



MR CHOUDHURY GOES TO HOLLYWOOD

How an Indian yoga champion moved to America and made millions from 'McYoga'



BIKRAM CHOUDHURY HAS DONE FOR yoga what Arnold Schwarzenegger did for bodybuilding: gone to California as an immigrant and turned his pursuit into a moneymaker, becoming a global star into the bargain. Also like Schwarzenegger, he is entangled in lawsuits.

Now 58, Choudhury arrived in Beverly Hills in 1973 from his native Calcutta, where in his teens he was a champion in both yoga and weightlifting until an accident with a 280-pound barbell almost ruined one knee. Yoga was vital to his recovery.

In the US, he opened his very first studio in the basement of a former bank. His classes were free – until one of his earliest students, the actress Shirley MacLaine, pointed out to him that, unlike in India, in the US people would only think he had something worthwhile to offer if he charged them for it. And with that, his yoga-teaching career took off.

In 1984 he married five-time All India Yoga Champion, Rajashree, who is an expert business manager and the quiet power behind Choudhury's front-of-house visibility. There are now more than 1,200 'Bikram Yoga' studios all over the world and he is reaping the profits. He has a fleet of Rolls-Royces, wears a Rolex and name-drops former and present pupils – the likes of Madonna, Raquel

Weich, John McEnroe, Brooke Shields and Ricardo Montalban.

The key to Choudhury's biggest success, and the source of his dispute with other yoga teachers, has been his copyrighting of his lesson style, which consists of a routine of 26 'asanas' (yoga postures) taken from the classic 84 that have been used by yogis for centuries, along with two breathing exercises, all performed twice in a room heated above 40°C (he says it 'works the body like a blacksmith'). All are done to a rigid 90-minute script.

Go to any Bikram Yoga class, and that's what you'll get. It's a franchised system that, allied to Choudhury's willingness to sue those who try to copy him or create spin-offs of what he sees as his teaching (he demands \$150,000 per infringement) has earned his approach the nickname 'McYoga'.

Though he's not the first to try to copyright parts of the activity, he has done it with the most aggression and the most success. The US magazine *Yoga Journal* calls Choudhury 'yoga's bad boy'.

Choudhury sells the teaching method to would-be teachers who must pay \$5,000 to attend a nine-week 'yoga camp'. This alone earns him more than \$3.5m annually. The

aim is to make the experience similar to walking into Starbucks for a coffee: you always find the same trappings, the same routine. "You could say that," he says. "Only I see it life."

But there are flies in the ointment. First, others are getting in on the franchise act: venture capitalists think others could teach their own forms of yoga, rather as Choudhury has, with the same nationwide ambitions.

And a lawsuit that began hearings last month could bring the whole basis of the Bikram Yoga system crashing down. Elizabeth Rader, a copyright lawyer, claims nobody can

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patent parts of a such an ancient practice.

"You can't treat the poses as private property," she says. "Right now, people out there are trying to teach yoga, and they're not sure what's going to get them sued."

"The English language is public domain," retorts Choudhury. "But if you write a book, on any subject, you get a copyright."

Thus this classic American tale – of an immigrant entrepreneur made good – is taking the other inevitable American step: to the law courts. ●