

Hazrat Dastur Azar Kaiwan

How Ilm-e-Khshnoom answers the riddles about the life and times of a great Zoroastrian Saint

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The esoteric knowledge of *Ilm-e-Khshnoom*, which was revealed by *Ustad Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff* after his stay with the *Abed Sahebs* of *Demavand* has not only shed blissful light on our scriptures, traditions, rituals and religious way of life, but has also solved several riddles and complexities which abound in the history of Zoroastrianism. Quite a few seemingly extraordinary or unexplainable occurrences which have been noted by various historians have been properly explained and further expounded by *Ustad Saheb* and later on in the writings of *Dr. Saheb Framroze Chiniwalla*. One such occurrence which we will deal with in this essay relates to the life and times of an enigmatic and extraordinary Zoroastrian saint of the 16th century called *Hazrat* (the pious) *Dastur Azar Kaiwan*. Although the details of his life are sketchy, they have been thoroughly analysed by *Ervad Dr. Jivanji Modi* in a paper presented before the 6th Oriental Conference at Patna on 18th December, 1930, and subsequently published, along with his other papers, in a book entitled “Oriental Conference Papers”. From this well researched treatise, we gather that *Dastur Azar Kaiwan* was born around 1533 in Iran in an illustrious family of priests who traced their genealogy right upto the *Mai Abad* dynasty. *Azar Kaiwan* was drawn to things spiritual right from early childhood and it is said that he reduced his food and sleep from the age of five and started practicing severe spiritual experiments and penances. One of the strict rigours he undertook at a very early age was to live within a “*khumb*” or large earthen vase or pot for a period of 28 years. Later on, *Dastur Azar Kaiwan* left Iran and came to Patna, in India and stayed there along with a group of close disciples. He was well known in his time as an advanced Master and had a large following. Both *Dastur Azar Kaiwan* and his disciples were believed to possess enormous spiritual powers and various miracles and near-impossible feats were attributed to them. *Azar Kaiwan* died around 1618 at the age of 85, and was buried in Patna itself. Such is the brief, but remarkable outline of the life of this extraordinary Master.

But Khshnoom has shed some fascinating light on the Dastur. Dr. Saheb Framroze Chiniwalla wrote a brief article on Dastur Azar Kaiwan which was published in the *Parsi Avaz* newspaper in 1948 and once again in March 1964, and this article forms the basis for our essay. In order to properly understand the life of Dastur Azar Kaiwan, it is necessary to explore some other facets of the Zoroastrian faith. One such facet relates to the three different types of religious orders or paths leading to the Creator. These are known as the paths of:

1. *Saheb Dilan*
2. *Israkin*
3. *Mutahliyan*

1. The Path of the Saheb Dilan is that when an individual follows the tenets and teachings of the religion he was born into, as well as the long standing traditions of his forefathers. Such an individual gives respect to all religions and their great teachers, but remains steadfast in following the teachings and practices of only his own creed and places complete and implicit faith in his Prophet. When such an individual progresses through his faith and gains complete control over his physical senses and passions, he becomes the Master of his Heart and Mind, and thereafter is called '*Saheb Dil*'. The followers of Saheb Dilan path exist in all religions and not only in the Zoroastrian faith.
2. The followers of the Israkin path do not accept any Prophet or any religion. Some go so far as to even doubt the existence of a Creator. They believe that the greatest God is truth. This worship of truth sets them apart from the Daevayasni followers.
3. The followers of the Mutahliyan path accept all prophets and religions as great and given by God. But they try to follow the practices of each and every faith and try to please every God and prophet. In this attempt they fail to reach even their own prophet and are hence unable to progress onward in this life. Such persons go through repeated cycles of birth and death till finally the realisation dawns on them that it is the path of the Saheb Dilan which will really take them towards their Creator. Thus enlightened, they put implicit faith in their own Prophet, give up trying to please all, and finally start making slow but steady progress.

In order to clearly understand the life of the Dastur, it is necessary to discuss in detail another important aspect of the Zoroastrian faith, which is the classification and intensities of transgressions or sins, called *Gunah*. In the *Hormazd Khodae* prayer we recite: 'for all the sins (*az an Gunah*), - for sins relating to thought (*manashni*), word (*gavashni*) and deed

(*kunashni*); for sins relating to my body (*tani*), for sins relating to my soul (*ravani*), for sins pertaining to this world (*geti*), for sins pertaining to the spiritual world (*minoani*), I offer Patet (*Patet pashemanum*). While it is somewhat easy to understand the sins relating to thought, word and deed; and even sins relating to (or caused by) our body, it is not easy to comprehend what is meant by the sins of the soul and those pertaining to the spiritual world. This is due to the fact that we tend to believe that our short life of 70-80 years on this earth is the be all and end all of our existence. Khshnoom teaches us that our current life is but a small part of our overall journey towards our Creator. The circumstances in which we are born and lead our current life is largely governed by the thoughts, words and actions of our previous lives. Similarly, the way we live our current life will shape and mould the destiny and circumstances of our future existence. Thus the body changes, but the soul inside remains the same. It is this soul which bears the summary of our thoughts, words and actions. Thus every time we recite the Hormazd Khodae prayer (or say the Patet), we are not only offering Patet for our current thoughts, words and actions, but for all of these in our previous lives. It is, therefore, certain that some Gunah or transgressions relating to our previous lives (not necessarily on this Earth) could fall under the category of '*tani, ravani, geti, minoani*'. The prayers and Tarikats of the Zoroastrian religion have been structured by Prophet Zarathushtra and his Authorised Rainidars in such a fashion that their recital and observance not only gives relief for the sins of our current life, but also for transgressions committed millions of years ago when our soul was on its journey from and towards the Creator. Therefore, even though we may not understand the rationale of certain Tarikats, (for example, how does applying bull's urine in the morning affect our sins?) from a physical angle or with respect to our current life, when the objective of these tarikats is put in the correct perspective of helping in our soul's onward progress, they make perfect sense.

In addition to the classification of the sins as discussed above, it is also obvious that every sin cannot be of the same intensity or have the same effect as another sin. For example, the sin of walking barefoot (*aymuk dvarashni*) cannot be of the same intensity as say, speaking against the religion (*ashmoi*). In order to properly classify such sins, the Patet Pashemani categorises them under 4 different intensities, namely:

1. *Margarzan*
2. *Farodmand*
3. *Manideh*
4. *Aze*

5. *Permutations & combinations of the above*

1. The most severe intensity of a transgression is classified as 'Margarzan', i.e. one deserving the punishment of death. This is not to be understood as capital punishment. Rather it means that the effect of the sin is so severe that an entire new birth has to be taken in order to resolve the complications arising out of such a sin. The Pahlavi literature has a long list of sins categorised as Margarzan, including heresy, adultery, witchcraft, not recognising Ahura Mazda as Supreme, disobeying the advice of parents, etc.
2. Farodmand sins are those sins, which though serious, do not require another birth, and can be rectified in the current life itself, by following the solutions given in the religion. That is, the person who has committed the sin should first of all accept his wrong doing, and then follow the Path of Meher-Patet i.e. speaking the truth, and offering Patet when led wayward, and observing the basic Tarikats of the faith.
3. Manideh Gunah are those mysterious sins, possibly of the '*ravani, geti, minoani*' type due to which certain highly evolved souls like religious leaders, saints, or righteous kings have to suffer or bear the burden of the sins of their followers. This hard-to-understand category represents the final summation of sins committed many eons ago. The retribution (or punishment) for such a Gunah has also taken place. However, every time a Gunah is committed, a certain load is put on the Zravan or the time or age in which the sin was done. In order to completely negate the after-effect of this sin, not only is it necessary for the man to bear the punishment or retribution for the sin committed, he also has to lift the load he had put on the Zravan in that particular life. The punishment or retribution is decided by nature and his personal Khuda and given to him in that or a subsequent life. However, the load placed by the sin on the Zravan or time-period cannot be lifted so easily. It requires the performance of certain complicated Yasna, or kinetics, either by the person himself or through others, which will succeed in lifting the load on the Zravan. When this is not done, over a period of time, the loads placed by that soul on different Zravan periods, accumulate and form a holistic summation of Gunah, which is called Manideh Gunah. As the soul evolves further, it finally reaches the stage where it begins helping others with their progress. At such times, the soul takes birth as a saint or religious leader and is given the responsibility of guiding many others onto the right path. But at this juncture, the time or Zravan in which the evolved soul is born demands the

retribution for the load placed on all the earlier Zravan periods. This final summation and clearance of the accumulated Manideh Gunah is what causes such great and evolved souls to suffer, or sometimes leads to their death, even though they may be completely innocent.

4. An even more difficult category to understand is that of Aze Gunah. The word 'Aze' means 'from, arising due to, caused by'. Here the cause of the sin can be of two types. Either the sin arises out of the man's own weakness, or more mysteriously, it can be a sin arising out of the eagerness of the person to further the will of the Creator. All our prayers start with the formula '*Khshnaothra Ahurahe Mazdao*', i.e. 'may Ahura Mazda be pleased'. When man performs certain actions as a result of which the creations of Ahura Mazda progress, it is said that Ahura Mazda is 'pleased'. However, even in doing so, sometimes man may commit an unwarranted sin, which is technically called Aze Gunah. Even the mysterious births and lives of the leaders of major religions, which are solely for the purpose of '*Khshnaothra Ahurahe Mazdao*' also lead to certain types of Aze Gunah.
5. But the greatest complications arise when a sin can be classified as a combination of any of the above four intensities. For instance, a sin can be classified as Farodmand-Manideh or Margarzan-Aze whose retribution and clearance can be understood only by the soul itself after death. Even within this combination category, the most difficult permutation refers to sins categorised as 'Manideh-Aze'. It is this category which mostly affects Prophets, saints and religious leaders, who are born to further the wish of Ahura Mazda and work as per His Wish and Desire, but even in doing so, cause some slight Gunah, due to which they suffer in their public life or are even martyred. Thus Jesus Christ was crucified, various saints were martyred and other pious men and women are harassed and condemned.

Having taken this somewhat long but necessary detour, we are now placed in a position to better understand the life of Dastur Azar Kaiwan because it is this same category of indescribable complexities of Manideh-Aze Gunah which led to his troubled life and tragic end.

According to the information provided by Ustad Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff, Dastur Azar Kaiwan was a Saheb Dil of Demavand Koh and one of the most advanced members of

the secluded sanctuary, which was headed at that time by the seventh Sraoshavarez, *Khudamurad Saheb*. The Sraoshavarez was aware that Dastur Azar Kaiwan had been born under such circumstances that his collective Manideh-Aze Gunah would greatly trouble him in this current life. He thus warned Dastur Azar Kaiwan to be very careful in all his dealings so that no fresh Manideh Gunah would be created in trying to resolve the old Manideh-Aze Gunah. It was the objective of Sraoshavarez Khudamurad Saheb to make Dastur Azar Kaiwan pass through some difficult Yasna which would lift the load of the collective Manideh-Aze Gunah and give the current Zravan its due.

However, even before the Yasna could be started, the Zravan or time cast its malefic influence on the mind of Dastur Azar Kaiwan. At the same time, the then current Zravan caused certain persons to be born in the outside world with whom Dastur Azar Kaiwan had some past connections or obligations to be fulfilled. Thus Zravan laid the groundwork through which the breath of Dastur Azar Kaiwan, who was living in the secluded environs of Demavand, where no outside world influences could penetrate, could somehow mingle with the breath of those born outside Demavand, so that the past Manideh-Aze load could be lifted.

Soon one of the greatest, toughest and longest debates ever held in Demavand started between Sraoshavarez Khudamurad Saheb and Dastur Azar Kaiwan. It was Dastur Azar Kaiwan's contention that it was unfair that only the Saheb Dilan progressed spiritually in the confines of Demavand. Why should the man in the outside world also not progress? Why should the Saheb Dilan stay in Demavand when they could go into the outside world and help others progress? Could not the Saheb Dilan accelerate the progress of some common men by prescribing special 'tarikats' or spiritual disciplines for them? Why could not the path of *Israkin* be used to hasten the progress of souls belonging to different religions rather than the path of Saheb Dilan? Why should one wait for the slow process of Frashokereti when one could hasten it?

The Sraoshavarez explained that the process of Frashokereti was so long and lost in the mists of the distant future that it was incomprehensible to even the Yazatas. The Saheb Dilan of Demavand had attained their exalted status after many births in the outside world and through the intense efforts of Nature. In order to maintain this status it was necessary that they not come into contact with the outside world but remain confined in the environs of Demavand

and at the same time continue their divine mission from there. The path of the Israkin had a fundamental flaw which was its refusal to accept the distinct and sacred hierarchy which exists in Nature and appeal directly to the Creator for any and every thing. Just as an aggrieved person in the common world has recourse to a series of judicial remedies before finally reaching the Supreme Court, so also there exists in nature the distinct hierarchy of Amesha Spentas, Yazatas, Dae, Mino, Farrokh and several other spiritual entities who have been bestowed with certain powers to answer the appeals of needy persons, before they finally appeal to Ahura Mazda. It was not upto any individual, even a Saheb Dilan to disregard that hierarchy in Ahura Mazda's scheme of things. Thus the refusal of the Israkin path to accept this hierarchy of Ahura Mazda's dominion violated a Cardinal Rule.

Despite this wise counsel, Dastur Azar Kaiwan persisted in his belief that he could better serve Ahura Mazda by stepping out of Demavand and guiding and hastening the progress of a select group of disciples. Therefore, despite the disapproval of the Sraoshavarez, and knowing fully well that he would not be able to go back, Dastur Azar Kaiwan decided to leave Demavand and step into the outside world. In effect, the Dastur became over zealous about his mission of helping others achieve Frashokereti and therefore, himself broke the Cardinal Rule:

'He who ignores the rightful spiritual hierarchy of the creations of Ahura Mazda, in effect, ignores Ahura Mazda Himself.'

After leaving the environs of Demavand, Dastur Azar Kaiwan visited various places in Iran and India before finally settling in Patna, where he gathered a group of close disciples and began leading them on the path of Israkin. With his spiritual vision, the Dastur could realize which Tarikat would be best suited for each disciple and guided him accordingly. There were thus various levels of disciples around him based on their individual state of spiritual progress. However, the closest and most advanced of his disciples were designated by the suffix 'Yar' to their name, such as *Mahiyar, Meheryar, Homyar*, etc. These advanced disciples were engaged in spiritual kinetics which furthered the work and mission of their master. In effect, the Yar-level disciples functioned in the same manner as the 'friends' (*Hakhaya*) of the Yazata Sraosha mentioned in the *Sarosh Yasht Hadokht*.

Soon Dastur Azar Kaiwan became renowned throughout Asia as an advanced and formidable Master. He always lived in seclusion but had the ability to appear in front of various people at

the same time. News of his spiritual prowess reached the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556-1605), himself a keen student of various religious streams, who invited Dastur Azar Kaiwan to his court. The Dastur however refused to appear in front of him and finally it was Akbar who travelled to the Punjab to meet him. One of the most advanced disciples of Dastur Azar Kaiwan was a senior priest of Navsari called *Meherji Vatcha* who was given the title 'Mahiyar' by the Master. The word Mahiyar finds a resonance in the Avesta word 'Karmahi' or the 'far seeing fish' mentioned in the *Behram Yasht* (Yt. XIV, Karta 11). According to this reference, the Karmahi has the ability to see the smallest needle in the expanse of the *Rangha* river. The esoteric explanation is that the Karmahi has the ability to spot the most minute evil (denoted by the needle) in the entire cosmos (denoted by the Rangha river) and then tackle it accordingly. Similarly, Meherji Vatcha had been gifted by the Master with the ability to spot the source of evil caused by any person and treat it in an appropriate manner. When Meherji Vatcha was invited to the court of Akbar, it is said that an evil sorcerer had managed to produce two suns in the sky and challenged anybody to destroy this feat. Through the ability of 'Mahiyar', Meherji Vatcha was able to understand that the 'second sun' was but a reflection of the original sun on a metal tray that had been suspended in the sky through the evil powers of the sorcerer. Accordingly, Meherji Vatcha recited a suitable incantation that brought the metal tray tumbling down into the court of Akbar. This feat of Meherji Vatcha earned him the respect of the emperor who granted him a large tract of land near Navsari as a reward. Akbar was then instructed about the nuances of the Zoroastrian faith by Meherji Vatcha, who stayed in the court for some time and later returned to Navsari where he was unanimously elected as the Dastur (Head Priest) of the Parsis of India under the title Dastur Meherji Rana, and his descendants still assume the leadership of the community under the same title even today.

Thus the path of Israkin along with the Tarikats of different religions applied by Dastur Azar Kaiwan to his various disciples produced such results. Many more of his disciples were said to possess amazing powers like the ability to appear in more than one place at the same time, the power to walk over water, various healing and curing powers and the ability to transmute baser metals to gold. Yet the personal life of Dastur Azar Kaiwan was far from happy. After stepping out of the secluded environs of Demavand, the Dastur could not maintain the same high level of spiritual awakening in the outside world. His own powers were severely curtailed because of the negative environment of the open world and despite his attempts to live in seclusion, he could not replicate the pristine environment of Demavand in the open.

He suffered the same fate as a proud lion in a restricted cage. Realising his great mistake Dastur Azar Kaiwan pleaded with the Sraoshavarez to allow him to come back to Demavand, but the plea was refused on the grounds that he had been warned that such a thing would happen, and the spiritual contamination which the Dastur carried with him made him ineligible to re-enter Demavand. Because of this, the Dastur spent the last days of his life in Patna and after his death, was buried in Patna itself, thereby causing more Manideh Aze Gunah for his soul. Thus Zravan claimed its due from the Dastur and created a fresh set of Manideh Aze Gunah which would trouble the soul of the Dastur in his next birth.

Despite Dastur Azar Kaiwan's hopes, the disciples of the Dastur also did not live upto their expectations. Except for Dastur Meherji Rana, who achieved fame and respect, the fate of his other senior disciples is not known, except for the fact that some of them behaved in an inappropriate manner, thereby undoing the good instituted by the Master. Thus the good objective of Dastur Azar Kaiwan of furthering the cause of Frashokereti and hastening the progress of a select group of individuals backfired and created a spiritual backlog of evil which took a longer time to rectify, thereby nullifying the efforts of the Dastur. In effect, the wise counsel of the Sraoshavarez was proven right in the end.

There are some important lessons to be imbibed from the tragic life of Dastur Azar Kaiwan, which may be summarised as under:

1. It is important to remember and respect the distinct and sacred hierarchy which exists in Nature and to be very careful not to break the same. The fundamental rule to be always borne in mind:
'He who does not pay heed to the rightful spiritual hierarchy of the creations of Ahura Mazda, in effect, does not pay heed to Ahura Mazda Himself.'
2. To never underestimate the influence and power of Zravan. To remember that any evil we do not only creates an effect in nature which will have to be repaid by us, but also the time in which it was done will also demand its retribution.
3. To never go overboard or become over-zealous in thinking that one can hasten the progress of the entire creation towards Frashokereti.
4. The Tarikats of the religion one was born into are the best for that person. Any attempt to practice the Tarikats of other religions, however attractive or easy they may seem, is a recipe for spiritual disaster.

5. Man, however high he may be on the ladder of spiritual progress, is still bound to make mistakes.

These lessons from the life of Dastur Azar Kaiwan are applicable to all of us today and our attempt to put them into practice in our own lives may, somehow, lessen the burden of Manideh Aze Gunah on the soul of the departed Dastur Azar Kaiwan. We say this because it is a fact that even today there are a few fortunate Zoroastrians who are visited and helped by the soul of this great Master in some or other way.