



The Honorable Christopher Smith
Co-Chair
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
200 C Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Jim McGovern
Co-Chair
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
200 C Street SW
Washington, D.C. 20515

March 21, 2024

Dear Co-Chairs Smith and McGovern, and members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission:

On behalf of the Sikh American community, the Sikh American Legal Defense & Education Fund (SALDEF) welcomes the opportunity to submit written testimony to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing titled, "India: Recent Human Rights Reporting". We share the Commission's concerns over India's human rights abuses, particularly involving its suppression of the second Farmer's Protest which has resulted in the deaths of peaceful protestors. It is without a doubt that the Indian state's abysmal record on human rights is evident with its assault on Sikhs, Muslims, and other marginalized minority groups in India.

SALDEF remains committed to working with all stakeholders to pressure the Indian government to honor the human rights of religious minorities. It is our hope that our written testimony will shed light on the Modi regime's gross violations of the rights of marginalized Indians.

The second Farmer's protests in India have risen again due to the Indian government's failure to live up to its original commitments in 2021 to support its farmers. The farmers' current demands include an expanded list of 23 crops that the government would purchase at a minimum guaranteed price. To prevent the demonstrators from entering the city, the authorities have barricaded highways with cement blocks, metal containers, and barbed wire. Talks between the farmers and the government have been deadlocked.¹

The authorities deployed drones and used tear gas shells to disperse gatherings and medical camps. They fired shotguns loaded with metal pellets, which can cause blindness and other serious injury, for crowd control. Shubhkaran Singh, a 24-year old farmer, died of a bullet wound to the head after police repeatedly fired on protesting farmers in the area bordering Punjab and Haryana states.

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/29/india-protect-farmers-right-peaceful-protest>

SALDEF has spent an immense amount of effort documenting India's human rights abuses, especially through its use of censorship of social media. SALDEF's recent report on tech censorship in India, "*Virtually Vulnerable: Exposing the Human Cost of Digital Harassment*"² found that tech censorship conducted by the Indian state against protesting minority groups exposes the BJP's growing playbook for online narrative control.

In this report we found that State-level governments across India will implement internet blackouts to stymie organizers' ability to coordinate and social media propaganda machines spring into action; widely disseminating content that over time pushes some followers from the realm of misinformation into the realm of radicalization. In parallel, BJP officials use their sovereign authority within India to exert maximum pressure to shape systems and compel employee compliance at social media platforms—bringing platforms' global reach into the BJP political arsenal. Perhaps most troubling to advocates is the reality that both American technology firms and the American government operate under a calculus that accepting the Indian government's historical discrimination against minorities is worth opportunities like accessing the Indian market or executing larger geopolitical strategies in Asia.

The SALDEF Censorship report, *When #Sikh Was Banned, Worldwide Social Media Censorship of the Punjab Farmers' Protest: Analysis and Recommendations*³ highlights that the Indian government pressured Twitter to remove over 500 accounts and more than 150 tweets related to Sikhism and the Farmers' Protests, many of which were based in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. The Indian government's collaboration with companies like Facebook and Twitter to silence Sikh activism abroad is deeply concerning.

This year, Meta and X have taken down posts of Sikh and South Asian American activists on behalf of the Indian government's draconian law, the Indian Information Technology Act, 2000. For example, Activists such as Dr. Swaimann Singh received a legal notice by X that his tweet criticizing the Modi regime for its handling of the Farmer's protest was taken down in India.⁴

In 2021, the Indian government implemented secondary legislation that significantly increased its oversight of social media platforms, drawing criticism from UN officials for violating international human rights norms. This censorship was coupled with widespread misinformation about the Sikh population. In 2023, the Indian government initiated a search for an individual named Amritpal Singh, a Sikh activist known for his efforts to address various issues as SALDEF's, "*How the Indian State Deploys Disinformation and Online Hate: Case Studies*"⁵ from the Amritpal Singh Manhunt & Other Diasporic Sikh Experiences" report demonstrates, the Indian government deployed thousands of paramilitary troops, arrested more than 150 people associated with Amritpal.

² <https://saldef.org/wp-content/uploads/Tech-Censorship-Diasporic-Landscape-Report-v2.pdf>

³ https://saldef.org/wp-content/uploads/SALDEF_Social-Media-Censorship-Report-02282023.pdf

⁴ <https://twitter.com/singhswaiman/status/1759365794704568321?s=46&t=eE29jKvHsZEPYo638QPyEA>

⁵ https://saldef.org/wp-content/uploads/SALDEF_Amritpal-Singh-Censorship-Report-06302023.pdf

While we welcome this hearing on human rights in India, we further urge Congress to reassess its relationship with the Indian state with a key focus on respecting human rights and request that members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission address the following questions:

1. What is the United States Congress doing to pressure the Biden administration to condemn the brutal repression of Indians involved in the second Farmer's protests?
2. Where does the Commission stand on the \$3B arms sale between the United States government and India which was initially approved by Chairman Ben Cardin of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee?
3. What legislation is the United States Congress proposing to address specifically the human rights abuses by the Indian government?

We are pleased to see that the Commission is taking productive steps to highlight India's human rights record, which severely impacts the livelihoods of Sikh Indians and other minority groups. We look forward to continuing working with members of the Commission to protect the human rights of Indians.

Thanks,
Mandeep