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ṬĀLEBUF, ʿABD-AL-RAḤIM

ṬĀLEBUF (Talibov, Ṭālebov), **ʿABD-AL-RAḤIM, Ḥajji Mirzā** (b. Tabriz, ca. 1834; d. Buynaksk [Temir-Khan-Shura], Dagestan, Russia, 11 March 1911), intellectual and author of several influential works, including *Ketāb-e Aḥmad*.

Ṭālebuf was born as ʿAbd-al-Raḥim b. Šayḵ Abi Ṭāleb Najjār Ṭabrizi in the Sorḵāb quarter of Tabriz. It is generally believed that he left Tabriz for Tbilisi when he was about seventeen years old. During the 19th century a large Iranian community lived in the Russian Caucasus. Most had come north from the Azarbaijan province. A significant number of these were seasonal workers and economic emigrants, but a few had also left Persia to evade Qajar oppression. The region also housed a number of Iranian intellectuals, chief among them Mirzā Fatḥ-ʿAli Āḵundzāda (1812-78), who also lived in Tbilisi. Ṭālebuf's motive for leaving Iran is not clear. The speculation that he was not a destitute migrant worker is supported by the fact that in a relatively short period of time he was able to establish a successful business and acquire an impressive education. That Ṭālebuf studied Russian and modern sciences at Tbilisi schools (Ādamiyat, p. 1; Manăfi, p. 9), suggests that at least one motive for his migration was a desire for better opportunities to acquire a modern education.

After a number of years in Tbilisi, working for a wealthy Iranian named Moḥammad-ʿAli Khan Kāši, Ṭālebuf moved to Buynaksk in Dagestan (Dāḡestān); he may have also lived for a while in Khasavyurt (Manăfi, p. 10). In Buynaksk Ṭālebuf (Figure 1) established a road construction business, managed the postal service, and engaged in a number of civic and charitable

activities. He traveled to Istanbul in 1888, and in 1898 went to Mecca to perform the pilgrimage (*ḥajj*). He visited Berlin sometime around 1902 in order to seek treatment for his failing eyesight. He died in Buynaksk on 11 March 1911, leaving behind a daughter, Sunā Ḵānom.

As an ardent advocate of modern education, Ṭālebuf was among the sponsors of a number of schools, including two schools for girls in Baku and Buynaksk. His passion for education is also reflected in a letter in which he enthusiastically volunteers support for a public library in Tabriz, as well as in his will, in which he dedicated a substantial sum to educational projects. After the publication of *Ketāb-e Aḥmad* (Figure 2) Ṭālebuf became well-known among literate Iranians. He was so famous that during a trip to Tehran he was given an audience with Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah (r. 1896-1907). Because of his widespread reputation, in 1907, the people of Tabriz voted him in absentia into the first Iranian Parliament (*Majles-e šurā-ye melli*). But disheartened by accusations of heresy made against him by some members of the clergy, and disillusioned by the new Constitutionalist regime, Ṭālebuf did not take up his parliamentary seat.

Ṭālebuf has been called a liberal, a moderate reformist, a revolutionary, and a social democrat. However, like many other 19th-century Iranian intellectuals inspired by contemporary European ideas, he did not engage in any extensive scrutiny of liberalism or social democracy. This is particularly evident from contradictory ideological statements in his writings. For instance, while he criticized the radical advocates of the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11), he also occasionally alluded approvingly to ideas associated with the Russian Social Democrats. The dedication of *Masālek al-moḥsenin* to Mirzā ʿAli Aṣḡar Khan Amin-al-Solṭān (1858-1907), the powerful Qajar prime minister, generally noted for his reactionary policies, and Ṭālebuf's strong support for reform modeled after the Japanese Meiji Restoration suggest that he was not the kind of revolutionary figure that some biographers, such as Mirăli Manăfi, have portrayed him to be.

Ṭālebuf's first book appeared, when he was about 58 years old. Despite the fact that by then he started suffering from progressively failing eyesight, he translated and edited three books and wrote seven more in a span of about 18 years. Ṭālebuf's native language was Azeri Turkic, but he wrote all his books in Persian. This and his long residence outside Iran explain the frequent grammatical slips in his writings. Meanwhile, desiring to be known as "the engineer of the modern Persian language" (Ṭālebuf, ed. Afšar p. 45), Ṭālebuf

was among the pioneers of a new literary style, free from the verbiage common to most Qajar texts (see FICTION ii (a). Historical Background of Modern Fiction).

Ṭālebuf's first book *Noḵba-ye sepehri* (The best of the heavens) was a biography of the Prophet Mohammad. His most recognized work is *Safina-ye Tālebi yā Ketāb-e Aḥmad* (Ṭālebi's vessel or The book of Aḥmad). The first volume of *Ketāb-e Aḥmad* was written between 1890 and 1892 and was published in Istanbul in 1893 (Figure 2); the second volume appeared a year later. The fact that the book went through several reprints both inside and outside Iran testifies to its popularity. Its style and design made it a textbook of choice in the modern schools of Tabriz (Ādamiyat, p. 6). Ṭālebuf mentions that in writing *Ketāb-e Aḥmad* he was inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712-1778) *Emile*, although Rousseau's educational orientation is clearly very different from Ṭālebuf's. Consisting of 22 dialogues between the author and his imaginary son, Aḥmad, the book presents essentially an encyclopedic approach to several chosen topics, particularly from the natural sciences and Western inventions.

Among the topics discussed are brief descriptions of microbiological discoveries by Antony van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723) and Louis Pasteur (1822-95), various plants and animals generally unknown in Iran, and accounts of historical places around the world, such as the Great Wall of China and the pyramids of Egypt. Intriguingly, the first dialogue is about religion, possibly signaling the author's concern about the potentially hostile response by religious authorities. There are also a few occasions for brief political and social criticism in *Ketāb-e Aḥmad*. For example, Ṭālebuf criticizes the traditional system of education, condemning both the clergy and Qajar high officials for refusing to promote modern sciences. Ṭālebuf denounces the existing poverty in Persia and recommends the expansion of trade and the construction of railroads. Although in general supportive of European modernization, his book accuses the West of hypocrisy for exploiting the rest of the world while advocating freedom and fraternity. Opposing an intellectual trend that called for purifying the Persian language by suppressing Arabic words (see ARABIC LANGUAGE v. Arabic Elements in Persian), Ṭālebuf suggests that Persian is inferior to Arabic and French and does not have the required vocabulary for teaching modern sciences. Finally, *Ketāb-e Aḥmad* includes a number of drawings relevant to topics discussed, an educational novelty in 19th century Persia.

Many 19th century Iranian intellectuals, including Ṭālebuf, pointed to flaws in cultural, religious, and political institutions and practices as responsible for the country's stagnation, believing that without necessary reforms Persia would fall prey to British and Russian colonial designs. However, these reformists placed different priorities on what was necessary for the nation's salvation. Mirzā Malkom Khan Nāẓem-al-Dawla (1833-1908) and Mirzā Yusof Khan Mostašār-al-Dawla (1823-95), for example, believed that the rule of law was the most important prerequisite for the country's progress. Āḵundzāda and Mirzā Āqā Khan Kermāni (1854-1896), meanwhile, prescribed radical reforms in religious, cultural, and political practices. Ṭālebuf, in a position close to such earlier reformers as ʿAbbās Mirzā Qajar (1789-1833) and Mirzā Taqi Khan Amir Kabir (1807-52), believed that educating the young in modern sciences was the first prerequisite for Persia's progress. This priority is well reflected in the order of Ṭālebuf's books. The two volumes of *Ketāb-e Aḥmad* deal almost exclusively with modern sciences, and its educational mission is complemented by two books based on Russian translations and also published in Istanbul around 1893: *Hayʾat jadid* (Modern astronomy) by the French astronomer Camille Flammarion (1842-1925), and *Fizik yā Ḥekmat-e ṭābeʿi* (Physics or Natural science).

Substantial criticism of religious, political, and social institutions and practices begins to appear in Ṭālebuf's second major work, *Masālek al-moḥsenin* (The pathways of the benevolent). The *Masālek* is the narrative of a dream in which a group of scientists are sent by the Persian government on the mission to explore the Damāvand mountain. It has been suggested that the book is an imitation of the *Consolations in Travel, or The Last Days of a Philosopher* (London, 1830) by the British chemist and inventor Humphry Davy (1778-1829). Flammarion had published a popular annotated French translation of the book as *Les derniers jours d'un philosophe* (1st ed., Paris, 1869). Since Ṭālebuf had translated one of Flammarion's works from Russian into Persian, he could have known of Flammarion's French translation of Davy's *Consolations*. *Masālek* influenced a number of Persian authors, particularly Ḥājji Zayn-al-ʿĀbedin Marāgaʾi (1840-1910), the author of the *Siāḥat-nāma-ye Ebrāhim Beg*, and Mollā ʿAbd-al-Rasul Kāšāni (1864-1947) the author of the *Resāla-ye ensāfiya.* But the book was condemned by some ulama (*ʿolamāʾ*), among them the most eminent opponent of the Constitutional Revolution, Šayḵ Fażl-Allāh Nuri (1843-1909), and the famous defender of that revolution, Mirzā Moḥammad Ḥosayn Nāʾini (1860-1936).

The text presents a strong indictment of both Qajar high officials and the ulama. Ṭālebuf accuses the Qajar statesmen of being oppressive, selfish, and incompetent. In a rather bold statement, he even attacks the monarchy, by ridiculing the longstanding analogy that presented the king as God's shadow on earth. Political corruption, Ṭālebuf argues, has led to a mass exodus of Iranians. In brief theological statements, Ṭalebuf suggests that the main principles of all religions are the same. This deviation from Shiʿite orthodoxy (see SHIʿITE DOCTRINE) coupled with extensive criticism of the religious establishment and practices explain the ulama's strong condemnation of Ṭālebuf. Ṭālebuf confronts superstition, the mistreatment of the Babis (see BABISM), the lifestyle of high-ranking clergymen, and their opposition to modern sciences. However, Ṭālebuf, unlike Āḵundzāda and Āqā Khan Kermāni, is not hostile toward Islam. He neither presents pre-Islamic Iran as a golden age, nor does he consider Islam the cause of Iran's underdevelopment. On the contrary, he frequently cites the Qurʾan to support his reform agenda. Like Malkom Khan and Mirzā Yusof Khan Mostešār-al-Dawla, he suggests that the Islamic principles only need to be adjusted to the contemporary conditions of life to protect Islam and Muslims from European colonialism. Ṭālebuf qualifies his advocacy of adopting Western political institutions and economic models by drawing the readers' attention to the fact that, despite Europe's general prosperity, the poorer people there also live a wretched life. He warns, furthermore, that the unqualified imitation of European manners and customs could be detrimental to Persia's progress.

It appears that the Constitutional Revolution increased Ṭālebuf's interest in politics and political theory. In *Masāʾel al-ḥayāt* (The Challenges of life), which at times has been referred to as the third volume of *Ketāb-e Aḥmad*, there are discussions of world politics and modern warfare. Ṭālebuf offers definitions of concepts such as individual rights, freedom, and equality, and provides short accounts of the constitutional regimes in the United Kingdom, France, and Japan. After a critique of absolute monarchy and brief definitions of the political theories informing conservatism, anarchism, socialism and social democracy, the book ends with a translation of the Constitution of Japan. In *Iżāḥāt dar ḵoṣuṣ āzādi* (Clarifications on freedom) Ṭālebuf presents a more substantial discussion of political theory. The book begins by distinguishing liberty from license, and "natural liberty" from "civil liberties." Expressing his disappointment with the outcome of the Constitutional Revolution, Ṭālebuf offers a critique of the first Majles and discusses budgetary and institutional reforms. The book also presents a censure of the ruling class, a critique of the

deterioration of moral and civic virtues among Iranians, and a discussion of a constitution for Iran. The *Iżāḥāt,* finally, comments on foreign policy and the link between war and commerce. Ṭālebuf's last book, the *Siāsat-e Ṭālebi* (Ṭālebi's politics), appeared 1911 in Tehran, and comprises two parts. The first is a dialogue between a British and a Russian ambassador to Persia and assesses British and Russian policies toward the country. The second part is a dialogue between two Iranians who examine the causes of Iran's social and political crisis. Once again presenting a strong condemnation of the ulama and religious superstition, Ṭālebuf concludes that the main cause of Iran's decline and stagnation is the lack of rule of law, thus siding with Malkom Khan and Mirzā Yusof Khan Mostešār al-Dawla.

Ṭālebuf's other works are a Persian translation of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, again based on a Russian translation, and the *Safar-nāma-ye ābgarm-e Qafqāz* (Account of a journey to the hot springs of the Caucasus), as well as a number of articles in various Persian journals printed outside Iran and several poems. Ṭālebuf is also considered a co-founder of the satire magazine *Šāhsavan*, which was published in Istanbul (Browne, pp.106-7).

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