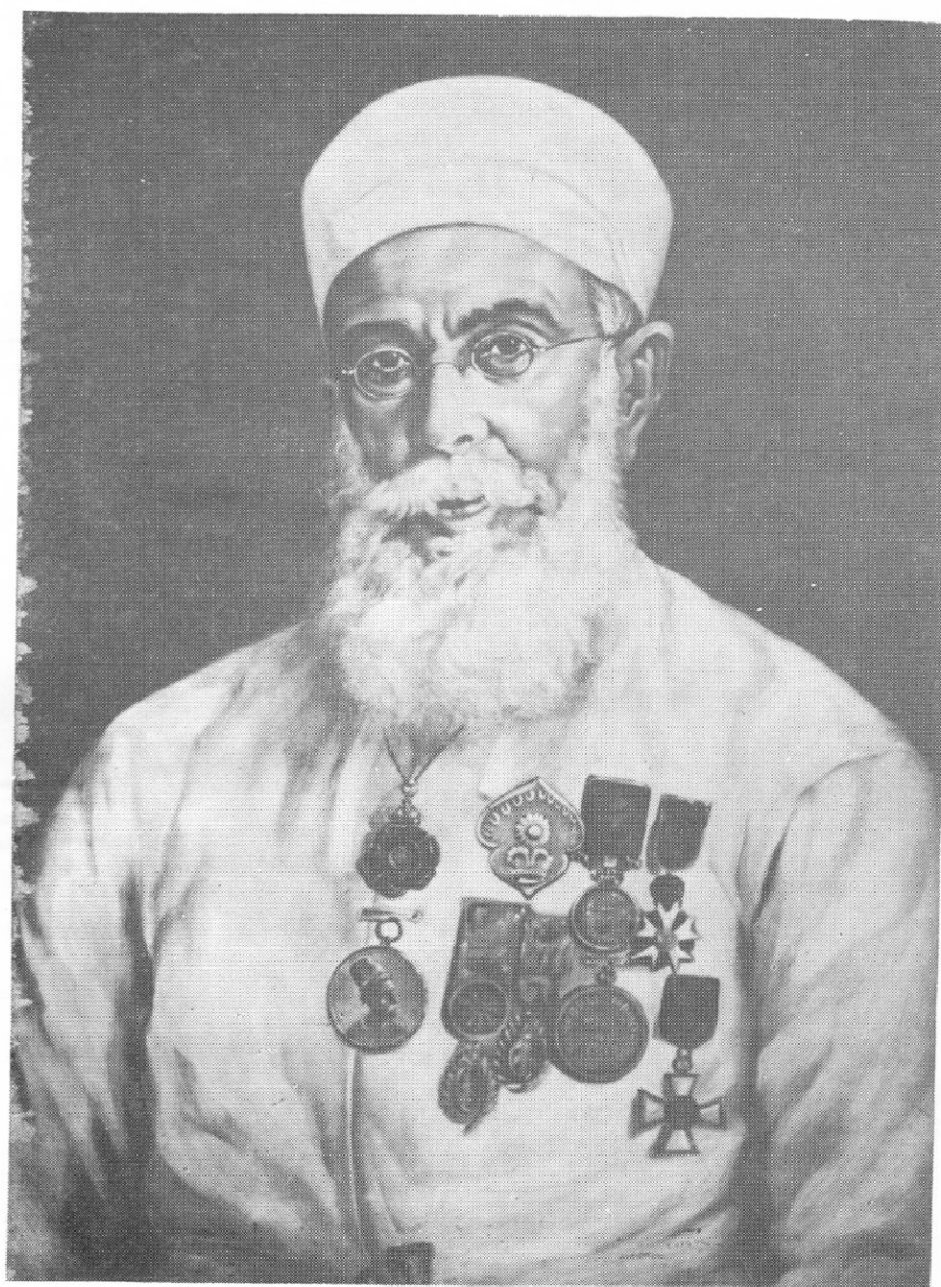


**THE RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES  
AND  
CUSTOMS OF THE PARSEES**

**J. J. MODI**



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# THE RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES AND CUSTOMS OF THE PARSEES

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## PREFACE

Shams-ul-Ulma Dr. Sir Ervad Jivanji Jamshedji Modi was for many years not only one of the guiding spirits but one of the most active workers of the Society for the Promotion of Zoroastrian Religious Knowledge and Education. This Society has now reprinted Dr. Sir Jivanji Modi's classic book "The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees".

A religion is made up not only of its ethics and philosophy but also of its ceremonies and customs. The ceremonies and customs often symbolise - or are expressive of - the ethics and philosophy of the religion. A faithful - and preferably meaningful - following of the ceremonies and customs of the religion are invaluable aids in the practical pursuit of a religion.

Without these aids, without following and being devoted to these ceremonies or customs the average Zoroastrian is likely to be a Zoroastrian only in name.

If he is unmindful of the ceremonies and customs of the religion the average Zoroastrian is unlikely to be a devotee of the ethics and the philosophy of Zoroastrianism. The rare exceptions will only prove the rule.

The Society hopes that this book which in India has long been out of print, and much in demand, will serve as a mine of interesting and authentic information on a subject of vital interest to Zoroastrians. The Society wishes to express its gratitude to the Trustees of the Parsi Panchayat of Bombay for granting a sum of Rupees ten thousand towards the publication of this book.

Time and Tide wait for no man and even religious ceremonies and customs undergo changes in time - some consciously, some unconsciously. However, in the case of Parsee Religious Ceremonies and Customs over the last fifty years since the last edition was printed in the year 1937, the Society felt that the changes which have taken place have been of no major significance and the Society has therefore, made no changes in the text of the earlier edition.

Now a few general words about the illustrious and erudite author: Born on 26th October, 1854 (3 years before the great Indian Mutiny of 1857) Jivanji Modi lived and laboured mightily in diversified fields of scholarship and communal and social work during the hey day of Victorianism, and for nearly fifty years prior to his death on 28th March, 1933 won communal, national and international renown and honours.



During the course of his long life he found time for writing hundreds of articles and giving hundreds of lectures for the lay public, as well as for learned societies, in Gujarati, English and French.

In addition to his duties at first as a practising Panthaki of the Jeejeebhoy Dadabhoy Agiary, Colaba and later as the Secretary of the Bombay Parsi Panchayat from 1893 to 1930 he found the time and energy to publish dozens of books mainly in the field of Zoroastrian religion and culture and Anthropological and Oriental Studies.

With all this he found the time to be a caring and concerned father of a family of eleven children and a very loving and lovable patriarchal grandfather of his many grandchildren including the present writer.

A life governed by habits of regularity and discipline, by dedication to goals of high endeavour and achievement and above all with a balanced realisation of the importance of physical, intellectual, emotional, mental and moral welfare and progress of the individual, the family and the community, resulted in Sir Jivanji Modi leaving behind him a legacy of which his family, community and country can be proud.

Part of Sir Jivanji's legacy is the present book which in this reprint is once again made available for interested readers in the hope that it will serve the original purpose of its author and be of interest and use to individual Zoroastrians and of benefit and advantage to the community in general as also to all members of other Faiths who seek an understanding of the subject.

28th March, 1986

Nadir Modi

DATE:

To  
THE TRUSTEES—PAST AND PRESENT  
OF  
THE FUNDS AND PROPERTIES OF THE  
PARSEE PANCHAYET

Whom—and through them the Parsee Community—  
I have tried to serve, to the best of my poor abilities,  
For a long period of nearly 30 years,  
As a Souvenir  
Of my long connection with their Board as their Secretary,  
And as a Token of Gratitude  
For all that they have been pleased to do  
to help me in my Duties and to encourage me in my Studies.

JIVANJI JAMSHEDJI MODI.

## PREFACE.

This book has grown out of the work of study, undertaken for the Dictionary of Religion and Ethics published by Dr. Hastings. In his letter dated 26th December 1905, Dr. Hastings, invited me to be a contributor to his Dictionary on the subject of Parsee Religious Ceremonies and customs. A complete compendium of all the Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees was wanting. So, on receiving the above invitation, I proposed to go thoroughly into the study of the whole subject, and this book is the result. Here and there I have re-cast the subjects as originally written.

My name was kindly submitted to Dr. Hastings by the late Revd. Dr. Mills, Professor of Iranian Languages at the University of Oxford. So, Dr. Hastings, at his suggestion, asked me to give "the closest possible description" of the ceremonies and customs. Dr. Mills also had written to me direct, to "be absolutely exhaustive as to details." Ere this, I had found, that a detailed description of the ceremonies and customs was wanted by scholars, especially foreign, as it would help them in their elucidation of some Avesta and Pahlavi texts. For example, I found that my paper on the Funeral Ceremonies of the Parsees, read before the Anthropological Society of Bombay, had been of some use to the late Prof. James Darmesteter in his translation of the Vendidad<sup>1</sup> Prof. A. V. W. Jackson, when he was in Bombay in 1901, had drawn my attention to the want of a detailed description of religious ceremonies, especially the Purification Ceremonies of the Bareshnûm. Then, in a letter dated 8th March, he wrote. "May I not urge you to write a detailed monograph of the Bareshnum I spoke to you on the subject that morning when I was at Colaba? Such a treatise giving all the Ceremonies would be important." I know that the want of such a book was felt, at times, in Courts of Justice, when there were cases

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<sup>1</sup> In his Appendix A, to the eighth chapter of the Vendidad, entitled "Cérémonies funébres chez les Parses," he thus refers to it: "Nous faisons grand usage dans cet exposé d'une excellente étude de M. Jivanji Modi" (Le Zend Avesta, Vol. II, p. 146 n. 1.)



in the matter of the Wills of Testators who directed certain religious ceremonies to be performed, and when there was the question of the proper significations of the ceremonies. I knew of a case, in which the learned Judge had to refer to Dr. Haug's *Essays on the Parsees for the explanation of certain Ceremonies*. In another case, the present Parsee Advocate General studied with some interest, for an explanation of some ceremonies, my rough copy of the manuscript sent to Dr. Hastings. So, bearing all the above suggestions and matters in mind, I have tried to be somewhat exhaustive, and hope, that the book will be of some use to students of Comparative Religion. I am glad to observe, from the preface of "*The Comparative Study of Religions*<sup>1</sup>" by Prof. Windgery of the University of Cambridge, that the advanced proof pages of this book, of which he speaks as "an exhaustive treatise on Social and Religious Customs of the Parsees," have been of some use to the author. Students of Comparative Religion, may in the matter of the religious ceremonies and customs of the Parsees, look to this book as a kind of a Dictionary of Parseeism. The exhaustive Index will help them to use it as such. I beg to tender my best thanks to my friend, Mr. Bomanji Nusserwanji Dhabhar M. A. for its preparation.

I think that, irrespective of the question of the want of such a book by the students of Religion and Anthropology, it will be found of some use to my community in general. The times are rapidly changing. The 'new' has been springing rapidly upon the 'old'. As often said, the heresy of to-day becomes the orthodoxy of to-morrow; the liberalism of this year, the conservatism of the next. The reader will find, that many a ceremony, ritual or custom has been spoken of as having become obsolete or as being more honoured in the breach than in the observance. Many more will be obsolete in the course of a few years. Customs are often as despotic as fashions.

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1. "*The Comparative Study of Religions. A systematic Survey*," by Alban G. Widgery, Lecturer in the Philosophy of Religion in the University of Cambridge: formerly Professor of Philosophy and the Comparative Study of Religions, the College, Baroda, Preface p. IX.

but they also change as fashions. So, this work will, it is hoped, serve, to a certain extent, as a record of what was once, and what is now, prevalent.

Some of the religious ceremonies and customs are good in themselves from a sanitary or hygienic point of view. As Prof. Max Muller says: "There is a reason at the bottom of everything, however, it seems unreasonable to us, in the customs and laws of the ancient world."<sup>1</sup> What is said of the old symbolism stands good, to a certain extent for some old customs: "The Symbolism of to-day preserves the serious belief of yesterday and what, in an age more or less distant, was a vital motive, inspiring an appropriate course of conduct, *survives in the conduct* it has inspired, long after it has itself ceased to be active and powerful." But, we find that, at times, "too much of even a good thing" spoils that thing. This is so in the case of some religious ceremonies and customs. We find that, very particularly, in the case of some purificatory ceremonies, for example, the Bareshnûm. The original good simple ideas of purity, *viz.*, freedom from contact with the impure, and isolation, if infection or impurity is caught or is believed to have been caught, are, at times, carried to tiresome extremes. No wonder, if they were so carried to extremes in olden times, when we see, that cases of that kind happen even in modern times, under an alarm or panic of a sudden epidemic, as that of Plague in Bombay in 1896-97. However, such extremes tend to obscure the original good object.

In the rituals of purification, especially in that of the Bareshnûm, as prescribed in the Vendidad, and as carried on later, we find such an extreme, ending in some tiresome intricacies. It seems that, at the end of the ninth century, there was, among the Zoroastrians of Persia itself, an attempt of a kind of revolt against the multiplicity or the intricacy of the ceremonies, and the standard of that revolt was raised by a prelate, Zâdsparam, the high priest of Sirkân. But the revolt was suppressed by the higher ecclesiastical authority at Pars and Kerman. We find an account of this controversy

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1 Max Muller's Science of Mythology.

in the Pahlavi Epistles of Mânuscheher.<sup>1</sup> It seems, that long before this, even in the times of the Pahlavi commentators, there arose some controversies about the intricacies and the details of the ritual of the Bareshnûm.

Goethe, that great German Hafiz, admires the view of the Purity of Elements (Fire, air, earth and water), as observed by the ancient Persians. He admires, what he calls, "Würde der Sämmtlichen Elemente" i.e., "The Dignity of Elements." He has attached to his Parsi-Nameh or Buch des Parsen, which forms the eleventh book of his West-Östliche Divan, some "Notes and Discussions (Noten und Abhandlungen). Therein, he says: "Their religion is clearly based on the dignity of all elements, as manifesting God's existence and power. Hence the sacred dread to pollute water, the air, earth. Such respect for all natural forces that surround man leads to every civic virtue. Attention, cleanliness, application are stimulated and fostered."<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding this admiration of the Dignity of the Elements, he runs down the later, what he calls, "endless tedium" of consecration and purification.

Some of the intricate tedium of purification carried to an extreme from the original reasonable thoughts of sanitation and purification, has now passed off and is passing away. But as it often happens, in the rush or fashion of doing away with what was tedious or unnecessary and what formed the excrescences, some other customs, which are good from sanitary and other points of view of public utility, also are done away with. Even M. Renan of France, who was taken to be a heretic for his liberal thoughts and views, and who therefore, cannot be suspected of any kind of undue conservatism, and who, though looking hopefully to the future, looked with respect to the past,<sup>3</sup> looked with distrust at the attempt to

1 *Vide* the interesting Introduction of Mr. Bomanji N. Dhabhar in his *Nâmakihâ-i Mânûshchîhar*. *Vide* West's Introduction S. B. E. Vol. XVIII.

2 *Vide* my Paper on "Goethe's Parsi-nameh or Buch des Persen", in the Journal of the B. B. R. A. Society, Vol. XXIV, pp. 66-95. *Vide* my Asiatic Papers, Part II, pp. 119-148.

3 He said: "J'aime le passé, mais, je porte envie à l'avenir."

throw off good with the bad. He said: "I fear that the work of the twentieth century will consist in taking out of the waste paper basket a multitude of the excellent ideas which the nineteenth century has heedlessly thrown into it." The Parsees of the present day, are, I am afraid, doing something of that kind. This book, which records all the religious ceremonies and customs of the Parsees, will, at least, show to future generations, what was the good that was heedlessly thrown off and what was the bad that was properly thrown off.

In connection with this view of preserving what is good in the customs of the old, one may appropriately quote from Mr. Carpenter's "Pagan and Christian Creeds" (p. 266) the following passage: "Numerous instances might of course be adduced of how a Church, aspiring to be a real Church of Humanity, might adopt and re-create the rituals of the past in the light of a modern inspiration. Indeed, the difficulty would be to limit the process; for every ancient ritual, we can now see, has had a meaning and a message, and it would be a real joy to disentangle these and to expose the profound solidarity of human thought and aspiration from the very dawn of civilization down to the present day. Nor would it be necessary to imagine any Act of Uniformity or dead level of ceremonial in the matter. Different groups might concentrate on different phases of religious thought and practice. The only necessity would be that they should approach the subject with a real love of Humanity in their hearts and a real desire to come into touch with the deep inner life and mystic growing pains of the souls of men and women in all ages."

In describing some of my subjects I have tried to follow a suggestion of Dr. Hastings. He had asked the subjects to be treated, both from the Irânian or the ancient Zoroastrian and the Parsee or the modern Zoroastrian point of view. I have tried to show, here and there, how the modern practice and view differ from the ancient, referred to in the Avesta, Pahlavi, Pazend and Persian books. I have generally tried to look at various subjects from a student's point of view and have merely described them as required. But in some places,

where possible, I have tried to explain old beliefs and customs and to trace their origin.

Some of the subjects treated in the volume, have been treated by me in various papers,<sup>1</sup> read before the Anthropological Society of Bombay and published, in some form or another, in the journal of the Society. So, I have tried to treat them, here and there, from the point of view of Cultural anthropology, and have given points of similarity with the beliefs and customs of other people.

I have treated the whole subject under the following principal heads:—

I. The Socio-Religious Ceremonies, which have been treated under the heads of (A) Birth, (B) Marriage and (C) Death Ceremonies.

II. The Purification Ceremonies, which are treated under the sub-heads of (a) Nâhn, (b) Riman, and (c) the Bareshnûm, (d) with an additional chapter on the purification of articles supposed to have been contaminated.

III. The Initiation Ceremonies, which have been treated under the sub-headings of (a) Naojote or the Initiation of a

1 These papers are the following:—

1 Birth, Customs, and Ceremonies (Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay, Vol. IX, pp. 568-82).

2 Marriage Customs and Ceremonies (Vol. V, pp. 242-82).

3 Funeral Ceremonies (Vol. II, pp. 405-44).

4 Purificatory Ceremonies. The Pâdyâb and the Nâhn (Vol. XI, pp. 162-185).

5 Purificatory Ceremonies. The Bareshnûm and Riman (Vol. XI, pp. 224-289).

6 Purificatory Ceremonies. Purificatory Processes in Daily life. (Vol. XI, pp. 364-375).

7 Initiation Ceremonies (Vol. XI, pp. 454-484).

8 Consecration Ceremonies (Vol. XI, pp. 496-544).

9 The Inner Liturgical Ceremonies. The Yacna (Vol. XI, pp. 996-1055).

10 The Outer Liturgical Ceremonies (Vol. XII, pp. 39-91).

child into the fold and (b) Nâvar and Martab, which are the two grades of Initiation into priesthood.

IV. The Consecration Ceremonies, which treat of (a) the consecration of Fire-temples, (b) of the Towers of Silence, and (c) of *Âlats* or religious requisites.

V. The Liturgical Ceremonies, which are treated under two principal heads: (A) The first head speaks of the Inner Liturgical services and treats of (a) the Yaçna, (b) the Visparad, (c) the Vendidâd, and (d) the Bâj. (B) The second head speaks of the Outer Liturgical Ceremonies of (a) the Âfringân, (b) the Farokhshi, and (c) the Satum. An additional Chapter treats of several ceremonies which are groups of more than one ceremony.

I beg to thank Rev. Hastings for the courtesy to let me use my articles in his Dictionary for the purpose of some of the subjects of this book.

FATEHMA LODGE, 1 WOODHOUSE ROAD,  
COLABA, Bombay, 5th November 1922.

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