EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite the Modi administration’s fervid attempts to draw on some of India’s religious traditions to boost India’s standing with prospective partners, it is unclear whether this strategy has yielded significant, tangible benefits. It may have had a marginal positive impact on relations that were already on the upswing (for example with Japan), but it has had no discernible effect on relations with Sri Lanka or Israel. As the government marginalizes its largest religious minority, Muslims, it is hard to see how highlighting selective aspects of India’s religious heritage will acquire traction in its dealings with a range of countries.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

• India sought to deploy soft power resources during the Cold War to offset its myriad material weaknesses and has made significant institutional changes in the post-Cold War to wield soft power more effectively.

• Since the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, Indian soft power efforts have incorporated an explicitly religious bent privileging Hinduism, and to a lesser extent, Buddhism.

• While primarily Hindu-centric, India’s religious soft power strategies have drawn on other aspects of its culture and history connected to religion, such as yoga and the country’s Jewish minority.

• Growing sectarian tensions at home may limit the capacity of India’s new emphasis on religious soft power to pay dividends on the global stage.
BACKGROUND

India has a long and mostly honorable tradition of using soft power in its diplomacy. In the wake of its emergence as an independent nation from the detritus of British colonialism, India had few material assets that it could effectively deploy to support its foreign policy goals. Consequently, its policymakers, most notably Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, relied heavily on the power of moral suasion in the conduct of Indian foreign policy. Accordingly, he pursued a highly ideational foreign policy which sought to shape international norms in a range of issue areas. These ran the gamut from the pursuit of global disarmament to the quest to end the apartheid regime in South Africa.

Rarely, if ever, did Nehru draw on India’s many religious traditions in his attempts at norm entrepreneurship. Instead his arguments were cast in humanistic and universalistic terms. During much of his long term in office (1947–1963), he tirelessly worked to promote a range of challenging goals. His efforts, though far from wholly successful, did usher in a modicum of changes in the global arena. Among other matters, there is little or no question that he played a vital role in delegitimizing colonialism. He was also at the forefront of opposing the racist regime in Rhodesia and the apartheid regime in South Africa. Furthermore, despite India’s significant material weaknesses, he was instrumental in placing global disarmament on the international agenda.

Nehru, of course, was the exponent of the doctrine of nonalignment which served as the basis of India’s grand strategy during his term in office. Under the aegis of this doctrine, Nehru had also promoted concept of Panch Shila or the “five principles of peaceful coexistence.” The ideas embodied in these principles had made no explicit reference to India’s various religious traditions. However, it certainly drew upon India’s extensive civilizational heritage. That said, Nehru, a staunch believer in a particular conception of secularism which accorded respect toward all faiths, had a complex relationship with religion. However, he never attempted to introduce it—let alone impose it—on public life.

His successors, while often relying on much of his ideational rhetoric, for all practical purposes ceded India’s moral leadership in most global arenas. They, for the most part, lacked his moral stature because they had squandered his legacy through their flawed policies both at home and abroad. Consequently, their attempt to draw on his intellectual inheritance mostly rang hollow and contributed little to meaningful changes in the global order. India’s hoary statements in support of the New International Economic Order, its long-standing opposition to apartheid, and periodic attempts to resurrect various proposals for global disarmament all amounted to little more than a form of “metaphysical pathos.” For all practical purposes, India’s voice counted for next to nothing in international affairs. Its pronouncements were seen as moralistic and devoid of any substance, especially as the country wielded little material clout. At worst, these gestures were viewed across the global community as little more than quixotic.

Indeed, it was not until the Cold War’s termination—the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of India’s hoary commitment to nonalignment, along with its fitful embrace of market-oriented economic policies—that India would emerge, once again, as a somewhat influential actor in the global arena. However, its leaders, for the most part, did not seek to resurrect the Nehruvian approach to foreign policy. More to the point, the country was preoccupied at home with the needs of liberal economic reforms and the demands of ethnic strife. On the international front, it was adjusting its foreign policy to a vastly changed international order. The exigencies that the country faced, both at home and abroad, consumed the energies of its political leadership. Consequently, they could
not mount a concerted effort to mobilize and deploy the country’s significant soft power resources, whether religious or secular.

The only effort of any consequence came well after the end of the Cold War. It involved the creation of a new Division of Public Diplomacy in the Ministry of External Affairs during the second iteration of the Indian National Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. By this time, the Indian economy was on an even keel, and the country had dramatically altered its foreign policy. It had also successfully weathered a raft of international sanctions that it had faced in the aftermath of its nuclear tests in May 1998. The decision to create this new division, it is widely believed, was to compete with the growing influence of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in Asia.9

The efforts that this new division undertook in short order were substantial. Among other matters, it inaugurated a new web portal for Indian public diplomacy, released a series of videos on YouTube, and launched a dedicated Facebook page. Also, in conjunction with the Center for Media Studies Academy in New Delhi, it held its first conference on the theory and practice of public diplomacy in 2010.10

Indeed, by the time the UPA government left office in 2014, India already had a substantial infrastructure in place to deploy soft power in the conduct of its diplomacy. Consequently, the new National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which assumed office in 2014, became an important beneficiary of the prior efforts of the UPA government.

NARENDRA MODI AND THE USE OF INDIAN RELIGIOUS SOFT POWER

The 2014 election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the premiership—with a clear-cut majority for his nativist, Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—marked a watershed in Indian politics. While the BJP and its predecessor, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, had always been a right-of-center, Hindu chauvinist party, it underwent a steady transformation under Modi’s leadership. He effectively moved the party in a distinctly ideological direction, deepening its commitment to a vision of militant Hindu nationalism.11

Furthermore, his victory marked a decisive end to the long-term dominance of the professedly secular Indian National Congress (INC). The results of the election saw its parliamentary presence reduced to a mere 44 seats in the 545-seat parliament. The weakness of the parliamentary opposition, in very large measure, also gave Modi virtually free rein to pursue the politics of Hindu nationalism.

Apart from some allusions to illegal Muslim immigration from Bangladesh, a well-worn Hindu nationalist trope, his election campaign had focused almost entirely on issues of lagging economic growth and lackadaisical governance under the UPA regime. Issues of foreign policy were hardly remarked upon during the campaign.

Consequently, the flurry of diplomatic activity that he embarked on after assuming office proved to be a surprise to many observers. Among other matters, in a historic move he invited all the premiers of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation to his inauguration. Within weeks thereafter, he made his first foreign visit to the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan in June 2014. Indeed, his new government evinced a keen interest in matters of foreign policy as exemplified in the announcement of his “neighborhood first” policy—one designed to improve ties with India’s smaller neighbors.12

Nehru, a staunch believer in a particular conception of secularism which accorded respect toward all faiths, had a complex relationship with religion. However, he never attempted to introduce it—let alone impose it—on public life.
International Day of Yoga: Indian Global Branding or Nativist Dog Whistle?

Beyond these initiatives, Modi also moved swiftly to deploy what could be considered a use of religious soft power in the conduct of diplomacy. This shift on Modi’s part is hardly inconsequential, as it marks a significant break from the past. Even a BJP-led coalition government under Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, between 1998 and 2004, had made no overt effort to deploy religious soft power in its foreign policy strategy. Modi’s adoption of this project is nothing short of novel.

His first foray into this arena came in the form of an address to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2014, where he called on the body to declare an international yoga day. Shortly thereafter, Indian diplomats made a concerted effort to generate sufficient support for such a declaration. Their efforts proved to be successful, and in December 2014, the United Nations formally declared June 21 to be International Yoga Day. Obviously, large numbers of yoga practitioners across the world practice yoga for its therapeutic benefits. For them, it is simply another form of physical training and exercise bereft of religious significance. However, for millions of Indians and Modi in particular, the practice of yoga cannot be severed from its religious moorings in Hinduism. While much of the world embraced Modi’s espousal of yoga, religious minorities, especially Muslims, India’s largest minority, expressed unhappiness with his efforts precisely because of the religious roots of the practice.14

Buddhism as a Soft Power Resource for India’s Relations with Asia

Interestingly enough, Modi also chose to draw on another important Indian religious tradition: Buddhism. His choice of Buddhism was hardly surprising for at least two compelling reasons. First, the faith had its origins as a reform movement of Hinduism, designed to challenge sacerdotal authority. Subsequently, one sect of the faith, Mahayana (the greater vehicle) Buddhism, actually came to be incorporated into the Hindu fold, with the Buddha seen as the ninth incarnation of one of the key members of the Hindu pantheon, Lord Vishnu, the preserver.15 Buddhism’s organic kinship with Hinduism no doubt rendered it attractive to Modi.

Second, India’s proximity to Nepal, Burma/Myanmar, and Sri Lanka—all three countries with substantial Buddhist populations, with the latter two actual Buddhist-majority states—no doubt played a role in his calculations to boost Buddhism. More to the point, it could prove useful in deepening the cultural dimensions of India’s burgeoning and multifaceted relationship with Japan. It could also prove helpful in fostering better ties with other Buddhist nations such as South Korea and Thailand and thereby dovetail with another strand of Modi’s foreign policy, namely the “Act East” initiative designed to bolster India’s ties in a range of areas with the states of East and Southeast Asia.16

Modi has also sought to boost Buddhism in other ways. Even though the original idea had been discussed under a UPA government, he seized on the plans to resurrect Nalanda University, an ancient center of Buddhist learning in India. The university had existed as early as the fifth century and had lasted until 1193, when it was destroyed following a Turkish invasion. In September 2014, a new university was opened at the original site.17 Since the launch of this university was a pan-Asian initiative, the Modi government has sought to highlight its Buddhist origins and India’s concomitant contribution to Asian civilization.18

Beyond the revival of the university, the government has also actively sought to promote prominent Buddhist sites across the country as part of a tourism drive directed toward predominantly Buddhist nations across Asia. The goal of this effort, obviously,
to attract a range of pilgrims from across Asia and highlight India's substantial Buddhist heritage. To that end, the government has created a tourist circuit that would enable visitors to travel to a series of prominent historical and cultural sites associated with the life of Gautama Buddha.19

Despite being fraught with some risk, given the People's Republic of China's extreme sensitivities on the subject, the Modi government adopted a different stance than previous governments toward the presence and activities of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal head of Tibetans. Other governments, fearful of invoking the PRC's wrath, had for the most part avoided granting the Dalai Lama much leeway despite continuing the long-standing policy of providing him and his followers asylum in India. The Modi government, however, chose to take a more expansive view of the activities that it deemed permissible. To that end, it allowed the Dalai Lama to inaugurate a seminar on “Buddhism in the Twenty-First Century” in March 2017.20 In April of the same year, it also allowed him to visit a prominent Buddhist monastery in Tawang in the northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. The latter decision was fraught with particular significance because it is not only part of the PRC’s territorial claims but also the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama. 21

Leveraging India’s Jewish Legacy in Relations with Israel

Finally, Modi’s attempts to draw on India’s religious traditions, as long as they do not involve Islam, have been nothing short of relentless. This is evident from Modi’s decision to highlight India’s Jewish heritage in forging a strategic partnership with Israel. While India had recognized Israel as early as 1950, it had kept the country at an arm’s length until it accorded full diplomatic ties in 1992. India had limited its ties to Israel for a complex array of reasons including its involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement, its perceived need to avoid alienating its own substantial Muslim population, and concerns about provoking the Arab world. After full diplomatic ties with Israel had been established, the relationship made steady progress. However, Modi was the first Indian prime minister to visit the country.22

Following the creation of the state of Israel, India's once-thriving and robust Jewish community steadily dwindled, owing to their emigration. This, however, did not prevent Modi from seizing upon and underscoring India's substantial Jewish heritage as he has pursued a strategic partnership with Israel.23 As the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel in 2017, he did not lose an opportunity to highlight that Jews had historically found India to be a safe haven when they faced persecution in various other parts of the world. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in turn, has also recognized the significance of this heritage. Not surprisingly, he stressed this dimension of the Indo-Israeli relationship during his visit to India in 2018.24 It is, of course, entirely possible that the two leaders find each other on the same page for another reason: Both of them, based on their actions in office, wish to turn their respective countries into Jewish and Hindu states.

India and the Geopolitics of the “Muslim Question”

There is little question that Modi has sought to capitalize on particular strands of India’s religious heritage in his foreign policy outreach. However, his deep-seated hostility toward India’s vast Muslim community will come at a cost in his dealings with the Muslim world. Despite having made considerable headway, for example, with states in the Persian Gulf, including Iran and Saudi Araba, there are troubling signs that some of these ties are at the risk of fraying.

A series of policy initiatives and some lapses that have taken place during Modi’s term have caused a rift with parts of the Arab world and
Despite its fervid attempts to draw on some of India’s religious traditions to boost India’s standing and to render the country more attractive to prospective partners, it is far from evident that this strategy has yielded significant, tangible benefits.

Beyond. Among these has been the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that will expedite applications for citizenship from Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, and Parsis from a number of India’s neighboring countries. This list, however, quite conspicuously does not include Muslims. Coupled with the CAA, India is also creating the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which threatens to disenfranchise a significant segment of India’s Muslim community. Among other matters, the NRC requires all residents of India’s northeastern state to demonstrate that they were citizens of India before March 24, 1971 (a day before the infamous Pakistani military crackdown in what was then East Pakistan, which led to the flight of some 10 million refugees into India) with appropriate documents or face deportation. The BJP has made clear its intent to expand the writ of this law to the rest of the country. Since many of India’s poor and marginalized are Muslims, there is every likelihood that significant numbers of them will be caught in this dragnet, as they may not have suitable papers.

The event that probably triggered the adverse reactions of the Muslim/Arab world, however, was the brutal police crackdown on students at a predominantly Muslim university in New Delhi, Jamia Milia Islamia, in December 2019. The students had been protesting both the CAA and the NRC on the grounds that they were highly discriminatory. In its wake, a number of commentators in the Gulf and elsewhere expressed their concerns about the treatment of Muslims in Modi’s India. A number of astute Indian political commentators have also highlighted the tensions between India’s domestic policies and its attempts to court the Muslim/Arab world. While the Modi government will probably take diplomatic steps to assuage the concerns of the Arab world, it is far from clear that these criticisms will lead it to rein in its domestic ideological agenda.

CONCLUSIONS

As the foregoing discussion shows, the Modi administration, unlike previous governments, has explicitly religious underpinnings. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that it has chosen to utilize particular aspects of India’s religious heritage in its soft power strategy. Despite its fervid attempts to draw on some of India’s religious traditions to boost India’s standing and to render the country more attractive to prospective partners, it is far from evident that this strategy has yielded significant, tangible benefits. At best, it may have had a marginal positive impact on relations that were already on the upswing, for example, with Japan. It has, however, had no discernible effect on India’s relations with Sri Lanka. Instead more quotidian issues of trade, investment, and security have dominated bilateral relations. Similarly, the invocation of India’s Jewish heritage has not really moved the needle on India’s expanding ties with Israel. Instead, more tangible matters, such as arms sales, intelligence cooperation, and counterterrorism, have remained at the forefront of this strategic security partnership.

It is also unclear if the Modi government will be able, in the foreseeable future, to further capitalize on its soft power strategy. In considerable part, Modi’s attempts to burnish India’s image abroad through the use of religious soft power will be tarnished because of the sharp turn toward illiberalism in India under his watch. As the government hounds and marginalizes its largest religious minority, Muslims, it is hard to see how the highlighting of selective aspects of India’s religious heritage is likely to acquire traction in its dealings with a range of countries. The jarring juxtaposition of harsh domestic realities with attempts to promote a vision of religious amity is unlikely to be lost on much of the world.
ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power (GRSP) project represents a multi-year, cross-disciplinary effort to systematically study state use of religion in foreign affairs. Through a global comparison of varying motivations, strategies, and practices associated with the deployment of religious soft power, project research aims to reveal patterns, trends, and outcomes that will enhance our understanding of religion’s role in contemporary geopolitics.

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The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University seeks a more just and peaceful world by deepening knowledge and solving problems at the intersection of religion and global affairs through research, teaching, and engaging multiple publics. Two premises guide the center’s work: that a comprehensive examination of religion and norms is critical to address complex global challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.

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