

ZOROASTRIANS (ZARATHUSHTIS) AND PARSIS

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Essence of Divinity Within Each One Of Us

History: Zoroastrians, also known as Zarathushtis, are followers of the Prophet Zarathushtra (ancient Greeks called him Zoroaster) who started the faith in ancient Persia (present day Iran). Scholars believe that Zoroaster existed from before 6000 BC to 600 BC! Greek historians have placed Zoroaster in much earlier times whereas European sources quote later dates, typically around 1400 BC to 1200 BC (1). Other sources, place Zoroaster's life approximately at 1000 BC (2) or before the rise of Achaemenid dynasty in Persia around 550 BC (3). (See Appendix on Page 4 for more details)



From a chronological perspective, Zoroaster preceded Jesus Christ, Gautama Buddha and Prophet Mohammed by several centuries. It is not clear whether Moses (1500 BC to 1200 BC) received the Ten Commandments before, during or after Zoroaster's existence. The Hindu scripture, *Bhagavad Gita*, was written around 1000 BC (1).

“Zoroastrianism is the oldest of the revealed world religions, and it has probably had more influence on mankind, directly and indirectly, than any other single faith ... some of its leading doctrines were adopted by Judaism, Christianity and Islam ...” — Mary Boyce, Professor & Zoroastrian scholar, University of London (1,7).

The Parsis: Zoroastrians of Persian decent, who migrated from Persia to India under the threat of religious persecution from Islamic invaders, became known as the *Parsis*. Although, originally, the Zoroastrian inhabitants of Iran were known as Parsis (from the province of Pars in Iran) the term today is commonly used to describe the immigrants who landed in India in the seventh century.

Arrival in India: Hindu India was kind to Parsis. Upon landing, the Parsi high priest, Neriosang Dhaval, approached the local Hindu rajah, Jadav Rana, for refuge. The rajah sent them a bowl of milk filled to the brim, signifying there was no more room in his kingdom. The high priest stirred a spoonful of sugar in the milk and said:

Just as this small amount of sugar has sweetened the milk, without spilling it, so will my people live harmoniously amongst your people and strive to enrich your community!

The essence of this event still holds true today. Like the *Moghuls*, the Parsis belong to a class of people who migrated to India and stayed to contribute to its diverse history and culture.

Contributions by Parsis of India: Although accounting for only 0.007% of India's population, Parsis have played a vital and pioneering role in India's industrial, political, scientific, and military development as well as philanthropy, establishing and funding many hospitals, subsidized housing projects, and charitable foundations, while never asking for a special or minority status from the Government.

Industry & Commerce:

- Lovji Wadia (1702-1774) started the merchant and naval war shipbuilding industry and turned Bombay (Mumbai) into the busiest seaport in Asia in his days (1). The Wadias built over 350 ships, including sixteen for the British Navy, four of which saw action under Admiral Nelson in the Battle of Trafalgar (9,10).
- Sir Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy (1783-1859) rose from humble beginnings to pioneering a trade empire with China (1).
- Jamshedji Tata (1839-1904), the patriarch of the industrial conglomerate, the house of Tatas, laid the industrial foundation of India. He was the first to start the iron & steel industry in Jamshedpur, Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore and the hydroelectric works in Lonavla. Today, the House of Tata commands over 50 companies including steel, chemicals, locomotives, power generation, commercial vehicles and locomotives, consumer goods, hotels, tourism, tea plantations and computer consultancy services. So far-reaching was his vision that India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, called him the “*One-Man Planning Commission*” (1).
- JRD Tata, a descendant of Jamshedji Tata and a keen aviator himself, was the first Indian to start a national airline (Tata Airline) that later became Air India, the flagship airline for the country (4).
- Sir Dinshaw Petit (1823-1901) laid the foundation of the textile industry in India (1).
- Fardoonji Marzban started the first Indian newspaper, *Bombay Samachar*, in 1822 (1).
- Sir Sorabji Pochkhanawala established the first Indian commercial bank (Central Bank of India) in 1911, which was wholly owned and managed by Indians and is still today one of the largest banks in the country (6).
- Ardeshir Godrej (1868-1936) became the hallmark in the manufacture of household products and furniture (1).
- Sohrabji Shahpurji Bengalee (1831-1893) as Justice of Peace was the first Indian to advocate the well-being of factory workers, long before the idea caught the imagination of social reformists in England (10).



Politics:

- Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917), the “Grand Old Man of India,” was the first to fight for Indianization of the Indian Civil Service. He was the first Indian to be elected to the British House of Commons in 1892 (4).
“Whether I am a Hindu, a Mohamedan, a Parsi, a Christian, or of any other creed, I am above all an Indian. Our country is India; our nationality is Indian.” (1893)
- Madame Bhikaiji Cama (1861-1936) was India’s radical firebrand and a propagandist for Indian independence. She was exiled from India and after her impassioned speech in Stuttgart, unfurled a flag (in tricolor) that became, with some changes, India’s national flag, forty years later (4).
- Sir Pherozshah Mehta: The pioneering mayor of the Bombay (Mumbai) Municipal Corporation and president of the Indian National Congress warned his countrymen of the British tactics of divide-and-conquer (4).
- Feroze Gandhi: A lawyer and former husband of the late Prime Minister Shrimati Indira Gandhi and father of the late Prime Minister Shri. Rajiv Gandhi.
- Nani Palkiwala (1920-2002) was at one time India’s ambassador to the USA.

Science:

- Dr. Homi Bhabha (1909-1966) was the prime architect of India’s nuclear and space program and the first chairman of the Indian Atomic Energy Commission (1948) (1).

Arts:

- Mehli Mehta (father of Zubin Mehta) founded the Bombay Symphony Orchestra (9).
- Zubin Mehta is renowned as the conductor and director of the New York and Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestras (1,4).

Military & Armed Forces:

- Head of Air Force: Air Marshal Aspi Engineer. Head of Indian Navy: Admiral Jal Cursetji.
- The first and only Field Marshal in the Indian Army, Sam Maneckshaw, now in his nineties but still going strong (1,4).

Philanthropy:

- At a speech in England in 1940’s, Mahatma Gandhi once said:

I am proud of my country, India, for having produced the splendid Zoroastrian stock, in numbers beneath contempt, but in charity and philanthropy perhaps unequalled and certainly unsurpassed (1).

Demographics: Most of the original immigrant Parsis of India remained in the state of Gujarat and prospered. They eventually spread their presence, mostly southward to Surat, Navsari, surrounding villages and eventually to Mumbai (Bombay). The population of Parsi Zoroastrians in India, according to a 2001 census, was 69,600 (5). Although the Parsi population continues to decline in India (5,9), it is encouraging to note the community starting to flourish in other countries. Although official worldwide or regional census data aren’t always available, the world Zoroastrian population in the year 2000 was estimated to be 276,600, of which Iran may have 157,000 (according to the Iranian government census); USA: 18,000; Canada: 7,000; UK: 7,000; continental Europe: 4,000; Pakistan: 2,500; and Australia: 2,100 (1). There is also some information suggesting that there are Zoroastrians in some of the countries of the former Soviet Union.

Core Values and Teachings: Zoroaster is believed to be the world’s *first monotheistic* religion based on *one* Supreme Creator and wise Lord of the Universe “*Ahura Mazda*”. Zoroaster proclaimed that the wisdom (of *Ahura Mazda*) is inherent in each one of us because he gifted us with a good mind. It is perhaps difficult to appreciate the originality and courage of Zarathushtra’s thoughts, today. Many prophets have come after Him with similar proclamations. However, if we place ourselves in the antiquity in which He lived, His teachings were radically different from anything that man had dreamt up, thus far. Prior religious practices were often based on fear and the need for propitiating and appeasing several gods (1,4).

Zoroaster’s teachings emphasize a free-thinking, rational mind, and its proper use in daily life (1,4). He taught that life is a constant struggle between two opposing forces - good and evil - in every individual and in nature in general. Each one of us must make the right, moral, and wise choice to discern what is good and to defeat the evil through **Three basic tenets and practices: *Humta, Hukhta, Huvrashta* — Good thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds**. When we exercise our mind – *Vohu Manah* - (our God-given ability to think), we create life and draw *Ahura Mazda* and his divine powers towards ourselves and Good prevails over evil (1,2,3,4). Costly material sacrifices or rituals will not change the way the individual is judged. Making our own choices, we alone have to bear the responsibility for our souls (7).

According to Zoroaster, *Ahura Mazda* created not only the physical universe consisting of sky, water, earth, vegetation, animals, mankind and fire; he also created, with all His wisdom, six spiritual powers called *Amesha Spentas*. They are: *Vohu Manah* (good mind), *Asha Vahishta* (best righteousness), *Kshatra Vairya* (divine kingdom), *Spenta Armaiti* (bountiful devotion), *Haurvatat* (health / wholeness) and *Ameretat* (immortality) (3,8). A combination of these physical and spiritual creations of *Ahura Mazda* is what Life is about — according to Zarathushtra. These concepts have stood the test of time



and are precursors to issues (and hopefully, answers) of more modern times, such as human rights, freedom of speech, and environmental protection (Zoroastrianism forbids polluting the air, water, fire, and the earth).

“The Zoroastrian ideal is strictly ethical. It sends its call to men and women to work together with the eternal Spirit of God in spreading and maintaining Khsatra, the kingdom of Righteousness, against all attacks of evil. This ideal gives us our place as collaborators with God in distributing His blessings over the world.” — Rabindranath Tagore.

Holy Book (Avesta): The Avesta consists of hymns, narratives and laws, all composed and written over a long period of time. It has many parts: Yasna, Gathas, Vispared, Vendidad and Yashts (3). Among these, the Gathas represent the core values and the original teachings of Zarathushtra, Himself (3,8).

Holidays & Calendar: Two main holidays are the spring festival in March, called Navroz, and the Parsi Zoroastrian New Year at the end of August. For example, on August 20, 2005, the year will change to Y.Z. 1375 (commemorating the last Zoroastrian king, Yazdegard-III). The calendar has 12 months of 30 days each, plus five special holy days at the end of each year, when prayers and special ceremonies are performed for the deceased loved ones. The last day of the year is called Pateti, a day of atonement; the New Year is celebrated on the next day.

Ceremonies: Parsis have many different types of ceremonies. There are ceremonies for initiation (*Navjote*), marriage, and ceremonies for the departed, consecration, thanksgiving (*Jashan*), ceremonies of maintaining the Holy Fire and several inner liturgical ceremonies. A traditional silver tray (*ses*) containing a cone (*soparo*) representing Mt. Hara (the mountain of sweetness), a rose-water sprinkler (*Pigani*) symbolizing fragrance and happiness, and a container (*kumkumdan*) for vermillion powder is always displayed on joyous occasions, such as birthdays, *Navjotes*, and weddings (10).



Place of Worship: Although commonly called *Agiyari* (meaning abode of fire), Zoroastrian temples are more accurately referred to as *Atash Kadeh*. They are of three different hierarchical levels — *Atash Behram*, *Atash Adaran*, and *Atash Dadgah*. The inner sanctum of the temple contains an eternal flame that never goes out. The holy fire in an *Atash Behram* is a very special fire that comes from 16 sources, including a lightning strike (9). It is important to note that Parsis don't worship the fire, itself.

Fire symbolizes the energy and the origin of the earth's creation (the Sun).

A priest (*mobed*) is always on duty (24 hours a day) to attend to the consecrated flame and place offerings of firewood (*aesma – baval/babul wood*) and fragrant wood (*boidhi – sandalwood*). Devotees may attend and pray for as long as they wish, at any time. More orthodox devotees may recite certain prescribed prayers as well as prayers of their choice for the five specific time periods (*geh*) of each day. There aren't any masses or conducted (mediated) prayers in the fire-temple. India has several Head Priests (*Dastoorjis*), usually one for each diocese (*Panthak*) and traditionally, always two Head Priests for Udwada (a town 120 miles North of Bombay) and the sanctuary of one of Zoroastrians' holiest fires, which has been continuously maintained for nearly 1,300 years, since its consecration in 721. Another fire in Yazd, Iran has been claimed to have been maintained for 2,500 years (9).



Fire (*Atashi*) in Receptacle (*Afregaan*)

Due to the small number of the Zoroastrian community in North America and their widely dispersed locations, there aren't any consecrated fire-temples that can sustain the necessary full-time priests and the maintenance expenses. Several major cities in North America, such as New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago, and Toronto have non-consecrated prayer halls in community centers, often referred to as *Darbe Mehers* (*Dar-e-Mehers*).

Zoroastrian Association of Florida (ZAF)



We are an association of Zoroastrians in Southeast Florida, registered since 1994. We have a mailing list of approximately 78 families, primarily in Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties.

We celebrate annually, two main holidays — the New Year (in August) and Navroz (Arrival of Spring on March 22) with entertainment such as a dinner, dance, and Parsee play. Cultural & heritage / religious classes for the children are held every month at various members' homes. Additional activities include an annual picnic, a *ghambaar* (traditional Parsee banquet served at no cost to attendees) preceded by a *Jashan* (thanks-giving prayer), and other special events.

A community newsletter is published about four times a year. Members elect a board of officials every two years. It is our eventual goal to establish a cultural center and place of worship for the local community. The ZAF logo depicts the sun, fire, and water, all key symbols of our culture.



Appendix (The History)

- **The Origin — Bronze Age – Kayanian Dynasty:** Zarathushtra retreated from life to a cave on a mountain, where He meditated for 10 years, communicating with nature and His inner self; He finally received enlightenment from Ahura Mazda (the Supreme and Wise Creator). He left the life of seclusion and descended from the mountain at the age of 30 to reveal his religion. It took Zarathushtra 10 years to gain his first disciple, his cousin. Hence, he went to another tribe where he was granted an audience with King Vishtaspa (1400-1200 BC) who became an ardent supporter and follower and from that time, within two years, the religion spread (1,4). Other sources place this key meeting in a much earlier time period with Vishtaspa (of the same name) who was a chieftan of the tribe.
- **The Growth — Achaeminian Period:** It was the official religion of the mighty Persian Empire including the Achaeminian emperors, Cyrus II the Great (559-530 BC), Darius I the Great (522-486 BC) and Xerxes I (486-465 BC) (1,4). Cyrus the Great conquered the mighty kingdom of Babylon (in today's Iraq), freed the Jews from bondage and helped them build their own temples, consistent with his belief of religious freedom and human rights in his empire. Cyrus II is often listed as *Koresh* in Jewish scriptures and referred to as the "Anointed of the Lord." Under Darius-I the Great, the empire and its official religion, Zoroastrianism, spread across Asia Minor, Turkestan, Uzbekistan, the Tadjik, part of Kirgiz soviet republic, parts of Greece, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, northern Arabia, Mesopotamia, Persia (Iran), Afghanistan, west Pakistan and the Indus Valley (4). The glorious Achaeminian Empire and its dynasty came to an end with the invasion of Alexander the Great in 334 BC. His armies defeated Darius-III and destroyed the temples, sanctuaries, and religious texts and massacred the priests in the city of Persepolis, which was the epicenter of Zoroastrian culture, literature, and original religious texts (1,3,4).
- **Dormant — Parthian Period:** For the following five centuries, Zoroastrianism remained dormant during the times of the Seleucid Empire (312-250 BC) and the Parthian empire (250 BC - 224 CE*). On a brighter note however, Vologeses – I (aka Valaksh) in 51-78 CE, ordered the collection and preservation of all the Zoroastrian scriptures scattered after the ravages of Alexander, perhaps for historical value. The Parthian dominance ended after long drawn out battles with the Romans to the west and Kushan to the east (1,4).
- **Resurgence and Decline — Sassanian Period:** From 224 CE to 651 CE, there was a resurgence of Zoroastrianism once again (and for the last time) as the official religion of a vast empire during the rule of Sassanian emperors who replaced the Parthian legacy (1). Many of the scattered texts that had been preserved orally were written down, translated and compiled. Although the early Sassanian emperors, such as Ardeshir – I (224-249 CE) were zealous about their own religion, they were tolerant of other faiths. In contrast, the last years of the Sassanian dynasty seem to be a period of extremes. The Sassanian answer to the threat of the Roman church was to proclaim Zoroastrianism as the only true and good religion. Ironically, the end to the Sassanian empire and that of Zoroastrianism as the official religion, came not by conflict with the Romans but by the invasion of the Arabs, united under the banner of Islam. The sovereignty of Persia (Iran) passed from the last Sassanian king Yezdegerd-III (632-651 CE) into the hands of Islamic caliphs (rulers). So completely was Zoroastrianism routed out from the country of its birth that in current popular thinking, the thought of Iran that was not always Islamic is almost inconceivable (4).
- **Migration to India & Iranian Zoroastrians:** From being the preponderant faith of diverse nations for two millennia with adherents in the millions, within a few centuries, Zarathushtis were reduced, by some accounts, to a miniscule core numbering less than 11,000. Seeking refuge from the oppression that offered them Islam or the sword, some groups of Zarathushtis made their way to the port of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf and set sail in seven ships towards the shores of India. They landed on the island of Diu in Gujarat on the West coast of India and after 19 years set sail again and arrived at a place called Sanjan. This was the year 716 (or 936 according to other scholars) (1,3,4). Some of their co-religionists remained in Iran and have managed to practice the faith in Yazd, Kerman, and other locations, regardless of the adversities through the centuries. The last Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919-1980) encouraged Zoroastrianism, once again. After the fall of the Shah in 1979 and the reversion of Iran to an Islamic Republic, the late *Ayatollah* Khomeini is said to have made an announcement that Zoroastrianism was one of four "acceptable" religions.

* CE refers to the period after the birth of Christ.

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References & Suggested Reading:

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- (9) "After 3,400 Years, India's Parsis are Dying Out," June Kronholz, the Wall Street Journal, May 27, 1982.
- (10) "A Zoroastrian Tapestry, Art, Religion & Culture," Edited by Pheroza Godrej and Firoza Panthaky, Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd. 2002.

Editor: Dastoorji Mirza is of the firm belief that Zoroastrianism originated before 6,000 BC. There are wide discrepancies in the historical dates quoted in different references. Although we have tried to be as accurate as possible, this compilation is primarily a review of references and is not claimed to be a work of original research. This document is intended to be a comprehensive but brief summary of Parsi / Zoroastrianism religion and culture.

