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The Economics of the Guru

Margaret Mahoney

Abstract

This essay studies “Gurus,” specifically the globalization of Hinduism that has spread Hindu spiritual practices in the West and also influenced the practices in India. In the United States, a focus on the self and individualism is a trait commonly found which has led to an increase in mindfulness practices. These practices travel around the world and are changed in the process, then come back to the “East” as commodified practices. Many modern gurus have latched onto traditionally Hindu practices and teachings and sell their own version of it in lectures and products that promise its consumers a better life if they follow the specific guru. The spread of Hinduism and the rise of the internet, which allows gurus to spread their teachings to a global audience, have created a culture of consumerism in which gurus can thrive by amassing a following and selling their products and services.

In Indian society, Hinduism is one of, if not the, dominant practice and spiritual system of the country. It originated in India thousands of years ago, and in that time it has gone through countless periods of transformation. One thing that has stayed consistent is the prominence of gurus in the Hindu religion. The actual role of gurus has varied considerably throughout the eras, but Hinduism thousands of years ago and Hinduism today have both seen gurus preaching their own lessons on how to practice Hinduism. In our increasingly globalized world, the word “guru” has taken on a new meaning outside of Hinduism. People in the West now know guru to mean a teacher or spiritual leader, and the word is used interchangeably with these terms. In this paper, I argue that the changing global landscape that has allowed Hinduism to spread to the West (especially the United States) has also influenced Hinduism in India. In the United States, focus on the self and individualism is a trait commonly found in the country’s society. This has led to an increase in mindfulness practices, which mainly focus on teachings found in “Eastern” cultures. These practices travel around the world and are changed in the process, then come back to the “East” as modified practices. Many modern gurus have latched onto traditionally Hindu practices and teachings and sell their own version of it in lectures and products that promise its consumers a better life if they follow the specific guru. The spread of Hinduism and the rise of the internet, which allows gurus to spread their teachings to a global audience, have created a culture

of consumerism in which gurus can thrive by amassing a following and selling their products and services.

The Role of the Guru in Indian Society

Traditionally, a guru in Hinduism is a teacher, a spiritual guide who mentors students in the ways of Hindu practices and theology. The Sanskrit word “guru” does not have just one definition. The first part of the word, “gu”, means “ignorance, while “ru” means “dispeller.”¹ The entire word can mean “dispeller of ignorance,” which has more weight to it than just saying a guru is a teacher. This is fitting because the word can also mean “weighty”; the guru has much more weight upon their person intellectually and spiritually since they are seen as a holy conveyer of Hindu wisdom.² The word guru has many different meanings because gurus have many different roles in Hindu society. Their primary role is as a spiritual teacher for individuals, but gurus also impart divine wisdom into the world, and in some cases are even seen as deities. The guru embodies and teaches Hindu values, not only intellectual facts and practices but the actual values associated with following Hinduism and staying on the path to enlightenment.

Originally, the guru taught the *Vedas* to Hindus. The Vedic tradition was taught orally, so the guru would have to rely on his knowledge alone as very few written teachings were available and used at the time. Since there was no written text to refer to, the guru was indispensable in the teaching of the *Vedas* as he was the only available point of reference. Gurus were generally from the Brahmin class, the highest level caste. A guru’s students were typically of the Brahmin, Ksatriya, or Vaishya caste, the highest three of the four categories in the caste system. The people chosen to be students of the guru, the *sisyas*, would live with or very near the guru while they learned from him. Since most of the teachings relied on memorization through listening to one person and emulating that person’s lifestyle, physical closeness was important in learning from a guru.

The *Vedas* reference gurus as being important to one’s spiritual journey, but the *Upanishads* declare explicitly that gurus are necessary to one’s spiritual education and attaining enlightenment. The guru is the only one who knows the nature of ultimate reality, and it is this knowledge one needs to achieve enlightenment. One cannot understand the universe if one is studying and attempting to understand it by oneself, according to the *Upanishads*. It is necessary to study under a guru who can impart this information, because only a guru can truly impart the truths found in the sacred texts. Gurus in the *Upanishads* are also connected to

¹ Joel D Mlecko, “The Guru in Hindu Tradition,” *Numen* 29, no. 1 (1982): 33.

² *Ibid.*, 34.

divinity, as their understanding of ultimate reality brings them up higher than human status. A guru's *sisya* would not only learn from this divine figure, this student would also perform services for them, such as maintaining their animals and other chores around the home and place of worship.

Gurus have also been important to temples, and temples have always been important in Indian society. Temples are not just religious places of worship, they are also social structures that inform the culture of a place since Hinduism is such a central part of most of Indian society. Temples are also an important part of the economics of a town, because they take money to run and can employ people in the town. People make donations to the temples as donations of charity, but since Hinduism has been so tied to the social culture of Indian society these donations could be used by wealthy citizens to gain social and political power in their town.³ Temples are associated with gurus who practice and worship there and teach in the sacred places, and these donations or gifts (called *danas*) benefit the economic interests of the guru associated with the temple that gets the donation. The donations that people made allowed the donors to decide what would happen in the temple: what the deity would be offered for food, what utensils would be used for feeding in the temple (as temples feed the ascetic gurus and the poor who have no food), and even what rituals would be performed. There was a campaign in the 1920s to 30s that served to regulate the use of these charitable donations to make sure that they were not being misappropriated.⁴ Guru-based associations opposed this campaign, as it reclassified temples as independent religious organizations and not charitable ones.⁵ This classification changes what donations funds can be used for and how they are treated. This campaign shows how gurus have always had an immense amount of power in Hindu society, whether they are tied to a temple or, as we will see, spreading their ideology around India and the world.

In contemporary times, gurus have grown in prominence outside of India. Gurus are now one way for non-Hindus and converts to learn about the religion. Even within India, tribes indigenous to the land who are not considered to be part of mainstream Hindu society will follow the teachings of gurus to gain respect and prominence in India by performing as Hindus. Gurus can provide non-Hindus with the necessary lessons to fit into Hindu society. People also follow gurus so that they can retreat from modern society.⁶ Gurus and their teachings of the path towards enlightenment are seen as an alternative to modern society, especially

³ Malavika Kasturi, "All gifting is sacred," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 47, no. 1 (2010): 110.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵ Malavika Kasturi, "Gurus and Gifting: Dana, the Math Reform Campaign, and Competing Visions of Hindu Sangathan in Twentieth-Century India," *Modern Asian Studies* 52 no. 1(2008): 99–131.

⁶ Mlecko, Joel D. "The Guru in Hindu Tradition." *Numen* 29, no. 1 (1982): 33-61.

Western society with its emphasis on productivity and materialism. Gurus are constantly adjusting to their new roles, and today gurus are powerful spiritual and political figures who can reach a wide audience through the rise of the internet. Although gurus, like spiritual figures in many other religions, are mainly ascetics who live with very little, they can still be powerful forces of commercialization and gain riches through companies that they run.

Baba Ramdev and Patanjali Products

One guru who has risen to fame and amassed quite a fortune on his way is Baba Ramdev, one of the popularizers of modern yoga and the founder of Patanjali products, a line of ayurvedic products that turned the ayurvedic market in India into a booming consumer market. Ayurvedic products are those which adhere to the ayurvedic healing system, a holistic ancient Indian system according to which health comes from a balance among the mind, body, and spirit. Although he has been criticized, mainly by Indians who see the conditions in which his company keeps its workers, he has been praised for his ability to jump-start Indian markets, “One Indian C.E.O. who has accused Patanjali of false advertising told me he was grateful to Ramdev — despite his many sins — for attracting a new customer base in ways that benefited everyone.”⁷ Ramdev came from humble beginnings, born Ramkishan Yadav into a low-caste household and eventually adopted a monastic life as a Sanyasi, taking on the name Baba Ramdev.⁸ He practiced yoga and meditation, and took to the idea that the practice of yoga has healing powers. He came to this conclusion after he started practicing to strengthen his body, which was weak due to childhood illnesses and accidents.⁹ Ramdev appeared on television teaching yoga, and soon amassed a following of devoted supporters. He kept growing as a spiritual figure, or “god man” as many gurus are known in India, and eventually started selling Patanjali products. He made claims both about the healing power of yoga and about the healing power of his products, which has brought criticism and scrutiny of him as some of his products have been shown to contain high levels of heavy metals mainly found in soil and ash. The amount of these metals can even reach toxic levels.¹⁰ But he has also been protected from this criticism because of his large following and relationship with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who Ramdev supported during his campaign.¹¹

⁷ Robert Worth, “The Billionaire Yogi Behind Modi’s Rise,” *The New York Times Magazine*, July 26, 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/26/magazine/the-billionaire-yogi-behind-modis-rise.html>

⁸ “Baba Ramdev Biography,” *Maps of India* <https://www.mapsofindia.com/who-is-who/health-life-style/baba-ramdev-biography.html>

⁹ Worth, “The Billionaire Yogi Behind Modi’s Rise.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

What makes gurus such as Ramdev so popular? First, we can look at his line of Patanjali products. On the Patanjali products website, the company sells everything from “natural food products” to “herbal home care” products. A lot of these products are meant to improve one’s health and wellbeing, and there is a specific section for Ayurvedic medicine that includes the subcategory “packages for diseases.”¹² These products have taken over the ayurvedic market, and have grown that market significantly. But why are people buying these products in particular? According to Mark Featherstone, there are three main theories regarding consumer culture. First, more commodities are being created and are more widely available, leading to an increased culture of materialism. Second, people use commodities to define their social roles and culture, and their satisfaction with these commodities relies on how the people use them to distinguish themselves and create their identity. Third, there is emotional pleasure that is derived (or believed to be derived) from consumerism, and that is what people long for in their consumption of commodities.¹³ Featherstone mainly looks at Western culture and consumerism, but these theories of consumerism are also applicable to Indian consumer culture. Patanjali products are consumed by people because 1) they are readily available, 2) they show a devotion to a guru and the way of life that the guru preaches, and 3) they are thought to fix problems that exists in people’s lives.

Patanjali products offer a solution to problems concerning one’s body and mind. They are advertised as health products, and because they are endorsed by a famous guru they take on a spiritual element. The products are therefore not only health products, but health products that can heal through divine means. Ramdev used a centuries old form of healing (the ayurvedic system) to promote his products as natural and having stood the test of time. He brought an ancient healing system into people’s homes in the form of readily available products, which is how the first theory of consumption relates to Patanjali products. Ramdev created the supply, and then the demand came out of that. The second theory concerning social distinctions explains the consumers’ readiness to buy products endorsed by a famous spiritual figure. By buying these products one is conveying to the world that one supports the guru who is selling these products. They may also consume his yoga classes or writings (publications are available on the website alongside homeopathic remedies) and follow his teachings. They are adhering to his system of spirituality and purification, and showing the world that they belong to the group who supports this system. The third theory of consumerism explains that when people buy these products, they derive pleasure from them. The products

¹² Patanjali Ayurved. <https://patanjaliayurved.net/>

¹³ Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: SAGE Publications, 2007).

are believed to fix something in a person's life through divine means. The products heal and purify one's body and home, and people who buy these products derive joy from their purchases and the end results that they believe the products will bring, even before they have used the products.

While these products do have a large spiritual component, Baba Ramdev's politics have also been a contributing factor in his branding and rise to prominence. Ramdev is not just pro-Hindu, he is a pro-India nationalist. He expresses his politics alongside his spirituality practices, because for him the two go hand in hand. As I previously stated, he has immense political power because he helped the current Prime Minister on his campaign trail. Ramdev's large following helped gather votes for Modi, and Ramdev was suited to transferring his followers to the political realm because of his pro-India stance. This nationalist political view is seen as going against the mainstream, something that people latch onto with renewed vigor when it is preached by a spiritual figure. Ramdev is seen as a revolutionary, someone trying to change his country to make it better for its residents, specifically those who are Hindu. He is so successful in part because of his alternative way of thinking in terms of how he brands himself. His products are completely Indian, as they adhere to the Indian ayurvedic tradition and are marketed to a Hindu audience by including ingredients such as cow dung and ghee, which is sacred to Hindus since it comes from the sacred cow. Ramdev is a huge critic of Western capitalism, and has spoken out against the harm Western products can bring to one's body.¹⁴ His entire platform is pro-Hindu Indian nationalist, and his products are meant to reflect that pro-India stance through the ingredients used (many sacred Hindu ingredients are used) and through the marketing as Indian health products.

Capitalism thrives when people believe in the message behind certain products and those selling those products. There is even a new category of business people who call themselves "management gurus." They use the Indian term guru to convey that they are experts in their field and can teach important lessons about business. These management gurus are mostly people who use techniques that are deemed alternative because they do not adhere to traditional management styles. They call for a revolution in the ways of business, but they do that by declaring systems that already exist need to be modified or eradicated entirely to start from scratch.¹⁵ They also say that culture, not just business models, have to change.

¹⁴ Rana Preetika, "Business News: Yoga Guru Takes on Global Brands - Ramdev's Consumer-Goods Empire, Based on Traditional Indian Medicine, Thrives," *Wall Street Journal*, Dec 31, 2015.

¹⁵ Anu Kantola, "Branded Revolutionaries: Circulated Gurus as Management Tools in Soft Capitalism," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, no. 3 (2014): 258-274.

They use counter-culture ideas of fixing society through the implementation of new systems (what one buys, wears, and how one acts) to create successful businesses and products. Baba Ramdev, along these lines, is a successful spiritual guru and management guru. He introduced and popularized new ideas about spirituality and politics in India, and his products were a breakthrough in the ayurvedic market. He has successfully used his politics and ways of thinking to promote his own teachings and products. His teachings are available as videos, CDs, and books, so they are also a part of his consumerism.

Yoga and Hinduism

Today, yoga as a practice has become a global phenomenon, especially in the United States. Though it is a religious practice in Hinduism, it has lost much of that religious connection when it was moved to a Western context. This section will focus on the Hindu practice of yoga, before its rise in the West when it transformed into what we now know as modern yoga.

Yoga has gone through an incredible change in the past one hundred and fifty years, and the yoga that is practiced today is basically unrecognizable as a practice stemming from ancient yoga. That is partly because of the incredible versatility of yoga. Just like Hinduism and India itself, yoga is a category that can fit an incredibly wide range of subjects within it, including theory, processes, and poses. Basically, it can be whatever one chooses it to be. The word “yoga” can mean many different things in Sanskrit, such as a constellation, to mix things together, and a process one goes through. In its earliest use in the Vedas, yoga meant “yoke,” as in to yolk a field via an animal. Because of its multiplicity, there are many different types of yoga. A Hindu scripture from the ninth century (before much of what we consider modern yoga was yet created) called *Netra Tantra* described two types of yoga. The first was subtle yoga, which were techniques to take over another person’s body by entering into it. Then there was transcendental yoga, which involves paranormal females who eat people so that the people are not bound to the sins of their own bodies.¹⁶ Neither of these practices sound like the yoga we know of today, and that is partly because these are religious practices. In Hinduism, one is reborn until one is able to achieve enlightenment. The idea of a being who saves a person from rebirth is important to Hindus, but not those outside the religion. Ancient yoga was devoted to saving a person’s immortal soul, and was less focused on the exercises and mindfulness techniques that is has morphed into.

Modern yoga started to develop in the mid-1800s, with different schisms sep-

¹⁶ David G White, “Yoga, a Brief History of an Idea” in *Yoga in Practice*, ed. David White (NJ: Princeton University Press. 2011), 1-26.

arating classical Hinduism from modern Hinduism. India had been introduced to the West and Christianity, and this had a great influence on India (as the country had been colonized) and Hinduism in general. Practitioners of Hinduism adapted the practices of the religion and explain it in different ways so that Westerners could understand the different and entirely foreign religion. Some swamis even adapted Christian ideas of heaven and hell into their own teachings for a time. But one Hindu in particular brought Hinduism to the West and helped develop modern yoga. Swami Vivekananda brought Hinduism to the West in the way many Christian missionaries brought Christianity to the East. He bridged the gap between Western and Eastern thought over Eastern spirituality. Vivekananda was interested in Western philosophy and thought, and studied these subjects alongside Hinduism. He travelled through India, speaking to the people he met in each town, and once he had gone through the country he decided he needed a better way to teach the masses. He needed people to disseminate information and money to fund the journey. He found the people in India who were willing to help him, but no one who was willing to pay him. That is how Vivekananda ended up travelling to America to spread his spirituality and gather funds along the way. He said of America, "I give them spirituality and they give me money."¹⁷

Vivekananda arrived in America in July 1893 and attended the Parliament of Religions, which was basically a showcase of both Eastern and Western religions. Many of these religions fell under the category of Western occultism (also called Western esotericism, ideas and thought loosely bound together by their development in the West). Vivekananda became involved with many Western occult groups after the Parliament, and he gained popularity as a lecturer in major American cities. Those involved in occultism were interested in a wide variety of non-traditional religions, and many took to Vivekananda's interpretations of Hinduism. India was seen by Western cults as a place of ancient knowledge, guiding many Westerners in their practices and beliefs. Vivekananda's Hinduism was therefore seen as authentic compared to the relatively new American occults, even though Vivekananda's Hinduism was already modernized and adapted for Western thought. This type of Hinduism that Vivekananda preached and that he took from his home of India is called Neo-Vedantia. This is a type of Hinduism that comes mainly from the teachings of the school of Advaita Vedanta, which was popularized by Ramohun Roy who lived in the early nineteenth century.¹⁸ That is the theology part of Vivekananda's teachings, but he also took ideas from occult

¹⁷ Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga : Patañjali and Western Esotericism* (New York: Continuum, 2004), chapter 5, Kindle.

¹⁸ Travis D Webster, "Secularization and Cosmopolitan Gurus," *Asian Ethnology* 75, no. 2 (2016): 327–57.

thought and applied them to Hinduism to create modern yoga. One such idea was the philosophy of positive thinking, which was the belief that one could take control of one's own situation, regardless of external factors, by believing that the external factors could not have any control over one's life. It redirects one from focusing on the negative to focusing on the positive. Occult thought also put faith in chiropractic medicine to realign one's body (and mind) quicker than mindfulness practices. This reveals the more physical and pragmatic techniques that American audiences were interested in, instead of many of the spiritually abstract teachings of Hinduism. Vivekananda continued his work in America, adapting Hinduism to a Western audience, and by 1900 he had created a "Universal religion" that used different types of yoga to fulfill the religious needs of a wide range of people.¹⁹ Yoga had become almost mainstream in the West, and it was not always connected to the Hindu spirituality from which it had stemmed.

Yoga and Commercialism

By losing its Hindu spirituality in favor of a more universal spirituality and philosophy, Hinduism was able to grow and spread in the West. But it was not all of Hinduism that was spreading. Types of mindfulness practices that stemmed from ancient Indian practices expanded to the West, as Westerners believed that these practices could help improve their health, both mental and physical. When Hinduism spread to the United States, it was forced to diversify. The masculine Hindu tradition that came from India was slowly replaced in the 1960s by a more feminine type of Hinduism.²⁰ Yoga in America today is typically caricatured as a rather feminine practice, when it is consumed by the masses in beginner level classes. Yoga does come from India, but it was made into an easily consumable commodity when it went global. It switched from a practice of spirituality to a practice of exercise, promising to reduce stress and create a healthy lifestyle for practitioners. It is a billion dollar market, and in 2004 yoga generated over \$30 billion in just the United States.²¹ Since it is such a profitable industry, there have been arguments over regulation and copyright within yoga. The Bikram Yoga College of India, headed by the guru Bikram Choudhury, has had lawsuits filed against it for attempting to copyright its own form of yoga. Choudhury started his own style of yoga, called Bikram yoga, for beginners when he was recovering from a knee injury. It is interesting to note here that Choudhury developed his unique style of

¹⁹ De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga*.

²⁰ Amanda Huffer, "Female Immigration as a Catalyst for Ritual Practice: A Social History of Hinduism in the United States," *Journal of Hindu Studies* 3, no. 2 (2010): 189–215.

²¹ Allison Fish, "The Commodification and Exchange of Knowledge in the Case of Transnational Commercial Yoga," *International Journal of Cultural Property* 13, no. 2 (2016): 189–206

yoga while recovering from an injury, much like Baba Ramdev started practicing yoga to strengthen his body after suffering illnesses and accidents as a child.

Bikram yoga became extremely popular, and is one of the most recognizable (and profitable) styles of yoga. Choudhury has headquarters in Los Angeles where he trained and certified Bikram yoga instructors so that they may teach at one of his nearly 800 franchises around the world. He no longer resides in Los Angeles after fleeing the US amidst allegations of sexual harassment and racial discrimination.²² Choudhury has publications outlining his yoga practices and techniques, and he started registering trademarks and copyrights based on those publications. He argues that the actual sequence of the postures is essentially original choreography and is therefore eligible for copyright. He claims that studios practicing Bikram yoga without certified instructors are potentially putting people in harm's way and are profiting off of his own hard work. The question here is whether yoga in all its forms exists as part of the public domain and is open to all, or whether it can be privatized by people who develop their own sequences of postures and techniques. The question is not whether it is a religious practice open to all. Choudhury does not tout his style of yoga as a practice of spirituality, it is instead fully intended to improve one's mental and physical health. Choudhury used the Indian authenticity Westerners believed he had a claim to to sell his product, but he also used the American system of privatization to monetize this authenticity.

The name Choudhury gave to his yoga institute evokes a foreign authenticity meant to make people believe in the power of Bikram yoga. Though his institute is headquartered in Los Angeles, it is still called Bikram Yoga College of *India*. Choudhury is an immigrant from Calcutta, India, and his background makes people believe that his practices stem from the ancient art of yoga. Though he claims Bikram yoga as his own creation, he says on his website that it stems from Hatha yoga.²³ One thing that is not found on the website is any mention of Hinduism or religion. Bikram yoga is purely for one's health, not for one's own spiritual practice. He uses India as a way to connect his style of yoga to the ancient styles from India, so that people believe his style is proven to work because it has stood the test of time. Many people tend to think that authentic ancient practices are useful, because if they are ancient yet still around then they have obviously worked, otherwise the practice would have died out. Choudhury uses this authenticity while also using the idea of modern adaptation. He took ancient practices, then adapted them to fit the needs of the modern practitioner. He believes that modern Western-

²² Samantha Schmidt, "Arrest warrant issued for Bikram Choudhury, the Hot-Yoga Guru Accused of Sexual Harassment" *The Washington Post*, May 26, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/05/26/arrest-warrant-issued-for-bikram-choudhury-the-hot-yoga-guru-accused-of-sexual-harassment/?utm_term=.4b2acb30b5df

²³ Bikram Yoga. www.bikramyoga.com.

ers care about health, not spirituality, so he took the religion out of the practice to appeal to a Western audience.

This plan worked, as Bikram yoga is one of the most profitable types of yoga in the United States. Choudhury set up the model for international yoga: use images of an authentic Indian practice, take out all references to the actual religion that it comes from, and profit. The category and label of “Hindu” has been a long-standing point of contention between certain gurus. Some gurus use the term openly and proudly, such as Baba Ramdev. He has stayed in India and is a proud Indian nationalist and Hindu supremacist. His practices are meant to promote Hinduism as an Indian religion, and his identity as a guru and his political power is tied to this use of Hindu as the word to describe him and his practices. Though he is a famous figure in India and around the world in the Hindu community, many gurus tend to shun the descriptor of “Hindu” as they gain fame in Western and non-traditionally Hindu countries. They tend to use words like “spiritual” to describe their practices and beliefs, which is just vague enough to become a universal term that can encompass a wide variety of people from many different backgrounds.²⁴ When gurus come to Western countries, especially the United States, they tend to dilute the religion to make it palatable to a much more diverse audience.

To accumulate followers for themselves, many gurus tend to pick out easily digestible sayings and teachings from Hinduism. This allows the audience that is unfamiliar with Hinduism and India in general to gain an interest in the religion. After that interest has been piqued, the goal of missionaries such as Vivekananda was to teach the Westerners more and more about the religion so that Hinduism could spread to the West. With these followers, he could gain monetary support from Westerners that would enable him to continue to spread his brand of Hinduism in India as well. But other gurus took this brand of easily understood Hinduism and took all the religion out of it, profiting off of the idea of a mystic Eastern spirituality. Gurus such as Choudhury pick the profitable ideas found in Hindu teachings, but mostly Hindu practices, and disseminate it for a wider audience. It is why they use the word “spiritual” over “Hindu.” The word Hindu when in reference to a person means a practitioner of Hinduism. The word spiritual can mean a variety of different things. It is vaguely religious, but it shuns the idea of organized religion. It basically means that a person believes in a power, whether that be a god or gods, the universe, or something else, that is greater than themselves. By casting such a wide net, it is easy for people to resonate with the nearly universal teachings or practices of gurus who operate mainly in the West.

²⁴ Amanda J. Huffer, “Hinduism Without Religion: Amma’s Movement in America,” *Cross Currents* 61, no. 3 (September 2011): 374–98.

Beyond Yoga: Other Forms of Commercialization

Though yoga is the Hindu practice that is best known to Americans because of its widespread practice in the West, there are other practices and beliefs that have been commercialized in Hinduism. In America, Hindu festivals and celebrations are less about the gods and goddesses that the event is for and more about the people who are attending. People come together, supposedly to celebrate their religion. In reality, they are celebrating their nationality and socializing. This, however, is not an inherently negative practice. Indian Americans are a minority in America, and when many Indians started coming to America after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 passed the new immigrants needed to find community in their new country.²⁵ Many Indians shared the Hindu religion, so one way to bring them all together and foster community was through religious festivals. Hinduism became a way to market to the new and growing group of Indians who were making their homes in America. The United States has always had immigration, but it is a heavily Christian nation and was unfamiliar with Hinduism. Indian immigrants faced the challenge of trying to assimilate just enough to fit into American culture, but not enough so that they would lose all connections to their home country.

Many manufacturers and retailers capitalized on the homesickness of these immigrants and the need that they have to hold onto their culture. Images and statues of deities have a huge market in the United States, because the disconnect from the country of origin makes people crave material items reminding them of their culture. These religious objects also help people worship in their homes, because temples in the United States are not as widespread as temples in India. There may not be a temple for dozens of miles that is easily accessible to Hindus in America. There is also an element of guilt that goes into the consumption of these items. American culture is very focused on consumerism and materialism, and a person can show that they are committed to their religion and home country by having objects originating from or reminding people of India. People can show that they are committed to keeping their culture through material goods, which can also be endorsed and sold by gurus as we saw with Patanjali products. Gurus also help people feel connected to their home country or ancestral country because of the new technologies that they can utilize to spread their teachings around the world. Baba Ramdev can go on television to lead yoga sessions with people who can follow along at home, even if these people are thousands of miles away from India.

²⁵ Mitra Semontee, "Merchandizing the Sacred: Commodifying Hindu Religion, Gods/Goddesses, and Festivals in the United States," *Journal of Media and Religion* 15, no. 2 (2016): 113–21.

While material objects can illustrate to others how much a person is devoted to their culture through the display of these objects, gurus provide a much more human connection. When people are following the works and teachings of gurus, they are much more immersed in the culture surrounding these gurus. Choudhury's yoga classes, while they do not declare themselves to be Hindu, do provide a space to be around others, all doing the same activity and interacting in the space. Baba Ramdev's television yoga is explicitly Hindu and Indian nationalist, so it draws in an audience who want to feel close to their religion and their country. With the rise of the internet, people can now feel connected to gurus such as Ramdev and follow his teachings without having to be physically close to him. When Vivekananda rose to fame, he did so because he came to the United States to spread his teachings on Hinduism. Gurus no longer need to go to different countries to spread their teachings in our increasingly globalized world. Gurus gain followers through their teachings and messages, then they can capitalize on their following and popularity by selling and endorsing products. These products make people feel closer to the gurus that they idolize, but also brings them closer to the culture that they are trying to stay connected to.

The role of gurus in Hinduism, and in society, has changed considerably throughout thousands of years. Gurus today are not just spiritual Hindu teachers, the term has now come to mean anyone who is an expert or teacher in their field. This use of the term guru shows how Hinduism has spread and the spiritual aspect of the religion has been diluted in the West. Gurus today can latch onto the term guru and its now secularized meaning, such as Choudhury does when he spreads his yoga practice. He saw the market that the practice of yoga had in the West, and capitalized on the idea of an authentic healing practice that was foreign to most Westerners. Then there are gurus such as Ramdev, who appeal to an Indian audience. Ramdev capitalizes on feelings of patriotism in India and Hindu supremacy to reach a large Indian Hindu audience. These gurus go after a specific set of people to spread their products and services, and both have been extremely successful in amassing a large amount of devoted followers. Gurus take their own ideas of Hinduism and Hindu practices, then modify it to the audience they want to reach. This modification is how specific gurus have grown their followings within the new globalized world that is focused on individualism, materialism, and commodification.

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