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Have fun in Afghanistan? Enjoy the weather...

**By Siddharth Varadarajan, *The Times of India*,
[25 March 2001]**

KANDAHAR: In any major Afghan town, you can be sure to find three kinds of shops on every street: a pharmacy, a stationery store and a photo studio. In a country that has been through 20 years of war, it makes sense to have lots of pharmacies. As for stationery, girls and women may not be allowed to study but there are clearly enough males out there buying notebooks and pens. But in a country where photography is banned - except when official documents require a picture protrait - why on earth does one require so many photo studios?

The Taliban may have decreed that photography is un-Islamic but old habits die hard. "People still take photographs of their family, especially during weddings," said the owner of one photo studio here. "Officially, our shop is only meant to take passport-size photographs for official documents," he said. "But selling films is our main business". Processing films can be more problematic, and risky. In Kabul, one studio keeps its customers' prints under a couch. Here in the south, people send their snapshots across the border to Quetta for developing.

Though having fun-or just living what the average Afghan considers to be a normal life-can entail serious risks, people here have not abandoned their love for music and films, especially from Bollywood. During the 6-hour journey from Torkham to Kabul, my taxi driver played a tape of Raja Hindustani 10 times. Taking more than a couple of cassettes on the highway is risky since they have to be secreted away in some hidden crevice of the car each time a checkpost of the Vice and Virtue police draws near. At one place, our taxi was given a thorough inspection and the driver frisked. Had the offending tape been found, he would have been lokced up for five days. As mere co-conspirators, we passengers would have gotten off lighter-Vice and Virtue would only have shaved our heads.

I asked Qudratullah Jamal, the Taliban's culture minister, what people could do for fun and entertainment in a country where music, cinema, TV, photography, dancing, painting and flying kites are all illegal? "Why", he said, clearly surprised by my ignorance, "there are many, many things to do for entertainment. People can enjoy the weather in Afghanistan. The climate here is very different. When you compare it with other countries, it is much better". As an afterthought, he added: "We allow sports. There is football, volleyball and horse-riding for boys".

And what about the girls, I asked. "We have approved a budget to build parks for entertainment for boys", he replied. And for girls? "The Islamic circle is not limited. It has

given rights to everyone, to boys.” And the girls, I persist. “Isn't it healthy that they should also have some entertainment and sports?” Qudratullah was losing his patience by now. “If we are to ask Afghan women, their problems have been solved. You cannot compare Afghanistan to other countries. The women of Afghanistan reject those things which are against Islam. It is the demand of Islam that women should live their lives according to the principles of Islam”.

Abdul Hai Mutmaeen, spokesman of Mullah Mohammad Omar, was prepared to be more liberal. “Anything which does not affect the moral character of women is allowed by us,” he declared grandly. Asked to give examples of what was permitted, he said: “During weddings, women can play the dayra (a small round drum). But we don't allow the dhol as this is immoral and against Islam”.

I told Mutmaeen that I had heard Hindi films are very popular and that Afghan women seem to like Shahrukh Khan a lot. (A foreign aid worker who attended a wedding in Kabul recently had told me she was impressed with the way the girls danced “just in Hindi movies”, but I decided not to bring this up). “During the communist days, these Indian movies were shown here. Today nobody wants to see them.” But even young people seem to know about the latest releases, I said. Surely they must still be watching. “No”, said Mutmaeen. “The Rabbani government had also shown these movies before 1996. They must remember things from those days. But don't worry. We are in the process of repairing peoples' consciousness”.

At the end of interview, I asked Mutmaeen whether he had ever seen a Hindi movie during the long years he spent in exile in Pakistan. “Certainly not”, he said. “I was busy studying in different madrassas. There was no time for such things.”
