

Establishment and Development of Religious Symbols

—Navsari Atash Beheram—

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The aim of this paper is to describe the establishment and development of a new Atash Beheram (Zoroastrian sacred fire) in Navsari for further clarification of the function and meaning of the existing Zoroastrian sacred fire. The materials and documents for our study are strictly restricted to the Gujarati historical document, Navsarinan pak atashbeheram sahebnan navan makanne lagto ahaval taths teno avak javakta hisab.

The conflict of panthak jurisdiction between Bhagarsath and Sanjan provides the background to the establishment of Atash Beherams in Navsari. Many Atash Beherams in the Parsi community have been founded by an individual person or a family in order to remember the name of individual person or family and the fravaši (soul) of the departed. But Atash Beheram in Navsari differs from the other Atash Beherams in the purpose of establishment.

The Gujarati historical document shows that Atash Beheram in Navsari was established through economic cooperation between Navsari and other neighboring Parsi communities. Each Parsi Atash Beheram has its own individuality in establishment and maintenance but Navsari Atash Beheram was established on the basis of money or material contributions not only from Navsari but also from other Parsi communities. Navsari Anjuman communicated with Surat Anjuman by letters and through intermediaries for mutual cooperation. Navsari Anjuman sent out letters asking for various types of contributions, with the result that a large sum of money, sandalwood, ritual utensils and several pieces of land were donated to the establishment of Navsari Atash Beheram.

This sort of money or material contributions for Navsari Atash Beheram show that the establishments of Parsi Atash Beheram at that time may have been closely connected with Parsi socio-economic development in India and with competing political interests of Mobeds. In Navsari the sacred fire used to be kept in the house and carried to Dar-i Mihr only for the sake of rituals until 1796. As late as the 18th or the 19th centuries when the Parsi secured economic development as well as political stability in the western coast of India, expanding their communities, Mobeds came to be divided into several panthaks for their own interests.

Key Words: Zoroastrianism Parsi Sacred Fire Religious Symbol

I Preface

The three kinds of sacred fires (Ātaš Bahrām:Ātaš Ādarān:Ātaš Dādgāh) of Zoroastrian Parsis stand in the very core of the community as the most significant symbol.¹⁾ So far the functions of these sacred fires have been clarified in terms of religio-cultural integration theory.

The sacred fires of Zoroastrian Parsis are addressed as “the son of Ahura Mazdā” (Av.athro ahurahe mazdāo puthra. Ātaš Niyāeš:4-8;10;12;18) and the Parsis “adore Ahura Mazdā through the (sacred) fires.” With “the offering and prayer,” the Parsis should approach the sacred fires, “infinite, immortal being” (AN:7-8;13-15). Such blessings as “life, wisdom, offspring, animate energy, courage” (AN:10-11) and “good rewards and everlasting relief of fravaši (AN:13)” are believed to be bestowed on those Zoroastrians who offer sandalwood and prayer to the sacred fires.²⁾

Each sacred fire of Zoroastrian Parsis has been founded by an individual person or family in order to be consecrated and installed in its own fire temple. Each sacred fire has its own individuality entirely different from that of any other sacred fire or any other ordinary one. This sort of traditional pious foundation of sacred fires among the Parsis is to remember the name of individual person or family and the fravaši (soul) of the departed.³⁾

The religious practice of offering sandalwood to the sacred fires has been carried out by the Parsis so that they can remember the name or the fravaši of those concerned. The māčis can be done in several ways: individual, family, kutumb, group, or trust and they mean so great a deal to the Parsis that the heirship and inheritance are involved in many cases. The māčis, in the case of Ātaš Bahrām in Navsari, have been done by the Parsis who have been descended from the priestly class, the Mobed. To be more specific, the Bhagaria priest derived from the Parsis priesthood in Navsari have conducted not only the individual māčis but also the family or collective ones for the perpetual maintenance of the most important sacred fire.⁴⁾

But focused studies of establishment of Atash Beheram have not been pursued to the full. It would be of the greatest help for understanding the function and meaning of the sacred fires of the Zoroastrian Parsis to describe in what way the sacred fires have been established and maintained in the Zoroastrian Parsi community. To clarify the establishment and maintenance of the sacred fires is to rethink the problems concerning symbol and society.

II Bhagarsath Anjuman and Bhagarsath Committee⁵⁾

In Navsari Roj 4 Mah 2, 1287 Yazdejardi, on 14 October 1917, Bhagarsath Anjuman under the rule of Vadi Dare Meher of Navsari appointed a committee (Bhagarsath Committee) to settle a legal case. Three years later in 1290 Yazdejardi, on 25 December 1920, Bhagarsath Anjuman set up a new Bhagarsath Committee to establish a new Atash Beheram in Navsari.

Twenty four years after Sanjana Mobeds enthroned Iran Shah Atash Beheram in Udvada for the second time, Navsari Bhagarsath Anjuman was eager to establish a new Atash Beheram Saheb in Navsari in order to preserve their own panthak and their rights to perform religious ceremonies. They desired to fulfill the work under the leadership of Deshaiji Saheb Khorshedji Tehmulji.

At the time of the holy public jashan ceremony of 'Rapithvan' in the year of 1134 Yazdezardi Vada Dastur and other Mobeds of Bhagarsath Anjuman gathered together in Vadi Dare Meher of Navsari and resolved to consecrate a holy Atash Beheram in Navsari, and Anjuman requested Deshaiji Khorshedji to take initiative and leadership to complete this work.

Bhagarsath Anjuman wrote letters to the Zarthosht leaders of different cities and to the then well-known and wealthy Bhagarria merchants in Surat viz. Noshervanji Bahmanji Shethna, Sohrabji Manekji Shethna, Dadabhoy Manekji Shethna, and leader of Mobed in Surat viz. Minocherji Khorshedji Sethna.

When they came to know about the resolution of Bhagarsath Anjuman that they would establish a new Atash Beheram Saheb in Navsari, the above-mentioned four wealthy merchants of Surat offered to help them with this religious work.

III Deshaiji Saheb Khorshedji Tehmulji and his Account Book⁶⁾

Deshaiji Khorshedji was the first leader of Bhagarsath Anjuman at the time of the establishment of a new Atash Beheram Saheb. He played an important role in every amelioration work of Anjuman and Bhagarsath Anjuman passed a resolution to establish a new Atash Beheram under his leadership and he was entrusted by the Anjuman to make all the arrangements for that work. Deshaiji Khorshedji fulfilled with the utmost care the obligation entrusted by the Anjuman.

He wrote in his own handwriting the income and expenditure account of every Rupee

of the establishment of a new Atash Beheram Saheb.

The ledger book and the day book of Sanvat 1822 consists of the following words of a new Atash Beheram Saheb.

“Account of consecration of a new Atash Beheram of Anjuman Sanvat 1822.”⁷⁾

(credit and debt)

Income	Expenditure
Rs.48 page.64 Pos Vad 9 for the crown given by Behdin Jivang Jamshedji Bharuchana	Rs.117 As.4 Ps.2 page.36 Maghsar Vad 2 for the crown work 1 and for the kapla (a sort of knife) 4
Rs.1339 As.8 Ps.2 page.89 Mah Sud given by Shedji and others.	Rs.350 page.41 Maghsar Vad Amas for Vandidad and others.
Rs.91 page.227 Jeth degra (large metal pot) through the agency of (=ha.) Boiwala Mobed.	Rs.1 As.8 Ps.2 page.119 Fagan for the oil for diva ‘mana’ 3/4 (=15kg)
Rs.15 page.26 Akhad Sud through the agency of (=ha.) Hamkar (profit of Hamkar meals)	Rs.1 As.2 Ps.2 page.140 Chaitra first Sud for the oil for diva or the light
	Rs.4 As.4 Ps.3 page.154 Chaitra first Vad for the fuel labour (bringing Bawalwood)
	Rs.1 As.4 page.184 Chaitra second for the oil for the lamp
	Rs.22 As.4 page.288 Shraavan for (the oil for lamp) and Bawalwood (castor oil)

The above amount of Rs.1339 As.8 Ps.2 credited in the books of account and ledger of Deshajji Khorshedji in the year Sanvat 1822 for the establishment of a new Atash

Beheram is seen also on the debt side in the account books Sanvat 1822 of Manocherji Khurshedji Sethna of Surat.⁸⁾

Expenditure

Rs.1039 As.8 Ps.2 Mah Sud 9 Sunday

Rs.300 deducted from my account and remaining Rs.1039 As.8 Ps.2 from Surat Account which you have accepted in cash as follows.

Rs.139 As.8 Ps.2 (donation of) Seth Noshervanji Bahmanji

Rs.300 (donation of) Seth Sohrabji Manocherji

Rs.300 Your account (Khorshedji's account)

Rs.300 (donation of) Seth Dadabhai Manekji

Rs.1039 As.8 Ps.2

Over the above Rs.1039 As.8 Ps.2 as a share of Surat for the establishment of a New Atash Beheram Saheb in Navsari, the amount of Rs.300 given as a share of Deshaiji Khorshedji is debted in his own account book under the head of "the account for the personal expenditure etc., Sanvat 1822" as follows.

"Rs.300 page 88 Mah Sud for the religious work of Atash Beheram"⁹⁾

IV Contributions from Surat and other Parsi Communities for the establishment of a new Atash Beheram in Navsari.¹⁰⁾

From the above extract and the short summary of the auspicious writing of late Deshaiji Khorshedji Tehmulji in his books of account and from the Persian couplet written by Mobed Sapurji Sanjan, Zoroastrian community will see that the letters were written by Bhagarsath Anjuman to the wealthy merchants of Surat to augment the expenditure for the establishment of the present fire temple of Navsari which was established on Roj Sarosh Mah Ardibehest 1135 Yazdejardi 1765 A.D. by Bhagarsath Anjuman.

The promise given to Bhagarsath Anjuman in the letters written by the above-mentioned four merchants of Surat was fulfilled by them as a share of Surat and they sent Rs.1039 As.8 to Bhagarsath Anjuman through Deshaiji Khorshedji Tehmulji along with his (Deshaiji's) two brothers' share of Rs.300 from his personal account. The total

expenditure for establishing the new Atash Beheram Saheb in Navsari at that time was Rs.1339 As.8 which was shared by five donors and that is why Bhagarsath Anjuman collected very little donation from outside for this work.

One Behedin native of Bharuch sent the crown (taj) of Atash Beheram, and from the above account book of Deshaiji Khorshedji, the ritual ceremonies of the establishment of a new Atash Beheram Saheb needed the total Rs. 350 only.

Sheth Minocherj Khurshedji Sethna, one of the Sheths of the above-mentioned four leading merchants of Surat, spent Rs.175 more for the marble stool enthronement of a new Atash Beheram, and one behedin Sheth, native of Surat, prepared one copper vessel (afraganyu) for the establishment of a new Atash Beheram and sent it to Navsari.

There was no need to construct a new building at the time of establishing a new Atash Beheram, because the present fire temple (Iranshah) of Udvada was housed in the sacred building in the possession of Bhagarsath Anjuman and Bhagarsath Anjuman repaired the building out of its own capital and enthroned a new Atash Beheram in that building.

On the occasion of the enthronement ceremony of a new Atash Beheram, the Zarthoshts came to Navsari from various cities, including the four wealthy merchants of Surat who gave their own contribution to the establishment of a new Atash Beheram Saheb. Mobed Shapurji Sanjan states the four merchants as follows in his own above-mentioned Persian couplet.

“They made their pilgrimage to Atash Beheram and they showed their reverence by giving donation for the maintenance of it. They spent plenty of amount for Atash Beheram and so made the entire Dastur Mobeds happy. They offered plenty of gifts towards Atash and made all the devils provoked.”¹¹⁾

In the account books of Deshaiji Khorshedji, we can find out that “the farms for the maintenance of Atash Beheram” was gifted by Sheth Dadabhai Manekji of famous Bhagaria Sheths of Surat. Deshaiji Khorshedji noted down the following lines in his account books of Atash Beheram Sanvat 1824 .

“Atash Beheram account of Sanvat 1824 Shethji Dadabhai Manekji gifted a piece of land for baval for the expense of baval. etc.”¹²⁾

The above-mentioned four merchants of Surat raised a large amount for the

establishment and maintenance of a new Atash Beheram. In addition to this, at the time of the enthronement of a new Atash Beheram, Sheth Minocherji Khurshedji Sheth of Surat personally came to Navsari and under the direction of Surat Anjuman, donated Rs.906 for giving Ashodad to Dastur Mobeds and for other expenses during the jashan of that day.

“906 Magsar Vad Amas Rs.906 in cash. At the time when Shethji personally came to Navsari for the enthronement of a new Atash Beheram, he gave under Surat Anjuman's direction for giving Ashodad to Dasturs and the boiwala of Atash. Replied to Surat for the above cashpayment.”¹³⁾

On the day of the enthronement of a new Atash Beheram, Zoroastrians from Surat and other cities came to Navsari and they consumed a huge sum of Rs.1719 through Deshaiji Khorshedji for the furniture and fixtures, etc. in the building of Atash Beheram Saheb. Deshaiji Khorshedji credited the above amount of Rs. in his account book of Sanvat 1822 as follows.

“Rs.1719 Page 41 Magsar Vad 11. When the new Atash Beheram was enthroned, people of Surat, etc. donated Rs.1719”¹⁴⁾

The favour shown to Bhagarsath Anjuman by the four above mentioned famous merchants of Surat Anjuman at the time of the establishment of a new Atash Beheram, was honoured by Bhagarsath Anjuman with shawls, etc. in recognition of their deep obligation to Bhagarsath Anjuman.

The above note of the account books of the whole Bhagaria Mobeds of Navsari in the year Sanvat 1822 is seen in the account book of the above year with the following heading.

“Rs.289 As.4 P.1 Magsar Vad. The expense incurred by Navsari Anjuman for shawls, etc. when Surat Anjuman came to Navsari at the time when the new Atash Beheram was established.”¹⁵⁾

In the same way, the share given to Deshaiji khorshedji by the four merchants of Surat at the time of the establishment of Anjuman's Atash Beheram in Navsari is recorded in

the Persian couplet of Mobed Shapurji Sanjana as well as in the account book of Deshaiji Khorshedji Tehmulji. Even after a long period of 160 years, for remembrance of their names, Bhargasath Anjuman has kept their names in the marble tablet in the new building.

V A new building and a marble tablet ¹⁶⁾

As stated above, because Deshaiji Khorshedji Tehmulji, on behalf of Bhargasath Anjuman, participated as a community leader in the establishment of a new Atash Beheram Saheb in Navsari, and because at that time he was also one of the powerful leaders in Bhargasath Anjuman, after the establishment of this Atash Beheram Saheb, he was entrusted with all the management and administration of the fire by Bhargasath Anjuman. He and his families continued this work with the consent and approval of Bhargasath Anjuman.

43 years after the construction of a new Atash Beheram Saheb, as the building became very old and dilapidated, Deshaiji Minocherji, son of Deshaiji Khorshedji, along with one wealthy merchant of Bombay, Sheth Vadiyaji Noshirvanji Manekji built a new building in yazdejardi 1178. This is shown in the following marble tablet.

“The place of worship of sacred fire was built by Deshaiji Manucherji Khurshedji and Vadiyaji Nushervanji Manekji in the year Sanvat 1865 Bhadarva Vad 13 Saturday Roj Hormazd Mah Farvardin 1178 yazdejardi. Parsi.”¹⁷⁾

The above-mentioned small marble tablet has still been kept in the building of Atash Beheram since last 125 years. After the establishment of Atash Beheram Saheb in Navsari in the year yazdejardi 1135 till upto yazdejardi 1260, Deshaiji Kavasji Erachji Gondalvala at the request of late Dasturji Saheb Darabji Mahiyarji renovated the building with several new changes.

This small tablet was fixed by Deshaiji Minocherji, son of Deshaiji Khorshedji, after a short period of 43 years of the establishment of Atash Beheram. Deshaiji Minocherji must have been aware of the history of the establishment of new Atash Beheram Saheb. If this Atash Beheram Saheb had been established only with the expense of Deshaiji Khorshedji, his son Deshaiji Minocherji would not have failed to mention his father's name in the above tablet.

VI Ownership of Atash Beheram in Navsari ¹⁸⁾

Nobody in the Parsi Community had been concerned about the ownership and the establishment until the administration was done by Bhagarsath Anjuman. But some time after certain Deshajjis were connected with the administration and attempted to be a sole owner of Atash Beheram, there was an uproar over such administration and the question of ownership of Atash Beheram was discussed in public.

After a long period of 125 years, the books of account of the establishment of Atash Beheram of Deshajji Khorshedji Temulji was found by a member of Bhagarsath Anjuman viz. Deshajji Pestanji Khurshedji, and the claim for the ownership of the Deshais was not accepted. Now Bhagarsath Anjuman found it necessary to repair the old dilapidated building and the then Vada Dasturji Saheb Darabji Mahiyarji Maherjirana appealed to a member of Bhagarsath Anjuman and private secretary of king of Gondal, Deshai Kavasji Erachji, who accepted the appeal of Vada Dasturji, arranged for the repairs and requested Dasturji to vacate the building.

With the order of Vada Dasturji, Mobed Sahebs shifted the holy fire of Atash Beheram Saheb and enthroned it after the required religious ceremonies in the building of Vadi Daremehr and had locked the door of Sanctum Sanctorum in order to keep in his own possession the silver Afraganyu presented by Behramji Sirvaivala. In this way Dasturji established the ownership of Bhagarsath Anjuman upon the building of Atash Beheram Saheb.

This act of Dasturji was taken as an insult by some Deshajjis who also had some say in the administration and they in turn locked the main entrance of the building. The Deshajjis started to obstruct the renovation work. Most of the members of Deshai family and even the second Akabar Vada Deshajji were regretful for such behaviour of Deshajjis.

Because Dasturji, knowing the true history of establishment of Atash Beheram Saheb, thought that the insulting behaviour of the Deshai family would disgrace Deshajji Khorshedji Temulji, Dasturji asked the members of Bhagarsath Anjuman to gather in order to break open the lock with the consent of Vada Deshajji Baji Saheb. After that was started the repairing work. When the work was completed, the marble tablet was fixed on the veranda of building.

“May Ahuramazda help us. As this building of Sacred Atash Beheram Saheb was in a dilapidated condition, under the direction of Navsari Anjuman and

with the order of Dasturji Saheb Darabji Mahiarji, Deshaiji Kavasji Erachji, king of of Gondal landlord Sir Bhagvatsinji carried out extensive renovations. Roj Hormazd Mah Dae Sane 1260 Yazdejardi, Sanvat 1947 Jeth Sud 8 14 June 1891 A.D.”¹⁹⁾

There was no other tablet in the old building of Atash beheram except this tablet which recorded the renovation done by Deshai Manocherji Khurshedji and Vadiyaji Noshervanji Manekji jointly 82 years ago in yazdejardi 1178. “Bhagarsath Committe” have preserved both these tablets as a memento in the newly built building of Atash Beheram Saheb.

VI Conclusions

The conflict of panthak jurisdiction between Bhagarsath and Sanjan provides the background to the establishment of Atash Beheram in Navsari. Many Atash Beherams in the Parsi community have been founded by an individual person or a family in order to remember the name of individual person or family and the fravaši (soul) of the departed. But Atash Beheram in Navsari differs from the other Atash Beherams in the purpose of establishment.

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