

The Role of Education Exchange in Strengthening Afghanistan-India Relations

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Abstract

Afghanistan and India have been two friendly countries sharing a long history of close ties. However, the two countries are confronted with a number of challenges including security, extremism, radicalism and trust deficit at the regional level . In the meantime, both countries have socioeconomic and sociopolitical potential for each other that can contribute to their stability and economic development. In order to mitigate the challenges and avail the opportunities, the two countries need to further strengthen their relations for the greater good of the region and people of the two countries.

The people to people contact of the two nations has been in the process of development through cultural diplomacy during the last two decades. As part of the diplomacy, the two countries have used education exchange, where Afghan students are provided with scholarships to study in India. In continuation of this effort, Afghanistan and India need to extend education exchange programmes which will contribute to bringing the two nations culturally further closer. As a result, the two countries will be able to further galvanize association of the two nations allowing them to pursue their development, security and prosperity agenda in the region.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, India, Cultural Diplomacy, Education Exchange*

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Introduction

The camaraderie that characterizes Indo-Afghan relations both at the political and popular level is a product not merely of modern geopolitics but is also a testimony to the existent historico-cultural linkages that have existed between Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent since ancient times (Chandra, 2002). Historically, Afghanistan has been the land bridge to India from the West. The two countries also have a common history, with several empires having encompassed areas of present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan and India¹. Afghanistan has remained a corridor and transit route for centuries for those traveling from middle east and central Asia to South of Asia. The partition of British India in 1947 ruptured India's geographical contiguity with Afghanistan but not the warmth that characterized their relations (Sharma, 2011). The friendly relations have been well depicted by Nobel laureate sub-continental writer and poet Rabindranath Tagore in his 1892 story titled *The Cabuliwallah* (Tagore, 2014). *The Cabuliwallah* is a story of love and affection of an Afghan for an Indian child and this love and sense of attachment remains part of human psychology among people of both nations even today.

Although separation of Pakistan from India has created a geographical distance between the two nations, Indo-Afghan cultural and political relations have remained close despite obstruction caused by the geographical change in the region. One of the key features of Indo-Afghan affinity has been state to state relations at a time when other neighbors in the region have been relying on non-state actors as their proxies for pursuance of their national interest in Afghanistan.

The Afghan-India bilateral relations, after Indian independence, were rooted in the Treaty of Friendship of 4 January 1950 between the Government of India and the Royal Government of Afghanistan, and subsequent Agreements and Joint Statements further harness the relationship (Government of India and the Royal Government of Afghanistan, 2020). Since then, the Indian Government has regularly been contributing to the development of Afghanistan through different initiatives details of which are captured by Avinash Paliwal in his book *My Enemy's Enemy* (Paliwal, 2017). One of those contributions that remain a symbol of Afghan-India relations is the Indira Gandhi Child Health hospital right in the heart of Kabul, capital of Afghanistan, which was built in 1966, the only such facility in the Country at that time (Mullen, 2017). India's broad

¹ <<http://notes.iasscore.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/3.-Indo-Afghan-Bilateral-Relations.pdf>> (Last accessed: 15.06.2020)

range engagement in the post 9/11² Afghanistan, however, has gigantically improved the relations of the two sides. The Indian Government's engagement in human capital development for professional capacity starving nation has been of pivotal importance. There have been programs implemented by the Indian Government using the South-South Cooperation strategy in order to supply qualified professionals from Indian bureaucracy during early years of the newly established state system as part of Capacity for the Afghan Public Service initiative (Evaluation Office, UNDP , 2009). Similarly, programs were initiated by the Indian Government that allowed Afghan students pursue their higher education in Indian academic institutions.

The Indian contribution to the development of post 9/11 Afghanistan has remained of significant importance. India has been at the forefront of providing both humanitarian as well as development assistance to the people of the war-torn Country. By 2010, it had become the fifth largest development assistance provider to the Country and by far the largest regional donor (Mullen, 2017). The important aspect of Indian assistance has been consideration of the Afghan Government priorities, a practice which was not followed by many. Details of some of the major projects implemented by the Indian Government in Afghanistan are as follows (Price, 2013):

- Food assistance to primary school children and construction and rehabilitation of schools (\$321 million disbursed)
- Supply of 250,000 tons of wheat
- Construction of a power line from Pul-i-Khumri to Kabul (\$120 million)
- Construction of the Salma Dam Power Project (\$130 million)
- Construction of the parliament building (\$27 million disbursed; budget \$178 million)
- Rehabilitation of Delaram-Zaranj road (\$150 million).

The Indian investment in development of Afghan capacities has been of significance importance to Afghan-India relations of recent years. The effort has allowed the two nations get closer to each other (Makhkash, 2020). As a result, the two countries have been able to garner public support for strengthening bilateral relations which has contributed to development of a useful regional alliance the continuation of which can certainly be of significance for regional economic development, safety, security and

² *The period starting with military intervention of the international community in Afghanistan in the wake of September 2001 attacks on the United States of America that resulted in collapse of Taliban regime and establishment of a new democratic state system.*

stability. This paper captures the importance of Afghan-India relations and importance of education exchange programs for cultural binding of the two countries which could ultimately bring the people of two nations together for working towards bilateral and regional prosperity, stability and peace.

2. Cultural Diplomacy and Education Exchange

Cultural diplomacy, 'the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding', forms an important component of the broader endeavour of public diplomacy, which basically comprises all that a nation does to explain itself to the world (Melissen , 2005). Cultural exchange gives us the chance to appreciate points of commonality and, where there are differences, to understand the motivations and humanity that underlie them (Bound, Briggs, Holden, & Jones, 2007). This is a form of public diplomacy mainly targeting the general public to visit countries as part of cultural activities in order to understand the local dynamics, way of life, attitudes and social practices. Highlighting its importance, former American senator J. William Fulbright says that in the long course of history, having people understand your thought is much greater security than another submarine³.

A number of tools are used as part of cultural diplomacy meant to promote soft power of the nations. Soft power according to Joseph Nye is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. He furthers, it arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies (Nye, 2009). The widely used tools for the purpose of cultural diplomacy are exchange visits for people engaged in cultural activities such as theater, art, literature etc. sports events and academic activities. When the Taliban government fell in Afghanistan in 2001, the Indian foreign minister flew to Kabul to welcome the new interim government in a plane not packed with arms or food but crammed with tapes of Bollywood movies and music, which were quickly distributed across the city (Pocha, 2003).

Education exchange programs have frequently been used during the last half a century by the nations as part of cultural diplomacy in order to influence ties among nations. The significance attached to the educational exchange by the world powers is very well highlighted by former US Secretary of State Colin Powell in his statement on International Education Week in 2001. He said that I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been

³ <<https://fulbrightacademylaw.org/quotes-of-senator-j-william-fulbright/>> (Last accessed: 15.06.2020)

educated here [in USA]⁴. Countries have been offering long and short term academic programs for students in order to integrate them in their societies for cultural sensitization and exposure. Rui Yong presents example of China and says that the Country realizes the critical role of higher education in the projection of soft power, promotes international exchange and collaboration to expand its global influence, and seeks to formalize the benefits of its rich heritage by establishing Confucius Institutes (CIs), which are centers for language study linked with universities around the world, named after the Chinese philosopher who lived from 551 to 479 BCE (Yang, 2010). The education exchange programs have been helpful for countries to expose people of other nations to local common practices, way of life and social values.

Educational exchange remains an important approach for establishment and development of cultural relations. Exposure of visiting students to the new cultural contexts, their engagement with the new environment and existence within a certain sociocultural setting allows one to fully understand and internalize the local culture. The students studying in a certain country have an opportunity to intermingle with the local students and through them get exposed to the local communities allowing them have a closer look at the local cultural dynamics. They get to know the local customs, way of life, social values and common practices which ultimately help them understand it and with continuous engagement internalize it. Living within a cultural setting helps the individuals get sensitized and used to the local cultural norms and practices.

Since youth is seen as potential for future leadership, countries often invest in this segment of the society through education exchange programs where sharing cultural dynamics remain at the center of the discussions. The youth finds it as an opportunity to understand local social values and common practices and as such based on that can shape their approach and attitude towards a certain nation. Hence, views of youth shapes policies towards nations based on their understanding of local dynamics, common practices and social values. In addition, in depth understanding of the local context and cultural dynamics help individuals position themselves accordingly while working with certain countries. Richard J. Arndt, long-time diplomat and former president of the Fulbright Association, believes that education exchange students return to their countries and begin almost immediately to shape attitudes, create new demands, launch new needs and open new markets (Arndt, 2001).

⁴ <<https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2001/4462.htm>> (Last accessed: 10.06.2020)

3. Regional Context & Afghan-India Cultural Relations

Afghanistan and India remain significantly important to each other in order to mutually benefit from economic development, regional cooperation, security and stability. In addition, collaboration between the two countries will enable them stand up to the challenges faced by the region in economic development, security and stability spheres by all nations of South and Central Asia. South Asia has been faced with threat of radicalism and militancy that has challenged stability of the whole region. The violent extremism, intolerance and conflict is a threat to the security of whole of Asia and beyond. India suffered at the hands of extremism from an instable Afghanistan in the past and there is no reason to expect anything different from a fractured state in future too. The Taliban provided sanctuary for training terrorists for Kashmir and allowed for the establishment of 21 camps across the country (Warikoo, 2002).

The region is faced with violent extremism and radicalism to which some nations of the region are more exposed than others. Such nations need to form alliance and act collectively to counter the challenges and threats posing perils for the regional stability and economic development. India, being one of the largest countries of the region and budding global economies, is one of the nations in South Asia that are in need of regional stability. The country, in the meantime, has the potential to lead the alliance with other nations for countering the threats to the economic and political development of the region. This will enable all the nations in the region to benefit from economic and political development opportunities.

Afghanistan is striving to rise from the conflict at a time when it is persistently challenged by militancy and proxies of the neighboring countries. A stable Afghanistan has the potential to serve as a key land bridge to facilitate India's energy and commercial interests in hydrocarbon-rich Central Asia, thus facilitating the diversification of oil and gas supplies and reducing India's excessive dependence on supplies from the Middle East (Sharma, 2011). A peaceful Afghanistan can help South Asia in general and Indian in particular to expand its trade activities and as such expedite economic development of the region. It also has the potential to serve as a gateway to penetrate the Central Asian market (Sharma, 2011). However, Afghanistan needs to sustain development gains of the last 19 years⁵ and achieve stability and peace.

⁵ *Following the post 9/11 intervention of the international community, Afghanistan has taken giant steps vis a vis democracy, respect to human rights, promotion of civil society, economic development and social capital development.*

Besides being bridge in the economic route in the region, Afghanistan also offers a lot of opportunities to the interested nations to invest in the Afghan economy. The untapped mineral resources, infrastructure development opportunities, vast agriculture sector and transit facilities are enticing prospects for the investors. As per the estimates provided by Gustavson Associates, the undiscovered gas reserves in Afghanistan range between 3.6 trillion and 36.5 trillion cubic feet, while oil reserves are estimated to be around 0.4 billion and 3.6 billion barrels, with 0.1m. to 1.3m. barrels of natural gas liquids (Gustavson Associates, 2007). Hence, India also has vivid stake in the Afghan economy which ultimately contributes to the Indian quest for economic development.

Given the current context, Afghanistan and India are in significant need of building further on their partnership and friendly relations. Enhancing the cultural exchange, akin to the diplomatic relations, between Afghanistan and India will result in an enhanced shared understanding and acceptability among the citizen that is of paramount importance for pursuance of common national and regional objectives of the two nations. The importance of cultural relations' strengthening has been realized by the leadership of two nations. Therefore; this aspect of bilateral relations of the two countries has been clearly outlined in the Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the two countries signed in 2011 and a section is dedicated to the issue titled *Social, Cultural, Civil Society, and People to People Relations* (the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2020).

4. Indian Educational Programs' Impact

International study and educational and cultural exchanges that involve people meeting face to face are widely acknowledged as being among the best ways to foster cross-cultural relations (Himelfarb & Idriss, 2011). Although, it is quite early to gauge the impact of Afghan-India educational exchange programmes, analyzing investment of some of the developed countries can be used as a good proxy indicator to foresee impact of the effort in near future. China, for example, has been investing heavily in Africa on education exchange as part of the development assistance. The range and diversity of these cooperation activities between China and Africa in the area of higher education and research have grown markedly in the eight years following the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summit of November 2006, as new forms of exchange have been established by the triennial FOCAC conferences (King, 2014). Similarly, in Taiwan, The Tsai administration has prioritized fostering intellectual exchanges between Taiwan and other regional countries to further promote regional

integration. In October 2016, the Ministry of Education published the New Southbound Talent Development Plan, which outlines the government's strategy to foster bilateral talent exchanges (Glaser, Kennedy, Mitchell, & Matthew, 2018). Looking at the history of bilateral relations, need for reciprocal support and experiences of China and Taiwan, it is quite evident that education exchange programmes are going to play a pivotal role in achieving broader partnership objectives of Afghanistan and India.

Exchanges can be among the most profound and inspiring events in a young person's life regardless of the ultimate career path. Those who have just completed them are a tremendous—and often untapped—resource for mobilization in support of greater cross-cultural understanding and dialogue (Himelfarb & Idriss, 2011). Hence, while Indian support to the post 9/11 Afghanistan in the area human capital development has been of significant importance, scholarships offered to the Afghan students have been of the greatest importance in regard to bringing the two cultures in closer touch where the students had an opportunity to accumulate a deeper cultural understanding of the two countries.

These training and education scholarships have created professional networks and cultural understanding between Afghan and Indian government officials, which will pay soft power dividends for India in decades to come (Mullen, 2017). The programmes have in first part been able to fill the capacity vacuum of Afghan society by supplying qualified human resources graduated from Indian higher education institutes. This substantive contribution of India has been a real force behind creating a positive feeling towards Government and people of India among Afghan nation. Secondly, the programs have been a catalyst behind binding the two nations culturally together by bringing thousands of young boys and girls near to each other to establish social relations, share cultural norms and help the two sides understand their cultures well. Using the past experience of the United States of America in the late 19th Century as a benchmark where the country opened its academic institutions to the foreign student and enrolled students from China, Japan and Latin American countries, the Indian programme for Afghan student's is certainly proving instrumental in benefiting both Afghanistan and India. Teresa Bevis gives full account of the early foreign students who studied in the United States. She writes that upon completion of their education, the students returned to their native countries and obtained positions of influence and as such significantly contributed to speeding up the development process. In return, America started enjoying leverage within the countries as a nation with quality education system and as such accumulated soft power which helped the

United States emerge to the position of influence in global politics at the beginning of 20th century (Bevis, 2019).

Today, ‘winning hearts and minds’ still composes an important part of the international higher education equation (Nye, 2009). Educational exchange programs have helped thousands of Afghans travel to different parts of India and stay there for a period 3-5 years for academic purposes. Such programs have been helpful for the youth of the two nations study together and engage socially helping them have an authentic understanding of their cultures. This, as a result, has helped people of the two nations come closer to each other for working as partners in every other spheres of life for their bilateral prosperity and long-term development.

The Indian scholarship programmes has not only brought a large number of Afghan students into contact with Indian youth but also has been the reason for transfer of a number of cultural practices to India. The busy Lajpat Nagar of Delhi has now been usually termed as “Afghan Nager” by many due to presence of large Afghan community choosing to live in the area (Das, Aljazeera Features , 2020). A number of Delhi hostels have Afghan students living side by side Indian students listening to Afghan and Indian music alike while Afghan Qabili Palaow⁶ has become a priority of the Indian students. In the meantime, Afghan style baked bread can now be found in New Delhi (Das, Deutsche Welle, 2020).

The examples of students living close to each other, sharing same taste for food, music and entertainment is the great testimony of how education can play an important role in strengthening cultural bonds among the two nations. The cultural binding helps the students participating in educational exchange programmes develop an emotional attachment with host nation which ultimately turns the students into envoys of the hosts in their home countries. Hence, currently, India has a hefty number of Afghans with a strong emotional connection with India.

The education exchange programs offered by the Indian Government to the Afghan students have been an opportunity to the public of India understand Afghanistan well. The programs have provided students an opportunity to present a positive and progressive face of Afghanistan, it has helped Afghan students challenge the stereotypes that are present among Indians about the Afghan nation (Afghan Zariza, 2020). As such, the Indian youth have had an opportunity to understand Afghans far better than they could through media. Cordial attitude of former president Hamid Karzai is,

⁶ *Rice cooked in Afghan style*

for instance, attributed to his student life⁷ that he spent in Shimla, India. Karzai went on to officially visit India fourteen times during his tenure in office (Mullen, 2017). If the former President of Afghanistan is considered a case study, the bonds established between students as part of educational exchange are surely going to help the two countries maintain their strong relationships in future as well.

5. Challenges to Afghan-India Relations

Afghanistan and India have been after strengthening their relations through different economic and cultural activities which should help the two nations come together for the greater good of the South Asian region. However, there exist a number of challenges that can hinder progress of the two countries towards achieving the objectives of establishing strong sociopolitical and socioeconomic relations.

Skepticism of Pakistan about Afghan-India relations has been omnipresent ever since relations of the two nations are established. Despite Pakistan's physical proximity to Afghanistan, the two have not always enjoyed the most cordial relations thanks to the differences over the Durand Line (Ganguly & Howenstein, 2009). Unable to believe that Indian leaders might pursue interests for reasons other than gaining advantage against Pakistan, Islamabad perceives India's efforts to gain influence in Afghanistan as a deliberate strategy of encirclement that is aimed at trapping and ultimately destroying (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012). Gautam Mukhopadhaya says that India's interests in Afghanistan have been typically perceived in terms of a strategic rivalry between India and Pakistan for power and influence in the country. More accurately, there is intense political competition between India and Pakistan in Afghanistan today driven by real or imagined security concerns (Mukhopadhaya & Mathews, 2010). With the fall of the Taliban and the establishment of the interim government led by President Karzai, the dynamics of the three-way relationship have changed considerably. India's attempt to use the reconstruction of Afghanistan to establish its regional presence and to gain from its geostrategic importance is in sharp contrast to Pakistan's lost clout in the state. The growing Indo-Afghan relations have not gone down very well with Pakistani interests in the area (Ahmed & Bhatnagar, 2007).

Besides, another challenge for the relations of the two countries is continuation and expansion of the cultural exchange, in particular education exchange, in order to ensure that the two nations remain on course vis a vis coming closer to each other. Opportunities for Indian

⁷ <<https://www.businessinsider.in/14-World-Leaders-who-have-studied-in-Indian-Universities/articleshow/52568600.cms>> (Last accessed: 15.06.2020)

nationals to visit and stay in Afghanistan remain very limited which slows down the speed of cultural exchange due to serious security threats to the Indian nationals. In pursuing its primary objectives in Afghanistan, Pakistan has relied on a variety of strategies, write Larry Hanauer and Peter Chalk. The authors further that most directly, it has backed proxies to attack Indian interests in Afghanistan (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012). In the assessment of the U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI), this support [to Taliban and Haqqani network] is a critical element in Pakistan's strategic arsenal to counter Delhi's military, political, and economic presence in Afghanistan (Blair, 2010). Both groups—which are engaged primarily in fighting U.S.-led coalition forces—are believed to have conducted strikes aimed specifically at India, likely with Pakistani support (Hanauer & Chalk, 2012).

The question of quality of education opportunities offered to Afghans in India has also been deliberated widely. The author has been informed by a number of students that usually Afghan students do not get a chance to study at higher ranked academic institutions. Though the issue can be a subject for a separate comprehensive research and analysis, the limited interactions of the author with students graduated as part of Indian scholarship programmes reveal that there is need for reconsideration in regard to assigning the students to the academic institutions. Enrollments at the higher ranked colleges and universities will surely add to the effectiveness of education exchange programmes.

6. Conclusion

Afghanistan and India have a long history of relations. The two countries have enjoyed strong state to state relationship while people to people relations also span over centuries. Particularly, since independence of India, this relation has peaked on diplomatic front. Afghanistan and India have had cordial diplomatic relations and India has been providing development assistance to Afghanistan throughout the last 70 years.

The threats and opportunities available in the South Asian region warrant the two nations to work towards further strengthening their bilateral relations. Afghanistan and India need to join hands in order to stand up to the challenges posed by the current realities and make use of available opportunities. As part of the effort, the two countries need to have its public close to each other which will ultimately have a positive impact on bilateral relations of the two countries.

In order to strengthen bilateral relations, it is important to pursue cultural diplomacy as an effective approach. Cultural diplomacy can bind Afghan and Indian nations and help them come close to each other. In this regard, education exchange has been one significant tool that has helped

youth of both nations, expected to be in position of policy level leadership in near future, come closer and have cultural bondage. The education exchange initiatives have produced visible results over the course of last one and half decade.

However, the sociocultural relations building process face challenges. The key challenge in this regard is concern of neighboring Pakistan since it sees it as an alliance building against it. Also, expansion and extension of cultural relationship building are also needed where Indian youth should also have opportunities to visit Afghanistan which is not happening right now. Afghanistan and India need to have a thorough review of the challenges and hindrances and devise a joint strategy to tackle the challenges and exploit the opportunities.

7. Recommendations

- The two countries should continue working for further development and strengthening of their bilateral relations for the greater cause of regional prosperity, development, security and stability. In this regard, a strategic review should be conducted in order to have a workable plan in place with key focus on education exchange;
- In order to address concerns of regional actors about the ever-expanding bilateral relations of the two nations, programmes should be developed where other countries of the region could also join the forums and as such have an opportunity to have their concerns addressed. Afghanistan and India should use diplomatic and non-diplomatic channels to address concerns of their immediate neighbor. This agenda can be pursued by also engaging Pakistan in cultural exchange programmes through establishment of joint avenues where all three nations can come together. Similarly, student exchange programs engaging students of all three nations can be considered in order to allow them come closer to each other for forming an alliance that could in future influence policies of the countries in the region for the greater public good.
- Cultural diplomacy should remain as one of the top priorities of the two countries and should run in parallel with the formal or Track-I diplomacy. As part of the cultural diplomacy, academic exchange programs should continue to bring people of the two sides closer to each other at institutional and personal levels. Particularly, in order to expand impact of academic exchange programs, avenues should be explored where Indian students and scholars could also visit Afghanistan.

- An evaluation of scholarship programmes should be conducted in order to identify loopholes and issues like placement of Afghan students in low ranked academic institutions could be authenticated. Such evaluation would certainly help in terms of identifying actions and avenues for further improving effectiveness of the programmes.
- The Indian Government and Indian Embassy in Kabul should develop a database of students who studied in India and establish alumni of Afghans who graduated for Indian academic institutions. The Indian embassy should meet and consult them on bilateral relations of the two countries and seek policy advice vis a vis bilateral and regional issues.

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