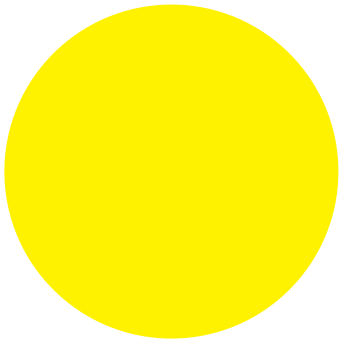




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How India and Iran are reviving civilizational ties

By Janvi Sonaiya
Senior Indian journalist

PERSPECTIVE EXCLUSIVE

When India's Culture and Tourism Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat sat down with his Iranian counterpart, Reza Salehi-Amiri, on the sidelines of the 26th UN Tourism General Assembly in Riyadh, the symbolism ran far deeper than polite diplomacy. This wasn't just another bilateral photo-op, it was the rekindling of one of Asia's oldest cultural partnerships, now being re-framed through the lens of tourism, soft power, and strategic connectivity. For centuries, India and Iran have been bound by history, poetry, architecture, and the gentle rhythm of civilizational exchange. The Persian influence on Indian art, language, and governance; from Mughal architecture to Urdu poetry; remains embedded in the subcontinent's cultural DNA. Conversely, India's spiritual traditions, culinary exchanges, and educational

interactions have long fascinated Iranian scholars and travelers. Now, in a post-pandemic world where tourism is increasingly seen as an instrument of diplomacy, both nations appear intent on transforming that shared legacy into a modern partnership. According to Iran's Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, India has been designated as a "strategic tourism partner", a phrase that signals intent beyond cultural niceties. Tehran's tourism diversification plan, which seeks to attract 20 million foreign visitors annually by 2030 (up from around 5 million in 2023), recognizes India's vast outbound tourism market of over 27 million travelers per year as a critical growth source. Tourism isn't merely about nostalgia; it's about economics. Pre-pandemic, Indian tourists spent an estimated \$25 billion abroad annually (UNWTO data), a figure that's now rebounding. Even a fractional redirection of that flow toward Iran could help Tehran's economy diversify away from oil and sanctions dependence. For India, encouraging inbound Iranian travelers and cultural events could deepen peo-

ple-to-people ties and diversify its own visitor base beyond traditional Western markets. Both nations have reasons to act now. Iran's strategic position between the Middle East and Central Asia, and India's growing economic and cultural footprint, create a convergence of interests that tourism can humanize. While governments debate pipelines and ports, travelers bridge those divides more naturally. No discussion of India-Iran relations is complete without mentioning the Chabahar Port; a project that symbolizes connectivity, commerce, and confidence-building. Located in southeastern Iran on the Gulf of Oman, Chabahar is India's answer to Pakistan's Gwadar Port (operated by China). Through India's investment in developing two terminals, Shahid Beheshti and Shahid Kalantari, Chabahar serves as India's logistical lifeline to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistani territory. In May 2024, India and Iran signed a 10-year agreement granting India operational rights for the Shahid Beheshti terminal, with India Ports

Global Limited (IPGL) committing an additional \$370 million in investment and credit. The port isn't just a trade corridor; it's a potential tourism and cruise services are developed, Chabahar could facilitate spiritual and cultural circuits linking Indian pilgrims to Iran's historic cities like Mashhad, Shiraz, and Isfahan, and even onward to Central Asia. Tourism officials in both countries have quietly discussed incorporating Chabahar into broader heritage and maritime tourism routes connecting coastal Gujarat and Mumbai with Iran's ancient port cities. This kind of soft connectivity aligns perfectly with India's "Neighborhood First" and "Connect Central Asia" policies, while helping Iran tap into India's massive middle-class travel market. Iran's Minister Reza Salehi-Amiri put it aptly: "We must make this huge historical capital the basis for tourism development and cultural cooperation." Indeed, the shared civilizational narrative, poets like Rumi, emperors like Akbar, and cities like Hyderabad that still echo Persian aesthetics, offers a ready-

made brand for tourism diplomacy. The path ahead, however, demands pragmatism. Visa facilitation, direct air routes between major cities (Delhi-Tehran, Mumbai-Shiraz), and digital promotion campaigns will be crucial. Both countries can also leverage multilateral platforms like the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and BRICS+ to fund and market joint heritage circuits. If done right, tourism can become the cultural Chabahar, a people's corridor that reinforces what geopolitics alone cannot. It would embody the new grammar of diplomacy: where travelers, not just trade envoys, carry the weight of bilateral goodwill. With both nations facing the twin challenges of image-building and diversification, this cultural bridge offers a rare win-win. From the verses of Hafez that still echo in Delhi's Dargahs to the Sanskrit manuscripts preserved in Iran's Qom libraries, the story of India and Iran is one of mutual enrichment. Now, with the promise of tourism and the port of Chabahar, that story might find a modern sequel, written not in treaties, but in travel itineraries.