WORSHIP IN A ZOROASTRIAN FIRE TEMPLE
the H. B. Wadia Ātaš Bahram

INTRODUCTION

The radiant light of fire, whether the warm fire of the sun, the simple but indispensable fire of the hearth, or the consecrated fire within a fire temple, is the principal focus of religious life for Zoroastrians. The life-generating light of fire is seen as the living, physical embodiment of the light of holiness itself.

Zoroaster spoke of the radiance and glory (Avestan: raēvatō xvārōnanāŋhatō) of Ahura Mazda, whose abode is the realm of light — endless and infinite light (Av. anagāra raōcāh; Pahlavi: anagr/asar rōšnīh).¹ Radiant light connotes purity and healing warmth — the plentitude of health and life — as opposed to the coldness of darkness and the decrepitude of disease and decay. Light also connotes wisdom, the wisdom that dispels the darkness of ignorance and displaces unrighteousness. A properly consecrated and fueled fire is believed to be a spark of the endless light which is the abode of the infinite, a physical epiphany of the realm of Ahura Mazda Himself. The sacred temple fire is the ‘son of God’ (Av. ātōrō ahurahe mazdā putra).²

In addition to being a concrete embodiment of the light of the infinite, fire also epitomizes the principle of cosmic order for Zoroastrians. Fire is considered elemental to the whole created universe: all that lives has fire within it. A corpse is cold because the animating fire is gone; a living human being, on the other hand, produces heat because of the subtle fires of vitality within. As the animating force of all life, therefore, fire is viewed as the epitome of the fundamental principle of life which in turn implies an ordered relation of all things in the universe to the ultimate source of life — Ahura Mazda, the Lord of Wisdom. A consecrated fire in the heart of a Zoroastrian fire temple is understood to be the actual presence of the cosmic life-animating principle of ‘righteousness’ (aṣa).

These are the underlying theological reasons why consecrated fires have been the principal focus of the devotional life of Zoroastrians from ancient times to the present. The major temples contain ‘fires of victory’ (Ātaš Bahrīms). When orthodox Parsis (Zoroastrians in India) enter these fire temples daily to pray before the fire and benefit from the radiant glory of this ‘spark’ of infinite light, they direct their prayers to the ‘son of God’ and seek fully to participate in the spirit of ‘righteousness’ itself.

Among the eight major Zoroastrian fire temples (Ātaš Bahrāms)³ in India
today one of the oldest and most prestigious is the Hormasji Bahmanji Wadia Ātaš Bahrām of Bombay. On October 11, 1980, the 151st anniversary of the installation of the sacred fire was celebrated. Such an event highlights the religious significance of a sacred fire for devout Zoroastrians and offers an appropriate occasion for a discussion of the types of worship that take place inside a Zoroastrian fire temple. Because non-Zoroastrians are forbidden to enter the precincts of a fire temple, we are grateful to Dastur Dr. Firoze M. Kotwal, high-priest of the H. B. Wadia Ātaš Bahrām, for providing us with detailed information about the fire temple itself and the acts of worship which take place within it. Although this article will focus on only one principal fire temple in Bombay, the description of religious activities that take place within this temple complex is characteristic of the rhythm of religious life within all major fire temples in India today.

The article is divided into three parts. Part I contains a brief account of the history of the Wadia Ātaš Bahrām and its sacred fire. Part II begins with a description of the temple complex as it exists today, followed by a discussion of individual, priestly, and communal modes of worship within the temple. Part III is concerned with the specific ceremonial events that were observed in the preparation and celebration of the 151st anniversary of the temple’s fire.

PART I. THE H. B. WADIA ĀTAŠ BAHRĀM

A Brief History

On February 17, 1803, a great fire broke out in the Fort area of Bombay. Three-fourths of the bazaar and about a thousand houses were destroyed. Hundreds of people perished. The Parsis who had lost their homes had to move, and many relocated in the Dhobitalao and Girgaon area of the city. Because they needed a place of worship in the vicinity where they lived, Hormasji Bahmanji Wadia, a wealthy and devout Parsi broker, built a temple for an Ādarān (second grade) fire in the Charni Wādī area (called Chandan Wādī). The temple was built in honor of his deceased father, Bahmanji Wadia, the son of the famous shipbuilder who constructed the first dry dock in India at Bombay in 1750 A.C. On November 26, 1805 (in terms of the Zoroastrian calendar: rōz Bahrām, māh Ardibehesht, A. Y. 1175) the ceremony for the installation of an Ādarān fire was conducted by five pairs of priests from Navsari. Dastur Edalji Darabji Sanjana was the priest in charge of all ceremonial observances. Today, in the prayer hall next to the sanctuary of the Ādarān fire an inscription in marble commemorates the event (cf. Diagram 1 below, No. 7).

Over a quarter of a century later, more than one-tenth (1074) of all the Parsis in the Bombay area lived in the Girgaon area. Sheth H. B. Wadia, who had passed