

Biden faces backlash over staffer with Hindu nationalist ties

by [Aysha Khan](#) in the [April 8, 2020](#) issue



Democratic presidential candidate and former vice president Joe Biden speaks during a campaign rally at Renaissance High School in Detroit on March 9, 2020. (AP Photo/Paul Sancya)

Former vice president Joe Biden's campaign is facing growing pressure to fire a top aide with Hindu nationalist ties.

Civil rights activists say Amit Jani, who was hired in September 2019 as the campaign's Asian American and Pacific Islanders national vote director, is unfit to work with the campaign due to his close association with Indian prime minister Narendra Modi and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

“To hire a supporter and friend of Narendra Modi opens the door to embracing anti-Muslim and Hindu nationalist politics,” reads an open letter published March 6 by Equality Lab, a South Asian American advocacy organization. “Progressive Asian Americans and South Asian Americans cannot stand by a candidate with relationships to fascists, here or abroad.”

An Indian American and a Hindu, Jani has also served as the campaign’s Muslim outreach coordinator.

Jani has posted Facebook photos of himself with Modi, including photos taken after Modi’s reelection victory and during the Howdy Modi event in Texas. Jani’s name also appeared on an event listing in New Jersey last year that celebrated the revocation of Kashmir’s autonomy and listed the BJP’s national general secretary as a speaker. His mother, Deepa Jani, campaigned for Modi’s reelection.

Since August, Modi’s administration has received international condemnation over its crackdown on Kashmir, its passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act, which critics call anti-Muslim and which for the first time in Indian history makes religion a criterion for citizenship, and plans for a National Registry of Citizens, which has already put 2 million people at risk of deportation or detention.

The fallout from the legal changes has led to deadly street violence targeting Muslims.

The organization South Asian Americans Leading Together, noting that Jani participated in a 2012 youth leadership program the organization hosted, wrote in a statement that “South Asians holding positions of political influence must be responsive to the most critical issues in our community, including Hindu nationalism and Islamophobia. When it comes to hate violence and discrimination, neutrality is not an option.”

Jani’s role in the campaign could jeopardize Biden’s relationships with the broader Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, the Equality Lab letter argues.

The letter’s signees, including Harvard professor Cornel West and nearly 40 other activists, scholars, and organizations, called on the campaign to fire Jani and develop “substantive policy actions” to tackle Hindu nationalism, Islamophobia, and white supremacy. A separate online petition urging Biden to fire Jani has received over 5,600 signatures.

More than 3,300 people have signed yet another petition in support of Jani. The petition describes criticism of Jani as “Hinduphobic.”

The Biden campaign did not comment on any of the letters or petitions, nor did it answer questions about Jani’s current role. But a staffer pointed RNS toward an announcement of a new hire: Farooq Mitha, a new senior adviser on Muslim American engagement.

Mitha is a former Clinton aide as well as a founding board member of the Muslim advocacy group Emgage, which endorsed Bernie Sanders last month. Mitha did not respond to a request for comment.

Reports indicate that the Biden campaign had been struggling to find a suitable Muslim staffer to court American Muslim voters since news broke of Jani’s hiring.

In an interview with the *Muslim Observer*, which announced Mitha’s appointment, Mitha sidestepped a question referencing concern over Jani’s role in the campaign and said Biden was “disappointed” by the Modi administration’s implementation of the NRC and CAA as well as India’s recent actions in Kashmir.

“He supports the rights of the Indian people to protest and believes that these measures are inconsistent with the country’s long tradition of secularism and sustaining a multi-ethnic and multi-religious democracy,” Mitha told the blog.
—Religion News Service