

The Navjote: A Zoroastrian Initiation

Navjote: The New Initiate of the Faith

The *navjote* ceremony is the initiation of a child into the Zoroastrian faith. During the ceremony the child is invested with the sacred undershirt (*sudreh*) and a special cord (*kūstī*). Upon being initiated, the young Zoroastrian bears a moral responsibility as well as a duty towards the upholding of the doctrine and principles of the Zoroastrian religion. The *navjote* of a child is usually performed between the ages of seven and eleven years. On the day of the *navjote*, the child is made to undergo the *nāhn*¹ ceremony in order to be in a state of ritual purity before the initiation.

The Journey Begins

The child sits facing east on a low wooden stool (*Guj.pāllō*) placed on the stage, and opposite him sits the officiating priest amongst at least four other priests who are invited to invoke blessings upon the child.

The *sudreh* is placed in the child's hands and all the priests begin to recite the *Yathā Ahū Vairyo* prayer. Next, the officiating priest alone recites the *Patēt Pashēmānī* upto the words *gētī mīnōānī* and immediately upon the words *ōkhē awākhsh*, the other priests join in to recite the remaining portion of the *Patēt* prayer. During this period the child is expected to pray as many *Ahunavars* as possible. The parents as well as the immediate family members of the child should also try and religiously participate in the ceremony by reciting additional prayers for the well-being of the child.

Sudreh: The Advantageous Path

The officiating priest and the child both stand up on the stage and face each other for the investiture ceremony. The *sudreh* is placed in an easy-to-wear position upon the child's hands which are held by the priest in order to maintain the all important ritual connection

known as *paiwand*. The priest leads the child in prayer and they both chant the *Din nō Kalmō*, "Confession of the Faith".

Next, both the priest and child together recite one *Ahunavar* and upon the word *shyuoth-ananām*, the priest ceremoniously makes the celebrant wear the sacred *sudreh*. The child is thus invested with the "garment of the good mind" which, it is believed, protects the wearer from extraneous evil influences.

Kūstī: The Direction Finder

The officiating priest positions himself behind the child so that they both face the same direction as the resplendent sun. The priest holds the mid-point of the *kūstī* in his left hand and the remaining length of the cord passes between the thumb and index finger of his right hand with the two ends of the *kūstī* hanging down loosely. The priest then recites aloud the preliminary portion of the *Ohrmazd Yasht*, followed by the small *Khshnūman* of Ohrmazd, "Unto Ahura Mazdā (who is) illustrious and glorious". He further invokes, "May satisfaction be for the worship, praise, contentment and fame. May the desirable *ahu*, the chief priest, speak to me; as the truthful learned judge *ratu* in accordance with righteousness made known to me".

Next, both the priest and child (still in *paiwand*) begin to recite aloud the *Ahuramazda Khōdāē* (*Kūstī Bastan*) prayer. Upon the words *manashnī*, *gavashnī*, *kunashnī* the priest, holding the *kūstī* together with the child, makes two loops which are interconnected. According to the oral tradition, the symbolism of this gesture is to remind the initiate of the two worlds, the physical and spiritual which are interdependent upon each other. Upon the words *Khshnaothra Ahurahē Mazdāō*, the priest encircles the *kūstī* twice around the child's waist and proceeds to complete the remaining portion of the *Ahuramazda Khōdāē* prayer.

The priest and child next recite two *Yathā Ahū Vairyōs* in the course of which the

¹ See Ch. 12 — "The Purification Rituals".

front reef knot is tied. He then encircles the *kūstī* once more around the child's waist and makes a reef knot at the back. This knot is tied whilst both the priest and the child recite aloud the *Ashem Vohū* prayer.

As the priest ties the front reef knot, he emphasizes twice upon the word *shyaothan-anām* (of actions) in order to indicate to the child the importance of good deeds required in order to fulfill a religious commitment entered into by the child. The rear reef knot is a symbolic confirmation of championing the cause of truth for its own sake as it leads to everlasting happiness. It is believed that the knot in front should remind the initiate that Ohrmazd is holy and matchless and that Zoroastrianism is the word of God; whilst the knot at the back should remind one that Zarathushtra is the prophet and that he revealed to his followers the religion of good thoughts, words and deeds.



Head of King Darius (c 6th century B.C.)

***Fravarānē*: The Declaration**

The child, as a newly confirmed initiate, next declares an oath of allegiance to the religion by reciting the *Fravarānē* in unison with the officiating priest. Thenceforth, the child is spiritually responsible for every thought, word and deed generated as he is endowed with a religious identity of his own. The tying of the *kūstī* may be likened to a ritual covenant that a Zoroastrian makes before God.

In the *Fravarānē*, the child firmly affirms an allegiance specifically to the Zoroastrian religion, for he declares, "...which, of all the religions that have flourished, and are likely to flourish, is the greatest, the best, the most excellent, and which is the religion given by Ahura Mazdā to Zarathushtra. To Ahura Mazdā I ascribe all good. This is the profession of the Mazdā worshipping religion." Both the officiating priest and child then sit down, whereupon the priest in a suppressed tone prays a benediction from *Yasna* 12.

***Dōa Tan-Dōrōstī*: The Final Blessing**

The officiating priest once again stands up and gives the final benediction for the health, wealth and well-being of the child by reciting the *Dōa Tan-Dōrōstī* prayer; whilst doing so he periodically showers grains of rice upon the child's head, as a symbolic gesture to ensure prosperity and plenty in the life of the newly initiated Zoroastrian.

Upon the completion of this prayer by the officiating priest, the other priests recite aloud the *Dōa Tan-Dōrōstī* once again, for the well-being of the child's parents or those who chose to sponsor the *navjote*. At the end of the ceremony, the priests are given a monetary gift as a token of appreciation for their services.



Additional Points to Bear in Mind

1. Why do the Zoroastrians wear the *sudreh* and *kūstī*?

"To wear the *sudreh* and *kūstī* is an outward sign of being a Zoroastrian. To wear a cord as sign of membership is an Indo-Iranian custom for men, developed in Zoroastrianism for women as well." (*Per.Riv.* p 23).

It is stated that moving around without a *sudreh* and *kūstī* is considered to be a sin. It is construed to be "walking around naked" (*Ph. wishād dwārishnīh*). (*Shnsh.* 4.8).

"At night when they lie down, the shirt and girdle are to be worn, for they are more protecting for the body and good for the soul." (*Shnsh.* 4.13).

"A token and sign of worship is of great use, and a great assistance therein is this belt which is called *kūstī*, that is tied on the middle of the body." (*Dd.* 39.7, *SBE* Vol.18 p 124). Evil is driven away when the girdle girds the body. A protection envelopes around the human being.

He who wears the *kūstī* is "...wise and is reminded of the Creator...thereby the power of the demons is more shattered, the way to sin becomes more obstructed, and the will of the demons greatly lessened." (*Dd.* 39.20, *Per.Riv.* p 24).

2. What should the *sudreh* be made of?

The *sudreh* should be made of a natural vegetable fibre like cotton. Silk, brocade or hide are not appropriate materials. (*Nīrangistān* p 163b - 164a, *Shnsh.* 4.4 - 8, 10.1).

3. What should the *kūstī* be made of?

The *kūstī* may be made of the wool of a goat, or the hair of a camel. It cannot be made of any synthetic fibre, nor of silk or brocade. (*Nīrangistān* p 163b - 164a, *Shnsh.* 4.4 - 8, 10.1).

4. Which direction should one face whilst doing the *kūstī*?

When doing the *kūstī*, one should face the direction of the sun, moon or a lamp. If performed at twelve noon, or in darkness, one should turn south - the direction of the abode of Rapithwin, the Lord of Ideal Time. (*Per.Riv.* p 28).

5. How should the *kūstī* be tied?

The *kūstī* should be tied around the waist over the *sudreh*, or one is not regarded as a soldier of God. It is a sin to walk around without a *kūstī*. The *kūstī* must be tied over the *sudreh*, in order that the direction finder may be symbolically guided by the garment of the good mind. (*Per.Riv.* p 23).

The *kūstī* should be three fingers loose around the waist; the *sudreh* should be four fingers loose on either side. (*Shnsh.* 4.2, 5).

6. The symbolism of the *sudreh*

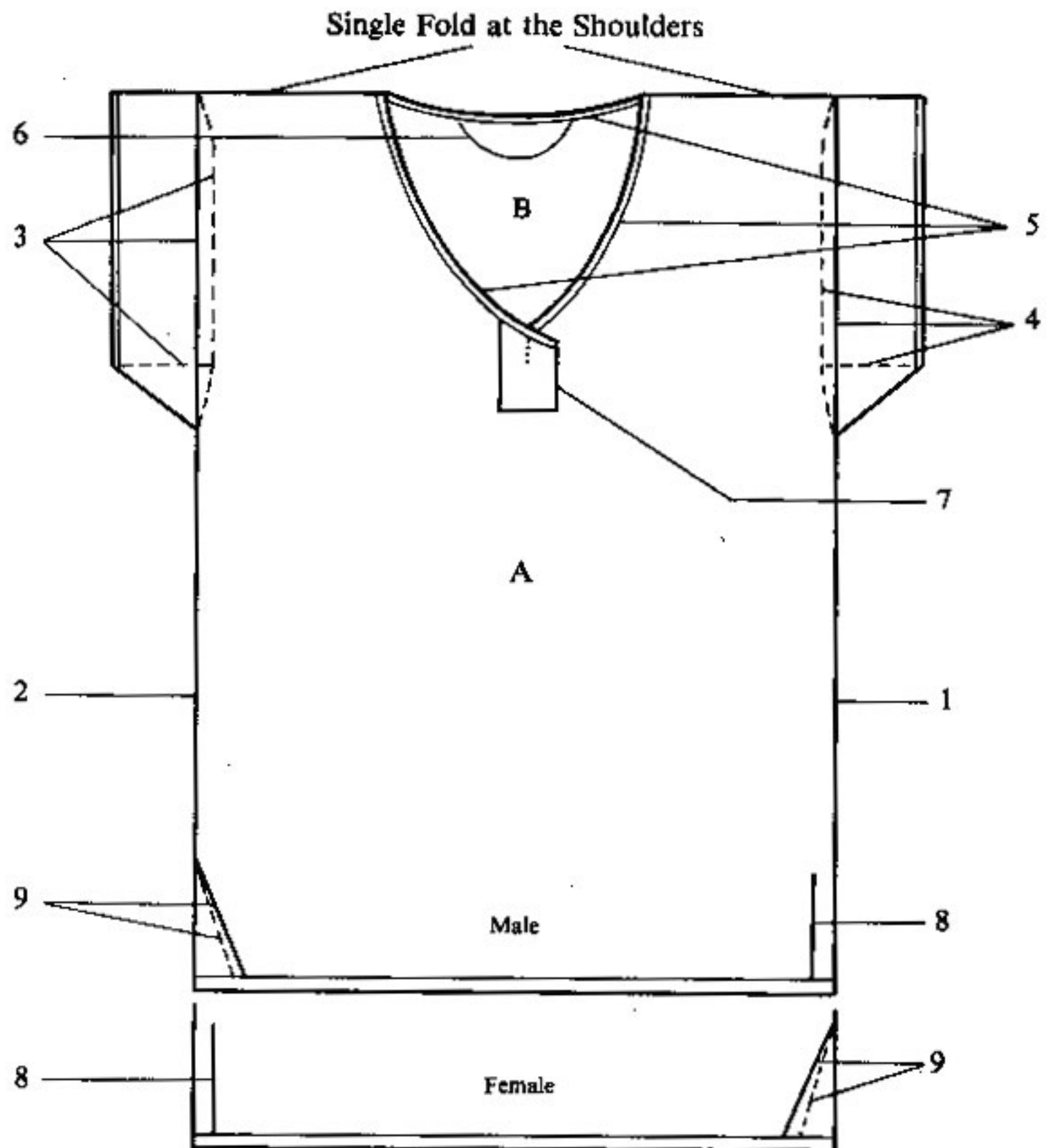
The *sudreh* should be white, as white represents purity of thought and so influences the mind to be good. "...the shirt is needful to be perfectly pure white and single,..." The *sudreh* should be of one fold, "...because Vohu Manah also is thus the one creature who was first..." (*Dd.* 40.2, *SBE* Vol.18 p 133).

The *sudreh* symbolically helps man to tap two types of wisdom :

- i) Instinctive wisdom (*Av. āsna khratu*)
- ii) Acquired wisdom (*Av. gaoshō srūta khratu*).

The *sudreh* being made of cotton fibre, represents the plant world; whilst the *kūstī* being woven from wool, represents the animal world.

THE SUDREH



The nine parts of the *sudreh* (advantageous path) may be seen to represent symbolically the 9000 year *Gumēzishn* period which every Zoroastrian, allegorically, is deemed to live. It is within this period that man experiences the processes of birth and growth, which will eventually result in the cumulative creative evolution of mankind.

The front of the *sudreh* represents the past that a Zoroastrian has lived and experienced. The back of the *sudreh* represents the future which a Zoroastrian is going to experience while man, the wearer, represents the present as he is symbolically juxtaposed between the past and the future.²

- 1,2 - side seams
- 3,4 - sleeve seams
- 5 - neck seam
- 6 - *girdo* - the storehouse of potential good deeds
- 7 - *girēbān* - the pocket of good deeds
- 8 - straight *tiri* - the reminder of imperfection in the physical world
- 9 - triangular *tiri* - converging to a point
- A - front of the *sudreh*
- B - back of the *sudreh*

2. The symbolism of the *sudreh* has been compiled through the information gleaned from the oral tradition.



7. The symbolism of the *kūstī*

The *kūstī* symbolizes the girding of all that is good. "...all its luminaries are girded by the girdles, as the girdle of the omniscient Wisdom has girded the all-intelligent angels." (*Dd.39, SBE Vol.18 p 126*).

"The belt should remind one of the purity of thought, whose dwelling is the heart..." (*Dd. 39, SBE Vol.18 p 125*). Purity of word and deed follows, if one remembers the significance of the girdle all the time.

The girdle is tied over the garment of Vohu Manah whose source; it is believed, is derived from Wisdom. (*Dd.39, SBE Vol.18 p 128*).

The *kūstī* is encircled thrice around the waist, symbolically reminding a Zoroastrian to generate good thoughts, words and deeds at all times.

According to the oral tradition, the symbolism of the woven *kūstī* is as follows :

- i) The 72 strands from which the *kūstī* is woven, represent the 72 chapters of the *Yasna*.
- ii) The 6 sections (of 12 strands each) represent the 6 *Amesha Spentas*. (The Bounteous Spirit, who heads the heptad of the *Amesha Spentas*, dwells in man).
- iii) The 12 strands represent the 12 months of the year, as well as the 12 words of the *Ashem Vohū* prayer.
- iv) The 6 tassels (3 at each end) represent the 6 *Gāhāmbārs* linked to the 6 creations of God. (Fire, the 7th creation, is linked to the festival of *NōRōz*).
- v) The 24 strands in each tassel end represent the 24 chapters of the *Visperad*, "All the Lords".
- vi) The hollow *kūstī* represents the two worlds – the physical and the spiritual.