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January Violence Is the Last Straw-After 10 Years of War, Virtually All 50,000 Hindus have Fled, Forsaking

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Kandahar in Afghanistan is a small town-a sleepy, four-bazaar town-but within its heart it holds a burden of griefs: ten-year-old Mukesh had been sent by his mother to the nearest bazaar to fetch yogurt for lunch. He never returned home alive. Caught in a sudden volley of cross-fire between warring factions, he was shot in the brain. His mother never recovered from the meaningless loss of her youngest child, and died within a few months.

Over the past ten years, the rest of this Hindu family have had to flee, one by one, from their beloved homeland of Afghanistan where they were born and brought up, and scatter into the far corners of the world. They are just some of the thousands of Hindu Afghans who have seen their loved ones, their community and their way of life evaporate before their very eyes. Such are the daily tragedies behind the stark newspaper headlines of the war in Afghanistan.

The once-flourishing capital of Kabul has been turned into a morgue as the troops of President Burhanuddin Rabbani and the rebel fighters led by his opponent, Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, fight to the bitter end. Indeed the last day of a recent four-day ceasefire was used by the warring factions to dig new trenches in preparation for more fighting. As jets bomb the embattled city, which is on the brink of famine, people flee the war zone with a handful of belongings. Thousands are homeless. The key players in this endless war may have changed from time to time, but the real victims have always remained the Afghan people.

The War With no Winners

Like pawns in a high-powered chess game, the Afghans-Sunni and Shiite Muslim, Hindu and Sikh alike-have watched helplessly as homes, businesses, places of worship and even lives have been snuffed out by bombs and bayonets. As Afghans, the Hindus suffer with the rest of the population. But as minorities in an Islamic country, they are placed in double jeopardy. When Babri Masjid was destroyed in India by fanatical Hindus at a Vishwa Hindu Parishad rally in December, 1992, some radical Muslim Afghans seemed to forget that Hindu Afghans were their countrymen, and burnt and looted their temples in Kabul, Kandahar and Jalalabad in retaliation.

The once-thriving Hindu community in Afghanistan which numbered 40,000 has now dwindled in some parts to a paltry three families. Manu Lal, a young Hindu who escaped from Afghanistan into Pakistan and then took refuge in the U.S., recalls the golden days of Hinduism in Afghanistan: "Indians have been there for thousands of years. My great-grandfather was born in Afghanistan. Even in a small town like Kandahar, we had 5,000 Hindus, and many beautiful temples. There were temples to Shiv Parvati, Devi Mata, Satyanarayan and also many gurudwaras. There were four big gurudwaras which even people from India came to see."

Indeed, many Hindus point out that Afghanistan was originally a Hindu country, and that 99 percent of the Hindu Afghans were born there. A statue of Buddha has stood in Kabul for more than 2,000 years and a mountain is named Asha Mai, after a Hindu goddess. Madan Kumar (his name has been changed to protect his family still in Afghanistan), a Hindu Afghan who fled to the U.S. nine years ago, observes: "We have lived in Afghanistan for generations-why should anyone question our nationality? So it is the religious differences which are being attacked."

The Hindus were mostly prosperous merchants, dealing in clothes, dry fruits, pharmaceuticals, currency exchange and Indian tea and spices. This may have hardened resentment amongst the Muslim Afghans. Says Kumar, "Although some Hindus have been so powerful that they have even controlled the exchange market [looted and burned in the January fightin], there were thousands of Hindus living in the slums. Overall, though, Hindus have done well, and that makes them a very visible minority and an easy prey for opportunistic forces who are looking for unstable situations."

Manu Lal recalls, "While Kandahar had more Hindus, Jalalabad [just on the Afghan side of Khyber Pass], which had once been partly controlled by Ranjit Singh, had a

large population of Sikhs. The capital city of Kabul had a big temple which had a Hindu school and taught religious scriptures and Hindi. In those days Hindus were very safe because they were treated like honored guests." Kumar acknowledges that though there may have been some religious bigotry, generally Muslims and Hindus lived in mutual respect and friendship. Not any more.

Temple Destruction

Hindu temples and Sikh gurudwaras have been attacked by rockets and bombs, some the casualty of war, and some of religious intolerance. About two years ago the ancient Mata Asha Mai Temple in Kabul, to which the local Hindus had devoted a lot of time and money, was hit by rockets. A new building erected in the surroundings has also been damaged, as have the Hindu cremation grounds. Hindus started using the gurudwara grounds for their cremations, until the gurudwara was also struck.

Last January Barnett Rubin, Director of Central Asian Studies at Columbia University, visited Afghanistan as part of a delegation sent by the International League for Human Rights, the New York-based organization which has consultation status with the United Nations. He visited Jalalabad, where Hindu temples and Sikh gurudwaras had been destroyed, to investigate whether the cause had been religious intolerance. The city, which before the war had 4,000 Sikhs and 800-900 Hindus, now has just 50 Sikh families and three Hindu families. He points out that while Hindus and Sikhs, like all the communities in Afghanistan, have suffered tremendously due to the war, these two communities have suffered most profoundly due to the destruction of Babri Masjid.

Says Rubin: "According to the Hindus and Sikhs in Jalalabad, their places of worship were undisturbed throughout the war. However, after the destruction of Babri Masjid, there was an emotional reaction on the part of some of the people there, and they attacked both the mandir and the gurudwara and destroyed quite a lot of the property there, although nobody was injured." Roopchand, a Hindu trader and community leader, explained that over 2,000 carpets and other valuables which had been endowed to the temple and which were stored in the basement were burnt or looted.

The Shurra of the town later apologized to the Sikhs on realizing that they had nothing to do with the destruction of the Babri Masjid. Comments Rubin, "Of course, the Hindus in Jalalabad had absolutely nothing to do with that too but I'm afraid there's a kind of tribal mentality still which is that when members of a certain group harm your group, then you take vengeance on that group. So they did not apologize to the Hindus."

Rubin and his team interviewed the three remaining Hindu families in Jalalabad and also visited the 850-year-old mandir which is a mazaar or pilgrimage place of the Bhakti saint Mathuradas. According to the Hindus, it was visited by people of all faiths since it was a combined Bhakti-Sufi shrine. But as Rubin points out, "All the religions have become more fundamentalized now, so they are more separate." The Hindus told the delegation that the destruction of the temple was not a mass movement and that they do not suffer continuing harassment. The delegation, however, found plenty of human rights violations. Rubin says, "Obviously burning or looting of temples and gurudwaras is an example of religious intolerance"

No Easy Way Out

With the capital of Kabul totally swallowed in the fighting, Hindus can no longer get visas from the consulate there or fly to Delhi. The alternate route is overland through Pakistan, but Pakistan will not issue transit visas unless they already have visas to India. Since there are no distinguishing marks to separate them from other Afghans, who do not require visas, Hindus do slip into Pakistan without visas. However, the situation is fraught with danger if their Hindu identity is discovered. Sikhs, because of their turbans and beards, have an even harder time entering Pakistan without a visa. Rubin observes, "There is some kind of religious discrimination on the part of the Pakistani authorities since they don't allow Hindu or Sikh Afghans to go into Pakistan without a visa while other Afghans are allowed to do so."

So as the once-beautiful, rugged country of Afghanistan slowly disintegrates, those who can escape, do. Many Hindus and Sikhs have fled to safety in India, Germany and the U.S. Those who stay behind, as one Hindu pointed out, are either too poor or too greedy. Indeed, contrary to the stereotypes of all Hindus being rich traders, there are many struggling there who have no way of paying passage out of war-torn Afghanistan. Rubin says, "There are no wealthy Hindus in Jalalabad. If they are wealthy, they are not living in Jalalabad."

While the majority have found refuge in India, a small number have landed up in America. Manu Lal, whose young brother was killed in the bazaar crossfire and whose mother died from the trauma of her son's death, fled to Pakistan and then to the U.S., to escape compulsory induction into the Afghan army. Another brother, who was in the army, was paralyzed during warfare. Yet another brother, forced into the army at age 14, managed to also flee to the U.S. Relative newcomers, the hardworking family is starting from scratch.

Madan Kumar has been luckier than most refugees: he came into the U.S. nine years ago as a professional and managed to make a good living for himself. The scars, however, remain. Asked if he experienced any tragedies while fleeing, he says, "That in itself is a tragedy-being forced to leave the country where you were born and raised. You establish links throughout your life and all of a sudden you're cut-off. Not all the families have been able to re-unite. It would not be an exaggeration if I told you that for the first five years every single night I had nightmares about the war. I thought I was back in Afghanistan."

A sizeable number of refugees have joined family members in Germany. The U.S. has a small community of Hindu and Sikh Afghan refugees, totalling about 500-600 people, or about 150 families. About two years back they formed an Indian Afghan Organization, which has its main office in New York and a branch in Maryland. Since many of these refugees fled with just the shirt on their backs, they have few possessions or mementos of their life in Afghanistan. They have just the memories and they share these with each other in social gatherings organized on religious festivals like Diwali and Holi.

If you ask Madan Kumar what he misses the most about a peaceful pre-war Afghanistan, he says, "The peace itself. That was a time when people were innocent, when there wasn't much dushmani (enmity). There was little religious intolerance. Hindus and Muslims were friends. They were a God-fearing people, living in peace. People have lost the culture they had for centuries. Something has been lost in this war, and it cannot be found again."

As the guns of war continue their maniac destruction of Afghanistan, it seems a certainty that the Hindu population will have vanished when the smoke clears. The ageless Asha Mai Mountain, the 2,000-year-old Buddha, and the Mathuradas Temple may still stand, but there will be no worshippers. Generations of Hindu Afghans will grow up on foreign shores without knowing their land. As Madan Kumar sadly

admits: "If I go there, I will feel a stranger. That circle of friends and family has completely vanished. A piece of land means to you as much because of social relations bound to it. If you've lost all connections, you go to that country in what hope, to know whom?"

Afghan Hindus in Delhi

While those who have stayed behind struggle with food shortages, bombs and a ravaged economy, those who have managed to escape struggle to start a new life in new places. According to Hinduism Today correspondent in New Delhi, Rajiv Malik, a large number of refugees have sought asylum in the capital and adjacent cities. The wealthy ones have settled down in the posh colonies of New Delhi like Lajpat Nagar and Defence Colony. Others have purchased homes in middle-class areas East and West Delhi. While Delhi has attracted the Sikh Afghans, many Hindus have settled in Faridabad, an industrial township in the neighboring state of Haryana.

Tek Chand Sarin, 66, is a Hindu refugee from Kabul who came to India eight months ago and is living with his family in Faridabad, in a middle-class neighborhood. Sarin, an active member of the Democratic Party during the early 80's, believes that Hindus were still happy and prosperous during the period the Russians were in Afghanistan. He noted, "Even after the Russians left Afghanistan, the Hindus faced no problem during the regimes of Babrak Karmal and Dr. Najibullah. I remember when Dr. Najibullah was in India, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi checked up with him about the position of Hindus in his country. To this the Afghan premier's reply was, 'Hindus of Afghanistan are our own people, and I will ensure that they face no problem in my country.'"

Sarin believes the real problems of the Hindus began when the leftists and fundamentalists came to the forefront in 1992. He says, "Three members of an influential family of Hindus were brutally murdered by Muslim fundamentalists after which it became abundantly clear that Hindus were no longer secure in Afghanistan."

He recalls the big backlash after the Ayodhya incident, with temples and gurudwaras being attacked: "There was also an attempt to burn the Holy Granth in one of the gurudwaras. But the fact is that the exodus of Hindus had started much before it. Nevertheless, after Ayodhya the feeling of insecurity gripped the minds of Hindus in a big way as even their women were insulted." Sarin and other Hindu

leaders had also met with Afghan President Rabbani to discuss their concerns. He, however, offered no assurances and that itself showed that times had changed. Says Sarin, "There were lots of cases of kidnapping and looting and the situation was going from bad to worse."

Sarin, who had given an interview to BBC on the violence faced by Hindus in Afghanistan, found certain cases registered against him and finally felt compelled to leave the country. While in Afghanistan, he had been a member of the managing committee of Mata Asha Mai temple. He turned over the charge of the 2500-year-old temple to the United Nations force, which set up an office in the temple building. At the same time, he found many temples and gurudwaras were controlled by militia who were using them as storehouses for arms and rockets.

The journey into India via Pakistan was a rocky one. Sarin told Hinduism Today, "We were harassed along the way. At many places we had to pay money to avoid inconvenience and harassment. Though I myself had no problem, many of my co-passengers were asked to shell out Rs. 2500 [US\$75] to get the passport stamped by Pakistani officials."