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Dr. Megha Khandelwal

Head & PGT English Faculty

India

meghamtr1992@gmail.com

Fidelity of Parsis towards Their Religion

Abstract

Parsis are known as the minor ethnic community in India. They emigrated from Persian land due to the invasion of Arabs rulers. They are the followers of Zoroastrianism religion which was founded by the prophet, Zoroaster or Zarathustra. These are another name for the Parsis' supreme god i.e. Ahura Mazda. He is considered as the most omnipotent and omniscient eternal God. This paper deals with the Parsis' beleaguered religion. Zoroastrian are acknowledged with futility of ancient rituals and rites. Zoroastrianism also taught several methods of being dedicated to the supreme god.

When any child takes birth in the family, before his parents, there is religion which welcomes him. The word Religion is very huge to understand but still it can be defined as the bond in which every human is tied. India is a country of diverse multicultural frame where several cultures and religions are practiced. Every individual of this land is tied with his fore-father's norms. Every religion is superior in its own ways and it is profoundly prioritized by its followers. Zoroastrianism taught a method of being dedicated to the supreme god of wisdom i.e., Ahura Mazda. It signifies that every choice of present becomes the result of coming future. It is attributed by Kulke:

Ahura Mazda is the creator as well as the judge on the day of the last judgment . . .
Ahura Mazda rules in this world as the ultimate supreme lord of eternity over the good spirits

(Spenta Mainyu) created by him. These Spenta Mainyu as the power of light and of good are opposed in this world by the evil spirits (Angra Mainyu) . . . The antagonism between two antipodes makes this world a battlefield between good and evil (19).

Fire is regarded as the important symbol in this culture as it denotes the presence of Ahura Mazda. It is also known as Atash Bahram in real Persian language. It is believed that, if the fire extinguishes it will be the final stage of the universe. That's why in every Parsi house, fire keeps burning and it also dictates: "no ceremony can take place without the fire being present" (Kulke 20). According to Zoroastrian beliefs, "no ceremony can take place without a fire being present. Fire is the symbol of Ahura Mazda, the light and the truth" (Kulke 20). Parsis uses sixteen types of fire to form one bonfire. Modi observes:

(1) the fire used in burning a corpse, (2) the fire used by a dyer, (3) the fire from the house of a king or a ruling authority, (4) that from a potter, (5) a brick- maker, (6) a fakir or an ascetic, (7) a goldsmith, (8) a mint, (9) an ironsmith, (10) an armourer, (11) a baker, (12) a brewer or distiller or an idol worshipper, (13) a soldier or a traveller, (14) a shepherd, (15) fire produced by atmospheric lightning, (16) household fire or fire from the house of any Zoroastrian (169-170).

Parsis celebrate several festivals like our Indian culture. These festivals relate to the birth, maturity, and death. Their ceremonies are celebrated according to the Seasons, Months, and Annual from the Zoroastrians calendar. Gahambars is the seasonal festival which is celebrated till five continuous days. There are six types of Gahambars like first is Maidyazarem Gahambar, which arrives in midsummer near about April or May. Second is Maidyoi-Shema Gahambars, which occurs in June or July. The third one is Paitishahema Gahambars, which takes place in September. The fourth one is Ayathram Gahambars, which occurs in October. The fifth one is Maidyaram Gahambars, celebrated in midwinter in

December or January and, the sixth one is Hamaspathmaidem Gahambar, celebrated in March.

The Monthly festivals are known as Jashan days. Annual festivals like Nauruz, New Year Day, the Thanks Giving ceremony of blessings, Khordad Sal, birthday of the Zoroaster, the ritual for fertility, i.e., Madasara, the Behram roje, and the Navjote ceremony. All these play a vital importance in Parsi culture. There is a particular preference of Navjote ceremony. In this context Narendra Kumar aptly observes:

A true Zoroastrian way of life consists in spreading happiness around. A Parsee should regard himself as part and parcel of nature, and as such, fulfill his obligation towards all creation. A true Parsee life is not for himself but for his family, society and the country as a whole. Brotherhood of man is thus a cardinal doctrine of Zoroaster's message (20).

Zoroastrianism does not believe in any division of caste. It only preaches to follow the moral path of brotherhood and unity. Parsis prefer a balanced and harmonious life. They make all their surroundings full of energy, enthusiastic and spiritually alive. It is attributed as, "The true Zoroastrian way of life consists in spreading happiness around . . . A true Parsee lives not for himself but for his family, society and the country as a whole . . . Men and women equal opportunities of spiritual evolution and salvation" (Kumar 21).

A Parsi fellow has three fundamental ways of living. A true Parsi "is a pious Parsee whose life is governed by humata (good thoughts), hukhta (good words) and hvarshta (good deeds)" (Kumar 83). All these teachings are founded in the Holy Scripture Zend-Avesta. This scripture, contain ancient commentaries which are known as Pahlavi text, written in middle Persian language. Very devotionally, Parsis follow them throughout their life. These teachings are:

1. The greatness of Zoroaster's greatness is not based on the false deities but on "transcendence of one god against the demons that do not exist" (Kulke 15).

2. Zoroaster focused “on man’s behavior and its moral drives, largely disregarding the ritualism of the worship of God” (Kulke 15).
3. Unlike the primitive religions that “tried to keep men [and women] bound with external observances, Zoroaster was the greatest of all pioneers who showed the path to freedom to man, the freedom of moral choice, the freedom from the blind obedience to unmeaning injunctions, the freedom from the multiplicity of shrines” (Kulke 15).
4. Zoroaster taught “man can only attain salvation through his behavior, not so much, however, through prayers and atonement” (Kulke 19).
5. For Parsis “the world is far from being perfect or complete but is rather a battlefield for the confrontation of Ahura Mazda and the Ahriman,” and “in this battle man is called up of his own free will for the good principle, to help the good to its final victory” (Kulke 253).
6. “Man makes an essential contribution to the victory of the good by working, whereby great importance is attached to self-reliance and self-help” (Kulke 254).
7. “However, in the ancient times in which the prophet lived, his Zoroastrian religion was radically different to anything mankind had ever known. Instead of a religion based on fear, on worshipping and appeasing several Gods, the Zoroastrian religion put a free-thinking, rational mind and one omnipotent, eternal God, Ahura Mazda, on center stage” (Taraporevala 12).

In the Parsi cultural canvas, there are some important ceremonies such as *Navjote*, *Chasni*, and *Behram roje*. When a child is born in a Parsi family, there takes place a ceremony called Navjote which initiates child to Zoroastrian religion. It is attributed:

The ceremony of investing a child with sacred shirt and thread [sudre and kusti] is called navjote. A Zoroastrian may put on any dress he likes. He may dress as a European, Hindu, Mahomedan or as a person of any nationality, but he must put *sudre* and *kusti* (Modi 143).

Chasni is an important ceremony which is based on spiritual eating. It aptly remarked: “The word is limited to ceremonial eating or drinking. Again, it includes in itself the meaning not only of physical eating or tasting but also mental or spiritual eating” (Modi 235).

For Parsis, education plays a very significant role. They understand the power of education. Like other major religions, they do not discriminate between the genders regarding education. Education is the only weapon left for them to stand and free them from sufferings. In the words of Kulke, it is: “as will be shown of very considerable importance to the general health of the community, was the emphasis on gender equality, not only the education accorded to girls but also in terms of their freedom of action” (Kulke 104-105).

Prayers are also known as the best means of purification. Parsis morning, noon, evening and night start with reciting of the holy Avestan prayers. Revising prayers for five times in a day is actually the sacred method to remain connected with the powerhouse, i.e., God. In twenty-four hours, the mind gets entangled with several stimuli. Some of them are good and some of them are bad enough that they deplete the mental stability of the person. To clear vibrations of the body, and spare themselves from evil thoughts, Parsis prefer a mode of prayers. The power of prayers provides them mental and physical strength to fight with all the circumstances. There is special liking for Ashem Vohu prayers. According to Modi:

The prayer of Ashem Vohu is Next to Ahunwar in importance and sanctity. It is the prayer in praise of Asha which can be said to be the watchword of the Zoroastrian religion . . . The prayers of Ashem and Ahunwar give courage and victory to those who recite them and follow their teachings (273).

Costumes are the first impression. It is like the mirror that shows the inside picture of the person. When we talk about the ethnocentricity elements in Parsis, we will find that costumes play a lead role. Parsis are the soul conscious humans. They prefer white garments on every occasion such as *Dugli*, *Kusti*, *Gara*, *Koshti*, and *Sudra*. *Gara* is a kind of religious

work or hand embroidered saris worn by females. “Thus a number of interviewees took for granted the notion that the *kusti* is worn to protect the individual from evil which can manifest itself in various ways from ‘magic’ to pollution” (Kreyenbroek 252). They all are the outward symbols of the faith.

Sudra is the shirt and the *kusti* is the sacred cord. *Dugli* is the white robe worn by a Parsi male. *Sudra* is also known as the one whole piece of the white cotton shirt which is to be put next to the skin. *Kusti* is made up of best seventy-two woolly threads which girded roundly on the waist above *Sudra*. It signifies the purity of heart and body.

Another measure which becomes the reason for ethnocentricity in Parsis is their purity and cleanliness. They are fond of purity and hygiene. This is considered as the life mantra for them. They maintain their piousness in every sphere of living. The purity of everything like words, attire, food, thoughts, water, land, air and fire has a special preference in their lifestyle. These concepts are fundamentals principles which are prescribed in Zarathustra’s preaching. They must be followed by every true Zoroastrians.

Hence, these feelings are the instances to show Parsi’s devotion to purity. They avoid even the touch and smell of other persons. The sweepers, roadside beggars, and other people are kept away from them due to this superior pure behavior and hygienic phobia. In fact, other inferior shadow is taken as the mark on their religion.

In Parsi culture, the treatment of dead-bodies is quite different from all other communities. They neither burn nor dig the dead body but directly places to vultures and crows for consumption. This treatment is known as the most specific method which is a highly ethnocentric trait of the community. Zoroaster wants his followers to remain pure and stay away from impurities. Kulke explains: “This explains the function of the Tower of Silence (Dakhmas), upon which the deceased Zoroastrians are thrown to the vultures because earth, fire or water . . . would be defiled by them” (19).

Becoming food for hungry vultures and saving all five material creations provide Parsis more peace. The people name Parsis as the Kagrakhaos, i.e., crow eaters but it does not imply that Parsis consume crows; it is actually not with crows but with vultures to which their dead bodies are fed. Another striking thing which attracts us about Parsis is that they do not allow non- Parsi to be entered in Tower of Silence.

Charity is an important trait in Parsi moral code. This code is based on the teachings of the prophet Zarathustra. It observes: “Parsi and charity is an integral and indivisible part of Zoroastrian life”. “The only condition for their loyalty was that they were not hindered in the practice of their religion” (Kulke 28). Hinnells and Williams remark:

Parsi charity functioned to create internal community bonds and it was a means to establish good inter-community relations. Individual Parsis not only gained religious merit with their charity actions, but they also created a peaceful and tolerant social- environment favorable to protecting the interests of a tiny minority like the Parsis (86).

Marriage is a holy social institution, in which two different groups from the same community come together. They get united for the creation of next generation. Marriage is also a pious opportunity to display the culture of the Parsi community. Being monogamous community of India, Parsi follows unique wedding customs and rituals. Kumar admits:

According to Zoroastrian, a true marriage is the sacred union of two souls, competing with each other in the ideal practice of self-abnegation. The marriage- ritual is also symbolic; fire which is present at the agreement -stage, is taken as the witness to the union of the two souls (25).

The sexual ethics are so strong that Parsis consider marriage as the holy responsibility and parenthood as the ideal stage of the person. They do not prefer sexual intercourse before marriage. They used to preserve their blood and DNA. For them mixed married people are “an asserts to the community as outcasts” (Paymaster 30). Parsis also prefer the fair

complexion. The birth of a black colored child considered as an occasion of misery for the family. If a newly born Parsi baby is of black color they named it as ayahs, i.e., servant's child.

They also have a fixed number custom. They feel that only a hundred rupees note bring good luck. This is the number much loved by the Parsis. Their wedding gifts always consist of white envelopes with a hundred and one rupee money inside. Karaka attribute: "On their wedding night, he boasted he would give her a hundred one sons. One for each tiger since his bride was almost forty" (42).

Parsis are famous for their gluttony. Food also connects to a cultural group. Immigrants use food as the means of retains their identity. People belonging to different cultures have different eating habits. Parsi community is the most food loving people. The main integral elements of their good life are their unique and tasty meal. No Parsi function is successful without good food and drinks. *Dhan Sakh* is the best known of Parsi Iranian dish cooked with meat, lentils, and spinach. They have no food taboos yet they do not eat the cockerel. The cow is venerated in India. Many Parsis abstain from beef.

Another thing which creates the sense of superiority is humor. Parsis prefer balanced, ethical and harmonious lives. They are fully loyal towards their religion, people and surroundings Being to colorful, Parsis made all their surrounding spiritually peaceful and energetic. They believe in their principles and teachings. These practices help them all over their rest of the life. The life of the Parsi is very joyful. They always create a light of divinity around them. Each day for them is like a celebration with or without purpose. No doubt, they suffer alot due to cruel authorities but the great feeling of self-satisfaction is the cause which made these Parsis a unique community in the world. We Indian wake up with several tensions and stress but the morning of Parsis are very contended and happy.

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