

President's Report to the Delegates, FEZANA AGM 2007

Good morning, my fellow Zarathushtis. Thank you all for spending your time and hard-earned money to come to Dallas to attend this 20th Annual General Meeting of FEZANA.

At this meeting, we have the distinction of having all four past presidents of FEZANA present: Rohinton Rivetna, Dolly Dastoor, Framroze Patel, and Firdosh Mehta. We have the wisdom and experience of these stalwarts to guide us; and we have the vigor, enthusiasm and fresh viewpoints of many new faces among us. It is my great fortune to be president of FEZANA during this exciting time.

NauRooz Pirooz

Eighteen days ago, we celebrated NauRooz, welcoming a new year full of hopes and aspirations for success – *pirooz* in Farsi, *fatteh firoozi* in Gujarati.

And this year, FEZANA completes 20 years of its existence. FEZANA was formed in a spirit of cooperation and farsighted hopes. The vision of FEZANA's founding fathers and mothers was to develop a Zarathushti community:

- that is well-connected, well educated,
- well grounded in religious thought, values and ethics,
- respectful of diversity, strong in collective giving,
- Economically prosperous.
- A community which will be recognized throughout N. America for its contributions in all aspects of life.

Progress and Perils

Immediately, FEZANA started charitable activities and scholarship funds. The FEZANA Journal helped to develop a core knowledge base about Zarathushti religion and successes. Religious education of children became an important, though uncoordinated, activity of most Associations. And of course, the social gatherings, youth activities, sports and adult congresses helped us to build a well-knit and happy community.

Several associations were fortunate to receive seed funding from Arbab Rustam Guiv to build their centers. But, we also began to experience a clash of cultures and viewpoints. Gulfs began to develop. Trust diminished. Obstacles materialized out of nowhere.

Facing Reality

When Dolly Dastoor was president of FEZANA, she said: "On this continent, we do NOT have the luxury of taking for granted the infrastructures that were inherited by us in

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our countries of origin". And fortunately, I might add, we do not have the problems of deteriorating or disused properties that our co-religionists are facing in India.

Here, we cannot expect rich Arbabs and Shethias to build our meeting halls, Agiarys, and schools. We have to create our own.

Shared Spaces

A well-conceived and practical Strategic Plan was developed, looking 5 years and 10 years into the future. Four areas called "shared spaces" were explored:

1. Leading a Zarathushti Life
2. Thousand Points of Light, which means each person must contribute,
3. Internal Infrastructures, our spiritual development, and
4. External Infrastructures.

Goals and milestones were developed for each shared space and volunteers were charged with implementing the plans.

One of the milestones was that by 2007, some large-scale entrepreneurship activities will be in place. We do have some fairly large-scale entrepreneurs in our community today, who we can count on. Among other milestones, we have a dynamic scholarship program, charities; we have obtained NGO consultative status in the UN. We published "Legacy of Zarathushtra." The Journal continues to serve the community well.

But one of the measurable milestones was: "Increase subscription of the Journal by 5% every year." The Journal committee, FEZANA executives and many others have made prodigious efforts to achieve this modest goal. But the subscriptions have not increased. And we are still lacking community infrastructure: FEZANA office, spiritual centers, consecrated temples, higher learning centers. We still do not have a cadre of professional religious scholars, and we do not have professional clergy.

We are learning to make do without a lot of things that we expected we would have by now.

Mapping the Terrain

Why have we succeeded in some areas and not in others? I believe that this is because we were, and still are, thinking in terms of HOW IT USED TO BE IN INDIA AND IRAN – RATHER THAN CONFRONTING THE REALITY AROUND US. Images and values of the old country are like maps -- useful so long as the terrain does not change. But the terrain has changed, and will continue to change.

The NauRooz table has a small mirror on it. We are asked to look at ourselves in the mirror. What is our self-image? Does it come from the real mirror in front of us, or does it come from the social mirror – what others are saying about us, or what we would like to think we look like?

WHAT WE ARE COMMUNICATES FAR MORE ELOQUENTLY THAN ANYTHING WE SAY OR DO! In the movie "300", Persians are shown as misshapen barbarians. Which image should we accept -- the comic-book image of "300", or the feel-good image that we all like and wish for?

When we think that the problem is "out there" and only if "they," meaning others, would "shape up" and show respect, the problem will be solved! This is outside-in thinking. Lasting solutions to problems, lasting happiness and success, come from the inside-out.

We need to understand the new territory. We need to understand ourselves, using our own honest mirrors; and we need new maps to negotiate the terrain. In business jargon, this is called "paradigm shift."

Paradigm Shift

Paradigm shifts are nothing new to Zarathushtis. In 1500 BC, Zarathushtra changed the way we thought about creation and about our relationship with Ahura Mazda, the force for good. In 800 BC, Iranians discovered ecology, developed purity laws and sang hymns to nature, thereby creating unprecedented health and a population explosion that led to empire-building.

Then Cyrus the Great changed the rules of governing people by his declaration of human rights; and built a joyous, free society in the known civilized world. Later, Sasanian emperors took on unlimited powers of life and death over all subjects; and sowed the seeds for the decline and fall of a great empire.

Religious hierarchy crumbled. But the religion lived on – underground in Iran and more openly but unchangingly, in India.

New Realities

Today, we are facing new challenges in India, Iran, and North America. Indian Zarathushtis are trying desperately to hold on to their customs and beliefs that have sustained them for a thousand years. Iranian Zarathushtis are finding new ways to live under an oppressive regime. We are wondering where to turn.

Here in North America, as the second and third generations take up leadership positions, we are becoming better attuned to our surroundings. We are beginning to develop new maps, and we are making changes. I predict that progress will be rapid from now on.

Last year, we convened a workshop in Chicago to take a fresh look at three broad goals for our community:

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- Build a united Zarathushti community
- Make Zarathushti presence an integral part of the N. American landscape, and
- Develop Zarathushti infrastructure.

These are worthy goals, NOT NEW, BUT VERY HARD TO DEFINE. First, we need to understand what exactly is a “Zarathushti community”? What is “the North American Landscape”? What infrastructures do we really need, and when?

To that end, we decided to do three things during the first year of my tenure:

1. Coordinate public celebrations of NauRooz
2. Increase formal public relations with the N. American media, and
3. Prepare to open a FEZANA office in a major metropolitan area.

THESE SMALL VICTORIES WILL PAVE THE WAY TO BIGGER VICTORIES.
You will hear more about these efforts today and tomorrow.

Unity is Elusive

But let us go back to the three goals. Although we have made progress in raising our profile through a dynamic public relations program and have begun to define our infrastructure needs, UNITY IS STILL ELUDING US.

There are many factors involved: cultural differences, distrust, and more seriously, a deep divide in our understanding of what “religion” means.

I believe that how we define ‘religion’ will shape our future. **HOW WE DEFINE RELIGION TOGETHER IS THE KEY TO OUR UNITY.** Only then will we be able to define what “Zarathushti community” means.

This was brought home to me in a most unexpected way.

Religion and Community

In June last year, a group called the "Church of Cognizance," based in Pima, Arizona, claimed that marijuana was the same as *haoma*, revered by Zoroastrians in *Hom Yasht*; and therefore, by smoking marijuana, they were just following neo-Zoroastrian religious practices. FEZANA and the North American Mobeds Council testified against their claims in a hearing in August. Finally in December, Judge Judith Herrera ruled that not only is the Church of Cognizance NOT a religion, but also that, even if it was a religion, the way that it is practiced by the defendants is not sincere. This was a victory for all of us – Zarathushtis as well as the U.S. legal system.

In her final statement, the judge pointed out that an established religion should have:

- Places for worship and rituals,
- Ordained priests and clergy,

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- Special vestments for priests and laypeople,
- Religious celebrations, and
- A well-run organization.

We know these to be the deeply observed philosophical, metaphysical, moral and ethical underpinnings of our religion. But the judge added, almost as an afterthought, that the Church of Cognizance did not conduct any mission work, and hence did not profess any deep spiritual values!

This last observation clarifies how important it is for us to be able to articulate our spiritual values, what we are all about, to ourselves and to others. And in order to articulate our spiritual values, all Zarathushtis need to be together, united, speaking with one voice:

“WE HAVE A MESSAGE. WE WANT TO BE HEARD, AND WE ARE ON A MISSION TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE TO LIVE IN.”

God bless our lands, our religion, FEZANA, our mobeds, and all of us!