

PRESERVING THE PAST TO ENSURE THE FUTURE

WE ARE FINANCIALLY WELL-OFF BUT SPIRITUALLY BANKRUPT

Summary of the talk given by Ervad Marzban Hathiram at the plenary session of the 7th World Zoroastrian Congress in Houston

[This is another young man who with a powerful Khshnoomic back-ground, did not hesitate to tell the Parsis the message of Khshnoom that if we don't preserve the past, there is no future: that 'good' is defined by Ahura and not the sinful mind of man; and that good thoughts, words and deeds is not the only formula of Zarthoshti Din; and to ask the listeners how many of them have Sudreh-Kushti on their bodies?

There is an under current message, for the orthodox. (traditionalist, if you like), in Marzban's bold speech. It is : that only IIm-e-Khshnoom has the strength to provide a faithful rationale of our Sacred Traditions and Institutions, and the courage to face the onslaught of the so termed radicals. - **Editor]**

"Preserving the past to ensure the future" seems to be a grand title with lots of scope to speak on and on. I have been watching the proceedings of this Congress over the last four days and have decided to speak on my impressions rather than give any grandiose talk on what we need to do.

Over 1200 years ago, a group of a few thousand men, women and children left the shores of their motherland, leaving everything they had - their riches, lands and belongings so that they could preserve and perpetuate the one thing that was the dearest to them - their religion. They were lead by a very highly evolved and saintly soul - Dastur Nairyosangh Dhaval and his team of mobeds. The man standing in front of you giving this talk happens to be the unworthy, 28th descendant of that great soul.

The question comes to mind: 'what prompted our ancestors to leave their beloved motherland?' Going over the proceedings of the last four days one would tend to believe that religion is only an intellectual argument that we need to have now and then whenever we gather at such occasions. Religion seems to be a matter of choice, of exercising our supposedly 'good minds' to choose between Ahura Mazda or Allah, Zarathushtra or Jesus. All that matters seems to be the Gathas, all the rest is stuff cooked up by my ancestors, the priests, so that they could enrich themselves at the expense of the gullible lay people.

If this hypothesis were true, what was the need to leave Iran? We could have exercised our 'good mind' there, chosen what we thought were true and lived happily ever after. So what prompted those 2000 men, women and children and their great leader to take this step? What was their idea of religion?

Their idea of religion was a holistic one. Religion to them was not an intellectual exercise, but a way of life. They lived, ate and breathed religion. They believed that religion was composed of seven major constituents Sudreh kustī, Avesta manthras, Yasna, Atash, the moral code enshrined in manashni-gavashni-kunashni, boonak pasbani preserving their unique ethnic and religious identity, and dokhmenashini. When they felt that they were not in a position to safeguard and freely follow all these practices, they made a conscious decision to leave their motherland and come to India with whom they had long-standing cultural and trading ties. We often hear the term 'refugees' bandied around. Let no one call them refugees for they made a conscious decision and left with full choice. They were not refugees. They were preservers of the faith.

So what does our religion say about the past? In the Zoroastrian religion, the past is remembered and venerated as 'dareghayao upayanyao' - long standing traditions. They are called worthy of worship and attuning along with the original law (datahe vidaevahe) and the holy, beneficent manthras (manthrahe spentahe). They are considered to be an essential part of our religion. Zoroastrianism believes that every thought, word and deed is recorded in nature and its collective form presents itself on the dawn of the fourth day of a person's death in the form of a beautiful maiden or an ugly hag. Similarly the thousands of yasnas performed or the millions of boi ceremonies done at our sacred Agiaries and Atash Behrams all form their collective clouds, which we attune to, and receive blessings from, when we participate in these ceremonies.

Speaking about thoughts, words and deeds brings to our mind the so called 'summary' of our religion in

those oft repeated words 'good thoughts, good words, good deeds'. To me, this is the most irritating explanation of our religion and needs to be done away with. Does the Zoroastrian religion have a monopoly on good thoughts, words and deeds? Does any religion tell us not to have good thoughts, speak good words and do good deeds? Then why do we go on repeating this cliché again and again? Instead, we should ask the question, 'what is good? Who defines good?' Is good defined by man - with his changing whims and fancies and compromising attitude or does someone else define it? In America, it may be considered 'good' to sleep around with anyone we wish, in India that may not be the case. So should we have differing good thoughts, words and deeds for different countries? How can we ever have stability and order if man were to define good to suit his view of the world?

Zoroastrianism very clearly states that the 'good' in this cliché is defined not by man but by Ahura Mazda Himself. "Hormazd khodae gunah andar din peda bekard." - 'The Lord Ahura Mazda has defined the sins in the religion,' says the Patet Pashemani, karda 3.

So it is the beholden duty of every Zoroastrian to follow the rules of the religion as defined by Ahura Mazda and His Prophet Zarathushtra.

Let us come to another topic. Yesterday we had a grand ceremony where we gave lifetime achievement awards to 5 distinguished persons. It is commendable that we have chosen to honour those among us who have excelled in their respective fields and brought glory and fame to the community. But it is a matter of shame and causes me deep hurt to realise that not a single priest was selected for this honour. Let us realise that but for the immense sacrifices of my ancestors and their immeasurable services to the community we would not be here celebrating the advent of the third millennium. It is them - countless, unremembered heroes - that the community needs to honour. It is because of their stupendous mental prowess which memorised the entire Avesta and handed it down from generation to generation, uncorrupted, not a single word altered or dropped that we have with us our scriptures, including the Gathas which many believe to be the only true guide to the religion. It is because of their unwavering faith and incredible services that we have our sacred Iranshah Fire yet ablaze. Their strong moral fibre and true Zoroastrian way of life demonstrated to the laity how a true Zoroastrian should live. It is because of them that all this and more has happened, and it is indeed a sad day to see that we have no time to honour them.

Contrast this life with what we see here today. In this hall of 600 people, **how many are wearing the sudreh-kusti? How many of us know the correct kusti prayers? How many of us observe our religious customs and traditions.** How many of us are quick to take of the sudreh-kusti the minute they become inconvenient? Is this what our forefathers left their motherland for? Are we worthy descendants of those great souls? Sad, but true, we have failed them. Let us compare that original Diaspora of 2000 souls with those of us who have now left India and settled all over the world. Our forefathers left their motherland to preserve and perpetuate their religion. We left India to earn more money and have a so-called 'better quality of life'. The original Pilgrim Fathers were led by a great and highly evolved soul. We have no leaders. Our forefathers came to India and established the Iranshah and the great pav-mahel that has preserved and protected us till this day. **We can only count 7 World Zoroastrian Congresses among our achievements and all seven of them have done nothing to preserve the religion.** Instead they have become occasions to mock the religion and its traditions, to invite people who have no business being there to speak on topics they do not truly understand. We have reduced our religion from a grand way of life to a shell of so-called good thoughts, words and deeds; of Gathic and non-Gathic, later Avesta and younger Avesta, of 'freedom of choice' and applying the 'good mind'. We are steadily marching towards our own extinction - not because our numbers are decreasing, but because we are rudderless we have abandoned the great religion that our beloved Prophet Zarathushtra revealed to us. Our children look up to their parents to guide them, not knowing that the parents are themselves ignorant. Our prosperity and financial well-being have lulled us into a sense of complacency for our religious practices.

I am here to give all of us a warning - we are well off financially, but we are spiritually bankrupt. Remember, my dear fellow Zoroastrians that times are changing. We are going to face some very difficult times ahead. The world is going through cataclysmic changes that will severely affect the way we live. In our quest for more money and material conveniences we have mindlessly raped our mother Earth and burdened her with unbearable levels of pollution. This situation is untenable and its after effects are being felt even as we gather here. Soon Mother Earth will strike back.

And when that happens, your money will be of no use, your grand mansions will crumble, and your wide roads and unlimited power will disappear. At that time of despair, when everything seems to be lost, remember my dear friends that you have the route to escape this horror - remember that you are Parsee-Zoroastrians, remember the divine shields of the sudreh-kusti that your Prophet has given you. Put these on again, if nothing at least do one Kusti every day, and it is a promise to you, that there will be no force in Nature that will be able to harm you.

This is the message that I want you take away from this Congress. That **unless we remember, honour and totally follow the past and the glorious traditions of our forefathers, there will be no future for us.**

KHSHNOOM, THE ONLY KEY.

We Parsis have our own sacred and spiritual institutions like Sudreh-Kushti, Manthra-prayers, Atash Kadeh, Yasna (Rituals), Dokhma, Meher-Patet, Boonak-Paasbaani. Each of these institutions has as spiritual and mystical foundations. Unfortunately we have not been taught their "faithful rationale". This expression means that each of the institutions has an explanation about its operation and function; that however goes beyond our intellect and consciousness; there are vast regions of Nature beyond our intellectual barrier; any spiritual explanation, therefore presupposes the existence of such unknown regions of Nature. Once that truth is absorbed in our mind, we will be able to understand the rationale, which is thus intellectually blended with Faith. In our ignorance which is thrust upon us by the western studies, we ignore the spiritual and mystical aspect of our Religion and that is the reason why our unique culture, which was once vibrating with spirituality, have sunk in the mire of western materialism. They called Religion as superstition. Today, at the end of the 20th century, it is modern science which is termed as superstition! Bryan Appleyard, a well known writer on science and the author of an excellent book, "Understanding the Present", has given reasons for calling science a superstition, in a recent issue of Times of India.

There is no source which can provide the faithful rationale of our spiritual institutions except IIm-e-Khshnoom. Taste it. The fundamental rationale of khshnoom is that our 'Tarikat's and Rituals usher us into divine presence and take us : "nearer to Thee, my Lord."

- Condour.

(Parsi Pukar June-July 2000 - Vol. 5; No. 12)