

Rise of Yoga Culture in America

By Inder Singh

India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, during his address to UN General Assembly in September 2014, had asked world leaders to adopt an international Yoga day, saying "Yoga embodies unity of mind and body; thought and action; restraint and fulfillment; harmony between man and nature; a holistic approach to health and well being." On December 11, 2014, the 193-member UN general assembly adopted a resolution by consensus, proclaiming June 21 as 'International Day of Yoga'. The resolution was introduced by India's ambassador to UN and had 175 UN members, including five permanent members of the UN Security Council, as co-sponsors.

Smithsonian, on October 19, 2013 opened an exhibition, "Yoga: The Art of Transformation" featuring temple sculptures, devotional icons, manuscripts and court paintings created in India over the past 2,000 years. Several artifacts displayed in the exhibit were borrowed from 25 museums and private collections in India, Europe and the United States. Smithsonian also arranged guest teachers to teach yoga classes on Wednesdays and Sundays during the exhibit days. A symposium on yoga's visual culture for scholars and enthusiasts was also organized. The exhibit was kept on view through Jan. 26, 2014, and then taken to the San Francisco Asian Art Museum for three months from February 21, 2014 to May 25, 2014. The Cleveland Museum of Art had the exhibit from June 22, 2014 to September 7, 2014.

The White House has embraced Yoga as a worthy physical activity. The annual Easter Egg Roll is the largest public event held at the White House. President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama made 'Be Healthy, Be Active, Be You!' as the theme for the April 1, 2014 event. They also included a 'Yoga Garden' on the Presidential lawn for children and their parents who attended the traditional Easter Egg Roll festivities and arranged a yoga session by professional instructors. The Obama family has turned the traditional event into an active family-oriented day, and included yoga since 2009 as part of the celebration.

For the last several years, yoga and meditation are becoming more acceptable in America. Americans have witnessed increase in yoga studios, meditation centers and vegetarian restaurants, all of which have roots in India. Several New Age gurus, who travel across the globe, have contributed to this popularity. In the United States, best-selling author Deepak Chopra has significantly contributed to Indian meditation philosophy and yoga going mainstream.

Yoga was first introduced to America by Swami Vivekananda who came to USA in 1893 to address the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. He made a lasting impact on the delegates and lectured at major universities and retreats during his stay of about four years. He started the Vedantic centre in New York in 1896 and taught Raja Yoga classes.

He focused on the religious aspect of yoga, which dealt with how to use meditation to become closer to God.

In 1920, Paramahansa Yogananda came as India's delegate to the International Congress of Religious Leaders in Boston. He established Self-Realization Fellowship in Los Angeles. Today, there are seven SRF centers in California where Yogananda's meditation and Kriya yoga techniques are taught on regular basis. Again, his Kriya yoga technique is for the realization of God.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi brought yoga to the United States in 1959 in the form of Transcendental Meditation (TM). TM offered tangible yoga and became popular in reducing stress and fatigue. During 1960's and 1970's, TM became "the most widely practiced self-development program in the United States."

Yogi Bhanjan came to California in 1969 and started teaching "*Kundalini Yoga, the Yoga of Awareness*." He was an inspiring teacher and developed a large following. Several of his followers became yoga teachers and some opened their yoga studios in various parts of the world, popularizing yoga for health and fitness. Thus began yoga evolution from spiritual to physical during the 1970s and 1980s.

B.K.S. Iyengar, considered one of the foremost yoga teachers in the world, was the founder of "Iyengar Yoga". He was the author of many books on yoga practice and was often referred to as "the father of modern yoga". His book, *Light on Yoga*, is called "the bible of yoga" and has been the source book for yoga students. Iyengar brought yoga to the west in the 70s and started hundreds of yoga centers, teaching Iyengar yoga which focuses on the correct alignment of the body within each yoga pose, making use of straps, wooden blocks, and other objects as aids in achieving the correct postures. He was awarded the *Padma Shri* in 1991, the *Padma Bhushan* in 2002 and the *Padma Vibhushan* in 2014.

Sri Sri Ravi Shankar established the international Art of Living Foundation in 1981, which is claimed to be operating in 140 countries. He has been promoting the Sudarshan Kriya, a rhythmic breathing yoga exercise.

Bikram Choudhary has earned fame and fortune by teaching yoga to Americans by opening heated yoga studios. His style of yoga is practiced in a room that has been preheated to a temperature of 105 deg F. Bikram Yoga is the 26 postures Sequence selected and developed by Bikram Choudhary from Hatha Yoga and is taught in 500 certified yoga studios all over the world.

Swami Ramdev is the most celebrated yoga teacher and has following which runs into millions. He has revolutionized people's thinking about yoga exercises. In 2003, India based Aastha TV began featuring him in its morning yoga slot. Within a few years, he

attained immense popularity and developed a huge following. His yog-camps are attended by a large number of people in India and abroad. His Pranayam exercises – a set of breathing exercises – are promoted to bring about balance between the body and mind. Regular practitioners claim numerous benefits.

Yoga, once an elusive practice has surged in popularity and its impact is everywhere: in movies, television, advertising, and schools. Yoga is marketed as a series of asanas (postures) that make you fit and help in weight loss. Many Americans have incorporated yoga routines as an essential part of their work out routine. America is now dotted with yoga gyms and studios providing easy access to everyone, including business executives and Hollywood celebrities. Several studies have shown that yoga also reduces blood pressure, back pain, relieves stress and improves overall health. Several doctors recommend yoga to their cancer patients during and after treatment. Over twenty million people in America practice yoga (As per a study by Yoga Journal in 2012). It thus has become as mainstream of an exercise as walking.

There are countless people who are making a positive difference through yoga. Hundreds of yoga websites have all kind of information about yoga, from health and wellness to spiritual and show simple to complex poses. Yoga studios are mushrooming in cities across America. Several entrepreneurs are flourishing in this \$30 billion industry. They publish yoga magazines, yoga books, produce TV shows, make DVDs, video games and apps, manufacture yoga clothes, yoga artifacts, yoga furniture and furnishings, yoga foods, yoga tea, yoga energy bars, and hundreds of products and services. There are also many yoga experts and teachers who have gained prominence in this multi-billion dollar industry. The proliferation of yoga schools, DVDs, and internet has made yoga easily accessible by one and all.

Yoga has gone through several ups and downs during the last fifty years but now has earned well deserved respect and recognition. At its core, yoga is both a physical and spiritual practice. But for most Americans, yoga is an exercise system that consists of a series of poses, postures and positions. Over twenty million Americans practice some form of yoga to stay fit and healthy.

Inder Singh regularly writes and speaks on Indian Diaspora. He is Chairman of Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO). He was president of GOPIO from 2004-2009, president of National Federation of Indian American Associations(NFIA) from 1988-92 and chairman from 1992-96. He was founding president of Federation of Indian Associations in Southern California. He is the author of *The Gadar Heroics* – life sketches of over 50 Gadar heroes. He can be reached at indersingh-usa@hotmail.com