

EVIDENCE FOR ZOROASTRIANS SUFFERING SIGNIFICANTLY MORE THAN OTHER MINORITIES IN IRAN

Dr. Kersey Antia

Nov 17, 2018; updated Dec 28, 2018

As noted by Aptin Khanbaghi in a very well-research study, *The Fire, the Star and the Cross: Minority Religions in Medieval and Early modern Iran* (T.B. Tauris, London, New York, 2006, p. 159), “Indeed, Zoroastrianism did not enjoy the same level of tolerance granted to the Jews and Christians within the realm of Islam. In addition, Zoroastrianism had lost the state support on which it had heavily relied under the Sasanians. Nonetheless, until the 9th century the Zoroastrians composed the majority of the population and the fall of the Zoroastrian state and the imposition of Islam as the official religion was not acceptable to them.” However, “After the 9th century the Zoroastrian population was left with the options of apostasy, migration, martyrdom or marginalization. With the patience of history they learned to accept their fate and acquired the social and political skills that were vital for their survival as a religious minority. On the other hand, the Jews and Christians who had the experience of living as minorities in Iran, were not so overwhelmed by the changes wrought by the Arab invaders.” They “suffered much less from the pressure borne by Zoroastrians and bureaucrats and prominent scholars who were compelled to embrace Islam.” Eventually, however, the Jews and Christians also became “vulnerable to the vindictive action of Muslims” (p. 161). He observes that “those who tackled the topic of Non-Muslim Iranians have portrayed them as oppressed, culturally static and materially and spiritually impoverished communities.” (p. 161). And yet he asserts that such persecutions over almost fourteen centuries have not succeeded in defeating or dampening their spirit. Aptin Khanbaghi quotes a page long plaintive verse from Minokhard (1883, vol. 139) condemning the Afghani invasion of Kirman very severely and very passionately, (the after-effect of which can still be seen skirting the city, visiting it so very saddened me as the bodies of some 10,000 Zoroastrians murdered by Afghans were laid to rest there).

He then presents details about the Zoroastrians of Afghanistan, especially Qandhar, joining the Afghan army circa 1721 under their own leader. “His presence in the Afghan army was so crucial that he was called Nasrullah, literally “help sent by God.” The number of Zoroastrians in Mahmud’s (Afghan) army was significant enough to

make him give a separate speech just for them saying “that the hour was now come which would free them from the yoke of their tyrants; that liberty was now in their own hands, if they could prove themselves on this occasion worthy heirs of the valour of their ancestors.” This was the first time since the 9th century that the Zoroastrians were mentioned fighting in Iran.” Some Zoroastrians in the region supported their co-religionists and “many Zoroastrians lost their lives in Yazd because of their support for the Afghans.” (p. 157). The Afghans also “won the sympathy of the Jews who hoped that Afghan rule would last.” (p. 157). However, as Khanbaghi notes: The hardship bore by the Zoroastrians is manifest in the declaration proclaimed by Mahmud's successor Shah Ashraf at Kashen: “And whoever is not Muslim will not be oppressed even if he belongs to the Zoroastrian faith.,” (footnote #905, p. 206).

On the basis of R.W. Bulliet's research finding, Aptin Khanbaghi maintains that “only a small proportion of Iranians had converted to Islam on the eve of the Abbasid revolutions” (p.21). He agrees with Madelung that there was a degree of anti-Arab and anti-Islamic sentiment behind various uprisings during the early Abbasid rule. He therefore contends: “The fading of the Zoroastrians from the historical annals should not be interpreted as a sign of their passivity and inferiority. Rather, their sudden change of fortune should be questioned, as a people who skillfully dominated an immense empire and influenced the culture of so many societies could not have left the historical scene without a struggle.” In the following pages he provides an account of these struggles. He maintains that Khurasanis were particularly rebellious as the damage caused to their land by the recent Muslim conquests was “still fresh in the memory of the local people who had been forced to accept Islam and who, despite their conversion were still forced to pay large tributes.” The success of Abu Muslim had depended significantly on the support of Zoroastrians who were then in majority and naturally hoped for an improvement in their miserable condition. But “The involuntary nature of these conversions” asserts Khanbaghi, “becomes manifest right after the death of the Abu Muslim in 754, when there was a surge in apostasies and revolts in Iran.” Noting the pervasiveness of the Khurramdins in the various uprisings against the Arab rule, he posits that the great majority if not all of the Khurramdin militants were of Zoroastrian background. Their misidentification as Mazdakis, and the popularity of the movement among people of modest social classes supports Madelung's argument that the Khurramdins belonged to the 'Low Church' of Zoroastrianism.” Although the Khurramdin did not disappear until 913 and even aligned with the Byzantines in their war against the Arabs in 838, Babak's defeat marks an end to the Iranian uprisings conducted in the name of the old Iranian religion'. As the Quran does not grant the Dhimma status to the Zoroastrians whom it mentions only once in Sura 22.17 for

discerning them from idolaters, the status of Zoroastrians became rather ambiguous in the eyes of the Arab rulers. As I have already noted, the Prophet did grant the Dhimma status to the Zoroastrians of Bahrayn when the Arabs captured Bahrayn in the Prophet's lifetime. However, Khanbaghi posits that "their mass conversion in the 9th century demonstrates that the Dhimma did not always apply to them." He adds: "It is just worth mentioning that in a number of Islamic schools, the Maliki, the Shafi'i, and the Hanbale, the value of a Zoroastrian life (or the price of his blood) was less than ¼ of that of a Christian or a Jew." However, the Jews and Christians were not free of Muslim pressure and the Jewish apocalypics of the time lamented the end of the Sasanian kings, "who they believed were good to them, and spurned the Arabs and their prophet for disrespecting them. Similar pressure was felt by the Christians after the reign of al-Ma'mun." (pp. 21-26). This observation refutes once again Jacob Neusner's remark that the Jews in Iran welcomed the Arabs.

Until the 9th century, notes Khanbaghi, the Mubid-i-Mubidan was still convoked along with the Catholics to the Arab court, but no such Zoroastrian representative is mentioned since then is (footnote No. 124 on p. 169). He also quotes Robert Brody (*Irano-Judaica IV*, Jerusalem, 1999, p. 181), on "the subject of" the feigned conversion of Iranians to Islam in the 8th century." as maintaining that "many Zoroastrians who lived at that time and converted to Islam...their heart was not free of Zoroastrianism.... And even the second and third generations were equivocal." (footnote No. 128, p. 169). Such well researched facts run counter to Kotauzian's uncritical, subjective opinions already noted.

Khanbaghi mentions that "the Caliph al-Radi had a leading Zoroastrian priest executed (cir. 935)", (p. 80), which again suggests some kind of protest by the Zoroastrian community even 300 years after the Arab conquest. He also mentions that in 1258 Bahram Pajdu wrote a treatise in Persian titled Bahariyyat and his son, Zartusht Bahram became famous for writing *Arda viraf Nama*, etc., circa 1265. Earlier, (circa 950) Kaykavus wrote *Zartusht-nama*. Both these works reflect the hard time Zoroastrians were facing then and expressed hope that "Iran was going to be delivered from its enemies and a Zoroastrian king would again occupy the throne." The author of the *Arda Viraf Nama* moans: "We have been tormented by demons" and "from end to end, the world is turned into a cemetery, houses and possessions have been blended with corpses." The Mongols seem to have destroyed one of the last ancient fire-temples which Qazwini reported as extant in the 13th century in Karkuye in Sistan. Since Zartusht Behram wrote in the Arabic script, his works survived and were "copied by Muslims for audiences in Bukhara, "which suggests the survival of Zoroastrians

there at the time. However, “even if they were no longer under Muslim rule, Zoroastrians were still not benefiting from the security and good fortune gained by other non-Muslim communities under Mongol dominion. They had no protector among those in power.” However, as the Mongol conquest led to the dissolution of the borders of Islamic lands throughout the region, it led to cultural exchanges among them.” Thus, Rustem Mihraban was able to visit India in 1269, which previously would have been difficult for a Zoroastrian. He copied only Pahlavi manuscripts for the Parsis as Persian had not yet become current in coastal Gujarat. In 1323 his great-great nephew Mihraban Kaykhuṣṭrav also visited Parsis and copied some Pahlavi texts for them. (pp. 79-81). However, Quissehr Sanjan does not mention them or even Hoshang Nariman who started the Rievayat tradition.

Thus, Khanbaghi shows that the Zoroastrians suffered much more than other minorities in Iran and among other reasons he ascribes it to the Zoroastrian and pseudo-Zoroastrian uprisings generating “a sense of insecurity in Arab circles. As a result, the Arabs more actively suppressed these groups in order to maintain order and peace in their dominions,” whereas Jews and Christians did not start “such upheavals and therefore there were no reprisals against them at least at the time.” (p. 26). It is thus obvious that Zoroastrians resented the Arab occupation as long as they possibly could, even as late as in 1721 A.D.