

Publisher: Porsesh Research and Studies Organization
Compiled by: Alisher Shahir



Thirty Stories of Agony: Poignant Accounts from a Community Forced to Migrate



Thirty Stories of Agony: Poignant Accounts from a Community Forced to Migrate

Interviewer and Author: Alisher Shahir
Publisher: Porsesh Research and Studies Organization



Publisher: Porsesh Research and Studies Organization
Compiled by: Alisher Shahir
Cover Design and Layout: Hamid Fidel
English Translation: Bismellah Alizada
Pashto Translation: Nusrat Elham
First Edition

© 2022. All rights reserved for the publisher.

To the generations of Afghan non-Muslim minorities who
lived and died in silence of centuries-long suppression in
Afghanistan

Contents

Acknowledgment	9
Introduction	13
The Second-Class Citizen “Forcibly expelled from His Homeland”	17
In Religious Studies Courses, We Were Pressured into Conversion.....	21
“They Burned Alive before Our Eyes”	25
“God Creates All as Humans But We Divide Them into Hindus and Muslims”	29
“There Is No Difference between a Hindu and a Bird,” Said the Murderer When He Killed My Brother.....	33
The Only School for Hindus and Sikhs in Kabul Closed Down	37
“A Life of Agony”	41
Appearing on an Interview Could Aggravate My Situation	47
I Studied in the Same School as Engineer Mohammad Khan and Ramazan Bashardost. It Was the Discrimination that Made the Difference.....	51

A Stranger in My Own Country	55
A Dream that is Impossible for Me as a Sikh Citizen	57
“A Normal Life Is But a Dream”	61
“To Everyone, Homeland is Kashmir”	65
Seven Years of Solitude	68
I Was Killed That Day	71
I Will Be Glad If I Have a Piece of Bread on My Table	75
My House Was Usurped and My Signature Was Taken under Duress	79
A Taliban Fatwa: Rape the Infidels!	83
Over the Last Decade, No Afghan Hindu or Sikhs Managed to Attain a University Degree	88
We Were Forced to Sin for Ten Years	91
The School Administration Disregarded My Complaint Because I Am a Hindu	95
The Hindu’s House Near the Mosque Should be Burned: A Fatwa	99
“We Never Gave Up”	104
A Sikh Tortured by the Taliban: “I Felt the Death”	115
They Found Us Helpless and Could Abduct Anyone of Us	117
Only Throwing Stone Is Replaced by Harassment	121
We Can Hardly Breathe	125
“We Never Felt So Compelled to Leave Our Homeland” ..	127
Because We Had No Supporter, They Demanded Four-fold Repayment of Our Debts.....	131
I Couldn’t Become a Doctor. I Will Carry the Sadness and Regret with Me All My Life.....	136

Vaisakhi is the most important festival in the Sikh calendar, which falls on 13/14 April each year. Hindu and Sikh communities had come together to celebrate it in Kart-e-Parwan Dharamshala.

Following the recent suicide attacks, the Hindu and Sikh population in Afghanistan have dwindled to just a few hundred.



Acknowledgment

This volume is the product of tireless work of a committed team who undertook one of the most demanding responsibilities under one of the most difficult circumstances, investing time and energy into this research work. It took two years of hard work for this project, which consists of five different components to be completed. Towards the end of this project which coincided with the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, many of our team members were hopeless.

The narration of lives of 30 Hindu and Sikh citizens of Afghanistan compiled in this book, serves as an oral history of this ethnic and religious minority in Afghanistan who have gone through years of persecution discrimination and humiliation. These thirty narrations are gathered through face-to-face interviews with members of Hindu and Sikh communities in 10 provinces including Kabul, Kandahar, Nangarhar, Ghazni, Kunduz, Helmand, Paktia, Parwan, Khost and Laghman. Interviews were also conducted with members of these communities in India, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia where they have migrated.

These 30 narrations are picked from nearly 100 interviews that have been conducted over the mentioned period of

study. The main reason for picking a limited number of these stories is the fact that we wanted to maintain the volume within a reasonable number of pages, given that it is printed in three languages.

This volume is part of a series of five interrelated activities Porsesh Research and Studies Organization has conducted: a documentary film on the lives of Hindu and Sikhs of Afghanistan, a detailed research study on the repression and forced displacement of these communities between the collapse of Dr. Najibullah's government and the end of Ashraf Ghani's government, collection of a photo album of over 600 photographs that shed light on the various aspects of lives of Sikhs in Afghanistan, and creation of comprehensive database (information bank) that recorded all important events, impactful developments, security events, and legal developments between the fall of Dr. Najibullah's government and the fall of Ashraf Ghani's government. These five valuable contributions have been made possible by selfless endeavors of our dedicated colleagues and friends, and on behalf of Porsesh Research and Studies Organization, I would like to take this opportunity to express my immense gratitude to all of them. I would also like to thank Mr. Ehsan Shayegan, Director of Porsesh Research and Studies Organization, who led this project and managed all relevant coordination and works to make this happen. I shall also thank all of my dedicated colleagues at Porsesh Research and Studies Organization who didn't lose their hopes even after the fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021, and continued their contribution from Kabul and other countries where they took refuge, to complete this research study—entirely without expecting any material incentives.

I would also extend my gratitude to the former Ministry of Information and Culture, Ministry of Borders and Tribal Affairs, the Hindu and Sikh community of Afghanistan, specifically their representatives Mr. Narinder Singh Khalsa, Ms. Anarkali Honaryar, and Mr. Sadpal Khalsa, former advisor to the president, for facilitating interviews and provincial travels for this study. A special thank you goes to Ms. Gulsoom Rezaie for her facilitation of interviews with Sikhs and Hindus outside Afghanistan.

I would also like to thank Mr. Bismillah Alizada for translating these narrations into English, and Mr. Nasrat Elham for translating them into Pashto. They both did a wonderful job in keeping faithful to these stories following principles of professional translation. If the content of this volume is more conveniently accessible to more audiences within and outside Afghanistan, the credit goes to these two friends. We are also grateful to Dr. Homeira Qaderi, author and women's rights activist, both for writing a preface for this volume and for reviewing it as it was being finalized. Ms. Qaderi did this incredible job during August 2021, the incredibly tough days after the fall of Afghanistan, as she was under extremely difficult circumstances given her background and profile. The credit for the cover design and layout design goes to Mr. Hamid Fidel who is well known for his elegant cover and layout designs for books, magazines and other printed media.

Finally, I would like to thank Open Society Foundations for funding this project, particularly this volume.

Alisher Shahir

▼ The ancestral house of Dr. Raghunath Ashna in Kandahar city, Kandahar province.



Introduction

“I was born here in Jalalabad. I grew up here. My birthplace and my soil are inseparable parts of my existence. There is nowhere dearer to me than my homeland. My heart will still beat for my homeland even if I live away from her.”

In the same land from which love and affection have been snatched away, the young Gurdip Singh amicably shared his story – but not his name. Most of the persons behind the stories in this collection are anonymized. This sends a shattering message that the fear of going unacknowledged still lives on.

Before reading this collection, I was under the impression that I had experienced, in my own home and abroad, all sorts of miseries that a human might go through: war, poverty, gender-based and ethnic-based discrimination, unwanted and unending migration. But the agony between the lines in this collection opened my eyes that are more to war, and to the trauma that it inflicts on humans.

Afghanistan is a land of tales and torments. She is the land of our loved ones who are no more, a land of roads that feed on human bodies. It is a country of empty houses, endless

cemeteries, never-ending anguish, ever-waiting eyes.

I can't help but to confess that I was crushed by overwhelming anguish as I read each page of this collection. The overt and covert misery of humans in this collection have struck me so deeply and forcefully that I feel like I am faced with mad waves of a flood of boulders. The words in this collection, simple as they might appear, are like dungeons that symbolize the void left after the death of kindness in the shackles of ignorance. Who could have been so heinously brutal to turn love and affection into shovels and pick axes to dig such an abysmal dungeon?

Karanjee Gaba recounts the night when the Taliban sanctioned raping the infidels. He relays that his grandfather attempts to protect the dignity of the girls in the family with empty hands. Karanje is an adult now and lives far away from where this happened, but he carries the anguish with him and chokes up when he talks about those acrimonious moments.

Sitnam Singh tries to ignore the unkindness of those around him by being compassionate and welcoming. But the anguish flows subconsciously from between his lips: "They used to address me as Hindu the potato and hurled stones at me." He is the only one left of the 120 families who used to dwell in Helmand. However, he still prays for peace in the country from the abandoned Dharamshala in the city.

Darshan Singh is as scared of a camera as much as he is scared of a gun because he had previously spoken up and it has had backlash. He tries to protect his life and property by raising his hands against his face as he faces a camera.

They planned to murder Jagtar Singh Laghmani for not being a Muslim. They put a dagger on his throat and told him to recite the Shahada Words.

The loneliness and helplessness that Tuti Singh goes through has made it possible for a young Muslim gang member who wears polka dotted pants to exact extortion money from his shop in Shor Bazaar.

Anjan Singh's account of his brother's death is beyond painful. Attar Singh is painted in his blood, but no one from the onlookers' steps in to help because no one shall touch the infidel. When the elders of the community go to the murderer to ask why he killed the young boy, they are told that killing is a Hindu as normal as killing a chicken.

Marwan Singh Malhotra recounts from his childhood how his teacher used to disregard his complaints of harassment by fellow students on the basis of his belief and ethnicity. Finally, he was left with no options but to drop out.

This collection is all about the unspoken and unheard words that should have been told and relayed way sooner. We ought to have turned these pages earlier than this and should have thought about such a ceaseless intolerance and lack of compassion.

Memories are about immortalizing moments of joy or grief. Talking about memories can also be cathartic, particularly in contexts where people have a lot to say about unkindness and cruelty of others.

We are left with no ways but to open this wound, no matter how deep it is, and to think about ways to heal it. For years, cultural obstacles have obstructed individuals to talk about

themselves and their anguish. Silence and resignation have allowed violence and injustice to become more rampant and omnipresent. There is no other way to uproot oppression other than facing it upfront. This is unto all of us. If there are none amongst us who dare to patiently take it upon themselves to tell these stories, how can we engage in the required intersubjective endeavor to heal it? It is with writing about this anguish that we can create the hope for overcoming. Let us assist each other in documenting the history of our behaviors in the hope of better days and in the hope of foreclosing these acrimonies that have befallen to us from repeating itself.

I appreciate the painstaking efforts put together by reporters who have conducted the interviews and have documented for the posterity a tiny part of the miseries that have been inflicted upon this oppressed community.

This collection takes a new and persistent look at the concept of pain and healing. It gives a platform to individuals who have kept silent out of fear of their safety or out of the shame attached to their experience. The reporters have remained sincere to the narration and tone of the narrators. They have made it possible for more people to learn about these grieves, and that raises our hope for resolution and healing. This invaluable collection serves as a reminder to us all those that humans are bigger than their anguish.

Dr. Homeira Qaderi

Kabul, August 2021

The Second-Class Citizen “Forcibly expelled from His Homeland”

In 1992, Afghan Singh (a pseudonym) was one member of the significant Hindus and Sikhs community in Kabul's Kart-e Parwan area who lived a harmonious life and ran successful businesses. Back then, each family in this community possessed two-three vehicles, a fact that testifies to their medium-class economic status. Afghan Singh and his fellow community members never thought a sudden turn of events would take away from them all of their belongings and leave them with no other options but to think about saving their lives. “It was not more than three or four months since the Mujahidin regime took over that coercion, usurpation and looting began.” Afghan Singh explains the turn of events in a grim tone. “They broke into people's homes and scared them with Kalashnikovs (AK-47). Their purpose was clear—coercion and extortion. They would forcibly take individuals out of their home and would ask for a hundred, two hundred or five hundred afghanis as ransom. More than half of the bullies were from a particular province, and another thirty-fourty percent, including Anwar Dangar, were from the north.”

Two vehicles of Afghan Singh, one a Mercedes Benz and another a Toyota Pickup, were usurped. Sadly enough, however, the coercion and extortion went far beyond usurpation of property. As Afghan Singh claims, this begharaz (civil and impartial) community lost at least nine young members; one of whom was Afghan Singh's young cousin. He was taken to a back alley in Shor Bazaar, Kabul, and murdered after a dagger was stabbed in his chest. A few others were shot dead in front of the Pakistani Embassy in Kart-e Parwan neighborhood. A handful of youths were even taken off taxis and shot dead. Afghan Singh harrowingly narrates his account of what befell this beleaguered community, stating that everyone knows who called the shot in Kart-e Parwan area at the time.

However, there is a limit to the degree a small defenseless community such as the Afghan Sikhs and Hindus can afford to stay. The community's limit of patience was hit with the increasing casualties, and they began to ponder on options that they had never thought of. "Leaving Kabul stirred a horrible feeling in us," recalls Singh as he explains that the Hindus and Sikhs began selling their properties and belongings ahead of migration, properties that they had inherited from their forefathers who had lived in Afghanistan for centuries. "The day we left Kabul on a truck, I looked at what my eyes fell on for one last time. As the truck moved past the Pul-e Khishti area, I had the impression for a while that the truck was moving slowly. I stared at our clothes that were on sale at the hand-me-down shops by the street. Our clothes symbolized our own status in Afghanistan, a dast-e dowom community (second-class community)." Afghan Singh immigrated to India through Pakistan, along with his family and relatives. In India, they temporarily took refuge

in streets and Dharamshalas/Gurudwaras. They finally managed to rent a shelter, but still lived as second-class citizens in their host country. “You are Afghans,” they were told. “We don’t have enough opportunities to provide jobs for our citizens! How can we help you?”

As Afghan Singh found it hard to make a living in India, he went to Russia, Kazakhstan and Tashkent as an economic migrant. From 2002, he started his own small business in Kazakhstan in a small shop. But it did not prove promising. “I fared no better there,” claims Afghan Singh who also lived there on a business visa. “Visa requirements became increasingly harder for Afghan passports. Kazakhstan granted other Afghans a ‘refugee’ status, but this excluded us.” According to him, one of the Afghan translators had told the Kazakh officials that they were Indians, so India ought to shelter them. Along with twelve other Hindu and Sikh families, Afghan Singh made several attempts, but Kazakhstan neither granted them asylum status nor issued visas for them. After twelve years of miserable life in Kazakhstan, they returned to India where they secured fake Indian passports with borrowed money. They arrived in Europe with those passports, and after spending fifty-two days in a refugee camp, they were re-settled in London.

Afghan Singh has been living in London with his family for the past nineteen years. “My sons and I run a business,” explained Afghan Singh, who has a UK citizenship. “Thankfully, we have four shops and work hard. In Afghanistan, too, we used to work hard, paid taxes and customs duties, but never managed to break the cycle of persecution and oppression.” Afghan Singh claimed that Hindus and Sikhs are the most peaceful community in Afghanistan, mind-

ing their own business. This religious minority did not take weapons against anyone in the never-ending wars in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, memories of his homeland still disturbs his prosperous life in London. Afghan Singh stressed that nowhere can replace one's homeland. He still agonizes over the memory of being forcibly expelled from the county. "During the fall of Dr. Najibullah's government in 1992, we ran a shop in a basement in front of the Ministry of Information and Culture," recalled Afghan Singh. "There were several shopkeepers from Panjshir province who used to harass us with their constant warnings of expelling our entire community from the county -- and they sadly materialized it. After the Mujahidin took over, the first thing they did was expelling the Hindu and Sikh community from Afghanistan. Were we not seen as a second-class citizens, who could expel us from our homeland?"

In Religious Studies Courses, We Were Pressured into Conversion

In a freezing morning on one of the last days of autumn, his right hand was tightly locked around a broom. He seemed fifty years old, but he had the appearance of a much older guy who had spent more years than his age at the service of the Dharamshala/Gurdwara. While unbosoming himself, he nostalgically narrated the days when dozens of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs congregated for their religious rites inside the Dharamshala/Gurdwara. It is sad that now there are only a handful of worshippers in the Dharamshala/Gurdwara. He regretfully said that one could hardly see anyone on the premises if there are no religious events or rites.

We asked him to show us the address of one of the remaining Sikh families in Kabul. He guided us to a small house in a slum outskirts of the capital. The tiny house accommodated a Sikh family of six. To us, the family seemed tranquil, unlike our expectations. Following a cup of tea, we were introduced with the household. One could sense that something was missing in the vibes of the house. It is hard to express, but maybe it was tranquility or peace of mind?

The housewife was a thirty years old lady whose wrinkles

and grey hair showed her much older. While holding her baby tight in her arms, she sobbingly recalled the tragic day when the community lost twenty-six members in an attack in Shor Bazaar, Kabul. Nine months had passed since then, but the trauma was so fresh that seemed like it took place just yesterday. The Shor Bazaar attack was fateful for her community and herself. “The attack wrenched our hearts. Everyone is shattered. The community has dispersed. No one is left here. Our loved ones were killed, and those who survived went to other countries,” she added. In the attack she lost a brother and a nephew, a tragedy that took away from the community hope and tranquility, and their sense of belonging and protection.

Ajay, a twelve years old boy, hardly agreed to speak. With an ambiguous look and hesitant demeanor, he nodded and granted our request. As he talked about his heart-wrenching experiences of childhood and school time, we realized why he was hesitant to speak. He had been through so much persecution and harassment that it seemed strange to him that we talked to him without persecuting him. “In school, they called us Hindu-e Diwana (the crazy Hindu) and Hindu-e Kafir (the infidel Hindu),” he relaid. “They pulled my hair. That is why I dropped out of school and only took some classes in the Dharamshala/Gurdwara.”

Surpal Singh (pseudonym), a twenty-five-year-old boy who is the family's eldest son said he still loved his homeland but preferred to live somewhere where he would not be worried about losing another member of his family. “Homeland is like one's mother and no one likes to be separated from their mothers, but the circumstances left for us no other options,” added Surpal, who wished to live in a country where hu-

manity matters more than ethnicity. “If we leave Afghanistan, we will not return until the rights of minorities are respected/considered.”

While asked about his school days, Surpal paused and stared at the ceiling. Then he said with a sad tone: “When we went to school, everyone called us Kafir (infidels). In religious courses, we were pressured into converting to Islam.”

Sources: Interviews and Subh-e Kabul Daily Newspaper website.

This page intentionally left blank

“They Burned Alive before Our Eyes”

Hakim Ajit Singh's brother had just graduated from the private Ariana University with a degree in pharmacy when he set up ‘Surkhrud Darmalton’ (Surkhrud Pharmacy). Only a few days since the launch of his pharmacy, the news circulated across the city that Mr. Ashraf Ghani, the former President, would pay a visit to Nangarhar province. On the margin of this official visit, the president was also scheduled to meet with a number of Hindus and Sikhs in the province.

Four days ahead of the president’s visit, the Presidential Protection Service (PPS) put in place strict security measures in certain areas of Jalalabad, capital of Nangarhar. On the day of the visit, the president was scheduled to meet Hindu and Sikh elders at three o’clock in the afternoon. It was half-past three in the afternoon when sixteen Hindu and Sikh citizens along with one Muslim passed the first checkpoint. In the second checkpoint along their way to the rendezvous, the Hindu and Sikh visitors asked the security guards to allow a vehicle that carried a few Hindu and Sikh elders who were unable to walk the long way. The visitors were asked to wait until the PPS could secure a permit to allow the vehicle in. After less than ten minutes, a horrible explosion shook the city, and thick plume of smoke spiraled into the sky from

Chawk-e Mukhaberat (Mukhaberat Square). What happened following the terrifying sound of explosion was difficult for Ajit Singh to explain. Seated in his herbal medicines shop in Jalalabad, he took his eyes off me, choked up, and discontinued the conversation. One could read the depth of sorrow on his face and in the tone of his voice.

Ajit Singh was born in Jalalabad thirty years ago. He was the only member of the family who still lived in Afghanistan. Every morning when the sun rises, he leaves Dharamshala/Gurdwara for his shop where he sells herbal medicines of his own making. In 2012, as the security situation deteriorated in Afghanistan, his family migrated to India. Ajit Singh lived with one of his brothers, Anup Singh, who pursued his education in Afghanistan. Ajit Singh and his brother had lived away from their family for years. They used to be optimistic about Afghanistan's future and hoped their family would return from India once the security situation grew better. The hope was dashed in 2018 when the already shrinking community lost two dozens of its members, including Ajit Singh's brother, in the Jalalabad attack.

Hakim Ajit Singh was in his shop when the sound of the explosion petrified him. He rushed to the scene, finding tens of his community members injured and a car on fire. Ajit and his friends were trying to take the wounded to hospital when the PPS opened fire at them. They could have helped at least six members of their community to survive if the PPS hadn't opened fire at them. "They were burned completely," sighed Hakim Ajit Singh. "They were not recognizable. My brother and three of my best friends were burned in front of my eyes. The police neither opened the car's door so that those on board could escape the fire nor did they

allow us to do so. If the car doors were opened, at least the wounded could get out of the car themselves and could possibly survive. They would not have burned before our eyes.”

The crumbling Hanuman Mandir, located in Sultanpur Sufla village of Surkhrod district of Nangarhar province. The temple structure has remained in the same condition for years.



“God Creates All as Humans But We Divide Them into Hindus and Muslims”

“In the name of God of Justice and Equality,” said Anarkali Honaryar to open her speech. This is a motto that once earned her a fatwa from the extremist clerics. She first heard this motto from Dr. Sima Samar, the former Chairwoman of Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), when Ms. Honaryar was a member of the Commission.

One day, in a program that was also live-streamed on a TV, she opened her speech with the motto. She soon noticed a commotion in the audience, but did not understand the reason. After she concluded, someone rose up from the audience and hurled a harsh objection at her: “You have no right



to invoke the motto, because a non-Muslim is not allowed to use this sentence. The God with these characteristics is only the God of Muslims.” Realizing that the circumstances was tricky and risky, she quickly moved to another room. Several religious scholars immediately convened to issue a religious fatwa to make it clear whether or not she had insulted Islam and Muslims.

Anarkali Kaur Honaryar, who represented her community in the Afghan Senate, faced such discrimination from her fellow Afghans. Honaryar could not hold back her tears as she was delivering a speech when she was awarded the Ibn-e Sina International Peace Prize, an annual award granted to influential and inspiring figures who have contributed in making a just a peaceful Afghanistan. In her speech, she talked about the woes of her life and that of other Hindu and Sikh girls who were not allowed to go out of their homes. “I was born in a family where no girl was allowed to go to school, study and work,” she said as she sobbed and tears streamed down on her face. “It was not because of the family barriers but rather because society doesn’t allow it. Many of the Hindu and Sikh boys could not go to school either; but girls even more vulnerable.”

To make sure his daughters and sons could attend school, Anarkali's father moved from Kabul to one of the provinces and settled in a neighborhood where no one would know whether they were Hindu [Sikh]. Her family even attended Muslim religious ceremonies. “We used to go to the mosques from the first of Muharram to the tenth, the Day of Ashura,” said Anarkali. “I was too young but remember that my mother used to cry at the mourning rituals, and I used to join my mother when I noticed her tears. Rumors

spread all the way to our community in Kabul that we had all converted to Islam. Therefore, we used to live away from our community.”

According to Anarkali, since people knew about her house in Makrorian, Kabul, children threw stones and mud at their house and derogatorily called her Anarkali the Hindu and Anarkali the infidel. She spoke of the agony of living in a society where it is considered a sin for her Muslim compatriots to call a Hindu/Sikh brother or sister. She claims that someone had referred to Hindus and Sikhs as 'Hindu and Sikh brothers and sisters' in her dissertation at one of the universities. The reviewers deducted a few marks to punish the student.

“In spite of the fact that I was born and raised here, I don’t know where my homeland is,” added Anarkali painfully and sobbingly. “When my neighbors want to acknowledge us, they express that they love the Indian people very much! When I meet my close friends, they tell me about the kindness of Indians! But I have never been to India and have only had one official trip there. How can I make them understand that I am an Afghan citizen?” Honaryar has relatives—aunts, uncles, and cousins—who have converted to Islam. Her relatives neither had higher education nor a deep understanding of Islam at the time or after conversion—most of them are even not literate. They converted to ease the circumstances they were under.

One day, one of Anarkali’s childhood neighbors—who calls her, aunt—visited her in her home in Makrorian. When she left her house, the neighbors asked about their relationship and she replied that she was her aunt. The neighbor exclaimed in surprise: “A Hindu aunt?!” Anarkali believes that

the community still has a long way to go, and that they have never been disappointed. Shedding tears is never our weakness; but pains that we can't forget no matter how much we try. She ended her speech with a poem written by Sahir Ludhianvi and sang by the late Mohammad Rafi from the Bollywood film *Dhool Ka Phool* (1953):

Tuu hindu banega na musalaman banegaa/ You'll neither be Hindu nor Muslim,/ Insaan ki aulad hai insaan banega/ You're the son of Human, you'll become a Human,/ Kudarat ne to banaI thi ek hi duniya/ Nature sired out only one world,/ Hamane use hindu aur musalaman banaya/ We separated it as Hindus and Muslims,/ Tuu sabake liye aman ka paigaam banega/ Learning this, you'll be a Message of Peace (for them),/ Insaan ki aulad hai insaan banega/ You're the son of Human, you'll become a Human,/ Ye din ye Iman dharam bechane vale/ Those who sell out their faith, their beliefs and religion,/ Dhan-daulat ke bhukhe vatan bechane vale/ Those, avaricious, who sell out their own country,/ Tuu inake liye maut ka ailaan banega/ You'll be the Proclamation of death for them,/ Insaan ki aulad hai insaan banega/ You're the son of Human, you'll become a Human,

“There Is No Difference between a Hindu and a Bird,” Said the Murderer When He Killed My Brother

Attar Singh rolled in blood; no one rushed to take him to hospital. “He is Kafir (infidel). He is untouchable,” an old man declared. A man from the crowd rushed to Attar Singh, placed him on his shoulders, and carried him away from the bloodbath. “Where do you take him? He is a Kafir,” shouted another man who ran away from the crowd. The person who carried Attar Singh’s [wounded] body on his shoulder hurled back: “I see a human being; I see no Muslim or Kafir here.”

After Attar Singh’s funeral, the elders assembled and decided to go to Hakim Jan’s home to interrogate him about why he opened fire at Attar Singh. Sobbing over the phone, Anjan Singh explained that the elders received a painful response: “There is no difference between a Hindu and a bird,” the murderer’s father said to the elders who were left disappointed. Fifteen years had gone by since the incident, but Anjan Singh remembers so clearly as if it just happened the day before.

Attar Singh’s family now lives in India. His brother, Anjan

Singh, yearns to return to his homeland, Afghanistan. “We hope one day we can return to Kabul,” says Anjan Singh. “Every time I came here, my father told me to search for his brothers, but I haven’t been able to find them yet.” The precarious situation in Afghanistan has also changed the condition for his family. Therefore, the connection between their close relatives has been severed. “My father died in India and my uncle in Afghanistan,” explained Anjan Singh. “They did not see each other for fifteen years and were unaware of each other’s circumstances.” Anjan Singh migrated from Afghanistan and lives with his family in India. Sobbing over the phone call, he talked about the tragic days when he lost his brother.

One day a missile hit a school in Gardiz, the capital city of Paktia province. Attar Singh was concerned about his brothers and rushed to the school to fetch them. He was not allowed to cross the cardons. The soldier, who was assigned to keep people clear, told him that the missile remains unexploded and that Singh had to leave the area immediately. Attar Singh, who was not more than eighteen years old at the time, bought grapes and began eating them in one of the hills near his brothers’ school and waited until for him to come out of the school. While eating the grapes, Hakim Jan, who was an Arbaki (local militia), approached him and sat next to him. “After exchanging a few words—not understood what was exchanged—Hakim Jan stood up and pulled the trigger,” narrated Anjan Singh from accounts of the people who witnessed the scene. In the blink of an eye, at least ten bullets were fired. “He was rolling in the blood with five bullets having pierced his kidney and five others shot at his thigh,” added Anjan Singh.

For more than half an hour, Attar Singh cried out for help and made his last struggles to survive. Countless people gathered around him to just watch him die—as if there was no humanity. Others cursed those who wanted to help him. It was said, “He is a Kafir, don’t touch him.” After half an hour, the savior arrived at the scene. He was a young man for whom only humanity mattered. He placed Attar Singh on his shoulders regardless of what others said. But unfortunately, it was too late. Attar Singh was no longer breathing.

▼ An old house, belonging to Hindus and Sikhs, with mud-made walls is located inside Hindu fortress in the old Bazaar of Khost city, Khost province.

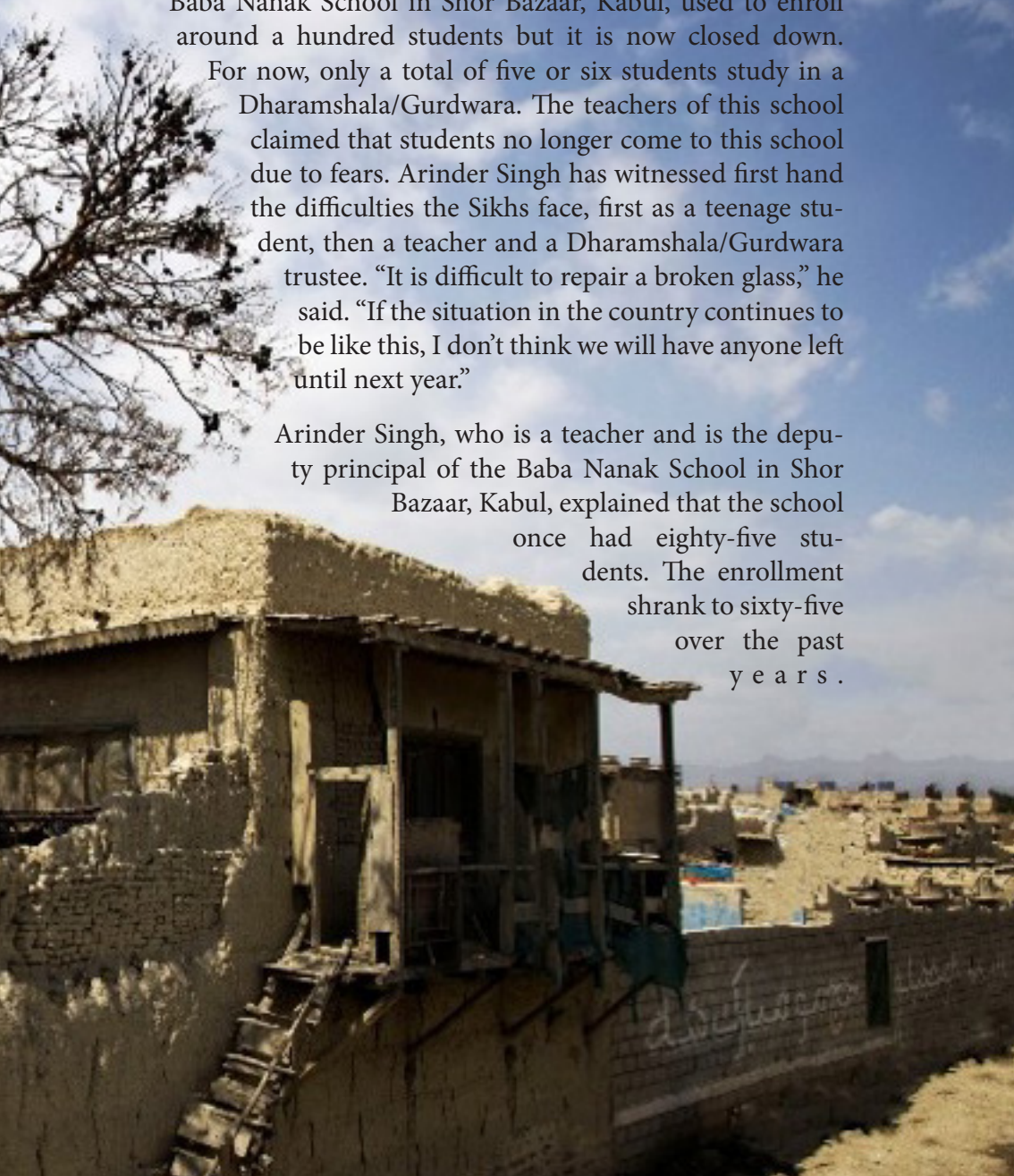


The Only School for Hindus and Sikhs in Kabul Closed Down

Baba Nanak School in Shor Bazaar, Kabul, used to enroll around a hundred students but it is now closed down.

For now, only a total of five or six students study in a Dharamshala/Gurdwara. The teachers of this school claimed that students no longer come to this school due to fears. Arinder Singh has witnessed first hand the difficulties the Sikhs face, first as a teenage student, then a teacher and a Dharamshala/Gurdwara trustee. “It is difficult to repair a broken glass,” he said. “If the situation in the country continues to be like this, I don’t think we will have anyone left until next year.”

Arinder Singh, who is a teacher and is the deputy principal of the Baba Nanak School in Shor Bazaar, Kabul, explained that the school once had eighty-five students. The enrollment shrank to sixty-five over the past years.



This plummeted to thirty students until two years ago. Over the course of the last two years, Shor Bazaar witnessed a mass migration of Hindu and Sikh community who had lived in this neighborhood for generations. Hindus and Sikhs were not limited to only Shor Bazaar, they were part of the ethnic mosaic in most provinces of Afghanistan.

Security threat was not the only reason behind closure of this school. Harassment of Hindu and Sikh students on the streets was another reason according to Arinder Singh. The school is not far from the Dharamshala/Gurdwara where most of the families were accommodated in the spare rooms. Safety of students has been the principal reason why schools and Dharamshala/Gurdwara were built at close distances. According to Arinder Singh, they had ordered the guardians to accompany their children from home to school and back. Arinder Sings said, "Our children were beaten on their way in several cases. They were thrown stones at or were investigated for information about their money and belongings. As a result, the gate of the only school for Hindus and Sikhs in Kabul was shut." According to him, the closure of this school, however, was temporary. There are hopes that after the situation gets better, it will be reopened. But its permanent closure cannot be ruled out completely.

Wishing peace for Afghanistan and the world, Arinder Singh prayed with his students inside a Dharamshala/Gurdwara. "The situation is becoming more dangerous day by day," he added when anxiety was visible from the wrinkles on his face. "In Afghanistan, there is enormous fear looming over our heads. Even during the course of our worship, we are scared. Afghans have suffered so much. In this country, nowhere remains to be safe for us." The lives of minorities are

affected by the heavy grief of losing their community members, missing them, and regretting the memorable days that may never be repeated. They dream for a peaceful country, but they seldom have any other practical options other than leaving their country. “We do not want to leave the country unless we are forced to do so,” he wrapped up.



“A Life of Agony”

At the cusp of his youth, Chabul Singh felt a lifetime of regret. He wished he could turn the clock back to allow for him to relive his childhood and teenage years. The older he gets, the more insecure the



situation in the country grows. He was nostalgic about the days when his compatriots—Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims—went to meadows and picnics together without any security concerns. In those days, he told me nostalgically, tanks used to parade to Cinema-e Pamir in the center of the city and in other streets in central Kabul on important days of national celebrations such as the Independence Day. The city used to be lit up and people came out to celebrate together in the meadows. They spent the whole day eating delicious food, listened to happy music, and had fun with their families and friends until late at nights.

Chabul Singh recounted his sweet memories of betting with his Muslim friends on PEPSI bottles at the playgrounds and meadows, and whoever lost the bet would have to pay for the food. In addition to these entertainments and celebrations, they also had unique religious festivals. “The Hindus and Sikhs traveled from Kabul to Jalalabad for seven to eight days to celebrate the Vaisakhi festival,” said Chabul Singh. “We used to hand over the keys to our house to our Muslim neighbors and had no worries about our houses.”

Chabul Singh was born fifty-three years ago in Gardiz, Paktia. During his childhood, there was more certainty and the situation was more predictable. His father was a goldsmith and ran a shop, and he occasionally apprenticed with him. “At that time, Afghan Hindus and Sikhs dwelled in various cities, and owned houses, shops and businesses,” added Chabul Singh. “In Gardiz, most of our relatives and friends were goldsmiths, including my father. They made rings and necklaces, and they could live as they planned to go about their lives.”

Chabul Singh and his family moved from Gardiz to Kabul

due to insecurity. Ever since, the tranquility and happiness is no more there. Poverty knocked on their door. Chabul Singh was eight years old when he and his father opened a *simsari* (cosmetics) shop in Sara-e Ahmad Shahi, Shor Bazaar, Kabul. As he grew up, his father set up another shop on Jada-e Maiwand (The Maiwand Road). But it seemed that Chabul's fate was tied to the cosmetics store at Sara-e Ahmad Shahi. "When there was security, our life was better. At least we were not harassed," explained Chabul Singh who has always struggled to make ends meet for forty-two years of his life. "Back then, it didn't matter how much we earned—ten or twenty afghanis or even a single loaf of bread. We used to eat it happily with our family. But at the end of the period of Mohammad Daoud Khan and after the collapse of Dr. Najibullah's regime, the Mujahidin came to power and our situation turned for worse." According to Chabul Singh, the Mujahidin era was the beginning of the miseries for religious minorities in Afghanistan. He recalled that Mujahidin used to rush to their shops and take whatever they needed without paying for them. If the shopkeepers asked for payment, they would be beaten up.

After the Mujahidin government, life became even harder for his friends and community members. They chose to migrate en masse to secure places. "Although we were away from our homeland, we closely followed the news and developments," explained Chabul Singh who immigrated with his family to India and settled there for twelve years. "You may have an idea of how bad news from your homeland leaves a strong impact on you when you are in exile. One day during meal time, I was sitting together with my family and listened to the news. There was bad news from Afghanistan. Everyone stopped eating, rose from their places, and

wept. Everyone wished it was just not true. The radio anchor announced that Dr. Najibullah was assassinated—the news was casted twice.”

Like Chabul and his family, countless other Afghan immigrants wished good for their country from exile. They wished for peace so they could return to their homes. Their prayers were granted in 2003 when hundreds of Hindu and Sikh citizens had yet another chance to return to Afghanistan. “A significant number of Hindus and Sikhs —about 80 percent of those who had emigrated during the Mujahidin era—returned to their homes in Kabul (i.e. Taimani and Shor Bazaar) during Hamid Karzai’s government and resumed their work,” added Chabul Singh.

According to Chabul Singh, the Afghan Hindus and Sikhs lived a good life during Hamid Karzai’s presidency. He agreed that the situation was not ideal, and there was war and insecurity, but there was less mass killing, robbery, massacres, and suicide attacks. After returning to Afghanistan, he enrolled his children at school. But the situation was not the same as before they left Afghanistan. “My children were repeatedly asked when we came to Afghanistan from India? Why don’t you go to your country?” added Chabul Singh whose children were seen as immigrants and strangers. “They were persecuted, called Hindu-potato, and were forced to convert to Islam. It was still tolerable as we thought they were children and didn’t know enough, but it became intolerable when teachers pressured our children to learn the Qur’an.”

The harassment that Chabul Singh’s children faced in particular, and other Hindu and Sikh children in general, was a major cause of school drop-out among the community.

Their education was reduced to private schools, and to their own religious schools. As a result, a considerable number of Hindu and Sikh children remained illiterate.

Over time, Chabul's children could hardly walk on the streets. It was no longer safe for them to walk outside and they were constantly harassed. According to Chabul, when one's wife and children have no peace of mind, life will be nothing but hell. But he didn't want to give up in the face of these hardships and didn't plan to leave his country one more time.

Not before long, harassment gave its place to security threats for Chabul and his community. "The 2018 terrorist attack in Jalalabad was an unprecedented incident in the history of Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan," said Chabul Singh painfully. "We lost many friends and loved ones. The grief of this incident will stay with us for the rest of our lives. We could only allay ourselves thinking about every citizen of the country who suffers. But after the 25th of March 2020, when we were attacked in Shor Bazaar, Kabul, we could no longer justify our stay in the country. They targeted us intentionally, and we chose to leave our country to save our lives."

Chabul Singh, who migrated to India six months before the interview, told me that the pain of being away from home this time is heavier than before. In the earlier period, he told me, Hindus and Sikhs left their homes due to the general insecurity in the country, but this time they feel a deep wound in their hearts. "We suffered previously as well, but this time is different," said Chabul Singh. "When no one is harmed by you, and you never took a gun against anyone, but you are still brutally attacked, you can only leave your country. It is

excruciatingly painful.”

▼ *The Entrance gate of Kote Cheshmah Garden, located in Sutlanpur Aulia village, Surkhrod district of Nangarhar province. Both the Gate and Garden are in a state of ruins.*



Appearing on an Interview Could Aggravate My Situation

“I relay to you my pain and my sorrows,” painfully uttered Darshan Singh. “I share them with you so that you learn about what we are going through. I talk about this just with you. Please don’t film me and don’t write about it anywhere. You conduct the interview and go about your life; I am left here in this shop surrounded by an enormous number of people who intervene in each and everything. What good your interviews do to us? You post them on Facebook so people get a chance to watch our miseries? Or you post it so the cruel oppressors watch them and later come to bash our shops and beat us up? Is this what you want?”

Darshan Singh's words as expressed in the above sentences may seem very mundane, and may look unsentimental on paper, but it is crucial to know that he uttered those few sentences with his heart throbbing faster, his face evidently showing anger, his voice trembling, his throat choked up, and his hands shaking. Looking closely at the 67-year-old Darshan Singh, I thought of myself as an eagle who was poised to destroy the nest of a sparrow. For a moment, I was overwhelmed by a sense of self hate and hesitant to show

him the [authorized] letter handwritten in Panjabi script by Sandpal Singh Khalsa—a Senior Advisor to the Afghan President for the Affairs of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs. He put his palms together and raised them in front of his face in sign of respect, asking us not to record videos.

I explained to him that no one would step into his shop without his consent. I also told him that his shop was his privacy and that no one would film his shop without his permission. A journalist who is familiar with the basics of journalism would not do anything that endangers the interviewee. I explained to him that there are many ways a reporter can protect the identity of their source. Although it was difficult for me to make these sentences understandable enough for him, my explanations did help in giving an impression of safety. I noticed that the vibration in his voice and shaking of his hands gradually went away. All this was probably not because I was determined to encourage him to grant me an interview, but rather to find out what had happened to him that he was so afraid to be interviewed.

I assured him earnestly that his interview would not be filmed, recorded, or posted on Facebook. All the while there were two women in his shop. One of the women exchanged a few words in Hindi with Darshan Singh. I did not understand the conversation but inferred from her tone that she was objecting to Mr. Singh being interviewed. The family most probably had a heartbreaking experience from an interview in the past, and the camera and the tripod triggered them. He explained how he was hurt by one of his interviews and why he hated every reporter and You-tuber ever since.

After saying goodbye to him, we mentioned that we wanted

to publish his words in a book. “So, it is not for a Facebook post?” he asked with a surprised tone. “No, Sardar Sahib,” I replied. He happily turned to his wife and exchanged a short sentence in Hindi which contained the English word ‘book’. Although it was time for us to say good bye to them, Darshan Singh greeted us one more time and expressed his consent to be interviewed. “It should not be mentioned who threatened me and what they did to me,” he said. “They are still threatening me and can take my life at any moment.”



▲ The Gurdwara (Dharamshala) Sri Guru Nanak Darbar in Mukhaberat Square, Jalalabad city. This is one of the oldest Gurudwaras in Nangarhar Province. According to Sikh religious sources, Baba Nanak once lived in this Gurdwara for 40 days.

I Studied in the Same School as Engineer Mohammad Khan and Ramazan Bashardost. It Was the Discrimination that Made the Difference.

Dilip Singh Bashardost was born eighty years ago in Bala Hissar (The High Fortress) in Gardiz, capital city of Paktia province. Bashardost has eleven children—eight daughters and three sons. At the time of his birth, over eight hundred Hindu and Sikh citizens used to live in the city. Most of them ran businesses, selling commodities that they imported from India and Pakistan. “During the reign of Zahir Shah, our business was in a boom,” said Dilip Singh. “In Gardiz, there used to live between one hundred and one hundred and fifty Hindu and Sikh families. We had two worship places, one for Hindus, which was called the Mandir, and the other for Sikhs, which was called the Dharamshala/Gurdwara.” Bashardost told me that the sovereigns of the time respected their religion and culture. Even local officials visited their temples and delivered speeches of harmony and solidarity. Due to the bust in labour and market, Hindus and Sikhs moved from Gardiz to other provinces of the country. Dilip Singh and his relatives chose to resettle in Ghanzi province.

“We went through a lot of uncertainties and misery,” added Bashardost who spent more than twenty years in Ghazni with his family of eight. “My father was a zargar (goldsmith) and could hardly make ends meet. In the beginning, I was a photographer and had an analog camera with a tripod. I used to work near Qarabagh District Court and because I had a contract with them, most of the documents of the court and government offices were referred to me for to be photocopied.”

According to Bashardost, Hindus and Sikhs faced less persecution at that time. They enjoyed a happy life in Ghazni’s Qarabagh district until the Mujahidin. With the Mujahidin in power, the circumstances for this community began to undergo dramatic changes. Bashardost and his family moved to Ghazni City, the center of Ghazni province.

Omnipresent harassment, discrimination, and lack of decent employment for this religious minority have compelled Dilip Singh to relocate along with his family to more than four provinces and districts over the years. After four years in Ghazni, Dilip Singh moved to Kabul’s Shor Bazaar. “We settled in Kabul for more than ten-twelve years,” said Dilip Singh, who has served in the 99th Brigade of the Afghan army in Qargha, a district in the northwest of the capital. “I do not remember exactly when, but I guess it was during one of the leftist regimes, probably Babrak Karmal. I served with this languta (the turban), I put on my military uniform and proudly served for my homeland. At that time, people used to respect us. It didn’t matter if non-Muslims wore the languta.” After completing military service, Dilip Singh returned to Ghazni, and like most Hindus and Sikhs in the province, started a traditional herbal medicines shop.

For Dilip Singh, life and business have been interwoven with discrimination. He pursued his secondary education up to grade seven in Qarabagh district, Ghazni province. “When I was in grade one, Mr. Ramazan Bashardost was in grade four,” said Dilip, noting that he went to the same school as Dr. Ramazan Bashardost, an MP from Kabul who previously represented Ghazni in the parliament. “But we can’t be compared now because the educational opportunities were not the same for both of us.” He also told me that Engineer Mohammad Khan, the former Deputy Chief Executive of the National Unity Government used to study in the same school as him, and was in grade six at the time. “What bothers us is the lack of educational opportunities and opportunities for self-actualization. I could not pursue my education and secure positions that Bashardost and Engineer Mohammad Khan could,” said Dilip Singh.

After returning from Kabul, Dilip Singh Bashardost ran a traditional herbal medicines shop in Ghazni for over thirty years. Besides that, he advocated for minority rights. He advocated for seven years for three worship places of the community to be repaired but was unable to convince the Ministry of Information and Culture. Over this period of time, their properties along the Ghazni river were seized by the government. The government built fifty-sixty shops on their properties and the rents of these shops go to the pockets of municipal employees. The government said at the time that they seized the properties to build a public park. Mr. Bashardost wanted to become a lawyer to advocate for the rights of his community members.

In 2019, he decided to run for parliament from Ghazni province to advocate for the rights of Hindu and Sikh minori-

ties. Due to some political issues, the parliamentary election was not held in this province. “In the previous election, I secured one thousand votes,” said Bashardost, who previously ran for a provincial council seat. “The ballots were one thousand according to our observers at the voting sites, but due to fraud, the commission announced that it was only four hundred.” Although Dilip Singh did not secure a seat in the provincial council, he represented Ghazni Hindus and Sikhs in various political and social events for many years. In Ghazni province, the citizens knew him as a representative of the Hindu and Sikh community for years.

In recent years, insecurities mounted—especially the targeted suicide attacks in Jalalabad and Shor Bazaar. Mr. Bashardost left his hometown like tens of hundreds of other Hindus and Sikhs. “Leaving the country of your birth after going through all the difficulties of the past eighty years as I have experienced—it is not easy,” added Bashardost. “The goals that my children and I could dare to think about until two or three years ago are all dreams now. That is why we had to give up on our homeland.”

A Stranger in My Own Country

I met Gulcharan Singh and Guljit Singh inside their shop around one of the Dharamshala/Gurdwara in Jalalabad. They seemed to be in their mid-twenties. They have only received religious education in the Dharamshala/Gurdwara, not any school and university education. They were too young to remember the Taliban regime, but both of them clearly remembered Hamid Karzai's administration. They both thought that their work and life improved under Karzai's presidency.

Raised in Jalalabad, Gulcharan and Guljit did not recall a childhood without persecution and verbal abuse. Gulcharan believed that he could go to school, or even university, were there no verbal abuse and physical harassment. Gulcharan particularly recalled Hindu kachalo (Hindu the potato), an abusive word that all Afghan Hindus and Sikhs may have heard from their Muslim compatriots.

As a religious group, Afghan Hindus and Sikhs have faced the most heinous forms of atrocities and discriminations in the country. Whereas they have long history in Afghanistan to be counted as indigenous inhabitants of the country, they have often been considered as strangers by their Muslim

compatriots. As a result, they have suffered discriminatory and persecutive social behaviours and usurpation of properties.

This religious minority dwell predominantly in Kabul, Nangarhar, Ghazni, Helmand, Paktia, Kandahar, Khost, Laghman, Parwan, and Kunduz. Over the past four decades of war, they have increasingly shrank in number as a consequence of mass migrations to the extent that in some provinces only a handful of them remain in the provincial centres. Nangarhar is one such province in which, according to Gulcharan Singh and Guljit Singh, their population have been reduced to merely a few families.

There is a huge disparity when it comes to Afghan Hindus and Sikhs community's access to public services like public transport, education and health care. "Our elders can't travel on bus, let alone our youngsters," says Gulcharan. "I can't do anything. They insultingly tell us to go to India." Most young Afghans believe that Hindus and Sikhs who live in Afghanistan came here from India. Gulcharan believes previous generations were more open-minded and tolerant and had better knowledge about the history of this community. "Compared to being unable to attend school or travel freely and being killed without any reasons, all other problems are minor problems. One is left heart-broken when others consider him/her as a foreigner in his/her home country and keep asking when he/she would go to India," said Gulcharan after a deep breath.

A Dream that is Impossible for Me as a Sikh Citizen

Gurdip Singh was born in 1996 in Jalalabad, the capital city of Nangarhar province. The 90s were the worst of years for the Afghan Sikhs and Hindus. Gurdip told me Afghan Hindus and Sikhs will only be happy when their lives, properties, and honours are protected against some insanha-e jahil (ignorant people).

Over the course of my interviews with Afghan Hindus and Sikhs, I noted one common point that was raised by all interviewees: the perception that they were never considered as Afghans. Even their closest Muslim friends have asked them about when they plan to leave for India. Gurdip Singh lived a rather good childhood. Regardless, he has often heard sarcastic words and insulting swears from his Muslim compatriots. He was hesitant to say those are bad memories of his life. He has grown indifferent to those insults and swear words.

Despite all the challenges that the community faced, his family did all that was necessary for him to go to school. He enrolled in 2002 and graduated from Abdul Wakil High school in Jalalabad after twelve years. After nineteen years,

his family no longer lived together. Gurdip Singh lived in Jalalabad along with his mother and sister while the rest of their family have been forced to flee the county. According to Gurdip Singh, before the 2018 suicide attack that targeted this vulnerable community in Jalalabad, the population of Hindus and Sikhs exceeded three hundred families. Now, however, there are no more than ten-twelve families left in the city. After the emigration of Hindus and Sikhs from Jalalabad, most families are separated. Their hope to be able to stay in Afghanistan dwindles every day.

Of his big family, Gurdip Singh has only his mother and one sister left in Jalalabad. What this family has gone through is but the tip of the iceberg for Hindus and Sikhs community. Gurdip, who considers Afghanistan in general and Nangarhar in particular as 'a mother', told me that he had traveled to India several times. He cannot help but travel to India because most of his friends and acquaintances are there. But his heart beats for Afghanistan even when he is in India. "I was born and raised here," said Gurdip Singh. "My homeland is part of who I am. To me, nowhere is as dear as my homeland. No matter where I go, my heart always beats for my country." He said Hindus and Sikhs are not politically opposed to any groups in Afghanistan. But he believes there are many people against the Hindus and Sikhs who may attack them anytime they get a chance. Recent years have seen the most deadly attacks against this religious minority. This keeps Gurdip Singh and other Afghan Hindus and Sikhs awake at nights.

During our conversation, Gurdip Singh revealed a dream that he had cherished since his childhood: joining and serving in the army. He aspired to enrol in the army and serve

the country where his entire community have lived in fear for the past decades. “I was interested in serving in the security forces, and I still am” said Gurdip Singh. “But as you know better, this wish looks like an impossible dream for me as a Sikh citizen.”

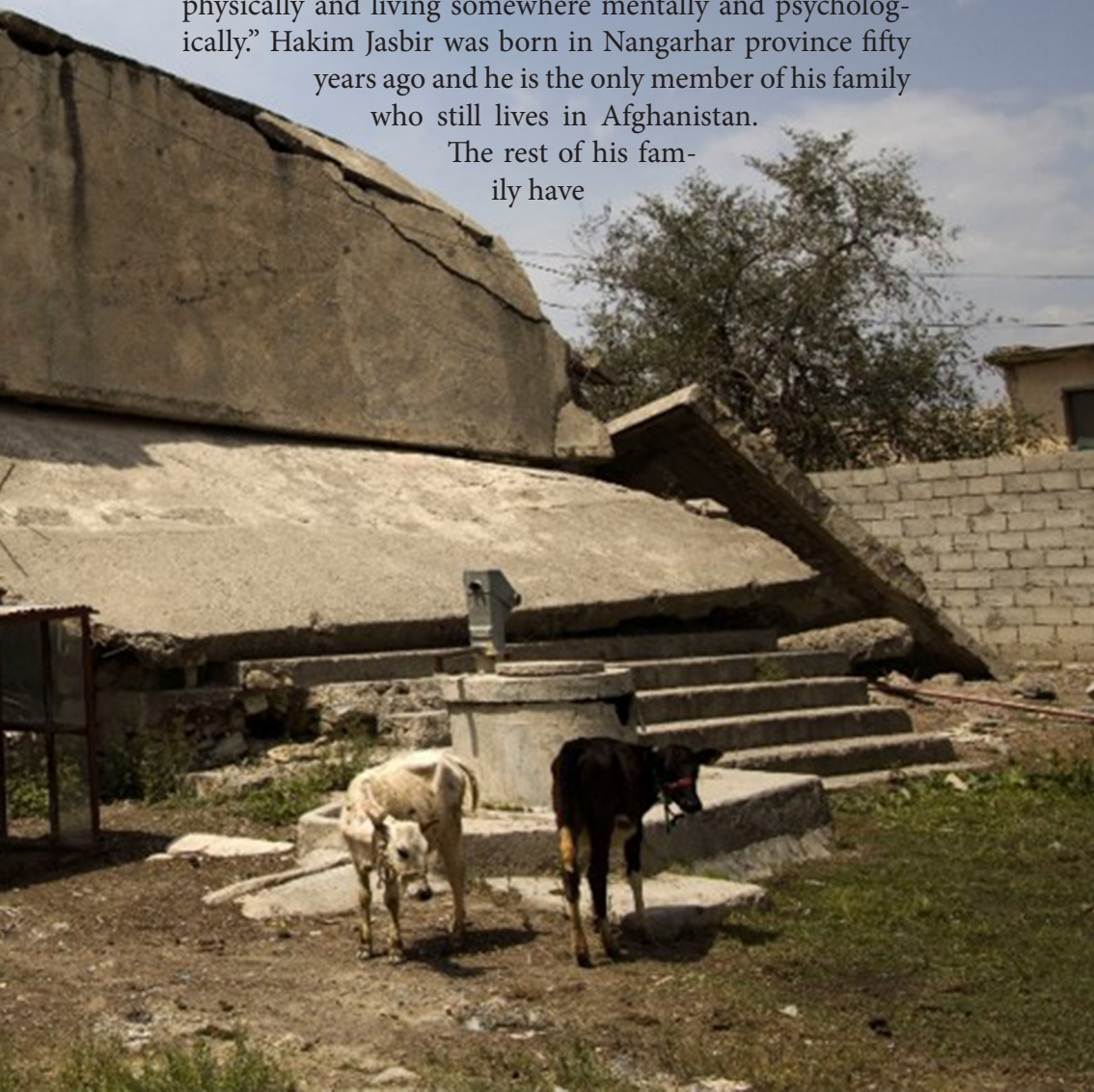


Prem Nagar Mandir, located inside the old Bazar of Khost City, is popularly known as The Hindu Castle or Fortress. Insecurity and lack of job opportunities in the past decade led to the migration of Hindus from the province. As a result, the Prem Nagar Mandir crumbled and it lies in ruins today. Currently, the Mandir's premises is full of weed and it has become a grazing ground for cattles belonging to local Muslims.

“A Normal Life Is But a Dream”

“It is inaccurate to say that the Hindus and Sikhs are leaving Afghanistan because they have already left the country,” told me Hakim Jasbir Singh in his herbal medicines shop in Jalalabad, capital city of eastern Nangarhar province. “You may say some of them still live here, but you need to realize that there is a big differences between dwelling somewhere physically and living somewhere mentally and psychologically.” Hakim Jasbir was born in Nangarhar province fifty years ago and he is the only member of his family who still lives in Afghanistan.

The rest of his family have



all emigrated to India over years due to the difficult circumstances in the country.

“Previously, it was not that unfair. If a rocket was fired, anyone could be the victim,” added Jasbir Singh with a wearisome tone in response to my question about the past regimes and the civil war. But to him the Mujahidin era and the civil war years were marked with assassinations and bullying aimed at this community. He claimed that a significant number of Hindus and Sikhs lost their properties during this period. “At night, they would come to our houses and would pay a meager amount of money to buy our properties. We had no power to argue or refuse and they would forcibly get the documents fingerprinted by us.”

Over the course of this exchange with him, I realized that some of the most sensitive and controversial incidents of those years are no longer sensitive for him and his community members. Perhaps this reality reveals the depth and severity of the problems that they have distinctively endured in their homeland. To this community who have lost their houses and properties, those sensitive topics are dwarfed by the magnitude and multitude of the problems that they have endured. During the course of our discussion, Jasbir Singh used the analogy of “mother” when he talked about Afghanistan. He then declared that no one wishes to be separated from their mother. He believes that those Hindus and Sikhs who have left the country did so not only to save their lives but also to protect their honor and dignity. Or at least this is true in the case of Jasbir Singh himself who moved his family to India to save their lives and to protect their dignity and honor.

Prolonged wars have shown their ugly faces to Hindus and

Sikhs in Afghanistan more than any other community in the country. According to Jasbir Singh, wars have put their honor and dignity at risk and have left them with no other options but to emigrate en masse. Their emotional bonds with their homelands, however, is strong enough to survive this emigration. He reveals a pattern in this migration: each family leaves one or more members behind in the country when they migrate. This is their way of cherishing the hope that one day, maybe someday in the future, Afghanistan will return to normalcy and they may have a chance to return to a more secure homeland where they were born. "As soon as the country becomes secure, I will bring back all my family members. I always pray for such a day," said Jasbir Singh with a pinch of determinism in his tone.

The situation of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs was better before the Mujahidin era and the civil war. As Jasbir Singh remembered, the community lived a normal life during the reign of Dr. Najibullah in the mid to late 1980s. But ever after that, their circumstances increasingly changed for worse. "Many people may take it for granted to go to work without fear and spend time with family members," said Jasbir Singh. That is a normal life for him, one that he remembers the community once enjoyed and said several times during our conversation that he misses those days. "Most people enjoy these basic human rights without any disturbance. But my relatives are so much encircled by many woes that for me a normal life as such has long been a dream."



The destroyed Hindus Mandir, located in Sultanpur Aulia village, Surkhrod District of Nangarhar Province. Currently, the destroyed temple is used as a garbage and waste disposal area for local Muslim villagers.



“To Everyone, Homeland is Kashmir”

After the situation of Afghanistan began to increasingly turn for worse during the reign of Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan in the mid-1970s, Harinder Singh migrated to India where he lived for more than twenty-five years. He made a living for himself, worked hard for financial stability of his family, and married an Indian girl and became father of many children.

When Harinder Singh entered India, he was only an Afghan teenager, but after twenty-five years of living there, he became an Indian. He gradually forgot the Dari and Pashto languages that he spoke fluently in his home country. He said he tried to teach a few words of Dari to his daughter when his busy life allowed. His daughter learned a few words that she has now forgotten about. He doesn't remember enough about the Afghan culture to relay to his daughter. But there was one thing that never left him alone: the emotional bond with his homeland. The more years that passed by, the more he missed his country. “My wife is Indian, but I never decided to secure Indian citizenship,” said Harinder Singh, suggesting a sense of pride. “Twenty-five years have gone by but not a single year has passed without me wishing to return to Afghanistan. Many advised me to apply for [Indian] cit-

izenship, but I have always refused to do so because I have always longed to return to my home country one day.”

After the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001 and the outset of a new order, hopes were revived for Afghans who wished for a peaceful life. Harinder Singh, who had waited for such a day for years, set out to return to his homeland with a handful of other families. “The Hamid Karzai era was the time of abundance,” described Harinder Singh. “Business flourished and everyone earned good money. You rarely saw frowning faces. Everyone treated you well.”

It has been twenty years since Harinder Singh resettled in Shor Bazaar, Kabul, where he runs a traditional herbal medicine shop. As the security situation deteriorated, he moved his family to India and occasionally travels on a long-term visa to meet them. “I can secure Indian citizenship, but I want to remain an Afghan,” added Harinder Singh who has refused to attain Indian citizenship. “I always travel with a visa and come back with a visa.” He provides for his family through his small traditional herbal medicines shop, and sends remittances to India each month. “A few months ago, my daughter got married. My son goes to school there,” explained Harinder Singh.

Like other Afghans, Harinder Singh looks forward to a peaceful Afghanistan where his business could boom and allow for his family to repatriate. If such a day ever comes, his only wish is to then reclaim the lands and properties of his father. He claimed they possessed lands and houses in Shor Bazaar, but all of them were grabbed. Now they work in rented shops and live in the Dharamshala/Gurdwara. “Nowhere other than your birthplace can become your

homeland,” said Harinder Singh who spent half his life away from home and doesn’t wish to seek asylum in any country. With a sense hope and determinism, he said, “The situation will get better. No country becomes yours, not Canada, not Germany. This Pashto proverb is as relevant as ever—To everyone, homeland is Kashmir (east or west, home is the best).”

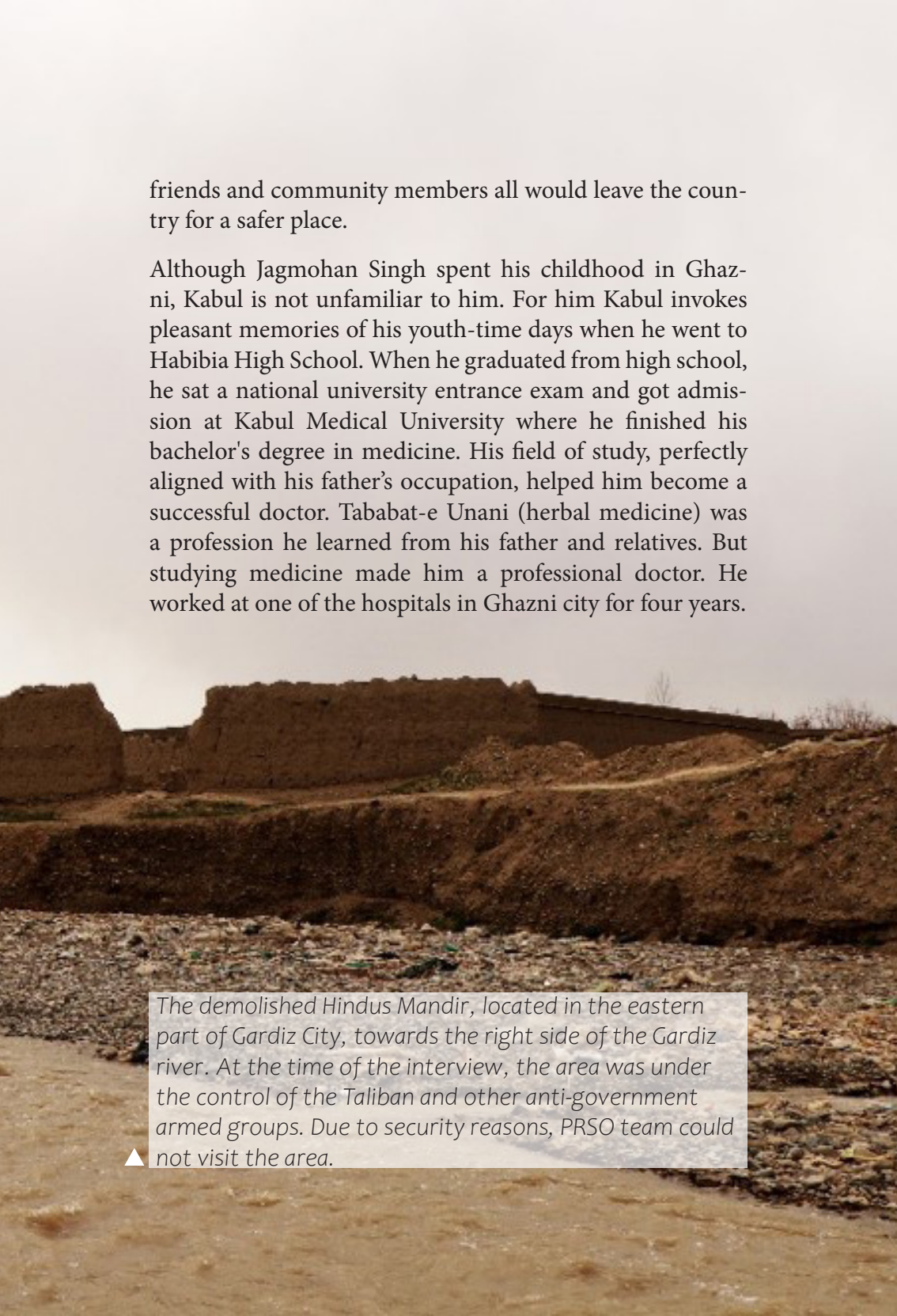
Seven Years of Solitude

Seven years had gone by since his last relative left Gardiz, the capital city of the south-eastern Paktia province. He used to live away from them in the city where his father was born. He recalled the fond days when dozens of his community members lived near Bala Hissar (High Fortress) in Gardiz city where they ran a large part of the garment trade. Jagmohan Singh Bashardost himself was born forty-five years ago in Ghazni province. He grew up in Sanai city, a nickname for Ghazni city after the renowned mystic poet from the province. He went to school there and spent his childhood and teenage years with children of his community. Bashardost never imagined a time when none of his friends would be around and couldn't even think of a future when he would spend days and nights in solitude after his



friends and community members all would leave the country for a safer place.

Although Jagmohan Singh spent his childhood in Ghazni, Kabul is not unfamiliar to him. For him Kabul invokes pleasant memories of his youth-time days when he went to Habibia High School. When he graduated from high school, he sat a national university entrance exam and got admission at Kabul Medical University where he finished his bachelor's degree in medicine. His field of study, perfectly aligned with his father's occupation, helped him become a successful doctor. Tababat-e Unani (herbal medicine) was a profession he learned from his father and relatives. But studying medicine made him a professional doctor. He worked at one of the hospitals in Ghazni city for four years.



The demolished Hindus Mandir, located in the eastern part of Gardiz City, towards the right side of the Gardiz river. At the time of the interview, the area was under the control of the Taliban and other anti-government armed groups. Due to security reasons, PRSO team could not visit the area.

Jagmohan Singh's community members in Paktia province lacked access to medical services and asked his father to send him to their province to address the shortage of doctors for the community. First, he was supposed to serve there for two years, but seven years had gone by since. Now, he was the only member of the once big Sikh and Hindu community in Gardiz and complained about land grabbing and property usurpation that his community had suffered. He had no properties left for him and lived in a rented apartment. He told me even their crematorium known as 'Shamshaan Ghaat' was forcibly grabbed and was now used for agriculture purposes.

Jagmohan Singh was the remainder of more than two hundred Hindu and Sikh families who once dwelled in Paktia. He pointed at land grabbing and property usurpation as the main drivers of mass migration of this minority community from this province. According to him, the community took their complaints to the Provincial Council and the local administration several times, but they only received empty promises. No practical measures were taken to address the problem. "As long as I remain healthy and do not suffer from any illnesses, I will never leave here. Let alone seven years, even if I live alone for a hundred years, I won't leave this area," added Jagmohan Singh.

I Was Killed That Day

Afghan Hindu and Sikh citizens have traditionally held their crematorium ceremonies (Shamshaan Ghaat) in Qala Cha area in the outskirt of Kabul. However, the area has become more populous over the years. For the Hindus and Sikhs, this was not a welcome development because the predominant Muslim residents who occupied the area now showed opposition to crematorium ceremonies. Recently, it had almost become impossible for the community to hold their ceremonies without police protection.

Jagtar Singh Laghmani took me to the Shamshaan Ghaat in Qala Cha. He showed me how tall protection walls had been built around the crematorium site to ensure the mourners are safe from stones that could be thrown at them by their Muslim compatriots. This originally religious quarters had recently been surrounded by newly built multi-story buildings. These modern buildings provided a ready platform for those who throw stones at the mourners. "Every time a funeral is held, they throw stones and bricks at the mourners and the dead," Jagtar Singh told me. He emphasized that the restrictions that Hindus and Sikhs face currently were not imposed even by the Taliban. "During the Taliban regime, Hindus and Sikhs only had to wear a yellow scarf/turban for

distinction. They could hold all their religious ceremonies without any harassment,” he continued. Although Afghanistan is a Muslim-dominant country, its current constitution guarantees the rights of religious minorities and allows them to worship freely under the law – at least on paper.

This religious minority played a leading role in Afghanistan's trade for centuries. Today, however, they are best known for their traditional herbal medicine shops. Like dozens of Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan, Jagtar Singh also owned a traditional herbal shop. We left Qala Cha for his shop. But he complained that there is no profit in this business anymore. He said they are no longer respected by other communities as before. They are rather considered strangers and foreign citizens who are supposed to eventually leave the country. The security situation in Afghanistan deteriorates and so does persecution against this religious minority. They are harassed for a range of issues – sometimes for not being a Muslim, sometimes for their crematorium ceremonies, and sometimes for nothing at all.

Jagtar Singh tried his best to keep as silent about his agonies as he could. He feared that what he uttered to me could potentially become an excuse for someone to hurt him. He was afraid of the people around him. His face spoke loudly, unlike his introvert character. Every wrinkle on his face spoke a thousand lines. I could not dare to ask him more questions – all I wanted was to jump in and hug him as a brother and compatriot, but I could not. It would seem fake to him against the backdrop of what he had experienced.

For a moment, neither did I ask anything nor did he speak a word. He gazed at the crowd in street in front of his herbal shop. Then, he broke the silence: “You know, every day of

ours begins with fear and trembling. If you are not a Muslim, they don't regard you as human. Worse than that, you have no idea what to do and where to go." He sobbed as he uttered these loaded words, his tears streaking down his face. He needed emancipation from the agonies that hurt him, from the insult that he endured, and from the memories.

Then, Jagtar told me the most painful of his memories. One day, as he was setting up his shop, a stout man with his head tied in a kerchief walked into his shop. Jagtar Singh began trembling although it was broad daylight. He approached Jagtar Singh, pointed a dagger to his abdomen, and whispered in his ear to read the Kalima-e Shahada and convert to Islam. Utterly confused, Jagtar Singh quickly pushed the stranger away from himself. "What are you doing?" Jagtar Singh screamed intentionally so the neighbors could hear him. "Do you want to kill me? What is my fault?" The man pointed the dagger to his throat and told him again to read the kalima, threatening that he would slit Jagtar's throat if he failed to obey. "The neighbors wanted to help me, but nobody dared to approach him," recounted Jagtar. "The dagger was on my throat for ten minutes and I felt death every second!"

Finally, the neighbors intervened and saved Jagtar Singh from his Muslim compatriot. "I felt utter death," he told me. "I was sure, he would kill me if the neighbors did not intervene. But the fact is that I died that day. Now, I only have a body with no soul. I was killed on that day."

▼ A portrait of Chocha Singh, who had traveled to Shor Bazar Gurdwara to participate in a religious festival.



I Will Be Glad If I Have a Piece of Bread on My Table

Jakendar Singh worked to financially support his family as soon as he could tell his right hand from the left. Rather than going to school, he chose to work in shops but no shopkeeper would agree to grant him an apprenticeship at an age as young as seven or eight. He went from one shop to another in the entire Shor Bazaar and its surrounding neighborhoods. Some people made fun of him, others felt pity for him, a few verbally harassed him by saying his mouth still smelled milk (a local proverb that implies someone is too young and immature). No one helped him in his quest for a job. Disappointed in the shopkeepers, Jakendar Singh approached street vendors who sold fresh fruits, vegetables, and food on their four-wheeled wooden carts. He found the vendors more generous, and after three-four days, a vendor granted him a job as his sales assistant.

His friends call Jakendar Singh by the nickname 'Jinseng' which is the name of an energy drink in Afghanistan. He worked with the vendor for over two years as an apprentice. He was so much excited about his earning that he would rush home to show off to his mother as soon as he made

twenty Afghans. His mother used to give him a hug in encouragement and appreciation. Over the course of these two years, Jakendar Singh worked with several street vendors and fast food sellers like mobile bean stores, soup carts, and Shour Nakhod carts that sold ‘chickpeas with a mint sauce topping.’ He used to ask his sister for a shopping list in the evening and would go to the cheap marketplace to do the grocery shopping.

When I asked about his father, he paused for a moment. “It was all my father’s fault,” he continued sobbingly. “I did all sorts of labor work at that young age. There was no form of humiliation and insult that I didn’t receive. I did the hardest of labors at that youngest age, all because of my family. I never stole anything, nor lied to anyone. If I found a penny, it was with unimaginable toil. My father did not do anything. I wish he at least bothered to encourage me, to cheer me up, and to give me a hug in support—as my mother always did. All he knew to do was to drink.”

“My sons and daughters didn’t have any better childhood than myself,” he remorsefully told me. “Of my four daughters, one was adopted by my brother and another by my sister. My other two daughters and my newly married son live with me.” Like himself, his daughters and sons have not been able to go to school, but for different reasons. “I could not go to school because of economic problems, but my children are deterred by insecurity,” he explained. “The security situation is and petty crime is horrible. My own pocket was picked and my phone was stolen several times in Arzan Qimat neighborhood of Kabul. So, guess the situation for my wife and children? They cannot even step out.”

Jakendar was not optimistic about migration either. “Life is

difficult away from the homeland. You will only realize it after you leave your country,” said Jakendar Singh, 52, who had spent the last several years of his life away from his homeland in New Delhi, India. “Our drinking water, our apples, our fresh fruits, our dried fruits, our grains and our vegetables are unique. You can’t find them anywhere else.”

The Hindus and Sikhs only go about their own business and harm no one. They don’t deserve the injustice and oppression that they face. “No one can feel the agony that we feel in our hearts. May God bless everyone,” added Jakendar Singh. “We went about our own business, but they killed us en masse. Both in Nangarhar and Kabul, the situation became so difficult that we had no other option other than to leave the country. Who does not like their country! I have said it many times that we will be happy with a piece of bread if we have it.”



The Old (Kuhna) Gurdwara or Dharamshala is located in Charmgari street, Shahr e Kuhna, Charikar City of Parwan Province. This sacred room is known as the Martyrs Room. It was built in honor of the “Jute” Martyrs.



My House Was Usurped and My Signature Was Taken under Duress

After visiting his family in India, Kala Singh planned to return to Kabul. But it was in the middle of the pandemic and due to the restriction on movements, the flights between India and Afghanistan were cancelled. He was stranded in Delhi. Therefore, when the Dharamshala/Gurdwara was attacked in Shor Bazaar, Kabul, Kala Singh was away. The attack took a big toll on the community and left dozens killed and wounded. The casualties were specially high, Kala Singh said, because the terrorists attacked when a huge number of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs had congregated for a mass prayer for their country amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kala Singh explained that he wished to attend this mass prayer in Kabul as the community were planning for it. He had mixed feelings about the flight cancellations due to the pandemic and was ambivalent about whether it had been fortunate or unfortunate for him. He said there were many children in the Dharamshala/Gurdwara when the attack took place. He lost two cousins, Shankar Singh and Jaman Singh. Despite all these unfortunate events, Kala Singh returned to Kabul when flights resumed. His emotional bond

with his homeland never broke. He served twice in the army forty years ago. The first time in the 37th Commando Brigade and the second time in the 230th Detection Unit.

Kala Singh had seen many political changes that Afghanistan went through over the past five decades. He remembered when in 1973 Mohammad Daoud Khan staged a coup to depose King Zahir Shah, who had ruled over Afghanistan for 40 years. Kala Singh believed the situation of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs was a lot better during those four decades. The 1973 coup was followed by other coups and a protracted conflict that has never stopped. Kala Singh believed that the situation gradually grew worse for Afghan Hindus and Sikhs since Daoud Khan's regime. He thought Hamid Karzai's period was better for the community, but they never did enough to address the problems that this community continues to face. The herbal medicines shop he ran was his own property before the civil war, but now he paid a rent of AFN 3,000 per month. Now, he was homeless and lived in Dharamshala/Gurdwara where he no longer felt safe. The Dharamshala/Gurdwara where he was sheltered was attacked by terrorists in 2020 in which a handful of this religious minority were killed and injured.

Although Kala Singh lost all his properties, he still lived in Kabul. He once migrated to India alongside his family but returned during Hamid Karzai's presidency after having lived in India for fourteen years. Kala Singh was the only member of his family who still lived in the country while his wife and children were miles away. During our conversation he pointed his fingers to Dharamshala/Gurdwara that was located across from his shop and regretfully said that he once owned a house in front of the holy premise,

but the property was usurped by influential people after he returned from India. The usurper told him, “Your mother had sold the house to me before she died and you must sign the document.” After he realized that they were local strongmen, he chose his life over the house and put his signature at the bottom of the document. With that, he effectively lost his house forever. He claimed that those who grabbed his house were among the influential gunmen in the neighbourhood that at the time of our conversation fell outside government’s control area.



A portrait of a young Sikh boy during the Vaisakhi religious ceremony held in Kart-e-Parwan, Kabul. The young boy had recently returned from India along with his mother. His mother was wounded in the ISKP attack on Shor Bazaar Dharamshala in Kabul the year before. Although, she had undergone several eye surgeries, she was yet to fully recover from her wounds.



A Taliban Fatwa: Rape the Infidels!

As night fell, the city under the dark rule of the Taliban became terrifyingly silent, occasionally punctured by nightly breeze, swoosh of leaves, and barking of stray dogs. The darkness was littered by the dim light of lanterns that could hardly lighten outside from behind the windows of thatched houses. To the city's residents, the sounds of footsteps during night patrols were the only clues of life in the city.

Karanjee Gaba's grandfather was also a night patroller but only patrolled around his house to assure safety of his household. He stayed awake and vigilant at nights so that his family could sleep in the city that was insecure for his community. Although he was only six years old, Karanjeer Gaba was mature enough to worry about his young sisters. The presence of the grandfather and his several rounds of patrols at nights allayed Gaba's apprehensions.

One night, as the grandfather was awake and on his self-assigned duty, he heard a voice from the little garden in his courtyard. He focused on the voice but could not recognize it. He guessed it to be the voice of an animal, not that of a human. But as the voice got closer, his grandfather's heart beat faster. He braced for a defense. He realized that there

were four human beings, not animals.

The four strangers arrived at the gate and all four of them hit themselves against the wooden gate, breaking the wooden rod that was placed behind the gate to fortify its security. As they broke in, Karanje Gaba's grandfather moved all his young female grandchildren to a small hidden room. Then, he told everyone else to stay calm and pretend to be sleeping.

Four people in loose local costume with big turbans tied around their heads, weapons on their shoulders, and piece of cloth covering their faces, walked into Karanje Gaba's home at midnight. As soon as they entered, they turned on their torches and looked around the room. When they could not find Karanje's sisters, one of them shouted in Pashto language, "Where are they? Where did you hide them?" Gaba's grandfather told them, "Mullah Sahib, is everything okay? What is the issue that you are here at midnight? Are you looking for someone?" The young warrior slapped the grandfather and yelled, "Don't waste my time. Where did you hide them?"

Everyone was terrified and cowered in their places. Gaba's grandfather turned on the lantern and tried to take their attention away. But they were adamant. They wore kohl in their eyes and Karanje Gaba had seen them before. They began searching the house, first every room, then the kitchen, the stable, the lobby, the lawn, and all around to find the girls. They got close to the room where the girls were in hiding and the entire family were in shock. The grandfather was ready to die if that would save the dignity of his granddaughters. "You beasts! What do you want from us? You can't do anything unless you step over my dead body,"

shouted the grandfather as he firmly held a heavy stick in his hands.

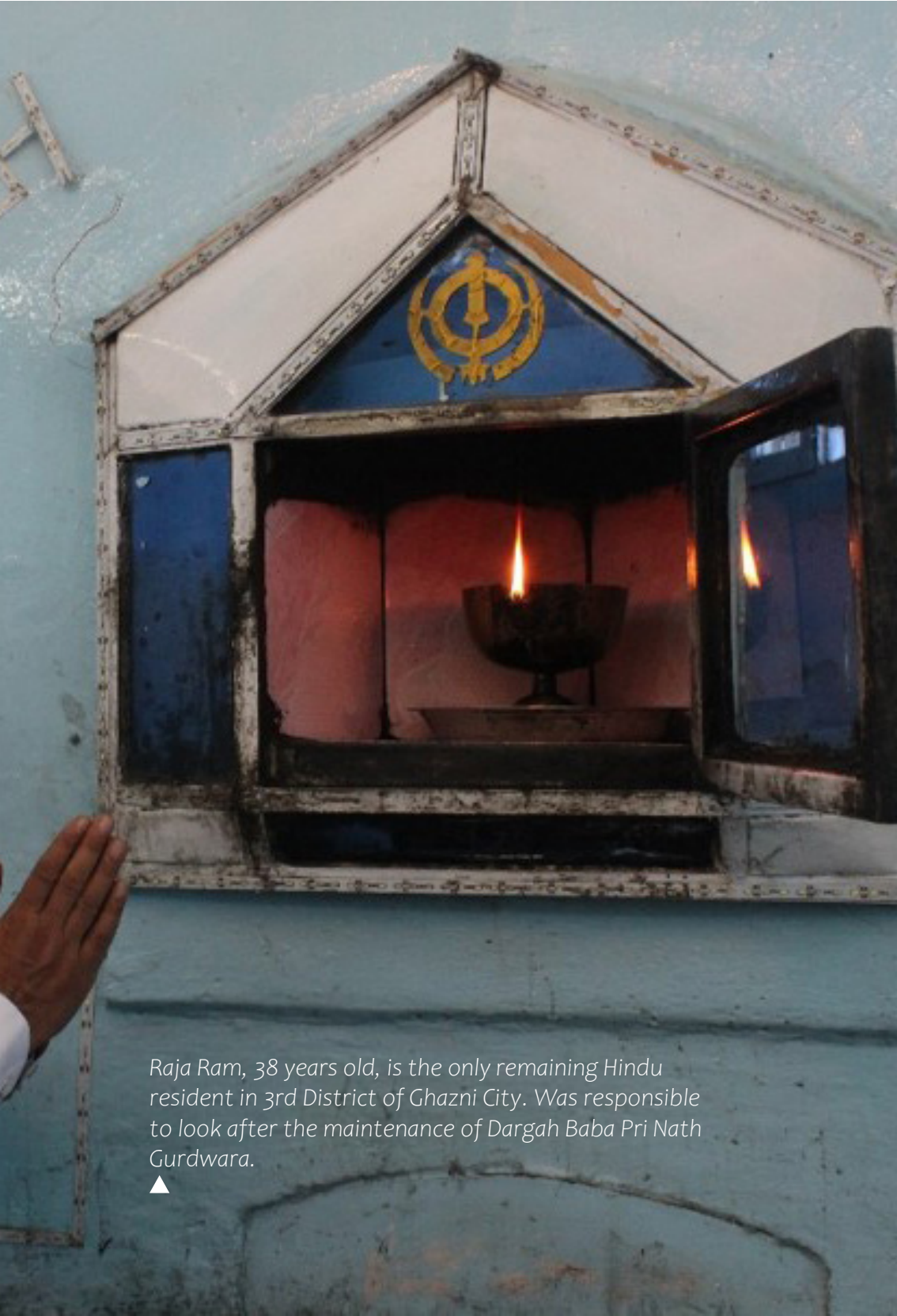
Gaba's grandfather saw no compromise from the four strangers and hit one of them on his nape with the stick. The warrior who had a weapon on his shoulder was injured and laid bleeding. It took only a few moments for him to die. Karanje Gaba, who was recounting to me his childhood memory on WhatsApp, remained speechless for a moment. He had no idea how to explain what his family went through after his grandfather killed one of the Taliban warriors who tried to rape young females of the family. "Give me one second," Karanje Gaba sobbingly requested in a British accent.

Karanjee Gaba has lived in London for over seventeen years now. At the outset, he asked me if I could talk to him in English—he understood Persian and Pashto very little. I had found Karanje on Twitter—he is a Sikh model in Britain and represents Sikhism culture and custom. I found him through his biography on Twitter, possibly the shortest bio of all which read "Afghan Sikh". This biography was enough for me to realize his bond with his country. He called his language "Hindko" and explained that their language is a combination of Hindi and local Afghan languages.

After the pause, Karanje unmuted his WhatsApp call and continued: "After the Taliban warriors realized one of them was dead, they tortured all of us that night. They took my grandfather out, forced him to kneel down at a close distance from them, and adjusted the light on his face. My grandmother turned everyone away from the window and told them to close their ears, but I couldn't. My grandfather's weak body looked like a soulless target signpost on a military training ground. All three of them knelt down, took

their guns at my grandfather's slim chest, and emptied their magazines. After the horrible murder of my grandfather, it saw the murder of my entire family. The silence in that neighborhood of Jalalabad city was broken, and all of them disappeared into the darkness.”





Raja Ram, 38 years old, is the only remaining Hindu resident in 3rd District of Ghazni City. Was responsible to look after the maintenance of Dargah Baba Pri Nath Gurdwara.



Over the Last Decade, No Afghan Hindu or Sikhs Managed to Attain a University Degree

Kartar Singh was born in Kabul fifty-nine years ago. He studied until grade seven but dropped out due to financial problems. According to him, the few educated Hindus and Sikhs were forced to leave Afghanistan during the civil war in the early 1990s. Over the past ten years, not a single member of Afghan Hindu and Sikh community could secure a university admission. It is devastating to know that there is no one with higher education among this religious minority group. Humiliation and harassment of the Hindu and Sikh by fellow Muslim students at schools, persecution on streets, and poor economic conditions of households are the main reasons why this highly vulnerable group remained deprived of education.

Kartar Singh, who is a father of six children, shared with me heartbreaking stories of his school days. He told me that the community was satisfied with the situation before the inqilab (revolution), referring to the frequent coups in the 1970s. Back then, their children could go to school, pursue higher education and play on the streets with their Muslim

playmates without any worries or misbehavior.

According to Kartar Singh, beginning with the Mujahidin era and ever since, they no longer experienced a happy day. “In the past, Hindu and Sikh students went to university, but now discriminations have increased against us,” he said. The most notable form of discrimination for him is the Muslim and non-Muslim distinction that he always faces. “One of my sons used to go to Naderia [High] School, the other one graduated from the school and craved to go to university. One day, on the way to the university he was shoved hard by a stranger, fell down, and was severely injured. I was also with him that day. We both asked the guy why he shoved my son and some ten-eleven people encircles us in no time, yelling insultingly: “O Kafir! What are you talking about?” They were looking for an excuse to beat me up. After that bullying, my son dropped out.”

“Now, life gets tougher as each single day goes by,” continued Kartar Singh. “Social problems have increased. Our children cannot go to school safely. Muslim children snatch their bags, pull their hairs, and throw away their books and stationery.” If you compare it with the past, inappropriate behaviors and harassment have increased. He was surprised at seeing adults encouraging their children to beat a Hindu or Sikh begharaz (defenseless) child. “One day, I told my son to walk with a distance ahead of me so I could follow you to see who bothers you and why. A stranger grabbed his bag and threw it away. Another tore his books. Elders passed by and just laughed at them,” he added.

The situation was not always this bad. The previous generation of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs cannot be compared with the present generation in terms of education and expertise.

Thirty years ago, Hindu and Sikh physicians and specialists had high credentials and were employed at high levels of the government. As Kartar Singh rightly said, Devin Niranjana worked as a Finance Minister during the reign of Mohammad Zahir Shah. Also, during Dr. Najibullah's leftist government, Hindu and Sikh physicians worked in public hospitals. "Dr. Binsari Lal was an internist, Sona Ram was a surgeon at Charsad Bistar Hospital, Sam Santosh Singh was a neurologist, Babu Singh was a dermatologist, Tara Singh was a pediatrician at Maiwand Hospital, Harbans Singh the director of Ibn-e Sina Hospital, and Devin Niranjana Das was a former Minister of Finance among others."

To make Afghanistan a more secure place, Kartar Singh and his two brothers served twice in the army. Now, he seemed pessimistic and had no hope for a better country. With a disappointed look and frustrated tone, he told me that he was left with no other options but to leave Afghanistan. When I asked him about his destination country, he replied: "The country doesn't matter at all. I will go anywhere where religion is not an issue. It is enough to be human and appreciate humanity. Everyone is born a human; it is the society and family that make them Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians. Humanity is the first religion."

Sources: Interviews and Etilaat Roz Daily Newspaper.

We Were Forced to Sin for Ten Years

Kuldip Kaur was born in Kabul fifteen years ago. She remembered the recent historical changes of Afghanistan very vividly, particularly the dark period of the Taliban rule and the civil war and the Mujahidin regime that preceded it. “We grew up with war and raised our children in war,” said Kuldip Kaur. “All governments were overthrown and the rulers buried, but what was never overthrown and buried was the war itself.” She was wearing a brown head scarf in the way Muslim Afghans wear a head dress. After fifty years of living in the traditional and Muslim society in Afghanistan, even her choice of clothing is taken away from her. In an Islamic society like Afghanistan, wearing a scarf is mandatory for women, no matter even if one is not a Muslim woman.

Shor Bazaar of Kabul was not always a safe home for Kuldip Kaur. Like many other Afghan Hindu and Sikh families who had migrated to other countries, she migrated to India three times, but eventually returned to Kabul when it was a little bit better. If she left Afghanistan for the fourth time, she wished to never return. None of her relatives lived in Afghanistan any more. All of them had abandoned the country. To emphasize how difficult it had become for the community now, she said even the era of the Taliban re-

gime was were better for the community. “The Taliban only forced us to wear a yellow piece of cloth to be distinguished from our Afghan Muslim compatriots,” she said. According to her, during the Taliban regime approximately three hundred Hindu and Sikh families used to live in Afghanistan.

With the beginning of the interim government in late 2001, the new government urged the Hindu and Sikh immigrants to return to Afghanistan, but their mass migration continued to increase. At the time of the interview, only a small number of Hindu and Sikh families, totaling less than one hundred persons, lived only in Kabul, Ghazni, and Nangarhar provinces. The other provinces – such as Khost, Parwan, Kandahar, Laghman, Kunduz, Paktia, and Helmand – that were once home to dozens of Hindu and Sikh families were now home to none of them. They had all migrated to India and European countries.

Land grabbing, poverty, and persecution have rendered hundreds of Afghan Hindu and Sikh families homeless. They now lived in Dharamshalas/Gurdwaras of Kabul where they had been sheltered for years now. One of Afghanistan’s biggest Dharamshala/Gurdwara is located in Kart-e Parwan, Kabul, which is eighty-five years old. The Hindus and Sikhs possess only twenty Dharamshalas/Gurdwaras/Mandirs in various provinces, while approximately forty other Dharamshalas/Gurdwaras/Mandirs had either been either usurped or destroyed; among them were the Dharamshalas/Gurdwaras/Mandirs that were hundreds of years old.

The architecture of the Dharamshalas/Gurdwaras in Kabul is such that it has dozens of rooms which are used by sojourners. Now, these rooms were home to several homeless families who resided there permanently even though their

religion does not allow it. Kuldip Kaur, her husband and their two young sons had been living in one of the rooms for ten years. Her only dream had been to have a shelter and to marry her two young sons. She claimed that now the number of Hindu and Sikh families had dwindled as most of them had migrated to foreign countries. Until six or seven months before the time of the interview, dozens of families were settled in the Dharamshalas/Gurdwaras. "According to our religion, living inside the Dharamshala/Gurdwara is a sin. We were left with no other options but to sin for the past ten years," said Kuldip Kaur.



A Jago evening (Staying Awake) ritual at the wedding ceremony of an Afghan Sikh. During the Jago, the groom and bride dance in separate rooms and the community members join them. Since most of the relatives were away, therefore, the groom's families and friends from abroad are watching the wedding ceremony online via social media.



The School Administration Disregarded My Complaint Because I Am a Hindu

“Afghanistan is so out of control that only God could fix it,” said Marwan Singh Malhotra. Having lived for twenty-seven years in the country, he was left but with one option: to migrate to India. Now he was twenty-eight years old and with three children. Although he spent his childhood and youth days in Kabul, he had to leave the city of his childhood after a deadly attack against the community in Shor Bazaar of Kabul.

On 25 March 2020, a suicide attack targeted Har Rai Sahib Dharamshala/Gurdwara in Shor Bazaar, Kabul as the community were in religious ceremony. Twenty-five Hindu and Sikh citizens were brutally killed and six others were injured. As he recalled the attack, Marwan Singh could hardly speak. He choked up and talked in a slurred voice. He currently resided in India and still suffered from the deep trauma that this tragic incident had left behind. “In the aftermath of the attack, we had but only one choice: to leave Kabul forever,” added Marwan Singh who lost an uncle and many friends in that attack.

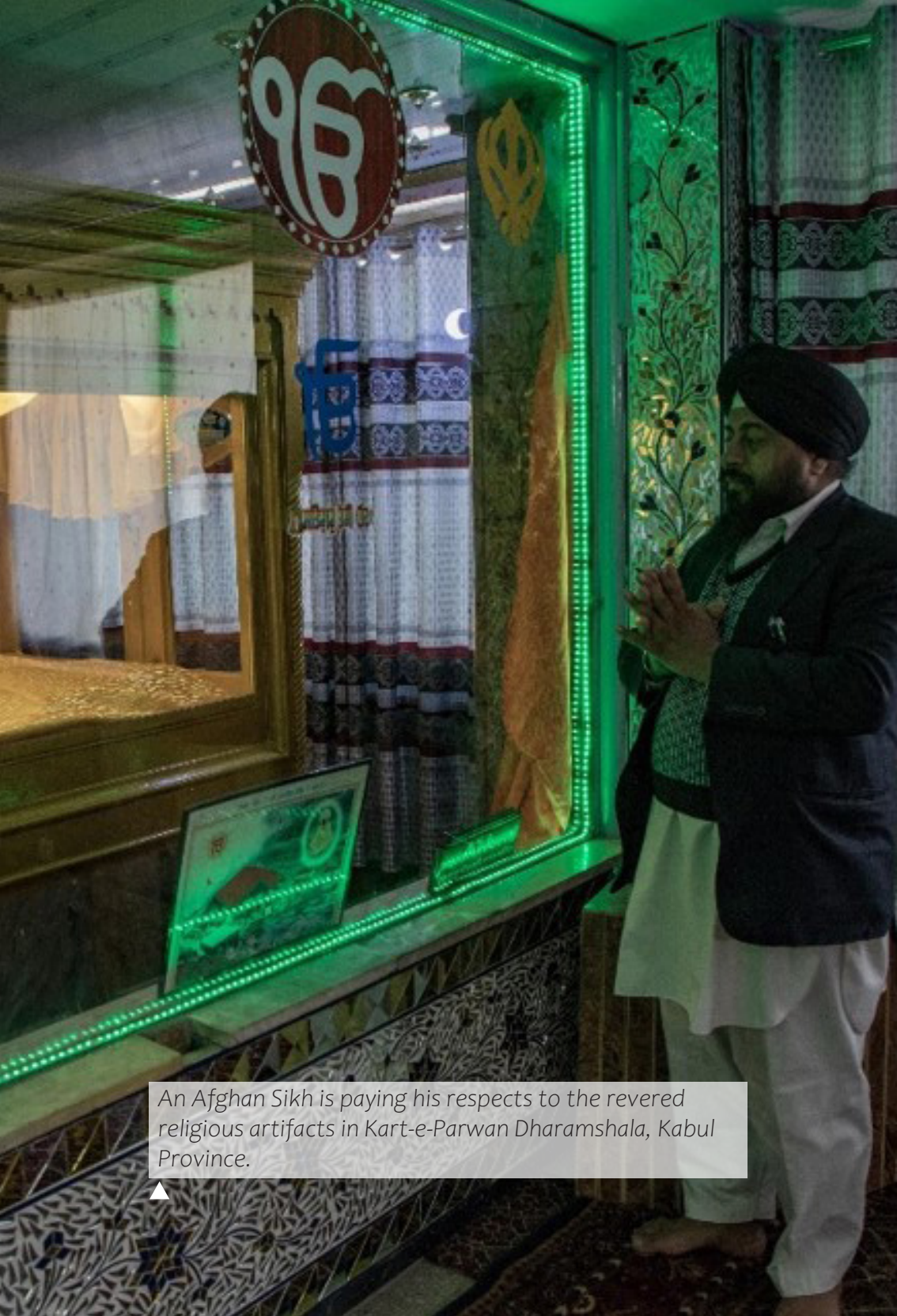
According to Marwan Singh, it may be difficult to live in any

society if you are practicing a belief that most people in the society know little about, but it is always a lot harder in a society like Afghanistan. "In Kabul, you can be killed if you believe in a religion different from that of others. We had experienced it every day," said Mr. Singh. After his graduation from school, he could not enter the university due to discriminations but the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC) hired him as an employee. "I was treated very well. It was good to work for our country, but the circumstances did not allow for more," added Marwan Singh, who considered working in the Commission as the rare good days of his life in Kabul.

After the attack on 25th of March on the Dharamshala/Gurdwara, Marwan Singh chose to migrate to India with his family. "There was no security; we were left with no choice," complained Marwan Singh. "The day when we wanted to hold a cremation ceremony for the twenty-five members of our community, they planted mines on our way. How could we stay in Kabul anymore?" Now he was concerned about Afghanistan. "Only God can save Afghanistan," he hopelessly said. He told me heart-wrenching stories about his memories from Kabul.

According to Marwan Singh, one day when he was in grade six, several of his classmates threatened him with a dagger and asked him to pay ten thousand Afghanis to save his life. He registered a complaint with the school administration. He said when his classmates told the headmaster that he was a Hindu who believed in a religion other than Islam, his complaint was disregarded. Eventually, he dropped out of the school only to resume it after seven years in 2013. "My friends were perfect examples of the Dari proverb "a snake

in one's sleeves"; they pretended to be my close friends, but missed no chance to insult me," added Marwan Singh Malhotra. "In grade six, I was not threatened for my money, but for my religion."



An Afghan Sikh is paying his respects to the revered religious artifacts in Kart-e-Parwan Dharamshala, Kabul Province.



The Hindu's House Near the Mosque Should be Burned: A Fatwa

It was a Friday morning and Munawar Singh had fewer customers than usual. Most of the shops around him were closed, and as noon got closer, everyone called for the Friday prayers. "May God accept your prayers," said Munawar Singh. "Pray for us, too."

As the khutbah, a sermon before the Friday prayer, began, Munawar Singh lounged on his wooden bench in the shade of the canopy in front of his shop, just like any other Friday. He took some dry fruits from his pocket and drank water from his mashk (water preserving container made from animal hide). Munawar had made his own unique mashk to keep water cold in the intense summer heat in Jalalabad.

Unlike every other Friday, he couldn't hear the sermon from the mosque. He decided to prepare his lunch. As he chopped tomatoes inside a pan, he wondered why the sermon was not audible from the loudspeaker. He harbored apprehensions as the sermon grew less tolerant of the minorities by every Friday. He was scared of these extremist messages spread from the minbar (pulpit) of the mosque against non-Muslim Afghan citizens.

When the omelet got ready, he left it on the table cloth that he has just spread and went to buy a loaf of bread. After buying the bread, he asked the baker's apprentice about the silence of the mosque's loudspeakers. The boy told him, "Before going to prayer, my father said that an important issue would be decided in the mosque today. Therefore, I guess the loudspeakers are switched off." While he was seated at his table cloth to eat his lunch, he grew worried about what he had just heard from the baker's apprentice.

Munawar Singh grew concerned about Friday prayer sermons when Gerindel became the mullah Imam of the mosque. Munawar Singh whose shop was located near the mosque, used to follow the sermon delivered by Gerindel every Friday. His sermons were toxic and spread hate speech against minorities—the topics of Shiites and Sunnis, Muslims and non-Muslims were among the hottest debates of this mullah. Gerindel was an immigrant who had received his religious education in a Pakistani madrasa. The summary of his previous Friday prayer sermon was ominous, "If the neighbor of a mosque is a Hindu, the prayers of all Muslims in that mosque will not be accepted."

As he was eating his lunch, a loud slogan of "Allah Akbar, Allah Akbar" was heard from the mosque and he quickly saw everyone rushing to the Dharamshala/Gurdwara, which was a few steps away. Munawar knew them all, most of them were his neighbors in the bazar, and Munawar had business dealings with them, but none of them were a friend on that day. According to Singh, they were enticed by the mullah. They covered their faces and looked like a group of savage attackers. "They were yelling and wanted to set us on fire," recounted Munawar.

After that incident, Munawar Singh chose to live away from his country for forty-one years, unable to return home. That incident in Jalalabad in 1969 made life bitter for him and several other Hindus and Sikhs and they were eventually forced to abandon the city. “After that incident, our elders referred to the then governor of Nangarhar to seek justice,” he added. “At the time, the governor was Din Mohammad Khan, who was the police chief of Nangarhar before assuming governorship. He ignored our complaint and said such incidents are normal. He told our representative to take care of Dharamshala/Gurdwara, and as a Muslim, he would take care of the mosque.” Munawar Singh added that the governor's remarks emboldened the ‘harassers’. The next day, they destroyed the house of Dilip Singh, another Sikh citizen, near the mosque, and the Hindus and Sikhs could not do anything in protection.

Munawar Singh was seventy-one years old at the time of the interview and lived in Delhi, India. I interviewed him on WhatsApp. “Who does not love his homeland?” he ended with a trembling voice. “Believe me, while leaving Jalalabad, we were not happy, not even one percent. But we faced all odds and had no supporters. Mullah Imam not only issued a fatwa to burn our houses but also declared that no Muslim should communicate and deal with Hindus and Sikhs.”





Afghan Sikhs dancing with sticks in their festivals and wedding celebrations. Choob Baazi or playing with sticks is a folk dance of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus that is performed on various happy social occasions.



“We Never Gave Up”

All the beds in the hospital were full of individuals who were injured and hopes were entrusted only in doctors who rushed from bed to bed. In the dim light of the hospital, they appeared like saving angels who flutter their wings to save dozens of lives as they struggled to attend to the wounded. The alarms of ambulances carrying the dead bodies and the wounded, the laments of relatives of the victims, the whimpers of the wounded, and the blood stains on the floor of the hospital followed the heinous attack against a vulnerable community only a few minutes ago.

All the wounded persons on the beds had turbans tied around their heads and were related to each other through blood and faith. The situation of each one was worse than others—one was unconscious, one was semi-conscious, and one dead. As he opened his eyes, Narinder Singh found it intolerable to see such a scene and to hear such wailing. He closed his eyes and tried to pretend that he was dreaming. He shook himself and lifted his head from the pillow, only to realize the depth of the incident that had befallen to him, his family, and his community.

Narinder Singh hastily pulled the cannula that was attached

to his hand and moved out of the bed. No doctor could stop him as he frantically searched for his father. He rushed out to the gate where he saw Mudir Delawar and Wali Mama, his close friends, walking towards him from the opposite direction. "Narinder, you are alive!?! We were searching for you. Your name is on the list of martyrs," said his close friends. Narinder only asked one question: where is my father? Wali Mama dared and said, "Your father is fine." Mudir Delawar, however, could not control himself. He turned his face away from Narinder and screamed. Even recounting this grueling scene was not easy for him. While talking about those extremely painful moments, his tears rolled down his cheeks. According to him, this is only a small part of the excruciating life he and his family had lived. They had started from scratch several times.

Narinder Singh was born in 1984 in Gardiz, capital city of Paktia province. Before his birth, one of his uncles was killed and his five daughters, who were as sisters to Narinder Singh, lived in his house. As Narinder Singh grew up, he felt fortunate to have many sisters. Everyone was kind to him and did not allow him to feel lacking anything. At the age of four, he seemed sweeter than ever. One day, like any other normal day, Narinder's sisters gathered around him and busied themselves playing when they heard a horrible sound. The roof collapses in a glimpse killing Narinder's five sisters and one cousin. The rest of the family struggled to save lives of others who were still breathing.

Narinder Singh's family were forced to move from Shar-e Naw (the new city) to their ancestral old house at Shar-e Kuhna (the old city) of Gardiz, and started from scratch. His father, an army officer during Dr. Najibullah's reign, was the

only breadwinner of the family. His father's job helped the family gradually make a life for themselves. Narinder Singh was seven years old when he realized his father's rank in the army—he understood it from the relationships between his father and government and army officials. He was proud of his father's stylish uniform and polished boots, and wished he could also wear them one day.

One day, his father left the house with a smile on his face, having put on a military uniform and polished boots—his boots were polished by one of Narinder's sisters. When he returned in the evening, he was no longer smiling or wore the stylish military uniform because Gardiz was captured by the Mujahidin. Haqqani, a commander of the Mujahidin, had disarmed him, taken his uniform and had announced the end of their rule.

As his father lost his job, Narinder Singh's family once again started from scratch. However, his father did not give up. This time around, he set up a 'kerosene-lamp' repair booth. His father was no longer alone, Narinder Singh helped him at that age. "First, we had a make-shift booth made by nylon-plastic. Repairing the kerosene-lamp was a very difficult job and my hands were all cracked wiping the lamp tubes. Worse was when wind blew because I had to pay two to five afghanis for each wick as penalty," recounted Narinder Singh.

As portable samovars began to be used by people to boil water, their business boomed and they set up a shop that they owned. Samovar was introduced by the Afghan refugees who returned from Pakistan. "I put the tubes of the kerosene-lamps in the samovars to burn the residual dirt and clean them. This made our work easier and we could

repair 200 to 300 kerosene-lamps a day,” explained Narinder Singh.

The financial situation of Narinder Singh’s family kept improving. They could make ends meet. One evening they closed their shop, went home and listened to the BBC radio only to hear a breaking news: it was 8 pm and BBC reported that Hindu and Sikh worship places are attacked in a number of provinces, including Kabul and Ghazni. The reason was that Indians had set on fire a mosque in India called ‘Baburi Masjid’. The Afghan Hindus and Sikhs were citizens of Afghanistan and had no relations with the Indians. The news was so shocking to Narinder Singh’ father that he had no idea what to do. He knew that the Muslims would also attack the Dharamshala/Gurudwaras in Gardiz as soon as they learn about the news.

As his father was bracing for a sad turn of events, the gate of their home was heavily knocked. It was one of Narinder Singh’s uncles who lived in same street. He told them that they are under attack and that they needed to move the women and children to the basement immediately.

Narinder Singh’s father, who saw his dignity, religion and reputation in danger, pulled out the weapon that he had hidden under earth when he was in military and was poised to defend his home and family. The Muslims stormed the Dharamshala/Gurdwara as Narinder Singh’s father and uncle were in defense. The war intensified as the bullets were piercing into the sky. Rockets, PKs and grenades were fired. As casualties on both sides increased, mediators proceeded to negotiate a ceasefire. The mediator was a person named ‘Qari’ who was a trustworthy person by both parties. “Anup Singh, stop fighting,” Narinder’s uncle was addressed from

the loudspeaker. “We will convince this side as well. Except the Dharamshala/Gurdwara itself, burn rest of the items and put down your flags to end the war.”

Narinder Singh’s uncle didn’t understand why they had to do this when they were Afghans, grew up here and had no relations with Indians. When he opened the door for the Qari, he had a feeling that he handed over his life with his own hands to those who were thirsty for the blood of their compatriots in the wake of a dispute in another country. In a glimpse, Anup Singh was shot and fell on the ground. His chest was drilled by bullets – eight to nine bullets were fired. They did not just kill Narinder Singh’s uncle but threw grenades into the Dharamshala/Gurdwara.

In the early morning, Narinder Singh’s father went barefoot from Shar-e Kuhna (old city) of Gardiz to take his complaint to Haqqani, a Mujahidin commander. He explained to Haqqani what had taken place in the community the previous night and went on to explain that he is an Afghan and had served the country. After hearing his complaint, Haqqani even didn’t look at him. Instead, he told his soldiers, “Call the bulldozer guy, take him to his home, and demolish his home, Dharamshala/Gurdwara and whatever else he has. Don’t leave them alive.” Narinder Singh’s father fretted and quickly left the place. “I will send you two buses,” said a man who was accompanying him. “Save the women and leave everything else.”

Narinder Singh’s father and others got on the busses, took their holy books, the corpses and the wounded and secretly left Gardiz city. Narinder Singh’s father, uncle and cousins were not allowed to leave. “They were not allowed to leave Gardiz until the Dharamshala/Gurdwara, their houses and

their furniture were burned down,” said Narinder Singh. “When everything was reduced to ashes, the people rescued my father, uncle and his sons. Several other tribal elders accompanied them to Ghazni so that no one would harm them along the way.”

Narinder Singh and his family began their life anew in Ghazni. His father chose to teach the Hindu and Sikh children, and Narinder Singh became an apprentice in a garment shop. He was paid daily wages and paid for daily needs of the family until his father could receive his salary at the end of each month.

They lived a tough life in Ghazni where Narinder Singh could not attend school due to their financial limitations. His daily wage was not sufficient. It could only cover the daily food. He was always worried about someone in the family getting sick. In that case, they borrowed money. Narinder Singh remembered a day when he was paid less, and went home with less food. He knew how difficult it was for a worker to go home empty-handed, especially if he is the only breadwinner. As soon as Narinder Singh reached home, he saw that his father had fallen sick. He didn't have enough money to buy the medicines. He went out to buy some fresh fruit for his father, but didn't have enough money for that either. “I had to buy the watermelons that had begun rotting, cut off the rotting parts and brought it to my sick father,” added Narinder.

When one of Narinder's aunts came over from Kabul to visit them, she was saddened at seeing their miserable situation and suggested for them to move to Kabul where they could find better jobs. Narinder's family listened to her and moved to the house of one of the remaining Hindu and Sikh fami-

lies in Kabul. But the house had no doors or windows. After setting up the house with the help of his cousins, Narinder Singh found a job in one of the shops in Mandavi marketplace, Kabul. The cash he earned in Kabul was not more than what he earned in Ghazni. He received his cash every evening and walked from Mandavi to Deh Afghanan, from there he took a bus and got off in Dahan-e Bagh for grocery shopping. The bus didn't charge for one or two stops. "I used to buy the daily needs from a shopkeeper called Haji, whose sons now have a shop in Parwan-e Du area," added Narinder Singh. "He was a very good man. I could take oil, rice, eggs and other groceries and he agreed with me paying later in the month. This allowed me to buy some coals to heat the house in the winter."

Narinder Singh's brothers and sisters were younger than him, and they could hardly tolerate the cold winter of Kabul. They spent the days with cold and waited for the piece of coal that the elder brother would bring in the evening. The mother lit the coal in the sandali (a popular mobile fireplace in Afghanistan) and everyone would come together around it. Narinder's father, who could no longer bear the hardships of life, resumed his teaching job. "You can't be an apprentice all your life. You have to open a shop for yourself," he recalled his father who once told him.

With his savings from his meager salary and some loans from friends and relatives, his father set up a shop for Narinder Singh in Deh Afghanan area of Kabul. Narinder began selling herbal medication and practicing traditional medicine. Narinder's work boomed and saw no downtime even under the Taliban regime. "The Taliban had nothing to do with us, I was only flogged once for not closing my shop

during prayers,” said Narinder Singh.

A few months after the Taliban takeover, the group began looting the houses of Hindus and Sikhs. According to Narinder Singh, the Taliban evacuated Hindus and Sikhs from their homes and housed their fighters. Narinder Singh’s father, who was the teacher of Hindu and Sikh students, stood up bravely against the land grabbing and spoke to the Taliban, arguing with them according to the language of the religion they believed in. His resistance was effective and the Taliban stopped the land grabbing campaign. When the Hindus and Sikhs saw the courage that Narinder Singh’s father had displayed against the Taliban, they elected him as the head of Dharamshalas/Gurdwaras and Mandirs in Kabul.

In addition to taking care of Dharamshalas/Gurdwaras, Narinder Singh’s father still continued teaching Hindu and Sikhs students. As his workload mounted, Narinder Singh also began helping his father. The management and honesty of his father convinced the Hindus and Sikhs to elect him as Chairman of the National Council of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs. In every round of the elections among the community, Avtar Singh, Narinder Singh’s father, secured the highest number of votes and maintained chairmanship of the Council for seventeen years.

In 2010, a number of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs called on the Afghan government at a press conference in Kabul to allocate the community a seat in the Senate and another in the Afghan parliament. “In order to defend the rights of these ‘poor and oppressed’ citizens, Hindus and Sikhs must have a representative in the parliament,” Avtar Singh Khalsa said at the press conference. The seat was given to this

religious minority. In the 2018 parliamentary election, the Hindu and Sikh citizens collectively nominated Avtar Singh Khalsa, Narinder Singh's father, as their candidate for the parliamentary elections.

One day, as Narinder's father was planning his campaign, he received a call from Jalalabad and was invited to be there at four O'clock in the afternoon. His son and campaign staff could not stop him from going there. Narinder Singh, his father, and their driver, Mustafa, traveled to Jalalabad at the said time. A large number of Hindus and Sikhs had gathered inside the Dharamshala/Gurdwara in Jalalabad city. When Avtar Singh arrived, they were told that the then President Ashraf Ghani was visiting Jalalabad and had agreed to meet with the representatives of the community. The invited elders and a number of Hindu and Sikh citizens were transported in four vehicles to the Nangarhar provincial complex to meet the president.

Avtar Singh Khalsa, the only candidate of the Hindus and Sikhs, was in the first vehicle. His son and relatives were in the second one, and other community elders were in the third and fourth vehicles. They passed the first and second checkpoints, but were stopped for a few minutes for security clearance before the third checkpoint. As they waited, a bomb went off. Narinder Singh only could see dust and bricks all over the place.

When Narinder opened his eyes, nothing was the same as before. His friend, who was sitting behind him in the back seat, was thrown out on the ground by the blow of the explosion. Mustafa, his Muslim driver, was resting in the chair with blood dripping from his head. The third person, who was leaning in the back seat, was breathing heavily. No one

that he shook and called by name heard him. His only hopes were for Mustafa, who was firmer on his seat, but he was numb and silent. “Mustafa, Mustafa, dear Mustafa,” shouted Narinder Singh. Mustafa never heard or responded.

He rushed out of the vehicle and ran towards his father’s vehicle. When he first got out of the car, he thought everyone was okay. As he got closer to the first vehicle, he realized that his father’s head was hanging down from his neck. He dragged him out of the car. He shook him but only heard him shouting “ouch” in pain. “I was crying for help, but there was no one to help,” said Narinder Singh. “There was gunfire everywhere. Fires were shot by the police and President Protective Service (PPS) who had taken over the entire area. A traffic police got out of his car, put my father on his shoulders, and carried him to a newly arrived ambulance. I only realized that I was injured too. I don’t remember what happened to me afterwards—I fainted.”

The pain of losing nineteen community members (including his father, uncle, and several close friends) was not easy for him, but Narinder Singh did not give up. The community elders elected him, instead of his father, as their candidate for the parliamentary elections to fill their seat and advocate for their rights. “We have fought for our homeland. I have sworn to my God not to leave my homeland. Even if I lose another member of my family, I will still not leave my country. We are fighting for the development of our homeland,” concluded Narinder Singh.



A portrait of a Sikh boy with a deep and serious look.

A Sikh Tortured by the Taliban: “I Felt the Death”

On 22 June 2020, Nidan Singh Sachdeva was abducted from a Dharamshala/Gurdwara in Chamkani district of Paktia province and taken to an unknown place. The incident took place as he was repairing and protecting Hindu and Sikh religious sites in east Paktia. Only three months had gone by since he had returned to the province. “They accused me of cooperating with the Indian intelligence service and tortured me terribly for several days and nights,” said Nidan Singh. “They found no clues to prove that I was spying.” He owed his release partly to the endeavors of security forces and local elders in Chamkani district, and partly to a letter his wife wrote to Narendra Modi, the then Indian Prime Minister.

On June 25, Nidan’s wife wrote a desperate letter to Mr. Modi, asking him to do something for her husband. “Paktia is one of the centers of the Taliban and a safe haven for the Haqqani Network militants, a group who may have abducted him,” mentioned his wife in the letter. The letter highlighted that the Hindus and Sikhs as well as other Afghan minority groups faced brutality and there were no guaran-

tees for their safety and security. Jasmit Singh, Nidan's son said in an interview with an Indian media: "We want him to be transferred to Delhi as soon as possible. The video we received shows my father is being held captive and tortured."

After Nidan Singh was released, the governor of Chamkani district said they initially suspected land mafia for the abduction. But after five individuals were arrested and investigated in connection with this case, they found out that it was the Taliban. In 1990s, Nidan Sachdeva migrated to India with his family and was eligible for Indian citizenship. The Indian government declared that he was eligible for Indian citizenship if he applied for it.

Following Nidan Sachdeva's release, the Indian Foreign Ministry issued a newsletter expressing concerns over the targeting and harassment of the Hindu and Sikh minority in Afghanistan by "terrorists at the behest of foreign supporters." The Indian Foreign Ministry publicly declared India's decision to facilitate the migration of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs who were facing security threats in Afghanistan.

One year had gone by since Nidan Singh Sachdeva was released. He lived with his family in India on a long-term visa. The torture that he had experienced a year ago still hurt him. Reluctant to recall those sad memories, Nidan took a pause before he continued, "They were very cruel people. They don't deserve to be called humans. They beat me for several days and nights. It was not just torture, they forced at a gunpoint to confess that I was an Indian spy. I felt death as each bullet was shot."

They Found Us Helpless and Could Abduct Anyone of Us

Partap Singh was thirteen years old when his family left Jalalabad, the capital city of Nangarhar province, to settle in Kabul. His family and many of his relatives had migrated from Nangarhar's Khogyani district to Jalalabad several years earlier, but the city was no longer safe for them. Constant threats, harassment and extortion forced them to think about moving to Kabul. Little did they know that Kabul was the capital of bullies and looters.

Partap Singh and his family settled down in Shor Bazaar neighborhood of Kabul in a community of Hindus and Sikhs. His father and him set up a shop to make a living for their family. As he grew up, so did their nascent business. His aging father, arranged for Partap Singh to get married and held a fancy wedding party for him. After the marriage, Partap Singh had to take care of his own family and that of his father.

One evening, Partap Singh had just arrived home from his shop and had fun playing with his little kid who was in his arms. The door was knocked fussily. It was his sister-in-law who rushed in worried and told him that her father hadn't

returned from the Dharamshala/Gurdwara. The worst scenario crossed Partap Singh's mind but he tried to console himself and the family by saying that his father-in-law may have gone to a relative's home.

The entire family turned every stone for two days but found no clues about his whereabouts—he became certain that it was an abduction case. On the third day, Partap was frustrated and went to open his shop. He came across a letter tucked under his shop's door. "Perhaps the life of your father-in-law is worth 200,000 afghanis," read the piece of paper. "If you want him alive, arrange for the payment."

It took another three days for Partap Singh to prepare the amount by borrowing from a handful of friends and relatives. He followed their instructions and made the payment, but his father-in-law was not released. Five days later, the kidnapers sent him a message warning against reporting to the police. They asked him for a guarantee. Partap Singh handed over to them his shop's license as a guarantee and his father-in-law was released on the sixth day.

Partap's father-in-law recounted unsettling stories of torture that he had endured over the course of those five days. He was not fed enough, not given enough water to drink, and was threatened to death. After this incident, Partap couldn't help but think of leaving the county. But he had to pay his debts first. 200,000 afghanis was not a small amount for him, of which only 50,000 was from his own savings.

One month on, he was counting his saved notes on a sunny afternoon when two persons showed up. He stopped counting the notes. He began to shiver. The license that he had provided to the abductors gave them a clue about how

much his shop was worth and where it was located. The two persons abducted Partap along with 30,000 afghanis that he had managed to save to pay his debts. This time around, they asked his family for 500,000 afghanis as ransom. His family couldn't pay the ransom even if they sold the entire shop. Partap managed to escape and left the country immediately.

Partap Singh lived in India for thirty years. He had made a relatively good living for his family. But his sad memories of Afghanistan still hurt him. "The night I escaped from the kidnapers, I swore to leave this county forever," recounted Partap Singh. "We couldn't run our small business. They knew each and everything about us—they knew where my house and my shop were located. I still remember their abuses and the tortures. They warned me that they would kill me if the ransom was not paid to them. It was not easy to escape. But to escape was the only hope for me to get my family out of the trouble. I knew that we were helpless and they could kidnap another one of us."



A wedding ceremony held inside Kart-e-Parwan Dharamshala. The Sikh mother is feeding her son an auspicious sweet during the wedding rituals.



Only Throwing Stone Is Replaced by Harassment

Sitnam Singh was the only remaining member of the Hindu and Sikh community in the southern Helmand province. Their community once comprised of 120 families who lived in Lashkar Gah, the capital city of the province. Sitnam Singh used to run a traditional herbal medicines shop with his friend Taran Singh who left Afghanistan the year before.

I contacted Sitnam Singh on a spring day in April. We had our conversation in Persian that he spoke with a sweet Helmandi accent. He had a kind and amiable demeanor and exchanged a long greeting as I began the conversation. Sitnam Singh was so friendly with me that one guessed we were friends for ages. During our casual conversation on the phone, he also attended to one of his customers—with the same friendly manner. In response to my request for an interview, he politely said that he needed time to think about it and consult with elders of the community. We agreed on one day time for consultation and I contacted him again the next day and he accepted to be interviewed. In the aftermath of the two tragic terrorist attacks against the community in Jalalabad and Shor Bazaar of Kabul, it was understandable

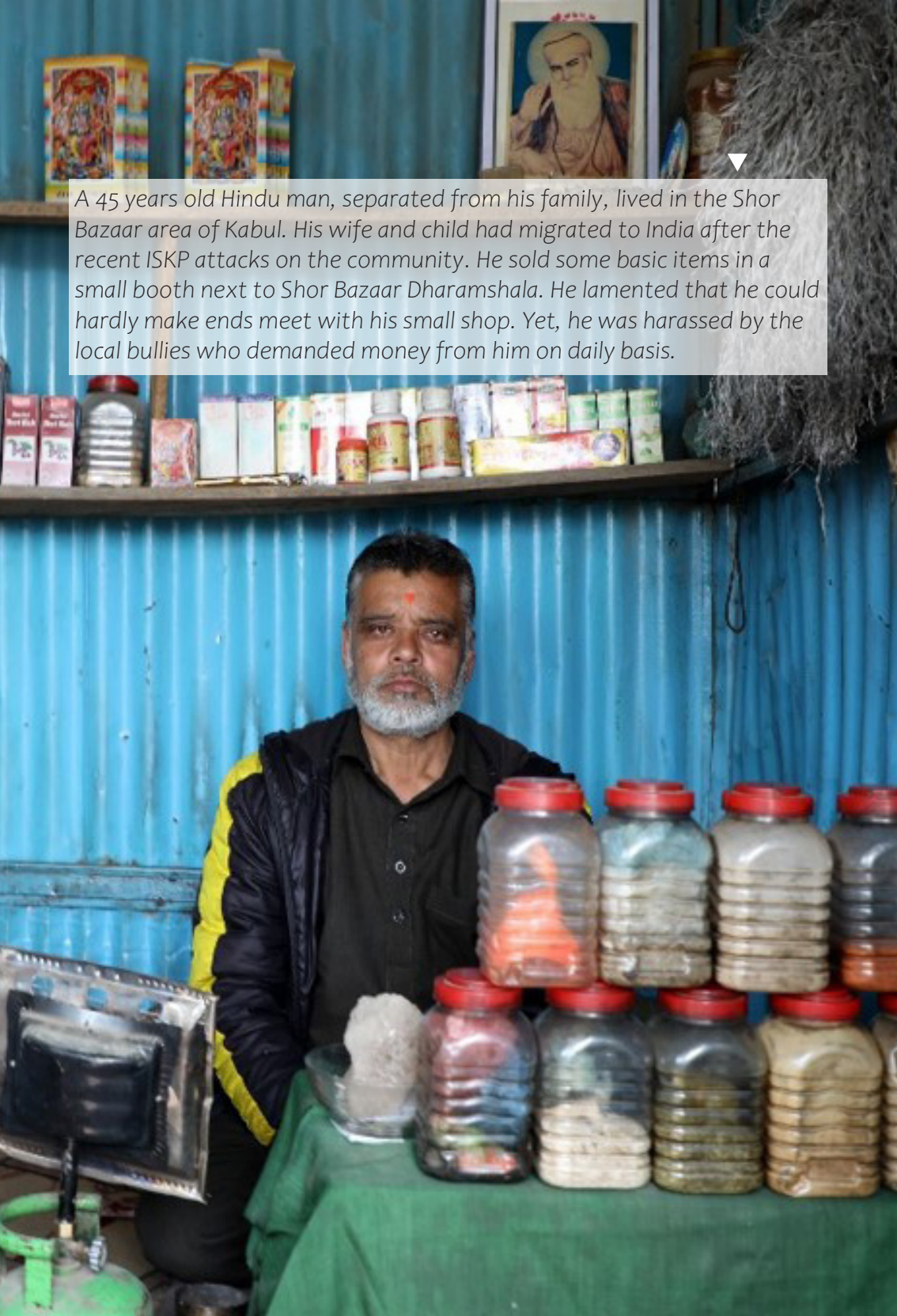
why they exercised caution when it came to their exposure and visibility.

According to Sitnam, the Hindu and Sikh community were settled in Helmand province during the reign of Mohamad Zahir Shah. The community first dwelled in the Maarja district. Later, they settled in Lashkar Gah and other parts of the province. He adds that Hindus and Sikhs lived a comfortable life until the beginning of wars in the 1970s that made it increasingly difficult for them to continue to live in Afghanistan. As wars began, the community began to immigrate. As the wars flared up, their emigration spiked. Sitnam Singh also immigrated to India once but the host country couldn't convince him to lay roots there. "I went to India," he said. "But the situation was not good in terms of work. It was hard to find jobs. Monthly, I could earn only 7,000 Indian rupees which was not sufficient. So, I came back."

According to Sitnam Singh, the migration of Hindus and Sikhs had spiked over the last three-four years. Now, he was the only member of the once 120-family community of Hindus and Sikhs remaining in Helmand. He lived in one of the Dharamshala/Gurdwara in Lashkar Gah city. He had a daughter who lived with his wife in Kandahar where there is still a community of Hindus and Sikhs. He remembered days that he spent with his family and relatives in Lashkar Gah as the best days of his life. Now, he was alone in the entire province with his empty shop and the Dharamshala/Gurdwara that he took care of. Both were reminiscent of sweet days for him. The Dharamshala/Gurdwara had witnessed religious rites and collective worshipping over the past several decades. The last time they congregated in the Dharamshala/Gurdwara to pray, they prayed for a secure

Afghanistan.

I asked him to share with me memories of Lashkar Gah that bother him. He paused for a while, and resumed with a heavy heart: “The residents of Lashkar Gah are very good people, but the small number of jahil (ignorant) people are the exception, and such exceptions exist in every society.” He continued, “They throw stones at me and call me Hindu kachalo (Hindu the potato).” He told me that he was repeatedly called kafir (infidel) and was thrown stone at. He usually commuted between his residence in Dharamshala/Gurdwara and his shop by bicycle. He was now used to the verbal harassment that he heard on his way to his shop and back, and always pretended as if he didn’t hear them. He was still happy that “throwing stones is replaced by verbal harassment.”

A photograph of a man with a grey beard and a red tilak on his forehead, sitting behind a counter in a small shop. The shop has blue corrugated metal walls. On a shelf behind him are various items including boxes of instant noodles, jars, and a framed picture of a Hindu deity. In front of him on the counter are several large plastic jars filled with different types of grains or lentils. A green cloth is draped over the counter. The man is wearing a black jacket with yellow accents on the sleeves.

A 45 years old Hindu man, separated from his family, lived in the Shor Bazaar area of Kabul. His wife and child had migrated to India after the recent ISKP attacks on the community. He sold some basic items in a small booth next to Shor Bazaar Dharamshala. He lamented that he could hardly make ends meet with his small shop. Yet, he was harassed by the local bullies who demanded money from him on daily basis.

We Can Hardly Breathe

In February 2021, six people were injured in a suicide attack in Bagh-e Qazi, the first police district of Kabul. One Sikh was killed and three others were injured in this attack. Sher Singh and his brother were among the wounded. At nine O'clock in the morning that day, they opened their grocery store. Sher Singh took a broom to sweep the patio clean and his brother was busy putting the groceries in front of the shop. A sudden boom from the nearby struck him and others around him. Sher Singh and his brother sustained injuries, and the goods inside the shop were buried under thick dust. The one person who was killed in this attack was Shani, their nephew.

I met Sher Singh in Shor Bazaar, Kabul, and listened to his stories. He had lived in the country for eighty years, hence he is a live history of Sikhs in Afghanistan. He relayed to me the agony that Hindu and Sikh citizens felt. He began with a suicide attack that had happened in his shop. He emphasized on 'lack of personal and financial security' throughout our conversation. He told me that this vulnerable community experienced harassment every day and night. As he was talking to us, he kept looking around to make sure others didn't hear his complaints. His eyes brimmed with tears.

I asked about his personal life but he said that he had nothing in his life. His shop was a rented property and he had no house. The land that he had inherited from his ancestors was usurped by local strongmen. After the explosion destroyed his shop, he hardly managed to set up another one but he barely managed to make ends meet.

Although Sher Singh had lived in Afghanistan for a long period of time and devoted himself to the political system in the country, his back was bent under loads of problems and difficulties. He also talked about his service in the Afghan army. “During Mohammad Daoud Khan’s regime, we were safer,” Sher Singh said. Back then, he served in the military for a total of five years, of which two were voluntary. “Then, nobody used to ask us about where we are from and when we moved to Kabul. No one used to tell us to go to India,” added Sher. He told me that the situation grew difficult after Mohammad Daoud Khan's republic. He remembered the fall of Dr. Najibullah’s government at the hands of the Mujahidin as the worst memory of his life. “At the time, rockets were fired from all directions. Hundreds of us [Sikhs] were killed, we saw dead bodies everywhere,” Sher Singh said.

Sher Singh had spent most of his life in slum areas of Kabul, but now lived in a Dharamshala/Gurdwara. He was tired of the endless persecution and harassment that his children faced in Afghanistan, but couldn’t afford to leave the country. “A neighbor bothers us, and we cannot ask why,” he said, claiming that the government is unaware of their circumstances. “Fearing harassment, my daughter cannot step out. Everyone verbally harasses her and calls her out as Hindu. We can hardly breathe.”

“We Never Felt So Compelled to Leave Our Homeland”

The terrorist attack in Shor Bazaar of Kabul was one of the deadliest of attacks against the Afghan Hindu and Sikh citizens in the last two decades. Surbhi Singh Khalsa, representative of the Hindus and Sikhs community in Ghazni, told me that what happened to the community over the past five years had no match across the various regimes in the country's contemporary history.

In July 2018, elite and influential members of the Hindus and Sikhs communities from various provinces traveled to Nangarhar province at the behest of the former President Ashraf Ghani. But they fell prey to a suicide attack before their meeting with the president. It was an unprecedented terrorist attack targeting this vulnerable minority who lost thirteen members including Avtar Singh Khalsa, a runner in the parliamentary elections for the 15th term of the Afghan National Assembly, and Ravel Singh, a civil society activist who had a degree in pharmacy.

According to Surbhi Singh, the Nangarhar attack drove a huge exodus of Hindus and Sikhs from Afghanistan. This mass migration was more devastating to the community

in Ghazni province where not a single one of them has remained. During our conversation, he called on the international community and the United Nations to facilitate the migration of Afghan Hindus and Sikhs to a safe country. “We have never felt so compelled to leave our homeland,” said Surbhi Singh. “We no longer can afford to live here because no one ensures our security or pays any attention to us. The wounds of the Nangarhar attack and the pain of the Shor Bazaar attack still hurt our hearts and souls.”

Surbhi’s relatives lived in constant fear and trepidation—even in Kabul where the population of Hindu and Sikh community has also dwindled dramatically. “Due to the threats and fears, all Sikh families live close to each other in Shor Bazaar where the government has failed to take sufficient measures to ensure security,” he said. “They have assigned one or two security guards, but the untrained guards cannot defend the community when there is a serious threat.”

Surbhi Singh Khalsa followed suit after a considerable number of other Hindu and Sikh citizens left their country for India. But life no kinder to them in India. “In India, we are immigrants,” said Surbhi Singh. The Indian government has always treated them as asylum seekers and has implemented asylum laws both in terms of working and living in India. “We have to maintain a passport and a visa and are required to update them regularly,” Surbhi said.

When I asked Surbhi Singh if he lost a family member or a relative in the Shor Bazaar attack, I quickly realized how painful and irrelevant my question was. He explained that because the population of the Afghan Hindu and Sikh community is small, families are tied to one another through kinship and marriage relations. It is unsettling to know that

the loss of twenty-five people in the attack meant lives of fifty to sixty families were shattered. "Now, their wives are widowed," said Surbhi Singh. "Their children are forever orphaned. Who bear the responsibility? It was not the first or the second incident. We could not really tolerate anymore. We had to leave our homeland."



Afghan Sikhs are replacing the religious flag (Nishan Sahib) in their temple (Dharamshala) on the occasion of Guru Baba Nanak's birthday. Afghan Sikhs consider this day a holy day. Guru Nanak was the founder of the Sikh religion.



Because We Had No Supporter, They Demanded Four-fold Repayment of Our Debts

Tuti Singh is a sixty-two-year-old herbal medicine dealer in Kabul. I sat down with him in front of his shop and asked him to share with me memories and stories from his six decades of life in the city. Before our conversation began, I noticed that his wrinkled face turned pale at the sight of a young man who passed by from across the street. Given my several months of shuttling to the neighborhood, I can understand his apprehension and anxiety emanating from his bitter past encounters with some of the local people.

The young man wore cheetah print pants and a long hair with a white shawl tied around his head. He wore his pants slightly above his ankles and a big dagger dangled from his green sports belt. Tuti Singh began to fret as he saw the young man and walked closer to talk to him. To me as an observer, it seemed that he threatened Tuti Singh. He left the area before too long and Tuti joined me for our conversation. When I enquired if everything was alright, he said, "A few days ago, I borrowed five thousand Afghanis from him." His countenance clearly showed how regretful he was.

“I paid the money back on time, but he is not happy with the amount I paid,” continued Tuti Singh who was asked by the man to pay back four-fold. “He demanded me to pay 20,000 afghanis. He didn’t show up for a few days but turned up again and asked me to pay 10,000 afghani.” Tuti Singh couldn’t afford the amount but constantly received death threats from the young man. During my conversation with him, he told me that he had already paid half of what the young man has demanded, but he still adamantly asked for the remaining half.

Tuti Singh was ambivalent. He knew that this was nothing but extortion, but could think of no options other than paying the man to make sure his house or shop were not robbed and vandalized at night. As an herbal medicines shopkeeper, his income was hardly four hundred Afghanis per day. This meant he needed to pay all what he could earn in forty-five days.

In addition to harassment and persecution, Afghan Hindus and Sikhs also face security threats. On 25 March 2020, the community lost twenty-five people in a terrorist attack on their Dharamshala/Gurdwara in Kabul. In the aftermath of the attack, several of Tuti Singh’s relatives left Afghanistan, but he himself couldn’t afford to migrate. “We have no house here. My wife and children were forced to migrate to India. I am left alone,” said Tuti Singh. His life symbolizes discriminations that his community members have endured in Afghanistan.

During the Taliban regime, Tuti Singh was forced to flee to India only to be deported. He only had some fond memories from Mohammad Daoud Khan’s regime. “During the reign of Mohammad Daoud Khan, I was a soldier on duty in

Darul Aman,” explained Tuti Singh. “Then, no one harmed us. They were treated us like brothers.” He also told me that he lived relatively a good life during Hamid Karzai’s presidency, although his children faced persecution at school. “Fellow students pulled our children’s hair,” said Tuti Singh. “Fellow students threatened our children to convert to Islam.”

With all these difficulties, Tuti Singh still loved Afghanistan. “This is our homeland,” he wrapped up. “If the situation gets better, all my family members will return. It has become a lot more difficult over the past few years – for everyone. It has become difficult for people to save their lives and to make ends meet. The job market is not good at all, and suicide attacks look over our heads at any given time. The few qirans (pennies) that we earn end up being extorted by local strongmen.”





▲
Afghan Sikhs performing Stick Dance (Dandya or Choob baazi)
at a wedding in the backstreets of Karte-Parwan, Kabul. An
elderly Sikh man symbolically stares at a wrecked car.

I Couldn't Become a Doctor. I Will Carry the Sadness and Regret with Me All My Life.

Financial limitations didn't allow Vicky and his brother Raj, like hundreds of other Hindu and Sikh youths, to pursue a university education. Vicky was twenty years old and was born in Taimani, Kabul. He lived in a family of eight, of whom only he and Raj could graduate from high school. Due to the harassment by his classmates, their younger brother, Surpal Singh, could not pull beyond grade seven. His sister, Jasmit Kaur, dropped out in grade four. Most of the Hindu and Sikh families send their sons to work beginning from the age of seven or eight. In some families, financial problems explain why these highly vulnerable students drop out of school.

Verbal and physical harassment are other drivers of a high rate of drop outs among the Hindu and Sikh community. Vicky hesitated to share disturbing memories of his childhood and school days. "When I was a child, other children used to molest me," he said with blushes on his face. "I had to study in private schools from grade three to grade nine. They called me out as kachalo (potato) and Hindu. They threw tomatoes at us. We are Sikhs, not Hindus!" Most

Hindu and Sikh men are shopkeepers, and a small number of them, perhaps, only two or three in the entire country, have office jobs. Vicky, who got married the year before, is multilingual; he is fluent in Persian, English, French, Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi, and Bengali. "I know there is no job without bribes and connections," said Vicky who was not seeking a government job.

Getting an education is not only the dream of Afghan Hindu and Sikh boys but also a wish of their parents. Ever since they enrolled at Istiqlal High School in Kabul, their father wished to see Vicky in a doctor's coat and Raj with an engineer's helmet. Vicky and Raj surprised their family with the news of their graduation from high school after twelve years of hardship. Ten years had gone by since their graduation, but neither of them had been able to materialize their dreams of getting into a university. The number of youths from Afghan Hindu and Sikh communities who can go to university and get a higher education is almost zero. Most of them were not even able to finish the twelfth grade. With bushy beards and stout bodies, Vicky and Raj work from early morning to late night at an herbal medicine and cosmetics shop. Although they were no longer the shy boys who were molested by other children, they didn't enjoy their life in the face of an uncertain future. They had accepted the situation as it was and realized that becoming a doctor or an engineer was impossible for them. "It is difficult for me to face the fact that all my classmates have graduated from universities and most of them are employed," said Vicky with the deep sigh. "One of them became a doctor, one an engineer... but I am still sitting behind the vitrine of my father's shop. This bothers me."



After Attar Singh’s funeral, the elders gathered and decided to go to Hakim Jan’s home, the killer of Attar Singh, to inquire about the reason of firing. Sobbing over the phone, Anjan Singh explained that the elders heard a painful response. “There are no differences between a Hindu and a bird,” Hakim Jan’s father said to the elders and made them disappointed.

