

## **Facing the Emergency DownDog – On the Political Appropriation of Yoga**

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**Abstract:** *The present article is concerned with the political appropriation of yoga, whose global popularity has made it an increasingly attractive political tool of which the current Indian government makes frequent use. Since yoga's popularity is closely connected to the mediation of yoga images, Narendra Modi's Instagram posts surrounding events at the International Day of Yoga (IYD) of the years 2017-2019 lend themselves best for analysis. Based on Santiago Zabala's notion of the 'emergency of aesthetics' and Georg Simmel's thoughts on style, the analysis shows how the adoption of a globally circulating visual discourse on yoga facilitates the current Indian government with a means to stylize itself as benevolent, balanced and peaceful. The image thus created helps to conceal the mismanagement with regard to the current pandemic. As the article shows, the image is used as a way to frame the perception of Hindutva politics, diverting attention away from the nationalist politics deployed.*

**Keywords:** Yoga, Aesthetics of Emergency, Pandemic, Indian Nationalism, Instagram.

### **Introduction**

Yoga today is a hybridized bodily and embodied practice developed from a variety of religious, philosophical, and socio-political influences that has made its way from counter-cultural practice to the heart of pop culture with a heightened presence especially on social media (Jain 2015). The global spreading of yoga practices and the perception of yoga are closely connected to media and mediation (Singleton 2010), which lends importance to the investigation of images related to yoga on a platform like Instagram. Given yoga's present popularity and market value, it is not surprising that yoga has become an attractive asset in India's political arena.

Various scholars (see Miller 2020, Kinvall 2019, Tandon 2016) point out that yoga is an integral part of a "soft power" approach adopted by Modi's government. Introduced by Joseph Nye, the term *soft power* relates to a state's "ability to attract rather than coerce" (Tandon 2016, 59). It relies on "a marketable set of attractive cultural resources and a good narrative strategy for presenting these to a *global* audience" (Gautam and Droogan 2017, 23; my

emphasis). The annual celebration of the International Day of Yoga (IYD) on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June is an expression of these politics. IYD was officially adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2014, after Modi addressed the 69<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the UN to highlight yoga's Indian heritage and its various health and wellness benefits. The successful inception of IYD has been read as a "recognition of India's soft power by the international community" (Mazumdar 2018, 481). Given that much political credit from the outside and that images "are always linked to power" (Bleiker 2018, 26), Modi's yoga posts on Instagram deserve further examination.

The entanglement of yoga and politics in South Asia is not new. It is reminiscent of late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century understandings of yoga as native answer to the globally emerging physical culture movement, that sought to produce strong bodies which could counter not only colonial stereotypes of the effeminate South Asian but would eventually derail the colonizing project altogether and support India's struggle for independence (Singleton 2010, 95; 97). During the same time, the scientification of yoga discourse by Swami Vivekananda, a monk and philosopher who became popular both in India and 'the West', de-emphasized physical practice and impacted Indian nationalism. These seemingly contradicting stances are referenced by Narendra Modi's political use of yoga when praising it as a means of choice to confront the pandemic. (Miller 2018, 96).

Santiago Zabala observes that during the pandemic, political leaders succeeded in distracting "public attention away from the catastrophic consequences of their inaction" (Zabala 2020, np.). Instructive in this process have been (social) media. They play a significant role in the recurrent evocation of catastrophe and crisis for all sorts of issues and are understood to blind humans for "the real dangers, of not taking them seriously" (Žižek qtd. in Zabala 2017, ch. 2, sec. 'Paradoxes'). Simultaneously, "blogging and social networking has also made it easier for the state to plant and promote its own messages" (Morozov qtd. in Zabala 2017, ch. 2, sec. 'Paradoxes'). The present article therefore investigates both phenomena sketched out above. Using Modi's Instagram posts surrounding IYD as examples, the article shows how Instagram offers Modi a platform to conceal not just his failed politics regarding the pandemic, but also distracts from the advancement of his religious nationalism through yoga aesthetics. To do so, the article relies on Santiago Zabala's hypothesis that aesthetics is responsible for a lack of a sense of emergency, shaping the perception of reality to the extent that reality appears stable and fixed. His remarks will be accompanied by Georg Simmel's reflections on style, which are paramount in understanding how yoga aesthetics and Instagram play a crucial role in obscuring emergencies.

### **Aesthetics, Instagram, and the Lack of a Sense of Emergency**

Ever since the onset of the pandemic, our ‘way of being in the world’ has been questioned (Zabala 2020, 920). The virus not only highlights what it means to live in a globalised and closely linked world, but also unveils the human incapacity to adequately tackle fundamental questions humans are confronted with in a world of such complexity. This incapacity is rooted in the inability to acknowledge warnings, emergencies (921) or ruptures the pandemic represents (Roy 2020, np). Rather than take advantage of this rupture and “break with the past and imagine their world anew” (ibid.), humans avoid this effort (Zabala 2020, 921). Based on these observations, Zabala states that “[t]he greatest emergency [sic] are the ones we do not confront – ones that led to the current pandemic but are also further concealed in the responses to the pandemic” (920). This is why quick calls for a return to normality eliminate the chance to confront emergencies. Zabala’s consecutive diagnosis certifies humanity’s suffering from a lack of a sense of emergency, which not only prevents engagement with pressing issues but is responsible for producing inept responses to the pandemic and other emergencies such as climate change, e.g. (Zabala 2017, ‘Introduction’).

The present article examines pictures and captions of three posts Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi published on his Instagram account on the IYD festivities in the years 2017 to 2019. Looking at the ways in which Modi’s Instagram presence is based on a globally circulating aesthetics of yoga and Instagram’s purpose of “aesthetic visual communication” (Manovich 2017, 41), Zabala’s hypothesis that a lack of a sense of emergency is created through aesthetics – which he calls the “emergency of aesthetics” – deserves further examination. He claims that the importance of aesthetics lies in its capacity to “know[s] beforehand how to organize beings [...] in such a way as to appear original, unique, and also stylish if necessary” (Zabala 2017, ch. 1, sec. ‘Contemplation’). Aesthetics therefore exerts power as it frames the ways reality is perceived, offering seemingly fixed realities that promise rescue from heavily mediated “events” and “emergencies” while, in fact, obscuring those needing to be addressed (ibid., ‘Introduction’). In this process of framing, style plays a significant role: “This is why even the most popular art does not lack in style but [...] has a style that can be defined as an indifferent beauty” (ch. 1, sec. ‘Contemplation’), which leaves the viewer unscathed, unmoved. To discuss if that which can be seen on Instagram is art or not is beyond the scope of this article. Yet, Zabala’s stance on art and style clarifies how the global visual flows of images on Instagram frame what we see and how we see. His observation is echoed by Rd Crano’s criticism that the images produced or displayed on Instagram lack the capability to affect the spectator or beholder thus producing heightened indifference (2019, 1126-1127). The indifferent beauty created

through style frames the perception of reality, producing a predictable image with everything deviating from it being pushed to the margins (Zabala 2017, 'Introduction'). Georg Simmel's reflections on the matter help to clarify the importance of the term 'style' regarding Instagram. In his understanding, style becomes the category to evaluate an artistic creation that does not convey individuality or by which the viewer is not deeply and uniquely impressed (Simmel 1991, 63). In the context of the applied arts, indifferent beauty is desirable, as their underlying practical need encompasses a need for reproduction: Therefore, "it is their *meaning* to be reproduced, they are internally constituted for multiplicity" (66, original emphasis). Thus, style refers to a set of forms, arrangements or devices that can be applied to anything (64). Understood in this way, style is imposed from the outside, even borrowed (67). In the context of Instagram, according to Manovich, "[h]aving a style means adapting particular choices, coordinating them to achieve a distinct look, and being consistent" (2017, 99) with the aim to achieve optical recognition and increase visibility (Gunkel 2018, 313) on the platform.

Style also has a social function. Instagram facilitates the creation of aesthetic communities, in which shared visuals serve as social connectors (Leaver et al. 202, 58). Emulating a certain aesthetic thus expresses belonging or raises claims to belong to a certain (aesthetic) community and its (visual) discourse. Therefore, aesthetics become aspirational in the sense that other users aspire to certain styles if they want to be visible to a certain community. In the context of Instagram, style is not meant to question the status quo. Rather, it requires the 'right' amount of originality to stand out without falling outside the aesthetic visual framework of a given aesthetic community. The idea of aspirational aesthetics thus exemplifies how the framing qualities of style organize the perception of reality. It is this social function based on the reproducibility of style, the 'indifferent beauty' of it, coupled with the sheer multitude of images that is paramount in concealing emergencies from view. As Zabala states, the absence of a sense of emergency is created through the framing of emergency in a globalized system (Zabala 2017, 'Introduction'), of which Instagram as a multinational company with its own politics of visibility forms a part. Users expect to see what they are used to seeing and Instagram's algorithms grant visibility if posts follow aesthetics that attract many likes and, in turn, increase visibility.

Additionally, Instagram influences visibility of content through community guidelines, which intend to regulate what can and cannot be posted. In the past, this has led to much debate, for often the decisions made appeared to be biased. In India, Instagram's parent company Meta Platforms, formerly Facebook, has come under scrutiny for not applying measures against hate speech to all members of the political spectrum equally. Keeping a keen eye on its business interests in a country with 350 million Facebook users (Statista 2021), the company is accused of being especially lenient towards the current government in this regard, even though some posts have incited actual

violence (Daniyal 2020, np). To begin with, however, the analysis teases out how Modi's Instagram discourse on yoga sets the frame for his (failed) response to the pandemic.

### **Yoga and the Concealment of Pandemic Politics**

Already in his Instagram post surrounding the IYD events in Lucknow in 2017, Modi calls on adopting a yoga practice hinting at the benefits of the practice:

Joined Yoga Day celebrations in #Lucknow. Let's make Yoga a regular part of our lives. The benefits are immense. (Modi, "IYD Lucknow", Instagram)

By 2019, he references the health benefits of yoga more explicitly when he participates in the IYD events in Ranchi:

Yoga- a passport to health assurance and wellness. Have you made Yoga a part of your routine? If not, what are you waiting for. Here are a few photos from the Yoga Day programme in #Ranchi, #Jharkhand. (Modi, "IYD Ranchi", Instagram)

The captions reflect the style in which many yoga posts are labelled yet remain vague on what those health benefits particularly consist of. The discourse Modi references is well established. The general idea that yoga is beneficial for health was introduced by Swami Vivekananda in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, relying on scientific language to prove those claims. Since that time, yoga's global popularity has made discourses on yoga and its assumed health benefits widely accepted. Referencing his own yoga and meditation practice, Modi promotes himself "as the model of yogic health and accompanying productivity" (Miller 2020, 102). Modi asks: "Have you made yoga part of your routine?" and suggests to "make yoga a regular part of our life." The terms 'routine' and 'regular' connote, consistency and discipline, expressing qualities deemed necessary to advance in one's yoga practice (whatever that advancement might consist of). Tying the two terms to the claim that "the benefits are immense," taking care of one's health becomes a question of solely discipline and consistency. In the suggestion to adopt a regular yoga practice he appears to include himself: "Let's make yoga a regular part of our life" (my emphasis). Modi is thus able not just to express a demand, but through seemingly including himself in this demand appears to be leading an example of how to live a healthy life. This demand echoes in the question -although not marked as such- of the caption to the post on IYD 2019: "What are you waiting for" can be read as another invitation or demand to follow Modi's example in taking care of one's health through yoga. The framing of yoga as a means for "self-care and therapeutic stress relief" (Miller 2020: 101-102) shows that Modi has adopted the style of yoga discourse to present an image of himself as a caring, engaging and fit politician. The use of a yoga aesthetics thus serves to promote an image of the prime minister of India that shows him addressing health issues personally, as a leading example, and publicly through the IYD events and their mediatisation on his Instagram account. The adherence to this discourse

prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic helps to create a lack of a sense of emergency that is embedded in yoga aesthetics. This ‘emergency of aesthetics’ helps to conceal that the priorities of the Indian government lay elsewhere, rather than setting up adequate measures to confront the pandemic and its different phases (Roy 2021, np). Instead, the Indian government released ‘Yoga with Modi’ videos on YouTube, which show his animated avatar leading short yoga sequences meant “to help people deal with the stress of self-isolation” (Roy 2020, np).

Yoga is part of the therapeutic spectrum of India’s Ministry of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy) which focuses on native and naturopathic health approaches alongside India’s health ministry. Although AYUSH is meant to focus on the advancing of multiple Indian medical systems, medical traditions related to Hinduism are seemingly favoured since stronger emphasis has been placed on the promotion of yoga and Ayurveda (Khalikova 2017, 121). At the same time, the ministry seeks to influence discourses on yoga and how it is practiced by publishing the Common IYD protocol, thus giving an institutionalised framing of yoga as a Hindu health practice. Until 2014, AYUSH was a department of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, but it became a full-fledged ministry after Modi came to power, giving those forms of therapy more endorsements and a bigger budget (Kumar 2014). This move was justified by arguing that “Indian systems of medicine were suppressed during colonial times and were marginalized after India gained independence at the hand of anglicized elites” (ibid.). In its attempt to promote a “scientific version of Hinduism”, the current Indian government relies on an inheritance of Vivekananda’s Vedic science movement, which promoted yoga with nationalist undertones to further Indian independence from colonial rule (Nanda 2005, 226). The promotion of Indian medical systems, especially yoga and ayurveda, is thus framed in the language of an ongoing anti-colonial movement.

Additionally, lack of treatment and vaccines for the newly discovered virus “has thrown open a space where the hegemony of ‘western’ science and knowledge is being challenged” (Rambukwella 2020). In this process, the “good of science” is ascribed to Hinduism’s holism while “the bad of science” is a result of Semitic reductionism (Nanda 2005, 230). The therapeutic gap pried open by the Coronavirus is meant to be filled through yoga and its encompassing practice of pranayama. Both have been considered the only remedy to fight the virus by improving immunity (Rao 2020) and offering a “protective shield” against the virus (Modi qtd. in Al Jazeera 2020).

Instead of dealing with the pandemic by relying on science-based approaches, the government uses yoga recommendations as a cover up for its failed politics in dealing with the pandemic and to silence critique (Sood 2020, np). The ‘lack of a sense of emergency’ is created through adherence to a yoga discourse. Promoting yoga as an indigenous practice to confront not just the threat of the pandemic but the threat that ‘western’ medical systems pose to

indigenous ones, ‘emergencies’ are created which are addressed through the aesthetic framework of yoga. Simultaneously, the reference to yoga’s health enhancing qualities – together with the global availability and credibility of such discourse – works as an aesthetic frame which influences perception. Therefore, Modi does not appear as a reckless politician who does not take action although yoga is politically appropriated to cover up the ways in which the state has failed to provide for its citizens.

However, the pandemic is not the first instance in which yoga’s health benefits are used politically. Under the guise of highlighting yoga’s (mental) health benefits, parts of the Indian military received instruction in yoga long before the first IYD was celebrated on Delhi’s Rajpath (Ahmed 2016, np). While the investment in soldiers’ health is clearly welcomed in the article cited here, the political implications do not go unnoticed. Ahmad critically points to “the army’s institutional association” with Baba Ramdev, an ascetic guru who is said to have close ties to the current government, on whose premises the yoga trainings were held and who previously hosted conventions of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a cultural organization promoting Hindutva ideology (ibid.). Implied is the transmission of knowledge of a specific cultural context in a certain nationalistic interpretation, so that this “politicisation of the military”, as Ahmad suggests, might lead to the military “increasingly subscrib[ing] to the world view of the regime in power” (ibid.).

### **Peaceful Yoga – Nationalism’s Disguise**

Given Ahmad’s concern that “[...] the makeover of India in the image of majoritarian nationalism is unlikely to remain a political and democratic exercise” (ibid.), it is not surprising that Modi can be seen engaged in meditative contemplation or *pranayama* exercise surrounding IYD events.

Figure 1 shows Modi in a meditative posture depicting him as peaceful, focused and calm, maybe even pious. The overall impression created through this picture is that of a physically fit, yet benign-seeming elderly man, who knows his yoga practice and personally testifies to its benefits. Focus on meditational and *pranayama* practice allows him to ascribe the attributes related to these practices to himself and his role as political leader. The analysis of the actual yoga pictures of Modi’s Instagram account, however, shows that the peaceful qualities ascribed to the practice are intended to conceal the religious



Figure 1: @narendramodi, IYD Lucknow 2017

nationalism underlying yoga's soft power approach.

Modi relies on the known style of yoga pictures with the practices taking place outdoors in community with other practitioners to bring his message across. This also holds true for the more difficult postures performed (see fig. 2). Taken from the side at a low angle, the picture is reminiscent of the many back-bending pictures found on Instagram. Shot from the side, in a way which increases the aesthetic appeal of the body in that posture, they also highlight the arch formed by the bending of the spine. Postures like these are related to high back flexibility. However, to balance the bending of the spine, strong core muscles are needed. That is, yoga is a balancing act between flexibility and strength. At the same time, *camel pose* is also known as a heart-opening posture that is commonly believed to help reduce anxiety but also to open one's heart to whatever the universe has in store. Thus, the depicted posture itself can be read as a message of flexibility and strength, of surrender to something bigger, maybe even divine, and the fearlessness with which all this is met. The picture

Figure 2: @narendramodi, IYD Ranchi 2019



hence represents Modi to be simultaneously flexible and strong, fearless, and open-hearted.



Figure 3: @narendramodi, IYD Ranchi 2019



Figure 3, which shows Modi practicing *cobra pose*, underlines the previously established union of flexibility and strength through the posture itself. The picture shows Modi between the multitude of homogenously clothed men, conveying the notion that the politician is just one among many practitioners. However, the attention of the viewer is directed away from the multitude and quickly drawn to Modi himself. This effect is created through Modi being set apart spatially, having more room around himself than the others. Additionally, his entirely white clothing as well as his central position in the picture make him stand out from the crowd. Modi appears as the centre not just of attention but of action around which everything else reverberates.

Figure 4 reinforces this impression with Modi standing in front of other practitioners whom he appears to be guiding through the practice. With him in front clad in white clothes, the pictures evoke the guru-disciple relationship still existent as a way of transmitting knowledge about yoga, thus allowing Modi to stylize himself as a spiritual leader with authority in yoga. Through his role as Prime Minister, he can be seen as a stand in for the Indian nation. As Moffit observes, populist leaders are not understood to only represent the people but to *embody* the people (qtd. in Kinnvall 2019, 296; my emphasis). Thus, Modi's performance of strength, flexibility, and benignity at IYD allows him to send a message that shows India's strengthening without appearing to be threatening (Tandon 2016, 62). Lakshmi adds that his public engagement with yoga helps to clear his own image as a politician, diverting attention away from his involvement in the 2002 Gujarat killing of many Muslim Indian citizens (2020, 53).



Figure 4: @narendramodi, IYD Ranchi 2019

Visually, nationalist sentiments and a strong focus on Modi as a leading figure are also reflected in figure 4. Andrea Jain detects a “ritual quality” in the IYD mass events whose pictures transmit a “sense of communion” (Jain 2020, 133; 146). On the one hand they are the visual representation of yoga's much cited capacity to help “discover the sense of oneness with yourself, the world and the nature” (Modi 2014). On the other, they transmit an image of national unity

around a political leader and his ideology which is highlighted through the organization of the practitioners in the practice space. The pictures evoke the way in which students are placed in yoga studios or open-air events, forming rows, one mat next to another, thus creating the sense of community and togetherness, described by Jain. Showing those pictures on his Instagram account, Modi takes advantage of an existing aesthetic component closely associated with yoga. However, the wide long shots not only demonstrate that so many people practice with Modi. Rather, the organization of the mats and the practitioners behind Modi as leader/teacher/guru along with the participant's camouflage-colored trousers also reflect a rigid and seemingly military order that references the choreographed synchronicity of authoritarian propaganda pictures and are an example for the "aestheticization of ideology" at work (Lakshmi 2020, 53).

Another, more covert way in which Hindu nationalism is referenced in relation to yoga is the date of IYD, which was set to be on 21<sup>st</sup> of June each year, the day of the summer solstice (in the northern hemisphere). On the one side, it references Hinduism, being considered "the day Lord Shiva became the first yogi" (Chacko 2019, 18). On the other side, it marks the death anniversary of Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, founder of the RSS, of which Modi is a member. Miller points out that during India's struggle for independence, the RSS "combined, among other things, yoga practice with the fascist ideologies of Hitler and Mussolini in their aspirations to realize a Hindu nation state" (2020, 96). Yoga hence not only reflects unity of 'body, mind and soul' or the bodies depicted but metaphorically relates to the unity of the national body, which is organised around an understanding of that nation being fundamentally Hindu.

That these elements are most certainly choreographed is revealed in figure 1. While Modi is seen with eyes closed, hands joined together in front of his chest, the 'followers' he appears to be guiding sit more relaxed, eyes opened and mostly looking straight ahead, not focusing on Modi, creating a somewhat comical moment that manifests a rift that unveils the motivation behind the pictures. IYD can thus be interpreted as a "concerted effort" (Gautam and Droogan 2017, 19) which "enacts ideology" (Lakshmi 2020, 52) and "demonstrates that Hindu nationalism can also manifest as peaceful spectacle" (53).

Modi not only relies on aspects of language as part of a yoga aesthetics but heavily applies a visual style of representation characteristic for yoga pictures. In doing so he expresses his belonging to an international yoga community. At the same time, adhering to these aesthetics frame how the pictures of him practicing yoga are meant to be perceived or read. Therefore, the framework offered by global yoga aesthetics shrouds other facets of meaning the images might contain. In making use of a globally available and recognizable style of yoga pictures, the pictures hide their political significance from view. Modi's application of the visual codes of yoga is thus another stance

of the “emergency of aesthetics” created through a lack of a sense of emergency, that is, the lacking awareness of Modi’s political aims.

This has different implications internationally and domestically. In the run up to the first IYD in 2015, much effort was placed on emphasizing the secularity of yoga. As Gupta and Copeman suggest, the previously referenced scientificity of yoga in its quality as a Vedic but secular practice allows for cooperation across religious lines (2019, 320). On the contrary, Lakshmi interprets the overemphasis of secularism as based on the construction of the Hindu majority as tolerant who “used the secularity of yoga to advance and justify their anti-Muslim stance” (2020, 50). At the same time, claims of the Indianness of yoga follow a commonly known and globally available (and often orientalized) script of yoga’s long-standing tradition and its important continuation through the scriptures of Patañjali. In following these scripts, Modi bases his understanding of yoga on exclusions as Andrea Jain points out (2020, 149). By citing Patañjali as the ‘Father of Yoga’, the diversity and plurality of different yoga traditions as well as yoga’s dependency on contextualized meaning and malleability are forced into the background in favour for an understanding of yoga as Hindu. Clearly de-emphasizing yoga’s South Asian heritage, “Modi’s approach to yoga represents a political, ahistorical and essentializing strategy” (156) that he himself did not have to invent as “yoga has the benefit of already being a global and globalized export seen as being quintessentially Indian” (Gautam and Droogan 2017, 24). The attributes assigned to yoga have been appropriated by Modi. Relying on the global popularity of these attributes, he successfully conceals less benign aims of his politics. Not only does a global yoga aesthetic exert power in shaping the perception of what is visible on Instagram, it also helps to conceal the emergency of yoga’s political appropriation.

## **Conclusion**

The present article investigated three posts of Narendra Modi’s Instagram account created each on the IYD festivities in the years 2017-2019. It analysed how captions and pictures of the posts rely on a globally recognizable yoga aesthetics which allow Modi to attribute aspects associated with yoga such as peacefulness, calmness, health, focus and discipline to himself and his role as a political leader. Framed through an aesthetic of yoga, the posts represent ‘emergencies’ that conceal the mismanagement of Modi’s government during the pandemic as well as the Hindu nationalist agenda his government pursues. The first section has shown, how the adherence to a yoga discourse together with a rhetoric that frames the struggle against the Coronavirus as an ongoing anti-colonial quest, creates an emergency of aesthetics in that aesthetics shape the perception of how the Indian government deals with the pandemic. The framing created through the yoga health discourse, in combination with anti-colonial rhetoric favoring local medical systems and opposing allopathic ones,

distracted from pressing questions of individual citizen's health. Instead, the failed politics and many deaths his government is responsible for are covered up and the health of the nation – whose primary guardian Modi stylizes himself to be – becomes the centre of attention.

The second section focused on the visual discourse applied in the posts that are equally reflective of a globally circulating yoga aesthetics. Adapting the style of a widely accepted discourse, Modi aligns himself with the global yoga community. In so doing he not only gains more credibility for himself, but lends more authority to this discourse through his role as prime minister of India, the presumed birthplace of the practice. The mutual enforcement of the validity of such claims not only offered Modi the chance to divert attention away from the failed politics of his government in handling the pandemic. Since the pictures resemble a familiar yoga picture aesthetics, Modi is able to evoke the attributes ascribed to the practice. The association of strength acquired through yoga as one of benignity, peacefulness, and balance helps to successfully conceal political aims. The politicization of the Indian military through education in yoga training centres raises concerns as to whether the neutrality of the military – as far as there can be such a thing – could be maintained. It appears as if the attributes assigned to yoga as a practice are not just meant to shed a positive light on Modi himself but, by way of teaching yoga to soldiers, are meant to extend onto the military. To this end, the secularized discourse adopted around IYD is used to also make it more palatable to international spectators. Viewed in this light, IYD reflects not only an “attempt to politicise and nationalise” (Gautam and Droogan 2017, 28) or “weaponize yoga” (Sood 2020, np) but “seeks to alter our perception of yoga, India and Hindutva” (McCartney 2018, 2). Instagram appears as the glamorous, picturesque façade veiling “a malicious state” (Ara 2021). The appropriation of yoga discourse frames and organizes the perception of Modi's politics creating an emergency of aesthetics through yoga which makes yoga a soft power tool in the hands of the Indian government.

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