

Balochistan: The Ancient Hub of Zoroastrianism (A case study of Zoroastrian monuments in Balochistan)

Manzoor Ahmed¹ & Muhammad Iqbal²

Abstract:

Balochistan is the largest province of Pakistan. It shares its boundaries with Iran, Afghanistan and with other provinces of Pakistan. The territory of Balochistan has a great importance in history. Different rulers came over here and ruled the area. Especially the Iranian rulers ruled over here and spent a great time. With conquer of Persian rulers the Zoroastrianism accompanied. The traces of Zoroastrianism are found from different areas of Balochistan. This study will help to mention the Zoroastrian monuments in different areas of Balochistan. However, this study would be of worth pointing out the Zoroastrian remains of Balochistan.

Introduction: A Historical background of Balochistan

Balochistan is the largest province of Pakistan covering 3, 47,000 sq.km of Pakistan's total territory with 5% of its total population. The researches show that this province has a great importance in history. The archaeological evidences show that its history goes back to 8th millennium B.C.E. It has northern and north-eastern boundary with Afghanistan and Khyber Pakhtoon Khwa, its eastern frontier being bordered with Sindh and Punjab, and its western border is connected to Iran, while the Arabian Sea washes its southern base for a distance of nearly six hundred miles (Hughes 1977:2). It is ethnically diverse and is home to many religious minorities, including Sikhs, Hindus, Zoroastrians (also known as Parsees), and a diverse array of Sunni sectarian adherents, as well as Shia (Yusufzai, 2011). The strategic location of Balochistan is believed to be a gateway for the East and West. The ancient civilizations like Mesopotamia, Indus and Egypt had trade links with this land (Pakistan Census, 1998a).

¹ M. Phil. Scholar Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad

² PhD Scholar University of Peshawar



Figure 1.1 the map of Balochistan

Courtesy: Google/maps.com, accessed on 16 Jan. 2014

Birth of Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism is the ancient religion of Persia. According to Zoroastrians, it was often called the “Good Religion” because of its emphasis on goodness and righteous thoughts and behavior. It is one of the oldest religions of the world. Zoroaster (*Zarathustra*) is the founder of Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism was state-religion of the Persia between 600 BCE and CE 650 (Gill 1997:13). It spread in the reign of Achaemenian Rulers. Cyrus the Great was greatly influenced by Zoroastrianism but his acceptance of Zoroastrianism cannot be said certainly. His successor, the Darius 1, was one of the followers of Zoroaster (Hartz 2008: 37-38).

Dandamaec and Vladimir state that according to Zurvanism the good spirit of Ahura Mazda (Zoroaster) and evil spirit of AngraMainyu (Ahriman) are the twin sons of “Eternal Time”, the god of time, *Zurvan*. The Zoroastrian priests created a complex eschatology, according to which the world would last for 12,000 years. The first 3,000 years were the “golden age” when there was just

happiness. This was the period of Ahura Mazda. The golden age then ended and Ahriman created hunger, disease, poverty and death to disturb the maintenance of the world. However, a savior, named *Saoshyant*, will appear in the world from the kins of Zoroaster; in the final reckoning. Good would prevail in a total victory over evil and the ideal kingdom would emerge, where Ahura Mazda will rule undividedly in heaven and on earth (Dandamaec & Vladimir 1989: 325). Although some scholars believe Zurvanism to be a pre-Zoroastrian tradition, it is usually thought that it developed during the Achaemenid period. It may have become very popular during Parthian period, but in Sassanian period it appears to have come to the forefront of Persian religious life. In the same period it probably flourished as an intellectual movement within the Zoroastrian Church, rather than as a distinct sect. J.R. Hinnells stated about the myth of Ahura Mazda and Ahriman,

Before the existence of earth or heaven the great and ultimate being Zurvan existed alone. Wanted a son he offered sacrifice for a thousand years. The offering of sacrifice does not imply that he was praying to any other being, for in Persian belief the offering of sacrifice has merit or power in and of itself. After a thousand years, however, he began to doubt the fulfillment of his desire. He doubted the power of sacrifice to produce a son, Ohrmazd, who would create the heavens and the earth. At the moment of his doubt twins were androgynous. The twins were Ohrmazd, the fulfillment of his desire, and Ahriman, the personification of his doubt. Zurvan vowed that he would give the gift of kingship to whichever son emerged from the womb first. Ohrmazd, already displaying his great characteristic of omniscience, was aware of this and informed his brother, whereupon Ahriman ripped open the womb, presented himself to his father, declaring 'I am your son Ohramzd.' (Hinnells 1985: 71).

Zoroastrianism is considered to be one of the first monotheistic religions of the world. Zoroaster, the Persian Prophet, preached a religion of personal ethic, in which people's action in life were more important than ritual and sacrifice. Every individual is the helper of Ahura Mazda or Ohrmazd to root out the poverty and evil spirits. If a person does good deeds, he/she will be awarded paradise and those who do bad deeds will be pushed into hell.

Zoroastrianism's progress and development with Indo-Iranian borderland and Sub-Continent:

Zoroastrianism, the ancient religion of the Persia, spread in Persian Empire as well as in beyond the Empire. Being the official religion of the Persian State, it spread along with the ruler's conquered territory. The traces of the religion found from different areas, show that it had a good time in past. Evidences show that this religion progressed and developed with Indo-Iranian borderland and in Sub-Continent. Mohammad Rizwanullah mentions that the name of Pashin (a city in Balochistan, Pakistan) is mentioned in Avesta, the sacred book of Zoroastrians. He says:

“The earliest-known mention of Baluchistan in the Avesta, the VaraPishin-anha of which is undoubtedly identifiable with the valley of Pishin. In Shahnama we have an account of the conquest of Makran by Kai Khusru (Cyrus), and the Achaemenian Empire, which reached its farthest limits under Darius Hystaspes, included the whole of Balochistan “(Rizwanullah 1965: 9).

Cyrus the Great was greatly influenced by Zoroastrianism. There is disagreement about his acceptance of Zoroastrianism however, it is quite clear that Zoroastrianism spread during his reign. When he conquered the eastern side of Iran, Gadrosia (modern Makran), and the religion of Persia accompanied the spread of empire (Azad: 58).

The district gazetteer of Quetta also has something written for Zoroastrians that the early inhabitants of the city were Zoroastrian by faith (District Gazetteer 2004: 51).

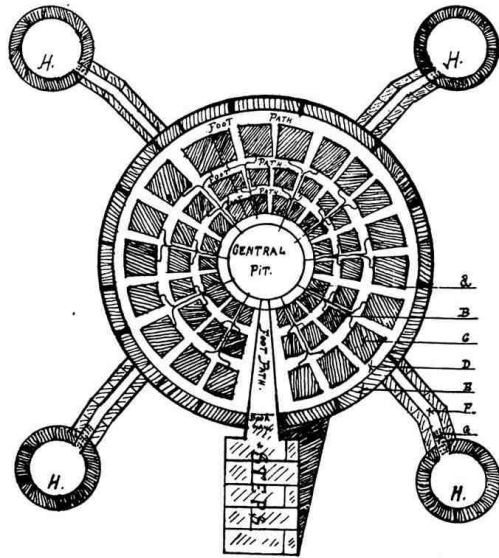
No doubt that this religion had a great time during the Achaemenid Empire. The rulers of this dynasty conquered a large territory from Greece and Macedonia in the west and Bactria (modern Afghanistan) and Makran (a city of Balochistan, Pakistan) in the east. Even the whole of Balochistan was conquered by the Achaemenians. Especially in the reign of Darius 1, the Achaemenian Empire spread to the banks of Indus River in the east and the Egyptian borders in the west(Akram: 01). Zoroastrianism the religion of Achaemenid Empire accompanied with the conquest. The traces of Zoroastrianism also found from Taxila (a city Punjab, Pakistan), very famous for ruins of Buddhist monasteries and stupas (Arberry 1953: 23).

L.K. Choudhary writes in his article “Pakistan as a factor in Indo-Iranian relation”:

“The Vedas and the Avesta, which are the earliest literary monuments of India and Iran, contain evidences of close connections between them. There is much in common between Zoroastrianism and the Vedic religion. Darius, the mightiest ruler of Persia, and Asoka, the noblest emperor of ancient India, contributed a good deal towards the intensification of the Indo-Iranian intercourse. The ever-growing Indo-Iranian relations, however, were interrupted by the invasions of the Huns, the Gujaras, the Turks, and the Arabs. But the Mughol emperors not only revived but considerably revitalized the Indo-Iranian relationship” (Choudhary 1974: 353).

Tower of Silence (Dakma):

In Zoroastrianism, fire, air, and earth are sacred. They avoid disturbing the sacredness of these. This is the main reason to use tower silence for disposing to their dead bodies. Gill says that the Zoroastrians disposed their dead bodies by exposing their corpses to birds and animals in special buildings known as Towers of Silence but today these practices are nowhere found except in India. In India it is also rapidly declining (Gill 2003:187). Tower of silence is a circular stone building open at the top. The inside of it is arranged with three stone plate circles. These circles have pedestrian paths around. The outer circle is for men, the middle circle is for women and the inner circle is for children. They put their dead bodies on these stone plates. There are four other connected underground wells around the main well. The bones of the dead bodies are cremated over there. There is one entrance through which the corpse bearers carry the dead bodies in the tower of silence.



Ground Plan, Towers of Silence, Malabar Hill, Bombay

- a. Row of Pavi for children.
- b. Row of Pavi for females.
- c. Row of Pavi for males.
- d. Foot paths.
- e. Outer wall.
- f. Underground drain.
- g. Charcoal filter.
- h. Underground well.

Figure 1.2: plan of tower of silence



Figure 1.3: tower of silence

Courtesy: www.google.com/images. Accessed: 15/5/2014

Zoroastrianism in Pakistan

Zoroastrianism is believed to have been a major religion in the region of Pakistan from the time it was part of the Persian Achaemenids Empire. Numerous Zoroastrian fire temples still exist in Balochistan, Sindh and parts of Punjab. More recently, from the 15th century onwards, Zoroastrians came to settle the coast of Sindh and have established thriving communities and commercial enterprises. These newer migrants are regarded to be called Parsi, at the time of independence of Pakistan in 1947; Karachi and Lahore were home to a thriving Parsi business community. Karachi had the most prominent population of Parsis in Pakistan. After independence, many migrated abroad but a large number remained. Parsis have entered Pakistani public life as social workers, business folk, journalists and diplomats. The most prominent Parsis of Pakistan today include Ardeshir Cowasjee, Byram Dinshawji Avari, Jamsheed Marker, as well as the late Minocher Bhandara. The founding father of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, married Ratti Bai who belonged to a Parsi family, after her conversion to Islam (Yusufzai 2011).

Apart from the above their presence in Pakistani Balochistan is the focus of this study. These communities and their archaeological remains would be discussed so as to bring to light the good religion to their people.

Zoroastrian Presence in Balochistan

The current study, however, focuses on the Zoroastrian Monuments in Balochistan. By keeping in view the geographical setup of Balochistan, it could be generally assumed that Zoroastrian presence is possible in Balochistan. It could be assumed with view of the fact that the land of Balochistan shares its borders with Iran and Afghanistan. In its western part, the areas connecting the Pakistani Balochistan and the Irani Sistan-o-Balochistan, it could be quite pertinent to note the presence of Zoroastrian presence. The Parsee people of Zoroastrian are regarded to be found in the areas what is now known as Iran (Persia). Similarly, important is the fact that the archaeologist and researchers have unearthed the Zoroastrian remains in the areas of Turbat (Kech-Makran), it is very near to the Irani Balochistan; the areas of Punjgoor it also connects with Iranian Borders of Sarawan whereas the Zoroastrian presence in District Kharan is quite problematic. A Tomb is found in District Kharan, seems to be a Muslim Tomb but the presence of

several skeletons and bones and their burial systems resemble with that of the Zoroastrian ones (Hasan 1990).

Particularly, there are several remains of Zoroastrian Monuments which evidently show the Zoroastrian presence in Pakistani Province of Pakistan. Not only the archaeological remains and monuments signify their existence but the Zoroastrian community living in some of the particular areas is evident to their existence. On the contrary, the matching boundaries of Irani Balochistan and Pakistani Balochistan could be another factor of their presence. The Pakistani Balochistan shares its borders, in west, in Kech-Makran, Pujngoor and Kharan, with Iran; Iran is the place where the Good Religion of Zoroastrianism originated and the people migrated settled in Pakistani Balochistan.

The Zoroastrian presence has been noticed in various places of Pakistani Balochistan:

Turbat (Kech-Makran)

Turbat being very near to Iran has witnessed Zoroastrian remains in its western parts. Cairns made of stones and mud have been noticed. The treasure hunters, in search of treasure, attempted to destroy these structures so as to find something new or some sort of treasure in these stone structures but could not find anything special which could be of their worth and value (Hasan 1990). Several stories are there regarding these structures and remains; one of them is mentioned in District Gazetteer which illustrates that during the time of Prophet David, so as to run away from the constant recurring of famines people committed suicide by entombing themselves in these small cairns; these cairns are locally called Dambis or Dambis. Moreover, these cairns currently are not found. They have been bulldozed or destroyed and new hutments and houses have been encroached. The account of Alexander through Balochistan has also given about the customs of the people who lived here then by Arrianus and Diodorus are quite revealing. It appears that in 326 B.C.E. the plains of Lasbella and their interior country was occupied by "Oritions" whose dialect and dress differed from rest of the Indians. Their customs regarding the disposal of the dead was unique. The bodies of the dead were carried out by their relatives who stripped themselves naked and carried spears. They placed the dead bodies on the mountain slopes of the thickets. They removed the clothing of the dead to be preyed by wild

beasts. It is quite pertinent from the above facts that their costumes resembled with that of the Iranian Tribes and are also resemblances of Zoroastrian practices (Hasan 1990).

Furthermore, the Karezes in the Turbat (Kech-Makran) are many in number. These also show some sort of resemblances with that of the Zoroastrian presence in the area. In the Zoroastrian belief, water and earth are regarded to be sacred or they of worth. A person Name Ashfaq from Quetta is regarded to be of Zoroastrian belief stated that the Karezes in Kech are built by their forefathers

Cyrus the Great was greatly influenced by Zoroastrianism. There is disagreement about his acceptance of Zoroastrianism however, it is quite clear that Zoroastrianism spread during his reign. When he conquered the eastern side of Iran, Gadosia (modern Makran), and the religion of Persia accompanied the spread of empire (Azad: 58).

From the above information it could be articulated that Zoroastrians existed in Turbat City of Kech-Makran.

Kohlu and Bharkan:

The presence of Zoroastrians in Kohlu and Bharkan areas, have been noticed by Brigadier (Rtd) M. UsmanHasan during his travel between these two areas. Small cairns have been observed. They are regarded to be very old and appeared to have been made with stones and lined with mud plaster. Locals of the area are of the view that these old ruins that fantastic tales are famous among them. It is said that a large number of “Kafila” (caravans) was destructed during the reign of Mahmood of Ghazni (Hasan 1990). These may be the towers of silences but it needs brief study to highlight the cairns.

Tower of Silence in Rakhani

The stone platforms which are 100 in number are located 40 miles away from Rakhani on RakhaniBeakker Road (Fig 1.4). These platforms are about 7 ft. high, 6 ft. long and 5 ft. 9 inches wide (Fig 1.5) (Kakar 1990). They have been built by placing slabs of stones one over the other. The exact purpose of these platforms could not be determined, but judging from the masonry that these queer platforms probably be the “The Tower of Silence” of the Zoroastrians. Many of these platforms are partly destroyed owing to the rock having crumbled away, a sign of the long period that must have elapsed since

they were used for burial practices. On these platforms the Zoroastrians used to out their dead bodies for probably hawks, crows and other to feed upon. The bones left over thrown into a well dug for this purpose. In Iran the structures of the Tower of Silence are different. They build towers for men, women and children; however, no deposit of the bones in this area was found (Kakar 1990).



Figure 1.4 Zoroastrian tower of silence

Courtesy: (Kakar 1990)



Figure 1.5 Zoroastrian tower of silence

Courtesy: (Kakar 1990)

Kharan

Kharan, the dome of the Mausolea Tomb, built of burnt bricks, is akin to ordinary Iranian tombs in shape i.e. a square chamber surmounted by a dome. There are numerous gimbals found scattered in the district.

Another set of remarkable archaeological remains are the “*Gabarbands*” or Zoroastrian Dambis, which are found in considerable number at Raskoh, Gorr and Siahhan Ranges. They bear evidence of different physical conditions than those prevalent today (Kharan 2011).

The present inhabitants of Kharan attribute the construction of *Gabarbands* to the Zoroastrians. These dams are terraced fields and legend says that the inhabitants who built them brought all the soil in bags, which they carried on their backs from the desert in the south. These *Gabarbands* were built to contain the rainwater in the terraced plots and the deposition of fertile alluvium on the otherwise rocky soil. This wonderful old system is also seen at Quetta, Kalat and Karachi highway. The great archeological explorer Sir Aurel Stein has described the *Gabarbands* as master-pieces for conservation and utilization of rain or snow water (Kharan 2011).

However, the Tomb found in Kharan seems to be a Muslims Tombs but it appears from the burial remains that there might also live the Zoroastrian People or it could be a changing pattern of their faith. (Fig 1.6, 1.7 and 1.8).



Figure 1.6 tomb in Kharan

Courtesy: Zoroastrianism in Balochistan/Who Built This Structure In Pakistan
- General Images & Media Forum - Pakistani Defence Forum.htm (Accessed
5/12/2014).



Figure 1.7 Burials inside the tomb



Figure 1.8 Closer view of the tomb

Zoroastrian Graves in Quetta Valley: the changing pattern of burials

It is very interesting to note here that the researcher documented the Zoroastrians graveyard in Quetta Valley during his MSc. Thesis. The Zoroastrian practices have changed with passage of the time and they vary from area to area. The burial graves found in Quetta Valley are quite appealing be noticed. The Zoroastrians in Quetta use graveyard to bury their dead bodies. In Quetta the Zoroastrian community lives on Fatima Jinnah road near Civil Hospital Quetta. Their graveyard is situated in Killi Ismail 460 meters north-east of Quetta Central Jail and 760 meter North-west of Balochistan Public Serves Commission.

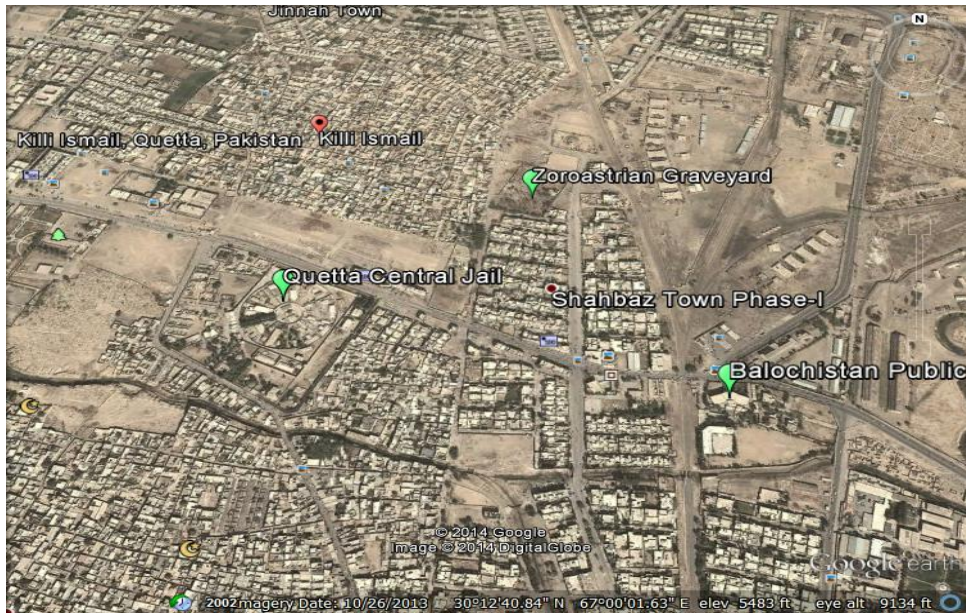


Figure 1.9: satellite view of Zoroastrians Graveyard

Courtesy: www.googleearth.com: accessed on 15/5/2014



Figure 1.10 Zoroastrians graveyard in Quetta Valley

The researcher interviewed Roshan Kursheed Barocha, the Chairperson of SOS village, Balochistan, and also the Head of Zoroastrians community in Quetta. She said the Zoroastrians in Quetta valley bury their dead bodies and also perform special rituals related to death ceremonies.

Mr. Ashfaq, a Zoroastrian from Quetta, said that they engrave their dead bodies. He knows this fact ever since he was alive. However, these graves represent some sort of changing patterns in their burial systems. It may be possible that the Zoroastrians used Towers of Silence (*dakma*) for their corpse. Gradually the Zoroastrians left the practice and started burial practices. The Zoroastrians graveyard in Quetta Valley is of British Period. So when the Zoroastrians started burial practices in Quetta Valley, the Muslims and the Christians also used burial for the dead. It can be possible that the Zoroastrians imitated Muslim burial practice because the early graves of Zoroastrians graveyard are just like Muslim graves. It seems that later on the Zoroastrians started to differentiate their burial practice from the Muslims. The graves of the later period are same in shape and size but different only in direction those of the early period (Fig 1.11).



Figure 1.11: graves of opposite direction

In this picture the graves of opposite directions can be seen easily. The earlier ones are similar to the Muslim type graves and the later ones are in contrast to them.

Another possible interpretation may be that the specific direction and distribution of graves in a specific direction is not entrenched in the Zoroastrian belief system; hence this can be found in the Quetta graveyard (personal communication with Barocha). The researcher has also found a picture of Zoroastrians graveyard in which the graves have specific distribution and the graves are charted by different directions. The picture is as follows:



Figure 1.12 Zoroastrians graveyard in United Kingdom

Courtesy: https://www.flickr.com/photos/tim_uk/13794082483/in/photostream/ accessed on 7 Jan. 2015



Figure 1.13 Zoroastrians Graves

Simple Graves



Figure 1.14 Simple Graves

So the changing patterns of the burial practices by the Zoroastrians of Quetta valley may have the sectarian issues or influence by the other religions. It also can be possible that in the Zoroastrian belief system there is no specific direction for burial.

However it is quite clear that the territory of Balochistan had a great time with the followers of Zoroastrianism. They had a great time and ruled over Balochistan. The archaeological remains of Zoroastrians in different areas of Balochistan witnessed the presence of Persian Religion.

Conclusion

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions of the world. According to Zoroastrians, Zoroastrianism is also called good religion because of its emphasis on righteous thoughts, righteous behavior and goodness. It was the Persian State religion in ancient times. *Ahura Mazda* is the god of light and *Ahriman* is the god of darkness. They are the twin sons of *Zurvan* “the god of eternal time”. Both have same powers but are rivals. Zoroaster (*Zurthushthra*)

the founder of Zoroastrianism is the messenger of *Ahura Mazda* to Persians. They had a great role in history. According to them, their religion is considered to be one of the first monotheistic religions of the world. It was the state religion of Persia during Sassanid Empire. As the time spent they became weak, even they left their religious practices, especially the tower of silence.

It could be assumed with view of the fact that the land of Balochistan shares its borders with Iran and Afghanistan. In its western part, the areas connecting the Pakistani Balochistan and the Irani Sistan-o-Balochistan, it could be quite pertinent to note the presence of Zoroastrian presence. The Parsee people of Zoroastrian are regarded to be found in the areas what is now known as Iran (Persia). Similarly, important is the fact that the archaeologist and researchers have unearthed the Zoroastrian remains in the areas of Turbat (Kech-Makran), it is very near to the Irani Balochistan; the areas of Punjgoor it also connects with Iranian Borders of Sarawan whereas the Zoroastrian presence in District Kharan is quite problematic. A Tomb is found in District Kharan, seems to be a Muslim Tomb but the presence of several skeletons and bones and their burial systems resemble with that of the Zoroastrian ones.

There is no doubt that Balochistan has been an ancient cradle of Zoroastrian civilization and religion. The several remains, burial structures and the Tower of Silence of the Zoroastrian Religion present in various areas of Balochistan are the salient features that have revealed Zoroastrian presence in Balochistan.

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