

On my last visit to Iran, I found it difficult not to compare Iran and India.

In Iran, the sun sets only after eight at night, shops shut only by eleven, restaurants at midnight. After midnight, gigantic Volvo trucks begin to pick up the neatly packed bags of the day's garbage from the edge of sidewalks. This exercise is amazing in its routine, efficiency and cleanliness. In Iran, every fortnight all road dividers are washed with soap! In fact my film crew and I visited a number of cities – Isfahan, Mashhad, Nishboor, Sabzwar, Sharood, Damghan, Quazvin, Sultaniye and Tabriz - and everywhere there was the same conscious effort towards tidiness. Roads within towns and superhighways are free of clutter and a treat to drive on.

Iranians are a proud race that would find Indian slovenliness deeply embarrassing. Indians may describe themselves as a “nation in the making” or “the largest democracy”, but fifty years down the line, we have nothing to be proud of, nothing to signify true modernization of a country. We are only large because of a population that increases at a speed that pushes us into greater and greater disarray and misery.

In a *chaishop*, two middle-aged men were talking to an Iranian settled in US, over traditional black tea, about the Islamic revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini. I joined in. They agreed that everybody was disappointed with the Revolution and that it had pushed them back a few years in history. Deep down they realized they had not wanted it, but have now left it behind and moved on. Islamic rigidity was mellowing down and that is why thankfully a “good fellow” like Khatami has been re-elected. The common man throughout Tehran, who hopes that things will just get better from and better from now onwards, shares this belief.

This has also led to the re-emergence of women in all walks of life. Islam has not undermined their spirit. As the largest voter segment, their will has been sharply registered in the return of

On Iran and Iranians

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President Khatami. The Islam of Iran is a far cry from the type dominant in Afghanistan that resulted in the terrible treatment of women by the Taliban. Again, unlike war torn Afghanistan, Iran is a picture of great technological consolidation. It has leveraged the energy and spirit of youth to move forward and is determined not to be pushed back into medievalism.

This does unnerve the *mullahs* but they have no choice in this “Islamic Republic”. If some of them feel bitter about losing their grip on the “maintenance of virtue” in Iran,

they need not worry. Iran is deeply wedded to the kind of Islam that gifted the world Firdousi, who wrote the epic *Shahnama* and Omar Khayyam, poet, mathematician, astronomer and author of the *Rubaiyat*. Their tombs at Mashhad and Nishaboor respectively are still maintained and respected.

The visible tyranny of mullahs on Iranian women is hopefully now left behind in the past. Among Shia Muslims, women generally do not peer from behind a veil. A colourful scarf covers the head, the black chador is replaced by coloured variants like beige-green or soft cream buttoned to below the knee but the beautiful faces of the women are there for the world to see.

In my last few days, I visited Tehran University, a hotbed of serious dissent. I first encountered Maryam outside the Fine Arts Department. Seeing a Persian translation of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* in her hand gave me the chance to talk to her. She asked if I could help her with understanding some terms though I did say I had not understood all of it in my university days.

She opened her book and pointed out an underlined word. The original French term *mauvaise foi* was in brackets next to the Persian translation. She wanted to know about *bad faith*. I gathered my thoughts and said, “I think it has to do with a kind of falsehood perpetrated by the self on the self. Self deception, if you like”. I took a breath. “Sartre also says later that



you cannot lie if you do not know the truth, that if you're ignorant of the truth, there's no way you can lie about it. But if you know only the truth, then in an attempt to conceal the truth, you can lie and that puts your being in bad faith. Here you are not concealing the truth from the other but from yourself. Sartre gives the example of a café waiter's job and says in all walks of life, we, like the waiter, put on an act that divides our individual selves into two persons – one acting, the other witnessing the act and things like that.”

Maryam looked at me with some admiration and may have wanted to continue but I asked if she could take me to the canteen as I wanted to eat. She insisted on paying for my food and then we stepped out. She worked part time for a women's magazine and felt deeply about women's issues. She had heard of a woman committing suicide by immolation in Gilan and wanted to cover it but could not travel alone due to the restrictions on women traveling alone. She needed a male relative to escort her and no one was interested in escorting her to Gilan. She wanted to know if Indian women could travel without such restrictions.

On being told that they generally are free to move about and even village girls do come to cities for their higher education and can manage their affairs, she looked a little disappointed. We next went to a book shop she wanted to show me. Book shops had become places of intellectual ferment, leading to new ideas and opinions, yet the department of Islamic Guidance had allowed them to flourish. The shops stocked titles only in Persian, including the latest novels of well known writers. I wished I knew the Persian script and language. I just knew the numerals and a handful of words that were part of Hindustani



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and a few that I had picked up during the trip. The word 'Kshir' drew my attention; when I learnt it was milk I told people in the shop that it was a word straight from Sanskrit.

I recognized a book by Nietzsche by his image on the cover. It was *Thus Spoke Zarathushtra*. 'He spoke against women, didn't he?' asked Maryam. I tried explaining my interpretation of his life and works and my admiration for him. Soon I began looking at picture post cards. She showed me a card of Ahura Mazda in the ruins of Persepolis that she liked. I bought it and gave it to her as a token of remembrance of our meeting.

One evening I met Parvenu Etmadi, an artist of eminence, and her friend Maryam, a microbiologist for dinner. Parvenu is short and radiant, stunning at 55. Her paintings are in demand. She has developed her own distinct style, resembling soft shimmering garments that float, enclose and envelop. Her life is different, very cosmopolitan. She had wiped out all presence of Iran from of her apartment, even the omnipresent Persian carpets.

Maryam came clad in black, but removed the chador indoors. At home,

people love celebrations and activities. Loud parties, she said, sometimes spill on to the streets inviting trouble from the young "Revolutionary Islamic Guards". Maryam was even taken to prison once from such a party, where the young guards 'raped her with their eyes', as she put it.

Outside the city, lie vast arid expanses of desert and the visual excitement of reaching mud coloured towns and villages with turquoise tiles on the domes of *mazars* and *masjids* is unsurpassable. The technique began in 7th century AD in Khorasan, the easternmost province of Modern Iran. It gained immortality in Isfahan, in the 16th and 17th centuries, around the time that Bairam Khan and Humayun arrived in Persia for imperial succour and military support. Turquoise remains the chosen colour for glazing in Islam.

Tehran is the largest of the few oases in Iran. Its beauty is lost in a city of 11 million people and 2 million cars. But beyond the city, behind the Damavand Peak, the view is spectacular. The barren heights of the Elburz quickly yield to magnificent forests with dense greenery, rills and waterfalls on my trip to Ramsar by the

Caspian, the greenest heaven on earth in the most salubrious of climates.

The Caspian Sea lies landlocked between Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Russia. The water is neither as salty as sea water nor brackish like the Pangong or the Mansarovar. The river Volga drains into the Caspian from the north.

Iranians have occupied their sea coast with sheer greed. Access or even a view of the Caspian is very limited, as the entire coast is inhabited by rich Iranians with beach houses. As the tide is no more than a foot tall, houses can be built close to the beach, unlike in India where only high rises on reclaimed land have the same luxury.

The *darya* or the beach on the Caspian Sea wore a festive look with a merry-go-round, mule rides and handicraft shops with shoddy stuff; not unlike India. The beach was divided between the genders by a large colourful plastic wall. There were no women bathing on their side of the beach. As I framed the picture of the sea with women wearing black sitting before it, I wondered at human intolerance. As I crossed to the men's side, the scene was lively with many bathers, life guards and children. In spite of the move forward after the Islamic Revolution, no women were expected to bare themselves, and hence their section lay empty.

As I had coffee and dates at the seaside café, I joined a group of girls and a boy. The young man ran a sandwich shop on the beach and had joined his girl friend and her sisters for a break. I commented on how handsome Iranians were, particularly their aquagreen translucent eyes. They could not understand the word 'handsome'. I tried beautiful. They understood. I said Iranian women were beautiful and the men handsome. They figured out the proximity in the meaning of the words.

The young man asked if I was a "“Ind”Hind”. I said “Yes, Indian”. He was almost ecstatic to hear that. “We love Hindustan, but hate Pakistan. They are no good”, he said. I had heard this before in almost all the cities we visited, in Tehran, in Isfhan, in Sabzwar, in Mashad, in Damghan and Tabriz. And now by the Caspian in Ramsar, everywhere the same direct hate of a country that was not even their immediate neighbour. In my hotel in Tehran the ground floor was occupied by many Pakistanis. On the few occasions that I interacted with them, I felt uneasy. They would ask me questions like, do you have Muslims in India? This was their silly way of telling me there were Muslims in India.



I reacted the only way I could - '*Janab hamaare Hindustan mein Pakistan se jyada musalman log hein.*' (We have more Muslims in India than in Pakistan). Hearing this they would burst into mocking laughter. This did not surprise me.

My memory sped back to an episode when I was editing a film of mine, *Guruji*, at the Rajkamal Studio in Bombay. I had an Iranian editor, Bahram Lahouti, a diploma holder from the Film & Television Institute of India in Poona. We stepped out for some tea inside the large studio complex. A film set with a mosque was all ready for filming. It was peopled with bare bodied men with swords in hand. They were practicing their dance steps in tandem with the swinging of their

swords. The green *masjid*, the men in harem pants and Arabian night head gear, all waiting for the hero (Jackie Shroff) to come out and sing a line to *khuda* before the *masjid*. We waited a while to see how the whole thing would work out. Jackie came dressed as a Muslim, and waved a green cloth to Allah as he sang before the *musjid*. Having seen firsthand the world of Indian Muslims, this event in the studio brought out Bahram's ire. He lost patience, and ridiculed the Indian idea of what Muslims are all about. In that ridicule I sense a feeling of pride in the refinement of his culture. He could not identify with the Muslim converts of India, despite supposedly sharing the same faith. He felt as if they were a people of a diminished culture, which was no match to the Persian version of Islam. In his view, Pakistani Islam was still lower in the civilizational scale. It is an eyeopener to see how the Iranians ridicule the sub-continent's version of Islam. They believe their brand of Islam is more refined and superior to that of Muslim converts who are usually Sunni or orthodox (unlike Shia Iranians).

Iranians are not Semitic nor are they Christian or Arabic. They share many racial characteristics with North Indians. Even the language of Iran is different from that of their neighbours. Their language is part of the same linguistic family as Sanskrit, unlike Arabic or Turkish.

As I continued chatting with the girls and later with two other young men, the Caspian Sea plunged into darkness, with only the sound of the water registering its presence. Later, as I spoke to my hosts from the airport, I wished them, Iran, Iranian people, everybody well. Soon one returned to a different world of the airlines, with only a passing cloud or the desert contours to remind me of the trip and the time spent with Iranian people. □

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