

## **Tough Times for Afghan Hindus and Sikhs**

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Dwindling community struggles to maintain identity.

"We aren't treated as human beings," Sikh businessman Amrit Singh said as he sat in his small grocery shop in the Kabul neighbourhood of Shor Bazaar. "When we are alive, we are disrespected, insulted and beaten.... And when we take our dead to the crematorium, which is our personal property, they won't let us burn the bodies, saying it stinks."

"Do we have any rights in this country or not?" the 45-year-old asked.

Hindus and Sikhs form a miniscule community in today's Afghanistan. Historically playing an important role as traders and entrepreneurs, they lived in Afghanistan in relative harmony for hundreds of years, mostly in the capital Kabul and in the southeastern Khost province.

According to Avtar Singh, chairman of the national council of Hindus and Sikhs, the community now numbers only 395 families. Before the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime in 1992, he said, there were around 200,000 people from the two communities.

During the civil war that followed, many sought refuge in other countries, India in particular. For those who remained, things got worse under the Taleban government of 1996-2001. Their freedom to practice their religion was restricted, and cremation was banned altogether.

Although that ban is no longer in place, Avtar Singh said funeral rites remained a major issue, noting public opposition to the use of the 120-year-old crematorium in Qalacha, southeast of Kabul.

"When we take our dead bodies to the crematorium, we take the police with us. Even so, local people throw stones at us. They disrespect our dead," he said, adding that despite appeals to the Afghan parliament, the Independent Human Rights Commission, the United Nations mission and the United States embassy, his community had received little help.

Daud Amin, deputy police chief in Kabul city, said that his forces were doing their best to protect the minority.

"We have always worked with them," he said. "We have accompanied them and we haven't allowed anyone to insult them. Members of the public threw stones at them only once, and we stopped it. We have helped them whenever they've asked us for help."

Residents of Qalacha insisted they had no problems with Hindus and Sikhs, only with the cremations.

Gholam Habib Fawad, deputy chairman of the community council in Qalacha, said the crematorium used to be located far from residential areas, but that had changed as more homes were built in its vicinity.

"When they burn bodies there, the smell goes into the houses," he said. "Many people react and fall sick. The children are scared. Some families need to leave their houses for several days and go and live with relatives."

Avtar Singh denied that the cremations had any impact on the environment.

"Representatives from the municipality and the police have been present when we burned the bodies, and even they said they didn't smell anything," he said.

Anarkali Kaur Honaryar, a Sikh member of the upper house of parliament, says she has raised the cremation issue at the highest levels.

"I have pursued [the Qalacha] issue with government officials myself," said Honaryar, who has been the Senate's only non-Muslim member since 2010. "They have been cooperative. I believe that certain political elements and foreign meddling are creating problems for the Hindus and Sikhs, since we didn't use to have problems with our Muslim brothers."

Many Hindus and Sikhs, however, say they face threats, insults and even physical violence from their neighbours.

"Our women can't go out," said Bajan Singh, who has a grocery shop in Kabul. "When our children go to school, they are insulted by their classmates for being Hindu. A number of our Hindu brothers have been

beaten and their money stolen. All of our rights have been trampled on. I wish [the government] would move us to some other country.”

Honaryar acknowledged that Sikhs and Hindus faced some problems, which she attributed to ignorance in the wider community. She said she had asked the media and the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs to launch a public education campaign.

“In my opinion, the low level of public literacy, immigration [of returning Afghan refugees], and lack of information about the Hindu minority are the causes of this problem,” she said. “But not everyone is like that. It’s just some ignorant people who do these things. I have contacted the police in such cases and they have been wholly cooperative and have punished the individuals involved.”

Honaryar said she was behind an initiative to build a purpose-built settlement in eastern Kabul complete with schools, a crematorium and other facilities for the Sikhs and Hindus in the city. But so far, the response had not been enthusiastic.

“Now that we’ve launched the town, no one is prepared to go there,” she said. “The municipality calls me every day and says construction work needs to get started there.”

Hindus and Sikhs living in Kabul said moving to new homes would not solve their problems, and they would face more security threats if they were outside the capital.

“We aren’t safe in the heart of Kabul even with all its police and laws,” resident Manpal Singh said. “How are we going to be able to live in a desert 20 kilometres outside from the city? What will the people in [other] villages do to us? Was there nowhere else in Kabul, so that they had to send us to deserts and mountains?”

Yet some people still have fond memories of a time when the Muslim and Hindu communities lived peacefully together.

“We shared our happiness and grief,” said Badshah, a Muslim shopkeeper in the town of Khost. “When we go to India now, we stay in their homes. They are proud Afghans. They are hospitable. They worked alongside us to address problems. I miss them.”

Samteral, a Hindu from Khost currently living in Kabul, said, “We were so friendly with our Muslim brothers that we never even thought about who we were or who they were. We were all the same, Afghans.”

He said he was still in touch with Afghan Hindus now living in India.

“They all mourn for their homes and villages. I wish we had security. so we could all live together again,” he added.

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