

## **Afghan Hindus and Sikhs Still Struggling**

**Author:** [Arzu Mohammadi](#)

Although conditions have improved since the end of the Taleban era, prejudice remains rife.

The tiny Hindu and Sikh community in the northern Afghan province of Baghlan say that growing discrimination is making their life increasingly hard.

Only a handful of families remain from a community that once played an important role as merchants and entrepreneurs, and who lived in Afghanistan in relative harmony for hundreds of years.

During the civil war that followed the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime in 1992, many Hindus and Sikhs sought refuge in other countries, India in particular. For those who remained, life got worse under the Taleban regime when their freedom to practice their religion was hugely restricted.

“The Taleban era was one of the most challenging periods for us, because all our religious ceremonies were prohibited, it was hard for us to even leave our houses,” said Baghlan resident Shirjan Singh, 55. “But after the Taleban government fell, and with the rise of the current government, we breathed a sigh of relief and returned to our normal lives.”

The Afghan constitution guarantees their religious rights as full citizens of the country, with Article Two stating, “The sacred religion of Islam is the religion of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Followers of other faiths shall be free within the bounds of law in the exercise and performance of their religious rituals.”

But many in the Hindu and Sikh community says that these principles are not being honoured. Shirjan Singh said that as well as frequent harassment, his fellow Sikhs lacked a proper place to worship. Funeral rites remain a major issue. Hindus and Sikhs cremate their dead, which often caused friction with their Muslim neighbours, especially as the community had no dedicated place to perform their ceremonies.

“[My family] have been living here in Baghlan province for the last 40 years, and up to the present day we have suffered a lot,” said Ahmad, a 45-year-old representative of the Sikh community. “If we look back to the Taleban era, life became so difficult for so many people that they escaped and fled the country. With the establishment of [former president Hamid] Karzai’s government, we felt more comfortable, particularly when we were officially recognised as citizens of this country once again. But once again, some of our fellow citizens don’t treat us as Afghan citizens, and most people insult and humiliate us.”

“Baghlan is a small province where all ethnicities [should] live like brothers with one other,” agreed local pharmacy owner Sardar Singh. “We have been living here for many years but the majority of the people still harass us, treating us like foreigners who don’t belong.”

Another local man, Ram Singh, said that around ten Sikh families were currently living in Baghlan province, down from 60 when the community was at its height.

He said that as there was no provision for their burial rites anywhere in Baghlan province, the community was often forced to cremate their dead in residential areas, leading to conflict with their Muslim neighbours.

“Our request from the government and the public is that they should treat us just like all other citizens, and stop ridiculing and humiliating us. We urge the government to prepare a suitable place of worship for us, as well as to provide education for our children.”

This is another problem; Hindu and Sikh children face persistent discrimination at school and as a result are often denied access to education.

“I am really keen on going to school and studying, but people harassed me on the way to school so I couldn’t go anymore,” said ten-year-old Samad Singh. “I want people to consider us as citizens of this country and stop harassing us and allow us to study and live.”

Previous attempts to highlight their conditions have not led to any substantial gains for the community. In November 2012, Hindus and Sikhs held protests outside the presidential palace in Kabul over discrimination. The government promised to build a dedicated town with a proper crematorium, but this has yet to materialise.

Baghlan governor Abdulhai Nyamati said that the government was ready to address any challenges the communities faced in their daily lives, but declined to comment on the provision of a specific place for the

cremation of their dead.

He also played down the extent of the problem, adding, "Hindus and Sikhs have the same rights as the other ethnicities and religions here, and there is no discrimination against them. The government provides proper residential and other services in any area they want."

Security forces in Baghlan provinces have also pledged themselves to afford Hindus and Sikhs the same protection as any other Afghan citizens.

"We do our duty and treat people equally," said Zabiullah Shuja, head of the Baghlan police media department. "Hindus and Sikhs living in Baghlan province just like other ethnicities and we will defend their rights if they face any trouble."

Abrar Sarwary, a professor at the faculty of law and political science at Hakim Sanai University, said ignorance was the main reason for the prejudice the community was experiencing.

The first step the government should take, he continued, was to ensure that Hindus had their own places of worship and the facilities for cremation.

"Hindus and Sikhs are citizens of Afghanistan and must have the same rights as everyone else; in law, no ethnic or religious group has supremacy," he said. "The biggest problem is the lack of awareness of the rights of the Hindus and Sikh people legally have in this country."

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