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Kabul celebrates International Students Day



Afghanistan's Minister of Communications Eng. Amirzay Sangin addressing the gathering on International Students Day at the Indian Embassy.



From right to left: Afghan Minister of Communications Eng. Amirzay Sangin, Minister of Commerce & Trade Dr. Amin Farhang, Ambassador Rakesh Sood, Deputy Minister of Higher Education Osman Baburi and Assistant Director of Cultural Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Habibyar.

The auditorium of the Indian Embassy can easily hold scores of people. But its real test came on November 11, when around 300 Afghan alumni from different Indian institutions filled the big hall to capacity on the occasion of International Students Day.

Organised for the second successive year, the function was also attended by several dignitaries, including Minister of Communications Engineer Amirzay Sangin, Minister of Commerce and Trade Dr. Mir Muhammad Amin Farhang, Minister of Agriculture Obaidullah Ramin, Deputy Minister of Defence Gen. Nooristan, Deputy Minister of Finance Major Razaq Samadi and Afghan Ambassador to India Dr. Makdoom Raheen, along with the chairman of Independent Administrative Reforms & Civil Services Commission (IARSC) and senior officials from the ministries of agriculture, foreign affairs, public works, commerce and industry, higher education and education, besides Parliament and the office of the President.

The International Students Day is celebrated to mark the birth anniversary of Maulana Abdul Kalam Azad. Maulana Azad, the first Minister of Education of post-Independent India, was instrumental in set-

ting up the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) — he also became its founder president. ICCR is the key governmental organisation promoting cultural relations between India and other countries. Under its scholarship programme, ICCR offers around 500 Afghan students unprecedented exposure to academic institutions in India every year.

Welcoming the enthusiastic audience for the second International Students Day, Indian Ambassador Rakesh Sood said that since 2001, around 2,700 Afghan nationals have benefited from Indian scholarship and training programmes. Besides, special courses were conducted for diplomats, journalists, teachers, lawyers and doctors. To further strengthen ties between the two countries, Sood also suggested forming an alumni association to act as a platform for conducting outreach activities and seminars.

Speaking on the occasion, many Afghan dignitaries and invitees recalled their own student days and appreciated India's role in capacity building and development of human resources in Afghanistan. It reflected India's commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan, they said. Sangin praised India's role, especially in the field of technical assistance while Dr. Jalali, director of the Indira Gandhi Institute

of Child Health (IGICH), paid glowing tributes to India for its assistance in strengthening the country's medical services.

Afghan Ambassador to India Dr. Raheen termed the relations between India and Afghanistan as "special" and said that India's help in the country's education sector was demonstrative of this relationship.

Himself an alumni of the University of Pune, the First Deputy Minister of Defence, Gen. Nooristani, fondly recalled his student days and summed up the mood of the evening with a couplet:

*Ham fikr wa ham khayal
banta hai dard-e-dil,*

*Kitne fasle ho zubanaon key darmiyan,
Sach kya hai ya nahi hain,*

*Abhi is sawal par zari hai bahas falsafa
dano key darmiyan*

("Let the debate among the philosophers continue on what is truth and what is not. Irrespective of distance among the languages, living and thinking together helps only to mitigate the emotional pain")

The function ended with a lively performance by 'Aryan Band', a popular Afghan music band. Aryan Band represented Afghanistan at the SAARC Band Festival from November 30 to December 1, in New Delhi. ■

Gurparb celebrated in Kabul



Ambassador Rakesh Sood addressing the gathering on the occasion of Gurparb.

Waheguru Ji ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji ki Fateh," (the Khalsa belongs to the Lord and the victory belongs to the Lord"), the traditional chant of the Sangat, reverberates with the collective voices of the 300-odd members gathered in the large hall of the Gurudwara at the Dharmasala in Kart-e-Parwan district of Kabul.

Kart-e-Parwan is home to most of the Sikh community in Kabul.

The Sikh community gathered at the 45-year-old building on November 24 to celebrate the Gurparb, the birthday of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism.

The nearly three-hour ceremony was infused with religious chants, prayers and devotional songs.

Schoolchildren recited poems in honour of Guru Nanak while guest speakers called for religious harmony, universal brother-

hood, peaceful coexistence and humanitarian assistance. Speaking on the occasion, Indian Ambassador Rakesh Sood greeted members of the community. "I am impressed by the organisation and your ability to cherish and celebrate tradition and culture," Sood told the gathering.

Afghan Sikhs moved to Afghanistan generations ago and have always felt at home here. All of them are fluent in Dari and Pashto (local languages), while some can converse in other languages like Uzbeki.

With his neatly tied blue turban and shiny and flowing black beard, Avatar Singh, member of the Dharmasala management committee, appears no different from other Afghan. He says, "We are Afghans and think like any other Afghan."

Ravinder Singh, another member of the management committee of gurdwara, is fluent in Pashto and Dari and is a fourth gen-

eration Afghan Sikh living in Kabul. Pointing to the sizeable presence of Afghan Muslims at the function, he says, "All these are our friends. We treat them as our own brothers and sisters. Though our worship systems may be different, we are part and parcel of Afghan society."

Though his business keeps him busy, he makes it point to come regularly to the gurdwara to pray with his family.

With a broad grin, he says, "This is an important festival for the Sikhs. The Gurparb in Dharmasala attracts devotees not only from Kabul, but from all over Afghanistan."

For him, celebrations like Gurparb are also occasions for renewing bonds and contacts within the community members. The Gurparb ended with the traditional langar (free meals), served to all the devotees and invitees. ■

Indian delegation participates in Kabul AGFAIR



A section of Kabul AGFAIR.

For many it was a record participation from India at any commercial event in Afghanistan, in the recent past. For the first time, a team of 40 Indian businessmen took part in the three-day Agricultural Fair (AGFAIR) in Kabul from October 23 to 27. Held on the famous “Bagh-e-Bala” fair grounds in Kabul, the exhibition attracted a large number of domestic and foreign visitors.

At three exhibition booths, the Indian delegation displayed an impressive range of specialties, including agricultural machinery and implements, seeds, fertilisers, pesticides and machinery for food processing and packaging among others products.

Many Afghan visitors showed a keen interest in the wide range of products on display.

AGFAIR also demonstrated the potential for foreign investors in Afghanistan. The Kabul Dairy Union, set up a few months ago with technical know-how and machinery imported from India, is already attracting a growing number of customers with its range of milk products.

The delegation was quite impressed by AGFAIR and the opportunities it offered to discerning businessmen. Krishna Murthy of the Andhra Pradesh-based Pratishta Industries says, “Afghanistan is an excellent area for processed food and fruit imports. Once a right partner in Afghanistan is identified, India has a ready market.”

Jagat Shah of Global Network, Ahmedabad, who was among those instrumental in bringing the Indian business dele-

gation to the fair, regards the direct land link and access through Pakistan, the key to unlocking the doors for trade between Afghanistan and India. Others like Sastry, a large-scale fruit trader from south India, meanwhile, are keen to explore the economics of cargo flights as an alternative option.

The Indian delegation used its visit to explore trading opportunities in dry/fresh fruits, medicinal herbs and carpets. At the end of the fair, the delegation signed Afghan export deals worth \$2 million, which includes supply of machinery and equipment, dry fruits, nuts, hing (asafoetida), pomegranates, grapes and pharmaceuticals. For Shah, “It is just the beginning. We are confident of more such deals in the future.” ■

Indian Embassy continue their dominance in Kabul Volleyball championship 2007



Indian Ambassador Rakesh Sood and Russian Ambassador Zamir Kabulov with members of both teams and the rolling trophy



The final match between India and Russia in progress at India House.

On November 16, the Indian Embassy team defeated the Russian Embassy team in the keenly contested final of the Kabul Volleyball Championship tournament of 2007 and retained the winners' trophy. The Indian team had won the inaugural championship in December 2006.

The Kabul Volleyball Championship was an initiative launched by the Indian Embassy aimed at promoting closer ties among the small and growing diplomatic community in Kabul.

At India House, members of the diplomatic missions participating in the tournament

gathered around the volleyball court while cheerleaders egged on their teams with much fervour.

In the best-of-five final, the first game set the tone for the battle royale between the two top teams of the tournament. With effective blocking and an attacking play, India maintained consistent pressure on the Russian team and won the first game at 25 to 17 points. The second game followed the pattern of the first one. Combining aggression with clever placements, the Indian team won the second game by 25 to 18 points.

With Russia losing two straight games, the third game became the decider for India to retain their championship title and for Russia to continue their fight for the trophy. With changes in their tactics, the Russian attack initially succeeded in penetrating the Indian defence. The decider became a "see-saw" tussle, with both teams matching point for point and fighting each point to the kill. Both teams then took "time out" and regrouped themselves.

However, the Indian team emerged the stronger one, winning the decider by 25 to 22 points, and retained the rolling trophy for the second consecutive year.

With two more embassies joining this year's competition, the volleyball championship is steadily gaining popularity among the diplomatic community.

The 2007 tournament began on September 28, featuring 10 teams from the embassies of the United States, Britain, Italy, Germany, Russia, Canada, Turkey, China, Japan and India.

Handing over the trophy to the winning Indian team, Russian Ambassador Zamir Kabulov praised the tournament as "an important initiative" and congratulated the Indian team.

Indian Ambassador Rakesh Sood thanked all the participating teams in making the tournament a success and handed over T-shirts with the logo of the tournament, as a memento to members of all teams.

Though his team lost a second straight time in the finals to the same rival, Kabulov sportingly said, "We are going to make it next year".

Sanjeev Sachdeva, a key player in the Indian team, said, "With this victory, we are like the Australians in world cricket. Now, it is the other teams who have to catch up with us." ■

Kabul TV airs first Afghan commercial serial made by Indians



'Palwasha' director Prasant Satapathy speaking at the premiere of the television serial in Kabul.

Loud music, action, replays of the same expression, reverberating dialogues, lots of tears and tense drama — the Indian living room is going to Afghanistan, in Dari and Pashto.

Starting November 25, TV sets in Afghanistan started beaming 'Palwasha' ('The Rays of Rising Sun'), the country's first home-made commercial serial. The serial is shot in Kabul but directed by an Indian. Also the technical team, make-up men and sound engineers were flown in from Mumbai.

After dubbed versions of Indian mega soaps like 'Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi' and 'Heena', 'Palwasha' tells the story of an Afghan woman of the same name and her journey as a daughter, sister and more significantly, the first female judge in an Afghan provincial court.

Sure enough, the "serial on law and justice through a family drama" starts with a court sequence — the staple of so many Hindi serials and Bollywood movies — where a young Palwasha, trembling, hands down a 10-year jail sentence to a murderer, who is her brother!

Says serial director Prasant Satapathy, a 11-year Doordarshan veteran: "The social prop-

aganda of the 20-episode serial is the uplift of the Afghan woman and the triumph of justice. We are trying to instruct Afghans that they should trust the legal system based on the Shariat and the Quran, and not resort to handing out justice by themselves."

Satapathy is now working for Aina, a Kabul-based NGO, which is producing 'Palwasha' with 40 percent funding from USAID. "We are setting a precedent in the entertainment industry here. No one has shot court scenes before in this country, and we had a Supreme Court judge with us to help during shooting," says Satapathy.

"People love these serials so much that they have started adopting customs depicted in them. We heard that an Afghan boy started praying to a *tulsi* plant in Kabul which led to a violent reaction from his father. The Indian influence on culture here has been debated in Parliament and is being perceived as a threat to Afghan culture," says Satapathy. "But in this serial, the cultural context is entirely Afghan, made just for this audience," he adds. Mumbai-based actor Sonal Udeshi plays 'Palwasha' while Viveki Prakash, who has

been involved with the news-based Indian programme 'Sansani', is the assistant-director.

In fact, the popularity of Indian serials have taken many in Afghanistan by surprise, especially considering the trouble, viewers go through just to switch on their TV sets.

Says Deputy Minister of Energy M. Sediq Ashan: "Only 10-15 percent of Afghanistan has electricity. This is mainly through hydro-electric power. For those who don't have the supply, houses and TVs are run by diesel generators."

Yet, "Kabul stops when Indian TV serials come on air", says Ramika Ahmad, executive director, Meco Construction and Road Building Company, and a member of the erstwhile royal family which was exiled during Taliban rule. "This is our favourite form of entertainment," says Ahmad, adding, "My personal favourite is 'Heena'. I bought a TV for my cook as he insisted on watching Tulsi in 'Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi'. We love Indian family dramas, as we have large families too. We can identify with the traditional values endorsed in these serials. Like Indian women, Afghan women also love to dress up." ■



After a long journey, Saif gets his due in Bollywood

It has been a long journey for Saif Ali Khan! From the pampered scion of a Nawab family to one of Bollywood's most versatile actors and a serious contender for the No. 1 spot, Saif has truly emerged triumphant at the turnstiles.

Saif's debut in Umesh Mehra's 'Aashiq Awara' in 1993 didn't earn him accolades, rather some negative comments were aired about his looks and appearance. No wonder he remained in the zone of the probable for so many years. Looking gawky, ill at ease and out of sorts in a series of post-debut films, Saif all but finished off his career.

He was and remains to a large extent a Khan from the outside. Aamir Khan and Salman Khan belong to film families. And despite being a Delhi dude Shah Rukh Khan is more of an insider in the industry today than any other actor. Yes, Saif has his mother Sharmila Tagore. But moms don't count much in Bollywood.

There're many stories about how insecure he would get on the sets of Karan Johar's 'Kal Ho Naa Ho'. But Saif denies them.

He said: "You know I get paranoid about every movie. I knew from the start that Shah Rukh would be the pivot of the film. But I knew I had great lines and a great role. I was never made to feel Shah Rukh was more important to the project. I went with very clear expectations. It was a civilised unit. Everyone was young and fun. I didn't feel like an outsider at all. I never did, though I was from outside Mumbai."

He says he never felt any need to be a part of any particular camp. "I was always warned

about camps and groups. And I always felt there was some strength to be gained from standing alone, and not being part of any camp. But at the same time if you look at it I'm quite a Yash Raj boy, in many ways.

"I started my career with Yashji in 'Parampara'. He saw my first screen test. My first hit 'Yeh Dillagi' was also connected with Yash Raj Films. The way they work suits me. I'm not expected to socialise with them. So the whole 'camp' thing is quite a myth for me. Really, Karan Johar and Yash Raj Films have spoilt me."

'Omkaara' was definitely a new beginning. When Vishal Bharadwaj zeroed in on him to play the Indian Iago, Saif was, as usual, unsure. He never says an outright yes to any role, not even when it comes to a film like Farhan Akhtar's 'Dil Chahta Hai'. That film clearly was the turning point in his career.

Farhan was sure he wanted only Saif to play



the confused, naïve and confounded Sameer. As usual Saif wasn't convinced. Four years later, Saif was the same indecisive entity, when Bharadwaj offered him Langda Tyagi.

"I was in Jaipur. And I began to think about how Vishal came down here to narrate 'Omkaara' to me. One morning I was sitting on a beautiful lawn in Jaipur's Rambagh Palace with no work to do. Vishal was sitting in front of me. At that point of time I was wondering why I was being offered a negative role. Vishal really pushed me. He told me he was worried because it was an important part. From getting me to cut my hair to delivering my lines properly... he was quite paranoid.

"Initially, I read my character's lines with a bit of an English accent. Looking back, I could've taken it even further. But it was correct timing. Everything fell into place."

Siddharth Anand, who's a close buddy, gave Saif's career as a leading man a further boost with 'Salaam Namaste'. Siddharth thinks Saif is constantly doing roles that challenge him to make his presence felt. Saif admits he's incapable of enjoying the gift of the present. "Perhaps. But at least I'm conscious of it. I'm always anxious about the future."

"On the sets of 'Omkaara' people would say there were four National Award winners. My first impulse would be to wonder who was the fourth after Vishal, Ajay Devgan and Konkona Sen. Then I'd realise, 'Oh shit, the fourth National Award winner is actually me!'"

Saif has the final word. "I may seem like a bundle of contradictions most of the time. But there's a method to my madness which is apparent only to me a lot of times." ■