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**SILVER JUBILEE:** From left, Nilufer Mama, Yezdi Antia, Jahangir Behboodi and Dr. Dhun Noria reflect the different cultural strains of Zoroastrians on their 25th anniversary in Ontario.

# Followers of ancient faith adapt to adopted cultures

By RAHEEL RAZA  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Those who don't know much about their religion call them "fire worshippers," and by inference, hot-headed. But history shows Zoroastrians to be a peace-loving and mild people.

There are widespread misconceptions about Zoroastrians because it is an ancient religion, says Ervad Yezdi Antia, a retired civil engineer and volunteer priest at Darbe Mehar (house of mercy), the Zoroastrian temple on Bayview Ave.

"We don't worship fire but recognize it as a powerful natural element like earth and water," he says. "It signifies purity and is therefore venerated. All our religious rituals are solemnized in the presence of fire."

Despite years of persecution that forced them to uproot from present-day Iran, Zoroastrians did not take up arms.

"The basic tenets of Zoroastrianism are that one should develop intellect and wisdom to lead a life of righteousness based on Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds," Antia says. "Thus, in essence, is the three-fold path at the centre of the faith."

The Zoroastrian community of approximately 100,000

language of the scripture, adds Antia, who has written but not yet published a paper on his community.

Zoroastrianism flourished in ancient Persia (now Iran) until the Arab invasion in 641 A.D. Then, some Zoroastrians were forced to convert to Islam, while others fled to the mountains. Around 785 A.D. a small group fled by boat to Gujerat on India's west coast, Antia writes.

The King of Gujerat received them warmly, allowing them to settle with freedom to worship, provided they adhered to five conditions: surrender of all arms, adoption of local dress, adoption of local language, performance of wedding ceremonies after sunset and an explanation of the religion to the ruler.

## 'Coming to Canada has minimized differences'

The Zoroastrians who settled in India are called Parsees (from the province of Pars in Iran). They assimilated in India and spread out toward Bombay for trade and commerce. With

in 1925, the Zarathoshtis were no longer persecuted and emerged as successful bankers, administrators and industrialists, playing an important role in the modernization of Iran.

Dr. Dhun Noria, head of laboratories at Scarborough Grace Hospital and a specialist in surgical pathology, is a Parsee from India and clarifies that differences among Zoroastrians are minor and purely cultural.

"Our scriptures are the same, and we believe in one Prophet," explains Noria. But there are some major cultural variations.

"In our marriage customs, we have incorporated Hindu traditions. We also draw chalk markings on our front door (a sign of good omen). We speak Gujerati fluently and have adapted the Gujerati style of wearing a sari."

On yet another cultural sphere is Jahangir Behboodi, a Zarathoshti from Iran.

"The language for Zoroastrians from Iran is Persian," Behboodi says. "Those who moved away from the base, which was in Iran, lost some of the original philosophy and took on cultural rituals" of their adopted countries.

"(All) Zoroastrians follow a solar calendar and celebrate the first minute, first hour of the

before the new year) is exclusive to subcontinent Parsees," explains Nilufer Mama, who is from Pakistan. My ancestors moved from Gujerat to what is now Pakistan, so our way of life is influenced by Muslim language, culture and traditions. Most Parsees from Pakistan speak fluent Urdu as well as Gujerati, and in our dress and food, we show a heavy Muslim influence.

"Coming to Canada has minimized differences between Zoroastrians and brought us all together in this wonderful country we call home," she says.

Despite their cultural affiliation with three separate homelands (Iran, India and Pakistan), Zoroastrians have been able to assimilate into Canadian society. Many of the approximately 5,000 in Ontario are philanthropists and social workers.

Noria, Behboodi and Mama have been in Canada for more than a decade, and are members of the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario, which celebrates 25 years of inception this month with festivities that culminated in a dinner and raffle last night.

Society founder and first president Minoo Treasurywala, who came to Canada in 1965, recalls the early days.