

The Social Position of Women in Old Persia

Tooran Shahriari Bahrami

Poetess

translated by Vida Bahrami Keyani

There has always been a close correlation between the social position of women and the general state of the society in question. It is therefore our intention to analyze the social, as well as the representative legal position of women in old Persia, all the way up to the end of Sasanian era.

Persia represents one of the oldest centres of human life. Documents concerning the social standing of women (and even men in old Persia are sadly few. Because the relevant information is not readily available, an analysis of the human society has to be supplemented with the study of related excavated archaeological finds.

It is probable that, around 10,000 BC, the Iranian plateau underwent changes in human geography. During that time, cave dwelling gave way to house-building, and the family became the focus and the centre of tribal power. Women worked both inside and outside homes. Not only did they bear children, which guaranteed family survival, but they also participated in productive activities, in order to provide for the needs of their tribes. This dual responsibility made their position stronger than the men's. Concerning this period, Will Durant writes:

During this matriarchal era, women were in charge of ruling, judging, conducting family affairs, distributing food, clothing, and all other necessities of life. Men did the hunting, and gathered foodstuff from jungles and farms, all of which they handed over to the matriarch, for distribution. The physical differences between the sexes, presently obvious, were not as noticeable in those days. This difference became a factor to be considered only at a later date, resulting from environmental and living conditions. In those earlier days, women differed little from men in physical strength, and stature. As a result of their living conditions, they had become strong, and were capable of doing arduous work for many long hours. Further, side by side with the men, they took part in fighting off enemies.¹

Also regarding prehistoric man in Iran, and the role of women in shaping the primitive civilization of the time, Dr Girschman writes: "In that primitive society, women bore all of the heavy responsibilities. Thus, a disequilibrium appeared between duties performed by men and women, and as a result women were granted a superior position *vis-à-vis* men".² Women were in charge of cooking, making earthenware, as well as looking after the fire, their children and their homes. They were also in charge of tribal affairs. Family relations followed the female line. Such female ascendancy, known as matriarchy, affected the later Aryan customs. Not only women held positions of economic and social leadership, but were solely in charge of the spiritual affairs of their tribes.

Like their neighbours, furthermore, the Persians had female divinities, and in different parts of the land people worshipped the goddess of fertility. Among the many archaeological finds discovered in Lorestan, the full face statue of a woman has also been found. Dr Girschman believes that this is an Asian goddess praised in Asia Minor up to Susa. This may be the source for the worship of the goddess Anahita.³

¹ Cf. W. Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, vol. 1. *Our Oriental Heritage*, New York, 1942, pp. 32-4. [The version apparently derives from a Farsi translation of Durant's work. Eds.]

² Cf. R. Ghirshman *Iran*, Harmondsworth, 1964, p. 28.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 103, cf. pp. 156ff.; *idem*, *Persia: from the origins to Alexander* (trans. S. Gilbert) (The Arts of Mankind), London, 1964, p. 88, cf. pp. 229-30, 250.

Now, let us discuss a few specific cases. Since the Ilami or Elamite civilization of the western part of the old Persia is one of the oldest known civilizations, it would therefore seem pertinent to look first at the standing of women amongst the Ilamis. Prior to the archaeological findings at Susa, information regarding this civilization was very limited. Efforts by Diolafoa, Dimorgan and other orientologists, resulted in its rediscovery. We now know that, around 4000 BCE, a civilization grew in that region of Iran presently known as Kousestan, Lorestan, Poshtkooh, along with centres in the Bakhtiari mountains. The Ilamis called their government Anshan or Ansan, and used a cuneiform script (made up of 300 characters), similar to the one used by the Sumerians. The statue of Naprassor, the queen of Ilam, which weighs 1750 kg, and is made of bronze, is a good representation of the social standing of women in those days. This statue is presently kept in the Louvre museum, and according to archaeologists, this queen ruled over the Aryan inhabitants of Ilam, and over peoples of the Zagros mountains up to Kermanshah.⁴

Another of the oldest known inhabited regions of the world, is the region around 'Sial[a]k' in Kasham. Many of the items that have been excavated point to the presence of matriarchal societies in that region. Among these discoveries, one can name spinning spindles, as well as jewelleries, such as necklaces, bracelets, and rings, made of shells, clay, or stone. The spindles point to the fact that, as early as 4000 BCE, women were involved in the art of spinning. The discovery of jewelleries demonstrated that women were interested in the acquisition of beautiful items, and art.⁵

During this period, which can be regarded as one of the most outstanding periods of matriarchal rule in Iran, buildings were often made of brick, and the designs on the walls were done by women. Not only did women play an important part in the execution and the running of the social life, but they added flavour and joy to their *milieu* by performing spiritual dances. Many findings support this later claim. For example, a pottery piece discovered in the Sialak region of Kasham shows women performing ritual dances. In other parts of Iran, such as the prehistoric hills of Fars in Persepolis, the hill of Arsanjan, Cheshmeh Ali in Susa, and Susa itself, items have been found depicting dancing. Similar dances are still performed by women in the south, central, and western parts of Iran. Further, prehistoric statues of princesses, queens, or goddesses have been found, a representation of the social position of women in those days.

The social position of women from the time of the Aryan migration to Iran to the Achaemenid dynasty (559 to 330 BCE)

Two distinct and momentous events happened during the beginning of the first millennium BCE that affected the nations of the western Asia. The first was the migration of Indo-European people to Persia, India, and Europe, and the second the discovery and the use of the metal, iron. Though the discovery of iron was of paramount importance, still our paper will be solely concerned with the former event, namely the great migration.

The northern and the eastern mountains of the Middle East, which made up the northern, western, and eastern parts of Persia, were used as a passage-way by the Aryan people to other parts of the world. Thus these regions also became inhabited by many different Indo-European groupings, the best known of which were the Medes in the west, and the Parsis in the south. The Parthians of the eastern Iran were also Aryan. The Medes had close relations with the advanced Mesopotamian civilizations, and their culture and civilization expanded to the north, as far as southern Russia, and Turkmenistan. Further, the Medes were the only Aryan tribe that succeeded in defeating, for good, the Assyrian empire, and in so doing freed many of the tribes ruled over by them.

Up until a century ago, nothing, no writings were available on the subject of the Median history apart from those in Greek and other foreign historians. However, over the last hundred years, thanks

⁴ [The queen was better known as Shala: and the Elamites were partly Semitic-speaking. Eds.]. Cf. E. Porada, *The Art of Ancient Iran: pre-Islamic cultures*, New York, 1962 edn. and trans., p. 61.

⁵ Ghirshman, *Persia, op. cit.*, pp. 1-26, 41-2, 51, 60-2, cf. pp. 256ff.

to efforts by archaeologists, thousands of written documents, as well as noteworthy historical items, have been discovered. Though related to the history of Assyria, Babylon, and other eastern nations, still these objects throw light on the Median history.

Following the establishment of the Median dynasty in the western parts of Iran, the system of matriarchy gradually gave way to patriarchy. Despite this change, women were still highly valued and respected, and were the ones in charge of agriculture.

During the Median period, women still occupied positions of tribal leadership, and of judgeship, with remnants of matriarchy still present. In the book on the history of the Medes, I.M. Diakonoff writes:

Matriarchy ended with the fall of the Median dynasty. [Further, citing Ctesias, the Greek historian, Diakonoff writes]: During the Median dynasty, the king's daughter, as well as his son-in-law could inherit his rule, and while patriarchy replaced matriarchy, women still kept their social, legal, as well as family responsibilities, with their rights only slightly reduced.⁶

According to research done by archaeologists, the garment of the Median woman differed only slightly from that of the Median man. Further, the Median woman did not have to cover herself with a veil. As mentioned before, a king's daughter and son-in-law were considered rightful successors to the throne. Since Aztiac, the last Median king, did not have a son, Mandana became the rightful heir to his throne. It was this female right of succession that played an important part in the transfer of power to Cyrus. The Achaemenid dynasty, with Cyrus the Great as its founder, replaced the Median dynasty. As we shall see later in the paper, Queen Mandana, Cyrus the Great's mother, was also the daughter of the last Median King, Aztiac, and thus the part she played in the transfer of power to her son was immense.⁷

Mandana founded special schools in order to train Persian boys of Cyrus's age in the arts of archery, horsemanship, and battle. Further, it was Mandana who taught Cyrus to differentiate between right and wrong. As written by Plutarch: "The most important elements in Cyrus's victory were women",⁸ and we should note that during the whole Achaemenid period which followed, men and women enjoyed equal rights".

In the Mazdai teaching, men and women are equal. This tenet played an important part in the high esteem accorded women in the old Persia. In the Zoroastrian religion, all righteous and learned people are worthy of respect. According to the Zoroastrian belief, at the beginning of creation, two intertwined rhubarb plants sprouted out of the earth, gradually turning into two humans. This took place on the Mehr day of the month of Mehr. These two humans looked the same in stature, and look, and were known as Mashieh, and Mashianeh. In the book of *Bundaheshn*, it is written:

And at that moment Ahura Mazda blew spirit (created prior to the body) into Mashieh and Mashianeh, and these two became living creatures. Then he told them, "you are the mother and the father of the people of the world. I created you righteous and complete. Use your words, your thoughts, and your actions properly, and do not worship evil spirits". So Mashieh, and Mashianeh began to move, washed themselves, and then said: "There is only one Ahura Mazda, and he is the creator of the moon, the sun, the stars, the sky, the water, the earth, the plants and all living creatures" (15).

⁶ Diakonoff, *Istorii Midi ot drevneishik vremen do konca IV veka do n.e.*, Moscow 1956, esp. chs. 1-2.

⁷ See eg., Herodotus, *Hist.*, I, 107-30.

⁸ Plutarch, *Vit. Artax.*, i.

This passage points clearly to the equal status given men and women in the Mazdaist religion, the basis of the Zoroastrian belief system. As mentioned, Mashieh and Mashianeh sprang out of the same root, and emerged simultaneously from the ground. Their respective growths and metamorphoses into humans were alike. Ahura Mazda addressed them both in the same manner, and with the same words. Following their acceptance of the oneness of God, they both said: "We shall both strive to be kind to one another, providing the other with contentment, friendship, and trust". Thus, in the Zoroastrian religion, neither the man nor the woman has any priority over the other.

Besides their equal standing at the dawn of creation, man and woman enjoy an equal standing at the end. Thus, when the *Saoshyant* (the Zoroastrian Messiah) shall appear from around Lake Hamoon, in the eastern part of Persia, 30,000 righteous and believing men and women shall come to him from every part of Iran. Out of these 30,000 half are men, the other half women.

Further, out of the six *Amesha spentas* (beneficent immortals), three are female, and three are male. The three male *Amesha spentas* are Bahman, Vahman, or *Vohu manah* (Righteous Thinking); Ordibehesht, or *Asha vahishta* (Justice, Truth); and Shahrivar, or *Khshathra vairya* (Desirable Dominion). The three female *Amesha spentas* are Esfand or Armaita (*Spenta Armaita*, Devotion), Esfand being the guardian of the earth. Khordad, or Haurvatat (Wholeness) the guardian of the waters; and finally Amordad, or Ameretat (Immortality). Further, many of the *Izads* (similar to angels, and ranked lower than the *Amesha spentas*), are female. For example, on the dawn of the fourth day after one's death, at the Bridge of the Requirer (*Chinvat*), the *Izads* Mehr, Soroush, and Rashn, will question the souls of the deceased regarding their earthly deeds and actions. While the first two *izads* are masculine, Rashn is a female *izad*. Further, the *izad* Daena, meaning conscience and religion, cooperates with Rashn. Also, the *izads* Chista (knowledge and mind), and Ashi (forgiveness, generosity, and comfort) are both female.

As for marriage, in ancient Persia Zoroastrians did not marry only to cater to their sexual needs, but rather they had a very progressive and noble reason. This was the provision of spiritual progress, and the ultimate victory of righteousness over evil. Zarathustra's teachings guide mankind to achieve the highest spiritual standing, which will in turn accelerate the coming of the *Saoshyant*, and thus the final victory of good over evil. Therefore, through marriage, which according to the Zoroastrian belief is a holy and praiseworthy act, devoid of inequality, discrimination, and degradation, we shall take part in this spiritual move. According to W.L. Geiger, one of the facts pointing to this equality is the nickname *Nemano payeti* given to women, meaning "The Light of the House". The nickname accorded to men is *Neman payeti*, which means "The Lord of the House". Following their marriage, indeed, women were accorded a position of equality and fellowship with their husbands, not one of subservience and belongingness. In other words, the wife did not become a slave to her husband, but rather, an equal in legal, as well as decision-making matters.⁹

The Danish orientalist Christensen maintains about Old Persia that men acted with respect towards women, and women enjoyed absolute freedom, in personal, as well as social and public matters. Women were free to choose their mates, a point clearly illustrated by Zarathustra's attitude towards his youngest daughter, Prooschista. Zarathustra tells Prooschista "I have chosen the learned Jamasp (a minister of the king, Vishtaspa) for your husband. Use your own judgement, and see if you consider him fit". In the *Gâthâs*, addressing all young girls and boys, Zarathustra advises: "To the future wives and husbands-to-be, these are my words, remember, and act according to their message so as to achieve a prosperous life. Each of you should try to outdo the other in kindness, righteousness, and holiness, for thus you may achieve a joyous life". We can see that pious men and women are addressed in the same manner. Further, greetings and praise are showered upon the *fravahar* (the soul and the essence) of both men and women, following their death. In the *Book of Yashts*, it is written: "We praise the fravahar of righteous men, and women"; and similarly in the

⁹ W.L. Geiger, *Civilization of the Eastern Persians in Ancient Times* (trans. Geiger), Oxford, 1885, vol. 2.

Yasna (38) one finds: "O Ahura Mazda, we praise the women of this land, women who have chosen righteousness as their path". In *Farvardin Yasht*, the longest *Yasht* in the *Avestas*, praise is similarly showered upon the *fravahar* of both righteous women and men.

The Zoroastrian women during the time of Zarathustra, as well as during the Achaemenid dynasty, enjoyed the highest form of legal right. This was indeed an outstanding historical time for women. As previously mentioned, a good example of this was Mandana, Cyrus's mother. The active participation of women like Atossa, Panthea, Roxanna, Artemis, and many others, in various spheres of life is also remarkable. As a result of archaeological excavations in Persepolis, tablets have been found showing women working side by side with men in the construction of the palace of Persepolis, and receiving wages and benefits, such as bread, wine, etc. equal to the amount given men. These tablets are presently to be found in museums around the world.¹⁰

After the Achaemenids

Following the downfall of the Achaemenid dynasty the position of women, began to deteriorate. During the Seleucid period, Greek women and girls were living in Iran, and since in Greece women did not enjoy equal rights to men, this effected the position of the Persian women as well. As we know, Zoroastrianism is based on monogamy, and no Zoroastrian man can wed another women, while married to one. However, many of these Greek girls and women became the lovers of Persian men, thus shaking the strong foundation upon which Persian families were based. Many became wedded to Persian men for a certain period of time, and others gave birth to children out of wedlock.

During the Parthian period, the standing of the Persian woman gained in strength. Still, the influence of the Seleucid dynasty and Hellenism had weakened their position. Further, as a result of Persian territorial expansion during the Parthian dynasty, Persia contained within itself various nations and tribes, each with their own traditions, and customs. This, undoubtedly, affected the position of women, and changed the status of family in Persia.

During the Sasanian period, a period of Zoroastrian revivalism, whereby Zoroastrianism became the official religion, women regained their rights and privileges. According to Darmesteter, "the Sasanian era not only impacted the history of Persia, but it also had a great impact upon the history of the world". Once again, women gained in respect. No one, not even the king could molest or otherwise impose his opinion upon a woman.¹¹ As evident by discovered documents and tablets, women enjoyed a special position during that time. For example, Shapur II's mother, together with the high priesthood, ruled Persia, for a period of twenty years (prior to the birth of Shapur himself, up until his reaching legal age). In *Pand Nameh*, Adorbadmehr Espand tells his son: "Whether your child is a girl, or a boy, send him (her) to school, so that he (she) may earn wisdom, and knowledge, and live well". In the Zoroastrian religion, women were able to reach the *Zoot* level (become a *Mobed*), which required high degree of religious learning. In the book *Matikan Hezar Dadestan*, it is said that one day a few women blocked the way of a high-ranking judge, in order to ask legal questions of him. The judge answered all questions but one. Whereupon one of the women responded that the answer to that question can be found in a particular book, and on a particular page. This shows that during the Sasanian era women were knowledgeable, even regarding intricate legal matters. In his book on the legal rights of women during the Sasanian period, Bartholomae notes how women were free to choose their husbands, and did not have to accept the man chosen for them by their fathers. In case of refusal to accept the father's choice, the father could not disinherit his daughter, or take other such actions against her. In the work *Matikan Hezar Dadestan*, we find it written: "Girls should not be forced into a marriage to which they do not consent" (19). And again, "Even after marriage, both daughters and sons are obliged to pay their parents' financial debts (28).

¹⁰ A. Christensen, *Die Iranier: Kulturgeschichte des Alten Orients* (Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft 3), Munich, 1933.

¹¹ Using J. Darmesteter (ed.), *Le Zend-Avesta* (Annales de Musée Guimet 31-2, 34), Paris [1892-3], repr. 1962, 3 vols.

Thus we can see that daughters were regarded as responsible beings, capable of accepting family obligations and responsibilities.

As for the supervising responsibilities of the man of the family, these were set by the family laws of the time, which expected the man to treat his wife and children with love and kindness. Parents and children were similarly obligated towards each other. It was not legal, for example, for anyone to give his wealth over to people outside the circle of the legal inheritors, denying such relations their due inheritance. Following the death of the father of the family, guardianship was granted to the mother. In case of divorce or separation, the woman could ask for dowry, and for as long as she had not remarried, or obtained an independent source of income, she was entitled to receive alimony from her ex-husband. Based on information regarding inheritance in the aforementioned book *Matikan Hezar Dadestan*, Bartholomae concludes that “during the Sasanian period, following the father’s death, inheritance was apportioned in the following manner: the wife and the sons were to inherit equal portions. Daughters inherited half that amount if married, and were granted a trousseau. If not, they too inherited an equal amount to that of their mother or each of their brothers”.¹²

According to the *Avesta*, a woman can own properties, and can manage them herself. A mother can become her children’s guardian. A wife can enter proceedings on her husband’s behalf, and manage his properties for him (in case of the husband’s illness or insanity). A wife can bring action against a cruel and ill-treating husband, asking the court for due punishment. A husband can not marry her daughter off without his wife’s consent. A woman’s testimony is accepted in the court of law. A woman can become an arbitrator or a judge. A woman can become the executor of a will, and can bequest all her wealth. As far as training and education is concerned, girls and boys are treated alike in the *Avesta*, wherein it is written: “O Ahura Mazda, give me a child capable of fulfilling his (her) duties *vis-à-vis* his (her) home, family, city, and country” (there is no mention of a girl or a boy).

At this stage, it will be worthwhile to mention Ferdousi’s *Shahnameh*, that masterpiece of epic poetry. One of the world’s greatest literary works, *Shahnameh* is a reflection of the characteristics, desires, attitudes, mentality, and habits of the inhabitants of the old Persia, being therefore a valuable historical guide. Throughout its pages, we encounter not only great men (Kaveh, Rostam, Esfandiar, Siavosh, and Sohrab), but also women of wisdom, and intelligence, namely Faranak, Sindokht, Gordafarid, Roodabeh, Tahmineh, Katayoon, Faranguiss, Kordieh, Poorandokht, and Azarmidokht. Thanks to their ingenuity, insight, sagacity, intelligence, and decision-making power, these women fulfilled great deeds, while acting as worthy advisers and examples to men. Ferdousi’s accounts are not mere imagining, but rather reflect true historical events, passed on in written forms, or otherwise orally from one generation to the next, until they reached him as synthesizer. Despite the prevalent narrow-mindedness, and limitations governing the lot of women during this time, Ferdousi managed to remain truthful to the traditional narratives reaching him, concerning the high status and importance granted women in the old Persia, prior to the emergence of Islam.

¹² C. Bartholomae, *Die Frau im sasanidischen Recht* (Kultur und Sprache 5), Heidelberg, 1924.