

# Women in the Gathas and the Later Avesta

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“We venerate the righteous woman who is good in thoughts, words, and deeds, who is well-educated, is an authority on religious affairs, is progressively serene, and is like the women who belong to the Wise God.

"We venerate the righteous man who is good in thoughts, words, and deeds, who knows well the religion he has chosen, and who does not know blind following.

"It is these people who, with their actions, promote the world through righteousness.”

(Aiwisruthrem Gah 9, Vispered 3.4)

Much has been said and written about man and woman. Some tell the truth. Others are empty claims. While enough has been written about ascendancy of man, much more through might than right, to his present position in the human society, the role of woman has not been depicted the way it should be. The reason is obvious: man is the author of most of the statements! These statements show that woman has been from the lady paramount of society to a mere chattel at home. While “mother” has been acclaimed by some to be the highest source of love and the best training for progress, “woman” has been accused by others of the being the cause of the downfall and the origin of pollution. Even on the eve of the 21st century when women are said to have won complete equality with men in advanced countries, comparative statistics of women holding high positions in administrative and other key posts is sadly very low. On the other hand, a glimpse of publicity stunts still show her no more than a showy object exploited for commercial profits.

Turning to fully comprehend the position of woman in the Avesta, we better first have a look at the topographical position of the land where the Zarathushtrian religion rose, spread, met other religions, and had its worst setbacks. It is the Iranian Plateau. It is a vast highland with an average height of 1220 meters (4000 feet) above sea level. It has rings of mountains, green valleys, and bleak deserts. It lies between the Caspian Sea, the Aral Sea, and the plain on the north, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean on the south, the Indus Valley and the Pamirs on the east, and the Mesopotamian valley on the west. It has had three major religious changes: Pre-Zarathushtrian, Zarathushtrian, and Islamic. Our subject covers the first two.

## **Pre-Zarathushtrian**

Pre-Zarathushtrian period has two phases: Pre-Aryan beliefs and the Aryan cult.

### **Pre-Aryan Beliefs**

Archaeological evidence shows that the pre-Aryan or indigenous civilization was mostly confined to proto-town settlements located at distances all over the plateau. The people of these settlements were generally self-sufficient, yet they maintained trade links with each other. The trade network between Mesopotamia and Indus interlaced them all together in cult and culture so much so that the only Dravidian language of the ancient Indus civilization, north of Tamil,

Telegu, and Kannada, is “Brahui”. It is now languishing in eastern Iran and western Pakistan, a proof that once upon a time, natives of at least the eastern part of the Plateau shared a common language with the inhabitants of the Indus valley civilization.

Women dominated religion and society in central and eastern parts of the Plateau but were themselves dominated by patriarchal cult of male priests in western parts. Here they were reduced to serve the male priests and pilgrims as temple prostitutes, remnants of which one finds in the so-called “Devadasis” of southern India. Cult prostitution has its own story in the ancient Mediterranean region. However, temple prostitution meant going to temples only during the period they could sexually serve men. Menstruation kept them away from going to temples and participating in the “holy rite”, an act which is the main **source** of the menstrual taboos still observed by many tradition-bound communities. Passage of time has exaggerated once the natural absence from attending their temple “duty” of sensually entertaining priests and pilgrims, to the much “abhorred uncleanness” of the menstrual period and segregation of later days when the real reason for not attending temple services were forgotten and fables were woven to justify the segregation.

## **Aryan Cult**

The Aryan mass migration changed the entire plateau. Pastoral and agricultural in profession and superior in number, strength, and speed, but not in settled civilization, these people soon spread over all the available virgin lands. They seem to have bypassed and generally circumvented old settlements because we have no stories preserved by the Aryans of their conquest, occupation, and subjugation of non-Aryans. The change brought in a gradual Aryanization of the entire population through assimilation. It is obvious that they were influenced by the natives too, particularly in the domain of town settlement and civilization in which they were far more advanced than the pastoral Aryans. Many customs, especially those brought in by women married to newcomers, were adopted without any evident opposition. Some of these customs are reflected in their paraphrased version in Avesta in the Vendidad.

The Avesta has no creation myth to tell how the first man and woman were created.<sup>1</sup> It simply says that Ahura Mazda created, among other things, the living world of mankind and other animals. Therefore, the earliest mention of woman is made when Yima Khshaeta (King Jamshid of the Persian epics) was divinely warned of the coming ice age spell and was directed to lead a group of 1900 “men and women” of the greatest, best, and finest species along with cattle, sheep, dogs, birds, and blazing fires inside a specious cave complex and save themselves.<sup>2</sup> Archaeology has shown that human beings survived the cold spell, which covered parts of Eurasia between 8,000 to 12,000 years ago, by taking shelter in caves and fire kept them warm.

But a casual mention cannot give us a true picture of women in the ancient Indo-Iranian society. However, the high regard in which female deities were held and other Avestan and

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<sup>1</sup> The Avestan creation myth was likely contained in the missing Damdad Nask (“book”) only surviving, in some form, through the Bundahishn. The Nadar and Chihrdad likely had a creation myths as well. – Caleb Goodfellow

<sup>2</sup> Vendidad 2.1–43

Vedic evidence show that women enjoyed a fairly high position in the moderately patriarchal society.

## Zarathushtrian

### Gathic and post-Gathic Period

It is with the advent of Zarathushtra that the position of woman in society emerged clear. The Gathas and supplementary texts in the Gathic dialect are explicit on the subject. The famous stanza of the “choice of religion” gives equal rights to both:

“Hear the best with your ears and ponder with a bright mind. Then each man and woman, for his or her self, select either of the two (the better and bad mentalities). Awaken to this Doctrine of ours before the Great Event (of Choice) ushers in.

(Gathas Song 3.2<sup>3</sup>)

To those who make the right choice and join the Good Religion, he says:

“Wise God, whoever, man or woman, shall give me what You know to be best in life—rewards for righteousness, power through good mind—I shall accompany him and her in glorifying such as You are, and shall, with them all, cross over the sorting bridge.”

(Song 11.10<sup>4</sup>)

Yet in another stanza he lauds:

“The Wise God knows best any person of mine for his or her veneration done in according with righteousness. I shall, on my part, venerate such persons, passed away or living, by their names, and shall lovingly encircle them.”

(Song 16.22<sup>5</sup>)

It is this stanza which is later paraphrased in the famous Yenghe Hatam formula, also in a late Gathic dialect:

“The Wise God knows better every man and woman among the living for his or her veneration done in accordance with righteousness. We, on our part, venerate such men and women.”

Furthermore, the Gathas present an inspiring message for the wedding couple. Of his three sons and three daughters, Zarathushtra selected his youngest daughter Pouruchista to give his advice and blessing. He wanted her to have a person “who is steadfast in good mind, and united with righteousness and with the Wise One” and advised her to “consult him with your wisdom”, and be progressively serene and munificent. She assured her father that would “**emulate** and **choose**” him in such a way that her act would be an honor for the father, the husband, the settlers, and the family. “As a righteous woman among the righteous people”, she committed herself to wisely serve the Good Religion more than ever. Pouruchista moved her father to leave an ever-fresh word for all the wedding couples. “These words I speak to the

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<sup>3</sup> Yasna 30.2

<sup>4</sup> Yasna 46.10

<sup>5</sup> Yasna 51.22

charming brides and to you, bridegrooms. Do bear them in mind. Comprehend them with your conscience. Master the life which belongs to good mind. May you each win the other through righteousness." Zarathushtra tells them to remain united and to strengthen and promote the universal fellowship of the Good Religion (S 17.3–7<sup>6</sup>).

The last blessing given by Zarathushtra near the end of his successful mission of 47 years put the finishing touches to his divine task:

“May the desired Fellowship come for the support of the men and women of Zarathushtra, for the support of good mind, so that the conscience of every person earns the choice reward—the reward of righteousness—a wish regarded by the Wise God.”

(A Airyema Ishyo—Y 54.1)

The Haptanghaiti of seven short “yasnas” and next in importance to the Gathas further clarifies the position held by woman in the Gathic society. Advocating learning, practicing, and preaching, it says: “The more a man or woman knows the truth, the better. He or she should zealously practice it and preach it to others so that they practice it accordingly (H. Song 1.6<sup>7</sup>).” It venerates the “womenfolk, ... who belong to You, God, on account of their righteousness (S 4.1<sup>8</sup>).” Indeed, it venerates the helpful law-abiding righteous, “born in whatever land, both men and women, whose good consciences are growing, have grown, or shall grow ... good men and women (who are) incremental, eternal, ever-gaining, ever-growing, ... who live a life of good mind (H S 5.2–3<sup>9</sup>).”

Zarathushtra prayed. “May good rulers, not bad rulers, rule over us with actions of good understanding and serenity(Gathas S 13.5<sup>10</sup>)” and his immediate successors rightly added, “May a good ruler, man or woman, rule over us in both the (mental and physical) existences (S 7.2<sup>11</sup>).”

It was this ordinary love and respect shown by Asho Zarathushtra to his men and women that created the tradition of commemorating outstanding men and women on the Memorial Day, the *Farvardegân* or *Muktâd*, at the end of the year. The Farvardin Yasht, a post-Gathic Avesta text, venerates the names of 261 persons, sixteen of whom are married women and eleven are maidens. This gives us a much higher proportion of women in the front lines of a religious order than in any other religion in its early stage, or even today. Keeping in mind the universality of the Zarathushtrian message in view, the Yasht then turns to human beings of every land and states in separate paragraphs:

“We venerate the righteous men... we venerate the righteous women of Aryan countries... Turanian countries... Sairimyan countries... Saini countries... Dahi countries... and of all countries... the righteous men and women, who (were) foremost in accepting the divine doctrine and first to listen to the divine teachings, who won for the cause of

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<sup>6</sup> Yasna 53.3–7

<sup>7</sup> Y 35.6

<sup>8</sup> Y 38.1

<sup>9</sup> Y 39.2–3

<sup>10</sup> Y 48.5

<sup>11</sup> Y 41.2

righteousness, who have been successful in establishing homes, districts, settlements, countries, who have been successful in learning the thought-provoking message, who have been successful in improving their souls, and who have been successful in obtaining all that is good.”

(Yasht 13.143–151)

The Aerpatastan is a book for the priestly class. It has not reached us in full but fortunately has the part dealing with woman officiants at rituals. It belongs to a time when every person was engaged in his or her livelihood profession, generally agriculture. One could only leave the job if another person was available to take over without a possible loss in property. Man and woman both officiated, whenever invited as priests in a ritual. If invited to officiate at a ceremony, husband and wife had to consider who was needed more to attend the profession so that the other was spared to proceed to the ritual scene. Women were at liberty to go to officiate at a ritual without the prior permission of their husbands. The officiant, more needed to attend to his or her daily profession, could only be absent for a total of six nights in traveling and officiating at the ceremony. It may be noted that those willing to become priests had to undergo a three-year rigorous course of learning, memorizing, comprehending, expounding the Gathas and the Haptanghaiti, till then the only guiding “principles of life” and the only prayers used in rituals. All non-Gathic texts now used in rituals are later, some very late, additions. The Avesta does not speak of the Yasna or the Vendidad ceremonies performed in present times in India.<sup>12</sup>

The Vispered is a booklet devoted to the seasonal festivals of Gahanbars. It shows that eight officials, each responsible for a specific function, took part in the ritual. In addition to the eight priests surrounding the holy fire, there were representatives of all the religious and social units of the locality to stand “prepared” to participate in the ritual, a procedure now out of question in present-day rituals performed by the priestly class while the laity lie low and silent. The *Zaotar* (literally ‘invoker’), the chief officiant, summons each of his or her seven colleagues as well as the representatives of the priestly, warrior, and prospering professions, and the representatives of the house, district, settlement, the youth devoted to further the religion, the teaching priest in the district, the roving preacher outside the district, and the house mistress. It is then that women and men of extraordinary talents, given in the stanzas quoted at the beginning of this essay are summoned to participate. We may note that a woman is called *hush-hâm-sâsta* (literally well-instructed in religious lore) and *ratu-khshathra* (rite-authority). The latter title is used for Ahura Mazda as the supreme authority (Vispered 11.1) and the Gathas as the foremost authority of all scriptures used at *ratu*, rightful rituals.<sup>13</sup> It may be pointed that due to a wrong rendering in Pahlavi, some have translated the above *ratu-khshathra* as “obedient to husband” without taking into view the other instances quoted above, particularly the one in which Ahura Mazda is *ratu-khshathra*!

As a participant, the Gathas are addressed as prayers to God and as guidance to mankind. Yet, as we have observed, the Gathic texts go a little further to mention both men and women so that it is fully understood that both the sexes enjoy equal rights in every spiritual (Gathic mental) and

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<sup>12</sup> see “Aerpatastan and Nirangastan” by Sohrab J. Bulsara, Bombay, 1915, and “Erbedestan, an Avestan-Pahlavi text” by Helmut Humbach and Josef Elfenbein, Munich., 1990

<sup>13</sup> Y 54.2, 55.1, 71.11, Vispered 11.1, Afarin-e Gatha 2.3, Vendidad 19.38

physical phase of human life. No priority or supremacy is given to any of the two. The two are free to emulate each other in union to win each other in righteous service.

### Later Avestan Period

We have left the pristine Gathic era and the immediate post-Gathic period behind. Centuries have passed. Changes have set in. Certain Gathic concepts have been personified under a new term “yazata”, meaning the ‘venerated, revered’. *Daenâ*—‘conscience, religion’ *Chistâ*—‘perception’, another term for *Daenâ*, and *Ashi Vanguhi*—‘good reward’, all feminine, are among the personified concepts.

The Din Yasht in honor of Chistâ and the Art Yasht in honor of Ashi, provide us with the names of two stalwarts of the Good Religion. They are Hvovi, wife of Zarathushtra, and Hutaosa, wife of Kavi Vishtaspa. In the Din Yasht, Chistâ is approached by Hvovi. She, “the righteous, the knowledge-seeking, wished (to join) in good share with the righteous Zarathushtra in thinking, talking and acting in accordance with the Religion (Daenâ) (Yt 16.15).” It shows that she wanted to marry Zarathushtra to serve the religion better, an act her daughter Pouruchista followed later on the occasion of her marriage. In the Art Yasht, it is Zarathushtra who prays to Ashi Vanguhi to grant him the boon that “the good, independent Hutaosa think, talk, and act in accordance with the Religion so that she believes in and comprehends my Mazdayasni Religion and brings good fame to my community(Yasht 17.46<sup>14</sup>).” Her conversion to the Good Religion, according to the composer of the yasht, was of special importance to Zarathushtra.

Ashi Vanguhi has the Art, or 17th Yasht, in her honor. This personification of a Gathic abstract, in her “yazata” role, is what Lakshmi is to the Hindus, deity of wealth and prosperity. Contrary to Anahitâ, a pre-Zarathushtrian deity of which we will speak later, she is not offered any animal sacrifices but is simply praised by pre-Zarathushtrian and Zarathushtrian kings and heroes to grant boons. She is highly aggrieved, we are told, to see three women: a barren *jahika*, a woman who delivers her husband a child conceived from a stranger, and a maiden seduced to bear child without marriage. She bars “impotent men, past-menopausal *jahi*, children, and virgins” from partaking her libations (Yt 17.54, 57–58). It means that the participants are told that she accepts only able-bodied men and women of mature and reproductive age in the rituals performed in her honor.

Although composed posthumously, the two Yashts not only echo two important events in the promotion of the religion but also reveal the importance of women in the mission. They also show that women still enjoyed high status although the marshal phase of the Good Religion had begun with the ascendancy of the conquering warriors and the advent of epical Yashts. The epical Yashts are mostly dedicated to pre-Zarathushtrian deities (Ardevi Sura Anahita, Tishtrya, Mithra, Varethraghna, and Drvaspa). Although edited and augmented to suit the Zarathushtrian environment, they have much of the pre-Zarathushtrian material in them.

Here, the first thing one observes is the dominating figure of Aredvi Sura Anahita. Originally a river goddess with a probable name of *Harahvati/Sarasvati*, she is known in the later Avesta by her titles as *Aredvi Surâ Anâhitâ*, freely rendered as the ‘Unpolluted Heroine Humidity’. She

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<sup>14</sup> Also repeated in Yasht 9.26

provides us with the description of a beautifully attired lady, whom kings and heroes of pre-Zarathushtrian days approached with ritual sacrifices of hundreds of large and small animals for helping them to accomplish certain tasks. The description runs: “Aredvi Sura (is) maiden, independent, tall, upright, well-shaped, and beautiful. Her beautiful white arms resemble the forelegs of a mare. She wears a crown of gold with a hundred stars, octagon in shape, shining circle, with ribbons flowing and flying. She has square-shaped golden earrings. Her lovely neck is adorned by a gold necklace. Her breast (are) made prominent by her tight belt glittering with ornaments. She wears a costly gold-embroidered gown with many folds. Her fur coat of one hundred female beavers shines like gold and silver woven together. Thus attired, she rides a chariot with reins in her hands. Her chariot is drawn by four white horses of the same breed. They are the wind, the rain, the cloud, and the hail.” She is called the healer; promoter of herd, home, country and the world; purifier of male seed and female womb; facilitator of childbirth; increaser of milk in breasts; and above all, the Guardian of Waters (see Yt 5.1–132). Strangely enough, it is this female yazata who prohibits women from partaking the offerings made in honor. All those who pray to her for boons are male. However, the high popularity enjoyed by her and other female deities to whom male kings and heroes turned for help reveals the feminine position.

Dravaspâ (Literally ‘Healthy-mare’) is another pre-Zarathushtrian female deity. Although she is the guardian of the animal world, she too accepts sacrifices of hundreds of animals by the kings and heroes approaching her for boons. A description of the wives and daughters, given in the Dravaspa Yasht, reveals how the upper class women lived. The wives reclined on beautiful coaches with beautiful cushions. They were well-attired, with square-built earrings and gold necklaces. They waited for their husbands to come and make love with them. Their daughters had narrow waists and were beautiful in body. Their shape was wishfully pleasing to those who looked at them (Yt 9.1–3).

The male yazatas, Tishtrya and Verethraghna, both pre-Zarathushtrian gods, bar “the robber, the *jahi*, the person who does not chant the Gathas, and the antagonist to this religion which is divine and Zarathushtrian” from partaking their libations (Yt 8 & 14).

*Jahi* or *Jahika* (the second is derogative) is generally rendered as “whore”, but the context in which the terms are used show that ordinarily it should mean a vagrant. Other instances show that when applied to woman, in addition to being a vagrant, she is said to be barren, “past-her-menopause”, and engaged in prostitution and witchcraft.<sup>15</sup>

## **Vendidadic Vanity**

Finally, the last phase of our essay. The Vendidad. or better *Vidaeva-dâta* literally ‘the Law against the Daevas’, is mostly devoted to pollution and purification rites. Although its composition is ascribed to the Parthian period (250 BCE to 224 CE), its contents show that most of the rites go well beyond the Zarathushtrian era, even into pre-Aryan times. The Avestan

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<sup>15</sup> Yashts 3.9,12,16; 8.59; Vendidad 18.62; 21.1, 17 for *jahi*, and Yasna 9.32; Yasht 14.51; 17.54, 57.58; Vendidad 18.54 for *jahikâ*.

renderings of many of the rites from whatever language they originally were, are merely a screen to make it look as Zarathushtrian as possible.

Improper contact with a corpse, menstruation, and stillbirth are among major pollutants. Contact with a dead body was a rare phenomenon among pollution conscious people. So, man and woman suffered less. But the other two naturally concern woman only. She has to experience the menstrual cycle about twelve times a year until menopause. But for the stillbirth, in those remote days of lack of hygiene and health care, she could suffer it once or twice in her lifetime. A third or fourth would have taken her life too. A woman, polluted and polluting as she was considered during her period, was placed under strict quarantine and segregated from other members of the family. She was given rationed food and that too without anyone coming into contact with her. At the end of her period, she had to wash herself ritually with bovine urine, sand, and water to regain her purified status in order to resume her normal domestic and social contacts and work. A woman with a stillborn child had to undergo a more rigorous purification rite over a longer period (V 5.45–56, 16.1–12).

Cohabitation with a menstruating women had physical punishment—60 lashes for the first time, 100 for the second, 140 for the third, and 180 for the fourth time (Vendidad 16.14–16).

It may be pointed out here that the way in which menstruation is not mentioned in any other parts of the Avesta, even by the yashts which specify those who should be barred from participating in the libations offered to them, one has to accept that it was taken quite naturally and did not pose a problem to the Zarathushtrian, or even to the earlier purely Aryan society. Only the Vendidad mentions menstruation and it reminds one of the pre-Aryan customs described earlier in this essay, although in a more gruesome form.

## **Prostitution and Seduction**

It is again the Vendidad which states: “... Indeed the *jahi* intermixes the seeds of the genius (a term used for a scholar priest) and a non-genius, Daevayasna and non-Daevayasna, and pesho-tanu and non-pesho-tanu (pesho-tanu was an extreme sinner whose body was ‘forfeited’).” (Vendidad 18.62). In other words, *jahi* is a prostitute who sleeps with men of “opposite” classes and creeds—scholarly priests and non-scholarly priests, Daeva worshiping laymen and non-Daeva-worshiping laymen, sinners of a special class of and non-sinners. It may also mean that if a woman who sleeps with more than one man of the same class would not be termed *jahi*. The *jahi* who mixes the seeds is a vicious person whose look “dries up one-third of waters, plants, and good thoughts, words, deeds and strength of a righteous man.” But while the Vendidad prescribes a summary death for *jahi*, nothing is mentioned about any punishment for those males, priests or not, who sleep with her. They are **not** termed as **prostitutes**. Men do not blame and punish themselves when it comes to adultery! Male chauvinism!

There is another Avestan passage found only as a quotation in the apparently out of context Pahlavi commentary under the chapter on Education in Erpatistan. Here is how it has been rendered by Bulsara:



“... And to (cohabitation) with adulterous ignoble barbarians and those of the worth of death, those of wicked creed we declare to be degrading as (cohabitation) with females of quadrupeds. These (facts) can be manifested from the passage in (the Avesta) "whereof then (is) a woman among "Mazdayasnians" (who) adulterates the (seeds) of Mazdayasnians and the demon-worshippers.”<sup>16</sup>

The same is rendered by Prof. Humbach and Prof. Elfenbein as:

“It is offence to cohabit with a whore, with a non-Iranian woman, with a Tanapuhr, and with one of evil religion. (I (refers to the writer of the commentary) make reference to whores together with female quadrupeds). They are referred to in the following (Avesta) passage: HE AMONG THE MAZDAIIASNIANS WHOSE WIFE (...?... A WHORE WHO) MIXES THE SEEDS OF BOTH MAZDAIIASNIANS AND DAEUUAIASNAS. (By cohabiting with) whores (and) women of evil religion Mazdaiian people are disqualified (i.e. (they are) no (longer) qualified; it is evident that both whores and non-Iranians (are referred to).”

It is the above two passages, in fact the latter one, on prostitution which are interpreted by the persons who repeatedly speak and write about interfaith and mutual respect and cooperation between revealed and recognized religions and that none of the followers of these religions are “demon-worshippers” and “dregvants” (followers of Lie) to mean that intermarriage is strictly prohibited, and that intermarriage is an act of adultery and the child an illegitimate product. They have to respond in a scholarly convincing way instead of making a mute statement and then leaving it to the vociferous to raise quite an uproar.

There is nothing in the Avestan texts that would prohibit and discredit a marriage between a Zarathushtrian and a non-Zarathushtrian. Mixed marriages took place. The Shahnameh has many instances of them and King Vishtaspa, who later chose the Good Religion and helped in spreading it far and wide, is shown to have married a (Roman) Greek princess. All know that the sources of that wonderful record are Pahlavi writings passed on to Ferdowsi by mobeds.<sup>17</sup> Iranian history, particularly from the Achaemenian days down to the Sassanian times, shows that Zarathushtrian kings, chiefs, and, definitely following them, other notables married outside. It does not seem to have posed any problem. Otherwise, all that was required was a commandment to have declared in clear terms, something to read: “Thou shall neither marry a non-Zoroastrian woman nor marry your woman to a non-Zoroastrian man!” And **save** all of us the hot, often foul, controversy. There is not a single commandment and not a single report by Iranian and foreign historians regarding the prohibition of mixed marriage. Therefore, all the uproar to stop it comes through twisted translations by 20th century guardians of self-styled “Traditional” Zoroastrianism.

To return to our subject, while the Gathic and other texts use *nâiri*, *genâ*, *ghnâ* for ‘woman’, the Vendidad is fond of *nâirikâ*, a diminutive for of *nâiri*, obviously in a contemptible sense.

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<sup>16</sup> “Aerpatistan and Nirangistan or the Code of the Holy Doctorship and the Code of Divine Service” by Sohrab Jamshedee Bulsara, Bk I, Chp V, para 9, page

<sup>17</sup> Particularly the missing Chihrdad Nask (in short, 22 “Yashts” about Iranian heroes”) probably informed Ferdowsi, although he likely pulled on many folktales as well. – CG

Seducing and impregnating a maiden outside marriage was considered a heinous crime. However, the Vendidadic society was broad-minded enough to declare that "if a young woman, belonging to a family or independent (note "independent"), married or not, conceives by a man" she should not feel ashamed and should not resort to abortion, because "it is murder committed by both the man and the woman". The man was commanded to support her until the child was born and then support the two for seven years. If he, for obvious reasons, did not, then the community took care of the mother and the child. Generally, old women helped in abortion by means of drugs "which kills the womb... or produces miscarriage." The scripture also prohibits the use of drugs to stop the issue or shorten the menstruation period. A lengthy period of issue was considered a sickness, and the woman is advised to be treated and cured (Vd 15.9–19, 45).

The marriageable age for both the sexes was fifteen years all along. However, while the Gathas show that a woman chose her husband through sound consultations, the Vendidad reveals that it was the father or the brother who gave away the girl to a righteous man seeking wife (Vendidad 4.45, 14.15).

## Conclusion

The Gathic doctrine places man and woman on fully equal status in all religious and social affairs, more than what is observed and practiced in modern "advanced" societies, but the post-Gathic period, particularly when the entire indigenous population of the Plateau was completely assimilated with their age-old-hard-to-die customs, things took a turn. Women were not regarded as highly by certain factions of the very late Avestan people. Chronologically the Avesta speaks about her decline in favor of an egocentric man of authority but never to a revolting degree. Taboos could not rob her of her position. There is not a single sentence in the Avesta that would belittle woman. Even the Vendidad does not make any derogatory remarks about her. She continued to be venerated in all the daily prayers on par with man, and she continued her normal life as *nmâno-pathni*, the mistress of house.

Whatever the past, time has come to turn to the divine Gathic doctrine to comprehend her true and rightful status. It is direly needed in order to reestablish the "Fellowship of men and women of Zarathushtra... highly regarded by Ahura Mazda" in a progressing world. It proudly and placidly places the Zarathushtrian women ahead of others and that too without resorting to any "liberation" task. The Gathas are **the** resort. Let us all, men and women, turn to them.

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