

SEX, SCANDAL & DOWNWARD DAWG!
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VANITY FAIR

"Where there's music, there
can be no evil."
—Gervasio

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Since 1994, thousands of fans of Bikram Choudhury—whose eponymous brand of heated yoga gained devotees including George Clooney, Lady Gaga, and Jeff Bridges—have flocked to his teacher-training program. Some women in his orbit now say that Choudhury sexually harassed and even sexually assaulted them, and five are suing him. BENJAMIN WALLACE explores the guru's journey from healer to alleged predator



PHOTOGRAPHS: LEFT, BY DAVID STRICK/REDUX; RIGHT, BY REBECCA GREENFIELD/POLARIS

Bikram Fee

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Bikram Choudhury directing a class in San Diego, 2010. *Opposite*, the license plate on one of Choudhury's Rolls-Royces.



Is the Heat

B

efore she broke up with her boyfriend, quit her job, attempted suicide, and began using drugs and alcohol, before the nightmares in which Bikram Choudhury takes her and some other women into a room and sets them on fire, the woman sitting across the table from me in a lawyer's office in Oakland, California—I'll call her Jane—says she had a carefree, sunny disposition. In 2004, then 21 years old, she was just another young American woman who fell under the spell of Bikram yoga, the original celebrity-favored form of "hot yoga"—a series of 26 postures and two breathing exercises performed in a precise sequence for 90 minutes in a room heated to 105 degrees. She had been working as a manicurist when she took her first class at a Bikram studio, and she'd fallen hard for it. "I loved it," she told me. "It became part of my daily routine. It gave me energy; it was healing, it was spiritual, it was a workout, it was everything combined into one spot." As her commitment to the yoga discipline deepened, her businessman boyfriend surprised her with a gift that deeply touched her: he wanted to pay \$10,900 for her to attend one of founder Bikram Choudhury's twice-yearly teacher trainings so that she could share

with others what had been so meaningful to her. And so, in September 2010—joining some 380 other mostly female Bikramites, from 33 countries—she went to San Diego, where that fall's training was being held at the Town and Country Resort hotel.

A Bikram teacher training is many things. Obligatory for anyone who wants to teach Bikram yoga, it's a nine-week boot camp, featuring two 90-minute classes six days a week, plus anatomy lessons, posture clinics, and meandering Choudhury soliloquies. It's an ordeal of over-stressed bodies and poor hygiene, a place where, according to several accounts, the combination of heat and vigorous activity causes people to vomit and weep and pass out and lose bladder control in a room full of their peers. It's a mass education, with numbing hours of rote memorization of the 45-page Bikram "dialogue" (i.e., the class script: "Your spine is bending backwards from the coccyx to the neck / Arms back, lean back, way back, fall back," etc.), overseen by an autocratic leader (permission is required to go to the bathroom; no one may wear green, a color Choudhury hates) and intensified by deprivations of food, water, sleep, and sex (forbidden).

It's also a Bollywood film festival: most nights, though the next day's program will begin at eight A.M., the hundreds of trainees gather in a darkened tent and stay up, often past three in the morning, watching Hindi-language films while Choudhury merrily narrates what's playing out on-screen and name-drops which actors he knows, according to a source. How the action and comedy movies are supposed to advance one's yoga practice or teaching efficacy is never explained, but attendance is mandatory. If you nod off mid-movie, one of the staff volunteers monitoring the room will shake you awake. A Bikram training, in other words, has some of the flavor of a 70s est event. Choudhury himself has likened it to "brainwashing."

Above all, a training is Choudhury's biannual moment of sustained stardom, when he gets to be Andrew Dice Clay with a Bengali accent, dubbing a bosomy trainee "Miss Boobs," by several accounts, or asking a man he deems insufficiently tough, "Boss, you got one ball or two?" And Choudhury—who at 67 still conducts classes in his signa-

ture outfit of black Speedo, jewel-encrusted Rolex, and headset mike, his chest waxed, his thinning black hair pulled into a top-knot, his baby-soft skin radiating a miasma of cologne—has fully embraced his guru prerogatives. Throughout the nine weeks, during daytime classes—when he perches on a raised leather chair with cool air blowing directly on him while everyone else melts in the suffocatingly hot tent—as well as evening lectures and the Bollywood-film viewings, he surrounds himself with clusters of lithe trainees who brush his hair and massage him. "He'd walk into the room," Jane says, "and people would literally put their hands together in prayer and get down on the floor and bow down, out of respect for him."

Jane says she was flattered, at first, when Choudhury paid her special attention, telling her after one class, "There were hundreds of bodies in that room tonight but you were the only one that listened to me. . . . Put your mat upfront and close to me every class." She did as her guru asked, and initially he showered her with praise and took special care to correct her postures. "You kind of felt you were in a safe place," Jane says. "It was such an honor to be around him." As the weeks passed, though, she says that Choudhury's comments took on a creepy complexion as he began weaving sexual innuendo into his patter. Jane says she was offended, but felt she was too far into training to back out, and she didn't want to disappoint her boyfriend, who'd paid so much to send her there. As alleged in a lawsuit Jane filed in Los Angeles Superior Court this past May, under the name Jane Doe 2, Choudhury's behavior escalated. (Bikram Choudhury declined to be interviewed for this story or to respond to questions.)

One night, the guru kept Jane after class and said he wanted her to move to L.A. to work at his headquarters. "I can see something inside of you that no one else can," he said, according to her account. "You will be greater than Mother Teresa, but you have to follow me. You have to do everything I tell you to do." He gripped her hand and stared at her. "I am your guru," he said. "I am your god. . . . Without me, you will be a piece of

**"YOU KIND OF FELT YOU WERE
IN A SAFE PLACE.
IT WAS SUCH AN HONOR TO BE AROUND HIM,"
SAYS ONE ACCUSER.**



BALANCE OF POWER

Clockwise from top left: Choudhury at his former headquarters in Los Angeles, 2006; posing with two admiring trainees, 2010; leading a class at his Bikram's Yoga College of India (San Diego branch), 2010.





STANDING ROLLS-ROYCE POSE

Clockwise from top: a 2007 portrait of Choudhury, in Beverly Hills, with one of his many cars; plaintiff Sarah Baughn, photographed on Ocean Beach, in San Francisco; plaintiff Larissa Anderson, photographed at her studio, FireHouse Hot Yoga, in Kirkland, Washington.



“I’M THE MOST SUCCESSFUL MAN THIS COUNTRY EVER HAD,” CHOUDHURY BOASTED IN A DEPOSITION.

gold undiscovered and covered in dirt.” Another night, as Jane came out of the women’s bathroom, she says that Choudhury was waiting and suddenly hugged her. “No one has ever made me feel the way you do,” he allegedly said, pulling her toward him and kissing her. She pushed him away, saying, “This is not right!” He apologized and said it wouldn’t happen again. He really wanted her to work at headquarters. “I just need you to be around me all the time. You have a spirit of gold that I need to learn from.”

Still another night, according to her lawsuit, during a Bollywood movie, Jane was sitting on an arm of Choudhury’s chair, massaging him at his behest, when he again pressed his case for her to come and work for him. “Let’s go up to my room,” he said. “We can talk about it there.” As Jane looked concerned, Choudhury hastened to add, “Don’t worry, we won’t be alone.” Trusting that he was going to tell her about a career opportunity, she went with him, but as soon as they entered his room, she realized her mistake. They were alone. “I can’t stay here,” she said. “I need to leave!”

She says she started to walk out, but Choudhury began crying and begging her to “save” him: “I am all alone. I need someone to love me. I need someone to touch me with love.” His wife, Rajashree, was “mean,” he said, and “hates me.” Jane protested that she had a boyfriend, but Choudhury allegedly said, “I need to spiritually enlighten you. In order to do that, we need to become one.” She says he grabbed her pants, pulled them down, and forced her onto the bed.

As Jane was crying and pleading for Choudhury to stop, he “forced his unprotected penis in her vagina,” according to her legal complaint. “Within moments it was over. The only thing Defendant Bikram Choudhury said was ‘How many times did you come?’” Jane says he ordered her to watch him fall asleep, and as soon as he did, she fled the room, numb and uncertain as to what to do or whom to turn to. She told me she thought about going to the police and giving them her jeans and telling them what had happened, but her roommate calmed her down and convinced her to stay at the training. “I wish I hadn’t washed them,” she says today of the jeans. “I wish I had saved them.”

The next day in class, according to Jane’s account, as Choudhury’s lecture went off on a particularly sexual tangent—the yogi waxed nostalgic about how, when he first moved to the U.S., women would “rape” him, and he volunteered his preference for “pussy” without hair—Jane started crying and ran out of the tent. A male staffer followed her and said, “You can’t just leave. You won’t graduate if you don’t attend every lecture.”

“Bikram is a rapist!,” she screamed. “This is all an act and a scam. All of you know what’s going on here and yet you turn a blind eye! I’m going home. You people are all sick and I’m not going to be a part of this anymore.”

According to Jane’s lawsuit—one of five that women have filed against Choudhury in the past year and which include charges ranging from sexual harassment to rape—the staffer responded, “We all know how Bikram is, that’s just part of it. If you leave now, you will never be able to come back. You will be out of the Family forever. You will not graduate and all of your hard work will be for nothing.”

Jane stayed at the training, and says that, when Choudhury told her to sit next to him and Rajashree at the graduation dinner, she did so, humiliated and afraid. Afterward, according to her suit, Choudhury took her aside and said, “If you come be with me, you will have everything you have ever dreamed of.” When Jane didn’t respond, he allegedly said, “If you fuck with me, I’ll fuck with you.” (In response to Jane’s and other women’s suits, the Los Angeles Police Department launched an investigation into their allegations against Choudhury. The district attorney’s office has reviewed the police reports and declined to prosecute.)

The Teacher

By outward appearance, Choudhury is a ludicrous character, a flashy showboat who wears crocodile shoes and gangster fedoras; owns dozens of Rolls-Royces, Bentleys, and the like (including Howard Hughes’s Royal Daimler, with a toilet in back); lives in an 8,000-square-foot Beverly Hills mansion seemingly built entirely from gold, stone, and mirrors; and has released a

maudlin album, *Bikram Love*, on which he sings synthy ballads with titles like “I Feel Lonely” and “People Are Beautiful.” He claims to sleep only two hours a night, and he is given to swaggering pronouncements—e.g., “I have balls like atom bombs, two of them, 100 mega-tons each. Nobody fucks with me.” Fashioning himself as a kind of suicide-prevention sexual Samaritan, he once said of his female trainees, according to a *Details*-magazine interview, “If they say to me, ‘Boss, you must fuck me or I will kill myself,’ then I do it. Think if I don’t! The karma!” Choudhury regularly makes outlandish, non-F.D.A./F.T.C.-approved claims for his yoga, asserting that it cures cancer, rid Janet Reno of her Parkinson’s, and saved John McEnroe’s career, among other miracle tales. (Choudhury reserves his least palatable thoughts, on women, gay people, various ethnic groups, and leadership—“He said, ‘Hitler was a genius,’” Jane says—for the relative privacy of his teacher trainings, according to multiple sources.)

He could be easily reduced to a cartoon, except that his eccentric brand of yoga has been wildly popular. Glamorous practitioners such as George Clooney and Lady Gaga have lent luster to the brand. More than 600 studios, from Hawaii to Alabama, and Buenos Aires to Bangkok, are dedicated to Bikram yoga. Most of them operate under affiliation rather than franchise agreements, however, and the font of Choudhury’s wealth is his teacher trainings. With several hundred students each paying about \$13,000 to attend the most recent training, he takes in an estimated \$8 million from the two annual events. Choudhury has happily embraced the label “McYoga” to describe his empire of studios offering a standardized product.

By Choudhury’s count, he has certified more than 11,000 teachers. In its militant repetitiveness, its quality of heat-purifying ritual, Bikram yoga represents an extreme of the yoga world, and the people most drawn to it are themselves often extreme in the level of zeal they bring to their yoga practice. Talk to any Bikram devotee and you’re likely to hear a story of healing, of a lame back made straight or obesity conquered or a suicide averted. “The one thing to understand about the Bikram community is it’s

premised on self-transformation,” says author Benjamin Lorr, who immersed himself in the Bikram community and wrote a book about it, *Hell-Bent*. “It attracts lots of people who have things they need to transform.”

This seems especially true of Choudhury’s inner circle: the people who work at his L.A. headquarters and live in “the yoga house,” a building owned by Choudhury; who staff his trainings and studios; who are on Choudhury’s handpicked list of teachers authorized to give advanced seminars; who place in the yoga competitions run by the U.S. Yoga Federation, which Choudhury’s wife founded; and who are invited to dine at his home or spend the night or even live there.

Here, at the center of the Bikram universe, many people don’t just do Bikram yoga, they *believe* in it. They believe in *him*. Lorr, in *Hell-Bent*, quotes a senior teacher at the 2010 San Diego training telling the tentful of trainees that Choudhury is “a fully realized human being, a true master,” and another who said that Choudhury “will see your future and understand your past.” Choudhury encourages this attitude, regularly likening himself to Jesus Christ and Buddha. He often describes his yoga as the one true yoga, and all other yoga modalities as “shit.” Presiding over the Bikram “family” with patriarchal capriciousness, he alternates carrot and stick to keep members in line. He has allegedly banished any number of disciples over the years, because they were becoming too successful, or getting too much attention, or for choosing a mate whom he disapproved of.

Francesca Asumah says she experienced Choudhury’s ideas about family firsthand. Among the litany of things Choudhury reportedly likes to express his disapproval of at trainings is inter-racial marriage. Asumah, a British woman of mixed race, says that when he did this at a teacher training in 2002 she challenged him, asking whom someone like her should marry. “He said, ‘People like you shouldn’t be born.’ The whole room went quiet.”

Asumah later volunteered at Choudhury’s headquarters. Like many people who love Bikram yoga, however they might feel about its namesake, she heeded the community bromide about “separating the yoga from the man.” All she wanted was to be a yoga

teacher, and HQ was the place to get the best training; she simply steered clear of Choudhury. After three years there, she fell in love with a man who did I.T. work for Choudhury, and in 2009 they married. “I’m English. We don’t do cults. It never even occurred to me we had to ask Bikram or tell him.”

The next year, within hours of Choudhury finding out about the marriage, Asumah says, he threw her out of the studio and told her husband, who’d been in the Bikram community since he was 15, and whose brother and father were also in the community, that he must divorce her immediately or else lose his job and no longer be welcome in the community. “Two days later, my husband left and went to live in the yoga house. . . . I cannot to this day blame my husband for what he did. But it was only then that I understood that this was a cult. It was just racism, deep unadulterated racism, and a cult, where they tell you who can love you and who can’t. Honestly, my heart is broken.” (Asumah’s husband disputes her account but would not discuss the details.)

Coming to America

Lrene Tsu, then a 27-year-old former starlet who had once dated Frank Sinatra, remembers the day in 1976 when she first walked into Choudhury’s original Beverly Hills studio in the basement of a bank building. Maybe two dozen students were on the floor, sitting Japanese-style with foreheads on the floor and arms stretched out, hands in prayer position in the half-tortoise pose, and Choudhury was standing on a woman’s back while describing the proper posture. “He was literally surfing and gyrating and talking and moving all at the same time. I don’t remember paying anyone. I think someone told me: you can leave as much as you want.”

Yoga was still a wifty California subculture, years away from entering the American mainstream, but Choudhury, just shy of 30, was becoming a darling of Hollywood. Stars such as Michael Jackson, Barbra Streisand, Herbie Hancock, Tom Smothers, Quincy Jones, Jeff Bridges, and later Kareem Abdul Jabbar and Jamie Lee Curtis were among the students drawn to this cocky showman with his charismatic mix of punishing yoga (the

heated room is, according to Choudhury, meant to reproduce conditions in his native Calcutta), comic monologue, and egalitarian hazing. (Interviewed by a tabloid in 1977, four years after he had arrived in Los Angeles, he said of his student Raquel Welch, “She has a terrible body. She has cottage cheese muscles, fat legs, and a stiff body.”)

Choudhury’s Forrest Gump–ian origin story, as told by Choudhury, describes a yoga prodigy, a child who was plucked from his parents’ home in Calcutta by a prominent guru named Bishnu Ghosh, proceeded to become the national yoga champion three years running, and toured India with Ghosh’s vaudevillian troupe doing yoga demonstrations. Among his students were the Beatles. Dispatched by his guru to Tokyo, then Honolulu, he claims he crossed paths with Richard Nixon, whose persistent phlebitis he cured using his “magic yoga.” He was then invited to the U.S., where, he says, Nixon personally greeted him on the runway. After he arrived in L.A. in 1973, Shirley MacLaine, who’d met him in Bombay years earlier, told him he had to start charging students a fee; Americans wouldn’t understand the donation concept. (MacLaine’s publicist didn’t respond to requests for comment.) Later, he said, he taught his yoga to American astronauts. Swaths of Choudhury’s biography are unverifiable. Lorr, in researching *Hell-Bent*, found both the Nixon presidential library and NASA unable to locate any record of a Choudhury connection, and he points out that the year when Choudhury claims he worked with the Beatles, 1959, pre-dates the band’s formation. Choudhury’s first real disciple in the U.S. was Tony Sanchez, who started taking classes in 1976, when he was still in high school. After his first class, Sanchez approached Choudhury to thank him, and asked what his philosophy of life was. “He said, ‘Be good to others, so others will be good to you.’” Choudhury was already heating his studio, but only to 85 or 90 degrees. Sanchez started coming every day, then began working the front desk part-time. “He felt that yoga was sacred,” says Sanchez, “a discipline that would actually help people not only physically but also mentally and spiritually and morally.”

When Sanchez met Choudhury, Sanchez

“I HAD A VERY DEEP BACKBEND; I THOUGHT HE PROBABLY JUST NOTICED MY SPINE,” SAYS A PLAINTIFF.

THE TALK OF CANNES

says, the yogi was attached to his strict Indian diet. As Choudhury began to make some money, he found a fellow Indian immigrant to emulate, the controversial ashram leader Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. “There were a lot of articles about Rajneesh, his affluence and power and the way he lived his life with Rolls-Royces and Rolexes, that made Bikram feel anything was possible,” Sanchez says.

Rajneesh was also known as the “sex guru,” but in those days, according to Sanchez, Choudhury was in a series of monogamous relationships and was more interested in massages than anything else. “I always thought he was asexual. . . . Even he said, ‘Sex for me doesn’t mean that much.’ I think what happened was, after Bikram became very famous and successful, he started taking chances, and people started looking the other way and forgave a lot of behavior. They didn’t say, ‘Bikram, you need to stop.’ He was like a kid in a candy store.”

Sanchez was with him on the trip back to India when Choudhury first met Rajashree, the teenage girl who would become his wife, through an arranged marriage. “I believe he was convinced it was the right thing to do to salvage the lineage; he was marrying a yoga champion from the same school he’d studied in.” It was after Choudhury got married, in 1984, that he became more serious about his business. (Sanchez, for his part, says he found himself excommunicated in 1984 after refusing Choudhury’s order that he break up with his then girlfriend, now his wife.)

“Yoga’s Bad Boy”

Before 1994, Choudhury had a handful of his own studios (in Tokyo and San Francisco, for instance), but that year he began minting large numbers of new Bikram teachers when he held his first teacher training, at the building he occupied at the time, on Wilshire Boulevard. The course lasted three months, and there were only around 25 trainees that year.

Choudhury would become a controversial figure in the broader yoga world. For one thing, he wasn’t shy about lawsuits or material things. In 1985, he’d sued Raquel Welch for publishing a book, *The Raquel Welch Total Beauty and Fitness Program*, which he alleged blatantly copied his own, 1978 book, *Bikram’s Beginning Yoga Class*; he obtained a settlement that he told people had enabled him to buy his house in Beverly Hills, for \$605,000. (It’s now worth an estimated \$3.6 million.) A 2000 *Yoga Journal* profile called him “Yoga’s Bad Boy.” But his controlling approach in the past decade has polarized even the Bikram community. Starting in 2002 he began furiously registering trademarks and even

STYLED BY MARTINE DE MENTHON; HAIR PRODUCTS BY SEBASTIAN PROFESSIONAL; MAKEUP PRODUCTS BY MAC; HAIR BY FRANCO GOBBI; MAKEUP BY MARIE DUHART; MANICURE BY HIRO; PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY PRODN PARIS; FOR DETAILS, GO TO VF.COM/CREDITS



Bérénice Bejo, photographed in Paris.

BEJO WEARS A DRESS BY PRADA; EARRINGS BY PRISTINE GEMSTONES.

The first time Bérénice Bejo appears in *The Past*, you flash back to her Oscar-nominated role as Peppy Miller in the silent film *The Artist*: she is on the other side of a soundproof glass wall in the Paris airport, mouthing hello to her estranged husband (Ali Mosaffa), who has flown in from Iran to sign divorce papers. Aside from that clever nod to Bejo’s previous role in which she utters not a word, her character, Marie, has plenty to say as the volatile mother whose affair with the owner of a dry-cleaning shop (played by Tahar Rahim) has possibly fatal consequences. *The Past* is Iranian director Asghar Farhadi’s first film in French and, like his acclaimed *A Separation*, deals with broken love and its ripple effects across generations. Bejo’s performance dazzled the Cannes Film Festival last spring (she won the best-actress award), and it is no wonder she famously gets along with directors: she is the daughter of Argentinean filmmaker Miguel Bejo and the wife of Michel Hazanavicius, who won the best-director Oscar for *The Artist*. Does Bejo have a favorite director? Put it this way: she spent the fall in the country of Georgia filming *The Search*, in which she plays a woman working in human rights during the Chechen conflict. It will be her third film with her husband.

—JIM KELLY

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NuvaRing

and included the warnings from Lidegaard. That was, for the plaintiffs' team, enough to indicate that the F.D.A. had given in to what seemed like pressure from the American drug companies. But for the warriors of mass tort, the newest development was significant. The lack of a stricter warning could extend the battle. In fact, the Merck Canada decision might ironically turn out to be a plaintiff's lawyer's dream. Shkolnik could hardly wait to get all that into an argument.

Thousands of cases are now being settled

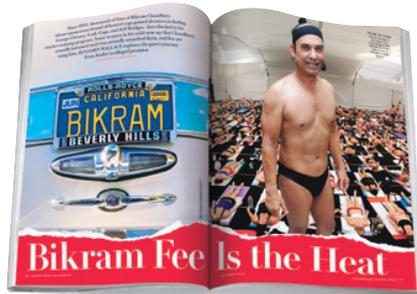
on behalf of plaintiffs who say they were stricken with clots after using Yaz or Yasmin. In the United States, more than 13,000 cases were filed against Bayer. There have been at least 100 alleged deaths. The F.D.A. came down hard on Bayer. "These sorts of stories usually appear in the business section," the mother of a 31-year-old Sony executive who had died in childbirth, allegedly of complications from having taken Yaz, wrote me during my research. "They never seem to have a 'face.' The real face is very beautiful, only 31, highly accomplished, and will never age." □

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Bikram Yoga



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 83 filing for a copyright registration on his yoga, a decade-long crusade that intimidated several studio owners into settling suits filed by Choudhury but ultimately proved futile, after both the U.S. Copyright Office and a federal judge declared yoga un-copyrightable in 2012.

In San Diego in 2010, Choudhury's rants seemed to reach a new level. Over the course of the training's first seven weeks, according to a lawsuit later filed by a trainee named Pandhora Williams, Choudhury spoke of a woman trainee's cleaning his "burning dick head," expressed his opinion that women are "here for one reason: to spread their legs and make babies," and asked a woman, "Where are you going, to change your tampon?" Another trainee, a gay black man who is H.I.V.-positive, recalls listening in pained silence as Choudhury shared his thoughts on how "most gay people would die of AIDS" and "they should put them on an island so they all die together, something like that."

With only two weeks remaining in the training, Williams marched up to Choudhury after class one day and asked why he was "preaching hate." According to Williams's suit, Choudhury said, "We don't sell love here, bitch!" then told an assistant to "get that black bitch out of here. She's a cancer." Williams said Choudhury kicked her out of the training, denied her a certification for the course she had spent \$10,900 to attend, and refused to refund her money.

A trainee named Elana Thalberg says she happened to witness part of the confrontation, and confirms hearing Choudhury say, about Williams, "get that black bitch out of here." After Williams was ejected, according to a deposition Thalberg gave for Williams's suit, a senior staffer instructed the rest of the trainees that no one was to have any contact with Williams; otherwise, "getting our certification could be in jeopardy."

Choudhury's classroom provocations could be dismissed as stream-of-consciousness blather, tired and offensive shtick perhaps, but shtick nonetheless. But Choudhury took matters even further, according to a separate suit alleging, among other things, discrimination, sexual harassment, and defamation. Filed by his former in-house counsel, Minakshi Jafa-Bodden, against Choudhury in the past year, the complaint alleges that, before firing her, he intimidated that she should pressure a witness in a suit to stay silent, discussed having the federal judge who'd ruled against him "taken out," and wanted her to falsely accuse a male studio owner of sexual misconduct, including being a "rapist."

When he was deposed in the Williams case in Los Angeles in August 2012, in a room at the superior-court building, Choudhury showed flashes of megalomania. At one point during nearly seven hours of sworn testimony, video of which was obtained by *Vanity Fair*, he tells Carla Minnard, Williams's attorney, "You are a joker. You are nobody." He flatly denies behaviors that have been witnessed by thousands of people (such as receiving massages from trainees), claims "seven billion" people will talk about him when he dies, and asserts, "I'm the most successful man this country ever had." It is for this reason, he states under penalty of perjury, that Harvard University is erecting a "Bikram building in their campus." (Kevin Galvin, a spokesperson for Harvard University, responds: "We checked with our capital-projects group and can confirm that no new 'building' in the usual sense of that term is

under construction funded by Mr. Choudhury or by a donation in his name.") Choudhury ultimately settled the case.

Behind the Scenes

In the light of allegations in the lawsuits, what transpired in the gloaming of the Bollywood viewings at recent teacher trainings went beyond even Choudhury's usual extremes for public behavior. Thalberg alleges that in 2010 "every evening he had four or five women massaging him in a revolting manner. The lights were turned down. I knew weird stuff was going on."

The following year, when the training was held in Los Angeles, Rebecca Blais, an army surgical nurse who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan, got up to use the bathroom during a movie; passing by Choudhury, she claims, she saw a similarly objectionable massage taking place. "I said, out loud, 'You've got to be fucking kidding me.' He ignored me."

In Choudhury's 2012 video deposition in the Williams case, before any of the rape and sexual-harassment suits had been filed, Carla Minnard, the plaintiff's attorney, says, "You have had sex with female trainees of yours. Correct . . . ? Is that true, Mr. Choudhury?"

Choudhury responds: "No."

Minnard then hands Choudhury the *Details* article from February 2011, written by a University of Missouri-Kansas City philosophy professor named Clancy Martin, in which the yogi styled himself as a carnal angel of mercy to suicidal women.

Choudhury, visibly flustered, says, "I don't want to answer. . . . That's my human right choice."

After Minnard reminds Choudhury that he is under oath and is obligated to answer her questions, and after a sidebar between lawyers and the judge, Minnard again asks Choudhury if his *Details* quote is accurate.

"No," responds Choudhury. Martin's quotation of him, he says, is a lie. ("He said it to me with a big group of people around," Martin tells me via e-mail.)

A Trainee's Tale

Sarah Baughn took her first Bikram-yoga class on October 19, 2004. Then in her second year of college, in Washington State, she'd developed scoliosis in high school, and the pain of her curved spine had made her an unhappy person. What happened next is the archetypal Bikram story: she loved the yoga and, as it healed her spine and spirit, became consumed by it, dropping out of school and taking out loans to attend teacher training so that she might devote her life to this thing that had changed her life.

She was pretty and enthusiastic. The first week, with Choudhury presiding, every trainee introduced herself or himself. When it was Baughn's turn, she said, "This yoga saved me. Now I'm happy. I don't get sick. I don't get pain." As Baughn recalls in an interview, "I looked up at Bikram and said, 'Bikram, I love you more than chocolate.' And everybody laughed. And he laughed." The third night, as students were demonstrating postures, she says, she found Choudhury staring at her, then watched as he dispatched a young woman brushing his hair to bring Baughn his diamond-spangled Rolex. (She returned it after class.) She was flattered by the guru's attention—"I had a very deep backbend; I thought he probably just noticed my spine"—but also found it uncomfortable. After class, he kept her behind; she says he told her they knew each other from a past life, and kissed her on the cheek. On the fifth day of training, according to the lawsuit filed this past March by Baughn, Choudhury called her into his office and said, "Should we make this a relationship? . . . I have never, *never* felt like this about *anyone*." Shocked, she protested, made her way out of the office, and broke into tears, she says. After telling her boyfriend what had happened, she approached Craig Villani, who ran teacher training, and, according to Baughn's legal complaint, revealed Choudhury's overture to him as well. In an interview, Baughn told me that Villani said she should "separate the man from the teacher" and not tell Choudhury's wife what had happened. (According to Villani, he explained to Baughn that if she wanted to take formal action she would have to go through proper administrative channels, and that protocol dictated she not start with Bikram's wife.) Baughn was unusually physically flexible, and she made a rapid ascent in the competi-

tive yoga world, placing second in both the nationals and internationals in 2006. When she went to Bikram headquarters for instruction from senior teachers including Choudhury, he behaved appropriately, and, according to the suit, he now seemed preoccupied with an alleged mistress, whose existence was an open secret in the inner circle. So she felt safe going to Hawaii to assist at a training he held there in 2007. Though she says he kept coming on to her, Baughn was able to deflect him.

When Choudhury's wife invited her to spend Thanksgiving in the Choudhury home that fall, she was grateful to be included in the inner circle and spent hours helping Rajashree prepare the meal. But that night, after Rajashree had gone to bed, Choudhury "embraced her from behind and pressed his pe-

but I cannot speak for the other judges. I did not see the final tabulation so cannot comment further on the result.")

Still, Baughn was determined not to throw away her yoga opportunities, and when the chance to assist at the 2008 Acapulco training came up, she went, allegedly securing an agreement from senior staffers never to leave her alone with Choudhury. But after one of the nights when Choudhury insisted his staff stay up watching Bollywood movies in his room, she fell asleep, she says, then awakened to find herself being ditched by the others. "I grabbed my shoes and the door went *click*," she told me. "I remember the *click*. And then I ran to the door, because I thought, Oh, shit, they weren't supposed to leave me. And when I got to the door, he was on me. He was all over me." Choudhury pinned her against the door and continued groping her, Baughn's suit says, "grinding his penis against her leg"—even as she said, "What are you doing? Stop this. I don't want to do this"—until she could pull the door open and escape.

After that, Baughn alleges, Choudhury wouldn't permit her to teach advanced seminars, despite her abilities, and his office contacted studios that had scheduled her for such classes and discour-

aged them from using her. In 2012, when her two-year-old daughter said she wanted to be a yoga teacher like her mother, Baughn had a crisis of conscience. "I was like, You can't teach yoga—you'll get raped," Baughn says. "That's what was in my head." Then, when she told a fellow teacher about her experiences and "he said, 'That's horrible,' period, no buts"—the first time a fellow Bikramite had responded with such clarity, rather than rationalizing the guru's behavior or blaming Baughn for it—she suddenly experienced the full effect of what had happened to her. It was then, she says, that she decided to file a lawsuit, to make sure Choudhury couldn't do to other women what he had done to her. Because of her prominence in the Bikram community, she hoped her message might be heard.

Speaking Out

Once Baughn sued, other women came forward. The plaintiffs accusing Choudhury of rape or sexual harassment tell similar stories: Choudhury allegedly singled out a naive young woman for attention, groomed



FEELING THE STRETCH

Choudhury leads "Bikramites" in a pose, 2010.

nis into her leg," according to Baughn's suit. Baughn says she froze as Choudhury talked about how lonely he was, what a "bitch" his wife was, and said, "I need someone to take care of me so I don't die." When Baughn rebuffed him, her suit says, he told her, "You will never be champion without me."

At the 2008 national championships, she tied for first place, but at the internationals the next day, she came in second, despite what she believed was a clear victory. (Baughn claims the winner had stumbled.) According to Baughn's lawsuit, one of the judges told her that all the judges had scored her as the winner: "You were f---ing robbed." According to Francesca Asumah, another judge, Michele Pernetta, told her that Choudhury had overruled the judges' decision, and that Pernetta was so outraged she'd never judge another of the events. (Pernetta, in a statement e-mailed through a publicist, said, "I did not have the winner of the Women's Finals as the winner

Bikram Yoga

her with talk of her cosmic specialness, made progressively more sexual overtures, and responded to rejection with angry threats.

Larissa Anderson was 22 when she started doing Bikram yoga, in her hometown of Kirkland, Washington. Anderson had a history of self-medicating with drugs and alcohol, and she found Bikram yoga emotionally healing; through her boyfriend Greg Gumucio, then a leading disciple of Choudhury's, she also grew close to the Choudhury family, especially their young daughter, Laju. After Gumucio had a falling-out with Choudhury and opened a number of rival studios, Choudhury demanded that Anderson show her loyalty by renouncing any connection with the apostate, according to the lawsuit Anderson filed in August. When Anderson refused, she claims, Choudhury told her, "You need to leave. You are no longer welcome here."

Unmoored, Anderson says, she eventually called Choudhury and apologized. She was welcomed back into Choudhury-family routines and she thought things were once again all right. One night after dinner, when Rajashree had gone to bed, Choudhury asked her to give him a massage while he watched a Bollywood movie. Eventually, Anderson says, she started to nod off from fatigue, but Choudhury asked her to stay, then tried to kiss her. She said no, she wasn't interested in that—"You are my family. I want to go to bed now"—but Choudhury persisted and raped her, according to Anderson's suit: "Larissa was horrified and went into what she now understands was trauma shock. She simply froze. Larissa could not find her voice to cry out for help. . . . Defendant forcefully spread Larissa's legs apart and ejaculated. It did not last long."

Over the next five years, Anderson remained in the Bikram community. She had come to believe that "her life would be over" if she left, the suit says, and she even worked at headquarters for a period, but she kept her distance from Choudhury. Like Baughn, Anderson says, she clung to the hope that she could keep doing the yoga she loved without the consequences that proximity to Choudhury implied.

By 2011, when Anderson finally did assist at a teacher training, she had taken out loans amounting to several hundred thousand dollars to open a Bikram yoga studio in Seattle. That October, giving Choudhury a massage in his suite at the training, Anderson found herself suddenly left alone with him, and he kept asking her to massage higher up his leg, her suit alleges; eventually, he said, "Are you sure you don't want to sleep with me tonight?" She says he pressed his body into hers against the wall, as she repeatedly rebuffed him and finally left. After that, he wouldn't list her

studio on his Web site, in violation of the affiliation agreement she'd signed, according to her lawsuit, which says Anderson has experienced "PTSD, anxiety, and depression" as a result of Choudhury's actions.

The pattern allegedly repeated with Jane Doe 1, who, like Jane Doe 2, filed suit early last May. When Jane Doe 1 assisted at the fall teacher training in 2011, she says, Choudhury flattered her by saying he had a "gift" for her, a "transmission," because they "thought the same." According to the suit, on another night soon after, he told her, "I have never met someone who had a mind quite like my guru. You have the divine in you. You have been touched by God." One morning, her legal complaint asserts, when she was doing her duty of tidying his suite and making sure there was fresh fruit, Choudhury surprised her and forced her onto the bed, pulling her pants off as she told him she didn't want to do this, and he called her "idiot" over and over. She says he forced her to perform oral sex, then raped her, according to the suit. "Defendant Choudhury forcefully manipulated her legs into a yoga posture, and laughed at her, saying, 'You are a yogini!'"

As with the other women, Jane Doe 1 says, walking away from the Bikram-yoga community wasn't a simple choice for her. She was broke, had spent what was for her a lot of money to attend teacher training, and had invested the last five years of her life in teaching Bikram. She stayed at the training and kept working, though she broke down crying in a staff meeting. Then, cleaning Choudhury's room days later, she says, she was attacked again. "The plaintiff could not feel in her body, she felt disassociated," Jane Doe 1's lawsuit states. "She could not run or act. Plaintiff remembers feeling that his sexual assaults were incestuous; like a family member attacking her." Eventually she borrowed money from her mother to enable her to leave the training. Three weeks after Sarah Baughn filed her lawsuit, Jane Doe 1 reported the alleged rapes to her local police department.

A Community Divided

The women's suits anticipate a likely defense of Choudhury's: Why did some of them keep going back? This is an idea that has currency in the broader Bikram community as well. A woman who co-owns three Bikram studios in Maryland attended the same 2005 training as Baughn, and they became friends. She says she clearly remembers Baughn getting very upset after Choudhury pulled her into his office and suggested they have a relationship, but is conflicted about Choudhury's culpability. "I don't mean to discount terrible things that happened, 'cause I do think he did things he shouldn't, but a lot of women will use what they have to get what they want, and not ad-

mit it. What did you think would happen in his hotel room? You think he was going to help you with your standing-bow pose?"

A handful of studios, on the other hand, including Larissa Anderson's and Michele Pernetta's, have dropped Bikram from their names. "It's just really clear that there's some serious issues going on, and I didn't want to be part of it," says Stephanie Dixon, owner of Summerlin Yoga (formerly Bikram Yoga Summerlin), in Las Vegas, who says she found it distasteful to brush Choudhury's hair when she attended teacher training, and who decided to rename her studio after the Baughn suit was filed. Then, when the three other suits were filed, she decided to phase Bikram yoga out of her curriculum altogether. "When more of the sexual allegations came out, I couldn't teach the series anymore and so I started slowly taking the classes away. I can't call myself a yoga teacher and then protect Bikram and put money in his pocket."

Tony Sanchez, the original Bikram protégé, who now teaches his own brand of yoga outside Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, takes a longer view. "I think Bikram was a different person at the beginning," Sanchez says. "He had a lot of intentions to help people. I believe what happened is, along the way, he had too many disappointments with people who were not loyal to him, including me. After he dismissed me, and I didn't grovel back and cry, he was disappointed. And I believe it's like the skinny person who finds himself eating a lot of junk food, and eventually that person becomes an obese person. Bikram was spiritually pure and all of that, and then he found himself with so many opportunities to fail, to succeed, and he took them all, and eventually he became an obese person with all his karmic shit that he has to deal with."

Irene Tsu, still subjecting herself to Choudhury's 26 postures after 35 years, has detected a wistfulness in her old yoga teacher in the past couple of years. "I know he misses the good old days. He'll ask me many times to organize a party of original students, for his last birthday, in February, for Christmas. A couple of the parties happened. Not everyone. . . . Kareem was there. . . . I couldn't find Shirley MacLaine. . . . He seemed to be very happy. I don't know if it's because he misses those days, when it was just a handful of us." □

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