

Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iran

Afghanistan

In John Gunther's *Inside Africa*, published in 1939, he describes Afghanistan as "one of the most fascinating regions of the world", and the "far frontiers" of British India in the northwest as "a wonderful living museum of anthropological lore!"

- 2.2. Migration from India to Afghanistan had occurred during the last several centuries, mainly from undivided Punjab. The emigrants mostly belonged to the category of retail shopkeepers and general merchants dealing in clothes and other consumer items. They settled down in various parts of Afghanistan, particularly Jalalabad and Kabul. In 1990, it was estimated that there were about 45,000 persons of Indian descent in Afghanistan. Most of those persons had become naturalised Afghan citizens.
- 2.3. After the Mujahideen and the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, there was a large-scale migration of local residents out of Afghanistan to neighbouring countries, mainly to India. This resulted in a drastic reduction in the number of people of Indian origin in Afghanistan. Those still remaining in Afghanistan were estimated, by our erstwhile Embassy in Kabul, at about 1000. A majority of these PIOs was based in Jalalabad, numbering about 600, while Kabul had about 400 of them and a very insignificant number were scattered in other parts of Afghanistan.
- 2.4. These Afghan citizens of Indian origin, established their own places for religious worship, in the cities where many of them lived. There are Hindu temples and Gurudwaras in Kabul and Jalalabad, as well as some other towns in Afghanistan.
- 2.5. India did not have any official representation in Afghanistan while the Taliban were in power. The Hindu and Sikh communities suffered harsh discrimination during that period.
- 2.6. In April 2001, the Taliban regime issued an order imposing new restrictions on the minority communities of Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan. Male Hindus, as per this edict, were debarred from wearing either *salwar kameez* or white turban. They were directed to wear a black cap and put a red *tilak* on their foreheads when they went out of their homes as marks of identification.

Hindu women too, when going out of their homes, were asked to drape themselves fully in a yellow cloth and wear an iron necklace. All Hindus were also required to display a yellow flag on their houses. Muslims and Hindus were debarred from residing in the same house.

- 2.7. Many Afghan Hindus and Sikhs, had moved out of Afghanistan before 11 September 2001. Many of them are presently in Pakistan and have expressed a desire to migrate to India. As they are PIOs, they have been advised to apply for permission to do so through our High Commission in Islamabad. Such requests are processed through the Ministry of Home Affairs, which would authorise the grant of visas after due scrutiny. The Government of India has offered every possible assistance to Afghan refugees who have come to India.
- 2.8. According to press reports, during their recent visit to India in December 2001, the Afghan Minister for Interior Affairs, Mr. Qanooni met with Hindu and Sikh minorities in the Afghan Embassy in New Delhi.

Central Asia

- 2.9. The Indian community in Central Asia, which is comprised of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, numbers only 2732 out of a total population of 55.5 million. It consists mainly of NRIs. The Indian community in Central Asia consists mainly of students, businessmen, workers, and representatives/employees of Indian or foreign companies. There is a respectable presence in it of managers, entrepreneurs and traders, particularly in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It is well regarded, having a higher per capita income than the national averages of the respective countries of its habitation. It has adapted itself to local conditions and has no problems with the local populations.
- 2.10. Out of the total Diaspora of 2732, 1127 persons are stationed in Kazakhstan. 900 are medical students. About 127 workers/managers are employed by Ispat International, a Soviet era steel plant that was taken over by the NRI businessman Shri L.N. Mittal. The plant, now called Ispat Karmet under Indian management, is a major success story. Indians also play an important role in other commercial activities and sectors such as pharmaceuticals. Besides Ispat Karmet, the following Indian companies have representatives in Kazakhstan – Ajant Pharma, Dr. Reddy's labs, Ranbaxy, Core, Lupin, IPCA, and USV. In addition, a project for setting up a mobile heating unit in Kazakhstan has been commissioned with ITEC funding. The Indian Cultural Centre in Almaty is active in projecting Indian culture. Several Indian cultural festivals have been held in Kazakhstan. The composition of the Indian community in Uzbekistan, currently around 690, has been changing over the years. The new arrivals are generally employees of multinational corporations, banks and hotels. They are employed as chartered accountants and management consultants and are well paid. About 20 Indians are employed by Indian pharmaceutical joint ventures in Tashkent. Some are working at a petrochemical complex in Karshi.

- 2.11. The Committee feels that the Indian community in Central Asia is bound to grow in view of its strategic and economic importance. The recommendations of the Committee would also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to this region.

Iran

- 2.12. Relations between India and Iran have traditionally been very close. Historically, there have been many instances of movement of people overland between the two countries. In more recent times, around 1925, the first lot of Indians – about 180 families – went to the Iranian border town of Zahidan. They drove there from the western districts of the then Punjab province of India, in the company of truck drivers who used to transport goods to Iran. After their initial influx, these Indians gradually started settling down in the nearby towns of Zabol, Birijand and Mashhad. In 1950, some more Indians went to Iran and settled down en bloc in Teheran. They were predominantly Sikhs, but there were also some Gujaratis among them.
- 2.13. In the 1960s and early 70s, the Shah of Iran permitted immigration into the country of about a million expatriate professionals to run its essential services. Among the new arrivals were about 10,000 Indian doctors, engineers and teachers. However, most of them, except a few doctors, left Iran after the Iranian revolution which ended the Shah's rule. As of now, the number of Indians who have settled down in the country consists of approximately a hundred and fifty families in Teheran, thirty-five in Zahidan and only two in Isfahan. A majority of these people are engaged in various business activities. Several of the Indian women have married Iranians and now reside in different parts of the country including Mashhad. Some Kashmiri students are studying at the Imam Khomeini University in Qazvin, while a number of other Indians are pursuing theological studies at Qom.
- 2.14. Almost all the Indians in Iran belonging to the third and fourth generation of emigrants have continued to retain their Indian citizenship. Only about ten families among them have become Iranian nationals. Similarly, a majority of fifth generation Indian emigrants have also adopted local citizenship because of work and tax related problems.
- 2.15. The Indian community in Iran, unlike its counterpart in some other countries, maintains strong links with India. Several of its members own properties in this country and even send their children to study in Indian schools. Most of them seek marriage partners for their children in India. Their loyalty to their country of origin is really touching. It manifests itself in responding to national calamities and crises in India such as the Kargil incursions and the Gujarat earthquake with the spontaneous remittance of contributions for disaster relief.

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