

Tehran, a city of surprises

By Fatima Bhutto

I began my day in Tehran on the subway. The Tehran Metro is, if you will pardon my overzealous language, an absolute wonder. Situated in central parts of the city, it runs on three lines. I bought a ticket on the Imam Khomeini line, the red line, and queued up with Tehranis on their way to work at the Haft-e Tir station to embark on some sightseeing.

"Do we have to sit in the women's only cabins?" I asked my interpreter Samira as we waited on the platform equipped with TV screens announcing the arrival of the next trains. She waved her hands, "If you like". The grey subway announced its arrival with some music, which was conveniently replayed at every single stop accompanied by the station's name. We hopped on and I felt like I was on the London tube. Samira had to push me off the subway; I was quite willing to hang on to my seat for the rest of the day.

We walked to Sarkis Cathedral on Karim Khan-e-Zand Street, an Armenian Orthodox church built in the late 1960s. Unlike the gothic churches hidden away in Sadder and under heavy Ranger protection, Sarkis Cathedral was a prominent landmark in Tehran. It is said to be the most visible non-Islamic building in the city; just in case you miss it, across the street painted on a large building is a mural of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus in her arms, angels sprinkled around their halos. I asked Samira (whose name is pronounced saam-ee-raah, which I kept butchering by not properly elongating my vowels) if religious minorities felt safe practicing their religion in an Islamic Republic. "They are the same as all of us, they speak Farsi, we look the same, we have the same names - there's no way of telling us apart". "Except that they speak Armenian" I ventured. Samira waved her hands again. She spoke a little Armenian too.

There is so much to discover in this megalopolis of 14 million people; it even makes Karachi look quaint and small. The landscape of Iran is said to have been continuously inhabited by a single nation of people longer than any other part of land the world over. Single nation of people sounds difficult to stomach in an age where nationalism, identity, and ethnicity dominate much of our politics, but Aryans aside, Iran is home to Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Lors (said to be descendants of those single nation people) and Balochis. Safak Pavey, a Turkish woman who heads the United Nations High Commission for Refugee's external relations office, told me that in the early 1990s, after the Gulf War (part one) Iran was home to 4.5 millions refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan. "Iran should receive thanks for that; can you imagine a European country giving 4.5 million refugees asylum?" While the number of Iraqis and Afghani refugees is slowly decreasing with repatriation projects UNHCR and the Iranian government are initiating, Iran remains a veritable melting pot. Tehran itself is composed of a diverse and unusual mix of ethnicities, nationalities, and religions and those people -including Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians - live safely and comfortably alongside Muslims and have done so for thousands of years. In Tarjish Square there is even a Little Pakistan where immigrants have set up a small bazaar of Pakistani made textiles, embroideries, and shoes. What can't you find in Tehran?

My rigorous sightseeing program continued with a stop at the Sa'd Abad Palace, once a summer home for the last Pahlevi Shah. It was a summer home the size of Malir and everything inside, except for the carpets, was French. Marie Antoinette looks down at you from every lamp, every table top, and every chest of drawers. It was a bit much. We toured the offices where Pahlevi senior is said to have plotted the CIA sponsored coup against the populist and democratically elected Mohammad Mossadegh, who nationalized Iran's oil, took photographs by the boots of Pahlevi junior's statue (the only remaining part, it was cemented to the ground and couldn't be torn off with the rest of his monstrous bronze image) and marveled at the fully equipped dentist's chair installed in the Shah's Niyavaran Palace, feet away from his bedroom, just in case such an emergency would arise. It's a miracle the Pahlevis left in one piece, so opulent was their grandeur.

I met with Mitra, a journalist, later in the day still disturbed by the ostentatious lifestyle of Iran's monarchs. How can these two very extreme histories, Western and Islamic, exist in one country? "Look," she explained "Instead of instinctively bashing the post revolutionary period, we should be able to acknowledge the positive gains brought by the Revolution. The Revolution helped spur on today's feminist movement - in the Shah's days only affluent families would send their daughters to universities for higher education. The poorer classes did not. This," she gestured tugging at her head scarf "made it more acceptable for women to attend large co-ed universities and pursue higher learning. It doesn't have to be celebrated - it's not an ideal situation - but it needs to be acknowledged. Today 65% of university students in Iran are women".

Mitra is an elegant and professional woman, the weekend before Muharram she was wearing red; I wouldn't have pegged her as having Revolutionary sympathies. And she didn't necessarily, but like most Iranians she was willing to balance the difficult and sometimes frustrating changes of the Revolution with its benefits. It is impossible to essentialize in Iran, impossible to paint things black or white - or red - there are so many facets to life in this country. Those diametric opposites do share the same space in Iran and its people, and perhaps Mitra, are examples of its dynamism.

Mitra continued "Did you know that at government health centers you can receive free contraceptives? Or that the topic of birth control is spoken about openly?" I didn't. Women in mosques are permitted to discuss reproductive rights, there are no taboos surrounding it, and in recent years counseling dealing with sexual and physical health has become compulsory for couples before marriage. Before receiving a marriage license, couples have to attend not only a counseling session but must also pass a university class centering on sexual health, HIV, and addiction.

There was more that deserved acknowledgement and I struggled to write as quickly as Mitra continued down the list. Government health centers are setting up rehabilitation centers for the country's large number of heroin addicts, even offering needle exchanges and methadone doses to those in need. Female circumcision was banned by Khomeini years ago, and while practiced dangerously in neighboring African and Arab countries, it is virtually non-existent in Iran. Religious minorities now receive the same amount of blood money in the case of bereavement that Muslims do, whereas before the Revolution they were only offered half the amount that Muslims could claim.

Mitra told me incredulously that sex change operations are legal in Iran. Though the procedures are sanctioned as a way of warding off homosexuality, a major crime in the country, it was the Imam Khomeini who gave his approval to gender reassignment while in exile in Iraq. This was light-years before the very topic became acceptable, and even fashionable, in Western countries. If Mitra and I had not spent the previous hour discussing the freedom of the press and Marxist blogs (very popular in Iran) I would have thought I was being taken for a ride. Even my liberal bearings could not absorb this last piece of information. "You can't be serious" I said, half expecting her to tell me she was just having a go at a foreign journalist for fun. "No, I am absolutely serious" Mitra insisted, amused at my look of utter disbelief. After medical and psychological evaluations, he or she is given a temporary permit which allows them to dress as the gender they will soon become without any fear of punishment. "Once the operation is done, sometimes in government hospitals, he or she can legally get married and live officially as the gender they have chosen for themselves". Gender reassignment is not as openly discussed as birth control, Mitra went on, ignoring my stumped look, but you can see interviews with such people in the newspapers and even advertisements sometimes. Does any of this happen in Pakistan? She reasonably asked since I hadn't stopped talking about Iran and Pakistan's similarities from the moment we sat down. "Not exactly..."

Before Mitra and I parted ways I thanked her for her time and for opening up new windows to Iran for me. Every hour spent in Tehran is an education; ideas are debated freely and openly, past and present shared without prejudice, politics and gender reassignment equal fodder for conversation.

This is so much more than the Iran of my imagination. I cannot wait for tomorrow's lesson.