

## The Suno India Show

### Spiralling back into the past: Afghanistan then and now

*This is a Suno India production and you're listening to The Suno India Show.*

**Rakesh:** Hello everyone this is Rakesh here production lead and co-founder of Suno India. So today we have a special episode being done by Urvashi Sarkar who is the guest host of this episode, and she is soon going to start a new show on Suno India called 'Beyond Nation and State'. Welcome Urvashi.

**Urvashi:** Thanks, Rakesh

**Rakesh:** Can you please tell us a little bit about yourself for the listeners.

**Urvashi:** So Rakesh, I've been a journalist for about more than a decade. And my primary focus of writing is international affairs, though. I've also been really interested in covering some aspects of, of rural life as well, especially the Sunderbans in West Bengal. And as a journalist, you know, you know, dabbled in different kinds of beats, I started out with the Hindu newspaper as an education reporter, then I studied my masters, and then I worked with some NGOs, for a bit and then I decided to come back to full time journalism. And I've been freelancing for about five years now, five or six years now. And during the last five or six years, I've written four different publications. And I've been writing on the subject of think tanks about nuclear policy and disarmament about nuclear energy. I've been writing about the United Nations. And so and, you know, there are various themes in my report arch, and I've been a fellow with the people's archive of rural India and I was also a fellow with the UN Rehem Al Farham Memorial Journalism Fellowship. My reportage also encompasses writing about environment development, gender, and culture. But I'm interested in questioning power in international relations, and I'm currently working on a book about Indian think tanks.

**Rakesh:** Can you tell us a little bit about the new show that we are planning to start so that the users can you know, come and subscribe to it once it is launched?

**Urvashi:** So Rakesh, the show is called Beyond nation and state, and it is about international affairs. And as the title of the show indicates, we won't just be talking about nations and states, but we will be going beyond it. You see, very often discussions about international affairs tend to be only about rivalries between nations border disputes, or conflict. This podcast is interested in all of that, but also wants to focus on especially wants to focus on the human aspect. You know, the role of people, big business corporations, movements and resistances international organizations and institutions. Beyond nation and state will also feature discussions about

identity literature and culture and try and provide a very wide perspective on what we mean by international affairs. Especially from a South Asian lens.

**Rakesh:** Thank you see, I'm sure the listeners will be waiting to catch your new episodes as soon as the show is launched. Over to you.

**Urvashi:** Thank you, Suno India for giving me this opportunity, and I really look forward to it.

*Hi I'm Urvashi Sarkar, in view of the tragic and developing situation in Afghanistan, we interview Nazes Afroz a former BBC executive editor for south and central issues. Nazes is a translator of the classic Bengali travelogue, Beshe Videshe about life in Afghanistan in the 1920s.. Nazes has extensively written about and photographed various locations in Afghanistan. He has also produced an exhibition about the Kabuli Walla Community of Kolkata.*

**Host:** The photo behind you from Afghanistan, is it?

**Nazes:** Yes, it is. This is the Daru Llamam palace. It was built in the 1920s, early 1920s when King Amanullah, the reformist King from the 1920s was deposed in 1929. In a tribal rebellion, he built that building to have Afghanistan's first parliament. At that time, he had written Afghanistan's constitution. It was one of the best documents I've ever written. It was just an eight page document in which he guaranteed rights for everybody in Afghanistan, the Equal Rights guarantee for women, the equal rights guaranteed for minorities, education was made fundamental right. And education was free up to the highest education level, up to university level. So that was meant to be the parliament building of Afghanistan in the 1920s, then that got very badly damaged during the Civil War times in the 90s. And so this is the image, that bad badly damaged image of Afghanistan, of the palace, and the kids playing in front of kids playing football in front of it. So I took that photo must be in 2011-12, something like that.

**Host:** You took this photo, right?

**Nazes:** Yes, I took this photo. Yeah.

**Host:** When did you take this photo?

**Nazes:** 2011-12 most likely around that time. So almost 10 years ago. Yeah.

**Host:** nd when was the last time you went to Afghanistan?

**Nazes:** It has been six years I was there last for my exhibition Kabuli walla exhibition in 2015 we held the exhibition inside the Kabul University, there is a center call Afghanistan Center at

Kabul University, ACKU And the exhibition was held there, and I was there for about a month a little more than a month actually. So that was the last time since then, there was no other opportunity to go there. I very badly wanted to go. But this situation did not arise. So I very badly wanted to go since 2015, which was the last time I visited but somehow never managed.

**Host:** Yeah, obviously, you're following the situation in Afghanistan. And since you have a very personal and intimate connections, you know, with the country. There's a sense of tragedy, and devastation that we're feeling at multiple levels. So as you're watching these visuals, and you're reading these reports, what according to you is the most point and tragedy to hit Afghanistan right now?

**Nazes:** Of course, the most poignant tragedy would be the speed at which the Taliban took over. Since the Taliban took over a few days ago, I've spoken with few dozen of my colleagues and friends who are still in Afghanistan or what outside Afghanistan, but they've got families inside. And I used to be a senior editor with the BBC, there is a big bureau there. And I was in charge of that region. And I recruited a lot of recruited a lot of people there, and I was trying to get in touch with them. Some I've been able to get in touch with some I have not been able to get in touch with. So everybody's surprised at the speed at which the Taliban took over there was absolutely no sense that it could happen. If you remember the history in even in 1994, when the Taliban emerged for the first time, and by the time they completed the control over the country, it took them almost two years. By 1996 they first came from the south, they came with the crossed they were of course they were reared in Pakistan, then they crossed over there to the southern districts and provinces. Then they went west, and then they went north and came down to Kabul, Kabul was the last city that they captured. At that time, the situations were so different, even in 1994 to 96, there was practically no armed resistance. There was no functioning army, there was no police, there was no armed forces. But now, we know that it was almost 300,000 troops, including the Afghan National Army, as well as the Afghan Armed Forces, I mean, the police forces, national police forces and the Regional Police forces, and the total number would be more than 300,000. So it was really surprising. It just seemed that they were just giving up one province after another. So a lot of my friends, colleagues, they think that there was some sort of conspiracy. So there's a lot of the a lot of conspiracy theories going around. They think that the Americans had sold the Afghans to the Taliban, because they wanted to get out very quickly. There are lots of talks going on in Kabul saying that the Americans have done a deal with the Taliban that only after the evacuation of the Westerners is completed, then only Taliban would actually enter the city and they will take control of the city. Of course, they have entered the city, they have entered the palace. They have captured the presidential palace, and they are at the airport. But there hasn't been any report of mayhem or looting or anything, but that people suspect what is happening is because there has been that understanding that the Westerners and all the end They have not been evacuated. And after everybody leaves, then it will be up to the Taliban to whatever they wanted to do want to do. So that's what what's going on. And that's the

greatest tragedy, the speed at which it just happened in weeks. So I was speaking with another colleague, former colleague, and his very close friend is almost like family. And he said that when the first major provincial city in Kunduz in the province of Kunduz, it felt that I was not worried that much it happened before, and the Afghan forces when they repented the Taliban before, but it did not happen like that. They just swept the country. And there is another thing that I've been hearing that the number of fighters on behalf of the Taliban. So my friend has spoken with one commander with the Afghan army, and he is based in small base. And he says that look, I have got 200 soldiers with me, I can fight, say 200 or even 400 attackers, but if 2000 people turn up outside the base, there is absolutely no hope. And we had to surrender. And what has happened is a lot of these army bases, they had lots of arms and ammunition. Some of them were not even open. So they were even in their crates, and the Taliban have got control over that. All of it. So now they have they are roaming around with tents, they are roaming around with armored cars, they even have the airforce the Afghan airforce that was left behind. So this is a company is going to be a different game altogether. Last time the Taliban was like a ragtag army, they only had Kalashnikov or few rocket launchers that said, and RPG, rocket propelled grenades, grenade launchers, that was all now they are almost like they will be fully functioning army. And I don't know if some of the army deserters or the army who have surrendered whether they would the Taliban force them to work for them. We have been hearing reports that a lot of the soldiers were leaving. So you know, in the north, there had been reports that they were so cut off from the rest of the country. And the first incident when the soldiers, few soldiers, they came to the Taliban to surrender, they were executed on camera, and the video was posted. So the rest of the soldiers they crossed into the neighboring country into Tajikistan. So that has been happening. My one of my, again, my my colleague, his brother in law, he was working for the Afghan Air Force. And he was posted in Harare. And there is no news of him. So he has either fled, and he is in a place where he cannot get in touch with the rest of the family. The rest of the family is in Kabul, his daughter is in Canada, and there they cannot get in touch with him. So nobody knows what has happened to him whether he has been killed, or he has gone to a place where from where he cannot get in touch. That is what is happening.

**Host:** The sense of, you know, conspiracy theories floating around. I've been reading a few of them myself. And yes, the sense that you get is that, that maybe there's been some kind of deal that happened behind the scenes with even our president Ashraf Ghani, he fled the country. And, and even a sense that the Afghans were misled, because I think even Joe Biden had given the statement that there is no question even a month back of, you know, of Afghanistan being destabilized and yet the run over by the Taliban has been so Swift. So there's a sense of that I would think of abandoned meant that the Afghan people feel by the international community, by their own leaders, and to have receded back to where they were two decades ago, more than two decades ago. Do you think that there's also a sense of abandoned abandonment and betrayal that the-

**Nazes:** Absolutely, absolutely, absolutely, there would be. The Afghans knew that they had been abandoned in 1994. In 1992, in fact, when there was a change of regime from the communist president, Dr. Najib, the last few minutes president of Najibullah when he handed over to the Mujahideen factions, at that point, there was nobody to oversee that transition. Nobody was there to ensure that the transition was peaceful. There was nobody to ensure that there was no chaos. So At that point, I mean, we have to go back a little bit more we know what happened in 79, with the invasion of the Soviet Union and the entry of the Soviet Army land troops in Afghanistan, that resulted in the US foreign policy, which just ensured the unending supply of arms weapons to the Mujahideen forces, the and also the foreign fighters, who came from all over the world, from Chechnya, Uzbekistan, to North Africa, to all the Arab countries who came to fight in the name of Islam. So there was this, this absolute dangerous cocktail that was there that was prepared to explode. So there was almost an emanation there was this ideology. They have to fight in the name of jihad in the name of Islam. That was the it was a holy war against the godless communists. So that resulted by the time the Soviet army was defeated, when they retreated and the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. And the West and as especially the USA, they just turned their back on Afghanistan, they did not care to make sure that people were the arms were taken away. No, they were not. So these were the warlords. These were the people who had, who were unhinged. And they wanted to impose their understanding of Islam. Of course, Afghanistan is a Muslim country. It is a conservative country. It had always been a Muslim conservative Muslim country, but it wasn't like this. Sharia Yes, of course, they were more governed by their own tribal ethics, and the tribal codes of conduct. But it was not this kind of Islam, this interpretation of Islam that was brought to Afghanistan at that time. So at that time, so everything was imposed, and then the Mujahideen forces, they were busy trying to be in power and the civil war happened and there was this chaos. There were there were massive atrocities that were committed on ordinary Afghan lives. Young women, boys, girls, they could not go out on the streets in the fear that these armed people, they would just pick them up. And that that is what happened. So at that time, when the Taliban came to instill some sort of law and order. The people actually were glad they were happy. They invited them, because they did. Of course, there were the punishment was very swift and and it was harsh. And they brought in and said, they brought some sort of by the time the Mujahideen, they had wasted all their arms and ammunition. They had absolutely nothing left no resources, okay, then the Taliban was being supplied by Pakistan. So the Taliban came, they controlled the country. So there was this relief, but then the rule of Sharia that the Taliban brought over them. Again, that was, again, another five years of operation, different kinds of operation, especially on women, and children. on everybody. We all know that history. So but and then, so there was at that, since then, if you had spoken with Afghans, there was the sense of abandonment, that time. And that sense of abandonment is much more acute now, because this is something this is they had been led to believe that they are not going to be abundant again. One of my colleagues in the BBC from downstream, najiba. So she interviewed Tony Blair, just after the war in 2001. And one of her

questions was, would you abandon Afghanistan again, and Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, he said, Never ever, we would abandon Afghanistan. But you see, I mean, Britain is no power any longer Britain will do whatever the US wants them to do. And this is what they did in Iraq. So everywhere that that is the history that we know. And, and then particularly the speed that the way we started the speed at which the Taliban took over. So now that a lot of people I think that maybe some elements of truth in it. The talks had been going on with the Taliban for last few years. It's it started, I think, from 2015 16 in Doha, and as they say, in Afghanistan, that you may have the watch, we have the time so you can look you may be on a certain time, a time. deadlines, but we have enough time. So we can just sit and we can wait. So the Taliban, I think they understood it very well, that they are going to leave, if not now, within the next few years. And that is what so they waited. And they waited and pounced at that first opportunity.

**Host:** I want to ask you, since you've been a photographer for such a long time, you've extensively photographed Afghan communities in Calcutta, you've done photography in Afghanistan as well. So what do your mind is some of the most disturbing visuals to come out of there now from a photographer's perspective, what is it that disturbs you the most at the moment?

**Nazes:** You know, the first is that, of course, we have to see. I mean, we are seeing a lot of videos now. Instead of still images. So one, I mean, the videos that have already horrified the whole world, the way that US transport aircraft, when it was landing on Kabul airport, and the way people were running in front of its wheels, and they were getting crushed, and somebody can when the aircraft tried to leave, and somebody was hanging on to its wheels, and dropping from there. And people were trying to people, some of the planes that are grounded, some of the civilian airline planes that that were grounded. So people were trying to get into them, they have absolutely no clue that those planes, those aircraft, were not going to take off. And the way they were trying to climb the stairs and falling from they're in getting injured or dying even. And by the time Taliban had already arrived at the airport, and they were shooting. Yes. So those are very distressing. And apart from that, yes, I think I'm in but it's too early to say what what it will be like, as I said that we have not seen images from outside Kabul, much. I've been reading reports that, of course, they have stopped mobile, mobile and internet connection in many places. So images will be hard to come by. It's only in Kabul, I think there is some amount of communication with the outside world. So we will have to wait and see. So the atrocities I'm sure the atrocities have started. Some video images have arrived, that that have emerged. So I think in the north, in some province in the north parliament, we're executing about seven-eight Afghans because they were working as translators with international organizations or maybe with the foreign army. So they're being executed and the bodies being thrown in the ditch. So those kinds of images have started arriving. And the Taliban also have their own. You know, they know they're tech savvy, they understand. So they're also filming them taking photos, and I'm sure they will release them just to attract more people for their own public relations, they will do that. And there are reports that a lot of Afghans they are trying to erase their digital footprint. So for

example, their Facebook pages, their Instagram or Twitter, whatever possibly they had said something of they had commented something they had posted something criticizing the Taliban, they really wouldn't like the Taliban to have a look at them. So I'm sure Taliban would be scouring the internet as well. To look for things that the people in the country they have said. So I had another colleague in the BBC but she, I saw on Facebook, she wrote yesterday that she's an Uzbek, from Uzbekistan, and she has been to Kabul many times. She works as an independent journalist now makes documentary films. So she said that one of our contacts in Kabul is a businessman. And the Taliban came and said that you are a spy of the US and demanded money from him. And they took all the three guns he had in the house, and those you know, every household would have a gun for their own safety. So they took all the three guns, they have children. So Shahida writes that now, her her her friend and her contact so they have three they have three brothers and they're taking turns. At the night to keep an eye the watching over the house at night taking turns. This is what is happening? So all sorts of stories would come out. Just yesterday, another friend, he's a young have called me from DC, from Washington, DC. He is studying there. And before that he for the last few years he worked with the government. He was posted at the Afghan embassy in Rome later he was working. He was a journalist first when I first met him, and then he worked for the government for various politicians. Then he was at the embassy in Kabul, he came back and he worked at the office of the president for two a couple of years before going before going to DC for his studies, has studies, but his entire family is back in Kabul. He is one younger brother was working at the office of the president in the last day, another brother works for another government department. Parents work for two NGOs. So you can imagine how vulnerable they feel, and they cannot get out. The father and the brother their passports have expired. And there is no way that they can. I mean, even if the others can manage to get a visa, of course, you cannot leave the country without a visa. As it is from Kabul, there is no way you can get out because there are no commercial flights. It's only the military planes that are evacuating nationals of various countries. So at that way, that way, it is so difficult for such people. So I have another friend, his family is out but his wife's family. So his in laws. They're also very close. They're like family, I've been to Mazar-e Sharif with them, I stayed with his in laws in Missouri in that house. And so they are stuck in Kabul. Yes, their resources, resourceful people. So if an opportunity arises, I'm sure they'll be able to get out. But I have absolutely no doubt that ordinary people who have got no such access, so but no such connections, where they will be. And this is what they will do. They will try to go on all directions. So I'm sure all the countries around Afghanistan, they there is going to be an influx of refugees. There has been for the last few weeks, there has been a massive influx of internally displaced people into cabin. When the Taliban were taking over the provinces people started coming to Kabul, and Kabul is in such a place there is no way I mean, it is surrounded by the Hindu Kush in the north and Jalalabad mountains in the east, and South is Kandahar and Pakistan. So they don't know where they will go. So I think we have to wait for a few few few weeks, maybe for for a bit to understand in terms of imagery. I think most of the imagery will come on behalf of the Taliban

unless they're from Kabul. And people there still have some internet connection. So they will possibly send some images across.

**Host:** A little while ago, you said the Taliban is extremely tech savvy. So they even did a press conference, which I'm sure you saw. And they said things like women will be allowed to work, there will be peace. So what do you think the Taliban is trying to do there?

**Nazes:** I'm sure they are, they will try to gain some legitimacy. But there is Is there any way to you know? Can we really trust them? Are they trustworthy? That's the whole point. So when all the talks are happening in Doha, there are so many things. So the first condition in Doha was that, that you have to there has to be a ceasefire. You cannot continue attacking government installations at the same time, you can come to know how to talk. They said, Yes, we agreed to the ceasefire. But you take a stocking we take a list of a number of attacks that have happened throughout the peace process, a number of attacks, major and minor attacks, attacks on government installations, attacks on aid workers, attacks on ministers throw these last few years when the peace talks were happening so they cannot be trusted. One of the another. Another condition was that there has to be the peaceful transition and there has to be reconciliation government. They said yeah, there'll be we'll talk about that. The moment they came in, and then some of the leaders were still there like Dr. Abdullah. Abdullah, the chief executive, former President Hamid Karzai, or the Hazara leader market. So they all talked about let's have a reconciliation government. They said what reconciliation government, we are the government. So how can you trust whatever they're saying? So they might be saying that for the consumption of the international community. But and then, as we, as I just mentioned, that there is no way of knowing what is going on in the rest of the country right now. We don't know if there have been also reports like the Taliban, that asking list of young women, because these, they have got huge number of fighters. And they said, okay, we need a list of young women that and we want them to marry our fighters. Those kinds of reports are also going around. So we don't know what's going on in the rest of the country because it's cut off.

**Host:** Turning the lens on to India, what do you think India's policy with Afghanistan should be at the state level? at a more geopolitical level? And at the humanitarian level? What do you think India's policy should be at the moment?

**Nazes:** I don't know what it should be. I mean, India, what it will do, it's very difficult. We had the kind of government we have here in India. We don't know. I mean, of course, they have said that they are going to accept Afghan refugees there. They started emergency visa service, but with caveats, right. Yeah, with caveats. Precisely. That's what I'm saying. So they said that it was the Hindus and the six would be accepted. But if large number of ordinary Afghans and Muslims, they would like to come seeking refuge, would they give it? I don't know. Of course, if we talk about what should be like humanitarian, if you look at the humanitarian side of it, every



country, around Afghanistan, if the local Afghans, they feel oppressed, if they feel tortured, they should be given refuge. This is what happened. I mean, of course, people sometimes, even if the countries don't want people just cross over. So yeah, so that will happen at some point of time. But India, that is the country in between India and Afghanistan. So that's, that's what it is on the side of the refugee crisis and the humanitarian side of it. In terms of the policy, you know, that I'm in the Government of India, they have lost out completely on this. They were not part of the negotiation. They were very late entrant very late, meaning that it's only just few weeks before the Taliban took over. The Indian government started making Overture to the Taliban. And as we all know, the Taliban is under total control of Pakistan security establishments, and then the ISI. And they would not want the Taliban to have anything to do with India. So India is stuck there. for 20 years after the fall of the Taliban, India was had quite a bit of goodwill. In Afghanistan, it invested a lot it built infrastructure. It built Afghanistan's parliament building. It built a huge dam, it builds some roads, hospitals, all of it. But now, and then also, my Pakistan felt that India was encircling Pakistan. Because India was having not only the embassy in Kabul, it was having consulates in Jalalabad, and in Kandahar and in her art and in Missouri, Sherry. So all over India's presence footprint was all over the country. So I was saying that. So Pakistan felt that India was trying to encircle Pakistan, even from both sides was trying to send which Pakistan from the east and the west and north. So So India actually started closing down the consonants as situation started becoming unstable in all the consonants. Now, they will not have any presence in Afghanistan. So I don't know what will happen. How will they start a channel with the Taliban, it's very unlikely that there will be any channel with the Taliban. There, there has been I think, in some people who work with the security establishments in India, they have stuff noting this very, very nuanced way they have started floating this idea or this is not the same Taliban as before. So we can actually engage with them. But we have to wait and see what the nature of this Taliban, let me say, very emphatically. So what is Taliban Taliban is, is is a political, it's a force of it's sort of it's a group of fighters. That is And the driving force is a police is a religious ideology. And that religious ideology is Sharia. So if you take Sharia out of it, then of course, it will be new Taliban. It can be any other sort of conservative Muslim party, something like that. But then it will not be Taliban any longer. And so there is absolutely no such evidence so far that they will abandon the strictest interpretation of Sharia the way they understand Sharia should be implemented. So there are reports from Iran. So Iran is quite an interesting example. errata, as you know, is in the west of the country, it's bordering Iran. It has a huge Shia community, and education among the shears and particularly among the women in the Shia community is very high. So I've been to Iraq twice. And I've seen I've been to the university there. So in Herat University, 60% of the students enrolled in the in the university were female students. 60%. So the day the Taliban took over, I think there was some sort of announcement that the women would not be allowed to come and join classes that they would not be allowed inside the university. So we already know that is happening. in Herat, when the first setting para was the first major city that that we captured. And then also there were announcements that women who worked in government or in other establishments, so their jobs would be given to men. So this is

what the Taliban represents. And they represented the same thing before. I don't know in terms of the brutal torture or brutalization of women and minorities, how that will be, we have to wait to see. But already, the indications are that possibly there wouldn't be much change. I mean, I don't think they would change.

**Host:** You and I are friends on Facebook. So I noticed that you had posted a picture on Facebook, where you had, it was a meeting of Afghan women, but you had sort of blurred out the faces. And also, I think the name of the organization and any sort of identifiers with regard to the specifics of that meeting, or who might have participated. It seemed like such a dystopian moment, where, you know, you had to do that kind of thing as as a photographer to, to protect yourself.

**Nazes:** Absolutely. You know, I mean, for last 20 years, it was, it was a time of hope, for 1000 people, the young of non-Afghan women, for the first time, the Afghan women, many of them, I mean, I met at that particular organization, the photo that I posted, I just erased the faces. And I cannot even see where it was taken. So they were the woman, women, elderly women, middle aged elderly women, they never had the chance to learn. So they were learning to read and write, they were very proudly, they were showing me, they were writing on a blackboard. They were discussing domestic violence, they were discussing women's rights. So some of the ideas were sort of getting to them. And when and they were, and they were regularly meeting, so this was in a small house. There, there were they were meeting quite regularly. It's not only there, but in other small places, all all the major urban centers, you could see so many I mean, the presence of women in public life. So that is going to be completely in danger. So I cannot put them in danger by publishing. So as I don't know, who will see those photos, who will be I mean, I have to blur out everything through which they can be identified or the place that can be identified or the organization can be identified. This is something there is no other way of course, then the soul of the image is gone. Because the stories are embedded on the faces of the subjects. But so but this, this becomes almost like I mean, this is all I can do. And through this, I think we can also draw attention to people saying that this is what is coming, possibly in days, weeks, months.

**Host:** That kind of brings me to my next question about where do you see the future of South Asia going are with an empowered Taliban. Do you see a lot of military for example, do you see the rise of proxy wars?

**Nazes:** We saw what happened in 1989, the proxy war when the Soviet Union left a lot of foreign fighters stayed behind. And there was massive amount of arms. And you will we know that the way the whole Kashmir insurgency the armed insurgents armed movement in Kashmir, it peaked from 1989 onwards. So, and, and, and, of course, I mean, it for Pakistan and for its own foreign policy for its security policy, the US that and before 1989. A lot of Kashmiri people, they wanted to be either independent or they wanted to be part of Kashmir, but we did not see armed

insurgency. There was no armed struggle. We saw a lot of fighters coming in, these are the foreign Mujahideen over there. So they crossed over, they were channeled to Kashmir. So, suddenly, you see, I mean, it's very, very interesting, it's quite ironical after the abrogation of 370 and when all the Indian even pro Indian Kashmiri leaders were put I am an under house arrest for almost a year and suddenly the Government of India they are reaching out to them, they understand the security establishment Indian in India understand what it means, if Pakistan and Pakistan security establishment, if they have control over such fighters for such a number of fighters and an arms and ammunition what they can do so, then maybe that is bound to be increased in proxy war, that is why now suddenly, they have the reaching out to the Kashmiri leaders, they were brought to Delhi and they were having discussions and that happened just I think about a month ago. And when by the time India has already alienated possibly the entire Kashmir valley people through its harsh policies. So now, yes, of course, it is going to have impact and and we know that there is extremism on the rise worldwide. And and yeah, we and then that we cannot escape from that. And if suddenly we have a situation here where people who were in charge to control it, they did not control it, they left and and it is going to find out most likely yeah.

**Host:** I also want to touch upon your work with the Afghan community in India, particularly Calcutta, you also had this exhibition, where you photograph the Kabuli wallas of Kolkata. Are you in touch with any of the Afghan communities in India?

**Nazes:** I am in touch with them more or less. I mean, I yes, of course, I spent almost three, four years with them. When I was doing the work, there was regular contact. So after that, it's not that I'm in regular contact with them. But of course, once in a while I speak to them, especially some of the leaders of the communities. But for the last few days, No, I have not. I know a lot of people, journalists from Kolkata, they got in touch with me and because they were trying to get in touch with them. So what what happens with them is a lot of them their citizens citizenship status it's not, you know, sorted yet, because they were many of them were born in India, they were born in, say, Kolkata, or in a place close to Kolkata, but they were they were when and they were born at home. So the birth had taken place at home. So they do not have any birth certificates. And they do not have any, they do not have any proof to establish that they are Indians. So what they do is because they're possibly the father came and the father's identity was transferred to them. So when their official papers were created, it's written that they are Afghans. Even though so if you look at the place of birth, I've seen documents place a birth it is how is the Twin City of Kolkata, but citizenship there right, Khyber pakhtunkhwa which does not even exist, no Pakhtoonistan is done, which does not even exist. Pakhtoonistan is a country that they thought that some some time some some time, there will be this country called Pakhtoonistan that they will be all be able to go to. So they write that and so now you know, but how the bureaucracy works. So their their status, they are in a limbo. And anything happens in

Afghanistan, the security agencies they knock on their doors in any way, they try to check if they are in contact with anybody there. So they are, they will be very afraid. And they are extremely shy to talk to journalists. So, I have dissuaded my some of the people who got in touch with me, I said, please don't try to get in touch with them, you will be, I mean, they will be unnecessarily hardest, even if they have spoken with you. You know, if an interview comes out, then the very next day they will be visited by at least four agencies. And that is bound to happen. So don't I mean, you will be harassing them, if you do that in any way. I mean, they, they, they're smart people, so they can evade, they will not pick up your phone. And even if they pick up the phone, and they say that, so and so generally is they will just hang up, and they will never pick up the phone. So that will happen. Yeah. But I've not spoken with them recently.

**Host:** I was also, you know, looking at some of your recent work where, you know, photograph their images from Afghanistan, that you publish for Pix magazine And there was, I was looking at the photos and also the text and a line jumped out or jumped out at me when you said that you wanted to escape this narrative of Afghanistan at war. And that was what kind of, you know, motivated you to explore the cultural life of Afghanistan. But now, you know, as we look at, you know, current developments, and I think again, once again, we are going to be captive to that kind of a narrative.

**Nazes:** Yeah, I mean, that had been, unfortunately, that had been the narrative for last 40 years. I mean, everywhere. I mean, worldwide, I have traveled the world, I've worked for the BBC, which is the largest news organization, even inside the BBC, whenever you talk about a story about Afghanistan, and this, that story had something to do with the war in Afghanistan, it was very difficult to get that story into your days agenda. So that was it. So as if there were no people as if they do not have any aspirations as we don't, they did not care how people so if there was no war, if there was no explosion, then Afghanistan was a non story. So I, I had my own interest about Afghanistan. So I was, I tried to interact with people, I stayed with them, I wanted to see them in their own space, I wanted to see. So for example, these are such such eye openers. So I was I recruited an editor for our cable Bureau. And he took me to his house on the eighth day, and that was a time when I was also writing a cultural guidebook on Afghanistan. So I was taking a lot of cues from him. And I was talking about family structure and joint family and all of it. And so, yes, so there may be in you know, that it's not the kind of joint family that we understand in India, by in Afghanistan joint family is not only your own immediate family, but it is the entire clan, they are your family. So everybody is your family. Your second cousin is also your family. And they are equally important. It's not only your own siblings, or your parents, but everybody in that clan, they are important. So anyway, so So now of course they say that okay, that there are so many brothers and they may they will all live in the same house. But they said but the kitchen has to be it has to be a single kitchen. It is the kitchen that makes a family. So you cannot have separate kitchens. So those kind of understanding of a society that I wanted to have. Unfortunately, when I travel for I've been I've been there for almost 15 years I travel for last five

years I could not and that is what I explored. I wanted to see if how they I mean what is what do they do with the public space. So if you saw on Friday in carbon, the only big public space where that is buggy bubble. So the garden a bubble where bubbles, grave is there is a huge public space and that it opens up to the to the people and people will go with the inter family will go they'll carry the gas cylinders they'll cook a meal because as it is life is so claustrophobic. They cannot go out much There is always this fear that something may happen. So on Friday, they go out. So this kind of expression that I wanted to see. So when you go and so so there was this international art festival called document, which is one of the oldest and very famous, it take place in causal in Germany and it takes every five years. So there was in, I think 2012, there was the 11th edition of cars, the document, and the theme was Afghanistan. And so they had, of course, it took place in Germany, but at the same time, there was a satellite exhibition taking place in Kabul. And some of those artwork they are, you know, I mean, quite abstract. But I saw that people are coming in, and they're trying to understand what it is why they have kept soil from different parts of the city in different boxes and that installation. So there was this installation where somebody had collected the soil of Kabul city, from different parts of the city, they put them in a box, and there is the map of the Kabul city and they were trying to solve the attachment with the city the way they were the artists that have gone artists who did it. Now there was an old man he came in, and then he looked around, and then my colleague and I were there. And so he asked my colleagues what it is about, can you please explain it to me? So that kind of, you know, activities were going on. A lot of young people you saw that were so eager to learn. they were so eager to express themselves, there is this graffiti artist, she taught at the art department, fine art department in Kabul University. So she did this massive graffiti art on the streets of Kabul, on the city walls of Kabul to address the women's issues, so yes, so that this is something and so they hardly make any news. But because this is ordinary life, but this is the strength of it, that people who are who have been in that situation in a war situation for so long for 40 years, how quickly they can turn around, and they can try to and it is called the Afghan resilience, the Afghan spirit. It reminded me of the last novella that Tolstoy wrote, it's called Haji Murata. This is about the church and leader church and rebel leader was fighting the Czarist Russia. And Tolstoy at that time was a captain in the Imperial Russian Army, and he was posted in Chechnya, that is when he came across, it was Haji Murat was a real life character. So he met Haji Murat there. And he wrote that novel much later on. It was very critical of Imperial Russia. And so he wanted the book to be published only after he died. And so he died in 19 109. And the book came out in 1911. So, the prologue of the novel, it's a novella. It's not a novel, full novel. It's a short one. And the prologue, he talks about that when he was in Chechnya, and he would ride out, and he would see these thistles with with yellow flowers, and they would trample over those thistles and they would just ride across and by the time they came back, the thistle was upright again. And from there, he started telling the story of Haji Murat saying that the Jetsons are like that. They're like those indomitable thistles who refuse to die. Even if you trample over them, with the horse, they will ride, they will, they will come back within hours. So this is the kind of spirit the Afghans also have.

**Host:** That's a beautiful way to think about you know, Afghan spirit, though we kind of also risk romanticizing it a little bit. I just wanted to conclude by asking you about the children of Afghanistan. I've noticed in your photography, children are prominent to you know, children at play children at various activities. And now, when I think about it, I can imagine I can imagine a bleak future But how can we aspire for otherwise?

**Nazes:** I don't know really. For example, I'm, I just wrote that in couple of pieces. There's a school just north of Kabul, there was a small town called Charikar about 40 kilometers from Kabul I've been there once you're visiting a primary school, it was just a one room school. And it's a mix, because these are really kids. So it's a mixed school boys, girls, all of them were there. And the teacher introduced us, the guests. And then there was some amount of singing. And then the teacher, I think, asked them to tell us what they want it to be not. They were not. I mean, mostly they were shy, but one or two, they were putting their hands up. And they talked and, and then we were, of course, it was translated to us. So it was a normal, somebody wanted to be a doctor, somebody wanted to be an engineer. Somebody wanted to be a teacher, but there was this girl, I think must be seven, eight years old. She said she wanted to be a police woman. And, and I just think just that that there was looking at those images from the school. I saw the face of that girl. She must have been seven, eight years old. So now and that was I took that photo in 2014. So she must be about 17-15 or 14-15 years old now, after seven years, 14-15 years old. So I was thinking, so a, she if the Taliban carries on, there is no way that she can become a policewoman. I don't know if she still has that ambition. But she's 15 years old, she cannot even attend schools anymore. And I've seen how the families everywhere they were so keen to send send the children to school they saw a huge opportunity and and the future for them with education. So this the the classes were buzzing everywhere. There is one evening in Kabul, I was leaving the following day. And that evening, I went I wanted to buy some souvenirs and some gifts. So my friend, one of my colleagues and friends He took me to a shop, which also is a restaurant and into a sort of souvenir shop. So it was in a small alley, and we went there parked my car. And it was evening. So I did I did not carry my camera. So I left the camera in the office. And, and that was a time when I suddenly see almost like, you know, in the evening, when you're standing on the seashore. The waves come in, when it was getting dark. All you see is that white form that you can see, when the waves crash on on the beach. It was almost like that. I saw suddenly waves of girls with the white headscarf. They came out and they were passing through that alley. Actually just at the corner, there was the school girls school. And the class was just over. The day was over. And they were coming out It almost felt like huge, like they're coming in waves and the way they were talking and they were bubbly. And I don't know whether the the parents feel safe to say send them to school any longer. So of course there is this massive, massive worry.

**Host:** I think we'll you know, wrap up on that positive very positive sort of imagery that you've left us with, of, of, you know, little Afghan girls away waves and waves of little Afghan girls

going to school. I think that's the image that you know, we'd like to carry away with us, even at this really grim time.

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