



## The Outsiders

Set apart by geography and beliefs, oppressed by the Taliban, the Hazara people could be Afghanistan's best hope.

By Phil Zabriskie

At the heart of Afghanistan is an empty space, a striking absence, where the larger of the colossal Bamian Buddhas once stood. In March 2001 the Taliban fired rockets at the statues for days on end, then planted and detonated explosives inside them. The Buddhas had looked out over Bamian for some 1,500 years. Silk Road traders and missionaries of several faiths came and went. Emissaries of empires passed through—Mongols, Safavids, Moguls, British, Soviets—often leaving bloody footprints. A country called Afghanistan took shape. Regimes rose and collapsed or were overthrown. The statues stood through it all. But the Taliban saw the Buddhas simply as non-Islamic idols, heresies carved in stone. They did not mind being thought brutish. They did not fear further isolation. Destroying the statues was a pious assertion of their brand of faith over history and culture.

It was also a projection of power over the people living under the Buddhas' gaze: the Hazaras, residents of an isolated region in Afghanistan's central highlands known as Hazarajat—their heartland, if not entirely by choice. Accounting for up to one-fifth of Afghanistan's population, Hazaras have long been branded outsiders. They are largely Shiite Muslims in an overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim country. They have a reputation for industriousness yet work the least desirable jobs. Their Asian features—narrow eyes, flat noses, broad cheeks—have set them apart in a de facto lower caste, reminded so often of their inferiority that some accept it as truth.

The ruling Taliban—mostly fundamentalist Sunni, ethnic Pashtuns—saw Hazaras as infidels, animals, other. They didn't look the way Afghans should look and didn't worship the way Muslims should worship. A Taliban saying about Afghanistan's non-Pashtun ethnic groups went: "Tajiks to Tajikistan, Uzbeks to Uzbekistan, and Hazaras to goristan," the graveyard. And in fact, when the Buddhas fell, Taliban forces were besieging Hazarajat, burning down villages to render the region uninhabitable. As autumn began, the people of Hazarajat wondered if they'd survive winter. Then came September 11, a tragedy elsewhere that appeared to deliver salvation to the Hazara people.

Six years after the Taliban fell, scars remain in the highlands of the Hazara homeland, but there is a sense of possibility unthinkable a decade ago. Today the region is one of the safest in Afghanistan, mostly free of the poppy fields that dominate other regions. A new political order reigns in Kabul, seat of President Hamid Karzai's central government. Hazaras have new access to universities, civil service jobs, and other avenues of advancement long denied them. One of the country's vice presidents is Hazara, as is parliament's leading vote getter, and a Hazara woman is the first and only female governor in the country. The best-selling American novel *The Kite Runner*—now a feature film—depicted a fictional Hazara character, and a real Hazara won the first *Afghan Star*, an *American Idol*-like program.

As the country struggles to rebuild itself after decades of civil war, many believe that Hazarajat could be a model of what's possible not just for Hazaras but for all Afghans. But that optimism is tempered by past memories and present frustrations—over roads not built, a resurgent Taliban, and rising tides of Sunni extremism.

A project is now under way to gather thousands of stone fragments and rebuild the Buddhas. Something similar is occurring among Hazaras as they try to repair their fractured past, with one notable difference: There are pictures of the destroyed Buddhas. The Hazaras have no such blueprint, no sense of what a future free from persecution is supposed to look like.

Musa Shafaq wants to live in that future. He is 28, with shoulder-length black hair and typical Hazara features, not unlike those of the Buddhas. He stands at the gate of Kabul University in a red sweater, black jeans, and tinted prescription glasses. Classes are out for the day. In two months, he will graduate, a notable achievement for any Afghan given the country's instability. Because he is Hazara, his success signals a new era. Shafaq is poised to finish at the top of his class, which should guarantee him the job he most wants, a teaching post at Kabul University.

"The Hazaras are producing the most enthusiastic, educated, forward-looking youth, who are seizing the opportunities provided by the new situation," says Michael Semple, a red-bearded Irishman who serves as the deputy to the special representative of the European Union in Afghanistan. Shafaq helped found the Center for Dialogue, a Hazara student organization with 150 members. The group publishes its own magazine, holds events promoting "humanism and pluralism," and works with human rights organizations to monitor elections. Semple deems the group part of an emerging political consciousness among Hazara youth.

"We have a window of opportunity," Shafaq says, "but we are not sure how long it will remain open." This son of Hazarajat is the proverbial country boy who came to the big city and made good. Shafaq's father farmed in their village, Haft Gody, in Waras, a district in southern Bamian, and ran a restaurant in the district center. Children in Waras customarily marry young, stay close to home, and tend the potato fields. But Shafaq wanted something more. When he wasn't helping his father, he read voraciously—novels, history, philosophy, translations of Abraham Lincoln, John Locke, and Albert Camus.

Growing up, Shafaq heard the stories of where his people came from, why they looked different from Pashtuns and Tajiks. He and his fellow Hazaras, the story goes, are the descendants of Genghis Khan's Mongolian soldiers, who marched into central Afghanistan in the 13th century, built a garrison, and conquered the inhabitants—a varied mix of peoples not uncommon along the Silk Road. When the locals rose up and killed Genghis's son, the conqueror retaliated by leveling Bamian and wiping out most of its residents. Those who survived intermarried with the Mongolian invaders and became the Hazaras—a genetic collaboration evident in the diversity of facial features among the region's people today.

In recent times a minority of Hazaras have embraced the Genghis connection as a point of pride, but more often the outsider lineage has been used against them. For many the modern-day narrative starts in the 1890s, when King Abdur Rahman, a Pashtun, launched bloody anti-Hazara pogroms in and around Hazarajat. Fueled by chauvinism, armed with fatwas from Sunni mullahs who declared the Hazaras infidels, Rahman's forces killed many thousands and took slaves from among the survivors. Throngs of Hazaras were driven from lowland farms up into the central highlands. Later rulers used force, law, and manipulation to keep the Hazaras confined, physically and psychologically, to those highlands.

Accounts of the Hazaras' dark history have been passed down through generations, a cultural inheritance of sorts. "It was an embarrassment for Hazara people to show their ethnicity," recalls Habiba Sarobi, Bamian's governor. Mohammed Mohaqeq, the former Hazara commander who received the most votes in the 2005 parliamentary elections, says, "We were like donkeys, good for carrying things from one place to another."

Shafaq was in tenth grade when the Taliban rose to power in 1996, promising security to a populace tired of the bitter conflict among ethnic warlords, including Hazara factions. A year earlier, the Taliban had brutally murdered Abdul Ali Mazari—a charismatic leader sometimes called the father of the Hazara people—who had helped found "the party of unity," or Hezb i Wahdat, in an effort to stop the infighting among Hazaras. After his death, the party splintered, and Taliban forces soon spread across Hazarajat.

"I was working with my father in the field when my sister ran to us and said, 'The Taliban are everywhere,'" Shafaq says. Villagers fashioned white flags from bags of fertilizer. Local leaders struck deals to appease the Taliban. Shafaq hid his books.

It was an ugly war. In Bamian Province, Wahdat fighters hoped to prevent the Taliban from taking the few parts of the country they'd yet to conquer. Schools closed. Crops lay unattended. Families fled for Iran or for the hills. The Taliban imposed a blockade on Hazarajat, prompting food shortages in a region already suffering from drought. In Bamian, the bazaar was torched and scores of families sought sanctuary in the caves near the Buddhas.

In early 2001, in the coldest days of a brutal Hazarajat winter, the horror came to the district of Yakawlang. On January 8, the Taliban rounded up young Hazara men in Nayak, the district center. "People were thinking they would be taken to court," recalls Sayed Jawhar Amal, a teacher in the nearby village of Kata Khona. "But at 8 a.m. they were killed. All of them." The men were lined up and shot in public view. When elders from Kata Khona inquired about young men from their community, they were also killed. In all, Human Rights Watch concluded, more than 170 were executed in four days. "Because we were Shia. That was the only reason," says Mohsin Moisaifid, 55, of Kata Khona, who lost two brothers that day.

Local leaders got permission to bury the bodies. The frozen corpses had to be separated with boiling water. Two weeks later, the fighting started anew. According to Human Rights Watch, Taliban forces burned down more than 4,000 homes, shops, and public buildings. They destroyed entire towns in western Bamian Province. Villagers fled into the mountains, then looked down and watched their homes burn.

Many took sanctuary in Waras, where Shafaq's family—mother, father, and seven siblings—were struggling to find food. Shafaq stopped studying and started teaching—Hazarajat schools today are full of teachers who didn't finish grade school. But his dreams were fading. "I was not very hopeful because I was thinking the Taliban will stay for another 10 or 20 years," he says.

The Taliban's onslaught was at its peak when planes crashed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It was a *deus ex machina*, says Michael Semple, who documented, at great personal risk, the 2001 Yakawlang massacre. After U.S. forces drove the Taliban from power, expectations rose. The Hazaras, in particular, thought deliverance was at hand. "I've operated in the days when Hazaras felt they were virtually faced with an apartheid system," Semple says. "Now it's a totally different kettle of fish."

But it is hard for Hazaras like Shafaq to trust this moment. "I would like to see a place where the dreams of young people are attainable," he says, "where there is a church and a Hindu temple, where other religions can exist. That is the aim of pluralism." He dreams of the teaching job at Kabul University and of marrying a woman back home. She is the daughter of family friends, a Sayed Shiite who traces her lineage to the prophet Muhammad. Sayed families do not customarily let their daughters marry Hazara men. But in this new era, maybe it is possible.

From the sky, Hazarajat is a slide show of stunning landscapes: The purple-hued canyonlands around Bamian, the deep blue waters of Band-e Amir Lake, cloud-piercing peaks rising from mountain passes near Waras. On the ground, it's a different story. For those who live here, this is a hard land with a hard history, from which they must wring a life.

A Hazarajat winter, once it arrives, stays for six months. The snow renders roads impassable even with four-wheel drive and tire chains, and closes the high mountain passes that separate districts. Despite promises, years ago, by the government and international donors to pave the roads from Kabul to Bamian and Bamian to Yakawlang, most are still glorified mule tracks. In winter greater numbers of women die in childbirth because they can't get help in time. Even in the best of weather, farmers can't get crops to market. "We tried taking melons and peaches to Kabul, and it was juice by the time we got there," says Chris Eaton, CEO of the Aga Khan Foundation's Afghanistan office.

Mohammed Akbar is a Hazara farmer with gray-blue eyes that match his tightly wound turban and an elfin face ringed by a white beard. He lives in Lorcha, a speck of a place in western Yakawlang. On a bluff above a narrow stream, mud-walled homes cling together in tightly packed clusters. These houses are among those the Taliban burned down in 2001. Every man in Lorcha can point to the mountain his family fled to and describe arduous journeys through thick snow lugging whatever they could carry. Today most damaged homes have been rebuilt. The villagers donated funds for a new mosque too. Money is short, but the village elder has persuaded farmers to resist the temptation to grow poppies. "It is *haram*," says Akbar, forbidden by Islam.

As the snow began melting last spring, some areas suffered deadly flooding. But Akbar—all of Hazarajat, really—hoped the runoff signaled the end of a punishing drought that had limited crop yields and forced many families to sell animals in recent years. On a mild, late spring day, Akbar irrigated a small plot of wheat just outside the village. The surrounding valley was a patchwork of similar fields filled with potatoes, hay, and wheat in early stages of growth. The nearest road was on the other side of the stream. A footbridge leading to the road had washed away when the stream swelled with runoff from melting

snow. Three logs had been laid over the water, and parents piggybacked their children across on their way to school.

In this tiny hamlet and throughout Hazarajat, education is a priority. Even if the school is a tent or a building with no doors or windows, even if the teacher has only a few years of schooling, parents want their kids to study, far more so than elsewhere in the country. Hussain Ali lives in a cave in Bamian, where his family sleeps on thin bedrolls and the walls are blackened with soot. His children could bring in extra income, but he wants them in school. "I'm old, my time has passed," he says, "but my children should learn something."

Scores of schools have been built in Hazarajat in recent years, mainly by aid agencies and the Bamian-based Provincial Reconstruction Team operated by New Zealand. In Daykundi's provincial capital, a group of teenagers said young people are refusing to marry until they finish school. Hazara high schoolers make up more than a third of those who take the university entrance exam, and the number—including the number of girls—is rising. Hazarajat is a deeply conservative place, but it is far from fundamentalist. Women here "go to school, they have their own pursuits, and they have their freedom," says Ryhana Azad, a female district council member in Daykundi.

In time, perhaps, these seeds will bear fruit the whole society can sample, but for now families must address immediate concerns. Often that means going where the work is. In village after village you see women—wearing long skirts, blouses, and head scarves in greens, reds, and sky blues—shoveling snow off their roofs or harvesting fields by themselves, because the men are working as day laborers in Pakistan or Iran or Herat or Kabul. It's hard on those who go and hard on those who stay behind. But sometimes adapting to the landscape means finding a new one.

For many that new place is Kabul, where some 40 percent of the population is now Hazara. On neighborhood streets in the western part of the city, you see Hazara children in uniform going to school, Hazara vegetable vendors setting up their carts, and Hazara shop owners and tailors opening stores. Hossein Yasa, the editor of the *Daily Outlook* newspaper, notes that there are Hazara-owned television stations, Hazara-owned newspapers, and a huge Shiite madrasa and mosque complex under construction. "The middle class of Hazaras is growing very fast," Yasa says.

Watching from the sidelines, however, is a huge Hazara underclass made up of manual laborers living in west Kabul neighborhoods—Dasht-e Barchi, Kart-e She, and Chindawul—that have neither electricity nor clean water. "You are talking about ghettos," says Niamatullah Ibrahim, a fellow with the London School of Economics.

Every day, the Hazara cart pullers are out on the main road of Dasht-e Barchi, wondering if they'll get any work. Sunup, sundown, winter, spring, summer, fall, they wait, hoping someone will hire them to use their carts to transport lumber, building materials, bags of wheat, cans of cooking oil, panes of glass, window frames, dishes for wedding receptions—something, anything—from one place to another.

Pahlawan, Baba, and Assadullah are three of many men doing this because they must, because it's all they know. They think themselves invisible, unseen, but in many ways they're the public face of Hazaras in Kabul, doing the jobs no one else wants. On a good day they'll earn 200 or 250 afghanis, four or five dollars. But they can never count on a good day. Pahlawan, "the wrestler," is the strongest, in his mid-30s, working since he was seven. "Every day we sit with our carts from morning to evening," he says. Zulfiqar Azimi is "Baba," 67, with a glass eye and missing fingers on one hand. "I have never had a moment of comfort in this life," he says. Assadullah is the youngest, quiet, handsome under all the dust. He recently returned from Iran. He is lean but moves stiffly. In his 20s, he says he used to be an expert martial artist. "Now," he says, "I have this cart."

The first job of the day is from a man who needs 20 bags of plaster moved to a work site. Pahlawan has wandered off, so Baba and Assadullah load the bags, 77 pounds each. Both men grasp the cart's bar, pulling roughly 1,500 pounds as cars and buses honk and spit fumes. Seven minutes and several hundred yards later, they turn into the mud-walled warrens of Kabul's backstreets. Breathing heavily, sweating profusely, they reach the site. They'll have to carry the bags the last 30 feet. Baba throws a bag over his shoulder and walks stooped over, head down, holding the bag with one hand, white powder spilling on his clothes. Another ten minutes and they're done. Baba and Assadullah get \$1.20, to split.

"You see our situation, at my age," says Baba, turning his head so I see his good eye. He pulls out a snuff tin, puts a handful in his mouth before heading

back to see if another job comes.

Some observers believe the discrimination Hazaras face in Kabul could be fueling a long-elusive sense of unity—and a desire for democracy. "I think there is a greater degree of Hazara nationalism in Kabul as compared with rural Hazarajat because people are experiencing this disparity between Hazara and non-Hazara in their day-to-day lives," says Ibrahim. The director of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, Sima Samar, agrees: "The Hazaras are more adaptable to democracy, because they feel the pain more than the others. They feel the discrimination. They really want equality and social justice."

Were the Buddhas still standing last May, they would have gazed down on a young man walking Bamian's main street, a bumpy unpaved tract with shops on both sides selling cooking oil, medicines, and building materials. A large billboard depicting Mazari, the martyred Hazara leader, stands on a hillside.

Musa Shafaq is back in the Hazara heartland. He did not get the job at Kabul University he wanted. "If I am going to live in Afghanistan, it should be in Kabul," he says. His stellar academic record should have made that possible. "He was one of the brightest students. He should have been recruited," says Issa Rezai, an adviser at the Ministry of Higher Education. But prejudice against Hazaras remains high at the university. Fundamentalist Pashtun professors still predominate, including some hard-core fundamentalists who led factions accused of atrocities against Hazara civilians. Sayed Askar Mousavi, author of *The Hazaras of Afghanistan*, says such discrimination underscores how little has fundamentally changed. In Bamian, he says, "there are two changes. There were two Buddhas, and now there are none."

Shafaq has had other bad news as well: He will not be able to marry his girlfriend back in Waras. "I love her and she loved me," Shafaq says, but "when I sent my mother to ask for her hand from her father, he refused. Because I am a Hazara."

And so, Shafaq is alone, back in Hazarajat, teaching at Bamian University, where all the other teachers are also Hazaras. Like their students, they are earnest, motivated, intelligent—and a bit fearful. Since reopening in 2004, the university has grown. Beyond the entrance is a dusty courtyard where groups of smartly dressed male and female students, books in hand, make their way to class. The sign on the front of the school is written in three languages—in English and in Dari, the most common language in Afghanistan, and then in Pashtu, the language of the Pashtuns, in the largest script.

Shafaq teaches the history of Afghanistan during the enlightenment and the industrial revolution, expounding on John Locke and Abraham Lincoln, on liberty and democracy. His salary is 2,000 afghanis a month, about \$40.

After so much hope, so many promises, the Hazaras are feeling ignored by the new government—led as it is by a Pashtun president. Across Hazarajat, the question echoes: Why has there not been more development and more interest in an area that is safe, where the population supports the government, where corruption is not widespread, where women play a role in public life, where poppies are not proliferating? It's not uncommon to hear farmers muse about growing poppies to sell on the heroin market, maybe even causing a little violence, because they think that might draw the government's attention.

Construction is not easy in this terrain, granted, but Hazarajat could be a model of what's possible when a region buys into the nation-building process. Yet so much time has passed. Already, the resurgence of the Tali-ban, who recently have targeted Hazara leaders in several districts abutting their southern strongholds, is stirring difficult memories. "Anytime we hear news of the Taliban on the radio, our bones turn to water," says Mohsin Moisaafid in Kata Khona.

Perhaps a new generation of Afghan leaders will emerge to finally lead people beyond the mindset of war and warlords and jihad. Much depends on whether the Taliban will continue to grow, whether the international community will lose interest, whether the tensions between the U.S. and Iran, fellow Shiites, will adversely affect the Hazaras. Whatever happens, much more than the fate of the Hazara people is at stake. As Dan Terry, an American aid worker who has lived in Afghanistan for 30 years, puts it: What happens to the Hazaras is "not just the story of this people. It's the story of the whole country. It's everybody's story."