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Zoroastrian Funeral Practices: Transition in Conduct

Anton Zykov

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Threads of Continuity

ZOROASTRIAN LIFE & CULTURE

SHERNAZ CAMA

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Disclaimer

This Volume draws upon a large number of sources in various languages, ranging from Avestan, Pahlavi, Greek, Latin, Middle Persian, Persian, Parsi Gujarati and Sanskrit for which different transliteration systems should ideally have been followed. Since we wished to make the text reader friendly, while we have made all attempts to explain a word in context, complete consistency of usage has not been possible.

Contributors have been permitted to use their own style of explanation and reference. Each essay has an individual Bibliography which follows the article in the Compendium.

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ZOROASTRIAN FUNERAL PRACTICES: TRANSITION IN CONDUCT

Anton Zykov

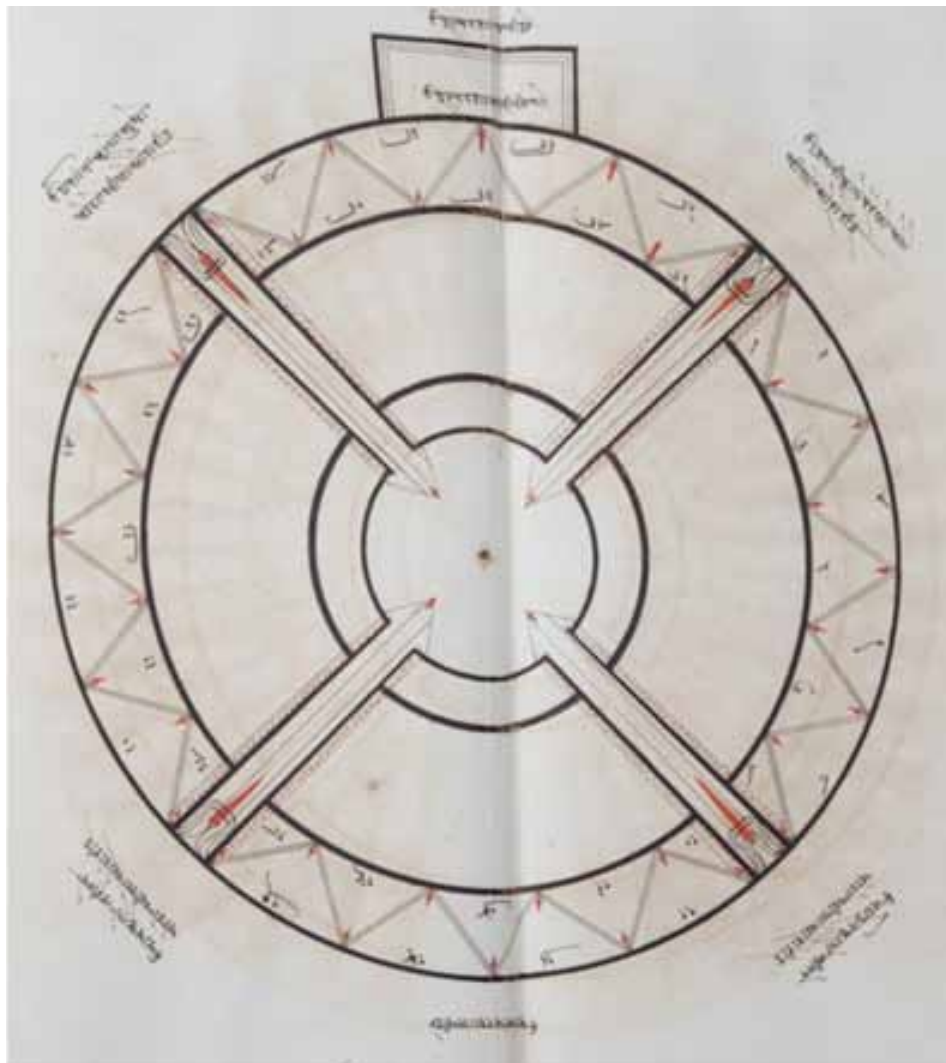
This article is dedicated to a better understanding of probably the most important ceremonies of the Zoroastrian religion – funeral rituals and people who are directly involved in their conduct. According to the tenets of the Zoroastrian faith, described in the nineteenth book of the Avesta, entitled Videvdat (Vendidad) or the “Law Against Devas (Demons)”, a body after death is possessed by the demon *nasu* that defiles it. Thus, any contact between the dead matter and other substances like earth, water and, especially, fire, is prohibited. After undergoing special cleaning ceremonies, the body is taken to the *dakhma*, also known as the “Tower of Silence”. A *dakhma* is erected usually in the shape of a round stone platform where dead bodies are placed and then consumed by corpse-eating scavengers, usually vultures. This mode of disposal was in use in Iran till the 1960s and is still prevalent in the traditional Parsi sites of India, primarily in Gujarat and Maharashtra.

Zoroastrian purity laws also put a strict ban on any contact between the dead and living beings. Even relatives of the deceased are not allowed to touch the dead. After death, a body is carried to the *dakhma* by corpse-bearers or *nasusalars* (“the ones who control the demon *nasu*”). They are thus contaminated by *nasu* until undergoing a purifying bath (i.e. special ceremony of washing the body with *taro*

or bull’s urine), which is called upon to clean them from the contact with the demon. In Iran, where burial in cemeteries or *aramgahs* has replaced *dakhmas*, no *nasusalars* can be found at present, except for one person, who used to do this work at the *dakhmas* of Qasimabad, a village on the outskirts of Yazd. In India, *nasusalars* who work in *dakhmas* are now very few in number and are predominately based at the Doongerwadi sites in Mumbai, Surat, Navsari, Pune, Bharuch and a couple of other cities with a traditionally sizeable Parsi population.

This paper intends to cast light on the history of the *nasusalars*, with particular attention focussed on the current situation of the Parsi community. Thus, the main focus of the paper is placed not on the sacrificial significance of the Zoroastrian funeral rituals but on the social impact that they might or might not have on the Zoroastrian community and, particularly, the origins of the *nasusalars* in India.

It is worth noting that this article comes at a time when the anthropology of death in the Parsi community has become not just a matter of academic discussion, but a subject of a major dispute about the future of the community. 2006 saw a scandal over a Parsi woman, Dhun Baria, who released her shocking pictures of the Doongerwadi *dakhma*¹ to the Indian media, showing the



ABOVE
RIVAYAT OF DASTUR DARAB
HORMAZDYAR WITH PLAN
OF DAKHMA
MEHERJIRANA LIBRARY,
NAVSARI

dramatic condition of the bodies kept there.

The corpse-bearer narrative was further brought to the public scrutiny with the publication of Cyrus Mistry's 2014 novel, *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*. Most recently, in the summer of 2015, *khandias* (pallbearers) and *nasusalars* announced a strike, as a result of which the Bombay Parsi Punchayet had to employ volunteers, who are not professional corpse-bearers, to do this often stigmatizing job.

The debate on the conditions of *dakhmas*, as well as the social treatment of *nasusalars*, polarizes the Parsis into two rival camps: proponents and opponents of the *dakhmenashini* system. The “*nasular* factor” can play a decisive role in this debate. Possible extinction of the *nasusalars*, as a result of their social treatment in India, which is discussed in this paper, can become one of the primary reasons for the end of the Zoroastrian mode of body disposal, which has been preserved for thousands of years.

This paper discusses the origins of *nasusalars*, as well as the evolution of this profession through the sixteenth to twentieth centuries, based on Zoroastrian normative literature and European travellers' accounts.

Containment of *nasu* and *nasusalars* in Videvdad and Persian Rivayats

Nasu or dead matter is considered to be the most polluting element that must be kept away from clean substances, and particularly from such pure spheres as water, earth or fire. Any dead substance, and particularly human corpses, are considered to be attacked and possessed by the corpse-demon Druj Nasu: “Directly after death, as soon as the soul has left the body... the Druj Nasu comes and rushes upon him, from the regions of the north, in a shape of a raging fly...”². As a precaution against the demon Nasu, any contact between dead matter and “life matter” was strictly prohibited. The Videvdad established ritual regulations in dealing with *nasu*. The most appropriate way to dispose of a corpse in ancient Persia was its exposure in a *dakhma*, a place where it was left in order to be consumed by wandering scavengers, chiefly the vultures known by the Persian name *روح شال* (*lashkehlor*) or corpse-eaters, and wild dogs: “O Maker of the material world, thou Holy One! Whither shall we bring, where shall we lay the bodies of the dead, O Ahura Mazda?” – Ahura Mazda answered: “On the highest summits (on the top of a mountain), where they know there are always corpse-eating dogs and birds”³. A *dakhma*, a place with a stone surface, should be located remotely from the pure elements: “thirty paces from fire, thirty paces from water, thirty paces from the consecrated bundles or *baresom*, three paces from the faithful”⁴. People, and particularly pious persons of the Zoroastrian religion or *Behdins*, must also refrain from any contact with the dead matter, although they inevitably have to do so while taking a corpse to a *dakhma*.

“...And when the birds begin to fly, the plants to grow, the hidden floods to flow, and the wind to dry up the earth, then the worshippers of Mazda shall make a breach in the wall of the house, and two men, strong and skilful, having stripped their clothes off, shall take up the body from the clay or the stones, or from the plastered house, and they shall lay it down on a place where they know there are

always corpse-eating dogs and corpse-eating birds”. The translator of the Videvdad, James Darmesteter, makes the following note: “These people are corpse-bearers or *nasu-kasha*..., the corpse must be carried by two persons..., no matter who they are; they may be a man and a woman, or two women”. From this text, we see no reference to a particular class or group of people in charge of the funeral ceremonies. Interestingly, the term “*nasusalar*” in other parts of the Videvdad is used as an attribute and describes not only those who actually carry the dead body, but also the priests who lead the ceremony. “Afterwards the corpse-bearers shall sit down, three paces from the dead, and the holy Ratu shall proclaim...” According to another of Darmesteter’s notes: “The priest who directs the funerals [is] ‘the chief of the *Nasu-kashas*’.”⁵

In the translation of the Pahlavi Videvdad, the passage that first mentions the term “*nasusalar*”, bears a slightly different meaning: “Then, when the birds have flown, the trees have become strong and the descending water shall have flowed away (that is, the adverse of winter shall have gone away), the wind shall have dried up the earth, then, for this (sin) (that is, so that it may not be), these Mazdayasnians shall cut up that abode by cutting up... They shall find out two men for-it, most agile (most industrious), cleanest (most instructed for the work); naked, without clothes...on the support of earth or of stone in mortar lining (to the *kata*). They shall lay him down on the earth, over which the corpse-devouring dog or the corpse-devouring bird may certainly know him.”⁶ This translation emphasizes the qualities of the people who are to execute the *nasusalar* job, in other words the criteria for eligibility to carry *nasu*. These criteria do not include a person’s descent from a certain class of people (or prohibition of this job for people of a certain social, for instance priestly, origin), but basically stress that the body should not be carried by the one who is not prepared (“most entrusted” or “skilful” as in Darmesteter’s translation) for the job.

The Videvdad drives us to a logical suggestion that the work of *nasusalars* could have been undertaken by any man or woman from the Zoroastrian community. A corpse-bearer had to recite certain prayers while carrying the body and to have undergone the purification ceremonies open only to those who were initiated into the Zoroastrian

religion. Thus, according to the Videvdad, it was impossible for a non-Zoroastrian to do the job of the *nasusalar*. Thus, the job of the *nasusalar* is represented in the Videvdad not as a professional post or hereditary occupation of a certain group of people, who were to remain in it, but rather as a service, either paid or voluntary, that could be undertaken by anyone. We can also assume that this service was usually conducted by the members of the family of the deceased, or by anyone else hired by the family of the dead rather than a central authority in charge of the community’s life. This tradition may have been maintained till the end of the nineteenth century in India, when the Bombay Parsi Panchayat took over the responsibility of hiring professional *nasusalars* and paying them fixed wages, whereas previously, corpse-bearers gained their reward directly from the families on the occasion of their work⁷: “They used to be paid by the families... the Trustees of the Panchayat created a special fund, whose income provides monthly salaries for them [*nasusalars* – A.Z.]”⁸.

The Persian *Rivayats* are “mostly the compositions of the dasturs of Persia, who lived in Persia in the XV to XVIII century”, or “collections of religious traditions... contained the replies and information collected by some special messenger who had been sent by some of the chief Parsis in India, to obtain the opinions of the Parsis in Persia regarding certain particulars or religious practice.”⁹ Most of the *Rivayats* discuss the instances of implementation of the rules described in the Videvdad, including those concerning the treatment of *nasu* and the *nasusalar* duties. Unfortunately, none of the *Rivayats* give a straight definition of the *nasusalars*’ origin. However, many of them specify those persons who can act as *nasusalars* in certain circumstances. The Kama Bohra Rivayat (1528), while describing the weather conditions under which the corpse should be carried to the *dakhma* mentions: “...then several persons (i.e. *nasusalars*) should form themselves into pairs (with a *paivand*) and there where they want to place the *nasa* (on the road when it is raining) they should hold the ends of the blanket...”¹⁰ In the Kaus Kama Rivayat (1694), on the same matter we also find: “the dead bodies should be taken away (in the manner prescribed above) because both (*nasusalars*, as well as the other carriers) should have their hands over that.”¹¹

The quoted translation was done by Parsi scholars and published in 1932 (reprinted in 1999). If we compare it with the collection of the original extracts from the text in Persian, published in 1922,¹² we see that the parts in brackets were added by the translator. Speaking about the first quoted piece, the author of the Rivayat just puts the Persian verb in the plural when speaking about the subject of action. The author does not mention the word “*nasusalars*” when he talks about the people who should carry the body. The second quoted piece is even more interesting. Its Persian original is: “...د نریگ رب اسن نوچ...”.¹³ “When (they) are carrying (or lifting) *nasa*, every one among these people who are in pairs must put his hand on it”. In this part of the Rivayats, is an example that demonstrates that when its author referred to the *nasusalars* or the corpse bearers he was simply saying they, probably meaning “they who carry the body, i.e. do the *nasusalar* job” should be taken care of in a certain way. In the translation however, we frequently find the word “*nasusalar*” put in brackets instead of simply “they who carry”, as the author most probably referred to a particular professional class of persons, who served as *nasusalars*, that exists in the Parsi community. This class of professional *nasusalars* was used by the author as a synonym for the plural pronoun use in the original text.

The same Rivayats however provide us with the eligibility criteria for conducting the *nasusalar* service. With the reference to the Kama Bohara and Kaus Kama Rivayats, the author of the book dedicated to laws on purity and pollution in Zoroastrianism Jamsheed Choksy, provides the following explanation of the *nasusalar* profession: “Human remains require special precautions and rituals because they can cause extensive pollution. In order to prevent spread of pollution and attack by the Corpse Demoness, a special class of persons arose whose profession involves transport of corpses to funerary towers. These individuals are termed corpse-bearers... Men, women in menses or who have miscarried or had a still born child, men and women together, or boys over the age of eight may serve as corpse bearers”¹⁴. In the original translation of the Rivayats this passage is as follows: “He who knows how to dispose of the corpse (in a proper manner) should carry it. A boy eight years old, who knows how to dispose of it properly, can carry it away. Two menstruous women will do. Two *nasa*

women, i.e. who have brought forth still born children may carry the corpse”¹⁵.

The part of this text which immediately strikes the reader is the permission for women who have given birth to a stillborn child or, moreover, women in their menstrual period to carry the dead bodies, which physically would be a difficult job to do. The translator of the 1932 edition of the Rivayats, Bamanji Dhabar, explains this inconsistency as a mistake of the translator from Pahlavi of this particular part, which is his view should be properly rendered as: “Everyone who understands the care of *nasa* will do. Two boys, eight years old, who understand the care (of *nasa*) will do. A woman free from menstruation or, a woman, who has not given birth to a stillborn child, or a man or a woman and a boy eight years old will do”¹⁶. This translation resolves the controversy, demonstrating that the translation of the Rivayat from Pahlavi into Persian was incorrect, misleading its later commentators. The correctness of this version is proved by an extract from the other Rivayats, such as the Rivayat of Shapur Baruchi (precise date unknown but approximately 1560) that explicitly prohibits this practice: “If *nasusalars* are (two) unclean women, it is not proper [the word “two” in brackets is added by the translator –A.Z.]”¹⁷.

However, the most interesting phrase in the given passage is the first: “He who knows how to dispose of the corpse (in a proper manner) should carry it. This phrase suggests that actually the job of a *nasusalar* could be done by anyone who knew it and was able to carry it out in the prescribed way. This explanation of this phrase correlates with the earlier note on the translation of the Rivayats, where the Persian uses the plural form of the verb and the translator adds the word *nasusalars* in brackets. It probably stems from the fact that Bamanji Dhabar, while translating the Rivayats in the 1920s, had in his mind the state of affairs that existed at that time and still exists in major Parsi cities today, where *nasusalars* represent a certain class or social group of the population involved in the *nasusalar* profession. However, the original authors of the Rivayat, by omitting the word *nasusalars* and deliberately using the plural form of the word, might have simply meant the pronoun *they*, in the sense of all those who know how to do and can do that job. In other words, the translation of the earlier quoted bit from the Rivayat of Kaus Kama

should be understood in the following manner: “the dead bodies should be taken away (in the manner prescribed above) because both [people knowledgeable of doing this job or acting as *nasusalars* (conducting the *nasusalar* service) on this occasion] should have their hands over that.”¹⁸ In another translation provided by Dhabar, this interpretation is demonstrated even more vividly: “Everyone who understands the care of *nasa* will do”.

Although the Rivayat above contains the list of various types of persons able to conduct the *nasusalar* job, the Rivayats generally assume that this person, notwithstanding their sex, must be a Zoroastrian or Behdin. However, this rule was not always strictly observed by the Parsis in India. In the Rivayat of Nariman Hoshang (1478), considered to be the earliest collection of correspondence between the mobeds of India and Iran, there is a continuous mention of “misconduct” of the burial ceremonies by the Parsis, from the Iranian Zoroastrians point of view. Particularly, the Iranian mobeds disapproved of the Indian practice of using non-Zoroastrians as carriers of the Parsi corpses. “The corpses of Behdins should not be carried by unbelievers (*kafir*) to the *dakhma*. Whether (the corpses be of our grandfathers or fathers, these, if uplifted, should be uplifted by Behdins, but it is not proper according to the good religion that unbelievers may uplift them”¹⁹. The later translator of this Rivayat, Ervad Bamanji Nusserwanji Dhabar adds the following note to this text: “As said here, in the 15th century and thereabout, the corpses of Zoroastrians were handled by Juddins and as said in another Rivayat, even the *gahan* (i.e. the bier) was made of wood”²⁰. Later in the same Rivayat, we find another mention of the same Parsi “wrongdoing”: “again, it has been represented (to us) that the *nasa* of men, dogs and other *nasas* are ordered to be lifted by infidels and juddins and they take them to the dad-gah. This is bad, odious and not good. There is greater crime thereof, because it is said in the religion of Ormazd and Zaratosht that if they knowingly order juddins to lift up these *nasas*, then if the juddins go near water or fire, that person who has issued orders is responsible for the sin. Lifting up a corpse is the work of Behdins”²¹. In the other Rivayat of Jasa, we also have the same strict attitude towards the religion of the corpse-bearers: “Two *nasusalars* who are men of the good religion are essential”²².

These texts evidently show that non-Zoroastrians were used in India as *nasusalars* at least in the fifteenth century. However, we find no description of the categories of people who were exactly used to conduct the Parsi funeral ceremonies in India. Were these *juddin nasusalars* professionals hired by Parsis? Were they doing the same job for other religious groups in India? The latter suggestion possibly explains the concern of Iranian mobeds that the impurity attached to *nasusalars* will pollute sacred spheres, particularly fire, given the traditional Hindu mode of disposal by burning of the dead.

Unfortunately, we lack Parsi narratives about their own funeral ceremonies till the beginning of the twentieth century. However, it is useful to look at the writings of non-Parsis, i.e. the accounts of the European travellers who started actively visiting India during the period of the Rivayats (late fifteenth to the late eighteenth centuries). Many of these accounts have left us with the description of the Parsi funeral rituals that most of the Europeans found particularly unusual.

Corpse-bearers in the funeral ceremonies according to the European traveller’s accounts of India in the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries

We have neither European nor Parsi accounts, nor any other fully reliable evidence, based on any writings of Indians or Parsis themselves about the life of the Parsi community at large in the early period of Parsi settlement on the West coast of the Indian subcontinent in the eighth to the late fifteenth centuries. We find the earliest possible mention of Parsis in the brief travel notes of Friar Jordanus, who is thought to have visited India in 1321-23: “there be also other pagan-folk in this India who worship fire; they bury not their dead, neither do they burn them, but cast them into the midst of a certain roofless tower, and these expose them totally uncovered to the fowls of heaven. These believe in two first principles, so wit, of evil and good, of darkness and of light, matters which at present I not purpose to discuss.”²³

The archaeological excavation undertaken in the *dakhmas* in the Gujarati village of Tena (also known as Thana) in the first half of the twentieth century showed the existence of seven *dakhmas* built there. The findings of

these *dakhmas* did not meet the excavators' expectations that they would find early traces of Parsi settlement in Gujarat. The head of the excavators' team, Jamshedji Unvala writes: "the fairly great quantity of black bangles found in this old dakhme of Sanjan, a type exclusively represented in the second stone dakhme of Tena with the exception of one solitary piece found in the first stone dakhme and the bangles of the Mogul and ordinary types like those found in the brick dakhme and the first stone dakhme of Tena would put this brick dakhma of Sanjan chronologically between the first and the second stone dakhmas of Tena, i.e. somewhere between the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of eighteenth century. Thus, this old dakhme of Sanjan is not as old as one should believe. It is relatively old. An older or rather the oldest dakhme of Sanjan remains still to be discovered"²⁴.

Another important issue which relates to this period is the possible widespread conversion of local Hindus to Zoroastrianism, which has no direct correlation with *nasusalar* service, but as we will later see, can potentially be connected to it. The 1898 Bombay Presidency Gazetteer, with the reference to the fourteenth century traveller's account, assumes that during the Parsis' initial period in Gujarat (eighth-fifteenth centuries) "the Parsis seem to have converted a large section of the Hindu population near Thana. In 1323 when Fryer Oderic was in Thana he found that the rulers were Musalmans and the people idolators, some of them worshipping trees and serpents and some worshipping fire. That the fire worshippers were either Parsis or Hindu converts to the Zoroastrian faith seems beyond doubt, as they did not bury their dead but carried them with great pomp to the fields and cast them to the beasts and birds to be devoured. This he [Fryer] repeats in another passage and notices that the bodies were speedily destroyed by the excessive heat of the sun. Again when he goes to Malabar he notices that the people there burned instead of exposing their dead."²⁵

It is hard to find a substantial reference to Parsis in the early writings of European travellers in India in the sixteenth century. In one of the earliest collections of the impressions of van Linschoten, who visited Goa in 1583, he mentions "all sorts of Nations, as Indians, Hethens, Moores, Jewes, Armenians, Gusartes, Benianes, Bramenes, and all Indian nations and People"²⁶ living there. "The

Moores eat all things except Swines flesh, and the dying are buried like the Jewes; but the Heathens as Decanijs, Gusarates, and Canaras, and other Indians being dead, are burnt into ashes"²⁷. This account of burial ceremony that the writer and the author saw at that time probably serves as evidence against the presence of Parsis on the island.

However, already from the beginning of the seventeenth century, we find a number of descriptions of the inhabitants of India's Western coast, many of which draw special attention to the Parsis and their "strange" mode of disposal of the dead. In Samuel Purchas' famous "Piligrimage...", published in 1626, we find traces of people who came from Iran: "The land of Cambaya [Gujarat – A.Z.] is fruit fullest in all India; which causes great traffic of Indians, Portugalls, Persians, Arabians, Armenians, etc. The Guzarates, or Cambayans, are the subtillest merchants in all those parts. They have among them many histories of Darius and Alexander..."²⁸. We also find a description of the religion of Gujarat which "is partly Moorish, partly Heathenish"²⁹. However, when it comes to the funeral ceremonies, among "thirty different sects", Purchas states that "the burning of their dead is common to all their sects"³⁰, which contradicts Zoroastrian fundamental purity laws.

Tomas Herbert, whose voyage to Gujarat is related to the year 1627, mentions Parsis among mercantile classes in Surat: "The other sort of people are merchants, Bramins, Gentiles, and Parsi, which are the original inhabitants"³¹. The following account is given to Parsis in general: "For variety's sake turn we now to another sort of Gentiles in Surrat and Guzzurat, called Parsees, who are a people descended out of Persia, banish hither (to avoid Mahometary and circumcision) upon the death of valiant Yezdgird the Persian king who died Anno Dom. 635 or thereabouts; whose life and doctrine (as it is gathered from the Daroo of Priests of this Sect, by Mr Lord, a minister for some years resident in the factory of Surrat, with what I gathered there myself) tale briefly as follows. Into India these Parsees came ... in five junks from Jasquez, sailing to Surrat, where after treaty with the Rajaeas and Bannyans they got leave to plant; and living peacefully to exercise their religion"³². According to him Parsis were divided into three classes, each having different responsibilities, "Behedins" or laymen, "Herboods or Daroos" or priest, one

of whose duties, unlike the former was “to keep themselves free from pollution” and finally “Distoor” or one high priest (“Pope”), who “must not touch any prophane thing, nor not the laymen or Daroos of his own belief, without washing of purifying after”³³. We should note that Herbert does not mention any particular class inside the Parsi community except for those three.

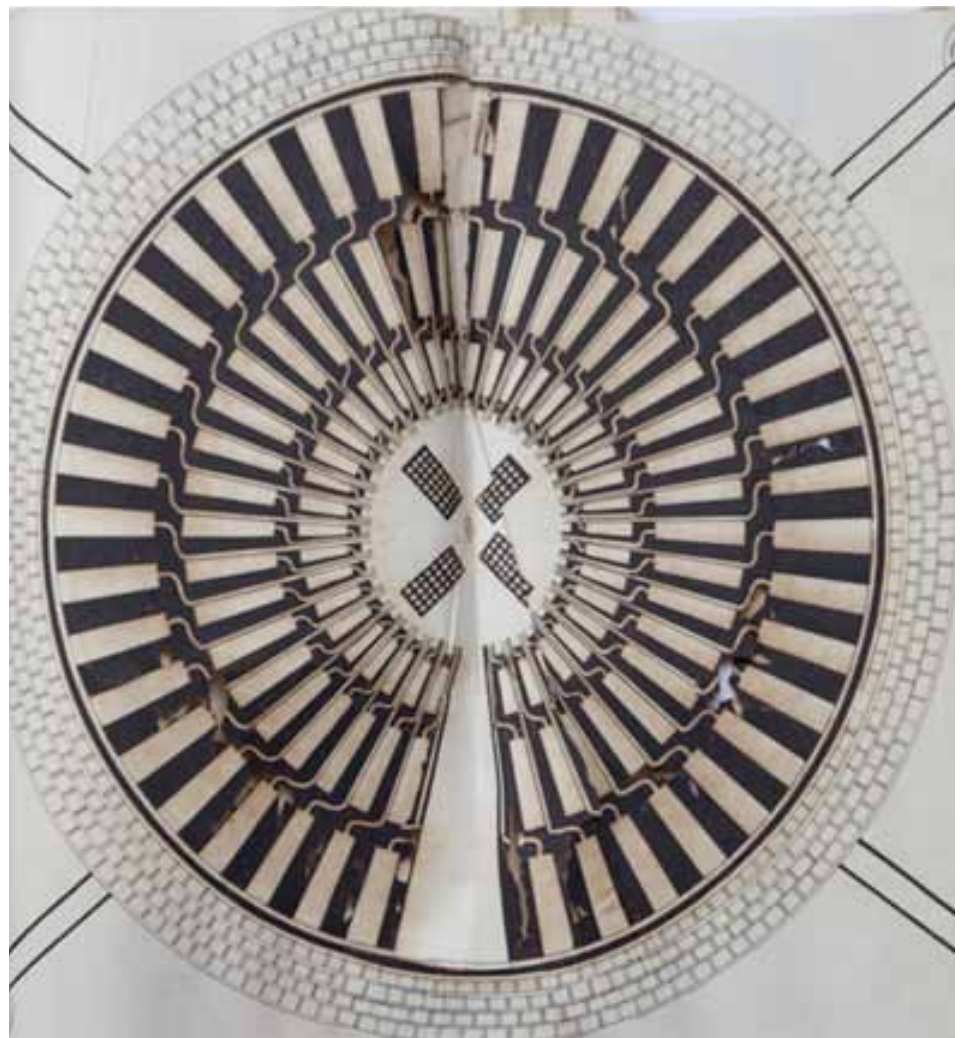
It is in Herbert’s accounts that we see a first description of the Parsi funeral rituals: “They [Parsis – A.Z.] neither bury their dead; but having first put the body into a winding-sheet, all the way as they pass towards the Grave his kindred beat their breasts, but with little noise till they come within 50, or 100 paces of the burial place: where the Herbood meets them, usually attired in a yellow scarf, and on his head wearing a thin turban. The Necessalors or bearers carry the corps upon the iron bier (for wood in forbidden in that is dedicated to the fire) to a little shed, where (so soon as some mystiques are acted) they hoise it up to the top of a round building, some of which a twelve foot high, and eighty in circuit... in the midst of it is a hole descending to the bottom, made to let in the putrefication issuing from the melted bodies, which are thereupon laid naked in two rows or ranks, exposed to the Suns rage, and the appetite of ravening birds, who spare not to devour the flesh of these carcasses, tearing asunder and deforming them in ugly fort”³⁴. Although Herbert does mention *nasusalars* as a people of a specific profession, i.e. those who undertake a specific job of carrying the bodies to the *dakhmas*, he does not include them into his earlier description of classes within the Parsi community. Thus, we may suggest that *nasusalars* either simply do not represent any particular social group, but are Parsis of a certain profession, and thus, fall under the category of laymen, not different from the other Behdins, or stand as a class outside the Parsi community.

In another early account from the Malabar coast, done by John Burells, who went to India some years before 1655³⁵, we find a mention of “the Persian tomb on the Malabar Hill”³⁶, which his later twentieth century commentators William Foster and Evan Cotton regarded as “Tower of Silence or dakhme, built between 1672 and 1673”³⁷. The *dakhma* certainly existed in 1674, as it is mentioned by John Fryer, who travelled to India in 1672-74 and published his account of Bombay in 1674.

Describing the Malabar Hill, he mentions that: “A-top of all is a Parsee tomb lately reared...”³⁸. This extract from Fryer’s letter is dated 16 January 1675 and by comparison with another letter of Streyntshaw Master, dated 18 January 1672, it is generally assumed that the *dakhma* was built between those two dates³⁹. Interestingly, in the same letter by Master we see that that Parsis have not constructed the *dakhma* straight after coming to Bombay, but had to use other modes of disposing of the bodies: “Here are some Parsees; but lately since the English had come to the island, and most of them are weavers, and have not yet any place to do their devotion in or to bury their dead”⁴⁰.

Another English traveller, Edward Terry, whose book based on his journey to India in 1616-19 was published in 1655, gives a more extensive account of the Parsi funerals: “as the Mahometans bury: so the Hindoos in general (not believing the resurrection of the flesh) burn the bodies of their dead near some river (if they may with convenience) therein their sow their ashes. And there is another sect, or

BELOW
RIVAYAT OF DASTUR DARAB
HORMAZDYAR WITH LAYOUT OF
THE THREE SETS OF PAVIS IN A
DAKHMA
MEHERJIRANA LIBRARY,
NAVSARI



sort of Heathens living among them, called Persees, which do neither these; of whom and how they bestow the bodies of their dead, you shall hear afterword... Now there are a race of other Heathens (I named before) living amongst those Hindoos, which in many things differ very much from them, they are called Persees, who (as they say) originally came out of Persia, about that time Mahomat and his followers gave Laws to the Persians, and imposed a new religion on them, which the Persees not enduring left their country and came and settled themselves in East India, in the Province of Gujarat, where the most part of them still continue (though there are some of them likewise in other parts of India) but wherever they live they confine themselves strictly to their own Tribe, or sect⁴¹. Terry shows the exclusiveness of the Parsi community and also mentions the professions that were usual to the Parsis. “Their profession is for the generally all kinds of husbandry, employing themselves very much in sowing and setting of herbs; in planting and dressing the vines and palmeeto, or toddy, trees, as in planting and in husbanding all other trees bearing fruit, and indeed they are a very industrious people...”⁴². Terry goes further and writes about the Parsi diet: “But further for those Persees they use their liberty in meats and drinks to take of them what they please but because they would not give offence, either to the Mahometants or Banians or to other Hindoos amongst whom they live they abstain from eating beef or swines flesh. It is the usual manner to eat alone, as for every one of them to drink in his own cup, and this is a means (as they think) to keep themselves more pure, for if they should eat with others, they are afraid that they might participate of some uncleanness by them”⁴³.

Terry, like Herbert, is attracted by the Parsi funeral and gives a rather long account of it: “and now lastly touching the burial of that people, they encircle pieces of ground with a round wall, that is of a good height, set apart for that purpose. These burying places stand remote from houses and roadways the ground within them is made smooth, or else paved by the bottom, in the midst whereof they have a round pit, made deep like a draw-well. The bodies of their dead, both men, women and children are carried to those places upon a bier made of slight round iron bars (for they will not have the dead bodies touched by any wood, lest they should defile it, because that is fuel

for their adored fire) and thus brought thither are laid round about near the inside of that wall upon the ground, or pavements. Covered with a white cloth; the Daroo, or Haboode accompanies the dead body near unto the door which enters the place (always kept fast shut, but when it is opened upon the occasion to let in their dead) and comes thither, speaks these words in the audience of all those which are thither assembled: That whereas the party deceased confined of all the four elements, he defiles that every one of them may now take his part. And this in the form they use, when they there thus dispose of the bodies of their dead. Which being thereto left in that open place, are presently laid bare by the fowls of air, who in short time after pick all their flesh clear from their bones, by consequence their fleshly part having no other sepulchres, graves, or tombs, but the craws and gorges of those ravenous fowls. And when upon this occasion they enter that round stage of mortality, the bare skeletons they find, which have parted with all their flesh are by those bearers of the dead cast into that deep round pit, where they mix promiscuously together and so make room for other dead bodies.”⁴⁴ Terry thus does not give us an idea of the persons who actually conducted the funeral rituals.

A German traveller, Johan von Mandelslo, who visited Gujarat in 1638, also gives an account of the Parsis in Surat: “Besides the Benjans there is another sort of Pagans in the Kingdome of Guzurratta, whom they call Parsis... They are the Persians of Fars and Chorasana, who fled... Their habitations are for the most part along the Sea-coast, and they live very peaceably, sustaining themselves by the advantage they make out of the Tobacco they plant, the Terry they get out of the Palms of those parts, and thereof they make Arak, in regard they are permitted to drink Wine. They intermeddle also with Merchandise, and the exchange of money, and keep shops, and are of all trades, except those of farriers, black-smiths, and lock-smiths; in regard it is unpardonable sin among them to put out the fire”⁴⁵. On funeral ceremonies Mandelslo writes: “When one is so sick, as that there is little hope of recovery, he is taken out of his bed, to be laid on a little bit of green Turfs upon the ground, where he lies till he give up the ghost, and immediately after, five or six Men, whose employment is to dig the graves, take him from the said Pallat of Turfs put a Shroud about him and lay him upon the Iron-grate,

made after the form of a Biere, upon which they carry the body to the place of burial... These places... are enclosed with a Wall of twelve or fifteen foot high... Over the Graves there are Bars laid cross like a Grate, upon which they lay the body there to remain till the Crows and other devouring Birds have consumed them⁴⁶. From this account we understand that at that the time of this witnessing, there existed a special category of people, whose profession was to “dig the graves”. They clearly represent a particular occupational group as the author refers to them as “grave-makers” with a certain fixed “employment”, thus distinguishing them from the persons of other professions. While Mandelslo carefully describes other occupations of Parsis in the beginning of his narrative, he does not mention this profession among those of Parsis. However, this may be unintentional. Further in his work, he mentions a “sort of people” called Theers, “who are neither Pagans nor Mahometans, for they have no Religion at all... [who] are altogether employed about the scouring of Wells, Sinks, Common-Shores, and Privies, as also cleaning of dead Beasts, whose flesh they eat... Whence it comes that they are in abomination to all the other Indians, who are obliged to purify themselves from head to foot, if any of these people, whom upon that occasion, they call Alchores, should touch them. Which is the reason that they further suffer them not to live within Cities, but assign them Habitations in the extremities of the Suburbs, that they may be as far as may be conveniently from the conversation of other men⁴⁷.”

In the account made by Peter Mundy, who travelled in India around the same time (1628-34) and published his observations in 1667, there is extensive mention of the Parsis. “Parsees are only found about Suratt, who neither bury nor burn their dead, but in certain round, wide, low towers they are laid on their backs with some covering over them circularwise, beginning at the circumference until it come round, and within them another ranck, they lie to purify, or to be eaten by fowle. There bones are thrown into a deep concavity like a well, made in the centre of it, as per this figure [the illustration enclosed in the book later – A.Z.], I having been in one of them myself. If any by chance touch any part of a dead man, as a bone, etc., he presently rends all his clothes in pieces and burns them, remaining as uncleane for 3 days, none coming near him.

It is also held a great misfortune if their Fire should go out their house, and procured again with a great detail of ceremony. These people came first out of Persia, leaving their country because they would not leave their religion at the coming up of Mahometisme, and these are those that manure [cultivate] the Toddy trees as Saratt, etc.

Hallalcores (halalkhor, scavenger, sweeper – later comment by R. Carnac Temple) are a kind of base, object and contemned people or caste most commonly put to empty houses of office, which go not with vault as ours, only in some place are certain high steps one by another, on which they set their feet and ease themselves. [The waste] is carried away by the Hallalcores, so that there is seldome any ill savor in their houses of office. They are also put to bring up, carry about and keep great men’s dogs (as unclean beasts). They also keep swine and eat of their flesh. They are put to cut of condemned mens heads. They eat all manner of carrion, as hourses, cattle, dogs, cats that die of themselves, sayeing other men are cruel in taking away the lives of the creatures, when as they eat none but those whome God kills. Any man that touches any of them thinks himself polluted, so vilely are they accounted. Yet are they in all great men’s houses for the uses aforesaid.⁴⁸

In both Mandelslo’s and Mundy’s texts we find the descriptions of the *halalchors* or *alchores* straight after the portrayal of the Parsi funeral rituals. The very term “halalkhor” (also found in various forms, like “halalchor”, “halalchor”, “halalhor”) must refer to Persian *روح لاله* meaning the “eaters of halal food”. However, most of the authors as we see above explain this name as “eaters of all”, which was regarded as an offensive description. In one of the earlier quotations, Parsis were described to have avoided eating pork or beef not to offend Muslims or Hindus, which probably means that the *halalchors* were not seen as a part of the Parsi community. Besides, Mundy’s description suggest that the *halalkhor* form a distinct outcaste group which is assigned other low profile professions, such as dealing with unclean beasts, which was not included in the list of jobs associated in one of the mentioned accounts with Parsis, who were largely involved in dealing with other animals. In the notes to the Mundy memoirs, the early twentieth century author defines a *halalkhor* as “a low caste Hindu⁴⁹.”

The other reference to *halalchors* as a caste group

responsible for unclean jobs is found in the later writings of the eighteenth century authors. In the account that was made in the very beginning of the century, *halalkhors* are for the first time directly linked with the occupation of *nasusalars*. In his travel account dated to 1701, Captain William Sympson mentions the three sorts of Surat population and “the Parsies or Gaures” among them, “of whom the tradition is that coming in a tempest, at the time when Muhammad and his followers gave laws to Persia that they were unwilling to submit to.”⁵⁰ Among other things, Sympson mentions the following: “Their way of disposing their dead is to expose their carcasses to the fowls of the air, carrying them into an open field, near the place where they are to be placed for the ravenous birds to feed on. The corpse being laid on the ground one of the company goes to look out a dog and having found one invited him along with the piece of bread provided for that purpose till he draws him as near the corpse as he can; for the nearer the dog is brought to the body, the nearer the soul is to felicity... When this ceremony is over two of the Daroos [Sympon refers to two types of priests: “the High Priest of these Persies is called Destoor, the common priests, Darooes or Harboods”] standing at small distance, repeat a tedious form of prayer, which lasts about half an hour, and then the Halalkhors convey the corpse to the intended repository, all the company following by two and two with their hands joined.”⁵¹ Sympson draws special attention to *halalkhors*, giving this view on their conditions: “The Halalkhors are a sort of Indians [we do not say Gaures or Persies, but Indians – A.Z.] in Suratte reckoned the most contemptible of all others but at the same time very useful and necessary. Halalkhors in the Persian language signify Eat-all; or men that eat everything; because they eat any sort of fish or flesh indifferently and will make a meal of a piece of carrion out of a Dutch as well as of the best of meat; and they drink wine as freely as water. These people are employed in cleaning the houses, sweeping the streets, carrying the dirt and dung, washing of dead bodies, and bearing them to the place of burial which renders them absolutely necessary, for in those parts such employments are looked upon as abominable by the Mahometans and Banians, that therefore that sort of men are reputed the vilest of all the inhabitants of Suratte; and it is the greatest of reproaches to call anyone Halalkhors. But they

themselves take all in good part how to all that passes by and carefully avoid touching any for fear of giving offense; by reason the touch of one of them defiles a Banian and puts him to the trouble of some purification; therefore they are shunned and endeavour themselves to keep at a distance from all persons.”⁵² The exact term *halalkhor* is used in neither any Zoroastrian literature, nor in Iranian or Indian. However, Sympson makes it clear that these were the people whose direct duties were to carry the corpses to their last repository, i.e. *dakhma*, thus they were *nasusalars*.

The description of Bombay by the previously mentioned author John Burnell, writing somewhat earlier than Sympson, also provides its readers with the term *halalkhors*, which the author, as the later commentary suggests, confused with *froses* (“commonly farashes, frashes from ‘farrash’ a menial servant”). Burnell described the burning of the body of a Hindu: “when a Gentile is dead, they must wash the body with cold water... and then lay it upon a bier so as are in use amongst us, which the Froses (a cast of people set apart for all offices of defilement) taking up... to the sea side, or if in the country inland, near some running or standing water, where being set down, they erect a pile of billets... Then the eldest son of the deceased, or nearest relation, sets fire to the pile...”⁵³ Thus, it is clear that the *halalkhors* or *froses* represented an outcast group that not only conducted funeral ceremonies for Parsis but also carried out other polluting jobs for other religious communities. *Halalkhors* were engaged in funeral-related services for all religious communities, and thus represented a special untouchable group in charge of professions that deal with the dead matter and, most probably did not belong to the Parsi community themselves.

This status of *halalkhors* as a non-Parsi group of the lowest caste probably remained the same till the nineteenth century. The other mention of this group we find in the *Journal of Residence in India* by Maria Graham, dated 1809, a little more than a century after Captain Sympson’s journey. Describing the life of the Europeans in Bombay, she mentions the types of servants that are working in her house: “For the meaner offices we have a Halalcor or Chandela (one of the most wretched Pariahs), who attend twice a day”⁵⁴. Graham does not refer to this servant as a Parsi, although her other writing always clarify a servant’s caste or religious background. Thus, she writes, “...the

coachman is always a whiskered Parsee...⁵⁵ or "...each guest brings his own servant, sometimes two or three; these are either Parsees or Mussalmans"⁵⁶. She also makes clear that by "Pariah", the definition she attaches to "Halalkhor" she means the most outclassed person, who belongs to the lowest caste: "Two Massalgees [earlier she defines them as "torch-bearers"] clean and light the lamps and candles and carry the torches before us at night. One of these is a Pariah, so that he can clean knives, remove bones and rubbish, which his fellow-servant Nershu, who is of a good caste, will not do."⁵⁷ This definition of *halalkhor* as an untouchable group did not shift its meaning till at least the beginning of the twentieth century. In the glossary of colloquial Anglo-Indian words and phrases, published in 1903, we find: "halal-khor – one who eats what is lawful..., applied euphemistically to a person of a very low caste, a sweeper of scavenger, implying 'to whom is all lawful food'."⁵⁸ Thus, *halalkhors* in nineteenth to early twentieth centuries still belonged to a certain caste of the lowest social status, and were not regarded as Parsis. This correlates with Simpson's and Mundy's description of them, as a "contemptible" class, considered as such by both Hindus and Muslims, and one whose touch "defiles" Hindus.

To summarize the above, *nasusalars*, being members of the *halalkhor* group, who conducted the *dakhma* burial rituals in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, were non-Parsi members of this particular untouchable caste and thus did not belong to the Parsi community, i.e. were Juddins. We believe that that is the very reason why in the Rivayats we find continuous complaints of the Iranian mobeds about the unlawful use of the non-Zoroastrians Juddins, who were used by the Parsis of India as *nasusalars*. However, in the earlier studies of Parsi funeral rituals undertaken in the late nineteenth-twentieth centuries, we do not find any sources that confirm that *halalkhors* continued their duty as corpse-bearers, although in the second half of the nineteenth century corpse-bearers still were represented by a specific group of population distinct from the other Parsis. This is evident from an 1860 collection of letters to the "Bombay Times" newspaper, republishing material from 1844-45. The Panchayat, having assembled in 1844 passed one of its *Bundobusts*, or "the rules and regulations for the better government of caste [meaning Parsis – A.Z.]" concerning the rules for the Parsi

women: "Nusa salars will be posted at the outside of the Fort Gates and paid men shall be placed at different stations with instructions to seize the person of any woman found leaving her house, or going about before sun rise or after sun set, and such shall take her to the Nusa Khana ["a public place where the iron biers, and other funeral paraphernalia are deposited, and in the veranda of this building females found guilty of disgraceful offences were kept in the former days and sometimes with their heads shaved as a mark of infamy"]"... "if any woman be found walking in the road (unaccompanied by proper servants and lighted lanthrom) before the sun rise, or after sun set, her person shall be seized by the Nusasalar"⁵⁹. Obviously, this employment of *nasusalars* was chosen as the most severe measure, called upon to scare the women. However, this story tells us that at that point of time *nasusalars* had already become a distinct group within the Parsi community, who, most probably, were nevertheless regarded as part of it. The Panchayat defines *nasusalars* as "a cryer – invariably the bearer of the Parsee dead bodies"⁶⁰. Thus, it seems likely that *nasusalars* in the middle of the nineteenth century, rather than belonging to an untouchable group that conducted the funeral-related services for other communities, as they did in the beginning of the eighteenth century, were now a part of the Parsi community.

The question arises as to why we see this change in the understanding of the religious identity of the corpse-bearer group, which in the eighteenth century was considered to be outside the Parsi community by both Parsis (as we see it in the Rivayats) and non-Parsis (as we see it in the European travellers' accounts). The answer to the transition in the social status of the *halalkhors* possibly lies in the other quite late Persian Rivayat dated 1778. "The Behdins of Hindustan having purchased mostly sons and daughters of Hindus (Indians) as slaves and female slaves possess them in their own work and home service, having taught Avesta to them, and having invested them with Kushti and Sudre according to the faith of Zaratushtra, employ them to prepare Daruns for Gahambar and other holy festivals to consecrate those things; and also all Mobeds and Behdins of India take food and drinks from their hands. But when they die, the said priests and laymen do not allow their corpses to be placed into the Tower of Silence. They say that these were born of non-Zoroastrian parents, and,

therefore, it would not be well that the bones of Behdins (i.e. born Zoroastrians) should mingle with theirs. Since they allow the performance of all the works of religion by them in their life-time, but after their death prevent them from being consigned to the Tower of Silence, it is requested to know from you whether it is allowable or not to place their corpses into the tower of Silence? Kindly write this subject clearly”⁶¹.

This quotation from the Rivayat demonstrates that there were instances of conversion to Zoroastrianism of certain categories of people who undertook certain duties for the Parsi community at least in the eighteenth century. We assume that these could well have been the people of the outcaste groups earlier described as *halalkhors*. Since the Parsis were suffering the disapproval of the Iranian mobeds for the use of Juddins, i.e. non-Zoroastrians as corpse-bearers, as we saw it in the earlier quoted Rivayat of Nariman Hoshang, they possibly decided to turn the descendants of this class of people, whom they were already employing, into Zoroastrians by “investing them with Kushti and Sudre”. The accounts of the European travellers in India in the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries clearly demonstrate that Parsis employed a certain outcaste group, known at least to the Europeans as “halalkhor” to conduct *nasusalar* services for their community. Moreover, as already noted, it is also clear that this group itself did not belong, at least in the most part, to the Parsi community, as members of this untouchable group were regarded as polluting by other religious communities of western India, i.e. Hindus and Muslims.

One of the impediments for this theory of conversion of a certain outcaste group in order to employ them as *nasusalars* is the tradition of non-conversion to Zoroastrianism widespread among a substantial part of the present day Parsi population, including figures of the community authoritative in religious matters. However, contrary to their opinion, some historic documents witness at least the interest of Parsis in converting local

Indian populations to Zoroastrianism. Another Rivayat of Kaus Mahyar (around 1602), which predates the text quoted above, describes the actual conversion of Indians, but was completed at least a century later than the Nariman Hoshang Rivayat that first mentions the practice of using non-Zoroastrians as corpse-bearers. It discusses the appropriateness of conversions for people often regarded as unclean: “Question: Can a grave-digger, a corpse-burner and a darvand (one of a foreign faith) become Behdins (i.e. converted to Mazdayasnian religion)?” “Answer: If they observe the rules of the religion steadfastly and (keep) connection with the religion, and if no harm comes on Behdins (thereby), it is proper and allowable.”⁶² Here we must say that burying dead bodies in graves or, especially, burning them were considered traditionally as most severe sins or crimes, and those committing them were not only regarded as unclean but suffered very strict punishment up to the death penalty. According to Videvdad “those wicked ones... [who] turned to Nasus [i.e. those who brought a corpse into the contact with water or fire – A.Z.]... shall pay for it in this world and in the next; they shall flay his body [body of the one who polluted fire with a dead matter –A.Z.] in the presence of the assembly, they shall tear him limb...and when his soul comes to the other world, he shall suffer from the devs.”⁶³ In the Books of Thousand Judgements, considered a Law code of the Sassanid Empire, these actions are also regarded as punishable crimes: “...he who buries corpses and he who cremates corpses must be arrested (‘bound’).”⁶⁴ This permission of conversion for grave-diggers and corpse burners which goes contrary to the religious regulations may possibly be a result of the involvement of the non-Parsi untouchable *nasusalar* group of *halalkhor* in similar ceremonies for other religious communities in the Western India, which involved ground burials in case of Muslims and burning for the Hindus.

Endnotes

- 1 Details on this story can be found in the *Parsi Khabar* newspaper:<http://parsikhabar.net/history/parsis-to-import-breed-vultures/633/> or the video report of the CNNIBN TV channel <http://ibnlive.in.com/videos/20608/section/v/3.html>
- 2 Vd 7.2: Darmesteter J. *The Zend-Avesta. Part 1. The Videvdad*. Oxford: OUP, 1887 (Delhi: Motilal Banarasi Dass, reprint 2005), p.75
- 3 Vd 6.45: Ibid., p.73
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