

# Hindus for Human Rights

**Statement for the Record from Hindus for Human Rights  
UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM  
Hearing on Advancing Religious Freedom Within  
the U.S.-India Bilateral Relationship  
September 20, 2023**

## **Introduction**

Hindus for Human Rights (HfHR) is a 501c(3) nonprofit organization, founded in 2019, which advocates for democracy, pluralism, and human rights in South Asia and North America, rooted in the values of our faith: *shanti* (peace), *nyaya* (justice) and *satya* (truth). As progressive Hindus whose faith tradition moves us to stand up for these fundamental values, we provide a Hindu voice of resistance to caste, Hindutva (Hindu nationalism), racism, and all forms of bigotry and oppression.

Hindus for Human Rights is dedicated to elevating and advancing human rights in the United States-India bilateral relationship, and regularly engages with government leaders, elected officials, religious and educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, and others to raise these issues in a variety of fora. As such, we are writing today to express our grave concern for the state of democracy, minority rights, and religious freedom in India, and we respectfully submit this statement for the record to the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom.

## **The state of religious freedom in India**

In May 2023, the United States Department of State released its annual International Religious Freedom Report on India for 2022, which painted a grave picture for the current state of religious freedom in India. In the report, the State Department outlined a persistent and widespread pattern of state-sanctioned discrimination and mistreatment against religious minorities such as Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs, including the bulldozing of Muslim-owned homes and shops, a ban on hijabs in a Karnataka girls' school, and the disruption and vandalism of Christian and Muslim religious services and houses of worship.<sup>1</sup> The findings of the State Department's IRF Report echo the concerns that have repeatedly been raised by USCIRF over the last several years, which in May recommended for the

---

<sup>1</sup> United States Department of State, *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: India*, May 2023. Available at <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/india/>.

fourth year in a row that the State Department should designate India as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) for “engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom.”<sup>2</sup>

While India’s precipitous decline in religious freedom for yet another year in a row undoubtedly impacts non-Hindu minorities most acutely, we are also deeply concerned about the rights and religious freedom of Hindus who, like us, subscribe to a progressive interpretation of our faith tradition that does not lend itself to weaponization in service of the hateful and exclusionary ideology that has been embraced by the likes of India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. As noted Hindu theologian and HfHR advisory board member Anantanand Rambachan has written, unlike doctrinal religions which coalesce around a clearly-defined and codified set of beliefs and practices, Hinduism is “an astoundingly diverse tradition” which can perhaps best be thought of “as a large, ancient, and extended family, recognizable through common features, but also reflecting the uniqueness of its individual members.”<sup>3</sup> However, there is little room for such diversity within the monolithic, fundamentalist vision of Hindu identity underpinning the Hindutva ideology which has been embraced not only by the ruling BJP, but also by the vast ecosystem of extremist religious groups, paramilitaries, and media outlets and personalities that currently enjoys a dominant position in mainstream Indian political and cultural life. In the *Hindu Rashtra*, or Hindu nation, envisioned by the Hindu nationalist movement, there is only one way to be a ‘true’ Hindu, and that way is inextricably intertwined with fear, suspicion, and even outright hatred towards Muslims and other minorities, including Dalit (oppressed caste) and Adivasi (Indigenous tribal) communities. This violently exclusionary vision of Hindu identity was exemplified by the hate-filled *Dharma Sansad*, or religious gathering, in the north Indian city of Haridwar in December 2021, where saffron-robed Hindu leaders called for Hindus to take up arms and commit genocidal violence against Indian Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

The last five years in India have seen a series of assaults on organizations, temples, and individuals whose conception of or relationship to Hinduism does not conform to the monolithic, exclusionary version championed by the Hindutva movement. On two separate occasions in July and August 2018, the late Hindu spiritual leader Swami Agnivesh, who vocally campaigned against religious hatred and intolerance, was attacked and violently beaten by Hindu nationalist mobs.<sup>5</sup> In October of that same year, after a Hindu leader in the south Indian state of Kerala spoke out in favor of

---

<sup>2</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2023 Annual Report*, April 2023, 24. Available at <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/2023%20Annual%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Anantanand Rambachan, “Hinduism,” in *The Hope of Liberation in World Religions*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (Waco: Baylor University Press), 113.

<sup>4</sup> “Hindutva Leaders at Haridwar Event Call for Muslim Genocide,” *The Wire*, December 22, 2021. Available at <https://thewire.in/communalism/hindutva-leaders-dharma-sansad-muslim-genocide>.

<sup>5</sup> “Swami Agnivesh Attacked By Mob Outside BJP Office, Complaint Filed,” *The Quint*, August 17, 2018. Available at <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/swami-agnivesh-attacked-outside-bjp-headquarters#read-more>.

a Supreme Court decision which ruled that women must be allowed to enter the famed Sabarimala temple, he received death threats and his ashram was set on fire by unknown assailants.<sup>6</sup> (While the case remained cold for more than four years, earlier in 2023 authorities accused and arrested activists from the BJP and the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh [RSS] paramilitary for the arson attack.<sup>7</sup>)

In December 2020, a leader of the militant Bajrang Dal organization in the northeastern Indian state of Assam warned that Hindus who tried to visit churches on Christmas day would be “brutally beaten.”<sup>8</sup> In April 2021, a series of videos circulated on Indian social media showing a man entering a Hindu temple in New Delhi and using a sledgehammer to smash a statue of Shirdi Sai Baba, a 19th-century spiritual master who preached interfaith unity and harmony and who is revered as a saint by millions of Hindus and Muslims alike. Other videos showed the man responsible being embraced by extremist Hindu monk Yati Narasinghanand Saraswati, who praised the demolition and called Sai Baba a “jihadi” with no place in Hindu temples.<sup>9</sup>

In July 2022, the Toronto-based Tamil Indian filmmaker Leena Manimekhalai received a barrage of death threats and had two separate investigations opened against her by Indian police after sharing the poster for her short film *Kaali*, which depicted the Hindu goddess Kali smoking a cigarette and holding an LGBTQ+ Pride flag.<sup>10</sup> When Member of Parliament Mahua Moitra defended Manimekhalai’s depiction of Kali in a televised interview, BJP units filed police reports against her for “insulting Hindu religious sentiments.”<sup>11</sup> And in September of 2023, a Catholic priest named Father Vineet Vincent Pereira, whose prayer center in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh is popular

---

<sup>6</sup> Nidheesh M.K., “Sabarimala: Hindu Ashram backing entry of women set on fire,” *Mint*, October 27, 2018. Available at <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/OudCkM2duSDCwngfaeMI0O/Sabarimala-Hindu-Ashram-backing-entry-of-women-set-on-fire.html>.

<sup>7</sup> “CB arrests BJP leader for firebombing Sandeepanda Giri’s ashram,” *The Hindu*, May 2, 2023. Available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/cb-arrests-bjps-municipal-councillors-for-firebombing-sandeepanda-giris-ashram/article66805134.ece>.

<sup>8</sup> “Hindus will be beaten if they visit church on Christmas,” threatens Bajrang Dal member in Assam,” *Scroll.in*, December 4, 2020. Available at <https://scroll.in/latest/980316/hindus-will-be-beaten-if-they-visit-church-on-christmas-threatens-bajrang-dal-member-in-assam>.

<sup>9</sup> Vijayta Lalwani, “Labelled ‘jihadi’, Sai Baba’s idol demolished in Delhi. Hindu hardliner exults. Devotees despair,” *Scroll.in*, April 4, 2021. Available at <https://scroll.in/article/991155/labelled-jihadi-sai-babas-idol-demolished-in-delhi-hindu-hardliner-exults-devotees-despair>.

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, “Indian director threatened over film poster depicting goddess smoking,” *The Guardian*, July 6, 2022. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/06/indian-director-facing-threats-over-film-poster-of-goddess-with-pride-flag>.

<sup>11</sup> “FIR against TMC MP Mahua Moitra as row over Kali remark intensifies,” *The Hindustan Times*, July 7, 2022. Available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/fir-against-tmc-mp-mahua-moitra-as-row-over-kali-remark-intensifies-101657133769400.html>.

among thousands of local *Krist Bhaktas* (devotees of Christ) who revere Christian teachings but still consider themselves Hindus, reported that he had faced harassment and death threats from Hindu fundamentalists who baselessly accused him of forcibly converting Hindus to Christianity.<sup>12</sup>

These are not isolated incidents. Rather, they reflect a much broader and more systemic narrowing of the boundaries for what versions of Hindu spiritual identity and practice are safely allowed to exist in contemporary India. Over the course of two months in early 2023, HfHR staff traveled across India, visiting nine states and meeting with more than two dozen Hindu religious leaders, the results of which were published by HfHR in an April 2023 report.<sup>13</sup> A recurring theme that emerged out of these meetings was the “pervasive sense of fear” among Hindu leaders who oppose “Hindu nationalism and rising polarization in India” but “are reluctant to speak up and put their ashram, temple, or devotees at risk.” Many leaders shared stories of themselves and their ashrams being targeted for harassment, violence, and even legal persecution instigated by Hindu nationalist groups in retaliation for speaking out or making even token gestures of friendship to other religious groups.<sup>14</sup>

Hindu nationalism’s assault on the freedom of Hindus to live their lives and practice their faith as they see fit has seeped into the everyday lives of ordinary Hindus as well. For example, due to the sacred nature of cows for many Hindus, cattle slaughter and the sale of beef is entirely banned or otherwise restricted in most Indian states,<sup>15</sup> and mobs of so-called *gau rakshak* (cow protection) vigilantes routinely attack and lynch those accused of involvement in cattle slaughter.<sup>16</sup> These vigilante attacks primarily target Muslims and other minorities, but they raise concerns about the religious freedom of Hindus as well, particularly those from oppressed castes—Dalits, who are among the minority groups frequently targeted by *gau rakshak* mobs, make up around 23 percent of India’s Hindu population, or more than 222 million people,<sup>17</sup> and beef has long been an integral part of Dalit cuisine and culture.<sup>18</sup>

These concerns about religious freedom in India are amplified by a pervasive and growing climate of intolerance toward interfaith and inter-caste marriages. So-called ‘love jihad’ laws passed in

---

<sup>12</sup> “Hermit Indian priest complains of threat to life,” *UCA News*, September 8, 2023. Available at <https://www.ucanews.com/news/hermit-indian-priest-complains-of-threat-to-life/102547>.

<sup>13</sup> Hindus for Human Rights, *Prema Yatra: Pilgrimage of Love*, April 2023. Available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d45b55d7563de000169a046/t/64469328bcca8c1c947739c6/1682346797095/India+Report+-+Prema+Yatra+%282%29.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> “The states where cow slaughter is legal in India,” *The Indian Express*, October 8, 2015. Available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-no-beef-nation/>.

<sup>16</sup> Human Rights Watch, “India: Vigilante ‘Cow Protection’ Groups Attack Minorities,” February 18, 2019. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/02/19/india-vigilante-cow-protection-groups-attack-minorities>.

<sup>17</sup> Stephanie Kramer, *Religious Composition of India*, Pew Research Center, September 21, 2021. Available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/09/21/religious-composition-of-india/>.

<sup>18</sup> Ashwaq Masoodi, “A story of culinary apartheid,” *Mint*, September 16, 2016. Available at <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/wJzDhGEE4csaX2BjhjHMsl/A-story-of-culinary-apartheid.html>.

several states around the country, which are based on a hateful and unfounded<sup>19</sup> conspiracy theory about Muslims seducing and coercing Hindus into marriage in order to forcibly convert them to Islam, have opened interfaith couples up to unwarranted legal suspicion and harassment by police and vigilantes.<sup>20</sup> Interfaith and inter-caste couples alike have been targeted in so-called ‘honor killings’ with little recourse or protections for victims,<sup>21</sup> and a pervasive culture of silence means that these crimes often go unpunished.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, India’s BJP government has invoked “age-old customs, rituals, practices, cultural ethos, and societal values” to argue against the legalization of same-sex marriage,<sup>23</sup> echoing the position taken by Hindu nationalist groups including the RSS<sup>24</sup> and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)<sup>25</sup>—a position which, of course, leaves no room for the rights of LGBTQ+ Hindus. The fundamental right to religious freedom is inseparable from the right to freely marry whomever one chooses, regardless of gender, religion, caste, or any other characteristic. The growing hostility toward this freedom affects every faith group, including Hindus, and bodes poorly for the future of religious freedom in India.

## Conclusion

The severely weakened state of religious freedom in India is undeniably alarming, and has received increased attention in American media and policy circles in recent years. However, as a strategic partner that has been actively pursuing a closer relationship with India, the United States has

---

<sup>19</sup> Arundhati Katju, “The Hindu Nationalist Myth of Love Jihad,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 23, 2020. Available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2020-12-23/hindu-nationalist-myth-love-jihad>.

<sup>20</sup> Betwa Sharma and Ahmer Khan, “Hindu Vigilantes Work With Police to Enforce ‘Love Jihad’ Law in North India,” *The Intercept*, July 3, 2021. Available at <https://theintercept.com/2021/07/03/love-jihad-law-india/>.

<sup>21</sup> Sreeparna Chakrabarty, “For inter-caste, inter-faith couples, a harrowing search for safe houses,” *The Hindu*, October 10, 2022. Available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/for-inter-caste-inter-faith-couples-a-harrowing-search-for-safe-houses/article65992898.ece>.

<sup>22</sup> Minakshi Das, “Perpetrators must be held accountable for honour killings, but legislative change alone will not end the practice,” *South Asia@LSE*, July 5, 2016. Available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2016/07/05/perpetrators-must-be-held-accountable-for-honour-killings-but-legislative-change-alone-will-not-end-the-practice/>.

<sup>23</sup> Karishma Mehrotra and Gerry Shih, “Indian government opposes same-sex marriage, warns of countrywide ‘havoc,’” *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2023. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/03/14/india-same-sex-marriage/>.

<sup>24</sup> “Powerful Indian Hindu group backs government’s opposition to same-sex marriage recognition,” *Reuters*, March 14, 2023. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/powerful-indian-hindu-group-backs-governments-opposition-same-sex-marriage-2023-03-14/>.

<sup>25</sup> “Vishwa Hindu Parishad’s Legal Cell Passes Resolution Against Same-sex Marriage In Two-day Long National Meet,” *Outlook*, April 24, 2023. Available at <https://www.outlookindia.com/national/-same-sex-marriage-sc-s-haste-not-appropriate-could-lead-to-new-disputes-says-vhp-news-280830>.

both the power and the responsibility to emphasize human rights and religious freedom in the U.S.-India bilateral relationship, and to pressure the Indian government to respect the rights of all people in India. Following USCIRF's consistent recommendations over the past four years, the State Department should designate India as a Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom, and U.S. policymakers should make a special effort to foreground human rights and religious freedom during official visits, summits, and other fora where the U.S.-India bilateral relationship is on display. This includes raising concerns about violations in both private meetings and public statements, as well as publicly and forcefully condemning hate, violence, and discrimination against religious and other minorities. We hope that the U.S. State Department, the Biden Administration, and the international community at large will heed the calls from civil society groups both in India and overseas who have been consistently raising alarms about India's growing human rights crisis, and will commit to prioritizing human rights and religious freedom for all people in all dealings with India going forward.