Manekji Limji Hatari and the rediscovery of Ancient Iran

Michael Stausberg, (Heidelberg, Germany)

It is well known that the late Jamshid Soroush Soroushian, whose memory this volume justly seeks to extoll, for many decades was among the leaders of the Zoroastrian Anjoman of Kermān. In an early chapter of his valuable Tārikh-e Zartoshtān-e Kermān dar in chand sadh (Kermān 1370 = 1991) he mentions that his family was involved in the history of this Anjoman from its very beginning (p. 3). As Jamshid Soroush Soroushian faithfully remarks, like its sister-organization in Yazd the Kermān Anjoman was founded by Manekji Limji Hatari (1813-1890), who was acting as its first president when he was staying at Kermān. It is strange, indeed, that Mary Boyce in her otherwise masterly essay on “Manekji Limji Hataria in Iran” passes over this lasting effect of Manekji’s work with silence. In any case, it seems appropriate once again to draw attention to Manekji when commemorating Jamshid Soroush Soroushian. In this short paper, however, I will not be dealing with the numerous achievements that make Manekji immortal among Iranian Zoroastrians. Instead, I would like to highlight another aspect of Manekji’s work that, to my knowledge, has not found the attention it may deserve: his attempts at rediscovering the pre-Islamic heritage of Iran which possibly had a certain impact on the young proto-nationalistic movement in 19th Century Iran.

Manekji arrived in Iran in 1854 as the first emissary of the “Society for the Amelioration of the Conditions of the Zoroastrians in Persia” (hereafter referred to as “the Society”). During his time in Iran he filed several reports to the Society (whose whereabouts are unknown to me). After almost ten years, in 1863, he returned to Bombay. As a later report, published in 1871, points out, tremendous efforts were made to find a replacement for Manekji. During his time in Bombay, Manekji’s son Hormuz had remained in Iran to carry on his father’s work. New arrangements having been made with the Society, Manekji himself returned to Iran in 1865.

On March 20th, 1864, during Manekji’s stay in India, a special meeting was called by the Society at the residence of Seth Merwanji Framji Panday, its main benefactor. At this special meeting which was chaired by Sir Jamshetji Jijibhoy, Baronet, Manekji gave a long speech. This speech is the backbone of his Rishāl-e ejhār-e shāte Iran which was published in 1500 copies to be distributed free to every potential donor by the Bombay Union Press in 1865. The speech covers 18 of the book’s 22 chapters.
In an inscription at the Dar-e Mehr-e Mahalle-ye Shar in Kermān, which was recorded by Mary Boyce, Manekji is referring to “the Society of the Indian Zoroastrians, who are of the race of the ancient Parsis of Iran”. To himself he refers as “Limji Hushang Hatāriā of India, by race a Persian”. Boyce notes that the inscription is “remarkable for the fact that, apart from the date and the colophon, it contains not a single word of Arabic origin”.

This very concern for his ancient Iranian or rather Persian heritage turns out to be a dominant theme in Manekji’s Essay on a Description of a Travel to Iran as well. Thus, in chapter 2 he deals with Iran as “the original birthplace of the ancestors of the Parsi community and of their Empire” (p. 2). In this chapter, Manekji paints an almost mythic picture of Iran. He states that Iran was referred to as paradise by previous rulers and that it was “the symbol of heaven” (p. 2). He explicitly remarks that “these words are not used by some for flattery, but truly the climate of the country, the vegetable produce and all things that are needed in this world being available, undoubtedly, that country was like the garden of heaven” (p. 2). Manekji’s view of Iran as a mythical region is also evident when he remarks that “Iran was located in the higher centre of world, like the very heart of the world”. According to Manekji, the ancestors of the Parsis who were “reigning over a large part of the world for thousands of years” had located their capital in Iran because of the country’s useful products and its salubrious climate (p. 2). In these mythic days of the ancestral empire, Manekji continues, “that nation was so fertile and full of knowledge and arts, industry and prosperity, that a prosperous nation like that may not be existing in the present times anywhere on earth” (pp. 2-3). In that mythic country, because of the piety, the purity and the cleanliness of its inhabitants, the “God fearing Parsi Zoroastrians of that time, many types of diseases were absent, and all enjoyed a long healthy life” (p. 3). The chapter concluded by stating that it can be said that the good Lord gifted Iran for the Parsis to rule and for the use of the Zoroastrian community” (p. 3).

The next step in the mythic construction of time and space is the topos of the fall. This came about “due to the hands of fate”, as Manekji states in the third chapter, “About the deteriorating condition of Iran after the Parsis lost their kingdom” (p. 3). After 1200 years of ‘alien’ rule, Iran has become a desert-like country. The garden of Heaven has disappeared, “and the angels who lived there have vanished, and... every scholar has been saying that Iran itself is paradise but has fallen in the hands of the devils” (p. 4). Manekji gives a long list of symptoms of the country’s decay: quarrelsome, deceit, plunder, illiteracy, poverty, cruelty, envy, jealousy, mercilessness, natural calamities, and tyrannical rule (p. 3). Because of the “unhygienic habits [of its later inhabitants - MST.] various diseases have crept in, and everyone’s understanding or reasoning has become dumb” (p. 4).

After a brief discussion “About the apparently changing condition of Iran after the Qajar dynasty ascending the throne of Iran”, as the title of chapter four goes (pp. 4-5), in chapter five, entitled “An account of the people’s happiness destroyed by prevailing rule in Iran” (pp. 6-7), Manekji mentions “several undesirable Iranian Muslims” who “have lost the fame of their nation and foolishly forsaken industry and trade” (p. 6). Manekji observes that the powerful among them saw it as their main occupation to harm the weak and to inflict suffering on others. They were local tyrants in towns and villages, “and there is no way to avoid them” (p. 6).

Chapters six to fifteen (pp. 7-78) contain the famous report on the dramatic and precarious living-conditions of the Iranian Zoroastrians, and the efforts to ameliorate their situation as undertaken or to be undertaken by Manekji and the Society.

Manekji considers the Zoroastrians or the Parsis, as Manekji prefers to call the members of his community, as the descendants of the pre-Islamic inhabitants and rulers of Iran. For Manekji, the concern for his present-day Iranian coreligionists therefore went along with a deep interest in the pre-Islamic past. He deplores the general ignorance about the pre-Islamic past, when he in chapter sixteen (“Brief note on original signs of Parsi Kings in Iran”) states that “the present surviving Parsis in Iran” were totally ignorant “whether any signs of their period still survive or not” (p. 79). According to Manekji, this ignorance is to be excused, since it was impossible for the Parsis to travel, “due to the persecution and harassment” (p. 79).

Together with his activities to improve the living-condition of the ‘the present surviving Parsis in Iran’, Manekji was also aiming at rescuing traces of their cultural heritage, and he devoted a good deal of his time and his money to this particular project. Manekji himself remarks that he “spent long days in traveling and making enquiries and collecting documentary evidence” (p. 79), and he considered himself much better equipped to undertake such a task than even the greatest foreign scholar: “It is also clear that to collect evidence about the land and religion of the ancestors of the Parsis, a person from the same group who may be a little known, can do better research than big scholars from foreign places” (p. 79).

His passion to explore the mythical landscape of pre-Islamic Iran was with him right from the beginning, and he recalls that prior to his departure to Iran he already had “roamed in several parts of India, and searched ancient books and having a curiosity to find out what were the works of skill.”
knowledge and vision of our ancestors” (p. 88). Not for nothing was Manekji known as a *dervish-e fānī*, a ‘transitory dervish’. In a way, Manekji’s travel to Iran can be seen as a mythical return-journey. Thus, in 1854, leaving Bombay by sea, he first set foot on Iranian soil precisely at the port of Hormuz, “from where the ancestors of the Parsis left Iran and came towards India”, as he remarks (p. 80). The first thing he did at Hormuz was to obtain an account of a special astronomic instrument. When describing his travels, he always notes his eagerness to register everything for posterity. The mention of the different places and monuments which he visited or discovered frequently conclude with remarks as the following: “some facts that relate to the history of the times of the ancestors of the Parsis have been obtained”, “these records have been obtained”; “all that has been recorded”; “saw all that and made notes with sketches”; “its story has been obtained”; “a summary of all that has been collected”; “we documented them and deduced their meaning”; “obtained an account of whatever was worth seeing”; “that has been copied along with some notes”; “whatever topics we saw or learnt about the times of the original ancestors of the Parsis has been all recorded”; “saw all these and obtained details”, “whatever one saw or learnt, notes relating to history have been collected to the extent possible”; etc. (pp. 80-86).

During his many exploratory travels, undertaken during a period of ten years, Iran unfolded itself to Manekji as a meaningful landscape, revealing many traces of its mythic past. He even opines that the “ancestors of the Parsis with foresight and wisdom” had left public and secret signs, writings, monuments and pictures all over the country (p. 86). Thus: Even twelve hundred years of political, religious, and natural disasters have to Manekji’s eyes not been able to obliterate these traces.

In a way, Manekji’s mythical return-journey to Iran foreshadows the later mythical and ecstatic travel to Mount Damavand that Behramshah Shroff (1858-1927), the central figure of mystical traditions in modern Indian Zoroastrianism, claims to have undertaken some years after Manekji’s report was published. Ustad Behramshah, as he is referred to by his devotees, reported that he for almost three years (from 1875 to 1878) was staying with a Zoroastrian master-community that reportedly went into hiding before the Arabic conquest of Iran and has remained invisible ever since. On an even larger scale than Manekji’s researches, the special travels of Ustad Behramshah opened up the secrets of the Iranian past, future, and religion. To some extent, the mystic career of Ustad Behramshah seems to be a transfiguration of the endeavors of Manekji, the “mendicant”, as he calls himself (p. 9). However, compared to Ustad Behramshah and his experiences, Manekji and his travels were, of course, more of the ordinary kind, even taking into consideration that some of Manekji’s discoveries.
religious reasons and in the hope of expanding his collection in the future, had refused that offer, thus renouncing a financial reward. Instead, he wanted to donate his collection to the Society under certain clauses. However, his suggestion fell on deaf ears. The Society obviously considered it none of their business to take care of Manekji’s collection and have it preserved and displayed in a proper way. Several times, Manekji repeated and revised his offer, but obviously without any result. Unfortunately, I am not aware of the latter destiny of this collection, and I was unable to find any traces thereof in Bombay.

Manekji who at that time was not at all sure if he would return to Iran (eventually he did) requested the leaders of the Indian Zoroastrian community to have his research continued. He regarded it as “the duty of every faithful one” (p. 87) to collect, publish, and revive the knowledge, skills, industries, rules, regulations, and politics of the ancient Parsis which “have been now lost for a long time” (p. 87). According to Manekji, the neglect of this work among the Parsis has led them into a position of inferiority to the European savants who have quickly seized that opportunity. Therefore, the educated members of the Parsi community, and those seeking after the welfare and reform of the community, had to “engage in dialogue or correspondence with the Europeans” (p. 87). These, clever as they are, immediately “show their superiority, and seeing the indifference and ignorance of the Parsis, serve their purpose in many ways. Yet, due to ignorance, we have to accept what they say. As a result, the time-frame of the original history and rules and regulations of the ancient Parsi - MSt. - has been lost and is still being lost. That harm can be prevented” (pp. 87-88). Again, this remarkable pleading for academic research and warning cry against the European scholars in a way reminds one of the later Zoroastrian esotericism as advocated by Ustad Behramshah Shroff and his followers. Moreover, it strikes a significant note in the context of the ongoing debate about post-colonialism and orientalism.

In that connection it is interesting to note8 that Manekji himself in Tehrān was on good terms with two major European intellectual figures involved in research on ancient Iranian history: Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson (1810-1895) and Joseph-Arthur, comte de Gobineau (1816-1882). Manekji accompanied Rawlinson on a trip in 1859. That gave him ample opportunity to converse with him. Between 1853 and 1855 de Gobineau had published his famous and influential Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines (Essay on the Inequality of Human Races) in which he advocates ‘racial purity’ as a precondition for the flourishing of ‘Aryan societies’, an idea which, in modified form, even today seems to appeal to a good number of Parsis. Like Manekji, de Gobineau also traveled through Iran and neighboring countries.

Keys to Manekji’s success in improving the lot of his Iranian coreligionists were not only his passion, coupled with courage, cleverness, and close ties to the Western powers, but also his good relationships to some members of the Qajar elite. For instance, he was on good terms with a freethinking Qajar prince by the name of Jalāl al-Dīn Mirza. The latter in his turn introduced Manekji to the provocative intellectual Fathali Ākundzādeh (1812-1878) who is probably best known for his attempts to revise the scripts for the Turkish and Persian languages and his ideas to reform Islam by ‘rationalizing’ it and freeing it from ‘superstitions’. Moreover, as Mangol Bayat has shown, Ākundzādeh, who himself was neither Iranian by birth nor by residence, was at the forefront of early nationalistic thinking in 19th Century Iran.

As a nationalistic thinker Ākundzādeh was strongly interested in the pre-Islamic cultural legacy of the country while condemning Islam as the cause for Iran’s decay from its presumed pre-Islamic splendour. The problem, however, was that he hardly knew anything about ancient Iranian history. Nevertheless, to Jalāl al-Dīn Mirza and Manekji he expressed his desire to do research in this field in order to reveal the “calamities and ruin our fatherland has suffered” due to the Muslim Arabs.9 In a letter to Manekji, dated July 29th, 1871, he confessed: “My hope is to have Iranians realise that we are the children of the Parsis and our fatherland is Iran. We should side with those who share our race, our language, our fatherland, and not with bloodthirsty aliens.”10 One cannot help wondering if these ideas were just ‘in the air’ at that time or if Manekji actually did stimulate this kind of approach. In any event, it is easy to imagine that Manekji must have been quite pleased with Ākundzādeh’s idea, for it confirmed his own project of rediscovering the mythic past of Iran. In another letter to Manekji, Ākundzādeh praises the Zarathushtrian as the “reminder of our ancestors ... from whom we have been separated.”11 The fact that Ākundzādeh praises Manekji in these terms seems to confirm the suspicion that Manekji was influential in reminding the emerging group of Iranian proto-nationalistic intellectuals of their pre-Islamic heritage.

In the very same letter Ākundzādeh holds out a prospect of better social and legal recognition for the Zoroastrians “who have suffered eclipse for 1280 years.”12 As is well known, this prospect, albeit for different political reasons, to a certain extent eventually became reality during the 20th Century. In the context of growing modern Iranian nationalism Zoroastrianism (rather than the Zoroastrians) in a way came to represent the presumed ‘pure’ Iranian heritage.13 One should not forget that this was more or less the role Manekji was projecting for the Iranian Zoroastrian communities when he was trying to abolish what he saw as practices and attitudes borrowed from ‘aliens’ (just as some Indian reformers were trying
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to remove presumed ‘Hindu’ traits in the religious and social life of the Parsis in India). On the other hand, however, Akhundzadeh in the very same letter to Manekji, asserted that the pre-Islamic culture and religion will not be restored in the future: “Islam will prevail, though not in the same way”, he states. Even this prediction was to hold true, though not quite in the way Akhundzadeh or Manekji would have anticipated.

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1 Michael Stausberg was born in Cologne, Germany in 1966, and received his Ph.D. from the University of Bonn in 1995. He is Docent of Religionshistoria at Uppsala University and Privatdozent of Religionswissenschaft at the University of Heidelberg and taught at the universities of Uppsala, Heidelberg, Tübingen, and Bern. Currently, he is acting as the head of a junior research-group at the University of Heidelberg (Institut für Religionswissenschaft). His main fields of interest are European religious history, Zoroastrianism, and (ritual) theory. His books include Faszination Zarathushtra (2 vols., 1998), and Die Religion Zarathushtras (3 vols., 2002-2003). He is the editor of Kontinuitäten und Brüche in der Religionsgeschichte (2001), Zoroastrian Rituals in Context (2003), and co-editor of Studies in Religious Iconography and Iconology (1998), Ritor och ritteorier (2002) and Theorizing Rituals (2004).


4 Essay on a Description of a Travel to Iran, 174 pp.


6 pp. 66-68 of the previous reference.

7 p. 66, note 48 of previous reference.

8 Boroussian, Tārīkh-e Zaroshtīān-e Kermān dar in chand sadeh, p. 5.

9 Boyce, “Manekji Limji Hatāriā in Iran”, p. 25.

10 quoted by Bayat, Mangol, Mysticism and Dissent. Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran, Syracuse, 1982, p. 168

11 quoted by Bayat, Mysticism and Dissent, p. 168.

12 quoted by Bayat, Mysticism and Dissent, p. 169.


14 quoted by Bayat, Mysticism and Dissent, p. 169.
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