

‘Culture’ as Breaking Barriers: India’s Evolving Diplomacy during Pandemic

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Introduction

Systemic theories of international politics represent arguments that the international system generates constraints that influence the behaviour and exercise of foreign policy of all states. As a consequence of the constraints generated on physical movement and direct interaction with the world on account of COVID Pandemic, countries across the world had to re-orient their strategy to promote their foreign policy objectives. In reinventing foreign policy instruments for sustained and uninterrupted interactions with the world, India under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi remained one of the most active actors adapting to the systemic changes brought by the pandemic in international milieu.

The most significant transformation was visible in the promotion of ‘Cultural diplomacy’, an important ‘soft power’ element of India’s foreign policy, in promoting linkages with people across countries and civilizations. For centuries, Indian art and culture have fascinated people from around the world, and attracted them towards Indian tradition and culture. However, the interruption in continued interaction with the world remained a major challenge during the times of COVID Pandemic.

To strengthen and foster India’s cultural diplomacy Modi government has revitalised its delivery mechanisms, particularly amidst the constraints posed by the COVID Pandemic. Such efforts by India have facilitated in the generation of hope among millions to wade through the tough times thrown up by COVID situation as well as enabled sustained connections with people confined within the four walls of their homes.

From Ayurveda to Yoga: Providing an ‘Alternate Health Care System’

The time-tested wisdom embedded in Indian traditional knowledge has come to be reckoned by international community as an alternate health care provider during Covid Pandemic. Consequence to such recognition and in a determined move to revive and promote the traditional Indian medicine system, the All-India Institute of Ayurveda

(AIIA) and UK's London School of Hygienic and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) collaborated and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to conduct study on health benefits of 'Ashwagandha' as a treatment to prevent infection from COVID19.

Similarly, the Ministry of AYUSH signed an MoU through virtual mode between the Pharmacopoeia Commission for Indian Medicine and Homeopathy (PCIM&H) and American Herbal Pharmacopoeia to help develop standards in the field of Ayurveda and other traditional medicine. Similarly, the age-old Indian practice of Yoga has assumed popularity as an alternate health care since time immemorial. Considering the multifaceted benefits of Yoga, the 7th International Day of Yoga (IDY) held in 2021 saw various programmes, including webinars and virtual events. The overwhelming participation of 491 million people worldwide in these events bears testimony of such health benefits of Yoga. In view of the restrictions imposed by countries on movement of people, PM Modi launched the 'WHO mYoga' app during the 7th IDY to enable easy learning of Yoga and training practices based on Common Yoga Protocol in many languages for continued access to its benefits to millions.

Consistent with the vision of PM Modi, and to provide access to the benefits of Yoga, ICCR as part of its regular exercise, organised an International Yoga Conference in 2021 on 'Yoga for Universal Well-being: Finding Commonalities between Indian and African Traditions' with the support of Consulate General of India in Durban, South Africa. More than 78,000 African healers from traditional Healers Organisations in South Africa and students of IKS-Africa and Yoga worldwide attended this Conference.

In similar vein, the Ministry of AYUSH also launched a unique programme 'Surya Namaskar for vitality' in January 2022 as part of the celebration of *Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav*. more than 75 lakh people from all over the world, including India, performed Surya Namaskar to ensure a healthy mind and body to protect themselves during the COVID pandemic.

Improvising Cultural Connect

Many good Indian cultural practices were also recognized and endorsed by countries across the world. The most significant is the usage of 'Namaste', practised as part of Indian culture to greet persons with reverence. On account of social distancing during pandemic, many global

leaders and heads of states, including Prince Charles of Great Britain, French President Immanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel changed their mode of greeting from handshake to 'Namaste'.



To complement and promote the widespread use of good Indian cultural practices a number of programmes have been organised to restore cultural connection across the world. The most innovative way to connect to the world through culture during the challenging times of COVID pandemic is the '*Kala Vishwa*' Programme, initiated by ICCR. The main objective of the programme is to provide opportunities and financial support to the traditional folk artists from India to showcase their talents, especially providing platforms to artists from rural/remote areas. As uncertainty seeped in the economy of countries across the globe due to COVID Pandemic, such initiative motivated local artists in sustaining their livelihood. ICCR's foreign students/scholars are also invited to the programme to gain knowledge on Indian art and culture and help disseminate the rich repository of Indian art and culture in their respective countries.



Photo Credit: Economic Times²

Continuing to invoke the essence of cultural practices edified in Indian spirituality, an interactive session on the theme 'Spirituality as Soft Power' was organised by ICCR on 9 November 2021 with the assistance of representatives of the 19 internationally acclaimed spiritual organisations of India, to spread knowledge in the field of values and traditions of Indian spirituality and Vedic knowledge across the globe.

It can be observed that in the wake of the global pandemic, various initiatives undertaken by India are a testimony to the global reach and impact of Indian cultural diplomacy. Notwithstanding the systemic constraints imposed by COVID Pandemic, India under the leadership of PM Modi has evolved Indian diplomacy in the most ingenious way. The multi-pronged strategy to make accessible the multifaceted benefits of ancient Indian tradition and culture to the world reflects the vision of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' (*World as one family*). It also shows that systemic constraints can be overcome by leaders through, in the words of Joseph Nye, 'contextual intelligence' i.e. 'the ability of a leader to understand changing environments, capitalize on trends, and use the flow of events to implement strategies.'

(Views expressed are personal)

²<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/the-royal-diaries-charles-meets-modi-camilla-roams-delhi-in-a-taxi/hello-primeinister/slideshow/61577743.cms>