

Hindutva In America

Executive Summary

An Ethnonationalist Threat to Equality and Religious Pluralism

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 is Not Hinduism

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 these core American values by perpetuating supremacist ideas and discriminatory conduct, especially against non-Hindu South Asians.


U.S.-based Hindu nationalists follow their Indian counterparts in trying to collapse the identities of Hindu and Indian, denying agency to Muslim, Sikh, Christian, and other non-Hindu Indians. 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. This ethnonationalist 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.

Hindutva Groups Fuel Civil Rights Violations in the United States

India-based groups have 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. As a result, 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.



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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 Upper-caste dominance with South Asian American communities stems from U.S. immigration laws that privilege skilled migrants who tend to be upper-caste owing to caste biases in India.² As a result, Dalits and lower castes have often found their experiences undervalued within the South Asian American community.³

U.S. based Hindutva groups implement their ideological goals in the following ways:

- ▶ promote political Hinduism,
- ▶ spread anti-Muslim sentiments,
- ▶ attack North American-based scholars and compromising academic freedom,
- ▶ try to collapse the identities of Indian and Hindu,
- ▶ oppose civil rights for the caste-oppressed,
- ▶ support Hindutva agenda items set by India-based groups (including the BJP),
- ▶ deflect criticism of themselves and other Hindutva groups, and
- ▶ secure influence with and access to American politicians.

Hindu nationalists have capitalized on anti-Muslim public discourse arising from the Global War on Terror to obtain greater acceptance of their ethnonationalist agenda. By couching their rhetoric within the mainstream narrative that Muslims worldwide are presumptively terrorists and violent, Hindutva organizations join the chorus of other Islamophobic right-wing groups.

The various strands of Hindutva in the United States, thus, further two objectives:

- ▶ othering Muslims as suspicious outsiders and
- ▶ stymying academic freedom.

Hindutva Groups Adopt Far Right-Wing Groups' Tactics

Hindu nationalists 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.⁴ 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.⁵

These 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.⁶ 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.⁷

Public and government attention to Hindutva 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.⁸ Such violations of international and domestic law prompted law enforcement to take more seriously cases of Hindutva-inspired threats in the United States.⁹

Harassment of Scholars and Teachers by Hindutva Groups

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. 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. Hindutva groups target scholars with doxxing, swatting, violent threats, heckling, blacklists, and defamatory online petitions.¹⁰

Hindu nationalist groups target faculty or college 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.¹¹ Also common are defamatory Islamophobic claims that a Muslim scholar is a “jihadist.” 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.¹²

Recommendations to Prevent Hindutva-Inspired Threats to Equality and Safety

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.

The following recommendations aim to prevent Hindutva-inspired groups from threatening the equality, safety, and lives of their minoritized targets in the United States.

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

Read the full report *Hindutva in America: A Threat to Equality and Religious Pluralism* at csrr.rutgers.edu

Endnotes

¹E.g., Purnima Bose, “Hindutva Abroad: The California Textbook Controversy,” *The Global South* 2, no. 1 (2008): 11–34; Aria Thaker, “The Latest Skirmish in California’s Textbooks War Reveals the Mounting Influence of Hindutva in the United States,” *Caravan*, February 6, 2018, <https://caravanmagazine.in/vantage/californias-textbooks-war-reveals-mounting-influence-hindutva-united-states>.

²Badrinathan et al, “Social Realities of Indian Americans” (caste in the Indian American diaspora).

³Maari Zwick-Maitreyi, Thenmozhi Soundararajan, and Natasha Dar, “Caste in the United States,” Equality Labs, 2018, https://equalitylabs.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Caste_in_the_United_States_Report2018.pdf; University Task Force on Caste Discrimination, “Caste-Based Discrimination in U.S. Higher Education and at Rutgers,” August 2024, <https://laborrelations.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/document/Rutgers%20Caste%20Report%20August%202024.pdf>.

⁴Rohit Chopra, “Online Hindutva as a global right-wing counterpublic,” *The Immanent Frame*, October 12, 2022, <https://tif.ssrc.org/2022/10/12/online-hindutva-as-a-global-right-wing-counterpublic/>

⁵Pranay Somayajula, “From Buffalo to India, the Right’s Demographic Paranoia Fuels Deadly Violence,” *Jacobin*, June 1, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/06/far-right-modi-india-us-great-replacement/>

⁶Feminist Critical Hindu Studies Collective (Shreena Gandhi, Harshita Mruthinti Kamath, Sailaja Krishnamurti, Shana Sippy), “Hindu Fragility and the Politics of Mimicry in North America,” *The Immanent Frame* special forum on Hindutva and the shared scripts of the global far-right, November 2, 2022. <https://tif.ssrc.org/2022/11/02/hindu-fragility-and-the-politics-of-mimicry-in-north-america/>

⁷Azad Essa, *Hostile Homelands: The New Alliance Between India and Israel* (London: Pluto Press, 2023); Aparna Gopalan, “The Hindu Nationalists Using the Pro-Israel Playbook,” *Jewish Currents*, June 28, 2023, <https://jewishcurrents.org/the-hindu-nationalists-using-the-pro-israel-playbook>

⁸Kanishka Singh, US charges ex-Indian intelligence official in foiled Sikh separatist murder plot, *REUTERS*, October 18, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/legal/us-charges-ex-indian-intelligence-official-foiled-sikh-murder-plot-washington-2024-10-17/>

⁹E.g., U.S. Department of Justice, “Texas Man Charged with Federal Hate Crime for Making Threats Against Employees of Sikh Organization,” Press Release, June 5, 2024, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/texas-man-charged-federal-hate-crime-making-threats-against-employees-sikh-organization>

¹⁰South Asia Scholar Activist Collective, “Timeline of Specific Incidents of Hindutva Harassment of Academics in North America,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 90, no. 4 (2022): 788–94; Vinayak Chaturvedi, “Annoy the Alt-Right in the U.S. today, and you could get ‘swatted,’” *The Hindu*, November 07, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/society/annoy-the-alt-right-in-the-us-today-and-you-could-get-swatted/article33038406.ece>

¹¹E.g., see several mentions in South Asia Scholar Activist Collective, “Timeline of Specific Incidents of Hindutva Harassment of Academics in North America.”

¹²South Asia Scholar Activist Collective, “Timeline of Specific Incidents of Hindutva Harassment of Academics in North America.”