

The Last Two Sikhs In Helmand

by Hugh Fitzgerald



[This](#) was a very small story. It was about a very small group of people. Two, to be exact, the last two Sikhs in Helmand Province in Afghanistan. But this story tells us a lot about Muslim behavior.

LASHKAR GAH, HELMAND, AFGHANISTAN – Like many other Afghans, Satnam Singh rides on a bicycle to work in his hometown of Lashkar Gah, the capital of the southern Afghan province of Helmand; that’s what he was doing on one day in early summer 2018.

“But that day, a man on a motorcycle deliberately hit me and I fell,” Satnam recounts. The reason that he got knocked over was apparently because the style of his turban clearly shows that he belongs to Afghanistan’s Sikh minority, members of a religion that has its center in India and Pakistan.

The incident might be small, but the seemingly never-ending nature of such harassment is – together with more serious threats and the dire economic situation – one of the main reasons that almost all Sikhs have left Lashkar Gah. In fact,

as of summer 2018, only two Sikhs remain in Helmand, which is considered the Taliban's heartland. The province is where U.S. and British forces suffered the highest casualties during the long Afghan war's latest ongoing chapter, which started with the U.S.-led intervention after 9/11.

The Sikhs have always been a small but native minority in Afghanistan; according to one account, prior to **1992, there were about 220,000 Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan** with another putting that number as low as 50,000. By now, the very few remaining are concentrated in the provinces of Nangarhar, Kabul, and Ghazni.

Until a few years ago, there was also still a tiny community of Sikhs in Lashkar Gah. During the Taliban regime in the 1990s, about 60 Sikh families were living in Lashkar Gah, Satnam remembers. They held out there despite the extremist Islamist rule of **the Taliban, who forced non-Muslim Sikhs to identify themselves by wearing yellow patches**. Satnam asserts though that, while the time under the Taliban was tough for Sikhs, things were worse in the preceding civil war – and the situation is also worse now. This was corroborated by other reports citing Afghan Sikhs.

Those yellow patches are nothing new to Muslims. Muslims used to require both Christians and Jews to wear distinctive clothing – blue belts and turbans for Christians, yellow belts and turbans for Jews. Later on, Jews were made to wear yellow stars instead. In Afghanistan, the Taliban forced not just the Sikhs, but the Hindus, too, to wear yellow patches.

Hence, the exodus of Lashkar Gah's Sikhs only began after the overthrow of the Taliban regime by the U.S.-led intervention, which was supposed to bring greater freedom for all Afghans, including minorities. "Since 2001 many left. And about three years ago, almost all of the remaining around 30 families of Sikhs decided to leave together," Satnam said during an

interview in July 2018. Virtually all of them, like the Afghan Sikhs that had emigrated before, went to India. "About two years ago, I sent my wife and daughter to my father-in-law in Kandahar [the capital of the neighboring province with the same name] and about a month ago from there to my father in India," Satnam added. By now, he and his friend and neighbor Charan Singh are the only two Sikhs left in Lashkar Gah.

When asked why all the other Sikhs, including his family, had left, Satnam's first reply is, "It is the harassment by the people."

"They throw stones at our houses, smash windows, and spray nasty graffitis on our walls," he continues. Those allegations are proven by the dents and washed out scribblings on the wall of the house in a sleepy dusty street, where Satnam and Charan live and where they renovate the last remaining Gurdwara (Sikh place of worship) in Lashkar Gah. Such continued harassment is also confirmed by a 2017 report from the U.S. State Department, showing that the (albeit limited) freedom of religion that the Afghan constitution guarantees exists on paper, but hardly in reality.

"And this harassment is not done by Taliban, but by ordinary local people," Satnam adds, voicing desperation about the fact that he and his fellow Sikhs are treated like unwanted strangers in their own birthplace. Slowly, over time, this has become intolerable.

In this case, the Muslim persecution is not from the government. In fact, the Taliban apparently honored the dhimmi system, leaving these and other Sikhs alone as long as they paid the jizyah. But the endless harassment and persecution comes from a different place. **It comes from the hatred, inculcated by the Qur'an, that is felt by so many Muslims for**

non-Muslims. The Muslim who deliberately knocked Satnam over with his motorbike, the Muslims who throw stones, break windows, scrawl graffiti on his house and business – they are not following orders but doing what comes naturally.

“We have complained to the police about this, but they cannot prevent it,” Satnam alleges. This was contested by Mohammad Zamon, the spokesman of the police in Helmand: “There are no problems between the Sikhs and other residents of Lashkar Gah. And if there should be any, the Sikhs can call the police and the police will – as in the case of any other resident – help them.”

Shouldn't we believe Satnam, who says that they – the last two Sikhs in Lashkar Gah – have complained to the police, but nothing was done, not even, it seems, making any serious attempt to find the harassers? In fact, the police spokesman, Mohammad Zamon, claims – absurdly – that “there are no problems between the Sikhs and other residents.” Really? They why did the last 60 Sikh families pick up and leave Lashkar Gah, where they had spent their whole lives? What about the fact that that, according to Satnam, people throw “stones at our houses, smash windows, and spray nasty graffiti on our walls?” These allegations, says the reporter, are proven by the dents and washed out scribblings.

In view of the aforementioned damage, however, this sounds like whitewashing the problems of Lashkar Gah's last Sikhs by a police force that arguably needs almost all hands on deck to keep the insurgency at bay.

In any event, Satnam also indicates many other issues that Sikhs face. For example, they would not be able to cremate the bodies of deceased Sikhs, the usual funeral method in their religion, as their Muslim neighbors see this as a sin.

So their Muslim neighbors believe they have a perfect right to

interfere with the Sikhs' observance of their own faith. Cremation is the standard Sikh practice, but since Muslims are against it, they apparently believe it only right and proper that they should prevent those Sikhs, as non-Muslims "the most vile of creatures," from such practice. **Muslim apologists like to quote Qur'an 2:256, "There is no compulsion in religion." Surely forcing Sikhs to abandon their hallowed practice of cremation constitutes "compulsion in religion."**

There are also threats. One letter that Satnam received demands all remaining Sikhs to pay, as non-Muslims, a tax, and threatens that "bad things" will happen otherwise, with the original Pashto language implying that this is a death threat.

This tax is simply the Jizyah, the payment non-Muslims, as dhimmis, must make to the Muslim state if they wish both to stay alive and to continue to practice their own religion. It was originally meant to apply only to Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, but later, the Muslims extended the dhimmi status to Hindus, Sikhs, and others, in order to increase the Jizyah payments. This threatening letter is a demand for the payment of the Jizyah, protection money against Muslims who otherwise might make sure that "bad things" happen.

The fact that on July 1 a suicide bomber specifically targeted Sikhs in an attack in Jalalabad, the capital of the eastern Afghan province of Nangarhar, that killed at least 19 people (most of them Sikhs) and wounded 20 more, shows that threats have to be taken very seriously. It should be noted, though, that said attack was claimed by the self-declared Islamic State, a group that is known for much more ruthlessly targeting civilians and religious minorities than the Taliban. Hence, as the self-declared Islamic State has no known presence in Helmand, such an attack against Sikhs appears significantly less likely here than in Nangarhar.

This is surely cold comfort, because while the Islamic State may not now be in Helmand, their bezonians might arrive at any time to see their form of justice done. And while the Islamic State may be “more ruthless” than the Taliban in attacking minorities, the Taliban are not exactly shrinking violets when it comes to persecuting or killing minorities. They did, after all, try to wipe out the entire community of Shi’a Hazara. That was ruthless enough. Besides, if the Sikhs are being attacked and killed in Jalalabad by the Islamic State, wouldn’t that possibly inspire the Taliban to “go thou and do likewise” with the last two Sikhs in Helmand? What a good deed that would be, in the eyes of Allah, to make all of Helmand Sikhfrei. No more Infidels – today Lashkar Gah, tomorrow all of Afghanistan.

Be that as it may, in the wake of the July 1 attack, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani assured Afghan Hindus and Sikhs that the government is not indifferent and will protect them. However, before this presidential assertion, Satnam stated that he does not have much confidence that the government can effectively protect them.

Why should they believe President Ghani? 220,000 Hindus and Sikhs lived in Afghanistan in 1992, and now their numbers are reduced to 1,300. That is a vote of no-confidence in the Afghan government, any Afghan government. You have never read of the Afghan government, no matter who was in charge, ever making a single arrest of anyone charged with harassing members of minority groups – the Sikhs, the Hindus, the Shi’a Hazara.

Another Afghan and member of the (Muslim) Hazara minority that is also targeted by extremists summed up how bad the overall situation for the Sikhs in Afghanistan is: “To be a member of a minority in Afghanistan is hell; but to be a Sikh means being in the innermost circle of hell,” he said.

A bone-chilling remark, especially for those who know what the Taliban did to the Shi'a Hazara.

Another reason for the Sikh exodus is the dire economic situation, which was also noted by the 2017 U.S. State Department report. "I left Lashkar Gah for India about two and a half years ago," Atar Singh, another Sikh who was visiting Lashkar Gah in July 2018, told The Diplomat. "The reasons [for leaving Afghanistan] were the war, the harassment, and the fact that there was no work," Atar, who used to be a cloth seller in his native Lashkar Gah, added.

The importance of this economic component becomes clear from the explanation for Atar's visit. "I came back to Lashkar Gah to see whether I can return and set up shop again here," he said. "The life in our exile in India is very difficult. We barely find any work to support our families and, although we are refugees, we don't receive any help from anyone. This is why I wanted to come back. But unfortunately the rents for shops in Lashkar Gah are high and the market in general is down. So I can't move back here."

This was corroborated by Satnam, who sells herbal medicine in his small store in Lashkar Gah: "Work has become very bad. However, the work here is still better than in India, where I wouldn't know what to do. So I stay."

The economic situation in India must be unbelievably bad, if it could lead a Sikh such as Atar Singh, who had previously fled, to return to see if he might be able to open a shop in Lashkar Gah again. But if he has absolutely no way to earn his daily bread in India, he may be willing to take this terrible chance.

Asked whether he would leave Lashkar Gah, if there was an alternative – another place where he could live and work – Satnam answered evasively. First, he said that there is no good alternative. When pressed again, he replied: "I will

stay in Lashkar Gah until there is absolutely no possibility any more to do so." Although he never stated this explicitly, one main reason Satnam is still holding out in Lashkar Gah is apparently that he simply does not want to leave his home, the place where he was born and grew up.

This clinging desperately, despite everything, to the place where you were born and raised, is humanly understandable. There were Jews who continued to live in Arab countries, despite the horrible treatment they received, until there were actually pogroms that finally forced them out. Even if you are treated cruelly by your Muslim neighbors, if they throw stones at you, break your windows, write graffiti on your walls, if you or your family haven't yet been physically attacked, you might still wish to hold on, thinking that somehow things will improve. But they don't. In Afghanistan, it's been nearly 30 years of increased harassment, and persecution, of minorities.

Echoing this, Atar, who – not without pride – mentioned that he had served seven years in Afghanistan's army in the 1980s, at one point melancholically said: "This is our homeland too." That's a fact that many of their Muslim neighbors seemingly ignore.

Why should their Muslim neighbors care whether these Sikhs consider this Muslim land, where Islam rules, as their "homeland"? It's an absurdity. Afghanistan is part of Dar al-Islam. Non-Muslims live there only on sufferance. It does not matter if they were born there, lived all their lives there, or served in the Afghan army. Afghanistan belongs to the Muslims. They are Sikhs. If they don't like it, they should get out.

But with only Satnam and Charan remaining, there is a very real danger that the Sikhs will disappear from Lashkar Gah and – even though there are still Sikh communities in places such as Ghazni, Kabul, and Nangarhar – maybe also from

Afghanistan as a whole, especially as those other communities are not that numerous anymore. The U.S. State Department report from 2017 cited estimates that there are only 245 Sikh and Hindu families with about 1,300 individuals.

Before 1992, there were 220,000 Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan. As of 2017, there were 1,300 Sikhs and Hindus left, and now there must be even fewer, after the deadly Islamic State terror attack in July 2018 in Jalalabad.

However, Satnam has not yet lost all hope. "I hope that the situation will become good again. Then, other Sikhs might return. After all, some of the ones that left did not sell their houses, but have only rented them out."

A forlorn hope. How many non-Muslims, once they have left or been expelled from a Muslim country, have ever returned? The handful who do are, like Atar Singh, simply unable to make a living elsewhere; they return only out of total desperation, and even in his case, it appears he's unlikely to stay in Afghanistan. As for Satnam's hope that because some of the Sikhs who, when they left Lashkar Gah, did not sell, but rented out their houses, that might mean they intend someday to return, is implausible. Isn't it more likely that, as they all left in a hurry, some of them were unable to sell their property, and chose rather to rent out their houses until such time as they could return, just very briefly, and only in order to sell their houses?

This story offers just a glimpse into Muslim mistreatment of non-Muslims. Someone tries, and succeeds, in knocking Satnam down with a motorbike, having recognized his tell-tale Sikh turban. Other Muslims throw stones, break windows, write "nasty" graffiti. These were people to whom he had done nothing wrong, his neighbors in a small town. His being a Sikh was enough to turn him into a target. Meanwhile, the police are lackadaisical about investigating this harassment, and the

police spokesman insists there is not the slightest problem between the Sikhs and the Muslims among whom they live. They just don't care.

Those apologists who claim that Muslims resent us, in the West, because of our foreign policy or, in the case of European countries, because of their "colonialist" past, have no way to justify this treatment of the Sikhs. What foreign policy have the Sikhs promoted? When were the Sikhs ever "colonialists"? They are being harassed, beaten, even blown up, as at Jalalabad, and harried out of their own country, Afghanistan, for the crime of being non-Muslims, "the most vile of creatures." Christian, Jew, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, it hardly matters. For murderous Muslims, that is enough. That is more than enough.

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