

The Zoroastrian Religious Studies

By Dastoorji Dr. Hormuzdiar Dastoor Kayoji Mirza



Naturally, the duties of the religious education, study, training and observance devolve upon the priestly class. In the Avestan times Athravan (a fire-priest) was the general term indicating the priest class. The priestly dignitaries were Magavan (practising priest), Ratu (spiritual head), Aethrapaiti (religious teacher, preceptor), and Havishta (religious disciple). Whole day was devoted to the sacred studies, duties, and services, but the early morning was specially regarded as most appropriate and propitious time for religious pursuits.

In the Avestan times, the candidates for the religious studies and sacred vocation were very carefully selected. They were required to be sound in physical health, mental ability, moral virtues, and spiritual advancement. Only those who were found fit in every respect, after rigorous training, trial and test, were allowed to pursue the sacred duties and priestly calling.

The sacred texts were committed to memory with the rules of recitation and chanting. The candidates were instructed and trained in reciting and chanting the sacred texts observing the rules of metre and prosody, in ritual prescriptions and intricacies, and in practising the rules of physical, mental, and spiritual purity.

Besides these, the sacred texts were required to be interpreted even in the Avestan times, and hence there were commentaries, expositions, and catechisms in the Avesta language. It appears that etymological studies were also conducted in those days, as we glean from some stray references (as for instance yt. 13.129).

A TRUE ATHRAVAN

A true Athravan is described as one who throughout the day and night pursues the divine wisdom, which would relieve one from distress and give freedom (in this world), which would give blissfulness (to the soul) at the Bridge of Selection (after death), and which would make one attain to the (real) life, to holiness, to the best (life) of the Best Existence (in the spiritual world)
—Vd. 18.6.

IN LATER TIMES

The extant Iranian records of the Achaemenian and the Parthian times mainly appertain to the historical and imperial affairs. Very little can be gained

therefrom about the Zoroastrian priests and priestly profession in those days. The ancient Greek and Roman writers have written profusely on Zoroastrian Religion and the Magi. According to them, the Zoroastrian priests used to recite prayers, observing the rules of purity and rites, and possessing spiritual and occult powers.

IN THE SASANIAN TIMES

The Zoroastrian revival in the Sasanian times is very well known. Tansar, Arda Viraf, and Adabad were the celebrated personalities. The Avesta texts were collected and re-edited, they were translated into Pahlavi, and commentaries were added thereto. The present Avesta script was invented, and the Pazand prayers were composed.

IN LATER CENTURIES

The Zoroastrian priests were active particularly in the ninth century. Practically all of the Pahlavi texts, now extant, were compiled or composed in the ninth century in Iran. The Parsi priests in Iran and in India wrote countless manuscripts in this and in later centuries. In India, the Zoroastrian texts were translated into Sanskrit, and also into Old Gujarati, and books on Parsi religion and history were composed in these languages.

In and after the 16th century, European scholars and travellers began to take interest in the Parsis and their religion. Prominent among them were Barbane Brisson (1590), Henry Lord (1620), and Thomas Hyde (1700).

In the post-Sasanian times the Avesta texts were studied in Iran through the Pahlavi translations and commentaries. In the early centuries in India, generally the priestly studies were conducted through the medium of Sanskrit and Old Gujarati. In the 15th century, after the advent of the Rivayats, the studies of Pahlavi and Persian were re-introduced. These studies received impetus by the religious controversies, and by the advent of the Iranian manuscripts and Iranian priests.

About the middle of the 18th century, Anquetil du Perron, a young scholar of France, travelled to India with the specific purpose of studying the Parsi religion and scriptures. He studied at Surat under Dorab Kumava (1748-1754), and published *Zend Avesta* (3 Volumes) in 1771. This book was a bombshell in the scholarly camp of Europe. A fierce controversy arose over the authenticity of the Avesta texts translated by Anquetil. This controversy raged for about 50 years, but it gave powerful impetus to the Parsi studies in Europe. In the mean time, the Old Persian texts were copied and deciphered in Europe.

The European scholars travelled in Iran and India, and carried with them important manuscripts to Europe. Ultimately, the controversy died out, "the Battle of Method" subsided, and an amicable compromise was effected between the so-called Traditional School and the Sanskrit School. Authenticity of the Avesta was recognized, and the importance of both, tradition and Sanskrit, for interpretation of the Avesta was acknowledged. As a result thereof, the science of philological and etymological studies of the Zoroastrian scriptures and Iranian languages came into existence.

K. R. CAMA AND HIS DISCIPLES

About 1855, K. R. Cama travelled in Europe. He came in contact with the European scholars, particularly Spiegel and Mohl. He studied Zoroastrian scriptures and Iranian languages on modern lines of philology. At Bombay, he introduced these studies among the Parsi priests. He educated and trained young Parsi priests, who later on became a batch of honoured, erudite and devoted scholar-priests — S. D. Bharucha, T. D. Anklesaria, K. E. Kanga, J. D. Nadirshah and others. These learned disciples of Came, in their turn, educated and trained their pupils, and thus created a second batch of erudite and devoted scholars — both Athornan and Behdin. These scholars assiduously and devotedly studied, educated and trained others, conducted research work, enlightened people, and produced scholarly works and learned literature.

ZOROASTRIAN OCCULT PHILOSOPHY

..... *Avesta Maga ana Magavan*

It is generally accepted that Zorathushtra had formed an association or a covenant of his immediate disciples, and it was known as *Maga*, and the members of this association were known as *Magavan*. Besides this, there are other stray references which indicate that throughout the long and chequered history of Zoroastrianism there were such associations of religious dignitaries, who preferred to lead a holy life in a secluded place, and to work unnoticed by general public.

STRAY REFERENCES

Although there is no historical account of such religious associations, there are some stray but significant hints and suggestions in the form of stray references scattered here and there in Iranian as well as in foreign sources, as noted below:

(1) Ancient Greek and Roman writers on wisdom and occult powers of the Magi, the Zoroastrian priests.

(2) Archaeological discoveries of the ruins of the Fire-temples with inner secret chambers (see below HOLY FIRES IN ANCIENT IRAN) .

(3) Coins of the rulers of Perses (Pars) with Pahlavi legends and fire-symbols even during the hellenized early Parthian period.

(4) Revival during the later Parthian period under Vologesis I.

(5) Revival during the Sasanian times.

(6) Stray references during the post-Sasanian times to:

(a) Zoroastrian centres in mountain-fastnesses in Pars and elsewhere in Iran.

(b) Independent kingdoms of Ispahbads of Khorasan; and

(c) Priestly kingdom of the Masmogans of Damavand

(7) Stray references to Zoroastrian priests residing in mountain regions in Iran, and appearing for specific purpose.

(8) Mysterious appearance of some controversial but remarkable books: *Dasatir*, *Dabistan*, etc.

These references may perhaps appear trivial, but collectively they are not negligible and they cannot be lightly set aside. With the background of these historical and literary references, scattered in various sources, we have to consider the claims of Zoroastrian occultism, which became manifest in the beginning of this century.

A REMARKABLE ZOROASTRIAN

In the first decade of this century, a remarkable Zoroastrian appeared in the religious life of the Parsis in India. He was a simple Mr. Behramshah Navroji Shroff, an humble resident of Surat. He was born in Bombay on 3rd August 1858.

During his boyhood, he had a defective tongue and he was faltering in his speech. He was an ordinary student of average calibre in his school days, and he learnt up to the fourth standard of the middle school of those days. He had no other education, knowledge, training or experience in religious and secular subjects.

In or about 1880, in the prime of his youth, Behramshah visited Peshawar (in the North-West Frontier Province of India in those days) to meet his uncle, who was running a shop there. Behramshah observed complete silence for about 25 years about the amazing experiences he gained during this journey and his stay at Peshawar. Behramshah became a remarkable Zoroastrian in his later life in the religious sphere of the Zoroastrians in India.

About 1905, Behramshah came out in public, first in the Bag-e Parsa Fire-temple at Surat. He put forward an astounding claim that during his stay in Peshawar, he had a miraculous opportunity of visiting Iran, and of meeting the Zoroastrian priests, who were living in secluded and secret places in the mountainous regions of Damavand. He further claimed that he stayed there for more than 3 years, and during that period he acquired, by training, practice and experience, occult spiritual insight and ancient spiritual wisdom and knowledge of the Zoroastrian Religion, zealously guarded and practised by the priests living there. He related marvelous stories of his journey to Iran and the spiritual experiences, which he gained there during that period.

THE USTAD SAHEB

Behramshah, who was and who is reverently known as *Ustad Saheb* among his disciples and admirers, expounded the occult philosophy of the Zoroastrian Religion in his unique manner in private discussions, in public lectures, and in his writings. He could speak with ease and fluency for hours together on varied religious and secular subjects.

The Ustad Saheb's expositions revived and restored the waning faith of Zoroastrians. He kindled a torch of religious faith, which burns up to now with spiritual brilliance. He instilled religious fervour, enthusiasm, and zeal among the Zoroastrian religious philosophy, expounded by the Ustad Saheb, is generally known as *Zarhoshti Ilme Khshnum* 'the Zoroastrian Wisdom of Bliss'. To propagate this occult philosophy among the Zoroastrians, he established the *Zoroastrian Ilme Khshnum Institute*.

Bequeathing the spiritual heritage of the Zoroastrian religious illumination to the Parsis, Ustad Saheb Behramshah passed away on Roz Bahman Mah Bahman Shanshahi 1296 A.Y., 7th July 1927 A.C.

HIS LEARNED DISCIPLES

The Ustad Saheb had many learned disciples. Chief among them were Dr. Framroze Sorabji Chinivala and his brother Mr. Jehangir Sorabji Chinivala. Both these brothers were the Ustad Saheb's trusted disciples; and he entrusted the Zoroastrian Ilme Khshnum Institute to these brothers.

The late Dr. Framroze was an ophthalmic surgeon, and his brother Jehangir, happily living with us, is a leading Advocate of the High Court and the Supreme Court of India. Both these trusted disciples of Behramshah could have amassed vast worldly fortune and material wealth by their professional practice, and could have lived in wordly comfort and material luxury. But, as

inspired by the Ustad Saheb, they preferred to enjoy spiritual luxury and spiritual riches, and to lead an humble life of piety, service, and sacrifice.

Dr. Framroze had a frail physique, venerable appearance, saintly personality, and mild disposition. As an ophthalmic surgeon, he treated poor patients free of charge, he gave free medical advice and also financial help to the poor and needy. Besides this, he devoted his time to the religious pursuits and sacred duties — exposition of the Zoroastrian Religion, prayers, ceremonies, laws of purity, scriptures, languages, customs, manners, practices, in the spiritual light of the occult philosophy as taught and inspired by the Ustad Saheb.

Dr. Framroze produced extensive literature on varied subjects, religious as well as secular, in Gujarati and in English. His marvellous *Nikiz-e Vēhdin* (2 Volumes) is a monumental work. Besides this, he translated commented upon, and expounded almost the whole of the extant Avesta—Gathas, Yasna, Vi parad, Yashts, Vaudidad, Khordeh Avesta. He wrote series of articles on ancient history, geography, literature, languages, and a host of varied subjects of religious, communal, and general importance.

Dr. Framroze passed away on Roz Rashn Mah Farvardin Qadim 1334 A. Y., Roz Mohor Mah Aspaudarmadi Shahaushahi 1333 A. Y., 6th August 1964 A. C.

Mr. Jehangir is a true Zoroastrian *Rathaeshtar* 'a warrior' by name, by personality and by action, wielding his mighty pen and devastating tongue in the cause of the Religion and the Community. Always ready and willing to listen to others, he is always uncompromising in the matters of principle and conviction. He is plain-spoken in public and in private, and he would never tolerate any non-sense or fooling; and in such matters he would even become blunt, but he is always sincere, straightforward and honest.

As an advocate, Jehangir gave and gives free legal advice and assistance, and conducted law-suits, without any fees or remuneration, in litigations arising out of the religious and communal controversies. Formerly for about 25 years through *Jame Jamshed*, and later for 25 more years through his own weekly *Parsi Avaz*, Jehangir rendered and renders yecman's services to the community. He diffused religious and secular knowledge and spiritual enlightenment, and fought many a selfless battle in defence of the Religion and the Community. He wrote and published hundreds of articles and delivered hundreds of lectures on varied subjects during the last 50 years. Jehangir is thus rendering selfless services in his unique manner to the Religion and the Community. May he continue to serve for many more years to come!