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Had Your McYoga Today? A Stretch of Success

■ Bikram Choudhury looks to franchise his torrid technique.

By HILARY E. MacGREGOR, Times Staff Writer

Dressed in sky-blue polyester, Bikram Choudhury leans back in his leather chair and holds forth on how he saved Hollywood, how he saved America, and how he will save the world. With yoga.

His yoga.

It is from here--a nondescript warehouse on La Cienega Boulevard north of the Santa Monica Freeway--that this spiritually driven, trash-talking, Rolls-Royce-driving guru is building his vast yoga empire.

Next to him is a map of the world, with pins for every Bikram yoga studio in America. In 1973 there would have been three pins--one in Honolulu, one in San Francisco and one in Beverly Hills. In January there were 500. Today, 650 pins stud the map. Bikram studios, he says, are opening around the world at a rate of two a day. Some cities--such as San Francisco--are so saturated with Bikram yoga studios that Choudhury may put a moratorium on the area.

"It was like this for years," Choudhury says, drawing a flat line through the air. "Then in the last years it shot up, like this! Like a rocket!" He launched his hand skyward and nearly leaps out of his chair.

Choudhury has taught his trademark brand of sweaty yoga--practiced in 100-plus-degree heat-- in Beverly Hills for nearly three decades. He has always done well. But now, he is riding the crest of the yoga tsunami sweeping the nation, and he is poised to cash in on his "product" the American way. Since January, a San Diego lawyer has copyrighted and trademarked Bikram's name, products, logo, clothing line, his scripted 90-minute teaching dialogue, and his sequence of 26 asanas, or postures.

Choudhury is not the first to copyright or trademark yoga products. But by fall, if all goes as planned, Bikram's Yoga College of India will become what is believed to be the first yoga franchise in the United States. The announcement has caused a stir in the yoga world, where Choudhury is already a controversial figure, dubbed "yoga's bad boy" by Yoga Journal.

By franchising, Choudhury makes tangible uncomfortable links between spirituality and commerce.

"You don't typically think of yoga and business being that intertwined," said Michael Harris, who

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Bikram Yoga

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runs a Bikram yoga studio in Portland, Ore.. "But yoga and business country *have* become intertwined."

Trisha Lamb Feuerstein of the Yoga Research and Education Center, a Santa Rosa-based nonprofit that tracks yoga trends, said franchising defies the spirit of yoga. "Yoga is huge and infinite. What's being branded are the physical aspects of the practice. You can't brand the spiritual aspects. Yoga is not hamburgers."

Choudhury counters that his popularity has created copycats and diluted his teachings. Franchising, he hopes, will keep his yoga pure and his workout as reliable as a cup of Starbucks coffee.

"Many people think yoga belongs to the world," said Choudhury's attorney, Jacob Reinbolt of San Diego. "That is wrong." Bikram's unique method, he says, "is one of the most easily protectable pieces of intellectual property there is."

So will Bikram yoga be as standardized as McDonald's?

For a moment the charismatic yoga-vangelist who preaches the miracles of the discipline in an amped-up patter of Indian-accented hyperbole until he is hoarse, grows reflective.

"You could say that," he finally says. "Only I sell life."

In 21st century America, yoga is big business. There are yoga retreats, yoga weekends, yoga books, yoga clothing lines, yoga calendars, yoga videos, baby yoga, even a yoga cruise.

It's unclear how many millions of Americans are practicing yoga, but a 1998 survey by the Wall Street Journal and NBC pegged the number at more than 18 million (up from 6 million in 1994). Although there are no current figures, the editor of Yoga Journal believes the number is significantly higher.

Nowhere is yoga more popular than in America's largest and most stressed-out urban centers. But with perhaps more brand-name yoga gurus per capita than any other city in the country--and legions of celebrities doing "downward dog" daily--Los Angeles has emerged as a center for yoga innovation. Still, for critics, franchising a form of the 5,000-year-old sacred path to divine realization seems like the biggest, and crudest, step yet in the commodification of spirituality in America.

"We have never heard of this," said Deborah Willoughby, founding editor of Yoga International, a Pennsylvania-based magazine that focuses on the spiritual dimensions of yoga. "A lot of places have branch centers, like Shivananda, or the Himalayan Institute, where students will open a center and work under the guidance of a spiritual director. But it is not like it is owned, or licensed. It is just a desire to spread the spiritual teachings.

Franchising, she said, is "hard to imagine."

"But it's very California," she said. "I think it probably means everyone else will be doing it soon."

On Easter Sunday, 300 giddy wannabes have descended on Bikram's Yoga College of India on La Cienega for an intense, nine-week boot camp that will transform them into yoga teachers.

They have come from France and Hungary, from Vancouver and Denver, from San Diego and Silver Lake. They have paid \$5,000 each for the chance to study at the feet of the Indian master.

Choudhury offered his first teacher training course eight years ago, to 35 students. Today his courses fill as soon as they are offered. This is his largest class ever. Choudhury earns \$3 million annually in teacher training alone.

The training program is the key to Choudhury's breakneck expansion; these fresh arrivals are the foot soldiers of the empire. They will practice yoga twice a day, drill each posture until they get it right and listen to lectures until the wee hours.

They will also have to memorize every word of "the dialogue" verbatim, complete with Bikram similes and turns of phrase. After the course ends, they will be dispatched to their hometowns like missionaries--taking Bikram to the people.

Bikram Choudhury, 56, was born in Calcutta, where yoga is a way of life. Like many Indians, he began doing yoga at the age of 4. His guru, or teacher, was Bishnu Ghosh, brother of Paramahansa Yogananda, who founded the Self-Realization Fellowship. At 13, Choudhury won the National India Yoga Contest--which judges suppleness and strength, knowledge, and presentation--and remained its undefeated champion for three years. Choudhury then became a weightlifter, winning the All India Weight Lifting Competition in 1963 at age 16. A year later he dropped a 380-pound barbell on his knee. He says doctors told him he would never walk again. He turned to his teacher--and yoga. Six months later, he says, his knee was healed.

Bikram's yoga is made up of a sequence of 26 postures (each of which is performed twice), and two breathing exercises, culled from 84 classical postures and more than 10,000 combinations. He heats the room to between 100 and 105 degrees, he says, to work bodies like a blacksmith.

At the urging of his guru, Choudhury came to the West. He opened his first studio in Los Angeles in Beverly Hills in 1973, in the basement of a former bank building. He was young and gorgeous, at a time when the nation was bewitched with all things Indian--from bedspreads and incense to Ravi Shankar and Krishnamurti.

"In those years he was trying to be a pure yogi," recalls Emmy Cleaves, who was Bikram's 15th student in Los Angeles and is now a senior teacher. "He slept on the floor there. That's the kind of sacrifice he was willing to make. He has invested a lot in this, because his guru told him to go out and teach yoga. From an Indian perspective, he was doing the right thing."

In those days Choudhury was celibate. He didn't drink, nor does he now. Some recall that the young Choudhury was so shy he would barely meet people's eyes when he spoke. He ran his yoga school as if it were in Calcutta, rather than Beverly Hills. "Do you know, every yoga school in India is free?" Bikram asked. "My school was free. We don't think to charge money. For us, a yoga school is like a temple. I had a little box, and people could put money in it. Like a church."

Shirley MacLaine, one of his earliest students, took him aside. "You cannot run a yoga school the Indian way," he says she told him. She hired a manager and a security guard, he says, and he began to charge for classes.

"If it's free, only 15 people would come," Choudhury said. "That's the way America is." (A 90-minute class at Bikram's Yoga College of India costs \$20, making it one of the most expensive in the city.)

In 1984, by arrangement of his guru's son, Choudhury wed Rajashree, a famed yogini--or yoga practitioner-- and five-time All India Yoga Champion. "That was the main reason I married her," he says. "She beat all the men, 1400 people. The year we got married she was the champion."

They have a daughter, Laju, 12, and a son, Anurag, 9. Rajashree has proved a strong businesswoman and a gentle presence against Choudhury's braggadocio.

On this, their first day of orientation, the students shed their shoes and walk into the 10,000-square-foot room where they will spend more than 12 hours a day for the next two months. This is no ashram, with wafting incense, soft light and chanting in the background. This is a yoga factory.

Mirrors line the walls. A carpet stretches forever. Lines for yoga mats are etched like parking places on the floor. Students trim their mats so everyone can fit in. Fluorescent lights glare down from above. The light, the mirrors, the microphones, give the room a carnival-esque quality. During yoga classes, heaters blow so hot, people grow lightheaded. The stench of sweating bodies hits a visitor like a wall.

On the second day, around noon, Choudhury finally arrives. (The master does not rise early because he stays up late watching Hindi movies.) Applause ripples through the room as he walks across the carpet, touching the hands of students who reach for him like a rock star.

Choudhury defies the stereotype of a soul-soothing, aphorism-spewing bearded yogi. He likes expensive cars and Rolex watches. He likes to drop the names of famous people he claims to have saved (MacLaine, Raquel Welch, Quincy Jones), the athletes whose careers he claims to have resurrected (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, John McEnroe), the president he says he cured (Richard Nixon--of phlebitis).

He climbs onto a chair perched like a throne on a large mirrored cube, and dons a headset. His introduction ranges from the compassionate to the profane, from the incomprehensible to the profound. Now, he is a soulful Indian. Now, an abuse-spewing Hollywood executive. (Cleaves calls his tendency to swear and exaggerate "Bikram-isms.") "Sometimes he uses a little profanity. He never did that in the early years," she says. "He learned a lot of that from the show-biz people. He thought that was America."

He welcomes his students and warns them what lies ahead.

"In America, they say, you can take a horse to the pond, but you can't make him drink," he says. "My way is different. I only take the horse to the pond to make him drink. If he doesn't, I'll cut his head off."

He asks the students to introduce themselves.

A man rises.

"I'm from San Diego. I've been doing yoga for 11 months. I love Bikram. He is God."

Some of the students hope to open studios, some want to teach. Some just love the yoga.

Kenny Colgan, 38, was a Northern California software executive who quit his job to study with

Bikram. "He is a world-class evangelist," Colgan said. "And I've known a lot of them in the technology world."

Kate Besleme, 30, took up yoga to help her overcome running injuries. Just out of graduate school, she has been hired by the Bush White House to help develop environmental policy. She waffled about disclosing to her new bosses the yoga training, fearing she would be labeled a flake. She said she hopes to bring Bikram Yoga to the White House. Seriously. "Why not bring this gift of healing to the people who are making this country function and run?" she asked.

On the 61st day of training, just two days before graduation, teacher training is winding down. Choudhury will lecture on the postures. Normally, he teaches his yoga classes in a tiny Speedo and lectures in street clothes. But tonight he is in tight white shorts decorated with red and orange flames. He climbs on the mirrored box and dances, as his students cheer. In his day, they say Choudhury ruled the discos. He still loves to dance.

Here, there are no typical Indian greetings of "namaste." No oms. "Welcome to Bikram's Torture Chamber," he announces, and he is not joking.

"This is beyond human imagination," Bikram says of his yoga. "You are not Kareem, McEnroe, or Nixon. You are just a piece of [expletive]." He threatens, in street language, to do damage.

He segues into a discussion of the postures but digresses again. "Your country, your life, they are a joke," he says. "This country is a mental hospital. It is never too late. You are never too old. You will be cured by only doing one thing," he says. "What is that?"

"Yoga," they cry out.

What?

"Yoga!"

Students having trouble with postures come to the front of the room to be corrected. A 50-ish man comes to the front of the room and sits. Should he push himself in a posture that really hurts his knee? He tries to lean back. Students stand, craning to see if he will make it, holding their breath. Will he hurt himself?

Bikram stands over him like a Marine drill sergeant.

"Of course it hurts! What do you think this is, cheesecake? When I crushed my knee, I used to bite my finger [in pain]. I had 10 bloody fingers. If you die, call me. American men are like women.

"What do I sell?" Choudhury asks as the man struggles.

"Pain," they scream.

Later, a woman comes up and does a beautiful "camel." She leans back on her knees and grabs her feet. She arches beautifully. Bikram climbs onto her, his feet on her hip bones, surfing her like a circus acrobat.

And then, Choudhury will stun with his compassion. A stiff guy comes up to do the camel. He

kneels. Choudhury instantly perceives an old ankle injury and grows gentle. His ability to discern injury and illness is uncanny, say his students. From afar, he can spot a twisted spine, an injured knee, a weak shoulder.

Some wonder if the guru has lost his way in America. Those who know Choudhury say beneath the trappings of wealth and glamour, he is still a man committed to protecting his special form of yoga, and--as his guru ordered--to spreading it as far as possible whatever it takes.

"Being in L.A., having all his cars, having all those people around him, has changed him," said Tony Sanchez, a yogi in San Francisco who studied with Choudhury and has a copyrighted yoga system of his own. "Underneath all that, though, I think he is a very pure, a very simple, and a very beautiful person."

Choudhury wearies of hearing that his brand of yoga is somehow not spiritual enough.

"I teach spirituality," he said. "I use the body as a medium. I use the body to control your mind, to make your spirit happy."

But before he can expand on the thought, his inner salesman emerges, touting ambitious new projects that seem to sprout from his head by the minute. He is building five new studios in L.A., have you heard? He is expanding the La Cienega studio. He is making an infomercial that will reach millions. He is working with partners to build a "health city" in India.

A few weeks later, he was on the phone from Paris.

"I was just at the opening of a studio here today," he said. "This is unbelievable. This has become a multimillion-dollar corporation.

"Did I tell you about the first world yoga contest in Los Angeles, from Sept. 25-28? There will be judges from all over the world.... "