

## Who are the Zoroastrians?

Almut Hintze explains why we need to know more about a small group that has an ancient heritage and current global significance



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funded by the Government of India, the exhibitions showcased the history, religion and culture of one of the world's most remarkable living traditions: Zoroastrianism. In his message, read at the opening ceremony on Nowruz, the Iranian New Year, Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister, emphasised that 'The rich culture of the Parsi community is an important and integral part of the country's invaluable heritage.'

From March to May 2016, Delhi's museums mounted four simultaneous exhibitions about the smallest of India's religious minorities, the Zoroastrians or Parsis: 'The Everlasting Flame' at the National Museum, 'Painted Encounters, Parsi Traders and the Community' and 'No Parsi is an Island' at the National Gallery of Modern Art, and 'Threads of Continuity' at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts. Fully

### Past and present

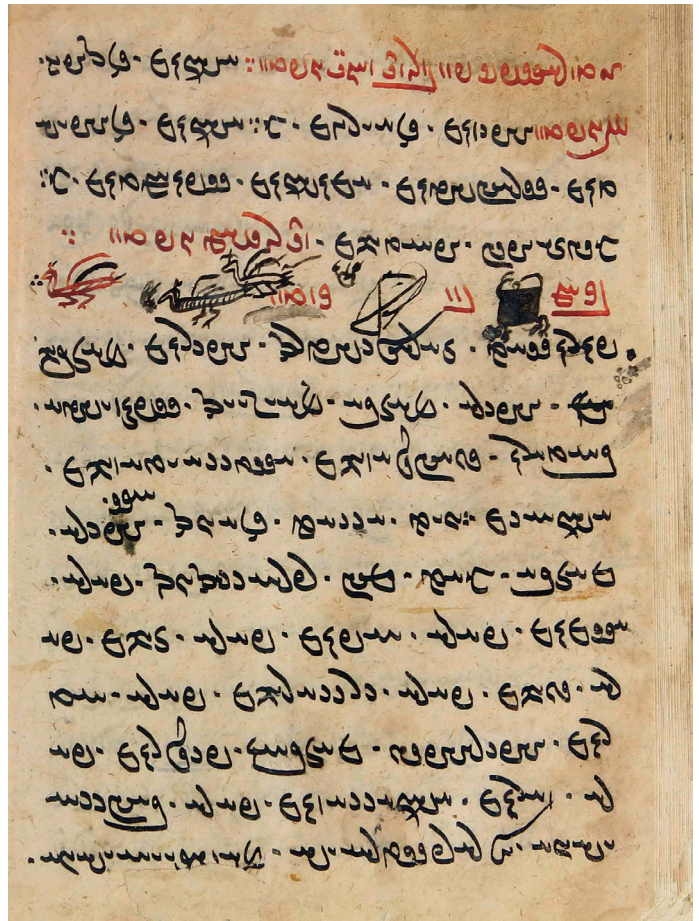
The roots of the Zoroastrians reach back to prehistoric Central Asia in the 2nd millennium BCE. According to their own tradition, the 'Mazda-worshipping religion' was inaugurated by Zarathustra. Later the Greeks turned his Iranian name into *Zoroastrēs*, from which the name Zoroastrian derives, denoting a follower of the religion of Zoroaster. Zoroastrianism flourished for over a thousand years as the state religion of the three great Iranian Empires: the Achaemenids, the Parthians and the Sasanians, but was ousted by Islam following the Arab conquest of Iran in 651 CE. The Islamisation of Iran was a slow but persistent process and led to the eventual erosion of Zoroastrianism in its homeland, where today c. 25,000 Zoroastrians still live. Emigration proved vital for the survival of the religion. Following the Arab conquest, Zoroastrians migrated to India in search of religious freedom and better living conditions and, coming from 'Persia', they became known there as Parsis. During the British colonial period they were among the first Indians to westernise and soon became leaders in business and legal, medical and other professions. From around 1850, they formed diaspora communities, linked to trade within the British Empire, in China, Sindh (then part of British India, present-day Pakistan), East Africa and Britain. In a second wave of

diasporic movements after the Second World War, Zoroastrians settled in Canada, the USA, Australia, Germany and, again, Britain, only rarely for trade, but more typically for education and career development – and to leave certain regimes. In particular, increasing Islamisation in Pakistan after Independence, in Iran after the 1979 revolution, together with Black African policies in East Africa, led Zoroastrians to leave those countries.

In spite of their small number of c. 130,000 people world-wide, Zoroastrians have made significant contributions to every society which they inhabit. A case in point is India, where the c. 61,000 Parsis make up only 0.006 per cent of India's 1.3 billion population, but contribute 5–6 per cent of the country's economic turnover. Mahatma Gandhi summarised their achievements by famously saying: 'In numbers Parsis are beneath contempt, but in contribution, beyond compare.' The role Zoroastrians have played in Iran under the Pahlavi regime, which treated them favourably, and in the UK, is no less significant. The UK's capital is among the most important centres outside India and Iran for this global diaspora community. For example, the Tata Group's involvement in Europe is centred on Britain, where it owns brands such as Rover, Jaguar, Tetley and the Taj Group. The Tatas, both

the Indian business empire that now looms so large in Britain and the remarkable Parsi family which built it, were frequent guests of King George V and Queen Mary and were among the first families of India's new business class to be accepted into imperial high society. Under Ratan Tata, the company has become Britain's biggest industrial employer. Another case in point are the first three ethnically Asian MPs at Westminster, who were also Zoroastrians: Dadabhai Naoroji in 1892–1895 for Finsbury Park; Mucherjee Bhowmagree 1895–1906 for Bethnal Green; Shapurji Saklatwala in 1922–1923 for Battersea North.

More recently, Karan Bilimoria (b. 1961), the chairman and founder of Cobra Beer, was the first Parsi Zoroastrian to become a member of the House of Lords in 2006. On this occasion he introduced the Zoroastrian prayer book, the Avesta, to sit alongside the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita and the Koran in the despatch box in the chamber of the House of Lords. Lord Bilimoria led the first debate on Zoroastrianism in the House of Lords in 2011 on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe, the oldest Asian organisation in the UK, and launched the Zoroastrian All Party Parliamentary Group in the British Parliament in 2013. Zoroastrian philanthropy is legendary. My own institution, SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies, London), benefited from it through the endowment by the Zartoshty brothers, who



An Avestan manuscript of the Yasna from the Library. IMAGE: AVESTAN DIGITAL ARCHIVE.

were of Iranian Zoroastrian origin, of what is to date the world's only endowed Chair in Zoroastrianism.

**Worship**

Zoroastrians worship their god, Ahura Mazdā, or 'Wise Lord', by means of priestly and lay rituals during which the performance of precisely prescribed actions accompanies the recitation of texts composed in the ancient Iranian language of Avestan. The most important of these rituals is the Yasna, or 'worship', whose 72 sections have at their centre the five Gathas, or 'songs'. These are 17 poems which are attributed to the religion's founder, Zarathustra. Together with a Ritual in Seven Sections, the Yasna Haptanghaiti, which the Gathas in turn enclose in their middle, they were orally composed in the 2nd millennium BCE and constitute the Older Avesta, the foundation text of the entire religion and earliest document in any Iranian language. In the Gathas the poet engages in a conversation with Ahura Mazdā about topics such as Good and Evil, the origin and creation of the world and a person's final destiny. Ideas about the choice between Good and Evil, which each person has to make, about right and wrong worship, judgement after death, reward and punishment, and heaven and hell are here formulated for the first time in world literature as constituent parts of a coherent belief system.

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Caring for the animal, represented by the cow, and protecting it against cruel actions is a further major concern in both the hymns and the Ritual in Seven Sections. In the latter, moreover, the deity is invited to come and be present in the ritual fire, which thus becomes Ahura Mazda's visible and tangible form in the presence of the worshippers. The Yasna Haptanghaiti constitutes the foundation for the pivotal role of fire in the religious practice and imagery of the Zoroastrians, who are occasionally wrongly labelled as 'fire-worshippers'. The Younger Avestan sections which sandwich the Old Avestan middle are comprised of praises and invocations. The praise of the sacrificial plant Haoma (Yasna 9–11) includes elements of Iranian epic literature, such as the succession of mythical kings and the story of the dragon-killing hero, which later re-surface in Firdausi's New Persian epic, the *Shahname*. Zoroastrian religious thought is widely considered to have impacted on Judaism from the time of the Judaean Babylonian Exile in the 6th century BCE, and later on nascent Christianity and Islam, although the full appreciation of its significance is severely hampered by the lack of reliable text editions and translations of the Zoroastrian sources.

### Multimedia Yasna

The Yasna, like most parts of the Avesta, exists in two forms: as a ritual performance, and as a written text. The former is a ceremony in which the priests recite the text by heart while simultaneously enacting the ritual. By contrast, the latter appears in the extant manuscripts, on which printed editions are based. My research on the Multimedia Yasna, which the European Research Council has recently approved for funding with an Advanced Investigator Grant (October 2016 to September 2021), combines two different, yet complementary approaches: one starts from the act of the ritual performance, the other from the manuscripts. In this two-pronged approach, the Yasna will be studied both as an event in the form of a ritual performance and as a text in the form of a literary document. The two procedures will be integrated to answer questions about the meaning and function of the Yasna in a historical perspective.

To date scholarly knowledge and understanding of the Yasna have been based chiefly on the written text, which has attracted the attention of philologists, linguists, and cultural and religious historians. However, while the authoritative edition of the written text is over a hundred years old and now considered outdated, there are few descriptions and no recordings at all of the performance of a full Yasna ritual. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the Zoro-

astrians of Iran abandoned the Yasna ritual some 50 years ago, and no Yasna ceremonies are performed in the diaspora. As a result, today the Yasna ritual is only celebrated by the Parsis in India, though requests are in decline and consequently the ritual know-how, although currently still available, is under threat. A recording of the entire event needs to be undertaken urgently in order to preserve this endangered heritage.

As part of the Multimedia Yasna project, my team is going to produce a film of the full Yasna ritual and transcribe the recitation text into Roman letters in order to make the words which the priests utter available to the observer in both aural and visual form. The transcribed recitation text will be visualised in the form of sub-titles that run simultaneously with the spoken word and the visible ritual performance. The project will thus produce a new primary source that will form the basis of further investigation and provide data for philological editions of parts of the Yasna. For the critical edition of the Avestan text, we will adapt and use digital technology that has been developed for an ongoing edition of the Greek New Testament at the Universities of Birmingham and Münster.

### Training

The training of priests takes place in special priestly schools which sons of priestly families join at the age of seven in order to learn the recitation and memorise the texts alongside the ritual actions. While such institutions were still numerous in the 19th century, only two, both in Mumbai, exist in the whole of India today. One of them is the Dadar Athornan Institute, though the number of students is dwindling. The other school, Andheri Cama Athornan Institute, currently has only one student and is almost defunct. The memorisation of texts continues an ancient oral Indo-Iranian custom best documented in the Vedic tradition of India, which shares a common heritage with the Avesta. However, apart from anecdotal

accounts, very little is known about how Zoroastrian priests are trained, as no investigation of their teaching and learning techniques has ever been undertaken. Such a study is likewise urgently needed as this tradition too is endangered. The Multimedia Yasna project will document and investigate the training of cultic personnel in Zoroastrian priestly schools and homes in India and Iran. This part of the project entails further filming in order to capture the teaching and learning techniques of the trainee priests rehearsing the Yasna ritual and memorising the text, and will show how a millennia-old tradition is carried on. ■



Priests performing the Yasna ceremony at the Fire Temple Maneckji Seth. From: Darmesteter, *Zend-Avesta* vol. 1.