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Sustaining Anti-Hindutva Activism in Aotearoa New Zealand: Strategies, Challenges and Way Forward

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Abstract
In this article, I will discuss how Hindutva operates in a small country like Aotearoa New Zealand, through various socio-cultural and religious organisations. The fieldwork for this article is a part of my larger doctoral research that focuses on anti-Hindutva activism in Aotearoa New Zealand. The study relies on ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with six anti-Hindutva activists to understand the presence of Hindutva and anti-Hindutva activism in the country. Compared with the copious work on Hindutva in the diaspora in other multicultural countries, there is comparatively less literature on the presence of Hindutva in Aotearoa New Zealand, and even less on the organisations that work to challenge Hindutva in diasporic spaces. As such, this article will make a valuable and timely contribution by exposing the veiled presence of Hindutva in Aotearoa New Zealand and then looking at the anti-Hindutva activism that challenges Hindutva in this country. In this article, I will discuss the methods, challenges and aspirations of one such organisation operating in Aotearoa New Zealand: the Aotearoa Alliance of Progressive Indians (AAPI). AAPI has become one of the most prominent organisations (and perhaps the only one in the country) that exclusively focuses on the rise of Hindutva in India and the diaspora.

Keywords: anti-Hindutva activism; Aotearoa Alliance of Progressive Indians; ethnography; Hindutva

Introduction

The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been marked by a resurgence of Hindu nationalist sentiments in India. Ever since it formed the government in 2014, the BJP, a "religious-nationalist party [that] asserts a deep affinity between Hindus and the nation" (Basu, 1999, p. 116), has grown in power and influence. The BJP derives its roots from militant Hindu organisations, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, or National Volunteer Organisation), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, or Universal Hindu Council), Jana Sangh (People's Council), and Hindu Mahasabha (Hindu Council). Even though these organisations claim to be cultural and non-political in nature, they play a significant role in envisaging India as a "Hindu nation" (Corbridge, 1999). Hindu nationalism is hardly a new phenomenon in India. Even before the independence of the Indian subcontinent, the RSS advocated an ideology called *Hindutva*, under which Hindus are the only authentic inhabitants of India (Siddiqui, 2016). The founder of the RSS, Veer Savarkar, believed that only those Indians whose sacred land (sacred to their respective religion) is within their India have the moral basis of claiming citizenship in India, thereby advocating a religious/cultural basis of citizenship rather than a territorial one (Das Gupta, 2006). Therefore, for Hindus, their love for their holy land is the same as their love for their fatherland, whereas for Muslims, their love is divided between India and the Middle East (Varshney et al., 2021). According to Savarkar, this is the reason why Muslims cannot be considered authentic Indians.

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Like India itself, the diversity in the Indian diaspora is marked by differences in caste, religion, economic status, region, duration in the destination country and language (Pande, 2013). Despite considerable ethnic diversity, most Indian diasporic spaces are dominated by upper-caste Hindus. Several scholars suggest that Hindus abroad adhere to a more orthodox, upper-caste and 'Vedic' form of Hinduism in their countries of settlement (Kurien, 2007; Lal, 1999)[1]. For instance, Lal (1999) argues that the Hindu diaspora in the US has developed a rigid understanding of Hinduism, one that is upper-caste, ritualised and classical. This is because most of the Hindus in the diaspora, especially the recent ones, are upper-caste (Zwick-Maitreyi et al., 2018). There is a rapidly growing Indian population in Aotearoa New Zealand, with Indians forming the third largest ethnic community in the country (RNZ, 2024). According to the 2023 Census, 292,092 individuals identified themselves as being of Indian origin (Stats NZ, n.d.). Like in the US, Indians immigrating to Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand since the 1970s have tended to be more skilled, urban, upper-caste migrants rather than people from rural areas. As such, Indian diasporic spaces become ideal sites for the expansion and mobilisation of Hindutva ideology.

Historically, the Indian diaspora has been involved in various forms of activism, including anti-colonial, anti-imperial and anti-Girmitya (indentured labour) activism. Likewise, the rise of Hindutva in the diaspora has not gone unresisted. Compared with the copious work on anti-Hindutva activism in the diaspora in other multicultural countries, however, there is less literature on the activism challenging Hindutva in Aotearoa New Zealand. In the US and UK context, the progressive literature that challenges Hindutva has focused on sustaining Dalit activism (ACDA, 2009),[2] exposing the organisation and scope of Hindutva activities abroad (Sabrang, 2002), highlighting the protests against welcoming Modi in other countries (Mandavilli & Swamy, 2019), and raising awareness and understanding about Hindutva ideology beyond the South Asian diasporic spaces (Narayanan, 2015). Such literature is particularly sparse in the New Zealand context, though. New Zealand-based scholar Dutta (2021) has done some excellent work on the rise of Hindutva in Aotearoa New Zealand, through Hindu cultural and religious organisations; however, their work does not focus on the anti-Hindutva activism in the Indian diasporic communities. As such, this article will make a valuable and timely contribution by exposing the veiled presence of Hindutva in Aotearoa New Zealand as well as looking at the anti-Hindutva activism that challenges Hindutva in this country. In this article, I will discuss the methods, challenges and aspirations of one such activist organisation, the Aotearoa Alliance of Progressive Indians (AAPI), which is operating in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Literature review

Hindutva in the diaspora shrouds itself in an egalitarian version of Hinduism, embracing the values of "*Vasudev kutumbakam*" ("The world is my family") while distancing itself from the violent and Islamophobic form of Hindutva. Western Islamophobia and Hindutva ideology construct Hinduism as an "exotic", colourful and non-threatening religion (as compared with Islam), which appeals to the people in the West (Bhatt, 2000). At the same time, diasporic Indians, especially American Hindus, are vastly involved in the funding of political activities of Hindu militant organisations like the RSS and VHP (de Souza, 2022). Within this framework, Hindus construct themselves as the model minority vis-à-vis other minorities in the country. Bhatt (2000) talks about Hindutva organisations' charitable and volunteer status in the U.K., which contribute to several local volunteer-based projects in London. This reverberates with the idea of *seva* (or service), which is understood as the core of Hindu values, thus aligning itself with egalitarianism and denouncing religious extremism. In

[1] The Vedic age was a period of Hindu history between 1500 BC and 500 BC when the holy texts Vedas were written.
[2] Dalit is a term that refers to the lowest-caste people in India, also known as the outcasts and untouchables.

Australia, Hindutva operates through socio-religious organisations that hide under the liberal rhetoric of multiculturalism. Hindu nationalist organisations in Australia seek legitimacy under this liberal discourse, while at the same time they fund violence against Muslims and Christians in India (Osuri, 2011). Hindutva organisations use similar shrouding and veiling strategies in Aotearoa New Zealand. Dutta (2021) has highlighted how Hindutva in Aotearoa New Zealand operates through religious and cultural organisations (for instance, the Hindu Council of New Zealand), which are often affiliated with Hindu militant organisations like the RSS and VHP. In a recent white paper, Dutta et al. highlighted how various Hindutva organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand (namely, Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh New Zealand, the Hindu Council of New Zealand and Overseas Friends of BJP New Zealand) operate to propagate the Hindutva project. These organisations employ what the research group defines as "equivocation", a strategy that allows them to lay claim to the Hindutva project in India while simultaneously obfuscating those links by claiming the liberal and multicultural narrative (Centre for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation, 2023).

There is plenty of literature on the rise of Hindutva in multicultural contexts like the US, UK and Australia (Mathew & Prashad, 2000; Raj, 2000). Kamat and Mathew (2003, p. 13) note that multiculturalism is proposed as a solution to racism, where each culture is celebrated equally, but that multiculturalism "deteriorates from being a progressive solution of empowerment to a regressive arena for nationalism because relativism is a core principle of liberal multiculturalism". This leads to a historical representation of cultures; that is, understanding each culture in isolation without seeing their relationships with other cultures. Such uncritical celebration of culture—stripped of its history—sows the seeds of extreme forms of ethnic and religious nationalism, including Hindutva. Hindu organisations in the US have been quite successful in attracting young, radicalised Hindus who find a site of belonging in such organisations. However, the Hinduism produced within these organisations is a Brahmanical patriarchal version that forms the centre of Hindutva (Kamat & Mathew, 2003). Interestingly, countries with state-encouraged multiculturalism become ideal sites for (re)production of Hindutva ideology. Hindutva finds fertile ground in multicultural countries, where it can grow and flourish without getting scrutinised by the secular voices in India.

In terms of anti-Hindutva activism in the diaspora in the US and UK, two key moments of mobilisation were the 1996 demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque and the 2002 Muslim genocide, both of which occurred under the reign of the current prime minister, Narendra Modi (Thapliyal, 2023). Anti-Hindutva activism in the US and the UK has amplified after the two subsequent victories of the Modi government. The advancement of internet technologies has allowed migrants to remain in touch not only with their home but also with their home country's politics. Anti-Hindutva protests have been amplified through social media technologies. Attacks on religious minorities, lynching, violence against women, and abrogation of Article 370, which had allowed the state of Jammu and Kashmir to have its own constitution, have triggered activist responses in the diaspora (Chatterji et al., 2019). Such resistance has come through the formation of digital activist spaces like Campaign to Stop Funding Hate (US), Coalition Against Genocide (US) and South Asia Solidarity Group (UK) (Thapliyal, 2023). South Asian activists have extensively used social media technologies like Facebook and X (previously called Twitter) to spread awareness about Hindutva and its presence in India and abroad (Biswas, 2023). As Hindutva has extended its influence transnationally, so has the growth of transnational anti-Hindutva activism (Thapliyal, 2023). In Australia, diasporic activism is concentrated in two main categories: 1) anti-racism activism, identity and recognition; and 2) overtly anti-Hindutva activism (Thapliyal et al., 2023). The first kind of activism has groups that advocate against racism and the exclusion of Indians from the public sphere (mainstream media, politics and popular culture). This group also includes Dalit activism, LBGTQ+ activism

and other subaltern activism that asserts these groups' identities and challenges Hindutva ideology.[3] The second kind of activism raises awareness of human rights abuses in India with the rise of the Hindu right. There are also several informal solidarity spaces that routinely challenge Hindutva on a daily basis, operating on Facebook, X and WhatsApp. Such literature on anti-Hindutva activism is completely absent in Aotearoa New Zealand, however, despite the existence of an organisation called Aotearoa Alliance of Progressive Indians (AAPI) dedicated to resisting Hindutva in the diaspora. This article will shed light on the topic in the New Zealand context and contribute meaningfully to the global literature on anti-Hindutva activism in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Methodology

This article is a part of my larger doctoral project on the experiences of women activists in the Indian diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand. I use a feminist ethnography framework to approach my data collection and fieldwork. The data consisted of semi-structured interviews, digital ethnographic data and ethnographic fieldwork. For this article, I interviewed four active members of AAPI and two ex-members of the organisation. Initially, I started my project thinking of conducting one-time semi-structured interviews with my participants but realised very soon that 'entering' their life with a tape recorder and 'withdrawing' after getting the data (Cotterill, 1992) was something that did not seem the right thing to do, especially after I had heard their stories of struggles and resilience during the initial interviews. Thus, my methodology evolved more into a feminist ethnography where I 'hung out' with my participants even before and after the interview and beyond the meeting spaces. It almost felt unfair (and even clinical) to call them participants, as the term does not encompass the range of relationships I developed with them. From this point on, I will use the Hindi term *sahabhagis* to refer to my participants. The term roughly translates to co-contributors, people who work with you/support you, and even share 'friendly' relationships with you. This dynamic term captures the complexity and diversity of the relationships I developed. I draw on Dana Davis and Christa Craven's (2023) definition of *feminist ethnography* as involving a feminist sensibility and an obligation to pay attention to marginality and power differentials; these include not only gender but also race, class, nation, sexuality, ability and other areas of difference. I deployed the feminist principles of reciprocity, accountability, honesty, equality and accountability in my research.

Positionality

I write here as a student and as an activist engaged in a struggle that affects me as a member of a marginalised community, a low-caste Dalit woman, both in India and in the diaspora. I have found acceptance in this activist community of resistance to the level where it has become a home to me. My Indian diasporic identity made it easier for me to access the community, understand the culture and sometimes even challenge my *sahabhagis'* beliefs and ideas. My gender, caste and ethnic identity, however, also affected how my participants saw me: the different ethnic, religious, linguistic and regional identities between me and my *sahabhagis* added a layer of difference between my participants and me. My positionality is that of a 'partial insider'—I am a scholar but also an activist within my research. Nevertheless, the views expressed by others here, gathered as part of my fieldwork data, were collected in line with research ethics and with informed consent. When writing this article, I gained the consent from all AAPI members; in fact, I was encouraged and supported throughout my writing

[3] Subalterns are populations who are socially, politically and geographically excluded from the hierarchy of power in an imperial colony.

process by AAPI. My involvement with AAPI (and its members) took different forms, ranging from online engagement to attending protests, engaging in community work, and so on. The domination of upper-caste Hindus in the diaspora often makes Dalits and Muslims more marginalised within the Indian communities. Therefore, a community like AAPI, with members from diverse castes and religious backgrounds, who are interested in progressive politics and ideas of social justice, was like a homecoming for me.

Findings

Hindutva in Aotearoa New Zealand

The first key finding of my study is the operation of Hindutva through different socio-religious and cultural organisations that are often affiliated with fundamentalist organisations like the RSS and VHP back in India. Even though they present themselves as relatively secular, non-political organisations, they espouse Hindutva ideology and associated Islamophobia.

One of the women activists I interviewed, Prerna, talked about the presence of Hindutva under the façade of multiculturalism in New Zealand:

> When I worked in the Human Rights Commission, these groups—so it's trying to contact the Racial Relations Commissioner and get him to endorse participating, not just a major Hindu festivals but all these small…religious festivals and say like, "Oh that culture, all about religion." That's what's the Racial Relations Commissioner—at that time the Chinese Kiwi person, who's Cantonese backgrounds but speaks Māori—but relied on communities to connect with them… So it just seemed innocent, and I actually said to the adviser, "No, these groups are fundamentalist groups; they are not inclusive; they don't represent their community. You should not [laughs] support them or meet with them, because they will take a photo of you and say look, you know, supported by Human Rights Commission."

Prerna talked about how Hindutva, in the diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand, works through socio-cultural fundamentalist groups who shroud themselves as community organisations and gain governmental legitimacy. Her activism meant exposing those Hindutva groups in her work settings and making sure that they did not gain such legitimacy.

Ratna, a trans woman activist, also talked about the Hindutva operation in Aotearoa:

> One article I got published in a mainstream publication was about this kind of risk of Hindutva elements in the diaspora here. They were trying to co-opt, have Māori narratives and say, "Oh yes, you know, we Hindutva people, essentially we Hindutva people, have a lot in common with Māori, right?" And they use synonyms like Hindus, Indian and Hindu categories. So I wrote a rebuttal to that, and I said this is a much more diverse population we're talking about…

There is academic research that supplements Prerna's and Ratna's discussion about the presence of Hindutva within an uncritical multicultural framework in Aotearoa New Zealand. For instance, Dutta's (2023) work demonstrates that Hindutva communities may also co-opt the language of post-colonisation, decolonisation and racism to consolidate power. Using the language of Indigeneity and tradition, these Hindutva groups often interact and intersect with White supremacist groups to propagate and reinforce Islamophobic hate (Bingham, 2022; Dutta & Rahman, 2022).

Such a co-option of Indigenous language and decolonial logic was evident when Gaurav Sharma, an upper-caste man of Indian origin, gave his oath to become a minister of parliament in both Sanskrit and te reo Māori (The Hindu, 2020). While this might seem harmless, it legitimises upper-caste hegemony even in

diasporic spaces. Sanskrit is the language of upper-caste Hindus, and historically, lower-caste people were not allowed to read and speak the language, and were even penalised if they did. Therefore, the usage of Sanskrit within the debating chamber of New Zealand's Parliament hegemonises the upper-caste attribute of the Indian diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand. It legitimises a violent language, Sanskrit, that excluded (and continues to exclude) lower-caste Hindus. This step was touted by many upper-caste Indians (and non-Indians who do not understand the nuances of caste and language) as decolonial, but Sharma's decontextualised usage of the language in the New Zealand House of Representatives failed to recognise the history of caste-based violence that the language is associated with. Furthermore, using Sanskrit alongside te reo Māori is problematic. By doing that, he equated te reo Māori (the language of the Indigenous people of Aotearoa) with Sanskrit (a hegemonic, upper-caste and exclusionary language that only a certain caste can use). This kind of equation goes without notice or concern in the uncritical multicultural framework of Aotearoa New Zealand.

During my ethnographic fieldwork, I also found out about the veiled presence of Hindutva in the Fijian Indian communities, promoted through Hindu religious gurus. In one such case, a wealthy Fijian Indian family sponsored a Hindu religious guru's trip from India to Aotearoa New Zealand. An event held at Mount Eden's Bhartiya Temple was a highly pompous celebration in honour of the guru. The guru gave sermons for nine days in the temple, each day covering a section of the Hindu epic *Ramayana.* As someone interested in examining Hindutva's influence in Aotearoa New Zealand, I attended one of the sermons. To my surprise, the sermon was hardly about the epic *Ramayana.* Instead, it focused on women's roles in Hindu society. The guru reverberated Hindutva discourse of ascribing traditional domestic roles to women, saying they should be subservient to their husband and passively obey his "orders". The guru emphasised how a woman's honour is tied to her motherly nurturing role, another prominent discourse within the Hindutva framework. The guru openly disparaged modern women who go to work instead of staying at home and taking care of domestic duties. To my horror, these sermons were not criticised; rather, people applauded in agreement.

Such a sinister presence of Hindutva continues to operate in Aotearoa New Zealand through such conspicuous celebration of religion/culture. The Indian media in Aotearoa New Zealand hailed the guru as an embodiment of Vedic knowledge and wisdom, ignoring his misogynistic and Islamophobic remarks (The Indian News, 2024). This is not a singular, isolated event where we see the import of Hindutva in New Zealand through the Hindu spiritual gurus of India—entry of such gurus is commonplace in Aotearoa New Zealand with events like these happening under the visage of cultural consolidation. Often, the Fijian Indian communities are more vulnerable to the influence of such spiritual gurus because of their longing for belonging to India (a country that they have been separated from for generations). They try to connect with their Indian identity through their Hinduism. Their devoutness to Hinduism is integral to maintaining and sustaining their culture and identity in a Western multicultural context; however, the conflation of Hindutva and orthodox Hinduism has made them vulnerable targets for Hindu nationalists.

Anti-Hindutva activism in Aotearoa New Zealand: The dawn of AAPI

The second key finding of my study is the growing development and influence of anti-Hindutva activism in Aotearoa New Zealand. The anti-Hindutva coalition is still in its early stages, although there is a formal organisation (AAPI) that solely focuses on anti-Hindutva activism. The activists within this organisation also engage with activists of other organisations or independent activists (not associated with any organisations). All the activists I interviewed are committed to more than one kind of activism, and often their commitment to one drew them to another. For instance, their commitment to anti-racism activism drew them to anti-Hindutva activism. AAPI activists were already committed to different kinds of causes and activism before coming

together to form an organisation that focuses on anti-Hindutva activism. Therefore, there is solidarity across activists and their activism(s). However, at the same time, I want to note that despite the existence of an organisation that focuses on anti-Hindutva activism, this kind of activism in Aotearoa New Zealand remains quite fragmented. Even though anti-Hindutva activists recognise the rise of Hindutva, they are not necessarily associated with AAPI. With a relatively smaller population of the Indian diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand (albeit an ethnically diverse one), the Hindutva presence is being obfuscated under the activities of socio-religious associations.

The Aotearoa Alliance of Progressive Indians (AAPI) was born in January 2020 out of resistance to the Indian Government's Citizenship Amendment Bill (later the Citizenship Amendment Act). This legislation fast-tracks citizenship for Hindus, Christians, Parsees and Buddhists persecuted in three neighbouring countries: Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh (BBC, 2019). By giving citizenship exclusively to non-Muslim immigrants, the act discriminates against Muslim immigrants. While posing as benign legislation aiming to grant citizenship to persecuted minorities in other countries, it needs to be examined within the context of India's National Register for Citizens (NRC), an instrument used to detect and deport illegal migrants. The NRC is one of the agendas of the current ruling party, which it wants to implement throughout India (Shankar, 2019). The update of the NRC was implemented in the northeast Indian state of Assam in 2015 as a court-monitored exercise. The final state list, released in 2019, excluded 19,06,057 people from the list of citizens (India Today, 2019). We have already seen the effect of a national register for citizens in Syria, where children who cannot establish that their father is Syrian can lose their Syrian nationality and so became stateless. If a condition like this is implemented pan-India, many Indians will be left off the register. While both Muslims and non-Muslims who lack the necessary documents may be excluded from the NRC, non-Muslims will be saved from being stripped of their citizenship through the CAA, irrespective of whether they are migrants or not (Bhatia & Devadasan, 2019). By granting citizenship based on religion, the CAA discriminates against religious minorities (who might also have been persecuted in neighbouring countries) and, "violates the principle of secularism, which is a part of constitutional morality" (Chandrachud, 2020, p. 151).

There were major protests across India (led by Muslim women in several instances) in response to the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). These protesters challenged the Hindu nationalist agenda by citing the Indian constitution and reminding the Government of their brutalities (BBC, 2020). There were similar protests held by the Indian diaspora in other parts of the world, including Aotearoa New Zealand. A group of progressive Indians called New Zealanders Against the Citizenship Amendment Act started a campaign in Aotearoa New Zealand against this regressive legislation. The members of AAPI come from different religions, ethnicities, castes and regions in India (which I feel is representative of India's diversity). AAPI was formed of people who are both marginalised and allies of the marginalised. They share a common sentiment of saving the Indian constitution, which is based on secular values (that the current right-wing government is trying to sabotage). A lot of my conversations with AAPI members were about how they felt about such Islamophobia being inflicted in their names and (in some cases) religion. AAPI held protests against the CAA in Auckland, Hamilton and Wellington. Thus, AAPI emerged from this group of progressives who decided to unite and mobilise against Hindutva forces and celebrate the idea of a secular India. Talking about the formation of AAPI, activist John told me:

> With AAPI coming together and we started collaborating … people who are more aligned with the same thing [same progressive values] … they really cared about their country, they wanted to do something [about] the issues back home.

AAPI believes in the pluralistic, democratic and secular ideas of India and aims to promote these values while engaging with the community in Aotearoa. AAPI envisages the creation of intellectual and community spaces for such discussions to occur. It addresses the brewing hate against minorities in India that plays out in the Indian diaspora, homogenisation of "the Indian culture", policies that systematically oppress and marginalise minority groups in India, restrictions on reproductive and women's rights, and the continued impact of neoliberalisation on low-income and vulnerable communities in India. Besides spreading awareness about the rise of Hindu nationalism in India, AAPI's efforts are mostly directed towards addressing these issues within the Hindutva-dominated spaces in Aotearoa New Zealand. And although AAPI has ties with other progressive social justice activist groups (feminist, LGBTQ+, anti-Islamophobic, Indigenous, etc.), its main goal is to discuss the rise of Hindu nationalism in India and diasporic spaces.

The CAA legislation in India was the transformative event that led to the organisation of the Indian diaspora as a collective. The CAA became the "critical event" (Tatla, 1999) for the progressive Indian diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand to unite and organise. AAPI activist Kamala talks about how AAPI was formed after the CAA bill was passed in India.

> Yes, the CAA bill. So, I thought, well it was time to stand up over here and protest. I've put it out on my South Asian creatives post—page to say, "Hey I wanna organise this protest", and realised that there were other people also organising and so we got together with them and there were some Muslim men from Aligarh who were putting it together … we did work to it together and even then we were not sure *ki kon aayega* (who will come) neither…

AAPI activists understand that they have the privilege to speak against Hindutva in Aotearoa New Zealand—a privilege they don't have in India. They can walk freely in Aotearoa New Zealand, say what they want and not be arrested. They feel they have an obligation towards India and her people to talk about Hindutva when they are living abroad. However, they do believe that "*Ye toh lambi ladai hai*" ("This is a long struggle"). The next section will focus on the strategies and the struggles of AAPI activism.

Countering Hindutva: Methods and strategies of AAPI

In this section, I will discuss the two strategies used by AAPI activists to counter the presence and influence of Hindutva in Aotearoa New Zealand: exposing Hindutva in Aotearoa New Zealand, and supporting Indigenous activism.

Exposing Hindutva in New Zealand

One of the main goals of AAPI is to expose how Hindutva operates in Aotearoa New Zealand. AAPI uses social media platforms for awareness and advocacy about the rise of Hindutva in India and the diaspora. AAPI is highly active on all its social media platforms, including Facebook, X and Instagram. It has 391 followers on X, which is very small given the size of the Indian diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand,[4] and reflects the scarcity of progressive voices in the Indian diaspora in this country. Nevertheless, most of the 391 followers actively share and engage with the posts on X, indicating there is interest in anti-Hindutva activism in Aotearoa New Zealand. Most of their posts discuss and criticise the Hindutva ideology furthered by the current Indian Government. The most common themes are violence against minorities perpetuated by Hindutva proponents (mainly in India but also globally), shrinking Indian democracy, sharing local protests on progressive issues (like

[4] In the 2023 Census, 292,092 individuals identified themselves as being of Indian origin (Stats NZ, n.d.).

women's rights, trans rights, etc.), challenging the officials from the New Zealand Parliament for demonstrating complacency with the rise of Hindutva in India and Indian diasporic spaces in Aotearoa New Zealand, and exposing the global network of the RSS, VHP and BJP. It is essential to mention that some of the posts are first shared within the group, where they are moderated before posting on social media. AAPI activists like Kamala are very vocal on the manifestation of Hindutva in Aotearoa New Zealand. On her X handle, she writes about how Hindutva operates in Aotearoa New Zealand through Hindu socio-religious and ethnic organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand. For instance, in one of her posts, Kamala wrote:

> Every Diwali I pull this out. Nothing has changed. Same old, same old. Passive participation in uncritical multicultural spaces that still co-opt brown people/South Asians/Indians who perform what white people want from us as migrants of colour using words like decolonise and re-indigenise freely, without any anchoring in the past or in any resistance struggles. Still obeisant. Auckland Diwali over this weekend is no different. There will be political speeches telling us how we are contributing to this country and how we bring colour and food. Economic units really, nothing else. Now ofc there is the very visible presence of Hindu fascists in this space who have usurped the festival giving it a North Indian, Hindi flavour. (Never mind the occasional South Indian performer.) Nothing has changed. Nothing will change unless examine our place as tauiwi (migrant-settlers) on this whenua (land) and what multiculturalism means through lens of tangata whenua (original inhabitants of the land).

This post captures how Hindutva operates in Aotearoa New Zealand under the guise of socio-religious organisations like the Hindu Council which organise events like the massive Diwali mela.[5] Kamala highlights how Hindutva groups co-opt the language of decolonisation and Indigenisation under an uncritical multicultural framework in Aotearoa New Zealand. At the same time, she advocates solidarity between tauiwi and tangata whenua. Kamala's post aligns with what Dutta (2021) highlighted in his work that Hindutva in Aotearoa New Zealand is spread through Hindu religious and cultural organisations that organise events like Diwali while propagating an upper-caste Hindutva project.

In another X post, Kamala talked about how Hindutva gets supported and legitimised by New Zealand political parties and government officials:

> Obviously, @cjsbishop is incapable of visiting a marae on his own but will do so with Hindu extremist organisations. (Not that @nzlabour reps wouldn't ya know.) Both the Hindu Council of New Zealand and the Hindu Youth are #Hindutva fronts. But they present themselves as indigenous...

The intersectional nature of the issue is quite evident here as Kamala tackles Hindutva appropriation of Indigenous issues and the simultaneous legitimisation of Hindu extremist organisations by National Party Minister Christopher Bishop. While doing that, she is exercising her activism within the Indian diasporic context (by being critical of Hindutva) and the New Zealand context (by being critical of the minister). She calls out New Zealand MPs for being complicit in the spread of Hindutva in the country.

Supporting Indigenous activism

Given AAPI's concern about Hindutva organisations and their alignment with Indigenous culture within Aotearoa New Zealand's uncritical multiculturalism framework, most of the activists are also involved, at some

[5] Mela is an Indian English word meaning a public event that is organised to celebrate a special occasion or an event, and where goods can be bought and sold.

level, with Indigenous activism. Even though I have a dedicated section in this article on Indigenous activism, I have demonstrated above how this kind of activism goes hand in hand with other types of progressive and social justice activism. Kamala emphasises that any kind of progressive activism must include a recognition of Indigenous issues within a Te Tiriti-based framework:[6]

> … because you can't live in Aotearoa and separate your… You know you can't have any activist struggle without actually understanding the Treaty of Waitangi and what that means, and—which is what is allowing us to do all of these things, and you know, co-governance and all of that.

Based on my involvement and engagement with AAPI and its members for the last eight months, I see AAPI's activism as something that is not divorced or isolated from New Zealand politics and social issues. It is perhaps important to note that AAPI regularly shares posts from Indigenous organisations, demonstrating its commitment to Māori sovereignty. My conversations with different AAPI members have revealed their commitment to increasing their involvement with Indigenous activism. Furthermore, they want to collaborate with more progressive organisations to engage more people from the diaspora and spread awareness about Hindutva in India and abroad. The sentiment of upholding and recognising Māori sovereignty in Aotearoa New Zealand reverberated across almost all my activists as they talked about tino rangatiratanga (Māori sovereignty), some even criticising the current co-governance framework that undermines the agency of Māori. Some activists, like Prakriti, were more radical than others about this. Here, she talks about how she is happy to re-earn her citizenship in a Māori country:

> I also understand that New Zealand is like in a really weird space. To be honest, I just think we should become a republic, and I just think Māori people should get their liberty back because I'm just like, well, that's what India did; that's what all the other Asian countries did when they decolonised, right? And I don't want to live in this system of like 50% of our governments, like, like this co-governance thing doesn't make sense to me. So I just think I'm just like either become a republic or like have a constitution that works for everyone. Or just full on, just be like this is gonna be a Māori country now. And I would be happy to be—like you know, if I had to re-earn my citizenship in this new state, oh let's fucking do it. Like I'd rather do that than … being this weird like limbo of like … Am I a citizen? Do I deserve to be here? You know, am I complicit in colonisation? I'm just like, I don't—I don't want to be in this whole biculturalism before multiculturalism. I'm like, I do not want to be under the White man; like I'm sorry, but like I don't mind being in a Māori country.

The struggles of land and colonisation resonated with Prakriti, who draws upon parallels between Asian countries and Aotearoa New Zealand (both colonised by the British). Unlike Aotearoa New Zealand, South Asian countries did not experience settler-colonialism and they received the land back. However, in Aotearoa New Zealand, the state-advocated multiculturalism often undermines Māori sovereignty by equating Māori as other "ethnic" groups that add to the diversity of the country rather than as tangata whenua (in partnership with the Crown). Ngata and Dutta (2023) suggest that solidarities between ethnic communities should not just be around their common identities but framed around concepts of "radical love" and questions of Indigenous justice. This would involve centring marginalised and erased voices by respecting diverse stories, incorporating

[6] Te Tiriti o Waitangi is an agreement signed between the British Crown and Māori representatives in 1840, and considered by many—especially Māori activists—to be the founding document of New Zealand. Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the English version, the Treaty of Waitangi, established the sovereignty of Māori over their whenua (land). However, the English version prioritised the transfer of power from Māori to the Crown. The issues of co governance and power sharing between the two parties is still very important in Aotearoa New Zealand today (Ruru & Kohu-Morris, 2020).

"practices of manaakitanga (hospitality and kindness), tika (truth) and pono (genuine), drawn from Te Ao Māori movements" (p. 11). Prakriti also recognises her positionality as tauiwi of colour who has been complicit in colonisation and extraction of land from Māori in a neoliberal settler-colonial state, and her words and activist commitment stem from this recognition.

Challenges of activism: Tensions and negotiations within AAPI

Like all activist organisations (indeed, all organisations), there are many ideological clashes between members and (now) ex-members of AAPI who decided to leave due to such differences. As I talked to different group members (and ex-members), I realised that their aspirations were practically similar (i.e., fighting right-wing fascism, including Hindutva) but that their methods differed. Some ex-members wanted to look at the Islamophobia rooted in Hindutva within a broader context of global Islamophobia. They talked about how global Islamophobia is located within structures of White supremacy, and Islamophobia in Hindutva has to be examined within a global Islamophobic context (rather than isolating the issue to Hindutva). For these ex-members, AAPI's method of getting Islamophobia rooted in Hindutva recognised by New Zealand media, politicians and institutions is problematic as it does not criticise the Islamophobia rooted in these very Western institutions and systems. AAPI's approach, argued the ex-members, creates a binary between Western and Hindutva-rooted Islamophobia rather than understanding how the two forms of Islamophobia reinforce and draw strength from each other. For instance, White supremacist and Hindu nationalist websites interacted after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, to attack and frame Muslims as the problematic "other" (Gittinger, 2019). This is a core structural difference in methodologies and course of action between the current and ex-members of AAPI. While AAPI members recognise the global connections between Islamophobia in Hindutva and the West, they also acknowledge the distinct nature of Hindutva within the context of rising populist nationalisms across the world. It is important to spread awareness about Hindutva through all channels available.

Another ex-member of AAPI, Natalie, was disillusioned by AAPI focusing and protecting privileged academic voices instead of more marginalised ones. She talked about why she left AAPI:

> …AAPI focused on certain academic[s] ... so the speaking out against Hindu extremists, that's important but I also feel like those people [academics] are some of the most protected people as well or have other resources that support them, so I felt like maybe we could also support more marginalised people that would be speaking out against Modi and his government, you know? That's when I was like, I don't know if this is what I wanna put my energy into now, because I think that, it doesn't mean that academic can't be marginalised— they totally can— but there might be People of Colour, or new migrants, sometimes their jobs are tied to their visa as well. I don't need the vehicle of AAPI to connect with them.

Natalie challenges the approach of AAPI that protects already privileged voices instead of supporting more marginalised people. She further added that she focuses her activism on providing one-on-one support to people in need instead of approaching them through an organisation like AAPI. Such diversity in engagement is more attuned to the pluralities of religiosities and constituencies involved in countering Hindutva in Aotearoa New Zealand. Inclusivity and intersectionality were another point of friction between the activists. Trans activists (who have quit AAPI now) did not see how AAPI is inclusive of their struggles within the Indian diasporic community, saying that AAPI does not recognise how Hindutva is harmful to the queer community. While AAPI tries to locate its activism within the broader progressive LGBTQ+ activism in Aotearoa New

Zealand, these trans activists ex-members of APPI claimed that the organisation does not understand the issues that trans People of Colour face in a White-dominated New Zealand.

Kamala talked about how AAPI responded to being called out by trans and LGBTQ+ activists for not being inclusive enough in their anti-CAA protests:

> … because we were only talking about the Muslim perspectives, and we were talking about coming from our secular perspective—the secular liberal … perspective, and then you have a Rainbow person or trans people turned up and said this is just really bullshit. When [name of a trans ex-AAPI activist] came, she got really angry at us … that you are not making it inclusive, you are not actually talking about the Rainbow, the Indian Rainbow community … Yeah, it was just—it was just really, you need to acknowledge all of these.

However, Kamala also acknowledged that even though AAPI respects diverse perspectives, members must show solidarity with each other (and other progressive groups in Aotearoa New Zealand) to make their issues/concerns heard. "We acknowledge that her [the trans ex-AAPI activist's] points are valid, but we can't alienate people—we need universality to make our voices heard." These three examples of activists leaving AAPI in favour of their own means of engagement with anti-Hindutva activism highlight the fundamental issue of universality within AAPI's activism. Somehow, AAPI's limited ability to include diverse or more pluriversal modes of engagement is the biggest point of friction within and limitation of AAPI's activism.

Another significant challenge for AAPI is the lack of mobilisation and awareness about their causes. Being a relatively new organisation made of people who do this work voluntarily (and have other full-time jobs), it is hard for everyone to engage consistently. There is the constant fear of burnout, especially given the sensitive nature of the content/issues AAPI members have to engage with every day. Explaining this, John said:

> We don't have the time or resources to actually go out and talk to them [more communities] and you know, bring people together, so that is the sad thing. Still, I'm thinking about how we can achieve it, but it always intervened and stopped.

However, there is hope, solidarity and willingness to organise and work together. All the AAPI members I interviewed resonated with this hope. As Rishabh said, "Actually my dream and goal is to get a good group of people. I don't know how to organise (laughs) … I mean, like even if we are not doing anything, you should know that there are people if you need to organise something." This suggests that even though the organisation may go through dormant phases, even its mere presence symbolises the hope that progressive voices in Aotearoa New Zealand can (and will) come together to resist dominant structures of Hindutva and/or right-wing extremism.

Conclusion: Lesson for diasporic activists

In this article, I have discussed how Hindutva and anti-Hindutva activism operate in Aotearoa New Zealand. The article relied on extensive ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with anti-Hindutva activists. I have demonstrated that Hindutva has a veiled "chameleon-like" presence in Aotearoa New Zealand as it aligns with Indigeneity within the uncritical multicultural framework of Aotearoa New Zealand. Anti-Hindutva activism, however, aligns with Indigenous activism to counter this narrative. Unlike Hindutva co-option of Indigeneity, which does not go beyond the optics of seeking cultural legitimacy, anti-Hindutva activists align themselves with the Māori cause of tino rangatiratanga. The logic of multiculturalism that prevails

in much of the Government's messaging often makes it hard to distinguish between these two different alignments. In this article, I have attempted to make such distinctions.

In the case of a settler-colonial state like Aotearoa New Zealand, it is important for diasporic activists to centre the cause of sovereignty and pursue their activism around it, as AAPI activists are doing. Such a strategy serves a two-fold purpose: first, it challenges White supremacy by supporting Māori sovereignty, and second, aligning with Māori issues gives diasporic activists greater support and legitimacy within the activist space, making them more relevant to New Zealanders who are not of Indian origin. Thus, they gain more visibility and support for their activism and can talk about Hindutva to the larger New Zealand society by showing the implications of Hindutva's co-option of Indigeneity. Such a strategy shows that there is no singular way to counter Hindutva; activists must be strategic. Acknowledging Indigenous struggle, settler-colonialism and the people of the land should be the first step for diasporic activists living in other settler-colonial countries like Australia, the US and Canada. Furthermore, inclusion of minority voices and perspectives is the key to moving forward for diasporic organisations so that all communities feel safe to participate. Only after the acknowledgement of Indigenous struggle and the inclusion of minority voices, should any kind of diasporic activism take place.

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