



# EVOLUTION OF THE ZOROASTRIAN PRIESTLY RITUALS IN IRAN

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# EVOLUTION OF THE ZOROASTRIAN PRIESTLY RITUALS IN IRAN

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## ABSTRACT

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Zoroastrianism, rooted in Indo-Iranian pre-history, has been practised in Iran continuously for at least three thousand years.<sup>1</sup> It was the dominant religion of pre-Islamic Iran, but after the defeat of the Sasanian Empire by the Arabs in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, it has survived as a minority community in Iran, India and the diaspora. The Zoroastrian religious sphere is dominated by the hereditary priesthood responsible for performing the rituals commissioned by the laity, called the *Behdins* ('of the good faith'). The priests are bearers of the millennia-old oral tradition wherein all the ritual texts are memorised and are recited during the liturgical ceremony.

However, this cultural heritage is severely endangered. With increasing urbanisation and emigration, the Iranian Zoroastrian population has whittled down to less than 20,000. Within the short span of a few decades, many age-old religious practices which had survived relatively unaltered since the Sasanian times have been lost. Due to the dwindling priesthood, the intricate higher liturgical ceremonies have been completely abandoned. Other fundamental changes have taken the form of substitution (e.g. disposal of dead by burial versus by exposure), dilution (reduced proficiency required for priestly ordination), relaxation (ritual purity requirements) and innovation (initiation of female priests).

These changes have not been studied systematically and the knowledge of traditional practices has not been formally recorded. The present study tries to address this gap by documenting the changes in the Zoroastrian rituals and practices in Iran as attested in historical documents and based on contemporary accounts.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper builds on the material previously submitted by the author as part of an assignment at SOAS.

## BACKGROUND

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Zoroastrianism was the state religion of Iran for more than a thousand year period, starting sometime during the Achaemenid era (550 – 330 BCE), followed by the Parthians (247 BCE – 224 CE), and finally the Sasanians (224 – 651 CE). After the fall of the Sasanian Empire, Zoroastrianism ceased to be the state religion, but it continued to be the religion of the majority for a few centuries. However, since the priesthood was no longer supported by the state, a breakdown in the elaborate priestly structure that existed earlier occurred steadily. There are a handful of Middle Persian texts dating to the 8<sup>th</sup>– 10<sup>th</sup> century CE period which discuss the precarious position of the priests due to the intensified conversion to Islam and the inability of the increasingly impoverished lay community to commission any rituals. During this time, many Zoroastrians left for India and in time came to be known as the Parsis (i.e. from Pars).

By the turn of the millennium, Islam had been firmly established as the majority religion of Iran, and over the next few centuries, the Zoroastrian population in most major towns was decimated through forced conversions and migration. By the mid-second millennium, the only pockets with any significant Zoroastrian population were the two desert towns of Yazd and Kerman. These remained their stronghold areas till the beginning of the twentieth century, after which many Zoroastrians started migrating to urban areas, chiefly Tehran, for better economic prospects. The turn of the second millennium saw another wave of emigration, this time mainly to Europe and North America. The Zoroastrian population of Iran has steadily continued to decline over the past few decades and is currently estimated to be less than 20,000. This has led to a rapid change in the religious practice, with the discontinuation of many traditional rituals and the evolution of new forms of worship.

## FRAMEWORK

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Changes have taken different forms, but have generally followed a pattern of moving from strict adherence in the past to a slightly symbolic or lenient interpretation in the present. To better understand the different aspects of the evolution of the rituals and practices, the following 5-point framework<sup>2</sup> spanning from minor modifications to a complete change is presented:

1. Reduction/Relaxation: Same practice but with reduction in the stringency
2. Modification: Similar practice but with certain key alterations
3. Substitution: Change in practice by replacing few elements but retaining core essence
4. Abandonment – Discontinuation of the practice altogether
5. Innovation – Completely new practice introduced without prior precedence

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<sup>2</sup> This categorisation is based on the classification by Michael Stausberg found at: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/zoroastrian-rituals>.



Figure 1: Degrees of change in the practice going from slight modification to complete innovation

It should be noted that many of the observed changes do not necessarily fit within one category but could exhibit two or more different features. For instance, the earlier extended purification rituals exhibit some elements of reduction (e.g. simplification of the ritual ablution *nahn*), as well as abandonment (e.g. the nine-day long purification *barašnom*, usage of consecrated bull's urine *nirang*).

Another aspect to be considered is that the scope of the present article is primarily limited to the changes that have taken place in the priestly practices. It does not trace the evolution of practices outside of the purview of the priesthood such as the worship at the *pirs* or shrines (in and around Yazd) and the *sofreh* rituals which have developed over a much longer period of time.

Each of these categories will be explained with one key example. The scriptural evidence for the practice will be first presented wherever possible, and then the changes will be examined as attested in the historical and contemporary sources. Before looking at each category in detail, important sources of knowledge are surveyed in the next section.

## SOURCES

The primary corpus of Zoroastrianism is the Avesta which comprises mainly of priestly liturgical texts, which are to be committed to memory and recited within the ritual, in praise of the god Ahura Mazdā, or 'Wise Lord'. The core of these rituals is the Yasna ('worship, sacrifice'), which has some parts dated to the second millennium BCE, making it the oldest surviving evidence of any Iranian language. In addition, there is a large corpus of Middle Persian texts from the late Sasanian and early centuries of Islamic Iran, which give us valuable insights on the religious practice from that time.

For the historical record, the *Rivāyats*, a series of epistolary exchanges between the Zoroastrian priests of Iran and India, present a bulk of evidence of the Iranian practice from the period of the 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The exchange began with the *Rivāyat* of Narimān Hošang in 1478 and ended with the *Rivāyat Ithoter*<sup>3</sup> of 1773.<sup>4</sup>

Mary Boyce's seminal work<sup>5</sup> based on her stay in the Zoroastrian villages in Yazd during 1963-64 remains the main source of information from that time. Subsequent inquiries in the 1970s by two independent researchers for their doctoral thesis,<sup>6</sup> also provide valuable details.

The contemporary account is based on multiple sources, chief among which is an article

<sup>3</sup> *Ithoter* 'seventy-eight' in Gujarati, from the number of questions and answers contained in the *Rivāyat*.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent survey of all *Rivāyats* and their dates see the essay "The Dates of the Persian *Rivāyats*" in Hodivala, *Parsi History*, 276-349.

<sup>5</sup> Boyce, *Persian Stronghold*.

<sup>6</sup> Fischer, *Zoroastrian Iran: Myth and Praxis* and Amighi, *Zoroastrians of Iran: Conversion*.

in Persian by Katayoun Mazdapour on current Zoroastrian rituals,<sup>7</sup> and the anecdotal accounts provided to the author by Mobad Mehraban Firouzgary, the current head priest of the Zoroastrian community of Tehran.

## CATEGORIES OF CHANGE IN THE ZOROASTRIAN PRIESTLY RITUALS

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### 1. REDUCTION OR RELAXATION

This refers to a practice where the required adherence has been reduced (e.g. tending to the consecrated fires only 2-3 times as opposed to 5 times daily, number of texts to be memorised by a priestly initiate), or the practice where the stringency in conforming to certain norms has been relaxed (e.g. requirement for purification after coming in contact with pollution, segregation of females during menstruation).

#### EXAMPLE: THE PRIESTLY INITIATION NOWZUD

The Zoroastrian priests follow the millennia-old oral tradition wherein all the ritual texts are memorised and recited during the liturgical ceremony. The priesthood is patrilineal and as part of initiation, the son of the priest is required to learn the entire corpus of Avestan ritual texts by heart and then perform it within the ritual.

The *Rivāyat Ithoter* of 1773 documents the priestly initiation in Yazd. The *mobedzāde* (initiate) who becomes *nowzud* (novice priest) must have learned the Yasna and the Visperad texts by heart and he must be familiar with the traditions in their entirety, and only after this can the *mobedzāde* become a *nowzud*.<sup>8</sup>

This practice continued well into the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Before the 1920s, almost all sons from a priestly family strictly followed their parental religious practice, and their training was mostly at home. Around 1930, the Dinyary Primary School in Yazd was attached to the *Ataš Behram* (fire-temple of highest grade) to provide formal education for the priestly initiates. Such routine initiations into priesthood lasted until about the early 1940s.

Things changed soon after the Second World War and the advent of the new Pahlavi regime, which brought about material prosperity and higher means of academic education, leading many offspring of priestly families to seek other lucrative professions. By the late 1970s, the number of priests had dwindled to such an extent, that the *Anjoman-e Mobedan* (Assembly of Priests) decided that the immediate solution was to relax the stringent requirements for initiation.

Since 1981, the *Nowzud* ceremony has undergone some radical changes. Any age limit for initiation has been overlooked due to the scarcity of candidates. The prerequisite for qualifying is now limited to memorising a limited portion of the 72-chapter Yasna text (Ch. 1-21 and 28-34 *Ahunavaiti Gatha*) and the Khorde (small) Avesta, along with acquiring

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<sup>7</sup> Mazdapour, *Tadavom Adab*.

<sup>8</sup> Vitalone, *Revayat Ithoter*, 155.

knowledge of the religious principles.<sup>9</sup> This is a significant relaxation from the stringent requirements mentioned in the *Rivāyats* and rigidly practised till the first-half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2. MODIFICATION

The term modification implies that certain aspects of the practice have been altered to incorporate new elements while retaining the main components of the earlier practice. Examples include the original higher liturgical ceremonies, which had been completely abandoned for the past 50 years, but were recently revived in a more symbolic form.

### EXAMPLE: HIGHER LITURGICAL CEREMONIES

The Zoroastrian high rituals include the long liturgy Yasna (worship, sacrifice), and its more solemn variants like the Visperad (*vispe ratavō* 'all the Gods') and the Vīdēvdād (*vidaēva dāta*, law of those against the demons). They are classified as 'inner rituals' as they are performed only within a ritual precinct demarcated by furrows, and can only be performed by fully ordained Purifier Priests (*Yaozdathragars*) who have undergone the long purification ablution (*Barašnom*).<sup>10</sup>

These inner rituals were performed in an unbroken tradition dating to at least the time of the Sasanian dynasty (224 - 651 CE). Recent findings by some scholars indicate that the long liturgy and its variants achieved their present form much earlier, likely in the Achaemenid period (ca. 500 BCE), and possibly even earlier, implying that these rituals have had an uninterrupted tradition of performance for over two and a half thousand years.<sup>11</sup>

The Yasna ritual occupies a central role in the Zoroastrian worship and was usually celebrated daily, while the more solemn variants like the Visperad, Videvdad and Vištaspa Yašt were performed only on special occasions. These rituals were further combined together to form longer ceremonies, like the Nirangdin, an 18-day long ceremony in which the *gomez* or urine of the bull was consecrated to create *nirang* for ceremonial use. It involves two priests undergoing the nine-night ablution (*barašnom*), followed by six days of the Yasna ritual performance and culminating with a Vīdēvdād ceremony.<sup>12</sup>

The Rivayats attest to a thriving culture of ritual performance in Iran. They present a thorough explanation on the nuances of the various rituals including the Nirangdin.<sup>13</sup> In response to the various lapses and omissions by their Indian counterparts, the Iranian priests exhort that every *Dastur* (high priest) ought to know how to consecrate the all-night long Vīdēvdād ritual and an injunction to celebrate all six Gahambars of the year. This adherence to ritual practice continued at least up to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Mobed Mehraban Firouzgary, the high priest of Yazd, recalls the Vīdēvdād being performed regularly in the 1940s in the Yazd *Dastooran Mohalle* (Priestly Quarters).

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<sup>9</sup> Firouzgary, *Inner Ceremonies*, 5-6.

<sup>10</sup> Modi, *Religious Ceremonies*, 207-08.

<sup>11</sup> Cantera, *Sacrifice Yasna*.

<sup>12</sup> Modi, *Religious Ceremonies*, 203-04.

<sup>13</sup> Dhabhar, *Persian Rivayats*, 347-57 presents a detailed account of the Nirangdin as prescribed in the *Rivāyats*.

However by the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these rituals were gradually curtailed and then completely abandoned in Iran due to the lack of qualified priests. Mary Boyce, during her stay in Iran, documented that the *Yašt-e Nirangdin* ceremony was performed for the last time in 1961 at the *Gahambar Khana* in Yazd, where seven priests well-versed in the *Vīdēvdād* ritual came together for the consecration ceremony. After this time, the capability to perform a *Nirangdin* ceremony seems to have been lost due to the lack of qualified ritual priests, which led to the inability to procure consecrated *nirang*, the fundamental and essential sacred implement mandatory for all higher liturgical ceremonies. In most cases, the use of *nirang* was abandoned completely or substituted by wine or fruit juice for certain purposes.<sup>14</sup>

Michael Fischer, who spent time in Iran during his doctoral fieldwork, reports that in January 1971, Dastur Mehreban Siavush had invited him to observe the *Yašt-i Visperad* ritual.<sup>15</sup> Even though the ritual normally required a pair of priests, the Dastur performed this three-hour ritual alone as there were no other qualified priests available. The Dastur mentioned that only seven priests remained in all of Yazd who were able to perform this ritual.<sup>16</sup>

Contemporary accounts mention that by 1980 there were no qualified priests and all the inner rituals had either been completely forgotten or have been overtly simplified.<sup>17</sup> In most places the *Yazišn-gah* i.e. the place dedicated for the inner rituals, and the various ritual implements used therein, are in an abandoned state. In the 1980s, the Tehran *Anjoman-e Mobedan* recognised the loss of the traditional rituals and made efforts to revive the core rituals, although some merely in symbolic form. The core Yasna ritual is now condensed to the recital of only the first 21 *has* (chapters) and is accompanied by a curtailed ritual performance. Similarly, during the six seasonal festivals (*gahambars*), the *Yašt-e Gahambar*, which was earlier celebrated with the Yasna ritual intercalated with the *Visperad*, is symbolically recreated in a concise Yasna recitation accompanied with the pounding of the *haoma* plant. Thus, while the major original higher liturgies have been abandoned, aspects of the earlier symbolism have been retained in their modified version.

### 3. SUBSTITUTION

Certain practices, like the disposal of the dead by exposure to the sun and scavengers, have been replaced by burials, which have carried over some of the elements of the underlying principles of the earlier system.

#### EXAMPLE: FUNERARY PRACTICE

Zoroastrian funeral ceremonies are premised on two objectives: first to isolate the centre of impurity, i.e. the dead body, and second to destroy it expediently. The *Vīdēvdād*, which in part deals with the impurities attached to dead bodies, gives an injunction against burying the dead in order not to defile earth, and have it devoured by birds instead (Ch. 3.8, 7.3).

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<sup>14</sup> Boyce, *Persian Stronghold*, 91-92.

<sup>15</sup> The *Yasna* ritual extended by 24 sections of the *Visperad* text generally recited during the *gahambars*, the six seasonal festivals of the Zoroastrian calendar year.

<sup>16</sup> Fischer, *Mute Dreams*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Mazdapour, *Tadavom Adab*, 152.

Even before the funeral, the dead body is not placed directly on the ground, but on a slab of stone. From there it is carried into the tower of silence (*dakhma*), a circular raised well-like structure built on elevated ground, for excarnation. The birds devour the flesh, the bones dry in the sun and are then deposited into the central well inside the *dakhma*, ensuring thus that the centre of pollution is quickly annihilated.

That this practice is archaic is attested by the Greek historian Herodotus, who lived in the fifth century BCE. In Book I of his *History* (I.140), he mentions that the Persians followed the practice of exposing their dead to the birds and dogs, but also in some cases they covered the dead bodies with wax and then buried them in the ground. The rationale in both practices was to not let the *Nasu* (corpse), a major pollutant, come in contact with the earth.

The *Rivāyats* give a detailed account of the *Tana* ceremony, the foundation-laying of the *dakhma* and its construction.<sup>18</sup> This is accompanied by a discussion on how to prevent ground and ground water pollution resulting from contact with the dead body. The minute technicalities stressed in the *Rivāyats* signal very strict adherence to the purity laws, especially when dealing with a corpse. The *Rivāyats* also discuss the performance of the death rituals of *Sagdid* (the rite of being 'seen by a dog'), the *Yašt-e Gāhān*<sup>19</sup> and the subsequent placement of the body in the *Dakhma*.<sup>20</sup>

An almost exact adherence to the above practice is observed in Mary Boyce's account of a funeral in Sharifabad village in the 1960s, including the *Sagdid* ceremony, the recital of the *Ahunavaiti Gatha*, and the procession of *nasa-salars* (corpse bearers) to the *dakhma* with the mourners walking behind them in pairs joined together with a *paivand* (connection).

However with development and urbanisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *dakhmas* became increasingly closer to city limits, severely curtailing their use. In most of the larger towns the traditional practice of exposure was abandoned in favour of burials; in Tehran to the *Qasr-e Firuzeh* cemetery in 1937, in Kerman in the year 1939 and in Yazd in the year 1957. In Yazd and Kerman, in addition to cemeteries, orthodox Zoroastrians continued to maintain a *dakhma* until the 1970s, when they were shut down by law.

It is noteworthy that the principle of not defiling the earth has been carried over to the new practice; the burial is done in such a way that does not put the corpse directly in contact with the ground. The body is placed on a metal stretcher, the legs of which keep the body off the ground. The bed of the stretcher is made of strips of metal so that the body, while supported, is also open to the elements from the bottom. Metal being non-porous, it does not conduct pollution or disease-bearing microbes. The sides of the grave are cemented and a cement cover is placed on the top so that dirt does not fall onto the body.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Dhabhar, *Persian Rivayats*, 102-03.

<sup>19</sup> The rite of isolating the pollution by the recitation of the Avestan hymn *Ahunavaiti Gatha* before the corpse is taken to the *dakhma*.

<sup>20</sup> Dhabhar, *Persian Rivayats*, 159-165.

<sup>21</sup> Fischer, *Myth Praxis*, 64.

#### 4. ABANDONMENT

This refers to ritual practices or customs which have been entirely discontinued in the present day without being replaced by another ritual or custom. Examples include the long intricate purification rituals required for cleansing pollution and also before performing any higher liturgical ceremonies.

##### EXAMPLE: THE LONG ABLUTION *BARAŠNOM*

The *barašnom* is the greatest ceremony of purification for those who have come into contact with the worst form of impurity, i.e. dead matter, especially with a dead body. It consists of triple cleansing with *gomez* (bovine urine), dust and water, followed by nine nights' seclusion, during which three simpler cleansings take place. The *Vidēvdād* (Ch. 8-9) has a large portion dedicated to the description of the *barašnom*.

The *Rivāyats* provide detailed explanations to questions regarding how a person undergoing the *barašnom* purification should act during the nine nights' retreat, and the correct way of administering it.<sup>22</sup> This importance accorded to the *barašnom* is apparent in the *Rivāyat Ithoter* where 15 out of the 78 questions pertain to it.<sup>23</sup>

The *Barašnom-e no-šwa* (ablution of nine nights), as it was referred to in Iran, was still actively practised until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it was the custom for every person to undergo it at least once in a lifetime, either personally or by proxy in case individuals could not undertake it themselves. Up to the 1950s, the *barašnom* was administered to all Zoroastrians of the region in the city of Yazd itself, which had a dedicated *Barašnom-Gāh*. However, after 1960, the use of this old *Barašnom-Gāh* was discontinued, but the rite continued elsewhere to a more limited extent.<sup>24</sup>

Contemporary accounts also attest to the purification rites being active until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, followed by a gradual discontinuation after that period. Mobed Mehraban Firouzgary states that the purity laws were regularly observed in the 1940s in the Yazd *Dastooran Mohalle*. The neighbourhood *Barašnom-e no-šwa* places were in use for purification rites to qualify the priests for the *Yazišn-gah* (inner) rituals. However, in the last 50 years, all the existing *Barašnom-gāhs*, and in general, all rituals which called for the use of the consecrated *nirang*, have been closed down or demolished.<sup>25</sup>

#### 5. INNOVATION

Certain new practices have been adopted in response to the changing socio-economic norms and, partly, as a response to the dearth of traditionally qualified priests. Instances of this include the weekly congressional prayers in lieu of the ritual performance, and the ordination of female priests and those from the laity.

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<sup>22</sup> Dhabhar, *Persian Rivayats*, 358-9.

<sup>23</sup> Vitalone, *Revayat Ithoter*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Boyce, *Persian Stronghold*, 118.

<sup>25</sup> Firouzgary, *Inner Ceremonies*, 1-5.

### EXAMPLE: INITIATION OF FEMALE MOBEDYARS (ASSISTANT PRIESTS)

The priestly profession has been a male prerogative from at least the Sasanian times and was always passed down from father to son. In view of this traditional gender exclusivity in priesthood, it is quite extraordinary to find references in Avestan texts that grant access for religious education and even priestly roles to both genders. In the mixed Avestan-Pahlavi text *Nērangestān*, we find some evidence suggesting that persons of either gender, or even minor children, could act as chief priests. Similarly the Pahlavi text *Šāyest nē-Šāyest* ('allowed and not allowed') permits women to be chief priests, although with restriction to rituals performed on behalf of female patrons only.<sup>26</sup>

However, later Zoroastrian texts testify to a state of gender-specific priesthood, where women are excluded from even the most basic religious roles and where the priestly functions are monopolised by men. In contemporary practice the priesthood continues to be hereditary and is passed on through the male line from father to son with the option of skipping up to three generations, after which it is forfeited.

In Iran, since the late 1970s, the number of priests has dwindled to such an extent, that the *Anjoman-e Mobedan* took the decision to augment the numbers from the laity. Hence the concept of *Mobedyars* was introduced, wherein the members of the laity were trained in outer rituals and essential ceremonies like the *Sedre-Puši* (investiture), weddings and death rituals. However, they could not participate in the performance of high rituals like the *Yasna* or other priestly initiation ceremonies.

The traditionally male-dominated priesthood has been further relaxed in recent years to allow for the initiation of female *Mobedyars*. In March 2011, the *Anjoman-e Mobedan* conferred the title of *Mobedyar* to 8 ladies among 15 candidates who had undergone stringent and extensive religious training in the Avesta and had passed the tests set by the council of priests. Their official curriculum requires fluency in the recitation of the entire *Khorde Avesta* and portions of the *Yasna* which are necessary for performing outer rituals, learning the translations, interpretations and philosophy of the scriptures as well as the religion, and learning the performance of outer rituals.

While the initiation of female priests can be seen as a recent innovation, it could well be put into historical context and be seen as a step towards the restoration of the equality of both genders in the ritual sphere.

### CONCLUSION

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As it has been illustrated, changes have taken many forms depending on both the internal context (i.e. the situation of the practitioners themselves), and external factors (laws and societal pressures, many beyond the immediate control of the community). And while it could be argued that change in the ritual sphere has remained a constant, it is difficult to deny that the rate of change has accelerated in recent decades, to the extent that certain core practices which have had an unbroken tradition of observance for thousands of years, have been abandoned over the past 50 years.

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<sup>26</sup> Hintze, *Priestly Authority*, 52-54.

Increased urbanisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has led to a shift in the dominant Zoroastrian population out of the earlier stronghold villages in Yazd and Kerman to urban centres, chiefly Tehran. The main fallout of this trend is the dispersion and integration of the Zoroastrians into the mainstream population, which in turn has made adherence to the age-old practices difficult and even infeasible in many cases.

Secondly, there has been a large-scale emigration out of Iran for better economic prospects. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most of the migration was to India, which has had the largest concentration of Zoroastrians anywhere in the world. However, after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, there has been an acceleration of emigration to Europe and North America. Both these factors have been the major cause of depletion of the traditional priesthood, as children of priestly families looked beyond their traditional roles to other professions and geographies. This and the general population decline have been the primary reasons for the abandonment of many age-old customs and practices.

In recent decades, there has been a cognisance of the loss of tradition and increasing efforts are being attempted to reverse the trend. The Tehran *Anjoman-e Mobedan*, for example, has in recent decades taken steps to return to the essential liturgies, even though merely to a symbolic extent. Nevertheless, given the trend, it remains absolutely critical to capture and to document the remnants of this ancient culture before it is irreversibly changed.

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