

Traditional Zarathushtis Mailing List

Quite a few of you have evinced interest in the recent visit of seven Indian priests to Iran. While I have been a bit busy during these last few weeks, I think it is now time to write my impressions about this trip. Due to time constraints I shall give these only in point form.

1. The visit was sponsored by the Iranian Anjuman, Mumbai. All expenses were met by them.
2. Seven priests - Ervad Aspandiar Dadachanji - Vatcha Gandhi agiary, Ervad Cyrus Dastoor - Naib Dastoor of Surat, Ervad Darayus Bajan - Mewawala Agiary, Ervad Kersi Karanjia - Andheri Athornan Madressa, Ervad Aspi Rao - Sethna Agiary and myself visited Iran for two weeks. We toured the cities of Tehran, Yazd, Isfahan and Shiraz.
3. I think the most important discovery (at least for myself) was the immense respect that people all over Iran have for Zoroastrians - we just had to say we were Zoroastrian priests (for those who could not identify us through our priestly dress which we always wore) and doors would open, smiles would break out, prices would come down, discounts would be offered etc. Ordinary men and women on the street would stop whatever they were doing and just stare at the strange spectacle of 7 men in white in a sea of black.
4. There is considerable awareness of the Zoroastrian religion amongst most Iranians. Their level of knowledge is minimal but they do know and accept that the Zoroastrians were the original inhabitants of Iran.
5. The Iranian Zoroastrians can be broadly classified into two groups - urban and rural. The urban group is identified by its prosperity (immense prosperity in some cases), whereas the rural are characterised by dignified semi poverty (although there are definitely some pockets of prosperity and vice versa within the two groups).
6. The religion is, to put in very bluntly, in shambles. There is no pav mahel (that is, no major liturgical ceremonies like Yasna, Vendidad, Vispered and Nirangdin are performed.) there is no Priest holding a Bareshnoom. Indeed there is no concept of Nahn. The fire temples in the cities are mere buildings, sometimes without any fire! Most places had a divo and a dormant afarganyu which we would rekindle. There is no 5 gah boi. There are very few priests, and maybe 3 or 4 who really know and understand what they are doing.
- Priestly dress is absent. The so called Head Priest is a cheeroot smoking retired army man who walks about in a suit.
7. Throughout Iran, the practice of Dokhmenashini has stopped despite the presence of really well built dokhmas and more than adequate sunlight. Aramgahs are used. Many Zoroastrians, especially the rural are extremely unhappy about this fact.
8. Very few Zoroastrians wear the sudreh and kusti all the time - only a few in the rural areas.
9. There is total freedom of worship to all Zoroastrians. The Govt. allows Zs to have their own schools, rest houses, libraries, wedding halls, Agiaries etc. One may do everything except convert. (!)

10. The ancient ruins at Persepolis and other places are reasonably well looked after. However, there is still some amount of smuggling and parcelling out of antiquities, sometimes through official channels (as per what reports we heard).
11. The present govt. of President Khatami is well disposed towards the Zoroastrians, as was the earlier President Rafsanjani. The shrine of Pir-e-Sabz falls in his constituency and he has plans to make it a big pilgrimage centre.
12. My impression is that the relative prosperity and absence of persecution has made the Iranian Zoroastrians a complacent lot. The years of persecution somehow kept them together and infused in them a fierce pride to protect the religion at all costs. However, vital knowledge about the rituals and doctrines of the religion was lost, and books, manuscripts etc were burnt. So while in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, Priests from India visited Kerman and Yazd with questionnaires regarding the religion and its practice, today we had to answer questions from priests and lay persons alike on some very basic and fundamental issues.
13. In this somewhat gloomy scenario, it warmed our hearts to see some spiritually strong fires in the villages adjoining Yazd like Kuchebiyog, Zainabad, Sharifabad, where ordinary Zoroastrians living a very simple agrarian life with very little material wealth have preserved fires which are believed to be centuries old.
14. There is a strong flow of money to all these villages, because we noticed quite a lot of repairs and renovations to the fire temples. I suspect that this money is coming from wealthy Iranians now settled in US, Canada etc. This can be a dangerous trend if these age old fires are threatened in any way by the donor's desire to "modernise".
15. The shrines of Pir-e-Sabz, Pir-e-Hrist, Seti-Pir etc are also very spiritually charging. A large number of devotees visit these places on specific days.
16. The Iranian Anjuman is interested in more priestly exchanges from India. Indeed they would like some of us to stay in Iran for some months of the year and impart education to their priests. However the language can be a problem.

Conclusion

The trip has been an eye opener for several of us. We were able to see in reality what we had studied in history books and Avesta texts.

We have also seen how persecution can cause the complete obliteration of a race and all its traditions and precepts. Full credit to those martyrs of old who withstood the tyrannical oppression of the Muslims and persevered in preserving their religion.

However, there is a danger today that the relative freedom and prosperity is causing an alarming degree of complacency in following the essential rules of our religion. If they are not careful, the Iranian Zoroastrians will succeed in accomplishing themselves what the Muslims could not do for over a millennium - wipe out the Zoroastrian religion and its followers. May that day never occur.

Kind regards,

Ervad Marzban Hathiram

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