

A brief look into the history of Photography in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan was/is a conservative country. Some of the Afghan kings and rulers started to open a chapter of relations with the outside world by bringing modern tools and technologies to the country. Foreign and strange arts for that time like photography were not really welcomed by the conservative and strongly religious people of the country. People used to think that if you take a photo, you become “*Kafir*”, which means “infidel” because photography and taking pictures are not allowed in Islam and as mentioned above, the majority of the people were conservative Muslims.

Amir Sher Ali Khan (1825 – February 21, 1879) was Amir of Afghanistan from 1863 to 1866. He was one of the first Afghan kings whose photograph was taken in 1869 by John Burke, from the album 'The Afghan War, Attock to Jellalabad, Gandamak and Surkhab.' John Burke accompanied the Peshawar Valley Field Force, one of three British Anglo-Indian army

columns deployed in the Second Afghan War (1878-80). In the photograph below which was taken in India, shows Amir Sher Ali Khan sitting on a chair and holding his sword.



After this photo taken by John Burke, other foreign photographers also started visiting Afghanistan. In the beginnings, only members of the royal family had the privilege of taking photographs. Fascinated by the art of Photography, a young king in Afghanistan became the first Afghan who started taking photos and developing photographs in his palace. He was the one who first introduced the telephone, cinema and automobile besides the photography. He is also referred to as a photographer king.

The Photographer kings of Afghanistan

Habibullah Khan (June 3, 1872 – February 20, 1919) was the Emir of Afghanistan from 1901 until 1919. He was born in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, the eldest son of the Emir Abdur Rahman Khan, whom he succeeded by right of primogeniture in October 1901. Habibullah was a relatively secular, reform-minded ruler who attempted to modernize his country. During his reign he worked to bring Western medicine and other technology to Afghanistan.

In 1909, the king bought the instruments and materials of photography from India and brought them to Afghanistan with himself and changed a Northern part of the palace into a laboratory for developing photographs. He used to spend a lot of time in laboratory and was also busy in teaching the techniques to the servants of the royal family. He did not like that others should take picture of his wives- *He had several-* so that's why he used to take the photographs and develop them himself.



King Habbibullah Khan sitting among his several wives

Khan

As his students in photography were servants of the royal family, in the beginning, with the help of the king, they used to take photographs of the princes, members of the royal family, aristocrats and some of the rich people surrounding the royal family. By selling the photograph to them, the money received from photography was given to an orphanage as a charity. Meanwhile, a photographer from India opened a laboratory in the city center of Kabul and started taking pictures of ordinary people who were not members of the royal family.

The art of photography spread very fast in the country, because after two years from introducing photography by the king in 1912 a photo contest was organized by one of the famous journals of the time. In that contest, two the photographs were chosen for the first place, one of them was taken by a member of the royal family and another was taken by a servant and student of the king Habibullah.

Another king who had a passion for photography was king Zahir Shah. Mohammed Zahir Shah (October 15, 1914 – July 23, 2007) was the last King of Afghanistan, reigning for four decades, from 1933 until he was ousted by a coup in 1973. Following his return from exile, he was given the title 'Father of the Nation' in 2002, which he held until his death. Zahir Shah's lengthy reign was associated with peace, security and modest political reform with women receiving education and voting in elections, and a free press.

A photograph of a broken statue taken by Zahir Shah during one of his trips to the north of Afghanistan was the reason of discovery of an ancient city built by Greek. French and Russian archeologists were searching for the city of Ai-Khanoum for several years. Ai-Khanoum or Ay Khanum possibly the historical Alexandria on the Oxus river was one of the primary cities of the

Greco-Bactrian kingdom. Previous scholars have argued that Ai Khanoum was founded in the late 4th century BC, following the conquests of Alexander the Great. Most recent analysis now strongly suggests that the city was founded after 280 BC by the Seleucid king Antiochus I.

The city is located in Takhar Province, northern Afghanistan, at the confluence of the Oxus River (today's Amu Darya) and the Kokcha River, and at the doorstep of the Indian subcontinent. Ai-Khanoum was one of the focal points of Hellenism in the East for nearly two centuries, until its annihilation by nomadic invaders around 145 BC about the time of the death of Eucratides.

The father of king Zhair Shah, King Nadir Shah was assassinated on 8 November 1933. Nadir Khan was visiting a high school and was shot to death during a graduation ceremony. The photograph from the scene possibly taken by an Afghan photographer was one of the first photographs taken from the scene of execution of a king. That photograph was later sent to London and was published in journals there.

During the reign of King Zahir Shah Polaroid cameras were introduced and became famous very soon through-out the country. The instant and or so called wooden box cameras were very cheap and simple. Placed on a tripod and lens housed in a wooden box. The camera is able to print black and white photo on a paper in a few minutes. These cameras captured the magical and glamorous lifestyle of the royal palaces and courts and gave to the people.

A few years ago an itinerant photographer and the camera could be seen in all major cities of Afghanistan to take "snapshots" were employed, but with the arrival of new technology in Afghanistan, the job disappeared. These cameras were manual and did not have any electrical appliances in the box made of wood.

It is likely that these cameras have been brought from India to Afghanistan, but



some have said that for the first time a Jewish businessman from outside of Afghanistan was the one brought this type of camera and a person named "Effendi" the famous photographer imitated it and made a large number of cameras himself. Because of religious beliefs, taking pictures was banned during the regime of Taliban. The cameras were broken by the religious police or kept hidden by their owners.

This type of camera acquisition occurred in the mid-1950s, when the government decided to issue a birth certificate or passport with photo. Before that ID cards were issued without photographs and with fingerprints only. The government hired Mr. Effendi to teach a group of officials to work with an instant camera and their agents who would travel to provinces of Afghanistan and distribute certificates and ID cards with a photo to the people. The advent of new technologies, especially in villages and provinces of Afghanistan was a very strange phenomenon. In Kandahar, a man called *Syed* (probably one of the students Effendi) was the first person in the city with his instant camera promoting photography. People of Kandahar rumored about the photographer that he has a magical device and *Syed* knows magic and people must be aware.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the development projects by the Soviet Union and the United States of America to help the government of Afghanistan expanded the construction of highways, airports and travel routes opened its doors to the New World. With the expansion of the press and the public agencies established such as the Afghan Film Institute and other institutions which were a big part of the photographic work, the art of photography has expanded greatly. Instant camera continues until the end of the Taliban regime.

Prohibition of Photography

With the coming to power of the Taliban in 1994, photography, cinema, paintings from living things, music and television were banned. No photos were published on the Taliban newspapers and radio singers were singing without music. The only exception was that men were allowed to get a birth certificate or passport in order to take photographs with turban - and women put their fingerprints. For this reason, photographers of instant camera did not lose their work and they were still active. But besides all these restrictions imposed by the government of Taliban, a number of Galleries used to take snaps of the weddings secretly and send them to Peshawar, Pakistan for printing.

Even the Taliban soldiers also had a great passion for taking photographs, a young mullah drawn with blue eyes and guns in hand, sitting in the midst of some plastic flowers snapped photos. Some of these photos were published on the internet after the fall of the Taliban.

After the fall of the regime of Taliban

After the fall of the Taliban, Afghans who were refugees outside the country in Pakistan and Iran for almost a decade returned back to their homeland. Some of those young returnees also brought skills and arts with themselves. Amateur and professional photographers rose during the new government in 2002 in the early years after the fall of Taliban.

Najibullah Musafir, who graduated from the faculty of Fine Arts from the University of Kabul at the time of Communist rule, held the first photography exhibition after the fall of regime of Taliban in 2002. The exhibition showcased photos from central Afghanistan.

A young photographer named *Reza Diqqati* came back to Afghanistan and established the "Mirror Media Center". The aim of the mentioned media center was to teach photography to young Afghans. In the center, a large number of young people were trained under Mr.

Diqqati and other foreign photographers, some of them are well-known figures of today's photojournalism in Afghanistan. They take photographs from Afghanistan for the international media and well known foreign journals. Including the Pulitzer Prize winner *Mr M. Hosseini*, was a disciple of mirrors media center. He works for France Press from 2007 onwards.

From Black and white photos of King Habibullah to the photographs of a Pulitzer Prize winner M. Hosseini, photographing in Afghanistan has come a long and eventful way, but the story of war and violence in Afghanistan has not changed much. The award winning photograph of Mr Husseini shows a 12-year-old girl named *Tarana* who is standing between the bloodied dead bodies of Ashura 2011 bombing in Kabul.



The award winning photograph taken by Mr. Hosseini