

In a Land Without Music

I have seen the future as envisioned by contemporary Islamists. It horrifies and does not work - anywhere. Today we look at two towns in Afghanistan.

Qandahar, an old city and monument in many ways to Afghan aesthetics, is a vast architectural ruin; its forbidden soul hides perhaps in the rubble. The town's physical destruction was caused largely during the war between the communist regime and its Russian patron, and their Mujahideen opponents. After their 'victory' the latter have robbed it, as they have most of Afghanistan, of hope and proscribed the pursuit of happiness. Music is banned in historic Qandahar which had once been famous for its bards and storytellers. Play is forbidden.

Several among the Taliban who rule Qandahar marched a boy through the bazaar; a rope around his neck, hands on his shaven head. He had broken 'Islamic law'. He had been caught red-handed, I was told - playing ball. Football is forbidden under Taliban rule as are basketball, volleyball and other games involving the movement of body. I did not meet any of the Talib leaders. So I do not know what they claim as the reason for this prohibition. People, including those who should know, say that the Taliban's concern is morality, sexual morality to be exact, and its logic by analogy - qiyas - is the same that prohibits women from appearing unveiled in public: boys playing ball can constitute undue temptation to men.

In Islamabad and Lahore, friends told local stories to suggest that what I had encountered in Afghanistan is not the iceberg but only its tip. One of these had a well-known Maulana object to Imran Khan polishing his cricket ball against the thigh on the ground that it was sexually provocative. The Maulana's should have been entered into the Playboy's list of kinky kicks. In any case, the mention of cricket reminds that in the matter of sexuality there may be a comparison of sorts between the English public schools and our religious madaris. In both there is a deeply suppressed dimension of guilt and anxiety about sexuality; in both an excess of fantasy and a culture of denial; in both a presumption that suppression and secrecy can yield a moral community.

There are of course many differences between Harrow and the deeni madrasah. In context, one contrast is fundamental: in the English public school the enforced prudishness is viewed as transitional, a necessary harnessing of adolescent drive although it does leave lasting scars on many grown-up 'boys' as John Le Carre's novels have brilliantly portrayed. In the madrasah, on the other hand, it aims at lasting socialisation in an ideology, a way of life. I spoke to a couple of Taliban who sat in the bazaar, kalashnikovs cradled in their laps. Tihara and Ta'zeer, purity and punishment, had constituted a core of their studies. They learned in Peshawar. The Taliban are products largely of our madaris, especially those run by the Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islam.

I counted a dozen persons clad head to foot in burqa but in three days did not see a single woman in Qandahar. Women are forbidden from working in offices. The few who worked for foreign agencies were ordered to stay home. A similar order was enforced in Jalalabad. The day after I arrived there in June, heads of all the foreign agencies were called in by the Shura, given a long lecture in Pashto which they did not comprehend but which was summarised by an interpreter: you are not to employ an Afghan woman in your offices, nor in your projects if that entails any contact with a non-family male (namahram). A Pashtun lady doctor, who worked for a foreign agency, shook her head sadly, stoically.

Jalalabad's authorities are liberal compared with Qandahar's. The Shura is drawn from various parties among which the Hizb Islami of Maulavi Yunus Khalis is dominant. Its governor Haji Qadeer is a brother of Abdul Haq, Khalis group's most powerful commander. Together, the governor and the Shura have permitted schools to remain open; only a limited number are. The Taliban, on the other hand, have banned all schools for teaching corrupt knowledge. Fortunately or otherwise, they have not

provided alternatives. Foreign women work in Jalalabad, and can be seen moving in cars. More Afghan women in burqa are seen shopping than in Qandahar.

It is an eerie experience to walk through the bazaars of Qandahar. Shops are shacks on the ruins of what had been a distinctive architecture of red clay over brick, reminiscent of Marrakesh where I had once spent restful, music filled days. They are stacked with small electronic products, including transistor radios. Yet, none is playing. These bazaars are devoid of music which is banned in Qandahar, in homes no less than in public. Television is similarly banned. Homes are regularly raided, and people are harshly punished for listening to music. The chowkidar in the house next door to mine was caught in the act, and badly mauled. He misses his recorder and the tapes of "sweet Afghan Naghma." By contrast, Jalalabad's rulers frown upon music but do not enforce their antipathy with much zeal. Several times I heard the contraband played discreetly in Jalalabad, but never in Qandahar. "There are levels of hell, remarked an international expert from a Muslim country.

Smuggling is clearly not a sin. In both towns its evidence is open and abounds. In Qandahar you can see truckloads of tires, electronics and glassware from Iran moving toward Quetta. From Jalalabad the volume to Torkham is greater and the trade is apparently mutual though by no means balanced or equitable. Nearly all food, wearable and household items in Jalalabad are from Pakistan. Car smuggling is apparently brisker from Jalalabad than from the Qandahar side. I visited four 'parks' in Jalalabad, and found only one near Qandahar's Pakistan border. Each had hundreds of new cars; some bore Kuwait, Emirate licence plates. Pricing suggested that one can get a Civic delivered in Pakistan with a Pakistani licence plate for about one and half lakhs, less than the standard Pakistan price. On larger cars one saves more. "Traders support the Taliban", says an informed relief worker, "as they do the Jalalabad Shura. They respect commerce and protect property."

Drugs remain the largest single item of trade but beyond hearsay and evidence of much unearned wealth concentrated in a few hands, it is not visible. In fact Afghanistan offers a most bleak picture of a country denuded of all material, moral, and human resources. Nearly all of Eastern and Southern Afghanistan's intelligentsia has left the country. The few educated men I met in Jalalabad and Qandahar worked for a foreign agency, lived in hostels, and on weekends returned to their families in Peshawar or Quetta. Friends and families I knew had moved to Europe or North America.

Yet, the two towns are viewed as havens of sorts by thousands of hapless victims of unholy warfare among the Mujahideen. They have moved from Kabul and its environs to the parched, sun-scorched inhospitality of the areas around Jalalabad and Qandahar. You see their dismal camps along the road to Pakistan. Leave your car; you stand upon a stark, burning earth, surrounded under the hot sun by very beautiful children. Grimy, ill clad, obviously undernourished, yet with sparks of intelligence in their eyes, and enough pride to refrain from begging. Some, forlorn-looking men eye the scene from a distance without interfering, But there are no women in sight. They are obviously inside those small ovens made of tin and mud. Salam alaikum, and the children light up. "Do you want water?" asks one boy.

Their positive disposition is an inheritance of a gentler past, an Islam not rigid like the one projected by contemporary Islamists, and also less given to profit and consumerism. So what future awaits those children who must grow in the harshest possible circumstances, without the 'corrupting' influence of modern education, without play, and without music? I am haunted by what an old man in a mosque had said about the Taliban: "They have grown in darkness, amidst death. They are angry and ignorant, and hate all things that bring joy and peace in life."