The art of living - the marketing of identity through nationality and spirituality

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THE ART OF LIVING - THE MARKETING OF IDENTITY THROUGH
NATIONALITY AND SPIRITUALITY

A Thesis
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Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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ABSTRACT

Spirituality has been a term that has always been associated with the East and more specifically with India. Spirituality has been revamped and repackaged in glossy packages by various spiritual groups and organizations in India. One among these organizations is the Art of Living, a non-governmental spiritual organization that has risen in popularity since 1996. This thesis concentrates on the Art of Living as an organization and of the dissemination of the new spirituality through this institution.

This research study pertains to the identity of self and of the sense of nationhood through the discourse and the practice of certain activities and practices, both mental and physical. These activities are prescribed by spiritual leaders known as guru’s who have held sway over the masses, especially since the time of independence, when India was still a fledgling nation and a sense of identity was desperately needed to unify what were a diverse mass of people. This study then is the study of spirituality and how the notion spirituality is utilized to reflect a sense of self and nationhood.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“They don't know. They don't understand the spiritual values of this country. There is a lack of self-esteem. Take the word saffronisation. People who have a problem with such a word should not be drinking orange juice. You do not have to believe in God to enquire about God's nature. If you are an atheist, at least you believe in your existence. And yoga doesn't exclude an atheist. There is no blasphemer in Indian philosophy. If you want to criticise someone you should have complete knowledge about his system of thinking. The very structure of Indian philosophy is such that you can never be a fanatic.”¹

(David, 2001:2)

Truer words could not have been uttered by the ‘guru of breath’ Sri Sri Ravi Shankar(SSRS), the founder of the Art of Living(AoL) in an interview with an India Today reporter, one of India’s top weekly magazines aimed at the more intellectual population who want to read about current events in a commercial set up. Filled with glossy pictures, the India Today nevertheless manages to comment on the more contemporary and pressing issues in society. In response to a question about how the word ‘Vedic’ had become retrograde now, SSRS stressed that spirituality was not dead. What is more important that he does not make a mention of the word Hindu. The words are carefully neutral and universal, stressing the non-religiosity of Yoga and the inquiry into the nature of God. (David, 2001:2) The quote above was taken from an article which was published just two months after the September 11th incidents in the United States. Coming at a time when the United States and to some extent the world was facing a crisis, SSRS was commenting on the importance of spirituality. This view and the tone in which this view is expressed- stressing the spiritual and not the religious- is taken by many other spiritual movements and organizations around India. These organizations are nothing new. The Osho ashram has been in India since the 1970’s and gained much

¹ An excerpt from an interview with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar taken from India Today, a weekly magazine, dated November 12th, 2001.
popularity because it was actively endorsed by film stars and because it advocated sex as the path to spirituality. Sathya Sai Baba—supposed to be an avatar of the Sai Baba who died earlier in the 20th century—has a thriving ashram and devoted followers; the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry in the South of India attracts a large number of Westerners, primarily French, because Pondicherry was once ruled by the French and the ‘Mother’ who started this ashram with Aurobindo was French.

While none of these organizations have managed to capture the imagination-and breath- of Indians before, their influence and existence cannot be discounted. Each played an influential role in its own time and still attracts a large number of devotees. Truth-seekers out on a spiritual quest—be they Indian or otherwise, adding to the spiritual market that is waiting to be tapped. Already the economic benefits of spirituality have been recognized. In Bangalore’s International arrivals section lounge of the airport, it is not difficult to find a tourist operator who is willing to take you on a tour of the ashrams in and around Bangalore. The photographs of SSRS and Sathya Sai Baba have a place of prominence on the front desk and walls of these tourist shops.

In a recent article to Mr. Chidambaram, the Finance Minister Indu Jain one of the owners of the Times Group of Companies appealed for the recognition of the economic potential of the spiritual market that was just waiting to be tapped. Incidentally the Times Group also owns the newspaper The Times of India which jointly owns a media school with the Art of Living (AoL). Her suggestion— to treat spirituality as an industry and recognize that it could be a future source of India’s income because India had a spiritual history which few other nations could rival (Jain, 2004:2). SSRS’s answer to the question of marketing and spirituality was more—spiritual—for lack of a better word. He claimed
that business and spirituality moved in opposite directions but at the same time he acknowledged-

“Market means the needs of the people, and the need of the people is happiness, peace, beauty.” (Roy, 2001:18)

It is this happiness, peace and beauty that the Art of Living is selling through the medium of breath, with slick marketing that is anything but- and therefore all the more slick- because of its simplicity and lack of gloss. But why is the study of spirituality in modern day India even worth a look, leave alone a study? India has often been associated with and is considered the paragon of spiritual dissemination. According to the German idealist, philosopher and linguist, Schlegel- ‘India was an object of fascination, a locus of spirituality, of imagination and mysticism as displayed in ancient Indian philosophy. Most attractive was the spiritual holism’ which was the ‘defining characteristic of Indian culture’(Goswami, 2004:89). Other than being an Orientalist statement, India’s expertise in the area of spirituality and religion is one that is still shared by many, not only in the West but also within India as the Indu Jain article indicates.

As much as India may have progressed today, it still has the spirituality tag attached to it and so to conduct a study of a spiritual organization and its ‘godman’ figurehead in India is no surprise. With celebrities such as Madonna, Goldie Hawn and Richard Gere regular visitors to India and Nepal because of their interest in Hinduism and Buddhism, spirituality as an industry has seen a growth trajectory that can only be described as awe inspiring. Other celebrities in India, politicians and film stars, cricketers and ambassadors to nations all actively endorse such organizations or movements simply by their presence at such events or being seen with such godmen. These stars from all walks of life have huge numbers of fans who are ardent to the extent of building temples
in the name of their favorite actor. There is regular worship in these temples much like temples with more divine gods and goddesses.

But why this topic—one that has been written about countless times before by ‘Western’ Anthropologists? After all, India today is not the land of cows and snakes on the road but also the land of computers and information technology, where science and ‘Western’ ways are slowly taking hold. Why study this? What relevance could this possibly have in today’s society where trends change seasonally? The Art of Living (AoL) has entered the 23rd year of its existence, long past the stage of being classified as a trend. It could be classified as a ‘Revitalization movement’\(^2\). While the Art of Living has not been officially labeled a revitalization movement looking at the definition in its most literal sense the Art of Living has revitalized spirituality and the move towards a more spiritual non-westernized India. Anthony F Wallace defined revitalization movements as—‘a conscious, deliberate, organized effort on the part of some members of a society to create a more satisfactory culture.’ (Wallace, 1966:27)

Revitalization movements are expressed when a dissatisfaction against the current conditions in society grow. These ‘conditions’ for Indian society would be a moving away from more traditional Indian values towards a more western mode of life— a move away from spirituality and religion being the primary reason. If India is a spiritual society and country then a moving away from spirituality would be a moving away from an identity that has stood India in good stead for decades if not centuries. The past decade has seen the proliferation of subtle (because they have not been recognized as movements) movements in society, all of which refer back to a nostalgic past, which was

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\(^2\) I call them revitalization movements and as far as I know the AoL has officially not been named thus by any other study or research organization. However, for purposes of this research study I think that the term applies to the AoL.
infinitely better than the present cultural dominance\(^3\)-which many deem to be Western. These movements, such as the Sathya Sai Baba ashram\(^4\), the Osho ashram and the Aurobindo ashram, are emerging and gathering masses of followers and the Art of Living is one such organization which has joined the general milieu of movements, techniques and the like which are advocating a return to ‘Indian roots’. These movements cannot be ignored. The well-heeled are the main component of the crowds that the AoL manages to draw and this brings us to economic considerations.\(^5\)

Spirituality and knowledge from a guru were traditionally considered to be for all and were not practiced with a profit motive. In earlier times, ideally a guru would have provided both psychological and spiritual guidance to an individual or community. While this might be a nostalgic view, there are many such guru’s in present day India who practice spirituality in such an ascetic manner, simply and with no call for attention towards themselves. This was confirmed for me by Dr. R.L Kapoor, a researcher who has studied what he terms ‘true yogi’s’ who are more interested in gaining spirituality than selling it. When these techniques/methods enter the elite category by becoming available only to a certain class by virtue of pricing, what happens to the common people who don’t have access to such methods to begin with? The AoL while never advertising the fact clearly attracts people from the middle and upper middle class primarily because of the pricing of courses. The spiritual health movement capitalizes on the growing demand for and a renewed interest in alternative health lifestyles and methods. Perhaps this growing demand is a need to experience the exotic or maybe reflects disillusionment with more allopathic, Western ways of dealing with the body which includes the clear

\(^3\) The result of British colonialism and present Western dominance due to globalization.  
\(^4\) An Ashram means a place where one can go for rest, where the Guru lives.  
\(^5\) www.indiayogi.com
Cartesian split between mind and body (Schep er Hughes, 1987: 9). Most of the high profile alternative/spiritual health movements in India, including the Art of Living, are aimed at the westerners as well as the rich, urban middle and upper middle classes Indians. “Traditional, ancient knowledge” is now being re-packaged to meet new demands. Already, techniques such as Meditation and Pranayama are being validated by the biomedical community and are finding many buyers within the larger biomedical context. Pranayama is the Indian equivalent of the application of the Chinese term Chi. Prana means life and Pranayama is the breath of life and is a breathing technique which includes three stages. It is one of the aspects that make up the Sudarshan Kriya or SKY (Sudarshan Kriya Yoga). Many of these techniques have already been accepted as established parts of biomedical healing.⁶

What is interesting about this research study is that it looks at the everyday commonalities of the spiritual life in the organization known as the Art of Living (AoL). This ethnographic study draws in and ties together many diverse elements not generally seen together in one setting. Originally beginning with a focus on the more medical aspects of healing which the AoL’s SKY breathing technique propagates, the focus changed as the research progressed to include the making and reshaping of identity and the struggle to identify what being ‘Indian’ is in the 21st century.

⁶ www.artofliving.org
CHAPTER 2: REVITALIZATION OF ANCIENT HINDU KNOWLEDGE

The past decade has seen a growing awareness of ‘Indian-ness’ among the Indian population. This revitalization and awareness is reflected not so much in public and political movements or gatherings like those of the Shiv Sena in Bombay city or the Rashtriya Seva Samiti (RSS) or national service society, than in soaps and films that talk of a return to a modern but traditional India, where family and values still come above all else. The movement is much more subtle now because there is no tangible enemy to target, such as the presence of the British prior to independence, rather there is the subtle ‘corruption’ of Western culture that seeps in through Hollywood movies released on a regular basis and the celebration of such ‘morally questionable’ events such as Valentines’ day, among other things.

Organizations like the RSS and VHP or the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (Universal Hindu Organization) are known for their inflammatory remarks regarding anything they deem as a threat to Indian culture(Hansen, 1999:36). The have been known to go on a rampage on Valentine’s day to ensure that all shops are closed. It is these organizations that have the tag of being extremist that target elements such as ‘vulgarit’y in Hindi movies which are of course the by product of westernization and never because the audience demanded a less prudish approach to sex and skin; clothes that are too tight or short are also the target- in a recent call by some concerned groups such as religious organizations and individuals including the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad or the Universal Hindu committee) and RSS who have appointed themselves moral gatekeepers, all college principals across the country, most of whom were of course males, were asked
to ensure that there was a dress code on campus so that women did not inadvertently expose themselves to male lust. These are only a few examples of the sources that arouse the ire of people who have taken it upon themselves to protect ‘Indian culture’ from being corrupted. 7

Popular soaps such as Kyunki Saas bhi kabhi Bahu thi (the mother-in-law was once a daughter-in-law) and films like Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham (Life is a mix of joy and sorrow) show ‘modern’ families who have managed to maintain Indian values and feelings while at the same time living in areas of the world as varied and diverse as Cape Town, South Africa to New York, USA. At the same time American television shows such as ‘Who wants to be a millionaire’ and ‘American Idol’ are being remade to be shown in their more Indian avatars or guises. Kaun Banega Crorepati (Who wants to be a millionaire) and Indian Idol (a remake of American Idol) are both hugely popular hits as is the Hindi dubbed version of the Bold and the Beautiful.

What exactly is meant by the phrase ‘Modern yet traditional’? This phrase reverberates from television advertisements, matrimonial advertisements and the everyday mundane conversations carried on by people, and is perhaps one of those terms that cannot be defined just so. Rather it needs to be seen in the broader context as referring to the ability to function in the modern market economy that India adopted in 1991 with the liberalization of the economy and embracing of free trade policies. Earlier economic policies still followed the Nehruvian ideal of Socialism. Nehru, India’s most charismatic Prime Minister promoted the idea that the economy was to have a welfare

7 www.rss.org
8 Modern here reflects educated, English speaking individuals who have liberal thoughts(love marriage, a woman having a career) while at the same time believing in the power of family and ‘Indian Values(reflected by the respect for elders, wearing sari’s and other traditional Indian clothes and Sanskrit prayers to name a few).
basis and was to be placed above profit making. It was his dream to eliminate poverty and make India a major economic power. Foreign investment was seen as a necessary evil and foreign firms were allowed into India only if they possessed technology that was unavailable in India. Also, the government of India had a majority say in the running of any company that entered India which effectively discouraged most foreign investors.

When the Narasimha Rao government inherited India’s economic burden in 1991, it was realized that socialism and welfare goals were not pushing India towards her goal of economic strength. Liberalization was the only option to get India out of her debt and to consolidate India’s status as having some amount of power on the economic front. Economic liberalization was in a sense imposed on debtor nations who had outstanding debts with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. This in turn lead to sudden changes and leaps in income and standards of living. From two national television channels, Indians were now faced with the choice of over a 100 channels, better and more products, foreign travel and the subsequent influx of foreigners, both travelers and others who would ultimately stay in India. The rural areas saw development in terms of paved roads, electricity and even one or two television sets which were often the source of communal gatherings during popular television programs.

The world had opened up. English as a language, was given immense importance because of the contact with English speaking countries. Western customs and fashions were now more accessible than ever before especially to the middle and upper middle classes. With more jobs becoming accessible and more and more Indians going abroad to study and work, the west had arrived in a big way in India, second only to the coming

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9 English and the awareness of a world outside India always existed but perhaps never before as intensely as during this decade of liberalization.
of the British in its magnitude. The west had now arrived again to conquer but it wasn’t an army of troops, rather it was an army of ideas and products. 10

I remember a time when there were just a few channels in India and there wasn’t much product choice. Most manufacturers enjoyed a monopoly. Between the time that we left India as a family in 1990 to live in the United States and then returned to live in India at the end of 1992, a huge change had taken place and this change was very visible. A neighbor had acquired access to the British Broadcasting Corporation and Central News Network via satellite- a matter of great excitement and status because earlier it was not within the reach of the middle class to aspire to such goals. Shops now held a veritable wealth of choice and foreign products such as Coca Cola and Pepsi had entered the market. What is noteworthy is not that westernization as a concept was recognized and seen in society; rather it was the speed and magnitude with which it happened. ‘Love’ marriages became more common, more women began to work, and work in the non-traditional sectors such as computers and finance, and identity as a whole changed.

The rapid socioeconomic changes of the 1990’s stimulated a crisis in identity. Identity- who are we? What should we follow? What is right and what is wrong? What is ‘Indian’ and what is ‘Western’? Is it possible to be both? Can one successfully amalgamate these two divergent concepts? These were some of the questions that were being asked in the early 90’s and are still being asked today. The chaos and uncertainty caused by the above mentioned factors lead to these questions. It is not surprising then that stress levels rose, not only because of these subtle underlying tensions but also with changing gender roles and economic reforms- the new and never experienced were entering Indian homes and minds. (Goswami, 2004: 24)

10 www.dipp.nic.in
New ways of dealing with these uncertainties and stress were needed. Older institutions like family and marriage had been replaced in importance and new ways of dealing with identity were needed. This crisis is one that has afflicted much of the generation born after the liberalization attempt or children who grew up during this time. A sense of confusion prevails because whereas the earlier generations, such as my parents generation, had a relatively simpler and fewer choices to make from lifestyle to products in the market; my generation and those born in the 1980’s had one lifestyle while growing up and another that was substantially different as a result of this liberalization once we entered our teens and adulthood. It left us in the unenviable situation of having to make a choice between what our parents would have wanted and what response this new market situation demanded and offered.

It is now that various institutions, including Hindu nationalist organizations like the RSS and VHP came to the rescue- most of them spiritual in nature and engaging in a discourse of Bharat Mata or the Mother Goddess concept that had taken root during the freedom movement prior to 1947. The Bharat Mata concept was the identification of the nation with the concept of mother and one who must be protected against foreign invaders and played a useful nation building role by personifying that which one was supposed to be protecting (Goswami, 2004: 221). So while the Art of Living was theoretically in existence since 1982, it rose to prominence only around 1996. Five years after the Indian market had opened up. However, to do away with the ‘tradition’ in Indian identity was akin to losing an essential part of culture that was deemed to be ancient and such an essential part of Indian life that to lose it and become completely western was not acceptable. That would be a complete submission to something foreign. At the same time,
many chose not to see that the Indian culture that had been operating since Independence has large elements of British influence woven into it such as English which was now one of the official languages of government and business.

Various products in the market reflect this movement towards a more Indian society. One such example is the Himalaya Drug company’s ‘Ayurvedic concepts’. *Ayurveda* literally means the science of life. The products are supposed to have been manufactured with herbs grown under the carefully controlled ministrations of the manufacturers. The ingredients listed on the products are listed in ‘ancient’ Sanskrit, a reference to a more glorious and non-colonized past, even though the same have English names. What made the product Ayurvedic is not that the ingredients used were uniquely Indian, rather it was the manner in which they were supposed to have been prepared-handpicked and dried and prepared according to the specifications of Vedic texts that carried Ayurvedic recipes- that made them so.

The advertisements are a marketing masterpiece; they show a ‘modern’ grandmother who is in the internet age, but at the same time the traditional Indian grandmother who cares for and is worried about the family’s health. It is no surprise that the family here refers to a joint family. The remedies that she advocates are modern because they are conveniently packaged in neat bottles and boxes, but at the same time contain ingredients that are ‘Indian’ and Ayurvedic. One advertisement broadcast in the summer of 2003 in particular showed this beatific grandmother advising her grandson who has a severe case of dandruff and wants to take his girlfriend out to the movies but fears being caught with ‘white flecks on his black shirt.’ The grandmother here plays the

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11 Joint family in the last few decades has come to mean three generations living together under one roof-the grandparents, parents and children. Though not very common today, many families still consider this a norm.
role of confidant- not many Indian children will tell their parents that they are dating- and advisor, giving her grandson a bottle of the Ayurvedic Concepts Dandruff shampoo which is natural and therefore safe as compared to harsh chemical shampoos. She then goes on to explain the centuries of knowledge behind the herbal concoction, all of which are *Ayurvedic* (*Ayur*-Life, *Vedic*- Knowledge).

The AoL is not far behind in catching up in the alternative therapies market. Not only does it now offer ‘Kerala style massages’¹², but it also has its own line of *Ayurvedic* products which are manufactured under the ‘Sri Sri’ label. Much like the products from Himalaya (Drug Company) which name the ingredients in Sanskrit, the AoL follows the same marketing technique.

Figure 1. The various AoL products at the Divine shop- at the ashram in Bangalore, India, 2004

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¹² Kerala is a South Indian state that is known for its vast treasury of Ayurvedic knowledge and its application. Kerala has in fact capitalized on and appropriated the Ayurvedic massage as its own in all its tourism ads, whereas in reality Ayurveda does not have a connection to any one state.
Although politics does have a role to play in this movement, I will summarize with a brief note as the history of the political influence on revitalization is a long and convoluted one. (For a more extensive discussion see McKean, 1996)

The BJP or the Bharatiya Janata Party (The Indian People’s Party) has over the past decade, along with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, introduced idea’s of “Indian-ness” as opposed to the “non-Indian” Congress(I)\(^{13}\) Party’s leader, Sonia Gandhi, very subtly whereas the more ‘militant’ Shiv Sena(Shiva’s army) in the cosmopolitan city of Mumbai causes large scale havoc when it goes on regular rampages on Valentine’s day to close shops that host this ‘un-Indian’ occasion.\(^{13}\)(Hansen, 1999:46) Mumbai is the “Indian” name for the anglicized Bombay which the Shiv Sena renamed in 1996. Mumbai is supposed to have come from the name of a goddess (Mumba Devi) venerated by the fishermen and women who made up much of the population in Bombay at one time. The reason Valentines day is the target for much of this ire is because it is seen as a completely exported event with no Indian roots whatsoever and it is the expression of public romance, something that is taboo in India. Over the past several years, there have been similar reactions against other signs of westernization such as McDonalds and KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken). Even in places such as Bangalore, where McDonald’s was driven out by a mob of irate protectionists of Indian culture, KFC thrives right along side the site where McDonald’s was situated.\(^{14}\) This is a somewhat extreme reaction for pacifist Bangalore. A city that is considered the Silicon Valley of India and has several

\(^{13}\) The I in the Congress stands for Indira- as in Indira Gandhi to denote a split from the INC or Indian National Congress that was the original Congress party.

\(^{14}\) Obviously, McDonald’s is thought to be more the symbol of westernization than KFC. This might be because of McDonald’s famous golden double arch and the fact that it is a more popular and successful retail organization as compared to KFC (personal observation). It also has to do with the fact that McDonald’s was the target of several rumors which implied that it used beef in its products.
other names such as Pub City and Garden City, once the holiday spot of the British troops because of its pleasant weather, today it is a modern city with all the trappings of ‘cosmopolitanism’, but with a much slower pace than one would have expected of a modern city. That such an extreme reaction was expressed is a surprise to many across India.

This revitalization has hit all aspects of India. Right from an emphasis on ‘censoring’ Indian films to the proliferation of several small and big, well financed religious and spiritual movements, one among them being the Art of Living15. Other more ‘Indian films’ in recent years such as ‘Pardes’ (foreign/alien land) and ‘Aa ab laut chalen’ (let’s return (to our roots)) make no bones about ‘Western corruption’ and one of the characters in Pardes even takes her fiancé to task for having pre-marital sex16. Indian soaps perhaps reflect this trend the most as explained above, with the emphasis being on retaining Indian values while at the same time also learning modern values needed for getting on in the world.

What reflects this phenomenon best are the lines from a song from the movie ‘Phir Bhi Dil Hai Hindustani’. (The Heart is (still) Indian)

“Hum logon ko samajh sako toh samjho dilbar jaani
Jitna bhi tumh samjho utni hogi hairaan
hum tumhe chatri dede kabhi jo bares paani
kabhi nayi packet mein dede tumko cheez purani
Phir bhi dil hain Hindustani….”

15 Arguably one of the best known spiritual movements in the market right now.
16 The hero in this movie plays the role of an Asian-American born and brought up in New York and therefore his corruption is thought to be immanent whereas his friend also brought up with him retains his Indian values with regular visits to India and is therefore the real ‘hero’ of the film.
“Try and understand us if you want, but as much as you understand, you will also get confused, we will give you an umbrella when it rains and sometimes we will sell you something old in a new packet, but the heart is still Indian….”

What this song is expressing is the multidimensionality of the Indian personality, underlining the innocence and mischief in the national character and making it a point to comment that old things are sometimes repackaged and sold as new. The fact that this repackaging is mentioned is a reflection of its prevalence and that it is considered to be such an essential part of Indian character. This repackaging goes both ways, with western concepts being transformed to suit more Indian tastes such as a McTandoor burger(mainly chicken cooked in an earthen oven with spices). Or Indian concepts such as meditation being sold using more western concepts of packaging and marketing.

The Art of Living and other such spiritual organizations that garner large groups of devotees from the middle and upper classes perhaps create and reflect this growing need for an assertion of Indian identity. A post colonial hangover ensures that the use of the word ‘religion’ is deemed dirty and perhaps even anti secular. In its stead, the word spiritual seems much more safe, secular and does not refer to any one religion explicitly.(Hansen, 1999:79) A much safer bet for a country home to at least 6 religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Islam and Christianity to name a few . Over the years and especially during the course of my study at the AoL when I spoke to several of the participants in one of the courses, especially to the younger populace, religion was not such a big draw. It would be a good way to draw in the more middle aged, retired crowd who would see their retirement to be a retirement from material life to an extent by adopting more spiritual and religious ways of living. Even within my own suburb several
prayer groups have sprung up over the past several years mainly consisting of women who don’t have any children or husband to attend to during the day.

These prayer groups offer a meeting ground for women and allow an opportunity for respite from housework. Often groups of women get together and chant the 1000 names of Vishnu or another God. Religious marketing would target this group but if the AoL is to progress and not become associated with the word Hindu then it needs to be more secular in its approach. The AoL does not waste any opportunity to demonstrate neighborly love, especially during a recent trip to Pakistan where SSRS was accompanied by Arun Madhavan, the senior most member on the AoL Board of Directors. Also, delegations from Pakistan and the Middle East now visit the ashram in Bangalore on a regular basis thus diverting any religious accusations. (Madhavan, 2004: 13)

The Art of Living, is only the latest in a line of spiritual movements to have taken the country by storm. Sai Baba, the Osho movement and the Aurobindo ashram are the other well known spiritual movements. The Osho movement regarded repression as being the one final barrier to achieving unity with God. So various methods are advocated to get rid of this barrier, the most infamous of them being free love or sex. Embroiled in controversy from its conception to the death of its founder Rajneesh who adopted the moniker Osho from the term ‘oceanic experience’, the ashram still exists in Pune in the state of Maharashtra (of which Mumbai is the capital) and draws people in search of spirituality. On the other hand, the Aurobindo ashram and Sathya Sai Baba ashram are more subtle in their spiritual messages. Sathya Sai Baba or the ‘true’ Sai Baba is known as one of India’s earliest celebrity gurus. He adopts his name from the earlier Sai Baba of Shirdi whom he is said to have idolized. Known for his vanishing acts with holy ash, or
and other such miracles, this frizzy haired guru was also embroiled in controversy in the 1990’s in Bangalore over his refusal to submit to scientific tests to ‘prove’ his ability to materialize ash and other such substances.

The Aurobindo ashram was founded jointly by Mira Alfassa, who was born to an Egyptian mother and a Turkish father in France, and Sri Aurobindo. However it is Alfassa who ran the ashram, established in Pondicherry in 1926, while it was still a French colony, while Aurobindo chose to go into ‘Supramental meditation.’ Still as popular today with a more Western than Indian crowd, (when I visited this ashram in 2003, Indians were in the minority and we were served grilled fish by a French man), the Aurobindo Ashram maybe the most elite of the ashrams. In summary, several spiritual movements in India have sought to establish mass following, however it is only the Art of Living that has harnessed marketing savvy and diversified into other areas such as healthcare, corporate courses and the like.\(^{17}\)

In a later chapter we will discuss in detail the marketing strategies of the Art of Living and the many ways in which it is able to reach the classes and masses alike.

\(^{17}\) www.indiayogi.com
CHAPTER 3: THE ART OF LIVING

The Art of Living (AoL) in its own words is a ‘non-governmental organization’ with centers in 143 countries and growing. Its services range in practice from charitable services to prisoners, the impoverished and illiterate and sending aid to countries stricken by natural disaster or war such as Iraq and Afghanistan. The name Art of Living was coined, as an instructor for the Basic course explained to us, because very often individuals were taught how to succeed in professional life but were never given pointers on life in specific and this is what the Art of Living endeavors to do- teach individuals to deal with and handle life with its assorted problems.

Since its inception in 1982 under the aegis of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (SSRS), the AoL has been known in India primarily for its propagation and teaching of the Sudarshan Kriya, a trademarked breathing technique. ‘A powerful breathing technique, the Sudarshan Kriya eliminates stress and brings us completely into the present.’ 18Us here refers to the people who practice the course. Marketed as SKY™, like many of the other courses and techniques propagated by the AoL it has been shortened. Quite often the acronym comes to define the method and the original meaning is forgotten. One example is the Divya Samaj Nirman course. Shortened to DSN, it is also expanded to mean ‘Don’t Say No’. More often than not the course will then be called the Don’t Say No course than the Divya Samaj Nirman course. It is like a mnemonic routine to memorize and understand the course and its concept.

The Sudarshan Kriya is credited with curing diseases from HIV/AIDS and Cancer to Asthma and Depression. This breathing technique is taught as a part of the ‘Breathing Health’ workshop which starts with a basic course lasting for six days, three hours a day.

18 www.artofliving.org
and culminates with a day-long session at the main headquarters of the AoL on the outskirts of Bangalore (City). This intense session focuses as much on restoring the balance in the individual as establishing a shared bond between the course members by sharing personal stories in small groups of two or three. During the Basic course in Bangalore the participants were divided into groups of three and were instructed to share our lives. The purpose was to narrate our life story. Often people began and ended with place of birth and academic or work achievements but on the prodding of volunteers who hovered nearby, all of us found ourselves opening up about parts of our lives we would not have normally divulged to people who were still virtually strangers after five days. There was one 19 year old man and a 48 year old woman in my group. The 19 year old shared his frustrations and problems with being called stupid because he never excelled academically. He also mentioned that he found himself drawn towards Buddhism and was practicing it (he was born a Hindu). The middle aged woman expressed her concerns with her eldest daughter, 28, not expressing any interest in getting married. Strangely the other two found themselves talking about their point of view when the third expressed her/his view. It felt like a mutual support group and once these ‘confessions’ had been made there was no awkwardness.

Basic courses often vary in size depending on where they are held. Courses can be held in established centers in and around the city as well as in the homes of individual practitioners ¹⁹ or in the headquarters, where the number of participants can swell to the hundreds. Much of the AoL’s marketing is targeted at emphasizing the necessary benefits of the Sudarshan Kriya, which literally means Right (Su) Vision (Darshan) Purifying

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¹⁹ For the purpose of this research project, the term practitioner will be applicable to both students and teachers of the AoL. The difference can be established by looking at the context in which the word will be used.
Action (Kriya). The benefits as expounded by the founder and practitioners of the course and corroborated by various scientific research studies\(^20\) include stress relief, increase in energy and ‘joy’, improved memory and focus, and the promotion of mental, physical and emotional well-being which in turn tackle ailments like Depression, Asthma and high blood pressure.\(^21\) The Sudarshan Kriya is utilized not so much as a main healing agent but rather as a supplementary effort to biomedical efforts such as chemotherapy for Cancer. I am therefore interested not so much in evaluating the efficacy of the Sudarshan Kriya and the other techniques incorporated within it as I am in exploring the meanings, contexts and marketing (commodification) of spiritual health in the context of this organization. One main commodity that is marketed is the ‘guru of joy’ himself. A marketing strategy and one of many labels given to the founder of the AoL, SSRS. One of the effects of the Sudarshan Kriya is supposed to be intense joy and I believe this is where the label may have come from.

The label stuck because one of the effects of regular Sudarshan Kriya is supposed to be joy and happiness. The best advertisement for this joy and happiness is the guru himself who has a constant smile on his face. (Gautier, 2002:69)

The Sudarshan Kriya is a part of all the AoL courses. Courses vary as to the length, the fees and other basic structures such as the emphasis in the course. Explained in detail below are the three basic courses. In reality, the AoL has several courses which number at least 10 but the three that I outline here are the basic triumvirate that make up the core of the AoL- The Basic Course, The Residential Course and the Divya Samaj

\(^{20}\) Including the research studies conducted by the Yogic Research Group of The National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Science (NIMHANS) headed by Dr. N.Janakiramaiah, one of my key informal advisors on this project.

\(^{21}\) www.ArtofLiving.Org/v2/srisri/srisribio.htm
The Basic Course

This is the first of the courses rigorously prescribed by the AoL and serves as a pre-requisite for all other AoL courses. Before any other course of the AoL can be done, even those involving just listening to story tapes such as the Ashtavakra course which lasts for 33 days and involves listening to SSRS talk about the Bhagavad Gita, one of the Holy books of the Hindus, the Basic course must be completed. It is the longest of the three courses, running to around six days in length with a length of around four hours a day. One thing that stands out in all of the AoL courses is the awareness of ego and the subsequent shedding of the same. It is emphasized again and again, in different forms at all times that the ego and individuality must be shed and a collective sense of self and identity be adopted. I noticed that this was the common thread that ran through all three of my courses. It seems that the ultimate goal of all the courses is to help the participant shed the ego and be like a child. More than once SSRS has claimed that he is a child that has never grown up and a child is seen to be the ultimate in egolessness which also accounts for their natural manner and lack of ego (Roy, 2001:21).

The basic course starts with a unique introduction to the other people in the group which can often number up to a 100 or more. There were around 70 people in my Basic course though the number was larger in the beginning. Later some people found it more convenient to come to an earlier or later batch and numbers dwindled due to this. Individuals are supposed to go around the group and meet as many people as possible and utter the simple but highly intimate statement- ‘I am …..(name) and I belong to you.’ In a
country where public romance, leave alone meeting with a member of the opposite sex
without causing some speculation is next to impossible, this is a highly intimate
statement. The class consists in all courses of both men and women, generally including
all age groups but the older, middle aged group is in the majority. This statement is not
followed up with a handshake, rather it is accompanied by a folding of hands, the
Namaskar—the traditional greeting in India. The folding of hands includes joining the
palms of the hands together with the fingers pointed upwards and a slight bowing down
of the head. The Namaste is in every sense a traditional greeting today in the urban areas.
Situations like weddings, traditional ceremonies, prayers at the temple might see the
performance of this action and while it is performed readily at a temple very rarely is it
used both by the younger and older generation alike in an informal meeting or session.
Even within families, the namaskar might be used only while greeting an older,
traditional person but from personal experience I can say that I don’t perform the
namaskar at all. The standardized western handshake and hello is the common greeting.

The main emphasis in this course is the explanation of the Sudarshan Kriya and
the steps involved in it, The Ujjayi, Bastrika and finally the Sudarshan Kriya. Ujjayi and
Bastrika are grouped together under Pranayama. Ujjayi involves breathing very harshly.
It can best be described as making a growl with the mouth closed. The growl needs to
come from deep within your stomach while you inhale and exhale. Ujjayi is not as easy
as it sounds and the first few attempts end up sounding like a kitten trying to roar and
several including myself began to cough. Our teacher Mr. Anand (whose name means
happiness) explained the purpose of Ujjayi breathing as that which concentrates attention
in the spinal cord which controls breathing under normal circumstances. The Bhastrika
on the other hand involves inhaling normally but exhaling forcefully. This form of breathing is supposed to purify the body. Short explanations like these are given prior to performing the breathing exercises for the first time.

The masterpiece of the Sudarshan Kriya is the tape with the voice of the ‘Master’ or SSRS on it. An audio tape with the chanting of the word Sohum on it, this is the final culminating event of the Sudarshan Kriya. Sohum means ‘I am’ and so the emphasis of this meditation is the acknowledgement of the self and the consequent ‘falling away’ and discarding of the self because one of the big concepts in Hinduism is the state of egolessness which is what this exercise is aiming at (Michaels, 2004:21). At times I was very critical of this exercise because after a point on this tape I would cease to be aware of what was happening to me and drift off into a heavy dreamless sleep. I did not know whether I felt relaxed because I had been meditating or because I had been sleeping. But if one is to listen to SSRS’s definition of meditation they might mean one and the same thing. He defines meditation as “the delicate art of doing nothing.”

The Sudarshan Kriya consists of Pranayama first, Bastrika and Ujjayi breathing second and the Sohum tape last. Every time the Sudarshan Kriya is performed all three of these steps must be performed in this particular order. The whole exercise can be shortened somewhat and all three steps can be performed more quickly if one is pressed for time. It is considered acceptable so long as all three steps are performed in their particular order. The whole exercise lasts around 40 minutes if performed without shortening the three steps, 20 minutes if shortened.

Of all the courses I did, this was the most ‘childish’ course of the lot. There were times when we were asked to start laughing as a group for no reason and I could see that I
was not the only one wondering whether we had all gone crazy. Intense embarrassment was usually the common reaction to requests such as introducing ourselves with the sentence ‘I belong to you’, exercises which involved looking into another person’s eyes for a length of time. This usually turned out to be a member of the same gender as the class would get segregated for this purpose. Many of the people in my class were middle aged or retired, housewives and executives. There were not many people my age and the majority of the class would not have been comfortable with a person of the opposite sex.

Often this embarrassment was expressed by not meeting one’s partner’s eyes or later after class broke for the day some participants would talk about their feelings regarding the various exercises that we had been put through that day. The AoL would use the term childlike to describe these activities which were designed to get the participants over their self consciousness and ego. These exercises were never explained to us by the instructor just as it was never really explained to us why the audio tape of the Sudarshan Kriya with SSRS’s voice was not available to us. Other than very evasive answers such as ‘only teachers can have access to it because they are the only ones who can handle it’ (handle what was again never answered) that never really answered the question, no other explanation was forthcoming. Only after an individual completes the ‘Teachers Training Course’ or ‘TTC’ is the tape available to them.

The importance of breathing and why so much stress is laid on it at the AoL needs to be explained here. Breath is inextricably linked with emotions and the mind. This is explained in a short video clip on the official Art of Living website, a practitioner of the AoL, clad in loose flowing garments with a dot of sandalwood powder on her forehead details how the emotions are expressed in many cases through breath.
‘When someone gets angry see how they breathe- the breathing becomes fast, harder and harsher….and when a person is happy or peaceful how do you breathe? Like aaaaaaaahhhhhhh(an exhalation). So you see, the breath is linked to the body and mind because it expresses our emotions. But so far it has been that breath has not been controlled by us. How about if we were able to control breath and were then able to control how we felt instead of the other way around?’ That seems to be the main idea here. To be able to control one’s own body and mind through breath. SSRS himself has said on the site- “Our breath is our life and Ayurveda is the knowledge of life.” 22

Harmony and balance are brought to the body, mind and spirit by establishing correct breathing practices and many of these breathing practices were already established in the ancient books given to us by the wise ancients. It is a sense of nostalgia here that gives the impression that anything old must therefore also be essentially Indian because it was untouched and uncorrupted by western or foreign influence. Whereas this point of view is prevalent and used today for the marketing of anything that is thought to be ‘essentially’ Indian such as a cosmetic cream made with herbal ingredients prepared keeping Ayurvedic principles in mind, it is often forgotten that India had trade contacts with much of the Roman and Greek world as well as the Middle East, Egypt and China. With the emphasis on Ayurveda by SSRS in his quote above we see the attempt to establish a connection with ‘ancient’ roots.

**Residential Course**

While the basic course is the first course that anyone entering the AoL must do there is no prescribed second course. It can either be the residential course which I did second or the *Divya Samaj Nirman* (Establishment of a Divine Society) or DSN course. Unlike the first course, the residential course is intense and focused by virtue of being in the ashram for four days with a prescribed regimen including diet and exercise. One

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22 www.artofliving.org
needs to commit to four days of staying at the ashram and eating the food and following the regimen prescribed. The regimen includes getting up at 5 a.m., bathing and then meeting at 6 a.m. at the *Vishalakshi Mantapa* or the lotus shaped meditation hall that easily holds up to a few 100 people.

![Image of Vishalakshi Mantapa](image)

Figure 2. The Vishalakshi Mantap meditation hall named after SSRS’s mother. Bangalore, 2004

Since the course has some rigorous yoga postures it is not for the fainthearted. To stretch and struggle into various positions on an empty stomach at 6 a.m., you need to have some strength of will. A good example would be the *navasana* or the boat pose. It involves balancing on one's stomach and lifting the chest and chin off the ground and the legs are bent up by the hands that go back to clutch the feet and force the body into a U shape. This cannot be done by anyone with a bad back and several people including myself who had not exercised for months struggled with the asanas in the beginning. Despite this, people, even those who are not ardent devotees, do this course once every
six months or once every year. There are others who will do it once in three months. Several people that I spoke to, even busy executives informed me that they took time out of their busy schedule because it was the one time that they did not have any stress or worry on their mind.

One of my co-participants, Ajay, who also happened to work in a technology company started by the AoL and who met and married his life partner through the AoL matrimonial website, explained that one needed a refresher course every once in a while. ‘It is like taking a car to the workshop. You need to tune that every few months, the body is the same. It needs a tuning up every few months to keep it running smoothly.’ Both Ajay and his wife had jobs with AoL related organizations and from all accounts (their own) were happy. Interestingly, this person explained to me that he left the process of choosing a life partner to ‘guruji’. SSRS sought help from the online matrimonial website exclusively for AoL devotees and after comparing the likes and dislikes of several young women with Ajay’s profile SSRS told them his decision, which they both accepted. Caste and class were not factors considered towards compatibility. His wife now works in the AoL research center as an administrator.

One of the main tenets of this course is Seva or service. Every participant in this course, whether young or old is expected to do seva of some kind. On the first day, we were given the opportunity to either serve in the kitchen, the bathrooms or the gardens. Kitchen work consists of mainly cutting vegetables or cleaning them, cleaning the kitchen as a whole or just serving food during lunch and dinner. Food is cooked strictly according to the satvik regime i.e. food with no excessive spices or salt and with no or
very little oil. The food is vegetarian and is supervised by the head cook who tells me he gave up a job in Dubai to come and serve Guruji.

Other than the yoga done early in the morning there really is very little physical exercise in this course. The Sudarshan Kriya is done several times a day and much of the day is spent in meditation. Again, during this course I felt that I drifted in and out of sleep when I was in the meditation hall. However we were never allowed to nap for long and the whole day sped by amazingly fast with videos, lectures and exercises as well as the seva each of us had chosen on the first day and continued for the duration of the four day course. The unique aspect of this course is the silence that the participants must maintain for three days.

![Figure 3. Inside the Vishalakshi Mantapa. Rediff website 2004.](image)

Starting on the second day of the course, silence starts from the first meeting with the guru who was simply named Raghu and is widely sought after by many as a teacher because he is said to teach well. The initially awkward silence quickly transforms into an
unbelievable state of mind, there is absolute quiet in the mind. It can best be described as a lack of thoughts. Since there is nothing to think about there is nothing to stress about. The first day of the course I found my brain working furiously since I was not talking, everything turned inward. While it was not hard to not speak, I often forgot during the early morning that we had taken an oath of silence and ended up shouting out the time at my roommate when she came to check the time near my bed as I was the only one who had an alarm clock. Other than these occasional outbursts, I stayed silent and enjoyed it immensely. As the second day of silence wore on, I found that I was not bothered with whatever stress I had had before and felt myself floating along on the silence. I even tried to go far away from anyone who tried to speak to me because I did not even want to gesture simply because that felt too much like talking. However for the purpose of this study I had to write my field notes everyday even if it was going against the rules of silence.

The only time this silence can be broken is during the evening satsangs or true gatherings when one is allowed to sing but there can be no talking and no gesturing. Every form of communication is discouraged, from gestures to writing. The idea is to give the mind complete rest. Silence is broken on the evening of the last day after the satsang and then one is free to leave the ashram. I was not alone in not wanting to talk after the silence had been broken and felt fierce resentment whenever anyone tried to talk to me. Other than this, all aspects of the course are not very different from the Basic course. Again attempts to draw out the child in the adult are made. We were asked to draw like a child, with complete abandon and without bothering about coloring within the lines. Another exercise involved making clay images with imaginary clay and then
investing this imaginary figure with life, even naming this creation. One’s deepest secrets are then told to this creation. Of all three courses this was the most effective for me as a person, as a researcher and as an individual. This was one course that I truly enjoyed. Participants were far away from the city and stress of everyday life. Also, this was the only time I was able to spend all day at the ashram and observe aspects I would not have been able to observe during day visits such as the small canteen near the Vishalakshi Mantap that also served food during times the kitchen did not. Several people availed themselves of the decidedly non-satvik food of flat spicy Indian bread or parathas cooked in ghee or clarified butter with pickles. I ate this food twice when I was famished and could not wait to eat till food was served at the kitchen.

**Divya Samaj Nirman or DSN (The Establishment of a Divine Society)**

The *Divya Samaj Nirman* course was the last of the three courses. This course can be done second or third. DSN is supposed to awaken and nurture the seva/service element in all of us, the unofficial motto of the course was ‘Don’t Say No’\(^{23}\). We were informed on the first day of the course that the purpose of DSN was to make lions and lionesses of all of us. And the first step to this leonine transformation was to readily perform and accept whatever we were told to do. This involved various forms of torturous exercises especially those designed to help a person overcome a fear. Participants were asked to tell the instructors their fears. Several participants named cockroaches and snakes. Various people actually began to cry during this experience, especially one particular lady who was petrified of cockroaches who was made to hold them in her hand despite her uncontrollable shivering.

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\(^{23}\) Also shortened to DSN. Like a lot of the other courses and concepts in the AoL names are shortened and the abbreviations can be played with.
Another girl admitted that she was terrified of snakes and was subsequently presented with a wooden snake (the box in which this ‘snake’ was kept was opened with all the drama and flourish of a live snake) which in her state of fear she thought was real. She then broke down crying and had to be soothed by volunteers. Since neither of my fears (spiders or heights) was represented here I was able to handle the live cockroaches passing from person to person. It left me mystified as to how terrorizing a person was supposed to help them get over their fear. As Jane, a Basic Course participant from Canada told me later in a private interview ‘maybe they do this to break your resistance like these cult groups do and then once this resistance is broken it is easier to get you to do what they want.’ Another aspect of the DSN which drew a lot of flak from one particular participant was an exercise in which groups of people who had been formed randomly on the first day were asked to go out onto the streets and randomly solicit people to join the AoL.

My groups consisted of mainly young men in the age group of 25-30, two middle aged housewives and one retired gentleman. All the young men were working for software companies in and around Bangalore and one worked in the US for an information technology firm. We were supposed to divide up and leave. However, this activity was also competitive and a board was put up in front of the hall behind the instructors chair and every day the numbers would be updated. Often I felt that we had been transformed into swooping vultures rather than brave felines who were out on a mission to get over our ego and solicit people on behalf of the AoL. But also to prey on poor hapless souls who when faced with three very demanding and persuasive participants had no choice but either make an excuse and bolt or pay up.
One of the first places that my group went to was a public library a few minutes from the venue of the course. The three people who comprised one half of my group went around the tables handing out pamphlets and trying to talk library administrators into joining the Basic course. No one really joined on the spot because this would require some amount of money and not many were willing to part with any amount even if it was to put us off. We ended up just talking to a lot of people and distributing more pamphlets. Some people at the library were interested enough to enquire about the course and some had even heard of SSRS. The only success we had was during another of these marketing jaunts in the evening when two other members of my group and I went to the homes of people we knew and ‘persuaded’ them to join the course. One motivation used to get people to join was that I had come all the way from the US to do the course and so surely they could part with a measly 50 Rupees to reserve their place in the course. Our group managed to get two people that evening using this line of persuasion.

Figure 4. A Divya Samaj Nirman or DSN group gestures excitedly on the last day of the course. Bangalore. 2004.
Other lessons in promoting egolessness were to select two people, individually, and make them stand in front of the group, while the group criticized them to their hearts’ content. Again the lesson here was to see who could take the most criticism without batting an eyelash or showing any emotions, even smiling. Since I was one of the two selected, I went through the experience of having a room full of people shouting at me and criticizing everything from my clothes to why I was not reacting! Specific criticisms were aimed at my clothes such as why I wasn’t wearing more Indian clothes (I had on jeans with an Indian tunic) and why I did not have a bindi or cosmetic dot on my forehead. Some of the complaints and criticisms were made up. Not every young woman needs to wear a bindi. However, the effect is spoiled when the same people come and apologize to you after the shouting session.

Perhaps the most ‘rigorous’ of the three courses where the participants are made to wait to eat food beyond allocated times, do the *padmasadhana* 24 five times a day or play the games designed to help one overcome shyness and insecurity, there were aspects of this course that were definitely taking things a bit too far. Perhaps the term ‘rites of passage’ can be used to define these exercises in fear. First defined by Arnold Van Gennep in his book with the same title (1960), Gennep defined two types of rites—Rites that were performed at the time of a person’s transformation from one status in life to the other and rites that are performed during a specific time of the year. Commonly, the first definition is the one used in Anthropology and other social sciences. Here as they are used in the Art of Living these can be termed rites of fear. Fear is the medium which transforms a participant from a meek lamb or whatever other form of weakness the

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24 The Padmasadhana is a yoga exercise consisting of various yoga postures such as the shavasana and bhujangasana.
participant contains into a fierce lion or lioness. The participant is made to endure the facing of a fear that can be deeply personal or general such as the fear of cockroaches. I was never able to contact the two participants again and enquire whether their fear had vanished completely or whether it was only for that one moment that they had been able to overcome it, but just that one moment also made a difference and instilled a confidence that came out of having faced a fear in front of other participants. (Gennep, 1960)

The AoL has a multitude of other courses that are not as popular because perhaps they are more segregated in the sense that they are made for specific populations. For example, the Ashtavakra course is 33 days long and as a result is attended mostly by housewives which busy executives who are needed in the office would not be able to attend; the ART EXCEL (not an acronym) course is meant specifically for individuals aged 18 and below because other forms of meditation are not really encouraged for the young because it is thought that they don’t have the mental strength to participate. It is these three courses described here that are the mainstay of the AoL and are the most popular.

A growing segment of the AoL market that has a high demand for the courses are the information technology (IT) companies situated in Bangalore. Several of the people in my courses were from high end IT companies such as IBM and Intel. In many instances the companies themselves send executives over from their head office to participate in these courses and paid the fees on behalf of the executives. When I spoke to an executive from IBM, I discovered that one of the branches of IBM in Bangalore has an IBM AoL club. These members got together regularly to practice the Sudarshan Kriya and also organized courses from time to time so as to introduce new members into the
chapter. Several people that I spoke to in these organizations said that they experienced a measure of stress relief and it helped make work easier but there were very few who practiced the Sudarshan Kriya on a daily basis. Most did the courses regularly once in few months much like a follow up just so that they would get to practice the Sudarshan Kriya during those times. It also seemed to represent a break from routine which in itself seemed to reduce stress rather than the actual course itself. I asked the person who organized the courses for IBM about the course fees. He told me that group fees were paid rather than individual fees and even if around 5 people showed up a sum of around 15,000 Rupees (around $400) was the paid. This was confirmed by the instructor for the basic course when he told the class that more money was taken for the corporate courses because they could afford it and in turn this money helped finance courses for the economically disadvantaged.

It seems to be like a Robin Hood policy of monetary distribution- to take from the rich and give to the poor, but it appears to work because the course offered in the prisons and rural areas are free of cost. (Gautier, 2002:89) Meanwhile, devotees of SSRS continue to canvass for him and more and more people enter the organization everyday to experience that breath of joy, whether from the corporate sector or otherwise.
CHAPTER 4: CREATION AND ESTABLISHMENT OF HISTORY

Like a lot of other organizations in India that depended heavily on successful strategies of creation of history and establishment of ‘ancient’ roots, the Art of Living too has drawn upon tried and tested techniques such as the creation of myth around the founder. Unlike the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Samiti (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the AoL draws upon the life of the guru and founder of the AoL Sri Sri Ravi Shankar from his childhood. 25

Much like any institution/organization trying to establish itself, the AoL seeks to authenticate itself by emphasizing its ‘ancient roots’ and knowledge (Farquhar, 2002: 245) by drawing upon knowledge from ‘ancient’ Hindu texts. Indeed, the founder himself is invested with the possession of this undefined and amorphous ancient knowledge. Excerpts from the website of the AoL read thus-

Even as a young child, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar was of a spiritual disposition, often found in peaceful meditation at a very tender age. At the age of four, His parents discovered him reciting verses from the Bhagavad-Gita. Throughout his teens, He studied with many renowned spiritualists and became a scholar of Vedic literature, along with an advanced degree in modern science by the age of 17. 26

The last excerpt is an obvious attempt to show that someone so heavily involved in ancient, spiritual knowledge and learning is not far removed from ‘modern science’ and that there is a balance between the old and the new. It is with this new science packaging ‘ancient’ knowledge that much of the marketing for the AoL takes place.

‘Ancient knowledge’ derived from unspecified ‘ancient’ Hindu texts then form much of

25 www.rss.org
27 Science here refers to Western Science and while India has science of its own these are not really accepted as science by the West, rather as pseudo science such as astrology and Vedic mathematics.
the validity enjoyed by the AoL. A founding myth is important to the creation of any organization especially one that is spiritual in nature, where it will be guiding other people. After all, why should people come to believe and follow someone which has no basis or foundation in reality or history?

“A founding myth provides a movement with a sort of condensation of the effervescence of its ‘nascent state’,” in which the basic objectives, the ethical standards, and the major grievances that gave birth to the movement are all concentrated.’( Hansen, 1999:86) The AoL set its basic objectives to be the ‘spreading of joy’ and while ethical standards for the organization have been derived from Hindu texts and ethical standards that have been around in society for years, the only major ‘grievance’ that the AoL fosters is the decline in spiritual education and spirituality in society (Alter, 2004:56).

While the AoL, said by practitioners to be secular in nature and not preaching any one faith, there seems to be a direct contradiction in practice. While many of the rituals conducted while I was in residence were ‘Hindu’ in nature, at the same time it is also essential to remember that much of Hinduism pervades everyday life to such an extent that it becomes difficult to distinguish and define where one ends and the other begins. For example, a woman sporting a bindi on her forehead in India is clearly declaring that she is Hindu but at the same time it is also not religious and is worn for decorative purposes. Or for example if I were to bump into a person or touch a book with my foot I would automatically touch that person or object and then my eyes in a gesture of asking for forgiveness which is at the same time Hindu but also a part of daily practice and is not a religious practice per se (Michaels, 2004:91). Many aspects of the AoL are undeniably ‘universal’ such as meditation, which is not the domain of anyone religion. On the other
hand, the AoL funds and runs the Vedic school where young boys are taught Vedic rituals, knowledge needed for a future priest. Many of these boys who conducted the *guru poornima* ritual lead by their teacher were in the age group of 8-14.

![Young boys from the Vedic school sit ready to start prayers as soon as SSRS comes to the dais during one of his evening satsangs. Bangalore 2004.](image)

Guru Poornima is a ritual conducted in honor of a guru or a teacher. It is the day special gifts are presented to the teacher by a student such as a shawl, bananas and a coconut (traditional gifts).

Their foreheads smeared with ash\(^{28}\) these children chanted with professional ease prayers that have been chanted by Hindu temple priests for centuries. This ritual was performed during the residential course which happened to include the *Guru Poornima* day. The *Vishalakshi Mantap* was the site of the ritual and in the evening, the *satsang*

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\(^{28}\) The ash is smeared horizontally are usually consist of three lines. The three lines signify Shiva or the God of Destruction. The Art of Living seems to have definite ‘Shaivaite tendencies.’
saw the participation of many non-ashram guests who traveled from the city for this occasion.

Earlier passages taken from writings on his childhood describe Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s spiritual nature and how he already knew and recited many of the ‘ancient’ texts that form a part of India’s past. Although never explicitly mentioned, here the writer is able to kill two birds with one stone- thus proclaiming Sri Sri Ravi Shankar not only as a child genius but also subtly hinting at this knowledge having carried over from a past birth.29 This is not an unusual strategy. The other known spiritual leader who used this tack is the Sathya Sai Baba, also in Bangalore. Everything about this history is vague. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar supposedly studied with various gurus and rumor has it that he studied mostly under the founder of the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

In very few places and texts about SSRS do we come across more explicit references to his guru’s. It is not mentioned on the AoL website. However an online blog happens to mention SSRS’s guru and even has a picture of SSRS with Maharishi Yogi. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi widely associated with the Transcendental Meditation movement or TM was credited with research into the seven fields of consciousness. Known for the TM it is not widely acknowledged that he is SSRS’s teacher, perhaps because of a rumored split between the ideologies of SSRS and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

29 www.artofliving.org
People who have worked with the organization have their doubts as well. While I was interviewing Dr. N Janakiramaiah of the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), he happened to mention that SSRS and Maharishi had parted ways because of difference in ideology. However he could not confirm to what extent this was true. He happened to hear this while on a trip to Canada several years back where the AoL has an established ashram. The Sudarshan Kriya™, the backbone of the AoL has vague beginnings too. The knowledge for the Sudarshan Kriya™ was supposed to have been ‘given’ to SSRS while he was in deep meditation and had taken on a strict vow of silence. This retreat from the world was in the Southern Indian state of Karnataka in an area called Shimoga.31

30 http://spaces.msn.com/members/guruji/
31 www.artofliving.org. This area has no special relevance as a holy spot or otherwise. It is in the state of Karnataka however of which Bangalore is the capital.
The rise to fame for SSRS was slow. He began teaching the SKY in 1982 but his popularity and fame rose only in 1996. Beginning with just two students in a small room in Bangalore after canvassing all over India for a while, he finally procured two students whom he met in Calcutta. These two students, prominent business people in their own right at that time, then decided to retire and work with ‘guruji’ as they fondly call him. These students are now on the board of the AoL foundation trust. It took 14 long years for SSRS to become a public name. Along the way SSRS also acquired the tags of not only His Holiness but also Sri Sri (which means the same thing). When asked why he was being presumptuous and attaching not one but two prefixes to his name SSRS is said to have replied that it was his devotees’ doing and he could not do anything to change their mind.’ (Roy, 2001:16)

**Ritualization and the Creation of Myth**

The mystical and divine nature of the ‘creation’ of the Sudarshan Kriya, this is not the only active myth that has been created and is being propagated. Myths and legends are being built around SSRS and being narrated and performed for audiences in all three of the AoL’s courses.

My first experience with this myth creation was during the basic course when the instructor\(^{32}\) began to tell us stories about SSRS and how he had divine vision. These stories were constantly repeated and emphasized at various points during the course and since I had the same instructor for the DSN course, the same stories were repeated there as well. These stories/myths work actively to create a divine aura around SSRS. Never

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\(^{32}\) Who I was told is ‘very closely’ related to SSRS. Anand is believed to be related to guruji. No one knows how exactly. I was not able to speak with this instructor as he kept putting our interviews off.
once did I come across anything in any written matter or text regarding this supernatural power. It was only through oral dissemination that these myths were being spread. Much of the myth creation had to do with the effective performance of narrative. Instead of the ‘Once upon a time..’ opening line, here the line was ‘Do you want to hear a story about….?’.

Many eagerly listened to SSRS’s divine powers in action and three particular stories were repeated again and again. The instructor for our Basic course, Anand, talked of ‘another instructor’ who one day decided to go to a fashion show. He thoroughly enjoyed himself and returned late at night. The next day there was a gathering of people who had come to see SSRS. A white carpet was laid on the ground and SSRS walked down this makeshift aisle as people flanked him on both sides. As he walked past this instructor he is said to have pirouetted and asked ‘Isn’t this fashion show better?’ which promptly left the fashion conscious instructor slack jawed.

In another incident, this same instructor went to watch a hugely popular Hindi movie when he should have been devoted in seva at the ashram. He returned from the movie and went to his room. He then received a phone call from ‘guruji’ who was in Delhi at that moment and the minute he picked up the phone guruji sang two of the lines from the same movie.

The third incident talks of how the instructor who was narrating these stories, happened to be traveling with SSRS by car to a rural area. This instructor was reading out various e-mails to SSRS. He inadvertently skipped one and even though SSRS had his
eyes closed he told him exactly what e-mail he had missed and what details that e-mail contained.\textsuperscript{33}

Any questions about these stories are avoided. In both courses, someone would ask without fail with regard to the first story about the fashion show- ‘so does this mean that guruji thinks fashion shows are bad?’ This question was never answered. The instructor put the question off for the last day and if anyone asked him again then, he would not answer or make a vague reply to the tune of ‘the divinity of guruji which cannot be answered.’ The performance is played not only by the instructor but also by the audience among whom I also include the volunteers. They would clap loudly and cheer with such enthusiasm that it made one feel small if one did not join in with the applause even if it wasn’t really felt. This clapping was often in response to the instructor talking about some of guruji’s statements and especially the stories mentioned above. A good example of performance by SSRS himself would be to take a look at a transcript from one of his evening satsangs where he regularly fielded questions from business to love.

\textsuperscript{33} My question here was if he already knew why was he asking for a reading of the e-mails? When someone else asked they were again put off. The question was never answered.
CHAPTER 5: THE ART OF LIVING - PRACTITIONERS AND CRITICS

It is almost pointless to say that every individual has their own point of view and situatedness regarding any situation and it is no different with the Art of Living. It would be easy to lump practitioners of the Sudarshan Kriya and other AoL practices as all being permissive of and aware of the ‘fact’ that the AoL is helping to regenerate a renewed interest in all things Indian and is moving the nation and its yuva or youth towards a recognition and practice of its ancient culture and practice while keeping in line with the modern credo of being scientific (read Western Science).

There is a lot of discrepancy at various points in time not only from the practitioners of the AoL but also from the Guru himself- Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. At the one end the current position of India and Indians as the resultant hybrid product of colonialism and modernization and westernization is attributed to the coming in of Western science with the opening up of India to the Western world. SSRS also thought it necessary to mention in one of his evening talks at his ashram on the outskirts of Bangalore that Science and Spirituality were in conflict only in the West and never in the East further reifying the split between East and West, Science and Spirituality. (Hansen, 2001:102)

There seems to be a sense of confusion which perhaps mimics the confusion that exists among many Indians as to whether we are modern or traditional or either one only and whether it is possible to reconcile the two at all. There is an endorsement of science, the Art of Living and the Sudarshan Kriya yoga as being scientific and therefore more widely applicable and practicable as opposed to a more confined ‘Indian’ art. At the same time there is a dissatisfaction being expressed that one is being coerced to take recourse
to these methods so as to disseminate a wholly Indian way of life. During various statements made during the evening satsang with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and other statements made by practitioners and researchers such as N Janakiramaiah who has studied the Sudarshan Kriya method formally under the aegis of the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS) this dissatisfaction was expressed via statements which were in direct contradiction.

“In politics no party is good. The youth are the future of the nation if youth get together there will be a flood of love, corruption can be removed and you will be able to strengthen your personality…. Women should come forward too.”
“We need to run the nation otherwise foreigners will come in and run the nation again.”

These statements were made at a time when the Congress Party had just recently celebrated its victory in the Indian elections and Sonia Gandhi had been elected the head of the party thereby giving her legal right to be Prime Minister. However, in a smart move, Sonia Gandhi stepped aside and let an ‘Indian’ take over the post so as to avoid controversy and possible riots.

The range of opinions about the AoL run the whole gamut from dislike to being an ardent devotee. I interviewed a friend’s mother who had done the Art of Living course several years back and she had nothing good to say about it. She complained about the fact that they had been told to go walking around the ‘lake’ near the ashram and how it was dry, to her spraining her ankle. Perhaps the most comic statement she made was when she asked me- ‘why do these people smile all the time? Only mentally retarded people do that….’ referring to the AoL credo to smile all the time.

On the other hand there was a more glowing opinion given by a distant relative at a family get together. When he learned that my research was based on the Art of Living
he took it upon himself to educate me about how ancient India was a veritable treasure trove of information that had been forgotten and subsumed in these modern times where western ways took precedence. However, echoing the general voice of people, he also went on to say that he was very happy to see that Art of Living was reintroducing ‘youngerstes’ to the old ways. To praying and spirituality, to dancing at the ashram and to dance with spiritual fervor rather than at the local disco to more western beats. The general consensus, whether from the old or the young, seems to be this pleasure with the reintroduction of forgotten ways of spirituality into society.

My roommate at the residential course was a middle aged lady with two daughters and her whole family was actively involved in the AoL. She told me that this was the 7th time she was doing the residential course and she also mentioned that she often came here to meet ‘guruji’ and do seva. The elder of her two daughters even teaches Art Excel courses. This lady’s parents live at the ashram. Her father was a prominent bank manager who then decided to give up his job and retire at the AoL. He now handles the accounts for the organization. During a walk to the nearby lake from the ashram, she happened to mention that many a time she had seen guruji refuse donations from some very wealthy people. She continued without any encouragement- that these refusals were because this money did not come from very good sources and because they were given with certain intentions. He accepted money only from those who genuinely wanted to give and gave with good intentions. She went on to relate how many times despite the new dining hall being in need of desperate money for further construction, he had still refused. She was obviously deeply into the organization and worshipped guruji as a living incarnation of God. She wasn’t the only one.
There were others during my residential course who had such deep and strong faith it left me with doubts about my own ability to have faith in anything in life. In what should have been a humorous episode but wasn’t, when a woman in my residential course on the last day spoke of the miracles of ‘guruji’. She had been trying to get in touch with her children that day and because the ashram is on the outskirts of Bangalore it is not possible to get a good connection on a cell phone. However, she reported that she had prayed to guruji to get the call through and she had subsequently succeeded and had been able to talk to her children.

Another family had come all the way from Punjab in the North of India. The two daughters in this family had been to one of gurujis satsang in the North. One of the girls stood up and told us at the end that while singing at the satsang with guruji, she had looked up and seen him and felt a marvelous sense of peace and had decided to come to Bangalore and do the course at the AoL ashram and her whole family decided to come along with her.

There was another NRI (Non Resident Indian) from Dubai who supposedly came every six months to do this course. He spoke about some personal difficulties he had been experiencing and that these in turn had lead to outbursts of anger. He claimed to have taken the basic course in Dubai and experience deep psychological satisfaction. Since then he says he has been organizing courses in and around the Middle East among the large Indian and non-Indian community there. These are only a few of the accounts of the AoL. Most people seem to hover between a need to believe deeply and cynicism about the more ‘God’ like qualities of SSRS. There are those who believe that SSRS is Jesus and Krishna reborn and there are others who believe that he is an ordinary human
being who has managed to reach a vast population with the spirit of reawakening India’s
dormant spirituality.

There were others from the scientific community especially who did not have
many good things to say about the Art of Living. Dr. Janakiramaiah was one person who
recognized the marketing behind the spirituality and expressed dissatisfaction with the
fact that although the research\textsuperscript{34} had been conducted jointly between the Art of Living
and NIMHANS, he felt that the research findings had been published much before any
valid testing could be done to prove the results were valid. Especially claims like
improved areas of function in the brain etc were not done according to the approval of
NIMHANS. The preliminary ‘positive’ effects had been observed and then published and
used as a validation for the SKY before any actual scientific testing could be done.

He referred specifically to one example and said that in one of the brochures they
describe that doing SKY leads to a tingling in your fingers and toes. The brochures claim
that this has to do with ultimate brain function and is a result of SKY.

\textquote{But if anyone keeps breathing like that- essentially they are hyperventilating and
flushing their body with oxygen, which is what is going to happen. There is no mystical
meaning behind the tingling in their fingers and all that.}

Then you have those people who will say that they felt guruji’s presence while
doing the SKY and when you ask them why they will say the same thing- that they felt
this tingling sensation-\textquote{Arre}\textsuperscript{35} if you keep breathing like that then what else will happen. I
know these things- they say all this because they are swayed into believing that what is
happening to them is spiritual or mystical but it is not. It is a common physiological

\textsuperscript{34} A joint research conducted between the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences and the
Art of Living. The effect of SKY on depressed patients was experimented upon.

\textsuperscript{35} A common exclamatory word which can mean anything from my god to good grief.
reaction to hyperventilation. Then they throw in all this science and research that they have done with SKY and all that. One very clever thing they do- they tell you that other than teaching you the SKY method the rest is up to you. They have this subtle way of attributing any changes to you and this goes down very well with the western audience. It is easily accessible also so there are a lot of people who are coming in to do AoL courses.’ By attributing some aspects of the course as appealing to the western audience, Dr. Janakiramaiah is referring to the marketing of the AoL which takes into consideration the different backgrounds of people that it can refer to and then works on that basis.

Dr. R L Kapur is another prominent researcher I spoke with who has done research among what he calls the ‘true’ yogis and sadhu’s who live in the Himalayas and practice austere meditation and fasting. He was highly skeptical of the Art of Living and the claims that it made about spirituality and imparting the same to society. After enquiring very subtly with me whether I was a devotee of SSRS (I replied in the negative), he proceeded to tell me about the true practitioners of spirituality in the traditional place where all mystics and gurus lived, the Himalayas and Rishikesh (one of the holy places for the Hindu’s). Dr. Kapur believes that what SSRS is doing is unlike what spirituality is like.

‘If he is that spiritual then why is he going around selling things and opening all these places? A sadhu is one who has no connection or relationship with the material world. They are supposed to be people who withdraw from all worldly concerns and keep no relationships, even with their families. And here this man goes around building these beautiful meditation halls and charging fees for these courses that he teaches- these
courses have things in them that have been around forever, not something that he
discovered and then decided to give the world.’

Ultimately, whether right or wrong, people have very strong emotions towards the
Art of Living. With a topic like spirituality it seems that there can never be any common
meeting ground between the believers and the skeptics. The practitioners who believed
left a strong impression about the strength of their belief and faith as did the scientists
who had as strong a faith in the non-viability of the same. Opinions will always be
divided but if one is to analyze the current situation, the AoL does not need to worry
about detractors- it has a lot going for it rather than against.
CHAPTER 6: PERFORMANCE OF SPIRITUALITY

Performance of an action(s) and its accompanying actions can make all the difference in making something acceptable and believable. Whether intentional or not the AoL fully lives up to spiritual standards of role playing. With various actions, events and rituals as well as more innocuous things like appearance and actions such as smiling, the AoL has managed to appropriate these actions into its enviable repertoire of spiritual performances. To be fair, the performance of spirituality must come from some demand from those who will view those performances, from their approval and perhaps need to see these performances to be able to believe more readily and fully.

A spiritual guide is ideally one who is Guru- one who can lead the ignorant from the darkness to the light. According to tradition and history as well as legends of the sages of old, these individuals renounced the world, only maintaining contact to an extent to be able to guide those who sought his guidance. These individuals had adopted one of the four ashrama’s or paths of Hindu life. Ashrama here means a stage of life. The Sanyasashrama was given the most importance and was generally adopted by men and consequently their wives once they had fulfilled all familial obligations and duties and their children were no longer dependent upon them. (Michaels, 2004:110)

In some cases, such as Shankaracharya and Madhavacharya\(^{36}\), the world was renounced at a relatively young age. Upon entering this stage of life, the individuals could not get married or other such earthly endeavors could not be pursued. SSRS’s history indicates that he had spiritual leanings from a very young age. He never married and as soon as he completed his formal education embarked on a spiritual quest. Since all

\(^{36}\) The founders of two of Hinduism’s most influential philosophies- the Advaita and Dwaita philosophy. These were two ways of looking at the world. For example the former preached that the world/was Maya or illusion among other things.
worldly pursuits are put aside, concern with appearance is one of the first things that is dispensed with.

![Figure 7. Some aspects of sartorial performance. Rediff Website. 2004.](image)

The hair and beard are allowed to grow. Other than ensuring a bath every day (because cleanliness is next to godliness), the only other modifications to the appearance that can be made are the application of a sandalwood mark on the forehead. (Michaels, 2004:129) SSRS dispenses with the sandalwood mark but he does adopt other sartorial trappings of guru-ness such as the loose flowing robes and dhoti\(^{37}\). He also has a rudraksh mala\(^{38}\) or what is known as a rosary around his neck. Keeping with the tradition of being a *sanyasi*, SSRS has allowed his hair and beard (which I read was trimmed) to grow. In

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\(^{37}\) A dhoti is basically a large piece of white cloth tied around the waist and worn like a sarong. In the South of India, this is the traditional dress worn by men.

\(^{38}\) It is called the Rudraksh Mala because it is thought that each bead has the face of Shiva on it.
keeping with the motto of the AoL, there is a constant smile on his face. This is one action followed by all the practitioners and teachers of the course.

There were times when I felt that the whole thing was a stage performance, one that had been rehearsed many times. Especially during the first course, I took a dislike to the instructor whose name meant happiness. It was hard not to when he told us that one of the basic tenets of doing the course was to give up all caffeine, even as he drank tea. It felt very difficult to relate the lessons of humility and egolessness that were being taught to us when the same instructor turned up just before the course started, leaving the volunteers to do all the work around the venue including keeping water and a flask of tea ready for him. Several volunteers would come and prostrate themselves at his feet before they left. The instructor was not older than 30 and I know that several of the volunteers were older than 30. Generally only the feet of one who is older than ones self are touched.

It was this serious contradiction between actions and words that made the performance seem stark and false. Perhaps it was the whole demeanor of a teacher addressing his students, making the whole situation more like a classroom with all the students seated on the rug on the floor and the instructor seated in a chair, a very obvious hierarchy and difference in levels that I resented. Perhaps it was the tone of voice used, of talking to lesser mortals because we were spiritually inferior, that got to me.

I was well aware that I had a bias but I was unprepared for the ferocity of my resentment. To my consternation there were times when I caught myself idly comparing the instructor to a rat which left me with feelings of confusion and guilt. The performance is continued in terms of clothes and demeanor. All the instructors wore Indian clothes.

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39 A honor usually accorded to someone older or wiser in the spiritual sense.
The instructor for the basic course was still considered young and did not have the more hirsute appearance of the other teachers. The residential course instructor followed in SSRS’s footsteps and dressed in the same manner. It seemed to me that even I got caught up in the performance and was generally calmer and less aggressive and felt more ‘Indian’ being in the ashram wearing one of the traditional dresses, getting up early and doing yoga and then eating breakfast and doing seva. Positively saintly!

It is a performance of being Indian through spirituality. Spirituality is considered something so essentially Indian that its practice readily places one as being ‘Indian’ as opposed to someone who is not. It does not matter that during these courses, the language of spiritual dissemination is English. English has been incorporated so deeply into Indian culture that I would not be wrong in saying that it is another one of India’s 16 official languages. Besides, as the instructor took pains to point out, he was talking in a mixture of Hindi and English or Kannada and English (Hinglish and Kanglish respectively as he termed them).

An example of performance during a question and answer session with a reporter from India Today Magazine—(Roy, 2001:16)

Q. You say God is fun. Then why the word god-fearing?

A. Not in this country. Here God is always in *leela,* (an epic or play) at play, as in *Krishnaleela.* Song, dance and drama are part of our spirituality, but we seem to have lost the sense of fun. God-fearing is a Christian concept. We have only *bhakti* (devotion), no *bhay* (fear).

Q. Is faith in constant struggle with reason?

A. Reason and faith should have a fine balance. Through reason you develop faith just like through reason you develop faith in antibiotics.
Q. But one man's faith can be murderous.

A. The problem begins when one wants to impose his idea of God. My idea of God and his idea of God should co-exist. The basic principle of the Art of Living is accepting people as they are. Life is multi-dimensional. When you forget this...

Q. What happens?

A. You have people like Osama bin Laden who have not read any scriptures other than their own. If he had studied the Upanishads he would not have done this. God has been there before the Koran. And we should take some responsibility. We have not taken the knowledge of yoga, Vedanta and Upanishads to the whole world. Remember, you cannot have a uniform way of living in this world. You cannot make everybody materialistic as the communists have tried and failed. And you cannot make everybody spiritual either. There is room for everyone in this world.

Q. There are people who think 'Vedic' is a retrograde word?

A. They don't know. They don't understand the spiritual values of this country. There is a lack of self-esteem. Take the word saffronisation. People who have a problem with such a word should not be drinking orange juice. You do not have to believe in God to enquire about God's nature. If you are an atheist, at least you believe in your existence. And yoga doesn't exclude an atheist. There is no blasphemer in Indian philosophy. If you want to criticise someone you should have complete knowledge about his system of thinking. The very structure of Indian philosophy is such that you can never be a fanatic.

Q. The New Age has spawned a salvation industry. Are you a marketeer of salvation?

A. Market means the need of the people, and the need of the people is happiness, peace, beauty. Salvation industry? Business and spirituality move in opposite directions. In business, you give less and take more. In spirituality, you give more and take less.

Q. Does the lure of spiritual alternatives then keep the gurus going?

A. It is man's search for happiness. In truth you reach the destination. Truth is the last moment. The finale.

It is this vagueness and obfuscation of replies that are so in contradiction to and frustrating when one expects a simple and straightforward ‘factual’ reply. The performance is in the tradition of what a guru’s answers are supposed to be like. In more than one autobiography of a guru or yogi it is stated that the wisdom of the guru is so
high that the answers, however simple they might be would be confusing to the more common mind. SSRS’s answers then are in keeping with this tradition. In a satsang in June 2004, I had the opportunity to be in the presence of SSRS as he answered the questions that the crowd threw at him. Below is an extract from the transcript-

Q- Guruji what can you say about politics?

‘People say that politics is bad but that is not so. No party is good in politics and the youth are the future of the nation- if the youth get together there will be a flood of love. Help remove corruption and strengthen your personality. Women should come forward too. This is not only for Men. We need to run the nation otherwise foreigners will come in and rule the nation again. We need to remember that Jana Seva is Janardhan Seva (Service to the people is equivalent to service to God).

Q- What should we do for this?

We must all work together. Give leadership and training to those who want it. Be happy in your mind.

Q- What about Science and Spirituality? Can we have both?

Science and Spirituality were in conflict only in the west, not the east. Science and Spirituality are compatible.

Q- Why do you travel so much?

The whole world has problems and the whole world is my family. That is why I spend six months in India and six months abroad.

Q- What inspired you to find this breathing process?

(Smiling) I don’t know.

Q- How do I become successful in business?

Work smart and work hard.

Q- Guruji, how to fight tension?

(Smiling) With a smile. Hmmm, teach simple bhajans (songs of God) in slums, feed people in slums.
Q- Will the Congress last more than five years?

There was no answer for this question. SSRS smiled.

Even vague answers which answer nothing are readily accepted by the audience. As we can see, there is nothing really highly spiritual and deep about these answers—on the contrary they are simple and something a good orator with the right personality could say. Adopting a certain tone of voice, a way of dressing all go a long way towards expressing a certain image that is also expected from the public. How many would accept a guru who dressed in ‘normal’ clothes like everyone else? How many would accept a guru who spoke as ‘normally’ as you and I? This performance is an issue of give and take— it is not a one way traffic with the guru pulling the wool over public eyes by dressing in traditional clothing and letting his beard and hair grow.(Alter, 2004:99)
According to Norman K. Denzin (2000), “Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of misrepresentation, including field notes, interviews, conversation, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self…. Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world” (Denzin, 2000:3). In the above definition, Denzin explains that researchers or people in the field study things in their natural settings and environment i.e. the researchers go to the object/s of study unlike quantitative research where much of the time the object of study is brought to one’s location be it in the form of questionnaires or even transporting a specimen to a lab. This in turn deposits in the researcher a sense of situatedness. “This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin, 2003:3).

Qualitative research is the use of a variety of materials such as case studies, life stories, reflexivity, personal experience, visual texts and the like, all of which in their own way define a certain sphere of an individuals life, all of which when put together will give the reader and researcher a somewhat accurate, researcher situated view of the situation. Since qualitative research is routinely deployed to study the lives of people as a whole, it must also employ a wide range of materials such as those described above. However, it is also realized that each of these materials and practices makes the world visible in a different way and represents aspects of individuals’ lives differently so it is only with the amalgamation of these practices that we can hope to arrive at a definition of
a person's life. For the purpose of this research, I did not have any definite hypothesis nor was I going into the field to prove or disprove any statement. Rather, my intention was to do a study of the Art of Living and its famous Sudarshan Kriya technique by participating in all the activities that I would be allowed to engage in. Participant-Observation was the most often used method in my fieldwork amply supplemented by other techniques and methods such as interviews, photographs, archival research, conversations and field notes. Fieldwork consisted of removing myself from an academic and theoretical setting and looking at the actual experience of what I had only previously heard and read about. I was able to spend almost three months in the field in Bangalore city, Karnataka, South India for my fieldwork.

This fieldwork included participating in three of the courses of the Art of Living, the Basic course, the Residential course and the Divya Samaj Nirman course.

Under fieldwork and participant observation I can include the other primary research methods that I used for this thesis. Rather than many formal interviews, I made very few requests for formal interviews and mainly just spoke to people when I came upon them. As a result some conversations lasted a few minutes, hurriedly spoken words while serving some food to a few hundred people after a satsang which was open to the public. Other conversations were more leisurely ones that lasted several hours and were continued at the homes of the participants who very graciously invited me into their homes and lives to share their experiences with the Art of Living. I requested formal interviews with three people- Dr. N. Janakiramaiah, Dr. R.L. Kapoor and Mr. Arun Madhavan.

These were individuals with whom I could not really request casual conversations
because they were individuals of high status with little or no time to spare.

Archival research was done primarily at two places- the *Times of India* newspaper office because I expected to find more articles or mentions of the AoL than any other newspaper because of its association with the organization. The other newspaper office where I did archival research was at *Deccan Herald* where I conducted research to see the ratio of articles as compared to the *Times of India* as also to see what kind of articles regarding the AoL came to light. As expected the number of articles were less. However, both had a treasure trove of information regarding the organization and about the activities of the AoL as well as SSRS and his talks.

The photographs taken during fieldwork captured some moments that are better explained pictorially than theoretically. Unfortunately, I was unable to take my camera onto ashram grounds for the residential course simply because there was no guarantee of security. I was able to capture moments of abandon and restraint, action and passivity as the photographs used in this thesis will show only for the other two courses that I took with the AoL i.e. the Basic Course and the *Divya Samaj Nirman* course.

Perhaps the hardest tool to harness in the field was myself. I felt I was going into this research topic with a bias against the Art of Living and all that it stood for. Religion and spirituality and just another godman on the make. However, reality was considerably different than what I had thought and considered. While marketing was happening at a furious pace, I was also able to see the other activities performed by the AoL such as working towards promoting health and hygiene in the surrounding rural areas as well as prompting and urging the students and practitioners of the AoL to actively do *seva* or service and to give of one’s time to those less fortunate than ourselves. This included
teaching children who otherwise had no access to formal education, paying a doctor to make a visit to a village that would have had no access to medical care otherwise. I was unable to participate in these activities myself as most of these activities were scheduled for a time after my departure and so I contributed financially to help fund some of the expenses such as buying some basic medicines and paying for transport.

But being in the field strengthened my view that the AoL was only one among many organizations in India that were recognizing the need to provide some order out of the chaos that identity issues had brought in and this was only one way of resolving the issue. Granted that spirituality is one of the biggest business’s in India today, it was only logical that this industry would go through a boom of people requiring some advice and guidance during some trying times. SSRS is not the only one cashing in on this. Others like the Sathya Sai Baba, also in Bangalore and Mata Amritanandamayi whose trademark is a hug like the AoL trademark is the SKY and the smile are only some of the better known of the countless and nameless gurus and institutes that dot the country. 40

While several methods worked there were some that did not and these had to be abandoned at the very beginning for the research. I had intended to record at least the formal interviews that I had scheduled as I knew that in most other instances I would be talking to people informally and carrying on conversations and deriving information from them and would not be conducting formal interviews with the majority. The reasoning behind this was that Dr. N. Janakiramaiah, Dr. R.L. Kapur and Mr. Arun Madhavan did not have time for informal conversations or repeated meetings whereas by virtue of spending time for the duration of the course with the participants I was able to elicit more information through informal conversations and I was also assured of follow up

40 www.indiayogi.com
conversations and meetings at their homes. I was also not able to record any of the interviews as Dr. Janakiramaiah was apprehensive about how the taped conversation would be used and felt more comfortable without a tape recorder. As a result I ended up not recording any of the formal interviews because the individuals I requested were not comfortable with the idea and to bring a tape recorder along for informal conversations seemed intrusive. Introducing it into the informal conversations at home would have formalized and constrained the atmosphere so I ultimately decided to not follow this method of study.

I spoke informally with 70 people, all of whom were participants in my three courses. Their personal experiences are represented in this thesis. I spoke formally only to 3 people. Because I was able to conduct archival research at the *Times of India* office and the *Deccan Herald* office I had access to a number of Art of Living newspaper articles- 69 from the *Times of India* for the years 2002-2004 and 12 from *Deccan Herald* for the years 2002-2004. However, I made use of only one newspaper article from the *Times of India* and it was not from the archives, but from the newspaper when I was in Bangalore. Web pages have also been a source of information but not a major one. The one webpage that I accessed the most often was the AoL official website. The others were accessed perhaps only once or twice and do not number more than 10.

The practice that elicited the most and the best information in terms of applicability, quality and quantity was participant observation. To be able to participate in the courses at the AoL, especially the residential course, was the best source of information. I was able to spend time on the ashram grounds and there was constant interaction with other participants in my course as well as participants in other courses...
who were also staying on the ashram grounds. This gave me ready access to *satsangs*, people such as the head cook whom I would not have otherwise met as a day visitor to the ashram and was able to immerse myself in the atmosphere and observe the day to day workings of a spiritual organization.
CHAPTER 8: THE MARKETING OF SPIRITUALITY

An article in one of India’s well known elite newspapers The Times of India published on the topic of spirituality in July 2004. This article was different in the sense that it took that final step and announced to the world India’s intellectual riches, among them being- ‘the collective brainpower of millions of engineers, scientists, doctors….’ What was unusual about the article was that in this virtual treasure trove of riches it also included ‘the immense wealth of our traditional wisdom, including the practice of Yoga, the powers of Pranayama….’.

To gauge the impact of the article, perhaps it would be better to quote from it-

“Few other cultures can lay claim to such an immense mother lode of scriptural wisdom and practical solutions for wellness. The time has come for India to harness the growth potential of spiritual and physical wellness.”

The writer goes on to request the Finance Minister, Mr. Chidambaram that spirituality and wellness must be treated like any other industry and the opportunity to cash in on this boom must not be lost because ‘Spirituality has immense potential to turn India into a global superpower: not in terms of megatons, but in terms of megabliss.’ What makes this article all the more noteworthy is that it was written by one of the owners of The Times of India, which happens to be in a partnership\(^{41}\) with the Art of Living. To make matters more interesting the owners of the Times Groups are devotees of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. (Jain, 2004:6)

\(^{41}\) The Art of Living and the Times of India in a recent Memorandum of Understanding opened a mass communications school on the outskirts of Bangalore. Also the owners of the Times of India, the Jain family are devotees of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.
Marketing then has reached its highest peak. With such powerful and eminent backers and publicists, the Art of Living has arrived. Perhaps because of these circumstances the AoL keeps a low profile in other areas of marketing such as advertisements, be they newspaper or television advertisements. We might attempt to define marketing here. But the marketing used by AoL could be classified as ‘Social Marketing’, something different from the term marketing that is bandied about today. There are many definitions and we can consider a few here.

Philip Kotler defines Social Marketing as ‘the design, implementation and control of programs seeking to increase the acceptability of a social idea or practice(s) in target group(s).’ Andreason defines Social Marketing as ‘the application of commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of their society.’ (Applbaum, 2004:72)

Both definitions cannot be applied in their entirety to the marketing techniques and concept of AoL here simply because there is no ‘official’ marketing department of the AoL, there is no office that handles press releases and the like. There is no need for one with backing from some powerful people and institutions like the Times of India and their owners, the Jains. Occasional articles published in the Times of India 42 make up much of the marketing besides the marketing done by practitioners and students.

42 To the best of my knowledge, other than the small advertisement printed in the other newspapers of Bangalore city, the main articles are carried only by the Times of India detailing SSRS’s activities and those of the AoL.
Figure 8. An Art of Living television advertisement: On the ISRO Layout local channel during the filming of Yuva or youth, a Hindi film released in 2004.

The best description of the Art of Living’s advertisements is the word simplicity. There is no frill and fuss to the advertisements. Perhaps what explains it is that there is no advertising agency that handles the advertisements for the Art of Living. Unlike marketing strategy that might state high visibility and advertisements in better known national channels, the Art of Living prefers to focus on advertisements through local cable channels such as the one shown above. Aired during hours when popular movies are shown, such advertisements ensure high visibility and an enviable reach. There is no extra graphic fuss. It is just a plain statement of facts naming the venue and time of the Basic Course. However, the advertisement is being aired at around 6 p.m. during a hugely popular new movie with 6 young actors. This ensures high visibility.
Figure 9. An advertisement very close to where SSRS’s family home in the city of Bangalore. This is a billboard advertisement showing SSRS in contemplation as he walks.

Rather, the advertisements are made by various members from the Art of Living, including members of the Board of Directors, subject to their approval. As one of the board members revealed to me during my interview with him, one of the first slogans of the Art of Living ‘We share, We care’ was proposed by him as was the current one. The Print advertisements have come a long way from early slogans like ‘We care, We share’ to ‘Joy is never tomorrow, It is always now…’. Advertisements in this genre primarily rely upon newspapers and pamphlets that are distributed by a variety of means. The newspaper advertisements are brief to the point of being terse. Other than listing the venue and time that the course is going to be held, there is no other information, nor is it an advertisement in the true sense because there is no persuasion whatsoever of any kind in these advertisements. The same holds true of the television advertisements as is
evident from the picture of the television advertisement above.

The ‘true advertisements’ then are the pamphlets that give information about the course being conducted with more emphasis on the Sudarshan Kriya and its benefits. Often printed in both the local language and in English, it contains a picture of SSRS and the AoL motto ‘Joy is never tomorrow, It is always Now…’. The best advertisements are the practitioners of the course. Discreet propagation is then a better alternative to direct advertisements. One method is to give students in the basic course some pamphlets and then in turn ask them to distribute it to family and friends. These pamphlets are also given out to the ‘marketing groups’ sent out from the DSN or Divya Samaj Nirman(The establishment of a divine society) course(Level 2 or 3 depending on whether you have finished the residential course by then). Perhaps it is my bias speaking but what the AoL presented as a lesson in getting over fear and ego, I perceived as an obvious marketing strategy.

One of the key aspects of the *Divya Samaj Nirman* is to get over all fears and becomes ‘lions and lionesses’. Supposed to inculcate the spirit of charity and service in the students and participants, one of the activities or homework we were given was to go out in groups of three and ‘persuade’ people we knew or even people on the streets to join the course. Since most of us were not comfortable with approaching complete strangers on the streets and soliciting them, most participants adopted the strategy of contacting and ‘cornering’ people in their homes so that they could go nowhere, and also money was more forthcoming. With this approach to marketing that is ‘just an exercise in student fearlessness and egolessness’, the Art of Living comes out on top with at least a few hundred people who will now attend the basic course. Either because they have been
converted to the AoL philosophy of life or because they have already paid up some
money. Money is a prime motivator and the AoL understands this very well. During the
basic introductory talk before the basic course can begin, the only form of advertising is a
cloth banner hung at or near the place where the course will be held and some small\textsuperscript{43}
newspaper advertisements. Generally around a 150-200 people show up for the
introductory talk which is free of cost and perhaps lasts an hour or more if questions are
asked. At the end of the talk, the participants are urged to give whatever they can, ‘even if
it is only 50 rupees.’

Once that money is given participants tend to come in for the course and pay the
full amount due. For those who are economically disadvantaged, the fee is lowered
slightly but a basic fee is still required, even if it is quarter the amount. Better still if it is
given before a person leaves the venue. To my knowledge no one ever took the course
free of cost. The only places where the basic course is free is at the prison as part of the
Prison SMART (Prison Stress Management and Rehabilitation Training) which is
exclusively for prisoners and besides the Sudarshan Kriya also teaches basic life skills
such as how to handle anger, and at the various programs run by the AoL such as the 5H
(Homes, Health, Hygiene, Human values and Harmony make up the 5 H’s) program. The
Prison SMART program and the 5H program are aimed at the economically
disadvantaged and lower strata of society. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar’s popularity has taken on
the aura of a ‘godman’ and without a doubt it is his name and face that keeps the
organization going and the marketing team is savvy enough to ‘Cash In’ on this. In

\textsuperscript{43} Literally and figuratively. The advertisements are announced in the ‘happening today’ section of the city
newspapers and are really tiny with small fonts. Despite this almost non-advertisement, people still show
up for the introductory talk- mainly because they have been told by someone else, have seen the banner or
are one of those who were talked into parting with some money by previous DSN participants.
laypersons terms a godman is a human being who has been invested with godlike powers such as the ability to perform miracles. On being questioned by a news reporter about this conferred godman status this is what he had to say-

"Everybody has the freedom to call me anything. Usually I don't react. Though it is good to be a man of God than to be a man of [the] devil."(Roy, 2001: 17)

However, the AoL’s courses are popular enough on their own to do without extensive marketing in India’s urban centers. The courses are highly rejuvenating according to practitioner accounts and claims made in the advertisements. The AoL has a massive following today with many practitioners, teachers and students alike, coming back to volunteer at the ‘Ashram’ on the outskirts of Bangalore. The BBC has quoted that this organization is the biggest of its kind in India 44 and growing at a phenomenal rate.

To date, an estimated five hundred thousand have undergone the course in Bangalore city alone. Add to this the courses now being taught at almost all urban centers and secondary cities in India and the voluntary aspects of the AoL which ensures that the ‘Basic Health’ course reaches the impoverished and even prisoners45. Add the figures and in one city alone the number reaches above a 100,000. The economics for the whole of India then are staggering, leave alone the rest of the world and AoL’s 143 centers worldwide.

Donations form another source of income and although this has never been discussed overtly, it is a given fact that with so many faithful disciples of the ‘guru of joy’, donations contribute significantly to the stream of revenue.

44 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/3393327.stm
45 However this is very clearly seen as charity work or something that one must do to help the less fortunate. This aspect of the AoL is also very well publicized on the website.
Figure 10. Matrimony is among the many fields into which the AoL has ventured. Bangalore 2004.

The poster in the photograph above for the Art of Living Human Resources is currently working to fill in AoL organizations with employees. The AoL has an information technology company of its own, through which it offers a range of services such as information technology consulting as well as a research center that has just been set up. What struck me was when a professor from my alma mater remarked, on hearing that I was conducting research on the Art of Living, that the AoL was no different than a supermarket chain with spreading retail stores all over the country and abroad. ‘After all’ she told me ‘what are they doing? They are taking this product and then they are marketing it, they are selling it. So even if it is spirituality it is a product, isn’t it? Then they are giving out licenses to all these practitioners who are shopkeepers who spread that product in their respective areas. How is it different because the product is spirituality.’ What struck me was the way the entire organization was reduced to this level of retailing
and products. The State Government of Karnataka (Bangalore is the capital) has recognized the spiritual tourism that is the direct result of the Art of Living and the other spiritual guru who also lives on the outskirts of the city, Sathya Sai Baba. Tourist desks at the airport in the departure lounge of the international airport offer trips to the outskirts of Bangalore city to visit the ashrams of the AoL and the Sai Baba. A large number of foreigners, including a large number of people from the Middle East and Pakistan, not just Westerners, come to visit both these spiritual guru’s and it looks like the spirituality industry is a burgeoning one.

Figure 11. With other ‘non-western foreigners’. Taken from a Rediffmail.com web slide show on the Art of Living. (2005)
During the residential course, I happened to meet a man who had done the basic course at the German ashram. He was an Israeli and was staying at the Ashram for several months, doing seva and attending the courses. He had with him a contraption that was being sold in the western ashrams that made sitting on the floor easier for those unaccustomed to what is a common way to sit in India. There were also several foreigners at the ashram— one European looking gentleman was regularly seen serving meals during dinner time, during the basic course I became acquainted with a Canadian woman who was taking the course while working at the Bangalore office of Honeywell, an international software company, another regularly sang and lead the bhajans or spiritual songs at the satsangs or true gatherings in the evenings at the Vishalakshi Mantap.

The target groups for the AoL are all age groups. There are different courses for different age groups but there is something for everyone. What is admirable is that the
AoL has managed to entice teenagers, an enormously difficult crowd when it comes to spirituality and religion, in any country. ‘Rock Satsangs’ where you dance to the joy in the divine are becoming more and more common. Starting off with bhajans, these often extend into the night usually with everyone ending up on their feet dancing with wild abandon. One need not be in a rock satsang to dance, several times during the evening satsangs with SSRS when he was in Bangalore, teenagers and other young people in the age of 19-21 thought nothing of it to start dancing in the background while guruji sang or while the bhajans played. It is not uncommon to see the ‘Mexican wave’ being performed here. (Gautier, 2002:66) During a satsang in June 2004, several young women who had come from various states such as Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra eagerly and boisterously shouted out various questions to SSRS and then decided to perform the Mexican wave to get SSRS’s attention, which it did.

Figure 13. During a Rock Satsang. Youngsters sway to bhajans. India Today online. 2005.

The concept of money is never really mentioned at the Art of Living. References to it are often made in connection with statements like how “money is a very small thing
in exchange for spiritual peace and joy” as our instructor Anand told us during the introductory talk for the Basic Course. The seemingly total lack of concern for anything material is not hidden. Many practitioners during the three courses I took often wondered how much the instructors were being paid and some even went so far as to make calculations regarding how much this one course by itself would be earning the AoL.

Figure 14. Some young volunteers and people from the audience start dancing during a satsang. 2004

If we look at the basic course for which we were charged 500 rupees a head, with around a 100 people in each course (and there are three batches a day) the earning is around One lakh fifty thousand rupees, a princely sum. During the Divya Samaj Nirman course, someone speculated that the instructors for these courses were paid at least 30% of the fees from the course fees. When I asked how he knew this, he mentioned that one of the people in his group was thinking of becoming an AoL instructor and that
he had heard that the instructors were well paid. During my interview with one of the members of the Board of Directors of the AoL I asked how the instructors survived and whether they were given something like a regular salary.

I was told that that all instructors were paid a ‘basic stipend’ of around two to three thousand rupees. Travel and food expenses were covered by the AoL but everything else was taken care of by the instructors. When I casually mentioned hearing this ‘rumor’ that 30% of the fees went to the instructor, he got visibly upset and stressed that the instructors were only given basic, minimum stipends and no more. This will perhaps remain a mystery because the instructors will not discuss their lives with you, leave alone their salary, and there was no way for me to determine what exactly was behind the 30% story.

However, not everyone works for money. Each course has several volunteers who come in before the class starts and arrange the carpets and make sure the microphone is set up right. If there is going to be a ‘show’ that day then a laptop is brought in and set up so that the students can watch videos of SSRS’s talks. These are often people who have been through the entire gamut of courses offered by the AoL, often several times each. Many are highly educated- one was a doctor, another was a Wharton graduate. Further marketing is done through the many videos that the course participants are shown. During the three courses that I took, we were presented with at least three videos or audio talks for each class.

Often the talks pertained to a particular point touched upon in class that day or like in the case of the residential course which was a special course because one of the
days was *Guru Poornima*, we were shown a video of SSRS in Lake Tahoe, California dated 1998 on Guru Poornima day talking about its relevance.

![Figure 15. A volunteer sets up a video show with the aid of a laptop. Bangalore, 2004.](image)

The marketing savvy of the AoL is then truly revealed only in the recognition of the fact that direct advertising for a product like spirituality will not go down well with an audience that has had its fill of godmen and money making gurus. Indirect advertising, aided by practitioners and students of the courses and video shows with free introductory talks and frequent articles in newspapers courtesy the *Times of India* is how the marketing here happens. (Applbaum, 2004:91) Diversification is another strategy employed. Ayurvedic schools, Vedic schools, Mass communication colleges and T-shirts are only a few of the products that the AoL has diversified into. This ensures visibility and the spreading of the Sudarshan Kriya.
Figure 16. Some of the institutions operated by the Art of Living. These include a school, an international standard residential school and the main administrative center in Jayanagar, Bangalore. 2004

Figure 17. The audio and video CDs sold at the Divine Shop at the Ashram. Bangalore, 2004
Figure 18. The Ayurvedic clinic and shop where many products made by the AoL are sold. Bangalore, 2004.

Figure 19. Clockwise from top left: Prominent liquor baron and politician Vijay Mallya during a more ‘posh’ meet at a five star hotel with SSRS; Indu Jain of the Times of India welcomes SSRS; With the Dalai Lama; Rhea Pillai-celebrity and model, at one of the satsangs. Pillai is an instructor at the AoL. India Today online, 2004.
Rabindranath Tagore, India’s first Nobel Laureate, eminent poet and freedom fighter, on the eve of departure for a tour of Southeast Asia in July 1927 warned against losing the personality of India as ‘Bharat’, the traditional name for India. He felt that foreign rule was the ultimate threat to the identity that was India and if India lost this identity then it would remain forever a slave to foreign powers. He then equated identity with independence and the establishment of this independence by holding on to an essential part of Indian personality which included ‘surplus of her cultural life’, ethic of sacrifice as opposed to the infliction of suffering imposed by foreign rule, inner truth and ‘spiritual essence.’ Today, in the first decade of the 21st century, after India has successfully completed more than 50 years of independence, the immediate threat of western dominance via media and fashion among other things has passed- for now. Constant threats keep appearing such as a recent controversy where a sari clad lady was not allowed to go into a discotheque because she wasn’t ‘westernized’ enough to go into a discotheque.

Constant controversies like these seem to threaten the general idea of Indian-ness or even brings to the fore the question of what being Indian really is. It is not possible to go back to being wholly Indian whatever that is. The idea today is to aim for a ‘swadeshi samaj’- a belated acceptance of a call given by Balgangadhar Lokmanya Tilak, a freedom fighter. Swadeshi Samaj refers to a self ruled society. Free of all foreign rule. Today this ‘foreign rule’ refers to westernization. The only way to reclaim swaraj today is to go back to being essentially Indian while being outwardly western. This essential Indian-ness is expressed through something considered to be essentially Indian-
spirituality. The proliferation of spiritual movements is a move towards maintaining and spreading this feeling of also maintaining and spreading being Indian. (Goswami, 2004:159)

After Independence from British Colonial rule in 1947 after years of agitation, the biggest problem facing Indian democracy and the establishment of government was the consolidation of various states and minorities and different groups, many of whom wanted to be united on the basis of language. A good example would be the agitation for the creation of different states along language lines such as the demand for Andhra Pradesh (or the land of the Andhra’s) populated exclusively with the Telegu speaking people, a Dravidian language group. At the same time there were wars in Kashmir and Hyderabad and the Kingdom of Mysore, which is the modern day state of Karnataka fighting to retain independence from the newly formed secular government. Gandhi had been assassinated and the trauma of partition lingered. Upheaval was the order of the day. At a time like this, the views of various eminent Indians such as Rabindranath Tagore were of extreme importance for they were the intellectuals of Indian society and the calls for unity was under the commonality of something ‘essentially’ Indian—‘Spirituality.’ (Hansen, 1999:22)

There was an insistence on spirituality then as there is now, as something defining Eastern character and as an essential part of anything Eastern and ‘oriental’. This reifying statement was perhaps essential in the definition of a nation and its people that had for more than a hundred years been subject to colonial rule. The chaos in the nation needed to be soothed by a common unifying factor. To unite groups of people who it is believed are more united now than they ever were before, spirituality would have been the
common denominator rather than language or customs or even religion which is practiced in such diverse ways that sometimes sects within Hinduism will clash with each other over differing beliefs.

According to Weiner, ‘it is somewhat remarkable the Indian government survived at all.’ (Weiner, 1956:283) The government had before it the unenviable task of uniting several different groups and factions as well as groups of people from different religions. Intellectuals such as Rabindranath Tagore advocated the use of spirituality to at the same time to emphasize an essential difference and distinction between the ‘materialistic’ west and the spiritual east. To give a partitioned nation the hope of a different goal- the building of a nation that had at its core that ephemeral quality known as spirituality that at once defined a group of people and excluded another was perfect.

However, in the 58 years since independence, the situation has not improved much in terms of national unity. Whereas the economy in India has opened up and there has been considerable unity in parts of the country especially in the urban areas where people from different parts of the country come together to work, a division exists still in terms of caste and class as well as language. In recent years, especially in the South (of India), language has been a major political issue and has caused civil disturbances. Most people in the South resent the imposition of Hindi as the national language as they see it as the imposition of one minority language over another. Mass communication has been another factor that has contributed to the division and strengthening of regions. Each ‘region’ has its own film industry and there is no common meeting ground for these as each claims to have its own special ‘character’.
There is a general ambiguity still as to the nature of the ‘Indian’ character. Indian leaders have had to ‘reconcile the social structure and traditions with what they feel are the needs of a modern state.’ (Weiner, 1956:286) This change however has not been fast enough for the more western intellectual crowd (consisting of Indians) who are not satisfied with the rate of social change. Indian society then is at a crucial point and is facing opposition to different kinds of change from various parties. Some ‘Hindu-minded’ groups are demanding the ban of cow slaughter as well as legislative moves regarding equal representation for women, which has been recently taken up by Sonia Gandhi. On the other hand are those western educated intellectuals who are demanding radical social change and an intellectual revolution in society. And then there are the middle class Indians, the vast majority of the urban population who are concerned with aspects of westernization. Should they adopt just western technology and not western values? Westernization here applies to much more than superficial trappings such as clothes or the preference for English as the main mode of communication in everyday life. What is worthy of concern is the adoption of the nuclear family as the main structure of family as opposed to the joint family which is the only means of social security for a large majority of senior citizens in India and the changes that these have consequently wrought on Indian society.

The fear here is then the complete adoption of western ways over and above ancient traditions and heritage. At what point will this adoption go all the way and completely ameliorate the existence of Indian society is the underlying fear. What does one do to counteract this fear of complete takeover and Western domination. Until a strong government can come to the fore and deal with the problems facing modern day

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India solutions will have to be found to hold together, if only temporarily, to unite warring groups and factions with ideologies and goals that are so different that it seems impossible to even try and unite them. “Culturally integrating the Westernized elite and the Hindu-minded groups, minimizing the present divisive tendencies of linguistic and other provincial groups, and narrowing the gap between economic expectations and fulfillment cannot be achieved without a strong central government.”(Weiner, 1956:291)

India has yet to come up with an answer for a strong central government and in the meanwhile a solution is needed and that solution is spirituality. Despite language and regional differences, caste and class differences, urban and rural differences what can bring about a measurement of unity and identification with the nation and notion of Bharat Mata or Mother India in the time of chaos is spirituality. This chaos left over from pre-independence and the current chaos which is the result of confusion over identity and the adoption and rejection of customs which may or may not be deemed as Western. In such a situation, a need for stability is offered by spirituality which offers an immediate solution in the absence of a stable government and most importantly a stable identity. Perhaps more than offering a stable identity to an Indian, spirituality offers ways of interpreting and translating the ‘historical dislocations of the present’ (Goswami, 2004:283) in and through a ‘nativist, historicist and idealist idiom’. To be able to translate the dislocation of personality and interpret it through more local discourse and tradition such as spirituality- something that has been considered inherently Indian. Spirituality was used as a call for unification before the movements to oust the British and gain freedom for Bharat, and it is being used now to interpret the transformations wrought by capitalism and the opening up of the economy.
Earlier used as a tool by Hindu groups such as the RSS and the VHP and later taking shape as a major political discourse under the rule of the BJP, spirituality has shifted from its position as a ‘Hindu’ practice in India to an element of unity and a powerful marketing tool to market the idea of identity and also to market the idea of nationalism in less strident tones than those used by the organizations referred to above. How successful it has been in its goals and its ties with political organizations is the subject of another study altogether but spirituality has from personal experience and observation been a subtle but powerful mobilizing force for Indian society. Towards establishing a Swadesh and to help distinguish a personality that stands autonomously and independent of Western defined aspects.
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