

Religious Role in Encouraging Social Justice and Environmentalism; A Case Study of Canadian Zoroastrians

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Publication History:

Received: December 10, 2023

Revised: December 19, 2023

Accepted: December 25, 2023

Published Online: February 01, 2024

Keywords:

Prophet Zarathustra,
Mahsa Amini,
Woman, Life and Freedom,
Zoroastrian Association of Quebec,
Canadian Human Rights Act,
Avesta,

Research related to Academic Areas:

Iranian Studies, Iranian Religions,
Ethnography, Social Studies,

Acknowledgment:

This is a sole academic project of the author.

Ethical Consideration:

This study has no aim to hurt any ideological or social segment but is purely based on academic purposes.

Abstract

Like many other religions across the globe, Zoroastrianism also encourages social justice and environmental protection. However, within the global demographics of Zoroastrian community, Canadian Zoroastrians have been at the forefront of promoting social justice and environmentalism, both in Canada and globally. As a small but highly active community, they have taken on a leadership role in advocating for these causes, drawing on the core values of their ancient religion. Zoroastrianism emphasizes the importance of good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, and this philosophy has been reflected in the community's commitment to promoting social justice and environmental sustainability. This study investigates that since the settlement of Zoroastrians from Iran and India to Canada, Canadian Zoroastrians have been involved in a range of initiatives aimed at advancing social justice, including advocating for human rights, supporting refugees and newcomers, and working to end poverty and hunger as their religious obligation. They have also been active in promoting environmental sustainability, working to reduce carbon emissions and protect natural resources. Through their involvement in various organizations and initiatives, Canadian Zoroastrians have been able to make a meaningful impact, both locally and globally. Moreover, this study also looks at how Canadian Zoroastrians are demonstrating a deep commitment to social justice and environmentalism, rooted in the core values of their religion. Their efforts have made a significant impact, not only in Canada but across the globe, and serve as an inspiration to others to take action to create a better world for all.

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Introduction

Zoroastrians are followers of the ancient Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism, which dates back to the 6th century BCE. Zoroastrians believe in the worship of one God, Ahura Mazda, and follow the teachings of the prophet Zarathustra. Over the centuries, Zoroastrians have faced persecution and discrimination in many parts of the world, including Iran and other Muslim-majority countries (Foltz, 2009).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Zoroastrians from Iran and India migrated to Canada, seeking economic opportunities and a better life. The first known Zoroastrian to settle in Canada was Maneckji Limji Hataria, who arrived in Vancouver in 1906. By the 1920s, there were several dozen Zoroastrians living in Canada, mainly in Vancouver and Toronto. In the following decades, the Zoroastrian community in Canada grew slowly but steadily, as more immigrants arrived from Iran, India, and other countries. In 1977, the first Zoroastrian Fire Temple in North America was established in Toronto, and it remains a central gathering place for the community to this day. Despite their small numbers, Zoroastrians in Canada have made significant contributions to the country's cultural, economic, and social fabric. Many have become successful entrepreneurs, professionals, and community leaders. They have also played an active role in promoting interfaith dialogue and understanding, and in preserving and promoting their ancient faith and traditions (Foltz, 2009).

Today, it is estimated that there are several thousand Zoroastrians living in Canada, with the largest communities in Toronto and Vancouver. The community is still relatively small and close-knit, but continues to thrive and make valuable contributions to Canadian society (Foltz, 2009). This study looks whether Canadian Zoroastrians visit Iran for their occasional or annual rituals when Iran is experiencing Islamic regime while, many of Canadian Zoroastrians have been involved in anti-regime protests (specifically after the sudden death of Mahsa Amini).

Canadian Zoroastrians' Visit to Iran

Although no one has stopped Canadian Zoroastrians for visiting Iran regarding occasional or annual rituals, however, they generally avoid to visit their homeland or religiously holy places due to various reasons such as distance, cost, and potential cultural or political barriers. Additionally, Iran has specific rules and restrictions for religious minorities, including Zoroastrians, that may make it difficult for them to practice their faith freely while visiting Iran. Therefore, Canadian Zoroastrians who do visit Iran for religious purposes may need to adhere to certain guidelines and regulations (Hudson, 2023).

On the other hand, neither Iranian government nor IRGC claims to impose barriers on Canadian Zoroastrians. Officially, Iran recognizes Zoroastrianism as one of the monitored religions, and Iran accommodates Zoroastrians in almost all the spheres of life. Zoroastrians are even allowed to contest elections and represent their community in National Assembly. However, like special privileges to Jews in Israel, Christians in United States, and Protestants in United Kingdom; Iran has also announced some key posts only for the followers of Twelver-Shia Islam. Otherwise, being a multicultural and cosmopolitan society, Islamic regime facilitates each recognized minority including Zoroastrians regarding performing rituals as per the defined laws (Asim, 2020).

General Perception of Canadian Zoroastrians about Iranian Islamic Regime

It is significant to note that Canadian Zoroastrians, like any other community, have diverse perspectives on the Iranian Islamic regime. Theoretically, each scholar of political and social sciences realize that the religion and politics are two separate spheres and do not necessarily dictate one's views on the other (Foltz, 2009).

That being said, a significant portion of Canadian Zoroastrians have concerns or criticisms about the Iranian government's treatment of religious minorities, including Zoroastrians. The Iranian regime has been known to restrict the religious practices of non-Muslims, including Zoroastrians, and this may cause

unease or dissatisfaction among the Zoroastrian community both in Iran and abroad. However, other portion of Canadian Zoroastrians have strong opinions regarding favoring Iranian regime in a context that “politics must be different from religious practices and beliefs”. They believe that Iranian government is fully authorize to counter anti-state activities, and no one religious community settling abroad must not be a part of any foreign funded project against its homeland (Foltz, 2009).

They also believe that Canadian Zoroastrians must not be a part of anti-regime protests in Canada. The sadden death of Mahsa Amini is an internal affairs of Iran while, Iranian authorities have justify their stance when they shared the videos of Kurd separatists in many cities of Iranian Kurdistan raising the slogans of sovereign “Eastern Kurdistan”. They also argue that Canadian Zoroastrians must support Iranian government when anti-Iran ambitions have been exposed behind the protests entitled “Zan, Zindgi, Azadi” (Woman, Life and Freedom) (Iran-International, 2023).

Canada-Iran Cultural Exchange Agreements; Implications on Canadian Zoroastrians

There have been some cultural exchange programs between Iran and Canada, including events related to the Zoroastrian community, but they are not directly proportional to the facilitation of Canadian Zoroastrians in Iran. The relationship between Iran and Canada has been strained in recent years, and there have been limitations on diplomatic and cultural exchange between the two countries. However, the Canadian government has expressed interest in improving relations with Iran and reopening diplomatic channels, which could lead to greater cultural exchange programs in the future (Canadian-Government, 2023).

Zoroastrian Fire Temples in Canada

There are several fire temples of Zoroastrians in Canada, including;

- **Zoroastrian Society of Ontario Fire Temple:** Located in Thornhill, Ontario, this fire temple was established in 1972 and serves the Zoroastrian community in the Greater Toronto Area (Reddit, 2019).
- **Zoroastrian Society of British Columbia Fire Temple:** Located in Burnaby, British Columbia, this fire temple was established in 1986 and serves the Zoroastrian community in the Greater Vancouver Area (Reddit, 2019).
- **Zoroastrian Association of Quebec Fire Temple:** Located in Montreal, Quebec, this fire temple was established in 1983 and serves the Zoroastrian community in the province of Quebec (Reddit, 2019).

These fire temples are significant places of worship for Canadian Zoroastrians, and are used for various religious ceremonies and rituals. They also serve as community centers where members of the Zoroastrian community can gather for social and cultural events (Reddit, 2019).

1) History and Objective of the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario (ZSO)

The Zoroastrian Society of Ontario (ZSO) is a non-profit organization that represents the Zoroastrian community in the Canadian province of Ontario. The ZSO was established in 1979 and

has been working towards promoting the cultural, social, and religious activities of the Zoroastrian community in Ontario (ZSO, 2023).

The primary objectives of the ZSO include preserving and promoting the Zoroastrian religion and culture, providing educational and cultural programs for the Zoroastrian community, and facilitating the integration of Zoroastrians into Canadian society. The society also works to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding with other religious and cultural groups in Ontario (ZSO, 2023).

In addition to organizing religious and cultural events, the ZSO also runs a community center in Toronto, which serves as a hub for Zoroastrian activities and events. The center includes a temple, library, and other facilities for community gatherings and events (ZSO, 2023).

At the same time, the ZSO plays an important role in promoting and preserving the Zoroastrian religion and culture in Canada, and in helping the Zoroastrian community integrate into Canadian society while maintaining its unique identity (ZSO, 2023).

2) History and Objectives of the Zoroastrian Society of British Columbia (ZSBC)

The Zoroastrian Society of British Columbia (ZSBC) is a non-profit organization established in 1982 to represent the Zoroastrian community in British Columbia, Canada. Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion that originated in Persia (modern-day Iran) and is one of the oldest monotheistic religions in the world (ZSBC, 2023).

The ZSBC was founded to promote the religious, social, and cultural welfare of the Zoroastrian community in British Columbia. The society's main objectives include:

- To preserve and promote the Zoroastrian religion, culture, and heritage (ZSBC, 2023).
- To provide a platform for members of the Zoroastrian community to come together and celebrate religious and cultural events (ZSBC, 2023).
- To foster a sense of community and togetherness among Zoroastrians living in British Columbia (ZSBC, 2023).
- To provide support and assistance to new immigrants from Zoroastrian backgrounds (ZSBC, 2023).
- To promote interfaith and intercultural understanding and cooperation (ZSBC, 2023).

Generally, the ZSBC has organized numerous events and activities to achieve its objectives. These include religious ceremonies, cultural events, educational programs, and social gatherings. The society has also been involved in charitable work, raising funds for various causes and donating to organizations that support the less fortunate (ZSBC, 2023).

The ZSBC has been successful in promoting and preserving the Zoroastrian heritage in British Columbia. It has also helped to create a strong sense of community among Zoroastrians living in the province. The society has played an important role in promoting interfaith and intercultural understanding and has contributed to the cultural diversity of British Columbia (ZSBC, 2023).

3) History and Objectives of Zoroastrian Association of Quebec (ZAQ)

The Zoroastrian Association of Quebec is a non-profit organization based in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. It was established in 1979 to promote the welfare of Zoroastrians and to advance their religion, culture, and education (ZAQ, 2023). The objectives of the association include:

- To provide a platform for the Zoroastrian community to come together, celebrate their festivals and events, and foster a sense of community (ZAQ, 2023).
- To provide religious services and rituals for the Zoroastrian community in Quebec (ZAQ, 2023).
- To promote education about Zoroastrianism and its culture, both within the Zoroastrian community and in the wider community (ZAQ, 2023).
- To promote social and cultural activities that preserve and enhance Zoroastrian heritage (ZAQ, 2023).
- To foster understanding and cooperation between the Zoroastrian community and other religious and cultural communities in Quebec (ZAQ, 2023).

The Zoroastrian Association of Quebec is affiliated with the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA) and the World Zoroastrian Organization (WZO). It maintains close ties with other Zoroastrian associations in Canada and around the world, and works closely with them to promote the objectives of the association (ZAQ, 2023).

Religious Freedom Index for Canadian Zoroastrians in Canada

By analyzing various religious freedom indexes, it has been examined that the Zoroastrians in Canada are free to practice their religion. Canada is known for its strong commitment to religious freedom and tolerance, as enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Zoroastrians are recognized as a religious minority in Canada, and they have the right to establish their places of worship, conduct their religious ceremonies and practices, and educate their community members about their faith. In addition, the Canadian government and civil society organizations have taken steps to promote the cultural and religious diversity of the country and to protect the rights of religious minorities. For example, the Office of Religious Freedom, established in 2013, promotes and protects religious freedom and promotes interfaith dialogue and cooperation (US-Government, 2022).

Significant Constitutional and Political Privileges for Zoroastrians in Canada

In Canada, freedom of religion is a fundamental right protected by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This means that individuals have the right to practice their religion without interference or discrimination (Laws-Lois, 2023).

Additionally, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act recognizes the rights of individuals to maintain and share their cultural heritage and encourages the preservation and enhancement of cultural diversity. The Act also prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion or ethnicity (Laws-Lois, 2023).

Furthermore, the Canadian Human Rights Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion in areas such as employment, housing, and services provided by the government (Laws-Lois, 2023).

These legal protections ensure that Zoroastrians in Canada are free to practice their religion without fear of discrimination or persecution. Zoroastrian communities are free to establish places of worship, practice their religious rituals, and maintain their cultural traditions (Laws-Lois, 2023).

Political Contribution of Zoroastrians in Canadian Mainstream Politics

Zoroastrians have made notable contributions to Canadian society, including in the political sphere. However, due to their small population size, their representation in Canadian politics has been limited.

One notable example of a Zoroastrian involved in Canadian politics is Yasmin Ratansi¹, who served as a Member of Parliament in the Canadian House of Commons from 2004 to 2020. Ratansi, who is of Parsi descent, was the first converted-Muslim woman elected to the Canadian Parliament (Burke, 2021).

Other Zoroastrians have also been involved in Canadian politics at various levels, including as candidates in federal and provincial elections. However, given their small numbers in Canada, their political influence is limited (Burke, 2021).

Role of Canadian Zoroastrians in Promotion of Social Justice and Environmentalism

Canadian Zoroastrians have actively participated in promoting social justice and environmentalism. One of the core principles of the Zoroastrian faith is to be a good steward of the Earth and its resources. Therefore, many Canadian Zoroastrians have taken up environmental causes and have advocated for policies to mitigate climate change and protect natural habitats (Hinnells, 2005).

In terms of social justice, Zoroastrianism teaches the values of equality, justice, and compassion for all. Canadian Zoroastrians have been involved in various initiatives to promote human rights, eliminate discrimination, and support marginalized communities. They have also actively participated in charities and organizations that provide support for vulnerable populations, such as refugees and the homeless (Hinnells, 2005).

As a community, Canadian Zoroastrians have also worked to promote interfaith dialogue and understanding. They have participated in events and initiatives that bring together people of different faiths to promote mutual respect and understanding. Additionally, they have been involved in efforts to preserve and promote cultural heritage and diversity, particularly through initiatives that celebrate the rich history and traditions of the Zoroastrian community (Hinnells, 2005).

Moreover, Canadian Zoroastrians also consider that their religion binds them for working regarding social justice and environmentalism. Hence, this is their religious obligation for ensuring both essentialisms not

¹ Yasmin Ratansi is a Canadian politician and a member of the Liberal Party of Canada. She was born on July 4, 1949, in Tanzania and her family migrated to Canada in 1975. Ratansi started her political career in 1988 when she was elected as a Toronto School Trustee. She later served as a Toronto City Councilor from 1991 to 2004 (Hinnells, 2005). In 2004, Ratansi was first elected to the Canadian House of Commons as a Member of Parliament (MP) representing the electoral district of Don Valley East. She was re-elected in 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2019 federal elections (Hinnells, 2005).

During her political career, Ratansi has held various positions, including Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Labor, and Chair of the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates. She has also been an advocate for human rights, gender equality, and multiculturalism (Hinnells, 2005).

As a Zoroastrian, Ratansi has been a prominent representative of the Zoroastrian community in Canadian politics. She has been a vocal advocate for interfaith dialogue and has worked to promote the values of the Zoroastrian religion, including the importance of social justice and environmentalism (Hinnells, 2005).

In November 2020, Ratansi resigned from the Liberal Party caucus due to allegations of financial impropriety. However, she continues to serve as an Independent MP for Don Valley East (Hinnells, 2005).

only in their locality but globally. According to Zoroastrian religious scholars, the holy book, Avesta, contains teachings on the importance of caring for the environment and promoting social welfare, such as;

One of the central tenets of Zoroastrianism is the concept of "Asha", which refers to the cosmic order and truth that underpins the universe. Zoroastrians believe that humans have a responsibility to uphold this order by living in harmony with nature and with one another (ARC, 2023).

The Avesta contains a number of passages that emphasize the importance of environmental stewardship. For example, the Vendidad, a section of the Avesta, outlines a code of ethics for environmental protection and sustainability. It includes instructions for preserving the purity of water and soil, and guidelines for treating animals with respect and kindness (ARC, 2023).

Similarly, the Avesta contains teachings on social justice and human rights. The religion emphasizes the importance of treating all people with dignity and respect, regardless of their social status or background. The Avesta contains passages that condemn discrimination and oppression, and that call for individuals to act with compassion and generosity towards others (ARC, 2023).

In fact, Zoroastrianism places a strong emphasis on the importance of social justice and environmentalism, and these values are reflected in the religion's holy book, the Avesta (ARC, 2023).

Role of ZSO, ZSBC and ZAQ in Working for Social Justice and Environmentalism

ZSO, ZSBC and ZAQ have also been involved in various initiatives aimed at promoting social justice and environmentalism.

The ZAQ has undertaken several community-based projects focused on promoting social justice, including organizing charity events, supporting local food banks, and participating in initiatives aimed at alleviating poverty. In addition, the organization has also been involved in various environmental initiatives, such as promoting eco-friendly practices and reducing carbon footprints (ZAQ, 2023).

Similarly, the ZSO is also actively involved in promoting social justice and environmentalism. The organization has organized fundraising events to support various charitable causes, including disaster relief efforts, and has worked with local authorities to promote eco-friendly initiatives. The ZSO has also been involved in initiatives aimed at raising awareness about climate change and promoting sustainable practices (ZSO, 2023).

At the same time, ZSBC has also been involved in promoting interfaith dialogue and cooperation. It has been participated in interfaith conferences and events aimed at fostering greater understanding and cooperation between different religious communities in Canada. It has also been involved in various interfaith initiatives, such as participating in community service events organized by other religious groups (ZSBC, 2023).

Conclusion

Since the settlement of Zoroastrians from Iran to Canada, Canadian Zoroastrians have been actively involved in promoting social justice and environmentalism. By examining their socio-political and

economic activities within the Canada and across the globe, it has been assessed that Canadian Zoroastrians have been committed for;

Respect for nature: Zoroastrians believe that nature is a divine creation, and they have a responsibility to protect and preserve it. Canadian Zoroastrians have actively promoted the idea of environmental conservation and have participated in initiatives to protect the environment (Kapadia, 2015).

Commitment to social justice: Zoroastrianism teaches the importance of social justice and equality. Canadian Zoroastrians have been involved in various social justice initiatives, including advocating for the rights of marginalized groups and supporting initiatives aimed at reducing inequality (Kapadia, 2015).

Community involvement: Zoroastrianism emphasizes the importance of community involvement and service. Canadian Zoroastrians have been active in various community-based initiatives, including volunteering, fundraising, and supporting local charities (Kapadia, 2015).

Interfaith collaboration: Zoroastrianism encourages dialogue and collaboration with people of other faiths. Canadian Zoroastrians have participated in interfaith events and have collaborated with other religious communities in promoting social justice and environmentalism (Kapadia, 2015).

Hence it has been concluded that Canadian Zoroastrians have shown a commitment to promoting social justice and environmentalism, guided by the teachings of their faith.

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