



cooperation from the Iran side in these efforts.

What concrete plans can be implemented to boost tourism between Iran and India? Are there any specific plans in motion?

Both India and Iran possess a rich and ancient cultural heritage, iconic historical sites, breathtaking natural beauty, a variety of climatic zones, and a rich tradition of hospitality. Moreover, the cultural richness of both countries draws upon a shared heritage, which is reflected in the similarities between our languages, cuisine, music and architecture.

Throughout history, our people have travelled to each other's countries - whether as merchants, students, holy men, healers, or pilgrims. There is certainly tremendous scope to encourage greater tourist flows between us today also. In particular, there is tremendous potential for Iran to attract more Indian tourists. Given India's massive population, the number of Indian tourists travelling to Iran is quite small. This is partly because of lack of information. It will be good if Iran could better advertise its incredible tourist attractions in India.

Both countries have been discussing measures to increase tourist flows. An MOU on Tourism cooperation is under negotiation. Some of the constraints that stand in the way of increasing tourist traffic are the limited air-connectivity between both countries, and problems related to payments and banking links. Despite these constraints, however, there is quite a lot of scope to increase tourism in both directions, and both countries are determined to work together for this.

As the largest film producer globally, India holds a prominent position in the cinematic world. The Iranian film industry has also garnered praise for its highly acclaimed films, winning trophies at international festivals including the Academy Awards. Given these achievements, is there potential for cooperation between India and Iran in the realm of cinema?

It is true that both our people are passionate about cinema. As you mentioned, the subtle realism of Iranian films has won accolades all over the world, including in India. Iranian films often win awards in Indian Film Festivals, such as the International Film Festival of India (IFFI), the International Children's Film Festival of India, etc. Iranian film directors have also been invited to act as judges or as part of the jury selection boards of Indian film fes-

tivals. This is an acknowledgment of their fine cinematic sensibility. Similarly, Bollywood movies and artistes have also been popular in Iran for a very long time. I am still quite new in Iran, but many Iranians I have met have spoken to me about 'Sholay', and said that it is one of their favourite films. Many of them even remember the iconic songs from that classic movie!

Given this mutual interest and enjoyment for each other's cinema, there is certainly scope to increase our cooperation in this artistic realm. In recent years, we did have collaborations in some movies. But a lot more can be done, and we would be happy to facilitate contacts between our film-makers. As the world's largest movie-making country, India has a top-rated institute to teach acting, direction, and various technical aspects related to producing films. We would be happy to welcome more Iranian students in this institute.

Many foreign countries have started offering facilities in their tourist sites for shooting scenes and songs of Bollywood movies. When Indian audiences see these sites on screen, it often leads to significant increase in tourist flows from India. Iran could also consider this innovative way of advertising its own exquisite tourist treasures in India. This would also provide opportunities to our film-makers to meet and get to know each other.

What is India's stance on Iran's possible membership of BRICS?

The Foreign Ministry of Iran had recently organised a useful Conference on possibilities of cooperation between Iran and BRICS, in which I had the privilege to take part. I had explained India's stance on this issue quite clearly during the conference. India welcomes Iran's engagement with BRICS. As far as formal expansion of the BRICS group is concerned, the BRICS member countries are conducting internal discussions on the criteria, modalities and procedures for this. India has an open and positive approach on the issue, and is contributing constructively to these internal discussions. As per BRICS traditions, the final decisions on these issues will be taken on the basis of consensus.

What are the reasons behind the slower-than-expected progress in India's efforts to develop Iran's Chabahar port?

India and Iran both share an ambitious vision of regional connectivity centred on the Chabahar port. For India, the Chabahar port is an optimally located node for accessing Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caucasus and Eurasian markets. Therefore, India is ful-

ly committed to realising this connectivity vision. That is why we have proposed inclusion of Chabahar into the broader International North South Transport Corridor. I had myself travelled to Chabahar immediately after presenting my Credentials to His Excellency the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, to underline the importance that India attaches to this project.

To fully integrate Chabahar into the regional connectivity grid requires investment in developing and operating the port, developing an industrial zone around the port, and connecting the port to the hinterland. This larger enterprise is something that is being largely undertaken by Iran on its own, and for which the relevant Iranian authorities have drawn up a long-term plan. It is understandable that the present geopolitical environment poses constraints for developing some of the facilities. In the longer-run, we hope that these difficulties will be resolved and the required work can be accelerated.

India's own direct involvement in Chabahar is, at present, limited to the actual operation of some of the port facilities. This has already been going on for several years now. The Indian entity responsible for operating these facilities has brought in significant equipment into the port, despite the fact that both sides are still negotiating a long-term contract for India's involvement. Recently, there has also been an encouraging increase in the traffic in the port, despite many constraints.

India has made its own efforts to popularise Chabahar port in the region. For instance, earlier this year, India organised the first India-Central Asia Joint Working Group on Chabahar in Mumbai, where Iran participated as a special guest. In 2021 and 2022 also, we had celebrated 'Chabahar Day' in India, to highlight the connectivity potential of this port. Even while chairing the SCO Summit in July this year, Prime Minister Modi emphasised the importance of Chabahar.

Sometimes, certain vested interests try to spread propaganda questioning India's commitment towards Chabahar port. These interests perhaps do not wish to see Iran and India collaborate on a strategic regional initiative. I would like to once again reiterate that India fully supports the vision of Chabahar as a strategically important connectivity hub in the region. Realising this vision needs joint efforts by all relevant stakeholders. The most important requirement is to develop the necessary infrastructure facilities and the industrial eco-system around Chabahar and to connect it to the hinterland. We fully support the efforts of the relevant Iranian authorities towards this end.

Persian Performs as the Umbilical Cord for Bilateral Cultural Relations of India and Iran



Sajjad Safari/Iran Daily

By Balram Shukla

Director, Swami Vivekananda Cultural Center, Embassy of India, Tehran

The New Education Policy (NEP-2020) of India has included Persian as one of its native classical language and not as a foreign one. This very attitude of Indian government towards Persian language is very significant. It clearly means that Persian in India is considered essential for safeguarding national heritage of language, literature and culture, just like other classical languages including Sanskrit, Prakrit, Odia and Kannada etc.

With inclusion in NEP Persian will be widely available at school level as option for students, possibly as online modules, through experiential and innovative approaches, to ensure that this languages and literature stay alive and vibrant.

The positive results of this inclusion can be seen in Indian Universities. Now in India, in Common University Test (CUT) any student throughout the country can apply for studying Persian in Universities even without prior degree of Persian. As a consequence only in Delhi University the seats for Persian have increased from 25 to 174. Inclusion as a classical language is also a matter of pride for any language. Many awards (e.g. Certificate of Honour and Maharshi Badrayan Vyasa Samman) are conferred by the president of India to the scholars of various age groups who work hard and excel in Persian. It is because Persian has been recognised as a classical language.

Persian has the capacity to bind Indian and Iranian cultures for its linguistic peculiarities and historical placement. This language belongs to a group called Indo-European language family. Most of Indian languages belong to the same group. Its morphological structure is very much similar to that of most Indic languages. This is why in India Persian is never considered as a foreign language. The cognate nature of Persian with Indic languages and historical fact that it has been a court language for 700 years in India; make Persian essential for India. Many Indic languages are replete with Persian vocabulary and people use them without any hesitation or considering them heterogeneous.

Persian literature has casted great effect on Indian literature especially on that of Urdu literature. Many in our young generation in order to know the first hand knowledge of Urdu turn towards Persian. If India and Iran have stayed connected for millennia uninterruptedly, Persian had played great role in it. Persian with other Indic languages forms the umbilical cord for bilateral cultural relations.

Hafiz, Sa'adi, Maulana, Khayyam and other classical poets and their literary mas-

terpieces are as popular in India as Iran. The poetic sensitivities which have been described by these poets are never felt as foreign by Indians. They enrich and extend Indian thought system hugely.

Having said that one should be aware of this fact that India has its own tradition of Persian language and literature. It should be noted that India is the richest country in Persian manuscripts. Many poets in India have special place, who are not so popular in Iran. For instance Ghalib and Bedil are extensively read and appreciated in India. About the printing of Iranian works, it would be interesting to note that almost all Persian classics were first published in India and afterwards in Iran. Munshi Naval Kishore Press in Lucknow and other printing presses in Calcutta, Agra and Kanpur were forerunners in publishing Persian books. Many reprints of their lithographed books catered the need of Persian lovers for several decades. Even today in India we find our own editions of Persian classics. To some extent, Iranian editions are also used by the students and Professors at the University level.

Key areas of cooperation in the cultural field

One memorandum of understanding in 2014 has been signed between ICCR and Iranian Cultural Heritage, Handicraft and tourism organisation to recognise the historical contacts and common cultural heritage between Republic of Indian and Islamic Republic of Iran with the aim of further strengthening the friendly relations and mutual understanding between the two countries.

Following this MOU several Days of Indian Culture and Days of Iranian Culture in India have been successfully organised, and many more are in loop.

Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre (svcc), Embassy of India, Tehran with collaboration of various cultural institutions in Iran has been organising programs which highlight the millennium old relation of India and Iran. A monthly lecture series has been institutionalised for this cause.

We have planned various cultural and literary programs with premier institutions in Iran. To name some of them is - Farhangestan e Zaban o Adab, Farhangestan e Honar, Golestan Palace, IRCHT, National Library, IRIB etc.

India and Iran have a lot to share with each other in many aspects. We see that Iranians are generously influenced by Indian Movies, Indian Songs, Indian literature, Indian cuisine and many more other dimensions of India. It is the affinity of ethnicity and geography that had made us so much fascinated to each other for several millennia.