

Yoga in Indian Politics : Impact and Relevance

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Abstract: Yoga, an ancient practice rooted in Indian philosophy, has transcended its traditional boundaries to become a global phenomenon. It encompasses physical postures, breathing exercises, and meditation techniques aimed at promoting physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. In recent years, yoga has found its way into various aspects of modern life, including politics. The intersection of yoga and politics is a fascinating and complex subject that touches on cultural, social, and ideological dimensions. This paper explores the role of yoga in politics, examining its historical roots, its adoption by political figures and movements, its impact on political discourse, and its implications for society.

Keywords: Yoga, politics, cultural heritage, public health, global influence, political discourse

Historical Roots of Yoga in Politics:

Yoga and Governance in Ancient India

Yoga's connection to politics is deeply rooted in India's cultural and spiritual history. Ancient Indian texts such as the Bhagavad Gita highlight the concept of Karma Yoga, or the yoga of selfless action, which emphasizes performing one's duty with dedication but without attachment to outcomes. This philosophy, which promotes ethical and responsible action, has influenced many political leaders throughout history.

The intertwining of yoga with governance can also be seen in the Dharma Shastras, ancient Indian texts that outline ethical and moral conduct for rulers and citizens alike. These texts reflect a holistic approach to governance, where personal spiritual discipline is seen as essential for effective leadership and societal harmony.

The Influence of Swami Vivekananda

One of the most prominent figures who integrated yoga with political life was Swami Vivekananda. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Vivekananda travelled extensively, promoting yoga and Vedanta philosophy. His teachings emphasized the importance of spiritual awakening and national unity, which resonated with many Indian freedom fighters. Vivekananda's vision of a spiritually awakened India played a crucial role in inspiring leaders who fought for independence from British colonial rule.

Vivekananda's speeches, such as his address at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893, not only introduced yoga to the Western world but also highlighted the potential for spiritual principles to guide political and social change. His advocacy for a balanced integration of spiritual and material development influenced political thought and inspired movements aimed at social and national reform.

Mahatma Gandhi and the Practice of Ahimsa

Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of the Indian independence movement, integrated yoga principles into his political philosophy, particularly the concept of Ahimsa (non-violence). Gandhi's interpretation of yoga extended beyond physical practices to include ethical and moral dimensions. He believed that personal spiritual discipline was crucial for political leadership and social change.

Gandhi's commitment to non-violence and self-discipline was deeply influenced by yogic principles. He often spoke about the importance of self-purification and inner strength, which he saw as essential for effective social activism. His application of yoga in the political arena not only had a profound impact on India's struggle for independence but also inspired global movements for civil rights and social justice.

Narendra Modi and International Yoga Day

In contemporary times, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been a significant proponent of yoga in the political sphere. Since taking office in 2014, Modi has actively promoted yoga as a key aspect of India's cultural heritage. His efforts led to the United

Nations declaring June 21 as International Yoga Day in 2014, reflecting yoga's global significance and India's soft power.

Modi's promotion of yoga serves multiple purposes: it reinforces India's cultural pride, promotes national unity, and advocates for a holistic approach to health and wellness. By positioning yoga as a central element of India's identity on the global stage, Modi has used it as a tool for cultural diplomacy and international relations.

Impact on Political Discourse:

Yoga in Social Justice Movements

Yoga has been embraced by various social justice movements as a means of fostering resilience, mindfulness, and community. Organizations like "Off the Mat, Into the World" use yoga's transformative power to inspire social change and support causes such as environmental sustainability and human rights. By integrating yoga with activism, these movements aim to promote a more just and compassionate society.

National Identity and Unity

In countries like India, yoga has been promoted as a vital part of national identity and cultural heritage. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Anna Hazare, and Narendra Modi have emphasized yoga's role in uniting the nation and promoting overall health. This promotion helps foster a sense of national pride and cohesion around a shared cultural legacy.

Diplomatic Tool

Yoga has also been used as a form of soft power in international relations. The global celebration of International Yoga Day, initiated by India, exemplifies how yoga can foster goodwill and enhance cultural diplomacy. This approach not only strengthens international ties but also promotes a positive image of the country on the global stage.

Political Messaging

Politicians worldwide have leveraged yoga to project an image of health, discipline, and holistic living. By associating with yoga, they aim to connect with health-conscious

voters and promote a balanced lifestyle. This alignment with yoga's values helps them resonate with broader societal trends towards wellness and mindfulness.

Cultural Appropriation

The global spread of yoga has sparked debates about cultural appropriation and the commercialization of a practice with deep spiritual roots. These discussions often focus on the importance of respecting yoga's origins and ensuring that modern adaptations do not dilute its essential philosophical principles.

Health Policies

Politicians advocating for yoga frequently promote health policies that integrate holistic health practices into public health systems. This includes support for preventive health measures and the inclusion of yoga in healthcare programs, which can lead to improved overall well-being and reduced healthcare costs.

Unity and Division

While yoga can be a unifying force that promotes peace and well-being, it can also be divisive when linked to specific cultural or religious ideologies. This potential for controversy underscores the need for mindful and inclusive approaches to integrating yoga into political and social discourse.

Cultural Preservation and Transformation

The political use of yoga highlights the tension between preserving cultural heritage and adapting practices for modern contexts. While promoting yoga can help preserve important cultural traditions, it also necessitates careful consideration of how these practices are adapted to contemporary needs and values.

Public Health

Integrating yoga into public health policies can have significant benefits for society, including improved physical and mental health outcomes and reduced healthcare costs. Governments and institutions investing in yoga programs address public health issues

such as stress, anxiety, and lifestyle-related diseases, contributing to a healthier population.

Global Influence

Yoga's global popularity enhances cross-cultural understanding and international cooperation. By promoting yoga, countries like India strengthen their cultural influence and foster goodwill. International collaborations on yoga research and education further enhance cross-cultural understanding and cooperation, contributing to a shared focus on well-being and peace.

Political Manipulation and Propaganda

The use of yoga for political purposes can sometimes be seen as manipulative or propagandistic. Critics argue that political leaders may exploit yoga to enhance their image or distract from controversial issues. The promotion of yoga by political figures can be perceived as a way to gain popularity or consolidate power rather than a genuine commitment to its principles.

Conclusion

The relationship between yoga and politics is complex and evolving. Yoga's journey from an ancient spiritual practice to a modern political tool reflects its enduring relevance and adaptability. As yoga continues to influence political figures, movements, and discourse, it faces challenges related to authenticity, commercialization, and manipulation.

Ultimately, integrating yoga into politics has the potential to promote health, well-being, and cultural understanding. However, it also requires mindful engagement to ensure that its true essence is preserved and respected. By embracing the ethical and philosophical dimensions of yoga, political leaders and movements can harness its transformative power for the greater good, fostering a more just, compassionate, and harmonious world.

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