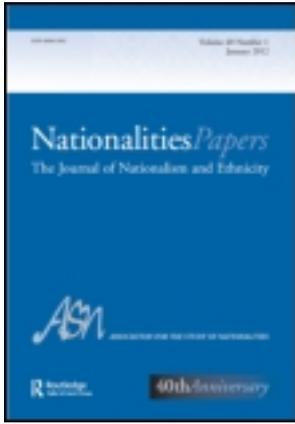


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## Minorities and marginality: pertinacity of Hindus and Sikhs in a repressive environment in Afghanistan

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The situation of Hindus and Sikhs as a persecuted minority is a little-studied topic in literature dealing with ethno-sectarian conflict in Afghanistan. Hindu and Sikh communities' history and role in Afghanistan's development are examined through a structural, political, socioeconomic, and perceptual analysis of the minority populations since the country gained its independence in 1919. It traces a timeline of their evolving status after the breakdown of state structure and the ensuing civil conflicts and targeted persecution in the 1990s that led to their mass exodus out of the country. A combination of structural failure and rising Islamic fundamentalist ideology in the post-Soviet era led to a war of ethnic cleansing as fundamentalists suffered a crisis of legitimation and resorted to violence as a means to establish their authority. Hindus and Sikhs found themselves in an uphill battle to preserve their culture and religious traditions in a hostile political environment in the post-Taliban period. The international community and Kabul failed in their moral obligation to protect and defend the rights of minorities and oppressed communities.

**Keywords:** political movements; minorities; social justice

### Introduction

Minorities can be defined as communities who are descendants of indigenous people or immigrants distinguished from the local majority by their own distinct culture, traditions, religious beliefs, and languages. They tend to remain neutral in the face of internal conflict and rely on state institutions for protection of their rights and security. Literature on internal conflict studies factors that render some places and situations prone to violence – structural, political, socioeconomic, and perceptual. Minorities are often victimized when state structures are weak, as aggressive vested groups take advantage of the situation and promote their own interests. Such states lack legitimacy due to their exclusionary policies of development; they lose public support and remain incapable of maintaining effective control of territories and national security. Autocratic regimes encounter resentment when they serve the interest of one or a few select groups at the expense of others. Discriminatory socioeconomic development policies generate disenchantment as the disadvantaged social groups view such practices as unfair. Such perceptions can lead to violence as communities and groups experience inequitable opportunities in educational, cultural, political, and social arenas.

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Minority communities in Afghanistan endured years of repression and were systematically targeted as the civil war erupted in the 1990s. Internal conflicts in the country were the result of structural failure and ideology – the rising tempo of Islamic fundamentalism. After toppling the Soviet-backed government, leaders of the Islamic fundamentalist parties that declared the establishment of an Islamic state failed to resolve their own differences, and subsequent infighting and wars among them rendered the state structure fractious and weak. As fundamentalists suffered a crisis of legitimation, they condemned rival groups for violating Islamic rules and resorted to violence as a means to build what they coined as a genuine Islamic state guided by Islamic *Sharia* laws.

Power struggles among Islamic fundamentalists and would-be leaders escalated as each tried to consolidate positions and mobilize communities for administrative autonomy, while leaders of ethnic communities fought to assert themselves politically. Backed by external patrons, these leaders had no regard for the rule of law and human life. Each group carved out spheres of influence to the extent that the state structure became non-existent as a political entity. As violence raged, some people and communities were forced to arm themselves to defend their interests, while many others abandoned their homes and properties and left for the relative safety of neighboring states.

Afghanistan is predominantly a Muslim country and home to various ethnic and tribal communities. Although each community played a role in the social, cultural, and economic development of the country, they also share responsibility for the destruction of the country's infrastructures and war of ethnic cleansing that claimed the lives of thousands of innocent men, women, and children. The fractured state apparatus remained a monopoly of the Islamic fundamentalist party of *Jamiat-e-Islami-e-Afghanistan*, Islamic Society of Afghanistan; Shia Hazaras were not adequately represented in the government. The Shia Hazaras had been persecuted in the past and were deprived of their basic rights and liberties and fought to assert their role in the post-Soviet polity trying to gain their share of power. The country is also home to a non-Muslim minority of Hindus and Sikhs. These communities were systematically targeted by Islamic warriors because of their religious beliefs.

A plethora of research papers had been produced that focus on ethno-sectarian conflicts between the Sunnis and Shias since the creation of a nation-state in Afghanistan in the eighteenth century, but the plight of Hindus and Sikhs as a persecuted minority remained a neglected topic of scholarly research. This article attempts to remedy this lack of literature and examines the history and participation of Hindus and Sikhs in the country's development since Afghanistan gained its independence in 1919, their status after the breakdown of the state structure and the ensuing civil strife in the 1990s that led to their persecution, and their *en masse* exodus to the neighboring countries of Pakistan and India as well as to the West.

### **Historical background**

Hindus and Sikhs are one of the indigenous peoples of Afghanistan. Regions in northern India and Afghanistan share a common cultural heritage. Buddhism that emerged in India established its influence in various parts of Afghanistan. After Arab Muslim armies launched a war of conquest on Afghanistan, Buddhists converted to the new religion because they saw Islam as compatible and appreciated the symbiotic relationship with trade. Buddhism, despite its spiritual outlook was commercial in its orientation and practice. Monasteries that were built on trade routes served as operation centers for commercial activities, providing services to passing caravans and giving credit and loans to merchants as well as organizing and facilitating transfers of money. With the domination of trade by

Arab merchants and the prosperous life that they enjoyed, the Buddhist mercantile class saw their prosperity in decline while that of their Muslim competitors rose; this contributed to the draw toward Islam (Morgan 2012, 99–100).

The Hindu Shahi dynasty who ruled the eastern and southern regions of Afghanistan were rooted in feudalism and were not sympathetic to trade. They resisted incursions by invading Arabs for almost 200 years until they were defeated by the Ghaznawi rulers. Sabuktigin (977–997) established his headquarters in Ghazni, fought the Hindu Shahis, seized Kabul (Kabulistan), and forced them to retreat to the eastern regions of the country. His successor Mahmood (998–1030) also fought the Hindu Shahis and expanded his rule eastward, forcing the Hindu Shahis to transfer their capital to Lahore, Panjab of present-day Pakistan. Mahmood destroyed Hindu temples, looted their contents, and built mosques on their ruins. He brought enslaved Hindu warriors to Afghanistan. He conveniently exploited professional Hindus such as Pahayi Nandlal Goya to serve in his administration. Successive authoritarian leaders also used skilled and professional Hindus and Sikhs to promote their own political agendas and appointed them as state functionaries.

Major Hindu groups residing in the country include the Balpa, Chawa, Daka, Katal, Khatri, and Kandi, and the Khatri group that constitutes the largest group is known as Sardar Khail, the nobles.

In the Islamic empire, non-Muslims were allowed to practice their faith but were obligated to abide by the law of the land. Allowing them to practice their faith was advantageous to the political system because of the revenue it generated for the state treasury – non-Muslims, in addition to paying regular taxes, were subject to paying *Jazya*, poll taxes. Because of Islam's tolerance of other religions, Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews lived in peace and prospered economically; they were mainly merchants. Despite efforts by conservative rulers offering incentives to non-Muslims to convert to Islam, Hindus and Sikhs resisted conversion from Hinduism and Buddhism to Islam and the Sikhs adhered to the teachings of Guru Nanak – founder of Sikhism (Ballard 2011).

Sikhs as a religio-political community emerged in Panjab, India, and its founder Nanak (born in 1469) visited Afghanistan in 1521 and 1540, preached the faith, and converted a few Hindus. Under the leadership of Ranjit Singh, the Sikhs expanded their influence by seizing Multan, Kashmir, and later extending their control westward, capturing Peshawar in 1834 bordering Afghanistan and their rule came to an end after the British annexed Panjab to British-India.

With the British invasion and subsequent domination of Afghanistan over the course of the nineteenth century, the rulers of Afghanistan remained loyal to the British Crown. Increased trade between Afghanistan and British-India compelled traders and merchants to travel across the region. Hindus and Sikhs who settled in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), now called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sind in Pakistan, traveled along a network of trade routes stretching from Lahore to Peshawar and to Nangarhar, Kabul, and Qandahar. They crossed the Hindu Kush mountainous ranges and established trading routes to Samarqand and Bukhara of Central Asia. These traders and merchants were from two communities: the Sindi Shikarpuris and the Panjabi Khatris. The former usually returned to their home base while the latter who had settled in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and areas beyond the Durand Line (the line separates Afghanistan from Pakistan) “occupied a specific niche: given their high levels of literacy in Farsi no less than in Panjabi, they made their living as merchants, traders, scribes and administrators (Ballard 2011)”. They had familiarity with bazaars and villages in the regions they traveled and established good rapport with the local Muslims where their few competitors were mainly Jews and Armenians. Faiz Mohammad Katib, an acclaimed Hazara historian (1862–1931), reflected

further on Hindu citizens of the country and wrote that their professions included farming, small-scale businesses, such as stores selling basic staples, jewelry, and fabric. Families of means engaged in trade, real estate, and currency exchange, and individuals with administrative skills worked as clerks and bookkeepers in government offices. Katib characterizes Hindus as men of integrity, high moral standards, and honesty when dealing with local neighbors and customers (Katib 2000, 111–112).

The reign of the ruler of Kabul Shir Ali (1869–1879) heralded the beginning of modernization as he built a number of projects, such as industrial establishments, print media, schools to train civil service personnel, etc., and visited Ambala, India, on an official invitation from the British and requested financial and military assistance from the British to support his modernization projects. Shir Ali liked Indian music and invited Muslim musicians from India to perform at his court and provided them with land in the old section of Kabul known as *Kharabati* or entertainment quarters and used elephants to transport these musicians back and forth. Indian Music and dance flourished and dancers included local men, while in Kama, Nangarhar dancers were Sikhs (Sakata 2002, 83–84, 137).

More Hindus and Sikhs settled in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan and Afghanistan after the partition of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947. The partition resulted in a bloody sectarian conflict between Hindus and Muslims. Hindus and Sikhs from Sind and western regions of Pakistan fled to India and those who had settled in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa had the option to stay because they had cultivated good neighborly relations with their Pashtun neighbors. However, Islamicization and rising Pakistani nationalism posed a threat to their way of life and caused some to flee to India while others found safe havens in Afghanistan among their co-religionists.

The status of Hindus and Sikhs improved substantially in the post-World War II period and political stability in the country enabled them to expand their businesses; many ventured into commercial and banking sectors to the extent that at one point Hindus and Sikhs were in charge of most banking activities in the country and a number had operated currency exchange centers in major cities that facilitated the operation of informal value transfer systems known as *Hawala*. In the *Hawala* system, individuals whose inter-linkages are reinforced by familial ties or ethno-sectarian association work together and establish residences far away from one another in two or several cities where a good amount of commercial transactions take place. They open offices to facilitate business to the custodian of one arm of the *Hawala* business who could issue a letter of credit or acknowledgement letter of debt to a depositor who could obtain the money either in demand or on a certain date in the immediate future, where another arm of the *Hawala* business operates. This system proved to be of immense utility to traders and businessmen traveling far distances, freeing them from the burden of carrying large amounts of cash and the risk associated with it to conduct their businesses.<sup>1</sup>

There is no reliable demographic data on Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan – it is suggested that in the early 1970s, the number of Hindu nationals was estimated to be 25,000–30,000 and that of Sikh nationals was estimated to be 15,000; however, there are unverified claims that the number of Hindus in 1990 was around 200,000 and those of Sikhs was 80,000 with some 30,000 residing in Kabul.<sup>2</sup> They primarily reside in Kabul, Logar, Parwan, Qandahar, Qunduz, Nangarhar, Laghman, Ghazni, Helmand, and Paktiya provinces and speak the language of the communities they settled in. However, Hindus' mother tongue is either Hindi or Lahnda and Sikhs' mother tongue is mainly Panjabi except those settled in Qandahar who speak Sindi and Riasti.

### Public perception of Hindus and Sikhs

Hindus and Sikhs bear some physical resemblance to Pashtun residents and largely adopted the local culture; however, Sikhs are distinguishable from others in outward appearance. They wear five items starting with the letter K such as *kes*, long hair uncut held with a *kangha*, comb, and a turban and carry two distinct weapons, *karpaan*, a small sword, and a dagger, *karra*, steel bracelet on the left wrist, and *kacha*, long underwear; however, there are many who are less rigid in their outlook and wear Western clothing, especially professionals and businessmen.

Although Hindus and Sikhs have been in the country a long time and played a significant role in the social and cultural life of the country, local Muslim communities still regarded them as aliens and associated them with Hindus and Sikhs in Hindustan – India proper. Islam recognizes non-Muslims, Jews, and Christians as “People of the Book” and treat them favorably; however, it discriminates against Hindus and Sikhs and does not recognize their scriptures, the *Vedas*, and *Sri Guru Granth* also known as *Adi Granth* to be divine as the Torah and Bible. This view of Islam forms the very basis of public perception with regard to Hindu and Sikh residents of the country. The majority of people practice traditional Islamic beliefs, such as living peacefully with their neighbors and tolerating other religions and practices. Most people also are fans of Indian movies to the extent that young men after watching Indian films memorize the songs by Indian actors and sing loudly after leaving the theater and even singing in private parties.

Narrow-minded Muslims look down upon Hindus and Sikhs and treat them as second-class citizens. Their contempt is so pervasive that even poor men who in the past worked as gardeners or maids in affluent Hindu families would consider themselves superior to their masters. Miscreant Muslim boys often harassed and bullied Hindu and Sikh boys and whenever they encountered them on the street they would insult them sarcastically shouting: “Kalima at ra bikhan” meaning recite the confession of your faith. Confession of faith for Muslim reads “there is no God but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God”. Although fundamentalists harassed Hindus and Sikhs, people in general and enlightened and educated people in particular treated them with respect and dignity calling them Lala Jan, meaning dear brother.

Some Muslims who cling to cultural prejudices do not attend Hindu and Sikh festivities or visit their religious centers and regard intermarriage with their woman as a sacrilegious act; however broad-minded and more liberal and democratic Muslims have no objections to marrying Hindu and Sikh women. Marriage between Muslims and Hindus seldom occurs and when it happens, the Hindu women often embrace Islam in order for the marriage to be sanctified and legalized, despite objections by her family and community. Mohammad Ishaq, a member of King Zahir’s immediate family, fell in love with a Hindu woman Karshah. She defied cultural and religious traditions, embraced Islam, and married Ishaq. Although her family and the community opposed it, they could not stop her because they feared retaliation (Hakam 2006). Hindus and Sikhs despite years of unceasing harassment and persecution did not abandon Afghanistan considering it their rightful home.

### The role of Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan’s polity

Afghanistan’s history is replete with violence – particularly ethno-sectarian conflicts and interference by foreign powers in its internal affairs. The politically dominant class maintained their rule by pitting one community against the other in order to perpetuate their instability. They utilized religion and religious bias as tools to rally people in support of their policies. The Sunni-dominated state systematically suppressed and persecuted the

Shias and subjected non-Muslim citizens to payment of poll tax and did not allow them to serve in the armed forces even though they wholeheartedly defended the country's national interests. Discriminatory policies toward Hindus and Sikhs were implemented by King Habibullah (1901–1919), as he ordered them to wear yellow tags to separate them from the Muslims, subjected them to paying poll tax, and restricted their religious observances and practices to their residential compounds. He provided a small amount of money and clothing to those who embraced Islam as a means to encourage further conversion of Hindus and Sikhs to Islam – an attempt to promote himself as a defender of the faith.

Hindus and Sikhs received a new lease on life after Habibullah's successor Amanullah (1919–1929) revised his father's policies, abolished slavery of Shia Hazaras, promulgated a constitution that treated people of all ethno-religious backgrounds equally before the law and abolished poll tax on non-Muslim citizens. Hindus and Sikhs were granted full citizenship status and were no longer required to wear special badges, their children were admitted to civil and military schools and graduates of the military schools were commissioned in the armed forces. Amanullah also urged citizens to refrain from coercing Hindus and Sikhs to embrace Islam and sacrificing cows when celebrating *Eid al-Adha*, sacrificial feast also called *al-Eid al-Kabir*, or the major festival out of sensitivity to Hindu nationals, who regarded cows as sacred in their faith (Emadi 2010, 21).

Inclusive policies and practices by the state enabled Hindus and Sikhs to play an active role in the country's polity. Their elected representatives were members of the provincial councils in Qandahar, Ghazni, and Jalalabad and at the Kabul Educational Association (Ghubar [1374] 1995, 794). Naranjan Das, born in Kabul around 1853, was granted the title of civil colonel in 1906 by King Habibullah and served as revenue officer. Amanullah awarded him the title of civil brigadier and appointed him Minister of Finance and a member of the delegation for signing the Rawalpindi Peace Treaty with the British Government of India on 8 August 1919 that recognized Afghanistan's independence. Das also was appointed a member of Afghanistan's delegation to the Mussoorie Conference (17 April–18 July 1920), north of Delhi, India, to restore relations between Afghanistan and Britain. Amanullah was committed to and supported equality of the country's citizens and his appointment of Das to such a high-profile position demonstrated his good intentions. This move also helped him gain the trust of Indians and be regarded as a potential ally and friend in their struggle against the British Crown. Amanullah encouraged and supported Indians to fight for their independence and appointed a Hindu, Nandlal Behsin, as his secretary who along with Diwan Malikchand Kapoor and others also translated pamphlets from Persian to Hindi and Sanskrit languages – literature that encouraged anti-colonial struggle in India. When conservatives opposed Amanullah's radical modernization programs and rebelled to overthrow him, Hindus and Sikhs rallied in his support. Mihr Chand Dahoon, a graduate of the military school, participated in the suppression of the Khost rebellion that broke out in May 1924, and Hindu residents of Khost declared their readiness to provide food for government soldiers. Mullah Abdullah, a cleric known as *Mullah-e-Lang*, spearheaded the rebellion as he believed that government modernization policies were anti-Islam. Amanullah suppressed the rebellion in January 1925 and awarded Dahoon a Medal of Honor in appreciation of his role in defending the country (Dass 2007).

Amanullah continued supporting the rights of Hindus and Sikhs during his rule. When he convened a *Loya Jirgah*, Grand Assembly of tribal elders (on 29 August–2 September 1928) in Kabul to ratify his modernization policies he involved delegates from the Hindu and Sikh communities that included Naranjan Das, Lachman Das, and Kashan Singh, government accountants, Shankar Das, an official at the Ministry of Agriculture, and Mangal

Singh, a spiritual figure. When some conservative delegates proposed measures to distinguish Hindus and Sikhs from the Muslims, liberal and progressive delegates opposed it; Amanullah himself stated that Hindus and Sikhs are patriots and loyal citizens who, like Muslims, defended the country against the British war on Afghanistan.

After Amanullah was forced to abdicate the throne in January 1929 Habibullah Kalakani known by a derogatory name *Bacha-e-Saqaw*, water-carrier son, a profession his father had, seized power in Kabul. As civil war raged throughout the country Hindus and Sikhs feared for their safety and security and on 7 July they drafted a message to Kalakani expressing their support for his leadership. The laudatory note was signed by Naranjan Das, Mangal Singh, and others. Kalakani was illiterate and his staff wrote a response to Hindus and Sikhs in which Kalakani stated that:

O! Hindus, we have given you our support to the extent we have been able to. It is also necessary to recognize that we have allowed you civil and political freedoms equal to those of Muslims, Jews, and other subjects . . . . From the perspective of religion, we protect you just as we protect others . . . I assure you in all sincerity that no one will bring any harm to your religious freedom if civil calm prevails. You may live peacefully, maintaining the principles of the holy Sharia, and your prosperity is our hope. (McChesney 1999, 231)

During Kalakani's nine months of rule, Hindus and Sikhs did not encounter hostilities. Kalakani respected the traditional bonds of friendship that existed between Muslims and their Hindu and Sikh neighbors to the extent that when Mangal Singh married his wife Habibullah sent the royal music band to perform at his wedding party in his house in Charikar, Parwan province (Dass 2003, 62).

Hindus and Sikhs suffered a setback during Mohammad Nadir's rule in 1929–1933. Nadir was Afghanistan's ambassador to France in 1924–1926 and remained there after he resigned from his post. He returned to Afghanistan and declared that he would fight to restore Amanullah to power. Nadir defeated and captured Habibullah and summarily executed him and his men and proclaimed himself king in October 1929. Supporters of Amanullah as well as minority communities and liberal and progressive forces opposed Nadir's leadership and despised his duplicity. To consolidate his rule Nadir came down hard on his opponents, imprisoned many, and eliminated potential adversaries. Most Hindus and Sikhs with loyalty to Amanullah became subjects of witch-hunts. The state punished prominent Hindu figure Das and seized his properties as a collective and public punishment of his family. Nadir retaliated against another prominent Sikh, Mitar Singh, founder and owner of a coffee shop in Bagh-e-Omumi in Kabul. The place was frequented by radical students and Nadir closed down the place in an attempt to deprive pro-Amanullah liberals and radicals of a venue to gather for political discussions, considering such activities as a threat to stability and his rule. The government also retaliated against a patriotic Sikh businessman, Moti Singh. He was a fan of modern education and had donated one of his properties, an inn located in the Saraji area in Kabul, for use as a school in the area where Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh students attended classes. Nadir closed down the school and transformed it into a state prison (Hakam 2006).

Although Hindus and Sikhs endured years of repression and marginalization, their situation improved somewhat in the late 1940s and after. Prime Minister Mohammad Hashim (1933–1946) had pursued a repressive policy of administration that alienated the ruling family from the public – disenchantment was on the rise. To realign the monarchy with the public and gain legitimacy Hashim was forced to resign and his brother Shah Mahmood was appointed prime minister. Shah Mohammad (1946–1953) initiated a number of reforms – freedom of speech and of association and formation of political parties and parliamentary election. The new era provided opportunities for Hindus and

Sikhs to play a role in the country's politics. Although they were drafted in the army as regular soldiers, they were not allowed to attend military schools or become army officers. This situation changed in 1955 after Pahan Shikarpuri, a high-school graduate lobbied successfully for the rights of Hindus and Sikhs serving in the army to become officers – a struggle that paved the way for others to attend military schools and become officers. Pahan was appointed a commissioned officer in the army (Dass 2003, 8).

As liberal and democratic forces opposed the repressive regimes and formed political organizations espousing societal justice, Hindus and Sikhs did not remain passive in the country's politics and they too joined their counterparts in the struggle for sociopolitical reforms. Hakam Chand (1908–2001) studied in Germany and taught at Amaniya High School, Kabul, and was a member of the official staff of Bank-e-Milli-e-Afghanistan. He sympathized with democratic forces and became a member of *Hizb-e-Watan*, Homeland Party founded in 1951 by Mir Ghulam Mohammad Ghubar that advocated democracy and societal justice.<sup>3</sup>

During the parliamentary election in 1948 progressive and democratic candidates such as Ghubar and revolutionary figure Dr Abdul Rahman Mahmoodi visited Hindu and Sikh religious centers with the intent to enlist their support. During the constitutional monarchy (1964–1973), various political parties were formed that included the pro-Soviet *Hizb-e-Demokratik-e-Khalq-e-Afghanistan*, Peoples' Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), and *Sazman-e-Jawanan-e-Muttaraqi*, Progressive Youth Organization, that became known as *Sazman-e-Demokratik-e-Nawin-e-Afghanistan*, Neo-Democratic Organization of Afghanistan, and they strove to influence the Hindus and Sikhs to support their policies. As leading figures of the *Parcham*, Banner, faction of the PDPA come from aristocratic and affluent families, some wealthy Hindu and Sikh figures found common interest with them and became members of the party (Mihir Chand Warma joined the PDPA as a member after the formation of the PDPA in 1965). During the parliamentary election in 1965, the PDPA candidates – Babrak Karmal, Anahita Ratebzad, and Noor Ahmad Noor – visited Hindu and Sikh communities, promising to defend their rights in exchange for their votes; however, after they won seats in the House of Representatives, their promises melted away like ice under the sun. Hindus and Sikhs learned from the experiences of the past, and at the parliamentary election in 1969, they nominated candidates from their own community, Dahoon Chand Kagar and Ji Singh Fani; while Fani succeeded in winning a seat in the parliament, he failed to use his position and authority to advance the causes of his community.

When the monarchy was overthrown in a coup by former Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud in July 1973 and Afghanistan was declared a republic the status of Hindus and Sikhs remained unchanged. To create a basis of legitimacy for the regime Daoud convened a *Loya Jirgah*, renamed it *Milli Jirgah*, National Jirgah (30 January–14 February 1977), to approve the draft of a new constitution. The Jirgah was dominated by handpicked delegates that included representatives of the Hindu and Sikh communities, Shiyo Saran Sagar from Kabul and Tara Singh Jawahari from Nangarhar. The delegates approved the constitution and endorsed continuation of Daoud's leadership.

When the republican regime was overthrown in a coup organized by pro-Soviet army officers loyal to the PDPA in April 1978 and Afghanistan was declared a democratic republic, the ruling party forced Hindus and Sikhs to join the party and a few may have joined the party on their own volition; like other members of the ruling party they too showered hosannas to the Soviet Union regarding it the Mecca of socialism. Individuals loyal to the party included figures like Warma. He was imprisoned during the rule of the *Khalq*, Masses, faction of the PDPA, but during the Soviet occupation of the country he served the regime in various capacities until he left the country in 1985. Parkash son of Hakam

Chand was a member of the *Parcham* and was appointed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Nawin Warma was a member of the party Youth Organization and later was promoted to full party membership. The PDPA's repressive policies of socioeconomic and political reforms forced many wealthy and aristocratic families to leave the country including a number of prominent Hindu and Sikh families. After the Soviets invaded and occupied the country patriots, nationalists and Islamists opposed Soviet occupation and fought to liberate the country. Puppet leader Najibullah (1986–1992) appealed to citizens to support the regime in its battle against the US-backed Islamic warriors. To gain support of Hindus and Sikhs he appointed Ganga Ram and Joginder Singh to the parliament. However, like their predecessors they were ineffective at leveraging their influence to allocate state funds for development projects in their respective communities. When armed resistance to the ruling party escalated, Hindus and Sikhs supported the war of national liberation, contributing money to fighters to sustain the resistance.

### **Islamic fundamentalists and persecution of minorities**

After the Soviet-backed government collapsed and Islamic fundamentalists seized power in April 1992, the relative peace and fragile stability evaporated as Islamic warriors engaged in a brutal battle for control of the country. They embarked upon Islamicization of an already Muslim society based on their narrow understanding of Islam. Unable to agree on power-sharing they fought one another – a war that recognized no rules of engagement as combatants took men and women of rival groups and innocent civilian hostages, raping, molesting, and mutilating their bodies.

As a scourge of ethnic cleansing raged throughout the country, Hindus and Sikhs initially believed that they will not encounter troubles and hostilities by Islamic warriors as they are not part of any warring factions and did not want to leave the country. Unfortunately, they paid a heavy price for their naïveté. Because of their predominantly trade and business professions, Hindus and Sikhs became prey for kidnappings for ransom. Warlords associated with Islamic parties brutalized them, looted their belongings, and molested their wives and daughters, and after forcing those to embrace their faith forced them against their will to marry them.

Hindus and Sikhs endured suffering as armed men terrorized them, demanding money as they moved from location to location seeking safety or while visiting relatives, running errands, and going to markets to buy groceries. Political repression and religious bigotry convinced many to flee the country leaving their ruined properties in the custody of their relatives or friends in order to escape reprisals by Islamic warriors (at present the number of Sikhs is estimated to be 3000 and those of Hindus at little over 100). Hindu and Sikh religious centers, *gurdwaras* and *mandris*, were either destroyed during the civil strife or were seized by powerful and armed men. At present, there are a few such centers in Kabul and in other regions of the country and two modern houses of worship in Kabul including the Asamai Mandris at the foothills of the Asamai Mountain and the Karta-e-Parwan Gurdwara.

Continued raids on private houses by criminals and Islamic warriors forced Hindus and Sikhs to leave their homes and seek shelter in *gurdwaras* and *mandris* believing that they will be safe there where community members help and protect each other and comfort those suffering from the trauma of war. Islamic fundamentalists came down hard on the community after a Hindu mob destroyed the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, India, in December 1992. In retaliation for what happened in India, they brutalized Hindu and Sikh nationals in

Afghanistan, destroying their temples and looting their contents. Since then the community was gradually deprived of their basic rights and liberties.

Shia Muslims who endured years of persecution and were marginalized in the country's polity are also responsible for brutalizing and persecuting Hindus and Sikhs in areas in Kabul which were under control of militias of *Hizb-e-Wahdat-e-Islami-e-Afghanistan*, Islamic Unity Party of Afghanistan, and *Hizb-e-Harakat-e-Islami-e-Afghanistan*, Islamic Movement of Afghanistan. In May 1992, *Hizb-e-Wahdat* militias murdered Mohan Lal Bajaj, his wife, and his son and seized his house in the Taimani area in Kabul. In Karta-e-Parwan armed militias entered Hindu and Sikh residences and after molesting the family they forcibly circumcised male members of the family (RAWA 2007, 227). Escalation of armed conflict caused *en masse* migration of people of all ethnic backgrounds. The flight of Hindus and Sikhs from Kabul has been described in these words:

With the capital of Kabul totally swallowed in the fighting, Hindus can no longer get visas from the consulate there or fly to Delhi. The alternate route is overland through Pakistan, but Pakistan will not issue transit visas unless they already have visas to India. Since there are no distinguishing marks to separate them from other Afghans, who do not require visas, Hindus do slip into Pakistan without visas. However, the situation is fraught with danger if their Hindu identity is discovered. Sikhs, because of their turbans and beards, have an even harder time entering Pakistan without a visa.<sup>4</sup>

India regards Hindus and Sikhs settled in India as refugees from Afghanistan and the process of issuing visas for Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan to India was long and expensive and effectively drains most families' meager resources. Hindu and Sikh refugees had settled in the capital city, Delhi, and many managed to secure visas for Western European countries and North America. Their lifestyle in exile had been characterized as follows:

Those who have managed to escape struggle to start a new life in new places. According to Hinduism Today correspondent in New Delhi, Rajiv Malik, a large number of refugees have sought asylum in the capital and adjacent cities. The wealthy ones have settled down in the posh colonies of New Delhi like Lajpat Nagar and Defence Colony. Others have purchased homes in middle-class areas [of] East and West Delhi. While Delhi has attracted the Sikh Afghans, many Hindus have settled in Faridabad, an industrial township in the neighboring state of Haryana.<sup>5</sup>

When the Taliban emerged in Qandahar in 1994 and seized power in Kabul in 1996, they adopted a more repressive policy of administration and a regressive approach in building an Islamic society based on their literalistic interpretation of Islam and Quranic injunctions and brutalized those who violated their rulings. They suppressed and marginalized Hindus and Sikhs and urged people to avoid buying items from their shops and efforts were also made to convert them to Islam. The Taliban ordered male members of the community to wear yellow tags to separate them from the Muslim population and female members of the community had to cover their faces like other women in Afghanistan and wear veils instead of headscarves. Reminiscent of Adolf Hitler's policies toward Jews during World War II the Taliban effectively segregated Hindus and Sikhs, ordering them to mark their houses to identify them as Hindu residences. Although the international community condemned the Taliban's harsh measures as a violation of religious freedom and Taliban's brazen action of destroying the two giant Buddha statues (dating back to the fifth century and carved in the face of a mountain slope in Bamiyan) in February 2001, they failed to effectively protect religious minorities against rising Islamic orthodoxy.

### Status of Hindus and Sikhs in the post-Taliban period

The US condemned the Taliban for sheltering Osama Bin Laden and members of his *al-Qaeda* organization and demanded that they hand him over to the US on charges of bombing US embassies in Africa. The US accused the Taliban of sponsoring terrorism and decided to overthrow them after the attack on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001. The US began bombing Taliban's fortified positions on 7 October, ended its bombings on 18 December as the Taliban were defeated, and installed Hamid Karzai as head of state. To legitimize his leadership, Karzai convened a *Loya Jirgah* (11–19 June 2002) in Kabul where elected representatives debated the draft of a new constitution. To appease the international community and human rights groups Karzai involved two men from Hindu and Sikh communities, Ganga Ram and Awtar Singh (later appointed them as members of the parliament, 2005–2010) as well as introduced Anarkalai Kaur Honaryar, a prominent Sikh woman who completed her studies at the Dental School at Kabul University, to the Jirgah.

One of the stated objectives of the US war on the Taliban was establishment of a democratic system of governance that is based on the rules of law and respect for human rights and women's rights. Since overthrowing the Taliban the US and NATO failed not only to stabilize the country but also to establish a government that is accountable to the public and respect the rights of its citizens, particularly non-Muslim minority communities – Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs. Islamic warriors associated with the Northern Alliance, NA, that supported the US war on the Taliban were rewarded by the US and they continue to hold prominent positions in the new bureaucracy. Afghanistan was declared an Islamic republic and Islam became the official religion of the republic. Although the constitution provides followers of other religions the freedom to exercise their faith, it prohibits non-Muslim citizens from contesting the results of presidential elections. Article 62 states that presidential candidates “should be citizens of Afghanistan, Muslim and born of Afghan parents”. Islamic fundamentalists treat Hindus and Sikhs with contempt and harass them, flouting the tenets of the new constitution protecting the rights of minority communities.

Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan and those who sought refuge in Pakistan and India welcomed the downfall of the Taliban as a new and improved era in their lives. In exile, they, like other refugees from Afghanistan, keenly watched developments back home and were eager to return home to rebuild their shattered lives. Their aspiration to return to their homeland has been described as follows:

Whenever we heard some good news about Afghanistan, we would celebrate it like a festival, Lal says. If we heard or watched any bad news from the radio or over the television, it would also upset us because it is our homeland — the homeland of our ancestors. Prem Nagar, known to local Pashtun Muslims as Hindu Qala, enjoyed a cordial relationship with surrounding communities. Some 150 Hindu and Sikh families lived in the 25-hectare village, which was enclosed by massive mud walls in line with local Pashtun architecture.<sup>6</sup>

A number of Hindu and Sikh refugees from Pakistan and India returned to Afghanistan to participate in the rebuilding of their homeland. Shankar Lal, 63 years old, who lived in India for two decades returned to reclaim the community's historic property known as *Prem Nagar*, House of Love, in Khost and petitioned the government to help him in regaining ownership of the property occupied by powerful men in the 1990s. The Hindus and Sikhs have an uphill battle to preserve their culture and religious traditions in a hostile political environment. Their disenchantment with the government for not protecting their rights and helping them to regain their properties continue to grow. They encounter hostilities and

are still unable to cremate the remains of their dead according to their traditions because of dogmatic neighbors living next to cremation sites. Requests that the government provide them alternative sites are repeatedly ignored by authorities.

Hindus and Sikhs could not pursue legal recourse in regaining their land or seeking restitution fearing retaliation and threats by powerful individuals who occupied their properties. They encountered a cold reception and sometimes outright discrimination by Islamic fundamentalists in positions of authority when they requested state services. For example, they lobbied the Ministry of Religious Affairs to provide free electricity to the community's existing houses of worship but the ministry denied their repeated requests although the government provides free electricity to mosques. The state treats Hindu and Sikh houses of worships as business entities subject to payment of higher fees.

In the political arena, Hindus and Sikhs are marginalized. They have only one seat in *Shura-e-Milli*, the National Assembly, even though they lobbied the government for two seats, one for each community. During the parliamentary election in 2010, candidates from the community, Pripatal Singh Pal, a former army officer in the 1980s, and Honaryar competed for a seat from Kabul but were defeated and Karzai appointed Honaryar to the Senate. Pripatal Sing Pal continued to speak on behalf of his community and was killed on 14 July 2012 when a suicide bomber attacked the wedding party of the daughter of Ahmad Khan Samangani, a member of parliament. Conservatives and Islamic fundamentalists oppose Hindu and Sikh involvement in the country's polity. Abdurrab Rasoul Sayyaf, a member of the National Assembly expressed his views regarding Hindus and Sikhs stating that:

The Sikhs and Hindus of Afghanistan are considered part of the dhimmi in line with Sharia law. The government has an obligation to protect them but they are required to pay a poll tax. They can hold civilian occupations, such as doctors, but they cannot be in charge of a governmental body or office. Upon meeting a Muslim, a Hindu is required to greet the Muslim first. If a Muslim is standing and there is a chair, the Hindu is not allowed to sit down on the chair.<sup>7</sup>

Hindus and Sikhs avoid sending their children to public schools because of pervasive abuse and harassment by fellow students and send them to private schools sponsored by their own communities.<sup>8</sup> Most of the community's own schools remain closed because of structural damage and due to the community's deteriorating living standards some families cannot afford to pay the required fees; however, a few affluent families send their children to private international schools and it is reported that there is one school for Sikh children in Ghazni, Helmand, Nangarhar, and Kabul.

Stringent Islamic laws treat dissent from Islamic and Islamic orthodoxy as crimes, such as apostasy and blasphemy. Although Hindus and Sikhs are allowed to practice their faith and work, they continue to encounter obstacles that include seeking employment opportunities in the bureaucracy and being harassed by fundamentalists when they celebrate their religious festivities. The Sikhs used to hold religious functions celebrating the birthday of Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism, and such activities are scaled down in Kabul and other places in order to avoid trouble with fanatic Muslims. Hindus and Sikhs continue to fight for their rights and liberties. Senator Anarkali Kaur Honaryar, former member of Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission, is an activist for human rights. Despite numerous hurdles that women encounter in a male-dominated society, she fights to promote gender equality and end violence against women and minorities. She was awarded the UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for Promotion of Tolerance and Non-violence in December 2011.

Disenchanted with the US-backed government, the Hindu and Sikh community turned to the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh when he visited Kabul in May 2011 and

appealed to him to grant Indian citizenship to Sikhs and Hindus as they encounter threats to their way of life in Afghanistan. As Hindus and Sikhs were persecuted by warlords and criminal gangs associated with the NA in the early 1990s, the Indian Government remained silent on the plight of Hindus and Sikhs in order to maintain close ties with the NA. After NA forces were driven out of Kabul and transferred the seat of the nominal government in the northern region under their control, India forged closer ties with the NA leadership and supported their crusade against the Pakistan-backed Taliban militias when they seized Kabul. Although India is the sixth largest donor nation in the rebuilding with some \$1.6 billion development projects, it did not exert pressure on the Karzai Government to do more to defend and protect the rights of minority Hindus and Sikhs.

Hindus and Sikhs continue to suffer economically and billions of international aid for reconstruction and development of infrastructures in Afghanistan did not trickle down to the community; efforts are underway to deprive them of representation in the political arena as well. The House of Representatives revised the parliamentary electoral law to remove an article that designated a seat for members of the community in the parliament in July 2013. Members of the Central Council of the Hindu and Sikh community and civil society organizations inside and outside the country protested against this action to no avail. Significantly, the House did not remove a similar article that reserved seats for Pashtun *Khochis* (nomads). Continued harassment, repression, and erosion of their rights caused members of the community to turn to the United Nations Office in Kabul, pleading to the agency to facilitate a mass emigration of the community from Afghanistan.

## Conclusion

Hindus and Sikhs are indigenous to Afghanistan and are patriotic and loyal citizens of the country. They served proudly in armed forces and worked in various capacities as officials in the state and private institutions. They had successfully assimilated themselves into the local culture and some even forgot how to converse in their own mother tongues. They suffered a near-fatal blow when Islamic fundamentalists seized power and many left the country to escape religio-political repression.

After the downfall of the Taliban rule like other refugees, they too returned home to participate in the rebuilding of the country and their own communities and regain their properties seized by powerful men. However, the international community and Kabul failed to protect and defend their rights and liberties. Karzai's promise of defending the rights of minorities and oppressed communities was nothing but rhetoric and his lip service promoting the rights of marginalized Hindus and Sikhs was limited to appointing a member of the community to the *Loya Jirgah* and the parliament.

Adoption of legislation alone does not protect the rights of oppressed communities against well-entrenched opposition. The plight of Hindus and Sikhs will not improve as long as Islamic fundamentalists merely re-label themselves as liberal and remain in positions of authority in the state apparatuses, and continue to harass non-Muslim citizens. People and communities are subtly encouraged to remain ignorant of each other's history, culture, and traditions, and this further delays opportunities to rectify these disparities in fairness and community well-being. Educating the public to respect diversity and pluralism as a source of strength rather than weakness would be a positive step and including the subject of diversity and pluralism in text books could broaden the horizon of the future generations who would be well informed and accept others as their own.

The government could establish its legitimacy and gain support of the oppressed communities if it made public gestures such as apologies or reparations or memorials to

surviving family members of the victims of the war of ethnic cleansing – a measure to keep memories of such a dark history of the country alive so that similar atrocities do not happen in the future. Kabul has a moral obligation to ensure the rights of its oppressed minority Muslim communities as well as its Hindu and Sikh citizens. The wounds of years of persecution and violation of civil rights of the oppressed and marginalized can only begin to be healed if perpetrators of crimes against humanity are brought to justice.

## Notes

1. For details on the Hawala System, see Ballard (2003).
2. *The Tribune*, 4 March 2012. Accessed May 5, 2012. <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2012/20120304/spectrum/main3.htm>. See also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism\\_in\\_Afghanistan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism_in_Afghanistan)
3. Mir Ismail Masroor Najimi. “Yadwara-e az Hamkaran-e Hinduyam” [Remembering My Fellow Hindus]. Accessed 27 April 2012. <http://kabalnath.de/Schankar%20Dara/Minare%20Chakari/M.Masor/Hamkaran%20e%20Hindu%20am.htm>
4. Lavina Melwani. “Hindus Abandon Afghanistan” (*Hinduism Today*, April 1994). Accessed April 25, 2012. <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=3259>
5. Ibid.
6. Abubakr Siddique. “Afghan Hindus, Sikhs Seek to Reclaim their ‘House of Love’” (*Radio Free Europe* (Radio Liberty), 11 November 2011). Accessed April 24, 2012. [http://www.rferl.org/content/hindus\\_sikhs\\_seek\\_to\\_reclaim\\_afghan\\_house\\_of\\_love/24388591.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/hindus_sikhs_seek_to_reclaim_afghan_house_of_love/24388591.html)
7. Reza Mohammadi. “Afghanistan’s Marginalized Hindus: Despite its Long History in the Country, Afghanistan’s Hindu Minority Has Been Pushed to the Fringes of Society” (*The Guardian*, 2 August 2009). <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2009/aug/02/afghanistan-hindus>
8. Hijratullah Ekhtyar. “Afghan Sikhs and Hindus Face Discrimination at School.” Institute of War and Peace Reporting, *ARR*, No. 405, 28 July 2011. Accessed April 24, 2012. <http://iwpr.net/report-news/afghan-sikhs-and-hindus-face-discrimination-school>

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