Hindus Flee Lawless Capital of Afghanistan
Category : September 1992
Published by Anonymous on Sep. 02, 1992

# Hindus Flee Lawless Capital of Afghanistan

Sinha, B.M.

40,000 Indians in Peril as Communist Regime Falls and Muslim Factions Battle for Control

What the Hindus in Afghanistan have feared for some years had happened - Islamic rule has returned in Kabul with the fall of the Soviet-supported Najibullah government. From the reports reaching Delhi from Kabul it appears that some Mujahideens - the Afghan freedom fighters who stoutly resisted the Russians - have made attacks on Hindus in Afghanistan to avenge what they say was New Delhi's support to the Najibullah regime. They are looting Hindu stores and even killing Hindus. In June an entire family was electrocuted by unidentified Mujahideens - there are a dozen major armed units in the capital city. The reports say Indian women have been publically humiliated, the Indian Embassy School seized and diplomats' houses looted. It is an irony that the attack has been made on the Hindus although they are bonafide Afghan citizens. Hindus dominate key trades in the country and if they leave, the Afghan economy will suffer greatly. It is not that they do not like Islam. Far from it. They consider themselves a part of the country and fully share its socio-cultural ethos. But there is insecurity.

It was reported on June 17th that heavily armed guerrillas on an armored personnel carrier stopped a busload of Indians fleeing Kabul directly in front of the Interior Security Ministry and near the Indian Embassy. They stripped men and women of all their valuables and then ordered them to leave. "Allah is with you, or all of you would have been dead," one Mujahideen said laughingly as the cowering Hindus fled.

The government of India has strongly protested to the Afghanistan government its

failure to protect the Hindus against the attacks by Mujahideens. There are 40,000 Afghans of Indian origin living in Afghanistan today. The interim President of Afghanistan, Mr. Singbhatullah Mojadidi, a 70-year-old theology professor, has expressed regret at the death of Hindus and attacks on them. But he admitted that there is practically no police system in his country at the moment and that the army is in no position to exert control over the various Mujahideen factions - for fear of reprisals. Hundreds of Muslims have been killed in recent weeks in internecine fighting in the capital.

Kabul's main money market, located close to the palace of Mr. Mojadidi, is run by Hindus. It is largely deserted after the abduction of its main trader, Mr. Chamanlal Kappor, earlier this month for a ransom of US $100,000. The kidnapping caused a panic among local traders.

Mojaddidi has already declared that Afghanistan will again be an Islamic state. He is to be soon replaced by Rabbani, who is more devoted to Islam. Citizens are already anticipating a return to rigorous enforcement of Islamic laws. Muslim women are putting themselves under veils after enjoying western style living under the Najibullah regime. Bottles of whiskey and vodka are fast disappearing from the markets, restaurants and hotels.

Hindus have been living in Kabul and some other cities of Afghanistan for decades. They are mostly engaged in trade and business, speak fluent Persian and call themselves Afghan Hindus. They lived under earlier Islamic regimes but did not feel unsafe then as they do today. The reason, as some of them say, is the vengeance with which the new regime will remove all traces of the communist rule that prevailed in the country during the last 14 years. The regime leaders will be very strict with those Muslims who liked the liberal policies of the Najibullah government. "How will the Hindus then not bear the brunt of this vengeance?" asked a Hindu resident of Kabul recently.

The plight of the Hindus in Afghanistan was brought to light by a video film made by a team from the Eye-Witness television news magazine during a recent visit to Kabul to do a story on the conditions under the new Islamic regime. The team talked to a number of Hindus and Sikhs about how they felt these days. They mostly talked without revealing their names. Some would only give statements with their faces covered. They all were afraid of harm being caused to them if their identities were disclosed to Mujahideens who are seen moving on roads with guns

at the ready.

Several of the Hindus interviewed by Karan Thapar for the TV show said they had been haunted by "uncertainty" and "fear" since the Islamic regime was installed. They talked in "whispers" and "can't sleep in peace at night." They are worried that the new regime in its desire to rigorously enforce the Islamic laws may cause harm to them. They feel that the new government looks at them as residents committed more to India and Hinduism. This may be the cause of some harsh steps being taken against them.

Delegations of Hindus from Kabul and other places like Ghazni have met both Mojaddidi and Rabbani and their members have sworn to them that the Hindus are loyal citizens of Afghanistan and are interested in its all-around development. They tried to remove the impression that the Hindus had cordial relations with Najibullah and were patronized by him. And they also conveyed their fear that they may be put to some harm by enthusiastic Mujahideens. Both Mojaddidi and Rabbani assured them the government's full protection.

The assurance has, however, not helped develop among the Hindus full trust in the new government. One of them told Eye-Witness: "We have no future here. We do not believe in these assurances." Another cited instances to prove why they are so uncertain about their future: "Our girls are harassed by young Mujahideens. We are made to feel that we are Kafirs [non-Muslim heathens]. We do not have power to protect ourselves."

There are many Hindus who want to return to India, but it is difficult. Earlier they used to go to India via Pakistan. But now Pakistan is reluctant to allow an exodus of Hindus across its land. Pakistan is carefully cultivating relations with the new government, and publicity attending a mass exodus - indicating non-Muslims are not safe under a Muslim regime - would hurt Afghanistan's public image. New Delhi is just 600 miles by air from Kabul, but the fares are out of reach for most Hindus. Still the number of those who want to leave Kabul for India is large. They Eye-Witness film showed a huge rush of visa seekers outside the Indian Embassy. Only those with little to lose are trying to leave. There are, however, families whose roots are so deep in Kabul that they would take at least two years to wind up their establishment and pack up. "Can we wait so long?" asked a worried old Sikh.

Hindus complained to Eye-Witness about the difficulties of getting to India. They urged Thapar to contact ministers and officers concerned in Delhi on his return and "persuade them to help us before it gets too late." They told him that a majority of Hindu families would like to return to India if the government helped in their rehabilitation.

The provocative Eye-Witness report was accidentally shown on national television in India without approval of the official Center Board. The board ultimately banned the film, but it appeared on television the night of June 7, 1992 because the officials believed that it had been cleared by the board. The Government and board came to know about the televising of the film hours after it was all over.

V.H. Dalmia, president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, urged the government to arrange a mass repatriation of Hindus from Afghanistan. "The government should do what it did during the Gulf War," Dalmia was quoted as saying in newspaper reports.

AFGHAN BIODATA:

This mountainous country is 250,775 square miles in extent, with an estimated population of 16,000,000 - no census has ever been made. Fifty-three different languages are spoken. The nation's capital is Kabul with a population of 1,500,000. The recent war resulted in 2,000,000 deaths and 6,000,000 refugees. In 1980 the life expectancy was 42.7 years, the national income per person $100/year and the adult literacy rate 12%. There is 1 phone per 1,000 people. The estimated present Hindu population is 40,000. The state religion is Islam. The only Christians in the country are diplomats and expatriate workers, as it is a capital offense for a Muslim to convert to Christianity.

HINDU HISTORY:

At right is the ruins of the Hindu temple of Jandial in Afghanistan. The country was home to the headquarters of the Pashupati sect. Among its famous temples was the Sun Temple at Sakawana. Remains of temples including icons of Ganesha,

Lakshmi, Surya, Linga and other Hindu Gods and Goddesses have been excavated at Amb, Mallot, Ketas and Baghaniwaiah. Afghanistan sat astride the Silk Road, the major trade route of early times to India and the Orient. Unfortunately for its then Hindu citizens, it was also the major invasion route into India, and Afghanistan has been the scene of many mighty battles. As a result of these invasions, Islam displaced Hinduism as the major religion by the 11th century CE. Kabul was the capital from 1504 to 1526 of the Mughal Empire under Babur, from which he ruled parts of India.

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.