

travelogue

## Esfahan Enchants

by Raana Haider

Continued from last week

**C**HARDIN'S 'Travels in Persia 1673-1677' is a splendid prose portrait of an ancient land and its people. John Fryer in 'A New Account of East India and Persia' in the seventeenth century summarised his impression of Esfahan thus: "The magnificently arched Buzzars which form the noble square to the Palace; the several public inns which are so many seraglios; the stately rows of sycamores which the world cannot parallel; the glorious summer houses and pleasant gardens, the stupendous bridges, sumptuous temples, the religious convents... are so many lasting pyramids and monuments of Abbas's fame; and people are wont to say 'Shah Abbas', as we should say, 'well done.'" The cityscape and image of Esfahan was and remains one of tree-lined boulevards, spacious squares, magnificent mosques, palatial palaces and wide expanses of greenery.

The longest ancient urban axis in civilization is to be found in Mexico. It is the Street of the Dead of the Teotihuacan civilisation. That was exceeded in the seventeenth century by the Naqsh-e Jahan (Design of the World) *maidan* (central square) in Esfahan. This core of urban planning measures 510 metres long and 165 metres wide, with an area of more than 80,000 square metres. It is twice as large as Moscow's Red Square and seven times the size of the Piazza San Marco at Venice. The other famed urban square of spectacular beauty is the place de la Concorde in Paris. The largest urban open space in the modern world is the Tiananmen square in Beijing according to our excellent guide, Agha Mahmud Reza Shayeesteh, a civil engineer who both enlightened and enthralled us with his elaborate explanations of the delights and merits of Esfahan's many architectural splendours. I told him that our next visit to Esfahan would have to be according to his convenience, since we insist that he once again accompany us. In the past, he has accompanied the Sultan of Brunet and Kofi Annan United Nations Secretary-General on their excursions to Esfahan.

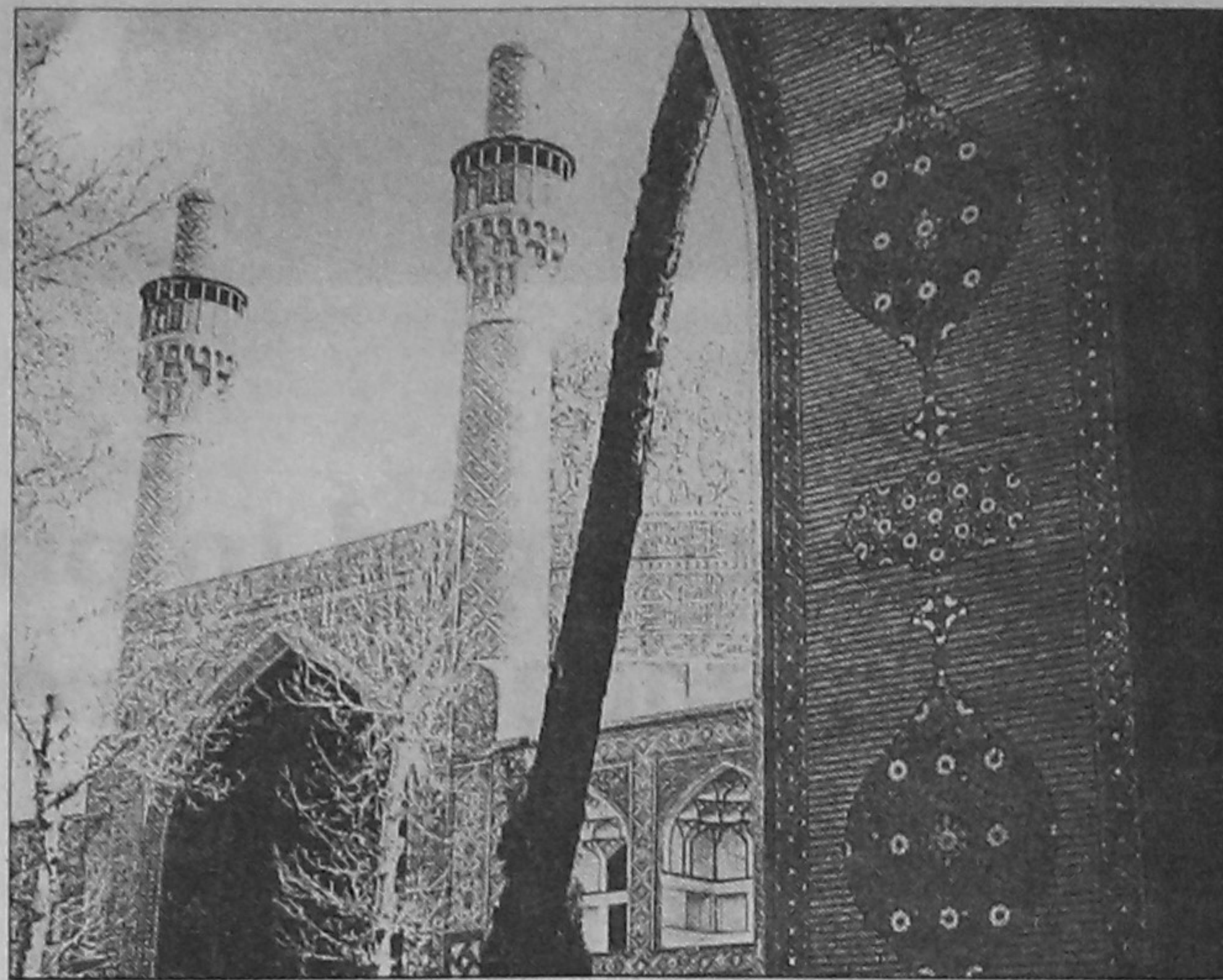
Entering the Naqsh-e Jahan square, the focal point of the capital city, where should one first rest one's eyes? The square itself is formed by a quadrangle of brick buildings of two storeys of recessed arches and arcades containing some 200 rooms, all built equal in size and form. In the middle of each flank of the square, stands an architectural marvel — a unique monument that mirrors the pinnacle of human creativity.

"The heavens often rain down the richest gifts on human beings, but sometimes with lavish abundance they bestow upon a single individual beauty, grace and ability, so that, whatever he does, every action is so divine that he surpasses all other men and clearly displays how his genius is the gift of God, and not an acquirement of human art." So remarked Giorgio Vasari architect of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence in the mid-sixteenth century about Leonardo da Vinci. Vasari also wrote a biography on the genius.

Such a profound declaration is applicable to the architects of the Sheikh Lutfullah mosque and the Imam mosque (earlier Shah Mosque and even earlier Shah Abbasi Mosque) that grace the Naqsh-e Jahan square. The Sheikh Lutfullah mosque, a private mosque for Shah Abbas, was built over a period of eighteen years early in the seventeenth century by Ustad Mohammed Reza Esfahani, son of Ustad Hossein, builder of Esfahan. The architect's name appears in two tablets installed in the Mehrab (the prayer niche inside the mosque indicating the direction of the Holy Place of Mecca towards which Moslems pray). It says 'a poor humble man in need of God's blessing, Mohammad-Reza son of master mason Hussain Esfahani, 1208 Hejira (1793 AD)'. The mosque is named after Sheikh Lutfullah, a Lebanese preacher.

A single *cafe-au-lait* dome, as seen from a distance, minus any minaret stands in splendid isolation. Its uniquely yellow-dominated tiled dome with turquoise inlaid petals, in an intricate arabesque and flora design, is a jewel in the crown of mosques to be found in Esfahan or anywhere else in the world. The yellow turns gold in the sunlight and presents a sublime composition in the backdrop of a clear azure sky. A frequent feature of Islamic architecture is the 'infinite pattern', i.e. "an abstract or repetitional pattern repeated in continuous sequence." It has achieved perfection in the dome of the Sheikh Lutfullah mosque.

"In Islamic art the decorative ele-



The dome and minarets of the Madraseh-ye Chahar Bagh. Described by Arthur Upham Pope as "perhaps the last great building in Iran." Built between 1706 and 1714 in the reign of Shah Soltan Hosein, the last Safavid monarch, the madraseh was financed by the Shah's mother, in honour of whom the building is also known as the Madraseh-ye Madar-e-Shah.

ment is of such importance that the term arabesque is now applied to an enormous range of surface decoration using fanciful motifs of foliate elements. Its earliest Islamic form, depicting patterns of grapes, foliage and tendrils was derived from classical Greece, Rome and above all, Byzantium and was developed by craftsmen working under Umayyad and Abbasid patronage" states 'How to Recognize Islamic Art'. The Umayyad and Abbasid caliphates ruled much of the present day Arab region from 661 to 945 AD.

Ali Akbar Esfahani is the Iranian Michelangelo of the Masjid-e Jame Abassi (Abassi Mosque) built between 1611 and 1616 with expansions continuing up to 1638. He was an artisan of the soul. The opulent yet extraordinarily simple mosque is the crowning achievement of Shah Abbas. He died before its completion despite exerting considerable pressure on its architect and builders. The structure staggers the visitor with its inventiveness and magnificence. It "represents the culmination of a thousand years of mosque building and a magnificent example of architecture, stone carving, and tile work in Iran, with a majesty and splendor that places it among the world's greatest buildings" proclaims rightfully 'A Travel Guide to Iran' by M T Faramarzi. It is one UNESCO's World Heritage sites.

An architectural marvel it is. The main portal in the middle of the southern flank of the Naqsh-e-Jahan square was built in order to maintain the symmetry of the central square. However, the axis of the mosque itself has been built at a 45 degree angle so that it can face the direction of the Holy city of Mecca. An exterior viewing of the building from the square will not reveal any of this accomplishment. Much of Islamic architecture excels in balance and symmetry. Yet Nature itself is asymmetrical and imbalance is reality. Roger Stevens raves at the "the vast pile at the southern end of the Maidan, that is in design and conception the most majestic expression of Persian Islamic architecture at the crown of its most sumptuous and triumphant era. The scale is stupendous, the plan ingenious."

Entering the vast portal, one is struck by the sheer grandeur of it all. Someone who has captured my sentiment as I took in the simple splendour is Roger Stevens. He writes "Once inside the great portal, whose massive dado of Ardistan marble with finely carved corner column leads the eye upwards to glistening stalactites of mosaic, the enchantment takes effect and critical faculties are dulled. Only prejudice bred of too much knowledge could fail to succumb to those encircling walls of dazzling blue, those soaring minarets, their reflections in the tank of the great court, or the deep shade of the ivans which reveal man's pigny stature. For all its reckless riot of colour, the Royal Mosque, by sheer weight of mass and contrasts of light and shade, is awe-inspiring; the hand may be the King's but the glory, there can be little doubt about it, is to God." As I read of Stevens's enchantment, the words of Giorgio Vasari regarding Leonardo da Vinci came to mind.

Persian Islamic architecture perfected the construction of the ivan. In 'Iran Today' Jean Hureau states "An ivan has the aspect of an apse open off the internal courtyard of the mosque or forming a porch with on each side, high vertical walls like those bordering a theatre stage. There are usually minarets on each end. The whole complex is covered with mosaics or

bright-coloured ceramic tiles, and occasionally by mirrors arranged into geometrical compositions ... The southern ivan is 38 metres high and 26 metres in depth." As you walk under the construction of dazzling perfection, you enter a great prayer hall that is covered by two domes: the outer domes is 52 metres high and the inner dome is 38 metres high — that leaves an empty space of 12 metres between them! Another architectural feat.

There is more! The Persians also raised the art of cupola-building to a peak. Andre Godard wrote in his book 'Art in Iran' "that cupolas have become once again splendid brilliant bubbles in the sky. There are really the world's most magnificent expression of enamelled architectural decoration." Gazing upwards at the cupola, one is moved by the vast display of floral design, all in golden-yellow and dense-blue enamel tile craftsmanship and the entire surface is illuminated by sunlight — creating a wonder between the cupola's gold and the blue of the sky. A Persian master ceramist of the fourteenth century called for domes to be covered with tiny specks of gold-leaf so that the domes "might shine like unto the resplendence of the sun." I have seen it work.

The unique combination of double cupolas of the Abbasi mosque has produced a sound miracle, a pure resonance that is heavenly. The acoustics produce both amplification of sound as well as replication of sound. We tried it and it is simply amazing. The purpose of this sound miracle was to relay the words of the Imam (leader of the prayers) to the congregation. The echoes must have produced within the gathered assembly a heavenly feeling.

The Ali Qapu palace known as the Sublime Gate was built as a reception and entertainment palace early in the seventeenth century by Shah Abbas in order to symbolize the power and prestige of the Safavid dynasty. It lies on the west side of the central square. The Ali Qapu palace is the first skyscraper built in Iran consisting of six floors and rising to a height of forty-eight metres from the ground level. A large porch with a central pool built of copper and marble is to be found on the second floor. This expansive verandah has twenty slender columns over twenty feet high, each column made of a single chinar tree-trunk. The columns were originally encased in glass in order to give the impression of a roof floating in the air. These mirrored-columns would have reflected the water of the fountains and pool creating a visual impact. The open space was used by the ruler, his guest and his court to watch polo-playing, sporting events and processions in the Naqsh-e Jahan maidan. The sixth floor has on its roof niches shaped-like bowls worked into the ceiling for both aesthetic purposes and acoustics. This floor was the music room. Making it to the top floor allows one to get an aerial view of the maidan and beyond into the city of Esfahan. The entire construction and its decorative arts constitute an architectural marvel. Chardin described this building as "This is the biggest palace that can be found in any capital."

Another grandiose palace built for official entertainment and ceremonies was the Chehel Sutun palace or the palace or forty columns. The name is derived from the pillars that dominate the large first floor-level open space. Twenty of them are laid out in three rows of six with two additional ones on either side of the main entrance. These add up to twenty. The remaining twenty are reflected in the

water in the rectangular pool with a pavilion at the far end of it. It is an exquisite and ingenious play of the substances of solidity and liquidity. Thus the name Chehel Sutun since forty in Farsi is Chehel and forty is also considered an auspicious number. The inner door portal had been covered with chipped Venetian glass. Necessity is the master of masterful invention; the glasses came all the way from Venice and the broken bits were artfully put to good use! The ceiling has large expanses of Venetian glass mirroring the ornamental arts to be found in the rest of the building. The detailed and large expanses of frescoes inside the inner reception hall are superb. Sadly, many have been chiselled and badly defaced by subsequent dynasties.

In 1721, the Bishop Barnabas of Esfahan described the Chehel Sutun talar (columned-porch) as follows: "The palace where the King held his reception is not a room or covered hall, but a very large open porch, handsome and more majestic than that of St. Peter's, though not so big. It is completely full of large and small mirrors, marvelously interlaced, and some pictures with fine frames...."

A small museum contains an intriguing item — a Tear Holder in turquoise glass from the tenth century. It was used to collect tears from the eyes of the wives of the ruler! They had plenty to cry about. My daughter and I were amused (or not so amused) at the idea of adding insult to injury. Once discarded, I wonder if the wife had to prove her sense of loss by publicly demonstrating her pain.

Bridge-building was another architectural forte. The two most impressive ones are the Khaju pol (bridge) and the Si-o Seh pol. The Khaju bridge was built between 1642 and 1667 under Shah Abbas II. The name is derived from the district of Khaju on the northern bank of the Zayandeh Rud river. The bridge is 110 metres long and little more than 20 metres wide in places. A two-tiered arcade is the simplest way to describe this remarkable construction. It serves as a bridge, a dam, a walk-way, contains pavil-

ions and in an amusing observation in 'A Travel Guide to Iran' "The most famous tea-house under the bridge is currently closed but may be reopened soon; this used to be one of the most atmospheric places in Iran to sit and drink tea or smoke the *ghalian* (hubble-bubble), surrounded by slumbering Esfahan manhood."

of the bridge makes it look like a string of pearls lit in the black of the night. The Si-o She bridge is the Bridge of Thirty-three Arches since it has thirty-three openings. It is also known as the Allahverdikhan bridge after Shah Abbas's Commander in Chief of his Army. The lower level of thirty-three (Si-o She) arches is surmounted by a second layer — thus, giving the bridge its name, beauty and rhythm. The bridge is now open only to human traffic and like the Khaju bridge serves as a prime spot for rest and recreation. These two bridges add immensely to the charm of the city. The excellent illumination give the bridges a jewel-like appearance at night.

Arthur Pope described the dome and minarets of the Madraseh-ye Chahar Bagh as "perhaps the last great building in Iran." It was built between 1706 and 1714 in the reign of Shah Soltan Hosein, the last Safavid monarch. The madraseh was financed by the Shah's mother after whom the building is also known — Madraseh-ye Madar-e Shah (the theological school of the Mother of the Shah). The adjoining caravanserai (must have been of the 5 Star Category) also provide the madraseh with funds for the welfare of its students and teachers. Today, the ancient caravanserai is the world famous Shah Abbas Hotel. In 1979, my parents and I had stayed at this sumptuous resthouse. Pope noted that "The glorious decoration of Abbasi Guest House is one of the distinguished products of art. The splendid art of the Safavids is so dexterously and elegantly revived in this mystic enchantment of A Thousand Tales. These decorations demonstrate both the dynamism of Persian artistic conventions and the continuity of modern supplement to other precious historical monuments of Esfahan."

This time, it was closed for renovation and scheduled to open early in 2000. The renovation in the tea-house facing the garden courtyard had a plaque noting that the work was undertaken by Iran Insurance Company. Its name was also to be found on a

that these were pigeon-towers. These huge mud-brick buildings could house several thousands of pigeons. They were mostly built during the seventeenth century when the expanding city required higher output per farmland to feed the increasing population. The pigeon-droppings collected within were used as manure for increasing fertility of the land. The largest grouping of them (some twenty) lies ten kilometres east of Esfahan on the Nain-Yazd road.

The other even more intriguing structural ruin is desolate mass of ruins perched on a rocky promontory that is enhanced by the scenic grandeur — an oasis featuring ancient pigeon-towers, mud-brick houses, orchards and streams. They lie at the base of the granite rock where is to be found a sixth century BC, five-storey high Zoroastrian fire temple cum palace. The now craggy ruin, on a mooncape of granite rock and well-camouflaged with its rock base, sits eighty-five metres above street-level. The view of the ancient fire temple has been successfully marred by a grotesque cylindrical built water tank built some 50 years ago. The water tank was built at a considerable cost, never used and is now to be broken down — a perfect symbol of short-term, inappropriate 'modern' planning.

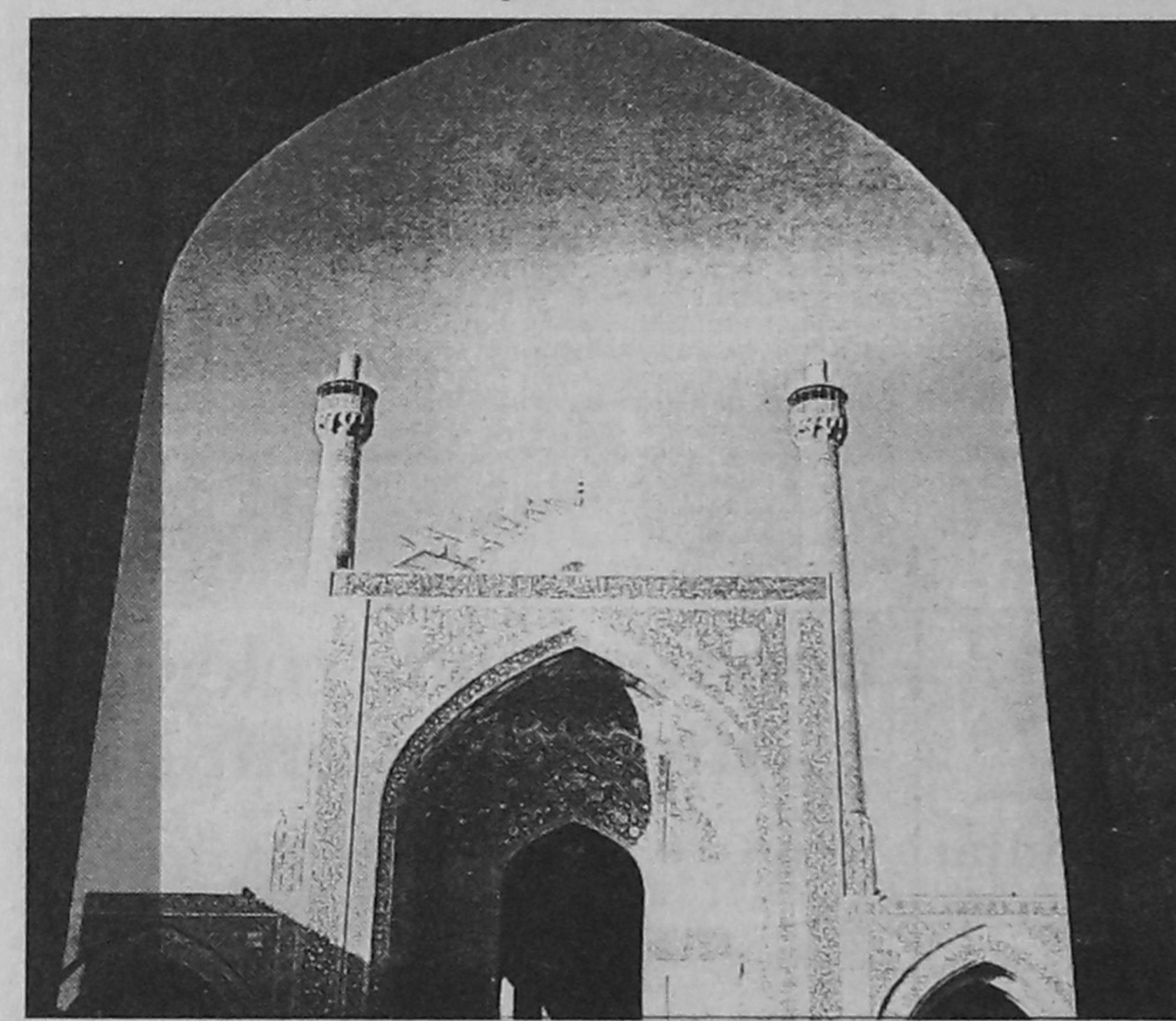
Fire is an essential element in Life. A Stephen Pyne once remarked "We are uniquely fire creatures on a uniquely fire planet." For Zoroastrians, fire is sacred, a source of awe and supplication. It also provides basic needs: food, light, protection and warmth and thus a factor in community-building and unity. 'Towers of Silence' were the traditional Zoroastrian burial sites. In Iran, they have not been in use for over three hundred years. In these 'Towers of Silence,' eagles and vultures disposed of the bodies, thus avoiding that earth, water and fire — the divine elements — be contaminated; the soul of the deceased already having been received by Ahura Mazda, the Supreme Being. Contrary to popular belief, Zoroastrians do not worship fire but regard fire as an essential element in Life and thus a symbol of worship. The religion was founded some 3700 years ago by Zoroaster in north-west Iran which is today west Azerbaijan. We visited a functioning fire temple in Esfahan that was built thirty years ago and donated to the city by an Armenian couple.

Shah Abbas persuaded or ordered some 30,000 Armenians from mountain-dwellings and the city of Julfa in Azerbaijan close to Iran's border to move to Esfahan early in the seventeenth century. Better opportunities or strategic coercion? There are differing views. "By this authoritarian move, the Persian sovereign ruined a commercial centre then under Turkish influence, and settled in his brand-new capital hard-working and skillful citizens" notes Jean Hureau. In 'Shah Abbas: Empereur de Perse' by Houchang Nahavandi and Yves Bomati (1998), the Iranian and French authors write of the scorched-earth policy that Shah Abbas wrought in the 'Old' Julfa region as a political move against the Ottomans with whom the Armenians were not at peace anyhow. Such a 'burn and rule' tactic was also much favoured by Shah Abbas' grandfather, Tahmasp. Regional rivalry between the prevailing power — the Ottomans and the Safavids led Shah Abbas to forcefully move the Armenian population to Iran using the 'carrot and stick' strategy. According to Nahavandi and Bomati, an Armenian delegation requested Shah Abbas for help against the Ottomans in 1602. In 1604, Shah Abbas made his move.

Subsequently, the migrants from 'Old' Julfa who settled into 'New' Julfa in Esfahan were accorded religious freedom, land and commercial advantages. The Armenian community flourished. Of the many Armenian churches — there were once twenty-eight — the largest, much gilded and most ornate is the Vank cathedral. Built between 1655 and 1664, it is richly decorated with exquisite murals depicting scenes from the Old Testament. In the cathedral museum there are Armenian manuscripts, Safavid charters, even a sketch by Rembrandt and a rich collection of paintings and tapestries.

Esfahan truly has something for everyone. There is enough diversity in the city to satisfy the most demanding of travellers. For in Esfahan, the imagination has soared and beauty has assumed heights of beauty and perfection.

About the writer: Raana Haider, a sociologist, is the wife of the Bangladesh Ambassador to Iran also forthcoming in 'Iran News: Tehran.'



Main porch of Imam Mosque, Esfahan.

large plastic clock (very twenty-first century) hanging on the wall. Somehow, the restoration effort was not up to standard. An annex, the 'new' Shah Abbas hotel was built in 1964.

Gilles Lambert in 'Connaissance des Voyages' (1970) wrote "When you return to the Shah Abbas after an excursion, you are certainly not plunged into the standardized universe of the tourist... Persian and French architects worked together on this undertaking, particularly Mr. Siroux, a specialist in traditional Iranian architecture and Mr. Foroughi, Director of the Iranian Art Institute. Mr. and Mrs. Paul Augier (from the famous Negresco Hotel in Nice) supervised the interior decoration. Most of its elements — windows, stained glass, sculpted doors, engraved wood — are ancient. The reception halls are decorated with miniatures; Iranian painter Ebrahimian took his inspiration from the Chehel Sotoon (Forty Columns) pavilion... recall the fact, that Esfahan-Nef-e-Jahan (Half of the World) — was long before organised tours were invented, a dream spot for the fore-runners of long-distance tourism: the desert caravan-drivers." This extract appears in 'Iran Today: Travel in Colour' (1972) by Jean Hureau.

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