

**At home amongst the Zoroastrians
...in Manhattan**

**By Simin K.
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The Iranian**

I guess a little background info is necessary here. I grew up in Iran under the Shah, in a secular, progressive and nationalistic middle-class family that lost everything as a result of the revolution. I came to the US when I was a teenager in 1979. And I was not born a Zoroastrian.

I've been living in New York City ever since, and I live alone and am unmarried at an age that most Iranians find beyond spinsterhood and then some. Don't get me wrong, I've had my share of relationships, it's just that I'm quirky, emotionally unavailable, unable to grow up like so many friends from my generation, and culturally confused.

But not to worry, like most New Yorkers I'm in therapy, a workaholic, and fully capable of "owning my issues", as they say.

I usually attend whatever "Iranian" cultural events are held annually in New York, from the Ilkhanid Dynasty at the Met, Ghajar Art at the Brooklyn Museum, the Art of the Islamic Revolution at the Grey, to this year's Safavid Dynasty Arts at the Asia Society.

In between the mega museum events, I've made the rounds with small Rumi & Persian poetry events, whirled with the whirling Dervishes of Greenwich Village, hung out at the little Sufi bookstore in Tribeca, and attended private Sufi meetings in Soho with luminaries of the art world.

Why do I do all of this? Because I'm looking and searching for an understanding of my culture of origin, and trying to figure out who I am in addition to finding "home". So when I heard about this event, naturally I knew I had to go.

There was Dr. Kaykhosrow Irani from City University of New York (CUNY) and Dr. Farhang Mehr, a Zoroastrian fashion show, the UN Ambassador from Tajikistan, and Parsi/Iranian food. Wow, how could I miss this one? So, could a single non-Zoroastrian female walk into a religious/ethnic family-based event without knowing anyone and survive? Talk about crashing a religious family event.

The New York stop of the 3000th Anniversary of Zoroastrianism was held at the Metropolitan hotel in Midtown, on Saturday, November 15th. The Anniversary was launched by the nation of Tajikistan which surprisingly enough turns out to have a genuine interest in Zoroastrianism as opposed to Islamism, a rarity amongst Central Asian countries these days.

A Parsi Indian volunteer in all white posted at the entrance of the hotel ushered me up the stairs to the event. Inside there were a couple of hundred people seated, in a variety of different costumes. Dressed for walking around on a Saturday afternoon, I was totally underdressed in jeans and sneakers.



Most of the attendees were families, combination of Iranian and Parsi Indian. I had a hard time telling Parsis apart from the Iranians. I figured out the Iranians mostly because they were speaking Persian. The younger Parsis looked like Indian movie stars with fair skin. And that last comment was probably the single most un-PC thing I could possibly ever write.

The opening invocations by the priests were translated into Persian and followed by an introduction in English by the Parsi host, and translated into Persian by Shirin Kiamanesh, who spoke eloquent Persian with perfect articulation. The equality of the sexes was repeatedly emphasized throughout the event, as several women speakers shared the stage with the male speakers.

Rashid Alimov, the UN ambassador from Tajikistan, was next. He looked like a burly Russian guy in a suit. So you can just imagine my surprise when he walked up to the mike and spoke in perfect Persian: "Salam be baraadaraan va khaaharaan e azeez..." (Greetings to my dear brothers and sisters...).

I was deeply touched by that since one of my great grandparents was of Russian descent, and I always have a soft spot for people who look Russian and speak Persian. He spoke about Zoroastrianism in English, and talked about the unity of all the Persian-speaking people of the world.

After the speeches I walked up to Alimov to thank him and the people of Tajikistan for launching this wonderful event. He bowed and in what I can only describe as perfect Persian body language and ta'rof, he said, "khaahesh meekonam khaanoom." He had all the mannerisms I associate with being Persian.

But the main attractions were Dr. Kaikhosrov Irani and Dr. Farhang Mehr. Dr. Irani is an intellectual powerhouse, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at CUNY, ex-director of the Academy of Humanities and Sciences, recipient of numerous prestigious awards and accolades, and a remarkable scholar and respected New York City personality of Parsi Indian descent. He was a student of Albert Einstein's, has written extensively on the ethics of Zoroastrianism as a philosopher, and his father was a famous translator of the Gathas.

Listening to Dr. Irani is a treat; and there is a video interview with him for sale on Zoroastrian web sites. This man is an amazing and witty speaker who lectured on the morality of Zoroastrianism within the context of social justice. As he spoke everyone was visibly moved by his discourse on morality and ethics.

At one point defining Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds as fighting for social justice, he looked straight into the captivated audience and concluded with, "It is your duty to speak up wherever you see injustice."

If you ever get a chance to hear Dr. Irani, make sure to do so, he reminded me of Joseph Campbell, with the same gentle smile, wise eyes, simple and resonant truths, and a wealth of fascinating knowledge on the Iranian and Indian ancient worlds, mythologies and religions. He is living proof of why we need philosophers in our world.

Dr. Farhang Mehr followed. Another intellectual powerhouse, Dr Mehr is a renowned Iranian Zoroastrian, who grew up in Tehran at a time of government sanctioned and societal persecution, yet managed to fight discrimination and rise through the ranks to become Finance Minister under the Shah, Governor of OPEC, and Chancellor of Pahlavi University in Shiraz, where he transformed it into the "Harvard of the Middle East", and spearheaded efforts to revolutionize Iran's university education system. He is currently a Professor Emeritus of International Relations at Boston University.

Dr. Mehr had a cold, yet his booming and resounding voice still managed to overload the mike on more than one occasion. He had perfect enunciation of Persian words and names, deliberating over every syllable as if it were delightful pastries in his mouth. He addressed the ambassador of Tajikistan pointing out that Zarthustra had been born in that area, and most likely buried in Mazar e Sharif in Afghanistan.

He pronounced the ancient cities of Samarkhand and Bokhara as if he were reciting poetry, and spoke of how the people preserved many ancient sacred tombs and sites by giving them Arabic and Islamic approved names. At one point apparently Pasargad, the tomb of Cyrus the Great, was called the tomb of "Maadar e Soleyman" (Mother of Solomon) in an attempt to preserve and protect it from destruction.

With his bow tie, perfect enunciation, and wealth of knowledge on Iran and Iranian history, listening to Dr. Mehr is truly a treat for any nationalistic Iranian, or Persianophile. Once again, don't miss an opportunity to hear Dr. Mehr as well; he is amazing. I certainly hope that the Iranian satellite media out in L.A. will someday tape Dr. Mehr for an interview.

What religious event and celebration would be complete without a fashion show. Now that's what I call a religion made for people of Iranian origin. What followed next was an amazingly beautiful procession of exquisite fabrics in astounding colors, flowers, candles and grace in motion set to traditional Persian music.

Young Zoroastrian volunteers of Parsi and Iranian heritage modeled traditional Parsi Saris and Iranian Zoroastrian wear. A narrator provided historical background information. The Persian white Zoroastrian groom outfit was far more ornate with gold brocade trimming than the simple Parsi version. And the sofreh aroosi (decorative trays setout for a Persian wedding) have their roots in Zoroastrianism.

The crowd cheered the young models, and they took it all in good stride. The Parsi girls showed a lot more skin than the modest Iranian Zoroastrian girls in green shawls covering their hair. I wondered if it was the influence of Islam or simply the practicalities of geography, the chilly and windy high peaks of Iran not exactly requiring the same clothing sensibilities as steamy Bombay during the monsoon season.

Little boys and girls in all white bearing flowers, a baby in a traditional red satin dress, red chiffon Saris with silver stars, true cobalt blue satin with gold, a mother and daughter team in traditional wear, young men in amazing traditional robes striding confidently and handsomely down the catwalk to donbak music, and lots and lots of candles, the whole thing was like a dream.

The show concluded with a selection of contemporary wear for young Zoroastrians set to Worldbeat House music featuring shirts made from exotic fabrics and jeans. The

Mobeds (priests) were the last to walk on stage, proving that these priests are not holier than everyone else, but rather fully integrated with their communities and quite comfortable and involved with the younger generations.

So back to my original question, could a single unaccompanied female who didn't know anyone at this event and was not related to anyone, survive this religious, family-based celebration? Yes, that was the amazing part. The Iranian and Zoroastrian families welcomed me, and I have to say nobody glared at me the way they do down at the Arab stores on Atlantic Avenue, where they can smell that I'm from their part of the world and they definitely don't approve of the way I look.

Over spicy Parsi finger food and Golab (rose water) drinks dyed red, I managed to socialize with different groups. I couldn't find any of the promised Iranian food, since everything was Parsi and Indian. A Parsi couple explained to me what the Patel leaves were and how to eat it, I gasped over how hot it was, and they looked at me smiling and claiming it was too bland for them.

They inquired about spices in Persian cooking and for some unknown reason I could only think of Turmeric, which they approved of, and then I drew a blank. So I offered, "Well we use mostly herbs in our cooking." Later on, duh, it came to me: Saffron, Somagh (Sumac), Cinnamon, and the list goes on.

Dr. Mehr was a pleasure to speak to, and Iranian and Parsi families embraced me as one of their own. I walked up to Dr. Irani and asked him: "How do you recognize injustice without getting angry, and how do you confront it without anger?" His eyes twinkled as if he had heard a magic phrase, he sighed "Ahhhh," and threw up his hands with a smile, "that is the question isn't it."

I met another young woman from Iran who like me had wondered in, in search of home and was also not from a Zoroastrian background. We laughed and shared samosas while raving about the familiarity of all the sights and sounds, and the amazing beauty and Persianness of everything around us.

Both of us agreed, that neither one of us would ever dare walk into a Muslim event, but this event with family, grace, joy, love, music, ethics, philosophy, history, and politics with Iranians, Parsis and Tajiks was an amazing celebration of everything we both recognized as quintessentially Iranian and Persian, with Indian influences thrown in.

Later a mobed priest and his wife talked to us and showed us books and publications on Zoroastrianism. They were an amazing and loving couple, with a lot of patience and affection for everyone who wondered by with questions. Their daughter had gone to Iran with other young Parsis as part of a documentary, and she spoke to us about her visit to Takht e Jamshid (Persopolis). A small group of non-Zoroastrians of all ethnicities had clustered around their table leafing through pamphlets, asking questions, and listening intently.

The sound of laughter, the Persian music and the candles finally got to me. The sight of the little boys and girls in pristine white with flowers got to me. The beautiful fabrics with vibrant colors got to me, the donbak and traditional Persian music got to me, all the sensory delights got to me and all the speeches, the wonderful Tajik gentleman, Dr.

Mehr's resounding and booming voice pronouncing the names of ancient cities as if he were reciting Hafez, and Dr. Irani's discourse on ethics and the twinkle in his eye all came together for me in an instant moment of clarity and recognition.

There was beauty, grace, profound ideas, kitsch and a passion for justice mixed with prayers and a fun family outing. What was this, and why was it all so familiar to me and comfortable like a favorite pair of well-worn shoes? This was a celebration of the ancient religion from my country of origin 3000 years later. I stood there recognizing and understanding that these 3000 years were as much a part of me and who I was as anything else. In that moment I understood that there was knowledge and recognition of Zoroastrianism embedded in my body, in my genes, in my mind and in my soul.

And was there actually a spiritual moment there? Yes there were many, but the amazing part of it was the recognition that this spirituality didn't have to be packaged like a weekend at a Catskills ashram, or resplendent with religious pomp and circumstance. It wasn't a typical white light moment, just the moment in which I realized that everything that I had grown up understanding as my culture had a sacred, divine and religious origin. Everything that I had taken for granted as my culture of origin was totally intertwined with Zoroastrianism.

Actually, that was the white light moment. There it was, everything that was so unique to my culture, including things that I had loved and judged harshly about my culture, the high and the low, the shallow and the profound, the sacred and the profane, the kitschy and the classic, all were resonating with this ancient religion. And that afternoon in Manhattan, I truly felt at home amongst the Zoroastrians whom I came to finally see as my true kin, and that is when I realized I am a Zoroastrian, have been my whole life, and didn't realize it before until it finally clicked.

After the event I walked down Lexington Avenue through Little India stopping at a favorite Indian store for Albaloo Khoshk (dried sour cherries), Nader the Persian store was already closed for the evening.

Standing in line in front of me were two Persian women picking up Basmati rice and arguing about the price in Farsi. I felt like telling them about my great discovery. "Bebakhsheed khaanoom man ham Irani hastam, va allaan daarem as een maraaseme zartoshti meeyaam," (Excuse me, I am also Iranian, and I'm just coming from this Zoroastrian event.).

I wanted to blurt out that I had finally realized who and what I was and share this amazing discovery with them. But they walked out with their Basmati rice before I had a chance to. So I paid for my sour cherries and smiled at the Indian girl behind the register. She smiled back at me, and I walked home happy in the dark, chilly autumn New York night, with my sour cherries and amazing discovery. I felt content and whole. Ashem Vohu.

Helpful links

The 3000th Anniversary of Zoroastrianism is coming to a city near you. Take the time to visit some of these events, this anniversary only comes around every 3000 years. For more information on events planned throughout the US and the world check the Adobe Acrobat file on: www.fezana.org/unngo.htm

For more on Dr. Irani and his works see his web site: www.kdirani.com

For more on Dr. Mehr see:

www.vohuman.org/Author/Mehr,Farhang.htm

<http://www.bombayparsipunchayet.org/Spring14.htm>

As part of the celebrations there will be a first ever Zoroastrian Film Festival in Chicago:

www.zac-chicago.org/zfilmfest2003/

Zarthushti Women's International Network (ZWIN), is sponsoring an exhibition of different aspects of Zarthushti culture in celebration of the Anniversary on its website: www.zwin3.net/

Web Based and academic Journal of Zoroastrianism:

www.vohuman.org/

A Web site and organization of Iranian Zoroastrians devoted to converting people of Iranian decent to Zoroastrianism anywhere in the world:

www.bozorgbazgasht.com/

The California Zoroastrian Center in co-operation with other organizations in the area is organizing a three day festival "Messages of Zarathushtra and Today's World Affairs", December 20-23, 2003. The Secretary General of UNESCO Mr. Koichiro Matsuura and his wife have been invited, and CNN is planning to send a crew.

Dr. Mehr can also be heard at the Library of Congress's John Kluge Center in Washington DC on December 11th, 2003, from 2-5pm, to mark the 3000th Anniversary of Zoroastrianism. Other speakers scheduled for this event include: Professor Stanley Insler, Chairman, Iranian Studies, Yale University, and Dr. Jehan Bagli, President of the North American Zoroastrian Mobeds (clergy) Council.

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