



## Negotiating the nation: diaspora contestations in the USA about Hindu nationalism in India

PRIYANKA CHARAN  
MGSU, BIKANER

**ABSTRACT.** *Diaspora positions and identities are being continually constructed, negotiated and reframed. Nevertheless, many studies tend to focus on the ethnocentric, exclusionary and/or nationalistic orientation of some groups. In this article, I will explore variations in the responses of the Indian American diaspora community to Hindu nationalism in India. The article will focus on the opposition of progressive groups to a particularly controversial Hindu nationalist leader, Narendra Modi. They stand in contrast to those US-based organisations that support Modi and his political ideology. The debate between the two sides shows a high degree of political polarisation within the community. This study illustrates the variations in interpretations of nationalism and identity that exist among groups operating in the transnational political space. In particular, it shows us that the political process that articulates these differences can impact policy in the home or adopted country.*

**KEYWORDS:** *diaspora; ethnic politics; Hindu nationalism; India; nationalism*

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### I. Introduction

In recent years, the influence of diaspora groups on the politics of both their home and adopted countries has been subject to increasing scrutiny. A large number of studies have discussed how diaspora groups exacerbate conflicts in their home and/or host countries (Collier 2003; Fukuyama 2006; Sageman 2004; Shain and Barth 2003). Another body of literature discusses how diasporas may be moderating forces (Brainard and Brinkerhoff 2006; Brinkerhoff 2006, 2009; Shain 1999). In both cases, diaspora politics represent efforts to create, highlight and reproduce a transnational, political identity (Adamson 2008). This process necessarily involves contestations and negotiations, where diaspora positions and identities are continually constructed, negotiated and reframed. Nevertheless, many studies focus on the ethnocentric, exclusionary nationalistic and/or violent orientation of some groups (Biswas 2004; Collier 2003; Fukuyama 2006; Huntington 2005; Lyons 2006; Mathew and Prashad 2000; Sageman 2004).

This article will explore variations in the responses of the Indian American diaspora community to Hindu nationalism in India. In contrast to the wide body of literature that investigates the support given by the diaspora to sectarian politics (Biswas 2004; Fair 2005; Kamat and Mathew 2003; Mathew and Prashad 2000), I will explore sections of the Indian American community that have challenged Hindu nationalist politicians in their country of origin. This research does not purport to challenge the validity of the existing studies. Rather, it illustrates an alternate, influential discourse. This article will focus on the opposition of progressive groups to a particularly controversial Hindu nationalist leader, Narendra Modi, currently the chief minister of the Indian province of Gujarat. They stand in contrast to those US-based organisations that strongly support Modi and the political ideology to which he subscribes. The debate between the two sides shows a high degree of political polarisation within the community.

A study of this nature highlights the multiplicity of identities that exist in the transnational political space. Diverse positions exist even when the group in question is clearly defined by an ethnic or nationalist identity. Diaspora activists display a long-distance nationalism; a normative view about the kind of nation their country of origin should be. Such nationalism transcends a defined locality. A long-distance nationalist lives in one country but participates in the politics of their country of origin, even though they may not harbour any plans to return to that homeland (Anderson 1992; Skrbis 1999).

Within a given diaspora, different leaders and organisations may have vastly different interpretations of nationalism, national identity and national norms. Diasporas are likely to adopt hybrid identity based on their

internal demographic or other characteristics, as well as the opportunities that they have been afforded (Brinkerhoff 2009). The activists studied in this article are seeking to mould policy in their country of origin in response to developments in their home country. As such, they challenge the authority of states, but do not necessarily weaken them. While some authors have argued that diasporas are particularistic in orientation because of their allegiance to a particular ethnic or national marker (Adamson 2008), this article shows that diaspora attachments to their country of origin can transcend ethnocentric, nationalist or illiberal tendencies and adopt more inclusive orientations.

The first section of this article surveys the growing literature on diaspora politics. There are numerous, richly detailed studies of the roles that diasporas play in their home countries. However, internal cleavages are recognised less explicitly in the literature. Next, I examine the controversy surrounding a political leader in India, Narendra Modi. I then investigate diaspora responses to Mr Modi, contrasting the support given to him by sections of the Indian Gujarati community in the USA with the opposition he has faced from an umbrella organisation named the Coalition Against Genocide (CAG, <http://www.coalitionagainstgenocide.org>). I then go on to discuss how the two sides to the Modi debate have different versions of nationalism and sovereignty as it applies to their vision of the country of origin. Finally, I summarise the highlights of the findings and discuss possible directions for future research.

### **Understanding diasporas**

In general, the term diaspora refers to a people with a common origin who reside, more or less on a permanent basis, outside their religious or ethnic homeland. They identify themselves, or are identified by others, as part of their homeland's national community (Shain 1999, 1994/1995; Shain and Barth 2003; Sheffer 2003). By their very nature, diasporas challenge traditional notions of citizenship, sovereignty and statehood. Their identities, interests and politics are changing constantly in relation to evolving circumstances and interactions (Adamson 2002; Basch et al. 1994; Brinkerhoff 2006; Faist 2000; Martiniello and Lafleur 2008; Østergaard-Nielsen 2001; Roy 2004; Saint-Blancat 2002; Shain and Barth 2003). Contemporary dynamics of diaspora movements have created new political spaces, which are not reducible to the nation-state (Biswas 2005). Within this space, diaspora groups complicate the notion of sovereignty by both supporting and subverting it. By linking state sovereignty to both national and transnational identity, such a process shows us the multiple forms of normative and strategic interactions that link people across borders (Vertovec 1999).

Diasporas have come to be seen as particularly important actors in the international political system (Shain and Barth 2003). A wide body of literature has examined the linkages between diaspora groups and fundamentalist or nationalist movements, including the conflicts in Israel-Palestine, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka and India (Biswas 2004; Bolan 2005; Collier 2003; Fukuyama 2006; Lyons 2006; Mathew and Prashad 2000). Another body of literature has examined the ability of diaspora networks to provide cosmopolitan and/or peace-building functions (Brainard and Brinkerhoff 2006; Brinkerhoff 2006; Shain 1999). Oded Haklai (2008) probed the intriguing question of why several Jewish organisations in the USA and Canada are making donations to Palestinian social movements that try to promote Palestinian claims in Israel, and argued that this support is influenced by an internalisation of the adopted country's liberal values. However, overall we see relatively little discussion on the policy impacts of the internal cleavages within a particular diaspora group (Biswas 2004; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007; Orjuela 2008).

It should be noted that there are extant studies that have addressed this gap with respect to South Asian (particularly Indian) Americans. Some of these have pointed out the different goals and strategies of Indian American groups that have emerged under a Hindu nationalist identity compared with those that have a secular or multi-religious orientation (Kurien 2007). A recent ethnographic study profiled seven South Asian organisations in the USA and provided a fascinating insight into the conflicts that have arisen within, and between, these groups over questions of class, gender and political orientations (Das Gupta 2006). However, this is still a developing area of study. This study highlights a specific campaign that illustrates differences within the Indian American community and the resulting policy impact.

Because of the transnational space in which they are situated, diasporas can help scholars of international relations understand changes in the relationship between states and globalised, collective identities (Adamson and Demetriou 2007). Diaspora groups rarely, if ever, represent a single set of characteristics. Many immigrants, whether of first or later generations, have multiple social and political relations that cross geographic, cultural and political borders. But while there is a theoretical recognition of the diverse interests represented by diaspora groups, few studies have empirically investigated political disputes that arise within a diaspora group. A few recent studies that discuss how diaspora contestations are discussed, debated and resolved through online forums (Brinkerhoff 2006; Turner 2008) are notable exceptions. Nonetheless, there is a pressing need for more studies on the expressions and outcomes of within-group differences.

In addition to their financial contribution to the home country, diasporas are a normative force, helping to negotiate transnational boundaries of legitimate behaviour. Even though they are physically outside the state,

at an ideational level they are 'inside the people', helping to define what the nation is and what it should be (Shain and Barth 2003). Because diasporas play a variety of roles, ranging from the highly cosmopolitan to the ethnocentric, they can help us challenge the dichotomous perspectives of cosmopolitan and nationalist politics. Diasporas that are engaged in activities linking their home and host countries are involved in transnational politics, in that they are engaged in some form of cross-border interaction and mobility. However, it is important to remember that transnationalism need not lead to a cosmopolitan world-view. Cosmopolitanism is characterised by recognition of political interconnectedness, a sense of global political responsibility and an interest in mediating between different cultures. While transnationalisation may lead to cosmopolitanism, it can also lead to a more insular or exclusionary political orientation (Brinkerhoff 2008; Das Gupta 2006; Mau et al. 2008).

It should be noted that the existing literature points to some significant contentions regarding the meaning and significance of cosmopolitanism in diaspora movements. For example, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a Hindu nationalist movement based in India, has a strong transnational base in the UK and the USA. Such a movement would be viewed by many as being non-cosmopolitan because of its anti-secular, nationalist ideology. Nevertheless, the VHP is a global movement, a product of modern flows of people, ideas and technology. Some authors have argued that such organisations are also cosmopolitan because they enhance the ability of people to choose from co-existing, multiple identities when confronted with changing conditions (Appadurai 1996; Rajagopal 1997; Van der Veer 2002; Vertovec 1999).

Constructivism is well suited to explain how diaspora politics develop. Constructivists urge us to view identity as the product of negotiated relations; in doing so, we discover that cosmopolitanism and nationalism can and do co-exist. Often diasporas will engage in efforts to shape national identity in order to perpetuate their own self-image rather than to gain leverage over material interests (Callahan 2003; Kapur 2007; Shain and Barth 2003). As such, there is a strong normative dimension to their activities. In order to have sustained collective action, it is necessary for people to feel both aggrieved and empowered enough to believe that, by acting collectively, they can redress the problem (McAdam et al. 1996). Such a situation can be created by a catastrophic event. Often, mobilisation around natural disasters, political events or grievances associated with the homeland can activate a strong sense of belonging and encourage collective mobilisation (Biswas 2004; Collyer 2008). As illustrated by Biswas (2004) in her study of Sikh diaspora nationalism, a particularly catastrophic event can be the catalyst for group insularity and radicalisation. As this article will show, an opposite reaction might also occur.

Some authors have argued that diaspora groups can help to shape US foreign policy in constructive ways while also promoting democratic values in their country of origin (Shain 1999). For example, they can enhance the accountability of government decision-making and campaign for a better quality of life by encouraging greater protection of human rights. In doing so, they do not necessarily threaten national sovereignty and can, in fact, strengthen states (Brainard and Brinkerhoff 2006). Others have pointed out that diaspora support for the Hindu nationalist movement in India is one of numerous examples showing that immigrants do not necessarily absorb the values of pluralism and human rights (Brinkerhoff 2008; Lal 1999). In fact, a given diaspora community can express both sides of this dichotomy (Kurien 2007; Prasad 1998).

A recent body of literature has pointed out that diaspora politics constitutes a form of constructed, transnational political mobilisation, marked by competition and internal fracture (Adamson 2008). This is an important contribution to the long-standing debate about whether diaspora identities are based on essentialist or constructed positions (Connor 1972, 1978; Anderson 1983). Adamson (2008) argues that diaspora identities can reflect a variety of positions, but that they tend to be bound by a particularistic, rather than universalistic, orientation, which focuses on a national, ethnic or religious identity. The following case illustrates a different point. Transnational identity networks based on diasporic perspective can, in fact, transcend a particularistic identity even though the network itself is defined by the country of origin. In other words, diaspora groups do, by definition, reflect a particular national identity. However, their political positions might reflect universalistic or inclusive ideals as applied to their adopted or home country. Such networks bring to transnational politics a cosmopolitan dimension that is rooted in the nation-state while still appealing to an inclusive, multi-faceted identity.

### **The American Indian diaspora and its response to Hindu nationalism**

The controversy surrounding Narendra Modi

Narendra Modi has been chief minister of the western Indian state of Gujarat since 2002. He is one of the most controversial and polarising figures in Indian politics today. Modi belongs to the Hindu nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Along with several other organisations, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) or World Hindu Council, the BJP is part of the Sangh parivar (family). Although the Sangh parivar has a diverse range of members, it is, generally speaking, Hindu nationalist in orientation and believes that India should be a Hindu nation. Proponents of this ideology, which is known as 'Hindutva', tend to oppose

groups, particularly Muslims and secular modernists, whom they accuse of threatening the cohesion of the Indian state. The political mainstream of the movement does not intend to enforce any kind of religious uniformity and orthodoxy. Rather, it aims to create political unity among Hindus, thereby creating a cohesive nation in which all groups are assimilated into the Hindu-Indian culture (Biswas 2004; Varshney 2002).<sup>1</sup>

Narendra Modi's notoriety stems from the sectarian, Hindu-Muslim violence that occurred in February–May 2002 in Gujarat. On 27 February 2002, the Sabarmati Express, a train carrying Hindu nationalists who were supporting a controversial temple-building project, caught fire near the Godhra station in Gujarat. About fifty-eight passengers were killed. Initial reports suggested that the train had been attacked by a Muslim mob. A subsequent inquiry, whose results were published in 2006, concluded that the fire was the result of an accident rather than an act of malice. The exact events surrounding the fire remain unclear and are disputed.<sup>2</sup> What is not in dispute is that the Godhra incident contributed directly to the most violent episode in Hindu-Muslim relations in a decade. Shortly after the train caught fire, Hindu nationalist cadres embarked on a violent rampage against Muslims throughout the state of Gujarat. This included looting and burning Muslim-owned homes and businesses, killing Muslims, and sexually assaulting Muslim women. The clashes left at least 1,000 people, mostly Muslim, dead. Some non-governmental organisations put the numbers killed at about 2,000. In addition, at least 150,000 people, overwhelmingly Muslim, were left homeless. Although such clashes are not new to India, the extreme brutality of the killings and the overt involvement of state authorities mark the Gujarat violence as distinctive.

Many Indian and international human rights organisations alleged that the attacks were planned meticulously, almost certainly with the complicity of agencies of the state government. These allegations have been supported by several eyewitness reports and subsequent inquiries, including those by India's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), National Commission for Minorities (NCM) and National Commission for Women (NCW). After the violence abated, Modi swept the state elections despite censure on his conduct from India's Election Commission. On several occasions during his 2002 re-election campaign, Modi was noted to have made provocative speeches against Muslims (BBC 2005; Brass 2004; Citizens' Tribunal Report 2002; Narula 2002; Varshney 2004).

Several years after the violence, Modi remains a controversial figure. In December 2007, in a result that surprised many, he was re-elected as chief minister of Gujarat. Interestingly, in the 2007 campaign he reoriented his image away from sectarian politics. In contrast to his inflammatory speeches of 2002, Modi focused on championing the state's impressive economic growth under his tenure and largely avoided resorting to anti-Muslim rhetoric. His main electoral plank was projecting himself as the leader of an investment-friendly and prosperous Gujarat, a haven for global investors. The chief minister also focused on Gujarati identity and self-respect, and emphasised the fact that Gujarat had become 'free of terrorism' under him. There were some references to his policies against Gujarat's minority Muslim population, but these were relatively less frequent.<sup>3</sup> Gujarat's double-digit economic growth under Modi played an important part in his electoral success. His victory left his supporters overjoyed but disappointed the vast numbers of Indians who hold him responsible for the 2002 carnage (Subrahmaniam 2007).

#### Diaspora support for Modi in the USA

There are an estimated 1.5 million Indian immigrants in the USA. The largest concentrations are in New Jersey, New York, Texas, California and Illinois, with a rapidly growing presence in the Washington, DC area and other parts of the country. A significant number of Indian immigrants – particularly men – are employed in white-collar professions such as information technology, management, engineering, and business and finance. While the demographic profile of the community is highly diverse, Indian Americans are among the wealthiest and most highly educated of minority groups in the country. Some authors believe that the community has become increasingly influential in policy-making, primarily because of their affluence and ability to donate relatively large funds to election campaigns (Biswas 2005; Kurien 2007; Terrazas 2008).<sup>4</sup>

Modi has a strong base of popularity in the USA, particularly among the Gujarati Hindu population. His appeal is buttressed by his constant references to Gujarati *asmita* (pride) and the impressive economic growth in this entrepreneurial province under his tenure, averaging almost eight per cent a year (Anonymous 2007; Sanghvi 2008). Modi's popularity in the USA has been linked to the wide support that Hindu nationalist politics have received from diaspora groups. The Hindutva movement in the USA has been spearheaded by the VHP or World Hindu Council. It takes a variety of different forms, appealing to numerous cultural, political and economic issues. The growth of Hindu nationalism in the USA can be linked to a mix of religious fundamentalism and market-friendliness. The VHP tends to focus on Hinduism identity as a political-social identity, organising cultural events and lecture tours that appeal to a wide swathe of Hindu immigrant communities. Many leading Hindutva organisations focus on their cultural mission and present a moderate rhetoric.<sup>5</sup> This supports the argument that diaspora groups will present a more moderate platform than their



homeland counter- parts in order to maintain legitimacy in the adopted country (Sheffer 2003). The politics of Hindutva reflect a mix of local, national and global politics and a sustained engagement with modern, global forces.

Precise financial contributions by diaspora groups to religio-nationalist groups are very difficult to ascertain. Nonetheless, financial estimates, as well as the presence of Hindu nationalist voices on prominent diaspora websites such as the Overseas Friends of the BJP, attest to the popularity of Hindutva among the Indian American community (Anonymous 2002; Kapur et al. 2005). This popularity has built on the model-minority status accorded to the successful and affluent Indian expatriate community (Mahurkar 2008; Mathew and Prashad 2000). Turning towards an assertive, nationalist and religious political identity is an appealing way for immigrants to address the racism they themselves experience and to assert themselves both in their country of origin and their adopted country. The popularity of this movement in the USA has been the subject of extensive study (Anonymous 2002; Biswas 2005, 2004; Kamat and Mathew 2003; Mathew and Prashad 2000; Rajagopal 2000; Van der Veer 2002).

### **Diaspora opposition to Modi in the USA**

Indian-American progressive groups that criticise sectarian politics in India are examined less frequently (Biswas 2005). A proposed visit to the USA by Narendra Modi gave the diasporic debate about Indian secularism an unprecedented, transnational public space. The violence in Gujarat in 2002 galvanised social justice activists from the south Asian diaspora. Some progressive groups organised fact-finding trips and contributed to relief camps in Gujarat. Recognising the transnational dimensions of Indian politics, a group of US-based scholars and activists launched the Campaign to Stop Funding Hate in 2002. This initiative tracks and publishes information on diaspora funding to right-wing, Hindu nationalist charitable organisations. The Campaign's activities have been the subject of a heated and acrimonious debate within the Indian American community, much of it through online forums (Anonymous 2002; Mehra 2002).<sup>6</sup>

In 2005, the split between the two sides of the debate attained public prominence. That year, the Asian American Hotel Owners' Association (AAHOA), which is predominantly Gujarati Hindu in composition, extended an invitation to Mr Modi to speak to its annual convention. This invitation galvanised anti-Modi activists into action. The CAG, comprising about thirty-eight organisations and ten supporting groups across the USA and Canada, was formed in February 2005 with the specific intention of protesting against Modi's visit. First, the CAG made an unsuccessful bid to have AAHOA rescind the invitation; next, they launched a public campaign against Modi's visit.

CAG members contacted officials within the US State Department and members of the House and Senate Foreign Relations Committees, asking them to deny Modi's visa application (Chatterji 2005). The organisation also made a successful appeal to the political commentator, Chris Matthews, to decline an invitation to speak at the convention. In addition, supported by Amnesty International and Indian activists, the CAG petitioned American Express to withdraw its sponsorship of the convention, with it eventually did. Much of the CAG's activities, including mobilising supporters and organising the campaign, was conducted online.<sup>7</sup>

The CAG's efforts were supported indirectly by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). In 2003 and 2004, the Commission had recommended that India be designated a 'Country of Particular Concern', largely in response to the events in Gujarat. It expressed concern about Modi's visit because of his role in the violence. In March 2005, the US government denied Mr Modi a diplomatic visa. The State Department concluded that, under the Immigration and Nationality Act, the purpose of his trip did not qualify for a diplomatic visa. His existing tourist/business visa was also revoked under Section 212 (a)(2)(g) of the Act. This section makes any foreign government official who 'was responsible for or directly carried out, at any time, particularly severe violations of religious freedom' ineligible for a visa to the USA. The US government held that, as chief minister of Gujarat, Mr Modi was responsible for the failure of the state government to control the violence against Muslims in 2002. While the State Department made no mention of CAG's campaign, the decision symbolised a victory for the Coalition's efforts (Chatterji 2005; Gupta 2005).

The ban on Modi's visit received mixed responses in both countries. In India, the government voiced its objection to the decision on the grounds that Mr Modi was a duly elected political leader (Gupta 2005; Mulford 2005). For the same reason, many Indian Americans viewed the decision as an 'insult to Indian democracy' (India-West 2005; Joseph 2005). Organisations such as the influential US India Political Action Committee (USINPAC) and the Indian American Forum for Political Education (IAFPE) were critical of the decision because it presumed Mr Modi's guilt before a decision had been made by the Indian judiciary (Mozumder 2002). Pro-Hindutva organisations in the USA were outraged at the denial. For its part, AAHOA continued with the event as planned and had Modi speak to the audience through a satellite link (Dutt 2005; Gokhale 2008).

The conflict over Modi has continued over the internet and in the American public space. During Modi's re-election campaign in December 2007, sections of the diaspora community, particularly those of Gujarati origin, mobilised to support him. The website of the Overseas Friends of the BJP (OFBP) published numerous articles praising Modi's economic and security-related achievements. A New-Jersey-based group organised an inter-net campaign to help Modi win re-election (<http://www.supportgujarat.org/>). The website emphasised Modi's administrative efficiency and 'modern' outlook. Consistent with many blog posts, Support Gujarat highlighted his purported success in fighting terrorism. The organisation asked non-resident Indians to encourage their friends and relatives in Gujarat to vote and participate in the campaign (Kurien 2007). The website has a very strong focus on Modi's development goals and makes only tangential references to his position on Muslims or secularism. After his electoral victory in December 2007, Modi had a live session with his US supporters through a video link. He noted the enormous assistance that Indian American Gujaratis offered to his campaign, although he was careful not to mention any potentially illegal financial contribution (The Pioneer 2008).

The issue of a possible visit to the USA was raised again in 2008, when Mr Modi was invited to speak to the World Gujarati Conference. This once again mobilised CAG and its affiliate organisations to campaign for a denial of his visa (Shourie 2008). The call for the ban on Modi's visit was reiterated by CAG in July 2008 and was supported by the USCIRF (US Commission on International Religious Freedom 2008).

### **A closer look at the CAG**

To gain a better understanding of the CAG, we examined one of the community-based organisations that was active in the campaign. The Chicago-based volunteer organisation, the South Asian Progressive Action Collective (SAPAC), is one of the constituent groups of the CAG. SAPAC is a left-leaning organisation that represents south Asians, predominantly of the younger (under 40) generation. It has a pan-south Asian composition, including Indian and Pakistani immigrants. SAPAC's claim to represent a collective south Asian interest challenges the transnational mobility of the India-Pakistan rivalry on the subcontinent. SAPAC addresses a number of different issues, but the violence in Gujarat was, in the words of one SAPAC member interviewed for this study, 'a slap in the face for us'.<sup>8</sup> They viewed the riots as inimical to the intrinsic values of both their country of origin and their adopted country.

The formation of the CAG provided a platform for SAPAC and like-minded groups to express their outrage at the events in Gujarat. The Modi invitation provided both a transnational cause and a domestic platform on which to display the grievances felt about the 2002 violence. The CAG was founded on a very diverse and cross-generational platform, including immigrants from India and US-born individuals. Consistent with the predictions made by McAdam et al. (2001), many of the people in the organisation were already politically active and, crucially, had significant experience in lobbying, the media and other outreach activities.

The internet provided an invaluable tool for the organisation's efforts. The CAG's website and online petition were instrumental in reaching audiences across the USA and Canada. The anti-Modi campaign also reached India, where it was widely publicised (The Times of India 2005). Linkages between different constituent groups were built through conference calls and emails. This marks a change from the traditional methods of harnessing support for a campaign, which often relied on direct contact with the organisers. It was heartening, said the respondent, to see 'how people came together' to address this particular issue. The emphasis on building links between a variety of different organisations showed the extensive use of social capital in forming the movement.

In addition, the networking skills that CAG members already possessed were key to the success of the CAG. Familiarity with advocacy strategies and pre-existing contacts with decision-makers in Washington, DC helped CAG disseminate its message with efficiency. One respondent involved with the campaign pointed out that these efforts, and their success, showed how much the Indian American community has evolved in its ability to publicise political positions and reach decision-makers. The political skills of CAG members illustrate a particularly interesting facet. Some prominent, media-savvy organisations, such as the IndUS Entrepreneurs and USINPAC, have received a great deal of publicity for their promotion of greater economic or security ties between the two countries. In reacting to Modi's visit, progressive organisations such as the CAG perceived an opportunity to also assert their values and positions in order to influence US policy. In the words of one activist, CAG members 'knew how to write press releases, how to reach Congresspersons, knew how to get our voices out there'. So why not, they argued, use these skills to present a view of Indian American transnationalism that is not commonly heard?<sup>9</sup>

Different versions of nationalism and sovereignty

How the Modi dispute played out in the USA illustrates a fascinating dimension of transnational politics, showing how ideological and political differences in the country of origin are transported to the adopted country. The adopted country often becomes a site for the debates that are raging in the home country. Much has been written about the particularistic nationalism represented by the right-wing diaspora groups that have extended their support to Hindutva organisations and leaders (Biswas 2004; Mathew and Prashad 2000). Nevertheless, organisations like the CAG also represent a form of diaspora nationalism. Like that of right-wing activists, the CAG's position is highly normative, grounded in the organisation's perception of what the Indian nation should and should not be. In contrast to the position of Hindutva groups, the CAG's nationalism refers to a perception of India that privileges ideals such as secularism, religious freedom and the protection of minorities. In contrast to the right-wing organisations that support Modi and the BJP because of their market-friendly policies, many of the constituent members of the CAG emphasise the need for social justice, equity and a broad-based notion of Indian national identity.

This contrasts with the particularistic nationalism advocated by many pro-Hindutva and pro-Modi organisations. Such groups tend to emphasise their advocacy of a strong and secure India, based on Hindutva principles. Their positions are often based on more exclusionary principles about who can be viewed as a 'true' Indian, with an emphasis on questioning the loyalty of Indian Muslims. Modi's market-friendly policies are also popular among these organisations (Biswas 2004; Mathew and Prashad 2000). Such organisations are less concerned with questions of equity and secularism.

These varying positions cohabit a shared political space. This space attempts both to define the interconnected values of being Indian and being American and to influence relations between the two countries. In these sense, both positions can be viewed as being cosmopolitan and global, with differing understandings of identity and norms. The contrasting forms of Indian American nationalism emerged out of similar factors: experiences of racism and multiculturalism in the adopted country and grappling with questions of identity. Above all, it represents a shared desire to respond to, and correct, domestic politics in India while becoming influential players in US-India relations. Arising from similar political opportunity structures, active diaspora groups are contesting identities and policies amongst themselves based on the different frameworks that they have adopted. At times, as in the Modi visa case, there is a clear policy impact that is sought, and achieved, by such campaigns.

The CAG's approach to the Modi controversy illustrates some of the novel ways in which diaspora groups are both challenging and strengthening the concept of sovereignty. By opposing the chief minister's visit to the USA, the diaspora groups resorted to a traditional and 'hard' concept of sovereignty – a state's right to control who enters its boundaries. Their demand for a visa denial for Modi was seen as a challenge to India's sovereignty by the Indian government and numerous diaspora organisations in the USA. However, from the perspective of CAG activists, the goal of the Modi visa denial was not to challenge India's sovereignty or legitimacy as a state. Rather, it was to use US sovereignty to assert that Indian politics and society should stand for values that are seemingly opposed by Modi.

The CAG's vision of India differs dramatically from those of pro-Modi and pro-Hindutva organisations. There is no clear winner in these contestations. While the CAG was successful in preventing Modi's visit, he continues to enjoy considerable support among sections of the Indian American community, as does the Hindutva movement. Some authors have argued that the discourse of Hindutva provides the immigrant Indian community with a sense of historical value and social capital (Kamat and Mathew 2003; Mathew and Prashad 2000). On the other hand, the anti-Hindutva movement also builds on social capital and a particular interpretation of both history and the present.

Ultimately, the debate between the CAG and AAHOA was not a difference of experience or opportunity, but one of interpretation. Both groups viewed Narendra Modi and his planned visit as an opportunity to promote a particular vision of India, seeking external legitimacy for their position (McAdam et al. 2001). The CAG's position is deeply rooted in Indian politics. At the same time, it seeks to promote inclusive ideals both within the diaspora community and in the country of origin. The opposition to Modi is fuelled by the belief that his politics are inimical to inclusion and secularism. This explains why, while condemning Modi, the CAG was careful to emphasise that its opposition was not to groups such as AAHOA, but to the policies represented by Modi.<sup>10</sup> The CAG's politics reflects a notion of secularism that seeks to support the separation of religion and state in the interest of religious liberty and equality of free citizenship.<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, AAHOA, Support Gujarat and other pro-Modi groups seek to mould India's identity according to their own normative position. Their support for Narendra Modi is based on the idea that his policies strengthen their country of origin, economically and socially. Organisations like Support Gujarat are particularly appreciative of his efforts to build a 'strong and secure' India. His presence in the USA was viewed as a

reaffirmation of India's growing influence on the international and American stages. Because they viewed the visa denial as unfair and a rejection of Modi's legitimate popularity, such groups continued their support for him both in the USA and in India. Their approval of his market-friendly policies has also underlined much of their campaigns in his favour.

## **II. Conclusion**

This article has explored some of the ways in which Indian American secular activists have challenged the positions of religionationalistic groups in the USA. This study highlights the complex and contradictory political positions that are often held by a particular immigrant community. It shows the ways in which those positions are negotiated in the public space and influence policy in the country of origin or country of residence. Recognising these internal contestations yields an important theoretical contribution to the study of diaspora politics by uncovering the variations that occur as transnational actors negotiate complex identities and values. From a policy perspective, recognising these differences can help the country of residence and the country of origin address the alternative constituencies and resources to which they have recourse. Under certain conditions, the diaspora might be a useful mediator in national debates and conflicts. Tapping into moderate and universalistic diaspora groups, while also understanding alternate constituencies, will help the country of residence to frame foreign policy that represents a more complete understanding of the country of origin. The variations between groups representing a given diaspora help us to understand the differences in national identity and nationalism that underlie their politics. The relative salience of different notions of nationalism will depend on a number of factors, including economic and social contexts as well as the advocacy skills present in a given organisation.

The study questions uni-dimensional analyses of diaspora movements by highlighting some of the internal contestations that have occurred within the Indian American community. For the CAG, a catastrophic event in India provided the impetus for group mobilisation towards a more inclusive view of Indian secularism (Bhargava 2002). This illustrates the fact that suddenly imposed and intensely felt grievances can lead to various forms of activity. Under certain conditions, diasporas might become more exclusionary and ethnocentric. However, some groups might take recourse to a more inclusionary position (Biswas 2004; McAdam et al. 2001). Divergent voices have arisen within the same community, responding to similar sociopolitical contexts and political opportunities, but based on different positions towards the country of origin. This, in turn, has had policy impacts in the area of foreign and transnational relations, depending upon the relative impact of these divergent voices.

The opposition of progressive groups to Narendra Modi highlights the fact that diaspora movements often appeal to normative change, articulating expectations and mobilising energies towards a certain vision of the homeland (Brubaker 2005). The efforts of the CAG are an illustration of how framing a larger issue (the debate about secularism in India and the violence in Gujarat) in a way that focuses individual attention and enables effective coordination (Modi's visit to the USA) can result in successful, cohesive mobilisation (Snow and Benford 2000). The CAG's extensive use of bridging social capital and the networking skills of its members show the extent of political learning that has occurred as the Indian American community has grown in size and influence.

The findings of this article point to several useful directions for future research. Firstly, some members of the CAG were motivated not only by the desire to influence the USA but also to participate in the debate in India.<sup>12</sup> Were they successful in this goal, beyond the immediate media coverage that they received? A clear, causal relationship might be impossible to determine under such complex conditions. Nonetheless, the indirect impact on the discourse and policy in India is a valuable area for study. Modi himself has moved away from the sectarian discourses to focusing on the economic achievements of his state. A 2008 terrorist attack in Gujarat that left about forty-nine people dead did not result in any communal violence in the state. Could a desire to refurbish his image with foreign and diaspora audiences have motivated this change? An exploration of this question would help us to understand the influence of external actors on political motivations and behaviour.

Secondly, supporters of Narendra Modi, as evidenced through websites such as Support Gujarat, are fairly parochial in their orientation, focusing on state-level politics and identity. More broad-based organisations such as the Overseas Friends of the BJP claim to stand for the 'greater' interests of India, but appeal to a particularistic 'Hindu' identity. Such organisations tend not to support inclusive secular policies in their country of origin. Other groups, such as SAPAC, represent a pan-south Asian identity. What role does bridging social capital play in cultivating universalistic values? Are there particular demographic factors, such as age or level of education, that influence these differences? One SAPAC member noted that the organisation itself represents a younger, under-40 constituency; the CAG was able to coalesce a cross-generational support base. Under what circumstances does a progressive movement reach a wider cross-section of supporters? Conversely, which demographic factors propel individuals towards a more exclusionary collective identity?



Thirdly, comparative studies with groups from other countries could reveal interesting patterns in the evolution of diaspora discourse. In a study of diaspora roles in the Sri Lankan conflict, Orjuela (2008) discussed both war-making and peace-making actors. She pointed out that, in this conflict, pro-conciliation groups have tended to be marginalised. However, the potential exists for peacemaking diasporas to assume a more prominent position. Other scholars have argued that online diaspora forums can often help to express and moderate polarising, violent discourses (Brinkerhoff 2006; Turner 2008). Studies that contrast peaceful or aggressive groups across countries will tell us more about the general patterns that determine variations in diaspora behaviour. Comparative studies of the processes by which diasporas articulate their position can help us understand how the boundaries of acceptable or unacceptable politics are established. We can then link such discourses to actual policy outcomes to better understand the effectiveness of diaspora politics. Further studies of this nature will help us address a critical gap in the literature by identifying the factors that determine the diversity of transnational activities (Horst 2008).

Reflecting on Modi's electoral victory in 2008, a writer in India commented:

[Modi] won Gujarat; and India is yet to make up its mind on this man, the very mention of whose name can still launch a thousand arguments. In the years to come, the site where the idea of Modi will be tested will be larger than Gujarat – it will be in the mind of India. (Prasannarajan 2008).

The mind of India is being tested both within the territorial boundaries of the country itself, and among its 'people' who live outside it. Examining such divergent discourses and identifying their links to specific outcomes can help us enrich and enliven our understanding of diaspora identities and politics.

### Notes

1 For more on the history of Hindutva, see Golwalkar (1939) and Jaffrelot (1996).

2 Another inquiry, released in September 2008, cleared Modi of any wrongdoing in the Godhra incident or the events that followed it.

3 For example, in 2003, Modi introduced the Freedom of Religion Act, which made it mandatory for a person to seek state permission before converting to another religion. The Act was clearly designed to prevent Hindus (particularly low-caste Hindus) from converting to Islam or Christianity. The Act was withdrawn in 2006 after being found to be in violation of the Indian Constitution's guarantee of freedom of religion (Hindustan Times 2008).

4 Other authors have noted the significant income and education differences within the Indian American community, and the consequences of those divisions (Das Gupta 2006). A further exploration of these variations is beyond the scope of this study.

5 A notable exception is the virulent [www.hinduunity.org](http://www.hinduunity.org). The support base for this website is unclear.

6 Recent literature has pointed out the instrumental role that the internet has played in diaspora mobilisation and expression (Adamson and Demetriou 2007; Brainard and Brinkerhoff 2006; Brinkerhoff 2006).

7 Interview with CAG participant, August 2008. 8 Interview with SAPAC member, August 2008. 9 Interview with CAG member, August 2008.

10 Interview with CAG activist, August 2008.

11 For more on Indian secularism and its variable meanings, refer to Bhargava (2002). 12 Interview with CAG member, August 2008.

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