



## KUSTĪG

**KUSTĪG**, the Pahlavi term (Pers. *kusti*, *košti*, Guj. *kustī*) used to designate the “holy cord or girdle” worn around the waist (Pahl. *kust*, Pers. *košt* “side, waist”) by Zoroastrians (Figure 1). The term glosses Pahl. *aiwayāhan* < Av. *aiβiānhana-* “holy cord” < Av. *aiβi* + *¹yāh* “to wrap around, to girdle” (Y. 9.26, Yt. 1.17). It is wrapped three times around the waist and is tied with two square or reef knots, one in the front and then one at the back, by both male and female Zoroastrians after they have been initiated into the faith.

The *kustīg* is a single cord of six interwoven strands, each made up of twelve white threads of lamb’s or, less frequently goat’s, wool—that is, a total of seventy-two threads. Cotton can be used as well (*Nērangestān* 67.6, 9). The six strands are braided together at each end to form three tassels, which contain twenty-four threads each. The holy cord’s symbolism was elaborated over the centuries. The six strands were equated to the six *gāhānbārs* or “religious feasts,” the twelve threads to the twelve months of the religious calendar, the twenty-four threads of the tassels to the chapters of the *Visperad*, and the seventy-two threads of the entire cord to the chapters of the *Yasna*.

Traditionally, in Iran and India, *kustīgs* have been woven by women from *āthornān* or priestly families (Figure 2), both as a pious duty and as a means of supplementing their families’ modest incomes. Sometimes the cords were woven by *mobeds* or *magi* themselves—a practice now very infrequent. During the 1920s, *behdin* or Zoroastrian women in the towns and villages around Yazd were trained to weave the cords (Boyce, 1977, pp. 236-37). Parsis at the city of Navsari in Gujarat became well known for supplying the holy



CORDS TO CORELIGIONISTS IN INDIA AND IN OTHER ZOROASTRIAN DIASPORAS, SUCH AS GREAT BRITAIN AND THE UNITED STATES. AS IN IRAN, INCOME FROM SALE OF THE CORDS AUGMENTS FAMILY EARNINGS. PARSİ GIRLS ATTENDING THE TATA GIRLS' SCHOOL AT NAVSARI ARE STILL TAUGHT HOW TO WEAVE *kustīgs*. OTHER PARSİ WOMEN LEARN THE SKILL FROM THEIR ELDERS; FOR EXAMPLE, MRS. NAJAMAI M. KOTWAL, MOTHER OF DASTUR DR. FIROZE M. KOTWAL, INSTRUCTED PARSİ GIRLS FOR ALMOST THREE DECADES. PRODUCTION OF THE CORDS IS CONSIDERED A JOYFUL ACTIVITY DURING WHICH THE WOMEN SING, LAUGH, AND SHARE RELIGIOUS AND LAY STORIES (LITLEDALE, 1898).

TYING THE *kustīg* AROUND THE WAIST WITH THREE ENCIRCLEMENTS (PAHL. *kiš*) IS BELIEVED TO REPRESENT *hūmat*, *hūxt*, *hūwaršt* OR “GOOD THOUGHTS, GOOD WORDS, GOOD DEEDS,” WHICH IS THE RELIGION’S CREDO, AND THEREBY SERVE AS A BOUNDARY TO PROTECT THE BODY AGAINST THE FORCES OF EVIL (*Rehbar-e Din-e Jarthushi* 5). SO IT IS SAID TO BE LUMINOUSLY *stāhrpaēsarjha*- “STAR-SPANGLED” (*Y.* 9.26), ENCIRCLING EACH DEVOTEE’S MIDSECTION LIKE THE ZODIAC DEMARCATING THE AXIS OF THE SKY (*Dādestān ī dēnīg* 36.35-36; *Bundahišn* 28.15; see also Bailey, 1971, pp. 145-47). ACCORDING TO THE *Čīm ī kustīg* OR “REASONS FOR THE HOLY CORD” (42-47), A SASANIAN-ERA TEXT PRESERVED IN BOTH PAHLAVI (OR MIDDLE PERSIAN) AND PAZAND VERSIONS: “THE PLACE OF ALL BEAUTY, LIGHT, AND WISDOM IS THE HIGHER PART, THE HEAD, WHICH LIKE PARADISE IS THE STATION OF LIGHTS ... THAT LOWER HALF, THE PLACE OF DARKNESS AND DESOLATION, IS LIKE HELL ... AND THE PURPOSE OF WEARING THE HOLY CORD IS TO DEMARCATATE THE TWO REGIONS.” THIS THEME OF SEPARATING MENTAL FROM PHYSICAL RECURS IN POST-SASANIAN TEXTS, SUCH AS THE *Gizistag Abāliš* (33-34), WHEN EXPLANATIONS ARE PROVIDED AS TO WHY ZOROASTRIANS MUST ALWAYS WEAR THE *kustīg*. ESSENTIALLY A RELIGIOUS SYMBOL TRANSFORMED INTO AN ARTICLE OF DEVOTIONAL CLOTHING, THE *kustīg* AND ITS RECURRENT EXERCISE OF UNTYING AND RETYING REMIND EACH WEARER ABOUT THE CENTRALITY OF PIETY AND THE NEED TO FOLLOW THE RELIGIOUS PATH THROUGHOUT LIFE (SEE FURTHER STAUSBERG, 2004).

THE RITE OF WEARING A *kustīg* PROBABLY DATES TO PRE-ZOROASTRIAN TIMES (BOYCE, 1989, PP. 13, 257-58). A SIMILAR PRACTICE AMONG THE HINDUS GOES BACK TO VEDIC RITUAL, WHERE MEN OF THE UPPER THREE CASTES ARE INVESTED WITH A HOLY CORD AT A RELIGIOUS INITIATION—THE CEREMONY OF THE SECOND BIRTH (SKT. *upanayana*)—BETWEEN THE AGES OF EIGHT AND TWELVE. THOSE HINDUS WEAR THE CORD DIAGONALLY AROUND THE BODY OVER THE LEFT SHOULDER AND UNDER THE RIGHT ARM, SLIPPING IT ASIDE WHEN NECESSARY BUT NEVER UNTYING IT. ALTHOUGH A DATE FOR THE *kustīg*’S INTRODUCTION INTO THE ZOROASTRIAN FAITH CANNOT BE DETERMINED PRECISELY, ITS USE MAY HAVE BEEN PRESENT AMONG THE PROPHET ZARATHUSHTRA’S EARLIEST FOLLOWERS DUE TO THEIR PRIOR FAMILIARITY WITH THE PRACTICE. POSSIBLE



origins of its usage are variously mentioned in the Zoroastrian texts. According to the *Yasna* (10.21), it was introduced by a holy sage named Haoma Frāšmi. The *Dādestān ī dēnīg* (39.18-19), on the other hand, attributes its first use to the legendary Pishdādian ruler Yima Xšaēta or **Jamšēd**, centuries before the birth of Zarathushtra; and later **Ferdowsi** too would echo this tale in the *šāh-nāma*. Other legends hold that Zarathushtra commended the custom to those who accepted his preaching (*Rehbar-e Din-e Jarthushti* 5).

According to Zoroastrian praxis, a *kustīg* must be worn by every man and woman who has been initiated into the faith through the *navjote* (also *naojote*) or “new birth” ceremony among Parsis and the *sedra-pušun* or “putting on the holy undershirt” ceremony among Iranian Zoroastrians (JamaspAsa, 1887; Modi, 1937: pp. 169-15; Boyce, 1977, pp. 238-240; Choksy, 1989, p. 55). During that initiation, which represents transition to adulthood and acceptance of responsibility for religious deed thereafter (*Yt.* 8.13-14, *Vd.* 18.54), each boy or girl dons a white undershirt (Pahl. *šabīg*, Pers. *šabi*, *šudra*, *šedra*, Guj. *sudra*, *sudre*) and ties a *kustīg* over it around the waist. Thereafter it is a *tanāpuhl* (sin to not wear the cord and undershirt, for so doing leaves the person unprotected from evil and consequently is equated to “scrambling around naked” (Pahl. *wišād dwārišnīh*) in the *Šāyest nē šāyest* (4.10) and the *Nērangestān* (67.11). The *kustīg* is mentioned in the third of sixteen Sanskrit *ślokas* by Ākā Adhyāru as a “good woolen holy cord put on the waist.” The merit accrued from tying the *kustīg* is equated in the thirteenth *Śloka* to performing “ablution in the [holy River] Ganges.” Compared in the *ślokas* to “a coat of mail armor,” it also serves to ward off evil under other situations (Schmidt, 1960-61). So, during funerals, the *kustīg* is held in hand to create *paywand* or “ritual connection” between two persons such as corpse-bearers (who hold this cord between them) while the Zoroastrian mourners, also in similar *paywand*, follow in procession (Boyce, 1977, p. 151).

Due to its religious roles, not only must the cord be worn every day during the devotee’s lifetime, it needs to be ritually untied and retied with specific prayers after the *pādyāb* purificatory ablution—a ceremony called the *pādyāb-kusti* which involves “making new the holy cord” (Pers. *košti nav kardan*) or “tying the holy cord” (Guj. *kustī bastan*) (Choksy, 1989, pp. 55-61; **Figure 3**).

While untying and tying the *kustīg*, the devotee should face east from dawn to midday and west until sunset—that is, toward the sun. At night, he or she may face an oil lamp, fire, moon, or stars. In the absence of any source of illumination, facing south is regarded as an appropriate *qebla*, for it is believed



to be the direction to the heavenly abode of *Ahura Mazdā*. The prayers, which are recited during the *kustīg* ritual, are divided into three parts. The first part is called the *Nīrang ī pādyāb* “rite for ritual ablutions.” Recited before untying the cord, it consists of the *Kām nā Mazdā* prayer (which has its roots in *Y.* 46.7, *Y.* 44.16, *Vd.* 8.21, and the third line of *Y.* 49.10; Choksy, 1989, p. 141). The second part is called the *Nīrang ī kustīg bastan/abzūdan* “rite for tying the holy cord” which is chanted while ceremonially retying the *kustīg*. The initial Pazand prayer of *Ohrmazd Xwadāy* (up to *pa patit hōm*) is a summary of the previous *Kām nā Mazdā* (Kotwal and Hintze, 2008, p. 10 with n. 29). The prayer ends with a short Avestan passage praising Ahura Mazdā and showing contempt for *Anra Mainyu* as an act of faith, followed by a line taken from *Y.* 50.11 (Choksy, 1989, p. 141). This part is completed by reciting one *Ašəm vohū* prayer, two *Yaθā ahū vairiō* (*Ahuna vairiia*, *Ahunwar*), and one more *Ašəm vohū* (Choksy, 1989, p. 139). The third part, which begins with the words *Jasa mē avañhe Mazdā*, constitutes the Zoroastrian confession of faith (MPers. *āstawānīh ī dēn*); it also is titled *stāyišn dēnīh* “the praise of religion” in the Pahlavi version. The first line of this prayer is taken from *Yt.* 1.27 and the remaining portion from *Y.* 12.8-9. It concludes with the repetition of one *Ašəm vohū* (Choksy, 1989, pp. 140-41).

The *kustīg*’s ritual efficacy must be renewed through the *pādyāb-kustīg* ceremony prior to engaging in other religious acts like worshipping at a fire temple, and after sexual intercourse, urination, and defecation. It is untied and retied upon awakening each day, at the beginning of the other watches or divisions (MPers. and Pers. *gāh*) of the day. Most Parsis, even when living in Western countries, still wear the *kustīg* regularly; Iranian Zoroastrians often wear it only for religious services so as not to be singled out for maltreatment by Muslims (Choksy, 1989, pp. 60-61).

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