

Zoroastrianism and Women's Issues

By Dilshed and Kersey Antia

Even though Zoroastrianism spread from Afghanistan to Turkey before the Arabs conquered Persia in the seventh century A.D. and even though it would have even penetrated into Europe had the Persians not lost out to the Greeks in the sixth century B.C., today few know what it is or that it even exists. Only about 20,000 Zoroastrians survive in their homeland of Iran and about 60,000 survive in India after migrating there from Persia by sea about a thousand years ago. However, many of them, about 15-20,000, have migrated to U.S.A. and Canada since 1950's, though some traders had migrated there earlier in the late nineteenth century. The prophet Zoroaster (circa 3200 B.C.) had emphasized Free Will and the equality of men and women -even the word he coined for the All-knowing God, Mazda, has a feminine root and three of Mazda's six attributes are also feminine. Even the name for Zoroastrianism (Daena) is feminine. So it is no wonder that women became so successful entrepreneurs that they earned more than the Persian queens in the sixth century B.C. and the Roman records show them serving in the Persian army along with men. Even though the medieval ages saw some decline in their equal status, especially due to the external influences, it was not hard for them to regain it after the advent of modernity which freed them from external and at times internal restraints. Plus, they were the first to become doctors, lawyers, social activists, independence fighters, entrepreneurs, and even chairperson of their own internal government (Panchayat). Zoroastrianism is regarded by many historians as very similar to the Judeo-Christian tradition, if not its source, and so it was open to western influences even while firmly adhering to its religious and racial identity. The Parsis were the first amongst their countrymen to develop modern enterprise from steel mills to nuclear science. A French woman, Madame Delphine Menant, who was so impressed by their religion and progress in the late nineteenth century that she wrote two volumes (*Les Parsis*) about them.

Uniqueness of the Problems Facing Zoroastrian Women in North America

It is only with the awareness of this background that one can understand the issues facing Zoroastrian women in North America. They did not face the same issues most Asian immigrants faced. Most of them were professionals even before migrating here. Even those that were not professionals were conceptually seeing themselves as equal partners to men in every way and some even felt superior to them per Tanya Luhrmann, an American

anthropologist.¹ Nevertheless, men and women both saw their roles in helping each other not only in raising the family but also on insuring the survival of their community on this continent in various ways. They worked shoulder to shoulder with men in being leaders of their community, in starting regional associations, very often chairing them and in building temples in cities where they concentrated such as in New York, Chicago, Toronto, Los Angeles, Van Couver and Houston. They also took the lead in forming a federation of all these associations which holds its conventions every two years and deliberates on issues facing them. Its second chairwoman, Dr. Dolly Dastur, a clinical psychologist, organized the Seventh World Zoroastrian Congress in Houston with great éclat in December 2000, a first of its kind held in North America. These associations are the main, if not the only, centers of Zoroastrian attempts at religious and social survival in North America. They cannot possibly survive without the significant role played by women in each and every of their activities. It was mainly through their initiative and editorship that a North American quarterly journal was started in order to keep the members informed of various regional activities, discussing current socio-religious issues and educating them about important religious and historical topics. This journal is often hailed as one of the best of its kind in the entire Zoroastrian world by the readers in other continents who exult in their adulation of its female editors. Perhaps interfaith marriage is the most critical issue facing Zoroastrian women in North America (and to some extent also in India) as the Indian Zoroastrians, through the influence of caste system in India, do not accept the children of such marriages in the fold, though a court decree in 1908, (not enforced consistently or unanimously), led to the acceptance of the children of males marrying out. They are also extremely opposed to conversion, as evidenced by their negative reaction to the conversion of a very willing and totally self-inspired American in 1983 in New York, though Iranian Zoroastrians and priests welcomed it overwhelmingly. No convention exists among them for converting the non-Zoroastrian spouses, though some liberal priests in North America do initiate their children into the faith, if they choose. Even so, not all of them choose to be Zoroastrians for various reasons, though one of the best books for teaching Zoroastrianism to children is written by a non-Zoroastrian's spouse in New York.

The Challenge Posed By Intermarriages in North America and Elsewhere

Zoroastrian affinity with Judeo-Christian traditions and their own liberal, modernistic disposition make them very much prone to easily intermingle with non-Zoroastrians and the strong secular sentiments in North America along

1 Luhrmann, T. M. *The Good Parsi: The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 176.

with its culture of acceptance and assimilation further facilitate this process. Yet many Zoroastrians, men as well as women, insist that only a Zoroastrianism that is totally ethnic will be able to continue and preserve its unique ancient rituals and traditions even in the American melting pot. However, another factor working against their survival is the higher number of females versus males (306 versus 229) in the marriageable age of 19 to 30. (*FEZANA Journal*, Winter 1999, p. 31). The reader can see the parallel we face with the Jewish community—a parallel often readily drawn by us. Thus, Mrs. Roshan Rivetna, wrote about “A Jewish Analogy” in the same *Journal* (p. 39) and asks: “Do Zoroastrians have something to learn from the Jewish experience in interfaith marriages?” At the convention of the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America in 1998 the most attended topic where people had to sit on the floor for want of space was about intermarriages where women shared their views and experiences about marrying out and ran out of time to ask all questions. Zoroastrian women are taking an active role in ensuring that time will not run out on their children, especially daughters, before this problem is resolved by the community here and elsewhere. Non-Zoroastrian spouses too often make a fervent appeal for inclusiveness. For instance, Catherine Bamjee writes in the *FEZANA Journal* of Fall 1994 (p. 51): “As a non-Zoroastrian I need more support from the Zoroastrian community, not less. I want to continue the religious traditions and rituals my husband is accustomed to. I want to participate as much in my husband’s religion as he can in mine. It’s the only way we can raise our children in an inclusive and fulfilling religious environment, and help the religion and the worldwide Zoroastrian community grow.”

Zoroastrians are facing a similar divide, though on a much smaller scale among themselves. The Indian and Iranian Zoroastrians have come face to face in large numbers on this continent like never before. Zoroastrian women on both sides are heavily engaged in using their natural social skills in reaching out to the other despite a thousand years of separation as also differences in language, culture, ethos, etc. Social events and intermarriages among them often tend to bring them closer and worshipping at the same place will remain a uniting factor in the future.

Legacy of Male Dominance in the Religious Sphere in the Past

In a *FEZANA Journal* (Fall 1994) devoted to the issue of “Zoroastrian Women: Past and Present”, its former editor Dr. Dolly Dastur, ably spells out another issue, an issue not unknown in other faiths: “Contemporary Zoroastrian women are highly educated, literate, professionally independent, motivated, ambitious, participating (equally) in every aspect of life, but face a great challenge – extreme male dominance in religious practices. Women today

experience a marked dichotomy between the social, civil and legal freedoms they enjoy and the religious constraints imposed on them by the orthopraxy”. Her concluding remarks sum up the sentiments of most Zoroastrian women: “Until recently, few if any, opportunities were available to educated women of faith to share their own insight and develop their own perspective. By dialoguing together, we can see where we have come from, where we are at present, and where we can go together. If we can organize and activate, we can change the direction of history and bring the balance in Zoroastrian religious structures.” Nevertheless, as the (male) editorial comment in the same Journal (p. 3) rightly observes: “It is a credit to our community that in spite of this, women today are active organizers and teachers of religious education in North America. They are active and visible as leaders and doers in all of our organizations, meetings and congresses. And they are increasingly being recognized by the Canadian and U.S. governments for significant contributions to their professions and communities. – We must try to alleviate their concerns, listen to their counsel, and support their hopes and aspirations. For it is the strong and equal role of the women in our society that holds the key to our continued progress, empowerment and survival.” Thanks to these efforts women can now become priestly assistants on the same basis as their male counterpart.

Surviving as Zoroastrians in the American Melting Pot

Another issue, quite universal and yet quite problematic to a Zoroastrian woman is juggling all the responsibilities of being a working mother and also doing enough to ensure her children will choose to remain Zoroastrian. Another Zoroastrian woman, a past president of the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington, D.C., wonders: “How do I show my daughter what it means to be a Zoroastrian especially when one is living in a non-Zoroastrian society? ... One does it by taking children to community functions, having kiddie play groups with other Zoroastrian children by going to rituals which reinforce the concept of being Zoroastrian. One does it simply by keeping alive our rich traditions of rituals and beliefs, by surrounding the children with the knowledge of their culture and heritage, by getting them accustomed to hearing and understanding (our mother tongues). In North America, we do not have the luxury of visually seeing representations of Zoroastrianism within our external society as it is in (our mother lands). ... As a result, all of a sudden many women have found that they started interacting more and more with the Zoroastrians in their midst after the birth of their children. In fact, the reinforcement of everything cultural and religious becomes an issue. ... My generation has never doubted who we are, our religion or culture. But we doubt what it will be for our children. ... We lived (our religion) everyday of our lives (“back home”). *What we question is whether our children will ever know*

this pervasiveness because even though they are being brought up in a Zoroastrian household they are also Americans in a society where (Zoroastrianism) for the most part is unheard of. ... So I continue to juggle.” (FEZANA Journal, Winter, 1999, p. 45).

While they struggle as working mothers, Zoroastrian women have made their mark in various fields. For instance, the film “Earth” adapted from Bepsi Sidhwa’s award-winning novel, *Cracking India*, about ethnic hatred and violence during the 1947 partition of India, as seen through the eyes of a young Zoroastrian girl, is winning international accolades. Persis Khambatta played the role of Ilia in Star Trek and co-starred with Sylvester Stallone in Nighthawks, which led to many more film roles. Tehmina Mehta, mother of conductor Zubin Mehta, was an accomplished pianist from a very young age as well as a mother who has tried to keep her brood together and happy.

The Importance of the Role Women Can Play in the Preservation of their Zoroastrian Identity

As long as the Zoroastrian women succeed in keeping their brood together and make their agenda for change get accepted by their community at large, the future of Zoroastrianism on the North American soil seems fairly secure, especially as the Zoroastrian men in North America by and large stand side by side with their women and freely support them even if they have to marry out, unlike many of their co-religionists in India. One wonders how long the Zoroastrians in India will be spared by destiny the situation we face here, though there are already signs and statistics hinting it is not far away, and one wonders if the Zoroastrians in India will still be able to survive unless they will learn from our sad experience and free the religion from the race as the Iranian Zoroastrians have ALWAYS done, so we can multiply and thrive. Their response will be critical for governing their destiny, as well as ours. Let us hope for the best outcome.