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Yoga and Violence: International Yoga Day and Indian Religious Politics

By Paul Hedges

Synopsis

While International Yoga Day seeks to promote spirituality and wellbeing, its origin may be linked to Hindu nationalist militant extremism. Will its benevolent ideals prevail?

Commentary

ON 21 JUNE 2015, the world witnessed the first International Yoga Day (IYD), an event declared by the United Nations General Assembly following lobbying by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Associated by many with spiritual wellbeing and harmony, yoga has roots in Hindu religious practices and traditions, even if the type of bodily exercises popularly found today have little connection to that tradition. An association with generic spirituality alongside health and wellbeing benefits have allowed yoga to become a worldwide phenomenon.

Indeed with 170 countries supporting the resolution at the UN it did not even need a vote, while Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's Message on IYD stressed it could promote "physical and spiritual health", "respect for one's fellow human beings", and "does not discriminate". In the UN resolution it was seen as part of India's traditional heritage without explicit ties to Hinduism.

Rising extremist violence

However, Modi's promotion of this event have ties to his endorsement of Hindu nationalism. Meanwhile, some commentators argue the rise of attacks on Christian churches, and other minorities, in India this year is linked to a tolerant attitude towards such militant extremism by his government.

On 14 June, Hindu militant extremists attacked a church in a town called Attingal, Kerala, severely beating the pastor while he was preaching, before assaulting the congregation. Reports suggest the violence stopped when the police turned up, although they were very slow to appear on the scene. This attack is notable because Kerala is an area of India with a very high proportion of Christians.

While overall Christians make up about 2-3% of the population, it is as high as 40% in Kerala, and in parts of that state and neighbouring Goa as well as some other areas Christians are a significant

majority. The event also occurred in a reasonable-sized town of around 40,000 people, whereas the majority of attacks take place in rural areas and where Hindus are in a clear majority.

Media, especially religious news websites like Huffingtonpost.com and Christianpost.com, have reported numerous other attacks this year, including the gang rape of two nuns, one of whom was 71 years old. Despite Modi's promises of greater security and equality, the reality for those on the ground is very different. Indeed, attacks are not just taking place with greater frequency, but Hindu militant extremists also seem more confident to launch attacks in urban areas including those with high Christian populations.

Hindu nationalist politics

Before he became PM, a number of opponents and commentators expressed worries about Modi's links with and support for Hindu nationalism, which can be associated with militant extremism. He was chief minister of Gujarat during one of the worst outbreaks of ethno-religious violence in recent years, the so-called 2002 Gujarat Pogroms, which targeted Muslims.

Although Modi condemned the riots, the failure of police to stop them – which some witnesses have claimed was politically controlled – or to follow up and punish the killers left a blot on his reputation in the eyes of many, especially when one of his ministers, Mayaben Kodnani, was jailed in 2012 for her role when trials were eventually instituted.

His party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has been linked with militant groups. Despite this history, Modi's pragmatic business-friendly approach was seen as hopefully meaning that he would ensure equality and safety would prevail so that he could present himself, as he promised in the elections, as the man who would ignite India's economic prosperity. The current situation, however, suggests no reason for optimism that ethno-religious violence and tensions will be quelled in India anytime soon. Indeed, it is possible that they may further escalate if militant extremists feel they can attack with relative impunity.

International Yoga Day: Ideals or conflicts?

All of this is a far cry from the perceived ideals of IYD, which millions embraced worldwide in a spirit of harmony, wellbeing, and spirituality. Of course, the event was not without its critics. It has been suggested by some that Modi promoted it to enhance Hindu nationalist feelings. In India, some Muslim politicians and leaders suggested it was an attempt to force Muslims to carry out un-Islamic Hindu religious practices. In response, it is recorded that some BJP politicians said such people could go and "drown in the sea".

Meanwhile, whether directly related to the IDY or not, some Russian government officials, possibly at the behest of the Orthodox Church, have sought to ban yoga, certainly within municipal buildings, claiming an association with "religious cults". Whether the practice of yoga is compatible with being a Muslim, Christian, or a member of another non-Hindu religion is debatable; but most mainstream Christian churches in many parts of the globe seem to regard the practice of yoga bodily movements as simply a health and well-being issue. Many Muslims in India also felt it was possible to participate.

While IYD clearly has lofty ideals, and is part of India's soft-power promotion, it must also be seen that despite the rhetoric, it has an association through the support of Modi and the BJP to an agenda that, arguably, promotes Hindu nationalism; and thereby is allied to those who seemingly turn a blind eye to attacks on Christians and other minorities.

While a boycott of IYD is not suggested, nor condemnation of it for hidden Hindu roots or agendas, it must be realised that it is neither innocent nor disassociated from politics. IYD may promote harmony and spirituality, but it is embedded within political discourses and power games. Nevertheless, it is hoped that everyone will promote IYD for its lofty ideals, and that these become its lasting legacy.

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