



BĪNAMĀZĪ I. IN ZOROASTRIANISM

i. In Zoroastrianism

All bodily discharges are regarded by Zoroastrians as violations of the wholeness of the person, therefore the result of evil and ritually unclean; bloodshed is worse still, and menses, called a “mark” or “stain” (Av. *čīθravaitī-*, *daxštā-* “menstruant”; Pahl. *daštān*, Arm. *daštan*) is regarded as a periodic illness caused by Ahriman (*Bundahišn*, TD₂, p. 40.12-14; text and tr. in Zaehner, pp. 355-59). In *Zādspram* 34.31, Jēh-dēw, the demon Whore, is appointed by Ahriman for the defilement of females (*āhōgēnīdan ī mādagān*; see Zaehner, pp. 350-51). A woman in menses is subject to severe restrictions.

In the traditional Zoroastrian community of Šarīfābād-e Yazd, Iran, the *bīnamāz* woman is so called because she must remove *sudra* and *kustī* and may not pray. This is in contradiction to the *Persian Rivayats* (tr. Dhabhar, p. 214), which require that she tie the *kustī* seven times a day. She must withdraw to a place, usually a small, dark hut (Pahl. *daštānistān*, Arm. *daštanatun*) where her glance cannot strike, and thereby pollute, the seven sacred creations of Ahura Mazdā. It must be fifteen paces from fire, water, and places of prayer; and three from places frequented by men. To have sex with a menstruant woman is one of the gravest sins a man can commit (*Vd.* 18 sets out terms of expiation). Despite the grim exactions of the observance, a girl’s first menses is celebrated by her family as marking her entrance into



womanhood; and there is no sense of guilt or original sin attaching to women, who are regarded as afflicted by Ahriman, as are even all the righteous in this age of Mixture (*Gumēzišn*).

The *bīnamāz* wears old, plain clothes and removes all adornments as soon as her period begins, lest they become permanently impure. She is allowed less food than usual—and no delicacies—and this is served in metal plates and taken with a metal spoon: other materials are porous and subject to pollution. She should wash with *nīrang* (consecrated bull’s urine)

before eating, and is enjoined to wear special gloves. Any work she does while in confinement is washed with *gōmēz* (unconsecrated bull’s urine) or with water from a bowl (not a running stream) before it can be used; so, also, are her garments for the period cleansed. Although Iranians wash thrice with water, the *Rivayats* forbid touching water for washing or letting even raindrops touch one in *bīnamāzī*.

The least period of *bīnamāzī* is three days, after which Iranians relax the rules of isolation somewhat. The period ends after a maximum of nine days, but normally seven. The menstrual flow must not be artificially stopped, and if it continues beyond nine days medical help is to be sought. One day after the day of the cessation of issue, the *bīnamāz* woman should wash with *gōmēz* and water over three *magas* (holes, from the *barašnom* ritual). If a woman has violated the rules of confinement, she is to pay for the performance of the ritual *dvāzdah hamāst* (twelve recitations of the *Vīdēvdād*, the Avestan text which treats of menstruation and purification in the greatest detail). Observance of the rules of *bīnamāzī* take precedence over other religious obligations: even if the menses begins when a woman is about to prepare a communal religious feast (*gāhāmbār*), she must withdraw, leaving the task to friends and neighbors. Iranian women sometimes forego traveling to a shrine of pilgrimage, lest their menses begin there and a grave sin of defilement be committed, thereby. But at the age when menstruation ends, some women will undergo the *barašnom-e nō šab* and spend the rest of their lives in absolute ritual purity, sometimes being appointed the caretakers of minor shrines.

In Bombay, pious Parsi Zoroastrian women of this writer’s acquaintance will sleep on a metal cot apart from the family when menstruating; they eat out of metal vessels, sit on a special metal stool, and do not go to work. One remarked to me that the time was a rest from her hard life as a mother and housewife with a job downtown besides. Many urban Parsis have greatly



reduced or abandoned the restrictions of menses.

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Šāyest nē šāyest, tr. Tavadia, chap. 3. *Vīdēvdād*, chaps, 16, 18.

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