



CHILDREN I. CHILDBIRTH IN ZOROASTRIANISM

CHILDREN

i. Childbirth in Zoroastrianism

The Zoroastrian community has traditionally regarded marriage as having a threefold function: to propagate the human race, to spread the Zoroastrian faith, and to contribute to the victory of the good cause (Sanjana, p. 508). The birth of a child is viewed as of intrinsic benefit to the whole community because it furthers each of these objectives. In the *Avesta* recognition of the value of both human and animal offspring is attributed to the prophet Zoroaster himself. In one instance he asked for the reward of a fertile cow and a steer (*gāuuā azi*; *Y.* 46.19; Insler, p. 275) and in another for ten mares with a stallion and a camel (*dasā aspā aršnauuatš uštrəmčā*; *Y.* 44.18; Insler, p. 73). The wedding hymn for his daughter Pouručistā also contains references to conception, though in terms not completely understood (*Y.* 53; Insler, pp. 110-11)

In *Ābān yašt* (*Yt.* 5), the Avestan hymn to the goddess Arəduuī Sūrā Anāhitā (see *anāhīd*), the goddess is spoken of as “life-increasing, herd-increasing, fold-increasing, wealth-increasing, and country-increasing” (*Yt.* 5.2); it is she who “makes the seed of all males pure and purifies the womb of all females for bringing forth (*vīspanəm hāirišinəm zaθāi garəβaqn yaožda’aiti*), who makes



childbirth easy (*huzāmitō*) for all females, and who bestows upon females timely milk” (*Yt.* 5.3 = *Y.* 65.2). In the modern Parsi community verses from this hymn are still recited to ensure an easy delivery and the birth of a healthy child, most often as part of *Ābān niyāyišn* (q.v.), which comprises nine verses from *Ābān yašt* that refer particularly to the condition of the woman and the fetus; less commonly the *Ābān yašt* is recited in its entirety. These prayers are passed down orally from mothers to daughters as part of their religious instruction at home (Rose, pp. 67-68).

An ancient formula for ensuring an easy birth and good offspring is preserved in *Vidēvdād* (21), where it is repeated three times: “I shall purify (*frasnaieni*, lit. “I shall wash”) for you [oh child] birth and growth (*zqθəmčā vaxšaθəmčā*); I shall purify for you [oh mother, your] body and strength (*kəhrpəmčā təuuīšīmčā*); I shall make you with child [and] with milk (*hačəṭ.puθrəm hačəṭ.paēmaniiqm*); oh strong one, with milk [and] milk, with fat, marrow, and offspring (*paēmauuaiti xšiptauuaiti raoyāuuaiti mazgauuaiti frazaintiuuaiti*), for you I shall purify a thousand springs, flowing together at the breast (*gao’anəm auui hantačīnā*), which is the nourishment of the child (*puθrahe θrimō*).”

In the Sasanian period it was specified that the duty of caring for and supporting a pregnant woman until the child was born fell on the father (*Vd.* 15.15-18) or, if he was unable, on the community of the faithful (*Vd.* 15.19b; see [children iii](#)). Every pregnant female, whether biped or quadruped, was to be treated with kindness (*Vd.* 15.19b); it was considered a grave sin for worshipers of Mazdā to strike or frighten a pregnant bitch (*ga’qm yqm apuθrəm*; *Vd.* 15.5), and they were enjoined to care for such an animal until the puppies were born (*us jasa-*; *Vd.* 15.21).

During her pregnancy a woman did not experience the monthly ritual impurity requiring sequestration in a separate house (called *daštānistān* or *pūnīgān* among modern Persian Zoroastrians), but, after giving birth she again became temporarily polluted. In the *Vidēvdād* there is a reference to incursions by Angra Mainyu (see [ahriman](#)) into the world at the time of a woman’s menses. Injunctions for countering such incursions, which also occurred during parturition, were elucidated and amplified in the later *Šad dar-e naṭr* (Dhabhar) and *Persian Rivayats*. In the *Rivayats* it was recommended that after childbirth the mother remain sequestered, as during menstruation, for forty-one nights. She was supposed to remain in the delivery



room, avoiding proximity to water or fire, wearing gloves, and using metal implements for eating (*Persian Rivayats*, tr. Dhabhar, p. 224). During the period of isolation she was to be careful not to touch any object of wood or earth (both being porous to contaminating matter; see [cleansing i](#)) and was not to cook or go near a fire (Dhabhar, 76.3-4); she was not to cohabit with her husband for a further forty days, lest she become pregnant again and the suckling child be weakened through lack of milk (Dhabhar, 76.5; *Persian Rivayats*, tr. Dhabhar, p. 225). At the end of the 13th/19th century D. F. Karaka (p. 157) reported that, while in this state of isolation, a woman was permitted to touch her own bed and that of her child, as they were made of iron. When the period of isolation was over the *Rivayats* enjoined the woman to purify herself of pollution by washing from head to toe with *gōmēz* (bull's urine), drying herself, then washing three times with water and putting on clean garments: “[T]hen she is pure” (*Persian Rivayats*, tr. Dhabhar, p. 224). According to *Šad dar-e naṭr*, she was allowed to wash her hair after only twenty-one days in isolation if she was able (Dhabhar, 76.2). The mother of a stillborn child was called *nasāmand* “one who possesses dead matter” and also had to remain in isolation for forty-one days (cf. *Vd.* 5.45-56, where only three nights are specified). She then had to undergo rituals similar to those after normal childbirth, as well as the nine nights’ *baršnūm* (purification) ceremony (*Persian Rivayats*, tr. Dhabhar, pp. 229-30). If a woman died during childbirth “*sagdīd* should first be performed over the woman and then over the [stillborn] child” (*Persian Rivayats*, tr. Dhabhar, p. 226).

Current Parsi ritual practices during pregnancy include ceremonies for Pañčmasin (“fifth month”) and Agarni (“seventh month”). At the Pañčmasin ceremony the parents and parents-in-law present gifts of new clothing to the mother-to-be. The Agarni ceremony is performed on an auspicious day in the seventh month in the presence of married women who have had children. The pregnant woman again receives a new set of clothes and jewelry from each set of parents and is given sweetmeats, symbolic of happiness (Karaka, pp. 154-55; Seervai and Patel, p. 45). There are no such formal prenatal rituals in the Persian Zoroastrian community, but pregnant women are encouraged to eat a diet that is correctly balanced between *sard o garm*, hot and cold. According to an ancient tradition retained by the Persian Zoroastrians, during this time the father of the child should take care not to kill an owl, called in the Avesta *ašō.zušta*, the beloved of Aša (see [būf](#)).

J. J. Modi reported (p. 4) that at the turn of the century it was customary among



the Parsis for the delivery of a first child to take place in the house of the woman's parents, in a clean room set aside for the purpose, in keeping with the injunction in the *Vidēvdād* that the place for delivery in the "Mazdean house" must be "the cleanest and the driest, and the least passed through by flocks and herds, by the fire of Ahura Mazdā, by the consecrated bundles of *barsom* and by the faithful" (*Vd.* 5.46). He noted (p. 5) that "In the case of a house or a place where no delivery has taken place before, religious-minded persons generally take care that a religious ceremony may be performed there before the delivery. . . . A priest or two say and perform the Afrinagān prayer and ceremony over the place. At times, even the Bāj prayer is recited." Although most women in both the Indian and Persian Zoroastrian communities now prefer to have their children in the hospital, it is still customary for a woman to spend the months or weeks before and after confinement at the home of her mother or of another female member of the family who has experienced childbirth and is free to assist her.

Modi (p. 5) also described the practice of lighting a lamp when a child is born; it is "kept burning for at least three days in the room where the child is confined." The same practice was recorded in the *Ṣad dar-e naṭr* (Dhabhar, 162), where it was said to protect the child from "assault by demons and fiends." Even when a child is born in a hospital some Zoroastrians will request that a *divō* (lamp) be kept alight in the confinement room for three days or so; in Persia they may light a candle at the *dār-e mehr* (fire temple).

In the modern Zoroastrian communities in both Persia and India the traditional period of isolation after birth is no longer commonly imposed, though strictly observant women, especially in priestly families, do still undertake a period of seclusion, sometimes remaining in a maternity hospital or convalescent home. The practice of retiring to the *pūnigan* or *daštānistān* after childbirth seems to have ceased among the Parsis in the 13th/19th century but was still attested in Persian villages until the mid-14th/20th century. The mother of a newborn child customarily remains away from the *dār-e mehr* or *agiary* (see *ātaškada*) and attends no funerals or other formal rituals until forty-one days have passed or postpartum bleeding has ceased. It is common for a new mother to be symbolically reintegrated into the Parsi community by means of a ritual bath (*sar šostan/nahn*) similar to that prescribed for men and women before their *sedra pušun/naujote* (initiation) and marriage. Among the modern Parsis a priest comes to the house to pray over the new mother. He then touches her lips with *taro* (consecrated bull's



urine) and *hōm* (Avestan *haoma*, in modern practice extracts of ephedra and well water) and gives her pomegranate leaves to chew and spit out. (In the *Hōm yašt*, *Yt.* 9.22, *haoma* is said to ensure “bright/capable children [*xšaētō.puθrīm*] and righteous offspring [*ašauua.frazaintīm*]). She then takes a normal bath, and the priest prays over her again (Rose, p. 90).

The Parsis have a tradition that the destiny of the newborn child will be fixed in the heavens on the sixth day (*chatta*) after birth, and on that day a tray containing “a sheet of blank paper, ink, pen, a coconut, and red powder” is placed beside the new mother’s bed (Karaka, p. 160). The first three represent hope for the child’s good fortune and success. The other items may reflect Hindu influence. It is at this time that a name is chosen for the child. Persian Zoroastrians have no formal naming ceremony; they often choose traditional names from the Avesta, from among the later heroes of the *Šāh-nāma*, or from a living member of the family whose qualities it is hoped that the child will emulate.

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