

LIMITS OF PHILOLOGY

In olden times, general education among the Parsees in India was limited. They lived in tune with the religious injunctions coming from the Dasturs. Whenever controversies arose, they were given form of questions and sent to Irani Dasturs in Iran. The explanations given from them are known as Rivayats. These were written in Persian Prose and although we cannot rely upon them one hundred per cent, they are a mine of information on the religious and social customs of the Zoroastrians of the later period in Iran, for many centuries. These also show how much the conquering Arabs were influenced by the iranians during Sassanian times.

The study of the religion and Avesta was restricted to the Dasturs and the priestly class. Avesta was interpreted through their study of Persian Pahlavi and Sanskrit. There were very few books as printing became common later. Although they believed that there was something mysterious about Avesta, they did not know the science of STAOTA YASNA, THE KEY TO DECIPHERING AVESTA, the law of vibratory colors! THEY DID NOT HAVE MODERN UNIVERSITY DEGREES TO DISPLAY THEIR SCHOLASTIC LEARNING: YET THEIR INSPIRING FAITH, THEIR IMPLICIT REVERENCE FOR AVESTA, THEIR NEVER FLAGGING DEVOTION TO THE RELIGION, THEIR STRICT OBSERVANCE TO THE TENETS AND RITES OF PURITY, THEIR ENTHUSIASM FOR CEREMONIALS ALL THESE CONSTITUTE THE VERY ESSENCE OF THE RELIGION, AND THE FACT THAT THEY DOUBTLESSLY SURPASS-

ED THE DASTURS AND SCHOLARS OF TODAY AND THANKS TO THEM ALONE, THAT ZOROASTRIANISM HAS SURVIVED TILL NOW. BUT WHAT OF THE PRESENT? WHAT SERVICE (OR DISSERVICE) SOME OF OUR PRESENT SCHOLARS ARE RENDERING, WE SHALL POINT OUT AND DISCUSS LATER.

The history of Philology or the business of translating Avesta: Avesta was first introduced in Europe in 1723 A. D. VANDIDAD then, was a sealed book, hung by an iron chain in the library as a curiosity to be shown to foreigners. A few years later, a Scotchman by the name of Fraser, went to Surat to obtain the knowledge of the contents of Vandidad. He attempted twice but failed to get it out of the Parsis.

Then in 1754 a young Frenchman Anquetil Duperron set off on the same mission. His government had promised to give him funds, make necessary arrangements etc. but he was too impatient and enlisted himself as a private soldier in the service of the French East India Company. After 3 years of adventure he arrived at Surat, where he stayed among the Parsees for 3 more years. He had to struggle against the same mistrust and ill will that had disheartened Fraser, but finally he prevailed on the Parsees to part with their books and knowledge. He went back to Parsis in 1764 and he gave the French the whole of the Zend Avesta and copies of several traditional books. He spent 10 years studying the material he had collected, and

in 1771, he published the FIRST EUROPEAN TRANSLATION OF ZEND AVESTA. Anquetil's task was mighty difficult. His teacher Dastur Darab had no grammatical knowledge of Zend at all. They communicated in Farsi we can imagine how consistent and dedicated Anquetil must have been. Then came the Germans and the English, and along with them some controversies too. These were resolved and a foundation of PHILOLOGY as a science was laid. Thus Avesta and Pahlavi literature have been contributed by different scholars and savants of the West in different languages in Europe.

In India, Philology received an impetus through the exertions of the late Seth Khurshedji Rustomji Cama, who was the first to acquire proficiency in that science in Germany and introduce its study in Bombay. He was honest and sincere, a perfect gentleman, a seeker of Truth. Camaji used to distribute fliers on Religion to people in trams and local trains of Bombay. It is because of Camaji's efforts that Avesta and Pahlavi are recognized as subjects of study in Bombay. Moreover, in order to encourage learning among priestly class, he established higher scholarships for the priests. Kavasji Kanga was another learned scholar and devout priest. To mention a few, scholars of the past-Dastur Sanjana, Dr. Dastur Darab, Behramgore Anklesaria, Sheher-yarji Bharucha, Ervad Phiroze Masani -- to all these we owe a deep gratitude.

VALUABLE SERVICES OF THE PHILOLOGICAL SCHOOL

In spite of the above fact, philology deserves great credit for effecting

the translations of the entire extant literatures of Avesta and Pahlavi and bringing them within the reach of the laity. For this valuable service philology occupies an incomparable and a sublime place and we deem it our foremost duty to acknowledge our deep obligations to philology, despite our honest and legitimate criticisms of the short-comings of that science, whether they be in the form of flaws or imperfections in translations, or of true import therein. Again, we have not adequate words to express our gratitude for the limitless labour dedicated to the altar of service of the Zoroastrian Scriptural literature by the selfless scholars and servants of the West and for the funds established by their governments for the study of the religious literatures of the Oriental countries. Many of the highly learned Western philologists have tirelessly striven to explain the Avesta-Pahlavi texts, and from many of them we have received the most honest and praiseworthy help in various ways. Priceless are their labours, and to them are due our warmest thanks.

Great as this achievement is from the linguistic and scholarly points of view, yet the introduction of the philological study of the Avesta among the Parsis themselves in Bombay has proved deplorable, for instead of being able to understand the Zoroastrian religion in its pristine purity -- about which the philological school is entirely in the dark -- many Parsi students of Avesta only imbibe the faith-shattering, misconceived opinions and ignorant and blasphemous criticisms against the sacred Yashts and other prayers levelled by Western scholars and their misguided Parsi imitators.

Let us elaborate, substantiate and exemplify this statement: First of all, Avesta is not a language as commonly understood. It is (or was) not a spoken language (dialect). It is a specially formed language for liturgical and ritual purposes of the Zoroastrian faith. The term 'Avesta' connotes "Knowledge of the Unknowable". The original dialect on which Avesta is based is called 'Kyan'. Asho Zarathushtra applied 11me-Staota or the Law of Vibratory colors and sounds on the Kyan dialect and Avesta was the result. Only those who had the key of Staota Yasna could unlock the treasures. Our Avesta terms are full of esoteric meanings and Scholars who try to decipher superficially are like blind leading the blind. Each one comes out with his own version and that is the reason THEY CANNOT AGREE.

For example, Yatha Ahu Vairyo has more than 30 different translations. This can never happen in a dialect. And that is where the pity lies. We are all divided; well-meaning, honest Zoroastrians get carried away because of ambiguous, superficial translations!

Some of our prayers are FASHUSHO MANTHRA, which are so powerful that they are said to be very close to the speech of Yazads. They are blissful mystical spells. Each word has nine meanings and cannot be subjected to grammar rules. Those who could decipher could also understand the sounds that birds and animals make. THE CONDITION FOR UNDERSTANDING FASHUSHO MANTHRA WAS NOT HIGH LEARNING, BUT EXTREME HOLINESS (ASHOI) which our materialistic minded linguists

could never learn in the biggest university!

There are so many technical terms in Avesta, the same word having different meanings in different places, in different contexts, that NO STUDENT OF AVESTA CAN BOLDLY ASSERT HIS OWN VIEW ON ANY SUBJECT TO BE A CORRECT ONE. In the absence of a systematic and consistent knowledge, it would be very difficult for our intellect even to grasp the fragmentary Avesta which is abstruse with unusual meanings. In deciphering Avesta, not only grammar is necessary, but knowledge of numerology is required. Long explanations and inner expositions regard each word needs to be expounded systematically in the context it appears. (No Avesta student upto now as ever been able to explain any of the 105 terms given on page 5-6 in the book: "Essential Origins of Zoroastrianism" -- by P. Masani). What can these translators know of the Teachings of Zoroastrian Scriptures? On what grounds can a Zoroastrian take these foreign writers' opinions and conjectures as gospel truth? Scriptural Truths are quite distinct from references derived from such translators and biased historians. They are accustomed to believe only what their reasoning faculty and their 5 senses allow them to perceive. Naturally, they will preach a religion of convenience -- one that is suitable to the worldly ways of living -- a religion without conscience, philosophy, or spiritualism.

Who then could decipher Avesta? What is the remedy? How can we

(Continued on Page 13)

(Continued from Page 3)

be certain what is correct? What and where is the little lamp that is awaiting to be fanned into flames to illuminate such a sorry state of affairs? For answers to all these WITH EXAMPLES, dear friends, we shall have to read, learn, study 'Kshnoom'. May Ahura Mazda grant us all the humility and wisdom to embrace the TRUTH.

-- Silloo F. Mehta

* * *

Knowst thou that
Thou hast to perform certain duties
Towards fellow-beings?
Any negligence
On thy part meaneth
Thou sinneth.
It is a sin of omission
However helpless, helpless thou be
Be ever steadfast to thy duty,
Day in, Day out.

-- (Vendidad H. 1)