

## **An Analysis of the Representation of Hindus in Western News Coverage of the 2019 Indian Elections**

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There have been several news reports, analyses and opinion pieces published in important Western media outlets in the past few months about the ongoing elections in India. The New York Times, The Washington Post, the BBC, Time magazine, The Economist, and National Public Radio are among the news that media that have devoted much attention to events and issues in India.

The overall tone of these articles has been severely critical of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Some articles criticize his economic policies and alleged failures. Most articles though, focus on a broader discourse which somewhat has Modi and his party as the focus, but also point to a deeper question of postcolonial representation – that of Hindu identity.

In this essay, I focus on the ways in which Hindus, Hinduism, and Hindu struggles for political and cultural representation in democratic modern India have been presented before Western news readers and listeners. Does the coverage of the elections recognize the space for a Hindu identity or existence even outside of the more commonly used “Hindu Nationalism” conceptual framework that prevails in media and academia today? Or does the coverage conflate the word “Hindu” with the notion of “Hindu Nationalism” and a particular understanding of it, and with the political groups often labelled as “Hindu Nationalist,” namely the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party) of Prime Minister Modi? What is the story, simply put, that the reader is being presented with in all these articles about, the women, men, children, scholars, social workers, peasants, laborers, and everyone else who identifies, and is identified today through legal, cultural, and political structures as a Hindu?

One can address these questions by looking closely and objectively at the different ways in which certain meanings are being constructed around this name using indicators such as word frequencies, linguistic labels, and most importantly in an age of digital and visual cultures, the sort of imagery used in the visual representation of Hindu identity as well. There are also several critiques of a factual and interpretive nature one might make of the claims advanced in these articles, and several alert readers have already done so. In this essay, I focus mainly on certain objective indicators of representation, and evaluate the perception among many Hindu citizens in India, America and elsewhere, and among some scholars and activists, that there appears to be a strong Hinduphobic bias in media coverage of India, reducing the work of even once well-regarded news sources to efforts, intentional or otherwise, at propaganda.

I focus on the following articles and reports published in April 2019 in the New York Times, BBC, and NPR, and one important article published in May (Aatish Taseer’s cover story for Time magazine). While there have been some more articles and opinion pieces published in this period on Indian politics and the elections, I have not included them in this analysis either because they are concerned with administrative issues concerning the election (how the authorities pull it all off sort of reports), or they are focused on economic or other critiques that have not quite placed “Hindu” identity, “nationalistic” or otherwise, as the focus of their claims.

As there are no articles or opinion pieces published at all offering a contrary view to the dominant “Hindu Nationalism” thesis of these reports, it may be fair to say this sample covers the range of representations that Hindus are given in Western news media at this time in the context of Indian election coverage. There is no “pro Hindu” voice for sure. Let us see if an “anti Hindu” voice exists now, or if the coverage has been unbiased and professional.

TABLE 1. KEY ARTICLES ON ‘HINDU NATIONALISM’ IN INDIA POLLS

DATE	PUBLICATION	TITLE
4/11/2019	The New York Times	Under Modi, a Hindu Nationalist Surge has Further Divided India
4/17/2019	The New York Times	Modi’s Campaign of Fear and Prejudice (OpEd)
4/22/2019	National Public Radio	Hindu Nationalism, the Growing Trend in India
4/23/2019	National Public Radio	India is Changing Some Cities’ Names, and Muslims Fear their Heritage is Being Erased
4/23/2019	BBC	Why Is a 2,500-year-old Epic Dominating Polls in Modern India?
4/25/2019	National Public Radio	Nearly 27 Years After a Hindu Mob Destroyed a Mosque, the Scars in India Remain Deep
4/25/2019	BBC	Meeting a ‘foot-soldier’ of the Hindu far-right
5/9/2019	Time	Can the World’s Largest Democracy Endure Another 5 years of a Modi Government?

It is evident from the headlines alone that none of these reports are sympathetic to the Modi government. However, what is worth teasing out is the broader issue of **how the Modi government is situated within a particular set of representations of Hindus in India at this time.**

### Making the Headlines

If we examine the headlines again closely for the ways in which the term “Hindu” appears (and for contrast, the word “Muslim” too), we see the following:

TABLE 2. ‘HINDU’ IN HEADLINES

The New York Times	Under Modi, a <b>Hindu Nationalist Surge</b> has <b>Further Divided</b> India
The New York Times	Modi’s Campaign of Fear and Prejudice (OpEd)
National Public Radio	<b>Hindu Nationalism</b> , the <b>Growing Trend</b> in India
National Public Radio	India is Changing Some Cities’ Names, and <b>Muslims Fear</b> their Heritage is Being Erased
BBC	Why Is a 2,500-year-old Epic Dominating Polls in Modern India?
National Public Radio	Nearly 27 Years After a <b>Hindu Mob Destroyed</b> a Mosque, the Scars in India Remain Deep
BBC	Meeting a ‘ <b>foot-soldier</b> ’ of the <b>Hindu far-right</b>

Time	Can the World’s Largest Democracy Endure Another 5 years of a Modi Government?
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The word “Hindu” appears in four of the six headlines listed here, and is associated in almost every instance with something violent or broadly negative. The word “divide” which appears in the New York Times headline in early April, also reappears on the cover of Time magazine in May, in which Prime Minister Modi is labelled as the “Great Divider.” There is something “divisive” these examples suggest, about Modi, or “Hindu Nationalism.” Two headlines suggest not just divisiveness but outright violence, with the idea of a “soldier” who belongs to not just “Hindu Nationalism,” in this case but what is described as the “Hindu far-Right” in one example (BBC) and the destruction of a mosque (NPR) in the other. The NPR headline is also telling in that it does not make the qualification that is often made (“nationalism”), and directly labels the actors as a “Hindu” mob (we will also find the “mob” is a fairly frequent trope in the articles too).

The broad picture the headlines paint of India is one of danger and violence from Hindus, and one of fear for Muslims. While it is important not to lose empathy for any group that feels fearful, whether a minority group in one country, or a minority group more globally speaking, the question does remain if the characterization of one group of people as a danger is being done precisely, factually, and with perspective and safeguards to avoid labelling a whole group as dangerous. Do these reports, in other words, offer such nuances about “dangerous” Hindus, and presumably, non-dangerous Hindus, who presumably, also exist.

### How is the “Hindu” Label Used?

One way to get a sense of the picture of Hindus being painted here is to look more closely at the various contexts in which the word appears in these stories:

TABLE 3. “HINDU” ASSOCIATIONS

SOURCE	ARTICLE	“HINDU” APPEARS AS:
NYT	Under Modi, a Hindu Nationalist Surge has Further Divided India	<p>“<b>conservative Hindu</b> movement” (to)  “make India a <b>Hindu state</b>”;  “<b>Hindu lynch mobs</b> began to pop up”;  cow a sacred animal under <b>Hinduism</b>;  “<b>extremist Hindu</b> priorities” (like)  locating “mystical river” from “<b>Hindu scriptures</b>”;  Nehru predicted that if fascism came to India it would be as <b>majoritarian Hindu communalism</b>; <b>middle and upper-caste Hindus resent affirmative action</b> and special laws for Muslims; Modi wore a green and saffron scarf and “<b>saffron is a holy color in Hinduism</b>” (note: doesn’t add green and Muslims); “<b>Hindu golden age nostalgia</b>”</p>

NYT	Modi's Campaign of Fear and Prejudice (OpEd)	"Hindu majority"; "Hindu Nationalist BJP"; a "firebrand Hindu ascetic" (Yogi Adityanath); "Hindus dwarf minority";
NPR	Hindu Nationalism, the Growing Trend in India	"Hindu Nationalism is idea that Hindu faith and culture should shape the state and its policies"; "Modi is a Hindu Nationalist"; "He belongs to a Hindu Nationalist party"; "Hindu Nationalism"; "Hindu Nationalism"; "Hindu Nationalists were miffed (in 1947) they wanted a Hindu state and didn't get it"; "Hindu Nationalist killed Gandhi"; "Hindu Nationalist"; "Hindu Nationalist" India (for Hindus) model like Israel or Turkey?; "Hindu Nationalist"; "Hindu Nationalist"
NPR	India is Changing Some Cities' Names, and Muslims Fear their Heritage is Being Erased	"Tens of millions of Hindus (took a dip in Kumbh)"; "Right-wing Hindu leader" (ref. to Deen Dayal Upadhyaya); "Hindu Nationalist" BJP; "Hindu pilgrimage site there" (does not reveal Hindu name was older one though); "Hindu nationalism"; "Hindu nationalistic politicians"; "right-wing Hindu nationalistic leaders" (Mumbai change); "Hinducentric" (names); Hindu, Muslim, etc. once lived together (quote from Muslim); "The Priest Politician" (Yogi); "Hindu youth militia"; Hindu women ("love jihad"); "most vocal Hindu nationalists"; "majority Hindu faith should be at the center"; "cows are sacred to Hindus"; "lower-caste Hindus" (attacked by cow vigilantes); celebrating Hindutva or Hinduness; outcry after "Hindu researchers" dismissed Einstein at conference and said "ancient Hindu gods invented planes"(note- here the implication is "Hindu researchers" are dumb, not 'Hindu Nationalist'); "Hindu Nationalist" RSS; "all-male Hindu volunteer corps"; dumbing down of education through talking of Hindu values, science, inventions (quote); Hindu Nationalist Godse murdered Gandhi; student will soon (if she passes IAS) be reinterpreting history through "Hindu eyes."
BBC	Why Is a 2,500-year-old Epic Dominating Polls in Modern India?	"Hindu mythological epic"; (like in every election) "conversation among Hard-line Hindus has returned to the epic Ramayana and its protagonist Ram" (note- so Hindus only talk about Rama when there's an election and they're 'hard-line'?); Hindu festivals; "powerful Hindu Nationalist organization (RSS)"; "consolidate Hindu votes"; "Hindu nationalist student union"; for "hard-line Hindus the cultural loss (of other versions of Ramayana, three thousand according to this report)

		is just collateral damage”; “ <b>Hard-line Hindus</b> believe the Babri mosque was built after the destruction of a Hindu temple by a Muslim invader”; (Hard-line Hindus) believe in a <b>sort of Hindu renaissance</b> (that will allow) <b>Hindus to band together.</b> ” (note- ‘sort of renaissance’ and ‘band together’ reek of colonizer paternalism, as if to say Hindus are subpar and needy)
NPR	Nearly 27 Years After a Hindu Mob Destroyed a Mosque, the Scars in India Remain Deep	“three-pronged <b>spears from Hindu scripture</b> ”; “ <b>hard-line Hindus</b> calling for mosque to be destroyed”; “ <b>Hindu faithful believe a Hindu god, Lord Ram was born</b> ”; “some <b>believe a Hindu temple stood there</b> (though archeologists dispute)”; “ <b>Hindu nationalists – those who believe India should be a Hindu nation</b> ”; “ <b>Hindu Nationalists</b> ”; “For <b>hard-line Hindus</b> mosque’s presence is offensive”; “ <b>Hindutva</b> ”; “ <b>Hindu attackers</b> ”; “ <b>Hindu-Muslim riots</b> ”; “train carrying <b>Hindu pilgrims</b> came under attack” (Godhra); “ <b>Hindu Pride</b> ”; Many <b>Hindus</b> , part of <b>majority-religion</b> , condemned 1992 killings but <b>hard-liners...</b> ”
BBC	Meeting a ‘foot-soldier’ of the Hindu far-right	“functionary of a <b>radical Hindu group</b> ”; “ <b>Right Wing Hindu mob</b> ”; “mob”; birthplace of <b>Hindu god Ram</b> ; ‘ <b>myth of Hindu tolerance</b> ’ (quote); “ <b>far-right Hindu supremacist</b> ” (Bajrang Dal);
Time	Can the World’s Largest Democracy Endure Another 5 years of a Modi Government?	“ <b>Hindu Nationalist BJP</b> ”; <b>Hindu Nationalist mobs</b> in 1992; “ <b>Hindu mobs...</b> public lynchings in the name of the holy cow”; “ <b>enraged Hindu mob</b> ” “hate-mongering priest in robes of saffron” “ <b>Hindu theocracy</b> ”; “ <b>Hindu Nationalist</b> ”; “ <b>fantasies of Hinduphobia</b> ”; “saffron-clad female saint”; “attack by <b>higher caste Hindu men</b> ”; “cows are sacred to Hindus.”

The word “Hindu” appears at least 86 times in these stories, and while “Nationalism” is the most common suffix that appears alongside the word, several other overlapping notions such as “theocracy,” “hard-liners” and “radicals” also appear (the phrase “hard-line Hindu” seems to be a recent plant, and shows up repetitively in multiple sources, and often for ludicrously inappropriate things like knowing there was a Hindu temple destroyed by the Mughal army in Ayodhya before the mosque came up!). There does not appear to be consistency or clarity in how some of these terms are actually used. The often-used “Hindu Nationalism” for example, is defined in only case, and that too in a somewhat abstract, unsubstantiated way (NPR – “the idea that Hindu faith and culture should shape the state and its policies”). This absence of verification for a seemingly central notion to this argument is however not surprising. **There is absolutely no evidence offered from the manifestos, public policies, or positions taken by the supposed Hindu Nationalist groups (the BJP mainly) whether they do indeed consider themselves “Hindu Nationalist” and if so what that term means to them.** It appears, just like the comedian Hasan Minhaj’s explanation in his Netflix show, that Hindu Nationalism is about

wanting to make “India more religiously Hindu.” It is perhaps this absence of clarity that is also responsible for the use of multiple epithets, a word salad, or a decorative plastic-salad perhaps.

While the debate about what Hindu Nationalism actually means is not the immediate concern of this analysis, the fact that **the word “Hindu” is used largely in relation to a range of alarmist concerns about violence, intolerance, and superstition, is indeed relevant to a critique of media representation here; and all the more so given the global, racial, and national positions of privilege vis-à-vis white Western journalists and institutions, and people of color living in a once-colonized nation.** Is the representation equitable? Or is there an element of orientalism at work, with old, tired colonizer fantasies and tropes somehow becoming normalized again despite the obviously good intent of protecting the minorities from the majorities? Is evidence offered, again, for the seemingly innately threatening nature of the majority, or is the absence of evidence for the main claims being covered up with some fast repetition and some old racism?

### **Hindus are Mobs, Muslims are Individuals: Media Message**

The imagery that is associated perforce with Hindus in these articles is far more than a simple critique of any events of political violence in India (for one thing, if it were that, these articles perhaps would also not refrain from their **complete silencing of Hindu victimization, whether in Kashmir, or in the two decades of relentless bomb-blasting that took place across India in the 1990s and 2000s;** that would have been honest, and principled). Instead what we see is the painting of a portrait of the Hindu in these words as: **primitive**, driven by blind belief rather than reason and evidence, and most of all, as an undifferentiated mass; a “mob.”

The last point may be better appreciated if we briefly examine some examples of the depictions of Muslims in some of the same articles:

TABLE 4. MUSLIM VOICES IN CONTRAST TO HINDU LABELS

The New York Times	Under Modi, a Hindu Nationalist Surge has Further Divided India	This article begins with Adnan, a Muslim in the machine tools market in the “catacombs of old Delhi.” Muslims are increasingly afraid to walk alone. When they talk, “ <b>their voices drop to a whisper.</b> ” “I could be lynched right now” says Adnan.
National Public Radio	Nearly 27 Years After a Hindu Mob Destroyed a Mosque, the Scars in India Remain Deep	We see, “At 80, Syed Ikhlaq Latif’s face...” We hear, Tayab-un-Nisa’s voice: “I’ve wept a lifetime of tears” (her husband was killed, “bludgeoned” to be precise).
National Public Radio	India is Changing Some Cities Names and Muslims Fear their Heritage is Being Erased	Ashraf’s “ <b>voice drops to a whisper</b> ” (note: this article begins by evoking “tens of millions of Hindus” at the Kumbh, as if to say their sheer size and numbers are scaring others into silence)

There is a clear asymmetry in terms of how much “voice,” quite literally, that Hindus and others are seemingly permitted here. This asymmetry, in terms of privileging one group or viewpoint through individualization, and the silencing of another through objectification and reduction to a mass, is a classic orientalist trope (Edward Said’s Orientalism video produced by the Media Education Foundation, shows us some fantastic examples of US news media’s Islamophobic reduction of Muslims and the Middle-East to an image of a mass of screaming protestors). While no one should deny Latif, Ashraf, Tayan-un-Nisa, or Adnan their grief and fear (and I hope sincerely for the best for them), we have to ask **if ever a Hindu victim of violence by Muslim extremists, either in Kashmir last March, or in Mumbai, or anywhere, has ever been afforded representation as an individual, as a voice, as a human being, in Western news media.** To the best of my knowledge, this has not happened. During the 2002 Gujarat violence for example, the New York Times ran a story on the heartbreaking scene at a graveyard for Muslim children, but never brought the attention close to the Hindu children who were burnt alive in the Godhra train, for example. More recently, after the Pulwama terror attack, the New York Times featured photographs and detailed quotes from the father and friend of the “shirk”-hating suicide bomber, but not one photograph or quote, from the grieving victims’ families. Their headline too was telling – it said, just after a Kashmiri had blown up 40 people from across India, that “*Kashmir* suffers.”

The absence of Hindu representation is very deep, as if one never existed at all, and deserved to be exterminated by religious conservatives without comment. This pattern, of rendering Hindus into masses, and Muslims into individuals, is also evident somewhat in the choice of photographs used in the sample (the only exception to the Hindu as “mass” is when a lone Hindu is individually highlighted as a ‘radical’ or a danger – so no good Hindu ever has a name, a face, or a voice).

TABLE 5. VISUAL REPRESENTATION: PHOTOS

NYT	Under Modi, a Hindu Nationalist Surge has Further Divided India	(Photo 1) BJP rally, all male (Photo 2) Modi with arms up, caption says “To many in the country’s Muslim minority, he is terrifying” (Photo 3) Muslims in Delhi’s “catacombs” (Photo 4) Dalit man in hospital after attack by “higher caste Hindus”
NYT	Modi’s Campaign of Fear and Prejudice (OpEd)	(Photo) saffron flag, close-up of “members of United Hindu Front” demanding deportation
NPR	Hindu Nationalism, the Growing Trend in India	
NPR	India is Changing Some Cities’ Names, and Muslims Fear their Heritage is Being Erased	(Photo) sign at “Mughalsarai” station – caption refers to “right wing Hindu leader who died there” (Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, author of Integral Humanism, RSS manifesto)
BBC	Why Is a 2,500-year-old Epic Dominating Polls in Modern India?	(Photo 1) Actor dressed as Rama “Many Hindus see Ramayana’s protagonist, Ram, as a hero” (Photo 2) Story of Ramayana in bullet form, image

		(Photo 3) Street in Ahmedabad with men watching Ramayan on large screen (Photo 4) Saffron men/boys seated in rows, hands raised (common trope); “Hindu activists” (Photo 5) Ravana
NPR	Nearly 27 Years After a Hindu Mob Destroyed a Mosque, the Scars in India Remain Deep	(Photo 1) Syed Latifi, 80 who “watched in horror” (Photo 2) Old quarter of Ayodhya, “dozens of Hindu temples” (Photo 3) Men with metal tools/weapons by Babri wall, “Hindu attackers” hit the wall (Photo 4) Satendra Das, Chief Priest in waiting.
BBC	Meeting a ‘foot-soldier’ of the Hindu far-right	(Photo 1) Dark photo of Hanuman, Rama figures in back with man in front, “Functionary of a radical Hindu group” (Photo 2) men on mosque domes (Photo 3) Ayodhya temples (Photo 4) police (Photo 5) “Mr. Sharma says Hindus never provoke violence”
Time	Can the World’s Largest Democracy Endure Another 5 years of a Modi Government?	(Photo 1) Modi at “road show” top angle (Photo 2) Modi video clip (satellite shooting) (Photo 3) Modi on cover of Time (Photo 4) Ikea customer (woman, likely Hindu) in Hyderabad, looking up at goods (Photo 5) Man in hospital recovering after attack by “higher caste Hindu men” (Photo 6) Cows, “Cows are sacred to Hindus, cow protection mobs have killed at least 46 .. most targets were Muslims.”s

### **Hinduphobia and “Hindu Nationalism”: The “Thuggee” Phenomenon of Our Time?**

It is curious that Western media have sought to paint a desperately one-sided and Hinduphobic picture of Hindus and Muslims in India today under the guise of calling out “Hindu Nationalism.” I wonder if it’s a lack of intellectual application (after all, they only need to read Koenraad Elst for a masterful and objective account of the Hindu movement and the place and role of the “Hindu Nationalist BJP” in it—and they might learn the name Sitaram Goel too, and perhaps the colorful phrase about the “greatest collection of duffers ever assembled” too - if you are a Western journalist reading this, go ahead and Google this phrase – you will be shocked, and will learn a thing or two). It is after all easier to go on bending truth here and there to fit a theory rather than actually challenge the received wisdom as it has come down to you from past practices in media houses – a past which sadly in the case of Hindus goes back to the colonial racist religious supremacist era it appears.



Specifically, these are the issues with the state of the media as it were:

One, the dehumanization, demonization, and denial of Hindus and Hinduism. The Hindu voice, experience, and struggle against more powerful religious-imperial and neo-colonial forces is far beyond the BJP or RSS or the loosely concocted widely repeated “Hindu Nationalist” label, and ought to be represented by any halfway decent international media house if it purports to go report on India today. The only reason the media is stuck is because it fails to recognize it is holding on to a colonial era racist myth about the Hindus being invaders of India (the NPR piece actually starts to wander towards this recognition, claiming that “Hindu nationalists” were opposed to “liberal reformist Hindus, colonialists, and missionaries” – so you admit the early “Hindu Nationalists” were anti-colonial perhaps?)

Two, readers should train themselves to spot and call out the codes of representation that constitute Hinduphobia and orientalism more broadly. The barrage of “Hindu” this or that epithets hurled at readers in the past few weeks indicate that the BBC, NYT and others are somehow hopeful that no one will notice that they have lined up Hindus on what they think is a civilizing mission timeline to progress out of savagery. The desperate attempts to deny Hindus their history, reason, and agency, is all over these articles. **It is quite telling that the NPR piece on changing Allahabad’s name doesn’t reveal at all that it’s a changing back!** I told my students when we discussed this in class that perhaps the NPR people thought the people who lived there by the Ganga before the Mughals came were grunting savages who had no language (just as Columbus wrote of the indigenous people in his diary). Perhaps they thought we had no names for our places, our holy places, at that. Interestingly, another grand liberty that several reports from the West have been taking is with language and precision in translation: how on earth does “Jai Shri Ram” become “Hail Lord Ram” when Jaya is “Victory”? The BBC even translated “Jai Hind” sometime ago as “Hail India.” Are you thinking this is “Heil Hitler” maybe, or want your readers to think that?

And the BBC piece on Rama and Ayodhya is even more strained; pretending there was no concept of a Rama as God story in India before the white man’s magic box (television) bamboozled us all in the 1980s into suppressing 3000 versions and following the “one true Ram was born there” version. We had temples. They were destroyed by zealots who couldn’t stand our gods. Admit it. That’s all.

Three, Taseer should realize that the “class revolution of 2014” that he alludes to is no different from a Hindu one. It is unfortunate that someone who seems to theoretically recognize the limits of the secular-anglophone-privileged class’s claims to moral supremacy in India goes back to label-spewing like all the other foreign journalists who went on their little brown savages tour this summer. Hinduphobia is not a fantasy sir, and the Hindus who you think are yearning for the past are not doing so at all. It is just freedom. Freedom from the past your world represents materially and culturally. Freedom fought for and held so long by the ordinary people of India for so long now, and a freedom it has been by privilege to write into language that the Anglophone bubble-people of the planet can hopefully understand too.

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