Long Distance Nationalism: Indian Americans and *Hindutva*

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Abstract

What explains Indian American attitudes toward Hindu nationalism? Following the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, *Hindutva*, or Hindu nationalism, has become a potent political force in India. In the Indian diaspora, particularly in the United States, the past decade has seen an increase in public activity related to Hindu nationalism. From the World Hindu Congress in Chicago, to President Trump and Prime Minister Modi's massive joint rally in Texas, to demonstrations against Hindu nationalist citizenship laws in India, Indian Americans are more vocal than ever about politics in India. This study employs regression analysis to identify key predictors of Hindu nationalism among Indian Americans. Religious identity and behavior, Islamophobia, and certain benchmarks of assimilation emerge as statistically significant. Little empirical work has been conducted on the subject of Hindu nationalism in the United States, especially after the ascendance of the BJP in 2014. As one of the first surveys of Indian Americans focused on Hindu nationalism, this work evaluates the existing theoretical explanations for the phenomenon and helps set the agenda for future research. Furthermore, this study puts forth a method for quantitatively measuring attitudes towards Hindu nationalism, the index of Hindu nationalist sentiment.

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I. Introduction

In February 2020, violent religious riots fueled by right-wing Hindu nationalist ideology resulted in the murder of more than 40 people in Delhi, India's capital city. Set against the backdrop of President Donald Trump's state visit to the city, these riots made international headlines. A number of Indian Americans were present at President Trump's rally at part of his official delegation, but neither the President nor the Indian American members of his delegation addressed the violence happening around them. In 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) held a joint rally with President Trump in Houston, with thousands of Indian Americans in attendance (Frayer et al. 2020). These events were significant not because they represent an anomaly, but because they are examples of an intriguing trend. From the World Hindu Congress in Chicago to the Trump-Modi joint rally mentioned above, the past decade has seen more and more public activity from Hindu nationalists in the U.S. This research aims to explain the formation of Indian Americans' attitudes towards Hindu nationalism. Despite the increase in Hindu nationalist activity in recent years, there has been little empirical evaluation of Indian Americans' attitudes towards the movement.

In the context of increasing public expression of Hindu nationalism in the United States, what explains Indian American attitudes towards Hindu nationalism? And, what are the roles of religious behavior and assimilation in the formation of these attitudes? These are the questions which I seek to answer in this paper. Hindu nationalism and its ideological foundation, *Hindutva*, have become a powerful political force in India during the past decade. With the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party in 2014, the movement became the dominant strain in Indian politics, reified by the BJP's landslide wins in

the 2019 parliamentary elections. Hindu nationalism itself has roots in colonialism and confrontations with globalization, and therefore it is unsurprising that the vast Indian diaspora has a complex, varied relationship with the movement and Indian politics more generally.

Indian Americans who profess some form of support for Hindu nationalism are participating in the nationalism of a nation in which they have not resided for some time, or even have never resided. Especially given the relatively recent entry of Hindu nationalism into the Indian political mainstream and the general global rise of right-wing political movements, Indian Americans' attitudes towards *Hindutva* are a puzzling phenomenon. Few studies have been conducted into this phenomenon in the past decade, during which Hindu nationalism has come to dominate national politics in India. By conducting this research now, I hope to capture some of the effects that this change in Indian politics may have had on Indian Americans' attitudes towards Hindu nationalism. I use regression analysis of original survey data as the main methodological tool in this research. This approach, while not allowing for causal claims, allows for the testing of hypotheses I have formulated based on literature review and for the identification of strong predictors of Hindu nationalist sentiment among Indian Americans. The findings of this study provide an empirical evaluation of existing theories in the past decade's new political context. They also help direct urgently needed future research regarding the processes through which Indian Americans form attitudes towards Hindu nationalism.

II. Hindu nationalism, *Hindutva*, and the Diaspora

Before I present the remainder of this paper, it is important to lay some necessary groundwork. In this section, I trace the history of Hindu nationalism and *Hindutva* and characterize their relationship with the Hindu religion. Then, I provide an overview of the rise of Narendra Modi, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the entrance of Hindu nationalism into the Indian political mainstream. I conclude with an account of Hinduism and Hindu nationalism in the United States.

Defining and characterizing Hindutva

The Hindu nationalist movement has its origins in mid- to late-nineteenth century India, during the period of British colonial rule of the subcontinent. The idea of India as *Hindu Rashtra* (lit. "Hindu nation") emerges from this period. Dayanand Saraswati and Aurbindo Ghose's writing and activism during this period represent the origins of themes in Hindu nationalist thought that persist to this day. First, both writers began privileging the Vedas as the central texts of Hinduism (Bhatt and Mukta 2000). Acceptance of the Vedas as primary holy texts was, and continues to be, far from universal for Hindus in India and in the diaspora (Kurien 2007, 4). Second, Saraswati and Ghose's writings saw the emergence of the Aryan heritage as a defining feature of Hindus. Ghose in particular wrote extensively about this, and these writings should be considered in a global context. Europeans, too, were pondering the origins of Aryans during this period. Ghose wrote that ancient Aryans were indigenous to India (Bhatt and Mukta 2007). It is important to note here that India as *Hindu Rashtra* is a strong rejection of other characterizations of the Indian nation; secularism and pluralism, for instance, are not compatible with the Hindu nationalist project of creating an ethnically and culturally "Hindu" nation-state.

From the 1920s onward, the movement we currently understand as Hindu nationalism emerged. Indeed, V.D. Savarkar, one of Hindu nationalism's founding ideologues, coined the term *Hindutva* (lit. "Hinduness") in 1923. With no traditional central authority or pan-Hindu ecclesiatical structure, defining Hinduism and its adherents is a complex task. Understanding Hindu nationalists' definition of "Hindu" is a useful illustrative exercise for understanding the core values of *Hindutva*. Hindu nationalists define Hindus as people for whom India is both homeland and holy land (Kurien 2007). Indigeneity to the soil of India is emphasized. In stark contrast, Muslims, Christians, and Jews, whose holy land is far from India, are explicitly excluded from the Hindu nationalist definition of Hindu.

In addition to indigeneity, Savarkar and his fellow *Hindutva* thinkers emphasize Aryan blood as a second defining characteristic of Hindus (Bhatt and Mukta 2007). To them, Aryans were the indigenous people of India during the ancient Vedic age, representing the last period in which Hindus were dominant in India (as opposed to the Muslim and Christian "invasions" of India in the subsequent periods). This understanding of Hinduism, while purporting to be rooted in ancient Hindu texts, is heavily influenced by British Orientalist versions of Indian history; this influence is clear in the Orientalist periodization of Indian history adopted by Hindu nationalists (Bhatt and Mukta 2007). The dual emphasis on land and heritage employed by Hindu nationalists is reminiscent of twentieth century European fascist ideology. This resemblance is neither superficial nor coincidental.[1]

[1] See Basu 2020 for a detailed analysis of the parallels between early *Hindutva* thought and early European fascist ideology.

Sangh Parivar

The Hindu nationalist movement[2] is highly organized. *Sangh Parivar* refers to the broad umbrella of organizations that constitute the movement. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is the oldest of these organizations, and continues to be the core organization in the *Sangh Parivar*. Founded by M.S. Gowalkar, the RSS is a highly centralized volunteer paramilitary organization that constitutes the arm of Hindu nationalists involved in civil society, working to promote Hindu values and spread *Hindutva* ideology (Jaffrelot and Therwath 2012). An offshoot of the RSS, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is the political wing of the Hindu nationalist movement, advancing Hindu nationalist interests by controlling levers of state power. Finally, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), is the cultural-religious component of the movement. The VHP works in India and in the diaspora to promote the Sanksritic, Brahamanical (upper-caste), Vedic vision of Hinduism espoused by *Hindutva* ideologues.

Indian Americans and Hindu Nationalism

The arrival of Hinduism to the United States far predates the arrival of a significant Indian population. Swami Vivekananda, speaking at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, is perhaps the earliest instance of Hinduism's presence in the United States. Vivekananda would go one to be one of Hinduism's earliest and most prolific ambassadors in the West. After the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was passed, Indians began arriving in the U.S. in increasing numbers, many gaining admissions through the new skills-based immigration provisions (Kurien 2007). Although not monolithic, Indian Americans[3] are, on the

[2] Hindu nationalism, *Hindutva*, and *Hindutva* movement, are used interchangeably throughout the remainder of this paper.

[3] For clarity, this study defines Indian Americans as persons living in the United States who identify as having some Indian heritage. This includes individuals in the second immigrant generation and beyond in addition to first generation immigrants.

whole, highly skilled, highly educated, and predominantly upper-caste (Kurien 2007). The institutionalization of Hinduism in the U.S. arrived alongside these post-1965 immigrants. They built temples, formed local associations, and began developing an American Hinduism.

In recent years, especially following the ascendance of Prime Minister Modi and the BJP, expressions of Hindu nationalist sentiment in the United States have grown increasingly public. Still, Hindu nationalist activity in the U.S. dates back beyond the past decade. In 2002, communal violence broke out in the Indian state of Gujarat, resulting in the deaths of hundreds. Much of the violence was carried out by Hindu nationalists seeking to extract retribution from Muslims for earlier violence. Narendra Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat, earned the moniker "butcher of Gujarat" for his role in facilitating the anti-Muslim violence (Nussbaum 2003). In the months and years following the riots, it became clear that Indian American supporters of Hindu nationalism had been involved in financing Hindu nationalist elements involved in the riots (Nussbaum 2003). Perhaps the most widely known example of Indian American Hindu nationalist expression in recent years is"Howdy, Modi!", the 2019 joint political rally held by President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Houston. The event drew a crowd of 50,000 (Frayer et al. 2020). Among those in attendance was Indian American comedian and journalist Hasan Minhaj, who aired a segment of his show, *Patriot Act*, about his experience at the rally. The segment depicts Indian American supporters of Modi lauding the Hindu nationalist agenda of the Prime Minister (Patriot Act 2019).

Chicago, in recent years, has seen a number of events related to Hindu nationalism that represent the hotly contested nature of the movement within the Indian American community. The 2018 World Hindu Congress (WHC), which took place in suburban Lombard, offers a prime example of Hindu nationalist activity in the U.S. The WHC drew significant crowds, and Mohan

Bhagawat, current chief of the RSS, was present as a keynote speaker. While drawing throngs of attendees, the event simultaneously drew a small group of protestors armed with anti-RSS chants and posters (Times of India 2018). More significant anti-Hindu nationalist protest activity occurred in January 2020, with thousands gathering in front of the city's Indian consulate to protest the Citizenship Amendment Act sponsored by the Modi government (Ullah 2020). In 2021, a Chicago City Council resolution condemning violence against caste and religious minorities in India generated controversy in the South Asian American community. General Secretary of the VHPA Amtiabh Mittal expressed his strong opposition to the resolution, decrying it as creating a "very derogatory image for future Indian generations" (Hussain and Byrne 2021). The recent history of Hindu nationalism in Chicago is complex, with strong sentiments being voiced both in support of and in opposition to the movement. Taken as a microcosm of the national Indian American community's attitudes, it is clear that Hindu nationalism is a sensitive topic towards which opinions are varied.

III. Predictors of Hindu Nationalist Sentiment Among Indian Americans

To identify key predictors of Hindu nationalism among Indian Americans, I develop a framework that considers religious participation, identity, Islamophobia, and assimilation. In this section, I present a theory that incorporates the existing literature on these subjects to argue that participation in Hindu religious organizations, self-identification as Hindu, and Islamophobic attitudes are likely important predictors of higher levels of Hindu nationalist sentiment. The existing literature on assimilation and Hindu nationalism points to a more complex relationship, and I develop a number of arguments regarding the nature of this relationship.

The attitudes of many Indian Americans towards Hindu nationalism can best be characterized as "tacit acceptance" (Kurien 2007, 238). To be sure, there are those who are avowed Hindu nationalists, committed to the goals of *Hindutva*. Both ardent nationalists and quiet supporters are of interest to this study. In the following pages, I present a theoretical framework for how many Indian Americans are exposed to the ideas of Hindu nationalism and how they develop attitudes towards the movement.

Religious Identity, Behavior, and Attitudes

Identification with and participation in American Hinduism is likely related to approval of Hindu nationalism. Hinduism in the United States is far more ecumenical and Sanskritic than the vast diversity in Hindu practice found in India (Kurien 2007). These characteristics, while seemingly incongruent with Hinduism in India, are quite similar to the version of Hinduism espoused by the Hindu nationalist movement. Kurien describes "popular" and "official" aspects of American Hinduism (2007), with popular Hinduism referring to the daily devotional lives of American Hindus, and official Hinduism referring to the version of Hinduism crafted by large

umbrella organizations. Some of these umbrella organizations, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA) have explicit ties to the Hindu nationalist movement in India (Rajagopal 2000, 479). Many others are not explicitly linked to *Hindutva* but espouse values and a version of Hinduism that bears stark similarities to those of the Hindu nationalist movement (Rajagopal 2000). While these two facets of American Hinduism, popular and official, may appear disconnected, they interact to shape Hinduism in the United States to be reflective of *Hindutva* ideology.

The relationship between American Hindu umbrella organizations and Hindu nationalism is clear. Perhaps the most prominent example is the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America. A direct offshoot of the Hindu nationalist Vishwa Hindu Parishad, VHPA is one of the oldest Hindu umbrella organizations in the United States–founded 1970–and has chapters in 15 U.S. states (Rajagopal 2000, 473; VHPA 2020). VHPA publishes literature promoting a "Hindu way of life" in addition to organizing religious lectures and seminars as well as service projects in India. The organization projects an image of cultural authenticity and leverages this image to shape the American public understanding of Hinduism "almost entirely along the grain of *Hindutva* thought" (Mathew and Prashad 2000, 526). The influence of *Hindutva* is clear in the literature published by the VHPA. One recent blog post about unrest in Delhi discusses Hindus being "brutally killed" and portrays Muslims involved in the unrest as organized, militant anti-Hindus (VHPA 2020). The post neglects to mention the 35 Muslims killed during the unrest (Pasha 2020), offering a prime example of the VHPA's Hindu nationalist slant.

The VHPA is not the only umbrella organization that promotes a *Hindutva*-informed Hinduism in the United States. The Hindu American Foundation, founded in 2004, is not explicitly aligned with any political movement, and instead purports to educate the American

public about Hinduism and ensure that Hindus are accurately represented in public discourse (Hindu American Foundation 2021). Still, its founding president and other staff have been directly involved with the VHPA (Rao 2003). Other major American Hindu umbrella organizations include the Hindu Students Council, the Infinity Foundation, and more; see Kurien 2007 for a detailed discussion. Many of these umbrella organizations share two key similarities: they seemingly exist to promote awareness of Hinduism and Hindu culture in the United States, but their messaging is also closely aligned with Hindu nationalist ideas. Participation in these organizations is almost definitely related to higher levels of support for Hindu nationalism, but most Indian Americans are not active members. The key takeaway is that American Hindu umbrella organizations have a major role in shaping American understanding of Hinduism with a distinctly *Hindutva* slant.

Thus far, I have made a case for how I believe many Hindu umbrella organizations in the U.S. promote Hindu nationalism, but I have not yet sufficiently made the case for why I predict that simply self-identifying as Hindu and participating in non-umbrella Hindu religious organizations is associated with higher levels of support for Hindu nationalism. For this, I turn to the interaction between Hindu umbrella organizations and "popular" American Hinduism, or the ways in which American Hindus practice their religion in their daily lives.

Through her extensive ethnographic fieldwork, Kurien finds that worshipping at temples, attending meetings of local Hindu associations, and practicing Hindu rituals at home are the primary ways through which a large number of American Hindus practice their religion (2007). These seem to be strictly religious practices. However, the connection between these organizations and the aforementioned Hindu umbrella organizations is intimate and far-reaching. Rajagopal writes,

> "...they [VHPA] form a network of contacts and affiliations with other Indian religious and social organizations in the U.S., and often their own members may occupy prominent positions in these other organizations. Thus, its influence extends well beyond its enrolment."

Everyday Indian Americans are also exposed to the VHPA directly through events such as the New York India Day parade, at which the organization had a float and speakers present (Mathew and Prashad 2000). Hindu umbrella organizations also organize large cultural festival gatherings throughout the year in the United States, and they partner with local temples and associations to organize these gatherings (Shah 2001). At a California event billed as the "Grand Cultural Festival"in July 2001, speakers included then then-chief of the RSS. The event was organized in conjunction with a number of local temples and Hindu associations (Shah 2001).

While dearth of academic literature on this subject makes it difficult to offer more recent examples of the interaction in the U.S., the ways in which Hindu nationalist umbrella organizations interfere in religious life to blur the lines between official and popular Hinduism is well documented in the Indian context (Geetha and Jayanthi 1995). Taken together, the synthesis between official and popular Hinduism in the United States results makes Indian Americans who participate in organized Hinduism more likely to be exposed to Hindu nationalist ideas and, in turn, more likely to express higher levels of support for these ideas.

In addition to American Hindu identity and religious organizational participation, attitudes towards Islam must also be considered. Islamophobia is a crucial tenet of *Hindutva*; from the 2000 riots in Gujarat to state violence in Kashmir, Islamophobic policy and action have been a prominent feature of *Hindutva* praxis. The 2016 National Asian American Survey found that Indian Americans tend to be more Islamphobic than the nation as a whole (Ramakrishnan et

al. 2016). Kapur arrived at the same finding in 2010. In fieldwork conducted with Indian American lobbyists, Therwath found "streaks of virulent Islamophobia", and argues that Islamphobia unites disparate professional Indian American lobbyists to advocate for Islamophobic U.S. foreign policy (2007). After the 2000 riots in Gujarat, Nussbaum found that Indian Americans played a significant role in financing right-wing Hindu nationalist violence during the riots and outlined a number of networks through which Hindu nationalists in the U.S. offer material support to their extremist counterparts in India (2003). There is overwhelming evidence that harboring Islamophobic attitudes is likely associated with higher levels of Hindu nationalist sentiment.

Assimilation

Level of assimilation is a potential predictor of Hindu nationalism sentiment, but the direction of this relationship is less clear. Assimilation is both a process and an outcome. The temporal dimension of assimilation, both within and across immigrant generations, is quite important. To measure assimilation, I draw from the sociological literature on the subject: socioeconomic status, intermarriage, linguistic patterns, and spatial dispersion as key factors in assessing assimilation (Waters and Jimenez 2007). I adapt these factors in my own measures of Indian American assimilation, discussed further in the methodology section of this paper. I predict two possible outcomes: either low levels of assimilation will be associated with higher levels of support for Hindu nationalism, or the opposite may be true, and higher levels of assimilation will be associated with higher levels of support. I provide two frameworks for understanding how assimilation may be related to attitudes towards Hindu nationalism, one for each possible direction this relationship may take.

For diaspora members with a low level of assimilation, a "loss of status" effect that creates a desire for belonging may be an important mechanism facilitating the development of positive attitudes towards Hindu nationalism. Portes advocates for this explanation, arguing that poorly assimilated immigrants, no matter the recency or even generation of their migration, turn to nationalism in the home country to regain a lost sense of belonging and to overcome feelings of guilt at abandonment of the home country--these sentiments are exacerbated by the perceived failure low levels of assimilation (Portes 1997, 799). Indian H1-B workers offer an important example of this argument; facing precarity and a loss of status, many Indian tech workers in the U.S. turn to Hindu nationalist forums to find solace in talk of India and spirituality and feel empowered to combat the marginalization they face in their professional lives (Kurien 2007, 55).

It may instead be the case that highly assimilated Indian Americans are drawn to Hindu nationalism. In the United States, Asian Americans as a whole are confronted with an ambiguous racial positionality. Masuoka and Junn's prism model of the contemporary American racial hierarchy offers a useful framework for understanding this ambiguity. They posit that while Asian Americans' proximity to whiteness is higher than other minority groups, their relationship to "Americanness" is still fraught. Their position in the periphery of the in-group of American society leads them to draw stricter boundaries on American national identity than their counterparts in the core (white Americans), especially on characteristics that are more accessible to Asian Americans (Masuoka and Junn 2013).

I argue that this strict enforcement of boundaries represents a desire, at least in some Indian Americans, to assert their belonging in the United States. Multiculturalism in the U.S. demands that immigrants construct an ethnic identity for public performance (Walzer 1999). For many Indian Americans, Hindu nationalism and the neat, strictly defined version of Hinduism

espoused by its adherents, offers a convenient identity for those Indian Americans seeking to assimilate into U.S. society. Rajagopal expands on this approach, arguing that the development of an ecumenical Hindu American identity provides a way for Indians to navigate their ambiguous position in the polarized racial hierarchy of the United States. He writes, "for Indian [Americans], to be 'Hindu' is to bask in Orientalist visions of an ancient civilization and so compensate at the present time for its bygone glories while muting the stigma of racism" (Rajagopal 2000, 472-473). Mathew and Prashad describes this turn to Hindu identity as an "ontological reversal of racism" (2000). When confronted with racism and white supremacy, some Indian Americans assert the superiority of their own perceived Aryan identity in response (Mathew and Prashad 2000). They argue that Indian American support for Hindutva is as much a response to racism in the United States as it is an expression of affinity for the Hindu Right in India.

In the existing literature, there is a considerable amount of evidence in support of this theory. Take, for instance, the creation of Hindu temples in America. Hinduism's lack of traditional Western religious structures makes it difficult for Hindu temples to attain church designation as per the Internal Revenue Service's guidelines (Kurien 2006). American Hindus, understanding the increased social acceptance and material benefits associated with state recognition of their religion, have worked to alter their temples and religious organizations, often in accordance with *Hindutva*-informed concepts of Hinduism, to increase their likelihood of achieving IRS church designation (Kurien 2006). In addition to the material benefits for specific organizations, this is representative of the process by which more highly assimilated Indian Americans use *Hindutva*-informed Hinduism as a tool for their assimilation into U.S. society.

Many second-generation Indian Americans, whose conceptualization of India and Hinduism is based primarily on their parents' nostalgic memories and their schooling in American Hinduism, are often seen on online forums and in campus organizations asserting that they are better Hindus than their counterparts in India (Rajagopal 2000). This behavior indicates the extent to which some second-generation Indian Americans have internalized Hinduism as an identity despite clear differences between their own understanding of the religion and the ways in which it is practiced in India. These second-generation Indian Americans' assertions offer more evidence in support of the idea that for some, Hinduism, shaped as it is in the U.S. by Hindu nationalist thinking, offers an attractive identity.

IV. Hypotheses

I have argued that participation in organized American Hinduism, the characteristics of American Hinduism itself, and different patterns of immigrant assimilation are all potential predictors of Indian Americans' attitudes towards Hindu nationalism. It is important to note here that I am by no means proposing that extremism is in some way endogenous to Hinduism. Instead, I have examined how the organized Hindu Right and the challenges of American society come together to make Indian Americans more vulnerable to a virulent strain of religious-nationalist ideology; this is a clarification that I will return to and expand upon in the discussion of my results. Following the previous theoretical discussion, I arrive at five hypotheses which I will test in my analysis. My hypotheses are presented below, accompanied by brief summaries of their theoretical justifications.

1: Indian Americans who self-identify as Hindu are more likely to express higher levels of Hindu nationalist sentiment.

Hinduism in the United States is characterized by many of the Sanskritic, ritual-focused aspects emphasized by *Hindutva*'s conception of the religion. Self-identification as Hindu by Indian Americans may therefore be related to more agreement with *Hindutva* broadly.

2: Higher levels of participation in religious organizations are more likely to be related to higher levels of Hindu nationalist sentiment.

Participation in Hindu religious organizations reinforces perceptions of Hinduism that are closely aligned with Hindu nationalist ideas. In turn, Indian Americans that participate in such organizations are more likely to support Hindu nationalism more broadly.

3: Negative perceptions of Islam are more likely to be related to higher levels of Hindu nationalist sentiment.

Hindu nationalist policy and activity is deeply Islamophobic. Indian Americans who express negative attitudes towards Islam will be more likely to agree with *Hindutva* ideology.

4a: Higher scores on assimilation benchmarks are more likely to be related to higher levels of Hindu nationalist sentiment.

Highly assimilated Indian Americans express support for Hindu nationalist ideas as a consequence of their assimilation into American society. Confronted with an ambiguous racial positionality, they use the cohesive definition of Hindu offered by *Hindutva* to construct an identity for themselves.

4b: Lower scores on assimilation benchmarks are more likely to be related to higher levels of Hindu nationalist sentiment.

Less assimilated Indian Americans turn to Hindu nationalism to fulfill a desire for belonging. The difficulties posed by assimilation to the U.S. and associated perceptions of a loss of status drive a desire for belonging which is fulfilled by country-of-origin nationalism.

V. Research Design

I employ a quantitative-correlative research design. The dataset for this research is constructed from an original survey of Indian Americans. Using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis, I test the hypotheses presented in the previous section to identity statistically significant predictors of Hindu nationalist sentiment (HNS) in Indian Americans.

Survey and Data Collection

I developed an original survey instrument to collect data for this project. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics[4] and fielded by Bovitz, Inc., from February 20, 2021 to March 1, 2021. A non-random sample of 256 Indian Americans was selected for data collection. To construct the sample, Bovitz sent the survey to respondents in its panel that self-identified as Indian American. As an additional check, a screener was included at the beginning of the survey to ensure that respondents identified as Indian American. Participants in this study do not constitute a representative sample of the entire Indian American population. In the results section, I include a comparison of sample characteristics and national population characteristics. The surveyed sample is not perfectly representative, but I find a reasonable degree of consistency with national characteristics.

Dependent Variable: Hindu Nationalist Sentiment

The dependent variable in this study is the level of support for Hindu nationalism. This is a difficult concept to measure, especially in the context of the Indian diaspora. I adapt an approach from researchers at Lokniti, an Indian public opinion research center (Kumar et al. 2018) to develop an index of Hindu nationalist sentiment among Indian Americans. This

[4] Access provided by Northwestern University Weinberg College of Arts & Sciences

approach casts a wide net, assessing attitudes towards a variety of ideas, politics, and policies that can be classified as Hindu nationalist. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the following six statements:

1. *India is the homeland and holy land for all Hindus.*
2. *All Hindus should adhere to a certain set of rituals and practices.*
3. *Prime Minister Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are taking India in the right direction.*
4. *The demolition of the Babri Masjid was justified.*
5. *The 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act is good for India.*
6. *Hinduism is the one true path to enlightenment.*

Statement 1 addresses one of the core ideological tenets of Hindu nationalism. The movement views India as both home- and holy-land for Hindus, an idea which it uses to assert both the indigeneity of Hindus and the non-indigeneity of Muslims, Christians, and others. This forms the basis of the exclusionary politics of *Hindutva*. Statements 2 and 6 address the degree to which respondents agree with *Hindutva*'s definition of Hinduism. While there is vast diversity found in the practice of Hinduism across India and the Indian diaspora, Hindu nationalists' idea of Hindu practice is more narrow, emphasizing a specific set of rules and rituals that Hindus must follow. Statement 3 addresses attitudes towards Prime Minister Modi and the BJP. The current Indian regime, in power since 2014, represents a major increase in political power for Hindu nationalists. Modi and the BJP have vigorously pursued Hindu nationalist rhetoric and

politics, making attitudes towards Modi and the BJP an important measure of Hindu nationalist sentiment. Finally, Statement 4 and Statement 5 address key events that function as litmus tests for Hindu nationalist sentiment. The demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was widely perceived as a landmark event in the history of Hindu nationalism. A long-standing Muslim place of worship was destroyed by militant Hindu nationalists who asserted that the masjid was located on the site of the Hindu god Rama's birthplace (Buchetta 2000). Ayodhya reentered the spotlight in 2020, with Prime Minister Modi breaking ground on a Hindu temple on the site of the demolished mosque (Gettleman and Kumar 2020). The 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act introduced changes to India's definition of citizenship that was exclusionary of Muslims and a landmark victory for Hindu nationalist politics. The CAA sparked widespread, sometimes violent protests throughout India and the Indian diaspora (Tandon 2020), making it a useful litmus test for Hindu nationalist sentiment.

Using these statements, I construct an index of Hindu nationalist sentiment for each respondent. Responses to each statement were assigned a weight on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 corresponding with strong disagreement, 5 corresponding with strong agreement, and 3 corresponding with neutrality. These statement weights are then averaged to assign an HNS index score to each respondent. Thus, higher scores on the index reflect more strong agreement with Hindu nationalism.

Independent Variables

The independent variables in this study are categorized into three sets: religion, assimilation, and demographic controls. Four variables are included in the religion set: religious identity, participation in Hindu organizations, Islamophobia towards Muslims in the United

States, and Islamophobia towards Muslims in India. Religious identity is measured by a categorical variable constructed from a survey question in which respondents were asked to report their religious identity from a set of options or to report an identity not included in the options. To measure the level of participation in organized American Hinduism, I construct an index. Respondents were asked to report the frequency with which they participate in the five major types of organizations identified by Kurien in 2007: local associations, temples, internet forums, student organizations, and umbrella organizations. As an additional measure of participation, I adapt questions from the 2016 National Asian American Survey (Ramakrishnan et al. 2016) regarding leadership positions in religious organizations and attending temples for reasons other than worship. In all, the following seven statements were presented to respondents.

1. *Attend a local Hindu organization meeting (Balavihar, satsang, etc.).*
2. *Pray at a temple.*
3. *Participate in Hindu Internet forums.*
4. *Engage in Hindu identity-based activism/advocacy.*
5. *Participate in a Hindu student organization.*
6. *Serve in a leadership position in a religious organization.*
7. *Visit a temple with people for reasons other than worship.*

For each statement, participants were asked to report the frequency with which they participated in each activity (Daily, Weekly, A few times per month, Monthly, A few times per year, Never). A weight from 1-6 was assigned to each response, with 1 corresponding with never, 2 with a few times per year, 3 with a few times per month, and so on. As I discuss in above, there is a great

degree of interaction between different types of organizations, and, in this study, I am interested in assessing the relationship between overall level of participation in organized American Hinduism rather than the impact of specific organization type. To capture this, I compute the mean of each participant's response to each of the seven statements and assign that mean as an index of participation. To measure Islamophobia, participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they thought Muslims were a threat to the United States and to India.

Assimilation is more difficult to operationalize, and I rely on Waters and Jimenez's framework for assessing immigrant assimilation. According to their review of the sociological literature, socioeconomic status, residential segregation, intermarriage, and English language acquisition are key metrics of assimilaiton (2005).

Two survey items are used to construct two variables measuring socioeconomic mobility. The first asks if respondents feel better off socioeconomically than their parents, and the second asks whether respondents feel that their children will be better off socioeconomically than themselves. This way, I am able to capture both intra- and inter-generational patterns of socioeconomic mobility. Both variables are included in regression analysis.

The most widely used measure of residential segregation is the index of dissimilarity, *D* (U.S. Census Bureau 2016).[5] To compute this index, accurate data on both tract population totals and metropolitan area population totals are needed. This data is beyond the scope of this survey. While I am unable to compute *D* for each participant, I adopt the idea of capturing dissimilarity as a measure of residential segregation. Each respondent was asked to report approximately how much of their neighborhood is Indian and/or Indian American.

Interracial/interethnic relationships are more easily measured. Respondents were asked about their relationship status, and those that reported being married or in a committed

[5] See White 1986 for details on how the index of dissimilarity is computed.

relationship were asked whether their partner is of a different race or ethnicity. Based on these responses, I construct a boolean indicator with TRUE representing the presence of an interracial relationship.

To measure English language acquisition, I use a measure put forth by Jimenez and Waters: primary language spoken at home (2005).[6] This is represented by a categorical variable with three levels: English, a mix of English and another language(s), and another language.

Finally, I include perceptions of discrimination as an additional measure of assimilation based on Vijay Prashad's work (2000). There are a variety of scales used to measure perceptions of discimination (see Williams 2016 for a review). I use a common scale for everyday discrimination put forth by Williams et al. (1997) and compute an index of discrimination for each respondent using a similar methodology to those outlined for other indices in this study. Lower scores indicate more frequent perceptions of discrimination.

I also include a set of controls. Hindu nationalist imagery and messaging is dominated by masculinity. Banerjee terms the image of India projected by Hindu nationalists a "masculinized vision of a nation" (2006). I include gender as a control factor to account for the possible effects that the masculinity of Hindu nationalism may have, allowing me to better assess the validity of my hypotheses. I include another control for immigrant generation, constructed from questions on self, parent, and grandparent nativity. First-generation immigrant is defined as a foreign born individual who has immigrated to the U.S. Second-generation immigrant is defined as a native born individual with at least one foreign-born parent, and third-generation is defined as a native born individual with native born parents least one foreign born grandparent (Rumbaut 2006). Finally, I include a control for U.S. political ideology. The exclusionary stance that Hindu

[6] Most respondents reported high levels of English speaking and reading proficiency. This measure was chosen because of greater variation in responses.

nationalists take towards minorities, especially Muslims, is incompatible with American liberal ideology (Hetherington and Weiler 2010), so self-identified liberals may be on the whole less supportive of Hindu nationalism. Furthermore, the closeness of Prime Minister Modi and President Trump may lead conservative Indian Americans to view Hindu nationalism more favorably. The results of the 2020 Indian American Attitudes Survey show that there may not be significant consistency between their attitudes towards U.S. and Indian politics (Badrinathan et al. 2020). So, while there is some empirical ambiguity about the relationship between U.S. political ideology and Hindu nationalist attitudes, the strength of the theoretical relationship justifies the inclusion of this control. Finally, I include a control for North vs. South Indian origin, as the BJP's electoral performance in North India is generally much stronger than in South India.

Regression analysis

I use Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to conduct my quantitative analysis. In all, four models are run, each with HNS as the dependent variable. The first model includes religion identity, attitudes, and behavior only. The second model adds assimilation variables, and the third model adds a set of demographic controls. This iterative approach to model building in multivariate regression analysis allows for the demonstration of relationships that persist even in the presence of additional factors, an indicator of a strong correlation. Regression does not allow for strong causal inference. With a quite limited body of work on the subject, this large-N correlative approach yields insights into more population-level trends than have been previously identified. Therefore, while the results of regression analysis do not imply causality, the

identification of significant predictors of Hindu nationalist sentiment allows for an empirical test of existing hypotheses and helps set the tone for future research.

Table 1. Model specifications (Dependent variable: HNS)

Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
Religion variables	Religion variables	Religion variables
	Assimilation variables	Assimilation variables
		Controls

VI. Results

In this section, I present the results of my quantitative analysis. I first discuss the characteristics of the surveyed sample and how they compare to Indian American population characteristics. Then, I discuss some descriptive statistics related to the dependent variable and key independent variables. Finally, I present the results of my regression analysis, wherein a number of predictors emerge as statistically significant.

Table 2. Sample vs. National Demographic Characteristics

	Sample	National[7]
Household Income (median)	$51,000 - $75,000[8]	$100,000
Educational Attainment		
Bachelors Degree	41%	32%
Bachelors + Advanced Degree[9]	63%	72%
Nativity		
U.S.-born	43%	31%
Foreign Born	47%	69%
Age		
	18-25: 18%	*18-29:* 17%
	26-35: 30%	*30-39:* 18%
	36-45: 27%	*40-49:* 22%
	46-55: 26%	*50 and over:*35%
	56 and over: 15%	-
Party Affiliation		
Democrat	56%	56%
Republican	12%	15%
Independent	29%	22%

[7] National demographics sources: Income, education, nativity, and age from Pew Research Center Indians in the U.S. Fact Sheet (Budiman 2017); Party affiliation from Indian American Attitudes Survey (Badrinathan et al. 2020).
[8] Respondents were asked to self report income from a number of predetermined options. Furthermore, reluctance to discuss personal income information should be considered when interpreting this result.
[9] Masters, Professional (J.D., M.B.A., M.D., etc.), Doctoral

Sample Characteristics

Although neither a perfectly representative nor truly random sample, this sample still generally aligns with national Indian American population characteristics on a number of parameters. Notably, foreign born Indian Americans are underrepresented, with 69% of the population being foreign born and only 47% being foreign born in the surveyed sample. This holds important implications for the interpretation of regression results presented in this section, and will be discussed further in the next sections. While median income appears to be slightly lower in the sample, respondents were asked to self-report income based on predetermined categories. Combined with respondents' potential disinclination to accurately report income and the lack of more granular data, the lower median income present in the sample should not be taken a serious issue for external validity. Educational attainment and age distributions in the sample broadly align with national characteristics with minor deviations. Taken as a rough proxy for Indian American political attitudes, the consistency of sample and population partisanship characteristics on this measure is a positive indicator of the external validity of this study. With the exception of nativity, which will be discussed later, most of this sample's characteristics suggest that this study holds a strong degree of external validity, though the results are clearly not perfectly generalizable.

Descriptive statistics

The key dependent variable in this study is the index of Hindu nationalist sentiment (HNS). HNS is computed on a scale from 1 to 5 with higher values indicating higher levels of support for Hindu nationalist ideas. An index score of 1 indicates strong disagreement, 3 indicates neutrality, and 5 indicates strong agreement.

Figure 1. Distribution of Hindu Nationalist Sentiment Index

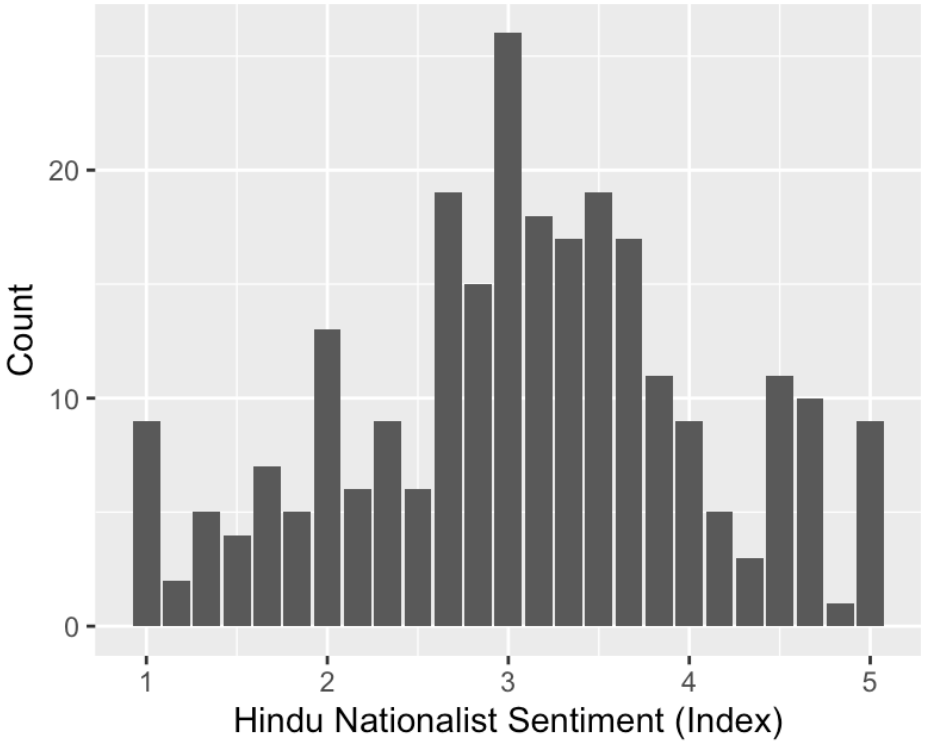


Figure 1 represents the distribution of the HNS index. The mean index score was 3.09 with a variance of 0.95. Therefore, while the average respondent could accurately be classified as expressing "tacit approval" for Hindu nationalism as discussed above, there is significant variation in the sample. Slightly more respondents indicated less than neutral attitudes towards Hindu nationalism than those indicating positive attitudes, but the split is fairly even. Indian American attitudes towards Hindu nationalism, therefore, vary significantly, and are not heavily skewed in favor of or against the movement.

Next, I examine participation in Hindu organizations. The index of participation in Hindu organizations has mean 2.04 and variance 1.63. This index is computed on a scale from 1-6, with 1 indicating no participation, 2 indicating a few times per year, 3 indicating monthly, and so on. The 2.04 mean, therefore, indicates that the average respondent participates in Hindu organizations somewhere between monthly and a few times per year. The relatively high

variance should be noted when interpreting this mean, as it indicates that while mean religious participation is low, there is quite a bit of variation in how Indian American Hindus participate in their religion all types of religious organizations.

Figure 2. Proportion of Participation by Organization Type

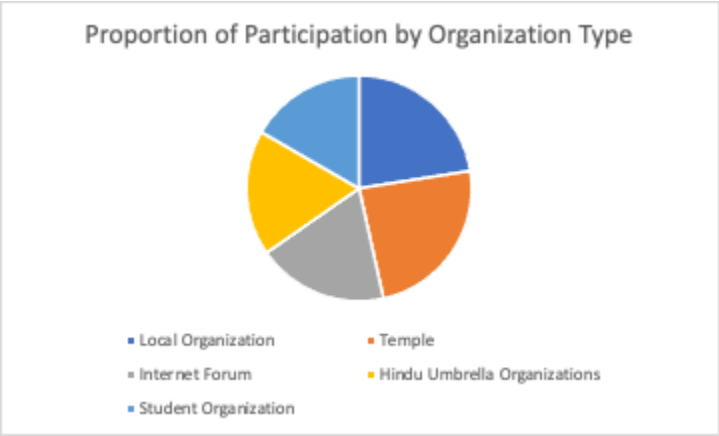


Figure 2 shows the breakdown of participation by organization type. This figure necessitates some careful interpretation. Respondents were asked to rate the frequency (weekly, monthly, etc.) at which they participate in each type of organizations, with higher numbers corresponding with more frequent participation. Figure 2 shows the proportion of visits by organization type. In line with theoretical expectations outlined previously, almost half of individuals' religious organizational participation is accounted for by organizations of popular Hinduism, i.e. temples and local organizations. Per Kurien's categorization, student organizations straddle the boundary between popular and official organizations; while often independent, in many cases they represent a clear demonstration of the influence of official Hindu organizations (Kurien 2007). A smaller but still significant portion of this participation is accounted for by official organizations, i.e., umbrella organizations and Internet forums. So, in this sample, individuals who participated in any American Hindu religious organization did so most frequently through popular Hindu organizations, but participation in official Hindu organizations is still present and far from niche.

Regression results

Next, I present the results of the regression analysis. A number of statistically significant predictors emerge, each with varying magnitudes of impact on the index of HNS. The results of all three OLS models are presented in the table on the next page, followed by a more in depth analysis of the findings. Again, all three models were run using the HNS index as the dependent variable. Table 1 is reproduced below for reference, and regression output is presented on the next page.

Table 1 (reproduced). Model Specifications (Dependent variable: HNS)

Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
Religion variables	Religion variables	Religion variables
	Assimilation variables	Assimilation variables
		Demographic controls

Table 3. Regression Output

Dependent variable: Index of Hindu nationalist sentiment (HNS)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Religion			
Hindu[10]	**0.617***** (0.095)	**0.551***** (0.103)	**0.521***** (0.107)
Organizational Participation Index	**0.258***** (0.039)	**0.277***** (0.046)	**0.306***** (0.050)
Islamophobia–U.S.	-0.081 (0.056)	**-0.101***** (0.057)	**-0.115****** (0.058)
Islamophobia–India	**-0.152***** (0.056)	**-0.161***** (0.057)	**-0.145****** (0.059)
Assimilation			
Loss of Socioeconomic Status-Self	-	0.112 (0.040)	0.002 (0.041)
Loss of Socioeconomic Status-Child	-	-0.015 (0.037)	-0.018 (0.037)
Discrimination Index	-	**-0.175***** (0.060)	**-0.165***** (0.062)
Intermarriage	-	0.068 (0.128)	0.076 (0.131)
Residential Segregation	-	**0.115****** (0.066)	0.105 (0.071)
Non-English home language	-	-0.053 (0.145)	0.043 (0.149)

[10] Another version of this model including all religious identities was run, and only Hindu emerged as significant. Therefore, the religious identity variable was aggregated into a Hindu/non-Hindu variable to aid interpretability.

Demographic Controls			
Second generation	-	-	-0.090 (0.113)
Third generation	-	-	-0.302 (0.210)
North Indian	-	-	-0.239 (0.167)
Male	-	-	-0.140 (0.098)
Constant	3.026*** (0.186)	3.330*** (0.278)	3.669*** (0.346)
Observations	254	245	238
R-squared	0.463	0.491	0.512
Adjusted R-squared	0.455	0.467	0.471
Residual standard error	0.723 (df = 249)	0.721 (df = 233)	0.718 (df = 219)
F-statistic	53.754*** (df = 4; 249)	20.420*** (df = 11; 233)	12.744*** (df = 18; 219)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

.

Self-identification as Hindu is associated with higher levels of Hindu nationalist sentiment. The coefficients on Hindu identification were 0.617, 0.551, and 0.521 across Models 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Across all models, this coefficient remained significant at the 0.01 level. The magnitude of the coefficient decreases slightly in the presence of assimilation factors and controls, but remains the highest of all statistically significant factors across all models. The positive sign of the coefficient indicates that self-identification as Hindu is associated with an increase of at least 0.521 on the HNS index score. Taken together, the results of all regression models suggest a strong positive relationship between Hindu identification and higher levels of support for Hindu nationalism.

Participation in Hindu organizations is also associated with higher levels of support for Hindu nationalism. The coefficient on the organizational participation index 0.258, 0.277, and 0.306 across Models 1, 2, and 3, respectively, remaining relatively steady even when other factors are added. The positive sign on the coefficient indicates that when the index of organizational participation increases by 1, an increase of at least 0.258 is observed on the HNS index. The coefficient remains significant a the 0.01 level across all models. The effect of participation in American Hindu religious organizations is not as strong as Hindu self-identification, but this relationship is still among the strongest observed in this dataset.

In general, Islamophobia is associated with higher levels of Hindu nationalist sentiment. Negative perceptions of Muslims in India is statistically significant at the 0.01 level in the first two models and at the 0.05 level in the third model. This is interpreted as follows: respondents who indicate more strongly negative sentiments towards Muslims in India are more likely to express higher levels of support for Hindu nationalism. The interpretation for the coefficient on negative perceptions of Muslims in the U.S. (significant in the second and third models at the 0.1 and 0.05 levels) is similar. The magnitude of the coefficient on Islamophobia in the U.S. is similar to that on perpcetions of discrimination, and the magnitude of coefficient on Islamophobia in India is even greater. Although perhaps not a surprising result, Islamophobia is clearly linked with Indian Americans attitudes toward Hindu nationalism.

Lower scores on the discrimination perception index are associated with higher HNS index scores. As a reminder, lower scores on the discrimination index indicate more frequent experiences of discimination. With coefficients of -0.175 and -0.165 in Model 2 and Model 3, the effect of perceived discrimination is relatively quite strong. The effect remains significant at the 0.01 level in the most robust model, indicating a high likelihood that there is indeed a

relationship between more frequent perceptions of discrimination and higher levels of support for Hindu nationalism.

Higher levels of residential segregation, measured by the self-reported percentage of Indian Americans in a respondents neighborhood, may be associated with stronger support for Hindu nationalism. However, the strength of this relationship remains unclear from this analysis. In Model 2, residential segregation has a coefficient of 0.115 (significant at the 0.10 level), indicating that respondents living in areas with higher percentages of Indian Americans are more likely to have higher HNS index scores. This magnitude of this effect is relatively moderate. However, this coefficient is not statistically significant and the magnitude of the coefficient decreases slightly in the most robust model. Therefore, I cannot form a definitive conclusion on the relationship between residential segregation and the HNS index. Still, these regression results show that residential segregation may indeed have some relationship with Hindu nationalist sentiment, but further exploration is needed.

No other measure of assimilation–intermarriage, perceived loss of socioeconomic status, or English proficiency–emerge as statistically significant predictors of Hindu nationalist sentiment in any of the models. Furthermore, no demographic controls emerged as statistically significant.

VII. Discussion and Implications

In this section, I evaluate my hypotheses using the results of the analysis presented above. In short, I find strong evidence in favor of hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 with markedly more mixed results regarding hypotheses 4 and 4a. I conclude this section by discussing the implications of my findings regarding Indian American political attitudes and the future of Hindu nationalism in the United States.

Evaluating Hypotheses: Religious Identity, Behavior and Attitudes

I find strong evidence in support of hypothesis 1, leading me to conclude that Indian Americans who self identify as Hindu are more likely to express positive attitudes towards Hindu nationalism. It is worth noting that self-identification had the highest coefficient magnitude of any predictor, and that no other religious identity had a significant relationship with attitudes towards Hindu nationalism.

Figure 3. Hindu Nationalist Sentiment by Religious Identity

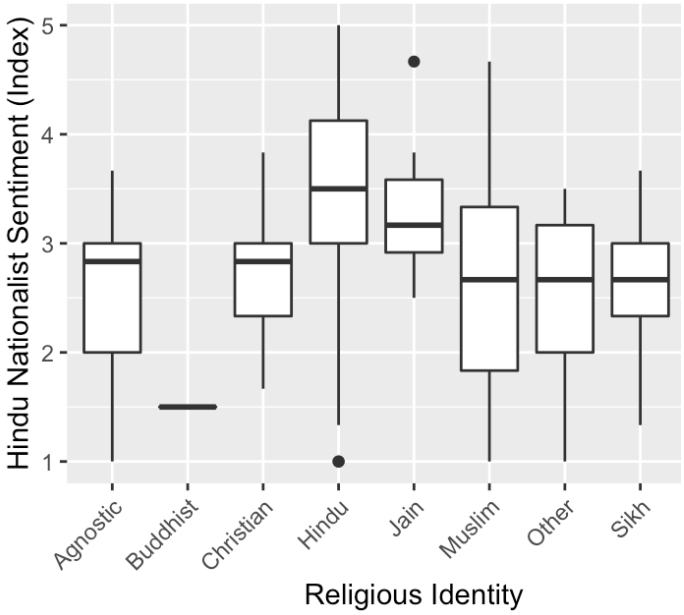


Figure 3 is a boxplot depicting the HNS index broken down by religious identity. This plot underscores the extent to which self-identification as *Hindu* affects attitudes towards Hindu nationalism. Not only is the mean response for the Hindu group quite a bit more positive than others, the entire distribution also skews more positive than any other group. It would be reasonable to expect that, for instance, Indian American Muslims would be less likely to support Hindu nationalism due to the movement's explicit Islamophobia. While the descriptive statistics shown in Figure 3 do offer some evidence for this expectation–Muslims are the group with the most generally negative attitudes towards Hindu nationalism–no religious identity other than Hindu emerged as statistically significant in regression analysis. With only Hindu identity emerging as significant, the evidence suggests that the characteristics of *Hinduism* in the United States, not other religious identities more generally, is one of the key mechanisms at play.

Hypothesis 2 is also supported by the results of regression analysis. Increased overall levels of participation in Hindu organizations in the United States makes Indian Americans more likely to express agreement with Hindu nationalist ideas. This confirmation of hypothesis 2 offers an important complement to the confirmation hypothesis 1. There is clear evidence that American Hindus' acceptance of Hindu nationalist ideas is not a result of some endogenous feature of Hinduism as a religion. Rather, the evidence suggests that Hindu umbrella organizations in the U.S. have developed a *Hindutva*-oriented outlook on Hindu religion and identity through multiple processes. From the organized Hindu Right's efforts to promote Hindu nationalism through the VHPA to immigrant selection through the U.S. immigration system, numerous factors unrelated to Hindu theology have shaped official American Hinduism to be accepting of Hindu nationalist ideas. Confirmation that Indian Americans' participation in and identification with Hinduism increases their likelihood of expressing agreement with Hindu

nationalism demonstrates the extent of the influence that official American Hindu organizations has on day-to-day life for Indian American Hindus. This synthesis of popular and official Hinduism, then, offers a strong explanation for Indian American attitudes towards Hindu nationalism.

Finally, I find compelling evidence in support of hypothesis 3–Islamophobic attitudes are associated with higher levels of Hindu nationalist sentiment. Negative perceptions of Muslims in India and in the U.S. both emerged as significant predictors of stronger HNS. Earlier in this paper, I cited the Modi regime's passage of the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act as an example of Hindu nationalism's fundamental Islamophobia. The COVID-19 pandemic offers another recent illustration. Many of India's television news channels harbor a heavy pro-BJP slant; as the deadly coronavirus spread through India, TV anchors scapegoated Muslims, referring to them with epithets ranging from "virus villains" to "human [COVID-19] bombs" (Yasir 2020). Given the virulent Islamophobia present in *Hindutva* ideology, rhetoric, and praxis, it is not particularly surprising that Indian Americans who harbor Islamophobic attitudes are more likely to support Hindu nationalist ideas. Somewhat troubling, though, is the fact that negative perceptions of Muslims both in India *and* in the U.S. are associated with higher HNS. I discuss Islamophobia in the American context in more detail in the final part of this section.

Evaluating Hypotheses: Assimilation

Based on literature review, I proposed two hypotheses for how assimilation may be related to Hindu nationalist sentiment. In hypothesis 4a, I posited that higher levels of assimilation may be associated with higher levels of HNS. Alternatively, in hypothesis 4b, I posited that lower levels of assimilation may be associated with higher levels of HNS. Perceived

loss of socioeconomic status, intermarriage, and English language proficiency did not emerge as statistically significant. Therefore, I refrain from drawing definitive conclusions regarding either hypotheses 4a or 4b. Still, two components of assimilation, perceptions of discrimination and residential segregation, do hold statistical significance. Higher levels of both of these measures are associated with higher support for Hindu nationalism.

The positive relationship between higher levels of discrimination and higher levels of support for Hindu nationalism lends support to Mathew and Prashad's proposed "reverse racism" mechanism (2000). Taken alone, it would be an overreach to argue that perceptions of discrimination alone are sufficient to draw conclusions about assimilation more broadly. Still, the significance of perceived discrimination deserves nuanced discussion. Experiences of discrimination may serve to remind many Indian Americans of their ambiguous position in the racialized hierarchy of U.S. society, thereby creating a desire for belonging. As I explained earlier, *Hindutva*'s Hinduism offers this feeling of belonging by crafting a version of Hinduism that is compatible with, even desired by, American society. Thus, Indian Americans who experience higher levels of discrimination may be drawn to Hindu nationalism as a way to grapple with desires for belonging.

Especially in the context of rising anti-Asian racism in the United States, this finding is particularly important. In April 2021, a white mass shooter in Indianapolis killed 8 workers at a FedEx facility, four of whom were Sikh Indian Americans (Mervosh et al. 2021). While the motive of the shooter remains under investigation, he is reported to have accessed white supremacist websites (Contreras 2021). Combined with the general climate of anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S., it is likely that Indian Americans have perceived higher levels of discrimination during this recent wave of violent acts and rhetoric. Some of these individuals,

including those who have not previously supported Hindu nationalism, may turn to the movement to find belonging in an American society that has increasingly alienated them.

While residential segregation is one of the benchmarks of immigrant assimilation outlined by Waters and Jimenez (2005), I refrain from arguing that the association found between higher concentrations of Indian Americans in an individual's neighborhood and higher levels of support for Hindu nationalism provides sufficient evidence to accept hypothesis 4b. This is especially true given the moderate effect of segregation and the disappearance of statistical significance in the most robust model. Still, some interesting implications emerge. Immigrants living in areas with higher ethnic concentrations are more likely to be exposed to ethnic community organizations and media, thereby lowering the cost of political mobilization of these residents (Ramakrishnan 2005). For Indian Americans, living in areas with higher concentrations of co-ethnics may lead to greater exposure to Hindu nationalist ideas through Hindu organizations.

More generally, I do not form any definitive conclusions regarding the nature or direction of the relationship between assimilation and support for Hindu nationalism. At the same time, I do not conclude a truly null relationship. Issues with how assimilation was operationalized in the quantitative portion of this study may be an explanation for the mostly null results I found. As both a process and an outcome, the temporal dimension of assimilation is important when assessing its effects. With a single survey, capturing variation over time and between immigration generations was difficult. It may also be the case that both hypotheses 4a and 4b hold water, and that there is a parabolic relationship between assimilation and Hindu nationalism. The assimilation index proposed by Vigdor (2006) may be useful in testing for a parabolic

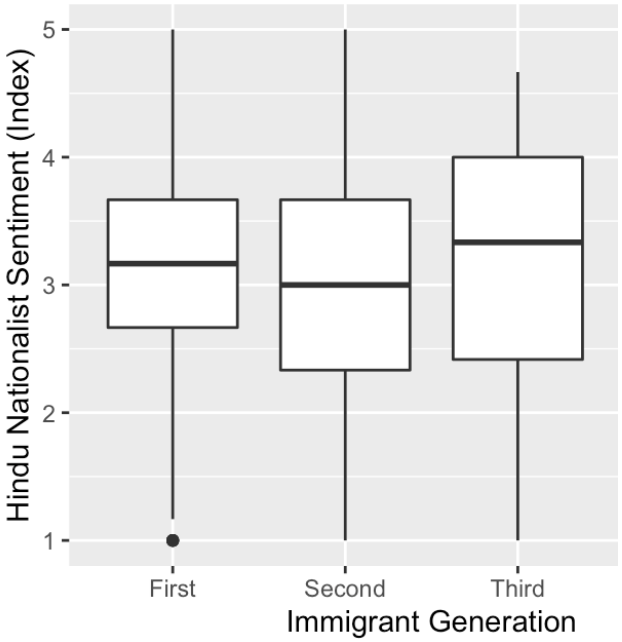
relationship through regression analysis. Unfortunately, the data necessary to compute such an index are beyond the scope of this study.

Implications

The findings of this research hold numerous implications regarding the future of Hindu nationalism in the United States and the study of Indian American political attitudes and behavior. In this study, I have shown how the Hindu Right, operating through organizations of official Hinduism in the U.S., has both effectively shaped public perceptions of Hinduism and influenced the day-to-day religious lives of American Hindus in favor of its religious-nationalist agenda. Hindu nationalism will likely continue to be an important component of Indian American politics, and it is reasonable to expect that it will become increasingly popular in Indian American communities.

Even in this study's sample, where native-born Indian Americans were overrepresented (see Table 2), there is significant, well-distributed variation in attitudes towards Hindu nationalism. Therefore, it is unlikely that Indian Americans will simply "age out" of affinity for *Hindutva* as the native-born population grows and matures. Immigrant generation was not a significant predictor of HNS in regression analysis. Figure 4, which shows HNS index scores broken down by immigrant generation, further underscores how the strategies employed by the Hindu Right are effective regardless of nativity or immigrant generation.

Figure 4. Hindu Nationalist Sentiment by Immigrant Generation



In short, demographics fail to explain Indian American support for Hindu nationalism. This failure, coupled with the evidence I have presented regarding the efficacy of Hindu nationalist strategies in the U.S., make it clear that Hindu nationalism will likely be a persistent force in the Indian American community.

For critics of Hindu nationalism, the intuitive response to this study may be to advocate for heightened policing and scrutiny of American Hindus and American Hindu organizations writ large. Recent U.S. history demonstrates that this would be a disastrously misguided impulse. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, the U.S. undertook unprecedented mass policing and surveilance of Muslim Americans with significant, long-term negative consequences for those involved (see Quinlan 2015 for a case study of NYPD surveilance and its negative consequences of Muslim New Yorkers). This should not be replicated. The consequences of Islamophobia are present even in the regression analysis presented above, with higher levels of Islamophobia being associated with more positive

attitudes towards Hindu nationalism. Continued research into this phenomenon, further challenges to the racist, Orientalist foundations of *Hindutva*, and community-based organizing will prove far more productive for those interested in engaging critically with Hindu nationalism.

From Indian Americans' financing of early-2000's Hindu nationalist violence in Gujarat (Nussbaum 2003) to Hindu nationalists successful campaign against a 2021 Chicago City Council resolution condemning the Indian regime's nationalist violence (Husain and Byrne 2021), harboring Hindu nationalist sentiment holds real-world ramifications for politics at all levels. If Indian Americans' Hindu nationalist support is to persist, so too will its real-world consequences. Indian Americans are widely understood to be a solidly Democratic voting bloc. Although they overwhelmingly favored President Joe Biden in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, a growing minority of Indian Americans have been voicing support for more conservative Republicans (Gjetlen 2020; Sirohi 2020).

At some level, this is not all that surprising, especially given the closeness of Modi and Trump. However, should there indeed prove to be a broader rightward shift in the voting behavior of Indian Americans in the coming years, the results of this study may offer some insight. Immigrant community organizations, including religious organizations, are important vehicles for political mobilization (Wong 2006, 119). The influence of the Hindu Right on American Hindu religious organizations, then, may be related to changing Indian American voter behavior. At the same time, partisanship and political ideology did not emerge as significant predictors of HNS in the regression analysis presented above.

Figure 5. Hindu Nationalist Sentiment by Political Ideology

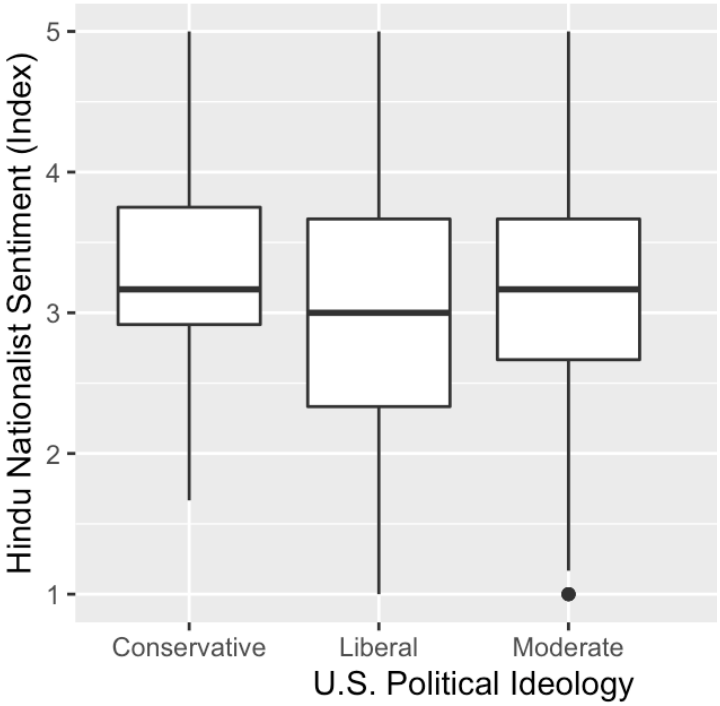


Figure 5 shows a more detailed breakdown of HNS by political ideology. It appears that conservatives and even moderates lean more in favor of Hindu nationalism than liberals. However, given the lack of statistical significance underneath this relationship, the question of political ideology's effects on Hindu nationalist sentiment remains unanswered. The relationship between support for Hindu nationalism, political ideology, and voting behavior presents an urgent line of inquiry with immediate implications.

VIII. Conclusions

Throughout this thesis, I have developed a number of explanations for Indian American attitudes towards the Hindu nationalist movement. The organized Hindu Right, working through of organizations of "official" Hinduism in the U.S., plays a significant role in shaping these attitudes. The synthesis of popular and official Hinduism results in Indian Americans who participate in U.S. Hindu religious organizations being more likely to be supportive of Hindu nationalism. Islamophobia, too, plays a prominent role in predicting Hindu nationalist sentiment. Finally, the role of assimilation continues to be complex, but this research has made headway into empirically testing the components of assimilation which are related to Hindu nationalist attitude formation.

The influence of right-wing Hindu nationalist organizations goes beyond just organizational participation. I find a significant positive association between identifying as Hindu and more positive sentiments towards Hindu nationalism. As has been discussed at length, organizations of official Hinduism work to shape the American public's understanding of Hinduism along the contours of *Hindutva*, thereby playing a significant role in shaping the very meaning of Hindu self-identification for Indian Americans. Clearly, many of the strategies employed by the Hindu Right have been shown to be effective, but the precise mechanisms through which these organizations cultivate Hindu nationalist sentiment remain blurry. Future research should employ a variety of methodological approaches to better under how *Hindutva* enters the Indian American political consciousness through organizations.

While a number of questions remain unanswered surrounding the relationship between assimilation into U.S. society and attitudes towards Hindu nationalism, it is clear that more frequent perceptions of discrimination make Indian Americans more likely to express positive

attitudes towards Hindu nationalism. Along with the numerous challenges Indian Americans face in their assimilation to U.S. society, the current climate of racialized antagonism towards Asian Americans as a whole makes this finding timely and relevant. Experiences of discrimination may reenforce desires for belonging, provided for many through Hindu nationalism. Furthermore, residential segregation may also be related to Hindu nationalist attitudes, but this study refrains from making a definitive conclusion on this factor. Still, individuals living in areas with higher coethnic concentrations tend to be more exposed to ethnic organizations. Given the importance of immigrant organizations in immigrant community political mobilization, future research unpacking the relationship between residential segregation, organizational participation, and Hindu nationalism will shed valuable light not only on the phenomenon of Hindu nationalism in the Indian American community, but also on nascent trends in Indian American electoral behavior.

There are a number of limitations to this study that should be discussed. The index of Hindu nationalism I construct as the dependent variable is unique in a number of ways. Few have constructed such an index for measuring sentiment in India, and this study is the first to construct such an index in the diasporic context. My construction of an index for Hindu nationalism is an important caveat for the interpretation of findings presented above. I emphasized capturing the wide set of ideas and political phenomena that can be classified as "Hindu nationalist". Further research should look to refine measures of this concept and should also consider developing measures for sentiment intensity–while I capture variability, I was not able to capture how strongly Hindu nationalist sentiment is held among Indian Americans. Assessing knowledge of Hindu nationalism would be an useful place to begin measuring strength of sentiment.

Understanding how strongly Indian Americans hold Hindu nationalist beliefs would enable researchers to unpack what makes a committed Hindu nationalist.

From Table 2, it is clear that foreign born Indian Americans are underrepresented in the sample I used. The explanations for Hindu nationalist sentiment I put forth in this study are robust in that they persist even when controlling for immigrant generation. However, it is highly likely that factors such as organizational participation and discrimination operate differently on different generations. For instance, second-generation immigrants may have quite different motivations for participating in Hindu religious organizations than their first generation counterparts (parental insistence, for example). However, given the underrepresentation of first-generation immigrants in the sample, I am unable to quantify these differences, and future studies should look to sampling techniques that allow for better representation in this regard.

Caste and Hindu nationalism are inextricably linked. Indeed, many argue that caste and Hinduism itself are fundamentally related (Ambedkar 1936). I have discussed how Hindu nationalist ideology relies on a narrow set of Vedic, Sanskritic, and upper-caste rituals and practices in its purportedly universal definition of Hindu-ness. With upper-caste rituals playing such a crucial role in the very definition of Hindu nationalism, it is only reasonable to expect that attitudes towards caste factor into Hindu nationalist attitude formation. Caste is far from a relic of Indian history. It continues to play a major role in the lives of those living in India and in the diaspora. In 2020, a wave of caste-based discimination allegations swept through Silicon Valley (Rai 2020), providing just one example of caste's relevance in the Indian American context. I included two questions about caste identity and the salience of caste identity in the survey instrument, but these data were ultimately excluded from the main dataset due to significant concerns over data quality and response bias. Undoubtedly, caste must play a prominent role in

future attempts to explains attitudes towards Hindu nationalism, and the experience of this research shows the major methodological hurdles that exist for such an endeavor.

Ultimately, this research lays the groundwork for future investigation of Indian Americans and *Hindutva*. With little large-N empirical work conducted on this subject since 2014, or even at all, this study marks one of the first large scale tests of existing theories about diasporic attitude formation regarding Hindu nationalism. By examining religious identity, attitudes, and behavior, as well as assimilation, I have conducted a wide–but not comprehensive–analysis of different factors that may be related to Indian American Hindu nationalist sentiment. Building understanding of this phenomenon not only advances academic understanding of the subject, but also help mitigate its more harmful effects.

Appendix A: Definitions of Key Terms

Hindu nationalism – A political, social, and religious movement that aims to build a *Hindu Rashtra* (lit. "Hindu nation") in India.

Hindutva – Literally "Hinduness", *Hindutva* forms the ideological basis for the Hindu nationalist movement. *Hindutva*'s defines "Hindus" as the people for whom India is both homeland and holy land, emphasizing indigeneity through connection to the land and Aryan ancestry.

HNS – Throughout this study, the abbreviation HNS is used to refer to "Hindu Nationalist Sentiment", a measure of the level of approval or disapproval an individual holds towards Hindu nationalism.

RSS – Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (lit. "National Volunteer Organization"). The civil society arm of the Hindu nationalist movement, the RSS works to promote Hindu values and *Hindutva*.

Sangh Parivar – An umbrella term referring to the collection of organizations spawned by and/or affiliated with the RSS.

BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party. The political arm of the Hindu nationalist movement, the BJP pursues a Hindu nationalist agenda and is the ruling party of India as of April 2021. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the Parliamentary Chairperson of the BJP.

VHP – Vishwa Hindu Parishad (lit. "World Hindu Council"). The religious arm of the Hindu nationalist movement, the VHP works to "organise, consolidate, and serve Hindu society" (VHP 2020).

VHPA – Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America. An offshoot of the VHP, VHPA shapes the public image of Hinduism in the U.S., promotes what it considers Hindu values, and engages in various service projects in the U.S. and in India.

CAA – Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019. A controversial piece of legislation passed by the Indian Parliament in December 2019, the CAA makes various changes to Indian citizenship rules, notably excluding certain persecuted Muslims from Muslim–majority countries.

Appendix B: Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Variables

	Mean	Median	SD	Count
Data				
Hindu Nationalist Sentiment	3.09	3.17	0.98	256.00
Loss of status (self)	2.62	2.00	1.21	269.00
Loss of status (child)	2.74	2.00	1.32	270.00
Primary Home Language				
A mix of English and another language	0.52	1.00	0.50	263.00
Another language	0.13	0.00	0.33	263.00
English	0.36	0.00	0.48	263.00
Intermarriage/dating	0.16	0.00	0.36	283.00
Neighborhood Indian percentage	1.43	1.00	0.75	260.00
Discrimination index	1.95	1.78	0.90	255.00
Local organization	2.37	2.00	1.69	259.00
Attend temple	2.51	2.00	1.57	258.00
Use Internet forum	1.97	1.00	1.48	258.00
Participate in umbrella org.	1.88	1.00	1.41	258.00
Participate in student org.	1.75	1.00	1.35	258.00
Hold a leadership position in religious org.	1.78	1.00	1.41	259.00
Attend temple (not for worship)	2.02	1.00	1.43	259.00
Relig. Org. Participation Index	2.04	1.43	1.28	257.00
Religious Identity				
Agnostic	0.05	0.00	0.22	259.00
Buddhist	0.00	0.00	0.06	259.00
Christian	0.09	0.00	0.29	259.00
Hindu	0.54	1.00	0.50	259.00
Jain	0.03	0.00	0.16	259.00
Muslim	0.20	0.00	0.40	259.00
Other	0.03	0.00	0.18	259.00
Sikh	0.05	0.00	0.22	259.00
Hindu	0.54	1.00	0.50	259.00
Party ID				
Democrat	0.56	1.00	0.50	260.00
Independent	0.29	0.00	0.46	260.00
Other	0.03	0.00	0.16	260.00
Republican	0.12	0.00	0.32	260.00
U.S. Political Ideology				
Moderate	0.42	0.00	0.49	260.00
Liberal	0.46	0.00	0.50	260.00
Conservative	0.12	0.00	0.32	260.00
Immigrant Generation				
First	0.58	1.00	0.49	272.00
Second	0.33	0.00	0.47	272.00
Third	0.08	0.00	0.27	272.00
Gender				
Female	0.51	1.00	0.50	270.00
Male	0.49	0.00	0.50	270.00
Indian Regional ID				
None	0.11	0.00	0.31	260.00
North	0.56	1.00	0.50	260.00
South	0.33	0.00	0.47	260.00
Islamophobia (U.S.)	3.45	3.00	1.36	260.00
Islamophobia (India)	3.41	3.00	1.34	260.00

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