

Afghanistan: the lessons of history?



Film maker Meena Nanji talked to **PAT MCDONNELL TWAIR** about the documentary that took her three years to film on a budget of \$200,000 in grants, and another two years to edit.

AS US PRESIDENT-ELECT Barack Obama forges his foreign policy, he could save time on lengthy debriefings with so-called Middle East experts when it comes to the question of Afghanistan if he were to spend 82 minutes viewing Meena Nanji's documentary *View From a Grain of Sand*.

Nanji uses the camera's lens with the same precision a surgeon uses his knife to expose the malignancy that poisons Afghanistan today: unbridled warlordism. And it is Afghan women who have borne the brutality of 30 years of violence.

Nanji interviewed many Afghans and organisations from 2001-2003. Ultimately,



Two young Afghan refugees from the film *View from a grain of Sand*

she focused on three women – a physician, Dr Roena; a teacher, Shapiray; and women's rights activist, Wajeeda – to explain the politics that turned Afghanistan into a failed state.

Speaking from refugee camps inside Pakistan, each woman's story is a lesson in Afghanistan's agonising decline over the past three decades. Dr Roena recalls how urban women dressed in western attire and attended university under the rule of King Mohammed Zahir Shah. Even after the Soviets invaded in 1978, education was expanded for women, she recalls.

Wajeeda, whose husband was killed fighting the Soviet occupiers, says women's

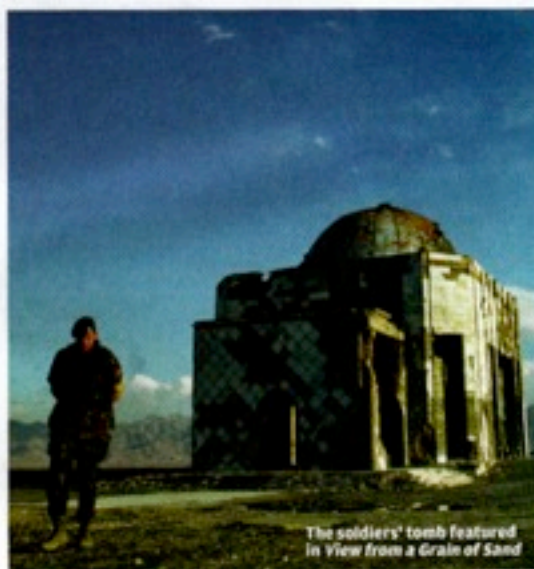
rights were halted by religious fundamentalist groups funded by US President Jimmy Carter to assault Russian forces. As the US continued to covertly reinforce extremist rebels during the Reagan regime, the national struggle to oust the Soviets was transformed into a pan-Islamic battle.

Teacher Shapiray talks into the camera, while her husband smiles ironically as she describes how the US and Gulf governments lavished billions of dollars on the Taliban until, in 1992, a puppet government was installed and women were compelled to wear the burka.

Nanji narrates that Taliban forces grew up in Pakistan refugee camps where they

were indoctrinated in religious schools. The Taliban drove out the warlords in 1996, but they also compelled women to wear the burka, and denied them an education. It was during this period of strict Taliban rule that music and kite flying were banned. With the invasion of US forces in 2001, Washington financed the warlords' Northern Alliance to expel the Taliban.

Nanji closes her film on the cratered and barren moonscape that is Afghanistan today. The camera pans in on Wajeeda who returned to Afghanistan but laments there is no security, no buildings, no schools, no parks, not even trees. She has no choice but to return once more to a Peshawar camp.



The soldiers' tomb featured in *View from a Grain of Sand*

Most film makers speak about the learning process of creating and editing a finished product. What was your greatest revelation in making *View From a Grain of Sand*?

Initially, my focus was to report on Afghan women in the Taliban period. I rapidly learned the situation was far more complex than Taliban cruelty. I naively assumed Ahmed Shah Massoud, who was killed on 10 September 2001 by Osama bin Laden's men, was an Afghan Che Guevara. As my interviews continued, I learned Massoud was no different from the other warlords (Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Rashid Dostam, Burhanddin Rabbani and Abdul Sayyaf) who used US-supplied armaments to fight the Soviets and then carved Afghanistan into their own fiefdoms with these same weapons.

The United Nations sanctioned these warlords to go after the Taliban and now they're part of Hameed Karzai's government. I realised the scope of the film had to include Washington's complicity in the creation and nurturing of Islamic fundamentalism during the 1980s.

We read reports in the US press about Afghan women going to beauty shops and no longer wearing the burka.

Women are as oppressed as ever. Many commit suicide to escape physical abuse from their husbands. Girls are forced into early marriages and can't go to school after they're wed. If a woman complains about abuse to the police, she's put in jail. I don't think women's rights are on Karzai's priority list. If you've noticed, his wife never appears in public.

How did you select the three women you feature in the film?

I decided to interview Afghan women in Pakistan's refugee camps after hearing a talk in Los Angeles by two representatives of RAWA (Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan). RAWA encouraged me to interview many Afghan refugees and their organisations. Only one woman, Wajeeda, is a RAWA member. I selected Dr Roheena and Shapiray because their stories provide an intimate look at how war, international interference and religious fundamentalism have stripped Afghan women of their freedom – even of their right to exist.

What do you think of President-elect Obama's pledge to send two new battalions to Afghanistan?

Washington should stop pumping money into the military option and spend it on reconstruction. Only \$5bn has been spent on rebuilding the country while \$50bn has been channelled into the war. The warlords are in the heroin trade which leads me to believe the Taliban are not back.

If you could speak directly to President-elect Obama, how would you advise him?

The Afghans do not want an occupation of any stripe. I want you to comprehend the futility and shortsightedness of a "military" approach. The Afghans do not want any more war, but if it's a choice between having foreign troops on their soil or not, they will fight foreign occupiers.

The Afghans need a massive infusion of cash and support that is free of old rivalries; they must have a police system that is corruption-free; they require ministries which have the will and the power to enforce those articles of the constitution that promise fairness and equal opportunities to all. Instead of spending more money on guns and soldiers, invest in a massive country-wide construction of educational and health facilities that work. All of these must train Afghans to run their infrastructure.