

HINDUTVA IN AMERICA:

An Ethnonationalist
Threat to Equality
and Religious
Pluralism



2025



Rutgers Center for Security
Race and Rights

Cover Image:
Paraded in the Indian Independence Day Parade in Edison,
New Jersey, invoking the bulldozer as an anti-Muslim
symbol, 2022, Photo Credit Minhaj Khan

Table of Contents

1	Executive Summary	1
2	Introduction	5
3	Structure and Operation of the American Sangh	11
	A - Transporting Hindutva from India to America	12
	B - Homegrown American Hindutva Organizations	13
	C - Maintaining Links with Hindutva Groups in India	14
	D - Hindutva Leverages Americans' Unfamiliarity with India	15
4	Agendas of U.S.-based Hindu Nationalist Groups	17
	A - Promoting Hindu Nationalism	19
	B - Anti-Muslim and Anti-Minority Sentiments	21
	C - Whitewashing History and Intimidation Campaigns Against Scholars	22
	D - Erroneously Conflating "Hindu," "Indian," and "Hindutva"	23
	E - Opposing Civil Rights and Protecting Caste Privilege	25
	F - Reframing Criticism of Hindu Ethnonationalism as "Hinduphobia"	27
	G - Influencing American Foreign Policy and Lobbying Politicians	27
5	Hindu Nationalist Tactics in the United States	31
	A - Hindutva Within the Indian American Diaspora	32
	B - Attack Campaigns Against Public Schools and Scholars	33
6	Hindu Nationalist Harms to American Society	37
	A - Promoting Islamophobia at the Local Level	38
	B - Discrimination Against Minorities within the Indian American Diaspora	42
	C - Hindutva Capitalizes on American Culture Wars	44
7	Recommendations	48
8	Glossary	50
9	Authors and Acknowledgments	53
10	Endnotes	54

Executive Summary

Hindu nationalism, also known as Hindutva, is a transnational far-right political ideology grounded in Hindu supremacy. In India, Hindu nationalists advocate a strict form of ethnonationalism that reimagines the secular Indian republic as an exclusively Hindu nation and seeks to relegate religious minorities—especially Muslims—to an inferior status. Hindu nationalism is distinct from Hinduism, notwithstanding Hindutva proponents' erroneous claims of representing all Hindus. In the United States, Hindutva proponents seek to silence the voices of Indian Americans and others who disagree with their ideology, promote harmful policies favorable to India's Hindu nationalist political parties, and control knowledge about South Asia's diverse, multireligious history. In so doing, Hindutva advocates undermine American pluralism and spread hate against Muslims, Sikhs and other minority groups within American society.

Hindutva in America examines the origins, networks, and impacts of Hindu nationalist organizations in the United States to demonstrate how Hindu nationalism threatens the civil rights of Americans. While India-based Hindu nationalist groups play a substantial role in promoting this far-right ideology globally, this report focuses on Hindutva groups operating on U.S. soil. Accordingly, the focus here is on the narrow, right-wing *political ideology* of Hindutva, not the *religion* of Hinduism.

The report begins by summarizing the origins and structure of the American Sangh—the network of Hindu nationalist groups operating in the United States. Integral to understanding this complicated network is the rise of far-right Hindu nationalism in India, a modern ideology with European fascist influences. India-based groups exported their ideology, structures, and tactics to various countries, including the United States. India-based and U.S.-based Hindu nationalist groups maintain close ties today, with some U.S.-based groups serving as branches of their India-based Hindutva counterparts.

The report proceeds to analyze the core issues and key tactics that Hindu nationalists deploy in the United States to promote their right-wing views, including Islamophobia, and people who oppose their agenda. For example, U.S.-based Hindu nationalists attempt to whitewash South Asian history in school textbooks in the U.S. and often viciously malign academics who seek to highlight India's history of pluralism. American Hindu nationalists regularly attack religious and caste minorities within the South Asian American diaspora—including Muslims, Sikhs, Dalits, and Christians—seeking to undermine their views and influence. Hindu nationalists actively recruit among second-generation and third-generation Hindu Americans.

Hindu nationalists' harmful tactics demonstrate an aversion to free speech and religious pluralism. American Hindu nationalists often use coercive strategies—including harassment and threats of violence—to insert their anti-Muslim and broader anti-pluralism viewpoints into American primary and secondary school curricula as well as higher education programming.¹

Since 2001, Hindu nationalists have capitalized on the anti-Muslim public discourse arising from the Global War on Terror to obtain greater acceptance of their ethnonationalist agenda.



Such overt intolerance, especially Islamophobia, undermines fundamental American principles of religious pluralism and equality. By couching their rhetoric within the mainstream narrative that Muslims worldwide are presumptively terrorists and violent, Hindutva organizations join the chorus of other anti-Muslim right-wing groups. American Hindu nationalists also target other minorities within the South Asian American diaspora, especially Sikhs and Dalits. Predictably, this anti-minority stance has prompted Hindutva proponents in the United States to ally with other American conservative movements that seek to undermine diversity initiatives, academic freedom in higher education, and pluralism.

To address the serious threats to American religious pluralism and civil rights examined in this report, it is imperative that policymakers and educators are informed about Hindutva influences in America and critics of Hindutva ideology are protected from harassment, intimidation, and threats to their safety. The following recommendations serve those ends:

1

Law enforcement, politicians, and civil society groups should cease partnerships with U.S.-based Hindu nationalist groups.

2

The U.S. government should impose sanctions on or refuse entry into the United States to persons who facilitate or provide material support for anti-minority violence in India.

3

U.S.-based Hindu nationalist groups, particularly those registered as charities, must be fully transparent about their financial links abroad, including material support originating overseas, financial resources directed overseas, and ties to foreign governments.

4

Federal authorities should ensure that U.S. groups that act as proxies of India's RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and its affiliate organizations register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act.

5

University administrations should educate themselves about the threats caused by Hindutva-inspired discrimination in the United States and protect professors, staff, and students within their universities from Hindu nationalist aggressions.

Introduction

Hindu nationalism, also known as Hindutva (literally meaning “Hindu-ness”), is a far-right political ideology distinct from the religion of Hinduism. Hindutva is “a modern political ideology that advocates for Hindu supremacy and seeks to transform India, constitutionally a secular state, into an ethno-religious nation known as the Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation).”² Put another way, Hindutva is “the political ideology of Hindu nativism and exclusivity that recasts the multiethnic, multifaith Indian subcontinent as a homeland for Hindus.”³

Hindutva
is a political
formulation.

It advances far-right ideas such as
nativism and ethnonationalism.
To be sure, Hindutva is not
Hinduism, both in terms of genre
and its impact on American
politics and society.

Whereas the religion of Hinduism contributes to American pluralism and religious diversity, the political ideology of Hindu nationalism works against those core American values by perpetuating supremacist ideas and discriminatory conduct, especially against non-Hindu South Asians.

While much of Hindutva’s ideology focuses on India, it is a transnational phenomenon that arrived in the United States over fifty years ago.⁴ Outside of India, Hindutva ideology flourishes among some members of the South Asian diaspora who often forge links with followers of other far-right ideologies, including white supremacy and Zionism.⁵ Many who actively oppose Hindutva also belong to the South Asian American diaspora, and, conversely, some American Hindu nationalists are not of South Asian ancestry.⁶ Both South Asians and Hindus—two overlapping but not identical groups—are minorities in the United States, with South Asians constituting just over one percent of the U.S. population and Hindus under one percent. In contrast, Hindus are nearly 80% of Indian citizens. This report focuses on Hindutva ideologues’ deep networks, ethnonationalist ideas, and consequent harms to their many targets in the United States, especially Muslim individuals and communities.

Dozens of Hindu nationalist groups in the U.S. operate on a national level, and exponentially more operate in local communities. Overall, Hindu nationalist organizations can be broken into two major categories. The first set of organizations have exact parallels in India and, in fact, were originally founded in the United States in the 1970s–90s by Indian citizens sent overseas by India-based Hindu nationalist organizations for that purpose.

Transnational American Hindu Nationalist Organizations

The Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS), the overseas branch of the parent Hindu nationalist group in India known as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).⁷

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad-America (VHPA), the overseas branch of India's Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP).⁸

The Overseas Friends of BJP (OFBJP), the overseas branch of India's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and a registered foreign agent in the United States as of 2020.⁹

Sewa International, the overseas branch of Sewa Bharati.

Both the HSS and VHPA founded student programs on American college campuses—Hindu YUVA and Hindu Students Council (HSC), respectively—that advocate Hindutva ideology to the next generation of Indian Americans modeled on India's Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP).¹⁰ The ABVP was founded in India as a Hindu nationalist student group by the RSS in 1948.¹¹

The second set of American Hindu nationalist groups lacks exact Indian counterparts. They were often founded post-2000 by second-generation Indian Americans.

U.S. Based Hindu Nationalist Organizations

Hindu American Foundation (HAF)

Hindu Mandir Executives' Conference (HMEC)

Global Hindu Heritage Foundation (GHHF)

Coalition of Hindus of North America (CoHNA)¹²

Additionally, there are numerous smaller U.S.-based Hindu nationalist groups, which sometimes pop-up and pursue a specific issue, only to disappear a short while later. Together, these U.S.-based Hindutva groups—the HSS, VHPA, HSC, Hindu YUVA, Sewa Bharati, OFBJP, HAF, HMEC, GHHF, and CoHNA—constitute a dizzying array of networks, in addition to many other Hindutva organizations that operate in the United States. The proliferation of groups makes them difficult to track. Often, individuals overlap in membership between specific organizations. Notably, Hindu nationalism is not a grassroots operation (as its members often claim), so much as a centralized program that operates globally and implements the RSS's agenda. The collection of Hindutva groups transnationally is often called the “Sangh Parivar,” meaning the family of the RSS, which broadly speaking sets Hindu nationalist priorities and methods.

Hindu nationalists forge links with other far-right movements in the United States, from whom they borrow tactics.

Hindu nationalist groups often ally with three broad far-right political movements in the United States:

- 1) White Christian nationalism,
- 2) Zionism, and
- 3) Islamophobia.

At times, Hindu nationalist organizations openly coordinate with representatives from these other ideologically defined communities, even promoting each other's causes, often out of a shared animus toward Muslims.¹³

Hindu nationalists also advance parallel arguments that accord with or, in some cases, mimic other American far-right groups. For example, white Christian nationalists in America advocate the “Great Replacement Theory,” wherein immigrants of color are said to be overtaking white Americans and thereby destroying (Eurocentric) American culture.¹⁴ In the Hindu nationalist version, Muslims (currently 14% of the Indian population) are falsely imagined to be on track to replacing Hindus (currently 80% of the Indian population), resulting in the spread of propaganda that the presence of Muslims threatens (Hindu) Indian culture.¹⁵ Both ethnonationalist theories contain dangerous majoritarian assumptions about who defines national identity. More broadly, U.S.-based Hindu nationalists “mimic white supremacy culture” by their claims of majoritarian victimhood without evidence.¹⁶ When American Hindu nationalists are criticized as ethnonationalists, they incorrectly describe criticism of India as “anti-Hindu,” modeling Zionist arguments that Israel cannot be criticized without anti-Semitism manifesting.¹⁷

It is important to reiterate that the political ideology of Hindu nationalism is distinct from the religion of Hinduism, despite Hindu nationalists regularly claiming otherwise. Trying to conflate the two—Hinduism as a religion and Hindutva as a political ideology—is a bad-faith strategy of Hindu nationalists to deflect legitimate criticism of their ethnonationalist agenda. Moreover, Hindu nationalists claim that Hinduism is reducible to Hindutva ideology, desire a Hindu supremacist state to replace the secular Indian republic, and embrace violence. Generally, these ethnonationalist claims are rejected by the substantial number of Hindus worldwide who do not subscribe to Hindutva. In the United States, anti-Hindutva views are espoused by many self-identified South Asian American organizations, progressive Hindu groups, Indian Muslim groups, and civil rights groups focused on caste equity. Some groups even seek to confront the spread of Hindutva within their communities. The Hindu American group Sadhana, for example, created a “Hindutva 101” guide that offers advice for initiating difficult intracommunity conversations.¹⁹



Logo of Sadhana, a Hindu American group critical of Hindutva

Hindutva violates the core teachings of Hinduism.



Some of the core teachings of Hindu scriptures include *ekatva* (oneness) and *ahimsa* (nonviolence). Hindutva promotes division and exploitation on the basis of religion. In a country where one fifth of the population is not Hindu, Hindutva advocates argue that India should be a country that privileges Hindus and openly incite violence against minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians. This is a majoritarian vision no different from the ugliness of white nationalism or conservative politicians who argue that the United States is a Christian country.

Hindutva is an American problem too.

Screenshot of Sadhana's Hindutva 101 Guide

Hindu nationalism has flourished in the United States for more than fifty years, resulting in harm to and beyond the South Asian American diaspora. The considerable success of Hindu nationalists in getting their far-right ideas tolerated, echoed, and even embraced by various sectors of American society is due, in part, to both Democrat and Republican elected officials' eagerness to receive donations from wealthy American Hindutva supporters.²⁰ The seeming contradiction of liberal Democrats supporting far-right Hindutva is often explained by differences in individuals' socio-economic positionality in America as compared to in India. Hindus are a minority in America and thus benefit from pluralistic protections in the United States. In contrast, in India, Hindus are a majority that increasingly benefit from majoritarian policies that oppress minority Muslim, Dalit and Christian communities.

Many Hindutva supporters back Democrats in the United States, while supporting—and lobbying Democrats to support—far-right conservative policies in India.

Although attention to Hindutva in the United States was scant in its early decades, it has ramped up in recent years. Numerous recent analyses, and even a 2024 Congressional Research Service report that specifies organizations by name, are shedding light on this ethnonationalist ideology.²¹ Public and government attention to Hindutva also increased in 2023 when transnational murder schemes targeting U.S. and Canadian citizens were orchestrated by Hindu nationalists affiliated with the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.²² Such violations of international and domestic law prompted law enforcement to take more seriously cases of Hindutva-inspired threats in the United States.²³

Hindutva in America, thus, draws on a wealth of scholarship, studies, statistics, and investigative reporting that documents the troubling rise of American Hindutva groups and consequent threats to the civil rights of Muslim Americans and others. American scholars writing on Hindutva often face vicious smear campaigns and threats of physical violence from Hindu nationalists, sometimes with the knowledge or support of the Indian government.²⁴ Indian journalists also face severe pushback for even reporting on Hindutva.²⁵ The transnational nature of the Hindutva movement places critics located in India (or their families) at serious risk of violent and repressive consequences. Long before the high-profile assassination attempts and attack campaigns, however, the American Sangh had been growing in scope and virulence.

Structure and Operation of the American Sangh

The Sangh Parivar (the Sangh)—the family of Hindu nationalist groups centered around India’s all-male paramilitary Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—is a transnational phenomenon. The Sangh is dedicated to transforming every aspect of Hindu society in India and Hindu American communities to instill militarized ethnonationalist fervor. The Sangh began in India over a century ago and started expanding overseas in the 1940s. The first Hindu nationalist groups were established in the United States in the 1970s. This section briefly traces the Sangh’s founding in the United States in the mid- to late-20th century—including its importation of fascist inspirations and leanings from India—that laid the groundwork for the extensive, 21st century American Sangh.

A

Transporting Hindutva from India to America

Members of India’s Sangh Parivar began to establish parallel Hindutva organizations in the United States in the 1970s. At the same time, India’s Hindutva ideologues were establishing overseas Hindutva groups in a variety of other nations. In the United States, the VHP-America (VHPA) was the first Hindutva group, founded in 1970 as an offshoot of India’s VHP. The VHP promotes itself as a cultural organization and focuses largely on religious affairs. Founded in 1964 in India, it was, for a time, classified as a militant organization by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).²⁶ The American HSS came next in the 1980s and replicated the RSS’s structure of shakhas (branches) that sought to entrench Hindutva in local communities.²⁷

India’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), founded in 1980, is the political entity that represents the Hindutva movement electorally in India. Their diasporic branch, Overseas Friends of BJP, was founded in 1992 and registered as a foreign agent in the U.S. in 2020 after heightened scrutiny of foreign interference in domestic American politics.²⁸ The organization Sewa Bharati oversees conversion efforts and other outreach affairs in India; in the U.S., its parallels include Sewa International and the India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF).

Student groups are also a central part of Sangh Parivar organizing. On Indian university campuses, India’s Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad was founded in 1948 to recruit college students to the Hindutva cause. Its United States counterparts—Hindu Students Council, a VHPA project founded in 1987, and the Hindu Youth for Unity, Virtues and Action (YUVA), a HSS project, founded in 2007—advance Hindutva aims and recruit within United States institutions of higher education.²⁹

B

Homegrown American Hindutva Organizations

Not all United States Hindu nationalist groups have a parallel Indian counterpart. This is especially true for groups founded by second-generation immigrants focused on expanding Hindutva in the United States. The most prominent of such organizations are 1) Hindu American Foundation (HAF) founded in 2003,³⁰ 2) Hindu Mandir Executives' Conference (HMEC) an initiative of the VHPA founded in 2006,³¹ 3) Global Hindu Heritage Foundation founded in 2006,³² and 4) HinduPACT, another VHPA initiative focused on supporting Hindutva friendly candidates in U.S. elections.³³

The U.S. Sangh is highly focused on expanding its core membership and spreading its influence and ideas into wider domains of social life in America, starting with the Hindu diaspora. For example, while each organization mentioned above maintains its own in-house media platforms, the U.S. Sangh also relies on entities outside its formal structure to amplify its message. One of the earliest popular American publications focused on Hindu life in the United States, *Hinduism Today*, associated with a Shaiva Hawaii-based monastery, was founded in 1979. Though the monastery is not formally part of the Sangh, the magazine has increasingly promoted Hindutva ideas since its founding. In the 2020s, it has been focused on engaging members of the U.S.-born generation of Hindus. The organization also made a successful pivot to new media, promoting its “educational” web series that advances Hindutva teaching points on its YouTube channel.

One organization that deserves special mention for its focus on influencing the Hindu diaspora in religious spaces is the Hindu Mandir Executives' Conference (HMEC), an initiative of the VHPA. Specifically targeting Hindu temples, priests, and congregations across the U.S., HMEC deliberately blurs the boundaries between religion and political ideology in order to spread Hindu nationalist propaganda under the guise of religious ideas more directly than any other group.³⁴ HMEC is also particularly focused on the younger generation of Hindu Americans, who might otherwise share their Christian counterparts' tendency towards being “unchurched.”³⁵

The multiplicity of organizations and the flexibility of the network makes the American Hindutva movement resilient and difficult to comprehensively track. New Hindutva groups are established regularly in the United States, a pattern unlikely to change in the near future. Nonetheless, the legion of organizations does not necessarily reflect raw numbers of adherents due to significant overlap in personnel and activities between the different groups.

C

Maintaining Links with Hindutva Groups in India

American Hindu nationalist organizations often maintain extensive ties with their counterparts in India, including individuals who travel back and forth between the two countries. For example, the HSS runs a series of programs in the United States, including indoctrination sessions that they pitch as cultural day camps for children of the Indian diaspora and trainings for part-time workers to create new branches (*shakhas*) of the HSS. Those who successfully complete three such training camps can attend a second-year training program run by the RSS in India, or by HSS branches in Kenya or Trinidad (Kenya's HSS was the first overseas RSS branch), which also have large Indian diasporas.

Graduates of this program are eligible to attend a longer third-year camp at the RSS headquarters in Nagpur, India.³⁶ These cultural or organizational activities, promoted by RSS/HSS, promote an exclusive ideology that only Hindus are Indians. Hindutva programs also often highlight “self-defense” in the form of weapons training and caste-based practices, which link the Hindutva movement worldwide.³⁷

The Sangh Parivar effectively uses technology to spread its message and connect its supporters globally. Hindutva groups were early adopters of the internet, which enabled them to organize and promote their ideas transnationally. This cyber-presence has been amplified by robust migration to the United States of tech professionals from the 1990s onwards at exactly the same moment when Hindutva—after decades of being a disfavored political ideology in India—was becoming mainstream with the rise of the BJP.³⁸ In 1996, through the diasporic group Hindu Students Council, the RSS launched the Global Hindu Electronic Network (GHEN) connected to the electronic platform called Hindu Universe.³⁹ Three years later, the first e-shakhas were launched, allowing the Sangh to connect with Hindutva sympathizers in faraway places lacking a physical presence, including Japan and Nigeria.⁴⁰

Still, far from being polymorphous and diffuse, the centralized organizational structure of the RSS as the parent body allows for what Ingrid Therwath describes as a strategy of online discretion in which various micro-communities are networked and resilient.⁴¹ At the same time, a culture modeled on Rediff on the Net in India became a template for the Hindu far-right online, in which authors combined moral outrage with conspiracy theories about a sophisticated anti-Hindu and anti-Hindutva machinery at work in the deep state.⁴² In 2022, scholars showed how this organizational structure and culture online was vital to an online harassment campaign targeting academics, which was coordinated through a few hubs in India and the diaspora but then amplified much further.⁴³



Global Hindu Electronic Network
(GHEN) Platform

D

Hindutva Leverages Americans' Unfamiliarity with India

The Hindutva movement relies on a general ignorance within American society of South Asian languages, history, and religions to enable the promotion of their dangerous, ethnonationalist ideology with minimal opposition. For example, on July 30, 2024, the Montgomery Theatre in San Jose hosted a showing of the Marathi play, *Me Nathuram Godse Boltoi*, a famous dramatization of a book promoted by Gopal Godse, brother of the assassin of India's revered independence leader Mahatma Gandhi.

Like his brother, Gopal Godse was a lifelong member of the RSS who was convicted on the charges of conspiracy for Gandhi's murder.⁴⁴ When the play first appeared in India, it was deeply controversial for justifying Godse's violence and glorifying Hindutva. Yet, no pushback is likely to occur for screening a Marathi play in the U.S. due to American audiences' unfamiliarity with the historical context. For the same reason, it is not unusual to find garlanded images of Nathuram Godse in Indian restaurants in the Bay Area. Most patrons would not recognize the connection between these businesses and a transnational ethnonationalist movement.

For members of the South Asian diaspora who oppose Hindutva, such events are deeply exclusionary, if not outright threatening. This form of covert discrimination and intimidation, which is legible to its targets but not to the broader American public, is a standard tactic that rarely comes to the attention of mainstream media.

Therefore, U.S. institutions, including universities but particularly state agencies and law enforcement, should not dismiss complaints from targets of such harassment simply because they are unfamiliar with the cultural subtext within which these threats are made.⁴⁶ American institutions should also evaluate the potentially extensive harms of even light links with Hindu nationalist groups.

The capillary nature of the Hindutva movement in the US relies on a host of affiliated and unaffiliated organizations that promote Hindu nationalism. However, the sheer number of organizations does not necessarily reflect numerical strength. Many organizations share the same personnel and leadership and rely on a core group of donors for support. The mushrooming nature of the Sangh should not be confused with ideological hegemony within the Hindu diaspora. Yet, given the organizational focus on youth and the dearth of other diasporic cultural organizations in many parts of the U.S., the Sangh presents an active threat of Hindutva indoctrination, particularly among second and third-generation American children of Indian origin.



Agendas of U.S.-based Hindu Nationalist Groups

Dating back to the 1970s, United States-based Hindu nationalist groups have pursued a range of goals that accord with broader Sangh Parivar objectives. Hindu nationalist groups in America often follow the lead of India's RSS, the predominant Hindu nationalist organization.⁴⁷ Indeed, U.S.-based Hindu nationalist organizations sometimes work in explicit concert with India-based Hindutva groups, thereby requiring them to register as agents of a foreign government in the United States.⁴⁸ American Hindutva groups also calibrate their social and political issues to resonate with Indian American communities.

For more than 50 years starting in the 1970s until the present, U.S. organizations animated by Hindutva ideology have focused their efforts on the following eight priorities:

- 1 Promoting Hindu nationalism
- 2 Spreading anti-Muslim sentiment
- 3 Conflating the identities of Indian and Hindu
- 4 Attacking North American-based scholars and compromising academic freedom
- 5 Opposing civil rights for the caste-oppressed
- 6 Supporting Hindutva agenda items set by India-based groups
- 7 Deflecting criticism from Hindutva groups by alleging Hinduphobia
- 8 Securing access and influence with American politicians

A

Promoting Hindu Nationalism

Hindu nationalist groups in the United States devote extensive resources to advocating for their politicized, ethnonationalist version of Hinduism. Although Hinduism is an incredibly diverse religion, Hindu nationalists—who are defined by their embrace of a far-right political ideology—endorse a narrower conception of the Hindu tradition and faith. Specifically, their version of Hinduism emphasizes ultra-conservative social and political views, cultivates a martial identity, and participates in exclusively upper-caste activities. Additionally, Hindu nationalist groups across the globe often blur the lines between Hinduism (a religion) and Hindutva (a political ideology), promoting the latter under the guise of the former. Last, they pitch Hinduism as more Indian than other religions practiced in India.⁴⁹ Specifically, Hindutva followers claim that Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and other religious minorities are not truly Indian, and as a result, Hindus alone can credibly speak about Indian history and culture.

In the American diaspora, the narrow Hindutva vision of Hinduism manifests in Hindu nationalists claiming the sole authority to define, describe, and prescribe to Hinduism.⁵⁰ Hindu nationalists pitch their politicized Hinduism—martial, intolerant, upper-caste, restrictive, and homogenous—to Hindus within the Indian American community and the American public.

Internally, American Hindu nationalists often focus on indoctrinating Hindu children and young adults. For example, the HSS (the American branch of India's RSS) supports curriculum for Hindutva-aligned weekly children's classes, including Bal Vihar and Balagokulam. The HSS and VHPA (the American branch of India's VHP) host youth summer camps, described by one volunteer in 2002 as empowering minor participants to "walk with their heads and chests held high with pride in being a Hindu."⁵¹ Such rhetoric follows a VHPA ten-point code of conduct issued in 1998, which seeks "to instill and cultivate the appropriate level of assertiveness and aggressiveness among Hindus."⁵² Religious content at these children-focused events is often restricted to upper-caste Hindu texts (eschewing works by lower-caste authors) while whitewashing parts of classic Hindu texts (e.g., Hindu justifications of the caste hierarchy).

HSS and VHPA children's curricula involve classic Hindutva activities like military drills and inculcating prejudice toward non-Hindus, especially Muslims. For instance, Balagokulam lessons include discussion of India being "under attack" from "foreign invaders," common Hindutva rhetoric for maligning Muslims as a fifth column.⁵³ Anti-Muslim sentiments also intersect with other anti-minority sentiments among Hindu nationalists in the United States. A researcher who observed a Hindutva-leaning summer camp in the suburbs of Washington D.C. in 2001 witnessed a college-age volunteer encounter vehement pushback after disclosing that she was dating a Muslim American.⁵⁴ Discussion at the camp soon turned to the perils of "marrying non-Hindus" with rhetoric that was anti-Muslim and anti-black.⁵⁵ Writing in 2020, a progressive Hindu American leader called out U.S.-based Hindu nationalists for similar anti-Muslim and anti-black bigotry, especially apparent in light of, at the time, the Black Lives Matter movement.⁵⁶

Hindu nationalists have developed robust materials to attempt to shape the political and religious views of the broader Hindu American community. U.S.-based Hindu nationalists were early adopters of the internet, which enabled the transnational Hindutva network to operate more efficiently. American Hindu nationalists have also been effective in promoting their message in spaces inclusive of all Hindus, which helps them reach a broad audience and normalize their far-right ideology within the diaspora. For example, the magazine *Hinduism Today*, founded in 1979, regularly features Hindutva ideas.⁵⁷ In 2006, the VHPA founded the Hindu Mandir Executives' Conference (HMEC) in order to facilitate the distribution of Hindutva materials and encourage recruiting in Hindu temples across North America. HMEC ensures that many Hindus seeking a spiritual or religious experience in the U.S. diaspora are likely to encounter Hindutva ideas and materials along the way.

Hindu nationalists face pushback against their narrow ideas about Hinduism from, among other quarters, progressive American Hindus who, in turn, become targets of Hindutva aggressions in the United States. For decades, Indian American opposition to Hindutva was largely organized through South Asian American organizations. More recently, some have claimed the identity of "Hindu American" with a liberal, inclusive, anti-Hindutva outlook. In response, U.S.-based Hindu nationalists often question whether their detractors are "authentic" Hindus, following general American right-wing strategies for questioning racial minorities' identities.



Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi participates in yoga

Seeking to influence the American public, Hindutva organizations have sponsored exhibitions, proclamations, and public events, often with deceptively benign content. For instance, in 2023, the HSS's Darshana exhibit was staged in state legislative houses and other public places across the United States. Darshana presented a sanitized, hegemonic Hinduism that, among other issues, appeared to subsume Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism—three discrete religious traditions—within Hinduism.⁵⁸ A core part of Hindutva ideology is that, as one researcher has put it, “Indians are culturally and ethnically Hindu regardless of other religious or cultural affiliations they may hold.”⁵⁹ More broadly, the Darshana exhibit participated in a longer history of Hindu nationalist groups seeking recognition for Hindu Americans as such.⁶⁰ It also served to introduce the HSS to a range of American politicians, providing a soft opening for this far-right organization, similar to their law enforcement outreach discussed earlier.

Hindu nationalist groups often promote yoga, a popular form of exercise, in order to make their groups seem benign. For example, the HSS sponsored numerous proclamations in American cities and municipalities lauding their organization of yoga events, which helped the group to gloss over their ethnonationalist activities and instead present themselves as a friendly cultural organization. Some of the proclamations were quietly revoked once American officials learned of the HSS's far-right and foreign links.⁶¹ India's BJP, too, uses yoga to promote far-right goals. Prime Minister Narendra Modi founded International Yoga Day in 2014 and thereby, in the words of one researcher and yoga practitioner, “mask[ed] a radical agenda of ethno-nationalist state violence.”⁶²

Moreover, Hindu nationalist groups in the United States have run campaigns to advocate the propaganda that yoga is Hindu alone when, in reality, it is multi-sourced and not religiously confined.⁶³ Like much Hindu nationalist discourse, these campaigns feature polemical language against those who disagree, such as accusing diverse, non-Hindu practitioners of yoga of “theft” and “rape” for not recognizing the practice's purported Hindu origins.⁶⁴ More broadly, such claims spread disinformation and imperil awareness of the multiculturalism of yoga and Indian cultures more broadly.

B

Anti-Muslim and Anti-Minority Attitudes

Hindu nationalists devote significant resources to attacking Indian religious minorities—especially Muslims and Christians. They trade in crude Islamophobic stereotypes that depict Indian Muslims as permanent outsiders, never truly Indian, and blame Indian Muslims for various woes in modern-day India.⁶⁵ They also allege atrocities by Muslims in Indian history that must be avenged, thereby attempting to justify ongoing modern-day violence against Indian Muslims including the destruction of Ayodhya's Babri Masjid in 1992. In the Hindutva imaginary, Muslims are the foil for defining the Hindu nationalist self, and demonizing Muslims dates back to the Indian foundations of Hindutva in the 1920s.⁶⁶

Whereas in India Hindu nationalist aggression against Muslims plays out as a majoritarian attack on a minority, in the United States, the effect is most pronounced within the Indian American diaspora.

Hindus are a minority in the United States but a majority of Indian Americans are Hindu, about 51%, which is a significantly smaller margin than their majority in India (close to 80%).⁶⁷ American Muslims of Indian national origin—about 10% of Indian Americans—thus face two-fold bias, from Islamophobia in American society and from Hindu nationalist aggressions within diaspora communities. U.S.-based Hindu nationalist groups have exhibited violent tendencies against American Muslim communities and individuals in episodes ranging from California to New Jersey (especially surrounding Indian Independence Day, when members of both groups participate in festivities).⁶⁸ While Hindu nationalists' violent tendencies have been largely restrained by American laws, brutal anti-Muslim violence in India is routine under the current Hindu nationalist government.⁶⁹

Hindu nationalists also have a track record of attacking Indian Christians, which manifests in nonviolent ways in the U.S. diaspora.⁷⁰ Notably, Christians constitute a larger percentage of the Indian American diaspora than their representation in India. Specifically, Indian American Christians constitute 11% of Indian Americans as compared to 2.4% of Indian citizens.⁷¹ The leaders of Indian Christian groups have numbered among those targeted by Hindu nationalist groups in the United States, such as in a 2021 SLAPP (Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation) lawsuit in which the Hindu American Foundation sought to silence critics.⁷² Hindu nationalists also commonly comment on the alleged inherent intolerance of Christianity. An extreme example is that, in 2022, the Texas-based Global Hindu Heritage Foundation, founded in 2006, published an article describing Jesus as “vicious, detestable, despicable, angry, wrathful, hateful, and a killer;” the group also raises funds for church demolitions in India.⁷³ Still, some Hindu nationalist groups ally with white Christian nationalists in the United States, which incentivizes them to tone-down anti-Christian rhetoric, at least in some contexts.⁷⁴

C

Whitewashing History and Intimidation Campaigns Against Scholars

Hindu nationalists consider schools a battleground for controlling information about Hinduism, Hindutva, and India. As a result, U.S.-based Hindutva groups have engaged in repeated campaigns of propaganda and intimidation aimed at American schools, universities, and individual scholars. Some far-right groups, such as the Hindu American Foundation, provide their own materials for use in K-12 classrooms, hoping that teachers will adopt Hindutva-laced information without realizing its political agenda.⁷⁵ This strategy relies on Americans' lack of awareness about Hinduism and Hindutva, encouraging teachers to adopt materials unaware of the political motives of the authors and the non-scholarly basis of the materials.

Many Hindutva attacks on individual scholars center around representations of Hinduism or criticisms of Hindutva. Hindutva groups target scholars with doxxing, swatting, violent threats, heckling, black lists, and defamatory online petitions.⁷⁶ They go even further to demand that the Indian government withhold visas or imprison scholars upon arrival and file bad-faith lawsuits in both India and the United States.⁷⁷ Hindu nationalist groups have targeted academic panels and even entire conferences, trying to shut them down, or prompt sponsors to pull out.⁷⁸ Such attacks on academic freedom put individual scholars at risk and have alarmed free expression groups, including PEN America.⁷⁹

Some Hindutva ideologues also promote broader American conservative talking points regarding higher education. In recent years this has included decrying “wokeism” and warning of the alleged harms of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and Critical Race Theory.⁸⁰ The initial academic targets of American Hindu nationalists, especially in the 1990s–2010s, were scholars of non-South Asian descent. However, in more recent years, they have squarely targeted South Asian American scholars.⁸¹ In this regard, Hindutva assaults on American higher education partake in broader anti-Asian racism and undermine efforts to diversify university faculty.

Hindutva college groups provide a soft introduction to Hindutva for many Indian Americans with a recruiting objective. Although Hindu nationalist college groups in the United States—such as the Hindu Students Council and the Hindu YUVA (projects of the VHPA and HSS, respectively)—have participated in assaults on higher education and individual scholars, most campaigns are driven by U.S.-based Hindu nationalist groups that are run by middle-aged and older adults who claim to speak for and on behalf of Hindu American college students.⁸²

Hindu nationalists in the U.S. frequently object to the content of college courses and curricula that focus on Hinduism, Indian politics, and South Asian history which opposes their beliefs and goals. They seek to prevent critical examination of their own far-right political ideas and activities. They also try to cover-up historical facts that they find inconvenient for their ideological bent, such as that ancient Hindu thinkers justified the discriminatory nature of the caste system. Indeed, modern-day Hindu nationalists fear that such knowledge will mar and splinter the Hindu community, thus eroding Hindu nationalism’s power. Last, U.S.-based Hindu nationalists object to scholarly methods, especially those that center attention on the historically oppressed, such as feminist and postcolonial approaches. Ironically, Hindu nationalists proclaim themselves to be “decolonizing” Indian knowledge, even while their followers perpetuate many colonial-era biases.⁸³

To further their censorship campaigns, Hindu nationalists exploit social media to smear, intimidate, and pressure universities to restrict classroom content. Over time, these assaults on American higher education have had significant chilling effects. Already, self-censorship is common. Some scholars advise students to study subjects other than Hinduism and Indian history, noting the intense harassment that many South Asia-focused scholars face from Hindutva ideologues in India and the United States. One rare positive outcome of the Hindutva targeting of scholars is that many American college administrators are now aware of the threats posed by Hindutva ideology and its supporters.⁸⁴ However, awareness does not automatically translate into defending individual faculty and academic freedom.

D

Erroneously Conflating “Hindu,” “Indian,” and “Hindutva”

The goal is to make Hindus the only legitimate spokespeople for Indian culture, reducing India’s multi-sourced, multireligious, and diverse set of cultures to Hinduism alone and whitewashing the far-right ideology of Hindutva. Together, this agenda poses significant threats to American social and political life by disenfranchising non-Hindu Indian Americans and allowing Hindutva to flourish unchecked on U.S. soil.

Within this broad framework, U.S.-based Hindu nationalists pursue a series of specific redefinition projects. First, Hindu nationalists—in India and the United States—frequently claim that Hindus are the only indigenous Indians.⁸⁵ This false claim seeks to supplant the widely recognized indigeneity status of India's Adivasis, which literally means “first-dwellers.”⁸⁵

The undermining of Adivasis has clear material implications in India, where land grabs and disenfranchisement are common. In the diaspora, Hindu nationalists leverage their self-proclaimed indigeneity to bolster their status as the exclusive spokespeople for India, deliberately excluding Indian Muslims, Christians, Dalits, Adivasis, and others.

The “Hindus-are-indigenous” talking point also has regional variations, such as claiming that Kashmiri Brahmins are *the* natives of Kashmir, a disputed region in the northern subcontinent.⁸⁷ There is a casteist component to this claim, because it grants Hindu Brahmins an exclusive right to speak for all Kashmiris even though the vast majority of them are Muslim. Indeed, many Kashmiris view India as a colonizing state.⁸⁸ The Kashmiri Brahmins Hindutva propaganda also has foreign policy implications for the United States, given that Pakistan, India, and China all make claims on parts of Kashmir. Indeed, U.S. Sangh organizations lobby the U.S. government at local, state, and national levels to promote Hindutva viewpoints on Kashmir. Hindutva proponents often describe South Asian Americans who support calls for Kashmiri independence or criticize Indian state actions in Kashmir as anti-Hindu terrorists or agents of the Pakistani state.⁸⁹

An additional Hindutva redefinition project is rejecting the fact that the Nazi swastika is of Indian origin.⁹⁰ U.S.-based Hindu nationalists target journalists and law enforcement who use the Sanskrit-origin English word “swastika” in describing hate crimes, instead pressuring them to call the swastika by its German name (*hakenkreuz*) to obscure its Indian link. The Hindu far-right's obsession with whitewashing the swastika is perhaps partly based on the embarrassment that this symbol—widely used benignly in Hindu and other Indian communities for several thousand years to denote auspiciousness—is the greatest symbol of hate for many in the Western world.⁹¹ But there are dark implications to the misguided swastika propaganda of Hindu nationalists.



Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) March

Hindu nationalism's origins are intertwined with European fascism, with early links well-established between Hindutva ideologues and both Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy.⁹² The Hindu far-right in the United States attempts to minimize this history because it may, understandably, make many Americans ill-disposed to Hindu nationalists. In this regard, Hindu nationalists may view the swastika—an Indian-origin symbol co-opted by the Nazis—as too close to Hindutva's actual Nazi links for comfort. Divorcing the Nazi swastika from its Indian origins whitewashes modern European history, especially the Third Reich's deep interest in Indology that extended to ideas like the “aryans” (a Sanskrit word, like “swastika”).⁹³ Such links are all the more important to understand given the current mainstreaming of far-right extremism in the United States.

E

Promoting Hindu Ethnonationalism

Hindu nationalism is a deeply casteist movement that perpetuates the harms of South Asia's strict caste hierarchy. India's major Hindu nationalist groups are, most often, Brahmin-led.⁹⁴ In recent years, the Hindutva movement has made significant gains in attracting lower caste and Dalit support in India, often by promoting an assimilationist narrative that proximity to upper castes and mimicking upper-caste behaviors will uplift historically oppressed communities.⁹⁵ However, India's Hindu nationalists continue to systematically mistreat Dalits and members of other low-caste groups.⁹⁶

Hindutva groups in both India and the United States often present anti-caste movements as disrupting the social harmony of Hindu communities. Yet, from its inception, the RSS leadership and those of other Hindutva groups has been drawn nearly exclusively from Brahmins, the uppermost echelon in the Indian caste system and historically the most privileged. When K. B. Hegdewar opened the first RSS *shakha* in southern India, it was in Canara High School, an all-boys Brahmin school whose grounds were not open to other castes.⁹⁷ However, the numerical superiority of the *bahujan*—comprising Dalit and Shudra castes at the bottom of the caste hierarchy—in India means that the RSS's project of creating a united Hindu population requires that the lower castes accept their ideology.

American Hindu nationalists recreate similar dynamics, with major groups being Brahmin-led and oppressive to lower caste and Dalit communities while also trying to attract their support. Indeed, some individuals from these historically oppressed groups join Hindu nationalist organizations to try to raise their social standing. Also, Hindu nationalist groups in the United States often whitewash the harms of caste due to a disinclination to admit internal community problems and their vested interest in perpetuating their caste privilege.

Upper-caste dominance in the United States stems from U.S. immigration laws since the mid-1960s that privilege skilled migrants from South Asia who tend to be upper-caste owing to caste biases in India.⁹⁸ Dalits and lower castes have often found their experiences undervalued within the South Asian American community. Indeed, caste-based discrimination is well-attested in the South Asian American diaspora.⁹⁹

Only in the past few decades have Dalits and lower caste Indians formed advocacy groups, causing them to be targets of hate campaigns by American Hindu nationalist groups.¹⁰⁰ Hindutva pro-caste advocacy thus poses grave risks to the civil rights of Dalit Americans and works against broad attempts to promote equity in American society.

In recent years, Dalit groups in the United States have advanced civil rights for historically oppressed caste communities, with American Hindu nationalists constituting the major pro-caste opposition. In the early 2020s, Dalit American activism focused largely on proposals to include caste as a protected category at higher education institutions and in U.S. law.¹⁰¹ In opposing measures that prohibit caste-based discrimination, U.S.-based Hindu nationalists face a starkly different playing field than in India. The Indian Constitution, ratified in 1950, outlaws caste-based discrimination, although the practice remains widespread and Hindu nationalist groups often lobby to undo measures that promote caste equity. In the United States, Hindu nationalists seek to preserve the status quo, where caste-based discrimination is not explicitly barred under federal law, making it largely invisible to law enforcement, university administrators, and others charged with addressing discrimination.



In 2023, California's Governor vetoed a widely popular bill to outlaw caste-based discrimination under pressure from a wealthy and upper-caste Indian American donor.¹⁰³

F

Reframing Criticism of Hindu Ethnonationalism as “Hinduphobia”

Hindu nationalist groups attempt to discredit their critics by disingenuously reframing anti-caste and anti-Islamophobia civil rights work as “Hinduphobia” or using the synonyms “hindumisia” or “anti-Hindu aggression.” Similarly, attacks against Dalit advocates allege misuse of Hindu texts or practices, rather than address systematic Brahminical biases.¹⁰⁴ Examples abound, including numerous Hindu nationalist attacks on American academics and civil rights groups, and specific examples are discussed in the tactics section of this report. Finally, Hindutva self-presentation masks colorism and anti-Black racism with a pluralist “model minority” façade.¹⁰⁵

While prejudice against people of Indian heritage in the United States certainly exists, structural bias against Hindus in either India or the United States is yet to be proven—a point underscored, ironically, by some Hindutva-sponsored reports that look for evidence of structural bias and fail to find it.¹⁰⁶ Nor do progressive Hindu American groups that combat anti-Indian discrimination endorse usage of the term “Hinduphobia.”¹⁰⁷ At present, hate crimes against Hindus in the United States are relatively low, occurring at roughly the same frequency per population as hate crimes against white Americans.¹⁰⁸ Also consider that, in 2023, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) reported 84 cases of anti-Hindu bias as compared to 754 case of anti-Muslim bias.¹⁰⁹ Falsely claiming bias, thus, undercuts the real discrimination experienced by diverse Indian American groups. Indeed, just as “anti-white racism” is a far-right concept designed to mimic and undercut attempts to address anti-black racism, so too does “Hinduphobia” seek to undermine efforts to counter Islamophobia.

Additionally, American Hindu nationalists use the specter of “Hinduphobia” as a shield against legitimate criticism of Hindutva ideology and India. In the United States, this effort often parallels Zionist attempts to dissuade criticism of their ideology and Israel as always, de facto, anti-Semitic.¹¹⁰ Indeed, some American Hindu nationalist groups ally with Zionist groups in collaborations intended to prevent criticism of the nation-states of India and Israel, respectively.¹¹¹

G

Influencing American Foreign Policy and Lobbying Politicians

American Hindutva groups host rallies and fundraisers that headline BJP politicians as part of a larger effort to support India’s BJP and affiliated Hindu nationalist organizations. Big U.S.-based events—like Narendra Modi’s appearances at Madison Square Garden in 2014 and at the Howdy Modi event in Texas in 2019—drew tens of thousands of Indian American attendees and elevated the profile of Hindu nationalism in the diaspora. Such events have also raised thorny questions of legal compliance with U.S. registration laws. After the Howdy Modi event in 2019, the organizer, Overseas Friends of BJP (OFBJP), formally registered as a foreign agent.¹¹²



Trump and Modi at the 2019 Howdy Modi Rally

The American Hindu nationalist devotion to whitewashing their counterparts' crimes in India pits them against groups—including U.S. government commissions and agencies—that promote religious diversity and human rights abroad. One prime example is the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent bipartisan government group that tracks human rights and religious freedom in numerous nations overseas. The USCIRF has drawn attention to declining human rights in India since the BJP took over in 2014, calling for sanctions for several years.¹¹³ As a consequence, USCIRF officials have been barred from India. In the United States, Hindu nationalist groups and individuals often level fierce attacks on the integrity of the USCIRF to discredit their reports on declining human rights in India. American Hindu nationalists are especially aggressive in trying to block the U.S. government from adopting the USCIRF's recommendation of sanctions against India; thus far, they have succeeded.¹¹⁴



Logo for Overseas Friends of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Registered Foreign Agent

U.S. Hindutva lobbying for the BJP often accelerates at key moments. For example, in the aftermath of the 2002 Gujarat pogrom in which then-Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi oversaw the murder of thousands of Indian Muslims and the displacement of tens of thousands, there was a surge in American Hindu nationalist activity, including the founding of new groups like the Hindu American Foundation.¹¹⁵ Modi was barred from entering the United States for more than a decade owing to these heinous crimes.¹¹⁶ After the BJP won India's general election in 2014 and Narendra Modi became India's Prime Minister, many U.S. groups felt emboldened to express pro-Hindutva sentiments more openly and to lobby for pro-Modi policies on Capitol Hill.¹¹⁷ Between 2014 and 2024, American Hindu nationalist efforts to whitewash BJP actions and other Indian Hindutva groups' crimes have become more aggressive, generally tracking the worsening human rights situation in India.

On policy issues impacting India, Pakistan, and the South Asian American diaspora, Hindu nationalists frequently try to influence or intimidate U.S.-based politicians at local, state, and federal levels. Through financial donations, lobbying, and threats pertinent to family members in India, Hindu nationalist groups have had some success. For example, former U.S. Representative Tulsi Gabbard received thousands of dollars in donations from the American Hindu far-right, which helped boost her career.¹¹⁸ HinduPACT is a VHPA initiative that seeks precisely to use financial donations to nudge American politicians towards pro-Hindutva positions. Alternatively, another American congresswoman said, in 2023, that she feared being banned from BJP-run India and thus unable to see her aging parents because she does not toe the Hindutva line.¹¹⁹



World Economic Forum

Hindu Nationalist Tactics in the United States

While U.S.-based Hindu nationalist groups unite in their overarching political agenda, they employ various tactics to promote their viewpoints and denigrate those who speak against them. Some groups engage in lawfare through harassing lawsuits, whereas others parade symbols of violence in front of mosques and Muslim-owned businesses in open acts of intimidation. Other American Hindutva organizations prefer a quieter approach of indoctrination within Hindu American communities and avoid public confrontations.¹²² Hindu nationalist groups are especially keen to focus on schools and universities as sites to protect or project Hindutva ideologies. Toward that end, Hindutva advocates have leveraged Islamophobic trends in the United States since September 11, 2001. By erroneously linking domestic terrorism inside India to the Global War on Terror, they promote far-right Hindutva political objectives and Islamophobia.

A

Hindutva Within the Indian American Diaspora

South Asian immigration to the United States soared after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as the Hart–Celler Act. The Hart-Cellar Act created a pathway for skilled migrants from South Asia, leading to half a million arriving between 1970 and 1990 and roughly another million between 1990 and 2010.¹²³ The “skilled” or “propertied” class of immigrants largely relied on existing caste networks within India to sponsor or support the expatriate communities in the United States. Alongside the ‘white-collar’ immigration of doctors, scientists, and engineers, the 1980s also saw a rise in immigration from the Gujarat and Maharashtra business communities. These business owners obtained an immigrant investor visa by establishing franchise-led businesses such as motels, gas stations, and liquor stores.¹²⁴ As this migration slowly established a professional and business class of Indian Americans, it solidified caste hierarchies within the South Asian diaspora in the United States, a key component of U.S.-based Hindu nationalist groups.

Additionally, the “push” factors of sectarian violence that drove emigration from India in the post-1965 period contextualize the initial import of Hindu nationalist ideas to the United States. In India, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) grew starting in the late 1960s, which affected the rising Indian diasporas in North America.¹²⁵ Chief among the consequences were the communal (Hindu-Muslim) riots in Gujarat in 1969, in Maharashtra in 1970, in Mumbai in 1974, the Emergency riots of 1975, and the Gujarat riots in 1985.¹²⁶ The riots caused the destruction of homes and property, lynchings, burnings, and gender-based atrocities primarily directed at Muslims and lower-caste (Dalit) communities in urban centers of these populous states—Gujarat and Maharashtra combined were nearly 100 million in the 1981 Indian census. Conversion, cow slaughter, and insults of Hindu kings and deities—in reality or perception—are often the triggers for political violence against Muslim, Sikh, and Dalit communities within India.¹²⁷

The politics of fear, othering, and caste solidarity that were pivotal to the rise of Hindutva groups such as VHP (and the more localized versions such as Mumbai’s Shiv Sena) also constituted a significant strand of politics in the diaspora.¹²⁸ With the ongoing hostilities between India and Pakistan (portrayed as Hindus vs. Muslims, in recognition of the religious majority in each nation) and the continuing communal riots inside India, the American Desi (Indian or South Asian) diaspora embraced separate cultures of shopping, eating, public rituals, and religious identities.

For parts of the Indian diaspora, which was sympathetic to Hindutva ideologies, this meant foregrounding their Brahminical identity as South Asian Americans through such actions as well as Brahminical organizations.

Parts of the Indian American diaspora also contributed toward the campaign to destroy the Babri Mosque (lit. “Babur’s mosque”) in December 1992. The mosque was a five-hundred-year-old place of Muslim worship in the north Indian city of Ayodhya. The mosque’s site has been contested since the late nineteenth century as also being the place of birth for Ram, a Hindu god and incarnation of Vishnu. After the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947, the matter of the birthplace of Ram became a potent rallying call for Hindutva.

The BJP was the political party most invested in attacking the Babri Masjid as an insult to Hinduism. Indeed, its followers participated in a national movement launched in 1989 by the VHP calling for the destruction of the mosque and the subsequent building of a temple for Ram on the same site.¹²⁹ Prime Minister Narendra Modi emerged in this movement as a key RSS organizer. For the first time in Indian politics, the rise of BJP as a national party was based entirely on, as a British Governor-General of India put it in 1843, “reversing the insults of 800 years ago.”¹³⁰

The Babri Masjid campaign also resonated with the Hindu diaspora. In the months leading up to the mosque’s destruction by a Hindu nationalist mob, members of the Indian diaspora purchased symbolic “bricks for Ram,” which would be used to build a temple for Ram at the site of the then “to-be-demolished” mosque.¹³¹ Thus, the 1992 destruction of a five-hundred-year-old mosque was the making of Hindutva politics *within and outside* India. While in India, the politics of fear required or was governed by public violence against Muslim, Sikh, and Dalit communities, the diaspora has, by necessity, chosen to work within institutional structures. Still, in Indian American diaspora communities’ representation of Hindutva history, recognition of caste-practices and hierarchies, and Islamophobia are among the defining areas of their political activism.

B

Attack Campaigns Against Public Schools and Scholars

The last twenty years have seen a marked rise in the prominence and sophistication in Hindutva attack campaigns against opponents within the United States. Before that, political mobilizations within the U.S. Indian diaspora were centered on events occurring on the subcontinent. Examples include the demonstrations, walks, and concerts associated with the War for Bangladesh’s independence in 1971, anti-Sikh violence in 1984, and the push for Kashmiri self-determination in the 1990s. These mobilizations occurred in major urban cities of America with sizable Desi populations such as New York, Chicago, and Houston.

The first major political mobilization centered on a domestic issue was the 2005–2006 California Textbook controversy. The Hindu Education Foundation (HEF) and Vedic Foundation (VF), two U.S.-based Hindutva groups, led a campaign to change the content of the sections on Hinduism and ancient India in sixth-grade social science textbooks in California. Because Texas and California textbooks set national curricular standards, the campaign’s outcome would have a national impact.

These Hindutva groups launched a public smear campaign against historians and scholars of India whose research produced factually-based analyses of South Asian histories. The harassment campaigns against professors of ancient and medieval India were largely waged in online fora (e.g., internet groups, emails, and blogs) but also included hate mail and phone threats to departments and universities in the United States.¹³²

The California textbook controversy in 2005 was followed by similar Hindutva-led campaigns against Texas textbooks¹³³ in 2014 and then again in California in 2016–2018 in opposition to including discussions of caste in the curriculum.¹³⁴ The American Sangh has also attempted to directly influence textbook publishing companies like National Geographic and Pearson, rather than relying on the democratic process of the California Curriculum Commission.¹³⁵ Other outreach efforts by conservative Hindu groups have included teacher-training workshops, designed to attract non-South Asian origin teachers hoping to enhance their cultural competence in teaching topics related to South Asia.¹³⁶

HINDUTVA 101

**a guide for discussing Hindu nationalism
with your parents, relatives, friends,
colleagues, [fill in the blank]**



sadhana.org

Cover for primer on Hindutva created by sadhana.org

A related vector of Hindutva campaigns against scholars are based on publications that Hindutva groups find “insulting” or “blasphemous.” These campaigns originate in India and the diaspora, demonstrating the transnational nature of Hindutva mobilization. For example, scholars of ancient and early modern India working in the U.S. have been targets of Hindutva hate-campaigns because of their research. Prominent examples include Sheldon Pollock (author of the 1993 article “Ramayana Political Imagination in India”), James Laine (author of the 2003 study *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*), and Wendy Doniger (author of the 2009 *The Hindus: An Alternate History*); all were subjected to hate mail, phone campaigns targeting their employers, and public denunciations.¹³⁷ Within India, their works are censored, burned, or banned, and publishing houses and even archives are attacked for assisting researchers.¹³⁸

American classrooms and university campuses predictably emerged as key spaces to control education about Hinduism and Hindutva. The Indian diaspora is increasingly visible on American college campuses in cultural groups—including those that focus on South Asian dance forms like Bharatanatyam or Kathak, or at organizations that celebrate Independence days of specific South Asian nations or big festivals such as Diwali—many of which assumed a central role in defining Hinduism in the United States.

For the most part, such college groups are inclusive and welcoming spaces. However, as some scholars have noted, Hindutva collectives on campuses interpret the celebrations in more xenophobic, casteist, or exclusionary forms.¹³⁹ Hindu nationalist groups on U.S. college campuses target faculty or courses that they view as unsympathetic to the cause of glorified, Hindutva-friendly depictions of Hinduism and South Asian history. The rise of Dalit Studies in the U.S. in the past twenty years, for instance, has attracted Hindutva-inspired harassment of scholars investigating the critical histories of caste in the subcontinent.¹⁴⁰ Also common are defamatory Islamophobic claims that a Muslim scholar is a “jihadist.”

Dismantling Global Hindutva Conference



A recent example of targeting scholarly activities by Indian and diasporic Hindu nationalist communities is the reactionary attack campaign on the “Dismantling Global Hindutva” conference in September 2021. This conference offered academic perspectives, drawn from a variety of disciplines, on the ideology of Hindu nationalism.¹⁴¹ The conference drew immediate fire from right-wing and Hindutva groups on social media and news channels in the Hindutva ecosystem. Opponents accused the conference organizers of “Hinduphobia,” a strategy taken from the American Zionist playbook that weaponizes antisemitism to silence criticism of Israel or the ideology of political Zionism.¹⁴²

Participants in the academic event received numerous death threats and a bomb threat. Various newspapers did independent reporting on the online abuse and harassment faced by the organizers, sponsors, and presenters of this academic conference. *Washington Post* reporter Niha Masih found that “nearly a million emails were sent out in protest to universities, the event website went offline for two days after a false complaint, and an email account associated with the event was attacked with thousands of spam messages.”¹⁴³

Al Jazeera also reported, “US-based Hindu groups have been aggressively campaigning and pressuring the participating universities to pull out of the conference.”¹⁴⁴

Academic participants in the conference with active Twitter presence—Christophe Jaffrelot, Gyan Prakash, Deepa Kumar, Manan Ahmed, Meena Kandasamy, and Dheepa Sundaram, to name a few—were targets of severe online harassment.¹⁴⁵ Other prominent academics such as Audrey Truschke and Ananya Chakravarti as well as the Civil Rights group Equality Labs (which focuses on Dalit issues) were also targeted with organized harassment. Further, the Hindu American Foundation—an U.S.-based advocacy group with ties to the India-based, Hindu nationalist paramilitary organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)¹⁴⁶—launched a civil complaint with the Department of State against the University of Pennsylvania for sponsoring the conference.¹⁴⁷ Attacks on the Dismantling Global Hindutva conference demonstrated the close coordination between high-profile social media accounts within India (largely using WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter) and official Hindutva platforms in the United States.¹⁴⁸

Hindu Nationalist Harms to American Society

A

Promoting Islamophobia at the Local Level

The various strands of Hindutva in the United States further two major goals: othering Muslims as suspicious outsiders and stymying academic freedom. Still, the social harms arising from Hindutva are extensive—impacting groups beyond the Muslim Americans, college students, and professors—and work against key American values of inclusion and diversity.

In 2022, the Indian Business Association (IBA) sponsored a float in Edison, New Jersey in a parade celebrating India's Independence Day. The float included an image of the then-current chief minister of the largest Indian state Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, and featured what appeared to be a bulldozer. The demolition equipment sent an unmistakably Islamophobic message. In the preceding years, the Indian government, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, had claimed the right to destroy the homes of people they labeled as criminals or illegally occupying land without due process. In nearly every case, the destroyed homes belonged to Indian Muslims without criminal records. To see this symbol of anti-Muslim hate on American soil during a parade purporting to celebrate the independence of India as a secular nation-state speaks to the growing global influence of Hindu nationalism.



Baba Bulldozer, Edison, New Jersey, 2022

The response to the parade revealed growing concerns regarding the rise of Hindu nationalism in the United States, even amid contestations. In a town council meeting in Edison shortly after the parade, Muslim members of the South Asian community expressed outrage about the bulldozer, saying that the IBA should not have been granted a permit. Another attendee who identified himself as a U.S. resident and an Indian citizen said in the float's defense, "The bulldozer was not a symbol of oppression against religious minorities...it is a symbol that represents freedom and protection of law and order."¹⁵¹ Many residents disagreed, with some linking the float directly with India's RSS, Hindutva, and anti-Muslim violence in India. After the town council meeting, the city council and mayor of Edison condemned the float. Edison's mayor, Samip Joshi, explicitly acknowledged that the paraded bulldozer was "a symbol of division and discrimination," and numerous New Jersey elected officials stated that hate has no place in the state.¹⁵² Still, the IBA faced no consequences for its actions and went on to organize the Indian Independence Day parade in Edison, New Jersey in 2023; the parade, again, included Hindu nationalists, this time waving flags connected to the Bajrang Dal, a hate group within India's Sangh Parivar.¹⁵³ In 2024, The VHPA sponsored a float featuring a replica of the newly constructed Rama temple on top of the destroyed mosque in Ayodhya for the India Day parade in New York City in a similar display of a Hindu nationalist victory symbol.¹⁵⁴

Following the 2022 bulldozer incident, the Democratic Municipal Committee (TDMC) in Teaneck, New Jersey released a resolution condemning the float and called for an FBI investigation into Hindutva organizations in the U.S., naming among them the Hindu American Foundation (HAF), Vishwa Hindu Parishad America (VHPA), Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation, Infinity Foundation, and Sewa International.¹⁵⁵

The Teaneck resolution prompted a flurry of responses from American Hindu nationalist groups that were far out of proportion with the initial statement by a single, local Democratic committee. More than fifty-five Hindu far-right groups—many of them nationally active—condemned the Teaneck resolution as "anti-Hindu," a frequent claim of Hindu nationalist groups seeking to deflect criticism and scrutiny.¹⁵⁶ The groups alleged that the Teaneck resolution was "hate-filled" and "[demonizes] the entire Hindu American community."¹⁵⁷ Soon billboards were plastered around northern New Jersey that condemned the Democratic Party and proclaimed, "Stop bigotry against Hindu Americans."¹⁵⁸

The magnitude and extremism of the response prompted a state-wide backlash against any consideration of the influence of Hindu nationalist groups. The Teaneck resolution was soon condemned by Democratic representative Josh Gottheimer, who called the resolution "anti-Hindu" and "disappointing."¹⁵⁹ Senators Cory Booker and Bob Menendez both initially issued statements condemning the bulldozer in the Edison parade but declined to engage with the TMDC resolution.¹⁶⁰ The New Jersey Democratic party released a statement condemning the resolution stating: "a foundational goal of the Democratic Party is to bring people together, not to divide them, and the anti-Hindu Teaneck Democratic Committee resolution does not accomplish this important goal."¹⁶¹ The resolution was discussed at a contentious Teaneck city council meeting, during which one individual of South Asian descent made extreme anti-Muslim statements.¹⁶² Teaneck councilmen Keith Kaplan and Michael Santiago-Pagan subsequently issued a statement condemning the individual's "hateful mistruths about Muslim people in India, the United States and around the world," while still condemning the TMDC resolution.¹⁶³



A billboard campaign in New Jersey in response to growing criticism of the U.S.-based Hindutva movement.

This series of events in northern New Jersey—which has been a hotbed of Hindu nationalist activities in the United States for decades—exemplifies the adverse impact of Hindu nationalist politics in America and the real threat they pose to democratic principles of pluralism, equity, and rule of law. Hindutva, like other ethnonationalist movements, requires exclusion, grievance, and exceptionalism to build a polity successfully. Hindu nationalist proponents hold the view that Hindus are a valuable yet persecuted community that require special legal protections and that they are particularly under threat from Muslims.¹⁶⁴ They seek to make the identity of “Indian American” synonymous with “Hindu American” and defined by anti-minority aggression. The Edison parade incident was, in effect, an effort to undermine the pluralism of Indian Americans by asserting a weapon of Hindutva authoritarianism at a celebration of Indian independence.

This is not the only time that Hindu nationalists have attempted to rally Indian Americans for a Hindutva cause on American soil. In 2019, Narendra Modi’s government abrogated Articles 35a and 370 of the Indian Constitution, effectively ending the limited autonomy afforded to India-controlled Kashmir.¹⁶⁵ Shortly afterward, the Indian Consulate General in the U.S., Sanjay Chakravorty, addressed a group of Kashmiri Pandits (an upper-caste Hindu minority group that largely left Kashmir in the early 1990s) in New York and suggested the “Israel model” as a means of Hindu “settling” Muslim-majority Kashmir.¹⁶⁶ The comment reflects a long-standing goal of Hindu rashtra (rule) by Hindutva proponents who have sought to reestablish what they view as the full original land of India or “akhand bharat.”



Akhand Bharat mural, Indian parliament, 2023

The geographical borders of akhand bharat vary, but the purpose is the same: reclaim so-called lost territory by forcibly seizing lands belonging to other peoples and nations for purposes of establishing a Hindu ethnonationalist state. Much like the bulldozer float in the Indian Independence Day parade in Edison, New Jersey, the expressed desire to settle Kashmir demonstrates that Hindutva ethnonationalism is salient within some communities in the Indian American diaspora. Moreover, American Hindu nationalists have engaged in extensive lobbying on Capitol Hill in recent years to shape U.S. domestic and foreign policy.¹⁶⁷

In the parade incident, the bulldozer, as a symbol of erasure through destruction targets Indian Muslims. In the Kashmir example, the Indian consulate general directs the language of erasure through settlement towards Kashmiri Muslims. Muslims are recurrently the disfavored “civilizational other” for Hindutva ideologues. A case in point is Prime Minister Modi’s racist speech during the 2024 election cycle—in which he falsely claimed that if the opposition came to power Hindus would have their possessions taken away and given to Muslims.¹⁶⁸ Hindutva groups often capitalize on and further entrench Islamophobia, a pervasive problem in Indian and American societies.

B

Discrimination Against Minorities within the Indian American Diaspora

South Asians, much like other racialized Americans, face racial discrimination in the United States. While some Indian American groups attempt in good faith to combat such discrimination, they are compromised by Hindu right-wing organizations that weaponize such racism to privilege Hindutva followers.¹⁶⁹ South Asians do not usually phenotypically present as “white” but do benefit from proximal whiteness—that is, they are favorably stereotyped as a “good minority” with financial stability, education, and social value.¹⁷⁰ Thus, South Asian Americans occupy a racially fraught position exacerbated by caste politics, Islamophobia, colorism, and anti-Blackness permeating and shaping their communities. In search of stability within an uneven racial terrain, Hindu activism in the early 2000s was invested in constructing a unique immigrant narrative for Hindu communities with respect to the South Asian diaspora and other ethnic minorities in the United States. Historian Romila Thapar describes this Hindutva as a “syndicated Hinduism,” a simplified Hinduism that seeks to suppress internal differences.¹⁷¹

Anthropologist Arun Chaudhari explains how this tension between being a racialized minority and contending with internalized politics of belonging provides a ripe environment for Hindutva ideologies to manifest in diaspora communities in the United States and the United Kingdom. He argues that Hindutva “functionally provide[s] precisely the kind of identity immigrants are compelled to express as viable multicultural subjects. Its circulation is explained as a way of navigating the marginalizing and racist terrains of their new homes.”¹⁷² Thus, Hindu activism in the U.S. both profits from and transcends Hindutva and its claims of ideological coherence. For example, recent iterations of Hindutva within the U.S., such as campaigns against anti-caste discrimination laws and policies,¹⁷³ leverage anxieties of belonging by incorporating the language of anti-racist movements and decolonial projects.

A case in point is the Hindu American Foundation (HAF)¹⁷⁴ and Coalition of Hindus of North America (CoHNA) which both argued in the 2020s that anti-caste discrimination legislation would “demonize” Hindus and South Asians, “violate existing non-discrimination policies,” reinforce “colonial tropes,” and increase the potential for anti-Hindu harm.¹⁷⁵ While HAF has expressed solidarity for racial justice protests and Indigenous land-back efforts (e.g., Dakota pipeline protests),¹⁷⁶ the organization still supports a standard Hindutva agenda.¹⁷⁷ On the one hand, HAF’s more liberal efforts attempt to build solidarity between various minoritized communities.

On the other hand, as Chaudhari points out, Hindu nationalism in the diaspora has a “nebulous character” that lives in incoherence, paradox, and contradiction.¹⁷⁶

Hindu nationalist groups like HAF, therefore, have no problem arguing for liberal causes when it suits them while at other times lobbying to infringe on Civil Rights, deny Muslim American viewpoints, and ignore human rights abuses abroad. In fact, the periodic liberal activities of U.S.-based Hindu nationalist groups give them a veneer of cover to pursue their far-right goals.

Vijay Prashad's *The Karma of Brown Folk* describes the “unique position” of South Asians in the United States. He argues the South Asian community is seen “as something fundamentally different from the ‘American’ (a word that is often used to index whiteness) suggesting that the latter is practical and worldly [and] the former is spiritual and ethereal. The distinction of geography (East/West) and of values (practical/spiritual) allows us to see such thought as a species of ‘orientalism.’”¹⁷⁹ Prashad's formulation of the South Asian racial positionality—as one which is coded as mystical and spiritual while seeking to establish social and political power by leveraging proximal whiteness—helps us reconcile limited U.S.-based Hindutva support for anti-racist and decolonial efforts with their broader push to censor discussions on caste violence, anti-Blackness, and anti-Muslim sentiment both within and outside of India.

Furthermore, there is an internal incoherence: not all Hindu nationalist groups are convinced that Hindus and the discrimination they face should be discussed within anti-racist frameworks. This split is visible when looking at the rhetoric of Rajiv Malhotra, founder of the Hindutva group Infinity Foundation who argues that “woke” forces are responsible for “breaking India and the US.”¹⁸⁰ Malhotra contends that while decolonizing efforts are vital for India's future and that “Hinduphobia” (the belief that anti-Hindu sentiment is a systemic concern) is a growing issue, so-called woke politics in the U.S. and India are responsible for hindering rather than furthering these aims.¹⁸¹

Some U.S. Hindutva groups have strategically aligned with broader American right-wing cultural causes that give them tools for advancing Hindutva objectives.

U.S.-based Hindu nationalist organizations use liberal and conservative language, depending on the group, issue, and audience. In some instances, they adopt the language of “progressive values” and “social justice,” especially to describe Hindus as an American religious minority. Other times, they adopt far-right rhetoric about the harms of “wokeism” and the need for “traditional values.”¹²⁰ Depending on the audience and issue, a Hindutva organization may toggle between these two rhetorical poles. Consistent throughout is an emphasis on advancing the far-right goals of the transnational Hindutva movement.

U.S. based Hindu nationalist groups cause harm to minoritized communities in four specific ways:

- 1 Combat statutes and polices banning caste-based discrimination
- 2 Uncritically defend Hindu organizations against accusations of casteism
- 3 Share information sourced from Islamophobic figures
- 4 Attempt to undermine peer-reviewed scholarship on India that contradicts Hindutva-inspired narratives.

Public figures such as Rajiv Malhotra have directly equated the conservative culture wars on Black histories and communities with the so-called threat facing Indians if, as he argues, U.S. anti-caste activism is exported to India.¹⁸² In each of these cases there exists agreement with the conservative stances of distrusting scholars, academia, and university education.

C

Hindutva Capitalizes on American Culture Wars

In recent years, Hindu nationalists have begun to forge explicit connections between United States conservatives and Indian Hindu nationalists.¹⁸³ Ram Madhav—RSS member, former BJP national secretary, and president of the conservative think tank the India Foundation—was invited to speak at the National Conservative Conference (NatCon) in July 2024.¹⁸⁴ In his speech, he emphasized the symmetry between Christian nationalism and what he termed the “cultural nationalism” of Indian conservatives.¹⁸⁵ He argued that “we derive our national identity from our ancient culture. Some call us ‘Hindu nationalists.’ We don’t mind that label if it is not misunderstood as ‘religious nationalism.’ We stand not for ‘theocracy,’ but for ‘dharmocracy’ – in which dharma represents universal values that India stood for – something akin to the Ten Commandments for the Christian world.”¹⁸⁶

Madhav describes the theocratic principles in the Ten Commandments as undergirding Christian nationalist views in line with Hindu nationalism while ironically cautioning against understanding Hindu nationalism as “religious nationalism.” Such a move to foster alliances between right-wing ethnonationalism in the U.S. and India was prominent under the first Trump Administration in 2016 to 2020, in which Modi and Trump were thought to have a strong friendship, one that Trump sought to exploit for votes with some success in 2016 and 2020.¹⁸⁷

These recent attempts to foster alliances between Hindutva and other conservative movements in the United States and India have roots in the U.S. Hindu Right’s harassment of North American-based scholars of Hinduism. Similar attacks have become commonplace in India under Modi’s regime.¹⁸⁸ The more recent U.S. conservative attacks on academic freedom, accurate histories, and race-conscious educational measures are also well-documented.¹⁸⁹ Madhav has a personal history of perpetrating attacks on academic freedom in India where protections for scholars remain weak.¹⁹⁰ In this sense, his remarks at the National Conservative Conference should be understood in the broader political landscape of conservative efforts to stymie academic freedom and stifle inquiry.

Beginning in the 1990s, Hindutva ideologues largely attacked U.S.-based scholars who were of non-South Asian descent. Their tactics included using sexist language to demean specific scholars, bad-faith accusations of misinterpretation, threats to employment and publication opportunities, and death threats.¹⁹¹ For example, in the 2000s, conservative philanthropist and author Rajiv Malhotra advanced the claim that scholarship on South Asia and Hinduism was controlled by so-called “peer review cartels” and that more Hindu scholars were needed who could offer the “insider” perspective that current scholarship on Hinduism was lacking.¹⁹² To be clear, Malhotra was advocating for Hindus who shared his views that caste is a colonial construct, Indian history should be a glory story, and Hindutva is a form of Hinduism to produce such “authentic” scholarship.¹⁹³ Such views, which dismiss the value of scholarly knowledge and can best be described as Hindu majoritarianism, garner significant levels of support within Hindu nationalist communities in the United States and in India.¹⁹⁴

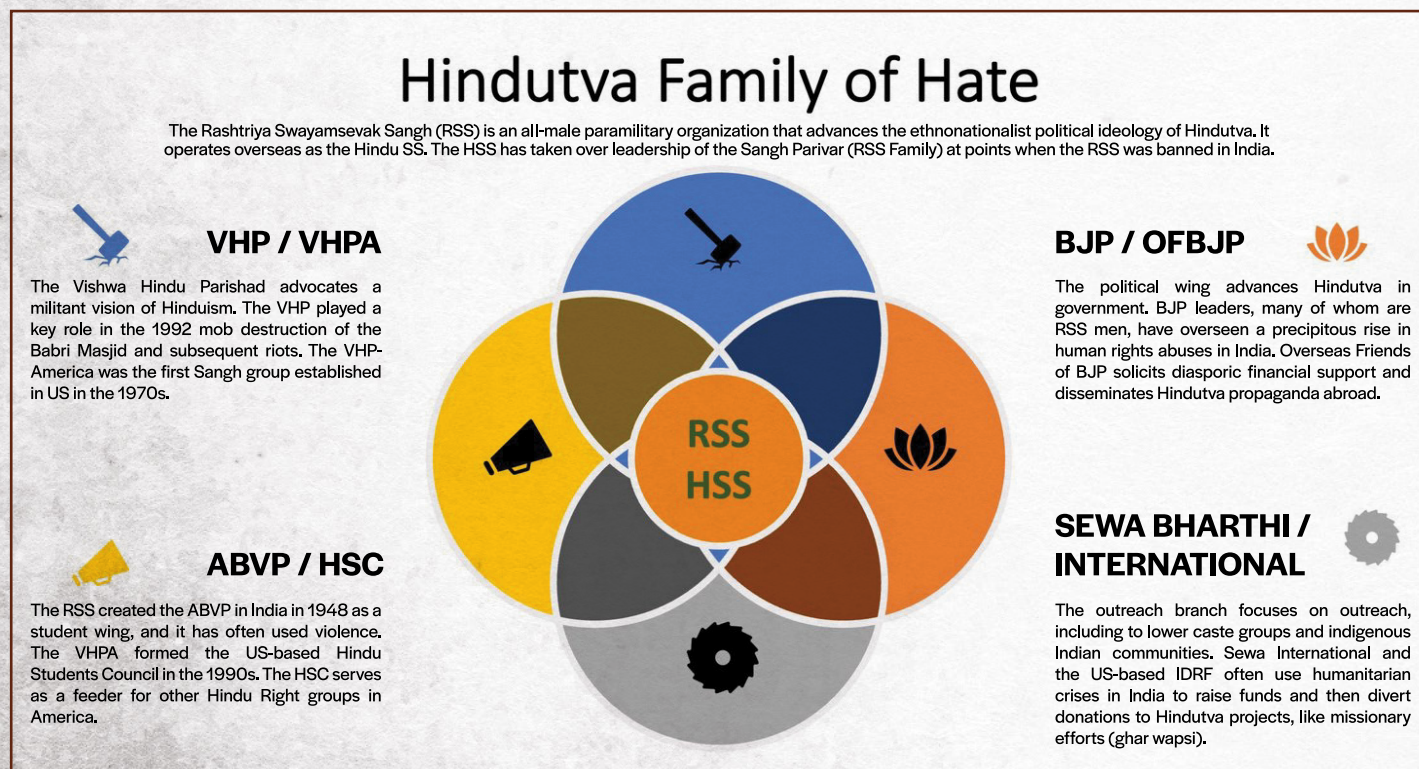
Both Christian conservatives and Hindutva ideologues in the U.S. have attacked scholars and scholarship that challenge their historical narratives, ethnonationalist ideologies, and religion-centered educational frameworks.

The response among scholars of South Asia and religious studies to Malhotra’s nativist criticism of the academic study of Hinduism illustrates how the Hindu Right exploits the racialized position of Hindus and Hinduism. On the one hand, as many scholars have argued, white supremacy and Orientalist frameworks continue to shape religious studies scholarship, including who has access to study traditions like Hinduism.¹⁹⁵ On the other hand, the solution that requires being Hindu as a necessary prerequisite for academic study imposes an identity bar that has no basis in scholarship, ultimately stifling rather than advancing scholarship.

Malhotra's proposed solution—rejected by scholars—that only Hindus should study Hinduism would privilege upper-caste Hindus, who constitute the vast majority of those of South Asian descent with access to higher education in the U.S.¹⁹⁶

Moreover, American Hindu nationalists often capitalize on other far-right movements within the United States in their attacks in higher education. For example, using the strategies of U.S. conservative Christian groups, Hindutva-aligned organizations such as the VHPA, HSS, and in more recent decades HAF and CoHNA, have found common cause with conservative and right-wing groups focused on issues of religious freedom and free speech, particularly on college campuses.¹⁹⁷ The VHPA's social media arm, HinduPACT, celebrated the 2023 Supreme Court decision striking down race-conscious admission practices at Harvard and University of North Carolina ostensibly in the name of equity for white and Asian students.¹⁹⁸ Another important development on college campuses during the last few decades has been the addition of multiple student-led organizations that have become the face of the U.S. Hindutva movement.¹⁹⁹ The Hindu Students Council (HSC), VHPA, and @hinduoncampus (an account on Twitter, or "X") have all acted as vocal allies of HAF, CoHNA, and other established Hindu nationalist groups, arguing that criticisms of caste and Hindutva represent nefarious attempts to impugn Hinduism and Hindus.²⁰⁰

The Hindu nationalist attacks on the "Dismantling Global Hindutva" (DGH) conference in 2021 similarly provide insight into the rigid and ultraconservative nature of Hindutva as it operates on U.S. soil. HAF and other groups that led the attacks on the DGH conference claimed that they were defending Hinduism, but they appear to have been motivated by a desire to hold onto a bounded, static Hindu identity that undergirds Hindu nationalist ideology.²⁰¹ The conference threatened this identity by analyzing how Hindutva ideologues profit from Hindu traditions and beliefs, "capitalize on social hierarchies, exacerbate discrimination towards marginalized communities, engage in religious supremacism, and reinforce patriarchal structures."²⁰²



North American Hindu nationalist groups perceived a threat to even discussing Hindu nationalism and alternative visions of Hindu identity. As a result, in the months leading up to the Dismantling Global Hindutva conference, Hindutva groups in the United States engaged in a coordinated campaign seeking to attack and discredit the conference's speakers, organizers, and sponsors.²⁰³ For example, HAF, CoHNA, and the HSS coordinated a massive letter-writing campaign that crashed servers at Drew University and overwhelmed administrators at many of the universities, colleges, and centers sponsoring the conference.²⁰⁴ At one level, such a response to an academic conference on Hindutva in the United States might seem disproportionate or bizarre—or even a niche concern. The response is noteworthy because it fits a “larger global pattern in which the delegitimization of universities is a pillar of far-right politics.”²⁰⁵ The Hindu nationalist attacks prompted numerous speakers to drop out of the conference program, especially those based in India or with family in India that could be targeted by Hindu nationalist violence.

After the conference ended, HAF sent a letter to the U.S. Department of Education formally claiming that the University of Pennsylvania had violated Title VI by hosting the conference.²⁰⁶ The complaint offers little concrete evidence of harm to Hindus at the University of Pennsylvania or on any other college campus. Instead, it focuses on the perceived threat to Hindus by an unaffiliated and independent organization: The South Asia Scholar Activist Collective (SASAC) and the field manual they produced to combat Hindutva harassment.²⁰⁷ To date, it appears that the DOE declined to act on the complaint, which alleged that scholarly investigations of Hindutva and its associated supremacist positions are anti-Hindu, conflating Hindutva and Hinduism. These actions speak to the anti-intellectual approach of Hindu nationalists, mirroring the playbook of anti-Palestinian American Zionist organizations, who are willing to use a mechanism designed to protect minorities, such as Title VI, to attack academics who provide critical perspectives in their areas of expertise.²⁰⁸

Recommendations

Hindutva in America explains the origins and dangerous consequences of the growing influence of Hindutva organizations in the United States. Tracing the roots of Hindutva ideology in India while showing its specific history and incarnations in the United States over more than half a century, the report shows the broad-based social harms arising from Hindu nationalism flourishing unchecked on American soil. The political ideology of Hindutva poses specific threats to certain communities in the United States, including Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs, in addition to critical scholars of India.

To address the serious threats to American religious pluralism and civil rights examined in this report, it is imperative that policymakers and educators are informed about Hindutva influences in America and critics of Hindutva ideology are protected from harassment, intimidation, and threats to their safety. The following recommendations serve those ends:

1

Law enforcement, politicians, and civil society groups should cease partnerships with U.S.-based Hindu nationalist groups.

2

The U.S. government should impose sanctions on or refuse entry into the United States to persons who facilitate or provide material support for anti-minority violence in India.

3

U.S.-based Hindu nationalist groups, particularly those registered as charities, must be fully transparent about their financial links abroad, including material support originating overseas, financial resources directed overseas, and ties to foreign governments.

4

Federal authorities should ensure that U.S. groups that act as proxies of India's RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and its affiliate organizations register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act.

5

University administrations should educate themselves about the threats caused by Hindutva-inspired discrimination in the United States and protect professors, staff, and students within their universities from Hindu nationalist aggressions.

Glossary

- ◆ **ABVP:** Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, India-based Hindutva student group
- ◆ **Bahujan:** Historically-oppressed groups at the bottom of the caste hierarchy
- ◆ **BJP:** Bharatiya Janata Party, leading Hindu nationalist political party in India
- ◆ **Brahmin:** Uppermost caste category
- ◆ **Caste:** Social hierarchy of oppression based on inborn and immutable status
- ◆ **CoHNA:** Coalition of Hindus of North America, U.S.-based Hindu nationalist group
- ◆ **Dalits:** Formerly known as untouchables, historically caste-oppressed
- ◆ **DGH:** Dismantling Global Hindutva scholarly conference in 2021
- ◆ **Diaspora:** community that lives somewhere other than their ancestral home
- ◆ **GHEN:** Global Hindu Electronic Network, online resources cultivated by the Hindu Students Council in the 1990s to spread Hindutva ideology
- ◆ **GHHF:** Global Hindu Heritage Foundation
- ◆ **HAF:** Hindu American Foundation, U.S.-based Hindu nationalist group
- ◆ **Hindu YUVA:** U.S.-based Hindutva college organization founded and run by the HSS
- ◆ **Hinduism:** Broad-based religious tradition, distinct from Hindutva
- ◆ **HinduPACT:** VHPA initiative focused on American politics
- ◆ **Hinduphobia:** A proposed set of biases against Hindus, often lacking in fact and weaponized by Hindu nationalists
- ◆ **Hindutva:** Far-right political ideology of Hindu supremacy
- ◆ **HMEC:** Hindu Mandir Executives' Conference, Hindutva group

- ◆ **HSC:** Hindu Students Council, U.S.-based Hindutva college organization founded by VHPA
- ◆ **HSS:** Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (overseas RSS)
- ◆ **IBA:** Indian Business Association, which sponsored an anti-Muslim float in New Jersey in 2022
- ◆ **IDRF:** India Development and Relief Fund
- ◆ **OFBJP:** Overseas Friends of BJP, registered foreign agent in the United States as of 2020
- ◆ **RSS:** Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, all-male paramilitary group, leading Hindu nationalist organization
- ◆ **Sangh:** Short for “Sangh Parivar,” the family of Hindu nationalist groups headed by the RSS
- ◆ **Sangh Parivar:** Family of Hindutva organizations headed by the RSS
- ◆ **Shakha:** Chapter of the RSS or HSS
- ◆ **VHP:** Vishwa Hindu Parishad, oversees Hindutva religious affairs
- ◆ **VHPA:** Vishwa Hindu Parishad-America (overseas VHP)

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The Center for Security, Race and Rights (CSRR) at Rutgers University Law School engages in research, education, and advocacy on law and policy that adversely impact the civil and human rights of America's diverse Muslim, Arab, and South Asian communities. CSRR's work is organized around three themes:

- The contemporary and historical intersection of race and religion in the United States;
- The criminalization of Muslim and Arab identity through United States and global national security laws and policies; and
- Transnational rights and security arising from relations between the United States and Muslim majority countries.

More information about CSRR can be found at www.csrr.rutgers.edu.

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