

# “ The Zoroastrian Paragna Ritual”

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&  
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Ceremonies and rituals-Kriyakam-constitute an important component of the Zoroastrian Religion, as observed by the Parsis of India.

We have amongst us quite a number of religious ceremonies ordained for the good of the living as well as the dead. Some of them are to be performed at the special consecrated places separately kept in the Agiaries. Certain specified physical apparatus and objects are utilized in these "Pav-Mahel" ceremonies, as they are normally called. Yazashney, Vendidad, Nirangdin belong to this class of ceremonies, They have come down to us from father to son of the priestly families, and are taught to Mobeds with great care and precision.

The Yazashney ceremony is preceded by what is known as "Paragna." Recently, the journal of Mithraic Studies has, in its Volume 2, No. 1 1977, published an article by Dastoorji Dr. Firozeji M. Kotwal and Prof. James Boyde, on "The Zoroastrian Paragna Ritual" (pages 19 to 54). The article is separately printed in the form of a booklet available at the price of Rs. 3 at the Parsi Vegetarian and Temperance Society, Noble Chambers, Fort, Bombay.

The article describes step by step the whole of the Paragna ceremony according to the standard and authoritative practice of the Bhagaria priests of Navsari.

The authors have divided their subject in two parts. The first part consists of the

actual description of Paragna and the second contains "the Interpretative Comment" (page 33 et seq.)

The description of this basic ceremony is given step by step in a simple but through style. There are six excellent diagrams and five beautiful plates showing the various stages through which the ritual apparatus i.e; 'Alaat's are made to pass during the ceremony. A study of this description will give our not-knowing fellow Zoroastrians, an idea about the precise, exact and thorough intricacies of our Kriya ceremonies, They are not mere external rituals, as some of us are ignorantly inclined to think. External formalities cannot be this much exacting. Every object used in Paragna is to be treated in a certain specified way and reciting certain specified 'Manthra's. Even a half hearted glimpse at the ceremony or its description in this article should be sufficient for any unprejudiced and objective thinker that this cannot be mere symbolism or just some formal ritual intended merely to impress the onlookers.

The Alaat's are required to be of specified sizes, shapes, compositions and structures. Each of them passes through certain actions performed by the priest accompanied by the reciting of specified 'Manthra' passages and sometimes even a single Manthric word. For instance, the cutting of the twig for the preparation of Hom juice is to be done in

a specified manner (page 25 and Plate III). In taking out 'Zohr', the priest holds the two 'fuliyan' between his fingers and subjects them to seven stages, dips them in the 'Kundi' of water and brings them back in their usual position. Each step is accompanied by a Manthric word or sentence (page 26). For instance, while reciting "Yazatnam", the fuliyan is held motionless on water, while, uttering "thwa" they are moved over the surface, while saying "asaonam" they are tipped so as to fill with a little water.....

In the second part of the article, the authors give interpretative comments on the meaning of this ceremony. They assert, and rightly so, that the ceremony is not merely symbolic. Such interpretation is inappropriate. The principal importance of all such ceremonies "is in the concrete physical and verbal activities themselves." The authors discuss this by laying down seven topics, each of which indicates that the ceremony is intended to invoke certain spiritual and mystical effect in nature; that this effect goes beyond man's intellectual grasp; that the Kriya establishes a closer contact between the physical world and spiritual realms and brings down purity and divine blessing on men and earth, and takes the creation towards its goal of ultimate salvation.

The seven topics are: (i) "the purpose of Paragna," being the closer contact between 'Getig' and 'Menog' realms; (ii) 'the meaning and importance of purity, physical, mental and spiritual that pervades every second of ceremony; (iii) 'Amal and Manthra,' that is the priest's own internal individual spiritual preparation that gives him power to perform the Kriya with its intended effect; and the power of Manthric words which are recited throughout; (iv) 'ritual gestures' that is, the movements of the hands, which infuse

spiritual energy in the objects of the ceremony; (v) 'the ritual objects' which have specific structures and which concentrate into themselves the divine energy of Ohrmazd and Yazad's; (vi) 'the hom mixture' which becomes a weapon of the Yazad's Cosmic warfare with Ahriman; and (vii) 'the Yozdathregar,' the performing priest who himself is one of the Alaat's in the ceremony.

The authors are 'traditionalists' or, as they themselves indicate, their interpretations are of and for the "orthodox Zoroastrians".

An "orthodox", according to the dictionary, is one who "holds correct and accepted views:' 'Ortho' means "straight" or "right"! Orthodoxy does not mean an immunity towards modernity, as some of us think and propagate. And the present state of modern scientific thought is heavily tilting towards the orthodox viewpoint, which advocates the preservation of the traditional institutions and practices.

Something extraordinary is happening in the field of all sciences since last six decades. Man's inquiry in the working of nature has led him into a mysterious jungle. One mystery points to another deeper than the first. Even a meager explanation of nature's forces and working is not forthcoming but appears to be receding farther away. Science knocks the door of mysticism but does not get an entry because its methods do not permit it.

And to add to the mystery, several discoveries and inventions are taking place which point a most significant finger to the truth that Religion and its spiritual institutions are founded on certain inexorable laws of nature, which man is unable to understand even faintly. It is on these laws that our Kriya's are based and in this article the authors have shown this very ably and

convincingly. Their interpretations, though indicative and suggestive, does not to this reviewer (who is a student of modern science) appear to be old, or obscure or antiquated. They are very much modern. The storms of energy whirling deep in the nucleus of an atom, the amazing energy a life-cell has stored in itself, the baffling mysteries the sky above is revealing every day and every night, the abnormal science of ESP which have now become quite normal, and extraordinary inventions in the fields psychic energy like Kirlian photography, and psychotronic generators, now assert emphatically that the spiritual institutions and exercises of our Religion are based upon a much advanced Science of nature, only a glimpse of which is revealed to ordinary mankind and are therefore not in any sense old or "worn out". They are ahead of the present times! For their justification we have not only to look to the past, but also to the future!

Another very significant fact that is revealed by this booklet is that the modern western studies of Zoroastrianism have now begun to tilt towards the traditional dogmas and doctrines. No study of and Religion can be devoid of its traditional, devotional and spiritual basis. Without that, it is not the study of Religion at all; and the western Zoroastrian studies have started realizing this great truth, much to the dismay of some heterodox amongst us. The tables have turned sharply. Those, who want to discard the spiritual and divine institutions of our Religion in the name of modernity have been thrown far away from it! And yet they are too obstinate to admit it or even to face the new discoveries of most modern science and the new trend in religious studies and researches! They still rely on sciences and researches of the last

century! They are immune to the fact that it is no longer "unscientific and unscholarly" to state, as the learned authors of this article have done, that "the significance of the ritual itself goes beyond man's intellectual grasp, beyond man-made meanings and interpretation" (page 38).

The authors of this small but authentic article deserve high praise. Dastoorji Firozeji Kotwal of the Wadiaji Fire Temple is not an ordinary scholar. He has a number of scholarly achievements to his credit. The present article adds a golden feather to them and let us hope he comes out with more and more of the 'traditional' and 'orthodox' interpretations. - **K. N. Dastoor**

**[Editor's Note:** In the Vast Khshnoomic literature in Gujarati, there is a book by Dr. Faramroz S. Chiniwalla: "Yazashney ni Buland Kriya" wherein the deep mystical science of the Paragna as also of the major Yazashney ceremony is elaborately set out.]