



## MINOVI, MOJTABA

**MINOVI, MOJTABA** (Mojtabā Minovi, b. Tehran, 19 Bahman 1282 Š./9 February 1903; d. Tehran, 6 Bahman, 1355 Š./26 January 1977), teacher, editor, translator, and literary scholar ([FIGURE 1](#)).

### LIFE

The eldest of twelve siblings, Mojtabā Minovi was born into a family of religious scholars that traced its lineage to one of the influential [mojtaheds](#) of the Qājār period, most probably Šari‘atmadār-e Esterābādi (Yaġmā‘i, p. 60). His pedigree is given as Mojtabā Minovi, son of Mirzā ‘Isā, son of Mollā Moḥammad-Ḥasan, son of Mollā Moḥammad-Ja‘far-e Šari‘atmadār, son of Seyf al-Din ‘Ali Esterābādi-e Tehrāni (Afšār and Dānešpažuh, p. 11). Minovi was quite proud of this scholarly lineage (Afšār, 1977b, p. 36). In manuscript no. 35 of his own library that was copied in his own hand, he signed his name as “Mojtabā Vāteq-e Tehrāni.” Manuscript no. 38 of this library was copied by ‘Isā b. Moḥammad-Ḥasan b. Moḥammad-Ja‘far-e Šari‘atmadār-e Tehrāni, whom Irāj Afšār identified as Minovi’s father (Afšār and Dānešpažuh, p. 41). Although he later adopted the surname Minovi, he continued to occasionally sign his published papers as ‘Ali-naqi Šari‘atmadāri (H. Šari‘atmadāri, p. 127).

His parents were first cousins, and his father, Šeyḵ Isā Šari‘atmadāri, was a religious and learned scholar. Mojtabā was only three years old when his father, who wanted to study jurisprudence under the scholar Moḥammad Taqi Širāzi, moved his family to Samarra in Iraq. At the age of five, he began his education in a maktab (see [EDUCATION iii](#)) and studied the Qor‘ān, the



Golestān of Saʿdi, and Ḥāfeẓ’s divan. At the age of eight, when he returned to Iran, he knew most of the holy writ by heart, but could also read and write in Persian and Arabic quite fluently. Having spent his early childhood in Iraq, however, he spoke Persian with a pronounced Arabic accent (Daryābandari et al., pp. 64-65; Māh-Monir Minovi, 2002, p. 7).

Once back in Iran, Minovi attended several schools, one of which was established by Sayyed Moḥammad Ṭabāṭabā’i (see [ḤOJJAT-AL-ESLĀM](#)), where Nāẓem al-Eslām-e Kermāni (historian of the Constitutionalist period) was an instructor. At this time, because Minovi wore a turban and the school officials knew of his family’s religious background, he was asked to serve as the school’s *piš-namāz*, that is, to lead the students in prayer. He later moved to Sepehr School, and Dār al-Fonun. Minovi’s years in the Dār al-Fonun brought him into contact with friends, classmates, and teachers, many of whom went on to become scholars and authors of note: Sadeq Hedayat, Noṣrat-Allāh Bāstān, and ‘Abbās Eqbāl Āštiāni, among others. He also began his passionate collecting of books at this time, a passion that led to the creation of his impressive personal library ([FIGURE 2](#)).

Before graduating from the Dār al-Fonun, Minovi’s father was transferred first to the city of Damāvand, and later to Lāhijān. As a result, he could not finish his formal education in either the Dār al-Fonun or the Dār al-Mo’allemin, which he attended later (Daryābandari et al., pp. 66-67; Yaḡmā’i, 1977, p. 748). Meanwhile he worked a few months as an elementary school teacher.

The family’s stay in Lāhijān coincided with the Jangali Movement (1914-1921) and foreign excursions into Gilān. Minovi, who was fascinated by the communist movement in the city, joined the party and traveled to Bāku, where he is reported to have met Lenin. However, before long, he was disappointed with the Communist Party, and returned to Gilān never to involve himself in politics again (Māh-Monir Minovi, 2002, p. 8). After the restoration of relative calm in the province, the family moved back to Tehran.

In 1920, following a short stint as a stenographer at the Ministry of Justice, Minovi entered the Teachers Training College. At this school, he came into contact with a number of scholars, such as Ḥabib Yaḡmā’i (1901-1984), and Maḡmud Najmābādi, with whom he formed lifelong friendships (Yaḡmā’i, p. 58). Like many other students at the college, Minovi had to work while studying. He did not graduate from this school either. He was first employed as a shorthand clerk at the Iranian Parliament, where he worked from 1926 to



1928, and then got a job at the Ministry of Culture (1929). His supervisors recognized his learning and placed him in charge of that ministry's library, which evolved into the Iranian National Library.

After working for fewer than fifty days in the library of the Ministry of Culture, Esmā'il Mer'āt (1893-1949), who was in charge of Iranian students in Paris, asked him to accompany him to France, and he did so in the hope of continuing his studies abroad (Daryābandari et al., p. 67). As it turned out, Mer'āt merely wanted Minovi to produce a suitably impressive mountain of paperwork that he could present to the bureaucracy as proof of the important work that his office was doing. Minovi found his circumstances very disagreeable. His only consolation was that Moḥammad Qazvini (1877-1949) was also living in Paris and Minovi could visit him twice a week and discuss matters of literary and scholarly interest. Five months later in 1930, Sayyed Ḥasan Taqizādeh (1878-1969), who was en route to London, stopped in Paris, met Minovi, and took him to London and put him in charge of the Iranian students there.

The happy respite, however, did not last long. Nine months after his arrival in London, Mer'āt, who was now in charge of all Iranian students in Europe, removed Minovi from his post and deprived him of his livelihood. Fortunately for him, someone in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company decided to pay Minovi's expenses in London for an additional year with the understanding that upon repatriation he would teach English at the Company's school in Abadan. However, after returning to Iran, he could not reach a mutually agreeable employment contract with the company and returned to Tehran, where he got a job at the Ministry of Culture.

During this period Minovi began to associate with a group of intellectuals that included Sadeq Hedayat, Bozorg 'Alavi, and Mas'ud Farzād. They created an informal literary group with four members and jokingly called it the *rab'a* (a word which does not exist in the sense of "foursome" in Arabic), alluding to another group, of more traditional scholars of the time (Eqbāl Āštiāni, Said Nafisi [1895-1956], Falsafi, Dašti, Foruzānfar, Bahār, and Ġolām-rezā Rašid Yāsemi [1895-1951]), whom they satirically called the *sab'a* "the group of seven" (Daryābandari et al., p. 69; Afšār, 2012, p. 71, n.2). Later, Parviz Nātel Kānlari, 'Abd-al-Ḥosayn Nušin, and a number of other younger intellectuals joined the "foursome," which used to meet in the "Rose Noire" café (later, Kāfeh-ye lālehzār-e now) in Tehran (Kānlari, 1977, p. 880). Minovi considered the five years of his association with these intellectuals as the most productive



years of his life and theirs (Daryābandari et al., p. 69). The textual works that came out of this five-year period were editions of *Nāma-ye Tansar* (Tehran, 1932), *Nowruz-nāma* (1933), and *Vis o Rāmin* (1935). He also took part in the Bārukim publisher's project of editing the *Šāh-nāma*, the first volume of which he edited personally (1934); helped prepare Moḥammad 'Ali Foruḡi's anthology of selections from the book (*Ḳolāša-ye Šāh-nāma*, Tehran, 1934); and in 1933 co-authored, with Hedayat, a book on the Iranian rebel Māziyār (killed c. 842). In addition, he translated *L'empire des Sassanides: Le peuple, l'état, la cour* (1927), the magnum opus of the Danish scholar Arthur Christensen. This translation appeared under the title of *Važ'-e mellat o dowlat o darbār dar dowra-ye šāhanšāhi-e Sāsāniyān* (Tehran, 1935; see below).

Minovi remained in London throughout the war years. While taking up various jobs in order to support himself, he returned to studying Middle Persian with Walter Bruno Henning and taught Persian at Oxford University. He also took up a position with the BBC at which he stayed for ten years. At the BBC, he presented a series of biweekly radio talks on various cultural and literary topics. Versions of some of these talks were published by his friend, Ḥabib Yaḡmā'i in the journal *Yaḡmā*; others were later included in volumes of his essays (Minovi, 1956, 1959, 1970, 1972, 1973).

In 1950, after a four-month stay in Istanbul as the director of the Iranian elementary school, Minovi returned to Iran and began teaching at the Faculty of Letters and Humanities and the Faculty of Theology of the University of Tehran. Taqizādeh and others were instrumental in obtaining his teaching position for him (Šanā'i, p. 885), and Badī-al-Zamān Foruzānfar forced through a rule that allowed Minovi to be appointed as a full professor of high rank (Vafā'i, p. 434).

In 1951 Minovi went to Istanbul for a second time in order to take part in an international congress of orientalists. There, he realized what a vast treasury of classical Persian texts was kept at Turkish libraries, and upon returning to Iran, he convinced officialdom to send him back for obtaining photographs and microfilms of these manuscripts. In Turkey, he was first in charge of selecting appropriate manuscripts for reproduction, and was later appointed as Iran's cultural attaché. During the years in Turkey (1951-58), Minovi explored Turkish collections and inspected some fifteen thousand manuscripts, from which he selected nearly fifteen hundred for microfilming for the University of Tehran's library (Daryābandari, et al., p. 77; Afšār, 1977b, p. 19; Vafā'i, p. 434).



He returned from Turkey to resume his teaching duties until 1969, when he was forced to retire. In 1971 Minovi was appointed director of the Bonyād-e Šāh-nāma-ye Ferdowsi, a research institute affiliated with the Ministry of Culture, and in 1973 he joined the Iranian Academy of Literature and Art as a permanent member (see [FARHANGESTĀN](#)). He continued his scholarly activities until the end of his life, correcting proofs of his last publication—the critical edition of the story of Siyāvoš (see [KAYĀNIĀN](#) v) from the *Šāh-nāma*—from his deathbed (Qarib, 1984, p. xxix; Šari‘atmadāri, p. 127; Riāhi, p. 9).

Minovi passed away on Wednesday, 26 January 1977. He was survived by two sons, Rāmin and Mākān from his English wife, Ellen Badham, and a daughter, Nilufar, from his second wife, Šahrbānu Partovi.

## WORKS

*Critical edition of classical texts.* Along with Moḥammad Qazvini, Minovi exerted the greatest influence on the application of Western textual criticism and its methodology to classical Persian texts. He must have become familiar with the European approach during his first stay in Europe (1930-34). One gets a hint of this in the bibliographical essay that he wrote for the earliest scholarly edition of Nāṣer Ḳosrow’s *Divan*, where he refers to Western scholars’ modern approach of collecting and categorizing witnesses to the texts that they edit, and to their systematic presentation of their manuscript variants (1993, pp. 73-102).

His contributions to establishing the text of Nāṣer Ḳosrow’s *Divan*, however, although quite impressive (1993, pp. 73-102, 619-92), remain in the shadow of those that were made by the two senior scholars, Taqizādeh (for whom, see, e.g., [HISTORIOGRAPHY](#) ix. [PAHLAVI PERIOD](#) [2]) and *Dehḳodā*, who were the volume’s main editors. He went on to a critical edition of Neẓām al-Molk’s *Siyāsat-nāma* (Tehran, 1931), which he did jointly with ‘Abd-al Raḥim Ḳalkāli (1872-1942), but it was Minovi who actually edited two-thirds of the text (Afšār, Yaḡmā’i, and Rowšan, 1991, p. 17).

His first independent effort at editing was directed at the *Nāma-ye Tansar* (Tehran, 1932), which had been previously published by James Darmesteter (Paris, 1894), but Minovi considered that edition inadequate. Next, he persuaded the publisher Bāruḳim to produce an edition of the *Šāh-nāma*, and he edited the first volume of what came to be known as the *Bāruḳim Šāh-nāma*



(Tehran, 1934; see Minovi, 1978, p. 115). The subsequent volumes of this edition of the book were prepared by different scholars.

Minovi's edition of *Vis o Rāmin*, which was supported by the Ministry of Culture and for which he received what was then considered a hefty sum (4,000 tumāns), was published in 1935. As stipulated in the contract, Minovi was to produce the edition in two volumes, one of text and another of notes. However, he never produced the volume of notes and engaged in extensive correspondence with the ministry in the hope of persuading it to let him postpone the publication of the second volume. Although he never produced the volume of notes, he had been collecting additional information for it, because some six hundred pages of his notes on the story are now kept at the Minovi library in Tehran (Āl-e Dāvud 1998, pp. 30-31). Thus, one cannot accuse him of dishonesty or of intentional breach of contract. He was merely following a pattern of procrastination and delay that was to mark several of his other editorial projects. For instance, in the introduction to his edition of the *Kalila va Demna* he speaks of his plan to publish an extended version of his brief introduction and his copious notes to the volume, and he predicts that the bulk of this material will be twice the bulk of the edition itself (Māh-Monir Minovi, 2002, p. yh [= xii]). However, like his notes to the *Vis o Rāmin*, the additional material to the *Kalila va Demna*, never saw the light of day.

Minovi's reputation as an editor is chiefly owed to his appointment to the post of director of research at the Bonyād-e Šāh-nāma, tasked with preparing the definitive edition of Iran's national epic. He was officially invited to take over this post in 1971 and was given every manner of material support. Four stories from the *Šāh-nāma* were prepared for publication under his supervision: *Dāstān-e Rostam o Sohrāb* (1973), *Dāstān-e Forud* (1975; edited by Moḥammad Rowšan and published without variants), *Dāstān-e Bižan o Maniža* (published posthumously in 1997), and *Dāstān-e Siāvaš*, in collaboration with Moḥammad Moktāri, with an introduction by Mehdi Qarib (published posthumously in 1984). However, at the time of his death some six years later, the foundation had produced nothing of significance or originality. The individual stories that were edited and published as samples of the Bonyād's work were merely updated versions of those that he had edited years earlier during his stay in Europe (Riāḥi, pp. 5-6; cf. Ġaravi, pp. 690-91).

If Minovi is to be judged fairly as an editor, it is his edition of the non-epic texts that would provide a better basis for judgement. Minovi's approach to editing is essentially the one proposed by the French medievalist Joseph



Bédier (1864-1948). Bédier rejected Karl Lachmann's (1793-1851) genealogical method and preferred to rely on the best available manuscript (*optimus codex*) of the work. He used the text's other available witnesses to correct the best manuscript's most glaring errors. It so happens that "best manuscripts" in Bédier's scheme also turned out to be the oldest manuscripts. Like Bédier, Minovi believed that, the older the manuscript, the fewer the corruptions that have found their way into its text. This led him and those who were trained by him to rely too much on the text of the oldest manuscript. Of course, Minovi acknowledged that a younger manuscript that was copied by a careful scribe from an authoritative exemplar may be superior to an older codex. However he also believed that, generally speaking, older manuscripts have fewer errors (Minovi, 1978, p. 121; Sa'idi Sirjāni 1976, p. 913; Zaryāb-e Ko'i, pp. 900-901).

Much of Minovi's preference for older manuscripts was a reaction to the approach of Iranian editors of his time, who tended to be highly subjective in their choice of variants and allowed their personal preference to take precedence over manuscript data. Although Minovi often railed against these editors and their approach (Minovi, 1968; 1975; 1977; 1978), he frequently fell short of the "objective" standards to which he aspired. He gives himself complete control of what variants should be included in the critical apparatus and what variants should be left out of it. In his introduction to the edition of *Kalila va Demna*, he explicitly expresses his preference for not adding to the bulk of the critical apparatus by listing "every manuscript variant in every case" (Māh-Monir Minovi, 2002, p. yh [=xii]; cf. Minovi, 1977, p. 91). This view is reiterated in his co-editor's introduction to the text of *Aḳlāq-e Nāṣeri* (Minovi and Ḥeydari, p. 6). Furthermore, he is often vague in indicating the sigla of his witnesses accurately. In his edition of *Nāma-ye Tansar* for instance, he introduces the readings of his witnesses by phrases like: "some other manuscripts have" (e.g., p. 30, n. 10; p. 40, n. 3; p. 47, n. 3). Ironically, what makes Minovi's editorial work of great value is *not* his adherence to method, but precisely his great command of the classical Persian and Arabic literary corpus—namely, the very ground upon which traditional editors justified their own work. His copious notes to his edition of *Sirat-e Jalāl al-Din Menkeberni* (Minovi, 1965, pp. 289-410) and his learned introductory essay and notes to his text of *Nāma-ye Tansar* (Minovi, 1932, pp. 49-71) prove the value of the learning that he undervalues in his assessment of traditional editors' works.

*Translations.* Minovi was a skilled translator. He had put a number of books



and lectures by the great Iranist Ernst Herzfeld into Persian (Minovi, 1926, 1927, 1929). His translation of Arthur Christensen's *L'empire des Sassanides: Le peuple, l'état, la cour* (1927), however, was declared "error-ridden" by the authorities, shortly after publication. Copies of the book were taken off the market. In his reminiscences, Minovi points out that the removal of the book was for political reasons and even speculates that the scholar, Rašid Yāsemi, who also translated one of Christensen's books, might have had something to do with it. But he also states that Yāsemi emphatically denied any involvement in the matter (Daryābandari et al., pp. 70-71). According to Minovi's own appendix to his translation, he relied on a copy of the French text that was sent to him by Christensen. This copy was somewhat different from the copies in circulation, because it included Christensen's many marginal notes and corrections. Minovi also states that he did not render all of Christensen's copious footnotes and documentations into Persian. Thus, because he worked from Christensen's revised copy, and also because he left some of the original's notes out of his Persian text and also because, in the course of his checking Christensen's Persian, Middle Persian, and Arabic references, he felt free to follow the wording of the original sources instead of remaining faithful to what Christensen had written (Minovi, 1386, p. 183), his Persian translation turned out to be different from the original. The Ministry of Culture's response to Minovi and Christensen's inquiries about the removal of the book from bookstores was that it included many errors and inaccuracies.

According to Afšār, Minovi's experience of the European culture was fundamentally different from the experiences of Qazvini and Taqizādeh, who had also lived in European countries for many years but, unlike Minovi, had not developed a genuine interest in and familiarity with Western literature (Afšār, 1977b, p. 16). Minovi also put a number of literary works into Persian (Afšār, 1977b, p. 16; Sa'idi Sirjāni, p. 910). The most famous of these is his translation of Hamlet's soliloquy, which has been repeatedly printed (Minovi, 1977, p. 153). He also co-authored, with A. J. Arberry, the catalog of the Chester Beatty Library (1959) and contributed many entries and notes to Arthur U. Pope and Phyllis Ackerman's *A Survey of Persian Art* (1964-65). However, it must be remembered that although he could translate from English and possibly French, his original writing in English, compared with the prose of other scholars of his own and the next generation, is stylistically inferior (see Minovi, 1962).



One of Minovi's greatest contributions to the development of Iranian studies is his investigation of various museums and libraries in Turkey and Europe, and the description of his important finds. Afšār writes that, along with Helmut Ritter and Ahmad Atesh, Minovi did the most in describing the significant manuscripts that were kept in various Turkish collections (Afšār, 1977b, pp. 17-20). His personal library of more than 16,000 books, including about 150 manuscripts, which he donated to the Ministry of Culture in 1977 (Tafažžoli, p. 361), was one of the best private libraries in Iran (Afšār 1977b, pp. 18-22). This library is now part of the Pažuhešgāh-e 'Olum-e Ensāni va Motāle'āt-e Farhangi in Tehran. The catalogue of this library was prepared by Iraj Afšār and Moḥammad Taqi Dānešpažuh and was published in 1995.

Minovi's vast learning and his willingness to help others—especially younger scholars—led to the creation of a cult of personality around him that has largely survived his death. Many of the young academics who were trained by him and are now senior scholars in their own right, including 'Ali Ravāqi, Mehdi Madāyeni, Mehdi Qarib, among others, continue to revere him. Writing in his memorial volume, Mehdi Qarib reminisces about how he would open his arms like Christ (Masiḥ-vār) to receive young seekers of knowledge (Qarib, 1977, pp. 15, 24, 26-27).

Minovi's great learning was tarnished by uncontrolled fits of rage and verbal abuse of others (Afšār, 1977b, p. 35). The examples are not few. His behavior toward a young Sa'idi Sirjāni caused the latter to return the verbal abuse and even try to resign his post. However, Minovi later apologized, and the two become fast friends (Sa'idi Sirjāni, p. 910; cf. also Afšār, 1977b, pp. 34).

Although known for his willingness to acknowledge error, this willingness is somewhat exaggerated. For example, his insistence that Ḡolām-Ḥosayn Mošāḥeb's *Dāyerat al-ma'āref-e fārsi* was seriously flawed, in spite of Afšār and Šafi'i-Kadkani's reasonable arguments to the contrary, makes it difficult to believe that he could back away from error as easily as he claimed (Daryābandari, et al, pp. 72-76). Similarly, his critique of the *Dāyerat al-ma'āref* for listing Thomas Becket (1118-1170) as one of Jesus' apostles is unnecessarily harsh. In fact, in his attempt to correct the error he makes one of his own by claiming that Becket was murdered during the reign of Henry VIII (r. 1509-47) thus missing the correct date of the saint's murder by more than three hundred years, and confusing the Tudor Henry VIII with the Plantagenet Henry II (r. 1154-89) (Daryābandari et al., p. 73). One of his celebrants who worked with him at the Bonyād-e Šāh-nāma reports that he



rarely felt the need to refer to dictionaries for determining the meanings of classical Persian words, because he believed most of the entries to be wrong (Qarib, 1977, p. 22).

Minovi is notable for his critique of Western orientalists, his self-confidence (Afšār, 1977b, pp. 905, 908; Şanā'ī, p. 888; Riāḥi, p. 5; cf. Minovi, 1978, pp. 116-18), and a tendency to challenge traditional scholastic dogma—for instance, with his early arguments that the poet Rudaki was not blind or that *Yusof o Zoleykā* was not penned by Ferdowsi (Yaġmā'ī, p. 60; Şanā'ī, p. 886; cf. Minovi, 1927; cf. Minovi, 1965, pp. vi-vii). However, although quite critical of a number of orientalists, Minovi had great respect for W. B. Henning and Vladimir Minorsky and deeply respected the contributions of Western scholarship to the development of textual criticism (Şanā'ī, p. 888; Minovi, 1978, p. 128). He co-edited with Iraj Afšār the memorial volume *Yād-nāma-ye Irāni-e Minorsky*, which was published by Tehran University Press in 1969.

A chronological list of Minovi's works is included in the second edition of *Nāma-ye Minovi*, ed. Iraj Afšār, Ḥabib Yaġmā'ī, and Moḥammad Rowšan, Tehran, 1991 pp. 17-21.

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