

Mobilization Mechanisms Behind India's Yoga Diplomacy: Organization, Identity and Ritual

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Abstract: The International Yoga Day, a grand transnational cultural festival launched by the Modi government in 2014, is a representative and typical case of contemporary India's cultural diplomacy. Till 2020, it has achieved huge success across the world, especially in countries like the US where the number of yoga practitioners boosted along with the International Yoga Day. Identifying yoga diplomacy as a form of mobilization, this paper investigates the specific mechanism behind its success from three aspects: organization, identity and ritual. The study presents that, first, regular participation in organizational activities and the influence of core members in the organization can mobilize the foreign yogis. Second, through constructing yoga as a symbol of Indian cultural product, the Indian government and Hindu organizations abroad are able to build a collective identity among the diaspora. Third, the Yoga Day celebration usually takes the form of large-scale gathering and vivid live shows, and according to the 'collective effervescence' theory, these are likely to generate the shared emotions among the participants and thus mobilize them. In addition, this paper also discusses the obstacles faced by India's yoga diplomacy and provides inspirations for cultural diplomatic studies and practice in the future.

1. Background

Along with the increasingly rich meanings and diverse forms of diplomacy emerged in the 21st Century, soft power diplomacy has been appearing frequently all over the world. Different from military and political power, soft power diplomacy helps a country achieve its strategic goals through culture, values and diplomatic rhetoric. The foreign policy of contemporary India is a typical case in which cultural soft power has gradually become the centre of attention and plays an important role on the international stage.

India's cultural diplomacy takes various overseas subjects as its objects. For instance, a lot of overseas citizens have the habit of consuming Indian cultural products. They are exposed to Indian culture through films, tourism, cultural experience and other means, and are a substantial market for the exportation of Indian culture. Thus, exporting cultural soft power to this group helps to promote India's economic growth. From the public diplomatic perspective, reaching out to foreign citizens is helpful to promote people-to-people friendship and bring friendly bilateral relations. Also,

diplomats are a key focus of India's cultural diplomacy, since establishing good informal relations with them through culture is beneficial to the success of India's diplomatic communication and the realization of its diplomatic goals.

The diaspora community is another significant group. Historically, there have been three emigration waves from India [1] : in the first wave, the early traders from the coastal areas of India moved abroad to conduct business, and their lifestyle presented the feature of cosmopolitan lifestyle. The second migration group were the indentured workers in the 19th century and the last wave emerged after the WWII. The third wave included Hindu and Muslim refugees who crossed the borders of India and Pakistan. It also contained the intellectuals who went to the west in pursuit of job opportunities as doctors, teachers, lawyers and, in recent years, IT engineers. Some of them migrated temporarily, while others settled permanently.

The main focus of contemporary India's diplomacy is the wealthy, influential third wave of immigrants [1]. They are wealthy middle class who generally live in developed countries. They actively participate in local affairs including political elections, owning social network and financial resources in their resident country. The aim of mobilizing this group is to promote the domestic economic development of India, to gain support and sponsorship for the electioneering of Indian politicians [2]. In addition, since the NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) policy was implemented, those eligible to vote among the 31 million NRIs around the world have become the overseas vote bank of political parties. This has encouraged the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Congress Party and other parties to carry out overseas mobilization activities. Examples of such mobilization include Narendra Modi's visit to the United States, the BJP and the relative associations' reach out to the diaspora under the name of Hindu nationalism, etc. The reason for their engagement with cultural diplomacy is that the diaspora utilize Indian culture to maintain their identity and maintain spiritual ties with their homeland, which has laid the foundation for their participation in Indian cultural diplomacy.

In short, due to a desire to establish closer ties with the above-mentioned groups, to attract them with cultural products, to impress them with cultural charm, and ultimately to make them serve its political, economic and diplomatic interests, India has conducted cultural diplomacy in various forms and in a wide range. The International Yoga Day, the focus of this article, is the product and a typical representative of the Modi government's cultural diplomatic practice.

India has a long history of conducting cultural diplomacy. Since the establishment of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) in 1950 [3], the institution has focused on foreign cultural relations and the overseas dissemination of Indian culture. As a country with an ancient civilization, India owns rich cultural resources, ranging from music, dance, film to literature. At the same time, given the large number of distinct religious and ethnic groups in the country, India's cultural resources are of high diversity, giving the country a vantage point in exporting its culture [4]. Among various kinds of cultural products, yoga has become an important strategic resource of cultural diplomacy because of its health value, worldwide popularity and cultural connotations.

In the 1980s, the ICCR started to send yoga teachers overseas to promote the practice. At the same time, yoga and Ayurveda have been 'nationalized' and 'normalized' as part of the five-year plan, transforming from cultural heritages to nationwide health therapies. In 2014, yoga diplomacy entered a new phase: since Modi took office, yoga has increasingly appeared in high-level diplomatic occasions and in the Prime Minister's speeches [5]. Modi announced at the UN General Assembly in 2014 that an international yoga festival—the International Yoga Day (IYD) would be held. His initiative was subsequently supported by more than 170 countries, marking a diplomatic victory of the Indian government [6].

The IYD is held on June 21 every year. In addition to the grand celebrations in India, Indian embassies and yoga organizations around the world hold large-scale yoga practice activities to introduce Indian culture and spiritual philosophy. The event has been warmly welcomed by people globally, which is considered a successful case of India's cultural diplomacy. To be more specific, the IYD facilitates India to achieve its political, economic and diplomatic goals and helps it to build closer cultural ties with the foreign public, diplomats and Indian immigrants abroad. At the same time, the phenomenon has captured our attention towards the reasons behind such success, which is understudied in the existing scholarship. It is necessary to raise a question here: what are the mechanisms that support the successful operation of cultural diplomacy?

2. Analytical Method: the Mechanism of Mobilization

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars have paid attention to the interaction between yoga, politics, economy and diplomacy. Their research focuses on: locating yoga in the context of modern history and exploring the relationship between yoga, science and power [7,8]; The relationship between yoga, Hinduism and Hindu nationalism [6,9]; Discussions on yoga consumption and neoliberalism in the western society [10, 11]. Regarding yoga diplomacy, scholars have discussed the contribution of yoga to India's cultural soft power and bilateral relations, and the controversy brought by yoga diplomacy [5, 12]. With the emergence of the IYD, there has been a growing interest in yoga diplomacy. However, few researchers have investigated the reasons for the success of the yoga festival and the mechanisms behind its ability to influence people overseas and achieve diplomatic goals. Filling this gap is one of the primary motivations of this article.

Here, I would like to draw from the "mobilization" theory. According to the interpretation of sociologists, mobilization refers to the social process of mobilizing various resources for group actions, and also refers to the construction of collective interests and motives. The institution undertakes the function of creating and interpreting these motives and interests and urges members to participate in specific actions [13]. In politics and diplomacy, the meaning of mobilization has undergone several changes: the traditional mobilization describes the collection of national resources to cope with the war [14]. In the 21st century, given the change in the international politics, mobilization has taken on a new look. Along with the breakthrough in science and technology, the process of globalization and multi-polarization, intangible power has replaced the status of military forces, negotiation and transnational organizations have become the mainstream modes of international exchanges [15, 16]. At the same time, international relations are no longer a confrontation between the two governments but have witnessed the devolution of power to non-governmental organizations, transnational enterprises and individuals that act as non-state transnational actors [15]. Governments and diplomats have to contact with and "mobilize" the people and transnational organizations of other countries to achieve their political and economic diplomatic goals, utilizing soft power-based approaches such as consultation, public diplomacy and cultural diplomacy [17].

This theoretical framework is a good entry point for analyzing India's yoga diplomacy. Aiming at overseas countries, India's IDY not only calls on overseas people to participate but also aims to promote close contact with foreign diplomats through yoga. From the perspective of cultural diplomacy theory, its purpose is to promote the overseas dissemination of Indian culture, to enhance the friendship and intimacy between India and the foreign public, to publicize the unique value system and cultural heritage of India, and to establish a good national image. This requires yoga to become the symbol of Indian culture that spreads in foreign countries, allowing India's message to

be accepted and internalized. This process, which helps India to achieve the goals of cultural diplomacy, presents the mechanism of mobilization.

3. Mobilization through the IYD: Three Theoretical Aspects

The mobilization function of the international yoga festival can be interpreted from three theoretical perspectives. They all focus on the relationship between individual members and their groups, pay attention to the specific mechanism in the construction of group ideology, and how this ideology plays a role in political mobilization. According to the theory of Antonio Gramsci, ideology is a system of ideas that comes from and guides reality, and it often acts as a means of political governance [18, 19, 20]. The author argues that the authority needs to use symbolic and ideological weapons to legitimize its power and mobilize the masses. The three aspects that will be illustrated here—organization, identity and ritual—contribute to constructing the ‘weapon’ of cultural ideology.

3.1. Organization

Organizational studies theorists, sociologists and political scientists [21, 22, 23] have discovered the correlation between group mechanism and political mobilization by studying organization activities and the political participation of group members. The frequency and pattern of members’ participation in organizational activities have an impact on the construction of group consciousness and the cultivation of a sense of belonging. This collective ideology can transform into political motivation and directly lead members’ actions.

Specifically, psychological analysis has found that the higher the frequency of members’ participation in organizational activities, the stronger the feeling of dedication they show, and the greater the group ideology casts an impact [13]. Regular gatherings are therefore essential to maintain the organization’s mobilization capacity. In the case of yoga diplomacy, the intensive schedule yet limited time period of yoga activities is complemented by the daily activities of local organizations. Normally, the IYD activities start on the June 21st of each year and last no longer than a month. The local yoga associations, including the Yoga Teacher Alliance and community-level yoga workshops, take a foothold in the grass-roots level and play an irreplaceable role in cultural diplomacy. Through daily gathering and social media platforms, they call on members to participate in the IYD, advocating for the festival. At the same time, their own daily activities can fill the blank period after the IYD ends, consolidating the mobilizing gains of the Yoga Day through maintaining the frequency of organizational activities.

Second, interpersonal relationships within an organization are critical to mobilization. The person at the centre of the organization owns power, privilege and can also influence the activity and mindset of group members [24]. In a yoga organization, the yoga guru acts as the authority of the discourse. Yoga guru originally refers to Hindu yoga masters in India, who are often well-known teachers and understand Hindu classics. When yoga gurus guide the learners, their view penetrates into the organization through the collective practice, even transforming the yoga practice into the personal worship of the teacher.

The centre-to-outward power relations is not only the characteristics of native Indian yoga, in which the social elite Brahman was the earliest yoga teacher, but also explains why India has been training and dispatching yoga teachers abroad. Through recognizing IYD participants as organization members and constructing temporary authorities — the well-trained yoga teachers and well-known gurus — India subtly conveys its official explanation of yoga to the broad

foreign public. The languages of yoga teachers include ‘yoga was originated as a Hindu tradition’ ‘the philanthropic spirit conveyed by yoga, which help to enhance the Indian culture influence and build a positive national image of India. In addition, yoga gurus such as Swami Ramdev have attracted numerous followers through their personal fame, and thus play a key role in the overseas spread of yoga and lays a foundation for the mobilization of the IYD.

Furthermore, the neo-structuralist theory opposes to view the organization as a closed system, but rather calls on attention to the relationship between the external environment and the organization. Research [25] shows that practice and research across organizational networks may contribute to group mobilization. In yoga diplomacy, the mutual promotion between Indian officials and civil activities is a good example. Although the practice of yoga diplomacy is a state-led cultural export, its overseas popularity is jointly stimulated by local organizations and yoga lovers. These organizations outside the official system thus become the strategic asset for India’s cultural diplomacy. Whether the Indian government has established direct interaction with them remains to be further studied, but what remains clear is the dynamics within the organizational mobilization of the International Yoga Day.

3.2. Identity

Collective identity is a social process, a system of relationship and representation that is shaped through cognition, emotion and interaction [26]. The role of the community is to interpret the identity, to construct the collective interests and motivations, and to generate the political consciousness among members, finally guiding their behaviour [27, 28, 29]. It is fair to say that strengthening and maintaining collective identity through various means aims at constructing unified collective actions, or in other words, mobilization.

The mobilization of immigrant groups during the IYD reflects the importance of identity. This mobilization symbolized yoga as a representative of national identity. Through cultural festivals and yoga practices, the presence of this symbol in the diaspora can be enhanced, which further leads to stronger group cohesion and a sense of belonging. And as illustrated above, the closer bond of the diaspora with India will bring latter opportunities for economic development and political gains. Meanwhile, yoga as a specific cultural product distinguishes ‘the Indian self’ from others. In a multicultural society, cultural minorities and sub-cultural groups tend to emphasize their own cultural uniqueness (for instance, yoga) to maintain group identity and honour, defending themselves from the mainstream culture’s oppression [30][31].

It is not difficult to discover the same phenomenon in Indian diaspora communities in the United States. Hindu organizations, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), promote the splendid history and profound implications of yoga and other Indian cultural heritage, call for opposing the stigmatizing of Hinduism. In this way, it reconstructs the collective identity of the diaspora, who are ethnic and religious minorities, and also rebuilds a shared cultural memory. As a contributor to India’s yoga diplomacy, the American Indian/Hindu organizations successfully mobilized the diaspora to participate in India’s economic development and election sponsorship.

3.3. Ritual

Discussions on the association between ritual, collective emotion and mobilization were first seen in the works of Emile Durkheim (1912) and Randall Collins (2004a). They proposed that rituals have a social function of promoting cohesion, stimulating common emotions through collective

effervescence, mass gathering or symbols [32][33][34]. This emotion is the foundation of social stability and the fuel of organizational development [35][36][37][38].

As a form of physical motivation, the mechanism of IYD activities is highly similar to that of rituals. The IYD is an international event with a large number of participants, including yoga practice, performance the introduction to Indian food and Indian lifestyle. The various activities can mobilize all senses of participants through language, music and body movements. By combining visual and auditory stimulation with clustering effect, the IYD achieves the physical and psychological synchronization of participants and brings ‘emotional contagion from physical co-existence’ into being.

This common feeling helps to generate the foreign public’s friendly attitude and interest towards Indian culture. At the same time, it allows the diaspora to feel the strong appeal of Indian culture at an international level, which enhances cultural pride and group cohesion. What is worth mentioning is that along with the development of multimedia, live broadcast has also become a ‘ritual’ that mobilizes the mass. The news reports of the IYD on various media platforms can engage the audience effectively and enhance the mobilizing capability of India’s yoga diplomacy.

4. Discussion

By analyzing the three mobilization mechanisms of cultural diplomacy, we have a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of Indian cultural diplomacy. In this part, the author will proceed from the above content and carry out a specific discussion. By locating the features of yoga diplomacy within the background of global cultural communication and modern diplomacy, the author will draw from the case of the IYD and provide both theoretical and practical inspirations.

4.1. Diversified Mechanisms Behind the Successful Cultural Diplomacy

The International Yoga Day has important implications for the study and practice of cultural diplomacy. First, many scholars have recognized the significance of cultural diplomacy and paid attention to the types and characteristics of Indian cultural diplomacy, but they seldom analyze the supporting logic behind it. In fact, the specific mechanisms of cultural diplomacy are diverse and require detailed categorization. From the perspective of mobilization, for example, organization, identity and ritual theories explain why yoga can go abroad and help achieve India’s diplomatic goals.

Through the international yoga festival, India has successfully used organization, identity and ritual mechanisms to serve its political, diplomatic and economic interests. On the one hand, India has fully mobilized its diaspora community. As the overseas inheritor of Indian culture, the community is considered substantial in cultural diplomacy. They are familiar with local people and Indian culture, and have extensive social networks in the region, allowing them to become the contributor of the overseas advocacy of Indian culture. Through the IYD, India has successfully turned the diaspora into strategic resources. For example, in the IYD in the United States, the embassy of India actively contacts local Indian overseas organizations and encourages them to participate in the preparation of the event, which has mobilized the diaspora resources and has encouraged them to engage spontaneously with cultural diplomacy. At the same time, by establishing closer spiritual and cultural ties with the diaspora through the yoga festival, India can obtain their political support and economic assistance more easily.

Secondly, by advertising the Indian origin of yoga, integrating the health value of yoga with the traditional Indian philosophy, then selling it to the local people and yoga practitioners, the IYD

enhances the overseas influence of Indian soft power and impress overseas audiences with the charm of Indian culture. This will not only enhance India's soft power and enable India to gain patent rights on yoga but will also bring huge overseas markets and new opportunities for the domestic yoga tourism and yoga industry. Third, in the international community, the concept of peace and harmony promoted by the festival is in line with the 'Indian value system' that India has been implementing in its diplomacy for a long time [6]. This value system, as Narendra Modi believes, makes India lead the world in a chaotic international society. Through the IYD, India is once again bringing its traditional values and moral values to the world and establishing an international image as a moral leader.

The mechanisms of organization, identity and ritual have helped India achieve these goals, and have provided profound insights for academic research and future diplomatic practice. Among our findings, there are two aspects that deserve special attention: first, the exploration of the specific mechanisms behind the implementation of cultural diplomacy poses a challenge to the simplified, homogeneous explanation of cultural diplomacy; Second, the participation of different actors challenges the state-centred diplomatic theory.

At a more fundamental level, the characteristics of culture itself, the careful selection of the mobilizing target, and the propaganda of the Indian government provide backup for the operation of the three mechanisms. To be more specific, culture is malleable and inclusive. It can be constantly endowed with new meanings, generate new cultural symbols and serve the interests of specific groups [39]. This characteristic is the premise for the identity mechanism: it is precisely because the Indian government and Indian organizations have endowed yoga with 'Indianness' or 'Hindu characteristics' that it can become an influential cultural symbol in transnational nationalist mobilization. The cultural inclusiveness has also given rise to a variety of alternative interpretations of Indian yoga, such as the popularized yoga in the US that serves people's health needs. With the development of consumerism, the health value and mysterious character of yoga are often sold to local consumers and yoga practitioners, who later constitute the support base of the IYD.

The selection of the target audience and the focus of publicity also provides support for the success of yoga diplomacy. The IYD's advertisement tactfully combines slogans of physical and mental health, Indian identity and world peace, targeting three social groups: the yoga consumers, the Indian diaspora and other countries in the international society. It is due to India's clear recognition of the targets that India has successfully exported its culture through organization, identity and ritual mechanisms.

4.2. A Decentralized View of Cultural Diplomacy

The theoretical contribution of the study is twofold: it reveals the specific mechanisms behind cultural diplomacy and the reasons for its success, and also inspires researchers to take a decentralized perspective in future studies. We find that diplomatic activities involve a variety of participants and cannot be simplified as an up-to-down policy execution of the government. On the contrary, non-governmental individuals, transnational organizations and the media have made contributions to the overseas dissemination of Indian culture with the help of organization, identity and ritual mechanisms. They form an important part of cultural diplomacy, providing a powerful complement to the traditional 'government-led' narrative. As Joseph Nye (1990) argued, the background of this change is the trend of global multi-polarization, globalization, scientific and technological development [15]. After the Cold War, the world has witnessed the decentralization of government power and the growing presence of non-governmental entities in international exchanges. Their influence on a country's foreign policy should not be overlooked.

In this context, the ability to utilize these emerging soft power resources is the criterion for assessing a country's cultural diplomacy capability. The performance of the Modi government has been generally satisfactory: he has recognized the need to mobilize this part of the resources and has actively engaged with the diaspora since the beginning of his tenure [2][5]. He maintains cooperation with overseas Hindu organizations and actively makes usage of transnational media and online platforms. For example, Modi publishes yoga practice videos online and interacts with yoga practitioners around the world, which enhances the world's attention on the Indian cultural product. To further promote Indian yoga abroad, Modi has been closely working with domestic yoga companies. The most typical case is his collaboration with Swami Ramdev, who founded one of the most profitable traditional medicine company: Patanjali. When expanding its overseas market, Ramdev and his company also helps to advocate the IYD, holding a series of relative programs [40]. In this way, Modi has used the corporate's influence over consumers and Ramdev's personal reputation to enhance the mobilization capacity of yoga diplomacy and has fuelled India's cultural soft power.

4.3. Obstacles and Challenges in the Implementation of Cultural Diplomacy

Despite the successful mobilization of the IYD through organization, identity and ritual mechanisms, the implementation of yoga diplomacy still faces challenges. For example, the identity construction with Hindu elements, the mobilization of Hindu organizations and the involvement of yoga gurus have raised concerns among many religious groups. Both the All India Muslim Personal Law Board and the Christian community have pointed out the risks of a Hindu-ized yoga [6][41]. In order to mitigate such doubt, India has given a pragmatic response by officially declaring that yoga is a neutral cultural product that is separated from religious or political intentions. At the same time, it still retains the Hindu elements of yoga in practice. Therefore, Modi mobilizes the Hindu organizations and the wealthy Hindu diaspora while doing his best to dispel suspicion from other religious groups and foreign societies.

However, in view of the complexity and diversity of cultural diplomacy, it is very difficult to completely dispel the discontented voices from all walks of life, which requires long-term efforts and detailed background investigation. The launchers of cultural diplomacy should be aware that although many people oppose the promotion of yoga, the reasons and stands behind it vary. Hindu organizations in the United States, for example, oppose the excessive commercialization of yoga and uphold the essentialist Indian yoga culture, and they may show dissent with the wave of yoga consumption brought by the IYD. Therefore, the key to the success of cultural diplomacy is to understand the distinct interest of every social group and to take all potential obstacles into consideration. It is also necessary to create a favourable environment and subtly guide public opinion through dialogue, coordination and multimedia.

5. Conclusion

In the context of the increasing importance of cultural soft power in diplomatic activities, India's cultural diplomacy practice is a representative and successful case. Bollywood movies have gone viral worldwide, Indian dance has appeared in the United Nations General Assembly, and Indian yoga is gaining more and more practitioners. There are many factors behind this success: the richness and inclusiveness of Indian culture itself, as well as the precise targeting and propaganda decisions of the Indian government. Together, these factors help Indian culture work through different channels and mechanisms.

From the perspective of mobilization, this paper tries to reveal the essential structure and mechanism behind yoga diplomacy. The author makes three arguments: first, under the organizational mechanism, the frequency of participation and interpersonal relationships within the organization contribute to the construction of group consciousness, which enables Indian culture to be more effectively exported. Second, the Indian government and overseas Indian organizations use yoga as a symbol of Indian culture to construct cultural identity among the diaspora, a strategic asset for India's economic, political and diplomatic benefits. Third, as a large-scale live event, the International Yoga Day generates emotional resonance and enhances the appeal of Indian culture through multi-sense stimulation. The above three mechanisms help us to explain the basic yet significant logic behind cultural diplomacy.

The analysis of the mechanisms also enables us to reflect on the theory of international relations and the study of diplomacy. The active participation of non-governmental subjects and the mobilization of various social actors by the Indian government have provided strong evidence for the decentralized constructivist IR theory. It has also inspired future researchers to broaden their academic horizons and explore the characteristics and significance of cultural diplomacy from several scales: the state, non-state NGOs, individuals and the culture itself. Only by focusing on the mechanism behind the phenomenon and the ideological discourses that are involved in the practice of diplomacy can we better understand contemporary diplomacy.

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