

Two Streams Converge

Summary: In the United States, Parsi and Iranian Zoroastrian communities sometimes hold separate schedules and services, but many share places of worship and are members of the same national Zoroastrian organizations. On the national and trans-national level, seminars, youth programs, and federations bring these two communities together. These interactions contribute to distinct modes of American Zoroastrian identities and communities.

The history of Zoroastrians in America, however brief, represents a critical juncture in an ancient faith, as two distinct communities and two streams of the same tradition converge on the same soil. Though sharing core beliefs and practices, these communities had developed many doctrinal, cultural, linguistic, and culinary differences over the centuries. Most Parsis from the Indian subcontinent speak English and Gujarati as their native languages, while most Persian Zoroastrians from Iran, who are generally more recent immigrants to the United States and Canada, claim Farsi as their mother tongue. Further, the two communities presently observe slightly different ritual practices and festivals and often follow distinct religious calendars.

Historical records indicate that the Zoroastrian presence in America dates back to the 1860s. During California's Gold Rush, one of the prospectors was a Zoroastrian named Cawasji Zaveri. In 1865, New York's *Evening Post* published a letter from a Zoroastrian named Dosabhai Faramji Cama protesting slavery. Other early Zoroastrians include Pestonji Framji Daver, a Parsi who came to San Francisco in 1892, and the first recorded Iranian Zoroastrian, Rostam Kermani, who settled in the United States in 1926. It is believed that the first North American Zoroastrian Association was formed in 1929 when a group of seven Zoroastrians in the New York area gathered in one Phiroze Saklatwala's living room on November 10, 1929.

Along with economic and early political factors, the discriminatory immigration practices of the 1900s limited the flow of Zoroastrians into the United States. In the 1950s and 1960s, many Parsis began coming to the United States for educational and economic opportunities—one of the most prominent immigrants from that time was the conductor Zubin Mehta. On May 23, 1965, a group of thirty Chicago-area Zoroastrians formed the Zoroastrian Association of America. As expressed in the Association's newsletter, their goal was clear: "...it is time now, for those of us in the vanguard of this migration, to

plan on ways to preserve our identity and our heritage while participating fully in the American way of life.” While the group disbanded a few years later, the mission of the Zoroastrian organizations that followed was similar: for a small religious community to establish itself in a new homeland.

American Zoroastrian organizations initially formed on an informal basis, with local groups of Zoroastrians holding gatherings in private homes to socialize and observe religious holidays. Many of these communities had doubled in size by the late 1970s as increasing numbers of Iranian Zoroastrians joined their co-religionists in America after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979.

Formal establishment of U.S. Zoroastrian Associations began in the 1970s and the founding of a local center for worship often followed. This was the case in New York with the Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York (ZAGNY) in 1973 which was followed by the Arbab Rustom Guiv Darbe Mehr in 1977.

On the West Coast, the Zoroastrian Association of California formed in Los Angeles in 1974, followed by the California Zoroastrian Center in 1980 and the Rostam Guiv Dar-e-Mehr inauguration on March 25, 1987; the Traditional Mazdayasni Zoroastrian Anjuman (or, Community) was founded in the late 1980s, as was the Zarathushtrian Assembly. In Northern California, the Zarthoshti Anjuman of Northern California (ZANC) was established in 1980, with the Rostam and Morvarid Guiv Dar-e-Mehr, a joint effort between two Zoroastrian groups, inaugurated on Jamshedi Navroz (New Year’s Day on the first day of spring) in 1992.

In the Midwest, the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Chicago (ZAC) was officially chartered in 1975. The inauguration of the Arbab Rustom Guiv Darbe Mehr in Willowbrook, Illinois followed on September 3, 1983. Farther south, the Zoroastrian Association of Houston (ZAH) was founded in 1976 and the Zarathushti Heritage and Cultural Center established over 20 years later. Across the nation, additional Zoroastrian Associations followed in places such as Metropolitan Washington, Greater Boston, Kansas, Washington state, Arizona, and the tri-state region of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware.

In addition to these formal associations, small Zoroastrian groups have formed in many other American communities, including groups in Detroit, New Orleans, Central Florida, and the Maritimes Provinces of Canada.

Every community in the United States brings together Iranian and Parsi Zarathustis as contributing members; however, some associations continue to have parallel schedules for the two communities, with only a few annual events being celebrated by the community as a whole. Other associations are making special efforts to unite the community. In Washington, D.C., the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington, Inc. (ZAMWI) began publishing a bilingual newsletter in 1989, and today all of their publications include Farsi translations; in Washington state, the Zoroastrian Society of Washington State (ZSWS) adopted the Fasli calendar in 1994 to encourage joint observations of religious events. The differences, while acute, are beginning to fade with the next generation. As one Bay Area Zoroastrian commented, “soon there will no longer be Parsi Zoroastrians or Iranian Zoroastrians; we will simply be American Zoroastrians.”

Most American and Canadian Zoroastrian associations are united under the auspices of the umbrella organization the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA), which celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2017. This organization publishes the quarterly *FEZANA Journal* and operates via numerous standing and ad-hoc committees and sponsors congresses, youth events, religious education seminars, and special projects to unify the community. Its aim is to represent a community with a diverse spectrum of Zoroastrian theologies while maintaining neutrality on controversial or divisive issues, thereby seeking to honor the autonomous approach outlined in its organizational constitution.

A vital and vibrant component of FEZANA’s membership is the Canadian Zoroastrian community. Some of the oldest North American Zoroastrian associations still thriving today were established in Canada. Today, there are three Canadian *dar-e-mehrs*, one in Toronto, another in Mississauga, and a third in Vancouver.

American Zoroastrianism is already emerging with its own, distinct face: Zoroastrian youth participate in annual events, from overnight camps to “Z-Ski” trips to the Zoroastrian Olympics. Just over the

border in Toronto, there is a Zoroastrian scout troop. Founded in 1990, Troop Toronto 100 continues to thrive today. The community also comes together regularly for Zoroastrian congresses, including FEZANA's North American Zoroastrian Congress; the North American Youth Congress; the World Zoroastrian Youth Congress; and, more recently, the North American International Gatha/Avesta Conference, under the auspices of the Council of Scholars on Zoroastrianism.

Members of this ancient faith are also active online: numerous websites cover everything from a basic introduction to the religion to advanced sites teaching the Avestan alphabet and including religious texts and their translations. Other sites feature online Zoroastrian match-making services and pages maintained by groups and individuals who strongly advocate a particular school of thought, from the "reformist" Zarathushtrian Assembly to the Traditional Mazdayasni Zoroastrian Anjuman. In addition, there are Zoroastrian bulletin boards and discussion groups, as well as a special listing of Zoroastrians on e-mail, known as "Z-mail."

The Zoroastrian presence in America is often overlooked. It is a small community with a brief history on this continent with significant immigration taking place only within the past five decades. Until then, the most tangible link between America and the oft-overlooked Zoroastrian faith was found in an unlikely place: a prominent 7,136-foot rocky peak in the Grand Canyon by the name of "Zoroaster Temple." When the temple was named, there were no known Zoroastrians in North America; today, there are over 15,000, with six U.S. *dar-e-mehrs* and a host of organizations and associations scattered across the United States. FEZANA's Zoroastrian Sports Committee now sponsors trips to the Grand Canyon. American Zoroastrians are making history, bringing together two ancient communities as they build places of worship, form organizations, and endeavor to make their own unique contributions to the American mosaic.