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Afghanistan's Government Offers Security To Hindus Entrenched in Embattled City

Afghanistan has been a harsh, mountain-edged, river-veined crossroads of religious cultures for millennia. Hellenic Greeks, Iranian Magi, Mauryan Empire Hindus, Buddhists from India and China and Islam Caliphates swept through like winds down the Hindu Kush ravines. Islam, with one break by Genghis Khan and much later by the Sikh armies, blanketed the country. Yet, Hindu mercantile populations thrived in Afghan society. With the Islamic, rebels' revolution and the Soviet invasion in 1979, Hindus also become war victims. Today, the Russians are gone. The rebels continue to lay siege to the large cities, including the capital, Kabul. But the Najibullah Marxist government is repulsing them long past predicted collapse. The fate of the country's 130,000 Hindus lies in the outcome of this stalemate, which may go on for another 3-4 years.

The beautiful Aashamai Mandir temple in Kabul makes me wonder if I am back in India. Not only its architectural grandeur, but the hundreds of people around it and the atmosphere they create unmistakably given a visitor the pleasant feeling of returning home.

The Hindus were so welcome in Afghanistan 50-60 years ago that they could put down roots in any of its cities without any problem. That is why they settled in large numbers in cities such as Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandhar, Herat and Ghazni. But the disturbed conditions for the last 10 years have forced them to leave small cities and move on to safe places in Jalalabad and Kabul. As the principle of a school for Hindus at the Aashamai temple told me, there is no problem from the government in Kabul; its officials are helpful and cooperative despite so much tension and

worry they are facing. "The problem is from the rebels. They are ruthless and make no distinction between Afghans and others when they carry out their raids. Several Hindus too have been killed by the rockets fired into Jalalabad and Kabul by the rebels. One of my friends was killed when a rocket hit the jeep he was driving."

There is fear among the Hindus that the rebels will treat them as supporters of the present regime and will, therefore, not spare them if they somehow manage to come into power in Kabul. The rebels are now embroiled in their own internal fratricide between competing militia over who will wield authority. But they remain in effective control of a large part of Afghanistan. It is not safe for businessmen to move freely outside Kabul. A few Hindu leaders told me that the government does not have much control over the areas beyond 30 kilometers from Kabul. A Hindu trader or businessman is most likely to be detained and taken into custody if seen freedom by paying a huge ransom in cash or kind. A large number of businessmen have stopped traveling outside the city, seriously affecting their trade.

Increasing insecurity for the Hindu population in Jalalabad and Kabul and the possibility of normalcy not returning to the country in the near future have forced a large percentage to migrate to India. The affluent among these refugees fled to the USA to rebuild there. Those unwilling to abandon all in Kabul and other rebel-shelled towns dispatched their families to Delhi and other cities in India and made arrangements for their stay until stability returns in Afghanistan. In Faridabad - a town near Delhi - hundreds of such families have found temporary shelter. According to Mehar Chand, a Hindu leader living there, they are hoping to go back to the Afghan locales they and their forefathers inhabited for more than a century. "These places are as dear to them as their homeland," he remarked.

The Afghanistan government despite its own troubles, has not been deaf to Hindu alarm. According to the public record and private opinion, it is attempting to make Hindu citizens feel relatively secure in their spiritual pursuits amidst the rebel's siege. Kabul television gives special coverage to Hindu festivals and a popular Hindi movie is aired every week. The newspapers incorporate on occasions like Holi, Diwali, Mahasivaratri and Baishaki. Live cultural and religious programs are arranged. Hindu religious leaders are given free access to Delhi and allowed to pilgrimage to holy sites in India. Passports in general are easy to acquire for Hindus wishing to visit India.

Government officials have even encouraged the teaching of Sanskrit and the

recitation of the Gita at social and cultural functions. According to a priest at the Aashamai temple, the Kabul authorities recently allowed Hindus to bring two beautifully-crafted images of Rama and Durga by air, though the law does not permit this. The images were packed in large cartons with labels that did not say what was inside. "But the air-port authorities knew they were idols. They just turned their eyes from them and let them be taken out as packages of ordinary items like fruit and cloth," said the priest.

With the withdrawal of Soviet troops, it is the national army that is doggedly preventing the rebels from overrunning the large cities. By law, all nationals in Afghanistan are required to serve in the army. This includes the Hindu citizens. But they are exempt from fighting. They are given jobs in the officers of the defense ministry or the army headquarters. The working hours are fixed: 8 AM to 4 PM. In contrast, the Afghans don't have fixed schedules and are called to work any time.

Dr. Joginder Kapoor, a Hindu doctor at the Indira Gandhi Medical Institute in Kabul told me, "We all feel grateful to the government for the care it takes of us. That is why we want normalcy to return as soon as possible." Kapoor represent the new breed of professional-level Hindu. Most Hindus are businessmen, dealing in dry fruits, cloth, cars and electronic goods like television and radios. But many are employed by the government. People say they are trusted, so are given responsible positions. A few are in the central committee of Najibullah's administration, helping to account for the religious largess extended to the Hindu population.

About forty years ago medical luminary Dr. Balmukund Das took the initiative to ensure that Afghani Hindus did not feel they were living in a foreign land. He personally knew the Afghan king - Zaher Ahmed - and later, President Daud. This helped him start a primary school in Kandhar for Hindu children. It taught in Hindi and Sanskrit, be side Pushto, the Afghan language. It became a meteoric success, so much so that it was attacked by conservative Islamic factions who said it was a center for the propagation of Hinduism. The authorities were swayed, but as long as Dr. Das lived he successfully fended off efforts to shut down the education center. When he died, the school went with him. Yet many of its students would later become key players in Afghan society.

Next to the Aashamai temple is another Hindu primary school founded 25 years ago. It is still thriving despite the clouds of war and political turmoil. Not only the

Indians, but the Afghans maintain ties with this school in order to understand each other better. The school's prominence also stems from its proximity to the Aashamai temple. They are both located on Aashamai Street that I now walk down pondering the rugged history of Hindus in this country.

At the most there are now 40-50,000 Hindus and Sikhs living here in Kabul - which has seen many historical sieges. For over a thousand years Hindu kings governed, worshipped in unimaginably splendid temples and battled in these same environs. It was a Hindu astronomer who called the land avaghana, from which Afghan derives. Ancient Hindus also called it aryana, "the excellent country." Ironically, the war of the mujahedin rebels has unearthed testimony of the old Hindu dominion. Explosions in mountain battles two years ago exposed huge and magnificent sculptures and smaller caches of religious artifacts. Many have been smuggled out of Afghanistan into the hands of unscrupulous art dealers.

I walk into the Aashamai temple interior, smelling of pungent incense and feeling like an otherworld refuge. A lamp is kept burning in the temple 24-hours-a-day reminding visitors of the inner light they should awaken to experience the eternal truth. The altar supports images of nearly all the Hindu Gods. It is said that a holy man from Peshawar, now in Pakistan, came to Afghanistan decades ago to spread the Siva sect here. Called Pir Ratnanath, he is believed to be the spirit behind the construction of a lovely Shivabghola temple outside a cave called Jogi Kila. From my conversation, most people attribute the dharmic spirit of universality to the cordial relations between Muslims and Hindus here. Religious conflict doesn't rear its ugly head, though two years ago a small wave of unexplained violence was vented against the Sikhs and Hindus by a few distraught Afghans. The weightiest karmic test lies ahead with the uncertainty of the rebel mujahedin treatment of Hindus if they should defeat the Afghan army.

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