

CRITICAL STUDY OF ZOROASTRIANISM WITH REFERENCE TO INDIAN PARSIS

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Abstract *Zoroastrianism is rather a scientific and rational explanation of existence, of reality as a whole, of man's place in it, his duties while in this life and the high destiny which he can achieve by establishing his conduct in accordance with the eternal and immutable law of Nature which Zarathustra called the Law of Asha. Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest extant religions, "combining a cosmogonist dualism and eschatological monotheism in a manner unique among the major religions of the world". In this paper Zoroastrianism with special reference to Parsis in India is described.*

Keywords: *Zoroastrian, Parsi, Priesthood, Values, Fire, Deity, Religious Values*

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Parsi community in India, in particular their ability to live peaceably for generations in a foreign land, as a very small endogamous group, and not to lose their distinctive Zoroastrian culture and religion through assimilation, has been a remarkable achievement. All those characteristics which make Parsis special and different from other communities emanate from their religious beliefs. Zoroastrianism pervades the everyday lives of Parsis. John Hinnells, in debating the issue of conversions, raises the question "whether Zoroastrianism is a religion or racial marker?" It could well be argued that religion has traditionally been the principal driving force behind all major world communities. What makes Zoroastrianism somewhat different has been its open and worldly, even materialistic, doctrinal structure. Also of immense importance has been and still is its continual impact on the daily lives of its adherents. S. D. Nargolwala states in his essay, "Zoroastrianism and Parsis in India": Zoroastrianism is not a religion in the sense in which the term is commonly understood. Zoroastrianism does not contain the ingredients which are ordinarily supposed to form part of religion viz. dogmatism, compulsions from without, blind faith, the fear of punishment and the expectation of future reward as the impelling forces of our daily life. If one looks back through Parsi history in India, one can say without equivocation that their religion has been the driving force behind the community's determination to achieve worldly and material success. Expressions reflecting this abound

in their literature, for example, in the essay compiled by the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington, Jashan, "Getting to know Parsi Zoroastrians," it says: "As a practical guide in daily life, his prescription was very simple. Think good thoughts, speak good words, do good deeds". Nargolwala, later in the same essay quoted above, writes about the active, heroic aspects of the Zoroastrian religion reflecting the character of the people themselves - their zest for life and their confidence in their own strength. In answering the question, "What are the most important Parsi values?" the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington, Jashan, highlights truthfulness, charity, purity and hard work. Interestingly, although these are the values emphasised by Zoroastrians in contemporary USA, they closely follow the sentiments expressed by an eminent Parsi in India many decades earlier. J. R. B. Jeejeebhoy, writing in the Introduction to *Parsi Lustre on Indian Soil* by H. D. M. Darukhanawala, writes: They lived in purity of heart conscious of their strength, they lived humbly, soberly and happily, they forgot pride of self, ... they were honest, frugal, hard-working and persevering, they identified themselves with all the beneficial reforms, and far-reaching influences of Western culture, they kept their purse strings loose and lightened the burden of their neighbours, they swerved not, even in the midst of slaughter and fury, from their ancient creed. Whilst a bit self-congratulatory, this statement by Jeejeebhoy does indeed reflect the core values of the Parsis, as perceived by themselves, by academics such as Kulke and Hinnells and by eminent Indians, for example Mahatma Gandhi himself.

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PURITY ISSUES, INTERMARRIAGE AND CONVERSIONS

Although Parsis reject any suggestion that they are fire worshippers, much has been written about the importance of fire in the Zoroastrian religion. For example: The fire is a symbol of the In a Zoroastrian temple, the only symbol before which prayers are said is the fire which is tended by a priest five times a day.... It is a symbol of purity, for fire purifies everything. It also stands for the "inner fire" or divine spark in a human being". Whilst fire "at home is a constant reminder that we should always keep our "inner fire" alive", a consecrated fire in a temple, tended by a Zoroastrian priest is not as simple as the presence of a consecrated cross and has always created major logistical problems for the community. The emphasis on purity as a corollary to the importance of fire has two aspects to it, one physical and the other ethno-religious. The physical side is manifest in terms of individual behaviour - characteristics such as cleanliness in the home, clean clothes and good facilities for washing and bathing. This in turn has directly fuelled the constant drive towards high standards of living and the adoption of Western style behaviour. The ethno-religious aspect, with its requirement to maintain purity of race, has become the single most important and contentious aspect of modern Zoroastrianism. The controversy rages between various groups, each one holding radically differing opinions. There are the orthodox or conservative Parsis, who insist that, to be a Parsi, both mother and father must have been born Parsi. Thirdly are those who, still more liberal, believe that, provided just one parent is Parsi, the children can also be Parsis. These more liberal elements believe that relaxation of the purity rules is critical in order to stem the population decline. The conservatives, on the other hand, believe quite the reverse that any relaxation of the purity rules will lead to dilution and eventually to extinction. Linked to and very much a part of the purity debate is the Parsi tradition that to become a Parsi other than by birth as well as conversion to its religion, Zoroastrianism, is absolutely forbidden under any circumstances. Much has been written about the conversion debate with reasons against conversion ranging from the absolute necessity to preserve the racial and religious purity of descent, or a continuing fulfilment of the promise made by the first Parsi settlers not to proselytise, to the much more mundane reason of the threat of being overwhelmed by lower caste Hindus with consequential loss of assets through dilution of charitable funds. Furthermore, as Farrukh Dhondy suggests in *Bombay Duck*: "There is evidence to show that the first Parsi settlers had no women with them and must have intermarried with the natives, the Hindus, so the first claim of the Parsis to be racially pure is suspect". Palsetia suggests that conversion from Hinduism to Zoroastrianism went on up until the seventeenth century but cautions that

the historical evidence regarding such conversions is hard to assess. Certainly this whole subject has become a major point of communal divisiveness. Along with such scholars as Homji and Palsetia, there are several New Zealand Parsis who believe that ethno-religious intolerance is one of, if not the main, cause of the current Parsi population decline in India. There is one other critical aspect of religious purity which has traditionally been of major significance and this is the issue of defilement by the dead. According to Zoroastrian belief, the dead body is unclean and must be dealt with expeditiously and in accordance with Zoroastrian rites. Kulke explains the requirements very clearly, when he refers to the importance of Zoroastrian purification ceremonies: The Zoroastrians ask time and time again to take great care in keeping the body and the natural elements earth, fire and water pure from defilement especially through dead matter. This explains the function of the Towers of Silence (*Dakhmas*), upon which the deceased parsians are thrown because otherwise earth, fire or water - according to the method of burial - would be defiled by them. Only the special class of corpse bearers might handle corpses (contact with a corpse by anyone else involves complex, often lengthy purification ceremonies). Not only are funerary rites an essential part of the traditional Parsi purity rules they are also a defining point of difference between traditional Parsi practices in India and pragmatic alternatives, of necessity adopted by diaspora communities.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CHARITY

What makes Parsi charity unusual has been the construction of very large, powerful charitable trusts. Charitable gifting to these trusts and the use made of the trusts by individuals has in the past had a major influence on Parsi identity, both as individuals and collectively as a community. It still does to this day. To be a good Parsi involves, *inter alia*, giving away a portion of one's wealth to benefit others, not just within the Parsi community but to anyone in need. "Charity is not viewed as a means to earn merits in heaven; rather, it is viewed as a divine quality which, when imbibed by a human being, causes that person to 'instinctively' lend a helping hand to anyone in need". This emphasis on charity had a great influence on the development of the Parsi communities in Gujarat and Bombay, particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, providing the financial resources to establish their infrastructure, and on a wider plain, the infrastructure of Bombay. This included not only the *agiaris*, fire temples, and *dakhmas*, but hospitals, libraries, schools and technical colleges, water supplies and roadways, housing colonies, rest homes for the elderly, investment capital for the young, endowment policies for the disadvantaged and a myriad of charitable trusts. Charity was never confined to helping the Parsi community, "the

nature of Parsi charity was fundamentally born of the Zoroastrian life-affirming philosophy to contribute to the welfare of the world". Stories abound regarding donations to relieve suffering, not only throughout India but as far afield as Europe. Nor did it abate after Indian independence. Records show that the Tatas and Wadias donated over six million rupees to the Gandhi Memorial Fund and that the Tatas and Godrejs gave four million rupees and five hundred thousand rupees respectively to the Indian Defence Fund at the time of the Indo-Chinese war in 1962. During the nineteenth century, charity became strongly linked to power and politics, not only within the Parsi community but also as a means of gaining favour with the British rulers in India. Within the community itself, this linkage was to cause the community leadership to pass from the priests to the *Shetias*, as they were called - the leading merchant houses such as the Wadias, Readymoneys, Jeejeebhoy, Petits and Tatas. Most of the heads of these houses were also to acquire British knighthoods or even baronetcies in recognition of their charitable deeds. The Bombay Parsi Panchayat, after losing its political control over the community in the late nineteenth century, became the major charitable trust and the principal administrator of Parsi charity; it remains so up to the present time. As Palsetia says in his Epilogue: "Parsi charity to Parsi and non-Parsi objects continues to be a hallmark of Parsi identity in Bombay and India.... In Bombay, close to a thousand Parsi charities have been listed in the Directory of Public Trusts under the Public Trusts Act since 1950". But this emphasis on charity has proved to be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it has helped both individuals and organisations to establish themselves, survive and grow. But on the other hand it has also created an environment within which dependency has grown alarmingly. "The level of Parsi dependence on charity continues to grow, and cautionary tales and criticism continue to be heard regarding its liberal availability, its misuse, and enervation of Parsi initiative". There is also an increasing number of adverse comments regarding the management and lack of coordination of Parsi trusts. Palsetia goes so far as to suggest that all these charities need streamlining and refocusing to meet the modern needs of an aging population, under threat from external economic forces. Parsi charitable trusts, for better or worse, remain an important aspect of Parsi culture in India up to the present time.

THE PRIESTHOOD

One other important area where religion has had a major impact on the Parsi community has been the traditional role played by the Zoroastrian priesthood. The position of the priest through the centuries has been an ambivalent one. If one goes back to the earliest days, immediately after the arrival of the Parsis in India, the priests had a dominant

leadership position within the community. Priests were imported from Persia to maintain religious integrity and to provide a link back to their home country. These priests were not only community leaders and mediators but also the conduit through which contact was maintained between Persia and India. Priestly families were looked up to as a separate aristocratic group with hereditary rights to the priesthood for up to five generations. But in later centuries, although priestly families were still set apart, the role of the priest ceased to be all-powerful.⁸⁰ Firstly there was a major split between the priests at Sanjan and Nausari at the beginning of the eighteenth century over primacy of jurisdiction. Then in 1785 the Governor of Bombay, at the community's request, appointed a Commission to adjudicate over whether or not priest and laity could intermarry. The Commission confirmed that they could. Both these events weakened the position of the priesthood in the eyes of the laity. Furthermore, with the increasing education, wealth and power of the laity, priests were more and more regarded with disdain by the Parsi community at large, because they were often ill-educated and poorly paid. In the nineteenth century, as the Parsi communities began to flourish, mainly in Bombay but also in Gujarat, education became all-important, particularly amongst the wealthy merchants who could afford to pay for it. This was to result in the balance of power, previously held in the Anjumans and Panchayats by the priesthood, passing to the lay leaders, particularly the leading merchant families such as Jeejeebhoy, Tata, Modi and Wadia. Most of these were descended from priestly families but were not actual priests. As priests slipped down the ladder both economically and socially, so their relevance decreased and their position became largely ceremonial, although some attempts were made to revive their position through opening special schools to provide them with a better education. Declining relevance, together with the resultant lack of central religious guidance, was to have a major impact on the community. Matters such as adherence to or modifications of the purity rules increasingly divided both laity and the priesthood. For example, some priests were, and still are, prepared to be more adaptable than others on such matters as intermarriage, conversion and disposal of the dead. A bitterly-worded letter written in *Parsiana* gives an interesting modern-day comment on the priesthood: "Our priests have had their day pulling a fast one on a reverent laity, making a virtue of the incomprehensibility of rituals, the monopoly to which was their trump card". One development arising from the changing circumstances of the priesthood has been the increase in part-time priests.

SUMMARY

For Parsis, their Zoroastrian religion is both a religion and a racial marker of social identity. Not only has their religion

provided them with their distinctive identity but it is also still the driving force which can both unite and divide them. Charity remains a significant Parsi religious characteristic, an essential part of being and being seen to be a good Parsi. Major issues concerning intermarriage and conversion, specific to Parsis rather than all Zoroastrians, have their origins in the Parsi purity rules and remain the principal cause for debilitating schisms. This lack of cohesion can, in part at least, be traced back to the lack of any central religious authority and the weakness of the priesthood, although Kulke maintains there is a positive side to this weakness, when he says: "Thanks to their limited authority, the priests could not become a retarding factor in the process of social change". Some would say the same logic applies to their religion, while others such as Homi Homji would strongly disagree: "Our anomaly is that economically we are a free enterprise, capitalistic, liberal society but socially we are a rigid, conservative, no-changing religious group".

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