

PREMA YATRA

PILGRIMAGE OF LOVE



PREPARED BY
HINDUS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

FACT-FINDING MISSION IN INDIA

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*"ALWAYS ENSURE THE FREEDOM TO DOUBT, THE
FREEDOM TO DEBATE, AND, IF NECESSARY, THE
FREEDOM TO DISSENT."*

- SWAMI AGNIVESH (1939-2020)

"IF I SURRENDER TO THE RSS, THERE IS NO LIFE."

- ANONYMOUS SWAMI, INDIA, 2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS:

INTRODUCTION.....	1
METHODOLOGY.....	4
KEY FINDINGS.....	6
• DEFINITIONS AND KEYWORDS	
• HINDU RESENTMENT AND ISLAMOPHOBIA	
• HINDU NATIONALISM'S GRASSROOTS POWER	
• REASONS FOR RESISTANCE	
• REPERCUSSIONS, VIOLENCE AND FEAR	
MOVING FORWARD.....	18

In 2019, Dr. Anantanand Rambachan, a scholar of Advaita Vedanta, wrote: “The rise of populist nationalism, and especially those versions that clothe themselves in religious colors, requires a critique from the same religious traditions.”

For the past four years, we at Hindus for Human Rights have strived to uplift the voices of Hindus who believe in the importance of pluralism, civil and human rights for all in South Asia and North America. We believe it is our dharma, or religious obligation, to speak out against all forms of hate and violence—including the political ideology of Hindu nationalism.

Hindus for Human Rights was founded by a group of Hindu Indian-Americans, some of whom are devout practitioners of their faith and others who are not particularly religious. Our co-founders agreed on one simple principle—if there is hate being propagated in the name of our faith and identity, then it is our responsibility to speak out against that hate, as Hindus.

From the beginning of Hindus for Human Rights, one religious leader, Swami Agnivesh (1939-2020), served as our guide. Swami Agnivesh was one of very few Hindu religious leaders to speak out against Hindu nationalism and caste in recent years. He was inspired by the Hindu teaching of vasudhaiva kutumbakam: “the world is one family.” This teaching inspired him to fight for the rights of communities who were not necessarily his own: bonded laborers, religious minorities, Adivasis, and caste-oppressed communities.

In 1981, Swami Agnivesh founded the Bonded Labour Liberation Front. In the midst of the anti-Sikh pogroms of 1984, Swami Agnivesh directly confronted Hindu mobs in Delhi, sheltered Sikh community members, and called for an end to the violence. He was physically attacked by Hindu extremist mobs on many occasions, including in 2011 and 2018. Even outside India, he received threats from these groups, such as at the 2018 Parliament of World's Religions in Toronto, Canada, where he was a keynote speaker. Swami Agnivesh was close to many of us in Hindus for Human Rights; some of us stood with him at the Toronto Parliament and Hindus for Human Rights' first retreat was held at his ashram.

Sadly, Swami Agnivesh passed away in 2020. The following year, in December of 2021, we were horrified to read news reports about a "Dharam Sansad" ("Religious Parliament") that was held at the holy city of Haridwar in northern India. At this gathering, one after another, Hindu extremist leaders called for mass violence against India's Muslim minority. Many of these speakers were saffron-wearing Hindu swamis and sadhvis.

In response to this open display of hate, we convened the first-ever statement by Hindu religious leaders denouncing the political ideology of Hindu nationalism, and the rising hate and violence that is being enacted in the name of Hindu religious traditions. This statement was endorsed by 18 Hindu religious institutions (such as temples and ashrams), and by 42 Hindu religious leaders from six countries, from the United States to South Africa to Afghanistan. In April 2022, we published this statement in the Indian Express, one of India's leading newspapers, and it was subsequently published in several regional-language news outlets across India.

Unfortunately, we received very few endorsements from Hindu religious leaders within India. We heard from some Hindu religious leaders that although they privately agreed with the sentiments in the statement, they did not feel safe signing on it. Many Indian Hindu religious leaders and institutions we reached out to simply did not reply to us.

This led us to ask ourselves: “Where are the Hindu religious leaders in India who are concerned about hate and violence being perpetuated in the name of our religious traditions?”

We came to India to answer this question.

Over the course of February and March 2023, members of the Hindus for Human Rights team traveled across India looking for open-minded and inclusive Hindu religious leaders. This report provides a qualitative overview of the conversations we had with nearly 30 Hindu religious leaders across India as well as Indian journalists, activists, and human rights defenders.

We left India both deeply disturbed, and deeply hopeful. We were dismayed to see just how deeply the political ideology of Hindu nationalism has seeped into the minds and hearts of many Indian Hindus and their religious leaders. At the same time, we are incredibly inspired and excited about the fierce, brave, outspoken, and justice-oriented Hindu religious leaders we managed to find. It is these swamis, gurus, acharyas, and mahants who embody the values of ***shanti*** (peace), ***nyaya*** (justice), ***satya*** (truth), and ***ahimsa*** (non-injury) at the heart of our traditions, and will guide us towards a world defined by ***lokasangraha*** (the universal common good) — where there is peace among all people, and our planet is honored and protected.

In February and early March 2023, two members of the Hindus for Human Rights team traveled to India with the goal of finding and meeting Hindu religious leaders across the country. We also met with our grassroots partner organizations as well as journalists, academics, and human rights activists.

We traveled across 9 Indian states, visiting 12 cities and some surrounding villages:

- Bihar: Muzaffarpur
- Haryana: Gurgaon
- Karnataka: Bangalore
- Kerala: Thiruvananthapuram
- Maharashtra: Mumbai
- National Capital Region: New Delhi
- Tamil Nadu: Nagercoil
- Uttar Pradesh: Agra, Varanasi, Ayodhya
- Uttarakhand: Rishikesh, Haridwar

In total, we had 53 face-to-face meetings. Of this total, 26 meetings were with Hindu religious leaders. We also engaged in several meetings with human rights defenders, students, academics, and even an 88 year-old freedom fighter who was active in India's independence movement!



We met 26 Hindu religious leaders from a wide variety of *sampradayas* (religious traditions) and positions, from temple priests and mahants to monastic leaders and gurus with substantial followings. Each of the Hindu religious leaders we met had been previously recommended to us by our partner organizations and contacts. Demographics-wise, our sample was limited largely to men from Brahmin and other dominant castes. Unfortunately, due to logistical constraints and a lack of previously established contacts, we were unable to meet with women religious leaders and leaders from Dalit and other marginalized castes on this trip (we did meet one swami from an OBC caste). However, we do have several of these contacts to follow up with in a future trip.

We engaged in informal interviews ranging from 30-120 minutes in length. These conversations were held in English as well as in Indian languages (Hindi, Tamil, Telugu).

Although we did not follow a standard list of interview questions, we began the conversations by introducing Hindus for Human Rights and our work. We then asked open-ended questions about their views on the current state of affairs in India with regards to social harmony (*sadbhav* in Hindi), hate (*nafrat*), and peace (*shanti*). Depending on their response, we would dive deeper into topics like religious extremism (*kattarpanthi*), violence (*himsa*), and more specific issues. Although we ended up meeting many open-minded and justice-oriented religious leaders, we also encountered our fair share of hate and bigotry as well.

For the safety of all individuals concerned, we have taken care to anonymize all responses.

In this section, we provide an overview of some of the major themes and issues that came up in the course of our conversations.

Definitions and Keywords

One theme that came up in our very first conversations is about the major terms that many human rights organizations and activists employ when talking about India today. These terms include **Hindutva** (coined by V.D. Savarkar in 1923), Hindu nationalism, Hindu majoritarianism, and Hindu **rashtra** (the Hindu state desired by Hindu nationalists).

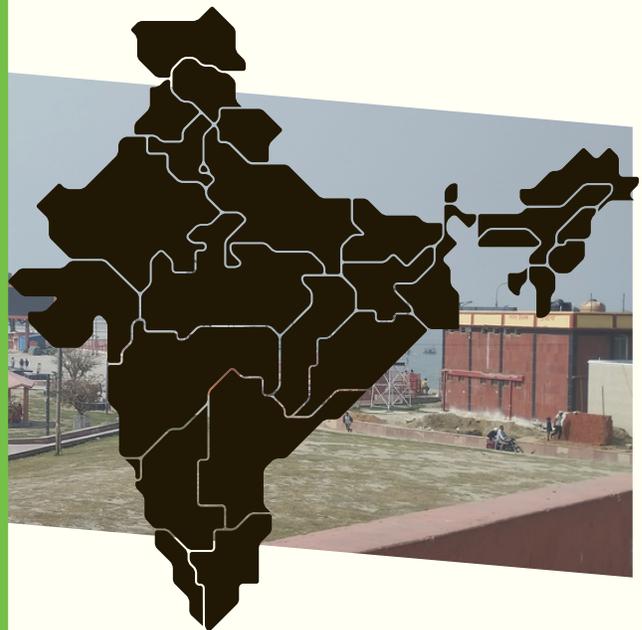
In our conversations, many of our interlocutors declared that the term Hindutva is here for good. Over the course of the past several decades, Hindu nationalist organizations have sought to obfuscate the origins of the term Hindutva as a political ideology. Instead, they have constructed a folk etymology that simply defines Hindutva as Hindu tattva, or the quality of being Hindu. Today, we can say that Hindu nationalists have been largely successful in obscuring the original context of the term Hindutva. In today's India, Hindutva carries the connotations of a strong, assertive Hindu identity. Hindu nationalist organizations in the diaspora have also been spreading this misinformation in recent years.

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This word and its “hindu tattva” etymology have become so deeply embedded in Indian political and social discourse, to the point that some of our interlocutors insisted that Hindutva and Hindu nationalism are two different concepts. Although this position directly contradicts Savarkar’s original use of the term, it seemed to be the ground reality everywhere we went.

Another key term we encountered is “Hindu rashtra,” or a Hindu state. This term refers to the long-standing desire of Hindu nationalists to transform India from a secular democracy into a Hindu majoritarian state. In a legal sense, this would require the Indian government to formally amend its Constitution. However, in many of our conversations, both with supporters and detractors of India’s current government, Hindus and non-Hindus, we heard a refrain that “India is already a Hindu rashtra” – the Hindu state is here, today.

“...we heard a refrain that “India is already a Hindu rashtra” – the Hindu state is here, today.



Hindu Resentment and Islamophobia

In connection with the mainstream nature of the term “Hindutva” among Indians today, we also encountered the depth to which a sense of victimhood and resentment has seeped into Hindu communities across the country.

The political ideology of Hindu nationalism rests on a foundation of “wounded sentiments” articulated by Hindu nationalist leaders and organizations. For those of us who seek to push back against Hindu nationalism, we understand that many Indian Hindus across castes and classes have deeply imbibed a sense of victimhood and persecution. This sense of victimhood is bolstered by arguments about Indian history, from the destruction of Hindu temples by Muslim rulers to forced conversions of Hindus to Islam.

This phenomenon of a majority population imbibing a “persecution complex” is not unique to India—we see it repeated throughout history and in many other societies today, including the United States.

This sense of “Hindu victimhood” or “Hindu resentment” we encountered was deeply intertwined with hatred towards India’s Muslim minority. In fact, throughout our trip, we were surprised by the extent that Indian Muslims have been dehumanized in the minds of many Indian Hindus, and their religious leaders.

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One swami we met, a leader of a prominent and wealthy Vaishnava sect, insisted that Hindus in India face much more discrimination compared to Indian Muslims and Christians. He repeated blatantly false claims, such as that 60 percent of the Tirupati temple's revenue goes towards the state of Andhra Pradesh's waqf board (a government institution overseeing Muslim religious properties). Despite insisting that Hindus and Muslims should not fight over history, he saw the demolition of the Babri Masjid as a positive incident.

We were excited to meet a swami in Uttar Pradesh who was vocally anti-caste. This swami came from an OBC caste, and faced threats of violence from local Brahmins when he started giving religious discourses. This swami clearly stated that caste was the biggest illness (*bimari* in Hindi) within Hindu society. And yet, when the topic turned to Muslims, he made a number of insensitive remarks, declaring that Muslims do not know the concept of humanity (*insaniyat*) and are intent on converting all Hindus.



Even leaders of a Lingayat organization in Karnataka, despite being clear that they did not identify as Hindus and that their tradition centered on equality and social justice, repeated the same dehumanizing tropes about Muslims that we hear from Hindu nationalist organizations. For example, these leaders expressed a fear that Muslims in Karnataka would soon outnumber the state's Hindu population due to high birth rates. They also insisted that Indian Muslims do not condemn any violence originating from their community.

This image of Indian Muslims as insular, violent, and hostile was repeated by other Hindu religious leaders we met.

Some Hindu religious leaders also expressed problematic views about “good Muslims.” One swami in Ayodhya praised the Muslims of the city for eschewing visible markers that differentiated them from Hindus, such as topis (skullcaps) and beards for men. This view that a “good Muslim” must be visually (and culturally) indistinguishable from Hindus is another important idea to challenge.



Hindu Nationalism's Grassroots Power

As Hindus for Human Rights, our work regularly puts us in direct confrontation with Hindu nationalist organizations and leaders across the Indian diaspora. Over the course of this trip across India, we came face-to-face with Hindu nationalism in even more direct and unexpected ways.

For example, in one meeting with a swami visiting Delhi, we found ourselves in the same room as members of the Hindu Mahasabha. In Ayodhya, as well, we saw the way in which Hindu nationalists, under the support of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, are literally reshaping the city. The city was full of armed soldiers and police, and this military-level presence extended to the Rama temple currently under construction over the site of the Babri Masjid. The sight of devotees taking darshan of Ram Lalla (the child form of Rama) while being watched by armed soldiers was truly dystopian.

Throughout the trip, we saw first-hand the extent to which Hindu nationalist groups like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) are embedded across India. Hindu nationalist groups have established umbrella organizations to organize swamis, temple priests, and other levels of Hindu religious leaders.

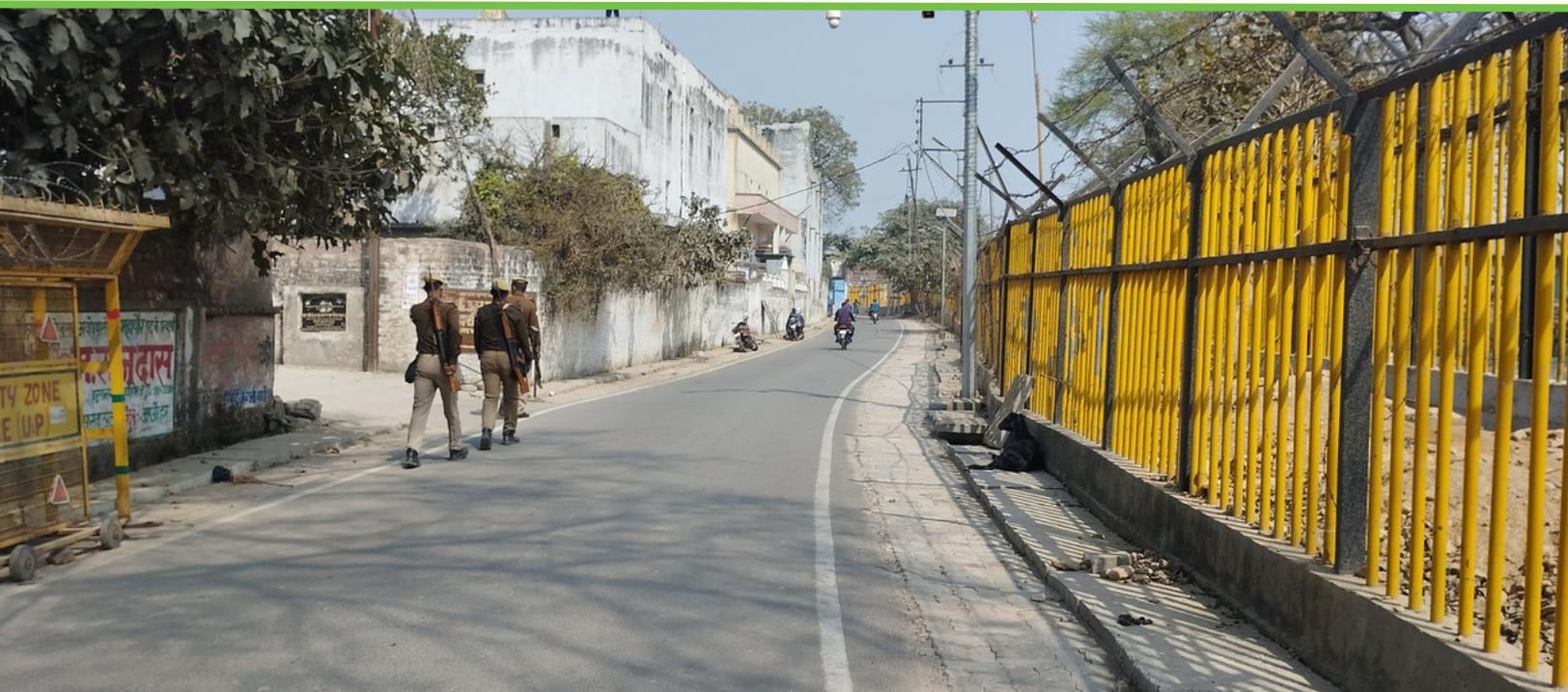
"The sight of devotees taking darshan of Ram Lalla (the child form of Rama) while being watched by armed soldiers was truly dystopian."



We heard from our interlocutors in ashrams that the RSS has been trying to infiltrate ashrams and temples in rural communities. We heard that it is a common tactic for the RSS to send its members or workers to spend a few days at a time in rural ashrams and temples, where they plant the seeds of polarization in the local community to be reaped in the future.

Beyond rural communities, we heard that government-funded universities are also being affected—some students and academics told us that it is increasingly difficult to get academic jobs if you are not connected to or supportive of the RSS.

Even some swamis we met who were involved in interfaith work are also in touch with the RSS. To us, this illustrated the degree to which Hindu nationalist groups, both in India and abroad, have embedded themselves in interfaith spaces by claiming to represent Hindu communities and perspectives.



Reasons for Resistance

In our nearly 30 meetings with Hindu religious leaders across India, we met many religious leaders who were deeply worried about the political ideology of Hindu nationalism and the rising hate and violence being carried out by Hindu nationalist organizations and leaders.

Some of these leaders grounded their opposition to Hindu nationalism in explicitly religious terms. For example, a temple priest in Varanasi told us that his idea of dharma is inseparable from humanity (*manavta* in Hindi). He said, “humanity is the highest religion” (*manavta hi sabse bade dharm hai*). This priest quoted verses from the Gita to make the point that in times of injustice, the Divine incarnates to protect dharma. He argued that we are living in a similar time of injustice, and so our dharma as Hindus demands that we must speak out against Hindu nationalism. He talked about today’s India as being very far from the vision of *rama rajya* (Rama’s Kingdom), which he defined as “a time when nobody even wept – there was no suffering.”

*"humanity is the highest religion"
(manavta hi sabse bade dharm hai)*

A leader of a monastic institution (math) spoke about being inspired by bhakti poet-saints, who spoke up for the rights of the poor, Dalits, minorities, women, and other marginalized communities. One swami in Haryana simply stated to us, “India has never had only one religion. This is a pluralistic land.” To this swami, religious diversity was at the heart of what it means to be Indian.

Other religious leaders spoke to us about the importance of mutual respect. A temple priest in Ayodhya firmly stated that if a Hindu procession is going past a mosque, the members of that procession should be respectful and quiet, not intentionally provocative.

Some religious leaders explicitly stated that they did not see Hindu nationalist groups like the RSS as possessing any religious authority. One temple priest asked, “Why should I have to listen to Mohan Bhagwat [the head of the RSS]? Is he some Shankaracharya?”

***“India has never had only one religion.
This is a pluralistic land.”***

Many religious leaders are opposed to the ways that the Indian government and Hindu nationalist groups are trying to stop age-old religious traditions and transform the character of Hindu sacred sites. These leaders spoke as representatives of their local traditions and cities.

For example, many Hindu religious leaders we spoke to in Varanasi were deeply upset by the renovations that the BJP government has executed in the city in order to transform Varanasi into a global tourist destination. Residents of Varanasi have argued that in the process of building infrastructure like the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, the BJP government demolished several historic temples. One priest expressed that Modi's renovations have transformed Varanasi into a "mall" and a "religious business center." Other interlocutors expressed frustration at how the ritual of Ganga Aarti has been subject to a process of "Disneyfication" and "commercialization" in an effort to bring in more money from tourists.

We heard similar narratives in southern India as well. In Karnataka, Hindu nationalist groups have called for Muslim vendors to be excluded from temple jatres (annual festivals). These groups have also voiced their opposition to traditional rituals like those of Belur's Chennakeshava Rathothsava (chariot festival), which begins with recitation of verses from the Qur'an. Researchers and activists we met with are finding that some temples have refused to comply with the demands from Hindu nationalist groups; the temple authorities argue that groups like the Bajrang Dal have no authority to change rituals that have been practiced for centuries.

Repercussions, Violence and Fear

In our meetings with over 25 Hindu religious leaders across India, we encountered a pervasive sense of fear. Even if they privately told us about their concerns regarding Hindu nationalism and rising polarization in India, many religious leaders are reluctant to speak up and put their ashram, temple, or devotees at risk.

Several of the Hindu religious leaders we met have already faced violence from Hindu nationalists. For example, one swami we met in northern India had installed different shrines in his ashram to represent different religions along with Hinduism, including Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Jainism. A few years ago, Hindu extremists from the RSS and Bajrang Dal vandalized the Muslim and Christian shrines at his ashram and engaged in destruction of property around the ashram.

Even in southern India, Hindu extremists have threatened and engaged in physical violence against the ashrams of some swamis we met who are widely known as critics of Hindu nationalism.

Under the current government in India, Hindu religious leaders who speak up against Hindu nationalism face a wide range of consequences. One outspoken and social justice-oriented swami we met in Varanasi has been investigated multiple times on charges of being a Naxalite, Communist, or Maoist.

Sadly, these threats of physical violence and government pressure have forced some progressive Hindu religious leaders into silence. We met one such swami in Karnataka who has been a target of Hindu nationalist groups for years. This swami's past writings are radical and fiery, but in recent years he has been under such pressure from Hindu nationalists that he has all but given up. His matha (monastery) is under heavy security, and during our meeting he insisted to us that "you cannot convince narrow-minded people."

Despite these challenges, we met several Hindu religious leaders who were outspoken critics of Hindu nationalism, and are committed to speaking out against injustice. Some of these swamis, such as those in South India, feel comfortable in doing so because they live in non-BJP-ruled states, where the local political parties are supportive of their stances.

Some religious leaders are attempting to resist Hindu nationalism in a more subtle way – for example, by inviting artists of all religions to perform at temple festivals, and by simply keeping their temples open to all.

One final challenge is that of isolation. Many of the religious leaders we met who were opposed to Hindu nationalism felt a deep sense of loneliness. They felt that they lack a network of like-minded peers; instead, most of the religious leaders they see in their communities or sampradayas are aligned with Hindu nationalism. The only progressive Hindu religious leader many of them could name was Swami Agnivesh, who is no longer with us.

Moving Forward

For us at Hindus for Human Rights, this was a deeply moving, inspiring, troubling, and eye-opening trip. We are troubled by the extent to which the tenets of the political ideology of Hindu nationalism have become deeply internalized by many Indian Hindus today, both everyday people and religious leaders. We were disappointed by the many meetings we held with swamis, acharyas, gurus, and mahants who insisted that all is well in India today, refusing to acknowledge any of the rising hate or violence that is taking place in the name of our religious tradition.

And yet, we left India inspired by the many religious leaders who did express their anguish and concern about communal harmony and the state of affairs in India today. Many of these swamis, mahants, gurus, and priests have faced threats and violent consequences for speaking out against hate and violence. And yet, they are committed to doing so—because, for them, the path of justice and peace is their dharma. These religious leaders all committed to mobilizing more people like them. We feel very grateful to these religious leaders for taking the time to meet with us, and for sharing their honest thoughts and hopes for India's future.



In addition, we are incredibly grateful for the work of the dozens of journalists, academics, students, and human rights defenders who we connected with over the course of our trip. Some of these individuals have been jailed for their activism; they have even faced death threats and physical violence. And yet, they are doing this work out of love for their neighbors and for all of India's diverse communities. Almost everyone we met expressed how important it is for a group like Hindus for Human Rights to exist—we hope we can continue to live up to their expectations and hopes for us.

We conclude with a set of concrete take-aways from this trip, which will inform our advocacy, communications, programming, and overall strategy moving forward:

- **Terminology:** In our advocacy, we will stick with the terms “Hindu nationalism” and “Hindu supremacy” to refer to the political ideology dominant in India today. We will push back against Hindu nationalists’ intentional obfuscations of the meaning and origin of the term “Hindutva,” and their desire to make it appear harmless.
- **Myth-Busting and Countering Islamophobia:** Today, many Hindus in India and the diaspora have deeply imbibed a story and sense of victimhood and persecution. In our communications, we must take this phenomenon of “Hindu victimhood” seriously, while also confronting the deep-rooted dehumanization of Indian Muslims among many Indian Hindus today. This requires an intentional, facts-based, and multifaceted communications strategy.

- **Speaking with a Hindu Voice:** In order to reach Hindu audiences, we must ensure our communications are grounded in our identity and core values as a Hindu organization. This is vital if we hope to reach and influence Hindu communities. Regional-language bhakti traditions are an important resource to counter the beliefs of Hindu nationalism.
- **Continue to Diversify our Network:** Most of the open-minded and inclusive Hindu religious leaders we met in India were dominant-caste men, largely Brahmins. We recognize the need for a diverse network of religious leaders, and will continue to reach out to Hindu women religious leaders and Hindu religious leaders from marginalized castes in India. This work has already begun.
- **Intellectual and Academic Engagement:** We should undertake a deep intellectual engagement and rebuttal of the works of Hindu nationalist ideologues such as Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar. Although many academics have been working on these topics in universities, they are rarely writing for everyday Hindu audiences. We have an opportunity to act as a bridge between academics and everyday Hindu communities who are receiving misinformation and hate speech from their WhatsApp groups and media sources.



- **Challenge Gurus who are Advocates of Hindu Nationalism:** Temples, mahants, and priests have their own communities of devotees. However, middle-class Hindu families in India and the global Indian diaspora are increasingly drawn to popular gurus and their institutions, many of whom are supportive of Hindu nationalism. These gurus and their organizations also run children camps and youth classes. It is crucial that we intervene in this space.
- **Strengthen Our South Asian Lens:** As we increase our advocacy in support of minority rights in South Asian countries beyond India, this will enable us to better reach and engage Indian Hindu audiences as well. We stand with religious, ethnic, and cultural minorities who face discrimination, no matter which country they live in.

***Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti.
Om Peace, Peace, Peace.***



***By Nikhil Mandalaparthi,
Hindus for Human Rights, April 2023***

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