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## UNIT 19 ZOROASTRIAN SOCIAL ORGANISATION

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### 19.0 OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit you should be able to

- outline the origin of Zoroastrianism in India
- state the population strength and spread of Parsis in India
- describe the role of Parsis in the socio-economic life of India
- list and describe the basic tenets of the Zoroastrian faith
- describe the basic Zoroastrian rites relating to initiation and Zoroastrian death
- describe the Zoroastrian customs relating to marriage, family, inheritance and succession
- outline the role of the Parsi Panchayat.

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### 19.1 INTRODUCTION

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In Block 4 you have so far read about the basic features of social organisation of the Hindu, Muslim, Christian and the Sikh communities. In this unit, we describe social organisation of another community, which has made its presence significant in India. We introduce you to some of the basic features of the

Zoroastrian social organisation. Zoroastrian popularly known in India as Parsis are following of Zoroaster. They are adherents of the religious system taught by him. Following this we have discussed location and population strength of Parsis in India. We discuss their role in the socio-economic life of Indian society. Then we describe the basic tenets of the Zoroastrian faith and rites relating to initiation and death, customs relating to marriage, inheritance and succession. Next are described the role of the Parsi Panchayat in the Zoroastrian community and the important festivals celebrated by Parsis.

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## 19.2 PROFILE OF THE ZOROASTRIAN COMMUNITY IN INDIA

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Before we trace their origin and location in India, let us briefly state the origin of Zoroastrianism.

### 19.2.1 Origin and Location in India

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions of the world. It takes its name from “Zarasthustra” (Zoroaster) who probably lived around the beginning of the first millennium B.C. His life period is dated diversely by historians as being anywhere between the fourth to ninth century B.C. Another name for Zoroastrianism is “**Mazdaism**” and is derived from the name of the religion’s supreme God “Mazda” (meaning wise) or *Ahura Mazda* (meaning wise Lord). Fire is worshipped as a symbol of ‘*Ahura Mazda*’ since it has the characteristics of purity and brightness.

The roots of Zoroastrianism can be located in an Iranian tribal and basically pastoral society. Research suggests that historically this religion originated in the eastern and south central regions of the Iranian world. It began between the great mountain ranges of the Hindukush and Seistan, an area that today is divided between Iran and Afganistan. By 500 B.C. Zoroastrianism had become the leading faith in Persia and Medea (now modern Iran). The Iranian-Zoroaster influence faced a serious challenge with the conquest of Iran by the Islamic Arabians in the seventh century A.D. The exodus or mass migration of Zoroastrians into other regions of the world can be seen to be a direct result of the forced Islamisation of Iran. [Kulke 1978: (4)].

The Zoroastrian religion was introduced in India about eighth century A.D. It is said that the first batch of Zoroastrians or Parsis reached Diu about 766 A.D. However, they abandoned it and set out for another place of residence. They took refuge in Gujarat. During their voyage to Gujarat from Diu their ship was overtaken by a storm. The voyaging Parsis took a vow that if they reached the shore in Gujarat safely they would establish the most sacred fire temple (called Atash Behram) there. The vow was duly fulfilled and a fire temple was consecrated in Sanjan (in Gujarat) where the Parsis landed safely. They took to agriculture and horticulture in and around Sanjan. As their numbers increased they spread to other parts of Gujarat. When the Muslims conquered Sanjan in the fifteenth century, the sacred fire was moved frequently and finally established at Udvada. The fire temple in Udvada is looked upon as the most sacred temple of the Parsis. Zoroastrian immigrants to India are said to have come from Pars. This is why they are known as Parsee. (Parsi

also sometimes spelt as Parsee). The Parsi community has adopted Gujarati as their official language. Let us now look at their numbers.

### 19.2.2 Population Strength

The Zoroastrian population around the world is estimated to be roughly 1,30,000 of which 82,000 are believed to be in India. Of this 82,000, more than 78.5 percent are reported to be living in Bombay. The strength of the Parsi population in India has varied between 80,000 and 82,000 as is evident from the recorded population censuses between 1881-1981. Their strength decreased to 76,382 by the year 1991. The Parsi community in India is found mainly in Maharashtra and specially in Bombay, Gujarat and Deccan. In 1991 a majority of 79.2 percent of Zoroastrians lived in Maharashtra, followed by Gujarat (16.92 percent).

### 19.2.3 Role in Socio-Economic Life

Migrating to India over 1300 years ago, the Parsis have been an important part of the economic, political, educational and social life of India. Prior to and during the Muslim rule they lent their support to Hindu princes whenever it was needed. They played an important role in the Mughal administration. Following the arrival of the British they were among the first people to adopt to the western style of life and to English education. The Parsis began in India as a small mercantile community. They excelled themselves in trade and commerce. Two of the leading areas of economic activity in the nineteenth century, shipbuilding and the textile industry, owe their rapid growth mainly to the investment and trading initiative of the Parsis. Thus, early growth of the modern shipping industry in India is associated with the name of a Parsi family the Wadias. They were commissioned by the British for the management of the biggest shipyard in Bombay continuously for 150 years from 1735-1885. Another Parsi, D.R. Bannaji owned a personal fleet of thirty trading vessels (i.e. ships). Between 1915 and 1925, nearly 20 percent to 30 percent of the cotton mills in Bombay were owned by Parsis (Gaubha 1979: 115-127).

Parsis have also been contributing greatly to the steel, chemical, cement, and other heavy industries. This has been so both during the British India and post Independent India. We have all heard about the Tata family. They were pioneers of the steel industry in India. Today they also run a host of other industries such as jute, chemical, tea, textile, printing, insurance, and so on. The Tata family is not only associated with industry but also with education and social work.

Parsis eminent in the political, economic, educational and social work in India during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries included B.M. Malabari, S.S. Bengali, N. Fardoonji, P.M. Mazban, Sir P. Mehta, Sir D. Wacha, Maneckji, D. Petit, J. Tata, C.J. Readyymony and so many others.

The Parsis began in India as a small mercantile community. Gradually, a number of their families became successful industrial entrepreneurs, merchants, educationalists, social reformers, lawyers and pioneers in many other fields.

Proof of their open attitude with regard to occupational selection lies in that many of the Parsis derive their family names from the occupations their ancestors pursued in India. Many of their descendents still do so. Interesting family titles

thus include: Unwala (wool dealer), Kapadia (cloth dealer), Jhaveri (jeweller), Motiwala (pearl dealer), Biscuitwala (biscuit dealer), Batliwala (bottle dealer), Ginwala (wine dealer), Sodawaterwala (Soda dealer), Mondalwala (wine dealer), etc.

### Activity 1

Take the map of India and mark the following items.

- a) The states where the Parsis are predominantly concentrated
- b) The location of their first fire temple
- c) The location of the plant of Tata Iron and Steel Company

Cross check your answer, if possible, with those given by other students at your Study Centre.

In general, Parsis are represented in different jobs. There is evidence to indicate that they have held many types of posts (Gaubā 1979: 115). Supportive data for this is available as early as the middle of the nineteenth century.

Currently more and more Parsis are establishing themselves in the scientific and other professions. Homi J. Bhabha was the pioneer of nuclear research in India and General S.H.F.J. Manekshaw is the first Field Marshall of the Indian Army. Modern education is widely shared by all the various communities in India and the entrepreneurial skills of communities like Sindhis, Punjabis and Marwaris have come to the fore in modern India. However, Parsis continue to do well in most fields of endeavour (Kulke 1978: 51-55). Socio-economic life of this community is influenced by the tenets of Zoroastrianism. We shall now describe the main features of this religion.

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## 19.3 TENETS OF ZOROASTRIANISM

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Zoroaster, the founder of Zoroastrianism preached monotheism (belief in one supreme God and a deep moral life. He was against idol worship and over emphasis of ritual sacrifice. The basic tenets of Zoroastrianism are outlined mainly in two texts. The first of these is the *Avesta* or the *Zend Avesta*—it is a collection of texts gathered in writing roughly between the fourth and sixth century A.D. The second is the *Gatha* which comprises texts which are attributed to Zarathustra. These belonged initially to the oral tradition. The *Gathas* are five in number. The first four are ethical and philosophical. They describe and emphasise the omnipotence of or all pervading nature of “*Ahura Mazda*”. They also deal with the problem of evil due to the activities of the evil spirit. The fifth *Gatha*, is a hymn on the occasion of Zoroaster’s daughter’s marriage. The *Gathas* are written in *Avesta* which closely resembles Vedic Sanskrit. *Ahura Mazda* is considered to be the supreme God. He is the creator of heaven and earth, day and night, light and darkness. Life is seen as a struggle between the forces of good and evil.

The evil spirit is “*Angra Mainyu*”. One has to choose between good and evil. The ethical dualism (dualism indicated in the existence of good spirits and evil

spirits) that Zoroaster preached, emphasised that there are differences between human actions motivated by goodness and those that are motivated by evil.

Purity in thoughts, words and deeds implies the will to do good. Anything that is not guided by this motive is apt to turn into evil. Therefore the primary task of man is to live a righteous life. He must fight against the evil spirits along with his creator *Ahura Mazda*. They will be helped by a host of good spirits. One who lives a righteous life attains paradise. This is described as a state of immortal holiness in thought, word and deed. If one leads an impious life that person is condemned to an eternal hell of evil thoughts, deeds, and physical torment. The Parsis believe that the soul lives on after death. It meets its fate on the day of judgement, under the supervision of *Ahura Mazda*.

An important feature of Zoroastrianism is that it does not preach celibacy, asceticism, renunciation or self denial in life. It demands strict purity in thought, word and deed. This consists of abstinence from acts like adultery, rape, and the like (Cornoy 1961: 865).

Purity is essentially associated with fire. For the Parsis fire is worshipped as a symbol of purity, energy, force, light and radiance. And fire is a symbol of *Ahura Mazda*. Zoroastrian temples take the form of fire temples and are of three grades—*Atash Behrams*, *Agiaris* and *Dadgahs*, in that order of sacredness. Once the sacred fire is installed in a fire temple it must always be kept alive (always kept burning). The interior of a Fire temple is shown in the figure 19.1.

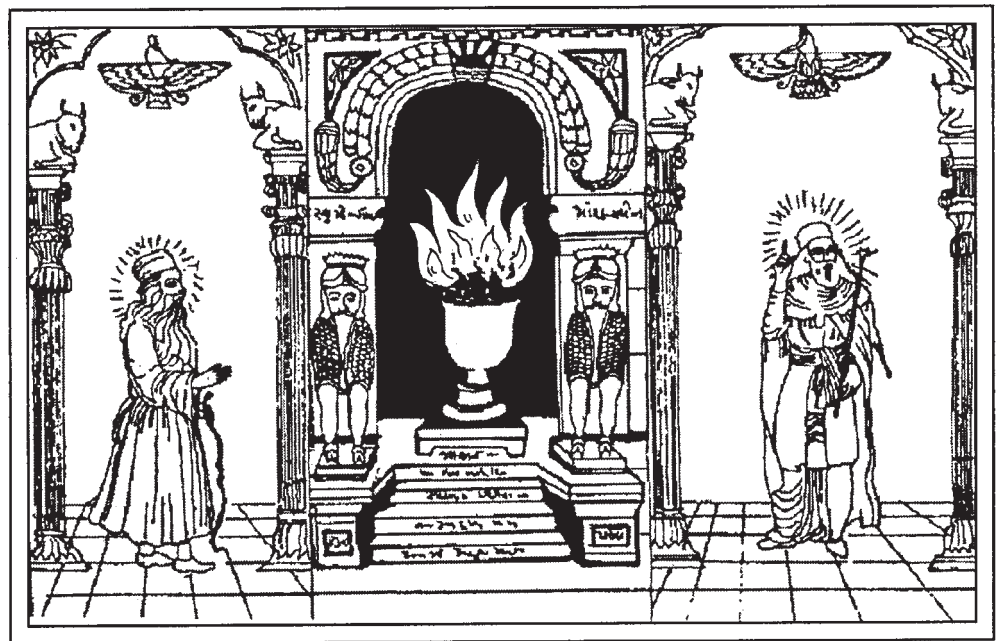


Fig. 19.1: The Fire temple

Many fire temples are places of pilgrimage for the Parsis. The oldest fire is known as the “*Iranshah*” which is supposed to have been burning for more than 1300 years. This is in *Udvada*. All Parsis have sacred flames burning in their houses also. These flames are kept burning constantly. In the fire temple the priest reads portions of the sacred scripture—the *Avesta*, five times a day. In each household, a Parsi is also expected to say prayers five times each day.

The translation of the sacred texts, including the Avesta was completed in 1820, from Pahlavi (ancient language) to Gujarati. The average Parsi is thus able to have access to the sacred texts for daily use in prayers. Zoroastrianism does not advocate fasting for religious merit.

The *Gathas* of Zoroaster is another source of information about Zoroastrian belief. They present the picture of a society in which agriculture and herds of domestic animals had come to be looked upon with affection. In the sacred prayer “Behram Yesht” the reverence that is shown to the cow is evident. This aspect of Zoroastrian faith (respect to the cow) reflects the interaction with Hinduism as Hindus also look upon the cow as a sacred animal. We will now discuss some of the rites, rituals and customs observed by the Parsis relating to birth, initiation, death, marriage and family. These reflect the belief systems discussed above. They also indicate the adaptations the Parsis have made as a result of the interaction with local dominant population and their rulers at different points in time.

Zoroastrian beliefs are closely linked with the way day-to-day life is carried on by the members of Parsi community. In the next section, we will see how basic rites and religious ceremonies form an important part of Parsi social life.

### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Who was the founder of Zoroastrianism?  
.....
- ii) What is the other name for Zoroastrianism?  
.....
- iii) What is worshipped among the Parsis as a symbol of the supreme God?  
.....
- iv) Where are the Parsis found in India?  
.....
- v) What are the two important sources of information about Zoroastrianism?  
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## 19.4 ASPECTS OF SOCIAL ORGANISATION

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In this section we describe important life cycle rituals relating to birth and death. The social institutions of marriage and family are also discussed here. The Parsi system of inheritance and succession, the Panchayat and Festivals also figure in our discussion of the social organisation.

### 19.4.1 Rites of Initiation and Death

Even though Zoroastrianism does not emphasise ritualism especially rituals sacrifices, there are some basic rites and religious ceremonies which form an integral part of the organisation of Parsi social life.

i) **Rites of Initiation**

Initiation rites mark the birth of a child into the Parsi family. On this occasion the child's lips are steeped in *haoma* (the sacred liquor). Full membership into the community is granted only when the child (both to a boy and a girl) attains the age between seven and fifteen. He or she then receives the girdle or cord called the *Kushti* or *Kusti*. This ceremony usually takes place before a child attains puberty. This initiation rite is called *Navjot* or *Naojote* (meaning new birth) and marks the admission of a Parsi boy or a girl into Zoroastrian faith. In addition, there is a host of other purificatory rites, which are often performed by many Parsis. They include the *padyab* (meaning ablution) *nahn* (meaning bath) or washing of one's body. The *bareshtnum* is a complicated ritual performed at special places with the participation of a dog. The left ear of the dog is touched by the person concerned. The gaze of this animal is believed to put the evil spirit to flight. The purification rites for the initiation of priests and corpse-bearers, involve, apart from other things *gomez* (consecrated urine), originally cow's urine following Indo-Iranian practices and ideas (Cornoy 1961: 579-581).

ii) **Death Rites**

The Parsi custom of disposing the dead is indeed unique. Death rites are probably the most elaborate of the Parsi rites. These reflect, among other things, their attitude to life and life after death. Parsis do not burn or bury their dead lest this should pollute fire or earth and make them liable to a strict punishment. They carry the dead body, amidst elaborate rituals, to a place built high up for this purpose. This is called a *dokhma* or 'Tower of Silence'. The body is left there to be eaten up by vultures.

The removal of the dead body (for its final disposal) must only be done during the daytime. As for the Tower of Silence, its interior consists of three concentric circles, one each for men, women and children. The corpses are exposed without any dress. The vultures do not take long (an hour or two at the most) to remove the flesh off the bones. The bones are dried by the sun, and later swept into a central well. Formerly, the bones were kept in an ossuary, (the place where bones of the dead are deposited) or what they called *astodan*, to preserve them from rain and animals. The morning of the fourth day is marked as the most solemn observance in the death ritual. It is believed that the departed soul reaches the next world and appears before the deities who are to pass judgement over it. The souls, they believe would be judged in the presence of *Ahura Mazda* and his helping spirits.

### **19.4.2 Marriage and Family**

Marriage is solemnised and sanctified by a religious ceremony but it is a contract. The prayers are recited from the Avesta. As a result of Hindu influence, prayers are recited in Sanskrit too (CSWI 1974: 48). Marriage is, by and large monogamous. Consent of both the boy and girl is essential for finalising marriage. Zoroastrianism prescribes strict monogamy. Religious tradition does not approve of child marriage. Dissolution of marriage (divorce or separation) is allowed under certain conditions. In fact in 1936, The Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act outlined clearly conditions under which divorce can be allowed. It also stated that both parties in marriage (husband and wife) could initiate

divorce proceedings. This law has been based on the liberal principles of Zoroastrianism, which grants rights to both men and women.

A Zoroastrian woman is considered as an equal partner in marriage and family. Both men and women are entitled to religious and secular education. Parents of the bride and the groom contribute to the expenses involved in setting up of their new household. A woman enjoys inheritance rights both in her capacity as a daughter and as a wife. Remarriage is allowed and a widow does not have to forego inheritance rights over her husband's property if she remarries (CSWI 1974: 4).

Thus Zoroastrianism has sanctioned liberal attitudes and practices regarding marriage and family. However, some of the less liberal attitudes and customs of the local population with which the Parsis came into contact have also made their impact on the institutions of marriage. Research has pointed out that by the seventeenth century A.D. Parsis settled in Gujarat had begun to pattern their social relationships after the Hindu society. Thus child marriage became common, some males practised bigamy or polygyny and widow remarriage was not easy. The evil practice of dowry also became prevalent. Horoscopes (birth charts) came to be prepared for Parsi children by Hindu priests (Bulsara 1968: 17-18).

These customs, especially dowry, bigamy, polygyny, child marriages, ban on widow remarriage, and divorce, came to be challenged by the enlightened sections of the Hindu and Parsi community including the members of Parsi Panchayat. Many members of Parsi community pointed out that these customs were not sanctioned by Zoroaster and therefore had to be stopped. Their concerted efforts indeed led to the removal of many of these practices. For instance, as a result of the vigorous campaigning by the social reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the 1929 Sarda Act was passed. This act penalised marriages of girls below 14 years of age and boys below 18 years. However, by this time (1929) there were hardly any child marriages among the Parsis. In fact, since then, the age of marriage has been rising, and since the 1960's the average age at marriage for Parsi men have been between 25-28 years. For Parsi women this is between 23-25 years (Bulsara 1968 : 26).

One important aspect regarding marriage and family, in which women suffer a disability even today, has been the aspect of inter-religious marriage. The child of a Parsi father and non-Parsi mother, whether in wedlock or out of it, can be initiated into the Zoroastrian faith by the Navjote or Naojote ceremony. However, neither by religion nor by law can a child of a Parsi mother and a non-Parsi father be admitted into Zoroastrianism. The steady decline in the size of the Parsi population can be traced, (to some extent) to the increasing number of marriages between Parsi women and non-Parsi men. Children born of such marriages are not recognised as Zoroastrians. Hence the decline in the number of members enumerated as Parsis. The Parsi community has not been able to stop such inter-religious marriages since Parsi girls enjoy the right to choose their spouses. Conservative members have their reservations and resentment against marriage between a Parsi and a non-Parsi. A Parsi boy's marriage with a non-Parsi girl is accepted with greater grace than the marriage of a Parsi girl with a non-Parsi boy. Since Zoroastrianism is not a proselytising



religion (it does not preach or practise conversion) it does not easily accept non-Parsi members into its fold.

Parsi girls marrying a non-Parsi boy by the 1954 Special Marriage Act have made a claim to the Parsi Panchayat that they must be given the right to visit the fire temple and remain a Parsi. It must be pointed out that these girls (those marrying non-Parsis) do not lose their rights of inheritance or intestate succession (CSWI 1974: 49).

### 19.4.3 Inheritance and Succession

A feature of the rules governing the Parsi intestate (without making a will) is that the share of male heir is double that of a female heir of the same degree. For example, if a male Parsi dies leaving a widow and children, the property will be divided so that the share of each son and widow will be double the share of each daughter. Further if a male Parsi dies leaving one or both parents in addition to his wife and children, the property will be divided so that the father will receive a share equal to half the share of a son. The mother will receive a share equal to half the share of the daughter. On the other hand if a female Parsi dies intestate her husband and her children, will receive an equal share of her property.

Among Parsis adoption is not recognised by custom or law for purposes of inheritance and succession. A Parsi widow without any children, can adopt a son on the 4th day of her husband's death. This is for the temporary purpose of performing certain religious rites for the dead man. This adoption is for a limited purpose and does not grant any property rights on the adopted "*palak*".

What is clear, from these Parsi rules of inheritance and succession, is that while they recognise the woman's right to inheritance and succession, the Parsi daughter's share of her father's property remains half of that of a son. It must be pointed out that most of these provisions were enacted in 1939. At that time these rules conferred more rights to women than the then existing Hindu and Muslim laws.

#### Activity 2

See the movie *Pestonjee* or any other film made on the Parsis. If you cannot see a movie on Parsis, read a book or magazine or journal, which has any articles, related to the Parsis. Note down what you have learnt from this activity about the Parsi marriage and family. Discuss the same with other students in the Study Centre.

### 19.4.4 Parsi Panchayat

Earlier we had mentioned that the Parsi Panchayat (also called *Anjuman*) played a role in reforming certain practices which reflected the infiltration of non-Zoroastrian elements into Parsi institutions (eg. child marriage, ban of remarriage, polygyny etc). In this section we will briefly examine the role of the Parsi Panchayat in India.

From the time Parsis landed in India, there were some members among them who negotiated with the rulers and traders on behalf of their community. Gradually the Parsi Panchayat or Council of Elders came into being. This was

established in Surat and Navsari around the middle of the seventeenth century. It consisted of both priests and laypersons. In this context, it is important to talk of the divisions, which have existed, in Parsi society in India.

In India, the Parsis are divided into two sections: namely the *Mobeds* (or priests) and *Behdin* (or laity). Priests for a long time were exclusive and intermarriage was seldom permitted. Only the son of a priest could become a priest. In terms of the Parsi Panchayat, in the seventeenth century though priests were members of the Panchayat, the laity members played a greater role in the economic role of the Parsis in India. Towards the last quarter of the seventeenth century the British started developing Bombay into their main trading centre. The Parsi community began to make full use of this trading venture in Bombay. The Parsi Panchayat played an active role in promoting the economic interests of the community. It also provided some inner stability and order to the Parsi community (Kulke 1978: 62).

The Bombay Panchayat was formally recognised to punish members of the community who went against the traditionally accepted Parsi norms (religious and social). Punishable acts included committing bigamy or insulting members of the priestly class. A person requiring divorce and permission to marry a second wife had to represent his case in writing to the Panchayat. When the bad conduct of a wife was established the Panchayat used to punish the guilty woman by taking her securities (her jewels, maintenance charge, funeral expenses on her death) before granting the husband permission to remarry. Those who were given permission to marry a second time had to get their marriage ceremony performed only by the priest named by the Panchayat. This would vary depending on whether the applicant belonged to the *Shehenshah* sect or the *Kadmi* sect.

Here we need to mention another social division. The Parsis are divided into two sections on the question of pronunciation of the *Avestan* prayers and the intercalation (this word means, to insert as a day on the calendar) in the Iranian-Zoroastrian calendar. In ancient Iran the length of the year was known to be 365 days and 6 hours. This difference of 6 hours was made up once in 120 years by adding one month known as *Kabisa*. Those who followed this method called themselves *Kadmis* or *Kadims*, meaning the ancient. While the Parsis who did not follow this calendar came to be known as *Shehenshahis*. Fire temples are open to both these sections. Intermarriage among these sects is quite common. For the *Shehenshahi* Parsis the New Year falls at the end of August, while for the *Kadmis* it falls a month ahead at the beginning of August. The Parsi Panchayat kept these divisions in mind when it tried to arrive at any decision.

Those who violated the rules were to be turned out of the community and punished, as the Panchayat thought proper. Besides obtaining permission from the Panchayat to marry a second time (when the first wife is alive) a man had to very often pay the Panchayat some amount of money as charity (Bulsara 1968: 28).

Among the punishments which could be imposed by the Panchayat were forbidding: (i) priests to enter the house of the person punished; (ii) the person to visit the Parsi temple; and (iii) the person to go to the Tower of Silence. Other punishments included beating the offender with a shoe, shaving a

woman's head, and excommunicating the deviants from the community and so on. The Panchayat continued to wield a strong influence over the religious-social life of the community till 1830. After this the sons of the old members took over and began considering their positions in the Panchayat as personal possessions. They behaved high handedly and in a biased manner. Henceforth, the Panchayat became an institution of class discrimination. Thus serious breaches like bigamy were now glossed over by the Panchayat, so far as the richer members of the community were concerned. This made some of the 'elderly' members resign their positions on the Panchayat. It had virtually become a powerless institution. The British Government also withdrew its recognition from the Panchayat.

In 1865, a Parsi Law Reform Association and later in 1961 a Government Commission worked on drafting a bill which gave the Parsi community, a written law of their own. It was entitled the Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act of 1865 and Parsi Succession Act of 1865. These Acts have been amended in subsequent years to liberalise and facilitate legal proceedings relating to marriage and succession.

### 19.4.5 Festivals

So far we have discussed the emergence of Parsi community in India, their basic tenets, some of the important rites and customs of the Parsis and the role of the Parsi Panchayat. There is another area of Zoroastrian social organisation that reflects the collective entity of the Parsis. The area which rejuvenates the Zoroastrian way of life are the Parsi Festivals.

Feasting is a necessary component of Parsi worship. In other words it is not just a 'desirable' or an expected mode of behaviour but one that is religiously enjoined upon Parsis. It follows directly from their fountainhead, Zoroaster, who enjoins every Parsi to lead a happy and joyous life. The principal festivals in the Parsi year are the six seasonal festivals, *Gahnbars* and the days in the memory of the dead at the Parsi year's end. Also, each day of the month and each of the twelve months of the year is dedicated to the deity. The day named after that month is when the great feast day of that particular deity is held. The new year festival, Noruz or Navroz is the most joyous and beautiful of Zoroastrian feasts. It is a spring festival in the honour of *Rapithwin*, who is the personification (i.e. considered as person) of noonday and summer. The festival to *Mithra or Mehragan* (noble spirits) was traditionally an autumn festival. This festival was as honoured as the spring feast of *Norus*.

As you have observed in this unit, the Parsis provide an interesting variation from other communities. Though numerically small and localised in a few regions in the world, they are significant in terms of their economic and social strength in India.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) Fill in the blanks in the statements given below.
  - a) The initiation site, which marks the admission of a Parsi boy or a girl into the Zoroastrian faith, is called .....
  - b) The place where the dead body of a Parsi is disposed is called .....

- c) The new year festival of the Parsis is called .....
- ii) State whether the following statements are true or false.
- a) Zoroastrianism prescribes strict monogamy.
- b) Low age at marriage is prevalent among the Parsis today.
- c) A daughter and a son acquire an equal share of the father's property when the father dies intestate.
- d) The Parsis Panchayat consists of both the priest and laymen.

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## 19.5 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, you were introduced to the social organisation of the Zoroastrian community in India. Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism (deriving its name from its supreme God, *Ahura Mazda*) was introduced in India around the 8th century A.D. We described how this community came to be localised in and around Gujarat and we mentioned their population strength at around 76,382 in India 1991. We pointed out that the Parsis (as they are referred to in India) have made a significant contribution to the economic, political, educational and social development of India. In order to have an understanding of their social organisation we looked at their basic tenets or belief systems. We noted that fire is worshipped as a symbol of their supreme God *Ahura Mazda*. We pointed out that Zoroastrians believe that a person has to make a choice between leading a good life or leading an evil life. We then moved on to describe their rites of initiation and death, their customs relating to marriage, family, and laws of inheritance and succession. We observed that in the Parsi society both men and women enjoy rights of succession and inheritance. We also described the Parsi Panchayat and the festivals of the Parsis. We have thus given an adequate overview of Parsi social organisation.

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## 19.6 KEYWORDS

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<i>Ahura Mazda</i>	Name given to the supreme God of the Zoroastrians, which means, "Wise lord"
<i>Avesta</i>	A collection of texts gathered in writing roughly between 4th and 6th century A.D. and attributed to Zoroaster or Zorathustra
<i>Dakhma or Dokhma</i>	Also known as 'Tower of Silence' where the Zoroastrians dispose the dead
<i>Mazdaism</i>	Another name for Zoroastrianism derived from the name " <i>Mazda</i> " meaning supreme Lord
<i>Navjot</i>	An initiation rite by which a boy or girl is admitted into the Zoroastrian faith

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## 19.7 FURTHER READING

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## 19.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) The founder of the Zoroastrianism is Zarathustra or Zoroaster.
- ii) The other name for Zoroastrianism is Mazdaism.
- iii) Fire is worshipped as a symbol of the supreme God.
- iv) The Parsis are found mainly in Gujarat, Maharashtra especially in Bombay and Deccan.
- v) The two important sources of information about Zoroastrianism can be derived from its texts, the Avesta and the Gatha.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i)
  - a) Navjot
  - b) Dakhma/dokma or Tower of Silence
  - c) Navroz/Noruz
- ii)
  - a) T
  - b) F
  - c) F
  - d) T

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