

The Zoroastrian Houses of Yazd

by Ryszard Antolak

A review of the article by Mary Boyce

Sometimes old buildings possess the virtue to express far better than words the fears and uncertainties of nations or religious groups. The old Zoroastrian houses of Yazd are one such example. Civil and religious persecution have dictated the style and pattern of their unusual architecture. Memories of repression are encoded in the design of their thick adobe walls. They are voices frozen into stone.

Yazd is situated on a high, arid plateau at the interface of two mighty deserts (the Dasht-e Lut and the Dasht-e Kavir). It was once an important station on the Silk Road, famous for its fabrics and textiles (1). For many years, its splendid isolation protected it from political upheavals in the rest of Iran. After the Mongol invasions that saw the total disappearance of Zoroastrian populations from the provinces of Sistan and Khorasan, Yazd emerged unharmed, protected by its vast expanses of featureless desert. It became a haven for Zoroastrians from all over Iran. In this city of walled gardens and turquoise domes they continued to practice their religion and customs relatively undisturbed. Most of them still spoke Dari, once the official spoken language of the Sassanian court, later confined solely to the Zoroastrian populations of Yazd and Kerman (though fragmented into countless local dialects) (2). The pleasant oasis city drew many artists, poets and sufis to the safety of its walls (3)

The region's prosperity and isolation lasted until the beginning of the eighteenth century whereupon two hundred years of political and religious turmoil ensued which decimated the population. Yazd suffered attacks from Afghans, Zands and Afshars, to name but a few. The Zoroastrian population was subjected to additional hardships. As a religious minority subject to discriminatory laws, it found it had as much to fear from its Muslim neighbours as from the foreign forces armed against it. It took extra measures to protect itself, a fact reflected in the community's unusual domestic architecture (4).

Yazd is famous for its unique sky-line of *badgirs*: tall, elegant wind-towers intended to catch the slightest movement of air and direct it downward into cool underground chambers. The houses of the region have great vaulted *talars* that open out onto spacious courtyards containing pleasant water features and gardens. But the older houses of the Zoroastrian population are significantly different from those of their Muslim neighbours.

In 1963 when professor Mary Boyce arrived in the region to study them, she discovered gloomy, fortress-like buildings virtually devoid of any furniture or greenery. They were low and airless. No *badgirs* adorned their roofs. The primary consideration of the builders had been defence. The ideal solution would have been to build upwards, erecting high, tower-like houses as are found (for example) all over Scotland. But in Iran, Zoroastrians were not allowed to build their homes any higher than a man could reach (or any taller than the houses of Moslems). They could only build outwards and downwards, creating dark honey-combs of subterranean rooms with adobe walls several feet thick to withstand attack. The Zoroastrians were physically greater in stature than their Moslem neighbours ("mighty men", as Mrs Boyce calls them) and they could well have put up a fight if they had to. But it seldom

happened. The penalty for killing a Moslem was certain death: to kill a Zoroastrian meant incurring only a modest fine, usually waived by the authorities. Better, therefore, to prevent attacks in the first place

Entry to the houses was via a single door from a narrow lane just wide enough to allow a fully-laden donkey to pass. The Law stated that the door of a Zoroastrian dwelling could be secured by only a single hinge, so a series of doors had to be built (one after the other) in the interests of safety. Finally, at the end of a gloomy corridor, a narrow door - the smallest of them all - led into a bare, central courtyard or *rikda*.

There were no windows. Sometimes glass bottles could be seen protruding from the walls of the entrance lane. But these served as spy-holes rather than windows, defence being uppermost in the minds of these persecuted inhabitants. The only light to enter the house was through the tiny courtyard or via irregular gaps in the doors or ceilings. In some of the buildings the courtyard had been covered over completely to prevent intruders gaining access from the roof. The result was total darkness and oppressive claustrophobia. It is ironic that Zoroastrians with their sophisticated theologies of light should have been forced to live in such shadowy, enclosed buildings.

Bicameral fortresses

The oldest standard form of Zoroastrian house described by Mrs Boyce dated from the early nineteenth century. All other houses were variations on its basic design. It was known in Dari as a *do-pesgami* (or “two-chambered” house) on account of its two open pavilions facing each other across the *rikda*. These were known invariably as the *pesgam-i mas* and the *pesgam-i vrok* (the ‘great’ and the ‘small’ *pesgams*) (5). Both had domed roofs to help minimise solar gain and speed up the loss of heat from below.

The *pesgam-i mas* (or “great *pesgam*”) was so called not because of its size, (which was often smaller than the *pesgam-i-vrok*) but on account of its greater significance. It was the room set aside for religious observances and where the ritual vessels, the *afirinigan*, the bowls and spoons etc., were kept. It was never built facing north (the direction of evil); and was always hidden from the doorway so that no non-Zoroastrian visitor might set eyes upon it. Clay rectangular pots in which grasses were sown at major festivals were secured high up in its corners, a welcome relief from the monochrome grey of the house.

The great *pesgam* was considered pure (“*pak*”) and hence no-one in a state of ritual impurity could enter it. Its floor was of plain earth. Brick, being a man-made material, was considered unsuitable as it offended the Zoroastrians’ feeling of harmony with Nature. The age of a house could often be estimated by the height of the great *pesgam*’s floor. This was always higher than the floors of the rest of the house, a consequence of the fresh layer of soil that was spread upon it every year during the *Farvardagan* festival (the festival that welcomes back the spirits of the dead). (6)

Opposite the *pesgam-i mas* was the *pesgam-i vrok* (or “small *pesgam*”), a secular pavilion dominated by weaving looms with threads strung from wall to wall across the room. Zoroastrians were forbidden by law to practice any skilled trades, and hence were forced to rely upon weaving (as well as some farming and cattle-droving) to earn a living.

There were various other rooms around the periphery of the house, all of which Mrs Boyce describes meticulously in her article. What is striking about them is their emptiness: the almost complete lack of furniture, decoration or even cupboard space. In the bedroom, clothes and linens were stored in cotton bundles along the sides of the walls as if its inhabitants were ready at a moment's notice to flee for their lives. This was often the truth, for persecution was endemic. In their haste they often buried valuables under the floors, hoping to retrieve them at a later date. This knowledge gave rise to the belief that all old Zoroastrian houses contained "buried treasure", and ensured that they attracted the attention of potential burglars. Somewhere in the house, however, there was usually a *panahgah* (a concealed room) where valuables, wine - and even children - could be secreted in times of trouble.

Another room commonly found in these buildings was the *ganza-yi punidun*. It was nothing more than a simple stone hut. Women would pass the first few days of their menstrual periods here, segregated away from the men. But by the 1960s this architectural feature of Zoroastrian homes was already passing into memory. Mrs Boyce once asked a young Zoroastrian girl what purpose she thought the structure might have served, and received the reply that it was probably "a hen-house"!

The only heated room in the whole house was the long narrow kitchen (or *pokri*) with its aromatic bread ovens. The weather in Yazd could be bitterly cold in winter, so the family would often congregate here in the evenings. Its fire was never allowed to go out.

Many of the laws discriminating against Zoroastrians (and other religious minorities) in Iran were still in force at the end of the nineteenth century. A Zoroastrian had to dismount from his donkey when approaching a Moslem. He was not allowed out of his house on rainy days because the water from his clothes might "contaminate" believers. He was compelled to wear distinctive garments to identify him as an outsider. He was not allowed to wear a hat or shoes, unless they were torn. Even eye-glasses were forbidden him. Subject to the notorious *jaziya* tax (7), he was kept firmly in poverty: a second-class citizen in his own country.

But when restrictions upon them relaxed at the beginning of the twentieth century, Zoroastrians again began to improve and upgrade their homes. The *do-pesgami* developed into *chor-pesgami* (or four-pavilioned) houses, upper stories were built, courtyards opened up and badgirs added. Water ponds and gardens began to appear to grace the inner courtyards. Life began to return to normal once again. Mrs Boyce reminds us at the end of her article that:

"Persia, with its love of gardens and flowers, was Zoroastrian before it was Muslim; and it was poverty and oppression that forced the Yazdi Zoroastrians into their small bare, fortress-like homes, without a blade of greenness to relieve the monotony. [But] as soon as pressure on them slackened, they created houses with gardens again."
- Mary Boyce, 1964

Notes

1. Marco Polo, who visited the city in 1272 called it "a noble and considerably sized city". It was famous for Yazdi, a silken fabric embroidered with golden threads.
2. Dari differs from Farsi in possessing fewer borrowings from Arabic. Over the centuries, Dari speakers have experienced extensive political pressure to yield up the

language. Today there are less than 10,000 of them worldwide, most of them in Kerman and Yazd. Dari belongs to the N. Western Iranian language family and is related to Kurdish Gilaki and Balochi. It is not equated with the Dari spoken in Afghanistan.

3. A few of these Sufis built influential monasteries in the district. Some of them, like the monastery of Sheikh Ahmad Fahadan, can still be seen today in Yazd.

4. The Zoroastrians of Yazd distinguish between two kinds of Moslem: the najib (kind, generous) and the na-najib (the opposite of najib). They attach these names to several villages in the district and travel considerable distances to avoid contact with na-najib communities.

5. Mrs Boyce sought out the correct Dari words for many of the domestic objects she wrote about in her article. She was helped by two primary source books:

Soroushian, Jamshid. *Farhang i behdinan*. Tehran 1956, and

Ivanow, W. *The Gabri dialect spoken by the Zoroastrians of Persia IV*. RSO, xviii (1939)

6. These basic house designs are peculiar to Yazd and are not found among the Zoroastrian houses of neighbouring Kerman. If they once existed there, they probably disappeared in the 18th century after the massacre of the Zoroastrian population by Mahmood the Afghan.

7. The heavy poll tax inflicted upon most non-Moslems.

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