

Afghanistan's Cultural Heritage

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Introduction

To write about the cultural heritage a country needs internal political stability, economic cooperation at the regional and global level, and a certain foothold in the international organizations and forums where it can voice its opinions and is taken seriously to put forth its issues. Nations also aspire to be recognised for their endeavours to develop holistically taking into consideration the economic and political stability, human resource and infrastructure development, education and employment opportunities and welfare of its people etc. Afghanistan is a state in turmoil for ages. However, there are several forces that come into play when one talks about Afghanistan, the geopolitical factors such as the relation between the Islamic world and the West; relations with Russia, China and Pakistan; the role of illegal rise of the economy through drug cartels and above all aspirations of citizens of Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a place that has been tossed by unrest for over three decades. It has been used as a battleground for many conflicts. And the prominent reason being its geographical location coupled with the fact that its different ethnic groups and minorities have been in conflict with each other, creating convoluted, twisted and complex situations over the centuries, thus inviting wars, be it the first and the second Anglo-Afghan wars, Soviet invasion, US intervention or the recent Taliban crisis.

The Afghan state was born out of the opponent pioneer powers, British-India and the former Soviet Union. However, Afghanistan territory has witnessed shifting empires over the sands of time, with Achaemenid, Alexander and the Seleucids, Mauryan empires ruling in the Pre-Christian era; Greco-Bactrian, Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythians, Indo-Parthians and Sassanian kingdoms prominent in the Classical period (250 BCE - 565 CE); in the Middle Ages (565–1504 CE), Ghaznavids, Ghorids, Mongol, Timurids ruled; and in the Modern Era (1504 onwards) Mughals, Uzbeks, Safavids, Hotaks ruled followed by Barakzai Dynasty giving birth to 'The Great Game' in CE 1837, that is the rivalry between British and Russian empires over this region. British concerns over Russia resulted in two Anglo-Afghan wars. Monarchy was overthrown in 1973 and the Republic of Afghanistan was born. Soviet invasion and its occupation (1978-89) for a decade which was then followed by foreign influences and civil war, destabilized the country further. Post-September 11 attacks in the USA and Taliban intrusion in Afghanistan, the state has been war-torn between Taliban and the Afghan government backed up by NATO forces (primarily forces of US and UK).

Violence has thus always been a part of the Afghan way of life. There has never been a single cause of violence in Afghanistan, be it ethnic rivalries between clans, Taliban control and dominance of the invasion of the country by the foreign actors. The script of Afghan's is all written in Pashtunwali, which has become a barrier and followed by this Pashtuns claims that Afghanistan is of the Pashtun population which ignites nationalist sentiment amongst them. Afghanistan's national anthem perceives 14 ethnic groupings among the nation's 27 million individuals, Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Balochis, Turkmens, Nooristanis, Pamiris, Arabs, Gujars, Brahuis, Qizilibash, Aimaq and Pashai.

Afghanistan mountains divide the country into four distinct zones that support different types of economic livelihood, including agriculture. Within each zone, the terrain is highly compartmentalized, which makes travelling, contact with other people and unity amongst the society difficult. The country's regions include Herat in the west, Kandahar in the south, Mazar-i-Sharif in the north and Kabul-Peshawar area in the east. The area along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border (Durand Line) opposite Peshawar and the northwest frontier province (NWFP) constitutes the fifth region. The Hindu Kush range separates the north from the south, 200km long from the Iranian border and extends up to the extreme northeast. North and northeast Afghanistan features a high mountain pass that flows into central Asia's steppes, granting access to Pakistan and India to the east. The northern portion of Afghanistan connects to Turkmenistan.

The Afghan nationalism occasionally bloomed with stories of empires' defeat and humiliation who tried their luck against the Afghans. One can rebuild its history and its exciting intermingling of empires and ethnic groups which have been lost due to the long-trodden war since 1979 and 2001.

The Ethnic Groups

In 1992, Minority Rights Group published a report in the form of a book named "Afghanistan: A nation of minorities" that stated that there is no ethnic group that makes half of the population. Till the 19th century the term ethnic group did not exist, thanks to the foreign academicians, they started dividing the people within the country based on sect, language, culture and geography.

One of the astonishing facts is that the ethnic groups which exist, neither of them had separatist aspirations. There are a couple of uniting factors between the groups that can bridge to good governance in a fragile democracy, but the dividing factor sets in with the linguistic issues and now with Taliban capture, this patchwork of ethnicity in the country which hampers the ethnic unity. Ethnicity is an unavoidable factor in Afghanistan and if the country wants to get rid of the ethnic trap, they need to address rational ethnic representation in fragile democracy and eliminate de-politicization of ethnicity.

Afghanistan is a country made up of numerous ethnic groups. These groups, throughout time, have used violence to achieve their goals. There are three main factors that can be put forward for the complications which have been prevailing in the country. 1. Family loyalties; religious and ethnic issues; local and national politics and cultural matters. 2. The second factor that causes violence includes geography, regional influences, historical effects, ethnic factors, governmental considerations, illegal drug trade, economic and education matters. 3. The third factor is the impact of the Taliban which infuses in nearly all aspects of Afghan life. The Taliban incite religious and cultural motivations for violence, their propensity to use violence has impacted the country throughout history. With the ethnic tension and fluid boundaries, there has been no policy, plan, or proposal that can address any single group. Ethnic violations have always played a significant role in the country ever since the inception of Afghanistan's modern state.

The dynamics of ethnic groups work differently. Ethnicity is very divisive and hard to deal with. They collapse if there is no central government and are very descriptive. The country at the crossroads had never been able to evolve a strong, powerful, and centralized state, equal to other Islamic empires of Safavid, Ottomans, or the Fatimids. In the absence of a structured statesystem, the internal power struggle within various Afghan ethnic and linguistic groups aimed at creating their alternative state institution, through violence and the militarization of their respective groups.¹

There is no single group that has represented more than 50 per cent of the population, even though the largest group, the Pashtuns, has tended to play a dominant role. From the perspective of identity, it is difficult to determine whether men or women have been the majority category. Men have likely to have died in the conflicts than women. Whereas women and children have generally been acknowledged as being disadvantaged within society.

The ethnic footing is only in the eyes of foreigners, but it's a standard differentiated group for them. For instance: - A Pashtun person wants to join the Taliban, it's okay for them, as each one of them wants representation. To apply in simple terms in International Relations theory – "*Man is a social animal and looks for his own interest*" – Aristotle.

Ethnic groups in Afghanistan are not subjected to one region and in many cases, overlap, weaving a colourful tapestry of a multitude of languages and cultures that in many ways intricate the pattern of the Afghan rug. Afghanistan is home to dozens of ethnic groups such as Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Hazaras, Aimaqs, Kyrgyz, Arabs, Pamirs, Qizilbashs, Balochs, Pashais and Nooristanis. However, there are four primary groups:- Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks/Turks and Hazaras.

Pashtuns – (the dominant ethnic group)

Pashtuns as a group are more in Pakistan, which leads to more cross border movement. The original Pashtun region goes down till the Indus River and till Karachi, which makes half of Pakistan. Their native language is Pashto, and in Kabul, the majority of people speak Dari. The Pashtuns demanded a separatation during the creation of Pakistan, but that would have meant that the Pashtuns in Afghans would have been in the minority. The Pashtun ethnic tribes are organized into smaller groups of clans – Durrani, Ghilzais, Gurgust and Karlanri. Historically, they have been the most influential ethnic group. In the 18th century, they were handed the reigns of leadership by the British for the Kingdom of Afghanistan. This was when Abdul Khan of Kandahar established the Durrani Empire. During the 1890s the Pashtuns were deployed in the northern region for the ethnic cleansing of Hazaras, they were hence chopped off, or they were sold into slavery.

Tajiks –

Tajiks are basically the merchant class who are the second largest group, approximately 30% of the Afghan population. Tajiks are a Persian-speaking Sunni nontribal group. Tajiks make up a large portion of Kabul's population. They are historically engaged in the work of merchants, bureaucrats and educated clergy. This group has maintained powerful roles, no matter who is in control of the government. Tajik has been used to describe Dari- speakers, individuals of Persian heritage, and settled people.⁸ With the emergence of few leaders in the 20th and 21st centuries like – Ahmad Shah Masood, Burhanuddin Rabbani (President – 1992 -1996), Abdullah Abdullah and Amrullah Saleh the status quo changed and eventually demanded more rights, and they were a big part of the creation of the modern state Afghanistan.

¹ Leibniz Institute for Social Science, "Afghanistan: The Rise of Ethnic Consciousness Through History, A Comprehensive overview of the Origin of the Afghan Conflict", 2015, Available at: [https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/43832/ssoar-2015-ali-Afghanistan the rise of ethnic.pdf?sequence=1](https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/43832/ssoar-2015-ali-Afghanistan%20the%20rise%20of%20ethnic.pdf?sequence=1)

Turks/Uzbeks –

Uzbeks initial origin emerges from Turkey that dwells and have eventually settled in the northern plains of Afghanistan. Uzbeks are estimated to be 8% of the population.⁹ A good portion of Uzbeks fled Afghanistan during the Russian conquest of Central Asia.

Hazaras –

Hazaras are Mongoloid people from Central Afghanistan that comprises 7% of the population. They are unarguably the most persecuted and marginalized group in the country. Unlike most Afghans, they are Shia Muslims. The majority is Imami Shia while the minority is Ismaili Shia.¹⁰ Under Emir Abdur Rahmon their land was taken away and distributed to Pashtuns. They also had harsh taxes imposed on them. When the Hazaras revolted, the Emir brutally massacred them and sold the remaining population into slavery. Until 1919, the Hazaras were legally slaves. To this day, anti-Hazara sentiment continues. Under the Taliban rule, they were singled out and murdered, most notably in the massacre of Mazar-e-sharif in 1998.

The Afghan problem did not start with the emergence of the Taliban or the U.S. invasion; it can be traced to two major, historical events that date back centuries. In 1499, Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama discovered a sea route to India, which meant the region now known as Afghanistan – once a connecting point between Central Asia and the west – lost its commercial importance. The second event came in 1893 when British India annexed a large portion of Afghanistan known as Pashtunistan into India with the Durand Line Treaty. That left the country land-locked. Ever since Afghanistan has been unable to become stable and prosperous, instead, it has served as a graveyard for a succession of governmental experiments: monarchy, republic, communism, Islamism and now a western-built democracy. All failed. As a gateway to India, this area has been invaded by such powers as the Greeks, Persians, Arabs and Mughals who sought to conquer India. Many got bogged down and stayed.²

British India favoured Pashtun tribes, and in their idea, the country belonged to the Pashtuns. That became the motivation factor why Afghan became an equivalent word to Pashtun and Pashtun became Afghan national dialect. Like in India, the work defines the caste/Varnas, i.e. Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, the same way the four major groups are also seen from that perspective. Pashtuns are prominent in the region and command the military and are belligerent. Tajiks are the financial keepers and thrift. The Uzbeks are known as ruthless. The Hazaras are disregarded in general; they are the unskilled and poor people.

After the decade-long Soviet Union invasion in the 1980s, the ethnic balance shifted. The inhabitants became polarized and started bickering over the distribution of power. Civil war raged throughout the 1990s, and an estimated 400,000 died because of fighting in Kabul.¹³ Arising from the perception that ethnicity is the predominant argument in the Afghan War, a peace process was initiated at the Petersburg Conference near Bonn at the end of November in 2001. The motive for this conference was ethnic representation in the government. Tribalism is assumed as one of the causes of ethnic conflict in Afghanistan. According to

² Raofi, Wahab, “Afghanistan Slides to the Brink of Ethnic Warfare”, 2016, <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2016/11/21/afghanistan-slides-to-the-brink-of-ethnic-warfare/>

scholars, loyalty to ethnic groups has impeded true nationalism and unity in Afghanistan.

From the beginning of Modern Afghanistan till today, ethnic leaders have used ethnic biases to win power. And such a mechanism of gaining control has divided the citizens of the country along ethnic lines. If we trace back the root of the conflicts, we will reach to ethnic sentiments that have been fueled by selfish political motives. Most of the conflicts that take place in the country begin from these ancient ethnic sentiments. Thus, tribalism in history has divided the people and has fostered favoritism in Afghanistan. Corruption and unqualified leaders have intensified ethnic conflict in Afghanistan. Gross mismanagement of national and international resources by incompetent leaders has impoverished and denied opportunities to most Afghans, which has led to agitations by citizens.

The Tajiks blame Pashtuns for sympathizing with the Taliban, which led to the fall of major cities like Kunduz, Kabul and surrounding districts. The Pashtuns accuse Uzbek militias of committing crimes against them in northern Afghanistan and charge Tajik leaders with sabotaging the peace process with the Taliban.

Conclusion

Zahiruddin Babur, who founded the Mughal Empire in 1526 and once ruled Kabul, wrote in his memoir that Kabul's inhabitants speak ten different languages. That kind of diversity used to persist in Afghanistan. The Taliban movement is undoubtedly a complex consolidation of religious, tribal and regional influence. The erosion of the Afghan state over the past 30 years has significantly affected the society of Afghanistan. Since the inception of the country three centuries ago, Afghanistan has been trapped in a whirlpool of wars and invasion. It vacillates from autocracy to short-lived "tranquillity," then slides back into anarchy. Societal and political ties are questioned by the younger generation as slowly, and gradually, globalization and modernity are coming into the state.

To conclude, there is no single cause of violence in the country. Not to forget the Taliban, which has evolved mostly from the Pashtun ethnic group that leverages violence within the country for several reasons. Afghanistan's issues are incredibly complex. Factors such as – geography, region, history, ethnic considerations, religion, tribal social structures, ineffective governance and fragmented economy have created violence. Also, the struggle comes for political power and access to resources.

India aspires for stability within Afghanistan and hanging on top of Pakistan, which blockades the relationship. Also, concern about China's role plays a part in Indian thinking towards Afghanistan. Reports that have recently flooded that China is pursuing/pushing for Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-China gas pipeline have raised concern for India. India and Afghanistan have been cooperating for the last ten years and with that India has provided nearly \$1.5 billion worth of assistance and trained many Afghans in India, including the Afghan police. More positively, there is a social and economic engagement, including investment by Indian firms and development projects undertaken by the Indian government. India's lead role under the Istanbul Process of regional engagement reflects its attempts to normalize Afghanistan in the region's eyes. India also assists in facilitating trading link through Iran.

There is no doubt that the ISAF and NATO have failed their operation. The loss of life both civilian and military, creating more ethnic divides and troubled borders has led the country into a situation where it will take a decade to come over the conflicts and now with the Taliban crisis. Also, in the early years of invasion, a veteran military officer who was commissioned by the Pentagon to examine the war in Afghanistan expressed a pessimistic view saying that the "conflict – created conditions that have to give warlordism, banditry and opium production a new lease on life.

To conclude in a nutshell, Afghanistan has become a playground for political influence between rivals and allied powers like Iran, the United States, Pakistan, Russia and China. It is also assumed that the US strategy in Afghanistan was to fight against international terrorism (Global War on Terror) and establish bases in this important geostrategic area to contain Russian dominance, but it has failed to keep the peace and develop the country. The question which persists in everyone's mind regarding the country is – What are the implications of Taliban rule in the wider Geopolitics of South Asia and the Middle East?