

## Choreographing Tolerance: Narendra Modi, Hindu Nationalism, and International Yoga Day<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This essay considers the significance of Narendra Modi's yoga agenda against the backdrop of increasingly violent right-wing Hindu nationalist policies and interventions under his administration. One of Modi's first official acts after being elected Prime Minister of India in 2014 was to urge the United Nations member states to declare June 21<sup>st</sup> International Yoga Day. In his speech, he argued that yoga has the capacity to unite both the self and the world. Though Modi espouses unity through yoga, he has arguably been one of the most divisive Indian leaders in recent memory. How do we reconcile the contradiction between "Modi the yogi" who proposes to unify the country and "Modi the Hindu nationalist" who has been actively responsible for dividing it along sectarian lines? What is the function of International Yoga Day within the broader context of Modi's anti-Muslim politics, both past and present? Why has yoga, in particular, become a central tenet of Modi's Hindu nationalist agenda? Drawing on Wendy Brown's (2006) theorization of "tolerance," I consider how Modi's yoga agenda has further entrenched the binary of the tolerant, "civilized" Hindu and the intolerant, "irrational" Muslim Other within the Indian national imaginary. In contrast to the notion of Muslims as militant, ideologically rigid, and intolerant (of difference), yoga performs the Hindu nation as flexible, yielding, open, and tolerant. With its benign, benevolent associations with health and well-being, mind-body harmony, and peace, Modi has mobilized yoga to obfuscate the increasing violence, inflexibility, and intolerance of difference under his administration. This essay concludes by thinking about the complicity of the liberal Hindu citizen in the rise of Hindu nationalism and the Hindu supremacist state.

**Keywords:** Choreography; Hindu nationalism; Tolerance; Yoga

June 21, 2015: *Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi sits in a cross-legged meditation position with his eyes closed on the lawn of Rajpath ("King's Way"), a tree-lined boulevard that runs from the Presidential Residence to India Gate in New Delhi, the capital of India. It is the first International Yoga Day. Modi is dressed in a crisp white cotton kurtha top and matching white cotton pyjama bottoms. Around his neck is a loosely draped scarf in white, orange, and green – the colors of the Indian flag. His choice of clothing indexes both purity and national pride; he is at once spiritual guru and political leader. Thousands of people, all dressed in white T-shirts and dark colored athletic pants, are seated behind him on uniform red yoga mats ready*

to follow Modi's lead. Modi's signature white beard and wispy hair stand out against the dark-haired youth behind him. The juxtaposition affirms his position as the supreme patriarch of the nation, while also being a man of the people. Shown on television screens in homes across India, International Yoga Day broadcast an image of Modi as the peaceful and powerful leader of a unified nation.

Over the speaker system, a voice begins to chant the sacred sound Om, followed by a Sanskrit sloka (prayer). The participants bring their hands together in the namaskar position. An aerial shot shows a sea of men and women in white shirts turning their heads and twisting their torsos in synchronization, the image of India Gate looming large against the hazy, smog-filled sky of New Delhi. The camera pans to a lone Muslim man wearing an embroidered skullcap. He has his eyes open and his palms turned upwards in an Islamic prayer position. Both his skullcap and upturned palms highlight Muslim difference. The camera reinforces his difference by zooming in on him, while also erasing his difference by panning out to show him as just one of many Indian bodies. Absorbed – or, perhaps, drowned out – by a sea of (presumably) non-Muslim bodies, he seems to be simultaneously apart from and a part of the nation (Doordarshan National 2015).

In this essay, I consider the function and significance of International Yoga Day against the backdrop of increasingly violent anti-Muslim Hindu nationalist policies and actions under Modi's leadership. In May 2014, Narendra Modi, who campaigned on a platform to modernize India's economy, fight corruption, and strengthen India's role on the global stage, was elected Prime Minister of India. One of his first official acts as Prime Minister was to urge the United Nations member states to declare June 21<sup>st</sup> International Yoga Day. In his speech to the UN General Assembly in New York on September 27, 2014, he spoke about yoga in terms of harmony, well-being, and oneness, emphasizing yoga's capacity to unite<sup>2</sup> both the self and the world. He said,

Yoga is an invaluable gift of India's ancient tradition. It embodies *unity* of mind and body; thought and action; restraint and fulfillment; *harmony* between man and nature; a holistic approach to health and *well-being*. It is not about exercise but to discover the sense of *oneness* with yourself, the world and nature (Modi 2014, emphasis added).

Modi's petition to the UN was signed by 175 countries and the first International Yoga Day was held in New Delhi in 2015 during which Modi led over 39,000 people from 84 countries in a collective, televised yoga practice, setting two Guinness Book of World records. In addition to the 39,000 participants in the capital, thousands of yoga practitioners in other parts of India and around the world from 191 countries including China, Morocco, and the United States also participated in their own International Yoga Day celebrations. Soon after taking office, Modi also established the Department of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homeopathy (AYUSH) – previously known as the Department of Indian System of Medicine and Homeopathy – to strengthen and promote India's links with yoga and other indigenous health and wellbeing practices. The Department became a federal Ministry and India's first Yoga Minister was appointed in November 2014.

For many critics of the Prime Minister, Modi's politicization of yoga to promote peace and unity reeks of hypocrisy. Modi has arguably been one of the most divisive Indian leaders in recent memory. Under his administration, violence against religious minorities and caste-oppressed communities has increased multifold. For decades, he has

been a leading proponent of Hindu nationalism, or *Hindutva* (Hindu-ness), which advocates for the cultural hegemony of (Brahmanical) Hinduism in Indian society, culture, and politics. Most notably, as I will discuss later, in 2002 he presided over the murder and rape of thousands of Muslims at the hands of Hindu mobs while he was Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat. Since being elected Prime Minister in 2014, Modi has continued to stoke widespread anti-Muslim violence and an overall culture of religious intolerance in India.<sup>3</sup> How do we reconcile the contradiction between “Modi the yogi” who proposes to unify the country through yoga and “Modi the Hindu nationalist” who has been actively responsible for dividing it along sectarian lines? What is the function of International Yoga Day within the broader context of Modi’s anti-Muslim politics, both past and present? Why has yoga, in particular, become a central tenet of Modi’s Hindu nationalist agenda?

Yoga has largely benign, benevolent associations with health, harmony, spirituality, unity, and flexibility. This has prevented many from seeing how it, too, has become an instrument of violence and marginalization by the Hindu right. I suggest that Modi has capitalized on yoga’s associations with harmony and flexibility to distract from his administration’s divisiveness and authoritarianism. Yoga has allowed Modi to choreograph an image of himself, and by extension the Hindu state, as flexible (i.e. accommodating) yet strong, peaceful yet powerful. Meanwhile, he continues to sanction genocidal violence against Muslims in India with impunity.

This essay takes seriously the importance of the (yoga) body in the aestheticization of Hindu nationalist ideology. As Joseph Alter argues, “by starting with the body one is better able to make sense of ... important features of the nationalist project” (2011, x-xi). Building on this as well as Bhuvi Gupta and Jacob Copeman’s argument that Hindu nationalism “is a condition of the body” that has emerged “from a particular prescription and practice of yoga,” (2019, 1). I consider how Modi’s International Yoga Day has further entrenched the binary of the tolerant, “civilized” Hindu and the intolerant, “irrational” Muslim Other within the Indian national imaginary. Despite what might ostensibly be perceived as a decolonial move to “take back” yoga from the West, I suggest that International Yoga Day should be viewed more skeptically as an attempt by Modi to bolster the Hinduization of India under the guise of yoga as a secular practice. In this regard, Modi’s politicization of yoga is a prime example of how the discourse of decolonization can actually be exploited to uphold violent right-wing nationalist agendas.

In order to support these claims, I will first historicize Modi’s anti-Muslim Hindu nationalist agenda to show how yoga is not an aberration but a continuation of that violence. Next, I will situate Modi’s mobilization of yoga for nationalist ends as part of a longer history of yoga and somatic nationalism in India. I will then discuss the ensuing debates about International Yoga Day and the way in which the discourse of (Hindu) tolerance masks the underlying anti-Muslim violence of Modi’s administration. I will conclude by thinking about the complicity of the liberal Hindu citizen in the rise of Hindu nationalism and the Hindu supremacist state.

### **Historicizing Modi’s Anti-Muslim Hindu Nationalist Agenda**

Modi is currently the leader of the Hindu nationalist Bharata Janata Party (BJP). The BJP is the political wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a paramilitary organization of militant Hindus who “seek to instate a pure Hindu society” (Alter 2005,

171). Arguing that “Hindus are physically bound to the country by birth,” the RSS is fiercely anti-Muslim, anti-Christian, anti-Western, and anti-secularism (Alter 1994, 569).<sup>4</sup> In addition to political ties to the RSS, Modi and others in his party have strong personal ties to the organization. Modi was a long-time member of the RSS and worked in service of the organization for three decades. His first Yoga Minister, Shripad Naik, also learned yoga through the RSS. Kapil Komireddi argues that, “[T]he beliefs of the RSS are not incidental to [Modi’s] politics. They are what animate his politics” (2015).

Hindu nationalist groups like the RSS and BJP believe that since they are the religious majority in India, “it is ‘natural’ and ‘democratic’ that their [Hindu] ‘rights’ should be promoted by the Indian state which hitherto has been ‘pseudo-secular’ because of its appeasement of minorities” (Anand 2005). *Hindutva* is not only aimed at suppressing the rights of religious minorities, namely Indian Muslims and Christians; it is also meant to awaken Hindus to the idea of India as a Hindu nation (Anand 2005). To this end, *Hindutva* justifies anti-Muslim violence as necessary for the ‘rightful’ establishment of a Hindu nation.

A prime example of such violence is the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, a mosque built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the city of Ayodhya. In the 1980s, the Vishnu Hindu Parishad (VHP), the cultural wing of the *Hindutva* movement, launched a campaign to build a temple to Ram at the site of the Babri Masjid, which they believe stands on the exact site of Ram’s birthplace. The campaign culminated in a rally in which the VHP, in collaboration with the RSS and BJP, mobilized 150,000 *kar-sevaks* (volunteers) who vandalized and demolished the mosque.<sup>5</sup> Several leaders of the BJP were found responsible for instigating the violence. The incident at Ayodhya fueled fears about Muslims taking over the (Hindu) nation and led to decades of Hindu-Muslim violence, including, most notably, the 1992-1993 Bombay riots and the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, which I will discuss shortly.

The power of *Hindutva* as an ideology relies on the discursive construction of Muslims as “morally corrupt, barbaric, violent, *rigid*, backward, dirty, and fanatic” in opposition to Hindus who are seen as “virtuous, civilized, peaceful, accommodating, enlightened, clean, and *tolerant*” (Anand 2005 207, emphasis added).<sup>6</sup> Constructing Muslims as barbaric, violent, and dangerous allows Hindu nationalists to justify aggressively protecting the Hindu faith and culture by any means necessary, including violent and extrajudicial ones. At the same time, it allows Hindus to imagine themselves as tolerant in comparison to the “rigid,” “fanatic” Muslim. Tolerance becomes the primary axis on which Hindus mark the moral superiority of Hinduism over Islam. Constructed as intolerant of (Hindu) difference, Muslims become subjects of the superior, more tolerant (*Hindu/tva*) state.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the irony is that Hindu nationalists have been anything but tolerant of Muslims, as the demolition of the Babri Masjid shows. This contradiction between Hindu nationalist claims of tolerance, on the one hand, and absolute intolerance of religious difference, on the other, is what characterizes the Hindu supremacist state.

Modi exemplifies this contradiction. Though he espouses unity and tolerance through yoga, Modi has a long track record of anti-Muslim violence and policies that have marginalized and dispossessed Muslims in India. Perhaps most salient is his time as Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2002 when he presided over an anti-Muslim pogrom. On February 27, 2002 a train carrying a large group of Hindu *kar-sevaks* was burned at

Godhra station in the state of Gujarat, killing 58 people. The volunteers were returning from Ayodhya where they had been agitating to build a Hindu temple to Ram.<sup>8</sup> In the days and weeks following, Hindu mobs engaged in widespread anti-Muslim violence, including the torture and mass murder of approximately one thousand Muslims, the looting and destruction of Muslim businesses and places of worship, as well as the rape of countless Muslim women by Hindu men whose wives stood guard at the door to protect their husbands.

The violence was orchestrated and sanctioned by the state (Ayyub 2016). Modi, for example, reportedly ordered officials to take no action against rioters. The police not only failed to protect Muslims, many actively participated in anti-Muslim violence by joining rather than dispersing the Hindu mobs. BJP leaders, too, fomented violence with televised hate speech. Modi himself attacked the media's coverage of the riots for irresponsibly inflaming passions and tarnishing Gujarati "pride" (Mehta 2006). In December of that year, Modi decided to call early elections and campaigned on an explicitly *Hindutva* agenda, which resulted in a landslide victory for his party. His "handling" of the riots and his political success in Gujarat in the wake of the pogrom made him a popular and formidable figure in the BJP. He rose to national prominence in the following years, becoming leader of the party and eventually Prime Minister of India in 2014.

Since coming to power, Modi has worked to consolidate his Hindu nationalist agenda. Emboldened by what he perceived as a clear mandate from the Indian people to continue his Hindu nationalist agenda after getting re-elected in 2019, Modi and the BJP-majority Parliament revoked Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which gave Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, near autonomy over its affairs. In order to quash dissent and prevent any efforts to organize against the occupation, the Indian government cut off all major lines of communication within Kashmir, including cell phone lines, internet, and cable television. They also imposed a curfew throughout the region and deployed the military to enforce it.<sup>9</sup> Stripping Jammu and Kashmir of its statehood has arguably been one of the most significant and brazen acts of Modi's time as Prime Minister. However, it has certainly not been the only one.

In 2018, right-wing agitators demanded that Assam, a state that borders Bangladesh, update the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which was created in 1951 to register all "genuine citizens." The NRC, which draws on The Foreigners' Act of 1946, requires any "foreigner" to provide legal documents to prove permanent Indian residency or citizenship. In an effort to weed out migrants from Bangladesh, the government classified any individual who entered the state after March 25, 1971 – the date Bangladesh was founded – as an illegal immigrant and foreign national. Those who fell into this category and failed to establish an unbroken, documented chain of heredity, which many refugees could not do, were stripped of their citizenship. Nearly two million (mostly Muslim) residents of Assam were effectively rendered stateless as a result.<sup>10</sup>

The NRC must be understood in conjunction with the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). If the NRC was intended to root out undocumented (primarily Muslim) immigrants, the main purpose of the CAA was to disenfranchise Muslims by giving amnesty only to non-Muslim immigrants from neighboring Muslim-majority countries (Kesavan 2019). Enacted on December 12, 2019, the CAA amends Indian citizenship to allow Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Buddhist, and Christian refugees from

neighboring Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh to obtain citizenship on the grounds of religious persecution.<sup>11</sup> The amendment does not mention Muslims presumably because all three countries have a Muslim majority and thus Muslims cannot technically claim to be a persecuted religious minority. While neither the NRC nor the CAA explicitly names Muslims, it is clear from their effect that their intent is to marginalize Muslims by delegitimizing Muslim citizenship and rendering Muslims second-class citizens or illegal altogether.

The CAA was met with widespread student protests at universities across Delhi beginning in mid-December 2019. Protesters argued that the CAA discriminated on the basis of religion, and unfairly targeted Muslims. Delhi police responded by using batons and tear gas on protesters, injuring and arresting hundreds of students. Student protests soon spread into large-scale citizen protests across the city (and the rest of the country). On December 14 at Shaheen Bagh, a predominantly Muslim neighborhood in South Delhi, Muslim women protestors blocked a major highway to call attention to the discriminatory CAA. Joined by tens of thousands of protesters from all different religions, the women remained there for 101 days despite a ban on public protests issued by the BJP government. During the unrest, rather than trying to quell tensions, BJP leaders actively stoked anti-Muslim sentiment, with one BJP MP calling on his supporters to shoot Muslims and those allied with them.<sup>12</sup> On February 23, 2020, BJP leader Kapil Mishra gave an incendiary speech in Northeast Delhi, calling upon a mob to attack Muslim and Dalit protesters in the area. The next day an anti-Muslim pogrom ensued and continued for three consecutive days, leaving 53 people dead, mostly Muslims. Once again, as we saw in 2002 in Gujarat under Modi's leadership, the BJP government was found to be complicit in the attack (Singh 2020). The police either refused to intervene to quell the violence or actively incited violence and joined the mobs attacking Muslims. Most of those arrested were Muslim, including many Muslim intellectuals and activists who were targeted and detained under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, a draconian anti-terror law. The government blamed the violence on a leftist *jihadi* network of conspirators that they argued was responsible for radicalizing Muslims at Indian universities. Twisting the narrative further, they depicted the explicitly anti-Muslim violence as actually anti-Hindu (Apoorvanand 2020).

India claims to be the largest secular democracy in the world but over the last few decades, and especially since Modi came to power in 2014, India has become increasingly *intolerant* of religious minorities, particularly Muslims, as the above events detail. Modi's second term, in fact, has been marked by a ratcheting up of state-led anti-Muslim rhetoric, policies, and violence. Since 2019, there has been a marked increase in hate crimes against Muslims by Hindu extremists, including attacking Muslims (as well as Dalits) accused of slaughtering cows,<sup>13</sup> forcing Muslims to chant "Jai Shri Ram" (Glory to Lord Ram), and even heckling Muslim legislators in Parliament (Ayyub 2019). The 2019 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) report on India outlined increasing violence, intimidation, and harassment against non-Hindus and caste-oppressed Hindus. The BJP rejected the report, touting, instead, India's "secular credentials, its status as the largest democracy and a pluralistic society with a longstanding commitment to tolerance and inclusion" (Manikanta 2020).<sup>14</sup> Once again, the idea of (Hindu) tolerance was used to mask growing intolerance of Muslims in India. Tolerance, a central tenet of the Hindu nationalist agenda, has been mobilized to sideline,

distract from, and dismiss criticism of the government's incursions on secularism. While some may argue that secularism and religious tolerance are being *replaced* with religious bigotry and intolerance of religious difference, I suggest that the discourse of (Hindu) tolerance is, in fact, just as integral to the BJP's anti-Muslim politics as state-sanctioned violence is. Yoga, as I will discuss later, has been central to this discourse of tolerance.

### **Corpo-realizing the Hindu Nation-State: Somatic Nationalism and Yoga**

Modi's mobilization of yoga in service of a Hindu nationalist agenda is not entirely new. Yoga has a long history of being mobilized for nationalist ends in India. The birth of modern yoga, which combines European and Indian cultural elements (Singleton 2010), emerged during the colonial period. Regarded as "a technique for achieving freedom from political bondage" (Strauss 2002, 241-242), it was thought that yoga could help Indians break free from the British by creating strong, virile, masculine bodies capable of fighting in the independence movement (Goldberg 2016). In 1947, India was partitioned into two states: India, which was to be a secular state, and Pakistan, which was to be a Muslim state. Partition resulted in some of the worst communal violence India has ever seen. On an All India Tour, yoga guru Swami Sivananda promoted yoga's message of tolerance, peace, love, and harmony in the hopes of uniting the country after Partition and counteracting widespread religious intolerance between Hindus and Muslims at the time (Strauss 2002, 238).

The RSS took a different approach by mobilizing yoga not to unite Hindus and Muslims but to strengthen the Hindu nationalist movement. The RSS was – and still is – fiercely against secularism. They blamed Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, for making India secular and denying Hindus political hegemony in post-Partition India. After Partition, the RSS dispatched its propagandists across the country with the goal of engineering a cultural revolution, largely through training camps for young Hindus. In these training camps, the daily *shakhas*, or drills, were designed to "create an all-Bharata (India) national consciousness" (Barry 2014). As part of its daily, military-style drills, the RSS incorporated yoga, including sun salutations and Sanskrit chants. The RSS believed that yoga could purify the Indian body and, by extension, the body politic from corrupt, foreign influences. Physical exercise, such as yoga, would train Hindu men "to become powerful, disciplined, and well organized so that they could be strong enough to purge the nation of all that made it impure – secularism, Christianity, Islam, capitalism, modernity" (Alter 2005, 171). After centuries of emasculation by colonial powers, the RSS believed yoga could turn the body into "a phalanx to ward off penetration and erosion from the outside" (Alter 1994, 577) and prevent India from being invaded again by a foreign power. The mind-body purifying properties of yoga were seen as key to strengthening the Indian body/nation.

This idea of "somatic nationalism"<sup>15</sup>, in which the individual citizen's body is used as a vehicle for embodying and propagating nationalist ideologies, has also been used to describe the teachings and campaigns of Swami Baba Ramdev,<sup>16</sup> a prominent, media-savvy guru in India who "has helped make yoga a key tool in the Hindu right's cultural arsenal" (Patankar 2014). Ramdev promotes yoga as the ideal medium to improve the health of both the individual and the collective national body. He claims yoga "can eradicate undesirable traits, control desires, and assist the cultivation of a new nationalist subject in this era of globalization", which he argues has sapped India of its strength (Chakraborty 2006, 387). His televised yoga lessons construct "a somatic nationalist bond through shared bodily performances" that help create, in turn, "an

imagined, somatic community” (Chakraborty 2006, 389). According to Ramdev, yoga has the capacity to awaken a nationalist consciousness in its practitioners and produce energy in the body that can be activated for nationalist purposes, re-charging the body so it’s ready to work in service of the nation (Gupta and Copeman 2019). In 2014, Ramdev did just that and held mass yoga fests across India in support of Modi. As a spiritual leader and yoga guru, Ramdev provided cover for Modi’s right-wing politics, helping Modi to rebrand his post-2002 image and get him elected.

While yoga has in the past been used to unify the nation by resisting colonial powers or healing religious conflict, it has been mobilized more and more as a technique of division by the Hindu right in service of constructing a Hindu nation. It’s with this in mind that I read International Yoga Day and the controversy it stirred.

### **International Yoga Day and Choreographing Tolerance**

Yoga is not, strictly speaking, a Hindu practice in large part because yoga’s roots predate the formalization of Hinduism as a religion. Moreover, the mix of meditative and physical practices that make up the discipline of yoga have their roots in various renunciate or ascetic (*sramanic*)<sup>17</sup> traditions present in Northern India approximately 2500 years ago, including Buddhism and Jainism, and, in fact, “are found in all the major religions originating in the Indian sub-continent” (Samuel 2008, 1).<sup>18</sup> However, this history is not well circulated. Today, even though yoga is practiced by Hindus and non-Hindus alike, it is predominantly associated with Hinduism and Hindu spiritual traditions.

Given the aggressive promotion of yoga by a staunchly Hindu supremacist government, then, it should come as no surprise that there was political backlash to International Yoga Day, particularly from Muslim groups.<sup>19</sup> Despite the outward secularity and universality of International Yoga Day, “[t]he coupling of yoga with Hinduism [by the BJP] so publicly sent a strong signal to religious minority groups that the Hindutva agenda was once again being imposed on them” (Ahuja 2015). The BJP government knew that nationalizing yoga would raise the hackles of Muslim groups and act as a dog whistle for Hindu nationalists. Hasan Suroor writes,

[W]hen a party which has assumed the mantle of Hindu cultural nationalism seeks so zealously to promote something like this on such a big scale it assumes a political complexion. And, it knows what it is up to. It’s waving the red rag in the face of the bull on the other side of the sectarian divide hoping for a ‘reaction’ (2015).

This ‘reaction’ centered on the *surya namaskar* (sun salutation), which became a heated point of contention in debates about the secularity of International Yoga Day. The All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB), a non-governmental organization established in 1973 to protect the legal rights of Muslims in India, launched a nationwide campaign against the *surya namaskar*, claiming that it violated the monotheistic nature of Islam since “Muslims bowed only before Allah” (Khan 2016). The AIMPLB said they planned to appeal to the Supreme Court to rule against the inclusion of *surya namaskar* and yoga in schools. In 2016, a lawsuit filed on behalf of Urdu medium schools in Mumbai stated that mandating (Muslim) students to perform *surya namaskar*, which they argued was a Hindu Vedic system and practice, was a violation of the fundamental religious rights of students (“Surya Namaskar Opposed to Fundamental Concept of



Islam” 2016). While claims that *surya namaskar* is antithetical to Islam certainly do not represent the views of most Muslims in India, there was enough vocal opposition that Modi removed the *surya namaskar* from International Yoga Day celebrations.

Then BJP Minister of Parliament Yogi Adityanath, a firebrand politician-cum-priest and staunch ally of Modi, was not so “tolerant.” In response to Muslim opposition to the *surya namaskar*, he famously remarked that they should “drown themselves in the sea.” Specifically, he said, “Sun is the source of life-giving energy. Whoever thinks Sun is communal, I would like to humbly request them to drown themselves in the sea or they should stay in a dark cell” (“Those Opposing ‘Surya Namaskar’ Should Drown in Sea: Yogi Adityanath” 2015). Though Adityanath’s comments were clearly incendiary, it was Muslim groups that were blamed for being intolerant by opposing the *surya namaskar*. The Hindu right used the secularity of yoga to advance and justify their anti-Muslim stance. The message to Muslims was clear: if you can’t accept the “life giving energy” of the state, then you do not belong here. In other words, Hindus are tolerant. Muslims are not. Hindu intolerance of Muslims is justified because of Muslims’ intolerance of other religions.

Speaking at a yoga event in 2017 after becoming Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Adityanath seemed to soften his earlier, fiery rhetoric by stating that since *namaz* (Muslim prayer) was similar to the poses in *surya namaskar*, yoga and its promotion by the BJP government could not be considered communal (“Namaz Done by Our Muslim Brothers is a lot like Surya Namaskar, says Yogi Adityanath” 2017). Whereas Adityanath’s first comment demonstrated absolute intolerance of Muslims, the second used yoga’s similarity to Muslim prayer practices to demonstrate Hindu tolerance and capaciousness. Both comments position Muslims as a problem that can be dealt with either through the abjection or absorption of difference, violence, or tolerance. Adityanath’s comments exemplify the paradox of Hindu nationalism: anti-Muslim violence and tolerance of Muslims are not contradictory ideologies, but, rather, two sides of the same coin.

To complicate matters, some Muslim groups have also drawn parallels between yoga *asanas* and Islamic *namaz*. In 2015, the Muslim Rashtriya Manch (MRM), an Indian Muslim organization founded in 2002 to bring Muslim communities closer to Hindus in India, published a book titled *Yoga and Islam*. The book was meant to address concerns expressed by Muslim communities about participating in International Yoga Day. Arguing that “*namaz* is one sort of yoga *asana*” (Joshua 2015), it packaged yoga as a religion-neutral exercise in order to make it permissible and palatable for Muslims to practice. While the publication of this book by a Muslim organization might seem to undermine the argument that yoga has become an instrument of the Hindu right, it should be noted that the MRM began in 2002 as an initiative of the RSS and has shown broad support for the Hindu nationalist agenda ever since. The MRM campaigned for Narendra Modi in the general elections of 2014, supported revoking Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, and backed controversial Hindu nationalist causes, such as banning cow slaughter. The BJP, in turn, has supported MRM’s initiatives, including the publication on yoga and Islam, which was released by AYUSH specifically to maximize Muslim turnout for the first International Yoga Day events. Without Muslim participation in International Yoga Day, how would the Hindu state be able to demonstrate its capacity for tolerance and unity?

Wendy Brown, in *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (2006), argues that in the modern West the liberal discourse of tolerance is integral to the constitution of the West and its Other; “it distinguishes ‘free’ societies from ‘fundamentalist’ ones, ‘civilized’ from ‘barbaric’” (177). Within this binary discourse of tolerance, there is a

“characterological superiority of the tolerant over the tolerated” (178). Tolerance not only defines the superiority of the West but also marks non-Western practices, regimes, cultures, and peoples as intolerable. This underlying morality is what enables supposedly liberal societies to enact ostensibly illiberal policies and acts of aggression towards that which is ‘intolerable’” (179). Intolerance is deemed acceptable in relation to that which threatens tolerance, i.e. barbarism. In India, intolerance towards Muslims is justified because they are seen as a threat to the liberal (Hindu) values of tolerance.

While Brown argues that the discourse of tolerance defines the West and its Other, in the Indian context, tolerance, I argue, is what distinguishes the “civilized”, liberal Hindu citizen from the “uncivilized”, conservative Muslim minoritarian subject. These ideas of liberal Hindu “tolerance” are embedded in the founding of India as a secular state in 1947. Elements of Hindu identity, particularly its uniquely pluralistic nature, were incorporated into the nation-building project from its inception (Gautam and Droogan 2018). Indian secularism, that is, has been predicated on the supposed tolerance, liberalism, and openness of Hinduism to accommodate all religions. Seemingly contradictory, Indian secularism, in fact, privileges Hinduism over and above India’s other religions, which are not seen to be as tolerant as Hinduism. Aavriti Gautam and Julian Droogan write, “This formation of national self-identity established on Hindu-derived principles of tolerance not only reflects an effort to unite various Hindu groups but at the same time creates an opportunity to criticize the intolerance of those who disagree to integrate and label them as ‘the other,’ for instance, Muslim and Sikh communities” (2018, 21). Secularism, in other words, both strengthens the primacy of Hinduism and weakens the power of religious minorities to voice opposition in India.

Not only does the discourse of tolerance position Hindus as more civilized, it also positions Hindus as more Indian than Muslims. Brown argues that there is an “etymological slide” from barbarian to uncivilized, foreigner, and wild brute (2006, 182). Those who are intolerant of liberalism – in this case, Indian Muslims – are viewed not only as barbaric but also foreign, not truly belonging to the nation; they are the ones who the Hindu right believes should have been expunged or removed at the time of Partition, a reminder that the Hindu nationalist project is incomplete and must continually abject or absorb the Muslim Other. The presumed inclusiveness of yoga, and therefore the presumed inclusiveness of Hinduism, positions the liberal Hindu as civilized, capacious, and capable of accommodating difference while positioning Muslims and other religious minorities, who oppose the nationalization of yoga, as uncivilized, narrow-minded, and incapable of accommodating other perspectives.

Though some may be tempted to see International Yoga Day as a sign of Modi’s commitment to India’s secular, pluralistic democracy, I am decidedly more cynical. I see his attempts to make yoga inclusive neither as a gesture of openness towards Muslims nor one of appeasement. In the case of International Yoga Day celebrations, removing the *surya namaskar* or acknowledging similarities between *namaz* and *asanas*, is not so much proof of the Hindu right’s openness towards India’s minoritarian Muslim communities as it is evidence of Hinduism as the majoritarian identity whose ability to accommodate difference acts as a sign of its overarching power over religious minorities. Indeed, according to Brown, “tolerance is an index of power” (2006, 188). The outward tolerance and absorption of other religious minorities is precisely what bolsters the status of Hinduism as the majority religious group, “the superior entity is the more capacious one, the one that can harbor difference and not be felled by it” (187). Here, Hinduism – and, by extension, the Hindu state – constitutes the superior entity as it is considered more capacious and capable of accommodating difference. In other words, yoga’s

physical and ideological “flexibility” to accommodate and tolerate other faiths becomes a symbol of Hinduism’s capaciousness and, thus, its ideological superiority over religious minorities who are seen as incapable of doing the same. This was encapsulated by the External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj at the UN on International Yoga Day 2015 who remarked that “At a time when ethnic conflicts and extremist violence are threatening to destabilise societies, yoga can serve as the perfect antidote to stem such negative tendencies and move us on the path of harmony and peace” (“Yoga Perfect Antidote to Stem Negative Tendencies: Swaraj at UN” 2015). Yoga, in other words, is seen as a remedy for conflict and dissent. If, in the West, tolerance “operates simultaneously as a token of Western supremacy and a legitimating cloak for Western domination,” in India, I argue, Modi’s choreography of tolerance through yoga operates as a token of Hindu supremacy and a legitimating cloak for Hindu domination (Brown 2006, 182). Under a Hindu nationalist government, tolerance becomes a weapon to silence opposition as antithetical to India’s pluralist democracy.

Moreover, the choreography of tolerance through yoga positions Modi as ideologically closer to the West. If “liberalism is the telos of the West” and tolerance is the defining feature of Western liberal societies, then Modi’s ‘toleration’ of Muslim opposition is a sign of his ideological kinship with Western liberalism (184). This has been especially important given that Modi had been, up until recently, banned from entering the United States due to his involvement in the 2002 Gujarat genocide. Since coming to power in 2014, he has waged an arduous campaign to sanitize his post-2002 image from “a despised provincial leader into a national saviour” (Komireddi 2015). Modi’s efforts to present himself as a calm and peaceful yogi suggest a concerted effort to expunge accusations of his involvement in anti-Muslim violence, both past and present.

More recently, he has used yoga to distract from the failures of the government to care for its citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the start of the lockdown, Modi used Twitter to share videos of him doing yoga *nidra*, a meditation practice in which the body is in a deep state of relaxation while still fully conscious, to help Indians reduce stress and anxiety. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of daily-wage migrant workers, suddenly without jobs or a source of income after the lockdown was announced in March, were forced to walk hundreds of miles to return home.<sup>20</sup> More recently, Modi’s government passed neoliberal farm laws, which will make farmers even more economically precarious and vulnerable to exploitation. By presenting himself as a modern yogi who cares about the well-being of Indian citizens, Modi has been able to distract from the continued economic marginalization of poor and working class people under his leadership, deflect attention away from the violence, corruption, and sectarianism that has marred both his past and present administrations, and present himself, instead, as a strong leader of a peaceful, unified nation (Black 2016).

## Conclusion

It is not a coincidence that Modi chose yoga as the physical embodiment of his Hindu nationalist agenda so soon after becoming Prime Minister. International Yoga Day doesn’t just reflect Hindu nationalist ideology; it enacts ideology. It is Hindu supremacy in motion. Modi performs the Hindu supremacist state by showcasing yoga’s capacity to accommodate and absorb Muslims as a symbol of the Hindu religion’s capacity for tolerance towards religious minorities. In return, anyone, especially anyone Muslim, who opposes yoga is marked as intolerant and a threat to unity. In contrast to the notion of Muslims as militant, ideologically

rigid, and intolerant (of difference), yoga performs the Hindu nation as flexible, yielding, open, and inclusive. Yoga also serves as a smoke screen to avert our gaze from Modi's past and ongoing genocidal violence. Yoga's physical and ideological associations with tolerance, flexibility, and unity have helped to all but erase the memory of Modi's role in the 2002 Gujarat genocide as well as distract from his and his party's divisive anti-minority rhetoric and policies since being elected in 2014. Through yoga, Modi "ensure[s] that India's posture [and his own] remains non-threatening" (Tandon 2016). After all, how could a man in Downward Dog pose ever be accused of stoking sectarian violence or sanctioning genocide?

Yet, it is not just Modi who is part of this choreography of tolerance. Tens of thousands of Indians participate annually in International Yoga Day events, offering their tacit (and not-so-tacit) support of a Hindu supremacist state. The success of Hindu nationalism as a mainstream ideology depends, in fact, on its adoption by liberal Hindus, many of whom engage in "spiritual bypassing" to avoid thinking about the connections between yoga and politics, including and especially yoga's connection to *Hindutva* politics.<sup>21</sup> Yoga's associations with tolerance enable the liberal Hindu Indian citizen to perform belonging to the Hindu nation while still subscribing to progressive notions of pluralism and openness. Understanding yoga as an integral part of Modi's Hindu nationalist agenda – rather than an aberration – implicates the liberal Hindu citizen in anti-Muslim state violence and Hindu supremacy. As Pankaj Mishra states plainly, "liberalism enables and is often in cahoots with imperialism and authoritarianism" (Singh 2020). However, the complicity of liberals is often overlooked in critiques of Hindu nationalism, which tend to focus on extremist groups, like the RSS, or explicit acts of violence. International Yoga Day, however, demonstrates that Hindu nationalism can also manifest as peaceful spectacle.

To be sure, spectacle is an integral part of nation-state formation; it helps to perform and consolidate power. Large, public spectacles of bodies in motion, e.g. dance, gymnastics, sports, have long been used as political theater by fascist and proto-fascist regimes.<sup>22</sup> Germany offers us a cautionary tale. National Socialism did not emerge all of a sudden or in a vacuum; the aestheticization of ideology began long before the Nazis came to power. The aesthetics of mass spectacles developed during the Weimar Republic "were continued, expanded, and perfected during the Nazi period" where they became effective political instruments for quashing dissent (Rissol 2010, 631).<sup>23</sup> As India slips deeper and deeper into fascism, it is imperative we pay attention not just to the violence perpetrated by the state through (extra-)legal and military interventions, but also to the more subtle, seductive, and performative ways in which fascist-nationalist power is being consolidated through the aestheticization of ideology, political choreographies, and mass spectacles such as International Yoga Day.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>A version of this essay was first presented at the *Race and Yoga* conference in April 2016 at Mills College (Oakland, CA).

<sup>2</sup>The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit word "yuj" meaning "to bind, harness, connect" and is a cognate of the English word "to yoke."

<sup>3</sup>Under Modi, incidents of communal violence increased by 28% between 2014 and 2017 (Griswold 2019).

<sup>4</sup>The RSS was established in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, a campaigner for Indian Independence who split from the Indian National Congress party over what he considered undue pampering of the Muslims by Jawaharlal Nehru, leader of the Congress Party.

<sup>5</sup> *Kar-seva* is a form of worship through work performed collectively and *kar-sevaks* are those who perform it. The term has been appropriated by the Hindu nationalist movement as a form of political activism aimed at building the Ram temple at Ayodhya. The term was adopted in a VHP meeting at Haridwar on June 23-24, 1990 (Mehta 402).

<sup>6</sup> These stereotypes draw on both entrenched Orientalist stereotypes of the ‘dangerous Muslim Other’ and more contemporary racial formations of ‘the Muslim extremist/terrorist’ as well as local racial formations of ‘the overpopulating Muslim’ who, it is feared, might one day overtake the Hindu majority in India (Anand 2005, 208).

<sup>7</sup> I thank the anonymous reviewer for this insight.

<sup>8</sup> In November 2019, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of handing over the land to build a Hindu temple. And, in August 2020, Modi laid the foundational stone to mark the beginning of temple construction.

<sup>9</sup> As of the time of writing, those restrictions and enforcements are still in place.

<sup>10</sup> Many others were also excluded from the NRC, including trans women who had changed their names when they transitioned as well as Dalit women who changed their names after marriage (Regi 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Myanmar was not included in the amendment because this would have meant including the Rohingya, a persecuted religious minority who are Muslim.

<sup>12</sup> While campaigning in Delhi in January 2020, BJP MP and Minister of State for Finance and Corporate Affairs Anurag Thakur, for example, led supporters in a chant “goli maaro saalo ko” (shoot the fucking traitors).

<sup>13</sup> Since March 2019, there have been 168 attacks by Hindu extremists, in the name of protecting cows, against Muslims and other religious minorities (Griswold 2019).

<sup>14</sup> A 1999 USIRF report similarly criticized the BJP and RSS for violence and discrimination against Christians and Muslims. In response, Narendra Modi, then General Secretary of the BJP, stated that “India doesn’t need a lecture on tolerance from other countries, especially one where racial discrimination is still rampant” because “liberalism is built into Indian ethos” (Manikanta 2020). Modi also pointed to the presence of Christians and Muslims in government as further proof of India’s secularism.

<sup>15</sup> Alter suggests that somatic nationalism “takes the body as a primary object of discipline and reform, rather than as a simple tool for the organization of a militant ideology” (1994, 559).

<sup>16</sup> Ramdev is the founder of the organization and corporate empire Patanjali Yog Peeth Trust, which promotes the health benefits of Ayurvedic food, medicine, and therapeutic products. Patanjali also advocates for the boycott of foreign companies and the buying of *swadeshi* (Made in India) goods.

<sup>17</sup> *Sramanic* traditions were concerned with finding ways to bring an end to the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) and the suffering of human existence, and included primarily meditation (*dhyana*) and austerities (*tapas*) (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, xiii)

<sup>18</sup> According to Geoffrey Samuel, there was substantially more fluidity and less distinction between religious identities in the past than there is today (2008, 14). For more on the complex, interreligious origins and roots of yoga, see also James Mallinson and Mark Singleton’s *Roots of Yoga* (2017).

<sup>19</sup> Opposition to the co-optation of yoga by the Hindu right has come not just from Muslims, but also Dalit-Bahujan communities (many of whom are also Muslim) who voiced their concerns about the increasing Brahmanization/Hinduization of yoga even prior to the establishment of International Yoga Day. Dalit-Bahujans have rightly pointed out that attempts to take back yoga from the West and return it to its spiritual “roots”, such as those forwarded by the Hindu nationalist diasporic organization Hindu American Foundation (HAF), are driven by caste-privileged Hindus whose claims to a homogeneous Indian culture conveniently erase caste, class, and religious differences (Patankar 2014). Moreover, they ignore the fact that, historically, Dalit-Bahujans were not allowed to speak Sanskrit or learn yoga, which “belonged” to Brahmins. Placing blame for the cultural appropriation of yoga solely on the West ignores the historic and ongoing violence perpetrated by caste-privileged Hindus on Dalit-Bahujan people in the name of Brahmanical Hinduism. While these caste-based critiques are important, for the purposes of this short essay on the anti-Muslim Hindu supremacist state, I focus on the reaction to International Yoga Day specifically from Muslim groups.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the hypocrisy of Modi’s yoga campaign during the pandemic, see Arundhati Roy’s essay “The Pandemic is a Portal” in the *Financial Times* (April 3, 2020) and Sheena Sood’s “Spectacles of Compassion: Modi and the Weaponization of Yoga” in *Jadaliyya* (May 3, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> The term “spiritual bypassing” was originally coined by Buddhist psychologist John Welwood in 1984. Robert Augustus Masters expanded on this in *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects Us from What Truly Matters* (2010). Patrick McCartney has used the term in relation to yoga in “Spiritual Bypass and Entanglement in Yogaland: How Neoliberalism, Soft Hindutva, and Banal Nationalism Facilitate Yoga Fundamentalism” (2019).

<sup>22</sup> A number of scholars have written about the role of performance, choreography, and aesthetics in fascist regimes. See, for example, Susan Manning's *Ecstasy and the Demon: Feminism and Nationalism in the Dances of Mary Wigman* (1993); Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi's *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (1997); Carole Kew's "From Weimar Movement Choir to Nazi Community Dance: The Rise and Fall of Rudolf Laban's 'Festkultur'" (1999); Lilian Karina and Marion Kant's *Hitler's Dancers: German Modern Dance and the Third Reich* (2004); Marie C. Percy's "Movement Choirs and the Nazi Olympics" (2015); and Marion Kant's "German Gymnastics, Modern German Dance, and Nazi Aesthetics" (2016).

<sup>23</sup> See also Kant 2016.

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