

# Iranian and Parsi Priests

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## (a) The Parsi Mode

### The Initiation as Nâvar and Martab

In India, it is only the sons of priests or of the members of the priestly families who can become priests. The right can be revived by any male member of the priestly family, though his immediate ancestors may not actually have been priests. The right can be revived by a descendant up to the fifth generation; it then dies and can no longer be exercised.

In order to be a thoroughly qualified priest, one has to go through two grades of initiations and their ceremonies. They are (1) the *Nâvar* and (2) the *Martab*.

#### 1. The Nâvar

The first initiatory ceremony for priesthood is that of Nâvar. The word means “one who is newly initiated in work of offering prayers, rites and sacred things to the Deity.” To initiate a person into priesthood, several stages of ceremonies have to be gone through. They are the following: (a) the *Bareshnum*; (b) the *Gewra*; (c) the initiation proper. I give herein an illustration which shows the initiate taking his Bareshnum.

(a) The candidate for initiation into priesthood has to go through two Bareshnum purifications [nine-night-and-day ritual of purifying by sipping consecrated bovine urine and purifying the body with unconsecrated bovine urine, dust, consecrated water (by adding drops of consecrated bovine urine), and prayers]. The first Bareshnum is said to be for the purification of his own body, the second is for the person in whose memory he becomes a Navar. Between the first Bareshnum and the second there may an interval of a few days if it is so desired, or, candidate may begin the second Bareshnum on the same day when he finishes the first. In that case, both the Bareshnums take 19 days in all. During these days, the candidate is to say his prayers five times during the day. He is expected to pass his time in a religious or pious mood. If, during any of the days of the Bareshnums, he has a *pollutis nocturna* [wet dream], that vitiates his Bareshnum. He must begin the Bareshnum again. If the case happens in the second Bareshnum, he has to repeat only the second Bareshnum. To avoid this risk, nowadays, the candidate for priesthood goes through the initiation at a very early age, between 15 or 16, when he is likely to be free from such risk. The second Bareshnum is for the *niyat* [in the name] of somebody. If that somebody is a lady, he must take care that he goes through the second Bareshnum and the subsequent ceremonies of *Gewra*, and initiation at a time, when there is no chance of that lady's passing through her monthly course. If she has her monthly course, that vitiates the ceremony which must be begun again when the lady has passed through her course and purified herself. If the person, male or female, in whose *niyat* the ceremony is gone through, dies during the period of those ceremonies, that event also vitiates the whole thing.

(b) On the candidate completing the Bareshnum, two qualified priests who “hold the Bareshnum”, who have to initiate the candidate, perform, what is known as the “*gewra*”

ceremony, which lasts for six days. This ceremony, which qualified them to initiate the candidate, consists of reciting the Yasna with its ritual for six consecutive days. Both the priests recite the whole Yasna with the necessary ritual. One of the two priests who recites the whole Yasna is called *Joti*. The other priest who assists him in going through the ceremony is called *Rathwi*. The priest, who performs the ceremony as *Joti*, is technically said to have “taken the gewra”, i.e. has acquired the qualification of continuing the ceremony. The priest who takes the gewra on the first day, is said to have taken the first gewra. He is to pass a night of vigil and watchfulness. If he has nocturnal pollution, he is said to have lost the efficacy or the qualification of his gewra. The gewra must be repeated the next day. If the efficacy continues, on the next day, in the morning, he gives the second gewra to his colleague. The other priest recites the Yasna as *Joti* and the priest who gives the gewra acts as *Rathwi*. He, now, in his turn, has to pass the night in vigil. Thus, each of the two priests has to “take the gewra” on an alternate day. These gewra ceremonies are to be performed for six days. To avoid the chance of the gewras being vitiated by the failure of the vigil of the priest holding the gewra for the particular day or by some other cause, at times, three priests are made to take part in the gewra ceremonies. Instead of one taking the gewra, two perform the ceremony, so that, if one fails to observe the required vigil and is disqualified for some cause, the other may serve, and the candidate may not be disappointed, and the initiation not delayed. The candidate has, during these six days, to pass his time in prayers during the five Gahs [prayer times in a day] and to observe all the observances of saying the grace at meals, etc. He is not to come in contact with any non-Zoroastrian.

(c) On the sixth day of the gewra ceremony, the priest who has taken the sixth gewra, initiates the candidate. The candidate takes his bath [The “Nahn” bath with consecrated and unconsecrated bovine urine, dust and consecrated water, simpler than the Bareshnum] in the morning with all its formalities and puts on a new set of white clothes. He puts on a white turban which is a symbol or insignia of priesthood. [He] is dressed in his full dress consisting of “Jama”, which is a loose gown-like dress of white linen, and “pichhori”, a kind of linen-belt, put round the waist. All the male of the gathering are similarly dressed in their full dress. The candidate carries a shawl in his left hand, it being insignia of an office or function which a person holds for life. [He] carries in his right hand a “gurz” or a mace.

The parents of the candidate invite a few friends, both male and female, to witness the ceremony. In mofussil (smaller) towns a general invitation to males is passed round in the whole town. So, any Zoroastrian who chooses may attend.

At the appointed hour, at about nine o'clock in the morning, a procession is formed to take the candidate to the temple for initiation. On the procession arriving at the Fire-temple, the candidate goes to the “Yazashna-gâh” where he is to perform the Yasna ceremony. The assembled priests are generally seated on carpets spread on the floor. The candidate removes his garments which form his full dress, performs the “pâdyâb kushti” and puts on the “padân” (mouth-veil). Thus prepared, he is brought before the assembly by one of the two priests, who asks for permission to initiate him. The Head-priest present, after the interval of a few seconds, takes the silence of the assembly for its assent and nods his head, or puts both his hands, to signify the acquiescence of the gathering.

The candidate must be free from leprosy or any wound from which blood oozes, otherwise he would be rejected and the necessary permission refused. It is to give the assembly an opportunity to see or examine him well, that he is presented after the removal of the upper garments. The candidate returns to the Yazashna-gah to go through the ceremonies of his initiation to recite the Yasna with its ritual. On returning to the Yazashna-gah, the candidate recites the Navar Yasna (Yasna without the Visparad) with its rituals, he acting as the Joti and the priest who initiates him as the raspi [Rathwi]. In the afternoon, he performs the “bâj” ceremony and takes his meals, after which he performs the “afringân” ceremony.

On the second and the third day, the candidate is permitted to have only one meal. The above three ceremonies are repeated in honor of Sraosha, and the baj is performed on the morning instead of in the afternoon as on the first day. On the third day, the above three ceremonies are repeated in honor of Sirouza (the Yazatas presiding over the thirty days of the month). On the fourth day the Yasna is recited with the Visparad, the baj and afringan in honor of Ahura Mazda. Thus qualified, the priest now called “herbad” (Avesta *aethrapaiti* ‘teacher’ [Gujarati “Ervad”]) can perform the afringan, Navjote, marriage and such other ceremonies but not the Yasna, the Vendidad or the baj ceremonies.

It appears that the “Navar” has been from the first, a ceremony of trial, of self-abnegation, self-denial, and self-renunciation.

A good deal of the original lofty ideal seems to be losing its ground now. In order to avoid the risk of failure in the pious meditation, self-abnegation, or control of passions, candidates are made to go through the initiatory ceremony in early boyhood before the age of fifteen or sixteen, when according to the course of nature, they are expected to be free from *pollutis nocturna*. Again now-a-days, it is not only those who are really intended to be priests in the future, go through the initiation, but many others who are intended by their parents for other walks of life. The latter are to go through it with the idea, that it is a religious ceremony worthy to be gone through. There are many medical men, lawyers and merchants of the priestly class, who have been made to go through it by their parents in their boyhood. That being the case, the whole of the Yasna is not learned and not recited but only a part.

## **2. The Martab**

The second degree for priest is known “Martab”. The degree of “Navar” does not entitle a priest to perform, what may be called, the ceremonies of the inner circle of the Fire-temple. He cannot perform the Yasna, the Vendidad and the Baj ceremonies. He cannot officiate at the purification ceremonies of “nahn” and “bareshnum”. In order to qualify himself to do so, he must go through the Martab ceremony. Besides the Yasna and the Vispered, which he had to read for his Navarhood, he has now to read the Vendidad.

For this ceremony, the candidate has to go through one Bareshnum of 10 days. On the 11th day, he, in company with a qualified priest, performs the “khub” ceremony and recites for it the Mino Navar Yasna with its ritual. On the second day in the morning, he has to recite another Yasna in honour of Sarosh, and at midnight he recites the Vendidad. This completes the

“Martab” ceremony, and he is now entitled to perform and recite any of the Zoroastrian rituals and prayers.

Condensed from pages 187 to 198, THE RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES AND CUSTOMS OF THE PARSEES, Ervad Shams-ul-Ulama Dr. Sir Jivanji Jamshedji Modi (1854-1933), 2nd ed. (reprint), Bombay, 1986

**NOTE:** At present, there are two ways to become a priest among the Parsis:

(1) Take the full school course of eleven years at the Athornan Madressa, Bombay, in which the student is also taught the rituals in detail. It takes six years to become a Navar in the Madressa, two years to be ordained as Martab, and a total of eleven years to get the Secondary School Certificate.

(2) The short cut by those, whose parents do not want them to become professional priests and who join other walks of life in business or employment. They do not join the Madressa for the purpose and attend their respective primary and secondary schools in their residential localities, in India or abroad. It takes them between 18 to 28 days to be ordained as priests.

In this second way, the candidate does not recite, as mentioned by the late Ervad Dr. J.J. Modi, the entire Yasna but a part of it. There are some who recite only eleven sections (hâs) and there are others who do only seven “hâs”. One is called “Eleven-hâ” Ervad and the other “Seven-hâ” Ervad. The remaining of the 61 or 65 sections of 72-ha Yasna are recited by the accompanying “gewra” priest. The majority of the “non-professional” Parsi priests belong to the category of “Eleven or Seven hâ” class. Unless they pursue their religious studies to a desirable height, they tag “Ervad” to their names in name only.

The entire course for initiation into priesthood, Navar or Martab, is to learn to recite the Avesta and Pazand texts by rote and to perform the rituals by practice. They are not taught the two scriptural languages, and they do not understand the true significance of what they do. It is on the university level that one learns the Avesta and Pahlavi languages and literature.

## **(b) Iranian Mode**

### **Initiation (“Nowzûdi”) as Mobed**

The candidate for priesthood must have all the religious information and pass the final examination in the Initiation ceremony, which in fact is a graduation ceremony. The candidates who want to join the spiritual fold and to practice as priests, must work for years under the tutorship of expert and experienced mobeds. In addition to learning Avesta, religious teachings, and the subtleties of rituals, they should also refine their character and manners. The religious teachings include the Khordeh Avesta, Darun, Fravashi, Yasna with the rituals of Gahanbar, annual, days, jashans, and other ceremonies. They should also learn through these years about the Zoroastrian Religion, its Founder, and other problems concerning the religion so that when they practice mobedship, they can teach the behdins and answer their questions.

A meeting is arranged to test the candidate. It is presided by the Head Mobed and attended by other mobeds. They test his religious knowledge and also see his spiritual and physical soundness and his good manners. After passing the examination, the candidate is allowed to go through his initiation and take up the profession of mobedship.

A number of mobeds meet at the house of the candidate one day before the initiation. They prepare a crown and a “vars”. The crown is a turban wound to fit the candidate's head. It is decorated with gold and silver chains with hanging coins and has other ornaments that make it look like a crown. It has “panâm” (mouth veil) hanging to cover the nose and mouth when worn. The panam has also the chained coins attached to it. The “vars” is made of six twigs of pomegranate, fig or willow tree. Each twig is wrapped with colored wool to make the vars multicolored. The twigs are made to make a circular pyramid in a plate. It is covered with a thin net. Four mirrors, dry fruit, candies, and a pomegranate are also kept in the plate. The “vars” is carried on head by the “vars-bearer”, who is the person who teaches the candidate as how to go through the initiation ceremony.

The Head Mobed and other priests are seated on a platform erected in the yard of the candidate's house. Other guests are seated around and still others stand in the balconies and on the rooftop. A large blazing fire-vase is kept in the middle of the yard. The candidate stands next to the Head Mobed.

The Head Mobed reads the Initiation Advice. The candidate is advised, among other things, to repent for his past sins and to begin a new religious life of doing good to people, always have God in mind, and remember the Sayings of the Prophet.

Next, all stand and the candidate is helped by the “vars-bearer” to go around and shake hand with the Head Mobed and other mobeds and say: “Hama-zûr bîm - Let us unite”. Then, all of them join hands and go round the fire three times as they recite the Atash Niyayesh. The candidate carries a T-shape metallic object whose T is swirled by him with his finger. The “Village Mobed” recites the Initiation Poem in praise of the occasion. Meanwhile the guests shower the candidate with flowers, rice, and eleagnus and thyme leaves.

The candidate and the vars-bearer enter the “Yazashn-gâh”. They keep the crown and the vars in a corner. They are joined by two other mobeds. These four persons and the mobeds seated outside the “Yazashn-gah” are united by a koshti. The group recites the Yasna from section one to nineteen.

The entire Initiation ceremony with its intervals lasts for four days. The candidate recites the Yasna on each of the four mornings and recites the Afaringan in the afternoons. After the conclusion rite, the newly ordained mobed can now participate with other mobeds in all the religious matters and rituals for one year. After that, he is permitted is to practice on his own.

\*Translated and condensed from Marâsem-e Mazhabi va Adab-e Zartoshtiân (Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Zoroastrians) by the late Mobed Ardeshir Azargoshasb (President of the Mobeds Council, Tehran), Tehran, 2nd. Ed. 1979 (in Persian).

**NOTE:** The Iranian mode has only one grade for its Mobedship as against the Parsi Navar and Martab. The Iranian Mobeds are generally much more informed on the Zoroastrian Religion. Compared to Parsi rituals, the Iranian mode is much simple. Bareshnum is not practiced. Initiation is performed as an adult and at a well-experienced and mature age. The hereditary condition has been relaxed and the laity can become para-Mobeds and Mobeds. Although, to the best of knowledge, no female has been initiated so far into Mobedship, the door has been opened for them to enter, first a pre-para-Mobed, then para-Mobed, and then Mobed<sup>1</sup>. The recital of the Avesta and Pazand is by rote and rituals by practice.

Avesta and Pahlavi are taught in all the universities of Iran and in certain (associations) anjomans. Iran boasts of the largest number of Avesta, Pahlavi and Zoroastrian Studies students and scholars—Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians—in the world.

### **The Zarathushtrian Assembly's Position**

The Zarathushtrian Assembly recognizes that every profession, which promotes human society, and which does not monopolize the office and/or does not exploit the people, is good and noble. It respects all scholars, priests or not, of other orders, Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians, for their mature knowledge of their respective and other faiths. What it does **not** recognize is the murmuring priest who goes by **rote** alone and does not know and understand what he recites and performs, and yet demands obedience and blind following from the simple, kept-in-the-dark laity.

And true to the Gathic tradition, the Assembly does not entertain a priestly class or division. It has proficient persons who officiate at religious ceremonies from birth through initiation to memorial; act as chief witnesses at, for instance, wedding solemnization; lead congregational prayers; and convey the Divine Message by practicing it for their own selves, teaching it to those who want to learn, and spreading it around the world. Any able person, male or female, may qualify on the concrete basis of his/her knowledge to be chosen and recognized as a *ratu*, a leader, *aethrapaiti*, a teacher, or *hamidhpaiti*, an assembly head.

(See "The Zoroastrian Priest in the Avesta" by Ali A. Jafarey, SPENTA periodical—Vol. 2, Nos. 5–6, Vol. 3, Nos. 1 and 2 - August 1992–May 1993, published by the Zarathushtrian Assembly, for full details)

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<sup>1</sup> A number of women have been accepted as mobedyars (para-mobeds) since the writing of this article. Work is being done to allow women to be full Mobeds. While the concept of Mobed (from magu-pati 'chief magi') is absent from the Avesta and not well defined in the Sassanian era, both the Avesta and Pahlavi writings say a woman (or child) can hold the position of Zaotar (Zot, chief officiator of the Yasna ceremony, a very prestigious priestly roll) as long as they demonstrate proper knowledge of the ritual. See Erpatistan 1.5, Nirangistan 1.40 and the accompanying Zand, and Shayest ne Shayest 10.35. – Caleb Goodfellow