‘Afghanistan is to the rest of the world what NE is to India,’ Raghav Sharma

Just like Afghanistan seems to be this wild west zone which is romanticized in the northern plains, much of the northeast area is also seen as this wild zone which most of India doesn’t know about, said Raghav Sharma, International humanitarian and director of Centre for Afghanistan Studies at OP Jindal School of International Affairs.

Sharma, in a tête-à-tête with G Plus, was drawing similarities between the northeast India and Afghanistan while in Guwahati for a seminar. He went on to say, “Like all Afghans are considered to be either Pashtuns or Talibans, everybody from the northeast are very derogatorily called ‘Chinkis’. A majority of the public continues to be unaware of the rich diversity of customs, traditions and ethnicity prevailing in the region.

The students of Gauhati University were introduced to the literary works from Afghanistan and provided with a perspective on the existing socio-cultural and political situations currently prevailing in the country through an international seminar on the identity, history and narrative in contemporary Afghan literature. The seminar was organised by the Department of English, Gauhati University from February 6-8.

Popular politician, Afrasiab Khattak, and international humanitarian Raghav Sharma attended the seminar as plenary speakers while Nandana Dutta, Rakhee Kalita Moral and Pradipta Borgohain attended as panelists. “Literature provides you a window into the wonderful nuances of everyday lived experiences in Afghanistan which are very far removed from what you see in TV images coming through news reports which mostly focus on violence and war,” Raghav Sharma told G Plus.

The seminar began with the inauguration and keynote address by Afrasiab Khattak, a left-wing politician from the state of Pakistan. This was followed by paper presentations by students and teachers of the department on the themes of gender, ethnicity, culture, terrorism, migration and displacement, to name a few.

Papers were presented on various Afghan literary works including Nushin Arbabzadah’s Afghan Rumour Bazaar, Khaled Hosseini’s The Kite Runner and A Thousand Splendid Suns. It was discussed that there’s very little dissemination of knowledge from Afghanistan to the rest of the world and thus Khattak provided the audience with a view into the existing socio-cultural scenario in Afghanistan.

“Afghanistan has been dominated by what is called ‘rivâz’ (custom) in local languages and it holds very true especially with the Pashtuns. It’s as if Afghanistan has become a low pressure point at socio-historical plane the way there are low pressure points in atmosphere that attract storms, Afghanistan too keeps attracting storms. But during the last two-three decades, a new Afghanistan has emerged in which there are more urban centres, a strong civil society, television centres, social media prevalence and women activism,” said Khattak.

The Department of English, Gauhati University, has been organizing a series of international seminars on literatures emerging from India and its neighbours, with two seminars already held on Sri Lanka and Pakistan. This year, the university shifted its focus to Afghanistan.

In terms of language and culture, Afghanistan retains a rich heritage that not only dates back to thousands of years but also charts a transnational trajectory in the form of Intercontinental literary culture that includes countries like Turkey, Iran and India in its ambit. However, modern Afghanistan is often regarded as an isolated, troubled, violence-ridden territory in the global imaginary, in the light of its occupation by the Soviets in the Cold War era and by the US in the aftermath of 9/11. However, this representation, as with any representation, comes with its own political and ideological baggage.

Poetry and fiction have been the dominant forms through which Afghan writers have articulated the trauma of violence, terror, displacement and loss of identity and home. Afghan writers have consciously undertaken to provide alternative versions of reading and representing Afghanistan rather than the politically dominant Western view of the nation. “The central focus of contemporary Afghan literature has responded to and addressed the drastic political and cultural changes in Afghanistan since the second half of the twentieth century as well as certain repressive aspects of tradition that perpetuate from the past well into the present,” informed Dr Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri, Head of the English Department, GIU.

Afrasiab Khattak is the President of Roshaan Democratic Institute, Ex-Senator, Ex-Chairperson of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), Ex-Provincial President of Awami National Party (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), Chairman of Board of Directors of Bacha Khan Education Trust Foundation, expert of Afghan affairs and Analyst of Regional Security, Socio-Economic Cooperation and Human Rights Activist.

Raghav Sharma is the director of Centre for Afghanistan Studies at OP Jindal School of International Affairs. Prior to this, he has taught in the Conflict Studies and Management Program and the Good Governance Afghanistan Program at the Willy Brandt School of Public Policy, University of Erfurt. As Research Officer at the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies he published extensively on issues of strategic importance for Afghanistan and Central Asia. He has also been associated with the development sector having worked and travelled extensively across Afghanistan in his capacity as an international humanitarian aid worker and having undertaken consultancies for the Aga Khan Foundation and Community World Services in Kabul.

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