



## BOOK REVIEW

*Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture*. Andrea R. Jain. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 240 pages.

*Selling Yoga*, Andrea Jain's influential monograph, is not a recent publication in the field of yoga studies. Having first been published six years ago, it has already been received by the academic community. Nonetheless, it still deserves thorough discussion, especially in light of expanding academic research on yoga.

Andrea Jain is an American scholar of religion and an Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the Indiana University School of Liberal Arts. Among her research interest she lists "religion under neoliberal capitalism," "the intersections of gender, sexuality, and religion," as well as "theories of religion" ([andrea Jain.com](http://andrea Jain.com)). It is the first of these broad themes that determines her scope of research on modern yoga. Her study offers a particular hermeneutics of modern yoga, interpreting it in terms of free market economy.

Unlike some of the most influential yoga researchers, Jain is not an avid yoga practitioner, having attended all but one semester-long postural yoga class as a university student (ix). This positioning has a dual implication: on the one hand, it allows for an external, seemingly unbiased perspective on yoga and for interpreting it in etic terms. On the other hand, however, it renders the experience of being a part of a modern yoga milieu inaccessible—a fact that bears on the author's construal of the studied phenomenon. As I will argue later, Jain's yoga is somewhat reified—described in terms of a malleable object transformed by external influences, such as consumer culture, rather than a social phenomenon whose changing qualities emerge from the experiences and interactions of people—instructors and practitioners.

*Selling Yoga* is a thorough study, foregrounding the author's main argument against a comprehensive review of academic knowledge of yoga available at the time of the book's composition. It is also polemical in character, with the author arguing for her



case strongly and debating with other authors. This makes for gripping, intellectually engaging material that keeps the reader alert at all times, but also invites further polemic, thus perpetuating healthy academic debate.

The work is divided into six chapters. Chapter One (Premodern Yoga Systems) is a summary of the academic knowledge on yoga in its ancient and medieval forms. It offers a comprehensive, up-to-date view on yoga, underscoring its heterogeneity and trans-sectarian character. Chapter Two (From Counterculture to Counterculture) is a retelling of the history of modern yoga, interpreting it in relation to its countercultural character. Jain makes a distinction between “modern yoga from the neck up”—the transnational assimilation of what was seen as morally superior, ascetic, and meditational *rājayoga*—and “modern yoga from the neck down”—the adaptations of *haṭhayoga* focused on body practices and postulating a re-sacralisation of the body. Illustrating her argument with summary biographies of Americans Ida Craddock and Pierre Bernard, the author shows how the latter forms of yoga, impossible to reconcile with Protestant morality, were condemned and pushed to the fringe of modern American society.

In Chapter Three (Continuity with Consumer Culture) the book’s main argument begins. The author claims that in late modernity yoga entered mainstream culture on mainstream culture’s terms—by aligning itself with consumer norms and expectations. It is the ability of late modern gurus to adapt to the rules of the free market that made the popularisation of yoga possible. Chapter Four (Branding Yoga) attempts to reinforce this argument by interpreting the activities of prominent modern yoga instructors (from Swami Muktananda to B.K.S. Iyengar and John Friend) in marketing terms, such as branding or packaging.

The next two chapters serve to nuance the claims of the previous two. By interpreting modern yoga as a “body of religious practice” (Chapter Six), the author argues against simplistic interpretations of its commodification—mainly those of Jeremy Carrette and Richard King.<sup>1</sup> This section of the book is also the first where the author takes into consideration the actual experience of a yoga practitioner, breaking with the reifying narrative of the previous chapters. In Chapter Seven (Yogaphobia and Hindu Origins), Jain deconstructs two stances that justify criticism towards the popularisation of modern yoga: the Christian objection to the involvement in practices of non-Christian origin (“Christian yogaphobia”) and the Hindu objection to what is seen as global appropriation of a Hindu tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> Carrette, J., and King, R. 2005. *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*. New York: Routledge.

*Selling Yoga* is an excellently written book by a knowledgeable and critical author. However, I feel that its main argument needs closer consideration and a re-evaluation, especially in light of the newer research on modern yoga.

Perhaps the most central realisation about Jain's narrative is that the author does not in fact argue that modern yoga functions according to the mechanisms of consumer culture. Instead, she applies the metaphor of consumer culture to describe modern yoga. She uses a whole collection of terms borrowed from the marketing lingo, such as "entrepreneurial godmen" for influential spiritual gurus and "spiritual wares" for the soteriological proposals of those gurus; "yoga entrepreneurs" for professional yoga instructors; "yoga brands" for yoga schools, traditions, and lineages; "packaging" for legitimising these lineages and their practices by creating particular mythologies; "products" for the kinds of yoga they teach.

For the majority of yoga practitioners, the most familiar metaphor used to construe yoga is that of education—it is common to speak of yoga teachers and students, yoga classes, yoga manuals—and yoga is seen as knowledge that is being transmitted from one individual to another. Jain shifts the metaphorical domain from education to market: yoga is construed in terms of a product that is branded and packaged by entrepreneurs in order to be sold effectively to picky clients. Such a stance does have its merits: it challenges the predominant education metaphor, problematises it, and shows that it is not the only way to construe yoga. Thinking of yoga in terms of education has its fallacies. In the prototypical case (i.e., school education), teachers are adults invested with much authority and power. Students, on the other hand, are minors dependent on teachers as their temporary guardians. Given the current crisis in modern yoga milieus, caused by the recurring exposure of sexual and other abuses among yoga instructors, the ability to deconstruct this metaphor and reassess the actual power and authority of yoga instructors is very valuable. But simply shifting the metaphorical domain from education to the market is not a solution.

This is not to say that Jain's thesis is not at all valid. The most exhaustive expression of this thesis is that "[p]ostural yoga is a transnational product of yoga's encounter with global processes, particularly the rise and dominance of market capitalism, industrialization, globalization, and the consequent diffusion of consumer culture" (xv). This is a strong claim, with the noun "product" suggesting that market capitalism, industrialization, globalization, and consumer culture made postural yoga. And such construal is a gross simplification. That capitalism and consumer culture have influenced the transformations of postural yoga or that they were one of the factors effecting these transformations is undeniable. But by no means did they produce it.





Perhaps the most important characteristic of modern postural yoga—one that has been mostly taken for granted—is its professionalisation. For the founding fathers of the movement—T. Krishnamacharya or Bishnu Ghosh—yoga was a profession, and so it is for contemporary yoga instructors. And as working individuals, these instructors are dependent on the economy model predominant in a given time and place. Suzanne Newcombe’s recent work shows, for instance, that in post-war Britain postural yoga operated largely within a socialist context.<sup>2</sup> In 1960s England, yoga classes became a part of public evening adult education, offered by Local Education Authorities. These classes—organised and offered on a low-cost basis—operated effectively until the neoliberal reforms of Margaret Thatcher put an end to the funding. In the United States, the recent move of New York yoga instructors to unionise shows the necessity to protect the labour rights of these instructors against the consequences of economic liberalism. This, together with Jain’s observations, suggests that yoga—just like any domain of professional activity—is responsive to local economic trends. Some instructors operating in liberal economies—such as the hot yoga tycoon Bikram Choudhury—might well deserve the name “yoga entrepreneur.” However, applying this moniker to any professional yoga instructor who developed an organisational structure to support the transmission of their system of practice a misuse of the term.

One of the “entrepreneurs” discussed by Jain is B.K.S. Iyengar. Describing his activity in the global yoga milieu as “branding” might seem self-explanatory, especially since the very name Iyengar Yoga has been trademarked for the sake of protecting standards across the globe. However, Newcombe has shown that the very process that Jain describes in marketing terms may be interpreted very differently. Newcombe explains Iyengar’s rise to prominence in the UK, the standardisation of his yoga practice, and the creating of a network of instructors as routinisation and institutionalisation of charisma. By providing a bureaucratic structure supporting the training and certification process, Iyengar turned his way of teaching yoga—a product of his personal charisma and experience—into a reproducible standard. Currently the global Iyengar Yoga organisation functions as a network of NGOs supported by member fees. After Iyengar’s death, new standards have been negotiated between the representatives of the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune and the local organisations. The international Iyengar Yoga organisation is a government-like structure rather than a business enterprise, and Iyengar Yoga itself is a standard rather than a brand. Or at least they may be interpreted along these lines in a construal very different from that offered in *Selling Yoga*.

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<sup>2</sup> Newcombe, S. 2019. *Yoga in Britain: Stretching Spirituality and Educating Yogis*. Sheffield, Bristol: Equinox.

Another point is that the marketing mechanisms that Jain associates with contemporary yoga milieus were already present in America in the early twentieth century. Philip Deslippe's recent study<sup>3</sup> has shown that the earliest yoga "gurus" in America—mostly itinerant Indians unable to leave the United States due to immigration policy—were quite competitive marketers. They advertised intensively, exploiting the stereotype of the Hindu possessed of mystical and magical powers, and using the medium of photography to uphold that stereotype. Sometimes they hid their true identities and professions, realising that "branding" themselves as yoga teachers would secure better income. They used the mystique of occult knowledge in order to lure customers into costly private classes. They fought competition, sometimes resorting to stealing intellectual property. At the same time, due to both competition and the peripatetic lifestyle of the gurus, student-customers would shift allegiances often, changing between one swami and another. Although the scale of the phenomenon might have been significantly smaller than now, yoga was already becoming part of something that would become consumer culture a few decades later.

Not only does the relationship between yoga professionals and yoga practitioners depend on local economies, it is also dependent on the degree of these practitioners' involvement. One of the characteristics of consumer culture that Jain identifies in modern postural yoga is the heretical imperative<sup>4</sup>—the necessity to make continuous choices on a highly heterogenous market. The multiplicity of competing "yoga brands" on the "yoga market" forces practitioners to choose a preferred brand. While this might be the case for casual practitioners or for beginners, who visit different yoga centres depending on their current interests or needs, more experienced practitioners tend to show allegiance to a particular lineage or system of practice in ways that go beyond being faithful to a brand. The cumulative efficacy of a coherent system of practice engaged in over time results in strong habits around which the practitioners' life is organised. The complex in-group social ties and the power dynamics between "yoga teachers" and their "students" lead to strong emotional involvement. These factors make shifting from one yoga method to another (or indeed foregoing any particular "method" altogether) very difficult. The recent media coverage of sexual and other abuses in modern postural yoga milieus shows how challenging it is for practitioners to part ways with their instructors, despite having experienced prolonged violence on

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<sup>3</sup> Deslippe, P. 2018. "The Swami Circuit: Mapping the Terrain of Early American Yoga." *Journal of Yoga Studies* 1: 5-44.

<sup>4</sup> See Berger, P. 1979. *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*. New York: Doubleday.





their part. Contrary to Jain's suggestion,<sup>5</sup> changing a yoga system or lineage is not like changing a car or personal computer brand—a fact that cannot be appreciated unless the psychosocial aspects of modern yoga are factored in.

Another of Jain's arguments concerns the adaptability of “yoga products” and “yoga services” to the ever-changing consumer needs. Once again, this observation is true in some cases. Trends in yoga apparel and accessories change relatively fast (though the infamous “Iyengar shorts” might be an exemption from the rule), and in some centres ephemeral varieties of yoga classes might come and go. But some of the most prominent systems of modern postural yoga seem very resistant to change. Iyengar Yoga or the Ashtanga Yoga of K. Pattabhi Jois, for example, are known for rigorously protecting their respective methods of practice against unauthorised change, and authorised change is introduced only very reluctantly. The concepts of tradition or lineage resound strongly in these milieus and they are more relevant than adapting to the expectations of prospective practitioners. It is in fact the practitioner who has to adapt in numerous ways in order to fit in a given milieu and into a specific system of practice. Certain superficial concessions may be made—a class might be called “Yoga Ignite” instead of “Iyengar Yoga Introductory Course” to make it more catchy. The “Iyengar shorts” might be sewn from higher quality, more colourful materials. But the kinds of bodily and social practices that catchy names and floral prints embellish are quite impervious to change—a fact that can remain obscure unless these bodily and social practices are looked at carefully.

Not factoring in the psychosocial context is, I believe, the weak point of Jain's argument, and it is, once again, the outcome of a specific metaphorical construal. Concepts such as yoga, market, or consumer culture are not only reified in Jain's argument—they are in fact treated as autonomous agents. There are certain interactions between consumer culture and yoga that make the latter subject to the former; there are certain influences of the market, but how they work and why they are effective remains obscure. It is not that Jain disregards the human factor entirely—in defending modern postural yoga as a body of religious practice, she asserts the practitioners' spiritual engagement with this practice. This consideration, however, is divorced from the rest of the argument. The said spiritual involvement, the presence and engagement of actual people, is not acknowledged as a factor shaping, transforming, or “producing” modern postural yoga.

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<sup>5</sup> “I would suggest, however, that surrender to a guru and his or her spiritual wares is not necessarily quantitatively or qualitatively different than surrender to a brand” (Jain, 2014: 93).

The blindness to the intricacies of the social relations within modern yoga milieus is illustrated strikingly by the author's statement that yoga is advertised as a means to better sex (110). To prove her point, Jain quotes Bikram Choudhury, who was recorded saying that a particular *āsana* is "good for sex. Cootchi, cootchi. You can make love for hours and have seven orgasms when you are 90" (ibidem). Any insight into the well documented behaviour of Choudhury (who has been accused of sexual abuse—including rape—by his students), as well as into the dynamics of guru-disciple relationships,<sup>6</sup> shows that commodifying and selling sexual prowess is not quite the issue in this case. By talking provocatively about sex, Choudhury does a few things. He transcends social norms and common expectations as to how a spiritual teacher should act—a behaviour quite standard even among premodern gurus, especially of tantric provenience. By alluding to a sphere of life that many practitioners might be ambivalent about he perplexes them, thus making them more susceptible to his influence. He also asserts his position as the dominant male in the group—the one who not only possesses unparalleled sexual capabilities but can also talk about them openly while walking among hundreds of students dressed in nothing but swimming shorts. Choudhury's talk of "cootchie cootchie" is not, or at least not primarily, about advertising yoga for better sex. It is about enacting his own authority over the group—the kind of authority that made it very difficult for his students to swap his "brand" of yoga for a different one despite his blatant, hurtful, and in fact criminal misconduct.

Jain's obliviousness to the foregoing issue might be explained by the fact that when *Selling Yoga* was being written, such abuses were not being discussed extensively. Although accusations against various yoga gurus—including Choudhury—had already been expressed, an open academic assessment of these kind of problems had not yet begun. However, now that this Pandora's box has been opened and new research is being produced, such misconstrual should be noted.

Finally, Jain's view on late modern yoga is incomplete, because she did not yet have access to relevant knowledge of its premodern varieties. According to Jain, "postural yoga is in part a product of consumer culture, hence the absence of anything that looks like it in the history of yoga prior to the twentieth century" (155). However, recent work by Jason Birch and Mark Singleton has revealed that late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-

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<sup>6</sup> For an up-to-date discussion of the guru-disciple relationship as it pertains to the issue of sexual abuse in guru movements, see Lucia, A. 2018. "Guru Sex: Charisma, Proxemic Desire, and the Haptic Logics of the Guru-Disciple Relationship." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86(4): 953-88.







century *haṭhayoga* had certain things in common with modern postural yoga.<sup>7</sup> One of these was the body enhancing character of yogic practices. The practices of a late eighteenth-century manuscript known as the *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati* were aimed at increasing practitioners' agility and strength. These practices were in all probability known to the twentieth-century teacher Tirumalai Krishnamacharya and they most likely influenced his system of yoga practice. According to Jain, however, the notion of body enhancement through fitness regimes is an element of consumer culture and it is through consumer culture that it became a part of yoga practice. Recent research indicates that it was a part of the construal of yoga at a much earlier stage.

Some of the points I made above hopefully show that today, six years after *Selling Yoga* was published, the arguments of the book should be reconsidered. Jain's theses are by no means wrong—there are simply too limited and too general. When Jain's book was being written, the amount of research done on modern yoga was fairly small and it was difficult to avoid generalisations. In 2020, there is much more contextualised, nuanced research in the field that has exposed the shortcomings of Jain's conclusions. Just by looking beyond the US the claim of the relation between yoga and consumer culture is weakened. Deeper research into the history of pre-modern yoga shows that modern postural yoga is more grounded in it than previously believed.

But the need to update our knowledge in relation to *Selling Yoga* is one matter. Another matter is the explanatory potential of the book. As I suggested before, describing yoga in marketing terms may make it easier to disarm the education metaphor that has been in use for centuries and that has been facilitating abuse. Other than that, however, does associating modern postural yoga with consumer culture explain anything? Does it truly account for its appeal and popularity? Is it in any way essential to its definition? Does the fact that in some parts of the world yoga is marketed just like yoghurt, laser printers, or kitchen sinks tell us more about yoga, or more about marketing strategies?

It is not “branding” or “packaging” that keeps practitioners invested in particular styles of postural yoga practice. There are intricate social relations involved, both between co-practitioners and between practitioners and instructors. And, most of all, there is the practice itself, offering rich experience—kinaesthetic, intellectual, and emotional. By means of long-lasting yoga practice people transform themselves—physically, socially, and mentally. If we remain blind to this experience and to these transformations, if we only see practitioners as simply being moved about by the pervasive forces of the

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<sup>7</sup> See Birch, J. and Singleton, M. 2019. “The Yoga of the *Haṭhābhyāsapaddhati*: Haṭhayoga on the Cusp of Modernity.” *Journal of Yoga Studies* 2: 3-70.



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mighty market, we will not find out much about the significance of yoga in the contemporary world. Because yoga is not a product—it is a protean, multifaceted social phenomenon. And it should be studied as such.

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