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No Hindu Left Behind is a Tall Order, Even in America

Rheaa Rao

with additional reporting by Gabe Carroll

John McCane, a 29-year-old Caucasian American, was born Christian and became Hindu when he moved to India to study anthropology more than a decade ago.

He is someone you can't miss on the streets. He wears a "tiruman" -- a large yellow line with two white lines on either side of it--on his forehead. He is a Vadagalai Vaishnavite, a strand of Hinduism that, simplistically put, worships both female and male deities as equal. He is also openly gay and is engaged to an Indian priest who is based in Australia.

McCane, based in Cincinnati, feels like Shri Vaishnavites are outnumbered in the United States. He thinks that there are very few places of worship for them in this country and that not many believers wear their devotion on their sleeves like him. So in 2007, McCane, who studied at University of Cincinnati, decided to help start the university's Hindu Student Council to feel more of a sense of belonging.

Though there were groups catering to a larger category of South Asians, he said that the Hindus on campus wanted their own group that was religious and not only cultural. He recalls that because of the presence of larger interest groups, the university was reluctant to fund a Hindu student group but were on board when they saw that a non-Indian was interested in it.

But, as excited as he was initially, McCane left the group in no time.

"It was supposed to be an open forum but became almost nationalist," he said. "It made me sad that it seemed like there was only one way of being Hindu."

McCane's Hinduism is almost summed up in the three-foot tall statue of a deity Bala Srinivasa that he takes with him when he moves

between countries and even within states. The statue is made of black marble and is carved in a mixture of styles of North and South India- combining the childlike features of Guruvayurappan of Kerala and the more symmetric structure of Panduranga of Maharashtra.

But the group became further away from the pluralism he expected. It was co-opted by Hindus who according to him leaned towards a form of Hinduism that favored nationalism and their own way of practicing Hinduism over others.

This is not a concern that only one Hindu or one Hindu group has.

According to the 2015 Pew Forum Religious Landscape Survey, there are 2.23 million Hindus in the US, comprising the fourth-largest religious community in the country. While Hindu Americans include people of diverse origins – including South Asia, the Caribbean and converts from other faiths – the majority belong to the wider Indian American community. The religious infrastructure of American Hinduism is equally diverse, representing a wide range of spiritual and regional traditions.

Within this diversity there is however a strong influence of organizations identifying with Hindu nationalist ideology and affiliated to the main Hindu nationalist organization in India, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Contemporary Hindu Nationalists trace their ideology back to a set of founders in the early mid-20th century and particularly to a writer and activist named Veer Savarkar who wrote a text called “Hindutva”, according to Manu Bhagavan, a professor at Hunter College specializing in modern India. Hindutva is synonymous for Hindu Nationalism as a ideology and one of the things it advocates for is thinking of India as a motherland and fatherland, he added.

“Everyone who has their religion traced back to this soil belongs and everyone who doesn’t doesn’t,” said Bhagavan. “Muslims and Christians, in other words, tend to become the targeted other in Hindu ideology.”

In India, Hindu nationalism is not a fringe ideology. Current Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s governing BJP party identifies with it, and it informs their policies and campaigns. With somewhere between 5-8 million members, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is one of the

largest non-governmental organizations in the world. In India it wields enormous political power, and the ruling BJP party is effectively its political wing. Since its founding in 1925 it has been subject to controversy, including accusations of violence up to and including acts of ethnic cleansing - documented cases of religiously motivated rape, murder and displacement - against Muslims, Christians and other minorities.

However, this dark side is not visible in how the RSS presents itself in the US, as a charitable organization ministering to the global Hindu diaspora, through multiple affiliate organizations, including its overseas proxy, known as the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS). While the HSS has yet to face major difficulties for its political parentage in the US, it has been investigated and warned to disassociate from the RSS in the UK. In addition to the HSS, there's the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America and the Hindu Students Council, that was born from the HSS and severed ties with it, but has maintained ideology similarities.

These organizations are 501(c)(3) organizations that deem themselves as cultural organizations. The words 'preserve' and 'promote' frequent their mission statements and they seek to educate and inform about Hinduism. **Though these Hindu organizations in the United States do not have a violent history or intent in the United States, it is important to trace their roots back to the Hindu nationalist movement in India to dig deeper into their rhetoric and what it means for Indian and American democracy.**

The Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America organize conferences, camps and seminars about Hinduism. The HSS in the U.S. spent \$1,826,513 on youth development camps, family camps and heritage camps of varying durations according to their 2013 and 2014 filings. These camps, according to their 990s, taught families a "Hindu way of life" and explored the philosophy of the religion through a combination of physical activities and discussions.

Videos of recent Sangh Shiksha Varghs are available online, including ones held in Chicago in 2015, Indianapolis in 2012, and the Bay Area in 2010. These videos show groups praying to saffron flags and practicing traditional martial arts.

The occurrences of these camps or “Sang Shiksha Varghs” on US soil is a sign of the RSS and its affiliates carrying on with crucial movement rituals in the diaspora context, according to Biju Mathew, a professor at Rider University and one of the key voices of the Campaign to Stop Funding Hate, that investigates the activities of these Hindu organizations in the U.S. They represent a powerful moment of initiation and cadre-forming, and are seen by some as a sign that – despite the superficial embrace of liberal rhetoric – the RSS remains a hardline political movement with a semi-paramilitary structure, even when abroad, he said.

The HSS registers these activities as “Hindu Heritage Summer Camps” on 990 forms – and has set up a separate 501(c)(3) under that name – but refers to them as Sang Shiksha Varghs in the activity’s description on the same forms.

“None of this is for anything other than building groups and a sense of belonging,” said Balmurli Natrajan, a professor of anthropology at William Patterson University. “They’ve taken this kind of very clearly practiced form of-- not self-defense-- but of actually fermenting riots and have packaged it in a benign way.”

According to Natrajan, these Hindutva organizations do not present themselves as conservative or hate-mongers in the United States. But though they have grounded themselves in seemingly liberal rhetoric, he adds, they cannot wander too far from their Indian political roots.

“The leadership of these organizations is very articulated and they have to be more flexible in the U.S. in order to attract a much larger crowd that their has no idea about the RSS and Sangh Parivar in India, or doesn’t want too much ideology but a feel-good Hinduism instead,” Natrajan said.

He gives an example of the Hindu American Foundation and their Not Cast in Caste report published in 2011. The report acknowledges casteism in India and Natrajan said that it also acknowledged caste as a part of Hinduism and took a strong stance against that. Natrajan alleges that the HAF were then criticized by the Sangh Parivar,

following which they took out sentences that were critical of Hinduism.

When New York City News Service dug out the report before it was updated, we found that a sentence that acknowledged casteism in Hinduism has been taken out. The original report said, “The Hindu American Foundation, in this report, acknowledges that caste-based discrimination arose in Hindu society; that some ancient Hindu texts lay down social laws and codes which support caste-bias and a birth-based hierarchy (although none of them prescribe untouchability)...”

It has been replaced to “This report recognizes that caste-based distinctions have been prevalent in the Indian society for a millenia and that some ancient ancient Hindu social laws and codes were used to justify caste hierarchies and bias.”

Both versions of the report emphasize that caste-based discrimination still happens and that Hindus are and must work further to eradicate it. Despite few attempts, we were not able to confirm that the Sangh Parivar’s criticism is what made the report go through edits.

But this is not the only report that the Hindu American Foundation has released that has sparked debate. The organization works on a policy level and one of its larger efforts was to change California textbooks’ depiction of Hinduism, a controversial campaign that some Indian Americans allege is a covert attempt to spread the RSS’s ideology – known as Hindutva, or “Hinduness”- in the US.

Shailaja Paik, an assistant professor of history at University of Cincinnati, calls this one of their defining battles. When textbooks are reviewed in California, different lobbying groups usually put forth their suggestions for edits. In 2005, the Vedic Foundation (affiliated with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America) and American Hindu Education Foundation (affiliated with the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh) sent in their edits for the first time. These were initially approved and then countered by a 47 scholars of South Asia, as well as Dalit organizations, an effort led by Michael Witzel, a professor of Sanskrit at Harvard University.

In March 2006, the Hindu American Foundation filed a lawsuit against California's Curriculum Commission because it rejected the edits the two Hindu organizations had proposed regarding Hinduism and India. They won the case in 2006 after the judge ruled that California's State Board of Education had violated the process by which the textbook gets approved. The textbooks however were not reissued due to cost reasons.

Paik was on the board of the South Asia Advisory Council, which was made up of mainly South Asia professors from different part of the United States. She said she was contacted by the board in 2012 and asked whether was interested in supervising edits that were a pushback to the edits made by the Hindu organizations. According to her, the advisory board was in charge of making edits to the chapters about South Asia in grade 5 to grade 8 level textbooks in California.

The goal, she said, was to make Hinduism seem open-minded and free of hierarchy by pushing caste under the carpet and saying that it exists all over the world and not in India, as do other forms of discrimination. Paik added that this was an attempt to save face after the caste discrimination issue came up in the U.N. in 2002. The edits were a way to say that this hardly played a role at all in the modern Indian society, which isn't true, she said.

There were attempts to make Buddha a Hindu prince when he was not caste sati (an old custom where women commit suicide after their husband dies) in a positive light. She said that the Hindu organizations would oppose their edits by citing Hindu scholars whose name they would keep under wraps, making them lose their credibility. Despite this, the Hindu American Foundation is using all their legal expertise to push for changes. In 2014, the organization refiled the case and in May 2016 it was decided that the edits would be reconsidered line by line after pleas that they misrepresented Hinduism.

"A textbook is the deepest you can get because every child read it," she said. " So they get it define what India is, what Hindu is for them."

Apart from ideological similarities to Hindu nationalist organizations back home, Raja Swamy, a professor of anthropology at University of

Knoxville, Tennessee, and a member of the Campaign to Stop Funding Hate, said that they saw the same people occupy leadership positions within these organizations and noticed a similar structure to their operations.

The campaign began looking into these organizations in early 2002. It was around then that they discovered a large number of these websites belonging to different organizations affiliated with the movement-- from affiliates of the sangh organizations to developmental aid organizations fundraising for India and outreach wings-- were sitting on a single server cluster that came out of San Diego.

The San Diego cluster was an open secret, Swamy said, that marked the early stage of the Sangh's early internet presence.

"We learnt a lot about the strategies of sangh organizations in the United States from this. We learnt that it wasn't some sort of problematic blueprint that unfolds," he said. "Instead they organizations have an organic quality to them. They produce and generate new kinds of strategies and initiatives."

He gave an example of the India Development and Relief Fund, a sangh affiliate that raises money for the poor in India and Nepal. One of Campaign to Stop Funding Hate's projects is the South Asia Citizens Web (SACW). According to the report that SACW published, 50 percent of the relief organization's funds went to sangh organizations and that in at least three states, these funded groups were involved in violence against religious minorities. The report was from 2002 but was restated in 2014.

New York City News Service took another look at the India Development and Relief's 990s as well as the list of organizations it funds and noticed that post SACW's report, it stopped funding certain organizations that the report highlighted. The IDRF could not be reached for comment on this, but according to Swamy it highlights what he means by the "organic quality" of these organizations- they cut off associations and coopt ones that serve similar functions.

To illustrate leadership overlaps between the organizations, Swamy points out to Ajay Shah, one of the founders and the first president of the Hindu Students Council used to be active with the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a nationalist student organization in India that is affiliated with the RSS. Shah came to the United States as a graduate student and became very actively involved in upgrading the electronic side of the group. He then became active in presenting this infrastructure to the RSS in India.

“There was light hearted talk of how old RSS men were being taught how the mouse works and how the internet works,” Swamy said. “But what is fascinating was that these were the early stages of the RSS gaining a web-based international presence that was being wholly facilitated by U.S.-based affiliates, notably folks who became big in the Hindu Student Council.”

Mihir Meghani was another early and active member of the Hindu Student Council, who is now a board member of the Hindu American Foundation and Swamy’s report alleges, is a part of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Meghani’s LinkedIn shows that he is an active board member of the Hindu American Foundation but states that the organization is not involved with religious or political organizations.

Despite all these allegations, these Hindu organizations have significant buy-in in the United States, especially amongst students and young professionals.

The Hindu Student Councils, that was born out of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and severed ties with it in 1993, have chapters in colleges and universities across the country. If the HSC isn’t in place then the Hindu Yuva Group, affiliated with the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, is. These student chapters, usually funded by their educational institute, organize large scale celebrations of festivals like Diwali and Holi.

“This sort of social space has been very attractive for a lot of young people,” Swamy said. “For them it is a chance to hang out with friends, to meet people of the opposite sex, to engage in what many American youth with engage in different contexts, like going to a party. I think that the kids who in there are not going in thinking

they're learning to hate, they're going because it is a fun thing to do, play games, hang out, which kid will say no to that?"

Nikesh Shah, the vice president of the Binghamton University chapter of the Hindu Student Council echoed this sentiment.

"It's like speed-friending," he says about one of their events, a giddy group dance that constantly requires switching partners called Ras Garba. "You get to see people, have a quick moment with them and can approach them later which is great at the beginning of the year when everyone is new to each other."

Shah, currently a junior at the university, joined the council as a freshman after interacting with its college board during orientation.

He said there were people who were older than him, smart upperclassmen who he looked up to and became friends with outside the context of being Hindu. Shah claims that he doesn't consider himself particularly religious but that the Hindu Student Council is a way to make Hinduism more relatable to everyone, to understand different cultures and help people understand where Hinduism comes from by showing them how fun it can be.

Sarthak Kalani, a PhD student at Columbia University who started the university's Hindu Yuva Group, an affiliation of the HSS sees it as way of organizing a community for social work. The Columbia chapter, he said, volunteers with New Alternatives For Children, a group that works with specially abled children. He admits that though the university has South Asian and even India specific groups, it is the philosophy behind Hinduism, something that he further inculcated through 'shakhas' back in India, that motivates him to do social work.

For Kalani, the yuva group is cultural, it is a way of organizing different types of Hindus without really engaging them in the nuances of the religion (its sects or the caste system) or imposing a certain way to be Hindu. He is wary of the politics of religion, the implication of Hindu nationalism and how it translates to the United States and prefers to not engage in it.

“For me, the definition of Hindu includes anyone to everyone who worships nature to those who do not believe in the existence of God, to those who believe in the idol worship and those who believe in the reality that this world is everything,” he said.

The dichotomy between religion and culture and the benign nature of these organizations has helped ground them in the liberal framework of American multiculturalism and there seems to be no problem with this outwardly.

Swamy acknowledges this too. The Campaign to Stop Funding Hate has received a lot of backlash from these organizations who claim that they are anti-Hindu and a shapeless organization with no clear leadership themselves. But for Swamy and others who are a part of this coalition, this is an important conversation to have. He said that the group did have dialogue with different chapters of the Hindu Student Council and were able to make some inroads with them.

“We engaged with them and told them that they can celebrate culture without being party to a fascist movement, without being a part of a kind of movement that has really terrible politics,” Swamy said.

According to him, the organizations have managed to consolidate support for their programs from youngsters because they frame themselves in the language that Hindu Americans have been looked down upon and need to protect and defend themselves. The culture that VHPA or the HSC promotes is very consistent with the RSS definition of Hindu culture, Swamy said, adding that this definition is strictly upper caste, very patriarchal and does not take into consideration complicated traditions that make up Hinduism.

“At no time were any of us of the opinion that people should not celebrate their culture,” he said. “In fact, most of us look for some sort of connection with home in almost a contrived way.”

He said that thinking about it that way and not only through hard facts in their reports helped both the coalition and the Hindu Student Councils they had dialogue with ask why it was that certain kinds of Hinduism weren't included.

One of the Hindu Student Councils that was the most receptive of this dialogue, he said, was Stanford University's Hindu Student Council. Swamy said that shortly after they spoke to Stanford's chapter, it disassociated itself with the main Hindu Student Council.

Vignesh Subramanian, a PhD student of electrical engineering at Stanford used to run the Hindu group from 2014 to 2016 while simultaneously running the Indian Student Association from 2014 to 2015. He claims to have no knowledge about the dialogue or disassociation that he said might have happened before he joined the university and the group. He did however say that the group changed its name from the Hindu Student Council to the Hindu Student Association in 2011.

Subramanian recalls the group being dormant in 2013, when joined. His goal was then to create a space where all different types of Hindus have space to worship and learn about their religion. The group has a room with a temple and library and have associations with different Hindu groups like Ramkrishna mission and International Society Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) who hold talks and weekly meditation sessions.

According to him, since the Bay Area has a large South Asian population, there are a lot of opportunities to be Hindu which are given more importance than in India, where it just becomes a routine, a way of life, rather than something that has to be sought out in a diaspora.

"That's why when you're heading an organization like this, it is important to be open and to represent all types of Hindus and not one section," he said.

Hinduism for him, is a religion with many paths and the freedom to embark on a path that will help you find answers about your changing identity. This becomes heightened when you're in another country, he said, and keeping this organization alive with a renewed sense of purpose has helped him understand himself better.

But for Swamy, this sense of self and community that comes with Hinduism must come with a critical exploration of how it fits in with

our changing identity of being Hindu in India and being Hindu in America, being a majority in a turbulent time in one country and a minority in an equally tumultuous time in another.

“Indian Americans are dealing with issues around sexism, racism, LGBTQ rights, anti-immigrant xenophobia,” Swamy said. “We have an affinity to a discourse of human rights. But how is it that we can have this affinity and still harbor an attitude that as Hindus we have some special extra right over other communities and religions? It remains to be asked if being proud of Hinduism forecloses any critical engagement with these fundamental questions.”