

Writing the ‘Deep Story’: A Comparative Case Study of the Rise of Nationalist Extremism in the United States and India

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Abstract

This paper examines the global resurgence of far-right nationalist extremism, focusing on the rise of authoritarianism in the United States and India. Based on the theoretical framework of White Christian nationalism developed by Gorski and Perry (2022), which builds on Hochschild’s concept of ‘deep story’ (2016), the present analysis demonstrates how aspiring authoritarians strategically mobilize exclusionary ideologies to consolidate power. The ‘deep story’ of White Christian nationalism in the United States under Donald Trump can (1) provide valuable insight into the rise of Hindutva in Modi’s India and (2) shed light on the transnational nature of contemporary far-right nationalist ideologies. Central to the analysis is the identification of the building blocks of the deep story: religiousness without religiosity as a marker of ethno-traditional group boundaries; the deification of political figures; nostalgia for a mythical past greatness; and the justification of violence and exclusion as necessary for national preservation. These building blocks construct a narrative of grievance and existential threat in which the dominant group perceives loss of status and projects anxieties onto foreigners and foreignness. Ultimately, the deep story of nationalist extremism functions to secure the consent of the dominant group for the acceptance of authoritarian rule.

Keywords

Hindutva, White Christian nationalism, India, United States, authoritarianism, populism

Introduction

Since the 2010s, many democracies worldwide including the United States and India have undergone backsliding under right-wing populist leadership (Nord et al. 2025). Political actors such as Donald Trump and Narendra Modi have mobilized narratives of civilizational decline, portraying liberal democracy and pluralism as existential threats to rally supporters around exclusionary ideologies rooted in racial, ethnic, and cultural supremacy. These narratives frame dominant groups as victims of demographic shifts, cultural decay, and ‘foreign’ influences to sow divisions and secure consent for authoritarian power consolidation.

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In the United States, this has taken shape as White Christian nationalism, a form of nativist nationalism that legitimizes the supremacy of white Christian males (Gorski and Perry 2022). This ideology blames various groups such as immigrants, feminist movements, Black Lives Matter activists, and transgender people, for the perceived cultural, moral, and political decline of the nation. Through this narrative of grievance and victimhood, Trump and the Republican Party have consolidated political power while undermining democratic institutions.

Similarly, in India, Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have maintained political dominance since 2014 by advancing Hindutva, a Hindu supremacist ideology. Central to this is the constructed threat of a Muslim invasion that is portrayed as a demographic and cultural menace threatening Hindu society. This narrative alleges that Muslim men are seducing Hindu women, seizing land, and committing atrocities, thereby framing such actions as existential threats justifying authoritarian measures. The BJP has employed this rhetoric to weaken judicial independence, suppress political opposition, stifle the media, erode academic freedoms, and entrench authoritarian governance (Chacko 2018; Ganguly 2019).

Although extensive scholarship has examined far-right movements across historical and geographical contexts, less attention has focused on the transnational circulation and recombination of their narrative building blocks. This study expands on the framework of White Christian nationalism developed by Gorski and Perry's (2022), itself based on Hochschild's concept of the 'deep story' (2016) to analyze ideological parallels between White Christian nationalism in the United States and Hindutva in India. By deconstructing the deep story into modular components, the analysis traces how nationalist extremism narratives can circulate transnationally, reassemble with contextual adaptations, to be promoted by authoritarians to undermine democracy.

Framework and Methodology

In *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (2022), Phillip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry borrow the concept of the 'deep story' developed by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild in *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2016), which aims to understand the factors that shape the political preferences of white middle-class Americans in the southern US state of Louisiana. The story presented by Hochschild revolves around feelings of resentment and betrayal that white, middle-class Americans, especially conservative-leaning ones, hold toward those perceived to be undeservedly 'cutting in' the line to achieving the American Dream (Hochschild 2016). According to this narrative, white, middle-class Americans see their opportunities seized by the 'line-cutters,' loosely conceived as minorities,

immigrants, and women (Hochschild 2016). Their frustration with this perceived injustice is further compounded by a feeling of ‘cultural marginalization’ in which their traditional values and conservative worldviews are ridiculed, culminating in the impression that these individuals have become ‘strangers in their own land’ (Hochschild 2016, 221). Consequently, the white, middle-class, conservative-leaning electorate sought political representation that offered the promise to restore proper order in the ‘line,’ one which they found in Donald Trump.

In *The Flag and The Cross*, Gorski and Perry offer a ‘deep story’ of white Christian nationalism in the United States. They advance that American far-right nationalism is one in which white Christians (and predominantly males) view themselves as the true Americans who founded the country on the Christian values that made it a ‘shining city on a hill.’ This makes White Christian males believe in their sociopolitical, economic, and moral superiority, thus supremacy as a birthright. Forces that challenge this supremacy, ranging from immigration, feminism, Black emancipation, to religious freedom, and more, constitute an immoral attack on white Christians. This self-created narrative of victimhood justifies the use of violence against the agents of the forces that they perceive to be attempting to subvert White Christian male supremacy (Gorski and Perry 2022). White Christian nationalists come to embrace xenophobic, racist, misogynistic ideals and authoritarian politics to control others to retain their supremacy and the freedoms that supremacy conveys. The concept of white Christian nationalism in the United States provides a framework for understanding the rise of Hindutva, Hindu hegemonic nationalism, in India throughout the ongoing tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Deconstructing the deep story of White Christian nationalism allows for its conceptualization through modular ‘blocks’: elements of the deep story that travel across geopolitical boundaries and are reassembled in non-Western contexts adapted to local particularities. This body of research identifies seven ‘building blocks’ of the deep story: religiosity without religiousness, the deification of political figures, a promised return to a mythical past, the threat of interracial relationships and miscegenation, the threat of the non-heteronormative, the moral asymmetry of violence, and the weaponization of the digital space. A comparative case analysis of the rises of nationalist extremism in the United States and in India reveals the transnational character of the narratives put forward by aspiring authoritarian leaders to secure and consolidate power.

The Building Blocks of the ‘Deep Story’

Religiousness without Religiosity

The building blocks of the deep story reveal key narrative components that shape and sustain far-right

nationalist identities. An especially illuminating dimension of the White Christian nationalist framework, as developed by Gorski and Perry, is its emphasis on religiousness with minimal demonstrable religiosity. As they argue, the ‘myth of a Christian nation’ is more important to white Christian nationalists than religion itself because the adherence to white Christian nationalism is a reflection of ‘ethno-traditionalism’ (Gorski and Perry 2022). This identity prioritizes belonging based on perceived ancestral heritage and cultural affinity over actual religious practice or belief. The myth of the United States as a Christian nation works as a tribal marker that distinguishes ‘real Americans’ and sustains the idea of rightful American belonging among white Christian majorities.

This dynamic is mirrored in Hindutva, which, despite its name, is not a traditional Hindu religious ideology. The roots of the Hindu supremacist movement are found nearly a century ago in the philosophy and works of V.D. Savarkar, a revolutionary figure of the pre-independence era in India (Zafar, Ali, and Irfan 2018). Savarkar’s 1923 seminal book *Essentials of Hindutva* (later retitled *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu*) laid the foundations for the construction of the Hindu identity based on ethnic, cultural, and geographic terms (Sharma 2002). Savarkar insisted on a clear distinction between Hindutva and Hinduism, as he believed the followers of any religion of Indian origins – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism – were deserving of the Hindu identity (Sharma 2002).

The first political iteration of Hindutva came through the establishment of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, henceforth referred to as RSS, a right-wing paramilitary group that self-identifies as a cultural organisation rather than a religious one (Jaffrelot 2010; Kamalakar 2025). The RSS was only a starting point: the organization rapidly sought to expand its influence and create wings operating in previously inactive areas like local and national politics (Jaffrelot 2010). The host of Hindu supremacist organizations that spawned from the RSS became collectively known as Sangh Parivar or the ‘family of the RSS’ (Jaffrelot 2010). One such organization is the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party headed by Prime Minister Modi. Although Hindutva was introduced to mainstream politics as part of the BJP’s rise to power in the 1990s under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Modi and the BJP embodied its principles arguably more closely and openly than any previous administration (Poddar 2024). Vajpayee, while sympathetic to Hindu supremacy, had to adopt a more moderate, conciliatory stance to project an image of consensus-building. Modi, in contrast, has made Hindutva a central pillar of his political appeal.

Thus, religiousness without religiosity represents the first building block of far-right nationalist deep stories, enabling both White Christian nationalism and Hindutva to harness sacred symbolism in the service of ethno-nationalist identity consolidation and exclusion.

The Deification of Political Figures

The deification of political leaders constitutes another central building block of the deep stories underpinning both White Christian nationalism and Hindutva. In the United States, Donald Trump's elevation to a quasi-divine status has largely been driven by his most ardent, often Evangelical, supporters, who depict him as uniquely chosen and protected by God (McCarthy 2019; Jones 2024; Gorski and Perry 2022; Sharlet 2020; Gorski 2017). Trump has neither disavowed such portrayals nor consistently distanced himself from them; instead, he has periodically employed language that suggests a providential purpose to his political role, thereby reinforcing these interpretations among his partisans (McCarthy 2019). Contrary to earlier claims that Christian nationalists merely tolerated Trump as a lesser evil, recent scholarship shows that many embraced him enthusiastically as a saviour figure who would shield White Christians from perceived cultural marginalization and political persecution (Gorski and Perry 2022).

A comparable dynamic can be observed in India with the deification of Narendra Modi. Modi has actively contributed to a mythos of extraordinary, even celestial, origins by alluding to his exceptional birth and implying access to special, quasi-supernatural capacities (Yadav 2024). These narratives frame Modi as a savior sent to resolve India's social, cultural, and economic problems, while leaders within the BJP describe him using explicitly theological language, such as *avatari purusha*, or incarnation of God (*The Telegraph* 2022; Sen and Nielsen 2022). In both cases, Trump and Modi cultivate and benefit from a messianic image, presenting themselves as singularly capable of rescuing the nation and restoring its rightful moral and civilizational order (Appelbaum 2016; Mogul 2024; Kaul 2017).

The purpose of deifying political figures revolves around the affirmation of not just strength but also moral authority. Sherman (2023) explains: 'A deity is either all-powerful or the oppressed victim who will prevail in the end. Trump, like Christ, is the king of kings when he wins, and when he loses, he is the heroic victim of oppression who will inevitably prevail' (Sherman 2023, 4). Among supporters, the effect is incontestable: support for the personality cult surrounding the deified figure reinforces its authority by broadening support, while disagreement reinforces the martyrdom narrative, reinforcing the moral authority of the leader (Sherman 2023, 5; Sen and Nielsen 2022, 505). Narratives of sacrifice, persecution, and eventual vindication are powerful blocks in the deep stories of nationalist extremism.

A Promised Return to the Mythical Past

Throughout his tenure as Prime Minister, Modi has repeatedly advanced a civilizational narrative in which India is said to have endured a thousand years of occupation and subjugation under successive foreign rulers, as illustrated by his 2023 Independence Day address describing the present as a ‘milestone between 1000 years of slavery and 1000 years of a grand future that is about to come’ (Modi 2023). This temporal framing departs significantly from conventional historiography, which typically locates the period of formal colonial subjugation in the roughly two centuries of British rule, and it represents a deliberate reconfiguration of India’s past that has gained prominence only under Modi’s leadership (Saleem 2023). By retroactively extending the duration of this period of slavery backward into the pre-colonial era, the narrative effectively recodes long stretches of Muslim rule as foreign occupation, thereby excluding the Mughal period from the repertoire of legitimate Indian pasts (Saleem 2023). It is nonetheless precisely this Mughal era, particularly from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, that many historians identify as a time of considerable prosperity, state capacity, and cultural efflorescence, and which would otherwise be a plausible candidate for a Golden Age of Indian civilization (Saleem 2023; Nanda 2003). Attributing such a golden age to a Muslim dynasty would fundamentally undermine the ideological logic of Hindu supremacy; the Hindutva narrative therefore displaces the locus of civilizational greatness onto a more remote and less historically specified Hindu past, imagined as pure, unified, and sovereign.

Within this reworked temporal imaginary, Modi presents Hindutva as the vehicle through which India can overcome a millennium of humiliation and reclaim its rightful place as a great Hindu civilization (Kaul 2017). The promise of rebirth rests on the idea that strict adherence to Hindutva’s principles will restore a moral, cultural, and political order that was disrupted by foreign incursions. Modi himself is cast in quasi-messianic terms as the leader uniquely appointed to guide Hindus back to that lost era of glory, thereby linking his personal authority to the broader project of civilizational redemption.

A structurally similar narrative is central to White Christian nationalism in the United States, which posits an earlier period of racial and moral purity prior to the corrosive influence of immigration, secularism, feminism, and racial equality (Gorski and Perry 2022). Here, too, the nation is imagined as having fallen from a divinely sanctioned order, and Donald Trump is framed by his supporters as the vanguard who will disrupt the existing liberal status quo and restore White Christian supremacy. The invocation of a mythical past thus functions as a crucial building block in both deep stories, providing a teleological script in which present conflict is a necessary passage on the road back to an idealized national community, and more broadly, to the ‘golden past as future’ (Kaul 2017).

This nostalgia for a mythologized, idealized past underpins a powerful drive toward traditionalism in both movements. In the American context, one visible manifestation is the proliferation of ‘tradwife’ content, where White Christian women publicly celebrate and aestheticize highly traditional gender roles, often through carefully curated depictions of domestic and rural life (Sykes and Hopner 2024). A similar preoccupation with traditional aesthetics permeates Hindu supremacist practices. Modi's own consistent choice of traditional Gujarati attire has been interpreted as a performative affirmation of Hindutva values (Vittorini 2022). In each case, the visual and sartorial revival of ‘tradition’ operates as a tangible representation of the imagined golden age and of the ‘purest’ iteration of the group’s core identity.

The drive to return to a mythical past of racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious harmony is indivisible from the exclusionary ideas about those who fall outside of the dominant identity. The white Christian nationalists are, by default, proponents of intolerance. As Whitehead and Perry explain: ‘Christian nationalism idealizes a mythic society in which real Americans—white, native-born, mostly Protestants—maintain control over access to society’s social, cultural, and political institutions, and ‘others’ remain in their proper place. It, therefore, seeks strong boundaries to separate ‘us’ from ‘them,’ preserving privilege for its rightful recipients while equating racial and religious outsiders with criminality, violence, and inferiority (Whitehead and Perry 2020). This dynamic is also consistent with the dominant views of Hindu supremacists.

The Threat of Interracial Relationships and Miscegenation

Both White Christian nationalists in the United States and Hindu supremacists in India propagate narratives that frame interracial and interethnic relationships as inherently deviant or coercive. The perception of Black American men as sexually corruptive, driven by the British Empire-era trope of the ‘Black Peril,’ is not only a reflection of the notion of a sexual danger to white women but also that of the ‘political danger of challenge to white hegemony’ (Bland 2005; Majavu 2023). In modern times, this dynamic is better exemplified in the rhetoric surrounding migrants from the Southern border of the United States. Trump himself has made public statements characterizing Mexican immigrants, and other migrants from Latin American countries, as ‘bringing crime’ and being ‘rapists’ (Chouhy and Madero-Hernandez 2019).

Opposition to interracial relationships in the United States has certainly receded after the abolishment of anti-miscegenation laws and the legalization of interracial marriage with the 1967 Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia*. However, as Whitehead and Perry demonstrated, even in modern times, the closer an individual identifies with white Christian nationalism, the less likely they are to be

accepting of interracial relationships (Whitehead and Perry 2020).

A parallel construction operates in India under the concept of ‘Love Jihad’ or ‘Love Romeo,’ a key narrative in Hindu supremacist discourse that articulates a highly gendered and communalized anxiety regarding interfaith relationships, particularly between Hindu women and Muslim men. Hindu nationalists propagate the claim that Muslim men are deliberately engaging in a covert campaign to seduce Hindu women into marriage and conversion to Islam, not out of personal or religious choice but as a stratagem of political and demographic domination (Rao 2011; Amarasingam et al. 2022). This narrative contends that these purported ‘Love Jihad’ seeks to facilitate the acquisition of Hindu land and property by Muslims and contribute to a broader ‘demographic war’ aimed at the displacement or reduction of Hindu hegemony. The trope, combined with a generalized miscegenation panic, operates as a conspiracy theory that portrays Muslim men as predatory aggressors seeking to undermine the Hindu nation from within.

The ‘Love Jihad’ narrative echoes Renaud Camus’ ‘Great Replacement’ theory which is promulgated by white supremacists in the West to similarly warn of an orchestrated effort to takeover the nation through interracial relationships and migration (Amarasingam et al. 2022). Both discourses mobilize fears of racial or religious dilution, manifesting in the purported seduction of women, who are framed as bearers of collective identity and thus in need of protection. This convergence situates ‘Love Jihad’ within a global pattern wherein sexualized threat narratives serve as powerful mechanisms to galvanize ethno-nationalist in-group solidarity and justify exclusionary and often violent measures against out-groups.

The similarities between the narratives of the ‘Black Peril,’ the ‘Mexican rapists,’ and that of the ‘Love Jihad/Love Romeo’ are striking. In all cases, the women are not viewed as whole human beings with agency in their choice of partners. Instead, they are reduced to naïve, gullible, fragile prey (Amarasingam et al. 2022). They are assigned a purity representative of the ethnicity or race, one that must be defended. As Bhatt (2023) explains, the conclusion is meant to be that the nation itself is being ‘raped’ by the immoral foreign invader and that those who sit idly by are complicit in its violation, reinforcing the idea that the Hindu man must become this hypermasculine protector to defend the woman and the nation.

The Threat of the Non-Heteronormative

White Christian nationalism and Hindu supremacism further converge in their ideological constructions of gender, particularly in their opposition to feminist movements and the broader

emancipation of women. While Gorski and Perry (2022) do not explicitly address feminism, they highlight a ‘crisis of white manhood’ as central to the maintenance of social and moral order within White Christian nationalism. Analogous to their hierarchical views on race and ethnicity, adherents of White Christian nationalism endorse a rigid gender hierarchy in which feminism is portrayed as an immoral and subversive force. Feminism is depicted not only as an ideological threat aiming to unseat the white Christian male from his ‘rightful’ position at the apex of social order but also as a pernicious influence that coerces women to abandon their presumed God-given roles within the family and domestic sphere (Whitehead and Perry 2020). This framework also underpins homophobic attitudes, wherein homosexuality is constructed as a deviation from the ‘natural’ order sanctioned by divine design (Whitehead and Perry 2020).

Hindutva articulates a commensurate model of gender relations that is based on a strict binary division wherein women are confined to the domestic sphere while men occupy the public domain (R. Sen and Jha 2024, 3). This gender order is justified as a divine and natural attribution of roles that reinforce traditional heteronormative gender norms and marginalize non-conforming sexualities. In this view, womanhood is strictly defined in relation to a woman’s place within the family structure as wives and mothers rather than as individuals. This mirrors the anti-feminism prevalent in White Christian nationalist discourse. Consistently, Hindutva’s condemnation of homosexuality also mirrors that articulated by White Christian nationalists, treating non-heterosexual identities as threats to the moral and social order.

The patriarchal foundations of both ideologies also shape their anti-feminist and homophobic stances. Within nationalist extremist discourse, women are symbols embodying the nation's honor, integrity, and reproductive future. Women are simultaneously idealized as pure and vulnerable but also portrayed as naïve and easily misled away from their God-given roles. They are 'sites of infiltration,' and their purported violation by out-group men signifies more than the violation of the body but the corruption of the homeland itself (Yuval-Davis 1997; Enloe 1989). Men are consequently cast as the protectors of the women and the nation, which is a role that is consistent with the hypermasculine ideals often promoted within far-right nationalist movements (Sen and Jha 2024). This dual dynamic reinforces a gendered social order designed to maintain male dominance and to regulate female sexuality and agency within both White Christian nationalist and Hindutva frameworks.

The trope of the defenceless woman who must be shielded from external threats exists alongside the narrative of the woman who must be protected from herself due to her susceptibility to corrupting forces such as feminism. This narrative complex not only legitimizes exclusionary attitudes towards

non-heteronormative individuals and movements but also aims to justify constraining women's autonomy by embedding them within a moral and political project aimed at reproducing traditional hierarchies. Such tropes have been historically central to nationalist imaginaries, where the woman-as-nation figure symbolizes both the promise and peril of the collective identity, reinforcing gendered expectations through symbolic and material practices.

Moral Asymmetry of Violence

Narratives portraying an endangered in-group facing existential replacement inevitably generate moral imperatives for violence against the constructed antagonists. The virulent Islamophobia permeating Hindutva discourse predictably fosters calls for violence targeting Muslims alongside other outsiders, paralleling the xenophobic, racist, and anti-migrant aggression inherent in White Christian nationalism. Similarly, overt antagonism toward feminism and homosexuality in both contexts engenders violent rhetoric along lines of gender and sexual orientation.

Under Modi, anti-Muslim hate speech has proliferated markedly. In 2023 alone, the Washington, DC-based India Hate Lab documented 668 hate speech events targeting Muslims at political gatherings across India, with 36 percent featuring explicit calls to violence and 77 percent occurring in BJP-governed states (India Hate Lab 2024). Hindu supremacists have been known to orchestrate provocations, such as conducting religious ceremonies in minority enclaves, to elicit retaliatory responses, which are then recast as unprovoked assaults on peaceful Hindu gatherings (Wilkinson 2006). This narrative will be used to legitimize the use of violence in the repression of minorities, as the violence of the minority is immoral and unjust, but that of the Hindus is necessary for the protection of the nation.

This dynamic is not unlike what prevails in the United States, where white Christian nationalists claim the use of violence by their own as legitimate, while the use of violence by 'others' constitutes a threat that must be eliminated. Gorski and Perry highlight this dichotomy through the differential views on the violence of the January 6th insurrection in contrast with that of the Black Lives Matter protests that followed the murder of George Floyd (Gorski and Perry 2022). The scope and scale of the events, as well as the severity of the violence they were associated with, are hardly comparable, but differing opinions regarding these events make for great predictors of ideological associations.

White Christian nationalists view the violence of January 6th through the prism of righteousness; this violence is not threatening because it was done by those who wield it legitimately (Gorski and Perry 2022). In their eyes, violence was not what insurrectionists wanted, but they did what needed to be

done to protect the nation. In contrast, the Black Lives Matter protests, which were mostly peaceful with occasional incidents of violence, were harshly condemned and characterized as apocalyptic. This is especially revealing when contrasting the right-wing condemnations of the protests and their praise for violent armed vigilantes like Kyle Rittenhouse, the white teenager who shot and killed protesters in Kenosha, Wisconsin in 2020 (Thayer 2025).

The commonality with Hindu supremacist violence is found in how the use of violence by the in-group is legitimized and the violence of the out-group is condemned due to the perception of righteousness and morality that comes from the narrative of victimization that dominates both the white Christian nationalist and the Hindu supremacist ideologies. The logic wherein narratives of victimization confer a ‘moral license’ to the in-group for violence while demonizing the out-group agency constitutes a critical building block of the deep story of nationalist extremism.

The Weaponization of the Digital Space

Far-right extremist and nationalist ideologies likely could not have ascended to mainstream politics without the help of social media. Whether it is Donald Trump’s Twitter account, communities on 4Chan and Reddit, blogs, or Facebook pages, these online spaces have become platforms for far-right radicalization in the United States (Rieger et al. 2021, 1). A similar pattern is observable in India, where social media is used to share racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, and misogynistic content promoted on far-right affiliated websites and channels (Amarasingam et al. 2022; Sen and Jha 2024). Not only that, but these platforms are also routinely used to bully, threaten, and even inflict psychological and incite physical violence on those perceived to be the enemies, usually ethnic, racial, sexual minorities or women (Rieger et al. 2021; Sen and Jha 2024).¹

What the online space, and particularly social media, has done for the spread of far-right nationalist ideologies in the United States, India, and possibly elsewhere is drastically lower the barrier of entry into far-right ideology and the practice of extremist violence (Zhuravskaya et al. 2020). In the past, engaging with extremists required proper connections, attending meetings and gatherings in person, or even having physical access to literature. This thus required being in the right geographic and social area and exposing one’s identity. Contact with extremism had to be sought out. With the advent of the internet and social media, far-right content has become so pervasive that it is hard to avoid it entirely. Moreover, the cost of participating in extremist behaviour is much lower due to the anonymity of the

¹ Practices in the online space that lead to psychological trauma include threats, with threats of sexual violence towards women being a particularly salient issue on social media platforms. It also includes the production of ‘deepfakes,’ or doctored videos, often featuring women engaging in pornographic acts (another issue that singularly affects women in the online space). Online practices that can lead to physical harm include ‘doxing,’ meaning the publication of private information of an individual on the internet, or even ‘swatting,’ in which a false emergency call is made to authorities, prompting them to dispatch a SWAT team to the home of an unsuspecting person.

online space, as well as its accessibility and convenience. This allows for far-right nationalist narratives to reach more people, sustain their interests, and empower them to lash out against their perceived enemies.

Beyond propagation, these digital environments facilitate targeted harassment, psychological intimidation, and incitement to physical violence against perceived enemies, which typically consists of ethnic, racial, sexual minorities, or women. Common tactics include doxing (public disclosure of private information), swatting (fabricated emergency calls prompting armed police response), and the creation of deepfakes, particularly non-consensual pornographic content weaponized against women (Rieger et al. 2021; Sen and Jha 2024).

The Deep Story

The deep story of nationalist extremism goes as follows: A majority ethnic or racial group with a cultural but not spiritual association with the dominant religion of its nation grows increasingly anxious about a perceived influx of foreigners and foreign influences that are demographically and culturally reshaping their society. The majority group comes to view itself as a vulnerable minority, despite its largely dominant socioeconomic and political position. Against this backdrop emerges a narrative in which these foreign agents and forces are seeking to overthrow the majority group. They want to seize the place atop the social, political, and cultural hierarchy and impose their immoral values and corrupted worldviews onto the dominant group. But the supremacy of the dominant group is its birthright. Its freedoms were deservedly bestowed upon them for the creation of this nation. Thus, it will not be relinquished without a fight. Though this dominant group is opposed to violence, it believes that violence can be justified when it comes to self-defence: that of its people and that of its nation. Violence is the necessary evil that will return the dominant group to the mythical times of glory that preceded foreign incursions and, with it, usher in a new era of peace, social harmony, and prosperity. Ultimately, the ‘deep story’ is a cautionary tale that reveals how the dominant group is led to relinquish power and embrace authoritarianism in a bid to protect its place atop the social hierarchy.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the contemporary ascendance of nationalist extremism in the forms of White Christian nationalism in the United States and Hindutva in India is best understood through the lens of the ‘deep story.’ By deconstructing these narratives, the analysis has shown how each movement narrates a mythic past of civilizational greatness, a period of decline engendered by outsiders and foreign forces, and a promised restoration under a leader who presents as a deified savior figure. These narratives transform majority populations into imagined victims, which legitimizes and

normalizes exclusionary ideologies and policies, and render authoritarian practices thinkable as necessary acts of collective self-defence.

A first contribution of the article has been to extend Gorski and Perry's theorization of White Christian nationalism and its use of Hochschild's deep story beyond the American case. Placing Hindutva in dialogue with this framework demonstrates that deep stories are not a peculiarly US phenomenon, but rather a powerful narrative form through which exclusionary projects articulate ethno-religious identity to legitimate illiberal, populist politics in diverse democratic settings. The comparison shows that an ostensibly Western conceptualization can travel productively to a non-Western context, while also requiring attention to local historical, cultural, social, and political particularities.

A second contribution has been to specify the internal structure of these deep stories as composed of recurrent building blocks that can circulate transnationally. Across both cases, the analysis identified religiousness without religiosity, leader deification, myths of a lost golden age and national rebirth, gendered and sexualized threat constructions, moral asymmetries of violence, and diffusion across cyberspace as key components that together give the deep story its coherence and political role. At the same time, the way these blocks are assembled and prioritized varies: White Christian nationalism leans heavily on anti-establishment rhetoric within a long settler-colonial imaginary, whereas Hindutva is articulated from within the state apparatus and reworks pre-colonial and colonial history into a narrative of a thousand years of 'slavery.' These differences matter for how authoritarianism is legitimized and experienced in each polity.

Conceptualizing far-right projects through modular building blocks of deep stories has broader implications for the study of nationalism, extremism, fascism, and democratic backsliding. It highlights how familiar elements, including the strategic mobilization of religiousness, patriarchal order, racialized or communalized enemies, and sanctified violence, can be recombined and updated through new media platforms for political purposes. It also suggests that, in addition to institutional safeguards, resisting authoritarianism requires competing stories that can unsettle the moral certainty and emotional appeal of the civilizational, 'deep story' myths. By making visible the building blocks of these deep stories and tracing their recombination across the United States and India, the article offers a framework for analyzing how exclusionary nationalist narratives travel, adapt, and threaten democracy anywhere.

Gorski and Perry wrote that 'white Christian nationalism is a 'deep story' of America's past and future' (2022, 3). So is the deep story of Hindutva in Modi's India. But all deep stories are myths told

to elicit anxiety, panic, and rage that interfere with logic, reason, and compassion. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the deep stories of white Christian nationalism and Hindutva have both ended with the ascent of aspiring authoritarian leaders to the highest offices of their nations.

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