

October 26, 2023

Congressman Shri Thanedar
1039 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
Via Electronic Delivery

Re: Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain Congressional Caucus

Dear Mr. Thanedar,

On behalf of the undersigned leading Sikh civil rights organizations, we write to express that the Sikh community's representation within the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain Congressional Caucus ("Caucus") is untenable under its current structure and stated objective. The Caucus was not created at the behest of the Sikh community. While some of our organizations have already spoken with you after the surprise announcement of the Caucus, there have been no reasonable assurances provided that this newly created congressional body will advance the interests of Sikhs; we are additionally concerned that it continues to exclude South Asian faith traditions, ethnicities, and castes. **Accordingly, we respectfully request the removal of the representation and implication of the Sikh community from this caucus—specifically by striking the word "Sikh" from the name of the Caucus.**

As you know, the Sikh Coalition, alongside other community and faith-based civil rights organizations, previously outlined [our concerns](#) upon learning about the creation of the caucus. Similar concerns were also articulated by [Asian American and Pacific Islander community organizations](#) in Michigan. As an organization founded to combat hate and discrimination against the Sikh community, our primary objective is to ensure that the Sikh American community's interests and identity are preserved and accurately represented.

One of our primary concerns is the lack of consultation with Sikh American civil rights organizations during the caucus's formation. Inclusivity in such processes is crucial to ensure that the community's best interests are genuinely represented. The announcement of a Hindu Caucus at the "[Hindu American Summit](#)"—an event aimed to deepen India's relations and control over religious affairs in our nation¹—earlier this year raises additional questions about the broader intent of the current caucus, since no Sikh organizations or leaders were consulted despite the Caucus' renaming.

¹ The United States was founded on strong principles of separation between church and state. These founding principles avoid the risk of nationalizing religious beliefs and suppression of expression that challenges a government's agenda. The Government of India's appropriation on religion runs contrary to these principles, resulting in a warped and weakened version of faith that differs from the sincerely held views of the authentic religious community.



In response to our concerns about the Caucus, you have publicly stated that the body was founded “specifically promoting understanding and peace for the [dharmic religious communities](#).” The Sikh faith, with its distinct beliefs, practices, scriptures, and origin, has previously been grouped as a “dharmic religious community” to [promote Hindu nationalist interests](#) and dilute the Sikh identity. As you know, Sikhism is a distinct and independent world religion, and should not be grouped as a “Dharmic religious community.”² The misguided grouping of the Sikh community within the Hindu identity contributes to misinformation³ about the faith and risks sidelining specific issues that are of paramount importance to Sikhs. Sikhs who maintain their articles of faith and outward identity tend to experience a unique set of challenges on the basis of their intersectional identities that include but are not limited to bias towards religion, race, ethnicity, and national origin. **Therefore, it is essential that the Sikh community in the United States maintain its distinct voice and advocate for its unique concerns, free from incorrect framing of the faith as a “Dharmic religion.”**

Additionally, the omission of Muslims and other religious minority communities from the South Asian diaspora also contradicts the Caucus’ goal to bring together faith communities in the United States. The inclusion of the Muslim community is prudent in light of alarming trends of Islamophobia in both India and the United States. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom’s recent findings on India’s [decline in religious freedom](#) and “sophisticated, [systematic persecution](#) of religious minorities” in recent years further emphasize the importance of comprehensive representation. Anti-Muslim rhetoric and hate crimes in the United States continue to remain elevated in a post-9/11 environment. The Caucus must also be willing to denounce hate-fueled Hindu nationalist activity within the United States; any failure to do so would continue to undermine the Caucus’ stated purpose of interfaith harmony. Should your Caucus genuinely desire to promote interfaith initiatives with the Sikh community in the United States, it should attempt to direct such efforts with the already existing Congressional Sikh caucus.

If the Caucus is to pursue interfaith solidarity, it must pledge to address India’s human rights violations. The broader concerns of the South Asian American community, especially regarding human rights issues in India, require a more collaborative and nuanced approach. We note that the formation of this caucus comes at a time after more than 70 of your colleagues in Congress issued a [bicameral letter](#) rightfully raising concerns about India’s troubling and worsening human rights record against religious minorities. Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, Dalits, and other faith communities are frequent targets of religious persecution in India. However, India has increased their targeting of religious minorities globally by actively chilling dissent by censoring peaceful online discourse. More troubling is news of credible allegations by Canada that the Government of [India engaged in transnational repression](#) by assassinating a Sikh Canadian dissident. The FBI has also recently [warned a number of Sikhs](#) in the United States about potential threats against their lives, we also note concerns of [more stories of threats and intimidation](#). These disturbing reports not only highlight that Sikh Americans of all walks of life are being targeted, whether they are

² Singh, Harpreet. 2012. Religious Identity and the Vernacularization of Literary Cultures of the Pañjāb, 1500-1700. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University.

³ For nearly a decade, the Sikh Coalition has worked to [correct information](#) in our nation’s school curriculums and textbooks that falsely identify the Sikh faith as a sect of Hinduism.



dissidents, elected officials, or houses of worship within the country. Given the international moment, community advocates rightfully have serious concerns about this newly-formed Caucus advancing the foreign interests of the Government of India in the United States, while minimizing the need to protect the civil rights and safety of Sikhs and other marginalized communities, such as Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis, and others. To address this concern, the Caucus must operate with full transparency in its operations, decisions, and engagements by regularly publishing reports and updates on activities and initiatives. These reports must also include disclosures of engagement with foreign agents (including their proxies) and special interest groups.

Finally, we echo the concerns of organizations who argue this caucus was formed without the full spectrum of Hindu American civil society, including Dalit and linguistic community organizations. Without inclusive representation from the Indian diaspora, this Caucus risks propagating Hindu nationalist policies in the United States and undermining the separate and distinct interests of South Asian communities in the United States, including Sikh, Muslim, Dalit, Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu Americans.

We welcome any caucus to forward the interests of our and other religious communities, so long as it does so in a way that is inclusive of perspectives of the entire South Asian community across faith, caste, and ethnic lines. This Caucus does not meet these qualifications under its current structure, and we therefore call for the removal of the Sikh community from its name.

Sincerely,

The Sikh Coalition
Ensaaf
Jakara Movement
Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF)

