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Theophobia, Hinduism, and Hindutva[1]

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Abstract: This article challenges the conventional view of Hinduism as an "inherently" inclusive tradition, arguing that its historical realities and lived practices often reveal profound exclusivity. The author introduces a conceptual framework that distinguishes religiophobia – a spontaneous, emotional aversion to religious difference – from theophobia, a socially and politically conditioned fear of the religious "other" that fosters rigid "us versus them" dynamics in the public sphere. The paper demonstrates that psychological tendencies towards religious superiority are pervasive, affecting even renowned figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, who implicitly privileged Hinduism over other faiths. Furthermore, the paper documents a history of intra-faith sectarian disputes and inter-faith intolerance, describing the persecution, marginalization, and structural appropriation of other Indic traditions, mainly Buddhism and Jainism. Finally, the text delineates the distinction between traditional Hinduism and modern Hindutva. While Hinduism is described as an open-ended spiritual tradition, Hindutva functions as a narrow, monistic form of cultural nationalism. The paper concludes that Hindutva exploits xenophobic anxieties directed against external faiths to build an exclusive national identity, thereby undermining societal harmony by forsaking fundamental pluralistic principles.

Keywords: Theophobia, religiophobia, Hinduism, Hindutva

This article seeks to demonstrate that, although Hinduism is frequently characterized as an inclusive and tolerant tradition, an examination of selected sources, relevant history, and lived practice demonstrates that it has often failed to be inclusive and tolerant. The paper will discuss three important elements to clarify why I believe this is the case. First, I will examine the distinctions between religiophobia and theophobia to illustrate that the distinction between these two terms is important to the discussion about inclusive and exclusive. Secondly, I will demonstrate that, unfortunately, religiophobia is a pervasive feature that even the great Gandhi, in all of his intellectual wisdom, cannot escape. Finally, I will examine how Hinduism has historically been intolerant not only towards non-Hindu traditions but also towards other Indic traditions (predominantly Buddhism and Jainism). This will lead to a discussion of how Hinduism perceives itself as superior, and later, this sense of superiority will extend outward to include the larger society, creating a nationally exclusive identity.

One of the debates I wish to engage with is the idea advanced by some scholars that Hinduism is, in fact, a tolerant and inclusive religion. Although Hinduism, or more accurately, Sanatana Dharma or Vedic Dharma, theoretically advocates inclusivism, in practice, the lived tradition tends to be exclusive towards other religions as well as its own sects and followers. For instance, certain classes and castes within its society are untouchables and outcasts, and individuals belonging to these sects and sub-sects are restricted from performing prescribed rituals. Hinduism, in its practices, is so exclusivist that even followers of other religions are barred from entering its temples. Notably, even Indira Gandhi, the former Prime Minister of

1. I am grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer for their comments and recommendations, and to the editors, Amanda Rosini and Elyse MacLeod, for their suggestions and extensive copyediting of my paper.

India and daughter of the first Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, though a Hindu by birth, was not allowed to enter or perform pooja at the Jagannath Temple because she married a Parsi, a non-Hindu. Hindu priests typically prohibit individuals considered followers of religions other than Hinduism from entering the revered and ancient temples, despite being Hindus by birth.

This examination of Hinduism will then lead to a discussion of Hindutva, specifically how Hindus perceive this ideology and how it differs from Hinduism. This paper will demonstrate that Hindutva, unlike Hinduism, suffers from Xenophobia. It strongly supports exclusivism and harbours a phobia of all other religions originating outside the boundaries they consider as "Hindustan or Bharat or India." It has no tolerance for "the other" and advocates violent means to eliminate that which it views as foreign. The concept of universal human rights is neither accepted in theory nor practice, as it advocates the religious rights of Hindus exclusively within the Indian subcontinent. Essentially, it is rooted in an inherent hostility toward followers of religions that originate outside the Indian territories.

Theophobia

The notion of religious phobia, or the phobia of religion, commonly known as *theophobia*, is one that is generally understood and defined as "the irrational fear of religion, of God's wrath, of gods, or of sin."[2] However, before discussing this specific fear, it is important to note that the term phobia is defined by psychologists as "an excessive and persistent fear that is disproportionate to the degree of danger in a situation."[3] Religion, on the other hand, does not have a "universal" definition; it can be defined in a number of ways depending on the social-scientific approach. However, for the purposes of this paper, when discussing "religion," we are referring to the beliefs, behaviours, expressions, and practices of a given people in relation to the transcendental, spiritual, and/or supernatural.

As noted, the phobia of religion is commonly understood as the fear of religion or of God(s).[4] However, "theophobia" is somewhat more complex than this simplistic definition. Theophobia can take on several forms; the most frequent is what is referred to as a "positive phobia" towards Divinity, that is, the fear of angering or disobeying God, and thus fear of divine punishment.[5] Additionally, we can also speak of theophobia from the perspective of the atheist who is fearful of the deity (or deities) and all things related to "any symbolic, iconographic, representation, manifesting antipathy, disgust of anything which could suggest Divinity and the guilt related to it," thus making this form of fear a negative form of theophobia.[6] I believe we can also introduce a third form of theophobia, one which views religion as exclusive. Here, theophobia is understood as an obsessive-compulsive behaviour manifested by a person who normally feels comfortable in his religion, religious beliefs, practices, rituals, teachings, and places of worship, but fears those belonging to other faiths.

Like xenophobia (fear of the foreigner, stranger), it is irrational, intense, and obsessive. It is a psychological reaction to religious theories and praxis. In religious contexts, its usage extends to dislike, morbid fear, or even hatred of the beliefs, rituals, teachings, practices, moral commandments, laws,

2. Vasile Chira, "The Fear and the Sacred: The Ontology and the Phenomenology of Theophobia," *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science* 10 (2019), 114, https://doi.org/10.22545/2019/0122.
3. Irena Milosevic and Randi E. McCabe, eds., *Phobias: The Psychology of Irrational Fear* (Greenwood, 2015), xiii.
4. The term theophobia is derived from a combination of the Greek words *theos*, meaning god, and *phobos*, meaning fear. Hence, etymologically and literally, it means "fear of God."
5. Chira, "The Fear and the Sacred," 117.
6. Chira, "The Fear and the Sacred," 117.

symbols, and scriptures in general, or of any particular religion. I would argue that theophobia is marked by an inexplicable anxiety or fear of the real or imagined "other," their religion, their scriptures, their God, and their other deities. In general, researchers identify the causes of phobias as behavioural, biological, and environmental factors.[7] Theophobia can be a condition that affects an individual or a community. In cases of theophobia, the causes could include traumatic and/or negative religious experiences, cultural influences, misunderstanding of religion and its principles, or existential anxiety, such as concerns regarding the afterlife, moral standards, and divine punishment. The "fear of religion" is not merely an individual, isolated psychological trait but a social and political phenomenon that results from social and political conditioning.[8] Individuals or communities experiencing theophobia are referred to as *theophobes*.

The concept of "fear of God" was first introduced by Plato,[9] although he does not use the compound term "theophobia," he does discuss superstitions related to the "fear of God," which Plato terms *deisidaimonia*; since this first instance, the concept has evolved and developed greatly. The term itself, "theophobia," originated in the works and discussions of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century European thinkers. Tayler Lewis, in 1895, summarized the central thesis in the tenth book of Plato's *The Laws* by stating, "We see not how, even on this scheme most ingenious as it is, the atheist can expect to find relief from his tormenting theophobia, or escape that dread, a superhuman being, whether he styles him a God or a Daemon."[10] In 1909, in his work *The Berlin Discussion of the Problem of Evolution*, Erich Wasmann addressed the developments of scientific temperament and the role of theophobia within it. He stated, "In many scientific circles there is an absolute theophobia, a dread of the altar."[11] In 1913, Robert Loyalty Cru, in his publication *Diderot as a Disciple of English Thought*, wrote, "Patriotism and theophobia are the sources of great tragedies and terrifying pictures."[12] In 1925, Morris A. Inch, in his book *Elder Brother: A Christian Alternative to Anti-Semitism*, examined the relationship between hatred and theophobia, concluding, "One might postulate at this point that persons who suffer from theophobia have a contempt for one thought, to usurp their prerogatives."[13]

All this to say that the term has been greatly debated and discussed over the course of the last several centuries; however, the scope of this paper is to refocus the discussion on theophobia on the insider-outsider dichotomy, emphasizing how perceptions, beliefs, and sentiments related to religion shape individuals and communities. A person or community exhibiting theophobic tendencies may cultivate an obsession with religious or cultural otherness, resulting in a radical change in their behaviour, lifestyle, and attitude towards those who do not share their views and opinions. This mindset fosters a sense of superiority among followers towards their own religion, and engenders extreme dislike, bordering on hatred, towards individuals of different religions or even sects and sub-sects within their own faith. Inevitably, this disrupts the prevailing harmony among different faiths and gives rise to an atmosphere of discrimination,

7. Irena Milosevic and Randi E. McCabe, eds., *Phobias: The Psychology of Irrational Fear* (Greenwood, 2015), 289–293.
8. Andrew J. Nolte, "Assertive Secularism, Fear of Religion and Political Mobilization," *Religions* 16, no. 6 (2025): 754, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16060754.
9. Plato, *The Laws*, Book 10, trans. David Horan, Platonic Foundation, accessed June 29, 2026, https://www.platonicfoundation.org/translation/laws/laws-book-10/, 885b.
10. Plato, *Plato Contra Atheos: Plato Against the Atheists* (1845; repr., ed. Tayler Lewis, Legare Street Press, 1923), 131.
11. Erich Wasmann, *The Berlin Discussion of the Problem of Evolution: Full Report of the Lectures Given in February 1907, and of the Evening Discussion* (Routledge, 2021), 47.
12. Robert Loyalty Cru, *Diderot as a Disciple of English Thought* (Columbia University Press, 1913), 421.
13. Morris A. Inch, *Elder Brother: A Christian Alternative to Anti-Semitism* (University Press of America, 2004), 81.

divisiveness, extreme anxiety, and fear. Furthermore, it cultivates societal perceptions of "I" and "you"; "mine" and "yours"; "us" and "them." The use of such language engenders feelings of difference and diffidence, and can even lead a community to feel superior or inferior. What belongs to me is perceived as more valuable than what belongs to others. I often admire qualities in others that I lack in myself, while ignoring their defects, incongruities, and shortcomings. Likewise, I am most likely to see faults in others' religions that are not truly there and turn a blind eye to the positive aspects. This psychological attachment to, and love for, our own, and disdain for what belongs to others, are, though not the only factors, the main causes of societal division. Hindering unity, harmony, and the sense of community within civilized society.

Unlike other aspects of life, it is often perceived as natural for individuals to favour the doctrines and practices of the religion into which they are born. Over time, prejudice against the doctrines and practices of other religions, as well as a preference for the dogmas, practices, and rituals associated with one's own religion, becomes an integral part of one's way of life. One's religion and beliefs are akin to one's skin or the DNA with which one is born. Arvind Sharma comes to similar conclusions in several of his writings. In one such discussion, he contends that based on the notion of "Multi Religion Identity" prevalent in Japan, the "principle of adherence to just one, and only one of the several religions either by birth or by choice is implicit in this conception of religion. In other words, it is not possible to be a follower of the religions of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam *at the same time*."[14] This sense of exclusive belonging or adherence to a single faith constitutes a significant definitional marker of the concept of religion. In fact, this author argues that it is not only the cause of inter-religious but also of intra-religious conflicts.

In Hinduism, this definitional marker has led to doctrinal and fierce conflicts between the Śaivites (Shiva worshipers) and Vaishnavites (Vishnu worshipers), between the Śaivas (Śiva worshipers) and the Śaktas (Śakti worshipers); in Jainism between Digāmbars (sky-clad monks) and Śwetāmbars (white-clad monks); in Buddhism between monastic branches of the Hinyānis and Mahayānis, and so on. Similarly, in Christianity, this has led to violent conflicts between Protestants and Catholics; in Islam between Shias and Sunnis; in Judaism between Orthodox and Conservative movements on the one hand, and Reform and Reconstructionist movements on the other. These divisions are evident not only within the ancient world religions but also among relatively newly founded religious sects. In Sikhism, often regarded as the world's youngest religion, there are, in addition to the three major sects – Khālsa, Nāmdhari, and Nirankāri – smaller sub-sects such as the Radhā Soamis, Neeldhāris, Nirmalas, Ravidāsis, Udāsi, and Nihangas, among others. Several instances of conflict among these groups have been recorded.

The psychological necessity of "exclusive" adherence to one's own religion, or to one of its denominations, can lead to a sentiment of unquestioned supremacy of one's faith. This, in turn, may produce a sense of superiority toward what is perceived as "mine" and a corresponding sense of inferiority towards what is not, sometimes leading to the denigration of the latter.[15] This superiority complex is a key factor caused by exclusivism, leading to both inter- and intra-religious conflict.

I would argue that it is difficult, if not impossible, to escape the sense of superiority and pride that is often attached to one's ideas, doctrines, faith, and arguments, and remain neutral vis-à-vis those that belong to others. This stands in distinct contrast to our attitudes towards material goods and possessions. In the case of worldly possessions, individuals may envy those who possess them, strive to acquire them or

14. Arvind Sharma, *Religious Tolerance: A History* (Harper Collins Publishers, 2019), 477; Arvind Sharma, *Hindutva for Our Times,* (Routledge, 2025), 9.

15. For further reading on the subject matter see M. K. Johnson, W. C. Rowatt, and J. P. LaBouff, "Religiosity and Prejudice Revisited: In-Group Favoritism, Out-Group Derogation, or Both*?" Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 4, no. 2 (2012): 154–168, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025107.

even seek to adopt or share the values and lifestyle associated with material wealth. On the other hand, in the case of religious beliefs, people often seek to maintain exclusivity and may regard those who do not share their faith with pity. They may even attempt to convert others to their faith through persuasion, coercion, or the use of other means.

The leaders of various religious faiths preach about the equality of all religions and maintain that the purpose of all faiths is to "bring the worshipper into the presence of God." Yet each tradition continues to regard its own path as the most accessible, effective, and superior means to that end. The Pope, the Dalai Lama, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, and the Caliphate all affirm that at the core of religion lie virtues such as truthfulness, honesty, temperance, courage, happiness, and peace, and each tradition provides methods to cultivate these qualities in our daily lives. At the same time, each upholds the distinctive superiority of its own spiritual practice over that of the others. For example, the New Testament states in Acts 4:12, "Salvation is found in no one else, [but Jesus,] for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."[16] Similarly, the First *Kalima* (phrase or utterance), also referred to as *Kalima Tayyaba (*Declaration of Purity*)*, is the foundational statement in Islam and states, "*La Ilaaha Illa-Allaah Muhammadur-Rasoolu-Allaah*," meaning there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. The Second *Kalima*, also known as *Kalima Shahadat* (Declaration of Testimony), makes the exclusivism clearer and states, "*Ash-had Al-la Ilaaha Illa-Allaah Wahdahoo Laa Shareeka Lahoo Wa-Ash-had Anna Muhammadan 'Abduhoo Wa Rasooluhu*," meaning I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, He is alone and has no partner, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and Messenger. Conversely, in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and their respective sub-sects abound in similar statements, such as "O Rama! Lord of the dynasty of Raghu! . . . Thou art verily the redeemer of the fallen and the sinful." In such formulations, the name "Raghu" may be substituted with the chief deity of the concerned religion or sub-sect.

Ultimately, this dynamic generates a continual contest for supremacy among adherents of different religions, sects, and sub-sects. Over time, such a contest may culminate in violent religious conflict, not only between different religions but also within any given religious tradition among different sects/denominations as noted above.

Theophobia vs. Religiophobia

Although theophobia and religiophobia are often conflated, I would argue that these concepts are quite distinct. While theophobia arises from societal conditioning – a fear of religious otherness that is socially conditioned and projected into the public sphere – religiophobia refers to a more immediate, non-reflective aversion to religious difference that may be individually or socioculturally acquired. The term "religiophobia" combines Latin *religio* with Greek *phobos*. The Latin religio is a compound word combining "re," meaning "back" or "again," and "ligare," meaning "to bind" or "to tie fast"; scholars generally explain that r*eligio* here conveys a binding to a deity or an obligation to a deity. The Greek term *phobos* means fear. As noted previously, a phobia is "an excessive and persistent fear that is disproportionate to the degree of danger in a situation"[17]; thus, "religiophobia" can be defined as an irrational, obsessive fear toward anything that is deemed to be or related to religion: beliefs, objects, practices, people, and organizations. This bias against an individual or community's spiritual beliefs will inevitably lead to discrimination or hostility towards different religious traditions. At present, this is exactly

16. All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV).
17. See footnote 3.

what is occurring within different societies, so much so that we have now come to identify different types of "religiophobias" that are specific to the targeted tradition. This gives rise to "Islamophobia," which refers to irrational and obsessive fear of Muslims; "Christophobia," the irrational and obsessive fear of Christians; and "Hinduphobia," the irrational and obsessive fear of Hindus.

Religiophobia is a modern construct; although its origins have not been assigned to one source, it is commonly associated with Michael Lerner and his socio-political discourse on the political hostility he observed in the United States towards organized religion that was not Christian.[18] Historically, many religious groups have oppressed others when in power. Unlike theophobia, which, as noted earlier, results from social interactions, religiophobia, which, according to Máté-Tóth, Povedák, and Szilárdi, is a "spontaneous aversion to religion," can be defined as "an innate and/or socio-culturally inherited aversion, a non-reflective and emotional attitude that inherently influences religion's relationship to us and our opinions."[19] Furthermore, both religiophobia and theophobia are distinct from other religion-related anxieties like "religious anxiety" and "spiritual anxiety." Religious or spiritual anxiety appears to be driven by personal, individual distress experienced by the adherent and generally refers to concerns about one's relationship with a higher power, divine punishment, or commitment to moral standards. While these anxieties can be distressing, they do not always reach the same level as a phobia.

The assertion that religiophobia is a pervasive condition can be best illustrated by considering the case of Mahatma Gandhi, an esteemed advocate of religious tolerance and a proponent of harmony among world religions. He advocated the view that a comprehensive understanding of one's own religion, as well as that of others, leads to the recognition that "religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as we reach the same goal?"[20] After critical and exhaustive study and deep reflection, Gandhi concluded that "(1) all religions are true; and (2) all religions have some errors in them."[21] However, regardless of these statements, he too, in his everyday life, was not immune to the emotional tendency to regard his own religion as superior to others. When speaking about Hinduism, Gandhi remarked, "Hinduism […] to me is the most glorious religion in the world," and he goes on to say, "[Hinduism,] I certainly prize above all other religions [because] for me Hinduism is all-sufficing. Every variety of belief finds protection under its ample fold."[22] Additionally, when discussing his preference for the Hindu religion and its scriptures over other religions, he states, "I am unable to satisfy myself with Orthodox Christianity […] Hinduism as I know it entirely satisfies my soul and fills my whole being and I find solace in *Bhagavadgītā* and Upaniṣads that I miss even in the Sermon on the Mount."[23] Concerning the religion into which one is born, practices, or has adhered to since birth, he asks, "If I tell you to give up your religion, will you do so?" and he answers, "Never."[24]

This suggests that even Gandhi, who taught that "All faiths constitute a revelation of truth, but all are imperfect and liable to error," was unable to escape the tension between this pluralistic commitment

18. András Máté-Tóth, Kinga Povedák, and Réka Szilárdi, "Spontaneous Aversion to Religion: Preliminary Approaches," in *The Faith and Beliefs of "Nonbelievers,"* ed. Pavol Bargár and Peter Jonkers, Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change, Series VIII, Christian Philosophical Studies 24 (The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2024), 210, http://publicatio.bibl.u-szeged.hu/34633/.
19. Máté-Tóth, Povedák, and Szilárdi, "Spontaneous Aversion to Religion," 210.
20. Quoted in Krishna Kriplani, ed., *All Men are Brothers: Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi, As Told in His Own Words* (Navjivan, 1960), 77.
21. Kriplani, *All Men are Brothers*, 78.
22. Hind Swaraj, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 10 (Publications Division, 1965), 329.
23. Mahatma Gandhi, "What Jesus Means to Me," *Young India*, August 6, 1925, 274.
24. Mahatma Gandhi, *The Way to Communal Harmony*, comp. and ed. U.R. Rao (Navjivan, 1994), 328.

and the strong psychological inclination he felt towards what he considered as "one's own – mine," a tension which can be read through the categories of "exclusivism" and "superiority." This psychological tension led even a person as enlightened and noble as Gandhi to admit, "I hold for my own religion"; "I swear by my religion, I will die for it"; "I hold my religion dearer than my country and that, therefore, I am a Hindu first and a nationalist after."[25] This pride in his religion persisted throughout his life. He repeatedly asserted, "I have been born a Hindu, and I shall die a Hindu, a *sanātanist* Hindu. If there is salvation for me, it must be as a Hindu. Hinduism absorbs the best in other religions, and there is scope for expansion in it."[26] It can therefore be inferred that Gandhi considered Hinduism, the religion into which he was born, as superior to other religions. This inference is supported by his belief that Hinduism integrates the most virtuous aspects of all other religions while excluding any corrupt elements.

Even in matters of prayer, Gandhi expressed a liberal view, stating, "My Hinduism tells me that along with the Hindu prayer, I should also offer the Muslim prayer and the Parsi and Christian prayers. True Hinduism lies in offering prayers of all religions because only he is a good Hindu who is also a good Muslim and a good Parsi."[27] Despite what he observes during his life and the shortcomings of Hindu practices, he maintains that "Nothing elates me so much as the music of the Gita or the Ramāyana of Tulsidas, the only two books of Hinduism I may be said to know. I know the vice that is going on today in all the great Hindu shrines. But I love them in spite of their unspeakable failings."[28]

Moreover, Gandhi also considers it natural for an individual to take pride in and regard his religion – whether the person was born into it or chose to adopt it voluntarily – as superior to others. He believes that the rituals, teachings, scriptures, prophets, and founders of one's religion are often viewed as more profound and satisfying than those of other faiths. Despite their sometimes irrational nature from an objective perspective, religious rites and practices tend to provide greater solace to adherents than those of other religions. Gandhi also noted that a faithful adherent acknowledges that "no religion is higher than his and the day he would think so he would change his religion."[29]

Furthermore, Gandhi compares the reason for attachment to the religion in which one is born, and the comfort derived from it, to the love and care a man has for his wife. He says, "I can no more describe my feelings for Hinduism than for my own wife. She moves me as no other woman in the world can. Not that she has no faults; I daresay, she has many more than I see myself. But the feeling of an indissoluble bond is there. [Similarly], I feel for and about Hinduism with all its faults and limitations."[30] This indissoluble bond between an individual and their religion is the foundation of deep love for one's religion. This sentiment is well expressed in the Christian hymn: "Love so amazing, so divine. Demands my soul, my life, my all."[31]

This intense, obsessive love tends to fuel pride and foster the belief that one's religion is superior to others, viewing it as the exclusive repository of absolute truth. Even when individuals recognize that their religious doctrines are contradictory, incoherent, and confusing and that the prescribed practices are impractical and, at times, corrupt, they tend to overlook these shortcomings due to their unwavering love and deep attachment to the religion of their birth. Instead of confronting these shortcomings, they justify the corrupt practices and theoretical inconsistencies. The caste system in Hinduism exemplifies this pattern.

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25. Kriplani, *All Men are Brothers*, 103.
26. Swaraj, *The Collected Works*, vol. 93, 114.
27. Swaraj, *The Collected Works*, vol. 94, 213.
28. Swaraj, *The Collected Works*, vol. 24, 374.
29. Swaraj, *The Collected Works*, vol. 21, 49.
30. Mahatma Gandhi, "Hinduism," *Young India*, October 6, 1921, 318.
31. Isaac Watts, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," in *The Celebration Hymnal* (Word/Integrity, 1997), no. 324.

For instance, Mahatma Gandhi was aware of the issues with the caste system and experienced caste injustice firsthand, yet he tried to justify the caste system within Indian society. Similarly, S. Radhakrishnan acknowledged doctrinal contradictions among caste theories across different Indian philosophical systems, and yet he defended casteism.

Just as Gandhi is deeply committed to his religion and willing to die for it, individuals of other faiths also hold their beliefs with similar devotion. Gandhi repeatedly justifies his actions by saying, "My religion teaches me"[32] and others similarly defend their actions under the guidance of their religion. Like Gandhi, they may also cite religious sanctions to justify their deeds or even misdeeds. I would argue that if followers of different religions remain isolated, focused only on their beliefs and practices, conflicts are unlikely. However, once these religious beliefs and practices enter the social or public sphere, it becomes inevitable to compare and contrast them with other religions, since a religion's beliefs and practices are carried out by a group or society that has voluntarily or involuntarily joined it. It is once we shift into the public, social sphere that we now move from religiophobia to theophobia, and the sense of exclusivism becomes one that is intermingled with society, culture, and politics. Thus, moving away from the singular personal beliefs and opinions one holds of one's religion and extending outward to encompass society and state.

Hinduism: Not So Tolerant?

Although many scholars and reformers cite the *Ṛg Vedic* hymn *"ekam sad viprā bahudā vadanti"* – meaning the truth is one – and interpret it differently, they often argue that Hinduism is pluralistic, inclusive, and tolerant of other religions. However, the history of Hinduism, which is both ancient and *Sanatana* – meaning eternal – contradicts this interpretation in theory and practice.

Historically, we encounter many instances of discrimination, intolerance, and exclusivism within the Hindu tradition when speaking of other Indic traditions, specifically Buddhism and Jainism. Patānjali[33] explicitly asserts that the Śramanas and Brahmanas are eternal enemies *(virodah asvatika*) analogous to the snake and mongoose. In the medieval period, Kumārila Bhaṭṭa[34] described the Śramanas as "the ungrateful and alienated children who refuse to acknowledge what they owe to their parents."[35] Śaṅkarācārya[36] is even more rigid and uncompromising, accusing the Buddha of "incoherent pattering (*asambaddhaprālitvā*) or

32. D. G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, vol. 1 (Publications Division, 1951), 196.
33. Patānjali is recognized as a sage, mystic, and philosopher, frequently referred to as the "father of contemporary yoga" due to his compilation of the Yoga Sutras. It is generally believed that he lived between the second century BCE and the fourth century CE. For further reading on this figure, see David Gordon White, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography, Lives of Great Religious Books* (Princeton University Press, 2014).
34. Kumārila Bhaṭṭa was a highly influential seventh-century philosopher and prominent advocate of the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā school of ancient Indian philosophy. He is well known for his fierce defence of Vedic ritual practices, his development of fundamental epistemological theories, and his significant contribution to opposing the expansion of Buddhist and Jain doctrines across India in the medieval period. For further reading on this figure, see Daniel Arnold, "Kumārila," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Stanford University, 1997–2025), last modified March 24, 2024, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kumaarila/.
35. *Tantravārttika: A Commentary on Śabara's Bhāṣya on the Pūrvamīmāṃsā Sūtras of Jaimini*, trans. Mahāmahopādhyāya Sir Ganganath Jha (1903–1924; repr., Sri Satguru Publications, 1983), 195.
36. Śaṅkarācārya, also known as Shankara, was an Indian philosopher, mystic, and theologian of the eighth century. He is best known as the leading scholar of the Advaita Vedānta school within Hindu philosophy. For further reading on this figure, see John Thomai, "Śaṅkara," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Stanford University, 1997–2026), last modified May 8, 2026, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/shankara/.

even deliberately and hatefully leading mankind into confusion."[37] Madhusudan Saraswati,[38] in his commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā*, equates "the teachings of the materialist Buddha and others are like those of *melecchas*."[39] He does not consider them even worthy of his attention. Apan and Sambardar, the two Nayanar (Shaiva) saints, used derogatory phrases like "shameless Jain monks," "naked Jains who fast by night," "wicked monks who eat in barbaric ways," "the weak and filthy Jains with their yellowing teeth," "mad Jain monks' who wear mats, and pluck their hair and eat their food standing," to describe the other. Such hostile sentiments even permeated everyday language. It could be heard in statements such as: *Hastinā pīḍyamāno'pi na gacchejjainamandira na vaded yāvanīṃ vāṇīṃ prāṇaiḥ kaṇṭhagatairap*, meaning "Even if you are threatened to be crushed under the foot of an elephant, do not visit a Jain temple; Never use *maleccha* language, even at the cost of losing your life."

Nathan McGovern, in his book *The Snake and the Mongoose: The Emergence of Identity in Early Indian Religion*, challenges the common belief that the antagonism between the Orthodox and Heterodox, Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical, Vedic and Śramanic schools of Indian philosophy is erroneous.[40] He contends that an anachronistic distinction between "Brahmanical" and "non-Brahmanical" should be abandoned. When examining the identity of Indian religions, we tend to reduce the snake-and-mongoose metaphor to a simple dichotomy. Essentially, when Indian religions are presented in their "pure" form – without any interpolations and extrapolations – they seem to present a picture of harmony. However, this view is incomplete, as I believe it relies on selective reading of the texts and fails to offer a complete picture of both ancient and modern India. Consequently, the animosity between the snake and the mongoose persists.

Furthermore, it is also inaccurate to assert that Hindus are tolerant of non-Hindus. Historical records document instances of forcible conversion of non-Hindu places of worship into Hindu temples since the arrival of non-Hindu religious practitioners in India. Consequently, many places of worship belonging to Jains and Buddhists, as well as Zoroastrian fire temples, Christian churches, Muslim mosques, and various tribal religions have been converted into Hindu temples over centuries.[41]

The earliest instances of Buddhist temple desecration can be traced in medieval manuscripts, which record the destruction of Buddhist monasteries and shrines across Gandhara and Punjab in the fifth century by the Huna ruler Mihirakula.[42] These sites were then abandoned, and Shaivite temples were immediately rebuilt either upon the ruins or nearby. An early example of a Jain shrine that was subsequently destroyed and converted into a Shaivite temple is documented in a seventh-century manuscript. Following his conversion, Mahendravarman ordered the destruction of the Jain shrine at Pataliputra and repurposed the

37. Śaṅkara, *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya* I.1.1.
38. Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (c. 1525–1632) was an eminent Indian philosopher and monastic scholar of the Dashanami Sampradaya in the sixteenth century. He is widely recognized as the final distinguished figure of the classical Advaita Vedānta tradition. For further reading on this figure, see Sanjukta Gupta, *Advaita Vedānta and Vaiṣṇavism: The Philosophy of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī* (Routledge, 2006).
39. *Bhagavad-Gītā with the Annotation Gūḍhārtha-Dīpikā*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Advaita Ashrama, 1998), 16.7–9.
40. Nathan McGovern, *The Snake and the Mongoose: The Emergence of Identity in Early Indian Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 2.
41. For further reading, see Sunil Kumar, ed., *Demolishing Myths or Mosques and Temples?: Readings on History and Temple Desecration in Medieval India* (Three Essays Collective, 2008).
42. K. T. S. Sarao, *The Decline of Buddhism in India: A Fresh Perspective* (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2012), 122.

site to build a Shiva temple.[43] During the early medieval period – especially under the early Pallava and Chalukya reigns – Buddhist and Jain sacred spaces were the main focus of structural conversions, but other non-Hindu sacred sites were also targeted. For example, the Ateshgah of Baku in Azerbaijan illustrates the transformation of Zoroastrian fire temples into Hindu temples.[44] Some Muslim mosques have similarly been converted into Hindu temples; a notable and legally significant example is the demolition of the sixteenth-century Babri Masjid to make way for a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Rama.[45] Additionally, Christian churches across various continents have been repurposed by the Hindu diaspora into Hindu temples.[46] In India, a prominent example is the Śiva Temple in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh.[47]

Hinduism: Tolerant and Non-Tolerant

A more thorough analysis of the matter reveals that there is a conspicuous "debasement" of Śramanic[48] traditions by Hindus, notwithstanding the apparent unprovoked nature of Hindu criticisms directed at the Śramanic tradition. The only significant criticism against Brahminism that I have encountered is contained in the *Dhammapada*, where a "brahmana if he is not free from moral defilements" is called a *bhovadi*.[49] "Bho" is a customary term of address in Pālī language, employed to address inferiors and equals. The Brahmins reproachfully refer to Buddha as "Bho Gautama," whereas Buddha usually addresses them as "*bhante*" – a respectable form of address for a venerable person. In the Jaina texts, there is no account of any unpleasant encounters or references to the use of impolite or improper language by Hindus.

Contempt toward Śramanic religions is attested not only in various Hindu textual sources but also, according to some accounts, in lived social practice directed against Jains, Buddhists, and other non-Hindus. The *Sauryapurāṇa*[50] explicitly states that "the Carvakas, Buddhists, and Jains should not be allowed to settle in a kingdom." Similarly, the Buddhist text *Divyadāna* describes Pushyamitra Sunga as "a great persecutor of Buddhists" and reports that he offered a reward of one hundred dinars for every Śrmana's head.[51]

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43. R. Umamaheshwari, "'Retrieving', Seeking, the Tamil Jaina Self: The Politics of Memory, Identity and Tamil Language," in *Reading History with the Tamil Jainas: A Study on Identity, Memory and Marginalisation* (Springer, 2018), 229, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-81-322-3756-3_4.
44. K. T. S. Sarao, *Baku's Temple of Eternal Fire: Its Connections to Baba Nanak and the Udasi Sadhus* (Bloomsbury India, 2021).
45. Sushil Srivastava, *The Disputed Mosque: A Historical Inquiry* (Vistaar Publications, 1991).
46. Martin Baumann, "Templeisation: Continuity and Change of Hindu Traditions in Diaspora," *Journal of Religion in Europe* 2, no. 2 (2009): 149–179.
47. Nirmala Carvalho, "Uttar Pradesh: Hindu Radicals 'Reconvert' Christians, Turn Church into a Temple Dedicated to Shiva," *AsiaNews*, August 28, 2014, https://www.asianews.it/en/south-asia/india/uttar-pradesh-hindu-radicals-reconvert-christians-turn-church-into-a-temple-dedicated-to-shiva.
48. Śramanic traditions are ancient Indian religious movements that emerged outside the elite Vedic (Brahmanical) religion and often challenged it. Beginning in the sixth century BCE in the Ganges plain, these traditions rejected the authority of the Vedas, the caste system, and sacrificial rituals. For further reading, see Govind Chandra Pande, *Śramaṇa Tradition: Its History and Contribution to Indian Culture* (L.D. Institute of Indology, 1978).
49. *Dhammapada*, chap. 26, v. 396.
50. *Sauryapurāṇa* is a minor Hindu text, regarded as influential especially in the medieval period during sectarian tensions. For further reading, see R. C. Hazra, *Studies in the Upapurāṇas: Vol. I. (Saura and Vaiṣṇava Upapurāṇas)* (Sanskrit College, 1958).
51. V. A. Smith, The Early History of India (Clarendon Press, 1904), 214.

Many literary texts portray a pejorative representation of Buddhist and Jain life and teachings. Kalhan's *Rājatarangini*, a twelfth-century text, contains numerous accounts of the persecution of those belonging to these two Śramanic traditions. One such narrative concerns Ashoka's son Jalauka, a Śhaivite, who is depicted as having destroyed every Buddhist monastery he came across.[52] Similarly, Shashanka,[53] a contemporary of Harsh Vardhana, is described as having cut down the Bodhi tree at Gaya, destroyed 1600 stupas and monasteries, and killed thousands of Buddhist monks and lay followers.

However, contempt was not directed solely towards the "other." Within the Hindu tradition, there have historically been numerous points of contention among different Hindu sects. Sacred spaces and locations have consistently been sources of tension. For example, many adherents gathered at sacred river sites such as Haridwar and Prayagraj; however, these sites were highly contested among various sects, especially between devotees of Shiva (Śaivites) and those of Vishnu (Vaiṣnavas). Guhiye reported that a fierce battle occurred in the year 1299 between the Śaivites and Vaiṣnavas in Haridwar.[54] The Naga sadhus (Śaivites) won a decisive battle against the Bairagis – a Vaiṣnava sect. In 1760, the Śaivites once again secured victory at the same location. Approximately 18000 people were killed in this conflict. It is reported that this battle definitively established the supremacy of the Śaivites over the Vaiṣnavites. In 1707, in Ayodhya, following the death of Aurangzeb, another confrontation took place between the Śaiva sannyāsins and the Vaiṣnava vairagīs. There are also numerous other narratives of plunder and destruction which reflect the hostility of Hinduism towards non-Hindu religions. These accounts are not mythological or political propaganda; they are historical reconstructions established by scholars.[55]

Notwithstanding the atrocities committed by the Hindu kings and brāhmaṇas, followers of Śramanic religions did not harbour animosity towards Hindus. In fact, members of Śramanic religions and other non-Hindus often bestowed favours, land and monetary benefits upon Hindus and Brahmins. Arvind Sharma, in his book *Religious Tolerance: A History*, considers the following events as well-documented and authentic historical facts:

1) Khāravela, a Jaina king of Kaliṅga in the first or second century BCE, granted brāhmaṇas exemption from taxes during the ninth year of his reign.
2) By the end of the first century BCE, Western Deccan was occupied by the Śakas of the Kṣaharāṭas dynasty, when Satrap Nahapāna displaced the Sātavāhanas from their ancestral territories. The Nāsik Cave Inscriptions No. 10 records that Usavadata, son-in-law of Kṣatrapa Nahapāna, made generous offerings to gods and brāhmaṇas along the sacred rivers and at Bharukaccha (modern Broach), Daśapura, and Govardhana, anddonated a field to support Buddhist monks.
3) Śubhākaradeva, an eighth-century king of Odisha, was the son of a Buddhist ruler. He described himself as deeply devoted to the Buddha (*paramasaugata*). Despite this, he granted two villages to a hundred brāhmaṇas from different *gotras*.[56]

52. Kalhaṇa, *Rājatarangiṇī*, II.4–6 (trans. M.A. Stein, 1961).
53. Seventh-century ruler of the Gauda Kingdom in Bengal.
54. David N. Lorenzen, "Warrior Ascetics in Indian History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 98, no. 1 (January–March 1978): 69–70.
55. For a detailed discussion, see William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 82–85, where Pinch reconstructs the 1707 Ayodhya clash following Aurangzeb's death, highlighting the rivalry between Nāgā sannyāsins and Vaiṣṇava bairāgīs. 69–70.
56. Sharma, *Religious Tolerance*, 403.

These are simply a few examples; it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the numerous incidents at length, but it is important that the reader understand that there are many more such incidents.

How is it then that many scholars have come to regard Hinduism as a tolerant and inclusive tradition? This is because Hinduism is often spoken of as a religion with a capacity to easily assimilate rituals, customs and teachings of other religions, as well as their respective saints. This perspective is supported by examples such as the Vaiṣnavisation of Riṣabhdeva and Buddha, whom Hindus regarded as *avtāras* or incarnations of the supreme Lord Vishnu within the Vaiṣnava tradition. However, Padmanabh S. Jaini refutes these assertions and argues that the assimilation of other traditions is not an act of pure benevolence or pluralistic acceptance; rather, it is a highly effective socio-religious strategy for survival and dominance.[57] More precisely, when discussing the Riṣbha *avtāra* of Vishnu, Jaini notes that "Vaiṣnvaisation of [Jainism] through the device of the avatāra is a fine example of a vain drive towards the syncretism of two rival faiths."[58] Regarding Buddha as Vishnu's *avatāra*, he observes that it was a strategic maneuver for "introducing brāhmaṇ priests to officiate at the Buddhist temples."[59] Nevertheless, these efforts to unify conflicting faiths ultimately proved unsuccessful, chiefly owing to the unscrupulous intentions of the Hindu priests. Both Buddhists and Jains rejected these ideas, maintaining their unique identities and affirming their rights as independent religions and philosophies.

The preceding section may be succinctly summarized by Swami Vivekananda's renowned remark, which directly addresses these issues through his insightful observation on the profound paradox inherent within Indian society: "No religion on earth preaches the dignity of humanity in such lofty strains as Hinduism, and no religion on earth treads upon the necks of the poor and the low in such a fashion as Hinduism."[60] Essentially, Hinduism encompasses both extraordinary highs and considerable lows. Scholars such as Arvind Sharma, in all their writings on Hinduism and even Hindutva, assert that Hinduism is a tolerant and inclusive religion.[61] Nonetheless, they must provide a convincing, historically accurate, and doctrinally correct account to substantiate their conviction. To definitively establish their thesis, they should base their conclusions on comprehensive, well-grounded, and verifiable textual evidence, rather than on selective theories and susceptible or speculative facts.

Attention should be directed to K. Satchidananda Murty's incisive critique of orthodox Hindu epistemology, in which he traces the textual-historical lineage of the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā scholar Jaimini and the commentator Kumārila Bhaṭṭa to dismantle contemporary neo-Vedāntic assertions of universal pluralism. Murty contends that classical orthodoxy remains fundamentally inflexible: "The undoubted opinion of the greatest authorities such as Bādarāyaṇa, Jaimini, Śaṅkara and Kumārila [is] that the Veda is the only true scripture, and that the Vedic faith is as exclusive as the Semitic faiths and brooks no rivals."[62] Therefore, classical Hinduism – when examined through its foundational legal and philosophical texts – operates under the absolute conviction that it possesses a monopoly on ultimate religious truth. This

57. Padmanabh S. Jaini, "Śramaṇas: Their Conflict with Brāhmaṇical Society (1970)," in *Collected Papers on Buddhist Studies* (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2001), 47–96.
58. Padmanabh S. Jaini, "Jina Ṛṣabha as an Avatāra of Viṣṇu," in *Collected Papers on Jaina Studies* (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2000), 343–344.
59. Jaini, "Śramaṇas," 90.
60. Swami Vivekananda to Alasinga Perumal, August 20, 1893, in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 5, Epistles—First Series (Advaita Ashrama, 1947), 15.
61. Arvind Sharma, "Hinduism," in *Our Religions: The Seven World Religions Introduced by Preeminent Scholars from Each Tradition*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Harper, 1993), 1–68; Arvind Sharma, *Hinduism for Our Times* (Oxford University Press, 1996); Arvind Sharma, *Religious Tolerance: A History* (HarperCollins Publishers India, 2019); Arvind Sharma, *Hindutva for Our Times* (Routledge India, 2025).
62. K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1974), 219.

underscores Murty's assertion that scholars should explicitly clarify that assertions such as "All religions are true," "Hinduism is inclusive," "Hinduism is tolerant," and "Hinduism is peace-loving" are made solely from their own authority and do not represent the orthodox Hindu tradition.

Concluding remarks

I believe that the issue of Hinduism being labelled as tolerant and inclusive by some, while being criticized by others for being intolerant and exclusive, relates to an important distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva. The question of the "exclusivism" of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – here referring to the exclusive nature of the deity, that there is only one God and the existence of other deities is denied – is well attested, and thus the revelation of the one "true" God is the only path humanity must take. However, this is not the case with Hinduism, for it is pluralistic in its view of the divine (thousands of deities) and in the many paths to truth. Hindutva, however, is different. It claims to be a variant of Hinduism, which is, to a certain extent, exclusivist, not in the way that it perceives the divine but in how it understands itself vis-à-vis the other traditions that try to co-exist within the same space. It teaches that scriptures and revelations of other traditions – specifically Islam and Christianity – are untrustworthy or dangerous because it views these traditions as inherently intolerant, aggressive, and incompatible with a pluralistic society. For there can only be one God and one path.

It is important to note that Hindutva is a secularized concept born out of the political context of the twentieth century, one which focuses on civilizational, cultural, and political nationalism in India. According to Vinayak Damodar Savarkar,[63] the guiding maxim of Hindutva is "one who wields the sword has the truth on his side."[64] He contends that the goal of Hindutva is not so much to gain spirituality, as to "reacquire territory, rehabilitate religion, preserve the Vedas and Shastras, protect cows and Brahmins, and establish suzerainty and diffusion of Hindu fame and glory."[65] He argues that "Hinduism is only a derivative, a fraction, a part of Hindutva" and that it "embraces all the departments of thought and activity of the whole Being of our Hindu race."[66] His independent and nationalistic views appealed to many in the early twentieth century; he is well known for his slogan "Militarize Hindudom, and Hinduize politics" – a slogan that continues to appeal to many Indians, especially those who follow the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS's) ideology.

The purpose of Hindutva ideology or movement is to establish a Hindu nation or state (Hindu *Rashtra)* characterized by a clear distinction between "I" and the "other." In such a state the boundaries between categories such as "us" and "them," "friends" and "foes"," "Hindus" and "Muslims," "Hindus" and "non-Hindus," "righteous" and "wicked," "tormentors" and the "tormented," "oppressors" and the "oppressed," are clearly and distinctly drawn. There is no confusion or ambiguity regarding their connotation or denotation. It can be said that Hindutva embodies a political dimension of Hinduism, emphasizing social and cultural distinctions between individuals or groups and the other for political purposes. The factors that contribute to the exclusivity of Hindutva are "a common nation (*Rashtra*), a common race (*Jāti*), and a common civilization (*Sanskriti*)."

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63. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar was an Indian politician, activist, and philosopher. He was a prominent yet divisive figure in the Indian independence movement. Savarkar is especially known as the main architect of Hindutva ideology, aiming to unify Indians through a distinct Hindu cultural and national identity. To learn more about this figure, see Janaki Bakhle, *Savarkar and the Making of Hindutva* (Princeton University Press, 2024).
64. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?*, 2nd ed. (Veer Savarkar Prakashan, 1942), 19.
65. Savarkar, *Hindutva*, 25.
66. Savarkar, *Hindutva*, 4–6.

Hindutva doctrine wholly disregards the spiritual and social aspects of Hinduism, yet it claims to be more comprehensive than Hinduism itself. As Shashi Tharoor rightly points out in his book, *Why I am a Hindu*,

> Hinduism has always acknowledged the existence of opposites (and reconciled them): pain and pleasure, success and failure, creation and destruction, life and death, are all manifestations of duality inherent in human existence. These pairings are not contradictory but complementary; they are aspects of the same overarching reality. So, also with the secular and the sacred: a Hindu's life must involve both. To acknowledge this would both absorb and deflect the unsavoury aspects of the resurgence of Hindutva.[67]

More importantly, contemporary Hinduism is characterized as "agglomerative, pluralistic, vast, and open-ended, while Hindutva is monistic, narrow, and close-ended."[68] In his 2020 unpublished manuscript, "Hindutva, Hinduism and Majoritarianism," Arvind Sharma distinguishes between the *śiṣta* – learned – and *loka* – common people – and asserts that a small group of scholars who represent the *śiṣta* viewpoint may promote an exclusivist stand-alone doctrine, whereas the majority segment of the Hindu community, representing the *loka* viewpoint, treats Hindutva as an extension of Hinduism. Those who support the *śiṣta* view of Hindutva adhere to the theories, teachings, and practices of inclusive and tolerant Hinduism. They regard Hindutva as a derivative of Hinduism. For proponents of the *śiṣta* perspective, Hinduism is primary, and Hindutva is considered a sub-sect. Conversely, advocates of orthodox Hindutva describe themselves as nationalists, asserting that Hindutva takes precedence over Hinduism. Many of these individuals assert that Patanjali is a part of Hindutva. Given that Hindutva is an exclusive ideology that limits scope for evolution and innovation, the majority of practicing Hindus do not endorse its doctrine and are happy with Sanatana Dharma's inclusive and pluralistic principles. They view Hindutva as an extreme manifestation of theophobia.

The distinction I sought to make in this paper is between religiophobia and theophobia, whereby "religiophobia" is a pervasive psychological tendency which impacts our perceptions, attitudes and opinions, while theophobia projects these elements out into society and presents other traditions as "lesser" and "inferior," thus creating a sense of superiority. I believe it is this sense of superiority born out of the exclusive feature of Hindutva, whereby the Hindu Indian is equated with the Indian state and viewed as the "pure" identity to a certain extent. In this framework, the other traditions are not simply perceived as other, but as a danger to this identity, and it is this "irrational fear" that is generated within Hindutva and is used to act and react negatively against those who are perceived as antagonistic to the envisioned nationalist identity. An identity closely associated with Hinduism, but far removed from its core principles of pluralism and inclusivity.

I would like to share with you the following widely sung prayer (*ardās*) by the Sikhs, which, free from any sense of superiority or inferiority, expresses wishes for the well-being of all societal segments without discrimination based on class, caste, or profession. It encapsulates the core teachings of Gurbani, and I believe it is this *ardās* prayer that sums up the true spirit of Hinduism.

O Guru Nanak, the True Emperor!
Bestow on us the boon

67. Shashi Tharoor, *Why I Am a Hindu* (Aleph Book Company, 2018), 76.
68. Tharoor, *Why I Am a Hindu*, 40–41.

Of pure love and mutual understanding,
Of livelihood, sustenance and daily bread,
Of True and selfless love,
Of pure and clean, pure water, and
Of the blessing of Gurus' Bani, the Eternal Word.
Thou give justice to the givers of our daily bread.
We surrender our minds and honor to you.
Pray! Thou save us all, pardon us all!
Save us all, forgive us all!!
…
May laborers get wages,
Worthy of their labor!
May Thou bestow on us the virtue
Of patience and perseverance.
May Thou fulfill all our benign wishes,
And endow us with
Milch cows and buffaloes,
With milk and clarified butter,
And, the merit of Japuji-recitation.
With folded hands,
Do we pray unto Thee:
Save us all; pardon us all!
Save us all; forgive us all!!
. . .
We, the earthlings of Kaliyug, the Dark Age,
Are brimming with egoism,
And, afflicted with the vices of
Badmouthing, backbiting, and calumny.
O Lord! Thou hast saved countless souls,
Save this mortal, too!
Save this mortal, too!!
Save the whole world, O Lord…!!!
. . .
O Guru Nanak, the True Emperor!
Bestow on us the boon
Of pure love and mutual understanding,
Of livelihood, sustenance and daily bread,
Of True and selfless love,
Of pure and clean, pure water, and
Of the blessing of Gurus' Bani, the Eternal Word.

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