



IRANI, DINSHAH JIJIBHOY

IRANI, DINSHAH JIJIBHOY (b. Bombay, 4 November 1881; d. Bombay, 3 November 1938; Bombay. He was trained and worked as a professional lawyer, but at the same time he was also active as a philanthropist and scholar of Zoroastrianism and Persian literature. He became an important cultural intermediary between the Zoroastrian community of Bombay and the intellectual community of Iran during the 1920s and 1930s.

Family background and early life. Dinshah Irani was born to a family of Zoroastrians with relatively shallow roots in India. Unlike the already established Parsi community of western India, which dates its settlement in the subcontinent to the aftermath of the seventh-century Arab conquest of Iran (see [PARSI COMMUNITIES i](#)), Irani's family settled in Bombay as part of a wave of migration that began during the eighteenth century (Šahmardān, pp. 495-97; Coyajee, p. vii). As social and economic conditions in the Iranian Zoroastrian towns of [Kerman](#) and Yazd deteriorated during this period, and as contact with Bombay's more prosperous Zoroastrian community increased, significant numbers of Iranian Zoroastrians began to migrate to India (Amighi, pp. 127-37). The growth of their number gradually led these new Iranian Zoroastrian residents of Bombay to take on the family name "Irani" and become a discernable sub-community within the Parsi community of Bombay.

Irani's family background can be traced to this history of migration. On the paternal side of his family, it was his grandfather, Bomes, who left his native Yazd in the mid-nineteenth century and set out for India with his son Jijibhoi. The maternal side of his family had roots in Bombay that extended to the late



eighteenth century. His mother, Piroja Bānu, was purportedly the granddaughter of Golestān Bānu, who in the genealogical memory of the “Irani” community of Bombay is regarded as one of the original migrants of the late eighteenth century wave of Iranian Zoroastrian migration to India (K. D. Irani; Šahmardān, pp. 495-97).

By the time of Dinshah Irani’s birth in 1881, the growth of Bombay as an important commercial port city had helped the Zoroastrian community to achieve significant prosperity. This era of prosperity produced not only wealthy Parsi commercial and industrial barons, but also a growing Parsi middle class. Irani’s education and early career was very much tied to the growth of Parsi middle class prosperity in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bombay.

Education and career. Irani completed his undergraduate education at the University of Bombay’s Elphinstone College in 1901, with degrees of Bachelor of Arts in English and Persian literature. He excelled so rapidly in the study of classical Persian literature that he was appointed as a teaching fellow in Persian at St. Xavier’s College in Bombay the following year, where he began what was a promising, but soon abandoned, academic career. This early stage of his career resulted in the translation of a number of classical Persian literary works into English, including poems of Sa’di and Hāfez, as well as two significant prose works, namely Nežām-al-Molk’s *Siar al-moluk* and Hōsayn Wā’ež Kāšefi’s *Anwār-e sohayli*.

Irani, while pursuing his literary studies to the end his life, was also increasingly drawn toward a civic-minded career. To meet the demands of this public vocation, Irani turned towards the study of law. He completed his legal education with an LL.B. degree in 1904 and embarked on a successful legal career, working primarily as a tax attorney representing the Parsi commercial firms of Bombay (Coyajee, pp. ii; Šahmardān, p. 490). However, he did not let his involvement in legal work prevent him from pursuing his literary and scholarly interests. He studied Avestan and Pahlavi at the Jamshedji Jijibhoy Madresa of Bombay, where he came into contact with the tradition of modern Parsi academic scholarship, in particular the renowned scholar [Kharshedji Rustomji Cama](#) (Irani, 1922, p. 1). It was through this influence that Irani began the serious study of [Zoroastrianism](#) and became a participant in the modern Parsi reinterpretation of the Zoroastrian tradition. He became an active member of Zoroastrian reform societies such as the “Gāthā Society,” the “Rahnumae Mazdayasnan Sabha,” and the “Fašli Calendar



Reform Movement” (Ringer, pp. 161-62; see [CALENDARS iv](#)).

These reformist and civic interests also led him to co-found two organizations that would come to play important roles in reaching out to the Zoroastrian community of Iran and to the larger intellectual currents inside Iran in the 1920s and 1930s, namely, the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjoman (est. 1918) and the [Iran League](#) (est. 1922) in Bombay (Šahmardān, p. 492). Similar to the mission of their nineteenth-century predecessor, the Persian Zoroastrian Amelioration Society (see [CHARITABLE FOUNDATIONS ii](#)), the mission of these two organizations was to improve the social and economic conditions of Zoroastrians in Kerman and Yazd, as well as to facilitate the assimilation of newly arrived Iranian Zoroastrians in Bombay. As the co-founder and co-president of the Iran League and the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjoman, Irani raised money for the building of schools, hospitals, orphanages, and other Zoroastrian civic institutions (Ringer, pp. 161-62).

Intellectual collaboration with Ebrāhim Purdāwud. Irani’s civic activism and literary pursuits ultimately came to coincide through his extensive intellectual collaboration with the Iranian scholar Ebrāhim Purdāwud (1885-1968; [HISTORIOGRAPHY ix](#)). This intellectual partnership led to the publication of a series of seminal texts in the twentieth-century revival of Iranian antiquity. As the president of the Iran League, Irani invited Purdāwud to Bombay in 1924 in order to engage with the Parsi academic community (Mo‘in, pp. 21-29; Masani, pp. 13-15; Hinnells, pp. 79-80). Purdāwud’s already established reputation as a scholar of Avestan and Pahlavi, and his talent as a poet of the Persian language, inspired Irani to recruit him to the cause of translating the Zoroastrian scriptures into New Persian. By the 1920s, the translation of the Zoroastrian scriptures into New Persian had become an increasing preoccupation for Irani and the Parsi community. When Irani discovered that Purdāwud had not only acquired the necessary linguistic skills, but was also an accomplished poet, he realized that Purdāwud would be the ideal translator to make these texts accessible to modern Iranian readers. As a result, Irani and the Iran League recruited Purdāwud and sponsored his three-year stay in India, during which this translation project began.

The partnership led to the publication of the first editions of the Zoroastrian scriptures rendered in New Persian, initially with the publication of the *Gāthā* in 1927, accompanied by extensive commentaries provided by Purdāwud. In addition to the *Gāthā*, the two also collaborated in the publication of a series of other texts. Between 1925 and 1938, the two worked together to edit, write,



translate, and solicit funds for the publication of additional texts, including *Yaštāh*, *Yasnā*, *Ḳorda Avesta*, *Purāndoḳt-nāma*, *Irānšāh*, *Aḳlāq-e Irān-e bāstān*, *Falsafa-ye Irān-e bāstān*, *Payk-e mazdayasnān*, *Bist maqāla-ye Qazvini*, *Ḳorramšāh*, and others. All of these books were published in Persian, through the financial sponsorship of the Bombay-based Parsi associations, and they were exported to Iran with the intention of inspiring a renewed interest in Iran's national history, culture, and literature.

Later work. Dinshah Irani traveled to Iran on two occasions, initially in 1924 (Masani, pp. 13-15), and again in 1932, accompanying the Nobel laureate philosopher-poet, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), who was invited by the state for a four-week tour of the country. Irani had been instrumental in organizing Tagore's visit to Iran (Marashi, pp. 52; Ferdowsi millennium celebration (*jašn-e hazāra-ye Ferdowsi*), but his declining health prevented him from making the journey.

Despite the onset of poor health, Irani still managed to publish his last major work, *Poets of the Pahlavi Regime*, in 1933. This monumental work is an eclectic, bilingual English-Persian anthology of early twentieth-century Persian poetry; it includes poems that were carefully selected by Irani to reflect the political, cultural, and literary transformations that were characteristic of Iran's post-constitutional era. Irani had collected the poems through the extensive written correspondence that he had maintained for many years with Iranian poets, writers, and intellectuals. This correspondence does not appear to have survived, but it is clear that Irani maintained regular contact with many of the major literary and scholarly figures of his era, including Sa'id Nafisi, Maḥmud Afšār, Āref Qazvini, Moḥammad Qazvini, Moḥammad-'Ali Jamālzāda, Ḥosayn Ḳāžemzāda Irānšahr, Moḥammad-Taḳi Bahār, Šādeq Hedāyat, Rašid Yāsami, Šādeq Režāzāda Šafaq, and many others (Irani, *Poets*, pp. v-viii).

Irani died of kidney disease in 1938. He was eulogized by friends and colleagues in both India and Iran (*Andiša-ye mā*, pp. 4). A memorial service was held in his honor in Tehran at the Firuz Bahrām Zoroastrian School, which drew the attendance of many Iranian scholars, literary figures, and dignitaries ("Dinshah Irani Obituary"). In India a memorial fund was established in his name to perpetuate his legacy of Indian and Iranian intellectual collaboration. The first publication sponsored by this fund was the *Dinshah Irani Memorial Volume* (Bombay, 1943). This bilingual English-Persian volume included articles from major intellectual figures of India and



Iran during the 1920s and 1930s. Today the volume stands as a major source for the intellectual history of Iran and India during this period.

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