

A PERSIAN STRONGHOLD OF ZOROASTRIANISM

based on the Ratanbai
Katrak lectures, 1975

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IBADAN NAIROBI DAR ES SALAAM LUSAKA ADDIS ABABA

KUALA LUMPUR SINGAPORE JAKARTA HONG KONG TOKYO

DELHI BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI

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Zoroastrians. They also diverted themselves by climbing into the local tower of silence and desecrating it, and they might even break into the fire-temple and seek to pollute or extinguish the sacred flame. Those with criminal leanings found too that a religious minority provided tempting opportunities for theft, pilfering from the open fields, and sometimes rape and arson. Those Zoroastrians who resisted all these pressures often preferred therefore in the end to sell out and move to some other place where their co-religionists were still relatively numerous, and they could live at peace; and so another village was lost to the old faith. Several of the leading families in Sharifabad had forebears who were driven away by intense Moslem pressure from Abshahi, once a very devout and orthodox village on the southern outskirts of Yazd; and a shorter migration had been made by the family of the centenarian 'Hajji' Khodabakhsh, who had himself been born in the 1850s and was still alert and vigorous in 1964. His family, who were very pious, had left their home in Ahmedabad (just to the north of Turkabad) when he was a small boy, and had come to settle in Sharifabad to escape persecution and the threats to their orthodox way of life. Other Zoroastrians held out there for a few decades longer, but by the end of the century Ahmedabad was wholly Moslem, as Abshahi became in 1961.¹⁹ It was noticeable that the villages which were left to the Zoroastrians were in the main those with poor supplies of water, where farming conditions were hard.

Under the Pahlavi dynasty, which took power in 1925, the rule of law was fully extended to Zoroastrians, and the violence in Moslem pressures had almost disappeared by the 1960s; but other factors were then hastening the erosion of the Yazdi community, notably the attractions of Tehran, with its wide opportunities and relative freedom from religious strife and prejudice. The local Moslem population was swelling steadily in numbers (thanks largely to better medical care), and as Zoroastrians left for the capital there were always Moslem families eager to move into their old

¹⁹ A little fire-altar of solid stone was rescued from Ahmedabad by a group of young Sharifabadis (under the leadership of Noshiravan, Agha Rustam's father), who rolled it laboriously across the desert to the safety of their own village, where it now stands in the fire-temple. The last Zoroastrian family left Abshahi in 1961, after the rape and subsequent suicide of one of their daughters. Hajji Khodabakhsh's own mother was of an Abshahi family. After her death his father married again, this time an Ahmedabadi bride, and through this marriage Khodabakhsh had a half-brother, Bahram Surkhahi (known as Bahram Škundari or 'Beetroot Bahram') who was some fifty years younger than himself.

homes, and this meant a steady infiltration of the dominant faith into Zoroastrian strongholds. At the end of the nineteenth century there were still a number of villages in the Yazdi plain which were wholly or almost wholly Zoroastrian, and there were Zoroastrians too in villages over the mountains to the north, around Biyabanak. The last left there early this century,²⁰ and by the mid 1960s, of the thirty-one villages in the Yazdi plain which still had Zoroastrians in them, not one was entirely Zoroastrian. In addition to the losses caused by migration or conversion to Islam, there were others due to the fact that (much to the sorrow and perplexity of the community) relatively large numbers of Zoroastrians embraced Baha'ism, and many suffered accordingly in the terrible Baha'i massacres which took place in Yazd early this century. No Sharifabadis succumbed to the proselytizing of the new faith, but even among them the growth of the Moslem population was rapid after the Second World War. At the beginning of the century there were only two or three Moslem families in the village, but by 1964 there were reckoned to be about a thousand Moslems to only some seven hundred Zoroastrians.²¹ Two Husaynias had been built,²² and the call of the mu'azzin sounded loudly over the Zoroastrian quarter, which itself was being steadily penetrated by Moslems as Zoroastrian families sold up and left for Tehran.

Naturally even in the Yazdi region, famed for its religious fervour, there were Moslems who were not particularly zealous, or burning to vex the unbeliever; and in some of the suburban villages the two communities lived tolerantly together. In the past too there had

²⁰ The last Zoroastrians in Biyabanak, four brothers and a sister, tenant-farmers, left there in about 1900 to save the sister from the attentions of a local Moslem. They sought the protection of their Zoroastrian *arbāb* (landowner) in Yazd; and he sent one of them, Isfandiyar, to act as his agent in developing the then tiny hamlet of Hasanabad-e Maybod (see further below). He was still living there, in his eighties, in 1964.

²¹ In 1976 the figures were 455 Zoroastrians and 510 Moslems, the drop in the population representing movement to the cities (information from Agha Rustam).

²² Such places of worship are found in most Moslem villages of the Yazdi region. The older one in Sharifabad was built at the end of the nineteenth century on ground between the village and the neighbouring town of Ardekan, which was the original area of Moslem settlement. The second one was built in the 1950s in the more recent settlement on the south side of the village, known to the Zoroastrians as the *Shahr-e Lukhthā* 'Town of the Naked', because of the numbers of impoverished Moslems who had crowded there. Zoroastrians had always to pass through one or other of these Moslem quarters to reach the highway to Yazd, or Ardekan with its shops and secondary schools.