

Principles of Education in Ancient Iran with a Look at Yashts

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ABSTRACT: The Iranian nations were one of the greatest ancient nations who left great and deep impacts in the world. Nature, religion and government were the main factors constituting the education of ancient Iran. The most important goal of education was to educate the children in various stages of training and turn them to useful members of society. To reach this end and based on the teachings of Zoroaster in the sacred book of Avesta, the children were given religious, moral, military, reading, and writing training on the basis of three principles of: Good Thoughts, Good Behavior, and Good Words. Meanwhile, Zoroastrian clergymen (Magian) played important roles in this area.

Keywords: Ancient Iran, religion, education, mortality, Yashts.

INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of man on earth, education was present. When the early humans were teaching the methods of feeding, pasturing and cultivating the land to their children, they were actually educating them.

From the distant past, Iranian attached great importance to the education and this issue was highlighted via the sovereignty of Zoroastrianism over this territory. Zoroastrianism approach to human and his education has been the most important principle leading to the foundation and shaping of the history of education in Iran because there are a lot of words and sayings about the knowledge and politeness in the Avesta. This point indicates that the ancient Iranian emphasized on the education very much and that the status of knowledge, wisdom, and literature had been very high among them.

In ancient Iran, education meant that a person must obtain enough knowledge and learn to be polite in order to attain proper traits and deeds and try to be a useful member of society. This paper attempts to examine the foundations of education in Yashts and answer to the following questions: Whether the Zoroastrian religion has had a role in education? What had been the goals of the Zoroastrian religion in this field and what had been involved in this issue?

1. Education in Ancient Iran

Having attained great attentions to knowledge, wisdom and politeness, Iranians were thinking about education of their children from the very beginning so that children should be entrusted to the teacher after the age of seven. In ancient Iran, there have been a lot of factors that affect education which can be divided into two categories of religious and non-religious factors.

1.1. Non-religious factors

Among the non-religious factors influencing the education, one can points to the geographical and government situations.

1.1.1. Geographical situations

Iran is almost a dry land, full of deserts and mountains which are largely devoid of plants and herbage. Due to lack of water and food, living and surviving in such a land required hardworking. So, ancient Iranian were diligent and painstaking people and were trying their bests to survive. However and with regard to this fact that Iran is located in south part of Central Asia, this country has always been threatened by its neighbors. The tribes, phyles and nomadic tribes, who lived around the country, constantly attacked Iran in order to seize food and livelihood and plundered all the annual efforts of this people completely. This led Iranian people to learn how to resist against these attacks and learn the methods and techniques of fighting and bravery.

1.1.2. Government

Government was another non-religious factor. In fact, the government has played a major role in education. Since the establishment of Mad government and after the advent of imperial in Iran, the authority was centralized in one place and managing this vast country was delegated to the people who were reliable and dependable, know their responsibilities well and do their jobs properly. Because of this and with regard to the necessity of doing such, a number of children of princes, elders, and grandees were trained for bureaucratic and administrative works. In fact, "the government has continuously controlled the people and education had been in hands of power holders as a social necessity" (Dorrani, 1997).

2.1. Religious factors

2.1.1. Zoroastrian religion

The main principles of Zoroastrian religion had been the three principles of good thoughts, good behavior, and good words. This issue has been pointed out at Din Yasht, Verse 2, Paragraph 6 as follow: "The science has been praised in words of Zoroaster and has emphasized on good thinking, words, and behaviors in thoughts, words, and deeds in order to be prosperous" (Pourdavood, 1998).

Aryans believed in the existence of two types of good and evil existences who were in constant conflict and struggle with each other. Zoroaster conceived all good and beautiful features in Ahura Mazda and all the evils in Demons and encouraged all humans to learn science: "We praise the most right and proper creature of Ahura Mazda that guides us to good manner and leads to sooth and provides us with what is favorite and ideal" (ibid, p. 174).

As recommended by the Zoroaster, people should do their duties and tasks and move toward to verity and efforts and endeavors in order to pave the way for ultimate triumph of truth and goodness in the world. On this basis, the Paragraphs 5, 14, and 16 of Farvardin Yasht assert that: "Lifetime is a constant struggle between the truth and lies, good and evil, beauty and ugliness" (ibid, p. 189).

Zoroaster taught religious education to people in order to be vigilant and do not succumb to the forces of evil and that they must pay attention to the Companions of Ahura Mazda. The Companions of Ahura Mazda are those six Amesha Spenta or Holy Immortals including: Bahman (pure natured), Ordibehesht (best purity), Shavrivar (ideal kingship), Sepandarmaz (modesty), Khordad (happiness and health), Mordad (eternal life). Thus and regarding the educational and training aspects, it was a necessity for people to attain their moral qualities such as the characters of Ahura Mazda and always set Amesha Spenta and Amshaspandan and Ahura as their models.

Zoroastrian religion always encouraged people to learning and obtaining knowledge to such an extent that in one part of books of Yashts in "Din Yasht", there are a lot of references to "Chista" as the Goddess of Science. Chista or what, which means thinking, learning and knowledge, is the name of the angel of science and knowledge. This existence is translated into Farzanak (young daughter) in Pahlavi language. Similarly, the name of the youngest daughter of Zoroaster is "Pouro Chista" which is derived from the above word and means a very knowledgeable and wise person (Pourdavood, vol. introduction, p. 11). Mostly, the meaning of "Chista" has been pointed out in different sections of Yashts including Soroush Yasht, Hadokht, Paragraph 16: " The Companions of pure Soroush... The Companions of good Chista, The Companions of most righteous Chista" (Yashts, vol. 1, 1998, p. 538).

In addition, Chista means knowledge, wisdom, science, wise and thoughtful in Avesta book and this is due to the fact that the basis and origin of human actions stem from his thoughts and good thoughts lead to good words and behavior and bad thoughts lead to evil words and behavior. Thus, the right thought is a prerequisite for right words and behavior. "Verily, the humankind must be so pure, neat and noble-minded in order to attain themselves to commendable and noble-minded traits of Ahura Mazda" (ibid, p. 85).

In the Avesta, Bahman is the first creature of Ahura Mazda and represents a symbol of good thoughts and wisdom of God in the spiritual world. He is a goddess who denotes humankind with wisdom and prudence and makes him closer to the Creator (ibid, p. 88). So, we can say that science, reason and critical thinking have been so important in this religion that contains Chista as a symbol for science and knowledge as well as Bahman as a symbol for thinking. Thus, the very close relationship between religion and science is indicated thereof. Although the name

of Yasht 16 is “Din Yasht”, we see some references in Verse 1, Paragraph 2 of this book to Chista as an angle of science and knowledge: “ O you! The rightmost science of Mazda, O you! The Holy Creature” (ibid, p. 174).

2.2.1. Magian

Since the Zoroaster has recommended the Magian to the honesty and verity in Holy Avesta, it can be concluded that they had a significant role in the education of their time because educating and training of special children has been specific to Magian. In fact, with the advent of Zoroaster, the responsibility for doing public religious affairs was entrusted to the Magian. Zoroaster has always insisted on this point that the leaders must be those who are wise, experienced, knowledgeable and educated. In a similar vein, the following recommendation is provided in Aban Yasht, Verse 21, Paragraph 91: “the Magian who are aware of questioning and answering and who are experienced and wise and to whom His Holy Word is reincarnated” (ibid, p. 275).

In fact, Magian were activating religious beliefs and customs in the society. Since public education was based mostly on religious issues in ancient Iran, the Zoroastrian clergymen (Magian) were responsible for education and training. These Magian are examples of good character and morals and were respected and admired in general. They were accustomed to study at night, learn the courses, and teach the basics of religious and moral lessons to their students (Sedigh, 1975, p. 14).

3.1. Educational programs in ancient Iran

In ancient Iran, educational programs were based on the Holy Avesta which was divided into three major components: Religious and moral training, physical education and military training, teaching reading and writing and arithmetic.

3.1.1. Religious and moral training

In ancient Iran, the first stage for educating the child was the education of parents and, especially the mother. Children learned their initial lessons from their parents and friends. The role of mother, as the focal point of the family and the main focus of this small community, was of high importance. Therefore, the role of parents in education has been vital. Children were familiarized with ethnic and national characteristics, early life rules and religious practices in families. When the child reached the age of seven, he was entrusted to the teacher and he/she studied up to the age fifteen. Teachers were firstly from Magian class. Families were sending their children to altar or fire-temples and later to Court academies in order to be taught. In fact, the initial training had been more of religious types due to this fact that religions have been the first base of human learning and have had effective impact on education and culture of people. Thus, it can be concluded that the training School of that period had been religiously-oriented (Keshavarzi, 2003).

Zoroastrian clergymen read some prayers five times a day in front of the fire which was highly efficient in edification. Verity was a point which was of high importance in moral teaching. It is because of this point that verity has been the basis of moral teachings of ancient Iran. Furthermore, this point has been so emphasized and repeated in the Avesta so that this characteristic has been considered as one of the fundamental features of the Zoroastrian religion. The following phrase has been inserted at the beginning of all paragraphs of “Din Yasht”: “We adore the rightmost science of Mazda, O you! The Holy Creature” (Yashts, 1998).

3.1.2. Physical education and military training

One of the most important types of teachings for young people had been the physical education and military training. The major reason for this type of training may be the geographical situation of Iran because Iranian had been obliged to fight against the outsiders' invasions. Furthermore and regarding the need for robustness and abiding by the health of body and psyche of people, it seems that this type of training had been a must thereof. Thus, the ancient Iranian insisted on military education for their children because the illness had been attributed to the Demon in the Zoroastrian religion. Hence, Ahura Mazda and the Amesha Spenta and the Gods had been requested for health in Avesta. In the same vein, the following phrase has been provided in Mehr Yasht, Verse 20, Paragraph 11: “I adore the one to whom the warriors at the horse's back pray and I praise the one to whom they implore for the strength and health of their horses and bodies” (ibid, p. 202).

It was the duty of everyone to act against the Demon and to sustain health and wellness. In the Avesta, Soroush Yasht, Verse 10, Paragraph 25, God is always asked for health and vigor: “O you holy and beautiful Soroush! Please strengthen our horses and bodies so that we can detect our enemies far away and shun away from our combatants and defeat our malicious hatred enemies by one shot” (Yashts, 1998). However and as can be seen in another part of Avesta (Hoom Yasht, Paragraph 17), people asked Hoom to help them fight against malice: “O you golden Hoom!

I want you to give me intelligence, power, victory, health, healing and all the strengths and all the knowledge” (ibid, p. 602). Thus it can be concluded that the Iranians had believed in this motto that: sound body, sound mind. They tried to foster a spirit of courage and warlike within their children to help them have pure spirits and also healthful and joyful body (Naghi, 1976) and to be a useful member of society.

One of the military trainings and physical educations that ancient Iranian taught to their children had been horse riding. Ancient Iranians considered the horse as one of their family members and prayed for themselves as well as for their horses. This point has been pointed out in Aban Yasht, Verse 14, Paragraph 53: “We must ask for strength of the horses and healthy body” (Yashts, 1998). Horses had been so important in ancient Iran to such an extent that they deemed their Gods astride on their horses. Similarly, this point has been pointed out in Aban Yasht, Verse 2, Paragraph 11: “Venus has sat in front of the carousel and has taken its rein and is riding the horse” (ibid, p. 212).

In addition to horse riding, ancient Iranians also taught shooting and polo to their children. This was due to this fact that shooting had been used for subsistence in the peace era and for defending from the homeland in the time of war. Ball and polo game was considered as one of the recreations of kings and princes. Besides, the Iranians’ attention to water and their strong interest in sanitation and cleanliness and religious duty in Zoroastrian religion led them to teach their children to swim.

3.1.3. Reading, writing, and calculating

Learning to read and write was limited to only a few specific classes and people. In the past, Iranian society had been a caste society and no one could ever enter into another class. In fact, the ancient Iranian believed that the child of a craftsman should always be a craftsman because he has inherited this talent from his father and thus will be more successful in this field. Thus, in the class system of that period, which was a caste society, nobody could move easily from craft or agricultural fields to army or justice class. Therefore, training had been limited to specific classes and individuals. Since such roles as commander of army, ruling, judgments, keeping legal and financial accounts and taxes had been the responsibilities of princes and the sons of nobles and Magian, therefore, only this group could be blessed by reading and writing.

CONCLUSION

Full human development has been the ultimate goal of all religions including Zoroastrian religion that also has its attention toward this goal. According to the surveys done on Yashts of Avesta, it was concluded that the Zoroastrian teachings encouraged learning and education and formation of cultural principles and issues to such an extent that both community and family deemed education as very important. Furthermore, they have attempted to reach a common goal that is nothing but being a useful member of the community and being of service to community and country. All religious and moral education and military training for children and young people had been toward achieving to this goal and the Zoroastrian religion has had a significant impact on various sectors of education.

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