

Title

Yoga and Hindu Nationalism: The Case of India

Author's Name

Shivani Choudhary, Center for Cultural Sociology, Junior Fellow

Institution

Sociology Department, Yale University

Contact Details

Postal Address – 125 Olive St, Apt D2, New Haven,

Connecticut, United States of America,

Pincode – 06511

Email – [shivani.choudhary@yale.edu](mailto:shivani.choudhary@yale.edu)

Mobile - +12035082587

Word count

8641

**Title**

Yoga and Hindu Nationalism: The Case of India

**Abstract**

In the current Indian political scenario, the populist leader (Prime Minister Narendra Modi) is successful in mobilizing people and creating meaning by dominating the cultural codes and symbols around the traditional practice of yoga. The paper illustrates this argument by invoking the Cultural Theory of Social Performance and undertaking an analysis of the discursive appropriation of yoga by the Indian PM through successful performance. He does it by employing the binary discourse through his yoga performances, where those who identify with the Hindu nationalist ideology and belief systems fuse with the leader's performance. They become a part of the sacred side of the binary and the flagbearers of the Hindutva project. Those who are unable to fuse with this particular meaning of yoga that supports the Hindu nationalist project are projected as the profane and evil of society. The critical issue that needs to be underlined here is that yoga, which is treated as a symbol and practice of spiritual and physical well-being, becomes politically charged and attains the ability to push forward the agenda of a regime in power. The leader propagates a ritualistic experience of the practice of Yoga through the medium of the most popular radio program in the history of radio worldwide, Mann Ki Baat. The propagation of yoga by the leader is an exemplar of how with the advancement of mass media and technology, the interactions and performances by actors are no longer bounded by the material world and need not take place only in the ritualistic sense whereby each individual is present in a particular space and undergo the first-hand experience to identify themselves with a specific symbolic repertoire. Successful performance in contemporary societies is a combination of both virtual and physical realities.

## Performance By The Yogic Prime Minister In The Hindu Nation

### Introduction

The Hindu nationalist right-wing Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), under the umbrella of the National Democratic Alliance, won the 2014 Lok Sabha elections (16th May 2014) and formed a majority government in India (Laughland and Weaver 2014). After coming to power and declaring<sup>1</sup> his victory as the victory of India, the leader of the party Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi took on the task of creating a “New India” which would take a clean break from the ‘recent’<sup>2</sup> Indian past, which for him was inflicted with the ills of corruption, pollution, inequality, terror and numerous other issues which were derailing India from the path of greatness. The populist leader started creating this new path by giving elaborate successful performances to his audiences, that is, the people by reviving various age-old traditions of Indian civilization. This revivalism consisted of making the majoritarian Hindu nationalist agenda of the right-wing party seem consistent with the invisible cultural structures, codes and symbols that represent the timeless values of the Indian civilization. The performances by the leader seem to become the enactments of those codes and symbols in real-time.

Yoga is one such space in the current Indian scenario where the political actor<sup>3</sup> (PM Narendra Modi) is aiming to undertake a felicitous performance to establish a connection with the

---

<sup>1</sup> Modi tweeted: “India has won!” and added in Hindi “Bharat ki Vijay, ache din aane waale hai” (“good days are coming”). This tweet became the most retweeted tweet of 2014 in India. (Modi 2015)

<sup>2</sup> A past that was created by the opposition party Indian National Congress (centrist ideology) and its leaders.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Alexander defines the Politician as a “collective representation, one that can be energized through a process of symbolic communication and, by this process, become a carrier of intense social energy” (Alexander 2011, 108). It is in this sense I have understood the meaning of a politician for writing this paper.

people or his audience. He propagates this ritualistic experience of the practice of Yoga through the medium of the most popular radio programme in the history of radio worldwide, Mann Ki Baat<sup>4</sup> (translated as Some musings, straight from the heart) (2019, 5). The propagation of yoga by the leader is an exemplar of how with the advancement of mass media and technology, the interactions and performances by actors are no longer bounded by the material world and need not take place only in the ritualistic sense whereby each individual is present in a particular space and undergo the first-hand experience to identify themselves with a specific symbolic repertoire. A successful performance in contemporary society is a combination of both virtual and physical realities. The paper will further elaborate on the performance of yoga by the right-wing populist leader of India to demonstrate this point.

The main aim of the paper is to put forth how the leader of the majoritarian Hindu-nationalist party in India is successful in mobilizing people and creating meaning by dominating the cultural codes and symbols around the practice of yoga. He does it by employing the binary discourse through his yoga performances, where those who identify with the Hindu nationalist ideology and belief systems fuse with the leader's performance. They become a part of the sacred side of the binary and the flagbearers of the Hindutva project. This fusion is not limited to being just a part of the audience but also becoming an active performer of yoga along with the leader. While those who are unable to fuse with this particular meaning of yoga that supports the Hindu nationalist project are projected as the profane and evil of society.

---

<sup>4</sup> Show is streamed on the following websites (Transcripts also available): <https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/mann-ki-baat/>; <https://www.mygov.in/campaigns/mann-ki-baat/>; <https://www.narendramodi.in/mann-ki-baat>.

The critical issue that needs to be underlined here is that yoga which is, treated as a symbol and practice of spiritual and physical well-being becomes politically charged and attains the ability to push forward the agenda of a regime in power. This shows that the democratic struggle for power is not limited to maintaining control over the instruments of hegemony and force in society. “The struggles for power take place as struggles for persuasion, as performances that unfold before an idealized audience of rational, responsive, and putatively solidary citizens” (Alexander 2011, 107). Winning elections and maintaining political power depend upon who can dominate the cultural realm and symbols. And even the ancient spiritual, mental and physical practice of yoga that symbolizes the union of body and consciousness for an individual at a personal level possesses a politically charged meaning that can be publicly performed by PM Modi to mobilize people and take further his Hindu nationalist ideology.

The paper illustrates the above argument by undertaking an analysis of the discursive appropriation of yoga by the Indian PM through an “effective performance”, that is, successful. The performance is called successful by identifying and elaborating on three significant moves that are allowing further entrenchment of Hindu nationalist ideology in Indian democracy. The performance of yoga by the leader first, allows the leader to endorse India as a global leader and “*Vishwaguru*” (world leader) in the international community. Second, it provides a space for the populist leader where he can form a personal connection with the people, mobilize them to follow him unquestionably and become one with the leader and his goal of establishing a Hindu nation. Third, it nurtures exclusionary politics by limiting the meaning of yoga to the narratives of the majoritarian Hindu ideology of the right wing. The paper will elaborate on these three moves in detail to substantiate the claims made in the argument that an inherently cultural and private

practice of yoga can also be politicized to attain larger goals of propagating a particular ideology in the public sphere.

To understand the arguments made above and situate them contextually I'll first shortly introduce the radio program Mann Ki Baat which is the main platform where PM Modi showcases and promotes the practice of yoga to his people. Second, I'll elaborate on the meaning of yoga as it has been understood via various strands of thoughts over time in Indian society, to grasp how it becomes easy for the populist leader to appropriate the meanings in his favour.

### **Mann Ki Baat**

Historically, Radio has been an integral part of political communication since its inception in the 1920s. It has the most miniature form, a portable transistor, which neither costs much nor takes much space. It can be heard and, unlike TV, serves without the necessity of being viewed. In that sense, both the medium and the message are compelling ideas even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. "Radio has thus long informed the making and shaping of the public sphere in colonial and postcolonial India" (Bajpai 2021). This is something Modi understood and successfully made an excellent tool through which he could reach the last person in the country<sup>5</sup>.

PM Modi initiated the radio programme Mann Ki Baat to form a direct connection with the people of India and remove the middle man (Media channels, civil society outlets, questioning by the opposition- any avenue where he might be questioned) who might corrupt his message and

---

<sup>5</sup> "To reach the widest network possible the Information and Broadcasting Ministry announced that the private tv channels, FM radio stations and community radio stations could take the feed from Doordarshan News and All India (AIR) free-of-cost" (2019)

manipulate people against him. He returned the radio to the centre of public imagination by launching Mann Ki Baat on Vijay Dashami<sup>6</sup> 2014, Oct 3<sup>rd</sup>, which since then has been broadcasted once a month, on Sunday at 11:00 am. The day symbolizes the victory of good over evil and establishes Mann Ki Baat as a space that constantly focuses on a flawless version of reality that the populist leader and his party have achieved ever since he came to power. It is a space where “the new politics of Modi’s BJP which is a blend of new Hindutva<sup>7</sup> and the political economy of a new variety” (Palshikar 2019, 103) is created and propagated.

### **The Meaning of Yoga**

Sage Patanjali around 200 BC to 150 BC systematized Yoga as a school of thought in the textual work the Yoga Sutra, and ever since there have been various attempts to interpret it and other textual writings by philosophers, practitioners and intellectuals. The significant thing to note is that the meaning of yoga and the philosophy around it never existed as a fixed, primordial entity, even though the canonical status of a few primary texts such as Yoga sutra might provide that impression’ (Alter 2021, 4). And so, by the end of the nineteenth century, the analysis of yoga, in its genuine form shifted to understanding it as an enigmatic discipline taught via oral tradition, that was the practice-based teaching of *gurus*(teacher) to their disciples (Whicher 1998). The valorization of oral tradition was to produce a continuity between the ancient truths and the modern times to produce an idea of historical continuity and put forth an essentialized view of the ancient

---

<sup>6</sup> It is also known as Dussehra/Dasara/Dashian, a major Hindu Festival (Buddhists and Jains also celebrate it) that marks the end of Navaratri. The significance of this day is that it marks the victory of good over evil, which commemorates the victory of Lord Rama over evil king Ravana. It also marks the victory of Goddess Durga over the buffalo demon Mahishasura to restore peace and dharma.

<sup>7</sup> Suhas Palshikar defines this new Hindutva as “become Hindu politically and to become ‘religious Hindus’ by way of public manifestation of religiosity”.

civilization. The aim was to not situate yoga beyond time and space that might have been highlighted by the ancient transcendental philosophical meanings but to view it as a product of human imagination in history that was depicted by the oral teaching of the guru.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western scholars such as Mircea Eliade extended the definition of yoga by synthesizing Eastern (tradition) and Western (modernity) traditions (Eliade 1958). This Oriental definition was concerned with the philosophy, mysticism, magic, religion, and metaphysics of yoga in the East. It restricted them from understanding ‘the value of the body in terms of what might be called yogic materialism’ (Alter 2021, 7). As a result, with the expansion of the anti-colonial movement in the Indian subcontinent, there was a rise of another range of philosophers and practitioners from the north and western parts of India who became responsible for the Yoga renaissance in the body. The Hindu nationalist philosophers and leaders Sri Aurobindo and Vivekananda took “the ‘anti mystics’ approach and took the analysis of yoga in terms of physical fitness, applied medical research, and pragmatic populism rather than arcane of philosophy and spiritualism” (Alter 2021). This put yoga out of the classical understanding of something that is transcendental, metaphysical and spiritual to see it as the body of practice which is a fact of everyday life. It became a symbol of muscular nationalism and created a group of fit men who would fight the colonizers and be the symbol of a strong, independent India.

In contemporary times the United Nations defines “Yoga as an ancient physical, mental and spiritual practice that originated in India. The word ‘yoga’ derives from Sanskrit and means to join or to unite, symbolizing the union of body and consciousness.” (2022 Theme: Yoga for humanity 2022). From the above statements it can be acknowledged that Yoga originated in India,



but that does not mean that the modern day meaning of yoga can be drawn from an “unbroken line connecting the 21<sup>st</sup> century yogic postures with 2000 years old yoga sutras and the supposedly 5000 years old Vedas” (Nanda, Feb 2011, Who owns Yoga?). The paper takes the definition of Yoga by historian Meera Nanda who argued, “a tremendous amount of cross-breeding and hybridization has given birth to yoga as we know it [making] yoga a unique example of a truly global innovation...” and it is precisely the evolution of yoga through the modern era of colonialism, muscular Indian nationalism, Vedic scientism and commercialization of Hindu spiritualism” (Nanda, Feb 2011) in India and abroad(US, Sweden, Europe, China et cetera) that lead us to this modern day practice of yoga.

These contradictory and fragmentary experiences that arise from combining traditional and the ultra-modern, post-colonial and global modernity, East and West, colonizer and colonized, science and religion have established an order that hints towards an ambiguous meaning of Yoga (Fachandi 2019) that is now a symbolize different meanings to different people based on temporality and spatiality. This paper investigates this symbolic aspect of yoga. To see yoga as a performance by a political actor and understand the messages those performances convey to the people. The ambiguity in the meaning allows the populist leader to play on these wide spectrums of meanings.

## Method and Theoretical Framework

### *Sampling and retrieval*

The analysis of the paper covers the speeches of the Indian Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi in the radio program Mann Ki Baat from 2014 (May) – 2021 (December) that addresses the mechanism behind the construction of new narratives around yoga by the leader. The other media articles and content from social media platforms (Twitter, YouTube) have also been analysed for the same time period mentioned above to better understand what implications this new meaning of yoga has on the ground social and political reality. The focus is on those perspectives and material that emphasized the celebration of International Yoga Day and broader issues linked to it in contemporary Indian society.

The speeches of PM Modi were retrieved from <https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/mann-ki-baat/> website which provides single-point access to all the episodes of the radio program, along with all the other speeches given by the PM during his tenure on various significant occasions. Tweets and images posted by PM Modi on his Twitter accounts (@narendramodi and @PMOIndia) have also been analyzed to support the analysis. The information regarding International Yoga Day and its themes each year have been retrieved from the official UN Website <https://www.un.org/en/observances/yoga-day>. To access the government's official initiatives, advertisements, policies and other steps taken to boom the tourism industry around Yoga and spread their agenda data has been analyzed from the government website <https://www.incredibleindia.org/content/incredible-india-v2/en/experiences/yoga-and-wellness.html>. I have also tried to cover data from different media outlets such as *Hindustan Times*, *India Today*, *The leaflet*, *The Wire*, *NDTV*, *Newslick* and *Indian Express* in India to get a

wide range of views from different ideological standpoints of the media outlets. Last data from the survey report on *Religion in India: Toleration and Segregation (2020)* by the Pew Research Center has been used to further support the arguments made regarding how the definition of yoga that has been promoted by the PM and his party is exclusionary.

For all the material, I chose to restrict data retrieval to the time period around International Yoga Day or the mention of the day by the leader or the media outlets. I focused on this particular time because yoga is most mentioned on social media platforms, and news outlets, and even gain international attraction during this period as it is recognized by the United Nations. More significantly, the PM can be seen practising yoga with the people (audience) during this time. This sets the mise-en-scene to analyze the performance of the populist PM in real time, where the audience also becomes active participants.

### *Analysis*

The paper elaborates on how the traditional practice of yoga has been appropriated for political mobilization by the present right-wing Hindu majoritarian regime in India. The paper undertakes an analysis of the discursive appropriation of yoga by the Indian PM through “effective performance”, that is, successful. It summarizes the politicization of yoga in contemporary Indian society by the leader and its ruling party. I detected and identified how this shift in the meaning of yoga is underpinned by three discursive moves that are taking place because of the changes made in the Indian political culture by the Hindu nationalist leader. Critically I use contextual knowledge about Indian society to discuss how the practice of yoga is rooted in the broader Hindu nationalist ideology.

I demonstrate these findings or moves through select examples – extracts from Mann Ki Baat radio program speeches, images of the PM performing yoga, the image of people performing yoga on International Yoga day et cetera.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The arguments that have been raised in the Indian context concerning the practice of yoga cannot be given through the objective mode of questioning. These are not the issues one can respond to within the yes-no binary. Instead, an in-depth discussion of the formation of meanings and myths around the performance of the practice of yoga by the right-wing majoritarian forces in India is required. Hence the paper has invoked the ‘Cultural Theory of Social Performance (Alexander, Performance and Power 2011)’ by the Cultural Sociologist Jeffrey C Alexander as the underlying theoretical framework to decode the speeches of the political actor PM Modi and his performances. Alexander brings into focus how with the increasing complexities in society which has become more divisive and diverse, the elements which compose the performance of an actor have become separated and defused analytically and empirically. It has become much more difficult to re-fuse the separated and defused elements to make a performance successful. To attain success the actor needs to form a ‘cultural extension’ (meaning to relate to the already existing cultural symbols and texts of society) and a ‘psychological extension’ (identify on a personal level with the performance) with the audience. These extensions generate a connection between the performer and their audience even in the most differentiated, segmented and complex social and cultural reality.

The ‘performativity of objects’ (Alexander, The performativity of objects 2020) is another theory by Alexander for conceptualizing the meaning of yoga. The paper has employed this theory

to understand yoga through the lens of cultural sociology. As per the theory, the aesthetic surface is something that we can touch, see, hear, smell, or taste, its material. And the discursive depth is defined in terms of the meanings, moral associations, collective beliefs and emotions. Each object that is, present in a performance possesses both the discursive and the aesthetic elements in it, keeping in mind that it is the discursive depth that plays the critical role and no iconic object can exist only in material (aesthetic) terms, it always needs to be understood through the discursive aspect of reality. Alexander argues that performances by actors become successful only when the audience accepts the discursive meaning of the objects. The paper will help us elaborate on how yoga too possesses this material as well as discursive depth that culminates into a successful performance that leads to the mobilization of people/audience.

### **Decoding the Performance of the Yogi Prime Minister**

The revival of Yoga by the present regime and Modi in Mann ki Baat is becoming successful due to the ‘cultural and imagined cultural meaning encased inside the aesthetically shaped material shadow around yoga’ (Alexander 2020). Although yoga has materiality in it it is ‘enmeshed in networks of meaning before its physical impact’ (Alexander 2020) on the body. So, while yoga possesses an ‘aesthetic surface’ that the bodily sense can feel, it also has ‘discursive depth’ that it represents in the form of collective beliefs, emotions, et cetera. of traditional Indian society as we read previously in the paper. So, it is not just about the physical postures, the clothing, and the ambience that defines the practice of yoga but also the discursive depth and iconic power it holds. So, yoga is an icon with surface and depth.

Therefore, the understanding of the performance of Yoga by the political actor in the public realm cannot remain restricted to a populist tactic of the leader. Even if the leader employs it as a tactic the reason that it is successful in mobilizing people is because of the meanings it symbolizes to different sections of the population. And this is the reason that the practice of yoga mobilizes people politically and can move beyond the spiritual well-being (moksha) or physical fitness (via asana, and posture exercises) that appears on the surface. The actor PM Modi might have understood the significance of the modern-day ambiguous definition of Yoga and that is, what he keeps in mind while performing Yoga in unison with his audience, such that his performance becomes acceptable to the world. In the background, he pushes forth the Hinduised version of Yoga that becomes visible during his performances.

Now the paper will illustrate the three significant moves that are allowing the further entrenchment of Hindu nationalist ideology in India by undertaking an analysis of the discursive appropriation of yoga by the Indian PM through an “effective performance”, that is, successful.

### **1) Portraying India as a ‘Vishwaguru’ (world leader) in global politics**

Since the UN proclaimed 21st June as International Yoga Day in 2014, the ruling party has been orchestrating a grand spectacle each year. The PM tweeted after the first International Yoga Day – *“35,985 people belonging to 84 nations joined #YogaDay programme at Rajpath. 2 world records have been set. Yoga truly unites.”* (Modi 2015). The example of the first international Yoga day where the PM along with 36000 approx. people from 84 nationalities performed yoga at the #YogaPath (Raj Path), creating a symbolic and physical unity of the nation and projecting

*Bharat* as a leader and visionary that could provide a similar connection to the world. This celebration allows the PM to create a ritualistic sense of connection with the people. Because through these celebrations, the virtual interaction at the level of radio episodes is extended to the physical world, where the crowd is made to gather in hundreds and thousands and bonding is created based on these narratives that redefine the very social and cultural meanings of society.

Creating these grand spectacles has been a common practice of the incumbent right-wing government. Gatherings have occurred an innumerable number of times, especially around the charismatic persona of Modi or on the themes related to nationalism and the building of a 'New India'. The success of Yoga, which led to the setting up of two Guinness world records and the recognition of India in a positive light worldwide, gave impetus to the leader and his party to continue the trend. E.g., Hailing the Jan Dhan Yojana, when more than 1.8 crore bank accounts were opened in a week (23 to 29th Aug 2014) by the Government of India, set up another Guinness World Record (2015).

Figure 1 shows PM Modi performing yoga during the first International Yoga Day and enacting the ritualistic performance with thousands of people from various nations. He is invoking the image of a '*global yogi*' and a '*Vishwaguru*' who could relate himself to any other human being in this world and simultaneously retain '*authentic Indianness*'. The leader sits in front of everyone wearing a white kurta-pyjama with a cloth representing the colours of the Indian flag around his neck. Behind him, you can see young men and women wearing a t-shirt and track pants and following the acts of their leader. The interesting part here is that performance of yoga is done by the performers who are not wearing a robe or ethnic version of clothing but a very modern,

trendy western attire with printed logos of a saint performing yoga, that is, clothing that is worn in gyms and other modern exercise spaces. The image shows how the Indian reality is being rebranded by repackaging it into something that can be consumed by the international audience. This imagery can be called a *'site of enchantment'* as it has been captured to display an ideal vision of the reality of unity between India and the rest of the world that is exaggerated to such an extent that all other versions of reality are foreshadowed (Kaur 2020, 102-03). The present regime aims to project its version of social, political and economic reality as the 'permanent', 'final' and 'only' version of existence for all.



Figure 1

On the surface, this image is the celebration of revivalism of the ancient practice of Yoga and bringing it back to the world platform, where people worldwide feel they are part of a common ritual. The PM has *"substantiated the chronicle of an ancient spiritually-oriented civilisation with resonance for the present, thereby rendering both yoga and India as simultaneously timeless and*



*ahead of their times* (Puri 2019, 321)”. Given the times that we live in where people focus more on self, self-care and individuality, but at the same time, they want to experience spirituality and remain rooted in their culture. Yoga provides the perfect blend of this combination where the individual-oriented Western society accepts it as a mode of self-care, and the Indian counterpart promotes it as a mode to recuperate from the ills of modernity, competition, and consumerism (Godrej 2017).

This performance of yoga exemplifies how the populist leader can draw a cultural extension with the people of India and at the same time extend that connection to the international community. Even though secularized health and fitness-oriented postural yoga were always treated as inauthentic, inferior and accused of being tied with Western decadence that was incapable of experiencing a spiritual and psychological transcendence (Nanda, 2011, *The Ludicrousness of Taking Back Yoga*). The ambiguous meanings of Yoga have allowed the populist leader to appropriate the meaning as per his need and help him to re-imagine the position of India in world politics. The right wing of India has tapped this spiritual practice to proclaim India as a “Vishwa Guru” (World Leader). And the credit has been taken by the PM and his party for bringing the project of making India a world leader to fruition. Modi here has achieved a successful performance by taking the leadership role and creating an inclusive space to spiritually and physically connect the world by performing the practice of yoga in unison with the rest of the world on International Yoga Day.

In one of the episodes, the PM confirms his intentions of becoming the Vishwaguru by stating, *“When I proposed the International Yoga Day, it was just an idea. But the scene that was witnessed on 21st Jun was such that wherever the sun dawned, wherever its rays*

*reached, there was not a single landmass wherein it was not welcomed by way of yoga. We can say with conviction that the sun never sets in the world of yoga practitioners. The way yoga was received and welcomed with open arms around the world, I'm certain that there is no Indian who is not proud of it.”* (2019, 273) (Mann Ki Baat, June 2015).

## **2) Creation of a direct connection between the populist leader and his people**

From the above analysis, we can argue that yoga becomes a prime site to provide a seamless cultural connection to the audience by painting a picture of mental, physical, spiritual, and cultural unity<sup>8</sup>. This unifying image not only offered a cultural extension at the global platform but also became a space where the leader came in direct contact with his people. He performed Yoga in unison with the people. He merged with the people and became one of them, showcasing himself as not the other but as one among them. As a result, the physical, mental, and emotional distance between the leader and his followers dissipates<sup>9</sup>. And the political actor becomes successful in forming a *personal identification* with the audience at an emotional, sentimental and psychological level. The fusion of performance and the creation of personal identification with the audience took

---

<sup>8</sup> The themes of International Yoga day concretize the point of how the leader and his government paint a picture of unity for the people of India and the world – “Yoga for Wellness” (2021 Theme), “Connect the Youth” (2016), “Yoga for Heart” (2019), and “Yoga for Humanity” (2022 theme) along with Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav (because India has attained 75 years of independence, yoga would be performed at 75 iconic sites) (2022), this proves the every expanding scale of these performances.

<sup>9</sup> The link to watch the Yoga performance on Guinness World Record page - <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2015/6/prime-minister-modi-helps-india-stretch-its-way-to-world-records-during-internati-386074>; Images of Modi interacting with the crowd and how Yoga gained international prominence- <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/international-yoga-day-celebration-at-rajpath-sets-guinness-world-records/>.

place both in the physical and virtual reality for the leader and his followers. We will first discuss the physical reality below:

*The Physical Bond formed during the ritualistic performance of yoga*

Initially, when this mode of ritualistic yoga performance was initiated by the PM and his government it provided a sense of pride and thrill among the individuals who became a part of these performances. They were provided with a feeling that they were doing something great for the nation. Over time, these symbolic yoga performances became so significant for the audience that they have become performers in the name of carrying on the '*Atmanirbhar Bharat*' (self-reliant or self-sufficient India) project. It would be appropriate to call them "Shadow Performers" because even though they are the prime actors of these yoga performances, they only act out the plot, that is, being written by the majoritarian government.

Figure 2 portrays a young girl wearing a mask of Modi and performing Yoga with other women of the community during the 2019 International Yoga Day. The women are wearing clothes ranging from nightgowns to t-shirts and track pants. They have even used different types of mats which might not even be considered proper yoga mats to exercise. There is no restriction on how one dresses up or how one designs the mise-en-scene to perform this ritual. The significant point to notice is that the performance might not be in sync with what a genuine practice of yoga is supposed to look like and it doesn't even matter to the people. However, the underlying ritual becomes complete for the people only when there is a sense of the presence of their leader among them. Even without being physically a part of these performances, the populist leader becomes the

hero of those gatherings as the act is being carried out in his name. The actual performers become the shadow of the populist leader by wearing the mask of the leader and experiencing his presence among them. This leads to the creation of a strong bond of unity between these shadow performers and the leader himself. Ananya Vajpayi has defined the phenomena as the ‘mirror-like persona of the leader’ (Vajpeyi 2020, 24) allowing people to see their reflection in the Prime Minister. The gatherings of Yoga have successfully become one prime space for such unifying performances that showcases the necessity of the presence of the leader for the ritualistic gathering to be successful.



Figure 2

One must question if this bond is eternal and has some definite meanings and values that define it or if it only ends up being a tool in the hands of the political actor. As the reflection does not have space for “others” in this gaze of mutual fascination’ (Vajpeyi 2020). Because, at the level of the shadow performers, they feel that they are part of a dialogue, they represent the PM

and the nation, and it's their version of values and symbols of the ancient culture that each of these performances pushes to the centre stage. But in contrast, these yoga performances might not be a dialogue between the leader and his people but a monologue that leads to the exclusion of many.

### *Forming connections in the Virtual World*

The development of technology and innovation have quantitatively increased the number of iconic objects in society, and it becomes challenging to diffuse to elements that would lead to a successful performance. In contemporary societies, it becomes difficult to maintain this iconic power because of the sudden influx of so many iconic objects. So, it requires the audience's experience of surface and depth when a performance is taking place. In the case of the iconic power of yoga, the discursive experience is felt by the audience through the upper-caste Hindu version of reality and invoking emotions around the nation. At the level of the surface, successful performance is achieved via 'personal' and 'highly mediatized branding' (Vajpeyi 2020, 21) by the PM in Mann Ki Baat episodes by the populist leader and the advertising and marketing done around Yoga to feed the audience by the government agents and policymakers. Here the PM, his party and supporters become the 'designers and critics'<sup>10</sup> who share, advertise and make this version of reality (Yoga in this case) the accepted version.

One example of this scenario is as follows: During Covid, the PM created a hologram video version of himself performing yoga and released it on [Twitter](#) in response to people asking him for his

---

<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Alexander argues that these critics are important as they provide authenticity to the iconic object and allows people to believe and trust it to be the right narrative. In case of Yoga, the acceptance of this upper-caste Hindu version of yoga by many film stars (Akshay Kumar, Shilpa Shetty, Kangana Ranaut etc.), spiritual gurus (Baba Ramdev, Sri Sri Ravishankar etc.), most Indian TV channels and newspapers. Most importantly, the acceptance of Yoga on international platforms such as UN and how it has been celebrated throughout the world every year since the acceptance of International Yoga Day.

fitness regime on one of the Mann Ki Baat radio episodes. The hologram of the leader portrays him as an eye-catching image of a fit person with slight muscles who is performing the *vrikshasna* or the tree position in yoga meditation. Figure 3 this hologram of Modi standing in a room with windows that shows a peaceful tranquil view of nature. The blue t-shirt and black track pants blend well with the background and picture him as a fit modern man performing the ancient practice of yoga. The scene is relatable to any modern Indian who is living on their own during the covid lockdown and looking for spiritual and mental well-being. This hologram is a highly mediatized branding of a flawless version of that reality where PM is a symbol of balance, peace and tranquillity. The people feel closer to him as they are made to enter the private space of the leader and are made aware of how he takes care of his physical and mental well-being through the medium of yoga. This access to the life of the actor through a hologram which is animation has the power to form a connection with the people. It makes them follow their tech-savvy, chic, trendy leader in the form of a social influencer who provides them with access to his private space. The young tech-friendly generation that experiences most of their reality through social media platforms is able to form a bond with a leader who is efficiently able to enter their virtual world. These performances overshadow the fact that it is a period when the nation is suffering from high covid death rates, a lack of medical services for people, huge unemployment and the economy is in shambles.



Figure 3

One other way the iconic power of Yoga is made to diffuse in the performances is by initiating the ‘hashtag culture<sup>11</sup>’ whereby any scheme or initiative being launched goes hand in hand with launching hashtags on all the government and the political leader’s social media platforms. In today’s world where people do more socialization online on virtual platforms rather than offline in person. These hashtags and trendsetters become the game changers to set the narrative, making the PM’s political performance successful. As he is reaching where the maximum amount of audience is, he is engaging with these applications and tools of technology that concretizes his image as a tech-savvy, youth-oriented and modern leader who is also deeply rooted in the *Bharatiya* culture. This approach of the political actor allows him to transcend a

---

<sup>11</sup> Apart from Yoga, the PM has mentioned these hash tags in various episodes and asked his audience to engage with them - #YogaDay, #YesWeCan, #IncredibleIndia, #selfiewithdaughter, #NewIndia, #Acchedin, #SwachhBharat, #AyushmanBharat, #EkBharatShreshthaBharat, #Digital India, #SankalpSeSiddhi, #SwachhataHiSeva etc.

particular identity. Moreover, he can even pick up elements from opposing ideologies and identities to connect with people<sup>12</sup>.

The PM makes the audience feel like they are a part of this performance by asking them to engage on these virtual platforms and helping him reach as many people as possible and make the initiative taken up by the leader or his government successful. He asks them to post their pictures while performing yoga and putting the hashtags to get the conversation going. He then at times shows these images on the radio show stating how energetic, active and involved the citizens of the nations are. They are playing the role of a good citizen by performing their duty and being involved in the conversation that their leader started on these online platforms. The practising of yoga at their homes and posting their picture on with a hashtag that their leader introduced to them itself becomes fulfilling and provides them with a feeling of fulfilment. They have a sense of achievement when they are following in the footsteps of their leader. This way, the audience feels that they are also contributing to the journey of creating a 'New India'. Ananya Vajpayi calls Mann Ki Baat, along with other modes of interaction (Twitter, electoral rallies, foreign visits) used by the prime minister as 'empty signifiers' or 'pure reflective surfaces' (Vajpeyi 2020). She further argues how these traditional physical interactions, electronic modes of communication, and social media platforms act as mirrors of popular consciousness and provides the opportunity to the Hindu electorate to experience (physical, mental and emotional) what they want. And the PM becomes

---

<sup>12</sup> The concepts of hybridity and mimicry by Homi Bhabha that were put forth to understand the post-colonial subjects helps one to understand the phenomenon. Bhabha had argued how the post-colonial subjects are complex and though they were colonized but at the same time they themselves were changing the colonizers during this interaction. They try to mimic the colonizers but also affected them too, as a result a hybrid version of post-colonial subjects were created in the postcolonial societies. It is this hybrid version that can help decode the support for the PM, even when he is drawing support from different and at times opposing ideologies.



successful in his performance on these modes because he can make this experience emanate from himself; people see, feel and hear themselves in the PM.

### 3) The performance of Yoga and the entrenchment of Exclusionary Politics

However, this unifying image of Yoga that has been disseminated over and over in the Mann ki Baat episodes has various issues<sup>13</sup> underneath it. It also has the capacity to nurture exclusionary politics by limiting the meaning of yoga to the narratives of the majoritarian Hindu ideology of the right wing. The inherently cultural and private practice of yoga can also be politicized to attain larger goals of propagating a particular ideology in the public sphere. The actor has within him the capacity to create the binary of sacred and profane through his performance such that those who do not fuse with the performance are treated as profane. Similarly, those who are not able to mesh themselves with this performance by the yogi PM are excluded. This helps us understand the political and material changes that can be made through the performance of certain cultural codes and meanings in society.

Keeping the Indian political scenario in mind the paper will elaborate on two ways these exclusions have come into effect through the performances of yoga by the leader. i) Invisibilizing the lower caste, marginalized version of yoga and appropriating it to create an upper-caste

---

<sup>13</sup> This spectacle of Yoga was being accused of being a veil to hide the dire situation of health care infrastructure in India, where the health budget as a percentage of GDP is still as low as 0.35% in the 2022-23 budget. (Chakraborty and Rajagopalan 2022) (Chitravanshi and Das 2022). “The debate around International Yoga Day is not about health benefits. It is about the “media spectacle in the name of health when spending on health is being reduced” (Singh 2021).

Hinduized definition of yoga as the universally acceptable version ii) Exclusion of other religious definitions of yoga with an aim to either wipe out their past or overshadow it with the Hindu religious definition of yoga.

First, to be able to efficiently use the discourses around Yoga, the NDA regime and PM Modi extended their original definition that was based on Swami Vivekananda's upper-caste Brahminical understanding of the practice. To attain maximum supporters, they have appropriated Hatha Yoga, a type of yoga that focuses on the development of bodily strength, immune system and physique to increase the length of life and survive in harsh climatic conditions. It is in deep contrast to the upper-caste version of Yoga based on Vivekananda's interpretation of Patanjali's Yoga Sutra as providing a scientific method for 'seeing God' and attaining spirituality. The populist leader and his party have appropriated Hatha Yoga and now showcase it as a part of the Indian epic, Rig Veda. In reality, Hatha Yoga was practised by low-caste *tantrics, jogis, fakirs, sorcerers and hatha yogis* who were never a part of the Vedic-Patanjali tradition and were looked down upon by the superior spiritual community (Nanda, 2011). The most marginalised sections of society used to practice it and it was a medium of survival for them by attaining physical strength. The leader and his party do not acknowledge this origin but treat Hatha Yoga as a part of their upper-caste Hindu nationalist version. In reality, their spiritual and philosophical definition of yoga had kept the knowledge and practice of yoga limited to certain sections of people till the early and mid-twentieth century.

In an episode, PM said, "*Yoga has broken barriers of caste, creed and geography to unite the people of the entire world, which is the very essence of the real sentiment innate*

*to Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam that we have followed in letter and spirit over centuries. Our Rishis, sages and saints have emphasized certain tenets; yoga has concretely proved them. I believe that the concept of wellness today is bringing about a revolution. [...] My dear countrymen, as a people, we are truly blessed to be born in this land, bhoomi of Bharat, India. India has had a rich historical canvas. Every single month, every single day in fact, is a marker of one historical event or the other. Every place in India is replete with signposts of heritage. Every place has been blessed with a saint, a luminary or a great, famous personality who has contributed through his sagacity.” (Mann Ki Baat, 24th Jan 2018).*

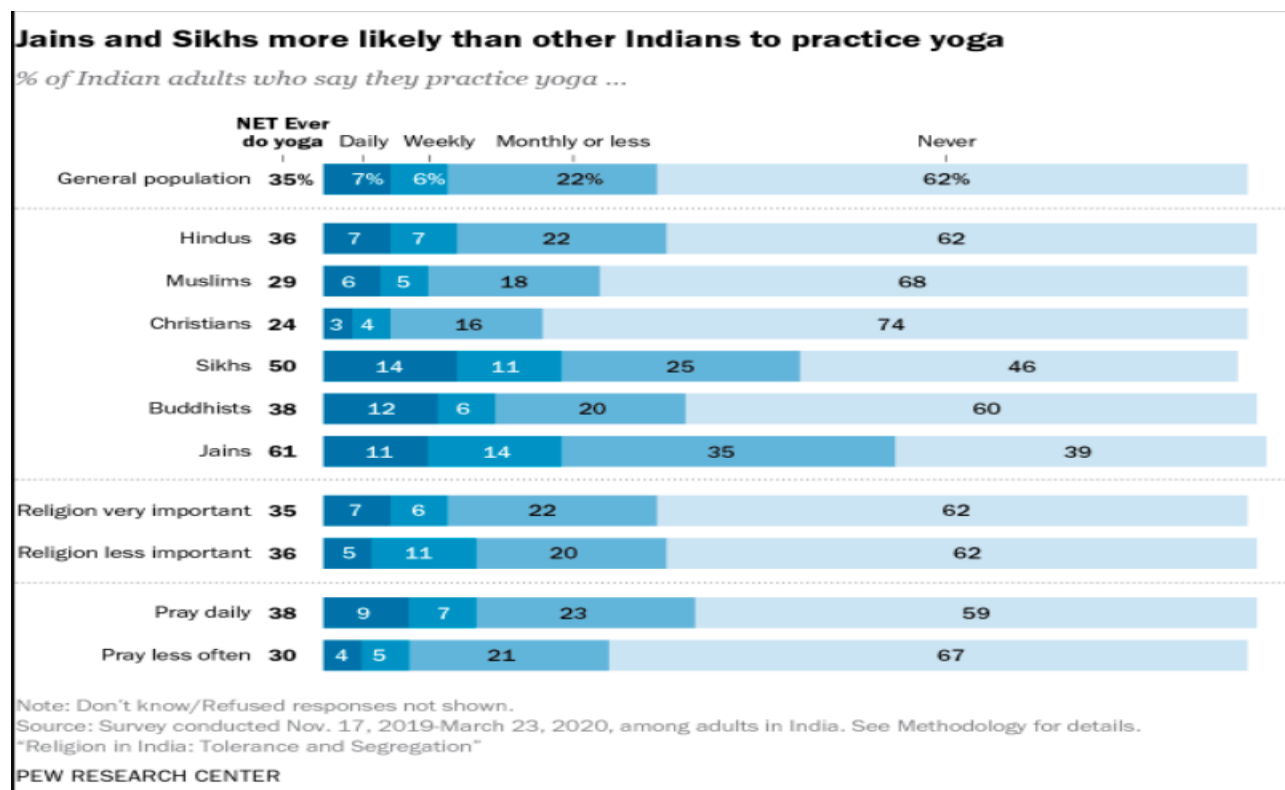
If one decodes the extract given above, the PM accentuates the discursive depth of yoga by evoking the historical eminence of the Hindu version of Indian *culture (Bharatiya, following the philosophy of uniting the world – Vasudev Kutumbakam, Mother India)*. The description here is in consonance with the right-wing majoritarian ideology and vision of a nation. At the same time, at the material level, it complements the other schemes and initiatives of the government (‘Incredible India’, ‘Fit India’, ‘Make In India’ et cetera). These are also embedded in this particular upper-caste Hindu-oriented discursive meaning of India.

Second, keeping 21st June as the International Yoga day itself has been criticised by a section of the population as it is the death anniversary of Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (also known as Doctorji), the founder of the Hindu right-wing organisation Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh during the colonial period (Singh 2021). So, the accusation is that the government is trying to push forward the right-wing ideology of Hindu majoritarianism and Hindutva through this symbolic

gesture of connecting Yoga to the RSS founder. And, if the government is appropriating the meaning of yoga from its parent organisation, RSS, then it will lead to the exclusion of many and will favour hyper-nationalism in the real sense, “*whereby India is rendered a Hindu nation and Hinduism itself is reduced to an upper-caste variety, has been long in the making, what is troublingly apparent is how Yoga is being mobilised in its service.*” (Puri 2019, 319). Jyoti Puri has substantiated this viewpoint by arguing that yoga has had many histories. It has been practised in various forms – Buddhist, Sufi, Jain, Tantra, Nath, and postural yoga, which possesses intercontinental evolution. But, the emphasis on chanting *Om*, performing *Surya namaskar* (sun salutations) and using the Sanskrit vocabulary while talking about different exercises and postures are embedded in upper-caste Hinduism, and it has become nearly impossible to disengage Hindutva from yoga (Puri 2019). The problem thickens as this Hinduized version of yoga bases itself on “pre-Islamic imagery of Bharat combined with the globalized aesthetics of Hindu cultural identity” (Kaur 2020, 254). Hence, this led to the establishment of an India whose true cultural essence is made free of Muslims by harping on to the mythical ancient past. The performance becomes problematic because of the exclusionary nature of the definition of Yoga, that is, being propagated worldwide. At the same time, at the domestic level, if anyone challenges this version of Yoga, then that person would be put into the category of ‘anti-national’ or charged with ‘sedition’ (Puri 2019).

The recent survey report on “Religion in India: Toleration and Segregation” (2020) by the Pew Research Center can be used to further support the above argument. One would imagine that as the Hinduized version is pushed by the state, it must mean that at least the maximum proportion of people practising yoga would belong to the Hindu religion. Figure 4 shows that it is the people

who believe in the religious faiths of Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism form a higher proportion of yoga practitioners than those who are affiliated with the Hindu religion. This report is clear proof of the exclusion and ignorance of other versions of Yoga in the narratives of PM.



## Conclusion

This article elaborates on how the leader of the majoritarian Hindu-nationalist party in India is successful in mobilizing people and creating meanings by dominating the cultural codes and symbols around the practice of yoga. This is understood by employing the Cultural Theory of Social Performance in the Indian context. The theory is invoked by applying the binary discourse

to the yoga performances by the leader. Those who identify with the Hindu nationalist ideology and belief systems fuse with the leader's performance. They become a part of the sacred side of the binary and the flagbearers of the Hindutva project. This fusion is not limited to being just a part of the audience but also becoming an active performer of yoga along with the leader. While those who are unable to fuse with this particular meaning of yoga that supports the Hindu nationalist project are projected as the profane and evil of society.

The critical issue that needs to be underlined here is that yoga which is, treated as a symbol and practice of spiritual and physical well-being becomes politically charged and attains the ability to push forward the agenda of a regime in power. This shows that the democratic struggle for power is not limited to maintaining control over the instruments of hegemony and force in society. The cultural, spiritual and religious jargon that has been employed in the performances of Yoga communicates a false perception of "unity and integrity" at the domestic and international platforms. The deeper reason for this pomp and grandeur around Yoga is to first, construct a "new Nation" based on the old Hindutva ideology. Second, 'to cover up economic failures, unemployment, corruption, political instability and a looming crisis of legitimacy' (A. Gudavarthy, Emergency Message for Modi Regime: Don't Take People for Granted 2021). The regime has decoded the significance of 'cultural ethos and symbolic lifeworld of "the people"' (A. Gudavarthy 2021) and so the leader can give a successful performance by engaging with the content of those cultural scripts. This paper dealt with one such cultural script around the practice of Yoga. The leader drew legitimacy and electoral support by tapping into the people's popular consciousness (cultural, religious, and traditional symbolism) that he evokes from the available meanings, codes and myths of society. The myth of India being a Vishwaguru of Yoga and

responsible for bringing spirituality to the rest of the world is deeply 'entrenched the in the collective meaning of nationalism tied to latent religious symbolism' (A. Gudavarthy 2021) that allowed Modi in forming the cultural extension and personal identification required to make performances in Mann Ki Baat successful.

## Works Cited

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2011. *Performance and Power*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2020. "The performativity of objects." *Sociologisk Forskning* 57 (3-4): 381-409.
- . 2020. *The Performativity of Objects*. May 6. Accessed 2022. <https://ccs.yale.edu/videos/jeff-alexander-bar-ilan-center-cultural-sociology>.
- Alter, Joseph S. 2021. *Yoga in Modern India: The Body between Science and Philosophy*. Princeton University Press.
2021. "As PM Modi turns 71, India sets record with 2.5 crore Covid jobs in a day." *India Today*. September 17. Accessed October 2021. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pm-modi-birthday-india-covid-jobs-record-bjp-launches-20-day-mega-event-1854104-2021-09-17>.
- Bajpai, Anandita. 2021. "Matters of the Heart": The Sentimental Indian Prime Minister on All India Radio." In *The Politics of Authenticity and Populist Discourses*, edited by Christoph Kohl, Barbara Christophe, Heike Liebau and Achim Saupe, 105-26. Palgrave Macmillan.
2015. "Behold Modi Government's Guinness Record Certificate." *India Today*. January 21. Accessed January 2022. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/modi-government-guinness-book-record-jan-dhan-yojana-236772-2015-01-21>.
- Taneja, Richa, ed. 2018. "Born on PM Modi Birthday, Over 1200 Cut Cake Together To Set World Record." *NDTV*. September 18. Accessed January 2022. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/born-on-pm-modi-birthday-over-1200-people-cut-cake-together-set-guinness-world-records-1918156>.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1958. *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*. Translated by Willard R Trask and Willard Ropes Trask. Princeton University Press.



- Fachandi, Parvis Ghassem. 2019. "Reflections in the Crowd: Delegation, Verisimilitude, and the Modi Mask." In *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India*, edited by Anggana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot, 83-100. Noida, Uttar Pradesh: HarperCollins.
- Godrej, Farah. 2017. "The neoliberal yogi and the politics of yoga." *Political Theory* 772-800.
- Gudavarthy, Ajay. 2021. "Emergency Message for Modi Regime: Don't Take People for Granted." *The Leaflet*. June 26. Accessed August 2021. <https://theleaflet.in/emergency-message-for-modi-regime-dont-take-people-for-granted/>.
2022. "India creates Guinness world record by waving 78,220 flags simultaneously." *The Hindustan Times*. April 26. Accessed June 2022. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-creates-guinness-world-record-by-waving-78-220-simultaneously-video-101650944542346.html>.
- Kaur, Ravinder. 2020. *Brand New Nation: Capitalist Dreams and Nationalist Designs in Twenty-First-Century India*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Laughland, Oliver, and Matthew Weaver. 2014. *Indian election result: 2014 is Modi's year as BJP secures victory*. May 16. Accessed 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/16/india-election-2014-results-live>.
2019. *Mann Ki Baat: A Social Revolution on Radio*. New Delhi: Rupa Publication.
- Modi, Narendra. 2015. *Twitter @narendramodi*. June 21. Accessed March 2020. [https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/612664483748524032?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E612664483748524032%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fpublish.twitter.com%2F%3Fquery%3Dhttps3A2F2Ftwitter.com2Fnarendramodi2Fstatus2](https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/612664483748524032?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E612664483748524032%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fpublish.twitter.com%2F%3Fquery%3Dhttps3A2F2Ftwitter.com2Fnarendramodi2Fstatus2).

2017. "On Modi's birthday, fan creates Guinness World Record by displaying 2 lakh photos of PM." *One India*. September 18. Accessed Dec 2021. <https://www.oneindia.com/india/on-modi-s-birthday-fan-creates-guinness-world-record-displa-2545509.html?story=1>.

Palshikar, Suhas. 2019. "Towards Hegemony: The BJP Beyond Electoral Dominance." In *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India*, edited by Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot, 101-116. Noida, Uttar Pradesh: HarperCollins.

Puri, Jyoti. 2019. "Sculpting The Saffron Body: Yoga, Hindutva, and the International Market Place." In *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India*, edited by Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot, 317-331. Noida, Uttar Pradesh: Harper Collins.

Singh, Jyotsna. 2021. "Why International Yoga Day is no cause for celebration in India." *DownToEarth*. November 30. Accessed March 2022. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/why-international-yoga-day-is-no-cause-for-celebration-in-india-50269>.

Srivastava, Vandana. 2017. "Vadodara creates Guinness World Record with more than 5000 people sweeping a bridge, pays tribute to PM Narendra Modi's Swachh Bharat Abhiyan." *India.com*. May 29. Accessed December 2021. <https://www.india.com/viral/vadodara-creates-guinness-world-record-with-more-than-5000-people-sweeping-a-bridge-pays-tribute-to-pm-narendra-modis-swachh-bharat-abhiyan-2180429/>.

Swatman, Rachel. 2016. "India's PM Narendra Modi sees three records broken at birthday event." *Guinness World Record*. September 19. Accessed February 2022. <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/2016/9/indias-pm-narendra-modi-sees-three-records-broken-at-birthday-event-444299>.

Vajpeyi, Ananya. 2020. "Minorities and Populism in Modi's India: The Mirror Effect." In *Minorities and Populism - Critical Perspectives from South Asia and Europe*, edited by Volker Kaul and Ananya Vajpeyi, 17-28. Springer.

Whicher, Ian. 1998. *The Integrity of the Yoga Darsana*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.