

The Trepidation Amid Non-Muslims in Afghanistan: A Critical Analysis of the Apprehension Confronted by the Religious Minorities in Taliban's Rule

Syed Sibtain Hussain Shah¹, Sara Khatoon², Lubna Abid Ali³

Abstract

This study examines the concerns of non-Muslim religious minorities in Taliban rule in Afghanistan since 2021. As the Taliban returned to power, fear had particularly increased among Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and other communities who were already marginalized and facing significant challenges to their survival in the country. The rigid religious laws adopted by the Taliban current regime, combined with its previous harsh policies and resurgence of other militant groups such as Islamic State Khurasan Province (ISKP) and lack of protective measures, has fuelled worries over the safety and rights of these non-Muslim minorities. Studying contemporary incidents of frequent violence and prejudice, and the background of the persecution as a guideline, this paper seeks to investigate the social, religious, and traditional factors involving concerns among minorities. The theory of 'Religious Persecution', which addresses how a state or non-state actors demonstrate their intolerance and prejudice towards individuals and communities based on their religious beliefs, leading to discrimination, violence, and oppression, is appropriate for examining the fear among the non-Muslim minorities under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The authors applied the comparative method, document analysis, and content examination for reviewing reports from human rights organizations, official statements from the Taliban and other relevant entities, research publications, news articles, and social media content. The study finds that the combination of factors above has resulted in an environment of persistent fear among the non-Muslim communities and forced many of them to leave the country for a protective destination abroad. The study highlights the urgent need for international attention and intervention to address the vulnerabilities confronting non-Muslim minorities in the current environment in Afghanistan and to ensure their safety and protection.

Keywords: Trepidation, Non-Muslims, Religious Minorities, Afghan Taliban, Afghanistan

1 PhD in Political Science and Public Administration from the University of Warsaw Poland. Email: drsibtain.numl@gmail.com

2 Visiting research fellow at the University of Religions and Denominations Qom, Iran. Email: sarahshah130@gmail.com

3 Professor at Department of International Relations, FCS, National Defense University (NDU), Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: lubnaabidali@ndu.edu.pk

Introduction

Afghanistan with 43 million population estimated in 2024 (KARIMI, 2019), is considered a Muslim majority state because the religion of 99.7% of people in the country is Islam (Sunni 85–90%, Shia 10–15%, other groups 0.3%) (Hasan, 2023). Besides, the Muslims as the majority communities, Afghanistan is also home to a small number of non-Muslim populations, including Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs, contributing to the country's cultural and economic environment for a long time (Mulhalland, 2019). However, their populations have decreased owing to continuous migration to other countries because of constant conflict, persecution, and fear of violence in Afghanistan.

A small Christian community, which even exists in Afghanistan today, remains vulnerable to probable persecution under the Taliban regime (Travis, 2005). The population of Christians in the country is assumed to number between 1,000 and 2,000, primarily practicing their faith in concealment due to the risks connected with the accusation of apostasy, which is punishable by death under local interpretations of Sharia law (Doors, 2022). The size of Sikh and Hindu communities, which were originally about 700,000 in the 1970s and 220,000 in the 1980s, has been reduced to between 200 and 900 people together by 2021, with the majority residing in Kabul, the country's capital, Jalalabad, the capital of Nangarhar province, and Ghazni, the capital of Ghazni province (Kaur, 2021).

Similarly, Afghanistan's previously robust Jewish population has completely gone, with the last known Afghan Jew, Zablun Simintov, fleeing after the Taliban's comeback in 2021 (America, 2021). In the early twentieth century, the Jewish community's members, largely located in Herat and subsequently in Kabul, were in the thousands, with Jews actively involved in local markets and customs administration. However, during the late twentieth century, evacuation prompted by security concerns and societal pressure reduced the Jewish population. Another small religious community in Afghanistan is the Baha'i community, which in the hundreds, confronts systemic prejudice and maintains a low profile to prevent persecution (Jawad, 2021). The Baha'is beliefs, established in the early 20th century, have also endured repression and they are sometimes required to conceal their beliefs as they are considered apostates by Afghan religious law.

The Taliban's return to power in 2021 has put religious minorities at even greater risk, as the rigid interpretation of Sharia law by this regime restricts religious freedom, forbidding non-Muslim practices, marginalizing religious minorities, imposing limited religious liberties, and forcing them to seek shelter overseas (Peace U. S., 2021). The study of the contemporary position of religious minorities in Afghanistan is important for understanding the larger consequences of political instability, religious intolerance, and human rights abuses in this combat zone. This research also provides a case study of the role of international humanitarian organizations, global communities, and neighboring countries in extending

humanitarian aid and sanctuary to persecuted communities.

By evaluating the severe problems of Afghanistan's non-Muslims including the impact of the state's strict policies, social discrimination, land confiscation, and deadly terrorist attacks by terrorist groups such as Islamic State Khurasan Province (ISKP), this research contributes to a deeper understanding of their under-risk historical cultural identity and social services. In addition to addressing shortcomings in the existing literature, the study also sets some advantageous recommendations for an effective preferment of the necessary policy reforms, economic support, and diplomatic efforts to protect religious liberties and prevent future marginalization of the vulnerable communities in the conflict-affected locations. To identify the gap in the accessible scholarly work on apprehension encountered by non-Muslim minorities under Afghan Taliban rule in Afghanistan, this article conducts a mandatory literature review.

Literature Review

The purpose of a literature review is to critically examine existing research work on a topic, identify gaps in contemporary knowledge, and provide a foundation for new research. It helps situate the current study within the broader academic context. In case of fear among the non-Muslim religious minorities in Afghanistan under Taliban's rule since 2021, the authors of the current study reviewed the relevant existing academic work. For example, a piece of literature points out the ideological foundations and political maneuvers of the Taliban while offering a thorough historical and political study of the group's ascent to power (Crews, 2008a). Addressing the question; of how Sharia law is strictly interpreted by the Taliban for naturally marginalizing non-Muslim populations, the literature maintains that the Taliban has a history of enforcing exclusionary policies that have resulted in systematic denial of rights while persecuting the religious minorities (Crews, 2008b). This fundamental knowledge lays the groundwork for analyzing the newly emerged risks under the present Afghan administration.

Another author explores Afghanistan's intricate ethnic and cultural tapestry, stressing a greater national cohesion and acknowledgment and respect of the rights of all ethnic and religious communities and reconciliation among them through national and international efforts (Jawad S. , 1992). Investigating the Taliban's acts of ruthless revenge, forced conversions, and the destruction of religious places during their reign from 1996 to 2001, the reachable literature illustrates that these actions motivated by systemic intolerance and socio-political factors left a long-term impact on Afghan society (Rashid, 2001).

In a joint academic contribution with Jolyon Leslie, another author, Chris Johnson's analysis of Afghanistan's sociopolitical climate focuses on successive government failure to protect non-Muslim minorities, contending that the Taliban's return exacerbates these flaws by exploiting minorities as scapegoats to consolidate

ideological dominance (Leslie, 2004). The scholarly work also presented a critical understanding of the historical marginalization of non-Muslim minorities in Afghanistan, with a focus on the Taliban's influence and the socio-cultural factors, arguing that the biased religious doctrine influenced the Taliban's activities, resulting in extreme persecution of minorities (Silinsky, 2014). Thomas Barfield, a social anthropologist offering a historical review of Afghanistan's politics and culture, acknowledged that the continued religious minorities' persecution aggravated by the Taliban's extreme policies, erodes social solidarity and national stability in Afghanistan (Barfield, 2010).

A Europe-based Afghan scholar Omar Joya sees the Afghan conflict through the lens of "religious grievance," claiming that political marginalization and religious sovereignty concerns fuel the insurgency. The scholar criticizes the economic orientation of post-2001 development discourse and advocates for moderate alternatives to radical narratives, emphasizing upon need to reduce conflict through initiatives that address both religious and political issues (Joya, 2023). There are also diverse scholarly perspectives on the migration of different segments of society from Afghanistan, which can be exemplified by the analysis of Alessandro Monsutti, an Italian scholar of anthropology and sociology. According to him, migratory movements and transnational networks have historically played an important role in Afghan resilience and livelihood strategies, as evidenced by the remittance system (Monsutti, 2008).

Assessment of the literature also finds out that Afghanistan's history displays a rich tapestry of religious variety, with Christian, Sikh, Hindu, Jewish, and Baha'i groups, having significant influences on the country's cultural, economic, and social fabric over the ages (Bureau of Democracy, 2007). This pluralism was most obvious in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when different ethnic and religious groups interacted freely and played important roles in trade, business, and municipal governments. Sikhs and Hindus, for example, were crucial to Afghanistan's economic sectors, particularly in Kabul, Kandahar, and Jalalabad, the country's big cities, where they ran companies in herbal medicine, textiles, and finance (Arify, 2021). However, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, followed by civil war between Afghan Mujahedeen groups and Taliban's control in the 1990s, led many Afghans to depart from Afghanistan due to the rising religious intolerance and bloodshed, reducing this non-Muslim population to barely 200-700 people by 2021 (States, 2021).

The existing literature provides a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan's sociopolitical and religious dynamics, concentrating on the historical and cultural aspects of Afghanistan's multi-cultural society, marginalization of non-Muslim minorities, the Taliban's ideological foundation, and persistent discrimination exacerbated by sociocultural factors. However, there is still a major gap in understanding the exact implications of the Taliban's government restoration in August 2021 for non-Muslim minorities, particularly the changing vulnerabilities

under the current system. While previous research provides important historical and theoretical insights, it falls short of addressing concrete frameworks that combine domestic changes with foreign measures to defend the rights of minorities such as Christian, Hindu, and Sikh communities facing various religion-social challenges in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the intricate interplay of religious administration, cultural diversity, and migration trends in determining minority experiences has received scant attention. Bridging these gaps is critical for developing holistic solutions that promote diversity, stability, and human rights.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

In this study, a theoretical perspective and a methodological framework are presented to enhance the understanding of this topic covering the Taliban's return to power, religious minorities' apprehension, and the impact of the threats faced by the marginalized communities including Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs. The theory of 'religious persecution' offers an analysis of systemic threats of persecution, discrimination, violence, and oppression to individuals or groups because of their religious beliefs, frequently aimed at eliminating or subjugating their sacred activities. David Smith clarifies this concept by arguing, "Prosecution refers to violence or discrimination against the members of a religious minority because their religious affiliation involves the most damaging expression of prejudice against an out-group, and going beyond verbal abuses and social avoidance," (Smith, 2015). The scholar further describes the concept as an action that is intended to deprive individuals of their equal rights due to their political and religious affiliation or to force religious minorities to assimilate, leave, or live as second-class citizens.

In the case of religious persecution in Afghanistan, this theory appropriately applies to the suppression of non-Muslim minorities like Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians, who are facing serious threats of harassment, violence, and forced displacements from extremist groups like the Taliban and ISKP, driven by a rigid interpretation of religion and intolerance toward diversity. According to the logical understanding of 'religious persecution', this concept addresses how a state or non-state actors express intolerance and prejudice towards individuals and communities based on their religious beliefs, which leads to discrimination, violence, and oppression. As for the methodology, this study employs document analysis and content investigation of the qualitative method to examine the fear among the non-Muslim minorities under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan through reviewing reports from human rights organizations, official statements from the Taliban and other relevant entities, research publications, news articles, and social media contents. A comparative analysis was also incorporated in order to relatively evaluate the attitude of the first Taliban regime and its current government toward the minorities.

The Taliban's Return to Power and Religious Minorities

The Taliban's first term, from 1996 to 2001, was distinguished by extreme

interpretations of Sharia law, imposing strict punishments, including public executions and amputations during its previous tenure (Amalndu, 2002). Ethnic and religious minorities, even members of the Muslim minority group 'Shia-Hazara' were brutally persecuted, with hundreds reportedly killed in operations to solidify Taliban rule in Shia-dominated regions such as Bamiyan and Mazar-i-Sharif (International, 2002). During the prior regime of the Taliban, Afghanistan's non-Muslim groups, including Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs were subjected to widespread discrimination, harsh restrictions, and targeted violence as a result of the stringent interpretation of religious rules. There were apprehensions that some of Afghanistan's petite non-Muslim minorities disappeared in different periods (Freshta, 2023).

In 2001, the Taliban's authorities had received international notice when they demolished the two possibly 6th-century monumental Buddhist statues in Bamiyan Valley situated in the central region of Afghanistan. The Taliban's act of destroying the ancient Buddhist statues was strongly condemned by the international community as it was considered an attack on the cultural heritage of the region (UNESCO, 2021). Worldwide, the Taliban's earlier regime was isolated, with only Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates recognizing its rule, while the United Nations and other countries levied sanctions. This isolation intensified after the Taliban facilitated Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden to stay in Afghanistan, resulting in the 9/11 attacks and the US-led invasion in 2001, which promptly deposed the Taliban government. The Taliban's original reign left Afghanistan economically impoverished and severely divided along ethnic and religious lines, laying the groundwork for continuous war and instability (Maizland, 2023). From October 2001 to August 2021, the Afghan Taliban's members were engaged in battle against the Afghan government and US-led foreign forces based in Afghanistan. Both domestic and international factors including a complicated set of events in the two decades resulted in the Taliban's return to power after the withdrawal of US-led international coalition forces from the country in August 2021.

Despite claiming a moderate attitude, the Taliban implemented again a severe interpretation of Islamic law that harms religious and ethnic minorities and women in the country. (Hassan, 2023). Soon after their return to power, the Taliban's authorities stated that they would allow minorities, including Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians, to freely practice their faith and promised a more inclusive administration than their previous control from 1996 to 2001 (Australian Government, 2022). The Taliban's leadership framed these promises as part of their adherence to the Islamic principles that, according to them, safeguard the rights of minority faiths under an Islamic system but these pledges remained unimplemented as many feared these assurances were aimed at securing foreign aid and diplomatic recognition rather than genuine commitment to human rights. The stories soon surfaced that harsh rules were generated among Afghanistan's non-Muslim minorities. The Taliban reinstated limitations from its 1996-2001 administration, adopting a harsh interpretation of Sharia law that marginalized non-Muslims and fostered a climate of fear. Sikhs,

Hindus, and Christians are reported to be pressured to follow Islamic rituals, with some receiving outright threats to convert to Islam or leave the country (Thomas, 2021).

Taliban forces allegedly imposed clothing standards and prohibited public worship, thus forcing non-Muslims to practice their religious traditions in secret and their women to follow the imposed dress code. For example, minorities are banned from marking their religious festivals in public and their women are forced to dress like Muslim women who must cover their face and whole body by using a burqa or niqab (Times, 2023). According to reports, religious minorities have had their homes searched, with some accused of carrying "un-Islamic" literature risking persecution or incarceration (United States Department of State, 2014). Given this atmosphere, numerous religious minorities have sought sanctuary overseas, substantially reducing their already small populations in Afghanistan. The execution of rigid Taliban laws has produced a hostile climate, exacerbating the anxieties and vulnerabilities of Afghanistan's non-Muslim communities while weakening the country's religious plurality.

The Taliban implemented laws that degraded religious minorities to second-class status, prevented them from freely practicing their beliefs, compelled them to wear distinguishing attire, and exposed them to harassment and violence. This policy, in particular, during the Taliban's previous regime had already targeted Sikhs and Hindus by forcing them to wear yellow armbands, isolating them from the entire society, and creating a climate of stigma and prejudice in the society. The religious minorities considerably decreased in number in Afghanistan in the previous term of Taliban and onward while those who remain in the country are confronting a deeply rooted fear and marginalization in the second term of the group (Taliban) since 2021.

Apprehension Amid Religious Minorities

The non-Muslim groups in Afghanistan have experienced tremendous challenges since the Taliban leaders' return to power in 2021 in stark contrast to the state before their takeover (Tinnes, 2023). The non-Muslims had already experienced major obstacles during the Taliban's first administration from 1996 to 2001, although their situation had gradually improved following the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. In the period after the fall of the Taliban regime (from 2001 to 2021), non-Muslim communities like Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians were free to practice their faith more openly, and some were granted limited political representation and involvement in civil life (Hassan, 2023). For example, attempts to establish gurdwaras (Sikh worship places) and Hindu mandars (Hindu temples) were permitted and these and other non-Muslims were allowed to practice their religion publicly, despite continuous threats and discrimination by the fanatic groups. It was the period when minority rights were more recognized, although not entirely safeguarded (Saiya, 2018). The presence of international humanitarian entities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) offered some advocacy and aid to religious minorities in

obtaining their fundamental rights and protections, as well as access to education and employment opportunities (Daniel, 2024). The Afghan government before the Taliban's return had made some measures to protect human rights, particularly those of religious minorities, but these commitments were also frequently not kept due to corruption and continued violence in the society (Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban, 2022).

In striking contrast, since August 2021, the situation for non-Muslims has deteriorated significantly. The Taliban's retracted policies have resulted in significant limitations on religious liberty, with non-Muslims experiencing greater persecution, violence, and discrimination. Reports on forced conversions, intimidation, and the reintroduction of clothing regulations for non-Muslim women have created an environment of dread, forcing many people to practice their faith in secret. Furthermore, non-Muslim communities have severely reduced their population in Afghanistan, with many leaving the country completely, resulting in a major reduction in religious and cultural variety. As the Taliban's return to power has led to increased religious persecution and social marginalization again, the comparative analysis of the period of the Taliban's first term and its return to power establishes, how the policies of the Taliban against the minorities in its first term again created an environment of fear and repression, threatening the survival of Afghanistan's non-Muslim communities and erasing centuries of cultural heritage after its return to power since 2021.

According to a report published by US State Department, "Members of all religious minority groups reported fear of persecution by the Taliban," (US Department of State, 2022). Quoting the religious minorities' representatives, the report describes that the Taliban continued to marginalize and repress members of these groups, including by restricting access to worship, civil service positions, and university admissions. The apprehension among the masses since mid-2021 caused significant demographic shifts from Afghanistan, notably migration of the non-Muslim minorities including Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians towards a safe destination. For example, the Sikh and Hindu populations in Afghanistan, which had already shrunk to between 200 and 700 by 2021, have continued to decrease as their families seek asylum in countries such as India and Canada. According to reports, over 200 Afghan Sikhs left Afghanistan for India immediately after the Taliban returned in 2021, and many more are currently seeking shelter abroad (USCIRF, 2024). In August 2021, with the fall of Kabul to the Afghan Taliban, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs not only conducted an operation for the repatriation of Indian citizens from Afghanistan but also arranged special visa facilitation for the evacuation of Afghan Sikhs and Hindus from the country (UNHCR, 2022).

The Christian group, which was formerly thought to have 1,000-2,000 members, has also suffered the simultaneous challenges of persecution and societal marginalization. Many have gone underground, adopting covert religious customs to

evade Taliban inspection and potential retaliation (Adeli, 2024). The continued violence and persecution have resulted in a massive outflow, adding to the overall trend of departure among educated professionals and minority groups that feel threatened. Human rights organizations believe that up to 80% of non-Muslim populations have fled the country, resulting in the near-complete extinction of various religious groups from the Afghan landscape (Amnesty International, 2024). The demographic transition is worsened by the Taliban's policies and practices, which have resulted in more disorder and societal division. As a result, Afghanistan's once-diverse religious environment has become increasingly homogenous, with a focus only on the Taliban's specific brand of Sunni Islam, generating worries about cultural erasure and the region's loss of religious variety.

Threats Confronted by Christians

According to a report of 2022, around 360 million Christians experienced prejudice and persecution globally in the year ending in October 2021—a 20 million increase from the year before Afghanistan is the world's most hazardous place for Christians due to the religious persecution, particularly under the Taliban regime (Peacock, 2022). The report verifies that Christians in Afghanistan confront frequent threats and violent acts, which have increased since the Taliban retook control in 2021. The climate for Christians, who are sometimes obliged to practice their faith in secret because of the serious consequences of being found, has grown increasingly dangerous as some specific events show the grave challenges encountered by this vulnerable community (Jones, 2021).

The United States withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, causing more courage for the Taliban to deteriorate religious and civic liberties in the country. Targeted killings and abductions of many Christians have been reported since the Taliban's return (International Christian Concern, 2023). For example, in 2021, a Christian convert was assassinated in Jalalabad, and the murder was attributed to the Taliban, who publicly opposed conversion from Islam to Christianity.

Before the Taliban's takeover, Afghanistan had few churches, especially in metropolitan areas such as Kabul, but many churches have shuttered or operated in secret since the Taliban's return due to fears of violence that this minority community experienced. According to a report by a human rights organization, in December 2021, a group of armed individuals attempted to crash a church service in Kabul, resulting in the termination of public prayer (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The social ostracism of Christians in Afghanistan also causes significant psychological and emotional stress. The dread of being detected frequently separates people from their communities, reducing their capacity to seek help or support. This societal stigma is accentuated by the Taliban's anti-Christian rhetoric, which refers to Christians as infidels who ought to be punished ((EUAA), 2024).

The continuous threats have forced many Christians to abandon Afghanistan.

In 2021 and 2022, there was a large surge in asylum applications by Afghan Christians seeking safety in other countries including India and Canada (Rozario, 2021). These tragedies underscore the severe vulnerability of Christians in Afghanistan, emphasizing the critical need for international engagement and support to safeguard their rights and safety in the face of institutional persecution (Daniel Philpott, 2018). Side by side Taliban's harsh behavior and strict policies, violent extremist organizations such as ISKP (Islamic State Khorasan Province) also continue to take negative actions and pose dangers to Christians and other religious minorities in Afghanistan. Unlike the Taliban, which aspires to govern largely via a rigid interpretation of Sunni Islam, ISKP advocates a more violent and fanatical philosophy that involves targeting not just those who oppose them, but also diverse Muslim sects and religious minorities (Lisa J. Campbell, 2024). ISKP's militants specifically target Christians and other religious minorities in their attacks.

The restrictions and limitations imposed on minorities have severely impacted their religious and cultural identities and societal presence (Roberts, July 2019). The grave situation for converts to Christianity has been repeatedly brought to light by the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), describing that they are at particular risk of arrest, detention, and violence. Those who abandon Islam risk severe repercussions under Afghan Taliban rules, such as incarceration, torture, or even death (USCIRF, 2021). According to a Christian advocacy group, the majority of society and even friends and family members of the converts to Christianity frequently reject, shun, or even assault them (Zadab, 2021). The Social marginalization and legislative restrictions on religious freedom in Afghanistan result in higher unemployment rates for minorities, particularly Christians (Center, 2010-2050). This issue has gotten worse since the Taliban came to power, further excluding religious minorities from the job markets.

Challenges Encountered by Hindus

There were hundreds of thousands of Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan in the 1970s and 1980s but the conflicts and wars that broke out in the years after and the onset of growing persecution pushed many out (Negah, 2023). There is a report of approximately an estimated 200,000 members of Hindu and Sikh groups in Afghanistan before the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime but many of them lost their homes and businesses and fled from the country in the 1990s. When the Taliban came to power in 1996, Hindus and Sikhs were stringently required to wear yellow badges on their dress and besides the ban on building their new temples, they were forced to pay a special tax called "Jazya", which was historically imposed by the Muslim rulers on their non-Muslim subjects.

However, the during Afghan regime after the fall of the Taliban, the 2004 constitution of Afghanistan acknowledged and safeguarded Sikhs and Hindus as equal citizens with Muslims (U.S Department of State, 2023). There was lots of hope for improvement of the conditions of the minorities in Afghanistan; for example, the

expectancy expressed by an Afghan Hindu living in India since 1996 that he is waiting for the right time to back to his homeland Afghanistan (Tamanna, 2015). Despite the constitutional pledge, Hindus and Sikhs became targets in the years after. In the targeted violence, Hindu worship places were attacked in Afghanistan, owing to the religious intolerance promoted by extremist organizations such as the Afghan Taliban and ISKP. For instance, in July 2018, ISKP allegedly bombed a joint public meeting of Sikhs and Hindus in Jalalabad, the capital city of eastern Nangarhar province, killing 19 people and injuring 20 (BBC, 2020).

Hindus in Afghanistan have faced several problems, which is indicative of a broader trend of persecution against the religious minorities. These problems include human security, violent attacks, discrimination in society, and migration from their homeland (Bhattacharjee, 2024). Since the Taliban's re-entrance in 2021, stories of harassment and violence against Hindus have grown. Many people have reported receiving threats and harassment when attending temples, creating an environment of fear that inhibits public prayers. Due to ongoing threats, a sizable section of the Afghan Hindus had already left the country in the years preceding the Taliban's takeover with many of them taking sanctuary in other countries including India.

Another issue relating to the Hindu community is the danger of forced conversions, causing serious concerns among this minority group. After the Taliban takeover, tales have arisen of Hindus being forced to convert to Islam, particularly in areas where they are more vulnerable (Negah, 2023). Families are concerned that their children, particularly females, would be likely forced to convert or forcedly marry Taliban male members or those in authority. In addition to forced conversions, Hindus face substantial social marginalization as the cultural stigma associated with their beliefs frequently leads to discrimination in everyday life, including difficulties in obtaining an education and finding work. Many Hindus have reportedly felt disconnected from their communities, which has resulted in a deep sense of insecurity and despair among this community. The confluence of these variables generated an environment even in educational institutions, where teachers and students from the majority groups often discriminate against Sikh and Hindu pupils, excluding them from school events, making fun of them, and pressuring them to convert to Islam during the first period of Taliban and onward (Emadi, 2018).

As the migration tendencies augmented as a result of all the hardships faced by the minorities in Afghanistan, several Hindus (estimated to be about 500 by 2021), also escaped from the country in quest of safety and asylum in other states (Barlas, 2022). In 2021 alone, several Afghan Hindus were transported to India as part of international humanitarian operations (Ghosh, 2022). Hindu migration movements reflect both acute challenges and long-term survival strategies, but the migration substantially reduces Afghanistan's already shrinking Hindu population, increasing worries for the minorities' regional cultural and religious legacy.

Sikh Community's Plight

Side by side with other religious minorities, the situation for the Sikh community in Afghanistan has also gotten worse since the Afghan Taliban controlled the country. The Sikh community has experienced economic marginalization, social exclusion, forced conversions, and violent attacks, all of which have contributed to the Sikhs' quick departure from Afghanistan. Thus, life has grown more dangerous and unpredictable for those who remained in the country as several significant occurrences have underlined the brutality experienced by Sikhs in Afghanistan. In August 2021, at least 20 people, including Sikh worshippers and security guards were killed in a suicide explosion claimed by ISKP at the Karte Parwan Gurdwara, the famous Sikh temple in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan (Ramachandran, 2022). The terrorist attack on another Sikh temple "Gurdwara Har Rai Sahib" in Kabul in March 2020, claimed by ISKP, which killed 25 people, already drew considerable attention to the growing violent extremism targeting minorities in the country. These successive brutal events shocked the Sikh community's members and many of them left Afghanistan as a result of mounting communal dread (Singh, 2022).

Abduction and forced conversion of Sikh women and girls have also increased since the Taliban's return as it was reported that the Taliban members or their local militants frequently kidnap these women, compel them to convert to Islam, and force them to marry Muslim males (Sirajudin, 2022). In these circumstances, approaching the Taliban's legal system for protection or justice by the Sikhs might become useless while forced abductions have created a generalized sense of terror among them. Ultimately, the kidnappings, involuntary conversion, and forced marriages cause more pain and social marginalization of the Sikh community.

In 2021, approximately 200 Afghan Sikhs were evacuated to India and many more have expressed the desire to leave Afghanistan due to worsening conditions in their homeland. Some reports indicate that a substantial portion of the Sikh population has fled to Canada and other countries, seeking refuge and a safer environment to practice their faith and normal life. The increasing number of asylum applications reflects the urgency of their situation, as Sikhs face ongoing threats to their lives and livelihoods in Afghanistan. The story of 22-year-old Afghan Sikh Kulraj Singh highlights the dangers of attempting to escape from Taliban custody in Afghanistan (Times of India, 2015). According to this story related to a period before the Taliban's return to power, during his 40 days in captivity by a group of Taliban for ransom, Kulraj spent three days in water and 17 days in solitary confinement (Rana, 2015). According to Kulraj, "They used to cut my hair, torture me, and deprive me of proper food for many days. I wasn't allowed to see the sun for seventeen days, and I was forced to convert to Islam and be kept in neck-deep water for three days (Singh, n.d.).

The violence, prejudice, a sense of insecurity, displacement, kidnapping for ransom, forced conversion, and forced marriage raise concerns about the future of the Sikh community and the preservation of their national identity and cultural heritage.

Significant acts of violence have highlighted the critical need for the protection of the rights and well-being of Afghan Sikhs, who face an uncertain future in their own country. According to religious theories of Taliban and other violent extremist groups, Sikhs and Hindus widely are referred to as "kafir" which means unbelievers, isolating them from other parts of the society and putting their existence in danger in the country (Rana, 2015). The ongoing plight of the religious minorities in Afghanistan serves as a stark reminder of the need for international advocacy and support to protect these vulnerable religious minorities facing persecution.

Impact of Oppression and International Response

In the aftermath of decades of conflict in Afghanistan, the entire population of the country suffers from various difficulties and upsets in everyday life, such as poverty, weak economy, societal problems, physical and mental sickness, sadness of family separation, relationship breakdown, human losses, losses of businesses and homes, disturbance of communication system, migration and many of other several accidents. (Babury, 2013). The Afghan religious minorities including Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs have been significantly impacted by these troubles as they are more vulnerable and marginalized in the complex situation of the country, facing above 40 years of unrelenting conflict (Meera Thoompail, 2020). Persecution has led to a crisis of identity among non-Muslims because their faith is an important part of their identity and suppression of their views can cause internal tensions and feelings of guilt. This existential battle frequently leads to the loss of cultural legacy, since newer generations are unable to connect with their religious traditions.

The international reaction to the situation of non-Muslim populations in Afghanistan has been a combination of humanitarian relief, human rights activism, and measures to assure religious minorities' safety. Several international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and foreign governments have taken action to meet these vulnerable people's critical needs. Focusing on the circumstances related to humanity, the United Nations warns that Afghanistan is rapidly turning into the greatest humanitarian crisis in the world, and the Afghan state is on the verge of total collapse (Gaouette, 2021).

The international community continues to resist deeper commitment due to increasing anxieties about rights' security, devotion to international law, and financial transparency (Runde, 2024). The World Food Programme (WFP) provides food aid to needy groups in Afghanistan, particularly non-Muslims facing economic instability and prejudice. The UNHCR has sought to enable the resettlement of Afghan refugees, especially religious minorities, to safe countries while also assisting those who remain in Afghanistan. NGOs like the International Christian Concern (ICC) and Open Doors have been involved in advocating for the rights of Afghan non-Muslims at the international level, highlighting their plight, and pressing governments to take action (Concern, 2021). This includes legal assistance for those seeking asylum and advocacy for policy changes to protect religious freedom.

The U.S. government may continue to assist the disadvantaged Afghans by supporting and encouraging financial measures for humanitarian aid. The U.S. Department of State, in its 2021 report, verified efforts to accommodate Afghan refugees, with an emphasis on those in danger due to persecution for their faith. In Canada, the Justin Trudeau administration offered promises to the Afghan Sikh community that they would be transported to Canada from Kabul (Gupta, 2024). Additionally, European nations such as Germany and France extended support for Afghan religious minorities through resettlement programs.

Human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have also advocated for the protection of non-Muslim Afghans by highlighting the systematic attacks on religious sites and forced conversions, prompting foreign governments to respond with diplomatic pressure on the Taliban to ensure the protection of non-Muslim Afghans (Ahmed, 2022). The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) passed resolutions calling on the Taliban to recognize the rights of religious minorities, citing the persecution faced by Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs (United Nations, 2023). These advocacy activities led to nations including Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia granting humanitarian visas for Afghan Hindus and Sikhs as stated in Human Rights Watch's 2021 report. Given their unique vulnerability, Canada took the initiative to award emergency refugee status, and by 2022, more than 500 Afghan Sikhs and Hindus had received asylum in Canada (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

While international assistance in providing asylum and issuing statements for raising voices in favor and condemnation of violence highlights global awareness of the plight of non-Muslims in Afghanistan, these efforts fall short; concrete, coordinated actions are still required to guarantee the safety and rights of minorities within the country.

Conclusion

With the Taliban's 2021 back to power, the plight of non-Muslim populations in Afghanistan continues to be a critical humanitarian and human rights concern. These communities' particular difficulties underscore the urgent need for global attention and action. The findings of this research summarise that since the Taliban's resurgence as a state actor, non-Muslim communities primarily Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus have experienced increased persecution, discrimination, abduction, forced conversion, and violence. Many have been forced into hiding or have fled the country, leading to a significant decline in their populations (Mogul, 2021).

The ongoing violence, discrimination, and other threats against the minority communities not only put their safety and identity in danger but also inflicted severe emotional damage and mental health consequences among individuals of these communities. In other words, living under the Taliban in current conditions is like being in a tunnel with no light (Bizhan, 2023). While international organizations,

NGOs, and foreign governments have made efforts to provide humanitarian aid and advocate for the rights of religious minorities, challenges persist.

As for recommendations, there is a need for sustained pressure and engagement with the Taliban to protect these vulnerable populations. The international community bears a significant responsibility in addressing the plight of non-Muslim communities in Afghanistan. Raising awareness about the situation of religious minorities is crucial. Human rights organizations activists, and foreign governments must continue to advocate the protection of these communities and hold the Taliban accountable for their discriminated actions. Providing targeted humanitarian aid is essential to alleviate the suffering of non-Muslims in that country. The international community should ensure that assistance reaches those most in need, regardless of their religious affiliation, and support efforts to create safe environments for vulnerable parts of the Afghan society. Developing clear pathways for resettlement and asylum for those fleeing persecution is vital. The international community must work collaboratively to establish comprehensive strategies that prioritize the safety and dignity of non-Muslims seeking refuge from violence.

While the situation for non-Muslim communities in Afghanistan remains dire, there are potential avenues for hope, particularly through efforts aimed at reconciliation and inclusive dialogue (Berghof Foundation, 2019). The Taliban's engagement in dialogue with civil society and minority groups, including Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians, could help create opportunities for reconciliation and a more inclusive Afghan society. The potential for reconciliation and peace exists, contingent on inclusive dialogue and grassroots efforts to foster understanding among diverse groups.

As the situation evolves, the international community must remain vigilant and proactive in supporting the rights and welfare of non-Muslim communities, having their enduring spirit and commitment to maintaining their identities and beliefs in Afghanistan. Their plight is not just a regional concern but a reflection of broader human rights challenges that demand global attention and action. The resilience of these communities coupled with international support, can pave the way for a future where religious diversity is respected and protected in Afghanistan.

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