

Iran to India: Tracing A Journey

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By Kian Tajbakhsh

I first arrived in India expecting it to be a cousin, culturally and socially, to my country of birth, Iran. Although it is often claimed that the histories of the two countries are intertwined, the reality is different – the two cultures are more different than similar and where they have overlapped, the traffic has been all one-way, Iran failing to match India's ability to borrow and learn from the exchange. Iran has suffered and continues to suffer from its inability to absorb the often broader imagination, depth and variety of Indian culture and its embrace of the worlds available to us. I have come to this understanding not through intellectual study – it is the outcome of a two-decade experience of trying to find a way to tie the pieces together into a workable whole. In fact, a significant part of the last 20 years of my life has been shaped by the differences and similarities between the two cultures and my sometimes mistaken expectation of how easy it would be to carve out a space for myself between the two. I have not always been successful.

I first came to India, appropriately enough, serendipitously. That was 20 years ago, and ever since, my attachment to it has been intense, complicated, and as my friend Chandana described it once, parabolic. This felicitous phrase came to mind when, one evening in New York, we wanted to read some of Faiz's poems that were written in Urdu – I read out from the Persian-Arabic script, which I could read but not understand, she translating the words into English that she could understand, but not read. I often thought about the roundabout connections that have tied Iran, India and me together into an amalgam that has been continuously inspiring – and occasionally painful.

In 1986, when in my mid-twenties, I was living in New York and waiting to travel to Iran after many years' absence. When this plan fell through (the Iran-Iraq war was still raging and I did not get an exemption from military service) a friend suggested I go instead to India – I could work as an intern for a well-known community development organisation, and language would not be such a problem. If I couldn't get to Iran, I figured, India might be a temporary substitute. Two sets of references suggested India was going to have strong enough affinities with Iran to satisfy me. One was the apparently close historical ties between the two countries and cultures, embodied in Persian poetry and the arts, so much part of Mughal history; the other, more unconsciously, was my experience of growing up in England and the inevitable Raj-inflected self-understanding of the British, refracted back through all the fantasies and love-hate relationships of their colonial history.

Having no family or community around me then, I often identified with the most familiar, brown-skinned characters nearest to me – in books and films, and other hapless boys

from the sub-continent, sent to boarding school so far from home. And food. It would be hard to overemphasise the impact that Indian food can have on anyone from our part of the world, condemned to eat English boarding school food – for me, it was an escape, a visceral liberation, as if planting the seeds of an alternative identity imported from India.

All this led to my going to Delhi. Mercifully, I knew nothing about yoga or gurus and had missed the hippie generation's psychedelic fascination with the East. My assignment involved travelling the length and breadth of the country by train, visiting many places, meeting many people – a story I will have to leave for another time.

Several years later in New York, I met a Shia Muslim and followed her back to Delhi, where we married and lived for almost two years. Many Indian Shias looked to Iran as an important cultural reference – ironically, reinvigorated by the very same force, the 1979 revolution, that was keeping me out of Iran and that had pushed me to India. This liaison did not last; and over the years, I have tried, and mostly failed, to reach other embodiments of the wish that had been engendered in me. Still, I loved Delhi then and still do.

But from the very first trip, I realised that the country, notwithstanding the great diversity within it, was entirely different from what I had expected. Now, after living in Iran for several years, I see a civilisational break somewhere on the eastern border of Iran, separating the Indian subcontinent and the Iranian-Central Asian worlds, more or less running across Afghanistan and Pakistan. To cross over it, into the sub-continent, is to move into a different aesthetic, philosophical and cultural environment (although this is sadly attenuated in Pakistan). The way the senses are understood and responded to – through colour, sound, taste, the understanding of the body, of the sexes, of beauty, of the meaning and representation of metaphysical variety and unity, of hospitality and formality – all these are utterly different in the two worlds. I have a handsome statue of Ardhanarishvara on a mantelpiece in my house in Tehran, but it's very hard to explain to people here why I like it and what is of significance in it. It can't all be traced to the dominance of Islam in Iran although I think it has a lot to do with it.

Today, Iran is repeating its dismal performance of the 16th century, when it went through an Islamic Shia revival, fanatical and orthodox, hurling its best poets, painters, architects and musicians into the embrace of the Mughal court, where they were absorbed with indigenous artists to create the beauties of the Mughal period. But there was no reverse movement or influence. Akbar wrote to the Persian Safavid Shah Tahmasp, suggesting greater tolerance of dissenting views – he was rebuked. Who knows what the result might have been had there been more reverse traffic?

But there hasn't been. So I'll settle for coming to India as often as possible!