

Hindu American Foundation (HAF) Written Statement for the Record



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"Hate Crimes and the Rise of White Nationalism"
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Chairman Nadler and Ranking Member Collins, the Hindu American Foundation thanks the House Judiciary Committee for holding today's hearing on the topic of *Hate Crimes and the Rise of White Nationalism*. Crimes motivated by bias based on a perpetrator's bigotry against a particular group of people on the basis of race, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, age, or disability are particularly egregious as they target entire communities. The rise of hate crimes, noted by the FBI, in conjunction with the rise of White Nationalism is a troubling trend that FBI Director Christopher Wray acknowledged last week in Congressional testimony and requires the full attention of lawmakers at the federal, state, and local levels across the United States.

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) is a non-profit non-partisan advocacy organization for the Hindu American community, an estimated population over 3 million across the United States of America. Founded in 2003, HAF's work impacts a range of issues — from the portrayal of Hinduism in K-12 textbooks to civil and human rights to addressing contemporary problems, such as environmental protection and inter-religious conflict, by applying Hindu philosophy.

The Foundation educates the public about Hinduism, speaks out about issues affecting Hindus worldwide, and builds bridges with institutions and individuals whose work aligns with HAF's objectives. HAF's three areas of focus are education, policy, and community. Through its advocacy efforts, HAF promotes dignity, mutual respect, and pluralism in order to ensure the well-being of Hindus and for all people and the planet to thrive. HAF stands firmly against hate, discrimination, defamation, and terror.

Hindu American Demographics

Hindu Americans, estimated at 3.2 million, are one of the fastest growing American religious communities. Hindus represent diverse ethnic backgrounds, including but not limited to individuals of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Malaysian, Indonesian, Afghan, Nepalese, Bhutanese, Sri Lankan, Fijian, Caribbean, and European descent. The majority of Hindus, however, are of Indian ethnic origin and are largely an immigrant community. It was only after the lifting of the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924 in 1943 and the abolishment of quotas for immigrants based on national origin in 1965 that Hindus came to the United States in increasing numbers.

Most Hindus have come to the U.S. as students, high skilled workers, or family members in search of better economic opportunities and unification. And there are others who have arrived in this country after facing religious persecution in their country of origin, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan. In the last few years, for example, more than 90,000 mostly Hindu Bhutanese have been resettled across the country after being forcibly evicted from Bhutan in the 1990s and living in refugee camps in Nepal for nearly 20 years. There are also those who are undocumented.

Today, Hindus in the United States are from all walks of life and professions including medicine, engineering, law, entertainment, and are entrepreneurs in a variety of industries. We are served by nearly 1,000 houses of worship and community centers in every state and several territories of the union.

There are four members of the US House of Representatives currently serving who identify as Hindu. There are high ranking appointed officials and civil servants of Presidential Administrations past and present who also identify as Hindu, along with the numerous state and local elected and appointed officials, as well as civil servants in many state and local governments.

Anti-Hindu Hate Crimes

The Hindu American community has a long history of being targeted for hate crimes. Starting with the “dotbuster gangs” that attacked Hindu men and women wearing tilaks (sacred forehead markings) during the 1980s to the brutal murder of Srinivas Kuchibhotla at a Kansas bar in 2017 and most recently the attack on a Kentucky Hindu temple earlier this year.

Despite this long history, it was not until the aftermath of the tragic shooting at the Sikh house of worship in Oak Creek, WI on August 5, 2012 that a national movement began to ensure the inclusion of Anti-Arab, Anti-Hindu, and Anti-Sikh categories in law-enforcement tracking forms to better collect statistics on hate crimes perpetrated against these communities.

Beginning on January 1, 2015, the US Department of Justice began collecting specific data on law enforcement tracking forms for hate crimes that were deemed Anti-Hindu. This was done in part with the long standing advocacy efforts of HAF, along with other civil rights and faith based advocacy organizations, and with the support of the Hindu American community who for decades were counted simply as the “other.”

Since the collection of this data began, the number of victims of crimes specifically designated as motivated by anti-Hindu bias in the United States have tripled in number, according to the latest FBI statistics.¹ This number, however, does not accurately represent a complete picture of the extent of hate crimes faced by Hindu Americans. Many incidents against individuals or places of worship don’t get reported by victims or are not recorded by law enforcement. Similarly, many bias incidents against Hindus may not be recorded under the anti-Hindu category due to mistaken identity. For instance, some incidents motivated by anti-Arab or anti-Muslim sentiment may actually involve Hindus victims. Moreover, some crimes against Hindus may be based on their racial or ethnic identity and consequently be categorized under a racial/ethnic category instead.

While the nature of hate crimes against Hindus has changed since the violent “dot buster gangs” of the 1980s, where Hindus were attacked by gang members leading to numerous deaths and injuries, Hindus and Hindu places of worship continue to be vulnerable to attacks, particularly in this post-9/11 environment. And most of these crimes targeting Hindus have been perpetrated by white Americans.

Cases of Mistaken Identity

In many instances, especially after 9/11, bias crimes against Hindus (and Sikhs) have been based on the perpetrator’s mistaken belief that the victim is Muslim or Arab. Although these crimes have been documented as Anti-Muslim or anti-Arab hate crimes, HAF has worked with Sikh, Muslim, Arab, and pan-South Asian American organizations to highlight the nature of these crimes and their impact on the Hindu and Sikh communities, while calling for full investigations and prosecutions under federal and state hate crime statutes.

For instance, on February 22, 2017, the murder of Srinivas Kuchibotla and wounding of Alok Madasani, Indian Hindu immigrants and IT workers at an Olathe, Kansas bar by a white-male, Adam Purinton, was based on the perceived identity of the victims and Purinton’s intolerant views that non-whites did not

¹ https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2015/topic-pages/victims_final.

belong in America. In fact, prior to the attack, Purinton, was yelling racial slurs and told the victims, who he reportedly mistook for being of Middle Eastern origin, to “get out of my country.”²

Purinton was stopped from harming more bystanders by another white male, Ian Grillot, who fortunately survived life threatening injuries after being shot himself upon intervening.

Purinton plead guilty in his trial to attacking Kuchibotla and Madasani whom he believed were from Iran, and was sentenced under federal hate crime statutes with life in prison. Kuchibotla is survived by his widow Sunayana Dummala.

Purinton’s views are not isolated, however, and are reflected by a growing trend of white nationalist violence targeting anyone perceived to be an “outsider” or someone who doesn’t conform to their definition of an American.

Hate Speech and Hinduphobia

Violence and bigotry are often fuelled by speech that can be construed as hateful and intolerant. While such speech does not rise to the level of criminal behavior and is protected under the 1st Amendment, if left unchallenged, it can perpetuate discrimination and in some cases, breed violence.

With the proliferation of social media and online activity, in particular, hate speech directed towards religious groups has become increasingly commonplace. Like Americans of other faiths, Hindus have also routinely endured hate speech and the denigration of their religious beliefs.

Even as the Hindu American community grows its numbers, Hinduism remains poorly understood in the American public sphere. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, only 22% of Americans knew a practitioner of the Hindu faith, compared to 38% for Muslims and 61% for Jews.³ Americans in general also held a neutral or negative view of Hindus compared to other religions in the United States.⁴

Given a lack of familiarity with Hindu practitioners, many Americans are influenced by the portrayal of Hinduism offered in the mainstream media, by public officials, and by their own community and religious leaders. Unfortunately, much of the coverage of Hindus, Hindu Americans, and Hinduism in these outlets is flawed, relying on stereotypes and inaccurate information.

As a result, Hindus have often faced xenophobic prejudice from their fellow Americans. Much of this prejudice has been spread through the efforts of evangelical organizations. While the ostensible goal of these organizations are to convert Hindus to Christianity, the heightened rhetoric used often demeans Hindus and denies their humanity. Moreover, Hindu Americans frequently face harassment and religious prejudice when they attempt to participate in public life, whether they choose to lobby their representatives, or run for public office.

² KTLA Channel 5 (Kansas City), *Kansas Man Who Killed Indian Engineer at Sports Bar After Yelling ‘Get Out of My Country’ Is Sentenced to Life*: <https://ktla.com/2018/05/05/kansas-man-who-killed-indian-engineer-at-sports-bar-after-yelling-get-out-of-my-country-is-sentenced-to-life/>

³ Pewforum.org, *How Americans Feel About Religious Groups*: <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/07/16/how-americans-feel-about-religious-groups/> (last visited March 26, 2016).

⁴ *Id.*

This phenomenon has been described as “Hinduphobia,” although the term has not become a mainstream, easily identifiable concept as there has been no concerted effort to document incidents and cases of anti-Hindu bigotry in the public sphere in the United States, or elsewhere. “Hinduphobia” and “anti-Hindu hate” are thus often used interchangeably.

The need for such documentation and research on such bigotry is ever growing as the FBI in its recent hate-crimes statistics from 2017 reported that Hindus were the victims of the largest number of hate crimes after adherents of Abrahamic religions. The Hindu American Foundation is currently carrying out research on anti-Hindu hate and Hinduphobia and will be releasing a comprehensive report in the near future.

The Nexus of White Nationalism and Christian Supremacy

What often accompanies White nationalism is a deep rooted bigotry towards religious minorities in the United States in the form of Christian supremacy. Christian supremacy is the belief that faiths other than that of Christianity have no place in society, or must submit themselves as secondary to Christianity in the public sphere. Those who espouse such beliefs are also known to hold anti-immigrant viewpoints, particularly towards non-Christian immigrant communities.⁵

In more benign forms, Christian supremacy is often cloaked in the veil of “religious liberty” legislation and campaigns that encroach upon the Constitutionally mandated Establishment Clause. These actions are often carried out by elected and appointed law makers who espouse these views, and are championed by their constituents who agree.

In more pernicious attacks, direct campaigns at non-Christian religious groups are often perpetrated with the intent of intimidating and harming worshipers as well as average citizens. Hindu temples have been repeatedly targeted with White nationalist, anti-immigrant, and Christian Supremacist graffiti.

The latest example of such an instance towards a Hindu house of worship occurred on January 28, 2019, when a seventeen year old broke into the Swaminarayan Temple and Cultural Center in Louisville, Kentucky. A young, proclaimed Christian, white male spent hours spray painting messages like, “*Foreign B****es Whore F*** You C**!*” on walls, windows and doors. The vandal also wrote bold religious messages — “*Jesus Is All Mighty is everything*” with a Christian cross — in the former church that had been converted to a Hindu house of worship. Thankfully, the suspect has been apprehended and is awaiting trial.⁶

Although state officials, local law enforcement, and the broader community in Louisville came together to support the local Hindu population, as is often the case in such attacks anywhere in the United States, the incident did likely reflect the beliefs of a growing section of white Christian Americans who hold extremist views on immigrants, ethnic minorities, and non-Christian religious groups.⁷

⁵ Murali Balaji, Rewire News. *White Christian Nationalism May Not Be Religious, But It Is Christian*: <https://rewire.news/religion-dispatches/2019/03/21/white-christian-nationalism-may-not-be-religious-but-it-is-christian/> (March 21, 2019)

⁶ Jay Kansara, Religion News Service. *After attack on Hindu community, Kentucky shows the way forward*: <https://religionnews.com/2019/02/08/after-attack-on-hindu-community-kentucky-shows-the-way-forward/> (February 8, 2019)

⁷ *Id.*

Recommendations

The Hindu American Foundation strongly urges Congress and the Trump Administration to take the following steps in order to address the growing trend of white nationalism, Christian supremacist bigotry, and intolerance in our country:

- Increase funding for the FBI and Department of Justice to monitor White Nationalism and Christian Supremacy in the United States and elsewhere, as they do for other forms of extremism that pose threats to the safety and security of the United States of America;
- Vigorously defend and uphold the Establishment Clause of the Constitution and protect the separation of Church and State in order to send a message to all Americans that no faith is privileged over another;
- Continue to urge law enforcement agencies across the country accurately report hate crimes to the FBI to ensure accurate data is available;
- Cease from portraying any immigrants as those who are stealing jobs from American citizens, and discredit members of civil society who espouse such views as this can perpetuate misleading stereotypes; AND
- Continue to initiate legislation and resolutions, such as H. Res. 183, that send a strong message to all Americans that bigotry and intolerance will not be accepted in the United States of America.