

Transnational Repression

Modi Regime's Targeting of Critics in the United States

(By Indian American Muslim Council)

In 2015, when the trailblazing photojournalist Masrat Zahra began covering protests and human right abuses in Jammu and Kashmir, she almost immediately attracted intense scrutiny from the Indian government. In 2020, she was charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), a draconian law that has enabled Indian police to arbitrarily imprison scores of activists under the pretense of anti-terrorism.¹ Zahra fled to the United States in hopes of escaping persecution and continuing her work from abroad.

But here, her problems only increased. In Zahra's absence, her family, friends, and neighbors have been targeted by the Indian government. In retaliation for her position on the Indian government's revocation of Kashmir's autonomy, Indian police beat Zahra's father and brother. They have recently expanded their persecution to Zahra's family's next-door neighbors.

Her travel privileges to India have been revoked, and she fears for her safety even in the US, where, like other Kashmiris, she contends with the threat of Indian government informers within her community.

Troubling as it is, Zahra's story is just one of thousands of cases of transnational repression (TNR) carried out by the Indian government. The combination of surveillance, revocation of travel privileges, and harassment of overseas relatives that Zahra has faced is emblematic of the wide range of threats posed by the Indian government to nationals residing overseas, including in the United States.

From recent assassination attempts on North American Sikhs to hitherto underreported intimidation and disinformation campaigns against foreign critics of Modi's regime, the Indian government deploys at least 9 of the 11 TNR tactics recognized by the FBI in order to silence dissidents and religious minorities residing abroad. In its effort to realize the Hindu nationalist agenda of transforming India into a pure Hindu nation, purged of religious minority groups including Muslims, Christians, and caste-oppressed communities, the Modi regime has resorted to a wide variety of authoritarian tactics—which have now been deployed against foreign dissidents.

¹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/india-stop-abusing-counterterrorism-regulations/>;
<https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/07/27/back-future/indias-2008-counterterrorism-laws>;
<https://sansad.in/getFile/BillsTexts/LSBillTexts/Asintroduced/75%20of%202022%20as%20intro.pdf?source=legislation>

The tactics deployed by the Indian government in the US broadly align with transactional repression as it is defined by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).² Described as a process whereby “foreign governments reach beyond their borders to intimidate, silence, coerce, harass, or harm members of their diaspora and exile communities in the United States,” the FBI lists the following tactics as emblematic of TNR:

1. Stalking
2. Online disinformation campaigns
3. Harassment
4. Intimidation or threats
5. Forcing or coercing the victim to return to their country of origin
6. Threatening or detaining family members or friends in the country of origin
7. Abusive legal practices (e.g., lawsuits, asset freezes, or withholding legal documents such as passports)
8. Cyber hacking
9. Assault
10. Attempted kidnapping
11. Attempted murder

This survey identified the Indian government as using at least 9 of these tactics within the United States and/or against American citizens, with only kidnapping and stalking going unreported.

2. Key Findings

- Within the United States, agents of the Indian government have practiced at least 9 out of the 11 forms of transnational repression (TNR) identified by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).
- Transnational repression impedes academic production, journalism, human rights research, and bonds between community members within the United States. The climate of fear induced by the Indian government's actions results in widespread self-censorship and directly challenges Americans' First Amendment freedoms.
- Indian consulates play a key role in perpetrating transnational repression from abroad. They serve as the long arm of the Indian government within the United States, infiltrating diaspora communities with undercover agents, undermining routine citizenship processes, and denying Indian Americans their constitutional rights.

² <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/counterintelligence/transnational-repression>

- Transnational repression committed by the Indian government in the United States represents an extension of the Modi regime's authoritarian and Hindu nationalist domestic policy. The Indian government's assassination of a Sikh separatist in Canada (and attempt to assassinate another in the United States) aligns with its overseas killings of Sikhs in Pakistan. The persecution of American human rights activists follows the playbook of persecution of activists and critics of the Modi regime in India; the revocation of travel privileges from Indian Americans mirrors the policy of revoking passports from dissidents within India.
- Indian Americans widely reported that statements of clear support from the United States government will help diaspora communities feel safer and improve lines of communication between the two nations.

3. TNR tactics

A. Violent Attacks in the US

The most egregious form of transnational repression practiced by the Indian government is the assassination of Indians residing abroad. In 2023, Indian agents allegedly assassinated one Canadian Sikh leader, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, while conspiring but failing to assassinate a Sikh leader in New York City, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun. Though investigations are ongoing, preliminary findings suggest that senior intelligence officials within India's foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), ordered the killings.³

The death of Nijjar and the attempted killing of Pannun sent shockwaves not only through Indian American Sikh communities, but also through the broader community of Indian American human rights activists and dissidents.⁴ According to Canadian officials and an indictment in US federal court, the North American assassination attempts were coordinated between American and Canadian Indian government representatives and senior intelligence officials in India.

These events represent the extension of a violent transnational campaign conducted by the Modi government in Pakistan, where at least 11 Sikh or Kashmiri leaders in exile have been assassinated over the past two years. Asked why India would take the risk of attempting to assassinate an American citizen, one anonymous Western security official said: "Because they knew they could get away with it."⁵

³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/who-is-gurpatwant-pannun-target-foiled-murder-plot-us-2023-11-23/>; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/04/29/india-assassination-raw-sikhs-modi/>

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<https://www.vox.com/world-politics/24160779/inside-indias-secret-campaign-to-threaten-and-harass-americans>

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/04/29/india-assassination-raw-sikhs-modi/>

B. Retaliation against family members and friends in India

Among the most common forms of transnational repression faced by Indian nationals residing abroad is the harassment and intimidation of their India-based relatives, friends, partners, and former neighbors. The Indian state has retaliated against foreign critics by threatening their contacts in India with police violence, invasive interrogations and phone calls, verbal threats, and the confiscation or even demolition of family-owned properties.

US-based interviewees reported that foreign interrogators were particularly interested in obtaining information about their citizenship and visa status within the US, questioning their families until they obtained information that might be used against them in immigration procedures. This form of TNR is felt acutely by Kashmiris living abroad.

C. Disinformation campaigns

The Disinfo Lab

Since at least 2020, an Indian intelligence-affiliated organization called the Disinfo Lab has produced extensive dossiers of disinformation aimed at discrediting US-based critics of the Modi government in India. Totalling several hundred pages of fabricated claims, the Disinfo Lab's smear campaigns have been distributed by domestic Hindu nationalist groups to members of the US Congress and the California legislature. These dispatches are also regularly amplified by senior leaders of the BJP and members of the Hindu nationalist press in India. According to former Disinfo Lab employees quoted in the report, the organization is led by Lt. Col. Dibya Satpathy, a RAW officer who is reportedly connected to India's national security advisor, Ajit Doval.⁶

The impact of these reports has been severe. According to anonymous sources, Indian law enforcement officials have cited claims from these reports while interrogating detained Indian Americans and Indian nationals. The dissemination of these reports online also routinely leads to death threats and threats of sexual violence against their targets, according to multiple researchers and activists targeted in Disinfo Lab reports. Among the myriad groups and individuals targeted by Disinfo Lab are IAMC, Hindus for Human Rights (HFHR), Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal (D-WA 7th District), the United States

[Cans](#)

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/12/10/india-the-disinfo-lab-discredit-critics/>

Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), journalist and activist Pieter Friedrich, and the Dalit (i.e. oppressed caste) rights organization Equality Labs.

D. Dismantling Global Hindutva Conference Retaliation

One example of how transnational repression affects academic freedom and community dialogue in the US was the disinformation campaign against the Dismantling Global Hindutva academic conference in September 2021, which gathered academics to discuss Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) and its global impact on human rights, academic freedom, and political violence.

Soon after the event was publicized, participants were inundated with violent threats based on misleading claims circulated by Hindu nationalist leaders in India and the United States. Accused of promoting terrorism and anti-nationalist or anti-Hindu rhetoric, participants received tens of thousands of death and rape threats from individual X accounts in India. A number of participants withdrew from the conference out of fear of being banned from traveling in India or violence against themselves and their families. The servers of Drew University in New Jersey crashed after receiving more than 30,000 threats. Conference speaker Meena Kandasamy had pictures of her children posted online, captioned “ur son will face a painful death.”⁷

The flood of hate speech was inflamed by public statements from leading Indian politicians. BJP politician Kapil Mishra, notorious for his role in inciting anti-Muslim violence in Delhi, falsely claimed that conference attendees were supporting terrorism in a Tweet that was reposted nearly 20,000 times.⁸ Kanchan Gupta, a senior advisor to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting under Modi, also helped to promote attacks against the conference attendees.⁹

Many of the attacks on academics participating in the conference appear to have been coordinated by BJP members and India-based Hindu nationalist groups. According to a study conducted by researchers at

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https://www.huffpost.com/entry/far-right-hindu-nationalism-is-gaining-ground-in-the-us_n_6352d3efe4b04cf8f38360e4

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https://web.archive.org/web/20220427025315/https://twitter.com/KapilMishra_IND/status/1436173144591536129

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<http://web.archive.org/web/20210910034459/https://twitter.com/KanchanGupta/status/1436166262938243072>

Columbia University, a considerable portion of the threats were generated by a “workforce” of users working with the BJP and other Hindu nationalist organizations in India and using WhatsApp and Instagram to plan attacks and disseminate information.¹⁰

E. Undermining citizenship rights, detentions, and deportations

In an attempt to silence and intimidate foreign nationals deemed hostile to the Modi regime, the BJP selectively undermines Indian travel rights for American citizens and Indian nationals residing in the United States. The Indian government has:

- deported American citizens of Indian origin
- confiscated passports of Indian nationals, confining them to India
- placed individuals on no-fly lists
- and—in a matter of particular concern for Indians born in the US—withheld or revoked Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) status, a permit that allows any person with parents or grandparents from India to live and work in India without a visa for life.

Indian consulates in the United States play a vital role in abetting this form of transnational repression, whether by ordering deportations of American citizens from India or providing intelligence gathered on Americans to official counterparts in India.

F. Political interference via Indian Consulates and Overseas Political Groups

Indian consulates have also sought to influence American legislation and perceptions of Hindu nationalism. In alignment with the BJP's push to silence criticism of its more extreme policies, domestic Indian consulates have on several occasions allied with domestic Hindu nationalist groups to challenge opponents of the Modi regime.

The involvement of Indian consular officials in quashing a Chicago City Council resolution criticizing the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) illustrates the effect of Indian transnational repression on local governments.¹¹ In response to intense lobbying from an alliance between the consulate and members of domestic Hindu nationalist organizations, several mentions of troubling human rights trends in India were

¹⁰ <https://dgh-tweet-study.github.io/>

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<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/03/india-citizenship-amendment-act-is-a-blow-to-indian-constitutional-values-and-international-standards/>

struck from the resolution. The Consul General of India in Chicago also reportedly intimated that the passage of the legislation could damage relations between India and the United States, leading former Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot to distance herself from the legislation.¹²

In 2024, the Consulate General of India in New York City worked with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America (VHPA) to promote an anti-Muslim hate symbol in the city's annual India Day Parade. The VHPA's float included a recreation of the Ram Mandir, a Hindu temple built directly over the ruins of a mosque raised by Hindu nationalist mobs in 1992.¹³ This partnership is particularly troubling given the history of the VHPA's Indian counterpart, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). In 2002, VHP members helped to organize the killing of more than 2,000 predominantly Muslim Indians after the destruction of the mosque where the Ram Mandir now stands.¹⁴

5. Recommendations

To raise the visibility of the Indian government's practice of transnational repression and protect its victims going forward, IAMC recommends that the government adopt the following measures:

1. Implement the bipartisan Transnational Repression Reporting Act of 2024, which would require the attorney general to catalog each case of transnational repression in an annual report and document the US government's law enforcement response in each instance, as well as the response of foreign governments after being confronted with their involvement.
2. Sanction offending Indian officials under the [Global Magnitsky Act](#), under which the US may impose sanctions on any individual who violates "internationally recognized human rights and freedoms, such as the freedoms of religion, expression, association, and assembly, and the rights to a fair trial and democratic elections."¹⁵
3. Prevent intimidation, surveillance and harassment campaigns by Indian consulates in the United States.

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<https://www.chicagotribune.com/2021/03/24/symbolic-city-council-resolution-addressing-tensions-in-india-voted-down-after-months-of-negotiation-and-pushback/>

¹³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/22/babri-mosque-to-ram-temple-a-timeline-from-1528-to-2024>

¹⁴ <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-vishwa-hindu-parishad-of-america-vhpa/>

¹⁵ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/284/text>

4. Designate India a Country of Particular Concern (CPC), the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) highest warning against countries who undermine religious freedom.
5. Activate the Arms Export Control Act (AECA) to halt arms transfers to India until the Modi regime ceases its persecution of religious minorities and dissidents living abroad.