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Canada, USA... Modi's India and the Long Reach of Hindutva

Saturday 22 June 2024, by [RAMANA M.V.](#), [SUNDAR Aparna](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2024).

SPEAKING IN THE Canadian parliament in September 2023, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau revealed that Canada's security agencies were looking into "credible allegations of a potential link between agents of the Government of India and the killing of a Canadian citizen," Hardeep Singh Nijjar. [1]

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Some months later it was the turn of people in the United States to learn about a plot to assassinate another Sikh activist. [2]

To be sure, little of this evidence is public and it will likely be very hard to tie actual government officials in India to either of these cases. Yet, these allegations do offer a glimpse into how an increasingly militaristic and aggressive Indian state, espousing a Hindu supremacist or Hindutva ideology, operates in today's world.

These are far from the only cases. In October 2022, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service named India as a foreign interference threat, along with China. [3] The assessment reportedly talks about a Government of India "proxy agent" providing "electoral support — including significant amounts of money — to a number of politicians at all levels of government" with the ultimate aim of keeping "pro-Indian politicians in office." [4]

Some politicians of Indian origin strongly aligned with Hindutva have openly espoused its cause in Canada; one of them hoisted a saffron flag in Ottawa in November 2022. [5] Saffron is the color associated with Hindu right-wing groups such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the cadre force that controls a wide array of civil-society and political organizations associated with the Hindu supremacist cause. [6]

Since 2014, when Narendra Modi became Prime Minister of India, saffron has also become a color "associated with hatred and violence against Muslims." [7]

In the United States, groups associated with Hindutva have also sought to influence elections and politicians, attacking anyone seen as critical of their ideology (for example, the Representative from California, Ro Khanna). [8] In 2019 a new political action committee (PAC), Americans for Hindus, was set up, according to the FAQ on its website, "in response to recent anti-India and anti-Hindu statements and actions by members of the Progressive Caucus ("PC") of the Democratic party," [9] and funded fourteen Republican candidates for the 2020 federal elections. [10]

In August 2022, bulldozers with the faces of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Yogi Adityanath, under whom India's largest state of Uttar Pradesh has become a laboratory for some of the worst kinds of anti-Muslim hatred and violence, were used as floats in an India Day parade in Edison, New Jersey. [11]

The bulldozer has been used to demolish Muslim homes and businesses in India in a form of collective punishment, and its open display in an American parade speaks of the global spread of the symbols and practices of Hindu supremacism.

The Bogey of "Hinduphobia"

In both the United States and Canada, Hindu supremacists have tried to mark off any criticism of Hindutva or associated practices like casteism as "Hinduphobia." At a conference held in 2021 to help build legitimacy for the term, Hinduphobia was defined as a "set of antagonistic, destructive, and derogatory attitudes and behaviors" towards Hindu religion and its followers "that may manifest as prejudice, fear, or hatred." [12]

There has been a sustained effort to introduce this notion into laws. In 2023, for example, there were resolutions condemning "Hinduphobia" by Ohio state Senator Niraj Antani, [13] and by Republican Representatives Lauren McDonald and Todd Jones in the Georgia Assembly, which actually passed the resolution. [14]

A petition to Canada's House of Commons called upon the body to "recognize Hinduphobia as a term in the glossary of terms in the Human Rights Code to describe anti-Hindu prejudice and discrimination." Fortunately, the Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Persons with Disabilities responded by pointing out that Canada's government "unequivocally rejects all forms of hate and discrimination." [15]

None of this makes a lot of sense if one goes with standard meanings of the term "phobia." The Oxford English dictionary, for example, offers this meaning: "fear, horror, strong dislike, or aversion; esp. an extreme or irrational fear or dread aroused by a particular object or circumstance."

The question that one should ask is whether there is any evidence that people in North America exhibit these emotions when they encounter Hinduism, especially at levels that merit legislative action.

In fact, the playbook is borrowed from the Zionist right wing, which has been trying to define any criticism of Israel as antisemitism. [16] Similarly, Hindu supremacists define as Hinduphobic any attempts at criticizing not just Hinduism as a religion, but also the current regime in India, in particular the government's failure to curtail or punish organizations associated with Hindutva (the so-called Sangh Parivar) when they call for a genocide against Muslims. [17]

Thus, for example, when Representative Ilhan Omar introduced House Resolution 1196 (Condemning human rights violations and violations of international religious freedom in India, including those targeting Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, Adivasis, and other religious and cultural minorities), [18] the Hindu American Foundation tweeted (or X-ed): "Rep. Omar has a long record of #Hinduphobia and continues her damaging efforts." < [19]

Scholars and academics, too, have been tarred with the same brush. When many of them came together to organise a major online conference on "Dismantling Global Hindutva," its organizers and participants were at the receiving end of harassment and intimidation. [20] A member of the Hindu American Foundation termed the event "practicing Hinduphobia in the guise of academic

freedom.” [21]

Reality of Discrimination

Finally, those who raise concerns about a real form of discrimination, namely discrimination based on caste, have been accused of being Hinduphobic. In recent years, a number of reports have documented the wide prevalence of caste — a hierarchical and degrading social system — in the diaspora, not just India. [22]

For example, a 2018 survey carried out by Equality Labs documented widespread evidence for such discrimination in the United States. [23] In 2020, California’s Department of Fair Employment and Housing sued CISCO, the digital communications technology company, for caste discrimination. [24]

Thanks to these revelations, there has been a wave of action by oppressed caste or Dalit activists to have this real discrimination be recognized.

Anti-discrimination efforts succeeded in Seattle (Washington), [25] and at the Toronto District School Board in Ontario, which filed an application with the Ontario Human Rights Commission asking it to “assess and provide a framework for addressing caste oppression in a public education context.” [26]

In April 2023, California state Democratic senator Aisha Wahab introduced a bill that called for banning caste-based discrimination; [27] the bill was ultimately vetoed by Governor Gavin Newsom. [28]

This effort to highlight caste discrimination is one reason why the Republican party and other right-wing groups are raising the bogeyman of Hinduphobia.

Ohio Senator Niraj Antani condemned the anti-discrimination ordinance passed by the Seattle City Council as Hinduphobic. [29] The Canadian Organization for Hindu Heritage Education (COHHE) based in Toronto dismissed concerns about caste discrimination saying “there is no caste in Canada. This is all being brought in as Hinduphobia.” [30]

Contesting Hindutva and the Far Right

On the face of it, groups like the Canadian Organization for Hindu Heritage Education seem to be interested simply in promoting Hindu heritage and values. [31] That ostensible aim is one way these groups manage to attract members, especially younger second-generation Indians, and collect money.

In fact, they are quite political and part of a much larger grouping of organizations in the diaspora allied with the rightwing Hindu-supremacist movement.

The latter, as one of us has argued elsewhere, is part “of a global far-right, not necessarily in the sense of organizational cohesion or global conspiracy, but in the sense of shifting public discourse in that direction, undermining liberal democratic values, delegitimizing any kind of equalitarian mobilizations, normalizing fake news and anti-science perspectives, and aligning with White supremacists and Zionists.” [32]

Hindu-supremacist groups and associated organizations, for example, have been deeply involved in spreading disinformation on social media around the genocide in Gaza. [33]

These moves have not gone unchecked by members of the Indian diaspora in North America: from

caste-oppressed activists mobilizing to have caste recognized as a category of discrimination, to academics and scholars organizing the “Dismantling Global Hindutva” conference, to Muslim organizations successfully mobilizing widespread condemnation, including by the Woodbridge/Perth Amboy chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, [34] of the bulldozer in the Edison, New Jersey parade. [35]

An extensively researched report by a new multiracial, interfaith, anti-caste coalition of organizations and activists against all forms of supremacist politics maps and exposes Hindutva’s vast U.S. network. [36]

Though with relatively meager financial and organizational resources when compared to the forces of Hindutva, which are able to draw on the resources of the Indian state and of other rightwing supremacist groups, the anti-Hindutva left is actively engaged in solidarity with other left groups on Palestine, labor and anti-racism.

This is a task not just for Indian diasporic groups. The broader left has to be involved in resisting Hindutva and its expansion into Canada and the United States.

[The first part of an extensive interview on Kashmir also appears in this issue. For further background, see “[Hindu Exceptionalism and COVID-19](#),” by Mona Bhan and Purnima Bose in ATC 214, September-October 2021.]

M.V. Ramana & Aparna Sundar

P.S.

- “The Long Reach of Hindutva”. Against the Current No. 230, May/June 2024:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc230/the-long-reach-of-hindutva/>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-indian-government-nijjar-1.6970498>

[2] <https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/29/politics/us-prosecutors-charge-indian-man-with-attempted-murder-for-hire-plot-against-sikh-activist-on-us-soil/index.html>

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[4] <https://www.thebureau.news/p/indian-proxies-funding-canadian-politicians>

[5] <https://twitter.com/aryacanada/status/1587474210229714946?s=46&t=gGQLWFsIlPHyrIhCTtE6bQ>

[6] <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii112/articles/achin-vanaik-india-s-two-hegemonies>; On the RSS and saffron, see <https://www.penguin.co.in/book/the-brotherhood-in-saffron/>

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- [15] <https://www.ourcommons.ca/petitions/en/Petition/Details?>
- [16] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/oct/16/conservative-activists-want-to-outlaw-anti-semitism-in-public-education-why-is-that-a-bad-thing>
- [17] <https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/14/asia/india-hindu-extremist-groups-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>
- [18] <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-resolution/1196/text?r=1&s=1>
- [19] <https://twitter.com/hinduamerican/status/1574745173011169280?s=46&t=f8Z-mMCUpQ1YRWu9QloP6A>
- [20] <https://twitter.com/hinduamerican/status/1574745173011169280?s=46&t=f8Z-mMCUpQ1YRWu9QloP6A>
- [21] <https://religionnews.com/2021/09/10/practicing-hinduphobia-in-the-guise-of-academic-freedom-dismantling-global-hindutva-conference/>
- [22] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35650616>
- [23] <https://static1.s>
- [24] <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/01/tech/cisco-lawsuit-caste-discrimination/index.html>
- [25] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/22/seattle-becomes-first-us-city-to-ban-caste-discrimination>
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