

# Modern Yoga, Consumer Culture and Religion

Andrea Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 240 pp. \$ 20.95

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Andrea Jain's book is located within the corpus of scholarly work that has emerged over the last two decades around the phenomenon of 'modern Yoga'. The central problematic this literature seeks to address is the emergence of Yoga as it now exists in such contexts as Yoga studios across the world. There are two aspects to this work: one is to demonstrate the break between premodern and modern forms of Yoga, and the other is to examine the global processes whereby the latter has come to function the way it does. In doing this, various analytic possibilities have been brought to bear on the question of 'modern Yoga', and the book also reflects on the ways in which we might define religion, and the extent to which modern forms of Yoga can be called religion.

Jain's work, coming after various authors have already set out the broader narrative of what is termed modern or 'postural' Yoga, is able to explore one significant aspect of the history of Yoga in detail: its journey from being an 'elite' 'counterculture' activity for the first several decades of its existence in the West to becoming a popular and easily accessible experience today. In doing this, Jain utilizes the idea of 'continuity with consumer culture'. *Selling Yoga* is remarkable for its ability to bring conceptual clarity not only with the study of 'primary' material, but also in the analysis of and response to secondary literature.

The first chapter of Jain's book surveys 'premodern yoga systems' in an attempt to demonstrate how premodern Yogis of any persuasion were 'hardly the images we tend to envision when we think of modern practitioners of Yoga' (p 19). More significantly, this chapter puts forth one of the central theses of Jain's argument – that premodern Yoga was different from contemporary versions because it grew in a different context, which is to say, what has been common to Yoga across centuries has been the fact that it has understandably always been determined by changing sociocultural circumstances.

Modern Yoga, Jain explains in the second chapter, grew out of 'encounters' between Yoga reformers from India and Westerners engaged in 'metaphysics to fitness' (p 21), and modern social phenomena. Much of this section looks at early engagements with Yoga in the West and the reception of Yoga there, discussing some tendencies that the encounter with Yoga brings out about Western sociocultural history. Until the middle of the twentieth century, modern Yoga was 'countercultural, elite, or scandalous' (p 41), writes Jain. It is possibly also an important aspect of the history of 'religion' in nineteenth and early twentieth century United States, as it served as a counterpoint to religious doctrines which had a somewhat broader yet mundane and conservative appeal at the time.

The factors which determined the success of late twentieth century modern/postural Yoga are summarized by Jain in terms of issues relating to government policy (opening up of immigration restrictions), prevailing attitudes towards existing religions, consequently the relative ease with which gurus 'enter(ed) the market', and the way consumer culture functioned. Also then, religious identity is conceivable as 'bricolage' in a modern context. The shift which takes place in this period is that Yoga is no longer counterculture, but pop culture.

Jain contrasts modern/postural Yoga with modern 'soteriological Yoga' to explain why the former became popular in the late twentieth century. The examples she uses of the former to illustrate her point include the Siddha Yoga of Swami Muktananda and Preksha Dhyana of Mahaprajna. Jain holds that the reason modern/postural yoga became more successful in the market was because it does not require a lifelong commitment or any radical shift in worldview, and allows direct access. Weaving theoretical analysis deftly into her narrative, she also reads this in terms of continuity with consumer

culture. In 'Branding Yoga', she narrates the example of John Friend's Anusara Yoga, which she calls a 'second-generation Yoga brand' (whereas Siddha Yoga or Iyengar Yoga are first generation). She discusses the relationship between consumption and Yoga, and brand and meaning.

Jain's fifth chapter takes a cue from something she says in the preceding one, where she observes that surrender to a guru is not easily distinguishable 'qualitatively or quantitatively' from surrender to a brand (p 93). The chapter is focused on explaining how modern/postural Yoga may be thought of as a 'body of religious practice'. She develops her argument mostly as a critique of Jeremy Carrette and Richard King's *Selling Spirituality*. In response to their position (and that of many other academics and non-academics) that certain forms of modern/postural Yoga are 'mere commodity', she argues that this position ignores the emic perspective on modern/postural Yoga. She then goes on to address Carrette and King directly, demonstrating that their position on postural Yoga is based on an essentialist, reified understanding of religion. According to Jain, Carrette and King mistakenly take the view that religion is clearly distinct from and opposed to the profane, is 'good' and also *sui generis* (p 102).

Jain's critical response to Carrette and King depends on Mircea Eliade's idea of hierophany, meaning 'manifestation of the sacred', and her example is the 'body' in Iyengar Yoga. The increasing lack of distinction between the sacred and the material, she points out, is the 'dominant ontology of consumer culture', as Hugh Urban demonstrates (p 104). Postural Yoga, rather than lacking religious and philosophical content, then reflects the 'dominant religio-philosophical mode of consumer culture'. In response to the possible argument that postural Yoga concerns itself only with personal salvation, she brings up the religious problem of human pain and suffering. Her discussion of the question presents an interesting engagement with Preksha Dhyana in North America. On a second point, she draws attention to the fact that the 'religious' need not be ethical: indeed, according to Eliade, Yoga may, on the contrary, be 'antisocial' and 'antihuman' (p 120). Further, she points out that it might be a problem to project back a modern conception of social justice onto ancient systems. Finally, she argues that religion is, in fact, *not sui generis*.

In the sixth chapter, she looks at Orientalist presumptions regarding Yoga which inform both those who think of it as 'theirs' because it is 'Hindu', as well as Christian groups who oppose it on religious grounds precisely for being Hindu. She argues that

both the positions emerge from consumer culture, a space which they share in common with postural Yoga itself. Critiquing the idea of an unchanging essence, she posits that protests espouse a 'distorted history' which 'serves a fierce will to power' (p 156). Finally, she brings together the various threads running through her work to emphasize the ideas of context-sensitivity, diversity and the absence of an essence or centre.

While Jain's account is internally consistent, and she certainly accomplishes what she sets out to do quite effectively, her work inspires at least two questions. One is her discussion of etic versus emic views. In her preface, Jain speaks of her experience with the Jain community (pp xiv-xv). When, to the community, she claims that she is 'Jain, but not Jain', distinguishing her last name from religious identity, the community's response is usually one of dismissal. Jain reads this, perceptively, as stemming from their *karma* centred ontology, which leads them to deny that her sociocultural context and experiences shape her. Two processes of translation can be observed here: the Jain community's translation of Jain's claim into a system that is comprehensible to them, and Jain's translation of their dismissal into an analytic which is comprehensible to her and her audience. In a sense, her reading of postural Yoga through ideas of consumer culture is also an act of translation. While one of her criticisms of Carrette and King is that they are dismissive of emic views in their critique of some versions of Yoga, it is not certain to what extent Yoga practitioners would agree with the way she populates the category of 'religion' as she applies it to them. Similarly, her reading of twentieth century Yoga organizations as less or more successful due to their continuity or otherwise with consumer culture presents an ontology which would find itself at variance with that of practitioners of many soteriological Yoga traditions. This is an interesting problem with which she does not engage as sensitively as it might be expected.

The other, related point is that while it is true that Carrette and King appear to reify the category of religion, she appears to miss the point of *Selling Spirituality*, which is in fact a *critique* of consumer culture. The book, if not a call for action itself, certainly judges traditions in terms of the extent to which they may be critically effective.

That said, Jain's work is a persuasive analysis of modern Yoga in terms of consumer culture and emphasizes the context-specificity of yoga, raising some critical points but also providing an analytical structure for further study of an important phenomenon of modern cultural experience.