

# From Dream To Reality

## —The Story of Promoting Reading and Publishing for Afghan People

Shirazuddin Siddiqi

*"I hope Afghan children will learn a lot from all Afghan Publishing House (APH) publications. I also wish APH success in continuing its activities by playing its Afghan, Islamic and national role in building a lucky Afghanistan."* by Fazal Wazir Zadran

Publishing books is not anything new in Afghanistan. But the skill of publishing books for specific target groups is not widespread. The books—mainly poetry—that represent the cultural heritage of Afghanistan and form the classical literature of the country have something for everyone. Anybody reading them will find something of interest, which in itself is the skill of a great writer. But the print revolution around the world has proved that it is no longer sufficient for people to find sporadic lines of interest in books. They would rather have the choice of the whole book on a subject that they want. I am not suggesting, in any way, that this has affected the great value of the classical treasures, but that we are living in a new world; a world in which printing and publishing have developed so much that writers and publishers have to think very hard about the market before thinking about the book. They have to identify a target group and study its interests, needs, language, etc. if they want their publishing initiative to succeed. Publishing has become a very dynamic and complex process in the developed world. However, the developing, and, in some cases, even underdeveloped, countries have also gained significant and valuable experience. One such country is Afghanistan; a country that lost most of its cultural treasures, including its libraries and books, due to more than two decades of war.

Afghanistan, once recognized as the crossroads of civilization, was invaded by the Soviets in 1979, but various aspects of the system of governing the country were influenced by the Soviet system long before. One of these aspects was publishing which, like the Soviet system, was heavily government-run. The dominance of the government in this area comes from the fact that almost any book, newspaper, magazine, etc. had to be printed on the government's printing press and clearance was needed from an authorized government body. This tight system of government control and monopoly diminished because of the war. Afghans, especially those in exile, started printing their own books, magazines, newspapers and brochures with varying print runs. Ironically, the war opened new opportunities for Afghans to take initiatives that they could not dream of before.

### The Dream

When I was a schoolboy I discovered a shelf in the very small library of my school on which there were more than a dozen storybooks in English. I used to go to the library and pick up a book every day and flick through its pages. This turned into a hobby. One day I was busy flicking through the pages of one of those storybooks when an older student came and asked if I could read it. When he learned I couldn't read English, he offered to read them to me. This incident left a very deep scar in my heart. Had the book been in Dari or Pashto, my own languages, I would have been able to read it myself. However, it awakened a dream in me: the dream of having storybooks in Dari and Pashto, Afghanistan's two main languages.



Mr. Shirazuddin Siddiqi

### Afghan Education Projects

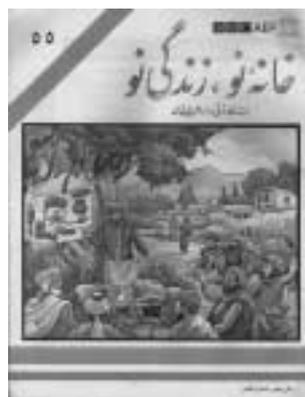
During the war years in Afghanistan, it was not only individuals who exploited the publishing opportunities which opened up when the war ended tight publishing controls, but NGOs and other organisations also started getting involved in publishing. Some of them sufficed with printing a newsletter or a brochure while others took a step further and started publishing magazines (monthly or quarterly), books, and in some cases weekly or monthly papers. One of these organizations was the Peshawar-based Afghan Education Projects (AEP), which is part of BBC World Service. I have worked with AEP since 1994 when I left Afghanistan. There I had taught drama at Kabul University and was Editor-in-Chief of the Artists' Union's main publication entitled *Honar* (art).

AEP's first activity was the production and broadcasting of an Afghan radio soap opera called *New Home, New Life*\* in Dari and Pashto. My first assignment with the project was to oversee the publishing of a magazine to accompany the popular soap opera.

The *New Home, New Life* magazine became very popular amongst its readers and amongst listeners of the *New Home, New Life* soap opera. Why?

*"Before I didn't know how to read or write. Now I have learnt enough from the magazines to write to you."* by Ibrahim Shah Saddat

It became evident that three elements played a key role in making the cartoon magazine so popular. These were: colour, pictures (illustration), and the story-telling nature of the



*New Home, New Life*  
A monthly cartoon journal based on the radio soap opera for Afghanistan from the BBC



*The Lion and The Woodcutter* (centre front row) and other APH publications in Dari and Pashto

journal. The combination of these three elements turned the magazine into very popular and interesting reading. It was thanks to this popularity that even members of the Taliban movement would come to our office to get copies. The Taliban had an official ban on the distribution of any print material with pictures and illustrations. But this Taliban-ban was not enforced on distribution of AEP's material, which was very rewarding for us. Our books offered, in a very small way, hope to their readers under a very hopeless system. This is reflected very strongly in the comments made by Fazal Wazir Zadran copied at the beginning of this article. It should be noted that the illustrations used in the magazine are not strictly cartoons but rather part-cartoon, part real illustrations.

In 1995, it occurred to me that we could add a literacy component to the magazine. This new section was called *Where There Is No School* and consisted of an illustration and a simple story from *New Home, New Life*, and an exercise page. A very simple four-step instruction is given as footnote. This simple approach did not require any teacher training but was designed for any literate who wished to help family members and friends to learn how to read and write. The success of this small, but significant, exercise triggered off a childhood dream.

The introduction of the *New Home, New Life* magazine's literacy component reminded me very much that when I was a child I didn't have anything in my own language to read. But repeatedly I was told "Afghanistan as a poor country cannot afford to have books for different age groups!"

In 1995, after I became deputy project manager, the Afghan Education Projects sent me to London for familiarization with the BBC. One day, I found myself in a bookshop in London spending long hours going through hundreds of books for children: books for young children and books for older children. Scanning through these books revived my childhood dream again. But the same reason, "Afghanistan is a poor country", tied my hands and engulfed my mind and as a result stopped me from doing anything.

It was in 1996 that UNESCO asked me to go to Bangladesh to do a feasibility study to set up a radio programme. There I saw the real face of "poverty". I failed to fix any limit to the extent of "poverty" as much as I failed to find any limit to the extent of "hospitality" of those communities with whom I happened to meet in Bangladesh. However, Bangladesh had gained a wealth of experience in publishing. I came across numerous titles of books for adults and children. Seeing those books filled me with admiration and wonder. It also filled me

with shame for doing nothing for Afghans and Afghan children.

### The First Book

On my return from Bangladesh, I managed to put together a meagrely funded package for publishing the first book for semi-literate adolescents called *When There Is Peace*. This first book helped us to learn a lot about publishing for specific target groups. Encouraged by this experience, I contacted an ex-colleague from Kabul University, *Siddiq Zhakfar*, an excellent artist, and asked whether he was interested in doing something valuable for children. Then came two other colleagues to make up our team. The first product of our efforts was an Afghan folktale called *The Lion and The Woodcutter* which was followed by many more titles. The main message of the first story, *The Lion and The Woodcutter*, was mutual understanding and being attentive to friends' feelings.

The launch of *The Lion and The Woodcutter* in 1997, marked the establishment of the Afghan Publishing House (APH), within AEP. In addition to storybooks, APH has published a number of books on specific subjects—e.g. use of natural dye in carpet weaving, improving the quality of earth bricks, Afghanistan's cultural heritage, how differences could be fostered in favour of better and peaceful life, etc.—for semi-literate adults and adolescents.

To our great disappointment, the book on the cultural heritage of Afghanistan, entitled *Know Your Country*, came off the printing press exactly on the day, in 2001, when the Taliban blew up the two giant Buddha statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan.

*"One of our neighbours did not let his daughters go to school. One day I showed him 'Ahmad Saves His Father' (a storybook by APH). It effected him so much that he allowed his daughter to attend school."* by Muhammad Anwar Ghaznavi

*"I am a regular reader of your childrens' storybooks and cartoon magazine and I have learned many things from them. For example, girls' education. My brothers are very fond of the math pages of your magazine. And now they have learned basic mathematics. Children's storybooks are fantastic. 'Ahmad Saves His Father' elaborates and shows the value of education."* by Khaliq Zada Haqani



*The Mat Weaver*

Very much in line with the spirit of the *New Home, New Life* radio soap opera, messages of peace, tolerance, co-existence, work, learning, and hope formed the bedrock principles of our publishing initiative.

One other thing which, in my view, contributed to the success of our publishing initiative, was the involvement of the target group in the development process. We took our illustrations to members of the target audience (i.e. children) and to the decision-makers (i.e. adults/parents). We were keen to make sure that their reaction and input was considered in the revisions. After a few titles were out, it went further than this: readers contributed their own stories. We then published a few stories contributed by our readers, including *Harvest Time*, *The Mat Weaver*, and *The Gold Fish*.

### For High Quality Publishing

The battle after publishing the first books was worth remembering. Quite a lot of decision-makers advised us to downgrade the quality of printing and instead increase the number of copies. Their main argument was again "Afghanistan is a poor country". The books should be "dirt cheap" but available in large numbers. But time proved that a smaller number of high quality, durable books serves more people better than large numbers of low quality ones. It was quite important to get this right from the start, as in societies where adults and parents decide for children, publishing has to be as attractive and convincing for adults as much as it should be for children. Most of the letters we received about our books came from adults. They reacted to these books very positively and, as expected, asked for copies for their children. This was how most of our books reached the children, who were our main target group.



top and bottom: Reading Scenes in Afghanistan (photos courtesy of the author)

Thus, the dream that sounded so impossible and remote became true and is no more a dream but a reality. Afghan children now have their own storybooks in their own national languages! There are strong indications that adults seek these books as much as the children themselves!

### *\*New Home, New Life*

Since its launch in April 1994, Afghanistan's first ever radio soap opera *New Home, New Life*, broadcast by the BBC three times a week in Pashto and Dari, has captivated millions of listeners. The programmes aim to teach people how to survive and cope with the practical problems of everyday life. The format is a uniquely powerful and entertaining way of putting across educational messages. People can identify with the characters and through them with the storylines. The production team depend on expert advice and audience feedback to ensure that the storylines are topical and relevant. *New Home, New Life* is set in three fictional Afghan villages and amongst its cast are characters who have returned to Afghanistan from the refugee camps. It covers topical issues and gives information people need: basic health and hygiene, how to recognise landmines, how to bring up children, advice on tending animals and growing crops. Afghans are also reminded of traditional ways of organising their affairs through the village jirga, so that local disputes can be resolved without automatically reaching for a gun.

To describe the popularity of the drama, it is sufficient to say that in one of the latest storylines, covering the emergency Loya Jirga, the UN Special Representative in Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, appeared. Mr. Brahimi played himself greeting one of the heroes and inquiring about the health of other leading characters.

### **Shirazuddin Siddiqi**

Born in 1962 in Kabul. He studied and then taught drama at Kabul University until civil war began in 1992. Later, in exile in Pakistan, he helped develop a cartoon magazine based on the Afghan radio soap opera, *New Home, New Life* for BBC Afghan Education Projects. In October 1995 he became Editor, Drama & Publications.

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