

# The Navjote Ceremony

## *A Zarathushti Initiation*

### **Investment of a Zarathushti child with the sacred sudreh and kushti, performed according to Parsi rites and customs**

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**T**he *Navjote* marks the transition into adult life, which in ancient Iran began at 15, when one was expected to announce one's faith in the Good Religion, a choice which only an adult can make. As Asho Zarathushtra exhorts us to make the right choice in everything we do, one had to wait until adulthood to make such a choice, as is still the vogue among Iranian Zarathushtis. Under the Hindu influence, however, Parsi Zarathushtis perform the Navjote at 7, 9 or at the latest at 11.

At the navjote, one becomes the captain (*Jote* or *Joti*) of his or her own life, and is responsible for all of his or her deeds from then on, freeing the parents from responsibility for the initiate's actions. Parents are, however, expected to fully prepare the child to become a true and well-versed Zarathushti before he or she can qualify for this ceremony.

**Sudreh and Kushti.** At the Navjote the child is invested with a white muslin shirt (the sudreh) and girded with a girdle (the kushti) made only from lamb's wool, representing *Vohu Manah* (Good Mind).

In the *Avesta*, symbolism pertains, not only to humans, but extends to celestial beings as well. Thus, even the *Gathas* describe Spenta Mainyu as "clothed in the hardest stone (sky)" [*Ys. 30.5*]. *Yasht 13.2-3* depicts Mazda as wearing "yonder sky as a garment, decorated with stars, made by the spirits." *Yasht 17.14* depicts *Ashi* (*Ashishwang*) as "putting on garments made bright." The "white garment" worn by Chista, associate of Daena [*Yasht 10.126*] is an obvious reference to the sudreh.

The word for 'garment' in Avesta is 'Vastra'. The word 'sadro' or 'sudreh' is derived directly from Vastra and not from 'Sudreh' or 'profitable path', as claimed by many scholars. Even the later Pahlavi texts mention the sky as the *vohumanic* garment (*Vastrak*) of Hormuzd [Madan's *Dinkert*, p. 829]. The

*Great Bundahishn* [T. D. Anklesaria, p. 18] describes the sky as a fortress replete with spiritual armaments essential for fighting the evil forces.

The Avestan word for *kushti* is *Aiwyaoinghana* (or belt). Hom Yasht [25-26] describes it as the heavenly, ethereal belt of the sky, worn by Haoma Yazata. When Asho Zarathushtra himself refers to such symbolizations among the divinities such as in Yasna 30.5, it strengthens the belief that he and his successors also saw the inevitability of clothing humans with vestments to remind them of the divinity within them, as well as to constantly and zealously safeguard their divinity from temptations and evil, and enhance it so that humans too become divine.

The Zarathushti religion is a religion of symbolism, and it is not surprising therefore that it finds its zenith in its initiation ceremony.

**Janoi and Barmitzvah.** No other initiation ceremony is more ancient than the Navjote, except perhaps the *Janoi* (thread) ceremony of the Hindus. However, whereas only males from the privileged priestly class are assigned the right of putting on the Janoi, males and females from all classes of Zarathushtis have gone through the Navjote ceremony since time immemorial.

The Navjote is comparable to the Jewish Barmitzvah (for men) and Batmitzvah (for women), though the latter is a very recent innovation dating from the twentieth century or so.

## The Ritual Bath

**Nahan — the ritual bath.** As in all religious initiation ceremonies, the Navjote starts with a ritual bath, at first at home, and again at the place where the Navjote is to be performed.

After performing the regular kushti prayers [see page 27] the initiate recites the *Baj* prayer [see page 29] which is a beautiful prayer suitable for reciting before meals, but is unfortunately hardly ever observed in our times.

The initiate is then asked to sip *nirang* (bull's urine obtained from consecrated ceremonies) or, in its absence, pomegranate juice, three times, saying: "I am drinking (it) for cleansing (my) body and purifying (my) soul." The initiate then recites the following prayers: 4 *Ashem Vohus*, 2 *Yatha Ahu Vairyos*, 1 *Ashem Vohu*, *Ahmai Raeshcha*, *Jasa Me Avanghahe Mazda*, and *Kerfeh Mozd*.

Thereafter the initiate goes for the bath (*nahan*). This ritual cleansing followed by a bath symbolizing inner purification inspires the initiate to align him or herself with God and all Godly forces and to overcome evil.

The initiate, now covering the head with a cap, and wearing white trousers and a white shawl is led in procession by the priests and family members carrying the ceremonial *sés* tray to the place where the navjote ceremony is to be performed.

After being welcomed with an *Achoo michoo* [see page 51], which is a Hindu custom for invoking good luck and for driving out evil forces by the initiate's mother or other nearest female relative, the initiate is seated on a low wooden stool (*patlo*), preferably facing in the direction of the sun at the time, and certainly avoiding facing the north, "from whence bloweth the Ahrimanic (satanic) life- negating, wintry winds." Four (usually) priests sit around the initiate on the floor, with the officiating priest in front facing the initiate.

## THE CEREMONY

**Patet - Repentance.** The officiating priest starts the ceremony with a recitation of the *Patet* (repentance) from the Avestan *Paitita*, or 'turning back' (from sins). The other priests join him when he says "*Aukhé Awakhsh*", which may mean "O Ahura! forgive me (in thy mercy)!" Not too long ago all initiates memorized the entire *Patet* prayer and recited it along with the priests, which makes sense because repentance by the initiate of all past bad thoughts, words and deeds is a prerequisite for ensuring spiritual awakening and commitment. Nowadays, the initiate is at least encouraged to recite the *Ashem* and *Yatha Ahu Vairyo* prayers while the priests recite the *Patet* for him or her. Those Zarathushtis present in the audience too could do well to do the same.

**Din No Kalmo - Declaration of Faith.** After the *Patet*, the initiate and the officiating priest rise and stand facing each other, the initiate holding the *sudreh* sleeves in his hands, and the priest holding the initiate's hands and the *sudreh* at all times, signifying his tutelage or authority. They both then recite *Din No Kalmo* - the Declaration of Faith in the Zarathushti Religion [see page 33], the priest henceforth leading all the prayers, and the initiate following, in a loud and audible voice.

**Investment with the Sudreh.** Both recite one *Yatha Ahu Vairyo*, and the priest puts the *sudreh* on the initiate while saying "*shyaothnanam*" ('working hard' for Mazda's creations'), symbolically suggesting that the initiate henceforth takes it upon him/herself to work diligently to realize the divinity within one's own self and without, so as to ultimately bring about *Frashokereti* - the final renovation/resurrection by his or her virtuous actions.

**Hormuzd Khodae - Girdling of the kushti.** The priest then positions himself behind the initiate, both facing the audience. The priest holds the *kushti*'s midpoint in his left hand (the mid-point suggesting an equal balance between the two worlds in our life). With his right thumb and index finger he

holds up the kushti, about a foot from the left hand, letting the rest hang down without touching the floor.

The priest first invokes Ahura Mazda, the Highest of the High, in verses similar to the initial verses of *Hormuzd Yasht*. Both then pray *Hormuzd Khodae* and make two interconnected, equal circles with the kushti, while saying the words “Manashni, Gavashni, Kunashni” (thoughts, words, and deeds) and circle the kushti fully around the initiate’s waist, after invoking God by saying “Khshnaothra Ahurahe Mazdao” and knotting it in front, thus completing the second circle, while saying “*Shyaothnanam*”; and then complete the third circle, by tying two knots in the back, while reciting one *Ashem Vohu*. The three encirclements around the waist represent Manashni, Gavashni and Kunashni.

The reason for holding as well as wearing the kushti at the mid-point of our mortal frame also seems quite apparent. Just as the two equal circles are made in the kushti right after referring to the mortal body and the immortal soul (*tanee o ravanee*) as well as to the material world and the celestial, spiritual world (*geti minoaanee*), one must strike a careful balance in one’s sojourn on this earth between our material aspirations and spiritual attainments in all our thoughts, words, and deeds, so that our material existence comes to fulfill the needs of the spirit.

**The Symbolism of the Kushti.** The exact symbolism behind tying the four knots is now lost to antiquity, as it was not laid down firmly in any of our scriptures, but was only transmitted orally, thus giving free rein to varying interpretations.

From Anquetil du Perron who learned all he could about the Zarathushti religion from a Parsi priest in Surat in 1760, if not from earlier Pahlavi texts, down to our times, we find numerous interpretations for the four knots. One explanation is that the first knot signifies that there is only one God, the second signifies that the Good Religion is the word of God, the third confirms Zarathushtra as the Prophet of God, and the fourth demands allegiance to him and God for ever.

Perhaps the reason our scriptures do not explain the meaning of these knots is their meaning is too obvious to need any explanation if one knows the language. As we observed at the very outset, our religion is the religion of symbols, which reaches its highest pinnacle in the symbolism of the sudreh and kushti.

Tying the first knot obviously indicates that the new initiate will try very hard to control bad thoughts, words, and deeds. He or she subjugates and ties them down, as it were, just as Shah Faridoon tied down the evil Zohak. Tying the second knot represents his attempt at “making his mind an invincible

fortress” “in his battle against the temptations he faces every day and every hour” by tying and strengthening his resolve to follow good thoughts, words and deeds, as observed by a great scholar, B. T. Anklesaria, in perhaps the best book on this subject [*Nirang-e- Padyaab, Bombay, in Gujarati, 169 pp, 1939*].

He further observes: “The reason for tying knots in the back while praying Ashem Vohu is also quite obvious. Zoroastrians are enjoined to observe Asha all their life and for that reason the beginning and ending of every prayer is accomplished by the sacred formula of Ashem. We recite five Ashem Vohus at different times while tying the kushti as well as while untying it” (which is an old forgotten custom worth renewing). Thus the last two knots may signify our resolve to begin and end our life with Asha.

**The Culmination - Jasa me Avanghahe Mazda.** The initiation is culminated with the initiate reciting *Jasa Me Avanghahe Mazda*, and lovingly but unequivocally declaring his unswerving faith in the Good Religion. Both then again sit down. The priest marks the initiate’s forehead with a red ‘*tili*’ (a Hindu practice signifying good luck), and gives him or her a coconut, betel leaves, areca nuts (sopari), grains of rice, rock sugar crystals, and a garland and bouquet of flowers.

**Tandarosti - Invocation of Blessings.** The ceremony is essentially over at this point, making the newest initiate the latest addition to the world’s most ancient revealed religion, an occasion worthy of celebration. The priests recite the *Tandarosti* prayer with the officiating priest, while showering the initiate with grains of rice, rose petals, coconut flakes, and pomegranate seeds, all symbolizing plenty, prosperity and progeny, and resembling the benevolent forces of Spenta in this world and beyond



## Commentary

Asho Zarathushtra was the first prophet to lead mankind away from believing in magic spells, shamanism, idolatry and polytheism, by emphasizing free will and the importance of making a wise choice - *fravarané* (‘I actively choose’) working for God. More than any modern-day psychologist, he realized the powers of the mind and incorporated them so intricately in his teachings as also in the symbolism of the sudreh and kushti, that they, for ever, have served us as the mental fortress against temptations facing us eternally.

Thus in these spiritual vestments, the *Getig* and *Minog* merge into one, psychologically conditioning Zarathushtris to conceive their earthly life as a life of the spirit and their earthly frame as a vehicle for attaining spirituality in this world which was actually conceived by Mazda in the spiritual world.

None other than Asho Zarathushtra himself could have brought about such an inspiring innovation in the ancient Indo-Iranian tradition of Janoi and true to his egalitarian and universal teachings, offered it to all men and all women irrespective of their class or status.

Moreover, his emphasis on the proper exercise of free will in order to willingly align ourselves with the *spenta* (spiritually augmentative) forces as against *angra* (evil, retarding) forces so as to usher in *Frashokereti* with our true actions, as well as numerous Gathic verses in the kushti prayer, clearly reveal the hand of Asho Zarathushtra himself in the making of this beautiful ceremony.

As an ever-ready soldier for God, a Zarathushti is expected to live and die with the sudreh and kushti on, except during bathing, thus making the body an instrument of God, forever a living temple *Facile Princeps* for him or her, in which the *Getig* and the *Minog* worlds, as well as *Tan* (body) and *Ravan* (soul) merge into one, rendering, us special instruments and agents of God on this earth, which Zarathushtra says we truly are.

Maybe this explains why, per Mary Boyce, there were no fire temples in Iran until the times of the Achaemenians, who perhaps adopted the idea of building formal structures of worship from their contact with other nations.

One is supposed to tie and untie the kushti every time one goes to answer nature's call, a custom that was observed religiously until a generation or two ago. Such a practice cannot but condition one to seeing himself and his body, as something more than a physical entity, and keeping oneself ready to serve God, as his soldier, at all times.

Nay, one cannot even be laid to final rest without having the sudreh kushti on. Indeed it is considered a sin to be without them while alive, which is tantamount to "walking around naked" [*Shayest Ne-Shayest*, 4.8]. *Dadestane Dini* [39.20] declares one is smart for wearing them because one is "reminded of the Creator ... the temptation to sin becomes difficult" Yasna 60.11 perhaps best represents the ideal of sudreh kushti:

Because our minds are full of joy with these (religious observances), (our) souls attain the best (and) (our) bodies (become) full of heavenly glory; may they (our souls), (therefore) reach, O Mazda, from the disclosure (at Chinvat Bridge) unto Ahura's own realm, the best existence (paradise).

Death is thus seen here as a progression into a "heavenly (best) existence" rather than as an Ahrimanic concoction as interpreted (or misinterpreted) by later Pahlavi writers, if we only embody in life, the high ideals of Sudreh Kushti worn on our body.

When this tradition is willingly and zealously observed not for centuries, but for millennia, the psychological conditioning it creates by establishing the physical body as an instrument of the spiritual forces is infinitely greater than any Pavlovian spell we know of.

Since Asho Zarathushtra does not promise an easy way out for our salvation, he may have, in his infinite wisdom, devised the sudreh kushti as an eternal reminder for us to remain on God's side at all times and ultimately bring about the Kingdom of God on earth after realizing God within us.

The introduction of the *Patet* in the navjote ceremony is a much later development, written in Pazand (Pahlavi written in the Avestan script), just a couple of centuries before the loss of the Sassanian Empire, as an obvious response to the spread of Christianity in Iran. If we take into consideration the fact that the navjote used to be an act of free choice based on one's full understanding of his/her religion, and full comprehension of what it entails and means, we can understand why only adults over 15 were allowed to qualify for it in Iran.

Since the *Patet* is written in Pahlavi, which was the only language the Sassanians generally knew, the adult initiate must have been fully aware of its meaning. However, the Parsi laity and priests as a rule were not so aware of its content, and so saw no problem in requiring the child initiate to recite the adults' *Patet*, after limiting the age of initiation to pre-teen years, as a consequence of Hinduized thinking. However, when the Parsis began to study their ancient languages, they saw the incongruity of a young child reciting the *Patet*, meant mostly for adults.

Some Dasturs such as Dr. Dhalla pointed out this anomaly, but when other priests refused to change their age-old custom, he compromised by saying the *Patet* in a very soft voice with them.

It is only this tenacity and steadfastness of our priests, even when shabbily remunerated for their services, that have been mainly responsible for our being able to preserve our entire religious heritage at a time when there were no printing presses and books.

I hope the reader will make allowance for this fact before hurrying to pass any judgment. Actually, it is to the credit of Sassanian priests that they composed not only the *Patet*, but also wedding and other navjote prayers in Pahlavi, even allowing them to be recited aloud and not in soft intonation (*baj*) as is the strict custom, so everyone can understand them. Thus, *Hormuzd Khodae* is often considered to be the loose Pahlavi translation of *Kem na Mazda*, and *Din no Kalmo*, and *Tandarosti* are also in Pahlavi. Even today Iranian Zarathushtris are able to follow most of them, but the same cannot be said of the Parsis.

Asho Zarathushtra was perhaps not unaware of such an eventuality. What powerful, suggestive message he and his successors neatly and intricately wove into the symbolism of the sudreh kushti could aid and assist our spiritual sojourn on this earth more than any printed books and translations ever could, if we could only don them as a spiritual dimension of our physical entity.

*Aedun Baad!* (May it be so!) ■

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