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Canada: Inside the Conservative Party's growing alliance with right-wing Hindu groups

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Hindu organizations are springing up in Canada, often parroting Conservative talking points about crime, cost of living, and anti-LGBTQ politics

"Welcome," the Hindu spiritual guru intoned from an elevated stage covered in white and saffron cloth. "And very, very happy birthday to you."

It was June 2023, and Pierre Poilievre was getting a warm reception at the Hindu Sabha Temple in Brampton, Ont.

The Conservative Party leader, wearing a sash with an inscription hailing female Hindu goddesses, and a tilak, a Hindu mark on the forehead, was introduced to a [full house](#) of temple-goers as "the next Prime Minister of Canada."

By the time he got around to making remarks, Poilievre outlined his usual policy proposals—slashing taxes, balancing the budget, and cutting housing regulations. But he also had offers specifically for Canada's Hindus.

"When I go to India to meet with the Indian Prime Minister, we will sign a free trade agreement, and I will be able to sign the document in Hindi," he pledged to loud applause.

He promised to fast track licensing for immigrant professionals—a barrier for Indians and many other immigrants to Canada.

And Poilievre also expressed his solidarity with the victims of what he described as a wave of hate.

"The number of hate crimes now targeting Hindu communities are up by over 100 per cent over the last eight years," he said. (That was a bit of creative math: there were [two hate crimes](#) motivated by Hindu identity reported in Canada in 2023, and zero in the previous seven years.)

"This is the life we have under Justin Trudeau," Poilievre said. "But the good news is that we are going to turn the hurt that Trudeau has caused into the hope that Canadians need."

Some might assume the parties that have historically most supported immigration—the New Democrats and Liberals—would win the backing of most immigrants.

But it isn't the case. A [poll](#) from last spring showed that the Conservative Party now dominates with one of the largest groups of new immigrants to Canada—Hindus. They enjoy 53 per cent of their support, with the next-most-popular party, the Liberals, clocking in at 21 per cent.

As the political climate in India has shifted right, so too have politics in the Hindu diaspora.

For a decade, India has been ruled by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The BJP has tried to move India away from its historical commitment to secularism toward Hindu supremacy (known as Hindutva), often turning to [extrajudicial violence](#). Under their reign, wealth inequality has risen to a level [greater than during the British colonial period](#) and largely concentrated in the upper castes.

The BJP has relied on the increasingly large and influential Hindu diaspora in countries like Canada for important support, from [donations](#) to [lobbying](#).

In the midst of this rightward shift, a proliferation of Hindu civil society organizations have sprung up in Canada, many of them parroting Conservative talking points about crime, cost of living, and the anti-LGBTQ dog whistle of “parents’ rights.”

They’re also [championing Hindu nationalism](#), brandishing a definition of “Hinduphobia” that aims to silence criticism of Prime Minister Modi and any discussion of [caste-related discrimination](#) that exists in Canadian schools.

With a federal election looming this year and old Liberal immigrant coalitions crumbling, players within the Conservative Party and Hindu organizations are investing in an emerging alliance. While neither are truly loyal to each other, both hope it will pay off—with electoral results and the strengthening of their reactionary and sometimes shared agendas.

How the Liberals won—and started losing—the immigrant vote

Why the shift of some immigrants to the Conservative Party?

This is the question at the heart of University of Toronto sociology professor Emine Fidan Elcioglu’s work.

“Stephen Harper’s Conservative government enacted stricter citizenship requirements, expanded grounds for deportation, reduced family-class immigration, and made successful asylum cases more difficult,” Elcioglu told The Breach.

But during the same era, “the CPC strove to rebrand itself as the party of diversity, while consciously grooming Asian immigrant candidates as members of Parliament.”

They had their work cut out, because historically, Liberals have had a central hand in creating Canada’s reputation as a cultural mosaic where people of all backgrounds are welcomed and valued.

Until 1967, an immigration quota prioritized Europeans over other would-be entrants to the country. Liberal Prime Minister Lester Pearson’s government scrapped that system and replaced it with a policy that brought in skilled professionals, regardless of race—though racism still [persists](#) in how immigration operates.

Several years later, another Liberal prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, declared multiculturalism state policy and eventually opened up immigration to refugees and family members of Canadian citizens and permanent residents. As a result of these changes, most immigrants to Canada now identify as non-white visible minorities.

In 2015, the Liberal Party led by Justin Trudeau was elected on promises of [admitting thousands of Syrian refugees](#) and welcoming [immigrants' family members](#). Trudeau would go on to defend Canada as a [land that welcomes](#) “those fleeing persecution, terror and war” and admit a [record number of immigrants](#).

Together, these policies over the decades might have won the Liberals a loyal immigrant voting base.

And yet, Trudeau has taken immigrants' support for granted: unwilling to rein in the profits of landlords and developers [whose greed](#) has caused a nationwide housing crisis, Trudeau has begun [blaming immigrants](#) for the crisis and [restricting immigration](#).

This was fertile ground for Conservatives to make inroads.

There was no guarantee that these efforts would successfully recruit immigrant voters—“outreach only works if the targeted groups are receptive,” Elcioglu said. But receptive they have been.

A [poll](#) from last fall shows 45 per cent of East Asians favouring the Conservatives, well ahead of the Liberals and NDP, and 33 per cent of South Asians leaning toward the Conservatives, again leading the other parties.

Polls show religious Canadians tend to vote Conservative more than the general population. Still, even amid these broader trends, Hindus seem particularly drawn to Poilievre. His [favourability among Hindu voters](#) steadily rose in the spring while they turned increasingly away from Trudeau. Evangelical Christians are the only religious group whose positive feelings about Poilievre rose faster than Hindus'.

And a crop of right-wing Hindu groups have been working hard to raise the profile of Hindu nationalist narratives in Canada, and are eyeing the Conservatives as a path to influence.

Poilievre, the BJP's champion in Canada?

Ever since Canada's prime minister [accused India of murdering a Sikh Khalistani activist](#) on Canadian soil, Trudeau and Modi have been on the outs.

Poilievre has jumped at the chance to discredit Trudeau: “He's turned Canadians against each other at home and he's blown up our relations abroad,” he [told](#) Nepalese news outlet Namaste Radio Toronto. “We need a professional relationship with the Indian government. India is the largest democracy on Earth.”

Meanwhile, Poilievre remains the only major party leader who [refuses](#) to get the security clearance needed to view classified documents about foreign governments' political interference in Canada. Indian right-wing media has [interpreted](#) Poilievre's choice as a display of loyalty to India's version of the truth.

Poilievre might have reason to show fealty to Modi: confidential sources told [Radio-Canada](#) that Indian officials in Canada undermined the campaign of one of Poilievre's rivals for the Conservative leadership in 2022. Brampton Mayor Patrick Brown, who had previously been one of the [Canadian politicians closest to Modi](#), had begun [criticizing](#) the BJP's draconian crackdown on Indian farmers protesting agricultural reforms.

For India, a country with an increasingly militaristic and authoritarian

government [desperate](#) to [maintain](#) its slipping label as “the world’s largest democracy,” Canada’s blessing is invaluable.

Poillievre has worked to intertwine Canada and India’s fates. On Indian Independence Day in 2024—the year Modi finally began enforcing a 2019 law that [discriminates against Muslims](#) when they seek asylum from neighbouring countries—Poillievre put out a statement in which Poillievre [said](#), “May the Maple Leaf and the Tiranga [India’s tricolour flag] forever fly united in celebration of our freedom and our democracies.”

Trumped up charge of ‘Hinduphobia’ used to ‘smear and attack’

In 2023, Deputy Conservative Leader Melissa Lantsman [presented a petition](#) to the House of Commons to recognize and define “Hinduphobia” in Canada’s Human Rights Code.

Lantsman’s former advisor is Yasharth Verma, who serves as the vice president of the Southwest Ontario chapter of an organization called the Canadian Hindu Chamber of Commerce. (Verma says he was not involved in Lantsman’s decision to present the petition.)

The organization raised Hinduphobia in their [report](#) on the 2024 federal budget, which advocated for reducing the deficit and expressed “deep concern over the lack of specific measures” aimed at “addressing Hinduphobia.” Their President Kushagr Dutt Sharma publicly [celebrated](#) the re-election of Modi in 2024.

Lantsman’s petition was supported by [a letter to MPs](#) from 80 Hindu-Canadian community groups, several of them already aligned with the Hindu right, and spearheaded by the Canadian Organization for Hindu Heritage Education.

In a 33-page document on “Recognizing Hinduphobia,” Canadian Organization for Hindu Heritage Education President Ragini Sharma writes about what she claims is systemic discrimination against Hindus in academia, at school boards, and on police forces.

While naming some real expressions of racism, Sharma also labels as Hinduphobic such acts as the City of Burnaby commemorating Gauri Lankesh, a vocal critic of Hindu nationalism who was murdered by unidentified shooters; the *Toronto Star* criticising a propaganda film that justifies India’s brutal military occupation of Kashmir; and an academic giving a talk at a Toronto library about the dangers of Hindu supremacy.

The Hindu right uses a selective [list of incidents](#), such as recent scuffles between Khalistani activists and Hindus at a Brampton temple, to prove that Hinduphobia is growing in Canada.

Hindus do experience discrimination and violence in some parts of the world, like in Bangladesh, where the homes and businesses of the country’s minority Hindu population have been [attacked](#) since the fall of the Awami League government in August. But charges of “Hinduphobia” in North America are often trumped up to block criticism of the BJP’s Hindu nationalism.

“As a minority community, Hindus in the diaspora do face various forms of bigotry and discrimination,” said Pranay Somayajula of Hindus for Human Rights. “But the specific term ‘Hinduphobia’ is very much steeped in the insidious politics of Hindutva.”

Somayajula notes the term was [coined](#) by the Hindutva ideologue Rajiv Malhotra, and is often seized

upon to “smear and attack political opponents.”

A case in point: when a motion that proposed banning discrimination on the basis of caste—the rigid social hierarchy that consigns many low-caste Hindus to hereditary poverty and prejudice—came before the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in 2023, the Canadian Organization for Hindu Heritage Education launched a [campaign](#) to shut it down, arguing that the motion unfairly painted upper-caste Hindus as oppressive.

“There is no caste in Canada,” Sharma [told](#) New Canadian Media, despite [documented instances](#) of caste discrimination in Toronto schools. “This is all being brought in as Hinduphobia.”

Canadian Organization for Hindu Heritage Education won the battle—they successfully got the original motion modified, cutting out the formation of a committee to develop anti-caste curriculum recommendations and getting the motion [referred](#) to the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC)—but lost the war when the OHRC [recognized](#) caste-based discrimination in official policy.

The group has since [organized events](#) to teach parents how to engage in the school system to address “institutionalized Hinduphobia in [the] Canadian education system.” The move toward advocating for “parents’ rights” to influence classroom discussions is a standard strategy for social conservatives. In Canada, “parents’ rights” activists have tried to scrub discussions of sex, gender identity, racism and colonialism from classrooms.

In September, the Canadian Organization for Hindu Heritage Education co-hosted [an event](#) with one such “concerned parents” group to discuss [Petition E-5010](#), which seeks to end gender-affirming care for those under 16. Sharma later [urged her followers to attend](#) the “1 million march for children” in opposition to education about gender and sexual identity.

The Hindu right is not unique in trying to suppress left-wing discussions in schools. But by adopting the framing of “parents’ rights,” they reveal themselves as political players in the broader conservative movement in Canada. Their use of this phrase says to the conservative movement: you help us dictate the terms of Hindu nationalist education, and we’ll help you dictate the terms of gender and sexual identity education.

Indicative of this kind of coalition building, the Canadian Organization for Hindu Heritage Education found an ally in TDSB Trustee Weidong Pei when Pei voted against the motion to ban caste discrimination.

Pei attended their Hindu Heritage Month event in North York, which he was instrumental in organizing. Pei has gone on to seek the nomination to be the federal Conservative Party candidate for Willowdale in the upcoming federal election.

The first priority listed on his website: “defend parental rights.”

A common platform, a politics of opportunity

In September 2024, a new Hindu organization came on the scene: Canada Hindu Vote, formed to “empower Canadian Hindu voters to actively participate in the democratic process.”

This organization is typical of the soft right-wing Hindu groups that have grown into a network in Canada. Their mandates often seem innocuous, but a closer look usually reveals a commitment to right-wing causes, and specifically to promoting Hindu nationalism.

Canada Hindu Vote's launch event [featured](#) community leaders, such as the Canadian Organization for Hindu Heritage Education's president Sharma, whose claim to Hindu repute is their Hindu nationalist advocacy.

In the [sole blog post](#) on their website, Canada Hindu Vote identifies what they see as the key issues for Hindus. Many of these mirror what you'd hear from any Conservative Party spokesperson today: cost of living, crime, car theft, and economic woes. But they add the Hindu right's own concerns: vandalism of temples and infringement of parents' rights, praising Hinduism's ancient emphasis on family values.

In a recent interview, Coalition of Hindus of North America Canada President Rishabh Sarswat spoke at length about attacks on temples, distortions of Hindu history in public education, and a lack of legal and police recognition for anti-Hindu hate, as the major issues that Hindus face. In short: Hinduphobia. Only after explicit prompting did he name issues such as affordability or anti-immigrant racism.

There is no single representative body for Hindus in Canada, but by examining the constellation of existing organizations and their priorities, a distinct political platform emerges.

These groups seek to legitimize a definition of Hinduphobia that precludes criticism of the caste system and of Hindu nationalism; to promote education that [sanitizes](#) any [atrocities committed](#) under the banner of Hinduism; and to secure the ongoing prosperity of Canada's upper-caste and upper-class Hindu business community.

To achieve these goals, Hindu organizations are [lobbying representatives](#) to support their cause. They are also [working with police](#) to ensure that Hinduphobia is treated as a serious hate crime.

It should come as no surprise that such a broadly conservative set of concerns finds an outlet in the Conservative Party. As far back as April 2023, Poilievre became the first leader of a federal party to [make a statement opposing Hinduphobia](#). "We have to stop Hinduphobia and nasty comments that are made about Hindus and the vandalism and other violence targeting Hindu Canadians," he said in an interview with Prime Asia.

And yet, the Conservatives have been restrained in offering their full support to the Hindu right's agenda. Poilievre pulled out of a Diwali event as allegations of India's foreign interference in Canada raised tensions between the two countries, leading the right-wing Hindu Federation to [express](#) its "deep disappointment" in his actions and the Canada Hindu Forum to call for a [boycott](#) of his campaign event.

Sarswat lamented that every political party in Canada has ignored Hindu—or Hindu nationalist—concerns: "There has been no politician who has done significant work [toward] dismantling Hinduphobia."

Canada's Hindu right remains on the hunt for a political champion. Their politics do not align with the longtime standard-bearers for immigrants, the Liberal Party, but they have not yet wholeheartedly embraced a new party.

One long-standing ally is Liberal MP Chandra Arya, who has dutifully advanced the narrative that Hindus are under attack. Meanwhile, the more fringe Canada Hindu Forum [worked with](#) People's Party of Canada leader Maxime Bernier in support of an "end to mass immigration and...ethnic ghettos." (This did not, however, stop Bernier supporters from [calling](#) for the deportation of Hindus.)

The Conservatives and the Hindu right are opportunists—they are experimenting with championing

each others' goals, while being unwilling to offer the other support they feel has not yet been earned. For now and for the foreseeable future, an ascendant Conservative Party remains the greatest opportunity for the political advancement of the Hindu right in Canada and, conveniently, the party whose politics most closely match theirs.

The Breach made repeated attempts to get interviews with representatives of several Hindu organizations. Some of them initially agreed to speak, but then stopped answering emails and phone calls when The Breach tried to set up interviews.

Hindu advocacy, for whom?

Following clashes at a temple in Brampton in early November between Hindus and Khalistani activists, Sarswat ran [a webinar](#) titled “Canadian Hindus under Attack: Hindu organizations fight back.” It featured not only Coalition of Hindus of North America Canada and Canadian Organization for Hindu Heritage Education, but [six other groups](#) representing business, youth, temples, and right-wing cultural groups. The message was clear: we are many, and we are united in our fight.

The fight in question is in promoting a narrative that Hindus the world over are under attack, and that a militarized India cleansed of “[infiltrators](#)” can be their only safe haven. It’s similar to the narrative about Israel being advanced by right-wing Jewish organizations in North America, and indeed, [public alliances](#) between [Zionists and Hindus](#)—including [Sharma and Sarswat](#)—have been a feature of the political landscape particularly since October 2023.

There are real issues facing Hindus in Canada: international students from India have their [wages stolen](#) and work in deplorable conditions under the table because of a [cap on off-campus work hours](#); South Asian immigrants are being [scapegoated](#) for the Liberal government’s failure to deliver adequate housing, health care, and public services; and racialized Canadians earn [81 cents to the dollar](#) in comparison to white Canadians, all while cost of living [has soared](#).

But none of these issues are particular to Hindus, and none of these are the main struggles on which proponents of “Hinduphobia” are focused. These are the same problems facing other immigrants, other South Asians, other racialized residents of this country.

On those fronts, gains have always been won through social movements that unite us in our common interests, across lines of race and religion—whether that is [winning back lost wages](#), [forcing landlords to repair crumbling housing](#), or [fending off the racist far right](#). Despite the goals of Hindutva activists, Hindus cannot escape the fact that our best bet for a livable future is in building a multi-racial working-class majority.

“The CPC represents the interests of white wealthy citizens,” adds U of T’s Elcioglu. Which makes the rightward march of Canadian Hindus a tragedy, because it can only ever mean one-off deals with a ruling class happy to toss Hindus overboard the moment we are no longer convenient.

Somayajula of Hindus for Human Rights notes that “what [right-wing Hindu] groups are doing is dangerously short-sighted, and it puts our communities at risk in the name of supposedly ‘protecting’ Hindu interests.”

That is the point, really. The game and goal of the Hindu right in Canada is service to the Hindu nationalist project first. Hindus, actual people with material concerns, are a distant second priority.

Or, as Sarswat put it, “I don’t speak for all Hindus. I speak for [the] interests of Hindus.”

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