

MULTI-ETHNIC AND HINDUISM IN AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

Although the Taliban group is well known, it is not the only representation of ethnic and religious groups in Afghanistan. Besides being inhabited by various groups from internal Islam, there are also Hindus and Sikhs. This paper aims to describe the condition of ethno-religious diversity in Afghanistan, especially regarding Hinduism. We write this article by conducting a literature study that emphasizes descriptive analysis after comparing sources from previous writings. This is obtained based on literature study with descriptive and qualitative methods. From the literature review and previous experience received from the Taliban firsthand, during the Taliban rule from 1996 to late 2001, Hindus are forced to wear yellow armbands in public to identify themselves as non-Muslims. Hindus are forced to wear the burqa, which allegedly "protects" them from harassment. This is part of the Taliban's plan to separate "non-Islamic" and "infidel" communities from Muslim communities. Even so, most ethnic and religious groups, including Hindus, refuse to leave Afghanistan because they feel less pressured by different treatment from the Taliban in the past.

Keyword: *Afghanistan; Hinduism; Multi-Ethnic; Violence.*

Abstrak

Meskipun kelompok Taliban terkenal, itu bukan satu-satunya representasi kelompok etnis dan agama di Afghanistan. Selain dihuni oleh berbagai golongan dari internal Islam, juga terdapat umat Hindu dan Sikh. Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan kondisi keragaman suku-agama di Afghanistan, khususnya mengenai agama Hindu. Kami menulis artikel ini dengan melakukan studi kepustakaan yang menekankan pada analisis deskriptif setelah membandingkan sumber-sumber dari tulisan-tulisan sebelumnya. Hal ini diperoleh berdasarkan studi kepustakaan dengan metode deskriptif dan kualitatif. Dari tinjauan literatur dan pengalaman sebelumnya yang diterima dari Taliban secara langsung, selama pemerintahan Taliban dari tahun 1996 hingga akhir 2001, umat Hindu dipaksa untuk mengenakan ban lengan kuning di depan umum untuk mengidentifikasi diri mereka sebagai non-Muslim. Umat Hindu dipaksa mengenakan burqa, yang diduga "melindungi" mereka dari pelecehan. Ini adalah bagian dari rencana Taliban untuk memisahkan komunitas "non-Islam" dan "kafir" dari komunitas Muslim. Meski begitu, sebagian besar kelompok etnis dan agama, termasuk Hindu, menolak meninggalkan Afghanistan karena merasa tidak terlalu tertekan dengan perlakuan berbeda dari Taliban di masa lalu.

Kata Kunci: Afghanistan; Hindu; Multi-Etnis; Kekerasan.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article was written to provide an overview of the religious diversity in Afghanistan, especially the existence of Hinduism, which has rarely been disclosed except by foreign media. Although the influence and existence of Hinduism is rarely discussed, its impact is clearly visible and can be felt concretely for those who have read the related literature or who have visited the country. During the period of the first Taliban rule, 1996-2000, Hindus and Sikhs were forced to wear yellow badges and hang yellow flags over their homes as an instrument of identification, in exchange for allowing them to live in Afghanistan and worship according to their religion (Dalal, 2010).

On the other hand, in recent years, acts of violence against Hindus and Sikhs have increased. At least 20 people were killed in a suicide attack on a convoy of Hindus and Sikhs in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, in 2018. In March 2020, Chawla an influential Hindu in the country called on the international community, especially Turkey, to help minorities in Afghanistan and rebuild the country. The national (ethnic) and religious composition in the last half century has made the Afghan state in a state of instability. (Inderjeet Singh, 2019, p. 31) Many Hindus including Sikhs fled the country in the last three decades. They later settled in Germany, France, the United States, Australia, India, Belgium, the Netherlands, and in other European countries.

As a result Afghanistan's Hindu population declined to around 50 percent by 2020. Following the Fall of Kabul in 2021, the Government of India had to evacuate its Hindu and Sikh nationals when the Taliban took over. Only a Hindu religious leader resides in the country today, acting as the Guardian of the temple. Sethi, the religious leader in question, stressed that their group has not been under pressure and continues to perform daily religious rituals despite the Taliban's control of the capital Kabul. He added, "We continue to hold worship, spiritual practice, and daily activities. So far, we have not been under pressure from the Taliban. Even movement members came to us and gave us their phone number. They asked us to contact them if we had any problems (Dalal, 2010)."

This paper is based on a literature study. Writer reviews books such as *Afghanistan in the History Course* written by Ghubār, Ghulām Muḥammad, and Sharf Fāyiz. This book chronicles the multi-ethnic tensions of Afghanistan, and the Hindus who once ruled Afghanistan an extension of Indian rule during the golden age. While the other book is a book by Malkasian Carter entitled *The American War in Afghanistan*. This book tells about the war waged by the United States against the Taliban, who were considered mujahid when the Soviets came to power and turned into terrorists after America and its allies invaded the country.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. Multi-Ethno-Religious in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country that is always marked by inter-ethnic conflicts as well as inter-religious nuances or at least between religious sects. One of the main and largest ethnic groups in this country is Pashtun with more than 42%. The predominantly Sunni, Pashto-speaking group has dominated Afghan

political institutions since the 18th century. Over the years, many Pashtun leaders have emphasized Afghanistan's "right to govern", most of them belonging to the Taliban movement, which took control of Afghanistan for the second time after coming to power from 1996 to 2001. Two former presidents, Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, is a Pashtun. Classically the Pashtuns are based in the south and east of the country. The majority of the population in this border area, what is known as a tribal area is inhabited by the majority of Pashtun tribes living in the interior of Pakistan's border. However, the dominance of the Pashtun ethnic group often breeds hatred among other groups, mainly due to political, economic and cultural marginalization (Marsden, 2001).

The Tajiks are Afghanistan's second largest ethnic group, making up more than a quarter of Afghanistan's population. Their main language is the Farsi dialect called Dari, as well as the Afghan lingua franca. This group spreads mainly in the north and west of Afghanistan and has strongholds in the Bashir Valley, Herat City, and several northern states. The Bashir Valley is best known for its resistance to Soviet occupation in the 1980s and the former Taliban regime. The late commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, who bore the title "Lion of Panshir" and fought against the Red Army and the Taliban, tops the list of Afghanistan's top Tajik leaders. Burhanuddin Rabbani, also a Tajik, held the presidency between 1992 and 1996, before Kabul fell to the Taliban (Project, 2021).

The third minority, the Hazara, are believed to be from Central Asia and the Turkic people. This ethnic Mongolian crossbreed Shia Muslim adherents live in the mountainous region of central Afghanistan known as Hazara Jat (Hazaristan). The exact number of Hazaras is unknown, and according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, they make up 9 percent of Afghanistan's population. Hazara speaks various Persian oriental dialects called Hazaragi with lots of Mongolian and Turkish words. Most of them are Twelve Shiites, although some are Ismaili Shiites or Sunnis. Hazara live in fortified villages overlooking narrow valleys, where they grow barley, wheat and legumes, as well as a variety of fruit and vegetables. The vast, treeless mountains are used for sheep grazing. Hazara, mostly self-ruled until the 1890s. Their forced and brutal integration into the nascent Afghan state by the Pashtun majority army of Abd al-Rahman Khan sowed the seeds of permanent hostility between Hazara Shia and Pashtun Sunnis along religious and ethnic lines. Since then, Hazara has faced marginalization, persecution, and displacement. The last episode of this persecution at the hands of the Taliban took place in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when hundreds of them were killed when Taliban fighters entered the city of Mazar-i-Sharif.

Hazara are concentrated in Bamiyan, Ghor, Daykundi, and most of Ghazni, Uruzgan, Parwan, and Maidan Wardak. Their forced and brutal integration into the nascent Afghan state by the Pashtun majority army of Abd al-Rahman Khan sowed the seeds of permanent hostility between Hazara Shia and Pashtun Sunnis along religious and ethnic lines. Since then, Hazara has faced marginalization, persecution, and displacement. The last episode of this persecution at the hands of the Taliban took place in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when hundreds of them were killed when Taliban fighters entered the city of Mazar-i-

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The Uzbeks are the last minority group from the main line of ethnic groups in Afghanistan. They are believed to have appeared in Central Asia in the 3rd century BC, and some claim to be descendants of Genghis Khan. Most are Sunni Muslims who follow the Hanafi school, which mainly reflects cultural identity rather than religious identity. Their language is Uzbek, and although it is a dialect of Turkey, it is closely related to the language spoken by the Uygur Muslim minority in China's Xinjiang region. Uzbekistan's proportion is about 9 percent of Afghanistan's population and is concentrated in the northern provinces bordering Uzbekistan. Among the most prominent cities they were placed in were Maimana, Sari-Pol, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Kunduz. The structure of Uzbekistan society is still dominated by ethnic groups, reflected in their social and political life. Uzbeks occupy the most significant part of the fertile land in northern Afghanistan, and most of them are farmers, growing grains and vegetables. In addition, they produce producers and animal products that generate significant income for their community (Meirison & Kasmidin, 2020).

2.2. Hinduism in Afghanistan

It is not known exactly when Hinduism began in Afghanistan. However, historians suggest that the southern lands of the Hindu Kush may be culturally related to the Indus Valley Civilization (5500-2000 BC) in ancient times. (Kātib Hazārah et al., 2013, p. 78) Yet most of them assert that Afghanistan was inhabited by the ancient Arians and then the Achaemenids before the arrival of Alexander the Great and the Greek army in 330 BC. Three years after Alexander's departure, Afghanistan became part of the Seleucid Empire. In 305 BC, the Seleucid Empire lost control of the lands south of the Hindu Kush to the Indian Emperor Sandrokotus due to the Seleucid Mauryan Wars. Alexander captured this territory from the Arians and founded his settlement. However, Seleucus I gave it

to Sandrokotus (Chandragpet Moriah), on condition of joint marriage and in exchange for 500 elephants. (Kātib Hazārah et al., 2013, p. 76)

The Indo-Aryan people of the region, particularly in the south and east of the country, are Hindus. Gandaris is the most prominent of these. Pasha and Nuristani are recent examples of the Indo-Aryan Vedas. When the Chinese travelers Faxian, Song Yun, and Qioncang discovered Afghanistan between the 5th and 7th centuries AD, they wrote many travel accounts containing reliable information about Afghanistan. (Kātib Hazārah et al., 2013, p. 78) They claim that Buddhism was practiced between the Amudari (Gihon River) in the north and the Indus River. However, they don't mention much about Hinduism, though Seung Yoon states that pagan rulers don't profess Buddhism but "proclaim the worship of false gods and kill animals for their flesh. (Lee, 2018, p. 97)"

Later forms of Hinduism were also prevalent in the southeastern region of the country during the reign of Shah Turki, with the Khair Khanna Temple, the Brahmani Temple in Kabul, and the statue of Gardez Ganesha in Paktia State. Most of the ancient monuments, including the marble statues, date back to the seventh and eighth centuries, during the reign of the Turki Shah. The current figure of Gardez Ganesha is attributed to the period of the Turkic Shahs in the 7th-8th centuries AD, not to his successor, the Hindu Shah (9th-10th centuries AD), as has been suggested. The dating process is based primarily on stylistic analysis, which shows significant graphic and stylistic similarities to the works of Buddhist monasteries in Fundokistan, also dating from the same period. Hinduism flourished under the rule of the Hindu Shahi and then witnessed a sharp decline with the advent of Islam at the hands of the Ghaznavid and Mongol dynasties who did several times to defeat the Shah. Hinduism in Afghanistan was revived after the Battle of Nowshera and the annexation of land under the Sikh Empire by Hari Singh Nalwa, along with Sikhism (Hosseini, 2021).

Entering the 17th century revival of Afghanistan by the Hotak Dynasty, Hindus enjoyed high positions and business occupations. The main ethnic groups in Afghanistan practicing Hinduism today are Punjabis and Sindhis, who are believed to have joined Sikhs as traders to Afghanistan in the 19th century. Until the collapse of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, several thousand Hindus lived in the country. But now their numbers have decreased, most of the others immigrated to India and the European Union (Ghubār & Fāyīz, 2001).

For nearly half a century later, Afghanistan has suffered from instability and civil war, which escalated sharply with the military invasion and occupation by the former Soviet Union between 1979-1989, which withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989 after suffering heavy material and human losses. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the pro-Soviet regime held out for three years in the face of Islamist groups backed by the West and Pakistan. After four years of fierce and destructive conflict and war between Islamist groups that toppled the pro-Russian Najibullah regime in 1992, the hardline Taliban movement controls much of the country. It enforces a strict Islamic system in which girls are denied education after ten o'clock, and women are forced to wear the burqa (Ghubār & Fāyīz, 2001).

2.3. Taliban Pressure and Indian Government Response

Minority Hindus and Sikhs, have lived in Afghanistan for hundreds of years. Punjabis and Sindhis are the main ethnic groups in Afghanistan practicing Hinduism today. It is believed that they came with the Sikhs as traders to Afghanistan in the 19th century. Until the collapse of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, several thousand Hindus lived in the country, although it eventually declined significantly. The majority of others immigrated to India, the European Union, North America or elsewhere. Afghan Hindus and Sikhs often share places of worship and religious activities. Despite the two distinct ethno-religiosities, Hinduism, along with Sikhs, is better known as Hinduism. In terms of linguistic demographics, the Hindu community is diverse and generally follows regional origins: Punjabis speak Punjabi, Sindhis speak Sindhi and the northern and southern dialects of Hinduism. The local Hindu community in Afghanistan is mainly concentrated in Kabul (Marsden, 2001).

During the Taliban rule from 1996 to late 2001, Hindus were forced to wear yellow armbands in public to identify themselves as non-Muslims. Hindu women are forced to wear the burqa, which is alleged to "protect" them from harassment. This is part of the Taliban's plan to separate "non-Islamic" and "infidel" communities from Muslim communities. The Indian and American governments condemned the decree as a violation of religious freedom.

Massive protests erupt against the Taliban regime in Bhopal, India. In the United States, Abraham Foxman, president of the Anti-Defamation League, compared the decree to the practice of Nazi Germany, in which Jews were required to wear a badge that identified themselves. Several influential lawmakers in the United States wore yellow armbands reading "I am Hindu" during a Senate debate to express their solidarity with Afghanistan's Hindu minority. India analyst Rahul Banerjee said this was not the first time Hindus had been targeted by state-sponsored repression in Afghanistan.

Violence against Hindus has led to the rapid destruction of the Hindu population over the years. Many Afghan Hindus have fled the country since the 1990s, seeking asylum in countries such as India, Germany and the United States. In July 2013, the Afghan parliament refused to allocate seats to minorities, voting against a bill to distribute those seats. The bill, proposed by President Hamid Karzai, lists tribal people and "women" as a "vulnerable group" (Marsden, 2001).

Elsewhere, India's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that India maintains contact with Afghanistan's Hindu and Sikh communities and is ready to evacuate anyone wishing to leave the country due to the precarious security situation. New Delhi – Sputnik revealed, "We are in constant contact with representatives of Afghanistan's Sikh and Hindu communities and will work to facilitate the return of those wishing to leave Afghanistan to India," ministry spokesman Arindam Bagchi said in a statement. "There are also some Afghans who have become our partners in promoting our joint development, in education efforts and the people at large, and we will support them," he continued (Tanner, 2009).

As for Indian nationals in Afghanistan, Baji said the Indian government maintains regular contact and monitors developments in Afghanistan and has advised these nationals to return home immediately. However, repatriation efforts

were halted on Monday due to the suspension of commercial flights at Kabul airport. "The government will take all steps to ensure the safety and security of Indian citizens and our interests in Afghanistan," Baji said. Government sources told Sputnik that India had transport planes on standby at Kabul airport, ready to fly Indian diplomats and security officials home. This came after the Taliban (classified as a terrorist organization in Russia) took control of the Afghan capital, Kabul (Threlkeld et al., 2021, p. 91).

After the return of the Taliban movement to rule Afghan soil, fear persists for minority groups in Afghanistan; ethnic, national, religious and sectarian minorities. The split that can occur at any time due to differences in background and composition is considered a permanent challenge to political stability. Afghanistan consists of 34 provinces, and the population is spread among 14 ethnicities. The largest is Pashtun, from which most of the Taliban fighters come from. Among them, Turkmen and Arabs about 2.5%. Sunni Muslims make up 90% of Afghanistan's 40 million people. While there are no official statistics and numbers are limited to media and human rights reports, Shiites and other minorities including Sikhs, Hindus share the rest. Apart from Shia, hundreds of Sikhs and Hindus are scattered in Kabul and Jalalabad. Their numbers have decreased drastically since the seventies. Nearly a quarter million of them fled to India and several European countries during the American invasion of Afghanistan. This has placed Afghanistan as the fourth most dangerous country in the world. According to the International Minority Rights Group, all groups face a systematic risk of violent persecution and mass killings (Mitchell, 2017).

3. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that Afghanistan is not only a country for various religious groups within Islam, but also for other religious groups. From within Islam, there are Pashtuns as the largest ethnic group that dominates political institutions which often cause hatred because of their marginalized politics. On the other hand, the Tajiks are well known for their resistance to Soviet occupation, including against the Pashtun Taliban. Meanwhile, those who are often identified with Shia sects are the targets of marginalization, persecution, and displacement. The last episode of this persecution at the hands of the Taliban took place in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, when hundreds of them were killed when Taliban fighters entered the city of Mazar-i-Sharif.

In addition to the internal diversity of Islam, there are also Hindus. Although considered a small minority in the country, they have been present for hundreds of years. It is strongly suspected that their presence coincided with the arrival of Sikh traders in the 19th century. Just like the groups within Islam, they also did not escape the target of acts of violence and expulsion. Even their temples and places of worship were subjected to destruction from successive regimes in the country.

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