

Russia cracks down on Yoga classes to check occultism

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London: Close on the heels of India leading worldwide International Yoga Day celebrations, Yoga classes have been banned in a central Russian city by the authorities to check spread of 'religious occultism'.

At the centre of the crackdown are two studios holding classes for Hatha Yoga a set of asanas or postures involving deep breathing and tough physical exercises, which as per Hindu mythology was first practised by Lord Shiva.

Incidentally, Hatha Yoga is the most popular form of Yoga globally, including in the US, and a Russian Bollywood actress named Indra Devi (born Eugenia Vassilievna) is widely credited to have popularised it in the West more than 100 years ago.

Yoga is known as an ancient Indian spiritual and exercise discipline to balance mind, body and spirit, while millions across the globe joined in spectacular celebrations to mark the first International Yoga Day on June 21.

In India, celebrations were led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose call led to declaration of this Day by the United Nations and who himself performed various asanas and pranayams with a record number of over 35,000 people.

However, Yoga has become highly commoditised globally over the years and various schools and cults have sprung up in different parts of the world in its name.

In the first major crackdown abroad, the authorities in the central Russian city of Nizhnevartovsk have now asked the two Hatha Yoga studios Auro and Ingara to stop holding yoga classes in the municipal facilities of the city, as per the Russian media reports.

They were reportedly renting out stadiums and public meeting halls for their classes. Kommersant business daily reported that the Nizhnevartovsk officials have barred use of municipal buildings for yoga classes and have issued orders to the two studios on this.

The Moscow Times reported that the order has been issued "to prevent the spread of new religious cults and movements."

The authorities have also issued a letter to the heads of departments for physical culture and education, stating that Hatha yoga was "inextricably linked to religious practices" and has "an occult character," as per the Kommersant report.

Yoga is said to be very popular in Russia.

Russia-born Devi had learnt Hatha Yoga from an Indian Guru and was later described as the "first lady of yoga".

She went on to teach the same to many in Europe and the US, before she died in 2002 -- weeks before her 103rd birthday.

- PTI