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Indian Who Built Yoga Empire Works on Politics

By [LYDIA POLGREEN](#)

HARIDWAR, India — The sun slumbered well beneath the horizon, but Swami Ramdev had been up for hours. Swathed in a saffron loincloth, he led his charges, a few hundred devotees in this holy city on the Ganges River and tens of millions more watching on television, through a rapid-fire series of [yoga](#) poses.



“If you sweat this much in the morning, you will never get old,” he shouted, the Chiclet-white dazzle of his smile undimmed by the wild bush of his beard. His own 50-ish body, lithe and supple as it whipped through the poses, underscored the point.

Without skipping a beat, Swami Ramdev, who as one of [India](#)’s most popular and influential gurus has reintroduced yoga to India’s masses, segued seamlessly into his latest passion: politics.

“We clean up our bodies,” he cried. “Then we will clean up our democracy!”

Swami Ramdev plans to do for the body politic what he has already done to the country’s creaky physiques: whip it into shape. He announced last month that he would found a political party that would field candidates for each of the 543 parliamentary seats in India’s next general election in 2014.

“What the people need is honest, brave and responsible leadership,” he said in an interview at the sprawling campus of his rapidly expanding yoga, natural foods and medicine empire in northern India. The country’s political system is riddled with corruption and riven by the deep divisions of religion and caste, he said. Tapping into the ancient Indian wisdom that gave birth to yoga, and the holy texts like the Vedas and Upanishads, is the only way to excise those cancers, he contended.

“We must have a total revolution,” he said.

In some ways Swami Ramdev harks back to India’s earliest leaders with a message of self-reliance, national pride and traditional Indian values. But with his vast yoga empire and legions of followers on television and the Web, he is also a product and symbol of the New India, a yogic fusion of Richard Simmons, Dr. Oz and [Oprah Winfrey](#), irrepressible and bursting with Vedic wisdom.

Swami Ramdev says India has relied too much on the system of government it inherited from its British colonizers and lost the traditional systems of governing that held sway for centuries.

“The British didn’t make policies to make the country stronger,” he said. “They made them to extract the maximum resources from the country.”

Multinational corporations have no place in India, he contends. India should be steeped in its own culture.

“Be Indian,” he exhorted his followers on a recent morning. “Speak Indian languages. Wear Indian clothes. Drink Indian drinks.”

All things foreign, he argues, like Coca-Cola and hamburgers, pollute the Indian spirit and weaken it. The [World Health Organization](#) is a favorite target: it is, he says, “a big conspiracy” cooked up by American pharmaceutical companies.

Even cricket, India’s beloved national pastime, comes in for criticism as a British import that encourages drinking and immodest ogling of cheerleaders.

He does not plan to run for office himself, he said, and his proposed policies are a hodgepodge. He would fight corruption by making it punishable by death, he said. He would force those hiding billions of dollars abroad in so-called black money, or illegal wealth, to bring that money home to invest in India.

“That loot needs to come home for development,” he said, offering no details on how he might make this happen. “This money will change the whole of the country.”

These views have touched a chord with his followers, many of them from the striving lower middle class who find themselves torn between tradition and the allure of modern life.

“We are very frustrated with the politics of India today,” said Jitender Pratap Singh, a teacher who attended a yoga session with the swami here. He voted for the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party in the last election, but was eager to join the swami’s party.

“I want change for the next generation,” he said. “Yoga can rescue India.”

But whether Swami Ramdev’s political message will find a wider audience remains to be seen. Indian politics is a peculiar ecosystem that favors creatures nurtured practically from birth in its unique habitat. Outsiders, no matter how popular or celebrated they may be in their respective walks of life, seldom succeed. Hardly a handful of film stars, business tycoons or religious leaders have tested the waters in politics, and none have met with any real success.

Some religious leaders here said they were glad to see the swami dip a toe in politics.

Digambar Jitender Puri, 36, a sadhu, or holy man, attending the [Kumbh Mela](#) festival this month on the banks of the Ganges River here, said Swami Ramdev was doing important work.

“He is thinking in the right direction and talking about the problems of the nation like corruption, poverty, economy,” Mr. Jitender said. “I think he will succeed.”

But other holy men were skeptical.

“Ramdev is a successful yogi, but politics will puncture him,” said Sri Nityanand Puri. “God has given him some gifts, but his ego will finish him.”

The hurly-burly of politics is no place for holy men, he said.

“He thinks that he can fix all the wrongs,” Mr. Nityanand said. “He will be consumed by the dirt of politics.”

As the son of an impoverished farmer who made an improbable rise to the uppermost ranks of India’s spiritual leaders, Swami Ramdev sees little need for modesty. His winning smile and giggling shrugs suggest self-effacement, but the appearance is deceiving.

“I am very powerful,” he averred in an interview. “The people love me.”

From the campus of his organization, [the Patanjali Yogpeeth Trust](#), he oversees a growing empire. Here, on the outskirts of Haridwar, he has a hospital and an ayurvedic medical school and research institution, which teach an ancient system of natural healing, as well as a vast agricultural and processing operation that cranks out everything from shampoo to juice and herbal supplements.

Lately, his international profile has been on the rise. He has [led yoga classes for huge crowds](#) in Nepal, Japan, the United States and elsewhere.

His organization's holdings now include a small island off the coast of Scotland, donated by a wealthy Scottish-Indian couple. He is also planning to open a yoga and health center in the Houston suburbs on nearly 100 acres of donated land.

His venture into domestic politics is just the next chapter of his divine mission, Swami Ramdev said.

"Now I see the light after the night," he said. "If India is saved, then the whole world will be saved."

Hari Kumar contributed reporting.