

Women in Ancient Iran through Achaemenian Times.

by

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We do not have extensive direct evidence, from Iranian sources, of what life was like in ancient Iran, in large part because of destructive major invasions that occurred around 331 BC when Alexander the Macedonian destroyed the Achaemenian Empire, and 647 AD when the Arabs destroyed the Sasanian Empire. Most of the information we now have was written by those who were the enemies of Iran, and thus are slanted by their own cultural and political biases. But some ancient Iranian texts do remain, which have now been supplemented by archeological evidence, from which we can glean bits and pieces of what life was like for ancient Iranian women through Achaemenian times.

The earliest textual evidence comes from the Gathas of Zarathushtra, which many scholars believe were composed around 1,100 BC or earlier. The Gathas demonstrate a happy equality between men and women in religious and personal relationships, as do other Avestan texts written a few centuries later. Zarathushtra named his daughter Pouruchista which means "full of illumined thought" -- this from a man who considered good mind (vohu manah) to be a divine attribute. On her wedding day, he advised her

"Do thou persevere, Pouruchista To thee shall He grant the firm foundation of good thinking and the alliance of truth [asha] and of wisdom..." Y53.3 (Insler translation throughout¹).

According to Zarathushtra, "good thinking" "truth" and "wisdom" are divine attributes – attributes of Ahura Mazda – which Zarathushtra thought his daughter capable of attaining, along with all the living.

On this same occasion, he gave the following advice to all the brides and grooms who were then getting married:

"Let each of you try to win the other with [asha], for this shall be of good gain for each." Y53.5.

The meaning of "asha" includes the truths of mind and spirit -- all that is true, good, beneficent, (generous), and right. This is great advice for any relationship. But it tells us that in Zarathushtra's view, the marriage relationship is not one of domination and subservience, but of partnership, with each spouse making the same effort to win the love and respect of the other with truth, i.e. with all of the values that comprise the true order of things (asha) -- truth, generosity, friendship, lovingkindness, compassion, justice, et cetera.

The later Yasnas are full of instances in which men and women are specifically mentioned together. An early Zoroastrian prayer starts with the words

"Those men and women, both do we adore, whose every act of worship is alive with Asha..." (I.J.S. Taraporewala translation²).

In an age when men worshipped gods by slaughtering animals (and possibly each other) in stone temples, Zarathushtra introduced the idea of men and women worshipping God -- side by side -- in the temple of life, by infusing His divine qualities into each thought, word and action.

In those ancient times (though sadly not today), this equality of men and women in religion, extended even to the ritual. The Visparad mentions "... the saints of the ritual, male and female." (Visparad 1.3; Mills translation in Sacred Books of the East, Vol. 31, page 335).

And a much later text, the *Aerpatastan and Nirangistan*, as translated by S.J. Bulsara, (and published by the Trustees of the Parsee Panchayat Funds and Properties, 1915)³, speaks of women priests, indicating that when it was necessary for a priest to travel, such priestly duties were allocated between men and women priests (not necessarily husband and wife) in a way that harmonized with family responsibilities, so that neither priestly duties nor family responsibilities should suffer. The text states that as between two priests who are married to each other, if both have control over property and can manage wealth, then either one can travel to perform priestly duties. If only the man has control over property and can manage wealth, then the woman priest should travel to perform priestly duties. And if only the woman has control over property and can manage wealth, then the man priest should travel to perform priestly duties (pages 17 -- 18) -- indicating not only that women were priests, but that they had independent control over property, even after marriage.

This text (written by Zoroastrian priests) also insists on a non-Zoroastrian woman's right to practice her own religion without legal or physical persecution. It states that if a man converts to the Good Religion (the name Zoroastrians called their religion in the ancient world because of its emphasis on goodness), he should not force his wife to convert. He is not permitted to strike her, or stop supporting her, nor does she pass from the condition of being his wife, because she refuses to convert (page 40). Regrettably, it also suggests that the newly converted Zoroastrian husband should not sleep with his non-Zoroastrian wife (surely a subtle, but unworthy, effort to persuade the wife to convert!). Whether this suggestion was followed by such husbands, the text does not say.

This equality in personal relationships and religion, extended to social governance as well. The Haptanghaiti, (a text close in time to the Gathas), prays:

"..... May a good ruler, man or woman, thus assume rule over us....." Y41.2 (Humbach translation⁴),

indicating that in those ancient times, it was taken for granted that women could not only rule over tribes or nations in their own right ("...man or woman..."), but could be good, respected, rulers as well.

In the early 1900s, an archeological dig in Persepolis, the palace of Darius the Great, discovered hundreds of clay tablets (now known as the Persepolis Fortification Tablets) some of which are discussed in Brosius, *The Women of Ancient Persia, 559 -- 331 B.C.* These tablets included payroll records which showed that the numbers of male and female workers were "well balanced" (Brosius, page 182). Women were employed as both workers and supervisors, received the same rate of pay in wine, beer, grain or silver, as their male colleagues (pages

182, 153 -- 160), and received additional pay as mothers -- unfortunately with preferential treatment by some employers, for a mother of boys (page 172, 178, 182). These tablets also show that women owned, and had full control over, their own estates throughout the empire, were involved in the management and administration of these estates, disposed of their rents and income, employed work forces, paid taxes, and enjoyed economic independence. They had their own personal seals, and issued orders in the form of letters under seal, to various administrators (page 180). They had the legal right to act independently from their husbands (page 197), and participated in public feasts and in the social life of the Court (page 96).

Even after the Achaemenian Empire fell to Alexander the Macedonian, that ancient gender equality did not entirely disappear in outlying areas. Professor Moulton, late of Oxford University, writes of a foreign diplomat, one Tchang K'ien, who in 128 BC, found two classes of population in Khorassan and Bactria, the nomads and the "unwarlike". Moulton paraphrases this diplomat's description of the unwarlike population as follows: "there is no supreme ruler, each city and town electing its own chief. They pay great deference to their women, the husbands being guided by them in their decisions" and Moulton concludes that this description "reflects the features of the Gathas sufficiently well." ⁵

The freedom which women enjoyed in ancient Iran, is also depicted in the Shah Nameh where for example, Gordafried, the daughter of a garrison commander was described as "well versed and unrivalled in the arts of warfare." When Sohrab laid siege to her father's garrison, she challenged Sohrab to single combat, during which the tip of his lance caught her helmet, and her long hair streamed out as she rode, causing Sohrab to exclaim in astonishment: 'If the women of Iran are so valiant, what must their men be like!' Similarly, Rustom's daughter, Banoogoshasb, was described (by her husband) as a knight in her own right. It is interesting that these legendary stories of women warriors are echoed factually in the Cambridge History of Iran which mentions that the women warriors of a Persian satrap, were introduced to Alexander at a banquet in Ecbatana (Vol. II, page 484). There is even mention (in the CHI) of a woman admiral in Achaemenian times, but I cannot at this time find a page reference for it.

In conclusion, it would be simplistic (and possibly inaccurate) to state that there were no differences at all between the treatment of men and women in ancient Iran. Unbiased evidence of life in ancient Iran is sparse. But what little remains to us, establishes that women were regarded as capable and respected equals -- an equality that in some ways is unequalled even today in the United States (for example, in matters of equal pay, the glass ceiling, as well as women rulers and priests). This evidence establishes that ancient Iranian women enjoyed an unusual degree of legal and social equality and freedom in making their life choices -- in worship, in entering the priesthood, in marriage, in owning and managing property, in ruling kingdoms, in earning livelihoods in the workplace, and even in warfare.

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¹ As it appears in Insler, *The Gathas of Zarathushtra*, (E. J. Brill, 1975).

² As it appears in I. J. S. Taraporewala, *A Few Daily Prayers from the Zoroastrian Scriptures*, (Hukhta Foundation Reprint, 4th edition, 1986), page 7.

³ This text is described on the title page as follows: Aerpatastan and Nirangastan, or The Code of the Holy Doctorship, and the Code of the Divine Service, being Portions of the Great Husparam Nask, on The Order, the Ministry, the Officiation, and the Equipment of the Holy Divines of the Noble Zarathushtrian Church.

⁴ As it appears in Humbach, *The Gathas of Zarathushtra and Other Old Avestan Texts*, (Heidelberg, 1991), Vol. 1, page 150.

⁵ Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism, The Hibbert Lectures delivered at Oxford, 1912*, (AMS Press reprint), pages 85 -- 86.