

A Visit to a Dar-e-Mehr

Summary: Zoroastrian houses of worship are called dar-e-mehrs, or fire temples. Their primary purpose is to house the “eternal flame,” a fire with which many Zoroastrian rituals are performed. While Indian dar-e-mehrs are closed to non-Zoroastrians, dar-e-mehrs in the United States act both as places of worship and learning centers open to non-Zoroastrians.

While many American Zoroastrians worship at home or in small gatherings, some larger communities in America have begun to establish their own houses of worship. This new addition to America’s religious landscape is known as a *dar-e-mehr* (or *darbe mehr*), sometimes referred to as a “fire temple,” as Zoroastrians pray in the presence of fire. Mobed Shahzadi’s religious instruction booklet published by the California Zoroastrian Center explains: “Fire, light and all the good luminaries remind us of the divine light, purity and love of Ahura Mazda. Light is the visible symbol of God who is invisible. That is why we face a light or fire, whether the bright sun in the sky or the candle, lamp, and a blazing fire vase with sweet-smelling wood on it. Furthermore, fire in the Gathas also stands for the inner fire and warmth found in every human heart.”

The eternal flame is a key symbol in Zoroastrianism; the element of fire is respected and must never be extinguished. One of the most common misunderstandings regarding Zoroastrian religious practice is that Zoroastrians are “fire worshippers”; in reality, the fire solemnizes the prayers and the worship is directed to Ahura Mazda. In India and Iran, fire temples are attended by *mobeds* throughout the day; one of the most ancient fire temples in Yazd, Iran, has a flame which is said to have burned continuously for 1,500 years, since the time of the Sassanian Empire. In America, most fire temples have flames equivalent to that of a small household fire, or may maintain a small, continuously burning flame, similar in size to a pilot light.

Zoroastrian houses of worship are located in renovated houses in New Rochelle, New York, and Vienna, Virginia with new constructions taking place in Hinsdale, Illinois, San Jose and Westminster, California, and in Houston, Texas. Many of the American *dar-e-mehrs* were funded through the assistance of the Guiv Foundation, a charitable Zoroastrian trust. Established by the Iranian philanthropists Arbab Rustam and Morvarid Guiv, the trust provides funds to Zoroastrians in Iran, India, England, Australia, and North America; accordingly, many U.S. centers today bear the Guiv name. The Arbab Rustam Guiv Darbe

Mehr, established in 1983 in Hinsdale, a suburb of Chicago, was inaugurated with Mrs. Morvarid Guiv offering the first piece of sandalwood. This temple was the first to be built from the ground up in North America, a project of the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Chicago (ZAC).

The temple is but one tangible reminder of the Zoroastrian presence in the heartland—a small but dedicated community that has steadily grown and diversified over the last 50 years. Today, a total of 600 Zoroastrians from Metropolitan Chicago and the neighboring states of Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, and Iowa, comprise ZAC's membership. As one enters the Arbab Rustom Guiv Darbe Mehr, a vivid tale about an ancient faith in the modern world unfolds. Above the doorway is a winged figure, the *farohar*, which symbolizes divine glory. It does not represent Ahura Mazda, who takes no form, but rather the presence of the Divine which dwells within all.

In India, non-Zoroastrians are forbidden to enter a fire temple; however, in the suburbs of Chicago, people of all faiths are encouraged to come and learn about Zoroastrianism. The Center itself was designed to serve multiple purposes, and includes a library/learning center, a kitchen, an assembly hall, and a prayer hall. The library, available for research on Zoroastrianism, is also the site of community meetings. The kitchen facility is used for food preparation for large events, as well as for individual families, so they can prepare foods that accompany the death remembrance ceremony. From the main entrance, one enters the assembly hall, in which classes, activities, and many social events and religious celebrations are held. To reach the prayer room one must walk through a small corridor to an adjoining building, where the room is situated away from the main activity of the center to insure a sense of sanctity and peace.

Before entering the prayer room, all visitors must remove their shoes and cover their heads. The room is furnished simply, with carpeted floors and a life-sized portrait of the Prophet Zarathushtra. In the center is the altar—a fire vase, or *afargan*, set upon an elevated platform. The *afargan* was shipped to the United States from an historic fire temple in Surat, India, that was no longer in use. On either side of the vase are two tables: a marble one on which oil lamps are lit, and another on which trays of sandalwood are available for offerings.

Off the prayer hall is a small room in which the *mobeds* don their white vestments. Chicago, unlike many American cities, has a cadre of *mobeds* to serve the community. These *mobeds* offer their services on a voluntary basis in addition to working full-time jobs, as is common practice in American Zoroastrian communities. During normal business hours, two of the *mobeds* work as engineers; others work as a stock analyst, an accountant, and a storekeeper, and the high priest is a psychologist. In addition, the *mobeds* often travel to other communities in nearby states to perform the initiatory *Navjote/Sudreh-Pushi* rites and the Jashan thanksgiving ceremonies, as well as weddings and funerals. Today, the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Chicago financially supports young *mobeds* who wish to be ordained.

The Chicago community brought the *dar-e-mehr* to life in 1983 through fundraising efforts ranging from bake sales, raffles, and car washes to telephone drives. During the final stages of the center's construction, the community worked on the weekends to sand, varnish, clean, polish and paint in order to get the temple ready for the inauguration festivities. As the community has grown over the years and its needs expanded, the center continues to do the same, both in terms of programming and in space. As the visit to the fire temple concludes, one may consider the words engraved upon the marble plaque in the entryway, which dedicates the temple to the "children who shall carry the torch of Zoroastrianism for future generations in North America." Thus the visit ends where it began, with the key symbol of the eternal flame, given new expression by the Zoroastrians in America.