

Date: December 13th, 2020

Re: Urging the Chicago City Council not to pass Resolution R2020-583

Honorable Mayor Lori Lightfoot and the Chicago City Council Members:

The Coalition of Hindus of North America (CoHNA) urges the Chicago City Council not to pass Resolution R2020-583 (*Recognition of India's 74th anniversary of Independence Day and call for condemnation of violence against certain castes and faith groups*). The resolution is very divisive, full of disinformation/falsehoods and reveals an extremely poor to non-existent understanding of the issues being referred to. In these unprecedented times of COVID-19, when communities are reeling under unemployment¹, eviction², homelessness³, hunger⁴, destitution, racism, and opioid crisis,⁵ and other pressing problems, spending precious money, resources, and time on matters that the Council barely understands reflects poorly upon your work ethic and priorities. Rather, **focusing on matters such as Resolution R2020-583 only sow seeds of division and hatred.**

Resolution 2020-583 not only misrepresents the people and the Government of India, but it also propagates disinformation⁶ about Hindus, vilifies them and perpetuates Hinduphobia. The resolution mischaracterizes India's Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 (CAA), along with the situation in states like Assam and Jammu & Kashmir. In doing so, it jeopardizes the safety and well-being of the Hindu American community – a minority community that contributes significantly to the welfare and prosperity of Chicago, the state of Illinois and our great nation.

First, it is important to understand the CAA⁷. CAA is a limited and humanitarian extension of India's Citizenship Act, 1955 and fast-tracks Indian citizenship for 31,000 religious minorities, who fled Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan in the face of extreme persecution. This includes a number of laws and court decisions limiting their access to basic rights around adequate representation, personal safety, economic opportunities, and freedom to practice their faith, and has led to the persistent decline of religious minorities in these countries. To be eligible for naturalization under the provisions of this Act, those who fled systemic religious persecution are required to have entered India by December 31st, 2014 and have resided in India for a period of at least five years.

The focus on these three countries stems from recent history that led to the partition of British India and the creation of modern India on religious grounds, as well as agreements such as the Liaquat-Nehru Pact that unfortunately never lived-up to their promise of safeguarding the religious freedom of minorities in India's neighborhood. The Joint Committee on the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, a bi-partisan parliamentary committee, reported in 2016 that the amendment will benefit only an estimated 31,313 individuals including 25,447 Hindus, 580 Sikhs, 55 Christians, 2 Buddhists and 2 Parsis.⁸ The amendment was necessitated by the fact that those fleeing systemic persecution⁹ or fear

¹ <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/2020/12/7/22151693/coronavirus-covid-unemployment-benefits-congress-stimulus-bill-heroes-act-food-stamps-snap>

² <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/the-covid-19-eviction-crisis-an-estimated-30-40-million-people-in-america-are-at-risk/>

³ <https://blockclubchicago.org/2020/11/10/chicagos-homeless-population-was-already-on-the-rise-before-the-pandemic-now-city-scrambles-to-plan-for-next-wave/>

⁴ <https://wgntv.com/news/coronavirus/already-in-high-demand-chicago-food-depository-braces-for-whats-to-come-when-many-lose-financial-help/>

⁵ <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/12/9/22166058/cook-county-opioid-deaths-anti-overdose-medication-naloxone-police-emergency-rooms>

⁶ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/why-the-anti-caa-protesters-are-wrong-writes-kanwal-sibal/story-GMrSQUxK74T4AMzdt0VXFJ.html>

⁷ <http://egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2019/214646.pdf>

⁸ https://www.prsindia.org/sites/default/files/bill_files/Joint%20committee%20report%20on%20citizenship%20%28A%29%20bill.pdf

⁹ <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/PAKISTAN-2019-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>

of persecution¹⁰ have been seeking refuge in India for decades now.¹¹ However, because of constraints such as their inability to provide documentary proof like a valid passport or other travel documents, naturalization became a difficult and time-consuming process.

Citizenship would allow these refugees to get access to facilities like jobs and education, and to begin the process of rebuilding their lives versus living in limbo as stateless refugees. CAA seeks to do just that, much like the Lautenberg-Specter Amendment in the U.S.¹² What's more, in May 2020, President-elect Biden openly advocated¹³ for providing refugee status to Hindus and Sikhs escaping persecution in Afghanistan, while in June 2020, twenty US senators wrote to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo¹⁴ and urged him to provide emergency refugees status under the FY20 US Refugee Admission Program, through Priority 1 and Priority 2 embassy referrals, and to ensure that US COVID-19 assistance reaches religious minorities in the country.

The Act does not, in any shape or form, alter the citizenship or rights of India's 200 million Muslims who continue to enjoy the same rights as other communities under the Constitution of India. Nor does it restrict the entry of Muslims or Jews or any other person. All those who are fleeing persecution or simply seeking Indian citizenship from any faith or any country can continue to apply for Indian citizenship under the existing provisions.¹⁵

Furthermore, even previous governments in India have issued calls for passing such a law – thus it is not unique to the current government and is not a sign of bigotry against Muslims and minorities. Speaking on the floor of Indian parliament as early as 2003, former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh¹⁶ characterized granting Indian citizenship to persecuted religious minorities fleeing Pakistan and Bangladesh as India's "moral obligation." Provincial leaders across political parties supported the idea, making it non-partisan and broad based.¹⁷

Any statement that deviates from the above is therefore based on a dangerous political agenda that seeks to harm the good relations between the United States and India. Millions of Americans support India's effort to protect persecuted religious minorities and the Chicago City Council should also do the same.

Consider the following reasons:

1. The persecuted minorities¹⁸ of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh are on the verge of near demographic extinction. They have been systemically and systematically denied a minimum standard of living. Women and children have been abducted, raped, and forced into marriages¹⁹, following forced conversion. There have also been reports of starvation and violence during the current COVID-19 crisis. Just in March 2020, radicals

¹⁰ <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/the-plight-of-pakistans-hindu-community/>

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-34645370>

¹² <https://www.uscis.gov/policy-manual/volume-7-part-1-chapter-2>

¹³ <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/biden-for-relocating-afghanistan-sikhs-hindus-85440>

¹⁴ <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/06-25-20%20RM%20letter%20to%20Pompeo%20on%20Afghan%20Sikhs%20and%20Hindus.pdf>

¹⁵ <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pakistani-muslim-woman-gets-indian-citizenship-in-kashmir-thanks-govt-1631262-2019-12-24>

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/BJP4India/status/1207542398282162177>

¹⁷ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/India-willing-to-give-asylum-to-Hindus-from-Pak/articleshow/15499985.cms>
<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/west/story/pak-hindus-in-jodhpur-clamour-for-citizenship-116798-2012-09-24> <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/caa-protests-when-manmohan-singh-sought-citizenship-for-persecuted-minorities-from-bangladesh-pakistan-watch/1798668/>

¹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-minorities-rights-idUSKBN0JN1F020141209>

¹⁹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/08/hindu-muslim-pakistan/536238/>

from ISIS killed 25 Sikhs²⁰ – including several women and one child – in Afghanistan, where the total Sikh population is only around 600²¹.

2. India has historically welcomed religiously persecuted minorities, a quintessential sanctuary where these minorities thrived, much like the City of Chicago which characterizes itself as a sanctuary city. An especially important example is the tiny but prosperous community of Zoroastrians (Parsis)²² who fled Iran and made India their home a few centuries ago. The Indian Jewish experience²³ is another positive and important example, especially since their India story runs counter to their anti-Jewish experiences in other parts of the world.

By passing Resolution R2020-583, the city is essentially reneging on that spirit and essentially confirming that severely persecuted minorities and refugees deserve no extra kindness, help or accommodation and those who seek to help the most destitute are engaging in “discrimination.”

Secondly, the resolution is baseless on the claim that Prime Minister Modi's “extremist government forced nearly 33 million people in the northeastern state of Assam to prove Indian citizenship or face detention at mass prisons and detention camps,” unaware of the historical context of the issue.²⁴ The crisis in Assam was triggered by the influx of refugees fleeing persecution by the Pakistani army²⁵ in 1971 from what was East Pakistan back then. Ironically, America ignored their plight back then²⁶ just like the city of Chicago is choosing to ignore their plight now. The massive influx overwhelmed the native Assamese population culturally and socially and led to simmering discontent and sporadic violence. Seeking to address this historical problem in 2013, the Supreme Court of India mandated the government of the day to update the NRC. The resolution erroneously attributes the Supreme Court's mandate to some “extremist government.”

Thirdly, the assertion of the resolution R2020-583 that LGBTQ people, Adivasis, Muslims, women and oppressed castes could be stripped of their citizenship in the context of NRC demonstrates the Council's complete lack of knowledge about and familiarity with India, along with outright propaganda being peddled by vested interests. The Government of India has clarified that there is no plan²⁷ for a national NRC. It has also assured that, if and when the NRC is administered, no one will be excluded on the basis of religion, gender, or caste²⁸ (note: castes exist in all religious communities of India, not just among Hindus). There is no basis to claim that the Indian Government seeks to discriminate against LGBTQ people. In fact, the BJP led parliament passed the Transgender Protection of Rights Bill that went into effect this past January²⁹. India's first transgender university was opened in 2019³⁰.

The reference to oppressed castes is another falsehood, since some 70-80 % of the refugees who will be helped by the CAA belong to the oppressed groups – making CAA a highly pro-Dalit law.

²⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/world/asia/afghanistan-sikh-kabul.html>

²¹ <https://www.sikh24.com/2020/03/28/afghan-sikhs-asked-to-quit-afghanistan-within-10-days-or-get-ready-to-be-killed/>

²² <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/zoroastrianism>

²³ https://www.forbes.com/2007/08/05/india-jews-antisemitism-oped-cx_gw_0813jews.html?sh=3e98b643d458

²⁴ <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/assam-nrc-a-timeline-leading-to-publication-of-2019-final-list-5953434/>

²⁵ <https://books.google.com/books?id=JB4UBgAAQBAJ&pg=PA1866#v=onepage&q&f=false>

²⁶ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2014/07/25/book-review-the-blood-telegram-nixon-kissenger-and-a-forgotten-genocide-by-gary-j-bass/>

²⁷ <http://muslimmirror.com/eng/for-now-no-plans-of-pan-india-nrc-home-ministrys-first-official-confirmation-in-parliament/>

²⁸ <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-nrc-to-cover-all-religions-across-india-no-one-needs-to-be-worried-amit-shah/342690>

²⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-27031180>

³⁰ <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/india-s-first-university-for-transgender-community-to-come-up-in-up-s-kushinagar-1631851-2019-12-27>

Fourthly, Resolution R2020-583 erroneously accuses Prime Minister Modi of stripping Kashmir of its prospects for self-determination. Kashmir's self-determination via plebiscite under UN resolution 47³¹ laid down a primary precondition – requiring the government of Pakistan to “secure the withdrawal from the state of Jammu and Kashmir of tribesmen and Pakistani nationals not normally resident therein who have entered the State for the purpose of fighting.” Unfortunately, Pakistan never fulfilled this precondition and continues to occupy parts of Kashmir, thus rendering the resolution calling for plebiscite (thereby self-determination), null and void. In the decades since then, Pakistan has further violated the UN mandate by surrendering part of its occupied territory to China³², while cross-border terrorism sponsored by Pakistan has left thousands dead in Kashmir and changed the demography of the state. Additionally, the Hindu and Sikh micro minority was brutalized, massacred, terrorized, and was given the options “Ralive, Tsaliv ya Galive” (convert to Islam, leave Kashmir or get killed),³³ which resulted in their exodus.³⁴

The Chicago resolution seeks to “reject violence in the name of any faith, condemns all supremacist thought, calls for an end of divisions along faith lines.” **Yet, it tragically fails to stand for the religiously persecuted minorities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan seeking a decent life for themselves and their families.** The resolution also fails to consider the Kashmiri Hindu pandits who were subjected to an ethnic cleansing in the name of their faith.³⁵

Regretfully, the city that prides itself in welcoming all has created divisions in the peaceful South Asian community by venturing into politics it knows little about and taking cues from organizations that have a history of peddling Hinduphobia and supporting the denigration of Hindu religious festivals and symbols. In doing so, the Council has created a hostile atmosphere for Hindu Americans in the city of Chicago and beyond. In an environment where Hindus are already facing discrimination and hatred, such resolutions add fuel to the fire, and advance anti-Hindu prejudice and bigotry that openly discounts the fact that Hindus, Sikhs and other religious minorities continue to be persecuted in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh.

For these reasons, we urge the Chicago City Council to uphold their oath, demonstrate responsible governance, and focus on helping communities to get through these testing times instead of indulging in this non-germane, factually inaccurate, and deeply divisive resolution which will cause irreparable damage to the Hindu community.

Kindly acknowledge receipt of this letter. We are available for further discussions and to provide any additional information as needed.

Sincerely,

Nikunj Trivedi
President,
Coalition of Hindus of North America (CoHNA)
<https://cohna.org>

³¹ <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/47>

³² <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/the-truth-about-ladakhs-shaksgam-correcting-historical-wrongs-in-jk/>

³³ <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/kashmiri-pandits-offered-three-choices-by-radical-islamists/>

³⁴ <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/exodus-of-kashmiri-pandits-from-valley-6232410/>

³⁵ <http://koausa.org/wailvalley/b2chap8b.html>