



## IRĀNŠĀH

---

**IRĀNŠĀH**, the term now used by the Parsis as the name of their oldest sacred fire, the Ātaš Bahrām (q.v.) established originally at Sanjān and now installed at Udwada, both in Gujarat; but this usage cannot be traced to earlier than the beginning of the twentieth century C.E.

*The Iranian evidence for the use of this term.* *Irānšāh* “King of Iran” occurs, with *Šāhānšāh* “King of kings” and *Bahrām Firōz Šāh* “Victorious Bahrām, King,” as a term for the Ātaš Bahrām of Kermān. It was so used by a learned high priest of that city, Dastūr Nōširavān Marzbān, whose copious verses form part of the *Rivāyat* of Bahman Asfandiyār (Bahman Punjyā), dated to 1626/1627 C.E. (see M. R. Unvala, *Persian Rivāyats* I, p. 166, col. 2, 1. 17, “Šāh-e Irān”; p. 168, col. 2, 1. 16, “Irānšāh”; B. N. Dhabhar’s summary in English, *Persian Rivāyat*, p. 176, section 10 and p. 177, section 17). Dastūr Nōšira-vān appears to have used these various terms for the Fire both for elegant variation and to maintain the rhythm and rhyme of his verses (Dara S. Meherjirana, p. 346), but applying the expression “Irānšāh” to an Ātaš Bahrām was not an innovation of his, to judge from the fact that this occurs as a proper name among Irani priests, given them presumably out of reverence for the Fire which their fathers served. The earliest attestation of this name is in 1494/1495, when it was borne by Mobed Irānšāh bin Malekšāh of Kermān, who completed in that year his verse *Saddar* (See E. W. West, *Grundriss der iranischen Philologie* II, p. 123; Shapurshah H. Hodivala, p. 300, with references for two other occurrences of the name, pp. 308 with 309, 316; Dhabhar, *Persian Rivāyat*, p. 610).

*The Parsi evidence for the use of this term.* The Parsi evidence for the use of this



term is purely literary, the only source being the *Qeṣṣa-ye Sanjān*, a poem composed by the priest Bahman Kaikobād, who completed it in 1599. It tells the story up to that date of the Ātaš Bahrām which the Parsis established at Sanjān after arriving in India; and Bahman refers to this Ātaš Bahrām by expressions like those used by Dastūr Nōširavān for the Kermāni Ātaš Bahrām: *Ātaš Bahrām Firōz*, *Šāh*, and *Irānšāh*. Of these *Irānšāh* (variant, *Šāh-e Irān*) occurs five or six times, as does Ātaš Bahrām itself (with slight variations in the number of occurrences between manuscripts), the other two less often.

Since Bahman’s poem predates Dastur Nōširavān’s, there can be no question of his having been familiar with the latter from Bahman Punjyā’s *Rivāyat*; and there is a problem, therefore, as to how their similar use of the term “Irānšāh” came about. Either of two explanations seems possible: one, that there had been literary contacts between Irani Zoroastrians and Persian-speaking Parsis before the latter part of the sixteenth century for which evidence has not survived; the other, that his use of the term “Irānšāh” was part of a general Zoroastrian tradition of religious verse brought with them by the migrant Parsis and maintained by the priests of Sanjān since the founding of their sacred fire. Such a tradition would have died out subsequently with the fading of knowledge of Persian among the Parsis.

*Terms used of the Sanjāna Ātaš Bahrām in prose documents.* The first Parsi emissary to Iran, the layman Narimān Hōšang, who arrived in Yazd in about 1476, told the Zoroastrian priests that there was an Ātaš Bahrām in Navsari (where the Sanjān fire was then being kept); and this information was repeated by later emissaries, all laymen, no other term for the Fire being used (for references see Dhabar, *Persian Rivāyat*, index, p. 639, under “Atash Behram of Navsari”). Further, when the Sanjāna priest Hamjiār Rām (who was living in 1516) made a marginal note about the installation of the Fire in Navsari, he too called it simply the Ātaš Bahrām (D. S. Meherjirana, p. 348).

Numerous Parsi documents survive from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and among those compiled by Bomanji B. Patell the Sanjān fire is referred to (pp. 1, 5, 30, 33-35, 225, 855, 857-60, 867) simply as the *Ātašbehrām*, and (after other such fires had been established) as *Puratām Ātašbehrām* “the old Ātaš Bahrām” and *Sanjānwālan Ātašbehrām*, “the Ātaš Bahrām belonging to Sanjān.” Its building in Navsari was called simply the *Ātašni Aḡiāri* “the Agiary [see under [ĀTAŠKADA](#)] with the Fire,” this being then the only Parsi place of worship with a Fire burning in it continually (Kotwal, p. 666). In one document in which Sanjāna priests wished to refer to their Fire with



particular reverence, that is, a letter written by them in 1746 to Manekji Naoroji Sett (leader of the Bhagarias (q.v.) in Bombay and a generous donor to the Fire), the term they chose for it was *Śrijī*, an honorific used for gods and the most illustrious of men. (For this letter see Patell, pp. 859-60; Shapurji K. Hodivala, pp. 328-39; Jamasji and Jamshedji Meherjirana, pp. 122-26.)

*Later developments among the Parsis.* A number of manuscript copies had been made of the *Qeṣṣa*, but they remained in private possession, and this poem in Persian was unknown to the Parsi community at large. In 1826 Aspandiarji K. Dastur published a book on intercalation in which he cited a passage from the *Qeṣṣa* with the term *Irānšāh* in it, but his work was too specialized to attract wide attention. In 1831 a careful Gujarati translation of the whole poem by Framji A. Rabadi appeared, who used for this purpose “ten or twelve” manuscripts; but this was incorporated in a book of such uneven quality that it was generally ignored (S. H. Hodivala, p. 93; D. S. Meherjirana, p. 349). E. B. Eastwick’s English rendering (made from a single, rather poor manuscript) came out in 1844 in a learned journal with a naturally restricted readership, and although it was followed in 1855 by an anonymous verse translation in Gujarati, interest in the poem remained slight. It was not until about the beginning of the twentieth century that the Sanjāna priests at Udwada came to study it seriously, and they concluded from it that *Irānšāh* had been the proper name of their Ātaš Bahrām; and they then evolved the explanation that it had been so called because it was consecrated to be the earthly representative of Yazdegerd III, the last Zoroastrian king of Iran—an explanation which runs counter to what is said in the *Qeṣṣa* about the particular reason for establishing the Fire. The first published reference to this interpretation appears to have been in 1905, in a work by Jivanji J. Modi, who in one place (pp. 71-73) made several allusions to the “Iranshah Fire.” When in 1920 S. H. Hodivala published his English translation of the *Qeṣṣa* (again from a single, but good, manuscript), he accepted (p. 106, n. 34) that this was the Fire’s original name; but this idea was then still unknown among the Parsis generally (S. K. Hodivala, pp. 309-13). In 1935 Shavaxah Darashah Shroff (under the pen-name “Frozgar”) published his *Śri Īrānšāh Ātašni Gīt* “Song of Śri Irānšāh Fire”; and in 1942, for the bicentennial celebrations of bringing the Fire to Udwada, the celebrated Parsi poet Ardashir Faramji Khabardar composed his *Śrijī Īrānšāhnō Garbō* “Dance-song for Śrijī Irānšāh” (D. S. Meherjirana, pp. 302, 312). Thereafter acceptance of the Udwada interpretation grew steadily and by now it is believed by almost all religiously-minded Parsis, and even the few skeptics among them tend to refer to the Fire



as the Irānšāh.

*The early history of the Sanjān Ātaš Bahrām.* The only source for the early history of the Sanjān Ātaš Bahrām is the *Qeṣṣa-ye Sanjān*, which gives only broad chronological indications. The poem as a whole will be discussed later in the *Encyclopaedia*. Here only the relevant verses are summarized with explanatory comments in brackets. In 1922 the lithographed text, not very correctly reproduced, of a single ms. was published by Unvala (*Persian Rivāyats* II, pp. 343-54), and Hakeem S. Qadri prepared an edition by collating four manuscripts, which was published posthumously in 1964. (For references to translations other than those already given, see the bibliography.)

The *Qeṣṣa* tells how the founding group of Parsis met a violent storm on their voyage from Diu and prayed to the divinity Bahrām (q.v., patron of travelers), vowing if they were saved to kindle a great Fire for him. By the blessing of his Fire they reached land and with the permission of the local rajah settled in a place which the Dastūr who led them named Sanjān. They prospered, and set about establishing an Ātaš Bahrām. Priests and laymen worked together for months, helped by having with them all the *ālāt* (q.v.) from Khorāsān (that is, the ritual necessities for the task, which presumably included ash from an Iranian Ātaš Bahrām and probably *nirang* and a *vara*). Also, several parties of other priests and laity joined them, bringing ample resources, so that the Fire was consecrated as the religion required.

After 700 (or 500 according to some manuscripts) years (probably in about 1465) a Muslim army attacked Sanjān. The Parsis fought beside the Hindus to defend it, but in vain. Priests rescued the Fire and, accompanied by their families and some lay people, carried it to Bahrot Hill (one of a group of forested hills in which there are caves, about 14 miles [22.5 km] south of Sanjān). There they remained, enduring hardship, for twelve years. They then moved, with their families and the Fire, to Bansda/Vansda (a small inland town, deep in the forest, which was within the Sanjāna priests' jurisdiction or *panth*). The Fire was received there with much honor, and Parsis journeyed to venerate it. But the ways to Bansda were not easy, and after two years Changa Āsa (q.v.), a prominent layman of Navsari, proposed to its Zoroastrian assembly (*anjoman*) that they should bring the Fire there (being a larger place, Navsari, the chief town of the Bhagaria priests with easier access). The Sanjāna priests who tended the Fire agreed, and it was installed in Navsari in a "fair house" *koš kāna*—probably of necessity a modest building, the times being unsafe for any ostentation by non-Muslims. There Bahman Kaikobād, a



descendant of one of the three priests who had rescued and tended the Fire, leaves its story.

When the Fire was installed at Sanjān it was set presumably in an altar-like pillar with hollow top, like the traditional fire-holders (see *ĀTAŠDĀN*) of Iran; but during its wanderings it must have been kept in a portable metal vase, an *āfrinagān* (q.v.); and since the Navsari authorities had no other model, they made for its permanent receptacle a larger version of this, which was to be the prototype for all other holders of Parsi sacred fires (Boyce, p. 172). From the late nineteenth century the Irani Zoroastrians began to replace their traditional holders by these handsome vases, imported from Bombay, which are by now general among them also. (As a result the misleading term “fire altar,” used by non-Zoroastrians for fire-holders of the old type, has had to be dropped in favor of “fire vase.”)

*The later history of the Fire.* When the Fire was brought to Navsari, it was agreed between the Sanjāna and Bhagaria priests there that the former should have the exclusive right to tend the Fire and to benefit from all offerings and donations to it, and that the latter should provide all other religious services, as was their hereditary right. This agreement worked harmoniously for many years, with the Fire leaving Navsari only briefly, from 1733 to 1736, a lawless period when, with bands of brigands roaming the countryside, its priests carried it for greater safety to Surat. By then, however, their agreement with the Bhagarias in Navsari had been breaking down for some decades, for the growing number of Sanjāna priests led some of them to increase their incomes by performing services for the townspeople—an infringement hotly resented by the Bhagarias; and eventually, a legal judgement going against the Sanjānas, they withdrew with their Fire to Bulsar/Valsar, a town some 20 miles (32 km) from Navsari, by then under Sanjāna jurisdiction. The Fire was temporarily housed in one of its two agiarys, until a layman built it its own; but the Sanjāna priests of Bulsar wanted agreements with those serving the Fire which the latter found restrictive, and after only two years they left, taking the Fire to the little fishing village of Udwada, also within the Sanjāna *panth*, where it found a permanent home.

There it continued to be the chief object of Parsi pilgrimage, with pilgrim numbers increasing after Udwada became linked by rail with Bombay/Mumbai. All Parsi sacred fires are honored by an anniversary ceremony (*sālgiri*) on the day in the month of their founding; and since both are unknown for the Sanjān fire, its ceremony is held on day Ādur of month



Ādur (q.v.), with pilgrims coming especially then, and throughout Ādur month, and on day Bahrām in every month. The privilege of serving the Fire remains with nine families, all descended from the three priests who rescued it from the sack of Sanjān; and the position of High Priest, Dastūr, passes in turn from the head of one family to another.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians, their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London, 1979; 4th corrected repr., 2001.

Homi E. Eduljee, *Kisseh-i Sanjan*, K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, Bombay, 1991 (with tr. of the text, pp. 47-59).

Edward B. Eastwick, "Translation, from the Persian, of the Kissah-i-Sanjan; or History of the Arrival and the Settlement of the Parsis in India," *Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, I, April 1842, pp. 167-91; reprinted by R. B. Paymaster, 1915.

Shapurshah H. Hodivala, *Studies in Parsi History*, Bombay, 1920 (tr. of the *Qeṣṣa*, pp. 94-117).

Shapurji K. Hodivala, *Pāk Īrānšāhnī Tawārikh*, Mumbai, 1927; abridged version in Engl. tr. by N. D. Minochehrhomji, *History of Holy Iranshah*, Bombay, 1966.

Firoze M. Kotwal, "Some Observations on the History of the Parsi *Dar-i Mihrs*," *BSOAS* 37, 1974, pp. 664-69.

Dara S. Meherjirana, *Nōndh ane nuktechīnī*, Bombay, 1939 (a learned commentary on the old Sanjāna and Bhagarīa documents).

Jamasji Sorabji and Jamshedji Sorabji Meherjirana, eds., *Navsarīnī pahela dastūr meherjīrānā lāibrerī madhenō*, Bombay, 1955 (copies of old Sanjāna and



Bhagaria documents made by the editors and deposited in the First Dastur Meherjirana Library, Navsari).

Jivanji J. Modi, *A Few Events in the Early History of the Parsis and their Dates*, Bombay, 1905 (with copious citations from the *Qeṣṣa*).

Idem, *Dastur Bahman Kaikobad and the Kisseh-i Sanjan*, Bombay, 1917.

Bomanji B. Patell, *Pārsi Prakāsh I*, Bombay, 1888. Rustam B. Paymaster, *Kisse-i Sanjān*, Bombay, 1915.

Idem, *Early History of the Parsees in India*, Bombay, 1954.

Hakeem S. Qadri, *Qissa-e-Sanjan*, Bombay, 1964 (contains the text, collated from 4 mss. by Qadri, followed by very free verse translations into Eng. and Urdu by Jameel Ahmed and Kazim Ali).

Framji A. Rabadi, *Hadesa Namah*, Bombay, 1831.