

Yoga is a gift from India to the world. It can help transform global health

By Amitabh Kant

On June 21st, 2023, as the world celebrates International Yoga Day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi will lead the celebrations at the United Nations headquarters with representatives from over 180 countries expected to participate. In fact, over 25 crore people are expected to participate this year, with the theme 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam', aptly translating to "One Earth. One Family. One Future."

Yoga in fact is an exclusively Indian concept and intervention that has taken the world by storm. In many ways, it is symbolic of what we as a nation stand for, and over time it must be a part of every Indian's lifecycle of good health and well-being. It is also an intervention and practice that is increasingly necessary not just for Indians but for the entire world.

It is therefore one of India's biggest soft-power brands, with India taking the lead for the rest of the world in terms of health-positive behaviour and actions, making it a beacon for India's soft-power role. The importance of soft power cannot be understated, with several front-line nations taking the onus of using soft power to build their brand entity. Now, as India becomes a world-leading nation across several aspects, soft power is a key aspect of India's consensus-building role, highlighted and expanded upon during the G20 Presidency.

Yoga has left an indelible impression in the health approach of hundreds of millions of people, positive in every way. It is therefore India's marquee soft power brand and one which will define India's heritage and unique advantages. In many ways, yoga is the health intervention that any individual can inculcate through their entire lifecycle to remain healthy, active, and prevent the incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). India is at the cusp of a transformative demographic dividend for the next several years, and an active population is a healthy and productive population. A key intervention in inculcating healthy lives and living is the practice of yoga, as part of an overall lifestyle that includes regular walking, and other movement-related activities such as playing a sport and classical dance among others. Yoga can be practiced at home efficaciously, with minimal if any, equipment required, and can be practiced by any age demographic.

The International Day of Yoga was declared by the United Nations, through a resolution, the draft of which was proposed by India and endorsed by 177 member states. It was first introduced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his address in 2014 at the 69th session of the UN General Assembly, where he said "Yoga is not just about exercise; it is a way to discover the sense of oneness with yourself, the world and the nature."

Yoga is a powerful intervention for any society, most of all India, for better physical and mental health, to control the inception of NCDs including cancer, cardiovascular diseases, respiratory diseases and the rapidly expanding incidence of diabetes. At a time when there has been an alarming rise in the incidences globally of diabetes and chronic NCDs, as with every other issue that the Government of India is progressively taking on, this too is one we should counter together as a nation, and bring in healthy and active living. One of the key preventive health interventions for these ailments are physical activity including yoga, walking, and any other form. These are critical.

As a nation, we must become a physically active society, and one of our targets ought to be universal physical activity for every Indian, perhaps by 2047. The role of yoga in this cannot be overstated, given our demographic dividend. In recent years, yoga has emerged as a key driver in promoting physical activity in India.

As an ancient practice with proven benefits in promoting mental and physical well-being, yoga has gained widespread recognition worldwide. Several studies have shown that yoga can help tackle NCDs. It is also backed by incontrovertible science. WHO has listed yoga as a means to improve health in its global action plan on physical activity 2018-2030. UNICEF has stated that children can 'practice many yoga poses without any risk and get the same benefits that adults do. These benefits include increased flexibility and fitness, mindfulness and relaxation.'

Yoga is that rare gift which imparts all the benefits, with no side effects or downsides. Yoga by India will be immersive, adaptive, universally inclusive and universally practicable. It serves a health and well-being purpose. Physical activity is a national imperative and one of its strongest cogs is and will remain Yoga.

This is why the world is following India's lead in adopting it as a health and wellness tool for peace and well-being, amplifying the soft power that India now exemplifies as a national and global imperative, to be active, and healthy. This is why it is India's key soft power brand for generations to come.

The author is G20 Sherpa, Government of India. Views are personal.