December 10, 2015

First off, I would like to thank the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee for organizing this event and for their efforts to combat intolerance, prejudice, hate, and hate-based violence.

As education director of the Hindu American Foundation, I have noticed the rise of xenophobia in this country, and how it’s impacting almost every facet of our society. This isn’t just about the suspicion of and scrutiny towards Muslim-Americans, it’s about how a growing fear of the Other - shaped by changing demographics, political rhetoric, and a lack of cultural competency - is manifesting itself in the ugliest ways possible.

The xenophobia has collateral damage, and the recent attempts to marginalize and calls for excluding Muslims, particularly those from war-torn parts of the Middle East, is representative of a climate that now feeds on hate and fear, rather than trust and amity among diverse communities. The fact that religious litmus tests are even being discussed shows just how low our social and political discourse has reached.

No community should face this level of ostracism and scrutiny, particularly since we as Americans have repeatedly seen the disastrous consequences of our rejection of Others. The massive displacement of Native Americans; post-Reconstruction violence against Blacks; the discrimination against Asian immigrants, exemplified by the California Alien Land Act of 1913 and the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924; anti-Semitism and even the outgrouping of Italian and Irish immigrants; and the shameful legacy of Japanese internment are all legacies of our failure to learn from mistakes of the past.

As we join our friends in the Arab American and Muslim American community in a call to end this climate of fear, I should note that the Hindu community is suffering in this climate as well. On Thanksgiving, 40 jhandi flags outside of a Caribbean Hindu home in Queens were set afire, and authorities are investigating the arson as a hate crime. Just over the weekend, at Penn State University - my alma mater - a student was charged with ethnic intimidation after he assaulted an Indian student based on his appearance. Not to mention, just a few months ago, the sign for a planned Hindu temple in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, was shot at over 60 times.

We need to come together as an American family to advocate for pluralism, dignity, and mutual respect for all people. Let’s take this stand before hateful rhetoric spirals into sustained violence and institutional discrimination.

Even in these fearful times, I’m reminded of this Hindu prayer as a guide of our collective strength and action:

Let all be prosperous
Let all be nourished
Let our thoughts be unified for the benefit of humanity
Let our quest for knowledge be luminous and joyful
Let there be no hatred
Peace within us Peace around us Peace between us

Thank you.

-Murali Balaji, Ph.D., Director of Education and Curriculum Reform, Hindu American Foundation