

# Hindus for Human Rights

Monday December 4, 2023

Chairman Ben Cardin Ranking  
Member Jim Risch  
Senate Foreign Relations Committee  
United States Senate  
423 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Cardin and Ranking Member Risch:

As a coalition of South Asian American civil society organizations, we are writing to express our gratitude for the upcoming Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing on transnational repression. We also write to express our concerns about the rise of such repression from the Indian government. In 2023, this repression greatly accelerated, with the worst brunt of this repression affecting minority religious communities in the United States.

In February 2023, the BBC's Delhi offices were raided by the Indian government for alleged tax irregularities. In reality, the offices were raided, because the BBC, a foreign news agency, released a documentary covering Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rise to power, and included reporting on Modi and his allies' role in the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim riots and 2020 Delhi riots.<sup>1,2</sup> The Indian government also pushed social media companies to censor the documentary on their platforms. YouTube and Twitter complied with the censorship requests, and Twitter withheld posts from American actor John Cusack from being viewed by Indian audiences.<sup>3</sup>

This past March, while the Indian government conducted the largest known internet shutdown in the state of Punjab, North American Sikh activists protested the shutdown and brought the issue global attention to their large audiences.<sup>4</sup> In apparent retaliation, the Guardian reported that the Indian government ordered Twitter to withhold 120 Twitter accounts, including several Sikh Canadian accounts, including those of Canadian MP Jagmeet Singh, poet Rupi Kaur, and the BBC's Punjabi Bureau.<sup>5</sup>

In July, when Modi returned to India after his trip to the United States and Egypt, Indian Cabinet Minister Smriti Irani falsely accused an American citizen, Sunita Viswanath of Hindus for Human Rights, as part of a large conspiracy to destroy India.<sup>6</sup> Viswanath and a member of Indian American Muslim Council had been previously singled out in June by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party official Amit Malviya.<sup>7</sup> While Malviya's attacks increased trolling against both individuals, as well as their organizations, Irani's attacks spurred a weeks-long news cycle with legacy media outlets uncritically reporting conspiracy theories

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-64634711>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/14/bbc-offices-india-raided-tax-officials-modi-documentary-fallout>

<sup>3</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2023/01/24/twitter-elon-musk-modi-india-bbc/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/india-punjab-amritpal-singh-1.6785857>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/05/twitter-accused-of-censorship-in-india-as-it-blocks-modi-critics-elon-musk>

<sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/amitmalviya/status/1674080829105135622?lang=en>

<sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/amitmalviya/status/1664474354695176194?lang=en>

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about American citizens as facts.<sup>8, 9, 10, 11</sup> Malviya and Irani alleged that George Soros, through Viswanath, has conspired with opposition leaders to destroy India. This political attack has become part of the BJP's messaging ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.<sup>12, 13</sup>

Irani's attacks came days after Malviya singled out Wall Street Journal reporter, Sabrina Siddiqui, as an alleged enemy of India after Siddiqui, who is of Indian descent, asked Modi about India's human rights situation.<sup>14</sup> Her question was one of only two questions reporters were allowed to ask the Prime Minister during his state visit to the United States. Siddiqui faced such intense digital intimidation that the White House Correspondents' Association, the National Press Club, and the Biden Administration condemned the attacks she faced.<sup>15, 16, 17</sup>

In August 2023, the Middle East Eye reported that the Indian government suspended the passports of at least 10 Kashmiris, including individuals living abroad. These individuals were informed by email that they were required to turn in their documents to authorities.<sup>18</sup> This move renders these Kashmiris stateless. Some of those living abroad, especially activists, journalists, and students, decided to leave Kashmir and India to escape the Indian government's increasing oppression of Kashmiris. Some of these Kashmiris have stated that, because of their activism, they feel unsafe to return to India and have previously reported that their families have faced legal harassment, including arbitrary detention and questioning.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the most troubling evidence of the Indian government's repressive tactics emerged a few months ago, in September, when Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau informed Canadians that agents of the Indian government may have been behind the murder of Canadian citizen Hardeep Singh Nijjar. Nijjar was apparently targeted because of his political support for the Khalistan separatist movement.<sup>20</sup> The Indian government has thus far refused to cooperate with the Canadian government in an investigation into the murder. Days after Trudeau's allegations, reports emerged that the FBI informed at least five Sikh leaders in the United States that they were facing credible death threats from agents of the Indian government.<sup>21</sup>

This past October, major Indian American human rights organizations, Hindus for Human Rights and Indian American Muslim Council, were informed that X, formerly known as Twitter, had withheld both

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<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/who-is-sunita-viswanath-whose-photo-with-rahul-gandhi-was-flagged-by-smriti-irani-101688009925849.html>

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<https://zeenews.india.com/india/bjps-smriti-irani-questions-rahul-gandhis-alleged-meeting-with-george-soros-aide-in-us-2628348.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/CNNnews18/status/1674301379958181894>

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<https://bharattimes.co.in/who-is-sunita-viswanath-and-whats-the-controversy-surrounding-her-meeting-with-rahul-gandhi-in-us/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/bjp4india/status/1714123329307910568>

<sup>13</sup> <https://twitter.com/bjp4india/status/1720484152846233606>

<sup>14</sup> <https://twitter.com/amitmalviya/status/1671977616851746816>

<sup>15</sup> <https://whca.press/2023/06/27/whca-online-harassment-of-white-house-journalist-is-unacceptable/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.press.org/newsroom/national-press-club-statement-continued-online-harassment-wall-street-journal-reporter>

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<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/white-house-blasts-harassment-reporter-asked-modi-human-rights-record-rcna91251>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/indian-government-strips-passports-kashmiri-dissent-modi>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/events/indias-backsliding-democracy/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-indian-government-nijjar-1.6970498>

<sup>21</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2023/09/23/sikhs-fbi-canada-india-nijjar/>

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organizations' accounts in India in response to a legal complaint by the Indian government.<sup>22</sup> X did not give any additional information to either organization, but the actions were taken days after both organizations led a coalition of civil society organizations in denouncing sweeping raids against 100 journalists.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, just last week, the Department of Justice announced charges against Indian national, Nikhil Gupta, for attempting to assassinate US citizen Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. Like Nijjar, Pannun supported the creation of an independent Sikh state and was targeted for these political beliefs.<sup>24</sup> Chairman Cardin, as you have noted, this is not just part of a worrying trend in India's backsliding democracy, but part of a global wave of dictators feeling empowered to violate the rights of people outside of their borders.

We hope that, during this hearing, you will ask the expert panel about the need to address transnational repression from partner countries, including India. The US government has demonstrated its swift and strong response when hostile governments have repressed the free speech of Americans on US soil. This response has included visa bans and targeted sanctions.<sup>25</sup> We have yet to see similar consequences against governments that the US considers partners.

After this hearing, we urge you to engage the Biden Administration to confront the Indian government on its increasingly repressive tactics against Americans. Finally, we hope you will move S.831 - Transnational Repression Policy Act out of Committee and push the bill for a floor vote soon. This bill will provide much-needed protections to Indian Americans against a foreign government as we continue to exercise our First Amendment rights.

As India becomes a closer security partner, the US must make clear that this partnership cannot come at the cost of the civil rights of Americans or the security of our democratic ideals as a nation. And so, at this hearing and in the weeks to come, we urge you to take action regarding the concerns Americans have presented about the ongoing threats to our safety from the Indian government.

We are grateful to the Committee for its active engagement with civil society regarding the deteriorating human rights situation in India. We hope your continued interest will amplify the global concern that, as India's democracy deteriorates, the rights of the people in India and the diaspora are coming under increasing attack.

Sincerely,

Hindus for Human Rights  
Americans for Kashmir  
Indian American Muslim Council  
Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund  
Sikh Coalition

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/us-based-minority-advocacy-groups-blocked-on-x-in-india/article67426316.ece>

<sup>23</sup> <https://thewire.in/world/will-not-be-silenced-hindus-for-human-rights-x-account-withheld>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-charges-connection-foiled-plot-assassinate-us-citizen-new-york>

<sup>25</sup> <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0343>