

REFLECTIONS ON KABUL

Reached Kabul after a 2 hour flight from Delhi. The scene from the aircraft was actually quite interesting- You cross the Indus, and there is a strip of green and then all of a sudden, just barren desert- not a tree in sight, sparse habitation, miles and miles of sand! Then come the mountains- rugged, stark, brown. Extending forever- looking at these mountains from the air one can easily believe why this country has been hard to capture and rule throughout ages.

And then one hits a valley- the Kabul valley. Not the green oasis one had imagined but stark and brown again. The plane descends and there are houses, sheds, loads of construction and lots of devastated buildings. The airport is very basic- like Bagdogra airport almost. As we land, there are rows of helicopters and UN aircraft on the tarmac.

The immigration, customs and baggage handling is fast and efficient. I realize that my mobile is not enabled here but spot a kiosk of Afghan Wireless and enquire about getting a SIM- pleasantly surprised to find that you can show your passport and get a complimentary SIM with some 400 Afghani of talk time!! So I am all set!

Afghanistan is a landlocked country which seems to be a victim of geography- it sits on the crossroads of Central, West and South Asia. This has made it, in the words of Arnold Toynbee, a “roundabout of the ancient world”, with people from all over coming here, either passing through it or even settling down. It is clearly an ancient land- the city of Balkh in the North was, till the discovery of the remains of ancient Damascus, the oldest living city. Alexander crossed it in 330 BCE on his way to India. Repeated invasions from the West and the North have left the country a mixture of various ethnic and linguistic groups.

In 1747, after the death of the infamous Nadir Shah, a Pashtun Ahmed Shah Durrani was established what we know today as Afghanistan. The Pashtun tribes ruled Afghanistan till the Marxist rule was established in 1978. The legendary Zahir Shah was the king from 1933 to 1973 when he was deposed by a former Prime Minister Daoud Khan who in turn was deposed in the Marxist coup by Tarakki in 1978.

The chaos and the hustling by the porters and taxi drivers outside the airport is familiar! There is surprisingly very little security. In fact, all around the airport, I see Afghan police wearing strange baggy trousers but De Gaulle style caps and no guns. In fact, there is less security here than even at ISBT in Delhi! This, I found on my return, was an illusion- actually, the airport is one of the most dysfunctional and chaotic airports I have been to! On the return trip, it took us over 2 hours to get to check in- there were more than 4 security checks of baggage and the body. And, this is most interesting, everyone, from the security personnel to the person who checks you in, asks for baksheesh!

We are ferried into a Toyota Van to be taken to our hotel. The Afghan hosts are polite to a fault and all of them speak Hindi! In fact, almost everyone here speaks some form of Hindi since a lot of them have been to India.

The roads are fine- the houses on the road from the airport are all mud and pretty sordid. The place we are staying is in an area called Shahr-e-Naw or New City- it is the city centre and is the downtown. We see the Indira Gandhi Institute of child Health and a cinema hall which only shows Hindi films! The streets look like the bazaar of any small north Indian town. Chaotic, a lot of traffic, lot of hawkers- except the hawkers are all either money changers or mobile card sellers and the cars on the road are all Japanese or American!

The hotel is pretty new- run by Indians I found out, as are a lot of construction companies and other business. The security at the hotel is stiff- at least 5 AK 47 carrying guards, and metal detectors etc. In fact, all along the road there are houses with high walls, barbed wire at top being guarded by big, tough looking Afghanis with AK 47 rifles. I thought these might be VIP houses but it turns out that they are all guest houses.

Guest houses for the expats is big business in Kabul. About 300,000 expats in the country, most in Kabul since outside of Kabul there seems to be no state! The expats stay in heavily guarded guest houses and don't move around too much.

A friend who has been here for some time tells me that the Afghans hate all expats except the Germans and the Indians- the Americans, the Britishers and of course the Pakistanis are hated the most. Just before our trip, there had been 2 suicide bombing attacks in Kabul and now all the expats are lying low- the UN people, it is rumored have been told to remove the UN markings from the cars and such like! Almost everyone I spoke with said that the Russians were much better in this regard- they built dispensaries, schools etc in the remote areas, they lived like the Afghans (not behind high walls and barbed wire) and there was security- it is this last thing which the middle class Afghans are missing now.

The hotel are also classified according to their security preparedness- the one we are staying in has the highest MOSS 5 rating which means it is Ok for UN and World Bank people to stay here.

I venture out onto the streets- it is Ramzaan and most people are hurrying along home, with huge Afghani naans under their arms to break the fast. The naans are made in "bakeries" which are essentially small tandoor shops. Except that the tandoors are appropriate technology- the tandoors or ovens are still made of clay but they are fired not by coal or wood but by huge canisters of cooking gas! The

Afghan tradition of baking also is evident in the numerous bakeries selling biscuits, cakes and other goodies.

I walk along a street which has only construction material stores- sanitary fittings, pipes, pumps etc. In fact, in all of Kabul, all the stores in a street typically sell the same thing- thus there are streets where there are over 20 tailors (all using Singer sewing machines of pretty old vintage), others where one gets only car spare parts etc. I change some money on a corner, take some pictures and am back in time to go to an Iftar dinner hosted by our host the Chancellor of the Kabul University. We are here as part of a World Bank sponsored project to prepare a blueprint for greater cooperation between University of Delhi and Kabul University.

The iftar dinner starts with the hosts saying their prayers and then breaking their fast with light snacks. The Minister for higher education is there as are many high officials in the Kabul University. The customary speeches are made and then dinner starts- I am sitting next to one of the Deans who is telling us about how the war has destroyed the infrastructure in the city.

The next day, we are taken in a bus to the Kabul University for various meetings. There is a dusty haze which seems to be a permanent feature of mornings in Kabul. The city of Kabul is fairly sprawling- there are houses on barren hills, though from a distance it is hard to imagine how anyone would be living in such harsh conditions. There seem to be no running water or sewage. Along the road there are buildings which have been clearly destroyed during the war- a cinema hall which is totally devastated though the only thing remaining is a neon sign saying "Cinema Theatre". There are houses where the roofs have caved in but people are still living in them.

There is a lot of activity on the streets and the markets. There is poverty all around. The streets have an unusual number of children begging, though this might be due to the Ramzaan. Everybody seems to be selling something- one of the streets that we cross is an auto junkyard dealers. With the number of foreign cars in Kabul increasing hugely (second hand cars from Dubai etc apparently are very cheap), there is presumably a great demand for spares. Then there are battery shops, about 30 in a row and so on. Beauty parlors are also everywhere though passing through this section of town which is not very affluent, one does not see any women on the streets. The beauty parlors all have photographs of Katrina Kaif or Aishwarya Rai- not blonde Hollywood starlets!

Afghanistan has 19 universities- all of them public. Out of these, 4 are in Kabul. Kabul University is the oldest University, established in 1931. In fact, in 1922, the then king had decreed that all women must be educated. It is sad to see a country regressing from such beginnings.

Kabul University campus is huge and scenic. It is also green. And there are roses everywhere! Apparently, the Afghans have a weakness for roses- so when they can grow them, they do it with great gusto. Inside the rooms, in the cars, in the busses and taxis, there are plastic imitations of roses in all colors! The buildings are either big, Soviet style structures or barracks. We are taken to the Chancellor's office for a meeting. The office looks comfortable though not affluent. After the meeting with the Chancellor we are taken to a tour of the campus.

The campus is bustling with activity. Kabul University has about 8000 students. Every year, there is a national common examination for all the Universities and out of the approximately 80,000 students who appear, about 1300 are taken in by Kabul University. There are many women on campus, though each and every one of them is wearing a scarf to cover their head.

We are taken to the Computer Center first- this one, like most of the other facilities in Afghanistan has been built by foreign money- in this case, the Germans have set up this center. The center is fairly up to date in its equipment and one sees all the 50 computers occupied, mostly by girls as it happens. Internet surfing, some projects etc. Most of the work is done in Dari or Persian, the official language. Internet connectivity is provided by NATO through a satellite connecting to the NATO hub in Hamburg.

Next on the agenda is the library- here too there are many corners- the Iran corner, the American corner (which is totally deserted !), the German corner etc. Each country has provided funds and books etc to the library. There are over 300000 volumes in the library we are told, some 50% of them in English and the rest in Dari. The library was very good at one time but during the war, there was no fuel wood and so the fighters burnt books to keep warm during the severe Kabul winters.

I was also told that a similar thing happened with the trees in Kabul. Babur, some 500 years ago had planted Chinars here which have now all but disappeared. Then came the Russians who planted huge numbers of trees like Russian poplar, maple etc. During the Taliban days, most of them were cut to provide fuel wood since electricity was in short supply.

In the library, we also saw books with bullet holes through them. Apparently, the University was a front, with one side perched up on the hill next to the University shelling it to rid of the defenders inside the campus. This has taken a huge toll on the campus- I saw steel cupboards through which rocket shells have passed. The laboratories, especially in the Chemistry dept. were totally and absolutely wrecked.

The other amenities in the campus are mostly non-existent or in shambles. It is difficult to believe that the toilets on the campus are actually in a worse shape of

cleanliness and functionality than the public toilets in India! (an interesting sidelight though- all the WCs that I saw in Kabul had their “hole” in the front!) There were no food stalls or canteens that I could locate on the campus.

I saw a fair mix of girls and boys, though almost never did I see any intermixing. And all the girls, like every single women I saw in Afghanistan, had their head covered with a chador. The students belong to all the provinces and are chosen on the basis of a common admission test after their high school. The undergraduate degree is for 4 years of which the first year is a common course for all subjects and is basically a remedial course to bring all the students upto the same level.

I was taken into the classrooms where classes were going on. The students are all writing in Dari as the lectures are all delivered in Dari. There are no text books and so all that the student has to learn is the class notes. The students are quite inquisitive and when asked to give us some feedback on the problems they face, a number of them do venture. They speak some English, though every single one of them started his (always his, no girl got up) spiel by “In the name of the mighty Allah and with the permission of my respected teachers.....”.

The day starts at 8 am and finishes by 1.30 pm since this is the month of Ramadan. The Afghans seem to be extremely pious when it comes to fasting since everyone we met was observing the fast. But it is more than that- once when the bus stopped at a traffic light and one of my colleagues was chewing gum, some urchins at the stop light made rude gestures asking him to spit the gum out!

I venture out of the hotel to roam around the streets. One of the main markets is a place called Chicken Street which has several shops selling stones, jewelry, carpets etc. The pavements have many dry fruit sellers as also fruit sellers. The hawkers in Kabul have a wonderful contraption to sell their wares- a wheelbarrow with a single scooter tire! On top of the wheelbarrow is fixed a platform which has fruits, Chinese trinkets, caps and what not.

There is a “shop” on the pavement which has huge numbers of DVDs of Hollywood and Bollywood films. The DVDs, obviously duplicated in China are dirt cheap- 30 Afghani per DVD. I am skeptical of the quality and so buy 2 diffidently to check out the quality. As it turns out, the quality is pretty good, very unlike the pirated film DVDs available in Palika Bazaar.

There is obviously a lot of poverty around- the urchins on the streets cleaning the parked cars, the beggars lying on the road and the general demeanor of most of the people on the street. Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world- more than two-thirds of the country lives on less than \$2 a day. But there is also obviously a lot of wealth. The number of cars in Kabul is astounding considering that the population is only around 2-3 million. A lot of the cars are huge SUVs

and I saw several “designer boutiques”. My local informant tells me that the money is coming from one of three sources- the dollar economy being sustained by the expats and aid, the drug money and also the money stashed away from the war. The development aid is being plundered. The drug economy is by some estimates, some 70% of the total economy.

While one sees this dollar economy everywhere (every single price is quoted in Afghanis or US Dollars) the average Afghani is having a tough time. The school teacher makes about 2000 Afghanis or US\$40 a month. This, I was told is about how much an average Afghani earns in a month also. The highest paying jobs are with the NGOs and multilateral agencies. The University teachers get from \$250 a month to about \$400 a month. No wonder that most of them have a second job to survive.

The security situation in Kabul is deteriorating very fast- the one week that we were there, there were 3 suicide bombings, one just about 400 meters from our hotel. Interestingly, there was no panic in the hotel. In fact, the way I found out about this was while waiting for our transport in the morning, the guard panicked when 2 westerners came out of the hotel to wait for their cars. They were told to hurriedly go inside since their presence might trigger another attack! This was not an isolated incident- at the airport, I saw a westerner get out of an unmarked car, with 4 guards and a bullet proof jacket.

The penultimate day in Kabul was a Friday, a holiday. So we were taken sight seeing to Babur Bagh. This is the first “Mughal Garden” and Babur is buried here together with his daughter. The tomb of Babur, with the famous quote “If there is a heaven on earth, this is it”, is also bullet ridden. The whole complex is being restored by the Aga Khan Foundation, though I heard murmurs of this being done to promote a hotel in the complex. The garden is laid out as all Mughal gardens- fountains, terraces, flower beds and fruit trees. From the garden we went to the top of the hill which serves as a backdrop to the garden. The top of the hill has two cannons which were fired at 6 hourly intervals for the residents of Kabul to keep track of time.

Our last stop was a huge area on the other side of town- Khair Khana, a mammoth residential and commercial complex. The streets are filled with small and large shops, hawkers of all descriptions while the side lanes are residential. There is no sign of an underground sewer and here for the first time I noticed that huge containers are being used as shops and houses! Scarcity is the mother of all innovation- what better use to put these solid, cubical steel structures!

The city is devastated- almost every single building one sees has some signs of the destruction caused by the long war. There is a lot of rebuilding going on and construction is booming. However, there are rumors of kickbacks and a major portion of the aid being wasted.

As we taxi on the runway on our way back, I see a row of F-16 fighters at the airport. The planes, the Apache helicopters, the armored carriers, the tough looking Americans in the hotel, all a reminder of the occupation in Afghanistan. Call it reconstruction or by any other name. However, the spirit of the boy I met at Kabul University still inspires hope. Here was a young boy with a cheerful disposition who was at the top of his class in the Faculty of Science. When I asked him whether he would have any problems with his family if were to come to Delhi for a Masters program, he candidly replied that he has no family- they were all killed in the war.

A whole nation, which has borne the brunt of a war lasting 30 years, still surviving under such harsh conditions and trying to improve their lot- that is the one thing which amazed me. But then, as a friend of mine said, for almost 2000 years, various foreigners have tried to subjugate the Afghans and have failed. Maybe this too shall pass.