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## Imagining Hāfez: Rabindranath Tagore in Iran, 1932

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### Abstract

In April and May of 1932, Rabindranath Tagore traveled to Iran on an official visit. He had been invited to Iran as the official guest of Rezā Shah Pahlavi. Using an array of primary source material, this article examines the cultural, political, and ideological implications of this trip for the emerging discourse of nationalism in interwar Iran. The article argues that Tagore's visit to Iran played an important part in promoting the new official nationalism of the Pahlavi state. The emerging interwar ideology of "Pahlavi nationalism" sought to dissociate Iran from the Abrahamic-Islamic "civilizational ethos" that was now understood to have long dominated Iranian culture, and instead sought to associate Iranian nationalism's claim of cultural authenticity to a newly emerging notion of "Indo-Iranian civilization" rooted in the pre-Islamic culture of Zoroastrianism and Aryanism. Tagore's visit to Iran was seen as an opportunity for his Iranian hosts to present him to the Iranian public as a living personification of this newly conceived idea of national authenticity. The public ceremonies and pronouncements that accompanied Tagore during the four-week trip all reinforced this basic message. The paper therefore argues that the Tagore visit to Iran was closely tied to the Pahlavi state's policy of cultural nationalism.

### Keywords

Rabindranath Tagore, Hāfez, Rezā Shah, Indo-Iran, Civilization, Nationalism, Zoroastrianism, Aryanism

In the early morning of Wednesday, 13 April 1932, the plane carrying Rabindranath Tagore and his entourage landed on a makeshift airstrip in the southern Iranian port-city of Bushehr (Tagore 2003, 22, 121-29).<sup>1</sup> Tagore

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts of Tagore's travelogue of this trip, originally published in Bengali as *Parasya-Yatri*, were partially translated into English by Surendranath Tagore in *The Modern Review* (1932) and *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly* (1937). Sri Sukhendu Ray translated the remainder of the travelogue for the 2003 edition. All references in this article are to the full translation published in

(1861-1941), who by 1932 had a well-earned international reputation, not only as a patient activist for India's independence, but also as a poet, playwright, novelist, and 1913 Nobel Prize laureate, had come to Iran at the invitation of the Pahlavi state. Iranian diplomats at the foreign ministry and the Ministry of Education had conceived of a Tagore visit to Iran after learning of Tagore's 1926 visit to Egypt. Tagore's visit to Egypt as an Asian elder statesman bearing a message of "cultural revival" had impressed the Iranian diplomats. The ministry officials concluded that Iranians, like their Egyptian counterparts, would respond well to such a message (Golbon, 130). Iran's consul-general in Bombay, Jalāl al-Din Keyhān, had similarly conceived of a Tagore trip to Iran via associations he had developed with members of Bombay's Parsi-Zoroastrian community. By 1931 Keyhān began to lobby the Iranian foreign ministry and the Ministry of Education to issue a formal invitation to Tagore (*idem*, 131; Tagore 2003, 113). The official letter inviting the poet to Iran for a four-week official visit was finally issued on behalf of Rezā Shah Pahlavi in February of 1932. Tagore, for his part, wrote in his remarkable travel diary of the trip that he was eager to "know clearly how western Asia is responding to the call of the new age" (Tagore 2003, 31) and accepted the invitation, embarking on 11 April 1932 from his villa on the outskirts of Calcutta.

Tagore's journey to Iran by air was an unusual one for the seventy year old poet. The many years of international travel that he had undertaken since winning the 1913 Nobel Prize for literature—traveling to dozens of countries on virtually every continent in the world—had all been undertaken either by sea or rail.<sup>2</sup> The two-day journey aboard a twelve passenger Dutch Air Mail Fokker Trimoter aircraft, from Calcutta to Allahabad, Jodhpur, Karachi, and Jask, before finally landing in Bushehr was thus a new experience for the poet, introducing him to the still new practice of international air travel (Tagore 2003, 18).<sup>3</sup> Just as importantly, however, flying by plane—or by "sky-chariot" or "mechanical Pegasus" as he called it (*ibid.*)—gave the poet an entirely new perspective on the geography linking the land of India and Iran.

2003. Other sources detailing the itinerary of Tagore's trip to Iran can be found in *Indo-Iranica* 9.2 (1961), and *Bokhārā*, ser. no. 45 (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Tagore had only one previous experience with air travel, from London to Paris in 1921. See Dutta and Robinson, 315 f.; Bose, 261. The most complete itinerary of his many travels can be found in Dutta and Robinson, Appendix 2, and in Tagore, 1961a.

<sup>3</sup> The Calcutta to Bushehr journey was part of Royal Dutch Airlines' regular air service linking Amsterdam and Batavia. The route ran regularly during the 1920s-30s, pioneering long distance commercial aviation; see <http://www.avsim.com/hangar/flight/dc2uiver/adambatavia/Luchtdienst.jpg> (accessed 10 Feb. 2010).

### Tagore's Travels

Flying along the Makran Coast, where the territory of British India approached Persia, Tagore wrote in his travel diary, "...the field of view seen from the aeroplane is immensely larger [and] the apparent motion of objects below correspondingly slower" (Tagore 2003, 25). In narrating his experience of air travel Tagore seemed intrigued by the distortions of perception that he encountered while looking out across the landscape from the heights of air travel. In his travel-diary of this experience he took great pains to document these distortions of perception. The altered perceptions of space and time allowed him to imagine what he described as "a different creation." The world as "viewed from such heights is very different from our usual world" which, as he explained, is ordinarily confined by "a limited range of sense perceptions." Seen from the vantage point of air travel, however, Tagore visualized an alternative geo-cultural imaginary where the distances of territory are minimized in favor of larger trans-territorial cultural and geographic continuities. He writes that this alternative imaginary is ordinarily "beyond the scope of our imagination" but when seen from such heights, and with the aid of poetic intuition, the view below comes to reveal "another world altogether... [reflecting] the play of a particular set of rhythms" (ibid.).

Tagore's ruminations on air travel reflect many of the larger themes of culture and politics that preoccupied him throughout his many travels to the societies bordering the Indian Ocean. As Ashis Nandy, Sugata Bose, Michael Adas, and others have written, Tagore's extensive and much publicized travels throughout Asia and Africa were more than political trips designed to raise the diplomatic profile of gradually emerging anti-colonial independence movements; Tagore's trips were also efforts to contest the geographic and territorial boundaries that had been imposed by Euro-imperial colonial regimes. The gestures and symbolism of Tagore's travels were efforts to assert the presence within the emerging international state-system of alternative geo-cultural notions such as "Indian Universalism," "Brahmanic-Liberal Humanism," "Pan-Asian Civilization," or the idea of an "Afro-Asian" cultural-political solidarity that stood in contrast to the mono-logic of "European civilization" (Bose, ch. 7; Nandy, 2-8; Adas 2004, 50-52).

In making these kinds of civilizational claims Tagore did not shy away from using the then dominant romantic orientalist discourse to assert the notion of an "eastern" solidarity defined by a spiritual essence, standing in contrast to a "western" culture defined in terms of materialism and mechanization. The substance and tone of his most famous essay, *Nationalism*, for example, continuously contrasts the concept of "the Western nation," described

as “steel unto steel, machine unto machine” with an understanding of “the East” which was understood to embody “all the sweet flowers of simple faith” (Tagore 2005, 70). Much of Tagore’s geographic, cultural, and political claims reflect this basic assumption common to the romantic orientalism of the early twentieth century. Tagore derived these assumptions from both orientalism’s disciplinary and scholarly tradition, with which he was familiar, as evidenced through numerous citations or passing references that he includes in his written works, and, just as consequentially, from the more diffused romantic orientalism of interwar European vernacular culture, with which he was also familiar as a participant in the culture of “British India” (Hay, 1970, 14-26). The tone of this vernacular orientalism affected not only Tagore’s cultural-political assumptions, but notably also the style of his writing. In describing the style of Tagore’s prose, more than one commentator—even one as generally sympathetic as Ashis Nandy—described Tagore’s choices of metaphors and literary style as “dated,” “rococo,” or “purple” (Nandy, 5).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, throughout his European, as well as his Asian and African travels, Tagore consistently used the available language to make sometimes crudely familiar essentialist statements describing an East-West dichotomy. Significantly, however, despite the dated nature of his language, orientalism also gave Tagore room to make sometimes quite radical cultural-political claims. His numerous lecture tours to Europe during the 1920s, for example—as Europe was emerging from one catastrophic war and moving towards another—were all couched in terms of the language and symbolism of an “Oriental sage” coming to chastise “the West” for the devastation its civilization had wrought on itself and the world.<sup>5</sup> In the aftermath of the crisis of European culture following World War I, there was thus enough cultural room within the discourse of orientalism for someone like Tagore to appropriate the mantle of a “morally superior” oriental critic of western culture.<sup>6</sup> In Tagore’s usage, therefore, the language of orientalism was not restricted to the notion of passive and powerless orientals standing mute before an ascendant Europe. Using assumptions, references, and even a tone which indicated that he was speaking from within the language of orientalism, Tagore simultaneously worked to invert and reorder the terms of that discourse to empower and give voice to parallel and coeval geo-cultural essences existing outside of Europe.

<sup>4</sup> Less sympathetic commentators, such as E.M. Forester, famously described his writing as riddled with “Babu sentences.” Part of the problem was the difficulty of accurate translation. On this issue, see also Sen, 275-86.

<sup>5</sup> There is considerable primary and secondary writing on Tagore’s travels to Europe, e.g. Dutta and Robinson, 266-305; Aronson; Kampchen, 1999; idem, 1991; Rothermund.

<sup>6</sup> For Western culture’s moment of crisis following World War I, see Adas, 365-80.

His April-May 1932 trip to Iran was intended precisely in this way. Throughout the four-week tour from Bushehr to Shiraz, Isfahan, and Tehran—where he met at every stop along the way with intellectuals, religious leaders, political figures, and ordinary people—Tagore consistently emphasized the cultural and historic ties that linked India and Iran. At archaeological sites then under excavation, while admiring the architectural style of early modern structures, or while discussing the legacy of Persian poetry, music, and food in South Asia, Tagore's public comments—as well as his private ones recorded in his travelogue—all reflect his interest in asserting the existence of what he calls "Indo-Iranian Civilization."

### Imagining Indo-Iran

Tagore's thinking about the idea of an Indo-Iranian civilization was part of his larger understanding of a broadly unified Asian civilization. His long-standing interest in Japanese, Chinese, and Indonesian cultures was all similarly conceived. Despite the territorial and national distinctiveness of individual states, Tagore consistently argued for deeper cultural connections and a deterritorialized understanding of culture that moved beyond the borders of individual nations. In this way Tagore was following a kind of thinking that, as Prasenjit Duara has argued, was common to the interwar period (Duara 2001; idem, 2004). Under the influence of Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, and others, the concept of *civilization* was changing in significant ways during the early twentieth century; its older meaning of a singular concept associated with "civility" in contrast to "barbarism" was giving way to a new liberal internationalist notion of a world community consisting of multiple civilizational blocs existing alongside one another and each characterized by a distinctive moral-aesthetic essence. As Duara has argued, these civilizational essences became the cultural-historical genealogies in which newly independent and emerging nation-states sought to root themselves. The discourse of nationalism, as it was developing during the interwar period, required newly emerging nations to align themselves with larger civilizational genealogies. Membership in a particular civilizational bloc strengthened a would-be nation's political claim to independence by endowing those claims with the moral authority of a civilization and, what Duara calls, its "...transcendent spiritual purpose" (Duara 2001, 99).

From the point of view of the Pahlavi state, therefore, Tagore's trip to Iran offered an important opportunity to showcase Iranian nationalism's larger ideological project of promoting Iran's pre-Islamic culture as the basis of

its modern civilizational affiliation. Like other emerging nation-states of the interwar period, Iranian nationalists of the 1920s and 1930s were eager to construct an appropriate cultural-historical genealogy for Iran. Central to their ideological project was the construction of an alternative civilizational genealogy that conspicuously dissociated Iran from the long-dominant Abrahamic-Islamicate civilizational genealogy, and instead repositioned Iran within an Indo-Iranian civilizational concept, rooted in the classicism of the Avestan and Vedic heritage shared between Iran and India.<sup>7</sup>

This ideological project overlapped with Tagore's own transnational and "pan-Asianist" cultural notions, and as such Tagore showed great interest in the cultural and political developments taking place in Iran. In a letter written to a friend in the 1930s, he wrote:

Culturally speaking Persia comes nearer to us than most Asiatic countries. In language, religion, literature and arts we have very real affinity and all through the course of our past history communication of mind has been constant (Tagore, 2003, intr.).

Tagore's interest in an Indo-Iranian civilizational concept developed alongside his other pan-Asianist ideas. His already-mentioned travels to East Asia, South-east Asia, and the entire Indian Ocean world were an important indication of his interest in establishing intra-Asian cultural ties.<sup>8</sup> His close friendship and deep intellectual kinship with the Japanese writer and art collector Okakura Tenshin (1863-1913)—whose influential 1903 book, *The Ideals of the East*, began famously with the sentence "Asia is one"—also indicates Tagore's search for finding the cultural strands of a common Asia.<sup>9</sup>

The Indo-Iranian portion of that broader Asianist project took shape through Tagore's readings of the latest historical and philological findings produced by European scholars of Indo-Iranian studies.<sup>10</sup> Tagore was also an

<sup>7</sup> For the pre-Islamic revival in modern Iranian thought, see Tavakoli-Targhi; Marashi.

<sup>8</sup> Hay has the most detailed analysis of Tagore's visits to China and Japan; for Tagore's travels to Indonesia, see Das Gupta, 451-77.

<sup>9</sup> Okakura Tenshin (Kakuzo) was in many ways the Japanese version of Tagore, a public intellectual and advocate for Japanese modernity who simultaneously emphasized the cultural rootedness of Japan within "Pan-Asian" culture. See Tenshin, 1904; idem, 1956; idem, 1970. See also Weston; Tanaka; Notehelfer. For the friendship between Tagore and Tenshin, see Bharucha.

<sup>10</sup> Tagore, like many early twentieth-century Asian nationalists, was an avid consumer of the scientific orientalism of his day. During his tours of Europe he made great effort to meet with scholars of Indian culture. Tagore's Visva-Bharati academy also became a research institute that hosted many orientalist scholars during the interwar period, including such key figures in the fields of Indic and Indo-Iranian studies as Sylvain Levi, Moriz Winternitz, Vincenc Lesny,

important supporter of the field of Indology as it was developing within Indian academic institutions. The Greater India Society—the early twentieth century Calcutta-based network of Indian philologists and historians who, like Tagore, conceived of an Indian universalism stretching beyond the territoriality of India's borders—also greatly shaped his thinking about Indo-Iranian cultural and historical ties. Tagore was, in fact, such a key figure in the Greater India Society's view of itself that he was listed in its official publications as the Society's symbolic intellectual figurehead (Bayley, 710).<sup>11</sup>

Just as importantly for the development of Tagore's Indo-Iranian civilizational concept was his friendship with Dinshah Irani (1881-1938), a prominent member of the Parsi community of Bombay. Irani had been a longtime advocate for greater Iranian-Indian political, economic, and cultural contact. In addition to his well-established career as a solicitor in colonial Bombay, Irani also worked for many years as a key figure in Bombay's Iranian Zoroastrian Society (founded in 1918) and the Iran League (founded 1922), organizations that sought to promote commercial and cultural ties between the two countries, as well as to enhance the position of Zoroastrians inside Iran. Irani's civic activities also extended to his work as a writer, translator, and promoter of Zoroastrianism. Under his direction the Bombay Zoroastrian societies became instrumental in the publication of numerous Persian-language texts on topics relating to pre-Islamic Iranian culture, texts which in some cases, through Irani's sponsorship, became available to vernacular readers of Persian for the first time in many centuries (Coyajee, i-xiii).<sup>12</sup> Tagore came to know Irani through the Zoroastrian Society's philanthropic work; Irani and the Society eventually became important benefactors for Iranian and Zoroastrian studies at Tagore's Visva-Bharati Academy at Santiniketan.<sup>13</sup> Among Irani's

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Carlo Formici, and Giuseppe Tucci. Interestingly, Tagore's orientalist interlocutors were primarily non-Anglophone. Pur-Dāvud makes this point; see Pur-Dāvud, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Tagore did not share the Hindu chauvinism of some members of the Greater India Society. Among Tagore's closest intellectual associates within the Greater India Society was the comparative philologist of Indo-Iranian studies Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1890-1977); see Chatterji, 1972. Chatterji also accompanied Tagore on his Southeast Asian tour of 1927; see Das Gupta, 451.

<sup>12</sup> Irani was instrumental in publishing Ebrāhim Pur-Dāvud's first modern Persian translation of the Gathas as *Yashthā* (Bombay, 1928). Irani also composed a number of his own works in Persian (see References). In addition to his native Gujarati, and English, his Persian-language writings indicate that he also acquired proficiency in modern Persian, although he indicates that he was assisted by his friend (and pioneer Iranian filmmaker) 'Abd al-Hoseyn Sepantā; see Irani, 1933a, preface.

<sup>13</sup> The Zoroastrian Society endowed the Visva-Bharati academy for the study and teaching of Persian and Avestan. The endowment also allowed for the acquisition of a library of original texts for the study of Iranian and Zoroastrian topics.

personal scholarly efforts was the publication of his own English-language translations from the Gathas, published as *The Divine Songs of Zarathustra* (1924), which helped to introduce Zoroastrianism to a wider audience in the English-speaking world. As an indication of their friendship and collaboration, Tagore wrote an introductory essay for Irani's anthology, titled "The Indo-Iranians."<sup>14</sup>

This essay can be read as an important statement of the cultural premises animating both Tagore's own concept of Indo-Iranian civilization and the ideological basis of interwar Iranian nationalism. The essay echoes much of the popular racial, linguistic, and anthropological writing of the time to argue for the deep racial and cultural connections between the peoples of Iran and India:

Pods burst, and winged seeds are borne away by the winds to distant soils where, in combination with new environments, variations are produced, and nature, full of creative curiosity, is given opportunity for making new experiments. In the history of man, such experiments have been made with races, driven by some ethnic storm, who reached lands far away from their original habitation, different in climate and surroundings.

The Indo-Iranian people, like a giant river, started on their nomad career from their now-forgotten land of birth, in some obscure dawn of history. At last the current of emigration divided into two streams, one finding its destination in the west of the Hindukush, and the other pouring into the plains of India through some gap in its mountain barrier. . . . The two people, though racially one, were placed in environs which were greatly different. (Tagore 1923, 191)

From this somewhat poetic rendering of the Aryan migration theory of Indian civilization, Tagore goes on to describe the deep similarities in the religious and cultural patterns in the subsequent histories of India and Iran, what he attributes to the "underlying strand of unity in their development of mind, owing to their common race" (idem, 192). He is prolific in his praise of Zoroaster—"the greatest of all the pioneer prophets" (ibid.)—and emphasizes important similarities between the religious ethos of Zoroastrianism and Hinduism with respect to ritual, devotion, and sacrifice. He goes on to emphasize, however:

It is interesting to note that the growth of the same ideal in the same race in different geographical situations has produced results that, in spite of their unity, have certain aspects of difference. The Iranian monotheism is more ethical, while

<sup>14</sup> The introductory essay was originally published, in a slightly longer form, in the *Visva-Bharati* academy's own quarterly journal; see Tagore, 1923.



the Indian is more metaphysical, in character. Such a difference in their respective spiritual developments was owing, no doubt, to the active vigor of will in the old Persians and the contemplative quietude of mind of the Indians. This distinction in the latter arises out of the climactic conditions of the country (Tagore 1923, 201).

Tagore accounts for the differences between Indian and Iranian culture by pointing to cultural effects engendered by geography and climactic variation. He suggests, however, that these variations are superficial and scarcely obscure the much more important continuities and connections that link India and Iran to a common moral-aesthetic essence:

It nourishes my heart to know, that the peoples who had nourished their seeds of civilization together, and blended their voices in an original mother tongue which belonged to them both, should, even after their long period of separation, have kept some primal similarity of expression in the growth of their respective histories (Tagore 1923, 206).

It was precisely the identification and promotion of this “primal similarity of expression” that became the central theme and symbolism of Tagore’s visit to Iran in 1932. Throughout his four-week stay in Iran, Tagore—and his hosts—made consistent reference to the symbolism of these civilizational bonds of “Indo-Iranian culture.”

### **Introducing Tagore to Iran**

The intended symbolism of Tagore’s visit to Iran was not, however, self-evident from the point of view of most Iranians. The public events and officially staged ceremonies that took place during Tagore’s four-week tour—from Bushehr to Shiraz, Isfahan, Tehran, and points in between—were all covered with much detail and great fanfare in the Iranian press. It was through these public ceremonies and events, and their prolific press coverage inside Iran, that Tagore was introduced to the Iranian public as a living personification of an Indo-Iranian civilizational ideal. That civilizational ideal and its grounding in the pre-Islamic cultural memory of Iranian nationalism had been the focus of much of the Pahlavi state’s cultural policy during the interwar period, including through means of education, public commemorations, the promotion of archaeology, the construction of public sites in neo-classical architectural style, and other forms of cultural production.

Situating Tagore as a symbolic personification of that Indo-Iranian and pre-Islamic civilizational ideal, however, required a certain amount of work

on the part of Tagore's Iranian hosts. Prior to the 1932 visit, Tagore, as a public literary figure, was largely unknown to Persian readers in Iran. Beyond a select group of Iranian literati who were familiar with Tagore's writing—not in the original Bengali, but through German, French, and English translations—Tagore remained largely obscure. Tagore was himself aware of this dearth of public awareness of his literary work and wondered how it would effect his reception during his trip to Iran; how would he be perceived, he wrote in his travelogue of his journey "...in a land where I have no readers" (Tagore 2003, 37). Available Persian-language translations of his poetry, plays, and essays were minimal in 1932; such translations as were available, were made entirely from translations rendered originally into European languages, rather than directly from the Bengali. The most important of these early Persian-language translations of Tagore's poetry were those serialized in the newspaper *Parvaresh* by the important Iranian writer and intellectual Bozorg 'Alavi (Golbon, 134; Azhar, 177).<sup>15</sup> Colonel Mohammad Taqi Khan Pasiān, the gendarme commander and nationalist rival of Rezā Khan, also translated selections of Tagore's poetry into Persian during his years in Berlin between 1918 and 1920 (Cronin, 699). Another important early Persian text that introduced Tagore to an Iranian audience was the short booklet written by the historian and literary critic Sayyed Mohammad Mohit Tabātabā'i (1932).<sup>16</sup> It was only after Tagore's visit to Iran that the work of translating his oeuvre into Persian began, most importantly with the 1935 publication of *Sad band-e Tagōr*, a specially commissioned collection of one hundred poems, including numerous poems from Tagore's most famous work, the *Gitanjali* (1910), translated collaboratively from the original Bengali by Ebrāhim Pur-Dāvud and Mulvi Ziā' al-Din at the Visva-Bharati Academy (Tagore, 1935; Pur-Dāvud, 23; idem, 2005, 187-93).<sup>17</sup>

To compensate for the relative obscurity of Tagore as a public and literary figure, his Iranian hosts used the press to publicize Tagore's significance and to situate him within the ideological parameters of Pahlavi nationalism. In the days and weeks before his arrival in Iran, and during the trip as well, Iranian newspapers carried summaries, descriptions, and assessments of Tagore's literary and political work. The leading Tehran daily introduced Tagore to the

<sup>15</sup> Bozorg Alavi's translations were made from the German editions of Tagore's poetry, which Alavi came into possession of during his time in Germany in the 1920s, a period during which Tagore was at the height of European popularity.

<sup>16</sup> See also the "Tagōr" entry in Dehkhodā's *Loghatnāma* for bibliographic information on translations of Tagore into Persian.

<sup>17</sup> For the most complete discussion of translations of Tagore's work into Persian, see Firoze, 118-31. Translations of Tagore's work increased dramatically from the 1950s.

public and explained why his presence was so important. “Our dear readers,” the article began, “may wish to acquaint themselves more fully with the ideas and thought of the poet and philosopher from India who is our new guest” (*Ettelā’āt*, 20 April 1932). He was not just another poet, but a poet and sage “whose writings have been translated from Bengali, which is his mother tongue, to many foreign languages and have been published all over the world, placing his poetry and thought in the lofty garden of world literature” (*ibid.*). Articles lauding Tagore’s poetry and his stature as a cultural icon continued to appear during the whole of his four-week stay in Iran.

The same newspaper contained an article that was particularly important in conveying the cultural symbolism of national revival associated with the visit. The article placed Tagore—“the famous Bengali sage and poet who is one of the most famous luminaries of the present age” (*Ettelā’āt*, 28 April 1932)—and his visit in the broader context of the cultural history tying Iran and India together. “The people of any nation have a specific destiny,” it read, “and the destiny of the Iranian nation is to have a very close relationship with the destiny of the nation of India” (*ibid.*). The connection between Iranian national authenticity and the classical heritage of India was a common and consistent theme of Iranian nationalism during this period, and Tagore’s visit was yet another opportunity to popularize the theme. The article went on to say that

...six thousand years ago our fathers were brothers with the Indians and lived together as one nation. Afterwards these two brothers were separated from one another, and our ancestors came to the Iran of today by way of Transoxiana and the River Oxus. However, during this voyage they brought with them the essence of Indian culture. Even today names such as Jamshid, Fereydon, Kiumars, and others that are repeated in our language and are part of our mythology have not been separated from the mythology of India, and these names are the same words that our forefathers brought with them (*ibid.*).

The article described in great detail the elements of cultural continuity that continued to link Iran and India. Just as elements of Iranian culture could be found in Central Asian cities such as Samarkand, Balkh, Bukhara, Kabul, and Herat, so too they could be found in South Asian cities and regions such as the Punjab, Lahore, and Sindh. “In no way is there any distinction between these people in terms of race, culture, literature, opinion, ways of thinking, or material life” (*ibid.*), the article stated. Persian poetry was still recited by India’s poets, and the Persian language was known by anyone who claimed to have literacy. “Even down to the present day the non-Muslim population of India uses the *divān* of Hāfez in religious ceremonies and on Friday gathers to pay homage to the spirit of Hāfez” (*ibid.*).

Iran and India were thus presented as part of a single national culture. The article suggested that circumstances of history had separated the two, but at their core they continued to share a common authenticity. The implication was that the separation had been effected during the Islamic period, and with the renaissance of national culture then underway, this “unnatural” condition of segregation could be remedied. The author’s references to the traces of cultural continuity linking Iran and India were attempts to find and highlight those remnants of “authenticity” that remained and to begin the work of rekindling them. The promotion of this sentiment in the public’s mind established the framework in which Tagore’s presence in Iran was perceived. The article concluded, next to a front-page portrait of a saintly-figured Tagore: “The arrival of Rabindranath Tagore in our country is like the arrival of an elder in the land of his forefathers. With total happiness we Iranians will show hospitality to this brother” (*Ettelā’āt*, 28 April 1932).

Tagore himself was well aware of the symbolism that surrounded the trip. During his three days in Bushehr he was presented to the local public through a series of receptions and welcoming ceremonies. His official host in Bushehr was the governor of the province, along with Iran’s consul-general to Bombay, Jalāl al-Din Keyhān, who arrived to guide Tagore and his entourage during the trip. Also arriving in Bushehr was Dinshāh Irani, who had likewise made the journey from Bombay to accompany the poet. As his hosts led him from one public reception to another, Tagore perceptively recorded in his travelogue his impressions of how he was being received by the people of the city:

Who or what am I to these . . . crowds? . . . When I had been to Europe, the people there know something of me as a poet, and so could judge me on materials before them. These people also believe me to be a poet, but solely by force of imagination. To them I am a poet, not of this or that kind, but in the abstract; so that nothing stands in the way of their clothing me with their own idea of what a poet should be. Persians have a passion for poetry, a genuine affection for their poets; and I have obtained a share of this affection without having to show anything for it in return (Tagore 2003, 37).

The “force of imagination” that Tagore perceived was the Indo-Iranian civilizational ideal that was the basis of interwar Iranian nationalism. It was this ideological background that conditioned Tagore’s presence in Iran, and he was in effect placed on display as a living personification of Indo-Iranian authenticity. He goes on to compare the receptions he had in other countries that he had visited with the welcome he experienced in Iran. “I am reminded of what happened when I was in Egypt,” he wrote; “They evidently looked on me not only as a poet, but an Oriental Poet, and must have felt that their

country was sharing in the honor which was being shown to me” (ibid.). In Iran, he continued, the cultural bonds were even closer:

Coming to think of it, my relations with Persia are even more intimate, for am I not an Indo-Aryan! Persians have throughout their history taken pride in their Aryan descent, and that feeling is gaining strength under the present regime. So they are looking on me as a blood relation. . . . In thus feeling me to be their own, they have made no mistake, for I too feel quite close to them (ibid.).

The racial vocabulary was a very important element of the Indo-Iranian civilizational ideal, which both Tagore and his Iranian hosts made consistent reference to during the trip.

Since the discovery of the Indo-European language family in the eighteenth century, philologists and anthropologists had theorized about its various branches.<sup>18</sup> Indian and Iranian intellectuals were pleased to discover that the authority of European science had placed their nations among those with the most “advanced” racial stock. By the interwar period, and especially during the time of Tagore’s visit to Iran, the Indo-European theory—and the associated cult of Aryanism—had reached its “scientific” and ideological peak, not only in Germany, as is more commonly known, but also in Iran and India. One of Tagore’s travel companions, Kedar Nath Chatterji, who accompanied the poet during the trip to Iran as the official correspondent for the Calcutta-based *Modern Review*, observed the Aryan symbolism that followed Tagore during the trip:

Firstly, there is the Aryan movement. There is now a very strong feeling amongst all the intellectuals—and with the lead of H.M. the Shah, amongst all young Iranians—that Iranian means pre-dominantly Aryan. This has now completely superseded the Pan-Islamic movement and the pride of the intellectuals and the younger generation in the cultural achievements of Aryan Iran is growing fast. This has awakened a feeling of kinship with Indians and as such intellectual Iran feels proud at the fame of a brother Aryan—the Poet (K.N. Chatterji, 330).

The references to Aryanism that both Tagore and his Iranian hosts employed during the trip were part of the larger project of defining the historical genealogy of Indo-Iranian civilization. Interwar Iranian nationalism was in the process of defining a new ideal of national “authenticity” rooted in the classical heritage of pre-Islamic Iranian history. Aryanism and the idea of Indo-Iranian civilization were the new cultural markers that came to define that authenticity.

<sup>18</sup> There is a large literature on the cultural and political history of the “Aryan theory.” The most comprehensive and useful treatments are Poliakov; Trautmann; Todorov.

### Conversations with 'Ali Dashti

Also in Bushehr Tagore met with 'Ali Dashti (1894-1982), the Majles deputy then representing the region. In addition to his work as a Majles deputy, and later as a senator, 'Ali Dashti was a key figure in modern Iranian intellectual history. His prolific writing in newspapers and literary journals, as well as numerous monographs and novels, spanned an impressive array of topics from poetry and religion to politics and social reform. Over the course of his long career as a writer, his intellectual iconoclasm drew harassment, censorship, and periodic imprisonment by the authorities, first under Rezā Shah, and eventually following the Islamic revolution.<sup>19</sup> 'Ali Dashti met Tagore on at least two occasions during the poet's time in Iran, first in Bushehr and again, later in the poet's journey, at Dashti's home in Tehran, where he introduced Tagore to a circle of young Iranian intellectuals (K.N. Chatterji, 329; Tagore 2003, 126). Their conversations, which were eventually published as interviews in the newspaper founded by Dashti, *Shafaq-e sorkh*, reveal how Tagore and his hosts were thinking about the idea of national authenticity and cultural change.

During their first meeting in Bushehr, Tagore commented to Dashti that part of his intention in coming to Iran was to "make acquaintance with the real Persia" (idem, 35). In referencing this comment in their later conversation Dashti replied,

You told me in Bushehr that you have come to us in Persia to discover the old India. Quite true, our real spirit is old Indian; it comes from a past when we shared a common culture. Even now an inner affinity persists, and it is this that makes you feel at home with us (Tagore 2003, 154).

Tagore shared the Indo-Iranian cultural bond that Dashti referred to. Echoing a common sentiment that Tagore repeated to a number of interviewers and correspondents during the course of the trip, Tagore referred to the Indo-Iranian and Persianate culture of his childhood in the Jorasanko district of northern Calcutta:

... the path was open for me before I was born. As a matter of fact, in our home in Bengal the spirit of Iran was a living influence when I was a child. My revered father and my elder brothers were deeply attached to Persian mystical literature and art. Going back further one discovers that at one time the Bengali language freely borrowed words from your vocabulary, which we use now without knowing their origin. When you find this, you must know that something of your

<sup>19</sup> His most famous and controversial work is *Bist o se sāl*. See also J.E. Knörzer.

culture flows through our daily life; for words are merely symbols of thoughts and attitudes, which they represent. Even before the Mohammadan rule in India there was an active cultural interchange between India and Iran; in our classical art and literature direct traces of this are to be discovered (ibid.).

From this common cultural background their conversation then proceeded to discuss changes in art, literature, and music then taking place in both Iran and India. The question of cultural adaptation to new and modern influences—especially influences from European and American culture—was another major preoccupation for Tagore, and found its way into his conversation with Dashti. In discussing music, Tagore referred to the “unquestionable greatness” of European composers such as Beethoven and commented, “without doubt our own music would be all the richer if it can absorb, into its living texture, creative influences from European music” (idem, 156). Tagore continued, however—echoing another prominent theme that runs throughout his writing—by cautioning that Iranians and Indians “must ponder seriously before we go in for hasty imitation of Western life in its totality” (ibid.).

Tagore had a long history of arguing this point in Asian societies he visited. As early as 1916 he lectured in Japan regarding the danger of the “material” culture of the West threatening to devour the “spiritual” culture of Asia (Hay, 63 f.).<sup>20</sup> The response of the Japanese intelligentsia in attendance at Tagore’s lecture at Tokyo’s Imperial University, where he delivered his speech titled “The Message of India to Japan,” was just as skeptical as that of ‘Ali Dashti and his salon of young Iranian intellectuals in Tehran in 1932. In his response to Tagore’s warning, Dashti challenged the poet by saying that the process of cultural change is impossible to manage and may require bold efforts of innovation. Dashti stated,

I am not afraid of foreign influence. . . . Our soul accepts what it may; we cannot determine consciously how much to receive or reject exactly. The whole process of assimilation is a subconscious one so that there is perhaps no fear of only outside influence totally submerging or exterminating the basic character of our civilization. . . . Greek ideals, for example, have left their legacy in the great architecture and sculpture of India; but at the beginning of Greek influence we would probably have feared that India was doing harm to its traditions by accepting Greek motifs and technique to experiment upon. In Persia similarly, we have had periods of extraneous influence but this has only vitalized our Persian genius. We have quickly shaken off the imitative phase and retained something from it, which has helped us (Tagore 2003, 157).

<sup>20</sup> The same theme runs through the first chapter (“Nationalism in Japan”) of his 1917 book, *Nationalism*.

Dashti's impatience for modern reform, like that of the Japanese intellectuals whom Tagore encountered in Tokyo, troubled the poet. On more than one occasion he cautioned Dashti and others regarding the dangers of too rapid cultural change. Those dangers included losing the "native genius" of the culture, as well as rousing the opposition of what he described—comparing Iran with India—as "rigidly pious mullahs corresponding to our Hindu priests" (idem, 155). Tagore's concern regarding the dangers of conservative orthodoxy and narrow sectarianism was another of the central themes emphasized throughout his writing. It was also a central issue discussed with many of his hosts during the trip to Iran. His own experience in India had shown him that conservative Muslims and conservative Hindus could prevent the deeper cultural universalism that he envisioned tying India and Iran together. Tagore's own father, the Maharishi Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), a major figure in nineteenth century Indian religious and cultural reform, had been an early founder of the Brahmo Samaj movement, which was regarded with suspicion by orthodox Hindus. Also, according to commonly known tradition, the Tagore family's ancestry was derived from the Piral Brahmins who had been ostracized by orthodox Hindus after they became tainted by contact with Muslims in the eighteenth century, rendering them by writ of conservative Hinduism as unworthy of marriage (Dutta and Robinson, 17 f.).

The suspicion of Hindu conservatives no doubt reminded Tagore of the conservative Muslim clerics whom he also encountered in Iran, such as those who greeted him at the Royal mosque in Isfahan:

... everyone I saw inside the mosque was dressed like a mullah, and from their disapproving countenance we were apparently not very welcome there. . . . Which did not surprise me, because I am not sure if. . . outcasts like me will be allowed to enter the Jagannath temple in Puri! (Tagore 2003, 64).

Elsewhere he described, "the asphyxiating domination of the mullahs" as a danger to "progress" (idem, 49). Despite his perhaps prophetic warnings concerning the dangers of religio-cultural conservatism, Tagore's overarching mission during the trip to Iran was to emphasize the threads of a common Indo-Iranian culture that could overcome the dangers of narrowly conceived orthodoxy and could instead serve as the moral-aesthetic and civilizational basis for a modern identity rooted in a shared authenticity.

### **Tagore in Shiraz**

During the Shiraz portion of the journey Tagore continued to emphasize this theme. Arriving in Shiraz by way of Kāzerun on 16 April, after an arduous



drive along what he described as “the rough, desolate road” (Tagore 2003, 38) from Bushehr, Tagore’s five-car motorcade was greeted by a military escort and welcomed into the center of the city. At a specially prepared garden reception, citizens, dignitaries, and representatives from various local organizations were assembled to welcome Tagore to Iran’s most famous “city of poets.” Also present at the Shiraz welcoming reception were three eminent figures of interwar Iranian cultural and intellectual history: Hasan Forughī, the scholar, diplomat, and brother of Prime Minister Mohammad-‘Alī Forughī, Keykhosrow Shāhrokh, the official representative of Iran’s Zoroastrian community in the Majles, and Mohammad-Taqī Bahār, the most renowned and respected Persian poet of the time (Golbon, 131; Tagore 2003, 122). All three were key figures in shaping the cultural policy of the Pahlavi state during the 1920s-30s and were well aware of the important symbolism of Tagore’s presence in Shiraz.

The ceremony began with the governor of Fārs thanking Tagore for making the journey from India. Next, an official welcome message was read aloud by a citizen of the city:

The town of Shiraz is proud of its two immortal and glorious sons [Sa‘dī and Hāfez]. The sweep of their genius is akin to yours. The fountain of inspiration that nourished the flowering of our two great poets is the same as the source of your inspiration. The spirit of the poet Sa‘dī whose resting place has for centuries sanctified our city is now watching over us. Hāfez’s delight is reflected in the joyous mood of our countrymen celebrating your presence here (Tagore 2003, 47).

From the beginning of Tagore’s visit to Shiraz he was presented as a living heir to the poetic tradition of Sa‘dī and Hāfez. In responding to the welcome message, Tagore, speaking to the assembled crowd in English, with translation into Persian, continued the symbolic comparison of himself with the famous poets of Shiraz:

Ages ago the then ruler of Bengal had invited the poet Hafez to visit Bengal, but he could not make it. But I, a poet from Bengal, received an invitation from the ruler of Persia, and in response to that I am now personally amongst you. This gives me the privilege and pleasure of conveying my greetings and good wishes in person to you in Persia (Tagore 2003, 47).

Tagore was referring to the story of Ghiās al-Dīn A‘zam Shah (r. 1390-1411) of Bengal who according to literary legend traded hemistiches with Hāfez and reputedly invited him to the court of the Elīās Shahī dynasty in Pandua.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Legend has it that Sultan Mahmud Bahman (r. 1378-97), king of Deccan, also invited Hāfez to India. Hāfez went as far as Hormuz before becoming homesick for Shiraz, ultimately

While there is much reason to question the historical veracity of this story, Tagore's well-placed referencing of the legend suggests a shared oral and written tradition of myths, legends, and literary-biographical anecdotes that were part of a unified Persianate literary tradition spanning Indo-Iranian culture. While in Shiraz, Tagore in fact consistently emphasized to hosts and interviewers the presence of Persian poetry—in particular the influence of Hāfez—in the Subcontinent, and the effect that it had on his own poetic sensibility.<sup>22</sup> As the court language under the Mughals, Persian was the *lingua franca* of the political and literary elite of India for several centuries. Tagore's father, the Mahari-shi Debendranath Tagore, perhaps the most important influence on Tagore's life, was fluent in Persian and, as he writes in his own autobiography, had a special affection for the poetry of Hāfez (Tagore 1961, 250). Rabindranath Tagore, while himself not proficient in Persian, recounts on numerous occasions that his father would recite the poetry of Hāfez to him as a child (Dutta and Robinson, 315; Tagore 2003, 133 f., 140 f.).

Tagore's referencing of the Hāfez legend is important for another reason as well. Implicit in the story is the theme of travel and migration between India and Iran. Travel and migration were key elements in the culture of pre-modern Indo-Iranian civilization. The obsessive territoriality of modern nation-states obscured the trans-national, trans-territorial, and considerably de-territorialized understanding of culture that existed in the pre-modern period. The long history of Indo-Iranian religious, artistic, and literary contact as expressed, not only through the medium of poetry, but also through the vast record of early modern travel writing between Iran and India, suggests—as Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have suggested—that there existed an “Indo-Persian republic of letters” (Alam and Subrahmanyam, 359 f.) that stretched across the fuzzy boundaries of the Iranian plateau, Central Asia, the Subcontinent, and the greater Indian Ocean cultural universe (see also Subrahmanyam). Standing before the admiring crowd at the garden reception in Shiraz, having made the long journey from Calcutta, Tagore now came to personify that trans-national cultural ideal.

The visits to the burial sites of Sa'di and Hāfez reinforced this idea even further. Among the projects carried out by the Pahlavi state beginning in the interwar period was the rebuilding and embellishing of the tombs of the great poets of Persian literature, including those of Omar Khayyam, Ferdowsi,

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declining the offers to visit India. This legend is reproduced and analyzed in many sources. See Browne III, 285-87; Kalim, 42-51; Mohit Tabātabā'i, 45-47; Abdi, 5-7; Davar, 160 f.; Arberry, 150 f. Both the Bahmani Kingdom of the Deccan and the Elias Shahi dynasty of Bengal invoked Iranian and Persianate imagery as the basis of their legitimacy. For the Elias Shahi court at Pandua, see Eaton, 42-50.

<sup>22</sup> For the influence of Hāfez on Tagore, see Ahmed.

Sa'di and Hāfez, into suitable sites of national memory.<sup>23</sup> Tagore's visits to the tombs of Sa'di and Hāfez took place before the final transformation of the sites into national monuments, but nevertheless underscored their status as important to the project of Pahlavi nationalism. At a reception held in the courtyard adjacent to Sa'di's tomb, Tagore was presented, with some fanfare and before another assembled crowd, with an illuminated manuscript of Sa'di's *Golestān* (*Ettelā'āt*, 30 April 1932; Tagore 2003, 122). The following day, 18 April, Tagore visited the mausoleum of Hāfez. As with the tomb of Sa'di, the famous Hāfeziya had not yet been rebuilt into the much more known structure that it became, after 1935, when the French archaeologist André Godard and his Iranian associates, 'Ali Riāzi and 'Ali Sāmi, designed and built the new neo-classical columned edifice to honor Hāfez (Kamali). The structure, as it existed at the time of Tagore's visit, was an enclosed edifice composed of iron, more typical of Qajar-era religious shrines. Tagore's description of the tomb perhaps anticipated the soon to be initiated rebuilding of the structure; the Hāfeziya consisted of, he wrote, "... a machine cast pavilion with grilled rails [that] had been erected atop the old tomb, which to me did not at all fit in with the spirit of Hafez' poetry" (Tagore 2003, 49.) Approaching the tomb, his hosts next allowed Tagore to enter inside the railed enclosure and sit beside the stone slab marking the grave of Hāfez. Accounts indicate that Tagore sat momentarily in deep contemplation. As he writes in his travelogue, Tagore was clearly moved by the experience:

Sitting near the tomb a signal flashed through my mind, a signal from the bright and smiling eyes of the poet on a long past spring day—akin to the spring time sunshine of today. We were, as it were, companions in the same tavern savoring together many cups of many flavors... I had the distinct feeling that after a lapse of many centuries, across the span of many deaths and births, sitting near this tomb was another wayfarer who had found a bond with Hafez (Tagore 2003, 50).

Tagore's communion with Hāfez was more than simple histrionics; rather, it was important as a symbolic expression of yet another common strand of Indo-Iranian culture that Tagore and his hosts were trying to emphasize during the course of Tagore's visit to Iran. Significantly, in the case of Tagore's visit to the Hāfeziya, the shared national authenticity of Indo-Iranian civilization was now expressed through an appreciation of Persian mystical poetry. Much of the rest of the symbolism tied to Tagore's trip to Iran emphasized the pre-Islamic history of Indo-Iranian civilization, whether it be through

<sup>23</sup> The building of cultural sites and national monuments was carried out by the Society for National Monuments. See Bahr al-'Olumi; Grigor; Marefat.

the invocation of racial and linguistic themes, or through the referencing of Indo-Iranian cultural ties as expressed through the ancient Avestan and Vedic traditions. Tagore's expressions of affection for Hāfēz, however, seemed to suggest that the Indo-Iranian bonds of national authenticity were not exclusive to the pre-Islamic period, but extended—through the medium of classical Persian poetry—into the Islamic era as well; as Sugata Bose has commented, the “shades of Aryanism” invoked by Tagore in this case came to intermingle with the “depths of Sufism” (Bose, 260).

The idea that the great poets of the medieval Persian mystical tradition were expressing national sentiments beneath the guise of Islamicate Sufi poetry was an idea increasing in circulation in the interwar period.<sup>24</sup> It was precisely this idea that had inspired the Pahlavi state to commission the rebuilding of the tombs of the great Persian poets of the tenth to fourteenth centuries, as a way to physically embody the idea of the Iranian-ness of Hāfēz, Sa'di, and the entire literary canon of Persianate belle-lettres. Both Iranian and Indian nationalist intellectuals were making the case that Persian Sufi poetry was in fact the expression of a much deeper tradition of Indo-Iranian spirituality that stretched back into the earliest stages of the pre-Islamic period. The great Indian philologist, member of the Greater India Society, and close associate of Tagore's, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, wrote evocatively in describing Tagore as the heir to this tradition that began in the pre-Islamic past and which found its later cultural expression in Iranian Sufism,

*Tasawwuf* as a perfected system went from Iran to India after Northern India was conquered by the Turks from Afghanistan and Central Asia in the 11th-12th centuries. . . . *Tasawwuf* became one of the common platforms on which the seekers of Truth in both Muslim Iran and Central Asia on the one hand and Hindu or Brahmanical India on the other could meet and enrich each other's minds. . . . We need not go into the details of this international fellowship in the domain of mysticism. The history certainly requires to be fully investigated, and the beginnings of it go to the earliest Indo-Iranian times, when the two immediate sections of the Aryan or Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language-culture group, in Iran and in India, started adventuring in the domain of spiritual intuition and realization. . . . And we are happy to find that the great Rabindranath Tagore himself formed a golden link during this century in the chain of spiritual friendship binding up India and Iran (Chatterji 1961, 7).

<sup>24</sup> This idea would eventually find its most developed expression in the work of the generation of scholars following World War II. See Zarrinkub and Corbin, among many others. For the genealogy of Hāfēz within the literary and cultural history of Iranian nationalism, see also Ferdowsi, who identifies the 1928 publication of the book *Hāfēz-tashrib* as the foundational text in the “national sacralization of Hafez.”

Suniti Chatterji's invocation of the deep Indo-Iranian spiritual roots of later Sufi traditions is similar to the ideas of the Iranian scholar and intellectual, Sādeq Rezāzāda Shafaq. In discussing one of Tagore's more famous essays, *The Religion of Man* (1931), Shafaq explains that Tagore's discussion of Zoroastrianism emphasizes the idea of ethical universalism. The basic tenets of Zoroastrianism as seen from the point of view of Tagore, writes Shafaq, made Zoroastrianism among the earliest world religions to combine spirituality and ethics as the basis of a universal teaching. According to Shafaq, the later arrival of the universalism of Islam to Iran thus had a precedent in earlier Iranian history, and helps to explain why Islam found fertile ground in Iran after the seventh century (Shafaq, 34 f.). As Shafaq writes, the distinctions between particular religious traditions—in this case the distinction between the pre-Islamic and Islamic religious traditions of Iran—work to obscure the underlying spiritual continuity expressed in what Shafaq describes as *ruh-e irāni* “the Iranian spirit”.

... It was the Iranian spirit, and the truths of Zoroastrianism and the sacred religion of Islam, that once again gave voice to this universalist teaching through the beautiful and supple forms of the philosophy of Iranian *'erfān* (ibid.).

Shafaq, like Chatterji, was situating Iran's mystical tradition within a larger tradition of national culture. The medieval tradition of Persianate literary mysticism was thus re-articulated as the moral-aesthetic expression of Iran's national spirit. From this reading of Indo-Iranian history, at its roots, the religious dimension of this national spirit transcended the particular religio-spiritual boundaries of Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Islam, and instead approached what was now understood as an ecumenical monism that in the later medieval period became manifest through the language of Persian Sufi poetry. As Chatterji and Shafaq argue—following Tagore—the traditions of *tasavvuf* and *'erfān* and the poetry of Hāfez were thus rooted within a re-positioned civilizational genealogy that was enframed as Indo-Iranian spirituality. Tagore's presence in Shiraz, and his public displays at the mausoleum of Hāfez, thus came to further symbolize and personify the idea of a common religio-spiritual essence tying Iran and India together.

### From Shiraz to Tehran

After setting out from Shiraz on 22 April, Tagore's five-car caravan next trekked along the “comparatively wide and smooth” road linking Shiraz, Isfahan, and Tehran (Tagore 2003, 53). His first stop was at the ruins of the

ancient Achaeminid empire at Persepolis, outside of Shiraz, where he was given a tour of the site by Ernst Herzfeld, the German-born archaeologist who was then conducting the first systematic excavation of the site under the sponsorship of the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute.<sup>25</sup> Like his visit to Shiraz and the Hāfeziya, Tagore's visit to Persepolis was again underscored with grand symbolism.<sup>26</sup> Tagore described his ascendance of the Apadana staircase of the palace-complex of Darius I, and his meeting with Herzfeld,

I was carried up the stone steps on a chair. Hills behind me, the infinite sky above me, and down below the vast expanse of a desolate countryside. At one end stood the frozen-in-time stone monuments bearing silent witness to the glories of the past. Here I met the famous German archaeologist Dr. Herzfeld, who was in charge of excavating and bringing to light the relics of the ancient achievements (Tagore 2003, 55).

Tagore's meeting with Herzfeld—whom he describes as “in high spirits!”—was a remarkable encounter, and was described in Tagore's travelogue with some detail (*ibid.*). The two men, in fact, had a great deal in common, having met once before in Berlin, in 1921, while Herzfeld was a professor of Near Eastern Archaeology at the University of Berlin, and had gone to hear Tagore speak during one of the famed Nobel laureate's numerous lecture tours through Europe. Both shared a keen interest in the large-scale evolution of the cultures and societies of the ancient period and did not shy away from making broad civilizational speculations.

Tagore recounts in his travelogue that as the two were strolling through the grounds of the site Herzfeld pointed out the many connections between the relics found at Persepolis and the archaeological record of India. Among these connections was suggestive evidence from the physical structure of the palace-complex itself; Tagore writes that “[f]rom the available record it appeared that Indian teakwood was also employed for roof construction” (Tagore 2003, 54). Tagore was particularly interested to learn from Herzfeld about the physical remnants of an ancient Indo-Iranian civilization. In recounting another point of their conversation, Tagore described an object collected by Herzfeld and presented for Tagore's consideration,

The German professor showed me one of these exhibits, an egg shell cup with etched designs on it, and he remarked that these designs were of the same family

<sup>25</sup> For Herzfeld's archaeological work in Iran, see Dusinberre; Abdi.

<sup>26</sup> The public symbolism of Tagore's meeting with Herzfeld was later recounted in *Ettelā'āt* along with a transcript of a telegraph sent by Tagore to Herzfeld thanking the professor for the tour of Persepolis, *Ettelā'āt*, 7 May 1932.

as those found in Mohenjodaro. Sir Aurel Stein had found many specimens in Central Asia which could be identified with Mohenjodaro culture. From the evidence of these far-flung findings one is tempted to conclude that an earlier major civilization preceded the known modern civilizations, and having spread its wings was now extinct (Tagore 2003, 54 f.)

His remark regarding relics at the city of Mohenjodaro is a reference to the Indus Valley civilization of the second and third millennium BCE, which had only recently been discovered in the Sindh region and was, like Persepolis, receiving its first extensive excavation in the 1920s and 30s, in this case by the Indian Archaeological Survey.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, his reference to the work of Sir Aurel Stein (1862-1943), indicates Tagore's up-to-date knowledge of the latest archaeological discoveries in India, Iran, and Central Asia in the early twentieth century. Stein, a Hungarian-born British subject, was—like Herzfeld—another key figure in late nineteenth and early twentieth century archaeology. His excavations in eastern Iran, central Asia, north India, and western China received wide publicity and brought to light a great deal of information relevant to understanding the Buddhist cultural and religious history of Asia, earning him, like Tagore, a Knighthood from George V of Britain.<sup>28</sup> Tagore, like many Iranian and Indian nationalist intellectuals of the interwar period, followed with great fascination the latest scientific discoveries of European anthropology and archaeology. Based on this knowledge, and inspired by the archaeological remains he saw all around him at Persepolis, Tagore speculated about the civilizational genealogy of Indo-Iranian culture,

... Sometime in the din distant past a breakaway group of Aryans took shelter on the high tableau of Persia... it is possible that these people were contemporaries of the Mohenjodaro era... (Tagore 2003, 56).

While Tagore's speculation regarding the historical sequencing of the Aryan migration to Iran and the Mohenjodaro civilization is dubious, what is more interesting is that Tagore, like his Iranian hosts, was intellectually tantalized by the suggestions of Indo-Iranian cultural continuity stretching back to the most remote past. Beyond references to archaeology, Tagore went on to make continuous observations throughout the trip of similarities between Indian and Iranian religion, mythology, music, art, and literature. In thinking about religion in the Achaeminid period, for example, Tagore writes—again following the thinking of many Indian and Iranian nationalists of the early and

<sup>27</sup> For the Mohenjodaro and the history of archaeology, see Trigger, 181 f.

<sup>28</sup> For the life and work of Aurel Stein, see Mirsky.

middle twentieth century—"the ruling deity of this heroic dynasty was Ahura Mazda. One finds some similarity with the Aryan god Varuna of India" (ibid.).

In all of these cases it was an idealized classical past that most inspired Tagore and his Iranian hosts. The symbolism of Tagore touring the grounds of the ancient Achaeminid capital allowed the Pahlavi state to underscore one of its main ideological projects of the interwar period. Neo-classicism had become a central motif of Iranian nationalism by the 1930s, enabling the cultural and political project of the state. By associating modern Iranian culture with the classical phase of Indo-Iranian civilization, the state was repositioning Iran within the civilizational discourse of the early twentieth century. By the interwar period the global legal-political discourse of nationalism simultaneously conceived of individual nation-states as politically sovereign and defined within strict territorial parameters, but at the same time individual nations were also conceived as being part of larger networks of cultural alignments and civilizational blocs. These cultural and civilizational alignments worked to strengthen the moral and political authority of individual states within the larger international system. Iranian nationalism's ideological project of interwar neo-classicism thus worked to simultaneously emphasize Iran's political and territorial sovereignty while also situating Iran within the deeper civilizational parameters of an Indo-Iranian culture. Tagore's presence at Persepolis, as with the symbolism throughout his journey to Iran, bestowed the moral authority of Indo-Iranian civilization onto the Iranian nation-state.

It was during the time that Tagore spent in Tehran that this symbolism reached its ideological peak. Tagore arrived in Tehran on 29 April and spent the next two weeks in the capital city. His itinerary during this, the final portion of his trip, was filled with an almost continuous series of receptions, ceremonies, meetings, and lectures before a variety of local audiences (*Sālnāma-ye Pārs* 1933, 68-70). 'Isā Sadiq, chancellor of the Teacher's College and an important player in the cultural life of Iran during the Rezā Shah years, spent considerable time with Tagore during the Tehran portion of his trip. Sadiq's memoir invokes an image of Tagore that reflects how his Tehran hosts perceived the visiting poet:

...Tagore had a tall, lanky stature and wore a long, simple cloak that only increased his lankiness. With his tousled white and silvery hair and long forehead, an open and elongated countenance, penetrating and engrossing eyes, long and delicate beard, a voice which was mild and pleasing, speech that was measured and deliberate, and movements that were supple and graceful, Tagore exuded a very noticeable and effective presence (Sadiq, II, 156).

Sadiq went on to say that this impressive appearance "reminded one of the great sages and mystics and ancient prophets" (idem, 156-67). There was a



great deal of interest in Tagore's physical appearance during the Tehran portion of the trip. The daily *Ettelā'āt* included numerous references and descriptions of Tagore, including a detailed article with a headline that read "The Visage [*qiāfa*] of Tagore" (*Ettelā'āt*, 5 May 1932). Tagore's statements, activities, as well as his physical presence reinforced the impression of him as an ideal-type *hakim* personifying a notion of Indo-Iranian authenticity.

The symbolism of Tagore's presence in Iran was also conveyed during the speeches and ceremonies that he participated in during his two weeks in Tehran. Tagore gave two formal speeches during his stay in Tehran, one at the Ministry of Education on 5 May and the other at the Literary Society on 9 May. Both speeches attracted great interest on the part of the political and literary elite of Iran and were widely covered in the local press. Tagore also had at least one private reception with Rezā Shah, on 2 May, at the Sa'dābād Palace, which also received wide coverage in the media.

At the meeting with Rezā Shah, Tagore presented the monarch with one of the poet's famous "poem-paintings" that he had composed to convey the symbolism of his trip to Iran. Tagore's poem-paintings combined poems written on canvas against a backdrop of an abstract visual image usually composed in watercolor. Tagore composed numerous such paintings during his career, as one his favorite creative forms, allowing him to combine his love of poetry with visual arts.<sup>29</sup> In an interview with *Ettelā'āt* several days following the meeting with Rezā Shah, Tagore explained the symbolism of the central motif in the abstract painting. It included, according to Tagore, a figure intended to represent the shah kindling a small flame, which in turn represented "the light of Iran" (*Ettelā'āt*, 4 May 1932; Sadiq, 158). A figure representing Tagore was also drawn, approaching the central figure to help light the flame.<sup>30</sup> The imagery captured the symbolism of Indo-Iranian cultural revival intended by Tagore's trip to Iran. Tagore, as the symbol of Indo-Iranian authenticity, was portrayed as returning to Iran to help Rezā Shah revive that authenticity after centuries in which that sense of national culture had become diminished.

Tagore also made reference to the painting during his speeches at the Ministry of Education and the Literary Society, which attracted an audience of approximately one thousand members, according to contemporary and newspaper accounts (Sadiq, 157; *Ettelā'āt*, 10 May 1932). Both speeches were given in English but translated into Persian by Mohsen Asadi, a professor of

<sup>29</sup> For Tagore and the visual arts, see Robinson.

<sup>30</sup> The poem itself read: I carry in my heart a golden lamp of remembrance of an illumination that is past // I keep it bright against the tarnishing touch of time // Thine is a fire of a new magnanimous life // Allow it, my brother, to kiss my lamp with its flame; *Ettelā'āt*, 4 May 1932; Tagore 2003, 124.

English and former member of the Iranian Foreign Service. The speeches, accompanied by excerpted translations, were included in the press coverage. Tagore elaborated on the painting and his trip to Iran by saying,

I am an Iranian and my ancestors passed through this land and went to India. I am therefore pleased to be returning to my homeland. I realize that the kindness shown to me here is because of this unity of race and culture. And the reason for my trip, despite the difficulty of the journey, is precisely to show the sense of unity and affection that I have for Iran (Sadiq, 158; *Ettelā'āt*, 4 and 7 May 1932).

After referring to the cultural, historical, and racial ties between Iran and India he alluded to the painting more directly. "War and disease," he said, had ravaged the "civilization" of Asia, and Iran, like India and China, had fallen "into the shadows" (*ibid.*).

[I]n Iran, however, the light entered into Rezā Shah's hand. I was in a far corner of India when I saw this new light on the distant horizon. And so I came here on behalf of India and all of Asia to salute him and to witness his great deeds, which are a source of pride and strength for all of Asia (*ibid.*).

In these speeches, as elsewhere during his Iran tour, Tagore once again invoked the idea of Iran and India as part of a larger Asian ideal of civilization. His speeches and interviews in Iran, and the ceremonies and activities in which he participated, underscored these metaphors of national renewal and Indo-Iranian cultural solidarity.

Rezā Shah himself emphasized this theme during the private meeting with Tagore and his entourage. During this meeting the shah made his goals for Indo-Iranian relations very clear to Tagore and the other guests. As Rostam Masani, who, along with Dinshah Irani, was one of the Parsi members of Tagore's delegation at the royal reception, later recalled,

His majesty's message to us was simple and straightforward. He expressed his regret that the descendants of the ancient Iranians had very little contact with their fatherland. He wished to see more of them. He did not ask that they should take their money with them from Hindustan to Iran, although he was anxious to see the resources of Iran developed and the Parsis taking a hand in it. 'Come in small numbers,' he [the shah] said, 'see things with your own eyes; wait and watch and then decide for yourselves whether some of you should settle down in the country of your ancestors. We will welcome you with arms outstretched (Masani, xxiv).

Rezā Shah's interest in encouraging renewed contact between the Parsi community of India and Iran was both pragmatic and ideological. The wealth of

the Bombay Parsi community was seen as a potential source of investment in Iran's social and economic development. At least as importantly, the ideological interest was to identify the Parsi community of Bombay as the embodiment of Iranian authenticity and as a model of modern Iranian national identity. To promote both of these interests, during their private meeting Tagore and Rezā Shah also discussed the Iranian state's decision to establish an endowment at Tagore's Visva-Bharati Academy at Santiniketan for the study of ancient Iranian culture.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to his formal speeches at the Ministry of Education and the Literary Society, and his private meeting with Rezā Shah, Tagore also visited the American College (later Alborz high school) in Tehran, the Majles, the newly established College of Music, and met with members of the Bahai, Zoroastrian, and Armenian communities (*Ettelā'āt*, 7-10 May 1932; Chatterji 1933, 328 f.). The aforementioned Keykhosrow Shāhrokh, who had accompanied Tagore during much of the poet's trip, also gave Tagore a special tour of the newly founded Firuz Bahrām Zoroastrian School. Tagore was given the honor of laying the foundation stone of the school (*Ettelā'āt*, op. cit.; Chatterji, op. cit.). Later the same day he was honored as the special guest at a performance of a play at the school, which was inspired by a story from the *Shāhnāma* and was performed, as he describes, "with a large dose of patriotic ardour" (Tagore 2003, 89; *Ettelā'āt*, 7, 8, and 12 May 1932; Chatterji, op. cit.; *Sālnāma-e Pārs* 1932, 68-73).

Tagore's stay in Tehran also coincided with the celebration of his seventy-first birthday, which was held in the streets of the capital with large, state-sponsored public ceremony (*Ettelā'āt*, 5 and 7 May 1932; Chatterji, op. cit.). The celebrations concluded with Tagore reading to the assembled crowd a poem he had composed for the occasion. The poem was translated into Persian and published prominently in the newspapers on the following day, along with details of the public event (*Ettelā'āt*, 7 May 1932; "Victory to Iran!" *Indo-Iranica* 14.2 [1961], 1).<sup>32</sup> When Tagore finally departed Iran on 15 May, and headed towards Baghdad for a visit to the soon to be independent Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq, he sent a telegram thanking his Iranian hosts,

<sup>31</sup> The endowment was established in 1933 at Visva-Bharati University. Its first beneficiary was Ebrāhim Pur-Dāvud, who was dispatched to India from Germany, where he was pursuing advanced studies in Iranian philology. See Ahmed, 240; and Mostafavi, 67.

<sup>32</sup> The poem reads in part: "Iran, thy brave sons have brought their priceless gifts of friendship on this birthday of the poet of a faraway shore // for they have known him in their hearts as their own. Iran, crowned with a new glory by the honor from thy hand this birthday of the poet of a faraway shore finds its fulfillment // and in return I put this wreath of a verse on thy forehead and cry: 'victory to Iran.'"

I am deeply grateful to His Majesty the shah of Iran for giving me the opportunity to visit the ancient country of Iran. I am also deeply grateful for the kindness and hospitality you have shown me. Your gracious invitation to a poet from India shows how close our two nations are. Our nations, which at the beginning of history were one nation . . . and which spoke the language of a common civilization . . . but which subsequently became divided from one another . . . I am hopeful that today, in which both have awoken from a deep sleep, that the two will once again move towards the future as brothers (*Ettelā'āt*, 21 May 1932).<sup>33</sup>

The telegram, the Persian translation of which was also prominently published in *Ettelā'āt*, captured both the political and cultural message that Tagore's visit conveyed during the four-week official visit. The diplomatic ceremonies and official displays of friendship were intended to strengthen political relations between the new Pahlavi state of Iran and the emerging national movement in India. Central to this political objective was the articulation of the ideological message of the trip to reinforce an Indo-Iranian cultural ideal as the civilizational basis of Iranian nationalism.

### Conclusion

Tagore's official visit to Iran was just one example of the Pahlavi state's effort to redefine the cultural basis of modern Iranian national identity. Other efforts in this regard included the promotion of a nationalist culture through the curriculum of the expanding school system, the promotion of archaeology and the building of museums for the public display of national objects, the construction of monuments, statues, and mausoleums designed to emphasize certain parts of Iranian national culture, and a new officially sanctioned visual style of neo-classicism that increasingly came to dominate the public life of Iran's urban spaces. Tagore's visit to Iran can in part be understood as part of this larger context of state-led cultural production during the interwar period.

What made Tagore's trip more unique was the way in which, in his case, the symbolism of Iranian national culture was conveyed through the presence of a living figure. During his month-long stay in Iran, Tagore became a living monument, on display, as a personification of what Iranian authenticity quite literally looked like. He was presented to the public as the embodiment of an authentic national tradition which had retained its cultural purity in India and which was now returning to life in Iran under the leadership of Reza

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<sup>33</sup> Tagore spent an additional twelve days in Iraq before beginning the return journey to India on 31 May.

Shah and his administration. His visit to Iran was thus represented as the return of a lost authenticity to its original homeland.

Central to this form of nationalist representation of Tagore's presence in Iran was the way in which both Tagore and the state made use of the discourse of "civilization" as it existed during the early decades of the twentieth century to effectively rearticulate the historical-cultural genealogy of India and Iran. By the 1920s and 1930s the discourse of civilization was changing in very important ways that in turn came to shape how emerging national states viewed themselves on the rapidly crystallizing world stage. The older nineteenth century meaning—in which a singular notion of "civilization" was contrasted to "barbarism"—was giving way to a new cultural mapping of the world with distinct civilizational blocs standing alongside one another and each characterized by a distinct moral-aesthetic essence. This new civilizational discourse followed the political logic of post-WWI liberal internationalism and the new legal doctrine of national sovereignty. The civilizational blocs of this new cultural mapping of the world were rooted in an understanding of the "moral equivalence" of distinct civilizations, which in turn was understood as parallel with the legal and political rights of emerging sovereign nation-states.

It was within this context that Tagore's visit came to fit into the cultural and political history of the interwar period. The visit was part of the Pahlavi state's project of aligning Iran's cultural-political genealogy with the moral authority of Indo-Iranian civilization. This civilizational affiliation buttressed the state's goal of following the interwar discourse of nationalism by rooting Iran's nationalist ideology in the moral authority of a world civilization. What it also meant was that the Pahlavi state was increasingly coming to contest the Abrahamic-Islamicate civilizational affiliation, which was also a key element of Iranian history. As the episode of Tagore's visit suggests, the Pahlavi state's Indo-Iranian project of neo-classicism successfully aligned the ideological basis of Iranian nationalism within the interwar cultural-political discourse of nationalism, but that discursive re-alignment would over time produce further cultural, political, and ideological contestations.

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