CHAPTER 1

CULTURAL INTERACTIONS BETWEEN INDIA AND IRAN

Considering the geographical proximity of India and Iran, the traffic between the two countries in men, merchandise and ideas was only natural. Cultural interactions between India and Iran have a long history. Sind and Gandhara became part of the Achaemenian Empire and India paid the highest tribute to the Iranian Empire which was 360 talents of gold-dust. Apart from tributary political relationship which had little impact on the level of cultural interaction, there were cases of migration of people from Iran to India.

While some Iranians were just travellers to India- after sometimes they decided to go back to their country- others were migrants to this country, decided to stay and their offsprings were born and brought up here. A case in point is that of Zorastrians who moved to this country in the middle of the eighth century. This migration added a new dimension to the contacts between the two countries in which religion, persecution and tolerance played important roles.

Causes of Iranian travels and migrations to India

Iranians travelled to India in groups or as individuals. Sometimes specific factors motivated the members of a family to abandon their attachments in Iran and migrate to India. In both cases the reasons responsible for travel or migration could be classified and reviewed.

2 Farhang Ershad, The Historical Immigration of Iranians to India, Tehran, 2000, pp. 146-156.
Political Turbulence

A major factor behind the migration of Iranians to India was political turbulence in their home country. Reasons for such turbulence could be many. Sometimes internal revolt caused insecurity and confusion, and in some cases the invasion of foreigners created waves of insecurity in a specific region. The Iranians witnessed the attack of foreign forces to their land many times. The army of Mongols invaded Khurasan twice in the thirteenth century. During these attacks, first from 1219 to 1222 by Chingiz Khan, and the second from 1253 to 1258 by Hulaku, many persons left this region for the neighbouring countries, including India.\(^3\) Sayyid Sharaf ud Din, one of the ancestors of the Sayyids of Kintur moved from Nishapur to India, following the attack of Hulaku to this region.\(^4\) This event took place during the reign of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq who gave the Sayyid a *madad-i maash* grant “at Kintur on the bank of the river Ghagra, in the present district of Bahraich.”\(^5\)

In the next century, the invasion of North eastern Iran by Timur caused the group migration of Iranian families to India after 1385 A.D. By now India was getting integrated more and more with the Persianate world.

From one perspective, then, northern India became a part of the perso- Islamic world in precisely the same way as did Transoxania, Ghazna, or Ghur. Just as Bukhara, Tirmiz, Nishapur, Isfahan, Sabzavar, and Herat were important in this cultural landscape, so too Delhi and Lahore acquired a place there and a reputation.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) *Ibid*, p. 134
In between invasions, there were cases of warfare which generated insecurity and caused the movement of populations. The safavids were engaged in warfare on both sides of their frontiers; with the Ottoman Turks in the west, and the Uzbeks in the East. These battles created insecurity and disorder especially in the north western and north eastern parts of Iran and compelled many persons to leave the country. Qazi Nurullah Shushtari (1549-1610) the renowned Iranian jurist left Mashhad due to insecurity arising from the Uzbek invasion of the town. The Uzbek incursion caused the murder of Qazi’s brother and he had to leave for India. The Qazi received a warm welcome by the emperor Akbar, and was appointed as the qazi of Lahore.

The third important invasion faced by the Iranians was that of the Afghans in the eighteenth century. Beside a terrible massacre, this incursion left thousands of people homeless. However, not everyone could migrate; only those persons were able to migrate to a secure place like India who had a reputation in learning or literature, or were joined to the safavid court. One of the main characters in the present study, Ali Hazin left, his country on account of the Afghan attack on Isfahan.

Persecution

Essentially, absolutist rulers did not tolerate dissent. The Safavids suppressed every adversorial movement. In addition, like other places, in the Safavid court too, members of the aristocracy were involved in intrigues against each other. When a new king was enthroned, a new group of men accompanied him and tried to push aside the previous

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8 Nawab Inayat Khan Rasikh, Bayaz, Ms. Habib Ganj Collection, Aligarh Muslim University, ff. 97a-b.
group and vice-versa. During such power plays some courtiers fell victim to cruel intrigues. Khaja Imadud Din Mahmud Gawan (d. 886/1481) whose ancestors were statesmen in the Kar-Kiya dynasty of Gilan was compelled to leave Iran, in Shah Tahmasp’s reign, as a result of court intrigue and family rivalry.\(^\text{11}\) This able politician, after wandering in places like Cairo and Damascus left for the Deccan.\(^\text{12}\) He eventually entered the Bahmani court and became prime minister. The collection of Mahmud Gawan’s letters, *Riyaz ul Insha*, shows his zeal for promoting the Deccan as an outstanding cultural centre in India. Gawan corresponded with prominent Iranian scholars in order to persuade them to travel to the Deccan. He invited Nurud Din Abdur Rahman Jami, Ubaidullah Ahrar, and the renowned philosopher Jalal ud Din Dawani to the Deccan.\(^\text{13}\)

The Bahmanis ruled over the Deccan from 1347 to 1518 and during the ministry of Gawan their territory reached its maximum limits. The state also gave important posts to *Dakhinis*, who competed with foreigners (*pardesis*), and in this way preserved the balance of power in the government. Rizvi indicates that after Gawan’s execution in 1481AD by the Bahmani king’s order, the glory of this kingdom faded.\(^\text{14}\)

The support of especially the first two Safavid king, to Shiism caused enmity with the followers Sunnism, or in some cases towards those who were just accused of following Sunnism. Contrary to his father, Shah Ismail II (1576-1578) was inclined to the Sunni sect of Islam, and the Shiis were not his favourite. The migration of Mir Muhammad Mumin Astarabadi (d. 1625) a prominent personality in the Qutb Shahi court was caused by the religious policies of Shah Ismail II and the anarchy in the regin of Sultan Muhammad

Khudabanda (1578-1588). This prominent scholar was the tutor of Prince Haider Mirza, the son of Shah Tahmasp I and left Iran during the reign of Sultan Muhammad Khudabanda. He was appointed as peshwa by Sultan Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah. The position of Peshwa was the most important in the Qutb Shahi State and directed judicial, religious, educational and political policies in the kingdom. Rizvi writes of Mir Mumin’s services in the Qutb Shah’s court:

Mir Muhammad Mumin diverted the Sultan’s attention from warfare and territorial expansion to strengthening the internal administration and re-orientating the cultural life of the capital. He was deeply concerned of Mughal expansionist designs and believed that only pressure from the Shah of Iran could stave off the crisis. He also did all he could to promote unity among the Deccan Sultans. 15

Although Shah Abbas Safavi was favourably disposed towards Mir Mumin, and the Mir could have gone back to Iran, he preferred to stay in the Qutb Shahi court and tried to propagate Shiism in the Deccan. Shah Abbas also endorsed the Mir’s presence in the Qutb Shahi court and encouraged him to strengthen the relations between the two dynasties. 16 Hydarabad emerged as an important town when Mir Mumin was Peshwa, and although the Sultan had mooted the idea of such a town, its plan and construction were done according to the Mir’s direction. 17

Inspite of the initial attachment of Safavids to Sufism, they later became opposed to it. This opposition was mainly out of the affiliation of Sufi leaders with the Sunni sect of

15 Rizvi, History of Isna Ashari Shiis in India, I, p. 304.
17 Ibid, p. 115.
Islam. The other reason was disagreement between jurists and Sufis. It is known that in the Safavid period, jurists had a particular position in the court. Shah Tahir, the principal counsellor of Burhan Nizam Shah who came to Ahmadnagar in 1523, was the object of suspicion by Shah Ismail I due to his popularity among a group of Sufis, and then was compelled to leave Iran on account of an attempt upon his life. Shah Tahir converted Burhan Nizam Shah to Shiism in 1537-8, and subsequently Shiism was declared the state religion.

Sometimes, an entire group was persecuted for its heterodox views. The Nuqtawis are one such example. They were the followers of Mahmud Pasikhani whose views were rejected in the Shiite environment of Iran. The Nuqtawis migrated to India in Akbar’s reign who was tolerant towards diverse shades of religious orientation. Thus one can see that persecution, political or religious, personal or collective, forced people and groups to move out of Iran, and India was one destination they favoured.

Employment

It is notable that after the appearance of Indo-Islamic states, the flow of Iranians to India increased markedly. To strengthen the basis of their powers, the Indian rulers preferred to use the talents of foreigners, including Iranians. Since Iran had from ancient times an organized state apparatus, rulers were interested in using and learning Iranian methods of administration. Moreover the loyalty of Iranians in their duties made them trustworthy to manage the imperial affairs.
Under the Delhi Sultanate, a new phase began in the relation between Iran and India. While the Turks and the Afghans were the strong arms of the central government, Iranians worked as their meditative mind. As we discussed earlier, the presence of Iranians was more perceptible in the court of the kings of the Deccan, the Bahmanis and their successors.

A new phase in the relationship between the two neighbouring power began under the Mughals. Humayun was helped by shah Tahmasp with men, money and war material to regain his kingdom. A large number of Iranians accompanied him and found positions of importance in his empire.

The court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar attracted the most number of Iranians, including artisans, scholars, administrators and literary men. Akbar himself had a special interest in the presence of talented Iranians in his court. Muzaffar Alam speculates that Akbar wanted to pay back the debt the Mughals owed the Iranians for their support in reconquering India. In addition, the principle of Sulh-i Kul made Akbar’s court an appropriate environment for all thoughts, from rejected Sunnis of Iran to the Nuqtawis. Akbar gave a systematic structure to the Mughal bureaucracy and also made it ethnically cosmopolitan.

Between 1575-1595 among 184 mansabdars in Akbar’s court, 47 of them were Iranians, i.e., more than 25 percent. Iranians became more powerful during the reign of Jahangir whose favourite queen, Nurjahan, was also an Iranian. The share of the total

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21 Muhammad Yasin, *A Social History of Islamic India*, Delhi, 1974, pp. 5-6.
award of Iranian nobles in the Shahjahan reign, among the Turanis, Afghans, and different 
groups of Indians was of the highest level.

Comparing the situation of Iranians and Turanis in the Aurangzeb’s reign, Athar Ali 
argued that just 13.6 percent of nobles in the first phase of Aurangzeb were Turanis, and in 
the second phase of the rule of this emperor, this number decreased to 12.5. He explains 
about Iranians’ superiority over Turanis:

The Iranis were supposed to be far more cultured, and won special favour under both 
Jahangir and Shahjahan. It has been suggested that in the war of succesion Aurangzeb 
rallied the Sunnis against the Shias, but there is no basis for this assertion. Out of 124 
obles of 1,000 and above, who are known to have supported Aurangzeb up to the 
battle of Samugarh, 27 were Iranis, 4 of them holding rank of 5,000 zat and above. As 
against this, 23 out of 87 of Dara Shukoh’s supporters were Iranis. After all, Mir Jumla 
and Shaista Khan, the leading Irani nobles, were Aurangzeb’s partisans.25

Although in the Mughal court Iranian nobles were protective of their interests, but 
as Riaz ul Islam has pointed, they essentially aligned their interest with that of the Mughal 
kings.26

The existence of a Shiite rule in Awadh in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries 
also was effective in attracting Iranians to this region. Since the Nawabs of Awadh were of 
Iranian origin, they encouraged Iranians to find employment in their kingdom.

Thus employment was an important factor which drew the Iranians towards the Mughal court and the court of the nobles. They were awarded *mansabs* and jobs, and were able to live a prosperous life in India.

**Commerce**

Commercial relations between India and Iran commenced from the third millennium BC and reached their zenith in the middle of this period i.e in the time of Saragon of Akkad (2371-16 BC) except from 1600 BC to 600 BC when due to chaotic condition there was no relation between the two regions for a long time.\(^{27}\)

The commercial relations between India and Iran was enhanced by the fact that strategically all caravans starting from central Asia or India for the Mediterranean, had to pass through the Iranian high plateau. On the other hand, India was geographically placed at the center of a network of linkages which joined such distant places such as the Red Sea, Arabian Sea, South East Asia, Central Asia and China.\(^{28}\)

During the Empire of the Parthians (250 BC to 226 AC) there was an expanded commercial relation between India and Iran, since the silk route flourished in this space. When due to high way robberies, the land routes turned insecure and the sea route from Persian Gulf to the Indian coast became important. Under the Sasanids also, commercial relation between India and Iran thrived.\(^{29}\)

Due to agricultural and manufactured products of India, this country was constantly one of the main commercial partners of Iran; and in the Safavid period this relation reached

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\(^{28}\) Ishrat Alam, ‘Technological Exchange between India and Iran in Ancient and Medieval Times’, *Ibid*, p. 77


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its high point.\textsuperscript{30} Iranian silk was imported into India; along with other items such as, madder (\textit{runas}), used as a red and crimson dye for Indian cotton, and almonds (\textit{badam}), and Shiraz wine.\textsuperscript{31}

As Najaf Haider explains there were three parameters effective in the choice of a route by merchants: the length of travelling time, personal safety and the safety of the goods and money in possession, and transaction costs.\textsuperscript{32} Due to the existence of the first and second factors in the Persian Gulf route to India, the Gulf became an important maritime route for Iranian traders. The Persian Gulf route declined from thirteenth century onwards, due to the Mongol invasion and destruction of Baghdad (1258) as well as the devastation by Mamluks of the port towns on the Syrian coast, in possession of the Crusaders (1291).\textsuperscript{33}

However the route gained prominence in the sixteenth century. Some specific factors were responsible for this revival:

The first was the political unification of trade routes from Aleppo to Basra. Between 1516 and 1538 AD, the Ottomans made major territorial gains in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Iran. The protection provided \textit{en route} to merchants by the Ottoman state was an important factor behind the transformation of Aleppo into the biggest Levantine entrepot, and an increase in the biannual caravan traffic to Basra and Hurmuz.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{30} Najaf Haider, ‘Global Networks of Exchange, the India Trade and the Mercantile Economy of Safavid Iran’, \textit{Ibid}, p. 193
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid}, p. 195.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Ibid}, p. 190.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid}, p. 191.
The presence of Portuguese in the Persian Gulf in the second half of the sixteenth century, and the protection that they provided to the merchant convoys, for their monopolistic aims, was responsible for the enhancement of Hurmuz as a commercial port. Although its importance declined in the early seventeenth century, the appearance of a new factor on the Indian side increased the significance of Persian Gulf routes at the same time:

There was a third development, now on the Indian side, which contributed favourably to the expansion of the Persian Gulf trade, viz. the consolidation of Mughal polity and economy. India was the biggest trading partner of Iran in this period, and the figures worked out from a detailed inventory of Indian exports to Iran in the 1630s suggest that the total value of merchandise was over 32 metric tons of silver.\(^{35}\)

Abdul Latif Shushtari, introduces in his travelogue some of his relatives who had travelled before him to India for commercial reasons. He himself came to India for commerce. Moreover, when Ahmad Bihbahani travelled in the early nineteenth century to India, he was entertained in different towns by Iranian traders.

Commerce was therefore an important link in the chain of men, merchandise and ideas moving between the two countries. There were colonies of Iranians and Armenians in India; and of Indian baniyas in Isfahan.

Religious Motives

Often the travel of some Iranian sufis to India has been to propagate their mystical thoughts. The travel of Khaja Muin ud Din Sijzi (b. 1141) the founder of Chishtiyya order,

\(^{35}\) Ibid, p. 193.
from Sijistan (Sistan) to Ajmer is an important case. Ajmer became a religious center where thousands of pilgrims assembled from far and near. 36

Due to its geographical location India has been the confluence of different thoughts from ancient times. The principal of tolerance espoused by Indians also was a factor that permitted foreigners to live peacefully in this country. 37

Shiism was an important religious link between the rulers and subjects of the two countries. Due to the importance of Najaf and Karbala, as two Shiite holy places, Indian Shiite rulers dedicated their financial support to the shrine of the Shiite imams. Under the rule of Ottomans in Iraq, Shiite towns usually suffered deprivation. By extending monetary supports Indian Shiite nobles contributed towards the revival of these towns. One important reason for the inhabitants of the shrine cities to come to India was to seek financial support for the shrine cities.

Abdu Latif Shushtari writes that the reason of his brother's travel, Muhammad Shafi to India was to overcome the problem of shortage of water in Karbala. Hence Aqa Muhammas Baqir Bihbahani and other scholars urged him to travel to India, in order to attract contributions for building a canal. 38 Describing the reasons of his travel to India, Ahmad Bihbahani also explained that one of his objections was to gather financial support from Mir Alam, the Iranian Shiite governor of Hydarabad for the repair the rampart of Karbala which was ruined on account of Wahhabi attack. 39

During the rule of Nawabs of Awadh, seeking financial support reached to the highest measure.

36 Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century, Delhi, 1974, pp. 181-182.
37 Ershad, Historical Immigration of Iranians to India, p. 133.
38 Abdul Latif Shushtari, Tuhfat ul Alam, Tehran, 1984, p.132.
Conclusion

There were multiple factors responsible for the movement of Iranians towards India. It is difficult to assign weightage to one or the other factor at any given point of time; usually they worked in tandem. There were both push and pull factors: political disturbance and persecution pushed people out of Iran and Indian wealth, political stability and tolerant religious and cultural environment pulled them towards India.

In pre Islamic Iran, the relation of this country with India was largely political or commercial. In the domain of culture there was some interaction but it was quite limited. The introduction of Islam first into Iran and later into India founded a strong religious and cultural link. The rise of two big imperial state system also played a very important role in bringing the two countries culturally closer. The rise in international trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries further strengthened the bilateral relationship and facilitated the movement of people, money, merchandise and ideas.

The active presence of Iranians in India for one reasons or another had a deep impact on the language, art, and culture of the Indians. Persian was the language of the Mughal court and high cluture. This status of Persian continued until the first half of the nineteenth century. The influence of Iranian architecture and painting in India also is indisputable. In this regard Rezavi writes:

A large number of Iranian architectural features are perceptible in Indian architecture since the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the thirteenth century. The first monumental Sultanate structure, the Qutb complex, comprising the Qubbatul Islam Mosque, the Qutb Minar and the Alai Darwaza, reflect Iranian concepts and origins. Modelled after the Ghurid period mosques, the Qubbatul Islam follows the Seljuqid
Iranian plan of the four-aiwan courtyard mosque with certain modifications. The four-aiwan courtyard mosque plan was one in which an integrated enclosed space was created by the symmetrical repetition of aiwans (portals) and arcades on the main and transverse axes, thus creating structure with a centralized courtyard flanked by cloisters and portals on three sides and a prayer chamber and a portal on the side facing the qibla.\footnote{Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, ‘Iranian Influence on Medieval Indian Architecture’, \textit{Growth of Civilization in India and Iran}, p. 127.}

Schimmel has recognized the influence of Iranian designs on the designing of the Mughal gardens. She writes that all Mughal gardens have been made according to the Irani \textit{Chahar Bagh} principal.\footnote{Annemarie Schimmel, \textit{Im Reich der Grossmoguln} (\textit{dar qalamrow-i khanan-i Mughul}), tr. Tehran, 2008, p. 353.}

It is in this context that we are going to view the life experiences of the three Iranian travellers to India.