

Indo-Iranian Cultural Relations Since 1947

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Introduction

From times immemorial the Orient has been the cradle of civilization. Amongst all other Oriental countries Iran and India stand first and foremost in their contributions to world culture. These two nations have been the torch-bearers of knowledge, the fore-runners of a fine civilization. The relations between India and Iran have been a continuous historical process from the dawn of history which has unfolded itself through an alternate phase of harmony and conflict and has percolated down to our times. It is no small matter that during all these centuries, the people of these two countries have shared racial affinities, the spiritual qualities, identical intellectual pursuits, traditional values, common literary heritage which constitute the inseparable bonds of fellowship, friendship and understanding between them.

Few people have been more closely related in origin and throughout history than the people of Iran and the people of India. The exchange of ideas, philosophies, customs, manners and wisdom between Iran and India was very common from ancient times which can be gleaned from various religious texts, such as ZendAvesta of the Zoroastrians and the Vedas of the Indians. However historicity of relations between Iran and India goes back to the period of the Achaeminian Empire established by Cyrus in the 5th century B.C. which also included a part of north-western part of India.

The advent of post-Islamic Iranian cultural influence in India has been the greatest and the most fruitful event in the long and eventful history of the land. From the time of the Mughals in India, it was a happy blend of Indo-Iranian elements in arts and sciences, architecture and town-planning, music and painting, language and literature, army and administration, crafts and customs, poetry and prose, that gave rise in Medieval India to one of the glorious civilization the world had ever seen.

Here I would like to have a brief survey of the Indo-Iranian relations since 1947 when India became independent and will mainly focus on the last quarter of the twentieth century. While the traditional relationship has continued to provide an incentive for the development of Indo-Iranian relations, it is also important to understand that our bilateral ties in the recent times have been largely determined by the new and complex system of

international relations which emerged during the so-called Cold-War period. It is, in fact, the new international and regional environment in the post-Cold-War period which is again prompting the leadership in our two countries that a fresh look on the existing pattern of bilateral relationship should be taken to give a new orientation to it.

Political Scenario since 1947

The partition of India in 1947 and formation of Pakistan resulted in the loss of India's age old territorial contiguity with Iran but also distanced the two countries politically. Iran was drawn to the west sponsored Baghdad Pact as Iran felt threatened by the Soviet Union on account of latter's support to Gilan in 1920 and occupation of Azerbaijan in 1946. The Azerbaijan crisis weighted heavily on the psyche of the Iranian people.

In the fifties of the twentieth century, India championed the cause of Non-Alignment Movement but Iran was drawn to the West. The Iran did try to allay the misapprehensions in the mind of the Indian leadership on account of Iran's alignment with the West, which the ruler explained was out of his fear of destabilization by the Soviet Union. He also tried to reassure Indian leadership during his visit to India that Iran's closeness to Pakistan was not at the cost of friendship with India. Yet despite all the diplomatic cordiality and courtesy the state of bilateral relations remained cool and cordial.

The sixties witnessed Iran's growing disenchantment with the United States of America which was unwilling to help Iran in case of threat to its security from sources other than the Soviets. Washington's favoured treatment of Turkey and Pakistan in the matter of supply of sophisticated military hardware rankered in the eyes of Iran and also caused disillusionment in Tehran. Iran responded to this attitude of Americans by evolving a new foreign policy posture and started moving in the direction of a new regional grouping – Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) – and opening up to the Soviet Union and its East European Allies.

It did produce a favourable impact in Indo-Iranian relations for the time being. India reciprocated through President Radhakrishnan's visit to Tehran in May 1963.

In the early Seventies the understanding between India and Iran was jolted on account of third Indo-Pakistan War in 1971. The post-1971 period saw a significant shift in the balance of power in the South Asian region which Tehran was compelled to take note of especially in view of Iran's aspiration to emerge as the preeminent power in the Persian Gulf area. It was, however, the economic factor which began to influence the Indo-Iranian relations in a big way. India was in need of foreign investment for her massive industrialization programme and looked to the oil-rich West Asian countries including

Iran to provide. India had a surplus of skilled manpower which she offered these countries including Iran in order to earn foreign exchange. This promoted a complementarity of interest as Iran had set for herself goal of industrialization. The sharp increase in oil prices in 1973 increased the importance of Iran for India as source of assured oil supplies on favourable terms. The decade of the seventies witnessed a remarkable growth of economic cooperation between India and Iran. By 1974 India's export doubled. This Economic cooperation further cemented the bilateral relations.

In 1979 the overthrow of the Shah and the emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini were viewed in India as a positive development.

Former Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's visit to Tehran in 1993 was a turning point in reviving relations. In 1995, President Rafsanjani of Iran came on a visit to India and expressed Iran's desire to involve India in finding a solution to the crisis in Afghanistan and leading support to the new geopolitical relation emanating in the region following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Considerable headway was made for political stability in the region and there was a thaw in the cultural and literary relations which gradually started progressing.

It was, however, the election of Mohammad Khatami as President of Iran in 1997 that a more favourable climate was created for the development of Iran's relation with India particularly in economic, social and cultural spheres.

At the Republic Day celebrations of India on 26th January, 2003 in Delhi, the Chief Guest was the President of Iran Mohammad Khatami. The President of Iran was accompanied by the Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi who echoed his sentiments in the following words; "Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Zoroastrians and the people of other religion are flowers of the same golden garden. All Indians should walk like brothers, brothers in arms, on the path of progress. All Indians and Iranians should walk like brothers on the path of progress." (The Hindu, dated 20.01.2003). Since then Cultural relations have progressed with amazing rapidity and, it must be said, have continued to progress at the same pace even under other Presidents.

Literary and Cultural Activities

Persian Literature has always enjoyed universal popularity and esteem. In India Persian has been official language of this sub-continent. Cultural ties between India and Iran have been very strong from the ancient times and remained active until the advent of the British rule in India in the eighteenth century.

After India's independence in 1947, an attempt was made by the leaders of India and Iran to restore and reinforce the traditional literary and cultural bonds. In 1954, a cultural delegation led by Dr. Ali Asghar Hekmat, a great lover of India and her culture, which also included Professor Pour-i-Dawood, a poet-litterateur, and others came from Iran and toured India in order to promote cultural ties between the two countries. Indian delegations headed by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Dr. Zakir Husain reciprocated the visits. The visit of Prime Minister of India Pandit Jawharlal Nehru in 1959, President S. Radhakrishnan in 1963, President V.V. Giri in 1967, Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1974 and President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed in 1976 to Iran placed Indo-Iranian Relations on firm footing. All the leaders recounted and greatly emphasized our age-old connections.

In his address at Tehran in 1963, the President of India Dr. S. Radhakrishnan echoed the Indians sentiments thus: "The connections are not even ancient, they are modern. If you look into our art, architecture, music, painting and calligraphy, you will see the profound influence that Iran has exercised on us. We have an Indo-Iranian language, Urdu which is spoken in many parts of our country. And we have many universities where Persian is taught as a classical language".

By these visits and expression of good will gestures, the traditional Indo-Iranian cultural ties of intellectual and spiritual intimacy were greatly strengthened by a continuous exchange of artists and men of learning. It was because of the sincere efforts of Dr. A.A. Hekmat that the Departments of Hindi and Sanskrit were established in the Tehran University. It was also at the initiative of Dr. Hekmat that a considerable number of Indian students and teachers went to Tehran and got their Doctorates in Persian language and literature from there.

Subsequently Ambassadors from Iran to Delhi took keen interest to ensure that Indian scholars of Persian were provided great facilities for making trips to Iran for attending Seminars and Conferences and mixing with common Iranians. It was felt that these close cultural, psychological and historical ties will pave the way for progress and prosperity for both India and Iran.

Modern Persian Literature of Iran

What existed in Persian literature until the beginning of the 20th century underwent a sea change. The poets descended from their idealistic ivory towers to the grass-root level and began to grapple with the problems of day-to-day life, divorcing stilted and turgid style of language and adopted simple, natural and fluent language with minimal of Arabic words.

In prose also the wearisome monotony in subject, treatment and language gave place to much-needed variety and vivacity: artificiality and exaggeration now yielded ground to naturalness and rationality. Poetry and prose were brought into contact with practical life, forsaking idealistic romance for realism. Thoughts were no longer dominated by the tyranny of high sounding words, but, they were rather made to correspond with thoughts and thoughts were finally freed from the bondage of frothy and ineffective expressions.

Modern Persian poetry became overwhelmingly absorbed in politics and patriotism; the longing for the beloved is replaced by love of the motherland. It has become out of the domains of the kings and the court-circles and has made the general public interested in literature. Iranian poets no longer turned to the kings, or their courtiers, or even to the ruling elite, but to the people at large for patronage. Iranian literature is now infused with great vigour and vivacity and has a great novelty which it did not witness in the preceding years. Iran's contact with the West, and Iranians' exposure to the Western literatures, in a way, has helped them to bring about a prodigious intellectual awakening in the country. It is well-known that poetry works greater miracles than prose in firing a nation with the passion for sacrifice, and this is precisely what the modern poets have done to preserve the independence and glory of Iran.

A brief account is given here how thoroughly modern Persian poetry has succeeded in stimulating the national enthusiasm for preservation of freedom. The grief of the Iranians at the destruction of their country, caused by the worthlessness of the Qajar rulers and the exploitation and undue interference of Britain and Russia in their affairs, in unmistakably reflected in their literature. The Iranian poets, and even prose writers were keen on ending their political and economical servitude to European nations and were equally keen to bring about social, political and religious reforms in the country.

Agha Pour-i-Dawood is one of the greatest modern patriot-poets of Iran and the brilliance of his verses is due mainly to his love for the motherland. He is highly critical of the Qajar kings, who were not of Iranian origin, and deplores their actions in no uncertain terms. He decries against the Russians who were held responsible for the ruin of Iran. He also observes that patriotism is the religion of modern Iranian youth, and says:

“Some worship the earth and some worship the Almighty, some adore the patent objects and some the latent essence; but, it you ask of the faith of Pour-i-Dawood, be it known that the modern Iranian youth idolizes the motherland.”

Pour-i-Dawood maintains that the brilliance of his verses is due chiefly to his love for the motherland. He says:

“Pour-i-Dawood has kindled in his heart the love for Iran;
that is why sparks of fire are emitted from his spirited poems.”

Poet Iraj Mirza, who was of princely descent, excels in realism. His poems have a peculiar sense of humour which are extremely popular with the people. Similarly, poet Arif devoted his genius largely to politics and patriotism. He suffered considerably for his outspokenness and very liberal views which were not liked by the then rulers.

Among all the modern poets of Iran, it is quite obvious that they care for purity of language and banish Arabic words as far as possible; which is in itself a clear indication of their patriotism. Agha Pour-i-Dawood, Hadi and Ayati have been very keen on purity of language and have tried to compose verses unadulterated with Arabic words. So much so, in 1936, Professor Sayeed Nafisee of the Tehran university published Persian-French and French-Persian lexicons of pure Persian words. Iraj Mirza is accredited with having used maximum French words in Persian. Nonetheless, many Western words of French and English origin, have also inundated Persian language as a matter of necessity. Dr. M. Ishaque, in *Modern Persian Poetry*, has given a long list of such words.

Other fundamental changes noticed relate to the ideas, subjects and style of modern literature which are quite consistent with the contemporary scenario and social reform being carried out in Iran where antiquated sluggish conservatism and outmoded ideas and imageries are being replaced by advanced and progressive ideas and views relevant to the present-day life.

When all is said, one cannot refrain mentioning, in spite of its modernity and greatness, modern Persian literature of Iran, as pointed out by Dr. M Ishaque in his monumental work, has not given us a Firdausi, or a Sa'di, or a Hafiz. Yet it cannot also be denied that the Persian literature of the present day is of reform, progress, culture and enlightenment and has proved its worth to occupy an honoured position in the literatures of the World.

Persian Language and Literature in 19th and 20th Centuries in India

In spite of political convulsions and economic retrogression under the British rule in India from 1757 to 1859 A.D. the period witnessed a remarkable outburst of intellectual activity in India and a radical transformation in her social and religious ideas. The impetus to these changes came from the introduction of English education, through the channel of which came the liberal ideas of the West which stirred the people and roused them from the slumber of ages. Reason and good judgement took the place of faith and blind belief; age-old superstition yielded to scientific development; immobility and inertia were replaced by progressive activity and thought; and new conceptions of

morality and religion remodeled the orthodox beliefs and habits. This change, initially, affected only a small group of enlightened persons but, slowly and gradually, the ideas spread among larger sections of the people and their influence penetrated even to the masses.

All the intellectuals of the nineteenth century in Northern India were well versed in Persian and, even in Bengal the intelligentsia knew Persian well, such as, Maharishi Debendranath Tagore, the father of RabindraNath Tagore, and Sri Vishvanath Dutta, the father of Swami Vivekananda, were quite proficient in Persian and took great delight in reciting to their families the poems of Persian poets Sa'di and Hafiz.

Until the beginning of the twentieth century A.D., there have been legions of Persian poets and prose writers in India, who composed ghazals, quasidas and nazams in Persian poetry, and qissas, ha kayats and historiography in Persian literature, which was quite common in India then, and have written in that style.

As a sequel to the exchange of early visits by the leaders of Iran and India, Culture Houses were established in India in order to promote an understanding of Modern Iran and to create and sustain among Indians a continuing interests in Iran and her affairs by Cultural exchanges, sponsoring visits of scholars and academicians, exhibitions of Arts and Handicrafts, books, visits of artists and holding of film festivals.

Basically, the Iran Culture Houses are comprehensive institutions designed to promote an understanding of modern Iran and to create and sustain interest in cultural activities pertaining to Iran.

Translations of Books

In the twentieth century many books were translated from Persian to Indian languages in post-independence era and Indian treatises into Persian. In this respect, lead was taken by Dr. Ali Asghar Hekmat, diplomat a poet-litterateur, who was Iran's Ambassador to India for a number of years. He rendered exemplary service in bringing the two countries culturally closer to each other. He himself wrote a number of books and poems about India. He translated "*Shakuntalam*" of Kalidasa into Persian prose and verse. His "*Sar-Zamin-i-Hind*" and "*Naqsh-i-Parsi Bar Ahjar-i-Hind*" in Persian acquainted Iranians with the Indians and their love for the Persian language. The cultural agreement signed by him and MaulanaAbulKalam Azad, the then Minister of Education, Government of India, paved the way for permanent cultural relations between the two countries. Teachers and students were exchanged and it is a matter of gratification that many Indian teachers and

students have got their doctorates in Persian literature from Iran and many of them are now disseminating Persian language, literature and culture in India.

To cite an example, it was in 1958, through the good offices of Dr. Ali Asghar Hekmat, Iranian Ambassador to India, who had developed a great friendship and had come to like Mr. Hira Lal Chopra for his poetic talent in Persian and his Government to visit Iran and deliver lectures in the University of Tehran. He went to Tehran towards the end of 1958. He delivered lectures on Indo-Iranian relations and cultural ties. He had God-given gift of composing, spontaneously, poetry in Persian and he recited his poetic compositions in Persian to the delight of his listeners. With his traditional Indian attire of *Achkan* and *Churidar*, so completely did he capture the imagination of the people of Tehran that wherever he went he was greeted and accepted as the embodiment of India and he became a roving ambassador of India in Tehran. He learnt to speak fluently in modern Persian. He used to converse like an Iranian and, therefore, was much sought after by the Iranian intellectuals, university teachers and students.

While at the Tehran University, Mr. Chopra decided to do Doctorate in Literature and submitted a thesis on Shrimad Bhagvad Gita with an exhaustive commentary in Persian and, perhaps, in the shortest possible time, the Tehran University awarded him the Degree of Doctor of Literature.

Under the guidance of the late Dr. Tara Chand, an eminent educationist and Indian envoy to Iran, Dara Shikoh's Persian translation of *Fifty Upanishads* and a booklet written by him on the proximity of Islamic philosophy with Hindu philosophy were published. Dr. M.T. Moqtadari translated Tagore's "*Gitanjali*" into Persian. Dr. G.L. Tikko translated some of the poems of Tagore into Persian. The Indian Council of Cultural Relations brought out a Persian translation by Dara Shikoh of the *Bhagvad Gita*, which is edited by Maulana Ajmal Khan and Kamgar Parsi, and "*Vikramorvashya*" by Dr. Sayed Amir Hassan Abidi. Professor Mehreen Shushtari, the celebrated author of "*The Outline of Islamic Culture*", out "*Dastan-i-Krishna*", a prose translation of Shrimad Bhagvad Gita, which has again been reprinted with exhaustive notes under the title of "*Naghma-i-Eizadi*".

Iran Society, Kolkatta

Apart from official level contacts between India and Iran, some cultural and academic societies in India have been rendering services in promoting Persian language and literature and building bridges of fellowship, and understanding. The foremost among them has been the sixty year old Iran Society of Kolkatta founded by Dr. Mohammad

Ishaque, a renowned scholar of Persian. The Society was founded in 1944 with the object of promotion of the study of Persian language and literature, history and philosophy, art and sciences pertaining to Iran, and for the maintenance of a centre of intellectual collaboration and cultural understanding between India and Iran.

The Society is regularly holding lectures by eminent scholars on Persian language and literature and on different aspects of history of Iran. It has to its credit a number of high standard works published on Iranian studies. It has a library well-stocked with books on Persian language and history of Iran which is extensively used by research scholars.

The crowning glory of the Society is the publication of bilingual English–Persian quarterly literary journal, the *Indo-Iranica*, which adorns the shelves of almost all the libraries of the universities in India and is broad engaged in promoting Iranian studies and culture. Special issues published on Al-Beiruni, Avicenna, Omar Khayyam, Maulana Rumi, Hafiz Shirazi, Mulla Sadra, Amir Khusrow, Allama Iqbal and other Persian litterateurs merit particular attention of the scholars and lovers of Persian language and literature.

The Society is like an oasis in Eastern India where seekers after Iranology can come and quench their thirst.

Many Ambassadors and other dignitaries from Iran have regularly visited the Iran Society and have admired the good work the Society is doing to promote literary and cultural activities and acting as a centre of intellectual collaboration and cultural understanding between India and Iran.

It was in Iran Society that on April 8, 1994, Dr. Seyed Mohammad Khatami, then Advisor to His Excellency the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Chairman of the Islamic Library of Iran, paid a visit to the Iran Society. In an eloquent speech, Dr. Khatami expressed his profound satisfaction and praise of the services of Iran Society towards the furtherance of literary and cultural link between the two great countries – India and Iran – and assured of his cooperation to the Society in promoting Persian Language and Literature.

I had the occasion to visit Iran to attend the *Shishmin-Majma 'Bainul-Milli Ustadaan Zaban-O-Adabiyat Farsi* (Sixth International Congress of Teachers of Persian Language and Literature) which was held in Tehran in January 2009 in commemoration of the 30th Anniversary of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. The discussions held there were thought-provoking. Altogether it was a wonderful and memorable experience.

It is through efforts such as these, I am confident, that Persian language and literature can be further promoted.

Conclusion

From 1997 Iran has once again opened its doors to Indian students for whom it has sponsored scholarships for M.A. and Ph. D. level studies as part of a joint Indo-Iran effort to popularize Persian language and literature.

Persian is not just a language of a nation or a region, but there is something more to it. From the medieval period, particularly in India, Persian is the symbol of common culture and scientific bonds between our two civilizations. Being the custodians of this language its spread and understanding would benefit both Iran and India as India has been one of the main centres and repositories in the past for learning and dissemination of Persian language and literature so much so that one of the styles of Persian poetry is called Indian Style.

The perspective of development in Indo-Iranian cultural relation has a tremendous potential in ushering in a new era of Persian language and literature and over-all cultural activities which will foster stronger bilateral ties between India and Iran in the future.

I conclude with the following words of Mallek-us-Shoara Bahar from his poem *Salam-i-Bahar ba Hind* :

Eternal has been our friendship,
A friend knows the voice of a friend;
India and Iran have been mutual friends,
Tho' not of the same complexion, of the same origin are they
The land of India shares the charms of Eden,
So the colour of wheat is manifest on every face.

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