

## **Religious and Cultural Relationships between Indian Parsis and Iranian Zoroastrians**

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### **Abstract**

The existence of ancient Zoroaster community so far, despite the numerous problems and obstacles which its followers have faced during different periods of time, particularly after the downfall of Sassanid dynasty, is note-worthy, therefore the relations of Zoroastrians after Islam's entrance to Iran could be a core issue to go through that. In the present study it has been attempted to evaluate the religious and cultural relations between Indian Parsis and Iranian Zoroastrians, along with advantages of these relations for the followers of that religion in India and Iran and also its consequences. Studies show that between Indian Parsis and Iranian Zoroastrian have been in persistent relationships. Although in some periods, these two religious communities could have been found unaware of each other due to inland or political anarchy, they would begin their relationships in various fields as soon as the political and social peace was restored. The religious and cultural relationships between the two nations, which were established to help the Indian Parsis, continued to help Iranian Zoroastrians in recent centuries and it caused this ancient religion to keep its identity and principles alive. This research has been conducted by using descriptive-analytical methods based on historical resources.

### **Keywords:**

Indian-Parsis, Iranian-Zoroastrians, Religious Relationships, Zoroastrian Associations

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## **Introduction**

After the invasion of the Arabs in Iran and the downfall of the Sassanids, the Zoroastrian religion, which has always been largely recognized, the religion of the country became severely shaken. Pressures from the Arabs on Zoroastrians to accept Islam or pay *Jizyah* led some of them to migrate to other lands to get rid of the current situation. The most suitable place for Parsi immigrants was the land of India because Hindu culture and civilization had much in common with their culture and religion, and on the other hand, India, with its multi-cultural identity, was the center of different religions that lived together peacefully.

## **The core issue & research questions**

Migration is always all about improving the living condition and getting out of a difficult situation hoping for a better future. In the early Islamic centuries, a group of Zoroastrians left their homeland to escape the oppression of the Arabs and to preserve their lives and religion. Some of these migrants settled in India, which we know today as the Parsis of India. Centuries later, with the emergence of new problems in how to conduct their customs, which was resulted from years of exile and scattering on the shores of India, they traveled to Iran to be aware of the situation of their community in Iran as well as with the help and guidance of their peers, they could overcome existing religious problems. Therefore, the representative of the Parsis of India entered Iran in 1477 AD. This journey was the beginning of a relationship between these two communities that continues till today, and if it were not for the mutual help of the Zoroastrians of Iran and the Parsis of India, despite the many problems that arose for this ancient religion in different eras, it would not have much retain its impact till today. The main question is how the Zoroastrian cultural-religious relations with the Indian Parsis could help to preserve the Zoroastrian religion? And which role of the relationship has been more influential in this regard?

## **Research Objectives**

Identifying the effective and practical factors of the limited and closed social system of the Zoroastrians of Iran, whose number was decreasing day by day in different periods of the centuries, as well as discovering the merits & demerits of bilateral relationship between them are among focused goals of this research.

## **Methodology**

To address the above issues and objectives, the method of historical research has been used, by collecting the first hand reliable resources. After studying and analyzing these informations and determining the cultural alignment and cultural interactions of the two Zoroastrian civilizations living in Iran and another in India, a deductive conclusion is reached.

## **Background**

Iran and India have various relations with each other since ancient times, and these relations were not specific to the Zoroastrians of these two countries in the Islamic period. In this regard, various works such as: "Relations between Iran and India in ancient times" by Aladdin Azari (1970 AD), "Relations between ancient India and Iran" by Ali Asghar Hekmat (1962 AD), "Relations between Iran and India based on national traditions" Eastern Aryans, especially Ferdowsi's Shahnameh "by Mehdi Gharavi (1975) and many others have been published in this field. These studies have been focused on the cultural relations between Iran and India in different historical and prehistoric periods and the result of these studies shows the cultural interactions between the Iranian plateau and the Indian subcontinent. The range of these historical connections is the third millennium BC to the Sassanid period.

The present study is an independent study on the subject of the relationship between the Indian Parsis and the Zoroastrians of Iran with a cultural-religious approach, a subject that can contribute significantly to know about ancient Zoroastrian religion by expanding it in different historical periods. This research, dealing with the cultural and religious relations between the Zoroastrians of Iran and the Parsis of India, considers the migration of Zoroastrians to India as one of the most useful activities to preserve the Zoroastrian religion. Also, given the solidarity and love that Zoroastrians have for their community, the relationship between the two communities was very effective, especially when each group was in danger of extinction. In fact, the survival of the Zoroastrian religion after the fall of the Sassanid till today, owes to these continuous and bilateral ties.

## **History of the Parsis of India**

The history of Indian Parsis is not that much clear and is still shrouded in obscurity. Iran and India are among the ancient countries of the world, which have long and extensive

cultural and trade relations. Most likely, Zoroastrians lived in India during the Sassanid period. Because the borders of Iran in pre-Islamic times were reaching to Sind. In the inscriptions of the Achaemenes, India is mentioned as one of their satrapies. The Sakas temple of Taxila from the Parthian period, 35 km from Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, is one of the prominent examples of Zoroastrian shrines on the shores of Sindh<sup>3</sup>. The oldest written document about the migration of Zoroastrians to India in the Islamic period is a short treatise in the form of Persian Poem known as the story of Sanjan, was composed in the early seventeenth century<sup>4</sup> and is also one of the most important resources in this field are studied and analyzed by researchers. After the fall of the Sassanid, the Iranians were still at war with the Arabs for more than a hundred years. A group of those who could not fight and could not pay the *jizyah* went to the mountains and the desert to save their lives and religion. As the mountains of Khorasan were the refuge of these refugees for many years; until that place was also occupied by the Arabs. The Zoroastrians then went to the island of Hormuz but they sailed for India because they were not safe there also. They then disembarked on the west coast of the Indian subcontinent, Gujarat, and asked the Hindu ruler of the area named as Jadairana, to permit them to stay there which were granted on condition of anonymity. The Parsis gradually settled in that place and named it Sanjan<sup>5</sup>. The Zoroastrians made five vows to the Indian ruler, which are as follows: Explain their religion but do not try to persuade the indigenous people to believe in it; Hand over their weapons; Learn Gujarati language; Have their wedding after sunset, and finally their wives wear Indian instead of Iranian. The Parsis, while maintaining their religion in India, also remained faithful to their commitments<sup>6</sup>. Sanjan, which was the first residence of the Parsis in India, became a large and wealthy city with the efforts and perseverance of the Zoroastrians. They lived a prosperous and comfortable life in Sanjan and their population gradually increased. After several centuries, some of them migrated to other cities in India<sup>7</sup>. After the British conquest, a large Persian population moved to Mumbai. Although their population in this city was a minority compared to Hindus; but they had a great contribution in the economic and cultural development of that city. As some of them were considered the

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<sup>3</sup>. Mehrafarin, 2010: 137-138

<sup>4</sup>. Zinali and Kabiri, 2011: 182

<sup>5</sup>. Azargashsab, 1979: 59

<sup>6</sup>. Khorshidian, 2005: 111

<sup>7</sup>. Azargashsab, 1979: 63

great and first capitalists and merchants of India. At the beginning of their arrival in India, the Parsis engaged in agriculture, then in the textile industry, and are now engaged in major commercial and industrial work<sup>8</sup>.

### **Relations of Indian Parsis with Iranian Zoroastrians**

Since the beginning of their migration to India, the Parsis have had relations with the Zoroastrians of Iran in various fields. In different periods when the situation of the Zoroastrian society of Iran and the Parsis of India was changing, according to the existing conditions and requirements, relations were established between them. These relations can be examined in three different periods:

From the beginning of Zoroastrian migration to India to the Mongol invasion of Iran

From the beginning of Safavid era to Qajar era

From the Qajar era to the Pahlavi period

### **Iranian Zoroastrian & Indian Parsis relations (from the beginning of migration to the Mongol invasion in Iran)**

After the migration of Zoroastrians, gradually other groups from different parts of Iran went to India and the relationship between Indian Parsis and the Zoroastrians living in Iran continued. When the Parsis entered Sanjan, they sent some people to Khorasan to bring the necessary tools to perform the ceremony in Sanjan to sanctify the fire of Mars, which was known as the fire of Iranshah, Along with these people, another group of Zoroastrians from the eastern regions of Iran went to India<sup>9</sup>. No information available on how long have such relations been established between them and the Zoroastrians. We only know that for an unknown period of time, they were unaware of each other's situation before 1477 AD). A letter written from Iran to India, states that: In the days of Turkism, it was not known whether these poor people remained religious in India. "Thirty-five years before this date, Behesht Bahr Nariman Houshang noticed this issue ..."<sup>10</sup> and from this date onwards, correspondence has taken place between them.

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<sup>8</sup> . Purdavood, 1915 Yazdgerdi; 1938: 23-24

<sup>9</sup> . Pourdawood, 1915

<sup>10</sup> . Shahmardan, 1984: 266

## **Relations between Zoroastrians of Iran and Parsis of India (from the beginning of Safavid period to Qajar era)**

In 1477 AD a person named Nariman Houshang was sent by the Parsis to Yazd, (which at that time was the religious center of the Zoroastrians and the residence of the cleric,) and informed the Zoroastrians about the situation of the Parsis and their quantity. The Parsis at that time, due to living in a foreign country and contact with non-Zoroastrians, had a kind of weakness and degeneration in the field of religious awareness. Therefore, in order to solve this problem and retrieve information about the true Zoroastrian rituals, Nariman Houshang was sent to Iran<sup>11</sup>. Nariman did not know Persian when he arrived, he stayed in Yazd for a year and traded and studied Persian, then he received answers to his questions from the priests and practically learned about religious issues and ceremonies. Iranian clerics conservatively wrote important religious issues in the Pahlavi language, but Nariman asked them not to write the letter in Pahlavi, because I Parsis did not know Pahlavi. This letter, which was written in 1468 AD, was written and sent in Persian instead of the Pahlavi language, but in the Avestan alphabet. In that letter, the Iranian clerics had asked the Persian elders: "To learn the Pahlavi script and the correct way to hold religious ceremonies, two wise men should come, learn the Pahlavi script and learn about dos & don't. Khoshkkan is near and Qandahar is near to Sistan & Sistan to Yazd, there is no fear of this"<sup>12</sup>. From that year to 1758 AD couriers carrying Persian letters came to Iran from India and returned to India with continuous training<sup>13</sup>. Letters were answered at the sheriff's house, by a person chosen from among the Zoroastrians to administer the affairs of the government by the clergy in his presence, and were signed by all the clergy, the sheriff, and many influential religious figures. They also mentioned the names of worshipers and priests of other cities<sup>14</sup>. The contents of these letters were later collected and published in a book called "The Narrations of Darab Hormozdiar" and "The Narration of Hormozdiar Faramarz". The content of these letters was religious and through this the Parsis were usually asked their religious questions to their Iranian counterparts and the Zoroastrian priests who lived in Kerman and Yazd, especially the villages of Sharifabad and Turkabad, eagerly answered them. Iranian clerics along with letters they wrote to the Parsis and resolved religious issues for them; they also sent them

<sup>11</sup>. Azargashsab, 1980 AD: 97-95

<sup>12</sup>. Shahmardan, 1984: 261-260

<sup>13</sup>. Bahrami, 1990: 3

<sup>14</sup>. Shahmardan, 1982: 137

many religious books and religious treatises and many tricks (Azkaar w Auraad)<sup>15</sup>. Instead of that the Indian Parsis, who considered the Iranian Zoroastrians to be the guardians of their traditional rituals in the land of their ancestors, provided them with financial aid such as Gujrati Parsis were used to send the money to their clerics in Iran so that they could offer special prayers for them, because they believed that the rituals that are held in Iran are more efficient<sup>16</sup>. In the 15th and 17th centuries AD, the Parsis were considered the disciples of the Zoroastrians of Iran in religious matters, and the Iranians lovingly guided them. When the situation of the Iranian Zoroastrians became very difficult in the eighteenth century, the possibility of communication between the two societies was minimized. But it was in this century that a cleric named "Jamasp Velayati" was sent from Kerman to guide the clerics to Surat, India. In Surat, the cleric realized that the Indian Zoroastrian religious calendar was one month behind the date of the Iranian Zoroastrian calendar. This was very important because many religious ceremonies depend on the calendar and history. After some time, some Surat clerics accepted the Iranian calendar and sent one of the clerics named Mullah Kavous to Iran for further research. After returning to India in Mumbai, this person introduced a new branch of religious sect known as the "Qadeemi" or followers of the old calendar. This group not only became subject to the Iranian Zoroastrian calendar, but also followed the customs and traditions of the Iranian Zoroastrians, which partially differed in customs of Indian Parsis. "Qadeemis" only infiltrated Surat and Mumbai, and the Zoroastrians of Gujarat remained steadfast in their ancient calendars, customs, and beliefs<sup>17</sup>.

Although most of the efforts were made by the Parsis to acquire religious knowledge, this issue was not in the sense of a one-sided and religious relationship, as according to the names of the year 1509 AD in this year four Iranian Zoroastrians came to India for business purposes<sup>18</sup>.

### **Relations between Iranian Zoroastrians and Indian Parsis (from the Qajar period to the Pahlavi period)**

From the end of the eighteenth century AD, the Parsis' attention to the living conditions of the Zoroastrians in Iran increased significantly. One of the factors of this attention was

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<sup>15</sup> . Shahmardan, 1985: 100

<sup>16</sup> . Boyce, 2007: 291

<sup>17</sup> . Kaj bar & others, 2007: 144-143

<sup>18</sup> . Tashkkori and Kajbaf, 2008: 168

the reports published by Western tourists about the deplorable situation of Zoroastrians living in Yazd and Kerman. With the removal of Amir Kabir in 1268 AH, the government's sensitivity to the situation of minorities, along with other reforms of Amir Kabir, faded; But in the meantime, the constructive role of "Anjumane Akabir Parsis " the Parsis Association opened a new chapter in the social life of Zoroastrians in Iran. In 1853 AD, the mentioned association sent a person named ManekjilimjiHateria known as Manekji sahibah to Iran to get information about their livelihood and problems while associating with their colleagues<sup>19</sup>. As soon as Mankeji arrived in Iran, he traveled to Yazd and Kerman, took care of the needs of the Zoroastrians, and provided financial assistance to the poor. He took some Zoroastrian youth from Yazd and Kerman to Tehran at his own expense, where he established schools and taught them. After a few years that these young people learned the religious teachings and information of that time, he built schools in Yazd and Kerman and appointed them to teach with sufficient salaries<sup>20</sup>. Mankeji worked hard to ensure the welfare of the Zoroastrians of Iran. He restored fire temples and crypts and rebuilt some. He repaired the shrine of Zarju (Pars Banu) near Yazd. Although Zoroastrians forbid killing cows in their religion, they vowed cows and slaughtered them in that shrine. Hatria wrote a signboard and installed it in the same shrine, forbidding and cursing the slaughter of cows. At that time, Zoroastrians in Yazd and Kerman did not use sidra and wrestling (clothes and belts of Zoroastrians) and Mankeji encouraged them to wear these clothes and gave all of them sidra and wrestling with their own money. Due to the hardships and pressures that came to them after the Safavid period, the Zoroastrians of Iran had forgotten many of their customs and practiced the reprehensible customs that were contrary to their religion. Such as not wearing a saddle and a ship, divorcing a woman, killing a cow, etc., which Mankeji reminded them of the correct customs of the religion<sup>21</sup>. The most important thing that Mankeji did for the Zoroastrians of Iran was to remove the burden of *Jizyah* from them. Accompanied by the British ambassador to Iran, Mankeji asked Nasser al-Din Shah to abolish the jizyah taxation. Finally, in 1920 AD, a decree was issued to remove the jizyah. With the help and guidance of the second representative of the Anjuman Akabir Sahiban Parsi, "Kaykhosrow Ji Khan Sahib", at the end of the reign of Nasser al-Din Shah, an association was established in Yazd around 1279 AD to deal with the internal

<sup>19</sup> . Tashkkaori, 2012: 31

<sup>20</sup> . Azargashsab, 1980: 103-110

<sup>21</sup> . Shahmardan, 1984: 624-622



affairs of the Zoroastrians, called the *Anjuma Zartushtian Yazd*. It was renamed the Yazd Zoroastrian Association. An association was formed in the same way with the help of this representative in Kerman<sup>22</sup>. In 1918 in Mumbai, an association called the "Iranian Zoroastrian Association" was formed to address the needs of Iranians living in Mumbai and to improve the living conditions of their brothers in Iran. The first action of this association was the establishment of "Sir Ratan Tata" clinic and pharmacy, Markar boys' orphanage and then the establishment of Jahangiri Conservatory in Yazd, all three of which was very necessary at that time and were effective in the development and comfort of Zoroastrians. Other activities of this association included: Markar cultural facilities in Yazd city with the help of "Pashtun Dosabai Markar" which includes primary and secondary schools for boys and girls and construction of clock tower, construction of primary schools in Yazd villages, helping to publish religious books and so on. The representative of this association in Iran was "Soroush Lohrasb"<sup>23</sup>.

## Conclusion

The Zoroastrians, who were forced to leave their homeland to escape the oppression of the Arabs, chose lands that were close to their culture. The best choice for them was the land of India. This group of Zoroastrian migrants who settled on the shores of India was called Indian Parsis. The Zoroastrians considered the Arab invasion of Iran to be like Alexander's invasion, and in the hope that Iran would once again be freed from the yoke of foreign subjugation and that they could return to their homeland, they maintained contact with their homeland. On the other hand, the Parsis, after years of living in a foreign land and the problems that plagued them in that land, lost some of their religious books and customs and had many questions in holding their worship ceremonies. At this time, learning about the situation of their Zoroastrian brothers in Iran, they asked for help, and the Iranians sent them a copy of the existing religious books to help them and reminded them of religious ceremonies. Years after this event, the same situation happened to the Zoroastrians of Iran. Due to the increasing hardships and pressures on Zoroastrian followers in Iran from the Safavid period to the Qajar period, Zoroastrians lost a large number of their religious books, became confused in holding religious ceremonies, and their situation became worse. It was at this time that the Parsis came to their aid and, with their financial, religious and cultural assistance, improved their

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<sup>22</sup> . Azargashsab, 1980: 127-126

<sup>23</sup> . Lohrasb, 1985: 25-9

situation. Therefore, if these relations had not been formed and the Zoroastrians would not have rushed to the aid of the Parsis; Persian society could not maintain Zoroastrian customs and traditions even if it continued. On the other hand, if the Parsis had not come to assist the Zoroastrians of Iran after that, there might not have been any trace of this religious minority in Iran. But both societies played an important role in preserving the Zoroastrian religion with wisdom and sacrifice and maintaining effective relations. In the meantime, it is likely that the religious rites of the Persian Parsis, which were imperceptibly influenced by Indian culture, made changes in the religious rites of the Zoroastrians of Iran, which were not easy to discern due to the loss of some religious books at the time. To be aware of this issue and the extent of its effectiveness, we must conduct research in this regard in different periods.

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