

Date: December 25, 2020

To: Board of Supervisors, Alameda County, California

Re: Recent Proclamation on Solidarity With Alameda County's South Asian Community

Dear Mr. Valle, Mr. Carson, Mr. Haggerty, Ms. Chan and Mr. Miley:

We are writing to you to express our outrage regarding your proclamation<sup>1</sup> expressing solidarity with the South Asian community and urge you to recall it immediately. Though the Proclamation claims to be in "Solidarity with Alameda County's South Asian Community," it has ignored the voices and sentiments of a majority of the same—especially Hindu Americans and Indian Americans (a large constituency in Alameda). Besides being full of divisive rhetoric, disinformation, and falsehoods, it reveals an extremely poor to non-existent understanding of the issues being referenced and succeeds only in sowing seeds of division and hatred.

It is more alarming that this measure was undertaken by proclamation, without open debate or the pretense of community engagement - which would have exposed the disinformation and allowed for counter arguments based on facts. This cuts at the very basis of democracy and equitable representation for all citizens of Alameda County, irrespective of religion, ethnicity, or country of origin.

The proclamation not only misrepresents the Hindu American community and the Government of India, but it also propagates disinformation<sup>2</sup> about Hindus, vilifies them and perpetuates Hinduphobia. The proclamation grossly mischaracterizes India's Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 (CAA), along with the situation in the state of Assam. In doing so, it jeopardizes the safety and well-being of the Hindu American community – which contributes significantly to the welfare and prosperity of Alameda county, the state of California and our great nation.

**Firstly, it is important to understand the CAA<sup>3</sup>.** CAA is a limited and humanitarian extension of India's Citizenship Act of 1955 and fast-tracks Indian citizenship for 31,000 religious minorities, who fled Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan in the face of extreme and systemic persecution. Examples include several laws and court decisions limiting their access to basic rights around adequate representation, personal safety, economic opportunities, and freedom to practice their faith, all leading 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 31<sup>st</sup>, 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, along with 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

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.acgov.org/board/bos\\_calendar/documents/DocsAgendaReg\\_11\\_10\\_20/PROCLAMATIONS\\_COMMENDATIONS/President%20Valle\\_303550.pdf](http://www.acgov.org/board/bos_calendar/documents/DocsAgendaReg_11_10_20/PROCLAMATIONS_COMMENDATIONS/President%20Valle_303550.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/why-the-anti-caa-protesters-are-wrong-writes-kanwal-sibal/story-GMrSQUxK74T4AMzdt0VXFJ.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2019/214646.pdf>

Buddhists and 2 Parsis.<sup>4</sup> The amendment was necessitated by the fact that those fleeing systemic persecution<sup>5</sup> or fear of persecution<sup>6</sup> have been seeking refuge in India for decades now.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> What's more, in May 2020, President-elect Biden openly advocated<sup>9</sup> 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 Pompeo<sup>10</sup> 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. Others fleeing persecution or simply seeking Indian citizenship from any faith or any country can continue to apply for Indian citizenship under the existing provisions.<sup>11</sup>

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 the Indian parliament as early as 2003, former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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 Alameda County should have done the same.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.prsindia.org/sites/default/files/bill\\_files/Joint%20committee%20report%20on%20citizenship%20%28A%29%20bill.pdf](https://www.prsindia.org/sites/default/files/bill_files/Joint%20committee%20report%20on%20citizenship%20%28A%29%20bill.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/PAKISTAN-2019-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/the-plight-of-pakistans-hindu-community/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-34645370>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.uscis.gov/policy-manual/volume-7-part-1-chapter-2>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/biden-for-relocating-afghanistan-sikhs-hindus-85440>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/06-25-20%20RM%20letter%20to%20Pompeo%20on%20Afghan%20Sikhs%20and%20Hindus.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/pakistani-muslim-woman-gets-indian-citizenship-in-kashmir-thanks-govt-1631262-2019-12-24>

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/BJP4India/status/1207542398282162177>

<sup>13</sup> <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/>

**Consider the following reasons:**

1. The persecuted minorities<sup>14</sup> 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 coerced into marriages<sup>15</sup>, following forced conversion. There have also been reports of starvation and violence during the current COVID-19 crisis. Just in March 2020, radicals from ISIS killed 25 Sikhs<sup>16</sup> – including several women and one child – in Afghanistan, where the total Sikh population is only around 600<sup>17</sup>.
2. India has historically welcomed religiously persecuted minorities, and is a quintessential sanctuary where these minorities thrived, much like Alameda which characterizes itself as a ‘welcome county.’ An especially important example is the tiny but prosperous community of Zoroastrians (Parsis)<sup>18</sup> who fled Iran and made India their home a few centuries ago. The Indian Jewish experience<sup>19</sup> 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 the proclamation, the county has reneged on that spirit, essentially endorsing a position 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 proclamation also incoherently states “...India passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which the National Register of Citizens (NRC) updates for citizenship based on religion.”** Apart from the glaring incoherence of the statement, what stands out is a malicious attempt to confuse people by stating that the NRC is updated for citizenship based on religion. Obviously, it is untrue. There is no national NRC in India to date<sup>20</sup> and this proclamation willfully tries to conflate it with the NRC of Assam, a Supreme Court mandated exercise that began in 2013.

Furthermore, the historical context of the Assam NRC process is being deliberately ignored.<sup>21</sup> The Assam NRC has roots in a festering historical crisis triggered by the influx of refugees fleeing persecution by the Pakistani army<sup>22</sup> in 1971 from what was then East Pakistan, into Assam. 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 for the state. Ironically, America ignored their plight back then<sup>23</sup> just like Alameda chose to ignore their plight now.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-minorities-rights-idUSKBN0JN1F020141209>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/08/hindu-muslim-pakistan/536238/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/world/asia/afghanistan-sikh-kabul.html>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.sikh24.com/2020/03/28/afghan-sikhs-asked-to-quit-afghanistan-within-10-days-or-get-ready-to-be-killed/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.history.com/topics/religion/zoroastrianism>

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.forbes.com/2007/08/05/india-jews-antisemitism-oped-cx\\_gw\\_0813jews.html?sh=3e98b643d458](https://www.forbes.com/2007/08/05/india-jews-antisemitism-oped-cx_gw_0813jews.html?sh=3e98b643d458)

<sup>20</sup> <https://pibindia.wordpress.com/2019/12/20/q-a-on-nrc-national-register-of-citizens/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/assam-nrc-a-timeline-leading-to-publication-of-2019-final-list-5953434/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://books.google.com/books?id=JB4UBgAAQBAJ&pg=PA1866#v=onepage&q&f=false>

<sup>23</sup> <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2014/07/25/book-review-the-blood-telegram-nixon-kissinger-and-a-forgotten-genocide-by-gary-j-bass/>

**Thirdly, the proclamation wrongfully asserts that “most Indians lack documentation such as birth certificate to prove citizenship, and a nationwide expansion of the NRC could deny tens of millions of people (disproportionately Muslims, oppressed castes Dalits, women and indigenous) of the CAA of their citizenship rights with no option to be re-naturalized.”** To say “most Indians” is purely false and reduces the rights of hundreds of millions of law-abiding Indian citizens. India has a well-established process of vetting who is eligible to vote in its elections, along with proof of citizenship.<sup>24</sup> India introduced voter ID cards as far back as 1993, a process that is well established and proven for the past twenty-five years. Over 900 Million people were eligible to vote in the 2014 elections, and around 550 Million people cast their votes in the largest exercise of democracy in the world - obviously, these people had to show proof of citizenship.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, the proclamation refers to “oppressed castes” while opposing CAA – ironic, given that 70-80 % of the beneficiaries of the CAA belong to the very same “oppressed castes.” In bringing up caste, the council also chooses to ignore that the current Indian President (Ram Nath Kovind) and its Prime Minister (Narendra Modi), a key architect of this law, are both from “oppressed” castes.

Furthermore, CAA has no connection to the rights of Indian citizens. That the NRC could deny “...millions of people...of the CAA of their citizenship” makes no sense either. Besides, the Government of India has clarified that there is no plan<sup>26</sup> 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 caste<sup>27</sup> (note: castes exist in all religious communities of India, not just among Hindus).

The proclamation seeks to “...oppose human rights violations anywhere in the world.” **Yet, it tragically and hypocritically fails to recognize the human rights violations of religiously persecuted minorities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan seeking a decent life for themselves and their families and speaks against an effort that seeks to restore human rights.** Just this year, the Bay Area’s very own Congresswoman Jackie Speier introduced Resolution H.Res.1085, which recognizes the existential threat faced by the Hindu and Sikh minorities in Afghanistan. The resolution also condemns terrorist attacks against them and proposes to resettle them in the United States of America under the United States Refugee Admission Program. Additionally, Alameda County did not factor the state of minorities in Pakistan, where each year, more than 1000 minor girls are kidnapped, raped, converted, and forced into “marriages” with their abductors, with the blessing of state functionaries in the police and judiciary.<sup>28</sup> Jobs are segregated by religion and food aid was denied to non-Muslims during COVID<sup>29</sup> in addition to multiple laws that discriminate based on religion. The county also ignores the slow genocide underway in Bangladesh, where Hindus have gone from being 22% of the population in 1951 to just 8% in 2011.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/india/who-can-vote-in-india/articleshow/68793337.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/16/asia/india-election-numbers-intl/index.html>

<sup>26</sup> <http://muslimmirror.com/eng/for-now-no-plans-of-pan-india-nrc-home-ministrys-first-official-confirmation-in-parliament/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-nrc-to-cover-all-religions-across-india-no-one-needs-to-be-worried-amit-shah/342690>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1098452>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2020/apr/01/discrimination-amid-pandemic-pakistan-deny-food-supplies-to-hindus-christians-as-coronavirus-rages-2124304.html>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/opinion/may-no-hindus-left-bangladesh-30-years>

Regretfully, the county which 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 county has created a hostile atmosphere for Hindu Americans in Alameda and beyond. In an environment where Hindus are already facing discrimination and hatred, such proclamations 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 Alameda Board of Supervisors to recall the proclamation, uphold your 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 proclamation 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>