

Indo-Iranian Relations During the Vedic and Avestic Periods

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Abstract: History of cultural genesis and outset of human civilization in the Indian subcontinent and Iran are thousands of years old. People of Iran were maintaining good relations with neighboring nations and the people of remote areas as well. In fact, background of cultural relation between Iran and the subcontinent is very long. We have a lot of mythological and historical evidences supporting a close bond between these two nations. At the beginning of the twentieth century, archeologists by excavating in the valley of the river Nile and the banks of the rivers Dazla and Forat proved that a great civilization existed about four to five thousand years BC extending from the shore of the Mediterranean sea and the valley of the river Nile to the basin of the rivers in Sind and the Ganges of Indian subcontinent. And people of these wide basins were correlated. In the light of religion, politics and government Elam and Harappa regions were similar to each other. Both the regions were ruled over by the priest-kings. And they were accustomed to worshipping the gods of land and sea and the Sun and the Moon. The Aryans proceeded from "Pamir" towards Iran and India in search of inhabitable land about 4000 to 5000 years before the birth of Christ. At first they settled in Samarkand and Bukhara now under newly independent state Tajikistan but later due to various hindrances one group of them invaded towards Iran and another group through the Khaiber pass proceeded towards India in between 1500 to 1200 BC. At present about two-thirds of Iranian people are descendents of Aryans. There was indeed an affirmative change in culture and language on the basis of co-existence of these new settlers and the local people. Consequently, a new language and new culture got shape in Iran and Indian subcontinent as well.

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Introduction

The background of cultural relations between Iran and the sub-continent is very long. We have a lot of mythological and historical evidences, supporting a close bond between these two countries. The archeological excavations in the Valley of the river Nile and the banks of the rivers Dejle (Tigris) and Forat (Euphrates) proved that a great civilization had existed from about four to five millenium BC from the shore of the Mediterranean sea and the valley of the river Nile to the basin of the rivers in Sind and of the river Ganges. The people of these wide basins obviously were correlated.

Indeed, both the Veda and the Avesta are the most ancient religious books of the Indian Aryans and the Iranian Aryans. The Aryans proceeded from "Pamir" towards Iran and India in search of habitable land about 4000 to 5000 years before the birth of Christ. At the first stage they settled throughout the basins of the rivers of Amu Darya (Oxus), which nowadays has known as Samarkhand. Historians have assumed that from this north-eastern part, the Aryans invaded towards western-Iran by raiding their domesticated horses in between 1500 to 1200 BC and another group proceeded towards the sub-continent through the Khaiber-pass¹.

In fact, the Aryans were warlike and cattlemen and the local people were mostly farmers. They had been influenced in some extent by indigenous culture through communication with the local people. And by this way they made a new culture and local government as well.

The Aryans, who entered the land of Iran, were divided into two groups. One of them settled in Media region of north Iran, a fertile area adjacent to the Caspian Sea, and

another group settled in Fars region, a coastal area of the southern Iran. Consequently two separate dynasties were established such as "Mad" (the Medes) in Media and "*Hakhamanshi*" (the Achaemenid) in Fars. Later on, *Hakhamanshi* dynasty developed into a powerful one and at one stage conquered media and brought the whole area under their rule².

On the contrary, the other group of the Aryans who reached Sind by passing the Khaiber valley was limited within this area for about ten decades. At the 6th century BC. by advancing towards the eastern side, they got their way to the valleys of the Ganges and the Jamuna and paid attention to flourish their own civilization³.

There was a positive change in culture and language after the new settlers came into contact with the local people. Consequently, a new language and a new religion as well as a new culture developed in both Iran and India. There are so many features that bear resemblance of the one to the other. For instance: the similarity between the teachings of *Avesta* and *Vedas*, the similarity between the gods and goddesses worshiped in ancient Iran and India. Both were fully convinced that a sublime law runs this Cosmos, which is ageless, timeless and changeless. Both had discovered the principle that the Lord of all is one and the same.

The mountain ranges and the vast ocean separating India and Iran could never hamper the friendly relations of the people of both the countries. Since the dawn of history to the present age, caravans of people have traversed, by land and sea, mountain, forest, and has been continually coming and going to and for both the countries. We propose to discuss here the relations between these two

neighboring countries during the Vedic and Avestic periods:

Vedic Period: This period got its name from the book Veda i.e. the most ancient religious book of the Aryans. During this period the Iranian and Indian Aryans were living together or recently separated from each other and still they could remember their manners and customs.

There are, however, different views among the Indian and non-Indian researchers on the antiquity of Rig-Vedas. Some scholars believe that the Rig-Veda i.e. the most ancient book of Vedas and compiled in about 4000 BC, caring the memories about the lives of Iranian and Indian Aryans, before their migration to Iran and the Sub-continent⁴. In this connection Dr. Sabt Hasan Rasavi points out:

“Rig-Veda is the first religious book and the first literary work on poetry and religious epic, which appeared about 1200 year BC by the successor of Aryans in the regions, included completely the independent state of Pakistan, today”⁵.

In the 19th century, some Indian scholars like, Tilak considering the calculation of the figures and characters of the stars, found in some of the Montros of Rig-Vedas, expresses that these Montros are being written in between 5000 to 6000 BC. But Max Muller observes the date as about 1200 BC. Jacob says that two hymns had composed in 5000 BC, on the basis of the astronomical information given in them. And according to Coalbroke Vedas was compiled in 1400 BC⁶. However, it is a fact that Rig-Veda is the most ancient literary work of Indian Aryans and older than the present Jewish religious book⁷.

In 1908 AD, 'Inscription of Gajkuye' discovered by Vinkar, a German orientalist, in Central Asia at the ancient capital of Haiti. It was written in between 1400 BC and 1300 BC. The name of some Vedic gods such as Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Nasatia (Nahid) are being quoted here as a sacred symbol of confirmation and continuation of the agreement between the Haiti and Mitani nations of Western plateau of Iran⁸. Moreover, on the basis of this cuneiform style of writing inscription, it can be presumed that in 1400 BC before the separation of Iranian and Indian Aryans the Vedic religion had a remarkable influence even on the remote areas of Iran and the Central Asia.

Avestic Period: The Aryans migrated towards western side, settled at the eastern plateau of Iran and introduced this land with their name. Since then, the land called as Arya and in abridged form is Iran. Because, Arya meaning Aryan, and Ana is suffix of place, meaning place, space. And both the parts unitedly giving the meaning of 'place of Aryans'.

The spiritual leader of the Aryans 'Zoroaster' appeared in this period proclaiming himself as Prophet, having the holy book, called Avesta. For this reason, this period introduced as Avestic period. Scholars expressed that the appearance of Zoroaster and genesis of the most ancient portion of Avesta were being existed about in between 1400BC and 100BC⁹.

In this connection, it may be mentioned that considerable similarity and proximity is observed between the language of *Avesta* and Veda especially Rig-Veda. For this reason these two languages are being considered as two sisters of one mother or two dialects of one tongue. The resemblance between the language of Gatha i.e. the oldest part of Avesta and the language of the Vedas in the view

point of sentences, words, grammar, composition, orthography, and style and metre are so close that the whole sentences and strophes of the Gathas can be turned word by word into Vedic form by only changing a few letters according to laws of phonetic variation. These similarities are not only found in form and shape but also agreeable with poetical insight and sound taste¹⁰.

These two languages are common in lexicographic affinities. So many vocabularies and words are being found in these two languages that have the same meaning and shape, which can not be observed in the other languages of Indo-European family. Therefore, for the sake of research on Vedic Mythology (ostureh shenasi), it is necessary to get direction from Avesta, as a primitive and correct text.

Further, Iranian contemporary to Zoroaster as well as the Indians especially those who were living in the locality adjacent to the Iranian border spoke in similar language¹¹. Professor Joel Waiz Lal in his book *An Introductory History of Persian Language and Literature* also points out:

"Not only among Iranian dialects, but also among all the languages of the Indo-European family, the language of the Gathas and the Avesta takes a very place in importance. It is most remarkably rich in inflections¹², and almost completely agrees with the language of the oldest Vedic hymns. In style and expression it is extremely rough and clumsy, and contrasts unfavorably with the elegance and symmetry of Vedic Sanskrit. On the other hand, it can show forms, which are unquestionably, more primitives than those found in Vedas. The resemblance between the Gatha language and the language of the Vedas is so close that they seem hardly more than two dialect of one tongue. Whole sentences and strophes of the Gathas can be turned into good old Sanskrit by only changing a few letters according to laws of phonetic variation"¹³.

We may quote here some similar words from Avesta and Vedic Sanskrit languages having the same meanings, such as:

Avesta:	Vedic Sanskrit:
Zaotar	Hotr
Athravan	Atharvan
Yasna	Yajna
Azuiti	Ahuti
Airyaman	Aryaman
Atar	Azr
Gandarewa	Gandharava
Ahura	Asura ¹⁴ .

Undoubtedly, the study of *Rig-Veda* and *Avesta* is very important to recognize the ancient Iranian and Indian culture. The word Hind is appeared in Avesta with the description of the North India. The land, *Hindustan* (India) has been quoted four times as Hindu in Avesta¹⁵. Furthermore, the Sind valley, which has seven important rivers such as the Satlaj, the Byaz, the Rave, the Zhelum, the Sind and the Kabul are being quoted in the Rig Veda as '*Sapta Sindu*', and in Avesta as '*Hapta Hindu*' (Haftab). In fact, generally, the Vedic letter sound sin is changing to *Ha-i-Havvaz* in Avesta language. In course of time, the word *Hapta* and *Sapta* from the beginning and the letter 'wav' from the end have drooped and only *Hind* and *Sind* have retained today. Among the seven rivers two become dried and the other five are still flowing, which constituted the area as Punjab¹⁶.

Till about 1400 BC Indian and Iranian Aryan worshiped the same god and goddess. No differences are found between *Divya*-worshippers and *Asura* (Ahura)-worshippers. The differences got shaped, at the time, near to Zoroaster or at the period of Zoroaster, about the beginning of the first millennium BC. At this period most of the Iranian Aryans became *Ahura* (Asura)- worshiper and most of the Indian Aryans became *Daiva*-worshiper. Apart from this, some other gods had been introduced in Iran and India as opposite to each other. For instance : *Daiva* Indra were considered as malicious and impure by the Iranian Ahura-worshippers while he accepted as one of the important gods by the Indian Aryans. He addressed more among the entire god and goddess in the hymns of Rig-Veda. And praised and adored by a large number of *Rishies* i.e. composers of Vedic hymns. Similarly, *Ahura* (Asura), who was considered as one of the gods of light and luminosity, and acceptable to the Iranian and Indian Aryans remained only as special god to the Iranian Aryans. But *Asura* (Ahura) considered in India as malicious and impure Devil¹⁷. In this regard Dr. Sayyed Mohammad Reza Zalali Nayeni observes:

"most probably this type of change and diversion got place in the period of near Zoroaster or at the time of his appearance. Because he tried to make the Iranian monotheist and introduced Ahura or *Ahura Mazda* as only god for good, blessing and beneficence. He also prohibited the worship of natural manifestations"¹⁸.

As we discussed earlier that the Aryans divided into two groups and finally, one group migrated into India, which resulted the existence of the Iranian and Indian Aryans. Perhaps, it would be the most important cause to have some differences between the old gods and new ones. But conspicuously only religion was not the root of difference but it was one of the causes to it¹⁹.

Moreover, the followers of *Asura* (Ahura) were more trained and steady among the Iranian and Indian Aryans, and they were retainers and agriculturists. On the other hand, followers more primitive *Daiva* concept were powerful class but they were less developed. The first group remained in Iran with their satisfaction. And the second group, due to adventurous mind and searching more, migrated towards the east and finally entered India²⁰. It can not be assumed that all persons who remained in Iran were *Asura* (Ahura)- worshipers and those were migrated to India were *Daiva*-worshippers.

It is evident by the inscription on stones of the great Iranian emperor Khashayarshah on *Daiva*-worshipping, which was excavated in 1935 AD that even in the 5th century BC *Daiva*-worshipping was a regular custom in the Achaemenian kingdom. In Vedic and Pruanic stories *Asuras* have been introduced as brothers of Gods and like *Daivas* attained the higher position than *Daseus* and *Rakeshses*²¹.

Considering Indian *Daiva*-religion and Iranian *Ahura*-religion it might be concluded that till the appearance of Zoroaster, more or less these two religions and cultures were similar to Buddhism in India and Orphisms in Greece. Both the religions prohibited killing of animals in religious ceremonies, but Zoroaster did not prohibit this. No doubt, the ceremonies, observed following the attack and demise of Zoroaster in ancient Iran were most similar to the Vedic-ceremonies. Likewise, most of the Vedic and Avestic rituals and customs are from the same origin.

It is mentionable that the initiatives, taken by Zoroaster could not succeed effectively in order to make any change in *Soma* (Homa) worshipping, which is one of the

characteristics of Veda and was in practice in Iran prior to Zoroaster.

The formal number of gods is 33 in both Veda and Avesta. In both the books gods primarily incarnated with the image of combative Aryan heroes, rider on a cart, which is pulling by energetic horses. Vedic god *Yasan* and Avestic god *Yazdan* protecting the Sky²².

Varuna, god of the skies, quoted in Veda as god of the gods and appeared in Avesta as *Ahura Mazda* and bestowed a new attribute upon Him as '*Danaya Tawana*' in this book²³. Varuna with the help of Mitra (in Avesta Mithra) is keeper of quality morals and spiritual god Rita of Veda comes in Avesta as Asha²⁴. Gandharava of Veda is equal to Gandarawa of Avesta and Krishanu of Veda is equal to Kereshani of Avesta. Yama son of Vivasvat quoted in Veda as commander of the deceased person but Yima son of Vivanvant is mentioned in Avesta as a commander of haven²⁵.

Numerous evidences indicate that despite the initiatives of Zoroaster, Iranian religion in most contexts remained as it was prior to him. In this connection Dr. Sayyed Reza Zalali Nayini says:

"Over all it can be assumed that the objective of innovation planed by Zoroaster was not to cut the previous relations, but he decided to establish the principles of religion of *Asura* (Ahura) and to make it clean from the abominations of Devils"²⁶.

Furthermore, all the attributes of Varuna, which have been enumerated in the Vedas, are ascribed to *Ahura Mazda* in the Avesta. Both, the Aryan scriptures, the Vedas and Zoroaster's Avesta, declare that God and Ishwar are one and the same. "He is one. The learned describe Him differntly", says the Rig-veda. According to the Avesta,

"*Ahura Mazda* (Ishwar) is the creator of the whole universe and the sustainer of all life."²⁷

On the other hand, Varuna, as the Vedas declare, "is the creator, the sustainer and the defender of all the world and is omniscient. It is he who is the causer of the earth and heaven. It is he who was set the planets in heaven and has determined their course and, having expanded ocean and land, peopled them with living beings. He knows every thing and lord of all. He knows the past, the present and the future. He knows the course of wind, the birds that fly in the air and the ships that sail in the ocean and their courses. He counts even the winks of man's eyes. He is the defender and lord of worlds. He sees all the things"²⁸.

Zoroaster envisages two clear aspects of *Ishwar*, god or *Ahura Mazda*, which are quite evident from the very name '*Ahura Mazda*'. In his capacity as *Ahura*, he is the lord of all beings, that is, soul and, as *Mazda*, he is the Creator of the whole phenomenoneal world. "*Ahura Mazda*" is all powerful; he is the dispenser of justice to all; he is all wisdom, he is the most exalted and the most glorious, and the destroyer. In him He reattains the memory of each and every thing. In the heart of every listener, he lives as a witness. Everyone seeks his mercy and love. Those who long for light receive light from Him. It is He who has created the world and it is He who again and again breathes life in it. He has His abode in the world of truth. His love takes all the living beings, men and animals, within its fold"²⁹.

The forms of worship prescribed by the Vedas and those by Avesta, both do not admit of temples or idol worship. It is the duty of every householder, whether he is a king or an ordinary man, to keep the fire burning in his home and continue to perform *Yagya* in it. What has been

called *Yagya* in the Vedas has been indicated by the term *Yasna* in the Avesta. Those who discharge the duties of priests (*purohits*) in the performance of *Yagya* or *Yasna* are designated in both the religions almost by the same names, such as *hotar*, *jotar*, *atharvana kriya*, *akan* and *kaikaus*. There are many other features that bear resemblance to each other. The religions professed by the Vedas and Avesta were both followed by such people who looked upon life with pleasure and ambition; both were actually in quest of a life, which was governed by the principles of excellence and virtue. Both had discovered the principles that the Lord (*Ishwas*, *Khuda*) of all is one and the same³⁰.

It is very strange that Varuna is known as Asura in the Vedas (*Ahura* in Avesta) but in later religious literature it is giving the meaning of *Danav*, that is, enemy of Gods. Regarding such dissimilarities in the existing phenomena of both the religions Mr. Panday notes:

"With the passage of time, both the lands underwent certain changes. Then came a time when both Iran and India again fell victims to the machination of *pourohits*, and at both the places religion meant nothing but a formal observance of frivolous rites and rituals"³¹.

On the basis of the above discussions it can be presumed that both Rig-veda and Avesta are representing the same indication of a cognitive and thoughtful relation. This lingual and religious kinship and nearness made it possible that when Aryans were passing the Plateau of Iran they were carrying some hymns of Rig-Veda with themselves. The *Rishis* (*Pourohit*) and spiritual family got memorized and protected them. They carried these to India and wrote down there³².

It can also be concluded that ancient religious and cultural history of Iran is very much cognate and near to the

same of India. This similarity and nearness would be more visible by studying both Rig-Veda and Avesta. Thus it would not be possible to separate ancient Irinian and Indian culture from each other. Both had been derived from the same culture and saturated from the same source³³.

However, in course of time, the fall of Achemenid imperialism to Alexander in 331 BC. Paved the way for the Buddhist missionaries of Emperor Ashoka to carry the message of their new religion to the countries of the Western World, with the result that Eastern Iran, right from the banks of the Seyhun (Sir) and the Jeyhun (Anu) upto Hiramand, swarmed with Buddhist missionaries and *bhikhus*. From Sughd to Sistan, Buddhist temples and monasteries sprang up. The kings who succeeded Ashoka also embraced this faith and propagated it among their own people³⁴.

The hectic activities, which are resulted from, and the heat, which was generated by these movements, created a new confluence and devised a new pattern, which amalgamated all the faith Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Buddhism. This new religion was known as Manichaenism³⁵.

The great man Mani (born. 14th April, 216 AD) had founded his philosophy about man, life and its objectives on the teaching of Buddhism. This world is a vale of sorrows. He said that man's life was naturally composed of pain and suffering. The only way to salvation is self-effacement, i.e. complete control over one's own self which, finally, results in self-obliteration; in other words, to do away with one's own existence, i.e. fana. This is salvation, he declared³⁶.

Finally, the religion of the great Mani survived long in Iran and also reached far-off countries, but the Iranians, as a

community, never accepted it. Likewise, Zoroastrians also failed to sustain. Within a brief span of time, Islam dominated the whole region. On the other hand, gradually by the help of local rulers, Hinduism achieved its supremacy over all religions in the sub-continent, and Buddhism lost its glory. Later, Islam dominated the region upto the British domination.

Conclusion

The people of India indeed are deeply aware of their milleniums old affinity with the people of Iran. From the very beginning of human civilization both the nations stood culturally and artistically side by side and their fountain of inspiration was one and the same. This relation improved after the arrival of the Aryans in Iran and India, especially, during the Avestic and Vedic periods. Thus they have succeeded in preserving a sense of pride in their common heritage and together rejoice in their wonderful tradition of cultural continuity through the ages.

Notes

1. Maqbul Beg Badakshani, *Tarikhe Iran, Pakistan*, vol. 1, 1967, pp. 18, 77.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Sabt Hasan Razavi, *Savabake Tarikhi o Ravabete Maddi o Ma'navie Pakistan o Iran, Tathire Ma'navie Iran dar Pakistan*, Ulama Academy, Auqaf Department, Government of the Punjab, Lahore, 1971, p. 116
4. *Tarikhe Ravabete Farhangie Iran*, publications of Cultural Relation Section, Ministry of Art and Culture, Tehran, 2536, vol. II, p. 8.
5. Sabt Hasan Razavi, p. 116.

6. Reza, Zalali, Nayini, Mohammad, Sayyed, Dr., Preface, *Gujedehe Surudhae Rig-Veda*, Tehran, 1372 Solar year, pp. 49-50.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 50
8. *Ibid.*; also see, *Tarikhe Ravabete Farhangie Iran*.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
10. *Gujedehe Surudhae Rig-Veda*, p.20.
11. Nasari Islam, *Tarikhe Adabiate Iran*, Tehran, 1328 Solar year, 1948 AD, p. 2.
12. Inflection is set of word forms that show different functions or meanings in a sentence. For example, 'actors' is an inflected form of 'actor'. This is added to actor expresses the meaning more than one. But not an inflected form of actor. It is a different word. In English, nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are inflected. (For more information see, *The World Book Encyclopedia*, vol. 10, p. 268).
13. Waiz Joel Lal, *An Introductory of Persian Literature*, 2nd edition, Delhi, pp. 25-26.
14. *Gujedehe Surudhae Rig-Veda*, pp. 25-30.
15. *Tarikhe Ravabete Farhangie Iran*.
16. *Ibid.*; also see, *Tathire Ma'nuvie Iran dar Pakistan*, p. 114.
17. *Gujedehe Surudhae Rig-Veda*, pp. 23-24.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25. For more information see, *The Preytaneia in Greece, Vestal fire of Rome, Garhapatya of India*.
20. *Gujedehe Surudhae Rig-Veda*, p. 25. For more information see, Sukumar Sen, *Old Persian Inscriptions*, pp. 148-56.
21. *Gujedehe Surudhae Rig-Veda*.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 27
23. *Tarikhe Ravabete Farhangie Iran*, p. 9.
24. *Gujedehe Surudhae Rig-Veda*.
25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*
27. *Indo-Iranian Thought: A World Heritage*, ed., M. Shoja Khani, Renaissance Publishing House, Delhi - 1105, 1995, p. 5.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 9.
32. *Gujidae Surudhae Rig-Veda*, p. 30.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 31; also see, Ardeshir Khabardar F, *New Light on the Holy Zarathushtra*, pp. 728-777.
34. *Indo-Iranian Thought: A World Heritage*, p.10.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*