



## NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Red Deer, AB

Day 2

April 27, 2023

### EVIDENCE

---

**Witness 11: Babita Rana**

Full Day 2 Timestamp: 09:59:36–10:14:09

Source URL: <https://rumble.com/v2kqsc-national-citizens-inquiry-red-deer-day-2.html>

[00:00:00]

**Shawn Buckley**

Our next witness is Babita Rana. Babita, can you please state your full name for the record spelling your first and last name?

**Babita Rana**

Babita Rana, B-A-B-I-T-A R-A-N-A.

**Shawn Buckley**

Babita, do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

**Babita Rana**

Yes.

**Shawn Buckley**

Now, you are a computer programmer at the University of Alberta.

**Babita Rana**

Yes.

**Shawn Buckley**

And you have worked there for over 20 years.

**Babita Rana**

Yes, I've been there for about 28 years as a student and staff.

**Shawn Buckley**

Right, right. Now, can you tell us what happened, what your experience was as an employee at the university when COVID came along?

**Babita Rana**

Okay, so March 2020, everything shifted to remote work. So ever since March 2020, I've been working from home. My whole team shifted to remote work and that transition went pretty smoothly, just given the nature of our jobs. It was all on computers online, so we found our groove pretty quickly. And yeah, we worked from home until September 2021.

**Shawn Buckley**

I'll just stop you. Because you're a computer programmer, you and your whole team can— You don't have to be on site; you can work from home.

**Babita Rana**

Exactly. I was able to perform 100 per cent of my duties remotely in that year. In those 18 months between March 2020 and September '21, I did not have to go into the office at any point to do my job.

**Shawn Buckley**

Okay. I just think it's important for people to understand that as your story goes forward. So I'm sorry, continue.

**Babita Rana**

Okay, so September 2021, that is when the university introduced the COVID-19 directive. Compliance was mandatory, and they had given us the options— Or they had told us that they would make accommodations for medical exemptions and religious exemptions. So I applied for a religious exemption early October 2021. That exemption was denied. I received an email late on a Friday night around 10 p.m. telling me that the exemption was denied, and I was given five days to appeal. So essentially, two business days to appeal. I managed to get in the appeal, and the appeal was also denied. And shortly thereafter, I was informed that I would be placed on leave without pay.

**Shawn Buckley**

Can I just back up and flesh out with you a few questions about the religious exemption? Because my understanding is that a number of employees, over 100 applied for religious exemptions and that you're aware of this because of discussions with the union. Am I correct?

**Babita Rana**

That's right. I'm told that the university received over 100 religious exemption requests from staff. That doesn't include students and that doesn't include the medical exemptions.

**Shawn Buckley**

Okay, we're just speaking about staff. But as far as religious exemptions, you were advised by the union that over 100 applied. And my understanding is that 100 per cent of those applications were denied.

**Babita Rana**

Yes, that's what I was told by the union.

**Shawn Buckley**

And that they were all denied on the same day.

**Babita Rana**

They were all denied in the same fashion. We were all given similar canned email responses that went out at the same day. I know this because I was in communication with other staff who were affected by this. We were sharing stories, and they had said that they had received the same email at the same time.

**Shawn Buckley**

Okay, now the University of Alberta actually has its own human rights office.

**Babita Rana**

Right.

**Shawn Buckley**

And so you made an application to the University of Alberta Human Rights Office. Can you tell us what happened?

**Babita Rana**

So yes, after my appeal was also denied, I submitted a formal application. The university has this office called, Office of Safe Disclosure and Human Rights. And through our union collective agreement, there's a process whereby you can submit a formal discrimination complaint. So I ended up submitting that complaint

[00:05:00]

after I received my notice that I was going to be placed on leave. There was also this work-from-home program that the university had introduced in mid-November of 2021. So that was basically just formalizing what we had already been doing, working from home. It was just paperwork. But that work-from-home program wasn't available to me because I wasn't vaccinated. The rest of my—

**Shawn Buckley**

I just want to get it clear. So first of all, you had a job that 100 per cent you could do from home, and you were doing from home.

**Babita Rana**

Yes.

**Shawn Buckley**

You weren't asked to come back to the campus.

**Babita Rana**

Yes.

**Shawn Buckley**

But notwithstanding that you were working from home, there was a program that you could apply for to be classed as working at home. But to qualify for that you had to be vaccinated.

**Babita Rana**

Right, so my entire team was approved to continue working from home, but I was excluded from that.

**Shawn Buckley**

So the university thought that because you were unvaccinated, you weren't safe to work at home, apparently.

**Babita Rana**

Yes.

**Shawn Buckley**

Okay. Did they explain that to you? Because I'm having a few cognitive difficulties.

**Babita Rana**

They would phrase it as I was non-compliant with the COVID mandate; therefore, I couldn't apply for the work-from-home program. And I would argue that I would try to be compliant with their COVID directive via this exemption route, but they kept denying that.

**Shawn Buckley**

So you filed under this safe disclosure and human rights process. My understanding is there was four of you that did this. There were four complaints that were submitted.

**Babita Rana**

Yes, four.

**Shawn Buckley**

And my understanding is that actually the University of Alberta then stepped in and just stopped those complaints, terminated them.

**Babita Rana**

Right. So I was checking in with my union. This would have been probably early February 2022. I was checking in on the status of my complaint, and my understanding was that they were trying to settle on an arbitrator. And then shortly thereafter, I received notice that the University had reviewed the complaint and decided that an investigation was not needed. So they closed it. Closed all four.

**Shawn Buckley**

So your union had to file a grievance about that process now.

**Babita Rana**

Right.

**Shawn Buckley**

And you've been waiting 14 months on that grievance and nothing has happened.

**Babita Rana**

That's right.

**Shawn Buckley**

And you also then filed an Alberta Human Rights complaint, and you've been waiting 14 months, and nothing's happened.

**Babita Rana**

That's right, yes. My human rights complaint was accepted by the intake officer pretty quickly. But it's been pending approval from the director.

**Shawn Buckley**

I'm wondering if you can share with us, how have you been affected by this experience that you've had?

**Babita Rana**

Well, I was under a lot of stress in late 2021 when I was trying to get the University to see my perspective. I'd emailed the president several times; I'd emailed the board of governors several times. I got no response from them. I emailed the minister of advanced education and that office eventually got back to me and said that it was out of their hands and that I should get vaccinated.

But yeah, I was under a lot of stress at that time. I was worried about how we were going to manage our family finances when we were missing an entire income. And that's when a lot

of my physical health issues started as well. I think that's all because of the stress. And I still deal with those physical health issues today. It's been a long recovery.

**Shawn Buckley**

Right, so now that we're in April of 2023, you're still affected with depression.

**Babita Rana**

Yeah, so January 2022, that's when I was on leave. And looking back at that time now, I realized I was depressed. I was depressed, I was frustrated, and I was confused. I couldn't understand. That first week, I literally just sat on the couch with my kid, and I watched cartoons. I thought about nothing. I did nothing.

[00:10:00]

And I couldn't understand why I was sitting here when I could have been sitting ten feet over there at my desk working. But somehow that was unsafe for me to be ten feet over there. I was confused. I was angry.

**Shawn Buckley**

I know you don't want to go into details, so we won't. But I did want to just confirm with you that when you're talking about physical health issues that you also experienced because of the stress, it literally affected your day-to-day life for some period of time.

**Babita Rana**

Yeah. Everything from my ability to sleep, to being able to do basic hygiene, to getting dressed, to cooking, to cleaning, to being able to play with my kid. Every single thing that I did in my day was affected. There was a lot of pain, and it was extremely debilitating. And I still am trying to recover from that. I'm told that it's possible that it may not be a 100 per cent recovery.

**Shawn Buckley**

Right. I wanted to bring that up, even though you didn't want to go into the details, just so that people understand that this is something that's been lasting and significant. We're just not going into the details.

Now, I don't have any further questions for you. I'll ask if the commissioners have any questions.

**Commissioner Drysdale**

One of the things I've been hearing from multiple witnesses is that they applied for religious exemptions. I've heard this from police; I've heard it from doctors. I've heard it from folks like yourself. Did the university explain to you how they judged whether or not you believed in whatever it was you believe in, in your religion? How were they the arbiters of that?

**Babita Rana**

In my requests, I had made it very clear to them that I felt very strongly about my position. I had made it very clear to them that there were elements, from like a Hindu and a Christian background, that supported my arguments. Because I have both in my background. So I thought that I had met the legal definition of a valid religious belief, a sincere belief that connects to a larger belief system.

And they said, “No.” They said, “No, your beliefs are not sincere. Your beliefs do not connect to a larger system; therefore, you’re denied.” And I found that to be extremely offensive. I laid out my personal history, my religious background. I laid it all out for them in an attempt to convince them of how important this was to me. And then for them to come back and say, “No, your beliefs are not good enough.” That was extremely offensive and degrading to go through that.

**Commissioner Drysdale**

How did you feel and how do you feel about your employer looking into and questioning probably one of the most personal aspects of your life?

**Babita Rana**

Yeah, it’s wrong. I tried to express to them that this is something that I’m very passionate about. Who are they to judge my beliefs? I couldn’t understand it. It made me very frustrated, very angry.

**Commissioner Drysdale**

Thank you.

**Shawn Buckley**

So there being no further questions, on behalf of the National Citizens Inquiry, we sincerely thank you for coming and testifying today.

**Babita Rana**

Thank you.

[00:14:33]

***Final Review and Approval:*** Anna Cairns, August 30, 2023.

*The evidence offered in this transcript is a true and faithful record of witness testimony given during the National Citizens Inquiry (NCI) hearings. The transcript was prepared by members of a team of volunteers using an “intelligent verbatim” transcription method.*

*For further information on the transcription process, method, and team, see the NCI website: <https://nationalcitizensinquiry.ca/about-these-transcripts/>*