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# Hindutva and anti-Christian violence in contemporary India

M. Sudhir Selvaraj <sup>a</sup> and Kenneth Bo Nielsen<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Peace Studies and International Development, University of Bradford, Bradford, UK; <sup>b</sup>Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

## ABSTRACT

In this special issue introduction, we analyse the trajectory and forms of anti-Christian violence in India and its role in the wider Hindu nationalist project today. Inspired by Galtung's work on direct, structural, and cultural violence, we show how different forms of anti-Christian violence have waxed, waned, and combined in shifting constellations at different moments of India's postcolonial political history and in different state contexts. At the current conjuncture, however, the imagined threat of 'the Christian Other' has acquired an unprecedented centrality to Hindu nationalist politics, producing a systemic escalation in anti-Christian violence across many states. This violence is, we argue, characterised by a strong convergence of direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence, involving vigilante attacks and police complicity, but also an increasingly coercive use of state law, coupled with the production of a wider cultural common sense about the anti-national essence of non-Hindu religious minorities.

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## Introduction

In *Modi's India*, Christophe Jaffrelot (2021, p. 189) asserts that Indian Christians have now become 'prime targets' of Hindu nationalist attacks and violence after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014. The Evangelical Fellowship of India, a civil society organisation, reported that this violence had witnessed a four-fold increase between 2014 and 2023. These violent instances included beatings, disruptions of services and prayer meetings, and desecration of churches – mostly carried out by Hindu nationalist organisations (Pal, 2024). Recently, the United Christian

**CONTACT** M. Sudhir Selvaraj  [s.selvaraj2@bradford.ac.uk](mailto:s.selvaraj2@bradford.ac.uk)

Research Associate, Centre for Asian Studies in Africa, University of Pretoria

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Forum recorded a full 834 incidents of anti-Christian violence in 2024 (Sen, 2025). While still a smaller number of instances than anti-Muslim violence, the increasing number of instances of anti-Christian violence is noteworthy.

In this special issue, we explore the phenomenon of anti-Christian violence and its role in the wider Hindu nationalist project in India today. We examine how, why, and with what effect anti-Christian violence has occurred, while simultaneously using it as a case study of contemporary Hindu nationalist politics. By mapping and analysing a variety of forms that anti-Christian violence has taken in different states within India's federal system, the articles in this special issue make a two-fold contribution to current debates on Hindu nationalism, namely to (i) highlight the centrality of 'the Christian Other' and anti-Christian violence to the Hindu nationalist project, a theme that is often given scant attention in the wider literature; and (ii) to reflect on what the dynamics and modalities of anti-Christian violence tell us about the current configuration of Hindu nationalism.

In discussing 'violence', the contributors explicitly or implicitly acknowledge the work of Johan Galtung, adopting a broad understanding of the phenomenon that moves beyond minimalist and actor-oriented positions, providing a more nuanced understanding. Galtung (1969; 1990) posits that violence can come in direct/physical forms, as well as, in indirect ones. These indirect forms of violence include that which is embedded in and emanates from structural arrangements in society (structural violence), such as exploitation, discrimination, alienation, and marginalisation. It also includes what Galtung calls cultural violence, an invisible form of violence that operates as a kind of 'super-type' by providing normative justification and legitimation for direct and/or structural violence, making these 'look, even feel right – or at least not wrong' (Galtung, 1990, p. 291). Galtung's tripartite understanding allows us to establish connections between the different forms of anti-Christian violence that our contributions identify, while also stressing how violence can be perpetuated immediately and directly, but also more diffusely and imperceptibly through adverse structural arrangements and the production and circulation of specific forms of cultural common sense.<sup>1</sup> A Galtungian perspective, in other words, allows us to capture how anti-Christian violence has become systemic in conjunction with the rise and consolidation of Hindu nationalism as a hegemonic force in Indian politics and society.

In the remainder of this introduction, we first analyse the longer history and shifting phases of anti-Christian violence in India. We then situate our intervention in current debates on Hindu nationalism before we conclude with a brief overview of the contributions.

## **Anti-Christian violence in India**

Hindu nationalism (often referred to as *Hindutva*)<sup>2</sup> is a form of majoritarian cultural nationalism rooted in preserving dominant caste male supremacy

in India (Appadurai, 2006). It conceives of the nation in ethno-religious terms, upholding geographical unity, racial features, and a common 'Hindu culture' as central pillars of the nation (Jaffrelot, 1998). Historically as well as today, the Hindu nationalist movement projects itself as the defenders or protectors of the Hindu nation, particularly from the 'threat' posed by Muslims and Christians (Anand, 2011) who, because of perceived differences in cultural-religious terms, can never be part of the Hindu nation.

Dating back to the 1880s, the Hindu nationalist movement (and its antecedents) has developed a well-articulated portrayal of India's Christians as being a 'threatening other' to the Hindu nation (Jaffrelot, 2007, p. 31). Hindu nationalists perceive India's Christians to be 'agents' of western 'Christian' countries, intent on destroying the fabric of the Hindu nation as part of their global expansion. Within this Hindu nationalist worldview, Christian missionary work is construed as operating through force, fraud, and allurements to convert unsuspecting Hindus to Christianity and is viewed with the utmost suspicion. Accordingly, people's agency in choosing to change their religion is barely recognised. This is especially the case for Dalits and Adivasis, who are essential groups needed by the Hindu nationalist movement to add demographic weight to claims that India has a Hindu majority. Dalits and Adivasis are portrayed as being vulnerable, gullible, and easy to lure into converting to Christianity (Jenkins 2008), and Hindu nationalists have therefore long argued for the need to protect these groups that they see as properly or even 'naturally' Hindu from the dangers of Christian proselytisation (Selvaraj, 2024b).

Studies of the relationship between Hindutva and anti-minority violence in independent India have, for good reasons, tended to focus on the violent targeting of India's Muslims by Hindu nationalist vigilante groups and activists. This violence became more pronounced as Hindu nationalist mobilisation intensified from the 1980s in north India in particular, combining a politics of everyday communal polarisation (Brass, 2003) with occasional large-scale and deadly pogroms (Ghassem-Fachandi, 2012). While the phenomenon of anti-Christian violence has thus received comparatively less attention from scholars of Hindu nationalism, different forms of violence have, in fact, been enacted against Indian Christians in three distinct phases spanning almost the entire history of independent India. The first phase between 1947 and 1997 primarily worked through structural forms of violence in the shape of anti-conversion laws, that is, laws that limit religious conversion primarily to Christianity if and when effected through force, fraud, and allurements, as the laws routinely put it. From the late 1960s, such laws were put in place in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh (Selvaraj, 2025 and Kaiser et al. (2025)), and (so far futile) efforts to pass national level legislation along the same lines followed in the late 1970s. Similarly, while the affirmative action provisions that were originally open only to Hindu Dalits were later extended to Sikh and Buddhist Dalits in 1956 and 1990, respectively, Christian and

Muslim Dalits – as followers of so-called non-Indic religions – have persistently been excluded from these provisions (Selvaraj, 2024b).

A shift from structural towards direct violence occurred through a rapid escalation in physical attacks from the late 1990s when Hindu nationalists turned their attention towards India's Christians who gradually displaced Muslims as their primary target (Sarkar, 1999; Bhatt, 2001). This period saw large-scale violence in Gujarat in 1998 and in Orissa and Karnataka in 2008 (Bauman, 2020; Hota, 2024; Selvaraj, 2025), along with the rise of vigilante violence by Hindu nationalist organisations. This phase also saw the re-emergence of a new wave of anti-conversion laws in states governed by the BJP or its allies. Unsurprisingly, all of this unfolded in a context defined by the emergence of the BJP as a new central node in Indian politics. The scholarship on this second phase of anti-Christian violence attributes its emergence to a complex set of factors, including the diminishing electoral benefits of the anti-Muslim violence that followed the Ayodhya incident (Sarkar, 1999); the assertive movement among Dalit Christians to be included in the government's affirmative action policy (Wyatt, 1998; Zavos, 2001); and the disrupting effects of globalisation which directly fuelled Hindu nationalist anxieties about the erosion of traditional Hindu cultural values, and who in turn targeted Christians because they were seen as 'symbolic extensions' of culturally corrosive forms of globalisation (Lobo, 2002, p. 150).

The third and most recent phase has unfolded from around 2014 to the present, a timespan that coincides with the Modi premiership and the electoral and governmental dominance of the BJP at the centre and in many states. This is, we argue, a period in which direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence have converged in powerful ways, producing a systemic form of anti-Christian violence that relies on the further marginalisation of Indian Christians to construct the 'Hindu' majority in the 'Hindu' state. In the following, we sketch the systemic nature of this violence and outline what this tells us about Hindu nationalist politics at the current conjuncture – what some scholars refer to as the moment of 'new Hindutva' (Hansen & Roy, 2022). We do so in reverse order and start by mapping recent transformations in Hindu nationalist politics.

### **A third phase of anti-Christian violence: What's new about new Hindutva?**

Since Hindu nationalism came to prominence in national politics through its confrontational and ultimately violent mobilisation around the Babri Masjid – Ram Janmabhoomi issue in Ayodhya (Van der Veer, 1987; Bacchetta, 2002), a vast literature on the history, evolution and strategies of Hindu nationalist politics has accumulated.<sup>3</sup> As Hansen and Roy (2022) have summarised, the early scholarly interest in Hindu nationalism that emerged post-Ayodhya

focused on issues such as the political rationalities of the Hindu nationalist project and its attendant ideological and organisational strategies of social engineering and collective identity formation that, above all, sought to build a unified Hindu community in opposition to an antagonistic Muslim other. In line with this, the literature also tended to understand Hindu nationalism as having 'a decidedly insurgent charge' (Hansen & Roy, 2022, p. 3), its oppositional and often violent mobilisation locking it into a fiercely antagonistic relationship with the institutional order of the ostensibly secular Indian state.

The current literature on Hindu nationalism, in contrast, is strongly shaped by the unprecedented electoral success of the BJP and its robust entrenchment in state and governmental spaces across much of India after 2014 when Narendra Modi came to power. Indeed, much of the scholarship on contemporary Hindu nationalism highlights the gradual transition from oppositional and movement-based antagonistic mobilisation to the BJP becoming 'the new state-bearing party in India after 2014' (Nilsen et al., 2022, p. 30) as crucial for understanding how Hindu nationalism works today, as well as for how it is transforming India from above and from below. This scholarship on the modulation of Hindu nationalism into 'a governmental/statecraft project' (Hansen & Roy, 2022, p. 4; see also Nielsen & Nilsen, 2021; 2022; Nielsen et al., 2023; Jakobsen & Nielsen, 2024) is rich and varied and has sought to conceptualise India under Modi in variegated yet mutually resonant ways. One line of scholarship focuses on the mix of ethno-religious nationalism and political illiberalism and autocratization within the context of a still intact formal democracy to identify India as an ethnic democracy (Chatterji et al., 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021) or ethnocracy (Roy, 2024). In this setup, a singular dominant ethnic group now holds and deploys state power to ethnicize or, more precisely, Hinduise, territory and society. Closely aligned with this literature is the scholarship that foregrounds the close interplay and alignment between Hindu nationalist groups and forces across the analytical divide between civil and political society. Highlighting especially the increasing impunity with which Hindu nationalist vigilante groups can carry out their social policing, scholars have sought to conceptualise the emergent state under BJP hegemony as a 'vigilante' (Jaffrelot, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2023) or 'deeper' state (Jaffrelot, 2024; Kaiser et al., 2025). These terms seek to capture what can in effect be thought of as a more sinister and more potent version of the BJP's professed political ideal and strategy of providing the country with a 'double engine government': Rather than making do with merely holding governmental power at the centre and in the states and Union territories simultaneously (which is how the 'double engine' metaphor is usually understood), the aim of Hindu nationalist politics today is to ensconce the tenets of Hindu nationalism in both civil and political society – powered by the twin locomotives of

Hindu nationalist grassroots groups in the former and BJP governments in the latter – so as to establish Hindu nationalist hegemony in the true Gramscian meaning of the term.

What unites this variegated literature on ‘new Hindutva’ is, as we see it, a desire to understand the process of Hindu nationalist statecraft as it currently unfolds. As generations of anthropologists have shown, processes of statecraft or state formation are often rooted in forms of violence that seek to normalise and legitimize political subjection (Nugent & Suhail, 2018). The question that confronts us, then, is not *if* the current process of Hindu nationalist statecraft is violent, but one of *how and with what effects* it is so. The contributions to this issue rely on the study of anti-Christian violence to demonstrate that the process of Hindu nationalist statecraft today is inherently violent in all three Galtungian senses of the term. It relies strongly on direct, physical violence and intimidation, perpetrated both by Hindu nationalist vigilante groups and state police and security forces, who often collude or collaborate. When it comes to India’s Christians, this may, as indicated above, take the form of direct attacks on churches or houses of worship, and on priests, preachers, and individual believers, all of which have increased significantly over the past decade. However, unlike the large-scale and engineered anti-minority pogroms – often misleadingly spoken of as ‘communal riots’ – which characterised Hindu nationalist mobilisation in earlier decades, a new and more routinised form of what Pai and Kumar (2018) call everyday communalism is now emerging, producing in the process an arguably more durable anti-minority common sense. The contributions to this issue offer an illustrative examples of how this modality of everyday communalism can affect Indian Christians through everyday forms of subtle intimidation and veiled harassment – strategies that can always be welded to the deployment of police force and vigilante repression if and when required.

The current process of Hindu nationalist statecraft also produces new forms of structural violence, most visibly by locking the tenets of Hindutva into state law (Selvaraj, 2024a). Such use of the law as a modality of structural violence has intensified during the third phase of anti-Christian violence, and especially so over the past five or six years. Indeed, while it was still possible to claim during Modi’s first term in office that ‘it is through practice rather than legislation that [the BJP has] ... targeted Christians and Muslims’ (Jaffrelot, 2021, p. 189), the picture is very different today. Anti-conversion laws have, in particular, been introduced in more states and now exist in 12 in all, designed to target first and foremost non-Hindu minorities and their religious institutions and organisations (Nielsen et al., 2023). They have become more intrusive and harsher over the past decade, and many of them have expanded the scope to potentially target also Christian institutions and their employees, who could face sanctions such as the withdrawal of state financial support if

suspected of ‘fraudulently’ converting Hindus to Christianity. Provisions in such laws can also lead to the revocation of a Christian organisation’s ability to receive monetary contributions from outside the country under the Foreign Contributions Regulatory Act, something which will impact its functioning to the point of threatening its very existence (Selvaraj, 2024a, 2024b; Nielsen & Selvaraj, 2025). Further, these laws also formalise the incentivization of Dalit Christians (who make up a majority of India’s Christian population) to ‘reconvert’ to Hinduism, as they will then be eligible for affirmative action which Dalit Christians currently do not receive. Such laws, in other words, connect multiple forms of structural violence and thus, compound the experience of violence, particularly for those at the marginal intersections of religion and caste (Selvaraj, 2024b).<sup>4</sup> As the scholarship clearly demonstrates, the laws also enable a new level of extra-judicial enforcement by Hindu nationalist groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal, who often work in conjunction with the local police to inflict physical violence (Saiya & Manchanda, 2020; Nielsen et al., 2023; Selvaraj, 2024a).

The advent and prominence of social media, and not least the very skilled and adept use of these by multiple Hindu nationalist groups, have aided and magnified these efforts (Banaji & Bhat, 2022; Centre for the Study of Organized Hate, 2025). In addition, they have arguably also contributed to the production of a more widely shared form of common sense about the fundamental ‘anti-national’ essence of non-Hindu minorities and their ‘un-belonging’ to the Hindu nation. This is a long-standing trope in Hindu nationalist rhetoric that asserts that the loyalties of Indian Christians and Muslims by definition lie elsewhere, and it in effect constitutes a powerful form of cultural violence that is also integral to the current process of Hindu nationalist statecraft, and which routinises and normalises the stigmatisation of religious minorities. For Indian Muslims, this form of cultural violence is now so pervasive that it can only, if it all, be countered by excessive and near-permanent displays of fierce patriotism (see Vachani, 2022). For Indian Christians, the picture is still more mixed but, as the contributions to this issue bring out, a politics of cultural violence against Indian Christians is equally integral to Hindu nationalism at the current conjuncture.

### **The contributions**

We locate our studies of anti-Christian violence and Hindu nationalism at the level of the states of the federal system, paying particular attention to how specific regional histories, political cultures, and demographics have shaped political trajectories and forms of violence. The four articles in this issue focus on Odisha, Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Kerala, and Goa. As such, they offer in-depth analyses of only a relatively minor part of a much more complex national picture that we cannot do full justice to in this collection.

Still, we believe that the modalities of violence and the dynamics of Hindu nationalism that the articles bring to light will resonate beyond the confines of the specific contexts covered here.

The first two articles explore how the systems of anti-Christian violence operate at different levels in India's political system. Re-visiting the 2008 violence in Orissa and Karnataka, Selvaraj (2025) shows how cultural violence against Christians can flow seamlessly between states, and between states and the national level through the Hindu nationalist movement's immense political and social infrastructure. In doing so, Selvaraj shows how the relatively broad conception of the Christian 'threat' allows it to be adapted to suit a range of local contexts and can be triggered and activated relatively easily based on domestic or international events. As such, Selvaraj demonstrates the adroitness of the Hindu nationalist movement.

Kaiser et al. (2025) explore the dynamics of anti-Christian violence in contemporary Chhattisgarh, engaging with Jaffrelot's (2024) conception of a Hindutva 'deeper state' in India under Modi. Analysing the case of the Bastar district, a hot spot of anti-Christian violence, the article maps the contours and workings of an assemblage of more or less directly violent institutions, organisations and actors crisscrossing the state-civil society divide. Focusing particularly on a period when Chhattisgarh was under ostensibly secular Congress rule (2018-23), the article argues that anti-Christian violence persists even when the BJP is out of power, primarily due to the wilful inaction of the Congress and its so-called 'soft Hindutva' approach designed to appeal to the state's influential dominant-caste Hindu voters. This persistence of anti-Christian violence also under Congress rule raises uncomfortable questions about the political future of India's Christians more generally.

The next two articles focus on state contexts where Christian communities play a significant role in their state's social, economic, and political life as 'privileged minorities' (Thomas, 2018) namely Goa and Kerala. Both articles explore social and spatial strategies being employed by Hindu nationalist groups to symbolically or discursively redraw and reinforce the boundaries between religious communities in antagonistic ways. Harikrishnan (2025) highlights the efforts of Hindu nationalists to expand their influence in Kerala, where the BJP has only enjoyed limited electoral success. Harikrishnan argues that political success is not the primary aim of Hindu nationalists here, and that the absence of overtly communal or vigilante violence in the state often conceals the various ways in which Kerala's sacred geography is shaped and reshaped at the everyday level and across everyday sites. Following an examination of Hindu-Christian encounters in the state from the nineteenth century, Harikrishnan warns that the BJP's recent outreach to the state's prominent Syrian Christians – based on shared Brahminic lineages and a common (Muslim) threat – must be read purely as rhetorical and strategic.

In an analysis of Hindu nationalist efforts in Goa, Nielsen (2025) argues that, in a discernible departure from the more accommodating Hindu nationalist line pursued in the state a decade or two ago, the current conjuncture is marked by much more pronounced and confrontational anti-Christian rhetoric and politics, emanating not only from hard neo-Hindutva groups, but also from significant segments of the BJP. Engaging broader debates on new Hindutva, Nielsen argues that current political developments in Goa simultaneously reflect and drive broader national trends where the line between governmental Hindu nationalism and more radical neo-Hindutva formations is increasingly blurred. In the Goan context, this blurring produces an intensified form of anti-Christian rhetoric and politics.

In his critical commentary that serves as a conclusion to the collection, Nilsen (2025) reflects on what the contributions reveal about continuities and changes in the Hindu nationalist project of building a Hindu nation at a moment when Modi and the BJP are well into their third consecutive term in power. On the one hand, anti-Christian violence exemplifies an enduring feature of Hindu nationalism, and a crucial source of its potency, namely its ability to operate with long-term strategies for achieving its goals, even as it moves across shifting social, political, and cultural terrains. On the other hand, the present collection also brings out the ability of Hindu nationalism to shift, transform, and adapt as it progressively expands its imprint across India. The central implication is that the future of Hindu nationalism is likely to be defined by more variegated forms of saffronisation than what we have witnessed so far.

## Notes

1. We acknowledge the criticism that Galtung's framework risks being too expansive and value-laden, but insist that it enables a much-needed holistic perspective on anti-Christian violence that allows us to capture its multiple forms and the dynamic relationship between these in different contexts (Selvaraj, 2024a).
2. The coinage of the term Hindutva is often attributed to V.D. Savarkar with Hindutva being defined as Hindu-ness. Recent scholarship (Kapila, 2021; Chaturvedi, 2022; Bakhle, 2024) has nuanced this understanding.
3. Key contributions to this 'first wave' of scholarship on Hindu nationalism, which we cannot review in detail here, include Jaffrelot (1998) and Hansen (1999).
4. To this we can add other new legislation such as the many state laws banning the slaughter, transport and sometimes also the consumption and even possession of beef, targeting not only the culinary habits of most Indian Christians and Muslims (and Dalits and Adivasis), but also the livelihoods of particularly Muslims (and Dalits) in the informal livestock, beef and leather economies (Jakobsen & Nielsen, 2024).

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## ORCID

M. Sudhir Selvaraj  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9393-220X>

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