

## KABUL LIVES

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*1 November 2007*

In April 2007 Indian photographer \*Gauri Gill\* went to Kabul, Afghanistan, with the writer \*Shuddhabrata Sengupta\*. They explored some of the many histories that are still alive in a city that has come close to total destruction.

We started with the old, exotic city, with its own street of birds – Ka Farushi – which has everything from singing Bulbuls to fighting partridges. I'm sure it looked the same a hundred years ago.

We skirted around the glittering new 'Pakistani-style' homes owned by warlords in the elite neighbourhood of Wazi Akbar Khan, where they don't like being photographed at all. Many of the Sikhs in Karte Parwan came to Kabul because they were desperate to return 'home' from India. In the 'Russian' part of town the buildings reminded us of Delhi apartment blocks built in the 1970s.

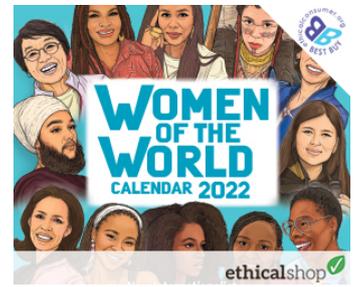
We visited Sakhi cemetery, a vast graveyard in a valley that also serves as an outdoor park. It is the most poetic graveyard I ever saw, with as many gravestones as there are homes on the hills behind it – seen from a distance the two forms echo each other. On holidays – Afghans only have Fridays off – the place is well used by people to relax, walk about, play, eat, chat, pray. In the middle I found a little weekend fair, complete with Ferris wheel and merry-go-rounds.



*The bird market in Ka Farushi Gauri Gill*



*The Shah M Alam Bookstore Gauri Gill*



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Shah M Alam Bookstore is an institution in itself. The young owner won't tell you what he thinks of *'The Bookseller of Kabul'*, but he was happy to download a lot of Afghan pop music for us on his super-fast computer. Upstairs, the older generation was seated on a carpet on the floor, drinking green tea, doing the accounts, old-style.

We saw new restaurants with their empty outdoor bar chairs. Afghans are forbidden entry to the decadent expat villa restaurants, since these places serve alcohol. Foreigners drinking wine and eating foie gras were scattered through all the rooms of *'L'atmosphère'*, a huge colonial home. From the inside it was hard to imagine the guards with their Kalashnikovs outside the high walls and ubiquitous barbed wire.

One morning we drove out to Paghman, following a bicycle race that had started at Darulaman Palace. It was sponsored by a cellphone company and had a huge enthusiastic turnout – boys and girls came from far-flung provinces to participate. We wished to avoid the more obvious images of war and the destruction of a city that looks like such a civilized paradise in old guidebooks. But it was hard. So many great old buildings, museums and libraries were simply shells. The streets were flooded with second-hand cars spewing smoke. Old mud huts ran up the hills higgledy-piggledy, lacking drinking water or any kind of sanitation.

And in Darulaman Palace Bart Simpson made an appearance.

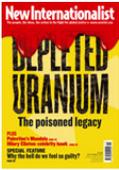
*\*Gauri Gill\** and *\*Shuddhabrata Sengupta\**



*Distributing the prizes at the end of the bicycle race in Paghman Gauri Gill*



*Graffiti in Darulaman Palace Gauri Gill*



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