

Why India Punishes the Afghan Sikhs?

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Global Research, October 25, 2022

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Religion](#)

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After the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan in August, 2021, they had announced general pardon for all Afghans, clarifying that they would not seek revenge and would not harm those who had previously worked for foreign forces in Afghanistan.

Despite it, tens of thousands of people, including more than 100,000 urban Afghans, mostly well-off and educated professionals as well as skilled persons crossed into Pakistan seeking asylum and a resettled status abroad. Several persons also left Afghanistan due to deteriorated economic conditions.

However, the case of Afghan Hindus and especially Sikhs is quite different which shows Indian double game and delusive strategy against them.

Although the Taliban had assured the Sikh community of their right to remain in Afghanistan and to practice their religion, yet Taliban's return reignited presumed fears of resurgence in violence which could target the community. It was because the propaganda of the US-led some western countries, including New Delhi.

Afghan Sikhs were numbered in the tens of thousands during the 1980s when they ran well-established businesses. But, only a few hundred were left when the Taliban took power last August.

In a Sikh temple (gurdwara) tucked in the narrow lanes of the Indian capital, New Delhi, 60-year Harbans Singh offered a prayer of gratitude. The temple has become his temporary home after he fled Afghanistan, where his family had lived for generations.

He said: "We have left our homes, our shops and come here to save ourselves...We have arrived empty-handed."

Singh and his other family members were in a group of 55 Afghan Sikhs who arrived in India in late September, 2022.

The latest exodus of the Afghan Sikhs was sparked by a deadly terror attack in June, this

year on gurudwara (Sikh temple) in Kabul which killed one worshipper and wounded seven others. The Islamic State group (Also known as ISIL, ISIS or Daesh) claimed responsibility for the attack.

Even before Taliban rule, Sikh's gurudwaras had been the target of terror assaults by this Sunni Muslim militant outfit, which also accepted responsibility by for those attacks.

ISIS terror group also attacked Shia's mosques, religious processions—Shia of Hazara community in Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to create sectarian divide and riots. After the Taliban seized power in Afghanistan, they not only condemned ISIS, but also started war against their militants.

Before the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, New Delhi had well-established its espionage system in that war-torn country led by its secret agency RAW whose agents were penetrated in the ISIS and as part of the double game were behind terrorism-related acts both in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

However, Press Trust of India pointed out on June 19, 2022;

“On priority basis...India has given e-visas to over 100 Sikhs and Hindus living in Afghanistan following a deadly terror attack on a gurudwara in Kabul on Sunday...Several blasts tore through Gurdwara Karte Parwan in Kabul's Bagh-e Bala neighbourhood on Saturday while Afghan security personnel thwarted a bigger tragedy by stopping an explosive-laden vehicle from reaching the place of worship of the minority community...The three attackers were killed by the Taliban forces.”

In this context, like the previous terrorism related assaults, RAW could be behind these terror attacks.

Nevertheless, as part of the dual strategy, the Indian government has facilitated the repatriation of Sikhs, including Hindus fleeing Afghanistan by offering visas, residency permits and organizing evacuation flights—the birthplace of Sikhism, India is home to most of the world's Sikh population.

Singh, who had never visited India, felt safe in the Sikh temple where they had got refugees. It has long been the first stop for those leaving Afghanistan.

But, fleeing a country they had called home for generations was also hard. In this regard, Harminder Singh who also took asylum in India stated:

“We had our temples there [Afghanistan], our community and we used to organize fairs on special occasions. Leaving our life there makes me feel sad”.

While New Delhi offered safety, the future may not be easy for my family because the wait for citizenship can be long and uncertain, as Singh added.

In a hopeful sign, some Sikhs have returned to Kabul in 2021 from exile in New Delhi, where many faced myriad problems amid a devastating wave of the coronavirus pandemic.

In this respect, Sandeep Singh, 25, told Radio Free Afghanistan:

“We were facing many problems [In India]. We didn’t had access to a doctor or medicines and had to pay our house rent...Finding work was difficult because as refugees we had to obtain visas and were required to register with the police.”

According to Partap Singh,

“They don’t have proper homes, work, or citizenship papers that would facilitate their rehabilitation. Even educating their children is a challenge...They are facing so many hardships. Some are setting up pavement stalls or selling street food to earn a living.”

Singh has returned to the same temple complex, where the Afghan government is now providing him with security and aid to start a new life. For now, he lives off the \$80 he can make each month as a shopkeeper.

Gulraj Singh, another young Sikh man, returned to Kabul three weeks ago after spending more than nine months in New Delhi.

Last year, Canadian and US officials had voiced concerns over the plight of Afghan Sikhs as some 200 families from the community moved to India.

In the recent weeks, 50 Afghan Hindus which include a majority of Sikh families have come back to Afghanistan.

Radio Free Afghanistan said that one Afghan Sikh man still living in India stated that the remaining members of their community are likely to return because of the challenges they face in India.

A Sikh remarked:

“It is very difficult to invest in India or set up a business while we are expected to pay for our children in private schools because we are not allowed into state schools...In Afghanistan, I had my own business.”

Reliable sources suggest that Afghan Sikhs and Hindus who were on exile in India met the Taliban who have assured them security, aid, and economic opportunities by the Afghan authorities.

Earlier, taking cognizance their plight the Taliban have urged its minorities-Sikhs and Hindus to come back to Afghanistan, claiming that the security situation has been solved.

In fact, although India’s Modi-led regime has disheartened the Afghan Hindus too, but his main target is Afghan Sikhs.

Notably, four referendums have been held in UK, Geneva, Italy and Canada in which almost 208,000 Sikhs actively participated and favoured an independent state of Khalistan in the Indian Punjab.

Particularly, the huge turnout for the Sikh referendum, organised by the pro-Khalistani advocacy group Sikhs For Justice (SFJ) was held on September 18, this year in Brampton city-in the Canadian province of Ontario, which depicted that the issue of the Sikh independence movement which is becoming a mainstream movement, as more than 110,000 Canadian Sikhs participated in the voting. During the referendum, the Sikh

community raised anti-India and pro-Khalistan slogans.

In interaction with media entities, Sikh leader Gurbatwant Singh Pannun-General Counsel to SFJ indicated that the voting in Punjab for the Khalistan referendum will start from January 26, 2023, coinciding with India's 74th Republic Day.

Undoubtedly, the referendum campaign by the SFJ has raised awareness in a global community regarding atrocities committed against Sikhs by New Delhi.

And besides mistreatment with other religious and ethnic minorities by acceleration of violence, and massacre, Sikhs have, continuously, been persecuting in India since extremist Narendra Modi-the leader of the fanatic ruling party BJP became the Indian Prime Minister.

In this connection, in its annual report of 2017, Human Rights Watch which conducted investigative work in 2016 pointed out Indian government's failure to control growing attacks on Dalits and religious minorities—Sikh community. Some latest reports of rights group have also pointed out violent assaults by the BJP radicals and other Hindu extremists on the various religious minorities, especially Sikhs.

According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's report: "Religious tolerance deteriorated and religious freedom violations increased in India...Minority communities, especially Sikhs experienced numerous incidents of intimidation, harassment, and violence, largely at the hands of Hindu nationalist groups.

It is surprising to note that after hundreds of thousands of farmers of various faiths began protesting against the government's new farm laws in November 2020, senior BJP leaders, their supporters on social media, and pro-government media, started blaming the Sikhs. They accused Sikhs of having a Khalistan agenda-a reference to a Sikh separatist movement in Punjab in the 1980s and 90s.

Now, Sikhs have understood the shrewd diplomatic tactics of the Modi-led government which is punishing them. Hence, desperate to come to India, they are returning to Afghanistan.

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