

Cross Cultural Relation between India and Iran

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In this article, the main focus will be on the cross-cultural relation between India and Iran. Further, the efforts taken by Aligarh Muslim University in strengthening the cultural and academic relation between India and Iran and how the Persian language helped in promoting Indo-Iran Relation. The relation between India and Iran is boundless. I have tried to capture how the cultural, political, religious, economic, and linguistic relations had bridged the gap and brought the two great nations closer and connected.

1. Introduction

Studying the relationship between the two Countries of India and Iran is thought-provoking and it helps us to look to the past for understanding and increase our knowledge. The first thing that allure while studying the relation between the two nations is the saying of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru who wrote in his book *Discovery of India*¹ ***“Among the many people and races who have come in contact with Indians and influenced India's life and culture, the oldest and most persistent have been the Iranians”.***

“I used to dream of a Persia where bulbuls made love to the roses, where in dreamland gardens poets sat around their wine cups and invoked visions of ineffable meanings. But now that I have come to your country my dream has been formed into a concrete image that finds its permanent place in the inner chamber of my experience ... I have visited Sa'di's tomb; I have sat beside the resting place of Hafiz and intimately felt his touch in the glimmering green of your woodlands, in blossoming roses. The past age of Persia lent the old world perfume of its own sunny hours of spring to the morning of that day and the silent voice of your ancient poet filled the silence in the heart of the poet of Modern India.”

2. They share a common origin

The Pre-Aryan and Aryan period is the earliest phase of The Indo-Iranian relationship which could be traced back to the tribal phase. The archaeological evidence also indicated the Indo-Iranian connection during the Age of Harappan civilization. The Harappan people are believed to have imported silver, copper, turquoise and lapis lazuli from Persia and Afghanistan.ⁱⁱ Iran supplied silver, gold, lead, zinc, turquoise to ancient India. Ivory was imported from India.ⁱⁱⁱ The relationship continued in the Vedic phase also. Moving further the founder of the Achaemenian dynasty in Persia was Hakhamanis. During the Achaemenian period, some parts of northwest India came under the Persian Rule Emperor Cyrus (550 – 529 B.C.).^{iv} Achaemenian art and architecture had a significant influence on India. After the fall of Achaemenid period and towards the end of 1st century BC, a line of kings with Iranian names, usually known as Pahlavas, gained the brief suzerainty of North West India. According to legend, St. Thomas brought Christianity to the kingdom of one of these rulers – Gondophares^v. The Sassanian period in Persia (226-651 AD) coincided with the Gupta period (308-651 AD) in India. The name of Pulakesin, the ruler of the Deccan, was known in Persia. It was usual to exchange Embassies between Persia and India. **One of the murals in Ajanta caves near Mumbai depicts a Hindu king with men in Sassanian dress.**^{vi} Indian peacock, dragons, cocks and spiral creeper adorn Sassanian monuments.^{vii}

3. Language not a barrier

Language is the foundation for communication, exchange of ideas & thoughts. It connects people more when they learn some words are surprisingly similar. The same has happened with Persian and Sanskrit. The ancient Iranian language of Avesta has numerous words in common with Sanskrit. The Persian word KHUDA goes back to Avesta Hvada, which is svadha in Sanskrit (inherent power). The Avesticbara survives in the name of Baghdad and it is Sanskrit bhaga or better known bhagavan).^{viii} In India, the Persian influence is seen in the Hindi. The common man uses many Persian words which have become a part of the daily language. The common Persian words used in Hindi and Urdu are chaddar, chera, dil, khoob and kharab zaroori and zameen etc.

Therefore, many scholars and researchers are passionate about learning Sanskrit and Persian. As mentioned by Prof (Late) Syed Amir Hasan Abidi in one of his articles titled Indian Elements in Indo-Persian Literature “Mullah Sheikh Sadullah (Masih) (Jahangir’s period) translated the Ramayana into Persian after studying Sanskrit literature for 12 years in Banaras during Jahangir’s time. Some of the lines of Ramayana of Masih have

been highly appreciated and quoted by men of literary taste. In one of the couplet in praise of Sita's Purity is considered to be the best in the whole mathnawi:

Tanash ra pairahan 'U' ryan na didah

Chu Jan andar tanu tanu na didah.

Her nakedness was not revealed even to her garments;

For she was in her robes like an unseen soul in a body.

Another couplet portrays Sita's disappearance into the earth:

Gareban-e- Zamin shud nagahān chak

Dar amad hamchu jan dar qalbe khak

Suddenly the earth gaped

And as a soul enters the body, she was taken in^{ix}

Several Hindu and Jain religious and philosophical texts from Sanskrit and Prakrit were translated into Persian. These include the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Upanishads, Bhagavata Gita, Nalopakhyaṇa (Nala and Damayanti), Bhagavata Purana, Vishnu Purana, Siva Purana, Skandha Purana, Vayu Purana, Brahmanda Purana, Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Harivamsa, Atharva Veda, Yoga Vashishtha, Sankara Bhasya, Atma Vilasa, Amrita Kunda, Prabodhacandodaya, Vajra Mahatmya.^x There are 24 different translations of Ramayana and 8 different versions of the Bhagavat Gita, 11 of Bhagwat Puran and 6 of Mahabharat in Persian language written by Hindu and Muslim scholars.^{xi}

4. Religion the binding force

Religion is one of the binding force between the people of two countries. In the 11th century AD, Islam came to India from the side of Persia through Sultan Mohammad Ghaznavi. The subsequent influence of Islam when it reached India had a rich Persian influence. Some new ideas like the Shi'a movement took shape in Islam. Islam became the common element that linked the Persian and Indian elites. Ghaznavi brought along a number of poets, artisans and religious persons who settled down in India.^{xii}

After Islam took over Persia, Zoroastrianism all but disappeared from Persia. The followers of the religion fled Persia and took refuge in Western India enriching the cultural and social life of India. They are today known as Parsis. The Parsis began arriving in India from around A.D. 636. Their first permanent settlements were at Sanjan,

100 miles north of Bombay. They are believed to have built a big fire temple at Sanjan in A.D. 790 with the fire which they had brought from Iran with them.^{xiii}

The hymn of Gayatri resembles the Gatha of the ancient Iranians. The vedic ritual of Agni and the Avestic ritual of Atar were similar. The Hindu Gods and Goddesses like Indra and Bhadrīka resemble Ahura Mazda and Mithra.^{xiv} During the Vedic period, gods were divided into two classes the devas and the asuras (In Iranian daevas and ahuras). **In India devas came to be more powerful** than the asuras and the latter word eventually took on the meaning of a demon. **In Iran the reverse took place** and the daevas were denounced as demons by Zoroaster. They still survive as such in the divers of Persian folklore, especially though Ferdowsi's epic Shah Nameh).^{xv}

Zoroastrian priests who spread the worship of fire and Sun and erected temples at Taxila and Multan.^{xvi}

To this day, there are close similarities in the Persian festival of Nowruz (Iranian New Year) also celebrated by Parsis in India and Holi as both are centered towards fire.

5. Political and Economic connection

The ancestors of the Supreme Leader of the Iranian Revolution Late Imam Khomeini had migrated from their original home in Nishapur to the Lucknow region of northern India towards the end of the 18th century. They settled in the town of Kintur. Imam Khomeini's grandfather Sayyid Ahmad left Lucknow in the middle of 19th century on pilgrimage to the tomb of Hazrat Ali in Najaf, Iraq. Although he stayed back and settled in the town of Khumayn in Iran, he continued to be known as “Hindi”. Even Imam Khomeini used “Hindi” as pen name in some of his ghazals.^{xvii}

India and Iran signed a friendship treaty on March 15, 1950. In addition to the Embassy in Tehran, India has two Consulates in Iran, one in Bandar Abbas and other in Zahedan. Before the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Shah of Iran visited India twice (March 1956 and February 1978) and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited Iran in 1963. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Prime Minister Morarji Desai visited Iran in April 1974 and June 1977 respectively. After the Iranian Revolution, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited Iran in 1993 and President Rafsanjani paid a visit to India in 1995. Indian Vice President Shri K. R. Narayanan visited Iran in October 1996. President Mohammad Khatami visited India from January 24-28, 2003 as the Chief Guest at the Republic Day parade. Both sides signed “**The New Delhi Declaration**” which set forth the vision of strategic partnership between India and Iran. Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh visited Iran to attend the 16th Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit held in Tehran

from August 28-31, 2012. Prime Minister met Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad.^{xviii}

The first tripartite meeting of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of India was held on September 11, 2018 at the Deputy Foreign Minister level in Kabul, Afghanistan. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan Hekmat Khalil Karzai represented Afghanistan, whereas, the Indian and Iranian delegations were led by Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale and Deputy Foreign Minister Dr. Abbas Araghchi, respectively. The meeting focused on consolidating economic cooperation, including Chabahar, as well as enhancing cooperation on counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, and continuing support to the peace and reconciliation process that is led and owned by Afghanistan. During the visit of President Rouhani to India in February 2018, MoU on Cooperation in the field of Traditional Systems of Medicine and a MoU on Cooperation in the field of Health and Medicine was signed.^{xix}

The 2018 International Day of Yoga was organized in the Indian Embassy School (Kendriya Vidyalaya) in Tehran. To commemorate the 150th Birth Anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi (from October 2018 to October 2019), a series of events were organized.

6. Trade and Commerce

During the prehistoric time there was **trade between the coast of southern Iran and India** through the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. The Harappan people are believed to have imported silver, copper, turquoise and lapis lazuli from Persia and Afghanistan.^{xx} Iran supplied silver, gold, lead, zinc, turquoise to ancient India. Ivory was imported from India.^{xxi}

Trade expanded mainly because Achaemenians introduced coinage, which facilitated exchange. India exported spices, black pepper and imported gold and silver coins from Iran.^{xxii} The grape, introduced from Persia with the almond and walnut, was cultivated in the western Himalayas.^{xxiii} One of the earliest Indian words for a coin is Karsa (also a small weight), which is of Persian origin.^{xxiv} Bam, in south-east Iran, was a major commercial and trading town on the famous Spice Road, a major tributary of the Silk Road, that connected trade routes from India through Iran to Central Asia and China.

In recent time the two countries have in place several Bilateral Consultative Mechanisms at various levels which meet regularly. The 18th India-Iran JCM was held in New Delhi on December 28, 2015. It was co-chaired by former External Affairs Minister, late Smt Sushma Swaraj and Dr. Ali Tayyebnia, Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance of

Iran. MoU on cooperation in trade, finance, energy, infrastructure and cultural issues was signed during the JCM.

7. Art and Architecture

The Taj Mahal (“the soul of Iran incarnates in the body of India”, according to M. Grousset, the French savant), Fatehpur Sikri and Humayun Tomb are among the finest examples of the synthesis of Indo-Iranian style in architecture. Beginning with Qutab Minar, the Iranian influence is visible. The arcuate forms, domed structures, plane and smooth walls, slender polished pillars and spacious halls with squinches and stalactites were Iranian.^{xxv} Handicraft like weaving of carpets, making of pottery, metal work and writing, binding, illuminating and illustrating of books, all developed with Iranian influence. Carpet weaving, enamelling, embroidery, inlay work, miniature painting, glass and glazed ceramic tiles, paper, leather, papier mache and metal crafts emerged from that period.^{xxvi} In the seventeenth century the Persian carpets had designs characteristics of the Mughal taste with staggered horizontal rows of plants or a plant-filled lattice. Its subsequent popularity is often linked to Nadir Shah who brought back considerable booty from his Indian campaign and also the scheme was used in the decoration of his palace. The theme remained popular for carved stone revetments, tile work and textile. Inclusion of the new floral designs on carpets and ceramics probably reflects a broader popularity, stimulated by familiarity with both European and Indian goods.

8. Exchange Programmes and Education

Indian universities are a popular destination for Iranian students for higher studies. Several high ranking Iranian officials and professionals have studied in India. There are a large number of Iranian students studying in universities at Mumbai, Pune, Bangalore and Delhi. The ties between the two countries are expected to flourish over years without being sidelined by the world politics.

An Iranian scientist travelled along with a team of Indian scientists on an Indian ship on a scientific expedition to Antarctica in 1998.^{xxviii}

The Aligarh Muslim University possesses an exceptional treasure house of rare Persian Manuscripts on which extensive research can be performed. The Department of Persian A.M.U. Aligarh, has played a pioneering role in introducing valuable and extremely rare Persian Manuscripts to the scholars of Persian Literature globally. Prof. Azarmi Dukht Safavi became the Founder Director of the Institute. She has more than 150 publications to her credit in different national and international journals and takes the glory for enlargement of Persian Language and Literature.

The Department of Persian, AMU is one of the oldest and leading departments of the University. Some other scholars and writers of International repute like Maulana Shibli Nomani, Prof. Hadi Hasan, Prof. Zia Ahmad Badayuni and Prof. Nazir Ahmad of AMU have meritoriously contributed towards the expansion of Persian studies. Many young researchers of the department are also playing a major significant role towards the growth of the department and have been seen strengthening the Persian language on different national and international fronts.

9. Publications

Several Iranian publications were printed in India in the early 20th century. The first Iranian Persian weekly was published by India (as also Egypt and Turkey). These included *Habl-ol-Matin* newspaper (published in Calcutta for 40 years), *Ahang*, and the sermons of Iqbalol-Dolleh. The first Iranian Persian weekly was published from India.^{xxix}

10. The Name India and Iran

People are patriotic for their Country and feel proud in introducing themselves as Indians or Iranians. It is very surprising to know that **The name of India has come from Iran through a long relay** – Iranic to Greek to Latin to English and finally to India with its dominance of English. India is a Greek word written 'India' in the Greek alphabet and pronounced Hindia. It comes from Hindos 'the river Indus' from the old Persian Hindu, the Persian pronunciation of the Sanskrit Sindhu. (In Avesta and old Persian an initial s was pronounced h).^{xxx}

Similarly, **the name Iran is related to Sanskrit Arya** (noble). The ancient Persian also used the name 'Arya' and the word survives in the word 'Iran'. Iranians are one of three peoples of the world who have called their countries 'Land of Nobility' or 'The Noble Land'. Iran is the Avesta word *airya* 'noble' with the toponymic suffix *-an*, denoting a geographical area. The name of Ireland is Eire in Irish language and *aire* means 'noble' in Irish. Aryavarta is the sacred land bounded on the north and south by the Himalaya and Vindhya mountains, and extending from the eastern to the western sea. The name Iran and Aryavarta are close relatives and denote the abode of the excellent ones, the noble and respectable people, those faithful to their land. The Persian speaking Azerbaijan is the ancient word *aryanamvajah* 'the power of the Aryans', which celebrates the emerging sway of the Iranians in the second or third millennium BC.^{xxxi}

11. Technology

India and Iran signed many MoU's in different fields. One important Implementation Protocol between Department of Science and Technology, Ministry of S&T and Iran's

Ministry of Science, Research and Technology on Cooperation in the Fields of Science and Technology again bought the two closer.

12. Bollywood and Fashion - A common Language

Indian cinema has a large audience in Iran. Early Iranian cinema had close links with India. Ohanian, the director of the first Iranian silent film, *Abi va Rabi*, (1929), left Iran for India and continued his academic career in Calcutta. Subsequently he returned to Iran in 1947, where he died seven years later. As a young writer and poet, Sepenta went to India in the mid-1920s to study ancient Persian language and history. In Bombay, his friendship with professor Bahram Gour Aneklesaria (an expert in old Iranian languages) encouraged him to consider the new and developing medium of film. Sepenta made four more films for Imperial Film Company in India: *Ferdousi* (1934), *Shireen va Farhad* (1934), *Cheshmehaye Siyah* (Black Eyes) (1935) and *Leyla va Majnun* (1936). Interestingly, he also made one film for the East India Film Company in Calcutta. All of his films dealt with the glorification of the old Iranian culture or the optimistic future of a modern Iran.^{xxxii}

Conclusion

India and Iran have managed to nurture multidimensional relationship, secured within a long history of cultural ties and kinship. The Indo-Iran relation is a vast subject and it is impossible to summarize in few pages. I have tried my best to cast a glimpse of important areas that connect the two nations such as History-Origin, Language, Religion, Politics, Trade and Commerce, Art and Architect, Education, Publication and even tried to capture Bollywood and Fashion exchange.

To summarize the various historical links proves the Indo-Iranian relationship i.e Pre-Aryan and Aryan period, Achaemenids Era (559-330 B.C.), Parthian Era (250 B.C. - 226 A.D.) and Sassanid Era (226 A.D to 651 A.D.). Though, there are many relations between the two, but what connect the People at large is ***“Language”***. As far as religion is concerned Islam came to India from the side of Persia through Sultan Mohammad Ghaznavi. Today Islam is the second-largest religion in India, with 14.2% of the country's population or approx. India and Iran signed a friendship treaty on March 15, 1950. In addition to the Embassy in Tehran, India has two Consulates in Iran, one in Bandar Abbas and other in Zahedan.

Over the years they share common Arts, Culture, Education, Trade, Cinema, Fashion and other traditions. Even today they enjoy friendly relations and collaborate in a comprehensive range of fields such as bilateral trade and commerce.

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