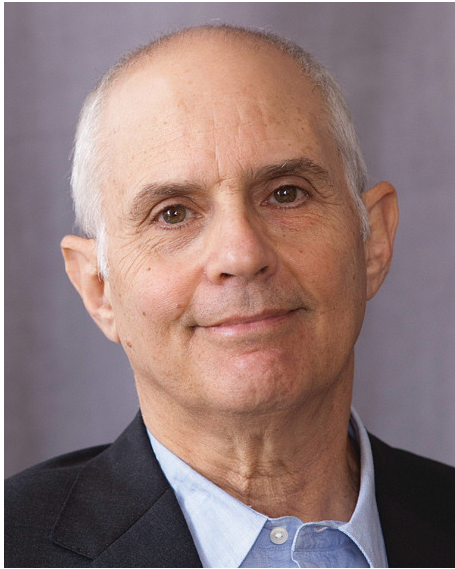


'Vedanta and yoga perfect match for certain American values'

BY MAYANK CHHAYA

There has always been a pervasive but undocumented feeling that Indian philosophy, as manifest in Vedanta on the intellectual plain and yoga on the physical plain, has very significantly influenced the West in general and America in particular. That feeling now finds a meticulously constructed scholastic endorsement in the form of an important new book.

Author Philip Goldberg's 'American Veda—From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation, How Indian Spirituality Changed the West' (Harmony Books, 398 pages, \$26) offers a comprehensive account of



Philip Goldberg

the inroads made by Indian philosophy since the early 19th century. In an interview with Hi India Goldberg dwells on how and why Indian philosophy has had such a profound impact in the West.

Hi India: To what do you attribute the fact that Indian philosophy has had as deep an impact on the West as your book so carefully establishes?

Philip Goldberg: The combination of Vedanta and Yoga was a perfect match for certain American values: freedom of choice and religion, individuality, scientific rationality, and pragmatism. They appealed especially to well-educated Americans who were discontent with ordinary religion and unsatisfied by secularism, giving them a way to be authentically spiritual without compromising their sense of reason, their consciences or their personal inclinations.

Hi: Is it as much a tribute to the openness of the West as it is to the appeal of Indian philosophy?

PG: Yes, indeed. I think the great teachers who came here from India were very much aware of that, and they adapted the teachings accordingly.

Hi: Do you think the mainstreaming of Indian philosophy, as manifest in the widespread practice of yoga, has to do a great deal with the fact that a lot of it comes across as secular and even agnostic?

PG: Yes, I think the remarkable growth of the "spiritual but not religious" cohort of Americans would have been unthinkable without access to the practices derived from Hinduism and Buddhism. In addition, the philosophy was presented so rationally that its premises could be regarded as hypotheses, and the practices were so uniform and so widely applicable that they lent themselves to scientific experimentation.

Hi: Is there a sense among Americans drawn to Indian philosophy that it is dogma

free and therefore non-threatening?

PG: Yes, and premises that might be taken as dogma were usually presented by teachers as ideas to be verified by one's own experience, not as take-it-or-leave-it or believe-it-or-else doctrine.

Hi: The Bhagvad Gita, for instance, is essentially a distilled, unemotional, remarkably modern code of conduct that is shorn of any denominational doctrines. Do you think that helps the cause of Indian philosophy?

PG: You bet. And not just a code of conduct, but also a manual for self-realization. People of all faiths and no faith have cherished it for that reason.

of internalizing the core values of Indian philosophy. Do you think people in America are conscious of this?

PG: Some are conscious of it, and therefore grateful to the Indian legacy. Others are not: it's seeped into the American consciousness in subtle but profound ways.

Hi: You speak about Americans accepting everything, from falafel to philosophy, depending on the circumstances. What do you think made the circumstances right for them to accept some of the core philosophical concepts from India?

PG: The rise of secularism, the success of science and especially the widespread alienation from both materialistic values and mainstream religion, which was not providing

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"In February 1968 the Beatles went to India for an extended stay with their new guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. It may have been the most momentous spiritual retreat since Jesus spent those forty days in the wilderness. The media frenzy over the Fab Four made known to the sleek, sophisticated West that meek, mysterious India had something of value. Our understanding and practice of spirituality would never be the same," is how the author begins the first chapter of the book.

Quite apart from the fact that the beginning is designed to be an attention grabber, it is obviously the author's considered conclusion drawn from long and comprehensive involvement in the subject. There are many aspects to Goldberg but perhaps the most important from the standpoint of this book is that he is someone who has internalized India.

He points out that translated Hindu texts were very much a part of the libraries of John Adams and Ralph Waldo Emerson. From there those ideas permeated to Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman among others. The timing of the book could not be more opportune in America when religious lines are getting very sharply defined and in turn even influencing its politics.

In recounting Thoreau's perspective about the Gita, Goldberg refers to a much quoted passage from the book *Walden*. Thoreau writes, "In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvad Gita, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seems puny and trivial."

Goldberg's 'American Veda' is precisely the kind of book that Indian American readers would do well to add to their library to become reacquainted with the power of Indian thought.

-Mayank Chhaya

Hi: Does the fact that Hinduism is not institutionalized, codified, congregational or instructional help in its spread?

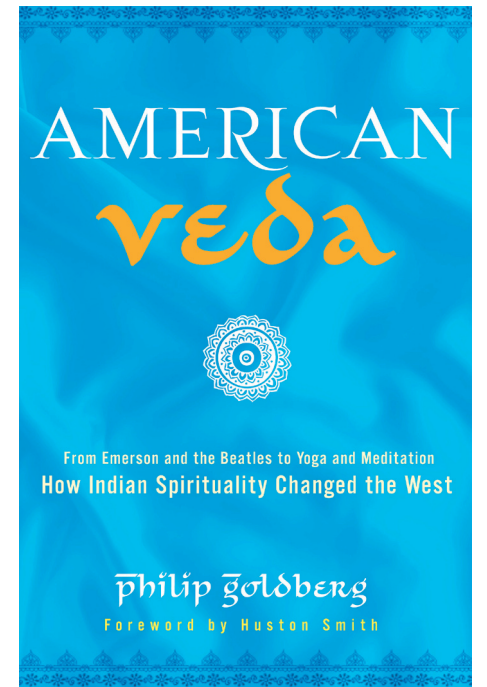
PG: Certainly that's true of the Hindu-based teachings that caught on with Americans, which were not even called Hinduism as such. The fact that Hinduism, even in India, is decentralized, diverse, non-institutional, etc., made it convincing that anyone can adopt the teachings without converting to a foreign religion.

Hi: One detects two distinct trends in your book in support of your primary contention about how Indian spirituality changed the West. One trend is at the operational level where words such as mantra, guru, karma and pundits have so seamlessly become part of the mainstream lexicon. The other trend is much deeper in terms

reliable methods of personal transformation and transcendence.

Hi: When you talk of "Vedization of America", do you mean that it has been a conscious development? Could it, for instance, also not have been a consequence of secularization/pluralization that the rise of agnostic information technologies?

PG: If you mean, could the trends I describe be attributed to the growth of pluralism and other social forces, independent of the Indian influence, it is very hard to say. Certainly, the combination of factors made for a perfect storm. I tend to think that the experiential practices of meditation and yoga, and the intellectual framework of Vedanta, accelerated, deepened and broadened what might have been an inevitable but amorphous evolution.



Hi: In your long experience studying this subject, are people surprised when you point out the widespread influence of Indian philosophy? What are their typical reactions?

PG: The most common response I've had is similar to my own once I dug into my formal research for the book: "I knew Indian spiritual teachings had influenced America, but I didn't realize it was quite that widespread or that profound." They're surprised by the subtlety of it, and by the non-obvious streams and tributaries through which the teachings spread.

Hi: Do you apprehend any organized backlash or, at the very least, pushback against once it is popularly recognized that Indian philosophy is more deeply entrenched here than they have understood?

PG: Not a big one, but some of it is inevitable. There has always been a backlash from both mainstream religion – conservative Christians in particular – and the anti-religious left. Vivekananda faced up to it in 1893, and all the important gurus were confronted by it. Right now, there's an anti-yoga campaign by some Christian preachers. I'd be very pleased if my book becomes a lightning rod for such a controversy. Bring 'em on!

Hi: How do you look at trends such as people saying that yoga is a Hindu tool and ought to be countered with a Christian yoga?

PG: That's a more complicated issue than is often realized. The question, "Is yoga a form of Hinduism?" depends entirely on how one defines both yoga and Hinduism.

That there are people teaching Christian Yoga and Jewish Yoga strikes me as a backhanded compliment to one of the great glories of the Vedic tradition: its universality and adaptability.

That having been said, the idea that yoga is "a Hindu tool," i.e., a form of stealth conversion, strikes me as a projection by Christians of their own messianic drive to convert the "heathen." That conversion is not in the Hindu repertoire – and that the gurus and swamis and yoga masters are content to have their students become better Christians – is hard for many to comprehend.

Hi: Do you think that it is the intellectual underpinnings of Vedanta or the mind/body wellness aspects of yoga which have made people more comfortable accepting them?

PG: It's been the combination of the two, and it's hard to separate them. Certainly, in recent years, the popularity of yoga as a wellness system has been dominant, but that has also exposed millions of people to at least the basic premises of Vedanta.

(For more details, readers can visit the web site www.philipgoldberg.com)