

DĀNESH Newsletter

No. 12, Spring 2006

DĀNESH Institute Conference

The next DĀNESH Institute Conference has been scheduled for October 20-22, 2006 in Indianapolis. Please see enclosed Call for Proposals. Members of the Conference Planning Committee are Cyrus Behroozi, Mahvash Hariri, Patricia Higgins, Mohammad Kaviani, Ali Akbar Mahdi, Irene Queiro-Tajalli, Nahid Shahnavaaz, and John Walbridge.

Message from the President

Greetings. On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to convey our best wishes for a happy Persian new year to all of our members.

In this issue of the Newsletter, I would like to highlight our next conference *Bridging Cultures: Constructing Experiences of Iranians Living Abroad*, scheduled for October 20-22, 2006 in Indianapolis. This conference promises to enhance understanding and appreciation of contributions, challenges, and aspirations of persons of Iranian heritage living abroad, particularly in the United States. Immigration is certainly a front page story these days, and while each immigrant group has its own ways of dealing with issues of adjustment, we hope to explore similarities and differences of this experience for Iranians and other immigrant groups. For further details about the conference, please see the enclosed call for proposals. I hope that you would submit a proposal and assist us by distributing the call for proposals to your appropriate networks.

In recent Newsletters, we have shared with you news about our current projects. These include the publication of DĀNESH Journal, the development of modules on aging Iranians in the United States, and the construction of a new website. A brief progress report regarding each project will follow. Regarding the journal, at the time of the approval of this project, the Board's sentiment was that the journal should be published electronically. Since then, further discussions have been held about the journal, and further information will be forthcoming.

For the modules on aging, a planning committee has been formed including Carolyn Fakouri, Mary Elaine Hegland, and myself. The development of the modules and training materials related to aging has as a purpose to create cultural sensitive materials on topics related to the experience of growing old in United States in general and aging Iranian immigrants in particular, as well as the impact this process has on their significant others.

As may be recalled, a website was constructed for the Institute several years ago. At this time, the website needs to be made current and more functional for our website users. We are in the process of working with a contractor to design our new website, which is to be in public domain. On behalf of our Executive Committee, Mahvash Hariri has assumed the leadership role for the further development of this project.

Finally, we are pleased to announce the Board's appointment of John Walbridge as the new member of the Executive Committee. Other members of the committee are Cyrus Behroozi, Mahvash Hariri, and myself.

Many thanks for your ongoing support of the Institute. Please stay tuned for more information about the conference and other developments.

Irene Queiro-Tajalli

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Professional Activities of Members

Last December, **Leah Baer** presented a paper at the Annual Conference of the Association of Jewish Studies concerning the situation of the Iranian Jewish community following the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The paper focused on the issues for Iranian Jews seeking asylum in the United States and the attempts of American Jewish leaders to aid their Iranian brethren. Their efforts were not without misunderstandings about the commingling of politics and religion in Iran.

An essay review of the book Bamdad-e Khomar (The Morning After) in Persian by **Cyrus S. Behroozi** was published in Persian Heritage, 10(37), 2005. Authored by Farzaneh Hadj- Said-Javadi, the book had been considered as the most popular and controversial novel published in post-revolutionary Iran. Since its original publication, at the time of the review, the book was reprinted thirty-two times. Dr. Behroozi's organizational activities included his election to the 2005-2006 Board of the Indiana Council on World Affairs and his appointment to its Executive Committee.

Mary Elaine Hegland's review of the book Women in the Middle East: Tradition and Change (Revised Edition), by Ramsay Harik and Elsa Marston was published in Journal of Middle East Women Studies, 1(2), 2005. In 2005, Dr. Hegland was elected to the Board of International Society of Iranian Studies. In this position, one of her responsibilities is to solicit nominations for the new Iranian Studies Life-Time Achievement Award and to form committees to choose the awardees. See also her article in this issue.

Yahya Kamalipour is a member of the Steering Committee for the Sixth Annual Global Fusion Conference, scheduled for September 29 – October 1, 2006 in Chicago. The overall purpose of the conference is to “promote academic excellence in international-intercultural communications studies worldwide.” Further information about the conference can be obtained at www.global-fusion.org.

Ali Akbar Mahdi traveled to Israel and Palestine with the Faculty for Israeli-Palestinian Peace in late December to mid-January. He gave two invited lectures at Israeli Universities, one at the Center for the Gulf Studies at the University of Haifa and one at the Center of Iranian Studies, Tel Aviv University. Dr. Mahdi spent over a month in Dubai, UAE, collecting

data on Iranian immigrants in that country. He is currently finishing a co-authored book on culture and customs of Iran. He continues to be interviewed on current Iranian political affairs, women in Iran, and social issues related to Iran and Islam by BBC, Radio Farda, Voice of America, and Yaran TV. His interviews can be accessed on these media's web page. Also, his webpage can be visited for the text of his articles and some interviews at www.owu.edu/~aamahdi.

To introduce more specialized articles, **Bruno Netti** has written the principal general article under the rubric “Music” for the Encyclopedia Iranica, edited by Ehsan Yarshater, which is to appear in 2006. Currently, Dr. Netti is teaching a graduate course about Persian classical music as Visiting Professor of Music at the University of Chicago.

In February 2006, **Irene Queiro-Tajalli** made several presentations at the Annual Program Meeting, Council on Social Work Education in Chicago. These included *Alternative Self-Study: Its Challenge and Rewards as Experienced by a Combined Program*, with Michael Patchner and Marion Wagner; *The Role of Social Work Education with Marginalized Communities in Latin America*; and *Publishing in the Journal of Baccalaureate Social Work* (panel presentation). In addition, with Khadija Khaja, she gave a keynote address entitled *East and West Meeting in the Middle: The Ethnic Lens of Social Work Practice* at the NASW Indiana Chapter Diversity Conference in Indianapolis. In March, Dr. Queiro-Tajalli presented at the IU Seventh Symposium Highlighting the Research of Faculty, Staff, and Students of Color “A Village of Researchers Changing Our Community.” The Title of her presentation was *Community Responses to Global Oppression: The Piquetero Movement in Argentina*.

Sholeh Quinn reports her election to the Board of International Society for Iranian Studies. Among other professional activities, the society sponsors the publication of its journal, Iranian Studies. This journal is one of the most prominent periodicals in the field.

Nahid Shahnava reports that, in the Fall of 2005, as a way of promoting the charity aspect of the Persian culture, a small group of Iranian women living in Indianapolis initiated an informal project to help Iranians and other Persian speaking new immigrants with their urgent financial and communications needs. An account was set up for this purpose under the

name of Persian Hardship Relief Fund, and immediately funds were solicited. The Iranian community responded enthusiastically and generously. The goal is to make small loans and grants available to relieve extreme temporary hardship, as well as to provide assistance with translation and other communication needs. To date, several families have been helped through these informal efforts.

Recently, **John Walbridge's** dissertation, Science of Mystic Lights, was translated in Persian and published in Iran as a book. Dr. Walbridge will soon visit Iran for a conference.

Feature Article

Elderly Iranians and a Transforming World: Modernization, Individualization, and Aging in the Islamic Republic

By Mary Elaine Hegland

Older Iranians are facing a transforming world. Extended family bonds are diminishing in strength, and the marital relationship and nuclear family are becoming more important. Social and geographical mobility are increasing. Children cost more money, time, and effort to raise in today's world. Young people are becoming more educated, finding new types of work, and gaining independence from their parents and relatives. Cultural change is taking place at a rapid pace. Young people watch satellite TV from all over the world, communicate with email, converse with friends on their mobile phones, play computer games, and take on new behaviors, values, interests, and life styles. Materialism is rife. At present, fine new homes, stylish clothes, fancy cars, and extravagant weddings and gatherings are possible for a larger proportion of the population and are highly desired.

All of these changes tend to take children and grandchildren away from elderly parents, I found during my recent research trip to Iran. Many of the same challenges which my students and I have found to face elderly Iranians who live in California now are also facing older people living in the Iranian village of Aliabad. Although the Aliabad elderly have not emigrated, as have the Iranian elderly in California, culture and society are changing around them. Life is becoming more rushed, complicated, expensive, and

demanding, even in Aliabad. To study issues of aging and the elderly in the Iranian village of Aliabad, I left for Iran in December, returning three months later. Obtaining a visa took quite a few months of effort. However, once in Iran, I was able to extend my visa a month at a time.

During 18 months in 1978 and 1979, for my dissertation, I had conducted my anthropological fieldwork research in the same village. Thus, I was able to compare the situation of the elderly in 1978 and 1979 with their conditions and lives on my trips to Iran during summer of 2003, summer of 2004, and December 2005 to March 2006. During my 25 year absence from Aliabad, dramatic socio-economic transformation had taken place. Aliabad had changed from a walled village of some 3,000 inhabitants living in traditional lives. Sons, upon marrying, brought their very young brides to a room in their father's courtyard. Most families lived in rooms in mudbrick courtyards. They wore regional dress, baked their own bread, bore many children, and enjoyed little change in their routines other than weddings and funerals, trips to the cemetery, and visits with relatives. As sons brought their wives home to their parents, someone was always available to live close to elderly parents. On the whole, older parents enjoyed respect and obedience from their children. They taught their children the necessary skills for their lives, child rearing, house keeping, animal care, and cooking and baking for females, and agriculture and trading, and shop keeping for males. Elderly parents lived in the midst of their children and grandchildren, sharing their lives on an intimate basis. Younger family and relatives surrounded the elderly.

Now Aliabad's wall has been taken down, and not many people live in the old village area. People have built new streets lined with courtyard walls and urban style fired brick homes. Women have modern kitchens, freezer and fridge, shower rooms at home, natural gas stoves or wall furnaces for heat in winter, vacuum cleaners, phones, washing machines, and telephone taxis or family cars to take them even for short distances. They do not bake bread or tend animals. Young women get a high school diploma at the least, and may attend university or training courses. They marry much later, postpone having children, bear only one or two children, and generally refuse to live with their mother-in-law even for a short period. They expect a completely furnished nuclear family house to be ready for them upon marriage. The village population has increased to some 7,000. Only

a small handful of men are still engaged with raising sheep and goats or with agriculture. Rather, they run almost every type of business imaginable in the village, or go into Shiraz to work in services or shops. In the village, one can purchase anything necessary for building, homes, or life necessities.

With all of this modernization, individualization, and globalization, the elderly, who grew up in a drastically different world, often feels out of place, ignored, isolated, and out of the mainstream of social life. Many couples and widows now live alone in their own homes as their children have moved into their own separate homes with their spouses and children. They are busy with their own lives, with the complicated processes of raising their children, and trying to prepare them for life in this changed world. They must now buy nice clothes for their children, equip them with toys and a computer, set aside a room for them, and take them to English and computer classes from a very young age. Children gain priority over parents. Resources go for one's own home, spouse, children and possessions, and often do not stretch also to care for elderly parents. Thus, a main research aim is to understand how the elderly try to cope with these lives, which are very different from what they would have expected.

During this period, I lived in Aliabad and in nearby Shiraz with old friends from my dissertation research experience. I spent my time in participant observation, discussions, and interviewing people about the lives of the elderly and how they have changed due to social, cultural, economic, and political transformations over the last 27 years. I was able to interact with, and interview, many elderly people and also others about elderly. I found that being with older people one on one was a good way of collecting less self-censored statements and views. I asked older people to compare advantages and disadvantages for elderly of life 27 years ago with the present. I observed how elderly people interact with others such as family, relatives, and neighbors. I observed elderly at gatherings and rituals. I continued to collect a list of the elderly people in Aliabad and those who have moved to Shiraz. Through living and interacting in Iran for three months, I was able to make a great deal of progress on my study of the elderly in Iran.

My visit coincided with the return of "hajjis" from Mecca, many burial and memorial gatherings, and Moharram, the month of mourning. These events and religious rituals also became a significant part of my

research. From them, I was able to compare religious rituals and activities, and the role of older versus younger and male versus female at present with my earlier visit 27 years ago. Fewer demands on women's time, literacy, education, greater availability of financial resources, and more freedom to go out of the house have enabled Aliabad women to become much more active and even to take leadership roles. Just as I had found in research among Iranian emigrant women in California, new conditions in Aliabad have allowed women to participate in religious activities in new ways. This research was also crucial to my plans of writing a book based on my dissertation, which focused on the Shi'a mourning complex in the Iranian Revolution.

A related area of research was how females viewed their experiences in education, the place of education in women's lives, and the position of women in society. I interviewed females of various ages about their education and views about female education. This research is significant to my research about the elderly, as the place of young women and their level of autonomy is very closely related to the situation of the elderly and transformation during modernization. Another endeavor was to talk about experts on village history. As often these were older people, I learned not only about village history and their views of changes, but also about their own histories and lives as older people.

During this three months of research, my previous experience in Aliabad was crucial. With the help of friends and their children, I was able to take optimal advantage of my time. Often, I was busy talking with others from morning until late night. I was able to widen my circle of interaction among more people. Level of cooperation and willingness to assist was very high. With warm hospitality, Aliabad people welcomed me and assisted me with my research. Because of my previous stay in Aliabad in 1978-1979 and the bonds which developed during this period, I was able to start conducting research immediately upon arrival and then continue to widen my circle of associates, moving from my old friends out to their children, friends, relatives, and neighbors. I owe much to the generous friendship of these long-time friends.