

# Journeys and Encounters: the History of the Zoroastrians of Iran and Its Challenges

## [Slide 2: introducing the project]

Before turning to the substance of this talk, I would like to first situate it within the broader framework that makes it possible. The research I am presenting today constitutes the initial phase of a larger project known by the acronym TRAVELS, whose full title – *Tracing Records and Views of European Literature on Zoroastrians of Iran in the Late Modern Age* – already gestures towards both its goals and its rather wide-ranging scope.

As the title suggests, the project's central aim is to reconstruct the history of the Zoroastrian community of Iran between the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, more precisely in the period that stretches from the last Persian *Revāyat* in 1773 to the establishment of the first Iranian Zoroastrian *anjoman* in 1854. Rather than offering a history of Zoroastrianism in the abstract, the project focuses on the community as a historical minority, observed, described, and at times imaginatively refracted through European literary and scholarly lenses.

## [2.a]

TRAVELS is funded under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Global Postdoctoral Fellowships, a European programme that supports a limited number of research projects each year deemed – shall we say – prestigious by the European Commission. In keeping with both transparency and contractual obligation, I am required to state that the project runs for three years and is fully funded by the European Union through my main host institution, Sapienza University of Rome. The same obligation explains why the reassuring formula “funded by the European Union” appears faithfully on *every* slide you will see today, much like a quiet but persistent watermark.

As mentioned, my primary affiliation is with Sapienza University of Rome, where I hold a full institutional attachment; however, as a global project, TRAVELS also involves two additional institutions during its outgoing phase, which spans the first two years of the fellowship.

## [2.b]

The first of these is the University of Toronto, where I am currently based as a visiting researcher and which serves as my main institutional home during this outgoing phase. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Department of Historical Studies at Mississauga for their warm welcome and their invaluable assistance during the rather testing bureaucratic period before my arrival, as well as the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilisations, which has very generously adopted me as a visiting scholar and involved

me actively and collegially in its academic life, including the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institution of Iranian Studies, which has kindly provided the opportunity to present this project.

### [2.c]

The third institution is SOAS, University of London, which I thank somewhat in advance, given that I shall not be in London until next May, but with no less sincerity for that temporal displacement. I am also deeply grateful to my three supervisors, without whom this project would remain a far more solitary enterprise: Professor Cereti of Sapienza University of Rome and the University of California, Irvine; Professor Raffaelli, my supervisor here in Toronto; and Dr Errichiello, with whom I will have the pleasure of working during the London phase.

One final technical point, though important, concerns timing. The project officially began on 1 September 2025, so I am currently in my fifth month. A good deal has already been accomplished in this relatively short span, but much more remains to be done, and it is for this reason that today's presentation will be methodological in emphasis, reflecting a project that is still very much in motion rather than one already looking back on its conclusions.

### [Slide 3: specifying the topic — history, not religion]

This project primarily concerns the history of the Zoroastrian community rather than the internal development of Zoroastrianism as a religious system. While the two are inevitably connected, my research consciously shifts its centre of gravity from doctrine to lived experience, focusing on Zoroastrians as a historical minority in Iran and examining their condition from a socio-political perspective. The aim is not to trace theological change across these eighty-odd years, but rather to understand how a marginalised community negotiated its place within changing structures of power, society, and economy.

These cultural, social, political, and economic relationships are examined within three concentric, interrelated contexts, each illuminating a different level of interaction and agency.

### [3.a]

The first context concerns intra-Zoroastrian relations, both within the Iranian community itself and between Iranian Zoroastrians and those living beyond Iran's borders, most notably in the territories governed by the British Rāj. The use of the term British Rāj rather than India is deliberate because the political geography of the period encompassed regions that no longer correspond to the modern geopolitical understanding of India, like today's Pakistan.

### [3.b]

The second context is inter-regional and situates the Zoroastrian community within the wider Iranian setting of the eighteenth century and the early Qajar period. Here, the research explores relations with local

authorities, patterns of negotiation with power, and the practical strategies through which Zoroastrians sought to preserve communal cohesion under conditions of legal and social constraint.

### [3.c]

The third and outermost context is extra-regional, and concerns encounters between Zoroastrians and non-Asian cultures, above all European ones. These contacts not only shaped European representations of Zoroastrians but also influenced how the community articulated its identity within an increasingly interconnected world.

Considered together, these three analytical levels allow the Zoroastrian community to emerge not as a passive object of history, but as an active and adaptive presence, rooted in local realities while engaged with wider transregional and global networks.

Although this research does not focus primarily on the history of Zoroastrian doctrines or ritual practices, this should by no means be taken to imply that such elements are marginalised or set aside. Even at first glance, it becomes evident that philosophical dimensions cannot be cleanly excluded from an enquiry of this kind; indeed, any attempt to do so would be not only methodologically unsound but also historically misleading.

As I shall try to show, particularly when I turn to questions of the methodology, the analysis of contemporary philosophical currents – both European and Asian – is in fact a central component in reconstructing the history of the Zoroastrian community, since these intellectual frameworks profoundly shaped the ways in which Zoroastrians were perceived, represented, and, at times, understood by themselves and by others.

### [Slide 4: Why 1773 and 1854? – the Zoroastrian Studies]

Now, why does the project focus on the period between 1773 and 1854? Zoroastrian studies covering the period between the golden age of Pahlavi literature and the final decades of the nineteenth century remain relatively underexplored. However, recent scholarship on the Safavid era has increased markedly, providing a richer contextualisation of the persecutions faced by Zoroastrians in relation to the country's economic conditions and to the position of other minority communities. These studies have further illuminated the social and economic structures of Iranian and Indian Zoroastrians, including the ownership of servants, thereby situating Safavid-era Zoroastrians within a broader framework.

Indeed, while the community undoubtedly faced tragic episodes, it remained vibrant and active at least until the early eighteenth century. By contrast, sources from the second half of the nineteenth century — whether European or Parsi — depict a community reduced to the limits of its endurance: impoverished, oppressed, and to such an extent that only a few were able to read the sacred texts, at least, according to some of these

sources. One particularly well-known description is Westergaard's letter, published by Wilson in *The Christian Observer*, in which he urged the Indian Zoroastrian community to intervene in order to revitalise their Iranian counterparts.

To comprehend the scale of this transformation, some sources estimate that at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Iranian Zoroastrian population numbered around 250,000 individuals. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, Maneckji Hatavia records that the entire community had shrunk to approximately 9,000 individuals, with over 6,500 living in Yazd and the surrounding villages. If these figures are taken at face value, the decline is undeniably dramatic, particularly when considering the earlier estimate.

This context explains the choice of 1773 and 1854 as the temporal boundaries of this research. These years serve as the Columns of Hercules for the Zoroastrian studies. Until 1773, the Iranian community maintained contacts with its Indian counterparts, leaving at least minimal historical sources, most notably the Persian *Revāyats*: indeed, the last extant letter – the Ithoter – dates to 1773. The year 1854, as previously mentioned, marks the founding of the first Iranian Zoroastrian *anjomans* by Hatavia,<sup>1</sup> showing a reversal of fortune and the resumption of contacts between the Iranian and Indian communities. Between these two points, the historical record is almost entirely silent—a period of profound darkness, of which only its rather drastic consequences are known. It was precisely this unknown and obscure interval that drew attention and inspired investigation.

Moreover, these two dates take on further significance when the history in question is viewed from a broader perspective, linking the fate of the Zoroastrians to wider regional and even international currents.

### [Slide 5: Asian and European studies]

This phase indeed coincides with, and reflects, transformations in the administration of the British and French empires and their expanding presence in Asia. Within Iran, these years mark a transition from an intermediate period, characterised by the simultaneous presence of multiple ruling dynasties, to a renewed political unity under the Qajars.

Similarly, the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century mark a pivotal moment for the Parsi community, as the laity rose and European cultural models gained greater influence. This era also saw an unprecedented intensification of intercultural relations between Asia and Europe, opening channels of exchange and interaction that had never before reached such a scale.

The significance of this period is also underscored when observing the subsequent decades of the nineteenth century. It was then that modern Zoroastrian studies began to revive in the West, with pioneering

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Stausberg, 'Zoroastrians in Modern Iran', in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, ed. by Michael Stausberg and Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina (Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 173–90 (p. 175); Monica Ringer, *Pious Citizens: Reforming Zoroastrianism in India and Iran* (Syracuse University Press, 2011), p. 149.

contributions by scholars such as Haug and Müller. At the same time, the development of Iranian nationalism reshaped the country's political and cultural landscape, while the Zoroastrian community gradually experienced a revival, reasserting its presence and vitality after decades of adversity.

#### [Slide 6: objectives]

In brief, summarising what has been presented so far, the project's objectives are threefold.

First, TRAVELS seeks to illuminate a dark chapter of Zoroastrian history in Iran.

Second, the project aims to situate the Zoroastrians within a broader regional and international context, linking their experiences to Iranian, Asian, and global historical processes.

Third, it positions the community and Zoroastrianism as a guiding thread through which to understand these eighty years of profound transformations, thereby allowing a once-marginalised minority to emerge as the principal narrator of this history.

#### [Slide 7: sources]

The main challenge lies in the nature of the sources available. Indeed, the period between the last *Revāyat* and Hataria's journey coincides with an interval for which local sources are exceedingly scarce. Iranian Zoroastrian literature experienced a marked slowdown throughout the eighteenth century, leaving only a handful of texts. At the same time, official contacts between the Iranian and Indian communities had effectively ceased, so that even on the Indian side, there are virtually no contemporary sources to illuminate these eighty years.

By contrast, from the late eighteenth century onwards, European presence in Asia steadily increased, reaching its peak by the mid-nineteenth century, a period often regarded as the golden age of European, particularly British, exploration in the region. At the same time, travel literature became one of the central genres of British writing, resulting in a substantial proliferation of diaries and firsthand accounts.

In relation to this period, I have collected numerous travel accounts of individuals who visited Iran and the Zoroastrian community, which provide valuable insights into its social and cultural landscape. Beyond travel literature, I have also gathered a significant body of material from other literary genres, all of which was either published or at least written within this historical window, thereby offering complementary perspectives on the period.

#### [Slide 8: the type of data]

Indeed, a defining feature of the European sources lies in their remarkable diversity, both in terms of authors and the information they provide. There is no single category of European traveller: military officers,

missionaries, diplomats, spies, explorers, antiquarians, artists, and journalists each offering distinct perspectives.

#### [8.a]

Some travellers provide only general observations, noting their presence in various cities, the approximate number of families, and their place within the broader social fabric. While these descriptions were often brief and lacking in detail, they confirm that Zoroastrians were recognised as a distinct minority within Iranian society. Notable examples of such travellers include Buckingham, Kinneir, and Malcolm.

#### [8.b]

Other travellers provided a more detailed and comprehensive picture of Zoroastrian life, addressing their social conditions, religious practices, and interactions with the Muslim majority. Europeans often perceived their lives as difficult or marginalised, shaped by pressures and discrimination. Religion was frequently described in terms of degeneration from the ancient teachings of Zarathustra, with modern Zoroastrians sometimes labelled “fire-worshippers” or “idolaters.” Ker Porter, in particular, attempted to explain how the religion of Zarathustra could have evolved—or, in his view, degenerated—into what he considered a true idolatry.

#### [8.c]

Many authors were also aware of the Zoroastrian migration to India, and occasionally drew comparisons between the Iranian and Indian behdins. It is sometimes unclear whether their information about Zoroastrians stemmed from direct observation or from knowledge of the Parsis in India. Although many use the pejorative term “Gueber” only to refer to Zoroastrians in Iran, European accounts often blurred the social and religious distinctions between the two communities. Travellers reporting in this manner include Fraser, Morier, Ouseley, and Southgate.

#### [8.d]

A smaller group of travellers recorded first-hand experiences with individual Zoroastrians, allowing them to depict daily life, social customs, and personal interactions with a richness and intimacy absent in more general accounts. This group includes Ouseley and Southgate, and, to a lesser extent, Conolly and the pseudo-Malcolm again.

#### [Slide 9: the issues]

Yet this diversity of information presents two major challenges.

First, many authors rely heavily on reports or data drawn from earlier travellers and theologians, who remained widely read in the nineteenth century, such as de Chinon, Travelier, and, above all, Chardin and Mīr Xwānd, as well as on contemporaneous travellers or historians, including Malcolm, without verifying the information.

Second, in addition to reproducing earlier information, these authors often inherit the preconceptions of earlier thinkers, such as Stillingfleet, Maimonides, and Newton, which they either repeat or adapt to the prevailing currents of thought in the nineteenth century.

### [Slide 10: Zoroastrian ‘ugliness’]

Thus, it follows that in various authors one encounters a mixture of both dated and new information, alongside a fusion of preconceptions that may well trace back to the sixteenth century or earlier, such as the concept of *prisca theologia* originating in the Renaissance, repackaged to align with the philosophical trends of the nineteenth century. For instance, the notion of *prisca theologia* is employed as a foundation to justify stadial theory with a religious-moral emphasis, which leads to the concept of Zoroastrian idolatry mentioned earlier.

Beyond these two issues, a third, and perhaps most crucial, is that the majority of available sources are European. Consequently, they are not only external to the Zoroastrian world but also largely disconnected from the wider Asian cultural context, emerging instead from a particular historical moment that might, without exaggeration, be characterised as the “age of prejudice.”

Here, in fact, we reach the very heart of the problem. By the term ‘age of prejudice,’ I do not refer solely to the attitudes held by Europeans towards Asians, and, more specifically, towards Zoroastrians, but also to the assumptions and preconceptions that modern society continues to harbour about this historical period, often colouring the way these authors are perceived in line with prevailing expectations.

It thus becomes evident, as noted at the outset, that it is impossible to study the history of Zoroastrians during these decades without taking into account the dominant philosophical currents and the diverse perceptions of Europeans and Asians between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

### [Slide 11: How to deal with this problem?]

A central question remains: how can one responsibly handle such strongly Eurocentric sources when studying a non-European community?

### [Slide 12: Fragmentation/Contextualisation and Counterbalance]

The answer, I would suggest, lies in a twofold strategy: fragmentation plus contextualisation, and counterbalance. Given that this research is still in its early stages, the primary focus to date has been on fragmentation and contextualisation, carefully dissecting the material and situating each piece of evidence within the cultural framework. By doing so, it becomes possible to navigate the inherent biases of the

sources, separate assumptions from observable facts, and illuminate the realities of the Zoroastrian community in ways the sources themselves rarely allow.

The component of counterbalance, though equally crucial, is still in its early stages and remains largely a task for the future. It involves integrating alternative perspectives, including those of Indian Zoroastrians and other contemporaneous actors, in order to offset the Eurocentric viewpoint.

### [Slide 13: Fragmentation/Contextualisation]

Fragmentation, as an analytical approach, primarily involves situating the authors within the specific cultural and intellectual milieu in which they wrote or compiled their diaries and works. This rests on two fundamental premises. First, it is essential to situate the authors within the contemporary debates of their period, recognising that it was common for travellers to revise and expand their notes upon returning home, integrating them with further study and reflection. Second, it requires acknowledging the diversity of thought both synchronically, across different authors writing at the same time, and diachronically, tracing how ideas evolved across successive generations of observers.

Indeed, since 1978, there has been a tendency to equate Orientalism almost indelibly with imperialism — *a connection that certainly existed and cannot be denied* — but which represents only one particular expression of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Orientalism. Moreover, Orientalism itself evolved over time, as did European approaches to Asian populations and polities. Recent scholarship has highlighted, for instance, that the period between 1790 and 1830 marked a significant transformation in the European administration of their Asian colonies, accompanied by a corresponding shift in engagement with Asian cultures and nations, including Iran and the Zoroastrians. Thus, a careful, contextualised reading of the sources requires sensitivity not only to the individual author but also to broader historical currents that profoundly shaped perception, representation, and interpretation.

### [Slide 14: Irish Orientalism, Buckingham – puntini e cerchio semitrasparente colorato]

A central principle of fragmentation is the recognition that, although a dominant ideology undoubtedly shaped many of these authors, this general trend emerged from the aggregation of individual perspectives, illustrating the reciprocal influence between society and the individual. Consequently, some authors aligned closely with dominant ideological currents, while others stood at a considerable distance from them. Two illustrative examples can be drawn from Irish Orientalism and the figure of James Silk Buckingham.

### [Slide 15: Irish Orientalism – books]

Many Irish travellers in Asia expressed notable sympathy for populations subjected to British domination, as well as for minority groups within the Middle East. This empathy was grounded in at least two shared experiences. First, they confronted the same imperial authority, the British Empire, and second, influenced by a variety of cultural factors, many Irish perceived a historical or ancestral connection to Asia, fostering a sense of affinity with these communities. Recent scholarship has emphasised the cultural link that Irish Orientalists perceived with ancient Iran, highlighting the nuanced ways in which personal identity and cross-cultural perception intersected.

### [Slide 16: James Silk Buckingham]

By contrast, James Silk Buckingham represents a strikingly independent voice. As an active journalist, he founded the *Calcutta Journal* in 1818, only for it to be suppressed by the East India Company due to its outspoken criticism of British imperial policies. Later, having contributed to the abolition of slavery within the British Empire, Buckingham travelled to the United States to expose the conditions endured by enslaved Africans, producing one of the earliest significant works on the subject. His career exemplifies how an individual perspective can both challenge prevailing ideologies and transcend Eurocentric assumptions.

### [Slide 17: Importanza di avere diversi Orientalisms]

It is essential to recognise the diversity among Orientalists when studying eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Zoroastrians because this diversity is reflected in the sources themselves: European accounts constitute the principal reservoir of information, and therefore it is crucial to assess their narratives carefully, distinguishing, on the one hand, concrete factual data from opinion or interpretation, and, on the other, to understand the manner in which these authors engaged with Zoroastrians, and consequently, the cultural filters through which they transmitted their observations.

Indeed, the central point is that travellers did not merely reproduce the reports of earlier authors; they actively interacted with Zoroastrians and Iranians, and subsequently interpreted local information through their cultural and intellectual lenses. In other words, every observation is simultaneously an encounter and an interpretation, coloured by both the social context of the community being observed and the ideological frameworks shaping the observer.

### [Slide 18: Occidentalism]

Engagement with Zoroastrians and Iranians introduces a second element, equally important to Orientalism, which must not be ignored. I am particularly pleased that Professor Tafazzoli, seated here, has been among the scholars who have most emphasised the significance of this factor: Occidentalism.

The abundance of European sources, indeed, should not obscure a crucial point: the informants themselves were often Zoroastrians or Iranians. It was *they* who determined what information to convey, and in what form, to the visiting European observer. Consequently, both the quantity and the nature of the material recorded are closely shaped by the perceptions these Asian informants held of Europeans, both as individuals and as a distinct social and cultural group. In other words, European narratives are inseparable from the choices, judgments, and interpretative frameworks of those who originally provided the information.

### [Slide 19: Occidentalisms]

Yet even in this context, it would be overly simplistic to treat Occidentalism, like Orientalism, as a single, monolithic phenomenon. At least in the study of Zoroastrian communities, it is possible to discern three distinct forms of Occidentalism.

First, the perception of Europeans held by the Parsi community, itself subdivided between reformers and conservatives, reflects differing attitudes towards adaptation, engagement, and authority.

Second, Europeans' perception among the broader Iranian population is shaped by political, military, and cultural contacts over time.

Third, the perception of Europeans by Iranian Zoroastrians occupies an intermediate position that incorporates elements of both the Parsi outlook and the broader Iranian experience.

Understanding these nuances is crucial, for they illuminate how European observers were themselves filtered through multiple layers of local perception, and how the information ultimately recorded reflects a dialogue — albeit asymmetrical — between communities rather than a unilateral account.

### [Slide 20: Orientalism and Occidentalism 1]

Orientalisms and Occidentalisms, however, should not be understood merely as two distinct sets of perceptions; they constitute two worlds that, during this historical period, interacted constantly and shaped one another, producing profound implications for the study of Zoroastrians of the era.

Military or political sources, for example, frequently relay information about Zoroastrians indirectly, as reported to European observers by local Iranian authorities, and are therefore inevitably filtered through the lens of Iranian perception.

By contrast, missionaries and independent travellers often established direct contact with Iranian Zoroastrians, so that the accounts they produced reflect, at least in part, the community's perspective, albeit through the observer's European and individual framework. Furthermore, many travellers first encountered Zoroastrians in India, particularly in Mumbai, where the Parsi community influenced their impressions and

communicated its own viewpoint, naturally selecting and framing information to shape European understanding.

It becomes readily apparent that Occidentalisms and Orientalisms are not merely parallel phenomena but rather complex forces that constantly shape and inform one another. To appreciate fully the significance of examining the interaction between these two worlds in the concrete study of Zoroastrian communities, one may consider the example of four figures whose work is particularly pivotal: Mollā Fērōz, William Jones, John Malcolm, and William Ouseley. Each, in their own way, exemplifies how the perspectives of European observers and Zoroastrians' self-representation intersect.

#### [Slide 21: Fērōz, Jones, Malcolm, Ouseley]

Between 1768 and 1780, Mullā Kaus and his son, the future Mullā Fērōz, undertook a journey to Iran during which the young Fērōz mastered Persian and received an education in the Iranian religious tradition, preparing him to assume the role of a Zoroastrian priest. This journey exemplifies an early intra-Zoroastrian exchange between the Indian and Iranian communities.

#### [20.a]

In 1778, further illustrating the mobility of Zoroastrian texts, Mullā Kaus acquired the manuscript of the *Dasātir* in Isfahan and brought it back to the Qadimi Zoroastrian community in Navsari, India. At the same time, European scholars were attempting to make sense of the Zoroastrian tradition from afar. In 1771, Anquetil-Duperron published his translation of the Avesta, produced with the assistance of the Parsi community, marking an early European–Parsi intellectual encounter.

#### [20.b]

William Jones, however, sharply criticised this translation and sought alternative sources to challenge the authority of the Zend-Avesta. It was through the intervention of Mohammad Husayn Isfahani that Jones encountered the *Dabestān*, which He then championed in 1789 in his *Sixth Discourse on the Persians* as a reliable and authentic source for the study of Zoroastrianism. Crucially, Jones's endorsement of the work relied upon the *Dasātir*, already known among Indian Parsis, though Jones himself never had direct access to the text, which would only be translated by Mullā Fērōz in 1818. This situation reveals the intricate layering of European, Indian, and Iranian Zoroastrian knowledge and how information circulated through multiple intermediaries before reaching a broader European audience.

#### [20.c]

The consequences of these exchanges were profound. The presence of the *Dasātir* within the Indian Parsi community, which was closely connected to the British imperial network, combined with Jones's influence, shaped the perceptions of later European travellers and historians, including figures such as Thomas

Maurice and John Malcolm. In 1815, Malcolm's *The History of Persia* drew extensively upon both the *Dabestān* and Persian literary sources with which he was intimately familiar, creating a European–Iranian and European–Asian nexus of knowledge.

[20.d]

The work had a lasting impact: it influenced Conder's *Modern Traveller*, which, in turn, was translated into Urdu in 1848, circulated widely in Iran, and remained a point of reference for national historiography well into the early twentieth century. In this way, Malcolm's publication elevated both the *Dabestān* and the *Dasātīr* to central positions in the study of Zoroastrianism, linking the Indian and Iranian communities through shared textual and historical frameworks.

[20.e]

Meanwhile, Mullā Fērōz's own translation of the *Dasātīr* in 1818 provided a definitive source, enabling more direct engagement with Zoroastrian thought. Yet the reception and interpretation of these texts varied widely among European travellers. Robert Ker Porter, for instance, relied upon Malcolm and the *Dabestān* in his accounts of Iranian Zoroastrians, though he never directly met the community. His representations, informed through his Iranian intermediaries, were notably negative, illustrating the potential distortions inherent in mediated observation.

[20.f]

By contrast, William Ouseley travelled to Iran prior to Mullā Fērōz's translation but engaged with these texts in subsequent years; his accounts reflect the additional depth gained through direct contact with Mullā Fērōz and Iranian Zoroastrians. In Ouseley's work, the interplay between European scholarly methods and Zoroastrian self-representation produces a perspective both richer and more nuanced, demonstrating how knowledge of the community was continually negotiated and filtered through multiple lenses. Notably, Ouseley was one of the first to openly criticise the *Dabestān* as an unreliable source for understanding Zoroastrianism.

What initially appears as a straightforward Eurocentric account reveals, on closer examination, a complex mosaic of interactions: intra-Zoroastrian exchanges, European scholarly intervention, Iranian mediation, and direct engagement with local communities. Understanding these layers is essential for accurately reconstructing Zoroastrian history and for appreciating the intricate dynamics of cultural transmission, intellectual influence, and the negotiation of authority across continents. Even within the limited sample of four prominent figures in the study of the Iranian Zoroastrian community, it becomes evident that diverse Asian perceptions of Europeans were never absent from these narratives. In other words, the European perspective was never entirely autonomous; it was filtered, refracted, and sometimes even reframed by the very communities under observation.

This Asian element within European works must not be underestimated. The Persianate cultural sphere contributed significantly to the development of Western thought, highlighting the active role of non-European actors in shaping European knowledge. Recognising this dynamic allows one to see European texts not as unilateral accounts but as products of dialogue, mediation, and exchange across cultural boundaries. Equally important is the need to study the interaction between Orientalisms and Occidentalisms, for it is only through this lens that one can begin to disentangle the ways in which the Zoroastrian community was projected within European narratives from the historical reality that may have existed.

At the same time, these ongoing exchanges illuminate another dimension of Zoroastrian agency. The community was not merely a passive subject of observation; rather, it functioned as an interlocutor in cross-cultural interactions, mediating the flow of knowledge and facilitating dialogue between diverse Asian cultures and, crucially, between Asia and Europe. In this sense, the Zoroastrians emerge not only as historical subjects but as active participants in the intellectual and cultural exchanges of their era.

As a consequence, this project aims to move individual Zoroastrian informants beyond the anonymity of the historical record. In doing so, the usual roles of informant and observer are reversed, placing the Zoroastrian informants at the forefront of the historical narrative.

#### [Slide 22: Counterbalance]

Although fragmentation contextualises European material and thereby highlights the Asian elements embedded within it, it remains insufficient to fully counterbalance the inherent Eurocentrism of the sources. The notable scarcity of direct Zoroastrian literary evidence throughout the eighty years should not, however, be a cause for discouragement.

As emphasised at the outset, this research project spans three years, of which only four months have elapsed. Consequently, there remains ample opportunity to undertake a variety of measures to redress the Eurocentric bias of the sources — some of which are already underway.

#### [Slide 23: Actions]

The first step involves extending the research to include later Parsi and Iranian sources, reaching at least into the early decades of the twentieth century, with the 1930s serving as a formal boundary. Historiographical works such as those by Framji Karaka or Dhalla contain invaluable historical information for the study of Iranian Zoroastrian communities.

However, in many texts, even modern texts, events from the late 19th century (the 1880s or 1890s) are generalised to illustrate Zoroastrian society across the entire century, thereby obscuring the socio-political transformations that affected Iran and the wider region over the course of the century. The 19th century

was marked by numerous developments, and later events cannot adequately represent the society of its earlier decades. Consequently, it is quite important to distinguish between events that occurred before and after 1854 carefully.

To complement this, the research should also encompass 18th- and 19th-century Zoroastrian travel literature in Gujarati, Persian, and English, beyond the well-known diaries of Mōlla Fērōz and Hataria, to better understand their perspectives.

A second avenue entails integrating modern Zoroastrian historiography with its traditional Western counterpart. During the twentieth century, a number of Zoroastrian authors produced works in Persian that have been overlooked by non-Iranian scholarship, with some notable exceptions. Bringing these texts into dialogue with existing historiography promises to enrich and diversify the sources available for analysis.

Finally, the project plans thorough investigations in local archives and libraries in Iran and India, as well as in private collections, aiming to uncover previously unpublished material. This research may also involve fieldwork to access original documents, particularly in Iranian archives in Yazd and Kerman, as well as in Indian collections such as the Meherjirana Library, the Alpaiwalla Museum, and the Cama Institute.

#### [Slide 24: conclusions]

In conclusion, the overarching aim of this project is to weave the history of Zoroastrians into global history, situating this community at the very heart of the narrative. By revisiting the critical period spanning the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it seeks to reconstruct Zoroastrians' own experiences and to illuminate the broader consequences and cultural reverberations of their interactions with neighbouring and distant peoples. Central to this endeavour is a careful reassessment of European sources, recognising both their importance and the indispensable contributions of Asian informants, while simultaneously striving to extend the research as far as possible through Iranian and Parsi materials, archival exploration, and the integration of Iranian Zoroastrian historiographical traditions.