



REPORTAGE / POLITICS

## Red, Saffron and Blue

How the American Sangh hopes to win the 2020 US elections

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A "Howdy Modi" event organised in Houston, Texas in September 2019. SERGIO FLORES/GETTY IMAGES

**ON 20 SEPTEMBER**, Princeton University's Hindu Life Program held a discussion titled "Hindu-Americans and the 2020 Elections." The virtual debate brought together Murali Balaji, the national co-chair of Hindu Americans for Biden, and Jay Kansara, a community organiser for Hindu Voices for Trump. In an electoral cycle marked by bitter partisan divisions, the event marked an unusually polite exchange between two men on opposite sides of the US political aisle.

The host of the event, Vineet Chander, was aware that political debates in 2020 had the potential to turn ugly. "We were fully prepared to skip this opportunity if we couldn't ensure that we had the right people at the table," Chander said, before introducing Balaji and Kansara. "Murali and Jay are friends. They are former colleagues. Interestingly, both of them worked side-by-side in some respects at the Hindu American Foundation." Chander's introduction was meant to

explain why the two were the right people for a civil conversation, but inadvertently revealed a different truth: that the Hindu American Foundation, an advocacy group that has consistently lobbied in favour of the Sangh Parivar—a network of organisations connected to the Hindu-nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh—encompassed what were considered mainstream Hindu-American voices in both the Democratic and Republican parties.

As colleagues at the HAF, Balaji and Kansara were accustomed to sharing the same stage. In November 2014, the two were both speakers at an HAF fundraiser in Houston, Texas. The chief guest at the event was Tulsi Gabbard, a Democratic congresswoman from Hawaii whose close ties to the Sangh Parivar are well-documented. Balaji, who was the director of education and curriculum reform for the HAF between June 2013 and December 2017, spoke at the 2014 fundraiser about his lobbying efforts against what HAF described as inaccurate portrayals of Hinduism in US textbooks. Progressive activists argued that the reforms pushed for by the HAF included attempts to erase references to caste.

Kansara was praised at the fundraiser by Rishi Bhutada, a member of HAF's board of directors and a key member of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America. The Bhutada family has been one of the most consistent supporters of the Sangh Parivar in the United States. While Rishi was a primary organiser of the VHPA's youth camps, his father, Ramesh, organised Indian-Americans in support of the Bharatiya Janata Party during their election campaigns. Today, Rishi is on the HAF's board of directors, while Ramesh is the vice-president of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, the RSS's international wing.

Kansara had been instrumental in bringing over thirty members of the US Congress to prime minister Narendra Modi's speech at New York's Madison Square Garden in September 2014. Bhutada also credited Kansara with mobilising representatives—including Gabbard—to sink House Resolution 417, a bipartisan effort co-sponsored by 27 representatives to call on India to protect the rights of its minorities.

Bhutada's praise was not empty. Two months later, in January 2015, Kansara was promoted to director of government relations, a position he held until his recent departure from the HAF to support Trump's re-election campaign.

Today, Kansara identifies as a "disaffected Democrat." Having consistently voted Democrat until 2016, he became disillusioned by the party's foreign policy when the former secretary of state Hillary Clinton was elected as the party's presidential nominee ahead of the 2016 Election. Kansara feared that a Clinton administration would advance the US government's financial support to Pakistan—a policy that he had vehemently opposed during his time lobbying for the HAF. Kansara voted for the Libertarian candidate in 2016. Four years later, he is now convinced that Donald Trump is the right candidate for the Hindu-American community—in large part, because of his foreign policy positions, and his relationship with Modi.

**IN RECENT DECADES**, Indian-Americans have been a highly reliable constituency for the Democratic Party. According to the AAPI Civic Engagement Fund, over 75 percent of Indian-Americans voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016. Given the community's consistent voting record and small size—the community makes up only slightly more than one percent of the American population—their votes have seldom been solicited by either party. However, ahead of November's elections, the Indian-American community has received an unprecedented amount of attention, headlined by Kamala Harris's candidature for vice-president.

While the Democratic Party hopes that Harris's presence on the ballot will energise voters of Indian origin in key swing states, the Republican Party has increasingly viewed the Indian-American community as up for grabs. Data collected by the AAPI survey in 2020 show that approximately two-thirds of decided Indian-Americans voters intend to vote for Joe Biden—still a comfortable majority, but nonetheless a nearly ten-point decrease in just four years for a Democratic presidential candidate. A significant percentage of those who switched affiliation to the Republican Party identify closely with the BJP regime

in India. A recent (<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/10/14/how-will-indian-americans-vote-results-from-2020-indian-american-attitudes-survey-pub-82929>) Carnegie Endowment survey shows that Modi's popularity is higher among Republicans. In all likelihood, they also lie within the orbit of the Sangh Parivar's diasporic network.

The American Sangh's relationship with the BJP regime can be traced back decades, even predating Modi's rise to national power. A number of groups affiliated to the Hindu nationalist RSS—such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad America, the Overseas Friends of BJP and the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh—played a key role in rehabilitating Modi's reputation after he was banned from entering the United States for almost a decade for his complicity in the 2002 anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat, the state he then ruled as its chief minister. When Modi was elected as prime minister in 2014, members of these RSS-affiliated groups—including Kansara, the Bhutada family and Bharat Barai, a close confidante of Modi—worked aggressively to amplify his global profile. Modi's address at Madison Square Garden, just months after his election, was the first of many such events.

When Donald Trump came to power in 2016, these high-profile events grew increasingly partisan and personalised, the India-US relationship increasingly reduced to that of two leaders and their political parties. Over the past year, this relationship has been celebrated in the form of two large-scale public spectacles in two of the Sangh's favorite cities: Howdy Modi in Houston in September 2019, when Modi toured the United States, and Namaste Trump in Ahmedabad in February 2020, when Trump returned the visit. The latter coincided with a horrific spell of anti-Muslim violence in Delhi that left 53 Indians dead, most of them Muslims. Trump's visit to Delhi coincided with the anti-Muslim violence, but he refrained from criticising Modi or the BJP, many of whose leaders had made inflammatory speeches days before the violence began.

The Delhi violence was merely one of multiple events that have challenged the Modi regime's international standing. Since its re-election in 2019, the Modi government has revoked Article 370 in

Jammu and Kashmir, accompanied by a brutal lockdown, and passed the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, a move that fundamentally altered what constitutes citizenship in India. These measures have drawn widespread criticism from international human-rights organisations, including within the United States.

The American Sangh has moved to oppose any US politicians who called attention to human-rights violations in India under Modi's rule. At the same time, it has promoted Hindutva, the BJP's Hindu-nationalist ideology, as a key "Hindu-American interest," and has funded politicians that display a willingness to legitimise and protect the Modi regime. Backed by its organisational power and financial resources, the Sangh has often succeeded in reducing a diverse Indian-American electorate into its loudest, wealthiest voices.

For the Republican Party, Modi's perceived popularity has yielded an opening. Many Republicans have articulated a shared transnational, right-wing nationalism, highlighting large blockbuster events featuring Trump and Modi in their outreach to the Indian-American community. Many members of the Sangh, such as Kansara, have promoted this narrative of a common ground, and organised in sophisticated ways to support the Republican Party.

Alongside his work organising for the Trump campaign, Kansara is also an operations advisor for Americans4Hindus, a far-right political-action committee founded in December 2019, in response to statements by Democratic members of Congress that were critical of the Modi regime's human-rights violations.

But the Sangh has hardly limited its outreach to the Republican Party. Aware of the possibility of a Democratic resurgence in November, multiple members of the Sangh have continued to work closely with sections of the Democratic Party—a phenomenon best demonstrated by Murali Balaji, Kansara's opponent at Princeton.

Like Kansara, Balaji has also extended his political work beyond the Biden presidential campaign, donating six times to another PAC, the

Hindu American Political Action Committee. The HAPAC's affiliations with the Sangh Parivar run even deeper than those of Americans4Hindus. But, unlike its unabashedly far-right counterparts, the HAPAC engages deeply with the Democratic Party—six of its nine endorsements ahead of the 2020 elections have gone to Democrats. Although the HAPAC is often tight-lipped about its exact policy positions, it has been deliberate in its endorsements and decisive in its lobbying, finding ways to defend the policies of the Modi government in language that is acceptable in mainstream Democratic politics.

Balaji and Kansara's projects—as well as those of the PACs they are affiliated with—are microcosms of the Sangh's political opportunism. Their divergent political affiliations in the United States obscure mutual connections to the American Sangh, whose interests and donors transcend traditional partisan divides. At a moment when the Modi regime's deteriorating human-rights record puts it in danger of international condemnation, the Sangh's committed supporters in the diaspora are working to ensure that they continue to have a voice in the ear of the eventual victors of the US elections, whoever they may be.

[↗ \(https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/how-the-american-sangh-hopes-to-win-the-2020-elections/attachment-16091\)](https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/how-the-american-sangh-hopes-to-win-the-2020-elections/attachment-16091)



A man stands in front of a hoarding of Modi and Trump, ahead of Trump's visit to Ahmedabad in February. Over the past year, the relationship between the two leaders has been celebrated in the form of two large-scale public spectacles AJIT SOLANKI / AP PHOTO

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**AMERICANS4HINDUS WAS FOUNDED** with a clearly expressed purpose. Its website reads: “A4H was set up in response to recent anti-India and anti-Hindu statements and actions by members of the Progressive Caucus (‘PC’) of the Democratic party that have aggrieved a large swath of the Hindu-American community.”

In July 2020, the group organised a virtual event titled “Hindus4Trump” in partnership with the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh and the Overseas Friends of BJP. At the event, Americans4Hindus endorsed Trump’s re-election campaign. Multiple Indian media outlets covered the event to stunning headlines, reporting that over a hundred thousand Indian-Americans had attended the event. One media organisation called it a “major boost to the Trump-Modi friendship.”

In reality, the attendance figures trumpeted by these newspapers were off by multiple orders of magnitude. I was unable to find any evidence of anything close to a hundred thousand attendees: a YouTube recording of the event had only sixty views as of October, while the live number of participants on the Zoom event had hovered around a hundred. The claim that a hundred thousand attendees tuned in to the event was mentioned in the pro-BJP diasporic newspaper *IndiaPost*, run by Romesh Japra, a co-founder of Americans4Hindus. The article itself was written by another A4H co-founder, Aditya Satsangi. I reached out to Americans4Hindu with a list of queries, including evidence of the attendance figures, but did not receive a response.

The Trump–Modi relationship took centre stage at the Hindus4Trump rally. Al Mason, the co-chair of the Trump Victory Indian-American Finance Committee, played a video containing clips from the Namaste Trump event, while Devabrata Ganguly, a donor to Americans4Hindus and a speaker at the event, argued that it was “time to pay back President Trump” for his support of the Modi regime. Ganguly also lashed out at the Democratic Party for colluding with whom he termed anti-India conspirators: “The challenges to our

motherland and homeland are dire and existential at this time. The disruptive movements to grievously hurt the homeland's very structural integrity in United States is alarming at the least. The Democratic Party is in alliance with the entire gamut of such forces."

Only Trump, Ganguly said, "has the courage to confront the Leftist, Marxist, Islamist fascists and the proponents of anarchy." Ganguly concluded with a telling statement: "Majoritarianism is not a threat, but the strength of any nation, as has been evidenced in India as well."

Given its explicit purpose and aggressive partisanship, Americans4Hindus has attracted a steady stream of donations from members of the American Sangh. Its first donations, worth \$10,000, came from Japra on 12 December, the same day the Citizenship (Amendment) Act was signed into Indian law and six days after the Democratic congresswoman Pramila Jayapal introduced House Resolution 745, which called on India to end mass detentions and the communications blackout in Kashmir in the aftermath of the Modi government's decision to annul Article 370.

Within a week of Japra's initial donation, Satsangi contributed another \$10,000, and Bhayani later followed suit. All three are prominent proponents of Hindutva in the diaspora. Japra and Bhayani have both been affiliated with the OFBJP, and played vital roles in coordinating Indian-American support for Modi's campaigns in both 2014 and 2019.

Satsangi also runs the Americans4Hindus blog, in which he has made little attempt to disguise his support for Hindutva and a deep-rooted Islamophobia. In a post titled "Fight for the soul of USA," Satsangi writes:

We have to understand the deep insecurity of most of the American Muslim organizations against Hindus and Hindutva. Hinduism and Hindutva cannot be hyphenated because they literally mean the same. Their deep insecurity comes from the fact that a resurgent India comes in the path of global Islamic Right Wing politics and fascist Ideas. Islamic Politics is by nature



right wing and extremist because they go against the nation state values of modern democratic states.

Americans4Hindus also reached out across the networks of the OFBJP, the VHPA and the HSS, inviting BJP leaders such as Subramanian Swamy and Ram Madhav for virtual events. It also tapped into the Sangh's coterie of far-right, Islamophobic ideologues, hosting exclusive events with the likes of Francois Gautier, a French Hindutva ideologue, and Renee Lynn, the founder of a website called Voice for India who has made comments against minorities under the guise of cow-protection.

Within six months of its establishment, Americans4Hindus had attracted donations from a number of Sangh members across the country. This included Bharat Barai, a VHPA member and close confidante of Modi who hosted the future prime minister in the United States on two separate occasions in 1993 and 1997, and later organised biannual video conferences for Modi to interact with the diaspora while he was banned from entering the country. Barai even led a contingent of over six hundred and fifty Indian-American activists to campaign for Modi ahead of the 2014 Lok Sabha election.

Sharad Mohan, a colleague of Satsangi at Nymbsoft, a software firm, and Subroto Gangopadhyay, a cardiologist and OFBJP member based in Houston, both donated over ten thousand dollars to Americans4Hindus. Subhashini Chokkalingam, a physician based in Illinois, contributed a further \$10,500. Mihir Meghani, another member of the American Sangh affiliated with both the VHPA and the HAF, donated another \$5,000, despite the fact that Meghani simultaneously chairs and contributes heavily to HAPAC.

Americans4Hindus has donated to and worked closely with Ritesh Tandon, a Republican running against the Indian-American Democratic Congressman Ro Khanna in California's seventeenth congressional district. On 29 August 2019, Khanna had responded to an article in *The Caravan* by tweeting that "it's the duty of every

American politician of Hindu faith to stand for pluralism, reject Hindutva, and speak for equal rights for Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhist & Christians.”

The Sangh was outraged by Khanna’s condemnation of Hindutva. Led by Japra, the Sangh searched eagerly for a challenger to Khanna. They found one in Tandon, who has openly admitted that his campaign was kickstarted in response to Khanna’s criticism of Hindutva, and has spoken of his family’s ties to the RSS with pride. Japra, who founded and convenes an annual extravaganza called Festival of the Globe, mobilised his extensive network in support of Tandon, who has called him a “top-notch supporter.” Tandon’s campaign was launched at Japra’s house, and received multiple donations from a host of members affiliated with the Sangh Parivar, including Chokkalingam and Meghani.

By June 2020, just seven months after its founding, Americans4Hindus had raised \$84,517. Almost ninety percent of this amount came from the eight individuals named above: Japra, Bhayani, Satsangi, Mohan, Gangopadhyay, Chokkalingam, Barai and Meghani. The figure was more than four times larger than the \$17,380 raised in 2020 by the HAPAC, which has been in existence since 2012.

However, it would be naïve to reduce the HAPAC’s clout to its financial pull. Like the HAF, its currency of choice is not merely financial power, but also social capital. Both organisations have played key roles in legitimising Hindutva in mainstream circles of the Democratic Party, protecting the Modi regime at a time when the Democratic Party’s progressive wing has grown increasingly concerned about India’s deteriorating human-rights record.

<https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/how-the-american-sangh-hopes-to-win-the-2020-elections/attachment-16092>



A horrific spell of anti-Muslim violence in Delhi that left 53 Indians dead, most of them Muslims coincided with Trump's visit to India. IMTIYAZ KHAN / ANADOLU AGENCY / GETTY IMAGES

**ON 5 AUGUST 2019**, the Modi government unilaterally revoked Article 370, a section of the Indian Constitution that had given the state of Jammu and Kashmir a degree of autonomy. The state was split into two union territories, and the Kashmir Valley was placed under lockdown. The region's internet was disabled, almost every Kashmiri politician of note was placed under preventive detention and thousands of Kashmiris were arrested. Human-rights groups have been unanimous in their condemnation of the Indian government's actions. Kashmiris in the United States, unable to reach their relatives for months, urged their representatives to take action.

On 21 November, Rashida Tlaib, a Democratic congresswoman from Michigan, introduced House Resolution 724, calling for the United States to condemn human-rights violations in Jammu and Kashmir and for Kashmir to be granted the right to self-determination. While the resolution made little headway, Tlaib's initial effort foreshadowed impending trouble for the BJP government on the international stage.

Less than three weeks later, Jayapal, an Indian-American Democratic congresswoman from Seattle, introduced House Resolution 745, which called on India to end mass detentions and the communications blackout in Kashmir. While it used softer language than Resolution 724, it remained an embarrassment for the Modi regime. More importantly, Jayapal was not satisfied with a symbolic resolution; she was committed to putting the resolution to a vote in the US Congress.

A Kashmiri-American advocate and lobbyist told me that the HAF worked aggressively behind the scenes to obstruct Resolution 745. When Jayapal first approached Eliot Engel, the chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee, asking for the resolution to be listed for markup, she was told that her resolution needed to find a Republican co-sponsor. It took her office over two months to find one. The Kashmiri-American advocate believes this was largely because of the HAF.

“We’d meet with one member, and they’d say ‘100 percent, we’re happy to do this,’” the Kashmiri-American advocate said. “And then, a day later, they’d call us back and say, ‘Oh no, we have to pull out.’ And what we found out was that during that day in between, the Indian lobby got to them and threatened them to back down.”

I asked the Kashmiri-American advocate to clarify what he meant by the “Indian lobby.” “This is where it gets super murky,” he replied. “There are actual lobbyists for the actual Indian government ... Those are the guys who arrange these meetings with Jaishankar and Engel and Brad Sherman”—who chairs the subcommittee on Asia. “Those guys are on the Hill themselves all the time, on behalf of the Indian government.”

But the Kashmiri-American advocate was also struck by how groups such as the HAF, while a domestic organisation, repeated the language of the Indian government. “The talking points that come out of HAF are almost carbon copies of the exact talking points the Indian government itself uses,” he said.

According to the Kashmiri-American advocate, it took Kashmiri advocates months to find a Republican co-sponsor. Eventually, a group of Kashmiri-Americans based in Kansas were able to convince Steve Watkins, a Republican congressman from the state's second district, to co-sponsor the resolution. But even after Resolution 745 found a Republican co-sponsor, efforts to advance it were regularly thwarted.

At first, the HAF worked behind the scenes, the Kashmiri-American advocate said, to have the resolution's language diluted. After hearing objections from both the HAF and representatives of the Indian government, Engel proposed edits to the language of the resolution. Jayapal's office also agreed to compromise following some back and forth, and Engel agreed to bring the resolution up for markup. He requested that Kashmiri advocacy groups keep news of its introduction under the radar until it reached the desk of Congress. But news of the resolution was leaked to the HAF, and it swung into action. I attempted to reach Engel and sent his office queries over email, but received no response.

"We kept our mouths shut, because that's what we were told to do," said the Kashmiri-American advocate. "But the Friday before the week when it was supposed to come up for debate, somehow HAF heard that the resolution was going to come up. They sent out an action alert to all of their members ... They launched a full campaign pummeling every member of Congress, telling them to oppose bringing up this resolution for debate." In a newsletter to its members, the HAF thanked them for responding to their action alert: "On Monday we asked you to contact Congress to stop Rep. Jayapal's anti-Hindu, anti-India bill and it worked. The House Foreign Affairs Committee didn't add H. Res 745 to the agenda this week," it read. I reached out to the HAF for comment, but received no response.

Resolution 745 was never brought up for markup. Although it has 67 co-sponsors, it has not been debated in the House of Representatives.

A few months later, in April 2020, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom released its annual report. For the

Modi government, its findings did not make for pleasant reading. The USCIRF chose to designate India as a Country of Particular Concern, a status reserved for governments that have “engaged in or tolerated systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom (https://www.state.gov/frequently-asked-questions-irf-report-and-countries-of-particular-concern/).” The 2020 report marked the first time India had received such a rating in over 15 years; between 2002 and 2004, India had been marked a CPC following the pogrom in Gujarat that killed over a thousand people, mostly Muslims.

There had never been much love lost between the USCIRF and Delhi in the past; the committee has reported that its delegation to India had been denied visas on multiple occasions—going as far back as 2001—and it has adjusted its own fact-finding methodology to rely on the testimony of on-the-ground human-rights activists, lawyers and organisations.

The Indian government responded to the latest report with scorn. Its foreign ministry spokesperson, Anurag Srivastava, remarked that the USCIRF’s “biased and tendentious comments against India are not new. But on this occasion, its misrepresentation has reached new levels ... We regard it as an organisation of particular concern and will treat it accordingly.”

The USCIRF’s reports carry no legal weight, but they are required to be considered by the US secretary of state. For human-rights groups advocating for religious freedom in India, the 2020 report was an important step in building momentum for their work. However, there remained little hope that the committee’s recommendations—which included targeted sanctions against offending individuals and organisations—would be adopted by the state department under Mike Pompeo.

Still, efforts have been made to keep the pressure on India. In mid September, 14 US senators—ten Republicans and four Democrats—wrote to Pompeo urging him to accept the recommendations.

The move sparked an immediate pushback from the HAF. The organisation responded with a letter of its own, urging the senators to reconsider. It accused the USCIRF of being infiltrated by a Pakistani intelligence agent and argued that the organisation's "misrepresentation of India is a symptom of a much deeper problem stemming from that organisation's lack of transparency and, quite frankly, lack of expertise, made worse by personal agendas driven by part-time, politically appointed Commissioners, who very often lack the requisite credentials or experience."

This was not the first time the HAF had sought to intervene in the working of the USCIRF. In early March, it had submitted another [letter \(https://www.hinduamerican.org/press/uscirf-misinformation-citizenship-amendment-act\)](https://www.hinduamerican.org/press/uscirf-misinformation-citizenship-amendment-act) accusing the committee of spreading misinformation about the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, claiming that the law was inspired by humanitarian concerns, and not, as many have described it, as a way to strip Indian Muslims of statehood. HAF's attacks on a US government-appointed commission have taken many in American political circles by surprise, but revealed the extent to which the Sangh Parivar is willing to go to protect the Modi regime.

**JUST A DAY BEFORE** the Delhi pogrom began, Rakhi Israni, a member of the HAPAC's board of directors, was interviewed by *NPR*. It was interested in Trump's coziness with the Modi government and the ways in which it could impact Indian-American voting patterns in the US elections.

When the host pointed out that progressives among the Indian-American community had criticised the Modi regime, Israni's response was bristly. "These are highly emotional topics for Hindu Americans," she said. "And the stance that a lot of the liberal left within the Democratic Party is taking, I think they may just serve to push more Hindu Americans away from the party." But, despite her comments, Israni has only ever donated to the Democratic Party.

Israni, who runs an education tutoring firm, has a long history of working with the Sangh, one that stretches back to her time in the Hindu Student Council. Founded in 1990 as a project of the VHPA, the HSC was designed to inculcate a new generation of Sangh leaders in college campuses across the United States. Although its presence on campuses has since waned, the HSC was one of the American Sangh's most successful projects. Many of its student leaders now occupy key positions in the Sangh—including in the HAPAC.

In 2003, Israni was the program director for the Dharma Conference, an event co-organised by the VHPA and the HSC that brought over a dozen RSS and BJP members to the United States. Among those invited were Murli Manohar Joshi, a former BJP president; veteran RSS leaders such as Balwant Apte and Dattatreya Hosabele; and Seshadri Chari and Tarun Vijay, editors of the RSS's mouthpieces *Organiser* and *Panchajanya*, respectively.

Mihir Meghani, the chair of the HAPAC—and also a donor to Americans4Hindus—is one of the HSC's most visible alumni. In 1995, Meghani was among multiple HSC members who attended the Vishwa Sangh Shibir in Vadodara. Organised every five years by the RSS, the Vishwa Sangh Shibir is an international camp designed to train Hindus living in the diaspora in the politics of the Sangh. Meghani has since written in awe of Hindu nationalism, and went on to co-found the HAF in 2003.

Like Meghani, Ramesh Bhutada also attended the Vishwa Sangh Shibir in 2010. His son Rishi, also a product of the HSC, is the HAPAC's treasurer. Sheetal Shah and Nikhil Joshi, the final two members of the HAPAC's board of directors, are on the leadership team of the HAF.


This new generation of Sangh leaders has also proven to be particularly skilled at maintaining the public image of groups such as the HAF and the HAPAC. Back in 1998, Rishi Bhutada wrote a note to the VHPA's governing council, expressing his frustration with the way in which the American Sangh found itself liable to being sidelined by criticism. "The only way we can counteract this is by focusing on



public opinion,” he wrote. “We may think we are doing good, but if the public hates us, all our work is for naught.”

Despite the careful effort put by its leaders into using deliberately mainstream language, the HAPAC’s relationships with the Sangh are as deep as those of its Republican-leaning counterpart. Between 2012 and 2020, the HAPAC has raised nearly two hundred thousand dollars; of that amount, over seventy percent of its total receipts have come from the Bhutada and Meghani families.

Multiple other names associated with affiliates of the RSS can be counted among the HAPAC’s donors. Shekar Reddy, an HAF advisor and a regular organiser of VHPA conferences, donated \$5,000. Donations have also come in from Sant Das Gupta, another VHPA member; Sudhir Sekhsaria and Subhash Gupta, members of the HSS; and Sankrant Sanu, a Sangh ideologue who spoke at the World Hindu Congress. Sanu has defined Hindutva as “Hinduism that resists” and infamously labelled critics of RSS relief work in Kerala as “insects” and “cockroaches.”

 (<https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/how-the-american-sangh-hopes-to-win-the-2020-elections/attachment-16093>)



Organised by the VHPA, the World Hindu Congress in the United States in 2018 included multiple RSS ideologues, including Mohan Bhagwat, whose presence led Tulsi Gabbard to publicly withdraw from the event.

**ON 18 OCTOBER**, the HAPAC partnered with the HAF and VHPA to organise another debate on Hindu-American issues. Israni was

appointed to moderate. Ajay Shah, who heads media outreach for the VHPA, was in charge of timekeeping. The relationship between HAPAC and HAF was even clearer: Rajeev Singh, a member of HAF's National Leadership Council, made introductions on behalf of both parties.

Jay Kansara was again in attendance, one of three speakers arguing for the Trump campaign. Alongside him were Srilekha Palle and Utsav Chakrabarti, also affiliates of the VHPA. In a space where allegiance to the Sangh could be assumed as given, Kansara and his other pro-Trump colleagues went on the offensive against their Democratic counterparts, accusing them of being poor partners to the BJP.

Chakrabarti was explicit in connecting his support for Trump to the President's unwillingness to censor the Modi regime. "More than 20 million Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs were given a second chance in life by the Trump administration, by keeping their hands-off approach from the CAA and the removal of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir," he said, before accusing the Biden-Harris ticket of tokenism. "No amount of namaste, no amount of greetings, no amount of tweets by some Hindu who supports you will ever take that away from the Trump administration."

Kansara later followed suit, attacking Biden for his role in strengthening the United States' relationship with Pakistan, and later insinuating that this was linked to Biden's past criticism of the CAA and NRC. "President Trump is actually supporting India's position in the region to be the refuge for Hindu minorities across the region, including Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, whereas in your campaign's webpage, he censures India for providing that place of sanctuary, of refuge," Kansara said. "Biden has been absolutely destructive to Hindu communities across the world."

The pro-Biden speakers on the panel were pushed on the defensive. Nish Acharya, one of the panelists, tried to downplay Biden's statements on the issue. "Vice President Biden made one comment on the India situation, and that was just a very short comment," he said.

But Chakrabarti continued to press the issue. He lambasted the Democratic Party for “going hammer and tong against India,” derided the resolutions against the CAA and the NRC that have been passed in six US city councils, and argued that Biden campaign has created more hinduphobia through their “vile and poisonous campaign.” At one point, Chakrbarti shouted, “The Biden side is not educated, and it still continues to go on its crazy path of activism.”

Acharya, eager to defend Biden, felt it was increasingly urgent to demonstrate that the Democratic Party would be a loyal ally of the BJP. He went so far as to claim that the BJP was a progressive party that offered a natural fit with the positions of the Democratic Party. “Major commentators who are not partisan have also said that prime minister Modi will get along just as well with President Biden once he’s elected on November 3 as he has in public with President Trump,” he said. “I’d like to point out that the BJP agenda in India actually is fairly progressive, in line with the Democratic Party.”

Mihir Meghani, wading into a stream of comments in the live chat on Youtube, added his opinion in support: “Obama did nominate for Modi for Time Person of the Year.”

The debate was revealing of the ways in which groups such as the HAF and the HAPAC rely on an often perplexing set of maneuvers. Despite the fact that their narrative tricks often crumble on examination from both the Right and the Left, they are central to their functioning—and to their power.

Groups such as HAF and HAPAC have been keenly aware of the fact that they occupy spaces where voice and representation have become the key currencies of minority mobilisation in American politics. As the American polity struggles to come to terms with its racist history, mainstream spaces have opened themselves to minorities in very specific ways. Minorities can articulate specific claims relevant to them, and then demand representation as a means to address those claims. These claims—even if they involve their own forms of discrimination, such as when pro-Hindutva groups pursue what they

present as Hindu interests—can seldom be challenged directly without accusations of racism or discrimination. This allows the HAF and HAPAC to tailor their discourse to American anxieties around racism and diversity, and whitewash the violence advanced by Hindutva ideology.

Carving out the category of “Hindu-American”—as opposed to its alternatives, “Indian-American” or “South Asian-American”—has been a key step. It allows a group such as the HAF to emphasise that Hindus in the United States have unique concerns, but also, more insidiously, to erase the relationships between many Hindus and other South Asians. This politics ignores the solidarities between various brown communities in the United States, many of whom face shared forms of racism. Simultaneously, it also makes invisible the presence of discrimination within South Asian communities, particularly along the lines of religion and caste. By constructing a paradigm in which Hindus are solely victims of racism perpetuated by a white majority, the HAF is able to present the Hindu-American community as a single, undifferentiated entity, blind to caste and theoretically incapable of responding to racism with any racism of its own.

Meanwhile, as the Sangh has worked to establish itself among Hindu-Americans, it has also perfected the task of monopolising the very Hindu-American representation around which most political claims are made, allowing it to cloak the advance of Hindutva as a furthering of Hindu-American political representation.

<https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/how-the-american-sangh-hopes-to-win-the-2020-elections/attachment-16094>



The American Sangh has worked tirelessly to rehabilitate Modi's image in the United States. The Indian prime minister enjoys popularity in the Indian diaspora. PIB

**JOE BIDEN'S PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN** released a policy paper in June outlining its agenda for the Muslim-American community. It also contained Biden's first official statements on majoritarianism and human-rights violations in India. The campaign urged the Indian government to "take all necessary steps to restore rights for all the people of Kashmir," and expressed Biden's disappointment with the CAA and the NRC. In its statement, the campaign noted that the two measures "are inconsistent with the country's long tradition of secularism and with sustaining a multi-ethnic and multi-religious democracy.

The American Sangh reacted immediately. While Americans4Hindus responded with scorn, the more telling response came from the HAPAC, which lobbied aggressively in Democratic circles—where it still carries legitimacy.

On 26 June, the HAPAC tweeted that it held "strong concerns" regarding the Biden campaign's statements and notified its followers that these concerns had been communicated directly. It urged the campaign to return with "important clarifications," and expressed that it expected a "comprehensive Hindu American community agenda."

Hindu-American interests are presented as synonymous with support for the Modi regime's policies, including the CAA, whose discriminatory nature has been condemned by human-rights groups and multiple UN bodies.

Earlier in the same week, Trump signed an executive order imposing restrictions on H1B visas and green cards—an issue that directly affects many Indian-Americans. Just four days after its statement to the Biden campaign, the HAPAC tweeted another public statement, expressing that it was “deeply disturbed” by President Trump’s executive order. The HAPAC argued that the move would “harm Hindu families, inject uncertainty into the lives of H1B visa holders, and impair America's economic recovery.”

Meghani later pointed out that the order “discriminates against Hindus” by limiting the number of Indians who can become citizens. For HAPAC, a similar case of discrimination on the basis of both religion and national origin in the case of the CAA, however, was not merely tolerable, but laudable.

In the face of the HAPAC’s criticism, the Biden campaign has chosen to adopt a strategic silence on its foreign-policy positions with India. But it has not walked back its statements. Multiple political insiders associated with the campaign and the broader Democratic Party confirmed to me that the campaign was unlikely to comment further on the issue until the end of the election. In its outreach to South Asian communities, the Biden campaign has also worked strategically, operating through a series of affiliates operating under the umbrella of “South Asians for Biden.” This includes religious groups such as “Hindu Americans for Biden”—co-chaired by Balaji— but also outreach directed at specific groups, from Sri Lankan-Americans to Gujarati-Americans. These affiliates are allowed to reach out to communities on their own terms, but cannot make formal statements on behalf of the campaign, a strategy that has allowed the Biden campaign to negotiate disagreements within South Asian communities without committing to any promises outside its manifesto.

Still, the HAPAC has continued to apply pressure in other ways. On 18 September, days after the release of the AAPI survey data that showed a ten-point movement in Indian-American votes from the Democratic to the Republican Party, HAPAC tweeted another announcement.

“Breaking: @JoeBiden campaign becomes first major party presidential campaign in U.S. history to complete Hindu American issues questionnaire,” the tweet read. It again took as axiomatic the HAPAC’s claims to representation of the Hindu-American community.

Both the Biden and Trump campaigns were sent the questionnaire, and Kansara, despite disaffiliating himself from the HAF, was asked to convince the Trump campaign to complete it. Kansara refused, arguing that the questionnaire was biased against the Trump campaign. The Biden campaign, eager to resuscitate its image among Hindu Americans, happily responded.

In the first part of the questionnaire, dealing with domestic policy, the questions put forward had a strong progressive bent: the HAPAC expressed its desire to tackle hate crimes against Hindus, its commitment to combating climate change and, in the aftermath of nationwide protests against anti-black police brutality, its support for police reform. It asked the Biden campaign whether it shared the same commitment—in many ways, all easy answers for a Democratic candidate.

In the second part of the questionnaire, related to foreign policy, the HAPAC asked the Biden campaign only two questions. The first dealt with the rights of religious minorities in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The second urged the Biden government to “stand with India and call upon Pakistan to stop its sponsorship of terrorism.” In a tweet released alongside the questionnaire, the HAPAC explained that it did not consider any other questions suitable for the questionnaire, writing: “Note: @hinduampac did not ask either campaign about about #CAA, #Article370, or any issue internal to India - for which no U.S. administration has locus standi to comment. @hinduampac remains concerned that these issues were unfavorably mentioned in the campaign's Muslim agenda.” Evidently, the HAPAC was ready to

deploy the language of non-interventionism in select cases, asking for certain types of foreign engagement, while proscribing others.

In both cases, the Biden campaign chose to respond positively, but in a language that was universal. It affirmed its commitments to the rights of refugees and religious minorities, and expressed their condemnation of all forms of terrorism. Again, the campaign was committed to avoiding any additional language, and chose to repurpose statements from its Indian-American community programme.

**DEMOCRATS IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES** opened a series of formal inquiries into allegations of abuse of power against Trump in late 2019. At the head of these proceedings was Raja Krishnamoorthi, a previously little-known Democratic congressman from Illinois.

Krishnamoorthi took a strong line against Trump. “President Trump is alleged to have coerced the Ukrainian government into manufacturing dirt by leveraging US aid to Ukraine. And this is something that's deeply disturbing, a gross abuse of the office of the president and very damaging to our foreign policy and national security,” he said in an interview to NPR.

According to a former staffer at his office, the impeachment proceedings against Trump catapulted Krishnamoorthi into the national limelight and came to define his public image. “The way that Congress works is that there is a general first-come-first-served policy —there’s an understanding that certain members are expected to take the lead on certain issues,” the former staffer said. “For Krishnamoorthi, his entire public persona is all related to criticism of Trump.”

Just a week before his interview with *NPR*, however, Krishnamoorthi had found himself on the same stage as Trump. Both were attendees at Howdy Modi, and Krishnamoorthi was the only Indian-American member of Congress attending. The event made visible the ways in which the Sangh Parivar’s lobbying straddled partisan divides. The



American Sangh has mobilised its financial and organisational resources to exert disproportionate political influence, portraying their interests as those of Hindus writ large.

Elected to office in 2016, Krishnamoorthi has received a significant amount of support from some of the Sangh's most prominent donors. This has included many individuals affiliated to Americans4Hindus and the Republican Party, including Chokkalingam and Barai—whose family has donated almost thirty-seven thousand dollars to Krishnamoorthi. The Bhutada family has also donated \$39,000, while Gitesh Desai, another OFBJP activist who travelled to India in 2014 to campaign for Modi, has also made multiple donations.

Krishnamoorthi has also been the biggest recipient of donations from the HAPAC. Despite its key role in protecting the Sangh's legitimacy in the Democratic Party, the HAPAC has not limited itself to the defensive. HAPAC has donated to dozens of candidates and formally endorsed nine, including the likes of Sri Preston Kulkarni, whose links to the Sangh Parivar have complicated an already close race in Texas' 22nd Congressional District. But with Tulsi Gabbard's political fortunes dwindling, Krishnamoorthi—who has received \$30,000 from the HAPAC—has for a while emerged as the new face of the Sangh Parivar in the Democratic Party.

Krishnamoorthi's rise to the top of the Sangh Parivar's list of allies was made clear by another HAF fundraiser held in Houston in April 2018. Krishnamoorthi—like Gabbard in November 2014—was the keynote speaker at the event. Mihir Meghani and Rishi Bhutada were again present, and were commended by Krishnamoorthi for their work.

At times, Krishnamoorthi's association with the Sangh Parivar has been explicit. A year before his appearance at Howdy Modi, Krishnamoorthi spoke at the World Hindu Congress in September 2018. Organised by the VHPA, the WHC included multiple RSS ideologues, including the likes of Mohan Bhagwat—whose presence had led Gabbard to publicly withdraw from the event. In November 2019, Krishnamoorthi participated at an event celebrating the

founding of the RSS, speaking on a stage in front of portraits of the RSS ideologues MS Golwalkar and KB Hedgewar. Krishnamoorthi has welcomed HSS delegations to his office and is also close to multiple executives of VHPA's Chicago chapter, including Shamkanth Sheth, Vinesh Virani and Nirav Patel, all of whom have both donated to and campaigned for him.

Raju Rajagopal, an activist for the group Hindus for Human Rights, corresponded with Krishnamoorthi for multiple months, beginning in December 2019, in the hope of convincing him to distance himself from the Sangh Parivar. Rajagopal had expected Krishnamoorthi to feign ignorance of the RSS. But Krishnamoorthi gave him a frank response. "Well, the bottom line, Raju, is that I cannot disturb my alliance," Rajagopal recounted him saying. "Beating Trump is more important, and I need to return to Congress.

When I reached out to Krishnamoorthi, he called Rajagopal's statement "highly inaccurate," and pointed to his work in support of Muslim-American communities, including his firm opposition to Trump's Muslim bans. Krishnamoorthi argued that he is neither "simply or solely pro-Hindu or pro-Muslim," but simply "pro-American."

Krishnamoorthi's political positions—and in particular, his strong criticism of Trump—indicate the Sangh's willingness to seek power in US politics wherever it lies. Often, its members have explicitly encouraged this opportunism.

On 6 October, the HAPAC retweeted a note from Rajiv Pandit, a Texas-based physician and former VHPA Governing Council member, and another member of the HAF's board of directors who has donated to HAPAC. "When Hindu Americans blindly trust one political party & write off the other, we are being foolish. Look at Muslim Americans – being successful in Democratic circles doesn't stop them from working with Christians in Republican circles," Pandit tweeted.

Pandit's tweet epitomises the nature of the Sangh's quest for power in the United States. Ahead of a defining election for both the United States and the world, the American Sangh has proven itself willing to say all things, to all people, at all times.

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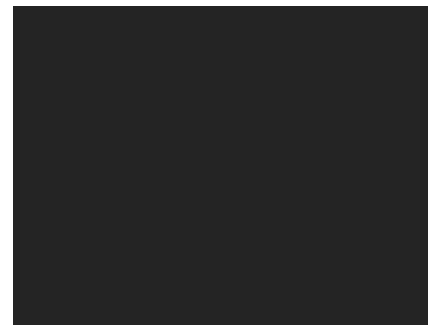


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