



## TAVADIA, JEHANGIR C.

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**TAVADIA, JEHANGIR C.**, Parsi scholar of ancient Iranian languages and Zoroastrianism (b. in the village of Tavdi, near Navsari, 15 August 1896 or 1897; d. Hamburg, 4 July 1955). He was educated at the D. K. Tata Anglo Vernacular Boy's School. Tavadia showed an early facility for languages and won a silver medal for Avestan studies at the Sir Cowasji Jehangir Zarthoshti Madressa. He then obtained a Bachelor's Degree from Wilson College in Mumbai. In 1918, he was awarded the Framji Sorabji Bhavnagri scholarship for excelling in Avesta at the intermediate level examination of Bombay University. His scholarship and interest in Avestan studies drew the attention of [Sir Jivanji J. Modi](#), who sent him to Germany for further studies in 1921. Tavadia obtained a Ph.D. from the University of Hamburg and then served as a Lecturer in Iranian studies there. During World War II, Tavadia was back in India and from 1940 to 1941 held the Chair for Avestan studies at the college (the present Visva-Bharati University) in Santiniketan (Birbhum District, West Bengal); after the war, he resumed his duties at the University of Hamburg. While at Santiniketan, he presided over the 15th All India Oriental Conference at St. Xavier's College in Bombay and presented a paper on "Iranian Studies: Their Present State and Future Prospects" (excerpt, 1950a, pp. i-ii).

Tavadia published the fundamental edition of the first ten chapters of the *Šāyest nē šāyest* with transcription, translation, and notes in 1930. For this text edition he also consulted manuscripts containing the *Supplementary Texts to Šāyest nē šāyest* preserved in European libraries, and he found them all to be derived from manuscripts M51 and the K20. He had every intention of



publishing those Supplementary Texts as well (i.e., chapters XI-XXIII) but was killed in an automobile accident before completing his task. This edition of the *Šāyest nē šāyest* was praised by H. W. Bailey as “a great service to Iranian studies, and in particular to that of medieval Zoroastrian customs” (*JRAS*, 1932, p. 973, in his review of Tavadia, 1930).

Tavadia also focused intensively on the *Gāθās*, in which his analyses were influenced by Hans Reichelt’s *Elementarbuch* and *Avesta Reader*. Tavadia viewed the *Gāθās* as having “a unique literary form—dramatic in the fullest sense of the word” (1952, p. i) and so attempted to demonstrate this form through his writing in *Indo-Iranian Studies*, volume II (1952). In that volume he categorized and assessed the themes of the first three *Gāθās*. He suggested that the first *Gāθā* dealt with “the lament of the world and the call to bring Zarathushtra to end the miseries of the Iranian world”; the second *Gāθā* “brings a beautiful prayer and a noble programme” as part of Zarathushtra’s message; and the third *Gāθā* contained Zarathushtra’s sermon on good and evil in the world, specifically “the choice from between them, and the consequences of it” (all: 1952, p. ii). According to Tavadia, Zarathushtra through the *Gāθās* clearly outlined the moral choices faced by humans, while exhorting his followers to choose correctly between the forces of good and evil. Previously, in “Zur Interpretation der Gatha Zarathustra” (1950), he had selected *Yasna* 28 to show that the *Gāθās* contained a unity of plan in both subject matter and literary art. Subsequently, in “Ormazd and Ahriman” (1954), he examined strophes from *Yasna* 30 to elaborate further on the concept of dualism as found in the Zoroastrian doctrine of good versus evil. Tavadia concluded that the *Gāθās* possessed a thematic unity and carefully woven interrelation with “the end of each leading to the next piece naturally and logically” (ibid.).

In his work on the three *Gāθās*, Tavadia reconstructed the Avestan pronunciation by omitting all repetitive verbal prefixes, unnecessary vowels, and diphthongs which he considered redundant. Moreover, Tavadia asserted that his studies would have been of greater value had he included his notes in abbreviated form below the text to help students of Iranian studies. Tavadia even believed that his own publications would have gained added functionality if he had included all relevant information from Christian Bartholomae’s *Altiranisches Wörterbuch* as well as Reichelt’s *Avesta Reader*, instead of restricting his comments to points of divergence (1952, p. iv). So he worked with meticulous diligence to preserve the grammatical and linguistic



details that had been given clear perspective by his intellectual predecessors, saying: “My endeavour has been to choose the proper form and meaning best suiting the context, etc., as well as to apply the broad principles of literary and historical criticism” (ibid.). Tavadia adhered to a dictum he often quoted to students, about how success in translation depended on the conviction that no detail was too small to be neglected and that an effort to secure a more correct interpretation was paramount when translating an ancient text.

In his article “A Rhymed Ballad in Pahlavi” (1955), Tavadia deciphered the rhyme structure of an apocalyptic poem preserved in the *Zand ī Wahman Yašt*. Tavadia concluded that the poem’s thirty lines preserved a pattern which followed “older Zoroastrian rather than later Islamic models.” Indeed, his research established a verse of eight-syllable lines, a primitive Indo-Iranian form known from the *Yašts* as well (see [AVESTA](#), “Contents,” sec. V).

Being a Zoroastrian himself, Tavadia was keen to highlight the importance of Iranian oral tradition in matters of faith. He believed the claim to be genuine that, while the whole *Avesta* had been transmitted orally for centuries, its subsequently scattered corpus had been brought back together from both oral and written sources on the command of one of the Parthian kings named Valaxš (Vologeses)—as recorded in the *Dēnkard* (4.16). He argued against Bailey’s assertion that the date for the first complete writing down of the *Avesta* had to be later, around the middle of the sixth century CE (cf. [AVESTA](#), “The ‘Arsacid *Avesta*’” and f.), proposing instead that the existence of an oral tradition in no way precluded the existence of a written *Avesta* as well. To augment his conclusion, Tavadia pointed out that the practice of learning and memorizing the *Avesta* continues as an oral priestly tradition among the Parsis of India, even though its written texts are also available. Tavadia perhaps had an advantage over European scholars, for his Indian education and Zoroastrian experiences gave him an understanding of the manner in which magi recite the *Avesta*, utilize it for ritual purposes, and transmit it to subsequent generations of *mobeds*.

His two pupils at Hamburg University were Frank-Richard Hamm (1920-1973), who studied Indology, and Bernfried Schlerath (1924-2003), who studied comparative philology under him.

Tavadia met his German wife during his studies in Hamburg, and they had one daughter. He died in a motorcar accident at Hamburg in 1955.



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