



A Journey From Torkham to Kabul

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Part 1: The Journey Begins

After we crossed the Torkham border, for 13 kilometers there were lines of containers and trucks stranded on the roadside. We asked our driver to stop the car. We wanted to ask the drivers of the standing vehicles if they were interested in telling us what the problem was. A few of them agreed to share their plight, and she recorded the conversation through the cell phone. Based on the information obtained, the story on the issues of trading between the two countries was developed and shared with the head office. Continuing the journey, our next stop was Marco Bazar, where we discussed issues amidst the border closure, with the taxi drivers who provided services to Torkham, Jalalabad, and Kabul. Since it was the responsibility of the other reporter in the team, he and the cameraman got out of the car, but the cameraman returned back after a few minutes. “what happened? has it been done so soon?” I asked. The cameraman said “No maam, the Taliban have come there and are furious, asking with whose permission we have come here and doing this kind of work.” “So?” I asked.

Cameraman: “they are taking us.”

Me: “Where?”

“To Ameer sb” the cameraman replied.

“And Me?” I asked

“You stay in the car, the driver is in the car, we will be in touch through our cell phones.” He told me this and went away, leaving me with newer worries for being a woman who was responsible for the protection of her team, as their head. In half an hour, the driver came to

the car and cursed us for getting into such a situation. He furiously stated that this was the Taliban's world now, nothing can be done without their permission, why did we come here. His fears held ground, as he was a resident of that area and had more knowledge and understanding of the issues about people and the Taliban. I tried to console him that once the Ameer sahib finds the reality about us, the matter will be resolved and we will be allowed to move. On my consolation, he shook his head, but the disbelief in his eyes told me he did not agree with me. After a while, the cameraman returned and asked the driver to move. I asked about the other reporter, "He is in the Taliban's car, they are taking us somewhere."

"Where?" I asked.

"I don't know, but they said they are taking us to their Ameer sahib" said the cameraman.

After driving for about ten minutes, we reached a hujra, where many people were already present. The driver and the cameraman went inside and parked the car in a secluded place so that I could maintain my purdah. After a while, a little girl knocked the window of the car. I pulled down the window. The girl asked me what I was doing there. I told her that I had come with a few of my companions.

"Where are you going?" she asked me. I told her, "To Kabul!"

"Why have these people brought you here?". she asked.

"I don't know." I replied.

I asked her, "What is your name and what are you doing here?",

She told me that her name was Muzdalfa and that was her Hujra.

Why are there are so many people here," I asked her.

She told me that a jirga was going on there. While talking to me she was ducking down as if hiding from someone.

I asked her how old she was and who was she hiding from. She told me that she was 12 years old and was hiding from her uncles as they didn't like girls to come towards the Hujras.

"So why have come here?" I asked.

"My brother told us about you and your companions when he came home, so I came to see you." she said.

Muzdalifa asked me, "Are you educated.""

"Yes." I said

"How much." she asked

"Till the university." I replied.

"I am also fond of education but, my uncle does not allow me." she told me.

"Do you go to school" I asked her.

“Yes, I am in class four, but I want to get a complete education, but don’t know how will this be possible now.” she responded apprehensively.

“When things get better, you will, don’t worry.” I consoled her.

She gave me a vague look and asked “do you think things will improve.”

“I hope so,” I said.

“But I don’t have a hope,” she added.

“Why?” I asked.

“My mother says stop dreaming and learn some housework, you will be married off in 2 to 3 years.”

During the conversation Muzdalfa’s cousin, Ayesha came. She was of Muzdalfa’s age. She stood there quietly.

Seeing her hennaed hands, I said “let me take a picture of your hands.” they agreed. I took the picture which made them very happy. Muzdalifah said she once came to Peshawar with her aunt and liked Peshawar very much.

When a young man approached the car, they ran home and I was alone again. An hour passed like that. An hour later, the cameraman and the driver arrived and the car sped off. I then asked about the reporter and got the answer that he is in the Taliban’s car. “Why?” I asked. Because now they are taking us to another Ameer sahib.

“But where?”

“Do not know”.

After a 20-minute drive, we were taken to an old dilapidated building in the mountains. There we were presented in the court of the Ameer sahib. Around us were young Taliban armed with heavy weapons. Some had grenades in their jackets. I was taken out of the car and taken to an old room. On one side of the room was an old filthy mattress, a small mat, and an old room cooler next to it, which was probably not used for a long time. There was not a drop of water in it but perhaps used as a fan now.

There were some boots by the window in the room, as well as a large number of military uniforms and jackets on the wall. Some uniforms also were tucked on the bricked shelves. The ceiling fan was shaking, more than giving any waft. The reporter entered in the room. I asked him. “What happened?”

“They need your ID and the office card.” he said

“Why?” I asked

“They are saying that they have to send it to Jalalabad, through WhatsApp.” he added.

“Many hours passed like this. Once in a while, I would stand up and try to look out of the window, but when the armed men passed by, I would rush back and sit down.”

I gave the documents to him and he whisked away.

After a while, he came to the room again and said “We are allowed to go.”

“Where are we going?” I asked

“We will go to Kabul because he has told us to go there!” he said.

The car drove off and now our destination was Kabul. No one said a word for a long time. In the end, I dared to ask what was the problem. So my colleague said that there were two problems. One is “why she (I) had come without permission and the other was that the woman had come without a mahram with strange men.”

“So what did you say,” I asked him.

“I just kept quiet and listened to what they had to say. I tried to argue but Ameer Sahib rejected that argument stating that I was talking about the Quranic verses revealed before the ayahs about purdah, which carries no weight. You should know that you are doing something that is not permissible in Islam.”

This essay consists of three parts, the remaining two parts of which will be presented soon.

End of part I,

Part II: The Journey Continues

This was my third trip to Kabul. Before that, I had visited Kabul in 2011 and then 2014. But there was a big difference between coming now and then. The Kabul, Shahar e Naw, where you could see life everywhere was now breathing in the shadow of fear. Even inside a safe hotel, my colleagues were seen advising me to be careful while roaming around. When we went out for dinner, I started to look for the Kabul of 2014 while waiting in the queue for a place in a restaurant. This time on, the other way around most of the restaurants seemed to be waiting for customers.

There was a strange silence in the air, with many questions for which I had to look for answers. In my desire to go out in the same search, I left the bed as soon as the dawn hit the sky. I stood on the terrace and looked at the questioning faces of people residing in houses built on a mountain, and on the questioning faces of people wandering on the roads. After breakfast, I walked towards Shehr-e-Naw Park with my mobile phone to cover the displaced people, to first understand their plight, as I had written about the homeless (displaced) people of Waziristan, Mohmand, Bajaur, Khyber, and Swat. I wanted to hear from the displaced people first, who had become a big question in Kabul.

Before going to the park, my colleagues warned me that people here do not like Pakistani media, so I should be careful. The park was inhabited by people from Kunduz on one side, Takhar on the other, and Balkh on another side. Hurdles, more than often, come in the way for women from media, but at the same time getting access to women, one gets deeper information, a reality check, which men often hide under expediency.

Having experienced the same while talking to women, I even got answers to the questions which were making the presence of these IDPs dubious in Kabul. When I asked the woman from Kunduz why she left her house, she told me that when the fighting started in her village, some incidents terrified them and they fled. "What kind of incidents?" I inquired. They told me that during the fighting, some people broke into some houses, disgraced women, and forcibly took them away, which frightened them and they left overnight. "Who were the people who were doing such things?" I asked. After a few seconds of silence, my question was answered with "I don't know." I guess that meant no more discussion on it. A widow told me that one of her sons was killed in the war and the other was missing, while she and her four children had been lying under the sky for a month. "Why did you leave your home?" I asked her. The answer was "because when there was a battle between the Taliban and the government, rockets fell on the homes and also on my house, which frightened us. I am a widow, what could I do to protect my children, so we just came out with the locals, but here now we are starving, lying under the open sky. We have to pay Rs 5 as a toilet fee, we

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don't have drinking water. We get something if a believer of Allah comes, and gives us something."

"Then why don't you go back home. Isn't there peace now?" I asked her.

"Well, is there peace?!" she responded to my question in a question.

"Why? do you have any doubts?" I asked her. "Now what can I tell you! All you have to do is tell someone to solve our problems and give us protection." I thanked her and took a step back, she asked, "Will you help us?" I reassured her that I could take her voice to the organizations that could help her.

The eyes of 500 families were fixed on me. Someone was writing down his phone number on a piece of paper and giving it to me. Someone wanted to get them help. Stranded under ceilings and walls made of colorful cloths, these people face a new journey every decade for the last 40 years, sometimes inside the country, sometimes across the border, where after 40 years, they are still refugees.

After finishing our work we walked on our way back to the hotel to record some footage on the way. As we walked, time and again, a tiny hand would grab the corner of my abaya and stop me to give small chits, asking for help. Reaching the hotel gate, my hand was filled with pieces of paper which were just pieces of paper for us, but bread for someone, roof, or medicine for others.

Our second story was about a women's park in Kabul, built during 2014, with a women's restaurant, where only women worked. There were offices for businesswomen, gyms, and shops run by women shopkeepers. But today a Talib was sitting with a gun at the gate. Everything inside was locked.

The third story was of a common man in the bazaar who believed that although peace had prevailed with the advent of the Taliban, business and commercial activities were in turmoil owing to the uncertainty about the future; the investors seemed to be uninterested. On the other hand, the common man had not enough to spend. Everyone was just spending on bread, vegetables, and other necessities of life. His argument made sense because we saw malls and big shops empty or closed down.

I saw some young men standing by the car discussing the policies of the new government and the rise of the Taliban. I asked the driver if he could ask them to give me an interview on camera. Two of them refused but one of them agreed. He was a student of political science at the university; seemed apprehensive about his future.

"What is your real concern?"

"My biggest concern is whether I will find my destination in this country; if in such a situation, educated young men like, me with progressive mindset, will find any space?. These were the questions that bothered me." The same was true of other young people who were probably outside the realm of the ideology that now ruled their country. The concern of these young people was justified because those who think differently in a particular circle are always disliked. I was well-aware of the feelings because I am from Pakhtunkhwa.

End of part II,

Part III: The Journey Continues

Torkham to Kabul

We had our second night in Kabul. During the stay, we met many people including men and women but it was important to know the thoughts of working women about the prevailing situation, as well as the views of housewives. The decision to go inside a house and talk to women seemed to be a good idea, because housewives told us what working women were a little hesitant to tell. Darsheela in anonymity told us everything, from the cables shut down to the closure of malls, and the realities of Kandahar and Kunduz.

"There is an opinion about the Taliban that they have changed. Do you agree with that opinion?" I asked her. "It's your second day here. You're roaming in the streets and alleys. What do you think?" she asked a question to my question.

"It was difficult for me, of course, but I want to know the opinion of those who live here," I said.

"They have not changed. They are treading slowly so that the world can feel changed." Darsheela said.

"Did you go out after August 15?"

"Yes, we went once." She said.

"So how did it feel?" I asked.

"There are a lot of Taliban in our area, so there was fear, but we went around in a car and came back home." She replied.

"You have a daughter? has her school opened?" I asked.

"It opened yesterday. She attends a private school, but since she is in fourth grade, her school is open, but classes for children above the sixth grade are still closed."

"Why?"

"They are older children and co-education has been disallowed?"

"And public schools?"



“Now that women have become aware, they need rights and inclusion in every walk of life. If they don't, get that it will be difficult for the Taliban to carry on.”

Right now, people are silent, but this silence will not last long.”

"It's the same there. The rest is open until the holidays."

Darshila suddenly said, "May I ask you something?"

"Yes of course!"

"When your Prime Minister Imran Khan came, he said that he would make Pakistan, a state of Madinah. He did not make it there, but he built it here."

"He didn't make it here. These are your people who have been struggling for 20 years." I saw her smiling sarcastically.

"People are ours, but" but when she got to the point, Kabul rocked with the crackling of bullets.

"What's going on ?" I looked at the woman with questioning eyes.

"Looks like Panjsher has fallen to Taliban !!!" she worriedly said.

I picked up my mobile phone and called one of the Afghan journalists. "Sister, any service!" On the other hand, I asked, "Why these shots? Is there any news of Panjsher?"I will tell you."

"Yhank you." The firing was so intense that Darshela's 8-year-old daughter, who was in the same room with us, knelt. "The girl is probably scared said the mother.

"Our children have become mentally ill, sometimes they hear explosions, sometimes shootings. Everyone gets upset." she said in a tearful tone.

Meanwhile, she assured her daughter that everything was fine. It was nothing, just a little firing.

Of course, it was not a little firing. The intensity and duration of the firing increased. Meanwhile, my mobile phone rang, the Afghan journalist told me that there was a rumor about Panjshir although the Taliban had not confirmed it yet. Yes! However, instructions have been issued by Zabihullah Mujahid to stop firing. If any further information came, he said he would contact me.

When I saw the Twitter, Pakistani media reported that Pansher was conquered; Red screens and a lot of scrobbling.

Darshila also connected to the Pakistani channel on mobile. "Have a look. It has not been confirmed here, and they have already conquered it. There was that same irony in Darsheela's smile that I felt while talking about the Prime Minister, a while ago.

Let's see what the Afghan media is saying, I inquired.

She visited the sites of some media houses and news agencies on her mobile but found nothing.

"Nothing has happened it will happen if it has to," she said irritatingly.

"Will it happen?" I asked.

"Yes, it will happen if all this could happen, that will too." she laughed.

"Yes, of course, it will, but where will it be, how will it be?" I asked

A simple woman who had some education but was born two years before the defeat of Russians, Darshila, who witnessed every era from the arrival of the Mujahideen, the Taliban, and the return of the US, she knew it all. She had internet access, she was connected to Pakistan, sometimes to Kabul, and her parent's home in Kunduz. What was hidden from such a woman?

I asked her ... "Do you think this system will work?"

"Yes, it may take some time, but those who are not taken along will do their job. It is not difficult to take capture this land, but managing affairs is a difficult task and they (Taliban) have a lot of problems to resolve. Now that women have become aware, they need rights and inclusion in every walk of life. If they don't, get that it will be difficult for the Taliban to carry on. On the other hand, girls want education, they want to move on, but they are also locked in their homes. So all these problems have to be solved. Right now, people are silent, but this silence will not last long."

It was one o'clock in the morning and we were talking. In the morning I had to go to some schools so we thought we should go to sleep now. There was silence, stillness after the savage firing had made the night even more mysterious.

As soon as we had breakfast in the morning, we started walking towards the Khushal Khan area where there were two government and one private school. First, I went to the private school. The principal was a man, while the teachers were both women and men.

After the initial greetings, I introduced myself and explained the purpose of my visit. After listening carefully, he very gently apologized and said that a video statement is not possible but, they would answer any questions."But why not video?" "There are two reasons for this. One is that we are employed in this school. The owner is someone else who is not here at the moment. Second, since the policy of the Islamic Emirate is not clear yet and their statements are changing day by day, we do not want to aggravate our problems by saying anything controversial."

"Let's just talk." I had to compromise.

"Yes of course."

"When did the school open and what is the position?"

"Our school is up to 12th class but we have only started classes till 6th since yesterday as the rest are not allowed yet."

"Do you have a co-education system?"

"That's why it's currently closed."

I asked the female teacher if her life had changed.

She laughed and looked at the principal and said, "You see me and my clothes everything has changed. I'm scared to leave the house but I can't quit my job because I have to run the house."

When I got out of there, I saw government school buildings facing each other at some distance.

Some classes were taking place but most of the rooms were closed. Female teachers were teaching in the classes.

The teacher from a public school also told us almost the same thing that a private school teacher told us. But the teachers here said that in the last 15 years the number of girls coming to school has steadily increased which was a very positive thing for a country like Afghanistan. "Hopefully, that continues because any obstacle will push us backward which we do not want."

After visiting the schools, we approached the owners and traders of some pharmaceutical companies whose businesses were on a constant decline.

"Did your delegation have any discussions with any responsible persons?" I asked.

"Yes, I received threats and if I spoke against anything, I would be punished according to Sharia." The vendor said.

"What does it mean? If the market runs, it is in the interest of the country. If the market runs, the country will run." I asked.

"It's you and me who think that way. They do what they want and do not allow dissenting voices or questions." I said.

"By the way, they have even announced a general amnesty, so there is no question of taking action against anyone."

"A general amnesty means a common man, but targeted killings continue. They just don't let anyone know." He added

The businessman said that if things did not improve in a year and a half, he would shift his business to Tajikistan or Dubai.

"I was thinking that to improve the economy, it is necessary to take the country's business community into confidence, but here this class which is being intimidated, and that will surely harm the market."

Coming from there, I was thinking that to improve the economy, it is necessary to take the country's business community into confidence, but here this class which is being intimidated, and that will surely harm the market.

Another thing I noticed was the same Afghan flag which was there before August 15th, so I asked one of the persons with us "you have not changed the flag, why?". "Why change?" An angry voice drew me in.

"The new rulers have a new flag?" I asked solemnly.

"It may be theirs, but this is and will remain the flag of Afghanistan." The bitterness of the tone startled me.

When we left the market, we found out that some women in the city had protested against their rights and the attack on Panjsher, which was dispersed forcefully. It reminded me of Darshila, "Right now people are silent but this silence will not last long" and then the very next day the silence was broken and the world saw what they were trying to avoid. Hundreds of women were seen chanting slogans on the streets of Kabul that we could not screen.

On my way back to Pakistan, passing through the bazaars of Kabul, I was looking at the walls very carefully, the walls that exhibited a woman and a child two days ago, was being whitewashed, and a new slogan was being written, "The blood of martyrs' washed away the occupiers."

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Photo credit: Farzana Ali