

Life and Works of Dastoorji Firoze Kotwal

Dastur Dr. Kotwal: An Interview By Dr. Shernaz Cama



Dastur Dr. Firoze Kotwal and Dr. Shernaz Cama

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Dastur Dr. Firoze Kotwal is a High Priest of the Parsi Zoroastrians of India and perhaps their greatest scholar in the Priestly tradition. From the age of 19 he has spent many hours each day studying Zoroastrian Manuscripts, particularly at the Meherjirana Library, Navsari, Gujarat. He has been Advisor to the UNESCO Parzor Project in its Module of Manuscript preservation. In this Interview, he talks about his life and his work.

The Priestly Background:-

My forefather's whole line was filled with excellent Priests, of the Navsari Bhagaria clan, who understood rituals very well. When there was any problem of rituals, priests from all over India would write to the Navsari Anjuman. In my genealogy, I am the 29th descendant of Neryosangh Dhaval, the great Sanskrit Scholar Priest of the 12th century. We have a printed Vanshawali of 1897 of the whole Bhagaria group of Priests and from that genealogical chart; we can trace the line of any Bhagaria Priest in the world.

My grandfather's grandfather and may be his grandfather too, for some period lived in Surat, since Pindaris (dacoits) used to attack Navsari. They moved to Surat with the sacred fire of the Atash Behram and then stayed there for several decades before returning to Navsari.

On links with Iran

There are some Priests in Sharifabad near Yazd. The last Priest of Iran to keep up the old traditions was Khodad Nevyosanghi . As a boy he was trained in the first batch of student priests, Navars, at the Dadar Madressa. I saw him in Iran, still taking baeshrum with gloves and we kept in touch during his lifetime, he even sent photos to me. There is no more following of the high liturgical rituals left in Iran.

On his Education

I have had a love for rituals from childhood. I decided, I can either be a good chef or a good full fledged Priest, you have to choose what you want to be. I used to go to Navsari but trained at the Cama Athornan, at Andheri in Mumbai. My Principal was Dasturji Dabu. From 1947 when I was admitted, I kept the bond for the next 30 years. First as student, then student teacher, then researching Avesta – Pahlavi as major subjects. I was the only member of the batch to take up research. It is hard work, younger people want freedom. Work as a researcher has to be part of a very disciplined life.

Avesta Pahlavi Studies

There are only 14 letters in Pahlavi and most vowels are absent. Yet every difficulty can be overcome with practice. I like Pahlavi more than Avesta. I read it everyday, so I am used to the difficulties, I believe that practice makes one perfect. My Avesta - Pahlavi teachers in school were the Head Master Framroze Patel. I took it up subsequently at Bombay University since Mr. Homi Chacha of the Madressa was attached to Bombay University. At University we were affiliated to St. Xaviers College. Dastur Hormazdiyar Mirza and Dr. Jamshed Unwalla were the great scholars of that time. Dr. Unwalla knew 15 to 20 languages. He had taught in Paris for 10 years. Scholars must feel a love for their subject in the heart and not just work for a degree. But I can't blame people in India; there is no opening for research in this subject.

I did my M.A. and PhD. under Dasturji Dr. Mirza. My PhD Topic was a Pahlavi Text "**Supplementary Texts to The Shayest – ne- Shayest**". The text is concerned with what is proper and what is seen as improper in the religion. It has many admonitions. It explains the meaning of each of the 30 days in the calendar. It gave me in-depth understanding of our rituals. There was no external examiner in India, so the University sent my thesis to Father Menasce in Paris. He approved of it and I received my PhD, from Bombay University.

Thereafter I wrote to the great scholar at Berkeley University, Prof. Henning. He liked it very much, but felt it needed revision. I needed to understand the Middle Iranian dialects, to help in my Pahlavi studies. Prof. Henning's health was failing; he could not take up any research students. It was he who sent my thesis to Prof. Mary Boyce and asked her to guide me.

Prof. Boyce was delighted since I was a full-fledged Priest. She could understand the rituals from me. Recently a Feitschrift Volume is being prepared for presentation to me, it is being published in America and edited by Prof. Jamshed Choksey. Jamshed asked Prof. Boyce to give her impressions of me for this publication. She has known my work from 1966 to 2006. So she wrote my biography and finished it just before her death, putting aside all other publications.

On Prof. Mary Boyce, Prof. Emeritus SOAS, London

Ever since I knew her, from 1966 at SOAS, due to her bad back she was always on a sofa and did all her remarkable work lying down. I worked both at SOAS and at her house from 10 am to 4 pm. I worked for 6 hour daily with her. She taught me and then would ask me questions on rituals. I translated pieces on many subjects, in Old Gujarati and Gujarati. She taught me a great deal. She always said 'Firoze you must have 2 things in writing, clarity and brevity'.

The Financial Problems of Research

I was financed in 1966 by the Bombay Parsi Panchayat, where Lady Hirabai Jehangir was the President and by the Wadia Trust. I required Pounds 14,000 for my research. After the devaluing of the Rupee, I had great difficulty in raising finances and was still running short of funds. Lady Jehangir asked me "Dr. Kotwal is there anything else you require?" I told her I needed 7000 Pounds still. She took out her chequebook, wrote the cheque and gave it to me; this was her encouragement and generosity.

Life In Europe

I lived at the European Hostel at Taunton Hall. My room was on the ground floor. Prof. Boyce had arranged the room through the Dean of the Hostel, for the whole year. I loved winter. Everyone else would be huddled in gloves and coats but I enjoyed it. The Warden would comment 'Dr. Kotwal, you are always cheerful even in this weather'.

I visited the British Museum; saw Iranian history preserved there. I had the great fortune of visiting Cambridge, where I met Sir Harold Bailey at Queens College. Sir Harold Bailey gave a dinner in my honor. I drank beer out of a Viking horn. I also visited All Soul's College, Oxford where I stayed with Prof.. Zaehner for 3 days. Zaehner's approach is very different. He was a staunch Christian. He was the most brilliant scholar on Zurvanism.

In Pahlavi Scholarship, Prof. Boyce remained unique. Her approach was not just Philology but also tradition. She told me, "**You should not discard tradition, it has many clues to provide philology**".

In her article she has written 'for me, Dr. Kotwal was a bonus". I was a student but also a teacher to Prof. Boyce. I translated old documents of the Parsi Prakash for her and documents from the Meherjirana Library. There was a constant crunch for money but I lived a frugal life of work only. One day Prof. Boyce gave me an honorarium in an envelope. I declined to accept, she insisted. I said, 'I cannot take anything from a teacher'.. She was so considerate that she made the University of London give me Pounds 150 and I used it to travel and meet international scholars across Europe.

She even drew up a Timetable and sent me to Switzerland for a vacation at St. Moritz as well as Lucerne; she wanted me to see both the mountains and the lakes and gave me a complete holiday.

I returned to Paris and met Father Menasche. I also met Prof. Phillippe Gignoux at Paris.

I traveled to Germany to meet the late Prof. Jehangir Tavadia's wife. She, a German knew I was from Navsari and helped me make contacts. In Germany I visited Hamburg University, Gettingen and then traveled to Copenhagen. There I met Prof. Vahman, an Iranian Bahai at the Embassy. He helped me go to Iran. Prof.. Asmussen was also in Copenhagen; he remained a jovial friend till he died in 2004. I then went to Oslo University, Norway to meet Prof. Morgenstierne, Prof. of Iranian languages. All these scholars were philologists.

Prof. Menasche however understood tradition and had translated the Pahlavi Texts including the **Dinkard**.

I had heard about the importance of Copenhagen from Prof. Boyce. She wanted my thesis made perfect. She even helped by sending all my hand written papers to her sister – in – law at Taunton to type and arrange. She had then sent my whole Thesis to Sir Harold Bailey at Cambridge. When he read it he offered, "It should be published ". Prof. Boyce wrote to Prof.. Kaj Barr, at Copenhagen who took the thesis to the Copenhagen Foundation.

Every bottle of Carlsberg or Touberg Beer sold provides 1 ore to the Copenhagen Foundation. This money is used to publish work of outstanding scholars anywhere in the world.

The team examined and approved my thesis. I received my PhD in 1966. In 1966-67 I went to the UK and revised it with Prof. Boyce, by 1969 it was published in Copenhagen.

Return To India

On my return I had no Panthak (Family Priestly Organization) . So I worked at the Cama Madressa, Andheri as a teacher and then became Head Priest simultaneously of the Tata Agiary, Bandra. As Priest of Tata Agiary I worked till 10am everyday looking after the Fire. The morning Prayers of Havan Gah I would perform the Boi of the Havan Gah at 6am. I would then return to the Madressa. At 3 pm I returned to the Tata Agiary and would perform all the ceremonies like the Uthamna, Lagan, (Weddings), or Navjotes.

All my life I work for 6 hours continuously in the daytime. 3 hours in the morning, lunch, a rest, then 3 hours in the afternoon. After 40 years of this routine, I have completed the **Herbadestan/Nirangestan**. The 4th and last volume is to be published this year in Paris.

The Most Important Work That I have achieved

The **Nirangestan** was written in Sasanian times in Avesta and translated into Pahlavi with glosses. It is very difficult to understand. The more difficult a work is, the more I enjoy it. My mind pores over a word, even when I am resting; I sometimes suddenly get a flash of illumination and get up to see that my intuition is often correct.

I have not inherited any Manuscripts from my own family. But I have been presented many by private collectors. My most precious Manuscript is from Dr. Unwalla's collection. It was given to me by Dastur Meherjirana. It is in the Devnagiri Script, 450 years old and was written in Ankleswar. It is correct but ironic that this Ms will now go back to the MRL as I have promised Parzor.

My Faith

There are plenty of Nirangs or Incantations used in our Faith but these are mainly in Pahlavi or Pazend. I put more emphasis on the Avesta Prayers. I can recite the Behram Yasht fully by heart; after all I used to recite it daily in my Fire Temple.

What is the meaning of our Prayers?

No one understands, even scholars can't understand a dead language but we have to not just look at etymology. Our attempt at understanding the Avesta is that it is the words of a Holy person and has value in its vibrations. A translation is not so important in rituals, the holy vibrations of man in communication with God, the word of sages that is very important when we recite the **Manthras**.

Our prayers are called **Manthravani**. The most holy **Gathas** or the words of Zatrathushtra himself are Hymns. Gatha means to sing Hymns. The ancient Gathas were chanted in groups of Priests. We have references to this in the texts.

Music, especially in the Madressa, Classical India music was very important. We learnt on the harmonium. Minochaer Vimadalal of Andheri used to teach us **Bhajans, Parsi geet** and **monajats**. The Monajat tradition of chanting and communicating with God is now almost lost..

Chanting is important for priestly training in that it gives the correct enunciation. Also when you recite and sing, you remember it very well.

Importance of the Meherjirana Library Navsari

The MRL has different types of work: Avesta, Pahlavi, Gujarati, Old Gujarati, Pazend, Arabic and Urdu even Kashmiri Manuscripts.

There are so many questions and answers in the **Rivayets**, they explain our rituals and our Faith. Some of these works are very old and very precious. The first Dastur Merherjirana's father's Manuscript is also there. He was Rana Jaisanghi, his Ms of the **Jamaspi** in Pazend is there, it is over 500 years old.

The **Jamaspi** is a work about the future. Jamasp was a soothsayer in the time of Zarathushtra and all the forecasts of the future are attributed to him in later times.

What is Truth and what is the True religion?

In the Madressas our Parsi Priests are not educated like the Christians. The calling of a man to religion and his acting like the Shepherd of the flock is not engrained at the Madressa.

I believe that Goodness is Universal. It is not the prerogative of only priests. Our religion is the religion of the good life, there is no monopoly on Goodness.

My most spiritual experience

As a full fledged Priest when I perform the high liturgies in the Navsari Vadi Dare Meher, (Fire Temple) in Dastur Vad, when I am in the **Pavi** (Consecrated space) I feel elevated. I was the first Priest to perform the exalted **Nirangdin** ceremony after my PhD, in 1966.

The **Hamkar** Priestly ceremony is also very moving. It is mainly performed in Navsari.

It means a gathering of those who work to keep the religion alive. Hamkar comes from the word **Ham**-Together, **Kaar**- Work. Those Priests who work together share a consecrated meal, in a very special environment.

How can the NMM help the Zoroastrians?

We have lost far too much, both in our community and in our textual Ms collections. A lot has gone abroad where it has been at least looked after, studied and preserved. But our traditions must continue in India we must have a chair of Iranian Studies as there are in foreign Universities. If it is well endowed, we can appoint good scholars, bring in some of the great foreign scholars to train our researchers and priests on modern lines. That will help keep the tradition alive in India.

At the Cama Athornan, my alma mater, there are only 2 students left. We should use these institutions for the good of the priests, the community and the traditions of our country. Our traditions are shared with the rest of India. I haven't studied Sanskrit officially but we have all to study Sanskrit because our **Aashirvaad** (blessings) are in Sanskrit. I can recite it like a Pundit. When we went to meet Chief Minister Narendra Modi at Udvada, I gave him a shawl and recited an

Aashirvaad and he was most surprised and pleased.

I know Avesta, Pahlavi, Pazend, Persian, Gujarati, English, Sanskrit-7 languages.

Future of the Priesthood

I believe in the old type of training for priests. They must learn, by heart, the entire Avesta, the Yasna, Visperad, Yashts all 72 Ha's or chapters. Their training must also explain the meaning of their work. Then they will perform the ceremonies with interest and scholarship.

We must have young Priest to study languages and be disciplined scholars. We also need original scholarship.

Message

The NMM interest is a very good omen for our community. I hope that with this not only will our Ms be preserved, but the knowledge embedded in them will be diffused all over the world. If we get international facilities in Navsari, then any researcher can come and visit, our culture, both Zoroastrian and Indian will be protected, preserved and propagated.

Lecture – Brief Synopsis:

Dastur Firoze Kotwal in his learned lecture on Zoroastrian Manuscripts explained how the oral Avesta was converted to the Avestan Script in the period 531-578 A.D. in the time of King Noshirwan Adil. So the Bronze Age words are now based on the Pahlavi alphabet. Though we have no proof, Avestan was possibly closest to Aramaic. It is stated that there were 12000 chapters written in letters of gold giving the entire teachings of Zarathushtra. These were destroyed in 331 B.C. when Alexander of Macedonia killed Darius III.

Greek and Roman culture have borrowed greatly from Persia.

In India, he explained, using Sanskrit etymology, the Parsis have preserved the Holy Fire without letting it go out for 1000years, from the landing at Sanjan till today when it burns at the Iranshah Atash Behram at Udwada. It has been preserved with the lifeblood of the priests.

Dastur Kotwal explained a text and colophon found at the Meherjirana Library. The greatest collection in India is to be found in this library at Navsari. He also told the audience that the oldest existing Zoroastrian Ms is to be found in Copenhagen. He has studied Ms at Copenhagen, London, Oxford and Paris as well as in other parts of the world.

He emphasized the importance of preserving books and Ms, quoting 'The words of a book'. He also told us how there is so little respect for Ms in India, that sometimes hand written Ms are sold to raddiwallas and have been rescued from grocers shops.

The Ms E1, which he discussed, belonged to Dastur Erachji Meherjirana, it was written in 1601 A.D. in two parts, the 1st part in Navsari by Shahpur Dastur Hoshang Asa and the 2nd part in Khambat, (Cambay) by Moviandan Shahpur. It is in 400 folios and is indispensable for both priests and laymen.

Dastur ji Kotwal is about to complete his Magnum Opus, which will be published shortly abroad.

Courtesy : Cyrus Bulsara