
PERSECUTION OF ZARATHUSHTIS IN THE 1800S IN YAZD

FIVE YEARS IN A PERSIAN TOWN (YAZD)

NAPIER MALCOLM

Yezd community includes persons of three or four different religions. There are in the town fourteen hundred Parsi houses, the inhabitants of which are Zoroastrian. There is also a smaller colony of Jews. The remainder are Mohammedans; but a considerable number of these belong to the Behāī sect, and are considered rank heretics. The Parsis, though greatly oppressed in the past, and still liable to some disabilities, have of late years become wealthy and prosperous. The Jews are in some ways less restricted than the Parsis; but, as they are still wretchedly poor, they are really much more down-trodden. That religious bigotry still exists among the Mussulmans in Yezd has only lately been made perfectly plain by the ghastly massacre of the Behāīs in the summer of 1903; but Mohammedan bigotry in Persia is by no means without limitations. It is spasmodic in its action, nor does it entirely obliterate every other feeling.

A few years ago Yezd had the reputation of being one of the most bigoted of the towns of Persia. The presence of the Zoroastrian remnant, who were subject to the grossest persecution,

served only to keep alive the fire of religious hatred; and the community of Jews in a lesser degree had the same effect. The stories of the way in which the Parsis were bullied and persecuted are interesting, as showing, amongst other things, the intense childishness of the Persian Mussulman. The atmosphere of the town seems to have resembled, as indeed it still resembles, that of a preparatory school for little boys. Up to 1895 no Parsi was allowed to carry an umbrella. Even during the time that I was in Yezd they could not carry one in town. Up to 1895 there was a strong prohibition upon eye-glasses and spectacles; up to 1885 they were prevented from wearing rings; their girdles had to be made of rough canvas, but after 1885 any white material was permitted. Up to 1896 the Parsis were obliged to twist their turbans instead of folding them. Up to about 1898 only brown, grey, and yellow were allowed for the *qabā* or *arkhālūq* (body garments), but after that all colours were permitted, except blue, black, bright red, or green. There was also a prohibition against white stockings, and up to about 1880 the Parsis had to wear a special kind of peculiarly hideous shoe with a broad, turned-up toe. Up to 1885 they

had to wear a torn cap. Up to about 1880 they had to wear tight knickers, self-coloured, instead of trousers. Up to 1891 all Zoroastrians had to walk in town, and even in the desert they had to dismount if they met a Mussulman of any rank whatsoever. During the time that I was in Yezd they were allowed to ride in the desert, and only had to dismount if they met a big Mussulman. There were other similar dress restrictions too numerous and trifling to mention. Then the houses of both the Parsis and the Jews, with the surrounding walls, had to be built so low that the top could be reached by a Mussulman with his hand extended; they might, however, dig down below the level of the road. The walls had to be splashed with white round the door. Double doors, the common form of Persian door, were forbidden, also rooms containing three or more windows. *Bad-girs* were still forbidden to the Parsis while we were in Yezd, but in 1900 one of the bigger Parsi merchants gave a large present to the Governor and to the chief *mujtahid* (Mohammedan priest) to be allowed to build one. Upper rooms were also forbidden.

Up to about 1860 Parsis could not engage in trade. They used to hide things in their cellar

rooms, and sell them secretly. They can now trade in the caravanserais or hostelryes, but not in the bazaars, nor may they trade in linen drapery. Up to 1870 they were not permitted to have a school for their children.

The amount of the *jazīya*, or tax upon infidels, differed according to the wealth of the individual Parsi, but it was never less than two *tomāns*. A *toman* is now worth about three shillings and eight pence, but it used to be worth much more. Even now, when money has much depreciated, it represents a labourer's wage for ten days. The money had to be paid on the spot, when the *farrāsh*, who was acting as collector, met the man. The *farrash* was at liberty to do what he liked when collecting *jaziya*. The man was not even allowed to go home and fetch the money, but was at once beaten until it was given. About 1865 a *farrash* collecting this tax tied a man to a dog, and gave a blow to each in turn.

About 1891 a *mujtahid* caught a Zoroastrian merchant wearing white stockings in one of the public squares of the town. He ordered the man to be beaten and the stockings taken off. About 1860 a man of seventy went to the bazaars in white trousers of rough canvas. They hit him

about a good deal, took off his trousers, and sent him home with them under his arm. Sometimes Parsis would be made to stand on one leg in a *mujtahid's* house until they consented to pay a considerable sum of money. Occasionally, however, the childish mockery that pervaded the persecuting ordinances enabled the Zoroastrians to evade the disabilities proposed. For instance, as the Jews had to wear a patch on the *qaba*, or coat, the *mujtahids* in about 1880 tried to make the Parsis wear an obvious patch on the shirt. Muhammad Hasan Khan was then Governor, and Mulla Bahrām of Khurramshār, a Parsi, asked him to arrange that his people should have three days' respite to get the patches ready. During these three days the Parsi women set to work, and made a neat embroidered border round the neck and opening of the shirt. This the Parsis exhibited as the required patch; and as it was very obvious, and was certainly an insertion, there was really nothing more to be said. In Yezd a small score like this counts for more than does a firman of the Shah.

In the reign of the late Shah Nāsiru'd Dīn, Mānukjī Limjī, a British Parsi from India, was for a long while in Tehran as Parsi representative.

Almost all the Parsi disabilities were withdrawn, the *jaziya*, the clothes restrictions, the riding restrictions, and those with regard to houses, but the law of inheritance was not altered, according to which a Parsi who has become a Mussulman takes precedence of his Zoroastrian brothers and sisters. The *jaziya* was actually remitted, and also some of the restrictions as to houses, but the rest of the firman was a dead letter.

In 1898 the present Shah, Muzaffaru'd Dīn, gave a firman to Dīnyār, the present *Qalāntar* of the Parsi *Anjuman*, or Committee, revoking all the remaining Parsi disabilities, and also declaring it unlawful to use fraud or deception in making conversions of Parsis to Islam. This firman does not appear to have had any effect at all.

About 1883, after the firman of Nāsiru'd Dīn Shah had been promulgated, one of the Parsis, Rustami Ardishīri Dīnyār, built in Kūcha Biyuk, one of the villages near Yezd, a house with an upper room, slightly above the height to which the Parsis used to be limited. He heard that the Mussulmans were going to kill him, so he fled by night to Tehran. They killed another Parsi, Tīrandāz, in mistake for him, but did not destroy the house.

So the great difficulty was not to get the law improved, but rather to get it enforced. When Manukji was at Yezd, about 1870, two Parsis were attacked by two Mussulmans outside the town, and one was killed, the other being terribly wounded, as they had tried to cut off his head. The Governor brought the criminals to Yezd, but did nothing to them. Manukji then got leave to take them to Tehran. The Prime Minister, however, told him that no Mussulman would be killed for a *Zardūshtī*, or Zoroastrian, and that they would only be bastinadoed. About this time Manukji enquired whether it was true that the blood-price of a *Zardushti* was to be seven *tomans*. He got back the official reply that it was to be a little over.

The Yezd Parsis have been helped considerably by agents from Bombay, who are British subjects, and of late years things have slightly improved. About 1885, a *Seyid*, that is, a descendant of Muhammad, killed a *Zardushti* woman in Yezd. Ibrāhīm Qalīl Khān took him, and, by order of the Zillu's Sultān, Prince Governor of Isfahan, and elder brother of the Shah, killed him before daybreak. When the Mohammedan mullas heard of it in the morning, they gave orders for a general slaughter

of the Parsis. Many of the Parsis were injured, but none killed. Then in 1899 the Sahāmu'l Mulk, at the commencement of his governorship of Yezd, killed a Mussulman servant of the Mushīru'l Mamālik for a criminal assault upon a Zoroastrian woman. This man was not a Seyid, which made the matter more simple. Just before, when the Mushīru'l Mamālik was temporary Governor, Isfandiār, the Parsi schoolmaster at Taft, one of the large Yezd villages, and Salāmat, another Parsi, were killed by two *lūtīs* (roughs) without reason. One of these *lutis* was a Seyid. Both were sent to Tehran, and a *mujtahid* went up with them to ask for their release. The Shah ordered the Seyid's release, but the fate of the other is not known. That the Seyid was not much intimidated is certain, as in the August of 1901, when I was in Taft, he used to wander about with other *lutis* quite openly.

During the last nine or ten years the governors in Yezd have been much stronger, and they have, generally speaking, been friendly to the Parsis. The Parsis are an industrious and intelligent people, and they have become in Yezd a wealthy community. Also there is an extremely wealthy Parsi in Tehran, Arbāb Jamshīd, who is probably

more able to influence the Persian Government in favour of his countrymen than are the Indian Parsis from Bombay. Nowadays no governor who wants to remain in Yezd can afford to leave the Parsi community out of his calculations. The real advance made by the Parsi colony seems to date from the second term of government of the Jalālu'd Daula, eldest son of the Zillu's Sultān, Governor of Isfahan. The Parsis themselves also put down a great deal of the improvement in their circumstances to the spread of the Behāi faith, and certainly, although a semi-secret sect, the Behāis individually plead openly for a general religious liberty and toleration. Naturally such a movement has been of considerable assistance to the Parsis. As an indication of the influence of the Parsis, it is interesting to notice that during the late Behāi massacres, immediately there was talk of an attack on the Parsi quarter, the Mussulman clergy applied themselves to suppressing the movement.

Although the Jews are very much weaker and poorer, they have their place in the social organisation of the town, and the contempt in which they are held does not prevent the Yezdis from recognising their right to a kind of citizenship.

Their religion of course is held in much greater respect than that of the Parsis, for they are people of the Book, and although the Persian Shiahhs granted the Zoroastrians a certain share in this status, when they allowed them to continue in the country on the same terms as Jews and Christians, the ordinary Yezdi of to-day hesitates considerably before he allows that Zoroaster was in any sense a prophet.

I myself have met Mussulmans serving in a menial capacity in Parsi houses; I have entertained Parsis of standing and Mussulmans of standing together on public occasions; and I have no hesitation in saying that even the bigoted Mussulman recognises the bond of common citizenship, although it is certainly true that on most occasions he prefers the bond of religion. Still, a Persian's religious feeling, even when it seems to amount to fanatical bigotry, is generally so connected with self-interest, that, when it is disconnected from thoughts of profit, it is difficult to know how much influence it will possess with him.

It is certainly a fact that a year or two ago, when an Isfahani Seyid came and preached in the Yezd mosques against painted trays, Manchester

cottons, bank-notes, and Bibles, the Yezdi Mussulmans gave him the cold shoulder, and treated him as a foreigner who had intruded himself into their domestic concerns.

People were surprised at this happening in the city which a few years before had been regarded as one of the most fanatical in the whole of Persia. As a matter of fact, the so-called fanaticism of Yezd was two-thirds of it non-religious in character. There was an element of turbulence, produced by a series of weak governors; there was a real religious element; and there was an element of insularity, utterly unconnected with creed and doctrine. In spite of the smallness of the Christian colony, which even at present consists of only eighteen Europeans, to which may be added twenty-two Armenians (the households of men in European employment), the people of the town which is after all not large, had soon become familiarised with this little settlement as a Yezd institution. Then the insular spirit came to be enlisted on the side of the Ferangis, and, the turbulence produced by weak governorship being eliminated, there was only the religious difficulty left.

There have only been Europeans in Yezd for

some twelve years. The early arrivals were a bank manager and a merchant's agent. The work of the Church Missionary Society has been established there for some six years, and the English telegraph clerk has been there for about a year. Now all the members of the colony have contributed something to the life of the town, and all the Europeans have worked together with marked cordiality and harmony. Both of these things have certainly had a great effect in hastening the establishment of the colony in the town, and in winning for it the support of the Yezdis' insular prejudices. The merchants are distinctly glad of the bank, and of the resident agent from a responsible Manchester firm. The people have learnt to value the Medical Mission; and the schools, though they appeal to a smaller class, appeal equally strongly.