Dignity, Status and Role of Women in the Zoroastrian Religion

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A fundamental premise of the Zoroastrian religion, as taught millennia ago by the Prophet Zarathustra, is the pivotal role of the individual in living and working alongside the good creations of Ahura Mazda (Wisdom Incarnate or the creative force). Thus, humans and the other creations, the physical manifestations of sky, water, earth, animals, plants and fire are to work in harmony. Man's role in this scheme of things is pivotal. He is given free will, and we are told in the Gathas of Zarathustra (Yasna 30.2)

> Listen with your ears to the best things. Reflect with a clear mind – man by man for himself – upon the two choices of decision, being aware to declare yourselves to him before the great retribution.

This Zarathustra taught, is the God-given right of man, which is based upon an ethical structure encompassing respect for creation and man's compassion and care for his fellow men. By the continual exercise of his choice between good and evil man thus becomes – perhaps for the first time in human thinking – responsible for his own destiny.

When we use the term `man'/`men', this is not confined to the male of the species. And this is set out most clearly by Zarathustra himself in the Gathas (Yasna 53.3) when he singles out his daughter

> Do thou preserve, Pourucista of the lineage of Haecataspa and Spitma, thou young one among Zarathustra's daughters. To thee shall He grant the firm foundation of good thinking and the alliance of truth and wisdom. Therefore, come to terms with thy will, and bring to realization the most virtuous and blessed (acts) of piety.

This establishes the benchmark in Zoroastrian ethos: women's role in human affairs is not just central but pivotal.

And so it has come to pass: the theological underpinning of Zarathustra's teachings as set out clearly in the Gathas. Through Iran's long imperium under three Zoroastrian dynasties: the Achaemenids, Arsacid Parthians and the Sasanians, our records show that dignity and status certainly were an aspect of life for royal and aristocratic women. While twenty-first century women take our economic independence for granted – certainly in the developed world – and think of our ancestral great-grandmothers as dependent on their male relatives, Iran's royal women enjoyed considerable economic independence.

There are a plethora of examples. One such is the case of Irdabama, a royal entrepreneur at the court of Darius I who employed 500 workers at a place near modern Shiraz. Several women owned immense properties in different parts of the empire, and their financial muscle, freedom of travel and a level of independence belie the misconceptions of Persian women hidden in harems!

The legal text, the *Matikan-i Hazar Datestan* (Book of the Thousand Judgements), compiled between Khosrow II Parviz's reign and the Arab conquest, sheds light not just on Iranian jurisprudence but on society itself. This immense legal compilation addresses several issues that face any society.

As a woman myself, I am heartened to read that in the parental home the daughter had the same rights as the son until she married, even if she was adopted. When sons and daughters had to be assigned things out of kinship, they had to be given them simultaneously: in itself an exemplar of equality.

I think it somewhat revolutionary for the times that a daughter could refuse to marry a husband chosen by her father. Let me quote (Anklesaria Ms. – A14, 12-13)

> There have been women who refrained (from marriage with the man offered to them as a husband) for the sake of a (bridegroom more) suited to them. Thus Xvatāyduxt refrained for the same of Veh-Šāhpuhr (=for the sake of become Veh-Šāhpuhr's wife)

And who was Veh-Šāhpuhr? He was the *magupatān magupat* (high priest) and the president of the commission that set down the official cannon of the Avesta under Khosrow II. This is female choice with bells on!

Interestingly, Sasanian Iran took, what must seem a rather revolutionary view on divorce. Either the husband or the wife had the right to seek the dissolution of

their marriage for `proper reasons'. As soon as divorce was sought by a wife by an action at law, her claim on the husband's guardianship over her ceased, unless her request was rejected by the court. If the divorce was granted, she fell back on her own people, until she married again. Property claims and rights were allowed to continue as before, or were resettled as the need arose.

Although it would be an exaggeration to claim that women in Sasanian Iran had the same opportunities that 21st century women have, there is an interesting reference in the *Matikan* to some young ladies discussing a tricky point of law. Whilst thus engaged, they noticed a prominent jurist in the vicinity. The ladies referred their legal dilemma to him, and asked for his opinion. The great man answered a couple of points, but did not have a ready answer to the more knotty problem under discussion; to which, one of the young ladies responded: `Leave that alone Master, and say you do not understand it'.

While historical examples abound, nearer to our own era, notices by European travelers who encountered Zoroastrians in both Iran and India, relate their encounters with womenfolk who were not reticent in stating their views.

Pietro Della Valle, an intellectual Italian spent several years in Persia before travelling to Surat and a tour of India (between 1616 and 1622). Like many foreign observers, Della Valle wanted to know more about the significance of fire in Zoroastrianism, and notes the response to his enquiries:

> I was told…that they pray three times a day, at sunrise and sunset and at mid-day; that they believe in one God only, creator of all things invisible and all powerful and because we said we had other ideas about them, the wife of the man with whom we were talking, who was present, mocked openly, it seeming strange to her that one could imagine that they knew nothing of God; to whom she made in our presence…several…prayers…and said `How, God we not know you? …and similar things: from which I can infer that the name of idolators which they are given does not perhaps fit them.

It took a Zoroastrian woman to educate the European; equally, it is proof that Zoroastrian women were not hidden away at home. Indeed, in this instance, they stood right beside the husband.

Besides being forthright, the fact that Zoroastrian women were gaining an education alongside their menfolk may explain many of the global success stories we have come to accept as normal. In India, by 1881, the Parsis, in their stronghold of Bombay were the most literate group; and by 1857, the Parsi Girls' School Association was founded with a subscription of Rs.15,000 by some leading members of the community. Girls' education was considered to be of crucial importance; and similar facilities were extended to their kinsfolk in Gujarat. This emphasis on female education was reiterated by the Englishman Henry George Briggs in his book, *The Parsis or Modern Zerdushtians*, published in 1852 in which he notes:

> …With respect to the education of their females, it ought to be more generally known that most of them can both read and write the Gujarati…A few families among the wealthy have permitted their daughters to acquire a knowledge of English…

Nor was female education in Iran overlooked. The Parsis in India established the Society for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Zoroastrians in Persia (Amelioration Society) and this was to ameliorate, in the truest sense of the word, the living condition of their Iranian co-religionists. Once again, emphasis was placed on female education. A school for 100 girls was started in Yazd, followed by schools in Kerman and Tehran for Zoroastrian girls. That was just the beginning, and demonstrated once again, the pivotal role of young girls and women within the community.

It is a rule of universal application that education is the gateway to opportunities, and it has enabled Zoroastrian women today to participate in diverse fields – the sciences, art, politics and much more.

Zoroastrian women – through the ages – have contributed much to society, often against great odds. The great patriot, Madame Cama, the Parsi lady who was the first to unfurl the Indian tricolor in Europe, decades before Indian independence, and was banished from her home by the British as a result.

I recently read the obituary of that great lady, Frene Ginwala, the first Speaker of the South African Parliament post-apartheid, a close confidante of Nelson Mandela who described her in his memoirs as "a beautiful young Parsee woman". She was a qualified lawyer who was at the forefront of the anti-apartheid struggle;

who travelled the country hiding activists who were being hunted by the police in safe houses until she herself had the police on her tail and was forced to take refuge in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and a 30 year exile. When Mandela arrived on her doorstep on his way to address the Pan-African Freedom Movement, Frene Ginwala's startled greeting : `Oh my God, I have to hide you', became a running joke between herself and Mandela. She dedicated her life to the independence struggle in South Africa, remaining true to her principles that all peoples are equal.

These were fearless women, unafraid to challenge the status quo, and who appear to have subliminally digested Zarathustra's advice to his daughter, `…the firm foundation of good thinking and the alliance of truth and wisdom…'

This brief outline of the place of Zoroastrian women in society suggests that over the millennia they have been accorded a status and dignity that is exemplary. But we humans are among the most fallible of all creatures, and so, we as Zoroastrians ought to be the first to acknowledge that there is still much more we can and should do for our womenfolk. Not all have the opportunities to shine; not all women live in egalitarian home environments, and there are many who are still left behind. Yet, the picture as a whole – with a backward glance at our history – encourages us that we can do even better.