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e-Diasporas Atlas

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Abstract

Hindu nationalists defend the advent of a Hindu state in India, while projecting the universal appeal of their ideology. Their very territorialised yet universal claims have been finding particular resonance among migrant populations, particularly in North America. This study strives to go beyond content analyses that foreground voices to focus on the network structure in order to highlight the new transnational practices of nationalism. Two main points emerge from this in-depth scrutiny. On the one hand, Hindu nationalist organisations have transferred their online activities mainly to the USA, where the Indian diaspora is 3.2 million strong and constitute therefore a prime example of long-distance transnationalist nationalism. On the other hand, the morphological discrepancies between the online and the offline networks point to new strategies of discretion developed to evade the gaze of authorities in countries of residence. The recourse to such cartographies thus becomes crucial not only in understanding what sectarian or illegal movements do but also what they seek to hide.

Keywords

diaspora, web, internet, India, Hindu, Hindutva

Mots-clefs

diaspora, web, internet, Inde, Hindou, Hindutva

In the past two decades, the end of the Cold War, the proliferation of transnational actors in international relations and the popularization of the World Wide Web, has led to a radical re-evaluation of the centrality of states and national territories in the shaping of politics. It has now become commonplace to underline the transnational nature of nationalism as well as the organic relationship between nationalism and print (Anderson, 1992). Some political scientists, drawing on Anderson's work on "imagined communities" (Demmers, Hylland Eriksen, Chan, Adria, Saunders), now also highlight the relationship between nationalism and cyberspace. The impact of the Web on transnational communities is open to divergent interpretations. For many scholars, the Web provides a platform for voices of dissent and minorities, and contributes thus to pluralism and to the democratization of political debates. This stance feeds upon few practical cases and is characterized by a certain degree of optimism that is itself, often, the by-product of a certain technological determinism (Negroponte, MacLuhan). Other scholars like Hylland Eriksen consider the Web mostly as an efficient tool for the preservation of national identities and for the dissemination of national causes, particularly amongst migrant populations (Hylland Eriksen, 2007: 7; Farivar, 2011).

Online Hindu nationalism provides a particularly pertinent case-study to assess the relationships between migration, technology and transnationalism. It showcases the particular sociology of a mobile Hindu nationalist elite and provides a starting example of how an existing offline network is translated online. Moreover, it sheds new light on the articulation of a global movement's universalist ambitions and a brand of nationalism, whose aim is the advent of a Hindu state in India. *Hindutva*, literally "Hinduness", refers to the ideology of Hindu nationalists that equates "Indian identity" with "Hindu identity" and according to which blood attachments prevail over the right of the soil. *Hindutva* ideology, which envisages national belonging in ethnic terms, easily incorporates migrants in its nationalist agenda. Moreover, Hindu nationalism has a modernist streak which foregrounds science and technology as pillars of Hindu civilisation. Pro-*hindutva* writings often go as far as attributing modern mathematics and astronomy to the ancient Hindu civilisation. Hindu nationalism is, therefore, both universalist and modernist,

and hence prompts a global online expansion. In addition, this expansion has been amplified by the mass migrations of Hindus to the United States, mostly of engineers and ICT professionals from the 1990s onwards (Upadhyay, 2011: 171) precisely at the time when Hindu nationalism was entering mainstream politics in India (Sundaram, R. 1996: 14, 16). All these factors turned the Web into a crucial arena for investigating Hindutva and "new patriotisms" (Appadurai, A., 1996).

Content analysis of pro-hindutva websites is a useful method to assess variations in discursive strategies of online hindutva. A clear focus on the interactions between websites, on the number of incoming and outgoing links (through which reputation and influence can be measured) and on the "missing" links will also highlight various strategies of promotion and discretion. Such a scrutiny of the nature, scope and modus operandi of online hindutva will therefore contribute to the epistemology of distant mobilisations more generally. The use of visualisation tools actually constitutes a crucial step in understanding new modes of production of the political. It also stresses, beyond the mere notion of voice, the importance of the gaze and of traces. Have traces been removed, hidden or concealed? If yes, why? For whose eyes (the audience) and from which point of view (the source) have they been drawn? Alternatively, whose gaze are they meaning to evade? In order to answer these different questions, this study will first give a brief preliminary history of the main pro-hindutva groups and of their offline network. It will then focus on the two main points that have emerged from the analysis of a corpus of 228 websites: firstly, Hindu nationalist groups are mostly now based in the USA, and hindutva has become an offshore ideology; secondly, the polemical and sometimes even illegal nature of pro-hindutva activities have resulted in strategies of online discretion.

Hindutva and the Sangh Parivar: a very centralized global network

Since the end of the 19th century, Hindu nationalists have always considered that their ideology had a universal appeal. Today, this global scope co-exists with the national and territorial agenda of Hindu nationalism, which vows a deep attachment to the sacred land of India and aims at establishing a Hindu state there. The ethno-religious

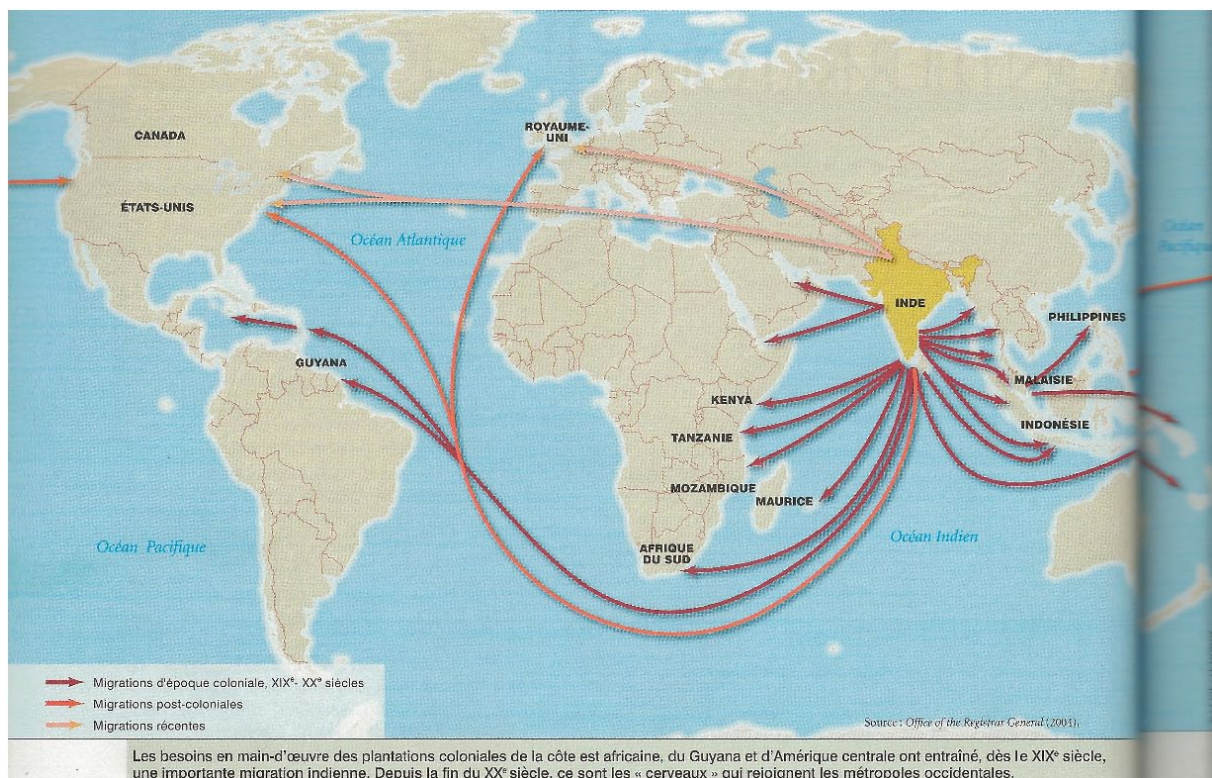
nature of Hindu nationalism is based on a conflation of a people with a civilisation and a territory (the sacred land or *karmabhoomi*). Very early on, this territorial political project acquired a universal dimension. When Vivekananda attended the World Congress of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Hindu nationalists belonging to various streams and organizations were already taking into account the world outside of India's geographical boundaries, beyond the Indian Ocean's *kala pani* "black waters" (beyond which Brahmins risked becoming out-castes).

Hindutva ideology followed in the wake of Hindu migrants around the globe.¹ These ethnic bridge-heads have justified and facilitated the spread of Hindu nationalism overseas because they constituted, according to Hindu nationalists themselves, fragments of India which were at risk of transforming, adapting and evolving abroad. In addition, the difficulties and discriminations

experienced by Hindu migrants lent some credence amongst Hindu nationalists in India to the syndrome of the oppressed majority, the belief that Hinduism was under threat.

Hindutva. Who is a Hindu?, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's seminal 1923 book, first introduced the term "Hindutva" in public discourse. For Savarkar, *hindutva* and the Indian identity coincided, while Hinduness was defined more on ethno-cultural rather than ritualistic lines. The concept of *hindutva* also comes with a particular political agenda, which aims at the creation of a Hindu nation-state. Today, the main champion of the *hindutva* ideology is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Association, RSS), which was founded in 1925 in the state now known as Maharashtra. For the RSS, Indian identity is the same as Hindu identity, and all members of religious minorities – mostly Muslims and Christians – should pay allegiance to the dominant religious community, at least in the public space. This organization functions through a dense network of about 50,000 local *shakhas*, or branches, where cadres provide physical and ideological training to over 2.5 million activists. Over the years, the RSS became the head of a very centralised structure with

1. If one adds the Hindus that have not been counted by the Government of India, particularly in Asia and the Caribbean, to the figures available, one can come up with an estimate of about 25 to 30 million Hindus around the world (i.e., about 85% of the 30-million strong counted Indian diaspora plus the non-counted population who migrated more than 4 generations ago).



The Hindu diaspora.

Source: *L'Atlas des religions*, Hors Série *Le Monde/La Vie*, 2011, p. 78.

numerous specialised offshoots and sections. It has a religious wing (the *Vishwa Hindu Parishad*, the World Hindu Council, VHP), a student wing (the *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* – ABVP – All India Student Association), branches for peasants, workers and even for tribals. It also has its own political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (the Indian People's Party, BJP) (Jaffrelot, 2005). The entire structure is called the Sangh Parivar (literally, “the family of the Sangh”, short for Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh).

The transnationalization of this network initially occurred in an unplanned and contingent manner, through individual initiatives and pre-existing family networks, before becoming part of a planned effort from India. The first *shakha* outside India was set up in 1947, aboard a ship bound for Kenya, by Jagdish Chandra Sharda, also known as Shastri. During the next decade (1947-1957), Shastri and his like-minded friends went to Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia, Tanganyika and Zanzibar, where they opened new local chapters of the RSS, thus setting up the first overseas extension of the Indian network (Sharda, 2008). Through their personal contacts, branches of the Sangh Parivar were also started in Burma, Mauritius and Madagascar (Bhatt, 2000: 559-593).

These East-African beginnings are not insignificant for understanding the establishment of the Sangh Parivar in Western countries because numerous full-time members of the RSS who were going to operate in the United Kingdom and in North America had worked in Kenya. Before 1957, a certain Mr Chamanlal was entrusted by the RSS with its development abroad, with maintaining a register of RSS members outside India and putting them in touch with Delhi in order to expand the network. In 1957, the RSS appointed Lakshman Shrikrishna Bhide as the officer responsible for international relations and made him ambassador-at-large for *hindutva*. Bhide set up his headquarters in Nairobi and undertook numerous tours of Africa and Asia. Until the beginning of the 1960s, Hindu nationalist ideology took root amongst diasporic populations who were the descendants of indentured labourers and “free” migrants (mostly traders and teachers). However, during the 1960s-1970s, the post-colonial Africanization policies carried out in many East African countries as well as the difficulties faced by Indians there in obtaining university seats for their children led to a phenomenon of

re-migration, especially from Uganda to the United Kingdom.

The RSS thus established itself in the United Kingdom under the name of *Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh* (Association of Hindu Volunteers, HSS), an organization that was officially born on 2 July 1966, but that had already been functioning for a few years in an informal manner (<http://hssworld.org/index.html>). The HSS granted exclusive priority to the multiplication of *shakhas*, as the RSS had done in India in the years 1925-1948. *Shakhas* were thus rapidly created in cities such as Birmingham and Bradford. They attracted Hindu immigrants, eager to convey Indian and/or Hindu culture to their children (Burlet, 2001: 13). It was at the time of the Emergency in 1975-1977 that the HSS assumed a new importance in the eyes of the “mother organization”. The RSS was legally banned in India for the second time in its history (the first time was in 1948 following the assassination of Gandhi by a former member of the RSS). The international cells became crucial in keeping the movement and the ideology alive and in collecting funds to that end. A secret registry was kept at RSS headquarters in Nagpur. It listed members who were planning to settle abroad, so that they could be put in touch with one another and encouraged, through Chamanlal, to either join or set up a *shakha* (Goyal, 1979, p 106, n. 91).

Simultaneously, in 1973 M.S. Golwalkar, then head of the RSS, wrote a letter to a young activist who had left India some years earlier for Canada to set up branches of the organization. Four years later, Jagdish Chandra Sharda, founder the Sangh offshoot in Kenya, retired and went to live with his sons in Toronto. The RSS took root in North America thanks to their combined efforts and more generally to a proactive expansion policy combined with migratory opportunities and the diasporic kinship networks of activists (a video presentation of the HSS in the United States can be seen at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LVaoaSGdPPUSGdPPU1feature=related>; and a video showing children being taught martial arts in a *shakha* of the RSS in 2008 in Cupertino, California: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UCdABWrMosU>).

Very rapidly, the global scale of the RSS expansion resulted in the adaptation of the *shakha* routine (both in content and format) so as to appeal to Hindu migrants, amongst whom students in

information technology and engineers figured prominently.² The World Wide Web rose to prominence as an outreach medium towards Hindus settled in the West and particularly in North America. Peter Van der Veer, Arvind Rajagopal, Arjun Appadurai and Vinay Lal have highlighted the deeply elitist nature of recent Indian migrations towards the United States, along with the predominance of Hindus amongst these migrants (Appadurai, 1995: 220; Rajagopal, 1997; Lal, 2003b: 235; Van der Veer, 2008). Most migrants belong indeed to the Hindu fold as well as to the middle class, and a large number of them work in the information technology sector. Ever since the 1990s, they have come to embody, in the eyes of many Indians at home, Indian modernity (Chopra, 2006: 194). This mobile elite, which is both receptive to *hindutva* and familiar with ITCs, was already quite familiar with the Web, as Christopher Helland pointed out. According to him, pro-*hindutva* activists were present on USENET forums as early as 1985 and intended to unify Hinduism, its practices and its rituals, through online media (Helland, 2007). Since then, the Sangh Parivar has contemplated new methods

2. In the same way, the RSS created IT-*shakhas* specially targetted for information-technology engineers in India and which only take place, contrary to traditional *shakhas*, on the weekend and without uniform.

of mobilizing the Web. In 1996, through the Hindu Students Council (HSC, its local student branch in the USA), the RSS launched the Global Hindu Electronic Network (GHEN), which was connected with the platform called Hindu Universe. In 1999, cyber-*shakhas* were launched online, through dedicated websites. The first one was inaugurated in September 1999 from New Delhi. Hundreds of activists from around the world participated. Later on, Skype-*shakhas* and e-*shakhas* were also launched. Two videos in which Shankar Tatwawadi, a cadre sent by the RSS to England in 1977 in order to coordinate different branches of the Sangh, explains the success of the e-*shakhas*, launched in 2008 in the United States can be found at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDhK0XSMW_E and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYDARewh1p4>. He explains, in Hindi, that “when we began the e-*shakhas*, we never contemplated that it would have as large a potential. There are numerous *swayamsevak*s dispersed around the world. It is, thus, difficult for them to maintain links with their original *shakha* (...) There are people in Japan, in Nigeria and also as far as Singapore. And as they live in very far-off places, I believe that they would not have the possibility of meeting each other. The e-*shakhas* make this possible.”

The screenshot shows the e-Shakha website interface. The main content area displays the 'FrontPage' with a welcome message and an announcement for an upcoming e-Shakha event on 20 Nov 2011. The event is titled '***** Upcoming e-Shakha: You are warmly welcome for next e-Shakha *****' and is scheduled for 20 Nov 2011. The announcement text reads: 'Namaskar, We started USA time zone eShakha, which is apparently sayam (evening) eShakha for Europe time zone. As per common understanding, Europe time shakha will be named as Keshav eShakha while USA time zone eShakha will be named as Madhav eShakha. Even though, timings are suitable for the time zones, if anyone can not attend his or her time zone, then he or she is free to attend other eShakha. This gives flexibility as per sechedule, at the same time brings responsibility on our scoulders to attend at least one eShakha. The timings for both eShakha is fixed and as per below.'

The website also features a navigation menu on the right side with links to Home, Shakha, HSS, e-Shakha Requirements, Sharirik, Bauddhik, and Tools. A sidebar on the right contains a 'To join this workspace, request access.' button and a 'Log in!' button. The bottom of the page displays a table with the following information:

Time/Date:	Keshav eShakha
Time is fixed on every Sunday, at 10:00 AM Tampere time (Please note that Non-EU countries time)	
Irvine	Houston
U.S.A. - California	U.S.A. - Texas
Sun 1:00 AM *	Sun 3:00 AM *
Buffalo	London
U.S.A. - New York	U.K. - England
Sun 4:00 AM *	Sun 8:00 AM

In January 2011, more than a decade after the launching of the cyber-*shakhas*, Anil Vartak, full-time member in the international department of the RSS, noted that this method has, in effect, proved to be particularly useful. He cited the example of Scandinavia, where Skype-*shakhas* are particularly efficient and make up for the material difficulties of organizing physical *shakhas* due to the climate and the distances (Vartak, 2011, Interview with author).

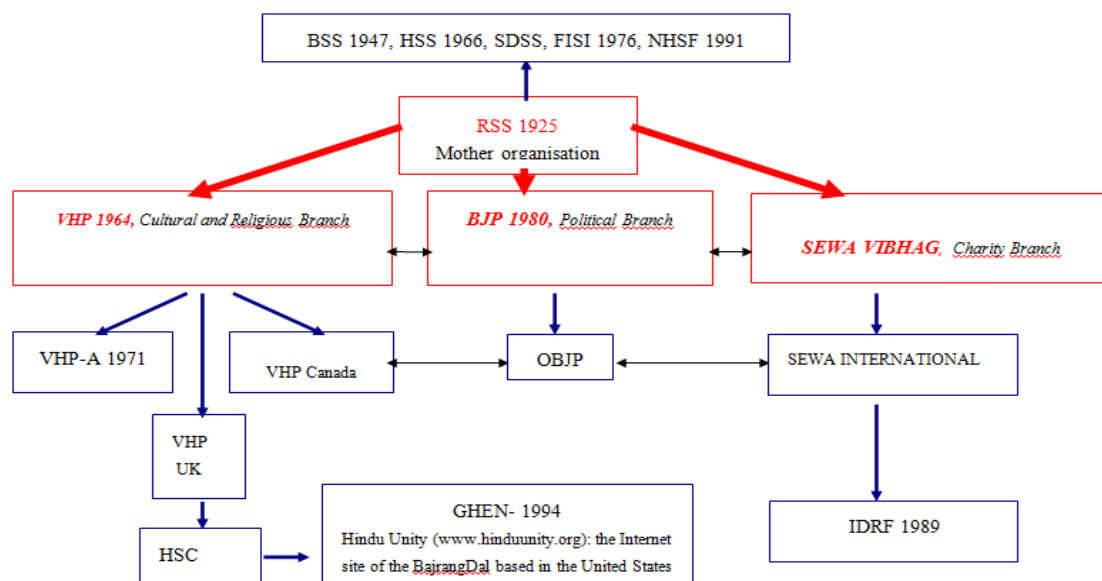
The RSS was quick to learn and tap the potential of the Web in order to bind together a heterogeneous and geographically spread-out community and transform it into an “imagined community”. Now, members of the RSS can, without actually meeting, share the same ideology, participate in debates and synchronically perform the same rituals. The existence of video tutorials, available on YouTube, enable Internet users to conduct the *shakha* rituals (singing, flag hoisting, etc.) in front of the screens at the same time (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWq5ijRgCF8>). In the 1970s, the RSS realized the potential of the Hindu diaspora for its defence and expansion at a time of crisis in India. Twenty years later, it realized that the Web also provided a crucial tool to this end,

particularly in the context of the decreasing number of physical *shakhas* in India (from 51,000 in 2005-2006 to 39,908 in 2011; Pathak, 2011) and of accusations being levied against the RSS for its possible implication in terrorist attacks (in Malegaon in 2006 and in Ajmer in 2007; Jaffrelot & Maheshwari, 2011).

In fact, from the 1970s till the 2010s, the Sangh multiplied its branches outside India and duplicated in most countries the dense network it had already built in India, creating thus a global yet centralized Hindu nationalist network (Therwath, 2005; Jaffrelot & Therwath, 2007; Jaffrelot & Therwath, 2011). One can actually compare the global presence of the Sangh Parivar to fractals since each network of the Sangh abroad reproduces the structure existing in India. Here is a sketch of the global Sangh Parivar network at large and, in the second graph, of the network in the United Kingdom. Of course, numerous independent groups, who share the *hindutva* ideology but are not an organic part of the RSS network, add to the influence and presence of transnational Hindu nationalism.

Was this expansion abroad accompanied by a simultaneous development on the World Wide

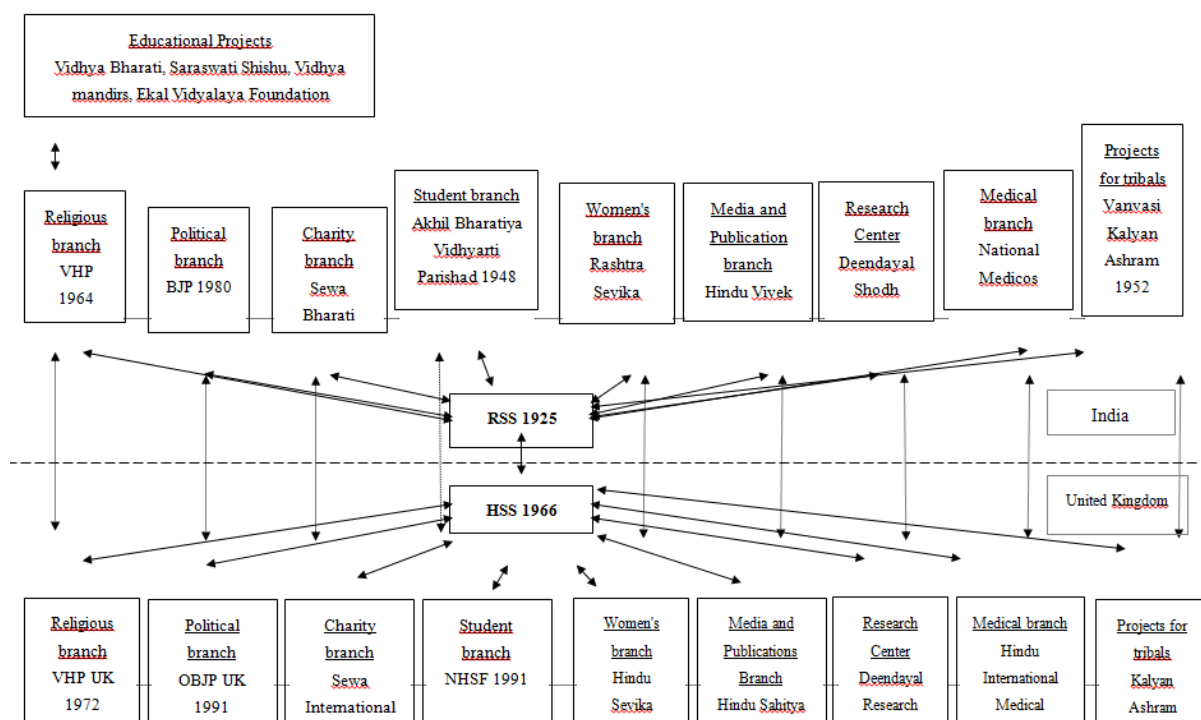
The Global Sangh Parivar Network



In red: Organizations based in India

In blue: Organizations based outside India

The network of the Sangh Parivar in India and in the United Kingdom



Source: According to AWAAZ- South Asia Watch Limited, *In Bad Faith ? British Charity and Hindu Extremism*, London, 2004, p. 10

Web? Is the offline network similar to or different from its electronic avatar? How can the structural differences between online and offline nationalist networks be explained?

An online network centred on the United States

In order to answer these questions, a corpus of 147 websites has been put together, starting from a few core RSS websites that were crawled 4 times till a satisfactory if not absolutely exhaustive list of pro-*hindutva* groups was obtained.³ About 80 additional websites stand out at the periphery of the corpus. These are “frontier sites”: they do not belong to the pro-*hindutva* universe but share a close proximity with the pro-*hindutva*. They can share common concerns, have a dialogue, and are therefore in the same “virtual neighborhoods” to use the Arjun Appadurai’s expression (Appadurai, 1996). This corpus was, in spite of the occasionally violent overtones of the websites it contains, relatively easy to constitute. According to Vinay

3. According to Koenraad Eelst, the Belgian pro-*hindutva* ideologist, these movements claiming the *hindutva* ideology without necessarily being affiliated to the RSS are more and more important outside India (Eelst, 2011).

Lal, Hinduism, decentralized and polymorphous by nature, found in the Web a natural medium of expression (Lal, 2003b: 249–450). Ironically but without contradiction with this statement, it is precisely the existence of an already well-constituted and centralized network that has rendered the constitution of a corpus relatively easy.

This corpus corresponds to the very particular ideology of *hindutva*. It is very dense and consists of a multitude of closely interconnected websites forming an homogeneous group although it is constituted of very different actors involved in different types of activities and referring to different territories (India, the United States, etc.). It is impossible to isolate clusters demarcating themselves from the entire group, which in itself signals the homogeneity of the *hindutva* world beyond the core institutional Sangh Parivar sites. These sites occupy, however, a central position and some constitute “authority” websites while others are “hubs”. After having analysed the morphology of the corpus and its polarization, we will dwell on frontier websites and will attempt to bring out the dominant profile of the actors of the network. Four key points will appear: the centrality of the Sangh Parivar in online *hindutva*,

the delocalization of its activities in the United States, the alliance with Jewish groups that share the same Islamophobic views and the fact that the actors of this ideological network are mostly male.

Five authorities, which naturally occupy a central position in the chart, stand out. They are the websites of the RSS itself, of *Organiser*, of The Hindu Universe, of Hindu Janajagruti Samiti and of Haindava Keralam. They are the principal actors of reference for online *hindutva*. Their presence as authorities clearly indicates the domination of the Sangh Parivar. Indeed *Organiser* is the RSS English weekly; The Hindu Universe is a platform created in 1996 by one of the American branches of the RSS within the GHEN project; the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti is a Hindu advocacy group founded in 2002 by a number of activists belonging to different local branches of the Sangh Parivar (namely the Bajrang Dal and the VHP) in Maharashtra. Moreover, in the "Activities" section of this website, an open letter calls all Hindus to establish a "group of cyber-activists":

As for Haindava Keralam, it is the Malayali branch of the Sangh, i.e. the branch dedicated to

the Malayalam-speaking diaspora from the state of Kerala, in South India.⁵ It is striking that the strongest authority of the entire *hindutva* universe is the magazine *Organiser*, a reference title published in the language of global communication. The other authorities, albeit less prominent and therefore spatially less central, are Hindu Vivek Kendra, Sangh Parivar, Voice of Dharma, Shadow Warrior and Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh USA. The Hindu Vivek Kendra, which publishes and distributes pro-*hindutva* writings, even aims at becoming "one of Hindutva's 'nerve centers' both in India and abroad".⁶ However, neither Hindu Vivek Kendra, *Organiser*, Sangh Parivar nor Haindava Keralam constitute hubs because they mention only few if any outgoing links. Only The Hindu Universe, conceived as a centre for documentation and a platform for both referencing and trade, is simultaneously an authority and a hub. This privileged position is unsurprising since the website is linked to the GHEN, the

4. "Join Cyber Activist Group", Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, <http://hindujagruti.org/activities/serve-dharma/join.php>

5. The importance of Haindava Keralam is also notable and illustrates a new phenomenon: the Sangh, born in Maharashtra and particularly well established in the Marathi, Punjabi and Gujarati communities, is now looking to spread in South India and, through the Malayali and Tamil diasporas, in the rest of South Asia and in South-East Asia.

6. "An Introduction", Hindu Vivek Kendra, <http://www.hvk.org/aboutvk.html>



Page seen on 13 October 2011.



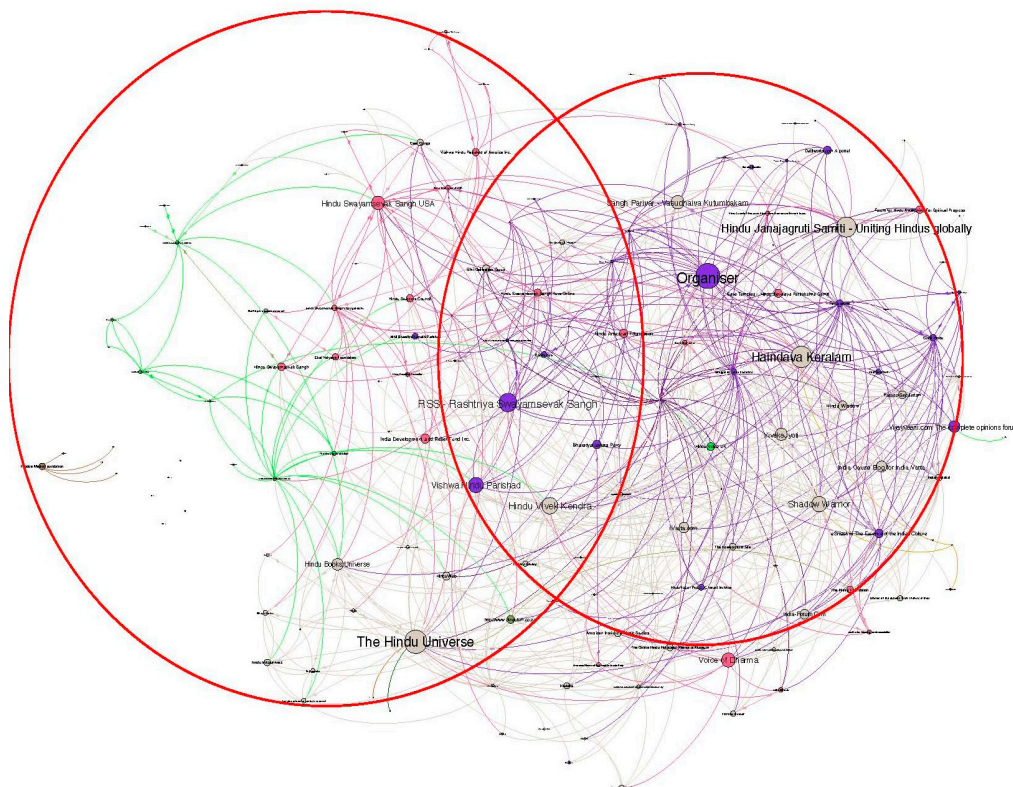
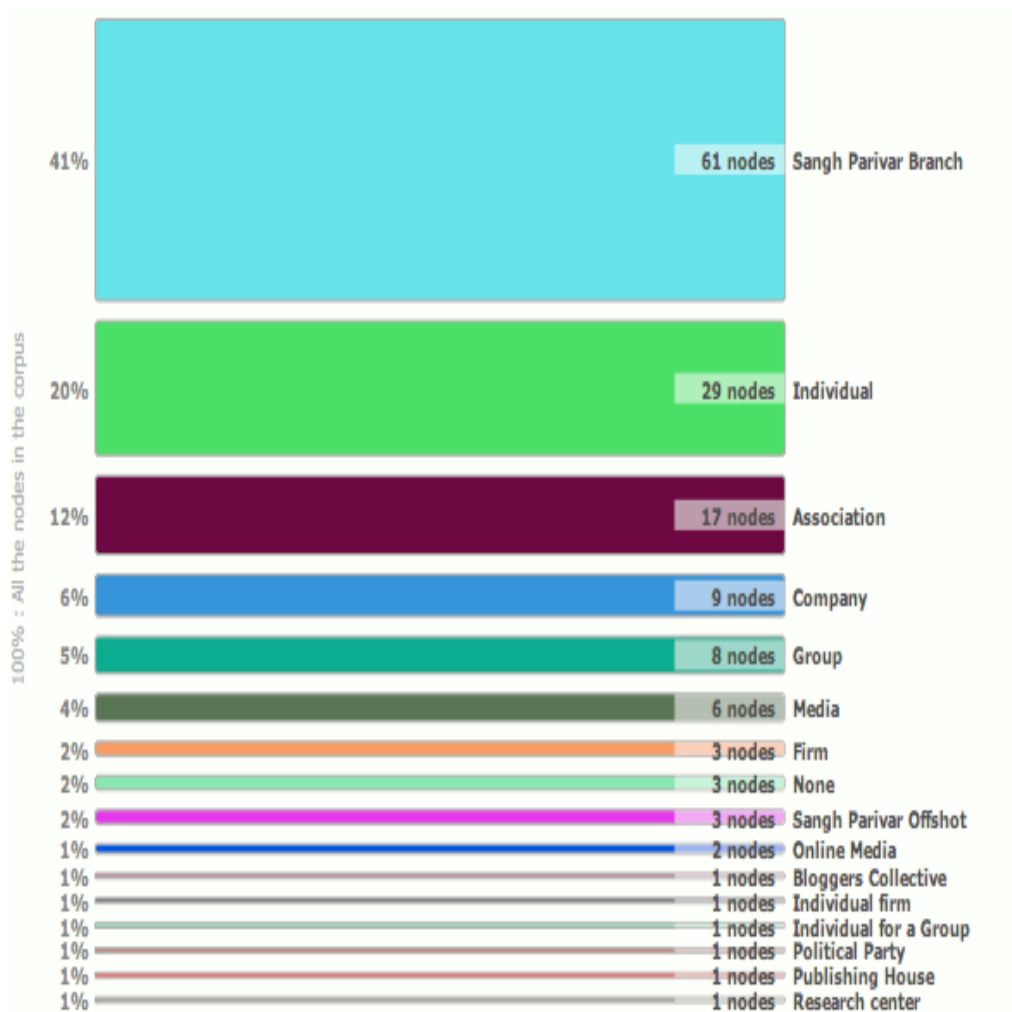
The Hindu Universe, accessed on 13 October 2011.

Sangh flag-ship project online and the core of its online deployment strategy.

Hinduism Resources is an important website. It is a hub, that is to say, a website that cites a lot. Although it is not an authority, since only 4 websites of the corpus refer to it, it refers to 47 websites, all belonging to the *hindutva* community. It thus perfectly fulfils its function of information platform. In the form of a blog, with no author name and no introductory text, it only offers lists of links arranged thematically. The Hindu Online blog is also, with 29 outgoing links, an important hub, whose stated goal is the propagation of the *hindutva* ideology. The banner of the website warns that: "All the posts on this blog are re-postings and post headings point towards the actual posts." Another blog, Dharma Today, is also a significant hub because it refers to websites of the Sangh Parivar and to the websites of affiliated organizations (like the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti). It also mentions the LTTE Peace Secretariat, the Sri Lankan Tamil guerrilla website, and is written in French, in contrast to the overwhelming majority of websites in English within the corpus (only a few websites, relatively isolated from the rest of the corpus, and based in the Netherlands are otherwise not in English). One can conclude from this first analysis that the Sangh Parivar is the epicentre of the *hindutva* ideology, in India

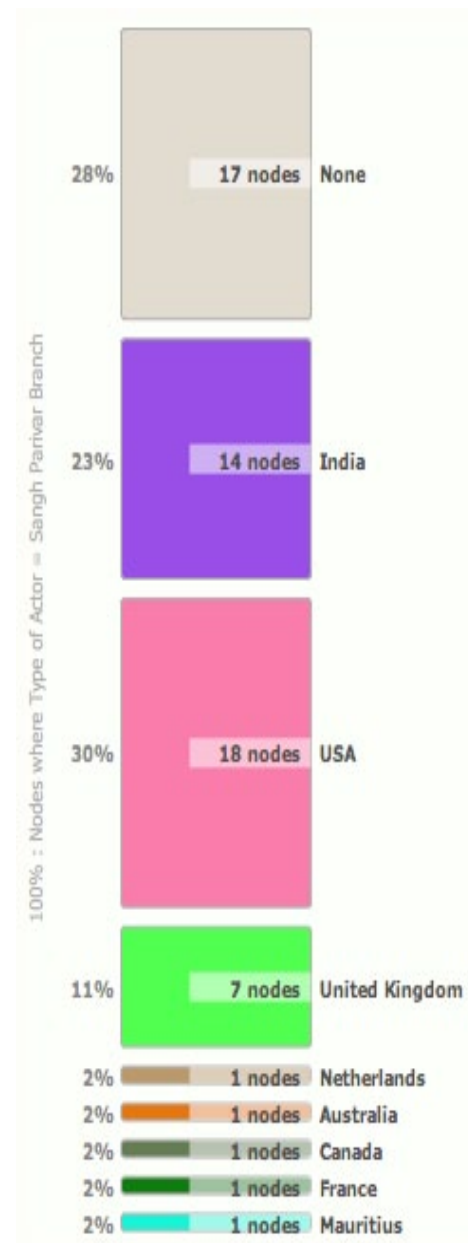
as well as abroad, offline as well as online. It can rely on many groups that will further disseminate its views. These groups either emanate from the Sangh Parivar itself or are in the form of blogs maintained by sympathisers. As the following chart shows, 61 of the 147 websites of the corpus belong to the "Sangh Parivar" category and three to affiliated organisations; i. e. more than 43% of all the pro-*hindutva* websites listed in this study are related to the Sangh Parivar, either institutionally or through private connections.

Although the corpus constitutes a close-knit community and looks more like a cobweb than like a star with a single centre, it nevertheless is strongly polarized. The density of links on the right side of the graph is higher than on the left, where three small, distant and relatively isolated subcommunities stand out. The denser part of the corpus on the right side of the graph, where one can find authority websites and hubs, is composed mostly of websites based in India, maintained not by groups but by individuals and whose main activity is linked to information and news. On the other hand, the less dense part of the graph, on the left, is made mostly of institutional websites of the Sangh Parivar, a few blogs, websites based in the United States and in the United Kingdom, and fewer news websites. Hindu Voice UK is an exception. This "intruder" website, based



in the United Kingdom, is indeed placed far from other websites of the same country in the middle of all the websites based in India, which appears logical because this monthly webzine edited in the United Kingdom largely refers to India and to Indian news. Aside from this exception, one can distinguish, within a general, very homogeneous and coherent graph, two large overlapping blocs: India (on the right) / USA-the rest of the world (on the left).

The Sangh Parivar, born in Nagpur in 1925, thus largely operates online from abroad, namely from the United States, a territory which in turn connects India to the United Kingdom (located even further on the left of the graph). However, all the websites refer to themselves as Hindu, and only very seldom as Indian, which in any case amounts to the same thing for champions of the *hindutva* ideology. An encompassing South Asian identity elaborated in diaspora is mentioned only once (by the obscure South Asian Bleeding Hearts Association group). Online *hindutva* is thus very territorialized and symbolically linked to India, while operating from the United States. The offline North American bias of the Sangh Parivar in the 21st century is confirmed online by the position of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh – USA at the head of authority websites and hubs of the Sangh Parivar category, ahead of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, *Organiser* and the RSS. This ranking, based on the number of outgoing and incoming links and citations, indicates the prominence of the American branches within the Sangh Parivar. Moreover, only 23% of the Sangh's websites are located in India as opposed to 51% abroad (of which 30% are in the United States, the remaining being in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Mauritius and New Zealand).⁷ Anil Vartak cited 10 websites when asked at the RSS headquarters in New Delhi in January 2011 about the sites deemed significant by his organization. All of them can be found in the corpus of this study. The first four (HSS USA, HSS UK, Balagokulam, HSS Canada) that he mentions are located in North America or in the United Kingdom (Vartak, 2011, Interview with author). The RSS website only appears in fifth position. Hindu nationalism, thus, has largely delocalized



7. The remaining 16% cannot be identified through an address in the Contact section or any other indicator.

its online operations outside the frontiers of the potential Hindu state that it earnestly hopes for.

This localization induces specificities at the level of discourse and neighbourhoods with most frontier sites also operating from the United States. Actually three types of frontier websites stand out: American associations located in the institutional neighbourhood of the Sangh Parivar in the United States; generalist conservative American websites like Fox News or neo-liberal think tanks, located in the neighbourhood of blogs and non-institutional *hindutva* websites in India; and between the two locations, a cluster of particularly virulent Jewish diaspora groups opposed to Muslims, like Media Maccabee, Jewish Task Force, ISRAEL 101, Kahane Net, Newkach. Indeed Islamophobia constitutes a common trait between the pro-*hindutva* groups, often via generalist platforms like *HinduUnity.org* (which has an "Israel Forever" category) or via Kashmiri Hindu groups, and hard-line Zionist groups.

Beyond the common Islamophobic discourse, this neighbourhood, which juxtaposes pro-*hindutva* groups and extremist Jewish groups, is particularly interesting in that it puts into contact diasporic groups from different regions but both operating from the United States. In his comparison of the online political discourse of pro-*hindutva* and pro-Dalit groups, Rohit Chopra pointed out that the two movements, both based in the United States, adopt the dominant discourse of human rights and use a common vocabulary, along with the victimology of genocide. This is done in order to ensure their promotion, their online respectability, their accessibility to a non-Indian audience as well as to foster links with other diasporic groups and (Chopra, 2006). The Hindu Holocaust Memorial Museum website, with its use of a terminology generally associated with the Shoah, illustrates this tendency very well:

In the post-9/11 United States, Islamophobia, albeit less consensual, has been added to the



**"ALLAH" IS THE MUSLIMS
TEACHER AND THE "HOLY"
KORAN IS THEIR GUIDE.**

Are you willing to fight back and protect
Hinduism and Judaism? They will not stop
until you teach them a lesson, learn the
techniques and information at
<http://www.hinduunity.org>

Hindus and Jews must unite as one and fight
oppression and terrorism for our people
around the world!

Rahul

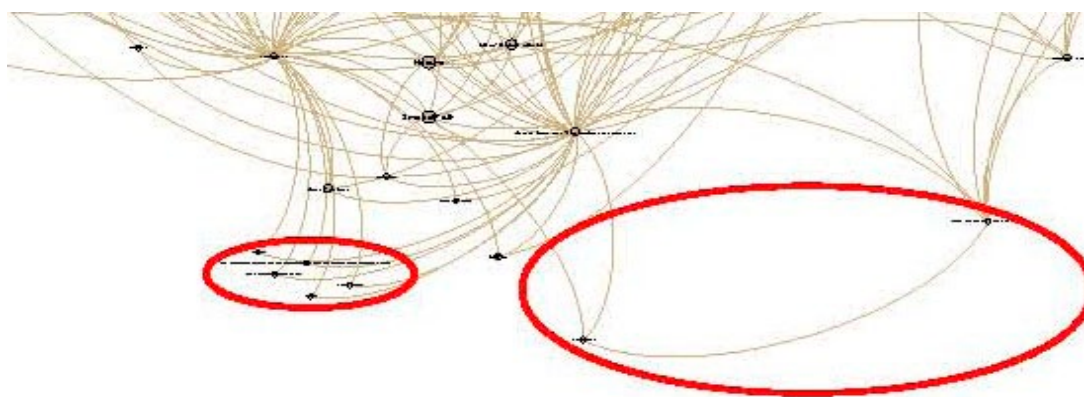
An Islamophobic pamphlet calling for an alliance between Hindus and Jews edited by the Hindu Unity website and uploaded on the Hindu Rashtra website. (<http://www.hindurashtra.org/hindujewposter.jpg>). Page accessed on 13 October 2011.

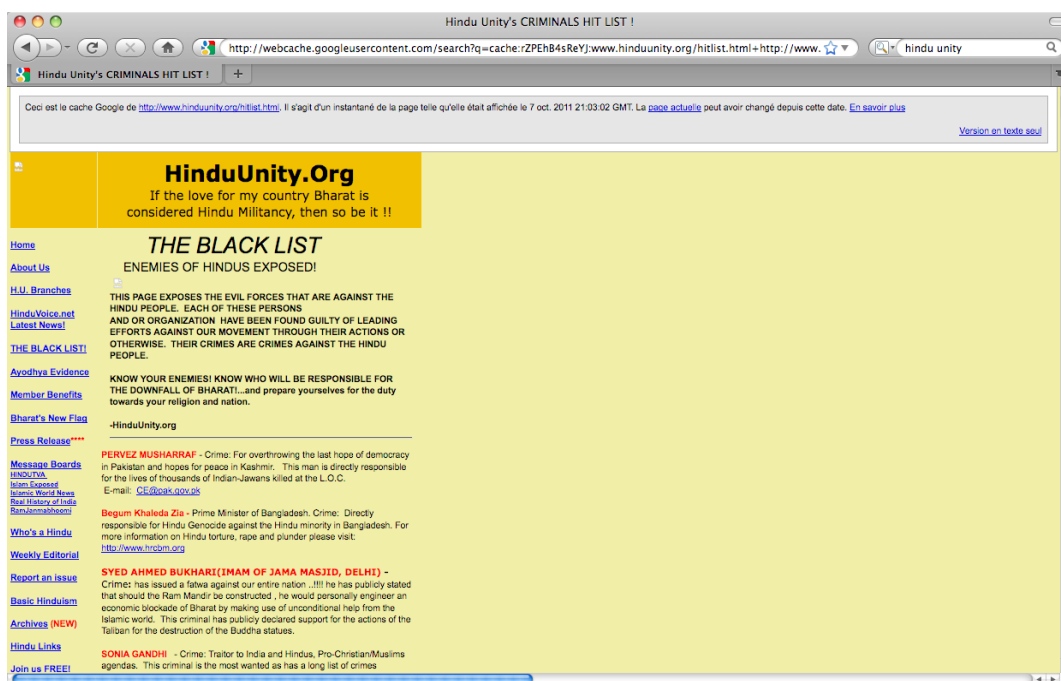


Page accessed on 13 October 2011.

dominant “global primordialism” (Chopra, 2006). The idea of a majority besieged by Muslim enemies, which is particularly vivid amongst Hindu and Jewish extremists, finds a specific resonance amongst migrant populations who are truly minorities (Therwath, 2007). The graph below proves the existence of links that are often mentioned but otherwise difficult to show, between extremist Jews and extremist Hindus in diaspora in the USA.

The case of Rohit Vyasmaan, born in 1970 and living in Brooklyn, is worth mentioning: he was a member of the Bajrang Dal (militia of the RSS) and founder of Sword of Truth, one of the most virulent websites of the *hindutva* universe. Sword of Truth does not have its own URL since 2008, but the entire content is archived on many websites, among which *HinduUnity.org*. There, one can still access a hit list of people who should, according to Sword of Truth, be attacked or even killed. They are accused of being “Anti-Hindu”, Muslim, communist and/or secular.





Page archivée par Google et consultée en cache le 13 October 2011.

Rohit Vyasmaan also heads *HinduUnity.org*. Initially based in Maryland, Sword of Truth was banned in 2001 by American authorities. In 2004, Sword of Truth and *HinduUnity.org* were blocked by Indian Service Providers on police order, following terrorist attacks in Bombay the same year, but *HinduUnity.org* continued to broadcast from the United States. Since 2000, *HinduUnity.org* has been registered in East Norwich in the State of New York. Rohit Vyasmaan renewed the domain subscription for the website in April 2009 and till January 2015.⁸ The very existence of this website, in spite of being shut down in India and having a sister organization banned in the USA, begs for further enquiry. The *New York Times* provides the answer: Vyasmaan's *HinduUnity.org* website was given shelter by a server belonging to the Hatikva Jewish Identity Centre, which harbours a certain number of extremist Jewish websites like Kahane (listed amongst frontier websites). For Vyasmaan, this is only logical because, he says, "we are committed to the same war. Whether we call them Palestinians, Afghans or Pakistanis, the root of the problem for Hindus and Jews is Islam."⁹

The different graphs generated in the context of this study actually confirm four central points.

8. *Whois.net*, <http://www.whoisnet/whois/hinduunity.com>

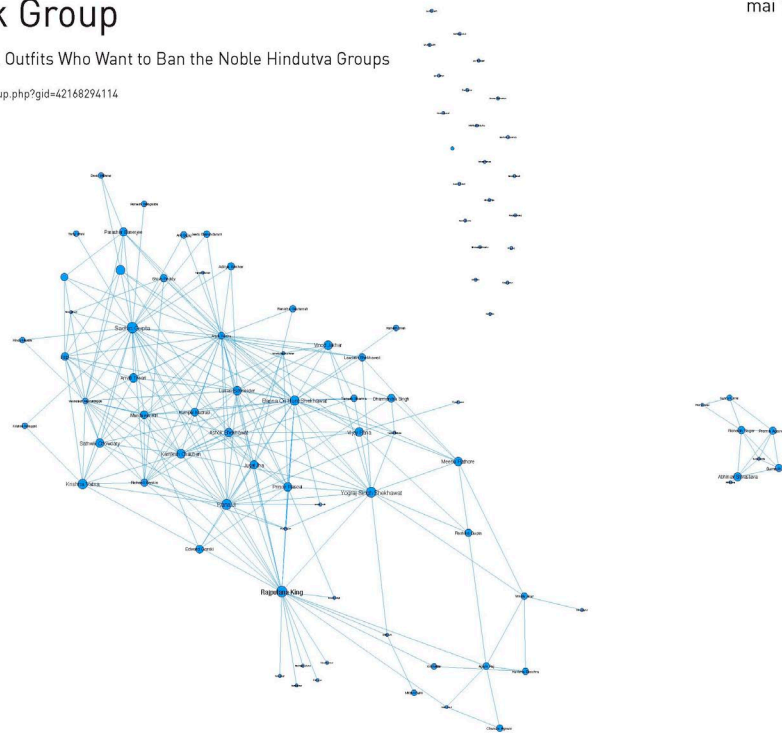
9. Dean E. Murphy, "Two unlikely allies come together in fight against Muslims", *The New York Times*, 2 June 2001. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/06/02/technology/02HATE.html>

First, the Sangh Parivar, online as well as offline, is at the core of the pro-*hindutva* movement. Second, the epicentre of Hindu nationalist forces is in diaspora, and more precisely in the United States. One can therefore witness the process of transnationalization of a nationalist movement whose political project is otherwise strongly rooted in a particular territory. It is on the World Wide Web that the articulation of a territorial project and of a universalist ambition is being elaborated. Third, it is in the United States that different nationalist diasporas come together around Islamophobia. Fourth, actors of the pro-*hindutva* movements, beyond associations and institutional websites, are largely men (and generally belong to upper castes; see Upadadhy, 2011).

The founding members of the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, for example, are mostly men with Maharashtrian surnames and belonging to communities based in Maharashtra and, more specifically, hailing from the city of Chiplun. Moreover, although half of the blogs listed (i.e. more than 18% of the entire corpus) are anonymous, the other half is invariably maintained by Internet users with a male name. These sociological data, which only hint at male domination and begs for further study, are actually consistent with findings obtained after a count of pro-*hindutva* blogs conducted by the author of pro-*hindutva* blogs on 25 September 2006. At that time, half of the

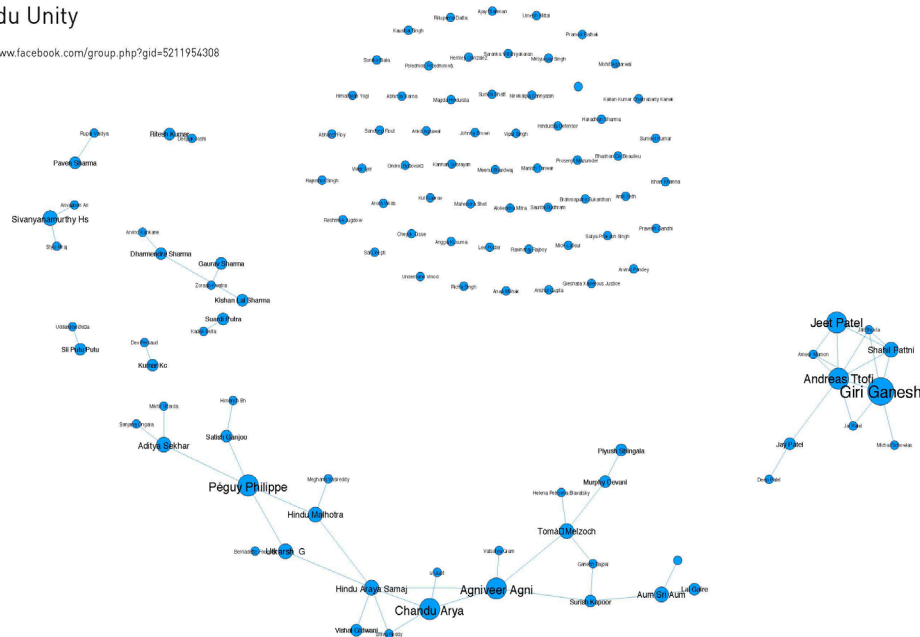
mai 10, 2010

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=42168294114>



mai 3, 2010

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=5211954308>



may be using pseudonyms, men are both more active and more numerous. They constitute about 92% of the total members of each group.

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Projet e-Diasporas Atlas : <http://e-diasporas.fr>

Strategies of discretion: understanding the absence of links

nation real, gives it materiality, materializes it. While the nation used to be, if not imaginary, at least a product of collective will and imagination, hence the success of Anderson's expression "imagined community", it has now materialized itself in websites, in lines of code, on servers. It is traceable and its defenders are identifiable.

This is what we tried to do in the first part of our analysis. But the absences and the gaps turn out to be as pregnant with meaning as visible links, authorities and hubs. As Bruno Latour recalls elsewhere, a network is indeed “an openwork lace where the gaps are more numerous than

[illegible]

the filled-in spaces” (Latour, 2010: 257). Let us therefore now turn to the blanks of the *hindutva* network.

On the far left of the general graph, three micro sub-communities appear, each dominated by a central website: the Vishwa Parishad USA, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh UK and the Hindu Media Foundation.

The latter is a website linked to a press group (mostly television and radio) based in the Netherlands and almost entirely in Dutch. This linguistic barrier explains in itself the isolation of this sub-community from the rest of the corpus. The case of the two former sub-clusters is more surprising when one bears in mind the nodal role that the VHP and the HSS play offline in the United States and in the United Kingdom. It is indeed surprising to see these real bridgeheads of the Sangh Parivar beyond Indian borders isolated from the rest of the pro-*hindutva* groups. This isolation can be construed as the result of a strategy of discretion employed by the Sangh Parivar since the mid-2000s, as much because of scandals as because of the legal constraints existing between the United States and the United Kingdom.

In November 2002, the Sabrang collective released a report exposing the India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF, based in the United States) and, two years later, in 2004, the AWAAZ collective (a movement of defence of human rights in South Asia) published *In Bad Faith? British Charity and Hindu Extremism*, a report exposing the activities of Sewa in the United Kingdom. Both reports deeply upset the communication strategy of the Sangh Parivar, which was thereafter eager to shun all negative publicity (Sabrang, 2002). These two reports, focusing on two associations raising funds for RSS projects in India and unveiling the whole structure of foreign funding of the Sangh Parivar, caused a scandal in India, in the United States and in the United Kingdom. They revealed the structural, hierarchical and human relationships between the USA- and UK-based diaspora and the Sangh Parivar in spite of the Sangh's self-proclaimed independence from non-Indian political parties and of its claims outside India of being non communal. Since the release of these two reports, numerous branches of the RSS, notably on American and English university campuses, have changed their names. Sangh Parivar websites in the USA and the UK have

also adopted a strategy of discretion, suppressing hyperlinks so as to simulate the absence of offline links too. This strategy also stems from the legal constraints that weigh on the RSS in India and on its branches abroad. Section 4 of the Indian Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act of 1976 (FCRA) forbids any political group from receiving contributions from abroad, in cash or in any other form (unless prior agreement is obtained from the Central Government). And in the USA, the law prohibits nationals from receiving funds from and from financing foreign groups involved in sectarian acts and serving other interests than American interests. Diasporic resources must therefore be tapped as discretely as possible.

Ever since 2002, the IDRF has been careful to not only distance itself and actually isolate itself from the Sangh Parivar, with which it nevertheless remains organically linked. Its website does not contain any link to any organization belonging to the Sangh Parivar, and the IDRF presents itself online not as an American group linked to an Indian Hindu organization but as a Canadian charity registered in Toronto by a Muslim man, Mr Rasool Muhammad, whose technical contact is another Muslim, Nabil Harfoush (<http://www.whois.net/whois/idrf.com>). However, nine websites of the *hindutva* universe make reference to the IDRF, amongst which the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh's Balagokulam (the youth section of the RSS in the United States) and Sewa Bharati (the charity branch of the RSS in India).¹¹ Certainly no website can be held responsible for being cited by another organization. But this referencing is not only both ideologically and institutionally consistent, it also shows the proximity of IDRF with the Sangh Parivar, as past actions attest despite current discourse and online discretion.

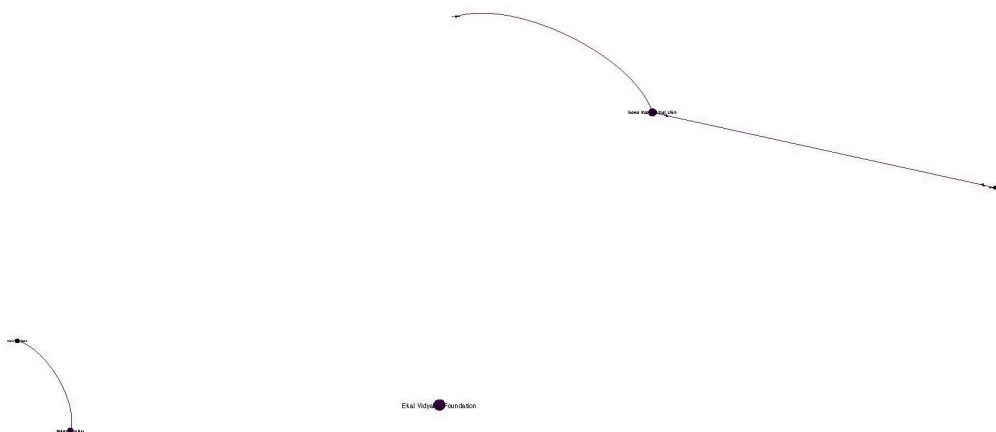
The Sangh Parivar carefully segregates of its different branches, a partitioning that in reality masks a strong degree of cohesion within a centralized

11. The Sangh Parivar has moreover been very discrete in its prohibition of the IDRF and more generally in its opposition to anti-*hindutva* movements. Thus only one website, that of Let India Develop, enables linking the *hindutva* universe to the corpus “South Asian Leftist Mobilisation” established in the framework of the e-Diaspora project. However, it is to be noted that a report, available online, taking the opposite view of attacks of which *hindutva* was the object in 2002 and 2004: Hindu American Foundation, *Hyperlink to Hinduphobia: Online Hatred, Extremism and Bigotry against Hindus*, 2007. Available at: www.hafsite.org/pdf/hate_report_2007.pdf

network in India. The website of the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh UK, for example, has a link only with the HSS and the HSS-USA as well as with Sewa Bharati. In the World Wide Web, no direct link with the RSS or with other branches of the Sangh Parivar is visible. The Indian VHP occupies an important place in the World Wide Web, with 21 references to different branches of the Sangh Parivar and to the RSS itself. However, VHP-America and VHP-UK are referred to neither by the RSS nor by the HSS (international or even local). Moreover, VHP-America, VHP-UK and VHP-Australia do not refer to each other. Of course, none of these organizations makes reference to or is referenced by the BJP, the political party of the RSS in India, which is nevertheless prominent in the entire network. This can be interpreted as a consequence of the legal prohibition made by many host countries on their citizens participating in political activities and political financing in other countries. Moreover, the BJP is not linked online to any other party or political group promoting the *hindutva* ideology, either in India (with the Shiv Sena for example) or abroad. As for the online presence of charity groups, they are split in three with, on one side, a sub-cluster of groups based in the United Kingdom and without any visible links with other countries, on the other side, an American sub-cluster linked to India and, in the middle, a website based in India. This online picture contrasts with the offline reality of a close-knit network of associations:

In the same way, the six lobbies identified in the corpus (4 lobbies *per se* and 2 wider organizations, Sewa UK and Vishwa Hindu Parishad, which also present themselves as lobbies) have no links leading to each other, although they

champion the same ideology and are, in the case of Sewa UK and Vishwa Hindu Parishad, offshoots of the Sangh Parivar. The websites of the four *think-tanks* and the three self-designated research groups, in whose interest it would be to work with each other, also have no links leading to each other. Even the RSS IT Milan blog, whose name means “RSS IT meeting”, does not contain any links leading to the *hindutva* corpus, which in turn does not cite it either. Vikaykumar, the owner of the blog, an engineer from Pune, in the Indian state of Maharashtra, probably chose not to associate himself with *hindutva* organizations in a direct manner, although he clearly shares their ideology. Actually, blogs constitute a very significant part of the corpus, with 20% of the Sangh Parivar websites being in the form of blogs hosted on platforms like Blogspot or Wordpress. Moreover, many key Sangh Parivar websites also have “doubles” and bear the same name (4 call themselves Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, 2 Vishwa Hindu Parishad and 2 Hindu Swayamseva Sangh). All these strategies of discretion were rendered necessary by the controversial dimension of the *hindutva* ideology in India, a communalist ideology that often incites hatred against the Muslim minority. The multiplication of homonym websites and of blogs, whose form enable more flexibility in terms of architecture and administration than an actual website, shows that the few examples cited above are not merely contingent but actually illustrate a larger and more systematic strategy of discretion as much in India as abroad. The case of Rohit Vyasmaan is still revealing in this regard. The Bajrang Dal denies having him as a member and declares they expelled him in 1993. However, the registration of the official website of the Bajrang Dal,

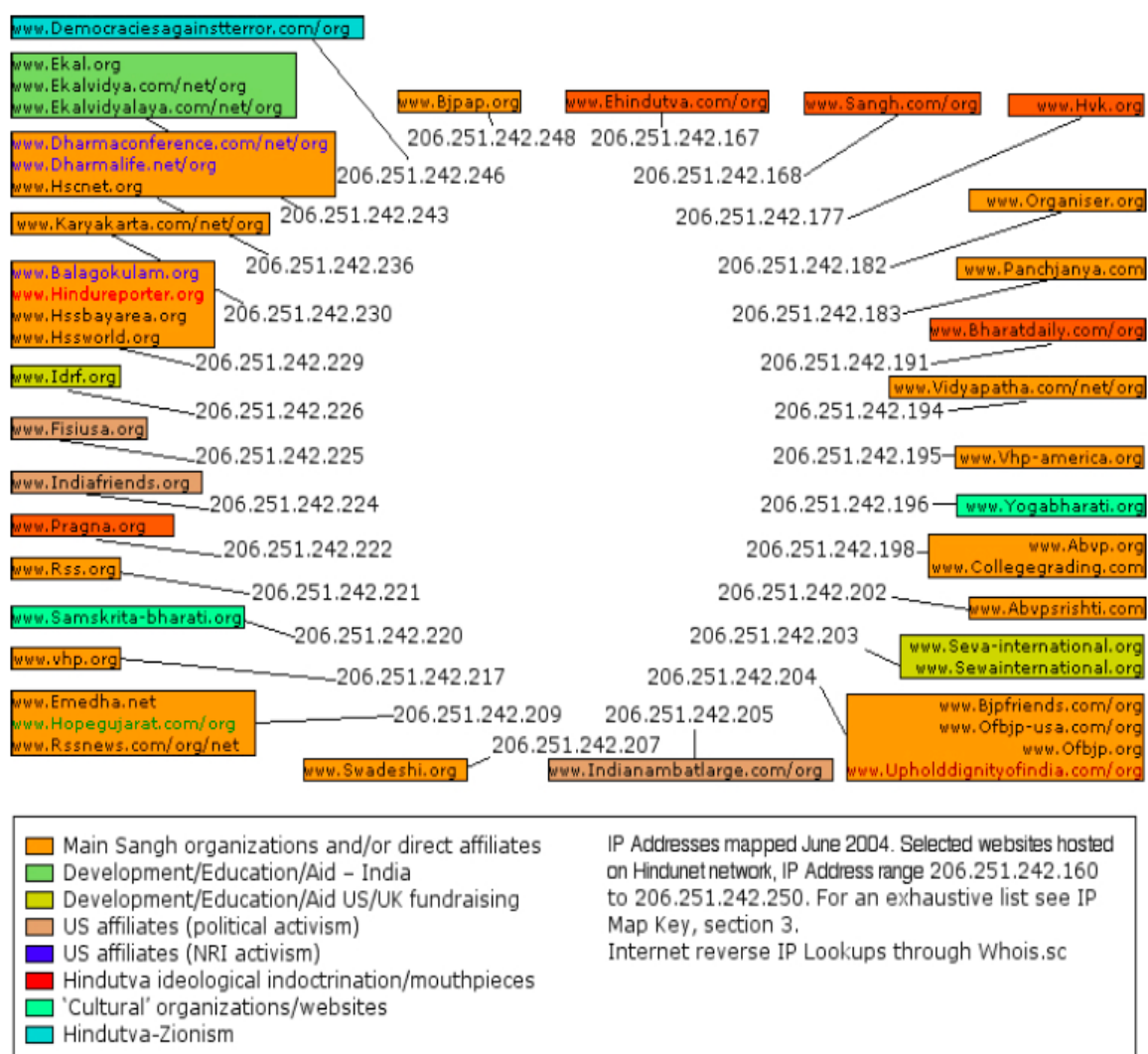


HinduUnity.org, was renewed by none other than Rohit Vyasmaan, in the United States in 2009 and for six years. More than a culture of secrecy, this strategy stems directly from a need not to fall within the ambit of American and Indian laws.

The chart below identifies the IP addresses of principal pro-*hindutva* websites affiliated with the Sangh Parivar in a 2007 report on the Hindu Student Council. It shows that, in spite of the protestations from the Sangh Parivar itself and in spite of its strategy of discretion, the electronic network of the Sangh Parivar is homogenous (it operates from a single centre in San Diego) and ensures a true function of assistance to the offline network.

Analysis of the blanks and absences in the online Sangh Parivar network reveals the network's larger strategy of defensive communication, following two scandals outside India that directly affected its fundraising activities and thus its finances. In reality, the Sangh has not erased all links and traces showing the existence of an online network replicating the offline structure. It simply minimized the possibility, for a non-specialist and for non-Indians and non-Hindus notably, to reconstitute links that unify the Sangh Parivar. For Rohit Chopra, this type of website is aimed at times at "enlightened global citizens" as well as at an intra-community audience (Chopra, 2006: 197; see also Davis, 2010: 14). The fact

The IP addresses of the Sangh Parivar's electronic network.



Source: Campaign to Stop funding Hate, Lying Religiously: The Hindu Students Council and the Politics of Deception; available at: <http://hsctuthout.stopfundinghate.org>, p. 22 and 25-26.

that the British branch of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) has a matrimonial service illustrates this intra-community dimension,¹² while the presence of large American companies like Pepsi amongst the donors of IDRF attests to the appeal to an extra-community audience. One must, however, add a third type of audience, for whose gaze such a partial online network is being put in place: public authorities, which, since the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, seek to supervise the World Wide Web and human and financial transnational flows online.¹³ This audience explains, for a large part, the strategies of discretion put in place on the World Wide Web. The great freedom that *hindutva* supporters enjoy in the United States, notably in their fundraising activities, comes as much from the relative disinterest of public authorities for most non-Muslim groups since 2001, as from the efficiency of strategies of online discretion. Quite logically, intelligence organizations that maintain a surveillance of the Web focus on visible data and traces, and only look to increase their panoptic view of the Web. Grasping that which precisely evades the gaze is more problematic. The World Wide Web becomes thus a potent space for the spread of sectarian, nationalist, and even illegal ideologies.

Conclusion

Many Indian social scientists, influenced by subaltern studies, by post-colonial studies and by the North-American domination of the architecture and contents of the Web, are now eager to foreground the minority and dissenting voices that also use this channel of expression.¹⁴ Ananda Mitra's work on the online presence of South-Asian female migrants in the United States illustrates this tendency. This approach insists on the notion of voice. This study hopes to show that the notions of gaze and traces should also be brought

into consideration when analysing the political usages and impact of the Web. The corpus visualization revealed traces that indicate that the *hindutva* groups, very ideologically attached to the Indian territory, operate institutionally from the United States, and are maintained by an elite, composed of conservative men close to extremist Jewish groups with whom they share Islamophobic views. The analysis of "spaces", "gaps" or "blanks" completes this reading and brings to light strategies of avoidance, circumvention and discretion that lead to a considerable morphological difference between the online and the offline network. Legal and reputational restrictions explain this dissonance. The different audiences targeted – community audiences, generalist audiences and local authorities – should be made aware of this.

Finally, this study could be pursued in three different directions. Firstly, a cartography of online Islamophobia would reveal diasporic electronic neighbourhoods and the adaptation of online discourse according to the country of residence/ of operation. Secondly, a sociology of online *hindutva* activists could be achieved thanks to the in-depth study of website administrators and of members of social networks like Facebook (clearly favoured by pro-*hindutva* movement over Twitter for example) in the wake of the study on online Somalian diasporic socialization on Facebook.¹⁵ The data collected would shed new light on these long-distance activists, their motivations, their needs and their influence. Of course, the pro-*hindutva* groups do not speak for the majority of members of the Hindu diaspora, but they nevertheless have often managed to establish themselves as a key actor in inter-community and even sometimes bilateral relationships. Thirdly, the resonance of this ideology spread online could be evaluated through the "Lipamanian device", a content-analysis technique based on keywords-based crawls and developed by the Digital Methods Initiative team at the University of Amsterdam and also used by Bruno Latour's MACOSPOM (Mapping Controversies on Science for Politics) team. These visualization techniques used so far to assess the impact of scientific controversies could very well be used to

12. "VHP Matrimonial Service", <http://vhp.org.uk/vhpcms/index.php?>

13. In India, the Indian Emergency Computer Response Team (Team of emergency computer response, CERT-IN, set up in 2004 and dependent on the Ministry of Information Technology) had, for example, forced service providers to block many pro-*hindutva* websites after the Bombay attacks in 2006, such as the personal blog of Rahul Yadav, a member of the VHP-A and student at the University of Indiana in the United States.

14. Nishant Shah, "Locating Internets", a workshop organised by the Center for Technology and Urban Planning (CEPT) and the Center for Research on the Internet and Society (CIS), Ahmedabad, 19-22 August 2011.

15. "What can we learn about Somalis from their Facebook networks?", 22 August 2011. Available at: <http://kimoquaintance.com/2011/08/22/what-can-we-learn-about-somalis-from-their-facebook-networks/>

assess the influence of ethno-religious political movements and ideologies.¹⁶

In 1996, Georges Prevelakis remarked that “networks are an inherent and fundamental characteristic of diasporas, they explain their actual resurgence and their growing importance on the international scene” (Prevelakis, 1996: 30). Fifteen years later, with ITC tools increasingly available to activists and governments, and the new relationship to space and territory that mass migrations have induced, cartography and network studies turn out to be more important than ever before for understanding diasporic and nationalist phenomena. Nationalism, and particularly in its long-distance form, expresses itself transnationally in innovative ways. More than ever, political science must therefore look to sociology, geography and even engineering for equally innovative tools.

Glossary

Hindutva: literally, “Indianness. A concept invented by Veer Savarkar in an eponymous work and which refers to a Hindu ethno-religious concept of Indian national belonging.

Kala Pani: the black water that separates India from the rest of the world and which it is forbidden to cross under punishment of losing one's caste.

Sangh Parivar: literally, the “family of the Sangh”, that is to say of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the RSS.

Sewa: literally, “service”. Reference to charity activities in general.

Shakha: literally, “branch”. Called base cells of the RSS in India and of the HSS in the United Kingdom.

Swayamsevak : Voluntary member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

Acronyms

ABVP: Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarti Parishad

ARSP: Antar Rashtriya Sahayog Parishad

BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party

BSS: Bharatiya Swayamsevak Sangh

FISI: Friends of India Society, International

16. <http://www.mappingcontroversies.net/Home/Platform-LippmannianDevice>

GHEN: Global Hindu Electronic Network

HSC: Hindu Student Council

HSS: Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh

IDRF: India Development and Relief Fund

NHSF: National Hindu Students Forum

OFBJP: Overseas Friends of the Bharatiya Janata Party

SDSS: Sanatan Dharma Swayamsevak Sangh

RSS: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

VHP: Vishwa Hindu Parishad

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