

The Dancing Boys of the North

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Wealthy strongmen recruit adolescent boys for entertainment and sex, with the local authorities powerless to stop the practice.

Some men enjoy playing with dogs, some with women. I enjoy playing with boys," said Allah Daad, a one-time mujahedin commander in the northern Afghan province of Kunduz.

He is one of a growing number of men involved in what is known as "bacha baazi"—literally, "boy-play"—a time-honoured tradition, deplored by human rights activists and clerics, that is seeing a revival in the relatively secure north of Afghanistan.

The boys are kept by powerful older men, made to dance at special parties, and often sexually abused afterwards. Known as "bacha bereesh" - literally, "beardless boys", they are under 18, with 14 the preferred age.

"When I was young, I had a bacha bereesh who was the best in the region," recalled Allah Daad, 44. "He danced like a flying pigeon.... Nobody could take his place afterwards. I kept him for three years, then left him when he matured."

Allah Daad has kept many boys over the years, and says he enjoys his "hobby". "I am married, but I prefer boys to women," he said. "You can't take women with you to parties in this region, and you can't make them dance. These boys are our [mark of] prestige."

Large halls known as "qush-khana" provide the venues for bacha baazi parties where the boys' "owners" or "kaatah" invite their friends to watch them dancing. Late in the night, when the dancing is over, the boys are often shared with close friends, for sexual abuse.

Allah Daad explained how the boys are enticed into the arrangement. "First we select boys in the village and later on we try to trick them into coming with us," he said. "Some of them stay with us for money; they get a monthly allowance, and in return we can have them any time we want. They don't stay with us all the time - they can do their own jobs and then just come to parties with us."

If a boy refuses to become a bacha bereesh, he said, there is little a man can do to make him. "We can't force them," he insisted. "Only the very powerful can have boys with them all the time."

The owner will take his boy to wedding parties to show him off to other men.

"When the party starts, the boys are dressed in special clothes, called 'jaaman'," continued Allah Daad. "Then Mazari dancing bells are tied to their feet and they dance in time to the music."

Several different types of dances are popular, he explained, each with its own beat. If the boy refuses to dance or performs badly, his master beats him with a long stick.

“We have to do that,” said Allah Daad. “We spend money on these boys, so they have to dance.”

Allah Dad’s current bacha, who is 16, refused to be interviewed.

Another owner forced his 14-year-old boy to speak, although he would not give his name.

“I was dancing last night,” he said, looking exhausted. “I have been doing this for the past year. I have no choice - I’m poor. My father is dead, and this is the only source of income for me and my family. I try to dance well, especially at huge parties. The men throw money at me, and then I gather it up. Sometimes they take me to the market and buy me nice clothes.”

The tradition of older men maintaining adolescent boys is by no means restricted to the north of Afghanistan, but the custom is in abeyance in the south, where the Taleban and their strict moral code act as a deterrent.

In the north, no such curbs exist, and bacha baazi has seen a massive resurgence in the past few years.

“Bacha baazi has increased tremendously lately and is still on the rise,” said Baz Gul, a resident of Kunduz. “In the past, people were ashamed of it, and tried to hide it. Now nobody is shy about it, and they participate openly in these parties.”

He explained that there were several reasons why the practice had become more common, one of which was the growing influence of local strongmen, who regard bacha baazi as status symbols.

These militia commanders are supposed to have demobilised their forces and handed over their weapons, but as IWPR has reported, many still rule the roost on the ground and retain the power to intimidate the local population.

Baz Gul said poverty was another reason why boys could find themselves ensnared, while the government had failed to do much about the problem and its police force enjoyed little public confidence.

“It used to be that only a few people had boys. Now everyone owns one and the authorities don’t care about it at all,” he said. “It’s got to the point where almost no party takes place without dancing boys. It’s seen as a disgrace if you don’t have dancing boys at your wedding. This has led to a rise in immoral behaviour among boys, and if nothing is done about it, this trend will continue.”

For some, a bacha bereesh is a status symbol.

“I am not really rich, but I am just as good as the wealthy,” said Nasruddin, known as Nasro Bay, who lives in Baghlan province. “I want as many bacha bereesh as possible, so that when I go to parties I am no worse than anybody else.”

Nasro Bay insisted that the dancing boy tradition was a good one.

“It’s a good thing,” he said. “We have our own culture. In foreign countries, the women dance. We have our own dances which don’t exist anywhere else in the world.”

Militia commanders and other men of substance buy and sell good-looking boys, using the bacha baazi parties as marketplaces.

“Commanders and wealthy men arrange parties in order to select a bacha bereesh,” said Nek Mohammad, a resident of Baghlan’s Andarab district who frequently attends dance parties, although he does not own a bacha bereesh himself. “Many of the men make their boys dance at these parties, and other men choose one and pay for him. By the end of the party, the boy has acquired a new owner.”

He said substantial amounts of money changes hands in these transactions.

Like Nasro Bay, Nek Mohammad sees public ostentation as part of the bacha baazi tradition.

“Commanders often take their boys to a market and buy them beautiful clothes, as a challenge to other commanders. Sometimes they even give them cars. That gives them a very big reputation,” he said.

Religious scholars condemn the custom, which they count as one of the most sinful acts possible.

“Making boys dance and sexually abusing them is strictly prohibited by Islam,” said Mawlawi Ghulam Rabbani, a religious leader in Takhar province. “Those who engage in it should be punished. They should be thrown off a mountain and stoned to death.”

Local officials admit the practice is prevalent but are at a loss as to how to combat it.

“Yes, bacha baazi is practiced a great deal, especially in the Khost-o-Fering and Andarab districts,” said Hafizullah Khaliqyar, head of the prosecutor’s office for Baghlan province. “Boys are forced to dance, they are sexually abused, and they are even bought and sold. Fights take place over these bacha bereesh. It’s increasing day by day, and it’s catastrophic.”

Khaliqyar said there was little that prosecutors could do. “The police and district heads won’t cooperate with us,” he complained. “They don’t send us their files, so we can’t take action.”

He said the paramilitary commanders involved were so powerful that no one – not even the police – would raise a hand against them.

“Regional commanders engage in this practice and support it,” he said. “They have money, power and

weapons, and neither the district heads nor the local population dares to tell us about this.”

However, Khaliqyar said he is committed to fighting the practice and had had some successes.

“We treat this matter very seriously. It’s against the law, and the perpetrators should be punished,” he said.

Police in Pul-e-Khumri, the capital of Baghlan, recently raided a bacha-baazi hall and arrested 30 men. “Their case is currently with the Supreme Court. We have sent several men to prison on these types of charges,” said Khaliqyar.

In Takhar province, the head of the local security agencies, General Sayed Ahmad Saame, also complained about lack of cooperation from the public.

“We have closed every bacha baazi centre we have found,” he said. “We have forwarded seven cases to the prosecutor’s office so far this year.”

But there is only so much the police can do. “This practice has such a long history in this province that local people treat it as a respected custom, and won’t cooperate with us. This is a serious obstacle to our work,” said Saame.

General Asadullah Amarkhail, the security chief in Kunduz, agreed that public cooperation was needed if the practice was to be curbed, although to date 27 people had been arrested in his province.

Mohammad Zaher Zafari, head of the northern branch of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, bemoaned the government’s inability to take action.

“Unfortunately I have to say that this type of dancing, sexual abuse and even the sale of boys has been going on for years,” he said. “It is a despicable culture. The boys involved are usually poor, underage or orphans, and they are forced into it by their economic circumstances.

“It’s shocking from both a humanitarian and a legal point of view. The boys who do this have a very dark future ahead of them – they will always be ashamed and they grow into frustrated human beings, and, pose a threat to community. The government has taken no action on this issue, and child abuse is still being practiced.”

Khaliqyar took a similar view of the damage done to the bacha bereesh, saying it destroys their identity.

“If the United Nations and the government don’t take this issue as seriously as they do child-trafficking and drug-smuggling, and punish the offenders, it’s going to be almost impossible to prevent it,” he said.

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Location: Afghanistan

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