

# Sadreh-pûshi—Navjote

*Ali A. Jafarey*

## **Aryan Age of Majority**

Since the day humans consolidated their primitive bonds into a well-knit society, they have evolved a process to admit the matured young as adult members. The initiation rite is therefore as old as human society, the acceptable age being as low as nine years among certain primitive tribes and as high as 21 years in certain more advanced societies. It has even branched into various modern graduation ceremonies in education, training, and achievements which are generally not restricted by age limits. Other initiations into a social order or a religious fellowship are also not governed by age limits. The initiation may be a simple or an elaborate ceremony, depending on the people and their times.

The ancient Aryans, ancestors of the people of Iranian culture, considered fifteen years as the age of attaining majority and consent for both the sexes. It was the right age when a boy had learned most of the trades of agriculture and animal husbandry from his father, and the girl had acquired most of the skills of homemaking and housekeeping from her mother. The two became fully qualified to take their respective responsibilities in the household and society.

The initiation ceremony was simple. The initiate had to receive a work band from an elder ‘to gird the loins’ and make a solemn vow that, once girded, one would serve the family and the folk. Prayers by an elder and blessings by the attendees made the ceremony more significant.

The antiquity of the ceremony, later tradition says, goes back to Yima Khshaeta (Middle Persian Jamshed, modern Persian Jamshid), a legendary leader of the southward migrating Aryans of the ice and post-ice ages, from 15,000 down to 8,000 years ago. It may be even older. The phrase “to gird” in almost all the Indo-European languages meaning “to prepare for action”, “to undertake a task”, and “to invest with authority”, proves its origin in a hoary past.

## **Original Zoroastrian Form**

Zarathushtra came to found a monotheistic religion of Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds, and to eradicate ignorance, superstition and both spiritual and social ills. However, he did not interfere with the daily life and the way of living of an industrious people. Rather, he purified and beautified it. His famous sermon on the “Freedom of Choice” and the “Great Event” (Gathas: Song 3.2<sup>1</sup>), and the eventual turning point in one's life through this prudent choice, is further illustrated by his mentioning of certain major initiations: The day King Vishtaspa joined “the Great Zoroastrian Fellowship”, and the occasions on which Ferashaoshtara was granted “the best bliss of righteousness”, and sage Jamaspa “united with righteousness”. He speaks of his cousin Maidyoimaha and other near relatives joining the Fellowship (Gathas: Songs 11.14–15,

---

<sup>1</sup> Yasna 30.2

14.9, 16.16–19<sup>2</sup>). His last song states that his best wish had been fulfilled because all those who chose the new order were initiated into the Fellowship and even his earlier opponents had learned the words of the Good Religion and acted accordingly (Gathas: Song 17.1<sup>3</sup>).

How the initiation was actually performed, his ever-guiding sublime songs, the Gathas, do not elaborate. However, the Haptañhâiti, the Avestan songs chronologically next to the Gathas, shows the “greatest event of decision” was held in a fire-enclosure, the earliest prototype of today's temples and the ceremony was performed facing the fire altar (Yasna 36). Another text, Fshusho Mânthra (Thought-provoking Message of Prosperity—Yasna 58), also in the Gathic dialect, breaks into a prayer for the prosperity of the settled industrious people and their useful animals, and ends with the same stanza of Haptañhâiti by asking for “perfection and eternity”... of initiation in an agricultural settlement.

The term *yâh* (from the root *yah*, meaning ‘to strive’) is translated as “the event of decision or choice”. It is mentioned in three places in the Gathas (Songs 5.2, 11.14, 14.9<sup>4</sup>). It occurs twice again in post-Gathic Avestan pieces. *Seraosha* (Listening to the Divine Voice) is “the true word most victorious in the event of decision, (because) the Mazdayasna Religion is the true law among all the good and righteous principles.” (Yasht 11.3). And “Righteous Zarathushtra, leader of the material world and the head of mankind, revered the Choice of Religion in all the events of decision.” (Yasht 13.41). It shows the continuations of the ceremony long after the passing of Zarathushtra and his companions.

## Initiation

It is *Fravarti*, the “Choice of Religion” text (Yasna 11.17 to 12.9), again in the Gathic dialect, which provides a clearer picture of the early form of the ceremony. It is a long piece of eleven stanzas. It depicts an “initiation” ceremony in which adult initiates renounced their previous beliefs and professions—polytheism, superstitions, sorcery, arbitrariness, robbery, and other “mental and physical illnesses”, each for his or her self, and joined the Zarathushtrian fellowship. It must have been quite interesting to see persons of diverse beliefs and practices come to share with those present by telling them of their past, how sorry they were for it, and how glad they felt to give it up by choosing the Religion of Good Conscience which “overthrows yokes, sheaths swords, promotes self-reliance and is righteous.” The main part of the *Fravarti* which concerns the declaration of the choice of religion is also known as the *Âstuye* (appreciation). The initiation, originally the ceremony aimed at admitting an adolescent into adult society at the age of fifteen, was now applied to give the initiate the opportunity to declare his or her choice of religion and thus become a responsible adherent of the religion. It meant the commitment for a radiating useful life of righteousness. The ceremony was climaxed by the girding of the waist with the *koshti* over the next-to-skin shirt *sadreh*, and the recitation of the *Fravarti* formula of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Yasna 46.14-15, 49.9, 51.16-19

<sup>3</sup> Yasna 53.1

<sup>4</sup> Yasna 32.2, 46. 14, 49.9

“Appreciation”. It was also performed for the initiates who chose the religion at an older age. It is this initiation that has been elaborated as well as contracted into the modern “navjote”.

The koshti was the ceremonial girdle of commitment to service, a service aimed at the continuous renovation of the living world for a progressive prosperity and a radiating happiness, towards wholeness and immortality. The sadreh was the simple shirt worn next to the skin. The prayerful girding of the koshti every day was aimed at reminding the person of his sacred commitment to serve, a solemn way of reminding oneself of the duty one had to discharge. Although the Fravarti does not indicate that any officiant led the adult initiation ceremony, the current tradition and anthropological observations at large suggest that there was someone who directed the procedure and that there were some people who witnessed it.

## Ceremony

The initiate, an adult of sound discretion, may either be a person born in a Zarathushtrian home or one who, originally of an alien belief and ideology, has chosen the religion of Good Conscience through study and conviction. He or she should understand and memorize as much as possible of the Fravarti formula, either both in the Gathic language and the native or national tongue, or if he or she prefers, only in one of them. The officiant will, of course, be at hand to prompt him or her in the recitation. He or she should know how to tie the girdle, koshti. Relatives and friends are invited for the occasion, which according to the Gathas and Haptañhâiti, is a great, rather the greatest, event of decision in one's life. Preferably all should wear white on this occasion, because white represents light, and it symbolizes the unity of the three basic colors—red, blue, and yellow—and therefore, the unity of mankind into an enlightened Fellowship.

A table is laid with a white cloth. A fire-vase lit with sandalwood or any other sweet-smelling incense, candles (preferably white), flowers, trays of dry and fresh fruits, a tray with rice and rose petals or any other showering matter, another tray with the koshti placed on it, and other decorative articles are placed on the table in a beautiful array. The decorated table symbolizes a prosperous future in a beautiful environment.

The initiate, wearing the sadreh, next to his or her skin, and if preferred under his or her upper garment, stands facing the sun or a light in such a way as to be close to the table but between the table and the audience. A hall may provide a platform for the purpose. The officiant, dressed in white, stands facing the initiate, preferably on the other side of the table. It may as well be made clear that (1) it is the initiate who “performs” the ceremony, (2) that the officiant gives only a guiding help, and (3) that the officiant and others present are, in fact, there to witness the Fravarti, the Choice of Religion ceremony.

The ceremony starts with the officiant, or an assistant, stating the significance of initiation, especially the main object of girding oneself and preparing to keep the world new and fresh with true actions. Then the initiate, if he or she prefers, gives the reason for choosing the religion of Good Conscience. The officiant recites the first song from the Gathas, offering a sincere prayer

to please the Wise God and to serve the world. He then hands over the girdle, also placed in a decorated tray on the table, to the initiate, who, in turn, prepares for the main initiation procedure as follows:

1. He doubles the koshti with the tasseled ends on one side and holds it in his hand with his middle finger between the two strands and puts the loop around the middle finger of the other hand. He stands erect and ready.
2. He begins by reciting a piece from the later Avesta:  
“Khshnaothra ahurahê mazdâo—For the pleasure God Wise.”
3. Then he turns to the Gathic texts to gird him/herself for service to maintain a renovating world:

*At ve staotâ aojâi, Mazdâ, añhâ-châ  
yavat ashâ tavâ-châ isâi-châ  
dâtâ añheush aredat vohu manañhâ  
haithyâ vareshtâm hyat vasnâ ferashotemem.*

“I am, Wise One, Your praiser and shall continue to regard myself so as long as I have the strength and the will through righteousness. This shall promote the laws of life through good mind, for true actions (here the initiate places the koshti on his or her waist) make life most renovated as God wishes.”  
(Song 15.11<sup>5</sup>)

4. The initiate winds the koshti and recites:

*Ashem vohû vahishtem astî. Ushtâ astî  
Ushtâ ahmâi hyat ashâi vahishtâi ashem*  
“Righteousness is the best good. It is radiant happiness.  
Radiant happiness comes to the person  
who is righteous for the sake of righteousness alone.”

5. The initiate recites the following formula twice and when pronouncing the word shyaothananâm (meaning acts) ties the first half of the reef-knot and on the second occasion the second half of the knot. He or she may first recite the original text and then use the translation for the second recitation.

The formula:

*Yathâ ahû vairyo  
athâ ratush ashât-chît hachâ*

---

<sup>5</sup> Yasna 50.11

*vañheush dazdâ manañho*  
*shyaothananâm* (here tie the first half knot) *añheush Mazdâi khshathrem-châ Ahurâi â*  
*yim drigubyo dadat vâstârem.*

“Both the Lord and the Leader  
are to be chosen because of their righteousness.  
These two appointments are made with good mind,  
so that the acts (here tie the second half knot) of life are done for the Wise One.  
And the dominion of God is well established,  
in which the chosen person is appointed  
as the Rehabilitator of the rightful who are oppressed.”

6. The initiate then winds the ends at his or her back and ties the two half knots at the two  
ushtâ (radiant happiness):

*Ashem vohû vahishtem astî. Ushtâ* (here tie the first half knot) *astî Ushtâ* (here the  
second half knot) *ahmâi hyat ashâi vahishtâi ashem.*

“Righteousness is the best good. It is radiant happiness.  
Radiant happiness comes to the person  
who is righteous for the sake of righteousness alone.”

7. With the koshti tied, the initiate stands with thumbs hooked into the koshti, or hands  
folded to recite Fravarti, the Choice of Religion declaration. The Choice of Religion  
declaration restores one's appreciation for the beauty of Good Conscience:

*Mazda-yasno ahmi, Mazda-yasno Zarathushtrish*  
*fravarâne âstutas-châ fravaretas-châ.*  
*Âstuye humatem mano,*  
*âstuye hûkhtem vacho,*  
*âstuye hvarshtem shyaothanem.*  
*Âstuye daenâm vañuhîm Mazda-yasnîm*  
*fraspâ-yaokhedhrâm, nidhâsnaithishem,*  
*khvaetvadathâm, ashaonîm,*  
*yâ hâithinâm-châ bushyeintinâm-châ*  
*mazishtâ-châ, vahishtâ-châ, sraeshtâ-châ,*  
*yâ Âhuirish Zarathushtrish.*  
*Ahurâi Mazdâi vispâ vohû chinahmî.*  
*(Aeshâ astî daenayâo Mazda-yasnoish âstuitish)*

“I, with my appreciations and convictions, choose for myself  
to be a worshiper of the Wise One and a Zarathushtrian.  
I appreciate good thoughts,

I appreciate good words,  
I appreciate good deeds.  
I appreciate Good Conscience,  
the religion of worshiping the Wise One,  
which overthrows yokes yet sheaths swords,  
teaches self-reliance, and is righteous.  
Therefore, of the religions that have been and that shall be,  
this is the greatest, best, and sublimest.  
It is divine and Zarathushtrian.  
I attribute all good to the Wise God.  
(Such is my appreciation for the Good Religion of worshiping the Wise One.)”

This completes his/her “Gathic” Choice of the Religion formula.

8. The initiate then may recite any of the following pieces in the Later Avesta and Persian with the intermitting Ashem Vohu:

*Jasa mê avañhê mazda:* “Come to my help, Wise One.” (three times)

*Ashem vohû vahishtem astî. Ushtâ astî  
Ushtâ ahmâi hyat ashâi vahishtâi ashem.*

“Righteousness is the best good. It is radiant happiness.  
Radiant happiness comes to the person  
who is righteous for the sake of righteousness alone.”

“May we unite in strength. May we unite in strength and righteousness. May we  
unite in strength and enjoy more merits. May we join meritorious people in  
merits. May we be far from sins of the sinful. May we join the koshti-wearing, the  
pious, and the good people of the seven continents of the earth.”

“Creator God help us pass over the great Bridge of Discernment in light, easy,  
happy and smooth way. O Creator God, may we reach the best of abode of the  
righteous, the bright paradise. full of comforts.”

*Ashem vohû vahishtem astî. Ushtâ astî  
Ushtâ ahmâi hyat ashâi vahishtâi ashem.*

“Righteousness is the best good. It is radiant happiness.  
Radiant happiness comes to the person  
who is righteous for the sake of righteousness alone.”

“May the special glory of the Good Religion of Mazda-worship be victorious.”  
(Three times)

(Here repeat *Ashem vohû* formula)

May God and the eternal progressives be successful. May it be so. May it be more so.

(Here repeat *Ashem vohû* formula)

Formula of Faith (Persian)

9. This Avestan and Pahlavi prayer has been added to the Initiation Ceremony and has become central to it in modern times:

*Razishtayâo chistayâo Mazda-dâtayâo ashaonyâo daênayâo vañhuyâo Mazda-yasnoish. Dîn-e Behi rast-o dorost ke khoda bar mardom ferestadeh in ast ke Asho Zartosht peighambar âvardeh ast. Dîn dîn-e Urmazd, dâd-e Zartosht.*

(Here repeat *Ashem vohû* formula)

*Dâdâr yek, Dîn-e Behi yek, Peighambar-e pâk-râh Asho Zartosht-e Espantamân-e anûsheh-ravân. Dânesteh-o bîgomân be râsti-o dorosti-ye Dîn-e pâk Urmazd.*

(Here repeat *Ashem vohû* formula)

Translation:

“The God-given Perception, the most right, the righteous (is) the Good Religion of worshipping the Wise One.

The true and right Good Religion sent by God for humanity is the one brought by Righteous Zarathushtra, the Messenger.

The (true) religion is the religion of God given by Zarathushtra.

(Here repeat *Ashem vohû* formula)

God is one, the Good Religion is one, and the Messenger of the proper path is Righteous Zarathushtra Spitama, the eternal. I understand and have no doubts about the truth and essence of the noble religion of God.”

For the righteous. (Here repeat *Ashem vohû* formula)

The serene ceremony concludes with a benediction.

\*\*\*\*\*