

Brief Report on the situation of Sikhs in Afghanistan – 19th November 2018
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My name is Dr Jasjit Singh. I am based in the School of Philosophy, Religion and the History of Science at the University of Leeds where I am a Research Fellow. Having completed my PhD on the religious lives of British Sikhs in 2012, I have regularly appeared on national and international media (BBC Radio 4, BBC Asian Network) to speak about the Sikh tradition and am regularly quoted in newspaper stories about Sikh issues (The Times, The Conversation). As a recognised expert in the Sikh Religion, I am often called in to present my opinion on Sikh issues and have prepared reports for media regulators and statutory organisations including government departments.

Since 2016 I have been called in by solicitor firms on numerous occasions to assist with Afghan Sikh asylum claims where the religion of the clients has been disputed. Since the start of 2018 I have dealt with 14 cases which has involved interviewing 14 Afghan Sikh families about their lives, their journeys to the UK and about their religious beliefs. In these cases, the Sikh identity of the clients has been disputed either because a) they do not keep long hair, b) they do not speak Punjabi or c) they have described themselves as Hindu.

These reasons highlight a lack of understanding about the Sikh tradition and about the situation of Afghan Sikhs in general. It is important to note that many Sikhs in Afghanistan have removed their religious symbols including their long hair due to harassment due to being non-Muslims (see below). Many Afghan Sikhs do not speak Punjabi as it is not their mother tongue. Finally, in Afghanistan, the term 'Hindu' is often used to describe non-Muslims with an Indian origin. In one case, an applicant answered eight questions on the Sikh tradition correctly but was regarded as being inconsistent due to not speaking Punjabi. I found that many of the cases were being refused because the UK Home Office were referencing Country Guidance which included a Wall St Journal article which stated that all Sikhs speak Punjabi. In July 2018 I managed to get the Home Office to update the Country Guidance to reflect the variety of languages spoken by Afghan Sikhs.¹ There is clearly a lack of knowledge and awareness of the situation of Sikhs in Afghanistan. Further research is necessary to fully map and record the situation.

The interviews highlighted that Sikhs in Afghanistan are unable to freely practise their religion. Interviewees have informed me about the threats they have faced as Sikh families in Afghanistan including their children being kidnapped. One informant described how his youngest son had been kidnapped to become a 'dancing boy' and had been returned with severe mental health issues. Another informed me that his daughter had been kidnapped never to be seen again. A number of interviewees highlighted ill-treatment of their Sikh children as a consequence of their non-Muslim status. One family informed me that they had stopped their children from attending their local school as their children would have their hair cut by their classmates. As Ganda Singh (2000: 39) explains, hair is "indispensable and perhaps the main symbol of the Sikh faith". Indeed, many of those I interviewed informed me that they had been forced to cut their hair due to excessive harassment both in the workplace and in day to day life. Wearing other Sikh symbols, including the Kara or iron bangle, informants stated that the various articles of faith made them an easy target in Afghanistan. The harassment faced, in particular by their children has led many Afghan Sikh families to seek to flee Afghanistan.

¹ See <https://barficulture.tv/world/282> (accessed 18.11.2018). The updated Country Guidance can be found here: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/728670/AFG - Sikhs and Hindus - CPIN - v4.0 July 2018 .pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/728670/AFG_-_Sikhs_and_Hindus_-_CPIN_-_v4.0_July_2018_.pdf)

A 2017 IWPR report highlights how only a handful of Afghan Sikh families remain from a community who had lived in Afghanistan for hundreds of years." The report states that life got worse for many Hindus and Sikhs under the Taleban regime when their freedom to practice their religion was hugely restricted.

"The Taleban era was one of the most challenging periods for us, because all our religious ceremonies were prohibited, it was hard for us to even leave our houses," said Baghlan resident Shirjan Singh, 55.²

Although the Afghan constitution guarantees religious rights as full citizens of the country, funeral rites remain a key issue as Hindus and Sikhs have no dedicated place to cremate their dead. Many interview respondents informed me that they were often reduced to cremating their dead in the Gurdwara in Kabul which does not have a dedicated facility.

The IWPR (2017) report also highlights that many Afghans do not treat their Sikh neighbours as full citizens with Ahmad, a 45-year-old representative of the Sikh community stating:

"If we look back to the Taleban era, life became so difficult for so many people that they escaped and fled the country. With the establishment of [former president Hamid] Karzai's government, we felt more comfortable, particularly when we were officially recognised as citizens of this country once again. But once again, some of our fellow citizens don't treat us as Afghan citizens, and most people insult and humiliate us."³

In conclusion, non-Muslims in Afghanistan in particular Sikhs and Hindus face numerous issues regarding the Freedom of Religion and Belief. The recent attack on the Afghan Sikh leadership in July 2018⁴ highlights that Sikhs in Afghanistan continue to be targeted for their minority status. Since the 1st July 2018 attack on Sikhs, there have been 17 other terror attacks by militants in Afghanistan with recent reports stating that the Taliban now contests or controls 61% of Afghan districts.⁵ The cases I have dealt with to date indicate that in addition to being unable to practice their faith, Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan continue to face significant levels of violence in their day to day lives.

² See IWPR (2017) report: <http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=country&docid=5a267f954&skip=0&coi=AFG&querysi=sikh&searchin=fulltext&sort=date> (accessed 18.11.2018)

³ See IWPR (2017) report: <http://www.refworld.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rwmain?page=country&docid=5a267f954&skip=0&coi=AFG&querysi=sikh&searchin=fulltext&sort=date> (accessed 18.11.2018)

⁴ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-44677823> (accessed 18.11.2018)

⁵ See <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/11/losing-a-war-in-afghanistan.php> (accessed 18.11.2018)