


## Special Issue: Parsis and Iranians in the Modern Period

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### Introduction

A hundred years ago in colonial Bombay, on September 10, 1922, a group of Parsis established an organization called the Iran League. Meant to strengthen ties with their Iranian Zoroastrian coreligionists inside Iran, the Iran League also endeavored to recast wider economic and cultural relations between India and the country which Parsis regarded as their ancient homeland. That ancient homeland, after all, was undergoing seismic change. In the years following Reza Khan's 1921 coup and the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925, Parsis watched with growing anticipation and excitement as Iran's new leader increasingly promoted a new national culture rooted in Iran's ancient past. Prominent Parsis, many of them leaders in the Iran League, fervently believed that Pahlavi Iran would herald all sorts of progressive change: improved conditions for the Iranian Zoroastrians, deeper appreciation of Zoroastrianism among Iran's Muslim majority, conditions for significant Parsi investment in Iran, and even the possibility of a mass Parsi "return" to the shah's domain, reversing the direction of centuries of Zoroastrian migration.<sup>1</sup>

A century later, many of these hopes and ambitions seem quite fantastical. Nevertheless, they reveal critically important aspects of modern Iranian and Indian histories. The affairs of two microscopic religious minorities, the Parsis and the Iranian Zoroastrians, open a vast window into Indo-Iranian cultural, economic, and political relations from the late nineteenth century onward. Zoroastrian philanthropic and cultural endeavors involved a yet wider set of questions about empire and nationalism: the two communities responded to very different political trajectories in India and Iran as well as the looming presence of the British Empire. Interactions between Parsis and Iranian Zoroastrians, who collectively numbered not much more than 100,000 souls at the time of the Iran League's founding, have left a lasting imprint on elements of modern Indian and Iranian society, from the bustling cities of Mumbai and Tehran to a shared literary and cultural landscape. It is in this spirit that we present the following articles in this special issue of *Iranian Studies* focusing on Parsis and modern Iran. Like the communities we study, we contributors are few in number, but we hope that our articles spark wider discussion about the role of minorities, diaspora studies, global history, and transnational perspectives in Indian and Iranian histories.

The articles in this special issue cover five key themes in Parsi relations with Iran: commerce and trade, philanthropy, cultural and textual exchange, travel, and minority identity. While most of our papers are confined to the late nineteenth century onward, these themes are useful lenses for exploring how, over a longer duration of time, Parsis retained physical and cultural ties with their ancient homeland. Trade helps explain the very creation of the Parsi community. While oral tradition and the sole written account of Parsi migration to India, the sixteenth-century *Qesseh-ye Sanjān*, emphasize religious persecution by Muslim overlords in Iran, archaeological evidence points to economic factors behind a Zoroastrian

<sup>1</sup> For the Iran League, see Patel, "Caught between Two Nationalisms." For more on the creative interactions between Parsis and Iranians from the late nineteenth century through the Second World War, see Marashi, *Exile and the Nation*.

presence on the Indian coast.<sup>2</sup> Long-standing Zoroastrian trading communities, likely predating the account narrated in the *Qesseh*, existed in Gujarati ports such as Bharuch. Indeed, Sanjan itself, where the *Qesseh* tells us Parsis first arrived on Indian shores, might have been a significant regional port.<sup>3</sup> The importance of trade as a factor in migration is further buttressed by the presence of Zoroastrian outposts beyond the Gujarati littoral, such as in the Kerala port town of Kollam, where a ninth-century copper plate provides us with the oldest written evidence of Zoroastrian residents in peninsular India.<sup>4</sup> It is likely that, as persecution against Zoroastrians intensified in Iran, the Parsi community grew out of waves of migrants to already-established Zoroastrian mercantile outposts along the western Indian coast.<sup>5</sup>

While acculturating to their new homeland in Gujarat, Parsis retained intermittent cultural and religious ties with Iran. In the late thirteenth century, for example, they welcomed a visiting Iranian priest, Rostam Mehraban. Rostam's great-great-nephew, Mehraban Kay Khosrow, spent an extensive period of time in Parsi settlements copying manuscripts brought from Iran.<sup>6</sup> Beginning in 1478, Parsis augmented bonds of text and travel with Iran via the *Revāyats*, a series of communications with the Iranian Zoroastrian priesthood which lasted until the eighteenth century. The *Revāyats* acknowledged the spiritual authority of the Iranian priesthood and led to further priestly exchanges between India and Iran, but they also contributed to the flourishing of scholarship amongst Parsi priests.<sup>7</sup> Under the Gujarati Sultanate and the Mughals, Parsis became stakeholders in the broader world of Indo-Persian culture, receiving titles and patronage from Indian rulers who cast themselves in a classic Sasanian mold while also participating in Indian Ocean trade at ports like Surat. Increasing Parsi prosperity, and the strength of its priesthood, led a section of the community to disavow Iranian priestly leadership and withdraw from participation in the exchange of *Revāyats* (the breaking point came with a fierce controversy, beginning in the early 1700s, over differences in the religious calendars of the Parsis and Iranian Zoroastrians).<sup>8</sup> The last *Revāyat* was received in Iran in the 1760s by Mulla Ka'us and his son, Mulla Firuz, who wrote of his travels in what is the oldest surviving Parsi contribution to the South Asian *safarnāmeḥ* tradition.<sup>9</sup>

By the early nineteenth century, the positions of the Parsi and Iranian Zoroastrian communities were starkly at odds with one another. The Iranian Zoroastrian priesthood went into terminal decline, with the overall community shrinking in numbers and exposed to significant impoverishment and deprivation. The flight of Zoroastrians from Iran to India—such as that of Golestan Banu, who according to tradition had escaped Kerman in 1796 after being threatened with abduction and conversion to Islam—highlighted the precarious nature of Zoroastrian existence in the ancient homeland, while swelling the ranks of an emerging “Irani” community in places such as Bombay and Poona.<sup>10</sup> Western travelers to Iran confirmed stories of community decline, which reached a concerned Parsi readership.<sup>11</sup> Such accounts launched a new form of Parsi engagement with Iran, one premised on philanthropy. In 1853, a group of Bombay Parsis established the Society for the Amelioration of

<sup>2</sup> For a recent English translation of the *Qesseh*, see Williams, *The Zoroastrian Myth of Migration from Iran*.

<sup>3</sup> Nanji and Dhalla, “The Landing of the Zoroastrians at Sanjan.”

<sup>4</sup> Cereti, “Some Primary Sources.”

<sup>5</sup> For a perspective on the Parsi migration that emphasizes the importance of Indian Ocean trade dynamics, particularly the rise of Arab competition, see Wink, *Al-Hind*. For a detailed analysis of declining Zoroastrian fortunes in Iran in the centuries after the Arab invasion, see Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation*.

<sup>6</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 170.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the *Revāyats*, see Maneck, *The Death of Ahriman*, chapter 3; and Sheffield, “In the Path of the Prophet,” chapter 4.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the calendar dispute, see Maneck, *The Death of Ahriman*, chapter 6.

<sup>9</sup> Sheffield, “Iran, the Mark of Paradise or the Land of Ruin?”

<sup>10</sup> For a brief description of Golestan Banu and her descendants, see, for example, Coyajee, “A Brief Life-Sketch of the Late Mr. Dinshah Jeejeebhoy Irani,” vi–vii. There remains strikingly little scholarship on the development of the Zoroastrian Irani community in India.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Westergaard, “Extract from a Letter.”

the Conditions of the Zoroastrians in Persia, which in the following year sent Manekji Limji Hataria as their emissary to Iran.<sup>12</sup> After Manekji confirmed the depressed conditions of a vastly shrunken Iranian Zoroastrian community, Parsi benefactors launched a comprehensive project of community uplift—education, social and religious reform, and institution-building—coupled with vigorous diplomacy to abolish the *jizya* tax levied upon Zoroastrian subjects of the shah. Parsi philanthropy and assistance helped improve the conditions of Iranian Zoroastrians and bring about substantial change in the community.<sup>13</sup>

As importantly, this assistance flung open the doors to a century of intensive Parsi engagement with Iranian society, both Zoroastrian and non-Zoroastrian. This has had a fundamental influence on Zoroastrian minority identity in both Iran and India. As Parsis played up their connections with Iran, both ancient and modern, they attempted to culturally and ethnically distance themselves from their fellow Indians, resulting in what Eckehard Kulke has described as a “mental estrangement” from India and the community’s “permanent identity crisis.”<sup>14</sup> Iranian Zoroastrians, meanwhile, reshaped their community identity in the twentieth century in response to Parsi cultural, economic, religious, and scholarly influence and the headwinds of Pahlavi-era nationalism. The Iranian Revolution, however, was a reminder to the community of its precarious status as a numerically insignificant minority — one which had to carefully navigate its relations with Iran’s Shi’i majority.<sup>15</sup>

The five articles included in this issue collectively trace the varied dimensions of this renewed encounter between Parsis and Iranians. Dinyar Patel’s article begins the issue by considering the larger imperial context of Parsi-Iranian relations. Despite their small numbers, influential civic leaders from among the prosperous Parsi community increasingly worked to advocate for the cause of Iran’s dwindling and beleaguered Zoroastrians. As Patel’s article details, the close associations that Parsi leaders enjoyed with British diplomats, combined with their tactful navigation of nineteenth-century imperial politics, set the stage for both the amelioration of the condition of Iran’s Zoroastrian community and British efforts to cultivate allies inside Iran. By the late nineteenth century, both Parsis and Iranian Zoroastrians were drawn into Great Game rivalries between Britain and Russia, demonstrating how philanthropy became enmeshed in broader struggles for political power.

Talinn Grigor’s article shifts the perspective from the realm of high politics to the terrain of textual, architectural, and aesthetic forms growing from renewed connections between Parsis and Iranians. Her article considers the trajectories of Parsi-published books and periodicals as they made their way inside Iran, and the role of these texts in shaping a new style of neoclassical revivalist architecture that emerged in both Iran and Bombay during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Grigor argues, while this new revivalist architecture embraced the universalist temporality of modernist historicism, the aesthetic elements emerging from this Parsi-Iranian revivalist architecture also reflected the cultural assertion of an emerging national consciousness shared by Parsis and Iranians.

By the 1920s, encounters between Parsis and Iranians became increasingly consolidated—not only as a result of diplomatic and textual exchange but now increasingly through the more accessible experience of travel and tourism between India and Iran. Murali Ranganathan’s article examines the little-studied genre of Parsi Gujarati travelogues to Iran during the early 1920s. As Ranganathan argues, these travelogues reflect growing Parsi aspirations for a more profound reconnection with what they considered to be their ancestral Iranian homeland. While Parsi aspirations for Iran were shaped by concerns regarding the community’s prospects in a

<sup>12</sup> For work on Manekji, see Boyce, “Manekji Limji Hataria in Iran”; Giara, Karanjia, and Stausberg, “Manekji on the Religious/Ritual Practices of the Iranian Zoroastrians”; Sheffield, “Iran, the Mark of Paradise or the Land of Ruin?”; and Zia-Ebrahimi, “An Emissary of the Golden Age.”

<sup>13</sup> Amighi, *The Zoroastrians of Iran*; Marashi, *Exile and the Nation*; Ringer, *Pious Citizens*.

<sup>14</sup> Kulke, *The Parsees in India*, 140, 144.

<sup>15</sup> Choksy, “Despite Shāhs and Mollās.”

soon-to-be independent India, these travelogues reflected deep anxieties and uncertainties that might result from a “return” to Iran.

The tension between Parsi aspirations and anxieties is also reflected in Afshin Marashi’s article. As Marashi details, while Parsi remigration remained a possibility that was increasingly discussed among community leaders during the 1920s and 1930s, the more immediate prospect of return commonly took the form of Parsi economic missions to Iran. Marashi’s article details a series of Parsi-led economic missions to Iran that had the goal of surveying the possibilities of Parsi investment in Iran’s nascent developmentalist ambitions. As the article suggests, like the lofty Parsi aspirations of permanent remigration, these Parsi plans to invest in Iran also faced innumerable obstacles.

Finally, Navid Fozi-Abifard’s article extends the analysis of the Parsi and Iranian exchange into Iran’s post-1979 cultural and political landscape. As Fozi-Abifard’s rich ethnographic discussion reveals, the contemporary status of Iran’s Zoroastrian minority does not signify a simple return to the community’s premodern social and cultural status. Rather, the legacies of the early twentieth century Parsi-Iranian exchange have left enduring traces on contemporary Iranian Zoroastrian consciousness, even as the community has now found it necessary to find some accommodation with a newly ascendant state-Shi’ism.

We present the five articles of this special issue, and the accompanying photo essay, as a small sampling of the recent research that has emerged from scholarship within the field of Iranian studies that has self-consciously sought to move beyond historiographic geographies defined by both the nation-state and the area studies paradigms. The recent engagement of Iranian historiography with the fields of Indian Ocean, Persianate, and South Asian studies has perhaps yielded the most prodigious scholarship to emerge from this shifting of historiographic geographies. Within this still nascent scholarship, the encounter between Parsis and Iranians was perhaps the most important and consequential, and yet long-ignored, episode that required investigation for understanding the trajectory of Iran’s modern history. It has only been since the emergence of critical approaches to the history of nationalism and the area studies paradigm that the consequences of this Parsi-Iranian encounter have come into clearer focus. Many other encounters that were just as consequential for Iran’s modern history—and just as long-ignored—no doubt remain hidden behind the still-lingering habits of conventional historiographic geographies. It will be the task of future researchers to uncover these still-hidden histories by finding new ways of situating Iran within the connected, transnational, and global histories of the modern era.

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