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Hazara Refugee Women of Quetta: Lessons in Survival and Strength

By Leena Z. Khan

“At times I felt like a thief because I heard words, saw people and places — and used it all in my writing... There was something deeper going on, though — the force of those encounters. I was put off guard again and again, and the result was — well a descent into myself.”

—William Carlos Williams, *The Doctor Stories*

JANUARY, 2002

BURURI-QUETTA, Pakistan – The city of Quetta, capital of the province of Balochistan, is nestled near the Pakistan-Afghan border. I was recently invited to accompany a team of Karachi-based social workers to Bururi — a township 18 kilometers outside of Quetta. Bururi is inhabited by a large number of Afghan refugees belonging to the Hazara tribe. We traveled by van through a rugged mountainous terrain dotted with cattle, goats and shepherders. We passed through countless small towns and hamlets separated by vast stretches of desert and mountains. The ten-hour journey was breathtaking and dramatic.

I knew very little about the Hazara people prior to my journey to Quetta. In route to Balochistan, a province of Pakistan bordered by Iran and Afghanistan, I



On the way to Balochistan—Rugged Mountainous Terrain



tribe. She is fluent in Farsi, Urdu and English. We conversed in Urdu. She told me that the persecution of minority ethnic groups by the majority Pushtoons is not a new to Afghanistan. Dr. Nargis' family migrated to Quetta from the Bamyan region in Afghanistan in the late 1800s. "Between 1880 and 1901 the ruler Amir Abdul Rahman conquered the Bamyan region, killing thousands of Hazaras. After a long and severe battle, my family along with other Hazara families, fled Bamyan and came to Pakistan."

In recent years, explained Dr. Nargis, the wave of migration from Afghanistan has taken

had an opportunity to learn more about the Hazaras from Hasan Abdullah, a social worker and vice-president of Mehfil-e-Murtaza, a Karachi-based mosque. Over the past several months Hasan has been organizing fund-raising drives at Mehfil-e-Murtaza, collecting food, clothing and medicine for Hazara refugees. Hasan told me that the Hazara people speak Farsi and belong to the Shia sect of Islam. They are believed to be descendents of Genghis Khan, the Mongol warrior of the 13th century. Another plausible theory is that the Hazaras were Buddhists living in Afghanistan prior to the arrival of Islam.

In recent years thousands of Hazara refugees have fled Afghanistan due to the Taliban's rigid interpretation and practice of Sunni Islam. Most Hazara refugees have made their way to Bururi and typically do not live in the camps operated by the UN and Pakistani government. Hasan explained that they use the camps only for transit from Afghanistan to Pakistan. "The main reason Hazaras leave the camps and come to Bururi is that they encounter discrimination by the majority Pashtoon-speaking Afghans, many of whom still have sympathy for the Taliban," he said. With the assistance of established Hazara businessmen and women in Quetta, many of whom have been living in Pakistan since the early 1900s, the refugees have received local assistance in the form of shelter, schools and access to health centers.

The social workers from Mehfil-e-Murtaza and a team of local doctors used the classrooms of Al-Zehra girl's school in Bururi as makeshift examination rooms for a medical camp. I was introduced to Dr. Nargis, one of the volunteer doctors working at the medical camp. Dr. Nargis was born in Quetta and belongs to the Hazara

place in four stages. The first wave of refugees came to Pakistan during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late 70s. Migration continued for several years due to turmoil in the country created by warlords. The next large migration occurred after the Taliban seized power in the mid-90s. More refugees streamed into Pakistan due to a long, countrywide drought depriving them of cultivatable land, as well as livestock. The latest wave of migration has occurred in the past two months due to the bombardment of the country.

Dr. Nargis regularly sees women refugees at a hospital in Bururi. She recently completed her residency and is specializing in gynecology. She intends to work with the refugee population in Quetta because of a lack of qualified women doctors in the area. Dr. Nargis and I waited inside the school grounds as preparations for the medical camp were being made. She invited me to stay and observe while she conducted the free checkups.

One by one, women began filing into the small classroom. Each woman had several children with her. Nearly every child had the flu and a persistent cough. Although the doctor spoke in Farsi with the women I was amazed that I was able to follow much of the conversations, since Urdu has acquired many phrases from Farsi. Most of the women complained of feeling tired and weak.

"The most common problems in the female refugee population are urinary-tract infections, severe low blood pressure and anemia," Dr. Nargis told me. "These women are not receiving adequate nutrition since they primarily consume black tea and leavened bread. Most women think they have a serious illness. They don't believe me

when I tell them their health would improve if they ate more fruits and vegetables. Sadly, they cannot afford to do so." Other problems she pointed out include lack of vaccinations against preventable diseases such as tuberculosis, typhoid, whooping cough, diphtheria, measles and tetanus.

Depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome are also common among the refugee women. Many women sobbed while they were being treated by the doctor. They spoke of having witnessed their husbands and sons being killed before their very eyes by the Taliban forces. Others remembered Taliban soldiers entering their homes and destroying everything in sight. "We were given two options," said one woman. "We could either leave the country or be killed." Another woman said she had arrived in Pakistan only two months before with over ten family members. Her family was stopped on its way to Pakistan by the Taliban. "They arrested my husband and wouldn't tell us where they were taking him. As he was being taken away my husband told me to continue heading for Pakistan—that he would join me later. However, I know I will never see him again." Another woman who came to be treated for a high-grade fever told the doctor that her husband had been killed during U.S. air raids over



Dr. Nargis treats a woman refugee in the medical camp.

Kandahar. The number of women who had similar accounts was staggering. Many now find themselves in Pakistan with no male family members, several children to support and few marketable skills.

Despite the refugee crisis in Pakistan, Dr. Nargis is relieved that the Taliban have been removed from power. "In 1997 the Taliban committed one of the worst acts against humanity in Mazar-e-Sharif. They killed 50,000 people, 27,000 of whom were Hazaras. They went after anyone who did not accept their version of Islam. The Taliban had a saying: "The Tajiks should go to Tajikistan, the Uzbeks to Uzbekistan, and the Hazaras to the *khobaristan* (graveyard)". God has given the Taliban what they deserve." Dr. Nargis believes that the Taliban view toward women has little to do with religion, and more to do with their own ideology. Answering the question of whether she believed the Taliban had tarnished the name of Islam, she replied; "I am very sad that these misguided people have manipulated the religion to gain power and control over the masses. A Muslim should not have to protect Islam; rather, the religion protects the Muslim."

Recently appointed Minister for Women's Affairs at the UN-sponsored meeting in Bonn on the reorganization of Afghanistan, Dr. Sima Samar is among a small group of prominent Hazara refugees in Pakistan who have returned to Afghanistan to be a part of the rebuilding process of the country. I met Dr. Samar in Bururi at her home, on Dec. 20, 2001, two days before she was scheduled to assume her position in Kabul. With Afghanistan emerging out of the Talibanized latitudes of intolerance towards women, Dr. Samar believes that the rebuilding of Afghanistan cannot take place without the present government's firm commitment to women's rights. "The



Dr. Sima Samar and myself

potential of women has not been fully realized. We have to start undoing the damage that has been done over the past decade. This will not be easy, by any means," she said during our brief meeting.

Dr. Samar grew up in Ghazni, in the central highlands of Afghanistan. She left her home when she won a scholarship to attend medical school in Kabul. In 1982, she became the first woman from the Hazara tribe to obtain a medical degree. Dr. Samar and her husband were

have always been passionate about working at the grassroots level. A political position is a dramatic shift from my work with the refugees. My heart will remain with the refugees here in Quetta but I feel a sense of obligation to play a role in the rebuilding of Afghanistan."

Over the next several days I visited a number of *katchi abaadis* in Bururi (a *katchi abaadi* is an unplanned community without proper sewage lines, running water or electricity). My guide and translator was Zakir Hussain, a Hazara refugee who fled from Afghanistan two years ago. Zakir is a pharmacist and a social worker in Bururi. Zakir expressed concern about the condition of the Hazara refugees. I asked, Why were the Hazara people here in Bururi and not in the UN-designated refugee camps? He told me that the Hazaras had been persecuted by the Taliban in Afghanistan for a number of reasons and still fear persecution from the Pushtoons in the camps. "The conditions in the camps are much worse than in Bururi. At least here they can find some work. There is also a lot of resentment and tension in the camps between the various ethnic groups and the UN has not provided them with any special protection. As a result they do not feel safe." Because they have left the designated camps, the UN does not extend the refugees in Bururi any aid. Most refugees are daily wage-earners, performing jobs like selling fruits and vegetables, carpentry and construction. During winter jobs are scarce and unemployment is rampant. "The Hazara people are very proud," said Zakir. "They would rather starve than beg for food. A day without work is a day without food."



Sughra weaving yarn

well known for their resistance to Russian rule. In 1984 her husband was arrested. She never saw him again. She and her son escaped to Quetta where she opened a hospital for refugees. In 1989, she launched *Shuhada* – a welfare organization.

Dr. Samar has maintained close links with Afghanistan since her migration to Pakistan. Over the past ten years she has used her base in Quetta to establish hospitals and schools in Afghanistan. Despite death threats and resistance from pro-Taliban groups in Pakistan, Dr. Samar has continued her work and is supported by a network of Afghan women. "I am looking forward to this position, although it did take me by surprise when I was informed that I had been selected for the appointment. I

I met a number of Hazara refugees who had fled from the Bamyán region after the barbaric destruction of Buddha statues, which dated back over two thousand years. There is a saying in Farsi: 'Afghanistan was once called the heart of Asia, and Bamyán the heart of Afghanistan.' In ancient times, Bamyán was the link between Central Asia and the subcontinent. Bamyán is well known for being the heart of one of the oldest Buddhist civilizations in the world and containing one of the most sacred places for the faithful. As Buddhism gave way to Islam, the people of Bamyán became predominantly Shia, and for years derived their income from tourists coming to the area. "The Taliban not only destroyed the historical Buddha statues, but also destroyed the main source of livelihood for the Bamyán residents," said my guide, Zakir Hussain.

Sughra is a refugee from Bamyán. She came to Bururi about eight months ago and lives with her husband and 13 other family members in a two-room *katchi abaadi*. Sughra spins balls of yarn to support her family. "One kilo takes



Boy weaver

me three to five to days to spin. I then sell the bundles of yarn to a local carpet maker who pays me thirty rupees per kilo [62 rupees is equivalent to \$1.00].” Everyone in her family, from a seven-year-old child to the adults, performs odd jobs in order to pay the rent of 500 rupees per month.

Sughra led Zakir and me through a rusty old gate to the home of Bashir – another refugee from the Bamyan region. Bashir took the three of us to a room. I was alarmed by what I saw as I stepped inside. Around 20 young boys, ranging in age from 5 to 13, were in a small dark cramped room with no windows. They sat side by side on old wooden benches weaving carpets. It felt like a prison. Dust from the carpets and looms was everywhere. Many of the boys were coughing. They were working away like machines and stopped only briefly to glance at us when we walked in. Bashir told us that a wealthy carpet seller in Quetta had hired him to manage and oversee all aspects of the weaving process.

“I hire the boys to perform the

weaving,” he said. “I am expected to provide the carpet seller with a certain number of carpets by the end of the week.” Bashir gets paid only 1,000 rupees per carpet. I asked him how much each boy earned in one week. Bashir seemed embarrassed by the question and replied, “ten rupees per week.” After a slight pause he added, “I am poor and have no other choice.”

Bashir showed me one child’s fingers, which had developed gangrene from cuts and overuse. I asked Bashir why such young children were hired to weave carpets. He explained that carpet dealers prefer young boys to older ones since their nimble fingers produce smaller and tighter weaves. “They also work faster and do not make any demands,” he said.

With most refugee families consisting of 12 to 15 members, it is not surprising to see so many children working. Zakir had mixed feelings about the use of child labor. “It is exploitation in one sense because the children are not being paid adequately for their services. But I don’t believe that it is wrong for children to work. In many families the male breadwinner has been killed and it is expected that the children will help support the family.”

Another pressing need among Hazaras in Quetta is proper educational facilities. The Al-Zehra girls’ school is a private school funded by the Iranian government for refugee children. The school provides over 700 Afghan children with free books, uniforms and education, and does not make distinctions regarding the religious sect of the child. The principal of the school, Ateka came to Quetta from Kabul 18 years ago. “Many of our students’ mothers who taught in Afghanistan, now teach at Al-Zehra. They were forbidden to teach after the Taliban



Young carpet weavers



Hazara women waiting to be seen by volunteer doctors

came to power. Today our children must learn skills so they will be able to earn a proper living in Pakistan. One way is by cultivating and promoting their own handicrafts."

On my last day in Quetta I was introduced to Neelofer Najafi, a doctor's assistant at Sehat Hospital in Bururi. Neelofer and her family fled from Afghanistan in 1997. Neelofer remembers a time in Afghanistan when women worked and were attending universities. She told me that before the Taliban takeover in the mid-90s, women in big cities were working and attending universities. The concept of *pardah* (seclusion of women) or *burqas* (a long black tent-like garment that hides the face and shape of the body) existed only in the rural areas. Even there it was not strictly enforced. "I still vividly remember when the Taliban captured Mazar-e-Sharif in 1997," she said. "Back then I was a student at Balkh Medical College in Mazar-e-Sharif. They forced the medical school to close down. You must already know that the Taliban did not allow women to work or obtain an education. Women were now forbidden to continue with their studies."

This was a devastating blow to Neelofer. She told to



me that she went into a severe depression after being told by the Taliban forces that she could not continue her medical education.

"My family and I left Mazar-e-Sharif. We knew that it was simply a matter of time before the Taliban would come after us. It was well-known that the Taliban were targeting people they considered non-Muslims." Hazaras, she added, were among this group. Within a few short

days, Neelofer left with her family for another town – Pulikhanary.

“In Pulikhanary they entered our home and threatened my brother and father that if they did not leave Afghanistan they would be killed. Within a few days we left for Kabul. We stayed for one night. The next day we left for Jalalabad with only the money we had in our pockets. We arrived in Peshawar by train. We did not know a single person in the city. My father met a man, also a Hazara, who told him there was a place near Quetta called Bururi where many of our people lived. He suggested that we go to Bururi. The last place we wanted to be was in the [refugee] camps. We took the man’s advice and left the next day for Quetta.

“With the help of some neighbors we knew from Afghanistan, we were able to find a house with two rooms. For one year, there were eleven people living with us. Those were the most difficult days of my life. I could think only of going back to medical school. My sisters and I took up embroidery until we could find better jobs.”

Neelofer spoke often of completing her medical education. She underwent an arranged marriage two years ago. “It is difficult to continue with an education after marriage,” she said. “I do not want to have any children until I have completed my education.” Neelofer’s husband, a physician at Sehat Hospital, is supportive of her decision. “My husband is encouraging me to enroll in medical school here. But it would be very difficult for me to go to medical school in Pakistan. I am waiting to go back to Afghanistan so I can complete my education.”

Dr. Mina Nauderi, a gynecologist at Sehat Hospital, arrived from Afghanistan one month ago. We spoke briefly about the conditions for working women in Afghanistan after the Taliban seized power. “I had been delivering babies in Afghanistan for 25 years. After the Taliban came into power, most women were barred from working except those with medical expertise who had been treating other women. I was one of the fortunate ones, since I continued to work while most women who had worked in the past were forced to stay at home.”

I asked Neelofer if her life in Pakistan was any better than it had been in Afghanistan. “We had a very good life in Afghanistan before the Taliban were in power. My father was a school principal, my brother was studying law in Mazar-e-Sharif, and I was in medical school. I had so many hopes and dreams back then. We had a nice home. We were happy and comfortable. Our lives were torn apart after the Taliban came to power.” However, Neelofer emphasized to me that she and her family are

in Pakistan temporarily. “Our lives are not in danger here, but I long to return to my *watan* [Urdu for homeland]. Afghanistan is our home. We pray for peace in our country. I dream of the day when I can return and serve my people.”

I heard similar views echoed by a number of other Afghan refugees living in the area. Neelofer took me to Gulshan-e-Hassan, a *katchi abadi* a few miles from Bururi. Bibi Ruqqayya caught my attention the moment I saw her. I heard many women speaking in an animated manner around a large *tandoor* (Urdu for oven). Sitting on an elevated platform near the *tandoor* sat a woman preparing *naan* (soft, oblong-shaped leavened bread, with thick edges). “That’s Bibi Ruqqayya,” Neelofer told me as we walked closer. Bibi Ruqqayya came to Gulshan-e-Hasan three months ago and is well-known for being the only woman in the town to own her own *tandoor*. Bibi Ruqqayya purchased a *tandoor* soon after her arrival to Pakistan with some money she had left from her jour-



Neelofer Najafi (L) and Dr. Mina Nauderi (R) at Sehat hospital

ney. I asked her if she worked in Afghanistan. “I began selling *naan* in Pakistan,” she explained while rolling out the dough. “My husband was killed in the war so I have to work to support my family. If I didn’t, we would starve.” Baking *naan* is strenuous work. It was difficult to breathe near the *tandoor* for even a few minutes because of the smoke and dust from the oven. Bibi Ruqqayya told me she cooks bread all day from sunrise to sunset. “Although *naan* has little nutritional value, it is consumed several times a day as it fills one up,” observed Neelofer.

I asked Bibi Ruqqayya if she wanted to return to Afghanistan. “I want to return to Afghanistan, but I don’t have enough money. We barely have enough to eat, so going back is out of the question. As soon as I have saved enough, my children I will go back.” The journey to Pa-



Bibi Ruqqayya baking naan at her tandoor

kistan had been expensive. Bibi Ruqqayya paid someone 1,000 rupees per family member to enter the country. "After we left Kabul we spent twenty-five days in a mosque without any proper food or clothing. Our journey to Pakistan took over twenty days by land. When we reached the Pakistani border we paid a smuggler 1,000 rupees for each person to take us to Quetta. But since I did not have enough money I paid the smuggler 1,000 rupees at the border and 9,000 rupees in Quetta."

* * * * *

What does the future hold for refugee women in Pakistan? What does the future hold for refugee women returning to Afghanistan? Will women finally be given the intellectual space and human dignity that was anathema to the Taliban regime?

I left Quetta with few answers to these questions. What I did leave with was the sense that the women I spoke with were not defined by one particular identity, that is an Islamic one. Their lives were rather complex, informed by diverse realities – defined, but not limited to their educational background, ethnicity, language, religious sect, and refugee status. What they all shared in common was a desire to return to their homeland, to be able to practice their religion without fear of persecution and to be able to return to their professions and educational institutions.

All eyes are on the new interim government in Afghanistan as women slowly begin to emerge out from under their *burqas*. There is a tremendous amount of hope and expectation that this time things will be different. For Afghani women, on both sides of the border, let's keep our fingers crossed that it will be. □

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