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Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Accidental foreigners

Young Iranian migrants in Pune and Kuala Lumpur

PhD thesis

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Abstract

Over the last two decades a sizable community of Iranians have made their way to Malaysia and India. Kuala Lumpur¹ in Malaysia and Pune² in India have become hosts to some of the biggest Iranian communities in Asia. In the 1980s, in the wake of the Islamic Revolution and during the Iran – Iraq war, waves of Iranians moved to the West. In general they presumed that their stay in the West, mainly in southern California, but also in Germany, the UK, Sweden and France, would be temporary. They had their bags packed during the first few years, ready to return back home as soon as things would calm down. The situation did not reverse however, and thousands of Iranians made the US and Europe their home. 30 years later, a common topic of conversation in Iran is the

¹ Capital of Malaysia, around 1.8 million habitants, with a tropical climate. Kuala Lumpur is diverse, with large Chinese and Indian communities. Bahasa Malaysia is the principal language, and English is widely spoken.

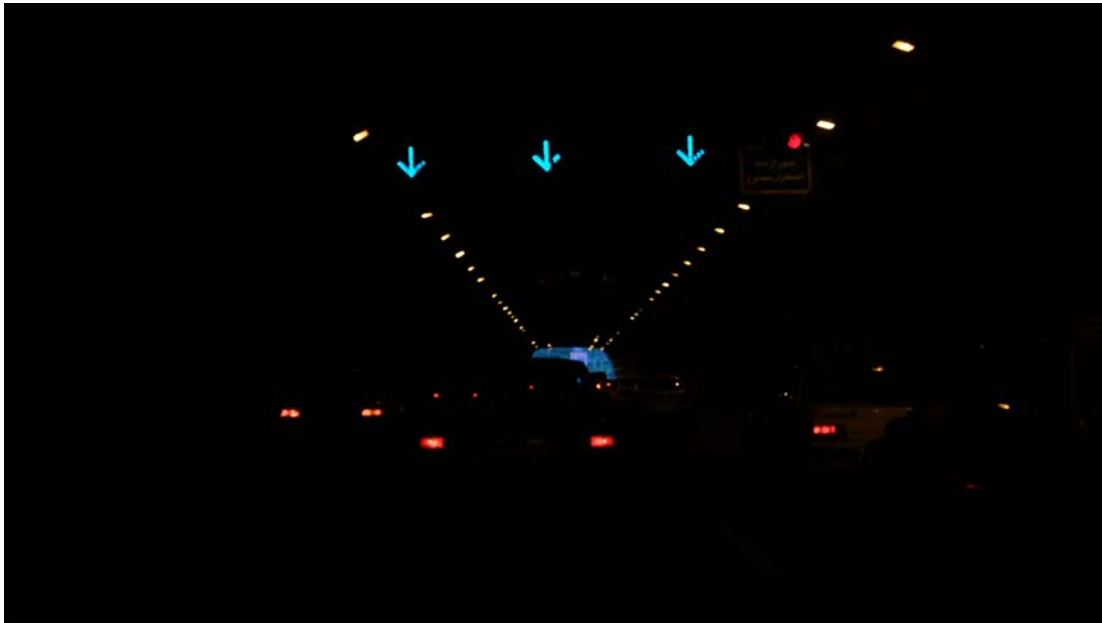
² Pune is growing fast, and is known for its universities. Smaller than Mumbai, only a few hours away by car, it is popular among Indian as well as foreign students.

ways available to leave the country. Moving abroad has become an obsession for the urban youth of Iran.

However, these days it is not so easy to leave the country. In the days of the Shah it was easy for someone with an Iranian passport to visit Europe. Today, because of the political situation, it has become very difficult to get a visa for the Schengen area or North America – the traditional destinations for Iranians. The options for Iranians who want to emigrate are limited especially if they want to move to the West. The neighbouring countries are usually not options that appear attractive. However, during the last two decades other destinations have emerged and thousands of Iranians have moved to Malaysia and India, mainly to Kuala Lumpur and Pune as mentioned.

While there is a wealth of literature on Iranians who emigrated to the West very little is known of the Iranians who left for countries east of Iran. In this thesis the trajectories and perceptions of young Iranians who left for India and Malaysia are explored.

1. Life is elsewhere: An introduction



Heavy traffic in one of many tunnels in Tehran, October 2015 (all photos are by the author)

Behnaz³ and I were sitting in the café next to the *khaneye honarmandan*, the “house of artists” in the central part of Tehran, a busy place in a historical and very beautiful building, with a theatre, a gallery, a vegetarian restaurant – unusual in Iran – and a café. We were sitting outside, on the veranda, and it was difficult to find an empty table. Behnaz was working for a newspaper. She was an artist herself, being a former art-school student. She had married young, with a prominent journalist. They had both been active in the *jombesh*, “the Green Movement”⁴ in the days leading to the presidential election of 2009. Her husband had been jailed afterwards, for his political engagement and his articles about the reformist movement. When he was released from prison he became increasingly addicted to opium and subsequently heroin. She had a horrible time, she

³ Since many of my informants wished to remain anonymous, all personal names and some other details of the individuals mentioned have been changed.

⁴ The reformist movement aspiring to change the government and making Ahmadinejad leave the president-post in 2009.

told me, in taking care of him. Her family and friends tried to persuade her to leave him, but she wouldn't. Leaving him would kill him, she thought. She took care of him when he was at his worst. Slowly, he managed to kick his habit and to recover. He returned to his writing and established himself as an influential and successful figure in the media. By then she was exhausted. She had helped him while he was at the bottom, but now she was tired - while his career was thriving. "I love this place", she said, looking around in the café. "There is a powerful and special bond between all of us sitting here in the café. I know that everyone, like me, was out on the streets that summer and the months leading up to it. This is a common experience we share. Each and everyone at the tables around us are my brothers and sisters. We walked together that summer and have something strong in common". Behnaz was depressed. Despite eagerness to leave, it is also meant a sacrifice: loss of family, friends, and projects. She had the chance to leave to Europe with her husband who had received an offer at a university. But for the first time she was not so interested in leaving. She wanted to stay with her friends and work with her own projects in Tehran. A year later, however, she had left Iran and gone to France. Despite her reluctance for leaving Tehran, Behnaz's position is envied by many young Iranians for whom Europe would be their first choice of destination.



A common type of garage door in Shiraz, October 2015

1.1 Previous research, motivation and Iranian migrants

There has not, to my awareness, been any research on Iranian migration to India and Malaysia in the context of the election in 2009. Some academic attention has been given Iranian communities in the West. Los Angeles is home to the biggest Iranian community outside Iran – southern California became a popular destination for Iranians fleeing the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war – and many musicians who were popular during the time of the monarchy in the 70s ended up there. A Christmas tradition – unexpected I would say – has developed: Most Iranians do not celebrate Christmas – only a minority are Christians – and, instead, during Christmas, tens of thousands of Iranian Americans gather in Las Vegas to party for a few days; live music is essential. Iranian groups and exiles in the West have received some academic and non-academic attention previously (Malek, Amy, 2006, *Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production*; Moaveni, Azadeh, 2008, *Lipstick Jihad*; Naficy, Hamid. 1993 *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles*), but so far there have been no studies on the young Iranian communities in Malaysia and India. For example, during a large conference on the Iranian diaspora at UCLA, Los Angeles, organised by Iranian Alliances Across Borders (IAAB), October 2012, not a single lecture, workshop or performance was devoted to the new Iranian communities in Asia. Still, despite most of the research in the field has been dedicated to Iranian immigration in the US and Europe, the emigration to Asia is in several ways more relevant to the current situation of Iran's youth. Among the people that I met in Teheran, Malaysia and India were as much spoken about as Europe and the USA.

The case of Iranians moving to countries east of Iran can be viewed in a larger context of youth – studies. How does a generation influenced by certain external events shape their future and life course?



Tehran, October 2015

I started my BA studies in Persian language and literature in 2002 and visited Iran for the first time in the summer of 2003. One of the first days a taxi driver pointed out where recent student protests had taken place in a student dormitory building. Despite the unrest the prevailing atmosphere at this time among the urban youth was loaded with optimism. This was during the era of Khatami. In the spring of 2005, in Shiraz, (living in a student room), I spent most of my days hanging out with new friends in the student dorm where I was staying. In between tea-sessions with chips and music – usually Iranian pop from the seventies – my neighbours were endlessly curious to hear about life abroad. Plans were made on how and where to migrate, but only in conversation, as people felt they could have a future in Iran.

A few days after the elections in 2009 I was back in Tehran. People were frightened but also excited – maybe there was real change to happen. The Islamic Republic had not been shaken in that way since its foundation. At night people opened their windows, or went up to the roofs, and shouted *allah o akbar* (“God is great”, an expression of celebration in Islamic countries), the voices echoing between the buildings. These words were reminiscent of the days of the fall of the Shah and the Islamic Revolution in 1979 when the same slogan was heard, at that time used by the revolutionaries.

But above all, it was in Tehran in 2011-2012 that I got to know people in some depth. I had time in Iran. In cafés it was easy to get to socialize and make friends. And regulars often opened up quickly. What Clifford Geertz calls “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 1998) was a situation that I quickly found myself in, and tried to merge into. The topic for my PhD thesis crystallized that year, together with my interest in migration and travel. An important reason why I wanted to write a PhD about something related to Iran is that I have had many good moments in Tehran and Shiraz, and have made friends – I like Iran and everything Iranian. Still I am aware (of course) of being an outsider, I have no Iranian family-background, nor have I grown up in Iran. I am equally fond of everything Indian, after a few years living in Delhi.

Travelling and exile are thus topics that have been close to me for a long time, and slowly, after spending time in Iran and meeting Iranians in India, the topic for my dissertation developed. I am deeply interested in travelling and migration – the experience of living in a foreign environment – and once the topic of the thesis came up it felt natural to pursue it. Other dissimilarities with the Iranian migrants notwithstanding, after a few years in both India and Iran, living abroad is something I can relate to. I choose to write the thesis in anthropology since the qualitative method appeal to me. The strangeness, mysteries, difficulties and joys of the experiences of migrants and travellers can, I believe, be captured most soundly with the anthropological methods – participant observation and fieldwork – rather than quantitative methods such as surveys. To my happy surprise, there did not seem to be any study about the Iranians that had gone east – a realization that made the topic all the more pertinent.



A common street-view in central Tehran, November 2015

1.2 Objectives, research questions, and hypothesis

In my study I start with material from fieldwork in Iran, and especially Tehran. I describe the life situations and reasons for leaving the country of some people whom I met and interviewed in Tehran 2011-2012. For many of them, spending their time watching foreign TV-series and following global trends in youth culture, life appears to be elsewhere. The section from Iran is thought to give a background as to why many have left the country, and an idea of how life in urban Iran can be for young adults.

My objectives are to explore a young generation in Iran in relation to migration. Has migrating become a way to become adult? Is it meaningful to say that migration has become a kind of rite of passage? What are the trajectories of young Iranians having moved to India and Malaysia? What kind of transnational ties with Iran is there among Iranians in Asia? How can the Iranian diaspora in Pune and Kuala Lumpur be described?

Apart from being a study of the specific case of Iranian migrants coming from a country with a violent and oppressive recent history, a thesis about Iranian migrants is also part of a broader, more general story of the contemporary

world. As has been pointed out, “one future trend is clear. For a majority of people, even in the apparently prosperous middle layers, their basic existence and life-world will be marked by endemic insecurity” (Beck, 2000: 3).

Can sitting in cafes and discussing plans to go abroad be viewed as a political statement and non-collaboration, expressing a different view of morals than the one supported by the Islamic Republic?

Can, in fact, going abroad and living with a completely different set of values than the ones defined by the Islamic Republic be viewed as a political act? Going abroad might be viewed as an act of defiance, of not subscribing to the morals and the version of life that the Republic dictates.

I test the hypothesis that the events during and after the election in 2009 was a trigger to move abroad. Bayat’s notion of non-movements (Bayat, 2010) might capture the sentiment in Tehran that spring and summer. Even though plenty of people were in the same movement it was not controlled or coordinated by anyone (Bayat’s “non-movements”). Life in Iran following 2009 may, alternatively, be described as a kind of non-collaboration, a refusal to agree with the official narrative of how life in Iran should be. For example, in Iran there are several official holidays commemorating religious or revolutionary figures. But rather than accepting the reasons e.g. for bank holidays people take them as time off, quietly not living according to the ideology of the Islamic Republic. One example is *ashoura*, when people go out and mourn the death of Hussein, killed in the year 680, in Karbala, in present Iraq. Instead of dressing in black and marching the streets chanting songs commemorating Hussein, people may view the days off as a holiday and for example take the opportunity to go for an excursion somewhere.

Was the summer of 2009 was defining for a generation, in the sense of Karl Mannheim – can large segments of the population relate to the events that summer? Karl Mannheim asserts in his essay “The Problem of Generations” (1927) that a generation is a group of people who confront the same historical

events. Not everyone born roughly around the same years react in the same way, but what makes a generation are connections to events during the years they grew up, i.e. to shared historical and sociological experiences. In a way comparable to the revolution in 1979, the demonstrations in 2009 engaged large groups of the (especially urban) youth. Afterwards, many of the young adults would do anything they could to leave the country.

The analysis has sections specifically relevant to my topic, as well as discussions on a more general level about migration, youth, and anthropology.

The study is multi-sited and the style is reflexive. Which specificities are there to a multi-sited approach and writing in a reflexive way; how can such an approach be an advantage? What new angles can be found in the relation between youth and migration? One piece treats methodology, with a special focus on walking and serendipity – an activity together with an attitude and trust in luck that, I believe, was decisive for the fieldwork.

On a more general level, I want to explore how travel is related to migration. Travel has associations to leisure, as opposed from its etymological roots, travail. Travel is often thought to be voluntary, and some migration is, but far from all. Can migration be called a kind of travelling then?

Staying, and not travel, was always assumed to be the ground for social life, and changing places can challenge the localism and any tendencies towards essentialising of cultures. Roots have been assumed to precede routes. Or can travelling be a deeper expression for the human experience?

1.3 Roots and routes



Street-art, Tehran, November 2015⁵

Ethnographic vignette

It was *ashoura*, the Shiite mourning festival commemorating Hussein, the supposedly (according to Shiites) righteous successor to the prophet Muhammed. It was in November 2015 in Tehran. In the bazaar people were handing out free food that is given on such religious occasions, *nasri*, and tea, under huge banners of Hussein and slogans such as *ya ali* – an exclamation honouring Ali, the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad who is especially revered in Shiia Islam. In the late evenings, along the Keshavarz Boulevard (the “agriculture boulevard”, before the Islamic Revolution called “Elizabeth Boulevard” since the English queen had inaugurated the boulevard during the Pahlavi-dynasty) in the centre, people were gathering, dressed in black, walking in processions, with enormous drums. Inside provisional tents food was handed out to anyone. Men were playing the drums while women and children were

⁵ These kind of seemingly rebellious paintings are found here and there on walls in Tehran. However, they must have been sanctioned by the regime (otherwise they would not be there, or at least not stay).

standing by the side of the road, watching. This had been going on for a few weeks. I often passed by a tea-stall covered with black flags with ornamented text saying *ya hussain* or something similar, where they were serving tea to anyone - a plastic glass with the hot drink. There was a lot of noise, a cacophony impossible to escape from, affecting anyone in the area, with songs blasting from loudspeakers on a truck driving forward very slowly. The day before the *ashoura* day, the climax of which is being built up during the preceding week, I was visiting a friend. We were to travel somewhere, to get out of town over the weekend. Outside her window we could view the procession along the street with men doing *asadari*, that is, hitting themselves on the chest in the rhythm of the music, while slowly walking forward. The music was loud. My friend was furious, shouting and cursing inside her flat for the sound to end. It was not a festival of her liking; she felt invaded having to endure the loudness from the street in her home. Her response to the state-sanctioned festival can be described as a kind of non-collaboration. And she was hardly alone in her reluctance: it seemed, from what I heard, as if most young urban people were not at all interested in commemorating Hussein and taking part of the celebration. This passive stance vis-a-vis the festival can be called a “non-movement” in the terminology of Bayat (Bayat, 2010: 3). My friend had applied for visa to Europe more than once but had always been denied it. Her attitude towards the West was negative because of that. Unfortunately, in Tehran, desires to travel and explore were, and still are, matched with very limited opportunities.

A study about the Iranian life in Kuala Lumpur and Pune may well start in Tehran the summer of 2009 – the summer that shook the leaders of the Islamic Republic. Not since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 had the streets been as filled with people demonstrating. People who had been active in the election campaign on the opposition side were jailed. Many were disillusioned, and although going abroad had been an important issue also in the past, the violence after the election in 2009 became a definitive trigger for many to leave the country. I explore the hypothesis that the course of events during summer of 2009 was a major trigger for thousands of Iranian young people’s decision to

leave. Indeed, in Kuala Lumpur and Pune many Iranians spoke about the events during the summer of 2009 as a major reason to emigrate.

In Tehran today, the *jombesh*, the Green Movement (at length explained further down), is a common topic of discussion among young adults. In cafés and on the streets, people narrate the events of the summer of 2009, and how they, and the movement, lost. The hopes of the reformists and the Green Movement were crashed when Ahmadinejad was re-elected. The reformists were brutally silenced and jailed. A second common topic is how to leave the country.

While sitting countless hours in cafes in central Teheran – that was the best way I found to get to know people – one discussion theme was more recurrent than others: How to get out of the country, where to go and what to do there. It seemed as if the urge to leave Iran had increased dramatically compared when I had visited Iran before. An obvious question emerged – what happens to everyone who leaves?

While living and studying in Delhi I had met with a large number of Iranians and made many friends. Some of them had been living in India for several years, up to a decade or more. Usually they were not in love with India. In fact, often the opposite was true. Iranians living in India were typically longing to be somewhere else. Many wanted to move to the West. Some felt stuck in India. They were not eager to go back to Iran – many would avoid that to any cost – the greatest attraction of being in India was just to not be in Iran.

In 2013, the summer before I enrolled for my PhD project, I arrived in Pune. I had read about the Café Good Luck, supposedly an Iranian place, and went there. Immediately I met an Iranian man. He drove me on his motorbike to his home where he was living with a group of friends, all from Iran. They were very forthcoming and easy to speak to – the topic for my PhD project appeared feasible.

One evening in Tehran in 2011 I had gone to my usual café, the Balcony, with my friend and flatmate Hasan. In the bar, serving coffee, juice and soft drinks, was a young man. He had piercings in his ears and by his left eyebrow, and his hair was long. Provoked by the ease and coolness that emanating from the youngster, my friend thought that he was spoiled. “He doesn’t work and gets his money from his family, that’s why he can sit here all day doing nothing”, my friend told me. The next day, returning to the café, I found the same young man sitting there. This time we took a seat at the same table. His name was Yousef.

Yousef did not work nor study because he was not allowed to. He had been active in the *jombesh*, the Green Movement – he had been out in the streets, like so many others. But he was caught, and dragged into a car by the police. “Are you a girl or a boy”, they laughed when they began to cut his hair by force. They shaved his head, but just on one side. “They only care about surface, they are so superficial”, Yousef said. “What do they know of what I care for, or think?” Since that day Yousef was not allowed to work, and he was thrown out of university. He spent most of his time in cafes in the city, planning to move somewhere abroad. One option was to move to Israel and study medicine there. He was Jewish. But he hesitated – he was not interested in leaving if he could not be sure that he could return because of the political hostilities between Iran and Israel.

First of all it should be pointed out that migrants should not be viewed as exceptions in the world today. Fewer and fewer of us live within cycling or driving distance from where we were born. To live among strangers, in a culture not necessarily one’s own, is a condition so common that being a foreigner has become normal. In this migratory age people who persist living in their ancestral villages are almost subject to more curiosity than the migrants and travellers. The Iranians who have settled in the East might have things in common with other migrants such as relatively privileged Westerners moving to China (Lehmann, 2014).

Another aspect I want to highlight is that although the traditional destinations of migrants - the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia - remain popular, the idea of which places are attractive to live is undergoing changes. The economical crisis has hit the West very hard and unemployment is rife all over Europe. The West's dominance is waning and several emerging economy countries, not least BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China), are becoming increasingly popular expat centres (Lehmann, 2014).



Park-e laleh, Tehran October 12, 2015

1.4 Organization of the thesis

The context-chapter explores the summer of 2009 in Iran, and there is a section of encounters with young people in cafes in Tehran. There is a discussion about youth and migration, and a short history of Iran as a host and producer of migrants. One chapter focuses at theoretical framework, with special reference to the validity – and problems – of generalizing. How meaningful is it to generalize when each of is so different?

The chapter with encounters from cafes in Tehran is meant to build up the argument that the Green Movement was a decisive marker for a generation. The cafes are meeting-points for the young to a higher degree than in many other countries – because of the lack of lively public places in Iran, the cafes have become especially important focal points for the dreams of the young.

Two chapters are based on the fieldwork in Pune and in Kuala Lumpur respectively. In my fieldwork I have followed the daily life, routines, and experiences of young Iranians who have moved to Pune and Kuala Lumpur. The ways they interact with the surroundings and go about their daily activities vary from person to person, but nevertheless they have much in common. These shared experiences constitute the basis of this thesis.

I started the fieldwork the autumn of 2014 in Kuala Lumpur and continued in Pune during spring 2015. One year later, in February 2016, I returned to Pune and continued the fieldwork the people I had met previous year.

There is a concluding discussion / analysis about the specifics of the present study, and one with a lesser focus on time and place – one with more general conclusions. This chapter explores the research questions from different angles, with a few concluding remarks.

Lastly, is one section about the situations that the informants found themselves in a few years after moving abroad – what happened after having lived a few years abroad?

There are ethnographical vignettes interspersed here and there in the text, meant to portray and highlight a tendency. They are short scenes, taken from journeys in Iran, and not necessarily during conscious fieldwork – they are situations I saw or found myself in which can serve to illustrate a phenomena. Sometimes scenes appear starkly and spontaneously when one is not looking for them – maybe while seeing a friend or on a walk.

I have focussed on the perspective of the Iranians, i.e. the migrants. Rarely I write from the perspective of the hosts, i.e. the Indians or the Malays. Iranian communities in Kuala Lumpur and Pune will reflect contemporary Iran – the thesis is about Iran rather than about India or Malaysia.

2. Theoretical and methodological framework

In this chapter I explore theoretical concepts that are relevant to my study. I look at intersectionality, the meaning of youth, youth culture, life trajectories, gender, et cetera. I give both a general background to the concepts as well as how they are related to my specific study. There is an ethnographical vignette, meant to illustrate theory. There are several sub-chapters: one with a background of Iran as a host and producer of migrants as well as a discussion on what the norm is – to move or to stay? There is one part on anthropology, migration and youth, with a discussion about the difficulties as well as necessities to generalize in anthropology.

What is meant by intersectionality? In the concept, multiple sets of complex inequalities are highlighted that intersect and influence each other. Perspectives that are taken into account include gender, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, age and disability (Crenshaw, 1991; MacCall, 2005). The idea is that these various identities intersect to create a whole that is different from the component identities.

Gender and ethnicity was highlighted by feminist authors in the 80s as instruments of analysis, without giving comparable emphasis on other social factors such class –also useful in order to understand different nodes of power that construct and make up lives and reproduces social patterns (Sibai, A. 2016.

46). The concept has been used to fathom the multidimensional nature of discrimination of women. Each context is affected by various structures simultaneously. An individual, wherever in the world, sees himself or herself defined in different ways by gender, age, ethnicity, culture, social class, illness et cetera (Sibai, A. 2016. 47).

The question of what it means to be a woman under different historical circumstances is always relevant. We can regard intersectionality as the result of different aspects of differentiation – of how economic, political, cultural, psychic and subjective factors intersect in historically specific contexts. The term “intersectionality” had, when it was coined, an emphasis on how ethnicity intersects with gender. Later, it came to be criticized for not having a class – perspective. An example is how social class intersects with gender in everyday life. To move freely in a city and meet friends is different, and something much more difficult, for a woman from a lower economic strata than it is for a man. In the context of studying youth, the hegemonic culture is represented by the socially adult.

Intersectionality can be a tool when analysing the closely related concept of human agency – what power, freedom and chances an individual has to influence one’s life. Someone rich from a privileged background in Tehran might go and study in the West, while others – because of economics – might employ a human smuggler and hide in a truck until one is in Europe.

An example of how different realities intersect was when a friend in Tehran said, “Iranians are the most confused people in the world” – there are many disparate worlds that meet and make it hard to construct a stable identity. A hegemonic culture, one (at least!) counter culture and one which can be – in lack of better words – a traditional culture. All these worlds intersect and contribute to making the youth of Iran “the most confused in the world”.

It is obvious that gender and class is crucial when discussing Iran – women are discriminated in both legally and by society. Class is another factor that –

naturally – plays an important role. It would be easy to assume that everyone who has a chance leaves the country – and that the rich leave. That would however be a mistake – many of the well off stay, and an unarticulated but de facto policy of the regime is not to interfere with the private life of – especially rich – people as long as they are loyal to the Islamic Republic. In other words, as long as one does not protest, it is fine to drink or socialize with the other gender.

The regulars at the cafes in central Tehran are typically from middle and upper classes, and people from less privileged classes might shun these relatively expensive places – “they have never worked, they are spoiled, and what they speak about is not interesting since they haven’t participated in life and don’t know anything about “. These words – uttered in affection – were by one friend who did not frequent the cafes, partly because they were too expensive – another example of intersectionality. He did not feel welcome because of his class, and was provoked by how easy they spent money “without doing anything”.

Living in Iran entails numerous restrictions in everyday life, especially for women. “Life in Iran is good if you are a man. But for women it is terrible” said Hussein in Kuala Lumpur. Apart from the most conspicuous law – at least for the visiting foreigner –, the veil that women must wear in public, women also have to wear a long-sleeved jacket that goes down to around the knee. Apart from stipulations on what to wear many laws also restrict women’s freedom and power. There are many examples: In a court two female witnesses equal one male witness. Women cannot divorce without their husband’s consent. Women are not given a passport without their father’s or husband’s consent either. These are all examples of how gender intersects with class.

Thanks to the Islamic Republic’s emphasis on education, the proportion of the population enrolled in a university has risen dramatically since the revolution. Especially women have improved their chances to study at universities compared to pre-revolutionary times. The irony is that their status in society in other senses has decreased. A woman is legally not allowed divorce from her

husband. Khomeini lowered the legal age to 9 years for girls to marry. A woman needs the permission from her husband to get a passport. Although women dominate at the universities Iran remains extremely patriarchal. However, the general stress on education in the Islamic Republic has empowered women; paradoxically, this has led to women being more articulate about their inferior position in society. For women, life in Iran can be especially stifling and travelling abroad experienced as very liberating.

The veil has been charged with symbolism and politics for decades. In 1935, under Reza Shah, all women had to remove their veils. This was shocking for many women who would rather stay indoors than outdoors without the headscarf. During the Islamic Revolution 1979 some liberal and secular women started to wear the veil as an act of resistance. The veil became, for some women, at that time a symbol of solidarity and resistance and a way to show that one was opposing western imperialism (Shahabi, 2006: 119). But since the Revolution wearing the veil is viewed differently – for liberal and cosmopolitan people it has commonly become a symbol for oppression.

It can be tempting to consider counter cultures that do not conform with the official culture of the Islamic Republic as a kind of resistance. But how political are the subcultures? Is listening to western pop music automatically political? It has been proposed (Shahabi, 2006: 120) that the lack of institutionalized and collective channels of political expression has led to more individualized, passive and fragmented forms of political resistance, since the aggressive and puritanical Islamic Republic hardly tolerates any kind of criticism.

People in Iran, and especially the young, move between worlds with radically different rules and ideals, several times a day. A student might on the way to university pass huge paintings of *shahids*, “martyrs” from the war with Iraq (and countless streets and alleys are named after them), and once at the university there are huge posters of the religious and political leadership with uplifting moral sayings. All the while the student might listen to the same music as someone his or her age at “that side of the water” – a way Iranians refer to

America, (“that other country at *that* side of the Atlantic”), while using social media that are banned in Iran but accessible through VPN. After university one might see a friend in a café around the Revolutionary Street with walls covered with art or books – the cafes in central Tehran can be incredibly beautiful – where the portraits of Emam Khomeini and the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on the wall are about the only reminder that one is inside Iran. Every shop or institution or café has to have portraits of Emam Khomeini and Ali Khamenei on the wall – not having it can cause serious problems. Navigating through these disparate worlds in everyday life, responding to whatever rules the context requires, people use what has been called “performative agency” (García Sánchez) – a street-smart way of minimizing the unwanted elements of the hegemonic culture while maximizing the freedom and chances of living the life one desires.



View from a roof-top in central Tehran, November 2015

What was surprising was to see that these strategies did not necessarily change when getting abroad – many felt they were observed, and there were rumours about “students” at the university working as informants for the Islamic Republic.

So, the hegemonic culture inside Iran, represented by the Islamic Republic, can be contrasted with a counter culture, and one culture that, in lack of other words, can be described as a “traditional”.

2.1 Youth culture, politics, transitions and trajectories

“When we arrived, it felt like coming home, coming out of jail,” an Iranian couple told me in Pune, referring to the freedom and liberty of the Indian society as compared to Iran.

To get a grasp of how the individual position him or herself in any analysis of youth it is essential to take into account social class, religion, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity (Sánchez García et al. 2014: 47).

In literature on political participation among the youth, there are some shared traits. The level of education, coming from a middle-class background and having a kind of political socialisation are all supposed to be conducive to political participation (Flanagan, 2009; Jennings and Stoker 2004).

In scholarship on youth and political participation, there are three aspects, connected to each other, that have had scholarly attention and are supposed to play important roles. The first deal with future economic scenarios, that often are bleak: personal and professional instability, dependence on family. The second aspect is the globalisation of identities, politics and culture – transgressing the fragile nation-state and national belonging and a generation of new self-representations that bridge the global with the local. The third aspect deals with a growing individualism caused by the weakness of traditional forms of support and welfare. The result is often pessimism, apathy and a lack of interest for the traditional forms of political interest. There are however new forms of engagements and activism, through the Internet for example (Sánchez García et al., 2015: 36).

In Fordist societies, there was a rather linear transition to adulthood, constituted by four elements: end of education and access to job market, and the abandonment of the parent's house and the establishment of an own family (Modell, Furstenber and Hershberg, 1976). This model is to a large extent not valid anymore – youth has come to be extended and fragmented (Galland 1996). The markers of the transition to an adult life are de-synchronized with expectations, and do not unfold naturally, with the result of inconsistent biographies in which the individual – often in case of seemingly failures – seem to be the sole responsible (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997).

In the era of modernity, time was considered to be quite linear, and the individual's biography unfolded in harmony with the unfolding of the different stages of life. In late modernity, this certainty changes, and time becomes fragmented and uncertain. Long-term stability is replaced with short-term uncertainty. Young people are the ones who suffer most, as the professional as well as private lives are marked by previously unknown obstacles to reach adulthood (Sánchez García 36).

With the precarious nature of the future, and the risk of abrupt changes and turning points in professional biographies, young people put forward alternative strategies (Du Bois-Reymond 1998). Young people count to a large degree on personal resources and creativity when it comes to finding alternative strategies quickly (Leccardi 2005).



A cooler and an antenna on a roof in Tehran, October 2015

2.2 Being young is to not be adult

The concepts of youth and adulthood are elastic. “Youth”, a socio-cultural construction, depends on conventions of the specific time and space – different societies construct different rites of passage from youth to adulthood, and individuals are shaped by these assumptions and preconceptions of what being young and adult means. The transitions can have less to do with age than with the social, economical and political order in question – biological age can be contrasted with social age. Individual experiences are determined by the assumptions, beliefs and the duties that a society ascribes on an individual (Sánchez García et al. 2014: 45).

Youth has traditionally been conceived as a “transitional period” from childhood to adulthood, which includes some rite of passages, such as marriage. However, today scholars view youth as a living condition in itself, with young people struggling to claim their youthfulness in the present. To go through these

transitions is a challenge while living under authoritarian regimes, and when the economy is in a flux. Scholars focus on youth in itself (Herrera 2011, in Sahwa p49).

In an Arab context, scholars agree that youth in Arab Mediterranean countries generally are quite distant from political parties, and prefer individual action to show their political commitment rather than institutional forms of political participation (Sánchez García 48) – and this is a tendency that definitely rings true to the Iranian context. None of the young Iranians I met in Iran or abroad would be involved politically in a formal way through a party. This is not to say that they were not political – politics was a constant topic of discussion, but people expressed their views through, for example, Bayat’s non-movements. As Sánchez Garcia et al. writes, “Young people appear in conflict with state nationalism and the expression of it, perceived as “old”. Belonging to their time and society, their values and social references are no longer exclusively national, as they dream of other places, they are in search of dignity for themselves and for a meaning to their lives, to gain recognition face à the authoritarian system as free individuals (Khadri, 2014: 53-56).

Youth is problematic to define – identities are flexible, and what youth signifies is largely negotiable. What is clear is that youth often can be based on social situation rather than chronological age. In a given culture preadolescent youth may be counted as youth, but elsewhere, and simultaneously, people in their 30s or 40s may be included in the same category. Youth as a carefree period of indulgence, as often popularly portrayed, is for many not viable due to economic constraints that quickly move them into adult responsibilities (Bucholtz, 2002: 527).

“Youth culture” was introduced as a new concept the social sciences in the 1950s and 60s. At that time young people were, much more than had been the case for earlier generations, recognized as bearing a distinct and separate culture that deviated to a large extent from that of adults (Camaozzi, I, Cherubini, D et al, 2015:). It was sociologist Talcott Parsons, focussing on youth practices and

youth as a social category, who coined the term. “Youth culture” was defined as the culture developed among a group of peers, the cultural world of young people and adolescents independent from the adult one (Camaozzi, I, Cherubini, D et al, 2015: 16).

A generation is typically being seen as giving a form of social identity along with class, ethnicity and gender. Anthropologists, among others, tend to see generations as having lived through common historical events and cultural forces. Generational identity comes from common experience, which leads to a symbolic culture and makes individuals that do not know each other feel bound together (Khosravi, 2008: 4). Every generation is unique and different from previous and coming ones. Generations are also characterized by how they react to the social environment around them, not only to the events themselves (Borneman, 1992: 48). Historical and societal events contribute to a generational consciousness.

In studying youth culture the “Birmingham School” emphasized class in the framework of hegemony and resistance. Youth culture is both generational and class-based. Generation may be as important as class since young people live in and shape a culture that in several ways may challenge the adult generation. However, youth culture in Tehran is clearly more about generation than of class; the authorities in Iran suppress young people from the upper, the middle or the lower classes alike (Khosravi, 2008: 4). The hegemonic order created by the parental generation has led to a homogenization of young people’s demands regardless of their class background. Indeed, at least in Tehran, youth culture tends to put class background in the shadows. In the cafes, for example, people with different backgrounds mix freely - even though most of them may belong to an educated middle class.

Anthropologists in Chicago – the “Chicago School” – were working on the concept of youth and deviant groups in the 1920s. Their studies focussed on marginality. At the time the city of Chicago was changing rapidly. A large number of immigrants were arriving and youth of immigrant background were visible in

the urban areas. What emerged from these studies was that these young immigrants shared values and patterns of behaviour that were different from the mainstream and adult society with respect to practices, style, and cultural orientations. The results remind me of the situation in Tehran today. The generational experiences of the youth of today in Teheran define them to a considerable extent and put them in contrast to their parents' generation, who made the revolution (Camozzi, Cherubini, Leccardi et al, 2015: 12).

The "Birmingham school" produced several important works in the 70s and 80s on youth groups in Britain with a class perspective, influenced by Marx and Gramsci – in an era when distinctive groups such as punks and skinheads emerged. These youth groups were seen as forms of resistance to a hegemonic culture. The term "subculture" was introduced to take account of these forms of cultural expressions. The scholars in Birmingham took leisure time and consumption as central themes of youth studies and emphasised that there exists not a single youth culture, or expression of a youth culture, rather, the concept is highly heterogeneous. (Camozzi, Cherubini, Leccardi et al, 2015: 20).

Karl Mannheim, in "The Sociological Problem of Generation" (1927), argued that the concept of generation is strongly linked to social change. He identifies analytical tools to be used in discussing "generation". "The generation location", for example, refers to a common location in the historical and social dimension and may include individuals belonging to the same age group in a society, therefore likely to be exposed to the same historical and social events and thus having several common experiences. The generation location is easy to identify in the Iranian context. The generation that made the revolution in 1979 have their memories and experiences of the Shah era as well as of the Islamic Revolution and the ensuing war. Their children have grown up in the Islamic Republic, "the most confused country in the world", a friend in his early 30s told to me in Tehran. We were speaking about the rules and morals encouraged and stipulated by the Islamic regime versus the way people in real life live. "People grow up being very confused", he said.

When people at the same age experience the same historical events, especially in their youth, a generational bond can emerge – a feeling of belonging to a special or unique entity, with a special way of looking at the world, a common consciousness. Another term in Mannheim’s analysis is “generational units”, referring to “groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways” (Mannheim, 1927: 184). Still, within a generation, among people who share a common destiny, several different ways of behaviour may emerge. In his essay “The problem of generation” (1927) Mannheim argues that being born at a similar time period in history and living in the same geographical area does not automatically lead to belonging to the same generation. What is needed is a common experience. Nowhere does this ring more true than in the case of Iran.

Early experiences tend to lead to a view of the world that stays as a reference point for the coming life experiences (Mannheim 1927: 177). What are the connections between youth and social change? Young people have not yet absorbed the habits and norms of the society and do not take social order for granted. Youth has therefore a potential for social innovation that can be moulded and is open – it can be exploited, controlled or repressed. In the Iranian context it is easy to see how youth is influenced by images from abroad given by media. Perceptions of the world outside Iran are to an increasing extent influenced by media – the contrast with the current social order in Iran becomes stark. The situation may serve as a breeding ground for dissatisfaction, the youth not accepting the norms of the Islamic Republic. “Frustration with the clerical rule and the constant anti-West propaganda, together with easy access to the outside world through video, satellite television and the Internet, has turned the West and the United States into irresistible magnets for thousands of Iranian youth (Basmenji, 2005: 48).



Disparate worlds in the metro in Tehran, November 2015

In his book “Modernity at large” Appadurai examines the modes of reproduction of culture, identity, and locality. Imagination, Appadurai points out, is of increasing importance for the construction of reality. Previously imagination was limited to certain realms of social life, like myths or dreams, but due to the globalisation processes and leaps in technology an increasing number of people participate in global flows of communication providing individuals with materials that fuel their imagination. “The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order” (Appadurai, 1996: 31).

In Tehran it is common to hear among the youth that one of the reasons for their struggling in life is the high unemployment rate. Education in Iran is good although it is hard to get into university, and after graduation it is difficult to find a job. Therefore, when leaving school, young people are typically unable to become independent from their parents. To buy or rent a house for themselves, support their families and – more crucially – themselves, establish families and be viewed as adults – all this is unattainable for many young adults. This situation – common all over the world, not least in North Africa and the Middle East – has coined the term “waithood”.

Youth's inability to become independent citizens does not depend on the youth themselves (Alcinda Honwana 2012) but rather from a meltdown of the socio-economic system that is supposed to provide them with opportunities. A social contract between the state and its citizens is broken, she says, the reasons being economic policies, corruption, and absence of civil liberties.

The term *waithood* was first used by Diane Singerman in her work on youth in the Middle East and North Africa, the term being attributed to youth transitions to adulthood. *Waithood* represents a contradiction of modernity, in which young people's opportunities are both broadened and limited. Technology has increased communication and global connections at the same time as opportunities are constrained by socio-economic circumstances and political instability. In Tehran people are connected globally via the Internet, just as people in London or Barcelona, and watch the same American TV-series. But, because of political reasons, most Iranians do not have the luxury of being able to travel as people e.g. with a European passport. And, with rampant corruption and inflation it is much harder in Iran to be able to get a job and make a living. All this leads to the situation that *waithood* is so prevalent in Iran. *Waithood* can last for decades, well into people's thirties and even forties. Extended *waithood* is rather becoming the norm and synonymous with being young (Honwana 2012).

Focussing on the young, aged up to around thirty-five, makes sense not only because they make up the majority of the Iranian population and are the future of the country, but also because "they were the target of the Islamization project that hinged on the war; now they are supposed to be an index for the success of the Islamic Republic" (Mahdavi, 2009: 8). The Republic sought to create ideological subjects through enforcement of proper "Islamic being". In response many young Iranians are revolting against the rituals in trying to "reclaim" themselves as well as their agency and citizenship. "Many young adults argue that they are now using their bodies and their sexuality to speak out against what they view as a repressive regime" (Mahdavi, 2009: 9).

Thus, the youth in Iran can largely be seen as a social class since the experiences that they share are so specific for this group. Older generations cannot really relate to the specific experiences of growing up in the Islamic Republic.

A common view in contemporary studies on youth is that classical notions of the life cycle as a series of fixed stages and roles through which every person move as they age are still valid, but that the stages have been delayed. It is assumed that the period of youth has been extended. Normative structures have loosened up and the life course has become more individualized, diversified, and fragmented. Individual agency and self-reflexivity are seen as having increasing importance in the construction of the self (Beck et al. 1994). With this view, nothing in life can be taken for granted. It is a state of being that increases both personal freedom and risk. There is no clear outline for how a life should be lived, and “people are expected to make their own life-plans, to be mobile, and to provide for themselves in various ways” (Beck, 2000: 70). Paths towards a professional life and leaving the family home have become more diversified.

For Beck, a feature of this shift has been a move towards notions of flexible work. The flexible worker is mobile and might change employment and, if necessary, residence frequently. A version of this appears to be true for the Iranians going abroad – instead of going where the jobs are people go where visas are given. The individualization of the life course is linked to the normalization of uncertainty and pressure for mobility. In spite of more fluid contemporary processes of age classification and life course transitions there are many ways in which the “more rigid pattern of the modern western life course which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century continues to claim a powerful hold on western imaginations” (Beck, 2003: 57).

The flexible global workplace makes life-paths increasingly different from those of previous generations. People are, more than previously, seen as being responsible for their life, the kind of work they do, and with whom they spend time.

There is a tendency to essentialize adulthood, against which youth, equally essentialized, is defined. Youth is supposed to have been prolonged, but adulthood isn't defined clearly apart from not being youth.

Youth has been considered as a condition to some extent in opposition to a prevailing social order, a period of semi-independence, and a period that defines its limits in relation to "adulthood". Youth can be understood as a social process, a journey from total dependence to the independence that characterizes adulthood. The markers that have distinguished youth visavi adulthood have usually been linked to education and its institutions - extensive education has prolonged the period of youth (Sepulveda, 2013: 15,).

More than ever, youth is characterized by heterogeneity in terms of experiences and paths leading to "the adult life". In many ways, older patterns and the dichotomy between adulthood and youth have disappeared. What are the realities in the process of becoming adult for the newer generations?

For being able to see patterns in life courses, processes and trajectories of life, a longer timeframe is required. The experiences of people are conditioned by a period in history and a specific place, while the individual circumstances are important too. A group of people or a generation do not share experiences in a uniform way. Social relations and networks contribute to individual biographies - lives are interlinked with other lives. Possibly most important is the notion of agency, the power to interrupt and resist given structures. Structures are what limit the power of the individual agency.

Older markers of adulthood have become invalid and new alternatives have come up. Independence and roles that traditionally have defined adulthood have been postponed, often for large segments of the population. Liminality as a concept was coined by Victor Turner (1969) to capture what people experience when they pass over a threshold from one stage of life to another. During the liminal stage people are suspended - they are not where they were before, nor are they in the state to come. This phase might be one of ecstasy and freedom,

between fixed points of classifications. How does the “between”-stage that the liminal state is take shape for the Iranian migrants? Is the term applicable to their experiences?

In exploring trajectories of Iranians abroad it is clear that the paths are as individualized as discussed above while also following larger patterns. The youth of today in Tehran have been called “The third generation” – the generation that was born after the Islamic Revolution. They are what the clergy hoped would be the “children of the revolution”, the children whom Ayatollah Khomeini called “an army of twenty million”. In this classification, the First Generation – at the time in their twenties or older – enforced the revolution. The Second Generation was in their early teens at the time of the revolution, and has only vague memories of the pre-revolutionary days. That generation makes up a large part of those who migrated from Iran in the 80s, during the Iran-Iraq war. The Third Generation includes more than half of the population of Iran obviously without any memories of pre-revolutionary days (Khoshravi, 2008: 5). These individuals have been formed by the Islamic Republic’s attempts to shape the generation to become citizens loyal to the revolutionary ideals.

An ethnographic vignette

While visiting Iran in October 2015 a friend and I decided to hitchhike out of Tehran. We went towards Alamut. My friend, an Iranian woman in her early 30s, was unmarried and lived in Tehran. She had been involved in the Green Movement and was very disillusioned with the Iranian regime. We went during the *ashoura* day, when Shiites commemorate Hussein who was killed in Karbala in 680 AD. On the streets of Tehran people went parading, honouring Hussein, and from cars with loudspeakers were heard the songs about Hussein. All over the city there was wailing and loud sad songs. My friend could not stand the sound - she was infuriated and had been screaming and shouting in her flat in Tehran, as a protest. We decided to get out of the city. All her friends seemed to

be like her, i.e. very critical to the Islamic Republic. In Shahabi's classification, she belonged to "the cosmopolitan or subcultural youth". Starting from *meidune azadi*, "the Freedom Square" – with the famous monument – we went hitchhiking. Five different cars picked us up. The drivers were young and male. They would all fit into what Shahabi calls "locally oriented conventional youth". Two of the drivers were *basij*, i.e. part of the voluntary force loyal to the leader. In one car they showed a photo of the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, on their mobile phone. The driver and his friend in the seat next to him were about to make the pilgrimage to Karbala the following week. They would drive to the Iraqi border and walk by foot from there. In other words, they were all "locally oriented conventional youth", as delineated by Shahabi. While walking around central Tehran, spending time in its very many cafes with young people, one can easily get the impression that almost all young adults are like the ones in the cafes. But, according to Shahabi, the great majority of the Iranian youth are conforming to the Islamic State's ideology (Shahabi, 2006: 114).

When the concept of youth appears to be so fluid the question arises if youth is connected to age at all? Traditionally, marriage has been the rite of passage marking adulthood but these days people marry well into the thirties. To this day marriage is a signal of being mature – being single is considered a temporary status. It is uncommon among single women in Iran to live away from their parents. Being married is the desired normal status. It is, however, not easy to marry without having a job – and in Iran, as mentioned, unemployment is high. Marrying implies traditionally to move out from one's family home, which however is difficult without a job. Thus the difficulty to enter the job market makes the period of being a young bachelor longer.

Just as in Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia (Sánchez Garcia, Feixa Pampols C, Laine, S, 2014: 22), military service is compulsory for male Iranians. The military service, the *sarbazi*, is often dreaded, and people do whatever they can to evade it. "It's a waste of time, they take two of your best years," was a common opinion expressed to me by young men in Tehran concerning *sarbazi*. However, without having done the *sarbazi* one can't apply for a passport. It may be possible to

avoid doing the military service under certain circumstances – if you are the only son, if your father died in the war with Iraq (if he was “martyred”), or if you are regarded as being physically unfit, for example. Not having done the military service in Iran is common among people who haven’t grown up in Iran but have an Iranian passport. Iran does not recognise dual citizenship, so people who have lived abroad for decades are still recognized as being entirely Iranians, not as Swedes or Americans - and second generation Iranians have to do the military service if they stay longer than a few months in Iran. Having done the *sarbazi* typically signals the end of the youth for male Iranians.

Marriage and military service thus remain important markers for entering an adult life, although nowadays these markers are being challenged. This is true e.g. for many of the Iranians who moved to India and Malaysia. The goal of becoming a socially acceptable individual might be achieved in alternative ways, such as going abroad, which may well change the traditional life course. Iranians having been brought up in the Islamic Republic and then moved to eastern countries may to a considerable extent bend and challenge the traditional view on how a life course is supposed to be.

2.3 Moving somewhere else

Iran has been a crossroads for travellers and migrants for centuries. Acting as a bridge in both the geographical and cultural sense of the word Iran has connected Asia with the Mediterranean and Europe. Greeks, Arabs, Mongols and Turks have invaded. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the ensuing wars Iran has been a host country for hundreds of thousands afghans, while at the same time waves of Iranians were leaving Iran fleeing the war and the new Islamic Republic.

Iran has been called the country with the largest brain drain in the world. In the wake of the Islamic Revolution people left Iran in massive scale. The rich often

went to southern California. Many fled during the war with Iraq, a war that lasted for eight years and resulted in the largest number of casualties since WW2, and settled in Europe.

The Islamic Revolution almost coincided with the communist “April Revolution” in 1978 and Soviet’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Although Iran has gone through deep economic crises the country still appears as an attractive destination for Afghans, with its – relatively speaking – plenty of employment opportunities (Monsutti, 2007: 5). Afghans were welcomed and many were well integrated in the society at a time when many young Iranians were occupied with the war with Iraq (Monsutti, 2007: 5). It has been estimated that in 2005 there were around one and a half million Afghans in Iran, over one million documented and half a million without papers. At the same time many Iranians were leaving the country. Iran and Afghanistan have much culture in common, the languages farsi (in Iran) and dari (in Afghanistan) being close and comprehensible for speakers of each language. In the autumn of 2015 refugees fleeing the wars in the Middle East were heading for Europe, often towards Germany or Sweden, countries that had a reputation of having generous asylum policies. Most of the refugees were from Syria, but there were also thousands of unaccompanied boys, in their teens, from Afghanistan. Many of them had been born or had grown up in Iran. They were at risk of being sent to the war in Syria by the Islamic Republic, or to be deported to Afghanistan. Initially they were welcomed in Sweden. However, a year later many were expelled from Sweden and sent to Afghanistan, where they might never have lived. Iran has continued to be an important host country for Afghan refugees who often survive on heavy manual labour jobs.

Iran has a plethora of historical ties with India. There have been several waves of Iranian migration to India, often because of greater freedoms there. During the Safavids, the dynasty that established shiism as the state religion in Iran, it became popular for Iranians to move to India where many became attached to the Mughal court. About one-fourth of the elite at the Mughal court was Iranian (Haneda 1997). Also, at the event of Islam, plenty of zarathustrians fled to India,

particularly to Gujarat. The relative proximity and shared history makes India a quite natural destination for Iranians. “Everyone here have good knowledge about Iran and in general a positive image of the country”, said one informant in Pune.

Thus in India, during Mughal times, there was a distinct Iranian element – the lingua franca in the court and administration was Persian. The historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam writes that the Persian elites in India flaunted “a feeling of superiority over the Deccanis” (Subrahmanyam, 1992: 343). A report from Dutch Lodewijk Ilsaacs Eyloff, from 1608, concludes that in Golconda Sultanate the most important posts were held by “arrogant Persians”. The king Humayun was exiled during the Safavid era in Iran, and upon his return to India, twenty-one of fifty-seven nobles around the king were Iranians. In the 18th century a Shiite family from Khorasan managed to take control of the Mughal province of Bengal. But Iranian migration in this period was not limited to India. Also the Burmese court had a large number of migrants from Iran, and there was an Iranian presence in Thailand that remained quite small until the mid 17th century. Then there was a rise, and by the latter half of the 17th century Iranians seem to have dominated the Thai court (Subramaniam, 1992: 348). During the Qajar dynasty in Iran high-profile Iranian intellectuals went to Istanbul where the first Persian-language newspaper outside Iran was published in 1876, and became a forum for criticism against the Iranian king Naser ul-din Shah’s rule (Keddie, 1999: 45)

Some Iranians left Iran to go to India because at home they were accused of being rebels or Sunnis – they had to flee to save their lives – while others left e.g. because the Indian courts offered better conditions than the Iranian counterparts. For the refugees India became a political asylum (Haneda 1997). There are thus links between people leaving Iran in that early era and the ones leaving at the present time, for similar political reasons. Although the country has been seemingly closed since the Islamic Revolution it has both hosted and produced numerous migrants.

The first important wave of migration from Iran in modern times, stretching from just after the Second World War until the time of the Islamic Revolution, resulted from Iran's slow economic recovery after the war, ironically combined with a dramatic new wealth that became available to a domestic elite – the oil money. The oil permitted many families to send their children to Western universities, and in 1977-78 about 100 000 Iranians were studying abroad, mainly in the US and various European countries particularly UK. More Iranian students than students from any other country were enrolled at US universities at the time, and after the Islamic Revolution many opted to stay in the West. Often their relatives in Iran joined them following the revolution (Hakimzadeh 2006).

After the Islamic Revolution people with leftist leanings, as well as young men trying to escape from the military service, tended to leave. Religious minorities also left. Many did not consider their move as being something permanent. Often, after having locked their homes, people left bringing with them only a few suitcases presuming that their stay abroad would be temporary – until the revolutionary instability had been cleared up. As time passed, however, a return to Iran seemed all the more distant.

From the mid 90s and onwards many Iranians have again been striving to leave their country. Among them are both highly skilled and educated people seeking better opportunities abroad, and those with little school education. Reasons for leaving include the economic crisis and the political oppression. Some have attempted to apply more unconventional ways of going abroad and being allowed to stay such as converting to Christianity before fleeing Iran – and once abroad stating that converting from Islam can be punished with the death penalty in Iran.

Migrants pave the way for other migrants to follow. Indeed, “each act of migration itself creates the social structure needed to sustain it. Every new migrant reduces the costs of subsequent migration for a set of friends and relatives, and some of these people are thereby induced to migrate, which

further expands the set of people with ties abroad” (Levitt, P, Jaworsk, B. N, 2007: 124).

Guyer (2007) has been discussing the perceptions of past, present, and near and distant futures in a sociological perspective, and argues that time in these days seems to have slipped into a “time that is punctuated rather than enduring: of fateful moments and turning points, the date as event rather than as a position in a sequence or a cycle, dates as qualitatively different rather than qualitatively cumulative” (Guyer, 2007: 410). People seem to be shifting context and travel more than ever, creating a feeling that both the distant and near future do not have anything to do with the current moment we are in. Having had to leave a country suddenly may give a feeling of being thrown into a time experience disconnected from the past and future.

Without hope few people would migrate. Hope fuels migration; migration is an enactment of hope and of faith in the future. Migration can be a reaction to despair (Pine, 2014: 96) embracing a hope for a better future. During the Ahmadinejad era and the following Rohani era, going abroad has appeared as possibly the most sensible strategy to a different and better life. The near future is one of punctuated time, while the distant future is one of hope, dreams, and often some kind of utopia. The successful talks in Vienna leading to the nuclear deal created optimism among my interlocutors in Pune. “It might be a good idea to move back to Iran quite soon”, they said. Hope is dependent on the capacity for ones imagination, on an ability to believe in a better future and to some extent to live with uncertainty – daydreaming about what might happen is a natural component. However, having left ones country one is especially susceptible to both hope and its opposite, despair.

The film *No One Cares About Persian Cats* tells the story of two young musicians wanting to leave Iran, their home country. In the film several musicians are seen, many being active in the underground scene in Tehran. When arriving to Teheran in 2011 I aspired to write about the underground rock and pop-scene. I managed to get hold of a musician who was also an actor in the film industry,

and called him. Immediately he sounded suspicious and wanted to know what I wanted from him. Later, while speaking to another musician, he explained that the musician/actor had been jailed after the film had been released, and naturally became scared when a foreigner called for discussing the film as well as the underground scene – per definition illegal. A hope of being able to play music freely had turned into fear.

Today it is common to imagine our world as being in constant motion, not only people and things, but also ideas and ways of living – globalisation has resulted in a situation where a shopping mall in France is nearly identical to one in Malaysia. Earlier scholars tended to view border crossing movements as deviations from place-bound communities and homogenous societies, but discourses of globalisation and cosmopolitanism have made the opposite the norm – mobility has been promoted as the normal and being attached to a certain place a kind of resistance against globalization (Salazar, 2010: 54) mobility). Notwithstanding the waves of migration from the wars in the Middle East and the tragedies during journeys crossing the Mediterranean, mobility generally has good connotations, signalling the ability, ease and tendency to move and change quickly (Salazar, 2010: 54). It has been assumed that mobility is increasing, and almost all voluntary mobility is associated with rising financial and social status as well as cultural status in becoming cosmopolitan. Still, sedentary, settled people have traditionally often been in a favourable light by theorists. Colonialists classified peoples according to mobility, the more sedentary they were the more “cultured” they were considered (Rosaldo 1988: 80). Cultural anthropologists, for their part, thought of cultures as immobile or as having a cyclical and repetitive mobility. “If they move, they will move in cycles” (Salazar, 2010: 55). By contrast, today, movement – the ability and freedom to be mobile – is frequently connected to high financial, social and cultural status.

In Iran today, almost anything that is considered foreign is charged with cultural capital and status. While travelling in the country it is striking how proud people seem to be about being Persian. It might seem paradoxical that a country that often prides itself for having the most dazzling culture also

attributes more prestige to any goods that are foreign than to things produced in Iran. For example, the alcohol free local “beers”, with brand names such as “Istak” or “Delester” – refreshing and not as sweet as soft drinks – are sold in any small kiosk and are popular. There are also foreign brands of the drink, from Germany and other countries, and these imported drinks are unfailingly more prestigious as well as many times as expensive as those that are produced locally. Their different tastes – internationally versus locally produced drinks – are indistinguishable. In Tehran my housemate and I often went out in the evening to walk and eat something. Many nights a week we ate falafel – one of few vegetarian options, and it was cheap too – and we had an Iranian-style “beer” with it. My friend would always ask for a foreign brand rather than the usual Iranian drink when we had our meal outside one of the small falafel joints. So, although settled people always have been viewed as being more cultured and civilized by, at least, western administrators and scholars, mobility and international tendencies – anything international and foreign – are often viewed favourably.



A café in Tehran – the logo resembling a well-known American coffee – chain, October 2015

Anthropologists have often attempted to challenge the notion of unitary cultures in fixed places. Early studies on mobility among colonized non-Western societies

were based on models of homogeneity. Sedentarism, stressing bounded places as the basis of human life, was the ruling norm. For example, the work of Margaret Mead describes life in New Guinea in the 1920s as a timeless culture unaffected by the outside world until the event of the Western influence (Brettell, 2003, quoted in Salazar 2010: 56). This classical type of anthropology “constituted cultures as essentially immobile or as possessing a mobility that is cyclical and repetitive... Those with culture are expressed to have a regular, delimited occupation of territory. If they move, they must do so cyclically.” Mobility was a characteristic assigned to only hunter-gatherers or gypsies (Salazar, 2010: 56).

Older anthropology often regarded border-crossing movements as deviations from the normative place-bounded societies. However, as already mentioned the last decades with cosmopolitanism have witnessed the opposite tendency, thus to view mobility as the normal and one of the characteristics of the current era. This trend has been so strong that it has - sometimes deliberately - been forgotten that societies have been “mobile” for along time. Anthropologists today often reject “sedentarist metaphysics” (Malkki, 1992, quoted in Salazar, 2010: 55), questioning the commonly assumed interrelations between peoples, places and cultures.

Since travel has always constituted an essential ingredient in anthropology (fieldwork typically involves travelling), and the practise of going away “to the field” has been a defining aspect of the discipline, the assumed link between culture and place has been strengthened (Salazar, 2010: 57). This tendency goes against the common thought among anthropologists arguing against the concept of place-bound societies.

Epistemologies that view “society” as a contained unity may have problems to explain the increasing interconnectedness of people and goods. Traditionally, anthropologists have built their epistemology by immersing oneself in a single place or community for a long period, and may as a consequence have troubles

in seeing transnational connections that do not fit into the image of the world which the anthropologist with effort has gotten to know (Salazar, 2010: 58).

The later decades have seen an increase of multi-sited studies, thus abandoning the study of bounded places in favour of the realities of a more mobile world. The movement of people often reinforces differences and inequalities but may also contribute in erasing such differences. Overall, border crossing mobility is still a human experience that is the exception rather than the norm and the processes that produce movement and global connectedness also produce exclusion and immobility in equal measure. Mobility has become a key difference – and an otherness-producing machine along with gender, class, and race (Salazar, 60, in Adey and Bissell et al. (ed) 2014).

2.4 Anthropology, migration and generalizations



Central Tehran, October 2015

“I didn’t know who I was before I moved to Copenhagen” says Christina, 34, from Reus, Spain.

How to theorise and generalise about conditions of migration when each migration story is unique? Speaking about identity and migration easily becomes a discussion about ethnicity, nationalism, and essentialism. What is it that distinguishes the migrants abroad making them different from anyone else? What distinguishes an immigrant group?

Different theoretical approaches to ethnicity have emerged in anthropology. The primordialist approach, popular until the 60s, suggested that ethnic identity is a result of deep attachments to group and culture. The instrumentalist approach focuses on ethnicity as a political strategy to be used as a tool whenever profitable. Finally, there is the situational approach, from the work of Fredrik Barth, focussing on the elasticity of identities seen as being constructed in specific historical and social contexts (Levitt, P, Jaworsk, B. N, 2007: 132).

Migration brings together people with different backgrounds and at the same time creates boundaries. Consequently, the instrumentalist and the situationalist approaches are the best fitting tools to be used in anthropological studies on migration. Contact with foreigners results in reflections over ones identity, and ethnic identification is “created, preserved, reaffirmed and even rejected through a continuous set of contrasts between one’s own group and others (ibid)”. In a sense, ethnicity is theorized as a response to certain situations. To become a member of an ethnic group can be seen as a way to figure out one’s opportunities in an ethnically pluralistic social setting (ibid).

Iranians in Malaysia and India did not seem to have reflected much about their ethnical identities before they moved abroad. It became a central concern once they arrived in the new country and were forced to adopt understandings of identity. “Ethnic groups are made, not born”, Glick Schiller wrote (Levitt, P, Jaworsk, B. N, 2007: 135) – in other words, it is through the encounter with others that one’s own identity takes form.

Due to the system of entrance exams into universities in Iran it is common for students to live a few years in a city away from home. Hussein in Pune, for

example, is from Tehran but he lived in Bandar Abbas during several years, while studying computer science. Within Iran regional identities play a role in society; this is less pronounced when being abroad.

“I had heard of Pune through friends in Tehran, I heard it was a student city, quite safe, and not too expensive” said Mina, 26, a student of pharmacy in Pune. It was common to hear that the main reasons why Iranians in Pune and Kuala Lumpur had chosen these destinations were that they knew some people there – friends or family. Kinships and friendships often cause a domino effect – people go where friends and families are. The network approach to migration can be compared to the market approach where the migrant makes a cost-benefit analysis of different possible destinations. Often, both networks and cost-benefit analyses play important roles for the migrant when deciding where to go.

In an era of mass migrations, globalization, and cultural flows, the idea of fixed cultures in bounded populations seems more absurd than ever – even though nationalistic movements in recent years have grown in Europe. As the idea of culture expanded to take account of global flows of images, people, commodities and capital, the notion of culture seemed even more fragmented and elusive. Paradoxically, in the 90s, when the global flows accelerated, the world outside anthropology started to use the concept of culture with great enthusiasm, in politics, by NGOs, etc. And today, with rising nationalistic movements across Europe, everyone seems to speak about “our” or “their” culture.

In the words of Clifford Geertz, the theory in anthropology needs to stay rather “close to the ground” compared to sciences more able to abstractions. The theoretical contributions are difficult to abstract from studies and integrate into anything one might call “culture theory” (Geertz, 1973: 24). I have always felt that there is a problem in anthropological theorizing in the generalizations and comparisons – that theories might erase ties and smooth over differences and inconsistencies in favour of coherence. Still, the fact that generalisations are problematic is not in itself an argument for abandoning generalisation. Generalisations and comparisons are tools in anthropology since structures of

power and domination form patterns in human lives that should be illuminated. The great variation of cultural forms is both anthropology's resource and the cause of a dilemma. How is such cultural variation to be countered with the biological unity of the human species?

In contrasting particularizing and generalizing in anthropology the particularizers tend to reject comparison, emphasise cultural diversity, and "see the world through the lens of the population with whom they worked in their ethnographic field site" (Brettell, B, 2009: 5). Their methods are description and interpretation. In contrast, generalizers put emphasis on similarities that can be found across cultures around the world, while also recognizing differences.

For some there is no doubt about the centrality of comparison in anthropology, since the cross-cultural translation by its nature is comparative. Also, "Ethnography employs words, and words are always applicable to more than one instance. It is impossible to describe a particular culture (or anything else for that matter) without using words that have meanings for others" (Brettell, 2009: 649).

Indeed, it might be impossible not to compare to one's own experience when going on fieldwork in an unfamiliar culture. Allen Johnson argues that any recognition of difference is a comparative process: "For all the emphasis on cultural relativism and the uniqueness of particular cultures in anthropology, ours is a pervasively comparative science" (ibid). We strive to detect in the behaviour, words and actions of other people that are analogous to a social experience we already know of, possibly from where we live or from other ethnographical studies (Brettell, 2009: 649).

Abu Lughod criticizes the notion of culture used by anthropologists for being static and homogenizing. Rather than generalizing, she proposes stories about particular individuals in time and place. The point is to in this way break notions of homogeneity and coherence (Hannertz, 1996: 31).



Ambiguous street-art, central Tehran, October 2015

"We are trained to suppress the signs of incoherence", writes Fredrik Barth in an article based on material from Bali, "yet we know that all cultures have always been the conglomerate results of diverse accretions" (Barth, 1989: 122). Looking for structures and similarities while on fieldwork I cannot help feeling that it would be too easy to suggest too much of coherence. What is striking is the diversity – and people are unpredictable. I like Barth's words that "we must expect a multiplicity of partial and interfering patterns, asserting themselves to varying degrees in various fields and localities; and any claim to coherence should be contested where it has not been demonstrated". People take part in different social environments depending on the context, "they construct different, partial and simultaneous worlds in which they move; their cultural construction of reality springs not from one source and is not of one piece". Indeed, while social scientists are obsessed with patterns or rules that purportedly govern behaviour, what is striking on ethnographical fieldwork is the irregularities among people (Cohen, in Ingold (ed.) 1996: 28). What is poignant, on fieldwork as well as in life, is the strange and wonderful diversity and the irregularities among people – people do not live under abstract laws! As striking are the similarities – personally I have found it as likely to find someone I feel akin to in a place away from where I am as with someone I grew up next to.

Cohen goes on arguing against generalizations: ...”by failing to extend to the “others” we study a recognition of the personal complexity which we perceive in ourselves, we are generalizing them into a synthetic fiction which is both discredited and discreditable. We fall back too easily on the assumption that in important matters the members of collectives think alike” (Cohen, in Ingold (ed.), 1996: 29). I agree that we, in anthropological writing, should look beyond “the blandness of the general to the sharpness of the particular” (Cohen, in Ingold (ed.), 1996: 30), while we at the same time need to attempt to formulate general conclusions.

In a way, it is difficult not to compare while being on anthropological fieldwork and observant on apparent similarities and differences (Brettell, 2009: 650). Just to note that anything is “good” is an act of comparison since it has to be good in relation to something else, often from the anthropologists’ home environments.

The comparative method has its roots in nineteenth-century evolutionary anthropology and the works of Sir Edward Tylor and others. Their model was an evolutionary one in which so-called primitive peoples living in the present time represented earlier stages of human society and cultural development through which all people had passed on the progressive march from “savagery” to “civilization”. This was the dominating paradigm until challenged by the pioneering scholar Franz Boas, who was sceptical of the evolutionary frameworks and generalizations at the time. In the classical essay “The limitations of the Comparative Method of Anthropology” (1896) Franz Boas argued that the comparative method had been misleading in its assumptions of connections wherever similarities were found. Thus, Boas writes that the comparative method “has been remarkably barren of definitive results, and I believe it will not become fruitful until we renounce the vain endeavour to construct a uniform systematic history of the evolution of culture, and until we begin to make our comparisons on broader and sounder basis” (Boas, 1896: 8).

Later, postmodernism challenged the anthropological authority in the 80s and promoted ethnographies as texts, and Clifford Geertz argued that the analysis of

culture is “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning” (Brettell, 2009: 654), ringing true to many anthropologists. He propagated for anthropology not to be generalizing across ethnographic cases – comparisons – but rather to analyse in depth a single case. The rejection of generalization is key to the postmodern approach. Postmodernism became concerned about the presumptuousness of ethnographic authority and doubtful about the goal of a science of culture. Postmodernists thus focussed on meaning rather than causality and relativism. Ethnographies were considered as literature, and generalizations were thought of as oppressive.

In “The Interpretation of Cultures” from 1973 Clifford Geertz formulates the concept of “thick description”. The concept of culture is for Geertz a semiotic one. Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he has spun himself. Culture is then these webs of significance, and the analysis of them has no definitive laws. The task is to interpret the webs, and search for meanings. A semiotic approach to culture can aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can converse with them.

According to Geertz, what defines anthropological work is “thick description”. Geertz takes the example of two boys rapidly contracting their eyelids. In one instance this is an involuntary twitch, in the other a signal to a friend. The two movements are identical: judging from the movements alone one cannot tell which was the involuntary twitch and which was the wink. The difference, although not possible to distinguish from a “camera-perspective”, between a twitch and a wink, is huge. The winker is communicating, deliberately, to someone according to a socially established code. Then, possibly a third boy contracts the eyelids in the same way. He is no longer signalling to his friend, but rather making fun of the one signalling to his friend. Here another layer of interpretation is needed.

Thus, the object of ethnography, according to Geertz, is to interpret the various movements of the eyelid. The ability to differentiate the meanings of the various,

apparently identical movements of the eyelid, is what makes a description thick rather than thin. Anthropological writings are, of course, themselves interpretations, and often microscopic.

In the context of the Iranian migrants in India and Malaysia I was, for example, struck by the large number of pet dogs that Iranians that I met had. In Pune many Iranian students were in the company of their small white poodles. What did that mean? In London, seeing friends whom I had met in Teheran three years earlier, I learned that they had brought their puppy from Tehran to London. Having a pet dog in Iran bears a different meaning than having one in, for example, a European country.

The ethnographer is faced with a plethora of complex structures that often may seem strange. Doing ethnography can be like trying to read a foreign and incoherent manuscript (Geertz, 1973: 10). A difficulty of interpretative approaches is that it often resists systematic assessment. Anthropologists work with, and within, the same societies as for example historians and economists, but anthropologists work in everyday settings. The challenge is how to link the ethnographic miniatures to larger contexts.

An ethnographic multi-sited study of migrants pushes the anthropological notion of “the field”. The field might no longer be one particular locality but rather include many localities, connections and networks, against which the empirical data becomes contextualised.

To what extent are people able to shape their own life? Max Weber worked on the concept of agency. He saw humans as individuals acting out of free will and determination through conscious choices of individuals, in contrast to Durkheim’s emphasis on human actions as predominately being dependent on structures that limit individual initiatives.

Immigration regulations are examples of external structures that to a large extent govern people. The immigration policies are of a great importance for the

young in Tehran who plan for a future abroad. Many know exactly the policies of the different countries and their embassies in Tehran. For example, the British embassy, in central Tehran by Ferdowsi Street, was stormed by *basij*, the paramilitary group, the 29th November 2011. The embassy closed, and people who had planned to apply for a British visa had to change their plans. The news was quickly spread throughout the city, many condemning the *basij* for storming the embassy thus destroying their plans to study in the UK. Not until the summer of 2014 did the British announce that they intended to reopen the embassy. In the meantime, getting to Britain had become a lot more complicated for Iranians since it was necessary to go abroad, to Dubai for example, and apply for a visa there.

Similarly, the visa policies of Malaysia determine the future of many Iranians. One reason why thousands of Iranians came to Malaysia has been its relatively generous visa-rules. Typically, Iranians were granted a three-month stay before having to apply for an extension. By then many had managed to get admission to a university, acquired a study visa, and thus were allowed to stay much longer. However, the visa rules changed, and currently Iranians are only granted a two-week visa on arrival. As a consequence, many have been forced to leave Malaysia.

Karen Evans has developed the concept of bounded agency – a kind of agency influenced but not determined by the context where the subjects are situated: “These young adults are undoubtedly manifesting a sense of agency, but there are a number of boundaries or barriers which circumscribe and sometimes prevent the expression of agency “ (Evans, 2001: 17). This meaning of agency is the most sensible I have encountered and one that is useful for the present study.

Human agency is about the flow of life events and what governs them. Humans may themselves form their lives but not entirely according to their own making. Social systems are never immune from change irrespective how powerful they are. Structures change; hence anthropologists look simultaneously at both

continuity and discontinuity and may need to use several theories simultaneously. How much can a theory tell?

Edmund Leach envisioned agency as being a manifestation of criminality, the logic being that anyone breaking a structure is also breaking some societal rules – without agency there wouldn't be any crime. Creativity contains an element of hostility to the existing system, he contends. Human action is in this context rooted in a desire to undermine established rules and conventions in the society, in order to generate new ones. In Iran, with all laws being broken on a daily basis – listening to music with female singers, dancing with the opposite gender – this take on agency is especially relevant.

In the case of the Iranian migrants in Asia it is easy to see how the migrants are stuck in a structure with visa regulations and restrictions. Still, because of agency, people make their way out of the country in cases when the structures permit it.



A hall for sports, with the portraits of the Ali Khamenei and Ayatollah Khomeini to the left

Surveillance has been used as a method of control, and is highly relevant when it comes to life inside Iran. The Iranian intelligence service is powerful. It really

affects the mind and behavior of everyone – young people get paranoid. The phones are supposedly bugged – that is what people say – and emails are read. The fact that it is impossible to know whether anyone is actually bugging your phone conversations adds to the paranoia. To some extent this sense of being under surveillance and seen applies to the Iranian groups in India and Malaysia too. People “know” that Iran is hiring people whose main job is to check what Iranians abroad are up to. The Iranian authorities have their eyes on them. Power, fear and suspicion are entwined in surveillance.



A gallery, Tehran November 2015

The panopticon, used from the late 18th century, was a prison where a minimal number of guards could watch the entire prison population. In the centre of the circle shaped prison was the guard tower from where the guards could see the prisoners. Since the prisoners could not see the guards they had to assume that they were always being watched. Foucault (1995) borrowed the model of the panopticon. Faced with the possibility of being constantly under surveillance and the threat of punishment the prisoners adjusted their behavior. While the panopticon ostensibly keeps the body entrapped, what is targeted in surveillance is the psyche. Being constantly watched by an invisible and unknown power makes one want to adjust to given social norms. Emotionally

there is a difference between being looked at by someone directly and through the lens of a camera or an invisible spectator, respectively.

The variety of emotions that surveillance evokes is huge: those being watched might feel guilty, embarrassed, uneasy or angry; they may also feel safe (Koskela, 2000: 257). Today, cell-phones and the Internet play an important role for the youth to communicate, while, ironically, the same technical systems are used by the authorities to keep track of people. Iran has, after China, “the most active experimental site in the cat and mouse game between state authorities’ efforts to control these media and citizen efforts to push the envelope of open access and information circulation” (Fisher, 2010: 521-522). The police might, symbolically, function like a panopticon.

Foucault writes that “he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (Foucault, 1995: 202-203). In 2008 Nokia Siemens supplied Iran with a sophisticated telephone monitoring program. The headquarters for these activities were built by Israeli contractors in the 70s (Fisher, 2010: 524). In general, although the Iranian migrants are outside of Iran many feel that they are under surveillance by the Iranian authorities.



A tea-house, northern Iran

By transnationalism I understand the ties that migrants establish with institutions, friends or relatives in their country of origin and “enable them to engage in a continuous relationship of exchange” (Paerregaard, 2008: 229). Transnational social fields refer to the fact that many migrants do not break ties and bonds and social relationships with their homeland, and has been introduced “to explore flows and movements that extend beyond national borders and entail global linkages between people and institutions in different parts of the world” (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994: 7, quoted in Paerregaard, 2008: 7). Some researchers have questioned the usefulness of the concept suggesting that the term is too broad. For example, Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt argue “if all or most things that immigrants do are defined as “transnationalism”, then none is because the term becomes synonymous with the total set of experiences of this population” (1999: 219, quoted in Paerregaard, 2008: 7). Karsten Paerregaard is also critical: “The definition of transnationalism reveals that it fails to account for migrants’ creation of new identities and their efforts to be recognized as immigrants in the host society. It also lacks the sensitivity to the everyday life of transnational migrants and their interaction with the social and cultural environment of the receiving country” (Paerregaard, 2008: 7). Many Iranians in India and Malaysia retain close family relationships, visit Iran whenever possible, follow Iran-related media, and strive somehow to be involved in the political affairs of their home country. One activity that is common among transnational migrants is to regularly send money back home – for example, that is the principal transnational activity for the majority of Peruvian migrants around the world (Paerregaard, 2008: 8). Iranians in India and Malaysia are similar in that respect but in a reverse relation – Iranians that I have encountered never send remittances home to Iran. Instead, the opposite is true since it is difficult for Iranians to earn for a living in India and Malaysia. Hence, family is sending money to them from Iran. Because of the international sanctions international credit cards do not work in Iran and money cannot easily be transferred to and from the country. This situation has opened up for dealers catering to many Iranians in Pune and Kuala Lumpur thus receiving money from Iran through middlemen.

So, among researchers on migration, it is now a common understanding that contemporary migrants often have plenty of ties to their home countries while living and being incorporated in the country to which they moved. Migration has always been a process that involves living across borders; with today's media communication is easy. Still the political and cultural importance of nation-state remains clear (Lewitt and Jaworsk, 2007: 130). The study of transnationalism has led to an emerging consensus among scholars that we can no longer study migration solely from a host-country perspective.

One way to include more transnational perspectives is to use multi-sited (Marcus 1995) or cosmopolitan (Appadurai 1996) ethnographies that move beyond simply studying immigrants in the receiving context and instead conduct empirical research at all sites of the transnational social field. The goal is to incorporate both the context of the homeland and the host country, to get a thick mapping of how global processes interact with local lived experiences.

The hierarchically ranked status of sending nations is often reflected in the status of its diaspora (Patterson 2006, quoted in Levitt and Jaworsk, 2007: 144). A country's rank within the world's geopolitical order can strongly influence how its emigrants are received. Thus, Iranians have higher status in India than in Europe, since Iran's status is higher in India.



2.5 When everyone is a traveller

When preparing for my fieldwork in southern Iran a few years ago I might have expected to meet an immobile culture – that’s how I thought a far away small town in provincial Iran would appear. Soon, I found that it was not the case.

After having arrived an early morning in Bandar Abbas by bus from Shiraz I had tea in a small stall and started to chat with the tea-seller. He had just returned from a trip to Turkey, to see Roman antiquities there. After a while he asked me what I thought of Michael Foucault. He loved Gabriel García Marquez, and said that he was trying to figure out what Marquez’ literary style was called in Persian. He had travelled to Bandar Abbas from the north-western part of the country, the Iranian Azerbaijan, to set up a tea stall in the south, by the coast. Later, while I travelled along the Persian Gulf in order to explore the *zaar* ceremony – a ceremony originating from the African Horn, related to exorcism and spirit possession and still existing in Ethiopia and Sudan – it seemed as if everyone was a great traveller. People were connected to the sea. Houses, at least one posh house that I saw, were built with wood from Tanzania. Other people who I met had been going to Karachi regularly and learned fluent Urdu. They were all travellers.

Similarly, in Tehran, it was as if everyone had a relative in Canada, Germany or Sweden. And everyone was on their way to somewhere. Some had submitted their visa application to a European country recently (unless the embassy in question had been closed as was the case with the British embassy). Others had more vague plans. A common plan was to travel to Turkey – Iran and Turkey have agreed that their citizens do not need visas to visit each others country – and to continue from there to any country possible.

While reading James Clifford’s “Routes” it is easy to relate his writing about “Travelling cultures” to the Iranian context. Clifford cites from Amitav Ghosh’s anthropological fieldwork in Egypt. In “In an antique land” – one of my favourite books – Ghosh recounts experiences from the village where he spent time for his PhD project. He writes: “The men in the village had all the busy restlessness of

airline passengers in a transit lounge". The traditional village as an airline transit lounge – Clifford thinks that there is no better image or figure for postmodernity or mobilities and rootless histories (Clifford, 1997: 1).

What counts as fieldwork – and what can the field be? Since the era of Malinowski and Mead anthropological fieldwork has typically comprised a longer – usually over a year – stay in a place far away. Such periods in the field have been considered as the base on which professional anthropologists and ethnographers build their work. But in Ghosh's book, as Clifford points out, fieldwork is less a matter of localized dwelling and more about travel encounters. "Everyone is on the move, and has been so for centuries: dwelling-in-travel" (Clifford, 1997: 2). For me, the field has been wherever I have encountered Iranians in Pune and Kuala Lumpur.

In Ghosh's book travel has become a norm, while dwelling demands explication. Why, Clifford asks, do people stay home? A conscious choice not to travel in a context with powerful and seductive symbols might be a form of resistance, not limitation, Clifford suggests. Similarly, I know people in Tehran who, despite they can't stand the government and have been living abroad for extended time periods, now insist on staying and living in Iran. Not to emigrate can be seen as a form of resistance. In other circles doing everything one can to leave is the norm – to stay in Iran if one has the chance to leave can then be seen as norm-critical.

2.6 Culture and aspirations of migration, cumulative causation and migration networks



The term Culture of Migration refers to the history and sociocultural dimensions of the sending community. It describes a situation where migration becomes ingrained into the repertoire of people's behaviours, and values associated with migration become part of the community's values (Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011). Cohen, in his analysis of the culture of migration experiences of rural Oaxacans in southern Mexico, writes: "the decision to migrate is accepted by most Oaxacans as one path toward economic well-being" (Cohen, 5, 2004).

Migrant networks play a very important role in the migration process. According to Massey et al. (1993), "migration networks are sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through kinship, friendship and shared community origin" (p.728). Having migration networks is important in lowering the costs of migration and consequently increasing its benefits. Networks are equally important once migrants arrive at their destination and are helpful when it comes to providing

information on jobs, housing, and other needs for new arrivals (Zai, L, 2007: 490)

Massey et al. (1994) argues that in the initial stage of migration, it is people who are in the middle of the socioeconomic spectrum who are likely to move. Migration is a risky and costly enterprise and poor people may find it too expensive, while the rich people have less incentive to go (Zai, L, 2007: 490).

Migration network theory was initially mostly preoccupied with factors at the individual level. Having a family member who has migrated or having a migrant friend significantly increases the likelihood of migration for other family members. On another level, the impact of migration on the community has been considered – and has been labelled “the cumulative causation theory of migration”. In this perspective, “causation is cumulative in that each act of migration alters the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made, typically in ways that make additional movement more likely (Massey et al. 1993:451).

Another very important impact migration has on the migrant-sending community is the creation of a “culture of migration”. Migration changes values and perceptions in the migrant-sending communities and consequently reshapes and redefines what is considered to be normative behaviour among young people. This is the case in many communities where migration is common – migration becomes a rite of passage and the thing to do for young people.

This culture of migration can have an impact on children of school-age, who see a future in a foreign country on the expense of focussing on school. Migration network theory and cumulative causation of migration suggest, in sum, behavioural changes at the individual level and the impact of migration at the community level, all of which lead to the increase and perpetuation of migration. Eventually, there is a domino-effect and migration becomes a self-feeding process and independent of the original socioeconomic forces that led to it in the first place (Liang, 2007: 492).

Massey et al. (1998) argue that any account of immigration must consider four basic facts of international movement: the structural forces in developing societies that promote emigration; the structural forces in developed societies that attracts immigrants; the motivations, goals, and aspirations of the actors who respond to these forces by migrating internationally; and the social and economic structures that arise to connect areas of out- and in-migration. Iranians going to India and Malaysia do not fit into this model, given that, at least India, is less socioeconomically developed than Iran.

So, when a culture of migration has come about, migrating somewhere else appears more than ever a desirable life project. Discussing migration, hearing stories of migration and seeing family and friends migrating creates a culture in which migration is viewed as something desirable – and increases ones cultural capital.

Compared with Delhi, where I have also lived, the situation in Tehran is very different when it comes to the culture of migration. Financially and materially, young in Tehran are, in general, better off than young students in Delhi. Still, none of my friends in Delhi planned to leave India – emigrating was not spoken of or dreamt of. Yes, many would go abroad for a year or a few to study, but there was no obsession comparable to what was felt in Tehran. The general vibe and atmosphere was much more positive and people I encountered viewed the future with a greater optimism. The easy and obvious explanation to this is the way the oppressive Islamic Republic makes everyone want to leave. When the gains are so minimal and the risk so high – what is the point of attempting change and to work in politics? This is in great contrast with student-life in Delhi, which was incredibly politicized, students working and organizing themselves, staying up in the nights, demonstrating, travelling for social causes in the country. The diversity of student life in Delhi had not created a culture of migration comparable to the situation in Tehran (but in other parts and contexts of India there exists a culture of migration, such as in destitute areas of Uttar

Pradesh, where every second man is going to a Gulf State, working and sending home money).

In Teheran there is no doubt an easily recognized culture of migration. Everyone talks about getting out of the country. However, Cohen's point that the decision to migrate is thought of as a path towards economic wellbeing, does not necessarily ring true when it comes to Iranians moving abroad.

A common distinction is made between expats and migrants in which expats are assumed to be privileged and well off. In contrast, migrants are thought of as being less driven by choice and more out of compulsion. There are not many similarities between a foreigner working as a computer specialist for a multinational company in Shanghai and a refugee fleeing from a war in the Middle East.

Expats are usually desired, whereas the migrants are not. Where in this dichotomy can the Iranians in Pune be placed? They haven't ended up in India entirely by own choice, but rather by lack of opportunities. Neither are they purely political refugees, and many talk about Iran in positive terms and are proud about their country.

Iranians travelling to India to study, in general belonging to the upper middle class are not economical migrants – Iran is a middle-income country whereas India is the country in the world with the highest number destitute citizens.

Iran is one of the most demonized countries in the world, by the West, and was one of three countries called “The axis of Evil” by an American president. It is one of the most politicized countries too, and a country that plays a major role in world politics. In the summer of 2014 the world's eyes were set on Vienna and the talks between Iran and primarily the United States – among the participants were the foreign ministers from Iran, US, UK, Russia, China, France and Germany – about Iran's nuclear power programme.

Whereas Iran in the West commonly is perceived as a country of extremists and a nuanced picture of the country rarely is given, the perception of

Iran in India is more positive; Iran is often thought of as a country of culture, and many associate them with the parsis who settled in India centuries ago. Iran and India share much history – Persian was the principal language of the administration of the Mughal Empire, and some of the best poets writing in Persian were living in India. Iran has a higher GDP per capita than India, but according to the world powers India is more benevolent and collaborative, with more soft power, and its economy is growing. Many have strong opinions about the Iran’s religious and political establishment. Reflecting this, Iran was one of the seven countries whose citizens the new American president banned from entering the US in January 2017, only a week after being inaugurated.

2.7 Lucky findings on foot – a methodology



In a café–restaurant in Koregaon Park in Pune, popular among Iranians

Serendipity, “the art of making an unsought finding”, as contrasted against purposeful experiments, might be an ideal that is relevant in some anthropological fieldwork. The concept of serendipity is all the more fitting for my particular project since it is believed it was coined by the English novelist Horace Walpole who based it on a Persian fairy tale, The Three Princes of

Serendip, in which the main characters travel around and make fantastic and unexpected discoveries (quoted in Salazar, 2013: 178). In the tale Walpole not only stresses the significance of luck when making discoveries, but puts equal emphasis on the importance of being “sagacious” enough to link seemingly unconnected phenomena in order to come to a conclusion. Serendipity has often been understood as purely happy coincidences, but to have the ability to see connections is of course vital (Salazar, 2013: 178). Since the concept includes both chance and sagacity, serendipity has been paraphrased “accidental wisdom” – an ideal to strive for during anthropological fieldwork. It is a practice that requires plenty of time for the accidental findings to appear.

During my fieldwork I relied to a large extent on serendipity. I want to argue that walking and serendipity are closely linked. Walking is an excellent activity to conjure up serendipity – to move through a city in search for situations and encounters conducive to the research, while at the same time take in the energy and atmosphere of a place. In Kuala Lumpur and in Pune, while on fieldwork, walking, and relying on serendipity, was probably my most important way to find my informants. For example, I used to take a walk in Bukit Bintang, the popular neighbourhood in Kuala Lumpur, in the evenings. Quickly I found some places where Iranians gathered – nodes in the Persian web in Kuala Lumpur. Relying on serendipity I focussed on particular streets and corners, and stroke up conversations with Iranians when I heard Persian being spoken. That is how I met Mahnaz and Hussein, both of whom would become important informants. Indeed, serendipity, along with reflexivity and openness, can be essential in anthropological fieldwork (Salazar, 2013: 179). Serendipity may perfectly mark the intuitive logic that transcends both subjectivity and objectivity, by which fluid anthropological sense is articulated (Hazan and Hertzog, 2016: 2).

Walking was, thus, a crucial method during my fieldwork. Walking, Tim Ingold suggests, is one of the most fundamental human experiences there are, along with talking. Life is as much a long walk as it is a long conversation (Ingold and Lee Vergunst, 2008: 1). Ingold’s claim that walking is a social activity rings true according to my experience: “in their timings, rhythms and inflections, the feet

respond as much as does the voice to the presence and activity of others. Social relations are not enacted *in situ* but are paced out along the ground” (ibid.).

Following Marcel Mauss’ essay “Techniques of the body” (Mauss 1935), where he elaborates on how ways of moving the body are taught (how to walk or run, for example), Pierre Bourdieu wrote about physical practices. Walking not only expresses thoughts and feelings that have been taught. Walking is also a way of thinking and feeling, through which an individual matures and cultural forms are generated. Can we consider thinking and feeling as ways of walking? It is tempting to agree with Ingold that we not only walk because we are social beings, but also are social beings because we walk.

Ethnographers are accustomed to carrying out much of their work on foot, often walking around together with the group of people that is being studied. Still, the walking itself has not attracted much attention among scholars. Walking is often part of the notes from the field, but is almost always omitted in the final work. Since erring on foot has been such a defining part of my fieldwork it would be wrong not to include it. Even multi-sited studies, Ingold points out, focus on the sites themselves, as though lives were lived at fixed places rather than along roads that connect them (Ingold and Lee Vergunst, 2008: 3).



Street scene, Tehran

2.8 Botanizing on the asphalt of Tehran, Pune and Kuala Lumpur

During my fieldwork I carried out much of the work on foot, with others or alone, always among others. On the pavements in Tehran the traffic of walking people is thick. Here, life in the public takes place on the pavements rather than in the cars – inside a car one is a kind of semi-private sphere. Sometimes, when I asked where people meet and make friends in Tehran, I was told that it, among other places, frequently happens while walking on the streets, (rather than in places connected to nightlife since e.g. bars are illegal).

Walking was a way to discover the field – Tehran, Pune and Kuala Lumpur – to get to know places and people. Walking was a kind of recreation, of fun, especially walking with the brothers I lived with in Tehran. We walked and talked in the evenings, in the Tulip Park. When I was alone, which often happened, I walked even more, in the central part of the city, choosing streets I had not walked before. That was the way I found places, such as cafes, and made friends.

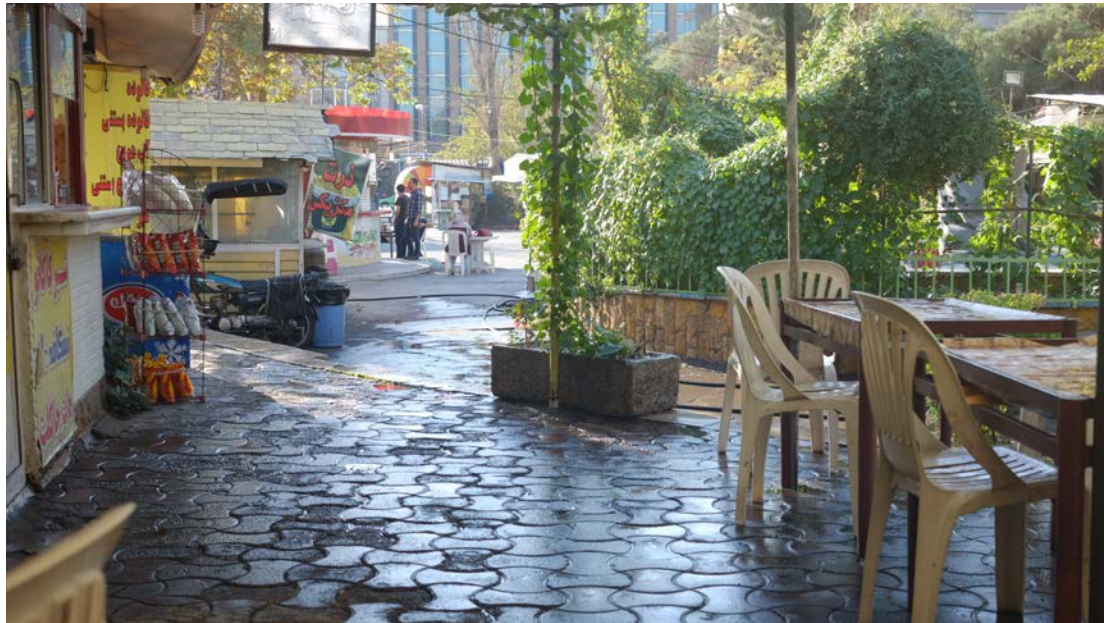
I believe that one can walk in a city with the explicit purpose of exploring it, and thus be more open, receptive and sensitive to its nuances. To the walker exploring cities the concept of the flaneur comes to mind. Charles Baudelaire wrote about the flaneur who goes botanizing on the asphalt, but lamented since he thought the flaneur was vanishing. The reason was that the arcades, where the flaneurs originally were to be found, were being removed and boulevards were built. The Parisian arcades, the *passage*, have its equivalence in Tehran, with the same name, passage. They are all over the city, typically taking shape as covered lanes filled with shops on either side, sometimes on several floors. They stand in contrast to the bazaar; as Shahram Khosravi (2008: 98) has showed, the passage representing modernity and the bazaar tradition.

Walter Benjamin wrote about the flaneurs: “Basic to flanerie, among other things, is the idea that the fruits of idleness are more precious than the fruits of labour. The flaneur, as is well known, makes “studies”” (Benjamin, 1999: 454). To refer to Walter Benjamin feels appropriate especially since Mehrdad,

whom I came to live with in Tehran, was involved in translating Benjamin, together with Adorno, Mercuse and others in the Frankfurt school, into Persian. I was introduced to Benjamin through Mehrdad and his friends. They would gather in the late evenings discussing philosophy in general, and Benjamin in particular, with a seriousness I was not used to from my own milieu, in Sweden. Often the discussions revolved around whether the books that they had been translating would be permitted to be printed or not. They had to get through the censorship by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Ershad. “You are not in touch with any university or any institution?” I asked. “No, no, that would be useless, the best thing we can do is to study for ourselves”. The group translating and discussing Walter Benjamin in someone’s flat represented an alternative space, a heterotopia (Foucault 1984), in relation to the authorities.

By walking I randomly found the places I frequented, and the people I would spend most of my time with. The most I can do of my stay while on fieldwork, I reasoned, is to be out, walking the streets and finding places where people meet and talk. That was how I thought I would be capable of registering details and write a description as thick as possible (in Clifford Geertz’ sense (Geertz, 1973: 3)).

I relied on participant observations and semi-structured interviews. I would use open questions, asking about life in Pune or Kuala Lumpur, reasons for leaving Iran and what made them choose India or Malaysia. The interviews would be informal in character, inspired by the “narrative interview” – technique, and they would be semi-structured to encourage spontaneous answers.



The popular hang-out park-e laleh, Tehran, October 2015

2.9 How was the data collected?

The fieldwork presented herein is multi-sited comprising studies on Iranian groups in Kuala Lumpur and in Pune. Following connections, associations, and relationships is at the heart of designing any multi-sited ethnographic research study (Marcus, 1995: 97). Furthermore, ethnography, being local, requires a close-up perspective; a multi-sited fieldwork ought to look for and discover new connections and associations in which traditional ethnographical concerns (agency, symbols, and everyday practices) can continue to be expressed, albeit in different ways (Marcus, 1995: 98). My field starts in Iran, from where the informants have started their journey and from where they have plenty of memories. The same language, Persian, has been used in all my communications with Iranians, thus both in Iran, India and Malaysia. In a sense, the field of the young Iranian exile communities remains the same, although the context and the background change. I will thus follow the people from Teheran, to Kuala Lumpur and Pune. The study design allows to “to follow the life or biography” of people.

To follow the people might be the most obvious and conventional way to organize a multi-sited ethnography, with Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* being the archetypical account. To follow and stay with people of a particular group makes especially sense in migration studies.

The life story, to follow the life or biography, is another way to structure a study that might well be multi-sited, and I have combined it with the narrative interview. The field is wherever the subject of study is at the moment – and in a mobile world, and studying migrants, the fieldwork naturally becomes multi-sited.

Even though mobility and migration have common points – both involve movement – there are also differences. Mobility involves a more privileged approach to movement, whereas migration often is forced or at least triggered by external circumstances. Mobilities such as lifestyle-migration has clearly more to do with mobility than migration in this dichotomy.

The narrative interview (as described by Bauer, 1996) encourages and stimulates the interviewee to tell a story about significant events from his or her life. The idea is to reconstruct events from the perspective of informants. The narrative interview encourages the informant to choose the topics being discussed. There is a risk in traditional question-response-schema of many interviews that the interviewer selects the themes and words the questions – the result might be that the data gathered reveals more about the interviewer than the issues and peoples that are being studied. In a way, the one who asks the questions controls the situation (Bauer, 1996: 2).

The influence of the interviewer should ideally be minimal. Everyday language should be used, and it is assumed that the perspective of the interviewee is best revealed in stories where the informant is using his or her own spontaneous language in the narration of events. Still, the narration will have structure – anyone telling a story follows a self-generation schema – anyone who tells a story follows basic rules of story telling (Bauer, 1996: 3).

Irrespective of social class or education, anyone can tell a story, it is a universal competence (ibid.)

In the narrative interview, the interviewer familiarizes him- or herself with the field before the interview. Then, once the interviewer and the interviewee meet, the topic of the interview is brought up. The interviewer then lets the interviewee speak without interruptions, only using non-verbal encouragement to continue the story. The only question asked is “what happened then?” “How come?” “Why”. The interview is followed by some small talk.

The main point is to let the interviewee be in charge of interview and to encourage his or her views and attitudes, rather than those of the interviewer. I have used this technique during my fieldwork. I would sometimes complement the narrative interview with more conventional questions, in the form of small talk.

Although the form could have loose fringes, the dialogue would invariably revolve around a few questions:

- How is life in Pune / Kuala Lumpur?
- How come you decided to come to Pune / Kuala Lumpur?
- Why did you decide to leave Iran?
- How is social life in Pune / Kuala Lumpur – with whom do you spend time?
- How and where do you see yourself in a few years?

I would ask what they do for leisure and about their future plans, and then follow up with questions (“why? What happened? Where?”). I would have a notebook and write everything down from the interview, and write up the notes soon thereafter at home, on the computer.

Participant observation as a technique is often seen as the hallmark of anthropology, but it might be a mistake to think that the method is new or

exclusively has been used by anthropologists in the academic world. 19th century novelists, Balzac for example, conducted ethnographical research in his novels, and made sure the characters wore the fashion of the season – he based his characters on participant observation and ethnographical notes (Okely in Ingold (ed.), 1996: 36-37).

I was on fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur during the autumn of 2014. In Pune I arrived for the first time in the summer of 2013 and stayed for about two weeks. I made connections that I would come back to during my later visits. In early spring 2015 I was back in the city. During this latter visit I met Tina and Hussein and his friends, whom would be among my main informants. I returned to Pune a year later, by spring 2016, and deepened the fieldwork among the informants whom I already knew. I followed Iranians, seven in Pune and eight in Kuala Lumpur, in their everyday life.

3. The Green Movement – a marker of a generation?



Street-art, Tehran, October 2015

In this chapter I write about the summer of 2009 and how it affected especially the young population. After a description of how the events unfolded that spring and summer, there are the experiences of young people that I spoke to in cafes in Tehran 2011-2012. There is also a section about growing up in the Islamic Republic, and one about Iran after the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. The idea is to give a background to why a culture of migration has developed.

The spring of 2009 Tehran was oozing with optimism, the election campaign being almost festive. Night after night tens of thousands of supporters of the reformist movement rallied in a party atmosphere. There were no policemen in sight as a sea of green clothes and banners was moving along Valiasr Avenue, the major south – north axis across Tehran. Some women even took off their veil – unthinkable in everyday life in Iran of today (www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/14/iran-tehran-election-results-riots). On one side was Ahmadinejad and on the other was the Green Movement, the reformists, with demands for a more stable economy, more liberty at home and improved relations with the rest of the world (ibid.). Mir Hussein Mousavi was the reformists' candidate, and although he was an insider representing the establishment and having worked for the Islamic Republic since the revolution, he was by many seen as someone new. He looked young for his age and managed to galvanize the powerful Green Movement.

The vital campaign, with demonstrations and manifestations, had begun during spring because of the upcoming election. Mohammad Khatami, the president between 1997 and 2005, had been popular among the young in Tehran and introduced reforms – life in Iran became more liberal, some more music was allowed, and a local popular music scene had emerged. The urban young aspired for more freedom. In contrast to the relatively liberal years during Khatami, the ensuing era of Ahmadinejad was, for many, one of disappointments and crackdowns. After Ahmadinejad's first term there were hopes that Mousavi, once he became president, would emulate Khatami and ease social restrictions as well as improve international relations (ibid.).

On the streets of Tehran it seemed that Ahmadinejad's first term as a president soon would come to an end. The election of 2009 was the first time for many to vote; even people disillusioned with the Islamic Republic flocked at the polling stations. It was like a carnival, people were waiving flags in taking part in the campaign to topple Ahmadinejad, the president that was despised in many circles but especially among the urban, educated youth.

When the results of the election were announced on a Friday proclaiming that, contrary to most expectations, Ahmadinejad had been re-elected, "people flooded the streets, not speaking to each other", Ahmed, a young man in a café in Tehran, told me. "It was as if someone had emptied a bucket of cold water over you. People were shocked," Ahmed continued. The coming nights people gathered on the roofs, shouting God is great, *Allah o akbar*, echoing the Islamic Revolution from 1979 when the same shouts were heard but at that time against the Shah. *Allah o akbar* was heard all over Teheran in the nights in the summer of 2009.

The streets were filled with people walking in silence. People I have spoken to emphasise how dignified this silent protest was. There was no violence. Then, after a few days, the police and the paramilitary forces, the *basij*, armed and on motorbikes, started to attack the demonstrators. Many were thrown in jail or expelled from universities. The Supreme Leader, *rahbar*, Khamenei, during his Friday prayer at the university in Tehran, made it clear that he would not tolerate any further upheavals. When the police attacked further violence followed. Many were killed, among them Neda Soltan whose death was filmed, spread on social media, and became a symbol for the Green Movement.

Individuals who affirmed the movement used to wear something green, a colour that had become a symbol of the reformists. Green is also the symbol of Islam and of hope. It was a great irony that wearing the colour after the crackdowns begun after the election de facto became illegal in Iran – the green banner of the prophet being a visible reminder of the nature of the republic (Majd, 2010: 52).

According to many young Iranians with whom I have discussed, the Green Movement in 2009 inspired the “Arab spring” two years later. By contrast, the authorities in Iran claim that the events that took place in the Arab world during spring 2011 reflected the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. The Arab spring was essentially a string of Islamic revolutions revolting against dictatorial secular governments, similar as when the Iranian people overthrew the authoritarian and secular Shah, the Iranian authorities argue. But the young do not agree. “In 2009 we stood up against our dictatorship, just as the people of Arab countries revolted against theirs.” “First the government of Syria, a close ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran, will fall, and then the Islamic Republic,” was a prediction that I heard from quite a few young Iranians in Tehran 2012.

Young people that took part in the revolts the summer of 2009 took severe risks. Many were jailed, lost their governmental jobs, or were thrown out of university. “I have been studying for an academic degree for five years. If I am seen on the streets demonstrating it won’t be worth anything. I cannot put that at stake”. Those words, by a young man in Esfahan in 2009, echoed a common sentiment about the protests. Was it worth to go out and demonstrate if one risked to be kicked out of university or loose one’s job? In general, Iranians that were active in the protests abroad – in London, Sweden or Toronto – were aware of the Iranian authorities checking them.

Shortly after I had found The Balcony - the café - I met Ahmed. He had a big beard, but not in the *basij* – the voluntary guards– style but rather much more unruly. He wore round glasses, and he was rolling cigarettes while not drawing in his notebook. He worked in a bookshop on the Revolutionary Street, called Horizons, and asked me to come for a visit the day after. He was also a freelancing illustrator and photographer, besides being a musician. Ahmed loved to play jazz. But playing jazz wasn’t tolerated in Iran, so he had to move, he said. He planned to move to Paris with his father. He had links to an Iranian Cultural Centre, by Canal Saint Martin in Paris, and was hoping to get a job there later. He

had always wanted to work in a bookshop and was happy that he was able to do so before he left, he said.

In the summer of 2009 Ahmed had been involved, as many of his friends, in the Green Movement, the *jombesh - e sabz*. Ahmed took to the streets upon hearing that Ahmadinejad had been re-elected. Hundreds of thousands of people walked the streets. Ahmad emphasized how dignified they felt - something that I heard from many of those who participated. They weren't shouting but walked silently. Ahmad and two friends, among thousands of people, came to Vanak square. Police had been transported to Tehran from the countryside together with the voluntary forces, the *basij*, arrived to the square and started to attack the demonstrators. Stones were raining on the police and people panicked. Ahmad and his female friends ran to try to escape, with policemen running after them, and he helped the girls over a door to a private yard. The police, on a motorbike, took Ahmed's jacket and speeded away, throwing Ahmad on the ground. Police came and beat him with batons. They happened to be outside a pharmacy, and the owner, seeing what was happening outside, came out and asked the police to stop beating his son - he lied that Ahmad was his son. Ahmad took a taxi home, with bruises on his body.

He worked at a newspaper as a photographer. He was 20 years old. One day, a few days after the election results were made public - Ahmadinejad had been re-elected - the police arrived to the newspaper workplace. Tear gas was thrown into the building, which made the employees run outdoors where they were caught by the police and driven to the Evin prison. Those who stayed inside, despite the tear gas, were eventually forced out in chains by the police. Ahmad was in the prison for four weeks, first in a cell with other people, among others a mullah. Then he was transferred to a solitary cell where he spent two weeks. The guards told him that he was facing the death penalty but Ahmad knew that they were faking. They had caught many thousands of people, and could not execute everyone, he reasoned. But some jailed teenagers broke down upon hearing that they were sentenced to death. In the nights relatives and friends gathered outside the prison waiting for their loved ones.

When Ahmad was released eventually he fell into a depression and spent one month in a mental institution. Since then he has had some small jobs waiting for an opportunity to move abroad. Ahmad recounted this while we were walking in Bandar Abbas by the Persian Gulf. As soon as some official-looking person approached us he silenced. Experiences such as Ahmad's were recurrent among the young in Tehran – often I heard similar stories.

3.1 Encounters in cafés of central Tehran 2011-2012

And how the Green Movement influenced young people in the city



Cafes in Tehran are semi-public spaces that have mushroomed in Tehran during the last decade, and have become a common meeting point for young people. They can be relatively expensive, a coffee up to ten times more expensive than in cheaper places nearby – such as the outdoor place in *park - e laleh*, “the Tulip Park”. The cafes are as liberal as they can be in the public sphere in the Iranian capital, with an atmosphere that is much more open than out in

the street. Inside cafes, women are, for example, allowed to smoke without risking unwanted attention from the religious police, the *gashte ershad*.

Walking around central Tehran in 2011 -2012 I soon became a regular customer at a few cafes. They usually played western pop – Pink Floyd was popular. Also heard was western classical music, and Beethoven was the name of one of the most well-regarded music-shops. On the walls many cafés had photos of authors – one café on the main Revolutionary Street was called Godot and had its walls covered with photos of Samuel Beckett.

One afternoon, while walking from the Tulip Park (*park – e laleh*) down towards the Revolutionary Street (*enqelab*) in central Tehran, I saw what looked like a private apartment, but it was a café. I walked in and took a seat next to a man who wondered if I was Russian. He had himself lived in Russia during a few years for his studies during a few years. He had a child there, and liked everything that was Russian. Now he worked as the chef in the café, making pizzas and pasta, and I ordered vegetarian lasagne. At that moment I did not know that I would be back to that café, called The Balcony, every other day in the months that were to follow.

One day at the Balcony an athletic man – a basketball player – sat down at my table. He, Hasan, had been active in the Green Movement in Karaj, a city next to Tehran that in recent years has grown to become a satellite town to the capital. Hasan was counting votes and knew that in Karaj a majority of the voters had voted for the opposition. Still, when the result was announced, Ahmadinejad had won in Karaj too. Many people involved in Mir Hussein Mousavi's campaign were jailed in Karaj. Hasan had a friend working for Iran Air who had put him on a passenger-list on a plane to Kish, the popular Island in the Persian Gulf, during the election days. Now it looked as he had been there, and not in Karaj, during the election so he managed to avoid being imprisoned. Otherwise he would still be in prison, he said.

Another day I met a filmmaker, Arash, who said that he wanted to make a film about me. The film would be about a foreigner in Tehran and called *The Immigrant*. Arash worked in another café where we met the next day. There I was introduced to a young woman, Somayeh, who used to be a law student until the summer of 2009 when she was thrown out from the university since she had been involved in the election campaign for Mousavi. She spoke about a professor whom she liked very much. The professor was sent straight to Evin during the campaign, she says, mimicking in a dramatic way, and had not been seen since. Somayeh called the leaders and powerful people for “sheep-sellers” since they supposedly were herding cattle until the powerful Islamic Revolution rewarded them by giving them important positions in the government. Arash was planning to leave the country in the spring. It was January now, and he wanted to leave around May. He would start by going to Turkey and then continue from there to any destination possible.

During my time in central Tehran I heard numerous similar stories from young people mainly in the cafés. It seemed as if almost everyone wanted to leave the country, to almost any place abroad – a feeling that have become acute after that summer in 2009. There were rumours being spread about embassies about to open. When I was there the *basij* stormed the British embassy, and all of a sudden plenty of people had to change their plans. People who had planned to study or work in the UK, or go there for a visit, now had to first travel to Dubai and apply for a visa there. Also, at approximately the same time the French embassy’s culture section closed, so it wasn’t possible to apply for a student visa for France.

Despite all the difficulties there was a certain positively charged atmosphere. For example, in the nights people would meet for hours in the flat where I stayed, to discuss literature and philosophy. Life and literature were taken seriously in a way that I, from Sweden, was not used to among younger adults. Friends coming for the evening might stay all night, speaking, reading, and smoking opium at the stove - the drug was heated and the white smoke inhaled from a straw made from a sheet of paper. The literature being discussed was

Western and Iranian such as for example Adorno and Walter Benjamin. The music listened to was similarly diverse: Shostakovich or Shajarian, and Iranian classical and pop from the seventies, thus before the revolution. In the cafés too, the popularity of European classical music and literature was clear, often the walls were covered with photos of European writers. Cafés were called, for example, Kafé Prague, Kafé Kafka, Mortelle, Kafé Godot. In short, it was striking how people romanticised Europe and the West.

Three and a half years later I was back in Tehran. To walk into the café, the Balcony, where everyone I had met with had been planning to leave the country, was sobering. Now, neither the staff nor the customers were dreaming of going abroad as much as a few years ago, or hardly at all. The owners, a couple, Siamak and Leili, had had a son and then separated. Previously they had been planning to move abroad, first to Turkey and then further west, towards Sweden, and I had filled in invitation letters issued by the Swedish immigration agency. "I am not thinking of moving anymore," Siamak said. He was still running his small café and the customers were mostly the same as three years earlier. But some had left. For example, Reza, 33, had been teaching French in Tehran – he had spoken French without (to me) any discernable accent– and used to run a radio station in the city, in French. He was also deeply interested in theatre and had been active in different theatre groups, some of them very political. He had recounted when he and his friends set up a play outside Evin, the prison known for its political prisoners – to play theatre directly outside the prison sounded dangerous, to say the least. He had moved to Montreal now, where he worked in a Mexican restaurant. Sadaf, 24, who had been a regular at the café, had left for Hamburg to study architecture. Nima, 32, another regular café guest some years ago, had left for Turkey with his brother and planned to continue his travel towards the West, Siamak told me.

Still I recognized several café guests from before. It was a tight group of friends and customers. The cafe is the closest one gets to a bar or pub milieu in Iran. Siamak lived in a room in the basement, and in the evening, after closing the café, a few guests lingered on. We stepped down to the basement. I was amazed by Siamak's generosity. He was incredibly open and giving. It was even

more impressive considering all the hardships he has suffered the last four years. Nothing had really worked out his way. When we met last time, in Tehran 2012, he was planning to leave the country with his wife. Just after I had left they found out that they were expecting a child. Now the boy was three years old and lived with his mother in southern Iran. Siamak was glowing with pride of his son. His room in the basement was bare. There were two old soft chairs and a carpet. There was no bed or wardrobe. The carpet was covered with cigarette ashes, and the room was smoked in. We took a seat, together with a man who was there a few years ago, a musician. Siamak sat down in a soft chair and picked up a plastic bottle of an alcoholic drink made from raisins. He poured up to everyone, and we cheered. "To become a father was the greatest that has happened to me", Siamak said. But nothing had evolved as he and the child's mother had planned. He had been in touch with a publisher in Sweden that publishes books in Persian, and sent them a manuscript. Maybe they could help with visas. "But I have really no plans of going anywhere anymore", he told me. Two younger men, they were both 23, sat with us. They were studying interior design and sometimes gave a helping hand in the café. They had grand plans. They planned to start a design company based in Germany and the USA. One of them, Kave, would take care of the business from Hamburg, where he would be living, while his friend Ali wanted to make Hamburg a base and work from there. We finished the bottle, and lied down on the carpet to sleep. "The youth of Iran is the most confused in the world", Siamak said in the dark before falling asleep. When I woke up late the next day Siamak was already up in the café working. Kave was also there, but Ali had gone. It was striking to hear how their dreams were so similar to those that Siamak had a few years ago. When I wanted to pay for what I had had the night before – coffee, cakes and drinks – I failed, Siamak refusing to accept anything no matter how much I insisted.

A friend, Hasan, had moved to Karaj, just outside Tehran. Four years ago he was living in central Tehran, working in a café and reading on his free time. In the nights his friends used to come and stay until the morning hour, reading and discussing, often speaking about how to get out of the country. Now, Hasan lived with his parents and commuted to Tehran every day where he was studying

theatre at university. "If our leaders were not so damn corrupt and were not looting the country", Hasan told me, "then I would afford an apartment of my own and have a job with a salary which I could live from". Hasan was certainly not the only one in such a situation. It was very common among young adults to live with their parents while studying and also afterwards, while planning to leave. Hasan had been an engineer student, however, after having joined a study circle he became engrossed by philosophy and literature and dropped out from the university. He wanted to go abroad to continue his studies in subjects of his new interests, and together we compared the prospects of different universities in Europe, in Prague among other places. However, his plans to study abroad had not been realized, instead he had taken up a course in theatre at the university of Tehran.

I lived with two brothers in Tehran. The younger one was married and worked as an accountant in a hospital. His wife was living close to the Caspian Sea during my stay, so he was alone in the flat, with friends coming over often. The older brother was spending his time applying for jobs and in general looking for opportunities. One idea was to buy olives and oil in the north of Iran and bring the goods to Tehran for selling. The plan didn't work out in the end. He was unmarried but had met a woman recently with whom he spoke to often. In the nights we often watched serials at TV and cooked something together.

While it seemed as if almost everyone were planning to leave the country the plans were rarely realized. There were many obstacles. Iran, possibly together with North Korea and Cuba, is one of the most demonized countries in the world ("the Axis of Evil"). The demonization is, at least in Iran's case, mutual, as the US is still referred to as "The Great Satan". Along the streets of Tehran there are paintings covering the walls of the buildings often with the message of how evil the USA is. Outside the former American Embassy in central Tehran, where American employees were held hostage at the eve of the revolution (1979 – 1981) are paintings of the Statue of Liberty albeit with the head being replaced with a death skull. And a few blocks away, by the Karim Khan Bridge, there is an American flag, maybe a hundred square meters large, painted on a wall. But

instead of the stars there are bombs and at the bottom of the flag is the slogan “Down with the USA”.

By the autumn 2015 the tensions between the West and Iran seemed to fade. Iran was an ally against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. President Rohani was more diplomatic than his predecessor, Ahmadinejad, and foreign politicians – mostly Europeans – couldn’t wait, it seemed, to visit Iran. The nuclear energy discussions in Geneva between Iran and the world powers including the US with its Secretary of State John Kerry were going well and a deal was reached. The Iranians promised to end the uranium enrichment provided that the rest of the world would lift the sanctions. Many thought that now there would not be as much aggression against the West in the public sphere as before - now it must be important to emphasise good relations. But upon visiting Iran in October 2015 I noted that the anti-West propaganda was as powerful as ever. For example, in one of the main squares in the centre, Vali Asr, there was a new poster large enough to cover the wall of an entire building, depicting a pile of dead bodies and on the top an American flag.

“For what would I stay here?” a young man on a bus in Tehran asked me. “Here’s no fun allowed, here’s no jobs, and we can hardly go anywhere. Why would you stay?” – these were questions people often asked in Tehran. Even for those who have money international travel was difficult because of the paria status of Iran in the world. In a situation when visas to Europe, North America or Australia – by tradition popular destinations for Iranians – are hard to get then people consider other possibilities. India and Malaysia were two viable options, both cheaper than many alternative countries, and visas easier to get.

Youth in urban Iran spending their time in cafés are from quite privileged classes, upwardly mobile. Typically, these cafés, in Tehran, serve thick espressos and cappuccinos, rather than the traditional drink of choice in Iran, black tea, and the cultural references are cosmopolitan. They use Facebook, although blocked (but accessible through VPNs) and forbidden in Iran, and they watch videos on Youtube and download western TV-serials – everyone seems to be

watching the American serials *Game of Thrones* and *Friends*. Many are photographers and show their work in the cafés. Most regulars are from the middle and upper classes and can afford to sit hours on a daily basis in the cafés. People from less privileged classes might shun these relatively expensive places – “they have never worked, they are spoiled, and what they speak about is not interesting since they haven’t participated in life and don’t know anything about “. These words – uttered in affection – were by one friend who did not frequent the cafes, partly because they were too expensive (Hasan, 26, Tehran, January 2012).

Young people are sometimes considered as having special potential for being “problematic” and deviating from social order. But it can also be assumed that young people, being very active in the society they live in, also contribute in a positive way. The agency – the will and possibility to influence one’s life-course – that people have is conditioned in the sense that the circumstances people find themselves in set the boundaries for what is possible for an individual. In Iran being overtly political is associated with risk, and people’s agency is bounded by the society – people are born into a context that is not always easy to get out of. To express political views in any form may come with a very high price.

3.2 Growing up in the Islamic Republic

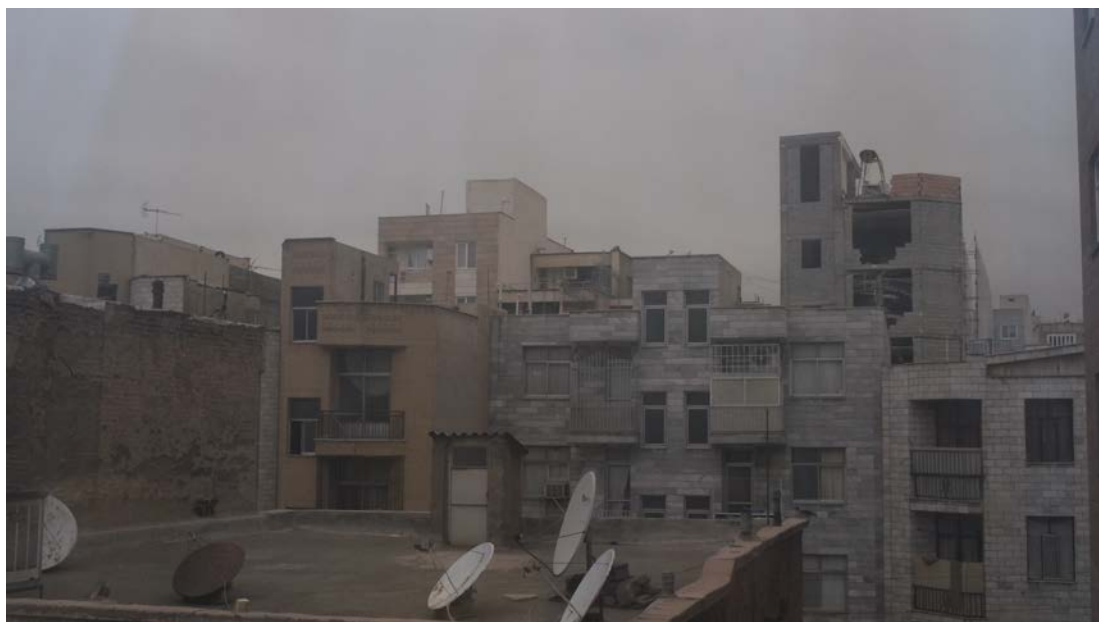
Among young urban adults, who make up almost two-thirds of Iran’s population, there is a lot of frustration with the current regime. “The demographic shift in favour of young people who are educated, due to the Islamic Republic’s free education policies, but unemployed and highly dissatisfied with the regime, has led to the situation where young adults have unlimited free time to interact with other dissatisfied young people” (Mahdavi, 2009: 9), 2009). People gather in cafes or sit in parks or cars and a major discussion topic is how to leave the country. Obsessed by the idea of going abroad (Khoshravi, 2008: 8) many Iranians closely follow the different countries’ visa regulations: Some embassies may issue visas, others may not, or may simply close down. “We can go to Poland

and from there continue to a good country such as Germany or Sweden” a young man in Tehran remarked.



A popular café in Tehran, November 2015

Iran’s population has increased dramatically, from 25 million in 1965 to 80 million in 2016. Today, Iran is one of the most youthful countries in the world – like many Arab Mediterranean countries. This dramatic demographic change has caused large social difficulties. Incapable of meeting the demands of the young generation the Islamic Republic may view the young as “a threat to the health and security” of the society. In the eyes of the establishment the young Iranians are associated with an ethical crisis and are seen as inauthentic (Khoshravi, 2008: 5).



Tehran, November 2015

The generation in Iran that was brought up after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, without any memories of pre-revolutionary times, has been called the “burned generation” (Khoshravi, 2008: 8). Parents in urban middle class families might have spoken about life before the revolution when there was a vital coming and going of students between Iran and the West. Shiraz University was collaborating with Harvard. Visas to European countries and the US were easy to get with an Iranian passport. In contrast, Ayatollah Khomeini infamously once said: “no fun is to be had in the Islamic Republic” (Mahdavi, 2008: 20).

By the end of the nineties the burned generation had grown up. Fuelled with images from abroad, in stark contrast with everyday life in Iran, the young ached to get out of the country. Before the Internet, images came often from illegal but very common satellite receivers showing European, Indian, Brazilian and American programs among others. These days people install VPNs to be able to access foreign and censored pages on the Internet.

Iran slowly opened up with the reformist leader Khatami who was elected in 1998. Society became more open and the press freer; freedom of speech increased. As the society seemed to take a more liberal turn there was a clear

optimism in progressive circles. To be a journalist was suddenly very exciting, almost anything was permitted for publication, and new, progressive papers opened (de Bellaigue, 2007; 2). At the same time, however, powerful conservative forces became concerned. If the liberal movement continued, where would it end? What would happen to the ideals of the Islamic Revolution? In 1998 a number of cultural personalities, writers, artists and journalists were murdered, killings that later were to be known as the chain murders. The journalist Akbar Ganji revealed that the murders were orchestrated by ruling politicians – in fact, by fractions of the authorities. Ganji was imprisoned for six years and moved to the USA in 2006, after he had been released.

When Ahmadinejad unexpectedly became the president in 2005 he was quite unknown among the general public although he had become elected mayor of Tehran in 2003. Suddenly the liberalisation of the Khatami era seemed distant. Newspapers were shut down. Ahmadinejad's aggressive rhetoric put Iran on the world map, but for bad – and sad – reasons. His ill-fitting and too large jacket was, of course, a calculated move thought to attract voters from the lower economical strata of the society. He had a reputation for not being corrupted, at least not much in comparison with some other politicians. The influential Rafsanjani, for example, was reputed to have built his wealth on public money – he became a symbol for corruption. A vote for Ahmadinejad was often a reaction against the unlawful ways of the political elite.

Everyday life in Iran is highly politicized in a way that I have not been confronted with elsewhere. Can politics be articulated and enacted in other ways than in conventional, organizational ways – does political behaviour always have to be verbal? Pardis Mahdavi argues that nonverbal communication can be political at least in a country such as Iran where the state aspires to regulate morality and social behaviours (Mahdavi, 2009: 9). In that way deviance from the state moral codes becomes dissent.

James Scott claims that the harder the pressure from above, the smarter the strategies people deploy to counter the pressure. He talks of one official and one

hidden transcript of how things in society should be (Scott, 1990: 2). The official transcript in Iran is that martyrs and families of martyrs should be happy because the martyrs are in heaven; as a matter of fact, soldiers, including children soldiers, were given a plastic key before they went out to the war against Iraq for being able to open the door to heaven. For the families it means glory to have a *shahid* in the family. The official transcript says that the *basij* militia is a positive force protecting against evil western forces, that wine-drinkers go to hell, and that the youth of Iran are the world's happiest. The hidden transcript is an inversion of this official transcript. People know that the *basij* sign up because of the advantages it entails, such as admissions to a university or easier access to scholarships, rather than out of ideological convictions. The public transcript refers to the open interaction between the subordinated and the ones who dominate, "the worker to the boss, the tenant or sharecropper to the landlord, (...) a member of the subject race to one of the dominant race" (Scott, 1990: 2). In Iran the relation is between the representatives of the ideology of the Islamic Republic and the common people who haven't been able to choose their government. Most viciously is the strife between the youth and the Islamic Republic's ideology.

To get an idea of Iranian youth culture it is of key importance to acknowledge the difference between the official and the unofficial youth discourses. In 2005, in Shiraz, a friend of mine who was 25 years old at the time remarked: "our leader has said that Iran has the most healthy youth in the world. Either he has zero idea of what youth in Iran is like, or he simply lies". The cultural world in which the young people live in has little in common with the official image. Mahmood Shahabi delineates three types of Iranian urban youth that can be useful for the present study: local, cosmopolitan, and activist youths (Shahabi, 2006: 113).

In trying to define these types of youth Shahabi goes back to the urbanisation in the 1960s when the land reforms under the monarchy caused an influx of migrants from the countryside to the city. These migrants experienced a radical change in their way of living, education, relations, clothing, and food habits.

Magazines were filled with photos of western style. In this era youth culture was often about rejecting the Shah and his regime (Shahabi, 2006: 112). The revolution caused the youth to gather and revolt against the monarchy. It led to a mass of radicalized youth, and in 1979 the leader of the revolution Ayatollah Khomeini established the Revolutionary Guards Corps. The Revolutionary Guards came to play an important role in the war against Iraq but also against minorities in Iran. Young people were instrumental in shaping the new country after the revolution. The Islamic Regime emphasized, in contrast to the Shah, the political engagement of the youth.



A common sight in cafés in Tehran: tea and ashtray

It is estimated that two thirds of the thirteen million people who live in Tehran are under the age of thirty. Of the young adults who are eligible and want to work, roughly half are employed (Mahdavi, 2009: 39). Young urban adults, who make up almost two-thirds of Iran's population, are mobile, educated (84 per cent of young Tehranis are enrolled in university or are university graduates; 65 per cent of these are women), and unemployed (the unemployment rate in this group is 35 per cent) (ibid.). Indeed, Iran has one of the youngest populations in world, where half of the total population of about 70 million people are under 29 (Shahabi, 2006: 113). Shahabi and Basmanji describe a phenomenon that can be called "counter culture" (Roszak, 1969) as opposed to an "official" Iranian

culture. A counter culture can be everything that is not sanctioned by the state. One of the goals of the Islamic Republic has been to address “problems” of morality, such as socializing with the opposite sex, listening to music with female singers, and, in general terms, not sharing the ideals of the Republic. Therefore, when a substantial share of the population – the young – is creating its own moral values an ideological base of the regime is threatened and a counterrevolution is being enacted. The state might also dissuade the young from going abroad to study by deciding that academic degrees from other countries are not valid in Iran. For example, people told me that first degrees from foreign universities would not count in Iran – the authorities want the young to stay in Iran for their BA studies (but many did not seem to care about this, at least not those who planned not to return to Iran). Some do not partake in these “deviant” activities at all whereas others do, at least to some extent. The three major kinds of youths identified by Shahabi (the locally oriented and traditional youth, the cosmopolitan youth, and the politically radical or activist youth often being part of the voluntary forces, the *basij*) are of course not clear-cut identities. Shahabi refers to Weber’s Ideal Types in arguing in favour of using these archetypes for analytical purposes (Shahabi, 2006: 113). The categories can be relevant when studying the Iranian migrants in Asia. Which social class do they come from?

Among my informants, predominantly urban Tehranis, everyone would fit into the “cosmopolitan youth” category – and not one single of them were in favour of the societal ideals of the Islamic Republic. Still, the great majority of the Iranian youth is conformist, says Shahabi. They grow up and live through their twenties without being involved in any alternative youth activities. Their views and opinions are consistent with those of the Islamic authority. There exists good communication between this group and the older generation.

During the time of the Shah it was the revolutionary youth, embracing an alternative youth culture, that was the “other” – in contrast to today, when, officially, “revolutionary” bears the meaning of being pro-government: To be a *enqelabi*, literally a “revolutionary”, is to be in favour of the Islamic Republic.

Today, the “other” or alternative youth culture has been constituted by cosmopolitanism and is characterized by materialism and hedonism. The alternative youth of today and that of the era of the Shah have their opposition to the government in common. Today, the “alternative” young people are mainly from upper and middle class backgrounds and tend not to be into politics apart from being against the order of the Islamic Republic. They identify with global youth culture - not the Iranian revolutionary ideology.

The lack of any institutionalized youth subculture means that counter-cultural youth lives an underground existence. Often they do not try to negotiate but rather hide in private houses and act out a culture that is very different from the official version of how the young in Iran should live. Thus the urban underground culture has hardly anything in common with the jargon used by the representatives of the Islamic Republic. Every Friday there is the Friday prayer at the University of Tehran. It is the ideological centre of the regime, its nerve, which the surrounding society has to relate to. The main building of the University is located on the Revolutionary Street in the central part of the city, dotted with cafés, where youth of the “cosmopolitan” type from the middle and upper classes hang out. They exist next to traditional, “governmental” types of young people, with shirts hanging loosely over their trousers and having a short beard. The Revolutionary Street might be the most politicized space in the city. At the same time as it represents the heart of the ideology of the Islamic Republic it is also highly cultural, with the City Theatre by the Vali Asr crossroads and the countless bookshops. Doubtless, it is a charged, vibrant place.

For many Iranians part of the attraction of being abroad is to be able to enjoy the same life-style in public - without having to hide it - as in privacy. As we will see this can not always be achieved, since even though there are no laws abroad of the kind of those of the Islamic Republic many feel that they are still under surveillance by the Republic, and self-censorship is not unheard of. The reason is fear that the Islamic Republic might act out repercussions later, when being back in Iran. This phenomenon is echoing Foucault’s notion of the panopticon.

Even though the official and the “unofficial”, i.e. the alternative, culture appear to be largely isolated from one another they may also overlap to some extent. One example is inside a car, which can function as some kind of a semi private mobile space. Thus, in cars the same rules as on the street do not apply. Women – it is chiefly women that are subjected to the regulations of how one is allowed to dress and not to dress – allow themselves not to wear the headscarf while being in a car, at least women identifying themselves with the alternative movement. The female dress is incredibly politicized, and it is very easy to – sometimes by mistake – cross the boundaries for what is permissible. A pair of high boots may, for example, attract attention from the police.

Another example of how the alternative, cosmopolitan kind of youth influences the public sphere is the way music has pushed the boundaries for what is being regarded as acceptable. For around fifteen years after the Islamic Revolution the only legal music in Iran comprised war hymns, traditional songs and instrumental music (Basmenji, 2006: 56). Since then the society has become more permissive, and today commitment to a particular style of music, with the associated clothing fashion, signals membership to a particular group. Both western and domestic bands are popular. Certain pop bands are legal, after having successfully applied for permission, and these few bands are allowed to give concerts inside the country. However, according to most people that I met in central Tehran the bands that have received permission to play and distribute their music are not interesting. The logic behind this opinion is that anyone that has officially been permitted to play live and be open about ones activities cannot be an interesting musician, since the government is so incredibly harsh. Anything in the lyrics that might be interpreted as criticism towards the establishment, even very mild or ambiguous criticism, is being censored. What is left and legal and allowed to be on the market is music with banal lyrics, simple love songs for example. Therefore, it is common among the urban youth to shun the artists that have applied for their music to be legally presented.

All works of culture have to pass through the “Organ for Islamic Guidance” in order to be distributed or published. I met a young man who had written a book

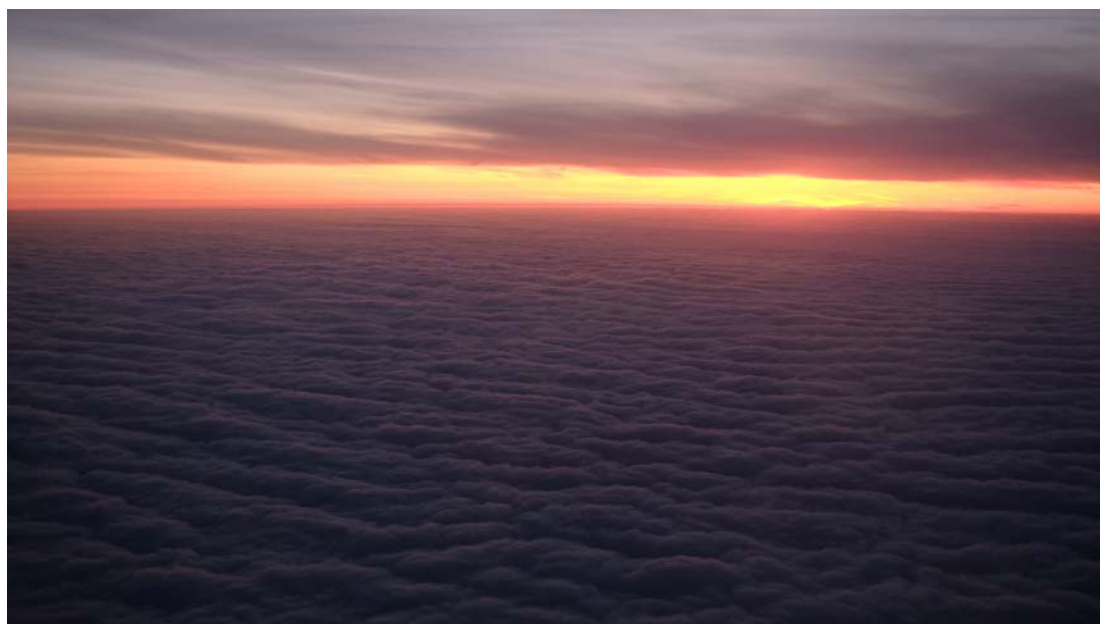
about his travels in Europe. He had sent it to the Organ for Islamic Guidance to go through it. "It may take anything from a week up to a year before they answer", he told me. "And they are unpredictable – it is impossible to know in beforehand what they will consider as being immoral". My friend had to wait for a year before the Organ for Islamic Guidance replied. They had censored his text by erasing anything related to politics or sex. But the book was published eventually; when I returned to Tehran a few years later it was for sale in the bookshops along the Revolutionary Street.

The female dress is endlessly politicized, not least for women with cosmopolitan, alternative inclinations. It is subject to negotiation with both conventions and the laws of the Islamic Republic. The headscarf, the veil, *hejab*, became compulsory in 1983, and not abiding to that law may result in imprisonment for anything from ten days to a year. The list is long for what counts as not respecting the law: not covering the head, showing hair, uncovered arms, trousers without a long dress covering them etc. Inappropriate *hejab* – according to the Islamic Republic – is of major concern. Just as satellite TV-receivers are forbidden and illegal, and at the same time being extremely common, women push the limits for what the authorities decide is legal. Police comes routinely and gather satellite receivers from the roofs, and the owners may have to pay a fine. Similarly, the morality police and *basij* routinely check and reprimand women whose headscarf has slid down and thus show too much hair. The women might be interrogated by the police in a bus and possibly driven to a police station before being let free.



“Enqelab”, (revolution), the nylon light says – close to “engelab” square in Tehran. This fashion stands in contrast to what most young people frequenting cafes and planning to move abroad would preferably wear.

4. Abroad



So far I have been writing about the urban environment in Tehran, and what happened in the summer of 2009 – events that, I argue, were a major reason for many Iranians to leave the country. I also discussed theory and concepts. How does Iranian migration to Asia look like after arrival in the host countries? How is everyday life for the Iranians who've gone abroad to countries east of Iran? How does the field appear like? Do they live in clusters, or do they usually live scattered around the cities? What about the transnational fields? I have two main sections that concern the receiving contexts. The first part describes the lives of a few Iranians who moved to Pune. Then follows a chapter on Iranians in Kuala Lumpur. Each part is introduced by a description of the field.

Visiting Los Angeles in 2011, and especially its neighbourhood Westwood, labelled "Tehrangeles" because of its close links to Tehran, felt like being in Iran. There are Iranian barbershops, ice-cream joints selling the Persian sweet speciality *falude*, bookshops and restaurants. Not far from the posh Westwood is Beverly Hills, with an estimated twenty-five per cent of its population having Iranian background and a mayor, Jimmy Delshad, who had grown up in Shiraz in

Iran. Southern California was a major destination for people fleeing the Islamic revolution and the Iran-Iraq war in the 80s. Now, three decades after the revolution, Persian is the third largest spoken language in Los Angeles. In a way, a “Persian” city outside of Iran has evolved. Those that arrived 30 years ago are getting old including the pop stars of the time of the Shah that still are hugely popular – the most famous probably being Googoosh, with her own TV-show, being popular in Iran too thanks to the illegal satellite receivers. Just as Westwood Boulevard in Los Angeles is filled with shops and restaurants in Iranian style and the most commonly heard language at the local Coffee and Bean outlet is Persian, there are pockets in Pune and Kuala Lumpur with equally much Persian being heard, spoken by people who left Iran long after those who moved westwards driven by the revolution in 1979 or the Iran-Iraq war. Life in Pune and Kuala Lumpur could give an illusion of being inside Iran given the great Iranian presence – with the shops providing Persian goods and the restaurants.

When reading about theories of migration I haven’t been able to find any theory that fits Iranians in Asia. The circumstances seem quite unique. Many Iranian immigrants are not eager to return to their home country – they may be afraid of doing so because of the political situation in Iran. They do not send money home, as many other migrants, and they don’t identify themselves as economical migrants. Instead, they receive money from their families and friends in Iran.

Migrants often move to countries richer than their own. This is not the case with the Iranians in India – Iran is a middle-income country, and India the country in the world with the highest number destitute people. Typically, Iranians don’t dream about a life in India. Rather, their purpose of being there is to get out of Iran. They are both lifestyle migrants and political migrants. Some try to start a business with a local partner, though it is difficult to get the necessary permissions. Typically, Iranian migrants stay for a few years in India or Malaysia before returning to Iran, alternatively going elsewhere.

4.1 Trajectories, examples

Pune, a city in the state of Maharashtra, in central India



Hussein with his pet dog in his car, Pune March 2016

Already being a popular destination for Iranians India became even more so when thousands of people abruptly decided to leave Iran following the election in 2009. India appeared a natural option to many, a quite easy and realistic alternative in terms of visas and costs. It had become too dangerous to stay in Iran for anyone that had been active in the Green Movement. Pune is just a few hours away from Mumbai, or Bombay, as most of its inhabitants still call the city that changed name in 1995. Pune is known for its educational institutions as well as for being a garrison town. It lies on a high altitude and is said to have a nice climate around the year. It was known as a haven for retired people, for being a bit sleepy. But lately the town has become increasingly lively with a large student population fuelling a growing café and bar-scene. While walking around in the city I notice signs outside several residential areas saying “No rooms are given to rent to bachelor men or foreigners”. Walking from Koregaon Park, known for the Osho Ashram, towards the old city and Mahatma Gandhi road, one

may admire large posters with pictures of the military and soldiers in very dramatic positions, jumping over fire, swimming, shooting. "Tough times do not last, tough men do" one billboard says. They aspire to recruit young men to the army. Continuing walking one approaches the railway, and when crossing it one comes into a slum area, with men playing cards on the ground, boys collecting a pile of empty beer bottles, and goats and dogs walking around. Soon one arrives to Mahatma Gandhi road, and continuing along that road, past shops and restaurants, the character of the street becomes slightly more dense and crowded and a little rough – it is the older part of the city. There one finds a bakery with a poster of a *faravahar*, the guardian angel associated with Zoroastrianism, Iran's pre-Islamic religion. The bakery is run by Parsis who emigrated from Iran generations ago since they, because of their religion, were at risk of being prosecuted in their home country. Opposite the bakery is a simple restaurant called Rustam's, also a Parsi establishment, the name being a reference to the national epic of Iran. I ask in the bakery for a good Parsi restaurant, and the woman behind the counter directs me to a place called Doberjee. There is a Zoroastrian fire temple in the area where only Zoroastrians are allowed to enter, and a well-known Parsi café called Yezdan serving white bread. During the Iranian new year, *noruz*, which is celebrated by Parsis as well as by Muslim Iranians, one can see people walking around this part of Pune, Camp, looking for items to decorate their *haft sin*, the table with seven symbolic items (all starting with the sound "s": *sabzeh* – green sprouts, *samanu* – sweet pudding, *senjed* – dried olive, *seer* – garlic, *seeb* – apple, *somaq* – sumac fruit, *serkeh* – vinegar) which is being prepared for the Iranian new year. The market is called Sharbatwala Chowk.

The Parsis in Pune themselves like to say that they came from Iran in the 7th century when the Arabs invaded Iran. At that time, they say, Zoroastrians had to convert to Islam for being able to stay in the country, so they fled to India. Upon reaching Gujarat by boat the king of Gujarat sent out a man with a glass filled to the brim with milk, as a sign telling that our country is filled and there is no space for more people. But the Zoroastrian king sprinkled sugar on the glass of milk and sent it back meaning that the Zoroastrian just would sweeten Gujarat.

Why did Pune become such a popular destination for Iranians? One explanation is that Pune since long has had a reputation for being a safe student town. It was also established as a centre for Zoroastrians, with several fire-temples and many inhabitants celebrating the Persian New Year. A most decisive factor, however, has been the domino effect. People in Iran knew someone in Pune, and informal group discussions on social media made a decision to go to Pune easier.

I arrived in Pune for the first time in the summer of 2013 and stayed for about two weeks. I made connections that I would come back to during my later visits. In early spring 2015 I was back in the city, this time to work on my Ph. D thesis. During this visit I met Tina, and Hussein and his friends, whom would be among my main informants. I returned to Pune a year later, by spring 2016, and deepened the fieldwork among the informants whom I already knew.

Summer, 2013. Along Fergusson Collage road one well-known Iranian place is the Good Luck café. The so-called Iranian cafés and restaurants are not Iranian in the sense that they serve food that is common in Iran. But in the Good Luck café they are Shiites, as most Iranians are, and they can inform you where the *Imambara*, the Shiite mosque, is located. Their forefathers came from Iran. They also know which customers are Iranian. In July 2013 a waiter at Good Luck café introduced me to an Iranian man. Almost immediately, after a few minutes of small talk, he drove me to his flat where he was staying with a few friends. A group of six-seven people were living together and seemed to spend most of their time together. Everyone was Iranian. We ate and chatted about their plans. Some were men well into their middle ages. They spoke about their habits. How much do you spend on life's necessities – food, rent, women – a man in his 40s asked a younger man. How much?

That same summer I met one young Iranian man called Abbas, who had been in India for two years. He was very articulate, and was setting up a small pizza-place in the area where he lived, Bhanwan. He was registered as a student at a university in Pune. He was disappointed about his Indian business partner who

wanted to make the restaurant they had set up together in an Indian style rather than Iranian. One major reason for them to move to India had been the results of the Iranian election in 2009. One of Abbas Iranian friends, living in the same flat, was clear that he wanted to move back – when the political situation had improved.

Two years later, by spring 2015, that whole group of friends had left Pune. They were back in Iran. While walking around in Pune, in the area where they used to live, I noticed that most Iranian signs had disappeared. The Iranian shisha place was empty. The restaurant with the “Persian restaurant” sign was not there anymore. And I didn’t hear any Persian. Abbas had set up a small business in Tehran. All his friends had left India, he told me via Facebook.

By March 2016 there are still pockets of Iranians living in the city, but they are much fewer than before. I was meeting a group of ten people and was spending extended periods of time with three of them, Sarah, Siavash and Hussein, whom I had met in Pune by the spring of 2015. After a year or so in Tehran, Abbas had left for Turkey and continued to Toronto. Now, being in Toronto, he doesn’t seem to have plans of continuing his travel.

The field in Pune

There are three main areas where Iranians live and hang out in Pune. One is Koregaon Park, the area famous for its well off residents, cafes and bars, and, not least, the Osho ashram. Osho became popular in the 70s and 80s, especially among Westerners, as a spiritual guru. There was a focus on sexual liberation; in addition, Osho had at some point the largest collection of Rolls Royce automobiles in the world. The ashram guests, wearing their red robe, still constitute a common sight in the area. While sitting in one of the many outdoor cafes or food joints one will hear Persian sooner or later. A second area is NIBM,

a bit further away, popular among Muslims in general and Iranians in particular. In the area are quite a few Iranian restaurants and also shops offering various Persian specialities. Some of the tea places announce “Irani Chai”. The third area is Bhandwan, a good ride from the centre. It is a residential area, with new buildings coming up constantly. One of the buildings hosts an Iranian restaurant on the top floor. It is dark inside, not much sun filters through the curtains, and the large room is filled with *takhts*, the Iranian piece of furniture that serves as a table. The place is serving *ghorme sabzi* and some other Iranian dishes.

Irani Chai, announces several small cafes around the area NIBM. But they don't serve any Iranian tea, not any more. The number of Iranians in Pune is much smaller now than a few years ago and most customers have disappeared. Opposite the restaurant Shandan, serving Iranian kebab, is the Iranian tea place without Iranian tea. Also, there is Khoshboo beauty saloon and Bombay South Café. Some shops sell *lavashak*, the Persian sour sweet delicacy, for Iranians that are still there after the sanctions that made everything so expensive.

Pune is a large city, but small when compared to Bombay just three hours away by shared taxi or a bus. Along Mahatma Gandhi road, in the centre, there are cafes that are said to be Iranian. The staff haven't arrived from Iran recently - Pune has had several waves of migration from Iran. The Good Luck café on Fergusson Collage road is Iranian - the owners speak some Persian and are shiite Muslims. The Iranian students usually come in the afternoon, they say. They serve sandwiches and Indian food, not the usual Persian dishes, and let me know the way to the Imambara.

While on fieldwork among Iranians in Pune several transnational fields appear. Everyone I meet follow Iranian news closely. All Iranians I encounter seem to have mainly Iranian contacts in Pune. And everyone is financed by their family in Iran. Because of the economical embargo there are no international ATMs in Iran; credit cards issued in Iran do not work outside the country and vice versa. There are exchange offices in Pune that cater for Iranians. The shops with Iranian goods and the restaurants are also part of the transnational landscape.

Tina, 27, is from the Caspian coast in northern Iran, and a privileged family. She speaks perfect English with an American accent, and has dyed her hair blond.

For the Iranian New Year *nouruz* Tina and I look for items for the ceremony, *haft sin*. We want large garlic, vinegar, and something green. We walk to the Zoroastrian area, by the end of Mahatma Gandhi road, and ask around for Iranian shops. We are directed to a little store next to a Zoroastrian fire temple. The house opposite the building has Zoroaster symbols and there is a small shop displaying the high green grass to be used in the celebration. We get one green plant and run into a woman, an Indian Zoroastrian, who is out to fetch her own things for the *haft sin*.

Tina had brought me to NIBM, an area with many Muslims including Iranians. Even though there were many more Iranians just a couple of years ago Persian is still heard frequently in the streets. There are plenty of Zoroastrian shops, one imambara – a mosque where Shiites gather for commemoration ceremonies, most notably the *ashoura* – and a few cafes around one end of the road. We ask for Parsi shops. Tina is quite messy, she loves dancing, in particular hip-hop – in Iran she used to teach hip-hop dance. She knows all steps from the film “Step-up”, she tells me. She can’t stand the Iranian government, and how Iran has developed, but she is very fond of the Iranian New Year celebration and looking forward to a nice *haft sin*. We get a table watch, a colourful one, honey, vinegar, apples, a gold fish, and a tablecloth with embroidery. Once back in the flat, we put everything we have bought on the cloth.

Tina and I first met in a Starbucks café after getting in touch through social media. She lives since about half a year in the neighbourhood of Keshav Nagar, next to a river. We roam around the NIBM area looking for *lavashak*, the Iranian sour sweet. We search for one shop in particular that we know sells Persian

specialities. The staff is Indian but know Persian. Previously, when there were many more Iranians in Pune than now, some shopkeepers began selling Iranian items - many Iranians had money, and many were nostalgic and homesick. A few roads away we eat a kebab, Iranian style. Also at this small restaurant the Indian staff speaks Persian. Several shopkeepers found it useful to learn a little of the Iranian language when the city was filled with Iranians. It feels like being in Iran.

We get hold of the honey, the watch, the green stuff, the gold fish, the vinegar, eggs and nuts for the *no ruz* ceremony, and return to the flat. The New Year is to be declared at four in the morning according to the Iranian calendar, and there will be a party organized by the Persian community opening at eleven in the evening and ending late in the morning. We are supposed to go there, but Tina is not so keen on it. We are waiting for a friend of hers who does not arrive until late at night.

An hour before the New Year we turn on the TV, online from the computer, to watch Manoto, the Persian channel sent from London. All my friends in Iran and abroad do the same right now, she says. She calls her mother in Iran. They discuss the negotiations between the Iranian government and the world powers in Switzerland regarding Iran's nuclear energy programme. "The idiots have met up", they say. Iranians abroad are transnationals in the sense that they are in close contact with their family in Iran and often follow such Persian TV-channels that are being broadcasted from stations outside of Iran. One of the most popular channels is Manoto. Googoosh, the pop icon whose most famous songs are from the time of the Shah, appears in the studio. She sings an old song. Then, just after the New Year has been born, she presents a new song and a video and performs it live. Tina is very excited. It's the first time she is not in Iran for the New Year. She can't sit still, and exclaims Happy New Year over and over again, loudly, to her two guests. It is four thirty in the morning.

Tina lives next to a river in Pune, in a flat with three rooms facing the water. It's a peaceful view, an Indian cliché, with cows wading through the water and children playing cricket on the riverbank. She arrived to India half a year ago.

“I had no idea about India before I came here. It was an instant decision. I couldn’t stand Iran anymore. I had two options: Dubai and India. In Iran I couldn’t walk freely, I had to adjust to the dress code, couldn’t wear tight clothes, and had to hide from the police wherever I went. I had to look out for the female police. If they catch you they bring you to the police station and possibly whip you. You can’t have parties really, and when you invite boys to your place, it is as if it was a crime. I couldn’t stand it. I don’t like to be constantly reminded of what I don’t like about Iran. My father once spoke with me about India when I was a child. Maybe that was a reason that I ended up here.”

“The beginning was quite tough. All was new. I didn’t know what to do here. I made some bad friends, bad people. I met a guy who I thought was helpful but who asked for lots of money in the end. Then, when my landlord tried to rape me, I fled to David’s house, my friend. “

“I realised one thing: people don’t care that much about women here. The situation is better even in Iran. David’s mother experienced it too, when she was here. They treat women very badly in India. Everything got better when I met David. It’s about meeting the right people.”

“My flat is so peaceful. India is peaceful. I will come back here later, maybe to stay for a few years. But within a few months I need to go to London and to have my passport arranged. I was born in London and can easily return there if I’d like to.”

After Tina was born, in London, her family quickly moved back to Iran where she grew up. Still, she tries to claim a British passport. Her sister lives in London and has appeared on the TV-show *befarmaeed sham*, on Manoto. The show is a reality show where a group of people cook for each other. In front of the camera, away from the host, the guests speak out about the food – what they really thought of it. The show is immensely popular in Iran. We watch the episode

when Tina's sister is there. Tina tells me how her sister doesn't know anything about cooking and how their mother had to instruct her in every step.

She continues:

"The summer of 2009 was a trigger. There were huge amounts of people in the streets. People thought that it'd be over, the government, that something would change. People felt threatened afterwards. But the government won't change. They will never change. That's the feeling we have. We were hoping that once Ahmadinejad left, it'd be better. And the government is better now, but it hasn't made a big difference for the people. In Esfahan acid was thrown on girls, by forces supported by the government."

"I'd never want to move back and live in that country, as long as it is like that."

"Neda was just passing by. She hadn't done anything. I was around there when it happened. I remember seeing her, I saw her on the ground, with blood all around. After Neda had been killed the protests declined. There were so many others that were killed or wounded. But her dying was filmed, and the film was spread in the media, that's why the killing of her got so much attention."

"Many people in Iran are so rich that they live in something resembling castles. And they live in whatever freedom they like. They are rich enough, and live in bubbles."

"Indians have in general been friendly with me. And when they haven't it might have been my fault. People have been respectful. Recently I have mostly been hanging out with foreign people. It's somehow easier to make friends with foreigners. In India everyone smiles, always, although they are poor. It's the opposite as compared to Iran. That's why I am at peace here in India. The Iranian community here is important for me, since I like to speak in Persian sometimes."

“Freedom is a big thing for many, to be able to do what one likes, to party. They make up for things they couldn’t do in Iran. I did that, enjoyed freedom when I travelled abroad, and it isn’t a big deal for me somehow. But for many the main reason to be here is to be able to party.”

“If you wait for this government to change, then you’ll repeat the mistake I have done and just waist time”. That’s what my mother tells me. She spent her life expecting the regime to fall. The best we can do is to get out of Iran, at least for a while. I will come back for visits, but I’ll never live there again.”

“I had some panic attacks and I broke up with my boyfriend before leaving Iran. I needed a big change. A friend had moved to Goa, just to have fun. She inspired me to go to India.”

“We had so much, we saw everything, and we don’t have the experience of living in poverty. “

Next day Tina and I meet an Iranian young man in a shop. We exchange numbers. There were many more Iranians here a few years ago, he says. “Most of them have left, since it has become a lot more expensive. The Iranian rial has lost very much against the Indian rupee. And those with seriously much money don’t travel to India anyway, but to Europe or the USA. Also, the university of Pune isn’t so well regarded and highly ranked in Iran anymore”.

Neda, 35, from Shiraz, and a middle-class family, has dyed her hair blond, and is very fashionable. After quite a few years in India she longs elsewhere.

I had met Neda and a friend of hers, Parastoo, outside a restaurant in Pune. Not long thereafter we meet in a café next to the flat where Neda and her friends live together.

One reason why Neda wanted to leave Iran was the entrance exams to the universities. The competition in Iran is very hard. She enjoys being in India, and says that life here is quiet and easy. On the negative side is that it is so far from home. She grew up in a big family, with five siblings. The Iranian secret service is incredibly well informed, she says. “They know everything about even us, being here in India. They have their eyes on us. I have been about seven years in India, but would like to move to the USA”, says Neda. She has pink nails, and a shirt in the same colour. She was studying English when she first came to India, then she continued her university studies in psychology up to MA-level. At first she was living with a boyfriend from Iran, but when he returned to Iran they separated. Now she lives with her friends Parastoo and Leila.

“I might go to Russia”, says Leila, “since I have a friend there. It will be safer there for me. I had some problems in Iran, and the Iranian embassy in India has their eyes on me, they call and check, often. It’s because one of my uncles, who was a high-profile leader of a separatist group in Baluchistan. He was considered a terrorist, and was captured and executed. Even though I have no sympathy with that distant relative of mine, the Iranian authorities follow me, and check every step I take. I don’t feel safe even in India, since Iran and India are friends - the relations are okay. Therefore I might move to Russia, where I have family friends. And Russia would be safer for me”.

Leila was put in jail in Iran for six months, accused of being a terrorist. Her father use to be a criminal, she says. Today the information service had called her mother and said that they were after Leila. Her mother suggested that she could go to Russia. “I don’t have an option, I need to change my location, to anywhere”, says Leila. A few months later Leila moves to Tehran, feeling safe there.

Parastoo applied to Swedish universities in 2007 but was not admitted. She was open for any country; she wanted simply to get out of Iran and see something new. The lack of freedom in Iran wasn't so important for her, rather it was wanderlust and a general desire to see foreign countries that was pushing her. She says that life in Iran is too materialistic, that it is very much about whom has what. It was always common among people around her to go abroad, she says. "Most of my friends wanted to leave Iran. I applied for a tourist visa to Sweden, but was denied it after the failed attempt to go there as a student. A friend asked me if I didn't want to come to India, and I thought that it might be a good idea. In India I got in touch with a guy who helped me and other Iranians with accommodation and practical things. I arrived in 2011. First I was just hanging out with Iranians and didn't practise that much English, but then I got an internship in an immigration office, where people were very kind to me and helped me lots. I also found a nice place to live in eventually. I recently applied for a Canadian student visa. We can't work in India, it's not legal for us, and that makes life more difficult."

Farnaz, 29, from Hamedan and a middle-class family, seem to be comfortable in Pune, in loose Indian trousers and flip-flops.

I passed by three blond women on the sidewalk. I didn't hear them speak but they looked Iranian, with their dyed hair. They were surprised to hear a foreigner speak Persian. Farnaz is here with two siblings, Shoure and Vaje, who arrived recently from Hamedan. How noisy and crowded here is, they say.

Farnaz has been in Pune for five years. She is from Hamedan. We meet later at Yogi tree, a popular hang-out in Koregaun Park, a leafy area of Pune. Farnaz has just finished her PhD in educational sciences. She has had a good stay in Pune, but also looks forward to leave. She will go to Dubai where she wants to work. Her fiancée lives there, they have been together for several years. He is Indian but they met in Dubai.

“The problem with India is that here’s too sweet, it’s too easy to be and remain here. People take degree after degree without any aims except for the desire not to be in Iran. Times passes without life progressing. We’re not allowed working in India. If you live and work anywhere else, even in Iran, then your life goes forward, you establish a home, get a car possibly, and can work. Here you have an easy and fun life, but it doesn’t lead anywhere. Even if we try to establish our lives here many of us have to return to Iran sooner or later, out of lack of choice. And once back in Iran it is as if we have to start anew again.

I want to live in a new house, I like new houses, not the old houses here. I like the houses to be new and fresh. I have a dog too. I have visited a few places in India, but not that many. I went to Goa once.

Once I was befriended with an Iranian at the office where we extend our visas. His English was very poor and he asked me to help him. He liked India but could not stand being away from his mother. He missed her too much. His visa did not permit him to leave and return to India, so he asked me to tell the administrators that his mother was sick and that he had to go home to visit her.”

Around us, at the Yogi tree café, there are several tables with Iranian guests. We speak Persian until some Iranians, a group of six people, among them a woman with tomato-red hair, take a seat around us. Then Farnaz switches to English. She is friendly but formal towards the other Iranian guests.

Farnaz’s cousin was in India and asked if Farnaz didn’t feel like coming along she too. “There are no entrance exams in India, unlike Iran. It’s easier to get into university here. In Iran there are so few possibilities. Here there isn’t an interview, nothing. It is very common to bribe your supervisor in Pune, although I never did. Many people think that Iranians are rich and often people try to take advantage of that.

I arrived in India and started my studies with the intention to really finish them, even though I realized that my studies here would not be super efficient. It

hasn't been fantastic all the time, but since I came here I ought not to drop out. I've been here for five years already.

I got an apartment after much trouble. If you are single, student and non-Indian it's not easy to find an apartment to rent. Many landlords do not accept foreign tenants. And if they do accept you, being a non-Indian, they think they can overcharge. Things are messy and complicated here unless you have connections. Hygiene is a huge problem. But here is peaceful, people have patience and take things easy, and that influences you – I've fallen into an easy and slow daily rhythm. Things are getting better. My fiancé is in Dubai, he's Indian, and I will go there after my degree. Indian films are very popular in Iran, not least Shah Rukh Khan. That's how I got to know India when growing up. I thought of going to Malaysia, but it would be more expensive. My mind has become more open with all people I have met. Still I have mostly Iranian friends. To learn English is an important reason for people to come here. I came straight from Hamedan to Pune and have mostly spent my time in this city. I came to India to get out of Iran and study. Living in India was never something I was planning."

One of the women at the other table is called Homa. She is 30 years old. "I remember once in Iran at the university", Homa says. "Someone remarked on how I was dressed. That's none of your business, I wanted to say. That kind of situations is the main reason why I left my country, she says. The stupid laws and social restrictions. And I have loved my time here in India. I have travelled in India, lots. From the Himalayas to the south. Now my boyfriend is here, he's a reason for me to stay. He is Indian. We love to travel, and don't mind simple buses or trains, we backpack. But our Iranian friends travel in style. They haven't gone further than Goa. People don't stay here for long, they are here for temporary stays that might get extended over and over again."

Homa sits with Zahra and Amir, who have been in India for a long time already, as well as with Elham and Omid who have been here for three days and four weeks respectively. They are both studying English. Elham has thought of going

to Malaysia too, but choose Pune. “It’s cheaper here”, she explains. She plans to study for the GRE-exam, in order to continue studies in the US.

Hussein, 26, from Tehran and a middle-class family, is extremely friendly and forthcoming, and becomes one of my main interviewees. He radiates ease and generosity, and drives both a scooter and a car around Pune.

Hussein was in Bandar Abbas in 2009 and got his visa for India after having had to wait only a few hours. He went to India immediately. During the presidential election campaign in 2009 Hussein was active in the campaign for Mir Mousavi. He had grown up in Tehran but lived in Bandar Abbas, a large city situated in southern Iran, by the strait of Hormoz, where he was studying at the university. After the election results had been disclosed it was obvious that Iran was not safe for him. Many of his friends were arrested. No one who had been associated with the reformist movement was safe. He decided to leave the country to anywhere possible. He had never thought of leaving Iran before – he had always liked his home country. He has some family members in Sweden who tried to persuade him to visit them and maybe study in Scandinavia, but at that time he wanted to stay in Iran.

That was how he felt until the presidential election in 2009.

Hussein arrives on a scooter to the NIBM area in Pune. We had met in a shop selling Iranian goods a few days before *noruz*. We had been looking for items for the *haft sin* table, and exchanged numbers. A few years ago there were Iranians everywhere, I am told. Today there are only traces of the former large Iranian presence. Many cafes announce Irani chai, black tea that is, but these days it is not being served. Most of the Iranians have moved elsewhere, often back to Iran. Hussein drives me to a café, which he likes, in the NIBM area.

“The first period in India was tough”, he says. But now he likes the country very much. “There is always something going on”. When he arrived the house where he lived was full of Iranians, but now he is the only one left.

“It took just a few hours to get an Indian visa. I went there in the morning and by noon it was ready. I was ready to go to any country outside Iran. Some people went to Malaysia, but it had a bad reputation, people said that Iranians there often ended up taking lots of drugs, not doing anything worthwhile, and wasting their lives. So India seemed more appealing. I could have tried to go to Europe, but everything happened so suddenly, I had to be fast. The results of the election and the crackdown that followed made it dangerous for anyone like me to stay. I had to leave the country as fast as possible. And I am very grateful that I got an Indian visa so quickly.”

He lived in a simple and provisional house the first months and used a bicycle to go to the university where he was learning English. The traffic frightened him, therefore he didn't use a scooter or a motorcycle, like most people do.

He was afraid of returning to Iran because of his involvement in the Green Movement, and did not go back for five years. Then, when Rohani was elected and Ahmadinejad finally left, the atmosphere in the society became more relaxed, and he felt safer returning back to Iran. So he went for a visit.

In Iran he had been studying computer science and he enrolled in the same discipline in Pune. However, the course in India was more technically oriented than the one in Iran, so he dropped the course and enrolled for a degree in Fine Arts. Then the sanctions on Iran made everything much more expensive for Iranians, and he decided to take a BBA degree, in business. He has been living in Pune for six years now. At some point there were so many Iranians in Pune that shopkeepers learned Persian to attract customers.

“The Iranians that arrived here a long time ago, by the time of the revolution in 1979 or before, are much more religious than we are. Once I visited a house of

an Iranian who had been here for a few decades. I came there since I maybe wanted to rent the house. But it was full of religious symbols on the walls, with quotations from the Quran. I thought that if I would stay there I would take down these things.

Parsis who has been in India for several generations usually like us, unlike the Iranians who have been here for a few decades only, Hussein says. "People still move to India from Iran, but much less than before, since it has become much more expensive here. Those who are really rich move to Europe, the US or Australia, to study. Iranians coming here, usually from the middle class, have some, but not very much, money. After their studies in Pune most of them return back to Iran although many would prefer to go elsewhere. But upon returning home, after several years here, many realize that their academic degree aren't very useful in Iran. And it is not necessarily easier for Iranians to go to Europe through India than going directly from Iran. Going somewhere else turns out, in most cases, to be unrealistic. For example, to continue to the US is very difficult. I went to the US consulate to apply for a visa once. They had a look at my passport and denied my application in ten minutes. I thought they would have a look on my credentials, but they denied because of my nationality. So most people return back to Iran, simply out of lack of choice. In some ways it might be like beginning from scratch again, since there are several foreign academic degrees that Iran doesn't recognize.

People in general know nothing about Iran, especially the westerners. They mix up Iran and Iraq. And often they have the idea that Iran is a backward country without anything. Once I went to a seminar, where some western guy asked whether there were cars in Iran. If there is electricity. At least people know about Iran here in India. Relations were usually good between India and Iran. I have a relative in Germany, who doesn't feel welcome there. But here in India everyone is welcome, it is an open and warm society.

I am never bored in India. There's always something happening, so much to see and discover. It is something I love about life here." Hussein disappears on his

scooter after having asked for permission, in a Persian way, to make a move, since he is seeing a few friends in the evening.

Soon thereafter we meet in the evening. Hussein knows a place, a “manly place” he says, where no women are allowed. Thus there are no women in this loud and crammed bar where we have to wait for a while before finding an empty seat. Hussein was in a relation with an Iranian woman for about three years but then she moved back to Iran. And since then he has not met anyone. He prefers to be with an Iranian for being able to speak in his mother tongue with his partner. These days there are not many Persian girls around, which doesn't make the matter easier. And he isn't that interested in Indians. He once dated a German girl but lost her immediately since he approached her in the Persian manner, a lot too slow, he says, and being too polite. She disappeared.

During the years that Hussein has lived in India he hasn't travelled very much. He visited Chennai for two days where he went to the American consulate to apply for a visa. He flew there. He has also been to Mumbai several times, it's close and he has to go now and then for matters with his visa. He likes to travel in style and comfort, he says, and would never travel by train -he rather goes by airplane. He also has a dog in his flat that needs constant care. Hussein thinks that it is not easy to travel because of the dog; furthermore, since he would not use trains or buses travel becomes a lot more expensive. He has stayed almost exclusively in Pune during his more than five years in India. India was never a place he thought of before he suddenly had to leave Iran. He says that it is peaceful and safe here, but India has never been a place he is eager to explore.

Hussein calls me the following morning – he is on his way to Koregaon Park - and proposes a lunch together, at a burger joint. We take a seat outdoors. We speak in Persian about the people – Indians – around us. Now, cigarette smoking is more common here among the young than just a few years ago, he says. An ex girlfriend made him quit his smoking habit some years ago.

“In Bandar Abbas it’s hot but there is air-conditioning everywhere. You just need to be exposed to the heat when walking from the car to the houses. Even the bus stands have air condition. So it doesn’t feel as bad as here.” We want to continue to some cooler place, anywhere with air condition, and end up at Starbucks, around the corner.

“I know several who were active in the election campaigns in 2009 working for Mir Mousavi. They were sent to jail, and are still imprisoned. One of my friends got a ten-year sentence. He will be almost forty when he is released. His youth and a large part of his life will be gone because of the regime.”

“The mullahs die very old. Do you know of Jannati? He’s still there, 93 years old, in the government, and has lots of power. In Iran there are several parallel power structures, and most powerful is the Supreme leader, Khamenei. I have a relative who knew him previously, when my relative was working in the foreign ministry. Khamenei was known as a populist and to be corrupt, he is not a nice man. He is mad.”

We finish our Coca Cola, a friend of Hussein calls, and we get out. On the road we meet two sisters on another scooter. They have a dog on their vehicle. It’s *sizdah be dar*, thirteen days after the Iranian New Year, and everyone is supposed to get out of their houses for a picnic. But it was too hot even in the early morning hour, so Hussein and his friends decided to stay home.

Kimiya, 25, is from Tehran and a lower middle-class family, fashionable, and on her way from India. This is her last few days in Pune

She is a friend of Hussein’s, and when we meet she is carrying a number of paintings made by her teacher in Iran. She wants to sell them, and we look out for possible buyers in the area. Kimiya has a car filled with books. She has just finished a degree in pharmacy, and has been back to Iran for a while, but came back. She has been living here in India for four years, and likes it. “But

sometimes it doesn't lead anywhere. The courses in Iran are really good, better than here I would say. However getting admissions is hard in Iran. I had lots of fun in India, but to progress in life here, that's not easy. I might take another degree in Bangalore, let's see."

We made an illegal parking, and when Kimiya, Hussein and myself get back to the car it is chained. "The Indian traffic rules make no sense. And the chains with which the car is locked are so weak, easy to break for anyone". The police come and we have to pay a few hundred rupees. "We bribe them, it's India after all", Kimiya says.

They tell me a story about Ganesha, the elephant god. "A god was in a battle and happened to, unknowingly, face his son on the battlefield. The god lost his head and was told to go to the forest and kill the first animal he found. Whatever animal it would be, he would get that animal's head. It happened to be an elephant. People believe in it!"

In the evening we meet in Hussein's apartment a bit outside the centre, in the NIBM area. It is a new house. "In Koregaon Park the houses are old," Hussein says. "I like to live in a new place." The sofa in the living room is very beautiful and tasteful, I remark. "It's old," he says. "Six years old, I got it when I first came here." The flat is filled with Persian flags, photos of Persepolis in Iran, rugs, a Christmas tree, Iranian nuts on the table, and *lavashak*, the Iranian sweet. His small white dog demands lots of attention. Hussein can not travel because of the dog. It makes any trip really complicated. We speak about relationships. "With communication everything can be solved," Kimiya says, "but it can be difficult with someone from another country, like India."

On our way out to the car again we meet two brothers and their mother, from Tehran. They have lived in Pune for a few years. The mother makes fun of Indians. We arrive to the restaurant late, 9.30, and are hungry. But let's eat at some better place, the mother says. "I can eat, but only if it's good, I won't eat just anything, just for the sake of eating". It is too late to order at the restaurant

where we are, and most other places are closed. So we drive to a night joint where people often come after parties. We eat and I take an auto ricksha back to my room. Kimiya and Hussein drive home.

Kimiya hopes that the negotiations between Iran and the world powers in Lausanne regarding the Iranian nuclear power plants go well. She has arrived in the café in Koregaon Park where I sit, Her hope is, she says, that the sanctions will be lifted so that she can have an international credit card and be able to transfer money abroad easily. She came to India in 2010 and returned to Tehran after her degree in 2014. “But it’s hard to live back home with family after the freedom I’ve had here”. Her car is filled with books about pharmacy.

“Many Iranians just wanted to go anywhere abroad, to any country. And they ended up in India since visa was easy and cheap to get. “

She came back to India during the Persian New Year a few weeks ago. She wants to enrol in a PhD programme and approached a few universities in Bangalore where they have a good reputation in pharmacy. Because of the sanctions she cannot apply from Iran and pay the university fee from there. She has to come with cash to the actual university.

We drive to a place that she likes, a restaurant/ bar/café. We google places we would like to visit such as Mauritius, Kerala, and Istanbul. We look at hotels in Eritrea and couchsurfers in Iran. She is not so keen on going to Bangalore without knowing anyone. It’s a city so much bigger than Pune where everything takes plenty of time, she points out. She’d like to live in another country one day, neither in Iran nor India.

In Pune Kimiya used to live by herself in a compound with a pool and tennis court. She was in a relation with an Indian man for some years. “Indians are warm and friendly,” she says, “but somehow they are hard to trust. Especially when the relations become closer.” She visited Goa several times, and loved it. Many Iranians have pet dogs in their homes, but Kimiya isn’t interested in pets.

Hussein, Kimiya and I meet in the coffee shop of a nice old hotel at MG road. It smells like a place where old stuff is being stored. Both Hussein and Kimiya have been in Pune for about four years, but they got to know each other only two weeks ago. Thus, although Iranians typically know of other Iranians in the city, they hadn't met before. But Hussein knew of her car, he says, that was how people used to refer to people they didn't know: He or her with the yellow Maruti, the red Ford, etc.

Soon thereafter, Hussein comes to pick me up with the car. We are going to see Kimiya and her friend Pegah. We drive to a tasteful, large Persian restaurant, and take a seat on a *takht*. Pegah is in her 30s, single, and has always had foreign boyfriends, Hussein says. We laugh and joke, lazing around in the large restaurant. Hussein says that he is afraid of going back to Iran. "Suddenly the rules for military service can change, and once there I might not be allowed to leave. The laws are capricious, inconsistent." Another problem of going back to Iran is Hussein's dog. It'd be expensive to bring the dog, and difficult - dogs are considered as being unclean in Islam.

"My father works in a an insurance company. Maybe I will be able to find a job there". But Kimiya did not sound like she was looking forward to it. She had an Indian boyfriend much older than her, 45-50 years old and married, and very rich. She was impressed by money. She stayed in a luxury hotel while visiting Pune for a month after having come back from a visit in Iran, and the car she drives is his. "She is beautiful but also simple and nice", says Hussein. "My sister was studying here before. She was supposed to go to Germany from Iran, but eventually ended up staying in Iran."

A year later, in November 2015, I meet Kimiya in Tehran. She lives with her parents, is studying German, and is preparing an exam that she hopes will lead to a validation of her Indian degree in Iran. She misses India but is not planning to return. Instead, she would like to move to Germany - that's why she is learning German. By autumn 2016, Kimiya still lives in Tehran with her parents.

She has found a job as a pharmacist, and is busy working. Now she does not have any plans of leaving the country apart from short trip to India, to see her friends there.

Narges. 27, from Tehran and a middle-class background, is tired of the hot weather and the spicy food, and seems to long back to Iran. But she has to finish her degree first.

Narges and Mina arrive in the burger-joint where we had met the previous evening. They have lived in India for the last five years. The reason why there are so few Iranians now compared to a few years ago is that Pune university isn't recognized in Iran any more, they say. "Once we go home we need to take a special exam to make our degree from Pune useful. But Bangalore University is recognized; therefore, very many Iranians go to Bangalore to study medicine, dentistry, and other such disciplines. Many students from Iran party and live a destructive life here in India. But we were never interested in that."

"I never planned to leave Iran and did my exam to get into an Iranian university. But I wasn't admitted, so therefore I went to India. If I'd had a chance to stay in Iran I would have done so", Mina says.

Narges and Mina are happy in India but have deeper feelings for Iran. "We had freedom in Iran too, in our houses, with our families. That was not a reason for us to leave. But life is good here in India. When I came, five years back, one rupee was 17 Iranian tooman, compared to now, when one rupee is about 70 tooman. So it has become several times more expensive for us to live here.

India feels more secure than Iran where we always had to look out when walking around alone in the city. Iran is not safe for women. I have a residence permit to live in the US but I prefer to live in Iran. I got a green card thanks to the lottery.

But relations between Iranians and Indians aren't good. Indians are unfriendly and have a lot of preconceived ideas about Iranians. Once I was in a traffic accident with my car. The car that rammed into mine just disappeared. Such a thing would not happen in Iran. People here have another culture. They are dirty.

If just the government changes, then Iran will become the best country in the world. I'd really like to live there then."

Mina has a heavy makeup. She speaks Arabic at home - her family came from Bahrain a few generations back. She has a dark red lipstick. Narges, is taller and speaks Turkish as well, her family being Azeri.

"Indians aren't good to live with. They walk around without indoor shoes in the house, for example. They might not use shoes in the toilet", Mina says. "The Indian boys like Iranian girls. But the Indian girls do not like us. They get jealous."

Narges and Mina plan to start up a company once their studies are finished, that would entail travel both in Iran and abroad including the US. They are into pharmacy, and their business idea is to buy drugs in India and then sell them in Iran.

Mina has just a few months left of her course, whereas Narges has one year left. They are both from Shiraz, but met in India. Both of them plan to have one foot abroad in the future too. The main reason for coming to India wasn't the freedom but that they did not qualify in getting into any university in Iran. The studies in India have been hard but they have both managed very well, they say.

4.1.1 Pune, one year later



Siavash was the one among my interviewees who was most interested in India. Here after a meal in Pune.

A year after my first longer fieldwork in Pune I am back in the city. Politically, it has been an eventful and important year for Iran. The extended negotiations in Vienna regarding the nuclear power program of Iran came to an end. The world powers – the US being the most prominent actor – came to an agreement with Iran. Sanctions would be lifted and the nuclear proliferation programme limited. It seemed as if the relations between Iran and the West were to improve. Media showed crowds celebrating and cheering in Tehran, hoping that relations were to be normalized and that Iran’s paria-status in the world would come to an end. That is how I felt when visiting Iran in the autumn 2015. But, in Iran, things are seldom what they appear to be. By a main square in the centre there is an enormous poster showing a pile of dead bodies, a war scene. On the top of the poster is a large American flag. In addition, there are also other, new posters along the roads, depicting American flags with bombs instead of stars. Still, relations *are* improving, and western leaders are frequently visiting Iran. With the many centres of power in the country there are forces that profit from having sour relations with the outside world. One rarely knows who is *really* in

charge of power. The sanctions have made it possible for some to make fortunes. Since the Iranians in Pune typically are transnationally engaged the situation in Iran is highly relevant for them. For many Iranians abroad the improved situation at home may be an incentive to return.

Hussein and I meet again, in the NIBM area. It is the first of March, and we have not seen each other in a year. I am struck by how big Pune is, it is a very spread out place, an old garrison city, a cantonment. There are still military academies that I pass by when travelling by auto from Koregaon Park. We were supposed to see each other in an Iranian restaurant but meet on the street instead, he driving and I walking. He plays Googoosh in the car, and we come to a Punjabi restaurant. Hussein is going to Iran in two weeks, for *noruz*. He has not been there for two years. Last time he celebrated the Iranian New Year in Teheran was seven years ago, in 2009, the year he went to India after the election.

Hussein follows Iranian politics closely. It affects his life quite directly. He is optimistic. Iran seems to be going in the right direction. The sanctions are to be lifted and the reformists won in the election just a day ago. European companies are signing long-term contracts, for up to twenty years, he says, because they know that Iran will be stable.

I ask if he thinks that many exile Iranians will return to Iran now. Yes, probably, he says. "And the president, Rohani, said that they will make Iran good for Iranians too. Not only good for the foreign companies wanting to "tap the world's last remaining market" as someone called it. So things seem promising." Hussein is excited to get back to Iran after a long time abroad. He has only one more year in Pune to do for his course. He said that he might be interested in going to Sweden afterwards. But Hussein can not stay in Iran for more than two weeks. He has to get back to Pune because of exams; also, he cannot leave his dog for a longer time. The dog will stay with two Iranian friends, Golnaz and Homa, whom he and his dog know well. Around the NIBM area there used to be a few places offering "Irani chai". But not anymore, many cafés that served

Iranian tea just a year ago have closed down. Clearly, the city is becoming less and less Persian.

Hussein picks me up in Koregaon Park in his car one evening, with Golnaz and Homa. There will be held a Jon Bon Jovi tribute evening in a place nearby, and we drive there. The sisters Golnaz and Homa are always together. They live together, they are classmates, and they study the same course, interior design. They are Hussein's closest friends in Pune, he tells me. Golnaz and Homa are about to finish their first degree and would like to continue studying and living in Pune. They seem at ease here. Golnaz is looking for a job because her parents will not support her anymore. If she wants to work in Iran? "Maybe, who knows. There were many Iranian and Afghan students here in Pune before. But most of them have graduated and left", she says. The live band starts to play Bon Jovi covers and the loud music makes it difficult to speak.

Golnaz and Homa are both quiet, and give plain and short answers to my questions. Their parents were here recently for a visit but were not fond of India. They thought it was dirty. Iran is better than here, Homa says. People come to India from Iran because of the freedoms, that's all, she says. Golnaz have been here since 2011. The reason, she says, why there aren't that many Iranians here anymore is that India in recent years has become much more expensive for Iranians as the exchange rates have become unfavourable.

On the Saturday before the Persian New Year we go to a food festival to eat tacos and fish. Golnaz is a vegetarian. There is a stall with Parsi cuisine, and Golnaz looks with curiosity. Parsi restaurants are common in Mumbai and Pune. Siavash and I have grilled fish. He is restless and wants to return home soon, on his scooter. After his stay in Pune he will look for opportunities for studying to PhD, he says, possibly in Germany.

Hussein is back in Iran for the first time in two years. When I arrive to his house Golnaz and Homa are watching an American show on TV eating watermelon,

nuts and chips. They have their dog there too, who barks loudly. Both sisters wear short trousers. Siavash reads Hafez aloud during the evening. We have a glass of Indian rum. Golnaz is in touch with Hussein, who is by the Caspian Sea at the moment. Siavash speaks about Shiraz, where he is from. In the flat is an Aloe Vera plant and photos of Persepolis. Golnaz disappears for a minute and comes back with new red lipstick.

Siavash, 26, from the Caspian coast in northern Iran, and a middle class background, is excited to be in India and wants to soak the atmosphere in. He seems to be full of joy when we meet.

Siavash did his first degree, a BA in archaeology, in Shiraz. He did his fieldwork at Persepolis and found artefacts that were several thousand years old, he says. Then he moved to Qom for his studies towards a Masters degree in Eastern religions. He lives there now, when not in India.

Siavash is going to have a class in Hindi, and I join him in NIBM. He has been here for six months, and didn't know English nor Hindi when he arrived. Now he speaks both languages fairly well. The teacher is from Mumbai and asks me about my research and what I have found out about the Iranians. The Iranians I have met here, she says, they seem lost and don't know where they are going.

Siavash insists on taking the escalator down even though we are just on the second floor. It's because he is from Shiraz, we joke. They have a reputation of being very lazy. We take his Vespa and drive to a café for some food. Siavash wears a vest with many pockets making him look like a journalist. He came to India for a visit in 2011, and stayed for a month. He likes it here, and would like to stay.

Siavash was in Shiraz during the protests in 2009. "They are such cowards", he says about the government. "The people in Iran are completely different from the government. You have seen the sisters yesterday. They are not even

Muslims”, he says, referring to Golnaz and Homa. “Everyone in Iran wants to leave the country. Since the summer of 2009 there is even less to stay for. Everyone wants to go. They killed so many. I feel free here, and in peace. In Iran, if you say anything against the government in a newspaper for example, they’ll come and bring you to jail. I don’t like the *rahbar*, the leader, Khamenei. But I don’t want him to die, since I don’t know what would happen next. Maybe the police, the *Sepah*, would seize the power. It would be a police state.” In Qom Siavash knows plenty of mullahs. “Many of them are not religious”, he says. “They might be atheists. Then there are the political ones too. I know all of them.” We are at a small café. We order two *masala dosas* and Siavash addresses the woman who works there with “auntie” – a common and respectable way in India to address any woman, just as men are frequently called “uncle”.

A few days later is the Iranian New Year, *noruz*, and Siavash and Golnaz have met with some friends to celebrate at a popular place called Shisha café, run by an Iranian from Rasht by the Caspian Sea. There are carpets hanging from the ceiling and plants everywhere. It is beautiful. We are about ten people. Golnaz is social, she laughs and takes initiatives. Homa is quiet. Everyone is dressed up. A young man from Tehran with a colourful t-shirt has ordered a Coca Cola, which he doesn’t think is sufficiently cold. “Change it”, he says to the waiter. After a kebab and rice they order a water pipe - a hookah – and they smoke and pose for photos. More Iranians arrive in the restaurant. There is no entertainment; they don’t even play Iranian music. The owner is from the Iranian northern coast.

The next day Siavash takes me on his Vespa to meet Golnaz at kafé Bliss. Golnaz wears a helmet. Siavash has had a radical haircut. “Why did you make it so short?” Golnaz asks. “You look like you’re in military service, as if you were a *sarbaz*”. Siavash explains: “it is mother’s day today,” he says. “My mother always wanted me to cut my hair short. So I did it for her, and she became very happy to see me with this haircut”. We continue to another small place for some Irani Chai. Golnaz doesn’t think that the place looks nice or clean.

Golnaz will stay in India for another two years, she says. She is admitted to a master's course in Pune and is looking for a job. She is very busy. Still, both Golnaz and Homa have time to meet most evenings. We meet at Hussein's place. Golnaz has made *gheime*, the Iranian dish. The sisters are vegetarians and do not eat. They have lived here for five years already. I ask them where they will be in ten years. Golnaz laughs. "Not in India and not in Iran, somewhere else," she says. Siavash doesn't know, it depends upon where he will do his PhD and get a job, he says. It's possible to transfer money from Iran to India through certain channels, such as exchange offices that specialise in this kind of transactions in Pune. But because of the sanctions the process is still illegal and complicated.

We - Hussein, his girlfriend and her parents and younger sister- gather at little café. Hussein's girlfriend came to Pune with her family half a year ago. In Iran she had been active in theatre. In Pune she studies English and will do a course in hotel management. A family from Esfahan arrives, a mother and two daughters. They live here in Pune while the father works in Esfahan. He is visiting Pune at the moment. "I sent them here," he says. "I work in an oil company. It's good and secular here." We all go to the cinema and watch Batman.

Siavash's favourite place to meet is cafe Bliss, close to NIBM road. We drink soda water. Siavash has been feeling sad the last days. He has not been feeling like going to class. He speaks about life in Qom. "You could go there, as a foreigner," he tells me, "and register in a course in Shiism. The government would pay for it if you tell them you would like to become a Shiite. They would give you a good visa. They would want you as a face, showing people that foreigners, and especially Westerners, like Iran and its regime and ideology. Qom is a religious city, where the mullahs are educated. It is said to have particularly many prostitutes too."

Siavash likes India and has, contrary to anyone else I know from Iran, a great interest in the country. He studies Hindi and will start to study Sanskrit in two weeks. He came to India a few years ago for the first time and says that he feels at peace here. "Peaceful, with all the noise and pollution?" I ask. "Yes, I feel free, maybe it is because of the political freedom", he says.

“The Iranians coming here aren’t the most studious ones,” Siavash continues. “They aren’t very rich either, but of the middle and upper middle classes. Everyone can’t afford to come here. But here is cheaper for us than some other countries, such as Turkey. Malaysia is a few steps more expensive than here. Usually people choose India for their study to be able to live and enjoy life here. Most of them eventually return to Iran. But not everyone – one can’t generalise too much – because some have managed to get to Europe, and one guy continued his studies at Harvard after his degree in Pune. Previously Pune was full of Iranians, but then when the dollar became expensive, and dramatically so, then people could not stay any longer. I want to learn Sanskrit and Hindi because it will help me in work. In Iran no one knows these languages, and maybe I can teach there. People come here to have fun, but they stay among other Iranians, and even after several years here many of them don’t learn English, let alone Hindi, since they just hang out with other Iranians. They don’t have an interest, usually, to get to know Indians. Most Iranians see themselves as better than the Indians. There are some mixed couples, but then the Indian part is usually half Indian and half Iranian, I have seen that a few times. I came to Pune since I heard that the prices were reasonable and that it was a student town and a safe place. Many of the Iranians in Pune are from Yazd. It has to do with the fact that many of the older generations of Iranians who live here originate from Yazd.”

A Somali young man and two Yemeni men enter the café. They are in the same class as Siavash. They study English. One of the Yemeni men is going back to Yemen very soon. An Iranian couple arrives. They are from Yazd. They tell me: “It’s true what you say, people got desperate to leave the country after the summer of 2009. We had two revolutions, one in 1979 and another one in the summer of 2009. We want freedom of speech and freedom in our minds. People go crazy in Iran with the lack of freedom. People come here just to get away from the oppression. “

The wife refuses to drink the tea since she believes the cups are dirty. And she stands up and looks disgusted when a dog shows up and is curious.

Siavash and I meet again the next evening. He has suggested an Indian restaurant, a busy and crowded place called Zam Zam. The restaurant is simple, clearly not a place for the stereotypical Iranian student – who is often obsessed with hygiene and who purports not to be able to eat spicy food – but Siavash thinks it is a great place. Siavash is the only Iranian I have met so far who has a genuine interest in India. He works hard to become better at Hindi. He loves classical Persian literature, and recites the classical poet Hafez while gesturing. When an auto-ricksha driver takes me on a considerable detour, which makes the trip both more expensive and half an hour longer, I get quite annoyed and explain for Siavash. Then, Siavash quotes Hafez, the message being that there is so much in the world to be annoyed at, and you better enjoy life instead. We order an Indian beef gravy, *daal* and *biryani*, with *rotis*, and we drink water and soft drinks.

“India is attractive because it is cheap. But in other aspects it is not an interesting destination for most Iranians” Siavash tells me. “One cannot work here, and refugee status is not given, there’s no asylum. There is no reason to come here except to have fun with friends. People come to study, but it is a pretext. There are two groups of people that go to Europe. First the refugees, they are able to get asylum status as political refugees and then work. Then there are the very smart students, top students. You remember the little boy who was found dead on the beach in Greece? After that plenty of Iranians went for Europe. They heard that Europe accepts all refugees from Syria and Afghanistan and thought it would be a good occasion to go, possibly to pretend to be a Syrian.

Siavash eats with great gusto. He had been at an expensive place the other night but didn’t enjoy it. “If one is in India, this is the kind of place one should go to. The food is good and always fresh, look at all the satisfied customers” he says before disappearing on his scooter.

Upon talking to Siavash I was reminded of an encounter in Iran the year before, in Shiraz, October 2015. I approach a small café open to the street in the centre of the city, right by the Karim Khan castle, close to the Zand crossroads. A guard working next to the place is sitting in the café, in his official guard dress, looking like a police. The man behind the counter is drinking a home-made brew of raisins. He invites me for a sip together with the guard. He has family members in Sweden and we chat about similarities and differences between Iran and Sweden. During the evening some of his friends come to hang out. One man is called Sina. His younger brother is right now in Athens where he has bought a Greek identification card. The same night he plans to head towards Austria and from there towards northern Europe, to Germany or Sweden. Sina wonders if the border between Denmark and Sweden is still open. "Can you guarantee that my brother will be doing fine if he comes to Sweden?"

4.2 Trajectories, examples

“I always think of Iran, but don’t want to be there, not now.”

Another host city: Kuala Lumpur, capital of Malaysia



Central Kuala Lumpur, autumn 2014

The field

The Iranians in Kuala Lumpur are spread throughout the city. Much of the life in the city centre revolves around huge malls functioning as cities within the city. Between two of the most popular and posh malls, the Suria KLCC and Pavilion, runs an indoor path, an over a kilometre long tunnel hovering three meters over the city demonstrating that much of the public life – the shops, streets and restaurants – is being lived inside the malls. The malls are as lively and dense with people as any of the streets around the Central Market in the colonial city centre. Inside the Pavilion, which is like a cathedral of shops shaped like a cupola when viewed from the inside, you see plenty of Iranians. I experienced that one is more likely to see groups of Iranians in malls such as KLCC and the Pavilion than in the city centre, Chinatown or Little India. By comparison, western tourists and backpackers tend to gravitate towards central Kuala Lumpur.

The areas around KLCC and Bukit Bintang, where the Pavilion is located, are expensive and most people, including Iranians, stay in other neighbourhoods. Around Ampang Point, for example, a few kilometres away – a 20 min bus-ride from KLCC – there are at least three Iranian restaurants and a couple of shops selling Persian foods and alcohol-free Iranian beer, Istak and Delester.

Ethnographic scenes, Kuala Lumpur October – November 2014

In Kuala Lumpur many people told me what Ali one day recounted:

“Three years ago there were tens of thousands of Iranians in Kuala Lumpur. Here, in the Pavilion mall, you thought you were in Tehran. Then the financial crisis in Iran happened, and things changed. When I arrived five years ago one ringit (the currency in Malaysia) was 200 rials but now it is 1300. It has become six times more expensive for us here.” Ali is accompanied with a woman, Mena.

Mena, 28, has an air of luxury, and is from a rich family in Tehran. She shows me photos on her phone of her white small dog who lives with her in Kuala Lumpur. Mena has lived in Kuala Lumpur for three years. The first period in Malaysia, she says, she just stayed home and cried. She was alone and could not speak English. Three years later she likes her life in Kuala Lumpur, still she aspires to leave the country, to go to Europe, within a year. She lives just next to KLCC in an upmarket building. When she goes out, she usually goes to KLCC or the Pavilion, “the most posh malls in Kuala Lumpur”, she says.

“Malaysia is growing and developing, and it’s modern”, she says. We sit in an Italian café in the Pavilion. There were no seats at the Starbucks outlet opposite us. Mena shows pictures of her dog that she bought in Kuala Lumpur. “I cannot take him out of the flat”, she says. “People don’t like dogs here. It is a Muslim country”, she says, “and I don’t like Muslims. The dog is my best friend, I love him, and he loves me”, she says.

Mena studies innovative design. “It appears to be a modern city, with these skyscrapers, but it’s just the surface. In reality Malaysia is a pretty backward country”, she says when we walk in the park by KLCC. She appears to be very well off. She has paid someone to write her proposal for PhD studies in Europe, and asks me if I know anyone in Germany where she plans to go. Her family is in the jewellery business in Iran. She has not brought any gold here, she says. “What I wear now is fake gold. One of my friends was robbed here in the street and her necklace was stolen. This is not a safe country. I am especially afraid of the Indians, and I don’t like the black people. I know it’s bad, but that’s the truth.”

The following week Mena stayed indoors for several days with her dog, refusing to go out. She was depressed because of what was happening in Iran. The morality police had thrown acid on girls in Isfahan recently, she said. “I hate Islam and Muslims”, she said. “All wrong is because of them. Muslims don’t like dogs, but I love them. In Iran they shoot dogs on the street”, she says.

From the Italian café, Amici, we face an enormous screen showing commercials and clips from fashion shows. Next to us is the mall with six floors filled by luxury brands such as Armani and Prada.

A few minutes walk from the mall towards Bukit Bintang, with a few Arab restaurants, there is a place announcing Middle Eastern cuisine. It is a Persian restaurant, a *kolbe*, a hut in Persian, and all its customers seem to be Iranian. Kia is working there, and is eager to speak. He is desperate to get out of the country, “to a place where I can live, work, and have a family”, he says. As a refugee he cannot return to Iran. “We live a wretched life here,” he says, and shows an ID-card from the UN stating his status as a refugee. He wants his story to be heard. “I love children”, he says, but can’t bring them up here. He shows me a letter which he wrote to the UN, and asks me to publish it. If his story gets known, he will be helped, he reasons. In the letter he emphasises that he is a Christian and loves God. He writes that he wants to live in a Christian country and that he was tortured in Iran. In Iran he converted from Islam to Christianity, was put in jail, and tortured for five years. He has lived in Malaysia for a few years, and it is better than Iran, but he is tired, he says.

During the evening the Persian restaurant fills up with people having tea and food.

Mahnaz, 33, from a middle class family by the Persian Gulf, has a bohemian style, and is easy to speak to. She wears long necklaces and colourful clothes.

Mahnaz was out in the Bukit Bintang area with a friend of hers – also Iranian – when we first met and started to talk. We decided to meet again later.

Mahnaz is an artist. She came to Malaysia and enrolled at the university in Kuala Lumpur, in the art-school. Every weekend she sells her artwork, handicrafts, in a mall in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. She produces art that is common in the popular alternative flea market in Tehran, *jome bazaar*, “The Friday Market.” “In

Iran it was difficult to make a living from the art," she says, "Iran has so many artists, female artists too. But here it is easier. I paint wallets and pen-cases, and make earrings of pencils similar to the ones that are popular in the *jome bazaar*." She sells her artwork at a table in the Amcorp mall during the whole weekend. She is painting some of her work at the same time, so that time passes faster.

We have a coffee outside the mall. Mahnaz chose to come to Malaysia because it was cheap. She considered Germany as her first option, but Malaysia was easier and cheaper. When she arrived she did not know any English so the first year in Malaysia she studied English. Then she applied to the art-school, was admitted, and enrolled in the program.

"I like the artistic freedom here," she says. "And the conditions are better for artists here in Malaysia than in Iran. I can sell my work for more money here. I stand out as a female artist. Many of my customers have been from countries outside of Malaysia, such as Australia. Malays prefer abstract art, not figurative."

"I wanted to see something new, to be exposed to a new milieu. I wanted to change the environment around me and find new raw material for my paintings. Many say that freedom is the main reason for coming here since there is no need to wear *hijab* and so on. I also came for this reason, but my main reason was that it would be good for my work. Still I like Iran. But if I return it will be hard for me. I have no network there. I am not optimistic about the future of Iran. But my father wants me back, he is quite lonely after my mother passed away. I want to go to Australia, I have become friends with one Australian who I met here in Kuala Lumpur and who likes my work. I plan to go there as a tourist and then get an artist visa."

"I brought loads of old paintings from Iran, works that I had done a long time back. I could sell them here. A few restaurants and bars are interested in my art. In Iran people would not buy them. My life was always about painting. For many years I was struggling in Iran as a painter, without any success. Here I am suddenly being successful."

“I married at 20 and divorced at 25. My husband was a drug addict and I worked as a teacher to support us both. He used the money I made for drugs. I have bad experiences of Iran, but go back for holidays. I have one life to live, and I want to live abroad while I am still young. I might see myself back in Iran when I am 45-50 to teach, but not yet. I still want to explore.”

The summer of 2009 is fresh in her mind.

“I was demonstrating in Tehran during the Green Movement. I took photos, which made me even more vulnerable since they were after people documenting the violence. The Green Movement happened at the same time as my divorce. It was horrible. I wrote my testament, just in case. I realised that somehow the movement was not going anywhere. After I divorced I decided to leave the country.”

Mahnaz studies at the University of Malaya. One day I accompany her to the campus. It is not uncommon to see not-so-young Iranians as university students, some are in their fifties. One friend of Mahnaz arrived from Iran with her mother, and both of them registered at the university. Similarly, one of her male friends came with his father, and both enrolled at the university too. To be registered as a student is one of the easiest ways to be able to live in Malaysia for some length of time.

The university campus is vast and spread out and has quite a few Iranian food joints catering for the sizable Iranian presence. Under a tin-roof, resembling a huge tent, there are several food stalls serving the students. In one corner stands *khanume namazi*, an Iranian lady preparing food. This is Mahnaz favourite stall. Also here it is striking to see how old some students are, often well into their middle age. Mahnaz explains that the Iranian government does not accept foreign undergraduate degrees. People have to do their first degree in Iran before they can go to universities abroad.

Mahnaz arrived in Malaysia four years ago. She has had several exhibitions in the city. "Most Iranians in Kuala Lumpur were simply fleeing from Iran, and many of them plan to continue to Australia," she says. "The Malay people are friendly, although I am not interested in the men. I don't find them attractive."

She knows everyone, both owners and guests, in the cafes in Bukit Bintang. Many of her paintings are nightly portraits – she derives a lot of inspiration from nocturnal Kuala Lumpur. She would not be able to display her paintings in Iran, because of the nature of the motifs, but repeats frequently that she is very fond of her home country and might return there if no other options materialize when her Malaysian visa expires in half a year. Her growing reputation as an artist in Kuala Lumpur makes it harder for her to leave.

There are at least two stalls with Iranians in the Amcarp mall every weekend. Except for Mahnaz, with her hand-made crafts, there is Mali, a woman in her mid-thirties. Mali lives in Kuala Lumpur with her husband and daughter since more than three years. The daughter goes to school and speaks Chinese, Malay and English, apart from Persian. "Chinese is hard to learn but increasingly important to know, it might be a great asset to master the language in the future," she says with pride. In the corner next to her three men, in their late middle years, sit with guitars and play. They ask if I can sing. Normally they sit on the ground floor when playing, and use amplifiers and microphones, but this weekend there has not been enough time to bring all the equipment, they explain. Come back next Saturday, there will be music then."

Mohsen, 24, from a middle class background in Tehran, gesticulates energetically while speaking. He is very open and willing to speak.

In Bukit Bintang, around barking colourful neon-signs, there is a live band on the pavement. Loudspeakers blast out electronic music and enormous billboards

shine. Just a hundred meters away is the street where Mahnaz usually goes out, at least on Wednesdays when the drinks are free for women.

Mohsen, 24, works in a Persian restaurant next to the main street in Changkat, Bukit Bintang. At ten o'clock in the evening the restaurant is empty. Mohsen has been living in Malaysia for two years. He likes to write articles for newspapers, as well as drama for the theatre, about various societal matters and religion. But he lost his motivation to write under the conditions stipulated by the Iranian government. He had been studying chemistry in Iran before leaving the country. After the summer of 2009 he had problems with the authorities and decided to leave. He had been demonstrating in the streets.

He recalls a ride in a taxi one day during the summer of 2009. The driver was of his parents' generation and had been protesting against the Shah in 1979 in support of what later became known as the Islamic Revolution. "We were united back then" the driver had said, urging Mohsen and his generation to unite. "The problem today is that you are too scattered."

Mohsen came to Malaysia with the hope to be able to write and express himself freely. He gesticulates while he speaks. "A revolution is what is needed in Iran," he says. "I always have Iran on my mind but don't want to be there, not now, I don't have much to return to." In Iran he would have to start everything anew. But abroad people have so negative associations with Iran. "I constantly have to defend my country," he says. He remembers once in Teheran when coming back from a party together with his mother. He was a teenager. He kissed his mother on the chin. The police saw it and stopped the car. The police thought they were a couple. "You cannot kiss anyone like that," the police said. Mohsen laughs and shakes his head in disbelief.

"In many ways I cannot say that I am proud of my country. People look at me as if they were afraid of me. I came here to work and live, but life isn't easy. I wait for something to happen. The future is unclear. It is because of the Iranian government that I am not in my own country. Only a small minority is in favour

of the government. But many people don't care about politics as long as they have food on the table. It is dangerous to be indifferent to society and politics as long as one isn't going hungry."

Around 10.45 PM I have almost finished the *gheime*, the Iranian stew with lentils, meat and some potato chips on the top. Around fifteen people enter the restaurant. They are part of a group travelling from Iran for a week's vacation. Donya, 25, has been living in Kuala Lumpur for a few years and is the tour leader. Suddenly the place gets crowded and busy. All take a seat indoors. A DJ plays contemporary Persian hits, the light is dim and the music so loud that it is hard to speak. People order food. The group is mixed, there is a young couple, one middle-aged couple, a woman with the hijab – she is the only woman in the restaurant wearing it – and a few crowded tables. A man playing the keyboard with a singer replaces the DJ. The singer is a relative of Ebi, the Persian superstar, Donya tells me. He sings both classics and new songs, everything in Persian.

The musicians encourage people to get up on the dance-floor. Donya circulates between the tables, making sure that everyone is comfortable. She brings her glass of beer to one table, the guests put their noses next to the glass, smell, and soon there is on the table one beer for each man. Alcohol is, of course, forbidden in Iran, and beer is expensive and difficult to find, although liquor otherwise is easy to get hold of.

The owner of the place shows up. He came from Tehran eleven years ago. His father joined him three years ago and is always in the restaurant. "Malaysia is good but Iran is more cultivated, the father says". "The Malays have a low culture."

We eat and eventually the band manages to get people on the dance-floor. It is such a mixed crowd, the couple in their fifties, the woman in the black chador and her husband who by the end of the evening lights a cigarette to have with his Pepsi, the happy group of six people with a bottle of vodka on their table, the

men documenting the evening with their phone cameras. The young and beautiful couple sit for themselves, and next to the stage there is a lonely woman drinking and chain-smoking while she sings along to the songs. She is the girlfriend of the band singer, Donya tells me.

There is nothing that indicates that we are in Malaysia. The food and music is Persian and everyone speak Persian. It is like in Iran but with liberties. It is like how I imagine life in Iran before the Islamic Revolution.

The tourists are driven back to their hotel in a bus, and a few of us – including the owner Ali, Saman, a 26-year old man from Esfahan who has lived in Malaysia the last eight years, and Donya – stay. Ali has brought a bottle of Chivas Regal to the table. They commute to Iran now and then but Saman has not been there this year. He works at a travel agency bringing Iranians to Malaysia. We continue to an Irish pub next door. The place is crowded and we get excited when a Persian song is played. This song is Iranian, Saman says, but I don't agree – the singer, Arash, grew up in Sweden. Donya, 25, is with her flowery dress the most dressed up guest. She came to Malaysia three years ago and lives with three other Iranian women. She studies and at the same time works as a tour guide for Iranian tourists. She does not socialise much with the local population. She is afraid of Indians, she says. Previously she had a Lebanese boyfriend.

Amir, 26, from a middle-class background in Mashad, has beard, and a style that gives a hint that he likes hard rock music.

Amir, likes to put on his earphones and listen to Finnish metal music while walking in the snow. "It is such a cold music," he says. "I want to see Finland at least for a few months some time." He is from Mashad and came to Malaysia three years ago. He had been to Armenia once before to do the TOEFL, the English language test. Except for that trip he has not been outside of Iran. He could not do the TOEFL test in Iran because of the sanctions.

“Iran is doing well compared to our neighbours,” he says. “Iraq is chaos, Afghanistan is still violent, and Pakistan too. I went out of Iran because of the limited opportunities there. I worked in Mashad for a few years for a company in electronics. I could have chosen other countries, Europe, Australia or the US, but the process of applying for a visa would take such a long time,” he says. “To Malaysia I could get easily, there was no need for a visa. Iranians were given a three-months visa at arrival.”

He likes Malaysia, but does not see himself here in the future. “Most Iranians see Malaysia as a step to somewhere else,” he says.

“Many want to leave Iran because of the limitations in the daily life. It is especially critical for women. The bad financial situation in Iran makes it difficult to plan a future. Prices fluctuate so much. And unless you have connections it is very difficult to get anywhere. The exchange rates for foreign currencies go up and down. It is hard to start up a business buying and selling goods. I want an ordinary life, to work and have a salary that I can live on. I could very well stay in Malaysia but it is impossible to get a permanent residence permit. You get a temporary permission, and might be able to extend it, but never a permanent one. I would like to continue to a safe country where I can work. The US or Australia might be good since I study electrical engineering. They have good schools if I want to continue my studies, and there are many companies related to my field.”

“I love the international environment here. I have friends from everywhere. Most of the Iranians I know have partners from Iran or from other foreign countries. It is not common to see Iranians with Malaysian partners – they tend to stick to fellow Iranians or Westerners. Most of them do not plan to stay here. If they have very good results from a university in Malaysia and a proper specialisation they might be able to go somewhere else. But those with average results usually have to return to Iran. And once back in Iran their Malaysian degree, even of high academic note, may not be worth much.”

“A few years ago it was easier for Iranians to come here. They gave visas for three months at the airport. Then you had time to check out universities and to apply for other visas. Now we get visas for only two weeks and the exchange rate has deteriorated. We get five times less Malaysian ringgit for our Iranian rials than a few years ago.”

We have had a burger with blue cheese on top at a place called Fuelshack next to Lowyat plaza in central Kuala Lumpur. The streets are filled with vendors and music is heard from street bands. Public life is lively and colourful. The tropical rains flush the city every day. “It is as if someone was pouring from a bucket,” Amir says. After the burger we continue to the cheapest place for a drink in Bukit Bintang. It is a shop in the bar area with space outside the shop to stand. There are no chairs and no toilet but people gather, it functions as a bar. Apart from us there are three Persian-speaking young men.

“I don’t usually speak to other Iranians, or look for them, Amir says. They are quite often *kolavardari*, “they take your hat” – they cheat and abuse you. When I arrived, for example, someone told me a wrong exchange rate. We even have a page on Facebook, Iranian Cheaters In Malaysia. We Iranians are quite often not comfortable with other Persians abroad. It can be hard to trust them because of the situation in Iran. You might be afraid of being seen without a hijab or saying something about Iran and its government. Someone might report something back to Iran that could cause problems later. I like many things about my country and always go back. But it is not a good place to live in.”

Amir has constantly had to face prejudices against Iranians. “Recently, I was in Singapore for visa-work. I used couchsurfing to look for accommodation and stayed with a German woman. When she asked from where I was, and I told her, she looked surprised. Iran? Are people from there like you? Yes, I said, what did you think? She became embarrassed and understood how dumb her question had been. She thought Iranians would have long beards, maybe something like Pakistanis. But I don’t blame her, I blame our government, who has not showed

a better face of Iran to the world. It is their fault, not people like that German woman.”

“With the chaos in neighbouring countries Iran stands in a better light. It is arguably the most powerful country in the region. If people from different countries would meet more often and mingle there would not be any conflicts,” Amir says. “I am happy with my stay here, I enjoy it, but I can see myself in another country in a few years, not Iran and not Malaysia, but somewhere else,” Amir says.

Ampang Point is another area in Kuala Lumpur with a strong Persian presence. There are a few Persian shops, announced as “Middle Eastern”. Ampang Point is located a few kilometres from KLCC and the Petrona towers. Two women chatting in Persian, presumably mother and daughter, get off the bus by the small, local mall. There are two supermarkets with Persian script in the displays announcing Iranian alcohol-free beer, *Istak* and *Delester*, nuts and canned *ghorme sabzi* and *gheime*. There are at least three Persian restaurants in the area. One of them, the Tehran restaurant, is empty apart from the employees and the owner Hasan.



A train station in Kuala Lumpur

Hasan, 34, from a business family in Tehran, wears a suit, and has a soft and easy-going attitude.

He has been here on and off for eight years. His father arrived first, fourteen years ago. Hasan followed, initially intending to study medicine. But he was not pleased with the academic programme, and it was expensive, so he quit. His father had opened a restaurant and Hasan joined him. He likes Malaysia. He really likes Iran too and is fortunate to be able to go back and forth quite often since he also has a travel company together with his family. He goes to Tehran once every month or so. He opened up the travel agency in 2008 with his father and a friend. "It is easy to start a company but hard to make money," he says.

"The Malaysian visa is always a trouble, and the country is not that safe. And to be Iranian can be troublesome. I had a bank account at HSBC but at one occasion it was closed down, the only reason being that I am Iranian."

He has had good relations with Malays and was together with a Malaysian woman for seven years. They wanted to stay together but their families did not let them marry. She was from Sabah, Borneo. “The Malay people are good. I was lucky to meet her.”

“I was 26 years old when I left Iran. I had a grocery shop around Hafez in central Teheran. I miss my family and the cold winter. I love Iran and will get back one day. The Iranian police works so well. They come quickly when anything happens. In Malaysia the police does not work as good. For me the restrictions in life in Iran – the lack of personal freedom – and the morality police were not an issue.”

“And, actually the Malay police act in a similar moralistic way. They also harass young couples. Once they came to my girlfriend and asked about me. It is not that different from Iran. And the Turkish police are worse than both the Iranian and Malay. They harass people, and ask for money. The Malay police are very conservative and corrupt. Still, I love living here.”

Fariba, 36, from a middle class background in Tehran, is agitated, and gets upset and emotional while speaking about Iran.

The park behind KLCC is impressive with its greenery, the jogging trails, the artificial waterfalls, the tropical trees, the benches here and there, and the small pavilions where people hang out. Around the park the posh skyline of Kuala Lumpur rises with the Petrona towers and Trader’s hotel. Fariba, 36, lives in the area. She is from Tehran.

Fariba moved first to Yerevan, in Armenia. It was hard to get a job there without knowing Armenian or Russian so she returned to Iran. But being a Christian she wanted to get out of the country. “Iran is like a prison,” she says. She was hoping to be able to move to France but it did not work out. She spoke to a friend in

Malaysia who persuaded her to come. She hesitated but said to herself that she could try it for some time.

When she arrived in Malaysia it was as if she became herself, something she not had been able to be in Iran – at least not in public. “It felt like coming out of jail. People were not afraid on the streets, people were happy, and free to be whoever they were.”

“In Iran”, she says, “I was always on alert on the streets. People there are mad, they have two different personalities, one in private and another in public. God has a plan for everyone and I was not meant to be there. As long as they see the leaders as religious authorities they do not rebel. They force you to be in a certain way, but why? They have to open up. People are not kind to each other. They eat one another. I feel pity for the people in Iran. Why should I be as they want me to be? Who gives them the right to impose their way on me? I don’t want anyone telling me how I should be. It feels like a prison. God does not judge, but the leaders, they judge. People are not honest, they speak behind your back, they don’t trust one another. I am not interested in politics, but they force us to be political.”

5. Somewhere abroad, somewhere on the way



Kuala Lumpur, October 2014

In many ways, a short interview in Kuala Lumpur with Zahra, 26, from Tehran, expresses some important points expressed by all my informants. She had arrived two weeks ago and was supposed to do a master degree in English but changed her mind once she arrived in Malaysia. It was better in Iran, she says. “When we leave Iran it does not really matter where we go. We just want to be comfortable. Couples want to be in a swimming pool by a hotel together, maybe with their child. In Iran that would be illegal.” She reads her prayers but does not wear veil. She likes the freedom in Malaysia but is not interested in living there at the moment. So she will return to Teheran but eventually she plans to leave Iran for another country with more freedoms. Zahra expressed the common feeling that the push-factors are stronger than the pull-factors, for Iranians going to India and Malaysia. The push-factors, to leave the oppressive Islamic Republic, were stronger than the allures of Pune and Kuala Lumpur. Still there was a sense of adventure, freedom, and expansion during a relatively careless

period of liminality – for Iranians migrating to Pune and Malaysia travelling and seeing new experiences was typically important, just as the push-factors from Iran. In this case, migration is closely related to travelling, as lifestyle migration.

Many Iranians in Kuala Lumpur and Pune can be described as lifestyle migrants in search for the “good life”, leisure, and escape (Benson and O’Reilly 2012) – they are relatively privileged and well educated, and might be compared to British migrants in rural France, or Scandinavians moving to Andalucía. A common narrative among them is that the journey fills a function in making their lives more meaningful.

In this chapter there are discussions about different aspects of the specific topic of this thesis – Iranian migration in Asia. Then there are sections with general conclusions, less tied to the specific context of my study.

Wanting something else, a form of resistance

My informants came from different places in Iran as well as from different social circles, but they were also similar in many ways, such as being secular, having anti-regime sentiments, and being educated. Typically one needs some privileged background to be able to travel abroad, but the really rich don't choose India or Malaysia – they go to the West, according to several of my informants.

“These were my last few months in Iran. I rent a room in Karaj for the time being. You are welcome to come over and stay with me until I am off. I will first go to Istanbul, and then wherever it will be possible. If you have any contacts, anything, please let me know.”

“I love Spain, it has always been my favourite country. One of my dreams in life, it may sound simple and nothing to you, but it is to sit in a bar in Spain one whole night, until the morning. And the people there are just like us Iranians.”

“Iran is not a place to live in. It has good people and the highest culture, but the situation today is bad. It has to do with politics and corruption. Iran is superior over our neighbours when it comes to culture, level of civilization, and sophistication. Something will happen sooner or later, and a few years after that, Iran will be a good country to live in. But not yet.”

In Tehran I perceived many young people's hopes of living elsewhere, or in Iran with another government, as a way not to cooperate, to not accept the present regime's view of what order there should be. For example, many refused to attend the huge book fair that was held in Teheran in April despite being fond of reading and of books, because there would be plenty of morality police. The discrepancy between life in public and in private is one of many particularities of the Iranian experience that has functioned as a trigger for people to leave.

Migrating can be viewed as a quiet protest, a silent political act not articulated in words. While the revolution and the ensuing war caused waves of Iranian migrants to the West, and foremost to southern California, the Iranians in Pune and Kuala Lumpur have left largely because of the results of the election in 2009.

The Islamic Revolution resulted in a diaspora of Iranians around the world, many of whom still, albeit for different reasons, are unable to return to their home country. The largest diaspora is in the West – in the US and Europe (Amirani, Shoku, 2012) – but the Iranian communities in India and in Malaysia are large too. Historically, Iranians have arrived in India in several waves, at least since the 17th century, and there is a common emotional bond between Iranians and Indians. Such a link is manifested for example during the Persian New Year in Pune when people go shopping for the *haft sin*. It is not unlikely for Iranians newly arrived to India to run into someone whose forefathers migrated from Iran – it is as if the different waves of migration somehow know of each other, and communicate.

Iranian migration to India and Malaysia takes place in a context where Iran has been demonized in the West since the Islamic Revolution. Many of my informants in India said that Iranians in Europe often are faced with racism and anti-immigrant sentiments. However, in India, with its historical ties with Iran, the connotations are quite different and Indians often have a positive image of Iran. Thus, the social and cultural capital for Iranians in India is high – and Iran is economically more affluent per capita than India. Spending days in cafes, discussing plans to go abroad can be political, an act of non-collaboration – enacting a different view of life than the one supported by the hegemonic power.



Street-art, Tehran, November 2015

5.1 Transnationalism and diaspora

There are several spheres of transnationalism relevant to the Iranians abroad. Transnationalism can be used in describing the Iranian diaspora considering that many Iranians in Pune and Malaysia retain very close relations with Iran. Iranians in India and Malaysia have to be in regular touch with the Iranian authorities to extend their passports and the ones in Pune visit Mumbai regularly for this reason. These links can be used for the Iranian authorities' surveillance – the officials at the consulate may ask what the Iranians are up to, and interrogate them.

Almost all of the Iranians that I met abroad follow what is happening in Iran through Iranian media including the sayings of the Supreme Leader – after all, the situation in Iran affects both themselves and the lives of their relatives and friends in Iran.

Bonds with friends and family back in Iran are strong. The immigrants communicate frequently with relatives and friends in their home country, and are often supported economically by them. Money is being sent between Iran and India/Malaysia from exchange offices in Pune and Kuala Lumpur that make a profit from the sanctions on Iran and the fact that ATMs in Iran are not connected to the international financial system. Thus, Iranians have to bring cash when going abroad and foreigners visiting Iran have to do the same. All of my interlocutors said that an important reason why they had gone abroad were friends that were already there, or word of mouth. Networks play an important role when Iranians decide to go abroad – people in Pune or Kuala Lumpur influence their Iranian friends to come too.

The diasporic ties are in general very pervasive. Originally referring to Greek colonies in western Asia and the Mediterranean the term diaspora early came to denote the Jewish community after the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem. As an analytical term, diaspora refers to a shared belonging of a geographically

scattered population with a collective memory of a homeland. These days it is used for all kinds of groups that maintain a sense of ethnic difference and a consciousness of originating from somewhere else. The notion of victimhood that the term carried when applied to Jews or the African-American diaspora has nowadays been alleviated.

In Pune the cliques of Iranian groups were mostly spending time with each other. They rarely had close ties with the citizens of their host country or with other Asians. In both Pune and Kuala Lumpur there were diasporic activities organized by Iranians, such as organizing a large party for the Persian New Year. *Chaharshambe suri*, another Iranian fest the Wednesday preceding the New Year, involving people jumping over fires, was also celebrated. The festivities, where and when, were announced through social media.

In Pune there are shops that specialize in Iranian foods, and in both Kuala Lumpur and Pune there are Persian restaurants catering for mainly Iranians, even though there were more shops and restaurants in 2011-2012 when the number of Iranians in the two cities peaked. A major reason for the decreased number of Iranians is that the US dollar became much more expensive visavi the Iranian rial; consequently, plenty of people could not afford to stay – living expenses went up by several hundred per cents. Also, in Malaysia the visa regulations for Iranians suddenly became less generous. Before, around 2011 and 2012, Iranians were given a three-month visa on arrival, which meant that there was adequate time to enrol at university and get a student visa to be able to stay for longer periods. But in 2014 visas were given for only two weeks on arrival. Another reason that made the option of returning to Iran more realistic and attractive was when Ahmadinejad's presidency was over and the more progressive Hassan Rohani came to power in 2013. At that point many Iranians that had had to leave Iran quickly in 2009 judged that it would be safe to return, at least for a visit.

5.2 Pride, partly triggered by the demonization of Iran by the West

Several of my interlocutors emphasised how strange and hostile conceptions Westerners in Malaysia and India had of Iran. The Iranians often found themselves having to defend Iran and convey that Iranians are not extremists, terrorists, or fundamentalist Muslims. These attitudes were not expressed, to the same degree at least, in encounters with Indians and Malays.

“You are Iranian? I thought Iranians would be different” a German woman told Amir in Kuala Lumpur. “Iran? Where are your suicide bombs”, a British woman asked Mahnaz, the artist, in a café in Kuala Lumpur one evening. Similarly, Mahnaz recounts when she and a friend, also Iranian, met two men in a bar and were asked if they were terrorists. Mahnaz spent the whole evening with them discussing Iran. Many Europeans living in or visiting Malaysia as well as many Malays expressed such ideas. “I feel accused by just being Iranian”, Mahnaz said. In Pune, Hussein had to explain to a European exchange student that cars existed in Iran – the European had assumed Iran to be very underdeveloped. That was something I heard in Iran too – among those who had visited Europe, a common experience was that people thought that Iran was extremely backward. “Do you have mobile phones in Iran?” a young Iranian musician was asked when visiting Budapest.

“I don’t blame them. I blame my government for giving such a bad image of our country to the surrounding world”, Mohsen, working at the Eastern Hut in Kuala Lumpur, said.

That Westerners in Malaysia and India hardly knew anything about Iran and that Iranians therefore often had to explain and speak about Iran was commonly expressed by my interlocutors in Malaysia. By contrast, none of them uttered anything similar about the Indians and Malays – especially not about the Indians. “People know about Iran here” Hussein in Pune said. This may seem logical

considering that Iran and India, unlike Iran and Malaysia, have been in close contact over the centuries and have an overlapping history; they are also closer geographically. The Parsis, who are Zoroastrians, in Bombay and Pune, for example, have made the “Iranian” aspect of life in India more entrenched. In Iran, Malaysia is frequently seen as a pleasant tropical country whereas India often is regarded as dirty and poor – but the exile Iranians typically do not face the negative attitudes in India as they sometimes do in Malaysia.

In India, Iran has long been thought of as a country of poets and sophistication having a language similar to Urdu, which was the language used by the poets in Delhi during Moghul times, until the British banned the language after having occupied India in the 18th century. At that time the court language in India was Persian – it was the language of court culture as well as of the administration. In the Red Fort in Delhi, engraved and filled with gold, are these words in Persian language: “*agar ferdoos hast, haminjast o haminjast o haminjast*” (if paradise exists, it is right here, right here, right here).

Cultural intimacy, as formulated by Michael Herzfeld (1997), expresses aspects of a cultural identity that may be considered a source of international criticism for the state, but are nevertheless used to provide people of a particular community with a sense of comfort. For Iranians abroad a sense of superiority that is common and has been nurtured in Iran can indeed give a sense both of unity and comfort. On the other hand it may easily be a source of ridicule and antipathy for outsiders. For example, in wide circles speaking of “Aryan genes” is accepted – a phrase I have heard countless times in Iran is “we are Arians” – seemingly unaware that the term has not been popular in the West since WW2. There is a sentiment that on one hand Iran is being demonized in the world while on the other hand Iranians are more sophisticated than others.

“Is Avicii Swedish?” Hussein asked. “He has an Iranian producer or manager”, he continued. “Someone working with him was at least Iranian”. In Tehran, while watching the TV-serial Game of Thrones, my friend pointed out that the composer of the signature melody was Iranian. That André Agassi, the tennis

player, had an Iranian background was something I heard more than once. While many Iranians in Kuala Lumpur and, albeit to a smaller extent, in Pune feel defensive about Iran because of people's ignorance about their home country it is also very common that they express a great pride of Iran and being Iranian.

In Bukit Bintang in Kuala Lumpur I spoke to a German man living there. "The Persians are the worst racists I have encountered," he told me. "They have a problem with how they perceive themselves. It is as if they were some folk nobler than others. Many have commented on phenomena that few Germans would have a clue of, and none would care about. We are both Arians, the Germans and the Iranians, they say. I knew a Persian girl. She was a blatant racist, and asked me how I could ever think of going out with a black girl. They want to make people think that they are rich, even if they are not, they love to boast, and they look down on other nationalities. Only surface and appearance matter to them. And about the showing off their apparent wealth - that is very simple. If they were affluent, they would not be here. Then their fathers would have paid 40 000 USD per semester for them to go to the West. They are not even supportive of other fellow Iranians. I have worked with several Persians. They gossip and stab each other in the back all the time."

"Iranians feel superior to the Indians" Siavash told me in Pune. There is a great pride among Iranians in India and Malaysia and the idea that their own country is culturally superior is widespread. Remarks such as "Indians are dirty" *kasif* or "their (the Malay's) culture is low" (*bifarhang / farhangeshon paeen ast*) were common, at least among Iranians who just had arrived. However, after a few years abroad many have a more positive image of the host country, and the feeling of being culturally more advanced typically becomes less pronounced.

To work on this PhD project, including going on fieldwork, has been a humbling experience – what aspects of the field to focus on, which questions to dwell on et cetera have been my own choices – and indeed, what has been overlooked? In contrast to a novel by a fiction writer, an anthropological field monograph would be discredited had the anthropologists only pretended to have been on

fieldwork. However, the differences might be smaller than we spontaneously think – “from the first ideas to fieldwork, note-taking and monograph, there are value judgements and choices. The necessary selectivity, the omissions, the accretions and theoretical paradigms lead is to acknowledge that the monograph is also a product and construct of the anthropologist’s academic and historical time (Okely, in Ingold (ed), 1996: 37).

Anthropologists may be professionally trained and take a pride in being as unbiased as possible. Still, unfailingly, the conceptions we have determine which aspects of reality we observe and which we ignore – conceptualization stands therefore at the core of anthropological work (Emanuel Marx, 31, nomadic turn). It is easy to project preconceptions into a text in the guise of established theories. We have to be constantly “drilling in the hard rock of our mind in order to overcome our stereotypes and mental blocks” (ibid). We need to question the conceptions we have gathered through fieldwork to avoid getting stuck in commonplace knowledge created by us and by the people we study. There has to be a dialectic relation between our selective observations and tentative interpretation for us to reach closer to an understanding of a reality that so unwillingly let itself to be conceptualized (ibid).



Outside the former US embassy in Tehran, November 2015

Iranians feel that the West has a negative image of Iran and they themselves typically despise the Iranian regime. In order to relate to an Iranian identity to be proud of many cling to the glorious past. It might be too easy for an outsider, an observer, to judge attitudes among Iranians that one may feel are too patriotic – there is, of course, a huge difference between going somewhere because one is interested in the country in question (as I always have had the luxury to do) as compared to going somewhere because one does not want to, or can, stay in the place where one is. Someone who is going somewhere for the sake of going anywhere, to get away, might be less interested in the new environment. And, to put things in perspective, deriding the environment one is visiting is very common among travellers and visitors – for example, western package tourists often express shock when arriving in India and suddenly being exposed to the poverty, garbage on the street, failing electricity cables, etc. The same phenomenon was probably, until recently, true for Scandinavians going almost anywhere abroad – “the water wasn’t safe to drink in continental Europe, the streets were dirty”, etc.

As we have seen, pride among Iranians exist together with opposite, equally pervasive sentiments – the feeling of having to defend oneself and of being a victim of racism – a kind of superiority/inferiority complex – *ogedeh*. Iranians often have this complex, which in turn is likely to affect their behaviour (Majd, 2010: 85). The superiority/inferiority complex may cause Iranians to see themselves as victims of the West but also be enormously proud of their culture and “sometimes too confident in an innate superiority” (Majd, 2010: 172). Iranians typically refer their superiority to the long history of a sophisticated home country that has had recognizable borders for millennia, while at the same time they suffer from feeling inferior because of West’s economical advantages (Majd, 2010: 172). *Ogedeh* was felt among most of the Iranians I met during fieldwork – the feeling of being nobler than others while at the same time, especially when being among foreigners abroad, representing a country that is often misunderstood at least in the West.

While I recognised a strong nationalistic tendency while on fieldwork (and it is easy for me to feel antipathy towards nationalism), I also see the reason for it – the feeling of being misunderstood and therefore, striving for a balance, having to defend one’s home country and its politics. During fieldwork, and while writing ethnography and discussing sensitive topics, I often remembered Michael Herzfeld’s point “If we are to make a reasoned defence of ethnography, we must be willing to treat a learned analysis as no less diagnostic of its author’s world view (cosmology or ideology) than are villagers’ gossip and daily practise of theirs” (Herzfeld, 1997: 101).

Although Iranians abroad often left Iran because of disagreement with their government the Islamic Republic’s version of nationalism sometimes confer with that of many of the country’s migrants. The pride of the culture and history may join most Iranians together, but the Islamic Republic’s tendency to stress the specific Islamic history is often not shared by young students. Instead, the Iranians I met during fieldwork were often emphasizing Iran’s pre-Islamic heritage, wearing necklaces with *faravahar*, a figure signifying Zoroastrianism, and having photos of Persepolis in their flats. This nationalism may be related to *Imagined communities*, where Benedict Anderson (1983) argues that communities are imagined because members of the community cannot all know each other.

“Here’s better to live than in Koregaon Park, since the houses are *newer* in Viman Nagar, Hussein said in a car while he drove through the area in 2016. In his flat, while he commented on a beautiful wooden sofa he had, he said that it had become *old*, implying that he didn’t like the sofa anymore. These kind of comments were common and represent a concept I don’t recognise from anywhere else. Are houses better to live in when they are new? Is not living in an old house desirable and associated with character and cultural capital? In Pune in March 2015, I interviewed Sara who had been living in India for a few years. She lived in Koregaon Park – by many regarded as one of the best places to stay in while in Pune although disliked by Hussein – but would prefer to live somewhere else, where the houses were *newer*. I think that the insistence on

things that are considered as new is an expression of being different. In the same vein, it was hard to find Iranians that liked Indian or spicy food.

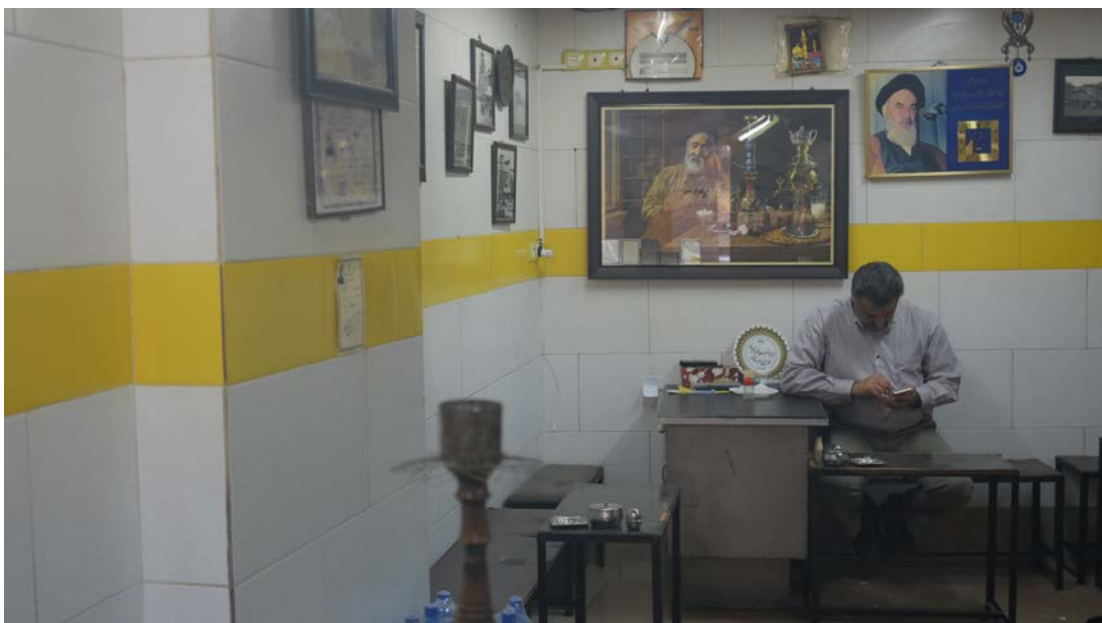
Donya, 25, and I walked around in Little India in Kuala Lumpur the week preceding *Diwali*, the Hindu celebration. We were supposed to stop and eat something, and we walked by a south Indian place. I ordered a *thosai* – a South Indian dish, similar to a crepe – in India called *dosa*, and asked if she would like one too. She has been living in Malaysia for over three years, and hadn't yet eaten in such a "simple" restaurant. "They are not clean", she said. In Pune, when we were to eat, my Iranian friends often drove spontaneously to Kentucky Fried Chicken or some other Western-style fast food joint, not any of the local Indian – and in my opinion much better – restaurants. Similarly, in Delhi, some years before, I had friends from Tehran who would not eat in any Indian restaurants since they didn't consider them "clean".

One way to interpret this emphasis on "clean" places and "new" houses is to think of it as a way to distinguish oneself from the local population. In the book *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas writes that "the ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and publishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience" (Douglas, 5, 1966). And further, "if uncleanliness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanliness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained" (Douglas, 1966: 50). The insistence on "cleanliness" – for what in this case is a different cuisine – can be an expression to keep the order of being different and distinguish oneself from the local population.

Most Iranians whom I meet in Pune have dogs. It must be incredibly inconvenient, and it was surprising to see to what extent the dogs appeared to govern so many people's lives. "I still have not been to Goa, since I don't know what I would do with my dog," says Hussein. "And I would have considered going back to Iran in the summer, but it is so complicated to bring my dog. It might be possible, but it is very complicated" he says. A few years later, we discuss whether it would be possible to bring the dog to Europe, since Hussein is

thinking of continuing his studies in Germany or Sweden. But he would not make a move without the dog.

Once Hussein and I saw Golnaz and Homa on a scooter in the front of us. We drove faster to catch up. The sisters had a dog between them on the scooter, and Hussein had his in front of him. I did not suspect to see that they had a small poodle too. Another day, in the Yogitree café in Koregaon Park in Pune, the table next to mine was occupied by a group of Persian-speakers. After a while I joined them. Under the table, I realised after some time, was a resting dog, the same kind of poodle as both Hussein and Golnaz and Homa had. Poodles are not particularly common in India. If anything people have dogs as guarding houses. Why does one see so many Iranians with dogs in India? (To have dogs as pets is not common in India, nor is it common in Iran). In Iran it is forbidden to have pet dogs – dogs in the street are shot by the police, and there are crack-downs on dog owners (Kamali Dehghan, 6 November 2014). The reason is that dogs are considered unclean in Islam. Having dogs can thus be seen as another way of making a point that one is not pro-regime. Alternatively, people might link having pets to a posh and western life-style – the dogs that are popular among Iranians abroad are in my experience small dogs that makes one think of celebrities' pets in Hollywood.



A tea- house, Shiraz, November 2015

5.3 Migration, reflexivity

There are as many reasons for Iranians going abroad as the number of individuals who have left. Is there anything that connects the artist in Bukit Bintang, the desperate man in the restaurant, and the woman in the flat with her dog in Kuala Lumpur? They all regard Iran as their home country, but now, being abroad, they live very different lives. Is it meaningful to write about the Iranians in Kuala Lumpur and in Pune as if they were a definable group? Is it possible to generalise within and between groups of individuals who have their nationality as the only common ground?

It might be impossible to make such generalizations, and I agree with Anthony Cohen when he writes that acknowledging that knowledge about ourselves seems quite unattainable – the essential self being frustratingly elusive – “must suggest the absurdity of general statements about societies or their collective constituents” (in Ingold (ed.), 1996: 29). Still, I also believe that for anthropology to be worth doing there must be generalizations (in Ingold (ed.) 1996: 30) – anthropology should not be some kind of art or psychotherapy – and in the context of this thesis there are themes coming again and again that make generalizations quite sensible. There are in Iran strong tendencies of longing and going abroad. To hear of someone who has moved to Malaysia or India for studies and life is common in urban Iran. Even though my informants were few it is clear that many of the themes expressed by them are valid for large segments of the Iranian urban population and tell something important in the context of today’s Iran.

I believe that the “I” in the narrative, the anthropological self, and the reflexive style can help to recognize that “those whom we study are, like ourselves, composite of selves, as complex as we are, as uncomfortable as we are ourselves with generalizations about ourselves” (Cohen, in Ingold (ed.), 1996: 29). Still, I see the danger in focussing too much on the anthropologist’s self, and I am more interested in learning about communities, places and cultures that I don’t know much about than an individual’s – the anthropologist’s – emotional responses. I

also agree with Anthony Good that anthropology is more than a literary genre and cannot be only reflexive or autobiographical (Good, in Ingold (ed.), 1996: 35).

Even though nationality arguably is a basic characteristic of an individual (I would be uncomfortable if someone defined me with given characteristics and qualities based on my nationality), just as there certainly still are things that link me especially with my generational compatriots, the experiences of growing up in the Islamic Republic, with its particular limitations, unemployment, and economical difficulties contributing to a desire to move abroad, form a common sentiment. Growing up as children of those who made the revolution has shaped a generation. Everyone that I met on fieldwork expressed a desire to live outside of Iran but no one said he or she aspired to stay permanently in India or Malaysia. At Pune University I spoke to a professor in anthropology who had had five Iranian PhD students. “They are all back in Iran, teaching anthropology” she said. “The Iranians come here for a few years, but none of them stay” – something that was true in my experiences, from discussions in Pune, Kuala Lumpur, and Tehran.

“The value of individualism” (Beck 1999) implies that people make their way into the labour market on their own initiative and are themselves responsible for their careers, successes, and failures – an attitude that can be decisive for the potential migrant.

Without their urge, desire and curiosity, people would not have left their country – the individual agency played the role. The agency is bounded due to restrictions such as immigration regulations and unpredictable exchange rates. Also, the economy of the individual families was important in determining whether people would be able to migrate – Iranian immigrants are usually financed by their families in Iran.

One common reason for Iranians going to India and Malaysia is that it is very hard to get into university in Iran. The entrance exam to get into university, of French model – a *concour* – is very demanding and only a fraction of the

applicants get through (Khoshravi, 2008: 7). Often I heard that a contributing reason for younger Iranians going abroad was that they had not been admitted to the course they had applied for in Iran. Many Iranians consider India and Malaysia countries socially downgrading (compared to Iran) and unfit for permanent settlement. Instead they see India or Malaysia as a jumping board for a long-term migration strategy.

In his studies on Ghanaian migrants in Germany, Boris Nieswand concluded that the migrants often had a low social status in their new country, but that the stay in Germany at the same time increased their social status in Ghana. This became obvious once they had returned. Nieswand refers to this phenomenon as the status paradox of migration (Nieswand, 2011). This status paradox is inverted in the case of the Iranians, at least in India. Malaysia is seen as an exotic country and is so far away and relatively expensive that it comes with some status to have been able to afford living there, but India typically is typically not associated with high status in Iran. According to an interlocutor in Pune, Iranians who move to Malaysia are usually richer than the ones who go to live and study in India. However, once abroad I would say that the Iranians have a high social status in both countries.

5.4 Youth, authoritarian regimes, and counter culture

What are the pull and push-factors for the Iranians going to India and Malaysia? The push-factors include what is thought of as the general oppressiveness of the Islamic Republic, which for many culminated and became unbearable and / or dangerous during the summer of 2009. The pull-factors for India and Malaysia are, arguably, not as strong as the push-factors. The totalitarian nature of the Iranian regime, with its morality police and forbidding culture, together with the high unemployment and economical downward spiral, has helped creating a culture of migration in urban Iran among the young. The culture of migration can be described as a non-movement in Bayat's sense, in the way the migrants are no organized albeit so many shares the same plans.

It can be argued then that a lack of freedom of speech, and a stifling vibe caused by the authoritarian regime, together with the socio-economical context, has caused the culture of migration. Compare this with Delhi, with its vibrant student culture – demonstrations, political activity, late night seminars et cetera – that to my experience does not have a culture of migration comparable to the one in Tehran.

There is a seemingly contradiction between Bayat's non-movements, where people make quite passive choices while still being political, and Scott's strategies of the poor – everyday strategies people find in order to resist the hegemonic order. The two approaches are however not incompatible, and people can have several ways at work simultaneously in order to live the life individuals want to live.

Connected to an authoritarian regime is state surveillance of its inhabitants – conspicuous in Iran. As expressed by many, and felt by myself, one consequence is an uneasy feeling – one never knows who is listening or what kind of behaviour that, for the time being, is considered as acceptable by the regime. The result can be self-censorship, possibly a goal of the totalitarian regime. The same mechanism is also valid abroad. Iranians know that the Islamic Republic

might have its eyes on them wherever they may be. If one plans to go back to Iran one might refrain from participating in any political activity that could be viewed as being hostile to the Islamic Republic.

Maryam, 26, from Tehran, was living and studying in London the summer of the Green Revolution. She, among hundreds of people, was demonstrating outside the Iranian embassy by Hyde Park. “They were filming the demonstrators”, she tells me. Many in the crowd, the majority being exile Iranians, covered their faces so that they would not be recognized. Maryam didn’t dare to return to Iran for several years. “Many used the occasion to apply for asylum in the UK. But it means that one has to give up one’s Iranian citizenship. And I was not willing to do that. Many of my friends managed to get permanent residency in the UK after that summer. Now it is hard for them to return to the UK. *They know everything, anyway,*” she emphasised and laughed. It’s easy to get paranoid when dealing with the authorities of the Islamic Republic – they are notoriously non-consistent. What is considered legal one day might not remain so the next day.

The experience of being watched creates an uneasiness and fear. “Leaving Iran felt like coming out of a jail”, said Fariba in Kuala Lumpur. “What I can’t stand is their talk about morality – as if they would have any”, she continued. Although Fariba compared leaving Iran with coming out of jail, implying that surveillance was not an issue abroad, many others were speaking about the control that the Islamic Republic exercised in Pune and Kuala Lumpur, checking on the activities of the Iranian students.

The categories “hegemonic culture”, “traditional” and “counter culture”, are of course, not clear-cut and always overlap to some degree. Still, for the sake of analysis, it makes sense to speak of these categories. For example, what to make of the *basij*, the paramilitary youth, purportedly working for the ideals of the Islamic Republic? Less accessible for outsiders than the “counter culture” – youth, the revolutionary *basij*, are less understood. How do they position themselves in the city? An article in May 2017 in *Le Monde* points out that they are as fashionable as anyone, and tries to renew their image away from the

sombre outlook they are known to have. They are also known to have been ruthlessly battling the demonstrators on the streets the summer in 2009. Since 1979, the look of the *basij* has not evolved much – dark clothes, loose shirts. But this is about to change – the revolutionary youth takes part of foreign media as everyone else, and navigates between the ideals of the revolution and a global culture transmitted via social media and TV. Many appear, however, firm in their ideals and they are loyal to the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who wants the youth to challenge the West in its “cultural war” with “Iranian values” (Imbert, Le Monde, 23.05.2017). Still, the *basij* identities are of course as plastic as anyone’s and a common reason to become a *basij* is plainly the advantages a membership ensues – in terms of scholarships, entrance to universities, and employment opportunities.

An ethnographical vignette

“Who are the *basij*? Who would want to be one of them?” I once asked a young man after chatting for a few hours on a long-distance bus between Shiraz and Bandar Abbas. He looked perplexed. “Well, I am one of them. I cannot afford not to be. All the advantages, the scholarships, I can’t afford not to be a member”, he said, while at the same time being frustrated with the government and life situation and dreaming of going abroad.

The character of the Iranian regime is not the sole reason for leaving Iran for somewhere else. Migration may be seen as a way of life and offers fun, adventure, and a chance to broaden one’s social networks – it can be considered a rite of passage, an attractive step towards adulthood in life - people want to spread their wings and experience something new. Liminality in the sense of Victor Turner – a state of being suspended, of not being in a situation where one was before but not yet in the desired state to come – is a term that fits the Iranians in Pune and Kuala Lumpur, and this period of liminality can often be greatly extended. *Can a whole life be spent in liminality?*

5.5 The Green Movement and the Arab Spring

Writing about the protests in the Arab world that broke out in late 2010, media turned their attention to “Arab youth” and elected it as the protagonist of the uprisings (Sánchez García et al. 2015: 46). Unemployment, betrayed life expectations, and increasing obstacles to emigration towards Europe sparked according to observers and protagonists the youth rage. Youth and their living conditions then became a major issue in national as well as international politics (Marks 2013, Murphy 2012).

It is interesting and relevant to compare the Arab spring with the Green Movement. According to many of the young Iranians I met in Tehran, Pune and Kuala Lumpur, the Green Movement in 2009 inspired the outbreak of the uprisings in the Arab world in 2010. “First Assad will fall, then the Islamic Republic of Iran”, was a comment I heard many times – the Assad regime in Syria being staunchly supported by the Islamic Republic. However, the spoke-persons of the Islamic Republic did not agree. According to them, the Islamic Revolution in 1979 was what had inspired the uprisings in the Arab world.

Indeed, which Iranian uprising, the Islamic Revolution that overthrew the Shah in 1979, or the Green Movement in 2009, that challenged the pillars of the Islamic Republic, is most relevant when speaking about the Arab Spring? During the protests in Tunisia and other Arab countries, many reformist Iranian leaders claimed the Green Movement as the Arab uprising’s main inspiration. Mir Hossain Mousavi, the leader of the Green Movement, wrote during the Arab uprising on his Facebook page that:

“The starting point of what we are now witnessing on the streets of Tunis, Sanaa, Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez can be undoubtedly traced back to the days of the 15th, 18th, and 20th of June 2009, when people took to the streets of Tehran in the millions shouting “Where is my vote?” and peacefully demanded that they get back their denied rights” (quoted in Bajoghli and Keshavarzian 2016)

A popular slogan shared on Facebook and later was heard in protests around Iran drew parallels between the events in the Arab world and the frustration of many of the Iranian protesters: “Tunisia could do it, but we couldn’t (*Tunisianist, ma natoonistim*) (Bajoghli and Keshavarzian 2016).

Mir Hossein Mousavi’s Facebook-post and the slogan heard in Iran expressed the view of the Green Movement, the reformists. However, everyone did not agree on the link between the Arab uprisings and the Green Movement. Predictably, The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ali Khamenei, was of another opinion:

“Today’s events in North of Africa, Egypt, Tunisia and certain other countries, have another sense for the Iranian nation. They have special meaning for the Iranian nation. This is the same as “Islamic awakening”, which is the result of the victory of the big revolution of the Iranian nation” (quoted in Kurzman, 2012: 162).

These two different interpretations of the Arab Spring echo the hegemonic and the counter culture respectively in Iran. The chaos that followed in the Arab world was spared Iran, and one can argue that the Arab Spring made the reformist movement in Iran more difficult – Iran is about the only stable country in a very volatile region, and this strengthens the regime. The reasons to immigrate are arguably not as acute in Iran as in many Arab countries, but the culture of migration is nevertheless strong in Iran.

5.6 Marriage: the most important marker for becoming adult?

A defining step into the adult life in the Iranian context has traditionally been marriage. With the Islamic Republic's emphasis on education the level and part of the population with a university degree has risen dramatically. Among the Iranians I met in Tehran and I spent time with abroad, education would be finished before marriage came into question – to live as a couple without being married is neither socially nor legally accepted in Iran. Although marriage remains an important step towards social adulthood, none of the interlocutors that I was in touch with outside Iran was married – one was divorced – and very few of those I met in Iran were married. None of them married while being abroad (during the period of my study). Among the Iranian urban youth the age of marriage has risen dramatically – as well as the divorce rate (<http://humanities1.tau.ac.il/iranian/en/previous-reviews/10-iran-pulse-en/82-38>). With the postponement of marriage the life trajectories have been altered in urban Iran, and a few years abroad might today act as a bridge towards adulthood. But can a period abroad be a step towards adulthood as important as getting married? To facilitate an understanding of trajectories it is beneficial to have a longer time frame.

Several authors stress the importance of three spheres in the transition to adulthood: education, employment and political participation (Kovacheva, 2008; Leccardi and Feixa, 2012). While analysing the life course, personal characteristics, agency, and the sociocultural context should be taken into account (Mayer, 2009). Speaking about the possibilities the individual has to shape his or her life, governing norms and conditions change according to context, meaning that young people adjust their behaviour to what the situation requires of them – agency can be said to bear a performative meaning (García Sánchez et al. 2017: 6)

Some social identities are imposed by society, especially on the young. Mary Douglas remarks that any social category is defined by identity attributes (1970). Behind the label “youth” there are identities that intersect, creating disadvantaged or privileged circumstances, which will influence the individual’s life course (Furlong, 2009). Although the school-to-work-transition often is seen as the main step in becoming adult, according to various authors, marriage is the step to achieving social maturity in the Arab Mediterranean countries (Rough, 1987; Singerman, 1997; Ghannam, 2012) – and the situation is arguably comparable in Iran. As my work show, social age, class and gender intersect and conditioned the lives of the generation marked by the summer 2009 in Iran.

When men and women who reach social adulthood late they find themselves in a liminal space in which they are neither children nor independent adults (Singerman, Singerman and Amar, 2009; Bayat, 2012; Konig, 2010; Sukarieh, 2012; Ghannam 2013). In this situation, marriage organises seemingly distinct dimensions of life such as labour, law, values, gender, politics or migration – the idea is that marriage is *the* way to achieve “social maturity”. In the words of Sánchez García (2017), it has to do with “deep structure”. Marriage is crosscutting, drawing together economics, education, politics and culture, and offers continuity in uncertain times (Sánchez García et al. 2017: 9).

As suggested by Sánchez García, marriage is a “social total fact” as described by Mauss (1996): “These phenomena are at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological and so on. They are legal in that they concern individual and collective rights, organize and diffuse morality; they may be entirely obligatory, or subject simply to praise or disapproval. They are at once political and domestic, being of interest both to classes and to clans and families. They are religious; they concern true religion, animism, magic and diffuse religious mentality. They are economic, for the notions of value, utility, interest, luxury, wealth, acquisition, accumulation, consumption and liberal and sumptuous expenditures are all present...” (Mauss, 1966 (1925): 76-77).

If social maturity is achieved with marriage and establishing a family, then, by the same logic, unmarried individuals are in a liminal position – in a transitory state. Being not married yet is seen as “a state of preparation and anticipation of a status still not realised” (Rough, 1987; Singerman, 2007; Koning, 2010). Are people migrating from Iran to India and Malaysia subverting this model – and if so, in what way? Mahnaz in Kuala Lumpur, who had divorced her husband who had drug-problems, came back to Iran later. “I don’t think I fit in the environment here in Iran”, she complained. A few years abroad functions as a rite of passage, and going abroad can be seen as part of a counter-culture, a culture of migration that blossoms in a milieu where anti-governmental sentiments are strong. Still, although some “social maturity” and cultural capital can be acquired through a period abroad, marriage remains of paramount importance – a “deep structure”, in the words of Sánchez García (2017), does not budge easily.

Young Iranians are often trapped by unemployment and failure of family formation, as well as a hegemonic culture, represented by the socially adult, that is quick to judge “deviant” attitudes. Many can not afford to start families or to get a home, and they can not be fully independent and enjoy the privileges and responsibilities of social adulthood associated with married status – and even a few years abroad does not change this pattern. Even if they have acquired economic independence, they are excluded from social and civic life – adulthood is not complete before marriage is a fact (Sánchez García et al. 2017: 23).

5.7 Pull-and-push factors in a comparative perspective

The push factors – the reasons for leaving Iran – among the Iranians I encountered were, commonly, the summer of 2009 and the violent response of the Republic to the demonstrations following the election. The economical insecurity in Iran was another reason to emigrate – many did not see a future there due to lack of jobs. Also, it could be easier to get into university in India or Malaysia than in Iran; emigration therefore appeared as a good option.

The pull factors for India and Malaysia were foremost that it was realistic to get a visa to any of these countries and that living costs there were low. Compared to the current situation among the youth in North Africa aspiring to move to Europe, the Iranians moving to India or Malaysia did not go there because of economical reasons or that the host countries would provide better employment opportunities, with higher income (Sánchez-Montijano et al 2017. 27). As we have seen, Iranians typically view India or Malaysia as a bridge to somewhere else (if the perceived bridge remains a bridge or turns into a cul-de-sac is another question – many ended up in Iran after a few years abroad). Nevertheless, for Iranians moving to Pune or Kuala Lumpur the years abroad can be a period of greater freedom, liminality, and a rite of passage towards adulthood.

5.8 Final remarks – migration as a way to say “no”

For an Iranian generation brought up after the Islamic Revolution, without memories of the Shah and the monarchy, the summer of 2009 often shattered hopes one might have had about the Islamic Republic, and triggered a desire to leave the country. The demonization of Iran by the West (“the axis of evil”, “a terrorist state” et cetera) has contributed to people being both anxious and proud about their nationality – anxious since Iran is so misunderstood in the West, proud because of the rich history and cultural heritage. In order to distance oneself from the Islamic Republic, many young Iranians in Kuala Lumpur and Pune emphasise the pre-Islamic history of Iran. Although every migrating story is unique, there are common themes that this generation share, such as the experience of the Green Movement, a marker of a generation.

The totalitarian regime of the Islamic Republic, as well as what can be the repressive social and moral norms, has contributed to a culture of migration – to migrate is widely seen a viable project for the future. To migrate is partly a rite of passage too, a way to grow up. Still, marriage remains a structure deeper than migration, and is more important as a way to reach social adulthood. Because of bounded agency, although most Iranians that I met would prefer to migrate to the West, many end up going to India or Malaysia. With performative agency, people navigate between the different worlds and realities that the complex Iranian context requires.

When abroad, and especially in a context that one has not entirely chosen by choice, it becomes important to distinguish oneself vis-à-vis the local population. Related to cultural intimacy, this can take the form of emphasising and glorifying ones own culture, or a rejection of the local cuisine.

Not agreeing on a political ideology can take many forms, including less obvious ones. When explicit political action is connected to real danger, or the loss of one’s youth (if one is jailed and sentenced to a decade in jail, which is a veritable

risk), protest can take more subtle forms. Examples of this are not to collaborate, or to ignore public holidays and commemorations that the state highlights. Another example is migration – to aspire and decide to leave to another country, where the morals of the Islamic Republic are not valid. Migration can thus be seen as a political act of non-collaboration, a way to say “no” to the political and social circumstances one finds oneself in.

In further research it would be interesting to continue to follow the Iranians in Pune and Kuala Lumpur – do they end on living in the West somewhere eventually? Among those who return to Iran, how does the experience of a few years in India or Malaysia affect their life? Another interesting question would be to explore other Iranian communities – how is the situation in Dubai, or in Turkey, on the way to the West?

6. Afterwards, elsewhere



After a few years in India or Malaysia, although life trajectories were diversified and life paths did not necessarily become much clearer, some trends could be discerned. Among the Iranians in Pune no one had been projecting a future there, and accordingly, when the university studies were finished they strived to leave Pune for somewhere else. But, the years abroad did often not lead to greater security, such as a job and a stable life. Rather, the experience of having studied abroad is seen as a phase in life where people gain cultural capital; many hope that knowing good English after living in an English-speaking environment may be attractive for employers even back home. Among those who have left India or Malaysia, everyone that I met speaks fondly of the time abroad. Some returned to Iran and started working in their field of studies. However, a common feeling, after a few years in India or Malaysia, is disappointment or disillusion when the opportunities that one projected did not materialize, when supposed doors to third countries – typically in the West – did not open.

So, consistent with the plans, a few years after moving from Iran to India or Malaysia most of the Iranians that I met had moved somewhere else. Among my

interlocutors no one had planned to stay and settle in India or Malaysia. When the studies were finished, and no further plans materialized, people left Pune and Kuala Lumpur. Usually they found it difficult to continue to a third country since visas have been hard to get. Some had gotten work in Iran while others found themselves in an unclear situation, planning to go somewhere – and waiting for something to happen.

After meeting Kimiya in Pune in 2015 she had returned to Iran where she was validating her degree in pharmacy from Pune. She was also applying to MA-courses in India in pharmacy and studied German, with the idea of working and living in Germany some day. A year later she worked as a pharmacist in Iran and did not have any immediate plans to leave. She spoke fondly of India (she loved Goa and went there often as a student) and wanted to return for visits, maybe for the Iranian New Year. She lives with her parents in Tehran now, works as a pharmacist, and plans to visit India for holidays when possible.

Mahnaz in Malaysia was planning to go to Australia with the help from a friend she had made in Kuala Lumpur. It was an Australian woman who liked her art. The plans did not materialize and since her studies were coming to an end she had troubles extending her Malaysian visa and had to return to Iran. First she went to Bandar Abbas where she grew up and has her family. There she found it hard to find any network relevant to her work – the art scene in Bandar Abbas cannot be compared to the one in Tehran. She was not happy with her situation and went back to Kuala Lumpur for a conference, failed to stay there for a longer time, returned, and once in Iran again she moved to Tehran. She thought of her situation as somewhere in between being settled and travelling. She aspired to leave for somewhere else.

Hussein in Pune has another year of his studies, thereafter things are uncertain. He stays in his beautiful flat in the outskirts of Pune and studies for exams that will lead to a degree in finance. He has recently met a girl with whom he has a relation, she from Iran. After this last year of his studies he plans to continue elsewhere, possibly in Europe. After having to leave Iran swiftly after the 2009

election he did not dare to return to Iran for many years. He loves Iran and is more optimistic about its future now than before. He has relatives in Sweden and maybe he will move there, either for studies or for life and work – but only if it would be possible to bring his dog to Sweden.

A year after my fieldwork in Pune Golnaz and Homa still lived there. When asked where she will be in a few years, Golnaz said “somewhere else, but not in India nor in Iran”. She was clear about her love for Pune but is not keen on staying for too long. Returning to Iran does not appear as an attractive option. But, after having finished her BA, she found a part-time job in Pune for a company, and travels in India, to Surat and Ahmedabad among other places, for her work. She plans to visit Iran the summer 2017 for a vacation combined with visa-work.

Siavash has left India and is back in Iran to continue his studies in Qom.

Neda was about to finish her studies in Pune during the spring of 2015 and returned to Shiraz in the summer that same year. In November 2015 I met her in Shiraz. She did not work, nor study. She was thinking of going to England if she got a visa. She asked why I didn't stay in a better hotel, or why I did not go to Shiraz by air rather than by bus from Tehran – the common Iranian emphasis on luxury, I thought (“why not fly and stay in a luxury hotel?”). We met by the Affifabad gardens in central Shiraz and I assumed we would spend some time in the beautiful historical centre. Instead, we drove far away, one hour's ride outside the city, to the biggest shopping mall in the area. The shopping centre was enormous, empty and massive. We parked in an underground parking-lot, a huge empty space. The building had an apocalyptic feel to it. At last we found a place serving kebab in tents giving an “authentic” air to the barren concrete-landscape. Neda did not want to stay in Iran, she planned to continue to somewhere else, like England. But her conceptions of how to get there were vague. “Maybe you know how to get there. I want to work or study, to live there,” she said. By spring 2016 she had her own apartment in Shiraz. Her plans to move to the West had not progressed but she said that she would make a try in

August 2016. Still, by autumn 2016 she lived in Shiraz and worked as a psychologist.

Abbas, one of the first Iranians I met in Pune in the summer of 2013, had been living in India since 2010, studying as well as setting up a business with an Indian partner. He was an energetic personality working constantly with his business, a restaurant offering Persian as well as Indian dishes. However, Abbas and the Indian business partner did not go well along anymore. Abbas had made it clear that in order to attract the Iranian population in Pune the food could not be spicy. But the Indian partner insisted in his opinion that Persian food would not be popular among Indian customers – after all, the restaurant was located in Pune where the great majority are Indians. You don't understand, Abbas said to the Indian partner, that Iranians don't eat spicy food. The former colleagues did not part on good terms.

Two years later, by spring 2015, that whole group of friends had left India. They were all back in Iran. While walking around in Pune in the area where they used to live I noticed that most Iranian signs were gone. The Iranian shisha place was empty. The restaurant with the "Persian restaurant" sign was not there anymore. I didn't hear any Persian being spoken. Abbas had set up a small business in Tehran. However, by the fall of 2015 Abbas had left Iran too, and was in Turkey together with several friends who also had been in India. They were in Denizli, in southern Turkey, planning to travel towards Europe. A few months later Abbas had arrived in Toronto where he worked in a restaurant. Things had, finally, worked out really well.

In Tehran I meet Alireza who had been in Pune in 2013. Alireza had been studying for a MBA in Pune, and had found a job in Tehran in a company dealing with cars. His office was situated in the middle of Tehran, by the Vali-Asr square, in a quite empty flat with an impressive view over central Tehran. Alireza would go to the airport after we had met to pick up some car-parts that had arrived by boat in Bandar Abbas.



Tehran October 2015

7. Glossary

Ali: the prophet Muhammad's cousin, and according to Shiites the righteous successor of Muhammad. An icon in Iran, often depicted in a green robe and a sword.

Ali Khamenei: *rahbar*, Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1989.

Allah o akbar "God is great", an expression of celebration in Islamic countries

Asadari: beating on the chest that Shiites do in ceremonies during ashoura

Basij: the paramilitary volunteers

Ashoura: the commemorative mourning of the murder of Hussein in Karbala the year of 680.

Chaharshambe suri: the festival of fire, celebrated the last Wednesday before Norouz

Emam Khomeini: The first Supreme Leader, *rahbar*, of the Islamic Republic

Evin jail: A notorious prison in Tehran with political prisoners

Gashte-ershad: the morality police roaming the streets in Iran

Hejab: the veil that women have to wear in public in Iran

Hussein: the son of Ali (Prophet Muhammad's cousin). Hussein was killed in Karbala.

Jombesh – e sabz: The Green Movement, the reformist movement during the summer 2009

Nasri: food handed out for free during religious festivals

Norouz: the Iranian New Year

Pahlavi – dynasty: the last dynasty of the Iranian monarchy, founded by Reza Shah in 1925 and succeeded by Muhammad Reza Shah, overthrown during the Islamic Revolution in 1979

Rahbar: "Supreme Leader", leader of the Islamic Republic. The first *rahbar* was Ayatollah Khomeini, and since he died in 1989, Ali Khamenei has been the *rahbar*, the "Supreme Leader".

Shahid: “martyr”, especially in the context of the Iran-Iraq war and soldiers who died, and according to *them*, reached heaven.

Ya ali: a common invocation of good spirits, an exclamation honouring Ali, the cousin of the Prophet

8. Bibliography

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Interviews and interviewees

Amir, 26 from Mashad, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur in November 2014

Farnaz, 29, from Hamedan, interviewed in Pune in March 2015

Fariba, 36 from Tehran, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur in November 2014

Hasan, 26 from Tehran, interviewed in Tehran, January 2012

Hasan, 34 from Tehran, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur in October 2014

Hussein, 26 from Tehran, interviewed in Pune in March and April 2015 and in February and March 2016.

Mahnaz, 33 from southern Iran, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur in October and November 2014

Mena, 28 from Tehran, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur in October 2014

Mohsen, 24, from Tehran, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur in October 2014

Nargues, 27 from Tehran, interviewed in Pune in March 2015

Neda, 35, from Shiraz, interviewed in Pune in April 2015 and in Shiraz in November 2015.

Kimiya, 25, from Tehran, interviewed in Pune in March 2015 and in Tehran in November 2015.

Siavash, 26 from the Caspian coast, interviewed in Pune in February and March 2016

Tina, 27, from the Caspian coast, interviewed in Pune in March and April 2015

