THE INDIA FORUM
A JOURNAL-MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

October 25, 2026

What the Failed Attack on an Illinois Temple Reveals about anti?Indian Hate in the US

By: Arun Brahmbhatt

Anti-Indian racism in the US often folds into anti-Hindu hatred and the targetting of places of worship. This bigotry derives from a long history of the right claiming the US as a Christian country with no place for idol worship.

Lawmakers in the United States are calling for a failed attack on the Sri Venkateswara Swami Temple in Aurora, Illinois, to be investigated as a hate crime. On 11 October 2026, as hundreds of Hindu worshippers gathered for the first day of Navaratri, a celebration of the divine feminine over nine nights, a 19-year-old man travelled to the Hindu temple, armed with a rifle and body armour, according to prosecutors. A jammed gun and a tip from the suspect's co-worker prevented a massacre. Authorities located a manifesto written by the suspect espousing white supremacist views.

> Anti-Indian and anti-Hindu hate in the United States are deeply intertwined.

US Representatives Ro Khanna, a Democrat, and Rich McCormick, a Republican, warned in a letter to the Federal Bureau of Investivation and the Department of Justice that this plot "did not emerge in isolation." They pointed to a broader rise in hostility toward Hindu Americans and Indian Americans. A 2026 Carnegie Endowment survey found that one in four Indian American adults reported being called a slur since the start of 2025.

In September 2026, for example, Bo French, a Texas Republican candidate for state office, posted a photo of a University of Texas at Austin football game that has been viewed 54 million times. Referring to the Indian American students centred in the photo, he claimed "the problem is now obviously far worse than anyone imagined." French's post provoked social media responses calling for violence against Indians and desecrating Hindu temples.

French's post said nothing about religion, yet the responses it provoked took aim at Hindu temples. As a professor of Hindu studies, I argue that this is because anti-Indian and anti-Hindu hate in the United States are deeply intertwined. Some of this hostility targets the Hindu worship of deities through sacred images, and it draws on a history of prejudice portraying Hindus as idolaters. This hate is amplified on the same online platforms that spread racial hostility.

The Demonization of Hindu worship

In Hindu temples, worship centres on "murtis," or consecrated images in which the deity is understood to be present. These temples and images have become frequent objects of online abuse.

In September 2025, Alexander Duncan, then a Republican US Senate candidate in Texas, objected to a large image of the deity Hanuman in Sugar Land, Texas. He asked, "Why are we allowing a false statue of a false Hindu God to be here in Texas? We are a Christian nation!" This post was viewed over 6 million times. In August 2026, pastor Dale Partridge posted an image of the Swaminarayan Akshardham Temple in New Jersey, claiming "our 1700s Christian forefathers would have this demon temple levelled in 24 hours."

> The charge that Hindus worship false gods and idols took hold in American national culture nearly two centuries ago.

Such rhetoric is widespread online. A September 2026 report by the Center for the Study of Organized Hate found that Hindus "have been singled out for attacks on the basis of their religion." The report states that posts routinely refer to devotees as "demon worshippers," deride Hindu deities and sometimes call for temples to be destroyed and replaced with "American" monuments. The report finds that these posts frame Hindu worship as "fundamentally incompatible with Christianity."

When these posts invoke America and Christianity, they represent an outlook that sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry call Christian nationalism: the belief that America should be distinctively Christian. In their survey from 2017, almost a third of Americans

said that the federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation.

I believe this current manifestation of Christian nationalist hostility to Hinduism is best understood in the context of the broader history of American Christian responses to Hinduism.

The Long History of Prejudice

As religious studies scholar Michael Altman argues, the charge that Hindus worship false gods and idols took hold in American national culture nearly two centuries ago. Nineteenth-century American schoolbooks, shaped by Protestant beliefs, sorted religions into "true and false," treating Hindu "idolatry" as proof of moral degradation.

In her study of Hinduism in America, scholar Vasudha Narayanan demonstrates that in the early 20th century, some Americans embraced Hindu ideas while keeping Hindus themselves at a distance. She explains that though a 1917 law barred most immigration from Asia, some Americans found inspiration in Hindu thought and yoga practices, presenting these not as Hindu but as "universal" spirituality.

> Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom depicted Hindus performing human sacrifice.

Religion scholar Diana Eck estimates that after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act opened the door to immigrants from Asia, the population of Hindu Americans reached over 1 million by 2000.

Starting in the 1970s, these Hindus built dozens of temples. However, Eck shows that these new temples were often met with hostility. In 1983, for example, attackers desecrated a temple outside Pittsburgh, smashing sacred images and scrawling "Leave" on the temple altar. In the early 1990s, vandals spray-painted a future temple site in New Jersey with "Get out Hindoos."

Religious studies scholar Sailaja Krishnamurti traces how this animosity continued into the 21st century. She points to the film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* which depicted Hindus performing human sacrifice, and to televangelists such as Pat Robertson, who denounced Hinduism as "demonic." These depictions, she argues, are reflected in violence against Hindus. In 2019, a vandal spray-painted messages about Jesus and defaced images of Hindu deities.

Reading Religion as Race

The Aurora suspect's manifesto does not single out Hindus nor does it mention "false gods." According to US Representative Raja Krishnamoorthi, the manifesto describes "Indians, Jews, Black people and other minorities as 'sub-human.'" Yet police chief William Nord said the suspect "was looking for a large Hindu temple." The suspect's hatred was expressed in racial terms, but his target was a Hindu place of worship.

Education scholar Khyati Joshi calls this blending of racial and religious animosity the "racialisation of religion." In a society where whiteness and Christianity have been treated as the norm, she argues, brown skin can serve as a stand-in for a presumed "other" faith. As a consequence of this racialisation, Joshi argues that "the religious nature of discrimination is overlooked."

She gives the example of the "Dotbusters," a gang that attacked Indian Americans in New Jersey in the 1980s. While newspapers called the attacks "racial beatings," the gang's name referred to the "dot" worn by Hindu women.

From Posts to Violence

Krishnamoorthi, who was inside the temple with his family on the day of the attempted attack, later stated in an emotional press conference: "This shooter was radicalised by his environment. He was radicalised by social media until he told a coworker he could not wait 'to kill Indians.'"

> The Aurora suspect's manifesto describes Indians, Jews, Black people and other minorities as 'sub-human'.

In tracking discrimination online, Stop AAPI Hate, a coalition tracking anti-Asian discrimination, found that South Asians were the targets of 71% of the online threats of violence against Asian groups. They note that a dominant theme of these posts was that of an "Indian invasion."

Economists Karsten Müller and Carlo Schwarz have linked online hate to offline violence. Policy experts argue that confronting online extremism requires greater coordination across all social media companies. These scholars support a growing chorus of voices calling for accountability when hate is manifested.

Racial hatred and the demonisation of Hindu gods have different sources and sometimes different voices, but on the first day of Navaratri, these forms of hate converged in a parking lot in Aurora.

In the aftermath of the failed attack, Hindu Americans are pointing to the need to speak out against both racial and religious hate.

Arun Brahmbhatt is an assistant professor of religion at Syracuse University, USA.

This article is being republished here from The Conversation. Read the original article here.