



BEHRAMSHAH NAOROJI SHROFF

BEHRAMSHAH NAOROJI SHROFF (1858-1927). Parsi religions teacher and founder of the movement known as Ilm-i Khshnoom ('Elm-e košnūm; Path of knowledge). He was born of a priestly family in Bombay but brought up in Surat from the age of two. Although some sources refer to a middle-class family background in Bombay, where his father was a moneylender (Shroff), he seems, rather, to have lived in poor circumstances in Surat, influenced mainly by his mother. He received only an elementary education in Gujarati, never proceeding to secondary school or instruction in English. At the age of 18 he left home after a quarrel with his mother and traveled to Peshawar where he stayed with his uncle. Near there, his followers believe, he met with a caravan of secret Zoroastrians. Behramshah, it is taught, was the reincarnation of a brave general from ancient Iran who had saved the life of a holy priest. That priest is now reincarnated as the Grand Chief (Ustad Saheb/Ostād Šāḥeb, a term also used by Khshnoomists to refer to Shroff) of a colony of Zoroastrian spiritual masters hidden in Mount Domāvand in Iran. This is said to be one of three such secret "Mazdaznian" monasteries: one on the European-Russian border, one a subterranean colony near the Caspian, and this one, Firdaus (Ferdows; Paradise) in Demāvand. Later Kshnoomists believe that only three persons have ever been allowed to enter Firdaus: an Iranian astrologer named Rustom Nazoomie, the prophet for the U.S.A., Revd. Dr. Otoman Zardusht, and Behramshah Shroff, the prophet for Parsis in India. Behramshah was led to Firdaus by the caravan of disguised Zoroastrians at the



behest of their Grand Chief as recompense for his aid in his earlier life. Firdaus is described as an agricultural paradise where all is peace, prosperity, and contentment. There are streets of rock-hewn caves with streams of nectar. No animal slaughter is practiced there. The colony of some 2,000 righteous souls guard both spiritual and material treasures from ancient Iran. There, it is believed, is preserved the original copy of the *Šāh-nāma* which the Sōšyāns will bring forth at the renovation of the universe. Behramshah is said to have remained in Firdaus for three years while he was given spiritual insight and occult powers. He entered Firdaus with a stammer and illiterate, he left it a powerful orator and an interpreter of Avestan and Pahlavi texts, with a knowledge of astrology and ayurvedic medicine, able to communicate directly, wherever he might be, with the Sahebs back in Firdaus. On his return to his homeland, tradition relates, he toured India for some ten years (ca. 1881-91) meeting teachers of various religions. Until 1907, however, he remained silent concerning these experiences. This period is described by his followers as one of physical inertness but of great mental gestation and exertion. He married in 1893. In 1907 he attended a religious class taken by Munchersha Palonji Kaikobad (Master) a noted religious orthodox who was principal of Surat High School. Kaikobad perceived a depth of insight in Behramshah's comments on the sacred fire and encouraged and launched him on his teaching mission. He introduced him to K. B. Choksi, who brought him to Bombay. His first public lecture there was in 1909 at the Banaji Fire Temple. He began to teach under the auspices of the Parsi Vegetarian and Temperance Society (P.V.T.S.) at the Bengali school, the Anjuman Atash Bahram (Anjoman-e Ātaš Bahrām) and the Theosophical Lodge. He was associated with the Fasli, (Faṣlī) movement which pressed for the adoption of a seasonal calendar in accord with the Gregorian one, though his followers are not particularly linked with that or either of the other two calendar divisions in the Parsi community.

There were some suggestions in the early years of building a separate temple at Jogeshwari, but these were not implemented, and neither Behramshah nor his followers sought to establish a different liturgical practice or cult. He is said to have delivered 64 lectures on Fire and the work of temples in nature, lectures which sometimes lasted for hours. Some 10 books or pamphlets were produced for free circulation, and his teaching was set forward through the P.V.T.S. monthly journal *Frashoqard* and the Zarathustrian Radi Society. Women as well as men attended his lectures—not a widespread feature of Indian religious practice at that time.



His teaching can be summarized as a Zoroastrianized form of Theosophy. Reincarnation, vegetarianism, an emphasis on the importance of occult powers, the value of traditional rituals, and a devotional commitment to prayers in the ancient sacred language rather than in the vernacular, these are teachings Behramshah Shroff shared with Theosophy. He differed in attributing the source of his inspiration not to hidden Masters in Tibet, but to a secret colony of Zoroastrians in Iran. Parsis were prominent in the early history of Theosophy in India but began to distance themselves when, under Annie Besant's leadership, Theosophy was increasingly identified with the cause of militant Hindu nationalism in the early years of the twentieth century. As political events in India created a sense of communal insecurity for the community, the conditions for Zoroastrians in Iran improved, and scholarly studies of ancient Iran revived affections for the fatherland. Shroff's teaching met the mood of the times for many. In addition to Kaikobad and Choksi his early followers were two pairs of brothers: F. S. and J. S. Chiniwalla and F. S. and D. S. Masani, though the interests of Parsis of many backgrounds were aroused by the Iranian links, notably the great religious reformer K. R. Cama and the scholarly secretary of the Panchayet Sir J. J. Modi. Shroff's claim to have direct mystical experience and contact with spiritual powers attracted many Parsis who felt that Western influences in the form of arid academic studies, Christianity, and materialism threatened the religious life and identity of the community. The movement he started, Ilm-i-Khshnoom, has remained within the community rather than forming a separate sect.

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