

## **LIFE IN THE PERSIAN PLATEAU FOUR MILLENNIA AGO; A PSYCHOHISTORICAL REVIEW ON THE AUTHORITY OF ZARATHUSHTRA'S WORDS**

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A review of the ancient geopolitical circumstances prevailing in the Persian plateau reveals the truth of Herodotus assertion, when he stated "... The Persian nation is made up of many tribes". If we go back by many centuries from the time of Herodotus and look back further into the primeval history of that triangular piece of land bordered by tall mountains, we will find the same description quite valid. All historical and archaeological evidences point out that from the dawn of Mesopotamian civilization, many different assortments of people were the original inhabitants of the plateau. Amongst those people Gutians, Lullubis, Elamites, Kassies, Babylonians, Assyrians, Sumerians and Akkadians can be named who ruled at least the part of plateau from time to time starting from 2700 BCE. It is noteworthy that Gutians, Lullubis and Eimite spoke a similar Caucasian language but the ,Kassies' language had more of a Indo-European origin.

Most of the contemporary researchers and scholars have concluded that the language of Zarathushtra as reflected in the Gathas, possessed a strong resemblance to Vedic Sanskrit, the other Indo-Aryan Professor Kaikhosrov D. Irani in his book :Understanding the Gathas" has elucidated this point in the following fashion "*The language of the Gathas is one belonging to their old Indo-Iranian languages. This language is called Gathic, and because it is incorporated into the Yasna Scripture which is part of the Avesta, it is also called Old Avestan*". Further research has shown that this language was predominantly spoken in the "Greater Khorasan", located in the northeast part of today's Iran. More specifically, it has been speculated that Zarathushtra first revealed his teachings in an area near Amu Daya in Tajikistan. One should assume that Zarathushtra was the beneficiary a special prevailing culture that is worth exploring. However, as one might guess, looking into cultures and the of psychosocial aspects of people belonging to about four millennia ago is a difficult task with dubious results.

It is not an exaggeration to state that there are not too many sources, which can provide a reliable glimpse into various aspects of life four millennia ago in the "Persian Plateau" or

anywhere else in the world. Basically the list of such existing resources is extremely short consisting of three almost contemporary documents including Rigveda, Yashts and the Gathas of Zarathushtra.

Rigveda is basically an early Indo-European literary work which apparently has been composed over an unknown length of time, describing various divinities heroic wars, actions and sacrifices. Unfortunately, at least superficially, it does not concern itself with the earthly matters such as peoples way of life or their attitudes regarding the more mundane issues. However, at a deeper level, one can argue that the passions and fears as depicted in Rigveda have their roots in the minds and hearts of the people of that origin. Therefore, some may argue that a rather questionable psychohistorical value can be assigned to such a collection.

Similarly Yashts are a collection of praises and prayers aimed at different Yazatas or pre-Zarathushti divinities. It consist of 21 non-contemporaneous Nasks or chapters. Most of it is composed in the best Persian tradition of heroic and poetic renditions. Some of it indeed contain profoundly beautiful verses with earthly and socially relevant implications.

On the basis of the aforementioned brief presentations, one can conclude that Rigveda and to a certain extent Yashts, are myth-o-theological expressions and descriptions of presumed heroic abilities of various divinities. As such they are almost devoid of any humanly qualities and do not elucidate the psychological and social qualities of their contemporaries. However, the third document of the ancient times, the Gathas, is strikingly different. It is a small poetic collection consisting of about 6000 words, in 238 verses which are divided into 17 chapters each called a "Ha". It is entirely composed by Zarathushtra Spitama who was born about 3774 years ago in the northeastern region of the Persian plateau, most likely near Amu-Darya. Zarathushtra's songs were not in the praise of divinities but he does invoke repeatedly the name of only one entity, AHURA MAZDA or at time "Mazda Ahura". Our contemporary philosopher/teacher K. D. Irani describes the Gathas the best when he states "*...there are some verses devotional in*

*character, addressed to Ahura Mazda, to the divine essences of Truth, the Good mind, and the Spirit of Piety and Benevolence. There are also verses which refer to episodes and crises in the mission of the Prophet. But the theology is interwoven in every Ha.*

It is that latter part of the above quotation, which speaks of “*episodes and crises in the mission of the Prophet*” that interests us for the purposes of this article. Zarathushtra, throughout His Gathas gives a general glimpse into his personal life, his disappointments, his hopes, his challenges and his victories. He also speaks of his enemies and friends and depicts the societal conditions of his time quite extensively.

Interestingly, Zarathushtra never even pretended as though he was speaking for the Divine. He rather encouraged his followers to listen and reflect when AHURA MAZDA speaks for himself to them. He saw his duty to enable every human being to see the essence of the God’s message and therefore, become a messenger of God in his/her thoughts, words and deeds. **In other words, he tried to teach his followers the language of God, which is universal and ubiquitous.** He strived to accomplish his lofty goals by asking questions and create a sense of wonder and inquiry.

*This I ask thee, tell me truly, O Ahura;  
What is the source of the Best Existence?  
How shall one who seeks it receive the blessed recompense?  
Surely, such a holy one, through Righteousness,  
Is a healer of existence, beneficent onto all,  
A genuine friend, O Mazda.*

Ha 44.2

*This I ask thee, tell me truly, O Ahura;  
In the beginning, who was the father and creator of Asha, the Truth?  
Who determined the paths of the sun and the stars?  
Who, but thee, so arranged the moon to wax and wane?  
This, O Mazda, and much more, I fain would know.*

Ha 44.3

In the absence of a clear external source of guidance, such as extraordinary divine intervention, one must wonder that from where Zarathushtra received his strength and the ability to be such a keen observer and such a magnificent thinker. What influenced him the most? What force(s) set him on the path of discovering the quintessence of life and interpreting the God's intentions for His creation? What factors, in about four millennia ago caused this man to speak of an omniscient (vs. omnipotent) creator, equality of men and women, freedom of choice, rejection of imaginary gods, existence of Goodness and God in every creation, the principles of earthly and spiritual consequences, the mastery of human beings over their own domain by improving their divine knowledge and the inherent positive value of righteous thoughts, words and deeds. What provoked him to repudiate the idea of *"God as the dispenser of benefits to the worshipper, who knows the secret of propitiating him, he tries to keep him for his own self or for the tribe to which he belongs"*. What made him to be able to access, as Tagore put it, the *"science of what is true"*.

In the following paragraphs I will attempt to present a reasonable understanding of Zarathushtra's environment, which possibly could have contributed his eventual ascension to becoming the founder of a "Universal Religion".

Zarathushtra was born in an era when a primitive polytheistic religion with powerful priests presiding over its many complicated and colorful formalities and rituals was at its peak. Zarathushtra from a very early age showed unmistakable signs of being a genius. He was an inquisitive and observant child who was not afraid to question the wisdom of adhering to the unreason and following the promises of imaginary gods. He invited anybody who listened to debates based on common sense and observable facts. He was not a passive youngster; to the contrary all evidence from the Gathas, which he authored later in his life, and other sources indicate that he was a strong, determined, assertive and innovative person who was not afraid to put his own well-being in jeopardy for the sake of promoting truth. It appears that he was one of those rare few, who have to forfeit their childhood because they have been destined for greatness. According to the recorded tradition once during his childhood, his father Pourushaspa Spitama, apparently out of desperation, afforded him the opportunity to debate a highly ranked, but as it turned out, an unfortunate priest. The priest survived the debate itself but in his way home, apparently died of what in modern medicine is dubbed as "suicidal heart attack", due to the stress caused by losing the debate to a youngster.

One can assume that Zarathushtra was profoundly influenced by his mother Doghdava. Otherwise he could not have thought of women as equals or in some cases, even superior to men. He married a woman that he apparently loved and respected. His wife's name was Hvovi. They had six children together, three daughters and three sons. His daughters' names were: Freny (loving), Thriti (promoter?) and pouru-chista (abundance of knowledge). And he named his sons: Isat-vastar (friend of the community), Urvatatar (supporting person) and Hvar-chitra (sun-like looking). A glance at the names that Zarathushtra and Hvovi chose for their children actually reveals an interesting fact about the depth of their commitment to the vast change that they wanted to bring about. It is well known that majority of the names prior to the advent of the Gathas revelation were either various derivatives of certain animals quality or quantity or related to the multitude of their deities. For example all names that end with -aspa pertain to horse. After Zarathushtra's proclamation of the good religion, names such as Spenta-data (progressive law), Fresham-vereta (newly chosen), Fresho-kera (renovator) and Hoshyaothana (good deed) replaced the animal and deity-related names. It is also extremely interesting and relevant to consider that he called his youngest daughter a name that meant Abundance of knowledge. This can be interpreted as an indication of his deep respect for women.

Part of Zarathushtra's theology was undoubtedly formed by the dark circumstances of his era. In Ha 29.1 in a celebrated poetic rendition he speaks on behalf of the "Soul of Creation":

*Unto Thee O Lord, the Soul of Creation cried:  
For whom didst Thou create me, and who so fashioned me?  
Feuds and fury, violence and insolence of might have oppressed me.  
None have I to protect me save Thee,  
Command for me, then, the blessing of a settled, peaceful life.*

*To what land shall I turn, and wither turning shall I go?  
For my kinsmen and my peers have deserted me.  
Not the people, nor their wicked rulers favor me.  
How shall I satisfy Thee, O Mazda Ahura?*

Ha 46.1

From this darkness and violence Zarathushtra fashioned enlightenment and patience. He became a truly "Peaceful Warrior". He denounced violence as he recognized the locus of evil, namely human being's minds and thoughts. Then he concluded that the only legitimate battleground was the arena of minds and hearts. He learned how to aggress upon the "evil-thinking teachers" with good words emanating from good thoughts. He denounced extremism but never minced words in repudiating the actions of the enemies of the people. The following Ha's exemplify the progression of his thoughts pertaining to this struggle.

*Evil thinking teacher distorts the truth and leads astray the mankind from his actual goal in life through his wrong teachings. He removes us from our valuable heritage of truth, righteousness and purity of mind. With such an expression of my inner spirit, I appeal to Thee, O Lord of Wisdom and O Asha, for protection.*

Ha 32.9

In 49.1 about his greatest enemy "Bandva" states the following:

*O Mazda, the greatest barrier in my way is Bandva, who by misleading the people always feels contentment. Come towards me, O Forgiving and Kind Lord, and grant me strength, enabling me to overpower him through Vohumana and save him from going astray, enjoying the good rewards.*

*Kavis and Karapans are a united force and try to distorted the spiritual or true lives of the people by their evil deeds; but when they approach the day of judgment, and they will be ashamed of their souls and inner selves which shall chide them as they fall down in the abode of untruth, where they are obliged to dwell forever.* Ha 46.11

*I am Zarathushtra, the staunch enemy of the liars and falsehood.  
I shall fight against liars as long as I have strength  
and shall uphold truth and righteous people whole heartedly.  
May I enjoy Thy spiritual and endless strength,  
O my Lord, and may I be Thy worshiper and devotee forever,  
O Mazda.* Ha 43.7

In Ha 48.7 Zarathushtra recommends the following course of action to his followers:

*Keep hatred and anger far away from yourselves.  
Let nothing tempt you to violence.  
Hold on to love and good mind.  
Brilliant teachers, who wish to hold fast to Truth,  
shall lead the followers of truth to Paradise,  
Thy abode, O Ahura, where the righteous people dwell.*

According to Taraporewala English rendition of 33.1, Zarathushtra in this most fascinating form advocates absolute fairness and moderation in administration of justice.

*In full accord with Law shall all men act,  
The Law that forms the basis of all life;  
With strictest justice shall the Ratu judge  
Whether it be the true man or the false;  
Against the false in him he shall with care  
Weigh all the truth that with it has been mixed.*

In this context, it seems justified to think that Zarathushtra himself was accorded some degree of fairness in his community that we possibly tend to think of as an "ancient primitive society". After all, Zarathushtra was invited to the king Vishtaspa's court and was allowed to present his arguments in front of the high priests of his era. He actually was heard and listened to. Vishtaspa himself actually converted to the Zarathushti religion

and became a supporter and promoter of Zarathushtra's new religion.

*Grant me O Truth, the blessing which is the fruit of the Good Mind;  
Grant me, O Piety, to me and to Vishtaspa, our cherished desires,  
And grant, O Mazda, Sovereign Lord, that reciting  
Thy holy holy words of revelation, I may make Thy felicitous Message heard.*

*Ha 28.4*

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that although Zarathushtra names his enemies and bitterly complains about their behavior, he apparently never felt that his life was in danger. Similarly, he never considered taking any severe action against his worst opponents. He fully practiced what he preached as he realized that the only acceptable battlefield is the battleground of minds and ideas. He felt quite victorious at the end. His teachings became the foundation of the most enduring and benevolent empire in the history of humankind. His teachings produced beloved Kings as Kouresh (Cyrus in Greek pronunciation) and Dariush (Darius in Greek pronunciation). Alas, that "the Teachers of Untruth and Falsehood, once again are ravaging the earth with violence, war, bloodshed and pollution. We must remain hopeful that human beings eventually will be able to achieve the conditions of an "ideal society" (Vahu Khashatra Vairya in the Gathas) and live victoriously in peace, as Zarathushtra once did.

*And these are facts, O Ye men and women:  
No happiness can be yours if the spirit of Falsehood direct your lives;  
Cast off from yourself all evil bonds that may chain you to untruth;  
Happiness linked with dishonor, happiness that harms others,  
is poison for the seeker.*

The evil faithless who brings ruins to the righteous here,  
destroys for himself his spiritual life hereafter.

*Ha 53.6*

*When, O Mazda, shall Piety come with Truth in our lands,  
When shall happy life in peaceful pastures come to us through good rule?  
Who shall bring peace to us from cruel and wicked men?  
To whom the wisdom of the Good Mind come?*

*Ha 48.11*

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