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Reclaiming the Faravahar

Fozi, Navid

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Conclusion

Religion without society is like a book in the corner of a library.

After the Gāthās and Avesta, customs (*sonnat-hā*) ensure the continuity of the community.²⁷¹

The choice to work with Zoroastrians after my unfinished project with the Ahl-e Haqq was another attempt to learn about marginalized communities in Iran. At the time, I did not know that the Zoroastrian religion was marginalized in academia as well, despite the fact that about a hundred years ago the famous scholar of Zoroastrian religion, Williams Jackson, noted the importance of this religion in the study of world religions:

A creed that holds [...] ideals of good thoughts, good words, good deeds, together with faith as a mainspring of salvation; which teaches a belief in a supreme deity, of angels and archangels, as opposed to the powers of darkness; which postulates that man is a free agent to choose the right; which inculcates the doctrine of the final triumph of good, the coming of a savior, the resurrection of the dead, a final judgment and a life hereafter—such a faith deserves to claim a right to occupy an important place in the study of the great historic religions of the world ...

(Jackson 1913:205)

Nonetheless, as late as 1985 James Barr complained that even though “the Jews lived about two centuries under the *Pax Persica*, and some of their most important books were written in that time, it therefore is striking that, on the whole, biblical and Jewish studies have remained very much aloof from the study of Iranian language, literature, and religion” (201). The failure to make Zoroastrian studies an integral part of the scholarship of world religions

has even affected *Numen*, which its first two numbers in 1954 and 1955 were dominated by lengthy essays on Zoroastrians. Michael Stausberg writes:

From the year 1970 onwards, however, Zoroastrianism disappeared as an object of study in its own right from the pages of the journal [*Numen*]. While it is mentioned in some general articles or in articles on neighboring religions such as Manichaeism, with one partial exception (Hasenfratz [1983] on different forms of dualism in Iran), no more articles on Zoroastrianism were published in *Numen* after 1969! This is an impressive testimony to the marginalization of Zoroastrian Studies in our scholarly field. (2008:566)

As a student of cultural anthropology, I learned that the amount of field research among Zoroastrians was even more disturbing. As far as I could discover, there are only four ethnographic works on the Iranian Zoroastrian community: Fischer's unpublished dissertation fieldwork in 1971–1972, Boyce's book published in 1977 based on her fieldwork in 1963–1964, Amighi's book based on her 1972–1973 fieldwork published in 1990, and Robert Langer on Zoroastrian Shrines initially published in 2004. Whereas a thorough investigation of the causes and reasons behind such a comprehensive marginalization of Zoroastrian study requires another project, the lack of fieldwork as discussed is partly due to the preterrain of social sciences in Iran that at best makes it extremely difficult for foreign scholars to conduct fieldwork in the country, in particular after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. To this we need to add Zoroastrians' exclusivity, which makes fieldwork access difficult for non-Zoroastrians.

The Iranian Zoroastrians' exclusive identity is shaped in an uneven dialectic with the dominant Muslims post-Arab invasion of seventh-century Iran. The anxiety to preserve the religion against absorption into the dominant Shi'a has made cultural survival a priority. The attenuation of traditions due to the prohibitive Islamic rules and influences of modern life has made such a concern more palpable. At the same time, a tradition of exclusivity has historically given priority to racial survival that prevents the community from accepting new members. This is despite the fact that due to emigration and conversion, accompanied by postponed marriages and fewer children, the number of Zoroastrians is dwindling, a serious threats that imparts a sense of urgency. The community does not accept Muslim Iranians partly to avoid against the Islamic prohibition on conversion from Islam to other religions; but also, as one informant put it, since they "betrayed Zoroastrians

and converted to Islam during the hardship after the Arab invasion and now want to come back.” The Zoroastrian community has lost membership due to conversion to the Baha’i faith too. Many Zoroastrians, even some high ranking mobeds, accepted Baha’u’llah as the return of the promised Shah Bahrām in late nineteenth century Iran.²⁷² They were excommunicated from the community. This exclusivity has left even those who married outsiders abandoned, increasing the racial component of the religion by a strict endogamous law, as a prophylactic against racial and cultural dilution, creating the conditions for imagining a community with pure Iranian/Zoroastrian blood.

Moreover, Iranian Zoroastrians’ newest wave of emigration in a general pattern of moving from the peripheries to the centre and to the West since the late 18th century could be framed as continuation of the historic exodus to the Indian continent. Zoroastrians’ as well as other Iranian religious minorities’ emigration from Iran has been facilitated on religious grounds. While pro-freedom and human and minority rights movements have provided a respite from the tight Islamic Republic laws for this indigenous community, by encouraging emigration such movements also have further reduced the dwindling populations. As such, the new danger to the life of Zoroastrians (and other religious minorities) in Iran is also external. The Islamic Republic has been only too happy to further this purging process through out-migration.²⁷³

Even so, the domestic hardships have had some inadvertent consequences regarding the internal dynamics of the Iranian community, resulting in a stronger sense of religious attachments. The regime’s emphasis on religious education increased Zoroastrian schools’ role in educating Zoroastrian students in their own religious matters, leading to an increased emphasis on Zoroastrian ancient and primordial identity. Moreover, due to the religious revivalism that spread from Muslims, more Zoroastrians took the priesthood examination. Nonetheless, the maintenance of religious knowledge in the community has suffered due to the new generation’s disenchantment with organized religions and its historically restrictive hereditary dimension, causing criticism of the hereditary mobeds’ position. All in all, disenchantment with the traditional religious authority, coupled with the introduction of elected associationalism and the rise of secularizing modern rational forces—such as the right to choose, freedom of religion, the separation of religion and state, and the equality of men and women—have transformed Zoroastrians from a community around authoritative religious figures to a community organized by electoral bodies. Nonetheless, even a

contemporary concept of authority defines the mobeds' position as ceremonial, criticizes agnatic rules, and emphasizes religious education, during my fieldwork only one ceremony took place in which a learned mobed was initiated.

As discussed earlier, the community was trying its best to stay alive and revive by observing prescribed celebrations and ceremonies, encouraging and accommodating members in their participation in events, attracting and using young people in programmes, holding competitions and offering rewards, (re)opening new and old establishments, renovating buildings, and assembling exhibitions. At the same time they redefined survival in a formulation which the socio-religious practices of the Shi'a and many other Iranian rites were understood as continuations of Zoroastrian pre-Islamic practices. This mode of historicity provided imagined continuities with the past. Such implicit denial of cultural interruption helped to reformulate the Shi'a as the unconscious bearers of the Zoroastrian tradition, affirmed by similarities with the Zoroastrians and by genealogical ties. Beyond trying to ensure survival, if only in terms of the continuity of practices and beliefs, this mode of establishing a cultural genealogy linked with Shi'i tradition aimed to improve life under the Shi'a, as all historical sufferings were blamed on the Sunni Arab violations of the true word of prophet Mohammad regarding his successor.

The community was also redefining and extending its notion of Zoroastrian tradition to incorporate Iranian culture. An aspect of Zoroastrian survival reformulation was the claim that all Iranians shared a culture inseparable from Zoroaster's teachings, resulting in an even sharper distinction between the Iranian Shi'a and Arab Sunnis. This trope of Zoroastrian discourse and performance of survival, moreover, linked them to a glorious past by affirming that Zoroaster's teachings provided the ground upon which great world religions and philosophical traditions were built, thus even assuming a universal relevance. Zoroastrian speakers, from whatever segment of the community, always brought attention to their contributions in the realm of governance, human rights, administration, and medicine. Further, they claimed to be the progenitors of monotheism. This claim was even made by a Muslim scholar. During Dr. Farugh's series of talks on pre-Islamic Iran, he stated that a historical ambiguity existed regarding Zoroaster: some argued that there have been several Zoroasters and that one was Abraham!²⁷⁴ Therefore, these imaginaries of Zoroastrian identities and theological universe exhibit not just their relations to Shi'i Islam, but also within the larger global context of world religions.²⁷⁵

The ritual performance of Zoroastrian social identities was a way to deflect challenges to its existence. The socio-discursive manifestations of such identities were configured as alternative and sometimes counter-hegemonic religious space. With their distinct priestly white vestments and melodic voices reinforced by the communal participation in a ritual space filled with the aroma of incense, Zoroastrians constructed an alternative religious space. In religiously-configured experiential and ideological spatio-temporalities of collective discipline, from an early age members participated in ritual acts, and observed religious duties; they experienced sounds, images, smells, and meanings and accordingly shaped their religious selves. In these communal gatherings many sensitive topics were discussed, such as the struggle to assume ownership of Zoroastrian ancestral lands and religious buildings confiscated by the regime, efforts to repopulate abandoned Zoroastrian villages, and attempts to stop the new generation from emigrating.

Zoroastrians' shared history as a subaltern community resulted in a communal sense of resonance-seeking evaluation, consonant with the discursive ideals embedded in these performances. As performatives that I outlined closely linked their historical juxtaposition against the dominant Shi'a, the contours of Zoroastrians' "cultural proclivities,"²⁷⁶ "historically cultivated dispositions,"²⁷⁷ and "prediscursive modes of appraisal"²⁷⁸ were shaped in, and their protruding edges effectively attenuated by, the continuous chafing against the imposing and dominant Shi'a. Such prolong frictions have honed Zoroastrians' sensibilities and articulations thereof. While private dialogues that I gathered were saturated with the discourse of difference from Shi'a, public ones were circumscribed by the regnant and assimilating demands of the Iranian Shi'i regime.

Two elements strike one as being of the utmost importance in fashioning a legitimate niche through messages of sharedness with and difference from Shi'a. One is the unambiguous Iranianness of Zoroastrians, providing the basis for their discourse of distinction and superiority. Zoroastrian practices sought to engender deep emotional connections to its eponymous founder Zoroaster and his teachings, and towards Iran and the pre-Islamic grandeur of Iranian/Zoroastrian culture. As modes of historicizing, these created links between past and present and put Zoroastrians at the genealogical core of Iranianness. Such assertions of priority and authority reversed external assimilating pressures and competing knowledge forms while simultaneously making the internal ties and traditions of knowledge significant through the ritualized recollection and the reliving of history.

The inculcated consciousness that I explicated involved a sense of precedence, preeminence, and authenticity, and a ubiquitous sense of distinction from and priority to Shi'i Islam, accompanied by the resentment of the Arabs. Thus, the second element in fashioning a legitimate niche was the historical Iranian-Shi'a /Arab-Sunni rift, which Zoroastrians exploited to formulate a dialogue of relatedness with Shi'a. Through these discourses the past was mediated, exigencies of the day were considered, and attempts were made to ensure the efficacy of rituals and maintain amicable relations with their Shi'a countrymen.

These socio-discursive enactments of the traditional semiotics of resistance have been configured by the fact that no overt political opposition to the state was possible, at least in public; it was therefore a challenge for Zoroastrians to maintain distinction. This tension shaped the internal logic and discursive regularity of Zoroastrians' organization and structuring of histories and historical consciousness. By means of non-threatening conventions, then, they sought to carve out a habitable space both in the Islamic Republic and among the Iranian Shi'a majority. So first through discourse of similarity and continuity with Shi'a, they made alliances against the Sunni Arabs, but implicitly stressing historical authority and influence over the Shi'a. And in order to maintain a non-political disciplinary contradistinction, Zoroastrian performative utterances emphasized apolitical jubilation and gender equality, in contrast to the Shi'a.

The speakers' dramatic and persuasive styles during public rituals, as exhibited through oral narrations of myths, life histories, parables, and tales, utilized tactical resources such as figurative language, proverbs, metaphors, allegories, and allusions. Such poesis of the Zoroastrian universe was indebted to the indirectness of the elliptical Persian language, which facilitates the kind of ambiguity that in Austin's analysis would make a speech act performative as opposed to constative (Austin 1962). That is, by drawing upon linguistic resources and literary images these performatives accomplished their goals and thus were "felicitous." Citing Persian poets to criticize Shi'i mulla's claim to sacred authority, invoking fabulists to discuss the historical oppression of Iranians during the Islamic period, and drawing upon Persian expressions to refute Shi'i fatalism and passivity were all examples of this mode of historicity. To all these we can add "the poesis of scene making," to use Warner, that is "transformative, not replicative merely" (2002:88). Even though the stylized Zoroastrian orality was observed in the fixed pleasantries, honourifics, and formalities, it still provided a creative space for the orators. These all served to maintain and inculcate Zoroastri-

ans' perspectives on their central place in Iranian history and contemporary world.

The proliferation of socio-discursive activities in the Zoroastrian circulative space exhibited a richness and complexity of temporal, numerical, and metaphysical symbolism, for which multiple and occasionally contradictory interpretations were available. In order to capture some of these contrasting perspectives and tensions, I quoted overlapping authoritative discourses. The religious discourse was enunciated by the mobeds and acolytes who also had academic authority, and the political discourse was that of the Zoroastrian member of the Islamic Republic's Parliament and members of different administrative bodies. I used three individuals as ideal-typical representatives of these status positions—the high mobed, the mobedyar Parliamentary Representative, and the community poetess. Each one's mode of address, edifying comments, and interpretations were closely tied to their personal inclinations and place in the Zoroastrian community, which also defined their connections to the outside world and the Islamic Republic. Nonetheless, their shared interpretations and perspectives all attempted to make the religion seem scientifically real, positive and healthful, as well as historically grounded, mystically potent, and universally relevant.

The high mobed's discourse in general was informed both by Zoroastrian theology and his profession in medicine. He chaired the religious body of the Mobeds' Council. As a physician, he exhibited a strong interest in framing religious matters in terms of Zoroastrian contributions to the sciences. In contrast, the mobedyar had a mystical approach. He knew many poems by Hāfez, Rumi, and Sa'di and even contemporaries like Sohrab Sepehry²⁷⁹ by heart and recited them regularly. His mystical inclinations provided a disembodied and universal reading of religious ordinances. But, more importantly, he was an intrepid political figure whose sharp criticisms of the government disqualified him from a second term as Zoroastrian Member of Parliament. When this occurred, his status increased among his co-religionists. Other educated members and acolytes focused on different issues, always anchored in the Zoroastrian religion. The poetess held a Ph.D. in Persian literature and her peremptory statements often sharply criticized the government. She was loved and famous for her own poems in which Zoroaster's teachings and contributions to Iran and to the world were recounted. Zoroastrian history was also used to frame a renewed Iranian nationalist sentiment. This in turn underpinned a sense of pride and at the same time provided the community with a condition in which improvement and not just survival could be achieved. The Islamic Republic's failure to

stop westernization, and the adoption by Iranians of practices such as St Valentine's Day provided the chance for Zoroastrians to ask the regime to ignore its negative attitudes towards celebrations linked to Zoroastrians and even to revive some ceremonies. This improved the community's position in Iranian nationalist discourse by providing imageries that bridged the religious gap and instilled a sense of national unity in the populace at large.

In the wake of the surge of Iranian national sentiment after the Constitutionalism of the 20th century, Iranian nationalism increasingly became interwoven with the ancient religion of Iran. During the secular Pahlavi regime Zoroastrians were officially elevated to symbols of Iranian nationalism. Moreover, after the Islamic Revolution, starting with the Iran-Iraq war and then during the reformist president Mohammad Khatami in 1997,²⁸⁰ the Islamic Republic increasingly invoked nationalism to rally domestic support, for instance, for its controversial nuclear programmes. This rhetoric was pursued more forcefully by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in particular after his contested second term in 2009, during which the protesters' initial slogans of "Where is my vote?" evolved into a larger demand of replacing the "Islamic Republic" with "Iranian Republic." The association of Zoroastrians with symbols of Iranian nationalism, albeit secular, in opposition to Islam, attaches them to many images of Iranian historical sites and also to the narratives that proclaim Iranians' contributions to the modern world. But more relevant is their attachment to what many Iranians would like to remember as a great civilization in which all religions and ethnic groups used to be free. These links for the most part were previously explored by scholars and nationalist movements that attempted to revive the pre-Islamic grandeur of Iranian culture, but were suppressed in the heyday of the Revolution.

There has emerged yet another opportunity for Zoroastrians' historical ties to become more observable. In light of a renewed ethnic consciousness among the Iranian Kurds, Turks, and Arabs, the religious leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, announced that 2007 was the year of "National Unity and Islamic Harmony," and the state-run media initiated programmes that gave the different ethnic and religious groups a public voice in Iran, allowing them to talk about their histories, traditions, languages, and heritage. Archaeological research covered in the media attempted to create a vision of one great nation with shared historical roots. Such positive image of the pre-Islamic past is in direct contrast to the image of ignorance and oppression promoted during the early years of the Revolution. The result is the creation of a space for academic research on ethnic and religious minorities in universities and

the production of art forms and documentaries for media consumption, both domestic and international.

This process was exacerbated by the creation of the Iranian international round-the-clock English news network (the Press TV). Even though the initial decision of the government to create the Press TV was to rebuff attacks from the Western media, its demands for materials to soften the image of the Republic's record of human rights abuse by presenting Iran as one of the greatest and oldest of world civilizations with a record of toleration and inclusion provided a venue for religious and ethnic minorities to be interviewed and their cultures presented not only to an international audience, but also locally. This defensive decision by the regime had the unintended consequence of helping to break the taboo of discussing nationalism and pre-Islamic grandeur, and resulted in the proliferation of pre-Islamic artifacts in the public arena in the form of images, pictures, jewelry, books, etc.,²⁸¹ many of which were associated with Zoroastrians.

The Islamic Republic that revived this non-Islamic notion of nationalism must now Islamize it, and present it as part of the evolving repertoire that combines Islamic and pre-Islamic symbols. One aspect of this Islamization was the regime's use of certain Islamic traditions, such as the supposed saying of the prophet Mohammad and the first Shi'i Imam Ali about high status of Iranians. Reference to Persians' intellectual superiority created a distinct sense of Iranianness and provided a context in which the nuclear technology became presentable as a matter of national pride and an expression of national intellectual genius. Among the many related activities, the Cultural Research Bureau began publication of a series of books entitled *What do I Know About Iran*. Its 34th volume was entitled *Zoroastrians*. In it, the author Katayoun Mazdapur says that this book will "provide those interested in Iran and the engaged young people of our country with vital, precise, and constructive information" (2005).

The regime's use of a new combination of pre-Islamic and Islamic cultural imageries was evident when in 2010 Rahim Mashaei, President Ahmadinejad's controversial Chief of Staff, talked about an "Iranian School of Thought" (*maktab-e Irāni*) instead of the usual "Islamic School of Thought" (*maktab-e Eslāmi*). He even said that the word "Iran" is a *zehr* or holy mantra. This positive re-evaluation of Iran's past occurred even though the previous Revolutionary Islamic governments not only ignored but forcefully suppressed some of the ancient Iranian and Zoroastrian cultural practices as anti-Islamic. These included ceremonies heavily linked to Zoroastrians such *chahār-shanbe-suri* and *Shab-e Yaldā*. Ayatollah Morteza Motah-

hary (1919–1979), one of the architects of the Republic, had once announced that “[s]ome stupid people observe this custom [*chahār-shanbe-suri*] and when one asks them why, they respond, ‘because our ancestors did it.’”²⁸² In the late 1980s, in my early twenties I was personally arrested three years in a row for my participation in the *chahār-shanbe-suri* celebration.

With the emergent nationalist sentiments however a shift has taken place. For instance, during my fieldwork in late 2000, these rites were openly celebrated and incorporated into the programmes of the state-run media; the official newspapers designated and announced certain parks for these celebrations, inviting the public to attend. Within the Zoroastrian community of discourse, the renewal of these practices was seen as a victory for the authentic Iranian culture that they promoted. As the high mobed told me, “An Iranian would say I will give up my life, but not my *chahār-shanbe-suri*.” He added that the evidence of this new attitude is that “Keyhān, [the most conservative newspaper] has written about the celebration of the *chahār-shanbe-suri*.” He pointed to the Shi’a-Sunni divide regarding the choice of the day for this celebration: “[t]he reason for this celebration was that the Abbasid Motavakkel was killed or died that day, so it became a day of celebration for Iranians.” I observed more signs of this orchestrated move when the Islamic Republic formally protested at the portrayal of the Achaemenid as savages in the Hollywood film *300*. In this 2007 fictional narration of the battle of Thermopylae, 300 Spartans defeat the Persian army of more than one million soldiers led by the Persian king, Xerxes the Great. In Iran, media panels, consisting of movie critics, historians, cultural experts, and even religious authorities, attacked all aspects of the film as yet another attempt by the West to dismiss Iranians’ past by depicting them as a barbarian nation, thereby perpetuating the Western colonial and oppressive missions in the Middle East.

In another example, during the commemoration of Ferdowsi’s eleven hundredth birthday on Thursday, 15 May 2008, several state-sponsored events took place. Ferdowsi’s image was printed on the Iranian 50 thousand *tuman* banknote, and his tomb was covered with flowers; the city of Tehran passed a law to establish a specialized library for Ferdowsi, and park-museums and passages were named after him. Other official events celebrated Ferdowsi’s pre-Islamic national epic, including musical performances, and traditional recitations of *naqqāli*, and traditional wrestling. The regime also acknowledged Charles Melville’s work from Cambridge University who was digitalizing all the existing illustrated copies of *Shāhnāme*. “It is accepted by all Iranians,” the mobedyar told me, “that Fer-

dowski intended to revive the *ajam* (a degrading term used by the Arabs in reference to Iranians).” Ferdowsi’s concluding verses in *Shāhnāme* confirm this intention: “[writing this book] I suffered for thirty years and brought life back to *ajam* through the [marvelous] Persian language.” The mobedyar added, “The lifelong endeavour of Ferdowsi is indicative of Iranians’ patience, which is evident even today.” His comment was a reference to the shared Iranian legacy of the Arab invasion and struggle to preserve Iranian culture, while also obliquely referring to the Zoroastrians’ endurance of suffering. Another mobed recited the same verses and concluded, “This is why we Iranians have the expression that ‘the end of the *Shāhnāme* is pleasant,’ because in the end Persians survived and did not become Arabs.”

Other examples of this revivalism as linked to Zoroastrians could be observed in Iranian cinema. The 2009 film *Green Fire*—rich in Iranian mythology and history, and featured in Iranian theatres and festivals—used the voices of mobeds reciting the Avesta and delved into the Old Iranian mythologies. While banning many of these films inside Iran, the regime permitted them to be exported to court international recognition. Another curious example of revival was a project to construct a faravahar-shaped island on the Persian Gulf,²⁸³ especially significant due to the controversy surrounding the Arab promotion of the title “Arab Gulf.”

As the scenery of Iranian nationalist discourse is being permeated with imageries linked to Zoroastrian tradition, Zoroastrians acquire new forms of visibility. The Islamic Republic is thus inadvertently helping to expand the ambit of Zoroastrian influence. However, this entails certain dangers for the regime. For example, Iranian youth’s revulsion toward religious austerity may cause some to be attracted to the allure of Zoroastrian tradition as an inviolate original Iranian tradition. After the contested re-election of President Ahmadinejad, these indigenous ceremonies became ritual spaces for the opposition, the so-called Green Movement, to protest. For example, reformists proclaimed *chahār-shanbe-suri* to be an ancient protest against the darkness of oppression.

All these show that a renewed desire of Iranians to rediscover and re-evaluate their past—Iranian nationalist historicity—converges with Zoroastrian religious historicity, providing a potential space for Zoroastrians to become an important symbolic resource for an emergent Iranian new public, and Zoroastrian imageries enter the temporality of Iranian politics. As Charles Taylor argues, to reiterate, when people take up, improvise, or are induced into new practices, a new theory penetrates and transforms the

social imaginaries, hence reshaping ways in which people imagine their social surroundings and fit together. Further, as Zoroastrians adapt themselves to the performatives of rational-critical discourse, through emphasizing associational life and rationalization of tradition, the Zoroastrian discourses and practices gain the potential to animate a social movement, acquiring agency *in relation to the state*.

This new salience has dangers as well as advantages for Zoroastrians, as too much difference from and similarity with the public could become identity threats. Thus, the question becomes how Zoroastrians deflect the threats to the transformative force of their alternative public as a result of relations with the state. As I have demonstrated, the *source* of authority for Zoroastrians is not the state. As a matter of fact, it is the state that draws on Zoroastrian cultural and historical imageries. The negative historical legacy of the Arabs, on the one hand, and the Shi'i political predominance and exhaustive presence in Iranian culture, on the other, may explain ways in which Iranian Zoroastrians strike a balance when drawing on imageries that could be interpreted both as differing from and coupling with the state. This helps one to understand the Zoroastrian positive attitude towards the Shi'a when they address a generic discourse of Iranianness, and their negative attitude when they intend to convey a more exclusive sense of Iranianness. Thus considerations of survival and distinction constitute the criteria of validity and feasibility that govern the production of Zoroastrian knowledge. It is in the pursuit of this logic that Zoroastrians render the eminent Iranian literary figures of the Islamic period a Zoroastrian reading, hence drawing on their authority by citing them.

The political and quasi-nationalist dimensions of Iranian-Zoroastrian identity in the construction of Iranian national imaginaries become even more palpable as this worldwide, scattered, and “unstructured nation” (Writer 1994) experiences a new sense of diasporic life—in particular through the conduits of the modern media, via the burgeoning of Zoroastrian websites and newspapers. Writer (1994) and Bekhradnia (1992) have reported elements of a fresh Zoroastrian revivalism in parts of the Persianate societies. For instance, some Izedi Kurds have recently identified themselves as of Zoroastrian lineage, and the Russified Tajik and Azerbaijani Zoroastrians have begun to express a Zoroastrian identity. Distinctive to the contemporary Zoroastrian community, as opposed to the past, is the possibility of mass communication between members of the diaspora. This has the potential to change the mode and scale of discourse that is constructive of modern Zoroastrian identity.

This ethnography shows that the long Zoroastrian struggle has reached yet another critical phase. At this juncture of my work they had successfully dealt with some tough decisions. The reopening of three communal establishments, the renovation of several centres, changes in ceremonies, and also the launching of several websites, justify such a claim. If successfully finalized, the most important sign of this resilience may be the construction of the massive fire-temple complex in Tehran. Nowadays Zoroastrian histories and historicities are ineluctably parts of the active construction of Iranian national-cultural imaginaries. Let me conclude with an extreme but telling example. In one of the Gāhambār ceremonies in the fire-temple, a young man greeted me with a *Salām*—he was not a Zoroastrian. He was from Birjand, a city in east Iran, had worked in Tehran for five years, and had some Zoroastrian friends. I asked why he was there and he answered: “national fervour” (*ergh-e melli*) and added, “They [the government] do not let us convert, but if it was permitted all Iranians would convert to become Zoroastrian!”

