



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

# **Challenges & Opportunities: The Advancement of Human Rights in India**

**Tuesday, June 7th, 2016**

**3:00 PM**

**1334 Longworth House Office Building**

### **Opening Statement**

Ladies and gentlemen, witnesses and distinguished guests, I now call this hearing to order. This hearing is entitled “Challenges & Opportunities: The Advancement of Human Rights in India” It will be comprised of two panels.

Recognizing myself for an opening statement –

Today, the relationship between the United States and India is expanding rapidly. Last year, bilateral trade in goods and services was valued at over \$100 billion, and the signing in 2005 of an expanded defense agreement paved the way for increasingly robust security ties. Since 2009, an annual strategic dialogue has strengthened these ties further, and the attendance of tens of thousands of bright, hard-working Indian students at U.S. universities has brought our two cultures ever closer together.

Yet many of these new developments, while certainly positive, have overlooked a troubling array of human rights concerns that should give us pause. In 2014, I chaired a hearing by this Commission examining the plight of religious minorities in India, noting at the time an alarming trend in instances of communal violence targeting Christians and Muslims. By nearly all accounts, the number of these instances has only grown in recent years. According to the U.S. Commission

on International Religious Freedom's most recent report, "religious tolerance deteriorated and religious freedom violations increased in India" in 2015. The U.S. State Department's most recent International Religious Freedom Report also cites several concerns, including the enforcement of "anti-conversion" laws in six states. Those convicted of violating these laws may face fines and, in some cases, up to three years in prison.

On February 25<sup>th</sup>, the co-chairs of this Commission and 32 of our colleagues, including eight Senators, wrote to Prime Minister Modi to express our concern at reports of violent incidents targeting religious minorities. The letter never received a formal reply, and the government's public comment on it characterized the concerns of these Members of Congress as constituting an "aberration".

Throughout the fall of 2015, numerous well-known Indian writers, artists, and scientists returned national awards in protest at what they perceived as "growing intolerance" against religious minorities and free expression. Some Indian business leaders and a noted Indian-born economist echoed these concerns, pointing out that a growth in intolerance could hurt foreign investment.

India also continues to be haunted by the legacies of the caste system. While the Constitution of India formally prohibits discrimination based on caste and the Indian government has made substantial efforts to recognize and provide economic relief to scheduled castes and other marginalized communities, serious abuses remain. In its most recent Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, the State Department reported that "many scheduled caste members continued to face impediments to the means of social advancement, including education, jobs, access to justice, freedom of movement, and access to institutions and services. It goes on to say that "there were numerous reports of violence [against Dalits] and significant discrimination in access to services, such as health care, education, temple attendance, and marriage."

Tens of millions of so-called "untouchables" are disproportionately at risk of being trafficked for commercial exploitation, and an unknown number, likely in the millions, are believed to live in virtual slavery as bonded laborers. The State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons most recent report ranked India as a tier 2 country, meaning it has yet to fully comply with the

minimum standards of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. According to the 2016 Global Slavery Index, a report released last week by the Walk Free Foundation, India is home to as many as 18.3 million modern day slaves, more than any other country in the world and four times the amount of the next country on the list. The introduction last week of India's first-ever comprehensive anti-human trafficking law is a welcome addition to efforts at countering this insidious blight on society.

Unfortunately, while some efforts are being made in the right direction, many are not. International and domestic NGO's, including a considerable number that support human rights initiatives or marginalized communities, have been targeted by the BJP government. According to various sources, licenses for nearly 9,000 NGO's receiving foreign funding were canceled by the BJP in 2015 and several high profile Western-based organizations, including Greenpeace and the Ford Foundation, were denied access to funds.

This effort, coupled with endemic abuses by security and police forces, judicial inadequacies, and the voracious use of sedition laws and other legal tools by federal and state governments to crush peaceful dissent has created a pervasive climate of fear for those who defend human rights.

This state of affairs is gravely concerning, and I must commend my colleagues in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, including Chairman Corker and ranking member Cardin, for recently voicing their concerns on many of these same issues.

It is my sincere hope that this hearing will shed greater light on these concerns, and I look forward to exploring ways we can work together to confront these challenges and advance human rights in India.

With that, I now recognize my distinguished co-chair, Congressman McGovern, for an opening statement.