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ARTICLE

As Seen from Bombay: An Iranian Zoroastrian Photo Album from the 1930s

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Abstract

This photo essay provides a visual archive of Parsi philanthropic efforts toward the Iranian Zoroastrian communities of Yazd, Kerman, and Tehran during the 1930s. The essay reproduces a collection of photographs from a photo album produced by the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjoman (est. 1918) for the benefit of Parsi audiences in Bombay. These photographs were taken and compiled by administrators of the Parsi-funded charities in order to demonstrate to Bombay-based Parsi benefactors how their charity efforts were being used inside Iran. The essay also discusses the importance of including visual archival material as part of the social and cultural history of modern Iran, as well as the unique sets of challenges that such archival preservation represents.

Keywords: photo essay; Zoroastrians; Iranians; Iranian Zoroastrians; Yazd; Kerman; philanthropy

The following pages contain a collection of photographs depicting the Iranian Zoroastrian communities of Yazd, Kerman, and Tehran. Taken between 1934 and 1937, the photographs were originally compiled together as part of a bound photo album produced for the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjoman of Bombay: many of the photos bear the stamp of the organization on their reverse sides. The Iranian Zoroastrian Anjoman (est. 1918) and the Iran League (est. 1922) were, by the 1920s, the two premier Bombay-based Parsi organizations involved in philanthropic activities for Iranian Zoroastrians. They were part of a longer history of organized Parsi philanthropic efforts in Iran which began in the 1850s with the establishment of the Society for the Amelioration of the Conditions of the Zoroastrians in Persia (hereafter: the Society for Amelioration). These organizations produced a stream of literature to keep Parsi donors and the general Parsi public informed of their activities. Whereas the Society for Amelioration published thick multilingual volumes of its proceedings—minutes in Gujarati alongside items dispatched from its emissary in Iran, Manekji Limji Hataria, in Persian, English, and occasionally French—by the 1920s the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjoman and Iran League were increasingly relying on the power of photography. The photographs presented here were probably part of an outreach effort in Bombay by the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjoman in the 1930s. Two of the photographs in this album (Figures 7 and 8) include English-language descriptions on the reverse bearing the signature "Soroosh." This name likely refers to Mirza Soroosh Lohrasb (1907–97), the long-serving Iranian Zoroastrian

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Figure 1. Male students at Marker Orphanage and Boys School, Yazd. Date unknown, likely 1934.

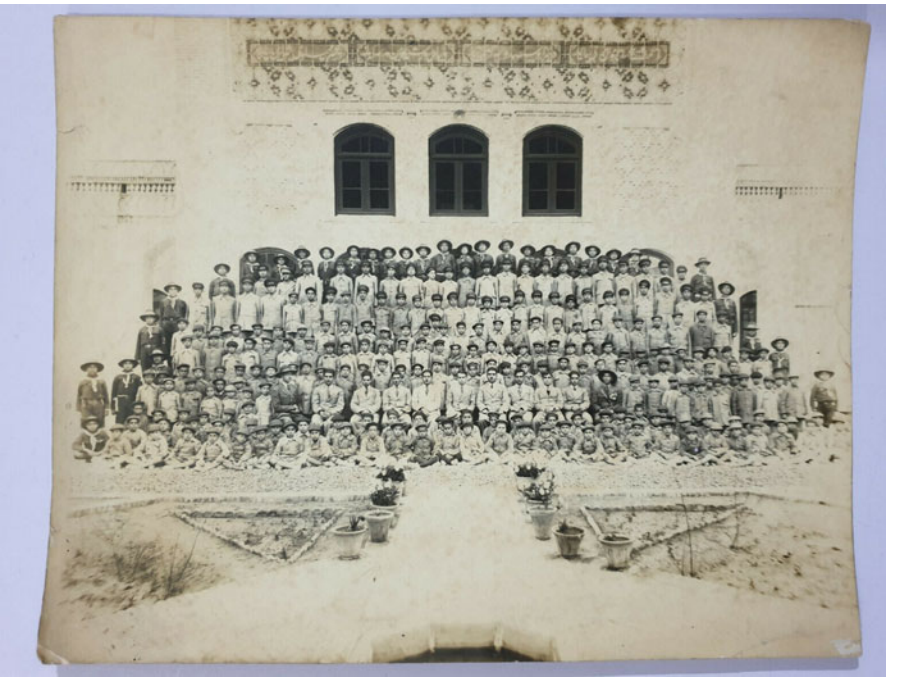

Figure 2. Reverse has English-language inscription reading, "The Anniversary of P.D. Marker Orphanage Opening Day, 12th April, 1936." Some are wearing scouting uniforms.

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Figure 3. Students at the Marker school in Yazd engaging in physical culture activities. No caption, no reverse inscription.



Figure 4. P. D. Marker (center, seated at table) and dignitaries at awards reception. Photo taken during Marker's 1934 visit to Yazd and Kerman. Prize distribution ceremony to students at the Marker Boys and Girls schools in Yazd with the governor of Yazd in attendance. Description of this photo is given in *Iran League Quarterly*, January 1935, p.124. No reverse inscription.

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Figure 5. Marker (center left with medal on his lapel) standing on steps of Marker Boys Orphanage and School. Photo taken during presentation ceremony of the "Neshān-e ʿElmi" first-class medal. Medal was given to Marker by governor of Yazd (standing next to Marker) on behalf of Reza Shah in recognition of Marker's educational philanthropy. Inscription on reverse of photo reads in English, "The opening of the P.D. Marker Orphanage and School on the 9th of October 1934." The orphanage and school had commenced operations in the 1920s and was significantly expanded by the time of its formal inauguration in October of 1934. This trip to Yazd coincided with the Ferdowsi millennium conference then taking place in Tehran.

manager of the Parsi charities in Kerman and Yazd. Working closely with the Anjoman in Bombay, Soroosh was likely helping to compile this photo album in order to facilitate the Anjoman's outreach efforts among potential Parsi benefactors. At about the same time, the Iran League was also publishing a remarkable collection of photographs in its journal, the *Iran League Quarterly*, to illustrate progress in the Iranian Zoroastrian community and Pahlavi Iran in general. One of the photographs in this album (Figure 4) was later reprinted in the pages of the *Iran League Quarterly*. Visitors to the Iran League's Bombay office could also purchase copies of its Persian Pictorial Series, sets of postcards which included photographs of Reza Shah and the young crown prince, the future Mohammad Reza Shah; Iranian Zoroastrians in new schools and community institutions; and Achaemenian and Sasanian archaeological sites. In multiple ways, Parsis and Iranians increasingly relied on the newly accessible technology of photography, along with the circulation of photographs between Iran and India, to convey a very specific narrative of social and economic development in Iran, one steeped in ancient Zoroastrian connections and featuring visible Parsi involvement in reform and progress.

Most of the photographs in this album feature institutions funded by one particular Parsi donor: Peshotanji Dossabhai (P. D.) Marker (1871–1965). In the twentieth century, Marker was the most generous Parsi philanthropist to champion the cause of improving the social and economic conditions of Iran's Zoroastrian communities. Based on a family fortune rooted in commercial, pharmaceutical, and banking enterprises, from the early 1920s Marker began to build on the earlier work of the Society for Amelioration to greatly expand

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Figure 6. Marker (standing in back, with garland around his neck) in front of a door to a home, with uniformed students and others gathered around him. Inscription on reverse reads in English, "This photo taken when Mr. Marker cut the first threads of the 3 completed carpets in the J.L. Home: 8-12-34." Plaque above window in photo reads "Hosiery Room." This was likely a weaving factory in someone's home that Marker had supported as part of his efforts to encourage economic development in Yazd and Kerman.

the educational and economic opportunities available to the Zoroastrian communities of Kerman and Yazd. Marker made two trips to Iran during this period, the first in 1924 and again in 1934. Between these two trips Marker provided extensive funding for a number of educational and economic initiatives, including the establishment of the Marker Boys' Orphanage and Day School, the Marker High School for Girls, and funding for numerous primary and middle schools for both boys and girls in the towns and villages surrounding Kerman and Yazd. Marker's philanthropy was so extensive in Yazd that the street where the main Marker school was located was renamed Marker Street (Khiābān-e Marker), and the neighborhood surrounding the Marker charities came to be known as Markerabad, complete with a clock tower underwritten through Marker's own philanthropy. Marker's educational philanthropy also extended to his support of publication efforts, including his sponsorship of the "Marker Avestan Series." The series published numerous texts during the interwar period, included accessible Persian-language works designed to provide introductory knowledge about a modernist and reformed Zoroastrianism intended for Iran's Muslim-majority reading public. The Marker series also published Ebrahim Purdavud's Persian translations, with commentary, of the *Gathas* and other canonical Zoroastrian texts. Marker's 1934 trip to Yazd and Kerman is recorded in this photo album (Figures 4, 5, and 6), which includes a photograph of Marker receiving the Neshān-e ʿElmi medal from the Iranian government for recognition of his services to Iranian education.

Collectively, the photographs in this album spoke in a language of reform and modernity that would have been instantaneously recognizable to Parsi audiences in the 1920s and 1930s. Coinciding with the growth of Parsi prosperity in colonial India, the nineteenth

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Figure 7. Kaikhosrow Shahrokh (1874–1940) (in nearest foreground, seated at right against wall) in the courtyard of the P. D. Marker School. Reverse has English-language inscription that reads, "Honorable Arbab Kaikhosrow visits Markarabad, June 1936." Signed "Soroosh." Likely Mirza Soroosh Lohrasb (1906–1997) who served for approximately forty years as the administrator of the Marker charities in Yazd and Kerman.



Figure 8. Another photo of Marker School courtyard taken during visit of Kaikhosrow Shahrokh. Reverse has English-language inscription that reads, "Meeting at Markerabad with Hn. Arbab Kaikhosrow Shahrokh—June 1936, Soroosh."

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Figure 9. Caption reads, "Celebration of seventeenth of Dey, 1315 [January 7, 1937]." This is the one-year anniversary of Reza Shah's decree banning the veil. On reverse there is an English-language caption: "17th Dey 1315 The Anniversary of Iran Ladies' Emancipation."



Figure 10. Photo taken at Marker Girls' School. No caption, no inscription, no date.

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Figure 11. Convocation ceremony for female graduates. The handwritten Gujarati text reads, "Ceremony to grant diplomas to young women graduating from the Tehran college managed by the Irani Anjoman." The identity of this college or institution remains uncertain: there is the possibility that these are graduates of the Anushirvān Dādgar Girls' School in Tehran. The banner above the students reads, "All who are knowledgeable, are strong, from knowledge an old heart will become young" [tavānā bovad, har ke dānā bovad, ze dānesh del-e pir bornā bovad]. The three framed phrases above the motto constitute the Zoroastrian saying: Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds. No date.

and early twentieth centuries were periods of intensive institution-building for Parsis across India: schools and colleges, including girls' schools; orphanages; medical dispensaries and hospitals; *gymkhana*s and sports clubs; and, by the early twentieth century, social work enterprises for the employment of the poor or disadvantaged. These are precisely the types of institutions which were photographed in the album compiled by the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjoman. Here, Parsi readers would see their Iranian coreligionists' equivalents of familiar scenes, such as groups of female students (Figures 9–12) or boys engaging in physical culture activities (Figure 3). An assertive spirit of social reform is suggested by the assembly of women and young girls celebrating the one-year anniversary of Reza Shah's decree banning the veil (Figure 9) as well as a convocation ceremony for female

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Figure 12. Convocation ceremony for female graduates. No date, no reverse inscription.



Figure 13. Adults standing in front of Marker Orphanage and School. The caption reads, "15 of Bahman Celebration, 1315 [Feb. 4, 1937] in Markerabad—welcoming and appreciation ceremony."

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Figure 14. Boy Scouts and Girl Guides standing in formation in front of Central Hall of Marker Orphanage and Boys' School. Reverse side of photo has the following English-language inscription: "Some of the troops of the Marker Orphanage Boy Scouts and Marker Girls' School Girl Guides."



Figure 15. Caption reads, "Celebration of 15 Bahman, 1315, in Markerabad, Yazd" [February 4, 1937].

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Figure 16. No caption or inscription on reverse. Girl Guides and Boy Scouts in uniform standing in front of Central Hall of Marker Orphanage and School.

graduates (Figures 11–12), scenes of which conveyed a shared Parsi-Iranian Zoroastrian progressivism as well as the achievements of the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjoman (as John Hinnells notes, a significant number of the Anjoman's properties in Iran were dedicated to female education).[1]

Several of the photographs feature Iranian Zoroastrian Boy Scouts and Girl Guides (Figures 2, 14, 16, and 17). Like female education, scouting was a feature of Parsi society linked to highly gendered ideas of community and racial improvement. Despite the wariness of the British Indian government, which worried about the potential for militarization amongst Indian scouting troops, scouting spread throughout India from 1908 onward.[2] By 1914, a Parsee Scouting Society had been formed in Bombay, with all-Parsi scouting troops taking the lead at representing India in international scouting events.[3] Iran's own history of scouting only gained momentum from the mid-1930s, the period depicted in these photographs. Although initially formed as a private club in the early 1920s, it was in 1934 that scouting (*pishāhangi*) became incorporated into the offices of the Ministry of Education. By the late 1930s Iranian scouting had become much more formalized, incorporated into Iran's national educational curriculum, and recognized by international scouting organizations. As seen by Parsi viewers in Bombay, the photographs of Iranian Boy Scouts and Girl Guides in this photo album conveyed—like all of the photos in this collection—a common ideal of social progress and gendered modernity shared by Parsis and Iranians.

Our goals in presenting these photographs in this special issue of *Iranian Studies* are twofold. First, as an important part of the archival record, these images provide a vivid account of Iran's Zoroastrian community during a period of rapid social, cultural, economic, and

[1] Hinnells, "The Flowering of Zoroastrian Benevolence," 283.
[2] Watt, "The Promise of 'Character' and the Spectre of Sedition."
[3] For a brief description of early Parsi scouting, see Homa-Vazir, "Scouting."

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Figure 17. Girl Guides and Boy Scouts of the Marker schools standing in formation in front of Central Hall of Marker Orphanage and School. No caption. No date. Reverse has stamp of Iranian Zoroastrian Anjoman of Bombay.

political change. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, the nation-building project of the Reza Shah years and the growing engagement and philanthropy of Parsi charitable organizations based in Bombay played important roles in improving the lives of Iran's Zoroastrian community. Collectively, we present these photographs to provide a visual archive of these changes to supplement the more commonly used textual sources to document this history. Our second goal in producing a digital version of this photo album is to underscore the ephemeral and endangered nature of modern Iran's visual archive, and to highlight the importance of cultivating new strategies for the preservation of photographic source material documenting the social and cultural history of twentieth-century Iran. While originally produced in Iran, this photo album was sent to the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjoman's offices in Bombay. The photo album was stored there from the late 1930s until perhaps as late as spring of 2021, when the entire album was put up for sale on the eBay online shopping and auction platform. It was at this point that we became aware of this photo album through the help of our colleague Daniel Sheffield. The seller of the photos, with whom we were unable to make contact, was selling the photographs from the album individually, page by page, on the auction site. It is unclear to us how the seller came into possession of the photo album and how the decision was made to sell them. The fate of this album is not surprising: in modern-day Mumbai, the collections of moribund Parsi organizations have regularly been pilfered, sold off, or disposed as scrap. Collections which remain intact suffer from poor preservation and staff and organizational indifference. Fortunately, we were able to preserve these photographs in order to keep them as part of a single digital photo album, a sampling of which we present here to readers of *Iranian Studies*. The complete photo album can be viewed at the digital humanities online repository housed at the University of Oklahoma's Bizzell Memorial Library.[4]

[4] See https://hdl.handle.net/11244/335212.

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As is the case with this lost and discarded—but fortunately now digitally recovered—photo album, we have no doubt that there remains a vast amount of uncollected and unarchived photographs pertaining to the social and cultural history of modern Iran that reside in private collections throughout the world, and which are in danger of being lost. While some efforts have been made over the years to preserve visual archival photographs and other documents from Iran's modern period, such as the pioneering "Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran" online archive and the Antoin Sevruguin photo archive at the Smithsonian Institute's Freer Gallery of Art, we believe there remains a vast body of material that is still inaccessible and outside of formal archival institutions. The ephemeral and endangered nature of these visual sources is perhaps especially acute for material pertaining to the social and cultural history of Pahlavi Iran. If properly archived, the collection, preservation, and utilization of this visual material has the potential of opening up new areas of research into modern Iran's social and cultural history. It is with the intention of contributing toward the production of such a visual archive that we present this digital photo album.

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