# Voices of Hindutva: Creating and Exploiting Religious Binaries
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*Editors' Note*
*This article is being published under a pseudonym, as the author fears that he would otherwise risk physical injury. Though as a general policy the Journal of Inter-Religious Dialogue™ discourages the use of pseudonyms as a potential hindrance to open and direct dialogue, it has made an exception due to the special circumstances of the author and the desire to broaden the scope of dialogue to include more challenging topics to discuss.*

## Abstract

In 2002, Gujarat, India experienced a traumatizing episode of communal violence in which Muslims, a religious minority, were actively targeted. It is widely believed that the state government, run and influenced by extreme Hindu Nationalist (Hindutva) groups, is at least partly responsible for this. Although the extent of their logistical involvement is debated, the rhetoric of many Hindutva organizations creates and demonizes a religious other. In contrast to the majority of Hindus and the majority of Indians, leaders of a number of Hindutva elements use language that creates pervasive religious binaries, which are instrumental in the recurrence of violence. The political success of Hindutva groups in Gujarat therefore complicates peace-building efforts, as illustrated by the dynamics of responses by local non-governmental organizations (NGO's) to the violence.

On February 27, 2002, a train carrying Hindutva volunteers caught fire in the town of Godhra, killing 55-60 pilgrims inside one coach. Although various reasons have been cited, including arson by a Muslim mob, the cause of the fire is still debated. The very next day, communal riots erupted in the city of Ahmedabad and in some villages around the state. The United States Government estimates that by the end of the period of rioting, 2,000 people were killed and 100,000 were displaced and moved to relief camps ("International Religious Freedom"). Humanitarian organizations claim that up to 2,500 were killed and 140,000 were displaced (Parker 2008). These riots have been called "pogroms" by professionals from various fields, including scholars such as Steven Wilkinson (2005, 3) and Paul Brass (2003, 390), because of the highly disproportionate number of Muslim casualties.

Allegations of governmental involvement are directed at the Sangh Parivar, a closely linked family of organizations that promotes an extreme Hindu nationalist ideology called Hindutva. Through its many branches, including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the Bajrang Dal, Hindutva ideology plays a significant role in arenas as diverse as politics, education, youth organization, social mobilization, and even paramilitary training. However, it is crucial to distinguish between Hindutva and Hindu, because only a minority of Hindus and a minority of Indians support the ideology itself. This piece is not intended as a polemic against Hindus, the vast majority of whom embrace peaceful and tolerant belief systems. Rather,

it uses the 2002 Gujarat Riots as a case study to show how a well-organized group can systematically wield rhetoric and political power to establish a religious "other" and call for violence.

Few dispute that Hindu-Muslim riots yield tangible political gains for these Sangh Parivar organizations (Brass 2003, 6). Their repeated democratic election, both in and beyond Gujarat, may be construed as evidence of the effectiveness of their incendiary rhetoric. But the link between their rhetoric and recurring communal violence has yet to be widely appreciated. Notwithstanding their exact level of involvement in the 2002 Riots, which is still being examined and debated, the messages put forth by Hindutva leaders exaggerate two binaries: Hinduism versus Islam, and Hindus versus Muslims. This paper seeks to demonstrate that these reified categories are then exploited to issue calls for inter-religious violence.

The first binary reified by Hindutva organizations is that of Hinduism versus Islam. In an interview, the notorious VHP leader, Praveen Togadia, described Islam as having an "exclusively totalitarian system ("We, Hindus and…")." With help from madrasas in spreading its fundamentalist ideologies, Islam encourages violent jihad and the killing of non-Muslims. In contrast, Togadia proclaims that "Hinduism is synonymous with harmony (Ibid)." After creating this binary, he calls Islam's intolerant ideologies the root of the problem (Ibid).  Praveen Togadia, having since been accused of participating in the riots himself, is a high ranking official in the VHP, which the U.S. State Department cites as an "extremist" organization that has instigated violence (Swami, "International Religious Freedom," Rajghatta).

Other Sangh Parivar organizations employ very similar rhetoric. Consider the Bajrang Dal, the Hindutva ideology's youth wing. It provocatively declares that Islam's mission is to convert and conquer all of India ("About Us"). Prahlad Shastri, a charismatic orator in the Bajrang Dal, even declared in a public speech that although not all Muslims are terrorists "every terrorist in the world is a Muslim (2008)." The markedly Hindu audience for his speech, including young children, was told that terrorism is endemic to Islam. The implications of such rhetoric are particularly incendiary because the state government attributed the Godhra train fire to a Muslim mob. Here, the juxtaposition of the two religious groups is taken one step farther: If the religious ideologies are fundamentally different, in that Islam is intolerant while Hinduism is harmonious, then the individuals ascribing to these ideologies are also fundamentally different from one another.

Thus, in addition to the binary between Hinduism and Islam, Hindutva rhetoric also presents a binary between Hindu and Muslim.  In this same speech, Prahlad Shastri goes on to say that the political elections are not actually between BJP and Indian National Congress (INC), but Hindus and Muslims. Although this simplistic description seems unfair, it is mild in comparison to the position of Shastri's umbrella organization, the Bajrang Dal, which contends that all Muslims should "go back to Pakistan and Bangladesh" (as if that is where they came from!), and that Muslims should not be allowed hold political seats in India (Bajrang Dal 2008). In another speech, Acharya

Dharmendra, a leader in the VHP, even compares Muslims to a disease, a headache, and a problem that is threatening to divide the Hindu nation once again (2008).

In both binaries created by Hindutva's divisive rhetoric, Hinduism and Hindus are shown to be the opposite of Islam and Muslims, and therefore superior. Hinduism promotes harmony, not intolerance. Peace, not endemic terrorism. India, not Pakistan or Bangladesh. And perhaps most instructive as to the original motive for creating the binaries: BJP, not INC. This final contrast in itself can inspire volumes of analysis, and is a topic to which justice cannot be done here. These rigid binaries, once formed, can then be exploited to incite violence, yielding likely political gains for Hindutva organizations (Brass 2003, 6). The justification for such violence takes two forms in Hindutva rhetoric: blame displacement and fear mongering.

Blame displacement is simply a way of declaring "They started it!" This strategy of justifying violence has been exemplified by multiple individuals who espouse Hindutva ideology. One example is that of Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi, who is affiliated with both the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Modi's response to the massacre in Gujarat was to say, "Every action has an equal and opposite reaction," implying that violence was to be expected after the Godhra train fire (Wilkinson 2005, 392). By displacing blame for the violence onto Muslims, who were in fact overwhelmingly the victims of the riots, Modi all but vindicates the perpetrators of such heinous crimes and equates the death of 55-60 to that of 2000-2500 victims.

This phenomenon of justifying violence by displacing blame is very common. Paul Brass says that in times of conflict, all participating sides justify themselves by claiming only to act in retaliation, using the terms "retaliation" and "self-defense" interchangeably. In his discussion of Hindu-Muslim violence in contemporary India, Brass puts great emphasis on proving false the distinction between aggression and self-defense (2003, 356). Such a distinction, if not completely false, is at least greatly exaggerated. This is a very disingenuous maneuver, which serves to endorse reactionary violence. Alongside blame displacement, Hindutva organizations also justify violence by fear-mongering and threat exaggeration.

Mechanisms for justifying violence through fear appear to proceed sequentially. First, the Hindutva leadership reopens wounds from different historical eras, all the way from "Mohammedan rule" up to the era of British imperialism and colonialism. Then, citing these historical events and their injustices as evidence, they construct elaborate conspiracy theories for the present. These theories implicate not only established foreign polities, but also many foreign religious entities, all of whom are described as helping Indian Muslims to threaten the security of the *Bharat,* or the Indian Nation. Once these exaggerated threats are topped off with a sense of urgency and imminence, a call to violence is the next and final step.

Praveen Togadia, for example, claims that during "the Mohammedan rule", thirty thousand temples were converted into mosques (The Milli Gazette 2008). The Bajrang Dal describes this era as a time of "barbaric" Mogul rule, a time when the Hindu nation had been enslaved but was ultimately freed (Bajrang Dal 2008). Acharya Dharmendra also references this history in the same speech mentioned above, and even makes a smooth

connection to the present day, declaring that "Christian and Islamic imperialism have become one." This statement is very succinct yet powerful. It peels at the scabs of history and implies that not only do Christian and Islamic imperialism still exist, but that they have now joined forces. Dharmendra even goes so far as to claim that foreign imperialism is visible in the actions of prominent politician Sonia Gandhi, whom he presents as a pawn of the Pope seeking to "Christianize and Islamize India." He emphasizes that Muslims have 28 countries in this world and Christians have over 200, then subsequently leaves his audience feeling helpless by asking, and leaving unanswered, two questions: "Which is your nation? Where will you go?"

Among the different threats that face the Hindu nation, according to Hindutva leaders, Pakistan plays an exceptionally prominent role. Togadia believes the VHP's responsibility is to expose Pakistan, Pakistani intelligence agencies, and their "grand design" to destabilize India. This is how the VHP can defend Vedic culture from totalitarianism and violence, according to Togadia. But Vedic culture, he claims in a videotaped speech, cannot be defended, nor can terrorism be eliminated, while Hindus still kneel before Muslims (see also The Milli Gazette 2008). Togadia's conspiracy theory implicates the Taliban alongside Pakistan and Pakistani intelligence agencies. But it does not end there – the Bajrang Dal even implicates the United States as a threat, citing American involvement in Kosovo, Bosnia, Timor, and Chechnya as historical evidence (Bajrang Dal 2008).

Aside from political and imperialistic threats, religious threats are also exaggerated. In 1981, a community of untouchable-caste Hindus from Meenakshipuram, a village in Tamil Nadu, converted *en masse* to Islam. Hindutva organizations often accuse wealthy pan-Islamists from the Middle East of sponsoring this conversion, suggesting that "petro-dollars" were given as bribes to those who converted. And even though evidence suggests otherwise, this event was construed as a Muslim conspiracy and an Islamic threat to Hindu values, culture, and unity. This event has since attained a mythical status, and is cited repeatedly by Hindutva organizations as evidence for a conspiracy against the Hindu nation (Van der Veer 1994, 26, 113).

Although vaguely rooted in history, much of the rhetoric that comes from Hindutva leaders is profoundly exaggerated. These embellishments are carefully echoed over and over again by Sangh Parivar organizations to different segments of society. Muslims and Islam are fundamentally different from Hindus and Hinduism. The Hindu nation, having previously experienced Mogul and British imperialism, is once again being threatened by Islamic imperialism. But this time around, the state of Pakistan, the Pope, Sonia Gandhi, the Taliban, the United States, and Middle-Eastern special interests all share a motive with Muslims. They are all trying to subvert the Hindu nation and Vedic culture, whether through politics or religion. Such sweeping declarations from Hindutva organizations offer not just simple commentary, but together form a holistic worldview.

With such a frightening worldview, taking violent action in "retaliation" is no longer quite so implausible. Especially provocative statements come from those whose rhetoric we have already seen. Acharya Dharmendra delivered a speech in front of a life-sized illustration of the burning S/6 train compartment, clearly depicting the Godhra train

fire, and creating a very emotionally charged moment. In the presence of political leaders, the police, and many others, Dharmendra asked his audience if Pakistan is their friend or enemy. He received a resounding response of "Enemy!" and continues:

> "Till Pakistan is reduced to rubble (literally, '*khaak-istan*'), Gujarat and Mother India can not rest in peace. It is simple – we have to root out the enemy and we must start from right here. The whole country will follow your example!"

Such an unequivocal call for aggression can also be found in speeches by other Hindutva organizers. Praveen Togadia explains to his audience that the Godhra train fire happened because the country follows Mahatma Gandhi's values. If they continue Gandhi's policies of nonviolence, he says, the terrorism will continue. "Brothers – we have to abandon Gandhi," urged Togadia, and received a modest round of applause from the audience.

Vinay Katiyar, head of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh and first President of the Bajrang Dal (Frontline 2002), is another key public figure who employs strong, warlike language. In an interview, Katiyar claims ownership for various controversial lands within India. He subsequently extends these claims to lands outside of India, and provocatively declares that even Mecca and Medina, the most sacred places in Islam, are "our places." The war is very old and continues to this day, insists Katiyar in an interview found in the 2006 documentary, "The Making of a Muslim Terrorist." Furthermore, at the end of this war, the "Vedic Sanathan Dharma" and Hindu society will be established – not only in India, but throughout the world.

The messages that come from Hindutva leadership clearly come across as divisive and incendiary. The language used by the Hindu Nationalist organizations creates strong and vastly exaggerated binaries of Hindu versus Muslim and Hinduism versus Islam. These binaries are subsequently used to justify and even call for communal violence, and are instrumental to its recurrence. Such crimes serve the political interests of the Hindutva movement at the expense of the Congress Party establishment and countless innocent citizens. And although the "other" is always demonized in a conflict situation, the apparent involvement of the regional government in Gujarat severely complicates the situation, especially for justice, reconciliation, or peace-building efforts.

In September 2003, a year and a half after the riots, the Supreme Court of India publicly said that they had lost faith in the Government of Gujarat. Then in 2004, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India went so far as to describe Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat, as a modern-day Nero who looked the other way during the riots (Tribune News Service 2007). Even today, faith in the Gujarat judicial system is nearly absent. Operating within this framework of stagnation and continued government indifference, many NGOs in Gujarat have given up the pursuit of justice for the victims and have settled for reconciliation. Even so, the question of how to pursue reconciliation remains daunting.

Non-governmental organizations (NGO's) in Gujarat face a litany of obstacles in their peace-building and violence-prevention efforts. In a place where governmental organizations may actually contribute to inter-religious strife, where does reconciliation begin? Experts on the matter generally agree that it has been nearly impossible to make progress through dialogue with Hindutva factions. Fr. Cedric Prakash, an internationally acclaimed human rights activist in Gujarat, describes the situation:

> For any serious dialogue, there has to be a level playing field, and the partners to the dialogue have to be sincere about it, which the Sangh Parivar is clearly not. Their whole agenda and worldview is based on hatred for and exclusion of non-Hindus, so how can you expect them to be sincere about dialogue (Sikand 2005)?

Pleas from human rights organizations have fallen on deaf ears, and attempts at such dialogue have indeed proven fruitless. As a result, some have tried to shift from dialogue with the government to dialoguing among the citizens.

Yet even those who engage in citizens' dialogue must concede its limited effectiveness. In most conflict situations, there are more people who do not fight than those who do so, and more people who reject hatred than those who perpetuate it (Anderson 1999, 24). Where a majority of citizens prefer peace over violence, but the latter is perpetuated by a select group that wields disproportionate power, the effectiveness of grassroots dialogue is limited. Unless such discourse can change the existing political structure, its effectiveness will remain fragile, and may be shattered in an instant by those in office.

Historically, Hindutva elements have gained power whenever there has been interreligious violence in India by exacerbating and exploiting religious divisions for political gain, and by playing identity groups against each other. This is most visible in the context of the 2002 riots. Although religion may be heavily implicated, it is not at the very core of today's conflicts in Gujarat in the way political dynamics are. Since the BJP shares many positions with its rival, the INC, they differentiate themselves primarily through their nationalist ideology (Overdorf 2008). The BJP has branded itself as an alternative to the ineffective, slow, and "soft" INC, and as a party that will secure national and state identities.

Recognizing this intricate relationship between politics and violence, many peace-oriented NGO's in Gujarat have been forced to develop political opinions. Even though they may pursue their own separate avenues towards peace, such as citizens' dialogue or education, they maintain political stances, even if unofficial. Prashant, for example, is human rights advocacy group based in Ahmedabad. Recognizing that fighting for human rights in the context of Gujarat necessitates being vociferously political, Prashant and its founder Fr. Cedric Prakash have consistently been outspoken critics of Hindutva. As a result, Fr. Cedric and many other like-minded individuals have received threats against their lives from people they identify as "government thugs." In light of this, it is not

surprising that very few individuals or organizations have challenged outright the rhetoric used by the Hindutva movement.

The events of 2002 were a tragic demonstration of the convergence of politics, jingoism, and religious extremism in Hindutva ideology. To effect positive change, all three must be addressed. Avoiding politics when elected officials actively perpetuate hatred and violence is counterproductive. Failing to address nationalist ideology when it is used to create a religious other simply encourages communal isolation. And not changing a discourse that exploits religion as an instrument to divide reinforces the exclusive binaries. Peace-building NGO's in Gujarat struggle with the complexity of their task on a daily basis, and a cohesive and effective response to Hindutva ideology at such a level has yet to be found. Perhaps one solution lies in government itself, in the rebranding and revival of the Indian National Congress, or even in the introduction of a third major political coalition.

There really is no debate – much less dialogue – possible regarding the binary-forming propaganda utilized by Hindutva elements. Gujarat, the state which once incubated Gandhi's principle of *ahimsa* (active non-violence), has now become a breeding ground for the extreme Hindutva movement. Until Gujarat and India at large shed identity-based politics in favor of issue-based politics, and until the language and actions of the Hindutva movement either reduce in volume or change in tone, lasting reconciliation along communal lines will remain elusive. In 1948, a member of the nascent Hindutva movement assassinated Gandhi, and even today, Hindutva continues to undermine the vision of a peaceful India.

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