



Coalition Against Genocide

Spotlight Series Report

Affiliations of Faith: Hindu American Foundation and the Global Sangh*

This Spotlight Series report documents the Hindu American Foundation as an instance of the latest round of the Sangh's expansion in the U.S.

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) has over recent years taken on the mantle of being the most outspoken Hindu organization in the U.S. on various matters that concern the Indian-American communities of the U.S., as well as on issues related to Indian politics and social life. It has done so by positioning itself as a liberal advocacy organization that is committed to a pluralist vision of India and the world. This document examines the HAF and lays out hitherto unpublished information that links it unambiguously to the sectarian Hindu supremacist Hindutva movement.

1. The Hindu American Foundation: Origins and Claims

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) was founded in 2003. The Foundation's stated mission claims that it:⁵

Educate[s] the public about Hinduism, speaks out about issues affecting Hindus worldwide, and builds bridges with institutions and individuals whose work aligns with HAF's objectives. HAF focuses on human and civil rights, public policy, media, academia, and interfaith relations. Through its advocacy efforts, HAF seeks to cultivate leaders and empower future generations of Hindu Americans.

HAF further is categorical in declaring that

[HAF] is not affiliated with any religious or political organizations or entities. HAF seeks to serve Hindu Americans across all sampradayas (Hindu religious traditions) regardless of race, color, national origin, citizenship, caste, gender, sexual orientation, age and/or disability.

All three claims of the Foundation - its liberal positioning as committed to "human and civil rights", its claims to be representative of diverse Hindu "sampradayas" or "traditions" as well as its

Hindutva and the Global Sangh

"Hindutva", or Hinduness/Hinduhood, is the name used to describe a Hindu supremacist ideology that emerged in India in the early 1900s. The ideology repudiates India's history as a multiethnic, multiracial and multireligious nation and proposes a 'Hindu' nation. The root organization in this formation - the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS - National Volunteers Corps) is modeled after the *Avanguardisti* and *Ballilla* Italian fascist organizations.¹ The RSS was founded in 1924 and over the next several decades produced several hundred affiliated organizations that are together referred to as the Sangh Parivar (or the Sangh family of organizations). These include the Bharatiya Janata Party (the BJP), its parliamentary front; the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, its cultural wing, and the Bajrang Dal, its goon squad, to name just a few.² In its global manifestation, the Sangh has grown rapidly since the early 1980s in the US and UK. In the 80s, the Sangh mirrored its Indian organizations in the US - the Hindu Swayam Sevak Sangh, the VHP of America and the Overseas Friends of the BJP, to name just three.³ In the 1990s, the Sangh expansion in the US saw them enter US university campuses and the internet with organizations like the Hindu Students Council and the Global Hindu Electronic Network.⁴

claims of being unaffiliated and independent of any “religious or political organizations” are worth examining.

In the next section we examine the last of the three claims – HAF's status as an unaffiliated entity. We challenge this with clear evidence of HAF's historic links with the Sangh Parivar (the Sangh family of organizations) – a global formation with its base in India – also known as the Hindutva movement. To clearly see the links between HAF and the Global Sangh Parivar, it is critical that the reader have a basic framework of Hindutva organizations and basic ideology. This is presented in the Highlight Box in this section, and illustrated in the figure below.

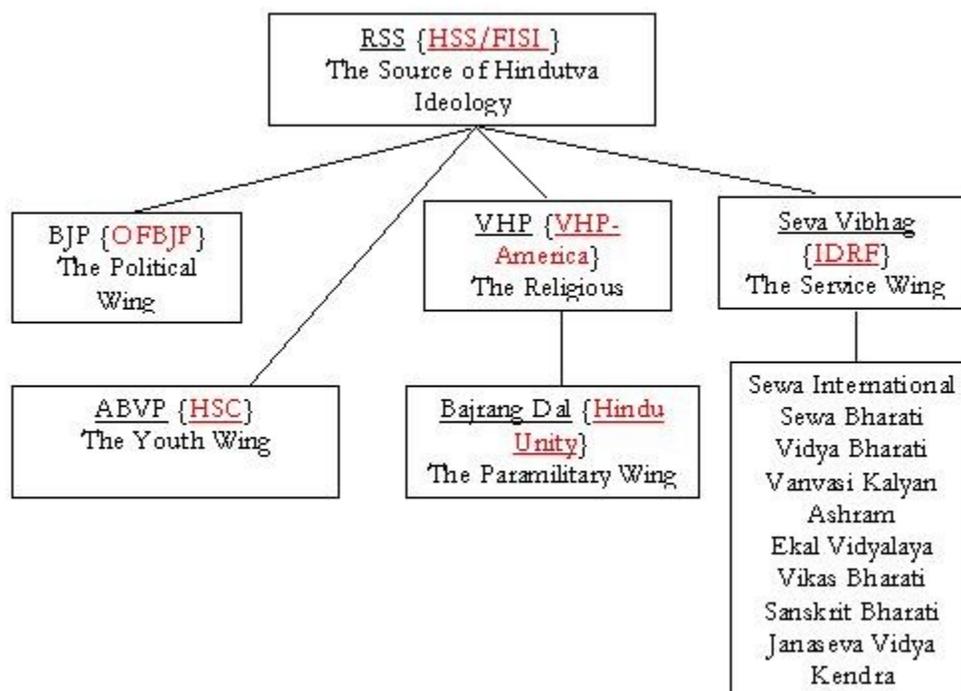


Illustration: Source: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh: A Primer
<http://www.stopfundinghate.org/resources/rssprimer.htm>

Having established the formative institutional links in Section 2, we turn our attention in the following section – Section 3 to the clear ideological affinity between the Sangh and HAF. We examine a key event that the HAF was involved in – the California Text Book Controversy, to show how the positions taken by HAF neither reflected nor represented the diversity of different Hindu populations, nor were they liberal in their commitment to civil or human rights. On the contrary, we argue,

these positions come out of its ideological affinity with the supremacist Hindutva ideology.

2. HAF and the American Sangh: One Movement, Many Institutions

The HAF came into being in 2003 with a stated goal (as reproduced above in the last section) of giving voice to “issues affecting Hindus worldwide... builds bridges with institutions” and influencing “public policy [and] media” and to “educate” the public on Hinduism.

Compare the content and language of this stated HAF mission/goals with the following text:

To address issues affecting... Hindus worldwide.. [t]o begin to establish a Hindu voice in the American and Canadian media... [t]o present a Hindu... agenda to public officials of the US and Canada... [t]o encourage HSC chapters to educate people about issues affecting us...⁶

The similarity is striking although it is not surprising. Both texts are in all probabilities authored by the same person - Mihir Meghani, the HAF supremo, co-founder and senior member of its current board. However, the extract above is from 1998, five years before the HAF was formed. Meghani clearly carried the idea of HAF with him for many years. As a matter of fact the earliest evidence in Meghani’s writings of the idea that was to later become HAF can be traced back to 1994-95, a year or so after he becomes the founding President of the Hindu Students Council, the Global Sangh’s student wing at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Meghani's 1998 text extracted above, probably one of the clearest expressions of the idea before it shows up again as the mission/goal of the HAF, is drawn from an internal email he is writing to his colleagues in the Governing Council of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHP-A). In other words, Meghani, who had started out as a student leader of the Global Sangh barely five years prior was now, in 1998, serving on the Governing Council of the Global Sangh's key organization in the U.S., and he was seated at that table as a leader of the National HSC. Meghani’s note from which the above quote is excerpted, is from one of many emails he sent on the internal mailing list of the VHPA’s Governing Council - vhpvc-l@hindunet.org. Thus the HAF idea developed over the period of a decade-long involvement with the Global Sangh - from the days before he was part of the VHPA's Governing Council, all the way into the years when he rose into the leadership of the American Sangh.

Meghani's energies as a young leader were recognized and nurtured by VHP-A leaders, with who he maintained a relationship of familial intimacy. In the

VHP-A's internal GC emails, he frequently refers to his "elders" as "Gaurang uncle" and "Mahesh uncle" for example.⁷ What is clearly discernible in Meghani's engagements as a GC member of the VHP-A is his push for a more sophisticated organizational strategy for the Sangh in the U.S. With the VHP-A led by first-generation immigrants who are unable to penetrate the mainstream American political framework, Meghani's creation of the HAF provided a hitherto unavailable opportunity to bridge the gap between the Hindutva agenda and mainstream American politics. By situating the HAF's work within a framework of American multiculturalism, Meghani effectively gained the ability to push the VHP-A's Hindutva agenda as an issue of "Hindu rights."

His trajectory as a "second generation" leader of the U.S. Sangh is also notable for the fact that Meghani utilized a rich crop of young Sangh activists like himself to build the HAF. Meghani's team of volunteers/staff who went on to become the founding leadership of HAF (and continue to be its leaders today) are largely drawn from within the ranks of those placed exactly like him, individuals with established credentials as members of one or another American Sangh organization or initiative. Thus Rishi Bhutada came out of the HSC at University of Pennsylvania, Sheetal Shah served as the Southeast Regional Coordinator for the HSC, Suhag Shukla was active with organizing HSC's regional conferences in the same region, Kavitha Pallod out of the VHP-A's American Hindu Youth Camp, Padma Kuppa with the VHP-A's Hindu Temple Executive Council, and Ramesh Rao with the India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF), a fund-raising arm of the VHP-A.

In summary then, in terms of where and when the HAF idea was conceptualized and developed, and in terms of who was brought together to implement it, HAF is a classic American Sangh story. It was conceptualized and developed within the belly of the American Sangh: the HSC and the VHP-A's Governing Council and a team of Sangh loyalists with clearly marked histories in various Sangh organizations were brought together as the leadership to execute the HAF plan. Thus any claims that the HAF makes to being unaffiliated and independent is unfounded. The HAF is independent and unaffiliated only in one sense of the word - legally. It is its own 501c3 and it files its own 990s. But in institutional and personnel terms - it is not just like the Sangh, but is an organization born and bred *within* and *of* the Sangh.

These structural connections that we have outlined in this section are more than borne out in the ideological stands that the HAF has taken over the last several years. Accordingly, in the following section, we look at the HAF's involvement in the California Textbook Controversy, and critically examine the nature of the positions it took and defended.

3. HAF: Hindutva at its Core

For the first two years of its existence the HAF largely defined and produced its own events and campaigns, most of them seemingly non-threatening and in the service of the soft, pro-human rights and pluralist image it had set out to cultivate for itself. It was only two years into its formation that the HAF was forced to engage in a public debate on an issue not of its own choosing and definition. This first major engagement in the public domain was in 2005 with what has now come to be known as the California Textbook Controversy. Since 2005 there have been a few other public engagements that the HAF has had to deal with, such as the 2010 Controversy around Sadhvi Rithambara's New Jersey temple speech, and the 2013 case of the Council of Parliament of World Religions (CPWR)'s withdrawal of sponsorship for the 150th anniversary celebrations of Swami Vivekananda's birth that VHP-A was planning. In each of these subsequent engagements also the ideological affinities and positions of the HAF are unmistakably in consonance with those of the Sangh Parivar in India and in the U.S.

HAF and the Hindutva assault on CA textbooks - 2005-06

In 2005, three Sangh organizations – the Hindu Education Foundation, the Vedic Foundation and the Hindu American Foundation sought to change the content of middle-school social studies textbooks in the state of California. The Sangh combine (HAF, HEF and VF) claimed that textbooks were promoting anti-Hindu views, and proposed a series of edits to California's Board of Education. The changes fell into three categories: references to 1. the Aryan invasion/migration into India, 2. the oppression of the caste hierarchy, and 3. the marginal position of women in ancient India.⁸ These references were all deemed false and recommended to be deleted from the textbooks. It was also claimed that these references were the source of a general antipathy towards Hinduism by the dominant white society.⁹ Taking advantage of the broad definition of American multiculturalism – namely, that each racial, ethnic, religious

The Ideological significance of the Edits

One of the key aspects of “Hindutva” or Hindu nationalism is that it sees being ‘Hindu’ as a political rather than a religious identity where India becomes the ‘natural’ and exclusive home of Hindus. This vision excludes millions of Muslims, Christians, etc. who’ve been part of Indian society for centuries, and assigns them the status of second-class citizens. In so far as the Aryan invasion/migration theory invalidates the claim that Hindus are the original people of India, Hindutva groups remain hostile to it. Similarly, reference to the Caste system and to the oppression of women in India challenge Hindutva claims that Hindus constitute a homogeneous society devoid of internal differences or oppressive relations.

community gets equal access to the celebration of their identities, these organizations sought to whitewash particular histories of discrimination that they claimed interfered with their ability to take pride in their identities. Further, they sought to insert new content that represented a Hindu nationalist and Brahmanical perspective at odds with established academic opinion and scholarly research on each of these subjects.¹⁰

In response to the timely intervention of community organizations spanning the entire Indian community in California - Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Dalits, and Sikhs, the California State Board of Education rejected these edits.¹¹ The Sangh combine led by HAF went to court seeking an injunction/TRO and failed. When the case was finally resolved, the court did rap the Board of Education for process failures but did not uphold any of the substantive claims made by the HAF.¹²

There is much by way of detail that we are not going into in this description. What is of import however, is how deeply connected to the Sangh ideological firmament these edits are. To even entertain the possibility that those who claim to be "Hindus" today may have arrived in India via invasion/migration from outside threatens the Hindu nationalist idea that Hindus and Hinduism are historically internal to the sub-continent. In other words, to entertain the possibility of Hindus, and Hinduism itself being from outside makes Hindu nationalism's claims in relation to India an impossibility. So also, the acknowledgement of caste hierarchies and identities opposed to upper caste Hindu identity such as the Dalit identity threatens the idea of Hindus as a homogeneous identity without any internal oppressions and contentions. In other words, when the HAF and its sister organizations of the Sangh took up cudgels on the above mentioned edits they were fighting to ensure that California middle school textbooks reproduced a Hindutva version of Indian history. What is even more alarming is that for an organization ostensibly built to defend the human and civil rights of Hindus, Dalits or the most oppressed among the Hindus were not seen as deserving of any defense. In jarring contradiction with its claims to represent all "sampradayas" of Hinduism, HAF's efforts to eliminate the voices of the oppressed majority within Hinduism- Dalits and women- is certainly indicative of its narrow ideological moorings, sugar-coated as they maybe in the language of rights.¹³

4. Conclusion: HAF's Janus-Faced Multiculturalism

In the above three sections, we have pointed to two clear sets of links between the HAF and the Global Sangh Parivar - the Hindu Supremacist movement called Hindutva. First, we have shown how the HAF was conceptualized within the U.S. Sangh institutions and is staffed by U.S. Sangh loyalists. Beyond such

institutional links, we have shown through one specific campaign - the California textbook case - that the HAF has no commitment to any of the liberal categories such as human or civil rights that it has cloaked itself in, but is rather only committed to a supremacist ideology that has deep implications for a plural society such as India. We have shown this ideological link through a single case study in the interest of brevity. It must however be noted that the record reveals several other instances in which the HAF has had no hesitation abandoning its commitments to human/civil rights and openly supporting Hindutva supremacist ideology. To mention a few in telescopic fashion - the case of HAF's defense of Sadhvi Rithambara - one of the most important hate-mongering leaders of the Hindutva movement in India,^{14,15} HAF's support for the VHP of America, its Sangh sister organization when the Council of Parliament of World Religions withdrew its support for a VHP-A event,¹⁶ and finally HAF's recent condemnation of a U.S. Congressional House Resolution that is critical of Hindutva and its votaries, and seeks to include human rights within the framework of India-US strategic dialog. All these illustrate how the HAF relies upon the opportunistic and unethical use of human rights as a cover while it seeks to destroy precisely the same for a large segment of Indians, especially those who are amongst the most vulnerable in India - Dalits and religious minorities.

Glossary

Brahmanical - referring to the religious and cultural traditions of the the caste group of Brahmins, including justifications for the caste hierarchy at the apex of which are placed the Brahmins themselves.

HEF- the Hindu Education Foundation - Created by the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS); includes as advisors many key leaders of the U.S. Sangh including Ved Nanda (founder of HSS), Abhinav Dwivedi (Hindu University), Yashwant Pathak (HSS), Beth Kulkarni (VHPA), S. Kalyanaraman (HSS) and David Frawley (Hindu University).

HSC - the Hindu Students Council- active on several U.S. college campuses, a project of the VHP-A started in 1990. Many of the key players in the HAF, including Mihir Meghani, are graduates of the HSC.

HSS - the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, the official US equivalent of the RSS, founded by Ved Nanda, an advisor to the HEF (see above).

RSS - the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, founded in 1925, the fount and leader of the Hindu supremacist movement called Hindutva. All of the organizations created by the RSS including the VHP, BJP, Bajrang Dal, ABVP, Sewa Bharati, and so on, as well as their U.S. and other international affiliates are collectively referred to as the Sangh Parivar, the family of RSS organizations.

Sampradaya - one of the various sects and sub-sects of Hinduism, that emerged from traditions tied to particular founding teachers.

VHP - Vishwa Hindu Parishad, founded in 1964 by the RSS (see above) as a vehicle for violent mobilizations led by extremist Hindu monks and demagogues. The VHP led and executed the destruction of the Babri Masjid (a historic structure and Mosque) in 1992and also played a central role in the Gujarat genocide in 2002. VHP defends the caste system and rejects efforts to include caste violence against Dalits as a recognized form of social discrimination at international fora such as the UN's World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in 2001.

VHPA - Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America, the American branch of the VHP, established in the early 1970s, and the most important Hindutva formation in the U.S.

Endnotes

- * "Global Sangh" refers to the transnational expansion of the family of RSS organizations, the Sangh Parivar. This expansion is viewed by the RSS as a necessary step to tapping into the political and financial support of expatriate populations especially in the more affluent parts of the world, notably the U.S. and U.K. The American Sangh refers to the most important Hindutva organizations operating in the U.S. that are tied institutionally and ideologically to the RSS.
- 1 M. Casolari, (1993) Hindutva's foreign tie-up in the 1930s: Archival Evidence, Economic and Political Weekly, Jan 22, 2000.
<http://www.sacw.net/DC/CommunalismCollection/ArticlesArchive/casolari.pdf>
 - 2 James G. Lochtefeld (1996) New Wine, Old Skins: The Sangh Parivar and the Transformation of Hinduism, Religion 26, 101-118
 - 3 Mathew, B., and V. Prashad. 2000. "The Protean Forms of Yankee Hindutva." Ethnic and Racial Studies 23 (3): 516-534.
 - 4 *Unmistakably Sangh: The National Hindu Students Council and its Hindutva Agenda*. Campaign to Stop Funding Hate. 2008. http://stopfundinghate.org/Unmistakably_Sangh.pdf
 - 5 Hindu American Foundation: Who We Are: http://www.hafsite.org/about/who_we_are [accessed 12/13/2013].
 - 6 VHP-A Governing Council Listserv Archive:
<https://web.archive.org/web/20091110042014/http://hindunet.org/archive/listmail-vhpgc-l>
 - 7 Gaurang Vaishnav - General Secretary of the VHP-A, and Mahesh Mehta - VHP-A founder, former president, and global coordinator of the VHP.
 - 8 'Palpable Falsehoods' - Open Letter by Professor Vinay Lal to the California State Board of Education. Outlook-India, Feb 7, 2006. <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?230129> [accessed 12/13/2013].
 - 9 'Now, Multicultural Hindutva.' Raju Rajagopal, Outlook-India, Feb 7, 2006. <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?230128> [accessed 12/13/2013].
 - 10 'Indian-Americans Decry Attempts by Hindu Supremacist Groups to Rewrite India's History...in California.' Friends of South Asia Press Release. January 10th, 2006.
<http://www.friendsofsouthasia.org/textbook/FOSACACPressRelease.html> (accessed 12/2/2013).
 - 11 See for example letters sent by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, Dalit Freedom Network, Dalit Solidarity Forum in the USA, to the California Board of Education unequivocally rejecting the efforts of the Sangh to institute content changes in textbooks.
<http://www.friendsofsouthasia.org/textbook/LettersOfSupport.html> [accessed 12/13/2013].
 - 12 'US Court Frustrates Hindutva Efforts to Gloss Over Indian History.' Uttara Choudhury, DNA (Daily News & Analysis), May 01, 2006.
<http://www.dnaindia.com/world/report-us-court-frustrates-hindutva-efforts-to-gloss-over-indian-history-1027048> [accessed 12/13/2-13].
 - 13 As if the ideological coherence in the edits sought by HAF and the Sangh is not enough, a cursory look at the leadership of the three organizations fighting for these edits - the HAF, HEF and VF - reveals the whole story all over again. Familiar figures traverse across and lead

Endnotes

multiple initiatives of the VHP-A, each of which publicly claim to be independent entities merely coming together on behalf of Hindu interests.

- 14 'HAF welcomes Hindu temple reversal on hosting Hindu monk.' September 7th, 2010.
<http://www.hafsite.org/media/pr/haf-welcomes-hindu-temple-reversal> [accessed 12/2/2013].
- 15 'Court to watch video footage of demolition,' Times of India. TNN Jul 19, 2003, 01.07am IST.
http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2003-07-19/india/27190226_1_ayodhya-demolition-case-cbi-counsel-rai-bareli [accessed 12/2/2013].
- 16 A stinging rebuke of the HAF's defense of the VHP-A sponsored event by the reputable interfaith organization, Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions. *The Council For A Parliament Of The World's Religions Refutes Allegations And Clarifies Its Position. 9/30/2013.*
<http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/news/index.php/2013/09/the-council-for-a-parliament-of-the-worlds-religions-refutes-allegations-and-clarifies-its-position/> [accessed 12/13/2013].