

UPSC Civil Services Examination

GS I (Art and Culture)

History of Zoroastrianism

The foundation of the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism was laid by the teachings and wisdom of the spiritual leader and reformist Zoroaster (also known as Zarathushtra) in the 6th century BCE in modern-day Iran. It is based on a dualistic cosmology of good and evil. It is also one of the world's oldest continuously practiced religions. In India, they are known as 'Parsis' or 'one from Persia'.

What are the principle beliefs of Zoroastrianism?

Zoroastrianism is a monotheist religion i.e. belief in one powerful cosmic entity. That entity, in this case, is Ahura Mazda or 'Lord of Light' in Persian. Other major features of Zoroastrianism include:

- **Messianism:** A belief in a 'messiah' or saviour who will liberate or save a group of people for eternal salvation
- **Judgement after death:** It is believed that a soul upon departing the earth will be judged by Ahura Mazda for passage to heaven or hell
- **Existence of heaven and hell:** Zoroastrianism elaborates well on the existence of heaven and hell.
- **Free will:** A concept that every individual has the ability to choose between different possible courses of action.

It is quite possible that the philosophical beliefs mentioned above may have well influenced major religions such as Christianity, Islam and Buddhism.

The most important texts of Zoroastrianism are those of the Avesta. The Avesta also contains the central teachings of Zoroaster known as the Gatha.

A fire temple in Zoroastrianism is the place of worship for Zoroastrians, often called Dar-e Mehr (Persian) or Agiyari (Gujarati). In the Zoroastrian religion, fire, together with clean water, are agents of ritual purity.

History of Zoroastrianism

Under the patronage of the Achaemenid Empire in the 6th Century BCE, particularly under Darius I, Zoroastrianism flourished in modern-day Iran and most of the Mesopotamian region under the control of the empire. The invasions under Alexander the Great did displace the religion with Hellenistic beliefs although it did survive in the regions of the former Achaemenid Empire particularly in Cappadocia (Modern-Day Turkey) and the Caucasus. It would not be until the formation of the Parthian Empire in the 3rd century BCE would Zoroastrianism would make a comeback in the land of its origins.

Zoroastrianism would be aggressively promoted under the Sassanid Empire, later coming into conflict with Christianised Roman Empire.

Zoroastrianism went into terminal decline after the Arab Conquest of Persia. The decline was not immediate but took course over the centuries with the majority of the pre-Islamic population of Iran converting.

Despite economic and social incentives to convert, Zoroastrianism survived in faraway regions of the former Sassanid Empire, but continued persecution by the populace as well as a deliberate state-policy compelled the remaining to migrate to more tolerant lands, particularly India. Today, though they are minorities in Iran, India is host to the largest concentration of Zoroastrians in the world.

There only about 70,000 Parsis in India because the community has a dwindling growth rate, due to low birth rates and migration. Although less in number, they are a highly successful group with many notable contributions towards Indian society ranging from the freedom struggle in the realm of business and military. Dadabhai Naoroji is notable for laying the foundations of the Indian Independence movement with the creation of the Indian National Congress. Even their military contributions are remarkable, with the most famous one being that of Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw, who led India to victory in the 1971 war with Pakistan.

