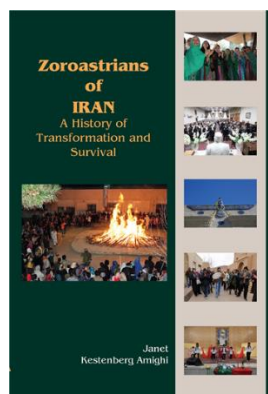


Zoroastrians of IRAN

A History of Transformation and survival

Based on a book wrote by : Janet Kesternberg Amighi



INTRODUCTION

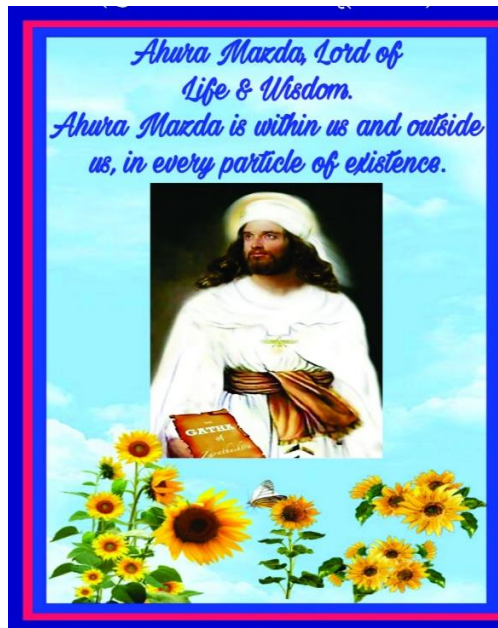
This book is an extensive revision and expansion of Writer's, 1990 book "The Zoroastrians of Iran: Conversion, Assimilation and Persistence". It was based on details collected by `writer while living in Iran from 1971 to 1978.

In her present book, Ms. Janet Kesternberg Amighi has not only added four new chapters, but chapters of the earlier book have been updated seeking answers to the original questions : How have the Zoroastrian community changed, responded and adapted in remarkably varied conditions in Iran?

Apart from her interest in making research as anthropologist in the demographic decline of India's Zoroastrian Parsis, the author had the advantage of having married a man who happened to be a Zoroastrian of Iran himself. She did a pretty good job of dropping many of her American biases and seeing the world through the multiple eyes of Zoroastrians and their multivocal stories which hopefully tells more than one side of most stories.

The author has made sincere efforts to describe the Zoroastrian religion from contemporary view followed by the sections in this book that focuses on the harsh conditions experienced by Zoroastrians in 19th century Iran. It concludes with a current situation of growing secularism, modernization and theocratic lifestyles adapted by Zoroastrians in Iran.

FACES OF THE ZOROASTRIAN RELIGION: THE GATHAS



The religion of Zoroastrianism is derived from the name of the prophet, called Zarathustra in the Avesta and Zartosht in modern Persian. Based on linguistic data, the time of Zarathustra was sometime between 1000 to 1700 BCE, roughly 3000 to 3700 years ago. Zoroastrianism was first preached possibly in northeast Iran, present day Afghanistan.

With the Arab conquest of Persia in the seventh century and the subsequent years, much of the Avesta texts were lost. The copies of the Avesta texts that exist today have been traced back to a recompiled manuscript of post conquest times. Zoroastrianism has persisted solely on the inherent power of recitation of Avesta texts for more than a thousand years.

DIVINITIES AND THE LATER AVESTA

In the Gathas, the Amesha Spentas, Vohu Manah, Asha, Khshathra, Armaiti, Haurvatat and Ameretat are named as abstract qualities of Ahura Mazda which is only visible through these qualities. In addition to the Ameshas, the Yazatas (Yazads) are introduced in the Yasna of the seven chapters as "Being worthy of worship". The Fravashis are also mentioned in Yasna as the inner guardian spirit or soul.

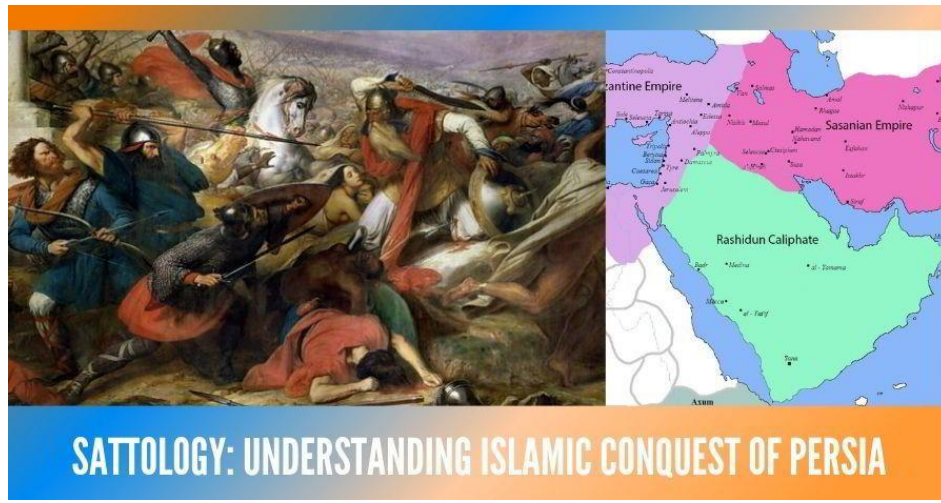


The old Avestan Gathas and Haptanghaiti were inserted in 72 Yasnas. The Yashts are 21 hymns of praise of individual divinities, such as Mithra (Mehr) and Fravardin. A compilation of the Vendidad written in Avestan is much like a dialogue between Zarathustra and Ahura Mazda for the maintenance of righteous living in pursuit of happiness in a world constantly threatened by pollution and chaos from the demonic powers.



Based on her semi-formal interviews focused on the social and cultural aspects of the Zoroastrian community, the author categorized their sense of Zoroastrian identity and characteristics into six groups. (1) Religious Authorities (2) Modern day reformists (3) Ritual oriented traditionalists (4) Defensive Responses (5) Comparisons with Islam and (6) Regional Differences. Despite this Zoroastrians are united in their focus on "Good thoughts, Good words and Good deeds".

: FROM THE ARAB CONQUEST TO THE QAJARS : **1200 YEARS IN A FEW WORDS**



After the Arab conquest of Persia, the majority of Zoroastrians converted to Islam. In Yazd and Kerman provinces, they persisted in the Zoroastrian faith and strongly resisted conversion to Islam. Some went to China and established Zoroastrian community there while many traveled to India and blended themselves like Sugar in milk in western parts of India, known as the Parsis. Although the religion shifted to a defensive mode to protect sacred knowledge and materials by gathering verbal texts and transcribing them in the Pahlavi language.

After three chapters on the Zoroastrian religion and early history, the book then turns to conditions of Zoroastrians in Iran from the 19th to the 21 centuries, including: the harsh persecutions experienced by Zoroastrians in the 19th century, Zoroastrian participation in Iran's Constitutional Revolution, community growth in Tehran, and the significant improvements under the Pahlavi shahs when Zoroastrian pre-Islamic history was valorised.

ZOROASTRIAN LIFE IN 19TH CENTURY YAZD AND KERMAN



Looking into the details of Zoroastrianism life in the second half of the 19th century, it is shocking to read about the segregated and humiliated lives of Zoroastrians in Yazd and Kerman. The Indian Parsi Traveler Manekji Limji Hataria wrote in 1865,

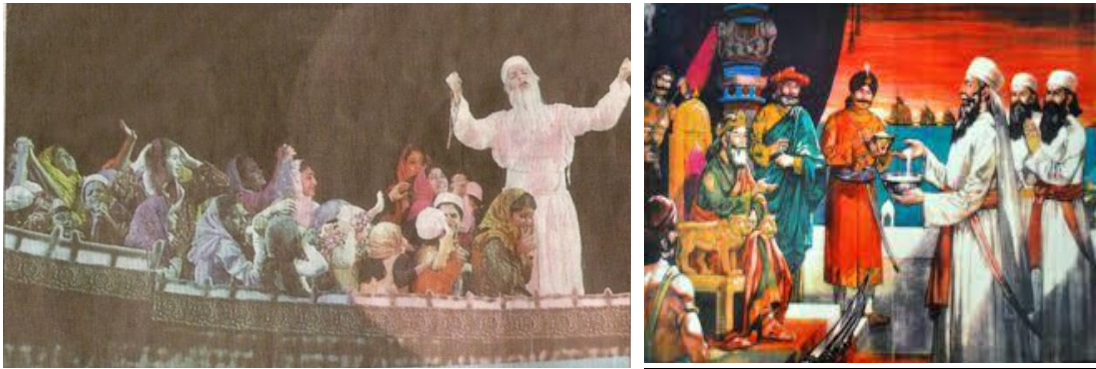


"I found the Zoroastrians to be exhausted and trampled so much that even no one in the world can be more miserable than them".

Their lives in Iran were of little value, they could be murdered and assaulted and their girls, women kidnapped, raped and converted to Islam, with no consequences. The most persistently burdensome was the poll tax - the jizya. They responded to such hardships and pressures in many ways, from escape to caves, emigration, conversion and perseverance. It is not surprising that the Zoroastrians went from being an empire to about 7000 in the mid-19th century.

Despite all the sensible reasons to convert, yet a small Zoroastrian community persisted in Yazd and Kerman and survived. Their act of family solidarity, maintenance mechanism of their cultural boundaries, their distinct elements of personality and social customs are some key contributions to holding firm in their faith in Zoroastrianism.

THE COMING OF THE PARSIS

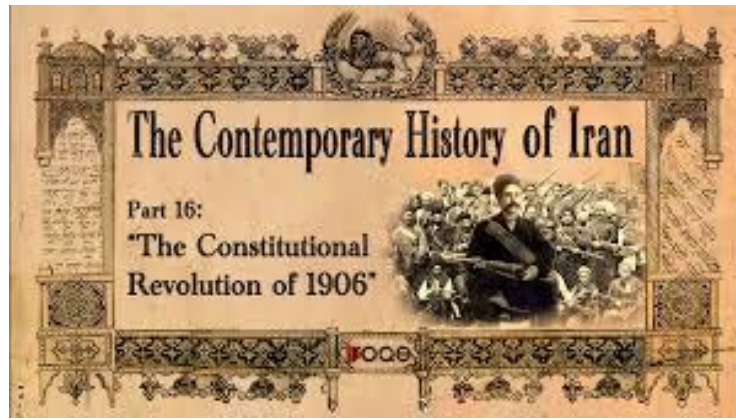


Based on some research, the author suggests that during the 8th to 10th centuries, a group of Zoroastrians left Iran for Western India by motivation of trade opportunities in India and not because of Muslim persecution. They were called the Parsis in India. They sent emissaries to Iran between the 15th and 18th centuries with a series of questions on Zoroastrian rituals and theology. The Society for Amelioration had appointed Manekji Limji Hataria as their representative to Persia in 1854. He remained for almost 40 years in Persia to improve conditions for his beleaguered co-religionists.

: BEYOND THE PARSIS : OTHER SOURCES OF REFORM AND PROGRESS IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY.

Although the second half of the 19th century were still very challenging for non-Muslims in Iran, the 20th century would usher in some considerable improvements. A series of positive events and influences began to converge for Zoroastrians there. By the late 19th century, Zoroastrian community was faced with conversion to Bahatism instead of Islam. The democratic policies adopted by Bahatism with acceptance of mandatory education, equality for all men and women and financial aid attracted Zoroastrians for conversion to this religion.

EARLY 20TH CENTURY TEHRAN AND THE CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION



The constitutional revolution of the 20th century would give Zoroastrians an opportunity to fight for democracy. They involved themselves in the constitutional revolution of 1905. This era had formed many community councils (Anjomans). The Zoroastrians of Tehran also created their Anjoman which focused on promoting their religion and practices. Avesta education, refurbishing Fire temples and administration of charities. The Zoroastrians emerged with improved legal rights in these hard years by supporting the revolution.

THE ERA OF REZA SHAH AND ENHANCED ZOROASTRIAN STATUS



Begun as an army sergeant, Reza Khan was pushed by the mujtahids to become the next Shah of Iran by 1922. Reza Shah's pushback against imperialism and centralization of power was supported by the merchants. His secularized efforts took the judicial and educational systems out of the hands of the Muslim clergy which reduced discriminatory attitudes in the nation. The western style education system was introduced, women were encouraged to work in the public sphere.

In 1928, ethnic clothing was banned for males, followed by ban on hijab in 1935-36. Wine shops and public music performances were opened. He renamed Persia "Iran" and Iran's Aryan heritage was reminded to the world.

Reza Shah created national holidays around Zoroastrian festivals Nowruz and Mehregan. He opened many doors to Zoroastrians including high military posts and accepted them as real Iranians. Despite Reza Shah's favoritism toward Zoroastrians, there was no easy shedding of caution in the provinces. They knew that persecution could re-emerge at any time and thus sought to strongly build up their own community. They became more attuned to social mores and encouraged themselves towards many reforms. By 1935, they had agreed to close their dakhmeh (tower of silence) with a determination that it was contrary to Zarathustra's Gathas. Another reform was to adopt the Fasli (Seasonal) calendar in 1939. The use of nirang (consecrated bull's urine) also became rare with a good thought that having a pure heart was cleansing enough to one's soul. The practice of sag-did (bringing dogs to view a corpse) was also rejected as inconvenient, unscientific and not found in the Gathas.

In 1941, Reza Shah was abdicated by the British Allied Forces and sent into exile. He died soon, leaving his young Son to continue as a nominal leader without any powers for the next 13 years. The Zoroastrian community was hit hard during World War II. The new era in 1949 revised the 1906 constitution which raised Islamic activism in Iran. Attacks on non-Muslims again increased in the provinces.

: THE MOSADDEGH ERA: **ZOROASTRIAN CONSERVATISM AND REBELLION (1941-1959)**

Mohammad Reza was planning to diminish the power of clergy with an aim to make Iran a secularized nation. In this era, differences between the reformers and conservatives were at its peak in Zoroastrian community. In 1943, a youth club was established by some youngsters to raise their voices in the Zoroastrian Anjuman of Tehran. They wanted to fight against the prejudicial laws of Iran. They criticized the opaque, inefficient and ineffective administration of Anjuman. In 1950, the

Zoroastrian Women's club (Sazman-e-Zanan-e-Zarhoshti) was established in Tehran to improve educational opportunities for girls. Two women were elected to the Anjoman in 1957 and due to their efforts, Zoroastrian women were given the right to vote in Zoroastrian elections.

Between 1945 and 1965, many Zoroastrians left Yazd and its villages. They settled in the less expensive southern areas of Tehran. Seeing the growing density of Tehran's population, a new town "Tehran Pars" was developed and housing project "Rostam Bagh" was established for Zoroastrians in 1954.



The Tehran Zoroastrian community fragmented in downtown, midtown to uptown and Tehran Pars. The unity of the community began to fray. On the other hand, immigration into Tehran reunited many Zoroastrian families, grew their population and enhanced new opportunities for them.

The Zoroastrians and other Iranians began to prosper economically after the previous decade's hardships. Under white revolution announced by Mohammad Reza Shah, land reform, women's rights to vote, worker's profit policy and national as well as women's literacy corps. were defined as the key goals. Despite several oppositions to these changes, the planned reforms were forward.

ZOROASTRIAN COMMUNITY AND FAMILY STRUCTURE IN 1960-'70s TEHRAN

Simultaneously to the growth in the number of community organizations, the pressure for political reforms within the Zoroastrian community jump-started. The younger professionals were dissatisfied with older businessmen's rigidity held onto community power. Their victory in the election in 1966 led to a significant transformation in Anjoman.

Family rituals were inescapably entwined in Zoroastrian community. Family visits on different occasions were particularly insisted upon. Until 1978 many families were still reducing it, but the porseh (funeral services) visits were the most obligatory. In Tehran, the nuclear and extended families were another social change in Zoroastrian community. In Kerman, life was very different than in Tehran. Rituals were less elaborate and simpler because of the pressures of poverty.

The main aspects of Zoroastrianism like Good thoughts, Good words and Good deeds (in Persian : Pendar-e-nik, Goftar-e-nik and Kerdar-e-nik), Gender equality and protection of environment were pushed forward by reformers. The response to ritual reforms for the use of cemeteries was rejected in Yazd until the government pressured them to close dakhmes in 1974.



As secular influences spread to the urban environment, prejudices were diminished towards non-Muslims. Although Zoroastrians remained conservative in policy decisions such as intermarriages or religious conversions. They were less engaged with western style entertainment than Muslims.

INTEGRATION INTO IRANIAN SOCIETY AND THE THREAT OF SECULARIZATION

On the other side, Islamist opponents did not approve of secular reference to Iran's pre-Islamic heritage. Most Iranians including Zoroastrians did not readily accept the dualism of Islamic and pre-Islamic heritage in their secular references.

The secular environment had transformed Zoroastrian community. The attendance at rituals was lowered. However semi-secularized events, such as Jashn-e-Sadeh, the Birthday of Zartosht and other secular gatherings kept attracting people in large numbers. There was diminishment of faith and interest in Zoroastrianism among the young as well as middle-aged Zoroastrians. It was the elderly who kept up the rituals.

: REVOLUTION AND THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN :



In 1979, Mohammad Reza Shah died in exile. Ayatollah Khomeini arrived in Iran triumphant and declared himself Velayat-e-Faghi, a Supreme Leader. Thousands of Iranians of all religions kept leaving the country for safety reasons in which non-Muslim groups were higher in percentages. Personal properties as well as properties of the Zoroastrian Anjomans were confiscated. Some Zoroastrians were declared "mammu'ye khoruj" or forbidden to emigrate. Almost all of those Zoroastrians who had attained good positions in public services, lost their jobs or were demoted.

Khomeini focused on restructuring Iran with Islamic mores. The Government announced that women would be required to wear the hijab. The liquor stores, casinos, nightclubs and theatres were closed. Women were fired from jobs that involve working with men. More dress restrictions were announced.

On the other hand, there were positive developments in the economic sphere. Food cooperatives were opened for the poor. Health care and education were extended in poor areas.

Faced with harsh protests and marches of an activist Iranian population, Khomeini moderated his approach toward non-Muslims. He referred to the Zoroastrians as the roots and Muslims as the branches of Iran and issued a fatwa for the protection of non-Muslims. The revision process of the 1906 constitution was started by the Government and representatives from non-Muslim communities were invited to participate. The new constitution was a unique blend of democracy and an Islamic Republic of Iran.

Inspired by the new democratic constitution, a number of Zoroastrians demanded reforms in their own community Anjoman and pressed its members to resign. They called all the Zoroastrians for a rewriting of the Anjomans constitution and emphasised the participation of all the people to prevent wrongdoing and conspiracies in Anjoman's day to day administration for everyone's well-being. In 1981, the Anjomans constitution was rewritten in the course of two community wide meetings.

Being a Supreme Leader, Khomeini soon made his Islamist position clear. He began reversing the Shah's discourse. The Government attempted to curtail the NOWRUZ celebration, replacing it with Eid-al-fitr. The copies of the beloved poetry work of Hafez and Ferdowsi (the Shahnameh) were removed from stores and schools. Ferdowsi University was renamed Mashad University. Although, a few symbols and structures were not transformed or destroyed.



Since September-1980 an estimated 5 lacs Iranians were killed in a devastating eight-year war with Iraq.

Just as some manner of peace treaty was produced in 1988, the Government started marginalizing Zoroastrians and other non-Muslims by controlling their religious institutions. The Zoroastrians were mostly excluded from the most desirable professions. Though the regime attempted to limit Zoroastrian-Muslim Social relations, it was heartening to see that most Muslims were not eager to go back to the harsh 19th century past. Positive Muslim attitudes with non-Muslims were spreading fast.

However, Government policy was an intrusive form of control for all non-Muslim organizations. Pre-approvals were required for every religious event from the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance, every lecture given at such events and every article published in magazines. Government intrusion into the field of education was particularly

intense. Arabic classes were mandatory for all schools. Restructuring of the faculty and text books took place at the university level too.

Perhaps to impress the international community or because of the influence of a liberal cleric or political leaders, the Government required a surprisingly close articulation of non-Muslims of recognized religions with Iranian Governmental institutions. Zoroastrians were expected to send a representative to all major state ceremonies and events. Although maintaining a degree of segregation between non-Muslims and Muslims was part of such organised articulations by the Government. These policies of articulation and segregation were sometimes hard to fathom for Zoroastrians. For example, Zoroastrian festivals like Jashn-e-Mehregan, Jashn-e-Sadeh were forbidden to Muslims. However, small open-to-all events were allowed on the occasions of such festivals. Although most Zoroastrians were describing these participations as their loyalty to the Islamic state and the revolution.

Thus, Zoroastrians have been subordinated, segregated and controlled but also brought into an articulated relationship with the Islamic Government and larger Muslim society in defined but evolving ways. Despite having a micro-minority (approx. 11000 people), Zoroastrian community's interrelationships were carefully structured which is a reflection of the powerful salience of this religion in Iran.

CHANGE UNDER SUCCEEDING PRESIDENTIAL REIGNS 1989-2021

The conditions for Zoroastrians remained changed time to time under succeeding Presidential Reigns of the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the first decade it was precarious for them. All the non-Muslims enjoyed complete religious freedom under President of Iran, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997).

Reformist Sayyed Mohammad Khatami was elected President of Iran in the 1997 election. Under his reign (1997-2005) several reforms were passed for non-Muslims. Government held public seminars on Zoroastrianism during the year 2003 which was designated as "The Year of Commemoration of Zoroastrians".



Reformist Sayyed Mohammad Khatami was elected President of Iran in the 1997 election. Under his reign (1997-2005) several reforms were passed for non-Muslims. Government held public seminars on Zoroastrianism during the year 2003 which was designated as "The Year of Commemoration of Zoroastrians".

Zoroastrians were not prepared for the reversal of Khatami's semi-effective reforms when in 2005, voters elected right wing Islamist Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the President of Iran. International sanctions grew over Iran's nuclear program. An emigration drives from non-Muslim religious groups were increased due to economic decline and rhetoric behavior of clerics. Although Ahmadinejad took steps toward reviving historical nationalism or Iraniyat. Zoroastrians summed up his tenure as "qati pati" (mixed up).

The next President, Hassan Rouhani's regime (2013-2021) was shifted towards moderation. Iranian heritage and its ethics under Zoroastrianism were praised by the Government. He described

Zoroastrianism as a divine religion amongst other monotheistic religions in Iran. Zoroastrian mantra "Good thoughts, Good words and Good deeds" was accepted by Rouhani.

All presidential eras in Iran were dichotomous for Zoroastrians and they were wary of backlash against them. Under Rouhani's second term, attacks on so-called proselytization have increased. Individual Zoroastrians were also targeted for uncertain reasons. The cultural religious symbols of pre-Islamic culture were being tantalized by the hardliners or were being protested. In the last term of Rouhani's presidency (2017-2021) the conditions for non-Muslims were beginning to worsen once again.

Even though Iran is a complex nation with its unique blend of democracy and theocracy, most Zoroastrians and Muslims are respectful towards each other. There are always two different contesting cultures that exist in Iran, Iranian versus Islamiyat which have shaped and reshaped over succeeding Iranian epochs.

ZOROASTRIAN RESPONSES IN THE FACE OF ISLAMISM AND MODERNISM



After Islamic Republic's establishment, several defunct Anjomans of the Zoroastrian communities were re-established. Although Anjomans were more subordinate to the Government, but also more empowered for the community. The Government provided budget finance to the Anjomans for renovation and repair or religious structures. Zoroastrian schools were mandated for religious classes to Zoroastrian children by Mobeds and instructors from Sazman-e-fravahar.

Looking at the shortages of Mobeds, Mobedzadehs were recruited and training classes for Mobedyars were instituted in 1981. The doors to women becoming Mobedyars were opened despite opposition by traditionalists. The monopoly of the Mobed priestly line was broken upon and the process of choosing a head Mobed was also dropped as all Mobeds are expected to be learned and equal. The days of kings may be truly over in terms of titles such as Arbob or Head Mobed.

As a part of compulsory religious classes as an academic course, Avesta prayers were translated into Persian. As a result, Zoroastrian youth are much more educated in their religion.

Looking at the overall impact of the Islamization of Iran coupled with modernization, the Zoroastrian community in Iran is continuing to navigate the modern world with its inclination towards standardization and formality.

It is not easy to assess whether conditions of Zoroastrians worsened, improved, remained equally harsh or all mixed up in Iran since the revolution. Though the question and its answers from

individual Zoroastrians have political ramifications, impact of accepting non-Muslims from Iran as refugees and Government's efforts to present a positive face internationally, the author has tried her best to give voice to almost all people. Most opinions are reflecting the inconsistent conditions of Zoroastrians in Iran. A positive assessment is focusing most on popular Muslim behavior, beneficial Government policy and increased religious knowledge.

VITALITY, PERSISTENCE, SECULARISM AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.

The gravest challenges in Zoroastrian community are its vitality in a secularizing environment. The community is facing an ever-declining population due to emigration since the period of revolution. Another challenge to vitality is internal conflicts within the Zoroastrian community and it is not new for them. The Islamic modernization and speed of technology changing lives shifted the traditional ideology of Iranians.

Just as Muslims in Iran adopted a secularized form of pre-Islamic culture with duality of iraniyat and Islamiyat, Zoroastrians too encouraged themselves towards Iran's pre-Islamic heritage and culture and seem by and large comfortable and even proud about shared Iraniyat, even if it is secularized.

Zoroastrian youth are more educated in Zoroastrian philosophy in 21st century secularism in Iran than they were under the Shah. They are now raising issues of community survival, emigration, dealing with customs and superstitions, improved leadership structure and the need for a world Anjoman. Ethical culture has increased in Zoroastrian society. For example, many Zoroastrians explain that good thoughts and good hygiene purify just as once did nirang.

The essence of the Zoroastrian religion is to leave the planet in a better place through our efforts and help increase the sum of human happiness by our presence in the world.

Despite dwindling numbers, the sheer number of Zoroastrian organizations and its endless activities in Iran is astonishing. The Zoroastrians have survived by adapting and being open to reinterpretation like their Gathas. Although they have been open to

sister communities, the door still mostly closes at the border of entry into the Zoroastrian religion.

In her very painstakingly written book, the author has traced the Zoroastrian community in Iran from its mostly harsh existence in the 19th century Yazd and Kerman to the year 2020, Zoroastrians managed to continue their traditions keeping themselves alive and survived. I truly enjoyed reading this book, gaining much knowledge from it about our community's modern-day history from 1850-2020. The book includes many anecdotes that enliven the remarkable history of the Zoroastrians.

The book is still seeking answers to the original question: How has the Zoroastrian community adapted to the remarkably changing conditions in Iran? The author attempts to present this narrative with minimal bias, offering the reader views through the eyes of the multiple Zoroastrians she interviewed or read, invoking their multivocal stories.

A COMPARATIVE OBSERVATION WITH THE PARSIS OF INDIA



I, learned much about our heritage in Iran and the many parallelisms among Zoroastrian youth in Iran and in India today by briefly reading this book.

In India, the numbers of Parsi community members are continuously decreasing in terms of census. The smaller town Anjumans of the Parsi community in India are facing difficulties in sustaining their existence due to polarization of the population, less employment opportunities in small towns, rural areas and the impact of urbanization.

Like the Zoroastrians of Iran, the youth of the Zoroastrian community in India too have been protesting for administrative reforms against the elders who have held positions for decades in the Anjumans. They are also succeeding in achieving their democratic rights in several Anjumans in India which seems to be essential for the survival and overall upgradation of Parsi community organizations in democratic nation, India.

Comparison in respect of religious perspective and Zoroastrian faith shows that majority of religious traditions, rituals and customs are well preserved in both places at Iran and India. Just similar to the Iran, the Zoroastrian youth in India are too eager to learn about the simple meanings of Avesta scriptures from Mobeds and religious scholars. It is utmost pleasure for the worldwide Zoroastrians that the Zoroastrians of Iran and the Parsis of India are united in their communities and they are heartily integrated to preserve their religious, social and institutional inheritance.

Just as Zoroastrians in Iran have adopted a secularized form of pre-Islamic culture with duality of Iraniyat and Zoroastrianism, Parsis of

India too have encouraged themselves towards India's heritage and culture and they are following their Zoroastrian religion with joy of India's proudful culture and history.

Rayoman S. Ilavia
