



ZOROASTRIANISM II. HISTORICAL REVIEW: FROM THE ARAB CONQUEST TO MODERN TIMES

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Designations. In ancient times Zoroastrians had traditionally referred to themselves as *Mazdayasna*-, from which the Inscriptional Parthian form *Mazdēzn*, Inscriptional Middle Persian form *Mazdēs*n, and Book Pahlavi (book Middle Persian) form *Māzdēs*n (plural *Māzdēs*nān) “Mazda-worshiper” were derived. Those self-designations continued to be utilized after Arab Muslims conquered Sasanian Iran in the seventh century CE and conversion of Zoroastrians to Islam occurred over the next five centuries. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, only very orthodox Zoroastrians still call themselves *Mazdayasna* (often rendered also as *Mazdayasni*), a term now used for interchangeably both the singular and plural.

In the Islamic period, another self-designation also became increasingly popular, namely, New Persian (Fārsi) *Zartošti*, *Zardošti* (plural *Zartoštiyān*, *Zardoštiyān*), which eventually provided the Gujarati word *Jarθušti*



“Zoroastrian” after Pārsis settled on the west coast of India between the seventh and ninth centuries CE, but is derived from a standard Avestan line in the Fravarānē “Profession of Faith” (from *Yasna* 12.1; compare *Yašt* 13.89 or Frawardīn *Yašt* in honor of the *Fravašis* or immortal souls), which begins with “I profess myself a Mazda-worshipper, a follower of Zarathushtra” (... *mazdayasnō zaraθuštriš*; see [CONFESSIONS i.](#)). So in fact the designation as “a follower of Zarathushtra” or “Zoroastrian” does go back at least to the third century BCE.

The term *Pārsi*/*Pārsee* (in the latter case the “i” long vowel is rendered as *ee* per more recent Indian convention) comes from the designation *Fārsi* “Persian” and is commonly used for the descendants of those Zoroastrians who left Iran and settled in India (and from India later went elsewhere), although it shows up in Indian subcontinental usage before the seventh century CE due to the presence of Zoroastrian sailors, warriors, and merchants there from the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sasanian empires. Another term used by Zoroastrians on the Indian subcontinent for later co-religionists from Iran who settled among the Pārsis, especially after the sixteenth century CE, and carved out economic niches for themselves, for instance, as alcohol distillers and vintners, is *Irāni* “Iranian.”

In Book Pahlavi, Zoroastrians called their religion *Māzdēsn dēn* “the Mazda-worshipper’s religion” and *dēn ī Māzdēsnān* “the religion of the Mazda-worshippers,” which was derived from Avestan *Mazdayasna daēnā*-. This Avestan phrase has been revived by orthodox Pārsi Zoroastrians in recent years. Also in Book Pahlavi are found the phrases *weh dēn* and *dēn ī weh*, both meaning “the good religion,” which were commonly used to denote the religion. So the religion’s followers also called themselves *wehdēn* (plural *wehdēnān*) in Sasanian and early Islamic times, from which the New Persian *behdin* “[follower of] the good religion” (plural *behdinān*) is still used by Zoroastrians in both Iran and India (among the Pārsis *behdin* is used for both the singular and plural forms).

Medieval Muslims writing in Classical Arabic and New Persian designated all Zoroastrians inaccurately as *al-majus* “magians” (see [MAGI](#)) based upon the technical term for Zoroastrian priests or magi (Middle Persian *magūk*, *mowbed*, *mowmard*, New Persian *mobed*). But the designation has stuck and is still used by pious Shi‘ites in Iran, often as a mild slur. Zoroastrian acts of worship customarily were conducted in the presence of fires on altars inside fire temples (Middle Persian *ātaxškadag*, New Persian *āteškade*; see



ĀTAŠKADA). So the New Persian term *ātašparast* “fire worshipper,” picked up from Christians, became an insult directed by Shi‘ites at Zoroastrians despite the latter’s protesting that their actions were similar to Muslims facing prayer niches and the Ka‘ba. Another early New Persian designation that still is used by Iranian Muslims to deride Zoroastrians as nonbelievers in God was *gabr*, meaning “hollow, empty,” hence “one lacking faith, infidel,” despite the latter sect’s claim that their scripture, the *Avesta*, is a holy book just like the *Bible* and the *Qur’ān*.

Zoroastrians who endure in Iran have retained an older version of the New Persian language, which they use among themselves, calling it Dari (to be distinguished from literary *Dari* and formal Afghan Persian, called Dari [see *AFGHANISTAN v. LANGUAGES*, also *KABOLI*]). Also sometimes called Behdināni, and most often spoken rather than written, it has two main sub-dialects—Yazdi and Kermani—due to the predominant pre-modern Zoroastrian communities of Iran having clustered around Yazd and Kerman. Muslims, who by-and-large are unable to comprehend the dialect, on the other hand, term it Gabri. Yet, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as Zoroastrian youth in Iran have steadily migrated away from their community’s traditional strongholds, the use of Dari has waned, and the Fārsi they have also always spoken and written has come to be their main language of communication, with English moving into second place due to the international convenience it offers. Likewise, in India, the Pārsis slowly began generating their own dialect of *Gujarati*, eventually mixing Gujarati, Persian, and English words, so that it is now called Pārsi Gujarati; it replaced Persian as their written and spoken language by the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. Then in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during the British Raj, Pārsis steadily learned the English language, which has now begun to eclipse Gujarati in daily usage. During the twentieth century, as both Pārsi and Iranian Zoroastrian relocated to European and North American nations, the generations born in those Western countries have steadily lost the ability to communicate in any of their faith’s languages, and English has become the community’s broad-based form of discourse.

Belief in Zaratuštra as a Prophet. As the Zoroastrians in the Achaemenian, Parthian (Arsacid), and Sasanian states interacted with Jews and Christians, they began developing a hagiography or sacred biography for Zaratuštra (Zoroaster) similar in themes to those of Moses and Jesus. Magian *hērbedān* “theologians” culled the *Gāθās* for details that could be ascribed to his life,



times, mission, and followers. The Sasanian-era hagiography was supplemented by parallels to the *Sīra* or text about the Prophet Muhammad's life between the seventh and thirteenth centuries. In that medieval canonized tradition about Zaratustra as the Prophet of ancient Iran and the founder of the Zoroastrian religion, the girl destined to become his mother, Duždōvā (see [DUGDŌW](#)) was forced to flee her hometown for another village. There she met a pious man named Pourušāspa, with whom she conceived Zaratustra, whose immortal spirit (Av. *frauuāši*) had been sent to earth by [Ahura Mazdā](#). A light supposedly shone from Duždōvā's womb when she was pregnant, resulting in attempts by evildoers to harm mother and fetus. Upon birth, Zaratustra's first breaths are said to have sounded like a laugh rather than a cry. Surviving several attacks upon his life by hostile kavis and karapans, who used fire, stampedes of horses and cattle, and exposure to wolves, Zaratustra eventually left home at the age of twenty. After a decade of wandering and contemplation, he received revelation via the [Aməša Spənta](#) "Holy Immortal" [Vohu Manah](#) (Mid. Pers. Wahman, Pers.: Bahman) "the Good Mind," and returned to preach the religion of Ahura Mazdā. Zaratustra was opposed by the clergy of the older cults in his native land and had to seek refuge at the court of a neighboring ruler named Vištāspa who accepted the religion. Here Zaratustra preached and gained many followers until he was assassinated by a priest of another sect at the age of seventy-seven, or so it was written. Through these stories, Zaratustra's image was firmly established as that of a Near Eastern prophet and eventually recorded in the *Zardošt-nāma* "Book of Zaratustra" (tr. Eastwick) and other post-conquest texts such as the encyclopedic [Dēnkard](#) "Acts of the Religion" (see Molé) in the Middle Persian and New Persian languages.

As Zoroastrians have endured centuries of minority status among Muslims, Christians, and Hindus, this hagiography has become increasingly popular, because it provided common ground with members of other faiths, especially Islam, under which Zoroastrians had come to be regarded as a *demmi* "protected minority." This pious biography is now reproduced in novels, comic books, and illustrated children's stories by Pārsi and Irāni popular authors. It has become the standard account of Zaratustra's missionary life and is accepted by modern Zoroastrians without examination and with pride that their faith's founder is regarded as one of the earliest prophets.

In contrast with the literary accounts that are derived from Avestan and Middle Persian sources, however, no early visual images of Zaratustra have



survived. Indeed the oldest one dates to the second century CE in the Mithraeum at [Dura Europos](#) and allegedly presents the ancient Iranian religious founder in Parthian garb. During the fifteenth century, as Europeans speculated about their intellectual past, the famed Italian Renaissance artist Raphael Santi (1483-1520) portrayed Zoroaster in a white robe, holding a globe of the stars, facing a depiction of Ptolemy, and standing next to Raphael himself on the lower right corner of the “School of Athens” fresco at the Vatican in Rome. In the nineteenth century, Zoroastrians began generating their own images of Zoroaster. One was modeled on a rock relief of Miθra wearing a rayed-cap commissioned by the Sasanian king [Ardešīr II](#) (r. 379-383) at Tāq-e Bostān in Iran (see [SASANIAN ROCK RELIEFS](#)). Another took the upward pointing gesture of the classical Greek philosopher Plato at the center of Raphael’s “School of Athens” and transposed it onto Zoroaster. Eventually both images were even fused together to depict the Prophet Zoroaster with rays of light emerging from a halo pointing his right forefinger toward heaven ([Figure 1](#))—this particular image remains extremely popular in fire temples and homes, although most Zoroastrians do not know its origins.

Priests, laypersons, and their religious writings. As Zoroastrians lost political control of Iran to Arab Muslims in the seventh century, and thereafter Zoroastrians began slowly but steadily adopting Islam, the magi attempted to preserve their religion’s beliefs, traditions, and lore by writing them down, first in Middle Persian and subsequently in New Persian. Manuščihr ī Juwānjamān (9th century), a high magus of Fārs and Kerman provinces compiled the [Dādestān ī dēnīg](#) “Book of religious judgements” and the *Nāmāgīhā* “Epistles.” His brother [Zādspram](#), the magus of Sirkan, authored the Pahlavi *Wizīdagīhā* “Selections.” Mardānfarrox ī Ohrmazddādān (also during the 9th century) produced the [Škand gumānīg wīzār](#) “Doubt-dispelling exposition” in Pahlavi to both defend Zoroastrianism and attack Judaism, Christianity, Manicheism, and Islam as *agdēn* “evil religion.” Another defense of Zoroastrianism, [Gizistag Abāliš](#) “[Book About the] accursed Abāliš,” was set in the narrative context of a theological debate conducted at the palace of the ‘Abbasid caliph al-Ma’mun (813-833) and associated with the denunciation of a Zoroastrian apostate. Two *hudēnān pēšōbāy* “leader of the faithful [Zoroastrians]” in Fars, [Ādurfarrōbay ī Farroxzādān](#) (early ninth century) and [Ādurbād ī Ēmēdān](#) (early tenth century) assembled portions of the Middle Persian *Dēnkard* “Acts of the Religion.” Zoroastrianism’s main cosmogonical and eschatological text, the [Bundahišn](#) “[Book of] Primal Creation” was redacted in the year 1078. The [Ardā Wirāz](#) nāmāg “Book of righteous Wirāz,”



although based on Sasanian-era materials, also survives through a ninth- or tenth-century redaction and preserves the description of a spiritual voyage through heaven, limbo, and hell.

Ritual texts compiled by medieval magi as Zoroastrianism declined in popularity include the short *Čīm ī kustīg* “Meaning of the holy cord,” which survives in both Pahlavi and Pāzand renditions. Among extant catechisms is the *Čīdag handarz ī pōryōtkēšān* “Select counsels of the ancient sages” dating from the ninth century. Also titled *Pand nāmāg* “Book of advice,” it provides a synopsis of religious values, beliefs, and practices. The *Pahlavi Rivāyat accompanying the Dādestān ī dēnīg* “Middle Persian treatise accompanying the Book of religious judgements” covers belief, rites, and religious law during the late ninth or early tenth century. Religious stipulations and ritual requirements are discussed as well in the *Šāyest nē šāyest* “The proper and the improper” with its supplementary texts, which, although based on Sasanian-period materials, date from the ninth century too. Other miscellaneous Zoroastrian writings in Middle Persian, but also including some of those already discussed, were collected together by magi into codices such as those used by Jamaspji Minocheherji Jamasp-Asana to compile the collection *Pahlavi Texts* (2 vols., Bombay, 1897-1913). The *Pahlavi Rivāyat of Ādurfarrōbay and Farrōbaysrōš* contain responses by two Iranian magi to questions posed by laypersons in the years 800 and 1008, respectively.

Magi living in Iran under Muslim rule also produced *Pāzand* (i.e., “[text] with commentary”) literature. Pāzand prayers include the *Paywand nāme* or *Ašīrwād*, which serves as the benediction for marriage ceremonies. This tradition was continued by a Pārsi priest named Neryōsangh Dhaval (late eleventh century or early twelfth century), who transcribed select Pahlavi books into the Avestan script to make them accessible to magi who could read Avesta, but not Middle Persian. Other Pāzand texts by Indian magi include the *Petit pašēmāni* (see [CONFESSIONS i.](#)) “Act of Contrition,” *Dibāče* or “Prefatory recitations” to *Āfrīnagān*, *Āfrīn*, *Duā*, *Nirang*, *Setāyešne*, and other regularly recited prayers and invocations (see, e.g., Kanga).

Neryōsangh Dhaval translated portions of Avestan scripture into Sanskrit, including an incomplete Pahlavi version of the Yasna, *Xorde Abestāg*, *Mēnōg ī xrad*, and *Škand gumānīg wizār*. Fragments of Sanskrit translations of the *Vidēvdād*, perhaps also going back to Neryōsangh’s efforts, have survived. His intention was to make Zoroastrian scripture and exegesis accessible to Pārsis who knew Gujarati and other Indian languages, but not Avestan and Middle



Persian. Sixteen Sanskrit *śloka*s or verses dating to before the seventeenth century, which discuss socio-religious matters from prayer times to dress codes to purity, are attributed by Pārsi tradition to Neryōsangh. Those verses, however, seem likely to be the work of a Hindu priest named Ākā Adhyāru rather than a Zoroastrian *mobed* or *behdin* (see KUSTĪG). On the other hand, the *Aširwād* was translated from Pāzand into Sanskrit by Dinidās Bahman prior to the year 1415.

Many Zoroastrian religious documents came to be written in New Persian. Most famous is the Pārsi community's founding legend known as the *Qessa-ye Sanjān* "Story of Sanjan." The *Qessa-ye Sanjān*, a narrative poem in New Persian based upon older oral traditions, was composed in 1600 by Bahman Kaykōbād Sanjāna, another Zoroastrian priest. Its contents, much romanticized, provide information on the early religious history of the Pārsis in India. Expository translations into New Persian from Middle Persian texts include the late medieval *Saddar Bondaheš* "[Book of] Primal Creation [written] in one hundred chapters," and *Saddar Nasr* "One hundred chapters of Assistance." More original works of advice, yet drawing upon established traditions, became the Persian *Revāyats* "Treatises" which date from the late fifteen to late eighteenth centuries and contain responses by learned Zoroastrians living in Yazd and Kerman to ecclesiastical questions posed by their Indian coreligionists. Those treatises include the *Revāyat-e Ithoter* "Treatise of seventy-eight chapters." The *Farziyāt nāme* "Book of obligatory duties," by Dastur "high priest" Darab Pahlān (1668-1734), written in couplets at Navsari, lays out the religious duties of each individual throughout life and on every day of the month, and it reveals Indian influences such as vegetarianism. It was translated and published in Gujarati for general readership approximately one century later. The same high priest's *Kolāse-ye din* "Exposition of religion" recounts the story of creation, the lives of Zoroaster and Yima (Jam), and the religious duties of laypersons; it lists Ahura Mazdā's names, lists the Aməša Spəntas and the demons opposing them, and cites important prayers. He also composed *monājāt* "religious songs" in Persian and Gujarati. During the twentieth century, the Iranian Muslim scholar Ebrahim Pourdavoud (1885-1968; see [HISTORIOGRAPHY ix. PAHLAVI PERIOD \(2\)](#), "Contributions of Purdawud") produced New Persian translations of the *Gāthās* and *Yāsts*, which became popular among educated Iranians and were reprinted by Pārsis in Bombay (now Mumbai).

Pārsis began composing original religious texts in the Gujarati language when



it replaced New Persian as their medium of communication. The mid-nineteenth century *Rehbar-e Din-e Jarthushti* “Guide to the Zoroastrian Religion,” a pre-modern catechism, was written by the high priest Erachji Meherjirana (1826-1900). That text was eventually translated into English with a commentary by the contemporary Pārsi priest Dr. Firoze Kotwal, who served as dastur of the Wadia Ātaš Bahrām in Bombay (Kotwal and Boyd). As generations of Zoroastrian theologians and priests adapted to life in minority and diasporic situations, between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries they also began augmenting subsequent manuscript copies of Avestan and Pahlavi texts with interlinear translations and commentary in Fārsi and Gujarati (Figure 2).

As English has become popular among Zoroastrians owing to British colonialism, Western-style secular education, globalization, and travel to and from the West, translations of scripture have been produced in that language too. Among the most commonly utilized prayer books, especially for teaching scripture to children before their initiation into the faith, with transcription in Roman script and translations into English during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are *Daily Prayers of the Zoroastrians* by the Ceylonese or Sri Lankan Pārsi scholar Framroz Rustomjee (1896-1978), who eventually immigrated to Australia to join his children, who had moved there a few years earlier, and *Khorde Avesta* by the Irani mobed Faribourz Shahzadi who now lives in the United States. Discourses on Zoroastrianism, written in English, have been published by Dastur Khurshed Dabu (1889-1979) at Bombay, Ērvad Godrej Sidhwa at Karachi, and Mobed Bahram Shahzadi at Westminster, California, among many others. Basically catechisms, those discourses serve to disseminate knowledge of Zoroastrianism from a variety of perspectives to clerical and lay Zoroastrians and to non-Zoroastrians who may not know any of their community’s traditional languages.

According to tradition, the *dastur dasturān* “high priest of high priests” moved to the central Iranian village of Torkābad north of Yazd in the twelfth century and then to Yazd itself in the eighteenth century. In India, starting in the tenth century, Pārsi magi divided into five *panths* “ecclesiastical groups” based on location: the Sanjānas at Sanjan, the Bhagarias serving Navsari, the Godavras based at Anklesar, the Bharuchas controlling rites in Broach, and the Khambattas of Cambay. These *panths* cooperated when necessary, for instance, during 1129-1131. To ensure that the community’s calendar received appropriate intercalation, although each generally regulated its own clergy,



laity, and religious matters through an *anjoman* “association.” The *anjoman* system of communal administration, borrowed from Iran, would eventually spread back to the Zoroastrian homeland in the nineteenth century, as Pārsis helped their coreligionists rebuild social organizations.

The present-day priesthood, whose members are still called *mobeds*, traces its lineage to the medieval magi of Iran. Indian magi do so via a single ancestor, Shāpūr Shahriyār (late tenth or early eleventh century). In Iran and India, they form the *āthornān* “[members of the] priestly group” distinct from the *behdinān* “laity.” Within the modern magi, ranks persist, including that of *ostā* (Pers. *ostād*) “teacher” (an uninitiated priest), *ērvad* (see [HĒRBED](#)) “teacher priest” (a priest who has undergone the first level of induction), and *dastur* “high priest,” whose office is usually, but not always, associated with a temple for a holy fire of the *ātaš bahrām* or highest ritual level. Two categories of lay individuals assist the magi now, especially in Iran: the *ātašband* “keeper of the flames,” who tends ritual fires, and the *dahmobed* “junior priest,” who serves as temple warden. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, another category of priestly assistants has been created by the Mobed Councils in Iran and North America, namely the *mobedyār* “lay priest,” to counter the growing shortage in the number of official clerics. In North America, even Zoroastrian women are occasionally initiated as *mobedyār*.

Magi in both Iran and India continue to wear white robes and a white turban. They don a white mouth and nose mask (Middle Persian and New Persian: *padām*, Gujarati: *padān*) to avoid polluting implements (New Persian and Gujarati: *ālāt*) and offerings (Av.: *miiazda*, Mid.Pers.: *mēzd*, Pers. and Gujarati: *myazd*) during rituals ([Figure 3](#)). For high or inner rituals, they are required to be in a major state of ritual purity, which is obtained via the *Barašnūm ī nō šab* “Purification of the nine [days and] nights,” ceremony (see [BARAŠNOM](#); [ZOROASTRIAN RITUALS](#)). During rites, an appropriately inducted and purified magus can serve as *bōywalla* “incense offerer,” *rāspi* “assistant,” or *zōt* “invoker.” Passed from father to son, but in no clearly documented cases to a daughter, priesthood involves long years of studying the liturgies and rituals of Zoroastrianism, starting during childhood. Now there are only two functioning seminaries, called *madrasas* and both located in Mumbai, for the magi: the Athornan Boarding Madrasa at Dadar and the M. F. Cama Athornan Institute at Andheri West. Despite such training, because scripture is memorized, many magi comprehend only the gist of prayers. Clerical training may be followed by formal initiation as a priest via a two-stage ritual process



involving the *Nāwar* and *Martab* (*Maratib*; Pers. *marāteb*) ceremonies among the Pārsis and the *Navezut* ceremony among Iranis. Ritual purification of body and soul is obtained via two (for the *Nāwar*) or one (for the *Martab*) *Barašnūm ī nō šab* performance(s) among Pārsi priests. Next, the novice performs the *Yasna* “Worship, Sacrifice” ritual for the *Nāwar* initiation or the *Vendidād* (“Code to ward off evil spirits”) ritual for the *Martab* initiation. Most magi also obtain secular education and, after undergoing only the *Nāwar* or basic *Navezut* induction, serve as part-time priests or else leave the priesthood completely for secular employment, which provides higher remuneration. The resulting shortage of magi has led to abbreviation of certain rites such as purificatory ones and a focus on the daily devotions or outer rituals such as *Jašan* “Thanksgiving” (Pers. *jašn*) services, rather than on high rites or inner rituals such as the *Vendidād* and *Nirangdīn* “Consecration of liquids.” On a daily basis, magi serve lay Zoroastrians at fire temples, in countries as diverse as Iran, India, Australia, England, and the United States, where they are employed by local congregations.

Conversion to Islam, decline of institutions, and minority status. The Arab Muslim conquest of Zoroastrian Iran and overthrow of the *Sasanian dynasty* (224-651) during the seventh century came to be associated with apocalyptic and prophetic expectations. Zoroastrian apocalypticism alluded to doom and the final days of humanity (see *ESCHATOLOGY i. IN ZOROASTRIANISM AND ZOROASTRIAN INFLUENCE*). According to the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* “Exegesis on the Devotional Poem to Vohu Manah,” redacted anonymously in ninth century Iran: “(Ahura Mazdā told the Prophet Zaratuštra,) ‘The seventh age, of alloyed or debased iron, entails evil rule by disheveled demons from the clan of Khashm’” (1:11; see *AĒŠMA*). Islamic prophecy highlighted triumph, presenting the Prophet Muhammad (ca. 570-632) and the Muslim caliphs as successors to Zaratuštra and the Sasanian monarchs. Since people believed those statements, they acted on their beliefs. Many despondent Zoroastrians, concluding that a true deity would not have forsaken their religion or them, chose to accept the faith, which had demonstrated its ascendance through political victory. Urban Irani Zoroastrians adopted Islam from the eighth through tenth centuries, and that faith spread among rural folk from the tenth through thirteenth centuries. As residents’ confessional alliance shifted to Islam, there was diminishment in contributions to pious foundations that supported the magi. Consequently, many Zoroastrian ecclesiastical institutions such as fire temples and *hērbedestāns* “theological colleges, seminaries” were either transformed into Islamic mosques and Sunni *madrasas*, respectively, or



abandoned and destroyed, by the fourteenth century. The *čahārṭāq* “four arches” style of fire precinct with its domed roof (Figure 4) was assimilated into Muslim architecture as domed mosques.

Zoroastrianism initially represented the dominant faith numerically, though no longer politically, in those regions of the Islamic empire seized from the Sasanians and the princes of western Central Asia. To facilitate peaceful governance, medieval Muslim scholars drew upon *hadīth* “traditions” attributed to the Prophet Mohammad and caliphs like ‘Umar I (d. 644) and the first Shi‘ite *emām* “spiritual guide” ‘Ali b. Abi Tālib (598-661) for incorporating Zoroastrians into the *ahl al-ḍemma* “protected communities.” Not all Muslims recognized Zoroastrians as a *ḍemmi* community, but the Umayyad (661-750) and ‘Abbasid (750-1258) caliphates did.

Because *ḍemmi* status provided at least nominal safety as a religious minority, magi facilitated the Zoroastrian claim to that position by making copies of the *Avesta* and its *Zand*. Zoroaster’s hagiography was augmented to remake him into a Near Eastern prophet (discussed above) who had preceded Mohammad. *Ahura Mazdā* was gradually transformed into the Zoroastrian God. Anra Mainyu “the Angry Spirit” (see *AHRIMAN*), who had originally been Ahura Mazdā’s spiritual opposite, became the Devil. Zoroastrianism influenced Islam as well, with Iranian traditions of afterlife including the imagery of a bridge leading to heaven filled with pleasure, and notions of an apocalypse at the end of time followed by an eschaton, entering both Sunnism and Shi‘ism.

Between the eighth and fifteenth centuries, the lives of Zoroastrians as members of a *ḍemmi* community were governed by religious tenets and by a sectarian society dominated by Muslim men. Realizing that cross-communal contacts threatened the traditional way of life, magi outlawed sex, marriage, and most forms of interaction by Zoroastrians with Muslims unless such contact was vital for a Zoroastrians livelihood or safety. Likewise, Muslim jurists (see *FEQH*) such as Mālek b. Anas (716-795) ruled that Zoroastrians should not be permitted to marry Muslims unless Islam was adopted. Yet intermarriage across confessional boundaries became increasingly frequent, with Zoroastrian spouses experiencing rejection from their coreligionists. So they adopted Islam and raised their children as Muslims. Because Zoroastrians were regarded as unclean, Muslims initially were not supposed to eat food prepared by Zoroastrians. Traditions, attributed to various early caliphs including ‘Alī and an ex-Zoroastrian companion of the prophet Mohammad named Salmān al-Fārsi (d. 656), developed to overcome that barrier,



eventually resulting in Muslim jurists such as Ahmad b. Hanbal (780-855; see [HANBALITE MADHAB](#)) decreeing that meals prepared by Zoroastrians could be consumed by Muslims.

Limited socioeconomic interactions with Muslims notwithstanding, minority status resulted in considerable hardship for followers of Zoroastrianism. The powerful Saljuq vizier Nezām al-Molk (d. 1092) commanded that Zoroastrians, like other *ḍemmi*, should not be appointed to positions of authority over Muslims and even equated them with Muslims groups that were regarded as heretical. Even more problematic was that Zoroastrians' standing under Islamic law was secondary to members of the majority confessional group—affecting equitable resolution of commercial and social disputes. The *jezya* “poll tax” usually was collected by community leaders rather than paid directly to Muslim officials by each Zoroastrian. Yet here too legal inequity impacted. Mahmud b. ‘Omar al-Zamaḡṣārī (1075-1144), an important Muslim theologian, suggested that Zoroastrians be publicly humiliated each time the *jezya* was collected. Previously, from around the year 750 onward, Zoroastrians were required to wear yellow colored caps, shawls, belts, and badges so that Muslims could easily identify members of that religious minority. Muslim authorities had forbidden the use of horses and saddles by Zoroastrians. (See, e.g., the jurist Abu Yusof al-Anṣārī [d. 182/798], ed. and tr., III, pp. 87, 93, 99; cf. the regulations imposed on all *ḍemmi* by the caliph Motawakkel in 235/849-50, in Ṭabari, iii, pp. 1389-90; tr., pp. 89-90. For the nineteenth century, see [KERMAN xiii. ZOROASTRIANS OF 19TH-CENTURY KERMAN AND YAZD](#).)

Conquest and rule of Iran by the [Mongols](#) (1219-1256), [Il-khanids](#) (1256-1335), and Timurids (1370-1507) resulted in violence against urban Zoroastrians residing in city quarters specifically designated for them. Those seeking to avoid harm often sought protection through re-affiliating their faith to Islam. Those Zoroastrians who survived sought refuge by moving to out-of-the-way locales within the Fars, Yazd, and Kerman provinces of Iran. There the magi attempted to maintain Zoroastrian rites and beliefs by compiling religious literature known as the Pahlavi Books in Middle Persian and the Revāyats in New Persian (see [KERMAN ii. HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY](#)).

The early modern period in Iran. During the Safavid period (1501-1736), institutionalization of Shi‘ism, often carried out violently, resulted in Zoroastrians increasingly experiencing the specter of forced conversion to Islam under the religious zealousness of Shi‘ite clerics or *mollās*. Zoroastrians



living in the cities of Yazd and Kerman plus the villages surrounding those urban centers seem to have borne the brunt of religious persecution which forced many of them into adoption of Shi'ite Islam. At the same time, the transformation of fire temples into mosques or *masjeds*, and desecration or even demolition of funerary towers or *daḳmas* accelerated. As a result, fire altars or *ātašdāns* came to be hidden in inconspicuous side chambers of fire temples to protect the flames which smoldered under piles of ash from being desecrated, as occurred when a governor of Kerman spat upon the fire there (Jean Baptiste Tavernier [1605-1689], p. 481; tr., p. 167; cf. Boyce, 1977, pp. 75-76).

During the reign of Shah 'Abbās I (1587-1629), it was noted that a number of Zoroastrians had been forcibly relocated in 1608 from Yazd and Kerman to the capital city Isfahan as laborers (Pietro della Valle [1586-1652], tr., II, p. 104; [Garcia de Silva y Figueroa](#) [1550-1624], tr., p. 179).

In other cities of Safavid Iran, they also served as a manual workforce and as textile weavers (Tavernier, pp. 106, 481; tr., pp. 41, 167; Silva y Figueroa, tr., p. 178). Outside the cities, they were forced to toil for meager wages on farmland owned by Muslims. Shah 'Abbās even had a high priest or *dastur dasturān* executed together with other Zoroastrian notables for failing to deliver to the royal court a legendary manuscript ascribed to the biblical Abraham that the Zoroastrians were, incorrectly, thought to have possessed ([John Chardin](#) [1643-1713], II, p. 179).

In the mid-1650s, among the harsh measures undertaken during the reign of 'Abbās II (r. 1642-66), mass expulsion of Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians from Isfahan's city center took place—on account of their presence being deemed detrimental to the orthodox beliefs, ritual purity, and day-to-day safety of Muslims. This is described by the chronicler [Arak'el of Tabriz](#) (tr. in Bournoutian, pp. 347-61; see also [KERMAN xiv. JEWISH COMMUNITY OF KERMANS CITY](#)). Forcible conversion of Zoroastrians to Shi'ism, execution of community elites who refused to comply and thereby set an example for the rest of the Zoroastrians, coupled with destruction of their fire temples and other places of worship was decreed by Solṭān Ḥosayn (r. 1694-1722; Lockhart, pp. 72-73; for the Shi'ite religious context, see also [MAJLESI, MOḤAMMAD-BĀQER](#)). Disintegration of Safavid authority at that time resulted in only sporadic enforcement of that royal commandment, and so the number of Zoroastrians did not fall drastically from around a supposed 100,000 until the 18th-19th centuries (Karaka, p. 31). The faith's members in Iran suffered



further as a result of the Afghan invasions led by Mahmud Khan Ghilzai and other tribal chiefs during 1719-1724 (see [ĠILZĪ](#); [KERMAN viii. AFSHARID AND ZAND PERIOD](#)). At Kerman, Zoroastrians in the *gabr-maḥalle* (their city quarter) and the surrounding villages were executed for being non-Muslims. Some Zoroastrians survived by fleeing via the *qanāt* or subterranean irrigation system into the citadel. Priests and laity who lived adjacent to the fire temple within the city survived the slaughter as well, and constructed a makeshift *daḵma* funerary tower to expose the mass of corpses (Karaka, pp. 33-35). Desperate for better living conditions, Zoroastrians eventually did side with the Afghans. Approximately five hundred Zoroastrian men joined the Afghan forces attacking Kerman, slaying many Iranian Muslims in a garden called the Bāḡ-e Naṣr. Likewise at Yazd, in September 1724, Afghan leaders reached a deal with their Zoroastrian counterparts in order to launch an attack against that city's Safavid citadel (Floor, pp. 43, 46, 49-50, 57, 93, 227). Collaboration with the Afghans led to the Zoroastrian minority being punished by forced conversion to Islam or execution by [Nāder Shah](#) (r. 1736-47).

Similarly, after Zoroastrians sided with the more religiously tolerant [Zand dynasty](#) (1750-94), which made pretensions to ancient Iranian tradition, they were designated traitors and punished by [Āḡā Moḥammad Khan Qājār](#) (r. 1779-97). In early Qajar times, as in the few hundred years previously, a major occupation among Zoroastrians was agriculture. Some of those individuals found work outside the agrarian sector as laborers, carpenters, weavers, bankers, and traders. The *jezya* had to be collected by the notables of each local community and paid to the regional Muslim authorities, and they were beaten if payment was not made in full on time. Conversion to Islam was enforced periodically with transformation of fire temples into mosques. As result, a majority of Zoroastrians continued withdrawing to rural settings—for example, the urban community at the royal capital Tehran numbered only about one hundred, and community membership at Isfahan declined to approximately four hundred households (Karaka, pp. 31, 39-42, 49; Malcolm, p. 47). Demographic estimates of Zoroastrians in Qajar Iran varied widely during this period (see [KERMAN ii. HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY](#)), and another source, namely, the Parsi emissary Manekji Limji Hataria (1813-1890; on him, see below), calculated a total of 7,123 in Tehran, Yazd, Shiraz, and Kerman (for his head counts, see A. de Gobineau [1816-1882], pp. 373-74).

Zoroastrians living during the middle of the nineteenth century feared that their homes would be raided and possessions—especially religious texts, trade



items, and personal valuables—seized or burned (H. Petermann [1801-1876], II, p. 204). Homes, therefore, had hiding places with food and water for persons plus discreet cubicles where valuables and religious items could be kept safe. Religious rites were performed indoors, out of view of Muslims, so as not to attract hostile action. The British educationalist Rev. Napier Malcolm (1870-1921) noted that, in 1865, Zoroastrians were required to follow essentially demeaning medieval rules for non-Muslim protected minorities. They had to identify themselves publicly through yellow or similar colored clothing, could not utilize umbrellas for shade from the sun or eyeglasses for better vision, were not permitted to ride animals in the presence of Muslims, so that the latter individuals would not seem shorter than the former persons, and were required to dwell in low-roofed homes with poor ventilation (Malcolm, pp. 36, 45-47; see [KERMAN xiii. ZOROASTRIANS OF 19TH-CENTURY YAZD AND KERMAN](#)). Given that Qajar authorities enforced those rules, the community did not complain of its hardships directly to the monarchy for fear of retribution, although they did communicate their sufferings to the Parsis in India.

Medieval migrations to India and elsewhere. The Arab Muslim conquest of Iran triggered migrations by Zoroastrians. Some Zoroastrians, especially Sasanian nobles and military personnel, immigrated to China. Zoroastrians survived in China as late as the middle fourteenth century, after which time they were completely assimilated into the local population. The situation proved different for those who went to India between the seventh and tenth centuries to form the Pārsi community there.

The Zoroastrian migration to India is recorded as the Pārsi community's founding legend known as the New Persian *Qessa-ye Sanjān* "Story of Sanjan." According to that text, during the reign of the Samanid kings (892-1005) groups of Zoroastrians left the northeastern Iranian province of Khorasan to avoid forced conversion to Islam. Their descendants finally reached [Gujarat](#) in western India by sea via [Hormuz](#) and Diu in the year 716 or the year 936 CE, depending on interpretation of the date's numerals. Despite details in the *Qessa*, other textual and archeological data suggest that the communal designation of Zoroastrians dwelling outside Iran as "Pārsis" (Sanskrit: *Pārasika*, *Pārsika*, from Iranian: *Pārsika*, *Pārsīg*) predates the eponymous landing at Sanjan. Zoroastrians in Iran certainly had contact with people in the Indian subcontinent from at least the fifth century BCE, through overland and maritime trade. Middle Persian inscriptions plus Sasanian coins and seals



found in archeological excavations of mercantile communities dating to late antiquity (third to sixth centuries CE) in India and Sri Lanka attest to such dealings and to Pārsi settlements. So do documents in the Old Sinhala language from the fifth and sixth centuries. Not surprisingly, in early Islamic times, *gabr* groups in the hinterland of north India are attested (Choksy, 2013 provides details). Likewise, a late ninth-century (dated to 849 CE) copper plate from Kollam, Kerala, documents Zoroastrian merchants having recorded their names in Middle Persian as witnesses from the “Good Religion” (Cereti, 2007, p. 212; “Copper Plates”). The number and size of such communities suggests that Zoroastrians must have entered India via both sea and land routes, and over many centuries, rather than in a single post-Arab conquest maritime migration.

About five years after their arrival, the Pārsis consecrated an *ātaš behrām* “victory fire” named *Irān Šāh* “King of Iran,” which remained their main flame for more than eight hundred years. Most religious rituals were performed using *dādgāh* “hearth” fires. The *jezya* that had been levied from the Zoroastrian minority in medieval Iran by Muslim dynasties was imposed upon Pārsis in 1297, when the Delhi Muslim sultanate conquered Gujarat. Economic hardship created by payment of the *jezya* plus the stigma of designation as *demmi* resulted in conversion of portions of the Pārsi population to Islam. Yet, the community persisted in their beliefs and praxes with the result that early European travelers began to encounter them. Thus ca. 1321 the Dominican friar Jordanus observed their exposure of corpses (Yule, tr., p. 21) in *daḵmas* (Av. *daxma*) “funerary towers” (see [CORPSE](#)). When their Indian religious stronghold at Sanjan was sacked by the [Mozaffarid](#) sultan Mahmud Begath (1458-1511) in the year 1465, Pārsi mobeds transferred the *Irān Šāh ātaš bahrām* to a mountain cave for twelve years of safety before moving it to the city of Navsari, where it again became the main focus of Zoroastrian piety in India. After a dispute in 1741 with the [Bhagaria](#) priests who controlled Navsari, priests of the Sanjāna *panth* who were custodians of that *ātaš bahrām* transferred it south to the city of Udwada, where it burns to the present day ([Figure 5](#)). The Bhagarias consecrated their own *ātaš bahrām* at Navsari in 1765. Thereafter, six other fires of the *ātaš bahrām* ritual level were established: two at Surat in 1823, and four at Bombay in the years 1783, 1830, 1845, and 1897.

As they assimilated into Indian society, pressure from Hindus compelled the Pārsis to accept certain socio-religious transformations. Ritual slaughter of



cattle had to be discontinued gradually in accordance with Hindu veneration for those animals, although goats and sheep continued to be offered with a portion of their bodies or fat being deposited in holy fires. The same religious framework stirred Pārsis into establishing a custom of maintaining albino bulls for procurement of tail-hair to make sieves used in rituals and for obtaining nīrang “consecrated bull’s urine” for purificatory rites. As Pārsis settled in parts of the Indian subcontinent where their demographic numbers were insufficient to maintain funerary towers, they began adopting the custom of burial within an *ārāmgāh* “place of repose, cemetery, graveyard” (Figure 6). Perhaps most important in terms of socio-religious change was that, over time, Pārsis came to be regarded as a caste within Hindu society. So, despite accepting some converts from among Hindus who had close contact through friendship or work, the religion slowly became hereditary in an Indian context with no converts being accepted. Pārsis also had to mingle with members of other faiths in India and to explain their doctrines and praxes. In 1564 the emperor Akbar (r. 1542-1605), already a student of non-Muslim religions, lifted the *jezya*. In 1578 he summoned a Bhagaria priest named Meherji Rāna to the Mughal court for a symposium (Modi). That contact proved beneficial to the Pārsis. The Bhagarias rewarded the clergyman by granting the rank of *dastur* at Navsari to him and his male descendants.

In 1746, a disagreement relating to the calendar caused division of the community into Kadmis, who accept the *qadimi* “ancient” Iranian calendar, and Shenshais or Rasimis, “traditionalists,” who maintain the original Pārsi calendar (see CALENDARS i. Pre-Islamic calendars). Since 1906, another group, the Fasalis (also Faslis) formed to follow a *faṣl* “seasonal” calendar for rituals. These communal divisions continue to the present and have even caused minor variations in liturgies and rites. Contact between Zoroastrians in India and Iran, that is, the Pārsis and the Irānis, gained momentum in the thirteenth century. Several religious texts were sent from Iran to India for safekeeping, and as a result, most of the oldest extant copies of Zoroastrian scripture and exegesis remained in India until colonial times, when some of those documents were obtained by Western museums and universities.

Pārsis and the British. Contact between the Pārsis and Europeans grew with the establishment of trading posts in the seventeenth century. European eyewitness accounts note that at first the Pārsis enforced their own customs, with violators being excommunicated or even, occasionally, executed. But as trade increased, so did the Pārsi community’s economic and social diversity.



The port of Surat grew into a settlement of over one hundred thousand Pārsi Zoroastrians between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. When in 1661 the port of Bombay came under the British East India Company's administration, Pārsis relocated there in large numbers as merchants. Pārsis flourished in Bombay, led by the commercial successes of individuals such as Lowji Nassarwanji Wadia (1702-1744) and Sir Jamsetji Jijibhai (1783-1859) in shipbuilding and the opium and cotton trades between India, England, and China. Pārsis also established themselves quickly in textile manufacture and the banking segment. Steadily, Pārsis became the mercantile arm of the British in India for more than two hundred years. In keeping with Anglican mores, ritual slaughter of animals was slowly phased out by the late 1930 as distasteful; so was the *ātaš-zōhr* "offering to fire," of animal flesh, fat, and butter.

Socioeconomic success under British rule began transforming the Pārsi community, and so a Panchāyat was established in 1728 to regularize and regulate religious and social practices via codes and edicts (see [BOMBAY PARSI PANCHAYAT](#)). In addition to serving the needs of Zoroastrians on the Indian subcontinent, members of the Panchāyat and other wealthy Pārsis also began to look after the needs of their coreligionists in Iran by building schools such as the Khodadādi School in 1879 and the Marker School in 1912 at Yazd, orphanages, retirement homes, and hospitals. Renovation of fire temples, funerary towers at Yazd ([Figure 7](#)) and elsewhere, and graveyards used by Iranian Zoroastrians also was funded from Bombay. The lack of religious freedom for Zoroastrians in Iran also concerned Pārsi elites, who sent an emissary named Manekji Limji Hataria (1813-1890) there in 1854. Hataria lived in Iran for four decades, married an Irani Zoroastrian woman, and even visited the Qājār court to intercede on behalf of those Zoroastrians. Hataria's mission, coupled with pressure on the Iranian monarch from the British Raj on behalf of the Pārsis, led to the *jezya* finally being abolished in 1882. Iranian magi also began traveling to and residing in India for clerical training—a trend that last until the later decades of the twentieth century when the priesthood within Iran was able to strengthen its organizational and didactic bases during the reign of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-79).

Secular, Western-style education picked up by the Pārsis in the nineteenth century resulted in English-style schools, libraries, and educational trusts being set up for their sons and daughters. Pārsi parents began encouraging their children to take up careers in public, multi-communal, workplaces. This



development played a major role in fueling a demographic shift among Pārsis away from the coastal villages and orchards of Gujarat to large cities like Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Karachi, and Colombo. Rapid urbanization began in the 1900s and reached 94 percent by 1961, and as a result Pārsis became a highly urbanized middle to upper class in the societies of the Indian subcontinent. Within this urbanized society, marriages arranged by relatives declined in frequency as Pārsi women began select their own spouses, just like their British counterparts. At the same time, educated women in the community began choosing careers over marriage, family, and domesticity. As a consequence, approximately 25 percent of Pārsi women remained unmarried from the 1970s onward, and so the community's birthrate began declining precipitously.

Pārsis began entering politics with Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917), an architect of Indian independence, becoming the first president of the Indian National Congress in 1885. Other Pārsis closely associated with the Indian nationalist movement were Sir Pherozeshah Mehta (1845-1915), Sir Dinshaw Wacha (1844-1936), and Madam Bhikaji Cama (1861-1936). In England, several Pārsis have held elected office at various levels of government starting with three members of the British Parliament, Dadabhai Naoroji of the Liberal Party mentioned previously, Sir Muncherji Bhownagree (1851-1933) of the Conservative Party, and Shapurji Saklatvala (1874-1936), who was a Communist. In 2006, Karan Billimoria was appointed a life peer in the British House of Lords as the Baron of Chelsea.

Zoroastrians in contemporary societies. In India, the community went on to help found the industrial base of modern India after that nation gained independence from Britain in 1947. Pārsi entrepreneurs established the iron and steel industries, hydroelectricity, the Indian Institute of Science, and the atomic energy research institute, the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. Pioneers included Jamshedji N. Tata (1839-1904), who founded the iron and steel industries, hydroelectricity, and the Indian Institute of Science, and Homi J. Bhabha (1909-1966), who pioneered atomic energy research. Others such as Lieutenant General Sam H. F. J. Manekshaw (1914-2008) led India's post-independence military. This trend in political involvement continues among Pārsis in other independent nations of the Indian subcontinent. Some Pārsis moved from India to Ceylon, where after independence of the modern Sri Lanka, Kairshasp Choksy (1932) became Minister of Constitutional and State Affairs and subsequently Minister of Finance. During the British Raj, other



Pārsis from western India went to the region that became Pakistan, where they continue to reside in the cities of Karachi, Quetta, and Lahore. Eventually, Jamsheed Marker (1922-) became a prominent ambassador first for Pakistan and then for the United Nations. Loyalty and service to the countries and cultures in which they reside have emerged as important attitudes among Pārsis.

Zoroastrians in Iran experienced social, legal, and economic parity with Muslims during the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-79), owing to that regime's secularist policies and its harkening back to Iran's pre-Islamic past. Approximately 60,000 Zoroastrians lived in Iran during the 1960s. Westernization of Iran in the twentieth century brought change to Zoroastrian funerary praxis with exposure of corpses being phased out. Iranian Zoroastrians now bury their dead in *ārāmgāhs* at Tehran, Yazd, Kerman, Cham, and other locales, after washing the corpse and wrapping it in a white shroud, following Muslim praxis. Their wedding ceremonies often are conducted not in fire temples but in community halls, and the bride and groom often wear Western clothes (Figure 8).

The advent of the Islamic Republic of Iran witnessed a return to *de facto demmi* status for Zoroastrians. They now reside mainly in the cities and suburbs of Tehran, Yazd, Kerman, Isfahan, and Shiraz. Technically protected under Article 13 of the 1979 Islamic Constitution of Iran, the community is allocated one elected representative position among the two hundred and ninety representatives in the *majles* "parliament." Despite being officially recognized as a minority and represented in public settings, Zoroastrians often are offered only limited protection on a daily basis from their Muslim neighbors. As a result, they sporadically have been targets for persecution. Community records list cases of Zoroastrian women being compelled to marry Muslim men in the presence of Shi'ite *mollās* "clerics" and to publicly adopt Islam. More important, on a daily basis, are renewed legal distinctions between Muslims and Zoroastrians, which echo ordinances that Zoroastrians experienced under earlier Islamic regimes. A Zoroastrian who converts to Islam is regarded by Iranian law as the sole inheritor of his or her family's assets. A Zoroastrian who even accidentally causes the demise of a Muslim faces the possibility of capital punishment, but not vice versa. The concept that Zoroastrians are *najes* "unclean," has been revived. Chronic unemployment has become prevalent among Zoroastrians of both genders due to discrimination. Consequently Zoroastrians have begun leaving Iran yet again,



immigrating to countries in North America and Europe. Those who remain behind still worship at their fire temples in Tehran, Yazd, Kerman (Figure 9), and Isfahan. Heritage communities of Iranian descent had survived in lands that became the modern nations of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as well. Recent economic-induced relocations have generated Zoroastrian diasporas in other Muslim countries of the Middle East, especially the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar. At those locales contemporary Zoroastrians continue their beliefs, rituals, and, customs in forms modified to mitigate conflict and facilitate coexistence with their Muslim counterparts.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European scholars concluded that the founder of the Pārsis' religion, Zaratuštra, had preached a monotheistic faith that was debased by his followers. This viewpoint gained the acceptance of many Pārsis, who sought to structure their religion into its allegedly pristine form based on the *Gāthās* "Devotional poems" ascribed to the prophet. Pārsi Zoroastrians who follow the teachings of Minocher Pundol (1908-1975) combine such trends with mysticism. The introduction of theosophy further attenuated doctrinal unity among the Pārsis. Lack of doctrinal concord and a concomitant decline in theological education continue to the present day.

Another issue that divides Pārsis across the globe is the role of women in positions of religious leadership. The persistence of notions of ritual pollution linked to menstruation and childbirth, especially among the male priesthood, ensures that women play no role in the faith's clerical hierarchy. As a result, women have found religious leadership posts in heterodox movements. One such group, the Mazdayasnie Monasterie of the Ilm-e Khshnum movement, which subscribes to mystical trends and holistic medicine, is led by a woman named Meher Master-Moos (1951-). Members of this sect regard both genders as religiously equal while alive and believe that souls are non-gendered and asexual after death. Among the Khshnumists, attainment of spiritual purity through mysticism is stressed rather than ritual purity of the body. Followers of another esoteric movement believe that an Indian Pārsi woman called Sri Gururani Nag Kanya or Nag Rani "Cobra Queen" represents an incarnation of the divine.

The spread of heterodoxy among Pārsis is in part due to an attenuation of their priesthood. Poor wages, substandard living conditions, and the lure of secular professional careers have steadily sapped enrolment in the two *madrāsas*. Attempts to enhance the lifestyle of priests have only limited



success among a community that increasingly views the magi as out of step with modernity. Consequently, most boys from priestly families (the magi continue to be a hereditary male ecclesiastical class) opt out of the priesthood altogether or attain only the *nāwar* or first level of clerical training. Thus the number of priests available to perform rituals continues to decline. So rites have in many instances been abbreviated and in certain locales are restricted to the basic ones of passage, including initiation, marriage, and death, and to *jašan* services. In a parallel development, the number of women who weave the *kusti* (see [KUSTĪG](#)) has also diminished as their priestly families take up secular occupations.

Other interrelated topics of much debate worldwide within Pārsi communities are those on who exactly are the Pārsis, should intermarriage with non-Zoroastrians be recognized, and whether converts can be accepted. As the Pārsis became a pseudo-caste within Indian society, they diverged from their Iranian coreligionists by abjuring conversion to the faith. By the nineteenth century, magi who initiated as Zoroastrians the children of non-Pārsi fathers or the adopted children (from non-Zoroastrian parents) of Pārsis came to be subjected to censure by their clerical *anjomans*. Guidelines were set, eventually, in India by that country's civil judiciary in 1909 and 1925 as the result of court cases seeking to exclude non-Pārsi wives from fire temples and community institutions.

Through those legal decisions, the civil courts upheld the community's restriction of its properties to the children of Pārsi and Irani Zoroastrians plus duly initiated children of Pārsi fathers by non-Zoroastrian wives. So in India and, as a result of colonial rule, in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, a Pārsi Zoroastrian, whether male or female, is defined as a person whose father was or is a Pārsi Zoroastrian. Converts are not accepted. The children of a Pārsi woman who is married to a non-Zoroastrian are not regarded as either Pārsis or Zoroastrians. They cannot enter fire temples, benefit from communal funds, or even have Zoroastrian last rites. Not all priests and laity accept that position, however, either in South Asia or elsewhere. So, recently in the United States (as previously in India), there have been occasional instances when individuals who wished to join Zoroastrianism have been initiated by Pārsi priests. Moreover, enhanced contact between Pārsi Zoroastrians and members of other faiths, especially in Europe, North America, and Australia, has led to an increase in the frequency of marriage across confessional boundaries.

On this issue, the diaspora communities in the West have increasingly



diverged from the Pārsis on the Indian subcontinent by permitting non-Zoroastrian spouses to attend rituals at fire temples and cemeteries, and to participate fully in community activities and governance. In so doing, Pārsis living in the West have come closer to the longstanding positions of Iranian Zoroastrians and Irani Zoroastrian immigrants to the West on these issues. Likewise, Pārsis in North America have begun initiating coreligionists who are not of clerical families into a lay priesthood, just as their Iranian counterparts had been beginning to do before 1979 by accepting men and occasionally even women as *mobedyārs*. So non-Zoroastrian spouses are routinely permitted to attend worship in the fire temples of the United States such as at Hinsdale (a suburb of Chicago) (Figure 10) and Canada. Even the more traditional Zoroastrian community in England has begun relaxing its rules. Zoroastrians in the Indian subcontinent and Iran often hold their children's religious initiation ceremonies in secular locales, while still having magi officiate, to facilitate non-Zoroastrian friends' attendance (Figure 11).

Modern Demographics. Zoroastrianism continues to decline in the number of its followers mainly due to low reproductive rates and to intermarriage with spouses of other faiths, resulting in children not being initiated into the faith. Worldwide surveys of Zoroastrian communities by the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA) indicates that in 2012, where global distribution of Zoroastrians was: India 61,000, Iran 15,000, United States 14,306, Canada 6,421, Britain 5,000, Australia 2,577, Persian Gulf nations (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman) 2,030, Pakistan 1,675, New Zealand 1,231, continental Europe 1,000, Singapore 372, Hong Kong 204, South Africa 134, Malaysia 43, East African nations 37, Sri Lanka 37, Japan 21, Seychelles 21, mainland China 21, Thailand and Vietnam 16, Philippines 15, Ireland 10, South American nations 10, Central American nations 10, Indonesia 5, South Korea 5 (Rivetna, 2012). So the global extent of Zoroastrianism now includes only approximately 111,200 individual followers (11 percent decline since the previous global census in 2004; Rivetna, 2004). As the communities in Iran and India continue to fall, those in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Southeast Asia rise, due to Zoroastrians emigrating there for economic opportunities.



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