Review

Calcutta Yoga: Buddha Bose and the Yoga Family of Bishnu Ghosh and Yogananda, by Jerome Armstrong. New Alexandria, VA: Webstrong LLC Publishing, 2018. vii + 652 pp., £52 (pb). ISBN 978-0-69211-671-5 (pb).

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The life of the famous Paramahansa Yogananda looms large, not only in the global imagination of yoga practitioners but, also, if not more so, in India. Yogananda is a luminary figure in the history of the twentieth-century spread of modern yoga outside of India. His 1946 book, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, is part of, what would seem, at least, an unofficial canon of ‘must read’ yoga-related books that ‘became one of the top-selling spiritual books of all time’ (p. v). Perhaps, due to the *gravitas* of such an individual, this is partly the reason why this book by Jerome Armstrong, *Calcutta Yoga: Buddha Bose and the Yoga Family of Bishnu Ghosh and Yogananda*, is as large as it is. At close to 660 pages it is encyclopedic in its volume. Spread across an overwhelming 98 chapters spanning 13 sections, not including front and end matter, the book begins with a handy family tree of the Ghosh and Bose family (p. i), followed by a map of Calcutta (p. ii) and a map of the suburb in north Calcutta where most of the story, even to this day, continues to unfold (p. iii).

This is certainly an important contribution to contextualizing this less than well-known side to Yogananda’s worldly life. However, as the introduction clearly states (p. v), this book is not altogether about Yogananda. Instead, it is about Buddha Lal Bose and his story; which, in part, is significantly intertwined with Yogananda’s and his brother Bishnu Charan Ghosh.

There is an auto-ethnographic touch to Armstrong’s prose that this reviewer greatly enjoyed. Particularly the way the reader is invited to explore the author’s personal journey and anecdotal responses, and along the way to connect with the different and intersecting lives of those who feature in this book, as well as their living relatives whom Armstrong also interviews in this ethno-historical tome. For example, in Chapter 11, which is only three pages long, we are afforded a glimpse of Armstrong visiting Pitambar Lane and the Garpar Road area in North Calcutta where the protagonists of this

story first meet, and sense his excitement at walking through the same lanes to the still-standing house owned by relatives of the Bose family, then we see photos of Armstrong sitting on the bed where Yogananda also sat (pp. 46–48).

The opening chapters capture a time past with the interracial marriage of Buddha Bose's parents, Emily Johnson and Rajah Bose, who met in London towards the end of the nineteenth century. Due in part to both being stage performers and magicians, and to their emigration to India, after having three children the marriage ultimately failed, with an unimaginable impact on the lives of all concerned. Abandoned, both emotionally and financially, by her family back in England, Emily Johnson was forced to accept the financial help of her father-in-law, Raj Shekar Bose, to help her finally leave Calcutta. However, this was on the condition of leaving behind Buddha Bose, while Emily and Buddha's two other siblings returned to England.

This introduction is quite compelling. The book builds on this emotional premise to uncover a truly fascinating account of the ways in which this mature, tense, complicated, colonial period in Calcutta created a space for the daring and adventurous young men of north Calcutta to explore the imported muscle culture and physical ideals from the West with the local physical culture of *bayam* (Part Three). It portrays how this became represented in popular media through the merging of the practice and aesthetic of what we know today as body-building with the local health bodily cultures that came to be known as yoga (p. 299), through the context of famous Calcutta Athletes (p. 129). Not to mention how, through a mingling of pan-Asian spirits after Russia was defeated by Japan, this inspired Indian nationalists to push forward with their own struggle for independence from the British, which created a fascinating cultural exchange of jiu jitsu teachers from Japan with yoga teachers from India (Chapter 18). For instance, we learn from a letter written in 1931 by Buddha Bose to his brother, Dennis, that 'Jiu-Jitsu swept through Bengal in the 1920s, capturing the focus of Bengali youth' (p. 83). Part of this hand-written letter is reproduced in photographs (pp. 92–93).

On the same page, we come to learn that the Tagore family are most often credited with popularizing this cultural import. And, here, I thought that the Tagores were just good at poetry.

As a scholar currently working on contemporary yoga culture and the wellness tourism industry in Japan, I was most interested to read the sections pertaining to the development of links between Calcutta and Tokyo (Part 12). Also, how Bishnu Ghosh first went to Japan (p. 473); which later paved the way for the infamous Bikram Choudhary, of Bikram Yoga, who was sent, seemingly as a third choice, for the short-lived role of a yoga emissary to Japan. During this time, he modified the yoga taught to him by his teacher in a heated room so as to facilitate the comfort of the students in a wintry, poorly insulated Tokyo yoga studio; which paved the way for the development of what almost every global yogi and their yoga mat knows today as 'Hot Yoga' (Part 13).

The book is also full of fascinating stories and reproductions of many historical documents spanning more than a century of the life of Calcutta Yoga and its untold influence on the world of yoga. This includes photos of the main protagonists, as well as a multitude of magazine covers, articles and newspaper clippings in several languages.

Some of the photos of the more daring physical feats that show the more circus-like performativity of contortion artists (pp. 467, 492), such as people enduring elephants standing on them (p. 503) or having a motorbike ridden over them at speed (p. 483), demonstrate the bizarre way in which the untold Calcutta Yoga story helps to add several layers of texture to the continuously unfolding story of modern yoga. One of the ways that this confluence of aesthetics, athleticism and transcultural flows merge, that astounds this reviewer, is how aspects of yogic culture, particularly the abdominal muscular control of *navli* (pp. 128, 269), became an important entertainment, dare I say, gimmick, which became quite the crowd pleaser.

It is impossible to give a fair and balanced account of all the content in this meticulously researched and, overall, interesting book. However, the length is, perhaps, too long. One wonders if it could not have been culled to a third the length and still have retained the more salient parts. Perhaps, it could have been better presented to the reader as a series of smaller books. The length, breadth and depth of the book is nonetheless, impressive. However, in trying to present the contents of a not so straightforward collection of stories, Armstrong, it seems, was left with a difficult choice of how to lay it out. As a result, there are often instances where the information in certain sections feels as if it could have been situated in a different sequence that might create more congruency to the overarching narrative and temporality contained within. In short, it seems to jump around a fair bit without much knowing why. As well, the very short length of some chapters is a curious thing. Therefore, because of these revelations, this reviewer found the index to be quite a valuable tool to navigate this fascinating, and now told, story of yoga in Calcutta. While it is eminently possible that one could read the book cover to cover, it, perhaps, serves just as well as a resource to dive into for specific historical moments pertaining to the lives of Calcutta Yoga.