

Exploiting Idolatry: Social Identity Theory and Nationalism as seen in the case studies of
President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi

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Introduction

Opening

Hundreds of years ago, in the land of the Roman Empire and in the days when Christianity was still young, people living in the Roman Empire followed a practice known as emperor worship. As one might deduce, this practice involved praising and offering sacrifices to the Roman emperor. For early Christians, this practice presented a dilemma, as many refused to sacrifice to Roman gods and the Roman emperor. As a result, many Christians were persecuted to the point of martyrdom. The Roman emperor could not accept such defiance from Christians, and in turn, the state oppressed the people who refused to submit to what they perceived as idolatry.

Fast forward several centuries to the present day, and authoritarian regimes still exist, to be sure. For the most part, the world has moved on from state-enforced emperor worship. Idolatry, however, is still alive and well, a ravenous force dragging people to their knees in exchange for the promise of security, pride, survival, realized dreams, power—or perhaps a mix of all of the above. The days of the Roman empire cracking down on people who refuse to bow to state-centered idolatry may be gone, but there exist leaders who exploit nationalisms that people seem willing to kneel to.

This paper seeks to explore why people are drawn toward nationalism and certain subsets of nationalism, and how leaders appeal to the preferred subset of nationalism their base favors. By examining former President Donald Trump of the United States of America and current Prime Minister Modi of the Republic of India, this paper hopes to shed light on why it is people are drawn to certain nationalistic in-groups, how political leaders appeal to that draw, and what

the consequences are for democratic societies. Specifically, this paper seeks to answer two questions: 1) How do SIT and SIC explain people's draw toward nationalism and the formation of subsets of nationalism, such as religious nationalism and national populism?, and 2) How have Trump and Modi appealed to their bases' preferred subset of nationalism, and how does this affect civil society?

Definitions

Before diving into the topic, it is vital to understand the definitions of these key elements: Social Identity Theory (SIT), Social Identity Complexity (SIC), and Nationalism.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) revolves around social identities, which consists “of those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging.”¹ Social categorizations are cognitive tools that “segment, classify, and order the social environment” so individuals are able to take social action.² An individual’s social identification process is both “relational and comparative,” as people evaluate their own groups (the in-group) with other groups (the out-groups) and make judgments on which group they believe is better.³ SIT’s fundamental hypothesis is this: “[The] pressures to evaluate one’s own group positively through the in-group/out-group comparisons lead social groups to attempt to differentiate themselves from each other.”⁴ When individuals internalize their group membership, seeing it as part of their core identity, the social situation allows for intergroup comparisons as the in-group compares its characteristics to out-group characteristics. If an individual sees group membership as a part of their core identity, that person will attach self-esteem to the group

¹ Henri Tajfel and John Turner, *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict, (The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations, 33-47. 1979)*, page 40, para. 4

² Tajfel and Turner, *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict*, page 40, para. 4

³ *Ibid*, page 40

⁴ *Ibid*, page 40, para. 12, brackets added for clarification

membership. If a person desires to maintain or improve self-esteem, then that person has an interest in the strength and even dominance of their in-group, as the in-group's esteem becomes part of the person's self-esteem.⁵ An in-group compares and attempts to differentiate itself from out-groups in order to either keep or gain superiority over out-groups and, “[a]ny such act, therefore, is essentially competitive.”⁶

Building off of SIT, Roccas and Brewer propose the theory of Social Identity Complexity (SIC), which “refers to an individual's subjective representation of the interrelationships among his or her multiple group identities” and “reflects the degree of overlap perceived to exist between groups” a person belongs to.⁷ Both SIT and SIC are concerned with large, collective group identities, in contrast to small intimacy groups (such as a family or small team at one's workplace).⁸

Lastly, what is nationalism? Christophe Jaffrelot argues that it is important to distinguish between nationalism and the idea of nation.⁹ Whereas nations are institutional and state-oriented, nationalism is an ideology as an “ism”, tending to “claim the control of a nation and/or promote one's own (superior) identity against Others’.”¹⁰ Nihar Sri Naga Ganesh Sreepada expands upon the idea by noting that the ideology of nationalism is used to “[legitimize] power by promising an avenue greater than oneself.”¹¹ Sreepada notes comparisons between nationalism and religion, as nationalism provides a transcendent effect—a nationalist ideology tells people that they are

⁵ *Ibid*, page 40 (Tajfel and Turner)

⁶ *Ibid*, page 41, para. 2, brackets added for clarification

⁷ Socia Roccas and Marilyn B. Brewer, *Social Identity Theory*, (*Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 6(2), 88-106. 2002), page 88, para. 1

⁸ Roccas and Brewer, *Social Identity Theory*, page 89, para. 2

⁹ Christophe Jaffrelot, *For a Theory of Nationalism (Research Questions, Centre d'études et de recherches internationales CERI-Sciences Po/CNRS, 2003)*

¹⁰ Jaffrelot, *For a Theory of Nationalism*, page 5, para. 1

¹¹ Nihar Sri Naga Ganesh Sreepada, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Nationalist Rhetorics*, (Texas Tech University Digital Collections, 2021), page 10, para. 1

part of something greater than themselves, similar to what many religions claim.¹² For the purpose of this paper, I will use Encyclopedia Britannica’s definition of nationalism, that is, “nationalism [is] an ideology based on the premise that the individual’s loyalty and devotion to the nation-state surpass other individual or group interests.”¹³

This paper is not groundbreaking, as many before have written stacks of pages on the topics of nationalism, SIT, and SIC. In order to acknowledge the conversations around these topics that have been going on already, a discussion of the literature is necessary.

Literature Review

Origins of Nationalism

Jaffrelot argues nationalism does not necessarily follow from the existence of a nation, as Michael Hechter’s theory asserts. If the origin of nationalism is a nation-state, then how do we explain the case of China, which did not heavily turn to nationalism until confronted by the West—and how do we explain nationalism when the group in question does not have territory, such as the Kurds?¹⁴ Jaffrelot agrees with Ernest Gellner’s theory of nationalism, particularly with the idea that nationalism is not necessarily born from nations, but “is produced—or better, it is induced—by political fields of particular kinds.”¹⁵ Sreepada notes that people are drawn to nationalism could be based on Social Identity Theory (SIT), that is, people are drawn to certain groups based on their own social identities, experiences, and lifestyle.¹⁶ While this might be the

¹² Sreepada, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Nationalist Rhetorics*, page 16, para. 2

¹³ Hans Kohn, *Nationalism* (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023)

¹⁴ Jaffrelot, *For a Theory of Nationalism*, page 7, para. 2

¹⁵ Jaffrelot quoting Gellner, *For a Theory of Nationalism*, page 15, para. 1

¹⁶ Sreepada, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Nationalist Rhetorics*, page 18, para. 2

reason why people are drawn to *existing* nationalism, Jaffrelot is not convinced SIT and people's need to belong drives the *formation* of nationalism. Instead, Jaffrelot argues that nationalism is born out of resistance to some outside socio-cultural dominating force.¹⁷

Healthy Nationalism in America and India

Many may have negative connotations of nationalism as anti-democratic or even oppressive of minorities, perhaps recalling the violent nationalism of Nazi Germany or imperialist Japan. Nationalism, however, is a broad umbrella and is not necessarily undemocratic. Jaffrelot notes that in a multicultural society such as the United States, nationalism can function well if the national identity accepts all citizens as equally valued and legitimate community members.¹⁸ Likewise, Aisha Shahzad, Sadia Mahmood Falki, and Asma Sana Bilal note that nationalistic sentiments are tied to cultural and religious sentiments, and can even enhance these sentiments by strengthening the bond between them.¹⁹ A pluralistic, democratic nation should have a certain type of nationalism that “accommodates all diversities.”²⁰ For example, the ‘hyphenated American’ approach can soothe the tension between nationalism and multiculturalism by defining American nationalism as “a purely political identity,” allowing one to “retain a cultural, ethnic identity” that runs parallel to national identity (eg, Chinese-American).²¹ By keeping the definition of American nationalism bounded to the political sphere, a broad swath of people can both adopt nationalism and preserve their unique cultural identities while still being considered equal.

¹⁷ Jaffrelot, *For a Theory of Nationalism*, page 31, para. 1

¹⁸ *Ibid*, page 46, para. 1

¹⁹ Aisha Shahzad, Sadia Mahmood Falki, and Asma Sana Bilal, *Transformation of Indian Nationalism and ‘Otherization’ of Muslims in India (Margalla Papers, 25(1), 48–58. 2021)*, page 49, para. 1

²⁰ Shahzad, Falki, and Bilal, *Transformation of Indian Nationalism*, page 49, para. 1

²¹ Jaffrelot, *For a Theory of Nationalism*, page 46, para. 2

In the case of India, the world's largest democracy, there is a generally positive view of its nationalism as a force to protect all Indians in a diverse society.²² The Indian nationalism that sprung up in the 1800s was based on the multiplicity of languages (acknowledging India's diversity), and "it was propagated that all nationalities living in British India were supposed to be Indians without discrimination regarding language or religion."²³ Indian nationalism is seen as one of the driving factors that prompted the resistance to British colonialism and is arguably "the by-product of colonialism."²⁴

SIT, SIC, Subgroups of Nationalism, and Populism

SIT and Nationalism

As mentioned earlier, Sreepada notes SIT explains the draw people feel toward nationalism. The group that a person ends up siding with becomes their in-group, while "the Others" become members of the out-group from that person's perspective.²⁵ The self-esteem of the group is tied to comparing the in-group with the out-group, built on "us" vs. "them" competition. Eventually, the in-group seeks to enhance their status by diminishing the out-group's status.²⁶ Bart Cammaertz notes this phenomenon as well, stating "From a discourse theory perspective, the self is constructed in juxtaposition to its 'constitutive outside.'"²⁷

While group affinity is not necessarily negative, Sreepada warns that extreme group affinity can lead to conflict and "unrest in a society."²⁸ Cammaertz agrees and adds to this thread,

²² Shamsad, Falki, and Bilal, *Transformation of Indian Nationalism*, page 51, para. 3

²³ *Ibid*, page 50, para. 3

²⁴ *Ibid*, page 49, para. 4

²⁵ Sreepada, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Nationalist Rhetorics*, page 18, para. 2

²⁶ *Ibid*, page 18, para. 2

²⁷ Bart Cammaertz, *The Neo-fascist Discourse and its Normalisation through Mediation*, (*Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 15(3), 241–256. 2020), p. 243, para. 4

²⁸ Sreepada, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Nationalist Rhetorics*, page 19, para. 2

noting that extreme nationalism combined with nativism, which adds an ethnic component to the “us” vs. “them” rivalry, results in “rejection of and resistance against pluralist, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-faith societies.”²⁹

SIC and Nationalism

Like most researchers studying social identification, Roccas and Brewer agree that people hold multiple group identities, and are interested in how individuals navigate holding these identities.³⁰ Holding a complex social identity requires two things: one, recognizing that there are multiple ingroup categorizations; and two, that these multiple ingroup categorizations do not necessarily converge.³¹

Those with low social complexity merge their multiple identities into a single ingroup representation, while those with high social complexity acknowledge the differences between their ingroup categories.³² Roccas and Brewer use the example of Catholics and Italians to illustrate, two groups that have some overlapping members but do not objectively share all the members in each group. Not all Italians are Catholic, and not all Catholics are Italian, yet someone with low SIC, perceiving a high overlap between Catholics and Italians, might think “Catholic” when they think of Italians—furthermore, they might *only* consider Catholic Italians to be “real” Italians.³³

Cognitive complexity is characterized by how well a person is able to differentiate and then integrate conflicting beliefs and values.³⁴ There are four models an individual can employ to manage the relationship between multiple in-group memberships: Intersection, Dominance,

²⁹ Cammaertz, *The Neo-fascist Discourse*, page 244, para. 1

³⁰ Roccas and Brewer, *Social Identity Complexity*, page 88, para. 2

³¹ *Ibid*, page 93

³² *Ibid*, page 93

³³ *Ibid*, pages 94-95

³⁴ *Ibid*, page 91, para. 6

Compartmentalization, and Merger.³⁵ The Intersection model defines a single in-group as the intersection of multiple in-groups, and is considered the least complex mode of representation as it “[r]educes multiple, potentially diverse, group identities to a single, highly exclusive social identity.”³⁶ The Dominance model occurs when an individual chooses one of their social identities as their primary group identification, subordinating all other in-group identities, and seeing those subordinate group identities as not necessarily social identities but rather as *aspects describing* who they are. The Dominance model is seen as the second least complex mode of representation as it “[s]uppresses inconsistencies within a single ingroup-outgroup dichotomization,”³⁷ but this model has the potential to be more complex “if the dominant group identity is a relatively large, heterogeneous social category compared to a homogeneous compound category.”³⁸ The Compartmentalization model keeps social identities separate and context-specific, acknowledging and differentiating between social identities, but “without any attempt at reconciliation.”³⁹ Finally, the Merger model sees one’s social identity as “the sum of one’s combined group identifications,”⁴⁰ so the more social identities an individual holds, the more inclusive their in-group becomes “to the point where no sharp in-group-out-group distinctions are made on any dimension and all others are evaluated equivalently.”⁴¹

SIC adds another layer to the conversation around SIT and nationalism by offering an explanation for why people may subscribe to variations of nationalism, such as religious nationalism or ethnic nationalism. People who have difficulty distinguishing the boundaries between their social identities, or have low SIC, are “more likely to allow multiple identities to

³⁵ Roccas and Brewer, *Social Identity Complexity*, pages 89-91

³⁶ *Ibid*, page 91, para. 7

³⁷ *Ibid*, page 91, para. 7

³⁸ *Ibid*, page 92, para. 2

³⁹ *Ibid*, page 91, para. 7

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, page 91, para. 3

⁴¹ *Ibid*, page 91, para. 5

converge and perceive the boundaries of an in-group as more homogenous.”⁴² As Davis notes, in the case of Christian nationalism, someone might admit not all Americans are Christians, yet believe *true* Americans are Christians.⁴³ Similarly, in the case of Hindu nationalism, someone may admit that there are Indians who are not Hindus, but still believe *true* Indians are Hindus.

Populist Nationalism, Christian Nationalism, and Hindu Nationalism

Two major variations of nationalism are religious nationalism and populist nationalism, or national populism. Religious nationalism “religion-izes politics” by putting political issues and rhetoric in a sacred context, centering religion as a focal point of national politics.⁴⁴ Populist nationalism, as Jaffrelot writes about in *Modi’s India*, is centered around a leader claiming to represent the people (populism) who “[exploits] the fear of the Other and the anger arising from the manner in which this Other is affecting the nation,” in addition to claiming to be against elites.⁴⁵ Jaffrelot argues that Modi is both a Hindu nationalist and a national populist.

Regarding Christian nationalism, Whitehead, Perry, and Baker define it as “a pervasive set of beliefs and ideals that merge American and Christian memberships.”⁴⁶ They found in their study of the religious vote for Trump that “this brand of religious nationalism appears to be unmoored from traditional Christian ideals and morality, and also tends toward authoritarian figures and righteous indignation.”⁴⁷ They admit Trump seems to be a feeble representative of a “traditional religious conservative,” but argue this fact speaks to the strength of Christian nationalism, saying, “It seems Christian nationalist rhetoric can be used effectively by almost

⁴² Davis, *Enforcing Christian Nationalism*, page 303, para. 3

⁴³ *Ibid*, page 303, para. 3

⁴⁴ Sreepada, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Nationalist Rhetorics*, page 14, para. 2

⁴⁵ Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India* (Princeton University Press, 2021), page 33, para. 2

⁴⁶ Andrew L. Whitehead, Samuel L. Perry, and Joseph O. Baker, *Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election* (*Sociology of Religion*, 79(2), 147–171.2018), page 165, para. 1

⁴⁷Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, *Make America Christian Again*, page 165, para. 3

anyone promising to defend America’s “Christian heritage”...As a test of the power of Christian nationalist rhetoric regardless of personal piety, it is hard to trump Trump.”⁴⁸ They found voting for Trump was motivated by Christian nationalism for many Americans, independent of variables such as economic dissatisfaction, sexism, Islamophobia, political ideology, political party, or xenophobia. There are close connections with these variables, but Christian nationalism is not reducible to these factors.⁴⁹ According to their study, one unit increase on the Christian nationalism scale⁵⁰ corresponded with a 9% increase in the odds of voting for Trump.⁵¹ Overall, when it came to voting for Trump, “Islamophobia and Christian nationalism are the explanations with the most empirical support.”⁵²

Hindu nationalism has existed in India for decades, and its foundational ideology, Hindutva, “does not believe in the equality of citizenship.”⁵³ Hindu nationalism’s main concern is “eliminating or assimilating non-Hindu, specifically Muslims.”⁵⁴ While Indian nationalism was promoted and seen as a positive force for all, this promotion led to majoritarian dominance, and the Hindu majority began to resent minorities—Muslims especially—for allegedly taking advantage of secular laws.⁵⁵ Hindu nationalism exacerbates existing Islamophobia and the

⁴⁸ Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, *Make America Christian Again*, page 166, para. 1

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, page 153, para. 3

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, see pages 154-159. Whitehead, Perry, and Baker used six measure from separate questions that asked for agreement for whether: “The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation,” “The federal government should advocate Christian values,” “The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state” (reverse coded), “The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces,” “The success of the United States is part of God’s plan,” and “The federal government should allow prayer in public schools.” Possible answers to these questions ranged on a 5-point scale from (1) “strongly disagree,” (3) “Undecided,” and (5) “strongly agree.” The researchers used these questions and the answers to them to form an index ranging from 6 to 30, with a mean of 17.43 and a standard deviation of 6.43.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, page 162, para. 2 (Whitehead, Perry, and Baker). This data is taken from the study’s most robust model, which controlled for attitudes towards Muslims, illegal immigrants, racial bias, sexism, economic satisfaction, religious characteristics, and political party and ideology. In addition to finding a 9% increase in the odds of voting for Trump for every unit increase on the Christian nationalism scale, the study also found that one standard deviation increase above the Christian nationalism index (such as scoring 24 instead of 17.4) equated to a 58% increase in the odds of voting for Trump, regardless of the individual’s party affiliation and political ideology.

⁵² *Ibid*, page 166, para. 3

⁵³ Shamsad, Falki, and Bilal, *Transformation of Indian Nationalism*, page 53, para. 3

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, page 54, para. 3

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, page 51, para. 4

tendency to “otherize” Muslims, framing the Muslim out-group as a threat to an idealized Hindu India.⁵⁶ Hindu nationalists also “place more emphasis on ethnic historical-cultural traits than on spirituality and Hindu rites.”⁵⁷ In other words, they are more interested in the idea of a past Hindu Golden Age than Hinduism as a religion.

When discussing religious nationalism, Cherian George urges people to avoid the temptation to treat religion as the total explanation for human behavior, especially when discussing religions unfamiliar to a Western context.⁵⁸ George reminds his audience that religious communities are internally diverse, and religion can be a force for good—but society should be careful when it comes to religious nationalism where religious institutions attempt to exclude or discriminate.⁵⁹ George also acknowledges, along with Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, that “many agents of religious hate...are manifestly not steeped in the religions they claim to represent,” such as Donald Trump.⁶⁰ In contrast, Modi attempts to characterize himself in the tradition of a Hindu ascetic, or saint with a touch of nationalism.⁶¹

Thesis

In the hope of adding to the discussion around SIT, SIC, and subgroups of nationalism, my thesis is as follows: Former President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi both appealed to their respective bases’ nationalistic tendencies, the formation of which is explained by SIC, and are examples of nationalist leaders catering to certain in-groups of their constituents, at the expense of citizens belonging to out-groups in accordance with SIT.

⁵⁶ Shahsrad, Falki, and Bilal, *Transformation of Indian Nationalism*, page 54, para. 3

⁵⁷ Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, Chapter 1, page 13, para. 1

⁵⁸ Cherian George, *Analytical and Normative Frameworks for studying Religious Nationalism (SSRN, 2022)*, page 1, para. 5

⁵⁹ George, *Analytical and Normative Frameworks for studying Religious Nationalism*, page 4, para. 3

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, page 4, para. 5

⁶¹ Sreepada, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Nationalist Rhetorics*, page 92, para. 4

Case Studies

Case #1: Trump

Context

“You know what I am? I’m a nationalist, O.K.? I’m a nationalist. Nationalist! Use that word! Use that word!”⁶² Former President Donald J. Trump made this proclamation at a rally in 2018, to the tune of “USA! USA! USA!” from an enthusiastic crowd gathered in Houston, Texas. His critics were not as enthused, but this statement is hardly an isolated incident in the midst of a pool of controversial comments Trump has uttered. The former president made an impression on American politics, and not only due to his signature penchant for abrasive communication. Trump had and continues to have a fair share of supporters and critics, but whether people love him or hate him, it is undeniable that he has impacted the United States, for better or for worse.

Donald Trump was not a career politician but a businessman, with no prior experience in public service.⁶³ When Trump announced his campaign in 2015, many did not see him as a serious contender, but after a popular and highly publicized campaign, Trump won the 2016 presidential race.⁶⁴ Trump’s campaign was marked by large rallies, a constant stream of engagement with his followers on Twitter, and controversy. The stream of controversy surrounding Trump continued throughout his time in office, but before examining some criticisms, Trump’s accomplishments should be taken into consideration.

⁶² Peter Baker, *Use that Word!: Trump Embraces ‘Nationalist’ Label* (New York Times, 2018)

⁶³ Benjamin Waterhouse, *Donald Trump: Campaigns and Elections* (UVA Miller Center, 2022)

⁶⁴ *Ibid*

Notable Achievements While in Office

During his time in office (2016-2020), President Trump made several notable achievements. For example, Operation Warp Speed, designed to roll out COVID-19 vaccines as quickly as possible for Americans, was a stunning venture. Two commercial vaccines rolled out in under a year was a feat both Herculean and critical, as thousands of Americans died daily at the pandemic's peak.⁶⁵ Economically, the country experienced an annual average growth of 2.5% during Trump's first three years in office, US financial markets rose in value, the poverty rate in 2019 was at an all-time low, and Trump was able to deliver the lowest unemployment rates America has seen in half a century.⁶⁶ When it came to foreign relations, Trump's antagonistic relationship with North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un caused some angst, but notable achievements, such as the Abraham Accords facilitating peace between Israel and other countries in the Middle East, should not be overshadowed.⁶⁷

Notable Criticisms of Trump

While Trump's achievements in office should not be disregarded, the criticisms against him cannot be ignored. One of the earliest points of criticism was Trump's demeaning and objectifying attitude toward women. Trump not only hurled insults at female rivals referencing their physical appearances,⁶⁸ but his most damning remark came from a recording where he boasted of his ability to grope women thanks to celebrity status.⁶⁹ Another major point of opprobrium is the January 6th attack on the Capitol, during which Trump sent tweets that made

⁶⁵ David Shulkin, *What Health Care Can Learn from Operation Warp Speed* (NEJM Catalyst, 2021)

⁶⁶ Reality Check Team, *US 2020 Election: The Economy Under Trump in Six Charts* (BBC, 2020)

⁶⁷ Gerald Feierstein and Yoel Guzansky, *Two years on, what is the state of the Abraham Accords?* (Middle East Institute, 2022)

⁶⁸ Alexandra Desanctis, *Democrats Should Stop Pretending Trump's Misogyny Represents the Conservative Movement* (National Review, 2016)

⁶⁹ BBC, *US Election: Full Transcript of Donald Trump's obscene videotape* (BBC, 2016)

false claims about voter fraud and called upon Republicans to “fight.”⁷⁰ January 6th was disgraceful enough to merit Trump’s second impeachment, and he was charged with “incitement of insurrection.”⁷¹ In the words of Trump’s own former Vice President, Mike Pence, “What happened that day was a disgrace....And it mocks decency to portray it any other way.”⁷²

How Trump Fits into the Conversation: SIT, SIC, and Christian Nationalism

Now that we have examined some of Trump’s accomplishments and failures, why does this matter? Where does Trump fit into the larger picture when it comes to SIT and SIC?

Trump is a populist leader, specifically, a national -populist. Utilizing Christophe Jaffrelot’s description of national populism, national-populists not only claim to embody “the people” and fight on their behalf against the elites, but national-populists additionally claim to fight against “those who pose a threat to the ethnic majority and whom the establishment is accused of protecting: migrants, minorities, and so on.”⁷³ National-populists mobilize their base by exploiting fear and anger stemming from the Other, resorting to identity politics that replace social issues with symbolic issues.⁷⁴ Furthermore, national-populists downplay class divisions (as their nation needs to be united against the Other) and tend to emphasize identity politics when facing criticism for not delivering on their promises.⁷⁵ Trump fits into this description, from starting his campaign by otherizing migrants, characterizing Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists⁷⁶, to aligning himself with the ‘common man’ by using crude language, to promising to “drain the swamp” of elites in Washington, to giving his inaugural address flavored with

⁷⁰ Andrea Shalal, Trevor Hunnicutt, and Gram Slatterly, ‘History will hold Donald Trump accountable’ for Jan 6., *Pence says* (Reuters, 2023)

⁷¹ House Judiciary Committee, *H.Res.24 - Impeaching Donald John Trump, President of the United States, for high crimes and misdemeanors* (United States 117th Congress, 2021)

⁷² Shalal, Hunnicutt, and Slatterly, ‘History will hold Donald Trump accountable’

⁷³ Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, page 33 para. 2

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, page 33

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, page 33 para. 3

⁷⁶ T.I.M.E. Staff, *Here’s Donald Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech* (TIME, 2015)

populism, saying, “Today's ceremony, however, has very special meaning because today, we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the people.”⁷⁷

National-populists, like Trump and Modi, understand that people are drawn to groups and have the potential to be scared of the Other, in line with SIT. According to SIT, group identity is defined by what it is not. People in group A look at group B and compare their in-group with the out-group. Groups do not necessarily have to be dramatically or even *objectively* different for group identities to have an impact, as Tajfel and Turner found in their studies on group behavior and group identity. It is enough for an individual to be in a group and identify with that in-group to discriminate against the out-group.

In a study about warm and cool feelings liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats feel toward the opposite party, individuals were consistently shown to have warm feelings toward their own party and cool feelings towards the other party, *despite aligning with that other party when it came to policy matters*. SIT declares that group identity is often not logical, but the psychological impact of group identification can be so strong it may cause bias—despite the fact that a person might intellectually agree with an out-group more, as was the case for liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats.

The in-group/out-group competition and potential hostility that SIT explains already makes for an inhospitable environment for a peaceful, civil society. Furthermore, it takes little to cause the ugly monster of discrimination to raise its head, as Tajfel and Turner note that “the *mere awareness of the presence* of an out-group is sufficient to provoke intergroup competitive or discriminatory responses on the part of the in-group” based on a number of studies observing

⁷⁷ Aaron Blake, *Trump's full Inauguration speech transcript, Annotated* (*The Washington Post*, 2017)

minimal group behavior.⁷⁸ Notice there does not have to be an objective threat for groups to have conflict—instead, mere group comparisons are often sufficient for groups to compete socially.⁷⁹

This is not to say that threat is inconsequential. Both Trump and Modi are masters of the threat—not in directly threatening their bases—but in convincing their respective bases that they are under threat from an out-group (or multiple out-groups). According to SIC, “when there is a perception of threat, individuals perceive their ingroup as more homogeneous and *perceive the self as more similar to the ingroup and more different from the outgroup*. This finding suggests that under-threat individuals prefer clear in-group boundaries.”⁸⁰ To someone under threat, this perception alienates individuals in out-groups as the threatened person begins to see out-groups as very different from themselves. Pushed to an extreme, a threatened in-group might stop seeing out-group members as sub-human. Threats—both real and perceived—intensify ingroup bias, and furthermore, “*the threatened ingroup may temporarily dominate social identity*, and membership in the other ingroups becomes *both less important and less differentiated*.”⁸¹ For a populist leader aiming for votes, making their targeted in-group feel threatened will make that targeted social identity seem more important than other social identities—combine that with the populist leader promising to defend the in-group—and the equation is ripe for harvesting votes from the in-group.

When Trump appeals to the fear of a threatening out-group, be it the fear of criminal immigrants, jihadist Muslim extremists, or godless elites, the threat induces and solidifies the idea of a homogenous ingroup, in this case, the *true* Americans. These *true* Americans, feeling threatened by out-groups and therefore plagued with a sense of the heightened importance of

⁷⁸ Tajfel and Turner, *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict*, page 38, para. 4, italics added for emphasis

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, page 40, para. 2

⁸⁰ Roccas and Brewer, *Social Identity Complexity*, page 40, italics added for emphasis

⁸¹ *Ibid*, page 99, italics added for emphasis

their in-group, rallied around Trump and voted him into office. Trump drew from the energy arising from intergroup competition he exacerbated—it was not the mere force of his charismatic personality, but SIT at work as the in-group he targetted, feeling threatened by out-groups, looked to Trump to defend them against the threat of the Other.

Throughout his campaign and through his presidency, Trump appealed to fear of out-groups, raising the perception of threat. Trump used the language of othering quite constantly, as one would expect from a populist, emphasizing an “us vs. them” framework, both in the national context of the allegedly good people of America vs. “the swamp” in DC, and in international contexts, such as pitting law-abiding Americans against immigrants crossing the border—immigrants Trump labeled as criminals, rapists, and drug dealers. Trump has also appealed to the fear of Islam, complaining during his campaign in 2015 that “refugees from Syria are now pouring into our great country” and insinuating these refugees could be ISIS members, tweeting “On the Muslim issue: It might help @BarackObama if he actually supported Christians religious liberty rights,” implying that instead of supporting Christians, then-President Obama was favoring Muslims—framing the situation so Christians and Muslims end up being in opposition to one another, the in-group of Christians vs. the out-group of Muslims.⁸² These are a few examples of the way Trump provoked intergroup competition with in-group/out-group, “us vs. them” language.

At this point, the question arises of *why* does this work? Why does this work in the US, and why did it seem to work exceptionally well among Evangelical Christians? Why have we seen the rise of Christian nationalism so aggressively come with Donald Trump, and how was

⁸² National Immigration Law Center, *All tweets from @realDonaldTrump that include the word “Muslim” or “Muslims” since Donald Trump declared his candidacy for president on June 16, 2015*, (National Immigration Law Center, Accessed 2023)

Trump able to seemingly unearth this latent power of Christian nationalism that propelled millions to vote for him?

In order to answer these questions, we need to look at Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism in the American context should be distinguished from American civil religion. Civil religion is vaguely connected to Christianity, features general appeals to religion, and is tied to traditional morality.⁸³ Christian nationalism, in contrast, is “a pervasive set of beliefs and ideals that merge American and Christian memberships—along with their histories and futures.”⁸⁴

Christian nationalism declares an explicit association with the Christian religion and draws its roots from the Old Testament specifically, drawing “...parallels between America and Israel, who was commanded to maintain cultural and blood purity, often through war, conquest, and separatism.”⁸⁵ While Christian nationalism has close correlations with conservative economic views, sexism, racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia, Christian nationalism is a unique and independent ideology.⁸⁶ Christian nationalism, unlike Christianity and civil religion, is not necessarily tied to traditional morality, but instead “...emphasizes only its notions of exclusion and apocalyptic war and conquest.”⁸⁷

Recall that Whitehead, Perry, and Baker found that Christian nationalism is not merely a proxy term for evangelical Protestant affiliation, traditional religion, or political conservatism after controlling for those factors in their study. Instead, Christian nationalism is a unique ideology formed through the Intersection model outlined by SIC, that is, when a person with group identity memberships in Christianity and America defines their in-group as the intersection where those two groups overlap.

⁸³ Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, *Make America Christian Again*, page 150

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, page 165, para. 1

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, page 150 para. 3

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, page 153, para. 3

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, page 150, para. 3

Note that one does not need to be a genuine follower of Christ in order to identify with Christianity on a group membership level. When it comes to the population Trump targeted, Sreepada goes one step further in his evaluation and sees the in-group as *White* Christian nationalists, thanks to Trump's penchant for blaming minority communities, Muslims, Democrats, and immigrants as the root causes of economic anxieties, appealing to White Christian nationalists' anxieties of other ethnic groups taking over America's dominant ethos.⁸⁸ In that case, the in-group becomes even more exclusionary as another layer is added on top of the intersected Christian and American identities.

SIT fits into the picture and brings both the Christian nationalist and populist elements of Trump's strategy together. According to Tajfel and Turner, there are three options an individual can choose from when facing a threat to their social group identity: 1) Leave the group for a better one, 2) Redefine or alter elements, or 3) Fight the out-group.⁸⁹ The first option benefits the individual only and leaves the in-group in the same threatened place it started out in. The second attempts to salvage the group by either comparing the in-group to the out-group on a new dimension, redefining the values assigned to the ingroup's attributes from negative to positive, or abandoning the original in-group/out-group comparison and comparing the in-group with a weaker out-group. The third option is the most belligerent, yet keeps the ingroup together and continues to see the outgroup as viable competition, making rivalry possible.

A group does not necessarily need to be weak in order to feel threatened; dominant groups are susceptible to feeling threatened as well, illogical as it may seem.⁹⁰ If a dominant in-group sees "...their superiority as legitimate, they will probably react in an intensely discriminatory fashion to any attempt by the subordinate group to change the intergroup

⁸⁸ Sreepada, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Nationalist Rhetorics*, pages 135-137

⁸⁹ Tajfel and Turner, *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict*, pages 43-45

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, page 45

situation.”⁹¹ In the case of Christian nationalists in America, professing Christians, or at least politicians with unapologetically Christian backgrounds, have historically been the ones in positions of power. These politicians were not necessarily Christian nationalists, but it does not seem like a far stretch to state that Christian nationalists would have seen these people in power as part of their in-group. Today, we hear a lot of narratives about how Christians are in danger in America, Christian influence dwindling, and even a narrative of attacks on Christianity in America thanks to secularism. Trump did not dream up this narrative of a once-influential-group-turned-victims, but he played into it and centered himself as the solution, the one who would bring back Christian America and Make America Great Again.

Trump emphasized threats to American Christians, and it worked. If a group believes it is under threat, then salvation need not adhere to orthodoxy. Trump is far from a pious person, as a thrice-married braggart who has boasted about groping women. Yet he successfully framed himself as a warrior who would fight for Christian America, appealing to the in-group that felt simultaneously reminiscent of a past Golden Age and threatened by seemingly powerful outgroups.

Feeling as if they were losing in comparison to powerful outgroups like the Left and Islam, the in-group was compelled to vote for the candidate who acknowledged their struggle and promised to fight to save the nation under God. The low-complexity Integration model of SIC explains Christian Nationalism’s formation, while the threat arguments inherent to SIT explain the strength of Christian nationalism and its motivation that helped propel Trump into office. Christian nationalism as a phenomenon is more concerning than a single individual such as Trump. It seems it was not necessarily the appeal of Trump’s personal character compelling voters to side with him, although that may have been the case for some. In this specific case, it

⁹¹ Tajfel and Turner, *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict*, page 45, para. 6

seems that the strength of Christian nationalism compelled the Evangelical Christian vote. Trump, being a traditionally immoral person, speaks to the strength of Christian nationalism, showing that almost anyone can utilize the rhetoric and tap into that force.

One of the most meretricious incidents illustrating Christian nationalism and Trump's weaponization of it occurred in June 2020, outside of St. John's church in Washington, D.C. That day, U.S. Park Police (USPP) were not aware of the President's intentions to walk from the White House to the church for a photo op, although they previously made a decision to put fences around Lafayette Park to protect federal property.⁹² The incident in question occurred during the time of Black Lives Matter protests throughout the country, and on June 1st, largely peaceful protesters were present in the park. In order to clear the park for the president, U.S. Secret Service was deployed *before* the USPP began dispersal warnings, using teargas and force to clear a path for Trump.⁹³ After walking from the White House to St. John's, President Trump posed for photos while holding a Bible.

Some leaders in the Christian community criticized Trump for using a church building and Bible for partisan purposes, such as the former head of the Catholic church, the chief pastor of the Executive Council of the Episcopal church, and the then-presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.⁹⁴ Other leaders, however, applauded Trump's actions, such as megachurch pastor Robert Jeffress, who declared he thought it "completely appropriate for the president to stand in front of that church....And by holding up the Bible, he was showing us that it teaches that, yes, God hates racism, it's despicable—but God also hates lawlessness."⁹⁵

David Brody, a news anchor at the Christian Broadcasting Network, stated, "I don't know about

⁹² Domenico Montanaro, *Watchdog Report Says Police Did Not Clear Protesters To Make Way For Trump Photo-Op* (NPR, 2021)

⁹³ *Ibid*

⁹⁴ Andrea Shalal and Makini Brice, *Mainstream U.S. Religious Leaders Criticize Trump After Church Photo* (Reuters, 2020)

⁹⁵ McKay Coppins, *The Christians who Loved Trump's Stunt* (The Atlantic, 2020)

you but I'll take a president with a Bible in his hand in front of a church over far-left violent radicals setting a church on fire any day of the week."⁹⁶

The language these leaders used to characterize protesters is yet another example of the “us vs. them” dichotomy SIT predicts and Christian nationalism exacerbates. To be sure, there were violent protests and violent protesters during the BLM movement. To generalize all protesters as lawless, far-left violent radicals, however, is inaccurate and an illustration of the phenomenon of a threatened in-group’s tendency to characterize an out-group as homogenous, while identifying all the more closely with their ingroup.

What Groups Trump Appeals To

Apart from those adhering to Christian nationalism, what other groups did Trump appeal to? A study done by Democracy Fund’s Voter Study Group sought to answer the question of what groups Trump effectively appealed to during his 2016 election, that is, by examining which groups voted for Trump.

The study found that those who held othering views of immigrants, Muslims, and feminist women were especially prone to Trump’s appeal.⁹⁷ This finding is what one might expect, as Trump used in-group/out-group language when referring to these groups—acting as a public voice for this group’s opinions. When it came to Muslims in particular, the data suggests that Trump tapped into pre-existing cold attitudes towards Muslims, and economic concerns over the state of the national economy also boosted Trump’s success—not only through Trump’s direct economic appeals but by promoting cultural attitudes associated with Trump support (eg, “immigrants create a drain on American economy”).⁹⁸ The VOTER Survey (Views of the

⁹⁶ Coppins, *The Christians who Loved Trump’s Stunt*

⁹⁷ Robert Griffin and Roy Teixeira, *The Story of Trump’s Appeal: A Portrait of Trump Voters* (Democracy Fund Voter Study Group, 2017)

⁹⁸ *Ibid*

Electorate Research Survey) found Trump did well among White people without a college degree, winning 58% of that demographic's vote in the election, and that Trump voters were likely to have pessimistic views on the economy.⁹⁹ About two-thirds of Trump voters believed “life today for people like them is worse than it was 50 years ago,” compared to about one-third of Clinton voters.¹⁰⁰

Arlie Hochschild, a sociologist who spent 5 years with loyal Trump supporters, states that Trump's base clings to a “deep story” they use to both navigate their way in the world and explain their circumstances:

“You are patiently standing in the middle of a long line stretching toward the horizon, where the American Dream awaits. But as you wait, you see people cutting in line ahead of you. Many of these line-cutters are black—beneficiaries of affirmative action or welfare. Some are career-driven women pushing into jobs they never had before.

Then you see immigrants, Mexicans, Somalis, the Syrian refugees yet to come. As you wait in this unmoving line, you're being asked to feel sorry for them all. You have a good heart. But who is deciding who you should feel compassion for? Then you see President Barack Hussein Obama waving the line-cutters forward. He's on their side. In fact, isn't he a line-cutter too? How did this fatherless black guy pay for Harvard? As you wait your turn, Obama is using the money in your pocket to help the line-cutters. He and his liberal backers have removed the shame from taking.

⁹⁹ Griffin and Teixeira, *The Story of Trump's Appeal: A Portrait of Trump Voters*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*

The government has become an instrument for redistributing your money to the undeserving. It's not your government anymore; it's theirs."¹⁰¹

The findings in the Voter Study Group were consistent with this deep story, a story composed of elements that point to Trump, populism, and nationalism.¹⁰² Trump utilized symbols such as the American Dream and a past Golden Age of America, in addition to the promise of making America great again, in line with what we would expect from a national-populist. Combine all of these factors, plus Trump's use of in-group/out-group language enabling him to tap into intergroup competition SIT predicts, and there is little wonder he was propelled into the presidency.

Negative Impact on Democracy

Effect on Democracy Scores

Democratic quality in the United States did not escape unscathed from Trump's presidency. While it is true Trump was able to make some notable achievements, it is hard to deny the data insisting that democracy suffered under the Trump presidency. Both the Freedom House scores and the Democracy Matrix scores show a marked decline in democratic health during Trump's time in office.

The earliest available Freedom House score for the US is in 2017, a year after Trump took office, but despite the brief time frame available, we can observe a decline in freedom house scores from 2017 to 2020. The Freedom House score in 2017 was 89/100,¹⁰³ by 2020, Trump's

¹⁰¹ Arlie Hochschild, *I Spent 5 Years With Some of Trump's Biggest Fans. Here's What They Won't Tell You.* (Mother Jones, 2016)

¹⁰² Griffin and Teixeira, *The Story of Trump's Appeal*

¹⁰³ Freedom House, *United States: Freedom in the World 2017 Country Report* (Freedom House)

last year in office, the score dropped to 86/100.¹⁰⁴ Freedom House noted Trump’s tendency to retain and promote those within his personal business empire, his refusal to divulge his tax records, and his lack of transparency regarding major policy decisions, including but not limited to a travel ban preventing travelers from several Muslim-majority countries from entering the US.¹⁰⁵ According to the Democracy Matrix, the US score in 2015 was 0.93/1.0, while the score in 2020 fell to 0.86/1.0.¹⁰⁶ The 3-point drop in the Freedom House score and 7% drop in the Democracy Matrix is a concerning phenomenon, and not unwarranted.

A fundamental hallmark of democracy is the presence of free, fair, and regular elections. Elections are not just a benefit of democracy, they are a requirement. One of the most grievous anti-democratic stances Trump has taken is election denying, despite the 2020 election has been shown on multiple occasions to be a fair election.¹⁰⁷ Even federal officials in Trump’s administration conceded that the 2020 election was fair, and the Associated Press published a sweeping investigation investigating voter fraud—admittedly finding some cases of fraud, but these cases were nowhere near being significant enough to impact the election.¹⁰⁸ Trump, however, insisted on the false narrative of a stolen election, and continues to this day to assert the 2020 presidential election was “rigged” or a “Big Lie.”¹⁰⁹

The effects of election-denying go beyond the initial splash and following cerebral shock, but can reverberate to violent consequences. On January 6th, 2021, a throng of President

¹⁰⁴ Freedom House, *United States: Freedom in the World 2020 Country Report (Freedom House)*

¹⁰⁵ Freedom House, *United States: Freedom in the World 2018 Country Report (Freedom House)*

¹⁰⁶ Chair of Comparative Politics and German Government at the University of Würzburg, *Country Graph: United States of America (Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg)*

¹⁰⁷ Amy Sherman, *The Facts of a Fair US Election Have Only Gotten Stronger Since Capitol Attack (The Poynter Institute, March 2023)*

¹⁰⁸ Christina A. Cassidy, *Far Too Little Vote Fraud to Tip Election to Trump, AP Finds (AP News, 2021)*

¹⁰⁹ Hope Yen and David Klepper, *AP Fact Check: On Jan. 6 Anniversary, Trump Sticks to Election Falsehoods (PBS, 2022)*

Trump's supporters stormed the Capitol building, in an attempt to prevent the electoral votes from being certified.¹¹⁰

As a national-populist, Trump utilized symbolism in rhetoric, preferring to sway his target audience with symbolic speech. On January 6th, Christian nationalist symbols manifested in chilling physical form, having evolved past spoken phrases and into visually violent rhetoric. For example, gallows were erected for any politician resisting Trump's claim of election-stealing. Individuals signed their names on the gallows, along with phrases such as "God bless the USA," "In God we trust," and "Amen."¹¹¹ One of the most pervasive symbols used on January 6th was the Christian cross, seen on clothes, signs, flagpoles, and worn around people's necks. Two 8-foot tall crosses were set up, one in Freedom Plaza and another at the Capitol, where the crowd prayed around it wearing Trump flags and hats.¹¹² Other symbols included an assortment of flags emblazoned with phrases such as "Jesus is my Savior, Trump is my president," "GOD GUNS TRUMP," and "Make America Godly Again," all of these examples drawing parallels between Christian beliefs and Trump.¹¹³ Meanwhile, a litany of signs reading "Jesus Saves" could be seen at the insurrection, while Bible verses and phrases on signs were common and several people carried pictures of Jesus depicted as a White man wearing a MAGA hat.¹¹⁴

The symbolism at the January 6th insurrection is undeniably Christian nationalist, and perhaps the culmination of Trump's efforts to utilize the rhetoric. January 6th serves as a perfect example of national populism, Christian nationalism, and Trump's influence colliding to make a cocktail of a crusade against democracy. The event was an extreme manifestation of Trump's

¹¹⁰ History.com Editors, *US Capitol Riot (A&E Television Networks*, last updated December 2022)

¹¹¹ Andrew Seidel, *Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021 Insurrection - Attack on the Capitol: Evidence of the Role of White Christian Nationalism* (Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, 2022)

¹¹² Seidel, *Christian Nationalism and the January 6, 2021 Insurrection*

¹¹³ *Ibid*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*

targetted in-group fighting against who they perceived to be the enemy out-group. Trump may have promised to Make America Great Again, but the version of America the world witnessed by the end of his presidency was far from the rose-tinted Golden Age Americans were promised.

From D.C. to New Delhi

The second part of this capstone paper examines the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Republic of India. Trump and Modi's time in office overlap, with Modi holding the Prime Ministership from 2014 to the present day (2023), and Trump holding the presidency from 2016 to 2020. In an interesting anecdote, the two leaders got along exceptionally well during their overlapping times in office, even campaigning together in Houston and New Delhi.

Beyond their mutually friendly relationship, Trump and Modi hold other aspects in common. For example, both leaders make economic appeals, hearkening back to their economic successes (for Trump, his previous experience as a successful businessman, and for Modi, his economic successes as the previous Chief Minister of Gujarat). Both leaders were in charge of the world's largest democracies, with India being the largest, and America trailing as the second-largest. By the merit of the democratic significance of both countries alone, both leaders deserve to be studied in depth. The similarities continue, however, as both leaders qualify as national-populists, sharing the strategy of appealing to the people as a value and raging against elites—although Modi and Trump have very different styles of rhetoric, their core message is strikingly similar. Lastly, another key similarity both possess as national-populists is a predilection to otherize outgroups, particularly immigrants and Muslims.

Christian nationalism mixed with national populism under Trump in the United States led to startling results and prompted a new wave of studies on the topic. There is an abundance of

reasons to discuss religious nationalism in the US context. It would, however, behoove Western audiences “...to remember that the most evolved and extreme manifestations of religious nationalism occur outside western liberal democracies.”¹¹⁵ Hindu nationalism is one such evolved and extreme manifestation of religious nationalism. When discussing Hindu nationalism, those in the West should be aware of the unfortunate tendency to accept simple answers to complex situations of nations in the East and Global South, and avoid “treat(ing) religion as a complete explanation for human behavior, in a way [we] probably wouldn’t when studying the Evangelical movement in America...”¹¹⁶ Hindu nationalism is just as complex (if not more) as Christian nationalism, and the paper will dive into a discussion of it. Before this dive, however, we turn to examine the current face of Hindu nationalism: Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Case #2: Modi

Context

“I am [a] nationalist. I’m patriotic. Nothing is wrong. I am born Hindu. Nothing is wrong. So I’m a Hindu nationalist. So yes, you can say I’m a Hindu nationalist because I’m a born Hindu.”¹¹⁷ Modi made this statement in 2013, at a Reuters interview when asked who the “real Modi” is—a Hindu nationalist or merely the pro-business chief minister in Gujarat? For Modi, the two titles held no distinction, as he stated, “As far as progressive, development, workaholic, whatever they say, this is what they are saying. So there’s no contradiction between the two. It’s one and the same image.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ George, *Analytical and Normative Frameworks for Studying Religious Nationalism*, para. 4

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, para. 5, brackets mine for clarification

¹¹⁷ PTI, *I am a Hindu Nationalist as I am a born Hindu: Narendra Modi* (*The Indian Express*, 2013), brackets added

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*

The above statement reveals a few things about Modi. First, Modi comes across as unapologetically Hindu nationalist, implying that being a Hindu nationalist is a natural given after being born a Hindu. Second, Modi defers to the people, seeming to accept the labels of ‘progressive’, ‘development’, etc. Third, Modi claims to see no distinction between the image of him as a Hindu nationalist and the image of him as the pro-business chief minister, implying that Hindu nationalism bleeds through his political actions and into his political office.

Modi joined a local branch of the volunteer paramilitary organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), at 8 years old, and became a permanent member in his late teens.¹¹⁹ Modi often refers to his humble beginnings, serving customers tea in his father’s tea shop in a small town called Vadnagar in Gujarat.¹²⁰ He worked his way up the ladder in the RSS, and eventually became the chief RSS organizer of the entire state of Gujarat.¹²¹ By mid-1980s, when Modi was in his mid-thirties, his talents were broadly recognized, and he was appointed to work for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Even before holding any high political positions, Modi tried to fuse the historically elite RSS’s organization with the populist style of appealing to the people as the BJP’s organizing secretary in Gujarat.¹²² Modi continued to prove his worth in his organizational skills, and was reluctant to take up a political position when offered to replace the then-Chief Minister of Gujarat—despite enjoying being in contact with the people.¹²³ In spite of his initial reluctance, Modi ended up taking the Chief Minister position, which he held from 2001-2014, stepping down to take up the mantle of Prime Minister of India after a wildly successful campaign as the BJP’s candidate.

¹¹⁹ Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, page 34 para 3

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, page 34 para 3

¹²¹ *Ibid*, page 36 para. 1

¹²² *Ibid*, page 36 para. 4

¹²³ *Ibid*, page 38 para. 3

Notable Achievements While in Office

To his credit, Modi has made significant infrastructure and economic achievements as Prime Minister. One notable infrastructure accomplishment is highway expansion, with an average of 22 miles of highway laid per day during Modi's first seven years in office, a significantly higher amount compared to his predecessor (around 7 miles/day).¹²⁴ Installed renewable energy capacity in India doubled in five years under Modi as well, a step towards creating a cleaner and healthier environment.¹²⁵ Regarding the economy, more people have joined the formal economy under Modi, with most Indians now having a bank account that allows the direct transfer of cash benefits while cutting out middlemen—although some reports suggest many of these accounts are unused.¹²⁶

Notable Criticisms of Modi

Modi is currently one of the most (if not the most) popular leaders in the world, with an approval rating of 78% as of March 14, 2023.¹²⁷ Despite his high approval ratings, however, Modi is not immune to criticism. One of the most notable criticisms revolves around a massacre that occurred over 20 years ago when Modi was serving as chief minister in the Northern state of Gujarat. On February 27th, 2002, a train carrying Hindu pilgrims from Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh to Gujarat was attacked by a mob in Godhra (in Gujarat).¹²⁸ 58 people were killed, most of them Hindu pilgrims.¹²⁹ The next day, Hindu mobs in Gujarat set out murdering, raping, and looting Muslims, who they blamed for the pilgrim's deaths.¹³⁰ The violence went on for two months, and by the end of the pogrom, an estimated 1,000 people were murdered, 20,000

¹²⁴ Nikhil Inamdar and Aparna Alluri, *India Economy: Seven Years of Modi in Seven Charts* (BBC, 2021)

¹²⁵ Inamdar and Alluri, *India Economy: Seven Years of Modi in Seven Charts*

¹²⁶ *Ibid*

¹²⁷ Morning Consult, *Global Leader Approval Ratings* (Morning Consult, last updated March 2023)

¹²⁸ Tarushi Aswani, 'They Burnt My Parents Alive': Gujarat Riots Still Haunt Victims (The Diplomat, 2022)

¹²⁹ Aswani, 'They Burnt My Parents Alive'

¹³⁰ *Ibid*

Muslim homes were destroyed, and 150,000 people were displaced.¹³¹ 20 years after the pogrom, hundreds of Muslims were still displaced in their own country, with a report from the Centre for Social Justice tallying 16,087 people in Gujarat still living as internally displaced persons in 2022.¹³²

During this horrific time, where was the government? There are allegations that Modi's government in Gujarat was not only grossly negligent in handling the riots but *complicit* in the state authorities' willingness to look the other way while Muslims were being slaughtered and abused.¹³³ A senior police intelligence officer in the Gujarat intelligence bureau (in 2002), alleged in a sworn statement to India's Supreme Court that Modi told officials the Muslim community "needed to be taught a lesson" after the train attack on Hindu pilgrims.¹³⁴ Modi "never expressed any remorse" or "uttered the slightest apology" regarding the pogrom that occurred under his watch, which was the most violent incident since the Partition between India and Pakistan.¹³⁵ After Modi was elected Prime Minister in 2014, the BJP flung itself into efforts to amend Modi's image; in 2022 India's Supreme Court exonerated Modi of any criminal responsibility for the Gujarat pogrom after concluding there was insufficient evidence to prove criminal conspiracy between Modi and the violent mobs.¹³⁶

How Modi fits into the conversation: SIT, SIC, and Hindu nationalism

To see where Modi fits into the conversation of SIT, SIC, and Hindu nationalism, a discussion of Hindutva is required first. Hindutva is the ideology behind Hindu nationalism, codified by V.D. Savarkar in his book, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* The answer to this question is

¹³¹ Aswani, *They Burnt My Parents Alive*

¹³² *Ibid*

¹³³ Meenakshi Ganguly, *India's Blocking of BBC Documentary Reflects Broader Crackdown* (Human Rights Watch, 2023)

¹³⁴ Sanjoy Majumder, *Narendra Modi 'Allowed' Gujarat 2002 anti-Muslim Riots* (BBC, 2011)

¹³⁵ Jaffreot, *Modi's India*, page 59, para. 4

¹³⁶ Ganguly, *India's Blocking of BBC Documentary Reflects Broader Crackdown*

primarily based on an ethnic myth defining Hindus as descendants of the first Aryans to have inhabited the subcontinent. According to Jaffrelot, this “ethnic nationalism is territorial as well, given that Vedic India is indissociable from the sacred land where the holy rivers flow (starting with the Ganges) and on which only the traditional rituals are effective.”¹³⁷

Hindu nationalism is less concerned with religion than it is with ethnicity, with Savarkar’s thinking falling in line with a kind of ethnic nationalism termed as nationalism of a “chosen people.” This nationalism of a chosen people is similar to Zionists, who are more interested in the Jewish people and their Golden Age than they are interested in Judaism as a religion.¹³⁸ Hindutva holds to the idea that India is for Hindus, and Savarkar stated Muslims either had to submit and assimilate into Hindu culture, “entertain[ing] no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture,” or be content to stay in the country, unable to claim citizen’s rights.¹³⁹

As one might deduce from the present context, Hindutva did not stay in the realm of speculative ideology. K. B. Hedgewar, one of Savarkar’s followers, founded the Rashtriya Swayamsavek Sangh (RSS, or “National Volunteer Organization”) in 1925. Since then, it has grown into a massive nationwide Hindu nationalist paramilitary volunteer organization.¹⁴⁰ Hedgewar started the RSS with a core of mostly high-caste Brahmins dedicated to both independence from Britain’s colonial rule and protecting Hindu interests.¹⁴¹ Jaffrelot noted, “From the very start, the Hindu nationalist movement has been borne by the upper castes due to the social conservatism it promotes. Indeed, while in theory, it aims to abolish the “nation-dividing” caste system, such an ambition does not rule out a strong adherence to

¹³⁷ Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, pages 12-13

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, page 13, para. 1

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, page 14, brackets added for clarification

¹⁴⁰ Britannica, the Editors of Encyclopaedia, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2009)*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*

Brahminical values and the Hindu traditional social order.”¹⁴² Consistent with its ambition “to be the crucible of a new Hindu nation,”¹⁴³ the RSS emphasizes discipline to inspire strength and courage in their followers, seeking to attain this discipline through paramilitary drills and training.¹⁴⁴ The RSS has been banned by a Congress-led Indian government several times, for the role the organization played in communal violence, but this has not stopped some politicians from retaining membership in the RSS, such as Prime Minister Modi.¹⁴⁵

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Modi’s party, is closely connected with the RSS. The BJP (formerly called the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, or BJS) is a Hindu nationalist political party that branched off from the RSS, an association that caused the party trouble in the early stages of its development.¹⁴⁶ At first, the BJS decided to tone down its association with the RSS and form a coalition party with smaller anti-Congress parties, but after realizing their goals were incompatible with India’s secular constitutional framework, the BJS left this coalition and became the BJP.¹⁴⁷

Jaffrelot, in *Modi’s India*, comes to three main conclusions regarding Hindu nationalism. First, in the early stages of Hindu nationalism, Hindu nationalism was able to crystallize when “...circumstances enabled [Hindu nationalist] champions to weaponize a sense of vulnerability, whether it was Partition or the 1980s, a decade during which the Congress government yielded to Muslim pressures in the Shah Bano affair...”¹⁴⁸ Second, “...Hindutva is promoted by a tentacular organization that is exceptional for its longevity and its reach.”¹⁴⁹ Third, the anti-individualism in

¹⁴² Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, page 23, para. 2

¹⁴³ *Ibid*, page 14, para. 2

¹⁴⁴ Britannica, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁴⁶ Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, page 18

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, page 19

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, page 28, para. 4

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, page 29, para. 2

Hindu nationalism is closely tied to the caste system, which the RSS wanted to re-introduce in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁵⁰

Jaffrelot's first conclusion is what we would expect according to SIC, SIT, and the threat factor that exacerbates bias between the ingroup and outgroups. Hindutva, in no uncertain terms, advocates the position that the only legitimate Indians are Hindus, thus peddling an in-group built from the intersectionality model of SIC (defining the intersection of the Indian group and the Hindu group as the legitimate in-group for both Indians and Hindus). The pressure of threat felt by Hindu nationalists, whether it was Partition or the government allegedly giving into Muslim pressures, exacerbated already existing biases against out-groups as the in-group of Hindu nationalists scrambled to protect their version of India, leading to the solidification of Hindu nationalism.

Modi comes into this picture as the key figure who brought national-populism to the Hindu nationalist movement.¹⁵¹ Modi was already a member of both the RSS and BJP, but Modi played a key role in shifting the trajectory of Hindu nationalism by introducing national-populism into the mix, in what was a formerly elite-dominated movement. Modi also upset the political status quo in winning the 2014 election, with fellow BJP politicians winning enough seats to hold a majority in India's Parliament, a feat only the Congress Party was able to accomplish before 2014.¹⁵²

Modi was able to accomplish this feat due to a heavy reliance on symbolism, a tactic utilized by both national-populists and religious nationalists. In the words of K. N. Govindacharya, a veteran RSS member who spent time with Modi in the BJP, "Narendra's forte is political marketing. His mental matrix is simple. Politics is equal to power. Power stems to

¹⁵⁰ Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, page 29

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, page 31 para. 1

¹⁵² Ankit Panda, *BJP, Modi Win Landslide Victory in Indian Elections (The Diplomat, 2014)*

elections. Elections are the battle of images. And therefore, politics revolves around images, messages, and signaling.”¹⁵³

Framing social identity is the name of Modi’s political game, which he plays masterfully. Modi appealed to the fears, anger, and hopes of an insecure Hindu majority while dancing on the boundary of politically tolerable statements to make. After the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat, Modi did not encourage aggressive Hindu nationalist rhetoric, but his government continued to be affiliated with Hindutva.¹⁵⁴ While Modi may generally steer clear of overt verbal appeals to Hindu nationalism, his actions speak for him.

For starters, Modi positions himself as a Hindu nationalist sanyasi (ascetic), an image in line with “...a decades old philosophy that has been cultivated by the right leaning institutional Hindus.”¹⁵⁵ Interestingly, the Hindu philosophy of self-realization, the idea that a person is one with God in body, mind, and soul, stands in contrast with Modi’s ascetic rhetoric that references the nation being greater than the self—suggesting a fundamental disconnect between the Hindu religion and Hindu nationalism.¹⁵⁶ Then again, in-group identities created via intersection do not necessarily lend themselves to consistent values systems. Despite the seeming disconnect between Hindu philosophy and Modi’s rhetoric, the image he presents to the people seems to be enough for many to consider him as a member of their in-group.

During his time as chief minister of Gujarat, Modi infused public events with Hindu symbolism, when these events could have been secular—for example, performing a Hindu ceremony (puja) with the leader of a popular Gujarati Hindu sect at an event involving mixing the waters of two rivers.¹⁵⁷ Beyond promoting Hinduism (to the approval of the majority ingroup

¹⁵³ Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, page 96, para. 2

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, page 51, para. 3

¹⁵⁵ Sreepada, *A Cross-Cultural Study of Nationalist Rhetorics*, page 95, para. 2

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, page 93, para. 3

¹⁵⁷ Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, pages 51-52

community), Modi also made concerted efforts to dissociate himself from Muslims, such as discontinuing the iftar party tradition upheld by other chief ministers of Gujarat, and implementing unfair policies towards Muslims.¹⁵⁸ For one example, Modi's government in Gujarat refused to provide any assistance to the Muslims of Gujarat to rebuild any edifice that had been destroyed in the 2002 pogrom.¹⁵⁹ In creating distance between himself and Muslims, a significant and oft-detested out-group, Modi set the tone for increased in-group/out-group rivalry and contention.

What groups Modi appeals to

Unfortunately, there are no opinion polls or surveys available to explain Modi's appeal to voters, but there have been a number of interviews and individual testimonies, such as Sheela Bhatt's interviews of vote mobilizers and Snigdha Poonam's interviews of angry young men.¹⁶⁰ Historically, the BJP has performed fairly well with the upper-caste middle class and not as well with the lower-caste lower class. Modi, however, enjoyed unprecedented success as a BJP candidate among the lower classes.¹⁶¹ Bhatt and Poonam's respondents reported that they were drawn to Modi not only because he claimed to fight against the elite establishment, but also because he was a victim of the establishment, a label they identified with.¹⁶²

These angry young men Bhatt and Poonam interviewed considered Modi as a member of their in-group—a Hindu victim of secularist, modern, English-speaking, Muslim-favoring (and therefore terrorist-soft) elites who were pushing the country into modernization, but leaving the common man in the dust. One of Sheela Bhatt's informants put the issue this way, “After the

¹⁵⁸ Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, page 52, para. 2-3

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, page 52, para. 4

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, page. 105 para.4

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, page. 105 para.2

¹⁶² *Ibid*, pages 105-108

2002 riots when the media and other political parties started blaming Modi, thousands of people like us—now it must be crores¹⁶³ of us—started becoming staunch supporters of Modi. The more you blamed him, the more of our support he gained.”¹⁶⁴ It did not help that many of the reporters critiquing Modi in 2002 were “exactly the kind of woman [angry young men] loved to hate: urban, independent, opinionated.”¹⁶⁵ Many of these angry young men did not have the tools such as education and social networks necessary to keep up with a rapidly modernizing nation. Not knowing how to handle increasingly common social phenomena and threatening out-groups such as assertive women in the public sphere, and many lacking the education to effectively communicate in English, angry young men turned to a perceived member of their in-group: Modi.¹⁶⁶

Ironically, while Modi makes appeals and promises to the common man, his policies overwhelmingly favor elites at the expense of the lower classes. Under the Modi government, the upper castes experienced a remarkable comeback in Indian politics,¹⁶⁷ while Modi’s taxation policy strengthened the wealth inequality by abolishing the 1957 wealth tax, which in turn increased indirect taxes, which disproportionately affects lower classes.¹⁶⁸ For all his appeals to the poor and the common man, it is ironic that Modi prioritized cozying up to rich industrialists who provided financial support for his political success.¹⁶⁹ Of course, this fact does not prevent Modi from identifying himself with the lower classes and exploiting their anger, sense of vulnerability, and even their dreams. Similar to the way Trump was able to utilize the rhetoric of Christian nationalism absent being a saint in personal character, Modi was able to utilize the

¹⁶³ 100 lakh, or 10 million

¹⁶⁴ Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, page 106, para. 1

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, page 107, para. 1

¹⁶⁶ *bid*, page 106, para. 1

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid*, pages 139-143,

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, pages 144-145, especially page 145 para. 3

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, page 58-59

rhetoric of fighting on behalf of the common man absent doing much to help them. Modi both managed to affirm and stoke people's anger and fear, but also inspire hope and give his base something they could find pride in.¹⁷⁰ This point, taken with the fact that his policies ended up favoring elites, suggests that Modi's base is not worried about policy outcomes as much as having someone publicly echo their views. Modi's communication style was peppered with vulgarity and sarcasm, as opposed to the polished rhetoric of political elites, further cementing his crafted common-man identity.¹⁷¹

As the leader of the BJP, Modi is a Hindu nationalist appealing to a base also subscribing to Hindu nationalism. One of the points the BJP and Modi push is the sense of victimization, particularly at the hands of Muslims. In the words of one local BJP leader, "The point is to show we [Hindus] are the victims. This will get Hindus angry. *They will then realize they have to unite against the Muslims.*"¹⁷²

It is important to note that the "Hindus" referenced earlier do not refer to all Hindus as seemingly implied, *but the BJP's definition of what makes a true Hindu*, a more narrow in-group definition than the actual summation of all Hindu people. One lower-caste informant put it this way after the 2002 riots, "After the riots there were elections. At that time Vankars and Chamars [two Dalit castes] had become Hindus [*sic*: they already were], so they voted for a Hindu. So a Hindu won."¹⁷³ This shows that Modi and the BJP were able to birth a new equivalence between the "BJP" and "Hindu," a feat considering other candidates of other parties were also Hindus.¹⁷⁴ The sense of Modi and the BJP's defined "Hindu" ingroup is so strong that the Vankars and Chamars are referenced as "becoming Hindus" *despite the fact that they were already religious*

¹⁷⁰ Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, page 110, para. 2

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, page 69, para. 1

¹⁷² *Ibid*, page 80, para. 3, italics added for emphasis

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, page 44, para. 1, brackets from Jaffrelot

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, page 44, para. 1

Hindus. This is a prime example of the Intersection model of SIC at work—that is, the in-group in question is the overlap of Indians and Hindus *who subscribe to Hindu nationalism*, and Hindus who do not ‘vote for a Hindu’ (Modi) are not considered *true* Hindus. Accordingly, out-groups not only include Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and other religious groups, *but even Hindus who do not subscribe to the BJP’s ideology*.

For those that do subscribe to Hindu nationalism, Modi has proven to be a force against hated or intimidating out-groups via active policy, passive acquiescence to discrimination against out-groups, and by setting the national tone in favor of Hindu nationalism at the expense of secularism and tolerance for other religious groups. One example of active policy is the Beef Ban, a nationwide ban on the sale and purchase of cattle from animal markets for slaughter.¹⁷⁵ Cows are sacred and revered in Hinduism, but historically, millions of people in India have consumed beef, including Christians, Muslims, and Dalits (formerly called “untouchables”).¹⁷⁶ As a cheaper protein, beef was a popular option for India’s lower classes, and the industry was largely dominated by Muslims, who were disproportionately affected by the Beef Ban.¹⁷⁷ Despite the BJP’s official insistence that the ban was implemented to prevent “unregulated animal trade” and not to mandate people’s food choices in an allegedly secular country, the Beef Ban disproportionately affects outgroups, particularly Muslims.¹⁷⁸

When a similar ban on beef passed in the state of Maharashtra and was challenged in the Supreme Court, Justice Minister Ravishankar Prasad (BJP) admitted, “This government does not want to control people’s food habits but it is a reality that a large section of the Indian population

¹⁷⁵ Leeza Mangaldas, *India's got beef with beef: What you need to know about the country's controversial 'Beef ban'* (Forbes, 2017)

¹⁷⁶ Mangaldas, *India's got beef with beef*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*

reveres the cow.”¹⁷⁹ This statement is indicative of the majoritarian stance the BJP and Modi take—and when the perceived majority acquiesce to Hindu nationalism, India’s secular foundations can go out the window.

In addition to discriminatory legislation, Modi’s government promotes Hindu nationalism by attempting to delegitimize secularism. Under Modi, Hindutva advocates delegitimize secularism by lambasting both past and present secular Congress leaders, some going so far as to call Nathuram Godse, the Hindu nationalist who shot Mahatma Gandhi, a “patriot.”¹⁸⁰ Under Modi, states controlled by the BJP, have attempted to maintain and further their Hindu nationalist ingroup narrative by rewriting history. For example, several textbooks that were written for the states of Gujarat and Haranya open with praise to the Hindu goddess Saraswati.¹⁸¹ Dinnath Batra, the long-standing RSS member and author of said textbooks, denied this was an attempt to Hinduize education, but the fact remains that this writing favors Hinduism over other beliefs. An even more extreme textbook alteration in Rajasthan omitted both Congress leaders Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi from a social science textbook, despite the two figures playing crucial roles in modern India’s founding.¹⁸²

In addition to rewriting India’s history in textbooks and passing discriminatory policies, Modi’s government has also legitimized the RSS, in contrast to the bans imposed on the organization before. This should not be surprising, however, as Modi views the RSS as part of his in-group (as a proud RSS member), and Modi’s in-group is in power. SIT predicts that when a dominant in-group views “their superiority as legitimate, they will probably react in an

¹⁷⁹ Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, page 162, para. 2

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, pages 165-166, quoting Sakshi Maharaj, a BJP member of the Lok Sabha (lower house of India’s parliament). Tushi Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi’s nephew, responded to this statement by noting, “Sakshi Maharaj is at least honest enough to come out and say what’s in his heart.... The [BJP] government should endorse what Sakshi Maharaj has said, they shouldn’t be double-faced.”

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, page 173, para. 1

¹⁸² *Ibid*, page 173, para. 2

intensely discriminatory fashion to any attempt by the subordinate group to change the intergroup situation.”¹⁸³ It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that Modi and his government of Hindu nationalists are so intolerant of minority outgroups. Perceiving Modi and the BJP’s ingroup of Hindu nationalists as the legitimately superior group, this group reacts “in an intensely discriminatory fashion” to attempts from Muslims, Christians, Hindus opposing the BJP, and other minority groups who oppose their authority.

Negative Impact on Democracy

Modi and the BJP oppose secularism, but this fact alone does not necessarily make the nation undemocratic. When looking at the big picture and democracy matrixes, however, the world’s largest democracy has backslid at an alarming rate.

The earliest Freedom House score available for India was the 2017 report, after Modi had been in power for three years. Despite not being able to compare the score difference from before Modi came into power as Prime Minister and the present day, the Freedom House score difference between 2017 and 2022 is remarkable. In 2017, India had a score of 77/100.¹⁸⁴ This number held constant until 2019 when the number dipped to 75/100¹⁸⁵ and from thereon plummeted to a score of 66/100 in 2022, an 11-point difference.¹⁸⁶ The Democracy Matrix offers more insight, with further-reaching data. In 2013, the year before Modi took office, India’s score was 0.81/1.00. Since 2013, the Democracy Matrix score has dropped, hitting a low of 0.64/1.00 in 2020 but bouncing up slightly in 2021 with a 0.68/1.00.¹⁸⁷ Even taking the somewhat more

¹⁸³ Tajfel and Turner, *An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict*, page 45 para. 6

¹⁸⁴ Freedom House, *India: Freedom in the World 2017 Country Report (Freedom House)*

¹⁸⁵ Freedom House, *India: Freedom in the World 2019 Country Report (Freedom House)*

¹⁸⁶ Freedom House, *India: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report (Freedom House)*

¹⁸⁷ Chair of Comparative Politics and German Government at the University of Würzburg, *Country Graph: Republic of India* (Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg)

optimistic recent score, the Democracy Matrix score dropped 13 percentage points since Modi became Prime Minister.

In a healthy democracy, there is no discrimination on the basis of religion, and people are equally valued as citizens, regardless of their faith. During Modi's rule, unfortunately, there have been a number of instances of discrimination and acts of violence towards outgroup members, especially Muslims. This is not surprising recalling that Hindutva, the ideological foundation for Hindu nationalism, "does not believe in equality of citizenship."¹⁸⁸ In particular, Hindu nationalism demands the elimination or assimilation of non-Hindus into a Hindu state, especially Muslims.¹⁸⁹ Under Modi, the discrimination against Muslims couched in Hindu nationalism has been able to manifest in both national policy and the more subtle government toleration of violence against Muslims.

Apart from the beef ban mentioned above, Modi's government in Parliament passed a bill in 2019 amending the Indian Citizenship law, the amendment extending amnesty to irregular immigrants from three countries provided they lived or worked in India for at least 6 years—and provided they are not Muslim.¹⁹⁰ Under this legislation, called the Citizenship Amendment Bill, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis, and Christians are eligible for naturalization, but Muslims are excluded.¹⁹¹ Dividing migrants into Muslim and non-Muslim categories "explicitly and blatantly seeks to enshrine religious discrimination into law" according to Delhi-based lawyer Gautam Bhatia and "[the bill's] main purpose is the delegitimation of Muslims' citizenship" according to historian Mukul Kesavan.¹⁹² The Citizenship Amendment Bill appears to stand in stark contrast to India's constitution, especially Part III, Article 15 (section 1), reading

¹⁸⁸ Shahzad, Falki, and Bilal, *Transformation of Indian Nationalism and 'Otherization of Muslims in India,'* page 53, para. 4

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, page 54, para. 3

¹⁹⁰ BBC, *Citizenship Amendment Bill: India's New 'Anti-Muslim' Law Explained* (BBC News, 2019)

¹⁹¹ BBC, *Citizenship Amendment Bill*

¹⁹² *Ibid*

“The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.”¹⁹³ The constitution further enshrines the right to freedom of religion in Part III, Article 25, section 1 reading “Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this Part, *all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion.*”¹⁹⁴

In addition to State discrimination via national law, under the Modi government there have been several extrajudicial killings that target Muslims and Dalits in the name of protecting cows from slaughter. Self-appointed “cow vigilantes,” encouraged by BJP leaders’ communally divisive insinuations that the authorities are too soft when it comes to enforcing the beef ban, have resorted to violence against those assumed to be complicit in cow slaughter. Modi himself repeatedly advocated for increased protection for cows during his time as Chief Minister of Gujarat and during his 2014 campaign.¹⁹⁵

After Modi came into power in 2014, there was an almost 500% increase in communally divisive language in speeches given by elected officials (90% BJP politicians), with cow protection being a vital theme in several of these speeches.¹⁹⁶ This rhetoric in the public sphere, coming from elected officials, ignited and legitimized violence in the name of cow protection. For example, BJP politicians have made statements such as “we will hang those who kill cows,”¹⁹⁷ “I had promised that I will break the hands and legs of those who do not consider cows their mother and kill them,”¹⁹⁸ and “We should not take law into our hands. But we have no

¹⁹³ Constitute. (1949). *India 1949 (rev. 2016) Constitution* (Constitute)

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, italics added for emphasis

¹⁹⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Violent Cow Protection in India* (Human Rights Watch, 2023)

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, according to a survey by New Delhi Television contrasting the volume of communally divisive language pre-Modi and post-Modi as Prime Minister

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, Raman Singh, BJP chief minister, Chhattisgarh state, April 2017

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*, Vikram Saini, BJP lawmaker, Uttar Pradesh state, March 2017

regret over his death [Pehlu Khan]¹⁹⁹ because those who are cow smugglers are cow-killers; sinners like them have met this fate earlier and will continue to do so.”²⁰⁰

Such statements have not stayed in the realm of public discourse, but have exploded into violence manifested through cow-related violence and murder carried out by self-appointed vigilantes, encouraged by Hindu nationalist rhetoric. Human Rights Watch found that, between May 2015 and December 2018, there were at least 44 deaths due to cow-related violence; 36 of the 44 were Muslims, who overwhelmingly run India’s beef market.²⁰¹

As the BJP and Hindu nationalists promoted the narrative that Hindus are victims of Muslims and other minorities, particularly Muslims who slaughter holy animals, communal violence towards Muslims and other threatening outgroups blossomed under Modi’s watch. It was not until August 2018 that Prime Minister Modi made any strong statements against such violence, when he stated, “I want to make it clear that mob lynching is a crime, no matter the motive.”²⁰² As Prime Minister, while Modi might have refrained from virulent cow-protection-related speech, his silence while fellow BJP politicians spewed deadly jargon speaks volumes.

The strong social identity of Hindu nationalism built on Hindutva that Modi encourages as a leader, whether through legislation, vocally, or acceptance by silence, does more than just narrow people’s in-group and delegitimize both Indians *and* Hindus not subscribing to Hindutva. As troubling a scenario as the previous statement paints, the reality is a violent picture that surpasses mere social marginalization. The reality is that violent Hindu nationalism has materialized into the sticks, fists, and weapons used to kill out-group

¹⁹⁹ Pehlu Khan was a 55-year-old dairy farmer in Rajasthan who was beaten to death by a mob in 2017. A video of Khan being assaulted went viral shortly after his death; suspects for the lynching belonged to a cow vigilante group.

²⁰⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Violent Cow Protection in India*, Gyan Dev Ahuja, BJP lawmaker, Rajasthan state, April 2017

²⁰¹ *Ibid*

²⁰² *Ibid*

members—disproportionately affecting Muslims, who increasingly must wrestle with the choice to assimilate, leave, or suffer fatal consequences.

Analysis and Conclusion

Why does any of this matter? It matters because leaders such as Trump and Modi are exploiting people’s nationalistic idolatry, specifically, Christian nationalism and Hindu nationalism. In both cases, politicians exploit people’s idolatry using fear of out-groups, which in turn either propels those politicians into power or keeps them in power (Modi’s reelection). At this point, I anticipate some pushback from the reader who may find the characterization of both Christian nationalism and Hindu nationalism *as idolatry* to be objectionable. I will address concerns regarding both.

The scope of this paper does not include a discussion of the question of what religion is true, or whether or not several religions could be true. These questions are worth discussing but are beyond the scope of this paper. For the purpose of this paper, idolatry is defined as this: Idolatry is a distortion of authentic religion that parades as a legitimate form of the religion—in doing so, idolatry attempts to delegitimize the authentic religion, regardless of intent. Idolatry has the facade of religion, but in reality, it is an abuse thereof.

Christian nationalism is idolatry because it is a separate ideology that seeks to redefine Christianity and, in doing so, subordinate Christianity. As stated before, Christian nationalism attempts to “merge American and Christian memberships—along with their histories and futures.”²⁰³ The issue with this attempted merge is that the two do not perfectly align. Consider merging the histories and futures of Christian membership. The history of a centuries-old

²⁰³ Whitehead, Perry, and Baker, *Make America Christian Again*, page 165, para. 1

religion does not align with the history of the relatively young country called the United States. Regarding the future of the two, if one considers what the Bible says, the futures of the United States and Christianity are far from aligning. The Kingdom of God is and will be so vast, eternal, and glorious that to try and bound such a kingdom to the US seems insulting.²⁰⁴

In addition to the disparity between the histories and futures of the United States and Christianity, the two group identities are unable to merge well because there is not complete overlap between the two group memberships, and not all of their values are compatible. Due to this incompatibility, one or the other's values will have to give.

Christian nationalism seeks to merge both American and Christian memberships via Intersection, but since one of those memberships is significantly smaller than the other, a large section of both group memberships must necessarily be *excluded* in order to favor the relatively small intersection of the American and Christian memberships. Regarding Christianity's values, this runs contrary to the teaching that all who believe in Christ for salvation are one in Christ.²⁰⁵ Regarding America's values, this runs contrary to the idea that the government should not establish or favor a particular religion.²⁰⁶ It does not seem unreasonable to assume that, in the process of attempting to merge the American and Christian identities, both identities will lose some of their values in the process.

Now to address the concern as it regards referring to Hindu nationalism as idolatry. Hindu nationalism is a distortion of Hinduism and is thus a type of idolatry. As mentioned prior,

²⁰⁴ see Daniel 7:27, Psalm 9:7, Psalm 145:13 for a few examples

²⁰⁵ See Galatians 3:28

²⁰⁶ The First Amendment prohibits Congress from passing laws "respecting an establishment of religion." The Lemon Test set forth by the US Supreme Court in *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602 (1971) clarified that the government can only assist religion if the primary purpose of the assistance is secular, if the assistance neither promotes nor inhibits religion, and if there is no excessive entanglement of church and state. In contrast to this, Christian nationalism desires to favor the Christian religion in America.

Hindu nationalism is more interested in “ethnic historical-cultural traits than on spirituality and Hindu rites,”²⁰⁷ and thus seemingly not concerned with the right practice of religion.

One of the strongest signs of Hindu nationalism being idolatry is its rigid insistence that individuals in India must either assimilate into a Hindu state or leave. This insistence runs diametrically opposed to Hinduism’s value of tolerance. The value of tolerance in Hinduism is based on the tradition of respecting diverse beliefs within Hinduism itself, the belief that there are multiple paths to God and all religions are fundamentally good, and the belief that all humans are divine beings and therefore should be treated with empathy.²⁰⁸ These beliefs and traditions stand in stark contrast to the Hindu nationalism seen under Modi’s government, where people of other religions are discriminated against through both official national legislation and communal violence that too often goes unchecked. Additionally, Hindu nationalism clashes with the secular principles modern India was founded on, as it seeks to establish a Hindu state.

It is important to recognize that a person does not have to be religious, or be a Christian or a Hindu to engage in these types of religious nationalism. Religious nationalism can look and function in a manner quite distinct from the religion it derives from, whether this religious nationalism manifests in “Amen” scrawled on gallows erected outside the nation’s capital or a mob beating someone to death in the name of cow protection.

It is also important to acknowledge that there is nothing inherently wrong with having multiple strong attachments to various social identities, whether religious identities or national identities. It is possible for one to be both a passionate Christian or Hindu and an enthusiastic patriot *without* falling into the trap of idolatry, that is, religious nationalism. The issue is not

²⁰⁷ Jaffrelot, *Modi’s India*, Chapter 1, page 13, para. 1

²⁰⁸ Bodhinatha Veylanswami, *Tolerance: A Hindu Viewpoint* (Hinduism Today, 2022)

group membership *per se*, but the ability to distinguish between the boundaries of multiple group memberships.

Trump and Modi, whether they realize it in explicit terms or not, both have done an excellent job at pinpointing certain in-groups formed via intersectionality (low SIC) and exploiting the nationalistic sentiments of their respective bases. By identifying as victims of elites alongside their target bases, they were able to be considered as members of the in-group. Both leaders used sarcasm and vulgar language as a way of appealing to the ‘common man’ and a mark of distinction apart from the snobbish, eloquent elites. Both appealed to existing sentiments of victimhood. Trump emphasized the threat of migrants and Christianity’s waning presence in America, while Modi presented himself as a victim of the establishment in line with the sentiments of angry young men. While both Trump and Modi speak in the populist style of both claiming to be and represent ‘the people’, both are ironically wrapped up in the world of elites. Trump himself is a rich billionaire, and Modi has used his position to benefit the rich at the expense of India’s lower classes. This did not stop either leader from continuing to appeal to ‘the people,’ nor did it prevent them from utilizing in-group/out-group competition. Trump and Modi both appealed to the threat of out-groups; and, as SIT predicts, in-groups reacted in a discriminatory way towards out-groups. Both countries backslid democratically, although India’s backsliding was more dramatic. Both countries saw cases of extreme violence as a result of exacerbated in-group/out-group tensions, whether the January 6 riot at the US Capitol building or multiple instances of lynchings due to cow-related violence.

The abuse of religion aside, the findings of this paper offer a sobering glimpse of the effects of political leaders exploiting nationalistic in-group bias. An in-group does not need to be overtly tied to religion, of course, to display bias and discrimination. For example, Trump

successfully appealed to the group of uneducated, White voters who felt left behind by a society favoring immigrants, Muslims, and minorities over American-born citizens. In-group bias can exist for in-groups not explicitly tied to religion. The point is less about the particular type of in-group and more about the effects of bias and discrimination against out-groups SIT discusses. The in-group discrimination and violence seen in both countries should be concerning to anyone who desires to see healthy civil societies where people of all types of group memberships can live peacefully together.

Neither Trump nor Modi invented group competition, nor did they contrive the tensions between in-groups and out-groups. They did, however, take advantage of such tensions, and by promoting the idea of out-group threats to in-groups, *exacerbated* these tensions. The results decreased both countries' democracy scores and eventually led to harm against out-group members and the general health of civil society, while Trump and Modi perversely benefitted via their respective election victories.

Acknowledgment of Limitations

The issue of merging other social memberships with politics or nationalism is not the monopoly of a handful of politicians and does not exist solely in the realm of conservatives, or right-wing populists. Creating an environment harmful to democracy is far from being a duopoly of Trump and Modi. In fairness, the Democratic Party and its members in America and the Congress Party and its members in India have each done their share of damage in their respective countries. Politicians and parties on the other side of the Left/Right divide can be just as guilty of utilizing democratically harmful and counterproductive rhetoric playing off of people's low SIC and fear of out-groups.

In this paper, however, it is my hope that the discussion of two leaders exploiting the nationalistic tendencies of their bases offers a glimpse into the way SIT and nationalism can interact, many times to the harm of others—particularly when SIC used to define the ingroup is low, and outgroups are demonized.

For continued study, I would recommend further research conducted investigating SIT and nationalism as seen in case studies revolving around other political leaders, other types of religious nationalism, and political leaders considered to be left-wing. Unfortunately, the scope of this paper does not allow for such expanded research, but I recommend and hope further research will be conducted to enrich the discussion in the interest of a more respectful and more peaceful world where people are able to look past tribal ingroup prejudices and engage in constructive dialogue.

Moving Forward

It seems that the issues of national populism, religious nationalism, and politicians willing to exploit one or both of the above are here to stay. Tajfel and Turner's 1979 SIT seems to have stood the test of time, and it seems that individuals are not likely to stop associating and identifying with various social groups. As individuals are complex and do not belong to only one social group membership, the issue of managing multiple social group memberships will not disappear, therefore Roccas and Brewer's SIC will probably remain relevant.

As the phenomenon of belonging to, identifying with, and managing multiple group identities is unlikely to disappear, so are the risks associated with such phenomena. As long as individuals hold a variety of group memberships, there is a risk of individuals erroneously seeing blurred lines between overlapping memberships to the detriment and exclusion of legitimate

group members. As long as there are multiple groups, according to SIT, there will be intergroup comparisons that can result in tension and competition.

Tension and competition between groups is to be expected, but if it grows unchecked, can lead to discrimination and related injustices. To ameliorate the situation, several solutions could be implemented.

One solution would be to encourage increased intergroup exposure in a non-hostile environment. Person-to-person interactions and relationships may work particularly well, as individuals could begin to view members of out-groups as complex human beings such as themselves, rather than an abstract “other.” Another solution might be to emphasize the equality of citizenship in classroom education, to help prevent unhealthy forms of in-group-based nationalism that could develop later.

The last solution recommended here would be a continued study of the relationship between SIT, SIC, and subsets of nationalism, particularly looking into ethnic nationalism, a subset this paper does not have the scope to discuss in depth. Some other suggested research topics are comparing right-wing populism with left-wing populism, the appeal and/or symbolic relationship between charismatic populist leaders and their targetted base, a comparison of religious nationalism with religious orthodoxy, the significance of ‘Golden Age’ narratives and national populism, and a more vigorous study of national populist leaders around the globe, including Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Turkey), and Rodrigo Duterte (Philippines).

Biblical Integration

Finally, for those of us who are Christians, how do we navigate a complex world and our own complex group memberships, the different social identities we hold? While the discussion

regarding social identities in this paper has a critical tone, I would like to be clear that social identities in and of themselves are not necessarily negative. Being part of various social groups is natural and inescapable, as a person is born into a certain family from a certain culture and of a certain background. From cheering for the same sports team, coming from the same nation, or working in the same career field, we all navigate a galaxy of groups we can and do identify with.

In this paper, we have examined the sobering consequences that can occur when social identities become conflated with each other, with people not recognizing the complexity and boundaries of their social identities. But for Christians, who have been told that our mandate to follow Christ should bleed into every aspect of our lives, what do we make of all this? How do we hold our multiple social identities with awareness and wisdom, while still seeking to do all things by faith?²⁰⁹ We are justified through faith in Christ and have been “crucified with Christ,”²¹⁰ but our identity in Christ does not erase all our other identities. We are made new in Christ, but we are not made into *tabula rasa*. So then, how do we handle our social identities, and what do we do when they conflict?

Recalling Roccas and Brewer’s discussion of the four models people can use to structure their in-group representations, I argue that the Dominance model is the best option out of the four for a Christian to utilize when it comes to structuring in-group representations. According to Roccas and Brewer, the Dominance model is on the lower end of the complexity spectrum. Still, they acknowledge the following:

“Dominance represents a somewhat more complex and inclusive mode than intersection *if the dominant group identity is a relatively large, heterogeneous social category* (e.g.,

²⁰⁹ Romans 14:23

²¹⁰ Galatians 2:20

women) compared to a homogeneous compound categorization (e.g., WASP). However, if a dominant social identity is a relatively small exclusive group (e.g., a specific profession, a religious sect, or the like), then dominance is very similar to intersection in terms of complexity and inclusiveness. In either case, both dominance and intersection provide a resolution that divides the social world along a single ingroup-outgroup category distinction.”²¹¹

The other three models—Intersection, Compartmentalization, and Merger—are certainly possible options for Christians, but they all have serious flaws. Compartmentalization leads to the notorious ‘Sunday’s child’ syndrome, as an individual compartmentalizes their lives and divorces the Christian part (typically church on Sundays) from the rest of their lives. This is problematic, as the Bible explicitly says followers of Christ should love the Lord our God with everything—all our heart, soul, and mind.²¹² Compartmentalizing Christ-following does not seem like an option.

The Merger model is an attractive idea, but if we simultaneously recognize and embrace each of our group identity in their *most inclusive* forms, then we might lull ourselves into failing to preach the Gospel. With the Merger model, there could be a risk of thinking, ‘oh, you’re *in* already so you must be good and therefore I do not need to preach the Gospel to you.’ The Merger model seems to almost require a person to see their group identities as holding equal weight. Yet as Christians, we are called to put Christ first. From a practical perspective, applying to both Christians and non-Christians, it also seems like a gargantuan feat to hold each social identity with equal weight.

²¹¹ Roccas and Brewer, *Social Identity Complexity*, page 92, para. 2, italics added for emphasis

²¹² Matthew 22:37

The Intersection model seems to be the worst option. As the model with the lowest complexity and the narrowest in-group representation, the chance of bias and discrimination is higher with this model. The Intersection model is the model birthing religious nationalism, as individuals conflate their nation with the Promised Land. On an abstract level as well, it seems that in order for one to create an ingroup based on the Intersection of two social identities, then one has to view those social identities as relatively equal to each other. In the American Christian nationalist's context, then, the Intersection model would produce Christian nationalism because the individual in question is holding their national identity as highly as they hold their membership in the Christian group, if not higher. Followers of Christ should be grieved at this, for if this is the case, it is nothing short of idolatry—the act of idolizing the nation, placing it higher than Christ. I use the word “higher” because conflating national identity with the Christian one seems to disregard the fact that Christ is supreme.²¹³ Of course, does one have to be a true Christian to be a Christian nationalist? Of course not, but speaking here to genuine followers of Christ, we should be wary of falling into the trap of the Intersection model.

With these three models all having serious strikes against them, the only remaining model is the Dominance model. By holding our identity in Christ as first and foremost, having precedence over all other social identities, we are still able to acknowledge our other social identities and enjoy them within the bounds of our ultimate identity in Christ. Any conflict of values between our dominant identity in Christ and another one of our political identities is solved by deferring to our ultimate identity in Christ. In this way, Christians can navigate the maze of social identities, and in Christ, find beauty in our other important yet subordinate identities.

²¹³ Colossians 1:15-16

Concluding remarks

Interestingly enough, it was not the Roman emperor who started emperor worship. Instead, the practice began in earnest after Julius Caesar's assassination, when an indignant Roman public decided to hail him as a god postmortem.²¹⁴ Emperor worship grew in popularity and eventually into such a strong tradition that it became entrenched in the Roman state's political culture, to the point of killing those who refused to bow. The situation today seems almost inverted, as the case studies examine democratic countries with leaders who exploit the strong sentiments of groups and take advantage of in-group/out-group biases, as opposed to the Roman authoritarian state that insisted upon some practices such as emperor worship.

The fact that the robust practice of emperor worship was born thanks to a popular movement makes one pause. Groups are powerful, as is the sense of identity. What most would see now as an archaic practice imposed by a dictatorial leader on his cowering populace, was in actuality a practice pushed for by the people. We in the modern world should take warning, lest our collective idolatry lead also to destruction. In Rome, emperors were happy to take up the mantle of deity their people thrust upon them. Has anything changed under the sun? For today, there still lie would-be emperors in wait, all too eager to pounce upon the people's idolatry.

²¹⁴ Henry F. Burton, *The Worship of the Roman Emperors* (*The Biblical World*, 40(2), 80–91. 1912), page 82, para. 2

Appendices

Acronyms

BJP - Bharatiya Janata Party

RSS - Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

SIC - Social Identity Complexity

SIT - Social Identity Theory

Maps of the United States and India



Image 1.1 - the United States of America²¹⁵

²¹⁵ Image retrieved from https://wall.alphacoders.com/by_sub_category.php?id=240772&name=Map+Of+The+Usa+Wallpapers



Image 1.2 - the Republic of India²¹⁶

²¹⁶ Image retrieved from <https://www.vexels.com/vectors/preview/148400/india-map-with-states>

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