

Connecting with Homeland: Media Consumption of Afghan Diaspora in India

Gowhar Farooq

MPhil scholar, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

Received Date: 30 May 2021

Revised Date: 02 July 2021

Accepted Date: 13 July 2021

ABSTRACT

Afghan presence in India dates back centuries. It exists in the form of goods, language, cultural and political influences, and other subtler yet significant forms. The influx of Afghan students, traders, and medical tourists in India, especially post the 2001 regime change in Afghanistan, has given a boost to the relations between the two historical neighbors. The Afghan diaspora in India has, however, maintained its distinct cultural identity through language, food, crafts, and commodity exchanges, giving rise to transnational social formation. In recent years, among other ways, Afghans have maintained these transnational connections through the media. While the transnational flow of Indian media, including its consumption and influence in Afghanistan, has been thoroughly looked into by scholars, the role and influence of Afghan media among the Afghan diaspora in India have largely remained unexplored. This paper looks into how the Afghan diaspora in Delhi engages with media from their homeland. By using ethnographic tropes and by taking a cue from works of transnational media studies, the paper attempts to trace the flows, media consumption, and its influence in keeping the idea of 'Afghaness' thriving away from the 'homeland'.

KEYWORDS: *India, Afghanistan, Media, and Cultural Studies, Digital Media, Diaspora, Transnational Studies.*

INTRODUCTION

Nabi Roshan is a well-known Afghan TV personality. In 2019, Roshan came to India amid rumors that he was leaving Afghanistan for safety. Back then, Roshan's satirical show – Shabake Khanda or Laughter Network – used to draw thousands of viewers every Friday at 8 pm. However, Roshan, who used satire to take potshots at politics and political figures from Afghanistan, had attracted some bitter critics as well. During his stay in India, Roshan began Vlogging from Delhi. His Vlogs attracted hundreds of views and comments on Youtube alone (Roshan, 2019), with viewers from across countries expressing their views on Nabi and his visit to Delhi. While Afghans in Delhi were welcoming Roshan to the city and

asking him to visit them, many in Afghanistan expressed that they were missing him, urging him to return soon. One of the viewers, Eddie Akbari, while thanking Nabi, commented on his video from India Gate, saying he (Akbari) was at the same spot (India Gate) 30 years ago. The Vlogs of Roshan and interactions they solicited signify the connections, experiences, and memories of Afghans who have visited or stayed in India. Interactions on Roshan's YouTube channel and social media also foreground connections that media forge, often transcending barriers of geography and politics. Taking Afghans living in India's national capital Delhi as a group of study, this paper focuses on the role of media, especially digital media, in the transnational creation of 'Afghan' identity among the diaspora. To understand the nuances of the cultural connections between the people of India and Afghanistan, it is important to put into perspective, political relations between the two countries in modern times.

AFGHANISTAN-INDIA RELATIONS

Afghanistan gained Independence in 1919. Reformation and reconstruction had taken roots under King Amanullah Khan. However, with his abdication of the throne in 1929, violence ensued. Although King Zahir Shah's reign (1933-73) provided political stability to the country, revolts and insurgencies were common. It was during Shah's rule that nations state India and Pakistan, came into existence after freedom from the British in 1947. Before 1947, the undivided Indian subcontinent and Afghanistan shared a common border. The formation of India and Pakistan not only geographically altered the dynamics of the Indo-Afghan relations but also created new politico-economic realities. The relations between Afghanistan and India received impetus after the two nations signed a 'Friendship Treaty' in 1950. As India strengthened and scaled its relations with the erstwhile Soviet Union, it maintained a significant presence in Afghanistan, especially when the pro-Soviet regimes ruled the country after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 (Ashraf 2007). Afghanistan plunged into political crises in the 1970s, leading to the first major wave of migration from modern Afghanistan. As the crisis deepened in the decades



to come, many Afghans turned to Pakistan, Iran, India, and other countries as refugees or migrant workers. This influx of refugees and migrant workers led not to human and material exchange but also furthered a cultural swap. While a large number of Afghans returned to their homeland after the Taliban regime fell in 2001, some have continued living in various countries as diaspora, comprising refugees, migrants, and citizens. Migration due to violence and instability in their native country has forced a large population of Afghans to seek refuge elsewhere and then look for safer and more reliable prospects and spaces. Despite living away from their homeland for decades, the Afghan diaspora has maintained strong socio-cultural linkages with Afghanistan. These circumstances put them in an exceptional situation that makes them a community in flux.

A COMMUNITY IN SIMULTANEITY

According to Thomas Faist (2010, p. 9), transnationalism is a lens often used “used both more narrowly – to refer to migrants' durable ties across countries – and, more widely, to capture not only communities but all sorts of social formations.” These formations, as per Faist, may include solidarity, small-scale entrepreneurship across borders, and transfer of customs and practices. This exchange – that transcends borders – is carried out predominantly by people. In this paper, people are Afghan refugees and migrants in India.

Scholars Sahil K. Warsi (2015) and Aparna Malaviya (2016), who have conducted extensive ethnographic researches on Afghans in India, particularly in the Indian national capital Delhi, maintain that like in Afghanistan, Afghans in India come from diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. However, broadly, and particularly in the case of the Indian government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)¹, the Afghans have broadly been divided into two categories – ‘Hindu-Sikh’ Afghans and the ‘ethnic’ Afghans. The former (Hindus and Sikhs), the majority of whom have immigrated to India before and in the 1990s, are seen “coming home” to India; the latter (ethnic Afghans) are presumed to wish to “move somewhere else.” Especially in Europe and the US. Apart from these two categories, many Afghans come to India temporarily for medical treatments, for education, or visiting relatives and friends. The primary focus of my research is ‘ethnic Afghans’ and Afghans who visit the Indian national capital temporarily. Both belong to ‘simultaneity’ (Levitt & Schiller, 2004) -- physically in India but emotionally and culturally attached to Afghanistan. It is due to this ‘simultaneity’ that the ‘ethnic Afghan migrants,’ and the visitor Afghans, hereafter simply referred to as

Afghans, stay linked to their homeland in myriad ways, including creating what Benedict Anderson (2009) refers to as the imagined community. One of the several ways such imagined communities are formed, disputed, and reform is through the media.

AFGHAN DIASPORA AND MEDIATISED HOMELAND

The transnational flow of the Indian media, including its consumption and influence in Afghanistan, has stolen the limelight with scholars, journalists, politicians, and bureaucrats boasting how India's ‘soft power’ has succeeded in creating new warmth between the two countries. One of the often-cited examples of India's ‘soft power’ in Afghanistan has centered on the popularity and influence of Indian media, particularly Bollywood movies and Indian TV soaps (Purushothaman, 2010). While Indian media's influence remains an important area of study, the Afghan media's role and presence among the Afghan diaspora in India remain a highly under-researched area. Moreover, for almost five decades, Afghanistan has been primarily understood through the restricted prism of securitization and war. It is therefore essential to look into how the Afghan diaspora in Delhi engages with media from their homeland, the rationale behind this engagement, and how this helps them in keeping their Afghan identity and culture thriving away from their country.

In his research, Warsi traces Sohrab Press of the Old Delhi, a venture from where a monthly newsletter for the city's Afghans was published in the 1990s (Warsi, 2015, p. 167). For a long time, small publications like Sohrab Press or an odd newspaper item were the only way of knowing what was transpiring back home. Telephone calls were expensive, and the lack of telephone networks in large parts of Afghanistan made communication unreliable. With low literacy rates and an inconsistent postal network, even letter writing wasn't a very viable option. However, despite these limitations, Afghans in India would try to keep their memories and culture rekindled with books and audiocassettes. For instance, the songs of legendary Afghan singers Ahmad Zahir and Ahmad Wali traveled to Delhi through audiocassettes brought from Afghanistan. These were later copied and digitized on compact disks. Shops and restaurants in Delhi's Lajpat Nagar, Bhogal, and Wazirabad localities of Delhi continue to play songs of these Afghan legends.

As conflict and political instability plagued the country in the 1980s and the 1990s, free media remained a distant dream for years. Although not significant, the pirated and contraband media was smuggled in and out of the country throughout the 1990s. However, in 1996, when the Taliban rose to power, controlling almost two-thirds of the country, they banned TV and other forms of visual media and entertainment. The regime relied heavily on radio, which

¹ While India is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Status Convention and the 1967 Refugee Status Protocol, the UNHCR has been permitted to function in the country.

mostly broadcast religious debates and sermons. Five days after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the TV came back to life. As a sign of the end of the Taliban's hardline regime that had forced the closure of TV and forced women to cover their faces, the first image broadcast by the public television was that of a woman, Maryam Shakiba (Torfeh 2009). In late 2001, the media market finally opened up in Afghanistan. Focus on infrastructural projects and improved telecommunication services became a game-changer and established a base for media proliferation. The arrival of TV and radio channels after a long wait brought Afghanistan much-needed independent media.

Apart from giving the people of the country means of news, entertainment, and a voice, the flourishing media outlets also gave the diaspora of Afghanistan an opportunity to stay connected to their country. The rise of independent Afghan media outlets meant that people of Afghanistan, both within the country and outside, did not have to rely entirely on foreign media as they could now watch proceedings from the Afghan perspective. The media boom also brought issues, otherwise ignored and snubbed, to the fore and to the limelight and gave different religious, ethnic, and cultural groups an opportunity to put forth their perspectives before the people of the country. The arrival of satellite TV channels meant the diaspora could virtually bring their homeland alive just by switching on their TV set. This connection got a shot in the arm with the arrival of social media. Initially, Facebook, and later Twitter, brought news and updates from home instantly. In fact, Facebook, and its other services like WhatsApp and Instagram, serve as a prime source of news and leisure for Afghan youth in India.

Nawid Mirza, who is pursuing his studies in Economics from Jamia Millia Islamia, a prominent university in Delhi, says he gets almost all the updates about Afghanistan from the 'Pages' he follows on Facebook.² While there is a range of Facebook pages from Afghanistan he follows, over time, he has zeroed in on a few he trusts for his daily dose of news. While sipping chai in his college hostel, he scrolls through the page of Dr. Fahim Tokhi, an Afghan social media activist with over 1.3 million followers on Facebook (Facebook, Dr. Tokhi, 2019). Dr. Tokhi, who runs the page since 2013, provides his followers with a variety of media, including news and events updates, pictures, and videos that he deems interesting and user-generated content. Another prominent page Nawid follows is of Abu Moslim Shirzad (Facebook, Shirzad, 2010), a popular TV presenter in Afghanistan. When asked if he follows any news organizations from Afghanistan on Facebook, he named TOLO News and Khabar Tazah but added in the same breath that he prefers news from the pages of Dr. Tokhi and Shirzad. According to Nawid, these pages provide news

faster and do not take sides. To prove his point, he scrolled through Dr. Tokhi's page to show the recent updates and emphasized, "See. He updates fast." On being quizzed on how he gauges Dr. Tokhi as unbiased, Nawid smiled and replied, "I understood with time." Nawid's hostel mate Sikandar Azimi, who joined the conversation later, agreed that Dr. Tokhi was popular. For the diaspora, who access this information away from home, these individuals serve as modern-day gatekeepers, who act as conduits that not only provide the information of happenings in the homeland but also shape views on these happenings. In later days, meetings with Nawid and his friends made it clear that the majority of the media consumption of the Afghan youth in Delhi was heavily dependent on the Internet.

India's cheap mobile Internet tariffs, where one can access 2 Gigabytes of Internet data per day for 28 days at around \$6, has revolutionized how people consume media, with Afghans in India being no exception to this. Studies on the usage pattern of the Internet in India have shown that people, especially youth and people who are not literate, consume more visual media, especially through multimedia messaging apps like WhatsApp, social media, and YouTube.

Among Afghan youth, celebrities like singer Farhad Darya Nashir and TV personality and singer Aryana Sayeed are a huge hit. These, and others, are not only sources of entertainment and leisure, but they also represent what Miriyam calls "new and confident Afghan faces" that the diaspora connects to. Miriyam, who just completed her Bachelor's in medicine and now works at a public-funded hospital in New Delhi, belongs to a generation of Afghans who have spent most part of their lives in 'simultaneity' – emotionally and culturally connected to Afghanistan but geographically away from it. Many in this generation are up-to-date with the global media trends as well. Miriyam has been visiting Afghanistan consistently but plans to join her brother in Australia for higher studies. Many in this generation are living in 'simultaneity' -- emotionally positioned towards Afghanistan, living in India, and aiming for a secure and stable life in the West.

ASPIRATIONS AND ANXIETIES

In South Delhi's Kastur Niketan, signboards across the streets and residential areas in English, as well as Dari, indicate a strong Afghan presence. Areas like Kastur Niketan in Lajpat Nagar and localities in Bhogal have become synonymous with Afghans in Delhi. Although now expensive, a large number of the early Afghan refugees settled down in these localities after coming to Delhi. As Warsi observes, these localities "have come to possess a particular material Afghan presence" (Warsi, 2015, p. 173) with traditional Afghan bakers, restaurants, and shops selling paraphernalia and houses with names and signboards in Dari. Apart from this visible material presence, a network

² Responses from Afghans in Delhi as a part of this research are personal interviews, face-to-face interviews.

that serves the needs of the diaspora has flourished over the years. This grid includes translators, touts -- who serve as a link between hospitals in Delhi and Afghans who come to the city for treatment or medical care -- faith healers, and a range of businesses and services run by Indians. One of such several exclusive services is that of technicians who tune dish antennas to frequencies so that Afghans in India can enjoy their favorite programs and remain updated about the happenings in their home country. As discussed earlier, while the Afghan youth consume media mostly through the Internet, the older generation still heavily relies on TV for their dose of leisure and news.

Shows like 'Afghan Star,' also known as '*Sitara-e Afghan*,' a reality TV singing competition running for 16 years now, not only entertains Afghans across borders but also brings them together to cheer and support their favorite performers. David and his friend, who does not have access to satellite channels in India, say they, along with their friends, used to wait for the TV channel to upload the episodes on its YouTube channel. They watched the show on cellphones even when they had read the details regarding its latest episodes on social media. In March 2019, when Zahra Elham became the first woman to win the show, the news grabbed international headlines as well as fueled debates on what lies in the future (Agence France-Presse, 2109), as the Taliban are expected to arrive in the larger political scene of the country. Working as a media person or being a celebrity in Afghanistan does not only bring fame and responsibility; it can also attract unwanted troubles, including threats and attacks. Seventeen journalists lost their lives, and over 100 cases of violence against media persons were reported in Afghanistan in 2018 alone (IANS, 2019). The violence against journalists and media professionals, in fact, has recently surged. In 2020, several journalists lost their lives to assignments. Despite these cases, the media in Afghanistan is not only expanding its footprint but has also become a part of Afghan society both within and outside the country.

News bulletins broadcast at 6 pm and 9 pm (Afghanistan Time) on TOLO News and Araina News are the most popular source for a daily news round-up. During conversations with Afghans, it was apparent that the engagement with news peaked in the days of excessive violence in Afghanistan. The safety of their family, relatives, and friends in Afghanistan remains a big concern for the diaspora. Security concerns have become more severe after the rise of ISIS- Khorasan referred to as *Daesh* by most Afghans, and the recent surge in violence amid the withdrawal of the NATO and US forces from Afghanistan. In fact, according to Dawood Mohammad, who, along with his brother, runs a tailor shop in South Delhi's Lajpat Nagar, violence and political uncertainty keep Afghans anxious. Mohammad, who came to India in 2015, says that while his country is beautiful, the everyday violence there has

become unbearable for him. Mohammad has made Delhi his abode for now, but he and others, especially youngsters, who intend to return to Afghanistan after completing their studies in India, wish for a peaceful and stable political setup. However, they are uncertain about the future of their country after the foreign troops -- who have been backing the Afghan government -- leave their country before September 2021. A political turmoil similar to the 1990s and the events that followed is unacceptable for Afghans, who have seen their country taking small but positive steps toward an inclusive democracy. The outburst of these anxieties and aspirations spill over to the social media -- platforms that connect Afghan diaspora all over the world with each other and the people in their native country like any other media. Although diverse and geographically spread across several countries the social media enables seamless interactions, connections among fellow members of diasporas, and communication between several cultural groups and individuals in local, national, and transnational spaces.

CONCLUSION

Media networks have helped to forge the feeling of belonging among Afghans, created spaces for debate and expression, and have brought the Afghan diaspora closer to home by somewhat transcending the binary of 'homeland' and the 'other land.' In the case of Delhi, a city that has historically hosted Afghans for centuries and continues to be a hub of cultural and commercial exchange, these networks were relatively easier to forge. Improved ties between the two nations (Afghanistan and India) and the proliferation of media in Afghanistan post-2001, has also given a boost to this connection. And, while India has traditionally been a preferred destination for refuge, commerce, and education for Afghans, in recent years, a large number of them look for opportunities to move to the Global North, especially Europe. This migration will give birth to new connections and fractures. In such a scenario, media, particularly from Afghanistan, is likely to play an important role in keeping the Afghan diaspora connected with their homeland and provide a fertile ground for new forms of expression and media among Afghans living in the West. These means will also provide new, critical, and relatively uncensored perspectives on socio-political changes in Afghanistan for the years to come.

FUNDING: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

REFERENCES

- [1] Agence France-Presse. (2019). Zahra Elham becomes 1st woman to win on Afghan Star. Retrieved May 13, (2019) from Salaam Times website: https://afghanistan.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_st/features/2019/03/22/feature-03
- [2] Anderson, B., Affective atmospheres. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 2(2) (2009) 77–81.
- [3] Ashraf, Fahmida., INDIA-AFGHANISTAN RELATIONS: POST-

- 9/11.” *Strategic Studies* 27(2) (2007) 90–102.
- [4] Facebook, Dr. Tokhi. *داکتر فهيم توخي*. Retrieved May 13, 2020, from <https://www.facebook.com/Tokhi.official/>
- [5] Facebook, Shirzad Abu Moslim Shirzad. Retrieved May 13, 2020, from <https://www.facebook.com/abumoslim.shirzad/>
- [6] Faist, T. (2010). *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories, and Methods*
- [7] IANS. (2019, January 10). 17 Journalists were killed in Afghanistan in 2018. *Business Standard India*. Retrieved from https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/17-journalists-killed-in-Afghanistan-in-2018-119011000803_1.html
- [8] Levitt, P., & Schiller, N. G. (2004). Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society. *International Migration Review*, 38(3) 1002–1039.
- [9] Malaviya, A. (2016). *International Convention of Asia Scholars | Accelerating Research in Asian Studies since (1997)*. Retrieved August 3, (2019) from <https://icas.asia/en/border-and-belongingness-ethnographic-study-afghan-refugees-India>
- [10] Purushothaman, U. (2010). *Shifting Perceptions of Power: Soft Power and India’s Foreign Policy* | ORF. Retrieved May 12, (2020) from <https://www.orfonline.org/research/shifting-perceptions-of-power-soft-power-and-indias-foreign-policy/>
- [11] Roshan, N. (2019.). *نبي روشن / Nabi Roshan*. Retrieved May 13, (2020) from YouTube website: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_DVIsHsSW15n3yTpJObf9Q
- [12] Torfeh, Massoumeh., *Media Development in Afghanistan., Media Development LVI* (1) (2009).
- [13] Warsi, S. K., *Being and belonging in Delhi: Afghan individuals and communities in a global city* (Ph.D., SOAS University of London). Retrieved from <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/22782/> (2015).