

## *India Offers Escape to Afghan Hindus and Sikhs Facing Attacks*

Members of the dwindling minority communities, gutted by recent deadly violence, welcomed an emergency exit but expressed worry that what would await them in India is poverty.

**By Mujib Mashal and Fahim Abed**

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KABUL, Afghanistan — The Indian government said it will expedite visas and the possibility of long-term residency for Afghanistan's tiny Hindu and Sikh minorities, shrunken by decades of persecution and decimated by attacks in recent years amid the Afghan war.

“India has decided to facilitate the return of Afghan Hindu and Sikh community members facing security threats in Afghanistan to India,” the Indian Ministry of External Affairs said in a statement on Saturday. The statement, on the rescue of an Afghan Sikh leader who was abducted in eastern Afghanistan last month, did not provide further details.

An Indian official in Kabul said the decision meant that any of the roughly 600 Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan, an overwhelmingly Muslim country, would be given priority visas and the opportunity to apply for long-term residency once they arrived in India.

In interviews, many welcomed the emergency option, but said it posed an agonizing dilemma. In Afghanistan, they have livelihoods — shops and businesses passed down through generations — but spend their days dreading the next attack. Making a new start in India would most likely mean living in poverty, they said, particularly during an economic slump exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

Lala Sher Singh, 63, who lives near a Sikh temple in Kabul that was attacked in March, said the community had shrunk so much that his thoughts were occupied “day and night” by a fear that the next assault might not leave enough people who can perform the final rituals for the dead.

“I may get killed here because of these threats to Hindus and Sikhs, but in India I will die from poverty,” he said. “I have spent my whole life in Afghanistan. In this neighborhood close to the temple, if I run out of money and stand in front of a shop and ask for two eggs and some bread, they will give it to me for free. But who will help me in India?”



At a Sikh temple in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 2018 after the arrival of the bodies of two victims of the attack in Jalalabad. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

There was no official reaction from the Afghan government to India's offer. A senior Afghan official, who requested anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter with the news media, said that violence affected all Afghans, and that an offer of safety to Hindus and Sikhs put religious diversity in Afghanistan in doubt.

The official said the move appeared aimed at a domestic audience in India, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi has tried to move the country away from its secular, multicultural foundations and give it a more overtly Hindu identity, while projecting itself as a champion of persecuted Hindu minorities elsewhere.

The Hindu nationalist government recently amended India's laws in a way that critics say blatantly discriminates against Muslims, giving a fast track to citizenship for migrants who are Hindu or members of five religious minorities — but not Muslim migrants. The law is one reason Muslims feel increasingly demonized and marginalized in India, though they are the second-largest religious group, making up one-seventh of the population.

The status of Afghan religious minorities is more uncertain than ever, as the United States withdraws troops after more than 18 years and the Taliban, who ruled oppressively in the 1990s, prepare for talks with the government over power-sharing.

The battlefield has grown more chaotic, joined by more extreme groups such as a branch of the Islamic State which specifically target vulnerable minorities.

The Hindu and Sikh communities in Afghanistan once numbered in the tens, if not the hundreds, of thousands, with well-established businesses and high-ranking positions in the government. But nearly all have fled to India, Europe, or North America over decades of war and persecution.

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In the eastern province of Nangarhar, only 45 families remain from thousands before. In Paktia, another eastern province, only a single family remains — Jagmohan Singh, an herbal doctor, and his wife and two of their children. Their other two children have already decamped for Kabul.

“A few decades back, there were around 3,000 families of Hindus and Sikhs in different areas and districts of Paktia,” Dr. Singh said. “Except my family, all of them fled.”

As their numbers have shrunk, Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan often live in the same large compounds and sometimes also share a place of worship.

Just over 600 Hindus and Sikhs now live across Afghanistan; two major attacks in the past two years have killed about 50, leaving practically every family scarred.

The most recent attack was a six-hour siege by Islamic State militants on a Sikh temple and housing complex in Kabul, in March, that left 25 people dead, including young children.

After the attack, as community leaders expressed alarm, Afghan officials, including the national security adviser, promised new safety measures. But Narendra Singh Khalsa, the community’s representative in the Afghan Parliament, said the temple remained shut and unrepaired. Except for a few additional police officers in the area, they had not received any support that would ease their concerns.

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“They have made some checkpoints where a number of police officers are present,” said Warjet Singh, 22, who runs a shop outside the temple, where his mother, father and brother were killed. “But the officials know that they cannot prevent any attack with a police officer standing in front of

the temple,” he added.

“There is no change in our situation,” he said. “I am still risking my life when I come out every morning for work; I am still worried about another attack on our compound.”



Inside a Sikh temple in Kabul that was attacked in March. Mohammad Ismail/Reuters

Mr. Singh, who received financial assistance from the Afghan government, said life had become unbearable since the attack took his family and deprived him of a place of worship. His wife, who is pregnant with their first child, has dreaded going to the hospital because a maternity ward was recently attacked and mothers and babies were killed.

“When India provides a long-term visa, I will go and live there until the security situation is better in my own country so I can return,” Mr. Singh said. “No one will take my country from me, but it’s important for me to survive so I can come back when things are good.”

At best, India may be like a lifeboat — an emergency option for the families who take it, but one that lacks the security of a long-term solution.

The relatives of Rawail Singh moved to New Delhi more than a year ago, but life there has not been easy. Mr. Singh was an activist who was one of 14 Sikhs killed in a 2018 suicide bombing in Jalalabad, in eastern Afghanistan, as they were filing in for a meeting with President Ashraf Ghani.

Mr. Singh’s wife, Preeti, said she moved her three children to India in the months after her husband’s death. Her 16-year-old son, Prince, found work as an apprentice at a tailor shop, where he was paid about \$110 a month. With that, bolstered by occasional aid sent by friends from

Afghanistan and elsewhere, the family made do in the two rooms they rented for \$30 a month.

But as the coronavirus pandemic took hold, Prince lost his job; the tailor said he could no longer afford to pay apprentices. Preeti said her family spent their days confined to their two rooms, waiting for help to pay the rent.

Prince is still looking for a job, but he has not found anything yet.

“No one is giving us work,” he told his mother recently. “People say, ‘I can barely feed my own family, let alone hire you.’”

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