

BOOK REVIEW

Sreedhar and Mahendra Ved, *Afghan Buzkashi: Power Games and Gamesmen*, Vols.1 & 2 (Delhi: Wordsmiths), 2000, Vol. 1, 286 pp., price Rs. 900/US\$60; Vol. 2, pp., 271, price Rs. 900/US\$60.

Afghanistan is a trouble spot in the buffer zone between South Asia and Central Asia. Countries bordering it have direct concern about the political developments in Afghanistan. With the Soviet pull out from Afghanistan, power tussle in Afghanistan became confined within the warring Afghan parties with no sign of its end. Meanwhile, factionalism has heavily told upon the health of the country. A consensus about the future political system of Afghanistan is yet to be achieved. With the Taliban now ruling the country, the task of accomplishing the much-needed consensus remains far from reality. Consequently, the country is exposed to a political malaise - a malaise that gets exacerbated because of the interference by the external powers. What awaits Afghanistan? How will external powers keep responding to in matter of Afghanistan? These remain big questions before the international community.

The two-volume work, under review, gives a many-sided comprehensive contemporary picture of the country detailing the possible options that India has in the aftermath of Taliban's control of Afghanistan. While the first volume is burdened with the analysis of multidimensional aspects of the Afghan scenario, the second one furnishes in-depth data and information on Afghanistan from various sources. Thus, while the first volume contains analyses, observations, judgments, and predictions, the second one is mainly a collation and compilation of fact and data.

A cursory look at the work shows that the authors' concern for the implications of religious fundamentalism for India emanating from the Talibans' rule in Afghanistan is the motivational force to produce yet another third work despite their earlier two works almost on a similar theme: *Taliban and the Afghan Turmoil (1997)* and *Afghan Turmoil: Changing Equations (1998)*. What makes the current work, *Afghan Buzkashi: Power Games and Gamesmen*, creditable is their claim that the predictions they made in their earlier volumes have been borne by the facts (Vol.1, p. 5).

Divided into sixteen parts (except list of appendices, boxes, maps, figures, tables, charts, and index), the first volume of *Afghan Buzkashi* argues that the very game of *Buzkashi* is being played by none but the external powers, metamorphosing Afghanistan into the "hunted" calf. It is worth reflecting here that the word *Buzkashi* means a traditional winter game played in northern Afghanistan in which hundreds of horsemen compete for a fattened calf, and the winner is the one who finally possesses the calf. It needs underscoring at this point that in their second volume too the authors identify the external factor as a key macro causal variable for the incidents occurring in Afghanistan. To quote them: "But from 1977, there is a growing realization that the Afghan turmoil is largely the result of conflicting external factors" (Vol. 2, p. 6). What one gleans from their assertions is that in the game of *Buzkashi*, Pakistan has been playing an "extended" role by spawning the Taliban (Vol.1, p. 16) who are plagued by the "megalomaniac fantasies of conquering the CARs, India and so on: of cutting out Jammu and Kashmir and also Assam from the Indian Union."

However, given the ground realities, the first volume identifies five futuristic scenarios: (i) Taliban rule; (ii) Taliban defeat; (iii) arms embargo with the objective of imposing a broad-based

government; (iv) the emergence of an Islamic emirate of Afghanistan; and (v) the emergence of a Greater Pashtunistan, accompanied by break-up of Pakistan (Vol.1, p. 256). The work flags three daunting challenges before the comity of the nations. These are:(i) How to manage the Mullah Umar brand of violence and terrorism in the name of Islam? (ii) How to make countries such as Pakistan stop endorsing actions of people like Umar? (iii) How to tackle terrorism that is taking the shape of an instrument of foreign policy as one enters the new millennium? Contrary to what the Taliban are inclined to do, the authors categorically reject a military solution of the Afghan problem, and strongly favour the role of the UN in resolving the problem. They recommend a “pro-active” policy for India vis-a-vis Afghanistan.

The second volume comprises of fifteen chapters. Of the fifteen, some chapters provide country profile of the key external powers such as Pakistan, China, United States, and India. Other chapters cover issues such as the Taliban, the Afghan government, the human rights situation, weapons, drugs, pipelines, Osama bin Laden, the United Nations, the peace initiatives, and the profile of Afghanistan and as well as the profiles of the key war figures such Umar, Rabbani, Hikmatyar, Dostum, and Masoud.

The merit of the work lies, first, in giving an all-round compact portrayal of contemporary Afghanistan examining neatly and crisply the very policy implications of Taliban rule of Afghanistan for countries such as India, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the Central Asia Republics (CARs). In doing so, the authors have adroitly knitted a different picture for each of the countries highlighting the nitty-gritty which invokes food for further thought. Second, their findings that the CARs are fearful about the export of religious extremism from their southern neighbour are worthy. These findings

may help the countries (e.g., Uzbekistan) with a secular outlook to be cautious about the phenomenon. Third, their identification of the factors (they identified four factors) that were responsible for the success of Taliban adds to the literature on Taliban-related issue. Fourth, in the second volume, Sreedhar and Ved do a good job by appending a separate chapter that details the profile about such a key war figures: Umar, Rabbani, Hikmatyar, Dostum, and Masoud. They deserve appreciation for their studying of film footage and tap interviews to prepare the second volume. Their efforts fill out an existing gap. In addition, their treatments of human rights situation in Afghanistan put the issue on the front burner, an issue that perhaps remained on the back burner.

However, one needs to flag that the work suffers from some deficiencies. First, one may question the objectivity of the authors. The burden of the work is to project chiefly external actors' perspectives. The policy implications also reflect the perspectives of the external actors, who, of course, work at cross-purposes. Now, if the policy propositions are meant to bring peace and stability in Afghanistan, then the perspectives of the Afghan people are miserably missing. Second, as it happens with Indian and Pakistani scholars to get trapped into nationalistic discourse, the authors could not also get out of that stereotypes. These are, perhaps, fine for the domestic audience. Clearly, they have overdone the Pakistani factor, making their whole exercise India-centric. Third, one may consider the likely five future Afghan scenarios, as portrayed by Sreedhar and Ved, are vital, among other, parts of the subject. Unfortunately, they devote too little space for this. They even do not labour to identify which one is the most likely scenario out of the five. Fourth, the authors' claims that Taliban are up to cutting out Jammu and Kashmir and Assam from the Indian union are misplaced. They

neither append separate chapters on them to make their case, nor do they discuss these sensitive issues convincingly with documentary evidence. Fifth, their claim that the Kargil crisis of 1999 is an extension of Talibans' blueprint to destabilize India by exporting religious fundamentalism into New Delhi is not amplified by facts, evidence, and documentary proofs. The very nexus between the Talibans and the Kargil crisis also appears to be tenuous. Sixth, the mining issue, which has assumed an acute security problem because of its putting the lives of the Afghans and of the foreigners at stake, has received inadequate attention in their work. Seventh, at times the volumes lack adequate documentation in that the authors make citations without giving their sources (e.g., Vol.1, p. 20). Eighth, although by South Asian standard, the work is almost free from the printer's devil (a commendable job, indeed), some printing mistakes have made their way into the text (e.g., Vol.1, p. 21). Ninth, some repetition is also noticeable in the text (e.g., Vol. 2, pp. 136-138).

One must underline that Sreedhar and Ved have been persistently working in the area. This time also they have made good efforts to put together volumes of information to make their point. The reviewer holds that they have made home their points of view successfully. Viewed thus, *Afghanistan Buzkashi* is worth reading, and therefore, a good buy.

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