

Modi flexes India's cultural reach on Day of Yoga with backbends and corpse poses on the U.N. lawn

By Jennifer Peltz
The Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS — Praising yoga as “a way of life,” Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi performed poses ranging from cobra to corpse alongside a multinational crowd at the U.N. headquarters as he kicked off the public portion of his U.S. visit.

With a checkerboard of made-in-India yoga mats covering the U.N.’s spacious north lawn, Modi stopped and bowed at a statue of the assassinated Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi before saying in brief remarks that yoga was an all-ages, portable practice accessible to all faiths and cultures.

“It is a very old tradition, but like all ancient Indian traditions, it is also living and dynamic,” Modi said. “Yoga is truly universal.”

While yoga is a means to physical fitness, mental calm, and emotional contentment, “it is not just about doing exercise on a mat. Yoga is a way of life,” said the 72-year-old leader of the world’s most populous nation.

For Modi, who arrived in New York on a trip offering plenty of time to discuss global tensions, highlighting an ancient pursuit of inner tranquility was a savvy and symbolic choice. He has made yoga a personal practice and a diplomatic tool.

Taking his spot on a mat amid the throng of a thousand or more, the 72-year-old Modi participated over the next 35 minutes in breathing exercises, meditation, backbends, and other poses — from palm tree to diamond, hare to half-camel, crocodile to stretched-up frog.



The event honored the International Day of Yoga, which Modi persuaded the U.N. to designate in 2014 as an annual observance. This year’s version set a Guinness World Record, announced on-scene, for most nationalities — 135 — at a yoga lesson. It drew actor Richard Gere, singer-actor Mary Millben, New York mayor Eric Adams, U.N. General Assembly president Csaba Korosi, and deputy secretary-general Amina Mohamed, among other dignitaries. secretary-general António Guterres, who was at a conference in Paris, sent in a video greeting.

The shouts of demonstrators across the street could be heard during the meditative utterances of “Om.” About 200 Modi supporters and 50 critics rallied, kept apart by barriers and closely watched

by New York police.

The pro-Modi group cried out greetings to him and held signs with such messages as “America Welcomes Narendra Modi” and “United We Stand,” accompanied by a photo of the U.S. flag. Opponents yelled, “Modi, go back!” and waved large yellow flags referring to Khalistan, the name of the homeland that Sikh separatists seek to create in India.

First practiced by Hindu sages, yoga has become one of India’s most popular cultural exports. Modi has energetically promoted it as a feel-good way of stretching the country’s influence abroad.

Modi, a Hindu nationalist, presents himself as an ascetic who adheres to his religion’s strictures on vegetarianism and yoga. He has posted social media videos over the years of himself practicing yoga

FLEXIBLE STATESMAN. India Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears on a screen during an International Day of Yoga event held at United Nations headquarters in New York. Modi joined diplomats and dignitaries at the United Nations for a morning session of yoga, praising it as “truly universal” and “a way of life.” (AP Photo/Jeenah Moon)

poses and provided live visuals of him meditating in a Himalayan mountain cave after national elections in 2019.

Modi last visited the U.N. during the 2021 General Assembly, where he said that “all kinds of questions have been raised” about the world body’s effectiveness on matters including climate change, the coronavirus pandemic, and terrorism.

He also made a point of staking out his country’s place on the global stage, noting that “every sixth person in the world is Indian.” Since then, India has surpassed China to claim the world’s largest population, at 1.425 billion, and it is the world’s biggest democracy.

India has long sought a permanent seat on the Security Council, the U.N.’s most powerful group. India has been elected to a two-year seat several times, most recently for 2021-2022.

The prime minister then flew to Washington to join first lady Jill Biden for a visit to the National Science Foundation in Alexandria, Virginia. President Joe Biden also hosted Modi at the White House for dinner, including pasta and ice cream, and a musical tribute to the regions of India performed by youth dancers from Washington, D.C.-area Studio Dhoom.

“With this official visit, we are bringing together the world’s oldest and world’s largest democracies. But our relationship

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JULY 3
Doreen's Place (for residents only)
12-2 p.m.
610 NW Broadway St, Portland

JULY 10
Mobile Showers
10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
4244 SE 91st Ave, Portland

JULY 13
Street Roots
9-10:30 a.m.
211 NW Davis St, Portland
Mobile Showers
11-2 p.m.
247 SE 82nd Ave, Portland
Nightstrike
7:30-9:30 p.m.
Under the Burnside Bridge

JULY 17
Doreen's Place (for residents only)
12-2 p.m.
610 NW Broadway St, Portland

JULY 18
Union Gospel Mission
2-3 p.m.
3 NW 3rd Ave, Portland

JULY 22
Love Your Neighbor
12-2 p.m.
526 SE Grand Ave, Portland

JULY 24
Mobile Showers
10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
4244 SE 91st Ave, Portland

JULY 27
Street Roots
9-10:30 a.m.
211 NW Davis St, Portland
Mobile Showers
11-2 p.m.
247 SE 82nd Ave, Portland
Nightstrike
7:30-9:30 p.m.
Under the Burnside Bridge

JULY 31
Doreen's Place (for residents only)
12-2 p.m.
610 NW Broadway St, Portland

