Two thousand five hundred years old

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Undeniable value of Parviz Natel Khanlari's services

The last time I saw Dr. Khanlari was in ۱۹۸۷ when he told me that studying literature belonged to another time. "It is a different world now," he said. At the time I was a graduate student in literature and his advice to me was to start on a different path while I was still young.

Parviz Natel Khanlari was a great man–so great, in fact, that a mere listing of his accomplishments does him no justice. People still argue whether his most important contribution was his journal Sokhan (unparalleled to this day in the talent and rigor it fostered), his country-wide literacy projects (leading to a considerable hike in literacy rates), his role in standardizing and producing text books (the accessibility and quality of which we all took for granted), his various cultural organizations (reclaiming, as it were, "Iranian Studies" for our own scholars), the breadth and depth of his research (his definitive studies in Persian language, literature, and intellectual history), or his mark on contemporary writing (the clarity of his prose and brilliance of his poetry are aspired to by the best). The true measure of his greatness is that his influence reached from a broad, grass-roots level all the way up to the heights of cultural production.

Khanlari was also a successful man. Perhaps the most eye-catching part of his curriculum vitae was that he served as deputy minister of interior, minister of education, and senator. It was this aspect of his career that helped him accomplish as much as he did and brought severe punishment upon him after the revolution.

The story of how Khanlari "fell in the trap of politics," as both his supporters and detractors put it, is interesting. In the late ۱۹٤۰ she wrote a series of articles in Sokhan that became famous as the "bread and literacy" articles. He was troubled over the country's high illiteracy rate and argued that for a developing nation literacy is as crucial as bread. When he accepted his first government post as deputy interior minister, he was widely criticized by the intelligentsia. This was shortly after the coup in ۱۹۵۳ that ousted the hugely popular Mosaddeq and reinstated the Shah. Khanlari was seen as lending legitimacy to the irreparably compromised new regime. In an open letter he published in Sokhan, "To My Young Friends," he explained that he took the appointment as the opportunity to put his words into action. "I am a teacher," he wrote. "I consider teaching the most honorable of all professions and I will be a teacher as long as I live."

By the time he was appointed minister of education a few years later, he had become the most vocal critic of the ministry. The various literacy campaigns of the previous decades (mostly the akaber programs in urban areas) had been ineffective in design and riddled with poor management. Khanlari was convinced that literacy campaigns must reach the rural population and had the excellent idea of creating a "knowledge corps" (Sepah-e Danesh) that would use educated army conscripts to serve as teachers–not just of reading and writing, but in health and other development matters–in villages throughout the country.

There is an interesting anecdote of a meeting where Khanlari was summoned to present and defend

his "knowledge corps" before the Shah and a number of his generals. In a typical more-catholic-than-the-pope posture (or as we say in Persian, "bowl hotter than the soup") a number of the generals tried to convince the Shah that the project was detrimental to the very foundation of monarchy. A literate population does not make a submissive nation, they advised the Shah. Khanlari pointed out that any number of monarchies in Europe had survived the high literacy rates of their people. He also argued that teaching Persian to all Iranians, whether or not they were native Persian speakers, would have a unifying effect for the country. To the Shah's credit, he was not dissuaded by his generals. Khanlari's "knowledge corps" was established and eventually branched out into three distinct corps in literacy, health, and development education (Sepah-e Danesh, Behdasht, and Tarvij va Abadani). But over the years, like a great many other good ideas, the "knowledge corps" suffered from the executive bad faith and corruption that derailed and ruined many other intelligent and sincere efforts. Khanlari himself did not last long in his post as minister of education.

As historical irony would have it, however, the generals were not entirely wrong. By the end of the Shah's reign, over ۱۶۰,۰۰۰ male and ۳۳,۰۰۰ female members of the literacy corps had managed to make a significant educational impact on the population. What they had to teach, both in skills and ideas, however, was not compatible with political

oppression and gross economic disparity. In fact, exposure to the harsh living conditions of rural Iranians radicalized the corps and, along with them, the people they taught.

Leaving the ministry of education, Khanlari went back to research and higher education, founding the Foundation for Iranian Culture (Bonyad-e Farhang-e Iran). Broad as both the reach and appeal of his literacy programs were, this project plumbed the depths of Iranian culture. For one thing, it was a systematic and rigorous effort to rescue the study of Iranian intellectual history from Orientalist scholarship. The Foundation began with publishing manuscripts of centuries-old Iranian scholarship in all fields: literature, history, art, science, social science. It established research groups that studied and edited old and forgotten manuscripts. Eventually a graduate academy affiliated with the foundation (Pazhooheshkadeh-ye Farhang-e Iran) was created for which Khanlari handpicked candidates from his graduate students at Tehran University, giving them practical training in research, editing, and publishing. He developed relationships with Kabul University and trained a number of Afghan students, as well as establishing a chair for the teaching of Poshtu at Tehran University. He even introduced programs to revive the teaching of Persian in India and Pakistan, an old tradition that was vanishing in these countries.

When the revolution came along Khanlari and his foundation were in peak performance. Within months of the official victory of the revolution Khanlari was jailed. If any one had a working relationship with the previous regime he did–there was no need to unearth evidence, his work had been entirely public. His arrest was terrifying for all those who knew him. This was a time when people were daily being executed on the whims of unknown individuals. When after four months Khanlari was released from prison the ordeal had taken a toll on his health. Suffering from the early stages of Parkinson's disease the brutality he endured during his incarceration drastically worsened his condition. For years after his release, he continued to be subjected to periodic interrogations and harassment. His assets–namely a house and a collection of books–were finally released a decade later.

It is said that Khanlari's life was spared at the intervention of Ayatollah Motahhari, one of the original leaders of the Islamic revolution, who himself was gunned down shortly afterwards. It is certainly true that even in the heat of revolutionary hatred it was not possible to deny the value of Khanlari's services to the country or denigrate his name altogether. His daughter tells of one interrogation session where at the appearance of Khanlari a revolutionary guard broke into the recitation of his most famous poem, The Eagle. Back in ۱۹۸۷ he told me of another interesting encounter with revolutionary guards. At one point armed guards were assigned to his house to keep an eye on him while he silently worked behind his desk. Eventually, I imagine bored with watching a man read and write for hours at a stretch, the guards noticed the books. Before they knew it, Khanlari had them sitting down and reading with him. (I wish some of us had been so lucky.)

At Khanlari's release from jail, Mehdi Akhavan Sales, one of our best contemporary poets, wrote a poem of consolation to him after a famous ghazal of Hafiz, chenan namand-o chenin niz nakhahad mand. "You have left behind great works that do honor to the world of literature, may you persevere and continue," he said. "The great menace of this season of winter will pass/The turn for another spring will come."

Not one to miss the chance to reply in poetry, Khanlari wrote back a ghazal in the same pattern. "There is indeed hope for spring after the worst winter," he acknowledged. "But what use… hope and joy do not return to one in old age." In reply to Akhavan's hope that he would continue to "honor" the literary world with his works, he wrote: "Every honor I earned became a burden to me, why do I need to add to it?" His last line is the most poignant: "May you live happily, my friend of joyful times/Spring itself has placed another burden on my heart."

When this paragon of learning

told me to abandon my studies I did not take him seriously. I was aware of what had happened to him but I also knew that he knew better than anyone that ignorance and brutality have never managed to diminish the worth or attraction of literature. I'm almost sure he didn't even expect me to take his advice–more likely, he was testing me in a version of his screening of graduate students. (He insisted on maintaining a low budget for his organization because he said he wished to discourage any motivation other than "love.")

Khanlari's dignity and kindness were his trademarks. He never lost them even under the most extreme conditions. His composure and his respect for the intelligence of even his tormentors were disarming. Even at the height of his success he was not authoritarian or vain. But deep inside his eyes sparkled an exacting wit whose cutting edge he did not often reveal. His sense of humor was exquisitely wicked. (He was Sadegh Hedayat's close friend, after all.) I remember even as a child trembling a little in his presence, feeling that he could see right through me. Later, I could see that in spite of his gentle and soft-spoken manner, his eye for inauthenticity, vulgarity, and corruptibility was flawless. To this day I remain insecure as to whether I was of the caliber to be one of his chosen graduate students. At any rate, despite his advice to the contrary I did not abandon my intellectual pursuits. But I did understand how "spring" weighed on him like a burden. I could see for myself that "this is a different time now." When I returned to the U.S. I asked my dissertation advisor whether he thought continuing my studies was worth the effort. "I don't know," he said. By the time I finished my degree my expectations had sunk so low that there was no point in pursuing an academic career. Khanlari's advice worked its effect on me gradually.

Before my recent trip to Iran I arbitrarily snatched a book from a recycling pile, Evelyn Waugh's "Vile Bodies." At some point, one of the characters, a Father Rothschild, compares his generation to the "bright young things" of the ۱۹۲۰'s England. "My private schoolmaster used to say, 'If a thing's worth doing at all, it's worth doing well,'" he says. "But these young people have got hold of another end of the stick, and for all we know it may be the right one. They say, 'If a thing's not worth doing well, it's not worth doing at all.' It makes everything very difficult for them."

I too, after all, belonged to His Majesty's spoiled-brat generation: we wanted the best of all possible worlds. If I couldn't work with someone like Khanlari I wouldn't work with anyone at all. (And Father Rothschild was right, it did not make things any easier for me!)

Khanlari died in ۱۹۹۱. Luckily for us, he did not abandon work during his home-bound years. The Hafiz he edited during this time set a daunting standard of scholarship and taste–it remains to be seen whether it can be emulated any time soon. Two months after his death, his wife and colleague, Zahra Kia Khanlari, died. Zahra Khanom, as she was known, was his classmate from graduate school and among the first women to graduate with PhD's from Tehran University. My generation school children were introduced to the Persian literary canon through her incorporation of the classics into our elementary textbooks.

Their daughter, Taraneh, told me that during his last days in the hospital her father often appeared to be conversing with the great masters he had spent his life reading and studying. At some point a visitor put an absurd question to him: "How old are you, Dr. Khanlari?" He smiled through his closed eyes. "Two thousand five hundred years old," he said. It was a quintessential Khanlari reply: part inside joke, part absolute truth.

I believe Khanlari was the only man who had an answer worthy of Montesquieu to his famous question: "But how can one be Persian…?"