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'Hinduphobia': How the Language of Social Justice Works to Serve Hindu Nationalism in the US Diaspora

By: Sravya Tadepalli,Sunita Viswanath

Accusations of Hinduphobia that are made in the US have become an easy way to silence criticism of Hindu nationalism. Challenging this agenda requires both active condemnation of the Hindu right as well as active compassion and support for diaspora Hindus who experience discrimination.

In 2021, dozens of scholars from more than 53 universities planned an online academic conference, "Dismantling Global Hindutva" (DGH). The conference would discuss the impact of Hindu nationalism (or Hindutva ideology) on human rights, science, law, and other areas where Hindu extremism has affected the world.

A month before the conference, thousands of right-wing Hindus attacked organisers and participants with vicious ferocity. They sent death threats that forced some scholars to pull out. Hindu nationalist groups including the Hindu American Foundation (HAF), the Coalition of Hindus of North America (CoHNA), and the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) mobilised their bases to send hundreds of thousands of emails to universities decrying the conference as Hinduphobic. The attacks started well before the programme and the participants were announced--the conference was targeted simply because of the name, "Dismantling Global Hindutva."

The campaign rattled many university leaders. Conference organisers were called into meetings to explain themselves and school logos were pulled off from the DGH website. The conference ultimately went on as planned. But by arguing that Hindutva was Hinduism and that the conference would make Hindu students feel unsafe on campus, right-wing Hindus were able to create significant anxiety around sponsorship of the conference.

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The weaponisation of 'Hinduphobia' to shut down any criticism of the current Indian government and the growth in the term's purchase reveals the extent to which right-wing Hindus have depended on claims of discrimination to legitimise their own discriminatory agenda. Hinduphobia accusations have gained popularity over the last few years because they are an easy way for Hindu nationalists to silence criticism of Hinduism or Hindu nationalism. Nobody wants to be a racist, and well-meaning non-South Asian liberals too often take the bait of believing that criticism of Hindutva or caste discrimination is out of place and neocolonialist.

Challenging this agenda will require both active condemnation of histrionic efforts by the Hindu right to paint anti-Hindutva sentiment as discriminatory as well as active compassion for Hindus who have been marginalised because of their religion.

A history of phobias

The activism against the Dismantling Global Hindutva conference was just the start of a new Hindu nationalist effort to use the term Hinduphobia to silence critics of the Modi government and its atrocities. Echoing the trend of any criticism of Israel being decried as anti-Semitic, as has been visible in the past few weeks across the world, Hindu nationalists have deployed the same Zionist strategy to deflect criticism of the Hindu nationalist project.

> Hindu nationalists in the U.S. began increasingly using Hinduphobia to deflect criticism of the Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The term Hinduphobia has been used before - not always in good faith - to oppose people and institutions believed to be anti-Hindu. It started being widely used in the early 2000s, primarily to castigate academic literature and textbook content that some Hindus in the West believed were orientalist or portrayed Hinduism in a poor light. The term gained wider parlance during the 2005 California textbook controversy, when some Hindu nationalists and groups in the US used the term to argue that social studies textbooks were biased against Hinduism. Primary amongst them was Rajiv Malhotra, founder of the Infinity Foundation, who became particularly well-

known for accusing South Asian studies departments at various universities for hatemongering against Hindus, singling out the work of Wendy Doniger and other academics.

Yet the term's runaway popularity is even more recent. Hindu nationalists in the US began increasingly using Hinduphobia to deflect criticism of the Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. HAF only began regularly using the term in 2019 - the same year Modi was re-elected. An instance is the reaction to an op-ed by Maya Jasanoff, published during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visit to the U.S. in June and calling out the atrocities of the Modi government and the impact of Hindu nationalism in the diaspora. HAF's Suhag Shukla decried the essay as "targeting Hindu Americans" and "denying Hinduphobia" although the article did neither.

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Similarly, the term has been used to shut down any criticism of Hinduism or Hindu institutions, such as the alleged use of forced Dalit labour to build the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) temple in New Jersey. Right-wing Hindu groups also attacked efforts to ban caste discrimination in US institutions as anti-Hindu, saying it would create a negative perception of Hinduism. Despite being practicing Hindus, Hindus for Human Rights members have been repeatedly vilified as Hinduphobic for mobilising against nationalism in the name of our faith.

The term Hinduphobia is considered to have a particular insidiousness because the word itself is similar to Islamophobia - which, after the 9/11 attacks in the US, rapidly grew in use to describe the hate experienced by Muslims and people perceived to be Muslim in response to the attacks. The similarity of the words implies that anti-Hindu sentiment is as serious or on par with Islamophobia and lends the former unearned gravitas.

But while anti-Muslim discrimination in the West is widespread and well-documented, anti-Hindu discrimination happens far less frequently. Furthermore, Hindus from Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan - the Hindus who face the worst systemic marginalisation - do not use the term Hinduphobia to describe their condition. The discrimination they face is also arguably more because they are religious minorities than because they are Hindu, especially given that communities like the Ahmadis in Pakistan and Sikhs in Afghanistan have endured similar experiences.

Minority Hindus

American Hindus do face religious bigotry. A study from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace found that 18% of Indian American Hindus report having faced religious discrimination. It is not uncommon for diaspora Hindus to face bullying from classmates , institutional disregard for religious holidays , and even pressure to convert. This is especially true in communities where there is a low Hindu population. There have also been anti-Hindu hate crimes reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

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What Hindus may not realize is that their experiences are often more because of white Christian supremacy than anti-Hindu sentiment. In other words, Hindus are targeted less because they are Hindu and more because they are *not Christian*.

Hindu nationalists also do not want to talk about the fact that violence toward Hindus is closely linked to anti-Muslim discrimination and bigotry and violence toward brown religious minorities. Many of the incidents on HAF's timeline of Hinduphobia have happened because Hindus have been perceived as Muslim, immigrants, and/or people of colour.

For example, Srinivas Kuchibhotla was murdered in Kansas in 2017 because he was perceived to be Iranian and presumably Muslim. The timeline lists several events after 9/11 where Hindus were attacked because they were mistaken to be Muslim. Many of the other incidents on the list could have happened to any Indian person, regardless of their religion, as the individuals attacked were targeted because of their appearance.

Despite the fact that Hindu nationalists often accuse Muslims of being the main instigators of discrimination against Hindus, many incidents that have been described as anti-Hindu sentiment may actually be better described as Islamophobia. The interests of Hindu bodily safety and Muslim bodily safety in the West are inextricably linked.

There is perhaps no better way of showing how Hinduphobia arguments are usually in bad faith than the fact that those who use the word rarely stand in solidarity with Muslims or other religious minorities. Organisations that push the argument rarely work in coalition with other social justice groups to fight Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment that feed into racist attacks on Hindus.

In 2008, University of Maryland professor Sonalde Desai wrote an essay for Economic and Political Weekly about what she saw as a surprising number of her young Indian American students gravitating toward Hindu nationalist and caste-based organizations. She astutely observed that many of these students were not inherently "soldiers of saffron," joining these groups because of bigotry or hate, but were looking to forge religious community and find a positive Hindu identity when they likely grew up around intolerance. This made them susceptible to indoctrination.

> These organisations often attract Hindu university students who want Hindu community but do not necessarily support Hindutva.

This is increasingly the case today. The isolation young Hindu Americans face, combined with the dearth of spaces for Hindus to practice their faith in a progressive way, has led to the rapidly growing popularity of Sangh Parivar-affiliated groups such as the Hindu Students Council (HSC) and Hindu Youth for Unity, Values and Action (Hindu YUVA).

These organisations often attract Hindu university students who want to be part of the Hindu community but do not necessarily support Hindutva. But through their programming these groups are able to radicalise young Hindus who may have experienced bigotry to externalise their experiences in support of strengthening the notion of systemic Hinduphobia. Since these organisations focus more on Hindu experiences in the diaspora, it is not uncommon for students involved to not realize or believe that certain messaging is being used to further Hindu nationalist ideas in India.

What to Do

It is important for Indians in the diaspora to defend institutions and individuals who are lambasted for Hinduphobia just for criticism of Hindu nationalism or caste. Hindu voices are especially powerful in these efforts. In response to the vitriol against DGH, Hindus for Human Rights wrote a letter to university presidents defending the conference, saying "as Hindus, we stand for respect for all people, freedom of speech, and freedom of inquiry." This was a powerful and effective way of informing universities that the criticism of the DGH conference was in bad faith, and there was nothing anti-Hindu about condemning hate.

While Hindus for Human Rights supported DGH from the beginning, the conference was not without its flaws. In the planning stages, some organisers proposed including a panel discussing the difference between Hinduism and Hindu nationalism, but the idea was set aside. It was only after the attacks on the conference that DGH organizers realised the necessity of such a panel and reached out to Hindus for Human Rights to organise one.

Understanding the difference between Hindu religious traditions and Hindutva is vitally important to pushing back against Hindu nationalism. Had this panel been on the roster from day one, it would have been a more powerful statement to counter the Hinduphobia narrative.

A strong progressive Hindu movement will be required to defeat Hindutva and annihilate caste. We note how massive protests organised by Jews of conscience calling for a ceasefire in Gaza have put greater pressure on US leaders to end the country's unquestioning support for the Israeli regime.

> The secular condescension toward identifying as a Hindu, celebrating Hindu festivals, or taking inspiration from Hindu thought contributes to grievances about anti-Hindu sentiment.

Unfortunately, the intellectual left often diminishes the voices of the Hindu faithful as being inherently bigoted. The secular condescension toward identifying as a Hindu, celebrating Hindu festivals, or taking inspiration from Hindu thought contributes to grievances about anti-Hindu sentiment. Desai wrote in 2008, "If instead of winning the hearts and minds of some of these bright young

Indian Americans, we end up rejecting and tarnishing them, forces of secularism will be the greatest losers." We have already started to lose this fight, and the left - and we include ourselves in this category - needs a different approach to counter the impact Hinduphobia narratives that are having on our community's ability to fight bigotry.

Rather than gaslighting or writing off young Hindus for holding a victim mindset when they discuss facing isolation because of their faith, we should seek to listen and understand their feelings. Those of us who care about social justice should encourage these young people to channel their experiences of marginalization into standing in solidarity with other persecuted communities.

> We must build spaces for an open-hearted and inclusive Hindu identity so the right-wing does not continue to own all Hindu religious institutions.

The left needs to understand that Hinduism encompasses diverse beliefs, some of which are bigoted and rooted in caste discrimination and misogyny, and some which promote the highest ideals of social justice. We must build spaces for an open-hearted and inclusive Hindu identity so the right-wing does not continue to own all Hindu religious institutions. We should cherish festivals such as Diwali and Navaratri while reimagining ways to honour them in anti-caste ways.

We should take up non-controversial fights on behalf of the Hindu community. This means calling out the persecution of Afghan, Sri Lankan, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi Hindus. It means pushing for Diwali to be a school holiday and culturally competent policy making. While some may say these fights are unnecessary, it is important to do this work because it is the morally consistent thing to do. It lets ordinary Hindus feel that their concerns matter, making them more amenable to learning about the human rights abuses perpetrated by right-wing Hindutva governments in India.

The weaponisation of Hinduphobia in the West has been used by right-wing Hindu organisations to avoid scrutiny for their support for Hindu nationalist policies in India. It has been used to shut down efforts to ban caste discrimination in North America and most significantly, to silence criticism of the Modi regime's atrocities against Muslims, Dalits, opposition politicians, journalists, and activists. To cry discrimination when you are advocating discrimination is the definition of hypocrisy, and it is imperative that secular and Hindu people who believe in social justice work together to call it out.

(This piece was updated to include in Footnote 1 a citation for the earliest usage of the term Hinduphobia.*)*

Sravya Tadepalli is a board member of Hindus for Human Rights and a Masters in Public Policy student at the Harvard Kennedy School. Sunita Viswanath is the executive director of Hindus for Human Rights and a long-time human rights activist based in New York.

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