

## **Religion After the Fall of the Sassanians**

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### **MIGRATIONS**

According to Encyclopedia Iranica, there was a westward migration of a large group of Zarthustis called Arslans from Northern Iran in the 5th century. However, they were completely assimilated into the indigenous cultures within a generation or so. Traces of them can still be found in Spain and France.

The second mass migration came immediately after the fall of the Sassanians. Yezdegard III's son Phiroz, and other members of the royal family sought assistance from a distant ally in China. By the time Phiroz marched on Iran at the head of an army supplied by the emperor of China, Yezdegard had been murdered. Phiroz did not make any headway and had to return to China. That group was able to sustain itself in China for a few centuries, but eventually disappeared.

The third and most famous migration took place in the 10th century. This group of Zarthustis moved from their homeland near Nyshapour and the Fort of Sanjan in Khorrasan to the island of Hormoz in the Persian Gulf. After 3 years' preparation, they set sail for the west coast of India, landing on the island of Diu. They stayed there for 19 years before landing in Gujarat. They named their new home Sanjan. After that, it seems that there were several smaller migrations from different parts of Iran into the same region of India. From Kangavar, where there is a ruined temple to Anahita, came the priests with the surname Kanga. From the 3000-year-old city of Sari in Mazandaran, came another group who came overland and established the settlement of Navsari.

Each of these groups brought with them their own ways of performance of ceremonies and rituals. The first Atash-Vahran, the Iran-Shah (now at Udvada), was enthroned in 921 AD. Although there must have been many Atash-Aderans in the settlements, all other Atash-Vahrans (known today as Atash-Bahrams) were established only in the last 3 centuries. The Navsari Atash-Bahram was installed in 1765 and the first Atash-Bahram in Bombay - the Dadyseth Atash-Behram was installed in 1783. The Modi and Vakil Atash Bahrams in Surat were installed in 1823, followed by the Wadiaji Atash Bahram in Bombay in 1830, the Banaji Atash Bahram in 1845, and the Anjuman Atash Bahram in 1897.

### **SORROW AND SUFFERING IN IRAN**

#### **Arab Rule In Iran [1]**

The Arabs who conquered Iran were generally illiterate fanatics who had little knowledge of Mohammad's teachings. However, it appears that at first they allowed the Persians to practice their religion so long as they paid the Jaziya tax and accepted Arab suzerainty. Commander Saad Ibn-e Abi Vaghas wrote to Caliph Omar about what should be done with the books at Ctesiphon. Omar wrote back: "If the books contradict the Koran, they are blasphemous. On the other hand, if they are in agreement, they are not needed." All the books were thrown into the Euphrates.

Under another ruler Gotaibeh ibn-e Moslem in Khwarezmia, all the historians, writers, and mobeds were massacred and their books burned in fire, so that after one generation, the people became illiterate. Other libraries at Ray, Khorassan and Gondishapour were eventually destroyed. Only a few books that were translated into Arabic survived.

Yazid ibn-e Mohlab is reputed to have ordered the decapitation of so many Persians that their blood flowed in the water powering a millstone for one full day. There are many other massacres recorded. The Arabs called the Persians 'Ajam' meaning mute. The first voice of protest came from Firooz, an artisan who had been enslaved by an Arab. He assassinated Omar. Later uprisings are recognized as Abu Moslem of

Khorassan, whiteclads, red clads (led by Babak), Maziar, Oztaris, Afshin, and others. Finally, after 200 years, the Arabs were driven out of Iran by a man from Sistan, Yaghoub Leisse Saffari.

### **Under Persian Rulers**

Many Iranian noblemen had by this time picked up Arabic names and Islamic religion. They were even more zealous in converting their fellow-Persians to Islam. One Iranian premier, Sahib ibn-e Obbad (900 AC) would not look in the mirror as he would see a Persian. Publication in Persian was banned by Abdollah ibn Tahir, who burned Zarthusti religious books.

The 9th and 10th century saw the revival of Persian literature and culture by Zarthusti poets like Daghighi and Zarthost Bahram Pazdoh and later by Firdowshi, Hafiz and Khayyam. Firdowshi is credited with reviving the Persian language through his Shah Nameh, which is almost completely devoid of Arabic words. He renewed the Iranian legend of Kaveh the blacksmith and Fereidoun who vanquished the blood-thirsty Zohak (the Arab).

Hafez wrote:

In a garden renew your Zarthusti faith  
In the monastery of the Magi, why they honor us,  
The fire that never dies, burns in our hearts.

But others like Sohravardi, the founder of the school of illumination and Mansour Hallaj were martyred. When a group of fanatic Moslems destroyed the wall of a mosque and blamed the action on Zarthustis, many Zarthustis of Khorassan were massacred. Despite all this, by the end of the Safavite dynasty (1400 AD) there were 3 to 5 million Zarthustis in Iran. The Caspian province of Mazandaran was ruled by a Zarthusti dynasty known as Paduspanian until 1006 Hijri. During the rule of Shah Abbas the Great (1587-1628 AD), many Zarthustis of Iran were deported to a ghetto town near Isfahan named Gabrabad, where they lived in abject poverty.

The population of Zarthustis in Iran at the turn of the 18th century was estimated to be 1 million. Under order of the last Safavite king, Shah Sultan Hussain (1694-1722) nearly the whole population of Zarthustis of Isfahan and nearby towns were slaughtered or forcibly converted, according to reports by Christian priests in the area. The entire population of Gabrabad was wiped out. The towns of Naiin and Anar converted to Islam. The local language of the people there remains Dari. The customs and traditions of Abiyaneh remain Zarthusti.

When the Afghans arrived in Kerman, they first massacred the defenseless Zarthustis. The Afghans were defeated by Nadar Shah Afshar (1736-47) who became insane after his return from India. After a failed assassination attempt, he became suspicious of his son and blinded him. But when he found out that his son was totally innocent, he resorted to mass murder. By his order, all the Zarthusti population of Khorassan and Sistan were massacred. The few survivors had to travel on foot through the central desert to Yazd and Kerman.

The next dynasty in power was the Zand dynasty. A Zarthusti astrologer named Mulla Gushtasp predicted the fall of the Zand dynasty to the Qajar army in Kerman. Because of Gushtasp's forecast, the Zarthustis of Kerman were spared by the conquering army of Agah Mohammad Qajar.

During the Quajar era (1796-1925), the walls of Zarthusti houses could not be built taller than that of Moslems. If any child of a family converted, he was entitled to all the heritage. If they were riding a donkey, they had to dismount upon facing a Moslem. And they were not allowed to appear in public during the rainy days because the water that had run down from their clothes and bodies may contaminate the Moslems. At times, Zarthusti girls were kidnapped and forcefully converted and married with celebrations and fanfare. On top of all that they had to pay a heavy tax called Jaziya. Under these

conditions, many declared themselves as Moslems and picked up Islamic names but continued Zarthusti practices in secret. The latter group today is called Jadid.

In the 1850s, Count de Gobineau, the French Ambassador to Iran wrote: "Only 6000 of them are left and just a miracle may save them from extinction." The last known massacre of Zarthustis took place in Turkabad near Yazd. The descendants of this massacre have the surnames Turk, Turki and Turkian.

## **ZARTHUSTI RELIGION AFTER THE SASSANIANS**

Historical records of the religious life of the Zarthustis in Iran as well as India between the arrival of Islam and about the 14th century are very sketchy. What little information we have comes from Muslim writers and historians [2]. Masudi wrote about 950 AC that Zarthusti believed that Avesta came as a revelation from heaven. Those who believed in the Zend commentaries rather than the Avesta were called Zendiks. About 1000 AC, Al-Biruni wrote that the angel Srosh is spoken of as the most powerful angel against sorcerers, and he visits the world three times during the night to rout them. It was Srosh who introduced the practice of Zamzama, that is, reciting one's prayers with closed lips and emitting inarticulate sounds or in 'baj', as the Zarthustis do to this day. Artavahisht, as the genius of fire and light, watches over mankind, he said, and heals diseases with drugs, but besides this, as the genius who presides at the ordeal by fire, distinguishes truth-speaking man from a liar.

By the end of the Sassanian period the sharp distinction between man's soul and his Farohar was forgotten, and both were regarded as one and the same. Al-Biruni writes that the Zarthustis believed that the souls of the dead, both righteous and wicked, descended to the earth during the ten days of Fravardegan. They therefore fumigated the house with juniper, and put dishes of food and drink on the roofs of their houses, in the pious expectation that the souls would inhale their flavor and receive nourishment and comfort.

Spendarmad, Al-Biruni observes, is the guardian of the earth and of chaste women who are devoted to their husbands. On the fifth day of the twelfth month, both of which take their name after the archangel, people wrote a charm on three pieces of paper to scare away the noxious creatures and fix them on three walls of their house. The custom lingers in some Parsi families in India up to this day, who get a Pahalavi incantation written by the priests, preferably in red, and stick it to the front door of their houses.

Fasting was regarded as sin. He who observed a fast was compelled to feed some needy persons by way of expiation for his sin. Zarthusti were generally called fire-worshippers. Firdausi admonishes his co-religionists and asks them not speak of Zarthustis as fire-worshippers because they were the worshippers of one holy God. Kazwini, writing in about 1263, says that Zoroaster made the fire a Kibla and not a god.

## **Sects and Heresies**

Shahristani (1086-1153 AC) writes that the prominent sects of his time were the Mazdakites, Zarvanites, and the Gayomarthians. The followers of the latter sect believed in an eternal being called Yazdan. Yazdan entertained a thought in his mind on the probability of the origin of and adversary. This evil thought, believed the Gayomarthians, originated Ahriman, the spirit of darkness. The Zarthusti author of the Ulama-I Islam, written in about the 14th century, also attests to the existence of several different sects, who variously held that Ormazd himself permitted evil to exist in order that his goodness might be better appreciated, or that Ahriman was a reprobate angel who had revolted from Ormazd. These sects appear to be attempts at overcoming the constant taunts of the Moslems that Zarthustis believed in two Gods.

## **Interactions Between Iranian and Indian Co-religionists**

By the fifteenth century, the small band of fugitives who had left Iran in the 10th century and settled in the Gujarat in western India had begun to prosper. They had adopted many Gujarati customs, but had not forgotten their roots and remained a distinct community called Parsis. Having achieved economic stability and a sense of freedom, the Parsis now began eagerly to turn their attention to the necessity of gaining authentic information on the religious questions about which they were in doubt. They believed that their co-religionists living in Iran must be better informed on religious matters than themselves, and must have preserved the old-time tradition more faithfully than they themselves did. They therefore drew up certain religious questions on which they needed enlightenment, and in 1478 commissioned a daring Parsi to go to Iran and lay the questions before the learned Dasturs of their fatherland. Great was the enthusiasm caused by the fresh opening of a closer communication between the co-religionists; and for three centuries (1478-1766) a more immediate interchange of views took place between the Zarthustis of India and Iran [2]. No less than 22 messengers had left India during this period with questions pertaining to ritual observances, ceremonial ablutions, purificatory rites, forms of worship, rules of adoption and marriage and other miscellaneous subjects. These compilations, called the Rivayats were written in Persian, which had become the literary language of the Parsi scholars under the influence of the Moslem rule in Gujarat. The Rivayats provide a wealth of information on liturgical and social matters [3].

### **Theology of the Period, According to the Rivayats**

Rather than the Gathas and other Avestan works, the Bundahishn, Sad Dar, and Jamaspi, and Arda Viraf Namah inspired the clergy and laity in their conduct of life during that period. The formal rather than the spiritual, the concrete rather than the abstract, seem to be the prominent beliefs that were given in the Rivayats [2]. The hope of joys of a materialized heaven and the fear of the sufferings of a physical hell guided and controlled life. Man's soul and his Farohar are taken as one and the same. It came to be believed that the Yasna rituals offered in the name of the Farohars, or of the angel Hom, or of those of Zarthust, Gushtasp and other sainted dead person, could thwart the evil designs of their enemies; could rout the demons and fairies; could oppose the tyrant kings; could withstand famine and plague, retard the evil consequences of bad dreams, gain favor of kings and noblemen, and secure various advantages.

We are informed, moreover, that the reason of consecrating a set of white garments on the fourth day after death is to provide a corresponding heavenly garment to the soul in the next world. Bull's urine, an indispensable article in the purificatory rites of the body and ceremonial ablutions from the earliest times, took on the power of purifying the inner nature of man. Drinking consecrated bull's urine thus became an indispensable part of certain Zarthusti ceremonies.

A learned Iranian mobed, Dastur Jamasp Vilayeti, who came from Kerman to Surat in 1721, found the state of the intelligence of the Zarthusti priests in India so low that he resolved to impart religious instruction to some of the leading high priests. The Dasturs of Surat, Navsari and Broach consequently became his disciples. The first of these, Dastur Darab, later became the teacher of Anquetil du Perron. Dastur Jamasp also discovered the discrepancy of one month between the Parsi and Iranian Zarthusti calendars. Some of the Parsis adopted the Iranian calendar which was one month ahead, which is now known as the Kadmi calendar.

### **Relief And Amelioration**

But times later changed. Zarthusti scholarship could not thrive in Iran as it was able to do under the conditions in India.

A fourth migration of Iranians started in the mid-18th century and continued till recent times. Small groups, families and individuals began making the hazardous journey to India by donkey or even on foot through the deserts of Iran. This latest group is still known as Iranis in Bombay.

Due to these migrations, the Parsis became aware of the miserable and deteriorating conditions of their co-religionists. They dispatched emissaries to Iran- the most famous being Maneckji Limji Hataria in 1854

- to help their co-religionists. Hataria and other Parsi philanthropists founded schools and established several places of worship for Zarthustis, and were able to prevail on the authorities to abolish the Jaziyah tax in 1882. Conditions of the Iranian Zarthustis steadily improved after that. The pace of progress accelerated under the Pahalavi dynasty and Iranian Zarthustis began to enjoy prosperity on a par with their co-religionists in India.

## **CONCLUSION**

The sorrow and sufferings of the group that remained behind after the fall of the Sassanians, and the relative freedom and prosperity of the Zarthustis who had migrated to India led to profound changes in the practice of the religion that pervades the life of the Zarthustis to this day. However, we need to take into account the impact of the European philologists and the Zarthusti scholars who translated and improved our understanding of the Gathas, other scriptures, and Avestan and Pahlavi literature, before we can summarize the status of Zarthusti religion of today. But that is a story in itself.

The final chapter is still unfolding as the latest migrations of the Zarthustis of India, Pakistan and Iran bring about an unprecedented unification of religious knowledge, beliefs and practices that had developed independently in different cultures for centuries.

### *References*

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[3] S.M. Hodivala, Studies in Parsi History, Bombay, 1920.