

The Vedic Religion in Ancient Iran and Zarathushtra

Subhash Kak

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Scholars generally agree that before the advent of Zarathushtra, the religion of the *devas* was current in Iran. For want of a better term, some have called the pre-Zoroastrian religion Persian paganism.¹ But here we argue that to do so is to obscure its connections with the Vedic religion. The similarities between the pre-Zoroastrian Persian religion and the Vedic religion are too many to give it any other name.

The term Zoroastrian is after the Greek version of the name of the prophet Zarathushtra (*zarat*, like Sanskrit *harit*, golden; *uṣtra*, Sanskrit or Old Persian for camel) who has been variously estimated to have lived either around the time 1200 BC or perhaps half a millennium later. A Greek tradition assigns him to an age 258 years prior to Alexander, that is the 6th century BC.² The name by which the Zoroastrians call their own religion is Mazdayasna, the religion of Ahura Mazda (Sanskrit *Asura Medhā*, “Lord of Wisdom”). The R̥gveda 8.6.10 has the expression *medhām ṛtasya*, “wisdom of truth”.

Zarathushtra presented his religion as rival to the religion of the *daevas*, that is Daevayasna. Zarathushtra came from Bactria in northeast Iran, near Afghanistan. The Avesta speaks of several lands that include the Sapta-Sindhu (Sindhu-Sarasvati region of North and Northwest India). The scripture of the Zoroastrians is the Avesta. It includes the Yasna (Sanskrit *Yajna*) with the Gāthās of Zarathushtra, Videvdat or Vendidad (Vi-daeva-dat, “anti-Daeva”), and Yašt (hymn), which are hymns for worship. During the Sasanian period the Avesta was translated into Pahlavi and this version is called Zend Avesta.

The Zoroastrians speak of mathra (Skt. *mantra*) as utterances that ac-

company meditation. Like the Vedic tripartite division of society, the Zoroastrians have the classes priests (zaotar), warriors (nar), and pasturers (vāstar).

It has been assumed for some time that the *daevas* of the Mazda faith are the same as the Vedic *devas* and therefore Zarathushtra inverted the *deva-asura* dichotomy of the Vedic period. In reality, the situation is more complex and the Vedic and the Zarathushtrian systems are much less different than is generally supposed.

From Kashmir, which belongs square within the Vedic world, comes crucial evidence regarding a three-way division consisting of *devas*, *asuras*, and *daevas*. The scheme reflects the three-way division that is basic to Vedic thought. These three divisions in the outer realm are the earth, atmosphere, and the sun; in the inner world they are the body, breath (*prāṇa*), and consciousness or *ātman*. This tripartite classification is mirrored in the *gunas* of Indian thought: *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*.

Deva, or *devata* (heavens, *sattva*): power related to understanding

Asura (atmosphere, *rajas*): power related to activity

Daeva (earth, body, *tamas*): power related to acquisitiveness

Kashmiri folklore has many tales where *daevas* are counterpoints to *devas* and *asuras*. Sometimes the term *rākṣasa* is used as a synonym for *daeva*. This term *rākṣasa* occurs very frequently in Sanskrit literature. The word *rakṣas* appears in the Ṛgveda, the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa and other texts; it is also considered equivalent to Nirṛti. The *rākṣasa* form of marriage is the violent seizure or rape of a girl after the defeat or destruction of her relatives.

It is entirely possible that the term *daeva* came into Kashmir late as a result of the immigration of Persians. If that were the case, the reason why it took root is because it served as a synonym for an existing idea. It is equally possible that the term has been current in Kashmir from ancient times and its usage there parallels that by Zarathushtra from the nearby Bactria. Further support for this view comes from the fact that the Kashmiri Hindus, who have remained isolated from any Persian immigrations of the last few centuries, follow many practices that are prescribed for Zoroastrians. These include the

sacred thread for women (called *aetapan* in Kashmiri) and the sacred shirt (*sadr*).

The Vedic view of seeing the world in triple categories was in the later Purāṇic gloss simplified into dichotomies like that of *deva* versus *asura* (including *rākṣasa*). Zarathushtra made a similar simplification using the dichotomy of *asura* (including *deva* under the label *yazata*) and *daeua*. The *asuras* are the ground on which the *devas* emerge. The Zarathushtrian reduction is not particularly different from the Purāṇic.

In this paper, I summarize the general structural and nomenclatural similarities between the Zoroastrian and the Vedic systems. I hope to show that the Zoroastrian innovations on the prior Vedic system in Iran have parallels in the adaptations that were taking place in India in the Purāṇic period. But Zarathushtra's emphasis on a sharp dichotomy between good and evil gave rise to an aesthetic and an approach that was quite unique.

The General System

Here is a list of divinities that are included by the Zoroastrians amongst the forces of the good where I provide the corresponding Sanskrit spelling within brackets:

The Great Lord:

The supreme God of the Zoroastrian faith is Ahura Mazda (Asura Medhā). He is self-created, omniscient, omnipresent, holy, invisible, and beyond human conceptualization. In Yašt 1, Ahura Mazda proclaims: “My sixth name is understanding; my seventh is Intelligent One; my eighth name is Knowledge; my ninth is Endowed with Knowledge; my twentieth is Mazda (Wisdom). I am the Wise One; my name is the Wisest of the Wise.”

This is reminiscent of Purusha in the Vedas. The Cosmic Purusha projects on the three planes of the heavens, the sun, and the earth into the Viśve Devaḥ, Indra, and Agni. Likewise, Ahura Mazda projects his power of good through the Amesha Spenta (Immortal Energy).

Vohu Manah (Su Manah): Good Intention; Persian Bahman

Asha Vahishta (Ṛta Vasiṣṭha): Best Law; Ardvahisht

Kshathra Vairya (Kṣatra Vairya): Heroic Dominion

Spenta Armaiti (Spanda Aramati): Bounteous Devotion

Haurvatat (Sarvatata): Wholeness

Amaratat (Amaratata): Immortality

The first three are conceived of as masculine beings, the last three as feminine. The division of the six Amesha Spentas in three classes, with masculine and feminine forms, appears to parallel the projection of the power of Purusha into divinities in the three planes of Mind, Law, and Kingship.

Common deities (Yazatas):

Many deities are identical in the Zoroastrian and the Vedic systems. Some can be recognized by noting the peculiar sound transformation in going from Sanskrit to Avestan such as *aṣa* obtained from *ṛta*.

The Vedic deities are conceived within the framework of the *bandhu* between the astronomical, the terrestrial, and the physiological and the spiritual.³ There seems to be a similar conception behind the Adorable Gods (*Yajatas*) since they include several stars such as the Pleiades, Sirius, and Vega.

Airyaman (Aryaman): An Āditya who appears together with Mitra. In Yašt 3, there is invocation to Airyamā iṣyo, the “Desirable Airyaman”. Airyaman represents hospitality.

Āpas (Āpaḥ): Cosmic Waters; Ābān

Apam Napāt: Child of the Waters. The pre-Zoroastrian Varuṇa is still invoked in the yasna service as Apam Napāt.

Aradvi Sūrā Anāhitā (Sarasvati Śūrā): also Harahvati and the goddess Anāhitā.

Arštāt (Ṛta): Justice, Order

Aši, Mazā-rayī (Mahā-rayī): Fortune, “treasure-laden” (Yašt 17)

Asmān (Aśman): Stony vault, Sky; seen in opposition to Zam, Earth.

Ātar (Atharvan): Agni

Ātharvan (Atharvan)

Čistā (Śiṣṭā): Goddess of the Way, Mithra’s companion (16th Yašt)

Dāēnā: Religion, in later Persian Dēn, “Woman who can possess you”. The word *daena* survives in Kashmiri and Punjabi.

Dādār (Dātā): Giver

Gāv (Gauḥ): Cosmic Cow, Earth

Hvar (Svar) : Sun; in later Persian the prefix Khor as in Khordād (given by Sun)

Īza (Idā/Iḷā): Goddess of Sacrifice

Mithra (Mitra), also Mihr. Seen in Rāman Khrāštra, “Rāma’s Kṣatra”, Rāmarājya, in the Rām Yašt. Good Vāy (Vāyu) is called Rām (signifying joy and peace).

Sraoša (Bṛhas-pati): Companion of Mithra. In later Persia, as Sarōš or Siroos, he is the angel who mediates between God and man.

Thworešta (Tvaṣṭṛ): Fashioner

Ushah (Uśā): The Goddess Dawn that makes self-illumination possible.

Vād (Vāta): Wind

Vāyu, Vāy (Vāyu): Breath

Verethraghan (Vṛtrahan): Indra as destroyer of the veil of ignorance (Vṛtra) as in the Vedas = Persian Bahrām

Vivanhvant (Vivasvant): Sun

Yima (Yama); as in Jam or Jamshed (Yima Khšaeta, “Yima Radiant”) deserted by Khvarnah (Suvarṇah), Sun.

Mitra and Bhaga are two of the Ādityas, names of the Sun, in the Vedas. The other Ādityas from a late list are Indra, Aryaman, Vivasvant, Viṣṇu, Parjanya, Varuṇa, Dhātṛ, Pūṣan, Amśu, and Tvaṣṭā.

Since Mitra and Varuṇa are *dvandva* partners in the Vedas, the omission of Varuṇa from the Zoroastrian lists indicates that Zarathushtra was from the borderlands of the Vedic world where the Vedic system was not fully in place. This would also explain the omission of divinities such as Viṣṇu and Rudra.⁴ Likewise, it explains why the names of the Pleiades (Kṛttikā in Sanskrit) are very different: Paoiryaēnī.

But since Varuṇa is mentioned in the Mitanni documents, it is clear that the pre-Zoroastrian religion in Iran included Varuṇa.

It is remarkable that Baga (Skt. Bhaga), the pre-Zoroastrian name of God in Iran, is not listed amongst the Yazatas. This omission may be a consequence of the adoption of a new divinity, Ahura Mazda, in place of the old one.

Common cultural concepts:

The Zoroastrian innovations did not change the basic Vedic character of the culture in Iran. The worship ritual remained unchanged as was the case with basic conceptions related to divinity and the place of man. In disease the Zoroastrians speak of Aēšma in place of Yakṣmā.

Ameša (Amṛta): Immortal. The emphasis is on a state beyond time from which the phenomenal world emerges.

Arta (Ṛta): Asha; Cosmic Order

Aži (Ahi): Dragon. This is the dragon that covers truth.

Bāresman (Barhi): grass strewn on vedi

Druj (Druh): opposite of Asha, falsehood, anṛta
Framāyišn (Yajamāna)
Frashasti (Praśasti)
Hamkar (Samskāra)
Haoma (Soma); Used in ritual
Humayi (Su+māyā): good māyā
Karapan (Kṛpan): Niggardliness, Zarathusthra is hostile to it
Kav, Kay, Kavi (Kavi): Inspired seer
Mahal (Mahālaya)
Nāhn (Snāna): ritual bath
Pāvi (Pavitra): place to sacrifice
Saena (Śyena): the eagle; also Saena meregh (mṛga), Simurgh
Sogand (Saugandha): oath
Urvar (urvar): the original plant or productive ground; later Persian ruvān,
soul
Vāh, Vāh (Svāhā, Svāhā): Invocation at the fire ritual
Varah (Vrata): Vow
Yasna (Yajña); also Jashn; the act of worship; sacrifice
Yatu (yātu): magic; jādu
Yima son of Vivanhvant (Yama son of Vivasvant)
Yazata (yajata); worthy of worship

Zaotar (hotā): priest

Zaothra (Stotra): Worship

The struggle between the Ārya and the Dasyu in the Vedas is paralleled by one between the Ārya and the Turya (Turks).

Five divinities in Yasna Haptanhaiti

Aši (Āśī): Reward, called Mazā-rayi (Mahārayī)

Iš (Īśa): Enjoyment

Āzuiti (Āhūti): Plenty

Frasasti (Praśasti): Satisfaction

Pārandhi (Purandhi): Nourishment

Zarathushtra nowhere names the daevas born of Angra Mainyu (Pahlavi Ahriman, Hostile Spirit) but Middle Iranian books label Indar (Indra), Nanhaithya (Nasatya), and Savol. These appear to be a personification of the acquisitive aspects of the *devas*. Confirmation of this idea comes from the fact that Vāyu in the Zoroastrian view is said to have two aspects, one good and another harmful (*zinake*). The good Indra, as Verethraghan (Vṛtrahan), the destroyer of the veil of ignorance, is a yazata.

Further Parallels

The list of common deities and concepts will make it clear that the Zoroastrian system is essentially the same as the Vedic one. The presence of Indra in the list of the daevas seems to mirror the relegation of Indra that started in the Purāṇic times where instead of connecting to Svar through the intermediate region of which Indra is lord, a direct worship of the Great Lord (Viṣṇu or Śiva) was stressed. This innovation is not counter to the Vedic system since the triple division is a recursive order. The devas are a part of

the good forces in the Zoroastrian system under the label of yazata (*yajata*, the adored-ones).

The Zoroastrian mythology remembers the Vedic sages and heroes such as Kavi Suśravah (Kay Khosrau), Kavi Uśanas (Kay Us). The names Kṣatra Vīrya (Shahriyar) and Suvarṇah (Khwarrah, Farrah) help find the logic of late Persian names. The *daeua* in modern Persian are known as *deev*.

The commonality of the fire ritual is well known. Less known is the ritual of the nine-nights (barashnom i no-shab) which is like the Indian ritual of the same name (navarātri). The No Roz occurs on the day of the spring equinox just as the festival of Indra.

Zarathushtra made a clear distinction between the good way (ashavant) and the false way (dregvant). The pre-Zoroastrian religion of Iran is clearly Vedic. Zarathushtra's innovation lay in his emphasis on the dichotomy of good and bad. But in details it retained the earlier structure of the Vedic divinities and their relationship as well as the central role of the fire ritual.

Evolution, purity

The Pahlavi texts distinguish between the states related to the spirit and the body as mēnōg (Skt. manas) and gētīg (Skt. gaṭhita). The idea of Consciousness being primary is expressed in the theology as the creation first of mēnōg and then gētīg. In the beginning both these are perfect but later due to "mixture" there is trouble. In general, evolution proceeds from the mēnōg to the gētīg state. This is similar to the evolution from sattva to tamas.

The Pahlavi word for "confession" is patīt which is similar to *patita*, fallen. Purification is done by yoždāthra, śuddhi.

Herodotus states that the "Persians built no temples, no altars, made no images or statues" (Herodotus 1.131-2). Arrian in the Indica (7) says that Indians "did not build temples for the gods." To the outsider also, the two religions of the Persians and the Indians looked similar.

Elsewhere, I have summarized the evidence⁵ regarding the presence of the Indian religion in West Asia in the second millennium BC. This spread appears with the Kassites in 1750 BC in Mesopotamia who worshiped Sūrya and later for centuries in the empire of the Vedic worshipping Mitanni. These

ruling groups represented a minority in a population that spoke different languages. Other Vedic religion worshipping groups were undoubtedly in the intermediate region of Iran which itself consisted of several ethnic groups including the Elamite and the Turkic.

Zarathushtra brought a new element into the picture from the northeast. Linguistically, he happened to be “h” speaking in opposition to the Indic “s” speaking as in *haptah* versus *saptah* for week, or *hvar* versus *svar* for the Sun. He also brought the categorization of good versus evil onto the framework to create a new structure which was to be influential in the shaping of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The old Vedic religion survived for a pretty long time in corners of Iran. The evidence of the survival of the *devas* comes from the *daiva*-inscription of Khshayarshan (Xerxes) (ruled 486-465 BC) in which the revolt by the *daiva* worshipers in West Iran is directly mentioned.

Scholars generally take the use of *daiva* in the inscription as a misprint for *daeua*. Whether that is true or not, the inscription does point to the presence of diverse beliefs within the region during the middle of the first millennium BC. Furthermore, the presence of the Mitanni does support the notion of the *daiva* worshipers to the West of the Iranians.

Concluding Remarks

The extensive spread of the Vedic religion in Iran prior to Zarathushtra explains how the Zoroastrian “reform” left the basic system unchanged. The similarities in the ritual offering made by the Zoroastrians and the Hindus are well known. These offerings include the milk, water, the sap of plants, cakes of rice or wheat, fruit and vegetables, butter.

The spread of the Vedic system also explains how the Mitannis⁶, as an Indic-name using ruling minority, remained connected to their Vedic traditions. They were neighbours to the pre-Zoroastrian Vedic Iran and thus they should not be seen as an isolated group.

The chronological framework presented by the parallels between the Zoroastrian and the Vedic systems is in consonance with the idea that the Vedic people have been in India since at least 5000 BC, as confirmed by the astronomical references in the Vedic texts and the absence of archaeological

evidence regarding influx of people into India after that time⁷. The Purāṇas speak of the Vedic people in Jambudvīpa and beyond the Himalayas in the north in Uttara-Kuru. It appears that subsequent to the collapse of the Sarasvati-river based economy around 1900 BC, groups of Indians moved West and that might have been responsible for the Aryanization of Iran if it wasn't Aryanized earlier. This movement seems to be correlated with the presence of the Indic Kassites and the Mitannis in West Asia.⁸

In such a scenario, the Uttara-Kuru tribes, who were a part of the larger Vedic world, may have pushed Westwards in a process that must have continued for millennia and taken myths from the Indic region to Europe. This was not a process of invasions but rather a complex process with some migration and some cultural diffusion. One should note that about 10,000 years ago most of northern Europe was under ice in the last Ice Age and the inhabitants of ice-free southern Europe were speakers of non-Indo-European languages such as the Basque, Etruscan and Finnish of later times. To the extent the Uttara-Kuru tribes moved West, they must have intermarried with local populations to emerge as different European tribes.

The divergence in the names of the stars, which were central to the Vedic ritual, suggests that there existed variation in the traditions, reflecting local custom and influence of other cultures.

If the date of Zarathushtra being 258 years before Alexander is correct, then the syntheses of Zarathushtra and the Buddha, one extolling wisdom (*medhā*) and the other intelligence (*buddhi*), occurred at almost the same period. The use of temples is late in the Zoroastrian and the Hindu traditions and it may have been a response to the popularity of the Buddha image and the *sangha* that administered it.

Unfortunately, Avestan and later Zoroastrian studies have not made use of fieldwork of social customs in Kashmir and Punjab. It is my hope that research done on parallels in India and also on the Vedic religion prior to the coming of Zarathushtra will be most useful. The understanding of the Zoroastrian religion would benefit from a systematic comparison with the Vedic texts and by considering the Sanskrit etymologies of the Avestan words.

Notes

1. Boyce, 1975, 2001. In the Gāthās, Zarathushtra uses the imagery of the cow repeatedly, without reference to the plough or tilling of the soil. This has been taken to imply a pastoral life-style. This inference by Boyce and other scholars before her is in error since the usual meaning of the term *gauh* in the Vedas and the Avesta is “Earth”. In fact, farming was introduced in Central Asia as early as the 5th millennium BC and the idea of pastoralism in Zarathushtra’s age on this argument is wrong.
2. Ernst Herzfeld in his *Zoroaster and His World* has argued for the later date in contrast to the earlier date by Mary Boyce in her *History of Zoroastrianism*. In my judgment, Herzfeld’s arguments are stronger.
3. See Kak, 2000, for the astronomical *bandhu* that illuminate the origin of divinities.
4. It should be noted that the names in themselves are not as significant as the structure of the system.
5. Kak, *Akhenaten, Sūrya, and the Ṛgveda*, 2003.
6. Kak, *op cit*.
7. See Kak, 2000 and Kazanas, 1999, 2001, 2002 for astronomical and other reasons for the presence of the Vedic people in India at an early date.
8. The idea of a proto-Indoaryan Iran which led to the later Indic (Burrow, 1973) does not square with the facts related to Middle Indic names amongst the Mitanni and the Nuzi (Dumont, 1947). Likewise, it doesn’t explain the presence of *yahvah* in the Ṛgveda (Kak, 2003), or the distribution of the Ṛgvedic deities in several parts of the world (Kazanas, 2001).

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