



May 19, 2020

Honorable Saint Paul City Council Members,

I write to you as a former resident of Saint Paul and the Executive Director of the Hindu American Foundation (HAF). The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) is an educational and advocacy organization established in 2003 and headquartered in Washington, DC. Our focus is on educating the public about Hindus and Hinduism and advocating for policies and practices that ensure the well-being of all people and the planet. We work directly with policymakers and key stakeholders to champion issues of concern to Hindu Americans, including defending civil and human rights and protecting all living beings. Inspired by our guiding principles and Hindu teachings, HAF promotes dignity, mutual respect, and pluralism.

For some 16 years, HAF has published an annual human rights report that is widely cited by policy influencers and policymakers. We've worked closely with persecuted religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, and been on the forefront of documenting the horrific human rights conditions they have had to endure. We've made country visits, including a fact-finding mission to Bangladesh. We've also visited, volunteered in, and sponsored medical clinics at refugee camps in the Indian city of Jodhpur which serves religious minorities who have fled persecution in Pakistan. The conditions in these camps are deplorable and bureaucratic delays in obtaining legal status for these refugees have left these stateless people bereft of basic needs, even while they have no recourse of return to their original homes and villages. Religious minorities who fled to India from Afghanistan and Bangladesh suffer similarly -- stuck in legal limbo, unable to resettle and restart their lives.

India's Citizenship Amendment Act seeks to remedy this long-standing insult to injury.

From rampant institutionalized and social discrimination, and widespread restrictions on religious freedom to bonded labor, kidnappings, forced conversions, rape, rampant violence, land grabs, and destruction of religious sites, religious minorities and ethnic minorities live as second class citizens in these neighboring countries with no improvement of conditions in sight. For those who were able to flee, India has been their only hope for freedom and survival.

To provide you an understanding of the gravity of the situation, I offer in brief, the legal, political, and legal realities for religious minorities in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The horrors faced by these religious minorities is jarring, and it is no wonder that those who could, fled to the only secular democracy in the region -- India.



That neither the Council on American-Islamic Relations-MN nor Indian American Muslim Council brought these concerns to your attention nor included them in their advocacy for and drafting of RES 20-712 should be cause for serious concerns about these organizations' credibility, commitment to secularism as the only means to ensure religious freedom, and genuine concern for the human rights of all people.

Afghanistan: Afghanistan's constitution and legal system institutionalize discrimination against non-Muslims and firmly establish Islam as the state religion. These conditions continue to lead Hindus and Sikhs to leave the country, with only an estimated 200 families remaining (down from over 200,000 Hindus/Sikhs in the 1970s), according to Afghan Hindu sources. Afghan Hindu and Sikh refugees similarly continue to face struggles in other countries where they have sought refuge, and in some instances, face deportation proceedings.

The plight of minorities and women is particularly concerning, as these vulnerable groups remain marginalized and subject to violence, social prejudice, and harassment. Hindus and Sikhs lack cremation rights and are often attacked and humiliated while trying to cremate their dead. Hindu and Sikh children, in particular, are harassed and bullied in school for their religious beliefs. Parents are hesitant to send their daughters out alone due to fear that they may be kidnapped and forcibly converted and married off to Muslim men. Hindus and Sikhs have also faced employment discrimination, and are both politically marginalized and excluded from most government jobs.

Most recently, on March 25, 2020 a terrorist attack on a Sikh gurdwara in Kabul, Afghanistan left 25 dead and injured at least 8 others. About 150 people were inside the gurdwara at the time of the attack, including women and children. The very next day, terrorists attacked the cremation ceremony of the 25 victims, illustrating the heightened threat that religious minorities, like Sikhs and Hindus, face in Afghanistan. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack, however, some Afghan experts have pointed to a possible role of the Haqqani group and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), both of which are supported by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency.

Bangladesh: A bitter fact in today's Bangladesh is that the Hindu population is dying out. Since 1947, the Hindu population in Bangladesh (former East Pakistan) has drastically declined from 31% to 10% (less than 9% according to some estimates) today. In light of systematic human rights violations and discrimination that has incrementally worsened, the Hindu population has been irapidly leaving Bangladesh at an alarming rate and more than that of any other time.

Discrimination towards the Hindu community in Bangladesh is both visible and hidden. The state's bias in the Constitution and its reluctance to address human rights violations against



minorities makes this discrimination evident. Moreover, there has been a long history of violence and repression against Hindus in Bangladesh including genocide of an estimated two million then East Pakistani citizens (mostly Hindu), the ethnic cleansing of 10 million ethnic Bengalis (mostly Hindus) who fled to India, and the rape of 200,000 women (also mostly Hindu) in camps set up for the sole purpose of raping and terrorizing. This infamous history consists of many barbaric episodes of violence over the years, including attacks on Bangladeshi Hindus in retaliation for the tearing down of the Babri Mosque in India in the 1990s, the 2001 post election violence, and the vast appropriation of land under the Vested Property Act.

Although many Bangladeshi Hindu refugees have been living in India, they have done so without formal legal status. Prior to the Citizenship Amendment Act, the government had granted some refugees from Bangladesh living in India long term visas with the right to purchase land, but other hurdles remained.

Pakistan: The modern Pakistani state was created by partitioning the Indian subcontinent in 1947, following the British withdrawal, into secular Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. At the time of Partition, the Hindu population in Pakistan (the area formerly comprising West Pakistan) was approximately 26%, but millions of Hindus and Sikhs fled violence and riots for the safety of India. Today, Hindus are less than 2% (human rights groups have suggested that the government has intentionally lowered the figures to deprive minorities of services and political representation).

Pakistan is a federal republic with a significant role for Islamic law in the Constitution and legal system. The military establishment is the primary power-broker in the country and provides support and funding to Islamic militant groups operating throughout the region. Religious minorities face widespread persecution and a complex set of discriminatory laws and constitutional injunctions. The state, the military, and members of Pakistani civil society violate the human rights and religious freedom of its citizens, namely through blasphemy laws; abductions/forced conversions; sectarian attacks; and enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. Moreover, with the constitutional preference for Islam, religious identification laws, and depiction of non-Muslims in school textbook institutionalized discrimination and the second-class status of minorities, ensuring generational bigotry towards Hindus, Christians, and Jews.

Religious minority women and girls are especially vulnerable. An estimated 1,000 Christian and Hindu women are abducted and forcibly converted to Islam every year. Often, after being abducted, these girls are forcibly married to complete strangers, often twice their age, raped, sold off, or forced into the sex trade. According to several human rights reports, 20 – 25 Hindu girls are kidnapped and forcibly converted to Islam every month in Sindh province alone, some

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as young as three or four years old. Often, after being abducted, these girls are raped, sold off, or forced into prostitution.

Similarly, Hindus and other minorities have been subjected to the bonded labor system, attacks on religious sites and the illegal occupation of temples, and other acts of intolerance at the hands of non-state actors with the complicit or implicit support of government officials (or failure to act).

As the largest democracy in the world and an emerging global leader, we believe India should continue to be a beacon for the religiously and ethnically persecuted in its region, and a torchbearer of secularism, pluralism, and religious freedom.

Regards,

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