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International Yoga Day Controversy: India's Soft Power or Modi's Hindu Agenda?

By Juhi Ahuja

Synopsis

Worldwide observance of the International Yoga Day has been criticised as attempting to promote Hindu nationalism, directly linked to Narendra Modi's past affiliations with Hindu nationalist groups. Further analysis suggests it is a viable soft power measure of the Indian government.

Commentary

THE UNITED Nations General Assembly adopted International Yoga Day on 21 June 2015 at the suggestion of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It was inaugurated in New York by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and in New Delhi by Modi. More than 35,000 people participated in the mass yoga event in the Indian capital.

However the event resulted in domestic social backlash from religious minorities, especially Muslim groups. They accused Modi of pursuing a Hindu agenda through yoga, which the groups say is against Islamic teachings. The uproar was fuelled when key Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders made derogatory remarks about Muslims and their reaction to the yoga day.

Is yoga Hindu?

Nevertheless, the BJP government maintained that it upholds secular democracy in India. The controversy arose because of Modi's past and current affiliations to Hindu nationalist groups, his failure to adequately resolve inter-religious tensions despite international criticisms and exaggeration of the issue by the Indian media. Putting aside the religious underpinnings and reactions, the International Yoga Day is a key soft power strategy for India and a major personal accomplishment for Modi considering that more than 170 countries co-sponsored the resolution to celebrate the ancient practice which originated in geographical India.

The controversy calls for a critical assessment of the allegations against Modi's use of yoga, an ostensibly religious practice, as an instrument of soft power. To be sure, the practice of yoga sometimes involves chanting in Sanskrit – liturgical in Hinduism – or the adoption of bodily postures that display reverence to the sun. It is widely mentioned in Hindu scriptures such as the Vedas,

Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita as being beneficial for all of humankind to keep the body and mind healthy, and for self-awareness and consciousness.

While the knowledge of yoga originated in India, and was passed down through generations of saints, sages, and gurus, still, it was meant purely for the betterment of the individual, not the religious community or some god or gods. The practice of yoga predates the formal establishment of the Hindu religion and came about long before the natives of the Indian sub-continent were identified as 'Hindus'.

However, certain religious (i.e. Hindu and Muslim) and political groups may have a vested interest in labelling yoga as Hindu as it would both resonate with the Hindu-majority populace and at the same time create avenues for the Muslim-minority groups to voice their grievances. For example, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing political party seeking to establish a Hindu state in India, actively promoted the International Yoga Day both domestically and abroad.

The coupling of yoga with Hinduism so publicly sent a strong signal to religious minority groups that the Hindutva agenda was once again being imposed upon them. Earlier this year, Hindu extremists carried out isolated attacks on churches in south India – impacting the sentiment of the religious minority groups in general. As such yoga has been used as a tool for exacerbating interfaith disharmony.

Soft power posturing

Since assuming power in May 2014, Modi has been unabashedly extending Indian influence onto the world stage through strategic diplomacy, trade, and culture. In line with his efforts to project Indian ascendancy, he proposed the idea of a yoga day at his UN General Assembly speech on 27 September 2014, which was well received internationally. The UN recognised yoga as providing a holistic approach to health and well-being, and there was no attempt to present it as a religious or spiritual practice.

Modi's use of yoga as a soft power strategy is critical not only because having an annual event to commemorate it worldwide reminds global citizens of India, but also because it associates yoga with the Indian identity. The International Yoga Day also reinforces the growing popularity of yoga as a lifestyle choice worldwide. Few other countries are able to boast a UN-mandated event to their name.

The effects of soft power are long lasting but the results are not as immediate as hard power. If India wants to improve its bilateral and multilateral relationships and bring states around to its side, creating a positive image of itself through yoga is just one soft power strategy. It has in fact been counter-productive with regards to its crucial neighbour, Pakistan, which has declined to co-sponsor the resolution, citing religious reasons.

Bad timing, tough luck

The announcement of International Yoga Day came at a time when India was (and still is) pushing hard to be a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Any positive developments in India's favour are yet to be seen. Although it seems to have had a positive response internationally, it has had damaging effects domestically. The controversy has become more about Modi and less about India – an obvious indicator of the politicisation of the issue.

Furthermore, Modi became prime minister at a time when religious fundamentalism in India is gaining political attention (with extremism in the name of Islam and the Hindutva agenda). It certainly does not help his case that his past is coloured with religious controversy – the Gujarat riots in 2002 between Hindus and Muslims.

It is certainly unfortunate that Modi's personal record has become an impediment to his state's foreign policy strategies. Save for deteriorating interfaith relations at home, the International Yoga Day is a promising soft power strategy for India for years to come as it is a constant reminder of India's cultural heritage and serves as an avenue for diplomatic exchanges.

Juhi Ahuja is a research analyst with the Studies in Inter-Religious Relations in Plural Societies (SRP) Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg