

Beauty and the Beast

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In the first of two articles, Anthony Fitzherbert recollects a side of Afghanistan which contrasts vividly with the commonly held view of a country torn apart by war, poverty and religious extremism.

With rhetoric about Afghanistan focused on the satanic nature of the Taleban, and the less than edifying record of the Northern Alliance, I find it salutary to reflect on some of the more lasting impressions that I have gained from a long and intimate acquaintance with the country, which started in the 1960s. It is not just the beauty of the landscape, which is often breathtaking, it is the beauty of its people. Not just their physical appearance, which is remarkable but the beauty of their dignity, fortitude and unflinching courage in adversity.

Even in happier days, Afghanistan was an abjectly poor country by Western standards. In the glow of nostalgia it is too often forgotten that in the days of the King and his cousin Daud Khan, Afghanistan had some of the worst social indicators outside the African continent, with less than 10 per cent of the adult population effectively literate.

Or that hundreds of young Afghans, men and women returning from their education in the Soviet Central Asian states became genuinely committed communists as the result of comparing the condition of their brethren in the Central Asian Soviet republics with that of their own countrymen, who they perceived to be held in a time warp of poverty stricken, feudal, backwardness.

Even in those days, twenty five years before the advent of the Taleban, in few places outside the capital, Kabul, did you see Afghan women in public, who were not completely hidden under their pleated chadris of pale blue and faded gold. Although, it is true that country women working in the fields were always more loosely veiled, as befitted their labour, as indeed they still are, and the mahogany faced Kutchi women leading their flocks and camels, were as brazen and open faced as their turbaned and fiercely bearded men folk.

The impressions that remain with me most clearly have been gained from working for many years in rural Afghanistan engaged in the work of agricultural rehabilitation and development. Assisting livelihoods shattered by years of conflict and the almost total collapse of the fragile fabric of their state. This has involved traveling extensively in rural Afghanistan and into some of the remotest areas, seldom visited by foreigners.

These impressions are of a people who, for all their faults, have many and remarkable virtues - hard work, flair, ingenuity, dignity, pride, independence, courtesy, unflinching hospitality and above all courage. I have witnessed at first hand and repeatedly the unflinching courage of the Afghan people, not just in battle, but in the face of the catastrophe and a harsh environment, repeatedly re-building their lives and their communities shattered by conflict and natural calamity.

My latest mission was undertaken this August, in those final days before the "civilized" world was brought face to face with its reality. I traveled with a small group of Afghans for almost three weeks, deep into the valleys of the northern Hindu Kush, that lead far up into the central Hazarajat from the Northern Plains from Mazar-e-Sharif and Pul-e-Kumri.

I traveled also through some of the desiccated rain-fed wheat lands, along the plains and foot hills that face north towards Central Asia, where three years of drought have rendered the population completely destitute. This is an area of mixed ethnic origin and even more mixed religious persuasion, which, until the events of the last few days, has been under Taleban control since 1998.

Everywhere we met with the unfailing customary good manners, courtesy and hospitality of the local population; country folk and farmers living in the many villages we visited and in whose homes we spent each night.

Starting from Mazar-e-Sharif, we visited almost every valley between Pul-e-Kumri and Bamiyan. Poor sad Bamiyan with its empty Buddha niches. Strangely quiet - many of its young men having left to train for the fight against the Taleban, in Iran - with its well tended fields of potatoes, for which the area is famous, still being tilled by the old men and women and small children who have stayed on.

Although at the time of this mission all this area was under Taleban control, we did not have the slightest trouble with the local authorities. Most of those we met had been appointed from among the local Tajik and Hazara populations. The hard-line elements of the Kandahari Taleban and their Arab and Pakistani supporters were at the time too preoccupied in fighting the Northern Alliance on the Taloqan and Andarab fronts.

No restrictions were placed upon us and we traveled as we desired from one valley to another, talking with whom we wished, visiting countless settlements and staying wherever we chose in whatever village we happened to reach at night fall, even on some occasions well after dark. Since September 11, this would hardly be possible and already areas of factional control are once again changing.

All along the north facing slopes of the Hindu Kush, for more than 1,000 km, the hills are covered in a deep "loess" soil, created from the dust that blew in clouds and for millennia off the Central Asian steppe as the ice sheets retreated. This is the great belt of lalmi rain fed wheat land, the traditional bread-basket of Afghanistan, now so desperately affected by the worst drought in centuries.

The tragedy of the population of these northern foot hills and plains is it was relatively unaffected by either the Soviet war, or the internecine mujahedin "Commanders" war that followed it. The subsequent Taleban conquest didn't affect all the region either. It's only in the last 3 or 4 years that it has been seriously hit by climatic change.

These valleys and districts previously supported an agricultural population, in modest but reasonable prosperity, but are now completely parched. Thousands are now living in desperate, ragged camps, totally dependent on food aid or else hanging on in their villages, their seed corn eaten, their plough-bullocks, sheep and goats slaughtered or sold, until the last of their wells dry up and they have to move.

In dramatic contrast running through these now desiccated hills are a series of remarkably well-watered river valleys that still support an intense agriculture. These rivers are fed from deep springs welling up from the bowels of the Hindu Kush ranges and from mysterious lakes cradled in the central Hazarajat. Like everything to do with Afghanistan, its popular image is only, at best, partially true and the contrasts, even in the shadow of catastrophe, are as dramatic as the scenery.

The present inhabitants of these mountains and valleys are ethnically mainly Hazara and Tajik with a scattering of Uzbeks, Pashtuns and Tartars, but their faces show centuries and generations of intermarriage and the shifting lines of conquest. Some valleys and some communities are Shia, some Ismaili, some Sunni by religious persuasion, and some are mixed, living in traditionally tolerant proximity. This, despite the Taleban, an alien force, more fanatical, more implacable, more intolerant, more desert Arab than Afghan, Persian or Turk in their world vision of religious purity.

Though armed opposition has been ruthlessly crushed by all sides, the reality is that such places have largely been left alone by the Taleban, provided they have kept the peace and paid the taxes imposed on them for their religious deviance. Shia homes still displayed haloed icons of Hazrat Ali, like Christ in a green cloak with a sword, brought back from Iran by returning migrants and pilgrims to the shrine of the Imam Reza in Mashhad. Ismaili houses still bravely displayed photographs of their beloved Hazrat Imam, the Aga Khan.

In the course of three weeks we visited many wonderful and secret valleys. Each different, each a surprise, like the Iraq valley in Shibar entered through the merest crack in the frowning rock faces and leading into an enchanted world of orchards and intense cultivation. Some with strange Turkic names marking the many incursions from the steppe. Darreh Bir Kilich - the Valley of the Single Sword - remembering what long forgotten act of heroism or outrage? Or as a Persian lament - like Shahr-e-Sagan - the City of Dogs - remembering the Mongol slaughter, when all that was left was the howling of the dogs.

The amazing Kahmard valley. Fifty miles of towering multi-coloured cliffs and sheer rock faces in every hue of red and grey and ocre ever changing in the shifting light. Here a wonderful river still supports a rich and sophisticated agriculture, irrigating crops of wheat, potatoes, rice, maize, pulses, sweet smelling Persian clover, and orchards of apricots and ancient walnut trees. This amazing valley culminates where the Kahmard and the Bamiyan rivers meet, at a dusty bazaar with a mysterious name, Do Ab-e-Mikh Zarin (The Two Waters of the Golden Nail) where the chai khanas feed the drivers of the endless caravan of lorries that ply the trade of Central Asia with green tea, pilaw and kebabs.

Even in this wonderful place, war, internecine conflict and climatic changes have laid their baleful hand. The amazing source of the Kahmard river is high in the Darreh Ajar, where the King had a hunting lodge and the river pours out from a cave in the rock face, fully formed, limpid and teeming with trout. Even here, in this magic place, the ground is strewn with land mines that mark the front line between the opposing forces of the Hazara Shia, Hizb-e-Wahdat party and the forces of the Kandahari Taleban. The side valley of the Darreh Modar (the valley of the Mother) entered through a great cleft in the cliff face, pitted with the caves of an ancient Buddhist monastery, is drought stricken and parched - many of its orchards of apricots and mulberries gaunt and leafless.

Everywhere we engaged in long and always friendly discussions, on life, agriculture and the state of the world. Never was there a doubt in our minds that at the end of the day there would be a friendly place to lay our heads and a safe house in which to over night. Sometimes we slept in the house of a villager, sometimes with a farmer, sometimes with the mullah in his ja ye namaz, sometimes on a roof, sometimes in the mehman khana - the guest house of the local administration - no more than a simple room in a mud-brick house.

Our discussions likewise, with gatherings of the village men, were sometimes in the mosque, sometimes in a private house, sometimes among the fruit trees in a garden or in the shade of some ancient gnarled mulberry or walnut tree, sometimes in the parched wilderness gazing across fields that have produced no crops in three seasons. As men and strangers we only once had discussions with women, working in their bean fields, but they were Ismaili.

On no occasion was I as a faranghi, non-believer, questioned about my presence or made to feel in anyway discomfited, neither among Tajiks, Hazaras, Tartars, or Uzbeks or in the Pashtun villages of lower Doshi and Kunduz - where we went seeking sources of good wheat seed. My old opinion and the experience gained from years of working with them, about the skill and courage of the Afghan farmer in the face of his environment was once again confirmed.

There was little reference to the Taleban in our discussions and for the safety and security of our hosts we refrained from provoking it. These were not xenophobic, God-crazed fanatics, who we encountered on our journey, but hardy countrymen and farmers. Certainly, they honour the God of their forefathers according

to their ancient custom and particular interpretation of holy writ and have in their time fought bravely against the foreign invader under the green banner of Islam, but they have not yet forgotten the ancient laws of hospitality and courtesy due to the stranger, that pre-date even that.

Afghans are not, in my experience, by nature either xenophobes or religious bigots. Many a time when sharing the floor of a crowded room, in a bombed out village with fifteen or twenty bearded warriors and their armaments, they have with the greatest kindness placed me to sleep in the furthest corner of the room. So placing me with the advice that if I slept there they would not have to disturb my Christian slumbers unduly, when they rose to make their first namaz.

Many a mission made during the Ramadan month of fast has been punctuated by exhortations that I at least should eat, even if they were obliged to fast - to my acute embarrassment. Never once on this mission was I embarrassed by religious accusation or engaged in provocative theological debate, like gentlemen in an old fashioned London club where such conversation would be considered bad manners lest it cause embarrassment. So too, I hope, would I myself behave towards the guest beneath my roof and my companions on the road. May be also it was because the communities we visited and indeed the small group of Afghans with whom I traveled, themselves, represented several different ethnic and linguistic groups and Islamic theological points of view. This was more representative of the Afghans and the Afghanistan that I know, than the alien forces represented by the young black turbanded Talibs we encountered from time to time in tea houses, and dusty bazaars along the Pul-e-Kumri to Kabul road, returning to their camps from the Taloqan front.

It was after overhearing a conversation between three of these young fighters in a tea house that the Badakhshani poet in our party recited an old Afghan verse - remembering the Mongol slaughter of seven hundred and eighty years ago, in the Taloqan pass, now the scene of recent slaughter between the forces of the Taleban and the Northern Alliance and still on the front line.

"No one has crossed the Taloqan pass. With corpses the earth is not replete. Come, let us go to the Master !! The dead are dust. Youth has not grown old."

Lest I be lulled into a state of false reality we also heard tell of or came upon the grizzly evidence of atrocities committed by all sides during the internecine conflicts of the last twenty years: the crimes committed by the Hazara Shias of Hisbe Wahdat against the Panjshiri fighters of Massoud's Jamiyat Islami; the massacre of the Taleban by the people of Mazar-e-Sahrif in 1997; the former's revenge a year later; and the barbarities of Rashid Dostum's when he ruled his Northern Uzbek khanate, with his raping and pillaging troopers known as the qilimjams - the carpet thieves. (It has to be said that while Dostum committed atrocities, his regime was paradoxically liberal, allowing girls to attend school and university.)

There has been no exclusivity of murder and outrage. There are no innocents on any side in these terrible times.

Images of misery also linger in my memory. The pathetic makeshift camps of sticks and rags that lie scattered across the face of the parched landscape. Families displaced by drought and war and now in serious danger of starvation if the foreign aid is halted. The image of a young boy of about twelve with a skinny donkey loaded with cans. A tiny figure lost amidst the desiccated hills of Dahana-e-Ghawri setting out from his almost deserted village on his daily journey to fetch water from the nearest remaining spring five hours walk away, in the broiling sun.

Thank God, other more refreshing and hopeful memories also remain. One evening we arrived at dusk in a Tartar village in the lower Kahmard valley, dating from the Timurid settlements, set below towering cliffs with the river running strong and cool between fields of rice and maize and clover.

We were directed to a large mud-brick house with great heavy wooden doors, belonging to the qariadah, the head of the village, as a suitable place to stay the night. Clearly a man of substance. The great man was away visiting in the neighbouring Seyghan valley and his son was somewhere else when we arrived so we were met at the gate by the grandson.

A self-possessed young boy of thirteen with a handsome Tartar face under a large turban. He greeted us in his grandfather's name and bade us welcome with a grave dignity and courtesy beyond his years, and showed us with a shy smile, up some stairs to a long guest room carpeted with rough qilims. A small graceful and completely composed figure that could have stepped straight out of a Moghul painting. Quite un-dismayed by the unannounced arrival of a group of complete strangers, among them an Englishman.

A short time later his father and others returned and an evening meal was prepared. As always it was beautifully laid out and presented in the Afghan custom. For this was not a village on the brink of starvation though they were providing shelter to many from the drought effected side valleys. Fresh warm rounds of nan bread, a white pilaw of rice and raisins, a chicken with dried apricots and fresh sweet melon, served on a long white sofra of embroidered linen. After we had eaten the Badakhshani poet, recited from the Persian poet Hafez-e-Shirazi. Disturbing verses appropriate to the times.

How, I see that we are girded round with bitterness.

Every occurrence, I see, is full of treachery and disorder.

No compassion given between brother and brother.

I see no mercy between father and son.

Daughters all in conflict and discord with their mothers,

I see sons all at odds with their father

The thoroughbred wounded beneath its saddle.

While golden collars I see hung about the necks of asses.

Later he quoted the first verses of the Mathnavi of Jelaluddin Rumi or Balkhi as he is known in Afghanistan. The ones that he plucked from his turban and presented to his disciple, Husam Chelebi. The ones that start.

Oh listen to the reed how she tells the tale.

Complaining of her separation, from the reedbed

With all its yearning loneliness of man's separation from the divine.

Later I overheard the Badakhshani talking with the grandson of the house, who is at present being educated in the local madrassa in the Koran, but who had listened with wide-eyed attention throughout the recitations, which he was hearing for the first time. "Yes of course, Abdillah, it is essential that you know the Holy Koran" he said. "But you must not forget that to be a properly educated young man you must also know the writings of the great poets and mystics."

Recently, I heard news of my companions on this mission. Courageously and despite Taleban orders to the contrary they have managed to deliver seed to the farmers in all the places we had visited, in time for the

autumn sowing, and before they were finally and forcibly stopped by the authorities. Seed to increase the yields, seed to multiply against the time when the terrible drought will break.

Afghanistan has not yet completely reverted to barbarism. Courage and compassion are not yet dead, but if the people have a vision for the future they will preface it, I know, by the phrase - "With the help of God!" which means their own endeavor, hard work and initiative and a nudge or two from the Divine, not as a reference to the US or British governments - whatever we may wish or hope to the contrary!

Anthony Fitzherbert - a specialist in agricultural and rural development - has had a long association with Afghanistan. He first visited the country in the late Sixties and early Seventies; his most recent trip coming on the eve of the September 11 atrocities.

Location: Central Asia
Uzbekistan
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Tajikistan

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