

HINDUTVA & HINDU NATIONALISM

A GUIDE FOR PERPLEXED REPORTERS
& OTHER ONLOOKERS



HINDU AMERICAN FOUNDATION

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INTRODUCTION

IN THE PAST DECADE, AS INDIA HAS RISEN ON THE WORLD STAGE AS A GLOBAL POWER, THERE HAS BEEN AN INCREASED FOCUS AMONG JOURNALISTS IN THE WEST ON THE IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ITS CURRENT RULING PARTY, THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY (BJP), AND MANY OF ITS MOST OUTSPOKEN PROPONENTS. THIS FOUNDATION IS HINDUTVA, OFTEN REFERRED TO AS HINDU NATIONALISM.

A number of guides for reporters have been produced on Hindutva. Many of these have been written by authors and activists who are fundamentally opposed to it, yet present themselves as objective sources and dispassionate observers. They present Hindutva solely as a nefarious force in Indian society, going so far as to say that Hindutva is a form of supremacist thought akin to white supremacy, Christian nationalism, even European fascism. These same authors frequently use 'Hindutva' or 'Hindu nationalist' as smears against any Hindu who, at best, expresses support for particular policies of the BJP, or at worst, speaks openly and positively about their Hindu identity, regardless of the details of a person's political or social beliefs. Liberal Hindu American politicians in the US, for example,

have become mischaracterized as being far-right and their loyalty to America questioned because they support a strong US-India relationship, have spiritual ties to India, publicly express their Hindu identity, or don't make vocal criticism of the BJP their primary focus. Denial of being a Hindu nationalist or far-right is taken as further evidence of being so.

This guide is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of the topic. Rather, this guide will provide a concise counterpoint to other guides, present an outline of the origins of Hindutva, and take on directly some of the frequently made accusations about Hindutva. We hope that readers will come away with a more nuanced and informed understanding of Hindutva.

THE BASICS

WHAT DOES THE WORD 'HINDU' MEAN?

To place the philosophy of Hindutva in historical context and to truly understand the term, one must take a step backwards and look at the term 'Hindu' itself, its origins and how the meaning has evolved over the centuries.

The word Hindu itself comes from the Sanskrit word for river: 'sindhu'. This word gives us the name of the primary river running through modern day Pakistan, whose origins are high in the

Indian Himalaya, the Indus River. This river was one of the primary rivers of the Ancient Indian and Iranian civilizations.¹

Originally 'Hindu' did not specifically refer to a metaphysical and spiritual belief system, and the culture that accompanies it. Rather, it simply described the people who lived east of Persia, near and beyond the Indus River.

Today the philosophical, religious and cultural traditions of these ancient people are divided into Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism (plus some other smaller traditions

What's the distinction between Hinduism (a religious tradition) and Hindutva (a political ideology)?

The numerous quotes from early proponents of Hindutva, as well as the fact that one of the leading proponents was himself an atheist, should make it clear that while the political philosophy of Hindutva and the religious tradition of Hinduism overlap, they are not synonymous.

Hindutva is not about religion itself. Rather it is about the nature of Indian culture, civilization, the religious traditions that arose in the Indian subcontinent, and how these should inform the shape of the modern state of India — including providing grounds for inclusivity of followers of non-Indic religions living in India.

Hinduism, on the other hand, is a world religion, without a specific political ideology. You can be Hindu without subscribing to the political ideology of Hindutva — because you disagree with it for one reason or another in practice or theory, or because its concerns don't directly apply to you, perhaps you are Hindu living in Bali, your family left India generations ago and has less of a direct connection to India, or because you came to Hinduism from another religious tradition and the politics of India simply aren't very important to your life.

that don't register on the world stage or are now extinct). But at the time and for millennia, such hard distinctions weren't made as these traditions arose from the same culture and have much in common. Sikhism too arose from the same dharmic cultural milieu, albeit centuries after the term Hindu originated. Many contemporary Hindus will say that Hinduism is more a way of life than a religion, no matter what spiritual lineage or tradition they are a part of or their political affiliation.

WHAT ARE THE ORIGINS OF THE WORD 'HINDUTVA' AND HOW IS IT DEFINED TODAY?

Hindutva as a single word literally means 'Hindu-ness'. Set against the thousands of years of dharmic traditions, it is a very modern term.

In 1888, in one of the earliest references to Hindutva, the Bengali author Bankim Chandra Chatterjee characterized the essence of Hindutva as Divine love:

“The divine is present in all human beings, so that if I love the divine reality, I love all humanity as well, and if I do not love all humanity, I cannot love the divine reality. As long as I have not understood that I and

the world are not different I have not gained either knowledge, dharma, devotion, or love. This universal love lies at the root of Hindu dharma, and there can be no Hindutva without this inalienable and indivisible love.”²

In 1901, in an essay on Hindutva, Nobel-prize winning author Rabindranath Tagore wrote about how Hindu culture has for centuries encompassed a vast array of regional customs, beliefs, and peoples, some of these entirely contrary to one another, yet still with an underlying unity to them.³

Tagore's beliefs predated Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's shaping of a political philosophy of Hindutva, yet it resonates with Savarkar's definition of Hindutva and the key markers of Hindu culture.

In 1939, building on ideas first articulated in 1923, Savarkar defined a Hindu as “someone who regards and owns this Bharat Bhumi, this land from the Indus to the Seas, as his Fatherland as well as his Holyland; i.e. the land of the origin of his religion, the cradle of his Faith.” After listing out various spiritual lineages that today would be identified as Hindu, plus Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, as being part of “Hindudom”, Savarkar notes:

“Consequently, the so-called aboriginal or hill tribes are also Hindus: because India is their Fatherland as well as their Holyland of whatever form of religion or worship they follow. This definition, therefore, should be recognized by the Government and made the test of Hindutva in enumerating the population of Hindus in the Government census to come.”⁴

Such a distinction between those spiritual traditions originating in India and those that did not, and those which did not identify India as a “holyland”, does certainly exclude Muslims, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews as being Hindu (a distinction these communities certainly do not contest; although most of today’s Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs generally consider themselves outside the umbrella of the word ‘Hindu’). The line between spiritual traditions historically originating in India and those originating elsewhere was endorsed by no less than Dalit advocate Dr BR Ambedkar and ultimately enshrined in the Indian Constitution under his direction.

This distinction is often cited by Hindutva’s critics as evidence that the philosophy posits that non-Hindus aren’t really Indian or shouldn’t be equal members of

India as a nation. This is simply not the case, based on the historical record.

Savarkar’s words from 1909, recorded at an event in England at which Mahatma Gandhi was present and is said to have agreed with, support this:

“Hindus are the heart of Hindustan ... [but] just as the beauty of the rainbow is enhanced by its varied hues, Hindustan will appear more beautiful if it assimilated all that is best in Muslim, Parsi, Jewish and other communities.”⁵

Further to this point, in 1937 Savarkar stated

“Let the Indian state...not recognize invidious distinctions whatsoever as regards the franchise, public services, offices, taxation on the grounds of religion or race. Let no cognizance be taken whatsoever of a man being Hindu or Mohammedan, Christian, or Jew. Let all citizens of that Indian State be treated according to their individual worth, irrespective of their religious or racial percentage in the general population.”⁶

Much more recently, in 2016, Indian Prime Minister Narendra

Modi, speaking at a global Sufi Muslim conference in New Delhi, drew positive parallels between Sufism in India and the Bhakti tradition, as well as with Sikh practices, before concluding, “Sufism’s contribution to poetry in India is huge. Its impact on the development of Indian music is profound. It is this spirit of Sufism, the love for their country and the pride in their nation that define the Muslims in India. They reflect the timeless culture of peace, diversity, and equality of faith in our land.” ⁷

As for other modern expressions of Hindutva as well as how Hindutva views non-Hindus, the following long statement from 2024 by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh—the leading organizational supporter of Hindutva—is telling and parallels millennia-old definitions of the word ‘Hindu’:

“The RSS...believed from day one that this country belonged to the Hindus. The RSS perceives Hindu as a term that defines the national identity of the people living in this country. It is not a religious or sectarian identity. It is as the Supreme Court of India observed, a way of life. Hindus have their own ‘View of Life’ and a ‘Way of Life’. Within the Hindu

fold there are innumerable sects and subsects that have perfect freedom to follow their ways of worship. But the national identity of the people of this country is essentially Hindu. The RSS also believes, respects, and follows the principle of Unity in Diversity as a quintessence of the Hindu worldview. For example, an average Hindu believes that the Truth is one and can be expressed, told, described, and attained and realizes in different ways all leading to the One Supreme Reality. Anyone who subscribes to this worldview, accept and respect Bharat’s history [India’s history], nurture the country through their social values and make sacrifices to protect this value systems are Hindus in the eyes of the RSS, notwithstanding their religious moorings and affiliations.”

As for the place of Christians and Muslims in Indian society, the RSS states:

“Christians and Muslims [in India] have not come from some alien lands. They are all children of Mother Bharat. At some point of time in history their ancestors might have changed their religion and ways of worship. But that does not separate

them from the Hindu society in the larger context.”

Certainly one can find examples of supporters of Hindutva, members of the RSS or BJP or other aligned organizations not embodying the lofty language cited above. As is the case with all secular philosophies or spiritual belief systems, one should expect gaps between theory and practice. However, to downplay that the leading proponents of Hindutva over the past century and a half

presented their political philosophy as a broadly inclusive one rooted in reverence for the culture of India, which they label ‘Hindu’ as has been done for more than a millennia, rather than an exclusionary one based around contemporary narrower religious categories played against one another, as critics of Hindutva regularly do and continually allege, ignores entirely the words of the leading minds and organizations espousing Hindutva.

The Supreme Court of India definition of Hindutva: “Hindutva is understood as a way of life of state of mind and is not to be equated with or understood as religious Hindu fundamentalism...it is a fallacy and error of law to proceed on the assumption...that the use of words Hindutva or Hinduism per se depicts an attitude hostile to all persons practicing any religion other than the Hindu religion.”⁸

In the past decade a more generalized definition of Hindutva is sometimes put forth: Hindutva is Hinduism that resists. Under such a definition Hindutva is resisting, broadly speaking, several things:

- *Misinformation in academia and the media about what contemporary Hindus believe and do, often rooted in stereotypes originating in colonial-era misportrayals and then perpetuated by Leftist historians and thinkers in the latter half of the 20th century.*
- *Attempts by modern conservative Muslims and Christians, in India especially, to denigrate Hinduism and forcefully proselytize to Hindus, sometimes under the justification that such activities are a matter of religious freedom. For observers in the West, it's important to note that the rhetoric towards Hindus from conservative Muslim and Christian leaders in India itself is often much more highly critical than is the case coming from comparatively more liberal segments of these faiths in the West.*
- *Efforts to block Hindus from asserting the value of their culture on the world stage, as well as efforts to present India and Hindus as being somehow “backwards”, exoticized, and somehow lesser in comparison to other religious traditions, cultures, and nations. This is in response to the perception that both from colonial times, through a post-independence India dominated by socialist governments, Hinduism was not given its rightful place of prominence in India as being the foundation of Indian society.*

A TIMELINE OF HINDUTVA AS A POLITICAL MOVEMENT

A fully detailed history of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism in India politics is beyond the scope of this guide. From a reporting standpoint, however, the following timeline shows key moments in the history of the terminology, organizations, events, and some of the individuals involved in the past century or so.

1880S

The term Hindutva is used to describe the inclusive nature of the culture of India. At this point there is no explicitly political aspect of the usage.

EARLY 1900S

Though the intellectual seeds of the Indian independence movement had been planted decades earlier, including by some of the earliest users of the term Hindutva, in this time period the movement began coalescing, across communal lines.

Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, an avowed atheist, while in England studying law, was involved in a number of groups advocating for

India's independence. Some of his writings were banned by British authorities. He was ordered to be extradited to India from England for his independence activities in 1910. He would be sentenced to life-imprisonment for his work for Indian independence.

1915

The Hindu Mahasabha is founded to advocate for Hindu interests. It eventually would oppose Gandhi's Quit India movement—due in part to concerns that set against the backdrop of World War I, the movement would endanger the security of India—oppose caste or community-based divisions, distance itself from the civil disobedience movement and even help recruit troops for the British army during World War II.

1922

While imprisoned, Savarkar articulates his vision of Hindutva, with India being rooted in Hindu culture, broadly defined, and a future Indian state granting equal rights to members of all communities, Hindu or not.

Two years later, following many attempts at petitioning for his release from prison, Savarkar is successful. Though he would go on to speak widely about Hindutva, serve as president of the Hindu Mahasabha, his explicit criticisms of the British empire declined. It was during his time at the Hindu Mahasabha that the organization formed alliances with the Indian Muslim League and opposed Gandhi's Quit India movement.

1925

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), meaning “National volunteer organization”, is formed for broadly similar purposes as the Hindu Mahasabha: to stand up for Hindu culture and values and unify the various segments of Hindu society towards the goal of building a strong Indian nation. It too was explicitly opposed to caste or community-based divisions in its ranks. Though often described today as a paramilitary group, such a description is no doubt disputed by many of its members, likely in no small part as its groups don't engage in military training (their exercises are more akin to scouting). Today the RSS is one of the leading organizations promoting the values of Hindutva.

1948

In the months following India's independence from Britain, and against the backdrop of the monumental violence of Partition, Mahatma Gandhi is assassinated by Nathuram Godse, a former member of the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha. Godse had attempted to kill Gandhi previously, four years earlier, and had plotted to do so several more times before succeeding. As for Godse's motivations, he had several and complex ones: Godse said that he actually admired Gandhi, but he felt Gandhi's actions contributed to the violence of Partition and Hindu-Muslim communal violence more broadly, and that if Gandhi wasn't stopped, further communal violence would be the outcome. In the aftermath of the assassination, the RSS was banned for a period of time and Savarkar was arrested and charged in the plot. Ultimately Godse and one other accomplice were sentenced to death the following year. Savarkar was cleared of being involved. To this day, that Godse was a former member of the RSS is used by critics of Hindutva as a smear against the political philosophy as a whole.

1951

The Bharatiya Jana Sangh party is founded, emerging as a political party associated with the RSS. It would continue on as the leading political party espousing Hindutva as its political philosophy through The Emergency (see below for more). It advocated for the full integration of Kashmir into India as early as 1953. It ceased to exist in 1977, evolving into the Janata Party, from 1977-1980, with the Bharatiya Janata Party continuing to this day as its successor and as the leading proponent of Hindutva in Indian politics.

1964

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) is founded as a cultural organization to protect Hindu dharma and promote Hindu culture, here again broadly viewed as including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism. At its founding meeting leaders of all these religious communities are present, including the current Dalai Lama. In the decades since its founding, the VHP has developed related but independent organizations in many countries of the world, sometimes focusing on subsets of the community (college students, temple leadership and

management, social service). Alongside the RSS, the VHP is one of the leading organizations inspired by Hindutva.

1975-1977

“The Emergency”. In response to growing civil and communal unrest, as well as economic troubles, Indira Gandhi’s Congress Party suspends the Constitution, institutes strict censorship of all media, and targets all opposition politicians and groups. The RSS, alongside Islamist groups, the Communist Party of India, and virtually all other opposition to the Congress Party are banned, with leaders arrested. Though this banning of the RSS in this time period is often mentioned by critics of Hindutva, it is important to note that all political opposition was banned during this time period and that the RSS was hardly unique in being banned during The Emergency period.

In 1977, the Janata Party (an amalgamation of groups opposed to The Emergency and Congress) is elected to power, before being defeated a few years later.

1980

Bharatiya Janata Party formed, emerging out of post-Emergency years politics. Its initial successes

were limited, not coming into power for nearly two decades.

1992

Nearly two hundred years after a British court official stated that the Babri Masjid was built over the remains of a destroyed Hindu temple, consistent efforts to re-establish worship of Lord Ram on the site by both Hindus and Sikhs since the middle of the 19th century, and increased agitation by the VHP and BJP on the issue in the latter half of the 20th century, the situation boils over. On December 6, a rally organized by the VHP and BJP at the site grew to more than 150,000 people. The Babri Masjid had been cordoned off by police in an attempt to protect it. By noon, the police cordon was breached, police fled, and within a few hours the mosque—unused for more than four decades prior—was demolished. In the months following the destruction, inter-religious riots took place in many parts of India, leaving several thousand people dead. Later terrorist attacks in India used the destruction of the Babri Masjid as justification. Additionally, several thousand Hindu temples were attacked and destroyed by Muslim mobs in Pakistan,

Bangladesh, and Afghanistan in retaliation. In the wake of this, the RSS is briefly banned.

1999-2004

The BJP wins an outright majority of seats in Parliament and Atal Bihari Vajpayee becomes Prime Minister, a post he'd retain until 2004. During Vajpayee's term as prime minister, India begins economic liberalizations that kick off growth that continues to this day.

During this time period Narendra Modi becomes Chief Minister of Gujarat, a post he held during the 2002 Gujarat Riots. These riots, stemming from a rail car of Hindu pilgrims being set on fire by a mob of Muslims which killed some 60 people, led to the deaths, according to official figures, of roughly 1000 people and the injury of some 2500. Of the dead, 80% were Muslim. In the aftermath, Modi was widely blamed for at worst, instigating the rioting, and at best, being complacent. For a time, he was banned from entering the US, but was exonerated for any role in the violence by India's Supreme Court in 2012. Despite this exoneration, Modi is still personally blamed for the riots by political opponents of the BJP.

2014-TODAY

The BJP is elected into power again, with Narendra Modi as Prime Minister, first in 2014 and then again in 2019. Two long-desired, promised policies—policies highly debated in India, South Asia, and the diaspora—are carried out:

- › The full integration of the portion of the Kashmir region controlled by India into the Republic of India. Since the time of Independence, this region had been plagued with cross-border terrorism and proxy war by Pakistan and saw the religio-ethnic cleansing of its indigenous Hindu population (Kashmiri Pandits) in the late 1980s. The integration was done by vote of Parliament, abrogating Articles 370 and 35A of the Constitution, two articles that were always intended to be temporary. The move creates two new Union Territories: Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh. Previously the region had separate laws than the rest of India, and restrictions on investment and property ownership. As Union Territories, the region is now subject to the same laws as the rest of the nation and property ownership restrictions are removed.

- › The re-establishment of a temple to Lord Ram in Ayodhya, one of seven key sacred sites for Hindus. (The spiritual importance of Ayodhya for the vast majority of Hindus cannot be overstated. It is analogous in importance to the Temple Mount for Jews, or Mecca for Muslims.) After the Indian Supreme Court ordered an archeological survey that found there was indeed some sort of pre-Islamic structure under the Babri Masjid, likely a temple of some sort and that the site had been used for dharmic worship for centuries prior construction is allowed to begin in 2020. The same court ruling found fault with the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992, as well as provided significant land for the construction of a new, modern mosque, nearby. The temple is inaugurated in January 2024, in the midst of election campaigning, though the full complex will not be completed for several years.

A third policy, the establishment of a Uniform Civil Code, which would institute one set of secular, civil laws to all of India's citizens, eliminating separate religious law codes, is expected to be enacted should the BJP win in upcoming elections in 2024.

In addition, in an effort to provide a fast-track to citizenship for persecuted members of non-Muslim religious minority communities who fled widespread and persistent religious persecution in neighboring nations and are already residing in India, the BJP passes the Citizenship Amendment Act in 2019. The CAA was finally

implemented in 2024. CAA reduces the years required for these persons to live in India before being eligible to apply for citizenship and only applies to persons who arrived prior to the end of 2014. It does not change immigration requirements or otherwise restrict immigration of Muslims from neighboring nations into India, nor does it change the citizenship rights of existing citizens.

FREQUENTLY MADE ACCUSATIONS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT HINDUTVA & HINDU NATIONALISM

DO HINDU NATIONALISTS BELIEVE BEING HINDU IS MORE OF AN ETHNIC IDENTITY THAN A RELIGIOUS ONE?

The short answer is no. Either by early broad definitions of Hindutva proponents or later more specific definitions by Indian courts, there is no exclusive ethnic component to being Hindu that's been teased out. Hindu can be seen as a cultural identity, however.

A more complex answer is to question the framing of this frequently made accusation.

Hindu nationalism posits that India is historically and currently rooted in Hindu culture. In this framework, this is undoubtedly true as the definition of Hindu is more expansive than narrower, contemporary definitions of Indic religions (i.e. Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh). This also need not be taken to be an ethnic descriptor, as in practice there are Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs who have no current or historic family ties to India or any of the nations of modern South Asia — all of these religions have no formal restrictions on conversion based on ethnicity. Yet all of these

traditions trace back to India and view it as, to use Savarkar's term, a "holyland" and thus are parts of Hindu culture from a Hindutva perspective.

It is a fair criticism to point out that in the 21st century, with harder distinctions between these different spiritual traditions in vogue than historically was the case, that labeling them all as 'Hindu' is not accurate in terms of how practitioners might identify. Yet, that all these spiritual traditions and their accompanying cultures originated in and have indelible ties to India as a sacred geography is undoubtedly true.

DO HINDU NATIONALISTS WANT TO OVERTURN INDIA'S SECULAR CONSTITUTION AND BECOME A HINDU STATE?

No. Among the mainstream of self-identified Hindu nationalists, there is no agitation to rewrite India's Constitution so that Hinduism becomes the state religion.

There is, however, a strong sentiment to modify how secularism has been put into practice in India and to correct

for what is seen as a favoring of minority religious rights and a constraining or downplaying of those of Hindus.

Key to understanding this sentiment, from the perspective of a reader in the United States and the West broadly, is to recognize that secularism in India has been interpreted and implemented very differently. In the US, secularism ideally means that the government favors no one religion over another and that apart from some narrow circumstances, cannot interfere in affairs of religion.

In India, secularism has meant that the government allows different religious laws to apply in personal matters for minority communities, provides subsidies for pilgrimages for minority communities, and conversely in some states actively regulates the inner workings of temples and religious institutions of the majority Hindu community. Overall, while there is no state religion, rather than government keeping an arms length from religion, there is strong state intervention in religious affairs of Hindus. This is carry over from colonial times when British law in India recognized Sharia and cobbled together a Hindu law, with independent India adding Christian and Parsi law as well.

Under the most recent government, there has been a strong push to level the playing field between religious communities — particularly in regards to instituting one set of civil laws to the entire population in the form of a Universal Civil Code. Though portrayed by critics as interfering in religious affairs and moving away from secularism, seen objectively, this would actually bring India's implementation of secularism closer to the norms of secularism in the West. Moreover, religious laws do tend to impact women disproportionately, oftentimes denying them equal rights. Allowing Hindu temples to be run independent of government interference, to the degree that houses of worship of minority communities are, would also strengthen India's secularism.

DO HINDU NATIONALISTS WANT TO GIVE MORE RIGHTS TO HINDUS THAN OTHER RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN INDIA?

No. Recent proposed efforts to create a Uniform Civil Code and the general sentiment of celebrating the majority Hindu culture are often interpreted by the opponents and critics of the current government in India desiring to give Hindus more rights than other communities have. Such a move does upend decades of how religious minorities have been treated by Indian governments. However, having one set of civil laws that applies equally to all communities is not objectively giving Hindus more rights than others. Establishing a Universal Civil Code would bring India's civil law up to the standards of other avowedly secular nations, with all people being treated equally under the law.

IS HINDU NATIONALISM SIMILAR TO CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM?

No. If one takes seriously spiritual worldviews, Hindu nationalism does not have any similarity with Christian nationalism.

Hindu nationalism does center and celebrate the culture of the majority religious community of India and insist that Hindu religious institutions and cultural contributions be placed on equal footing with those of minority communities. In that Hindutva defines who is a Hindu culturally, and many Hindus themselves describe Hinduism as much as a way of life as a religion as defined in the West, the lines between Hindu identity and Indian identity can sometimes be blurred.

One of the leading definitions of Christian nationalism describes it as a “cultural framework that blurs distinctions between Christian identity and American identity, viewing the two as closely related.” Thus a very superficial parallel can be made (if one sets aside the fact that Christianity did not develop in North America, but in the Middle East).

However the details of Hindu teachings (that there are multiple

valid perspectives and paths related to the Divine, to start) and statements by leading proponents of Hindutva historically and in modern times (Prime Minister Modi’s statements on Sufism, cited above, for example), all point to significant differences between Hindutva and Christian nationalism in both principle and practice.

These differences only increase the more you examine them: The majority of Hindu nationalists do not propose all the people of India be made to follow Hindu religious customs, nor eliminate non-Hindus from being able to live in India or participate in civic life, still less posit that Hindu culture should be forcefully imposed on neighboring nations in some expansionist manner and, even still less, be imposed on the world as a whole.

Hindutva also does not say that non-Hindus are ‘damned’, ‘heathens’ or a lesser ‘unbeliever’ or must be converted to Hinduism. Such notions simply do not exist in any Hindu philosophies.

Hindu nationalism does not propose creating a Hindu theocratic state — nor could such a thing even be practically possible as there is no central Hindu religious authority, single pontiff, nor a single body of Hindu civil or criminal law that

could be implemented. This is in addition to the fact that no Hindu tradition says that it has the sole correct interpretation of truth. The opposite is the reality, both for Hindu spiritual teachers and political Hindu nationalists, that there are multiple ways of understanding the relationship between manifest existence and the Divine, and that all should be respected and reciprocated.

This last belief alone should render absurd any real parallel between Hindu nationalism and Christian nationalism.

Christian nationalism claims a monopoly on truth, on theology, and proposes that its beliefs be imposed on non-Christians, that Christianity should be expanded globally, and that conservative Christian religious principles should form the sole basis of government and civil life.

Furthermore, against any notion that Hindutva was conceived of on racist or supremacist lines, Savarkar's words on the unity of all humankind are apt: "There is throughout this world...but a single race, the human race kept alive by one common bond, the human blood. [...] Nature is constantly trying to overthrow the artificial barriers between race and race. [...] The fundamental unity of man from pole to pole is true, all else only relatively so." ⁹

IS HINDU NATIONALISM INSPIRED BY NAZISM AND FASCISM?

No. Critics of Hindu nationalism frequently cite a pre-World War II visit by Hindu Mahasabha leader BS Moonje to fascist Italy to observe cultural institutions as evidence of fascist inspiration for Hindutva. Such a visit did occur. However Italy was visited alongside England, France, and Germany for the purposes of learning how Western nations' institutions functioned and might be applied to a future independent India. It was the military training and organization of England, France, Germany, and Italy alike that informed Hindu nationalists of the time, not simply fascist Italy.¹⁰

As for Nazism itself, there are quotes supportive of Nazism from early Hindutva ideologues. These quotes express admiration for how Nazism united Germany, but were critical of what that unification resulted in, and there are also unequivocally anti-Nazi statements that can just as easily be cited.

For example, in the latter category, the vice president of the Hindu Mahasabha (a Hindutva body and precursor to more modern Hindu nationalist organizations) said, near the outbreak of World War II:

“In the conflict of ideologies, the Hindus have made their position perfectly clear. We hate Nazism and Fascism. We are the enemies of Hitler and Mussolini. We are long and struggling for our emancipation, and we want to repel any dictator who would try to reduce sections of humanity to slavery to serve the whims of his own megalomania.”¹¹

Saying that Hindu nationalism is inspired by European fascism is a critical and selective oversimplification to the point of inaccuracy. Prior to World War II, Nazism garnered public support in the US and the UK as well, it must be remembered, and the varying views in India be placed in a similar context.

IS HINDU NATIONALISM AN 'UPPER CASTE' MOVEMENT?

No. Hindu nationalism critics will often assert that the goal is to promote “upper caste” values and customs. When you look at the statements of the founders of the philosophy and the leading Hindu nationalist organizations you find something entirely opposite: A solid rejection of the importance of caste or community-based identities, and in fact, in some, the call for

jettisoning it from Indian society.

In 1915, Savarkar described the social institution of caste “the greatest curse of India” and urged, “It must be swept away, root, and branch.” He called it a failed experiment in social organization.¹²

Later, in the late 1930s, even though other leading figures in the struggle for India’s independence supported traditional caste or community-based distinctions, the RSS was conceived of as a unifying national organization beyond such divisions. Even the renowned anti-caste activist Dr Ambedkar noted, upon visiting an RSS meeting, that there were as many members of Scheduled Castes in the group as others, a sense of equality, and no sense of social distinctions.¹³

Today, though community-based discrimination in India persists despite being outlawed decades ago, the current prime minister of India, a proponent of Hindutva, comes from a so-called depressed caste background. The current and most recent past presidents of India are from similarly Schedule Caste or Schedule Tribe heritage.

The fact is that the leading organizations promoting Hindutva over the past century — the RSS, VHP foremost amongst them — have explicitly opposed

discrimination based on caste or community, as well as promoted a broad and inclusive definition of what Hinduism is and who is a Hindu.

IF 'HINDUTVA' IS NOT WHAT ITS CRITICS CLAIM IT TO BE, WHY DO HINDU AMERICANS CLAIM THE TERM IS BEING WEAPONIZED AND USED TO SILENCE THEM?

In the past decade particularly, critics of Hindutva have weaponized the term against Hindus in the United States they believe support the present BJP-led government in India.

Regardless of the person's exact political beliefs and even if they are objectively left wing in the US political spectrum, for critics of Hindutva and the BJP, if you are not actively denouncing both, then you are labeled far-right wing, an extremist, a Hindu nationalist, a Hindu supremacist, or a Hindu fascist. It is used to attempt to place an individual into a category beyond the pale of reasonable discussion and shut down consideration of the details of their beliefs.

The frequent mischaracterization of Hindutva being rooted in fascism and Nazism is done for the same reason: To place the political philosophy in a category so morally-aborrent that it ought not be discussed except to condemn it at every mention.

This intellectual crib sheet says that if you are a Hindu not condemning Hindutva, you are actively supporting it and therefore need to be called out for your ethical and moral failings, viewed with suspicion, and treated as dangerous.

Activists of all kinds have employed this tactic, but it has especially concerned Hindu Americans when employed by those in academia and the media. One such example is the Hindutva Harassment Field Manual, authored by self-described scholar-activists, which demonizes those Hindu American students and faculty espousing "elite Hindu ideas". The authors warn specifically Muslim, Christian, Dalit, and LGBTQ+ students that they may be in danger because of the former's mere presence on campus.

END NOTES

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- 5. Hindutva: Origin, Evolutions and Future (p. 223)**
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- 8. Hindutva is a Secular Way of Life**
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- 10. Hindutva: Origin, Evolutions and Future (p. 194)**
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PODCASTS

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Who is a Hindu?

All About Hinduism Podcast

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/all-about-hinduism/id1672092973?i=1000605467628>

HINDUTVA & HINDU NATIONALISM

A GUIDE FOR PERPLEXED REPORTERS & OTHER ONLOOKERS

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) is an educational and advocacy organization established in 2003.

HAF advances the understanding of Hinduism to secure the rights and dignity of Hindu Americans now and for generations to come.

We do this by providing:

- accurate and engaging educational resources about Hinduism and Hindu Americans
- impactful trainings, advocacy and services that protect and promote religious liberty, free expression, equality and justice
- critical and creative programs empowering Hindu Americans to sustain their culture and identity

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