



THIS IS Central and Southwest Asia

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Glorious Iran

By Bharath Sriraman, Professor of Mathematical Sciences



Naghsh-e-jahan, Isfahan

Iran- the word itself conjures numerous images in different parts of the world, however, for me the sound "E-raan" denotes history, beauty, language, culture and a 3000 year old shared heritage with the Indian subcontinent. I visited this glorious land again after a long hiatus and felt privileged to be invited as a guest professor of the mathematics faculty in Iran University of Science and Technology (IUST) in Tehran, and the Ministry of Education. The two and half weeks spent in Iran in August went by too quickly travelling the length of the breadth of the country and I left with the feeling that I wished I could stay longer. Such a sentiment might seem puzzling to the reader, what is it about Iran that is so attractive? This timeless, cultural and historical giant of the Indo-Iranian and Central Asian world is a country, often misunderstood, misinterpreted and misrepresented by biases, political and vested interests of the mainstream media. Visiting in the period immediately after the elections was an opportunity to experience events first hand and hopefully construct a narrative different from those found in the popular media. It is impossible for me to write in a few paragraphs everything that I experienced during my visit, however the interested reader is invited to a public lecture on October 29 which will include a photojournalistic narrative of Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, Persepolis, and the Caspian provinces of Gilan, Mazandaran and Golestan.

Having visited Iran sporadically over two and half decades, I was hoping to document and experience the nature of the changes that have occurred in society. I flew into the Imam Khomeini International Airport that is located about 25 miles south of the city, and was immediately taken by the functionality and opulence of this new airport. Lufthansa operates daily flights from Frankfurt that land in the early hours of the morning. My first act was to kiss the soil of this land and be thankful for the opportunity to be there again. As one drives into the bright lights of Tehran, it is easy to catch glimpses of the silhouette of the majestic Alburz mountains which bedeck the jeweled city from the North. My time in Iran was spent partly lecturing at the Iran University of Science and Technology in Tehran, as well as with several meetings at the Ministry of Education, with the rest of the time traveling as much as I possibly could to places of cultural interest and those that were dear to my heart. Being an official mehman (guest) and more or less fluent in the language opened more doors and hearts than I imagined was possible. Iranians are extremely hospitable and polite to visitors or musafirs (travelers), an integral part of their cultural trait.

their sheer beauty, not to mention the knowledge of tiling, geometry and symmetry possessed by the artists of this time period. The courtyard is also quite a sight to behold with hundreds of families stretched out on the lawns of the courtyard. Haggling with the bazaris (shopkeepers) is an interesting experience since they have been in this business for hundreds of years and only come down with the price if they feel like. I was told that more than 90% of the visitors to Isfahan come from other parts of Iran and the markets thrive here. The city is smaller compared to Tehran but the traffic is thicker and reminded me of my hometown Bombay. I stayed at the guesthouse of the University of Isfahan which is located on a hill that overlooks the city. The general "air" in Isfahan was quite different from Tehran, people going about their business as usual and not too many political or policing signs, although there is the same abundance of fruits, vegetable and goods. One evening on the Si-o-se pol [the bridge with 33 arches], an elderly gentleman struck up a conversation with me, welcomed me very warmly to Isfahan and said he was happy to see an Indian here. He recalled his experience many years ago in Delhi when he asked some friends to visit and they declined his invitation because of unsubstantiated fears about Iran. It felt good to be here!

The drive to Shiraz from Isfahan is another 450 kms, mostly south, and even though my friend and colleague Professor Mehdi Alaeian from IUST decided to leave early, we still ended up arriving half fried at 1:30 in the afternoon. The city seemed to be practically paralyzed by the heat, with most shops and restaurants closing at 2:00. Compared to Isfahan which boasts to be the artistic/architectural center of Iran mainly because of the Safavid marvels, Shiraz is the true heart of Fars, and the real cultural/historical capital of Iran- the gateway to Takht-e Jamshid (Persepolis), Nagsh e Rostam (Image of Rostam) as well as the site of the tombs of the Sufi mystic poets Hafez (1315-1390) and Sadi (1184-1283), both were Shiraz's celebrated citizens during the Golden Age of Central Asia. Shiraz also has resplendent, abundant gardens, markets and one can witness the family oriented lives of Iranians in the gardens in the evenings where families picnic. The colors that one sees here on people are also amazing! I was surprised to realize from the traffic signs that Bandar Abbas and Bushehr on the Persian gulf are only a few more hours away. The radio stations were blasting the beautiful Bandari music which made me nostalgic about my childhood and the familiarity with the music. The centralized university system in Iran allows one to book university housing at other universities as long as one is an "official" mehman (guest) of one particular university. Shiraz was more pleasing than Isfahan for many reasons even though it was much hotter during the day. The city is smaller, the streets and boulevards are huge (built I am told during Reza Shah's time), and the people are mehraban (very kind) to strangers. When asking for directions in Isfahan, one might get a shrug or "nemidunam" (don't know)- In Shiraz the people will give you detailed directions and sometimes ask you to follow them to make sure you get to wherever you are headed. The drop in temperature is also a welcome relief in the evenings, and suddenly after 6 pm the city comes alive with people, families, children, vendors, cats and cars. Hafez's tomb was very interesting to visit- I happened to go to a Kabab-yi (a kebab shop) before I went to Hafiziyeh [the tomb] and in this old Kabab-yi there were pictures going back a 100 years of the history of Shiraz, and lo and behold there was a prominent picture of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the great Indian poet, sitting near Hafez's tomb. After seeing this I did not feel worthy of being in the after-presence of great human



Mazandaran province, Caspian

The first iconic place I visited was Isfahan- the city of Safavid architecture and splendor approximately 450 kms south of Tehran. The drive to Isfahan in August allows one to experience the heat of the Iranian plateau and the terrain which for the most part is desert like [kavir] with old sand settlements cropping up here and there, occasional goat herds. The heat is something to be experienced especially when it hits 50 degrees Celsius [120+]- everything seems to slow down, the mind, the body and a general sense of sluggishness envelopes everything. The highway to Isfahan goes through the city of Qom [the Vatican of Shi'ism and the heart of the Islamic revolution]. Isfahan was the capital city of the Safavid dynasty (1500-1720), and is often called the city of bridges and architectural splendor. The city is a sight to behold with numerous four gardened boulevards, old bridges and the amazing courtyard Nagsh-e- Jahan, meaning the reflection of the world [now a UN world heritage site]. The corridors of this rectangular courtyard are full of bazaars and their wares. The color, architecture and symmetry in the tilings of the mosques are breathtaking and leave one paralyzed by

beings like Hafez and Tagore and told myself to be satisfied to be nearby but not visit, but on urging from my colleague Mehdi, I did end up going. The place was quite crowded but it was huge enough that the crowds were not a bother. Many of the women would crowd the tombstone, touch it or kiss it- and one could see the stone slowly fading away like Mary's toes in parts of Italy, Spain and Mexico! The place had a wonderful calming feel to it, with the music of Shahriar, the acclaimed Persian traditional singer, playing in the background. The rose gardens all around with benches more than accommodated the people present.

If Hafez is the love and soul of Iran, and if Ferdousi (the poet of the epic Shahnameh in 1000 AD) is the conceptualizer of vatan [identity and nationhood], then Sadi can be viewed as the giver of fairness and justice. Sadi's tomb was located below the hills that bedeck Shiraz on its Northern side, in an older quarter, where the narrow side streets with a life of their own reminded me of the darga areas of Mahim (a predominantly Muslim area in Bombay where my school was), with which I was very familiar. Sadi's tomb was more elaborate and not as ascetic as that of Hafez, with full grown narenj trees, and water in all its beautiful Islamic forms predominantly featured on the grounds. After visiting the tombs, I ate the famous Shirazi falooode -think of a special pasta that looks like vermicelli made especially to go with bastani (icecream). I spent one morning and afternoon wandering the bazaars near the city centre- including the famous Vakil bazaar [vakil means lawyer]. One can get lost in these bazaars as they intertwine into one another serpentine-like and can end up quite far away from where one started. Out of curiosity I talked to one of the carpet dealers after having partaken of his sherbet, and had to tell him with a heavy heart that I could not fork out \$800 for a small carpet I started coveting- maybe the saffron in the sherbet does have an effect. Interestingly the carpet bazaar's here supplied the carpet shops near the docks in Bombay! The bazaars were full of upper crust Shirazi, and many Bandari, Isfahani and Arab women, among others- and it was a visual treat for the eye to be able to identify them based on the different clothes that each one wore. Music was blasting from the stalls in the bazaar and it permeated well the smell of the clothes, spices, stone, carpet, fish and sweets. One could also find a copy of any newly released movie! One of the vendors remarked- this is not Tehran, this is Shirazi democracy(!) that is characterized by music, color and



Iftar (meal after sunset during Ramadan)

an anything goes attitude. The colors [different hues of pink, red, blue, green, yellow, . . .] of the traditional Fars clothes for women reminded me of saris. The streets around the city center of Shiraz are reminiscent of the downtown Fort area in Bombay- just replace the Hindi and Urdu signs with Farsi signs and add some color and cleanliness to the poorly maintained masjids. I also visited the Arg-e-Karim Khan (fort of Karim Khan) since that is where I ended up. Karim Khan who put an end to Nader Shah's tyrannical rule of Iran in the 18th century was considered to be an able ruler and is still loved by Iranians. His fort was very "spartan" and practical compared to the living quarters of Shah Abbas and the other Safavids found in Isfahan and the Caspian regions.

The remainder of my trip south included a visit to Takht e Jamshid (Persepolis), the capital of the Achaemenids dynasty dating back to 500 B.C, which is an engineering and architectural marvel, destroyed by Alexander, during his plunderous world- conquest. The reader may be surprised to know that Alexander the great, is also known as Alexander the accursed in certain parts of the world. Again historical and cultural context matters in how people and places get named or remembered.

After coming back to Tehran, I spent nearly one week in the Caspian provinces of Gilan, Mazandaran and Golestan. The drive to the Caspian province is spectacular through the Alburz mountains, and as one gains elevation from Tehran, the temperature starts radically dropping. I had heard about this but did not expect the air to change so radically- within a span of an hour the temperature dropped from the 90's to the mid 50's. It was magical to drive into the fog and after the crest of the mountain pass the vegetation also started changing into different hues of green inter-sprinkling the yellow, with rice paddies, bushes, sheep herds, eventually turning into a lush jungle and finally the flats near the Caspian. The Mazandaran province can be thought of as an intersection of California, Florida and Arizona in its vegetation, climate and weather patterns. It is the rice, bread, fruit and vegetable basket of Iran. Even though the vegetation is very Mediterranean, the regional climate is tropical, almost equatorial because of its proximity to the Caspian. In the summers, the water evaporates rapidly and one sees clouds forming in the horizon, slowly building up the moisture in them, until they burst and unleash a torrent of rain for a day or so. The trees and the vegetation [pine, spruce, olive, palm, orange, narenj, lime, grapefruit, peach, apricots, pomegranates, . . .] and the layout of the streets in many townships reminds one of neighborhoods in Southern Turkey, and Arizona- so visually one is in different places, but the air and the gradually creeping heat and humidity makes one feel as if they are in Bombay or Brisbane! Again due to space restrictions, I will not recount the travels to the Eastern and Western ends of the Caspian, and to the Turkmenistan regions.

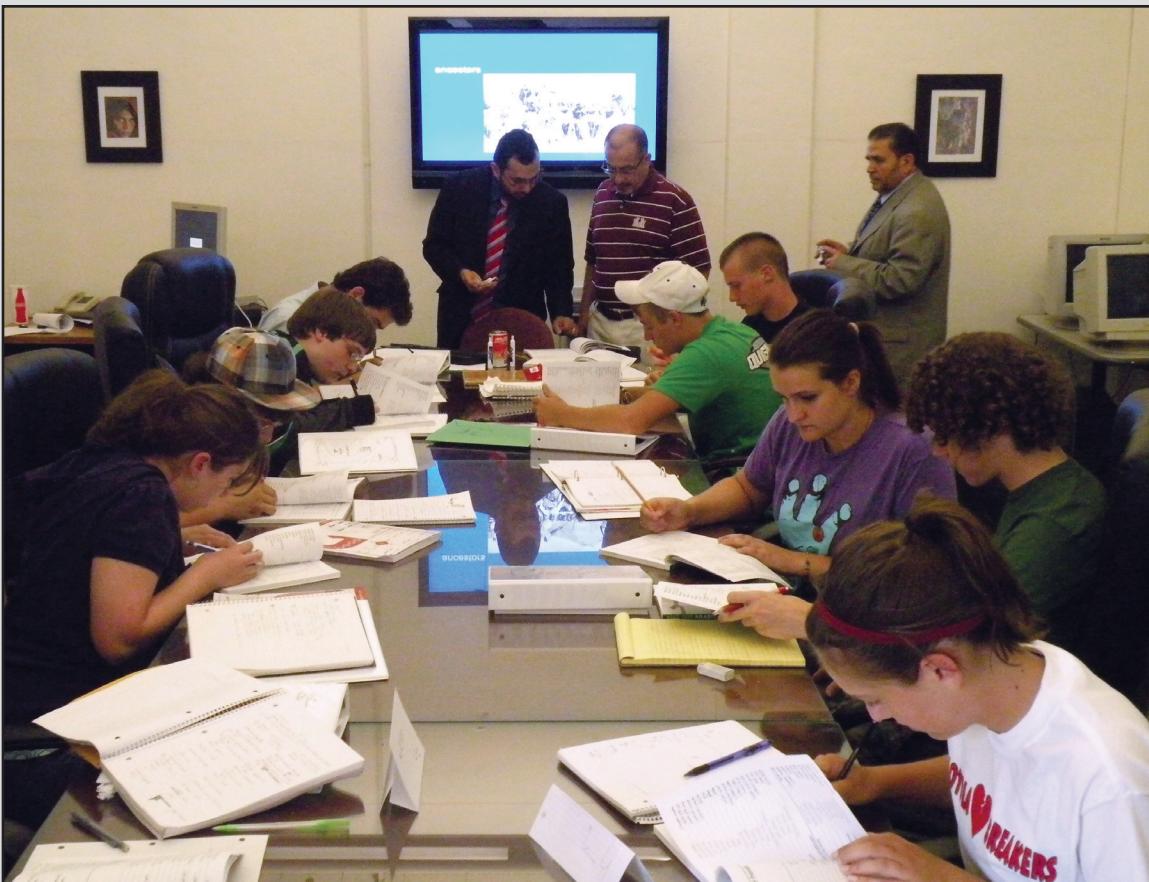
My time in the Caspian region was especially meaningful because it was during Ramadan. After fasting from sunrise to sunset, I was privileged to be the guest at many an iftar (the meal after sunset) in the villages of Mazandaran, surrounded by large families that welcomed a musafir. One especially memorable meal took place in the village of Arate, where the women of a family had made a special stew for the iftar meal out of sheep heads and other entrails [kal-e-pache], which was delicious with the different naans [breads] and a few spoons of freshly squeezed narenj juice as a garnish. I was thanked several times for being their guest, even though I insisted that the privilege was mine- but such are Persian manners of hospitality!

Glorious Iran (Continued)

An encore with a story of the Caspian provinces will be forthcoming in a future newsletter. For the impatient everything will be divulged on October 29. One final note, talking to one of the Emam's (holy leaders) on this trip, I learned that the revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini's grandfather was born in Lucknow and was an Indian, and Khomeini's father's middle name was Hindi (person of Indian origin or the language). Now just imagine if the grandfather had never left Lucknow, history would be so different...

Grant Brings Arabic Language Classes to Missoula Schools

By Cary Shimek, University Relations



Dr. Khaled Huthaily (left) and Mr. Samir Bitar (right) with high school students of Arabic in summer 2009.

After a nationwide competition, the U.S. Department of Education has awarded a five-year, \$764,000 grant to Missoula County Public Schools to create a full Arabic language and culture program for area students.

A ceremony to announce the new program was held at The University of Montana on Wednesday, Sept. 16. The event begins at 3:30 p.m. in University Center Room 331.

The grant will create the school district's first critical language program in collaboration with UM. A joint team of district and University personnel working under the direction of Dr. Alex Apostle, MCPS superintendent, and Mehrdad Kia, UM Associate Provost for International Programs, developed and wrote the grant.

Kia said program development will begin during the 2009-10 school year, with the first Arabic classes beginning in fall 2010. Ultimately,

Arabic will be taught in MCPS' three middle schools and three high schools. At the end of the Arabic courses of study, MCPS seniors will be eligible to enroll in advanced Arabic classes at UM.

He said current MCPS language teachers will receive intensive training in Arabic, and by 2014 the program will include three full-time credentialed Arabic teachers developed from the ranks of MCPS teachers.

"This program is intended to serve as a model for teaching in critical languages model other school districts in Montana and across the country," Kia said.

Team members responsible for writing the grant were Gail Becker, Becky Sorenson, Michal Malouf, Debbie Lowe, Libby Oliver and Lisa Moser of MCPS and Khaled Huthaily, Samir Bitar and Otto Koester of UM.

Public Presentation

"Iran and Its Resplendent Cultural and Historical Mosaic: Humanistic Reflections From a Recent Visit"



**Presented by Dr. Bharath Sriraman
Professor of Mathematical Sciences,
The University of Montana**

**Thursday, October 29, 7:00 PM
University Center 330**

**Sponsored by: International Programs, Central
and Southwest Asia Program, Maureen and
Mike Mansfield Center, Continuing Education,
and Persian Students Association**

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The University of
Montana

Central & Southwest Asia Brown Bag Lecture Series

All presentations are held from 12:00 noon to 1PM in the Central and Southwest Asia Program seminar room (Old Journalism 303) and are free and open to the public.

Tuesday, November 10
Seven Regions of Turkey
Presenter: **İşil Dönümçü**,
Modern and Classical Languages and
Literatures,
Central and Southwest Asia Program

Wednesday, December 2:
A Lady Griz in Kyrgyzstan
Presenter: **Jessa Linford**, Student,
The University of Montana

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