

JOE/ZUBIN'S "QUEST FOR ZARATHUSHTRA"

By Adi Doctor

"Joe has made it very clear to us that he does not expect anything whatever from us — all he wants is Zarathushtra" — Dr. Kersey Antia, in his homily immediately after performing the phoney 'Navjote' of Peterson on 5-3-1983.

So does Mr. Zubin Mehta, who, as a "cynic" on celluloid, asks questions to a priest about the great Prophet of ancient Iran. But there is a difference between the two. While Zubin Mehta is born of Parsee parents, Peterson is the son of Christian parents. Again, while Peterson claims that he has diligently studied the Zoroastrian religion (all self taught), Zubin Mehta concedes that he is an "ignoramus", about the religion and wants to be enlightened by the 'filmy' priest. **There the difference ends.**

Both of them, however, are equally guilty of using the wrong means to achieve their common end — "Quest For Zarathushtra". Joseph Peterson underwent a vicious travesty of a ceremony which was called, "Navjote" or "Vohujote" or whatever else; Zubin Mehta had to participate in a 90-minute film, which will be foisted on the Parsees, just to show how he was enlightened about Zoroaster and his religion! So you have a fictitious 'Navjote' and an irreverent film, to learn about the Prophet! In the last 200-250 years, when Anquetil du Perron led a host of non-Parsee savants to find out something about the mystical religion of Zoroaster, no one even dreamt of undergoing the farce of having his 'Navjote' performed. (We can easily gauge from this, how much knowledge Joseph Peterson has obtained about the Iranian religion!). So also, in the last eight to nine thousand years, which is the approximate era of Prophet Zarathushtra, though untold miseries, suffer-

ings and tribulations have his followers undergone (they lost their Empire, nation and even their language!), the religion itself has successfully navigated the vicissitudes of time, and yet, we are told that one of the main reasons why the film is being made is to educate both the present generation and posterity!

We don't need a pseudo-Zoroastrian or a sophisticated farce of a film to preserve our religion, which is destined to continue till the end of the cycles of time!

But Joseph and Zubin are only two marionettes, who have wittingly or unwittingly allowed themselves to be dragged in the "tamasha". It is the men behind them and the "media" used by them that are primarily responsible. And how!

We shall briefly examine the two 'agencies' ('Navjote' and film) and the puppeteers behind them.

As far as the 'Navjote' is concerned, we shall not go deep into the 'Conversion' aspect vis-a-vis the Zoroastrian scriptures. We shall only try to prove that this so called 'Navjote' of Peterson is totally void and invalid under Zoroastrian law.

It may surprise some of you to know that the Navjote ceremony is nowhere mentioned in our Scriptures, i.e. in the extant Avesta and Pahlavi/Pazend texts. **IT IS A RELIGIOUS TRADITION**, a Rewaaj, what the Avesta calls Upayana. Thus, the Navjote ceremony has come down to us, thanks to the priest class, through tradition, by word of mouth. At the very outset, therefore, the anti-traditionalists, both in India and abroad, who shout about throwing away "out dated customs", are given the

boot. And yet, hypocritically, those who pooh-pooh Zoroastrian traditions, like Kersey Antia, are themselves ultra-keen and anxious to cling to this traditional remnant of a **Navjote** to enable someone to be labelled a Zoroastrian! So much for the 'consistency' of some of the "New World" Parsees and Iranis.

In the traditional initiation ceremony or 'Navjote', the child who has to be **not more** than 15 years old, accordingly to Chapter 18 of the **Vendidad**, is first given a **Nahan** or spiritual ablution, when he is administered the **Nirang** (consecrated bull's urine). Now, anything that is consecrated, i.e. spiritually purified with holy incantations, is capable of attracting **Yazatic** currents and forces, and is called an **Alat**. Hence, such a consecrated object becomes desecrated and loses its power and potency if a person of alien faith even as much as casts his eye on it! So what happens to the **Nirang** if a Christian like Peterson were to touch it or drink it? **THIS VERY POINT WAS RAISED BY THE LATE JUSTICE DINSHA DAVAR IN THE PARSI PANCHAYAT CASE of 1906.**

The whole trouble arises, because the very word **Navjote** is not clearly understood. The significance or purport of **Navjote** is to make a new **Joti**. A **Joti** (initiate) is one who stakes a claim to the membership of the white side of Nature, in which the **Yazatic** currents are constantly flowing. The child asks for such membership and if its **Navjote** ceremony is validly and lawfully performed, it gets the permission to fight on the side of **Spenta Mainyu**. Such a child is then capable of tapping the **gaas** created by Prophet Zarathushtra and absorbing the blessings that pour from it. It is more than obvious that the **Sudreh-Kusti**, which are the "golden weapons" (**Zarenumant Sura**) to fight evil, are also

the means and wherewithals by which the **Navjotee** can tap the **gaas** of Zarathushtra. It is inherent in this that the **Navjotee** has to be a child born of **Masdayasni Bust-e-Kustian** parents. No other child can qualify for the **Navjote** ceremony! This is the **conditio sine qua non** for a valid, lawful **Navjote**. The **bunak** (nucleus) of such a child alone carries with it the properties of a true **Mazdayasnan**, who can before the age of 15, be initiated as a **Mazdayasni Zoroastrian**.

The one question, however, that beats us is that if, as pointed out at the beginning of this article, Peterson wanted only "Zarathushtra" (whatever that means), where was the need to perpetrate this brazen farce of going through a fake **Navjote** ceremony?

It is glaringly obvious from the above brief account, that Joseph Peterson, who claims to have studied the Zoroastrian religion, is, in reality as ignorant about the doctrines and tenets of the Zoroastrian religion, as Mr. Zubin Mehta is supposed to be in the film!

The genesis of the film also, not surprisingly, goes back to North America (the breeding ground, at least where Zoroastrians are concerned, for blasphemous thoughts and deeds!). If you think that dirty politics is confined to the Parsees of Bombay, you are mistaken. Consider this. In the initial stage, the Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York Inc. (**ZAGNY**) agreed to be "one of the forerunners, proponents, and supporters of the film", and accepted "to be the custodian, administrator and dispenser of the funds collected from individual donors and other Associations." **A Script Committee was set up at the 4th North American Zoroastrian Congress, held in April 1982 (the same venue where the then unknown Joseph Peterson**

was propped up by the organisers to read a paper on how enamoured he was of Zoroastrianism, etc. and the same venue where that notorious paper, pompously titled, "Non-Zoroastrian Precepts: Do They Have A Place?" by a World Bank Officer, Adi Davar, was read, which opened the Pandora's Box of violent controversies and mutual recriminations that continue to this day! In other words, we can say that the Congress gave birth to twins: the phoney 'Navjote' and "Quest for Zarathushtra"! This Script Committee, comprising about 11 "advisors", was concerned with the deliberations about the welfare of only one baby, the film. The script-writer, Mr. William Humble, who, in his own words, spent four "mind-blowing" days with the Committee members, as he was not especially knowledgeable on the subject, prepared a draft or perhaps two of the script by about November 1982.

In December, when the New York Philharmonic conductor, Zubin Mehta, came down to Bombay, with director Cyrus Bharucha, it was confirmed that the priest's role in the film would be played by Mr. Khojeste Mistree. That did it! Mistree, who had tried to blast the conversion caper in America earlier, was gall and wormwood to the original Script Committee. Some of the members resigned in protest, because of Director Bharucha listening to Mistree's advice and the consequent emendations in the script. In the meanwhile, Cyrus Bharucha had already given interviews to Bombay papers and magazines, which created a big controversy in Bombay, regarding some of the sequences of the film. The director, like some Indian politicians, issued an explanation, which just didn't wash with any discerning reader, that he was "misquoted"! Once again changes had to be made in the script.

By that time, the pro-proselytisation, moneyed gang back in the States, refused to donate the sums promised earlier. Yet the shooting of the film did go on, mainly in India. The director and the reel priest went around telling all and sundry that everything is now "settled" and that everyone is now "satisfied". Many gullibles and those who themselves had an axe to grind, did a *volte face* overnight. They abruptly stopped all tirades against the film.

Today, however, we still ask the question, IS EVERYTHING HUNKY DORY WITH "A Quest for Zarathushtra"?

Having considered the brief scenario, we shall now show from the words of some of the *dramatis personae* themselves, where TRUTH lies!

Director Cyrus Bharucha is very emphatic about one point: According to him "Freedom of Choice is one of the fundamental concepts of the Zoroastrian religion" (Jam-e-Jamshed Weekly, 13th March, 1983). Remember, that one of the main persons to guide him is Mr. Khojeste Mistree. So, we can safely draw the conclusion that Mr. Mistree also believes that our Prophet has given the "freedom of choice". Pray, where? According to *Yasna Ha* 30.2, would be the prompt reply. We, therefore, turn to USHTA, News letter Vol. IV, No. 1, May 1983, brought out by Mr. Mistree's 'Zoroastrian Studies'. There, the actor-priest gives a summary of the contents of *Yasna* 30. He states, inter alia, "Zarathushtra, through his revelation, was indeed taking a giant leap by elevating the role of the mind (sic) in every human endeavour. 'Listen with your ears to the best things. Reflect with a clear mind — man by man for himself" "Zarathushtra, in other words, was telling his people to think first, and then accept, and not believe mere-

ly through blind faith (sic). Rarely has a prophet exalted the use of the mind to such a great extent — Zarathushtra was the first prophet-thinker of the world, who wanted man to think and expected man thereupon to exercise a valid choice as a result of that thought process." Compare this with Bharucha's long interview with **Parsiana** (March 1983): "The great message of Zarathushtra was, I think I'll use the line from his Gatha(!)..... Man must first begin to think for himself, before he can believe." **So, here we have one more parallel between Peterson's alleged 'Navjote' and the film, "Quest"**

We have always maintained and reiterated the fact that this ruddy concept of 'Freedom of Choice', which is there only in the fertile imagination of some latter-day Parsees and not in our scriptures, is the highest common factor in most of the wayward, aberrated theories put forward by opportunists and those who have a nest to feather!

Continuing with Mr. Bharucha's statement in **Parsiana** (ibid), we find this gem of wisdom: "We say it in the script, (Zarathushtra is) the world's first prophet and thinker — the world's first rational man. It's a tremendous compliment to anyone. The man (lived) around the Bronze Age and for him to come out with what he did was quite extraordinary." One need only browse through Dr. Mary Boyce's works and her protege, Mr. Mistree's utterances to infer where the director of the film draws his inference from! "Bronze age", indeed!

Besides the director of the film, to whom we shall revert later, the other important film personality is the script-writer, William Humble. Humble was interviewed both by **Parsiana** (March '83) and **Ushta** (May, 1983). We merely quote here some

of the pertinent excerpts from both the interviews, and leave our intelligent readers to draw their conclusions.

Parsiana: "The image of Zarathustra as projected in Humble's script is that of a rational thinker rather than a mystic. He is a human being, a mortal man. He is a wise man, a rational thinker (one should be thankful for the small mercies!). **He's not the son of God.** He's a thinking man in the bronze age. A startling thing." (Emphasis ours).

Then talking at length about the Prophet curing King Vishtasp's "horse", Humble lets the cat tumble out of the bag. "**It wasn't a miracle, because otherwise he becomes a Christ-like figure**". (Emphasis ours). From this it is, evident how far the screen-playwright's preconceived notions and prejudices play havoc with the actual script.

Regarding the concept of Evil in the film, Mr. Humble said in the **Ushta** interview (naturally!):— "And I think that it is marvellous the way Zoroastrianism copes with it — that God is all-knowing and very powerful, **though yet not all-powerful** and therefore evil exists in the World". It is possible that after his four 'mind-blowing' days in Washington, Mr. Humble spent forty 'brainwashing' days at the Zoroastrian Studies, Bombay.

So far, we have tried to show how, right from the beginning, the craze for 'conversion' among some of the Zoroastrians of America, which culminated in Joe Peterson's "Navjote" and Zubin Mehta's "Quest for Zarathushtra" have run on remarkably parallel lines. There is yet one more issue very germane to our article that still remains to be considered. How has the subject of "Conversion" been dealt with in the film? Cyrus Bharucha (**Parsiana**): "We

had to touch upon the conversion question which we have, or will do but we certainly don't come to any conclusion about it. What we'll do is just present two points of view, and that's it."

When **Parsiana** asked **Humble** if he would convert to Zoroastrianism, he commented, "I find it very hard to swallow that your religion which is dying out (sic), won't accept converts". The conversion issue has been dealt with briefly in the film.

Finally, those who feel that the film being made is in safe, reliable hands, may ponder this: "At one point Mehta asks the priest, 'Has this religion got a death wish?' (because of the gradual decline in the number of its followers) and the priest replies that this question can only be considered when we have educated both our priests and ourselves"! **A very quaint and mischievous reply from the actor-priest, who is supposed to be a 'scholar'!** In the first place, he is blissfully unaware of the inexorable fact that the Zoroastrian religion is destined and meant to last through numberless cycles of times — in each cycle it will flourish 'az **Gayomard anda Soshyos**' (from Gayomard to Soshyos). with the various other **Raenidars** coming during the intervening period to revamp it; and in the second place, it is a clear-cut indication that the film will convey the message that once we and the priests are properly educated (whatever that means), we shall be ready to take, or rather, "accept" aliens in our religion!

Thus, both Joe and Zubin's approach to Prophet Zarathushtra via a medium (the alleged 'Navjote' and the film) is not only wrong but hazardous. Parsees of India will have themselves to blame if they do not still come out of their torpor and launch a vehement public protest against the sacrilegious shenanigans of some misguided Zoroastrians!