



DĀ'Ī-AL-ESLĀM, SAYYED MOḤAMMAD 'ALĪ

DĀ'Ī-AL-ESLĀM, SAYYED MOḤAMMAD-'ALĪ, Persian scholar, preacher, and lexicographer, born 1295/1878 at Lārijān. After receiving his early education at Āmol and Tehran, in 1316/1898 he went to Isfahan to continue his studies under the guidance of such respected religious teachers as Ākūnd Mollā Moḥammad Kāšī, Jahāngīr Khan Qašqā'ī and [Āqā Khan Najafī](#). His stay at Isfahan (1316-24/1898-1906), during which he also learned English and Hebrew, coincided with the arrival of some European missionaries, who, through their preaching and distribution of polemical literature, caused a great stir. The young Moḥammad-'Alī so effectively refuted their allegations in his monthly journal *Majallat-al-Eslām* (launched in December 1902) that he aroused considerable favorable attention, causing Moẓaffar-al-Dīn Shah (1314-24/1896-1907) to bestow upon him the title Dā'ī-al-Eslām (Nikū Hemmat, p. 438). In 1324/1906 he went to the Ḥejāz on pilgrimage; on the way back he passed through Egypt, where he was warmly received by Persian merchants familiar with his activities in Isfahan. He wanted to return home via Bombay, but when he reached there the local Persian expatriates sought his help in defending Islam against Christian missionaries. He learned Urdu, founded the Anjoman Da'wat-al-Eslām and the *Majalla Da'wat-al-Eslām* (October 1906), and preached so actively that he soon became known all over India. During the third year of his stay in Bombay he was appointed professor of Persian in the Neẓām college in Hyderabad, Deccan, an ideal forum for his preaching. Despite this new position, he remained active in polemical activities and year



after year devoted one quarter of his salary to the Anjoman (Dā'ī-al-Eslām, n.d.b, pp. 24-25)

From his vantage point in India Dā'ī-al-Eslām (n.d.a, p. 23), pained at the political plight of Persia and longing to see the country restored to its past glory, pleaded for universal literacy and a bipartisan approach by the ruling elite and ecclesiastical leaders to national problems (Dā'ī-al-Eslām, n.d.b, p. 23). He believed that, through national unity and revitalization, Persians could restore their country to greatness, as they had done under Nāder Shah (1148-60/1736-47), despite much greater odds (Durand, tr., p. ii). In order to further understanding of Persian history and culture in India, Dā'ī-al-Eslām established a chapter of Jāme'a-ye ma'āref in Hyderabad (1928, pp. 43-44; cf. pp. 27-28) and circulated numerous pamphlets.

Despite his political efforts, Dā'ī-al-Eslām's greatest achievement was his *Farhang-e neẓām*, the first Persian etymological work that approximated in format and range of information comparable dictionaries in European languages and thus marked a watershed in the evolution of Persian lexicography. Despite developments in the language in the last fifty years, it still retains its usefulness. Dā'ī-al-Eslām worked on his dictionary for nineteen years, three of which he devoted exclusively to research into the linguistic and dialectal aspects of the language spoken in Persia (Dā'ī-al-Eslām, n.d.b, p. 25). Unlike its predecessors, *Farhang-e neẓām* is not a mere compendium of archaic terms found mainly in poetic contexts; it includes words from Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and European languages that were likely to be required by those who spoke Persian, each classified according to part of speech, as well as to whether it was colloquial, slang, literary, obsolete, and so on. Words confined to specific dialects or associated with different social groups were also clearly identified. Pronunciations were recorded in Avestan script; when pronunciation varied, that of Tehran was preferred. When appropriate he illustrated correct usage by means of illustrative couplets, phrases, and the like. Because some knowledge of Sanskrit is required for the understanding of the etymologies of many Persian words, Dā'ī-al-Eslām compiled a Sanskrit grammar, which he included in *Farhang-e neẓām* (IV, pp. v-xcvi). He also attached great importance to the Avestan language (IV, pp. i, vi) and vehemently opposed the exclusion of Arabic vocabulary, which he considered an integral part of Persian as it had developed over the centuries. On the other hand, he had such a low opinion of the Persian verse of the Qajar period that



he ignored it as a source for his dictionary (1983, V, p. 1). He also destroyed all the poetry that he himself had composed under its influence (n.d.b. p. 25); all his subsequent compositions emulated Safavid style.

To Dā'ī-al-Eslām goes the credit for the first article ever written in Persian on the poetry of Eqbāl-e Lāhūrī (d. 1938; Jūnāgarḥī, p. 79), introducing him to Persians outside India (Moḥīṭ Ṭabāṭabā'ī, p. 208). In 1321 Š./1942 Dā'ī-al-Eslām returned to Persia, where he spoke openly about his views on various social, cultural, historical, and religious issues. After about four years he returned to Hyderabad, where he died on 26 Ābān 1330 Š./18 November 1951 (Naqawī, p. 256; Nīkū Hemmat, p. 438).

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