

“*Qayṣar-i Hindūstān Vīktūriyā*”: Negotiating Loyalty in Late Nineteenth-Century Parsi Laudatory Verse

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IN the light of Queen Victoria’s jubilee celebrations, the latter half of the nineteenth century saw a proliferation of laudatory literature in a variety of genres and vernacular Indian languages. As Miles Taylor has shown, numerous poems, acrostics, songs, and music materialized to celebrate her new imperial title.¹ Much of this work was published and sent to Delhi. Such was its profusion that Robert Bulwer-Lytton, poet and viceroy of India, complained to the queen in 1876 about these “enthusiastic effusions” from Indian poets of dubious ability.² He alleged that any sycophant able to turn a phrase was churning out laudatory verse. There are many dimensions to the narrowness of this perception. In a historical moment that produced reams of highly acclaimed patriotic verse by writers of varied ability in Victorian England, Lytton’s observation positioned Indian loyalty as mere sycophancy; it undermined and misunderstood the literary and political skills of Indian writers; it was blind to the cultural, regional, and linguistic variation with which genres of praise could be deployed; and it was tone-deaf in its incapacity to note literary ambivalences. Just as Victorian constructions of “Englishness,” “nationalism,” and “patriotism” have been explored by scholars for their political and literary nuances, diversity, and internal contradictions,³ expressions of Indian loyalty need not be taken at face value. More recently, historical scholarship has begun to view the underpinnings of Indian loyalty on its own terms by examining the Crown’s assimilation of local Indian traditions of patriotism and virtuous governance, the development of oppositional politics within a loyalist framework, the forging of hybrid identities, and the gradual carving of spaces for what has been termed “imperial citizenship.”⁴ Taylor’s study places

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Victoria's own attitudes to India and Indian responses to her in this complex, shifting environment, where loyalty was a continuous negotiation.⁵

To build on this approach and further interrogate the uses of Indian loyalty through its local and linguistic specificities, this article considers a particular kind of poetry, Persianate laudatory verse. I argue that analyzing the poetry of praise can usefully uncover the contradictory undercurrents of loyalism, and I use Hodgson's term "Persianate," rather than Persian, to acknowledge the wider cultural implications and mixed character of this verse.⁶ I focus on three figures who wrote and translated poems in praise of Victoria. Dastur Behramji Sanjana (1828–1898) taught Avesta and Pahlavi at the Sir Jamshedji Jijibhai Zartoshti Madressa (founded in 1863) in Bombay. Dosabhai Bahmanji (fl. 1873–1886) was a Munshi or teacher and scholar in Bombay, who, like his father Dosabhai Sohrabji (1786–1870), taught Persian, Gujarati, and Hindi to young gentlemen from wealthy Parsi families, and to merchants and English officers. Finally, Sohrabji Kuvarji Jivaji Taskar (fl. 1881), of whom little is known, appears to have made it a regular practice to write and circulate his laudatory verses in print. Together, these figures illustrate the generic complications of such verse when it was deployed by specific communities within an evolving system of manuscript exchange and print publication. In the context of burgeoning state-approved praise and the emerging textual culture, Persianate writing in India had its own parameters and status.

First, it drew on the literary characteristics and strategic wisdom of a long tradition of laudatory verse. The Mughal courtly arts were intensely occupied in constructing the ideal of the just king, from diverse sources. Poets and artists were frequently drafted in to reinforce, as Lisa Balabanlilar puts it, "the Timurid-Mughal's highly developed sense of the centrality of regnal justice."⁷ The imperial image of the just king was a complex construction based on the Mughal modification of Nasirean ethics, royal symbolism in miniature painting, and prose and poetic traditions of praise.⁸ The contents of the imperial libraries reinforced this, as did the commissioning and circulation of texts and albums of paintings.⁹ A self-consciously constructed Timurid ancestral past gave dynastic shape and stability to a peripatetic Mughal court, and arguably offered a model that the Victorian empire could (and did) adapt. Within this model of dynastic reconstruction, the crucial historical function of laudatory verse, its materiality, and its interconnections with other forms of textual and ornamental production are aptly illustrated by a miscellany commissioned by the grandson of Timur, Jalal al-Din Iskandar

Sultan, who ruled southern Iran from 1409 to 1414. Now preserved in the British Library, the deceptively small and intricately illustrated volume covered a truly miscellaneous range of poetry in the forms of *masnavis*, *qasidas*, and *ghazals*; plus prose treatises on astronomy, astrology, geometry, medicine, alchemy, history, and law.¹⁰ The eclectic selection was reminiscent of early modern English commonplace books, which similarly incorporated varying degrees of formality and density of intertextual associations.¹¹ It was thus a recognizable form of knowledge-gathering in the nineteenth century for colonial English collectors, whose own education relied on long-evolved traditions of commonplace book collation. Folios 343r–344r contained the work *Mukhtaṣir dar ‘ilm-i Iqlūdis*, theorems from the first book of Euclid’s *Elements of Geometry* as translated by Jamshid ibn Mas‘ud Kashi (Fig. 1).

The illuminated margins of folios 343v and 344r offer laudatory verse as rhetorical and aesthetic ornament. It praises the patron Iskandar as one whose name is inscribed in the margins of the book of success, with a sophisticated play on textual space, the act of writing, and imperial authority. Starting from the top margin, the four lines of verse are inscribed in gold to form an ornamental border around the translation of Euclid’s text, the last line forming the bottom margin. Inscribed imperial praise literally encloses or contains the inscribed knowledge. If Iskandar was fashioned as owning not just the book but the very knowledge it compiled from such a range of fields, the act of inscribing praise in the margins also ensured that the composer of the verse (possibly the scribe Muhammad al-Halva’i) was not merely consigned to the margins. Instead, it drew attention to the courtly scribe’s own self-fashioning as a sophisticated poet, deriving power from his literary ability—the power to construct and inscribe authority.

ای دفتر اقبال را نقش حواشی نام تو
بر لوح تقدیر از قضا حرف نخستین کام تو
دولت بکلک معدلت ایات فضل و مکرمت
بنوشته متن و حاشیه بر صفحه ایام تو

[O thou whose name is inscribed in the borders of the book of Success,
Thy will is the first letter upon Destiny’s tablet, by Fate decreed.
Good Fortune, with Justice’s pen, signs of wisdom and nobility
Wrote upon the text and margins of the page of these, thy times.]¹²

While rulers may “will” the production of praise, as highlighted by the rhymed endings—“*nām-i tu* [thy name],” “*kām-i tu* [thy will],” “*ayyām-i tu* [thy times]”—it is the pen of the poet, scribe, and possibly



Figure 1. A miscellany written for Jalal al-Din Iskandar ibn ‘Umar Shaykh, © British Library Board, Add. MS. 27261, f.343v.

compiler that materializes imperial desires and claims the poem, silently co-opting through allegory the positions of Justice and Fortune.

Iskandar’s little book was destined to travel far. In 1813 its owner, Miyan Akmal Badi’al-Din, secured against it a loan of three hundred rupees from Muhammad ‘Ali ‘Attar. It was then acquired by Sir John Malcolm, statesman and scholar, author of *History of Persia* and other works, governor of Bombay, and president of its Literary Society (1827–31). The manuscript was eventually sold to the British Museum

by his son in 1865, one of very many colonial acquisitions of Persianate texts produced to celebrate monarchs.¹³ The interest of figures involved in the Victorian administration of India in this kind of laudatory enterprise is unsurprising. The possession, elite circulation, translation, and gifting of such texts enabled the Victorian government in India to position itself as the inheritor of power and authority, in effect furthering a courtly culture of privilege connected to textual production, manuscript exchange, and print culture.

In this wider context, Parsi writers of laudatory verse offer an illuminating case study. The Parsi community in nineteenth-century India was not just a mercantile presence in western India but a cultural force. They drew on Mughal Indo-Persian tradition but at the same time claimed an ancient authority that preceded the Mughals. Their historical priority, which they highlighted as part of a strategic self-fashioning, depended on establishing a linguistic priority through their recovery of the ancient Iranian languages, scripts, and exegetical practices of Avesta, Pahlavi, and Zand, as I will discuss later. This linguistic skill and spirituality is conspicuously displayed in Behramji Sanjana's extraordinary composition in praise of Prince Alfred on the occasion of his visit to India in 1869–70. Published in 1871, along with a letter from the author to the prince and a brief reply of acknowledgment, this multilingual text created an imperial identity for the first British prince to set foot in India as “son of our Queen.” Consisting of a *masnavi* in Pahlavi, followed by a Pazand elaboration, and summarized translations in Gujarati and English prose,¹⁴ the text is structured to display a careful blend of the linguistic and spiritual strengths of the Parsi priestly community, together with the explicitly dynastic emphasis of the string of analogies praising the prince and, by extension, the queen and her family.

The prince was compared with no less than “Hormuzd,” the Iranian name derived from the Avestan name and title “Ahura Mazda,” the highest deity who taught Zoroaster and was proclaimed by him as God. Prince became priest in the analogy, echoing a long tradition of invoking Ahura Mazda as an ally in imperial iconography and royal inscriptions of Achaemenid courts from Darius I to Artaxerxes II.¹⁵ A series of Sasanian kings were named Hormazd, just as many were named Bahram; thus the poem exploited the blurring of the identities of author and addressee through its blending of royal and religious names and the evocation of ancient political alliances between rulers and clergy.¹⁶ It also compared Alfred to Zamasp (Sasanian king of Iran, 496–498/9), put on

the throne by the Zoroastrian clergy to resist his elder brother Kavad's Mazdakite reforms, which had advocated a primitive communism and challenged the hegemony of the aristocracy and clergy. Zamasp was later blinded and gave up the throne to his brother to prevent civil war. On one hand, therefore, Sanjana seemed keen to associate Alfred and the Victorian empire with the norms of Zoroastrian sacral kingship, whose doctrine was preserved in ninth-century Zoroastrian Pahlavi literature like the *Dēnkard*, and later Persian texts such as Firdausi's *Shahnāma*. These sources emphasized the role of the Sasanian monarch as the supreme representative of Ahura Mazda on earth, and the doctrine could thus accommodate the Victorian prince in a religio-political philosophy seen to be compatible with English norms of Divine Right.¹⁷ On the other hand, Sanjana's list of comparisons spoke through omission. There were no allusions to the Timurid Central Asian dynasty to whom the Mughals traced their origins. This effectively displaced Timurid myths and tropes of valor and kingship—which were already embedded in both the Indian context and the British imperial imagination of India—in favor of what the author considered a more pristine tradition of virtuous rule.

Sanjana's analogies were not only historical; they extended to mythical stories of kings like Jamshed who appeared in Firdausi's *Shahnāma* as the fourth shah of the Peshdadian dynasty, and in Zoroastrian scripture as Yimashaeta, the "radiant" good shepherd, compared to the sun and charged by Ahura Mazda to nourish the earth.¹⁸ This mythical king and religious figurehead became part of a network of stories and events, where he created plenty, swelled the globe to accommodate a rapidly expanding population and wealth, and helped the world escape an apocalyptic frost by retreating to a cave with two of every living species—much like Noah—and turning the "enclosure" into a city. Through the agency of these stories, the shepherd turned prince, and Jamshed became Shah Jamshed in the *Shahnāma*. Sanjana made other mythical comparisons between Alfred and Kersasp (Garshasp), the slayer of the destructive Zahhak in a Zoroastrian manifestation of the struggle between good and evil,¹⁹ or Kai Kaus, the mythological shah of Iran, whose inventive flying throne, which eventually crashed, was famously described in the *Shahnāma* as driven by ravenous eagles chained to its foot.²⁰ Sanjana compared the prince with divine entities embodying justice and truth—Meher, Rashnu, and Sraosha—and with the angel of victory, Behram, in another echo of the author's own name. His careful use of hypostasis incorporated the elemental mythology of his religion. Victoria's son was

“as valuable a friend to angels as gold is to men—as speedy as the sun—as effulgent as the moon—as shining as the fire.”²¹

The analogies, names, and allusive stories resonating with the names created an often ambivalent network of associations. The story of Kai Kaus, for instance, was one of overreaching ambition, supported by a flawed scientific invention. As Firdausi warned, Kaus, who “essayed the sky / To outsoar angels” or “assail / The heaven itself with his artillery,” narrowly escaped not only self-destruction but the eradication of his dynasty.²² The self-conscious emphasis on dynastic success also subtly recalled the vulnerability of dynastic authority, which needed the communities nurtured to support it, else the throne might crash. Sanjana’s compositional scheme reinforced a firm patriarchal structure, utilizing the privileges and learning of his priesthood. Through patterns of analogy and allusion, it placed the prince and the queen within the framework of a Zoroastrian history and mythological system as it was adapted by a specific Indian community, the Parsis. His final literary strategy was a prayer to Hormuzd to preserve the prosperity, grace, dignity, and good fortune of Queen Victoria, the subtext being that the Victorian dynasty should feel fortunate indeed to have the gift of praise and prayer from a distinguished Parsi *Dastur* or high priest. Victorian rulers were, I suggest, quietly reminded here of the historical role of *Dasturs* as king-makers.

Such texts can offer valuable perspectives for historical debates about the relationship between Victorian “courtliness” and “democratic royalism,” since they locate the value of the monarch and her descendants in their status as dynastic imperial rulers, or assist in reconstructing and preserving this function in an Indian context, arguably redressing, in part, parliamentary limitations on courtly interests at home.²³ At the same time, they shed new light on Sanjana’s own context. Recent studies of Parsis in colonial India have shown how their mercantile success was combined with the politics of philanthropy and the language of loyalty to distinguish this community as significant players in the shaping or appropriation of colonial norms.²⁴ But the sole focus on their political and economic collusion with, or resistance to, colonial powers, and on their role in the formation of Bombay’s civic culture, neglects the role that literary culture and linguistic traditions played in Parsi interventions in nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian politics. As Jesse Palsetia and T. M. Luhrmann have shown, Parsi identity was preserved by the integration of commerce and charity with the importance of religious merit and family lineage. This gave the minority community a standing in the wider

environment.²⁵ Palsetia thus prefers “partnership” rather than “loyalty” as a description of the Parsi community’s relationship with the British empire;²⁶ and Luhrmann’s ethnographic approach uncovers how commercial success and economic gain blended with ideas of religious “purity” to create the heroic figure of “the good Parsi” in whom honesty and commercial credit coalesced.²⁷ But religion, literature, and linguistic scholarship, I suggest, had an especially powerful presence: trade and charity alone did not construct Parsi identity. It is worth reconsidering the motivations of nineteenth-century Parsis as part of a wider, finely tuned cultural enterprise whose mercantile basis has received more attention than its literary and scholarly contexts.

Sanjana, in his capacities as the principal of the Zartoshti Madressa, fellow of Bombay University, elected member of the German Oriental Society, and editor and translator of the multivolume Pahlavi *Dēnkard* (a mammoth scholarly task continued by his son), was closely associated with a renowned Parsi merchant. The architect of Bombay’s civic society, Sir Jamshedji Jijibhai, was the first Indian to obtain a knighthood in 1842 and then a hereditary baronetcy in 1857. His patronage supported religious education, the cultivation of languages, literary writing, and printing.²⁸ Sanjana exercised his linguistic, literary, and historical talents to recover the ancient languages, scripture, and exegetical practices of Pahlavi, Avesta, and Zand. This was a remarkably complicated task owing to the clouded transmission history of the texts and scripts that defined Parsi tradition. Avesta was the oldest extant Iranian language from the Peshdad-Kayan period, while Pahlavi (or Middle Persian) developed, as a language, in the Sasanian period. Avestan texts were composed in prehistory and handed down orally, prior to the development of the art of reading and writing. Their transmission is recorded in the *Dēnkard*, the encyclopedic ninth-century compendium of Zoroastrian religious knowledge, whose first modern edition was produced by Sanjana himself in eight volumes published between 1869 and 1897.²⁹

According to the *Dēnkard*, the written corpus of Avestan texts comprising twenty-one volumes (*nasks*) was originally deposited in the archives of King Vishtasp, and twenty-one priestly families were tasked with memorizing a volume each, enabling the texts to be handed down orally through generations. When the written corpus was destroyed during the invasion of Iran by Alexander in 330 BCE, emperors and *dasturs* attempted to recompile the twenty-one Avestan volumes, which were endangered again during the Arab invasions of 641 CE. Twenty volumes existed till the ninth century, and a summary of nineteen based on

Pahlavi translations were found in books 8 and 9 of the *Dēnkard*. However, the massacres of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by Genghis Khan and Timur resulted in the loss of most of the Avestan *nasks* and Pahlavi translations.³⁰ Thus Sanjana's scholarly recovery and editorial re-creation of a standard, pre-Mughal textual compendium gave him and the wider Parsi community a claim to historical and linguistic priority, through which they could assert political priority above the Mughals. Moreover, it marked an attempted reversal of the damage caused by Mughal ancestors to textual traditions that constituted the religious core of Zoroastrian knowledge and philosophy. Sanjana also composed and translated religious treatises and published a Pahlavi grammar in 1871. He trained his son to continue the work and taught and earned the respect of European scholars who carried forward his research. Sanjana and Dosabhai Bahmanji, my second case study, were thus part of a culture of textual recovery, translation, and dissemination through print patronized by Jijibhai.

Bahmanji, however, differed from Sanjana—he was not a high priest but a *Munshi*, and his self-fashioning was thus more practical in orientation, as his publication of *Idiomatic Sentences* in English, Gujarati, Hindustani, and Persian languages testified.³¹ Expanding upon the work of his father, Munshi Dosabhai Sohrabji, the original author of this text, Bahmanji performed the pragmatic functions of procuring books and tutoring. The edition of *Idiomatic Sentences* carried a notice stating that Bahmanji was prepared to give instruction in Gujarati, Hindi, and Persian to European gentlemen; undertake the translation of letters, petitions, and other documents; and supply books in Indian languages to interested parties.³² The advertised booklist was eclectic: further collections of useful sentences in an array of languages, Parsi religious works translated into Gujarati, and, surprisingly, “Sakuntala Natak (in high-flown Urdu).” Bahmanji's *Tawṣīf-i Malīkah-i Ingīlīstān va Qayṣar-i Hindūstān Vīktūriyā* consisted of three *masnavis* in praise of the queen. His English translations, together entitled “An Address of Loyalty, in Persian Verse,” were printed in Bombay in 1886 to celebrate the golden jubilee.³³ Bahmanji separately prepared, decorated, and bound an elegant manuscript version of the Persian poems; though he did not include them in the printed version (Fig. 2).

Bahmanji designed his compositions to display poetic skill, meticulously following the prescribed verse and metrical structures of Persian *masnavis* (a Middle Persian poetic form, the *masnavi* consists of distichs in rhymed pairs, in which each hemistich contains eleven syllables).

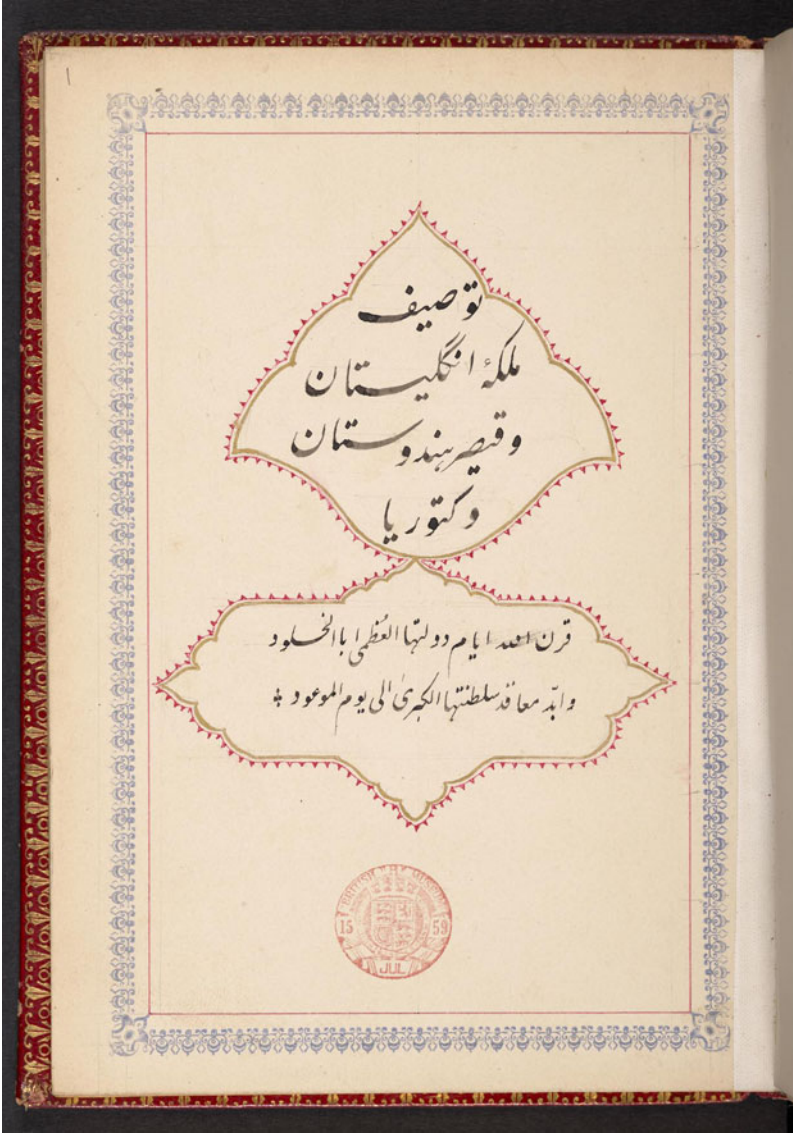


Figure 2. Dosabhai Bahmanji, *Tawṣif-i Malikah-i Ingilistān va Qayṣar-i Hindūstān Vīktūriyā*, © British Library Board, MS. Or. 14547, f.1r.

They demonstrated the poet's ability to execute different *masnavi* meters suited to the aims of the poems. The first long poem in *mutaqārib* (one such meter) was a narrative of Victoria's accession, beginning with the death and mourning of her predecessor, William IV, and leading to the rise of a new sovereign and era. By adopting a metrical form used in long narrative histories like Firdausi's *Shahnāma*, Bahmanji imagined

the events in a mood similar to that of succession narratives in Firdausi and in Mughal imperial chronicles. Victoria was thus inscribed within this historical tradition of empire writing. The shorter poems reinforced the groundwork laid by the first. The second *masnavi* in *hazaj* opened with a pun on Victoria's name:

ای نام تو همعنان نصرت وی یاد تو تو امان نصرت
و کثریه بعدل و نیکخواهی کرده سی و بیست سال شاهی

[O thy name is Victory's peer, to remember thee is to secure Victory.
Victoria, with justice and goodwill, for thirty and twenty years has
reigned.]

The direct address and repetition (“*nām-i tu* [thy name]”; “*yād tu* [thy remembrance]”) is reminiscent of the standard trope of laudatory verse, as noted earlier, in the example from Iskandar's fifteenth-century compilation. Having emphasized Victoria's “justice” and “goodwill” as the foundations of her reign, the poem then connects the present reign of Victoria and the immediate past of William's rule to positive historical examples of kingship in the figures of Mahabad and Hushang. The comparison with the former, the first prophet by divine decree according to the *Dabistan*, imparts both religious and historical authenticity to Victoria. The primeval ascetic king was regarded as the very source of civilized structures and brought languages to human communities.³⁴ Similarly, Hushang, the first king of the Peshdadians, was a primeval figure of authority, having, according to Firdausi, discovered methods of iron-working, firing, agriculture, irrigation, and organization of livestock for the benefit of mankind. His name was etymologically linked to good and just decisions, attributes that Bahmanji repeatedly emphasized in his poems as Victoria's own.³⁵ The third *masnavi*, in *khafif* meter, which had a more flexible syllabic pattern, constitutes a string of epithets and metaphors describing Victoria.

اشلام ای شه خجسته سیر دانش آگاه شاه نیک اختر
اشلام ای منیر مهد نظیر قیصر هوشمند و باترید

[Peace attend thee, O Sovereign of blessed virtues; wise, knowing, fortunate monarch!

Peace attend thee, O shining sun unparalleled, empress of prudent counsel.]

The metaphors move skillfully between the gravity of political virtues—Victoria as the “زیب ده دولت و اکلیل و تخت” [ornament of empire, crown, and throne], “معدن الاشفاق” [mine of

favors],” “منبع الاخلاق [fountain of moral virtue]”—and the value of her patronage, as “مجلس آرای صاجان سخن [Adorner of the assembly of eloquent speakers],” “مقجر بزم امل دانش و فن” [torrent of oratory, hope of learning and art].” The climactic linearity of the descriptors culminate in the vision of Victoria as “شہ علیا جناب جو ز قباب” [High Sovereign of heaven-reaching towers]” whose praise is justified and “sung at every door,” securing the obedience and gratitude of “کل مردم چه اکبر و اصغر” [All the people, great and small].” At this point in the *masnavi*’s tight-knit structure, the concluding vocative address and invocation of peace are aptly placed. The layered development serves to create a verbal portrait, maintaining the boldness of direct address, and summing up the praise the collection comprised:

کل مردم چه اکبر و اصغر راضی و شاکر از تو ای قیصر
 استلام استلام و الاکرام استلام استلام خیر ختام

[All the people, great and small, are obedient and grateful to thee, O Empress.

Peace attend thee, and God’s beneficence; Peace attend thee, to a happy end.]

The catalog of epithets of praise, each adding nuances to the portrait of imperial virtue, is an emulation of catalogs of princely epithets that introduced kings in Persian and Mughal literature.³⁶ The authorial control of the imperial image is strongly evident in such literary devices.

Bahmanji’s work, like many other polyglot literary and educational endeavors, was supported by the Jijibhai Translation Fund and the Jijibhai Parsi Benevolent Institution, of which Bahmanji’s father was an elected member in 1849.³⁷ In *Idiomatic Sentences*, Bahmanji carefully foregrounded his lineage by prefacing the work with a portrait and hagiographical biography of his father, Dosabhai Sohrabji, emphasizing his “considerable literary talent” and his descent from “a respectable priestly family.”³⁸ His “passion for books and aptitude for learning” attracted notice, and the purpose of the biography was to establish his father’s trajectory toward becoming a “good Parsi,” in whose footsteps Bahmanji himself would follow. The account also illustrated the cooperative path for secular and religious education through literary and linguistic scholarship. As *munshis*, Bahmanji and his father were trained in both pursuits, and this allowed them to become valuable intermediaries who in turn trained English merchants and gentlemen in Indian languages, literature, and music. As the title page of *Idiomatic Sentences* emphasized, this was a “new self-instructing work” that categorized the sentences and repeated them in English, Gujarati, Hindi, and Persian; including

explanatory notes and a range of “military, political, naval, mercantile, fiscal, and medical words and expressions” whose pragmatic uses were self-evident. In a broad pitch, the work was dedicated to “The European and Native Communities of Great Britain and India.” On the list of “subscribers” was Jijibhai himself, whose leadership ambitions were advanced by his patronage of literary and ecclesiastical activities. By the 1850s, Sir Jamshedji Jijibhai had built up his commercial empire and concentrated his efforts on gaining a baronetcy. This was to rest primarily on his ability to gather convincing evidence of patronage and charitable works: a document detailing his philanthropic commitments was circulated privately among influential individuals in Britain; while eulogistic biographies and a history of Jijibhai’s charities were published by eminent members of Bombay’s English community, such as Williamson Ramsay, former revenue commissioner, and George Buist, editor of the *Bombay Times*.³⁹ With English and local help, Jijibhai’s image as the quintessential “good Parsi” was constructed, through an “organized program of publicity on behalf of a colonial subject.”⁴⁰ Also important were Jijibhai’s initiatives for the reform of religious and literary education, which addressed factionalism within the Parsi priesthood by emphasizing educational reform while maintaining orthodox doctrinal and theological positions.⁴¹ This closely networked Anglo-Parsi community constituted a distinctive patronage system to create a literary and educational culture centered on the Parsis, with Victoria and her family positioned closely in relation to the “ancient” regime of Parsi religion and learning and relatively distanced from the Mughals and their Indo-Persian heritage.

The use of laudatory verse to transform this network into a literary coterie is illustrated by the appearance of an elegantly decorated collection of the poetry of praise in 1881. Published by the Education Society Press, Byculla (which would also print Behramji’s poetry), the volume contained poems by Sohrabji Kuvarji Jivaji Taskar, who wrote in his introduction that his composition of Persian poetry was inspired by Victoria’s assumption of the title of empress, and his aim was to describe her “justice, reputation and splendor” to “testify those feelings of loyalty to her throne which the Parsi community looks upon as a duty to cherish.” Taskar noted, “Copies of these verses, mounted and framed, were presented to the gracious Sir Richard Temple and some of the leading Parsis, who were pleased to make room for them in their halls.”⁴² The act of writing praise, and its material presentation and preservation, thus seems central to the formation of an Anglo-Parsi coterie. Taskar’s organization of his corpus of praise helps to construct this imagined

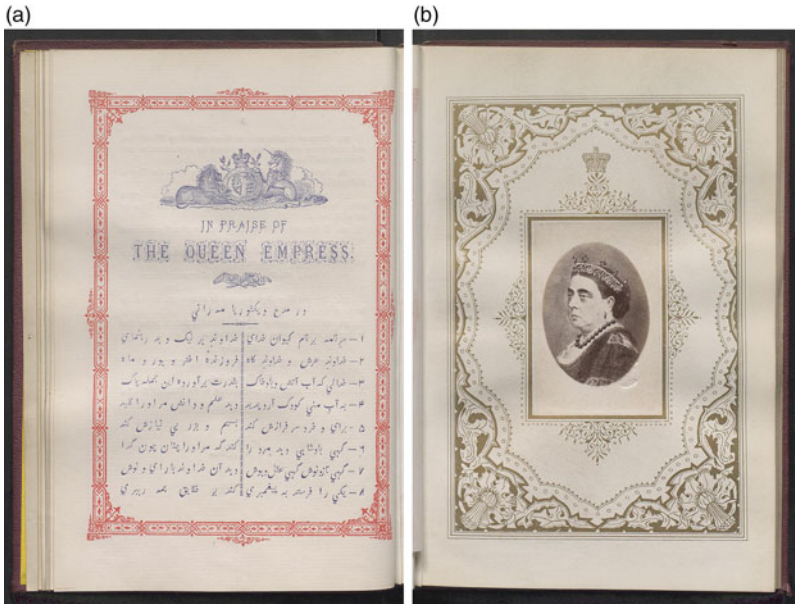


Figure 3. Sohrabji Kuvarji Jivaji Taskar, *Persian Poems*, Bombay: Education Society Press, Byculla, 1881, © British Library Board, Shelfmark: Asia, Pacific & Africa 757.1.43, p. 6, and inserted portrait of Queen Victoria.

circle of allies: the first poem, written to commemorate the Parsi new year, draws the addressees into the cosmic plan of the Zoroastrian “Creator,” who granted “us, of the Kayanian race, joy, ease and comfort.”⁴³ The poem “In Praise of the Queen Empress (در مدح ویکتوریا مه رانی)” comes next, with a rather grave looking portrait of its subject (Fig. 3).

This long poem of fifty-eight distichs positions the queen as an ally of the Creator. As Taskar put it,

بیا راسته عالمی چون بهشت چو وکتوریا نامش فرشته نوشت
 [She has adorned the world into another paradise, and her auspicious name has been written by angels – VICTORIA.]⁴⁴

The translation deliberately highlights the queen’s name instead of folding it into the clause of the sentence as the Persian original does. The angelic inscription of her name endows her with qualities of virtue, justice, and clemency, as the poem emphasizes, before taking a metaphorical turn:

همه نو جوان و همه نو نهال همه پهلوان و همه نیک فال
 بهار گلستان انگلندستان بیامد نسیمش بهندوستان
 گلی از گلستان هند و فرنگ جهان عطریبیز است از ان بوی رنگ

[She is youthful and as a young tree, brave in virtue and auspicious.
The spring-breeze of the gardens of England has entered India.
Roses from the gardens, in India and England, and the world, are
scented as *attar* from that one flower.]⁴⁵

In the Persian version, metaphorical associations are bolder, presenting Victoria as a transformed hybrid rose—she is a youthful and fresh plant, she carries the spring breeze from England, but the English rose now scents the roses of the world as *attar*, a distinctively Persianate perfume. Taskar’s fluid English translation, however, while retaining the vernacular and exotic “*attar*,” cautiously tones down the “nativizing” of Victoria by conveying a general sense of the lines rather than a close translation:

She is also auspicious in courage, philanthropy and valorous virtue.
The effects of the perfume of England’s garden have spread over India.
In India, in England, in the whole world, does this beautiful flower smell
like sweet *attar*.⁴⁶

The act of translation was a significant factor in the publications of the poems discussed here. While Sanjana—keen to reproduce and display the scripts and practices of Pahlavi and Zand as well as the regional tongue of Gujarati—provided summary translations in English, Bahmanji and Taskar seemed keen to maintain the Persian versification in English, at least in syntax and structure. They provided a parallel translation, with closely corresponding numbered couplets (notwithstanding some instances of misnumbering in Taskar’s case). They tried to replicate the Persian distich form by introducing a medial pause in their punctuation of the English sentence that translated each hemistich. But the poets demonstrated a tendency to mask the hybrid entity that the Persian poems actually made of the English nation and its royalty. Taskar’s English lines quoted above, for example, imparted more agency to “England’s garden” and the rose metonymically standing in for Victoria, while the Persian original allowed her mixed scent to transform the “world.” This suggests a cautiousness about tilting the balance of power, since the poets were, in a sense, writing the Persian/Pahlavi and English versions for different audiences. The gaps between composition and translation thus introduced ambivalence in the published works, which was perhaps one of the reasons why these expressions of negotiated loyalty could be misapprehended as sycophantic effusions. Bahmanji’s English translation of his third *masnavi* had the effect of

erasing the core literary device of creating a poetic catalog of virtues to allow the meanings of “Victoria” to shift imperceptibly with slight changes in the tonal nuances of laudatory phrases. This was difficult to maintain in translation and, in Bahmanji’s case, often entirely lost in the bland generalizations and obliteration of cultural meanings in the English version: “Victoria is the repository of patience, kindness, munificence, and laudable qualities” came barely close to the original poetic syntax and vocabulary, which may be more precisely translated as “Repository of inspiration and mine of favors, assembly of generosity, fountain of moral virtue” (1.4). The Persian version performed the gradual shift of emphasis from “ornament of empire” (the opening metaphor of 1.3) to “fountain of moral virtue” (the closing metaphor of 1.4). Such details could only speak to scholars and translators of Persianate texts among British readers.

Nevertheless, when such poems were copied with calligraphic care, printed in multiple fonts, bound and illuminated on beautiful paper, and sent on to appropriate authorities and patrons, with recipients’ responses added to the print publications, they were packaged as “modern” poems written in the ancient tradition, and designed to give the Victorian empire in India a “better” model of justice and authority. The Mughals, whose imperial organizational experience the British empire utilized, the poems implied, were wanting—a fallen version of governance that the Zoroastrian coterie could redeem. The boldly aspirational imperial garden of Taskar’s poem, whose rose he urged Victoria to be, was thus envisaged as a prelapsarian Zoroastrian enclosure.

Of the three poets I discuss, Taskar’s publication was the only one to contain similar poems of praise addressed to other figures. The poem to Victoria was followed by verse in praise of Lord Ripon, viceroy of India, and a series of eminent Parsis: Dastur Jamaspjee Dastur Minocheherjee Jamaspasa, “Of Elevated Position, High Priest of all Zoroastrians in India”; Sir Jamshedji Jijibhai, “Third Parsi Baronet, of Exalted Position, Head of all Parsis”; Seth Sohrabji Shapoorji Bengali, “Of Exalted Position, Sheriff of Bombay”; Seths Dinshawji and Nusserwanji Manockji Petit, identified as “renowned lords of charity”; and Khan Bahadur Seth Padamji Pestonji, “First Class Sirdar of the Deccan.” The order on the title page matched the order of the poems, creating a hierarchy of deliberately marked official positions. This formidable cast of characters materialized in their photographs appended to each poem, turning the volume itself into a coterie text that embodied an imagined alliance of leadership between the queen, her foremost imperial

representative the viceroy, the Parsi high priest, and Parsi secular leaders who had obtained formal positions and offices in the empire. It positioned the poet—who signed poems with the self-descriptor “مصنف کميرين خاکسار منشي سهراب جي ولد کورجي جيواجي تاسکر” [Composed by, humblest as the dust, Munshi Sohrabji walad Kuwarji Jiwaji Taskar]—as a “good Parsi” of suitable lineage who could construct a poetic discourse bringing together the British Empire and local hubs of power in his community. The topos of humility utilized to construct the enclosure of loyal subjects around Victoria was more complex than official responses to the laudatory verse could often fathom.

It was common for such volumes to be published with “endorsements.” Sanjana’s address to Prince Alfred had been published with an acknowledgment from J. Clerk, dated April 13, 1870, on behalf of the prince, stating that the latter wanted “to express his thanks” for the address presented to him “in four ancient languages” from “the priestly Community of Parsees.”⁴⁷ Taskar’s volume included comments from the viceroy’s office, polite and reticent, pronouncing the addressee “deeply gratified.” The *Times of India* (November 27, 1880) had noted that the poems in “highflown Oriental style” and their English translations “will be read with interest.”⁴⁸ A later report in the same newspaper (March 7, 1881) observed, somewhat patronizingly, that “some of the descriptions will doubtless be a source of merriment to many of our English readers.”⁴⁹ While the English reception of this poetry—perhaps willfully—missed the political thrust drawing attention to the usefulness of a loyal local network, the authors themselves saw fit to turn a blind eye to the sneering humor and published the ostensible endorsements. This was a politically canny move, indicative of their ambitious outreach and desire to gain praise.

The Parsi poets were keen to ensure their printed verse reached prominent readers. The Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, the Bavarian State Library in Munich, for instance, still holds a presentation copy of Sanjana’s address to Alfred, sent to King Ludwig II of Bavaria through an academic associate in Munich, who inscribed it to the king on the author’s behalf.⁵⁰ Sanjana and his son, Dastur Darab, closely networked with German orientalists such as Wilhelm Geiger of Bavaria, Friedrich von Spiegel, and Friedrich Windischmann, whose scholarly work in Avestan, Pahlavi, and Persian studies Darab Sanjana (fluent in German) had edited and translated into English.⁵¹ The presentation of the poem to Ludwig seemed cognizant of the delicacy of Anglo-German connections in the current climate of territorial

reorganization in Germany. In 1871, when Sanjana's address to Alfred was published, the Duchy of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha (which Alfred would go on to inherit through his father) joined, under fractious circumstances, the German Empire.⁵² The late nineteenth century was a period of political flux for the Ernestine duchies before they were split into independent states. King Ludwig's use of art and architecture to romanticize the royal dynastic message was arguably echoed in Prince Albert's ambitions for decorating the New Palace of Westminster and reviving royal artistic patronage in the mid-nineteenth century.⁵³ Sanjana's presentation of his poem to the so-called "fairy-tale king" of a realm bordering the deceased prince consort's native Coburg thus played into the double-edged nostalgia of dynastic kingdoms lost, but empires gained, that imbued his poem.

Persianate laudatory poems by the Parsi authors thus attempted a subtle reorientation of empire by representing political possibilities that might arise from a strategic alliance with their community and its heritage. The poems also present a striking contrast to exilic Persianate verse written in praise of the queen, from the environs of late Victorian London. An example survives in the little-known corpus of Mirza Muhammad Baqir Bavanati (ca. 1814–93), a multilingual scholar and poet who escaped from Shiraz to London in 1880. Persian in origin, he was Persianate in work and practice. After fleeing Shiraz for his unorthodox religious views, Bavanati established himself in London as a scholar and self-proclaimed prophet. His *qasidah* on Victoria (ca. 1876) was a bid for recognition made by an eccentric exile who worked in isolation, unable to draw upon the financial, local, or political sources of support available to Parsi authors in India.⁵⁴ Bavanati restlessly fashioned and refashioned himself: first as a dervish, taking the title *khodā'ī* (godly); then as a Christian, calling himself *Mazhar-e 'Īsā* (manifestation of Jesus); then an atheist, who converted again to Judaism before finally devising an amalgamated religious system of his own called Islamo-Christianity. His student and scholar of Persian, E. G. Browne, noted that "Mr Bakir of Persia," as Bavanati was known, was once beaten by a London mob for distributing leaflets in the streets promoting his unitarian religion.⁵⁵ In this case, the composition of laudatory verse was an isolated and desperate submission, underlining the author's perpetually marginal socio-political status, while he relied for survival on a more immediate and personalized network of students and scholars enabled by the growing demand in London for tutoring in Persian language and literature. This perhaps also explains why Bavanati's *qasidah* from London

remained tucked away among family papers in unassuming manuscript form, while the laudatory verses by Parsi authors from India, with their redoubtable public and political presence, blazed their way to court in print.

Such contrasts prompt us to rethink the colonial “culture of loyalism” in several ways. It is useful to consider how and why this culture could be misread by English contemporaries out of touch with its multilingual and cross-cultural nuances. We must therefore take account of the manipulations of language and genre that informed *how* loyalty was inscribed. It is important to read this in relation to developments in manuscript and print culture, and to consider how these were aligned with the ways in which specific communities operated. For the Parsis, literary modes of articulating (or subverting) loyalty were aligned with mercantile and philanthropic self-assertion. Patronage systems supporting the composition and circulation of vernacular literatures of loyalty (from India or London) did not work with the same conventions as English or European patronage, and poems of praise were often less about Victoria than about the micropolitics of local relationships and aspirations.

NOTES

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1. Taylor, *Empress*, 182–84.
2. Letter from Bulwer-Lytton to Victoria, ff.454–57. Taylor notes the poems are listed in NAI, Foreign Dept Proceedings (December 1877), Pol.A.439, and describes verses from this source.
3. A prominent example of English laudatory verse inspired by the jubilee, using tropes of praise that are also sycophantic at face value, is Alfred Tennyson’s “*Carmen Sæculare*,” esp. stanza IX, where the poet lauds “Fifty years of ever-broadening Commerce! / Fifty years of ever-brightening Science! / Fifty years of ever-widening Empire!” Also see, Pearsall, “Assume the Globe.” On the

- construction of Englishness, see Brooker and Widdowson, “A Literature for England,” 141–88; Cunningham, “The Language of Patriotism”; Lootens, “Victorian Poetry and Patriotism”; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
4. Bayly, *Origins of Nationality and Recovering Liberties*; Banerjee, *Becoming Imperial Citizens*; Boehmer, *Indian Arrivals*.
 5. Taylor rightly points out that “more nuanced explanations of loyalty are required,” and notes that loyalty to the queen among some parts of Indian society—such as the mercantile community represented by the Parsis—might be seen as “clientelism” or collaboration (5). I suggest here that even expressions of loyalty among the more overt supporters of the Crown had its nuances and subversions.
 6. Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*. For a lucid exploration of the evolution of “Persianate” in later scholarship as a conceptual framework looking beyond language and literature to encompass economic, political, and material cultures, see Ashraf, “Introduction,” 1–14.
 7. Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity*, 148.
 8. Richards, “Formulation of Imperial Authority,” 126–67; Alam, *Languages*, 54–69; Beach, *Imperial Image*.
 9. Seyller, “Inspection and Valuation,” 243–349; Stronge, *Painting for the Mughal Emperor*.
 10. British Library, MS. Add.27261, ff.343v–344r. Another similar miscellany is preserved at the Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon (MS. L.A.161). See Soucek, “Manuscripts of Iskandar Sultan,” 116–31.
 11. See Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books*.
 12. Translations from Persian, unless stated otherwise, are my own.
 13. Rieu, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts*, 2:868–71. For a digital copy of the manuscript and detailed catalogue description, see the British Library, *Digitised Manuscripts*, www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_27261.
 14. Sanjana, *An Address*. The copy used for this article, gifted to Ludwig II of Bavaria, is held in Munich: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, 4A.or.2098. See digital reproduction at <https://opacplus.bsb-muenchen.de/title/BV020352924>.
 15. See Boyce, *Under the Achaemenians*, 90–131, 164–263.
 16. As R. N. Frye notes, books of conduct and advice in Sasanian Iran emphasized that “religion and state were twin sisters.” Not only was it the duty of the ruler to support the religion, the title of chief priest (*moadān-moad*) was analogous to *shahan shah* or “king of kings,”

- and those in office performed the coronation of the new ruler, as Firdausi described it in his *Shahnāma*. Frye, *Political History*, 116–80.
17. On Zoroastrian expositions of sacral kingship, see Frye, *Political History*, 149–50; and Choksy, “Sacral Kingship,” 35–52.
 18. Darmesteter (1895a), *The Zend-Avesta, Part 1*, Fargard II, 10–21; Firdausi, *Shahnāma*, 1:129–40.
 19. Firdausi, *Shahnāma*, 1:373–87. In the *Dēnkard*, Keresasp is the tenth shah, after Kai Kubad, but Firdausi alters this course by placing Gershasp before Kai Kubad, as the last of the Peshdadians. While in the *Shahnāma*, his presence is nominal, scripture affords him a significant role: see Darmesteter (1895b), *The Zend-Avesta, Part 2*, Farvardīn Yast, 223, Zamyād Yast, 295.
 20. Firdausi, *Shahnāma*, 2:103–4.
 21. Sanjana, *An Address*, 5.
 22. Firdausi, *Shahnāma*, 2:104.
 23. Bentley, “Power and Authority,” 163–87; Taylor, *Empress*, 12–30.
 24. See Siddiqi, “Business World,” 301–23; Willmer, “Parsis and Public Space,” 277–98; Palsetia, “Partner in Empire,” 81–99, and *Parsis of India*.
 25. Palsetia, *Jamsetjee*; Luhrmann, *Good Parsi*.
 26. Palsetia, *Jamsetjee*, 7–8. While this may work for the commerce-based self-fashioning that shaped the practices of Jamshedji Jijibhai, the subject of Palsetia’s study, it seems inadequate for the wider cultural motivations of the Parsis.
 27. Luhrmann, *Good Parsi*, 99–109. Luhrmann notes how the contemporary Parsis she interviewed “adulate their past truthfulness as a past commercial asset” (101). Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Parsis have been compared with Hindu and Jain merchants of Surat, who combined religious appropriateness and economic credit to construct their reputation (*abru*): Haynes, “From Tribute to Philanthropy,” 339–60.
 28. On the orchestration of Jijibhai’s bid for the baronetcy, see Palsetia, *Jamsetjee*, 144–61.
 29. Volumes 9–19 of the *Dēnkard* were completed by his son, Darab, in 1928.
 30. Although attempts were made to commit Avestan texts to writing in Kayanian and Achaemenian times, the currently known Avestan writing system was developed in the Sasanian period and modified till ca. 628 CE. It attempted to address the ambiguities of the inscriptional, psalter, and book Pahlavi scripts. Zand evolved as a technical term for

exegetical gloss and commentary, though it has been confusedly regarded as a language or a synonym for the Avesta holy texts. The old Zand existed in the Avestan language, and subsequently in other Iranian languages until the fourth century CE, after which the Sasanians (the last of the Zoroastrian dynasties) imposed its own Middle Persian (Pahlavi) Zand. See Boyce, *Textual Sources*, esp. 2–7; Darmesteter and Mills, *The Zend-Avesta, Part 3*, xx–xxxvi.

31. Bahmanji, *New Self-Instructing Work*.
32. Bahmanji, *New Self-Instructing Work* (see “Notice”).
33. Bahmanji, *An Address; Tawṣīf-i Malikah-i Ingilistān*, ff.1–5.
34. Shea and Troyer, *Dābistan*, 1:15–17.
35. Khatchadourian, *Imperial Matter*, 1–2; Firdausi, *Shahnāma*, 1:12.
36. See, for example, Abul Fazl’s description of Akbar in *Akbarnāma*, 3:4–5.
37. Bahmanji, “Life of Dosabhai Sohrabji,” in *Idiomatic Sentences*, v.
38. Bahmanji, *Idiomatic Sentences*, i.
39. The document is mentioned in the following correspondence: Letter from Cursetjee Jamsetjee to John Malcolmson, 2. Also see Ramsay, *Memorandum*, published anonymously; and George Buist’s *Annals of India* (1849a) and *Correspondence, Deeds, Bye-laws* (1849b). Buist’s accounts formed the basis of the anonymous article, “Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy,” 135–52. Also see Palsetia, *Jamsetjee*, 144–52.
40. Palsetia, *Jamsetjee*, 144.
41. The Benevolent Fund was created in 1836 by Jijibhai, Framji Cowasji Banaji, and Jijibhai Dadabhai to educate children and young priests using a curriculum that included the study of Avestan, Persian, and English. See *Parsee Prakash*, 294.
42. Taskar, “Introduction,” *Persian Poems*.
43. Taskar, *Persian Poems*, 4.
44. Taskar’s English translations are somewhat free, and this line is mis-numbered in the English version as couplet 19, when the corresponding couplet is no. 18 in the Persian.
45. Taskar, *Persian Poems*, 7 (my translation).
46. Taskar, *Persian Poems*, 11.
47. Sanjana’s letter and the reply appear on the last two pages of the printed text, serving as a conclusion, and translated from English into Gujarati for local readers.
48. Taskar, *Persian Poems*, 38.
49. Taskar, *Persian Poems*, 39.
50. The inscription reads: “An Majestät / König Ludwig II von Bayern / in Sin[n]h[a]fter Ehrfurcht / gewidmet von / den Verfasser,

Peschutan Dastur Behramdschi, / Oberpriester der Parsier zu Bombay, / und Direktor der Zoroastrischen Priesterschud / im Auftrage der Verfasser: Prof. Dr. M. Gang zu München [To your Majesty / King Ludwig II of Bavaria / with Sincere Reverence / presented by / the Author, Peshotan Dastur Bahramji, / High Priest of the Parsis of Bombay, / and Director of the Zoroastrian Priesthood / On Behalf of the Author: Professor Doctor M. Gang of Munich].” I am grateful to Dr. Naomi Howell for her help with the transcription and translation.

51. See the posthumous publication of some of this work in Sanjana, *The Collected Works*.
52. Rall, *König Ludwig II*; Botzenhart, “*Ein Schattenkönig ohne Macht will ich nicht sein.*”
53. On Albert’s patronage of the arts, see Marsden, *Victoria and Albert*.
54. Bavanati, *Qasidah*, MS. Or.1031, Cambridge University Library.
55. Browne, *Press and Poetry*, 12–13, 168–74; Naini, *Safarnāma*, 210.

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