

Houchang E. Chehabi

Obituary

Reza Alavi, 1935–2012



It is with deep sorrow that we announce the death of our colleague and friend Reza Alavi, who died in Tehran on 3 November 2012 after a long and painful, albeit stoically borne, illness.

Reza Alavi Shoostari was born in Ahvaz on 7 September 1935. After attending Alborz High School for three years—an experience he did not enjoy because he found the school's ethos too authoritarian—he left Iran in 1950 for the United States and completed his secondary education at the Gilman School in Baltimore, Maryland. He entered Harvard College upon graduation in 1953. A resident of Leverett House, he graduated in 1957 with a concentration in History. Upon his return to

Iran in the same year, he studied Persian literature in the traditional manner at Tehran's *Sepahsalar Madrasa*. In 1959 he went up to Oxford and, as a senior undergraduate at St. Antony's College, read Sanskrit under Thomas Burrow, the Boden Professor of Sanskrit, and R.C. Zaehner, the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics. He held a deep interest in early Buddhism and Upanishadic philosophy, and in the summer of 1960 first visited India to spend some time at an ashram so as to immerse himself practically in Indian philosophy. He received his second BA in Oriental Studies from the University of Oxford in 1962. While at St. Antony's, he also collaborated with Albert Hourani on organizing seminars on Persian literature and history at that college's recently established Middle East Centre. Encouraged by Hourani and Zaehner, he decided to pursue a doctorate at Oxford, for which he was awarded one of the prestigious Boden Scholarships to study Sanskrit and Pali.

Family circumstances, however, compelled him to abandon his doctoral work and return to Tehran in 1963. For a few years he worked for the Central Bank, researching and editing its English-language reports. In 1967 he left government service to join the Behshahr Industrial Group as marketing director, but in 1970 he set up his own company, Nucleon, which imported educational and scientific equipment and publications. He was also named advisor to the Minister of Science and Higher Education, Majid Rahnema. His association with the Behshahr Group and Habib Ladjevardi, a son of the company's founder who had returned to Iran with an MBA from Harvard University, and was intent on modernizing Iran's entrepreneurial culture, led Reza Alavi to suggest setting up a business school in Tehran. He promoted and laid the groundwork for the creation of a graduate management school in Iran, modeled after the Harvard Business School. This project was supported by the Ministry of Higher Education and was realized under the leadership of his friend Habib Lajevardi in the shape of the Iran Center of Management Studies (ICMS). Set up in association with the Harvard Business School, it enrolled its first students in 1972.

Alavi was the only Iranian to know Pali, the sacred language of Theravada Buddhism and, at the urging of his close friend and fellow Indologist, Dariush Shayegan, he translated into Persian the *Dhammapada*, a widely read verse collection of sayings of the Buddha. It was published with a foreword he wrote on Buddhism as *Rah-e Haqq* (Tehran, [2537] 1357/1978).

In 1976 Alavi was appointed cultural attaché and director of the Iran Cultural House, in New Delhi, India. This post united him with the country whose culture and history he loved, and he forged friendly ties between the cultural center and Indian academic circles. While in India he published *Where the Wingless Eagles Await...: Poetical Enquiry in the Nature of Truth* (Delhi, 1979), a volume of English poetical meditations inspired by Eastern philosophy. At the time of the revolution a group of agitated students occupied the premises of the Cultural House, but Alavi, with characteristic aplomb, served them tea and calmed them down. He remained in India until August 1980, when he left for Paris without stopping in Iran.

For the next eleven years Reza Alavi lived in Paris, spending his time reading, reflecting, and teaching history at an English-medium school. The fruit of his reflec-

tions was an article, “Science and Society in Persian Civilization,” in *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization* 5, no. 4 (June 1985). In this essay he took Iran’s pre-revolutionary elite to task for alienating themselves from their native culture, going so far as to call them *native colons*.

In 1990 Alavi left Paris for Boston, and soon rejoined his *alma mater* as a visiting scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. Seldom do academic institutions look after visiting scholars and professors properly—Harvard is no exception. In his years at the CMES, Alavi compensated for this benign neglect by acting as an exceptionally gracious host to all academics who came through the CMES, breaking the ice with his customary blend of formality and informality that invariably led to a cup of tea, thus putting them at ease when they felt over-awed by their surroundings, and gently guiding them through the labyrinthine ways of a university he knew intimately. He ran the Iranian Studies seminars at the CMES and in 1994 became the founding editor of the *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review*, whose first issue came out in February 1994. He remained with the publication for the following two years.

In 1997 Alavi returned to Iran. Here, he soon became the center of a number of overlapping circles of friends and students. European diplomats and journalists flocked to his home to learn about Iranian history, and young Iranians sought him out to learn about India and Buddhism and to improve their English. He continued work on a monumental interpretive history of Iran that he had started in Boston, but, ever the self-critical perfectionist, did not ready it for publication. He wrote a lot but published little, and one is tempted to conclude that, in the words of Oscar Wilde, he put all his genius into his life and all his talent into his works. His genius was reflected in his numerous friendships, and the paternal but never paternalistic attention he paid to what he called the “younger generation.”

While hailing from Iran’s traditional social elite—his maternal grandfather was a close advisor of Sheykh Khaz‘al, the ruler of Mohammareh, and on his father’s side he descended from the distinguished scholar Seyyed Nasrollah Jazayeri—Reza Alavi also garnered the very best of Western learning, making him that rarest of social types, a rooted cosmopolitan. It is perhaps from this multifaceted nature, which in lesser souls would have generated an existential contradiction, that his capacity for irony came, a quality that equipped him to face the challenges and disappointments of life with patrician equanimity. He was also the only Iranian scholar I have ever met who had a keen sense of the absurd—Buddhist thought is steeped in paradoxes—which allowed him to make sense of events and situations that others found merely baffling.

Reza Alavi married Alieh Majd, MD, in 1961; they were subsequently divorced. He is survived by two sons, Karim, an economist in Vienna, and Ali, a professor of chemistry at the University of Cambridge, a grandson, Cyrus, as well as his close friend, Afagh Khatib-Shahidi, who selflessly stood by and cared for him in his declining years.