

SETTINGS

Among the Believers and Would-Be Leavers

Iran 1980-81: Chaitanya Kalbag in flashback mode

My first overseas reporting trip was to Iran nearly half a century ago. I have the Iraqis to thank for it.

I was a reporter with *New Delhi* magazine (which shut shop in 1981) in its namesake city. In 1979, soon after the Islamic revolution toppled Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran, I wrote a piece about it titled *Iran: A Return to Medievalism?* In December 1980, soon after the start of the Iran-Iraq war, I got a call from the Iraqi embassy asking if I would like to go on a conducted trip to the battlefield, and meet Saddam Hussein in Baghdad — an offer too good to refuse.

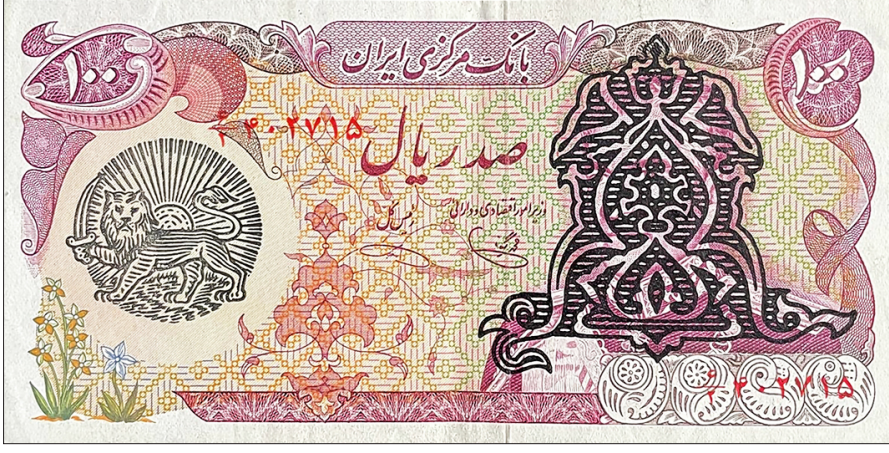
However, the day after I got my visa, the Iraqi embassy called my editor. I was to return to the embassy as they wanted to revoke my visa. The ambassador had noticed an article in the magazine that he did not like.

I returned dejected to my office. A couple of hours later, I got a call from the Iranian embassy offering me a visa to make an unchaperoned visit to their country, no strings attached!

By happy coincidence, Iran Air had resumed weekly flights from Bombay to Tehran after a disruption caused by the revolution. I was one of the very few passengers on an almost empty Boeing 747. As I walked into the terminal at Mehrabad Airport, I heard the sound of smashing glass, a man's voice raised in anger, and smelled a cloud of alcoholic fumes. It turned out the



WAR CRAFT: Even after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, banknotes with the deposed Shah's photo continued to circulate. But on some banknotes, the Islamic revolutionary government superimposed its own symbols on the Shah's face. The old and the new were legal tender side by side



COURTESY: CHAITANYA KALBAG

customs officers were seizing and smashing any alcohol brought in by hapless passengers. The air in the arrival hall was intoxicating!

What the RBI clerk said

I was to see the ghosts of times past everywhere I went for the next few weeks in Iran. There were many signs of how good the times had been for people who had some money when the Shah was in charge of their destiny. At my very first meal in my Tehran hotel, the waiter suggested I try some of their caviar. I'd never had caviar before in my life, and it would have been too expensive to contemplate on my modest Indian journalist's salary. In Tehran, I discovered that it was plentifully available at throwaway prices. In the streets, I saw people looking like a curious mix of

Western and Islamic fashion.

When I went to the bank to purchase local currency, I realised the wisdom of the RBI clerk back home who had advised me to take British pounds instead of US dollars. The bank manager sidled up to me. He offered me an exchange rate four times the official one, with no receipt and everything in cash. I asked him, startled, how he was doing this. He said he needed to collect enough foreign exchange to spirit his family out of the country.

Thanks to this bonanza, I had enough money to extend my one-week trip to three. My visa was renewed week after week without demur at the immigration office. I was able to visit the cities of Shiraz and Isfahan, absorb the local flavours and wander the streets of Tehran unhindered. I was never stopped by anybody or questioned.

Life seemed normal, and

there were few signs of the war with Iraq that had broken out a few months earlier. No air raid sirens, no blackouts. The television in my hotel room showed a lot of propaganda for the revolution with the Imam Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's brooding face popping up quite frequently. Many cinemas seemed to be showing American movies dubbed in Farsi. This was odd because the 52 Americans held hostage at the US embassy were just a stone's throw away. Their captivity had, by then, extended more than a year.

On Christmas Day, 1980, as I was walking past a newsstand, I spied a copy of *Time* magazine with John Lennon on the cover. The Beatles singer had been assassinated in New York early that month. In the United States, Ronald Reagan had been elected president, and there was increasing talk of the

hostages being released just before he took office in January. This seemed more of a calculated insult to Jimmy Carter, who had dispatched a disastrous rescue mission to Iran in the spring of 1980.

Chelo kebabs & the Pasdaran

In that pre-Google era, my main reporting tool was my shoe leather. Aside from conversations with the man on the street, shopkeepers and academics, I benefited from the deep knowledge of Iran's history, culture and people held by India's ambassador in Tehran, Akbar Mirza Khaleeli, as well as the All India Radio's Tehran correspondent C.V. Raman.

The department stores in Tehran seemed to be in a hurry to get rid of their pre-revolution stocks. I bought an entire set of ex-

cellent stainless steel cutlery and a tomato slicer (a novelty in India at the time) at rock bottom prices.

Although I enjoyed eating the *noons*, *chelo kebabs* and other delicacies, I discovered that deep in the heart of Tehran I could get unlimited free Indian vegetarian food at the Hare Krishna temple, which had been left unscathed.

There were other incongruities. In the beautiful cities of Shiraz and Isfahan, I saw people selling a lot of their household possessions on the pavements, probably in preparation for fleeing the country. On a sidewalk, I purchased a dog-eared copy of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, which seemed an appropriate title for the times.

Throughout this period, nobody from the government suggested I visit the war front. It was still early in the war, which dragged on for eight years before it entered a

bloody stalemate in 1988.

There was frequent snowfall and ice on the sidewalks. Early one morning, I was heading towards a street corner where a handcart vendor was selling steaming mounds of beets. I didn't notice that there was a four-foot deep gutter running alongside the avenue. I slipped on the ice and fell into the ditch.

Two revolutionary guards called Pasdaran came strolling by and saw I was in trouble. They hauled me up. In my broken Farsi, I explained that my glasses were still at the bottom of the ditch. Both men handed me their assault rifles and clambered down to retrieve my glasses. For a few minutes, I was left holding weapons of mass destruction. We all parted with friendly smiles and thanks.

Everywhere I went, I paid in cash for things I purchased. The revolutionary government had had no time

to print new currency notes. Most had the Shah's face on them still. Many of the notes now also had the Shah's visage defaced by symbols of their culture.

Nuts!

Iran already had a relationship of several decades of love and hate with America by then. Now when I look back, I find echoes of what we are hearing, seeing and reading today: oil, sanctions and civilisational differences.

I was starting to run out of money and booked my return. I bought a few packets of pistachio nuts to take back as gifts for family and friends. When I reached Bombay airport, I found myself at the tail end of a long queue of Indian workers returning from the Gulf being given a tough inspection by customs officers.

I dozed off on my baggage cart. I was shaken awake by a uniformed officer who asked me where I was coming from. I said I had flown in from Tehran. He asked me to accompany him to the head of the queue and told one of his colleagues to process my arrival first. The other officer made me open my suitcase, took a cursory glance inside, fished out a fistful of pistachio nuts, shoved them into his drawer, and waved me on. "Let him go," he said to his colleagues, "he is coming from Iran".

Chaitanya Kalbag has covered many historical world events in his five decades as a journalist for several national and international publications and news organisations