

SSZ 2007

A one-day educational seminar on “Practicing Zarathushti Customs and Traditions in North America,” preceded the presentation of research papers by noted academicians/ scholars at the Conference of the Society of Scholars of Zoroastrianism (SSZ), at the Arbab Guiv Darbe Mehr in Chicago on November 17-18, 2007.

Report by Roshan Rivetna

Over 75 persons on Saturday (for the educational seminar) and about 50 persons on Sunday (for the scholarly presentations) enjoyed the excellent program organized by the Society of Scholars of Zoroastrianism – SSZ (co-chairs Dr. Pallan Ichaporia and Rohinton Rivetna) and the warm hospitality and hosting arrangements, generously provided by the Zoroastrian Association of Chicago (ZAC). FEZANA is also gratefully acknowledged for their sponsorship and financial support towards conference and publication costs.

OPENING REMARKS

The Conference opened with a benediction by Chicago’s second-generation **Mobed Neville Vazifdar**. ZAC president **Hosi Mehta** welcomed delegates, and thanked all for coming to “participate, share and grow from this event.” In his Opening remarks, FEZANA president **Rustom Kevala** stressed the importance of such a conference: “We are the proud inheritors of a unique tradition. And we want the world to know about it”. **Rohinton Rivetna** reiterated the vision of SSZ – to encourage and promote scholarship, and the mission – to facilitate interaction among academicians, theologians/priests, educationists and practitioners. Unfortunately, due to emergency eye surgery, **Pallan Ichaporia** had to cancel his trip, but his papers were presented in his absence by his colleagues.

DAY1: PRACTICING ZARATHUSHTI CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS IN NORTH AMERICA

Session I. **Hosi Mehta** spoke of his personal understanding and experiences on *Living a Zarathushti Life*. **Pesi Vazifdar** described *The Zarathushti Calendar* – the different types, purpose of a religious calendar, religious content, meanings of the days and months, and gave some websites for further study and conversions. Speaking on *Zarathushti Scriptures and Texts*, **Kayomarsh Mehta** described the original 21 nasks and the collection of extant texts: the Avestan and Pahlavi texts, the Shah Nameh and the Persian Rivayets.

Session II. **Keki Bhote** presented *The Gathas – an Uplifting Guide to 21st Century Living*, stressing how Zarathushtra’s Gathas are as relevant to modern man as when the Prophet formulated them 4,000 years ago. **Bomi Damkevala** gave *An Overview of Personal Prayers*, describing the basic daily prayers (kushti prayers), Gahs, Nyaeshes, Yashts, Gathas, and other prayers from the Khordeh Avesta. **Edul Udvadia** described *Ritual Observances in a Zarathushti Household*: reciting prayers, a divo, prayer table, chalk and toran, doing charity (e.g. donating body upon death).

Luncheon Presentations. **Jehangir Mobed** spoke of the inspirational lives of two *Learned Scholars* – *Mobed Rostam Shahzadi and Mobed Firooz Azargoshab*, who were religious spokesmen for the Zarathushti community in Iran. **Jameshed Modi** presented an inspirational tribute to his grandfather, the highly acclaimed scholar, priest, author and speaker *Shams-Ul-Ulama Dr. Sir Ervad Jivanji Modi* .

Session III. Er. Jehan Bagli gave an enlightening description of *The Padyab-Kushti Ritual*, explaining the significance of each prayer, and the method of performing the kushti, with proper reverence and understanding. Rohinton Rivetna urged *Participating with Understanding in the Jashan Ceremony*. He suggested congregational participation at appropriate points during the Jashan ceremony. Rashna Ghadialy spoke of the *Need to Preserve, Conserve and Restore Ahura Mazda's Creation*. "Today being an environmentalist, 'green', eco-friendly is chic," she said, "But for us Zarathushtis, it is an imperative,"

Session IV. Keikhosrow Mobed presented the history and traditions (e.g. the Haft Shin table display) of the *Nouruz* (New Year) festival. Farida Sharyari described customs and traditions observed during the *Gahambars*, the festival of *Jashne Sadeh*, *Tirgan* and *Mehergan*. Mahnaz Farhadieh described the *Sofreh (Ritual Display)* set up for various occasions. Bahram Farhadieh described *Life Cycle Ceremonies for Birth, Navjote, Wedding and Death*, and associated customs and traditions. A handout *A Guide to Funeral Ceremonies and Prayers* by Kersey H. Antia, was distributed. The day ended with a proposal to build a Dakhma (Towers of Silence) and Bungli (a place for holding ceremonial last rites) at Waterwood, TX, about 85 miles from Houston. The paper *Khurshed Nagiroshni – Tower of Silence – Sky Burial – Dokhma and Bungli* by Jehangir K. Shroff was presented in his absence by Porus Dadabhoy.

DAY 2: PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH PAPERS

Session I. Pallan Ichaporia submitted a paper, *Gathas are not Didactic*. Almost all scholars, not to speak of lay translators, are inclined to consider the Gathas as a didactic poem, a sort of religious handbook with carefully coordinated and harmonized paragraphs. Yet this opinion is contradicted by the enigmatic style of the majority of Gathic stanzas (Y. 28-51), which evidence a sacrificial mysticism and spiritual isomerism. The Gathas are, in fact, poetical texts of visionary character. We believe that most of the evidence briefly given indicates that Zarathushtra composed the Gathas to invoke and glorify Ahura Mazda. Dr. Ichaporia, an elected Fellow of The Royal Asiatic Society of Gt. Britain and Ireland is an associate of Prof Helmut Humbach at Mainz University and co-authored several books. Works under progress include *The Concordance of the Gathas*.

Dr. William Malandra's paper *Orality and literacy in the Transmission of the Gathas* summarizes various facets of Gathic scholarship bearing on the transmission of the received text of Zarathustra's Gathas. It is shown that in the course of oral transmission certain phonetic changes were made owing to the fact that the priests were no longer speakers of Gathic Avestan; and that the received text is actually an instructional, school-text, that deviated from the oral delivery of the priests in the context of the ritual. It is then proposed that this school-text was a written text and that, in the course of time, it became the standard text both for the Pahlavi Gloss and for the priestly recitation. Dr. Malandra has a PhD in Indo-Iranian Studies from the University of Pennsylvania. He taught at the University of Minnesota, and is now researching Archaism and History in Avestan: laryngeals in Standard Avestan, and teaching part-time at the University of Texas-Austin. He is a regular contributor to the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

Session II. Keki R. Bhote spoke about *Zoroastrianism's Influence on the Offshoots of 3 Major Religions - the Essence of Judaism, the Gnostic's and Nestorian of Christianity and the Sufis of Islam*. (1) *Essenes*. The 1947 discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls revealed the great influence of Zoroastrianism on the Essenes. (2) *Gnostics*. The influences are: the

emphasis on knowledge, not blind faith; a dualism, carried over from later Zoroastrianism; belief in a transcendent God, not in the divinity of Christ. (3) *Nestorians*. Nestorianism disputed the nature of Christ as divine; it was protected from the persecutions of the Church of Rome under the early Sasanian Empire (4) *Sufis*. Sufism, with decidedly Zoroastrian roots, was formed in opposition to Orthodox Islam. It's cardinal principle is to "experience" God, rather than intellectualize him, in keeping with the early mysticism of Zarathushtra. Mr. Bhote is a pioneer in furthering Zoroastrianism in North America, a founder (in 1965) and president of the Zoroastrian Association of America, the first in North America, a founder and trustee of the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Chicago and president of the World Zoroastrian Organization, US Region.

Helmnut Humbach submitted a paper on *Jamsheed in the Gathas and their Pahlavi Translation*. The mythical figure of Yima (Jamsheed) was inherited by the Iranians from the Proto-Aryan period. It is closely related to that of the Indian Yama, the first mortal in Rigvedic mythology. Yima was the prototype of mankind in which both good and evil are inseparably linked with each other until the time of the Renovation of the world. The determinant factor of his fall is what the poets of the ancient Greeks call *hybri*, an excess of ambition ultimately causing the transgressor's ruin. Prof. Humbach is Professor of Indo-European Studies, University of Mainz. His works, in collaboration with Dr. Pallan Ichaporia, include: *The Gathas of Zarathushtra*, (2 vols. 1991), *The Heritage of Zarathushtra*, (1994) and (in progress) *Concordance of the Gathas*, *Dictionary of the Gathas*, *Pahlavi Version of the Gathas*, and the re-edition of *Zamyad Yasht*.

The Luncheon Keynote Address was given by **Dr. Rustom Kevala**. He spoke of the important place that Zarathushtis have in this world – to bring frashokereti, renovation and harmony. In North America, Zarathushtis are focusing on the three primary areas of Unity, Awareness and building community Infrastructure. He announced that FEZANA will now have a FEZANA office with a part time administrator, in Chicago. FEZANA is also exploring establishing a central resource for Zoroastrian literature, books, magazines, CDs, videos, scholarly research material, etc.. He proposed that FEZANA should adopt a North American Zarathushti Seasonal Calendar as the official calendar for all FEZANA work. This initiative is in no way a break from any traditional linkages – as Zarathushti behdins and athornans will continue to use their traditional calendar preferences. Dr. Kevala has been President, Zoroastrian Association of Chicago, President, Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington, Chair, FEZANA Information Receiving and Disseminating Committee, FEZANA Treasurer, Board Member and Treasurer of the Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, and currently serves as President of FEZANA.

Session III. Er. Jehan Bagli presented *From Mankind to Mazda – a Voyage in Life*. To Zarathushtra the supreme Divine being – Mazda – is a personification of Wisdom. Religion is a quest for one's true self, a quest for the Divine within. Zarathushtra elaborates some six primal values – the Amesha Spentas. Mankind must honor the sacredness of the universe, be its steward, and protect it, save it, renew it, and share it. When Man learns to do all that in this voyage of life, their physical self will be in unison with their innate spiritual self. This oneness with the divine within, will brighten the perception to visualize God in everyone and help everyone visualize God in themselves. Er. Dr. Jehan Bagli is President of the North American Mobed Council (NAMC), and Vice-president of WZO. He was a founding member and President of Zoroastrian Association of Quebec, editor of Gavashni magazine and founding editor of FEZANA journal. He is author/co-author of four books: *Religion of Asho Zarathusht and Influence through the Ages* (2003), *Understanding and Practice of Jashan*

Ceremony (2001), *Understanding and Practice of Obsequies* (2006) and *Congregational Prayers for Jashan Ceremony* (2007).

Prof. Matthew Stolper described *The Persepolis Fortification Tablets Project at the Oriental Institute*. The tablets, which were accidentally discovered and excavated by the Oriental Institute of University of Chicago in 1931, at Persepolis, are in crisis because of a lawsuit that seeks to have them seized and sold. Only about 5,000 of the over 15,000 tablets, with seals, coin impressions and text in cuneiform, Aramaic, Greek, Old Persian, Phrygian and Akkadian, have been studied so far. What makes this discovery truly exciting is piecing together the narratives that emerge – of the deeds of great men, or observations of daily Iranian life, business and traditions. These are the actual statements of people living some 2,500 years ago, and we have them today, exactly as they left the hands of the people who wrote them. Research work on this vast flood of information right from the heart of the Persian Empire, has radically transformed every aspect of serious study of the Achaemenid Empire. Prof. Stolper, has been on the faculty at the University of Chicago since 1980. He is currently the John A. Wilson Professor of Oriental Studies, at The Oriental Institute. He has participated in several archaeological experiences in Iran. Most of his research is now concerned especially with Achaemenid Elamite texts, language and history.

Session IV. Prof. James Russell spoke *On Some New Discoveries and Directions in Zoroastrianism*. He presented some significant achievements and discoveries in Zoroastrian studies over the past two decades. Prof. Russell has done some pioneering work on bas-reliefs from China, which portray Zoroastrian funerary rituals. This and similar discoveries have revolutionizing our understanding. Russell has proposed that Zarathushtra came from what is now Kazakhstan; and his name means “eldest camel”. Regarding his date, all evidence of a late date (during the Achaemenian period) has been shown to be false. Prof. Skjaervo sees Zarathushtra as a legendary figure constructed gradually by tradition; whereas Martin Schwartz finds strong evidence of the distinct personality of an ingenious poetic visionary. Nicholas Sims-Williams has deciphered documents in the Bactrian language, unearthed recently in Afghanistan. Russell’s principal contribution to Iranistics is in the field of Armeno-Iranica. With the conversion of Armenians to Christianity during the fourth century, churches were erected over the *atrushans* (fire-temples). In the Middle Ages, the girdle worn by an Armenian priest was called a *k’ustik* – the *kushti!* From his study Russell concludes that the cult of Mithra (called Mher in Armenian) originated in Armenia. Russell closed with a description of the world’s largest Mithraic monument: “a woman wearing a Liberty cap (the ancient Phrygian *pilos*) with the sun-rays of the typical Bactrian or Sasanian icon of Mithra framing her head” – the Statue of Liberty. Prof. Dr. James R. Russell is the Mashtots Professor of Armenian Studies, at the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University since 1993. He has a Ph.D. in Religious Studies (Zoroastrianism), School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Among his vast number of publications are his thesis on *Zoroastrianism in Armenia* (1987) and *Armenian and Iranian Studies* (2004).

Dr. Kersey H. Antia spoke on *‘Life’ after Life According to Zarathushtra*. Zarathushtra is recognized as the first in human history to lay down a clear rationale for what awaits us humans after our life on earth. He laid down the principles for this life – recognizing the importance of free will; and the consequences – worst existence for those who stray from the True Path, and the Best Mind for those who follow the Path of Asha. Vahishta (‘best’) later became ‘behesht’, the word for paradise. He developed a comprehensive belief system about Heaven and Hell. The *ashavan* attains *khshathra* (happiness) and a blessed existence; and the *dregvant* trembles and falls at the Chinvat Bridge into the House of Lie. Zarathushtra’s

revelation was a turning point in the history of beliefs in afterlife, and his emphasis on free will laid the foundation for human progress and liberty. Dr. Antia is high priest of the Zarathushti community in Chicago since 1977, and has served as an honorary priest for over half a century. A fully-ordained priest, from the M. F. Cama Athornan Institute in Mumbai, Dr. Antia studied religion and Avesta-Pahlavi under Dasturji Dabu, Mirza and other learned priests. He has lectured widely and is author of numerous papers on religion and psychology.

Proceedings:

A compilation of all papers presented at the educational seminar on Day 1, in a hardcover binder, is available upon request for US\$15 (+ shipping cost). Contact RRRivetna@aol.com.

All research papers presented on Day 2, will be published as an SSZ publication, with sponsorship of FEZANA. Contact PRIchaporia@aol.com.

Visit www.s-s-z.org for further information.