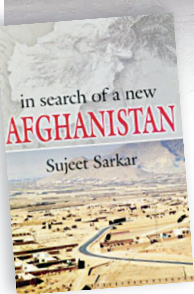




## IN SEARCH OF A NEW AFGHANISTAN



A new book by Indian author **Sujet Kumar Sarkar** reads the extra mile to unearth the layers and layers of myths about the war-ravaged country, which he argues, have been carefully nurtured by a 'biased' media

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**MUSCAT:** It's a search that is bound to debunk a thousand myths. *In search of a new Afghanistan*. That goes the name of the new book authored by Sujet Kumar Sarkar, an international developmental professional, who sheds completely new light on a region largely "stereotyped by the western media".

Explaining the *raison d'être* of this endeavour, Sarkar, in an exclusive interview with *Times of Oman*, said, "My book attempts at unveiling several lesser known facts helping to create an alternative understanding about Afghanistan, for the first time."

Sarkar, who has worked in Afghanistan for over six years as an international advisor on governance, also felt there was a need to undertake an in-depth study into some of the key issues that needed serious deliberation.

"After 9/11, Afghanistan resurfaced on the map, assuming strategic importance for its regional neighbours as well as the broader international community; it became a critical link, so to say, in achieving both regional and global peace and security," said the author, who had his formal education in rural development in India and then pursued an advance course in Washington.

Sarkar is convinced that the media has been playing to the gallery ever since 9/11, shaping international perceptions of Afghanistan. "Sensational press reportage from Afghanistan was more often than not just perfunctory and even biased. Sustained, comprehensive and authentic reports from ground zero were rare. Very few had the opportunity to take a peek into the heart of this country and debate on the real issues plaguing this nascent democracy," the author told *Times of Oman*.

What were the initial challenges in collecting and collating the material for this book? "My job profile in Afghanistan, as an international advisor in governance, has been greatly demanding. I also learnt the local language, Dari, to be able to remain objectively connected to the pulse of this nation," he explained.

In course of his professional stint in Afghanistan, which kicked off in 2005, he had the opportunity to closely witness the development processes across all echelons of society — from rural to urban areas, from north to militant-infested south, from governance to the governed, and more importantly, from ordinary citizens to the power corridors of Kabul — all of which Sarkar has meticulously recorded in the book.

Most of his inputs for this book have come from his consultations with a wide range of stakeholders during his stay in Afghanistan. He also had had informal discussions with Afghans from various walks of life, about the various facets of their lives. These notes, debates and discussions form the crux of his book.

Ten years since the war began in



**FUTURE TENSE:** (Top) Afghans wait to receive aid from a non-governmental charity organisation during the Holy Month of Ramadan in Jalalabad. Above: A woman carries a sack of flour. — Reuters

Afghanistan and billions of dollars spent, what has been the tangible progress for a common Afghan?

"In reality, the country is grappling with a lack of financial resources to fast track its development process," Sarkar replied.

"This may come as a surprise to many that the US and the West have actually committed a bulk of their aid around military support, rather than development, in Afghanistan, in the last one decade. In fact, 90 per cent of the resources provided by the western countries in the name of rebuilding Afghanistan are largely used by these countries to service their military apparatus, to tame the Taliban and irreversibly degrade their capabilities," he explained.

Sarkar is also convinced that had the US and the western policy makers employed more resources

in development, rather than military operation, one would have seen a very different Afghanistan by now.

"The whole world has to understand that military operation is not going to bring in the desirable results. Without strategic stress on development, it will be impossible to ameliorate the conditions of the citizens reeling from almost three decades of civil war and terrorism. Development alone can win the hearts and minds of Afghans and connect them to the mainstream nation-building process. This would further reduce the influence and grip of Taliban over the common man in Afghanistan.

"In fact, the very inability of the State to fast track the development response and assuage the suffering of the common

man is helping Taliban to gain ground, especially in the volatile southern provinces."

Sarkar is also convinced that despite the ongoing hurdles, including a worsening law and order situation owing to a resurgent Taliban, Afghanistan has made some good progress, especially in the sectors of education, infrastructure, health etc. "Things are not as grim as painted by the international media. One has to understand the dynamics and intricacies of the development and reconstruction process in Afghanistan before holding any perception about it, and more importantly, before getting sucked away by popular notions."

How fatigued is the common man from the war?

"The common Afghan is completely exhausted. He lives on a

tiny vestige of hope and the least he expects is some peace and stability, if not rapid prosperity and growth.

The State needs to expand the scale and scope of public services immediately to assuage the suffering of the masses, but is unable to do so due to resource scarcity on one hand, and the growing Taliban unrest on the other.

"While it has been possible, to some extent, to redress the common man's plight in the Northern provinces, the volatile southern belt — the traditional stronghold of Taliban — still poses a huge problem. This is exasperating the common man and alienating him from the State, which in turn is making the Taliban stronger and helping them gain from the unfolding situation in Afghanistan."

So, is development the real answer to all the ills that plague this picturesque country?

"In the last one decade the focus has been more on degrading the capabilities of Taliban than development. For every single dollar that is being invested for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, 90 per cent of it goes into security operations. And after one decade of military efforts, Taliban have grown stronger than ever. The military operation of the last decade has been counter-productive in some sense. I have explained in my book how two terrorists grow out of one killed by the NATO forces.

"Military operation is not the solution in Afghanistan. The international community should expand the development budget and invest more resources in development. This would allow the State to provide public services to the war-weary citizens and address their crying needs.

"This would also allow the State to connect the citizens in the fold of a nation, otherwise better organized in terms of their ethnicity, region and even local leaders. I am glad that there is a growing realisation among the international community now.

"At the recently concluded Tokyo conference, the international community pledged \$16 billion for fast tracking the development process. This is a marked difference from their initial approach towards Afghanistan."

Finally, would he narrate any unforgettable incident/s while working on the book?

"I once witnessed a suicide bombing from as close as 40 meters. It could easily have been me. In this book I have cited numerous incidents to suggest that it's one bad moment that separates life from death in Afghanistan.

"The second most touching and very sad moment was losing my close friend, Abdul Latif Ashna, the deputy governor of Kandhar, in a targeted suicide bombing. He provided me with a lot of insight for this book. At one point, I almost gave up the hope of writing this book. But then I realised that writing this book is perhaps the best way to pay tribute to hundreds and hundreds of such departed noble heroes. They are my inspiration for writing this book."

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**Sujet Kumar Sarkar**  
Author

