

**Hindu American Foundation (HAF)  
Written Statement for the Record**



Suhag A. Shukla, Esq.  
Executive Director/Legal Counsel

Samir Kalra, Esq.  
Director/Senior Fellow for Human Rights

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The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) is an advocacy group providing a voice for over two million Hindu Americans. The Foundation interacts with and educates leaders in public policy, academia, media, and the public at large about Hinduism and global issues concerning Hindus, such as religious liberty, the misportrayal of Hinduism, hate speech, hate crimes, and human rights. By promoting the

Hindu and American ideals of understanding, tolerance, and pluralism, HAF stands firmly against hate, discrimination, defamation and terror.

Since its inception, the Hindu American Foundation has made legal advocacy one of its main pillars. From issues of religious accommodation and religious discrimination to defending fundamental constitutional rights of free exercise and the separation of church and state, HAF has educated Americans at large about various aspects of Hindu belief and practice in the context of religious liberty, either as a party to the case or an amicus (friend of the court). HAF has also consistently spoken out against hate speech, bias, and hate crimes, regardless of the religious or racial identity of the victims. The Foundation firmly believes that bigotry and violence impact all communities and must be collectively confronted.

We are a nation whose strength and unity derives from its diversity. As our Great Seal proclaims: E Pluribus Unum (“out of many, one”). This is a concept that mirrors beautifully one of Hinduism’s core teachings, the Truth is One, but is manifested in different ways. Like Hinduism itself, Hindu Americans constitute a growing and increasingly visible piece of America’s religious mosaic.

HAF respectfully submits that while Hindu Americans on the whole enjoy religious liberty and freedom in the United States, hate speech as well as incidents of religious bigotry and hate crimes continue to concern the community. The following provides a brief overview of the specific issues affecting Hindu Americans.

## **I. Background**

Hindu Americans represent diverse ethnic backgrounds, including individuals of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Malaysian, Indonesian, Afghani, Nepali, Bhutanese, Sri Lankan, Fijian, Caribbean, and European descent. The majority of Hindus, however, are of Indian ethnic origin and are primarily an immigrant community. It was only after the lifting of the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924 in 1943 and the abolishment of quotas for immigrants based on national origin in 1965 that Hindus came to the United States in large numbers.

Similar to other minority and immigrant communities, Hindu Americans have experienced episodes of religiously motivated discrimination, intolerance, and violence. In particular, Hindus have been subjected to verbal abuse, slurs, and physical attacks on an individual level, while Hindu places of worship have been targeted for acts of vandalism, arson, and graffiti. Furthermore, the public sphere is replete with hate speech and pejorative and disparaging language denigrating Hinduism.

Unfortunately, incidents of bias and hate crimes against Hindu Americans have traditionally been difficult to track for a multitude of reasons. These include the conflation of religious and ethnic identity, underreporting by victims due to fear, and limitations in the FBI’s data collection (no separate category for anti-Hindu crimes currently exists). As a result, accurate statistics on the number of hate crimes against Hindu Americans are unavailable. The lack of comprehensive statistics, however, by no means diminishes the very real threat that Hindu Americans face.

## **II. Hate Speech**

Violence and bigotry are often fuelled by speech that can be construed as hateful and intolerant. While such speech does not rise to the level of criminal behavior and is protected under the 1st Amendment, if left unchallenged, it can perpetuate discrimination and in some cases, breed violence.

With the proliferation of internet websites, in particular, hate speech directed towards religious groups has become increasingly commonplace. As a result, organizations such as the Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC), Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), amongst others,

closely monitor extremist groups and individuals that sponsor digital hatred.<sup>1</sup>

Like Americans of other faiths, Hindus have also routinely endured hate speech and the denigration of their religious beliefs. For example, a report published by the Hindu American Foundation, entitled *Hyperlink to Hinduphobia: Online Hatred, Extremism, and Bigotry Against Hinduism*, documented the growing phenomenon of anti-Hindu online hatred.<sup>2</sup>

The report provided an overview of the methods used to demean Hinduism and detailed dozens of organizations responsible for producing such content. Whether by maligning Hinduism as “devil-worship” to promote a fear of Hindus and their beliefs, demeaning Hindu scriptures and deities, or falsifying Hinduism’s teachings and principles in order to claim the religious superiority of other traditions, these individuals and organizations seek to undermine tolerance and pluralism. In addition, they foster an environment where Hindus are branded as “the other,” and violence thereby becomes acceptable and justified.<sup>3</sup>

Hate speech against Hindus has not been confined to online mediums, however, and has included derogatory statements by public figures as well. For instance, last November, Kentucky State Senate President David Williams made disparaging remarks about Hinduism and Hindu beliefs in the midst of a Kentucky gubernatorial election.<sup>4</sup> When such comments come from those in positions of power, it sends a message that bigotry and religious exclusion are not only acceptable, but officially sanctioned.

Therefore, while the freedom of expression must be faithfully protected, speech that promotes hatred, intolerance, and has the potential of manifesting violently should be publicly condemned by all Americans.

### III. Bias or Hate Crimes

The recent tragic shooting at the Sikh gurudwara in Wisconsin represented the worst fear for all religious communities across America. The attack, fueled by extremist views, also demonstrated the urgent need to address hate crimes at a systemic level. This horrific incident, however, was just one of many hate crimes that continue to plague American society.

According to FBI statistics, for instance, there were approximately 6,628 hate crimes reported to law enforcement in 2010 with 8,208 victims. And out of that total, 1,322 incidents were motivated by religious bias, resulting in 1,552 victims. Except for Judaism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam, all other religiously motivated crimes were collectively classified as “Anti-Other religion,” and included 123 incidents and 141 victims.<sup>5</sup> The actual numbers are likely much higher, given that victims frequently do not report such crimes out of fear.

Although it is difficult to ascertain the number of attacks that have specifically targeted the Hindu community, there have been several incidents against Hindu individuals and temples in recent years. Moreover, racially motivated attacks against Indian Americans may also include an anti-Hindu component, as most ethnic Indians belong to the Hindu tradition.

In many instances, especially after 9/11, bias crimes against Hindus have been based on the perpetrator’s mistaken belief that the victim is Muslim or Arab. For example, in November 2011, a Hindu man was attacked and called a “terrorist” in a Lucky shopping center parking lot in San Jose, California

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<sup>1</sup> *Hyperlink to Hinduphobia: Online Hatred, Extremism, and Bigotry Against Hinduism (2007)*, Hindu American Foundation, [http://www.hafsite.org/pdf/hate\\_report\\_2007.pdf](http://www.hafsite.org/pdf/hate_report_2007.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> “Hindu Americans Shocked by Kentucky State President’s Intolerant Remarks,” (November 1, 2011), Hindu American Foundation Press Release, [http://www.hafsite.org/HAF\\_Shocked\\_by\\_KY\\_Williams\\_Intolerant\\_Remarks](http://www.hafsite.org/HAF_Shocked_by_KY_Williams_Intolerant_Remarks).

<sup>5</sup> U.S Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Investigation Hate Crime Statistics 2010, <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/hate-crime/2010/tables/table-1-incidents-offenses-victims-and-known-offenders-by-bias-motivation-2010.xls>.

after picking up groceries for a family Thanksgiving dinner.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in the summer of 2003, an Indian graduate student was beaten in Boston by perpetrators who shouted “go back to Iraq” and similar anti-Arab slurs.<sup>7</sup>

A 2005 report by Harvard University’s Pluralism Project noted that the student was “...robbed, beaten, burned with cigarettes, stuffed in a trunk and stabbed twice before finally being dumped along a road. Police suspect that the attackers mistook the Hindu man for a Muslim.”<sup>8</sup>

Even prior to 9/11, Hindus were subjected to harassment and violence. In the fall of 1987, a street gang in Jersey City, New Jersey calling itself the the “Dotbusters” assaulted a number of Indians, including Navroze Mody who was beaten into a coma with bricks while the gang chanted, “Hindu, Hindu!” The gang also committed acts of vandalism and harassed Hindu and Indian men and women.<sup>9</sup>

The name of the gang, “Dotbusters,” clearly made reference to forehead markings worn by both Hindu women (bindi) and men (tilak).

The attack on Mody was preceded by a letter to a local newspaper from the “Dotbusters” openly advocating violence against Hindus and Indians. The letter stated in part, “We are an organization called dot busters. We have been around for 2 years. We will go to any extreme to get Indians to move out of Jersey City. If I’m walking down the street and I see a Hindu and the setting is right, I will hit him or her.”<sup>10</sup>

Shortly after Mody’s death, another Hindu man “was assaulted by three young men with baseball bats as he walked home late one night. One of the young people yelled, ‘There’s a dothead! Let’s get him!’ as they set out with their bats. [He] was beaten severely and left unconscious with a fractured skull. He was in a coma for a week, in the hospital for three weeks, and suffered permanent neurological damage.”<sup>11</sup>

Beyond attacks on individuals, Hindu places of worship and institutions have also been targeted. With over 700 temples across the United States, the Hindu American community has witnessed acts of vandalism, graffiti, and arson on their religious sites. Earlier this year, for example, a New York man threw a Molotov cocktail at a Hindu temple housed in a residential property. The attack was part of a series of firebombings in Queens, New York, that also targeted a mosque and Islamic cultural center. The 40-year old perpetrator allegedly told police of his “dislike of Muslims, Arabs and Hindus,” and was indicted by federal and state grand juries with committing hate crimes in connection with the incidents.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, in April 2006, vandals destroyed a Hindu temple in Maple Grove, Minnesota, inflicting over \$300,000 in damage, toppling and dismembering sacred sculptures, and breaking windows and walls.<sup>13</sup> And in November 2003, a teenager was convicted for defacing a Hindu temple in Ashland,

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<sup>6</sup> SJ Hate Crime Victim Talks About Attack,” (January 28, 2012), ABC Local News, [http://abclocal.go.com/kgo/story?section=news/local/south\\_bay&id=8522432](http://abclocal.go.com/kgo/story?section=news/local/south_bay&id=8522432).

<sup>7</sup> “Know your Rights,” A Guide Produced by the Hindu American Foundation, [http://www.hafsite.org/sites/default/files/HAF\\_KnowYour%20Rights\\_Expanded.pdf](http://www.hafsite.org/sites/default/files/HAF_KnowYour%20Rights_Expanded.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> “Post 9/11 Hate Crime Trends: Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Jews in the U.S.” (2005), The Pluralism project, Harvard University, <http://pluralism.org/reports/view/104>.

<sup>9</sup> “Know your Rights,” A Guide Produced by the Hindu American Foundation, [http://www.hafsite.org/sites/default/files/HAF\\_KnowYour%20Rights\\_Expanded.pdf](http://www.hafsite.org/sites/default/files/HAF_KnowYour%20Rights_Expanded.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> “Dot Busters in New Jersey, The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, [http://pluralism.org/ocg/CDROM\\_files/hinduism/dot\\_busters.php](http://pluralism.org/ocg/CDROM_files/hinduism/dot_busters.php).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> “American charged with hate crime for attacks on temple, mosque,” (March 20, 2012), Indian Express, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/american-charged-with-hate-crime-for-attacks-on-temple-mosque/925997/>; “Man Indicted in Firebombings,” (March, 23, 2012), Times Ledger, [http://www.timesledger.com/stories/2012/12/newyearsfirecharges\\_it\\_2012\\_03\\_22\\_q.html](http://www.timesledger.com/stories/2012/12/newyearsfirecharges_it_2012_03_22_q.html)

<sup>13</sup> “Know your Rights,” A Guide Produced by the Hindu American Foundation, [http://www.hafsite.org/sites/default/files/HAF\\_KnowYour%20Rights\\_Expanded.pdf](http://www.hafsite.org/sites/default/files/HAF_KnowYour%20Rights_Expanded.pdf).

Massachusetts by spray painting hateful messages.<sup>14</sup>

The above examples are only intended to demonstrate the type and nature of attacks endured by Hindu Americans over the past several years, and they do not reflect the full extent of the issues faced by the community. From religious bias and discrimination to hate speech and hate crimes, Hindu Americans continue to confront a number of challenges. Therefore, it is necessary to address the root causes of such intolerance and violence that not only impact Hindus, but affect the lives of all Americans.

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<sup>14</sup> "Post 9/11 Hate Crime Trends: Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and Jews in the U.S." (2005), The Pluralism project, Harvard University, <http://pluralism.org/reports/view/104>.