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Category : October 1992
Published by Anonymous on Oct. 01, 1992

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350,000 are Displaced from Bangladesh, Punjab, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Kashmir.

It does sound strange, but it is true: India has become a home for thousands of Hindu refugees. They are coming not only from far-off lands like Africa and Fiji but also neighboring countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. There are Hindu refugees even from Kashmir and Punjab, two of the important states in the country. Many are now housed in makeshift camps around Delhi, India's capital. To comprehend the irony of this, imagine that Anglicans from Oxford were taking refuge in London.

At one of the camps, Ashok, a refugee from Kashmir, told HINDUISM TODAY: "I am trying to reconcile myself to the situation in which I have to live today. But how long can I accept living in such a way? Even those living in slums are better than us." He pauses for a few moments and then asks: "What have I achieved by asserting that I am a Hindu? I had four servants in Srinagar but today I am working as a servant for someone." When queried what he proposes to do, he says: "One of these days when I have suffered enough, I will have to do something drastic. Actually, I don't even have to do that. All I have to do is go back to Kashmir, approach the militants and tell them that I am changing my religion and all will be well. If all I have to do is to shout Pakistan Zindabad ("victory to Pakistan") and Hindu hai, hai ("death to Hindus") in order to earn the right to a decent living for my family, what is the harm in doing it?"

When thousands of hinds fled into India after its tragic partition in 1947, the reason was they were not wanted either in Pakistan or East Pakistan (now

Bangladesh) because of their religious beliefs and were, therefore, persecuted by the rulers. The same is the reason today for thousands of Hindus migrating into Delhi and neighboring areas, whether from Afghanistan or Punjab. That this should happen to a community which has always been peace-loving and whose religion teaches love for all makes the suffering of the Hindu refugees more poignant.

In the present anarchy in Afghanistan, certain factions of the Mujahideens have made Hindus and Sikhs a target of their Islamic fervor. They have caused so much terror among the Sikhs and Hindus that even those who had never seen India have fled to its safety.

Ironically, it has become as dangerous for a Hindu to live in Kashmir or Punjab as in Afghanistan. In these two Indian states, Hindus have become the victims of the wrath of those who have come to believe that Hindus stand in the way of their becoming fully independent of Delhi's control. For ages he Hindus have lived in peace and harmony with Muslims in Kashmir and Sikhs in Punjab. Many of them have had ties as close and intimate as those of a family. Similarly in Punjab the militancy of many groups of Sikh youths has turned itself against the Hindus in order to achieve the goal of an independent Sikh homeland.

This is completely opposite the situation in Afghanistan where Sikhs and Hindus have made common cause. In that country both Hindus and Sikhs have been called kafirs (worshippers of idols) and, therefore, treated as unfit to live in an Islamic country. But in Kashmir, the Islamic fundamentalists have tried to forge links with Sikh militants in Punjab through Pakistan in order to ensure Hindus are thrown out of both Kashmir and Punjab. The Afghan Sikhs are shocked to learn on arrival in Punjab as refugees that some of their brethren are taking out their wrath against Delhi on Hindus.

As if the suffering of the Hindu refuges from Afghanistan, Kashmir and Punjab was not enough for the country to bear, thousands of Hindus have been pushed out of Bangladesh into the bordering Indian state of West Bengal. Tragedy has become acute with thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils coming into the state of Tamil Nadu as refugees. No accurate official figures are available of these Hindu refugees and one has to depend for this on those running various relief programs. According to them, more than 4,000 Hindus have fled into India from Afghanistan. The Hindu migrant from Kashmir total 110,000 - 65,000 belonging to 18,000 families in 17 Delhi camps and 46,000 in Jammu. Five thousand Hindus have fled Punjab. About 3,000

Hindus have so far crossed into West Bengal from Bangladesh and about 200,000 Tamils are housed in refugee camps in Tamil Nadu and Orissa. Mr. Kidar Nath Sahani, a former Mayor of Delhi, says: "We had thought the ghosts that had raised following the country's partition in 1947 had been laid to rest long ago. But we were wrong. What we are witnessing is far more serious. We are waking up to new reality: the Hindu as refugee."

Anand Swaroop Bajaj fled from Kabul after his parents and brother were killed by Mujahideens. He lamented, "We are trying to forget what happened, but it is difficult to recover from the shock we went through." He was a successful businessman in Kabul and sold medicines imported from India, France and Norway. Today he is homeless and without money. Ram Parvesh Kapur is another refugee who escaped from Kabul with his wife and children. Their safe arrival I Delhi through a land route was a miracle. But what hurts him is that there is no one in Delhi to help him. He is one of those who have been left to fend for themselves. There are not many voluntary agencies to offer them relief.

Earlier Delhi had to grapple with the problems of Hindu refugees coming from Kashmir and Punjab. The government did offer succor to them but the problem was so gigantic that it began to expect others to share its responsibility. Thus when the refugees began to arrive from Afghanistan and Bangladesh they had the misfortune of being received with indifference about their plight instead of sympathy. Camps have been set up for them at many places in Delhi and other cities like Jammu and Calcutta. But the life they are living there is worse. They have to live huddled together; there is very little facility for the education of their children; there is certainly no privacy in the lives of these refugees. What makes their condition miserable is that they do not know when they would return to refugees from Punjab says: "We are living out of our suitcase and hold-alls, trying our best of keep body and soul together until normality returns in our states."

For many of the youths living in the refugee camps, life has become unbearable. They are educated and can take up jobs but they are not easy to get. The government gives US $10 to $40/month to each person depending on his category and condition. Most of the refuge lived a life of dignity and commanded respect in their community. It is therefore painful for them to live on doles like beggars. The plight of the refugees from Sri Lanka is far worse because they were already poor and downtrodden when they were pushed out of their land. It is no wonder that many of the youths in these camps often begin thinking in terms of taking to arms. Tamilians consider joining the insurgency in Sri Lanka, while Kashmiris have the option of converting to Islam and joining the revolt there.

Hindu refuges are not treated as victims of religious fundamentalism. They are categorized by the government in terms of their nationality. One official said: "We have put them in three categories. One is preferred category in which are the Indians settled abroad holding Indian passports, second are those Indians how hold passports of other countries and the third are foreigners." This is called a "secular approach" which ignores the fact that the exodus of Hindu refugees has been caused by religious factors.

Even most of the political parties have avoided taking this factor into consideration while raising the issue of victimization of the Hindus. They call the refuges "Indian" and claim that they have been driven out of Afghanistan, Kashmir, Punjab or Bangladesh for political reasons. It is this "secular" attitude towards the problem that has given the Bharatiya Janata party an opportunity to capitalize upon the exodus for political purposes. The leaders of this party and organizations like Vishwa Hindu Parishad are using the problem thrown up by the rising number of refugees to mobilize the Hindus on religious lines to secure victory over the Muslim fundamentalist on issues like the dispute over the Shri Ram temple and Babri mosque in Ayodhya. It is on such occasion that the need is strongly felt of the forces inspired by the universality of Hindu thought and religion to come together and save Hinduism from being distorted and exploited for the achievements of some narrow and sectarian ends.

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