

Did Zoroastrian influences survive in Wakhan?

Dr. Kersey H. Antia, 1986

Dr. D.A. Scott has made a significant discovery in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1984, No. 2., pp. 217-228) by asserting Zoroastrians survived until 1896 around Anu Darya, a river boundary between Russia and Afghanistan in what could be called Bactria (Balkh) of old. The evidence indicating the existence of tower of silence, fire rituals, Aryan affection for dogs despite Islamic dislike for dogs, Zoroastrian creation myths, etc., says Dr. Scott assertively, “make sense realistically only as Zoroastrian remnants surviving in an Islamic milieu”. An unknown Indian surveyor was sent out to this region by a British expedition (1870) team of Trotter and he referred to this people specifically as “the Zardushtis or fire-worshippers.” Olufsen also called them Zoroastrians on the basis of his extensive trips in 1896 to this region known as Wakhan. However, Wakhan became a subject of Anglo-Russian negotiations in 1983-6 when Wakhan was handed over to the ruler of Kabul “as a corridor to separate Russian and British territory.” Scott adds “consequently in 1896 the emir’s army entered and crushed Kafiristan-strict Muslim allegiance was enforced. However, pockets of similar archaic beliefs have maintained themselves to the present among the Dards, by virtue of their being just over the other side of the border in what was formerly British India now (N.W. Pakistan).”

Scott cites Russian researchers who reveal that the modern inhabitants of this region held their forefathers to have been fire-worshippers, with “the name of Zoroaster still known to them”. Unfortunately, they were removed to a different cotton-growing region after 1845, “where such isolated Zoroastrian elements were disrupted”; and Scott concludes: “For the future it would be of the greatest interest to have field work conducted in the Wakhan, especially to see how much, if anything, of the Zoroastrian elements has survived.” Zoroastrians of India and Pakistan owe it to themselves to visit this region and prevail upon their Russian and Pakistani embassies to help them find more information about this lost tribe and culture, who being Aryan should be of great interest to Indian historians also. Since some historians believe that the Aryans entered India and Iran through Bactria, Indian historians can dig up a wealth of information about the common Aryan heritage, beliefs, etc., by researching these people even at this late date as a joint Indo-Russian project. I also wonder if the Parsis had any inkling then of what was happening to their co-religionists. If so, they certainly would not have kept quiet considering the fact that long before 1898 they had sent Maneckji Limji Hataria to Iran as their emissary for the amelioration of Iranian Zoroastrians, and Dadabhoy Naoroji had even conferred with the then Shah of Iran for the same during his visit to London. However, if anyone can ferret out any information in this regard, he/she will be making a tremendous contribution to Zoroastrian history.

Note too, that although Dr. Scott does not seem to be aware of it, Sir Harold Bailey has found the language of Wakhan as “the nearest Iranian dialect to the Khotan-Saka” which has words “at times in a more archaic form of Iranian that in the Avestan texts” (*Indo-Scythian Studies*, Vol. VIII, 1985, p. viii). The studies of Sanskrit and Avesta too, therefore, will gain immensely by research on this rare people who may antedate the bifurcation of the Aryans into two distinct groups.