

RELIGION AND SOCIAL CHANGE AMONG THE ZOROASTRIANS OF IRAN

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1.0. Locational Analysis.

1.1. General Distribution. There are on the order of 20,000 Zoroastrians in Iran, 110 thousand in India (centered in Bombay, Gujurat State), 6 thousand in Pakistan (approx. 5500 in Karachi, 60 in Quetta, 300 in Lahore). In Iran, half if not more of the Zoroastrian population lives in Teheran. Of the two traditional refuge cities, Yazd and Kirman, only Yazd still has surrounding village populations. By 1962 the last villagers of the Kirman vicinity had moved into town (M. Boyce 1967). Yazd has about 15-20 villages with Zoroastrian inhabitants, the largest and most traditional of which is Sharifabad-Ardekan. Secondary Zoroastrian populations exist in Isphahan, Shiraz, Bam, Zahedan, Sanjan, Bandar Abbas, and Ahwaz.

1.2. Census Data. Within Iran statistics generally do not exist at all, and those that do exist are subject to large scale error. The Zoroastrian Anjomans (Societies) seem not to keep any statistics of their own but rely on the National Censuses. Two censuses have been carried out by the Government of Iran: 1956 (1335) and 1966 (1345). The census districts of the two, however, are not the same and thus are not comparable. It appears, furthermore, that in the 1956 Census children under 3 were not enumerated on the grounds that they would probably not live anyway, and that females under the age of 7 were not enumerated on the grounds that since they were not eligible to be married, they did not count. There also seem to be instances of enumerations of non-existent populations: the one thousand ninety-three Zoroastrians of Nejjafabad (1956), the sizeable Jewish population of Qazvin (1966--though here it is possible that this figure includes the Israeli nationals advising on the Qazvin development project), several small pockets of Zoroastrians in Khorasan. The President of the Zoroastrian Anjoman of Teheran is attempting to have the latter figures checked, but says that if such Zoroastrians exist in Khorasan, it is strange that they should have made themselves known to census takers but not to the Zoroastrian Anjoman.

Unfortunately, the Census summary tables only give total numbers by religion and place. Further enumeration must exist on the census tapes, and it should be technically feasible to break down the following tables by religion (Moslem, Jew, Zoroastrian):

- 2 - Place of birth of the population by sex and age.
 - 3 - Relationship to the head of household by sex and age.
 - 4 - Marital status of the population 10 years of age and over by sex and age.
 - 7 - Literate population 7 years of age and over, by highest certificate received, sex and age.
 - 17 - Employed population 10 years of age and over, by major occupation group, sex and level of education.
 - 46 - Household industries by type of industry and size of household.
 - 47 - Private households by size of household and selected characteristics.
 - 48 - Private households by size of household and sex and age of household head.
- A breakdown of these tables would provide a statistical profile on migration (2), household structure (3, 47, 48), education and vocation (7, 17, 46), and marital age structure (4). It would provide comparable data for the Muslim majority and Jews as the major other minority (since Bahais are not an officially recognized minority in the selected sites. This data would be sought for the following places: Yazd City, Taft, Ardekan, Sharifabad-Ardekan, Rural Yazd Shahrستان, Kirman City, Isphahan, and Teheran.

So far no success has been achieved in obtaining this information: the acting director of the Census Bureau of Statistics has told me that although computer time is only \$47/hr., this work would require (1) sorting of some 3 million cards (all on tape); (2) 10-15 hours of computer time; (3) and would cost me more than \$100,000. (NB: 15 hours at \$47 is \$705--i.e. an exasperating way of saying "no".)

1.3.0. COMMUNITY STRUCTURES: Yazd, Kirman, Zahedan, Quetta, Karachi. Even at this preliminary stage in the research, it is clear that Yazd and Kirman are past refuge centers which are rapidly being abandoned as such, and the Teheran has become the new center. The processes at work seem to be three: (1) an urbanization migration from village to town to Teheran, the first half of which is complete for Kirman and should be completed for Yazd in this generation; (2) a floating exchange with Bombay, somewhat inhibited since Indian independence, due to Indian restriction on capital alienation (affecting schools and welfare services in Iran), and on registration of alien businessmen; (3) a concentration of personnel in Teheran and redistribution to the provinces within the modern national bureaucracy and economy.

1.3.1. Yazd. Yazd is today a kind of "hollow" community; all but a few of the old Yazdi families have left for Teheran. Their houses stand empty (being somewhat sacred loci of the ancestors, there is some resistance to sale) or are rented by villagers moving into town on their way to Teheran. Or at least this is what the Zoroastrians themselves say is happening. In fact, houses are being sold; Muslims are moving into the heart of the Zoroastrian Quarter. A Teherani of an old Yazdi family says that once the community was better kept up: the kuches (alleys) were cobbled and there was a committee to take care of things; now after the kuches were dug up to lay water pipes no one has moved to repair the kuches. A project which I am just beginning will be to map the Quarter with a view to determine (1) how many Muslims have moved into what is still definable as the Zoroastrian Quarter; (2) in the Zoroastrian houses, number of people resident and relation to household head; thereby achieving a partial census of the community. Statistics from the two Zoroastrian boys high schools show that the fathers of 99% of the Zoroastrian students are village farmers, thus confirming the "hollow" structure of the community. These boys, if their village is near, come in to school each day; if they live further away, as say in Sharifabad, they come to live with an uncle, or bring an old grandmother to keep house for them.

The Zoroastrian Quarter is a distinctive section of the city; its women wear a strikingly distinctive dress; and its people speak a distinctive dialect. Though by-and-large the legal disabilities of the last century have been removed in practice as well as in law, Muslim barbers still refuse to cut Zoroastrian hair; a Jewish barber services the community. It appears that there are also separate public bath facilities. The relation between the Jewish and Zoroastrian communities remains to be explored: Jews apparently borrowed ritual myrtle plants from the Zoroastrians and several long-standing friendships seem to have existed. So far I have made no attempt to contact the Jewish community, but hope to do so in the future; the location of Jewish houses has been mapped by Mike Bonine (U. of Texas) and they appear to be quite scattered among the Muslim population of the old city around the Friday Mosque. This seems to be in contrast to the more compact Jewish community of Kirman.

Yazd's Muslim population has a reputation of conservatism and fanaticism. They apparently made enough trouble for a Bahai barber who cut everyone's hair that he left for Teheran. There was recently an attempt at a forced conversion of a Zoroastrian girl--this proved unsuccessful, at which point the separation of barbering facilities was re-stressed by the Muslims. There is no love lost between the Zoroastrians and the "uneducated Muslims". Yazd's Muslim population, of course, is also split into the conservative old Yazdis and the more "modern" Teherani-oriented members of the national government and banking bureaucracies. The festival of Moharram, for instance, is frowned upon, at least in its emotional excesses,

by the authorities: the carrying of the naql has not been permitted in Yazd for about four years, so instead of villagers coming to town for the mourning of Hossein, the townies go to the village. The Zoroastrians treat Muslim sensitivities with care: around the 10th of Moharram they closed their stores; they kept their own festivities of the 6th of Farvardin (Zoroaster's birthday) quieter than when it does not fall in Moharram; and occasionally the women will even don a chador (purdah veil) to show respect.

The migration back and forth with Bombay has had a considerable impact on Yazd both Muslim and Zoroastrian; for the Zoroastrians it has had added significance (cf. below "Bombay"). On one Zoroastrian genealogy of about 200 persons, 74 reside(d) in the Yazd vicinity, almost as many (61) in Bombay, 23 in Karachi, and only 23 in Teheran.

1.3.2. Kirman. Of this community I know little as yet. There is a gateway to the Zoroastrian Quarter which says "Shah, God, Country/ Zoroastrians of Kirman" reminiscent of the Parsi colony settlement pattern (cf. below). Some of the kuches are paved. No villages are left: migration from village to town complete.

1.3.3. Zahedan. Zahedan is a different kind of community than Yazd or Kirman. A frontier town, the core of the Zoroastrian community is merchants, supplemented by a floating population of government and bank officials posted here for a few years at a time. At the moment, there are 8 families plus two young fellows doing their national service in the Danesh Sepah (Literacy Corps) here. There are 70 individuals, 36 male, 36 female with the following age structure:

	male	female
The occupational structure is as follows:		
7 men run stores and cinemas;	0 - 15	15
3 are professionals (an engineer, meteorologist, veterinary);	16 - 25	6
3 work in offices (bank, oil company, municipality);	26 - 35	5
one man looks after the <u>anjoman</u> building,	36 - 45	6
one is a truck driver, and 2 are doing national service in the <u>Danesh Sepah</u> .	46 - 55	2
	56 - 65	2
	65+	0
		0

Of the women, two are nurses. Three or four years ago there were several more families including 3-4 doctors and two bank agents, these being the kind of floating government and business employees who are transferred in and out. Because the community is so small the women here wear the chador. There are 3-4 Zoroastrian Bahai families in town whom the President of the local Zoroastrian Anjoman has been trying without success to bring back into the fold. There is a sizeable Sikk merchant population.

[The above information was collected on a trip to Pakistan March 1970.]

1.3.4. Teheran. Teheran is the cultural center of modern Iranian Zoroastrianism; all the "scholars" are there. The two best libraries on Zoroastrianism are there (that of Poure-Davoud, and the Ardeshir Yaganegi Library of the Teheran Anjoman.)

The Teheran community, however, is also a new community: the first Zoroastrian to come to Teheran was the great financier-siraf Arbab Jamshid shortly before the turn of the century; he apparently was bankrupted by the monetary concessions made to the Russians. He was followed by other mercantile families; many of them invested in land and helped bring up farmers from Yazd to work the land, employing in their businesses those who were literate. In 1918 there were 170 Zoroastrians in Teheran; this was the year when a fire temple was established, three mobeds bringing the fire from Yazd. (The only Atesh Beheran, or highest rank fire, still remains in Yazd.) Many of the older families have houses in what used to be the northern part of Teheran; between Kh. Naderi and Kh. Takhte Jamshid. A newer concentration is in the new suburb of Teheran Pars developed by the Zoroastrian real estate man, Tafti. A third concentration is a village-suburb on the way to Qala Firuz to the east of town.

The community is quite well organized: although the Teheran Anjoman was the third to be founded in Iran, after those of Yazd and Kirman, it is today the primate Anjoman co-ordinating both the provincial Anjomans and the five sub-associations in Teheran. A Supreme Council consisting of representatives of each of these associations plus respected members of the professional and business community meets every other Thursday to consider the problems of the community. Welfare services conducted by the community include the running of schools and housing for the poor. There are plans to build a vocational school for girls with dormitories so that girls will not be forced to remain in villages while boys go to town to school and feel themselves above uneducated village girls. There is also a plan to transfer the Marker Orphanage from Yazd to Teheran; and to turn the Marker Schools of Yazd into a Commercial College.

1.3.5. Quetta. Quetta has a small Zoroastrian community of about 60 persons of whom 40 or 50 live within the walled compound of the Parsee Colony containing a fire temple, rest house for travelling Zoroastrians, and a number of earthquake-proof bungaloes (built after the 1935 quake). Most are merchants--a position analogous to the Iranian frontier town of Zahedan. In my brief visit I did not get comparable statistics to those of Zahedan, but a casual listing of businesses with Parsee names included one flour mill, an agent for Deutz Ltd, an agent for P.I.L.A.; two colliery owners, and one electric power engineer (which if indeed the community has only 60 persons--men, women, children,--would be a fair sample). The community gives free housing to a dastur who has been in Quetta 50 years (he runs the flour mill).

1.3.6. Karachi. Karachi is the primate city of the Pakistani Parsees containing at least 5500 of an estimated 6000 Parsees. There are two fire temples, and at least two Parsee Colonies. Since Dastur Dr. Dhalla died, there has been no high priest here. A Dhalla Memorial Institute has been established to function like the Cama Oriental Institute in Bombay. The Parsee Boys High School was founded in 1859 and was exclusively for Zoroastrians until 1945; today, of 1100 students only 250 are Parsees. The Girls High School was founded about 50 years ago. At one of the fire temples I was shown a newly consecrated pure white unblemished bull--a ritual element which has disappeared from Iran. The Parsees of Pakistan are healthy and prosperous, supposedly more so than those of Bombay.

1.3.7. Bombay. Of Bombay I have no first hand experience yet. But (1) the only school for training Zoroastrian priests is the Cama Aturman in Bombay; (2) business links with Iran have engendered a great deal of migration back and forth; (3) the Parsees of Bombay were instrumental in helping release their Iranian brethren from the ghetto existence of pre-Pahlavi days; (4) the vast majority of the world's Zoroastrians live in and around Bombay; (5) published statistics and records exist for Bombay as they do not for Iran, e.g.: J.F. Bulsara (1935) for the welfare system from 1871-1933; S.F. Desai (1948) for the depression and war years; P.P. Bulsara (1963), Dhalla, R.B. Patell (1876) etc. for the history of the Parsees; S.P. Davar (1949) and S.F. Desai (1963?) on the Parsi Panchayat. Thus Bombay must loom large in any account of Zoroastrians.

2.0. Religious Change.

2.1. Disposal of the Dead. The most striking change is the abandonment by Iranian Zoroastrians of exposure of the dead in daxmes (towers of silence). The daxme for Teheran (Rey) has not functioned for about 40 years. A graveyard has been established at Qala Firuz, but burial is done so as to aid decomposition (open bottom to the casket), and so as to keep pollution of the four elements to a minimum (metal casket; legs on the casket to keep it off the ground). Cases exist of old people wanting to be placed in a daxme; for that they must be taken to Yazd. But even in Yazd, a modern graveyard exists and is being used by the younger generation. Health

authorities in Yazd have requested that the daxmas not be used anymore as protection against air-borne microbes. In Bombay, on the other hand, the daxme is still almost exclusively used, although there have been movements toward burial, and, what is even more popular, cremation--cremation by electric "fire" has the advantage of not polluting fire as would the Hindu system of cremation. In Pakistan cremation does not seem to be an immediate possibility as the Muslims are opposed. The Karachi daxmas are now being encircled by the growth of the city, and there is pressure from Muslim neighbors, who happen to be members of the military, to abandon them: new ones may have to be built elsewhere.

The Vendidad speaks of burial as being a sin for which there is no atonement. The fiddle in Iran is to point out that the only true words of Zoroaster are those of the Gathas; all else is a compilation by priests trying to piece together what "Alexander gojaste" (Alexander the Terrible) destroyed when he burned the 21 Nasks of sacred scripture in the Persepolis Royal Library.

2.2. A big change which caused a crisis in the community some 50 years ago, the strains of which still have not healed, had to do with the change in calendar. This was a very complex affair the details of which I have yet to unravel. The new calendar was pushed through on the grounds that the holy calendar of 365 days had not been correctly maintained with the proper corrective intercalculations since Sassanian times. Whatever the validity of this, in the meantime a system had become established whereby the ritual calendar was expected to float around the solar calendar so that holy days would bless each day of the secular calendar in turn. These holy days had to do with a kind of ancestor worship in which one was to cook and eat in one's ancestor's home on anniversaries (3, 30, 40 day, year) of deaths when the spirits of the ancestors would be present. To those people who believed the sky would rain blood if they did not observe these rites at the proper time, the fiddling of the calendar was no light matter, and the community split into those who tenaciously stuck to the old calendar, those who adopted the new, and those who tried to follow both until the complication of ritual became too great. Mixed in with this was a political murder of one Ostad Master Khodabakhsh who opposed the calendrical change, and who it is said also wanted to break the power of the hereditary priesthood (this may be a cover story; it may be on the contrary that he was with the priestly opposition). Attitudes towards this man may prove to be an index to attitudes towards Zoroastrian politics in the same way the name Mossadeq is to Iranian politics at large. There is a public plaque to the murdered man in a kuche of Yazd, but the man who helped erect it for the time being is too suspicious of me to talk.

2.3. The question of conversion. Since the fall of Yazdigir III, the last Sassanian, neither Iranian nor Indian Zoroastrians have allowed conversion to Zoroastrianism, the former as a matter of survival through non-competition, the latter as a matter of not becoming a low-caste religion. Many Iranian Zoroastrians, however, fear extinction, and argue for conversion both on grounds of expanding numbers, and on grounds of bringing in new blood to counter inbreeding diseases. Diseases cited are diabetes, heart conditions, mental illness. I am trying to collect what statistics I can on this: the Muslim doctors at one of the 3 hospitals of Yazd say that (1) the Zoroastrians are a distinct group by blood-type distribution, (2) they estimate 35% incidence of abnormally high sugar levels. Mental illness is the most important and the most difficult to find out about: as neither Yazd, nor effectively Isphahan, has mental facilities local statistics are hard to come by; aside from trying to see if I can find anything at Razi Mental Hospital in Teheran (medical histories of relatives of admissions), genealogies may be my only source of information.

The question of allowing conversion has been raised in past congresses of the Zoroastrians of Iran. Probably the greatest negative argument is the possibility still of violence by Muslims against apostates; a second positive factor is racial pride. Connected of course is the question of out-marriage, and the fear is that

intermarriage, especially in a Muslim milieu, will itself lead to extinction. Two partial relaxations are with regard to Zoroastrian-Bahais who may be accepted back, and to a group of people known as jadid ("new") who during the persecutions of Safavid times took on Muslim coloration and who have recently petitioned the Zoroastrian Anjuman for recognition as full Zoroastrians, a petition which was accepted at the 1969 Congress.

2.4. Parsis and Iranian Zoroastrians. The Iranians consider themselves more modern, enlightened, and liberal. They abhor customs of the Parsees such as those utilizing the urine of a consecrated bull. They allow non-Zoroastrians to visit their fire temples (which the Parsees do not). They consider the Parsees to have absorbed much Hindu ritualism which goes against the spirit of Zoroastrianism.

The Parsees in their turn consider the Iranians to be uneducated. Iranian dasturs are thought to be able only to repeat prayers without any knowledge of philosophical subtleties or Avestan and Pahlavi etymologies. The Iranians they feel have lost most of their religion and have absorbed Muslim customs, making their Zoroastrianism an impure one.

2.5. Stratification. Towards the stratification thesis of my proposal, little as yet has been contributed: it is as yet too early in the research strategy therein outlined. Most contact so far has been with members of the upper classes. Interesting contacts which have yet to be followed up may be with a trained dastur-turned-hermit, and with a "sorcerer katkhoda".

3.0. Research strategy for the next quarter.

Progress up to the last month had been almost negligible thanks to the problem of obtaining a research permit (still unsolved), a detailed report of which is in the hands of Prof. Marvin Zonis, Center for Near Eastern Studies, U. of Chicago; and in the hands of Mr. William Sumner, Director of the Teheran Center of the American Institute of Iranian Studies.

Aside from the various projects in process mentioned above (mapping the Zoroastrian Quarter of Yazd; obtaining Census statistics; obtaining high school and health records; getting genealogies; general interviewing), a question of residence strategy is still in the air: it may prove to be possible to find a place to live in Sharifabad-Ardakan, reputedly the village with the strongest traditional patterns still in effect. It may be useful, after another month or two in Yazd to move there. On the other hand, since Prof. Mary Boyce (U. of London) is preparing a book on the Zoroastrians of Yazd, having spent considerable time in Sharifabad, it may be more useful to stick with Yazd itself and develop comparative data in the Jewish and Muslim communities.