

# Between the Western Study and the Mystic Science, of Zoroastrianism



## When Kharshedji Kama met Baheramshah Shroff

The hall was packed to capacity. Parsis wearing different kinds of caps, turbans and hats sat expectantly gazing at the stage.

On the stage a few people were seated. Of them, two attracted wondering attention. Both of them wore the well known box like pagdis; both had impressive beards.

One of them, apparently the President of the function, was a highly educated and esteemed Parsi. He was a well known brilliant scholar of the modern linguistic studies of Zoroastrian scriptures and writings, which were prevalent in Europe. He was the pioneer who brought those difficult and complex studies amongst the Parsis of India. He was revered as a master by a formidable team of Parsi scholars and students of Zoroastrian and oriental languages.

His name was **Khurshedji Rustamji Kama**

The other bearded gentleman on the stage was, in education and scholarship, the exactly opposite of the President. His education had not gone beyond Gujarati fourth standard; and English, he knew almost none; yet he was the main speaker before the assembly!

His name was **Beheramshah Navroji Shroff.**



The proceedings began. After the preliminaries of introduction and few words from the chair, the main speaker, Beheramshah rose to speak.

He fondled his beard with his hand, his lips moved almost unseen in some silent prayer and he began.

What was he speaking about ?

It was a lecture on Zoroastrianism all right. But the style, the language and the subject matter were extraordinary. He spoke like a scientist who had made some original discoveries and was presenting them before a lay audience. He seemed to know that the listeners were new to the subject which was full of technicalities and technical terms. He was, therefore, trying to keep his language as simple as possible. And he was succeeding beyond expectation. The style and the contents had an amazing impact on the audience.

What was the 'scientific' subject?

It was the mystical Science of **Zoroastrian Religion**. It touched the origin and the aim of cosmos and creation, and the origin and evolution of earth, matter and man! It touched the Zoroastrian Institutions like Sudreh-Kushti, Atash Beheram, Agiary, Manthra prayers. It referred to the great Plan of Ahura Mazda in presenting

mankind with Five great Religions. The speaker made ample references to Avesta writings and used several Avesta, Pahalvi, Pazend, Persian and Arabic terms, words and phrases and explained their meanings and significance with astonishing lucidity.

His lecture could be divided into three parts. First was a prayer to Ahura Mazda, to all His Divine Forces and Agencies working in Nature and Creation, to the Prophet Zarathushtra and to the speaker's own Ustad (Guru). The second part was the subject proper and the third was an excellent summary of all the points previously propounded. The first part was full of devotion and spoken with earnestness and sincerity. The subject proper was sub-divided into intelligent and intelligible patterns and the stream of thoughts was flowing smoothly and strainlessly from one to another. The final summary sounded like an astute lawyer's masterly summing up of the whole matter.

He finished ..... For a few seconds everyone in the audience sat in spell bound silence and then broke into an applause.

The President K. R. Kama rose to speak. He expressed his great surprise and appreciation for the speech. He admitted openly that what Beheramshah spoke was "surely Zoroastrian philosophy." certain technical terms, however, were new; "we will therefore understand it better when we hear him more".

An Avesta scholar amongst the listeners stood up and respectfully posed a question to Kharshedji Kama, "Sir, with due respect, does Beheramshah possess any knowledge of Avesta and Pahalvi?"

The questioner meant to say that Beheramshah did not have any knowledge of the linguistic studies of Zoroastrian languages as were prevalent in Europe and copied in India.

The President Kharshedji replied in a sweet, sincere tone, "My dear Sir, we have merely translated the words; what more have we done? Have we been able at all to obtain explanations of the mystical writings ('Bhedī Lakhano')? I feel that this man Beheramshah has got something we do not have. Let us wait and see".

It was rather strange to observe a renowned scholar like Kamaji referring to mystical writings of Zoroastrianism. Those were the days when the study of Zoroastrianism was reduced to mere history, geography and linguistic exercises, and any reference to mysticism and spiritualism was to be deliberately avoided. Yet here was the Parsi pioneer of this very study who said to the effect that mere translations of words made by that study was not at all enough and the inner mystical meaning and explanations of the Zoroastrian writings were required to be revealed!



#### A FLASH-BACK

This was not the first time when Kamaji stressed the necessity of understanding the mystical in Zoroastrianism.

A few years back, on 13th February 1901, a public function was held in his honour and he was there presented with a Memorial Volume published as a tribute to his meritorious services to the Study of Zoroastrianism. While giving his thanksgiving speech Kamaji said:

"Sirs, much remains to be done to explore and and develop the Zoroastrian writings. So far, we have sown the seed and only a small plant has sprung up and leaves have begun to appear. Far ahead is the time when the flowers will bloom and fruits will grow. But if the efforts are continued, that time will come nearer stage by stage. Nobody has extended any step in the mystical ('Batein') philosophy of the Zoroastrian Religion nor has any body made any research therein.

At present we do not at all understand several things and it is highly essential to open them up and reveal them”.



Thus, before the advent of Beheramshahji, Kamaji had already felt the urgent need for the mystical side of Zoroastrianism. And that was why after Beheramshahji's speech, Kamaji replied from the chair, to the questioning scholar that mere linguistic translations were not enough; inner esoteric meanings and interpretations should be forthcoming; and that Beheramshah had something in that direction.



But who was this simple looking Parsi from Surat with education almost nil, who could create such a sensational impression on no less a person than Khurshedji Rustamji Kama, an internationally known personality in the field of oriental studies? How could this Parsi having no worldly learning and training speak with such fluency and such effectiveness on profound spiritual and scientific subjects and that too in a style flowing like a steady and smooth stream?

This was a phenomenon, a scientific fact, which required an investigation or at least an explanation.

Beheramshahji himself gave an explanation. He stated that he had, at his age of about 18 years, come into contact with certain Zoroastrian sages — (Abeds). They had taken him to their abodes and taught him the mystic side of Zoroastrianism, by certain unknown methods; the Knowledge was imparted to him not much by word of mouth, but by showering certain blessings on him and opening certain latent centres in him. That was the secret of his clear understanding and lucid exposition of profound spiritual Truths.

This miracle of Beheremshahji's life could not be proved directly; but the style of his speaking and the contents of his teachings provided convincing internal evidence.

**Kamaji's words spoken before the two meetings clearly indicate that Religion cannot be without mysticism; and what Beheramshahji expounded was the mysticism of Zoroastrian Religion.**

The Mystic Science is some-times called Ilm-e-Khsnoom. That, however, is not a special interpretation of Zoroastrianism. Ilm-e-Khsnoom is merely the other name for Zoroastrian Science and Mysticism, and means “Knowledge imparting spiritual pleasure”.

In this Journal, we shall put before you some glimpses of that Zoroastrian Knowledge.



References:—

The meeting where Kamaji was in the chair and Beheramshahji was the speaker is referred to and his words reported in an article by Manchershah P. Kekobad in 'Beheramshah Shroff Memorial Volume — (1930) page 253. The exact date of the meeting is not known; but the year was 1908-9. The words spoken by Kamaji at the Memorial Volume function on 13-2-1901 appear in the “Report of Zarthosti Din-ni Khol Karnari Mandli for the years 1898-99 and 1903-4”, published in 1909 (Preface, reporting the 27th sitting — page 17).

Kamaji was not only extremely interested in Beheramshahji's exposition, but used to put before his students and co-scholars the meanings of Avesta words as explained by Beheramshahji. This zeal of Kamaji for Ilm-e-Khsnoom is reported by Khudabux Edulji Poonegar and Sohrab Jamshedji Bulsara, two other eminent scholars of Zoroastrian linguistic Studies, at pages 150-1 and 726 of “Beheramshah Shroff Memorial Volume”.

