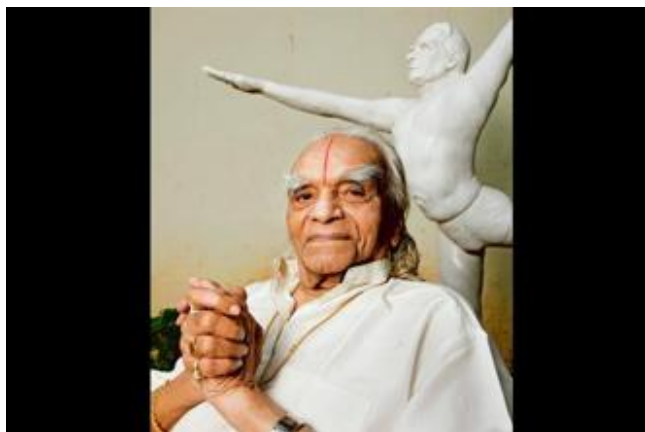


BKS Iyengar: Body and soul

The yoga guru most followed in the world, turns 95. We look at how Iyengar Yoga evolved as a brand, in a non-brand way

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BKS Iyengar at his institute in Pune with a statue of his young self at the background. Photo: Namas Bhojani for SZ magazine

With arms around the shoulders of his granddaughter Abhijata, B.K.S. (Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja) Iyengar walks up a flight of stairs in small, brisk steps, not for a moment resting both feet on one stair. Pune has a semblance of winter, and the yoga guru, in a flimsy *kurta* and *veshti*, proceeds to survey a “medical class” in the cavernous first-floor practice hall at his home and establishment, the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute (Rimiyi).

His famous style of prodding and admonishing students is as sharp as ever. In crisp Marathi, he pulls up a teacher who does not place the correctly-measured prop under a student’s back. He intermittently smacks the backs of those who appear sluggish. A good-humoured man outside of class, here he is similar to what, he has himself said, his own guru (and brother-in-law Sri Krishnamacharya) was like. The frail and sickly teenager Iyengar was knocked cold by the guru if he could not master an asana. Iyengar turns 95 today.

This is, by no means, a professionally-run yoga studio, the kind ubiquitous in most cities around the world today. This is a therapeutic class, meant for people of all ages, suffering from ailments such as

cervical spondylitis, osteoporosis, post-stroke trauma and clinical depression. The guru moves from case to case, adding and removing props, pulling and aligning limbs, avoiding the crescent-shaped pulpit as much as possible. Abhijata, in her 20s, and daughter of Geeta, Iyengar’s daughter, who teaches and manages the institute along with her brother Prashant, is an apparent heir. She says she spends most of her days with the guru, learning from him, as her mother and uncle did—not by being a *shishya* (student) or through a structured syllabus, but by being around him, imitating him.

As a revered exponent of this ancient discipline, or as a “*sadhak*”, as he calls himself, the nonagenarian is unmatched in his pursuit. Every morning, he practises for 2-3 hours, trying to perfect the stretches he has devised, combining and cementing the eight-fold path to enlightenment in Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra*. He can still do the *sirsasana*, or head stand, for half an hour at a go.

At 80, the guru suffered a heart attack, but he bounced back to health soon. His diet is basic Tamil vegetarian, with curd, rice, *sambhar* and cooked vegetables.

This is the longest a yoga guru has sustained his or her practice to perfect more and more. Pattabhi Jois, the guru of the Ashtanga school, also a disciple of Iyengar’s guru Sri Krishnamacharya, stopped active practice long before he died in May 2009 at the age of 93. Often impatient with interviewers, Iyengar does not really answer my question about being able to go on and on, offering instead a distilled view of what he practises and shares with the world. “Regarding perfection, that’s a very difficult question. I can say that I have superseded most in my *sadhana* (devoted practice). I am in it, and my mind and my intelligence gets better in my *sadhana*, and it reaches a certain place. When I stretch, I stretch in such a way that my awareness moves, and a gate of awareness finally opens. When I still find some parts of my body that I have not found before, I tell myself, yes I am progressing scientifically. My body is a laboratory, you can say. I don’t stretch my body as if it is an object. I do yoga from the self towards the body, not the other way around.”

Iyengar Yoga is the most widely practised form of yoga in the world; its home the entire world, from Broadway to Botswana. Currently, there are Iyengar Yoga schools in 72 countries. Its hearth, the modest building which houses Rimiyi at Shivajinagar, Pune, is still sacrosanct. It is essential for teachers, who come here for training from other countries, to have completed eight years of practice and an elementary certificate course. Their fee is the same as any student’s—`1,100 a year for regular classes and `2,000 a year for medical classes.

It is a rigid fold, loyalists often unequivocal about the superiority of their method over that of new, hybrid ones.

Iyengar has so far avoided the difficult questions of his legacy, keeping his attention on reaching more people through what he calls his “art and science”. In the 80 years that he has been practising, the 5,000-year-old Indian discipline has burgeoned under many brands, names and experiments. Iyengar was less tolerant of yoga entrepreneurship seven years ago when I met him for *Mint Lounge*'s inaugural cover story. Now he says it is probably a good thing that yoga has proliferated. “Who knows, we may be reading it wrong. It all depends on what state of mind the practitioner is in when he is doing yoga. Without knowing that, I can't say this yoga or that is bad. I think overall the majority of people who are practising it as a subject are following the right line. For the aberration, don't blame yoga or the whole community of *yogis*,” he says.

In the 1960s, violin virtuoso Yehudi Menuhin introduced two Indians to a bigger, more appreciative audience in the West—Pandit Ravi Shankar and B.K.S. Iyengar. While the gifted sitarist embraced a new home and acquired instant fame and following, Iyengar stubbornly stayed home. In Pune, where he had moved from Bellur, Karnataka, at the age of 18 to teach yoga, he had six children with his wife Ramamani.

His yoga spread across the world steadily, attracting a certain kind of follower. In 1975, after his wife's death, Rimi opened, its spiral structure inspired by the eight-limbed theory of Patanjali's yoga system. The guru travelled all over the world, propagating yoga as much as an art form as a science, performing his asanas on top of cliffs, at the centre of stadia and on podiums in countries which had perhaps not seen any other famous Indian.

He repeatedly petitioned for permission to establish a temple for Patanjali, who formulated the original yoga *sutras* in ancient Hindu texts. Each time this was turned down because Patanjali could not be characterized as a god. The latest version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* added Iyengar to its lexicon: “A type of hatha yoga focusing on the correct alignment of the body, making use of straps, wooden blocks, and other objects as aids to achieving the correct postures.” Iyengar has devised around 50 props that include ropes, blocks and mats used to align and stretch the body—the props have won him accolades as well as brickbats.

Iyengar Yoga also became India's best export, recently, to China. After a school started teaching Iyengar Yoga in Beijing in 2005, the guru and his close disciples visited the country in 2011, and around 20,000 people attended a workshop that he conducted in Beijing. Chen Si, a disciple of the guru who runs the The Iyengar Yoga Institute of China in Guangzhou, says: “As with many other imports, yoga came to China from the US, in 1985. Now, those who are familiar with yoga realize the worth of Iyengar Yoga. After guruji's visit, there's been a huge growth in the number of followers.” Chen Si organizes yearly nationwide trips in China for workshops and orientation programmes.

So Iyengar Yoga evolved as a brand, the non-brand way. Unlike, say, Ramdev, who is a one-man marketing vehicle for a popular brand of instant solution-oriented yoga, Iyengar is known as much for its process—the props, the long therapy sessions—as for the master who can do a head stand for half an hour.

Rajavi Mehta, a teacher at the BKS Iyengar Institute at Lower Parel in Mumbai, and a disciple of the guru, says: “There is nothing to the Iyengar brand except quality and the rigour that is associated with it. The medical aspect adds to its image as a serious, difficult form.” You become an Iyengar Yoga loyalist after you have endured its demands over a period of time—discovering parts of your body over years, as the guru says you ought to. Many sportspersons and athletes, including our cricket stars, Rahul Dravid, Sachin Tendulkar, Zahir Khan and Anil Kumble, have found fitness solutions in Iyengar's methods.

A strictly family-run, private institute, primarily a yoga research centre and a school, outstation students who come here to learn have to find their own accommodation. None of the institutes across the 72 countries is obligated to share its financial returns with Rimi, although it is the only place that issues certificates for Iyengar Yoga teachers beyond an elementary level. No other institute has to follow the fee structure of the parent institute either.

While Iyengar has always maintained that he has no right to brand his yoga “Iyengar Yoga”, and that his pupils have named it so, some of the younger teachers of the form, who have certificates from the institute in Pune and teach individual students or small groups at homes, charge astronomical fees, giving Iyengar Yoga the stamp of an elite, purist brand—the fee goes up to ₹22,000 for 12 classes in a month in Mumbai.

Most institutes in India, however, retain the standards of the parent institute. Rajavi Mehta says the fee structure remains the same for many years, with nominal hikes every seven to 10 years.

Insiders, both teachers and students, tend to believe Abhijata is the guru's successor. Iyengar's son Prashant, now 65, who is known for his classes on the philosophy and theoretical aspects of yoga, says he will leave it to the next generation, specifically his niece, to decide how she wants to run the institute in future. “If they believe in a professionally run organization, they will do it.”

The guru is completely averse to the idea of choosing a protégé or successor. “I never thought of this and I can't think of this. I have shared my knowledge with millions of people. A *yogi* can't develop favouritism. I consider the grossest of the gross and the finest of the fine students as equals,” he says.