at the same time disconnecting means and ends, determined personal effort from transcendent experience. Competitive self-discipline becomes a thing of value and virtue unto itself as bodies appear to transcend, with the promise of ultimate liberation, their own fetishization (see Alter 2008a, 2011b).

In light of Weber's focus on ascetic self-discipline as an aspect of the spirit of capitalism, yoga is of particular interest because it involves the embodiment of ascetic values. Most significantly, the goal of yogic enlightenment, to whatever degree it is 'erased' in practice, entails the fetishization of the embodied self as transcendent, thus animating an attitude toward life in which self-discipline becomes a sign of success. As such, yoga provides an important perspective on the embodiment of these signs in contexts where competition is fraught and complicated. This is most dramatically clear in contexts of athletic gymnastic asceticism and charismatic capitalism, which involves entrepreneurial asceticism.

The worldwide popularity of yoga today is based on the promise of holistic health and fitness. Postural practice has become a global phenomenon for a spectrum of reasons, not least of which is that it is said to be different from and better than other forms of exercise and self-development. This article makes use of historical material to gain an anthropological perspective on yoga in the twentieth century, as colonial and post-colonial changes during this period of time have defined cultural practices in the twenty-first century. Drawing on popular sources that document this history, the analysis here is anthropological rather than ethnographic (Ingold 2017). It is focused on the recent history of yoga's development in modern India, examining the tensions and contradictions manifest in the embodiment of athleticism, worldly asceticism, and

nationalism. It provides a critical perspective on claims made by those who see yoga as a means to the end of success in the embodiment of middle-class virtues of hard work and self-discipline.

In many contexts of practice in India, postural yoga has been consciously secularized and medicalized. This reflects the fact that the practice of yoga was subject to scientific study, regimentation, and routinization by a number of reformers in the twentieth century (Alter 2004). Science programmatically facilitated the translation of yoga's pre-modern magical and mystical affordances into terms more compatible with middle-class modernity, especially after yoga was institutionalized as a therapeutic modality and an indigenous system of physical education in the 1930s and 1940s.

Although the secularization of yoga in India is pervasive, the close association of postural practice with asceticism makes it possible for those who speak with authority by invoking enlightenment to attribute to themselves a kind of other-worldly power that is manifest in the worldly success they embody. As Andrea Jain (2020: 17–46) has persuasively argued, yoga's twenty-first century re-spiritualization is closely linked to the globalized flow of neoliberal forms of practice that build on commercialized economies of care and self-development (see also Jain 2011, 2012, 2015; Laycock 2013; McCartney 2019; Rosen 2019). As examined in this article, however, the fetishization of embodied enlightenment by so-called godmen—who perform transcendence through embodied practice—produces a spectrum of different forms of competition that depend upon, but also erase, the existential possibility of absolute transcendence and the perfection of the self. In relation to the practice of yoga, competition throws into sharp relief the contradictions and paradoxes associated with the embodiment of ethical principles and the realization of self-development based on elusive ideals of freedom, liberation, and independence.

Further complicating questions about the reasons why individuals and groups practice yoga are the secondary characteristics of institutionalized yoga (commercialization, branding, trademarking) and less formalized claims that link specialized kinds of practice to individuals who embody various kinds of authority (Foxen 2020; Jain 2014; Neumann 2019; Singleton and Byrne 2008; see also Powers and Greenwell 2017; Puustinen and Rautianiemi 2015). In the context of modern, secular India, these individuals are often referred to—somewhat derisively—as 'godmen'. The claims made by godmen are almost inevitably politicized, either explicitly or implicitly, in the sense that one person's claims are in competition with those of another. This is especially true in contexts where authority is based on claims to enlightenment or on popular assumptions that a person embodies transcendent, sagely wisdom. In situations where a charismatic teacher establishes a following of acolytes, the secondary characteristics of institutionalization take on a life of their own (Copeman and Ikegame 2012; Singleton and Goldberg 2014).

The article is subdivided into three sections to show how postural yoga has been popularized in ways that fetishize the body and the relationship between the body and enlightenment. The first section highlights the development of postural yoga as a sport and the way competitive yoga anticipates branding and self-promotion. The second section focuses on Swami Sivananda's brand of spiritual yoga and the dynamics of embodiment and competition in the context of anti-colonial secular socialist nationalism. The third section examines Baba Ramdev's development of postural practice as a form of neoliberal self-development. As a tremendously successful entrepreneurial godman, Baba Ramdev draws on the power of enlightenment in the philosophy of yoga to empower individuals to feel as though they can succeed in life by competing with themselves.

## **Yoga, Competition, and Contradiction**

In stark contrast to a history of practice oriented toward enlightenment, yoga has recently been institutionalized as a commercial sport under the banner of the National Yogasana Sports Federation (NYSF 2022) of India:

Yogasana as a sport has the potential to emerge as a multi-billion-dollar industry in the next few years and make a significant contribution to the country's GDP. The National Yogasana Sports Federation aims to develop an athlete base across 600 districts and build a brand value of over Rs. 1,000 crore [approximately US\$126 million] in five years.

Transformations in practice during the early twentieth century precipitated this shift (Alter 2011a). As codified by Swami Kuvalayananda and Shri Yogendra, *asana* (postures) and *pranayama* (breathing exercises) were integrated into physical education programs as forms of indigenous calisthenics with a focus on fitness, health reform, and the development of good character and traits of good citizenship. It is not difficult at all to see how the practice of yoga drill routines, based on precise instructions for doing postures and choreographed sequences of postures, was adapted for organized competition (see Singleton 2010). To a degree, this has contributed to the popular perception that postures are organized on a scale of increasing difficulty, and that the challenge is to be able to do the most difficult postures more easily and perfectly than anyone else. Some postures are certainly more challenging and require more practice than others. But to conceptualize postures in terms of degrees of difficulty reflects the priorities of performative evaluation codified in the rules and regulations of yoga as a competitive sport.

Both Swami Kuvalayananda and Shri Yogendra popularized *asana* and *pranayama* for health and fitness in synch with a tradition of practice and

interpretation linked to Swami Vivekananda, the nineteenth-century spiritual teacher of neo-Vedanta—a modern interpretation of the classical Vedic literature of South Asia. Honorific titles such Shri, Swami, Baba, Paramahansa, and Maharaj signify the sagely wisdom of world renouncers who embody the possibility of enlightenment. In light of this, Kuvalayananda and Yogendra were both inspired by Vivekananda’s muscular commentary on the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, a text that has come to define modern yoga in terms of classical philosophy interpreted through an Orientalist lens (White 2014). Nevertheless, both Kuvalayananda and Yogendra primarily sought to demystify, secularize, and de-exoticize all aspects of practice (Alter 2005, 2007b). Kuvalayananda institutionalized yoga under the rubric of science and medicine, and Yogendra did so under the rubric of health care and physical fitness: the latter advocated scientific research, while the former strongly supported the practice of athletic and sportive yoga.

Early-twentieth-century reformers sought both to modernize *asana* and *pranayama* and to distance themselves from the magical dimensions of practice. But they were nevertheless well aware of the authority to be claimed by adopting and adapting the persona of sage godmen, and of the success they could achieve by regularly and strategically conflating self-realization and self-promotion. Under the authority of their adopted titles, and their interest in linking contemporary practice to India’s classical philosophy, they sought to medicalize, for the growing middle-class, what had been perceived to be the duplicitous magic of suspect ascetics.

It is important to note that the institutionalization and commercialization of yoga before Indian independence in 1947 was framed by the priorities of nationalism as much as by the interests of commercial success. In the 1920s and 1930s, Kuvalayananda and Yogendra engaged in an intense rivalry to reclaim yoga from colonial Orientalism and to find and define its relevance for modern India in terms of science, secularism, and spirituality. Both of them understood that postural practice could become a means to the end of integrated education, synthesizing body and mind in the service of independent India. Competitive yoga fitted into a framework of school athletic programs as a practice that encouraged individual growth and development, as well as collective physical fitness. School sports and physical education programs thus provided a structure for institutionalized yoga competitions.

Yoga as a sport may be understood primarily as a spectacular extension of the performative dimension of embodiment and physical practice. The person most intimately associated with competitive yoga is Bikram Choudhury (Vats 2016). Choudhury was a disciple of Bishnu Ghosh, a younger brother of Paramahansa Yogananda, the very well-known godman who authored *Autobiography of a Yogi* (see Foxen 2017; Neumann 2019). Through the College of Physical Education, established in Calcutta in 1923, Bishnu Ghosh inspired an approach

to gymnastics and bodybuilding that highlighted competitive performances and feats of strength based on muscle control and postural practice (Armstrong 2018, 2020).

Choudhury became a successful bodybuilder and one of the leading competitors in a series of regional and national yoga athletic tournaments that were gradually institutionalized during the 1950s and 1960s. These competitions were organized through a network of schools and institutes dedicated to the development of yoga as physical education. Perhaps most notable was Hanuman Vyayam Prasarak Mandal, a training school for indigenous athletics and sports that had sent a team to perform yoga and other Indian forms of gymnastics and indigenous games at the Berlin Olympics of 1936 (Alter 2007a).

Drawing on his athletic success in India, Choudhury moved to Los Angeles and established Hot Yoga, a unique sequence of postures performed in a heated environment. Taking full advantage of the countercultural interest in mysticism, and building directly and indirectly on a foundation established by Paramahansa Yogananda and a number of other godmen who had popularized *asana* in the United States in the 1960s, Choudhury marketed Hot Yoga and Bikram Yoga to an elite Hollywood clientele in the 1970s and 1980s before becoming embroiled in financial scandals and litigation concerning sexual assault and harassment. To escape paying millions of dollars in damages, he fled the United States and is now teaching his brand of postural practice in Mexico.

Choudhury does not perform yoga as a godman or seek to invoke the power of ascetic fetishization, as do godmen who affect renunciation. But his physically charged charisma derives from a conscious ability to manipulate the power of transcendental consciousness, to expand the boundaries of yoga to encompass spectacular manifestations of power. He does this by means of performances of self-perfection and the materialization and fetishized embodiment of this perfection as a self-consciously famous teacher of the rich and famous. The power derived from performances of perfection takes various forms, including bodybuilding, conspicuous consumption, sexual predation, threats of litigation against copyright infringement, and, of course, claims to be the best and most authentic exponent of 'pure' yoga anywhere in the world.

What is significant here is not whether Choudhury was, in fact, a national champion of yoga in the late 1950s and early 1960s. What is important is that he made this claim to legitimize himself in the 1970s and 1980s. He was able to define a space for modern yoga in which the competitive dimensions of bodybuilding and postural gymnastics synchronized with a spectrum of other articulations of competitiveness. Choudhury's globalized entrepreneurial success is an extension of the way in which yoga was 'invented' as a modern Indian traditional system of physical education that could be easily adapted to international competition while retaining a degree of indigenous authenticity.

Within this orbit, and in conjunction with yoga's secularized institutionalization as a form of alternative medicine and healthcare by figures such as Choudhury, Indian modernity has also produced charismatic godmen who have 're-sacralized' the secularized forms of modern Indian practice. Two striking examples will be used to illustrate important differences and interesting common problems regarding how yoga can involve a synthesis of spirituality and postural practice in order to achieve competitive self-development.

### **Swami Sivananda and the Divine Life Society**

If not the first, and if not completely unique, Swami Sivananda's approach to spiritual self-development through the practice of yoga represents a significant shift in the history of modern postural practice, one that very broadly reflects planned economic development in post-independence India. After leaving Malaya in 1923, where he had served as a biomedical doctor for ten years, Kuppuswamy Iyer, as he was then known, returned to India. He settled in Rishikesh, practicing yoga, studying scriptures, and engaging in spiritual exercise (Sivananda 1980). In 1924, he renounced worldly attachments, took *sannyas* (ascetic vows), and was given the honorific title Sivananda Saraswati.

Sivananda's brand of mid-twentieth-century yoga is ethically and morally Nehruvian and Gandhian in spirit, even though what he put into practice anticipates many twenty-first-century free market permutations of commercialized branding. Whereas Paramahansa Yogananda advocated for Yogoda physical fitness as a feature of Kriya Yoga, expanding his Self-Realization Fellowship to the United States in the 1920s–1940s (Foxen 2020: 223–256), Swami Sivananda combined the physical practice of yoga as self-development with the spiritual goals of God realization in the Divine Life Society, established in Rishikesh in 1936 (Sivananda 1970; Strauss 2002, 2005). Unlike Yogendra and Kuvalayananda, each of whom sought, in different ways, to disconnect yoga from religion and magic in the first half of the nineteenth century, Sivananda embraced the ethics of renunciation manifest in the practice of *sannyas* and developed an ascetic interpretation of modern Hinduism oriented toward the emerging Indian middle class. Much more explicitly than Paramahansa Yogananda, however, Swami Sivananda's domestic and nationalistic articulation of this worldly neo-Vedantic asceticism was focused on self-discipline and productive citizenship through postural practice.

From 1925 on, but especially in the late 1930s and the 1940s, Sivananda expanded what had been a small ashram and dispensary for the treatment of itinerate ascetics, building on the Divine Life Society to establish the Yoga Vedanta Forest Academy in 1948. The size and scope of the enterprise increased rapidly in the 1950s and continued to attract a large number of disciples, mostly

from India. Sivananda published intensively and extensively, writing several hundred books on philosophy, spirituality, and religion, as well as, most significantly, many books and pamphlets on the physical practice of *asana* and *pranayama* and the embodiment of a way of life anchored in yoga.

Sivananda epitomized a work ethic of rigid self-discipline that revolved around the axis of celibacy and the moral and ethical principles encoded in *yama* (restraints on impulses) and *niyama* (prescriptive observances of good conduct) within the structure of ashtanga yoga. He established an ethic of self-discipline in terms of worldly Indian asceticism, albeit with health, fitness, and self-control being signs of transcendent self-realization, instead of wealth and success being signs of God's grace. Although practitioners of this ethic did not measure their success against the achievements of others, the prescriptions for *yama* and *niyama* in Sivananda's writing are stated in absolute terms that set a high bar for the attainment of truthfulness, celibacy, dispassion, and the embodiment of non-violence. Engaging in self-discipline in conjunction with postural practice inherently involves the comparison of one's own efforts with the achievements of godmen who claim to have embodied enlightenment.

It is not at all coincidental that Sivananda's project to sacralize secularized modern yoga made particular sense within the framework of Gandhian self-determination in the 1930s–1940s, Nehruvian socialism in the 1950s–1960s, and policies intended to promote the production of a spectrum of Indian-made consumer goods ranging from automobiles to soft drinks in the 1970s–1980s. Cultural politics, economic policy, and nationalism during the Nehruvian decades in particular involved both the construction of social boundaries and the desire for a meaningful realization of the means by which to transcend these boundaries. In search of a way to reconcile the alienation of modernity, many young people from Europe and the United States came to Rishikesh in search of the same thing Sivananda had been searching for—that is, an authentic means by which to practice self-realization and to embody self-perfection.

What is especially powerful about Sivananda's project is the way in which the physical practice of yoga—in both gross and subtle manifestations—is designed to lead to and be the sign of the embodiment of a divine life. More clearly and explicitly than anyone since Vivekananda at the turn of the nineteenth century, Sivananda merged Vedanta philosophy and yoga. But Sivananda, unlike Vivekananda—who was agnostic if not inherently skeptical about the value of postural practice—not only developed a brand of physical exercise that was in essence spiritual. He also made it possible for individuals to translate the effort to attain enlightenment into the ethical and moral work of becoming healthy, productive, and upright citizens of a nation that had, collectively, achieved independence and freedom. This kind of translation across domains anticipates the possibility of further translation into the arena of neoliberal subjectivity,

and the co-optation of yogic self-discipline to the ends of individual success (see Godrej 2017).

In the Nehruvian decades of the 1950s and 1960s, Sivananda's project was conceptualized as an enterprise of public service dedicated to building up the spiritual integrity, vitality, and health of newly independent Indian citizens. In this context, the performance of yoga was coded to a shift from the anti-colonial nationalism of the 1930s–1940s to a form of post-colonial nationalism focused on the modernization of indigenous manufacturing and the self-sufficiency of socialist economic development. In its own way, the Nehruvian project was articulated in terms of precisely the paradox reflected in Sivananda's program. It was characterized by a spirit intent on breaking free of the bonds of nationalist-capitalist competitiveness, but also a spirit that, in malevolent form, found expression in wars with Pakistan; a border skirmish with China; contracts with, and then a ban on, Coca-Cola; dependency on foreign aid and Western family planning programs; and the erstwhile brain drain of the 1970s.

But the spirit of self-reliant Nehruvian socialism was also manifest in the practice of a kind of perfected *swadeshi* (indigenous self-sufficiency) form of yoga produced by Sivananda on the banks of the sacred Ganga in Rishikesh. Born in South India, Sivananda settled in Rishikesh after renouncing a lucrative colonial biomedical career in Malaya precisely because Rishikesh, a pilgrimage center at the base of the Himalayas, marked a point of ostensibly authentic origin for the development of embodied ascetic philosophy in modern India's ancient past. Rishikesh became a place that signified the connection between the sages who had achieved transcendence by retreating into mountain caves and the emergent middle class of modern India. Sivananda embodied this possibility.

The best way to appreciate the scale and scope of Sivananda's vision is not only through the growth and development of the Divine Life Society in terms of national and international branches, but also in the form of bodily yoga practice that connects the body to teaching. Sivananda's numerous books—often republished and widely distributed—materialize the ideal of self-realization in a way that makes the physical performance of yoga a powerful sign of worldly asceticism oriented toward selfless service and the internalization of individualized divinity (Divine Life Society 2022).

While there is a competitive dimension to Sivananda's work ethic as a godman, he developed a form of physical practice, outlined in an early seminal book of the modern yoga renaissance, based on hatha yoga (forceful, physical yoga). In light of his interest in linking physical practice to spirituality and enlightenment to embodied action in the world, it is important to note how Sivananda draws on the imagery of the Bhagavad Gita, a text that is often said to be, in a way that speaks to the 'competitiveness' of world religions, the 'Bible' of Hinduism. Referencing the Gita's depiction of self-realization as the transcendence of self-interest, he connects the physical practice of yoga to

the spiritual strength of heroic individual accomplishment. Directly referencing Lord Krishna's admonition to Prince Arjun to renounce attachments to the world of illusion and dispassionately perform his duty as a warrior, Sivananda (1999: 36) writes:

Hatha Yoga is a Divine Blessing for attaining success in any field. Body and Mind are instruments which the practice of Hatha Yoga keeps sound, strong, and full of energy. It is a unique armour of defence to battle the opposing forces in the material and spiritual fields. By its practice you can combat Adhi-Vyadhi [physical and psychic distress and suffering] and attain radiant health and God-realisation. Become a spiritual hero full of physical, mental and spiritual strength.

It is a small step from the metaphorical militarism manifest in this mode of competition to the conquest of disease and suffering by means of yoga, and then to Bikram Choudhury's realization that postural bodybuilding is, in essence, a competitive avenue to gain fame and fortune. By commodifying the means to this end, wealth and the appearance of health and spirituality reflect the power of embodied enlightenment.

Sivananda's corpus, published and republished from the late 1920s up to the present, brings into sharp focus the way in which the emptiness of yoga as a cultural signifier allows for a range of interpretations concerning its fetishized performance. For Sivananda, more than for many others involved in the yoga renaissance, yoga was simultaneously the essence of exercise and enlightenment, medicine and metaphysics, science and spirituality, philosophy and physical fitness. It was both nationalistic, in the mode of anti-colonial *swadeshi* politics, and an inclusive form of globalized self-development. The work to achieve self-control through the practice of yoga found public expression whereby the objective of transcendence was articulated as a form of competition that merged the challenge of self-development and the goal of both personal and national freedom and independence.

## **Baba Ramdev and Patanjali Yogpeeth**

Measured in terms of wealth, power, influence, and fame, Baba Ramdev stands out as one of the most successful godmen of all time, incorporating and embodying the ethics of asceticism and the spirit of entrepreneurial success in twenty-first-century India. He has explicitly established a distinctive public persona on the basis of postural practice and the performance of yoga as spectacle. He has also popularized yoga as a form of personal self-development that is appealing to a very large number of India's rapidly growing middle class (Alter 2008b, 2021; Chakraborty 2007; Sarbacker 2014).

Baba Ramdev's phenomenal success as a businessman is closely linked to the body and the performance of embodiment. He has built a corporate empire of Ayurvedic medicine and health food that reflects a lifestyle based on his interpretation of yoga. A nationally franchised company—with subsidiary units including a hospital, research center, school, and yoga resort, Patanjali Yogpeeth, in the city of Haridwar—grew out of Baba Ramdev's success as a television personality in the 1990s. Several yoga programs that he produced became extremely popular. The kind of yoga performed in this mediated way is not at all unique: it derives directly from the forms of postural practice codified by Kuvalayananda in the 1920s and by Sivananda in the 1940s–1950s. Nevertheless, there are a number of ways in which Baba Ramdev's Patanjali brand of yoga, and his performance of the branding of it, is unique and distinctive.

Baba Ramdev is a godman who embodies neoliberalism as a form of self-development for personal success under the rubric of religious nationalism. Born into a relatively poor rural family, but now the public face of a corporate empire, one of the most significant things about Baba Ramdev is that his postural practice of yoga appears to resolve profound contradictions. Asceticism accommodates acquisitiveness. An intensely competitive entrepreneurial drive manifest in copyright and patent litigation 'reflects' the wisdom of sagely mindfulness. Personal self-development as a branded icon involves a transcendence of the material—and materialist—self. With long hair, a full beard, saffron robes, and wooden *paduka* (sandals often worn by renunciants), he looks like an ascetic. But he does not affect renunciation. His brand of yoga essentializes embodied self-centeredness. In other incarnations, self-centeredness—in the sense of single-pointed concentration—is a means by which postural practice can lead to a divine life, if not directly to enlightenment, by transcending the illusion that is our collective, all-to-human perception of reality. Baba Ramdev incarnates the soteriological logic that a godman is divine, a person whose self perfectly reflects the transcendent, universal self. But unlike Sivananda's self-proclaimed worldly asceticism, Baba Ramdev embraces materialism, leaving it to his audience to find in this performance of self-realization a spiritual ethic of detachment and contemplation.

Baba Ramdev exemplifies a particular kind of success that reflects neoliberal capitalism in post-Nehruvian India. He embodies a form of competitive ambition that has capitalized and commodified the ideal of *swadeshi*, a Gandhian principle of national self-sufficiency encompassing economics as well as culture and character. He has commercialized the endless quest for self-determination, self-development, self-perfection, self-rule, and all the various ways in which the self and its body are fetishized in the context of neoliberalism's upwardly mobile middle-class quest to personalize the experience of enlightenment (Khalikova 2017, 2020; Tripathy 2019). Here it is important to keep in mind the extent to which those who practice Baba Ramdev's yoga engage in

a synthesis—however contrived—of a history of embodied philosophy extending from Patanjali through Vivekananda to Gandhi. Postural yoga performed according to Baba Ramdev's instruction becomes a way to express *swadeshi* idealism in a form that synchronizes with globalization and incorporates the values of modernity. Baba Ramdev's performance becomes a powerful sign of a distinctively Indian brand of ascetically inflected neoliberal independence and freedom.

With relatively minor changes to forms of postural practice codified by Sivananda, Kuvalayanada, and others in the twentieth century, Baba Ramdev has linked the performance of yoga on television to commercial advertising. Economic liberalization in the early 1990s opened up the market for television programming outside the domain of state control, and as Baba Ramdev's morning yoga program on Star TV grew, so did advertising revenue. Although the program was notionally about learning *asana* and *pranayama* techniques and routines, from the standpoint of programming and sales it was inherently about selling products to a market niche with precisely discernable interests and priorities. The significance of the triangulation between godman persona, embodied practice, and the value of commodities—in both the purely symbolic and the purely material sense—can hardly be overemphasized. Over time, Baba Ramdev has adapted this triangulation to market his products, market himself through his products, and market his brand of yoga by performing his phenomenal success as a rags-to-riches billionaire businessman who is also a very down-to-earth, other-worldly godman, who embodies asceticism in a distinctly neoliberal way.

Another factor that distinguishes Baba Ramdev from other godmen, and has directly contributed to his success, is that he has made *asana* and *pranayama* easy for anyone to do. This is achieved by encouraging those who watch and listen to him on television to not be discouraged by their own inexperience or physical limitations. Equally significant, his style of casual, conversational instruction is friendly, jovial, and inviting, rather than prescriptive and self-consciously authoritative. Beyond this, he has both simplified spirituality and assimilated its secularized form into a nationalistically inflected lifestyle centered on neoliberal self-development. All godmen must, to a degree, turn the promise of salvation or transcendent enlightenment on its head, and the practice of yoga in almost any posture facilitates this inversion. But Baba Ramdev has extended this move to a level that rivals Calvinist contortions.

A signature feature of Baba Ramdev's yoga is the televised and social-mediated mass performance of postures and breathing exercises. Participating in these performances, which often involve hundreds of individuals in rows on mats, provides an important perspective on the valuation of individuality and individual responsibility in the context of twenty-first-century free market opportunity and middle-class aspiration. In this context, Bab Ramdev's yoga is

held to do multiple kinds of work for practitioners: it relieves stress and anxiety; it facilitates mental concentration as a means to success in business and on school exams; it builds character and produces self-confidence; it corrects posture distorted by the bad habit of sitting at a desk, staring at a computer screen. But in conjunction with these benefits of doing yoga, and being seen doing yoga, it is a sign that one has integrated self-realization with neoliberal responsibility. Baba Ramdev has mastered the performative embodiment of this transference.

Baba Ramdev stages the performance of yoga again and again in ways that make those who participate in mass drill exercises feel that they are part of a community, while also lending them the sense that they can achieve everything on their own. Given the extent to which he is a charismatic godman who can manipulate the meaning of a free-floating signifier, Baba Ramdev is able to claim that everything he has accomplished reflects the power of yoga in practice. As discussed in more detail elsewhere (Alter 2021), this enables him to do things that seem fantastically irrational and contradictory, especially in terms of competitive performances. Baba Ramdev has established one of the most profitable companies in India today, defended himself numerous times against accusations of corruption, and strategically aligned himself with politicians. In a playful but no less serious mode intended to promote his brand of Patanjali products, he has also wrestled with Olympians, sparred with national champions, and participated in televised dance contests.

These competitions are dramatically staged, purposefully choreographed, and produced for media distribution. They involve Baba Ramdev performing himself in various contexts where he self-consciously crosses boundaries, breaks rules, and uses media to comment on what he is doing as a charismatic godman. His staged competitions with athletes, movie stars, and television personalities play off the pastiche of postmodernity to become a metacommentary on the more pervasive illusion of life itself, and the transcendence of this illusion through the disciplined practice of yoga. In this regard, it is important to focus on the dynamics of humor in Baba Ramdev's performances and the way in which he plays with the parodic disjuncture of asceticism and athleticism. Far from undermining his claim to hold the title of an adept who can beat world champions at their own game, it is as though everyone is invited to laugh with him at forms of competition wherein being the best produces and reproduces the illusion of ultimate perfection.

The promise of spiritual self-development linked to postural practice creates a sharp edge of competitive advantage in the marketplace of products that are either explicitly or implicitly *swadeshi* (Tripathy 2019). At the base of this sharp edge is not so much anything of use value, although all products carry something of that across the threshold of fetishized commodification; rather, it is Baba Ramdev's embodiment of contradictions that endlessly resolve into the

*lila* (divine play) of his self-presentation. His persona as a godman is the *avatar* of his persona as a wealthy entrepreneur.

In this context Baba Ramdev is at once an entrepreneur, driven by the desire to achieve fame and fortune, and a playful, self-deprecating renouncer, who appears to laugh both at himself and at the manifold beliefs and practices that structure our collective misperception of his reality (Alter 2021). Baba Ramdev's rhetoric of Hindutva nationalism is the antithesis of Gandhian cosmopolitanism, even though he gestures toward catholic inclusivity. However mendacious these particular articulations of *maya* (the snare of perceptual illusion) may be, very real consequences—with moral, ethical, and legal implications—result from the contradictions he embodies. These consequences are all the more divisive because of the way an ethic of neoliberal yoga extends well beyond religion to embolden those who pride themselves on having developed a spiritual lifestyle based on a nationalistic brand of *swadeshi* self-development.

As a commodity in its own right, and as a form of embodied practice that fetishizes a lifestyle, the postural practice of yoga is fully incorporated into the logic of neoliberal capitalism. Given the extent to which capitalism functions on the basis of elaborate illusions of value, involving belief in the omniscience of the 'invisible hand' of the market and what amounts to the magical manipulation of things like money, it is easy to see how yogic bodywork takes on both symbolic and real commercial value in the context of the market. The competitive structure of the free market combined with the spirit of Hindutva turns the ultimate goal of yoga—the equanimity of transcendence, which entails a realization that the desire to reach the goal is the manifest problem—into a commodity that can be embodied. Whereas Sivananda used yoga to promote the secular embodiment of a divine life dedicated to the common good of developing modern India, Baba Ramdev profits from yoga as a neoliberal ideal of embodied self-development.

## **Conclusion: Sport, Competition, and Transcendence**

The transformation of yoga over the past century and a half has been from magic to medicine to physical fitness to a mode of self-improvement that draws on the power of mysticism. The fetishization of embodied practice during this period has contributed to the flexibility of interpretive frames for understanding what is at stake in the practice of yoga. Fetishization also facilitates the internalization of enlightenment and the embodiment of forms of competition that are centered more on the self than on society, even though the self-centered dynamics of practice have various and significant social implications.

A recent article published in the *Economic Times*, a leading Indian newspaper, brings into sharp focus a key point in the argument presented in this

article—that postural yoga has been popularized and commercialized in ways that fetishize the body and the relationships among competition, ethical principles, and embodied ideals of enlightenment. The article, entitled “Competing with Myself,” is a short opinion piece published posthumously under the name of Sri Chinmoy, a world-renowned godman who died in 2007. Sri Chinmoy was a vocal advocate for athleticism and sport as embodied meditation. Before migrating to the United States, he was closely affiliated with Sri Aurobindo, one of the most well-known teachers of modern yoga. After developing his own brand of spirituality in New York in the late 1960s and the 1970s, Sri Chinmoy worked with Olympic athletes to help them improve their performance. However, in the article he makes the following point concerning the nature of competition (Ghose 2022):

Self-transcendence gives us joy in boundless measure. When we transcend ourselves, we do not compete with others. We do not compete with the rest of the world, but at every moment we compete with ourselves. We compete only with our previous achievements. And each time we surpass our previous achievements, we get joy.

In the spiritual life, we are always trying to transcend and go beyond. If today I do twenty things wrong, then tomorrow I will try to do only nineteen things wrong. I will constantly try to improve myself, and in this way I will get a tremendous sense of satisfaction. I am not competing with anybody other than myself. This is how I can feel that I am arriving at perfection.

The performance of yoga as athletic competition underscores the way in which practice focused on ascetic self-development must embrace the illusion of embodiment in order to transcend physical experience. Athletic yoga is a caricature of the fetishization of the self that is inherent to the idea of embodied self-transcendence. Whatever joy may be derived from competing with oneself, it entails hard, unremitting, dedicated work. Swami Kuvalayananda, Shri Yogendra, and Swami Sivananda sought to bring yoga down to earth and make it do the work of middle-class social and cultural reform by means of embodied self-development. Sivananda embraced the athleticism of yoga, but then linked postural practice to a spiritual ideal of worldly asceticism.

In this context, the work that competition does to enable self-improvement is materialized and essentialized in a regimented form of public postural practice under the rubric of the Divine Life Society and Sivananda Yoga as a global brand. As in the case of Calvinist worldly asceticism, Sivananda’s yoga is embodied in terms of righteous sociality. It reflects civic responsibility by contributing to middle-class health, well-being, and dedication to the nationalist ideals of Indian freedom and independence. But it does so by fetishizing the power of self-discipline. The materialization of self-discipline in postural practice is dependent on the erasure of the power of complete asocial detachment

that is integral to yoga's philosophical foundation. It is in this sense that 'enlightened' godmen in modern India are different from the elect 'men of God' whose fetishized wealth and entrepreneurial success reflects a functional synthesis of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism.

Although both Sivananda and Baba Ramdev fetishize the body and essentialize self-development, Sivananda's brand of postural practice combines asceticism, athleticism, and competition more easily, it seems, than Baba Ramdev's hyper, self-centered mode of personal self-development. For Sivananda, the practice of yoga is an end in itself, albeit one that has social significance. For Baba Ramdev, yoga is a means to the end of personal achievement as worldly self-realization. In this way, the performance of yoga invokes the possibility of transcendence. Performing yoga thus becomes a sign of one's investment in the value of personal self-development—the endless process of trying to become happier, healthier, and more productive. These are, of course, the core tenets of neoliberal responsabilization. Performed in massive arenas involving hundreds and sometimes thousands of people, Baba Ramdev's brand of yoga promotes ideology and generates tremendous wealth through advertising. But unlike Sivananda's appeal to the embodiment of a collective Divine Life Society, it does not build community. It enables those who participate to join in a staged performance of anonymous middle-class modernity, that is, to exercise their individuality and free will in terms of the power of embodied self-realization.

By turning the performance of yoga into a public spectacle, Baba Ramdev draws on the sense of mystery, secrecy, and ineffable wisdom that is a key feature of yoga's cultural history. All of the early literature on yoga defines its practice in terms of the importance of secrecy and self-isolation. As Svata-varama, the author of the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, one of the three most well-known pre-modern texts on postural practice, put it:

11. A Yogi desirous of success should keep the knowledge of Hatha Yoga secret; for it becomes potent by concealing and impotent by exposing.
12. The Yogi should practice Hatha Yoga in a solitary place being free from ... all disturbances. (Svatvarama [1915] 1991: 2)

Twentieth-century reformers have all struggled with the paradoxical nature of these statements and the contradictions that stem from teaching yoga 'indiscriminately' to everyone. Like other godmen, Baba Ramdev engages with the power of fetishism that is manifest in postural practice by simultaneously revealing the secret while invoking the power of secrecy itself. Doing yoga with everyone is empowering precisely because the potency of concealment is reflected in the exposed anonymity of the spectacle itself. Each person does the best they can on their own yoga mat. Each embodies the burden of neoliberal self-determination, aiming to become their own best version

by competing with themselves in terms defined by the liberating freedom of embodied immortality.

As it finds expression in a range of different contexts that involve various forms of power—spiritual, mystical, material, physical, and metaphysical—an examination of yoga as competition shows how these forms overlap and intersect in ways that productively complicate simplistic, universalizing assumptions about winning and losing, profit and loss, success and failure. A consideration of how power is embodied in the practice of yoga shows how a dynamic of fetishism provides a critical perspective on the work that competition does in the context of secular and religious nationalism. The embodiment of ‘enlightened’ worldly asceticism also brings into focus the work that competition does within the differing ideological frameworks of free market neoliberalism on the one hand and planned economic development oriented toward collective welfare on the other.

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