

A diplomatic and cultural triumph

ONE OF the outstanding triumphs of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy is International Yoga Day. Wherever I go in the world, I find this event gathering traction, generating enthusiasm, and inspiring support from the local community.

Global appeal

This year, on the eve of its worldwide celebration on June 21, I am in Austin, the capital of the 'Lone Star' state of Texas. International Yoga Day was celebrated there on Saturday, June 16, 2018, on the lawns of the majestic and stately Capitol, a beautiful 19th century renaissance revival style building in red 'sunset' granite. Coincidentally, but not surprisingly given how things go with us, it also coincided with the celebration of Eid-ul-Fitr in India.

The Texas celebrations were organised by the Indian Consulate General in Houston, led by Dr Anupam Ray, a physician-turned-IFS (1994 batch), in association with dozens of local sponsors and collaborators. For those in India who are not aware, yoga practitioners in the US exceed some 20 millions, easily over 10 per cent of exercise-capable members of the population. This is startling if impressive number exceeds, percentage wise, figures in India, the home and place of origin of this ancient art and science of well-being.

Not long after assuming office, PM Modi made a spirited pitch for International Yoga Day in his first address to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in September 2014. Not only did he speak in Hindi, as Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) officials had been forewarned, but his speech itself was not available till the morning of the day it was delivered. There was little prior warning let alone preparation for his historic push for Yoga. Addressing the UNGA, Modi said, "By changing our lifestyle and creating consciousness, it can also help us deal with climate change." He appealed to the member



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nations to support his call for an "an International Yoga Day."

Modi's proposal took not just the UN, but also the MEA by surprise. In fact, there was no prior 'file' on this; it was totally new idea. Seema Sirohi, who wrote an early report, declared "Yoga as foreign policy is indeed unique." However, to get the United Nations to approve International Yoga Day was by no means easy. Since 1980, UNGA rules require such proposals to be passed only if they were "of priority concern to all or the majority of countries and should contribute to the development of international cooperation in solving global problems." In fact, it seemed by all counts, a rather uphill battle.

How did we succeed? Ambassador Asoke Mukerji, then India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, played a crucial role. Mukerji, I am proud to say, was my teacher at St Stephen's College. When I joined BA (Hons) in English in 1977, it was already rumoured that he was sure to clear the Civil Services, which did happen the following year. I remember him conducting the introductions of our batch in the Senior Combination Room (SCR).

Smart diplomacy

We had been through many self-introduction, particularly during our 'ragging' fortnight. So fed up with the predictably tedious answers proffered, I said something, which much to my chagrin today, was as outrageous as it was silly. I remember how Mukerji neither ridiculed nor dismissed me. Rather, he deflected my provocation ever so gently that it passed almost unnoticed. I knew then that we had in our midst an outstanding diplomat in the making.

After successful stints in Belgrade and

Washington, Mukerji became the Consul General of India in Soviet Central Asia in 1990. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, he helped shape India's foreign policy with newly independent Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Then he served as a trade negotiator in WTO and India's Deputy Ambassador to the Russia, before becoming India's Deputy High Commissioner in Britain. But International Yoga Day was perhaps his greatest triumph.

Health challenge

Aided by a small team, Mukerji achieved the near-impossible. Early support of China, followed by the United States, Russia, France, United Kingdom, Germany and Japan helped enormously. A huge diplomatic coup was securing the support of 48 out of the 56 Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) group of states, including Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal, Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Indonesia. Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Brunei, and, of course, Pakistan went against the resolution. Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, as well as countries with a large Indian diaspora in Africa, Asia-Pacific, and the Caribbean, all supported the resolution. In our own region, Sri Lanka and Nepal were enthusiastic, as were Afghanistan, Bhutan and Myanmar.

Finally, on December 11, 2014, the UNGA adopted the resolution, with 177 out of 193 countries in favour, just 75 days after it was proposed by Modi. Mukerji attributes this astounding success to India's "inclusive diplomacy". What is more, there were abstentions, but no vote was cast against the resolution. Since its first global celebrations on June 21, 2015, the International Yoga Day has gone from strength to strength, proving *desi* naysayers wrong. Those who wonder at the PM's recent health challenge, which has gone viral, would do well to see its direct link to the idea of the International Yoga Day at the inception of his tenure.

International Yoga Day has made all Indians proud. Let us use this occasion to salute not only our PM, but all the teachers and practitioners of yoga the world over.

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The views expressed are personal*