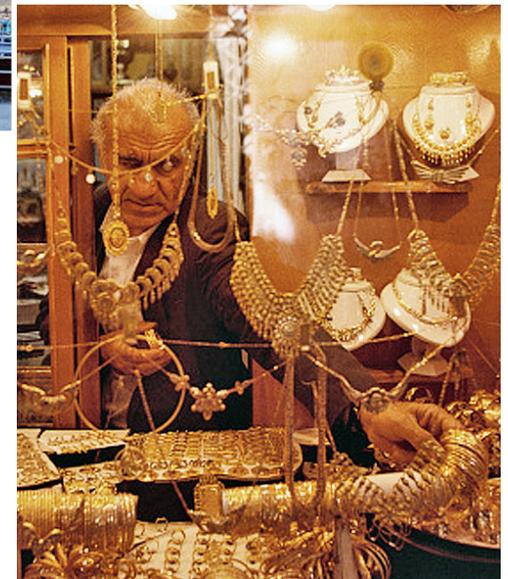


Open Season

Inside Chabahar, the Iranian port city that borders Pakistan and where alleged spy Kulbhushan Jadhav was based



A partial view of the Kalantari port in Chabahar



Jewellery shops in Chabahar have Indian workers, making elaborate designs for the gold-loving Baloch

:: Saba Naqvi

The first thing an Indian would think landing now in Chabahar, Iran, is that it is hot unlike Tehran. It's like the worst of Delhi before the rains.

The second thought may be: Hey, am I in Pakistan as it does not seem like Iran? Men are wearing salwar suits and some are actually talking in Urdu. One of the first people I spoke to in Chabahar opened with that most pressing question: Have you seen *Baahubali 2*?

The third thought that went through the mind of this particular Indian was: I am in the terrain where the former naval officer and alleged RAW agent, Kulbhushan Jadhav, operated from. Indian authorities say he was based in Chabahar from where Pakistani authorities kidnapped and arrested him for spying in Balochistan.

There has been scant reporting from Chabahar by the Indian channels hotly pursuing the Jadhav story. So I did my bit in the limited time I had in Chabahar where I had landed after a two and a half hour flight from

Tehran in an old Fokker 100 aircraft.

In Tehran, too, I had asked in the foreign office and in the headquarters of Iran's news agency IRNA about Jadhav and drawn a blank. The Iranians were more concerned about the killing of 10 border guards on April 26 by militants in a cross-border raid from Pakistan.

To understand the Jadhav story, first look at the map. Chabahar (which means "four seasons" in Persian) is a port that Iran is developing with some help from India. It is on the border with Pakistan and the local people on the Iranian side are Balochis (Sunnis, unlike Shias who dominate the rest of the country) as they are on the Pakistani side. In Iran it's referred to as the Sistan and Baluchestan province.

Port of Call

Balochistan is the largest province in Pakistan in terms of land mass but not

population. It is rich in natural resources. Not far from Chabahar in Iran, the Pakistanis are developing the Gwadar port with Chinese assistance as a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The Pakistanis are sensitive about the long-term independence movement in Balochistan and, as in other parts of that country, extremist Sunni groups have also moved in or been created. The Iranian side is peaceful.

For locals, the border is open. Pesh Bahar (which means "before spring comes") is the name of my local escort. He is Baloch and has been to Pakistan many times for weddings and so on. The border is just a few hours' drive and locals are allowed in and out. "We have better roads and infrastructure in Iran. Islam is more extreme in Pakistan but the Baloch are the same and all of us have relatives there." Other locals confirm this. Often they get a two-week visa but equally they just walk across.

I conclude therefore that it is entirely possible for Pakistanis to enter Iran through this route just as it would be for an Indian to merge with locals, most of

whom speak Urdu (although Balochi is the native language and in Iran they also learn Persian) and enter Pakistan.

Beyond Jadhav, there are more significant Indian angles to the Chabahar story. India has signed up to develop the port and a railway line to Zahedan inside Iran. If India does have a grand strategy for Afghanistan and Central Asia, this is the only route open to it. Pakistan and China are not happy over the Indian stakes in Chabahar.

But then, curiously, one learns from the managing director of Chabahar Free Zone, Abdolrahim Kordi (who studied in Pune and knows India well), that our investments have all been delayed. "It's all on paper and nothing on the ground," he says. The Iranians speculate there is US pressure on India but ask out loud what is the alternate route India has to access the region? They say they are not waiting and moving on but it would be good if India delivered on promises. Kordi adds that they are giving Indian companies sovereign guarantee of their investments but few have signed up as they need signals from the government. "Ultimately relationships between two private sectors is always more sustainable," he says.

The Iranians are waiting for Indian investments but I find a different type of Indian invested in Chabahar. I meet 52 Indian workers – from Kolkata, Kerala and Surat (Hindus and Muslims) – in a jewellery factory in Chabahar. Abdul Aziz, the Baloch who runs the factory, is a talkative hospitable man. Baloch people wear elaborate jewellery, from the tikkas on the foreheads to thick bracelets and necklaces. Who better than Indian artisans to make this in 18 carat gold with intricate designs. The workers seem happy enough, and say it's easier for them in Iran than Dubai where the cost of living is higher. The Baloch own-

Abdolrahim Kordi, MD of Chabahar Free Zone, says Indian investments have all been delayed: "It's all on paper and nothing on the ground"

Students protest against the death sentence Kulbhushan Yadav in Mumbai



The writer is a Delhi-based political commentator

NP AV

PC, Laptop
Tablet, Mobile

सुरक्षा

92.72.70.70.50
98.22.88.25.66

india
antivirus.com