

Afghanistan Rising from the Ruins

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Learning to dream in war-ravaged Afghanistan where nation-building is a global project and democracy is a new experiment in freedom sustained by outsiders

Irony has to be the least visible trait in war-scarred Afghanistan. It is not. It begins with the Ariana Afghan flight from Delhi. Inside the dusty, musty cabin, the man in the first window seat has been displaced by a polite but firm attendant for a last-minute passenger with a black leather briefcase, his fingers fiddling with his Communicator. "He is a very important official from our Foreign Ministry," says the attendant. The man, whose original seat in another row has already been occupied by a boy with a plastered leg, protests but finally obliges by moving to the middle seat. A few minutes before the take off, the attendant requests the passenger in the aisle to change his seat so that the man in the middle, a difficult customer, can move to the aisle and the dignitary, who happens to be the foreign minister of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, will have more arm space and some privacy. The minister, Abdullah Abdullah, once upon a time a close lieutenant of the slain Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud, looks a bit embarrassed by all this, and mutters something that could have only meant: "m okay. For an Afghan minister, the safest place is above earth, inside a rickety aircraft.

Two hours later, outside the Kabul International Airport, it takes a few minutes to realise that you are under the piercing gaze of Abdullah's original leader, now canonised on

walls and cardboards. Massoud, the unshaven martyr in his customary pakol, the traditional Pashtoon cap, is the war

lord frozen in paint, watching the first stirrings of freedom from the ruins of a war he had missed. The remains of the

first chapter of the war on terror are archival items from an era defined by the bloodlust of faith. Kites floating in the dust clouds over Kabul are the tentative symbols of freedom, and the profusion of Toyotas on the unruly roads marks the speed of nation building. In post-Taliban Afghanistan, the aid worker

a luxurious fairy tale in the heart of the ruins. Aspiration begins where irony ends.

A luxury hotel in Kabul is draped in symbolism—and not one of decadence any longer. The Aga Khan, the imam in pin stripes of the Ismaili Muslims and the man behind this multi-million-dollar idea, asks: "There are some who will ask: why build a hotel in Afghanistan at this stage of its struggle for development? And why build one of five-star level?" This highest priest of Koranic capitalism is an investor and re-constructor in the fourth world, and Afghanistan at the moment is one of his favourite compassion zones. He wants to create an "enabling environment"

in which Afghanistan—no doubt one of the world's most photogenic countries with its mountains and

valleys, not to speak of its picture postcard ethnic diversity can develop into an international tourism hotspot. Serena could be the 'distribution point', hopes the man in search of 'failed democracies'. Currently, the most conspicuous travellers to Kabul may be the diplomat, the investor and the donor, but an enthusiastic hotel executive doesn't rule out picnicking in Tora Bora and skiing in Bamiyan sometime in the future. And sightseeing in Kabul has to be a bit more than looking at the lamp post from where the communist leader Najibullah was hanged and the house that Osama bin Laden once rented. It is indeed quite a sight to see almost the entire cabinet of the Afghan Government, headed by President Hamid Karzai himself, at the opening of a hotel. As the President cuts the ribbon, it is an act of defiance as well as aspiration.

It could have been a satanic temptation in another era. This is the country where the 21st century's first war of global morality was waged in the aftermath of 9/11. It is where scriptural terrorism once made fear the national state of mind, and where faith stipulated the exact size of the beard, and where music was blasphemy and kite flying a crime. It is from here that bin Laden waged his first war against the empire before he became the paying guest of the Taliban, and the troglodyte of radical Islamism accessorised by the AK-47. The Taliban regime was more than medieval horror; it was a rage against civilisation. And this is the land where the shades of three civilisations merged Persian, Central Asian and Indian. Since the Aryans crossed the Oxus more than three millennia ago, the footprints of every possible invader have been multiplying on these rugged terrains from Alexander to Arabs to Genghis Khan to the Communists. The interplay of dynasties and empires, coups and public assassinations, culture cleansing of the worst kind and the tyranny of faith, tribalism and warlordism—for a land with raw violence and no justice,

don't look elsewhere. Competing empires played out their great games here, and the so-called buffer state has never breathed easy. Karzai, the 'elected' President of post-war Afghanistan, is trapped in history, which has always been merciless. Karzai, always resplendent in his designer robes, is the president of many missions—of reconciliation, unification and transition—and old ghosts are staging a comeback through the trapdoors of proto-democracy, making him all the more anxious. The elections, presidential as well as parliamentary, may have been the first stirrings of a civil society.

HOPE REGAINED: Women in an elected village council;

Karzai inaugurates a five-star hotel (below right)

The results of the elections to the 249-member Lower House, Wolesi Jirga, and to the provincial councils, are a measure of how democracy, however tentative and perfunctory it may be, reduces the distance between a hoary past and the nervous present. With the UN playing the election commission, the poll was without politics: all candidates were independent. (Remember, Karzai himself is a President without a party.) Still, a few winners stand out: refurbished Taliban, tamed warlords and, equally conspicuous, sanitised Communists. Like post-1989 eastern

Europe, Afghanistan too is realising that popular will doesn't mean unconditional freedom from the past. It is still a country sustained by the US and NATO troops, and Karzai is indebted, and dependent. The living remnants of the Taliban are capable of a few headline-grabbing fireworks.

So the ruler of one of the most ravaged places on earth needs all the blessings—and benevolence. The US and the UN may be the most visible presence in Project Afghanistan, everyone with a heart and a chequebook is here, making it the most dilapidated dateline of international goodwill (India's own contribution so far: Rs 51.58 crore). The beneficiaries range from gardens to monuments, elected village councils to microfinance, hotels to television, maternity wards to slums. The spectacular rebirth of Bagh-e-Babur on the outskirts of Kabul is perhaps a sprawling vindication of this magnanimity. The first Mughal Emperor, Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur Padshah Ghazi, was a first rate gardener, and this was his summer retreat, away from the humid Agra, and his chosen place to watch the sunset. He was reburied here by his son Humayun in 1540. This from Jehangir's inscription on the tombstone: 'When Paradise became his abode, the gatekeeper of paradise asked me for the date/I told him: Paradise forever is the place of Babur the King.' It was 'paradise lost' with the end of the Mughal empire, and the 1990s' civil war made Babur's Garden another photogenic Afghan ruin. Today 'paradise regained' is a project in its final stage, courtesy the Aga Khan. The 11-hectare garden is complete with a mosque that is a miniature parody of the Taj Mahal and the caravanserai and the haremserai (the

Queen's palace), and the creativity behind this 'modern' Mughal garden is the Indian

conservationist Rateesh Nanda. Elsewhere, though, it is not a walk in the garden. Still, dreamers are never in short supply in new Afghanistan, and some of them are homecoming natives. One of the most refined, and audacious, faces of this brain gain is Saad Mohseni, an investment banker by profession but a media maven in the making, ready to play bold and break taboos.

FIRST LESSONS: Students at a newly-opened school in Bamiyan

His independent television channel, Tolo TV, is hard news plus glitzy thrills, and nothing Islamic about them, one of the most popular items being Face of Bollywood. "Those memories live with me," he takes a time travel back to the Afghanistan he had lost, reclining in a chair in a cramped but cozy office he shares with his partner and younger brother. He along with his parents, brothers and sister returned from Australia in 2002 to regain home, and be part of the national reconstruction. There are others, like the smart Iranian woman entrepreneur Sarah Takesh, who is thinking of opening a fashion boutique in Kabul. Or the maverick Sheer Hussan Jaffri, who runs The Roof of Bamiyan, a quaint hillside hotel in Bamiyan. For almost three decades life was a picaresque for the man who carries passport size copies of his own impersonations—comrade, mujahideen, Taliban, American—in his wallet. He returned home but refused to vote. "I don't trust anybody. I want a president who looks after all the villages, not just the Pashtoons." Such murmurings of dissent—history gave Karzai a chance but he is not living up to it—have lost the novelty in Afghanistan, whose president is the best option in a bad situation, with no desirable alternative in sight. And the dissenting Afghan can't overcome the frustration in "Atmosphere over foie gras and the best of chardonnay, or at the Indian restaurant Jaisalmer over mutton vindaloo and single malt and retro music. Such luxuries are for the expatriates only, and it's the best time to be an outsider in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan compassion is there only in the sites of nation building. In a country that has known little benediction in its history, the most glaring absence is the Buddha, an awesome void staring into the valley. The road to civilisation's last ruins is punctuated by signposts announcing the danger beneath: undetected landmines are still waiting. Possibilities of such hidden death don't stop scrawny children in torn woollens from running toward the Buddha seeker. In Bamiyan, sacred and savaged, benevolence has always been hard to come by; high-tech gravediggers and travellers with camcorders and notepads are the new invaders, a necessary improvement on Genghis Khan's horsemen and the Taliban's bearded militia.

WHEELS OF CHANGE: Beneficiaries of micro-finance in a market

Where the world's tallest Buddhas (165 ft and 114 ft high) stood for almost 2,000 years, there are only the Buddha-shaped holes in the sandstone cliffs complete with caves, carvings and frescos, overlooked by the Koh-i-Baba mountain range. The Bamiyan Buddhas, an artistic confluence of the Indian and the Hellenic, were colossal glories of Mahayana Buddhism, but they were images that frightened the Taliban, whose art did not extend beyond the Koran and Kalashnikovs. In March 2001, they blasted the Buddhas in one of history's cruellest displays of iconoclasm and culture cleansing. "The explosions all went off together, all at once, and the Taliban shouted Allahu Akbar. The whole of the valley shook. They (some Taliban leaders and bin Laden) were all laughing and happy, like they were at a wedding or it was the end of Ramadan," one of the men who was forced at gunpoint to place explosives in the statues told travel writers Bijan Omrani and Matthew Leeming. Today, archaeology is doing its best to recover the remains of antique memory. In Afghanistan, it's not about rebuilding the ravaged nation alone, it's about regaining civilisati

and the philanthropist are the new volunteers of freedom. Assignment Afghanistan is the new romance in the Orient—the Hindu Kush chic revised. The irony of it all comes to a standstill once you check into Hotel Kabul Serena,