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Humanitarian Hindu, Exceptional Citizen

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Introduction

Following independence in 1947, the Indian state was swept up in the giddiness of building a new nation through central economic planning. Under the auspices of the Planning Commission and numerous five-year plans, the central government emphasized different aspects of development such as the promotion of agriculture, the creation of a higher education infrastructure, the regulation of industries, the reduction of unemployment, and a push to increase the gross domestic product, among other initiatives. In the first few decades of the nascent state, as Varadarajan (2010) explains, the government distanced itself from overseas Indians, who were experiencing discrimination in other countries, both to cement India's legitimacy as a territorially bound state and to respect the sovereignty of other nations in their treatment of "persons of Indian origin" (p. 54). Many of the four million Indians who had migrated during the colonial period to other British colonies were peasants or members of the business community (Varadharajan, 2010, p. 54). The social character of Indian migration changed in the decades following independence. In the US, the passage of the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 abolished hemispheric quotas, sought to reunite families, and prioritized the entry of skilled workers and professionals; this legislation contributed to the changing demographic of immigration. A significant percentage of caste-privileged Indians left the subcontinent to pursue higher education or professional careers in STEM-related areas during the 1960s and 1970s and were described in India as part of a "brain drain" (White, 2019, p. 3). Nonetheless the Indian government's initial dismissal of overseas Indians did not impede these caste-privileged Indian Americans from establishing philanthropic organizations such as the India Development Relief Fund (IDRF) to contribute to

economic development.[63]

Organizations like IDRF, founded by Vinod Prakash in the 1980s, invoke a Hindu idiom to describe their mission "to give back" to India. Diasporic Hindu philanthropy was directed from the US to the homeland in a desire to contribute to the uplift of the poor, a desire consistent with the Cold War construction of India as a third world country that could benefit from development projects.[64] Prakash (n.d.) uses Hindu concepts to characterize the US as an arena for dynamic agency, "our adopted land for living and action (*karmabhoomi*)," in contrast to the more passive, feminized space of India, "the land of our birth and ancestors (*matrabhoomi*)." Hindu Americans owe a "debt to Indian society at large" and want "to make a difference in the lives of the less privileged." Development work oriented to the provision of medical care and education enables them to achieve "one's contentment (*atmasanthushthi*) in life… a bigger meaning" (Prakash, n.d.). The *matrabhoomi*, motherland, becomes the recipient of diasporic aid projects that allow overseas Hindu sons and daughters of India to reinvent themselves as "brown saviors" to materialize their religious belief through development and to demonstrate their cosmopolitanism (Shankar, 2022).[65]

Two shifts over the last few decades have contributed to a transformation of the ethos of diasporic Hindu philanthropy and its expansion of charitable activities into the United States. The conditions of possibility for this transformation include the political mainstreaming over the last 50 years of *Hindutva* (militant Hindu nationalism) in India, and the government's liberalization and market reforms of a previously closed economy in 1991. Successes in Silicon Valley of overseas Indians also inspired the Indian government to revise its view of this demographic to be a "brain gain" (White, 2019, p. 4). Increasingly, diasporic Hindu organizations are stretching their geographic and ideological reach by also delivering aid to communities in the United States. Diasporic Hindu philanthropy becomes the means for Hindu India to expand itself outside its territorial borders. The diasporic philanthropic mission is now threefold: (a) to provide material aid and disaster relief to Indians on the subcontinent and marginalized communities in the US, (b) to normalize Hinduism as part of the American religious landscape, and (c) to assert

[63] For a thoughtful analysis of Indian American philanthropy directed toward development, see White (2019). Caste-privileged Hindus were not the only ones who were considered part of India's "brain drain." For instance, a majority of Christians in India are Dalit-Bahujan but the majority of Christians who emigrated from India to the US are upper-caste (S. Thomas, personal communication, May 19, 2023). For a detailed analysis of how Syrian Christians in Kerela claim a Brahmin identity, see Sonja Thomas' book*, Privileged Minorities: Syrian Christianity, Gender, and Minority Rights in Postcolonial India.*

[64] See Ahmad (1992) for an excellent analysis of how the Cold War terms "first world," "second world," and "third world" characterize the first and second worlds as subjects of history, and the third world as an object of history, whose identity derives from what agents in the first and second world do to it.

[65] See Shankar (2022) for a thorough analysis of the ways in which Indian caste privileged communities in the diaspora assume their new role as brown saviors in the global development and poverty alleviation economy and end up reproducing the project of racial capital accumulation. Many of Shankar's interlocutors consider themselves to be "secular, liberal, and nonpartisan" even though their liberal interventions end up sustaining and reproducing Hindu supremacist politics (2022, p. 439). However, our focus in this paper is on groups that do not eschew Hinduism as the basis of their seva praxis.

Hindu Americans as exceptional citizens by virtue of Hinduism's civilizational superiority. The shift in the orientation of diasporic philanthropy, in other words, is less an accident than a logical outcome of historical processes decades in the making: development has given way to Hindu humanitarianism at a time when India is becoming a Hindu supremacist state.

In this article, we focus on how US-based Hindutva organizations aligned with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) present their sectarian ideology and philanthropic practices as inclusive humanitarianism.[66] We first contextualize the rise of a dominant ideological strand in India today, Hindu exceptionalism, which presents Hinduism as the only pathway to "an evolved intellect" and appropriates principles of democracy, inclusivity, justice, and scientific inquiry as foundational to the Hindu way of life (Bhatt, 2001, p. 56).[67] Contemporary formulations of Hindu exceptionalism draw on historic discourses of Hindu racial and cultural superiority from the early 20th century while also harkening back to fears that Hindus are a "dying race" because of the growing population of Christians and Muslims in India (Datta, 1993, p. 1305).[68] According to the Pew Research Center, the most current census data lists Hindus as 79.8% of the population and puts Muslims at 14.2%, while the remaining 6% of the population consists of Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains (Kramer, 2021).[69] The specter of Hindu extinction, braided into discourses of Hindu exceptionalism, we maintain, shapes much of what passes as Hindu humanitarianism, or *seva* (service), in the diasporic context. *Seva* initiatives are designed to empower Hindus to reclaim values of peace, plurality, selflessness, and humanitarianism as primordially Hindu and to forge unity among disparate Hindu communities from India and elsewhere. The export of *seva* becomes a way to combat the perceived crisis of Hindu extinction and to present Hinduism as a force for positive social change.[70]

And yet the concept of *seva*, the elaboration of which has become central to diasporic Hindu philanthropy's self-description as an exceptional form of humanitarianism, depends on an implicit comparison of Hindu Americans to other communities of color, who are characterized in unflattering terms as a drag on social services or threats to public safety.[71] Prefigured as the model minority, humanitarian

[66] The VHP, or the World Council of Hindus, was founded by M. S. Gowalkar and S. S. Apte in 1964 to consolidate and strengthen Hindu society and serve Hindu Dharma. It is responsible for inciting and perpetuating violence against Muslims and other minorities in India. The RSS is a rightwing paramilitary organization aligned with the ruling BJP. For a summary of the different forms of violence enacted by Hindu nationalist groups, see Macher (2022, p. 2). This report maps the financial and organizational infrastructure of diasporic Hindu American groups.

[67] See Source of Sadhguru (2021).

[68] See Mukherji (1929).

[69] The most current data is from the 2011 Indian census. India was supposed to hold a census in 2021, which it has postponed until 2024.

[70] For example, see Spratt and Stanton (2023) and Itihasika (2023).

[71] "*Seva*" is also transliterated as "*sewa*." For a detailed elaboration of how Hindu notions of racial and caste superiority are intertwined with conceptions of white supremacy see FCHS Collective (2021).

Hindus slip easily into the role of exceptional American citizens.

Our analysis of diasporic philanthropy is based on close readings of newsletters of Hindu American organizations and YouTube videos of their members. These materials are collectively produced and express official positions of the organizations; they provide an important window into the community's religious beliefs, social practices, and public outreach. Diasporic Hindu philanthropy has become a vehicle to aid the BJP's projection of soft power abroad by normalizing Hindutva in the US while simultaneously saffron washing the Indian government's divestment of citizen rights and its persecution of Muslims in Kashmir and India.[72] The BJP benefits from the activities of Hindu Americans, who have the authority and credibility of "native informants" and can warn Westerners of the global threat of Islam.

Hindu Extinction

During an inaugural International Religious Freedom Summit that featured U.S State Department officials and representatives from Congress, members of one of the most prominent diaspora Hindu organizations, the Hindu American Foundation (HAF) alleged that Hindus face the grim prospects of "extinction" (McDermott, 2021). Their Director of Public Policy, Taniel Koushakjian, noted the "gathering was an excellent opportunity to spotlight anti-Hindu persecution by state and non-state actors in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and others," all Muslim-majority countries (McDermott, 2021). He elaborated: "it's clear that most people don't know that Hindus face extinction in these theocratic states and that India, as the largest democracy in the world and strategic partner of the US, is the only safe haven in all of Asia for persecuted religious minorities" (McDermott, 2021). The concern over extinction enables organizations like the HAF to advance a contradictory identity of themselves as part victim and part exception, recasting Hindus as a persecuted minority and simultaneously presenting India, and Hinduism more broadly, as a living embodiment of inclusion and democracy.

The HAF builds on prior mobilizations of the Hindutva right wing around the imagined issue of dwindling Hindu numbers in India. "Hindu communal common sense" has been shaped by discourses of Muslim hyper-fertility since at least the 1900s, Datta notes (1993, pp. 1316, 1305). In recent reiterations, such communal common sense is amplified by brazenly Islamophobic statements from India's Hindu political and religious leaders, as well as by the circulation of fake news on social media via accounts that are legitimized by the fact they are followed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself. For instance, fake news attributing 95%

[72] Kashmir has been experiencing the violent effects of India's occupation since the 1940s. The violence intensified and the obliteration of Kashmiri rights worsened after the BJP unilaterally abrogated Articles 35A and 370 in August 2019. Scholars and activists fear that the abrogation has made Kashmiris even more vulnerable to India's settler colonial politics (Bhan et al., 2022). While Hindutva politics of the BJP has negatively impacted both Kashmiri Muslims and the wider Muslim body politic in India, it is critical to understand that Kashmir is an internationally recognized dispute and Kashmiri demands for self-determination exceed the purview of the Indian constitution (Bhan & Duschinski, 2022).

of rapes in India in 2016 to Muslims and video footage showing doctored images of Hindus beaten up by Muslims bolster charges of Hindu extinction and serve as provocations for Hindus to awaken from their slumber before it is too late.[73] These images circulate in India and in the diaspora through the internet and WhatsApp groups, inflaming communal tensions beyond the borders of the subcontinent.

Muslims are also blamed for waging "Love Jihad," which Tyagi and Sen (2020) describe as a "moral panic" caused by the "alleged seduction, marriage, forced conversion and trafficking of young Hindu girls by Muslim men" (p. 104). Remarking on the similarity of this discourse to the hysteria in the 1920s of Hindu reform groups, including the Arya Samaj, around the conversion and abduction of women, historian Gupta (2009) points out that "the body of the Hindu woman has become a site for both claims to community homogeneity and honour, as well as for cracks within its articulation" (p. 13). Key political leaders of the BJP in their speeches have declared that Muslim men must refrain from wooing innocent Hindu girls or face death. Powered by discourses of Hindu extinction, such threats criminalize interfaith love while regulating female and queer sexualities. The open threats against Muslim intransigence also enable Hindu men to publicly defy colonial stereotypes of Hindu effeminacy and recuperate and reclaim their submerged masculinity (Hansen, 1996).

Pronouncements about Indian and Hindu extinction are strategic political interventions that obfuscate the pernicious crimes of the Indian state against India's Muslim and non-Muslim minorities, particularly in the last decade. In 2022, the bipartisan United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) designated India as one of fifteen "countries of particular concern" for "systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom"; India joins Afghanistan, Burma, and North Korea on this shameful list (USCIRF, 2022). The USCIRF voiced its alarm over the 2019 Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which fast tracks citizenship for those non-Muslim minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who currently reside in India, but excludes all Muslims, including those from Shi'a and Ahmadi Muslim communities, who themselves are persecuted in Afghanistan and Pakistan because of their faith. In conjunction with the government's plans to implement a National Register of Citizens, the USCIRF (2022) fears that "millions of Muslims" will be divested of citizenship and subject to "detention, deportation, and statelessness."

The Indian government's potential divestment of citizenship from Muslims comes on top of its persecution and detention of critics under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act and Sedition Law aimed at censoring those who advocate

[73] See Sidharth (2018). Among majoritarian nationalisms, it has become commonplace for such movements to construct their members as a vulnerable population that is in danger of being overwhelmed by minority groups. Ashutosh (2022) has observed how these movements are protean and draw on "an endless source of enemies" in the creation of an "imaginative geography of fear" (p. 333). In the US, the white nationalist movement warns of the dangers of "Great Replacement Theory," the fear that immigrants of color are allowed into the country to "replace" white voters. In Israel, we see the periodic anxiety surface that the higher birthrate among Arabs will lead to a demographic tide that will drown Jewish voters at the polls. And in India, such discourses of precarity rely on the mobilization of fear that Hindus will suffer extinction at the hands of Muslims.

for the rights of Christians, Dalits, and Kashmiris (USCIRF, 2022). Additionally, its revocation of Articles 370 and 35A, constitutional provisions that recognized Kashmir's provisional accession to India, has meant an intensification of India's military occupation and intolerable conditions for Muslim populations living there. In India, the stripping of rights occurs in a context in which Christians, Dalits, and Muslims are discriminated against in housing, employment, and the distribution of provisions, monitored in their personal associations to prevent interreligious relationships and marriages, and lynched by frenzied Hindu mobs on the suspicion of consuming beef or slaughtering cattle. Muslims and other religious minorities on the subcontinent are frequently victims of violence by Hindu zealots.

In her article on the ideological affinities between Hindu nationalism in India and "Hindus for Trump" in the US diaspora, Thobani (2019) suggests that the "productive synergy" between "distinct national projects" helps make Hindu supremacy a global project, whose reach extends beyond the "bounds of the Indian nation-state" (p. 747). Breaking from the normative identification of Hindu nationalism with India's territorial borders, some Hindu ideologues call for dissociating Hindu Dharma with the "landmass of India."[74] In a January 11, 2023, tweet, the Twitter handle Itihasika, frets that the "deep coupling with landmass of India makes Hindu Dharma appear like an ethnic construct." Itihasika laments the construction of Hindus as "Indians" rather than as universal religious subjects from multiple ethnic backgrounds. While other "faiths have successfully made their values universal and global," Hinduism is lagging behind. "The current construct is a recipe for stagnation at best and extinction at worst." If Hindus are to "survive," they must perpetuate Hindu values of peace and pluralism that are key to "enhancing human life experience." "It'll be unfortunate," Itihaskika opines, "if other ethnicities don't get to experience [Hinduism's] benefits." According to this logic, if Hindu decline or extinction is to be prevented, it is important to deterritorialize Hinduism so that its message of peace, plurality, and humanitarianism can become grounds to promote Hinduism as a universal religion.

Hindu Exceptionalism

Hindu exceptionalism has a complex historical genealogy and itinerary in modern Indian political discourse. Bhatt (2001) dates its emergence in early 20th-century discourses of Hindu superiority that were the outcome of Western Orientalist discourses that viewed Hinduism as the embodiment and "progenitor" of humanist values, or as "humanity's primal philosophy," ideas that shaped emerging Hindu revivalist movements in India and reproduced discourses of Hindu religious and cultural supremacy (pp. 12, 11, 24). These ideas would assume a political valence

[74] Thobani (2019) delineates diasporic Hindutva's view of the relationship between territoriality, Hinduness, and nationalism. She explains that the "essentializing association with the geographical terrain of modern India" and Hindus facilitates the diasporic ideological incorporation of religious and marginalized groups "originating on Indian soil" into the "Hindu fraternity." Thus, Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Dalits are figured as Hindu, but Muslims are not (Thobani, 2019, p. 752).

in the mid-twentieth century, becoming part of the ethos of Indian foreign policy. Sullivan (2014) has explained how Hinduism provided a palimpsest for Indian government officials and politicians, who believed that the country's unique role on the world stage, in the three decades following independence in 1947, was to provide moral leadership (p. 641). Such a role, they felt, was legitimized by India's civilizational antiquity, its status as the world's largest secular democracy, and the fact that Gandhi's theories of civil disobedience and protest had become a global export. Notions of civilizational superiority were very much rooted in Hindu ontology and the naturalization of virulent caste hierarchies, as Omvedt (1995) and Yengde (2019) have analyzed. Despite invocations of plurality and cultural diversity that purportedly make Hinduism an exceptionally inclusive religion, Hinduism is the outcome of brahmanic hegemony (Omvedt, 1995). Hindu exceptionalism continues to frame Hinduism, in the words of one of its adherents, as a "gentle, yogic" religion that believes in embracing "the whole of life and human society" (Shastri, 2019).

At the same time, Hindu exceptionalism also informs India's foreign policy. For example, post-Independence, Jawaharlal Nehru trumpeted India as exceptional for charting a third geopolitical way between the US and former USSR in the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement. In the early 1990s with the liberalization of foreign investment, discourses of Indian exceptionalism additionally became articulated with rapid economic growth and the rise of conspicuous consumption, an ironic contrast with the austerity of consumption modeled by Gandhi. With the emergence of COVID-19 in 2020, Indian exceptionalism underwent another transmutation in the pronouncements of right-wing politicians such as Modi that India's lower mortality rate during the pandemic evidenced the superiority of Indian bodies (Bhan & Bose, 2021). Not surprisingly given Modi's fealty to Hindu nationalism, he insidiously conflated Indian bodies with Hindu ones, further solidifying the identification between *Indian* exceptionalism and *Hindu* exceptionalism.

Since Modi and the BJP's rise to national power in 2014, Hindu exceptionalism has become integral to everyday governance and has shaped religious and political subjectivities of the Hindu diaspora in the US. During the Cold War, the US perceived Hindu nationalists as "reassuringly anti-communist" (Rajagopal, 2015). The lingering effects of the Cold War have meant Americans tend to view the RSS "benignly," as a form of "Gandhian volunteerism, or as Hindu revivalism," ignoring the violent, militaristic character of the organization (Rajagopal, 2015). Under Modi, neoliberal Hindutva comes wrapped in an ostentatious display of Hindu pride and sectarian performativity. For instance, several scholars have commented on how Modi's sartorial choices function as "dress performances" (Conway, 2017, p. 161) that are deeply connected to his "populist politics" (Vittorini, 2022). The wearing of saffron clothes in public religious gatherings and during key political ceremonies enables Modi to openly proclaim his Hinduness and to transform Hindu populism into a media spectacle that rallies the diaspora around the homeland (Vittorini, 2022). (The fact that cow dung patties for religious purification ceremonies are now available for purchase on Amazon and Hindutva pop music is a genre of its own illustrates how an unapologetic display of Hinduness has prodded Hindus globally to embrace their religious heritage and new forms of consumption.)

Hinduism's global export and the creation of a diasporic Hindu community have been facilitated by US-based publications such as *Hinduism Today*, which seek to foster solidarity among Hindus worldwide by marketing good deeds, informing readers about current international events pertaining to Hindus, and offering pedagogical instruction on elaborate rituals.[75] In 2015, *Hinduism Today* bestowed its Hindu Renaissance Award on Modi in recognition of his status as the first "openly devout and practicing Hindu" prime minister of India, who was committed to leveraging Hinduism's exceptional wisdom to "benefit" India and uplift "all peoples of the world" (*Hinduism Today*, 2015). Such overtures to universal humanitarian values of service and empowerment serve to package Hinduism as a religion of peace and inclusion while casting Hindus in the US diaspora as good global citizens. The explicit discursive and material investments in Hindu humanitarianism, we argue below, signal a much wider reassessment of what it means to be a citizen in the US, aspiring to secure a place in US's multicultural polity, and simultaneously to be a devout Hindu subject committed to a Hindu *rashtra* (nation state) in India.

Hindu Americans and Seva

In order to become America's exceptional citizens, many US-based Hindu communities emphasize civic public engagement to reconfigure the image of the Hindu American as an indispensable part of the US political-public sphere. From being hailed as part of a model minority focused narrowly on individual success, Hindu Americans aspire to be perceived as Hindu humanitarians. Earlier formulations of the model minority speak to the processes of assimilation through which Asian Americans have been absorbed into the national imaginary. Now, however, Hindu Americans are strategically promoting reverse assimilation by presenting differently situated individuals from across diverse races and ethnicities, occupations, and regions in the US as self-identified Hindus. In their campaign "I am Hindu American," HAF showcases a range of people, all of them claiming a Hindu American identity, who introduce themselves as actors, teachers, mothers, football players, yoga instructors, and politicians. Launched with the intent to foreground "many Hindu contributions to our daily lives: from yoga to the decimal system," HAF (2018) timed its campaign with Tulsi Gabbard's announcement of a presidential run in 2020. As the "first Hindu candidate from a major political party to enter the race for

[75] *Hinduism Today* is a Hawaii-based magazine that provides news related to Hindus, which it characterizes as a form of *seva*. From its website: "*Hinduism Today* magazine is a global public service to the family of Hindu faiths, produced by a small monastic community based in Hawaii. The small editorial team produces the magazine for the same reasons that other orders run ashrams, free eye-clinics, or orphanages–as a selfless service to the world" (*Hinduism Today*, n.d.-a). According to the magazine's Wikipedia page, it is distributed in 60 countries and has a circulation of 18,000. The website also boasts it reaches approximately 275,000 online readers in Europe, Africa, India, Malaysia, Mauritius, Singapore, and the United States (*Hinduism Today*, n.d.-b). Some of the pedagogical instructions on rituals seem invented and undercut the fluidity of Hindu religious practices; for example, *Hinduism Today* specifies an elaborate series of steps for conversion to Hinduism, which include renouncing one's former religion to a representative of that faith in the presence of a Hindu witness. Whether "conversion" is even permissible is an ongoing debate among Hindus.

the White House," a key plank of Gabbard's campaign was to assert that Hinduism was a "global and universal religion," and Hindus were "community oriented" individuals who championed the values of "tolerance, non-violence, and freedom" (HAF, 2018). Increasingly, thus, Hindus claim to draw from their primordial wisdom of mathematics, ethics, and philosophy as well as their ethic of *seva* to build the US social and body politic that aligns them well with American civic and political life. For instance, de Estrada (2023) argues how a defining element of right-wing Hindutva's foreign policy narrative is to reclaim India's alleged historic status as a *vishwaguru* or "world teacher" based on its spiritual and political superiority. In a bid to subvert existing geopolitical hierarchies, Modi and his allies have repeatedly claimed that India's "democratic spirit" is a "civilizational characteristic" and that "liberal values" of tolerance and inclusion were not copied from elsewhere but emanated from within the ancient Hindu civilization, a historic albeit unacknowledged legacy that positions Hinduism and Hindu Americans as natural teachers to the world (de Estrada 2023, pp. 438, 435). HAF's campaign is one such pedagogic attempt to reacquaint the world with Hinduism's glorious past and portray Hinduism's "exceptional" inclusivity and capaciousness as inherent characteristics.

Hindutva's interventions to transform model minorities into exceptional citizens, as well as the Hindu diaspora's attempts to claim plurality as a Hindu virtue, however, must be analyzed against the backdrop of decades of anti-Muslim rhetoric and Islamophobia in India and elsewhere. Hindu exceptionalism is not only based on a filial piety with a Hindu homeland but is also articulated through the registers of global service, humanity, and citizenship, enabling it to disguise its antipathy toward Islam. After 9/11, the Hindu lobby built on rising Islamophobia and used it to fuel what Mathew and Prashad (2000) call "Yankee Hindutva," a tech-savvy and mediatized iteration of Hindu diasporic identity that is driven as much from narratives of Hindu pride and proximity to right-wing Hindu groups as it is from acts of "Muslim bashing" on and off the internet (p. 518). Since 2001, a dizzying number of Hindutva organizations in India have proliferated in the diaspora, particularly in Nepal, the UK, the US, and Australia (Andersen & Damle, 2018).

Several of these diasporic organizations include "*seva*" in their title (for example, All India Movement [AIM] for Seva, Hindu American Seva Communities, Seva Foundation, and Sewa International) and many others highlight the centrality of the concept for their charitable and humanitarian efforts in their mission statements. Bhattacharjee (2019) has traced the theological and historical genealogies of "*seva*" and its companion concept "*dana*" (selfless giving) from their appearances in Vedic texts to their transmutations during the colonial and nationalist periods to their transfigurations in the diaspora, highlighting the "dynamic" nature of both concepts, which have grown more capacious over time (p. 77).[76]

During the colonial period, Indian nationalists perceived Christian missionaries as a threat to their cultural integrity because of the inroads they had made converting Dalits and Adivasis. Consequently, Hindu reformist and revivalist

[76] We are dating the Indian nationalist period from 1885 (the formation of the Indian National Congress) to 1947 (the achievement of Indian independence).

organization began to emulate the missionaries in the creation of institutions to deliver social services such as education and healthcare; they also became active in disaster relief efforts, which had a longer history in India largely based in the benevolence of individual rulers of the princely states who dispensed food staples during famines or temporarily suspended the collection of revenues during economic hardship (Bhattacharjee, 2019, p. 69). In the process, ideas of personal charity became associated with public works.

Gandhi also believed that *seva* was a necessary tool in the struggle to attain "purna swaraj" (complete independence). While not "part of Satyagraha or the direct struggle against colonial rule," Srivatsan (2015) elucidates the key role *seva* played in the processes of "self-purification, social construction, and Hindu revival" during India's anticolonial struggle (pp. 28–29). Indeed, by foregrounding *seva*'s political role in establishing the hegemony of the Indian National Congress and those of the national elites in the early 20th century, Srivatsan illuminates how *seva*'s "ethics of care" were rooted in sentiments of charity toward oppressed caste and tribal groups; in other words, they were informed by structural condescension by Hindu elites directed at those deemed to be from a lower social status. Formulations of *seva* rested on Brahmanical notions of caste rather than its abolition and, hence, further undermined the social and political rights of marginalized communities. Because such "caste-Hindu idioms" of *seva* rely on notions of elite charity instead of rights, they remain outside the purview of law, adjudication, or accountability. Even as *seva* activities to an extent helped with the "reconstruction of Hindu ethics" by altering the prior rules of interaction between caste groups, these activities nevertheless maintained "caste Hindu dominance" (Srivatsan, 2006, p. 437). Invocations of *seva* also enabled Hindu nationalist groups such as the RSS to rehabilitate the organization in the public eye after the assassination of Gandhi by an RSS adherent.[77]

In a complete inversion of *seva*'s origins in caste hierarchies, however, US-based diasporic Hindutva groups such as the HAF reframe *seva* to be critical to forging unity *among* Hindus in order to counter stereotypes of caste as endemically Hindu, which the HAF asserts is a Western imposition on Hindu society.[78] Refuting the notion that caste is a foundational Dharmic principle in Hinduism, the HAF alleges the Vedic term to denote difference is "*varna*," not caste, with the former being an innocuous framework to understand "human diversity and purpose" (Khanna, 2016). An article in *Outlook India* (2022), a news and current affairs magazine with a readership of 1.78 million, elucidates: the pursuit of *seva* is

[77] The National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT) recently removed references in high school textbooks to Gandhi's assassination by a Hindu extremist, Nathuram Godse. It has excised Godse's reason for the assassination, which was motivated by his sense that Gandhi had appeased Muslims. NCERT also eliminated references to the post-Godhra riots in Gujarat in which approximately 2,000 Muslims were murdered in 2002 (Sharma, 2023). While the Indian Supreme Court cleared then Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi of complicity with those engaged in the pogrom, then-UK Foreign Secretary Jack Straw suggests in a BBC documentary, *India: The Modi Question*, that Modi "tacitly encouraged Hindu extremists" and restrained the police from intervening in the violence. Banned by the ruling BJP, *India: The Modi Question* can be streamed from AppleTV and Amazon Prime.

[78] For more on the objections of Hindu American organizations to references to caste in history textbooks as examples of Western stereotyping, see Bose (2008).

"Hindu Sangathan—consolidation and strengthening of the Hindu society" and the incorporation of those categorized as "insufficiently Hindu" into the Hindu fold. Such forms of consolidation have sustained and indeed reinforced "traditional and regressive hierarchies of caste Hindu society" (*Outlook*, 2022). Caste ideologies that categorize Dalits, for instance, as untouchables and the perception that they are "the lowest of the low have followed them to America" (Ray, 2019). In the now widely publicized CISCO case in which the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing sued Cisco Systems in July 2020 for discriminating against a Dalit employee, the HAF expressed solid support for CISCO systems and blamed the state for conflating caste with religion (Suchitra, 2021). Enforcing Hindu integration, unity, and consolidation through *seva* activities that solidify caste hierarchies while at the same time attempting to disarticulate caste from Hinduism allows the HAF to market Hinduism's universal philosophy of "selfless *seva*" as an antidote to caste.

Every word carries within it the history of its prior meanings (Volosinov, 1986). In its trans-oceanic and transhistorical journey, the signifier "*seva*" retains the RSS's record on the subcontinent of establishing *seva* as a marker to delineate Hindus from their "primary 'enemies,' Muslims and Christians" (Bhattacharjee, 2019, p. 78). Those attempts survive in the diasporic elaboration of *seva* as a superior kind of religious giving compared to Muslim and Christian forms of philanthropy. More specifically, Hindu Americans define *seva* as "selfless service" that is "impersonal" and offered without any expectation of "reciprocity, reward, protection or patronage." Shyam Parande, the coordinator of Sewa International, even declares that "*seva* has no equivalent word in English just as there is no equivalent word for Dharma and Karma" to name the fulfillment of one's obligation to society (Bhattacharjee, 2019, p. 81). *Seva*, then, manifests a version of Hindu exceptionalism so extraordinary that it defies translation into the English language.

It is perhaps this construction of *seva* as an exceptional form of service that accounts for its affective appeal to Hindu Americans. Participation in Hindu American organizations oriented around *seva* enables the civic minded to ostensibly materialize their religious identity through humanitarianism. Sewa International, for example, touts projects that have provided disaster relief in the wake of hurricanes, delivered PPE to Native American communities, and aided FEMA in the distribution of food and in various vaccination drives.[79] In August 2020, FEMA recognized Sewa International for its contributions to relief aid, prompting Achalesh Amar, the Director of Disaster Relief at Sewa International, to observe: "FEMA's recognition indicates that we are on the national radar for disaster relief, and that our work is of a quality that merits national attention" (*Sewa News*, 2020, p. 3). Sewa International's President Arun Kankani adds this recognition is "a major milestone" that "opens many doors for us" (*Sewa News*, 2020, p. 3). The recognition of a Hindu American organization from a federal agency for its exemplary contributions to national efforts signals the transformation of humanitarian Hindus into exceptional American citizens.

[79] See its 2020 monthly newsletters, *Sewa News*.

Hindu Americans and Exclusionary Belonging

Conceptions of Hindu American citizenship are anchored in deeply exclusionary and racist protestations of "rightful" belonging through which Hindu Americans justify their credentials as "good" immigrants on US soil. Here their organizational materials are revealing. YouTube videos and newsletters such as *Sewa News*, the monthly publication of Sewa USA (the American chapter of Sewa International) targeted at their membership, are explicit about their proselytizing beliefs and political agendas. In their construction of *seva* as selfless giving, diasporic Hindus position themselves against other immigrants and the welfare state; their claim to be exemplary American citizens rests precisely on their status as "givers" to society and not as "takers" of public benefits. Ironically, even as diasporic Hindus reconfigure themselves as good Samaritans, they do so to accentuate the "inherent" virtues of Hinduism rather than as a deliberative process of self-realization fostered through grassroots and community-based work. Humanitarianism becomes an outward expression of their fundamental Hinduness, which is now being harnessed to augment Hindu American influence in the US public-political sphere.

Vibhuti Jha, a member of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS), a sister organization to Sewa International, states in a YouTube video that "Indians are ideal immigrants for living a good life, having good values," and contributing to society. He recounts a senator telling him: "We love you Indians as migrants to this country because you are professionals; you are educated; you do well in life; you take care of your families; you take care of your children; you have family values; you are least problem on the law and order side and you ask for nothing" (Jha, 2020). Jha (2020) responds to the senator by stressing that these characteristics emanate from a "belief system that believes in giving." While the senator and his or her political party remain unnamed in this video clip, the quotation references several stock phrases used by conservative politicians, including "family values" and "law and order." Through invoking a "belief system that believes in giving," Jha alludes to "*seva*." In the context of a video sponsored by the HSS, the implicit allusion to *seva* serves to conflate "Indians and Hindus" and not so subtly contrasts them with other immigrant groups and communities of color. Apparently believing these communities tap social services, Jha also implies they commit crimes.

Hindu conceptualizations of humanitarianism or *seva*, therefore, reinforce citizenship's neoliberal reincarnation—while the Hindu American diaspora demonstrates entrepreneurship, responsibility, and care, the state's social welfare policies are construed as "dole outs" for less ideal immigrants (Black, Latines, and Muslims), who are instead deemed in need of management by the police and prison-industrial complex. For example, Ashutosh (2022) has analyzed how the HSS's 2020 statement following the murder of George Floyd illustrates the contradictions of diasporic Hindu nationalists, who, on the one hand, grudgingly acknowledge the systematic racism directed against African Americans, but who, on the other hand, are unable to view their fellow citizens outside the paradigm of law and order (p. 334). Likewise, Shambuka (2021) points to how "Hindutva Democrats" distance themselves from earlier upper-caste Hindu associations with whiteness to express

solidarity with racial minorities in the US (p. 9).[80] Several Indian American political candidates have used the "savvy language of racial justice" to "endear themselves to social and political movements" that challenge white supremacy in the US while adhering to and reinforcing Hindu supremacist agendas in the US and India (Shambuka, 2021, p. 9).

Elsewhere in the discourse of diasporic Hindu philanthropy, the casual racism of Jha's allusions to other communities of color or the appropriation of social justice agendas by Hindutva Democrats morphs into a paternalistic benevolence. Sewa International USA touts its Stop Diabetes Movement (SDM) program focused on teaching yoga and "cyclic meditation" in 10-day camps to facilitate "a paradigm shift in [participants'] food habits and lifestyle" (*Sewa News*, 2017a, p. 2). In the first five years of the SDM camps, Sewa International has held 40 camps and trained 500 people, who reported experiencing a "significant drop in Fasting Blood Sugar and HbA1C levels" (*Sewa News*, 2017a, p. 2). These camps are targeted to the "inner city urban poor" and communities of color (*Sewa News*, 2017a, p. 3).

Particularly telling and cringe-worthy is the description of yoga outreach to the Latine community in San Antonio, Texas. The campaign was aimed at "elderly Hispanics" at a city community center, where Dr. Hetal Nayak, yoga trainer and physician, commenced holding twice weekly classes. *Sewa News* reports:

> Most of the seniors had never heard about yoga in their lives, and thus the deep relationship that Dr. Nayak now has with her students did not have a very smooth start. In the beginning the students resisted yoga as the concept of silent meditation and quieting of the mind before actually doing any workouts was alien to them. There was also a clash of culture of sorts, as this was the first time they were "working out" without loud music, and the focus was more on the self than outside. (*Sewa News*, 2017b, p. 2)

The blunt acknowledgement of a rocky start and culture clash suggest the program was imposed on the neighborhood center by outsiders rather than the result of an invitation from community members. Sewa International's account constructs the Hispanic community as distinctly *not* cosmopolitan: they "had never heard about yoga in their lives." According to the article, introspection and quietness are foreign to these elderly individuals, who much prefer the stimulation of loud music and interactions with others. They are represented, in other words, as unruly children, who resist instruction that will benefit them. The use of the word "alien" additionally conjures the dehumanizing term "illegal alien" popular with critics of immigration and often directed at Mexican migrants.

Sewa International's stated intention with this program is to facilitate "a silent revolution" to enable "elderly Hispanics to take control of their health and well-being" (*Sewa News*, 2017b, p. 2). The article includes several testimonials from participants, who credit the classes with teaching "patience" and "meditation" and offering them a respite from muscle cramps and other physical discomfort (*Sewa*

[80] See Macher (2022) for information on the ties between diasporic Hindutva organizations and the Biden-Harris administration (p. 46).

News, 2017b, p. 2). Cumulatively, the references to the laudatory intentions to improve health, the participants' initial reluctance, and the positive health outcomes paint a portrait of crusading Hindu Americans bent on saving members of the Latine community from their lifestyle choices in an almost comedic version of the colonial-era ideology of the white man's burden and civilizing mission. The yoga initiative represents a positioning of diasporic Hindus within American multiculturalism that produces hierarchies; those closest to practices now commonly associated with whiteness, such as yoga, bask in its shadow as exalted national citizens.

Yoga as Soft Hinduism

We deliberately invoke the proselytizing zeal of Christian missionaries in relation to Sewa International's yoga workshops. The comparison acknowledges the dimensions of religious belief that become actualized through repetitious, embodied practices. In her study of the mainstreaming of yoga and mindfulness in US public school curricula, Brown (2019) remarks on the North American public perception of these activities as devoid of religious meaning. Arguing yoga and mindfulness are both "secular and religious," Brown explains that participants in such programs often describe "having 'religious' or 'spiritual' experiences," which she points out can result in a change of affiliation over time (p. 1). The receptiveness to yoga in the US, in part, emanates from its deliberate disarticulation from its religious roots, including linguistic references to Hinduism, by its practitioners, contributing to the perception that yoga is a secular practice (Brown, 2019, p. 6) The absence of Hindu references in the discourse of yoga helps obscure its religious elements from members of text-based faith communities such as Christians and Muslims, who are accustomed to verbalizing belief through language. Brown reveals how some Hindu American advocates of yoga programs "code switch": "they market programs as fully secular, then report back to community insiders that they have won a 'Vedic Victory' or skillfully used 'Stealth Buddhism'" (p. 299).

Our point is not to profess that yoga is essentially Hindu, thereby denying the dynamism of religions and cultural practices and ignoring how new meanings can attach to rituals through contact among cultures. As manifest in the US, contemporary forms of yoga draw from exercise cultures and fitness regimes that emerged in the late 20th century (Holpuch, 2013). Rather we want to suggest that Sewa International, and like-minded Hindu American organizations, use yoga workshops as a form of outreach to non-Hindus. By inculcating dietary prescriptions, yoga exercises, and meditation, practices associated with present-day Hinduism, these organizations normalize Hinduism as part of the pluralistic religious landscape of the US. They also create importantly de facto, non-South Asian practitioners of exercises associated with Hinduism, who may be tempted, like Julia Roberts, to convert to the religion through this introduction to yoga (Kulkarni, 2018).

In their use of yoga as a means of outreach, Hindu American groups are following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's lead in his crusade to popularize yoga globally. Recall that he lobbied the United Nations General Assembly in 2014, proposing the establishment of an International Day of Yoga. The request came at the tail end of a speech beseeching developed countries to share funds and technology

and pledging India's intent to do likewise with less fortunate countries. Entreating his audience to "change [our] lifestyles" and avoid "reckless consumption," he imaginatively presented yoga as an antidote to climate change in a truly novel marketing campaign:

> Yoga is an invaluable gift of our ancient tradition. Yoga embodies unity of mind and body; thought and action; restraint and fulfillment; harmony between man and nature; a holistic approach to health and well-being. It is not about exercise but to discover the sense of oneness with yourself, the world and the nature. By changing our lifestyle and creating consciousness, it can help us deal with climate change (as cited in Pangambam, 2014).

Noticeably absent in Modi's UN address are references to Hinduism, an absence consistent with the promotion of yoga workshops by Hindu Americans; instead, he characterizes yoga as an "ancient tradition" and offers it as India's "gift" to the world (Pangambam, 2014).[81]

As we noted earlier, Hindu American organizations engage in code-switching and present different representations of yoga keyed to specific audiences. Even as they strip references to Hinduism in relation to yoga to American audiences, they explicitly describe yoga as Hindu and acknowledge its potential as a form of soft power to members of their own communities. "Yoga has gained admiration and captured peoples' imagination across the world," Singh and Srivastava (2014) write, "and thus has become a source of India's soft power. An article in *Hinduism Today* declares that the "record 175" cosponsors of Modi's UN resolution to dub the summer solstice as "International Yoga Day" "marked a widely acknowledged chapter in India's soft power story" (Ramabadran, 2021). All three authors bemoan the commodification of yoga and urge its rearticulation with its Hindu roots. Singh and Srivastava suggest "The Indian government can open studios abroad to train interested people in yoga, yogic therapies and Ayurveda … to ensure that yogic practices are practiced as described in the Vedas. Collaboration with the Indian diaspora should be encouraged to disseminate yoga training abroad, in regions where it is not yet popular." These quotations support Prachi Patankar's (2014) argument that caste-privileged Hindus have either erased or appropriated the "richly diverse indigenous and local spiritual practices," including yoga, to strengthen a "Brahmanical form of Hinduism."

A number of Hindus have praised the HAF's "Take Back Yoga" campaign precisely for restoring and popularizing Brahmanical versions of Hinduism. Writing from Chennai, Ramabadran (2021) applauds the HAF's "Take Back Yoga" campaign aimed at emphasizing the "importance of the real roots of yoga" in "Vedic wisdom." He approvingly quotes Suhag Shukla, the HAF's executive director, who warns of the "deliberate delinking of yoga from its religious and spiritual Hindu roots," a consequence of the "successful commoditization and marketing of yoga" (Ramabadran, 2021). The name of HAF's campaign, "Take Back Yoga," also

[81] Singh and Winter (2023) contend that the BJP and Modi's Hindu ideologues are strengthening Hinduism's civilizational politics internationally in forums such as UNESCO by producing "heritage imaginaries" of India as a Hindu nation.

rhetorically echoes the feminist campaign to "Take Back the Night," a misleading association with a progressive movement against sexual violence. Indeed, the recurrent theme of returning yoga to its Vedic roots underscores the socially and politically conservative agenda of Hindu American groups: their insistence that yoga quintessentially represents primordial Hinduism obscures Islamophobic and caste ideology. As part of its "Take Back Yoga" campaign, the HAF (2021) released an animated short that grounds yoga in Hinduism by emphasizing Sanskrit terms, revealing how specific poses represent bodily devotion to Hindu deities and borrowing Modi's characterization of yoga as a "gift to humanity." As Hindu humanitarianism becomes a global export from India, and Hinduness is reconfigured as a global ethic, the Hinduization of citizenship has meant shrinking rights and justice for its substantial population of Muslim and caste-oppressed minorities.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored how Hindu immigrants increasingly rely on discourses of Hindu exceptionalism to carve out a space in US's multicultural politics even as they play an active role in materializing the idea of India as a Hindu *rashtra* (nation state). Narratives of civilizational pride are now key elements of Hindu American diasporic identity and are purposefully deployed by many right-wing Hindu organizations and individuals to assert their status as ideal citizens of the US polity. As earlier narratives of poverty and socioeconomic suffering in India are replaced with tropes of resurgent Hindu pride and heritage, diasporic Hindus reframe themselves as "givers" rather than "beneficiaries" of Western largess. We described how Hindu immigrant groups have relied on civic public engagement that draws on the concept of *seva* to present themselves as culturally and religiously predisposed to good works and humanitarian citizenship. Instead of individual success as a key determinant of their model minority status, Hindu immigrants now increasingly use the trope of community service and engagement to present Hinduism as inherently virtuous and capacious. In a context of entrenched Islamophobia, such reassessments are meant to package Hinduism's virtues as a gift to humanity. While Hindu Americans in the US invoke Hindu exceptionalism to reinvent themselves as ideal citizens, they perceive Muslims in India as roadblocks to realizing Hindu glory and Hindu exceptionalism. For Hindus, Indian American civic exceptionalism functions as a declaration of ethno-religious identity in the US even as it aligns with global Islamophobia and abets the elimination of Muslims from Kashmir and India.

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