

# “THE ROLE OF THE PARSIS IN REKINDLING PRE-ISLAMIC IRANIAN NATIONALISM IN EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY IRAN”

*Between the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century to mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, Parsis and Iranians Zoroastrians collaborated closely to revive Iran’s pre-Islamic national identity and to raise awareness for the Zarathushti faith among the general public and specifically the Iranian intelligentsia. This article highlights some of the key individuals involved in these efforts and the activities performed to enable this.*

Observers of modern Iranian history have long recognized the important role that Iran’s pre-Islamic cultural heritage has played in shaping modern Iranian national identity. Beginning in the Qajar era, and increasingly during the decades of the Pahlavi dynasty, the culture of modern Iranian nationalism drew creative inspiration from the legacies of Iran’s ancient history and Zarathushti religion. Virtually no segment of modern Iranian culture — including literature, film, music, art, and architecture — were left untouched by modern Iran’s growing fascination with its ancient past. Most dramatically, in October of 1971, Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi’s (r.1941-1979) 2,500 year anniversary celebration of Cyrus the Great’s founding of the Persian Empire represents the culmination of modern Iran’s pre-Islamic revival. What is less often recognized, however, is the substantial role that the Parsi community of India played in encouraging, fostering, and actively promoting this neo-classical revival inside modern Iran.



Figure 1: Peshotanji Marker



Afshin Marashi  
University of Oklahoma

*Afshin Marashi is the Farzaneh Family Professor of Modern Iranian History at the University of Oklahoma. From 2011 to 2020 he served as the founding director of the OU Center for Iranian Studies. He is the author of *Exile and the Nation: The Parsi Community of India and the Making of Modern Iran* (University of Texas Press, 2020).”*

Email Address: [amarashi@ou.edu](mailto:amarashi@ou.edu)  
Website: [www.afshinmarashi.com](http://www.afshinmarashi.com)

**Maneckji Limji Hataria (1813-1890)** is perhaps the best-known figure in this history. His thirty-six years of residence in Iran, from 1854 to 1890, pioneered Parsi efforts to strengthen the Zarathushti community inside Iran and initiated a new era of contact between Parsis and Iranians. Despite these beginnings in the nineteenth century, it was during the early decades of the twentieth century that the Parsi community’s outreach to Iran entered its most active and sustained period. These early twentieth century efforts are

less often remembered, acknowledged, or detailed, but they played the most important role in helping to encourage a revival of Iran's classical heritage.

The first of these twentieth-century Parsi initiatives took the form of educational charities sponsored by Bombay-based philanthropists. The most significant of these efforts was initiated by **Peshotanji Dossabhai Marker (1871-1965)**. The Marker family, with deep ties to the Parsi communities of Bombay, Karachi, and Quetta, had enjoyed success in a number of industries, including commercial, industrial, pharmaceutical, and banking enterprises. After hearing reports of the poor social and economic conditions of Iran's Zarthushti communities, P.D. Marker decided to expand the educational opportunities in Yazd and Kerman, the Iranian cities with the highest concentration of Iranian Zarthushtis.

Chief among Marker's intermediaries in his charity efforts was Ardeshir Edulji Reporter (1865-1932). Though less often remembered than Maneckji Limji Hataria, Ardeshir Reporter likewise lived and worked in Iran as the Parsi community's official emissary, devoting more than three decades to the cause of reviving the heritage of the Zarthushti religion inside Iran. It was with Reporter's assistance that P.D. Marker began construction of what became the Marker Orphanage in Yazd in 1923, as well as what became the Marker Boys' High School and the Marker Girls' High School. The Marker charities also sponsored smaller primary schools in the villages surrounding Yazd and Kerman.

**Ardeshir Reporter's** educational fundraising efforts also extended to his collaboration with **Ratanbanu Bamji Tata**, another charity-minded Parsi philanthropist. During one of his trips to Bombay in 1930, Reporter solicited donations from Tata for the expansion of the Anushirvan Dadgar School and the Firuz Bahram School in Tehran. Both schools were originally established through earlier Parsi charities, but as Iran's Zarthushti community began to increasingly settle in Tehran, it became necessary to expand these schools to meet the demand of the growing Iranian Zarthushti student-age population in Iran's capital city.

Significantly, the Parsi educational charities were never restricted to Iranian Zarthushtis but were instead open for enrollment to students from all of Iran's religious communities. As a result, these Parsi-sponsored educational charities encouraged a culture that appealed to Tehran's increasingly diverse and cosmopolitan middle class. In the years that followed many notable non-Zarthushti Iranians attended these Parsi-sponsored schools, including Princess Fatimeh Pahlavi (1928-1987) and Prime Minister Hassan Ali Mansur (1923-1965), as well scholars including Iraj Afshar (1925-2011) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1933- ). The curriculum that was taught at these schools encouraged a culture of pluralism and diversity, emphasizing an interpretation of Iran's shared classical heritage that was inclusive of all of Iran's religious communities.



*Figure 2: Ardeshir Reporter*



*Figure 3: Marker Boys and Girls High School*



*Figure 4: Ratanbanu Bamji Tata*

There were a number of important books that served as the basis of the curriculum at these schools. Two books in particular, *Forugh-e Mazdayasna* (The Light of the Mazda Religion) and *Ayneh-ye A'in-e Mazdayasna* (Compendium of the Mazdayasna Belief) were central in introducing students to a modernized interpretation of the Zarathushti faith. Written by **Keikhosrow Shahrokh (1875-1940)**, the most important Iranian Zarathushti civic leader of early twentieth century Iran, both books were also sponsored by Parsi-funded philanthropies.

Among Shahrokh's most important civic achievements was his work as president of the Zarathushti Anjoman of Tehran and his service in the Iranian Majles (Parliament) from 1909 to 1940. It was during his long career as a Majles deputy that Shahrokh participated in many aspects of Iran's modernization efforts, including his work in drafting constitutional guarantees to protect the rights of Iran's non-Muslim communities. Shahrokh's own family background was rooted in Kerman's Zarathushti community, where he was born into poverty in 1875. Despite his humble background, it was through the efforts of Parsi charities that Shahrokh gained access to modern education, including learning the English language, first in Tehran, and then through his further education at Bombay's Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy School.

Shahrokh's education in Bombay was instrumental in shaping his modernized understanding of the Zarathushti faith. His two influential books reflect a new interpretation of the Zarathushti religion as part of the larger cultural heritage shared by all Iranians. Published originally in 1907 and 1909, both the *Forugh-e Mazdayasna* and the *Ayneh-ye A'ineh- Mazdayasna* appeared in multiple editions throughout the twentieth century. The publishing costs of these two books were supported by Parsi philanthropies, and both books were taught as part of the curriculum at the new Parsi-sponsored Zarathushti schools.



Figure 5: Dinshah Irani

The other central Parsi figure who worked closely with Keikhosrow Shahrokh during the early decades of the twentieth century was the Bombay-based civic leader **Dinshah J. Irani (1881-1938)**. Between 1918 and 1922 Irani worked with a group of likeminded Parsi philanthropists to establish two civic organizations, the Iranian Zarathushti Anjoman (est. 1918) and the Iran League (est. 1922). Fluent in Persian, and a scholar of Persian literature — in addition to his legal work as a partner in the Bombay law firm of Mulla and Mulla — Dinshah Irani was instrumental in leading both of these civic organizations. Under his leadership the Iran League and the Iranian Zarathushti Anjoman were remarkably successful in their goal of fostering cultural ties between the Parsi community of Bombay and Iranians who were now increasingly eager to learn about their pre-Islamic history and Zarathushti religious heritage.

Among the most important cultural projects sponsored by the Iran League and the Iranian Zarathushti Anjoman was the initiative to publish a new series of Zarathushti-themed books, produced under the auspices of Parsi printing houses in Bombay, and slated for export to Iran. These books were intended as introductions to the Zarathushti faith for general audiences inside Iran with the goal of dispelling many long-held prejudices about the religion. Dinshah Irani himself authored several books in this series, including *Akhlaq-e Iran-e Bastan* (The Morality of Ancient Iran), published in 1930, and *Falsafeh-ye Iran-e Bastan* (The Philosophy of Ancient Iran), published in 1933. All the Zarathushti-themed books sponsored by the Parsi civic organizations, which were circulated widely, went through numerous editions during the 1920s and 1930s and provided the Iranian public with a new interpretation of the Zarathushti faith as the common heritage of all Iranians.

The most important publishing collaboration sponsored by the Iran League and the Iranian Zarathushti Anjoman was a series of books published by **Ebrahim Purdavud (1886-1968)**. Regarded as a talented poet of the Persian language, by the early 1920s Purdavud also gained international recognition as the first modern Iranian to have mastered the ancient Avestan and Pahlavi languages, having devoted himself to many years of study in both France and Germany. Purdavud's unique combination of literary and scholarly talents compelled Dinshah Irani and

the leadership of the Parsi civic organizations to invite Purdavud to embark on a large-scale translation project of the ancient Zarathushti texts. Purdavud accepted the invitation, and beginning in 1925, worked closely with the Iran League and the Iranian Zarathushti Anjoman to produce a series of books that made the ancient Zarathushti texts available for the first time to readers of the modern Persian language. Most important was Purdavud's Persian translation and commentary of the *Gathas*, published originally in Bombay, in 1927, with the sponsorship of the



Figure 6: Ebrahim Purdavud

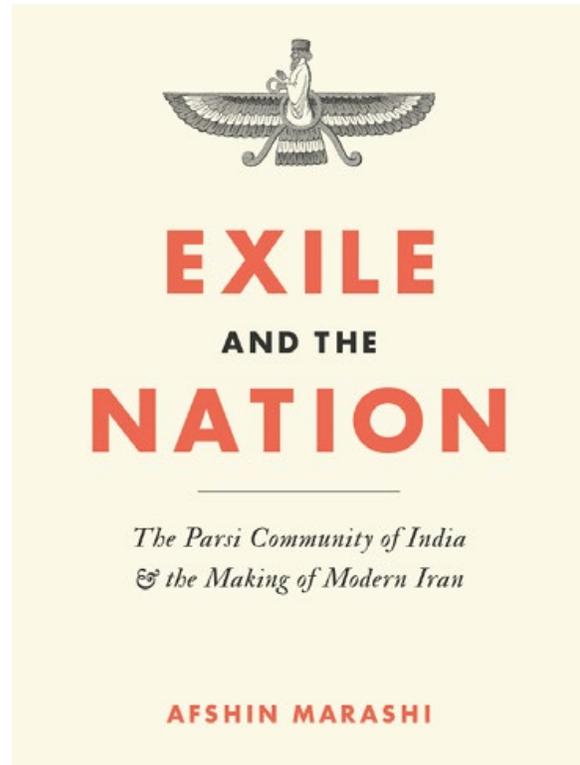


Figure 7: For more information on this topic, please buy Dr. Marashi's book: *Exile and the Nation*. More information is available at <https://utpress.utexas.edu/books/marashi-exile-and-the-nation>

Parsi civic organizations. Purdavud's translations received wide acclaim and profoundly redefined the way modern Iranians understood the Zarathushti religion.

The Parsi community's partnership with Ebrahim Purdavud represented the most important collaboration in the early twentieth-century Parsi-Iranian exchange. This collaboration was, however, the product of a more comprehensive engagement between Parsis and Iranians during that period. The Parsi charity, educational, and publishing efforts worked to improve the social and economic status of Iran's Zarathushti community, but these Parsi efforts also worked to provide Iranians of all religious backgrounds with a new understanding of a shared national heritage rooted in Iran's ancient past.

- 
- 1 Robert Steele, *The Shah's Imperial Celebrations of 1971: Nationalism, Culture and Politics in Late Pahlavi Iran* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2020).
  - 2 Mary Boyce, "Manekji Limji Hataria in Iran," in *K.R. Cama Oriental Institute Golden Jubilee Volume*, eds. N.D. Minochehr-Homji and M.F. Kanga (Bombay: Cama Oriental Institute, 1969), 19-31.
  - 3 Kekobad Ardeshir Marker, *A Petal from the Rose*, 2 volumes (Karachi: Rosette, 1985).
  - 4 Keikhosrow Shahrokh, *The Memoirs of Keikhosrow Shahrokh*, translated and edited by Shahrokh Shahrokh and Rashna Writer (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1994).
  - 5 Afshin Marashi, *Exile and the Nation: The Parsi Community of India and the Making of Modern Iran* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020), chapter 2.
  - 6 *Ibid.*, chapter 4.
  - 7 Ebrahim Purdavud, *Gatha: Sorudha-ye Moqaddas-e Payghambar-e Iran*, Marker Avestan Series vol. 1 (Bamba'i: Anjoman-e Zartoshtian-e Irani va Iran Lig, 1927).