



## PERSIA: People Place and Plenty

*Where the Carpet lies is thy place*

Pahlavan or mighty warrior was Rostam, a legendary figure in Persian Mythology who fought fearlessly crushing the demons in his path so that he could reach his jailed friend, the King. The heroes journey of Rostam makes Iranians (Aryans) proud of their history, and their identity is in keeping with their colourful traditions, historical and interesting festivals, and rich Persian culture (Spencer 1997). Persia or modern day Iran is a Land of magnificent mosaic mosques, exotic tea gardens and wonderful bargaining bazaars, once the Land of Lions and Lion Tamers, a legacy lives on engraved on sides of mountains and rock faces seen at ancient burial sites throughout the country. Iranians are rich in ancient history, myths and legends and symbolism; all contributing to their religious beliefs and sustainable development.

Two world summits have passed raising global questions and awareness of the destruction of the ecology through population explosion and manipulating nature through scientific and technological means, and carefree attitudes to the relationship between people and between people and the environment. Common goals were proposed in finding balance between the environment and world civilization (Gore 1992). Iran acted almost immediately to reforms after the first World Summit in 1992, whereby in 1993, the Environment Protection Supreme Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran established the National Committee on Sustainable Development (NCSC) initiating strategies at national level on growth policies and economic reform to meet the Summit's objectives. New policies in forward thinking were passed in the areas of ecological, social and economic sustainability (National Review/Assessment 2002).

Situated on a plateau surrounded by rugged mountain ranges and central deserts with shifting sands, Iran is meeting its commitments with traditional recipes inherited from the past. Education, employment, home, health and hygiene are at the heart of every responsible person in Iran. The Government since 1989 has taken positive measures to resolve issues of over population and poverty, tightening the gap between gender roles,

coastal preservation and biodiversity, protection of endangered species, water shortages and conservation, the destruction of rolling sands, and the ongoing interconnectedness between city and country with the goal of achieving the flow of sustainable balance between all spheres (Da Silva 2001).

Traditional values and wisdom manage to sustain 60 million people of Iran, a population that has doubled in 16 years, imposing a lot of pressure on the earth leading to poverty. Government subsidies and food vouchers are made available for underprivileged and vulnerable groups. In 1994 the Law for Family Planning and Birth Control was ratified and in the last 10 years the population growth has reduced remarkably from 3% down to 1.41% (National Review/Assessment 2002).

In Iran, both men and women are leaders in education, research and in all facets of government, the head of state and home is the man. Like any successful company, the home, too requires a figurehead, someone who is respected and supported well to lead and guide the family (National Review/Assessment 2002). Unity is important for sustaining any kind of growth, moral values and standards of living are high in Iranian minds where city folk, country villagers, nomads and governments work hand in hand to solve problems of the day. Traditional values and ancient social structures command the lives of all Easterners and their affinity with the land is part and parcel of their very existence (Kavunedus; Hammond 1972).

Evidence of sustainable development in Article 15 of the Iranian Constitution prohibits activities that harm the environment. In 1989, the Green Front of Iran was set up by four medical students who raised an awareness on environmental issues making them public, acting as mediators with government officials and working with school children. The Green Front today is active throughout Iran, it has over 6,000 paying members who organize tree-planting days and highlighting environmental dangers via mass media. The Green Front is also involved in offering solutions on endangered species such as the Caspian seals, Asian cheetahs, the Siberian Crane, the Houbara Bustard, the Yellow Iranian Deer, the Marine Turtles, the Tiger (danger of extinction), all protected by nationwide protection schemes; there are education programmes on the environment and biodiversity preservation in schools and on radio and television (Da Silva 2001; National Review/Assessment 2002).

The Marine Environment Research Project covers Iran's coastal areas protecting biodiversity, most importantly sturgeon breeding. The Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman lie to the south and the Caspian Sea to the north of Iran where fishing is the industry and caviar made from sturgeon eggs draw the tourists and the export trade. Iran is a member of the Caspian Sea Environment Programme (CEP) and Regional Organisation for Protection of Marine Environment (ROPME) (National/Review Assessment 2002).

Country folk are much more conservative than city people and are in tune with maintaining a balance with the earth; they use less energy, use water sparingly, and have recycling methods in place without contributing to environmental damage. Water is scarce in Iran, most rivers run dry in the summer months, therefore farming is difficult

for the villagers, yet land blooms through the use of ancient type irrigation sustaining the people and the economy (Spencer 1997).

Ancient practices of irrigation, known as the kariz and qanat systems, sustain the shepherds and farmers in the countryside of Iran. Farmers tap into wells and water canals to water their fields, and the village elders meet to make decisions on water allocation; an individual called 'mirab' is paid by the community to manage the distribution of water to the desired areas (Da Silva 2001; World Food Summit 2002). In the centre of all villages, a water channel or djuba (juy) is found, the main water supply and lifeline for the entire village (Rajendra & Kaplan 1993). The government has a 30-year plan to construct large dams to remove water shortages faced by country people (Namey-e Otaqe Bazargani 1996).

Iran's land mass is 164 million ha, 34 million ha deserts and arid lands of which 12 million are covered in shifting sands. The National Desertification Combat Programme for controlling running sands is working on sapling plantation, seed plantation, seed scattering and mulching resulting in rejuvenating 4 million ha of the desert lands; an international research centre was established in the city of Yazd in 2000 overseeing progress in controlling desert lands (National Review/Assessment 2000).

The following statement was made at the World Food Summit, 10-13 June 2002 held in Rome:

*International organizations may have the best of intentions when they propose the latest thinking to resolve development problems. But proposals may not be suited to local traditions, and in many cases, effective solutions are already in place.*

In Iran, traditional knowledge solves modern-day problems. The connection of Iranian cities, villagers and nomadic tribes stand united by tradition, their social systems and interconnectedness have proved that the old systems can work well even in modern times (Namey-e Otaqe Bazargani 1996). In fact, some 96 independent tribes and 547 clans live modestly and happily in outlying areas, many without electricity and pumped water. Life in the city and life in the country look different to the passerby, but all is relative, one depending on the seasons for sustenance while in tune with the earth and the other depending on changing technology competing for status in the modern world, yet, both bound by four thousand years of Persian history uniting the different ethnic groups in cities and country alike (Namey-e Otaqe Bazargani (1996).

Villagers and nomads soften their hands, hair and feet with henna, a way of relaxing from their daily chores; they make up 43% of Iran's population, living like they have done for centuries without electricity and modern farming technology, their centre of life is the mosque, their faith in God together with their ancient traditions sustain them. The more traditional a village is, the more likely it is self-sufficient. Farming involves manual labour and for some, the use of animals for ploughing, irrigation, weeding, reaping and threshing. International agencies cooperate with the government and local National

Growth Organisations in rural areas to find solutions to any existing environmental and social problems (Da Silva 2001).

The cities of Iran are like any city in western countries, with cars, buildings, traffic lights, fine homes, gardens and lawns, and excessive rubbish and contamination scares at sewerage outlets. People rush to work, schools, shops, depending on modern technology and competing for the best that life has to offer. Tehran, the capital city, is an example of the old and new that grew from expanding villages, where modern buildings are built on top of what used to be the best agricultural lands (Da Silva 2001) resulted in farmers being pushed further outward to farm less arable land.

However, sustainable development is found in the 90% of Iran's buildings made of mud bricks, protecting homes from the extremes of temperature in summer and winter. Wind-towers have been constructed above the roof line to capture the wind, air conditioning the homes. Village buildings have been built closely to each other as protection from sand storms and heat. In the south of Iran, a large clay wall circles the villages, an added protector from the elements and the strong winds that blow at 180 kms an hour, sometimes for 120 days inside the wall, there are lots of little streets leading to the different family homes, in contrast with the north of Iran where vegetation acts as a barrier from winds gaining momentum, therefore an outer wall is not needed (Rajendra and Kaplan 1993).

Nomadic Tribes dot the country side of Iran sustaining themselves, moving from place to place as shepherds seeking out new pastures and favourable climatic conditions for their livestock; sheep are kept in the fertile plains and in the shadow of mountains, whereas, goats, camels, donkeys survive in less fertile deserts of the interior. There are some 1 million of nomadic people inhabiting along the border and inland plains of Iran. These gallant herders and farmers live in collapsible goat hair tents and move their people and their livestock from winter quarters to summer quarters travelling on foot or mule and camel, walking or riding long distances during a year. They contribute to the country's economy in animal husbandry, farming barley, wheat and other grains and trade in animal and traditional products such as wool, Gilim and Jajim, special types of rugs (Namey-e Otaqe Bazargani 1996). The tribal women and their children do most of the manual work, while the men engage in the business of bartering and taking care that everyone plays an important and productive role in their society. Bartering is still practiced, for example exchanging rugs, butter, milk and other goods for sugar, salt and cooking oil (Namey-e Otaqe Bazargani 1996; Da Silva 2001). The Nomads' objective in life is to sustain their families and retain their customs.

Qashqaie, Boyer Ahmad Olia, Arab and Basseri Tavayef to name only a few of the tribes in the Fars Province oppose change, even though the government is offering land and water and the construction of suitable accommodation to shelter them and their cattle to alleviate the hot summers and freezing winters, a permanent residence where they can use fixed looms for weaving better quality carpet. Carpet weaving and cloth manufacture are traditionally Persian, hand woven articles are in competition with machine-made but the quality still lies in hand made carpet. Persian carpet has many uses in Iran, apart from

being a major export alongside oil products, it is used as doors to tents, for sleeping and sitting on and in some villages used for windbreaks, carpet is a sign of prestige and comfort, admiration and wealth, a Persian proverb, 'where the carpet lies is thy house'. The Qashqaie and other nomads are very proud to live the life that they live; isolation has helped to keep their identity. Even though they oppose change despite the government's push for settlement, they provide economic security and protection to their families costing the government nothing (Martin, unpub.).

Families take care of each other and are not looked upon as a burden, but as an honourable responsibility. The elderly are highly respected, they are seen as wise and a key to family stability. It is considered appropriate and rewarding for Iranian families to live with and care for their aging relatives (Rajendra & Kaplan 1993).

In Conclusion, Iran appears to be in control of sustaining population growth and poverty, it has an understanding on gender requirements and is tackling the issues on biodiversity in coastal regions while protecting endangered species. It is keeping water on tap and controlling rolling sands as well as maintaining harmony between city dwellers and country villagers. Family values and attitudes contribute to sustainable development and the preservation of ancient traditions where moral values of caring and sharing are instilled into the daily life of the Iranians contributing to tolerance and understanding of man and the environment.

*Ah make the most of what we yet may spend,  
Before we too into the dust descend;  
Dust into dust, and under dust, to lie,  
Sans wine, sans song, sans singer and – sans end!*

From The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.

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