

The Rationale of the Zoroastrian method of Dokhmenashini

By

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"O! Holy Creator of the corporeal world! O Ahura Mazda! Where may we take (and) where may we place (deposit) the body of the dead persons?"

Then Ahura Mazda replied, "Ye most pure spitama Zarathushtra! To the highest place (they shall carry and place) where indeed the corpse-eating birds and animals can see.

Then (thither) shall you carry - you mazdayasn and shall expose that corpse to the sun." (lit. shall cause to make that corpse "see the sun.")

(Vendidad 5:44-45; 5:13)

INTRODUCTION:

Death is an inevitable part of life. The word 'life' has a meaning only because of death, yet it is not the end of 'life'. One should not therefore despair of death.

It is true that the loss of a beloved person is a matter of great emotional distress, but then, we should take to heart the moral behind the advice of Alexander the Great given from his death bed to his mother, "Mourn for me as much as you like, but do not mourn alone. Mourn in the company of someone who has never lost any family member."

But side by side with the sentimental problem, there has always been the problem of disposal of the corpse. The method followed by us has, as its basis, the time-honoured injunctions of the Vendidad cited above. This Zoroastrian method is a direct result of the basic philosophy and tenets of the religion and is the

only method that conforms to these. Any and every other method of disposal of the dead violates the basic principles of the Zoroastrian religion.

Let us briefly examine these principles, because of which no true Zoroastrian can ever adopt any other method. In making this examination, let us not be guided by false sentiments but by objective scientific thinking.

THE BASIC ZOROASTRIAN PRINCIPLES

The Zoroastrian religion is deeply concerned with man and his environment. Here it does not just concern itself with the physical or material part of man or his environment, though this is the aspect with which we are mostly concerned and is important for our consideration of the method of "Dokhmenashini"

In prescribing all its methods and practices, the Zoroastrian religion has considered man in his most all-embracing aspect. Man is considered to consist of not only the physical, but also the mental and the spiritual. There are three further sub-classification within each of these three basic categories. Today, modern science has definitely recognised the first two categories, viz., the physical and the mental (psychic) and is deeply concerned about the possible existence of the third. This latter fact should not worry us. Zoroastrian, because science was in the same position regarding even the second category only a few decades ago. We 'Parsis' can take real pride that modern science is fast approaching our Zoroastrian ideals.

The religion has as its cardinal principle - purity, **Ashoi**. Thus man's duty to himself and his environment is to maintain both of these

pure and further, he should do nothing to defile them. In these injunctions, there is an implicit and explicit condition, that man should lead his life in conformity with the immutable Law of the Universe - **Asha**.

Thus in the actual mode of disposal of the corpse, the prime concern has been that completely hygienic and aseptic conditions must be maintained, so that no harm should be caused to the living and to their environment. The various rituals adopted are a consequences of this philosophy. We will discuss these in detail in the **light of modern science**.

The various religious ceremonies such as *Sraosh*, etc., are prescribed, because death is considered not only as a transition from the physical to the spiritual, but as an important severance of the three the physical, mental and spiritual aspects (constituents) - of man. The prescribed ceremonies make these severances smooth and are concerned with the mental and spiritual parts of man, as they break away from physical bondage. This operation is therefore confined to the non-physical plane. These ceremonies commence with the *Sraosh Baj* taken at the time of the *Sachkar*, through the *Sagdid*, the *Geh-sarna*, the *Sraosh*, etc., to the final *Dahm afringan* performed at the dawn of the fourth day. These constitute one whole ceremony.

Since, here, the object is to discuss the rationale of *Dokhmensahini*, the philosophy and the purpose of and the benefits accruing from these ceremonies will not be discussed.

We will now briefly examine how all the other systems for disposal fail to qualify by these standards and how *Dokhmenashini* alone enables us to fulfil these conditions, as well as all the accepted tenets and practices and philosophies of the Zoroastrian religion.

DOKHMENASHINI

The *Dokhmenashini* ceremony therefore is the method of disposing the dead body with due respect and solemnity and with due regards

to prevent the contamination of man's environment, air, water and earth, and of man himself.

The sanction for the existing method as well as profound opposition for other methods are to be found in the various chapters of the *Vendidad*. e.g, I, III, V, VI, VII and VIII as well as other Avestan books. We shall first consider disposal of the dead body by other methods.

DISPOSAL BY FIRE

One of the common methods adopted is to burn the body, be it on a wooden bier or an electric crematorium. Essentially there is no difference between the two; In one case, the ignition is by means of wood, in the other case, it is by electric power assisted by either coal or kerosene to help the body catch fire and burn. In the crematorium, normally higher temperatures of combustion are attained leaving a lesser amount of charred remains than in the case of wood fires.

While in case of wood fires, the smoke, soot and stench spreads even at ground level, in the electric crematorium, these go up the chimney and then spread in the environment - but spread they certainly do.

This aspect of contamination will be discussed below, but what is equally important is that in both, the body is burnt by fire.

The religion has held the Fire - *Atash* to be most sacrosanct, to such an extent that for most non-Zoroastrians, "Parsis" and "Fire-worshippers" are synonyms. The greatest sacrilege a Zoroastrian can ever do is to bring a contaminated object - and a corpse has always been recognised in the religion as such - in contact with the fire - *Atash*. This fire is not only burning wood, but also any and every of its forms, including the *Atash Vazishta*, the "fire" of electricity (*Haptan Yasht*, *Yashna* 36). Thus, disposal by fire - either wood or electric - is unthinkable for any Zoroastrian as it is tantamount to defiling and debasing the most sacrosanct object and symbol of the religion.

Atarsh puthra Ahurae Mazdao. Atarsh voi mazdao ahurahya ahi, mainyeush voi ahya spenishto ahi.

[*Atarsh is the son of Ahura Mazda. O! Atarsh, thou art the symbol of Ahura Mazda thou art the best symbol of Him.*]

No Zoroastrian can ever pray to Atash as above, sanctify it in the Atash Behrams, offer it sandalwood and other fragrance and then desecrate and profane it by putting a putrifying corpse on it. The bringing of either fire to any putrifying matter or vice-versa, is considered a heinous sin in the religion. Thus, apart from the question of contaminating the surrounding air, disposal of the dead by fire, either wood or electric, is the most objectionable method for Zoroastrians. It is true that when compelled by circumstances, we have been adopting other methods for disposal where facilities for a Dokhma does not exist, but even for this "shayast la shayast" considerations, this method does not qualify. It was for this reason that when compelled by circumstances, our sagacious and wise forefathers adopted burial as the lesser of the two evils (burial and cremation). They knew their religion and avoided cremation and we, to, should avoid cremation and should not be guided by merely a tendency to mimic the Westerner.

But when one burns a contaminated object, one is not only debasing the holy fire but is certainly spreading contamination by polluting the air. Scientifically, there is no fundamental difference between burning by fire using wood or electric power. In both cases, air is required to sustain combustion. There has also got to be a renewal of air in the combustion chamber. The exhausted air together with the products of combustion must be removed. These go up the chimney. As is well known, a human body is composed essentially of carbon compounds, therefore, apart from other products of incomplete combustion (demonstrated by the issuing smoke and soot) and other contaminants including disease-bearing viruses, there are large amounts of deadly carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide.

Apart from these very large quantities of carbon dioxide and monoxide, the acrid foul-smelling products of proteins are also let loose. The human body is composed of proteins including hair, nails, muscles, etc., and the very bad smells of burning proteins is well known. It was because of this nuisance of smoke and smell that the Municipal authorities were compelled to raise the height of the chimney. However, let it be realized that merely raising the height of the chimney is no solution, as these contaminations spread in the air and pollute the entire neighborhood.

Thus it fails to satisfy both religious and public health criteria and hence must be rejected outright.

DISPOSAL BY BURIAL

This method is widely practised probably because it enables pomp and vain human ego to be perpetuated. However, it violates various principles. Burial grounds cannot be usefully used for at least a century; thus good land which should be profitably utilized is wasted and the sacred earth is desecrated. So from the religious point of view, it does not enable us to maintain the earth clean and pure. It is well known that this method "cause pollution of both soil and air and should be discontinued within the borders or in the near neighbourhood of towns and thickly populated districts." [Drs. L.C. Parks and H.R. Knwood - Hygiene and public Health p/ 731]. It is further known that even after the lapse of several hundred years, microzymes or disease-producing organisms were found to be alive and as active as ever, becoming the cause of death to hundreds of workmen engaged in digging up ground which had been a burial place of those who had died of the Plague of Modana some 300 years ago. Infact, the plague was started anew and so killed thousands more.

Thus burial, too, is to be disqualified since it becomes a source of contagion as already described by the *Vendidad*.

DISPOSAL BY WATER

There is no such thing as a complete

disposal of the dead by water for, sooner or later, the decomposed body is washed ashore, Even in cases where the corpse might be eaten by the fish, there is enough contamination that gets around. However since this is not a common method, there is no need to go into this aspect any further, except to say that even the most slightly contaminated drinking water is the greatest danger to health. Suffice it therefore to say that this method also would not qualify as it tends to spread contagion.

DISPOSAL BY DOKHMENASHINI

The method of depositing the body in a confined space where not only is it open to sunlight but where the corpse eating birds like the vultures can see them, turns out to be the most hygienic.

Here there is no spread as the flesh, which is the real source of putrefaction and contamination, is completely exterminated in less than half -

an-hour. This is the quickest disposal that is possible. The objection to the flesh being eaten by vultures is purely sentimental and is baseless. It is immaterial whether the flesh is eaten by a few vultures or millions of worms as in earth burial, The only considerations are of efficiency and prevention of contamination.

Once the flesh is exterminated by the vultures, the sources of contamination in the forms of viruses and bacteria are also simultaneously exterminated. This is due to the extremely high body temperature of these birds and their peculiar body chemistry.

It is not only the most efficient and quickest method of disposal, but it can work equally efficiently at all levels of work load. This was proved conclusively during the plague epidemic in the city some 60 years ago. It worked smoothly and efficiently where other systems failed to cope up. The Dokhmas have never been known to

be a source of infection, because there is no infection in them. They are the epitome of perfection in their efficiency in disposing off and containing contamination.

Not only is the method therefore extremely hygienic, the most efficient and the quickest, but is also economical in terms of space, one dokhma serving a good sized population for centuries. Also it is the ultimate in simplicity and equality. There is nothing to differentiate the multi-millionaire from the pauper, the genius from the moron, for Death is a leveller and in Death all are one.

In this method, all elements held in reverence as sacred (earth, water, fire and air) are not in any way defiled and hence, is the only one to satisfy the religion's point of view.

It should be a matter of extreme pride to any Zoroastrian that his religion has taken such profound care and has postulated such rigorous control in preventing disease and defilement, The philosophy of the *Vendidad* postulated thousands of years ago, is now being avidly implemented in modern science and medicine. Modern day's public health engineering can never be more concerned with contamination and its containment than the *Vendidad*. It is for this reason that the Rev. Dr. L.H. Mills referring to the *Vendidad* cautioned, "Some of the later passages in Zend-Avesta regarding Purtrification and which might seem to some of us most grotesque were hardly superfluties, for they showed a sanitation which it would be better for us to follow rather than condemn. They anticipated much modern theory on the subject and led the way in the most practical of all sciences disinfection."

Let us therefore put sentiment aside and concern ourselves with only a hard-headed assessment of scientific facts. It is not only a matter of pride to us Zoroastrians but a profound tribute to the scientific acumen and knowledge of those ancient forefathers of ours who, thousands of years ago, recognised that a dead body begins to purtify after a certain period and becomes a source of contamination, and had stipulated periods of time after which theses changes began

to take place, While science as we know it today, became wise only about a century ago, to the facts that diseases can be communicated without physical contact, that there are unseen carriers of disease, that one of the sources of these unseen carriers of death and disease is a putrifying corpse, that in all cases, a corpse begins to putrify after a few hours, that this process is quicker if the deceased was ill prior to death, that isolation and containment of contamination can check the spread of these carriers, that ultra-violet light contained in sunlight acts as a bactericide, that burial grounds are a source of pestilence and disease, and should be removed from populated areas, that people (if not suitably protected) after possible exposure to source of diseases, should be quarantined for at least 9 nights before letting them mix with society, that even in the act of smelling, one is already exposed to the gaseous molecules responsible for smell and thus to that extent, is contaminated, these facts were know and have been recorded in the *Avesta* texts composed nearly 8,000 years ago. These are matters of genuine pride for all Zoroastrians.

Today in the most exacting of all sciences, where containment of contaminations is a major problem, where substances have to be pure to fantastic degrees. viz., atomic science, the name 3 guiding principles are used, which have been the rationale of the Zoroastrian method of *Dokhmenashini*. These 3 principles are:

1. Recognize the source of contamination and treat all cases as being contaminated.
2. Isolate this source as quickly and as effectively as possible.
3. Eradicate the source of contamination as quickly as possible with maximum efficiency and minimum spread.

Judged by these principles of sound public health engineering, our system of *Dokhmenashini* is the best of all this other systems for disposal of the dead.

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