

The “Parsi” School of Āḍar Keyvān

Around the end of the 16th century or, in other words, almost at the end of the Islamic millennium, two religious movements came into existence, one in India, the other one in Persia.

1. A movement, which was proclaimed (in 1581) by the mystic King Akbar Shah, was called Dēn i Ilāhī “the divine religion”. Mulā ‘Abd-’ul-qādir Badāūnī, the author of the Muntakhab-ut-Tawārīkh, ‘Selection of Chronicles’, who knew the court of King Akbar and who translated the Rāmāyaṇa into Persian in spite of his own wish, said the following words: “The history of Alef (1000) was written in order to announce the end of the religion of Muḥammad and the reading of the Arabic books. Strange period: the Islamic jurisprudence, the (Qurān) exegesis, and the science of tradition were rejected, whereas astronomy, philosophy, mathematics, poetry, history and legends were honoured.” Akbar took even other measures: from now on schools (the Madrisa) had to accept the Hindus. He abolished the five daily prayers, the fasting, the pilgrimage and the polygamy (he said: “God is one, and the woman is one”). He introduced a new calendar, Tārīkh i Ilāhī, replacing the Islamic lunar calendar with the Persian solar one. Furthermore, he replaced the hegira date with that of his coronation according to the tradition of the Persian kings. This monotheistic religion (that was also referred to as Tauḥīd ī Ilāhī) did nevertheless not address itself to the bondsmen nor was it of proselyte nature. A number of men of letters or science, rather of Muslim origin, joined the small and closed circle of Akbar after having pronounced the following formula of renunciation: “I, so and so, son of so and so, renounce the untruthful and false religion of Islam which I have seen and heard about from my forefathers, and by this, I enter the Dēn i Ilāhī of Šāh Akbar”. This religion did not leave any holy books, nor did it create the Ilāhī clergy, nor did it build any shrine (Akbar only ordered that the holy fire of the Parsis of Navsari should be carried and that the holy fire should be kept on day and night in his court). A new religion without conversion and without having any social foundation cannot go

very far. After the death of Akbar and even though the *Dēn i Ilāhī* did not have any spiritual leader anymore, the state of mind of this religion remained until Aurangzēb imprisoned his father Šāh Jahān, the grand-son of Akbar and killed his older brother Dārā Škōh while taking over the power (1658). The era of Akbar ultimately finished and a new order started. This new order brought about persecution, the destruction of the Hindu temples, etc.

2. During the same period of time, another movement, first came into existence in Persia and then saw the light in India. The founder of this movement was neither a king nor a high priest. He could rather be described as an offish, shy and lonely person who hides his identity. This kind of concealment is a characteristic of his school. For instance, for two centuries the identity of the author of the book *Dabistān i Mazāhib* “the school of religious doctrines” has intrigued many scholars and researchers, who have written about that book; however the real identity of the author is not yet certain. Contrary to Akbar’s movement, the movement of Āzar Keyvān does comprise a real “literature”, and even a holy book, the so-called *Dasātīr*. Mulla Kāūs, a Parsi from Gujarat bought one copy of the *Dasātīr* when he was in Espahan (in 1778). This copy could be found today in the Mullā Fērōz library in Bombay. When Jonathan Duncan, the governor of Bombay in the beginning of the 19th century learnt about the existence of this copy, he asked Mullā Fērōz (the son of Mulla Kāūs) not to show it to anybody. Then he started to translate the text in order to show it to the King of England. However, before being able to complete that hard work, he died. Sir John Malcolm encouraged William Erskine to continue the translation with the help of Mullā Fērōz. The *Dasātīr* was finally published in 1818 in two volumes: the first volume contains the text prepared by Mullā Fērōz and the second volume contains the English translation made by Erskine. Ever since other manuscripts of the *Dasātīr* have been found.

How could this movement be characterised?

Jivanji J. Modi believed that Āzar Keyvān and his followers were “the mystic-minded Zoroastrians of Persia”. And Henri Corbin referred to that movement as “the Zoroastrian *Ešrāqī* or Illuminative school”. He believed that this school was a Zoroastrian response to the great project of Šaykh al-Ešrāq Šehāb-al-dīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī (d. 1191) or in other words, the revival of the Philosophy of Light taught

by eminent sages of ancient Persia. Takeshi Aoki who recently undertook a study on the transformation of Zoroastrian Messianism in Mughal India has bestowed the name “Šīrāzian Zoroastrians” on the members of this school.

Indeed Āḍar Keyvān and his followers used and applied “Zoroastrian” vocabulary. They gave themselves the epithets *farzāna* which means “wise” or *mubed* (Zoroastrian) “high priest”. The only exception was the master and creator of the school, who following the example of the mystic King Hōšang, took the epithet of Āḍar. Yet, I believe that qualifying this person (Āḍar Keyvān) as a Zoroastrian is not certain and even questionable.

First of all, it seems strange that a Zoroastrian would be given the name Keyvān. According to the Bundahišn, Kēvān , i.e. Saturn, is a nefarious planet et there is no Mazdean Persian that had such a name.

The biography of Āḍar Keyvān shows that he was born in Stakhr and was sent to Shīrāz for his studies where he joined a Madresa. In the Madresa he distinguished himself from others and he was known to be a wise man. There he answered all questions and solved all difficult problems. This is the reason why he was named Du’l-’ulūm, i.e. “Master of Sciences”.

Anybody who has some knowledge about the occupied Iran by Muslims knows very well that a Zoroastrian (called *Gabr* by Muslims) could not enter a Madresa. Already Nizām al-mulk (11th century) showed his joy about the fact that during the ghaznavide period no Gabr dared even to show him or herself even in plains. In the 19th century during the Qājār monarchy Iran started to pay attention to Europe and schools like Dār al-funūn, Alliance Française, Alliance Israélite, etc. started to appear in Persia whereas the Gabrs were about to disappear and it was thanks to the efforts of the Indian Parsis that they could finally have their first school established in Persia. There is a thorough documentary, that of the « Persian Zoroastrian Amelioration Fund », mainly in Gujarati, where there are many examples of the persecution of Gabr families that wanted their children to learn reading and writing and that even at home. Was this kind of persecution different during the period of Āḍar Keyvān ?

Āḍar Keyvān lived during the reign of Shāh ‘Abbās whose reign tied in with the end of Islam’s millennium. Shāh ‘Abbās was told that the Gabrs had a book, the *Book of Jāmāsp*, which forecasts the end of ‘Abbās’ reign. Therefore, he gave the order to search for all copies of

the *Book of Jāmāsp* and to destroy all of them. A great number of the Zoroastrian manuscripts, in Avesta, Pahlavi (Pārsīg) or Persian were burned under that excuse and two scholars who happened to be priests were also killed. At the end of the 17th century (1699) another Safavid King, Sulṭān Ḥusayn ordered the Gabrs of Ispahan to convert to Islam and as they did not accept to do so, Sulṭān Ḥusayn ordered the massacre of approximately 12,000 families during one single day while distributing all their goods among their aggressors. Only a small number of Gabrs were able to leave the capital and went to Yazd in order to announce what happened to the Parsis there. That massacre of Ispahan is referred to in the book تاریخ تباہی فارسیان (still unpublished). Abbé Martin Gaudereau also gave some details of that massacre in his book “Relation of a mission from Ancyre to Ispahan in Persia”.

Therefore, the narrative of a young Gabr in a Madresa, appreciated by his colleagues (the طلبه ‘Talibāns’) and called “Master of Sciences” by them does not seem credible. If Āḍar Keyvān had gone to a Madresa to study there, he must have been considered by the school as a Muslim and in that case he must have had another name, namely a Muslim name.

Farzāna Bahrām i Fraḥād (died in Lahore in 1624) who was a spiritual authority of the group after Āḍar Keyvān told in his Šārestān i Čahār Čaman that one day there was a meeting in the school of de Shaykh Bahā’ al-Dīn in Espahān. A great number of the Ṭalebas were there on that day. Bahrām was also among them. That shows that the Ṭalebas considered him as one of them, that is to say, he was a Muslim and therefore, it is quite probable that Bahrām was a nickname. He justifies his presence as follows: “I was there because some of them as well as Šaykh ‘Āmil liked asceticism and they wanted to ask me questions about the school of Ešrāq”. (This emphasizes the fact that Bahrām was considered as a follower of Suhrawardī). That day, the topic of the discussion was the *jihād* which means killing those persons who are not considered as believers until they convert to Islam. They said: One should perform the *jihād* with the infidels. But there is a second group, those who believe in a sacred book. That group is distinguished in two: firstly those who have a book and a prophet like the Jews who have the Torah and Moses, or the Christians who have the Bible and Jesus. However, there are those who do not have a book but they believe in a so-called sacred book, like the Mazdeans (مجوسان) who say that they used to have a book called Zand and a prophet, named Zaratuštra. I wanted to intervene. But Shaykh made a sign not to speak. This is why I kept silent. Once

the meeting was finished and the Ṭalebas left, I talked with Shaykh, and I told him what I knew about the prophecy of Zaratuštra. Shaykh said : “You are right. But what is the opinion of the Leader of the Time (امام زمان) Āḍar Keyvān?” I replied: “He believes in the prophecy of Zaratuštra”. So he said: “Let’s not speak about it anymore. Whatever he says is true”.

Of course, if Shaykh considered Āḍar Keyvān to be a Zoroastrian, he would not have asked that question.

But if Āḍar Keyvān and his followers were not Zoroastrians, so who actually were they?

There is not any information about this movement beside some writings delivered by this movement itself. Despite the fact that part of the texts of Āḍar Keyvān and his followers have disappeared forever and even though they tried their best to hide their own identity, there is still a number of elements that we could refer to in their books in order to detect them.

First of all, they introduced themselves in their circle as “Pārsī”, and they introduced their school as a “Pārsī” school which induced Modi and the others to make a mistake with regard to their identity. The author of Šārestān wrote about a debate in Shīrāz shortly before the departure of Āḍar Keyvān to India (approximately in 1570). He said that Āḍar Keyvān used to take some distance from common people but also from the so-called “scholars”. However, one day before his departure some “scholars” came to see him in order to say goodbye. They talked about different topics such as language, cosmology, mythology, etc. There was also a Shiite scholar among them that day. He pretended that the Arabs were superior to the Persians (the عجم). He provided them with the following explanation and reasoning that one could find in some Arabic books as well: “ If a Persian is asked whether an Arab is worthy of becoming an Imām/ Prophet, he would say “Yes”; however, an Arab will never accept a Persian to become an Imām/ Prophet. The superiority of the Arabs comes from the prophet (Muḥammad)”. He wanted to know the opinion of Āḍar Keyvān, but he did not comment on that. The assembly suddenly became very noisy. There was also a Zoroastrian called Bahrām. He criticized Āḍar Keyvān of being silent. Some of Āḍar Keyvān’s followers said to Mubed Huš : “ If you do not answer them, they will believe that they are right ”.

Then Mubed Huš said (I am just summing it up and will not enter into the details of his reasoning): we never believe an Arab to become an Imām/ Prophet. The Arabs are not worthy of the Imāmat, because their character wavers between excess and deficiency, whereas we, the Pārsīs observe measure and moderation. Those who accepted your king (Muḥammad) as Imām are not Parsis; they are subjects of the Arabs (تو جمعہء تازیان, تو جمعہء عرب); whereas our origin is Parsi and so is our belief.

We are thus dealing with a dilemma here. Āḍar Keyvān and his followers did not belong to the Parsi community, yet they considered themselves as Parsis. The author of the Dabestān described very well the double face of these Parsis:

“They mingled with the Muslims and seemed to be like them; they have an Islamic name and another one according to their doctrine; they are dispersed in Iran and in Turan; they keep some distance from the Zoroastrians (گنجران) and they are not in a good relationship with them”.

Even though this description is right, yet it does not give us any answer to the identity question of those “Parsis”: Did they belong to a Persian community that maintained its identity and religion in secret and for centuries but did they only pretend to be and to be seen as Muslims just in order to be in security because of the persecutions – just like the Crypto-Jews of Mašhad who in the 19th century decided to pretend having converted to Islam, but they remained faithful to their ancient religion? Or did these “Parsis” just represent some artificial group?

If one read the hagiography of Āḍar Keyvān and his followers, one will be convinced that their pretended antiquity is wrong. In fact, this group was created by Āḍar Keyvān himself in a Muslim surrounding.

For any person who looks from the outside at the Persian history after the Arab conquest, the Parsism of Āḍar Keyvān would appear strange to him. But at least one has to admit that the Iranian “body” has always had difficulties with the transplantation of Islam. Instead of joining the Parsis –who, despite all calamities and troubles that they endured, they preserved their faith, belief and hope – Āḍar Keyvān created his own concept of Parsism and he pretended that those new Parsis who followed him would be more ancient than the Parsis themselves. One could be astonished by the inventiveness on the basis of which Āḍar Keyvān wrote two books: one book, *Mahēn-nāma*, “the

Great Book” which treats the material and spiritual creations, cosmology and eschatology. The other book, *Kahēnnāma*, “the Small Book”, the famous *Dasātīr* which is in fact a collection of the “revealed” texts of sixteen prophets, ranging from Mahābād to Sāsān the Fifth and in between them there are some fictitious characters, some Persian-Aryan heroes, Zaratūstra and even Alexander.

There is no information about the Great Book he wrote. In the *Dasātīr*, Āḍar Keyvān hides himself behind an unknown prophet, Mahābād, who appeared before Zaratūstra and even before the primordial man. He invented a “celestial” language (آسمانی) which is even older than Avestan and Sanskrit. It was the language of the divine revelations until the last prophet, Sāsān the Fifth who decided to translate such revelations into Pārsīg (at the end of the 6th century). A language exam with regard to that language shows that Āḍar Keyvān did not know the Pārsīg (or, Pahlavi) such as a Parsi priest who lived at the same period of time, not even to mention the Avesta. In order to create that invented language, he took elements from two languages: Persian and Hindi and for the Parsi version Āḍar Keyvān did not even hesitate to invent completely new words.

From the very beginning where his book, the *Dasātīr*, was published (in 1818), some people had doubts about its originality. For instance Sylvester de Sacy wrote: “I cannot put aside my suspicion that everything is taken from the Arab writers much later than the advent of Islam, and that the attribution of this doctrine to the Jāvēdān Xrad, an ancient Persian book, no matter which date one would like to attribute to it, is only another imposture and fraud out of the 1001 impostures that the *Dasātīr* consists of”.

Sacy’s suspicions were justified, as an example one could mention the text of Tahmuras (Av. *taxma urupi*, a cosmic hero), the 8th prophet in *Dasātīr*. I have proved that this text was only a word-by-word translation of the litany of Suhrawardi to the Sun (the Arabic text of Suhrawardi is called هورخش ال ک ب یر).

In order to show the “antiquity” of that religion, Āḍar Keyvān based his reasoning on a “tradition” that put another religion before Zaratūstra, which was the religion of Hōšang. He referred to this example in the *Šāhnāma* : Khusrō Abarvēz says in a letter to the Byzantine Emperor :

به ما بر ز دین کهن ننگ نیست به گیتی به از دین هوشنگ نیست

“We are not embarrassed because of our ancient religion; in the world there is not a religion better than that of Hōšang; it is (the religion of) law, goodness, modesty and love, and (also) astrology “.

That is why the school of Āḍar Keyvān is also called Āyēn i Hōšang which means “the tradition of Hōšang “.

Indeed, the Avesta speaks about a wise person, Aošnara before Zaratuštra. The Parsi tradition attributes the art of dialectic, *vimand-gōbišnīh* and the book of wisdom, the *Jāvēdān Xrad* to him. The *Jāvēdān Xrad* was discovered in the 9th century and some of its extracts were translated into Arabic. Muškōya/ Miskawayh (d. 1030) published those extracts, but he confused the name of the wise man Hōšnar (av. Aošnara) with the cosmic hero Hōšang (Av. Haošyaṇha). Thus, in Persian tradition the name of the wise man Hōšnar totally disappeared and the hero Hōšang became a wise king, and promoted and transcended at the prophet level (7th) by Āḍar Keyvān and was then referred to as Āḍar Hōšang. The word Pārsī Āḍarī has a double sense/meaning: it refers to the membership of the Āḍar Keyvān Group and simultaneously it refers to the membership of a religion which is more ancient than Mazdeism.

When Āḍar Keyvān left his native country in order to finally settle in India, he avoided any contact with the Parsis in Gujarat but also with the circle of Akbar Shah. So, he chose to stay in Patna. Āḍar Keyvān and his followers had learned to hide their identities among the Muslims in Persia what they continued to do so in India.

The book *Dabestān* describes that manner to infiltrate which is called *nihān-ravišnīh* in Pārsīg and despised by the Mazdeans as follows: “When a person who does not belong to the group (of Āḍar Keyvān) comes to a meeting of that group, he will not be attacked by the members of the group, his religion will be praised by the group, everything he says will be accepted and at each moment he will be respected and worshiped by the group. According to the principles of their religion, the group believes that God could be found through any religion. They avoid speaking out for any religious preference and they do not want to convert others. Above all, they keep their secrets.”

If in Persia they appeared like Ešrāqī, in India they rather seemed to be like a Sādhu or a Hindu Sanyāsī. From a theosophical point of view, Āḍar Keyvān remained faithful to the school of Suhraṁvardī. His

followers believed that Āḍar Keyvān was in communion with God and received his instructions from ancient philosophies of Persia, India and Greece. There are some philosophical texts that belong to that group. From a religious point of view Āḍar Keyvān preached that the human being could be saved by and through the religion in which he is born into.” This rule is true only for the common people. If not, the author of the *Bazmgāh*, Mubed Xušī said: “We do not have any religion. One must give up his or her own belief (in order to join our group)”. Āḍar Keyvān prohibited to kill useful animals, *zandbār*, and to eat meat. He preached asceticism, mortification, fasting and celibacy. He said that the body of a dead person should be washed and cleaned with pure water and rose water. He further stated that the dead body could be buried the way Muslims do it or it could be cremated the way Hindus do it. His rules have nothing in common with Parsism with the exception that he permitted to drink wine. When he died at the age of 85, it is said that his son Kaykusrō Esendyār who at that time was still a child became the leader of the group. If one wants to grant some sincerity to his teachings, it is difficult for me to believe that Kaykusrō was his real son, *tanīgzād*. Kaykusrō was rather the “chosen” son to continue illuminating the group. The *Šārestan* was written for education of this chosen child. A book, the *Jām i Kaykusrō*, is attributed to him. It was translated by Munshi Abdu’l-Fatah under the patronage of the famous Parsi Sir Jamshetji Jejeebhoy. It is about the spiritual travel to the afterlife of Āḍar Keyvān.

The Āḍarī religion did not survive during a long period of time after the death of its first gurus. However, contrary to the *Dēn i Elāhī* of Akbar Shah, it had a second and even a third life. The Persian literature was contaminated by the inventions of Āḍar Keyvān. Persian dictionaries inserted the invented words of Āḍar Keyvān. The name of Mahābād was introduced in some history books (for example, the *Nāma i Khusravān*).

A strange change: The Indian Parsis who never stood in direct contact with Āḍar Keyvān’s school, started to consider more than one century after the death of the mysterious Āḍar Keyvān this figure and his followers to be one of them. Despite the thorough and detailed study of the *Dasātīr* made by Sheriarji D. Bharucha who showed that the *Dasātīr* should not be seen as a Zoroastrian text (1907), there was still a Parsi scholar like J.J. Modi who wrote an article under the title:

“A Parsee High Priest (Dastur Āzar Kaiwān) with his Zoroastrian disciples in Patna, in the 16th and 17th century “ (1932).

Apart from the publication of the fundamental texts of the Āḍar Keyvān School or their translation into Gujarati by the Parsis, a new literature called “Āḍarī” came then into existence. One of the first known books in Gujarati, the *Mākulāte Bahmanī* (a conversation between Kersāsp and Bahman) was written by Mulla Kāus (the father of Mulla Fērōz) in 1788. One of the last books, in Persian, the *Frāzestān*, was written by a Parsi-Āḍari, and Mīrzā Ismā’īl Khān (whose Parsi name was Hormazdyār) and was further published in Bombay in 1893. Other texts could be mentioned which are still unpublished as for instance the *Nāma i Xurtāb* which was written by a certain Syāvakhsh Hormazdyār Parsi Irani Āḍari.

The famous Parsi Manockji Limji Hooshang Hataria who came to Persia during the second half of the 19th century in order to ameliorate the condition of the Zoroastrians of Persia became “Āḍarī”, and he gave himself the nickname Darvish Fānī. He played an important role as to the fact that the Zoroastrian community was influenced by the Āḍarī esotericism. Indeed, Āḍar Keyvān took the title “Pārsī”, but he wanted the Parsis to adapt themselves to him. For instance in the *Šārestān* it is written thus: “Before Zaratūstra the good religions were those of Ābād. After Zaratūstra, even though the Persian kings accepted the Zoroastrian religion but they interpreted and adapted it according to the Ābād doctrine. The Book of Zaratūstra needs to be interpreted. Unfortunately, the Mazdeans of Iran and India do not know anything about this previous religion because of the domination they suffered through the impious. And it is our duty to model the Book of Zaratūstra on the Dasātīr”. That duty was executed by a certain number of Parsis; they even prepared a book of prayers based on extracts of the Dasātīr and of the Avesta: کتاب زند و پنازند اوستا.

When Ibrahim Pourdavoud started the translation of the Avesta into Persian, it seemed necessary to him to give his opinion on Āḍar Keyvān. In a number of articles he referred to Āḍar Keyvān as a charlatan who contaminated the Persian language, and blackened the Persian history and invented stories. Following his critics, the name Mahābād disappeared from the history books and certain invented words also disappeared from Persian dictionaries. Even some defenders of Āḍar Keyvān like Rashid Shahmardān took distance from the latter and declared the Dasātīr as wrong, however, without attributing it to Āḍar Keyvān.

That illuminative school disappeared but its traces could be seen in other movements that appeared during the first decades of the 20th

century both in India and in Iran. An example will be given for each country.

In the beginning of the 20th century a Parsi *behdēn*, Behramshah Naoroji Shroff decided to leave Gujarat in order to go to Peshavar first and then to Damāvand. His narrative is something between a travel book and a visionary tale. On the mountain Damāvand he met a secret community that retreated into its own circle. Those people had real scientific knowledge about the Avesta, the mystic science that was called *xšnūm* by them. (The word *xšnūm* in the Gāθā, Y 48.12, 53.2 signifies “approval” and not “science”, unless we read it *xšnam* “recognition”.) Behramshah stayed three years with and among them. When he returned to Bombay in 1908, he started to preach that *xšnūm* among the Parsis, which means to adapt the Parsis’ religion together with the mystic science to the religious way of Āḍarīs. Ever since the number of those Parsi “dervishes” has been growing. For instance, when the last Dastur (Meherji Dastur Kekobad) of Navsari, the descendant of Meherji Rana (who was present at the court of Akbar Shah) died one year ago (on January 23, 2010), another Dastur of that esoteric tendency (Ervad Kaikhushroo Navroze Dastoor) took his place at Navsari.

Iran of the 20th century also knew a man inspired by Āḍarī mysticisms: Zabīh Behrōz. He was from a Muslim environment just like Āḍar Keyvān, but he rejected Islam. He even wrote a satirical book that caused the fury of the Shiite clergy in the 1930s and thus he had to be discrete and even had to hide himself. Just like Āḍar Keyvān, Zabīh Behrōz referred himself to ancient Persia but at the same time he distorted Persian history and instead of joining the Parsis, he decided to adapt “the ideology” of the Parsis (I applied the term of George Dumézil) to his own ideas. Just like Āḍar Keyvān, he knew well Arabic and Persian. He had very little knowledge of Avesta and Pārsīg (Pahlavi); he had a mystic side that one could see in his first writings (for example, در راه مهر) and when he was young, he became dervish for a short period of time. But above all, just like Āḍar Keyvān, he had an exuberant imagination. For instance, according to him, Mithras of the Mysteries worshiped in the Roman Empire was not a God but in fact a prophet who was born in the beginning of the Arsacid era in Zābul, i.e. in the South-East of Iran. And if there is no trace of Mithra and signs of worshipping of the latter in Iran, this is not because his thesis is wrong, but due to the fact that the Sasanian kings and the Magi destroyed all traces of Mithra in Persia. So, while Zabīh Behrōz referred himself to Persians, his storytelling gave Muslims another reason to hate the Persians. Even the Zoroastrians of Iran were

influenced by Behrōz's ideas: after more than 1300 years, they decided to abandon the date of their calendar (after Yazdegird) and to adopt the invented date proposed by Behrōz.

Well, I hope I was able to provide you with some insight into the Pārsī-Āḍarī movement that expanded itself in India and in Iran and the influence of which is still perceptible today.