

Reporting Guide on Hindu Nationalism

2024

South Asia Scholar
Activist Collective

Introduction to Hindutva



Hindu nationalism is a far-right political ideology of Hindu supremacy. Also known as Hindutva (meaning “Hindu-ness”), it was first articulated in India in the 1920s.

HINDUTVA IS A POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

The idea of Hindutva has remained stable over the years, especially in its core goal of making India, a constitutionally secular state, into “a Hindu Rashtra [nation] where some Indians will be more equal than others.”

This Reporting Guide provides extensive background on Hindu nationalism, what it is, where it comes from, what advocacy organizations, and human rights groups are saying about it and what the future might hold for Hindutva.



Table of Contents

1. What is Hindutva?
2. Brief History of Hindutva
3. Who is impacted?
4. Key terms
5. Frequently asked questions
6. Additional resources

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01 What is Hindutva?

Hindu nationalism is a political ideology that views Indian national identity and culture as inseparable from Hinduism.

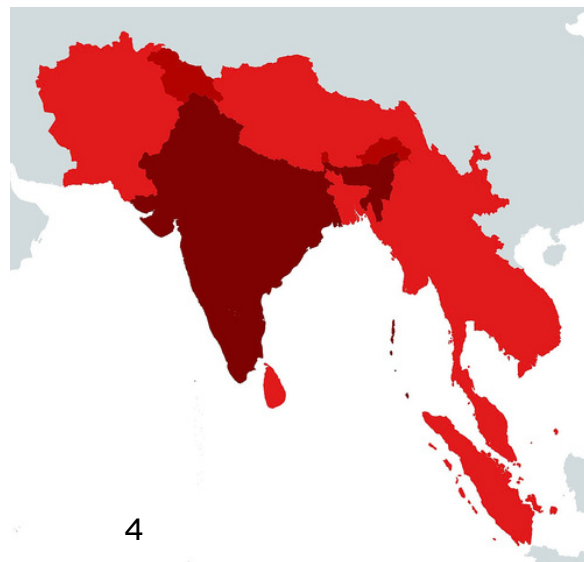
According to Hindu nationalism — or Hindutva ideology — Hindus are viewed as an ethnic, rather than explicitly religious, category. It has strong parallels with other forms of extremist religious and racial nationalisms, such as white Christian nationalism.

India, a constitutionally secular state, is nearly 80% Hindu, 14% Muslim and includes Christian (2%-3%), Sikh (<2%), Buddhist (<1%) and Jain (<1%) minorities.

Two of India's borderlands regions have historically had Hindu-Muslim conflicts-- Kashmir in the northwest and Assam in the northeast. In both cases, land, property and religion are often key instigating factors. These borderland regions have increasingly become key geographies in the Hindutva imagination as sites of "insurgencies" where the local Muslim populations (majority in Kashmir and minority in Assam) are imagined as fifth-columns or without the rights and protections available to all citizens. In both cases, civil rights are routinely suppressed and the Armed Forces (Special) Powers Act of 1958 is imposed.

Under the constitution, Muslims and Christians are not eligible for most of the caste-based reservations available to Hindus and others.

Hindutva imagination of "Akhand Bharat" (undivided India) that makes territorial claims on multiple disputed territories and sovereign nations



01 What is Hindutva?

The Hindutva endorsement of violence has proved a threat in India and abroad, as its reach and popularity have evolved over time.

First, Hindutva went global, expanding beyond Indian borders beginning in the 1940s. Today, Hindu nationalism is a worldwide phenomenon that negatively impacts multiple communities, especially of South Asian descent, across the world.

MANY OBSERVERS NO LONGER CONSIDER INDIA A FULLY FREE DEMOCRACY DUE TO STATE ADOPTION OF HINDU NATIONALIST POLICIES

Second, Hindutva used to be a fringe ideology embraced only by a minority of Indians. Hindu nationalism increasingly defines the Indian political mainstream, and a Hindutva political party (BJP) has governed at the federal level in India since 2014. Many observers no longer consider India a fully free democracy due to state adoption of Hindu nationalist policies.



Brief History of Hindutva 02

EARLY HINDUTVA: 1925-1947

Hindutva ideology was first articulated by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966) in 1923 in his pamphlet, “Essentials of Hindutva.” In this framework, Hindus are cast as a racial group.

Hindutva is a political ideology that Savarkar distinguished from the vast complex of religious beliefs and practices commonly described as Hinduism (or “Hindu traditions”). A defining feature of Hindutva is an exclusive nation for Hindus constituting the territory of the Indian subcontinent. A chief political organ for promoting such views was the Hindu Mahasabha party (founded in 1915).

SAVARKAR DISTINGUISHED HINDUTVA FROM HINDUISM

Early Hindutva leaders focused on Muslims as their primary opponent, and Savarkar and his followers drew on models of ethnonationalist movements in early 20th-century Europe, including those from Italy and Germany. Savarkar wrote about India as the “Fatherland” and conceived of Hindus as a race, united by shared blood. He encouraged his followers to use violence to achieve dominance over other communities.

In a key speech on India’s foreign policy in 1938, Savarkar explicitly defended Nazism. At the 21st session of the Hindu Mahasabha in 1939, he compared India’s Muslims to Germany’s Jews at the time. B.S. Moonje, who led the Hindu Mahasabha alongside Savarkar, visited Italy in 1931 where he met Mussolini and reported back on Italian fascist organizations. He wrote admiringly of these organizations, arguing that fascism was important to bring national unity and Hindu India needed similar institutions for military regeneration.

It must be said that in India at the time, Hitler and his politics were a bit of a floating signifier, meaning many things to many people in the subcontinent, where numerous groups were pushing for independence from Great Britain. For example, non-Hindu nationalists like Bengali author and freedom advocate Syed Mujtaba Ali also praised Hitler and the Nazis in the 1930s.

Brief History of Hindutva

EARLY HINDUTVA: 1925-1947

Hindutva ideas were adopted and put into effect by a paramilitary splinter group of the Mahasabha, which was founded in 1925: the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS or “National Volunteer Association”). The RSS was (and remains today) an all-male, uniformed organization that runs scout camps, especially for young boys, including weapons training and instruction in Hindutva ideology. Some of its first training camps were held in elite, all-boys schools, often reserved for upper castes, like Canara High School in Karnataka, where the first generation of state-level leaders of the RSS were trained.



RSS in
Bhopal,
2016

The group’s second and longest-serving head, M.S. Golwalkar (RSS leader 1940–1973), described Indian Muslims as “like the Jews in Germany.” An open admirer of Hitler, Golwalkar recommended the fascist leader’s “purging the country of the semitic Race – the Jews” as “a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by.” Hindu nationalists also target other Indian religious minorities, including Christians and tribal groups, whom they consider to be less Indian and less deserving of rights.

Brief History of Hindutva

EARLY HINDUTVA: 1925-1947

Overall, the RSS promotes a conservative, gendered perspective and emphasizes what has been called a “violent masculinity.” The RSS was formed to demonstrate the strength of Hinduness in the wake of British colonialism, which denigrated Hindu military prowess. The organization has typically featured brahmin-leadership and promoted upper-caste norms (see more on “caste” below).

Women are welcomed in the RSS’s much smaller, sister organization, the “Rashtriya Sevika Samiti,” which focuses on mobilizing women for the cause and promoting traditional gender roles.

HINDUTVA ENCOURAGES VIOLENT MASCULINITY FOR MEN AND TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES FOR WOMEN



Rashtriya Sevika Samiti meeting

Brief History of Hindutva

GROWING HINDUTVA: 1948–1980

India gained independence from British colonial rule in 1947, after a multi-decade independence movement whose leaders embraced non-violent resistance.

Hindutva activists objected to efforts by Mahatma Gandhi and others to include and protect religious minorities in an independent India. Angered by perceived tolerance of Muslims, one RSS man, Nathuram Godse, assassinated Mahatma Gandhi by shooting him at point blank range in January 1948. Godse was hanged for his crimes and the RSS temporarily banned. Savarkar was charged as a co-conspirator in the assassination, only to be later acquitted for lack of evidence. Combined, these acts rendered the RSS's Hindutva movement toxic to many Indians for decades.

Even while not broadly popular, the RSS sought to establish other Hindu nationalist groups in India, even creating parallel organs to the Indian state.

For example, the RSS established a private network of schools in 1946 called Vidya Bharati. They have since expanded to include 12,000 schools teaching over 3 million children. Many of these schools operate in remote areas of India among forest-dwelling and adivasi groups. Researchers have documented how the textbooks developed in these schools promote hate against other religious communities.

The RSS also founded the college-based Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad in India in 1949, which has been responsible for attacks on students and professors in recent years.

Other Hindutva groups had other foci intent on remaking Indian society. For instance, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (founded in 1964) focuses on religious affairs, and Sewa focuses on social outreach (e.g., conversion of adivasi groups to an upper-caste version of Hinduism). The RSS also created a subsidiary in 1978, the Akhil Bharatiya Itihasa Sankalan Yojana, to promote its own version of history.

Under the leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, many of the leaders of these parallel organs now fulfill the equivalent role in the state and are remaking education, particularly about history, along ideological lines.

Brief History of Hindutva

GROWING HINDUTVA: 1948–1980



The RSS began expanding abroad in 1948, with major groups emerging in the US from 1970 onward. These diasporic groups often share names with their India-based counterparts (e.g., VHP-America after India's Vishwa Hindu Parishad) and HSS (Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, after India's RSS). All of these groups share a commitment to Hindutva.

The impetus for global growth was strengthened when the RSS was banned for the second time in India between 1975–77 as part of sweeping anti-democratic measures during "The Emergency" when India's constitution was suspended. During this period, the HSS took over operations, thereby not only preventing the group from folding but also increasing the power of the overseas branches of the "Sangh Parivar" – the RSS's family of Hindu nationalist organizations (literally, "the RSS's family"). Following the model in India, US Hindutva groups train young Hindu Americans and pursue "cultural" outreach to US organizations, including law enforcement, who are often unaware of their ties to overseas groups.

Brief History of Hindutva

MAINSTREAM HINDUTVA: 1980–2014

Overall, from the 1980s through the early 2010s, the Hindutva movement grew more popular and powerful in India and abroad.

THE BJP AND RSS MAINTAIN CLOSE RELATIONS AND SOMETIMES SHARE LEADERS

By the 1980s, the Sangh Parivar comprised thousands of groups across the globe. In 1980, a new Sangh group was founded that would become notably powerful within a few decades: the aforementioned BJP, whose official socio-political platform is Hindutva. The BJP is sometimes referred to as the political wing of the RSS, and, indeed, the two groups maintain close relations and sometimes share leaders. The BJP first governed in India between 1998 and 2004.

Throughout the 1980s, the VHP campaigned for the destruction of the Babri Masjid, an early sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya in northern India. They popularized claims, first alleged in 19th-century British India in the midst of colonial-era Hindu-Muslim tensions, that the mosque was built on the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram and atop a destroyed Ram temple (scholars reject this claim).



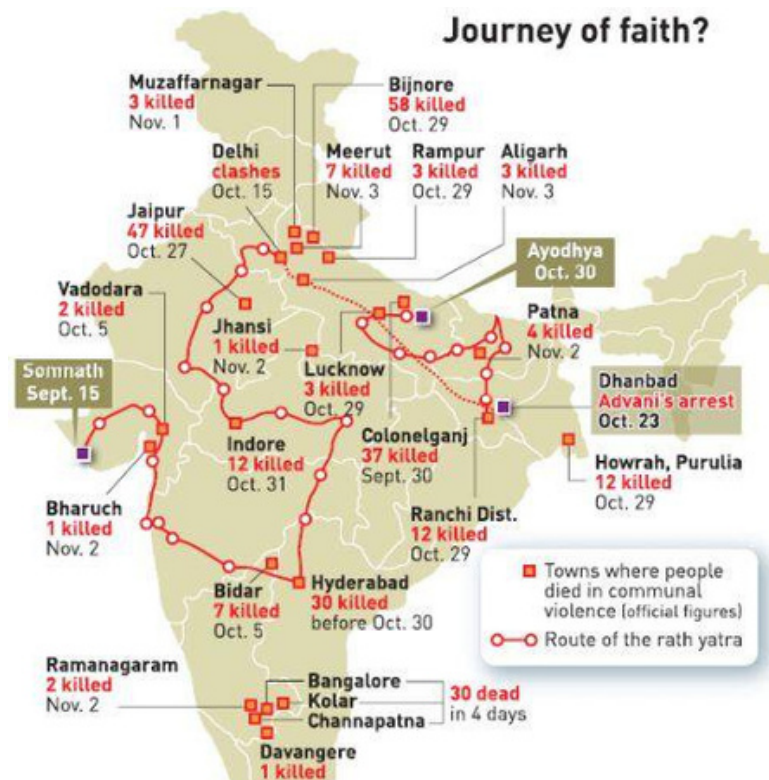
L.K. Advani (BJP politician) during VHP Ayodhya campaign, along with Narendra Modi (then-RSS worker), 1990

The Babri Masjid is associated with the first Mughal emperor Babur (“Babri” means “Babur’s”), and Hindu nationalists frequently use Mughal names as a stand-in for promoting hatred of all Indian Muslims.

Brief History of Hindutva

MAINSTREAM HINDUTVA: 1980–2014

The VHP agitated for years to destroy Ayodhya's Babri Masjid and to build a Ram temple in its place, sometimes using the phrase "mandir vahi banayenge" (the temple will be built right there). A global campaign to send "holy bricks" galvanized the Sangh Parivar's followers worldwide around this cause. The BJP leader L.K. Advani led a "yatra" (journey) in autumn 1990 to advocate for the mosque's destruction that left a trail of anti-Muslim violence in its wake.

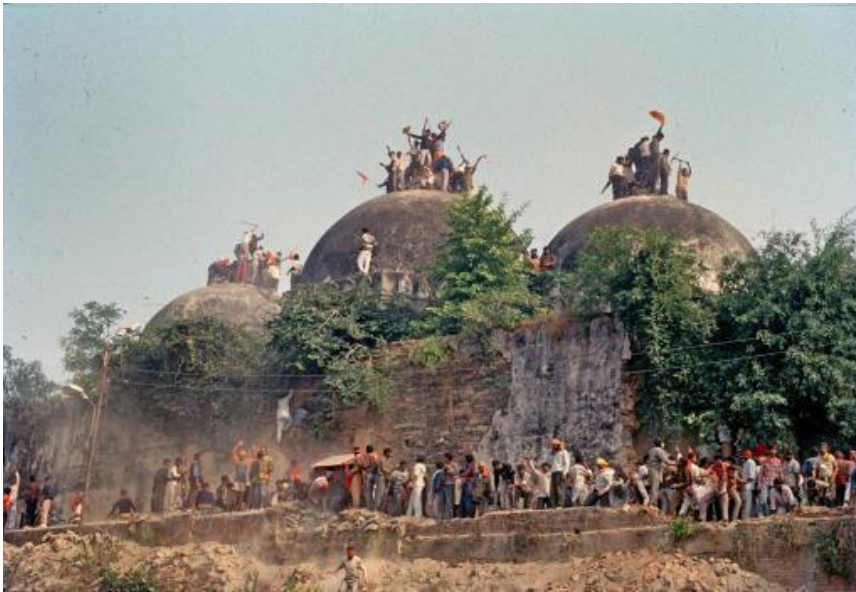


Places affected by violence during Advani's rath yatra – from September 23 to November 5, 1990. Ahmedabad, Haridwar, Bijnore, Palanpur, Moradabad, Rampur, Dhanera, Badaun, Aligarh, Padru, Mathura, Agra, Kanpur, Bharuch, Lucknow, Allahabad, Surat, Jaunpur, Faizabad, Vadodara, Bashi, Varanasi, Yaru, Ranchi, Patna, Mumbai, Godhra, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Dahod, Bidar, Kolar, Jodhpur, Bangalore, Davangere, Meerut, Ramanagaram, Channapatna, Ghaziabad.

Source: 'Legacy of a Divided Nation' by Mushirul Hasan; OUP, 1997.

Brief History of Hindutva

MAINSTREAM HINDUTVA: 1980–2014



In December 1992, after years of agitation, a mob torn down the Babri Masjid brick-by-brick. Riots followed across northern India in which thousands of Muslims were killed.

After Ayodhya, the next major outbreak of Hindutva violence in India was the 2002 Gujarat Riots (also called the Gujarat Pogrom).

The Gujarat riots were overseen by then-Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, an RSS man since childhood who had become a BJP leader. The evidence for Modi's leadership – and the brutal, sometimes deadly, subsequent cover-up – is extensive. In the end, a few thousand Gujaratis, mainly Muslims, were killed over three days of violence, with the police often aiding the perpetrators. Hundreds of thousands were also displaced. The events earned Modi a visa ban to the US, only lifted when he became Prime Minister in 2014.



Brief History of Hindutva


MAINSTREAM HINDUTVA: 1980–2014


Between 1980 and 2014, Hindutva groups proliferated outside of South Asia with two sets of goals. In part, they provide support to the Hindutva movement in India by fundraising, hosting India-based Hindutva leaders on speaking tours, seeking to explain away Hindu nationalist crimes in India, and encouraging sympathy for Hindutva among the diaspora. Simultaneously, diaspora Hindu nationalist groups pursued their own goals in their respective countries.

In the US, Hindutva groups try to monopolize access to government officials, educate diaspora children and young adults, and control the narrative about both Hindutva and Hinduism. This last goal has involved North American Hindu nationalist groups advocating for textbook revisionism and targeting scholars and journalists who write about Hindutva.

Global Sangh Parivar

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is an all-male paramilitary organization that advances the ethnonationalist political ideology of Hindutva. It operates overseas as the Hindu SS. The HSS has taken over leadership of the Sangh Parivar (RSS Family) at points when the RSS was banned in India.

**VHP / VHPA**
The Vishwa Hindu Parishad advocates a militant vision of Hinduism. The VHP played a key role in the 1992 mob destruction of the Babri Masjid and subsequent riots. The VHP-America was the first Sangh group established in US in the 1970s.

**ABVP / HSC**
The RSS created the ABVP in India in 1948 as a student wing, and it has often used violence. The VHPA formed the US-based Hindu Students Council in the 1990s. The HSC serves as a feeder for other Hindu Right groups in America.



**BJP / OFBJP**
The political wing advances Hindutva in government. BJP leaders, many of whom are RSS men, have overseen a precipitous rise in human rights abuses in India. Overseas Friends of BJP solicits diasporic financial support and disseminates Hindutva propaganda abroad.

**SEWA BHARTHI / INTERNATIONAL**
The outreach branch focuses on outreach, including to lower caste groups and indigenous Indian communities. Sewa International and the US-based IDRF often use humanitarian crises in India to raise funds and then divert donations to Hindutva projects, like missionary efforts (ghar wapsi).

Brief History of Hindutva

DOMINANT HINDUTVA: 2014-PRESENT

In 2014, the BJP won national elections in India, and Narendra Modi became Prime Minister.

Some say that Modi's popularity derived, in part, from his history of Hindutva-inspired violence – seen by many as a virtuous characteristic of a strong man – as well as the supposed good governance and development he oversaw in Gujarat. The BJP also received foreign contributions that likely aided its 2014 electoral success.

Between 2014 and 2019, human rights abuses and vigilante violence increased significantly. This included attacks on Muslims accused of eating beef (sensitive to upper-caste Hindu sensibilities) and assaults on interreligious couples, with Muslims often singled out for attack.

In 2019, Modi stood for re-election. His party, the BJP, won general elections by a landslide (although scholars still point out serious limits to Modi's popularity). In the subsequent few years, the Hindutva program accelerated rapidly at the expense of religious minorities, journalists, human rights activities, academics, and students.

Researchers point out how other Hindutva projects have accelerated since 2019 that are not tied to single events but rather part of broader trends, including: assaults on freedom of the press, severe reductions in academic freedom, India's rapidly worsening human rights record, curtailing human rights work, anti-environmental activities, attacks on Indian Christians – along with continuing attacks against Muslims and restrictions on religious freedom coupled with forced conversions to Hinduism.

The Modi government suffered few setbacks in recent years, with a notable exception being the 2020–21 farmers protests in which Punjabi farmers, many of them Sikh, held large-scale, nonviolent protests for months. These protests ultimately compelled the BJP to cancel a series of proposed farm bills. Sikh communities in the diaspora played key roles in raising awareness of this issue and are leaders in global pushback against Hindutva. In doing so, Sikhs have faced significant backlash.

Brief History of Hindutva

DOMINANT HINDUTVA: 2014-PRESENT

Owing to these general downward trends, India is considered only “partly free” by Freedom House and effectively an “electoral autocracy” due to its anti-pluralist practices by V-Dem Research Institute. Some of the incidents included in these reports are:

- **Kashmir.** In August 2019, the BJP revoked Article 370 of the Indian Constitution that gave partial autonomy to Kashmir and simultaneously imposed a communication blockade and siege. There were widespread, credible reports of human rights abuses, including jailing and torture of political opponents in addition to widespread crackdowns on any form of dissent, journalism, and human rights documentation. Under the BJP, India has also used internet blockades in Kashmir. The BJP also revoked Article 35A, a clause that protected the rights of Kashmiris as permanent residents, opening the door to non-Kashmiris to grab land in the region, vote and contest in elections, and seek state employment at the expense of largely Muslim Kashmiris.
- **Ram Mandir.** In November 2019, India’s Supreme Court issued a highly criticized decision allowing for the construction of the Ram temple atop the illegally destroyed Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. In August 2020, Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone, and, in January of 2024, Modi opened the still-incomplete temple over religious and political objections.
- **CAA / NRC.** In December 2019, the BJP passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). According to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, the law “essentially grants individuals of selected, non-Muslim communities in these countries refugee status within India and reserves the category of ‘illegal migrant’ for Muslims alone.” The government also announced intentions to conduct an India-wide National Registry of Citizens (NRC), a prove-your-citizenship program that rendered nearly 2 million stateless during a trial in Assam (a state in eastern India) and is projected to strip tens of millions of Indian citizenship. Whereas the CAA ensures Hindus a quick path back to being Indian citizens, Indian Muslims would remain stateless and, according to experts, be vulnerable to state action. In Assam, the government built camps to house the newly stateless. The passage of the anti-Muslim CAA sparked national protests for months and, as of early 2024, the program had not been implemented.

Brief History of Hindutva

DOMINANT HINDUTVA: 2014-PRESENT

Some of the incidents included in the V-Dem and Freedom House reports that consider India no longer a fully free democracy are:

- **2020 Delhi Riots.** In February 2020, rioters killed more than fifty people in northeastern Delhi. A subsequent report by the Delhi Minority Commission meticulously documented the instigation of a BJP politician, extensive anti-Muslim slurs and actions during the riot, and failures of local law enforcement to protect residents. Then US-President Donald Trump was in Delhi for part of the riots and said nothing.
- **Impunity for crimes against minorities and Dalits, often gender-based crimes.** The BJP has long sought to end India's reservation system that affords rights to historically marginalized castes and tribes. Under BJP rule, there have been a spate of violent crimes, including lynchings and gang rapes, against members of minority communities whose perpetrators have been flagrantly protected, even celebrated. This includes a rally held in support of the gang-rapists and murderers of a Muslim tribal girl attended by BJP ministers; the premature release of 11 men convicted of raping a Muslim woman during the Gujarat riots under then-Chief Minister Modi's watch, as well as the imprisonment for two years of a Muslim journalist attempting to cover the rape and murder of a Dalit girl in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh.
- **Abuses of history.** From Savarkar on, the Hindutva moment has sought to promote its own mythologized version of Indian history. A key element is the invention of a holocaust of Hindus, that seeks to legitimize violence against the descendants of the supposed perpetrators of that holocaust, namely Muslims and Christians. The current BJP government has not only radically remade the pedagogy of history in India to promote this version of history, erasing the narratives of Muslim dynasties and Dalits from Indian textbooks, but is systematically destroying the built environment of India's heritage. This includes large projects such as the transformation of Delhi through the Central Vista plan after the Indian state abruptly withdrew the candidature of the city for UNESCO World Heritage status. The state also provides tacit and explicit support for the vigilante destruction of shrines and mosques across the country.

03 Who is Impacted?

In India, Hindutva followers increasingly use violence to achieve their aims, whereas non-violent intimidation is more common among the diaspora. Many communities are harmed by Hindutva actions, listed here in alphabetical order:



Adivasi groups. Hindu nationalists support large-scale campaigns to convert adivasi groups — a member or descendant of any of the indigenous peoples of South Asia — to upper-caste Hindu practices. There are also reports of stolen land and resources. Hindu nationalists may also appropriate claims of indigeneity from Indian adivasi communities.



Christians. Christians account for 2–3 percent of Indian citizens and are increasingly subjected to Hindu nationalist assaults. Several Indian states have anti-conversion laws that are used to target Christians and Muslims (in practice, these are unevenly applied, leaving Hindu nationalist groups free to undertake massive conversion efforts). Despite repeated attacks on Christians in India, US-based Hindu nationalist groups sometimes ally with and mimic the tactics of white Christian nationalists.



Dalits. Hindu nationalism is an upper-caste led movement that often endorses caste privilege and upper-caste norms at the expense of lower caste and Dalit communities. Dalits are considered one of the lowest castes, outside the four main castes in the traditional caste system. The BJP had made major inroads with caste-oppressed communities in recent years by using the promise of Hindu unity, although some have grown disillusioned due to the entrenched casteism of the RSS. In North America, Hindu nationalist groups vehemently oppose attempts to introduce civil rights protections against caste-based discrimination for all, as with California's 2023 caste discrimination bill.

Who is Impacted?

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Human Rights Advocates. India's BJP regularly clamps down on lawyers and groups that document abuses and / or advocate for human rights. USCIRF has been barred from India for years, and Amnesty International closed its India offices in 2021 under state pressure. In general, the Modi government has targeted non-governmental organizations, including many who focus on poverty relief.



Journalists. Since the BJP came to power in 2014, India has dropped in the Reporters Without Borders rankings of press freedom and, as of 2023, ranks 161 out of 180 nations. Deadly violence and organized harassment campaigns against reporters – especially women, Muslims, and Kashmiris – are common. Reporters are sometimes incarcerated as political prisoners. While foreign journalists are more protected, the BJP has subjected those unwilling to promote Hindutva propaganda – like the BBC – to punitive state action.



LGBTQIA+. While recognition of LGBTQIA+ rights has moved forward with the 2019 Indian Supreme Court decision to rescind a 19th-century law banning homosexual activities, Modi's BJP government has opposed recognizing same-sex marriage and, following BJP wishes, the Supreme Court rejected challenges to the current legal framework lodged by LGBT couples. Although RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat said that LGBTQIA+ individuals have the right to "live as others," broad civil rights for queer people continues to be opposed by Hindutva organizations, because they see it as not commensurate with the idea of a proper "family."

Who is Impacted?

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Kashmir and Assam. Two of the borderlands regions of India, Kashmir in the northwest and Assam in the northeast, have experienced Hindu-Muslim conflicts. In both cases, land, property and religion are often key instigating factors. These borderland regions have increasingly become key geographies in the Hindutva imagination. In both cases, civil rights have been routinely suppressed and the Armed Forces (Special) Powers Act of 1958 imposed.



Muslims. Muslims account for roughly 14 percent of modern-day Indians, and India is the world's third-largest Muslim nation by population. Hindutva followers view Muslims as less Indian than Hindus and thus less able to represent Indian culture and society in the diaspora. Muslims are often blamed for historic, or imagined, wrongs against Indian society. There has been an increase in calls for genocide against Muslims, along with other violence and the destruction of property.



Scholars and students. Academic freedom has declined precipitously under BJP rule. Hindu nationalists, such as the college-based ABVP, harass Indian students and professors. Outside of India, the BJP tracks scholars whose work they perceive as threatening and are increasingly denying entry to academics. Hindutva harassment of North American scholars is also a well-documented phenomenon dating back to the mid-1990s and features a mix of US-based and India-based Hindu nationalist attackers.

Who is Impacted?

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Women. In recent years, India ranks as one of the least safe countries in the world for women. The use of violence as a weapon against women of minoritized communities or those perceived to be political enemies is increasingly common, with perpetrators emboldened through the political protection they enjoy from the state. Critics have claimed Hindutva ideology advances a vision of toxic masculinity, while others have highlighted “Hindutva feminism” as a misleading aspect of the movement.



Hindutva meme shared online in 2022, based on a 1930s Nazi poster

VINTAGE 1930's GERMAN ARYAN FAMILY NSDAP propaganda poster illustrating the German blond Aryan idealistic family, 'If you need counsel or aid, ask your local NSDAP party'



Key Terms 04

BJP – The Bharatiya Janata Party is one of the two major Indian political parties alongside the Indian National Congress. The BJP has roots in the paramilitary RSS and officially supports Hindutva.

Brahminism – The term has two distinct senses. (1) A religious tradition in ancient India premised on upper caste identity (especially used by scholars in this sense). (2) Privileging Brahminical culture and social practices in contemporary contexts (especially used by anti-caste activists in this sense).

Brahmins – Upper-most social category in the caste system; historically, Hindutva organizations have had strong Brahmin leadership and promote upper-caste norms.

THE CASTE SYSTEM HAS ALWAYS ENCODED INEQUALITY

Caste – The traditional social, economic, and religious structure of Indian society, which divides people into four broad groups, or castes (“varna” in Sanskrit) plus a large group of outcastes (Dalits, formerly called “untouchables”) and thousands of smaller groups, or subcastes (“jati”). The caste system has always encoded inequality and is justified in some premodern Hindu legal texts. Today, it is a rigid hereditary hierarchy across South Asian religious communities in which restrictions are placed on one’s social mobility, job opportunities, marriage prospects, and even whom one can eat with. Although caste discrimination is illegal in India, it is still common among followers of all religions throughout South Asia. The Indian government has various schemes to assist historically oppressed caste groups (called the “Scheduled Castes”) but these have not eliminated casteism.

Key Terms

Dalit – Pronounced “DAH-lit.” Literally meaning “downtrodden.” A term used primarily as a label of self-identity by those from the Scheduled Castes, or lowest subcastes. The term was coined in the 1800s and later popularized by B. R. Ambedkar. It is the preferred nomenclature today, replacing others often considered offensive (e.g., untouchable and harijan). Dalit-led groups are among the key organizations pushing back against Hindutva in the South Asian diaspora in the US (e.g., [Equality Labs](#), [Ambedkar King Study Circle](#), [Ambedkar Association of North America](#)).

Decolonization – Recognizing and correcting for the legacies of colonialism; the concept is abused by Hindu nationalists to argue for nativism.

Hindu Rashtra – “Hindu nation,” an ethno-religious state. Transforming India, founded in 1947 as a constitutionally secular state, into a Hindu Rashtra is a key goal of the global Hindutva movement.

Hinduism – A diverse set of religious practices embraced by many across the globe. While scholars and practitioners generally consider Hinduism to stretch back thousands of years, the term “Hinduism” was coined only around 1800 by a Baptist missionary. Alternatively, “Hindu traditions.”

Hinduphobia – A term recently popularized by far-right Hindu nationalists who invent and exaggerate claims of bias. Scholars overall reject “Hinduphobia” since Hindus have not historically faced discrimination as a religious community, nor do they face systemic oppression in India or the West at present. The term mirrors and thereby attempts to discredit Islamophobia, similar to claims of anti-white racism vis-à-vis anti-black racism.

Hindutva – Synonym for Hindu nationalism. The term literally means “Hindu-ness” and was popularized beginning in the early twentieth century by V.D. Savarkar, the ideological godfather of the Hindu nationalist movement.

Kashmir – A Muslim-majority territory in the northern subcontinent disputed by India, Pakistan, and China. The Indian side of the Line of Control that separates India- and Pakistan-administered Kashmir is the most militarized zone in the world. In the part of Kashmir controlled by India, the Indian government regularly commits what the UN classifies as [serious human rights abuses](#). In 2019, the BJP removed the region’s autonomy. Under numerous UN resolutions, the people of the region have been affirmed in their right to self-determination.

Key Terms

Kashmiri Pandits – Another name for the Hindu minority of the Kashmir Valley, most of whom are Brahmins. Many left the Valley in the 1990s during the height of an armed rebellion and Indian state counter-insurgency.

RSS – Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, an all-male paramilitary group founded in 1925 in imitation of contemporary fascist movements in Europe. The RSS advocates violence as a means to achieve its Hindutva aims and often focuses on indoctrinating children through regular attendance at its centers (shakhas). The RSS sits at the center of the Sangh Parivar, and it operates overseas as the HSS (Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh).

SANGH PARIVAR IS THE “FAMILY OF THE RSS,” A LOOSE COALITION OF HINDU NATIONALIST GROUPS GLOBALLY

Sangh Parivar – Literally “family of the RSS,” the loose coalition of Hindu nationalist groups that promote Hindutva across the globe.

Sanatana Dharma – Literally “eternal ethics,” the phrase is used by some practicing Hindus, most commonly from upper caste backgrounds, to refer to their religion. Historically, the phrase dates back to the nineteenth-century Hindu reform movements that sought to simultaneously defend and modernize Hinduism in the face of European Christian missionary criticisms.

Vedas – The Vedas are a set of four texts, largely hymns to various gods, composed in an archaic form of Sanskrit roughly 3,000 years ago by small, semi-nomadic groups in northwestern India. Today they are recited by Brahmin priests in religious settings. To Hindu nationalists, the Vedas represent a golden age of Hindu hegemony and scientific progress that is a key part of their mythology of the Indian past.

05 Frequently Asked Questions

Is Hindu nationalism limited to India?

Hindu nationalism is a global phenomenon and has been part of US social life for decades. There are numerous US-based groups associated with the Hindutva movement, including some that operate on US college campuses.

Isn't India a democracy?

According to its constitution, India is a socialist democracy. However, in recent years, democratic values (e.g., freedom of the press, free speech, and religious freedom) have been under threat through legislative and policy decisions. These actions led organizations like V-Dem to classify India as an “electoral autocracy” in their 2021 Democracy Report and suggest that autocratization is only increasing in their 2022 and 2023 reports. Also in 2021, the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance classified India as a backsliding democracy and a “major decliner” in its Global State of Democracy report. The US Freedom House classified India as “partly free” and the USCIRF’s 2022 report on religious freedom as a country “increasingly hostile towards religious minorities,” continuing to recommend in its 2023 Annual Report that India be designated a “Country of Particular Concern.

ANTI-MUSLIM BIAS AND PERCEPTIONS CONTRIBUTE TO THE HINDU NATIONALIST LEANINGS OF SOME INDIAN AMERICANS

Why do some US citizens support Hindu nationalism?

Indian-Americans tend to vote for Democratic policies and politicians (73% voted for President Joe Biden in 2020, 77% for Hillary Clinton in 2016). However, many Indians also maintain a positive view of PM Modi and the BJP, which they see as doing what is necessary for economic growth and social/political stability in India. Most Indians in the US are from dominant castes, and many have class privilege. Anti-Muslim bias and perceptions have also contributed to the Hindu nationalist leanings of some US Indians. Caste and class privilege along with anti-Muslim bias within Indian diaspora spaces has helped Hindu nationalist groups maintain influence.

Frequently Asked Questions

THE PRESENCE OF KEY HINDUTVA IDEAS DEFINES A GROUP AS HINDU NATIONALIST

How do I know if a group is Hindu nationalist?

Hindu nationalist organizations regularly deny their links with other Sangh Parivar groups, both to evade criticism and also due to the questionable nature of certain overseas financial connections. Ultimately, the presence of key Hindutva ideas defines a group as Hindu nationalist. Also, links with India's paramilitary RSS can be a giveaway, and many Hindu nationalist groups in the US have such extensive, documented connections.

ISLAMOPHOBIA

Why do Hindu nationalists target Muslims?

Explicit and violent anti-Muslim sentiments are attested from the initial articulations of Hindu nationalism in the early 20th century, wherein Muslims are the "Other" that, through maligning, produce Hindu unity. The rise of global Islamophobia after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 provided greater fodder to Hindu nationalists and enabled them to find increased traction. In the 21st-century, the targeting of India's Muslim minority relies on the language and legitimation derived from the Global War on Terror.

Didn't Muslims commit a genocide of Hindus in premodernity?

There is no historical evidence to suggest that any genocide of any population happened on the premodern subcontinent. This is a colonial trope that was picked up and amplified by Hindutva ideologies and has remained a prominent part of contemporary disinformation campaigns.

Frequently Asked Questions

CASTE AND EQUITY

Why do Hindu nationalist groups in the West oppose measures against caste-based discrimination?

Some US-based groups argue that anti-discrimination measures which include caste will: increase discrimination against Hindus, single out Hindus and South Asians alone as culprits of caste discrimination, be difficult to enforce since caste typically lacks visible markers, impose caste hierarchies on Hindu communities when most diaspora Hindus don't recognize caste or know their caste, and violate Hindu religious freedom. However, caste is a social hierarchy found in several cultures and traditions (not only in Hinduism). Research, court-proceedings, and individual reports indicate that caste-based discrimination is widespread among the US South Asia diaspora.

Don't some scholars say that the British invented caste?

No. This Hindu nationalist talking point misrepresents scholarly research, which suggests that caste was reified and altered in certain ways during British colonial rule (1757–1947). Scholarly consensus is that caste-based hierarchies in religious, social, and political life of South Asian communities date back to ancient India. The caste system has been dynamic through various forms of religious, social, and political change.

CASTE IS A SOCIAL HIERARCHY FOUND IN SEVERAL CULTURES AND TRADITIONS

How can you tell somebody's caste?

Caste is a socio-cultural practice that does not have many visible markers. In some cases, surnames denote particular castes. Other indicators can include marriage choice, diet restrictions, wearing of some sacred items, language word choices, ancestral home, and certain ritual practices. These are often difficult to discern for folks outside of South Asian communities and can also shift depending on region (or, in the diaspora, familial regional origins within South Asia).

Frequently Asked Questions

Is caste like race?

The comparison between caste and race helps many Westerners understand the caste system, although there are significant differences. The biggest difference is that caste is usually not immediately apparent based on physical appearance. However, the systemic marginalization that racialized individuals in the US experience is comparable to that of caste-oppressed people. Also, casteism and racism are sometimes supported by citations to religious texts (e.g., Brahmin-authored dharmashastra and the Bible, respectively).

POLITICS OF VICTIMHOOD

Have Hindus been historically oppressed?

Dalits and lower-caste groups have remained marginalized and oppressed throughout history. However, upper-caste Hindus were part of nearly all polities (whether led by Hindus or Muslims) on the subcontinent before colonization. Under British colonial rule, many upper-caste Hindus also fared well, finding access to English-medium education with some groups constituting a privileged class.

Do Hindus face discrimination in America?

There is no evidence of widespread or systematic discrimination against Hindus in the United States. The FBI began collecting data on hate crimes that targeted Hindus in the late 2010s, and the data since then shows that such cases are exceedingly rare. Anti-Asian hate is a real, documented issue and should be reported thoroughly, including when it involves Hindus.

What about the Dotbusters?

The Dotbusters were a hate group that operated in northern New Jersey in the 1980s, especially in the last half of 1987, and targeted South Asians. The group of attackers were of diverse racial backgrounds. While the Dotbusters claimed to attack “Hindus,” their targets were religiously diverse and the one lethal victim of their violence was Navroze Mody, a Parsi (Zoroastrian).

Frequently Asked Questions

What about anti-Hindu oppression in Pakistan?

There are reported and on-going cases of anti-Hindu crimes in Pakistan. The Pakistani state has taken actions against individual cases as well as in situations of collective or mob-like behavior. Although the Pakistani state continues to affirm the sanctity and preservation of its Hindu community, Hindus — along with other religious minorities in Pakistan — continue to face “aggressive societal discrimination” according to the USCIRF.

DISINFORMATION

How do I evaluate claims made by Hindu nationalist groups?

In order to verify specific claims, speak with scholars of Hindu nationalism, reach out to community organizations that are not Hindu nationalist in orientation, and consult respected statistical data and peer-reviewed studies.

HINDU NATIONALIST INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS OFTEN FABRICATE INFORMATION

Aren't Hindu nationalists just presenting an alternative point of view?

No. Hindu nationalist individuals and groups often fabricate information to support their ideology, exaggerate claims of discrimination, and espouse discriminatory perspectives against minoritized communities. Repeating such ideas without qualification risks endorsing disinformation and normalizing hate.

Is Hindu nationalism a grassroots effort?

No. Hindu nationalism is a well-funded global movement that has transnational financial, social and political links to organizations both within and outside of India. The coalition of Hindu nationalist groups is known as the Sangh Parivar (the RSS's family) and has political ties and influence in the United States.

Frequently Asked Questions

FAR RIGHT POLITICS

Why is the Hindutva movement right-wing or far-right?

Similar to other far-right groups, Hindu nationalists use bad faith claims, gaslighting, misinformation, and coordinated attacks against critics to promote their ideology. We also see parallel goals around Islamophobia and particular forms of ethnonationalist imaginations of citizenship (and immigration). This is a point of commonality highlighted by Norwegian domestic terrorist and convicted killer Anders Brevik who devoted several pages and makes 100+ references to what he viewed as the positive elements of Hindu nationalism in his 1518-page manifesto.

HINDUISM AND HINDUTVA

Aren't Hindu nationalist groups just defending Hinduism?

No. Hindu nationalists advocate for a particular kind of ahistorical, neocolonial political ideology that normalizes Islamophobia, affirms Hindu purity politics, and implements an exclusionary vision of Hinduism that papers over the diversity of the tradition. In the Hindutva world, not all Hindus are included. Hindutva ideology leverages, manipulates, and weaponizes Hindu symbols, traditions, and rituals to produce a politicized vision of Hindu nationhood.

Are all Hindus Hindu nationalists?

No. Followers of Hindu traditions are on the frontlines fighting against Hindutva ideology, both within and outside of India. Some Hindus oppose this violent, authoritarian ideology on political grounds. Others fight against what they perceive as the political weaponization of their religion (e.g., Hindus for Human Rights and Sadhana). Hindu nationalists regularly degrade such efforts and claim to speak for all Hindus in social arenas and political lobbying efforts.

06 Additional Resources

GENERAL RESOURCES

- Round up of [articles on Hindu nationalism and roundtable on Hindutva harassment of academics in North America](#), from the American Academy of Religion (2023).
- [“India”](#) from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom’s Annual Report (2023).
- [Perilous Intimacies: Debating Hindu-Muslim Friendship After Empire](#), by SherAli Tareen (2023).
- [“India’s State-Level Anti-Conversion Laws,”](#) from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2023).
- [“Inventing a ‘Genocide’: The Political Abuses of a Powerful Concept in Contemporary India,”](#) by Sanjay Subrahmanyam (2023).
- [“The Rise of Hindu Nationalism,”](#) by Cherian George (2022).
- [“Hindu Nationalism: From Ethnic Identity to Authoritarian Repression,”](#) by Pratap Bhanu Mehta (2022).
- [Global Voices’ 2022 Report](#).
- [“Hindutva and the shared scripts of the global right,”](#) from The Immanent Frame (2022).
- [“The Hinduization of India is nearly complete,”](#) by Yasmeen Serhan (2022) (Commentary).
- [“Religious Freedom Conditions in India,”](#) from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2022).
- [“Hindu Nationalism: A Movement Not a Mandate,”](#) by Alf Gunvald Nilsen (2021).
- [Modi’s India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy](#), by Christophe Jaffrelot (2021).
- [“Breaking Worlds: Religion, Law and Citizenship in Majoritarian India; The Story of Assam,”](#) by Angana P. Chatterji, Mihir Desai, Harsh Mander and Abdul Kalam Azad (2021).
- [“Creating Suitable Evidence of the Past? Archaeology, Politics, and Hindu Nationalism in India from the End of the Twentieth Century to the Present,”](#) by Anne-Julie Etter (2020).
- [“Hindutva’s Dangerous Rewriting of History,”](#) by Audrey Truschke (2020).
- [“The Hindutva Turn: Authoritarianism and Resistance in India,”](#) from the South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal (2020).
- [Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India](#), by Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot (2019).
- [“The Rise of Hindu Nationalism and Its Regional and Global Ramifications,”](#) from Education About Asia (2018).

Additional Resources

GENERAL RESOURCES

- “Buried Evidence: Unknown, Unmarked, and Mass Graves in Indian-Administered Kashmir,” by Angana Chatterji, Parvez Imroz, Gautam Navlakha, Zahir-Ud-Din, Mihir Desai and Khurram Parvez (2018).
- “Explainer: what are the origins of today’s Hindu nationalism?,” by Ketan Alder (2016).
- “The Hindutva View of History: Rewriting Textbooks in India and the United States,” by Kamala Visweswaran, Michael Witzel, Nandini Manjrekar, Dipta Bhog and Uma Chakravarti (2009).
- Hindu Nationalism: A Reader, edited by Christophe Jaffrelot (2007).
- You can also take a look at the AltNews fact-checking website.

HINDUTVA IN NORTH AMERICA

- “Hindu Nationalist Influence in the United States, 2014-2021 The Infrastructure of Hindutva Mobilizing,” from the Islamic Circle of North America (2022).
- “Hindutva Harassment Field Manual,” a project of the South Asia Scholar Activist Collective (2021).
- “Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) Network in Canada,” from the National Council of Canadian Muslims and World Sikh Organization of Canada.
- “Hindutva 101: A Primer,” from Sadhana (2019).
- “Transnational Hindutva Networks,” from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2019).
- “The Hindu Right in the United States,” by Audrey Truschke (2022).

Additional Resources

CASTE IN THE INDIAN DIASPORA

- [“Does Caste Have a Permanent Address?”](#) from Economic and Political Weekly (2023).
- [“Title VII and Caste Discrimination,”](#) by Guha Krishnamurthi and Charanya Krishnaswami (2021).
- [“Destructive Lies: Disinformation, speech that incites violence and discrimination against religious minorities in India,”](#) from Open Doors United Kingdom (2021).
- [“Social Realities of Indian Americans: Results From the 2020 Indian American Attitudes Survey,”](#) from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2021).
- [“Indian Chronicles: deep dive into a 15-year operation targeting the EU and UN to serve Indian interests,”](#) from EU Disinfo Lab (2020).
- [“India: The dissemination of misinformation on WhatsApp is driving vigilante violence against minorities,”](#) from Minority Report (2020).
- [“Caste in the United States,”](#) from Equality Labs (2018).
- [“Cyber-Hindutva,”](#) from the Fondation Maison des Sciences de L’Homme (2012)

HINDUTVA ATTACKS ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM IN INDIA AND THE U.S.

- [“Timeline of Hindutva Harassment of North American Academics,”](#) from the South Asia Scholar Activist Collective.
- [New Threats to Academic Freedom in Asia](#), edited by Dimitar D. Gueorguiev (2022)
- [“The State of Academic Freedom Worldwide,”](#) from Friedrich-Alexander University’s (Germany) Political Science Institute (2022).
- [“Report on Academic Freedom in India,”](#) from the Indian Cultural Forum (2020).

HUMAN RIGHTS IN INDIA

- [Freedom House Reports.](#)
- [Hindutva Watch.](#)
- [Amnesty International’s India Report.](#)
- The [United States Commission on International Religious Freedom’s reports on India.](#)
- [“Human Rights Report on India,”](#) from Human Rights Watch (2022).

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