

**Statement for the Record from the Sikh Coalition
UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
Hearing on Advancing Religious Freedom within
the U.S. - India Bilateral Relationship
September 20, 2023**

The Sikh Coalition respectfully submits this statement for the record in connection with the above-referenced hearing before the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. As a civil rights organization that represents the Sikh community in the United States and addresses hate-related backlash attacks, we write to address our concern about the religious freedom threats Sikhs face from the government of India. We would like to ensure that religious freedom and democracy are mutually advanced here in the United States and abroad.

By way of background, the Sikh Coalition is the largest Sikh American civil rights organization in the United States. We were founded in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, in response to a torrent of hate crimes against Sikhs throughout the United States. Our mission since then has been to work towards a world where Sikhs and other religious minorities in America can freely practice their faith without bias and discrimination.

In recent years, we have also expressed concern with Democratic backsliding in the United States; however, this concern is far from unique to the United States. As Sikhs, we remain deeply concerned about the authoritarian turn underway in India, which is both ostensibly the world's largest democracy and home to the vast majority of the global Sikh population. Most Sikhs in South Asia, who live in the state of Punjab, India, have faced systemic oppression such as restrictions on religious practices, economic marginalization, and suppression of political dissent—including extra-judicial punishment, violence¹, and a decade of enforced “disappearances.” The historical experience of our community in India² has left Sikhs all too aware of how authoritarianism, discrimination, and prejudice can lead to tragedy on the scale of

¹ “Protecting the Killers: A Policy of Impunity in Punjab, India.” *Human Rights Watch*, 2007, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/10/17/protecting-killers/policy-impunity-punjab-india>; “Dead Silence: the legacy of human rights abuses in Punjab.” *Human Rights Watch and Physicians for Human Rights*, May 1, 1994, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/India0594.pdf>.

² “WELL-FOUNDED FEAR: Understanding Legal Challenges and Best Practices for Sikh Asylum Applicants and Their Attorneys.” *The Sikh Coalition*, Nov. 1, 2021, <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/2021.11.01-asylum-report.pdf>.



genocidal violence.³ India's decline in press freedom,⁴ willingness to use excessive force against peaceful protestors,⁵ arrest and detention of dissidents,⁶ and efforts to curtail the free flow of information⁷ all directly affect its religious minorities.

Alarming Trend of Authoritarianism and Targeting of Sikhs

In recent years, numerous Sikh civil rights organizations around the world, including the Sikh Coalition, have been concerned at the increasing frequency with which Sikhs are being targeted in India as well as other countries, including the United States. When Sikhs and other religious minorities peacefully dissent, the response from the Indian government has too often been marked by attempts to suppress freedoms of expression through internet shutdowns, media censorship, intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and escalation of violence. Actions like these contradict human rights freedoms and risk exacerbating civil unrest and alienation of a religious minority community.

In March of this year, Indian authorities executed weeks-long massive mobilizations of paramilitary and police forces, conducted multiple coordinated arbitrary arrests with brutal violence, imposed mobile internet data blackouts, blocked SMS services, censored media, and disproportionately targeted Sikhs and political dissenters across Punjab.⁸ Similar oppressive tactics were also displayed during Farmers' Protests that began in September 2020.⁹

The Commission's need to continue its detailed and accurate documentation of such incidents is invaluable and vital for the United States to hold countries accountable for religious freedom violations. Congress must continue to ensure independent and bipartisan analysis of international

³ "Remembering 1984." *The Sikh Coalition*, Jun. 1, 2023, <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/blog/2023/remembering-1984-4>.

⁴ "With raids, arrests and hostile takeovers, India press freedom continues to decline." *NPR*, Apr. 3, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/03/1167041720/india-press-freedom-journalists-modi-bbc-documentary>.

⁵ "India: Excessive use of force, arbitrary detention and punitive measures against protesters must end immediately." *Amnesty International*, Jun. 14, 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/06/india-excessive-use-of-force-arbitrary-detention-and-punitive-measures-against-protesters-must-end-immediately/>.

⁶ "Indian activist's arrest spotlights crackdown on dissent." *The Associated Press*, Mar. 9, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/india-media-social-media-crime-arrests-f9331e556a1faf26eced6c05c40a71de>.

⁷ "Five years in a row: India is 2022's biggest internet shutdowns offender." *Access Now*, Mar. 20, 2023, <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/keepiton-internet-shutdowns-2022-india/>

⁸ Anisha Singh [Letter to U.S. Sec. of State Antony Blinken Re: Support for Sikhs and Democratic Norms in India during March 2023 civil unrest]. Mar. 21, 2023, <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Support-for-Sikhs-and-Democratic-Norms-in-India-March-21-2023.pdf>

⁹ "Modi's Response to Farmer Protests in India Stirs Fears of a Pattern." *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/03/world/asia/india-modi-farmer-protest-censorship.html>; "India: Government must stop crushing farmers' protests and demonizing dissenters." *Amnesty International*, Feb. 9, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/02/india-government-must-stop-crushing-farmers-protests-and-demonizing-dissenters/>.



religious freedom issues in India and around the world, and it can do so by permanently reauthorizing the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Prior human rights reports on India from the Department of State, spanning at least a decade, indicates longstanding concerns regarding India's major human rights issues concerning "police and security force misconduct, such as extrajudicial killings, torture, and rape."¹⁰ The Commission's painstakingly detailed analysis and recommendations further lend legitimacy to persistent recommendations in the past four years that India should be designated as a Country of Particular Concern. Recommendations made by USCIRF ensure that countries such as India are put on notice that they cannot operate with impunity.

Transnational Censorship from India

This is the fifth year in a row that India has chosen to rely on internet shutdowns to control largely peaceful protests and create a shield of impunity.¹¹ Moreover, the Indian government and its intelligence services have demonstrated a pattern of suppressing and intimidating dissidents and aid organizations by issuing indiscriminate and vague legal notices, auditing financials, and even arresting individuals on artificial charges and detaining them for unreasonably long periods.¹² Since 2020, India has regressed further down the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index. It is now ranked among the worst for global press freedom with the likes of Russia, China, and Iran.¹³ India has expelled foreign journalists due to work critical of Mr. Modi,¹⁴ and imprisoned a growing number of journalists in-country for their reporting.¹⁵

Broader actions by the Indian government to censor certain aspects of the country's national conversation evoke grave concerns of fostering a climate that could lead to mass violence against Muslims, Sikhs, and other minorities,¹⁶ especially given that India is considered a country at high risk for mass killings.¹⁷ Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Amnesty International, which

¹⁰ "India 2011 Human Rights and Labor Report: India." *U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor*, May 24, 2012, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/186675.pdf>.

¹¹ "Five years in a row: India is 2022's biggest internet shutdowns offender."

¹² "As Farm Law Protests Continue, NIA Sees 'Anti-National' Plot, Summons Activists." *The Wire*, Jan. 16, 2021, <https://thewire.in/rights/nia-summons-activists-linked-to-farm-law-protests-%20suspects-conspiracy-against-india>.

¹³ "India: Media freedom under threat." *Reporters Without Borders*, Mar. 5, 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/india-media-freedom-under-threat>.

¹⁴ "VICE journalist Angad Singh deported from Delhi." *The Hindu*, Aug. 25, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/vice-journalist-angad-singh-deported-from-delhi/article65810246.ece>.

¹⁵ "They Can Target Anybody': India's War on Free Press Is in High Gear." *TIME*, Aug. 1, 2022, <https://time.com/6202430/zubair-modi-muslims-target-media-free-press/>.

¹⁶ "India's Muslims: An Increasingly Marginalized Population." *Council on Foreign Relations*, Jul. 14, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/background/india-muslims-marginalized-population-bjp-modi>.

¹⁷ "Rising Mass Atrocity Risks in India." *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, Mar. 30, 2022, <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/blog/rising-mass-atrocity-risks-in-india>; "India: 2022-23 Statistical Risk



monitor human rights conditions worldwide, were forced to shut offices across India after being financially paralyzed by the Indian government.¹⁸ Oxfam and Khalsa Aid have also been subjected to raids by the Indian government.¹⁹ Similarly, the offices of BBC and other media organizations were subject to government raids.²⁰

Additionally, social media users critical of India's draconian policies routinely have their accounts restricted at the request of the government.²¹ Any criticism of the Modi government can lead to bans and attacks by trolls. Individual users have been targeted for something as trivial as sharing a BBC documentary that is critical of Mr. Modi;²² there have also been coordinated campaigns to restrict trending topics that peacefully acknowledge India's genocidal violence against Sikhs in 1984.²³ When American social media companies such as Meta and Twitter do not comply with takedown requests, their employees risk arrests and raids in India.²⁴ Former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey alleged that the Indian government threatened to "shut Twitter down" if they did not censor accounts commenting on the Farmers Protest.²⁵ We are deeply alarmed by the attempts by India's attempts to silence journalists, advocates, and nonprofits around the world. The United States government must advocate for press freedom as well as a safe 're-opening' of India for international NGOs that have been legally threatened or erroneously banned from monitoring and reporting on India's human rights abuses.

Growing Domestic Concerns of Hindu Nationalism and Foreign Interference

Finally, we note that this democratic backsliding in India affects religious minority diaspora communities in the United States as foreign interference is a growing concern of Sikhs and

Assessment for Mass Killing." *Early Warning Project*, Nov. 29, 2023, <https://earlywarningproject.ushmm.org/countries/india>.

¹⁸ "Amnesty to halt work in India due to government 'witch-hunt'." *The Guardian*, Sep. 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/29/amnesty-to-halt-work-in-india-due-to-government-witch-hunt>.

¹⁹ "How the Indian Government Uses Raids to Silence Critics". *Time*, Feb. 14, 2023, <https://time.com/6255425/india-raid-bbc-modi-documentary/>.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ "Twitter accused of censorship in India as it blocks Modi critics." *The Guardian*, Apr. 4, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/05/twitter-accused-of-censorship-in-india-as-it-blocks-modi-critics-elon-musk>.

²² "India bans BBC documentary on PM Modi's role in Gujarat riots." *CNN*, Jan. 23, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/23/business-india/india-modi-bbc-documentary-twitter-youtube-censorship-intl-hnk/index.html>.

²³ "Sites Blocked, Hashtags Banned: Are Sikhs Being Silenced Online?" *The Quint World*, Jun. 12, 2020, <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/sikh-banned-social-media-siyasat-punjab-operation-bluestar-ghallughara-facebook-instagram>.

²⁴ "Elon Musk's Twitter Widens Its Censorship of Modi's Critics." *The Intercept*, Mar. 28, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/03/28/twitter-modi-india-punjab-amritpal-singh/>.

²⁵ "Jack Dorsey: India threatened to shut Twitter and raid employees." *BBC*, Jun. 13, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-65886825>.



other religious minority communities here at home. The Indian government's behavior in this realm, including exercising influence to censor peaceful social media conversations²⁶ and expelling²⁷ and harassing²⁸ non-India-based journalists are all deeply concerning. It is also troubling to see the proliferation of extremist Hindu supremacist ideology within the United States²⁹ targeting Sikhs in Connecticut,³⁰ Muslims in New Jersey,³¹ and even state legislators in California who have spoken out about caste discrimination in the United States.³²

The Sikh Coalition has also received reports from individuals in the United States receiving threatening messages after attending peaceful protests critical of the Indian government. We are also aware of reports of government agents stopping individuals with false charges and arbitrary stops to elicit more information about Sikh communities in the United States. Similarly, allied nations to the United States, such as Canada, have expressed growing frustration over India's foreign interference of its nationals. In June of this year, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's national security advisor named India as a "top source of foreign interference in Canada."³³ These concerns were publicly raised by Prime Minister Trudeau at the G20 Summit in New Delhi earlier this month.³⁴ This week Canada has also has expelled an Indian diplomat following an announcement that Canadian intelligence services had credible allegations that the Indian

²⁶ "Sites Blocked, Hashtags Banned: Are Sikhs Being Silenced Online?"

²⁷ "Angad Singh: India deports Emmy-nominated US journalist." *BBC*, Aug. 26, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-62685014>.

²⁸ "White House blasts harassment of reporter who asked India's Modi about human rights." *NBC News*, Jun. 26, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/white-house-blasts-harassment-reporter-asked-modi-human-rights-record-rcna91251>.

²⁹ "What's fueling the rise in Hindu nationalism in the U.S." *NBC News*, Jun. 27, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/modis-popularity-grows-india-hindu-nationalism-rising-us-rcna90680>.

³⁰ "Norwich Sikh independence celebration is criticized by Indian residents." *The Connecticut Day*, Jun. 26, 2022, <https://www.theday.com/local-news/20220626/norwich-sikh-independence-celebration-is-criticized-by-indian-residents/>.

³¹ "Billboard Truck Displays Hateful, Anti-Islamic Messages Targeting NJ Mosques." *NBC New York*, Dec. 2, 2022, <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/billboard-truck-displays-hateful-anti-islamic-messages-targeting-nj-mosques/3980506/>; "Disruption at Edison's India Day Parade rattles Muslim participants." *New Jersey.com*, Aug. 16, 2023, <https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/2023/08/16/disruption-at-edisons-india-day-parade-rattles-muslim-marchersfront-headline/70596258007/>.

³² "Lawmaker Faces Violent Threats for Trying to Make California the First State to Ban Caste Discrimination." *TIME*, Mar. 29, 2023, <https://time.com/6267016/aisha-wahab-interview-caste-discrimination/>

³³ "India among top actors for foreign interference in Canada: national security adviser." *CTV News*, Jun. 5, 2023, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/india-among-top-actors-for-foreign-interference-in-canada-national-security-adviser-1.6428213#>.

³⁴ "Trudeau leaves India after aircraft issues delayed departure from rocky G20: Canadian prime minister's time at G20 summit in New Delhi highlights growing tensions between India and Canada." *Al Jazeera*, Sep. 12, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/12/trudeau-leaves-india-after-aircraft-issues-delayed-departure-from-rocky-g20>.



government was responsible for a recent murder of a Sikh on Canadian soil.³⁵ Left unmitigated, our national security and pluralistic society remain vulnerable to a threat that has demonstrated substantial growth in other nations.

Hindu Nationalists and White Supremacists are also worryingly becoming further aligned to advance their respective agendas of prejudice in establishing racially pure societies.³⁶ Supporters have embraced the Aryan race mythology as well as fascism, while White Supremacists have admired Hindu Nationalists promoting Islamophobia and the ideals of a caste system.³⁷ The cross-pollination of extremist ideologies to inspire bigoted acts of hatred has become a growing threat around the world.³⁸ The importation of extremist Hindu nationalist ideology into the United States has the potential to spur more violence and unrest against Sikh and Muslim communities, which are already one of the most targeted communities for hate violence in the United States.³⁹

We also note that the Department of Homeland Security's most recent threat assessment for 2024 has also identified the threat of transnational interference as a risk to our national security.⁴⁰ Similarly, the White House's National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism has committed to intensify efforts to reduce foreign support and the transnational links that help fuel antisemitism in the United States.⁴¹ Congress must also further understand the issue through congressional hearings and develop policy solutions that adequately protect domestic religious minority communities against all foreign and transnational threats.

³⁵ Trudeau Accuses India of Involvement in Sikh Leader's Killing." *Bloomberg*, Sep. 18, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-18/trudeau-accuses-india-of-involvement-in-sikh-leader-s-killing#xj4y7vzkg>.

³⁶ "Hindu Supremacists in a White World." *Oxford Academic*, Jun. 23, 2023, <https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article/90/4/805/7205783>.

³⁷ "Why white supremacists and Hindu nationalists are so alike." *Al Jazeera*, Dec. 13, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/12/13/why-white-supremacists-and-hindu-nationalists-are-so-alike>

³⁸ "New Zealand attacks offer the latest evidence of a web of supremacist extremism." *The Washington Post*, Mar. 15, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/new-zealand-suspect-inspired-by-far-right-french-intellectual-who-feared-nonwhite-immigration/2019/03/15/8c39fba4-6201-4a8d-99c6-aa42db53d6d3_story.html; and "Racism In America Should Not Take Center Stage in the Global Fight Against White Supremacy." *TIME*, Jul. 20, 2021, <https://time.com/6082168/white-privilege/>.

³⁹ "Latest Hate Crime Data Is at an All-Time High", *The Sikh Coalition*, Mar. 13, 2023, <https://www.sikhcoalition.org/blog/2023/latest-hate-crime-data-is-at-an-all-time-high/>.

⁴⁰ "Homeland Threat Assessment 2024." *Department of Homeland Security*, Sep. 13, 2023, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2023-09/23_0913_ia_23-333-ia_u_homeland-threat-assessment-2024_508C_V6_13Sep23.pdf.

⁴¹ "The U.S. National Strategy To Counter Antisemitism." *The White House*, May 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/U.S.-National-Strategy-to-Counter-Antisemitism.pdf>.



Conclusion

As a beacon of democracy and protector of human rights, the United States has a responsibility to denounce these injustices and ensure that our partnerships are aligned with our core values. In this moment, it is essential that our government and civil society work together to push for inclusive religious freedom, meaningful civil rights protections, and accountability for human rights violations in India. The United States must take concrete action to uphold democratic values and human rights with our allies and partners. To counter the alarming trend of authoritarianism and targeting of religious minorities, the United States must continue to support the documentation efforts of the USCIRF by permanently reauthorizing it. Designating India as a Country of Particular Concern based on longstanding human rights concerns is a crucial step in holding nations accountable for their actions.

Furthermore, transnational censorship by the Indian government poses a grave risk not only to press freedom but also to the safety and operation of international NGOs. The United States government must advocate for press freedom and ensure the safe re-opening of India for these organizations to monitor and report on human rights abuses. Lastly, the impact of India's democratic backsliding extends to religious minority diaspora communities in the United States, necessitating comprehensive policy solutions to safeguard against foreign and transnational threats. With the alignment of extremist ideologies and the potential for increased violence against Sikh and Muslim communities, it is imperative that Congress conducts hearings and develops measures to protect domestic religious minority communities and preserve our nation's security and pluralistic society.

The United States government must also be prepared to swiftly and forcefully condemn narratives of discrimination, hate speech, or other attempts to falsely portray entire minority religious communities as extremists, as well as explore the establishment of international agreements or frameworks that promote responsible behavior in cyberspace and deter foreign interference. While these challenges are immense and complex, we know that the United States has demonstrated leadership on both civil rights and democracy before.

