

Asha Vahishta Seminar II #8: Synopsis

The 8th session of AVSS (Phase II) was volatile in its discussion. All participants exchanged impassioned views regarding their opinions regarding the interpretation of Sanjan Landing. Had it been a salvation for Daena Mazdayasni, or was there a more nuanced description?

Within groups (tables), the participants interrogated each-other about the lore and realities of Sanjan. The session was especially thought provoking and involved, building upon the previous seven meetings (AVSS sessions) which had provided perspectives regarding faith/fellowship growth and sustainability. With this in mind, and as a comparison to draw upon, participants found that their re-construction of Sanjan Landing may have changed. That is to say, their opinions regarding the salvation that Sanjan was for Daena Mazdayasni, were adjusted and altered.

Reconvening after table-group discussion, the participants brain-stormed their ideas. A chart was set up to critique two narratives: Sanjan landed was freedom and liberation; those left in Iran succumbed to oppression and loss/alteration of their faith. After compilation of the list was complete, it was found that there may have been a lack of awareness of things which 'Freedom' created, as opposed to 'Oppression'.

'Freedom' meant, the liberty to slowly transform faith/fellowship from a cosmopolitan and joyful expression, into a xenophobic and fearful introversion. 'Freedom' provided for the elevation of single sources of authority (text/persons), a superiority complex vis-à-vis the Indian population, a promotion of 'orthodoxy' (as in a singular, mandated, and right belief), and a stagnation of development in faith/fellowship. Post-British encounter, 'freedom', further altered Daena Mazdayasni, through its interpretation as a 'protestant' tradition (enabled and justified solely by text), adjudicated over by jurists/academics in a critical analysis of text, valued above emotional wisdom. Religion moved increasingly to the site of temples, and religion became something to be related to (rather than something naturally felt).

By contrast, 'oppression' created introspection, reflection, and adaptation. Development of faith/fellowship was a necessity, and so faith/fellowship remained relevant to context of time-location-society. Integration of Zoroastrians among the non-Zoroastrian population was only an issue of secular/legal constraints, not a self-segregation. 'Oppression' prompted a continuous re-discovery of faith/fellowship in each generation. Religion remained a lived faith, centred in villages, not in temples. Folk elements of fellowship caused religion to retain an 'earthy' substance, avoiding dogmatism and a religion of elites (or elite interpretation).

The final thoughts of the session related to contemporary diasporic Parsi issues of faith/fellowship. Clearly, 'freedom' allowed the central festival and core message of faith (Nowruz, 'Jamshedi') to become neglected, obscured, under-appreciated, and forgotten. If anything, faith/fellowship become a constant remembrance of 'death', allowing faith to generally become a passive, quiet expression. This, opposed to conditions of 'oppression' which ensured that Nowruz, although commemorating the departed, was like faith in general, a celebration of life.

A damning question was put forward:

'Is there any comparable case where a religious group has forgotten or denied the significance of their most important festival/celebration?' Can you imagine a Christian that did not know the meaning, or celebrate, Christmas/Easter? Can you imagine a Hindu who did not know about Diwali? Perhaps when we wonder out loud, about where are the youth and what can be done to save our faith, we should reflect on the above. The answer does not lie in piecemeal attempts to address single issues, but an overall rejuvenation of faith/fellowship. That requires an awareness of mission-statement and operating-system, mandated by a vision document.