

# REPORT -

## JAI JAGAT YATRA IN IRAN

### February 4<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> 2020



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*There was a planned visit to Iran of twenty-five persons as part of the Jai Jagat march from India to Geneva in February 2020. As a result of the violent anti-government protests of November 2019, then the US-Iran conflict with the January 3<sup>rd</sup> assassination of General Soleimani, and then the shooting down of the Ukrainian airlines on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Iran was on high alert. For some days there was a potential war-like situation. In light of the changed circumstances, it was agreed that only six people ought to travel to Iran instead of the originally planned twenty-five participants. This included an additional two persons that had prior contacts in Iran and were able to dialogue with senior government leaders.*

## **Overview**

So whereas the original plan had been to make a short trip of one week to Iran; after arrival and evaluating the situation, it was decided to prolong the stay for a total of three weeks. Traveling was not difficult and it was not as alarming as was previously thought. There is often a negative image painted of the Middle East, especially about Iran, in the western media, and the presence and security of the western interests in the region had led to sanctions on Iran. However this did not change the people-to-people exchanges to Iran with many westerners traveling to Iran and appreciating the culture and its people. Undoubtedly the Iranian people are disappointed because sanctions prevents them from carrying on normal trade and tourism, two important sectors of the economy. For all of us, there was an openness and welcoming attitude. This was especially with the Indian participants because of the shared history and both being of eastern cultures.

As it turned out, senior leaders and central Ministers were not available for meetings as the country was reeling from multiple shocks including the death of the head of their Revolutionary Guard. The group was able to meet the Deputy Ambassador of the Swiss Embassy, and because they are the interlocutors for the United States in Iran, it was significant that they gave us such a strong and supportive message concerning our peace mission. It was concluded then, that the whole shape of the trip would have to change from being an effort at peace mediation, to a trip that explored the society and economy for how it was building internal peace in Iran.

During two weeks of travel in Iran, we covered a distance of 4000 km by road. The cities that we visited included Shiraz - the cultural capital of Iran; Bushier - one of the oldest cities of Iran; Bandar-abbas - an ancient sea port; Kerman - the traditional travel route to Pakistan and India; Yazd - the centre for Zoroastrian history; Isfahan - known for its Persian monuments; and Kashan - a desert city. What followed were many discussions with different groups of people throughout Iran including academics, activists, journalists, mayors, governors, businessmen, film makers, artists, faith leaders, scholars, students and other members of the public.

What was very fortuitous was meeting of Parvaney, the director of Payvand Aghvam Farhang Pars (PAFP), a company that operated in 32 provinces of Iran and showcased the work of women entrepreneurs through tours and exhibitions. She worked with her son Pooyon who was a tour operator to transmit to outsiders the rich heritage of the Iranian culture and its traditions. It was interesting that with sanctions preventing external trade, that the government supported local women's groups like PAFP to bring local culture, handicrafts,

village tourism together as a way to create livelihood. This was women's economic empowerment. There were still restrictions on women in terms of not going out alone and so this was something that they could do at home or in public places in groups.

We found that Iranians were aware of Mahatma Gandhi, and his principles of nonviolence and peace. They had experienced much conflict in the past, yet people we met, were peace-loving and they did not want their country to be plunged into war. Their approach led us to conclude that Iran could be one partner of the Jai Jagat participating in future exchanges as was illustrated by their Peace Museum in Isfahan; the Gandhi Park in Tehran; the Gandhi Chair that they were planning in the Institute of Philosophy in Tehran; the emphasis they put on local self-reliance in the economy; and the interest you had for programs on Gandhi. It was also evident that the Indian Embassy in Tehran was also supportive of extending Gandhi's ideas into their work with the Iranian government.

### **India's Connections to Iran as a Base for Building Peace**

Indo-Iranian (Persian) migrations are three thousand years old. These were two ancient civilizations that have been connected at different points of history. Historical evidence reveals that Indo-Aryans were mixed communities living and traveling between Persia and India. Also, because there was much interaction around the trade on the silk road through India and Persia and there was additionally the 'pepper road' from India through present day Iran to Europe.

Another important connection was the Zoroastrians (Parsis) that were basically Persians but after Muslims became predominant, they were persecuted and many fled to India between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Noted Parsis like Dr Homi Jahangir Bhabha, Cyrus Mistry, and Jamshedji Tata have contributed greatly to India's development. The noted Parsi scholar Maneckji Limji Hataria was also born in India, and was an early exponent of Indo-Parsi relations, and he brought children to India for education. The Zoroastrians set up an important temple in Yazd, and the fire pot in the main chamber was brought from India.

Sufism was transplanted from Persia to India. The Ni'matullah Wali, a sufi saint born in 1335 in Aleppo and died in the 1436 at over a hundred years later in Mahan in Persia. He traveled extensively through the Muslim world, and had studied in Mecca with Abdullah Yafe'i Qadri. After completing his studies, he lived in Samarkand in Central Asia for some years, during which time he met up with Tamerlane (Timur), the Turco-Mongol conqueror. As Ni'matullah shunned violence, he became a respected saint for the Sunnis and Shias. Sufism is a mystic form of the Muslim religion and he set up an order of dervishes. Ni'matullah's son, Shah Khalilullah was invited by the Sultanate of Bidar in Karnataka India, to promote his father's work, and did so around 1430 A.D.. India being a syncretic society was able to absorb sufism. Thereafter Ni'matullah's fame spread through Persia and India (although not recognized in India) and was a master to hundreds of thousands of people.

The great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore visited Iran in the 1930s; travelled to Bushehr, Shiraz, Isfahan and even visited the shrine of Sheikh Sa'di, one of the greatest classical poets. People travelled across great distances to meet Tagore and listen to his poetry. He was deeply touched and mentioned that while he was a loved poet in his country, he felt the warmth of the welcome in Iran.

Bollywood is perhaps India's greatest soft power, and Bollywood films are much loved in Iran. Actors like Amitabh Bacchan and Shahrukh Khan command a great following in the region.

There is a potential to learn from the people of Iran and to share peace building strategies at the global level. We in India can learn civic duty and local governance, and perhaps citizens of many countries can contribute towards building relationships with Iran through tourism and cultural exchange. The Jai Jagat Yatra was the much needed first step, and it seems the path is being created to walk further on the path of nonviolence and peace with people we met in Iran.

### **The People of Iran**

The Iranians were respectful, helpful, warm and welcoming throughout our visit. Never did they give us the feeling that our identity or our relationship with the western world was a barrier. It was indeed refreshing to see how Iranians were not suspicious of outsiders. This was important because the Jai Jagat team was Indian and French participants and representing many other international partners.

With regard to conflict and challenges that people faced, it was observed that in Iran, land and land-based resources were not a cause for internal conflict which was different from South Asia, Africa and Latin America. The government officials we met in Iran were well educated, articulate and aware of the challenges at the local level. Since we were treated so well by communities, it was hard for us to assess the various pressures under which citizens operated. We were in Iran at the time of national elections, and on the surface, everything proceeded normally, yet we appreciate that that elections operate very differently than those in India and other countries.

### **Role of Women**

There is a common misconception that in an 'Islamic' country, like Iran that all women are traditional because they wear head-dress; in fact, we found them to be modern in every way possible. Although women have restrictions on movement and are limited from certain public offices and employment, at the same time, we found them to be the leading and driving force of the local economy (unorganized sector) in Iranian society.

Historically there are some important women leaders and one among them that stood out from people we talked with, was Bibi Maryam Bakhtiari who was born in 1874 and died in 1937. She was a well educated reformer that fought for women's rights. Her family was connected to the Iranian Bakhtian revolution and with a tribal force that she joined in fighting against the cossacks and which later captured Tehran from Mohammed Ali Shah. Thereafter she began to oversee constitutional reforms.

Parvaney, the director of Payvand Aghvam Farhang Pars (PAFP), a company that operated in 32 provinces of Iran and showcased the work of women entrepreneurs showed that they were making many traditional handicrafts industry such as doll making, garment weaving, carpet

making and so forth. The hospitality and food sectors had women's active participation. There was also training centers for women like the Model School in Genevah. This had five hundred women including those from poor backgrounds, that were learning arts and crafts, shipping and fashion design. These provided women an opportunity to be out of the house. It gave women self-confidence and also some economic means to them.

### **Relating Iranian Handicrafts to Peace**

Through the women entrepreneurs, it was clear that there were links between handicrafts and peace. One of the handicrafts was: kashkooli carpet weaving which are made by five major nomadic tribes, known as the Kashtoi of southern Iran. They have preserved their traditional techniques of dying, spinning, and weaving. There are also carpets being made by the Lur nomads, the Baloch tribes and the Turkmens. It is known that of the world's best carpets are made in Iran and these are used for prayer and meditation.

Doll-making is a highly developed folk art in Iran. Iranians see this as a form of peace making. There is a special type of doll that is made as a symbol of peace. The web page of the Museum of Doll and Culture describes that through dolls, children "better understand ourselves and other peoples, which is a source of friendship and empathy, the first steps in achieving world peace between humans".

Persian calligraphy was an art to write holy words of the Qur'an and other religious quotes. It has been a decorative art in shrines or mosques. It has been used for peace purposes in taking quotes from famous writers.

There were many other handicrafts such as the copper production in Isafan; the pottery making; and the handprinting, which is world renown. These were related to peace making in so far as they contributed to a self-sufficient local economy. Despite the severe sanctions that have been imposed on the country, it is interesting to see how the local economic development has been a survival strategy.

### **A Remarkable Local Alternative:**

Mr. Focsihi who was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj (village self-sufficiency) developed a model village called Keshit. In fact, he had come back to Iran after being out of the country for some years, and when he returned he developed a water management system that enabled the community to have constant source of water. This is situated in a dry zone and there are now many palm trees. The village reconstruction also ensured that women had the opportunity to bathe in the canal and that there was also sufficient water for agriculture. As everyone has a plot of land, the community has organized their agriculture. Public spaces were organized so children could have playgrounds. The village was very clean. Many villages are reconstructing themselves in an effort to attract tourists and there are nice guest houses and ecotourism. This is an income earning activity for the village.





## **Culture, Traditions, Arts and Development**

Persians have been known to travel across the globe for centuries. Along with their trade, has been a rich culture of music, art, crafts and cinema. Persian music has a long tradition that spans centuries and is greatly respected.

Iran is known for its hundreds of very well-kept ancient monuments, palaces, gardens and shrines of Sufi saints, that are all maintained and kept spotlessly clean, in many cases with the help of UNESCO and with the Iranian government's partnership in protecting and preserving these ancient remnants of history. Iranian architecture is a wonder to behold.

In the cities, towns and villages all seem to be very well-planned. The local people make it a point to keep the public places clean and free of pollution. The cities are populated, but not chaotic; with a good balance between both eastern and western architecture. On the trip we

visited five mayors and they explained how they were trying to make the public spaces friendly for the poor, disabled, women and for street vendors.

While Iran has a fully modern medical system (although currently with a lack of drugs due to sanctions), they also have a traditional health practice known as *Avisan*, which is similar to the Indian system of Ayurveda in its concept of *Tridhoshha* (vata, pita and kapha). The ideas of Islam and the principles of Gandhi are in total agreement on the vices of alcohol consumption. Iran is a country where, in keeping with the principles of Islam, alcohol is banned through their traditions. And except for the diplomatic circles, it is unavailable.

### **Agriculture, Technology and Environment**

Iran has carried out many technological advances and implementation especially for water irrigation and harvesting, soil renewal and organic farming. Some farmers are planning to move towards millet production as a primary food grain (which is important since they have severe water shortages). In the semi-arid areas, architecture includes traditional wind towers as a form of cooling buildings, which are currently not used, but that seems like an energy conservation measure that certain people are considering reviving. They use ceramic dishes for eating and carrying items which use less water. They are looking towards making the most out of their largely mountainous terrain where land and water are both scarce.

### **Respect for Mahatma Gandhi in Iran**

Our visit to the Iran Research in Philosophical Studies in Tehran and the Centre for Peace and Development in QOM demonstrated interest in Mahatma Gandhi by in setting up a Chair of Gandhian Studies. In Isfahan there is a peace museum where we had the opportunity of exploring different possibilities of conducting workshops and training for peace building. There is scope to amplify the presence of Gandhi's nonviolence, by establishing a Gandhi Foundation, setting up a Gandhi Vatika (garden) and installing a Gandhi statue.

Having a Chair of Gandhian Studies and establishing a Mahatma Gandhi Foundation could assist in identifying and strengthening Iranians that could act as peace leaders in the region. To begin a process of identifying peace workers, we were planning to join a conference on the island of Kish; unfortunately this coincided with the global panic over the Corona virus and it was canceled. The Jai Jagat Yatra although truncated, has made some important initial steps in strengthening peace making in relation to people's respect for Mahatma Gandhi.

### **Summary**

The three-week program in Iran included one-on-one interactions, group discussions and large meetings that communicated the objective of the Jai Jagat March to propagate the practice of nonviolence along with message of Mahatma Gandhi as well as to learn of the local history, traditions, and livelihood patterns of Iran. What we learned is that peace had been deeply imbibed in the society. Sine additional recommendations were made for follow up. They were:

-Formation of a Mahatma Gandhi Foundation with the collaboration of the Indian Embassy. The Indian embassy has already established a Gandhi Garden and the Jai Jagat has offered a Gandhi statue that can be installed in this garden.

-Promoting the peace building efforts that Iranians are doing in-country by showcasing their rural economy and women entrepreneurs.

- Organizing cultural exchange programs between artists, intellectuals, students and social workers and inviting young people from Iran to be part of the peace training programs.

-A Gandhi Chair has been accepted to be established in the Iran Institute of Research on Philosophy in Tehran and discussions are going on with the Centre for Peace and Development of QOM.

-A small team of delegates have shown interest in joining the Jai Jagat Geneva Forum in Geneva, Switzerland to participate in a week-long program in September 2020.

- Deliver the solidarity letter from the Mayor of Abarkuh for the Mayor of Geneva

