

Afghanistan: The Other Perspective

by

Sreemati Ganguli

Senior Fellow, Interdisciplinary Institute of Human Security and Governance, India

The ongoing war in Ukraine may serve as a grim reminder of history- how rivalry between major powers for global political advantage pushes a country - the theatre of rivalry - towards an inevitable crisis situation, and a bleak, grim future remains the only possibility. Afghanistan of today bears the testimony of such a scenario, after the experience of a long era of political insecurity and instability. This article attempts to focus on the other perspective of security, the people-centric approach of human security scenario in Afghanistan, to search how a prolonged situation of uncertainty fails the country of its basic necessities of today, and even betrays its past potentials.

Food Security

From the human security perspective, and particularly in the context of food security, Afghanistan presents a most alarming picture today. According to the estimate of the UN World Food Program, about 2 million Afghan children are malnourished and about 22.8 million Afghans or more than half of the population are facing acute food insecurity in 2021. The UNDP's October 2021 estimates suggest that 97% of Afghan households could slip below poverty line before March 2022. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees suggests around 6 million Afghans have been displaced since September 2021. One estimate suggests that during 1950-2010, Afghanistan warmed 1.8 degree Celsius - about twice the global average- resulting in one of the worst droughts in decades that had a direct impact on its food security. The non-availability of seeds and credit for farmers is bound to make the food crisis worse. Poor Afghans face the social catastrophe due to an inter-linked triad of lack of food, medical aid and surviving kits to survive the harsh winter. As roughly 40% of Afghanistan's GDP and 80% of its budget is dependent on international economic aid, according to World Bank figures, the total ban on international aid and freezing of international financial assets may result into the collapse of the Afghan economic infrastructure in the near future. While the situation in Afghanistan could become the world's worst humanitarian crisis, as the World Food Program anticipates, Afghanistan received, as of February 2022, \$1.6 billion humanitarian aid from international donors like the US, the EU, Germany, the UK, France, Sweden and Canada with an additional pledge by the EU of \$1 billion, according to the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Assistance. But the pressing need of the hour is to revive the Afghan economy and to make it functional in a viable manner.

Economic Security

It seems improbable or impractical in this context, but it is a fact that only 10-15 years back Afghanistan, with its enormous natural resources and locational advantage, was poised to become the centre of trade corridors connecting Central and South Asia and in a broader sense, between Asia and Europe. The projects also held promise for an economic restructuring of Afghanistan, and for greater economic and political interdependence between Afghanistan and its neighbours, much before the Belt and Roads Initiative (2013) was declared by China.

The Silk Road was the first experiment, or rather, encounter, with globalization as David Held defined globalization as 'a process of ...transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction and exercise of power'¹, and the new Silk Road concept wanted to focus the revival of the centrality of Afghanistan in such a framework through a host of projects under the identical name 'New Silk Road' initiatives.

¹ David Held et al., *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1999, p.17.

The-then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit to the region in October 2005 was a crucial factor to promote the broad idea of a 'revival of the fundamental basis for the Silk Road' in the Central and South Asian region involving Afghanistan and to revive new areas of cooperation like trade, transport, energy, democracy and communications. This move was later followed by the New Silk Road Ministerial Meeting, co-chaired by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul and German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle in September 2011 in New York City to project the vision of a 'New Silk Road'. The promise was to make Afghanistan an effective trade and energy transport hub between Central and South Asia and between these regions and Europe.

The CAREC-ADB programme, another project of transport corridors, gathered together the five Central Asian republics, as well as Afghanistan, Mongolia and Azerbaijan and six international financial institutions (the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the International Monetary Fund, the Islamic Development Bank, the World Bank, and the UNDP) and also there was NATO's Virtual Silk Highway project to provide high-speed satellite channel access to the Internet and to the European Scientific and Educational Networks in the region.

Interestingly, Frederick Starr and Andrew Kuchins noted, in the conceptual framework of a Modern Silk Road Strategy (2010), that the U.S. led Operation Enduring Freedom (2001) opened up Afghanistan's Northern and Eastern borders to long-distance trade for the first time since 1936 and that was one of the most transformative developments on the Eurasian landmass in the past century.

These Silk Road projects have not gained momentum or fruition for various factors - internal and external, economic as well as political - but the promise and potentials of Afghanistan as an interconnecting state and as an economic beneficiary of trade and energy corridors among Central and South Asia and Europe still remain. The success of CASAREM (Central Asia South Asia Regional Energy Market) project, involving Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan is a testimony, while another ambitious energy cooperative venture, the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) energy pipeline with Afghanistan as a transit country, has become a victim of regional animosity and insecurity.

These corridors were projected to help Afghanistan focus on building new capacities so as to unlock the intrinsic and viable potentials of Afghanistan to act as a bridgehead between regional and global markets and in the process, to ensure economic growth of the country and a sustainable economic security of its people. But Afghanistan of today betrays the basic premise of these initiatives that to balance the twin tasks of ensuring lasting peace and sustainable economic development in Afghanistan, it is imperative to involve regional and global powers as active stakeholders in viable economic cooperation, not as powerbrokers in a new geopolitical game.

Gender Security

One of the most notable victims of today's Afghanistan is the women and their greatest concerns are security and education. As education of women is synonymous with female empowerment, and empowerment, in the sense of human security concept, provides women the right strategy to develop their resilience against difficult situations, global attention is focused on how the progress of women's education can be maintained against professed opposition by the state machinery.

Notably, one of the most significant achievements of Afghanistan during 2001-21 is in the field of female education - the US spent about \$1 billion for girls' and women's education and data shows that in 2021, about half of 20,000 students in Kabul University were women.

But a yet more significant point is that the process of providing education to women in Afghanistan was initiated long back. One of the reasons behind the civil strife against King Amanullah Khan in 1929, that cost him the throne, was his policy of modernization in areas like female education, which was resented by the ultra-conservatives of Afghan society. Though since the 1940s there were some baby steps in the field of girls' education, the sector got a boost after the Second World War under a new administration and later, after the Constitution was adopted in 1964. Data reveals that in the category of primary education, enrolment of female students increased from 900 in 1940 to 64,000 in 1999; in secondary education, from 340 in 1950 to 85,000 in 1994; and in the higher education category, from 80 in 1950 to 7,400 in 1990.²

The most vulnerable section of the population in any crisis is the women and, in an Afghanistan which finds itself in a continuing crisis situation for the last four decades, female empowerment and gender security are issues that requires additional sensitivity, attention and protection from across the globe. It would be a loss for the cause of global female empowerment, if the women's voices of demands for their rights in contemporary Afghanistan and search for a just and meaningful status in society remain unattended and lost in the cross-currents of international geopolitical calculations.

²Saif Samady, *Education and Afghan Society in the Twentieth Century*, UNESCO, Paris, 2001.

Democratization

While Afghanistan has been turned into the most fertile ground for regional instability in South Asia for the last half a century, it was not always so. History suggests that it was the Kabul Declaration of 1915 by the Indian Independence Committee that provided India its first Provisional Government-in-Exile (1915-1919), with Raja Mahendra Pratap as the President and Maulana Barkatullah as the Prime Minister. The move was supported by the Central Powers, led by Germany, and the Committee tried to gather additional support from the-then Afghan Emir, Tsarist Russia, China and Japan for the Indian freedom movement. However, the British government in India became suspicious of the involvement of Bolshevik Russia in such a move and under active British pressure, the Afghan Emir denied any support for this Provisional Government and it was forced to close down in 1919. But the resultant developments within Afghanistan involving the Emir, his family and the cabinet catapulted into a complex process of political changes with the assassination of Habibullah in 1919 and led to the Third Anglo-Afghan war in 1919, followed by the establishment of an independent Afghan state. Of course, the Provisional Government was a parallel development in India's freedom movement as within India, the Indian National Congress was active at that time to build a national peoples' resistance movement against the British colonialism and Mahatma Gandhi launched his first experiment of 'Satyagraha' (non-violent non-cooperation) for India's freedom in Champaran (Bihar).

Contemporary reality does not always reflect past potentials, as in the context of democratization in Afghanistan. Democratization is an essential factor to provide various forms of identity-based security frameworks for citizens through ensuring community security and political security parts of a comprehensive human security infrastructure.

While Afghanistan witnessed its first formal Presidential election in 2004 and the Parliamentary election was held in 2005, there is a long, although chequered journey of democratization in the country. The first Parliament of Afghanistan was established in the late 1920s under King Amanullah Khan, Parliamentary elections were held in 1949, an attempt to adopt the first Constitution of the country was made during Zahir Shah's 'era of Democracy' in 1964, while successive Parliaments functioned through elected representatives during 1965-1969 and 1969-1971. This shows first, that the history of democratization in Afghanistan far precedes most of its neighbours, and more important, that the process of democratic transition is an on-going one - there always remains the practical possibility of turns to more authoritarian rule under the garb of democracy or, worse, to total authoritarianism. Another important point is that democratization is not achieved simply, or solely, by holding elections. All Central Asian republics neighbouring Afghanistan hold elections regularly, and except in Kyrgyzstan which experienced two successive revolutions during 2005-2010, everywhere, the powers-at-the helms get re-elected regularly. Elections there have become a tool for the ruling coterie to perpetuate their rule for an indefinite time.

Notably democratization in a war-ravaged state like Afghanistan with diverse ethnicities, cultures and languages should take into account a lot of inter-connected factors: history, cultural norms, development of national identities based on ethnic, linguistic, regional and religious preferences, gender gaps, socio-economic conditions, rural-urban divide, political culture, structure and character of the ruling elite, allowance by the governing class for freedom of press and political opposition and so on, to provide an effective guarantee of security for the citizens.

Conclusion

Afghanistan has been experiencing a continued state of chaos, uncertainty and insecurity that culminates today in a horrific crisis scenario where human security situation has reached the nadir. Significantly, a crisis scenario, as was analyzed by Jacob Burckhardt, as a part of his *Die geschichtlichen Krisen* (1868), is a timeless feature of the human social and political experience, that starts from a negative aspect to protest against the historical wrongs of the past to a positive phase as a decisive moment of political or social agitation when diverse peoples unite around one cause, 'even if only in a blind conviction: *Things must change*.³

The question remains, will things change for the better in Afghanistan? If Afghanistan, with so much promise, is allowed by the international community to continue as a fertile ground for drug trafficking and extremism and to become again (as its history of the last two centuries suggest) a chessboard for competing vested interests - it would spell a doom, a catastrophe for global security scenario at large, which is already besieged by the waves of pandemic, economic collapse, growing ecological disasters and the onslaught of another international war, this time in Ukraine.

³Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History*, Hottinger, Indianapolis, 1979, p.226.

Dr Sreemati Ganguli is a researcher with interest in Indian foreign policy, energy geopolitics, issues of connectivity and human security concerns. She has two authored books, an edited volume and a number of articles in international journals and edited volumes to her credit.