

BIRTH CUSTOMS AND CEREMONIES OF THE PARSEES.

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At the instance of Rev. Dr. Hastings, the learned Editor of the Dictionary of Religion and Ethics, I had the pleasure of studying, as a whole, the subject of all Parsee ceremonies, rites and customs, and of preparing an exhaustive essay on the subject. But, as the nature of Dr. Hasting's stupendous work required only some portions, here and there, as stray articles—and those even often compressed—under different alphabetical heads, I propose placing before the Society the humble result of my study, in the forms of papers. This is the first paper of its kind.

I have tried to give a description of the different ceremonies, rites and customs, giving, where possible and available, references to the religious or semi-religious Zoroastrian books. At times, I have attempted to explain the signification and symbolism without attempting any justification.

All the Parsee ceremonies, rites and customs may be divided under the following heads.

Division of the subject.

- I. Socio-Religious ceremonies and customs
- II.—Purificatory " "
- III.—Initiation " "
- IV.—Consecration " "
- V.—Liturgical. " "

I.

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES AND CUSTOMS.

The ceremonies and customs, that fall under this head, may be subdivided, according to the three principal events of a man's life,—birth, marriage and death—under the following heads :—

A.—Birth Ceremonies and Customs.

B.—Marriage Ceremonies and Customs.

C.—Funeral Ceremonies and Customs.

(A) Birth Ceremonies and Customs.

The birth of a child is a very auspicious event in a Parsee House. It was so also in ancient Persia.

The birth of a child, an auspicious event. According to the Vendidad¹, Ahura Mazda says :—“ I prefer a person with children (*puthrâne*) to one without children (*aputhrâi*) ”. Even the very ground, where lives a man with his children, is allegorically described as feeling happy.² Cultivation and a good supply of food to people are recommended because they make mankind healthy and able to produce a healthy progeny.³ To be the father of good children was a blessing from the Yazatas, like Tishtrya,⁴ Mithra,⁵ Haoma,⁶ and Atâr,⁷ and from the Fravashis.⁸ To be childless, was a curse from the Yazatas.⁹ Domestic animals, when ill-fed and ill-treated, cursed their master, that they may be childless.¹⁰ Childlessness was something like a punishment from heaven.¹¹ God-given splendour¹² was associated with those who were blessed with children.¹³

¹ IV, 47.

² Vendidad, III 2.

³ Vendidad III, 33.

⁴ Yasht VIII, Tir 15.

⁵ Yasht X, Meher, 65.

⁶ Yaçna IX, Hom Yasht, 4, 7, 10, 13, 22.

⁷ Yaçna LXII, Âtash Nyâish, 10; Vendidad XVIII, 27.

⁸ Yasht X, Meher, 3; Yasht XIII, 134.

⁹ Hom Yasht, Yaçna, Hâ XI, 3. Cf. The blessings and the curse of Cambyses (Herodotus III, 65). Cf. also those of Darius (Behistun Inscriptions IV, 10, 11).

¹⁰ Yaçna XI, 1-2.

¹¹ Yaçna XI, 3; Yasht X; Meher, 38, 108, 110.

¹² Kharêno Mazdadhâta.

¹³ Yçst XIX, Zamyâd, 75.

A Zoroastrian woman often prayed for a good, healthy child.¹ A Zoroastrian man and woman prayed before their sacred fire for a good virtuous child.² A woman without a child was as sorry as a fertile piece of land that is not cultivated.³ She prayed for a husband who could make her a mother of children⁴.

Among the Achemenides, a wife who gave birth to many children was a favourite with her husband, who did not like to displease her in any way.⁵ Children being the choicest gift of God, their lives were, as it were, pledged by parents for the solemn performance of an act.⁶ We read in Herodotus⁷: "Next to prowess in arms, it is regarded as the greatest proof of manly excellence to be the father of many sons. Every year, the king sends rich gifts to the man, who can show the largest number, for they hold that number is strength." Strabo also says a similar thing.⁸ We learn from the writings of the Christian Martyrs of Persia that the ancient Persians, did not like, for the above reasons, the prohibition against marriage among the Christians in the case of holy young Christian girls.

In the Avesta itself, we find no references to any ceremony or rite during the state of pregnancy. The only allusion we find is this:—Women on finding themselves *enciente* prayed before Ardviçura for an easy delivery,⁹ and then for a copious supply of milk at their breast for their children.¹⁰ The allusion to these prayers suggests, that there must be some formal ceremonies accompanying those prayers, but we do not know what they were.

Coming to later Pahlavi and Persian books, we find that the Shâyast lâ Shâyast directs, that when it is known that a lady of the family has become pregnant, a fire may be maintained most

¹ Yaçna IX, 22.

³ Vend. III, 24.

⁵ Herodotus IX, 111.

⁷ I, 136.

⁹ Yasht V (Abân), 87.

² Atash Nyâish, Yaçna, LXII, 5.

⁴ Yasht V (Abân), 87.

⁶ Herodotus IX, 10.

⁸ Bk. XV, 11.

¹⁰ Ardviçura Nyâyish, 3.

carefully in the house.¹ The Saddar also gives this direction.² We have the remnant of this injunction in the present custom of some of the modern Parsees, who, on the occasion of the completion of the fifth and seventh months of pregnancy, light a lamp of clarified butter in their houses. The reason, assigned for this in the Pahlavi and Persian books, is, that the fire, so kindled in the house, keeps out *daêvas*, i.e., evil influences from the house. A fire or a lamp is even now taken to be symbolical of the continuation of a line of offspring. For example, it is not rare to hear, even now, words like these "*Tamâro cherâg roshan rahé*," i.e., "May your lamp be always burning." This benediction is meant to say: "May your son live long and may your line of descent continue."

According to the Avesta, in the state of pregnancy, a woman is to be looked after very carefully. It is wrong for the husband to have sexual intercourse with her in her advanced state of pregnancy, which, according to the Revâyets, commences with the fifth month.³ She is to abstain from coming into contact with any dead or decomposing matter, even with a thing like one's tooth-pick which may contain germs of one's disease.⁴

During pregnancy, the modern Parsees have no religious ceremonies or rites. On the completion of the fifth month of pregnancy, one day is celebrated and known as "*Panch mâsiun*," i.e., the day of the fifth month. Similarly, a day is observed on the completion of the seventh month, and is known as *agharni*. These days are observed as auspicious days of rejoicement only in the case of the first pregnancy. They are observed not in accordance with any religious injunction or with religious ceremonies or rites. The expectancy of a child being

¹ Chap. X, 4; XII, 11. S. B. E. Vol. V, pp. 316, 343.

² S. B. E. Vol. XXIV, p. 277, Chap. XVI, 1.

³ Four months ten days. *Vide* Anquetil Du Perron, *Zend Avesta*, Vol. II, p. 563.

⁴ *Shâyast lâ Shâyast*, Chap. X, 20; XII, 13, (S. B. E. Vol. V, pp. 323, 344); Saddar, XVII, 2 (S. B. E. Vol. XXIV, p. 278).

a joyful event as said above, these days—especially some day after the completion of the seventh month—are observed as joyous occasions, when the lady who is *enceinte* is presented with suits of clothes by her parents, relatives and friends and especially by the family of her husband. The husband, in turn, is presented with a suit of clothes by the wife's family. Sweets are sent out as presents by the husband's family to the bride's house and to near relations and friends. In these sweets, one prepared in the form of a cocoanut,¹ has a prominent place. A cocoanut typifies a man's head² and so it is a symbol of fecundity. Some of the customs observed on these occasions are more Indian in their origin and signification than originally Persian or Zoroastrian.

In the case of the first delivery, it generally takes place in the house of the wife's parents. A room or a part of the room, generally on the down floor, is prepared and set apart for the purpose. As the *Vendidâd*³ says, the place for delivery must be very clean, dry and least frequented by others. It appears, that in former times, such places were specially provided in Parsee houses on the down-floors. Parsee houses in those times had generally spacious down-floors that were used for all purposes. The upper floors were low, and were rather like lofts. So, the down-floors provided proper places for delivery, as enjoined in the *Vendidâd*. But, as, with changed circumstances, Parsee houses of to-day are not what they were before, and as, at present, in storied houses

¹ Among the Rajputs of India, the acceptance of a cocoanut is a symbol of the acceptance of a proposal for marriage (*Vide* Tod's *Râjasthân*.)

² The following story connects the cocoanut with a man's head: An astrologer once said to a king that whatever was sown or planted on such and such a coming auspicious day, would grow well. The king said: "Suppose somebody sows a man's head on a stony ground; will that also grow up into a luxuriant tree?" "Yes," said the astrologer. The king, thereupon, cut off the head of the astrologer and sowed it in a stony ground. The cocoanut palm grew out of it (*Journal of the Ceylon Asiatic Society, January 1891*).

³ Chap. V, 46.

the down-floors in big towns are generally the worst part of the houses, places of delivery at the down-floor are now-a-days properly condemned as unhealthy. In the case of a house or a place, where no delivery has taken place before, the religious-minded persons generally take care that a religious ceremony may be performed there before the delivery. In other words, they get it consecrated. A priest or two say and perform the Âfringân prayer and ceremony over the place. At times, even the Bâj prayer is recited.

On the birth of a child, a lamp is lighted and kept burning, for at least three days, in the room where the lady is confined. The Saddar, speaks of three days. A lamp lighted on the birth of a child, is confined. The Saddar, speaks of three days. It says: "When the child becomes separate from the mother it is necessary to burn a lamp for three nights and days, if they burn a fire it would be better—so that the demons and fiends may not be able to do any damage and harm; because when a child is born, it is exceedingly delicate for those three days."¹

Some people keep the lamp burning for ten days and some for forty days, which are generally observed as the period of confinement.

On delivery, the mother is enjoined to remain apart from others. She is not to come into contact with fire, water, and other furniture of the house.² In the case of those that give birth to still-born children it is enjoined in the Vendidâd³, that they must thus remain apart for 12 days. This period has been latterly extended, as described in the later Pahlavi and Persian books to forty days in all cases of delivery. Now-a-days, a Parsee lady has generally forty days of confinement after delivery.

The Saddar says: "During forty days it is not proper that they should leave the child alone; and it is also not proper that the

¹ Chap. XVI, 2; S. B. E. Vol. XXIV, p. 277.

² Vendidâd, V, 45-49.

³ Vendidâd, V, 55-56.

mother of the infant should put her foot over a threshold in the dwelling (*i.e.*, leave the house) or cast her eyes upon a hill, for it is bad for her menstruation."¹

Some families, following the Hindu custom, observe the fifth day after birth known as *pachory* (*i.e.*, the fifth day) and the tenth day known as *Dasori* (*i.e.*, the tenth day) as gala days, but these days have no religious signification whatever.

During these forty days, the lady is in a state of isolation. She is not to come into contact with any body and with any part of the ordinary furniture of the house, especially wooden furniture and linen articles. Her food is to be served to her on her plate by others. Those who have to come into contact with her, have to bathe before they mix with others. Even the medical attendant had to do so; but, now-a-days, this sanitary rule is more honoured in the breach than in its observance. The original injunction seems to have been intended to observe "purity" in order to prevent the spread of the puerperal fever and such other diseases to which women in this state are subject.²

¹ Chap. XVI. 4, S. B. E. Vol. XXIV, p. 277.

² *Vide* The chapter on "Maternity and its Perils" in Mr. Havelock Ellis's "The Nationalization of Health" (1892) pp. 123-143. It says that in England and Wales where 4,500 women die every year in childbirth "about 70 per cent. of this mortality is due to puerperal fever" and that "almost the whole of this mortality might be avoided." It is the careless medical practitioners and midwives, that are responsible for this mortality because they do not take sanitary care, and carry germs from one woman in confinement to another. The Midwifery writers of old said to their disciples "Thine is a high and holy calling; see that thou exercise it with *purity*." In the enjoined isolation of the Parsee women during their confinement, the original intention seems to be that of observing *purity*. Some of the later Pazend and Persian writers have not properly understood the original good object of the early writers, and so, have carried the rigour of isolation too far. But anyhow, the original injunction of isolation is intended for the *purity* referred to by old midwifery writers.

At the end of forty days, which is the period of confinement, the lady has to purify herself by a bath before ordinarily mixing with others. At first, she takes an ordinary bath and then goes through what is called 'nân', a contraction of the Sanskrit word 'śnan,' which is a sacred bath. A priest, generally the family priest, administers that bath with consecrated water.

All the bedding and clothes of the woman, used during the forty days of her confinement after delivery are rejected from ordinary use. They are enjoined to be destroyed, lest they carry germs of disease among others. But now-a-days that injunction is not strictly followed.

Formerly, a mother in child-birth first drank a few drops of the sacred Haoma-juice, which was squeezed and consecrated in a fire-temple. The newborn child also was made to drink a few drops of this juice. Anquetil Du Perron¹ refers to this religious custom as prevalent in his time. In the Hom Yasht,² Haoma is said to give fine healthy children to women. Haoma was emblematical of immortality. But now-a-days this custom is rarely observed, and, in place of the Haoma juice, a sweet drink made of molasses or sugar is given to the child as a first auspicious drink.

Herodotus³ refers to the custom of naming the child among the ancient Persians. We infer from what he says, that the parents waited for some time after birth and then watching the physical and mental characteristics of the child, gave them such names as indicated their characteristics. In the case of modern Parsees, many name the child after an immediate deceased ancestor. A Parsee name is made up of three names. The first is his general name. The second is his father's name and the third is his surname or family name. Now, it is the first of these three that is the proper name

¹ Zend Avesta II, p. 564.

² Yaçna IX, p. 22.

³ Bk. I, 139.

of the child, and in the case of that name, many prefer to call a child by an immediate ancestor's name. Suppose a person named Jivanji had his father named Jamshedji, and his mother named Awabai. Then on the birth of a child, if it is a male child and if his own father (Jamshedji) was dead, he would prefer to name it Jamshedji. If it were a female child, he would like to name it Awabai after his deceased mother.

Some resort to a so-called astrologer and name the child as advised by him. This process of naming the child has one particular religious signification, and it is this: In all religious ceremonies, during life or after death, a person's name is recited as he or she is named at the time of his or her birth. This name is called, *Janam-nâm* or birth-name. In his or her Naojote or sacred shirt and thread ceremony, marriage ceremony, or any other ceremony, enjoined by him or her during life time (*Zindah-ravân*), the birth-name is recited together with the father's name. In all the ceremonies after death (*Anôsheh-râvan*), the name is similarly recited. In the case of a female, her personal name is recited together with that of her father as long as she is not betrothed. But after betrothal her name is recited together with that of her husband. As a lady's name is recited with her husband's in all ceremonies after betrothal, the ceremony of betrothal is known as "*Nâmzad shudan*" in Persian or "*Nâm pâdvun*" in Gujarati, meaning "to give a name."

The birth-day of a Parsi child—and especially the first birth-day—is an important day. No religious rites or ceremonies are enjoined as necessary. But the parents generally like to celebrate it in, what one may call, a religious way. After a bath and a new suit of clothes, the child is generally sent with some sandal wood to an adjoining Fire-temple. There the ashes of the sacred fire is attached to its forehead. Some of those, who can afford, get a religious ceremony known as *Fareshtâ*¹ performed. That is generally done on the

¹ Pers. فرشته i.e., angel.

first birth-day. This ceremony consists of the recital of prayers in honour of the different Yazatas or angels and indicate that God's blessings are invoked upon the child and wished that it may be blessed with all the physical characteristics and mental virtues over which God has directed these Yazatas to preside. According to Herodotus¹ "of all the days in the year, the one which the ancient Persians observed most was their birth-day."

From a strictly religious point of view, there is nothing special to be remarked in the case of the childhood of a Parsi child. It is held to be innocent and not liable or subject to the performance of any religious duties or rites. If God forbid—the child dies before the Naojote or the investiture of the sacred shirt and thread, its funeral ceremonies are on a lower scale. In the case of an adult male or female, if he or she belongs to the layman class the appellation of Behedin is added before his or her name in the recital of ceremonies. If the person belongs to the priestly class, the appellation is Ervad if he is a male and has passed through the initiating ceremony of priesthood (Nâvar). It is Oshta (Avestâ Hâvishta, *i.e.*, a disciple), if he has not passed through that ceremony. In the case of a female of the priestly class, the appellation is Oshti (feminine of Oshta), but in the case of a child, whether belonging to the priestly or layman class, it is 'Khurd,' *i.e.*, small or young. This appellation signifies that the deceased person was too young and that it had no responsibility for duties or rites as a Zoroastrian.

At or about the age of six, the child has to learn by heart a few religious prayers—especially those falling under the head of, and attached to the Nirang-i-Kusti², *i.e.*, the recital for putting on

¹ Bk. I, 133. *Vide Ibid* Bk. IX, 110-14, for the king's birth-day feast Tykta'. The king soaped his head and gave gifts on this day. He refused no demands of gifts on that day.

² Spiegel, translated by Bleeck, Vol. III, p. 4. "Le Zend Avesta," par Darmesteter, Vol. II, p. 685.

the sacred thread. These must be learnt by heart for the coming occasion of its Naojote, when it is to be invested with sacred shirt and thread. After this investiture, the child's name ceases to be recited as *Khurd* in the prayers accompanying religious ceremonies, but is recited as Behedin or Oshta, as the case may be, *i.e.*, as it belongs to the layman or the priestly class.
