

My Academic Journey from Nimruz to Hamburg

The war directly or indirectly impacts the lives of many people around the world, and I am no exception but it is worth sharing my story to inspire Afghan youth, especially girls who are currently not allowed to attend schools in Afghanistan.

I was born on December 25, 1985, in one of the remotest regions in Afghanistan. It was not a very fortunate time to grow up, amidst the invasion of Afghanistan by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and constant wars ravaging the country. Despite this, my father tried to provide me with as good an education as he could. Happiness overflowed our family when I first entered kindergarten knowing it would be my new home. My father, who had studied in Ukraine, lovingly named me 'Patrice' which means noble. However, as the war intensified between the Mujahideen and USSR, my name troubled many people in our society. The local Mujahideen finally forced my grandfather to change my Western name. As a result, my name changed to Nazir Ahmad. The excitement of learning and growing was slowly shattered as the Mujahideen accumulated power. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, conflict for power erupted among the Mujahideen leaders, leading to a civil war and forcing the modern education system to come to a halt. Thereafter, the education system worsened during the Taliban regime. Each day was a horror, especially for those like me who wanted to study in underground (covert) schools, thanks to some educators who took the risk and secretly provided modern education to boys and girls in their homes. The life got distressed day by day until our only option was to leave the country and find shelter in the neighbouring countries. Initially, we migrated to Pakistan and later to Iran. However, life as a refugee in both countries was not easy. At the time, it was difficult for Afghan refugees to get formal education there. All hopes of getting proper education similar to my father's were dimming with time. Many Afghans including my cousins accepted the situation and settled down, but it was out of the question for me to give up my dream of education.

Late, but the tides turned in my favour, and I touched the soil of my homeland after 2001. I immediately resumed my formal schooling but this time with low-quality education as the only available option. At the time, there were no private schools in the country. Besides, physical violence in government schools was normal. Nevertheless, I completed high school and was looking forward to my higher education journey. India was a dream destination for me because my grandparents used to describe it as the land of knowledge, diversity, Ayurveda and yoga. Also, my father passionately guided me to follow the examples from Mahatma Gandhi's 'My Experiments with the Truth' and his principle of *Ahimsa* (non-violence). The dream of studying in and exploring India was certainly high but the financial backup was very low, and this hurdle sealed my door to opportunity for another two years. So, to paddle my canoe, I, along with my father and brother, established a small stationery business where I worked for a while and saved money to support my higher education.

Finally, the year 2007 showered blessings on me to begin a new academic journey. I was lucky to get admission in the prestigious Indraprastha University to pursue my bachelor's degree in management studies from Jagannath International Management School in Delhi. In the first semester, I wanted to give up my dream of higher education and go back home because I was not able to understand any of the textbooks or lectures. In the first midterm exam, I could only pass one out of the eight subjects. On top of that, I got dengue. When I reached the hospital, they directly admitted me: I was in a foreign land, young, afraid, and severely sick, with no one to look after me. Dengue still remains a critical factor of fatality for thousands of people annually. I saw a few Afghan students give up their studies and ICCR scholarships to return back home. But I could not give up because I fought against circumstances, society and even relatives to get to this place. Additionally, it was not easy to give up because I was considering

myself a hope and inspiration for my family members and the youth in Afghanistan. The only option was to keep grinding and studying as much as possible. Gautham Buddha well-said, “When a student is ready, the teacher will appear”. I found great teachers, Prof. Ravi K. Dhar, Prof. S.K. Dogra, and Prof. Silky Kushwah, who motivated me and provided extra time for me. In 2010, I got my degree with an A division. Before coming to Hamburg, I visited my college and the director of the college blessed me by tapping on my shoulders. During my college days, I travelled to many states, visited many universities and historical places, and met many great personalities. I was introduced to the Persian and Pashto department of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) by Ms Heela Najib, daughter of our former President Dr Najibullah. I never thought that one day I will be teaching in this department. Ms Najib was very kind to dedicate her time to meeting, encouraging and supporting Afghan youth, and she also organized many events such as the celebration of Abdul Ghaffar Khan's birth anniversary, showing historical places, etc. She played an important role in the lives of many Afghan students, including me, to learn and grow. I learned many things from friends, colleagues, professors, and society. After four years in India, I found myself to be an open-minded, multicultural, and completely transformed person. Soon, I found my soulmate, and after marriage, we felt capable of contributing to society. We decided to travel to Afghanistan and improve the lives of many Afghan youths. Upon returning to Afghanistan, my wife and I provided our marriage ceremony money to an orphanage. Then we established a school, ‘Afghan National School’, to provide quality education to the young generation. We continued our support of the orphanage and also provided free education to as many children as we could. Besides, we conducted environmental awareness programs through our school events, radio and television programs. In 2013, I got an award from the National Environmental Protection Agency. By this time, the school was properly functioning, and opening a hospital and a university was on my bucket list because Nimruz did not have a single university or a proper hospital at the time. But I lacked the knowledge to open a hospital or a university. Hence, I decided to pursue my master's and acquire knowledge of opening a hospital.

I got admission to the Master of Business Administration (MBA) in 2013 at the University Institute of Law and Management Studies (UILMS), affiliated with the prestigious Maharshi Dayanand University. At UILMS, Prof. Vijay Rathee, Prof. Sandeep Agarwal and Prof. Pratibha Bhardwaj were great sources of encouragement and support. For the first time, I presented a research paper along with my professor at an international conference at the Economics Department of Kurukshetra University in 2014. During my two years of MBA, I learned many things starting with writing a research paper, presenting and conducting research projects. I did an internship with Fortis Hospital in Delhi for five months and built a strong network with healthcare providers and doctors. Further, I found a deep interest in different traditional medicine systems such as Siddha, Homeopathy, Naturopathy, Unani and Ayurveda. Now, the time came to go back with the knowledge and establish a hospital in my province. I reached home in 2016, but because of the security situation, those who wanted to support the project told me to wait for some time. I could not abide my time and decided to enrol myself in a PhD Program. Thus, I submitted my application to the Ministry of Higher Education of Afghanistan for a doctoral scholarship. In mid-2016, 11 candidates including me received the prestigious Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) scholarship for Doctoral studies.

A new academic journey in higher studies began in 2016 when I enrolled myself in the PhD program at the Centre for European Studies (CEUS), School of International Studies (SIS) at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). It became a dream for me to study at this university which I initially visited in 2008 and where I also fell in love with my wife. JNU is a great platform to discuss your ideas with people from different walks of life. It is multicultural, multilinguistic and gives enough exposure to scholars to explore, experiment, learn and grow. JNU has produced eminent and well-known leaders, researchers, diplomats and academicians.

Unfortunately, after 2017 many protests and violence happened on campus, and I could not attend many important lectures including coursework classes. Later the Covid19 pandemic forced the University to totally shut down. Additionally, I could not travel to Belgium and Germany for research fieldwork due to the pandemic. However, I gained a lot of experience and knowledge during the four years of my doctoral studies. I could attend many offline and online conferences/ seminars/ workshops and present papers, publish articles and learn different languages. Towards, the end of my PhD, I published many academic articles and papers, published in reputable journals. I am sincerely grateful to my supervisor, Prof. Gulshan Sachdeva who despite of Covid19 provided time and support to me to complete my PhD on time. I will always remain indebted to him and all my professors at the Centre for European Centre.

Similarly, JNU opened many doors of opportunities to the outside world for me. In 2018, I got the opportunity to work in the Political Department of the Embassy of the I.R. of Afghanistan in New Delhi. I was fortunate to work with Ambassador Farid Mamundzay, Dr Shaida Abdali and Mr Tahir Qadir, who was Chargé D'affaires at the time. Further, it helped me to attend the annual Raisina Dialogue where I had the opportunity to directly interact with the leaders, ambassadors, academicians and journalists who came together from different parts of the globe. I had the opportunity to meet President Emmanuel Macron, President Ashraf Ghani, former President Hamid Karzai, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, former Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, H.E. Mohammad Umer Dauzai, Special Envoy for Regional Consensus Building on Peace and head of high Peace Council of Afghanistan, H.E. Zalmay Khalilzad, U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation, Dr S. Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister of India, H.E. Edgars Rinkēvičs, Foreign Minister of Latvia, H.E. Haneef Atmar, Foreign Minister of Afghanistan, H.E. Smriti Irani, Minister of textiles at the time, H.E. Meenakshi Lekhi, Minister of External Affairs and Culture of India, Tara Bhattacharjee, Granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi. I had the honour to meet H.E. Ugo Astuto, Ambassador of the European Union to India, H.E. Walter Lindner, German Ambassador to India, Prof. Michael Göring, head of ZEIT-Stiftung, H.E. Amar Sinha and H.E. Vivek Katju former Ambassadors of India to Afghanistan. I also had the opportunity to meet officials from the embassies of France, Switzerland, Finland, Poland, Norway, Sweden, Netherlands, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

Every journey indeed has a beginning and an end. And so my PhD journey came to an end after the submission of my thesis on December 31, 2020. Thereafter, I got selected as the Representative of Afghan Youth to Asia by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, which introduced me to the Youth High Council in Kabul. Despite the Covid19 pandemic, I tried to connect the Afghan and Indian schools and encourage Afghan students to participate in debates and other activities using online platforms. Additionally, I along with Dr Elham was working to connect an Afghan medical school with Indian doctors for the exchange of knowledge. Further, I along with my spouse and Prof. Anwar Khairee wrote a book titled, 'Easy Pashto Handbook: With Hindi Pronunciation' for the Indian students of the Centre for Persian and Central Asian Studies, JNU. It is designed to help those who have difficulty in Pashto grammar and pronunciation. Unfortunately, after launching the book, I was severely infected with Covid19 and lost over 12 kg. I was tired, exhausted and homesick. I really do not know how I travelled home on April 26, 2021. I did not go to a doctor; instead, I treated myself through yoga, Ayurveda and traditional medicine.

After a bit of recovery, I searched for a pulmonologist for my father who had a breathing problem but we did not have a single pulmonologist in Kabul. Therefore, I decided to use my knowledge and solve this issue. I along with Dr Elham established the Tele-Consultation Clinic where we provide access to Indian doctors through our system. Additionally, we connect

Afghan patients to their doctors in India for follow-ups as it was difficult for them to travel. My father, family members and many patients were treated through our Tele-Consultation Clinic. I also used to attend Youth High Council meetings while I was in Kabul. Besides, I wrote a book titled, 'Search the Light Within You', dedicated to the Afghan youth in order to make them aware of their potential of becoming great even in the face of difficulties. The book was very welcomed and went for the second print. I still was not fully recovered from Covid19, but despite this uneasy situation I had to travel to India in June. Upon my return to India, I was scheduled to have my PhD Viva and planned to organise a workshop for the Afghan youth regarding the Jojoba plant to green the deserted areas in Afghanistan. H.E. Mamundazy, supported the initiative to organise the workshop. I defended my PhD thesis on July 31, 2021, and after two weeks, the Afghan government collapsed. All the plans got cancelled, my partner Dr Elham closed the clinic, the stationery business downsized, and my father handed over the school to someone else. At the same time, my scholarship ended with the completion of my doctorate. I did not have a source of income. Even the banking system collapsed with the fall of the Afghan government and my parents could not send me money. I thought it was a nightmare, but it was reality. I was in a dire situation, financially, mentally and emotionally. All the old memories of the invasion, war, killing, displacement and suffering of refugees resurged and the daily horrifying news was adding to the pain.

I am grateful to Mr Marius Elbracht, a friend I knew from JNU who used to work with Misereor as a project officer in Africa and Middle East Department, who told me about the **German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA)**. I sent a mail to the President of the esteemed GIGA institution, **Prof. Dr Amrita Narlikar**, explaining my situation. She immediately replied with kind words, "Thank you for your message. The events in Afghanistan are really shocking. Our thoughts are with you and your family". She connected me to her team Ms Sofiia Sehin, Ms Julia Kramer, Dr Peter Peetz to support me throughout the process of becoming a visiting fellow. After a few days, I received a supervision letter from the GIGA President. I will always remember this gesture of the leadership of the esteemed GIGA that welcomed a scholar with open arms and provided me a great opportunity to contribute to society and academics through my endeavours. The process of finding funding was difficult and took enough time. In the meantime, I started translating small projects in Pashto and Dari to English and vice-versa for survival. In January 2022, at the request of H.E. Mamundzay, I established the board of Sayed Jamaluddin Afghan High school. It was a great feeling the day we re-opened the school for Afghan students (mostly girls), and I wish I could open all the schools for girls in Afghanistan. I was more than happy to organize the graduation ceremony of a group of students on May 6, 2022 and support them to pursue their higher education. All credits for re-establishing the school and providing quality education to Afghan students go to the Ministry of External Affairs of India, the Embassy of the I.R. of Afghanistan in New Delhi, and the Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti-autonomous body of the Ministry of Culture, Government of India.

In 2022, the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, a German foundation, accepted my research proposal, titled **Reassessing the European Development Assistance in Afghanistan** and also to publish my PhD Thesis, "European Development Assistance in Afghanistan with Special Reference to Germany, 2002-2017" as a book. I am thankful to Dr Wüstenmann, Dr Lauter and Mr Gulberg for their kind support during the whole process. I am also grateful to my great friend, Dr Omar Sadr for his invaluable guidance and support in finding a scholarship. I would also like to thank my family, friends and colleagues particularly Dr Veda, Mr Ershad, Ms Khushi, Mr Azad, Mr Pius, Mr Manoranjan, Mr Hanif, Mr Simant and Ms Navita Ji for supporting me during difficult times.

Finally, in January 2023, I became part of the esteemed GIGA family. I am grateful to Prof. Dr Amrita Narlikar, Prof. Dr Patrick Köllner, Prof. Dr Eckart Woertz, and Prof. Dr Christian von Soest for their kind and warm welcome. I am confident that I will learn a lot from each member of the GIGA family and also from Germany, the land of thinkers, inventors and scientists. I like the clean weather of Hamburg so much that I enjoy running every day and registered for the 37th Haspa Marathon Hamburg.

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