

Sensible Solutions For Surviving Transformation in Zoroastrianism by Adhering to the Basic Precepts of the Prophet

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Summary

It is an understatement to say Zoroastrianism is undergoing transformation as it seems to be at that stage, and fast accelerating to the stage of disintegration and even disappearance. It has changed so much in the last one hundred years as to cause alarm for its very existence in near future. What the Arab did not accomplish, modernity has, by bringing us close to self-destruction. This is not the first time Zoroastrians in diaspora have faced threats to their existence but certainly this is the last time they will face such threat unless they find a genuine solution to this crisis. And adhering to Zarathushtrianism and eternal precepts of Asho Zarathushtra rather than Zoroastrianism, which represents all that was composed and preached under the name of Zarathushtra through millennia, and may or may not be in the consonance with the prophet's teachings. The Iranian Zoroastrians provide us an excellent example in this respect.

To say that Zoroastrianism is undergoing transformation is tantamount to ignoring the deathly crisis it is facing today. Zoroastrianism is long past the process of transformation, and is facing the danger and disintegration and disappearance before long. However, the sadder truth is Zoroastrianism is in such a state of affairs because it has not realized the wisdom of transforming itself, and adjusting to the need of the changing times that have taken a toll on all religions in the world. Had we taken care of this in the past, the future will not look so gloomy and helpless today.

Zoroastrianism In Transformation

Yes, Zoroastrianism is in transformation (or even beyond it) mostly because the world has changed but Zoroastrianism has not. It will be difficult, if not possible, to enumerate all the Zoroastrian practices that have changed just in the last hundred years, or so. I repeat, just in the last one hundred years or so. The sons of the priests hardly want to join the priestly profession, and those who do only learn a few Haas (chapters) of Yasna, and none of Visparad, instead of all the 72 Haas as was the norm only a century ago. There were no

such things as part-time priests then, but today we cannot do without them. It is hard to reconstruct the strict life higher-level priests had to follow as the times have changed so much. He could not eat anything not cooked by his family or by Zoroastrians following purity laws, he had to drink everything without touching his lips, he could not travel out-of-town without taking a nine night Bareshnum, he could not touch non-Zoroastrians while going around town or partake of food prepared by them, or travel by any public conveyance, he could not pray with a priest of the different sect, etc. This is alarming as the priesthood has been the only factor that kept the community together after the fall of the Sassanian Empire. No priests, no community, as the saying goes.

Women in priestly families adhered strictly to the purity laws and “confinement” during their monthly period, a priest covered his head at all times, even in his sleep at night, priests as well as devout lay persons used Nirang first and say routing prayers before using water on getting up in the morning, or recite Baaj before each meal, even priests such as Sir Jivanji Modi were not allowed to perform higher-level ceremonies if they traveled by ship, as it involved polluting the sea; sneezing or the presence of hair, nails, etc. would vitiate any ceremony. Higher level ceremonies such as Yasna, Vendidad, Bareshnum, or Nirangdin were a must for the relief of the departed soul. But it is not possible to perform them outside of India, and often in India itself. When the priests who can perform them are getting rarer and rarer, the modern generation is getting skeptical of the need for such ceremonies when the prophet made himself explicitly clear that we all will be judged at the Chinvat Bridge by the sum total of our good thoughts, words and deeds. Therefore a transformation in our perception of what Zoroastrian practices are essential is necessary in order to avoid a transformation in Zoroastrianism itself. We have a precedence for doing this on the basis of *Shayest Na-Shayest* – what is possible to do and what is not. Sir Jivanji Modi, Dastuiji Dabu, etc. have laid down what ceremonies are necessary and what minimum rituals we should observe. Modi is on the record for maintaining that after-death ceremonies are not really required, because what is required for passing the Chinvat Bridge is the sum total of all our good thoughts, words, and deeds surpassing the bad ones. If that is not the case, no amount of ceremonies can change that situation. As noted by J.K. Choksy, “Such practice conflict with the Zoroastrian doctrine that each individual is responsible for his or her own fate through actions performed while alive.” (*Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1989, p. 42). And the prevailing paucity of priests for performing such ceremonies will make it increasingly difficult to perform many ceremonies, which is sad but it ought not to bring down Zoroastrianism which is based on much firmer grounds. Most of our ceremonies were not of Zarathushtra’s making but were compiled much later on and in later languages. The best way to *safeguard Zoroastrianism is by ensuring that it reflects Zarathushtraism by representing*

our practices in terms of what Zarathushtra himself actually preached or preferred instead of what has been passed on in his name which has today come to be known as Zoroastrianism. If Zarathushtra were to come to earth today, he would be aghast at some of our practices and beliefs. We need not worry as long as changes in our practices and traditions do not deviate from Zarathushtrianism. Therefore, the changes in Zoroastrian practices should not dishearten us and make us give up hope on surviving, as long as these changes do not violate the spirit of Zarathushtrianism and its high ethical standards, gender equality and Free Will.

The changes in Zoroastrian *society* are even more pronounced than in Zoroastrian practices in the last hundred years alone as it is spread all over the world which makes it so difficult to observe all our practices. Albeit, it is difficult to observe all these practices even in the old country itself, where we hardly see Zoroastrians wearing Topee (skull cap), saying prayers every morning, doing Kusti as required or even wearing Sudreh-Kusti, taking bath immediately after hair-cut, shave or bodily discharge, not partaking meat on Unroja days, observing the rules for menstruation cycle, using Nirang soon after waking up before using water, etc., etc. Modernity has not affected only us but others too. If you read the following injunction, would you think it applies to us?

When a woman has a discharge, her discharge being blood from her body, she shall remain in her defilement seven days; whoever touches her shall be impure until evening. Anything she lies on during her defilement shall be impure. Anyone who touches her bedding shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain impure until evening; and anyone who touches any object on which she has sat shall wash his clothes, bathe in water and remain impure. Be it the bedding or be it the object on which she has sat, on touching it he shall be impure. And if a man lies with her, her defilement is communicated to him; he shall be impure and any bedding on which he lies shall become impure.

Sensible Solution for our Survival

Actually it is from Leviticus 15:19-24 and is addressed to the Jews, who face a similar crisis today, except that, as I have explained elsewhere, Zoroastrian purity laws are so very, arduous and stricter than even the Jewish ones. I do not intend in anyway to de-emphasize or belittle the significance of all these practices we are no longer able to maintain. I am simply advising not to give up on Zoroastrianism for this reason alone but remain firm and steadfast in adhering to Zoroastrianism as long as these changes do not go against the grain of Zarathushtrianism or violate its basic principles. I for one

prefer the times when I lived with my grandfather for one year in 1943 in a small Parsi village of Singapore where time stood still and the effect of modernity being negligible, there was no need for change. However, modernity, which we Parsis embraced early on, rather earlier than any other people in India, or even Asia, variably leads to changes in any society but more so in the case of those who embraced it earlier on. This renders us helpless to fight against the *Zeitgeist* and compels us to save Zoroastrianism from disappearing by salvaging whatever we can in the spirit of *Shayest Ne-Shayest*. Practices and customs are man-made, but Zarathushtraism is God's gift to mankind and deserves to be preserved and practiced for ever. *But equating Zoroastrianism with Zarathushtrianism has compounded this problem and made us create two problems out of one.* Some practices that have not come down to us from the prophet himself but stem from later times need to be examined from the point-of-view of how they follow or deviate from Zarathushtrianism. The message of Zarathushtra represents eternal truth and let us be guided by that and nothing else.

However much the modern Zoroastrian had to abandon, often against his/her will, past practices and rituals in the last one hundred years because it was simply not possible to follow them, nevertheless there are still more than enough of them that are so meaningful, practicable, and inspiring for their observance and continuance today. A good example is suggested by what the Zoroastrians in North America are able to perform as the denizens of the latest Zoroastrian diaspora formed in our own times. Even though no diaspora there could (or would like to) afford hiring a full-time priest, priests who offer their services on a voluntary basis perform Nahns for every occasion, as well as Jashans for every occasion, Afrinagans, Furroxi, Satum, Navjotes, weddings, funeral ceremonies, Boi ceremonies on certain days, Saroshno Kardo, Uthamnu, Cheharum, Dasmoo, Masisso, Varsi, Baaj, etc. Their meaning and significance and need are explained in religious classes to youngsters, adolescents and adults. Lay priests-helpers (Mobedyars) are also trained for these services especially in areas where Mobeds are not available. Translations of prayers are often provided and understanding of the prayers is emphasized. All these ceremonies are regularly performed at least in Chicago as well as in all other main diasporas which generally have a Darbe-Meher by now. The whole congregation prays Atash Nyash and Tandorasti with the priest during the Boi ceremony, at least in Chicago, which is a new and uplifting religious experience. At least in Chicago lay persons are encouraged to pray with the priests during Jashan and Afrinagans. Besides regular religious cases, a religious topic is discussed once a month in the Darbe Meher. Seminars, lectures and conferences by outside scholars, inter-faith meetings, etc., are also held on an ongoing basis. Thus, even in the latest diaspora that mostly came into existence only since 1970 or so, Zoroastrianism is able to serve the basic need for rituals for its adherents and no one has ever claimed or complained

otherwise. If someone feels a need for higher ceremonies, they are directed to the Agiaries in India (as they are no longer performed in Iran). Thus, Zoroastrianism is able to take care of the basic needs of its adherents in North America.

Although the lay person may not even be aware of it, even changes in the very concept of Ahuramazda have taken place from time to time. The Gathic omnipotent Ahuramazda is not the same God as the God of Vendidad and of the later Pahlavi texts, as Ahura Mazda has to fight with his adversary Ahriman at every step, and has even been assigned a status equal to Ahriman during the Gumezishn (mixture) period. This Sasanian concept of Ahuramazda continued until our own times. However, I clearly remember as a ten year old child (in 1946) grieving over the death of his very beloved grandfather, seeking solace from any quarter, surprised at reading a condolence letter from an old relative blaming his death on Ahriman.

Learning From the Past

This threat to our existence is, as a matter of fact, not the first one we have faced in our long and chequered history, though it is the last one we will face if we fail to resolve it and ultimately succumb to it. Zoroastrians that were spread from Asia Minor, Syria, Arabia, Iraq, and China all the way to Egypt during and after the Persian rule that prevailed there from the fifth century B.C. onwards faced the same crisis for survival that we do today. Even the Sassanian King Shapur I (240-271 A.D.) who invaded Cappadocia in modern Turkey was surprised to find a colony of Zoroastrians remaining quite intact there since the fall of the Achaemenian empire in 330 B.C. He even mentions it in his rock inscription at Kaaba-yi Zardusht at Naqsh-e-Rustom. Strabo (XV.3.15) describes Cappadocia as “almost a living part of Persia”. Mary Boyce notes that the Sakas even converted to Zoroastrianism in Pontus, and it was in these regions that “The Iranian religion survived, despite persecution, down to at least the sixth century A.C. – a full millennium after Alexander’s conquest” (*History of Zoroastrianism*, Vol. III, p.308). Evidence abounds for Armenia and Georgia having Iranian settlers who eventually succumbed to the Byzantine pressure for converting them to Christianity in order to turn them against the Zoroastrian Iran. Boyce also reports the existence of Zoroastrians in Syria, Egypt, etc., long after the fall of the Achaemenian Empire. *Cambridge History of Iran*, (Vol. 3 (1), p. IX) even reports the existence of a Persian occupation force in Yemen which “with the rise of Islam apparently went over to the new religion”. It reports that Uman (Mazun in Farsi) was populated by Zoroastrians and is mentioned as an Iranian province in Shapur I’s Inscription at Kaa’ba-yi Zardusht. I have elsewhere quoted Michael Morony’s well-researched evidence that the Zoroastrians were settled in Bahrein and when the Arabs captured it, prophet Mohammed had regarded them as “People of the

Book” which prompted the Calif whose army conquered Iraq and Iran to treat Zoroastrians as such.

After the Arab conquest of Iran, many of the surviving Sassanian dynasty and nobility fled to China and Central Asia. Ghirshman observes that their arrival ‘initiated a new wave of Iranian influences’ to the Chinese. (R. Ghirshman, V. Minorsky and R. Sanghvi, *Persia the Immortal Kingdom*, Orient Commerce establishment, Clifford House, London 1971, p. 92). This led to a process of cultural synthesis, resulting in what is generally recognized as Sino-Persian art, the evidence for which can be seen in Tang dynasty representation of ladies playing polo which was introduced to China by the Sasanians, vases and Tse-Niao (bird) motif mural painting found in Kizil, Sinkiang in circa 700 A.D. This Tse-Niao (bird) wearing an elaborate collar and holding a pearl pendant with three jewels in its beak is an exact representation of a Sasanian motif. The cities of Chang’An, Lo-Yang and Tun-Huang, along with Kashgar and Khotau, were swelled by Iranians after the Arab conquest of Iran. In Chang’An, Iranians were settled in four major quarters in the city. The Tang Shu archives reveal that “inside the (Ming Huang) palace, Iranian music is held in high esteem, the tables of persons of noble rank are always served with Persian food, and the women compete with one another in wearing Persian costumes”. These Sasanians introduced the Persian gardens to China. The Chinese described these Sasanians as having fair skin, blue or green eyes and dark or auburn hair. (*Shadows in the Desert: Ancient Persia At War*, by Kaveh Farrokh, Osprey Publishing, Oxford, 2007, p. 283).

According to the *Cambridge History of Iran*, (Op. cit., p. 176), Yazdegird sought Chinese assistance against the invading Arabs. His son, Peroz, sent an embassy to the T’ang court for help, but the Chinese emperor did not find it feasible to help him in view of the great distance dividing them. However, Peroz was supported by the troops of Tukharistan (now Badakhshan in Afghanistan) and contacted China for help in 662 and China recognized him as a ruler of Iran and promised to investigate the possibility of aid, which did not however, materialize. After being defeated by the Arabs he migrated to the Chinese capital of Cch’ang-an. After Peroz’s death his son tried to recoup his fortunes in Tukharistan and Sogdiana against the Arabs but failed. The Chinese court, however, continued to recognize the existence of the Sassanian monarchy until circa 850, but it was only a fiction. “None the less, the continuing fiction indicates that hopes for a restoration of Sasanian power, at least in Central Asia or eastern Iran, had not faded among the refugee nobility. Many Sasanian nobles must have fled to Central Asia and even to China from Iran, and they surely contributed to the spread of the Persian language in such cities as Bukhara and Samarkand in place of Sogdian.” A bilingual inscription on a gravestone found near the town of Sian in circa 872 mentions the death of

a Suren princess which attest to a persistence that unfortunately failed to secure their fate in exile.

The Cambridge History of Iran, Volume 3(1), p. 603, describes in detail that by the conquests of Shapur II, “an important degree of direct Persian control was established in eastern Arabia and with the stationing of Persian soldiers and officials there, Zoroastrianism came to be implanted,” which however, was the case wherever the Persian troops were stationed. It adds: “The pre-Islamic Arabian poets occasionally refer to Zoroastrian practices.”

When the Yamani leaders urged King Khushrov I to send troops to defend them against their unpopular Ethiopian occupiers, Khushrov first hesitated to intervene in a distant land but eventually decided to send a force of eight hundred soldiers who were “originally destined for execution but were now allowed an opportunity to redeem themselves in the battle,” (Op. cit., p. 607), which indeed they did. However, the Cambridge History of Iran does not mention that these Persian soldiers were mostly the Mazdakites destined for execution for abandoning Zoroastrianism for Mazdakism, but this fact may explain why they later adopted Islam though under pressure and even “helped the Muslim commanders suppress the revolt of the local prophet al-Aswad”, (p. 607). The reason attributed for their adopting Islam by the Cambridge History of Iran as due to “the cataclysm of (the Roman Emperor) Heraclius’ victories in Iran,” is not correct since the Sasanian rule in Iran continued unabated thereafter until the Arab invasion of Iran. “A Persian occupation force remained in the Yaman till after the HIJRA, when Muhammad came to an agreement with Batham, the Persian governor of that time, and then after Batham’s death, with his son”, (p. 607).

Even when the Arabs invaded Bahrain in 630 A.D., some Zoroastrians, who included Arabs in their ranks, “however, remained faithful to Zoroastrianism, as did some of the Persians in ‘Uman; these majus became liable to the Jizya or poll-tax like the Jews and Christians, the concept of who constituted “the People of the Book” being thereby DE FACTO extended”, (p. 609). This is not a complete account of Zoroastrian immigrants, which I intend to detail elsewhere, but these examples should suffice.

Pliny the elder lists other lands where the Magi were settled: Arabia, Ethiopia, and Egypt. Contemporary Hellenistic sources, locate Magi also in Syria, Babylonia, western Anatolia (Turkey) generally, Ephesus, and Elephantine in Egypt. They covered all the Mediterranean’s eastern littoral. Therefore, Samuel Eddy asserts: “Only they had the community of interest, ideas, cults, and wide dispersion to have disseminated the *Bahman Yasht* in its versions to western Anatolia through Babylon. *Only they* could have spread the *Oracle of Hystaspes* into Kappadokia and Pontos, whence it found its way in Greek and eventually into the hands of Lactantius, or circulated the Sibylline

Oracle on Alexander, which found its way probably from Ephesus into the Sibylline collection of an Alexandrian Jew. Indeed, these Magi made a deep impression as they went about spreading the good news of the coming liberation of the East from evil European kings. And the impression was etched on the folk-memory of the eastern Mediterranean peoples. These Persian priests *inspired the birth legends of the Savior Jesus* in the Gospel according to Matthew, which dimly echoes the *Bahman Yasht*,” — Three Magi seeking the Saoshyant (Jesus Christ) “who is to come, bearing royal gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They are threatened with extinction by the wicked Hellenized king played by Herod. That this story is Iranian is proved by the similarity of detail between Matthew and the *Bahman Yasht*, the star motif cannot have been conceived by anyone native to Palestine, because if the Magi of Matthew had really followed a star seen in the eastern sky (compare Matthew), they would have begun their journey in the Mediterranean Sea.” (*The King is Dead*, by Samuel K. Eddy, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1961, p. 68).

In all these instances history has left us few facts about how these various Zoroastrian groups ceased to exist but it seems quite obvious that their tiny minority eventually succumbed to the overwhelming pressures or propaganda from the majority religions. However, the present Parsi crisis has not only nothing to do with the pressures from the majority religions, but it is also sympathetically viewed by others who do not wish to see the Parsis vanish, as can be seen from their various comments and concerns in the Indian media. This puts the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the community itself to resolve the crisis. And the formula of adhering to Zarathushtraism for assuring the continuity of Zoroastrianism should prove a useful guide. I did not conceive it proper to include the Iranian Zoroastrians as facing transformation, though they are not totally exempt from it, because they have undergone many such transformations, from the fall of the Sassanian Empire in the seventh century A.D. and have had to constantly devise ingenious ways to survive.

Learning Onwards From Our Iranian Hamdins

Even as I am writing this paper, I came across an article in the *FEZANA Journal*, Spring 2010, (pp. 60-62) by Mobed Mehrban Firouzgary, the high priest of Iran (who did practice Mobedi in India and speaks Gujarati well, and therefore is not unmindful of the Parsi orthodoxy), saying: “The consecrated urine (Nirang) of the Varasia and any derivatives from there on are looked upon as items of history when antiseptics and hygienic products were not yet discovered.” He also observes: “Compared to the long established practice of taking nine-night Bareshnums by an initiate (Navar) in India, in Iran we do not have any active Bareshnum facilities anywhere, and hence a candidate (for Navar) does not take any Bareshnum.” In the same Journal (p. 63) Keikhosraw

Mobed makes the same observation about the last Nirang ceremony (obviously Nirangdin) in Yazd was performed in 1941.” They did not give up on Dakhmenashini because of any want of vultures, but because of a peremptory dictate of the last Shah, and yet they devised ways not to let their burials pollute the land. It is so surprising to see Iranian Mobeds expressing these views when just a few centuries ago they were advising us in various Rivayats about how to adhere faithfully to all of our essential rituals and practices that they are now even oblivious of.

But does this make them any less Zoroastrian than the Parsis? I, for one, think no other people have suffered perennial and unspeakable persecution for over 1,380 years in the world as they have. I admire, all the same, the tenacity of the Parsis to adhere to the strict dictates of their religious traditions, but are they *all* really what Asho Zarathushtra would want us to follow, or are they really traditions that have accrued over the millennia in the name of Zoroastrianism? The Iranian Mobeds have figured it out enough to survive despite so many hardship they have suffered. But it seems the Parsis are now called upon by destiny to pay a price for their good fortune, which made them so complacent and rigid. What the Arabs did not succeed in totally annihilating us, modernity along with our rigidity and ostrich-like attitude, have a fair chance of doing so. But it is still all up to us to avoid it if we follow Zarathushtrianism.

Conclusion

With the rise of modernity and the intellectual legacy of the Enlightenment, westernized societies have tended to become secular. Modernity has rightly or wrongly become synonymous with the transfer from the authority of tradition and religion to the authority of reason. This view popularized by the German sociologist Max Weber, is the price one pays for leaving the charms and consolation of religion behind. However, Weber, a non-believer, was himself, not unlike myself, nostalgic for an age when faith imbued life with meaning and purpose in life. Nevertheless, he never thought twice about viewing secular thinking as a significant advance in human self-understanding. Religion, though still an important part of human society even in the West, has been relegated there to the private sphere, becoming by far and large an individualistic search for one’s spiritual well-being. Such a phenomenon, however, is a danger in itself, as faith not linked to or governed by culture becomes so problematic. How can religion be passed along to children in highly westernized people such as the Parsis when the religion is no longer a fundamental part of the culture they inherited even as they give lip-service to it at times, or when the religion becomes an intensely personal, internal experience? As the Parsi culture is without doubt among the oldest surviving cultured n human history, its complete dissipation and extinction will indeed be

a great loss to humanity. It will therefore be nice indeed if some wise counsel prevails among them and they begin to claim as their own those who marry out even as they also have to encourage the rest to marry within their order to avoid utter dilution teetering on extinction. As I have stated so very often, Zoroastrianism does enjoin acceptance of aliens in its fold, if needs be, as long as it is voluntary since it is based on Free Will. Such a religious tradition, so very ancient and yet so modernistic in its concept despite its prehistoric roots, does not deserve extinction, or even near-extinction, which it is inviting on itself unwittingly. May Ahura Mazda, the All-wise Lord, the first ever notion of an omniscient God found by mankind, (perhaps except by the Jews' notion of Yahweh), guide them to avoid self-destruction even as there are no forces at work to do so. Amen!