

“the one supreme conviction that we are a great people . . . should be ever vibrant in our breasts . . . a sacred duty and trust is cast upon us of bringing home to humanity the sublime truths embedded in our Dharma”

-MS Golwalkar, *sarsangchalak* of the RSS, 1966.¹

The modern history of Hinduism is one inseparable from Hindutva. Scholars have pointed out that Hindu nationalism has been a key feature of the “public manifestation of Hinduism”², with a network of highly-organized groups like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in the vanguard. In the post-colonial era Hindutva has gone transnational—increased Hindu emigration from the subcontinent has facilitated the spread of these vanguards and their ideology worldwide. But just as religious practices mutate in their journey from the ‘home’ to the ‘host’, Hindutva groups have transformed as they go global, illuminating the culture of the ‘host’ as well as the tactical priorities of the organizations.

In the US, South Asian migration swelled after the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which opened the doors for highly-educated, skilled migrants. Hindutva organizations were not far behind. By 1971, VHP-America had been founded, and two years later RSS member L.M. Sabherwal founded the HSS (Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh) at the recommendation of Golwalkar. Jaffrelot describes this American setup as “totally atypical”³, given that the RSS usually precedes the VHP.

¹ Christophe Jaffrelot and Ingrid Therwath, “The Sangh Parivar and the Hindu Diaspora in the West: What Kind of “Long-Distance Nationalism?” in *International Political Sociology*, 280.

² John Zavos, “Hinduism in the Diaspora” in *Routledge Handbook of the South Asian Diaspora*, 312.

³ Jaffrelot and Therwath, 283.

Other organizations such as the Hindu Students Council rode these coattails, and by the 1990s a developed network of Hindutva organizations was in operation. This paper will attempt to sketch the *modus operandi* of these organizations, examining the ways in which they differ from their Indian counterparts. I propose two analytical categories: the American *sangh parivar* concerns itself with *conflation* and *assimilation*, leading to a marked difference from India in day-to-day proceedings at *shakhas*.

One of the key features of the *sangh parivar* abroad is a consistent attempt at *conflation*. Hindutva organizations deliberately conflate Hinduism and Hindutva, primarily by entering pre-existing Hindu networks such as temples and social events such as Diwali. Conflation also happens in another sphere by the deliberate equation of Hinduness to Indianness, furthering the broader Hindutva mission of delinking Islam from India. The best example of the former is the functioning of the VHP in America. Rajagopal's⁴ survey of various Hindutva groups in the US lays bare the mechanisms of the VHP, which conducts sunday-schools and youth camps by leveraging the infrastructure of pre-existing or constructed temples around them. In the midst of the Ram temple building movement of the nineties, the VHP conducted *shila pujans* (brick worship) in multiple American cities, sending back the sanctified bricks along with donations to Ayodhya.⁵ This example is significant, as it exemplifies the linking of Hinduism with real, material gain to the Hindutva cause. Another example is the VHP's convening of a *Dharma Parishad* (Parliament of Religions) in 1998, which was attended by various sects of diasporic Hindus. The VHP in this case slipped into the

⁴ Arvind Rajagopal, "Hindu nationalism in the US: changing configurations of political practice" in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 473.

⁵ *ibid*, 474.

innocuous role of a group with a philosophical interest in Hinduism, seemingly divesting from a broader nationalist goal. By acting as a “reservoir of knowledge and skills . . . teaching families how they could retain their culture”⁶, VHP made itself attractive as a ‘consultant’ to temples which sought to organize seminars and youth classes. This mission was furthered by the VHP’s creation of ‘educational’ materials. The VHP’s UK branch published *Explaining Hindu Dharma: A Guide for Teachers* in 1996, an example of material that positioned Hindutva organizations such as the VHP as the arbiters of true Hinduism, blurring the lines between the two. The other conflation—between Indianness and Hinduism—is also one that Hindutva organizations are happy to promote. This is exemplified by the Hindu Student Council, an entirely student-run organization which operates chapters on university campuses across the nation. This organization organizes many *Diwali* and *Holi* events, portraying them as ‘Indian’ culture, deliberately erasing the religious diversity of the subcontinent in favour of a more North-Indian, Hindu understanding of Indianness. This conflation is aimed at non-Indian residents of the ‘host’ country, who are least likely to have any understanding of the subcontinent’s diversity. They may well leave an event with the belief that they have experienced the sum of ‘Indian’ culture. On the other hand, the nuanced Hinduism-Hindutva conflation is aimed at second-generation South Asians who are open to acculturation and are slightly more knowledgeable about the nature of the subcontinent. These two conflations can serve as a lens for understanding the motivations behind specific programs of the *sangh parivar* abroad.

⁶ *ibid*, 474.

The second category contributing to difference is a goal of *assimilation*, of attempting to fit in with the new environment of the ‘host’ culture. Hindutva organizations have had to tweak their presentation in order to woo young second-generation South Asians, and their material has changed accordingly. Jaffrelot notes that American Hindutva makes room for “homosexuality, living out of wedlock, and divorce,”⁷ which are condemned by Indian Hindutva. In order to reach this young Indian-American population, the distribution of the HSS *shakha*’s time also changed, with “less time spent reciting prayers and team sports replac[ing] martial arts”⁸. This assimilatory behaviour reflects not just the culture of the ‘host’ society but the priorities of the *sangh*’s target audience. An important part of that target audience is wealthy business executives, who, as Jaffrelot wryly points out, are unlikely to participate in the traditional *shakha* exercises of calisthenics and getting up at dawn to salute the saffron flag. The goal of assimilation is also evident in the way organizations are named—despite recurrent contact with headquarters back in India, groups often change their names abroad to avoid any ideological connotations. A prime example of this is the RSS mutating into the HSS. This may also contribute to the goal of conflation—a renaming may make these organizations sound more ‘Hindu’ than ‘Hindutva’. Jaffrelot points out that there is also a legal motivation for renaming. In the UK, renaming may help circumvent legislation that makes funding openly political organizations difficult.

These two categories are difficult to apply to Hindutva organizations in India. The *assimilation* category is by definition inapplicable, as India is thought of as the natural Hindutva

⁷ Christophe Jaffrelot and Ingrid Therwath, “The Sangh Parivar and the Hindu Diaspora in the West: What Kind of “Long-Distance Nationalism”?” in *International Political Sociology*, 286.

⁸ *ibid*, 282.

karmabhoomi. The *conflation* category is slightly more applicable, but there is an argument to be made that Indian Hindutva, particularly post-2014, is of a direct, unabashed nature—there is no coy conflation between Hinduism and Hindutva, and Indianness is outrightly equated to Hinduism. Achieving these conflations is not a ‘target’ for the Indian *sangh parivar* the way it is for the American—in India, the participants of these groups hold these conflations to be axiomatic, while the American is yet to be ‘sold’ on these propositions. Looking at the actions of diasporic Hindutva organizations through these categories yields interesting results: the California textbook controversy, for example, can be viewed as an example of *conflation* at work, while the summer-camp themed VHP sessions can be viewed as the *assimilation* of Hindutva into a quintessential American tradition. Perhaps a day will come when the American *sangh parivar* is able to join its Indian counterpart in ticking off the boxes of *conflation* and *assimilation*, having accomplished these goals completely. Until then, these categories may serve as valuable lenses.