

## **Bakhshesh and the Western Psyche**

By John Krauskopf

People from western cultures are almost always discomfited with cultural customs involving “bakhshesh,” a word technically translated as “gift.” However, in modern usage in certain situations, it could also be accurately translated as “tip” or even “bribe.” I had a great deal of trouble with this concept for the first two years I lived in Iran. Intellectually, I understood, but viscerally I resisted. The concept is not really foreign to my own culture, but the range of situations where it is applied is different. We tip taxi drivers, waiters, and hairdressers without feeling unfairly treated. However, “tipping” someone in a government office to speed up the issuance of a permit sets off deep feelings of indignation in us. We pay commissions and finder’s fees, even hire third party expeditors, without feeling ripped off. Yet we feel the “bakhshesh” expected for various services in a country like Iran is a sign of incurable corruption and decadence.

I had managed to live for almost all of my original 21-month assignment in Iran without once violating my strong American sense of values regarding the payment of bakhshesh, and I was perversely proud of this fact as if I had triumphed in some kind of an elaborate game. However, in my last few hours prior to departure from the country, I simultaneously lost the game and gained substantive insight into the place for bakhshesh in the Iranian culture. Moreover, I gained confidence in my own ability to function within these cultural concepts. The odd part about the experience for me was that, when it was all over, my culturally American fear of feeling corrupted, abused and ripped-off was not justified.

The incident began when my homeward trip to the United States was drastically rearranged by the Six-day War of June 1967. I had planned to travel through Iraq, Lebanon and Jordan, but this suddenly became impossible. I decided to go, instead, through the Soviet Union. Advance arrangement of the complete trip through the official Intourist travel agency in Tehran was required, and this typically took a month or more. I believe I hold the all-time speed record for Russian travel approval by getting my itinerary confirmed and the required paperwork completed in only eight days. The travel agent got the approval by cable from Moscow on Thursday. He managed to issue the Russian air tickets, train tickets, hotel coupons, meal coupons, and tour coupons by the close of business that day. No business was conducted on the Friday Sabbath, but the agent ploughed through the Russian visa issuance process on Saturday.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t able to get the steamship tickets issued for the trip across the Caspian Sea from Bandar Pahlavi to Baku without the Russian visas in hand. By the time he actually had the visas, the steamship office in Tehran had closed and would not be open again until Monday, the day of the weekly sailing from the Caspian port 250 miles to the northwest of Tehran. My travel agent told me not to worry about this one incomplete detail as I held confirmed reservations, and I could buy the tickets at the shipping company’s office at the port on Monday. The ship sailed at 4:00pm so I arranged to get to the port before noon in order to have plenty of time to take care of this business.

After two years in Iran, I had become adapted to the inescapable delays in getting things done. Peace Corps volunteers wryly referred to the pace of life in our adopted country in terms of “one-thing days” and “two-thing days.” A “three-thing day” was a rare anomaly and a cause for celebration. However, I seemed to be on a roll because of the success I had had in speedily making all of the Russian trip arrangements in Tehran, and I had grown a little careless. My four-hour allowance for steamship ticket purchase turned out to be not nearly enough.

Arriving at the customs shed for exit formalities, I was asked for my steamship tickets. I told the inspector that I had reservations, and I would be purchasing the tickets here. He stopped processing my papers and informed me that the ticket office had closed for lunch and the Iranian version of a siesta. It wouldn't be open again until four o'clock. I pointed out that the ship sailed at 4:00pm. The inspector nodded that he understood and suggested that I wait for the next Monday's sailing. He could do nothing to help me get the tickets, but without them, he could not continue with the exit formalities. I began some strident and noisy (but culturally appropriate) protests that attracted several other officials from their posts in the largely empty customs building but produced no action on the solution to my problem. The consensus of all concerned, as well as those who were just kibitzing, was that I would have to wait until the following Monday's sailing. I backed off a little and went into consultation with my Peace Corps companion on the trip and some friends who had accompanied us to bid farewell.

Our strategy session was not getting anywhere when the porter who had brought our baggage in from the taxi deferentially approached me and said that he had overheard my problem and was sure he could help me. In Iran, there is almost always a “way” around this kind of problem. At that moment, I sensed this modest worker would be my guide to discover such a “way.”

He signaled me to follow him, and he led me through the customs building and out onto the quay. I left my friends with the bags and trailed after the shuffling steps of the porter's sandals, which were made from discarded tires. About 150 meters past the point where the Russian ship was moored, we stopped in front of the last of several staff houses inside the port compound. The porter said this was the house of the director of the port, and surely this man could help me. The porter rang the bell, and the port director himself, dressed in his pyjamas, opened the door. The porter mumbled a few obsequious apologies for disturbing the port director's rest, but noted that I had an urgent problem and then retreated backwards down the porch steps, leaving me to articulate my problem.

The director invited me into a room where he had an impressive desk and a couple of western-style office chairs along with a picture of the Shah and several other symbols of his authority. From the handy ever-present samovar, he personally served the customarily scalding-hot tea in small “estecans” (straight sided glasses) perched in elegant engraved brass holders. The tea was accompanied by a brass plate piled with lump sugar so I could sweeten the beverage to the socially required degree. We spoke for many minutes about many things. He, too, opined that I would have to wait until the following Monday to make my trip to Baku.

He did, however, keep talking. I recalled my two years of service for the Ministry of Education in Khuzistan Province. I spoke of the many kindnesses shown to me by the many friends I had made in my adopted country. I noted that having my leave-taking colored and having all my

plans for the trip to the Soviet Union destroyed by a trivial problem such as how to get the tickets seemed unnecessary. I knew that there had to be a solution. Surely someone with the power and authority of the director of the Bandar Pahlavi port could help me. He observed that, although he was the director of the port, he had no knowledge of something as mundane as issuing tickets. I pointed out that one aspect of his job was to promote commerce and trade with the Soviet Union. It would truly be unfortunate to have all the arrangements that his Russian colleagues had made for the two Americans go to waste.

Finally, my host reached into the drawer of his big desk and pulled out some ticket stock. He said that he had never written a ticket before, and he wasn't sure he would be able to do it right. However, he wanted to help me since I had done so much for his country. After fumbling for some time with a tariff book, he asked me for 240 tomans (about \$32.00 at the time) for the tickets. I said that I did not have any more Iranian currency, but I had U.S. dollars to pay for the tickets. The recently brightening mood of our conversation darkened abruptly. The director then placed the ticket stock back in the drawer and resignedly said that I would have to wait and go on next Monday's departure.

The director conceded that he did have the authority to issue tickets in an emergency but noted that he was not a bank. Although he was the director of an international port in a country where black-market dollars were prized, he professed to have no knowledge of what the exchange rate for dollars might be. He wouldn't be able to verify a rate until four o'clock when the national bank downtown reopened after the siesta, and that would be too late for this week's sailing.

We seemed to be back at square one, but the director did keep the conversation open. Again I recalled my dedicated service, the wonderful Iranians I had met, how sad I would feel if I couldn't make the journey I had so carefully planned, and how some of the Iranian administrators I had worked with seemed to be clever enough to overcome apparently impossible obstacles. I got out two \$20.00 bills, new, crisp and straight from the safe at Peace Corps headquarters in Tehran and began folding and unfolding them with one hand.

After a time, my host stated that he truly liked me and trusted me. Therefore, he would believe me if I insisted that these two strange green pieces of paper were really worth as much as 240 tomans. As he retrieved the ticket stock from the drawer, I laid the two twenties on the edge of his desk where they remained until I left the house. No mention was made of any change from the \$40.00. With many warm words of gratitude and farewell, I left the director to resume his nap. With an enormous sense of relief, I emerged from almost an hour in the dusky room into the bright sunshine and salt air of the quay.

Eager to get back to the customs shed and report my triumph to my waiting companions, I sprang down the porch steps only to be called up short by my erstwhile guide, the porter, an accomplice whom I had completely forgotten by this time. He had been patiently squatting by some cargo crates, waiting for me to emerge with my problem solved. The porter was quite certain I would be so grateful to the person who had shown me the "way" to solve my problem that I would make sure this person was properly compensated. He told me as much.

I had in my pocket a set of one example of each denomination of Iranian paper money intended as a souvenir. I chose a ten-toman bill (worth \$1.30 U.S. and about 1.5 times the daily wage of a laborer at that time) and passed it to him. At first, he protested that his help had been worth much more than ten tomans to me. Knowing from two years' experience that this amount was generous in the cultural context and that only foreigners would have gotten that kind of an aggressive reaction to the amount of "bakhshesh" offered, I scolded the porter for being greedy and told him he had been lucky to get the ten tomans already given to him. This signaled clearly to him that, although an obvious foreigner, I knew what I was doing.

My guide instantly returned to his culturally correct obsequious demeanor, showered me with thanks, and returned to the customs shed to take charge of our bags which would now make the 4:00pm sailing.