

# Men on Top: Sexual Economy of *Bacha Bazi* in Afghanistan

## Abstract:

In contemporary international society, Afghanistan may be cited as a dysfunctional entity with a litany of internal conflicts. One of these bedeviling anomalies relates to the prevalence of a culture of sexual violation of pre-adolescent boys by powerful male patrons. This widespread practice, colloquially known as *bacha bazi*, exists in an informal institutionalized form. While *bacha bazi* predates the current round of internal strife and war, the prevailing political chaos and conflict dynamics in the country has contributed to its persistent growth.

What are the cultural roots of this specific sexual predation? How has it managed to exist and flourish in a deeply conservative Islamic society? Why do sections of Afghanistan's adult male population harbour fascination for the pre-pubescent male body? What has been the institutional response to such abuse? And, most fundamental of all, how do the victims of this violence cope with their harrowing experience?

This article examines the political economy of *bacha bazi* from an interdisciplinary perspective that includes the interrogation of the problem from sexual, sociological, religious and legal standpoint. The analysis is situated in the intersection of predatory toxic masculinity and conflict studies and attempts to provide a holistic interpretation of this problem. While doing so, it turns the mirror on contemporary Afghanistan with a specific aim to problematize the effects of *bacha bazi* across society.

The research for this study was conducted between 2018-2021. The narrative covers the period preceding the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021. Much of the data, information and interpretation pertains to the interregnum - between the removal of Taliban regime of Afghanistan in 2001 and until their subsequent return to power in 2021.

In this context, it must be underscored that the Taliban, during their first stint in power (1996-2001), openly denounced this practice and maintained a strict attitude towards those practicing it in public. Thanks to this strict stance, *bacha bazi* had become an underground activity. It is pertinent to stress following the US invasion and subsequent occupation of Afghanistan non-Taliban opposition, the warlords, *bacha bazi* resurfaced openly, becoming a 'normalised structured practice' across much of the country.

It is not very clear what is the disposition of the current Taliban regime towards the culture and practice of *bacha bazi*. In any event, the focus of this article is primarily the occurrences during the interregnum highlighted above, with a firm sight on the historical precedence surrounding this enterprise.

## **Situating *bacha bazi***

Sections of Afghan society have long practiced forms of adult *male-boy* sex as personal entertainment, which, in modern parlance, can be defined as pedophilia. In local Dari *bacheh-baazi* refers to “playing” with kids (as sexual toys) and in Pashtun *bacha bazi* is simply sexually entertaining oneself with a boy. In this practice, the pre-pubescent male body is used as conduit for the sexual gratification of another male adult – usually occupying a powerful societal position. *Bacha bazi*, or “boy for play,” “involves men known as *bacha baz*, or “boy players” collectively exploiting, enslaving, or raping young boys in a systematic and organized fashion in war torn Afghanistan (Jones, 2017: 66).

The institution of *bacha bazi* involves procuring and sexually exploiting pre-pubescent boys by militias, strongmen, warlords and anyone with money and societal status. The phenomenon presents a system of gender reversal for the victims (Mondolch, 2013: 3). Once in the possession of these consumers, the boys are groomed to take on the role of female dancers and entertain their patron and his close associates. These dance ensembles are often preambles to sodomy and other forms of sexual violation of the boys by their patron and other clients.

This practice, steeped in history and culture, has become commonplace and institutionalized in war-torn Afghanistan. As a socio-cultural practice *bacha bazi* in the past had a much wider geographical remit. Eugene Schulyer, a nineteenth-century American scholar, writer, explorer and diplomat traveling in Central Asia was perhaps the first Westerner to introduce the topic in the West. His depiction of *bacha bazi* in the region suggests the deeply permeated institutional identity of this undertaking (Schuyler, 1877: 132-

3). A time-honoured tradition among the Khanates in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, *bacha bazi* was banned in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the region. However, in spite of the religious and state-led prohibition, it did not disappear completely. *Bacha bazi* simply became an underground activity during Soviet control of the Central Asian republics.

While this practice faced religious prohibition in neighboring Afghanistan, it nonetheless flourished in private because the rich and the powerful patronized it. Although it has a chequered history in Afghanistan, *bacha bazi* actually thrived and became a mainstream activity in the chaos and ensuing political uncertainty following the Soviet invasion of the country and in the years leading up to the rise of the Taliban, particularly among warlords and *mujahideen* fighters (Everett, 2015: 11).

Afghanistan's mujahideen warlords, who fought off the Soviet invasion and instigated a civil war in the 1980s, regularly engaged in acts of pedophilia. Keeping one or more “chai boys,” as these male conscripts are called, for personal servitude and sexual pleasure became a symbol of power and social status (Mondloch, 2013a: 13).

The practice had a brief rupture during the 1<sup>st</sup> Taliban rule (1996-2001). It is commonly agreed that the Taliban banned and publicly punished the practice when they came to power in the 1990s. While instituting nationwide *Shari'a* law, the Taliban proscribed *bacha bazi* as *haram* or illegal (Chopra, 2016). According to some Afghans, “the rape of young boys by warlords was one of the key planks in Mullah Omar’s mobilizing strategy that led to the Taliban’s ascent to power” (Reid, 2002). However, following the collapse of their regime in 2001, the hitherto underground practice of *bacha bazi* again became common in certain regions of Afghanistan and “evolved into boys being kidnapped, trafficked, and raped with any semblance to or recognition of the cultural nuances that used to embody the practice such as dancing at events or social gatherings” (Prey & Spears, 2021: 3).

During the democratic interregnum (2001-2021) the practice of *bacha bazi* had an exponential growth and enjoyed countrywide appeal and audience. Among a section of Afghans, “owning boys [underage male sexual slaves] was considered a symbol of status” (Gohir, 2010: 9). Some observers point to the fact that as many half-of-the total adult male population in the Pashtun tribal areas of southern Afghanistan pursue boys, making it clear that male-male paedophilia is a pervasive issue affecting entire rural communities (Bedi, 2021: 3). Such findings are reiterated by some other studies. According to another observer, “half the Pashtun tribal members in Kandahar and other southern towns are *bacha baz*” [ones who engages in such practice] (Jones, 2017: 72).

Similarly, several Afghans, interviewed for this study, stressed that the practice is very widespread and particularly so at the grassroots level (CM 1,3, 5, 6,11 &13). An earlier study on the subject stressed, as many as 50 percent of the men in Pashtun tribal areas of southern Afghanistan take boy lovers in the form of *bacha baz* or *chai boy* (Mondloch, 2013: 6). Similarly, on the mainstream institutionalization of the practice, another investigative report suggested, prior to the Taliban takeover of the country in 2021, some twenty percent of all Afghan weddings included a *bacha bazi* show as a spectator entertainment for the guests (see Londono, 2012).

There is no denying the fact that the two-decade long external military presence provided critical support to this practice. While the U.S. and other international forces were intimately aware of Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) and Northern Alliance co-opting a historical practice in order to traffic and sexually abuse young Afghan boys (Prey & Spears, 2021: 3), they nonetheless had to turn a blind eye to *bacha bazi* primarily to keep these

alliance partners in good humor. Thanks to these conspiring factors and actors, although there was a “blanket ban” imposed by the previous government, the practice and popularity of *bacha bazi* remained undented during that period (Nickel & Sahak, 2019).

## Literature Review

While an acknowledged practice amongst a section of the populace through the ages, *bacha bazi* has received scant discussion in academic literature. Whereas references to it has been made in recent years in the works of (Misra, 2015; Èlise, 2018) pertaining to male-male sexual violence, there exists no full-scale study on this subject. Whatever scant literature there is on *bacha bazi* it comes to us from a range of non-academic sources. Notable among these are cultural and literary references to this practice in works such as *The Kite Runner* (Hosseini, 2003). The topic has also received in-depth scrutiny in investigative reporting in the works of journalists such as Rustam Qobil’s “The sexually abused dancing boys of Afghanistan” (*BBC News* September 7, 2010); Najibullah Quraishi’s “Uncovering the world of ‘bacha bazi’” in the *The New York Times* (April 20, 2010).

British independent filmmaker Ben Anderson’s documentary, *This Is What Victory Looks Like* (*Vice Media, Inc.*, May 6, 2013), visually introduced the western audience to this “horrifying” practice. In 2017, two Americans attempted something unconventional. As one critic on the media outlet BBC put it, ‘lyricist Charlie Sohne and composer Tim Rosser created a musical *The Boy Who Danced on Air* – it was about a subject even Afghans would consider too sensitive and unsettling’ (Haidare, 2020).

Scholarship on contemporary wartime sexual violence against men is on the rise

(Gottschall, 2004; Zawati, 2007; Misra, 2015; Féron, 2018). Yet, credit must go to some US journalists and conscientious soldiers highlighting the complicity between the existing power structure in Afghanistan and the systematic sexual exploitation of vulnerable boys (Goldstein, 2015; The Editorial Board, *New York Times*, September 21, 2015). It is their intervention which led the US State Department to call *bacha bazi* a culturally sanctioned form of male-male rape. In addition, in recent years, several human rights monitoring agencies, such as United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe (UNRIC) in its report, *The Dancing Boys of Afghanistan* (2014), have contributed to the critical debate on the topic. Interestingly, the report of *Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction*, titled “Child Sexual Assault in Afghanistan: Implementation of the Leahy Laws and Reports of Assault by Afghan Security Forces” (June, 2017), has made some notable interventions in highlighting the plight of the victims.

While this study acknowledges the contributions made by these various groups of observers, it seeks to examine the phenomenon from a multidisciplinary academic perspective – something that has not been attempted before. It combines grounded contemporary inquiry involving specific deviant sexual behavior with a wide-ranging theorization of socio-sexual transformations in a post-conflict setting. The article’s stated goal is to explore the social, legal, cultural dimensions that have enabled the proliferation of the practice of *bacha bazi* in the post-2001 period.

In the main, this article makes three fundamental assertions on *bacha bazi* – often overlooked by other studies on the topic. They are as follows: First, it argues that the prevalence of near anarchical condition in a given society facilitates predatory sexual behaviors to come to the fore and assume a mainstream acceptability. Second, it evaluates the

political economy of sexualized bodies in the context of conflict and war. Third and most important of all, it interrogates the phenomenon through the experiences of three sets of actors – the victim, the perpetrator and some members of the society at large.

## **Methodology**

This is primarily a qualitative study. As is the case with most qualitative research, this research uses both primary as well as secondary sources. In terms of secondary sources, it refers to textual materials, scholarly literature and legal documents pertaining to the stated problem. The non-quantitative primary sources included in this study pertain to field notes, transcripts, and informal semi-structured and unstructured discussions with both victims and violators, as well as Afghan men from various stratum of society. The work also makes ample use of reports on the subject produced by various news outlets, policy bodies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) on the practice and prevalence of *bacha bazi* in Afghanistan. In sum, the methodological approach of this research is a combination between primary sources and qualitative elements with descriptive and explorative objectives.

Qualitative research is often about external individual behavior and human experiences (Saldana, 2011). The topic under discussion is all about individual behavior and victim experience. As such, it is both a sensitive and a challenging study. Needless to add, ethical issues play an extremely important consideration in such an undertaking. Part of the study is informed by informal semi-structured and unstructured discussions on the topic, conducted by the author over several months between 2018 and 2021. The participants of the

study were a self-selected group of individuals who volunteered to be interviewed about their experiences with *bacha bazi* falling within the realm of victim as well as perpetrator.

There were two sets of questions for the participants in this study. One for the victims and another for the perpetrators. The participants in this study include victims and violators as well as common Afghans living in diaspora in India and the UK. All together 7 victims, 9 perpetrators, and 13 community members responded to the questions raised in this study. Evidently, various accounts of victim and perpetrator experiences can be found throughout this study. All ethical principles (i.e., safeguarding the participants as well as the researcher) were strictly observed. The research followed Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC, 2015) six ethical guidelines that addresses the questions of harm (direct or indirect to the interviewee and interviewer).

Sexual violence can be a sensitive topic to research. Examination of this phenomenon can pose multifaceted problems to the researcher. Moreover, given its sensitivity, the topic can introduce the researcher and the reader to challenges not usually found when dealing with other such subject matters in social or conflict studies (Farga, 2016: 77). In a study such as this, the extent and the dynamics of this particularized violence was not possible to measure objectively without asking those involved, directly or indirectly, extremely difficult questions. Once again, I would like to stress, all participants voluntarily contributed to the discussion and their comments, experiences and afterthoughts are fully anonymized in this study. As is the case with semi-structured and unstructured interviews, informed oral consent (Miller, *et. al* 2012: 60) was obtained from the participants prior to the discussion surrounding the topic. The sensitive nature of the data and the clear need for anonymity and confidentiality has meant the use of specific coding or marker. Wherever I have used their



reflection or summation, I have applied the coding FBB (former *bacha bazi*) and P (for perpetrator). Similarly, wherever I am paraphrasing the community members' comments on the topic it is highlighted as CM (denoting community members). The numbers alongside the respondent's specific identifying marker denote that that respondents' anonymized identity.

As the keen reader would realize, this study straddles several theoretical positions while it examines and explores this subject. The research design used the existing relationship between the prevalent sexual practice among certain Afghans and the overall conflict condition that maximized the dynamics of *bacha bazi*. Moreover, since human physicality or the body is at the center of this investigation, this study examines its use and abuse from a range of theoretical perspectives stretching from anthropology to political theory and from law to religion, often specific to the conflict terrain of Afghanistan. It is only through the use of such a multidisciplinary lens, this study postulates, one succeeds in examining the nature and extent of this violence holistically.

### ***Bacha as the Sexed Body***

At the heart of the enterprise of *bacha bazi* sits the physicality of the victim. It is worth inquiring in this context the victim's core physical identity. Is the *bacha* (a) male individual; (b) female; or (c) belongs to the transgender category? All victims who were interviewed in this study identified themselves as male. This does not exclude the possibility that there may be some victims who would identify themselves as "males in a female body" or belonging to the transgender category. Since, in the overarching cultural framework of Afghanistan, the *bachas* are known to be boys belonging to male gender, this study uses the pronoun of "he" while evaluating their physical and sexual appropriation under the practice of *bacha bazi*.

Before all else, it needs to be stressed that a *bacha*'s identity emanates from a specific physical attribute. The identity that is conferred upon him is that of a sexual object. The abject condition into which the victim is forced into, begins with reference to his specific physical condition. He is acquired, procured or purchased by his future violator for his bodily violation. Consequently, it is his body that determines the overall discourse and activism surrounding *bacha bazi*. Hence, it is pertinent that we focus on ways and manners through which the victim's body is sexualized and the economic value placed on his very physicality.

All bodies are sexed. But what it means to be an object of sex, or have a particularized sexual violence forced on that given body, can shift across culture, time, and place (Cream, 1985: 33). Consequently, a sexed or sexualized body "is an outcome; an outcome of both politics, and nature, of mind and matter" (Cream, 1995: 31). A *bachha* is a sexed body. Owing to the overall conflict setting and cultural dynamic, such sexed body easily becomes available for procurement, consumption, exploitation, and distribution.

Moreover, while war and anarchy create conditions for particularized forms of sexual violence, we must stress the victim is a victim because of his specific physicality. Evidently, such outward conditions determine the fate of specific physical outcomes. As Cream underscores, there is no way a body, "can escape its social and cultural setting" (Cream, 1995: 31). Similarly, the socio-cultural milieu conspires towards perceiving physicality in a certain manner. Consequently, "the social body constrains the way the physical body is conceived and bodily experience, in turn, reinforces and mediates understanding of the social" (Fuss, 1989: 37). Hence, the *bachas*, their owners and the society at large that participates in the workings of this cultural/sexual enterprise are all products of that setting. A

*bachha*, therefore, while wholly unique, is at the same time a product of the sexual milieu and the conflict setting that he is a part of, as well as the world that he inhabits. *Bacha bazi* “peels away the masculine identity of boys in a society where sexes are tightly segregated” (Chopra, 2016).

Our bodies are units of our legitimate, social, sexual and biological truths (Cream, 1989: 40). The society or constituency that uses certain bodies to undermine those sets of original truths is in many ways undermining the primary sexual legitimacy of that body. This radical discontinuity between the original sex and gender at an early stage has important implications for the owner of that specific body.

As Féron argues, “gender is not a quality of the female body, as many approaches to sexual violence in conflict seem to suggest, instead, bodies become gendered through the repetition of acts and practices that relate to known social norms” (Féron, 2018: 5). Examined within this trajectory, a *bacha*’s body would appear to be a site of liminality. It occupies a liminal space. Its uniqueness is based on the fact that that specific body has not yet reached its full sexual identity formation. Thus, the ownership over of that liminal body allows the violator unlimited power in enacting the identity of that physicality as he so desires.

If the body is a form of physical capital, as suggested by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 2001), we find its clearest demonstration in the context of *bachha bazi*. In poverty-stricken Afghanistan, where women are forbidden to work outside the domestic milieu, making men the only breadwinners, boys often have to provide for their families from a very young age. Many are tempted by the money that being a *bacha* can give them. In their struggle to

survive, their families are often too busy to object, or even notice where the money comes from.

In rural Afghanistan, and in the ghettos of the cities where very few work opportunities for the male householder exist, the burden often falls on the young boys of the family to seek out economic resources from a very early age (CM 1, 4, 5, 8, 10). According to recent UNICEF figures, approximately 2.1 million Afghan children between ages 6 and 14 are involved in some form of child labour (Nallu, 2018: 7). In the context of political economy of destitution, Afghanistan sits at the bottom in the world poverty index.

The society forbids women from entering the public space and prevents them from earning any meaningful additional economic rewards. This often puts the burden on male members of the family as the sole breadwinner of the family. Often, boys who need to feed their families become *bachas* from as young as 12 years old. As one observer points out, in this environment of abjectness, perpetual conflict, education is seen as secondary to earning money. The miserable economic conditions force the most vulnerable to seek ways of sustenance. Little wonder, many children skip school so they can work to support their families (Gouhari, 2018).

Often times, this process is involuntary as parents (read fathers) sell their children into *bacha bazi* (to plying pimps and intermediaries). Forced into the world of *bacha bazi*, many victims silently accept it as a survival strategy (FBB 2 & 4) in the face of grinding poverty that is splaguing them and their families. While some continue in it for years, others grudgingly accept it as a temporary transitional occupation (FBB 1 & 5).

## Commodification

In war-torn Afghanistan a *bacha* is often viewed as a commodity (P 2, 4 & 7). He is a product for consumption by certain groups of individuals. There are multiple ways in which the body of an individual is “commodified” in a conflict-ridden society. In such contexts, a given body ends up receiving a specific value, a requisite role and its unique place in that conflict-mediated society. According to Bourdieu, the physical body equals physical capital. It has a commercial value. For Bourdieu, a given body is “an unfinished entity which develops in conjunction with various social forces and is integral to the maintenance of social inequalities” (See, Bourdieu, 1993). Hence, it can be commodified like any other object in the capitalist mode of production. In this section, I examine the complex sexual economic process at work, which contributes towards sustaining this practice.

Interestingly, a given body can only be commodified as a physical capital provided it is aided by three specific conditions: (a) the social location of that body; (b) habitus; and (c) taste (Bourdieu, 1993). If we were to discuss these Bourdieuan classifications in turn, this is what we come up with in this interpretation. First, the material circumstances of a society are directly linked to the commodification of the body; It is dependent on the social/physical want of the society. Second, habitus, according to Bourdieu, is the ‘worldview’ of the individual or possessor of that specific body. Put simply, it relates to how an individual sees his or her body in relation to the social world. Third, the meaning of the body and the physical capital is directly dependent on the “taste” of the society. In other words, in order for a body to be commodified it has to satisfy or fulfill a certain physical expectation of the consumers i.e., masses.

The sexual objectification and commodification of the *bacha*'s body is not solely linked to him being bought and sold by his captor. There also exist modes of indirect commodification of his body and identity. If the *bacha* is an object of material consumption, there are two sets of consumers. In the first category are the rich, the powerful and the well-connected class occupying various high positions in society. These are the direct consumers. In the second category are hundreds of thousands of "aspirational consumers/perpetrators" who would like to practice *bacha bazi* in their everyday life, but are prevented from that engagement because of financial challenges, personal circumstances and changed political environment.

That unrequited desire, however, contributes to the perpetuation of commodification of the *bacha* in a different form. Often, this constituency serves as indirect consumers of a product in a long line of supply chain. The chain begins with direct sexual abuse of boys and is then marketed in electronic form for mass consumption. What follows is a demonstration of that affordable involvement in *bacha bazi* - albeit from a distance. Prior to the Taliban's lightning takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, in the capital Kabul and other major Afghan cities, *bacha bazi* CDs and DVDs were widely on sale from street vendors, stalls and carts, "serving an audience who can't afford the real thing" (Abdul Ahad, 2009). Typically, such videos and CDs were sold in dusty marketplaces and bazars across the country (Jones, 2017: 67). All over Afghanistan, consumers who could not afford a boy for their private *bacha bazi* had to settle for videos of these events. Put simply, to a vast number of consumers of *male-male* sexual violation through such depiction, the victims constituted both as products and productions of a lived reality.

Continuing with the issue of commodification, this enterprise involves specific procurement strategies. To the practitioner of *bacha baazi* (i.e., *bacha baz*), the boy sexual slave is first and foremost a product (P 1, 4, & 5). As such, procurement of this product involves various ways and methods. Sometimes a likeable good-looking prepubescent boy is kidnapped from his family and forced into sexual slavery. Other times, he is bought by the moneyed and the powerful from poor and economically destitute parents who sell their young son for financial reasons (Gouhari, 2018; Nallu, 2018).

In rural Afghanistan, families with an “abundance of children, often provide a son to a warlord or government official – [under the practice of “chai boy” or apprentice] in order to gain familial prestige and monetary compensation - with full knowledge of transactional sexual ramifications” (Mondloch, 2013: 8). The *bacha* in this proprietorial framework is a product in the supply chain. Once inducted into the life of sexual slavery and servitude, the owner maintains complete ownership and sovereignty over him. Due to this ownership right, a *bacha* is bought, sold and bartered depending on the whims and fancies of his owner.

In parts of Afghanistan, *bachas* “are widely flaunted as a totem of affluence” (Chopra, 2016). Within the subculture of *bacha bazi*, the commodification of the *bachas* even takes a competitive turn. In a traditional conservative society such as Afghanistan, where the genders are tightly corralled, the possession of pretty young boys dressed effeminately can be a mark of social status, power and masculinity” (Chopra, 2017). Often times, the owners of these hapless victims try to outdo each other on their merchandise. Many violators (*bacha baz*) compete for boys ‘who have not seen the sun for years’, a euphemism for unblemished beauty” (Chopra, 2017). “My *bacha* is better looking and more handsome than yours”, and

“My boy is a better dancer” (Everett, 2015a). These are some of the familiar banter that go on between the owners of male sex slaves.

Curiously, some *bachas* who have gone through this process of commodification themselves do not hide their intention to perpetuate this mode of production (FBB 1, 2 & 6). Anecdotal evidence suggests that many older *bacha baz* had once been victims of this practice in their boyhood days. Hence, some of today’s victims of this violence may aspire to engage in the same practice – once they have attained adulthood and acquired enough monetary wealth and power – “repeating the same cycle of abuse” (Chopra, 2017). In view of several observers and the feedback received from the interviewees in this study, many of the prominent Pashtun men who habitually engage in *bacha bazi* were likely abused as children. Since some of the victims or *bachas* do receive power and patronage from their abusers, when they grow up and occupy powerful positions in the society or carve out a niche for themselves as strongmen or warlords, they end up perpetuating the cycle of abuse (Mondloch, 2013: 7). One study goes so far to suggest that “most of the *bachas* are going to be perpetrators in their adult lives for they lack soft skills and formal education ((Nisya, Sunarko & Trihartono, 2019: 2).

In light of this, one could argue that some victims’ decision to become a perpetrator is a conscious one. For this constituency, the desire to master the opportunity that conflict and chaos provide is not easy to suppress. Hence the admission of a *bacha* that “once [he] grows up, [he] will be an owner, and [he] will have his own boys” (Brinkley, 2010). As is the case in other conflict locations, where former victims embrace the role of perpetrators of particularized violence, with no education, no social support network, many boys become



criminals, and become *bacha baz* themselves (Everett, 2015: 12). Thus, we have come to a full circle in this commodification process.

The *bacha* is also a transitional commodity with a limited shelf-life. Within the framework of this proprietorial relationship between the violator and the victim, the *bachas* are released once they reach adulthood and grow facial hair (around 18-19 years of age). Upon attaining adulthood and their release, *bachas* can theoretically marry a woman, reclaim their status as male and begin the process of “normal” life. Similarly, if the proprietor feels that the *bacha* is not an attractive commodity for consumption anymore, he is unceremoniously dumped (Ibrahimi, 2007). Yet, release from the life of boyhood sexual slavery does not automatically guarantee them a place in the adult male world. To a large majority of victims of this practice, the commodification process can be an ongoing, unending and a lifelong one. Without a support network, they fall back into one form of sexual slavery or the other in their post-*bacha* years (FBB 1 & 3). I will return to this question of life beyond post-violation later in the discussion.

### **Male-Male Sex and Islam**

Prevalence of *bacha bazi* in deeply conservative Islamic republic of Afghanistan would appear as an anomaly. Within the religio-cultural milieu of Afghanistan, “homosexuality is not only strictly forbidden but savagely punished, even between two consenting adults” (Gohir, 2020: 9). The dominant question that arises here is how could a religiously oriented society tolerate this level of sexual depravation and permissiveness? In this section, I examine the discourse and response surrounding this practice from within the perspective of religion.

The Taliban who ruled Afghanistan between 1996-2001 and now are back in power, “executed homosexuals by lapidation, bulldozing walls to crush their bodies” (Ruthven, 2007: 77). Yet many of the leaders of the Taliban sported *bachas* both in private and in public (under the tradition of *Halekon*). Given this ambiguity, one is forced to seek answers to *male-male* intercourse elsewhere. Since Afghanistan is a deeply conservative Islamic society, perhaps, it would be interesting to see how this practice is explained within Islam.

Islam recognizes both men and women as having sexual drives and rights to sexual fulfillment. It affirms heterosexual relations within marriage and lawful concubinage. All other sexual behavior is regarded as *haram* and thus illicit (Dunne, 1998: 9). Yet, at the same time, traditionally, in Islam, there has been tolerance for male homosexuality (Whitaker, 2016: 9). Furthermore, in Islamic context existing social taboos and enforced silences relating specific sexual behavior and practices provide a space for negotiability (Dunne, 1998: 9). Consequently, in some Islamic societies, recreational homosexuality is regarded as less threatening to family values than heterosexual (especially female) infidelity (Ruthven, 2007: 77). It is this lack of restraint, one could argue, that has provided a window of opportunity to a segment of population with specific homoerotic fantasies to engage in wartime pedophilia.

What is the general Afghani male’s interpretation of homosexual behavior in this regard? As one critic has emphasized, “what is too often missed in Western analysis is that individual sex acts or behaviors do not necessarily define one’s sexual orientation in Afghanistan (Prey & Spears, 2021: 7).” One needs to draw a distinction between homosexuality as a sexual orientation and homosexual practice as a form of occasional entertainment. In general, Afghani society draws a clear distinction between a homosexual

person and homosexual act. According to this moral/biological compass, a person can commit acts of homosexuality but may not be homosexual. Thus, being openly gay or homosexual in one's sexual orientation, the said person is exposed to the wrath of the community as it proscribes such individual sexual preference. However, when it comes to the practice of homosexual acts the response of the society is rather ambiguous. Then there are ethnic and tribal norms to take into consideration. Curiously within the majority Pashtun culture (where this practice is most acute), social norms dictate that *bacha bazi* is not un-Islamic or homosexual at all — if the man does not love the boy, the sexual act is not reprehensible, and is far more ethical than defiling a woman” (Mondloch, 2013a).

What is more, those Afghani men or *bacha baz* engaged in *male-male* sex through this institution are not categorized as homosexuals. Why not? This ambiguity or better still liminality is an increasingly common phenomenon as “contemporary concept of homosexuality resists such categorizing “in favour of recognizing more complex realities of multiple and shifting positions of sexuality, identity and power (Dunne, 1998: 8).” The ever present near-anarchy and warlike condition in Afghanistan through the ages has spawned its own dynamics of sexual politics. *Bacha bazi* is primarily a sexual relationship between an older dominant male holding some form of power and authority. Within this sexual power dynamics, the dominant male is almost always the penetrator (controlling and active) and the young boy lacking autonomy and authority is the submissive and inactive party subject to penetration (Prey & Spears, 2021: 8). Curiously, despite anally penetrating other men and in particular boys, the dominant male is not viewed as a homosexual or his acts pertaining to homosexuality.

On the contrary through his act, he is seen as a virile figure - emasculating the inferior. In the end the act of male-male sexual penetration within a specific power dynamic not only demonstrates the penetrator's hyper masculinity but adds to his prowess and prestige. Consequently, far from being treated as homosexuals, those Afghani men who employ boys for their sexual gratification or those who openly cohabit with their *bachas* or toy boys escape the categorization of homosexuality and thereby avoid persecution (as it is illegal in the Afghani context).

Furthermore, one ought to bear in mind that the essentialist sexual identity that is heterosexual or homosexual is not clearly described or defined in the Afghani context. Hence, it allows a man to marry a woman, have children, and at the same time cohabit with a boy sex slave. Hence, the prevalence of the Afghani (Pashtun) saying: "a wife is for procuring children and a *bachha* is for pleasure" (Everett, (2015a; Jones 2015). A *bacha baz* is a man wedded to two physical beings. The first one is his lawful wedded wife. The second one or ones are his sexual companion(s) belonging to the same sex as him. Unsurprisingly, often times one encounters a scenario where the wife ends up accepting the boy sex slaves as part of the family (not that she has any choice in it) (Everett, 2015). Consequently, such behaviour and practices "leave normative constructions of licit and illicit sexual behavior unchallenged" (Dunne, 1998: 9).

### **A Sexual Necessity?**

Since time immemorial, some societies have viewed prostitution in a positive light (Tannahill, 1980). As a matter of expediency, many ruling authorities throughout the ages and across civilizations have viewed prostitution as "a socially useful alternative to potential male sexual violence against women in general and respectable women in particular" (Dunne,

1998: 8-9). What happens then when a society not only bars women from licit premarital sex but also bans female prostitution of any kind? The answer to that could be that some constituent members might seek alternatives to satisfy their libido within that society (Sanders, O'Neill & Pitcher, 2018). Consequently, it may end up targeting the most vulnerable and helpless members of society. Left unchecked, over time, that society may come to accept such forms of predatory sex as normal.

In a strict Islamic society such as Afghanistan, premarital sex is forbidden for women. Any lapse from this amounts to death by stoning for women. The relegation of Afghani women to the private sphere, and society's strict demand that they stay virgin until they are married off creates a sexual vacuum. Absence of women in public space has not forced a section of Afghan men to remain celibate until they are married. One could therefore argue that in Afghanistan, the absence of women in the public domain and strict rules on heterosexual relationship outside the institution of marriage is a dominant factor in pushing men to seek *male-male* sexual gratification.

Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that female social absence in interpersonal relationships has contributed to the emergence and growth of the tradition of *bacha bazi*. As one of the victims put it, "because men like women and they are not available, we act like women" (*quoted in* Abul Ahad, 2009). In view of some critics, repression of sexuality and extreme gender apartheid in this ambiguous conservative sexual space is to blame for the prevalence of *bacha bazi* (Gohir, 2010: 9). Physically and socially isolated from female companionship, some Afghan men develop alternative avenues to satiate their libido. In these contexts, having sex with boys assumes social acceptance (albeit grudgingly).

And with that, the informal recognition of the culture and practice surrounding *bacha bazi* emerges.

Furthermore, politics surrounding *bacha bazi* in contemporary Afghanistan introduces us to many other sexual paradoxes. There are clear socially imposed discriminatory attitudes when it comes to sexual commodification of male and female citizenry. Afghan society maintains high moral standards for its female members and considers their honour and position sacred. For instance, women prostituting themselves is seen as a bigger taboo *vis a vis* their male counterparts. By contrast, male child prostitution is seen less of a legal and moral problem compared to women soliciting sex for money, or female prostitution.

Consequently, society is not so steadfast when it comes to the treatment of its vulnerable male adolescent members. An example of this lowering of moral standards and legal provisions suggests that sex with a boy is ‘lesser of a sin’ compared to having sex with an unmarried woman. Thus, one could argue that society at large has not only learned to look the other way, but in some instances allowed the use of young boys as female sexual substitute. As one observer put it, “if social norms had a pecking order, violating boys would be seen as far more ethical than violating women” (Chopra, 2016).

### **Toxic masculinity**

While staying on the topic of sexual violation of vulnerable young boys in Afghanistan, one also needs to examine the behaviour of the perpetrator. While the earlier discussion highlighted why the perpetrator takes on a boy sexual slave, there is more to his behaviour than is traditionally examined. It's impossible to overstate how important Afghan view of

masculinity is in the perpetration of *bacha bazi* in the country. For all intent and purposes, a vast part of Afghanistan remains misogynistic and male-dominated. In fact, in this highly charged gender segregated society, the possession of young boys decked out as pretty women and having the culturally recognized right to sexually violate them symbolizes utmost male power and primacy.

As is the case with many underdeveloped war-torn societies, often times “masculinized power is consistently associated with those who have control over resources and who have an interest in naturalizing and perpetuating that control” (Féron, 2018: 37). That being the case, from the perspective of the perpetrator, his ability to induce sexual violence is a representation of his masculine power and a form of self-entitlement (P 2, 5 & 6). The perpetrators’ psychological repertoire operates along what one might term hegemonic or toxic masculinity. Apart from the predatory behavior, the perpetrator of this violence also demonstrates a specific socially constructed attitude that expects him not only to be violent but unemotional, and sexually aggressive. In such contexts, domination through a particular form of sexual undertaking displays and reaffirms his position in the upper echelons of male hierarchy.

The male body is one of the principal sites for the performative constructions of masculinities (Thurnell-Read, 2011: 979). Within the construct of toxic masculinity and in a conflict setting, the enterprise of sexual violence has multiple meanings. From the violator’s perspective, the ultimate objective behind this undertaking is to display, communicate, produce and maintain dominance. Such outcomes are then enjoyed for its own sake and used for ulterior ends as exploitation (Card, 1996: 11-12). Furthermore, for critics like Raywen Connell, “toxic masculinity is all about assertion of masculine privilege or men’s power. Put

in our framework of discussion, it boils down to the economically privileged, militarily powerful and politically dominant to enjoy privileges that are unlawful, but nonetheless accessible. In a perverse sort of way, it is the perpetrator's ability to exact these privileges from the society, which endears him as masculine.

If toxic masculinity is equal to marginalizing others, the informal institution of *bacha bazi* provides the violator many opportunities to express that behavior. In Afghanistan, toxic masculinity equates to a pyramid of violence – with explicit and manifest violence at the top (killing) and a very different kind of sexual violence at the bottom (keeping boys as sexual slaves). Perpetrators do a good job of occupying this hierarchical order. Moreover, if the definition of toxic masculinity is all about dominance and hegemony, the perpetrators of this form of violence seek to preserve and extend it through the enterprise of *bacha bazi*.

Similarly, male sexual violence is often a consequence of how gender norms and roles support and underpin societal relations of power (Féron, 2018: 41). As Dunne argues, “sexual relations in the Middle East [*sic* read Islamic societies] have historically articulated social hierarchies, that is, dominant and subordinate social positions: adult men on top, women, boys and slaves below” (Dunne, 1998: 8). In this configuration, the underprivileged, poverty-stricken, effeminate boys from Afghanistan's hinterlands occupy a naturally preordained ‘lower’ social position *vis a vis* the village elder, local militia, policeman, the strongman, the moneyed man and the warlord. Translated into the world of sexuality, the hapless *bacha* procured by his master is not only socioeconomically subordinate but is condemned to a dominant/subordinate sexual relationship. This naturally manifests itself in his master dictating all the sexual rules. In the sexual politics of *bacha bazi*, the master and his cohorts



are the absolutists on top, while the *bachha* is a subordinate, predestined for complying with sexual demands.

Furthermore, curiously as it has been suggested by some critics, “sex in Islamic societies is not always about mutuality between partners, but about the adult male’s achievement of power through violent sexual domination” (Dunne, 1998: 8-11). The strategic purpose of the use of sexual violence against a given constituency, then, is to manifest the militaristic masculine identity of the male perpetrator (Skjelsbaek, 2001: 217). Within the framework of toxic masculinity, in parts of Afghanistan, if you are a strongman, in order to establish your credentials as one, you not only have to sport a few *bachhas*, but you are also required to protect your sexual domain. If you fail in these twin endeavors, you risk losing your strongman masculine identity. Hence, reports of gunfights between two *bacha baz* over ownership of a *bacha* is not an uncommon occurrence in Afghanistan (Chopra, 2016).

### **The Legal Vacuum**

Wartime predatory masculinity revolves predominantly around the principles of power and aggression (Zawati, 2007: 1; Misra, 2015; Salter, 2019). Left unchecked such behaviour can become an uncontrolled practice and may come to enjoy some degree of public acceptability. In the context of Afghanistan, we encounter such behaviour assuming an unregulated, vicious, and self-perpetuating character (Misra, 2015). In *bacha bazi*, we witness government-condoned child sex slavery. In spite of the debates and legislations surrounding gender rights and protection in the erstwhile democratic Afghanistan, there was widespread exclusion of civilian males needing protection in this gender-based sexual violence. Successive Afghan governments have been reluctant to engage with the issue head on.

Former Afghan president Hamid Karzai often brushed aside the gravity of the situation. When asked if his government was going to do something about it, he famously said, “[l]et us win the war [against the Taliban] first. Then we will deal with such matters” (quoted in Jones, 2017: 71).

It is true that prior to the 2021 take-over of Afghanistan, within the Afghani legislation, “there was a set of behaviors that were clustered as harmful traditional practices — most specifically, exchanging a daughter to pay family debt, and older men forcing a boy to have sex (*bacha bazi*). What is more, the law on “pederasty,” or sex between a man and a boy, is not only unlawful but also punishable by five to 15 years in prison” (Martin, & Miriam 2014; Jones 2015). Yet, the law was rarely applied. If anything, it disadvantaged the victim in its current form. According to some victims, during this phase, the country provided virtually “no protection to *bacha bazi* survivors” (AFP, 2017).

In view of the US State Department’s 2017 report on human trafficking and human security, the measures taken by the Afghani government in tackling it is far from satisfactory (<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/271341.pdf>). Even though *bacha bazi* has been prohibited by law for over a year now, “so far there are few known examples of perpetrators being sentenced” (Nickel & Sahak, 2019: 3). While the government in Kabul criminalized *bacha bazi* and pursued numerous cases against those involved, including many militia leaders, the police, Afghan soldiers and law enforcement officials, the majority of these cases have had to be dropped. Why? Once again, the failure to prosecute perpetrators had boiled down to corruption and power play across the system.

The report went on to argue that official complicity remained a serious problem, especially in sexual exploitation. In conclusion, the report argued that “most of those who engaged in *bacha bazi*, paid bribes to, or had relationships with, law enforcement prosecutors or judges that effectively exempted them from prosecution (<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/271341.pdf>).

As of 2019, there had been “not a single prosecution for male rape – and few, if any even – in previous years” (Glinski, 2019). This has prompted some scholars to argue that “in Afghanistan, justice is a commodity that can be bought by those who happened to have more money and power than others (Nisya, Sunarko & Trihartono, 2019: 2). The uncomfortable truth that stands out is that “since *bacha bazi* is mostly practised [and defended] by those in positions of power – warlords, commanders, and politicians – it is hard to stamp it out” (Chopra, 2016). Consequently, all this amounts to “a government’s complicity in the systemic sexual enslavement of its population of children. It is an abnegation of its sovereign responsibility” (Jones, 2012: 483).

Children are entitled to protection simply by virtue of the fact that they are children (Lee-Koo, 2013: 482). Yet, in an underdeveloped society such as Afghanistan, victims of rape and assault – both male and female – are often prosecuted and punished rather than the perpetrator (Abawi, 2009). Interaction with many of these adolescent and adult male survivors (during the course of semi-structured interviews) offered a harrowing post-violence experience for the victims. They often cited police hostility, public ridicule, ostracization by the family and lack of trust when it comes to rehabilitation into the society.

“Violence is an accepted form of punishment in most households, and children get used to it,” said Najib Akhlaqi, head of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs’ child protection action network. “The children don’t just accept it, they expect it” (*quoted in* Gouhari, 2018). He said the ministry receives phone calls from concerned passersby on a regular basis. When the network dispatches police to the scene, the children often deny they are harassed, fearful that admitting it could invite more abuse later on (*See*, Gouhari, 2018). “It is a double bind situation for many of the victims.” Something that was stressed by the victims who participated in this study. As has been explicitly observed by some critics, “an Afghan kid who is sexually exploited, if he reports it, he will end up in prison. They become pariahs” (Londonño, 2012).

Society’s refusal to acknowledge the victimhood of male children rests on prevalent mores and values (Gouhari, 2018; Chopra, 2019). Very often, the violated boys do not fit into the image of a victim. The most common perception associated with this victimization is that (a) the survivors were effeminate (thus invited the violence upon themselves); and (b) they were in it for “they must have enjoyed it.” In a hyper-masculine patriarchal society, the male victims of this violence are expected to take this experience in their stride. Owing to the burden placed by society on him, the victim feels as he grows that he is going to get over this experience.

Under these circumstances, one could argue that the existing laws and culturally sanctioned social mores puts the child/victim in an extremely disadvantageous position. Alternatively, as some scholars have cynically put it, “how can we expect the law enforcement to work [in favour of victims] when it is the matter of [societal] values we are facing?” (Nisya, Sunarko, & Trihartono, 2019: 8). Put simply, the rights of the victim are

overlooked in the perceived interests of the community. Unsurprisingly, the victim grudgingly accepts it as norm. “Children grow up believing that raping boys [being raped by men] is normal” (Chopra, 2017).

### **Life beyond *bacha***

An assessment of *bacha bazi* should not be confined to only one aspect of introspection i.e. the context and culture of violation. While staying on this topic we also need to look beyond that. It is as important to focus on the plight of the young adolescent boys undergoing these nightmarish experiences as to what happens to their fate afterwards. What happens to the former *bacha*? What becomes of them once they "age out" of their prepubescent years? “What happens when these boys grow up?” (Everett, 2015: 12). Do they live out the rest of their lives in sexual slavery? Are they integrated back into society? How do they cope with their experience once they grow into adult males?

Surviving sexual violence means primarily “dealing with and overcoming the suffering induced by such violence and breaking free of the role imposed on the victim” (Féron, 2018: 94). Even when they are free from their masters, given the societal norms and the role that was once forced upon them, the victims struggle to find an alternative profession or livelihood. According to local photojournalist Barat Ali Batoor, “if you are raped or you are abused, you will not have space in society to live proudly” (Londonño, 2012). This choice between a rock and a hard place before the victim is aptly stressed by an AFP report on the issues. It argues, “in a country with little legal protection or psychosocial support, victims might be lucky to escape their abusers but not their past” (AFP, 2017). Put simply, for the victims, it is a helpless, never-ending, solitary struggle.

*Male-Male* sexual victimization greatly undermines masculinity of the victim (Misra, 2015; Féron, 2018). Many of the victims who “age out” of their adolescence and no longer appear pretty find it difficult to return to their original male sexuality (Londonño, 2012). Leaving the life of a *bacha* and the life beyond is often an arduous undertaking. Not all victims get a chance to redeem their past by becoming important persons in their post-*bacha* years (CM 3, 6, 10 & 11). The stigma of having lived as a *bacha* is hard to overcome (Abdul Ahad, 2009). These victims are often “seen as caricatures of shame and cast out of their families and fall prey to a new cycle of abuse” (AFP, 2017). Theirs is a story that “no one wants to talk about. A story shrouded in a miasma of shame” (Chopra, 2017). In curious turnaround events, these victims continue with perpetual sexual slavery for lack of any alternatives. Forced into feminization in their formative years, many find themselves nowhere to turn to but in the marketplace (Gouhari, 2018). Unsurprisingly, prostitution is often a common default option for a majority of the abused boys (Everett, 2015; AFP 2017). This is an accepted and reasonably widespread survival strategy (FBB 1, 3, 4, 6 & 7).

A good segment of the former *bachas*, do however, manage to reintegrate into the society, either by becoming soldiers for the same outfit that had enslaved and violated them in the first place, or by joining some other outfit where their past is unknown (Mondloch, 2013; Jones, 2015). Once an erstwhile victim has well and fully imbibed the status of a strongman, he begins his own private vendetta of what he had experienced in the past. In view of one critic, “many prominent Pashtun men who currently engaged in Bacha Bazi were, in all likelihood, abused as children (Bedi, 2021).” Thus begins the procurement of the *bacha* by the former *bacha* and so on. In some cases, it is, indeed, a full circle for both the victim and the perpetrator (formerly FBB 2 and now P4).

In this scheme of things, the violator often makes the victim responsible for what happened to him. The violator makes the *bacha* feel it was the latter's specific physicality, that contributed to his violation in the first place. By that definition, it was the *bacha* alone who was responsible for his subsequent sexual slavery. This form of manipulation is often accompanied by profound psychological damage (Misra, 2015). The trauma of victimisation and victimhood breeds a special kind of response among some victims.

Once a boy becomes a victim of *bacha bazi*, he is typically deranged and emotionally traumatized for life (Jones, 2017: 68). Incensed by their own failure to defend themselves, society's refusal to acknowledge their plight and the inadequacy of the legal system to punish the actual perpetrators, a limited number of *bachas* have embraced some extreme measures. Scarred by their horrific experience, some of the victims contemplated the logic of self-sacrifice to avenge their violation (FBB 3 & 5). Although not commonplace, the brief democratic interregnum in Afghanistan saw a third strategy employed by the *bachas* that is not so much a survival strategy as it had to do with revenge and redemption. For some *bachas* (forced into this sexual slavery and sexual violence), the only escape from their abject condition was to forge a secret deal with the then contenders of power – the Taliban.

Since a good majority of *bacha* owners were powerful military figures and law enforcement officers, the victims found it harder to confront them either openly or within the existing rigged judiciary. It is in this context that the Taliban s found an unusual ally in many *bachas*. It is stressed in various contexts that it is the very public nature of this abuse which led to an increase in support for the Taliban in the past (Prey & Spears, 2021: 7). Many victims, incensed by their experience, joined the ranks of the Taliban to avenge their abuse.

While this study does not glorify the rise of the Taliban style of politics in Afghanistan, there is no doubting the fact that their ascend to power had some support base from the sexually abused boys. “Liberate me and I will help you get my abuser’s head and weapons” (Chopra, 2017) is one of many such proclamations employed by the victims. Making the most of this unusual ally, the Taliban has used some victims as Trojan Horses while sending them on suicide missions to police and military posts where the victim blows up his abuser. It is too early to suggest, whether the Taliban has genuine empathy for the victims of this dreadful sexual predation. What is beyond doubt is that in Afghanistan’s ongoing vortex of violence, this is simply “a perverse kind of double victimisation of children” by Afghanistan’s warring parties throughout (Chopra, 2016; Misra 2015).”

## **Conclusion**

The predatory sexual politics of *bacha bazi* introduces the reader to some difficult and painful conclusions. Wartime sexual violence against boys in Afghanistan is not a corollary of war, but intrinsically linked to the larger cultural and conflict dynamics. In the current post-war setting, *bacha bazi* is carried out with impunity by the rich, the connected and the powerful. Different factors and actors have connived to keep this practice under cover. Inadequate legal framework, valorizations of toxic masculinity, societal double standards, twisted gender norms and poverty of victims have all contributed to the perpetuation of this abominable practice.

In spite of nearly two decade-long external involvements, archaic social traditions and deep-seated gender norms have kept much of rural Afghanistan in a medieval state of purgatory (Mondloch, 2013a; Misra, 2021). The larger society would appear to have turned a



blind eye to *bacha bazi* while treating it as residues of an ancient practice. There exists almost societal complicity in the continuation of this predatory sexual violence. It tolerates this violence by considering it as part of the overall cultural milieu. Such prevalent cultural perception has made *bacha bazi* almost mainstream in some parts of the country.

It cannot be stressed enough that the widespread subculture of pedophilia in Afghanistan constitutes one of the most egregious ongoing violations of human rights in the world (Mondloch, 2013). While there exists some legal provisions against *bacha bazi*, it is at best feeble and mostly ineffective. The violator walks unabashed and free, because of the prevalence of an unwritten culture of impunity that protects him. And, at the other end of this spectrum, by keeping a close lid on the victims' experiences, society has invalidated their stories. Disturbingly, this callous disregard towards their suffering has made them victims twice over.

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