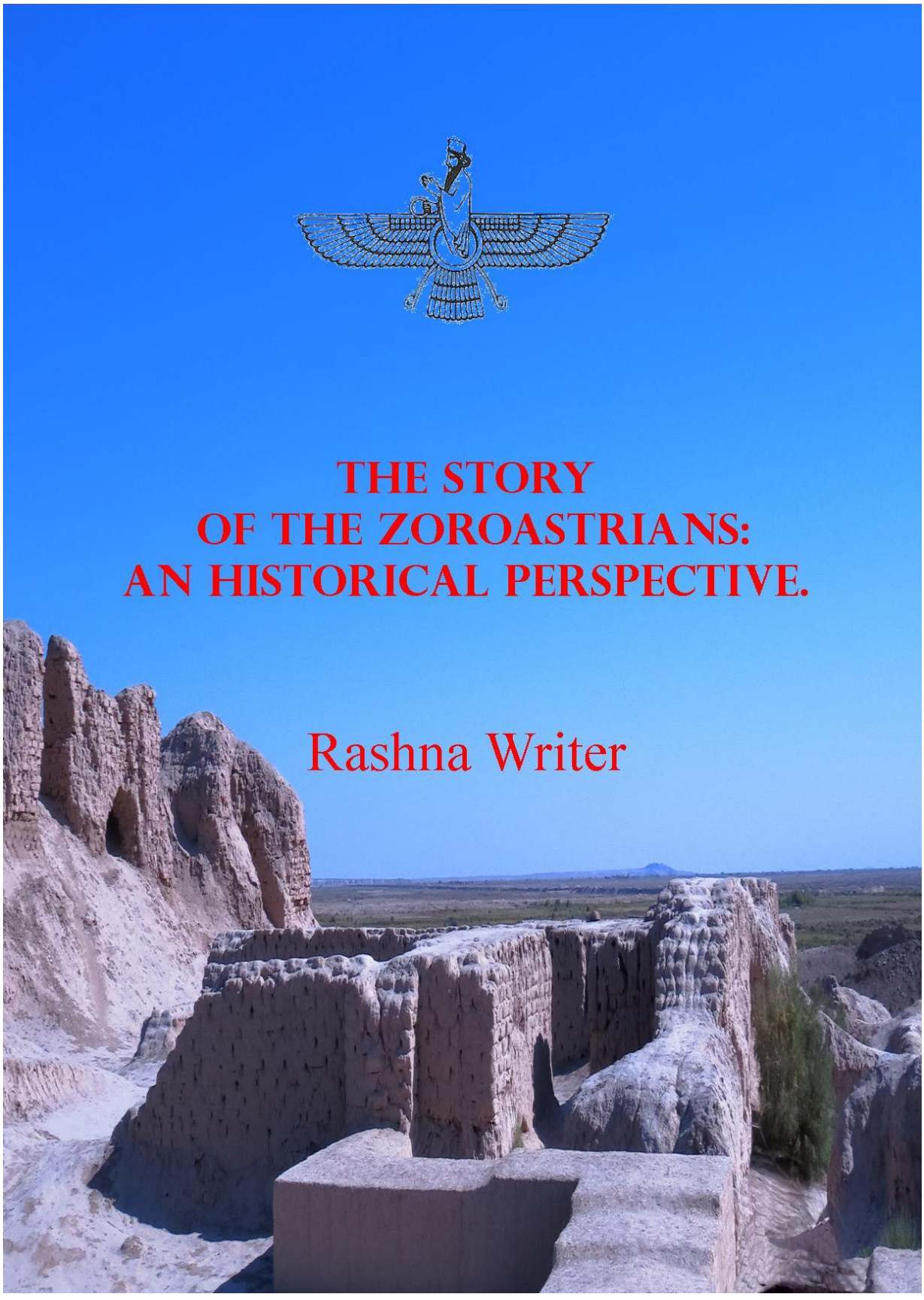

THE STORY OF THE ZOROASTRIANS: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE.

Rashna Writer

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PREFACE

I am Rashna Writer, a Parsi Zoroastrian who was born and grew up in Calcutta, India. Ever since I was a little girl, I have been intrigued to know more about my community – a small handful among the millions of Calcutta's population.

When I came to Britain to study for my doctorate in International Relations at the London School of Economics, I found that colleagues and friends had, more often than not, never heard of a Parsi, and many could not even pronounce the word Zoroastrian. I thought it was time I educated myself on the story of my people.

It has been a long journey over many years. I had to start at the very beginning. As we all know, the story of the Zoroastrians began in Iran. As my research progressed, perhaps my own background as a political scientist pushed me towards the political history of ancient Iran, the political colossus of its' day. I found it impossible to stop. How did a once mighty Zoroastrian land evolve into what it is today? And what of my own small community in India, the Parsis?

I would like to take a few moments to explain why I have concentrated on the history of Iran as a means of understanding the Zoroastrian story. Indeed, a recollection of history is a form of storytelling. Our curiosity about the past is intense, and a review of history is the first step in remembering. Historical knowledge helps us gain perspective.

Often however, history is itself a controversial subject. It can, and occasionally does, tell the story from a particular perspective. To that extent, the trick is in the telling. Equally, some of us have memories of being taught history at school: endless lists of kings and queens, battles, dates and all of it somewhat lifeless. There is another reason why history gets a bad press. Academic historians who plough their furrow with a narrow focus that leaves the non-expert behind. So, in a general sense, the study of history leaves many people cold.

Yet the subject is of real importance. The history of the Zoroastrians is somewhat unusual: from a great imperial people, to a `most minuscule minority' whose numbers have dwindled to a frightening extent. This has led, in turn, to a collective amnesia about *who are the Zoroastrians?* In some instances, Zoroastrians themselves question: `who are we'? Reviving a historical memory is a

road to understanding. In this sense, a historical perspective gives us a better appreciation of the past, helps place ourselves in the present, and can be invaluable in charting a roadmap for the future.

The study has taken many years, during which time I have authored a few books on the subject: *Contemporary Zoroastrians An Unstructured Nation; The Re-shaping of Iran From Zoroastrian to Muslim* and co-authored with Shahrokh Shahrokh *The Memoirs of Keikhosrow Shahrokh.* Between 2008 and 2019 I was Senior Teaching Fellow in the Department of Study of Religions at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), and have spoken at conferences.

It would be impossible to detail all the minutiae of this vast subject, and I have restricted myself to highlighting the important and significant events in the long story of Zoroastrian civilisation. I have borrowed heavily from the many classical authors of antiquity and the contemporary scholars whose research has helped me piece together this work. Much of this will be known to many of you. It is my hope that you may find the re-telling helpful, and int its' printed and audio format, you can keep and return to the *Story of the Zoroastrians.*

I produced the *Story of the Zoroastrians* as an audiobook during the Covid-19 lockdown. I have since been asked if a printable copy could be made available. Both, the audiobook and printable copies are available on my website: www.rashnawriter.com.

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of Iran, this ancient nation, transcends geographical space. The civilisation of Iran – known in western antiquity as Persia – was home to the first world empire, created by the Achaemenids in the 6th century BC. But its status as a national state goes back even further. The history of Iran is the story of a nation and a people whose sense of unity is attested to in the ancient Avestan texts, such as the *Vidēvdād (Vendidād)* which outlines the geography of the `Aryan lands'. The list includes Sogdia, Merv, Bactria, Herat, Gandhara, Arachosia, Ragha near modern Tehran, and Hapta Hendu (eastern Punjab). Some of these areas are recognisable in their modern settings in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Ancient Iran was underpinned by the religion of Zarathustra, and Zoroastrianism evolved into the national religion of the majority of the Iranian people.

We can agree that the story of Iran merits our attention, and together we will explore this fascinating land and her people.

So who are the peoples who came to be known as the Iranians?

The settlement of Iran by Iranian peoples, perhaps from the 4th to the 3rd millennium BC, was via the Caucasus and Transoxiana (in the vicinity of the Aral Sea). The successive waves of settlers penetrated the plateau over many centuries. The great movement of the Indo-European people, of whom the Indo-Iranians were a sub-group set out from their Central Asian homeland and settled far and wide, from northern India and Iran to distant parts of Europe. The eastern branch of Iranians followed the natural route from Bactria to the heart of Iran, interestingly because what is now Afghanistan and the Punjab was occupied by the sister branch of the Aryans, the future Indians. The Iranians who came via the western route moving along the Zagros mountain range, encountered Elam (in the southern province of Pars), Mesopotamia and Urartu (which we know as Armenia). It would take some four centuries before the Iranians could assimilate the aboriginal population and establish their distinctive civilisation. Professor Ghirshman defines the first half of the 1st millennium BC as the `turning point in human history', a time when the centre of political gravity shifted from civilisations nurtured by historic rivers such as the Nile and Euphrates, to less

clement regions. Iran's rise to global superpower status would take generations, even though an ancient text referred to Iran as a land `rich only in square miles'. What is so remarkable is that the new-comers on the plateau – the coming superpower – met the multiple challenges of geography, climate and the composite character of the population to overturn the old status quo to create the first world empire and leave its mark on world history.

The Avestan hymn to Mithra (*Mihr Yasht* 17-18, 87) establishes an organisational structure that is both ethnic and, in the words of the great scholar Ilia Gershevitch `socio-political'. This national consciousness is emphasized by the fact that they referred to their home *airyå daiŋhāvō* or *airyō.šayanƏm* translated as `Aryan Countries'. Before we go any further, it is useful to bear in mind that the use of the term *airya* is the self-designation of the peoples of Ancient Iran (as well as those of Ancient India) who spoke Aryan languages. The term Aryan is therefore a linguistic concept and not a racial term.

In this far off time, we encounter Iran's `heroic age', where the rulers were referred to as *Kay* or *Kavi* meaning hero. The most venerated among the dynasties was the *Kayān* , archetypes of good governance and heroism. Kay Vištāspa, the last of his family, was an early supporter of Zarathustra, and not surprisingly the Kayanian dynasty is revered in the Avesta. This royal house produced yet other heroes. Kay Khosrow, who pre-dated Zarathustra, is venerated in the Avesta as the `Hero of the Aryan countries and consolidator of the empire' (Yt 15.32). It appears therefore, that the ancient Iranians, well before the birth of the national prophet, thought of themselves as a nation; all the way to Ardashir Papakan, founder of Sasanian dynasty whose use of the term *Ērānšahr* spoke to the ethnic composition of the land and gave weight to the political reality of the Sasanian state. The national identity of the Iranian peoples remained intact from before the time of the prophet well into recorded history.

Besides its political and military pre-eminence, Iran's other major contribution to the world was the teachings of its prophet Zarathustra (known to the Greeks as Zoroaster).

The renowned Iranist, Professor Mary Boyce, was prepared to state boldly that `Zoroastrianism is the oldest of the revealed world-religions, and it has probably had more influence on mankind, directly and indirectly, than any other single

faith.' Its stature in antiquity would have been immense, as the national religion of three great Iranian empires – the Achaemenid, Arsacid Parthians and Sasanians – which ruled its multinational domain almost continually from the 6th century BC to the 7th century AD. It is difficult, if not impossible to accurately fix a date for Zarathustra, but there is evidence to place him when the Stone Age was giving way for the Iranians to the Bronze Age, arguably, somewhere between 1700 and 1500 BC.

The Zoroastrian scriptures are known collectively as the `Avesta' (meaning `Authoritative Utterance'); and the language in which they are composed is referred to as `Avestan'. We have received Zarathustra's message primarily from the Gathas, 17 great hymns, scrupulously preserved by his followers, and recited to this day. The Gathas are an integral part of the compendium of the Avesta. In it the Prophet expounds the tenets of his faith. He perceives of Ahura Mazda (Wisdom Incarnate) as the one, uncreated God.

Significantly, Zarathustra defines all that is good as emanating from Ahura Mazda. Two original principles coexisting from the beginning were twinned as the two *mainyus* – the motivating forces confronting humankind on earth. One is *spenta* (benevolent), which adheres to Ahura Mazda; the other is evil, identified as *angra* (hostile and inimical). They are diametrically opposed in thought, word and action, the pivotal ethical triad of Zarathustra's teachings: *humata, hukhta, huvareshta* (good thoughts, good words, good deeds). The Prophet is most painstaking in stressing their complete antithesis:

> Neither our thoughts nor teachings nor intentions, neither our inclinations, nor words, not even our actions or conceptions nor our souls are in agreement. (Y45.2)

Thus, one is the author of life and progress, the other of non-life and regression. All the bad in the world is attributed to evil, which for the time being opposes goodness. The ethical message of Zarathustra is that the whole good Creation should unite to remove evil from this world.

Therefore there can be no compromise with *Angra Mainyu* in the Zoroastrian tradition. But *Angra Mainyu,* while being wholly evil, is finite in time. Ahura Mazda is assisted in his task of overcoming evil by the *Amesha Spentas* Bounteous Immortals, and *yazatas,* those worthy of reverence. Man and the other creations

of Ahura Mazda, the physical manifestations of these Bounteous Immortals, – sky, water, earth, animals, plants and fire – are to work in harmony, thus linking the material and spiritual worlds. Man's role in this scheme of things is pivotal. He is given free will. In the *Gathas*, Yasna 30:2 we are told:

> Listen with your ears to the best things. Reflect with a clear mind – man by man for himself – upon the two choices of decision, being aware to declare yourselves to Him before the great retribution.

This, Zarathustra taught, is the God-given right of man, which is based upon an ethical structure encompassing respect for creation and man's compassion and care for his fellow men. By the continual exercise of his choice between good and evil, man thus becomes – perhaps for the first time in human thinking – responsible for his own destiny. The heaven or hell he went to after this life was deemed to be the direct result of his thoughts, words and deeds. The future resurrection of the body and the Last Judgement after which everlasting life for the reunited body and soul would ensue, are, in Zoroastrian terms, the ultimate `making good' *frasho-kereti* of Ahura Mazda's good creation.

As we progress, we will look more closely at the many facets of Iran's long history: from Zoroastrian Iran to the coming of the Arabs that led to the migration of a small group to settle in India, where they live to this day. Equally significant are Iran's contributions to arts, science, mathematics, little known architectural feats such as the Gorgan Wall in the north-east of the country, and much else.

Iran's story deserves recounting.

The Achaemenid Dynasty

PART 1

THE ACHAEMENIDS: FOUNDERS OF THE IRANIAN STATE
558 – 330 BC

The Achaemenid dynasty conceived of Iran as a state and turned the abstraction into reality. Ruling from the southern state of Pars (hence they are known to history as the Persians) they put Iran on the map and crafted a world empire that extended from the Caspian Sea to Egypt, and from the Black Sea to north-western India. They were ancient Greece's most powerful neighbour and adversary; and their conquest of Egypt brought to an end 2,500 years of Pharaonic rule. They are acknowledged in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, for having released the Jews from exile in Babylon and helped the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem with funds from the Persian exchequer. The world today may have forgotten them, but their influence endures to this day.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Achaemenids' imperial reach was, quite simply, staggering. At the height of its power, the empire encompassed approximately 5.5 million square kilometres, spanning three continents: Asia, Africa and Europe. At its greatest extent, it included modern territories of Iran, Pakistan, parts of Central Asia, Asia Minor, Thrace and Macedonia, much of the Black Sea coastal regions, Afghanistan, Iraq, northern Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Syria and all significant population centres of ancient Egypt as well as Libya. In the 5th century BC, it is estimated that some 49.4 million people, or around 44 per cent of the world population lived in the Achaemenid Empire, which would make it the largest empire in its day in terms of percentage of the world population.

But before we remember the Achaemenids, we should say a few words on the Median dynasty. The Medes were an Iranian people, settled in north-western Iran. They defeated the Assyrian Empire around 614 BC. The balance of power now shifted. The Medes had succeeded in creating an Iranian empire.

While the Medes were on the world stage for roughly 60 years, one of the great wonders of the ancient world – the Hanging Gardens of Babylon –was created which has an intimate connection with Media. The Median princess Amyitis was married to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, to help cement a political alliance. But the homesick princess pined for her green and mountainous land, and became increasingly depressed in the hot flat landscape of Mesopotamia. Nebuchadnezzar, to placate his wife, fashioned the Hanging Gardens in an attempt at recreating his wife's homeland. The Greek geographer Strabo described it as consisting of `vaulted terraces raised one above another, and resting upon cube-shaped pillars. These are hollow and filled with earth to allow trees of the largest size to be planted...' Whether by recreating a verdant garden as a husband's gift helped Amyitis overcome her homesickness, or whether she continued to long for the mountains of her now distant homeland, we shall never know. But one thing is for sure: the Iranian princess was a catalyst for one of the wonders of the ancient world.

The Median dynasty's great achievement was to overturn the status quo by replacing the great Assyrian empire. They were however, the curtain-raisers for the main event: the great Achaemenid dynasty that was to follow. Initially, the Persian Achaemenes family were vassals of the Medes, and even during their vassalage were styling themselves as `great king, king of kings, king of the land of Parsa' [Pars]. A gold tablet engraved in cuneiform and in the Old Persian language, belonging to Ariaramnes of the Achaemenes clan informs us that

> …this land of the Persians, which I possess, provided with fine horses and good men, it is the great god Ahuramazda who has given it to me, I am the king of this land.

This tantalising find in the Median capital of Hamadan, is the oldest Achaemenian object known and bears the earliest Old Persian text. The fact that a senior member of the Achaemenes clan proclaims his allegiance to Ahura Mazda, testifies to their Zoroastrian credentials.

Cambyses I, of the Achaemenes family married Mandane, daughter of Astyages, King of Media. Their son was Cyrus the Great. Herodotus, who wrote his *magnum*

opus, The Histories, almost 100 years after Cyrus's death, tells a fascinating story of how his parent's marriage came about:

> Astyages had a daughter called Mandane, and he dreamed one night that she made water in such enormous quantities that it filled his city and swamped the whole of Asia. He told his dream to the Magi, whose business it was to interpret such things, and was much alarmed by what they said it meant. Consequently when Mandane was old enough to marry, he did not give her to some Mede of suitable rank, but was induced by his fear of the dream's significance to marry her to a Persian named Cambyses, a man he knew to be of good family and quiet habits – though he considered him much below a Mede even of middle rank.

But Astyges's hopes of securing his dynasty were not to be. His grandson Cyrus was an ambitious man, keen to build his own empire. To do this he would have to defeat his grandfather Astyages. Over the course of two battles, grandfather and grandson confronted each other. Having defeated the older man, Cyrus nevertheless treated him with deference. Cyrus's victory inaugurated a new era. He set out to build his empire and place Iran on the world map. Perhaps, there had been some truth in Astyges's dream after all.

There were 11 Achaemenid kings, and almost all of them were impressive in their own way. Certainly, the more familiar names: Cyrus the Great, Darius, Xerxes are among the best known. But even among the lesser known, they would oversee major global events until the final denouement of Alexander of Macedon's defeat of the last Achaemenid ruler, Darius III which opened yet another chapter in Iran's history.

The exemplary career of Cyrus the Persian, Kouroush as he would have been known by his people, was a man who created a nation and changed the balance of power in the Near East. During his reign – from 558 to 530 BC – he was instrumental in elevating Iran into a major power which, after his lifetime grew in stature and can rightly be considered a superpower of the ancient world. The endeavour begun by Cyrus, and consolidated by Darius led to the most extensive

empire in the history of the world which, to quote Professor Ghirshman was a `synthesis of ancient civilisations'.

Cyrus the empire builder appears to have had a clear-sighted vision: expansion of territorial boundaries and the maintenance of vast areas of conquered lands, coupled with respect of foreign peoples, their religions and cultures. Cyrus must have been a remarkable military strategist, his unprecedented conquests suggests he was. His decision to strike out on his own and his vision of expansion led to the consolidation of Iranian and non-Iranians tribes, listed by Herodotus as including people from the south-eastern corner of the Caspian Sea as far as the Indian Ocean. Their unification appears to have been achieved on the whole peacefully, and it is thought that the college of seven princes may date from this period. (The `college of seven princes' was an acknowledgement of the seven *Amesha Spentas,* the Bounteous Immortals*,* integral to Zarathustra's teachings). This body formed the royal council of the Persians, in which the king was the first among the seven. Thus, within the borders of Iran proper, there came a union in which the tribal chiefs took an active share in the formation of the State.

Having successfully incorporated Lydia and defeated its monarch Croesus; the Phrygians and Mysians (roughly modern Anatolia/Turkey), other Asiatic tribes then quickly submitted to him; and this was followed by the piecemeal submission of Greek cities. The year 547 BC marks the first contact between Persians and Greeks, the year Cyrus defeated Croesus of Lydia. Neither people recognised its fateful character: the Greeks, unaware at this point in time that the Persian monarchs would loom large in their international relations; for the Persians, during the next half century, Greeks on the western boundary would continue to be problematic, albeit less of a real threat than some historians believe. The surrender of Babylon however, was Cyrus's greatest achievement. What followed is by now well-documented and has become a glorious chapter in the collective memories of peoples of Iranian descent.

When the despotic Babylonian king Nabu-naid was defeated, and the state was in chaos, the Babylonians were ready to welcome any deliverer. The Persians saw their opportunity, and their general Gobyras, entered Babylon without battle clearing the way for Cyrus's entry on October 29, 539 BC. The discovery, centuries

later, in 1879 of a small cylindrical clay object, covered in the cuneiform script, referred to now as the `Cyrus Cylinder', although a brilliant piece of Persian propaganda, can equally be read as the conqueror's manifesto. Here, Cyrus sets out his intentions:

> `...My numerous troops marched peacefully into Babylon. In all Sumer and Akkad I permitted no unfriendly treatment. The dishonouring yoke was removed from them. Their fallen dwellings I restored; I cleared out the ruins...'

Following the conquest, Cyrus returned the gods carried off by Nabu-naid, not only to their native Babylonian cities, but also the gods of Assyria and Elam, and had their ruined temples rebuilt.

It was Cyrus's encounter with the Jewish exiles in Babylon, and his approach towards them, as set out in the Old Testament, that gained him a reputation for tolerance and respect of foreign traditions, and was to create a template for future Persian monarchs. The `Cyrus Cylinder' informs us that the surrender of Babylon brought Cyrus into contact with the `people of Israel' who had been imprisoned in the city. The Persian monarch issued his famous decree for putting an end to the captivity of the Jews and for rebuilding the temple of Jerusalem. Fascinatingly for us, it is the Hebrew Prophet Ezra, who documents the interactions: `...Thus said Cyrus king of Persia, the Lord God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah...' (Ezra i. 1-4) Again, Ezra informs us that the Persian monarch commanded that the `cost [for the rebuilding of the Jewish temple] be paid from the royal treasury' (Ezra 6:3-5), establishing a pattern for future Persian monarchs. His elevation in the Jewish texts is therefore, understandable. Isaiah 45.1 states emphatically: `This is what Jehovah has said to his anointed one, to Cyrus whose right hand I have taken hold of to subdue before him nations...'

Palestine periodically came under the control of the Persian Empire, and communities of Jews continued to live throughout these territories for the period of the three Zoroastrian empires. It is interesting for us to remember that the

Talmud, the commentary of the `Oral Law' (*Mishna*) was composed not in Palestine but within the Persian Empire during the Arsacid Parthian and Sasanian dynasties, thus confirming the founding principles for tolerance and acceptance of foreign religions and cultures by successors of Cyrus.

The career of Cyrus can be studied essentially as that of a great military strategist, a revolutionary figure in relation to the vanquished, and as the first great Iranian who shaped his nation into an actor on the global stage. He would have been aware that the Persians – newly arrived on the international stage – had set about conquering nations that pre-dated his own. We can make an educated guess that he had set himself the goal of creating the greatest empire yet known to history, and began laying the foundations for governance of this wide-ranging territory. The conquered states were replaced by formal provinces, each ruled by a governor working with civil servants, in close contact with the centre. During the reign of Cyrus, the empire was divided into 20 satrapies, each ruled by a satrap *khshathrapavan* (protector of the kingdom), and these satraps were responsible for civil administration and the collection of levies.

Thus, Cyrus laid the groundwork for his great enterprise: the elevation of Iran in the firmament of nations. This man of flesh and blood appears to have been all too human: a military strategist whose clear-sighted vision and iron determination is attested to in various sources, and who, we are told, could be irascible and hot-tempered. There is a vignette where Plutarch describes a royal initiation in his work, *Life of Artaxerxes II*

> ...Into this sanctuary the candidate for initiation must pass, and after laying aside his own proper robe, must put on that which Cyrus the Elder used to wear before he became king; then he must eat of a cake of figs, chew some terebinth, and drink a cup of sour milk.

Thus nearly 125 years after the death of Cyrus, kings of his dynasty `put on' his robe at their coronation.

To this day, Cyrus is regarded as the father of his nation. Even beyond the borders of Iran, and over the millennia, his stature remains undimmed. The ancients were

familiar with this great man; while the Greek author Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, eulogised the man and is a timeless exposition of leadership. Indeed, what may come as a surprise to us is that this `manual of leadership' was read by a diverse range of people including, perhaps ironically, Alexander of Macedonia all the way to Caesar and even Machiavelli. Significantly, there is a link between Cyrus and the United States' Constitution. It is well known that Thomas Jefferson, one of the Founding Fathers, owned two copies of *Cyropaedia:* a Greek and Latin version. It is acknowledged that Jefferson was influential in inserting the Religion Clauses in the First Amendment of the US Constitution, in keeping with his high regard for Cyrus as depicted in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia.* Thus, the First Amendment reads:

> Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

The individual's right to freedom of worship remains a key element in the creation of the new republic, acknowledging the founding principles of the founder of the Achaemenid Empire.

Before we leave Cyrus and meet other Achaemenid monarchs, we need to address the ongoing debate as to whether he was in fact a Zoroastrian. Indeed, the religion of Zarathustra is so intimately linked with Iran that the Zoroastrian-ness of its monarchs is of crucial significance. There are those who argue against and point to the fact that Cyrus made no mention of Zarathustra or Ahura Mazda; that his corpse was embalmed and buried in a tomb; while he paid homage to the Babylonian god Marduk, and indeed, acknowledged and honoured the gods of the different religions of the countries he had conquered. An argument as to Cyrus's Zoroastrian pedigree is put forward by those who would point to the stone `altars' at Pasargadae; that Cyrus named his daughter `Atossa' which is the Persian for Hutaosa, the name of Kay(King) Vištāspa's Queen, i.e. a Zoroastrian name; and that according to Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, Cyrus `followed the instruction of the Magi'. Professor Stronach points to the tomb reliefs in Pasargadae, Cyrus's winter capital near modern Shiraz. These suggest that the sacred fire or its embers may have been carried in a brazier, as still occurs in contemporary Zoroastrian practice in Iran and India; as well as the northern limestone plinth in the vicinity of the tomb. The open air complex at Pasargadae

thus functioned as an *atesgah* or “place/space of the fire”, i.e. a Zoroastrian fire precinct.

In spite of the on-going discussion as to Cyrus’s Zoroastrianism, when evaluating the record of a monarch, rather than attempting to read his thoughts and imagine the level of spirituality he may or may not have reached, the more pertinent question is the political function of religion. In this sense, we can probably agree that Cyrus was an enthusiastic imperialist, but a less keen evangelist!

Cyrus died fighting the Massagetae, a tribe in the north-east of Iran. He is buried in Pasargadae, which bears a brief royal inscription: `Here I lie, Cyrus, king of kings’. He was succeeded by his son Cambyses, in whose brief reign the Persians conquered Egypt, the last of the four great empires to be conquered. The Persians now controlled the profitable Greek trade with Egypt, and Greek merchants flocked to the country. The result was Persian domination over a substantial part of the Greek world.

Nevertheless, history has not been kind to Cambyses, whose short reign was marred by the usurpation of the throne by his brother Bardiya. At Cyrus’s death, Bardiya was in charge of Media, Armenia and Cadusia, and proclaimed himself king while Cambyses was on the Egyptian campaign. There are differing versions connected to Bardiya. We are informed by Darius I that Cambyses killed his brother Bardiya, and an imposter called Gaumata presented himself to the country as Bardiya. It is believed that Gaumata ruled for six months and was ultimately killed by Darius and six other nobles. Darius then ascended the Achaemenid throne as the rightful heir.

Darius was just twenty-eight when he became king, but he would leave an indelible imprint on the dynasty and the empire: the great administrator and law giver who continued the dynasty’s territorial expansion. Early on in his career, he established himself, and set out his manifesto on rock carvings. At Behistun (1.1-3) he informs us that `I am Darius, the great king, king of kings, king in Persia, king over the lands, the son of Hystaspes, the grandson of Arsames, an Achaemenid’. The king leaves us with the strong impression of having harnessed Ahura Mazda in consolidating his position. Thus we are told that `by the greatness of

Ahuramazda, I am king. Ahuramazda conferred the royal command upon me' (DB 1.11-12).

Even though he had made plain to his people and the empire that he was now the man in charge, there were many challenges facing the new king and the young empire. Among the first was a revolt in the newly-conquered Egypt, which this shrewd man appeased by offering 100 gold talents to the individual who discovered a new Apis bull. This generosity took the Egyptians by surprise, and the revolt was brought to an end. The significance of the Apis bull in Egyptian worship cannot be over stated. Its' ancient roots meant that priests of the bull cult identified a sacred bull by its very specific markings, and once such a bull had been identified it was proclaimed a god incarnate and worshipped accordingly. Darius understood this well.

Remember Cyrus's promise to finance the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple at Jerusalem. E*n route* to Egypt when a question arose in this connection, we learn from the Prophet Ezra (5:6-7):

> And now, if it seems good to the king, let a search be made in the royal archives which are there in Babylon to find out whether a decree was made by King Cyrus to build this house of God in Jerusalem, and let the king send us his pleasure regarding this matter.

Persian officials made a search in Babylon and Persepolis and then remembered that Cyrus had returned to Ecbatana, capital of Media. It was here, in Ecbatana, that they found proof of Cyrus's promise to the Jews and now, Darius honoured the promise made long ago. Thus, the Temple in Jerusalem was completed on 12 March 515 BC as recorded in Ezra 6:15.

The work of expanding the empire continued. Western India was conquered, and was now designated as the satrapy of Hindush, followed by the formation of the Libyan satrapy. However, in historical memory – more especially in western civilisation – it is the Persian defeat and Greek triumph at Marathon that continues to mark Darius's military career.

Libraries have been written on the Battle of Marathon, and a few words on what preceded this epoch defining event would be useful. As early as 491 BC, Darius sent heralds to Greek cities in the hope of persuading them to accept Persian authority. Not surprisingly, the Greeks were offended by this proposal. Their reactions were somewhat extreme: Athens went so far as to toss the Persian heralds into a pit, while the Spartans tossed the Persians into a well. When the Persians installed a ruler over every city-state they conquered, it provoked the Ionian Revolt, which was the start of the long and often bitter confrontation between the Greek and Persian empires. The revolt by Asia Minor Greeks spurred Athens to dispatch 20 triremes to Ephesus; while Athenian hoplites marched on the Lydian capital Sardis and sacked it. This was a significant development. Sardis was the capital of Lydia, modern-day Turkey, and part of the Persian Empire. On hearing of this in Persepolis, Darius was outraged, and legend has it that he instructed one of his servants to whisper in his ear, three times a day, of the Athenian outrage so that he, Darius, would never forget it. Thus, when Darius set off for what is remembered as the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC, it was to punish Athens for its' transgression into what the Persian monarch regarded as a domestic affair.

Let's return to the action on the field. Relations between Sparta and Athens were often fraught; and when the former was declared an enemy of Persia, it suggested a Persian-Athenian alliance which, however, did not materialise. Athens had declared war on Persia. Nevertheless, Darius crossed the Hellespont and captured five cities in five days, and Macedonia recognised Persian leadership implying that Greek unity was at best, debatable. This ought to have been to Persian advantage, except for a series of strategic errors on their part. The newly installed young Persian commander, a nephew of Darius, overturned normal practice and when Eretria fell, he allowed its temples to be destroyed and the city and its peoples were enslaved. This gave Athens the green light to fight the Persians. Even then, Sparta reneged on its promise to fight alongside Athens. But Athens was to prevail against the Persians.

The battle of Marathon in 490 BC is talismanic in Western civilisation, perhaps because it was the first time the Greeks had defeated the Persians on land. It continues to reverberate to this day. John Stuart Mill believed that the Battle of

Marathon was more important an event in British history than the Battle of Hastings, which is saying something! While the historian, J.F.C. Fuller explained its significance claiming that `...their victory endowed the Greeks with a faith in their destiny that was to endure for three centuries, during which western culture was born.' Darius however, viewed Marathon as a temporary setback. He died in November 486, before he got the opportunity to overturn the defeat.

While the Persian defeat at Marathon in Darius's reign remains axiomatic in western history, this monarch's place in the history of Iran rests on his ability to expand the empire he inherited and, more significantly, his singleness of purpose. This King was unique. His appreciation of the importance of law and order as well as an efficiently run bureaucracy, laid the foundations of the well-oiled machinery of the Persian state and Empire. He went further and laid the foundations for the economic life of the Empire with the standardization of weights and measures, as well as the development of coinage. Darius was an administrator *par excellence.*

History would come to know Darius as the great law giver, not least for having set out a new law to be enforced upon the whole empire. He was forthright in his convictions:

> By the favour of Ahuramazda, these lands walked according to my law; as was to them by me commanded, so they did. (*Beh.* 8)

The king's insistence on the importance of legal precepts would have far-reaching consequences for what was, after all, a relatively new dynasty. The Iranian term for law – *dat* – was now in common usage. Collectively, they made up the Ordinance of Good Regulations: they were collected, revised, incorporated in the new law book's creation which was supervised by Darius himself. Nor did it restrict itself to royal decrees. Rather, traditional custom came to be institutionalised. Darius's Law Reform was the gold standard of its day. Not surprisingly, some 268 years after his death, and long after the demise of the Achaemenid dynasty, in the Hellenist Seleucid era, the king's *dat* remained authoritative.

When Darius's son and successor, Xerxes, ascended the throne, his ambition to overturn his father's reversal at Marathon turned into a series of ignominious defeats that have entered the lexicon as evidence of western superiority over the so-called `barbarian' east. Xerxes admittedly, got much wrong. During his re-conquest of Egypt, he overturned earlier Persian respect of foreign cultures, by appropriating temple properties and sanctioned harsh treatment of the natives. In Babylon, where Xerxes had earlier served as viceroy and ought to have been well received, something went horribly wrong. The Babylonians revolted and the punishment was severe. Yet again, Xerxes reversed Achaemenid practice and carried off the gold statue of the Babylonian god Bel Marduk which was then melted down as bullion; properties of the wealthy elite were confiscated; extortionate taxes were imposed and, perhaps worst of all, was Babylonia's incorporation with Assyria. This was not a promising start for Iran's new monarch.

These blunders however, have historically paled into insignificance compared with the defeats suffered in Europe. The historic Battle of Thermopylae was fought in central Greece at the mountain pass of Thermopylae. Despite the outcome, and contrary to general belief, many Greek city states either joined Xerxes or remained neutral, while Athens and Sparta led the resistance with a number of other city-states behind them. Greek unity was always a fragile construct. Nevertheless, in September 480, Xerxes' army utterly defeated a Greek force of 300 Spartans and Thebans, led by the Spartan king Leonidas, at the pass of Thermopylae. Persian and Greek naval forces fought an indecisive three-day battle at sea, and the early Persian success at Thermopylae meant that the path now lay open for an attack on Athens. However, in Athens itself, the leading general Themistocles, had already ordered the evacuation of the city, and Athens was taken – without resistance – on 27 September 480. The Acropolis was seized and the temples destroyed. For Xerxes, the Persian objective of the campaign – the punishment of Athens for the Greek defeat of his father Darius at Marathon – had been achieved.

However, the following sea battle at Salamis was pretty calamitous for the Persians who were cornered in the narrow straits. Although Herodotus saw cowardice in Xerxes' decision to return home at this point, it is possible to suggest that he took a calculated decision not to engage his navy in another battle, not

least because the Phoenician ships would have been unable to manoeuvre in the narrow waters; and he had received news of a renewed revolt in Babylon. So he left Mardonius, his brother-in-law in charge of an elite contingent of 10,000 men. The Persian general, with the help of the king of Macedon, proposed a peace agreement with Athens including rebuilding the Acropolis. When the Athenians turned down the offer, the Persians occupied the city for a second time. Battle now became inevitable. The Persian army met a Pan-Hellenic force on the plain outside Plataea. Mardonius' death on the battlefield proved disastrous for the Persians. The Athenians seized the opportunity and pursued the Persians by sea and attacked their ships off the island of Mycale in Ionia. In this decisive battle, two of the six Persian armies were completely destroyed, while the third had to abandon Europe to guard disaffected western Asia.

In the years that followed the Persians lost their command over the Hellespont, relinquished control over Byzantium, Thrace and Macedon. The ignominy of the defeats in Europe however, does not appear to have affected the stability of the Persian Empire. Xerxes reigned for a further fourteen years but was assassinated by his eldest son Darius, who, Herodotus tells us, had reason to hate his father for having seduced his wife. Artaxerxes, was persuaded to kill his brother Darius, and ultimately gained the throne as Artaxerxes I.

It was during Artaxerxes I's reign that the Peloponnesian War broke out in 431 BC a conflict that raged for twenty-seven years between the Athenian Empire the Delian League against the Peloponnesian League led by Sparta and ended with Athens surrender to Sparta. The Greek world was convulsed by this fratricidal struggle, which the Persians could have capitalised on had it not been for a plague that swept through large parts of the Persian Empire. Multitudes died, the economy, already ravaged by over-taxation was out of kilter, and when Artaxerxes I and his Queen Damaspia, passed away on the same day in 424 BC, a bloody contest for the succession between the late king's sons ensued.

Darius II Ochus was victorious. His queen was Parysatis. Both the king and queen were half-Babylonian by birth, and history records that it was Queen Parysatis who was the power behind the throne. Her favourite son was Cyrus, and as our story develops, we will return to him, and his treacherous role in the Achaemenid

dynasty. Greco-Persian tensions had not gone away. Even though Athens had initiated a peace treaty with Darius II, it soon reneged on it. Its' Greek adversary, Sparta, now began to collect tribute formerly paid by Greek states of Asia to Athens, a most dangerous development from Persia's perspective. Enter Tissiphernes, arguably the most able and outstanding Persian diplomat, whose clever manoeuvres brought about the surrender of Spartan claims to tribute by introducing "lend-lease", whereby a government gives material aid and other services to allies.

At this point, let us turn our attention to Cyrus the Younger. His sense of entitlement and arrogance was demonstrated early on when he had executed two nephews. Why? Because the boys had not hidden their hands in their sleeves in his presence, thereby flouting the conventional gesture of respect. In 405, Cyrus the Younger, financed the Spartans, who won the battle of Aegospotami, closing the straits to Russian grain thus starving Athens into submission. Despite Persian money having helped Sparta best its rival Athens, Sparta was only moderately grateful to Cyrus the Younger.

Thus, when Darius II Ochus died, and was succeeded by Artaxerxes II whom the Greeks nicknamed Mnemon meaning `mindful', his brother, Cyrus the Younger was waiting in the wings – literally – ready to seize the throne. As preparations for the new king's coronation were getting underway at the temple at Pasargadae, Tissiphernes brought a Magus who had been Cyrus the Younger's tutor with disturbing news. Artaxerxes II was informed that his brother was planning to assassinate him before he put on Cyrus the Great's robe, a central feature of the coronation ceremony. Indeed, Cyrus the Younger *was* prowling the temple recesses. Having been caught red-handed, the younger brother was about to be executed when their mother Parysatis begged pardon for her favourite son and asked that he be allowed to return to his satrapy.

On returning to his satrapy, Cyrus the Younger began actively to prepare to snatch the throne from his brother. He added 13,000 Greek mercenaries to the troops under his command, heading for confrontation with King Artaxerxes II. The decisive battle took place on 3 September 401 BC. The two brothers faced each other on the battle field; Cyrus rushed forward, wounded Artaxerxes, but in the

melee, Cyrus himself was killed. It is said that King Artaxerxes II himself mutilated his brother's body. Their mother Parysatis was now in disgrace. It is not surprising that the Greeks admire Cyrus the Younger, but in Persian history, his treachery was unpardonable.

Even in his ignominious death, Cyrus the Younger left behind a troubling legacy, the large body of Greek mercenaries now in the heart of the empire. Even as their generals were put in chains, new leaders were chosen under whose leadership the mercenaries headed home through the harsh Armenian winter. This cohort have come to be lionised as the Ten Thousand, and their return to the Black Sea is eulogised as proof of the ease with which the brave Greeks could crush the mighty Persian Empire.

Artaxerxes II had been left a fetid legacy by his brother's treachery. He could not stand by and watch the Athenian alliances with essentially a band of dangerous rebels. What has come to be known as the `King's Peace' was thus proclaimed. It declared:

> King Artaxerxes holds it right that the cities in Asia should be his own, also the islands of Clazomenae and Cyprus. The other Greek cities, small and great, shall be autonomous, except Lemnos, Imbros, and Scyrus, which shall belong as of old to the Athenians. Whoever shall not accept this peace, with them will I fight …

Artaxerxes had, with quiet authority, ensured that the wealthy Greek cities of Asia surrendered to the Persians, whom Greek poets and orators never tired of denigrating as `the barbarians'. By accepting Artaxerxes's ultimatum, the Greeks had, in fact, acquiesced to the right of Persian intervention in purely European affairs, setting a dangerous precedent for the near future. Artaxerxes II, known as Mnemon, an Achaemenid monarch of whom we hear so little, had succeeded where Darius and Xerxes had not. The `King's Peace' was imposed on European Greece which led to the complete disintegration of the Spartan and Athenian empires.

Unfortunately, the perennial issue of over-taxation continued in Artaxerxes II's reign which led to internal fissures within the Empire. As revolts spread and class wars gained momentum, the authorities were ruthless in dealing with it. Ironically, while the Greek cities of Asia prospered, a noticeable lack of internal cohesion now posed a very real threat to the Achaemenid Empire. The internecine battles for the throne of Artaxerxes II after his death, was the writing on the wall that the dynasty's glory days were now behind it.

We now come to the reign of Artaxerxes III, referred to by his throne name Ochus. He has come down in history as the most bloodthirsty of the Achaemenid clan. Even before ascending the throne he had killed off all his relatives regardless of age or sex. Once again, Egypt, always ready to rebel against its Persian overlords, was in revolt, as were several other provinces. This King's method of dealing with the Egyptians was to stab, with his own hands, the sacred Apis bull, and in its place set up an ass which he compelled the natives to worship. His reprehensible behaviour was a far cry from the early practice of respect for foreign cultures as laid down by the father of the dynasty.

Meanwhile, in Greece, an historical event was gathering pace. Philip of Macedon – father of Alexander – was now acknowledged as the outstanding Greek of his generation. Greece watched with alarm as the Persian King Artaxerxes III re-conquered Egypt and Phoenicia, which once again gave him command of the seas, and the Empire appeared stronger than it had been for a century. This perception of strength, no doubt induced Philip of Macedon to negotiate a friendship treaty with the Persian monarch; while in Athens, Demosthenes called on his compatriots to send an embassy to Artaxerxes. Greek unity was a myth. The Athenians recommended to the Persian monarch that he make war on Philip of Macedon. Even as inter-Greek rivalry was playing out, Artaxerxes III was poisoned by his physician on the order of the eunuch Bagoas.

Ironically, bloodthirsty tyrants can sometimes prove to be able rulers. And so it was with Artaxerxes III. His assassination altered geopolitics. A Greek league, with Philip of Macedon as commander-in-chief, now prepared for their crusade to "liberate" all the Greek cities under Persian rule.

The eunuch Bagoas, now king-maker in Persia, placed on the throne Arses, a son of the murdered king. This newly elevated king ruled for a mere two years, and was also killed by Bagoas, who completed his task by killing all Arses' children. The Achaemenid family had been decimated. The empty throne was presented, by Bagoas, to 45 year old Darius – destined to be the Achaemenid dynasty's last king.

The disarray within the ruling family marked the final years of the Achaemenid era. Darius III would oversee the end point of Empire.

The Achaemenid Dynasty

PART 2

ALEXANDER OF MACEDON: GREEK VICTORY OVER THE ACHAEMENIDS

In Greece, Alexander of Macedon came to power following the assassination of his father Philip. The young Macedonian was intent on establishing a world empire, although even at this crucial stage, Greek unity remained fragile. Athens asked Darius III for financial assistance to help fund an insurgency against the Macedonian upstart. An over-confident Darius contemptuously replied:

> I will not give you gold: do not ask me, for you will not get it.

Hubris indeed. Alexander would have no truck with his fellow Greeks trying to cosy up to the Persian King. The young Macedonian made his point: he destroyed Thebes completely, demonstrating both, a ruthlessness and his ambitions. Now, he was the Greek standard-bearer who would carry the banner of the Greek crusade against the `Persian barbarians'.

Darius III now sensed the threat to his throne. His offer of a 300 talents bribe to Greece was officially refused by Athens, although the great Athenian orator, Demosthenes, was happy to help himself to 70 talents, while condemning Alexander a fool!

The Greek crusade against Persia got underway in 334 BC. In three major battles, Alexander put an end to the Achaemenid Empire. Alexander was successful in all the three major battles he fought against Darius III, which helps explain why he was dubbed `The Great' in western history.

At Granicus (Lydia), even as both sides fielded sizeable armies, the Macedonians gained early success, meaning that Alexander now ruled over Orientals, Macedonians and Greeks. At the Battle of Issus (Syria), Darius's huge army ought

to have been dominant, but lost the strategic advantage and as Alexander retraced his steps back through the Syrian Gates and deployed his troops, Darius fled the battlefield, shamefully abandoning his mother, wife, daughters, infant son, as well as his chariot, bow, shield and cloak. In effect, the Persian monarch had handed Alexander the western half of the Persian Empire. Alexander now swiftly claimed victory in Syria and Egypt.

He then received a letter from Darius in effect telling the Macedonian that he had invaded his country and should forthwith return the Persian royal family, forget the current battles, and reinstate the former alliance that had been proposed by Alexander's father, Philip, and the former Persian king, Artaxerxes III. Alexander's reply was telling. He accused Darius III's ancestors of having wantonly invaded Greece, which Alexander now, as commander-in-chief of the Greeks was set on his crusade as retribution for an ancient wrong. And he notified the Persian that henceforth Darius must address Alexander as king of Asia!

Greek unity remained strained even then. The Greek cities of Thebes, Sparta and Athens had dispatched ambassadors to Darius. Alexander had them taken prisoner, while he himself continued his mopping-up exercise. Darius continued to petition the new master of Asia, and offered him a ransom of 10,000 talents for his family, cession of all the empire of the Euphrates and his daughter in marriage, all of which were, unsurprisingly refused by Alexander. Now that he was on a winning streak, he had no need to grant any concessions but rather, remained single-minded in obliterating the Persian Empire.

An interesting footnote in the historic events being played out was the role of a certain Ariarathes. He led the Persians who had escaped from Issus, retreated northward and recovered Paphlogonia and Pontic Cappadocia. He struck his own coins, and was the first of a dynasty of Iranian kings of Cappadocia, who went on to preserve the country's independence throughout the Hellenic period of Iranian history.

Alexander meanwhile, was preparing to inflict the final blow on Persia. He crossed the Euphrates while Darius encamped on a small stream on the far bank. Darius was no match for Alexander's strategic genius. The Tigris had been left unguarded

and Alexander marched his troops through Assyria for four days; on the fifth day, he ordered them to rest and get a good night's sleep, even as Darius's men were up all night, preparing for the historic battle.

At the Battle of Gaugamela (`grazing place for camel'), the Persian side fielded a vast contingent including Bactrians, Indians, Sogdians, Scythian Dahae, Arachosians and others, and Darius was surrounded by loyal kinsmen and the famous Persian Immortals. On either flank of the Persians were Greek mercenaries. Alexander meanwhile, had moved his cavalry to Arbela, some 75 miles away. Here he learnt that Darius, taking his Bactrian cavalry, kinsmen and Immortals, had fled for a second time, headed for Ecbatana, back to Iran. The Persian had, quite literally, handed over his kingdom to the young Macedonian. Persia's humiliation was complete.

Alexander was master of all he surveyed. He arrived in Babylon and proceeded to Susa where he now took possession of the treasures in the palace which amounted to 40,000 talents of silver and 9,000 talents of gold in coined darics. Alexander reached the capital Persepolis by February 330 BC. He took on the mantle of the legitimate successor of the Achaemenid monarchy, and in the ancient Persian capital, he ended his successful crusade. There was yet more treasure to be found in the capital: 5,000 gold talents at the head of the royal bed; 3,000 talents in what was known as the `King's footstool'; clusters of costly jewels and so much more. This booty was for Alexander's soldiers to plunder. It is true that Alexander of Macedon remains a major figure in history, lauded for his military exploits and bringing to an end the great Persian Achaemenid dynasty. However, his ledger was blotted by some of the excesses that either he sanctioned or were the zealous intemperance of his men.

Alexander's swagger was reflected in his letters home where he told of having ordered the Persian captives to be massacred. He visited Pasargadae, where he commandeered the treasure of Cyrus the Great, even as he paid homage to the founder of the Iranian Empire. The barbarities at Persepolis, and what some historians are prepared to acknowledge as an `act of sheer vandalism', the burning down of the stupendous palaces on the platform, remain a blot on Alexander's career.

Much has been written of his time in Iran – his respect for the memory of Cyrus the Great, his donning of Persian dress, the mass weddings of Macedonian soldiers with Persian women and his own marriage to Roxanne who bore him a son. But in Zoroastrian memory, he remains *Iskander e guzistāg* – Alexander the Accursed.

Following his premature death, what came to be known as the `Fortune of Alexander' was, for the Hellenic world, short-lived. The Greeks had been virtually gifted the Iranian Empire by the numerous failures and sheer cowardice of Darius III. Yet Alexander's successors squandered the gains through their incessant wars. Even the Romans, who succeeded to the mantle of *the* Western power, were unable to restore Alexander's vast but briefly-held conquests. But significantly for Iran itself, the reign of Alexander was, with historic hindsight merely a prelude. The Seleucid dynasty founded by his general Seleucus Nicator, and the brief Hellenic inter-regnum would come to an end with the eventual recovery of Iran by the Arsacid Parthians.

The Achaemenid Dynasty

PART 3

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ACHAEMENID DYNASTY

Before we leave the Achaemenid dynasty which was followed by the Arsacid Parthians from north-eastern Iran, we ought to reflect on the first Iranian dynasty to have put the country on the global stage having ruled their vast empire for nearly 230 years. Their many military successes as well as the reverses they suffered has helped in our understanding of the extent of their dominion. But there is more to the story of empire than wars and conquests. Nothing enhances our understanding of a time long past than a glimpse into the lives of the ordinary people, and interactions with their governors.

Despite Alexander's arson at Persepolis, the discovery of the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, dated between 509 and 394 BC, although concentrating mainly on Persia, allows us glimpses of life beyond the south-western corner of the country. Together with the 114 Persepolis Treasury Tablets, dating between 492 and 458 BC, mainly concerning `payment' to workers, these several texts are, in Professor Josef Wiesehöfer's words, `so numerous and so astonishingly eloquent' as to unveil hitherto unknown aspects of life in Achaemenid Iran.

We get intriguing glimpses into the lives of historical figures: queens, princes and princesses, the aristocracy and satraps. An interesting vignette tells us of Artystone, a daughter of Cyrus the Great, and wife of Darius I. She is mentioned in several of the Persepolis texts, and as the owner of at least three large palaces. We learn that she entertained her husband Darius I at Kuganaka in 498 BC. Royalty was never like us lesser folk!

Dynasty implies continuity, and the death of the king and the coronation of his successor were formulaic. When a king died, the sacred fires were extinguished and the Empire observed a period of mourning. The monarch's corpse was prepared for burial in rock-cut tomb-chambers at Naqš-i Rustam and Persepolis, the only exception was the free-standing tomb of Cyrus at Pasargadae. During the mourning period, the successor had to fulfil certain commitments, viz. burying his father, executing the provisions of his will and the observation of certain religious

rites. Only then could the coronation proceed. The investiture was conducted by the priests in a sanctuary, and as we have seen, the crown prince would put on the robe which `Cyrus the Elder used to wear before he became king', then eat a cake of figs, chew some terebinth and drink a cup of sour milk. Thus sanctified in a temple and having offered prayers to Ahura Mazda, the new monarch could lay claim to his divine right of sovereignty. Only then was the new king given the right to the insignia of his power: certain royal garments and shoes, the upright purple tiara, the sceptre in his right hand and lotus blossom in his left hand, a lance and bow. Thus attired, he presented himself to his subjects.

An aspect of the ancient world that often remains tantalisingly obscure is the role of women in society. Given that we are dependent on extant sources, written or visual, the subject of womenfolk, not surprisingly more often than not, centres on queens and princesses. This is what history records. Contemporary Greek writers, namely Herodotus, Xenophon, Plato, Aristotle, Ctesias among others, acknowledged the role of royal women in disparate public arenas as they travelled across the country, while their economic independence gave them a voice in political affairs. The received wisdom that royal women as well as aristocratic women in Achaemenid Iran were confined to purdah, was a later Greek confection after the fall of empire. Rather, this strata of women were part of a scrupulously hierarchical court structure in close lock-step with the king himself.

What today is sometimes referred to as the `royal walk-about' – when royalty meet the public – was a feature of an Achaemenid monarch's diary. Artaxerxes II and his wife Stateira gained popularity with their travels through the country. Plutarch (*Artaxerxes* 4.5-5.1) draws a picture of the comfortable relationship between the queen and her people:

> What gratified the Persians the most was the sight of...Stateira's carriage, which always appeared with its curtains up, and thus permitted the women of the people to approach and greet the queen. This made her the beloved of the common folk.

The upper echelons of society lived privileged lives, but we get a picture of their sense of duty and responsibility.

A celebrated feature of the Persians was the special attention paid to the education of their sons. Herodotus' famous observation that the Persians taught their sons `three things only from their fifth to their twentieth year: horsemanship, bowman-ship and telling the truth', is an insight into the importance, as they saw it, of character formation.

A martial spirit, courage and even a warlike disposition were thus seemingly fostered in the youth. Prowess in arms was highly regarded, while a disinclination on the part of the subject to enlist at the king's call when he went to war, was a capital crime. Thus the conscientious objector would have been shown scant mercy by the army chiefs! Herodotus informs us that Darius was petitioned by a father who had three sons to spare one from joining an expedition, with the result that all the three sons were put to death by royal order, to set an example to others. Harsh treatment indeed.

The creation and maintenance of a vast empire, across two and a half centuries, suggests that the importance of the army is a given. In Cyrus' time the troops were essentially a militia in which each soldier had to provide his own equipment. Gradually, a standing army was formed in which, alongside the Persians there were Medes and eastern Iranians. When necessary, subject peoples were called on to supply further contingents. From the earliest days of empire, Greek mercenary units enlisted in the Persian army, and Xenophon informs us that each soldier received free board and lodging and monthly pay of one gold daric. The inclusion of mercenaries was a general practice in the 4th century BC.

An interesting facet of the Persian army was the use of the decimal system, namely, units of tens, hundreds and thousands with their corresponding "officers". The elite troops were the 10,000 Immortals; detachments of 1,000 men was led by a *hazārapatiš* (`leader of a thousand'); the commander-in-chief was from the Persian and Median aristocracy or a member of the king's family, and there were further detachments of the king's `bodyguard'.

Away from wars and conquest, Iran came in time, to be famed for its gardens, creating spaces that were `paradise'. It was from the Old Persian *paridaida* that the Greek *paradeisos* entered our vocabulary. Xenophon wrote:

> Yet further, continued Socrates, in all the districts he resides in and visits he [the king] takes care that there are `paradises', as they call them, full of all

> the good and beautiful things that the soil will produce, and in this he himself spends most of his time, except when the season precludes it.

Thus, aesthetics were an integral part of Persian civilisation. But the Achaemenid era gained a reputation for so much more. Their domains were vast and they were diverse. The empire's longevity owed much to the administrative structures put in place by the founders of the dynasty: the emphasis on legal precepts and the just execution of the law; the funding and upkeep of infrastructure so that the centre could keep in touch with the farthest reaches of the empire and, of course, the imperial army whose role was central to the imperial exercise.

Iranians gained a reputation as competent administrators, and long after the demise of empire, their model of governance was emulated by the Arab conquerors. The foundations were laid very early on quite simply because the vast extent of empire demanded a scale of political organisation for which there was no prototype. Cyrus the Great overturned earlier ancient models of governance of conquered nations by keeping existing local administrations in place rather than inserting a Persian model on them. The innovative step of placing a satrap (`protector of the realm') in each conquered land was a system that would endure. Initially, satraps and other high officials were recruited at local level, although by the time Darius I ascended the throne, the satrapal office had become virtually dynastic. This, however, was not set in stone. In one famous instance, Darius supplanted the Persian Gobyras as satrap of Babylon, and soon Persians appeared in subordinate offices and sat alongside eminent locals as judges. Importantly, the satrap was the king's representative. Thus a form of devolved government came into being.

Governance of this vast expanse demanded good infrastructure, and the establishment of the Royal Roads, were a marvel of their time. The Assyrians had already put in place a road system which connected Asia Minor and Assyria. The Achaemenids used the prototype and greatly expanded it to connect the main cities and the satrapal and royal centres across the empire. The most important of these Royal Roads led from Persepolis via Susa to Babylon and from there to northern Iran. Here the route split into a northern sector leading through Cappadocia and a southern sector through Cilicia to Lydia and its capital Sardis. The eastern route covered Persepolis to Ecbatana in Media from where it

continued to the Caspian Sea via Bactria and into Central Asia. The southern route connected the Indian satrapy to the centre; while Egypt was linked by road via Jerusalem and Damascus. The genius of the Achaemenid road system was the security it offered to riders and messengers: at intervals of 25-30 kilometres, road stations provided food and shelter to the traveller. Herodotus was quite taken with the Royal Roads:

> The nature of this road is as I shall show. All along it are the king's stages and very good hostelries and the whole of it passes through country that is inhabited and safe...there are 111 stages in total. So many resting stages there are on the journey from Sardis to Susa.

The Royal Roads doubled up as the postal system – in fact, the first postal system known in history. Again, Herodotus' enthusiasm is catching:

> Now nothing mortal travels faster than these couriers, by the Persians' skilful contrivance. It is said that the number of men and horses stationed along the road equals the number of days the whole journey takes – a man and a horse for each day's journey; and these are stopped neither by snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness from accomplishing their appointed course with all speed.

The Royal Roads were indeed a marvel of their time. Their accomplishment can be put in context when compared with travel times in the 17th century as Europeans negotiated the Treaty of Westphalia (24 October 1648). This treaty ended the 30 Years War in Europe and involved some 194 European states. The delegates met at Münster and Osnabrük in Germany in December 1644. Reams of letters needed to be sent between the envoys and their principals. Post from Münster to Paris or Vienna would take 20 days; it would take even longer for post to reach Stockholm or Madrid. Compare this with the speed of travel along the Achaemenid Royal Roads.

In addition to overland routes, there were naval routes as well. The eastern Mediterranean where Phoenician and Cilician trade ships docked; along the Red Sea to the Gulf of Oman and from there via the Indian Ocean to the mouth of the River Indus; and the little-known Achaemenid contribution to the construction of the 84 kilometre-long canal linking the Red Sea to the Nile, the early prototype for the Suez Canal, confirmed in four languages by Darius I himself:

> I ordered the digging of the canal from a river called Nile which flows in Egypt to the sea which begins in Persia. Afterwards this canal was dug just as I ordered, and ships passed through this canal from Egypt to Persia, as I had wished.

We have seen the close attention Darius I paid to the imposition of law – *dat* – and the codification of a law book. Indeed, the Iranian monarch was eager to be ranked alongside Hammurabi as a great lawgiver. He insisted on the incorruptibility of the judges and special weight was given to the rules for evidence. The duty of the king is consistently seen in Zoroastrian Iran to establish justice between all sections of society. Justice, in Iranian thought, could be expected, indeed demanded, of even the most evil king. In the epic S*hah-nameh*, the wicked ruler Zohak is confronted by the challenger:

> You may have a dragon's form, but you are a king and it is your duty to let me have justice.

Herodotus informs us that Persian kings had

> ...a praiseworthy law...which suffers not the king himself to slay any man for one offence, nor any other Persian for one offence to do incurable hurt to one of his servants. Not till reckoning shows that the offender's wrongful acts are more and greater than his services, may a man give vent to his anger.

We have seen that Iran had a long and ancient national sentiment noted in sections of the Avesta. Herodotus in fact comments on the Persians' love of country. He notes that the Persian did not pray for his personal blessing, rather:

> ...he prays for the welfare of the king and of the whole Persian people, among whom he is of necessity included.

Experts are now prepared to acknowledge that Zoroastrianism was `old' in eastern Iran when the Achaemenids established their empire. By the time the Persian Achaemenids received it from the east, as a great imperial people they would set about putting their distinctive stamp on it in ways that have endured to this day. Zoroastrianism came now to be possessed of temples, shrines and estates, served by an ever increasing number of priests.

There are arguably, two identifying markers of Zoroastrianism today. One is the fire temple and the other is the *dakhma* or Tower of Silence for the disposal of the dead. The fire placed on an altar-like stand in royal palaces dates to the early Achaemenid era. There is evidence of fire-holders at Persepolis; the discovery of two great plinths at Pasargadae and the King's hearth fire was emblematic of his majesty and confirmation of this practice.

Professor Mary Boyce puts forward an explanation for the establishment of fire temples in Zoroastrian worship. This *may* have occurred at some point in the 3rd century BC. Babylonian records suggest that during the reign of Artaxerxes II, nicknamed Mnemon, statues of `Aphrodite Anaitis' were erected in the main cities of the empire, and people were encouraged to worship it. The Zoroastrian reference would have been to the *yazata* Anahita (`immaculate') and invoked in the Avestan liturgies by the triple epithets `Aredvi Sura Anahita'. The `Fratadara' Temple in Persepolis speaks to Artaxerxes II's devotion to Anahita, and the King's command to venerate man-made icons would have been unacceptable to many priests and laymen. It is probable, that as a compromise, the elevation of a fire – as a symbol of devotion and in keeping with Zoroastrian traditions – was then introduced. By the end of the Achaemenid era, the fire temple was a central feature of Zoroastrian worship.

As an imperial people, Iranian colonialists, merchants and others were to be found in non-Iranian lands; and where there were Iranians, there were Zoroastrian priests to administer to their needs. Strabo (63 BC) a native of Cappadocia, observed their place of worship:

> In Cappadocia...for there the tribe of the magi, who are also called `fire-kindlers' is large...they...have fire-sanctuaries, noteworthy enclosures; and in the midst of these there is an altar, on which there is a large quantity of ashes and where the magi keep the fire ever burning. And there, entering daily, they make incantations for about an hour, holding before the fire their bundle of rods [barsom], and wearing round their heads felt tiaras which reach down over their cheeks far enough to cover their lips...

Zoroastrian priests today would fit Strabo's description as set down in the 1st century BC.

While academic debate continues as to whether or not the Achaemenid kings were Zoroastrian, the political role of religion is perhaps the more appropriate question, given the breath of power these monarchs held over their far-flung empire. This is demonstrated by Darius I whose many references to Ahura Mazda was as much to harness his god to embellish his legitimacy as a point of commonality with his people; while his uncompromising statement at Susa informs us that `Ahuramazda is mine; I am Ahuramazda's'.

Significantly, we learn from the Persepolis Tablets that the Achaemenid kings permitted freedom of worship of the many gods in their conquered realms, and even supported them in doing so. However, foreign religious sites were expected to toe the political line and pay the relevant taxes, unless they had been relieved of it by prior arrangement. Religious tolerance of foreign faiths has come to be a defining feature of the dynasty. Foreign observers themselves tell us so.

Herodotus attests that the Persians were generous in their treatment of conquered peoples: They would honour an enemy who had fought valiantly. Sons of rebel chiefs were treated with great consideration, occasionally being permitted to rule over their father's territories. And there were occasions when the conquered king spent the remainder of his life at the Persian court as an honoured guest of the king. Plato noted that under Cyrus' rule the empire was bestowed with a `spirit of freedom, friendship and community.'

We have seen how, ever since Cyrus' contact with the Jewish exiles in Babylon and his promise to fund the rebuilding of their Temple in Jerusalem, a special and respectful relationship grew up between the two peoples. The Jewish community was to be found throughout the oriental world, and were prepared to acknowledge the Achaemenids as the governing authority. Many Jews were domiciled in Egypt, and some among them willingly served as Persian mercenaries, while Jewish priests and businessmen played their part in the political and economic history of the days after the collapse of Achaemenid rule.

Although Jewish-Persian relations remained cordial – not just under the Achaemenids but into the Parthian and Sasanian eras – one event, Purim (`lots') has come to be seen as a blot on the landscape. Xerxes is thought to have played a controversial role in the Jewish festival of Purim. Here's what happened. The king threw a lavish party at which he asked Queen Vashti to display her beauty,

which she refused to do. Xerxes chose a new queen – Esther – who did not reveal to her husband that she was Jewish. Meanwhile, Mordechai discovered a plot to assassinate Xerxes, which led to the conspirators being apprehended and hanged; and Mordechai's refusal to bow down to Haman, the King's secretary, led to bad blood between the two men. When Haman discovered that Mordechai was Jewish, he plotted to kill him and all the Jews in the empire. This fiendish plan is said to have got the go-ahead by Xerxes. Lots were cast to choose the date on which to do this: and the 13th Adar was fixed. On this day, the people were free to massacre the Jews and loot their property.

At this point, Esther interceded. At a banquet she revealed to Xerxes that she too was Jewish and that Haman's dastardly plan was to exterminate her people including Esther herself. Xerxes was enraged. As the Book of Esther relates it, King Xerxes ordered his men to hang Haman `on the stake that he had prepared for Mordechai'. A decree was then dispatched throughout the Empire, related in the Book of Esther 7:13-14:

> ...that the king granted to the Jews that were in all the different cities to congregate themselves and stand for their souls, to annihilate and kill and destroy all the force of the people and jurisdictional district that were showing hostility to them...A copy of the writing was to be given as law throughout all the different jurisdictional districts, published to all the peoples, that the Jews should become ready for this day to avenge themselves upon their enemies.

The Book of Esther relates that `for the Jews there occurred light and rejoicing and exultation and honour' (7:16). Xerxes reversed Haman's absurd plan; indeed, he allowed the Jews of his realm to defend themselves. And so it came to pass that on 13th Adar, 500 attackers and Haman's 10 sons were killed in Shushan, followed by a Jewish slaughter of, it is said, 75,000 Persians. In a letter to her people, Esther announced the commemoration of the Jewish redemption by instituting the holiday of Purim, meaning lots. As for Mordechai, he reached the very heights of prominence at court, again related in the Book of Esther:

> As for all his energetic work and his mightiness and the exact statement of Mordecai's greatness with which the king magnified him, are they not written in the Book of the affairs of the times of the kings of Media and

> Persia? For Mordecai the Jew was second to King Ahasuerus [Xerxes] and was great among the Jews and approved by the multitude of his brothers, working for the good of his people and speaking peace to all their offspring (10:2-3).

On closer examination, what continues to be seen as a blot on Xerxes' career was in fact, quite the reverse.

However, before we get carried away, it is as well to remember that the Achaemenid record was not without blemish. Crucifixion and mutilation of limbs were punishments inflicted on rebel chiefs. And those inhabitants who acted treacherously against the Persian army were, on occasion, put to the sword or sold as slaves.

A nuanced assessment of the Achaemenid dynasty – which at its height was the largest empire in the ancient world – would highlight the fact that local autonomy and decentralisation of jurisdictions overseen by central government, accounted for the stability of the empire. Despite the Iranian concept of sovereignty highlighting the separateness of the Persians from other inhabitants of the realm, the evidence suggests that Persian suzerainty was considered beneficial because it acted as guarantor of stability – political, economic and social – for the subject peoples. We must accept however, that the Egyptians took a different view.

The Achaemenid dynasty ruled their vast, disparate Empire for some 230 years. Under their rule, the civilised world of antiquity came nearer to being under one political control than ever before. Their statecraft encompassed a respect for the religions and traditions of those they conquered, so long as they acknowledged Persian overlordship. Greco-Persian tensions were the leitmotif of the era, and Greek victories at Marathon, Salamis and Plataea came to be seen as historical events that would shape the world. The perennial Greek refrain of the Persian `barbarian' may be jarring to the ears of the more dispassionate onlooker, but equally, the Persians would return the compliment by dividing the world into `Iran and non-Iran'. Cyrus the Great did not lack ambition: after all, he was intent on building an empire, but we learn that `...he reverenced the laws, and knew that there are unjust wars...' Herodotus states unequivocally that the Persians were generous in their treatment of conquered peoples, and religious freedom of the

conquered was the norm, even as Zoroastrianism remained Iran's national religion.

Iran has for millennia had a strong sense of identity. It is no exaggeration to say that the ethos of Zoroastrianism has much to do with this. Professor Ghirshman reminds us that the ' spirit of the Persian people was imbued with this love of country'.

All empires must come to an end, and so it was that a confluence of events brought Iran's glory days to a close. Centrifugal forces within the Empire began to gain momentum. The chaos within the royal court and the weakness of the last monarch just as a rising star in Macedonia set his sights on a crusade against the Persians all heralded a perfect storm that would bring Achaemenid Iran to an end. Despite this, the civilisation of Iran remains among the high points in the history of the world, and after a brief foreign inter-regnum, Iran would reassert itself and continue as a major global power.

The Parthian Dynasty

PART 1

THE PARTHIAN DYNASTY: WRONGLY OVERLOOKED BY HISTORY

247 BC – 224 AD

Justin the Roman historian wrote of `...the Parthians, who hold the east in their hands as if it were their share of the world...', yet today, even in the Iranian world, this dynasty that ruled over a re-born Iranian empire for some 470 years, is virtually forgotten. As Rome's chief adversary in the east, the Parthians would establish themselves as a superpower in their own right, ruling vast domains that included all of modern Iran, Iraq and Armenia, parts of Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, as well as periodically, territories in Pakistan, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine.

When Alexander of Macedon conquered the Persian Empire that led to the fall of the Achaemenid dynasty, Seleucis, one of Alexander's generals, gained control of Mesopotamia and areas that were once integral to Persia, creating the Seleucid Empire. A brief Hellenistic inter-regnum saw the introduction of Greek systems although the Persian form of governance persisted. Satrapies continued to be administered by satraps answerable to the central government and ultimately the king. Parthia became one of those satrapies.

The brothers Arsaces and Tiridates were members of the Parni tribe. By about 250 BC, their incursions into parts of the Seleucid Empire led to their successful invasion of the province of Parthia, where they overcame the local satrap. Once in possession of the Seleucid satrapy of Parthia, Arsaces I founded his kingdom. The birth of the Arsacid Parthian dynasty is dated to the historic event of the election of Arsaces I as leader in 247 BC. Henceforth, all the kings of the dynasty took the name 'Arsaces'.

There were some 32 kings of the dynasty, some of whom were outstanding leaders, others whose short reigns barely merit mention. By 170 BC, the Arsacids had consolidated their rule in the southern regions of the Caspian Sea. Although historians and students of Iranian history are familiar with the Greek versions of

the names of Parthian kings, it is only fair that we should familiarise ourselves of their names in the Iranian original.

The rule of one of the greatest kings of the dynasty, Mithradates I (who would have been more familiar to the Iranians as Mihrdad) (171-138 BC), saw further expansions to the west against the Seleucids, and later against Rome. He re-asserted Arsacid power in Mesopotamia, as well as securing the crucial conquest of Armenia. When the Romans defeated the Seleucid Antiochus III in 189 BC, Mithradates I, considered the true founder of the Parthian Empire, seized the opportunity to mint independent Arsacid coinage and began his territorial expansion.

The annexation of Mesopotamia, Media, Elymais, Persis, Characene and Assyria in the west, was followed by the eastward expansion into Gedrosia, Herat and Seistan. It was during Mithradates I's rule that the Parthians built a vast military camp at Ctesiphon (near modern day Baghdad), which later became the Parthian capital. This monarch's major achievement was what can be termed the `liberation' of the provinces of Iran from the Seleucids. Mithradates I now assumed the title 'Great King', and took on the mantle of the restorer of the Achaemenid Empire.

Mithradates II,(Mihrdad) a nephew of the first Mithradates, was among the most remarkable of the Parthian kings. On his coinage, he introduced a new epithet: `Epiphanes' [god manifest], although establishing the young dynasty on firm foundations was a work in progress. The new king had to restore order to the newly won states in the West; while in the East, he retook Merv, reoccupied Herat, and made Seistan his vassal.

International relations were remoulded when in 115 BC Mithradates II received an embassy from the Emperor of China. The two rulers concluded a treaty to promote international trade in the process elevating Iran into a major transit state. The Chinese historian Sima Qian's *Shiji*, records that:

> ...when the Han envoys visited the kingdom of Anxi (Parthia), the king of Anxi ordered 20,000 horsemen to meet them on the eastern border of his kingdom. ...As the envoys travelled to the capital they passed through several dozens of cities inhabited by great numbers of people. When the Han envoys set out again to return to China, the king of Anxi then

> dispatched his own envoys to come with them to China to see its great breadth and might...

The date: 115 BC, was thus a seminal event in Sino-Parthian relations, and would have far-reaching consequences.

Not only was Mithradates II responsible for opening up to China, some 20 years later he took the strategic decision to establish his protégé, Tigranes on the throne of Armenia. Eventually, Tigranes of Armenia would go on to create a powerful kingdom that included all Asia Minor and bordered on continental Greece. Armenia would remain a buffer state over which Rome and Parthia fought several wars.

With Armenia now in familial alliance with the Arsacid monarch, Mithradates II had the building blocks of imperial might in place. When in 92 BC, Rome reached the Euphrates the Parthians sent an embassy proposing an alliance. Sulla, the Roman, appeared oblivious of the rising power of the Parthians. Rome's condescension of Parthia would come back to haunt them.

Mithradates II had once again made Iran into a world power. It faced Rome in the West, and traded profitably with China in the East. He reconfirmed his stature by assuming the title `King of Kings'. The parts played by Mithradates I and Mithradates II - that is, in Iranian terms Mihrdad I and Mihrdad II – in the foundation of the Parthian Empire were arguably, reminiscent of Cyrus and Darius I of the Achaemenid dynasty. However, after Mithradates II's death, we would have to admit that his successors were often unworthy of the Parthian throne.

Let us pause here to recapture history. A few years ago, archaeological evidence of the strength of Sino-Parthian relations made a stunning discovery. DNA tests showed that China's first emperor employed foreigners in building his mausoleum, home to the Terracotta warriors. Qin Shi Huang was the first emperor of a unified China who built the first great Wall and ordered up a giant mausoleum for himself outside the north-western city of Xian, guarded by an estimated 8,000 life-size pottery warriors and horses. In 2006, scientists took 15 DNA samples from remains in a labourers' tomb and found `one sample has typical DNA features commonly owned by the Parsi in India and Pakistan, the Kurds in Turkmenistan and the Persian in Iran', according to Tan Jingze, an

anthropologist with Funda University. Proof indeed, of close ties between Parthian Iran and China.

Let us resume our story of the Parthian kings. The great Mithradates II's reign was followed by less prominent monarchs until we reach the reign of Orodes II (Urud, in Iranian) (57-38 BC). He gained the throne after defeating his brother, yet another Mithradates. This brother, Mithradates, had sought Rome's assistance. Orodes managed the capture and execution of his brother thus removing the threat to his throne. Rome calculated the events as demonstrating an innate weakness within the Parthian body politic. When Crassus was made Rome's proconsul in Syria, the Senate in Rome had no appetite for war with Parthia. Crassus convinced the Senate that Iran was now an easy target and, in fact, a Roman victory would add to its wealth.

Since the Punic Wars – the three wars fought between Carthage and Rome over nearly a century which led to the destruction of Carthage – Rome had been victorious in every major campaign. Crassus was confident of victory over Parthia and not many Romans could have foretold the result. In 53 BC, the Roman legions were trapped near Carrhae (in south-eastern Turkey) by the Suren, representative of Parthian nobility, and who we will encounter again. The Roman legions were no match for the light and heavy Parthian cavalry, and it is said that some 30,000 Romans, including Crassus and his son were killed or taken prisoner. The stunning Parthian victory was a severe blow to Rome. The Battle of Carrhae in 53 BC compelled Rome to introduce cavalry into its army; while the dénouement was the head and arms of Crassus brought to King Orodes II while he was watching a performance of the *Bacchae* of Euripides alongside the King of Armenia. In this context it is interesting to quote Plutarch who reminds us that 'Orodes was not ignorant of the Greek language and literature', suggesting the King's cosmopolitan mind-set that extended to sections of the Parthian nobility.

Returning to politics. The shock of Parthian victory compelled Rome to acknowledge, most grudgingly, Parthian power. The Roman eagles of the legions were now lodged in Parthian temples. Let us put this into context. The Roman eagles were a prominent symbol carried by each legion and were of semi-religious significance to the Roman soldier. Yet another result of the Battle of Carrhae was the settlement in the oasis of Merv of a number of Roman prisoners, many of

whom married local women and had families. Of long-term importance was the hostile attitude towards Rome of western Semites – peoples such as the Jews of Palestine, Nabateans of Damascus, Arabs of the desert and the inhabitants of Palmyra – all of whom now looked to Iran as a counter to Rome. Indeed, for over a century, the Euphrates frontier remained inviolate.

Even as the moment of triumph was bearing fruit, internecine rivalry within the Parthian court hampered progress. Rome was not reticent in taking advantage of its' enemy's difficulties. When King Orodes II lost his favourite son Pacorus, another son, Phraates IV (his Iranian name would be Farhad) ascended the throne. This king had a bloody reputation, having slaughtered some 30 brothers and their families. The reign of Phraates IV coincided with the career of the Roman Mark Antony, who was anxious to reverse the stigma of the colossal Roman loss at the Battle of Carrhae. However, Mark Antony was denied victory when he was pitted against the combined forces of the Parthians and Armenians. Not long after, Antony was defeated by Octavian, the future Roman Emperor Augustus. Events in Rome under Emperor Augustus would leave its mark on Parthian affairs.

Augustus did not perceive Parthia a major threat to Rome, not least because of the frequent palace revolts, and what Rome saw as an absence of strong central control. Let us not forget the Roman eagles, symbols of its legions that had been captured at the Battle of Carrhae, as well as those lost to Parthia by Mark Antony. Emperor Augustus needed to retrieve these symbols of Roman might, as well as thousands of captive Romans. The best way to do this was to establish diplomatic relations between Rome and Parthia, and as a measure of his generosity, Augustus gifted King Phraates IV a slave girl, Musa. Before we turn our attention to this shape-changing gift, a word on how this diplomatic arrangement between Rome and Parthia was portrayed by the Western power. In Rome, the public relations machine went into overdrive. It was declared as Augustus' greatest victory and the legitimation of his imperial rule. Their poets eulogised the start of the Golden Age which they said was "heralded" by Augustus. This was rather significant, because henceforth Parthia and later the Sasanian Empire were the only other superpower beside Rome, and were deemed as such.

During Augustus' reign, it is believed that at least five Parthian legations visited Rome. It was fairly common-place to parade hostages from among the Arsacid Parthian royals living in Rome; and Roman workshops produced standardised versions of the Parthian that coincided with the cultural preconceptions of the Roman elite. The net effect of these endeavours was the generalised perception of the Parthian – as viewed by the Romans – of having been defeated in battle and a captive, or even a supplicant.

To return to Augustus' rather questionable gift to Parthia. In what must have been seen as an astonishing turn of events, Musa – the slave girl – soon became King Phraates IV's favourite wife; and this wily lady soon contrived to exile Phraates' older offspring, who were sent off to Rome. The path was now clear for Musa's own son by Phraates to be appointed heir. The skulduggery at court now gained momentum. Musa and her son murdered the old king and mother and son contracted an incestuous marriage. The son ascended the throne as Phraates V.

This was a step too far. The Parthian senate, already resentful of the foreigner Musa, demanded that she and her son-husband quit the throne; while the senate petitioned Emperor Augustus to send them one of the sons of the old King Phraates IV who were in exile in Rome. Parthian affairs were indeed, in chaos. The return to Parthia of the westernised prince was not going to be an easy acclimatisation, as Vonones I came to realise. He lasted but a few years on the throne. Artabanus II (Ardavan in Iranian) was the victor in the struggle with the Roman backed Vonones. The new king was an Arsacid on his mother's side, and appears to have put the empire on a sound economic footing.

Nevertheless, around this time, the Arsacid throne was occupied by short-lived kings. Internecine wars and the confused state of Parthian politics has led some historians to conclude that the Parthian era was one of inherent instability. This is true, up to a point. But often, after periods of instability, a prince would appear, the immensely influential nobility would re-assert itself, and the Empire continued to be governed.

The reign of King Valakhsh I (51-78 BC) saw a neo-Iranian renaissance. A fire altar is depicted on the reverse of his coinage, and for the first time, the coinage bore letters of the Pahlavi-Arsacid alphabet. Several Parthian rulers bore the name Valakhsh in the first and second centuries AD, and while we cannot say with

certainty that it was Valkash I who was the monarch responsible for what is the famous memorandum demanding the preservation of the Avesta, it is worth recalling the injunction as written in the later 9th century Pahlavi text, *Dēnkard*:

> Valkash the Arsacid commanded that a memorandum be sent to the provinces (instructing them) to preserve, in the state in which it had come down in (each) province, whatever had survived in purity of the Avesta and (its) Zand, and also every teaching deriving from it which, scattered by the havoc and disruption of Alexander, and by the pillage and looting of the Macedonians, had survived, whether written or in authoritative oral transmission. (DkM, 412.5-11)

During the reign of Valkash III (AD 105-147), the numismatist, David Sellwood, suggests that his drachms/coinage `are so common that they point to a very healthy economy', even as the Roman-Parthian wars continued on their relentless path. The changing of the guard in Rome coincided with Valkash III's reign. The Emperor Trajan reversed the far-sighted policy of Augustus. This meant that the Armenian question, the perennial *casus belli* between the two powers, soon resurfaced. Trajan's proclamation of Armenia as a Roman province and his subsequent encircling of the Black Sea ought to have brought about a Parthian response, which unfortunately was pre-occupied in a civil war. The power vacuum was soon filled.

In 115 AD, the Roman Emperor Trajan cut a swathe through the cities of the Parthian Empire including Babylon and Seleucia, as well as capturing the Parthian capital, Ctesiphon. Roman coins now proclaimed `PERSIA CAPTA' – Persia has been conquered. Trajan then processed down to modern Basra at the mouth of the Persian Gulf but now it was Rome's turn to suffer a setback, at the very height of its successes. A series of revolts followed: in Egypt, Cyprus, Palestine, Syria, Northern Mesopotamia, the Jews of Cyrenaica, and eventually, the entire Semitic world rose up against Roman advances. Parthia now seized its opportunity, arguably demonstrating that it was capable of setting aside internal difficulties and domestic disputes to capitalise on its adversary's setbacks. Parthia ignited partisan wars, which was followed by the rebellion of Armenia. The Roman Emperor Trajan, who had made and unmade kings on the throne of Iran, was compelled to withdraw. Rome's victories had turned to defeat. Even so, the

Roman capture of its capital, Ctesiphon, was a crucial turning point in Parthian history, which led to the revival of Iranian national sentiment.

The reign of kings who followed continued to be marked by yet more Roman-Parthian wars. Civil wars between Parthian royal brothers were often fermented by Rome, and this great power rivalry endured for decades. The final years of Parthian over-lordship of Iran and its empire, was sign-posted in, by now, recognisable fashion. The enmity between the two royal brothers, Valkash VI and Artabanus led to the latter taking refuge in Rome, under Emperor Caracalla. When Artabanus left Rome, he regrouped his forces and attacked Macrinus who had been elected emperor following Caracalla's assassination. Artabanus IV was the last Parthian King. He was defeated by Ardashir, founder of the Sasanian dynasty.

The Arsacid Parthian dynasty was immensely long-lived. Certainly, it was bedevilled by internecine rivalries. On the face of it, its governing structure was that of a seemingly loose central power, and it was constantly at war with its rival for world power. All this might make it seem far-fetched for us to assert that the Parthians could in fact, have left a lasting legacy on Iran. Indeed, this dynasty is almost never given the weight it deserves. The short-comings of Arsacid Parthian rule have been highlighted; its many salient features are seldom discussed. Equally, very little attention has been paid to the Zoroastrian revival in Iran during this era.

Let us investigate the Parthian legacy.

The Parthian Dynasty

PART 2

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE PARTHIAN DYNASTY

Parthian Iran gets a bad press as a poorly governed, loosely knit political structure that had lost sight of the administrative genius of the Achaemenid era. But is this judgement justified?

Arsaces I, founder of the dynasty, was *primus inter pares* of the clan leaders of the Parni, which granted him kingship. His coronation in 247 BC in Asaak confirmed his status. The Roman historian Justin, compared Arsaces with Cyrus, and explained his role in establishing his dynasty:

> …When Seleucus was thereupon called back to Asia because of further unrest, he [Arsaces] was given a free hand to reorganize the Parthian empire…So through his both well founded and well organized kingdom, Arsaces became no less memorable among the Parthians than Cyrus was among the Persians…and when he died at an advanced age, the Parthians honoured his memory by thenceforth calling all their kings Arsaces.

Thus we learn of Arsaces' unique political and military prowess, and an awareness of his humble origins, while in keeping with tradition, the memory of the founder of the empire was adopted as the official throne-name.

The king was the first among equals. We learn from Strabo that the earliest authority of other Parni clan chiefs was best illustrated by the right of the head of the Suren clan to crown the king, and the `council' to `appoint' the king. The feudal system, based on the seven great families of which the Arsacids themselves were one – was a survival of the Achaemenid tradition referring to the seven *Amesha Spentas* in Zoroastrian theology – and this system endured and remained immensely powerful throughout the Parthian era. These nobles possessed vast landed properties, in fact, some gained hereditary ownership of provinces.

The honour of crowning the monarch fell to the head of the Suren clan, reinforcing his seniority among the nobility. Indeed, we recall that it was the Suren (as the head of the clan was referred to), who defeated the Roman Crassus at the decisive Battle of Carrhae in 53 BC. Despite the immense power of the nobility, through the dynasty's long rule, the nobility demonstrated their intolerance of any pretenders to the throne. *Lésé majesté* was not to be tolerated.

We hear from Strabo that the `council' `appointed' the king; and the council itself was composed of `relatives' of the king, i.e. noblemen close to him, as well as `wise men' and magi. While the king had the right to appoint his successor, it was with confirmation from the nobility.

A few words on the Arsacid Parthian nobility. As the historian Parvaneh Pourshariati reminds us, the very fact that the Parthians `remained the greatest unconquered foes of the imperialistic Romans through most of their rule', helps explain the dynasts' own self-perception, as the `feudal nobility' that had helped to underpin the Arsacid dynasty's decentralised government. The dynastic families' own power base established itself over time, so that the Karins were associated with Media, the Surens with Seistan, the Espahbadan with Gorgan and the Mehrans with Rayy. The generational power they accumulated within their own territories was enhanced by ownership of immense tracts of land, manpower and materiel.

This was indeed, a feudal society, with the aristocracy at the top of the pyramid, and the serfs at the bottom. The aristocracy itself was hierarchically structured, and since they contributed the armed cavalry in war, they were invaluable to the king. In fact, the nobility was connected to the Arsacid royal house through layers of political alliances. The very titles by which they were referred to give a clue as to their proximity to the king. So we hear of `The Greatest' by which nomenclature the aristocracy was known. Then there was the group referred to as the `King's Friends'; there was a `First Friend' who could in time come to be an `Honoured Friend', and the ultimate accolade, `First and Most Honoured Friend'. This exalted circle as well as the magi, formed the King's Council.

The first capital of the Parthians was Nisa in the province of Parthia (located today in Turkmenistan). In about 217 BC, the Parthian capital was moved to Hekatompylos, which remained as the main capital of the Parthian empire until 50 BC, while Nisa continued to function as an important city. During that period, Rhagae (Rayy, near Tehran), Ecbatana (in Media), and Ctesiphon near the river Tigris were also selected as capitals. The Parthians had a multi-capital system.

The Roman geographer, Pliny the Elder noted that:

> …the Parni possess in all eighteen kingdoms, such being the divisions of their provinces on the coasts of two seas…the Red Sea on the south and the Caspian Sea on the north…

In addition to the `Kingdoms', there were regions subject to the king alone and administered by satraps. Mesopotamia was one such satrapi. The administration of the multi-cultural empire demanded the use of many languages and scripts, written on clay tablets and parchment to disseminate information. Unfortunately, the very nature of parchment, which is vulnerable to destruction, helps explain the paucity of written documents from the administrative centres and royal archives. Nevertheless, archaeologists have discovered administrative records from Nisa preserved on clay shards. These are records of deliveries of wine from the many estates and vineyards in the region. Equally important, is the mention of not just the office of satrap, but the ostraca of Nisa also mentions *margraves* or wardens of the marshes, and commanders of the fortress. Other documents discovered at Eura-Europos (located in Syria) refer to tax collectors or commanders-in-chief of a fortress, (MP *argbed*).

Modern historians are bemused that an empire ruled by a dynastic monarchy would countenance the existence of regional kingdoms. This, it is argued, suggests a weak central power that allowed regional leaders immense political independence. And the fact that these leaders were sometimes referred to as `client kings' or `semi-independent kingdoms', confuses the picture further. But the nomenclatures are misleading.

What on the face of it appears to be a somewhat weak, disjointed empire, demands a re-think. The empire was made up of multiple kingdoms, each with a

local dynast, its own administration and military resources. Certainly, the Parthian empire was heterogeneous, and the kingdoms remained integral to its political system. Nevertheless, these local leaders recognised the Parthian king as *the* `king of kings'. These local dignitaries would have made their strategic calculation that as diminutive entities they could better withstand external threats under the protective umbrella of the Arsacid Parthian King. There were advantages for these small kingdoms within this system; not just military support, but financial and economic backing in terms of infrastructure and trade. Perhaps most important of all was the recognition of these small kingdoms as members of the king's court. In return, they provided the Parthian army with heavy and light cavalry in times of war.

Commercial considerations too, played a part. Local economies made huge financial gains from the vast trading network that ran through the Persian Gulf, along the Euphrates, around the Caspian Sea, onto the Royal Roads via Merv to Bactria and Samarkand. There was little incentive for them to rock the boat, which helps explain the relationship between the regional kingdoms of the Parthian Empire: it made political, strategic and economic sense. Both, the kings of the Arsacid dynasty and the local dynasts who ran their small kingdoms clearly understood the logic of the system.

Contemporary historians however, continue to take contradictory positions. The historian Professor Potts maintains that the Parthian empire may not have been more `than a very loosely knit agglomeration of provinces in which local rulers exercised considerable autonomy.' On the other hand, the historian Joseph Wiesehöfer, suggests that the Parthian kingdom was indeed an empire, where the kings were `masters of an ethnically, politically and culturally heterogeneous empire and had to cope with a multiplicity of political institutions and cultural and religious traditions.'

Iran's geographical location and its' imperial stature played a part in making it a major intermediary in trade between East and West. Rome needed imports since it was not self-sufficient which, in turn, led to it evolving as a centre of a vast network of countries stretching from Gaul – meaning parts of western Europe –

all the way to Central Asia. As a major transit area, Iran's role was pivotal: middlemen, agents, caravan leaders, guilds of batmen for water carriage and several other specialists catered for trade and commerce that became a vital part of the economy. The Parthians, much like their predecessors the Achaemenians understood the importance of maintaining infrastructure. The roads were maintained to an immensely high standard. The existence of mounted desert police is confirmed by documents found in Dura. The postal service and the relay stations allowed for extremely fast travel: a royal contender for the throne is said to have made a journey of 350 miles in two days.

Equally, the Sino-Parthian accord signed between Mithradates II and the Chinese emperor which led to the exchange of embassies, helped establish direct relations between the two empires. This was instrumental in putting the balance of trade on a sound footing. The Chinese historian Shi-Chih, from the early Han period summed up the Parthian economy as being essentially based on agriculture. Wine was produced on large estates, and Persia's fame as a fruit producer endured into the Parthian era. The vital caravan routes which led to Mesopotamia through Central Asia to China, contributed to the empire's financial prosperity. Sino-Parthian contacts were close. They exchanged embassies on a regular, annual basis. We are told by one Chinese source that at least 10 missions visited Iran most years. Diplomacy was married to trade: China importing lapis lazuli and food stuffs such as onions, cucumbers, pomegranates, pistachios and apricots. And although the immensely prized items, frankincense and myrrh that China bought, originated in Yemen and Ethiopia, the Chinese referred to it as Po-ssu – Persian goods. Iran was famous for the remarkable fruit it produced, the peaches of Samarkand `as large as goose eggs' came to be referred to in China as the `Golden Peaches' owing to their rich colour.

The routes on the Silk Roads along which the caravans moved between China and Iran depended heavily on Parthian traders. They made huge profits which they justified in safeguarding the caravans, right across the Parthian empire from Merv (in Central Asia) to Charax (Basra in southern Iraq). Although the Silk Road has caught the imagination of generations, in the Parthian era the maritime routes

which transported goods from the Persian Gulf, via Bahrain and Oman to the Indian Ocean were equally important.

Both Chinese records, Sima Qian's (145-86 BC) *Shiji*, and Ban Gu's (32-92 AD) *Hanshu*, reveal that the Parthians shared many cultural characteristics with the kingdoms of Sogdiana (Samarkand), Bactria (northern Afghanistan) and Ferghana. Here is one description:

> From Dayuan (Ferghana) heading west towards Anxi (Parthia) the different countries speak different languages, but their customs are largely similar and they can understand each other's speech. The peoples all have deep-set eyes and many men have beards and whiskers. They are good at business and will haggle over a fraction of a cent. Women seem to be held in high respect, and the men make decisions on the advice of their women…

This then, was no insignificant imperial power. The Parthian Empire was instrumental in regenerating Iran after the brief inter-regnum of Alexander's conquest and the rule of the Seleucid dynasty.

It is said that the Parthians were born to the saddle. They were indeed, expert horsemen. What has come to be known as the *Parthian shot* remains a feat of horsemanship that only the most confident of riders could be expected to achieve. Yet, it was the mainstay of the Parthian cavalry. The *shot* was engineered to deceive the enemy and encourage him to break ranks. And this is how it was done:

> They attacked and then seemingly retreated from battle, giving the enemy soldiers a false sense of security which made them pursue their attackers, only for the Parthians to turn backwards on their apparently fleeing horses and shoot their arrows in mid-gallop.

The Parthians put their stamp on governance, commerce and warfare, as well as contributing much to an Iranian revival, a fact that is, more often than not, overlooked. During the reign of that great monarch, Mithradates II, his coinage, both drachms and tetradrachms bore the titles "King of Kings" or "Great King of

Kings", titles that were not used by the Hellenist Seleucids. The Iranian-ness is confirmed by the coinage of the era. On Parthian bronze coins fire altars are occasionally shown in the early first century during the reign of Phraates/Farhad; they appear on bronze coins of Artabanus II (10-38 AD), while the bronze coins of Valkash III have a male figure standing at a fire altar.

Besides reasserting imperial authority, dress too, became a recognisable feature of the times. The distinctive trouser-suit, worn by the king himself and more generally by the populous, as well as the V-necked jacket came to be an identifying feature of the Parthian himself. Indeed, this was the stereotypical Roman depiction of Parthians.

Rome can be said to have been somewhat schizophrenic in its perception of Parthia. The cult of Mithras, where followers worshipped the deity Mithras (believed to be representative of the Zoroastrian *yazata* Mithra denoting contract), appeared in the late first century AD and spread from the Italian Peninsula across the whole of the Roman Empire. The secret cult was tolerated by the emperors because it was in favour of imperial power. Being a Persian god (with a small `g'), the visual reliefs continued the theme of the Persian/Parthian stereotype: Mithras clad in what Romans believed to be typical "Persian chic", the Phrygian cap and pants, which Romans did not wear. Whatever its origins, the cult of Mithras in Rome was firmly based on Roman perceptions. The adoption of Christianity by the Roman Emperor Constantine, and its subsequent spread through the Roman world, gave rise to the depiction of three Persian Magi – the `Three Wise Men' – in Christian portrayal.

While history itself may have a memory lapse of the mighty Parthians, to their contemporaries they were a recognisable and distinctive imperial power.

What of their religious beliefs? There is considerable evidence to suggest that the Arsacids were tolerant of other religions, but were attached to the Zoroastrian faith. Nevertheless, as with much else when discussing this dynasty, their Zoroastrianism is often debated, despite there being evidence to the contrary.

Let us take our lead from archaeology.

The stele of Khvasak from Susa mentions the Arsacid era using Zoroastrian names of the month and day. An example: Year 426, month Spandarmat, Mihr day, which is computed as 14 September 215.

Excavations in eastern Bactria reveal a great sanctuary that included a fire temple. Here archaeologists found a building which contained a stone bench-altar, adorned by two great birds and a large quantity of wood ash. In Cappadocia (modern Turkey), which was a former Achaemenid possession, Persian colonists continued to practice their faith. Strabo, writing in the first century BC notes that `fire-kindlers' possessed many `holy places of the Persian gods' as well as fire temples. The Greek traveller Pausanias, gives us a glimpse of Zoroastrian practice in Lydia:

> Sanctuaries in the Hierocaesarea and Hyppaepa, and in each of the sanctuaries is a chapel, and in the chapel there are ashes on an altar, but the colour of the ashes in not of ordinary ashes. A magus, after entering the chapel and piling dry wood on the altar…chants an invocation of some god in a barbarous and, to a Greek, utter unintelligible tongue…Then without the application of fire the wood must needs kindle, and a bright blaze shoot up from it.

Isidore of Charax, who lived at the turn of the millennium, recorded in his *Parthian Stations II*, Zoroastrian practices in Parthia proper. In the town of Asaak, `where Arsaces was first proclaimed King', an ever-burning fire was maintained. This Fire could have been the dynastic fire of the Arsacids, established by them on the Achaemenid model, and we can surmise, that it was the dynasty's way of claiming to be heirs of the Persian Great Kings; and arguably, emphasizing their Zoroastrian allegiance.

Armenia, long the cockpit of Parthian-Roman rivalry, played a not insignificant role in the story of Zoroastrianism. We saw that Mithradates II placed his protégé on the throne of Armenia, which brought that state within the Parthian fold. When King Valkash in 62 AD, put his younger brother Tiridates on the Armenian throne, this cadet branch of the royal family ruled there into the Sasanian era. In fact, Tiridates, who ruled in Armenia, was known to be a strictly observant

Zoroastrian. He was referred to in Roman sources as a magus. Historians agree that during the latter part of the Parthian period Armenia was a predominantly Zoroastrian land. It was during Sasanian rule that it embraced Christianity. Armenian sources tell us that the Armenians worshipped `Armazd' as `Creator of sky and earth', and `Father of all the gods'.

As interesting for us today, it is from the Parthian era that we have been handed the oldest descriptions of tending sacred fires. The most ancient identified remains of an actual fire temple, on the Kuh-i Khwaja (`hill of the Master') in Seistan in south-eastern Iran, is a legacy of the Parthian era. Furthermore, the sacred fire, Karkoy again in Seistan, was probably established during this era.

There were three Great Fires of Zoroastrianism, mentioned in the hymn to Fire, *Atash Niyash*. They were the Adur Burzen-Mihr (located in Parthia), Adur Farnbag (located in Pars), Adur Gushnasp (located in Media). It is possible that all three of these Great Fires, if not enthroned in the Achaemenid era, must have been installed early in the Parthian period, because by the Sasanian era their origins were said to belong to antiquity. For the Parthians, not surprisingly, it was the Adur Burzen-Mihr that was particularly beloved. Professor Mary Boyce has suggested that it was their `particular fire', and she points out that their devotion to is highlighted in the classic poem `Vis u Ramin' which tells of one of the Parthian kings abdicating to spend his last days in seclusion at the temple.

Foreign observers were then, as now, intrigued by two aspects of Zoroastrian practice: the role of Fire and disposal of the dead. The latter caught the attention of Justin, writing during the Parthian period that `…their funerals usually consist of letting their dead be torn to pieces by birds and dogs, only the naked skeleton is then covered with earth.'

Archaeology and foreign observers' notices appear to confirm the prevalence of Zoroastrianism in Parthian Iran. What then of religious freedom for the conquered?

The Arsacid Parthians showed a leniency towards the several religions within and beyond their borders. Their open-minded attitude towards their subject peoples led in turn, to a penetration of Iranian influences throughout the Middle East, and

arguably, because of the relentless Parthian-Roman wars, the influence of the more tolerant Parthians carried a certain weight which, in turn, enhanced the perception of their Zoroastrian faith.

Continuing the practice of their Achaemenid forebears, the Arsacid Parthians gave generous support to the Jewish communities in their realm. Professor Ghirshman suggests that the Jewish people would have regarded the Arsacids as true defenders of their faith, given the oppression they suffered under the Seleucids as well as the Romans. Professor Joseph Wiesehöfer states categorically that `we know, for a fact that they enjoyed a period of peace and maintained close and positive contacts with the reigning dynasty.' The Jews came to look upon Parthia as the only great power capable of delivering them from the foreign yoke, which in times of extreme intolerance of Roman governors, would lead some among them to seek shelter in Parthian territory. An interesting historical footnote was the event in 20 BC when a small Jewish vassal state was established on the banks of the Euphrates and remained in existence for nearly 20 years. Around the second century AD, an exilarch of Davidic origin represented the Jewish community at the Parthian court and served in a political-administrative capacity. Equally interesting was the great Jewish revolt of the second century AD, which set the Roman Orient ablaze. Parthian assistance to the minority gave rise to the well-known saying:

> When you see a Parthian charger tied up to a tomb-stone in Palestine, the hour of the Messiah will be near.

This is yet another Jewish reference to an Iranian as the deliverer of the Jewish people; the first was of course, that of Cyrus as the `anointed one'.

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest world religions, although its missionary activities were, at best, very limited in scale. Perhaps this is what turned it into an ethnic faith. Historically, it had co-existed peaceably alongside the many faiths it encountered within and beyond Iran. This model was challenged in the later centuries of Parthian rule with the emergence of evangelical faiths: Buddhism along the Indo-Iranian borders, and Christianity in the west. Some among the missionaries sought new converts among Zoroastrians by attacking the tenets of

the faith. While the zeal to gain converts was in its early stages during the late Parthian era, it gained momentum during the Sasanian era and indeed, came to define the career of some Sasanian monarchs. But insofar as the Arsacid Parthian kings were concerned, we can say that they continued the long and honourable tradition of religious tolerance of their subjects many and varied religions.

If one's enemy is able to speak of your qualities, there must be some truth in it. And so we hear from some Roman historians that the Arsacids were loyal to the leading moral precepts of their faith. They treated their captives fairly and with respect. Their word was their bond, even as they remained faithful to treaty obligations. Classical authors including Justin, Strabo and Arrian were somewhat bewildered as to how a dynasty from small beginnings came to be the equal of Rome. Their technical and military advancement was unrivalled in the contemporary world. Besides the Romans, the Chinese emperor sought a military alliance with Parthia in his battle against invading hordes, importing Parthian horses to help shore up his defences.

The Parthian Empire existed from the mid-3rd century BC to 224 AD, yet they remain ignored.

They have been vilified as masters of a weak, inchoate empire. The question of whether Iran was Zoroastrian in the Parthian era continues to be debated. Very seldom do we remember, or give due recognition to the role played by the Parthians in safeguarding the historic myths and legends that originated in eastern Iran. Not surprising really. Parthia proper is located in north-eastern Iran, and the Arsacids would have played a role in preserving tales such as those of the Kayānid dynasty, so beloved by Zoroastrians to this day, not least because they eulogise Kay Vištāspa, Zarathustra's first patron and encapsulate the `heroic legends' that were Zoroastrianised over time. Among the most popular legends that live on to this day, are the stories that recount the heroic deeds of Rostam and his son Sohrab. The great *pahlavan* Rostam was thought to have hailed from the province of Seistan and these legends would have been current in the Parthian era. Equally popular was the love poem *Vis u Ramin*, one of the most famous tales of heroism, love and adventure told or sung at the royal court of the

Arsacids, which endured into the 11th century as a poem in New Persian. These and much else of ancient Iran's mythical and legendary heritage was preserved and passed on to future generations by the Parthians.

It is not too far-fetched to suggest that this eastern Iranian tradition was, in Professor Wieshöfer's words `superimposed, during the Parthian period, on the rest of the local or regional traditions of Iran.' Gradually, the glorious deeds of Arsacid princes and nobles would come to be included in Iran's epics, which tradition would come to be embedded in the culture through the *gōsān* – a minstrel – who Professor Mary Boyce informs us was:

> Privileged at court and popular with the people; present at the graveside and at the feast; eulogist, satirist, story-teller, musician; recorder of past achievements and commentator of his own times.

The misrepresentation of this imperial dynasty has meant that they have been denied their rightful place in Iranian and world history, and as transmitters of a specifically Iranian culture. Professor Antonio Invernizzi points out, that `…an unwarrantedly negative and suspicious attitude towards the Parthians appears strangely widespread among scholars…' Could it be because scholars have relied mainly on Greek and Roman sources to understand this era? And as we have seen, the Greeks of the Seleucid era and the Romans were abiding enemies of Parthia.

A more dispassionate reading of history shows us that the Parthians remained the greatest unconquered foes of the imperialist Romans through most of their rule. They were the equals of the Romans. Some historians were prepared to recognize this. Neilson Debevoise's unequivocal observation that `the most cursory examination of the [classical] literature…[underlined the fact] that Parthia was no second-rate power in the minds of the ancients…Poet and historian, dramatist and technician, all speak of the military and political strength of the Arsacidae. Collections of Latin inscriptions teem with references of Parthia. It was frankly admitted that there were but two great powers in the world: Rome and Parthia.'

It is only fair that we acknowledge that the Arsacid Parthian dynasty had recouped Iran from the Hellenistic inter-regnum and once again established it as a major world power.

The Sasanian Dynasty

PART 1

THE SASANIANIAN DYNASTY: THE APOGEE OF ZOROASTRIAN IRAN

224 AD – 651 AD

The Sasanian dynasty was inaugurated when Papak, the founder, seized power from the local governor in his native Pars, while his younger son Ardashir confronted the last Arsacid Parthian king, Artabanus IV, who he defeated in battle in 224 AD. The overthrow of the Arsacids, who had reasserted Iranian sovereignty previously usurped by Alexander and his generals, would have thrown the country into turmoil. But Ardashir was set on establishing a new Persian Empire and his military prowess and administrative skills were employed unstintingly. He did not shy away from using whatever means were necessary to achieve his ends. Religious propaganda was used ruthlessly. The king and his court set out to convince the population that the House of Sasan were indeed the more devout followers of Zarathustra than the Parthians had ever been.

The highly nationalistic Sasanian monarchs wished to re-establish Iranian glory as they understood it to have been in the days of the great Achaemenid kings, Cyrus and Darius. But we need to put the new dynasty in context. The Arsacid Parthian dynasty, whose power base was centred in Parthia (roughly coterminous with modern Khorasan, in the north-east), was overthrown by the Sasanian dynasty (from the southern province of Pars). The ousting of one Iranian ruling house by another that aspired to don its mantle set the scene for continuing tensions that developed, into what the historian Parvaneh Pourshariati refers to as `a dichotomy between the Sasanians [Parsig] and the Parthian [Pahlav], which forced the Sasanians into a confederate arrangement with the powerful Parthian dynastic families...' The immense wealth, lands and manpower that the Parthian nobility had accrued over the centuries, they lent to the Sasanian monarchs in times of war. This in turn reinforced the key role they came to play within the Sasanian realm. It would not be too far-fetched, therefore, to suggest that the Sasanians felt compelled to include the Parthian dynastic families in the governance and military policies of their empire and that, from its very inception, the Parthian dynasts had a virtual stranglehold on the new dynasty.

Therefore, contrary to our general understanding, the Parthian nobility did not disappear in the Sasanian era. Rather, they were a major force in the working of the empire and indeed, several Sasanian kings were related, through marriage, with Parthian nobility.

This helps us understand that the overthrow of the last Parthian monarch did not automatically make Ardashir, as he set about establishing the Sasanian dynasty, the undisputed king of Iran. The Sasanian king's progress was challenged when the king of Armenia, Chosroes I, himself a member of the Arsacid family, allied himself with Scythians, Romans, and Kushans, in an attempt to halt Ardashir's progress.

However, when Ardashir smashed this coalition in a series of battles, he became master of an empire that stretched from the Euphrates to Merv, Herat, and Seistan. On the western flank, conflict with Rome was unavoidable as he set about consolidating his frontiers. The Persians reoccupied two important fortresses: Nisibis and Carrhae.

Ardashir reigned for almost half a century and established a new Iranian Empire. The army was now a force to be reckoned with. In a novel move, he co-opted his son Shapur in his reign during his lifetime. According to tradition, Ardashir handed over the Crown to his son and retired from active life a few years before his death.

Thus, Shapur ascended the throne, well tutored to take the reins of power as the new dynasty prepared itself for the world stage. Iran was caught between Rome in the West and the Kushans in the East. The Kushan Empire had been formed in the 1st century AD, in what is now northern Afghanistan, southern Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Among Shapur's early interventions was the seizure of Peshawar (in modern Pakistan), which was the winter capital of the Kushan king. He then occupied the Indus valley, pushed north and crossed the Hindu Kush, conquered Bactria (northern Afghanistan), and having crossed the River Oxus, entered Samarkand and Tashkent (i.e. Uzbekistan). Shapur appeared to have made short shrift of the Kushan dynasty which was deposed and Persian suzerainty recognised.

Shapur then turned his attention to the West, intent on dealing with the Roman question. His historic victory near Edessa led to the fall of the Emperor Valerian,

who, along with 70,000 Roman legionnaires was sent into exile in Iran in 260 AD. This event is commemorated on the rock-cut relief at Naqš-i Rustam which shows the Emperor Valerian on his knees, before Iran's monarch. Then, as part of a mopping-up exercise, the Persians over-ran Syria and Cappadocia.

Shapur was among the great kings of the Sasanian dynasty, whose legacy would endure. His challenge, as he set about consolidating the new regime, involved not just military conquests and the consolidation of his frontiers. He also set about remodelling the Parthian institutions he inherited in favour of a more centralised state. Shapur was an intellectual. He commissioned translations of Greek and Indian works on a wide range of subjects ranging from medicine to philosophy. He extended a welcome to the religious preacher, Mani, founder of Manichaeism, a divisive and controversial figure in Iranian affairs. Ultimately, Mani was put to death by a later Sasanian monarch, Bahram I.

We have seen how outstanding monarchs are often followed by somewhat less inspiring or even incompetent rulers. Shapur was followed by fairly inconsequential kings, until his youngest brother, Narseh, came to the throne. Iran's main adversary in the west was Rome, to be more precise, it was the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire that was the theatre of the many wars fought. Narseh's reign began with war against Rome, which took control of Little Armenia, a group of provinces east of the Tigris. This was a severe setback. It was the first time Rome had made such critical advance at Persia's expense. This in turn led to renewed Kushan power, to the extent that Narseh considered it prudent to marry his son and successor, Hormizd II, to a Kushan princess. Hormizd II's untimely death left the throne to a minor, Shapur II.

Shapur II enjoyed a long and immensely successful reign. While the new king was still a minor, the Kushans took advantage of the somewhat confused state of affairs in Iran, and made territorial gains. The tables were turned however, once Shapur came of age. Now his priority was to regain territory, and there was not much the Kushans could do as he annexed their lands and created a new province governed by kings chosen from among Sasanian princes, who now took up residence in Balkh. From here, Sasanian art spread further East, all the way to Chinese Turkestan (roughly modern Xinjiang) and even penetrated China itself.

On the western front, Shapur II was determined to overturn the disgrace of agreements Narseh and Bahram II had felt compelled to conclude with Rome. There now followed a series of protracted engagements. It was almost like being on a see-saw: Rome would make advances, and then the Persians would. It was only when the Emperor Julian fell in battle, that the Roman army withdrew and agreed peace terms, which allowed Shapur II to regain the disputed provinces. Persia and Rome were the two major powers of their day. They fought relentlessly to hold on to their power. The intensity of their contest however, gained an altogether new dimension when the Roman Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity.

When Armenia, which in large measure had absorbed Zoroastrianism from the early Parthian era, converted to Christianity, which in turn brought it closer to the Roman Byzantine world, the ferocity of Perso-Roman wars would be tinged with a religious overlay. It has to be said that a section of the Armenian nobility continued to maintain its old connections with Iran. Armenia was now a country divided: one camp newly converted to Christianity, the other, keen to follow the old ways. In Iran proper, the Christian subjects of the Persian king were seen as a fifth column, and overturning centuries of religious tolerance, the persecution of Christians which began in Shapur II's reign, was a stain on Iran's record. We must acknowledge that with the injection of the religious dimension in global politics, the Zoroastrian priesthood were not idle bystanders, on occasion they were cheerleaders for the persecution of the Christians.

Latent Christian-Zoroastrian tensions in great power relations would have been the leitmotif of the era. When Yazdegerd I, who was married to a Jewish lady, and was seen as being lenient towards the Christians, ascended the throne, he came to be known as `the Christian king' while the Zoroastrian priesthood denigrated him as `the Sinner'. These nicknames themselves give us a flavour of the times. Yazdegerd appeared anxious to repair relations between the religions – perhaps with an understanding that religion had turned political. He convened a council and installed a *catholicos* at Seleucia. Unfortunately, the Christians took advantage of their privileges, and when violent demonstrations against Zoroastrian sanctuaries erupted, Yazdegerd was compelled to change his policy. The king's death led to fierce competition for the throne among his sons.

In the battle among the brothers, Bahram V (best known in Iranian history as `Bahram Gor') was victorious. Bahram had been brought up in a small Arab vassal state, and he received military aid from the Arab prince of Hira, which helped him ascend the throne. While this may have got him where he wanted, the fact that an outside power had managed to successfully intervene in the dynastic affairs of Iran, set a dangerous precedent. Bahram V is among the most famous of the Sasanian kings. He must have been immensely gifted: he was known as a hunter, poet and musician. He was immortalised in legends for his physical prowess, which is how he earned his nickname `Gor'.

To help consolidate his power, Bahram arrived at an understanding with the nobles. Overseas, he managed a successful campaign against the growing power of the Hephthalites (often referred to as the White Huns). This was a power that rose in Central Asia around the $5^{th}/6^{th}$ century AD. Originally based in Bactria, they eventually expanded eastward into Sogdia, and southward through Afghanistan and northern India. Of particular interest to us was their growing confidence which saw them inch nearer and nearer to lands controlled by the Sasanians.

However, Bahram Gor was less successful in his war with Byzantium which in turn, saw the resumption of persecution of the Christians. The Christian issue had to be settled. And so it was, in the reign of Bahram V that the Christian church of Iran was made independent of Byzantium, which brought to an end the perception of Iranian Christians as a fifth column. But Iran's allegiance to its' Zoroastrian roots remained intact.

Bahram Gor was succeeded on the throne by his son Yazdegerd II who has been described as a zealous Zoroastrian. Armenia, which since the early Parthian era had embraced Zoroastrianism, and later converted to Christianity after the new religion was adopted by Rome, now entered the equation. Yazdegerd II is remembered for marching into Armenia in his effort to win back the country from Christianity. In fact, he was rather heavy-handed in this undertaking. He crushed the Armenian insurgents and carried off representatives of the nobility and clergy, none of which would have endeared the Iranians to the Armenians!

We now arrive in the era of king Peroz, who was an unfortunate king. He had to grapple with a famine that gripped town and country. He had no choice but to remit taxes and distribute corn. The country was bedevilled by religious strife.

Hitherto virtually unknown in Iran's long history, we now hear of persecution of Jews, while the Christian church itself was divided between Nestorians and Monophysites. A word on these two Christian beliefs. The Nestorians were considered a Christian heresy which declared that Jesus was two distinct persons: one human and one divine. The Monophysites developed as a reaction against the Nestorians and believed in the `one nature' of Christ, the divine nature.

In addition to his many domestic problems, the wars on the eastern front against the Hephthalites/White Huns brought the country to the brink of financial and political disaster. When Peroz was defeated and taken prisoner, he bought his freedom not just by paying an exorbitant ransom, but felt compelled to leave his son Kavad as hostage. What, in geopolitical terms was a decimation of Iranian power, led to Peroz feeling compelled to appeal to Rome – the old enemy – for help.

Politics and war seldom play out in straight lines. Calculations, that may appear bizarre on the face of it, can occasionally define policy. So it was that the Emperor Nero took the decision to ransom Peroz when he fell into the hands of the Hephthalites, bearing in mind that Iran had long served as a buffer against barbarian invasions on Rome's eastern frontier. But Nero's Machiavellian scheme soon emerged when Rome encouraged the Hephthalites in an attack on Peroz, which in turn, meant that Peroz had no alternative but to mobilize his forces to withstand the onslaught. This eastern war however did ultimately lead to several years of peace, which allowed Peroz to repair his finances. He should have left it at that. Instead, he was determined to lead another attack against the Hephthalites, and against the best advice, he went ahead but was killed in battle in 484. Peroz's strategic error meant that for the next 50 years, the Hephthalites were dominant players in Iranian affairs. Their domains now stretched all the way to Merv and Herat. Iran was compelled to make hefty annual payments, and Hephthalite kings interfered, with impunity, in Iranian domestic affairs.

Let us not forget that Peroz had left his young son Kavad, as hostage in his early war with the Hephthalites. Indeed, the crown prince spent his youth among his captors, and it is highly probable that the Hephthalites had a hand in his gaining the throne. King Kavad had been dealt a poor hand. Certainly, the old cliché, `heavy lies the head that wears the crown', would apply. Iran's economy was in

dire straits after years of famine, Peroz's wars and his final defeat, and the huge financial tributes the country paid to the Hephthalites. Furthermore, imperial policy had to contend with revolts by vassal states, while the Hephthalites posed a real threat on the northern frontier. The powerful nobility pressured the king, even as dissatisfaction grew among the populous. It was in this climate of social unrest that the Iranian masses drifted towards the Mazdakites, a movement started by a certain Mazdak. This was a class struggle. Some historians have even referred to it as an early Marxist movement.

Mazdakite doctrines emphasised universal brotherhood. To achieve this, property was to be held in common, a scheme in which, his detractors pointed out, he included women. Since peasants and artisans comprised the bulk of taxpayers, it is not surprising that they were among Mazdak's main supporters; nor that the priesthood and high nobility who were exempt from taxation, were among Mazdak's deadliest opponents. Indeed, he remains the arch-heretic in Middle Persian Pahlavi literature. Mazdak's teachings had nevertheless convulsed the land, with the seizure of property and the abduction of women that they explicitly encouraged.

Initially, Kavad was well disposed towards the Mazdakites and even introduced a number of new laws to quell the social injustices. The nobility were not pleased with these developments, and promptly deposed the king who was thrown into prison. Kavad escaped and took refuge at the Hephthalite court , which one could argue, was his home from home. The Hephthalites, with their clear understanding of Iranian affairs, gave Kavad an army to return to Iran and unseat his brother Zamasp. So, once again, Kavad sat on his throne, but, as had almost become a pattern in Iranian affairs, he was beholden to the Hephthalites and forced to pay tribute. More significantly, he depended on the Hephthalite soldiers who kept him safe against his enemies at home.

Throughout this upheaval, the Mazdakite movement continued apace. It was only when it resorted to revolution – looting property, abducting women – but most significantly of all, their opposition to the nomination of Kavad's son Khosrow as his successor, that Kavad broke ranks with the revolutionary group. The Zoroastrian clergy, who were never reconciled to the Mazdakite movement and, for that matter, nor had the Iranian Christian clergy, were now vindicated.

Mazdak and his followers were crushed. However, alongside the turbulence, a key religious question, was now resolved. It was in the reign of Kavad, that Nestorianism became the only established form of Christianity in Iran.

Iran had been rocked, some might say, traduced during the reigns of the unfortunate Peroz and his equally ill-fated son, Kavad. But now fortune smiled on Iran and her empire. Khosrow I Anoshirvan, Kavad's son was one of the greatest Iranian kings of all time, the apogee of Zoroastrian Iran. His mother was the sister of Bawi of the Ispahbudhan Parthian nobility, confirming that Parthian Iran, contrary to generalised myth, had remained integral in Sasanian Iran. The King's greatness lived on for generations; in fact, he earned his nickname – Anoshirvan, meaning the Just – because of his famed love of justice. And beyond Iran, his name, like that of Caesar in the history of Rome, came to be a designation of the Sasanian Kings.

Despite the apparent weaknesses that had begun to infiltrate the social milieu, the disintegration of the empire would have been inconceivable during the reign of Khosrow Anoshirvan. Aware of the situation, he set about restoring Sasanian might on two fronts: the social fabric had been weakened internally by the Mazdakite movement, and externally by the exhausting wars against Byzantium. Khosrow's wide-ranging reforms dealt with the most urgent tasks. Thus the new tax system established a fixed tax based on the average of several years' harvest, and individuals were counted for the head tax, in a model that would later serve the Islamic caliphate. Khosrow's army reforms meant that the lesser nobility were given equipment and a salary in return for their army service, thereby securing the direct support of the military class that owed allegiance to the king. A corresponding reduction in the power of the nobility was the other side of this coin. This period saw the rise of the *dehqān*, landlords who were almost local potentates, and who were to evolve into the spine of Iranian society, as the Arabs would later discover. Khosrow divided the empire into four parts, and placed a *sepāhbād*, or general, in command over each one. The enhanced efficiency of the army would shortly reap rewards when put to use against Byzantium.

Khosrow revolutionised the structure of Iran's army. Whereas previously there was just one commander-in-chief, now there were four commanders appointed for the four divisions of the Empire; and military service was made compulsory.

Securing the borders meant that strong fortifications were built in the Derband pass to secure the region from nomadic incursions, while a wall, built near the south-east corner of the Caspian Sea, helped plug the `gap' in the mountain armour of Iran.

Let us reflect on this. The Sasanian kings, as we have seen, were involved in a series of wars on the northern frontier, first against the Hephthalites and later against the Turks. The Great Wall of Gorgan, in northern Iran was built from 420s AD to 530s AD, and was occupied until the 7th century. (The Great Wall of Gorgan is sometimes referred to as `the Red Snake' owing to the red colour of its brick). The Wall stretches for almost 200 km and is lined by 38 forts. It is the longest fort-lined barrier between Central Europe and China, and is longer than Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall put together. The Gorgan Wall and its associated ancient military monuments provide a unique testimony to the engineering skills and military organisation of the Sasanian Empire. They help to explain its geographic extent, from Mesopotamia to the Indian subcontinent, while its border defences contributed to the Empire's prosperity and its longevity. The great Wall of Gorgan is one of the most elaborate defensive barriers ever erected and arguably the most sophisticated of its time (i.e. the 5th and 6th century). It is probable that Khosrow's fortifications in the north were part of the Great Wall of Gorgan.

Khosrow I Anoshirvan, even as he restored his nation's infrastructure, was mindful of Iran's imperial ambitions. Accordingly, the military was put to work. Despite the `perpetual peace' signed with Byzantium, Khosrow invaded Syria, captured Antioch and transplanted its inhabitants near Ctesiphon, and granted freedom of worship to the Christians. Having secured both, his domestic and external borders, Khosrow felt sufficiently strong to refuse to continue his tribute to the Hephthalites, who were no longer capable of enforcing their will on Iran. It is said that Khosrow harboured `a great hatred against the Hepthalites', which might explain his decision, twenty years later, to form an alliance with western Turks and finally smash Hephthalite power.

Iranian affairs had been overhauled. Its impressive military successes were bound to raise eyebrows with the old enemy, Rome, which now formed an anti-Iran coalition aimed at encircling the enemy, although this did not amount to much. Rome's attempts at instigating disturbances in Armenia came to nothing given

Iran's military superiority; and Khosrow's forces did the same to quell disturbances in Mesopotamia.

Khosrow I Anoshirvan was indeed a great king, a military strategist under whose stewardship Iranian civilisation reached new and greater heights in art, science and literature. But, it was the King's compassion and sense of justice that was his greatest legacy. Libraries have been written on Anoshirvan, and what has come to be known as Mirror Literature, written after the Arab conquest of Iran, continued to eulogise this great man. Al-Ghazali, the great Muslim theologian, jurist, thinker and mystic, who lived around the turn of the 11th/12th century, said that no king had left behind so good a name as he, and that Prophet Mohammad was proud to have been born in the reign of Anoshirvan the Just. In his *Counsel for Kings*, Al-Ghazali notes:

> God on High sent the Prophet to transform the Abode of Unbelief into the Abode of Islam through his benediction, and to bring development and prosperity to the world through justice and equitable rule. The king of that epoch was Anoshirvan, who surpassed the kings who had been before him in justice, equity and ability to enforce discipline. ...after the birth of Mohammad, Anoshirvan continued living two years. Our Prophet was proud of his epoch, and said: `I was born in the time of the Just King'. Such was his information about Anoshirvan's justice...It was through justice that Anoshirvan made the world prosperous.

This is a remarkable observation from a source beyond Iran.

My own favourite story about Anoshirvan is:

> A Roman ambassador, sent to Ctesiphon with rich presents, when admiring the noble prospect from the windows of the royal palace, remarked an uneven spot of ground, and asked the reason why it was not rendered uniform. `It is the property of an aged woman', said a Persian noble, `who has objections to sell it, though often requested to do so by our king; and he is more willing to have his prospect spoiled, than to commit violence.' `That irregular spot', replied the Roman, `consecrated as it is by justice, appears more beautiful than all the surrounding scenery.'

Khosrow I's nickname – Anoshirvan – was justly deserved.

Hormizd IV ascended the throne under auspicious circumstances, inheriting an extensive empire from his father, Khosrow Anoshirvan. The new king was an accomplished, intelligent and learned man who sought to continue his father's policy, but almost immediately found himself caught between the ubiquitous power brokers: the nobility and the clergy. To shore up his position, Hormizd sought the support of his Christian subjects which in turn, enraged the Zoroastrian priesthood.

The greatest threat to his throne however, came from the Parthian nobleman, Bahram Chubin. He was the outstanding military figure of his day, and had won a series of victories over the Huns in the north; Turks in the east, but had suffered reverses in operations against Byzantium. Therefore, it is not surprising that King Hormizd was unsuccessful in his attempts to disgrace Bahram Chubin, whose popularity with the troops, combined with the nobility's treachery towards their king, meant that Hormizd was deposed. He was taken prisoner and mutilated, and the throne was then handed to his son, Khosrow II (better known as Khosrow Parviz).

Bahram Chubin did not disappear, rather, he aimed high. He belonged to one of the greatest among Arsacid nobility, the Mehran, and he wanted the throne. The fragility of the Sasanian state under Khosrow II was underscored not only by Bahram Chubin's ability to march on the capital, Ctesiphon, in 590 AD, and declare himself king, an act of *lèse-majesté*, which unquestionably was a step too far even for other Parthian dynastic families to accept. Khosrow Parviz was powerless in the face of this coup, and took refuge with the Byzantine Emperor Maurice, and with the help of foreign troops supplied by his benefactor, Khosrow Parviz defeated Bahram Chubin who was, in turn, assassinated. It was not the easiest way to claim one's inheritance, and once he ascended the throne, it has to be said that Khosrow Parviz's imperial overreach was the last hurrah of the Sasanian dynasty.

But first, debts had to be paid. The new king had only managed to secure his throne with the help of Emperor Maurice, who now exacted his price, meaning that Persia lost practically all of Armenia. When however, Emperor Maurice died, Khosrow used the pretext of avenging the death by setting out to conquer all in his path.

The chronology is interesting: In 610, the Persian army regained Armenia, seized Edessa, marched across Cappadocia, took Caesarea, and reached the Bosphorus near Scutari. The following year, 611, Khosrow's troops captured Antioch, Damascus, finally Jerusalem which they looted for 3 days. Over 50,000 Christians were killed, and relics, including a piece of the True Cross were carried off to Iran. This was an immensely powerful symbol in Christianity. It is believed to be the wood of the Cross on which Jesus Christ was crucified. Later, the cross was broken-up into many shards and distributed across Christendom to be used as relics. So we can only imagine how this particular act would have antagonised the Christian world. Then, in 616, the Persian army captured Gaza and invaded Egypt. They took Old Cairo and Alexandria, marched up the Nile to the borders of Ethiopia. While in Asia Minor, they captured Ankara and besieged Constantinople. This was the high point of Khosrow Parviz's reign. Nemesis would arrive swiftly.

The Perso-Byzantine wars that lasted almost three decades were, in the words of an Armenian historian, the `last great war of antiquity'. It was in fact, a foreign policy adventure that debilitated the Sasanian realm. However, even before this disastrous military adventurism, Khosrow Parviz had deposed Al-Nu`man, the first Arab Lakhmid to adopt Christianity in 602, possibly as a means of taking control of the defence of the desert borders into his own hands. But the days of Iranian suzerainty were drawing to a close. The `day of Dhur Qār', an event which occurred in 611, remains a defining moment in Arab history. The Bedouins of Bakr bin Wail and Shaibān defeated the combined force of other Arabs and the Persian cavalry, pursuing the latter back into the Sawad (approximately modern Iraq). This symbolic event established Iranian vulnerability, and tradition attributes to the Prophet Mohammad the comment that `It is the first time that the Arabs have got the upper hand of the Persians, and it is through me that God has helped them.' The Prophet Mohammad, in a letter to Khosrow Parviz, suggested that Iran embrace Islam. When the king tore up the letter, the Prophet warned: `His kingdom will be torn from him in the same manner.'

Khosrow Parviz's military successes against Byzantium meant that he had virtually matched the military achievements of the Achaemenids. The question arises: how then did the Sasanians, in the late 620s, experience what the great classical Armenian historian Sebeos described as `one of the most astonishing reversals of fortune in the annals of war'? Central to this meteoric conquest and its

catastrophic reversals was the mutiny of general Shahrvaraz who formed an alliance with the Emperor Heraclius. The alliance between the Iranian general and the Byzantine emperor helps explain Persian defeat and loss of authority in the Byzantine, on the eve of the Islamic conquest. Shahrvaraz's duplicity was beyond words.

Let us take a look behind the scene. Shahrvaraz was a member of the Parthian Mehran dynasty. The Shahrvaraz-Heraclius alliance meant that, by 624, the Byzantines had conquered Transcaucasia, Azerbaijan and Media, so that the northern regions of the Sasanian realms were now at Heraclius's mercy. Khosrow Parviz, belatedly sensing the mortal danger to his dominions, now sent for his general, Shahrvaraz; but already, the behind-the-scenes machinations of the military elite of Iran meant that the king found it impossible to regain lost ground. Not only had Shahrvaraz formed an alliance with the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius; Farrokhzad, son of yet another immensely important Parthian dynast, Farrokh Hormoz, was a co-conspirator in the Shahrvaraz-Heraclius alliance against King Khosrow Parviz. Farrokhzad's brother Rostam also rebelled against the Sasanian monarch in Azerbaijan, thereby arguably enabling Heraclius's invasion of the province. The deal struck between the Byzantine Emperor and the Parthian dynasts Shahrvaraz and Farrokh Hormoz, led to the invasion of Azerbaijan, the capture of Median towns and, significantly for the history of Zoroastrianism, the sacking and extinguishing of the Adur Gushnasp, one of the three main fire-temples of antiquity. This helps explain Shahrvaraz's treachery in not saving the Fire-temple.

Khosrow Parviz now saw the need for a bold stroke against Constantinople to bring the war to a close, and negotiated with the Avars, Slavs, Bulgars and others, a joint attack on the capital. Generals Shahrvaraz and Shahin were to fight alongside the newly formed alliance. But Byzantine sea power rendered the allied force ineffectual. Khosrow Parviz, meanwhile, sought scapegoats for the continual humiliation Iran had suffered at the hands of Heraclius. The king's mishandling of state affairs did not go unchecked, however: he was deposed by what has been called the `collective conspiracy' of several immensely powerful Parthian dynastic factions, who then elevated Shirouye –Khosrow Parviz's son by a Roman princess – to the throne in 628 AD. Not surprisingly, the new monarch was a pawn in the hands of the nobles.

The Sasanian dynasty began to unravel swiftly. Shirouye barely occupied the throne, and was succeeded by Ardashir III (628-30): a child on the throne of Iran just when the Arabs were on the march and Shahrvaraz's rebellion was gaining momentum. The general, emboldened by Heraclius to mutiny against the child king, marched on Ctesiphon, seized the capital of the Sasanians, killed the grandees, took over their wealth, and put the seven-year old King Ardashir to death.

Shahrvaraz now ascended the Sasanian throne, marking the first time in the four hundred year history of the dynasty that a non-Sasanian had managed to do so. And so, Shahrvaraz, a member of the Parthian Mehran dynasty, crowned himself king on 27 April 630. The hubristic nobleman had over-played his hand. What was deemed the ultimate act of *lèse-majesté* was strenuously opposed by all. Shahrvaraz occupied the throne for a mere 40 days. He was murdered on 9 June 630.

The Parthian dynasts continued to make and unmake kings and queens in the dying days of the Sasanian era. Enter Purandokht, daughter of Khosrow Parviz, who was now elevated to the throne by Farrokh Hormoz, another powerful Parthian noble. The powerless queen was overthrown by another member of the Parthian Mehran dynasty; which led to the elevation of her sister, Azarmigdukht, another of Khosrow Parviz's daughters.

Farrokh Hormoz now asked for Queen Azarmigdukht's hand in marriage, which she refused. But the Parthian nobleman, not to be outdone, ascended the Sasanian throne regardless. Evidence from coinage minted in Fars and Media suggest that it belonged to Farrokh Hormoz, and confirms that he took the throne name Hormizd V, ruling simultaneously with Azarmigdukht for more than a year. This arrangement could hardly continue indefinitely. With the help of yet another Pathian nobleman, the queen had Farrokh Hormoz killed, which led in turn to further bloodletting, when Farrokh Hormoz's son Rostam killed the Queen to redress his father's death.

With the death of her sister, Purandokht once again ascended the throne, which was to continue until Yazdegerd III, the last Sasanian king, ascended the throne in 633 AD. Shortly after Yazdegerd was crowned, the seminal battle of Qādisiyya brought down the curtain on the Sasanian Empire.

The Army, which had contributed so materially to the greatness of the dynasty, in the end brought about its downfall. Generals treated provinces of which they were governors as their fiefdoms. And no group or individual was capable of opposing the Arab advance.

Various reasons have been advanced for the downfall of the mighty Sasanian edifice in the face of the advancing Arabs. We can blame the exhausting Perso-Byzantine wars, the decline of the Zoroastrian church, and even the theory of the `old age' of the empire, as put forward by Professor Yarshater. The chaos that enveloped the House of Sasan in its final decades as it grappled not just with its external enemies, but equally with the different Parthian dynasts vying for the throne, meant that the Sasanian monarchy, which had ruled over a vast empire, was so debilitated that it was no match for the newly invigorated power of the Arabs.

Sasanian Iran, once a political colossus, was demolished by the Arabs newly galvanised by Islam in the 7th century AD. This historic event altered irrevocably the very fabric of Iran's religious, cultural, social, juridical and economic edifice, while her role in the world would undergo a transformation: from that of a major imperial power to a component element in the new empire of the Islamised Arabs.

The Sasanian Dynasty

PART 2

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE SASANIAN DYNASTY

Iran is not exceptional among ancient societies in having a rich religious tradition. By the Sasanian era, the Zoroastrian church was the epitome of a distinctive Iranian ethos. So inextricably linked was the Zoroastrian religion with Iranian secular power that the 9th century Zoroastrian text, the *Dēnkard*, asserts that `Religion is royalty, and royalty is the religion.' (DkM 47.6) The Sasanian dynasty harnessed Zoroastrianism for political reasons. From its very inception, Ardashir, in his bid to establish a new Persian Empire, married his military prowess and administrative skills to religious propaganda, which was used ruthlessly. And two long-serving and ambitious high priests – Tansar and Kirder – who exercised immense political as well as ecclesiastical power under successive Sasanian monarchs, were largely responsible, with the blessing of the kings, for further elevating the Zoroastrian church.

Indeed, Ardashir, founder of the Sasanian Empire, appropriated for himself the *yazdan xarrah i Ērānšahr* (`the divine Fortune of Iran'). An ancient text relates that the last king of the Parthian dynasty, Artabanus, was chasing the fugitive Ardashir when a `great ram', after pursuing the Sasanian for a time, mounted behind him on the horse. Artabanus's vizier interpreted the incident to mean that `the Royal Fortune has reached Ardashir and it cannot in any way be taken.' Having acquired the `divine Fortune of Iran', Ardashir made the restoration of Zoroastrianism the central pillar of his state. In this nation-building exercise, the king was assisted by the Zoroastrian priesthood.

The Letter of Tansar, attributed to his high priest, Tansar (but possibly written at a later period) has come down to us in Persian translation. It puts forward the central principle upon which imperial order was restored:

> Do not wonder at my zeal and ardour for promoting order in the world, so that the foundation of the laws of the religion (*dīn*) may be made firm. For religion and kingship were born of the one womb, joined together and never to be sundered.

In another passage, Tansar emphasises:

> Our ancestors and their descendants have held to this belief and resolve and have known nothing but goodness and benevolence from kings, and kings nothing but obedience and affection from them.

All of which underscores the linkage between the throne and the populace.

Even more influential than Tansar was the long-lived politician priest, Kirder. This was a man whose remit extended well beyond Iran's borders. Shapur I took him on his Roman campaigns. Kirder comments that in the various foreign lands they passed through – Syria and Cilicia, Cappadocia and Pontus, Armenia, Georgia and Albania, he found sacred fires and priests tending them, arguably fire temples founded in Achaemenid times, now maintained by descendants of former Persian colonials. Shapur I himself had a keen intellect, and was anxious to preserve the lost gems of the faith. Again, we turn to the 9th century text, the *Dēnkard*, which informs us that

> The King of Kings, Shapur son of Ardashir, further collected those writings from the Religion which had been dispersed [that is, theoretically, by Alexander] throughout India, the Byzantine Empire, and other lands, and which treated of medicine, astronomy, movement, time, space, substance, creation, becoming, passing away, change in quality, growth... These he added to the Avesta and commanded that a fair copy of all of them be deposited in the royal treasury; and he examined the possibility of bringing all systems into line with the Mazda-worshipping religion. (DkM 412.17-413.2)

All this while, Kirder's career flourished. Hormizd I elevated him to `mobed of Ohrmazd'; while Bahram I is thought to have been helped on to the throne by the immensely powerful Kirder himself, now acknowledged as `Kirder by whom Bahram's soul is saved'. The underlying political dimensions were underscored by yet another appendage to his name, for Kirder was also named `mobed and judge of the whole empire'. So it comes as no surprise that Iran's high priest made sure, as he put it that :

> ...many people who were unbelievers became believers; and many a one there was who held the doctrine of the *dīvs*, [an evil god, or demon] and through me gave up that doctrine.

Tansar and Kirder had both served their kings well. The Sasanian state came to be inextricably linked to the Zoroastrian church. It was possibly during the reign of King Narseh that Persian as the `sole official language' was introduced throughout Iran. The significance for Zoroastrianism was that all the secondary religious literature, including the commentaries (*zand*), was henceforth in Middle Persian written in Pahlavi script, thereafter the only recognised living language for the religion.

The 70-year reign of Shapur II, further reinforced the position of the Zoroastrian faith among the Iranians. The king was ably assisted in this task by the highly esteemed figure of Adurbad Mahraspand. Referring to the king, the *Dēnkard* recounts that

> The King of Kings, Shapur son of Hormozd, summoned men from all regions to an unprejudiced disputation to examine and investigate all utterances. After the triumph of Adurbad, through his tested utterance, over all those of different groups, schools and sects, he made this declaration: `Now that we have seen the faith as it truly is, we shall not tolerate anyone of false religion, and we shall be exceedingly zealous'. And he did even so. (DkM, 413.2-8)

Adurbad's `triumph' in this quotation refers to his having undergone the ordeal of molten metal to vindicate his interpretation of the Zoroastrian faith.

It was in the reign of Shapur II that Sasanian Zoroastrianism came up against Christianity, which was now effectively the religion of the Roman Empire. Shapur imposed double taxation and tribute on his Christian subjects because they were no longer eligible to serve in his armies, since they shared `the sentiments of Caesar our enemy'. Meanwhile, the Zoroastrians living under what was now Christian rule in Asia Minor suffered likewise. In 322, overturning a long-cherished tradition, Shapur II sanctioned the persecution of Christians, at the behest of the Zoroastrian priests.

Yet, other monarchs, such as Khosrow I Anoshirvan, were distinctly clear-sighted. He is quoted in the *Dēnkard* thus:

> The realm of Iran has gone forward relying on the doctrine of the Mazda-worshipping religion, which is the synthesis of the accumulated knowledge of those who have gone before us, (intended) for the whole world. We have no dispute with those who have other convictions, for we possess so much (truth) in the Avestan language by pure oral tradition, and by written records, by books and memoranda, and also in the common tongue by way of exegesis – in short the whole original wisdom of the Mazda-worshipping religion. (DkM, 413.9-414.6)

The reference to the Avesta in both oral and written transmission was made possible because it was around this time that an unnamed intellect among the Zoroastrian priests invented the `Avestan' alphabet, what Professor Mary Boyce described as `an elegant one of great distinction'. This wonderful invention meant that the priests could record the surviving Avestan texts at the dictation of other Persian priests who, since the time of Tansar, had been appointed guardians of the scriptural canon. The great Sasanian Avesta was compiled in 21 *nasks* or chapters, which were then divided into three groups of seven. The first group contained the Gathas and all the texts associated with them; the second, works of scholastic learning; and the third, treatises of instructions for priests, law-books, and various miscellanea, including the *yashts*, (hymns).

As we would expect with a dynasty that proclaimed its allegiance to Zoroastrianism – which they continually referred to as Mazdaism/Mazda-worshipping religion – would be the continuation of the regal practice, handed down from Achaemenid and Parthian times, of establishing their own regnal fires. Coins minted by Ardashir have a representation of his fire on a pedestal on the reverse, which practice was continued throughout the dynasty. The implicit Zoroastrian reference to the dating of the Sasanian era is a citation in an inscription at Bishapur, which tells us that:

> In the month of Fravardin, in the year 58 [of the era]; in the year 40 of the Ardashir fire; in the year 24 of the Shapur fire, the king of fires… etc. etc.

Thus Ardashir's edict notifies us that he became king, and the king's fire was consecrated in the calendar year 223/24 AD; and his son Shapur's investiture, as well as Shapur's fire was consecrated in 239/40 AD.

Both, father and son were, from the evidence available, Zoroastrians, and were not shy in publicising the fact. Indeed, we can suggest that in disposition, Shapur unabashedly promoted the Zoroastrian religion. Let us listen to his words:

> And because of the fact that the gods have thus made Us their 'own property' and We have gone to so many countries and taken possession of them with the help of the gods, therefore We founded a great number of Vahram fires in each country and carried out good deeds for many Magi. And we enlarged the establishments of the gods.

This is as much a religious as a political statement. Claiming a familial connection to 'the gods'; establishing multiple sacred fires, consecrating many in honour of members of the royal family, as well as taking care of the priests, reinforces Shapur's credentials as a monarch who well understood the central role of Zoroastrianism in Iran.

Zoroastrianism's sacred fires – spoken of by practitioners of the faith as well as foreign observers – would have proliferated the land. At the apex were three great fires, mentioned in the hymn to fire, *Atash Niyash*. The great Adur Burzen-Mihr, located in Parthia and thought of as the Parthian fire, was considered immensely holy. Legend links it to Zarathustra and Vištāspa, his first follower. The Adur Farnbag, located in Pars province was the especial fire of priests, and the Adur Gushnasp located in Media that of warriors. By tradition, Sasanian kings, after their coronation, would make a pilgrimage on foot to the Adur Gushnasp, the `fire of warriors'.

Historically, Zoroastrianism has been inextricably linked with Iran, the received wisdom being that the monarch and the church were the two central pillars of the Sasanian state. Zoroastrianism thus came to be seen as virtually the `state religion' of Sasanian Iran. However, this is something of an overstatement. It is not to question the devotion and deep attachment of the Iranian people to the Zoroastrian faith. However, the king's own attachment to his Zoroastrian faith was not allowed to dictate policy. Rather, that from the perspective of the state, calculations of *realpolitik* would have guided individual Sasanian monarchs in

their relationship to the Zoroastrian church. Although Zoroastrianism appeared to be in contest with the proselytizing Christian church, virtually unknown to Zoroastrianism before the Sasanian era, it still remained tremendously powerful: its theocracy underpinned by the temporal might of the Sasanian state. Indeed, Zoroastrianism and Iran-ism mostly coincided.

But history is seldom as straightforward as we would like it to be; indeed, there is more often than not a contradictory complexity. And so it was in Zoroastrian-Christian relations in the era of the Sasanian and the eastern Roman Empire.

Christianity had secured many converts in the Sasanian realm, but it was not about to replace the older faith, as has sometimes been suggested. Not being an evangelical faith it had to face, perhaps for the first time in its long history, a severe challenge from the new religion. At this early stage, however, the Christian church was itself divided. The Nestorian Christians of the Sasanian Empire had been involved in contentious disputes with the Monophysites following the synod of Beth Lapat (Gundi-Shapur in southern Iran) in 483, and later councils. Certainly, Zoroastrian-Christian relations in the Sasanian era were occasionally fraught. Earlier examples of this included that most influential of Zoroastrian priests, Kirder's boast of persecuting members of minority religions, including, as he tells us: `Jews, Buddhists and Brahmans and Aramaic and Greek-speaking Christians and Baptizers and Manicheans'. Kirder's immensely long stewardship over religious orthodoxy was only overturned by Narseh when, to quote Professor Duchesne-Guillemin, `the temporal and spiritual power was again to be concentrated in the king's hands.'

The ancient Armenian chronicler Elishē, explains that despite Shapur II's attempts, when the king realised that Christianity was making inroads within the Sasanian realm, recognising the futility of his policy, the king instructed:

> ...the magi and chief-magi that no one should molest them [Christians] in any way, but that they should remain undisturbed in their own doctrines without fear, magus and Zandki [heretics] and Jew and Christian, and whatever other many sects there were throughout the Persian Empire.

The Christians particularly fared well under Yazdegerd I, whose epithet, the Sinner, had much to do with his `good reputation with the Christians' as well as with his being `kind to the Jews' as Duchesne-Guillemin argues, having married a

Jewish woman. Hormizd IV married a Christian woman and was thought to have converted to Christianity. Therefore, overall, despite periods of persecution, as the historian Asmussen categorically states: `throughout the whole Sasanid period, Christianity was tolerated [so much that] without reservations on the part of the state, Christians performed services on an equal footing with their Zoroastrian fellow countrymen'.

The Jewish communities, for the most part, also fared well under most Sasanian kings, though some monarchs, of course, were more benign than others. Yazdegerd I continued to be singled out as a friend of the Jewish people, arguably thanks to his Jewish wife. He is believed to have given a belt (*kamar*) – which was a mark of honour – to the exilarch, in just one of his many good deeds towards his favoured community. Equally, Bahram V Gor is thought to have received help from the Jewish community when he was temporarily deposed; Bahram Chubin gained the support of the wealthy Jews; and Khosrow I Anoshirvan had a `rather benevolent policy' towards the community as Professor Parvaneh Pourshariati details.

This leads us to conclude that the king's own devotion to his Zoroastrian faith was not allowed to dictate policy. Sasanian practice in relation to its minority communities was based on political expediency rather than an overarching religious dogmatism.

Zoroastrian Iran – from the Achaemenid era through the Arsacid Parthian and into the Sasanian epoch – was an imperial state, a power with global outreach. It endured for almost a thousand years, with the brief interregnum of Alexander's conquest and the Hellenistic Seleucid era. This longevity could not have been achieved without remarkable statecraft. We get a glimpse of this in a letter Khosrow I Anoshirvan sent to the senior-most officials of the empire, as quoted by the Arab historian Tabarī:

> The thing that most strikes fear into the hearts of people is the feeling of deprivation felt by those who fear the ending of their state of comfortable living, the eruption of civil disorders, and the advent of unpleasant things to the best of individuals, in regard to their own persons, their retainers, their personal wealth, or what is dearest to them. We know of no cause for fear or absence of a thing that brings more crushing ill fortune for the generality

> of people, nor one likely to bring about universal disaster, than the absence of a righteous king.

For the faithful, the Zoroastrian church was underpinned by the crown. An invaluable text, the *Matikan-i Hazar Datestan* (Book of the Thousand Judgements) sheds light not just on Iranian jurisprudence but on society itself. Possibly compiled in the period between Khosrow II Parviz's reign and the Arab conquest, by a certain Farrokhmard i Vahram, it is a collection of legal decisions, legal procedures as well as a compilation of royal decrees. The M*atikan* demonstrates that Sasanian Iran had a distinctive legal code and its jurisprudence would have been influenced by Avestan texts and an underlying Zoroastrian ethos.

This invaluable text deals with issues ranging from religious endowments to family life, marriage and divorce, adultery, agriculture, land disputes, rent collection, slavery, criminal law and much else. Some aspects of Sasanian Iranian society are more readily understandable to us today; while others certainly, would cause us to raise an eyebrow.

We learn that state laws were enacted by the imperial legislature and promulgated by a decree of the king. The Court of the Lord High Chancellor was the Supreme Court in all lay matters, while ecclesiastical courts would be presided over by the *Dasturan*. In secular matters, where a party in a case was represented by a lawyer, the presiding judge or magistrate would need to satisfy himself that he had been appointed in accordance with proper form.

The Zoroastrian church administered the law in certain matters, overseen by the Magavpatan Magavpat, or Grand Master of Divinity. The church courts tried all crimes against the church, as well as those relating to marriage, dowry, divorce, adoption, inheritance and testamentary matters. The ecclesiastical courts were to be governed by the same legal rules of procedure as ordinary courts.

In ancient Iran, one reached adulthood at age fifteen, when the initiation ceremony, referred to as *sedre-pushi/navjote* was performed, at which stage one was legally an adult. This meant that a man was of marriageable age, although a woman could be married before she was fifteen, but not against her will.

Provision was made within the legal code for the governance of family life. At the apex of the family group were the lord and lady of the house – usually the eldest

surviving couple. Although the concept of the extended family prevailed, a son of the family could demand his lawful share in the family and establish a separate home of his own. But such a son could not succeed the `lord of the house' in the family structure. Following the death of the lord of the house, the lady of the house acquired special privileges. She became the guardian of the family if the son of the family remained a minor, and would share equally with him in family inheritance. She was also entitled to inherit what was not otherwise assigned away, or did not belong to others by distinct right.

Whatever came to the family after its sons had received their inheritance, and its daughters had been married and provided with their dowry and inheritance, was to go to the lady of the house and the posthumous child of the lord of the family, if any, although a guardian would be appointed over that child in such cases. She then took over whatever was assigned to the `joint' family. In her capacity as executor, she alone took legal liability for the property, being legally liable in the event of a dispute even if there were other members of the household.

Both parents and children had mutual responsibilities and privileges. The father was bound to use his property first for the needs of his family: he could not give it away as a gift or in charity if that deprived his wife and children of proper maintenance. A father who criminally neglected maintenance and guardianship of his child had to make good the expense to anyone else who fulfilled that duty in his stead. A son of the family had special responsibilities: the eldest son had to manage the property set apart for the benefit of the soul of the deceased, as well as undertaking trusteeship of any fire temple founded by his father. Above all, the son who took over the parental property was bound to undertake guardianship of minor brothers and sisters.

Daughters, too, had claims on their parents and brothers and sisters. In the parental home the daughter had the same right as the son until she married, even when she happened to be an adopted child. A daughter could not be compelled to marry against her will, and she could refuse to marry a husband chosen for her by her father.

What appears rather revolutionary was that either the husband or the wife had the right to seek the dissolution of their marriage for `proper reasons'. As soon as divorce was sought by a wife by an action at law, her claim on the husband's

guardianship over her ceased, unless her request was rejected by the court. If the divorce was granted, she fell back on her own people, until she married again. Property claims and rights were allowed to continue as before, or were resettled as the need arose.

Although it would be an exaggeration to claim that women in Sasanian Iran had the same opportunities that 21st century women have, there is an interesting reference in the *Matikan* to some young ladies discussing a tricky point of law. Whilst thus engaged, they noticed a prominent jurist in the vicinity. The ladies referred their legal dilemma to him, and asked for his opinion. The great man answered a couple of points, but did not have a ready answer to the more knotty problem under discussion; to which, one of the young ladies responded: `Leave that alone, Master and say you do not understand it'.

The M*atikan* makes reference to criminal law in Sasanian Iran. The prisoner could be arraigned only where a case could be brought against him – otherwise he would have to be discharged, and the complainant would have to compensate him for the false accusation. The accused might either confess his guilt, or deny the charge and offer his own explanation of the matter. The voluntary confession of the accused would not be regarded as sufficient ground for convicting him unless it was independently corroborated. When an accused was found guilty of having committed the same crime for the fourth time, he might be given a life sentence. If at the end of the inquiry stage the accused was found entirely innocent of the offence with which he was charged, he was to be honourably discharged.

Slaves, referred to as *anšahrīg* , meaning `foreigner', were to be found in the Sasanian realm. The majority of such persons would have been those captured in war. A slave could be sold, leased or given away. What would appear unacceptable to us today, are references in the *Matikan* that speak of a father's ability to sell his children; as well as a child inheriting the status of a slave as a result of descent. One passage informs us that:

> Only the father is entitled to sell children into slavery. And on his deathbed or in a state of physical helplessness he is entitled to sell (them) only to someone to whom it is permissible to sell in the state of `*atvadāt* (i.e. in a state of utmost destitution)….

Nevertheless, the slave was considered a human being, recognised as different from other possessions which was theoretically, a safeguard against cruel treatment.

Today we find such transactions and inferior status of persons, inhuman. But we must acknowledge that society was structured rather differently in the 5th/6th century. Even so, enslavement at any time in history is an unacceptable aspect of human society.

We have seen that historically, the Iranians were considered skilled administrators, which tradition continued into the Sassanian era. The pyramidical structure of the Sasanian administration was headed by the grand *vizier* or prime minister, whose great office of state meant that he was answerable to the king himself. The ministries, better known as *divans*, included the office of the chancellery; while fiscal responsibility rested with the director of taxes whose department was staffed by accountants, tax-collectors and agents.

The organisation of the Sasanians' vast domains followed a discernible pattern. In the early part of their rule, princes and other dynasts were given control of certain regions or `kingdoms' of the empire. Another territorial unit, referred to as *šahr* (`province'), would have been divided further into `districts' and governed by a satrap. Other than the provincial officials, there were regional officials, while the provincial governor oversaw civil matters.

Significantly, the `office of the Magi' was at `district' level. At the provincial level, the *mōbad* was the spiritual head, whose tasks nevertheless included administration of religious matters. The Sasanians paid special attention to the place of Zoroastrianism in Iran, as we have seen. So it is not surprising that by the late Sasanian period, the office of the `Great Mōbad' was a position above that of the *mōbad* , and at the apex of the Zoroastrian hierarchy was the *mōbadān mōbad.* The religious bureaucracy contained yet another layer, the office of the `protector of the poor and judge', whose job it was to act as the legal representative of the `poor man' at court. What we today might think of as `legal aid'.

We have seen how Khosrow I Anoshirvan revolutionised tax collection. Before him, the harvest was assessed on the standing crop or on the threshing-floor, which meant that the state's annual revenue was unpredictable. Khosrow's

reforms introduced tax rates which allowed the state to receive a more dependable amount. Indeed, among the ancients, Anoshirvan's dictum on taxation was eulogised by Mas'udi, which has an ageless ring:

> The kingdom relies on the army, and the army on money, and the money on the *harāğ* and the *harāğ* [kharaj: land tax] on farming, and farming on justice, and justice on the integrity of officials, and the integrity of officials on the loyalty of the viziers, and at the top of it all is the watchfulness of the king regarding his own inclinations and his capacity to guide these so that he will control them and they will not control him.

However, we need to acknowledge that during Khosrow II Parviz's reign, taxes grew ever more onerous – arguably a result of his ambitious wars against Byzantium – and quite naturally, led to immense dissatisfaction among the populace.

The longevity and high calibre of the Iranian civil service helps us understand that with the conquest of Iran, the Arabs came to rely heavily on Iranian administrators, and indeed, borrowed hugely from the older model of governance.

CONCLUSION:

The stamina and durability of Iranian culture and identity are due largely to Iran's strong sense of national identity – a political concept that, as we have seen, can be traced to the Avesta. It is as if a strong line runs from the distinctive national identity of the `origins of Aryan lands' as quoted in Yasht 15:32, the Ram Yasht; through to, what Heinrich Schaeder refers to as the `world empire' of the Achaemenids, who equally emphasised a robust notion of `national identity', referring to themselves as `Aryan by origin/race' (*Ariya čiça*). The term Ērānšahr, applied to the country in the Parthian era, and the inextricable linkage between Ērānšahr, the royal house of Sasan, and the Zoroastrian religion reached their zenith in the Sasanian period. The vast empire and its myriad peoples were signposted by the king's title: `King of Kings of Iran and Non-Iran'.

Iran's national identity thus has a long pedigree. Understandably, therefore, Iranians' deep attachment to their sense of nation-hood would be difficult to dislodge. We can agree with the academic Shapur Shahbazi that, `the collapse of

the Sasanian Ērānšahr in AD 650 did not end Iranians' national idea'. Even as it was to be overtaken by the new and vigorous Islamic faith, the Zoroastrianism of the Sasanian epoch was the strong religion of a mighty state which retained the devotion of a cross-section of the Iranian peoples. The new political reality failed to eradicate their attachment to the notion of Iran. There is a singular persistence in the historic conception of Iran. The concept of Ērānšahr, bequeathed to the nation two millennia ago, has proved remarkably stubborn.

Iran's exceptional contributions may be seen in government and administration, in warfare, in the refinement of their art and culture. In the course of it's long history Iran was able to adapt and assimilate the great urban civilisation of Mesopotamia; after the Macedonian conquest, it experienced the impact of a powerful Western influence, but although drawing largely on these foreign civilisations the people remained, distinctly, Iranian. In the face of later invasions, Arab, Turk and Mongol, they had the strength not only to survive but also to absorb the foreign elements. The culture and majesty of Iran prevailed.

The Arab Conquest of Iran

PART 1

CONQUEST

The overthrow of the Zoroastrian Sasanians by the Arabs, inspired by the spirit of Surah 9.29 of the Quran which enjoined them to `Fight those who believe not in God and the Last Day and do not forbid what Allah and his Messenger have forbidden...', meant that the conquest of the empire had been undertaken, in the first instance, to expand the realm of Islam. The Arab conquest was thus altogether different in its scope and magnitude than the earlier conquest of Alexander had been.

Through the many centuries of contacts with foreign peoples: Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Egyptians, Hindus, Chinese, Romans, Jews, among others, the essentially Zoroastrian ethos of the nation had been retained. The Arab conquest of Iran was to have an altogether different effect on the land and her peoples.

The edifice of Sasanian Iran, the veritable political colossus of its day, was dismantled by tribes of Arabs who had previously posed no threat to the empire and would have been considered of no consequence by the Great Kings. Yet it fell to them to vanquish the major power of the day. The Arab Ambassadors' Address to Yazdegerd III, the last Sasanian king, set out their stall:

> Whatever thou hast said regarding the former condition of the Arabs is true. Their food was green lizards; they buried their infant daughters alive; nay, some of them feasted on dead carcasses, and drank blood...Such was our state. But God, in His mercy, has sent us, by a holy Prophet, a sacred volume, which teaches us the true faith.

A brief recapitulation of relations between Iran and the Arabs prior to the latter's' conversion to Islam would be useful. Not only were the Arabs neighbours of Iran, but defeats at the hands of successive Sasanian kings meant that they had been dispatched to various parts of the empire and re-settled, a common practice of the time. Thus, we learn that following Shapur II's massacre of rebellious Arabs and their deportation to various parts of Iran, the Bakr b. Wa'il was sent to

Kerman, and the Bani Hanzala to Fars. In due course, such deportees were assimilated into the local population. This, in addition to trade links between the two nations, meant that the Arabs were not unfamiliar with Iran and the Iranians. As Professor Richard Frye noted, the contacts between Arabs and Iranians `were not few and slight but many and profound'. The overthrow of the Persian Empire by the Arabs ought therefore to be seen in its geopolitical perspective which preceded the later development of conversion of the conquered nations to the word of the Prophet Mohammad.

The Arabs were no strangers to Mesopotamia and Egypt centuries before the Prophet's birth. By the Hellenistic period they dominated trade between their peninsula and the eastern Mediterranean. Even before the birth of Christ, Arabs were to be found in the Fertile Crescent, and until they were checked by the imperial power of the Sasanians, they ruled in Hatra, Palmyra and elsewhere. The Ghassanid Arab kingdom was a vassal of the Byzantine Empire; the Lakhmid Arab kingdom had its capital at al-Hira on the Euphrates. They served as effective buffer states for both the Byzantine and Sasanian empires. When Khosrow II Parviz deposed the Lakhmid King Nu'man in 602 and the Ghassanid kingdom was vanquished, the Byzantine and Sasanian empires were in due course to become targets for the Bedouin Arabs.

The urgency of defending their frontier from the gathering Arab forces was belatedly recognised by the Sasanian court. Rostam Farrokhzad – whose father, Hormozd, had been murdered by Queen Azarmidokht for his plot to overthrow the Sasanian dynasty – this Rostam, was named commander of the Iranian army. The scene was set for the first major defeat of the Iranians at the hands of the Arabs. The repercussions of the fateful battle of Qādisiyya, conventionally dated to June 637, continue to reverberate in Iranian history.

By now the throne was occupied by Yazdegerd III, destined to be the last Sasanian monarch. The internal dynamics of court life acted to stifle a rapid response to the growing Arab threat. The king was notified that the Arabs were at Qādisiyya, a small frontier town some 15 miles from Kufa. The youthful new king was not in command of his realm, which was effectively divided and led by Rostam, of the Parthian faction, and Firuzan, of the Parsig faction. The two groups could not agree on a strategy for engaging the Arabs now encamped at Qādisiyya. What

transpired next is interesting. Rostam, the Iranian general sent a message to one of the Arab commanders, suing for peace and reminding the Arabs of the benevolence of the Persians towards them. The Arabs acknowledged this and noted:

> By God, if the Persians were to agree to all of these declarations, the Muslims would indeed never draw near [to their] land except for [purposes] of trade or some necessity.

When Rostam delivered this message to his compatriots, the Iranians rejected it out of hand; yet another Arab messenger engaged in dialogue with Rostam, and offered the Iranians the three `classic' choices – tribute, conversion or war. Rostam once again conferred with his men, but he had no success until a third Arab messenger was sent. The Iranian general, convinced that there was nothing left but to engage in battle, now gave his response to the Arabs:

> We are firmly established in the land, victorious over our enemies, and noble among nations. None of the kings has our power, honour, dominion.

The Arab response:

> If you need our protection, then be our slave, and pay the poll tax out of hand while being humiliated; otherwise it is the sword

This set the seal on the battle that was to follow.

Rostam now joined battle. Estimates of the opposing forces in the battle of Qādisiyya differ – the Arabs are thought to have had between 6,000 and 38,000; the Iranians from 20,000 to over 100,000. Needless to say, the real numbers must have been somewhere in the middle of these ranges, with the Iranians fielding a larger force. The action itself was short and sharp, extending over some three or four days. The early stages of the battle went the Iranians' way. This changed with the arrival of Syrian reinforcements. The casualties on both sides were high, and Rostam's death on the field of battle on the final day caused the Iranian army to take flight. The historic `Kaviani banner' – pregnant with mythic symbolism for Iran, and believed to encapsulate Iranian nationhood from prehistoric times – was captured by the Arabs at Qādisiyya. The *yazdan xvarrah i Ērānšahr* (fortune of Iran) had now all but ebbed away.

The Arab victory at Qādisiyya gave the victors control over the most densely populated part of the Sasanian Empire. Within two months, they had laid siege to the Sasanian capital, Ctesiphon. We learn that, when the victors reached the royal palace in Ctesiphon,

> ...the white palace where some individuals had fortified themselves, an Iranian peeped out and spoke to us [the Arabs]. We answered him and made several offers, saying, `There are three choices available to you'. The Iranians were informed of their choices: `If you espouse our faith, Islam, you will have the same rights and responsibilities as us. If you spurn Islam then you will have to pay us tribute. If you reject that option too, meet us in combat and God will choose between you and us.

A Zoroastrian spokesperson replied:

> We reject the first and last choices. However, we agree to the second one.

Thus the Zoroastrian population in the Sasanian imperial capital, Ctesiphon, opted to pay tribute to their new masters, and the Arabs stationed their troops in the city, some distance from the native inhabitants.

Meanwhile, Yazdegerd, the king, took flight, with the Arabs in hot pursuit, even as the endgame was playing itself out. The king departed his capital together with the treasures and his entourage of thousands. The Arab army therefore walked unchallenged into Ctesiphon, gaining possession of the legendary wealth of the Persian court. Tradition suggests that the 60,000-strong army divided the spoils so that each man received 12,000 dirhams. Underlining this reversal of Zoroastrian fortunes, one of the earliest Iranian converts to Islam, Dastur Dinyar, formerly a Zoroastrian priest, now known as Salman al-Farsi, a confidant of Prophet Mohammad, was named governor of Ctesiphon.

Qādisiyya was a defining moment in Arab-Iranian relations: the balance of power had shifted decisively in favour of the Arab army which gained a foothold on Sasanian territory. So long as Yazdegerd remained alive and in flight, the possibility remained, however remote, of the resurgence of Sasanian authority. He now had no alternative but to make a final effort to save his country. He issued orders that his generals and their divisions should assemble at Nihavand for a final confrontation with the Arabs. The king's summons was heeded; Iranian

forces from around the country were mobilised. The Arabs too, prepared for battle. Both armies were now in position at Nihavand, in the province of Media, for the decisive battle that would bring down the curtain on Sasanian Iran.

The major battle of Nihavand took place in 642, and lasted three days. The Arab general sent an emissary to his Iranian counterpart, suggesting that the latter surrender and thus avoid bloodshed. The Zoroastrian general's reply was dismissive:

> Distaste for your corpses polluting the air is the only thing preventing me from commanding my marksmen to shoot all of you with a salvo of arrows, for you are foul.

The Arab attack followed, and Tabari informs us that `the two armies fought a mighty battle'. Both, the Arab and Iranian generals were killed on the battlefield, but the Arabs emerged victorious. In the words of the historian Baladhuri, it ensured that `the Iranians never again amassed an army of that size'. The `Victory of Victories' brought to an end a mighty imperial power that had confronted both Rome and Byzantium and kept the Hepthalites at bay. It had fallen on the Arabs, once considered insignificant neighbours, to bring down the political colossus of their day. Nihavand was the *coup de grace* of Sasanian Iran. Within some fifteen years of its calamitous surrender, Muslim forces were in command of virtually the entire Iranian plateau.

The Arab victory over the Iranians at Nihavand in 642, marks the dawn of a new epoch in Iranian history. The Arabs advanced virtually unrestrained, with the exception of some semi-independent local governors, known as *marzbans,* offering resistance to the invading army. Within fifteen years of the Battle of Nihavand, with the exception of Makran and Kabul, the Iranian plateau succumbed to the Muslim Arabs. The rapid decline of the Sasanian realm was the consequence of the lack of a co-ordinated resistance to the victors, even though the conquest of all Iran continued into the Umayyad caliphate, conducted on several fronts, and was, in fact, what has been termed an `organised infiltration'.

The historian Tabari outlines the early annexation of the provinces which were left to their own devices without assistance from the Centre. The caliph Umar instructed the victorious army to consolidate the victory over the Persians at Nihavand by marching to Isfahan. The aged Persian governor (*marzban)* who had

fled the city but returned, in 644, surrendered on terms of payment of *kharaj* (land tax) and *jizya* (poll tax/head tax). We will return shortly to discuss these taxes and their role in the reshaping of Iran. In 645, the Arab army marched on Kerman; then moved to Jiruft in the south-east, and from there to Kohistan. Another column marched on Seistan. Other major centres were rapidly over-run by the invading Arab army. Hamadan, ancient Ecbatana, was taken soon after Nihavand, as was the sacred city of Rayy, which fell without much resistance, owing to the conversion to Islam of a local notable. After the fall of Rayy, the governor of Damavand struck an independent deal with the Arabs and agreed to pay 200,000 *dinars* as *jizya* annually, which kept Damavand free of Arab attacks for the next hundred years.

Two columns moved on Azerbaijan, which submitted to the Arabs after the fall of the provincial capital Ardabil, which city acquiesced to the imposition of *jizya.* In the reign of the caliph Uthman (644-56), the province of Gorgan on the Caspian littoral was taken. This caliph attempted an attack on Tabaristan, where its topography of pathless forests and its long line of hereditary princes, the *sipahbad*, courageously defended their province, which did not fall till the mid-8th century. The warriors of the Faith marched on Khuzistan, and the Arabs penetrated as far as Qum. The conquest of Khorasan, in the north-east, was undertaken last.

Several Iranian towns staged uprisings after their capture, which meant that the Arabs were engaged in a continuous series of skirmishes designed to recapture them to consolidate previous gains. Fars, the seat of the great imperial heritage, and heartland of the Sasanian Zoroastrian state, lay on the strategic route. By 644 the governor was killed; while the governor of the provincial capital Istakhr made peace, and by 648 the *amir* of Basra was in possession of Shiraz, Shulistan, Darabjird, Fasa, Istakhr and Firuzabad.

While Yazdegerd III remained alive and in flight from the Arabs, Iranians continued in sporadic fashion to break their terms of surrender. Yazdegerd fled from province to province in search of means with which to repel the Arab tide. His journey took him through Rayy, Isfahan, Istakhr, Kerman, Seistan, Khorasan, when finally in 651/2 he was murdered in Merv.

Some provinces and peoples attempted a return to their Zoroastrian religious beliefs and customs by breaking treaty obligations made earlier with the Arabs. Thus, the district of Shapur rose in revolt; Kazerun rebelled; in both Hamadan and Rayy insurrections against the Arabs ensued; Azerbaijan, Fars and Kerman did likewise. Khorasan and Transoxiana, despite Arab attempts at administrative consolidation of their north-eastern outposts, remained in turmoil.

At this point, it is worth stressing the distinctive patterns of Arab settlement and control in the south and west of the country, around the principal province of Fars; and the north-east, around the major province of Khorasan. In due course, in their own particular ways, both Fars and Khorasan would once again play central roles in the unfolding events, just as they were in the new chapter emerging in the story of the diminishing Zoroastrian community. For the migrants who departed Khorasan in the 10th century were the founding fathers of the Parsi community of India; and the scattered remnants of Zoroastrians in Iran fled to the inhospitable desert city of Yazd in Fars province, and to Kerman. The later developments, however, had their antecedents clearly signposted in the Arab formula of settlement and administration.

The southern and western provinces of the plateau in geographical proximity to the Arab heartland had fewer opportunities for rebellion, especially after the establishment of garrisons at Jibal (Azerbaijan) and Shiraz (Fars). Local governors negotiated peace and the agreement to pay the *jizya,* with the possibility of salvaging some minor privileges for themselves. In the early years such surrender meant that life could continue without major changes, but in time the settlement of Arab tribes and the imposition of *jizya,* with its harsh implications, was to lead to the large-scale conversions from the old religion to Islam as a means of escape from the tax. The Arab settlements in Iran following the conquest is a subject seldom referred to, yet in the first hundred years after the establishment of the Muslim community, various Arab tribes settled in substantial numbers in places like Hamadan, Isfahan, Fars, Qum, Kashan, Rayy, Qazvin, Azerbaijan, Khorasan and Seistan. Among these settlers there were those bent on expanding the frontiers of Islam.

In due course, the Iranians were to show their contempt of the immigrants. In Hamadan the Arabs were referred to as devils; in Seistan they were deemed the

followers of *ahriman*, arguably the most damning of all Zoroastrian epithets. In Qum, the local Iranians would shout insults and throw refuse into Arab dwellings. These responses, however, were in themselves the reactions of the defeated. The flood of Arab migrants to Iran was further consolidated once they began to acquire property and contract marriages between themselves and the local people.

The Arabs, having effected a complete conquest of the Sasanian realm were bequeathed the sophisticated bureaucracy and legal machinery of imperial rule. While the scribes and bureaucrats of the old regime were kept in place to execute matters of state, in due course the new Islamic faith and its distinctive religious ideology had to be accommodated to Iranian conditions. The intricate problem of taxation would come to have great long-term consequences.

In the early period of conquest, subject peoples' payment of tribute in kind was referred to as *kharaj* or *jizya*. Later, *kharaj* developed as a land tax, and *jizya* a tax on movable property and persons. Later still, *jizya* evolved into a poll-tax on non-Muslims, and evolved as the chief distinguishing feature in terms of social recognition between Muslim and non-Muslim, with the imprimatur of the state.

By `people of the book' or *dhimmis*, the Prophet Mohammad is thought to have inferred the Jews, Christians and Sabians. To them the choice given was death, Islam or payment of tribute. Theoretically, other infidels, those not `of the book', had only two choices: Islam or death. The sheer numbers of Zoroastrians conquered by the Arabs with the fall of Iran meant that, once the fighting was over and the bureaucracy had been recouped, local terms were agreed and the Zoroastrians were treated as *dhimmis,* i.e. on payment of *jizya.*

The lowly status of this class of persons was enshrined in a guide:

> ...to the duties of a civil servant, the following instructions for the collection of poll-tax are given...The dhimmi...has to stand while paying and the officer who receives it sits. The dhimmi has to be made to feel that he is an inferior person when he pays...He goes on a fixed day in person to the emir appointed to receive the poll-tax. (The emir) sits on a high throne. The dhimmi appears before him, offering the poll-tax on his open palm. The emir takes it so that his hand is on top and the dhimmi's below. Then the

> emir gives him a blow on the neck, and one who stands before the emir drives him roughly away...The public is admitted to see this show.

By the time of the Umayyad dynasty which ruled from 661-750, Iran had become a part of the caliphate and the number of Iranians who had comprehensively embraced Islam forestalled a return to `Zoroastrian rule'. Relations between Arab Muslims and non-Arab Muslims known as *mawali*, were regulated by religious decrees, but tensions remained. These non-Arab Muslims were treated in the early decades of conquest as second-class citizens, and understandably, had social grievances. When the line of divide between Arab Muslims and non-Arab Muslims was finally eradicated under the Abbasid dynasty –the dynasty that overthrew the Umayyad dynasty – the situation for the Zoroastrians progressively became harsher, because then the test of wills was between the followers of the Prophet and the `infidel'.

To understand the change from one Muslim dynasty – the Umayyads – to the next – the Abbasids – we should say a few words on the strategic province of Khorasan in north-eastern Iran. In the first instance, the Arab conquests of Khorasan and Central Asia were primarily to raise revenue; conversions were therefore a secondary consideration. The local populations suffered severely as a result of this Arab stratagem which helps explain the end of the ancient cultures of Sogdia, Khwarezmia (located today in Uzbekistan) and Bactria. Even by medieval standards, we learn that the conquest of this part of the country was exceptionally brutal.

In due course, the Arabs of the garrison cities of Khorasan contracted marriages with the indigenous peoples and became part of the local population, so that soon Arab armies became Muslim armies. By the time of Abu Muslim, leader of the revolt against the Umayyad dynasty, the Arab tribes had become assimilated into eastern Iran and Central Asia. The nature of Khorasani society as well as that of the Transoxiana region, which were then primarily trading and commercial areas, helped this development. Most importantly, however, the fact that more Arabs had settled in the outlying areas rather than the interior of the plateau, meant that it was in the north-east that the greater mix of peoples occurred.

While Iranians generally continued to resent Arab power, a certain level of inter-dependence was inevitable. The talents of the Iranians were obvious in terms of

administrative and cultural achievements, and the Arabs found these impossible to ignore. The Umayyad dynasty, ruling from Damascus, appointed Iranians to the position of governors and other high offices, not only those who had embraced Islam, but Zoroastrians and other non-Muslims as well. However, despite elevation to high office, the non-Muslims were subject to strict Islamic regulations as applied to the `infidel'. Accordingly, payment of the *jiyza* was mandatory, and support for the government and submission to the Islamic law, *sharia*, were strenuously inculcated. The *dhimmis* thus continued to have no personal rights, only community rights.

Nevertheless, towards the end of the Umayyad caliphate, a high level of assimilation between Arabs and Iranians had been achieved, which process was completed during the Abbasid era. Gradually, Iranian Muslims and Arabs found common ground.

The Arab Conquest of Iran

PART 2

ZOROASTRIANS IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC PERIOD

As the Islamization of Iran progressed, the Zoroastrians were, by definition, beyond the pale. Muslim officials dealt with representatives of the subject communities which, in the case of the Zoroastrians, were the *hudinan peshobay* (leaders of those of the Good Religion). This office had been in existence since Sasanian times. The Zoroastrian populace was however now contemptuously styled `gabr' or `gaur' meaning infidel, by which pejorative term they continued to be referred to.

There was thus a steady stream of converts to Islam, since worldly advancement clearly rested with the new power. Some conversions were voluntary, others were enforced. The towns with Arab garrisons were especially vulnerable and, with great regularity, the urban fire temples were extinguished one by one and given over to mosques. The Zoroastrians would feel compelled to flee.

Perhaps the greatest long-term blow to Zoroastrianism was the substitution of Middle Persian, written in Pahlavi script, by Arabic, during the Umayyad era, in about 700 AD. The entrenchment of Arabic as the holy tongue of Islam became gradually widespread, while Pahlavi became the preserve of the Zoroastrian priesthood. The ancient legends of the *pahlavans* (heroes) of Zoroastrian civilisation were shorn of their original religious connotations in order that Iranian aristocrats, newly converted to Islam, could continue to claim descent from historical figures without jeopardising their new allegiance to Islam. Zoroastrianism's unique link with Iran's heritage was thus, further eroded.

Iranian Muslims evolved a tradition partly designed to make Islam appear of Iranian pedigree, to help enhance national pride. Thus, the historical figure we have previously encountered, Salman al-Farsi (who was in fact Dastur Dinyar), the Persian who abandoned Zoroastrianism and became an early follower of Prophet Mohammad, was elevated by Iranian Muslims and decried by the Zoroastrians. More significant, however, was the legend that Husayn, son of Ali, Prophet Mohammad's grandson by his daughter Fatima and the fourth caliph had married

the Sasanian Khatun Banu. This fictitious princess was thought to be the mother of the historical fourth Shi'a Imam, and the Shi'a or `Party' of Ali, held that the caliphate belonged to him and his descendants but had been wrongfully usurped by the Umayyads. Iranian converts swelled the Shi'ite faction against the Arab nationalism of the Umayyads and, by emphasising the role of Khatun Banu of supposed Sasanian royal blood, further weakened the position of the diminishing Zoroastrians, who were then portrayed as not having the sole monopoly of close links with Iran's ancient heritage.

Once the novelty had worn off, however, adoption of the new faith was often regretted; but even the nominal Muslim is forbidden from recanting his faith, for which offence the penalty is death. Such dilemmas must have been plentiful, for a 9th century Zoroastrian text – *Rivayat of Adurfarnbad and Farnbag-Srosh* – puts a simple question before the *hudinan peshobay*:

> A man who has put off the *kusti* repents within a year. But he cannot tie the *kusti* again for fear of his life...

The *kusti,* of course, is the sacred thread worn around the waist by Zoroastrians, and a badge of identity of the fraternity.

Although many would have been reluctant converts, or adopted Islam to escape payment of the *jizya,* nevertheless, the offspring of even superficial converts grew up within an Islamic milieu, having substituted prayers in Arabic for the ancient *Avesta*, and with successive generations of Iranians the Islamic faith was the only one they had ever known. The gradual erosion of the memory of the Zoroastrian religion and its accompanying ethos for the majority of the Iranian population was thus achieved.

The Iranians of Khorasan province have often been perceived to have been the prime instigators of the successful Abbasid revolt against Umayyad rule, implying Iranian success at the expense of the Arabs. The Khorasani Abu Muslim (who we referred to earlier), had support from the Arabs and the Iranians for a new regime. The Arab tribesmen who had settled in Khorasan and had vested interests in their new homes, were reluctant to give up their newly-acquired sedentary security for continued service in the army. Significantly, the Umayyads had demanded the land-tax from them, thus obliterating the vital distinguishing feature between the Arab and non-Arab population. Therefore, when in 748, Abu

Muslim began openly to recruit men for his army, not along tribal lines as had the Umayyads before him, but rather with reference to residence, the new reality of the Iranized Arabs and the Iranian Muslims was acknowledged. In time, this Abbasid army was seen as representative of Khorasan, spoke the *lugha ahl khorasan*, and the soldiers of this army were designated `sons of the daula', which distinction was handed down to their offspring. It was this Khorasani army based in Iraq which, arguably, had been instrumental in blurring the line of divide between Arab and Iranian. Henceforth, the distinctions were between the Muslims and non-Muslims, and the Zoroastrians were to experience greater levels of misery as a result.

Let us turn to the Zoroastrian population of the day, of which very little is heard, with the exception of the Zoroastrian books written in Pahlavi script in the 9th century. Fars province remained the centre of this diminishing population. Abu Zaid al-Balkhi noted of the Zoroastrians of Fars province that:

> ...the Zoroastrians have preserved the books, the fire temples and the customs of the era of their kings, thanks to an uninterrupted succession; they retain their ancient usages and conform to them in their religion. There is no country where the Zoroastrians are more numerous than in Fars, because that country is the centre of their power, rites and religious books.

The problem of studying the condition of the Zoroastrians with the rapid Islamization of Iran is the scant information available on the subject. Occasional references to them in Arab geographies and books on religion compels one to extrapolate from these in order to piece together a picture of the Zoroastrians and Zoroastrianism in Abbasid times.

Fars and Kerman were the main centres of Zoroastrianism; isolated areas in the Caspian provinces, Azerbaijan, Rayy and Isfahan continued to retain a few fire temples which attracted worshippers. While the early decades of Islam had witnessed Zoroastrian-Muslim conflicts, relations between the two communities gradually became regularised, and the Zoroastrians retreated into their ghettos. Ibn Balkhi records that the earlier revolts in Fars, especially in the Sasanian city of Istakhr, were suppressed, and with the increase in the ranks of the Muslims, the Zoroastrians appear to have become resigned to their position. Shiraz replaced

Istakhr as the provincial capital, probably in the 9th century, and a Zoroastrian population was to be found there as in Kazerun.

Kerman was governed independently under the Abbasids, but was seen in fact as a virtual extension of the province of Fars. It would appear that a greater part of the Kerman population embraced Islam earlier than did the inhabitants of Fars. Nevertheless, the relative isolation of Kerman meant that until the present times it has, together with Fars, remained a centre for Iranian Zoroastrianism.

Media, the ancient centre of Zoroastrianism in western Iran, continued to have small pockets of population in Abbasid times. The plateau with the three main cities of Hamadan, Isfahan and Rayy were referred to as al-Jibal by the Muslims. Few Zoroastrians remained in central Iran, and these mainly in the villages along the desert from Rayy to Qum, Kashan, Nayim and Yazd. Reading through Arab geographies referring to Zoroastrian pockets in Iran reveals the paradoxes of the Zoroastrian condition. Thus, despite their diminishing number and gradual impoverishment, they appear not to have been confined to ghettos, at least not universally. Abu Dulaf met a prosperous Zoroastrian in Rayy in 944, who had apparently accrued his wealth by supplying the army of Khorasan with provisions and was well-known for his generosity.

There were villages in Azerbaijan where Zoroastrians were to be found in the Abbasid period. Indeed, one of the three great fires of Zoroastrianism, the Adur Gushnasp at Shiz, is thought to have continued to function beyond the 10th century. Azerbaijan, like Transoxiana, was a frontier province. While the Sunni sect had reached Gorgan and parts of Tabaristan, the tenacity of Zoroastrianism in the Caspian area and the continuation of religious practices into late Islamic times appear to be confirmed by the presence of two towers with Arabic and Pahlavi inscriptions – in western Gorgan and in eastern Tabaristan: Mil-i Radkan in western Gorgan (1020), and another at Lajim in eastern Tabaristan (1022). They were erected by the ruling family in those mountain areas. In this region, at least, these 11th century inscriptions bear witness to the durability of the Pahlavi script, which had long since been replaced by Arabic on the plateau.

Finally, Seistan, with its famous Karkoy fire temple, survived until the 13th century, owing in all probability to the isolation of this province.

The mid-9th century marked a watershed: the return to a Zoroastrian society was by now irrevocably past. The Umayyads were unenthusiastic missionaries, since the increase in numbers of converts meant a reduction in tax revenue. Under the Abbasid caliphate, however, the numbers of new converts to Islam rose inexorably and led to changes in attitudes. The conversion of all the subjects of the caliphate to Islam was the objective of the increasing band of missionaries.

The 9th century Pahlavi literature is an invaluable source for the history of the Zoroastrian community of the day. It is both `explanatory' and `polemical', and the vehicle through which the Zoroastrian doctrine is set forth, in some instances as a counter to Islamic theology. The religious leaders, *hudinan peshobays*, were at the forefront of this creative work, the first known is Adurfarnbag Farrokhzadan who lived around 813-33 and defended his Zoroastrian faith most commendably at the court of the Caliph Ma'mun. A later *hudinan peshobay*, Manuschchir (881), author of the *Dadestan-i -dinig* meaning `Religious Judgements', dealt with questions by laymen on religious issues. These give us clues as to the position of the community. The issues cited are, for instance, queries as to why the faithful should have to suffer such evil; whether it is a sin to give up the Good Religion for `foreignness and evil religion'; whether one can conduct business with `non-Iranian' infidels. Manuschchir urges the faithful to continue steadfastly to uphold the laws of their faith since Zoroastrianism could only survive if it did not deviate from the original revelation of Zarathustra, and adhered to his message without compromise with the new ideological force which now pervaded Iran.

Indeed, he rebuked his brother Zadspram's innovative compromises with traditional practices, by maintaining that discussions and concurrence of views between:

> ...the priests who are the leaders and heads of the community...members of the assemblies of the different provinces…

All of which, Manuschchir argued, must be the method whereby communal matters are appraised. This serves to illustrate the fact that even in reduced circumstances the Zoroastrians managed to retain communal unity.

The surviving Pahlavi literature deals chiefly with everyday aspects of Zoroastrian life such as the correct performance of rituals, purity laws, the symbolism of the *kusti*, and statements of beliefs.

These are the last extant body of works in Pahlavi without Arabic words, and would have been easily comprehensible to the laity. Indeed, some among them were themselves authors of Pahlavi works, the best known being Mardanfarrokh, whose 9th century text S*hkand-gumanig Vizar* or `Doubt-dispelling Exposition', is a comparative study of Zoroastrianism and other faiths. The essential axiom of the Zoroastrian message, namely, that Ahura Mazda is the Creator of only that which is good, the seven creations, and as such is not the author of afflictions upon his creations is, reasons Mardanfarrokh, a more rational message than that of the Abrahamic faiths where God bears responsibility for good and evil.

The *Dēnkard*, begun by the first *hudinan peshobay* and edited and enlarged by a later descendant, Adurbad-i Emedan, towards the end of the 9th century, while encompassing various matters relating to the `Acts of the Religion' suggested by its title, includes an invaluable summary of the contents of the 19 books of the *Great Avesta* with a detailed analysis of three. As we have seen, the Sasanian *Avesta* contained 21 *nasks* (volumes), and Adurbad informs us that in his time the *Avesta* and its *Zand*, or commentary, had been wholly lost.

The Arab historian Baladhuri informs us of the carnage in the royal Sasanian city of Istakhr, which helps explain the grave loss of invaluable scriptural texts. A copy of the *Great Avesta* would, in all probability, have been held in the royal library. But, by this time the sacred fire in Istakhr had been carried away and the city lay in ruins, compounding the losses never to be recouped.

The 9th century Pahlavi texts are evidence of the life and conditions of the community, and this body of literature produced by priests and laity, particularly in Fars and Kerman, came in time to be the priceless treasures of the Zoroastrians, a testament to their tenacious survival in the face of relentless opposition. Later, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Parsis brought these invaluable texts: *Dēnkard, Dadestan-i dinig, Selections of Zadspram, Rivayat of Emet-i Ashavahistan* and the *Shkand-gumanig Vizar*, to India for safe-keeping.

References to Zoroastrians and their fire temples by 10th and 11th century Muslim geographers, especially in Fars province, testifies to the continuing existence of

the community in southern Iran. A useful compendium of classical references to the location of Zoroastrians deserves mention. Thus, we are told by Yaqut that near the town of Idhaj in Khuzistan, there was a fire temple in the time of the caliph, Harun al-Rashid. A Turkish governor of Qum destroyed an important fire temple in 895 in the town of Farahan. Ibn al-Athir refers to a riot in 979 in Shiraz when local Muslims attacked the Zoroastrians. A last brief period of respite was afforded to the community when the Buyids established control over much of Iran. The Buyid `Abd ad-Dawla, is believed to have had a magus as his secretary and had an Arabic inscription carved on the stones of Persepolis commemorating his visit there in 955. The mōbad of Kazerun in Fars, the erudite Marasfand, was said to have read and interpreted the Pahlavi inscriptions for him.

By the mid-9th century, the Abbasid caliphate, ruling from Baghdad, was at its prime. Antagonism between Arab and Iranian had given way to antagonism between Muslim and non-Muslim. While the Zoroastrians managed to remain a considerable minority and experienced a brief renaissance in compiling, composing and editing Pahlavi literature, persecution of non-Muslims was intensified from the late 9th century. In the 10th century**,** the founders of the Parsi community left their native Khorasan, departing from the little town of Sanjan in the south-west of the province, having abandoned hope of ever finding justice and peace under Muslim rule. They sailed from the Persian Gulf and landed on the west coast of India to open a new chapter in their story. For those Zoroastrians remaining in Iran, little direct information is available of their plight under the Seljuk Turks who swept through Iran from Central Asia in the early 11th century. The greater calamity of the Mongol invasions, described by the historian E.G. Brown, `whereof the sparks flew far and wide, and the hurt was universal', meant that once Ghazan Khan embraced Islam and the Mongol converts swelled the ranks of the Muslims, the dwindling numbers of Zoroastrians were further reduced in size and their sufferings redoubled. Fars had submitted to the Mongols early in their march across the plateau, and thus avoided large-scale slaughter. And it was here, in Fars, around the oasis city of Yazd and in the more remote province of Kerman that the Zoroastrians came together to seek a final refuge for themselves and their sacred fire Adur Khwarrah, and where they would remain to the present time an insignificant and distressed minority.

The Arab Conquest of Iran

PART 3

IRAN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO ISLAMIC CIVILISATION

Iran had been reshaped by the Arab conquest. Yet, as though in keeping with Herodotus' observation that no people are so inclined to accept foreign ideas as the Persians and then reshape them to their own genius, the Iranians retained links, some tenuous, others close, with their Zoroastrian past, while accepting Islam and proceeding to universalise it. In due course Iran became an integral part of the Islamic world and was to break the continuum of perception that `Arab equals Islam', in the process expanding the breadth of Islamic culture to embrace the world. Inverse borrowings gradually emerged, such as the impact of Arabic grammar and vocabulary on the New Persian language, so that attempts at eradicating the Semitic linguistic input would be like removing Latin contributions to the English language. It could not realistically be done. Nevertheless, Iran has uniquely retained its distinctive language, New Persian or Farsi; a fact of which Iranians remain immensely proud.

Despite the Arab victory and the subsequent inducements and compulsions to embrace Islam, the Iranians preserved many beliefs and customs from their pre-Islamic heritage which remains in evidence to the present time, emphasizing the great continuity of practices and the conservatism of the people. Thus, the Nowroz or New Year, which in Zoroastrian Iran was celebrated in devotion to the creation of fire and foreshadowing the *Frasho-kereti* (renovation of the world), continues to be celebrated in Islamic Iran as the New Year. It is said that even the caliphs could not dislodge the Iranians' deep attachment to this major spring festival.

The pre-Islamic customs and usages, as well as the national holidays which were found to be amenable to Islam, were retained. Indeed, the borrowings were legion. Specific Zoroastrian religious practices, such as prayer five times a day, resembled Islamic practice in such identical terms that they are now perceived in the general consciousness to have originated in the Semitic faith. The

complementarity of certain religious practices was to make conversion to Islam easier in the early stages of the conquest.

The distinct Iranian consciousness was aroused most eloquently by a single epic work: the *Shah-nameh* of Ferdowsi (d.c. 1020). The historical references in his magnum opus make it as much a `tone poem' of Zoroastrian Iran as a valediction to a glorious age long past. Ferdowsi himself hailed from the northeast of Iran, in Sogdia (modern Uzbekistan). Its lucrative trade links made it the centre of the Samanid state (874-999), and allowed it to assert a measure of political independence from the Abbasid caliphs. The Samanids encouraged a reworking of the glories of pre-Islamic Iran to help maintain their independence from Baghdad.

It was within this environment that Ferdowsi crafted the *Shah-nameh* (Book of Kings). The epic does not insinuate a return from the Islamic Empire to a Sasanian one; nor does it contain any mention of Zoroastrianism. The perennial Iranian dialectic of the struggle between light and darkness is represented by Iran and Turan: the Iranians and the Turks. The significance of Ferdowsi's epic is that the nationalistic conceptions contained in such poetry continued to be absorbed by the Iranian people and engendered a sense of their own separateness from the Arabs. Indeed, when Twelver Shi'a Islam was officially adopted as the state religion by the Safavid dynasty in the 16th century, the *Shah-nameh* played its part in the separation of the Iranians from the rest of Islam. While contemporary Zoroastrians regard it as a `religious history' of Zoroastrianism, the Iranian people as a whole view the epic as their nation's great literary heritage.

The stamina and durability of Iranian culture and identity are due largely to Iran's strong sense of national identity – which, as we have seen, is a political concept that can be traced to the Avesta, a prized heritage. Understandably, therefore, Iranians' deep attachment to their sense of nationhood would be difficult to dislodge. Admittedly, the Sasanian Empire was not a perfect political system: the calibre of its monarchs varied hugely; the centrifugal nature of the polity, having initially contributed to its success, came eventually to be a major cause of its downfall; societal stratification weakened the social fabric, and the endless wars with Byzantium made perpetual demands on the treasury. These failings in the long history of the dynasty must be acknowledged.

Equally, there was a laissez-faire component embedded within the nation's theory of governance which extended to other areas. The Sasanians were tolerant of religions other than their own. Zoroastrianism was never a statist religion, even when the kings were extolling its virtues and funding fire temples. Even as it was to be overtaken by the new and vigorous Semitic faith, the Zoroastrianism of the Sasanian epoch was the strong religion of a mighty state which retained the devotion of a cross-section of the Iranian peoples. Thus, the new political reality failed to eradicate the attachment to the notion of Iran. The vigorous new power that overran Sasanian Iran did not succeed in turning it into an `Arab country'.

The usefulness of the Iranian administrative structure served the Arab conquerors well. Professor Richard Frye was prepared to state categorically that `only in Iran did they find the complete blueprint of an imperial establishment...' Much has been written on this subject, but we must be content with referencing just a few instances. The scribes were mainly Iranians, and they soon learned Arabic in order to continue in their profession under the new regime. Iranians came to dominate the bureaucracy, the *kutab*, and were to be found in all branches of government. The Arabs were prepared to concede that Iranians had mastered the art of managing the state; and today, we are familiar with the office of *vizier*, an office unknown to the early Arab administration, taken from an Iranian blueprint and evolved over time, in the process, forging an Arab-Iranian bureaucracy.

Iran's substantive contribution to the `new high culture' would continue to enrich Islamic sciences and the arts for generations to come. Again, just a few examples must suffice. Iran was a major contributor to what came to known as Islamic mathematics, and indeed, some of the most renowned scholars were Iranians. It would be impossible to list all the scientists of Iranian origin who contributed to Islamic sciences which enhanced world learning. A good example is the great mathematician, Muhammad b. Musa al-Khwarazmi (d. 850), whose book *al-Jabr*, gave its name to what we now call algebra. He also lent his name to algorism, the decimal system of computation. Although most of us think of Umar Khaiyam (d. 1122) as a poet, he in fact, reformed the old Persian solar calendar which had continued in use in Iran beside the Muslim lunar calendar. This new calendar, called the Jalili, was more accurate than the Gregorian calendar. Avicenna's magnum opus, *Qanun* or *Canon*, came in time, to have a major impact on medicine in medieval Europe. Among the greats was Abu Raihan al-Biruni (d.

1048), from Khwarazm, considered one of the greatest scientists in world history. He wrote on geography, geology, mathematics, astronomy and history.

Iranian contributions were wide-ranging. Subjects including irrigation, mineralogy, botany, zoology, general science, remain impressive. But arguably, of even greater significance was the huge contribution of the Iranian peoples to the culture of Islam, to the extent that scholars such as Professor Frye, suggest that `one might be entitled to designate the Islam which came into being in the 10th and 11th centuries as Iranian Islam using the Arabic language'. But this was, undoubtedly, in the Islamic mould. Zoroastrian Iranians would have mastered Arabic before they were converted to Islam, and they would go on to make great and immensely impressive intellectual contributions to Islamic and world learning.

The essence of the Iranian civilisation survived the advent of Islam. In many respects, Iranian civilisation helped shape its Islamic successor. Any objective observer of Iran will discern a singular persistence in the historic conception of Iran. Both in the glory days of empire and as it stands today, Iran remains a recognisable nation-state harking back to a past from which it continues to draw in order to shape its present, and to carry it forward into the future. The concept of Ē*rānšahr*, bequeathed to the nation two millennia ago, has proved remarkably tenacious. Iran has travelled a long road from Zarathustra to Mohammad, but it has retained something irreducible along the way: it has absorbed a foreign ideology while transforming it to fit its own contours. Iran today embodies, in different ways, both its Zoroastrian and Islamic inheritances.

Zoroastrians in post-Conquest Iran

PART 1

ZOROASTRIANS UNDER THE SAFAVID DYNASTY AND AFGHAN INCURSIONS

Iran's inexorable move into the Islamic orbit would have huge and immensely complex repercussions on the fast-diminishing Zoroastrian fraternity. But before Iran settled down, once and for all, as a Muslim nation – albeit with borrowings from its ancient traditions – there were still some calamitous events that had to be endured. What has been called the `Persian intermezzo' of the 9th and 10th centuries, `between the Arabs and Turks' was the prelude to greater troubles that were to follow. Early in the 11th century the Seljuk Turks entered Khorasan from Central Asia and overran the plateau, wiping out every local dynasty *en route*. During their rule (1037-1157) little is heard of the condition of the Zoroastrians, but many may have died during the wars of conquest, with many others compelled to embrace Islam.

An even greater misfortune was the Mongol onslaught that drew the curtain on both the Abbasid and Seljuk caliphates. The new invaders from Central Asia were indiscriminate in their slaughter: Muslims, Zoroastrians, Jews and Christians were to suffer in the catastrophe. The devastation wrought on the already-diminishing Zoroastrian community was immense. It is suggested by Professor Mary Boyce, that the last great collection of their religious texts, including, as she notes: `every copy of the Sasanian Avesta', was destroyed at this time. The remaining fire-temples – those that had been left standing during the earlier Arab and Turkish invasions, would have suffered the same fate. With the adoption of Islam by Ghazan Khan (1295-1304), the newly galvanised zeal of Mongol converts once more decimated Zoroastrian numbers. And yet, a core of steadfast Zoroastrians hung on resolutely to the faith and culture of their fathers, and took refuge in the oasis cities of the southern province of Fars and neighbouring Kerman, in, what has been described by Boyce as `protective obscurity', where they remained until the early decades of the 20th century.

It was to prevent further desecrations of religious institutions that a group of high priests followed the *Dastur dasturan*, the successor to the head of the established church dating back to the Sasanian era. They took refuge, with the Fire, composed

of the Adar Farnbag, one of the three great regnal fires of ancient Iran, and the Anahid fire, the ancient sacred fire of Istakhr, the `family' fire of the Sasanian dynasty. This was relocated to Sharifabad no later than the 11th century. The loyal support of the Zoroastrian villagers of Turkabad, in Yazd province, played a vital part in the endeavour. Henceforth, the two small villages of Sharifabad and Turkabad, at a safe distance from the provincial authorities in Yazd city, evolved in time into the ecclesiastical centres of Zoroastrianism in Iran.

The support of the Zoroastrians for their priests and what, the Frenchman, Jean Chardin, observed were the `generous presents' to the sacred fire, would have been of great significance. It enabled the clerics to buy their community's security from the provincial governors and ensured survival down the centuries. When the *Dastur dasturan* moved to the provincial capital of Yazd, the French traveller Gaspard Drouville, writing in the early 19th century, could comment that

> ...pilgrimage to Yazd is a strict obligation, and none among them can dispense with making it at least once in his life. They then bring presents to the high priest.

Before we return to the precarious survival of the Iranian Zoroastrians in this often hostile Muslim environment, we need to consider the major historical events that were shaping Iran. The Safavid dynasty that governed Iran from 1501 to 1721, declared Shi'a Islam the state religion of Iran. This was an Islamic revival in opposition to the anarchy and exploitative domination of Iran by foreign powers – not just the Turks and Mongols, but also the conquest of Iran by the legendary Timur (Tamerlane).

The Safavid monarchy reached the zenith of its political power under the visionary Shah Abbas. Twelver Shi'ism was proclaimed the state religion of Iran. The 16th century was thus a major turning point in Iranian history: Zoroastrian Iran was officially dead with the proclamation of Shi'a Islam as the state religion. There was no room for non-Shi'as in this scheme of things. Shah Abbas I's decrees encouraged conversion to Shi'a Islam: the relatives of a Jewish or Christian convert to Islam lost all claim to his property. In 1656, Shah Abbas II gave extensive powers to his *wazirs* to forcibly convert Jews, and Shah Hussain (1688-1726) decreed the forcible conversion of Zoroastrians.

But even before the enforced conversion of Zoroastrians, in the reign of Shah Sulaiman in 1669, religious persecution further intensified, as the intolerant Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, who oversaw religious matters, set out systematically to emasculate the minorities. The persecution of the Zoroastrians was intensified and was particularly reprehensible. The infamous decree for the forcible conversion of the Zoroastrians to Islam has reverberations to the present day. A tale long held to be a source of the massacres of those Zoroastrians unwilling to bend to the shah's might relates to the story of a beautiful young Zoroastrian girl who was abducted by the shah's scouts, who took the damsel for their master's pleasure. The king became besotted with the young beauty, who, for her part, refused to succumb to the royal personage. Consequently, she was locked up in an oast house, the shah having convinced himself that a few days of quiet reflection would help her see sense. The young girl used her solitary confinement to plan her escape. The news reached the shah while he was at breakfast. He plunged his hand into a plate of honey and then into a bowl of sesame seeds and he `swore' that as many seeds as clung to the honey were the number of Zoroastrians he wanted killed. The decree went out, and the killings got underway. A few Zoroastrians survived having trekked to Yazd, where they were given sanctuary by their kinsmen. I was told this story by a Zoroastrian gentleman who claimed ancestry from the small group who escaped from Isfahan and sought refuge in Yazd.

In 1699, the archbishop of Ancyra witnessed the suffering of the Zoroastrians as the decree was enforced. The Zoroastrian quarter of Isfahan in Hasanabad was the worst affected. Their temple was destroyed and replaced by a mosque and a school. The only saving grace was that the Zoroastrian priests had managed to save the sacred fire and had already escaped with it to the relative safety of Kerman.

Zoroastrian sufferings were verbal and physical. The widespread usage of the term *gabr,* designating an infidel, came to be synonymous with the Zoroastrians; while the even more wounding epithet *atash-parast* (`fire-worshipper'), was not merely inaccurate, but a dangerous reference suggesting that these so-called pagan peoples' lives were of little value. Not content to confine social antagonisms to Muslim-Zoroastrian relations, incitement of the Armenian Christians to denigrate Zoroastrians as *moxrapasht* (`worshipping ash') – as

referenced by Professor James Russell – points to a robust policy of divide-and-rule and a callous disregard for the wellbeing of the Zoroastrians by the Safavid establishment. Conversion of fire-temples into mosques, and the violation and often outright destruction of *dakhmas*, was part of a predictable pattern. Thus, near the town of Nowdaran, the remains of a Sasanian-era fire temple was remodelled in the Safavid era for Muslim worship, while the citadel of Bam, in Kerman province, where once a Sasanian ā*takhshgāh* and *ātashkadeh* (both meaning `house of fire') had stood, was subsequently turned into a Safavid *chahār fasl* (`open four-cornered building') built with a watchtower.

The Islamization of Iran had overturned the Zoroastrian community: their numbers were decimated; their temples were torn down, some turned into mosques; their *dakhmas* were desecrated, and their religious culture was vilified. The group of Zoroastrians who had emigrated to India in the 10th century, where they came to be known as the Parsis had, by the 15th century attained a modest prosperity. Having been granted religious freedom they began to turn their attentions to the correct maintenance of religious traditions in their adopted land. The Parsis of India turned for religious guidance to the *mōbads* of Iran. From 1478-1768, they exchanged a series of treatises on religious questions – known as the R*ivayats* – which helps us piece together the conditions of both the communities, in India and Iran, in the Middle Ages.

We learn from this corpus of letters of the harsh reality of lives for the Iranian Zoroastrian community. In 1510, the Zoroastrian population of Turkabad and Shairfabad was 400, perhaps a reference to the heads of households and the leading men of the community. In 1511, the *Rivayat* contained the signatures of leading laymen, presumably descendants of the small landowners and farmers who had the courage in the first place to receive the *Dastur dasturan* and the sacred fires. The letter accompanying the *Rivayat* of Kamdin Shapur, dated 1558, was signed by 28 priests from Turkabad and Sharifabad. However, we do not hear of a high priest in Turkabad after 1681, and during the next century the *Dastur dasturan* moved to the city of Yazd, which is where European travellers down to the late 18th century note that the office-holder resided.

We do not know the precise details that led to his move, but it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the Muslim authorities would have wanted to keep a close

eye on the leader of the Zoroastrian community, and that the provincial town was an ideal location. This explains how Yazd came to be, what Mary Boyce referred to as the `stronghold' of Iranian Zoroastrians in the Muslim era. The priests went along to serve the community, the *Atash Bahram*, and assist the *Dastur dasturan*. A distinct Zoroastrian quarter grew up around the Mahalle-ye dasturan (the priestly quarter), beside the older quarter inhabited by the laity.

The existence of a Zoroastrian community in the city of Yazd is attested in a letter dated 1511, signed by 21 laymen. The absence of a single priestly signature suggests that this community of some 500 households looked for their ecclesiastical needs to Turkabad and Sharifabad. But once the *Dastur dasturan* himself moved to Yazd, almost all the priests of the area appear to have taken up permanent residence in the city. The *dasturs* assumed leadership of their people, both in Iran and India, since the edifice of their state had been dissolved.

While very few records survived of the Zoroastrians during the Arab colonisation of Iran, the Safavid Shah Abbas's capital at Isfahan was a magnet for European ambassadors, merchants and even Christian missionaries, some of whom wrote of the Zoroastrian community nearby. We learn from the Portuguese traveller, Pietro della Valle, that in 1608 Shah Abbas had `a very great number of Gaurs' (as the Zoroastrians were contemptuously referred to) brought from Yazd and Kerman to work as labourers in and around his capital. There were some 150,000 Zoroastrian families in Isfahan at the time of Shah Abbas.

Don Garcia de Silva y Figueroa was the Spanish ambassador at the court of Shah Abbas. He observed the Zoroastrian quarter in Isfahan, the capital, contained some 3000 houses. The men were still primarily labourers, although a small number of artisans and a handful of merchants too, could be counted among their number. The ambassador remarked on the poverty of the Zoroastrians. What struck him particularly were their clothes which he writes resembled a colour like `cement made of brick-dust', which suggests that the Spaniard was unaware of the injunction that forbade the Zoroastrians from wearing dyed cloth.

The Frenchman, Father Raphael du Mans, who travelled to Isfahan and lived there until his death in 1696, on enquiring about the Zoroastrian religion, was informed about their holy book. The Zoroastrians asserted that it was older than the Old Testament and was said to contain prophesies. Father du Mans then writes:

> As naturally everybody wants to know the future, Shah Abbas...did his utmost to acquire the book, but none was found, nothing remaining among these Guebres but old traditions, for the most part, fables.

As often in historical narrative, the trick is in the telling. This very event is recorded by the *Dastur dasturan* in a letter to the Parsis sent in 1635. Thus, when the imaginary book of Abraham failed to materialise, Shah Abbas put to death the *Dastur dasturan* and several other Zoroastrians, and had the religious works removed by force, and as the *Rivayat* informs us: `and they were persecuted because still more books were demanded though they had none to give'.

In 1654, another Frenchman, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier made a difficult detour to Kerman during his travels in Iran. There were now some 10,000 Zoroastrians there permitted to `live in quiet' by the Shah. They were somewhat better off than their kinsmen in Isfahan. The commemoration of a fire-temple built in Kerman in 1644 by an individual Zoroastrian wealthy enough to bear the associated costs suggests that small pockets of relatively affluent religious individuals were to be found in this more remote south-eastern corner of Iran in the 17th century. However, in keeping with their reputation for secrecy, the Kermanis did not allow Tavernier entry into their temple. They justified their reticence by relating their experience when a Muslim governor had forced his way into the sacred precinct where,

> ...he, it seems, expected some extraordinary brightness; but when he saw no more than what he might have seen in a kitchen or chamber fire, fell a-swearing and spitting upon it as if he had been mad.

Understandably therefore, by the 17th century the Iranian community had taken to concealing each sacred fire in a small concealed windowless room within its mud-brick temple, with a `cupboard-like door', to which the presiding priests alone had access. In an anteroom, on an empty pillar-altar, the embers from the sacred fire itself would be placed for private prayers and community festivals. The laity thus deprived themselves of actual sight of their sacred fire. The preservation of their religious icons could best be achieved by camouflaging them: Islamic Iran's Zoroastrian temples were, in a very real sense, the least ostentatious places imaginable.

One feature of the Zoroastrian community that was observed by several of the travellers was the position of their womenfolk. This was in such stark contrast to that of the Muslims and Hindus in Iran and India respectively, that the Europeans appear to have felt a compulsion to comment on it. Andre Daulier-Deslandes observed that `Guebrabad' [the Zoroastrian quarter] in Isfahan was a `beautiful village', where the men wore clothes of fine brown wool and the women `go out with their faces unveiled'. Indeed, he remarked that `their women, far from avoiding us as other Persian women did, were very pleased to see and talk with us'. The independent-minded Zoroastrian woman is not a modern phenomenon!

But there was no escaping the deteriorating political climate. Yet another French traveller, Jean de Thevenot, who wrote between 1665 and 1667, informs us that the Zoroastrians were the most `extremely hated of all men'. This observation may reflect the growing bigotry of the Muslim mullahs which culminated in the forced conversions of 1696. The poverty and suffering of the Zoroastrians would have been real enough. It aroused the pity of the French missionary, Father Sanson, who had arrived in Persia in 1683. He wrote:

> They groan under a cruel Slavery: They are forbid the Liberal Arts, and exercise only the Drudgery of Labourers, Gardeners and Porters. They are always put upon the vilest, and most painful Works...The modern Persians...treat 'em worse than they do the Jews; they accuse 'em of worshipping the Sun and Fire.

The *dasturs* of Iran well understood the precarious condition of the community. Among their priorities was the need to safeguard their valuable manuscripts, which they tenaciously did until the Parsis took some of the valuable texts, as we have seen – *Dēnkard, Dadestan-i dinig, Selections of Zadspram, Rivayat of Emet-i Ashavahistan* and the *Shkand-gumanig Vizar* – to India for safekeeping in the 18th and 19th centuries.

In the closing decades of Safavid Iran, Cornelis le Bruyn arrived in Isfahan in 1703, and was unable to learn much about the Zoroastrians, since most had been forcibly converted to Islam under Shah Hussain in 1699. As though Safavid rule had not been bad enough, that of the Afghans and Qajars was yet to come.

Despite its power, the Safavid dynasty suffered from innate weaknesses, and by the 17th century the army had ceased to be an efficient military machine. In the

18th century Iran fell into anarchy, and the new competitors for political power were the Afghans, Afshars, Zands and later the Qajars. Nadir, an Afshar chief, had deposed the last of the Safavids and crowned himself shah of Iran. Nadir's successor, Karim Khan, was the leader of a coalition of Zand tribal groups in western Iran, whose regime lasted from 1750 to 1796. In turn, it gave way to the Qajars who established a dynasty that would last until 1924.

During the Afghan campaign in Iran, Kerman, in the south-east, bore the brunt. The Zoroastrian district – Gabr Mahleh – was located outside the city wall. In 1721, Mahmud's marauding horsemen embarked on a sortie through the district. The Zoroastrians, predominantly farmers, had only their spades and pitchforks with which to defend themselves. Not surprisingly, Gabr Mahleh's population was virtually wiped out. A few of the terror-stricken survivors fled to the city to ask for help, only to be pursued by Afghan horsemen. It was too late to shut the gates of the district and fill the protective moat. In no time, Kerman city, too, was overtaken by Mahmud's forces. A Kermani Zoroastrian who had observed the massacre, and the inadequacy of the Safavid monarch in defending the minorities, converted to the Sunni sect of Islam and joined the Afghans. He came to lead the force that toppled the weak Safavid Shah Hussain. This man, now known as Nasrullah Khan, remains a controversial figure, and debate continues to this day as to whether the Kermani Zoroastrians sided with the Afghans because one of their own had risen in its ranks.

While one Zoroastrian made the decision to join the winning side, yet another, Dastur Jamasp, a resident of Gabr Mahleh, lost his entire family, save a young son, in the massacre. The Afghan's intent – to march on to Yazd, Shiraz and the capital Isfahan – compelled the Dastur to make a hasty decision. Taking his surviving son and a volunteer, he travelled to Yazd to warn the Zoroastrians of that district of the imminent invasion. The three gentlemen from Kerman covered a distance of over 300 kilometres, mainly on foot through the desert, in roughly a week. The gatekeepers of the city of Yazd were informed of the tragic occupation of Kerman. The city of Yazd's fortification was strengthened against Mahmud's invasion. Dastur Jamasp and his companions then took shelter in a Zoroastrian hamlet. While recovering from his travels in Yazd, he was informed that a Parsi had travelled from India to seek guidance on doctrinal matters from *mōbads* in the mother country. In recognition of his services in saving the Zoroastrians of Yazd,

the Kermani Dastur was chosen to travel to India to arbitrate in the Parsis' theological dilemmas. He reached the shores of India and proceeded to Surat, where he came to be known as Dastur `Velayati', the senior priest from the old country. A descendant of Dastur Jamasp proudly recounted his ancestor's accomplishments to me, stressing the ties between the communities in Iran and India.

If the Zoroastrians had, in fact, calculated that they would be better off under an Afghan yoke, they were soon disabused of the notion, since Mahmud returned back to Kandahar after having treated the Kermanis `with great brutality'. But the Kermanis were better prepared for Mahmud when he returned a second time. We learn from the Polish Jesuit priest, Father Krusinski's history of the Afghan campaign, that the `Upper Town' was able to hold out until 1725, while the `Lower Town' was reported to have made:

> ...no Resistance, being delivered to Maghmud by the Town Guebres or gaurs that delivered it to him in his first Expedition.

It is a reflection of the depth of Zoroastrian suffering under the Safavids that, despite Mahmud's `great brutality', they appear to have assisted him. Kerman was not alone. The village of Gaz, nine miles from Isfahan, succumbed to the Afghans after a Zoroastrian maker of *qanats* (underground water channels) was ordered to tunnel under the walls. During his second attack on Yazd, Mahmud is said to have made a `secret arrangement' for the Zoroastrians to rebel at the time of his assault, although this failed.

The question remains: why did the Zoroastrians align themselves to the foreign Muslim invader? The Kermani Zoroastrians were said to have `looked upon the invaders as liberators rather than enemies.' One possible reason is that Nasrullah Khan, one of Mahmud's ablest generals, although a convert to Islam, continued to be looked upon as a Zoroastrian. His reputation for tolerance and humanity, and his presence in the Afghan army, might have gained the confidence of his former co-religionists. In personal correspondence with Mōbad Rostam Shazadi, I learnt that there were some 12,000 Zoroastrians who `fought under the command of Nasrollah Khan-e Gabr' (Nasrullah the gabr/Zoroastrian).

The several theories of the Afghan campaign, Kerman's strategic position, and the role of the Kermani Zoroastrians especially, continue to be debated. Professor

Jamsheed Choksi details a little known report, provided in letters to and from Armenian representatives of the Dutch East India Company, by a Dutchman, Bartholomeus Lispen, in charge of the office in Kerman between 1720-1722. Zoroastrians were among the workmen employed to build city fortifications by the governor of Kerman in October 1719. In early November 1719, the Afghan commander reached Kerman, and took two prominent Zoroastrian men hostage to ensure that other members of the minority community would provide food and lodging for the invaders. When Mahmud Khan Ghilzai reached Kerman, he imposed a tax of 10,000 tomans on the local population, including 3,000 silver coins from those Zoroastrians who had converted to Shi'a Islam and 2,000 from those who had not changed their religious allegiance. This led to some 500 Zoroastrian men joining the Afghan forces attacking Kerman, which led to their killing several Iranian Muslims in a garden called the Baq-e Nasr. Zoroastrian accommodation of the Afghans proved futile: the Afghans burned much of Kerman city, which included Gabr Mahleh, before retreating. Needless to say, the Zoroastrians would pay the price for siding with the enemy, especially such an inconstant one as the Afghans turned out to be. The Shi'a populations of Isfahan, Yazd and Kerman extracted their vengeance on the Zoroastrians of those towns once the Afghans had departed. The reign of later rulers – such as Nadir Shah who offered them `the alternative of death or conversion', or the Qajar Aqa Muhammad Khan in the 18$^{th}$ century, who `put to the sword' Zoroastrians of Kerman, served to emphasize the Zoroastrian community's immense suffering at the hands of the Shi'a Safavids that propelled them to engage in the high-risk strategy of siding with foreign invaders.

Nadir Shah, an Afshar chief deposed the last of the Safavids in 1736, and proclaimed himself shah of Iran. His policy had systematically excluded religion from the political sphere and was immensely significant for Iran, since it caused a definitive break with the Safavid era. There were estimated to be some 150,000 Zoroastrian families in Iran during Nadir Shah Afshar's reign. The next important ruler of the interregnum, was one of Nadir's captains – Karim Khan Zand – who reigned from 1750 to 1796. He was thought never to have performed his prayers and to have regarded the ulama and the religious students as parasites. During his just and kindly rule, there were thought to be some 10,000 Zoroastrian families at his capital, Shiraz.

Zoroastrians in post-Conquest Iran

PART 2

ZOROASTRIANS UNDER QAJAR RULE AND THE ROLE OF THE AMELIORATION SOCIETY

The Qajar dynasty

The Qajar dynasty was to oversee Iran's affairs from 1796 to 1924. Thereafter, the short-lived Pahlavi dynasty took over. There was a weakness at the centre throughout the Qajar reign, even as the religious establishment gathered a momentum towards independence that, by the Pahlavi era, would result in the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Well before that, during the 19th century, European conquests and the parceling of the land into Russian and British economic zones of influence had so polarised society that the constitutional revolution of 1905 was virtually inevitable.

Aqa Muhammad Khan, the founder of the Qajar dynasty, confirmed his state's adherence to the Twelver Shi'a faith as the national religion. As we have seen, the Shi'a establishment had set about denouncing Zoroastrianism and thereby the Zoroastrians, simply and systematically. Two tools – taxation and physical segregation – were expertly deployed to legitimise the untouchability of these people. So thoroughgoing was its success that the Zoroastrians laboured under it well into the early part of the 20th century; and the threat of its redeployment, as and when that suited the whims of a local despotic governor or mullah, was never far away. Thus, the two powerful weapons – *jizya* (poll tax) and the derogatory status of *najes* (`polluted') –were used against the hapless community through the centuries, and the Qajar era was among the more bleak that had to be endured by the minority.

The denigration of the Zoroastrians as polluted or *najes* was based on the theological rationale of their pollution being imparted to the Muslims, which automatically implied their designation to the lowest status among all non-Muslim peoples. The Muslim legal text, the *Ibadat*, states that all vessels used for drinking or eating must be kept pure for the Muslim's use. Such vessels are made impure by the touch of a pagan, and Zoroastrians were deemed pagans and untouchables, retaining that entrenched status down to the 20th century. The

more remote areas of Iran where the Zoroastrian community had settled – particularly Yazd, but also Kerman – became well-known for the strict observance of the code that enshrined *najes.* Thus, a Muslim would not eat from a dish that had been touched by a Zoroastrian, nor permit his garment to be touched by the *gabr* – which meant that Zoroastrians were prohibited from using most community facilities, such as barber shops, bath houses, water fountains and tea houses.

In order that the Zoroastrians were readily distinguishable from the rest of society, they were required to wear distinctive brownish-yellow garments, a folded rather than a twisted turban, and tight knickers instead of baggy trousers. They were also forbidden to wear white stockings, eye glasses or rings. Their houses had to reflect their inferior status, too. Thus, the elevation of a Zoroastrian home must never exceed the height of the outstretched hand of a Muslim at prayer. In any case, it was essential that any approaching person could clearly discern that it was the home of a pagan, and it was therefore mandatory to splash white paint around the doors.

Zoroastrians were prohibited from engaging in most occupations – especially those that involved physical contact with Muslims, such as trade. The few intrepid individuals who did would have been expressly prohibited from setting up shop in the bazaar in Yazd and Kerman, and under no circumstances could they deal in linens. (Linen was an important item of trade, and arguably too lucrative to permit competition). Water was deemed to be a potent conductor of pollution, and led to several bizarre injunctions on the Zoroastrians, who were, for example, prohibited from going out in the rain, since the `wetness' would carry and spread pollution.

The first-hand account in Ardashir Bonshahi's memoirs draw a vivid pen-picture of the living conditions of a Yazdi Zoroastrian. Ardashir was born in 1911 in Allahabad, in the province of Yazd. He came from a poor family who did not own the land they tilled. He was educated till the third grade, and informs us of the five disciplines emphasized at the school run by the Amelioration Society: nails were to be well cut; respect for one's elders; respect for one's parents and an emphasis on telling the truth. Every day at school, the students were to recite

aloud the *kusti-bastan, sarosh baj* and passages from the Avesta; the basic *kusti* prayers.

As we have seen, most public contacts between Zoroastrian and Muslim were prescribed by rigid codes. Ardashir relates how on one occasion he took his donkey to market with goods saddled onto the beast. As a Zoroastrian, he walked barefoot alongside the animal. Upon reaching the bazaar, he noticed the Muslim stall-holders had sprayed the floor with water. Ardashir, the *bacche gabr* (child of an infidel), would not be permitted to walk across the bazaar precinct. His donkey was led through it, and Ardashir retrieved his animal at the other end of the market place on a dry patch of land. This was in keeping with the Shi'ite dictum that anything wet is easily polluted, and physical contact of a Zoroastrian on wet ground would pollute the ground, since the Zoroastrian was deemed *najes.*

Oddly enough, the Zoroastrian is esteemed in Iran for his honesty. Ardashir relates how certain tribes, such as the Bakhtiari, would leave their sheep for sale with a Zoroastrian and return the following year to collect their money. On one such occasion, a tribesman who had left some sheep for sale with a Zoroastrian did not return to the village for two years. The Zoroastrian decided to sell the Bakhtiari's sheep and gave the proceeds for a *gahambar* in honour of the tribesman, setting aside a piece of land for the *gahambar* to be held annually in the Bakhtiari's name. The tribesman returned in the third year to claim his money. The Zoroastrian then explained how the money had been used, and took him to witness the *gahambar* in his name. He told the Bakhtiari that once he saw the ceremony, he could decide on what he wanted to do next. If he disapproved, the Zoroastrian would return the money from the sale of the sheep to him. The Bakhtiari tribesman observed the *gahambar* ceremony, partook of the *chasni* of fruits and nuts, and instructed the Zoroastrian to continue with the annual prayers in his name.

I was told a similar story by a Zoroastrian lady who spoke of the trust local Kurdish tribesmen felt for her father-in-law, a highly respected Zoroastrian in the area. Prior to the annual migration between Hamadan and Tehran with their flock, Kurdish tribesmen would leave their money for safe-keeping with the Zoroastrian, rather than entrust it to a bank. The Kurds would say, quite simply that: `You are a Zoroastrian, we can trust you with our money'.

Ironically therefore, Zoroastrians were seen as essentially trustworthy, despite their lowly status in society.

Even so, these anecdotes were the exception to the rule. The catalogue of civil disabilities endured by the Zoroastrians were extensive. Murder, robbery and physical abuse on a regular basis had become the norm. What seriously harmed the community, serving to deplete its numbers further, was the kidnapping and conversion of young boys and girls. Yet another reason for the high attrition rate of Zoroastrians was the institutionalisation of the inheritance laws. Thus, if one member within a Zoroastrian family converted to Islam, the very act of conversion to the dominant faith implied that the convert claimed the inheritance rights to the property of their Zoroastrian kin. The systematic means employed through the centuries to deplete Zoroastrians' numbers, take control of their property, and continue to place the most stringent limits on their employment opportunities through extra-legal means couched in theological terms, helps explain the impoverished conditions under which Iran's Zoroastrians were compelled to live.

Indeed, to remain a Zoroastrian was a singularly undesirable position in society. Those who clung to their historical roots with tenacity might be thought of as being stubborn in the extreme. But the resistance to Muslim overtures was, in the final analysis, dependent on every individual Zoroastrian, owing to the sustained level of persecution, and the authority's watchful eye on their movements which precluded any organised resistance at community level.

There is little written or oral evidence to suggest that the Zoroastrians sought redress from the authorities at community level. But there is one event that remains alive in the communal memory. In 1880, the *mujtahids* – Muslim religious scholars – demanded that Zoroastrians wear a special patch on their shirts so that they could be even more clearly identified. This was a restriction too far. It provoked the Zoroastrian Bahram, to ask for a three-day reprieve. The Zoroastrians used the time to embroider exquisite patches on their shirts, and they now wore the badge of discrimination with pride, having outwitted their detractors. This tale is recounted often and with pride to this day.

Among the few tools available to the Zoroastrians to keep the Muslims at arm's length was what has come to be known as the `Zoroastrian language', Dari. This

language, sometimes referred to as the court language of the Sasanians, had evolved from Middle towards a New Persian stage. Iran's Zoroastrian population are fluent in New Persian (referred to as Farsi). But during the early centuries of Muslim domination, and well into the 19th century, especially in the remote Zoroastrian villages of Yazd, Dari remained a lingua franca within the home and for community discourse. The usefulness of Dari for the Zoroastrian community was self-evident: although it shares a common source with Persian, the two languages are mutually unintelligible. In London, I once met a Jewish Iranian from Yazd who spoke of having known some Zoroastrians in his native village. He took particular pride in the fact that, although he spoke no Dari, he could understand `a few words'.

No matter what barriers the community erected between itself and a hostile world, it had been earmarked for persecution. The relentless erosion of the community had become the norm. Mary Boyce records the last mass forced conversion that occurred in the mid-19th century in the village of Turkabad. While all the able-bodied men-folk were working in the fields one autumn day, a group of Muslims descended on the village and seized them, with threats not just to their person but of `the horrors that would befall their women and children'. Meanwhile, their mothers, wives, sisters and daughters were also being terrorised in their homes. At the end of a day of excruciating violence, `most' of the village had accepted Islam; and since death was the penalty for those who recanted from Islam, Turkabad was turned from Zoroastrian to Muslim in under twenty-four hours. Its fire-temple was destroyed with only the shell of the building left as a reminder of what it once stood for.

The Amelioration Society

The pitiful condition of the Zoroastrians began to filter back to their co-religionists in India. It was brought to the attention of the Parsis when the Iranian Zoroastrian lady Gulestan, married the Parsi, Framji Bhikaji Panday, in Bombay. Gulestan's reminiscences of the suffering of her people in Iran inspired her husband Framji to aid `with body, mind and money' those Zoroastrians who came to Bombay from Iran, and it is said that he earned the title of `father of the Irani Parsis'. Their eldest son, Burjor, started a fund to assist Iranian Zoroastrian refugees; and in 1854 another son, Mehrwan, started a fund that came, in turn, to be referred to

as the Society for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Zoroastrians in Persia (better known as the Amelioration Society). Manekji Limji Hataria was the first and the most outstanding Parsi emissary the Society sent to Iran, in 1854, to assess the condition of the Iranian Zoroastrians and report back to Bombay. But Manekji did much more. He laboured on behalf of Iran's Zoroastrians until his death in 1890.

Manekji notified Bombay of the Zoroastrian population of Iran in 1854:

> Yazd and its surroundings had a total of 6,658
>
> Kerman had 450
>
> Tehran had 50
>
> And there were a few families in Shiraz

Thus, in 1854, Iran's Zoroastrian population stood at a little over 7,158.

Their conditions of misery and poverty must have astonished Manekji, coming as he did from the affluent Indian stronghold of Zoroastrianism in Bombay. His first concern was the renovation of religious buildings, since the great majority of fire-temples had been either destroyed or turned into mosques. He undertook the repair of the Atash Bahram in Yazd; in 1857, the Kerman Atash Bahram was rebuilt, and as the inscription notes, it was

> ...with the help of the charitable gift of those endowed with liberality, the community of the Zoroastrians of India, who are of the race of the ancient Persians of Iran, by the agency and efforts of the *behdin* [a Zoroastrian] of lauded conduct, Manekji, son of the late blessed Limji Hushang Hataria of India, by race a Persian.

Village *adarans* were repaired; *dakhmas* built at Yazd, Kerman, Sharifabad and at Qanat-ghesan. Once the restoration of the religious infrastructure had been taken care of, Manekji was equally keen to introduce a level of structured self-governance in the community based on the Parsi *panchayat* model introduced in India. So, in both Yazd and Kerman, an elected committee of Zoroastrians was established to manage the community's affairs; later such committees were established in most of the villages of Yazd.

Manekji Limji Hataria is immortalised in modern Zoroastrian history as the prime instigator for the removal of the hated *jizya*, or poll-tax, which, as we have seen, all `unbelievers' or non-Muslims were required to pay. Very early on, Hataria understood that payment of the tax was the single most severe restriction placed on the Zoroastrian population of Iran, and had become the main instrument of their oppression. The tax on the community was levied annually, according to imperial orders. The tax collectors would add an amount, arbitrarily arrived at, for their commission, and the subsequent final demand placed upon the poverty-stricken Zoroastrians would often be inflated by as much as 200 per cent. One chilling description of the event reads:

> Upon the annual collection of the tax the scenes presented at the homes of those unable to pay it were terrible to witness. Some, to save themselves from torture, and as the last resource, gave up their religion and embraced the faith of Mohammad, when they were relieved from the payment of the tax. Others, who would not violate their conscience, abandoned their homes to escape the exactions of the tax-gatherer. These determined individuals, even when they escaped, had always to leave their wives and children behind them.

While negotiating for the removal of the *jizya* over a period of 25 years, the managers of the Amelioration Society in Bombay contributed 109,564 rupees in assistance towards payment of the poll-tax for the poorest of the Iranian Zoroastrians.

Understandably, Hataria's main preoccupation was to achieve the complete abolition of the hated tax on the community. This proved no easy task. The negotiations for the removal of the tax burden took a quarter-century – from 1857 to 1882, when, in the autumn of that year, it was finally abolished. This is how it was accomplished. Hataria and the influential Parsi backers of the Amelioration Society in Bombay brought their powers of persuasion to bear on the British who, in turn, were prepared to urge the shah to review the case for the Zoroastrians in his land. Hataria was presented to the Qajar shah under the auspices of the British ambassador in Tehran, Major-General Sir Henry Rawlinson. An immediate reduction was achieved in the amount of tax payable, 100 tomans for a total claim for that year of 920 tomans, payable by Yazd and Kerman. When

the shah visited England in 1873, a deputation of Parsis, led by the first non-white member of Parliament, the Parsi, Dadabhai Naoroji, supported by Sir Henry Rawlinson and the MP E.B. Eastwick, yet again petitioned the Iranian monarch. The Parsis continued to press their case to Tehran, through the good offices of the British government. Finally, on 27 September 1882, the royal decree ordering the immediate abolition of *jizya* was received by the Amelioration Society in Bombay.

This, then, was Manekji Limji Hataria's single greatest achievement. The Amelioration Society in fact, took a holistic approach to the betterment of conditions of Iran's Zoroastrians. From the start, schools began to be established for the education of Zoroastrian children: village schools in Yazd and Kerman, a boarding school in Tehran. A school for 100 girls was started in Yazd, followed by schools in Kerman and Tehran for Zoroastrian girls. The Amelioration Society was equally aware of the dangers of abduction of young Zoroastrian women by Muslims, and set aside an amount of money with which orphan girls of marriageable age were `settled in life'. Accordingly, more than a 100 girls were given in marriage to Zoroastrian men, with the Society bearing the costs of the marriage.

Hataria was instrumental in `opening up' Tehran, the Qajar capital, to Zoroastrians. In 1854 he had noted a mere 50 Zoroastrians in the capital. In addition to building the school, Manekji also built a *dakhma* in Tehran, and established a guest-house or *mehman-khaneh*. The gradual change in attitudes of the Muslims of Tehran towards the Zoroastrians meant that, over time, larger numbers moved from the provinces to the capital city. Manekji Limji Hataria's mission in Iran had been a remarkable achievement by any standard, and his endeavours in Iran coincided with the high-water mark in Parsi-Iranian Zoroastrian relations.

Keikhosrow Shahrokh

Two extraordinary Zoroastrians – Jamshid Jamshidian and Keikhosrow Shahrokh – were instrumental in improving the conditions of Iranian Zoroastrians in the 20th century, capitalising on the glacial changes in the community's living conditions.

The Zoroastrian merchant, Jamshid Jamshidan, a man highly regarded for his honesty, established close contacts with the Qajar court. He obtained the main contract to supply the Qajar army with provisions, a monopoly that led to

financial prosperity. He began his career as a contractor, and went on to become the most prominent banker in Iran. The government would pay for the provisions in instalments, through the collection of taxes. These promissory notes were lodged with Jamshid who became, in effect, the banker to the government of Iran, at a time when the main banks in the country were controlled by the Russians and the British. No mean achievement. In his vast commercial enterprises, Jamshid employed between 150 to 200 Zoroastrians.

One of Jamshid Jamshidian's employees was Keikhosrow Shahrokh, who served as his secretary. He was, arguably, the most outstanding Iranian Zoroastrian of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Here was a man who, as a member of a despised community, himself from humble beginnings, rose to prominence as adviser to the shahs of both the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties, while representing his people in the Majles (Parliament), which seat he held from 1909 until his death in 1940.

Keikhosrow Shahrokh was born in Kerman in 1874. He went to Bombay to study to be a teacher. On his return he was sent to Kerman in 1894 as a teacher employed by the Amelioration Society. Harassment of Zoroastrians had not abated, and the general Muslim hostility towards Zoroastrian education led, in one instance, to a school being destroyed as it was adjacent to the home of an influential Muslim's sister, and supposedly the Zoroastrian youth would look into her home. Qajar Iran lacked a constitution, and authority resided with the *mullahs*, who decreed the particular school should be razed to the ground. However, Shahrokh was tutor to the governor's children at the time, to whom he taught English. He petitioned his employer who granted a reprieve to the school.

It is difficult for us today to grasp the extent of discrimination suffered by the Zoroastrians. I remember conversations with Keikhosrow Shahrokh's daughter, Farhangis. She recalled an incident when her father, in contravention of established custom, decided to ride on horseback to the governor's mansion to teach the governor's children. The Muslims sent a message to the governor that if this Zoroastrian was to continue thus, he would be killed. The governor, however, instructed Shahrokh to continue to ride his horse, and when the *bazaar sayeds* followed him to the governor's mansion, the latter gave instructions that they should be whipped. Thus it was in Kerman that Zoroastrians were first allowed to ride on horseback, and in due course, no longer required to wear Zoroastrian

attire. But this was not a straightforward matter. Keikhosrow demanded from the highest authorities that the Zoroastrians be allowed to wear normal clothes. The Muslims objected. The Zoroastrians in Yazd went on strike, and ultimately, the Zoroastrians were allowed to wear `normal clothes'.

In 1989, I had the privilege of meeting one of those who witnessed, at first hand, this social revolution inspired by Keikhosrow Shahrokh. Dr Rostam Sarfeh was born in Kerman to Zoroastrian parents and came to Yazd in 1910 at the age of two. He was at pains to emphasise that despite the abolition of the *jizya* in 1882, Muslim prejudices against the Zoroastrians did not disappear. He recalled the three main Zoroastrian quarters in Yazd: *Mahalle Dasturan* (priests' quarter), *Mahalle Bozi* and *Mahalle Postekhane Ali.* Near the Zoroastrian school was the *Dar-i Mehr* (i.e. the place of worship) , and Rostam Sarfeh himself attended the Khosrovi School until the age of twelve.

The experiences of his youth were clearly seared into Rostam Sarfeh's memory. He recalled wearing `special' Zoroastrian clothes, which he described as: `turban, no shoes, only slippers'. He described at length the strictures on interaction between Zoroastrian and Muslim. He spoke of:

> …carrying a shawl, and if you have to go into a Muslim home, you must place this shawl on the floor and sit on it because we Zoroastrians are *najes.* We Zoroastrians had to carry a special shawl and wear turban and slippers and wide trousers. We could not wear anything black which was a colour only for the Muslims, because they had to know you were Zoroastrian, not Muslim.

He continued:

> …In 1926, Keikhosrow Shahrokh through his contacts with Reza Shah, said Zoroastrians must be allowed to wear normal clothes. The Muslims said, `No, we have to recognise them'. So we in Yazd held a strike. Ultimately, Zoroastrians were allowed to wear normal clothes.

In 1927, Rostam Sarfeh went to Tehran, where, he said:

> …life was a little better for Zoroastrians… But still…Zoroastrians were not allowed to own shops throughout Tehran, only in special caravansaries. Gradually, the general Iranian populace under the Pahlavi dynasty studied

> ancient Iranian history. [This led to] better treatment of Zoroastrians by the Muslims.

Shahrokh was a social reformer. In every sense, the Zoroastrians of Iran had been relegated to the margins of society, and the vast majority were left to scratch a living. Their regeneration would have to be thoroughgoing if it was to bear fruit. Health, education, employment, legal safeguards, safeguarding life and property, all demanded attention. In his *Memoirs*, Shahrokh recounts that his native Kerman he renovated the school and established three girls' schools. The subjects taught in these schools were Farsi, arithmetic, religious education, geography and physical education.

Keikhosrow Shahrokh had a long and distinguished career. He was both, the *de facto* representative of the Zoroastrian community, as well as an adviser to later Qajar shahs and Reza Pahlavi, founder of the Pahlavi dynasty. Yet, despite his elevated status, he notes in his *Memoirs*:

> There can be no doubt that with the growth in influence of Islam in Iran, the condition of the Zoroastrians deteriorated day by day. There was no peace and security for the community.

A stark assessment indeed, from someone who remained, to the end of his days, a patriotic Iranian and a proud Zoroastrian at the heart of the Iranian establishment.

Zoroastrians in post-Conquest Iran

PART 3

THE PAHLAVI SHAHS AND THEIR ZOROASTRIAN SUBJECTS

The Qajar dynasty had brought Iran to its knees. Worse still, it had become a pawn, a plaything to be manipulated by the big powers. While Britain and Russia called the shots and the effete shahs mortgaged the country, it was just a matter of time before their dynasty was toppled. When Reza Khan, an officer in the Cossack Brigade, came to power as head of the army and minister of defence, he took control of the military and the police, defeated tribal and provincial forces, and by 1924 had declared himself Shah of Iran.

The restyled Pahlavi dynasty would go on to create a highly centralised government. What was revolutionary however, was that both Reza Pahlavi and his son and successor, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, used some of the symbolism of an older Iran as part of the ideological re-creation of the `new' Iran. By defining the state in national and ideological terms, the Pahlavis were prepared to look with less hostility upon the Zoroastrian community, now portrayed as the repository of the nation's cultural heritage. As Reza Khan began extending the rule of law to the Zoroastrians – perhaps for the first time since the 7th century – Keikhosrow Shahrokh, a close advisor and confidant of the new shah, took the role of *de facto* spokesman for the Iranian Zoroastrians.

The Zoroastrians came to see the Pahlavi era as a golden age. The Pahlavi regime was prepared to acknowledge that it was the Zoroastrians who were intrinsically Iranian. While it lasted, this new and regenerative climate of tolerance allowed the Zoroastrians to recover, in a very short time, from the thirteen centuries of injustices inflicted upon them.

From the Zoroastrian perspective, the introduction in the mid-1930s of the Uniform Legal Code, instituted their rights pertaining to marriage, divorce and inheritance. In Muhammad Reza Shah's era, the 1967 Family Protection Law, revised in 1975, further reconfigured the Zoroastrians' legal position in Iran. Under the Pahlavis, the community would come to enjoy a level of physical safety unheard of under previous dynasties. This was particularly significant in terms of

religious freedom, curtailed to the point of virtual eradication in earlier times. Now however, they were permitted seemingly unfettered freedom to practise their faith.

Although individual men of genius, most notably Keikhosrow Shahrokh, played their part in improving conditions for the Zoroastrians, other developments were also leading in the same direction. The gradual migration from Yazd and Kerman to Tehran came, in time, to redefine the community. Tehran played its part in turning the Zoroastrians from a rural into an essentially urban people. This, in turn, brought them to the attention of a wider audience at home and overseas, and enabled this microscopic minority to attain achievements way beyond its numerical insignificance.

But what of the Tehran to which the Zoroastrians migrated? Britain and Russia had gained a disproportionately strong foothold in Qajar Iran, and had set about the economic exploitation of the country. Professor Janet Amighi's observations are compelling. She notes that despite foreign involvement, there was room in the `specialised niches' for Iran's enterprising religious minorities to dip a toe in the wealth-creating opportunities. Thus, while the Armenians monopolised the cloth business in the west of the country, and the Jews took over trade between Iran and Beirut, the Zoroastrians would soon become predominant in trade with India, and in banking operations, taking advantage of their fraternal links with the Parsis of India and the migration over generations of Yazdis and Kermanis to Bombay and its environs. The nationalistic sentiments of the Zoroastrians, who had never ceased to see themselves as the original Iranians, gave them useful connections to the wealthy Parsis of British India, whom both the Qajars and the Pahlavis hoped to lure back to the motherland. By the early part of the 20th century, therefore, the circumstances were in place for the establishment of a prosperous Zoroastrian community in the capital city of Iran.

Even so, their numbers were never great. As we have seen, Manekji Limji Hataria had reported to the Amelioration Society in 1854 that there were only 50 Zoroastrians in Tehran. A certain General Schindler noted that in 1880 their numbers had increased to about 150. Continuing its work, the Amelioration Society calculated that in 1892, the Zoroastrian population in Tehran numbered 295; by 1912 the Zoroastrian council's population census recorded 500

Zoroastrians living in Tehran. The Amelioration Society continued to send its representatives to Iran; and the Parsi emissary Keikhosrow Khan Saheb, arrived in Iran with a considerable amount of money from India's Parsis and concentrated on the development of community projects in Tehran. Thus, well before the inauguration of the Pahlavi era, the Zoroastrians already had a primary school in the capital, the old *dakhma* had been rebuilt, and a rest house for Zoroastrian travellers had opened. The Parsis' philanthropic deeds were matched by their commercial acumen. They underwrote Zoroastrian businesses, and a group of Parsis joined the powerful Yazdi merchant house of the Shah Jahan brothers in the formation of a bank in Tehran. From having been a despised, rural underclass, the Zoroastrians were beginning to carve a commercial niche in their capital city, before the convulsive events of the latter part of the 20th century.

Having achieved the throne, Reza Khan's programme of modernisation implied the need for secular reforms which, not surprisingly, suited the Zoroastrians who, by now, had become the new shah's staunch allies. A generalised myth has persisted in the Iranian Zoroastrian community that the Pahlavi regime favoured Zoroastrians. It is not difficult to see why. Having been excluded almost entirely from participating in national life, in 1925, they were allowed by Reza Khan to enrol in the armed services. By 1935 several had been promoted to high ranks, the best-known being the four-star General Nowzari. In his *Memoirs*, Keikhosrow Shahrokh recounts being present during a visit to the army school by the Shah where he spotted the Zoroastrian Nowzari. The monarch commented: `You are Zoroastrian. We need more people like these real Iranians here.'

Keikhosrow Shahrokh served as advisor to Reza Shah, and was truly a renaissance man. As we have seen, he represented his community in parliament from 1909 to 1940, but that was just the most visible of his public roles. He held several parliamentary posts including head of the Audit Department, and was instrumental in establishing the parliamentary printing press. He was appointed by Reza Shah `to look into the affairs of the railways', as well as being a member of the Supervisory Council of the Melli Bank and overseeing the printing of money. He served as his country's roving plenipotentiary: Russia, Germany and even the United States needed to be kept on board, and ruffled feathers soothed. One event was particularly telling. A group of visiting American tourists photographed the passion play depicting the martyrdom of Husayn. The crowd

attacked the visitors for what they saw as insulting behaviour. This resulted in a break in diplomatic relations between Iran and the USA. Reza Khan sent Shahrokh to Washington to negotiate with the American government, which he successfully accomplished.

Keikhosrow Shahrokh was an intensely patriotic Iranian and a steadfast Zoroastrian, and in the early years of his reign, Reza Shah was prepared to be guided by this visionary man. Thus, Shahrokh was given the go-ahead to create a museum of Iran's ancient heritage, and in 1925 he was instrumental in influencing the Pahlavi shah to introduce the Zoroastrian names of the calendar month. The Zoroastrian calendrical nomenclature survives to this day, despite the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

In spite of Shahrokh's many accomplishments at national level, the deep-rooted prejudices of the Muslim community towards the Zoroastrians were not going to disappear miraculously. The minority always had to make the necessary adjustments. The most striking passage in Keikhosrow Shahrokh's *Memoirs*, and among the most graphic, is the account of the central role he played in the building of the Zoroastrian cemetery in Tehran; while he gives a vivid account of his antagonism to the *dakhma*, a feature of the religion he refused to accept as intrinsically Zoroastrian. The severance of ties with ancient customs, especially those deemed offensive to Muslim sensibilities is, in truth, a mark of the accommodation that was *de rigueur* even in the more benign environment of the Pahlavi dynasty.

But despite the prominent role in national life of a very few Zoroastrians, it could not conceal the several paradoxes of the Iranian state. With regard to the Zoroastrians, there was a deeper truth that we should not overlook. In spite of having taken strides forward, the Zoroastrians were not accorded equal citizenship with their Muslim compatriots. As members of a minority group, they were permitted just one political representative in parliament and were barred from holding high government posts – although by 1933, as we have seen, they were permitted to implement their own laws of inheritance, marriage and divorce.

Even as the Pahlavi dynasty was attempting to bring Iran into the modern era, global events dragged the country into unchartered waters. As the Second World

War convulsed Europe, London put pressure on Reza Shah to end Iran's profitable trade relations with Germany. The shah decided to stay neutral between Great Britain and Germany. Meanwhile, Keikhosrow Shahrokh's high profile drew the spotlight on him and his family. His membership of the Freemasons, deemed a `British political organisation', was complicated by the fact that one of his sons went to Germany and presented radio messages extolling the Nazis, for transmission back to Iran. Reza Shah now considered Shahrokh a political liability. He met a tragic end: Keikhosrow's body was found in a Tehran back alley in 1941. But before his unnatural end, the Iranian establishment made sure Shahrokh became a non-person. Even he – a member of parliament for over three decades, confidant of the shah, advisor and negotiator on his behalf in diverse enterprises, and *de facto* spokesman for his community – could claim no immunity. This event yet again brought to the fore the tenuous nature of the Zoroastrians' relations with Iran's rulers.

Ironically, not long after this event, Reza Shah himself found that he had outlived his political usefulness. Although Iran was not a participant in the Second World War, its strategic position and rich natural resources meant that it would not be ignored by the Great Powers for long. Britain and Russia demanded the expulsion of Germans from Iran. In 1941 they seized control of the country, demanded Reza Shah's abdication, and installed his young son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, the nominal suzerain.

The Zoroastrians' hard-won economic success was severely threatened when international commerce fell off as a result of the Second World War. As Zoroastrian businesses began to fail, it was bound to impact on the wider community. With Britain at war with Germany, and Iran considered sympathetic to the Nazi cause, the wealthy Parsis of British India soon found impediments to transferring funds to their Iranian kinsmen. Worse still, those Zoroastrians who had made their fortune in India faced bankruptcy, and began returning to Iran. The political turmoil – a young and untested new shah on the throne – exacerbated the economic hardships. As the situation in the provinces grew more dire, when the better off in Tehran could no longer financially support their families in the villages, an influx of Yazdi and Kermani Zoroastrians, entered the city swelling Tehran's population. Whereas in 1940 there had been some 1,800

Zoroastrians in the capital, by 1950 their numbers had grown to 3,500, and by 1956, according to the Iranian Census, it stood at 4,992.

Muhammad Reza Pahlavi's arrival on the throne was anything but auspicious. Iran's multiple problems surfaced, and the outstanding question of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company was a poisoned chalice. In 1951, the iconic leader of the National Front, Muhammad Mossadeq was supported by a coalition of landowners, tribal leaders, leftist intelligentsia, merchants and the ulama (the body of religious scholars). This allowed Mossadeq to push a bill through parliament for the nationalisation of the oil company. The West was not amused. It boycotted Iranian oil, while the US withheld its support for Iran. The Iranian economy collapsed under the strain, and Mossadeq's coalition broke up. In the ensuing jostling for power, the CIA helped the army and Muhammad Reza Shah to seize power, dismiss Mossadeq, and re-establish an authoritarian regime. By 1954 the National Iranian Oil Company had been formed, a consortium that included foreign oil companies, including British Petroleum (BP) – the new name for the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company – along with several American oil firms. The consortium would produce and market the oil and share the profits with the National Iranian Oil Company – a neat method whereby the foreign companies avoided nationalisation and retained control of oil pricing and marketing.

The political and economic turmoil in the country was bound to take its toll on the Zoroastrians. The new breed of community leaders – those who had to pick up the pieces after Keikhosrow Shahrokh's death – belonged to the more conservative merchant classes. Rostam Guiv, from a wealthy merchant family in Yazd, was elected head of the *anjoman*, and replaced Keikhosrow as the new Zoroastrian representative in the Majles. Yazd and its environs had, in the not-so-distant past, been the `stronghold' of the Zoroastrians, along with Kerman. The changing political and economic dynamics of Iran had led to the steady relocation of the community to the capital. Between 1945 and 1965, Yazd's Zoroastrian population had halved: Tehran became a more attractive destination as droughts depleted farming communities. As the rural dispossessed began arriving in Tehran, the question posed itself: what was to be done with the numbers of unqualified people desperately seeking work?

In 1952, Rostam Guiv, with six other *anjoman* members, formed a commission to help the unemployed Zoroastrians. Unfortunately, this was a good idea that backfired. The commission bought land near the towns of Ahwaz, Shiraz and Isfahan, with the intention of establishing mechanised agricultural settlements. This, at a time when the majority of Zoroastrians were turning their backs on agriculture and were more interested in, as they saw it, joining the 20th century by entering the professions. Soon, what had been the commission's lands was taken over by Muslim squatters, and it became clear that the experiment had failed horribly.

Thus the Tehran a*njoman* itself had to find ways of absorbing the unemployed. What exactly the Yazdi Zoroastrians – hardy farmers who had withstood centuries of natural and political calamity in all its forms – made of their low-paid employment as *anjoman* clerks, `tea servers', and janitors can only be guessed at. While jobs of a sort were found for them, housing the newer arrivals also needed to be dealt with. Once again, as the Parsis of Bombay had done on earlier occasions, the Tehran *anjoman* involved itself with housing the more needy sections of the community. Rostam Guiv established a low-rent housing project in 1954, whereby more than 30 families were accommodated at the Rostam Baugh, which itself developed over time into a small enclave with its own temple, community hall and school. Tehran's Rostam Baugh would come to home successive generations whose grandfathers might have arrived in Tehran from Yazd or Kerman with few transferable skills, but who wished to maintain a Zoroastrian lifestyle while improving their employment prospects. Tehran's Rostam Baugh developed into a self-contained `Yazdi' village, where many of the residents spoke Dari almost exclusively and were expected to maintain proper codes of `Zoroastrian behaviour'.

While the focus of attention had shifted to Tehran, and a more benign government, the greater economic opportunities had swelled numbers in the capital. Thanks to improved economic conditions, the Zoroastrian population of Yazd increased to about 12,000. Tehran, as we have seen, had become an attractive destination for the Yazdis and Kermanis, and not just the laymen. But rapid urbanisation was taking its toll. The number of working priests also began to dwindle. Whereas there had been 200 priests in Yazd in the 1930s, by the 1960s there were just 10. More significantly, there was no longer an acknowledged high

priest among them – a *Dastur dasturan*. The priests began to lose their old authority in Yazd without acquiring a new and commensurate authority in Tehran. Meanwhile, their numerical decline was accelerated as more priests and their sons chose a secular profession rather than the poorly paid hereditary calling. Kerman, with its smaller Zoroastrian population and even more remote location, fared far worse. The last village family of Zoroastrians left in 1962, by which time there were only three or four working priests in the town of Kerman itself.

What of those who remained in Yazd, the `stronghold' of Iran's Zoroastrians? Despite Muhammad Reza shah's exhortations to build a new and dynamic country shorn of those prejudices that had held it back, it is worth quoting, at some length, Professor Mary Boyce's analysis from her masterful study, *Persian Stronghold* of what she refers to as the `harassment of the Zoroastrians of Yazd':

> The process was still going on in the 1960s...Either a few Moslems settled on the outskirts of a Zoroastrian village, or one or two Zoroastrian families adopted Islam. Once the dominant faith had made a breach, it pressed in remorselessly, like a rising tide. More Moslems came, and soon a mosque was built, which attracted yet others. As long as the Zoroastrians remained in the majority, their lives were tolerable; but once the Moslems became the more numerous, a petty but pervasive harassment was apt to develop. This was partly verbal, with taunts of fire-worship, and comments of how few Zoroastrians there were in the world, and how many Moslems, who must therefore possess the truth; and also on how many material advantages lay with Islam. The harassment was often also physical...They also diverted themselves by climbing into the local tower of silence and desecrating it, and they might even break into the fire-temple and seek to pollute or extinguish the sacred flame...

The Muslim attitudes led, not surprisingly, to some voluntary Zoroastrian conversions, most conveniently when marrying a Muslim. Professor Jamsheed Choksi draws our attention to the kidnapping of Zoroastrian women, and their subsequent conversion and forced marriage to their Muslim abductors, which would lead not just to further depletion of their numbers, but also to immense suffering for the girl's family, to whom she would effectively be lost forever. Besides anecdotal references, such events are recorded as having occurred in

Naymabad in 1884, at Husseinabad in 1927, at Mazra Kalantar and at Mahalle Yazd (the Zoroastrian quarter of Yazd) in 1935, and at Nusratabad in 1937. The attrition rate of Zoroastrian villages is best exemplified by Abshahi, which became wholly Muslim in 1961. The last Zoroastrian family felt compelled to leave following the rape and subsequent suicide of one of its daughters. By the mid-1960s, of 31 villages on the Yazdi plain which still had Zoroastrians, not one was entirely Zoroastrian.

Despite this, the Yazdis remained robust in their faith, especially those in the village of Sharifabad. Since the 14th century, this insignificant village had housed the most significant *Atash Bahram*, and with it the *Dastur dasturan*, which earned it the title of the `stronghold of Zoroastrian orthodoxy'. Although no Sharifibadi Zoroastrian was known to convert to Islam, by 1964 the Muslim population in the village stood at approximately 1000, while there were just 700 Zoroastrians. In 1976 there were 455 Zoroastrians and 510 Muslims – the decline in population caused by migration to the cities. The scarcity of *mōbads* in the Yazdi plain meant that, by the 1960s, Sharifabad, together with two other villages, Mazra Kalantar and Hasanabad-e Maybod, formed a single *hust* or parish. In 1964, the Zoroastrian population of the three villages stood at just over 1,200, and had an *anjoman* that attended to the community's needs.

The Zoroastrians who remained in Kerman, Yazd, Shiraz and Isfahan, had achieved a degree of peaceful coexistence with the Muslims. There are those now domiciled in the West whose recollections of growing up in one of the Zoroastrian communities in Iran during the 1960s paint a telling picture. Mehran Sepehri, domiciled in the USA, writing in the FEZANA Journal in 1999, tells of growing up in Kerman during the reign of Muhammad Reza Shah, when most Zoroastrians made their living either from farming or commerce. He talks of `the strict Muslim environment' which cemented community ties, so that even the young Zoroastrians were imbued with a sense of duty to safeguard their heritage. At the Iranshahr Male Elementary School in Kerman, a part of the daily curriculum entailed attending the fire-temple across the street, where the students were expected to say their daily prayers before they were allowed to have their lunch. The younger pupils took turns at the recitation of the Avesta, while the rest of the group

> ...whispered along...This daily ritual was a part of every Zarathushti elementary student life for six years.

Meanwhile, the Tehran *anjoman* had acquired the role of pan-community leadership, and gradually, Tehran's Zoroastrians came to accommodate themselves in an environment, especially under the Pahlavis, where gifted individual Zoroastrians were at a premium in the performance of civic roles. Although a small number of Zoroastrians had established successful family firms, by the 1950s, there was a tendency among the younger, better-educated Zoroastrians to enter white collar occupations. Reza Pahlavi, founder of the dynasty, was ambitious for his country and anxious to use productive, local talent. Indeed, he had actively sought Zoroastrian employees for government jobs, as his son and successor, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, would do after him. The brief flowering of the Zoroastrians of Iran remains inextricably linked to the Pahlavis.

However, politically, the Zoroastrians were located – formally, at least – precisely where they had been since the early 20th century. As members of a religious minority they were permitted one representative in parliament, but continued to be excluded from holding high office. While high office remained out of bounds, the lower reaches were attained by a few, who thus came to be looked upon as `representatives' of Zoroastrian interests. Mr Zarthoshti was elected a member of the Tehran city council; two Zoroastrian generals held administrative posts, some were even heads of ministerial departments. Nevertheless, there was a certain static quality to Zoroastrian involvement in national affairs, even under Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, whose protestations made clear that he considered these the `original' Iranians. Ambitious and qualified Zoroastrians would thus have their aspirations thwarted: starting out as lawyers, councillors, they would inevitably encounter a glass ceiling that had never been removed in the first place. The mirage of equality nevertheless remained intact. Things were better than under the Qajar or the Safavids, and the Zoroastrians were prepared to accept the less harsh environment as a step forward.

By 1974, the Zoroastrian population of Tehran stood at 12,500, with some within the community suggesting that it enjoyed the highest income levels of all religious groups in the country. There was a distinct improvement in their status. Zoroastrian businessmen still favoured employing their co-religionists in positions

of trust, while individual Zoroastrians shone in secular posts. Thus, Mr Parsai headed the Department of Transportation; Dr Namdaran headed his own hospital in Tehran, Dr Farin was head of heart surgery in Djam hospital; General Sioshansi was second in command of land forces in the army; Manucher Caboli was a senior executive at Bank Melli; Dr Farhang Mehr was chancellor of the University of Shiraz, as well as having been his country's representative at OPEC and a deputy prime minister; while others held responsible positions in several national ministries, including Agriculture and Justice.

Even this small number of high achievers was ultimately compelled to seek to make their mark within their own community. They remained on the periphery of the national community of opinion-formers and policy-makers, despite their individual talents, because they were members of a minority group that had only recently been granted entry into the professions. And the small gains made in the Pahlavi era were soon to be lost once again, as Iran was convulsed by the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Iran is now cloaked in the mantle of Islam; its sense of self-definition is derived from Twelver Shi'ism. The transformation of Iran from Zoroastrian to Muslim seems all but complete. Yet, for the minuscule number of followers of the ancient faith who have managed to survive against the odds, there is a rooted affection for the past. This was best explained by a young Zoroastrian I spoke to in 1989. I asked him whether he considered himself first a Zoroastrian or an Iranian. His answer said it all:

> I am first Iranian and then Zoroastrian, because Spitama Zarathustra was first of all Iranian and then he became a Zardushti. I am an Iranian because Iran is the land of the Zardushtis.

The Parsis

PART 1

PARSI MIGRATION AND SETTLEMENT IN INDIA

The earliest substantial record of the Parsi migration and settlement in India was compiled in 1599, by the Zoroastrian priest Bahman Qobād Sanjāna, the Qesse ye-*Sanjān,* a narrative poem which encapsulates the oral traditions of the community. The founding fathers left their native Khorasan in north-eastern Iran in the 10th century and arrived in Gujarat in the town of Sanjān. The *Qesse* tells of the local Rajah (king) Jadi Rana, having granted religious refugee status to the community upon the fulfilment of five conditions:

- Their priests would have to explain their religion to the king
- They would have to relinquish their native language and adopt the local Gujarati
- The women would have to give up their traditional dress for the Indian saree
- The men would have to lay down their arms
- They would have to conduct their marriage ceremonies after sunset.

Once the migrants felt confidently secure in their new home, they applied to the Rajah to permit them to build an *Atash Bahram*, and were granted permission to do so. The *Atash Bahram* refers to the highest grade of a consecrated fire, not the building in which it resides.

The immigrants sent messengers overland to Khorasan to bring back the necessary ritual objects for the consecration of the fire, and ash from an existing *atash bahram* in the mother country, thus retaining a link between the newly consecrated Indian *Atash Bahram* and a sacred fire from Iran. There were several priests among the original group of migrants qualified to perform the consecration ceremonies: the *Qesse* informs us that `several parties of priests and laymen of righteous life had also arrived at that spot.' So the Sanjān settlement must have continued to attract Zoroastrians from Iran as well as individuals who had sought refuge in India.

We can surmise that the safeguarding of their Zoroastrian religion had initially motivated them in their flight from Iran. The religious dimension was the chief feature of the group. In the early centuries of their residence in Gujarat they were, in the main, agriculturists and artisans, grateful for the refuge granted to them to continue the practice of their faith.

`Three hundred years, more or less' passed, in the *Qesse's* rapid transit across this period of time. In accepting the protection of the Hindu Rajah, the Iranian Zoroastrians were, by degrees, to acquire a certain level of Indianization. Such outward manifestations of Indian influence – those in keeping with the king's mandatory stipulations, are in evidence to the present day. The immigrants acquired the Gujarati language and in due course relinquished their original native Persian; their women wore the saree in the particular style of the women of Gujarat, and their marriage ceremonies are generally conducted after sunset. Other cultural adaptations, such as staining the forehead with vermillion on auspicious occasions; the wearing of red bangles by married women are, without question, their adoption of Hindu customs. The list of borrowings is, in fact, legion. The congenial environment of Hindu India as opposed to their collective memory of persecutions suffered in Iran, doubtless encouraged the burgeoning community to accommodate itself to the surrounding culture. Concessions made by them, originally to conciliate the prejudices of their Hindu hosts, and gradually as a product of acclimatisation to their adopted country, did not, however, dilute their intrinsic Zoroastrian-ness.

The settlement in Sanjān gradually flourished and small numbers among them moved further afield along the Gujarat coast. Parsi settlements were established at Vankaner, Broach, Variav, Ankleswar, Cambay and Navsari. As these new communities prospered, they would send for priests from Sanjān to join them. As a result, the priests found themselves fully occupied and, in order to serve the communities adequately, divided themselves into *panthaks* (groups of lay families) to which a priest served as their *panthaki.* In due course, this office came to be hereditary. Indeed, the Parsis had applied Gujarati terminology for the old system as it would have prevailed in Iran. By the 13th century, Gujarat had been divided ecclesiastically into five *panths*, each with its own council to administer its affairs, but all remaining closely linked to the mother-settlement at Sanjān and

the venerable presence of its *Atash Bahram.* Sanjān remained a place of pilgrimage for the Parsis from the earliest years of their settlement in India.

In keeping with Jadi Rana's requirement that the Parsi priests explain their religion, once the community had acquired mastery of the Old Gujarati language, learned priests with access to Sanskrit set about explaining the tenets of their Zoroastrian faith to their Hindu hosts. Neryosang Dhaval, a Sanjān priest who lived toward the late 11th/early 12th century, undertook the translation of Zoroastrian religious texts into Sanskrit from the Pahlavi. Neryosang's work displays a remarkable knowledge of both Sanskrit and Pahlavi, and was a high watermark in Parsi scholarship.

Political events were re-shaping India, and this was to affect the Parsis as much as their Hindu compatriots. A Muslim sultanate was established in Delhi in 1206, and in 1297, its army set out to conquer Gujarat. The wealthy port of Cambay was ravaged and its tiny Parsi population suffered severe losses. Gujarat was henceforth ruled from Delhi, and a period of religious intolerance began. The Parsis, together with the Hindus, were subject to payment of the *jizya*, and this tax served the more zealous sultans as an instrument for conversion to Islam.

Muslim incursions into India continued apace, and in 1398 Timur-i lang occupied Delhi. The Muslim governor of Gujarat declared independence in 1401, and a period of turmoil in the province ensued. The carnage at Variav, a village where the local Parsis were mercilessly put to death by the Hindu rajah for refusing to pay the extortionate taxes, occurred during this time. A ceremony commemorating the event continues to be solemnized by the community annually.

The politically unsettled climate that gripped parts of India had repercussions on the Parsis. In 1465 Sultan Mahmud Begada's army sacked Sanjān, and the *Qesse* relates the Sanjān Parsis' valiant stance in the battle, fighting beside their Hindu benefactors against the Muslim army. It was as a result of this that the Sanjān *Atash Bahram*, rescued by the priests, was removed for safe-keeping to a cave on `a hill named Bahrot', some distance from Sanjān. For the next twelve years the Fire remained in this isolated spot; later when conditions permitted, it was removed to Bansda, a small town in the Sanjān *panth.* A further two years elapsed and, in the words of the *Qesse:*

> ...from every district in which there were people of that pure creed...just as before men used to go...to far-famed Sanjān, so now the Parsis came to Bansda...

The *Atash Bahram* of the Parsis, the most tangible and sacred link they had with Iran, remained a focal point of the expanding community's devotions and loyalty.

The *Qesse* then introduces one of the great men of early Parsi history, Changa Asa, a wealthy layman from Navsari. Indeed, he is referred to by the ancient Iranian title *dahyubad* (`lord of the land') and we are informed that

> ...he would not suffer the faith to fall into neglect...He gave money from his own wealth to those who had no *sudre* or *kusti.*

Changa Asa recommended to the Parsis of Navsari that their town should host the *Atash Bahram*, and accordingly, extended the invitation to the Sanjāna priests. The Bhagaria priests of Navsari prepared a `fine house' for the Fire, and Navsari now came to be the religious centre of the Parsis. On this note the *Qesse* ends.

For several centuries, the Sanjāna and Bhagaria priests shared ecclesiastical duties harmoniously in Navsari. But, as the number of Sanjāna priests grew, they were thought to be encroaching on the Bhagaria's rights to perform all other religious work in town; which led over time to a reduction in the earnings of the latter group of priests. The friction between the two sets of priests resulted in the Sanjāna priests' decision to leave Navsari. In 1741 they took the *Atash Bahram* with them and in 1742, installed it in a new temple in the village of Udwada, on the coast a little to the south of Sanjān. This is the far-famed *Irānshāh* – *the* sacred fire of the Parsis; which was originally consecrated by their ancestors who had sought refuge in India and been granted permission by Jadi Rana. The determination of the early Parsis to safeguard their most sacred symbol is a tale worth remembering. Originally consecrated in Sanjān, when the political climate deteriorated, the *Atash Bahram* was taken to Bahrot where it remained for 12 years; it was then moved to Bansda for a further two years; its long sojourn in Navsari came to an end in 1741 when it came to rest in Udwada, deeply revered to this day.

With a more permanent abode for their Fire, a relative easing of political tensions, and their own modest prosperity, the Parsis began to turn their attentions to the

correct maintenance of religious traditions in India. As we have seen, they turned naturally for guidance to the *mōbads* of Iran, and thus was inaugurated the series of *Rivayats* or treatises on religious questions exchanged between the Zoroastrians of India and Iran. The corpus began in 1478 and continued until 1768. This invaluable collection of missives sheds light on the conditions of both communities in the middle ages, revealing the orthodoxy of both Parsis and Iranian Zoroastrians and their continuing resolve to maintain, with the utmost constancy, their religious beliefs and practices which they continued to perceive as their greatest asset.

When the Mughals came to India and had consolidated their power over a substantial part of the sub-continent, the Parsis were to gain a modest prosperity, despite Muslim dominance. An important event for the community during this period was the invitation to the Court of the Mughal emperor Akbar, in 1578, of a learned priest from Navsari, Mehrji Rana. Akbar was interested in religions generally, and had invited distinguished theologians of various faiths to debate at his court. The event, recorded by a Muslim historian, alludes to the presence of the Zoroastrian priest thus:

> Fire-worshippers also have come from Navsari in Gujarat and proved to his Majesty the truth of Zoroaster's doctrines: they called fire-worship the great worship, and impressed the Emperor so favourably that he learned from them the religious terms and rites of the Parsis, and ordered...that the sacred fire should be kept burning at court by day and night, according to the custom of the ancient Persian kings.

Akbar abolished the *jizya* throughout his domain, and Mehrji Rana, on his return to Navsari, was conferred the office of high priest. To this day, a Dastur Mehrji Rana is the religious head of the Parsis of Navsari.

The Parsis remained a marginal group in India and were subject to the vicissitudes which affected the land. A reversal of Akbar's policy of tolerance and the reintroduction of the *jizya* by his successors meant that Muslims were once again given precedence over other Indians. Violence occasionally erupted as a result, and the case of the Parsi weaver from Broach, one Kama Homa, whom a Muslim called a *kafir* (unbeliever), led the Parsi to retort spiritedly that it was the Muslim in fact, who was the *kafir.* The local magistrate when called to rule on the case

declared that no infidel was permitted to so cast aspersions on a worshipper of Allah and, therefore, Kama must embrace Islam or face death. He chose the latter and was beheaded in 1702.

What marked the Parsis as distinct from other Indians was the Zoroastrian religion they had brought with them in their initial migration from Iran. Indeed, this was frequently remarked upon by foreign travellers who encountered this small group. From the 17th century Europeans began to arrive in India for trade, some having previously encountered the Zoroastrians of Iran, and the parallel accounts of the two groups reflects a similarity in beliefs.

The Englishman, Ovington, observed of the Parsis:

> They own and Adore one Supreme Being, to whom as he is the Original of all things, they dedicate the first Day of every Month, in a solemn observance of his Worship. And enjoin, besides these, some others for the Celebration of Publick Prayers...They shew a firm Affection to all of their own Sentiments in Religion, assist the Poor, and are very ready to provide the Sustenance and Comfort of such as want it. Their universal kindness, either in employing such as are Needy and able to work, or bestowing a seasonable bounteous Charity to such as are Infirm and Miserable; leave no Man destitute of Relief, nor suffer a Beggar in all their Tribe.

Yet another Englishman, Henry Lord, in 1620, spent time with a *mōbad,* while a Parsi clerk at the English factory in Surat served as interpreter. Lord was informed that at about the age of seven, a child was educated by the priest

> ...to say some prayers and instructs it in the religion....Once put on him the *sudre* and *kusti* ...he weareth about him, and (which) is woven...by the preacher's own hand.

Henry Lord made a point of observing that the Parsis' `law alloweth them great liberty in meats and drinks...', which obviously struck the Englishman as particularly distinctive in India.

Henry Briggs was perceptive of some prominent aspects of Parsi identity, namely their convivial nature. He wrote:

> In disposition the Parsi is inclined to be sprightly – nay, even jocose; he is benevolent...fond of entertaining his friends, however indigent in means, or humble in position; a gourmand in point of living, and an undoubted bon vivant...The Parsis are notoriously given to good living.

Bombay became a British possession in 1661, administered by the East India Company. The Company was an early proponent of naked capitalism, and the story of the Parsi, Rustom Manek of Surat, is a tale of determination in the face of injustice. Rustom had personally addressed the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb to grant permission to the English to establish a factory in Surat, and was successful in his petition. Rustom Manek's relations with the English remained friendly until the appointment of William Phipps as Governor of Bombay, who revoked the family's business licenses, which were handed to their Hindu competitor, Vitaldas Parak. Rustom died in 1721, and Governor Phipps claimed that a substantial amount was owed by Rustom Manke's estate.

Rustom's sons were pressurised by the authorities. Framji Rastamji, the eldest son, was imprisoned, and Rustom's house was put under attachment. Framji was then fined Rs. 50,000 and made to pay Rs. 200 daily for the supply of food to the members and servants of his family. The younger brother, Bamanji, sought redress from the governor in Bombay, but instead, his movements were restricted to the city. All this led to the youngest of the brothers, Naoroji, to set sail for England in the hope of gaining redress. In 1723, the Court of Directors of the East India Company in London agreed the family's case and in settlement of the dispute the heirs of Rustom Manek were awarded Rs. 546,790 to be paid in 3 instalments.

Naoroji Manek was not only the first Parsi, but possibly the first Indian to visit England. He, along with the rest of his family, refused to be cowed by the might of the British establishment.

Meanwhile, in western India, the British, in their attempt to make Bombay a thriving port, declared complete religious freedom for those who chose to live and work there. Communal assemblies or *panchayats* were created, and the Bombay Parsi Panchayat was constituted in 1728. Despite the Indian nomenclature, the newly formed assembly was essentially the traditional Zoroastrian council of elders.

As Bombay's importance grew under British rule, and the Parsi population of the metropolis increased, the BPP played a central role in community affairs, its *de facto* remit extending beyond the city's limits. Lay and ecclesiastical affairs of the community were controlled by the trustees. The Panchayat accrued powers which allowed it to intercede in social matters by attempting to uphold the stability of marriage, and regulate divorce; it helped maintain the *dakhmas,* organised *gahambars* (religious seasonal festivals), and provided financial assistance to the sick, destitute, widows and orphans.

Thus, Bombay came to play a major role in the evolving story of the Parsis. It was from this port city and their growing contacts with the British that the Parsis were, in due course, to move from their former position of rural artisans and agriculturalists, to become the mercantile elite of India.

The Parsis

PART 2

PARSIS AND THE BRITISH

The Parsis of India have gained a reputation, over time, as a highly successful, well-educated and mobile community, who have contributed much to their adopted country.

The seeds of their prosperity were in fact, evident to observers by the 18th century. We get a flavour of this from a certain Lieutenant Moore, who observed as early as 1794:

> The Parsees...are the principal native inhabitants of the island of Bombay, in regard to wealth and numbers: not only the most valuable estates, but a very considerable part of the shipping of the port belongs to them...
>
> Some of them also have poor Europeans on their pension list, to whom are given a weekly allowance, and food and clothing...
>
> A Parsee beggar was never known; and their women, who are fair as Europeans, are proverbially chaste; so that a harlot is as rare as a beggar.

Writers on Parsi history have emphasised the Parsis' high esteem of the British; what is less often stated is the reciprocal high regard of the British for the Parsis. In Professor John Hinnells' opinion, the fact `that the regard was mutual was probably a major factor in the growth of Parsi wealth and power.' Indeed, the elevation in stature of the Parsis by the British was arguably the main reason for the small community's growing fortunes. The advantageous effects of Anglo-Parsi relations soon became clear. In 1808 Sir James Mackintosh observed:

> The Parsees are a small remnant of one of the mightiest nations of the ancient world, who flying from persecutions into India, were for many ages lost in obscurity and poverty, till at length they met a just government under which they speedily rose to be one of the most opulent mercantile bodies in Asia. In this point of view I consider their prosperity with some national pride. I view their wealth as a monument of our justice, and I think

> we may honestly boast that the richest inhabitants of this settlement [Bombay] are not of the governing nation.

This observation suggests that the British patted themselves on the back for Parsi successes. Certainly, the achievements of this `most minuscule of minorities' was rather astonishing. At the turn of the 18th century, the Parsi population of Bombay was a mere 10,000. Yet, by the beginning of the 19th century, the Parsis had become the foremost figures in Bombay. The statistics are revealing. Just a few examples must suffice.

Between 1795-6, Parsis owned more than half the tonnage of European-captained Indian ships putting into Bombay.

In 1805, Parsis owned more companies in Bombay: Parsis 18, Hindus 15, Europeans 9.

In 1855, of 24 Indian Justices of Peace in Bombay, 14 were Parsis.

By 1891, 6 out of 7 Indian surgeons employed in the provinces were Parsis.

In 1898, 46 out of 100 qualified Indian advocates were Parsis.

By the 18th century, India emerged as the hub of a triangular trade with China and Britain, shipping opium to China and shipping tea back to Britain. The Parsis were key players in this trading network. Let us pause here for a brief moment. The Parsis' involvement with the British in the opium trade with China, while it was lucrative, was unquestionably destructive for thousands of Chinese. For the Parsis collectively, pride in past triumphs must be matched by shame for misdeeds, which ought to be openly acknowledged.

To continue with our story. When Hirji Jivanji Readymoney set sail for China in 1756, the first Parsi to set up a trading company in Canton, followed in quick succession by the Banajis, Wadias, Camas, Vikajis, Parakhs and others, the Middle Kingdom had come to play a central role in the wealth creation of the Parsis of India. But the story that is really worth recounting is that of Jamshedji Jeejeebhoy. As a young trader, he was captured by the French, along with a young Scottish ship's doctor, William Jardine. The two became firm friends and business partners. Later, Jeejeebhoy set up Sir JJ & Co, and Jardine set up Jardine Matheson, one of Hong Kong's original *hongs* (a foreign commercial

establishment). Not only was Sir Jeejeebhoy the first Indian baronet, but the lifelong friendship between the Parsi and Scot meant that Jeejeebhoy was the only Asian director appointed to the Board of Jardine Matheson.

In due course, Parsis were pioneers in the textile trade, and their trade was facilitated by the flotation of banks. Sir Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy – the first Indian baronet, honoured for his vast and general charities – was one of three in a syndicate controlling the lucrative opium trade with the Far East.

The Charter Act of 1813 abolished the monopoly of the East India Company, and by the 1830s, Bombay was enjoying boom years with the opening of the Suez Canal, coupled with the opening up of the hinterland through the introduction of the railways to India. By the 1840s almost all the private trade entering Bombay passed through Parsi hands. Here they acted as shipping agents, brokers, providing storage and auction facilities. They were thus the chief economic mediators between Europeans and the Indian hinterland. It comes as no surprise therefore, that when in 1836 the Bombay Chamber of Commerce was started all 10 of the Indian members were Parsis. The nature of mercantile endeavours such as shipping and international trade in which the Parsis established an early primacy, led the community towards wealthy international markets.

Proximity to the English, their language, customs, education, form of government, resulted in the eager acceptance by the Parsis of the opportunity to study the English language, imitate certain English mannerisms, and fully avail themselves of educational opportunities which opened up careers in the sciences, law and government amongst others, while imbuing them with a respect for, and oftentimes deep attachment to the British system of governance. In all these areas, the Parsi was often caricatured as a `brown sahib', someone who imitated the English overlord. Certainly, the description was, in the main apt. However, like all generalisations, it would require qualification. Just as the Parsi borrowed from his Hindu compatriots without becoming Hindu, so he modelled himself after the English without turning himself into an Englishman.

The wealth creation of the community, and their willingness to participate in the various commercial endeavours of the British Empire, led to a growing recognition of the value of a `western' and `scientific' education. Parsi enthusiasm for western education, from the 19th century onwards, was to contribute to the most

fundamental changes within the community while making them the most literate of all Indians.

The first important English school was established in Bombay in 1825, and again it was in Bombay that the first college classes were organised at the Elphinstone College in 1834. The Parsis were quick to make the transition from Gujarati vernacular to the English medium of education. By 1881, they were the most literate group in Bombay. By 1857, the Parsi Girls' School Association was founded with a subscription of Rs.15,000 by some leading members of the community. The Society considered the education of women to be of crucial importance, in which regard the Parsis proved themselves far ahead of their time. Having established schools in Bombay, they recognised the need for formal education for the community as a whole. They then extended the same facilities to their kinsmen in Gujarat. Gradually, throughout the Parsi settlements in Gujarat, schools were endowed, some of which were only open to community members. All of this, taken in the round, meant that the Parsi community soon acquired the highest literacy rate of all Indian communities. In 1911, 71 per cent of Parsis in Bombay Province were literate. The 1931 Census of India shows Parsi men with an 84.5 per cent literacy rate, and women with a 73.4 per cent literacy rate.

Access to education had played a major part in the story of the Parsis. At the start of the 18th century Parsi dominance was based on wealth, whereas by the end of that century, as Professor Hinnells notes, they `shared in the work of the rulers.' The Parsis now had access to the legal profession, medicine, journalism, industry and much more, in all of which fields community members held leading positions.

It was perhaps the Parsi community's high profile that led to the highly controversial event in the early 19th century. In fact, it is an aspect of Anglo-Parsi relations seldom remarked upon, but nevertheless well worth recounting. Initially, the East India Company had prohibited missionaries, but in 1813 it renewed its charter, having given in to the pressures of new missionary groups in Britain. The first missionaries arrived in Bombay in the 1820s. In 1829, the Scottish missionary John Wilson arrived in Bombay, where he was to play a central role in the Parsis' re-assessment of their Zoroastrian beliefs.

John Wilson appraised himself of the Parsis' `very influential position' in Bombay, considered them ideal candidates for conversion to Christianity, and set about to

accomplish his task. He ridiculed the religion, poured scorn on ancient texts, portrayed Parsis as worshippers of the natural elements of fire, water, etc., and accused them of dualism. The matter came to a head when two young Parsis were converted to Christianity by the Rev. Dr. John Wilson. In vain the Bombay Parsi Panchayat filed a Suit before the High Court. In its petition it threatened the British Government that,

> ...if government would not help there would be a terrible uprising in the country, and the results would be disastrous.

This event emphasised for the Parsis the precarious position of their religion and, therefore, their community. Their acceptance of Western education and cultural values had not resulted in a diminution of their attachment to their religion and culture. The Parsis gave the impression of being "westernized", but they were not, in fact, "western". Parsis saw their distinctiveness and uniqueness as stemming from their Zoroastrian religion, and when they discerned a threat to it they reacted sharply, having held steadfastly to this since the first centuries of their domicile in India.

The conversion of the two Parsis by John Wilson served as a watershed in Parsi history. They concluded that if the Parsis were to combat encroaching Christian missionary zeal, the Parsis themselves, and their priests especially, would need to be trained in Zoroastrian theology and literature. This spurred them to create seminaries, which came in time to become centres for modern studies on Iran. These continued to gain in popularity among sections of the community who wished to re-learn their national glories, and rekindled enthusiasm for Zoroastrian Iran.

The Parsis

PART 3

PARSI CONTRIBUTIONS TO INDIA, PAKISTAN AND SRI LANKA

The Parsis' millennial domicile on the Indian sub-continent had seen this small community go from obscurity in rural Gujarat, to sharing in the wealth creation of the British rulers. But what is perhaps so remarkable is that prosperous Parsis did not shy away from their social obligations.

Once they achieved financial success, they put their considerable economic muscle behind building recognizable community infrastructure, which would ultimately include a community-wide network of benevolent institutions. The immense scale of Zoroastrian charity represented both, a means of preservation of collective identity, and self-help as a survival mechanism. Zoroastrian philanthropy was as much a reaffirmation of the community's religious traditions as it was a means of self-preservation.

In Yasna 46.12, we are told that `those who make the world prosperous through good thoughts and honest endeavours are those who live a virtuous life in good thought.' The Zoroastrian text, the *Visperad*, confirms that Zoroastrians `praise industry and courage'. Poverty is not eulogized, and asceticism is rejected, although there is a moral imperative to conduct business with integrity.

While hard work and wealth-creation are encouraged, wealth brings with it social obligations: not just token gestures towards those worse off than oneself, but, rather, serious commitment to assist others. The emphasis of Zoroastrian theology on living the good life – combining an encouragement to create material wealth with a social obligation to put it to good use – helps explain the immensely extensive welfare system established by the affluent members of the Parsi community in India. The small number of wealthy families would have argued that they were under a moral obligation to utilize a part of their wealth for the benefit of their people, since the community's very small size meant that collective dependence on the largess of the local authorities would have been futile.

The rather remarkable aspect of Parsi wealth creation was the fact that the seed capital for early industrial enterprises was raised entirely by relatives of their founders acting as guarantors for these enterprises. Middle-class Parsis volunteered to buy shares in Parsi firms, confirming the strong family and community awareness of the Parsis that had ensured the community's economic prosperity. Having established businesses that would go on to become thriving enterprises, families such as the Jeejeebhoys, Tatas, Camas, Masenas, Jehangirs and Petits all funded charitable institutions. Hardly any of the immensely wealthy Parsi families evaded their social obligations. The old cliché, `Parsi thy name is charity' was earned during this era of universal philanthropy.

Parsi contributions to social reform, education and economic development in India, and their well-known generosity, often benefited non-Parsis in India and abroad, and this in turn reinforced their acceptance by fellow Indians. The Parsi philanthropists established schools, libraries, colleges and hospitals, and relief assistance for victims of flood and famine.

Enormous amounts were donated by individuals and families, far too many for us to recount. A few examples must suffice. What was somewhat radical was that Parsi patronage was not limited to their own community. Thus, Parsi donations to the Muslim Khilafat movement of the early 1920s were proportionally higher than from the Muslims themselves. Parsis led the donors' list for collections made for poor Hindus of Gujarat; collected funds for the needy textile workers in the textile mills of Lancashire, in north-west England; the N.M. Wadia Foundation donated five million rupees for universal application, which was then disbursed to earthquake victims in Japan or people suffering from cancer in England. The Tata family have endowed numerous charities, far too many for us to list.

That Parsi charity was truly universal in scope is a little-known report by a certain Alfred Martin, in connection with the American Civil War :

> As for the generosity of the Parsees, it is unrivalled, extending far beyond the limits of Bombay. It went to Russia in the time of the Crimean War, when Florence Nightingale described the Parsee community as `the salt of the Bombay community.' It went to France in 1859, when the terrible inundations necessitated the supplementing of local aid by foreign help, and the Parsees were among the first to respond and among the most

> liberal of the contributors. It went to the United States at the time of the Civil War, our Sanitary Commission receiving a handsome remembrance from the followers of Zoroaster in India, sent, they said, because of their sympathy with the suffering soldiers and the Cause of Freedom and union.

On the sub-continent, the greatest political upheaval in recent history was the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947. There had been, well before the division of the subcontinent, Parsi populations in the Sind, Punjab, Baluchistan, now incorporated in the newly created nation. Jamshed Nusserwanji was elected the first Mayor of Karachi and is remembered as the `maker of modern Karachi'. The Karachi Parsi Anjuman Trust Fund was formed in 1918 to oversee the Parsi Trust properties and the upkeep of its two *dakhmas.* Community infrastructure in this port city included not just a community hall, a library, and a weekly journal, but provided charitable housing for the less well off in the community. Meanwhile, Parsi charity in Pakistan, as in neighbouring India, was not confined to their co-religionists. In Karachi, several eminent and well-off Zoroastrians gave generously to various charitable causes. In Quetta and Lahore, despite its much smaller Parsi population, generous donations were made to schools, hospitals and other public facilities.

And just as in India, individual Parsis have participated in and made outstanding contributions in diverse spheres of Pakistani life: politics, diplomacy, law and medicine. Thus, Jamsheed Marker represented his country at the United Nations, and served as his nation's ambassador to the United States; while Supreme Court Justice, Dorab Patel was a globally respected jurist. These and many other individuals continued the long Zoroastrian ethos of service and benevolence.

India was the `jewel in the crown' of the British Empire. We have seen that it was during this era that the Parsis began to migrate from the towns and villages of Gujarat, first to Bombay and then further into the Indian hinterland. We have also noted their willingness to learn the English language and grasp the opportunities of work offered in this new Indian environment, which led to their advancement. The age of prosperity had arrived for the Parsis. This has led to the general perception of the Parsis masquerading as `brown sahibs'. And as we have seen, this generalisation needs to be refined.

In the fight for Indian independence, two Parsi individuals, now almost forgotten, were key players. Dadabhai Naoroji, among the founding fathers of the Indian National Congress, and the first, non-white member of the British House of Commons from 1892-1895, argued tirelessly for India's independence, bringing to the attention of the British public the immense wealth it had gained as India's rulers, outlined in his "Drain Theory". Equally, Ferozeshah Mehta, also a member of the Congress Party championed constitutional methods to achieve Indian independence.

Meanwhile in London, yet another Parsi, M.M. Bhownagree, became the second non-white Member of Parliament, representing the Conservative Party from 1895-1906; while S.D. Saklatvala, was an MP first, for the British Labour Party from 1922-23, and then for the Communist Party from 1924-1929.

Nor should we forget Madame Cama, who tirelessly argued the case for India's independence in European capitals, and famously was the first person ever, to raise the Indian tricolour in Stuttgart, in 1907, a full 40 years before India's independence. Indeed, she was such a thorn in the side of the British, and her actions deemed treasonous, that she lived the rest of her life in exile in Europe.

The Parsis had never forgotten the immense debt of gratitude they owed India for having given them safe haven, when, a millennia ago, they had arrived on its western shores seeking refuge. India was a benign country in which to drop anchor. Independent India has shown itself ready and willing to put the talents of the community to use, and individual Parsis have risen to the highest ranks in diverse fields.

Parsis have been given the greatest responsibilities in safeguarding the nation, as heads of the different services of the armed forces. The best known and immensely respected was Field Marshall Sam Manekshaw, popularly known as Sam Bahadur (`Sam the Brave'), who was the first Indian army officer to be promoted to the 5-star rank of field marshal. Under his command, Indian forces conducted the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War which led to the creation of Bangladesh. Equally, there was Vice Admiral Rustam Gandhi, who played a decisive role in the 1961 operation that saw the end of Portuguese rule in Goa. Air Chief Marshal Fali Major, was an immensely successful head of the Indian Air Force.

Parsis have contributed hugely in India's legal sphere. Fali Sam Nariman, an internationally recognised jurist, was the highly respected Solicitor General from 1972-75. His son, Rohinton Fali Nariman, was appointed a judge at the Supreme Court in 2014, and his landmark judgements on matters of constitutional law have earned him the respect of fellow jurists. Alongside his impeccable knowledge of the law, a little-known aspect of Justice Rohinton Nariman's résumé is the fact that he is a trained Zoroastrian priest. As impressive are the careers of Sarosh Kapadia who served as the 38th Chief Justice of India; while Soli Sorabjee, a former Attorney General of India was a well-known proponent of civil liberties and human rights. The list of pre-eminent Parsi jurists would have to include Nani Palkiwala, who was, in his day, perhaps the best known legal mind in the country. He fought tirelessly for safeguarding the Indian Constitution, and in addition to his legal prowess also served as India's Ambassador to the United States.

Household names in India, indeed, names that are seen as synonymous with the Parsi community as a whole, include the Tata and Godrej families. Libraries have been written on the founding father of the Tatas, Jamsetji Tata, who founded the company over 150 years ago. His later descendants who continued to uphold the family banner include J R D Tata, whose love of aeronautics led him to become the first licensed pilot of India, even as he continued his career as a pioneering entrepreneur of the Tata group of companies. Ratan Tata was and remains, arguably, the most recognisable Parsi name in India and overseas. This modest man was Chairman of Tata Group from 1991-2012.

Godrej is a household name in India, thanks to the foresight of the founding father of the company, Ardeshir Godrej. He firmly believed that freedom would remain a distant dream until India became self-reliant. He began by manufacturing locks in 1897, and the company continued to expand so that its products – ranging from soaps, typewriters, white goods – are ubiquitous in Indian homes.

And India's aspirations to join the nuclear club owes much to Homi Bhaba, often referred to as the father of India's nuclear programme.

The Parsi-owned Serum Institute of India was, for many years, the biggest vaccine manufacturer by volume in the world. Roughly two thirds of all children on the planet were vaccinated with one or more of its products. As a partner of the

World Health Organisation, it's vaccines were already saving millions of lives. In 2020, when the global pandemic caused by Covid-19 struck, the company, started by Cyrus Poonawalla, and run by his son Adar, went into overdrive. By teaming up with the Oxford University-AstraZeneca research team, as well as producing the vaccine for 67 developing countries in the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation (GAVI), including India and most of Africa, the Serum Institute acquired the capacity to supply Covid-19 vaccines to half the world's 7.5 billion people. Bill Gates noted: `The contribution it [Serum Institute] has made to global health has been phenomenal.' The family's immense wealth is put to work at the Villoo Poonawalla Foundation, which aims to turn Pune (home to the Serum Institute and the Poonawalla family) into a model Indian city. It finances seven schools and a hospital, provides clean drinking water at 35 locations, and has hundreds of full-time employees backed by 250 trucks collecting refuse from the streets for conversion into biogas.

Thus, in several, diverse ways, the tiny Parsi community, has not just contributed to its adopted land, but is, in fact, a part of the very fabric of society.

It is true, that in general terms, when we refer to the Parsis, we use the short-hand term: `Parsis of India'. But we have seen that Parsis in Pakistan have also contributed much to their country, carving out a niche for themselves. While on the world stage, India and Pakistan remain staunch adversaries, the Indian Parsis and Pakistan Parsis, retain deep, familial and fraternal links.

The encounter of two Parsis, leading lights in their respective countries, and their encounter in Soviet Russia, tells its own story. During the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war that led to the creation of Bangladesh, Pakistan's ambassador to Moscow was the Parsi, Jamsheed Marker. The commander of the Indian armed forces was the Parsi Field Marshall Sam Manekshaw. Both, Marker and Manekshaw were friends, pre-partition. A few weeks before the outbreak of the war, General Manekshaw visited Moscow – an Indian ally – for an urgent consultation with his counterparts in the Soviet military. The Russian hosts took their visitor to the Bolshoi Theatre where they were amazed to find the Pakistani ambassador, Jamsheed Marker, waiting to greet them. They were even more amazed to see Marker (the Pakistani) greet Manekshaw (the Indian) embracing warmly and breaking into

friendly chat in Gujarati. Not really surprising for those in the know: they were both, after all, Parsis.

Although Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon and as much a part of the British Empire was left untouched by the Partition, this island nation, like its' neighbours, had a Parsi population decades before its' own independence. During the British colonial era, the early Parsi settlers established various businesses. Among the early pioneers were the Colombo Oil Mills run by Framjee Bhikaji Khan; the Colombo Dye Works run by the Jilla family, while Cawasji Colombowalla's coffee plantation covered some 850 acres. In the 1830's, of the 12 companies registered in the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce only two were non-English, both of which were Parsi companies.

Following independence, the Parsis' of Sri Lanka, much like their co-religionists in India and Pakistan, were prominent in diverse spheres. Nariman Choksi was Queen's Counsel and went on to become Justice of the Supreme Court. His son, K.N. Choksi was President's Counsel, Member of Parliament, Minister of Constitution Affairs and a Minister of Finance. One of the most renown architects of Sri Lanka was Homi Billimoria, who designed, among other buildings, the Nowroz Baug, the Parsi Fire Temple in Colombo, the capital. Sri Lanka's Parsi community were closely involved in education, medicine and, in what is almost a defining feature of the community, in philanthropy. However, by the early 21st century, it is thought that the Parsi population on the island of Sri Lanka hovers between 30 and 50 individuals.

Conclusion:

The special character of the Parsi community is indeed composed of three essential ingredients: their Iranian Zoroastrian stock; their Hindu-Indian socio-cultural dimension, and their voluntary acceptance of Western (specifically British) educational and secular value systems. These three factors may vary in magnitude among individual Parsis, but its impact upon the group is evident.

The Parsis constitute a mere 0.016% of India's massive population, and with declining numbers, are perhaps an even smaller percentage of the Indian population. Yet they remain an immensely complex community. The fact of their historical circumstances: the descendants of a small band of religious refugees, unobtrusively settled in rural Gujarat for the first seven hundred years of their

residence in India, visibly distinct from the host community and retaining pride in their `religion and race' came, in time, not only to be perceived as different by other Indians, but became accustomed to see themselves as different. The size of the community, the exclusivity it felt it possessed as a result of its unique religious heritage, together with its demonstrable ability to adjust to the dominant cultural values without becoming absorbed, became the dynamic of Parsi group persona.

The Parsis had been on the periphery of Indian society prior to the arrival of the British, whence they became significant intermediaries between the Western rulers and the Indians. With the approach of Indian independence, a new political reality gripped the subcontinent. On the chessboard of 20th century Independence politics the Parsis' numerical inferiority meant that they were no longer a major determinant in the complex format that modern India and the newly created Pakistan were assuming. The reality of their minority status thus came to be emphasized.

Yet, when the overall history of the Zoroastrian peoples comes to be written, India, and its generosity and benevolence towards this religious minority, will be allocated its own volume. The Parsis found a safe haven on the sub-continent, where, as the story goes, they continue to endeavour to sweeten the land, as a spoonful of sugar sweetens milk.

CODA

I began *The Story of the Zoroastrians* by saying that most people had not heard of Zoroastrians, and some could not pronounce the word.

Yet, as our story has progressed, we have seen what a considerable force the Zoroastrians were in the ancient world, and how, in modern history they have made their mark on the Indian sub-continent, and despite the huge challenges to their survival in Iran, contributed to their nation when given the opportunity. Zoroastrians, whether they hail from Iran or the Indian sub-continent are a people with a history.

Today, despite their depleted numbers, Zoroastrians are to be found – beyond the borders of Iran and India – in what is a second diaspora. The global dispersal means that pockets of Zoroastrians are now domiciled in the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, Australasia. In their new homes, the Zoroastrians may attempt to re-evaluate their Zoroastrian-ness to accommodate their new surroundings. In doing so, a re-definition of Zoroastrians – what it means to be a British or American, Australian or New Zealand Zoroastrian – is taking place.

Thus the story of the Zoroastrians is an evolving tale; no doubt, a tale that will be molded by the socio-cultural contours of their respective homes, and the 21st century itself.

The world may have lost sight of them, but Zoroastrians remain a small but vibrant community: changed, yet in many ways, unchanging.


BLACK SEA
CAUCASUS
CASPIAN SEA
BYZANTIUM
IBERIA (KARTLI)
Kura
L. Sevan
KHWĀRAZM (CHORASMIA)
Tashkent
Syr Darya
Kashgar
Kizil
ARMENIA
ARRĀN (ALBANIA)
Amu Darya
SOGDIA
CAPPADOCIA
L. Van
Āmid
Salmas
L. Urmia
PARTHIA
CILICIA
Antioch
Edessa
Carrhae
ADIABENE
Nisibis
Barbalissus
AZARBĀYJĀN (ATROPATENE)
GURGĀN (HYRCANIA)
Nīshāpūr (Abarshahr)
Atrak
Marv
MARV (MARGIANA)
Balkh
BACTRIA
GANDHARA
Indus
SYRIA
ARABISTĀN
Tigris
Hamadān
Rayy
ABARSHAHR
Bāmiyān
Kābul
Damascus
Pīrūz Shāpūr
MEDIA
Nihāvand
PADHASHKHWĀRGAR (ṬABARĪSTĀN)
Herāt
ARIA
Harīrūd
Peshāwar
Seleucia
Ctesiphon
Helmand
PARATĀN (PARADENE)
Jerusalem
ASORISTĀN
Iṣfahān (Spahān)
Jhelum
Hīra
Babylonia
Susa
KHUZISTĀN (SUSIANA)
DRANGIANA
MESENE
ELYMAIS
Euphrates
Kirmān
Sutlej
Stakhr
Shīrāz
Bishāpūr
PERSĪS (FĀRS)
KIRMĀN (CARMANIA)
SĪSTĀN (SAKASTĀN)
Indus
Ardashīr Khurrah
Dārābgird
ARABIA
Gerrha
PERSIAN GULF
TŪRĀN
INDIA
MAKRĀN
RED SEA
OMAN (MAZUN)
Rann of Kutch
ARABIAN SEA

HISTORICAL TIMELINE

ACHAEMENID DYNASTY: 558 – 330 BC

As per: Josef Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia from 550 BC to 650 AD* (London: I.B. Tauris) 2001

Cyrus the Great	558-530 BC
Cambyses	530-522
Gaumata/Bardiya	522
Darius I	522-486
Xerxes I	486-465
Artaxerxes I	465-424
Xerxes II; Secyndianus	424-423
Darius II	423-404
Artaxerxes II	404-359
Artaxerxes III	359-338
Arses	338-336
Darius III	336-330

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Alexander of Macedon: 356 – 323 BC

SELEUCID DYNASTY: 305 – 125 BC

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ARSACID PARTHIAN DYNASTY: 247 BC – 224 AD

(Dating based on coinage evidence as per David Sellwood: *The Coinage of Parthia*, (London, Spink and Son, 2nd edition) 1980

Arsaces I	247/38-217BC
Arsaces II	217-191
Phriapatius	191-176
Phraates I	176-171
Mithridates I	171-138
Phraates II	138-127
Inter-regnal (coinage)	127
Artabanus (Ardavan) I	127-124
Mithridates II	123-88
Gotarzes I	95-90
Orodes I	90-80
Unknown King	80
Unknown King	80-70
Sinatruces	75
Darius (?) (ruler of Atropatene, Arsacid on maternal side)	70
Phraates III (legitimate son of Sinatruces)	70-57
Mithridates III	57-54
Orodes II	57-38
Pacorus I	39
Phraates IV	38-2
Tiridates (usurper)	29-27
Phraates V & Musa	2 BC – 4 AD
Orodes III	6 AD
Vonones I	8–12 AD
Artabanus II	10–38 AD
Vardanes I	40-45 AD
Gotarzes II	40-51 AD
Vonones II	51 AD
Vologeses (Valakhsh) I	51-78 AD
Vardanes II (rebel)	55-58 AD
Vologeses (Valkash) II	77-80 AD
Pacorus II	78-105 AD
Artabanus III	80-90 AD
Vologeses (Valkash) III	105-147 AD
Osroes I (most determined rival of Vologeses III; his coinage indicates constant interchange of power in Mesopotamia between himself and Vologeses III)	109-129 AD
Parthamaspates (puppet king, placed on the throne by the Roman Emperor Trajan)	116 AD
Mithradates IV	140 AD
Unknown King (rebel)	140 AD

Vologeses (Valkash) IV	147-191 AD
Osroes II	190 AD
Vologeses (Valkash) V	191-208 AD
Vologeses (Valkash) VI	208-228 AD
Artabanus IV	216-224 AD

(The overlapping of some dates demonstrates the fluctuating nature of internecine wars; foreign interventions; a prince who occasionally might gain power in one part of the empire; or short-lived gains made by a rebel.)

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SASANIAN DYNASTY: 224 AD – 651 AD

As per: Josef Wiesehöfer *Ancient Persia from 550 BC to 650 AD* (London: I.B. Tauris) 2001

Ardashir I	224-239/40 died 241/42 AD
Shapur I	239/40 -270/72
Hormizd I	270/72-273
Bahram I	273-276
Bahram II	276-293
Bahram III	293
Narseh	293-302
Hormizd II	302-309
Shapur II	309-379
Ardashir II	379-383
Shapur III	383-388
Bahram IV	388-399
Yazdegerd I	399-421
Bahram V Gor	421-439
Yazdegerd II	439-457
Hormizd III	457-459
Peroz	459-484
Valakhsh	484-488
Kavad I	488-496; 499-531
Zamasp	496-498
Khosrow I Anoshirvan	531-579
Hormizd IV	579-590
Khosrow II Parviz	590-628
Bahram VI Chubin	590-591
Kavad II	628
Ardashir III	628-630
Shahrbaraz	630
Khosrow III	630
Queen Purandokht	630-631
Queen Azarmidukht	631
Hormizd V	631-632
Khosrow IV	631-633
Yazdegerd III	633-651

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MUSLIM DYNASTIES: 632 – 1979

As per: Rashna Writer *The Reshaping of Iran from Zoroastrian to Muslim* (Lewiston: New York) 2013

Arab, Turkish, Mongol and Muslim Persian dynasties

632-61	Rule of the first orthodox caliphs
661-750	Umayyad Dynasty, ruling from Damascus
750-1258	Abbasid Dynasty, ruling from Baghdad

Mongol and Turkish rule

1258-1400	Mongols conquered Iran and overthrew the Abbasid caliphate
1404-1501	Timurids and other Turkish dynasties rule Iran

Iranian dynasties and Afghan incursions

1501-1721	Safavid Dynasty
1719	Afghan army invades Iran
1750-96	Zand Dynasty
1796-1925	Qajar Dynasty
1925-1979	Pahlavi Dynasty
1979	Islamic Revolution, establishing the Islamic Republic of Iran

Glossary of Names and Terms

Adur Burzen-Mihr	Great Fire located in Parthia
Adur Farnbag	Great Fire located in Pars
Adur Gushnasp	Great Fire located in Media
Ahura Mazda	Wisdom Incarnate, the one uncreated God (Zoroastrian term for God)
airyå *daiŋhāvō*	Aryan Countries
Amesha Spentas	Bounteous Immortals
angra	hostile and inimical
angra mainyu	(Middle Persian *Ahriman*) the destructive impulse/spirit
anjoman	congregation of Zoroastrians, generally refers to town or village; community assembly
ātakhshgāh/ātashkadeh	`house of fire', i.e. a Zoroastrian temple
Atash Bahram	sacred fire of the highest grade
Atash Niyash	Zoroastrian hymn to Fire
Avesta	corpus of sacred texts of the Zoroastrians
Avestan	the Iranian language spoken by Zarathustra in which the *Avesta* is composed
bacche gabre	child of an infidel, pejorative term for Zoroastrian children in Islamic Iran
dakhma	`Tower of Silence' for the disposal of the dead
Dar-i Mehr	Zoroastrian place of worship
dastur	high priest
Dastur Dasturan	highest rank of priest
dāt	Old Persian term for law
dehqān	landlords who were almost local potentates
Dēnkard	9th century Pahlavi (Middle Persian) text
dhimmis	refers to `people of the book'
dīvs	demons
frasho-kereti	ultimate making good of Ahura Mazda's good creations; the renovation
gahambar	one of the six holy days of obligation in the Zoroastrian calendar

Gathas	hymns composed by Zarathustra
gōsān	minstrel
hazārapatiš	`leader of a thousand', elite troops
Hudinan peshobay	`leader of those of the Good Religion', Zoroastrian religious leaders under early Islam
humata, hukhta, huvaresta	good thoughts, good words, good deeds
jizya	poll tax paid by non-Muslims
kafir	unbeliever
kay or *kavi*	hero; title of Višhtāspa, Zarathustra's royal patron
Kayānid dynasty	members of Višhtāsp's dynasty
kharaj	land tax
khshathrapavan	Old Persian term for satrap, `protector of the kingdom'
kusti	`sacred cord' worn around the waist by Zoroastrians
kusti-bastan	the individual's act of untying and re-tying the *kusti* at the start of Zoroastrian prayers
Magavpatan Magavpat	Grand Master of Divinity
mainyus	motivating forces confronting humankind on earth
maji/magus	Greek form of Old Persian magu `priest'
majles	parliament
mōbad	priest
mujtahids	Muslim religious scholars
najes	polluted; the derogatory status applied to Zoroastrians in Islamic Iran
nasks	refers to the 21 collections of the *Avestan* texts
navjote	Parsi Gujarati term for the investiture of the young into the Zoroastrian religion
No Ruz/Nowroze	`New Day', Zoroastrian New Year
pahlavans	heroes
panchayat	Indian system of communal assemblies
Pahlavi	the language of the later Zoroastrian books
paridaida	Old Persian term meaning paradise, refers to gardens

Qesse-ye Sanjān	narrative poem that records the Parsi migration and settlement in India
Rivayats	Treatises; correspondence exchanged between Iranian Zoroastrians and Parsis between the 15th and 18th centuries
šahr	province
sedre-pushin	Farsi term for the investiture of the young into the Zoroastrian religion
sepāhbād	army general
Shah-nameh	`Book of Kings', the Iranian national epic composed by Ferdowsi, late 10th/11th century AD
spenta	benevolent
sudreh	sacred white undershirt on which the *kusti* is worn
vizier	prime minister
Yashts	Zoroastrian hymns
yasna	`act of worship', the main Zoroastrian religious service
yazata/yazd	being `worthy of worship'
Yazdan xarrah i Ērānšahr	`the divine fortune of Iran'
zand	translation of the Avesta, with commentary, in a vernacular

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