



DHALLA, DASTUR MANECKJI NUSSERWANJI

DHALLA, DASTUR MANECKJI NUSSERWANJI (b. 22 September 1875, Surat; d. 25 May 1956, Karachi), Parsi priest and scholar ([FIGURE 1](#)). In 1878 Dhalla came to Karachi with his father, married at the age of nine, and was ordained a priest (*navar*) in 1890. For a while he abandoned his studies and worked to augment the family's meagre income, but his scholarly interest never waned. At the age of nineteen he became the editor of a monthly magazine called *Golšan-e dāneš* (1st issue published September 1894). In its second year Dhalla took over the ownership of the magazine, but shortage of funds forced him to close it down in December 1896. On 21 March 1895 he delivered his first sermon on *ātaš* (fire). In the same year he published for free circulation a booklet in Gujarati, followed by five others during the next three years. On 21 September 1900 he delivered his first lecture in Bombay at the Framji Cawasji Institute. Later on the lectures he gave in Bombay and elsewhere in India made him famous in the Zoroastrian community. In August 1901 Dhalla went to Bombay to pursue his studies, and in 1904 he completed in three years the five-year course of the M. A. program in Avestan and Pahlavi studies at Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy Madressa. On 15 May 1905 he was sent by the Parsi community to the United States to study with A. V. W. Jackson at Columbia University, where he received his Master's degree in 1906 and Ph.D. in May 1908. His doctoral thesis entitled *The Nyaishes or Zoroastrian Litanies* (New York, 1908). Experiences at Columbia University changed Dhalla's outlook. His fascination with conventional ritualistic religion faded. He now considered



ethics as the highest form of religion and felt attracted to mysticism. His antagonism for western culture turned to amity. He returned to Bombay in December 1908 and on 19 September 1909 was appointed the High Priest of the Parsis in Karachi. In 1910 he initiated the idea of holding a Zoroastrian conference, but the controversy it created involving orthodox Parsis soon aborted the idea. In the same year he started the religious journal *Aša*, which was published for less than a year. In 1914 he again went to the United States to deliver lectures and while there published his *Zoroastrian Theology*. In recognition of his services, the Parsis of Karachi established a fund in 1915, from which he received a monthly honorarium. In 1922 he went to the United States for the third time and published his *Zoroastrian Civilization*.

Dhalla labored relentlessly all his life to make his co-religionists understand their own faith better. His motto in life was “plain living and high thinking.” He was well respected by his colleagues and community for his amiable nature and sincerity. For his scholarly achievements, he received the title of Shams-ul-Ulema (Šams-al-‘Olamā), the first Parsi in Karachi to receive such an honor. As a youth he upheld reformist views and involved himself in religious disputes through speeches and articles. But soon he found that such dispute hampered his studies and desisted from them as far as possible. Nevertheless, for forty-seven years he was considered a reformist Dastur by the majority of orthodox laymen and conservative priests. He was embroiled in the problem of proselytizing (the Juddin Question) that plagued the community; even though he held liberal views in the matter, he always sided with the orthodox majority. Besides the books cited above and a few others in Gujarati, his works include: *The Adornment of Priests* (Karachi, 1899), *Footholds of Purity* (Karachi, 1900), *Our Perfecting World* (New York, 1930), *History of Zoroastrianism* (New York, 1938, repr. 1963, 1977, 1985), *Homage unto Ahura Mazda*, (Karachi, 1941-47), *Ancient Iranian Literature* (Karachi, 1949), *Mankind Whither Bound?* (Karachi, 1950), and *World’s Religions in Evolution* (Karachi, 1953).

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