

Karzai turns nostalgic on a visit to Shimla

It was literally walking down memory lane for Afghan President Hamid Karzai as he took a long stroll on November 16 and visited his old haunts in Shimla, where he spent seven years as a student more than two decades ago. On a sunny and slightly nippy autumn morning, he set out on foot to the vice-regal lodge, the residence of the British viceroys during the colonial times.

Karzai turned nostalgic as he recalled his student days in this picturesque hill resort. Addressing students and teachers at the Himachal Pradesh University from where he earned his MA in political science in 1983, he candidly spoke about struggling to learn the English language as a student.

"I did not know a word of English when I arrived here but soon I picked up the language. In fact, my first attempts at learning the language were by studying botany and using a dictionary in my room located at the edge of the university," he recalled.

Karzai also recalled popular points and walks in downtown Shimla and the simple life of the townsfolk in those days. "I still recall that lilting song from Hindi film 'Mausam' — 'Dil dhoondhata hai phir wohi fursat ke raat din'," he said to cheers and applause from the audience.



President Karzai signing autographs of students of Himachal Pradesh University in Shimla.

The Afghan leader went to almost each and every nook and corner of the rambling vice-regal lodge built in the 19th century and walked its grassy lawns. He candidly confessed: "I fell in love with the magical charms of this hill town the moment I arrived here in 1977."

The Afghan leader walked on briskly to the university complex, even as his ministerial colleagues and security men had a difficult time keeping pace with him. He stopped at a guesthouse room in a wooded area at the edge of the campus and he was led inside it by a caretaker. "Oh! This place has really changed a lot in the last 23

years!" Karzai exclaimed.

"The bathroom is luxurious now. I remember I used to fetch a bucket of warm water from the ground floor to have a bath as there was no geyser then in my room," he told the dazed caretaker. Karzai then drove down to his hotel for lunch and met a waiting family and an old friend, Shyam Khanna. Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Virbhadr Singh called on the Afghan President in the afternoon. "It is indeed a matter of great pride for us that a student of the Himachal Pradesh University is now a head of state. We hope Mr. Karzai will visit the town again," Singh said after the meeting.

In the evening, Karzai drove downtown to the Mall, the heart of Shimla, which was crowded as usual with locals as well as holidaymakers. "If you do not go to the Mall every evening, you don't deserve to be called a Shimlaite," Karzai had told the university audience. Dressed impeccably in his trademark cape, the tall Afghan President smiled and waved at surprised passers-by and owners of stores where he had shopped during his student days.

He would stop and point out several places along the Mall road to colleagues walking with him. After spending about an hour at the Mall, he drove back to his hotel in time to catch a view of a spectacular sunset. ■

India-Afghanistan symposium on agricultural cooperation

Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai said his country needed Indian agriscientists' help in tackling environmental problems of water management and deforestation to check desertification.

"We are eagerly waiting for your help to protect our environment. Today there is no water in Afghanistan... We need serious, thoughtful application of science to manage water," he said after inaugurating the 'Indo-Afghanistan Symposium on Agriculture' in New Delhi on November 19. Looking for help from Indian agricultural

scientists to halt desertification in Afghanistan, he sought sharing of experience and expertise. Karzai said Afghanistan used to be the biggest exporter of raisins. "In fact, in the late 1970s, it had achieved self-sufficiency in agricultural products, but war, drought, mismanagement and destruction took away that," he said. "India must do everything to keep away deforestation, wastage of water. Degradation of environment is a worldwide matter," he said. With 2006 being celebrated as the U.N. International Year of Deserts and

Desertification, the three-day event organised by National Academy of Agricultural Sciences (NAAS) deliberated on the theme "converting deserts into oases".

Among the speakers was World Food Programme country director GianPietro Bordignon.

Earlier, M.S. Swaminathan, president of NAAS, said a majority of the population in India and Afghanistan depend on agriculture. The arid areas of both the countries need technologies which can help to increase income and employment. ■