

Letter urging Biden Campaign to Carefully Vet Political Appointees for Links to Religious Militant Organizations and Affiliates in India

December 2020

Dear President-Elect Biden,

We write to you as a broad coalition of community organizations in America that care about a principled relationship between the world's two largest democracies, the United States and India. Specifically, we are concerned about certain Indian-American individuals who are proximate to your Presidential administration. These individuals purport to uphold the values of the Democratic Party in the context of American politics; however, they also advance the ideology and political interests of violent, extremist Hindu Nationalist groups in India, essentially serving as their foreign agents. They often claim to be anti-Trump, citing their minority status and the values of the Democratic party. But in India, they stand for the equivalent of Trumpism: Hindu supremacy. These far-right groups have engaged in organized violence and discrimination against a number of minorities, including Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Dalits (formerly referred to as "untouchables") and Christians. We declare our strong belief that such individuals should not be part of your administration.

The United States and India have long shared a unique and important relationship. You have highlighted this in your own ["Agenda for the Indian-American Community"](#) stating:

"As the world's oldest and largest democracies, the United States and India are bound together by our shared democratic values: fair and free elections, equality under the law, and the freedom of expression and religion. These core principles have endured throughout each of our nations' histories and will continue to be the source of our strength in the future."

Today, however, the specter of authoritarianism hangs over India, as India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, threatens to abolish the cherished values of secularism, pluralism, and dignity of all communities — values that have defined the founding idea of modern India. Modi and his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have seriously compromised India's democratic institutions: its judiciary, free media, and even its education system, putting these to the service of an alarming right-wing ethnonationalist ideology, in which Hindus are considered racially and culturally superior to all other communities. Muslims, Dalits, and liberal/left activists have been particularly vilified and often even violently attacked, which has left them in constant fear for their safety.

The BJP is an affiliate of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a Hindu paramilitary organization that believes India is a country solely for Hindus, and views other minority groups as enemies or infiltrators. Many of its affiliate groups have been [labelled "religious militant organizations" by the CIA](#). The BJP has nowhere disavowed the belief system of the RSS; on the contrary, its leaders

borrow from both its discourse and its networks, passing legislation that targets minorities and emboldening various far-right Hindu militias. India's Home Minister, Amit Shah, has used the word "termites" to describe both immigrants and long-dwelling Muslim Indians and cast them as "infiltrators." Yogi Adityanath, the BJP Chief Minister of India's most populous state, has [publicly said](#) that "If one Hindu girl marries a Muslim man, then we will take 100 Muslim girls in return... If they [Muslims] kill one Hindu man, then we will kill 100 Muslim men."

According to one Indian media organization, there have been [over 113 lynchings](#)—mainly of Muslims and Dalits—since 2015. The latest and perhaps most horrific instance of such vigilantism was an anti-Muslim pogrom that transpired in Delhi this February in which over fifty were killed. President Trump, whose reelection campaign was endorsed by Modi, was *in Delhi* as these attacks occurred, yet chose not to comment on it. In August 2019, the BJP passed legislation ridding the state of Jammu and Kashmir of its last vestiges of political autonomy. The region of Kashmir—already the most militarized region in the world—has since faced a severe lockdown, [violations of basic human rights](#), and [a near-total media blackout](#).

In December of that year, the BJP passed its most ambitious legislation aimed at ending secularism in India—the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which links citizenship to religion for the first time in India's history. Together with plans for a nationwide National Registry of Citizens, the CAA threatens to disenfranchise millions of Indian Muslims, a move that you expressed concern about in your campaign:

"Joe Biden has been disappointed by the measures that the government of India has taken with the implementation and aftermath of the National Register of Citizens in Assam and the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act into law. These measures are inconsistent with the country's long tradition of secularism and with sustaining a multi-ethnic and multi-religious democracy."

The BJP and RSS have long sought to influence—and infiltrate—American politics through its affiliate diaspora organizations. Worryingly, many South Asian-Americans individuals with ties to far-right Hindu organizations in India are affiliated with the Democratic party. They might not openly endorse Hindu supremacism ("Hindutva") or call for violence against minorities, but they have often made their intentions clear in their mobilization against legislation that has sought to protect human rights in India. Indeed, they practice a peculiar form of identity politics, presenting themselves as spokespeople of the ethnic Hindu minority in the United States, while endorsing the worst forms of Hindu majoritarianism in India. They often use the pretense of fighting American racism, and espouse multiculturalism in the US, but perpetuate a racism of their own in India.

It is our belief that anyone who receives funding from or makes public statements in support of the BJP, RSS, and its affiliates—including their American chapters—are *entirely complicit* in the rise of authoritarianism and ethnonationalist violence in India. (By admitting such individuals to your administration, you risks such complicity as well, which will fatally undermine the commitments promised in your campaign, where you promised the following:

“As the world’s leading democracy, we have a responsibility to defend and advance rights and dignity, and work towards a more peaceful, more secure world. [Joe Biden] believes that what we say and do matters, and that we must not refrain from condemning violations of universal rights or from supporting economic and political reforms.”

With this context in mind, we call on you to support the following key measures that we and many other civil rights organizations around the country continue advocating for:

1. We urge that you thoroughly screen all individuals offering advice to, lobbying, vying for a position within, or in any way engaging with your administration. Specifically, there should be no tolerance for any individuals who uphold any form of supremacist belief, including in Hindu supremacy, both in India and the US. As a broad coalition representing the interests of the Indian-American, we demand to be involved in this screening process.
2. In the past, individuals who received funding from or made public statements in support of Hindu supremacist groups have seemingly found significant space within the Democratic party (such as [Sonal Shah](#) and [Amit Jani](#)). With that context in mind, we believe that it is important that future appointments be vetted for clear alignment on the issue of secularism, both in the US and Indian context.
3. We urge that the appointee of the US Ambassador to India also declare their support for these principles in India, and condemn Hindu supremacy. This appointment should be made without political pressure from Indian political groups (the [BJP was rumoured to have lobbied against the ambassadorship of Nancy Jo Powell](#), who stood firm against Hindu supremacy).
4. We urge that all Indian-American individuals engaging with your administration explicitly support House Bill [H.Res.745](#), which urges “the Republic of India to end the restrictions on communications and mass detentions in Jammu and Kashmir as swiftly as possible and preserve religious freedom for all residents.” This will be in line with [your campaign’s statement on Kashmir](#). (“In Kashmir, the Indian government should take all necessary steps to restore rights for all the people of Kashmir. Restrictions on dissent, such as preventing peaceful protests or shutting or slowing down the Internet, weaken democracy.”)
5. Given the immense, historic oppression of the Dalit community around the world, [including in the US](#), we urge supporting House Bill [H.Res.921](#) “Celebrating the 129th anniversary of the birth of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar” and adding caste as a protected category in civil rights laws and company policies, in line with the [Ambedkar Principles](#) (a recent lawsuit launched by California’s Department of Fair Employment and Housing demonstrates the urgency of this issue). The Indian-American Alliance Against Caste has demanded that caste be included as a vector of discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—and we endorse their demand.

As India plunges further into authoritarian rule, the need for the American government to speak out against human rights violations in the country—and take steps to counteract it—will only grow more stark. We hope to remain in communication with your administration about this matter.

Sincerely,

India Civil Watch International
Students Against Hindutva Ideology
Indian American Muslim Council
Dalit Solidarity Forum in the U.S.
Hindus for Human Rights
Ambedkar King Study Circle
Coalition of Seattle Indian Americans
Association of Indian Muslims of America, Washington DC
Boston South Asian Collective
Coalition Against Fascism in India
Ambedkar International Center
Justice For All
Progressive India Collective
International Society for Peace and Justice
Indian American Alliance Against Caste
South Asian Left Activist Movement
South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT)
Chicago Desi Youth Rising (CDYR)
National Coalition of South Asian Organizations (NCSAO)