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# **FROM MTV TO MODI: THE SAFFRONISATION OF THE INDIAN FITNESS INFLUENCER**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Fitness influencers in India gained prominence post-liberalisation as practitioners distinct from explicitly Hindu yoga and wellness experts. These influencers ‘launched’ their careers through participation in newly-created secular and globalised channels such as reality television (particularly MTV), modelling, and non-Hindu health practices such as pilates and therefore had a large and visible presence of religious minorities. However, this nature of the fitness influencer has shifted dramatically over the last decade, with the division between fitness influencers and Hindu supremacist yoga practitioners (whose role in Hindutva politics has been well documented) breaking down, a falling number of minoritised influencers and a corresponding increase in Savarna Hindu influencers, and finally the push to formally include fitness influencers into the Hindu state machinery as seen by the Fit India Dialogue 2020.

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## KEYWORDS

India; fitness influencers; hindutva; saffronisation



**Figure 1: Gurbani Judge and Swami Om on the Bigg Boss hot seat, a reality show they both participated in; example of a direct conflict between a fitness influencer and a Hindu ascetic; in the duration of the show they both spoke about health and wellness but frequently had fights over ideology, involving one incident where Swami Om flung urine and Judge and other contestants.**

## THE FITNESS INFLUENCER AND THE HINDU ASCETIC

Sahil Khan was an actor in the 2001 Bollywood movie *Style*; Gurbani Judge was a contestant and eventual semi-finalist of the 2006-07 Indian reality television show *Roadies*; Yasmin Karachiwala opened the first pilates studio in India in 2003 after gaining a pilates certification from United States. Khan and Judge are now both fitness influencers in the traditional sense with over ten million and one point five million followers on Instagram and Karachiwala is a bestselling fitness trainer with multiple studios across India, multiple high-profile Bollywood actors as clients and over a million followers on Instagram.

These three, to me, are emblematic of the early Indian fitness influencers who gained a platform using secular, globalised mechanisms and later monetised that platform into film appearances, brand deals, and business ventures. All three are also respectively Muslim, Sikh, and Muslim.

During the time that these three were establishing their respective followings, a parallel transformation was occurring in the fitness space: the establishing of Baba Ramdev and his yoga empire [4]. Ramdev's yoga program began airing on Aastha TV in 2003 in India and overseas, using much the same technologies and global economic transformations as the secular fitness influencers but for the exact opposite purpose: while they "indigenised" the global culture [6], Ramdev constructed his own Hindu nationalist culture and disseminated it to the world to amass, similar to the influencers, large followings which he later used to launch business ventures and political alliances, and is currently a billionaire founder of Patanjali Ayurved Limited.

This opposition between influencer and the yoga guru was reinforced by the structures they occupied. Yoga gurus such as Ramdev often have affiliations with Hindu right-wing organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliates [4] who have a history of targeting Bollywood celebrities and MTV. In 2011, the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti demanded that *MTV Splitsvilla* be banned [8]. In 2014, members of the student wing of RSS blackened the faces of *Roadies* anchors and chased them off of premises. Though fitness influencers and yoga practitioners allegedly performed the same role of promoting fitness, they culturally occupied very different positions in Indian society.

## CATEGORY COLLAPSE

Christopher Jaffrelot in a 2018 interview discusses how Hindutva has escaped explicitly Hindutva organisations and entered the public sphere, visible in the rewriting of textbooks and erasing the country's Muslim heritage by renaming cities and roads and railway stations etc and terms it saffronisation [1]. That is the process that has occurred with fitness influencers as well, with the previously secular category of fitness influencer merging with the Hindutva-affiliated Yogi, erasing their previous distinctions while also sidelining the previously visible minority influencers.

Sapna Vyas (@coachsapna on Instagram), with 1.6 million Instagram followers is an example of this saffronised fitness Influencer. She's a fitness coach specialising in weight-loss and like Karachiwala has American fitness certifications and does not centre her training around Yoga, but she is the daughter of Jay Narayan Vyas, an ex-Gujarat Member of Parliament (MP) from the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) who was Gujarat's health minister and 'launched' her career. Vyas, though on the surface appears to emulate the earlier fitness influencers, striking similar poses and wearing similar outfits and using and propagating similar techniques, used Hindutva channels and connections to gain a platform and endorsement deals, like the Yogis. She's unconnected to Bollywood or television, but has many connections to the state. Her feed has many photos of her with various national teams, with the sports ministry, and holding sessions in government colleges and schools. On twitter, she interacts often with BJP MP's and editors of Hindu right-wing magazines, but not, like the previous generation of influencers, actors or other mainstream media personalities.

## FIT INDIA MOVEMENT/DIALOGUE

Which brings us to the Fit India Movement, launched in 2019, an apparent acknowledgement by the BJP government that there is a distinction between fitness influencers and Yogis and an effort to bridge the gap since it is a separate effort than World Yoga Day and the Ministry of Ayush, and supported by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports. The movement specifically targets "influencers" and "enthusiasts" rather than specific athletes, with a great stress on hash-tag campaigns and online presence, which is in-line with BJP's hyperfocus on creating "brands" [10].

In 2020, as a part of the Fit India Movement, Modi hosted a Fit India Dialogue, a live-streamed event where he interacted with fitness influencers, a term applied to professional athletes and Yogis. This was the most blatant example of saffronisation of the fitness influencer - an exercise now that has gone beyond individual influencers to the Hindutva machinery itself seeking out influencers to expand their reach into previously untapped spaces. In the dialogue were Rujuta Diwekar, a celebrity fitness expert with a similar career trajectory as to Yasmin Karachiwala with foreign credentials and celebrity clients but with a Hindu last name and more focus on postural



Figure 2: the Fit India Dialogue, 2020, showing Modi and the other panellists.

[12]; Shri Swami Shiva Shyanam Saraswati, a Yogi and the most evident proof of the deliberate effort to saffronise fitness influencers; Milind Soman, an actor and an athlete that often interacts with Ms. Sapna Vyas on Twitter and on YouTube, and, fascinatingly, Afshan Ashiq. Ashiq is a Kashmiri football player who, during her interaction, discussed the backlash she'd faced from her family and community because of her playing football and how Kashmiri athletes with their lungs acclimatised to low-oxygen air had a stamina edge to their counterparts from the plains and how much joy it gave her to watch young girls and women play and exercise outdoors. There was no mention of the fact that she'd been photographed pelting stones at officers in 2017 and after that had been harassed offline and online, nor was there a hint of the scathing criticisms of the Indian state's treatment of Kashmir she shared in later interviews [2]. Perhaps, more than anything, Ashiq's presence on the panel highlights the saffronisation of fitness influencer and more importantly, the purpose of the exercise. To reach the demographic represented by these individuals while taking away their voices.

## CONCLUSION

Indian fitness influencers that gained prominence in the secular field of fitness and modelling, separate from Hindutva-affiliated yoga, have slowly gone through a process of saffronisation with the distinctions between them and the Yogis breaking down as well as them being formally inducted into the Hindutva machinery.

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