

## THE PROSPECT OF A PERFECTING SOCIETY

[This is the gist of the second of two lectures delivered by Kaikhosrov Dinshaw Irani to a large audience in our Dar e Mehr Hall, Sydney, Australia on Sunday, September 5, 1999]

The extraordinary transformation that Zarathushtra generated in the history of human thought consisted of **two significant ideas**: 1. That **religion is not a matter of tribal membership but a matter of personal conscience arrived at through individual choice** and, 2. That **religion is primarily and essentially a commitment to a moral life - a life dedicated to perfecting society**. We shall develop the full implications of this remarkable insight of one of the greatest spirits of the human race. But one must feel surprised, perhaps with sadness, that not only is this not widely known among Zoroastrians, but also neither is it expounded by those who are taken to be teachers of the faith!

**Every human being** has Individuality, a combination of a physical being (Tanu) and a spiritual component, the soul (Urvan); this gives us **a unique personality deserving of dignity and respect**. The Self of the Individual is the seat of consciousness and self-consciousness, hence, of thought, feeling and judgment. Thus persons, and only they as individuals, sensitive to values and reflective about options, are ones that generate and maintain a just society. A just society, in return, promotes the realisation of individual goodness and happiness of its members. Such is the prospect of a perfecting humanity.

Human beings do not automatically form utopian arrangements; it requires the dedication of persons of wisdom and goodwill. Let us note that Zarathushtra considers such attitudes and actions a matter of our religious obligation and asks us to comprehend this responsibility rather than engage in recitative activity, especially the incomprehensible.

A believer takes himself to be able to recognise a wrong whether it is in individual relations or in the functioning of society. In the theology of Zarathushtra we are taken to have the capacity for such discernment. But this needs to be developed by appropriate moral direction and guidance. Thus, **insightful moral education is not a matter of providing prescriptions of what to do and not to do**. The Gathas are totally free of prescriptions. What is to be taught is the notion of the 'Good', i.e. what is right in any situation. And this each one of us can recognise because we have the God-given Good Mind (Vohu Mana) for that task. We recognise Asha (Truth, i. e. what is right) not in its universal totality, but in its embodiment in every human situation. And where it is violated, **we recognise that there is a moral flaw, our consciousness being equipped to do so, benumbed with large doses of self-interest and selfishness**. It is said in the Zoroastrian tradition: 'Let there be no one who fails to recognise the face of injustice.' Such just humans do make a worthy society possible.

A good society is one where practices are so regulated that the interests of individuals are not trampled upon, only minimally curtailed. The Zoroastrian vision of society is not just actuated by love, for that cannot be rationally demanded or achieved, nor is it viewed as an economic structure functioning in the interest of the tribe. Human beings live in collective structure and their values lie in a balance of interests with a structure so constructed that we minimise the interference of the satisfaction of one interest upon the satisfaction of another. Arranging such a social order - what we call the Righteous Order - not only needs humans of goodwill, i. e. those who seek the promotion of Asha, but also needs deep understanding of social relations. There is a significant passage in the Gathas (**Yasna 48, verse 5**): "**Let those who know how to rule well, and not the evil rulers, rule us! Let them rule us with wisdom and skill, O Armaiti!**"

This inspiring message of individual and social ethics is based upon the idea that the universe was envisaged by Ahura Mazda to evolve the perfection in accord with Asha - the Ideal Right. When the material world came into being there were two forces operating therein, one promoting Asha, the other frustrating it. This makes for **the imperfect world we live in**. Human recognition of this flawed world is the first step in Zoroastrian ethics. The rest, following with the recognition of the flawed world, is understanding how it ought to be, i. e. Asha, articulation of its application to any situation in the world and, then, acting to implement Asha. We call this Humata, Hukhata and Huvarashta - the heart of Zarathushtra's faith.

Good human beings striving to promote the good, bring about with the help of social intelligence, the good society. And as such society gradually comes into existence, human beings receive the consequence of the life of Asha. A good society is established to provide and ensure.

1. the satisfaction of humans through their self-realisation.
2. the maximization of justice, i. e. minimise undeserved benefits and burdens.

It further strives to balance these demands with insight and recognition of the limitations of an imperfect world.

As humans advance in moral intelligence, the ability of Vohu Mana, the society of Righteous Order gradually tends to actualise. And such a society progressively leads to moralising of humans and brings them to a state of enlightened happiness, Ushta. Such is the ethical stance and cosmic optimism of Zarathushtra's message to humanity.

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