

An Introductory Analysis of Prayers

—Zoroastrian Parsis Prayers in Navsari, Gujarat, India(1)—

The purpose of this paper is to clarify coherence and modification of religious meanings in terms of prayer. The materials for our study are traditionally prescribed private prayers of existing Zoroastrian Parsis in Navsari in India.

Our careful and comprehensive literature review does not show us in the concrete to what extent Zoroastrian Parsis understand the meanings of such old prayers or to what extent these important prayers influence their thought and behavior in their everyday life. Nor does it show us specifically whether or not there have been some modification or changes in their meanings.

But our intensive research on existing Zoroastrian Parsi prayers showed that the literal meanings of Zoroastrian oldest and most important prayers are not understood or maintained by Parsis in Navsari. In this sense, their Avestan prayers are *manthric* recitation in expectation of some effective power or influence. The main reasons for it were described in the conclusion of this paper.

Key Words Zoroastrian Parsis, Prayer, religious meanings, religious education,

I Introduction —Problem and Purpose—

II Methods

1 Literature Review

2 Research

III Results

IV Discussion

V Conclusions

VI Suggestions for further studies

Footnotes

References

I Introduction

1 Problem

The purpose of this paper is to clarify coherence and modification of religious meanings in terms of prayer.

The materials for our study are prayers of Zoroastrian Parsis living in Navsari of Gujarat State in the northwestern coast of India. The founders of Parsi community came down to the shores of southern Gujarat around 936 and later in about the middle

of 13th century they began to move away towards the northern part of Gujarat to settle down. Since then Parsis have followed their Zoroastrian belief and custom.

2 Purpose

2.1 Significance

This study is to be done because there have been very few research results showed regarding private prayers in existing Zoroastrians. Our study's main findings will help us to understand one of the most important religious practices or activities. The results of this study will be used to test religio-sociological theories about the origin, functions and effects of religious behavior.

2.2 Scope and Delimitation

Our study is not concerned with such non-verbal and collective prayers as sacrifices, dances, and religious practices, but only with traditionally prescribed private prayers of existing Zoroastrian Parsis in Navsari, Gujarat state in India.

II Methods

1 Questions

In order to clarify coherence and modification of religious meanings in terms of prayers of Zoroastrian Parsis, three questions about Zoroastrian prayers will be discussed first: the basic questions here are,

(1) Question 1

What prayers are regarded as most important and are said most frequently?

(2) Question 2

On what occasions are the most important prayers said?

(3) Question 3

For what are the most important prayers said on such occasions?

2 Methods to discuss the questions

Two methods are introduced to discuss three basic questions above.

2.1 Literature Review

Zoroastrian prayers are mainly concerned with two foundations: belief in that transcendent and personal nature of Ahura Mazda which is revealed in Avesta as Creator of the World, and acceptance of the inner relation of Ahura Mazda and man. As in other religions in the world, petition, invocation, adoration, thanksgiving, penitence are directed to Ahura Mazda in Zoroastrian prayers today. (Boyce, M. 1984; Boyd, J.W. and Kotwal, F.M.1982; Dhabhar, B.N.1963; Modi, J.J.1922; Kotwal, F.M. and Boyd, J.W.1991)

2.1.1 Literature Review of Question 1

Traditionally prescribed private prayers of existing Zoroastrian Parsis in Navsari are composed of compulsory daily prayers(*nani Farziad*) and optional ones(*moti Farziad*). Among the compulsory prayers, *ahunavar*, *ashem vohu* and *yenghe hatam* are believed to be most important. (Dhabhar, B.N.1963)

2.1.2 Literature Review of Question 2

(1)*ahunavar* or *yatha ahu vairyo* are to be said on the following occasions.

- 1 when starting on a journey
- 2 when going out for business
- 3 when leaving my house for ordinary daily work
- 4 when entering the house on return from business
- 5 when starting a new work
- 6 when crossing a river
- 7 on missing the road
- 8 on entering a new village or city
- 9 when blessing somebody
- 10 on the occasion of repentance for sins
- 11 when in some difficulty of money
- 12 when fallen ill and weak
- 13 when in some trouble with somebody else
- 14 when someone is dead

(2)The occasions on which Zoroastrian Parsis pray *ashem vohu* are as follows.

- 1 when someone is dead
- 2 when starting on a journey
- 3 when going out for business
- 4 when leaving my house for ordinary daily work
- 5 when entering the house on return from business
- 6 when starting a new work
- 7 when crossing a river
- 8 on missing the road
- 9 on entering a new village or city
- 10 when blessing somebody
- 11 on the occasion of repentance for sins
- 12 when in some difficulty of money
- 13 when fallen ill and weak
- 14 when in some trouble with somebody else

2.1.3 Literature Review of Question 3

The literal meanings of the most sacred prayers in the Zoroastrian faith are

described as below.

(1) *ahunavar*

“As Ahura Mazda is the Sovereign Lord, so is Zarathushtra the spiritual lord due to his righteousness. The gifts of the Good Mind are for those who work for Mazda, the lord of Wisdom. He who nourishes the poor ascribes sovereignty to Ahura Mazda.”

(Boyce, M. 1984; Dhabhar, B.N.1963; Modi, J.J.1922; Kotwal, F.M. and Boyd, J.W.1991)

(2) *ashem vohu*

“*Asha* (is)good, it is best. According to wish it is, according to wish it shall be for us. *Asha*[righteousness]belongs to the Best *Asha*[Best Righteousness].” (Boyce, M. 1984; Dhabhar, B.N.1963; Modi, J.J.1922; Kotwal, F.M. and Boyd, J.W.1991)

(3) *yenghe hatam*

“Ahura Mazda knows who among the living is the best in prayer through righteousness. We praise them (those recognized as above by Ahura Mazda)whether male or female.”

“He who is pre-eminently good among the existing ones in offering to the male and female spirit beings is recognized and rewarded by Ahura Mazda on account of his righteousness.” (Boyce, M. 1984; Dhabhar, B.N.1963; Modi, J.J.1922; Kotwal, F.M. and Boyd, J.W.1991)

2.1.4 Results

Zoroastrian Parsis teach their children *ahunavar* first. Almost all prayers include *ahunavar* once or more than once. 21 words of *ahunavar* are said to correspond to the 21 collections of writings (*nasks*) of Zoroastrian scriptures. *ahunavar* is so important a prayer that it can be recited in the place of other Zoroastrian prayers.

ashem vohu is second to *ahunavar* in importance. It should be taught to Zoroastrian children after *ahunavar*. *ashem vohu* is said in praise of *asha* which means 'order, harmony, system, law and righteousness.' If *ashem vohu* is recited on particular occasions such as 'while at meals, going to bed, getting up from the bed and at the time of somebody's death, ' it is believed to have greater advantages than it does at other ordinary times.

yenghe hatam is the third greatest prayer and it is included in almost all Zoroastrian prayers as *ahunavar*. *yenghe hatam* is recited in the praise of the pure in conduct in conformity with *asha*.

2.1.5 Discussion

When Zoroastrian Parsis pray, they have to first wash their hands, face and feet three times (*padyab*)while reciting Avestan prayers(*khshnaothra ahurahe mazdao* and *ashem vohu*). Then they must go on to ritually untie and retie their sacred cord(*kusti*)which all the Zoroastrian Parsis should always wear around their waists.

The occasions on which Zoroastrian Parsis do *kusti* are :

- 1 When getting up in the morning
- 2 after going to the bathroom
- 3 after taking a bath
- 4 before having a meal
- 5 at the time of prayers
- 6 every *Geh*
- 7 before going to bed

According to Zoroastrian religious teachings, Parsis say their prayers to praise Ahura Mazda, ask for his help and protection in all difficulties(*Yasht* XI 3-4), and to oppose *Ahriman's* or *druji's* evils(*Vendidad* XIX 9). The prayer declares righteousness and prosperity, dislodging Angra Mainyu and his evil creation of heretics, thieves, etc(*Yasna* 60-61).

2.1.6 Conclusions

Our literature review shows that *ahunavar*, *ashem vohu* and *yenghe hatam* are regarded as most important Zoroastrian prayers and it also shows what literal meanings these important prayers have. Some of the literature describe on what occasion these important prayers should be said.

But the literature does not show us in the concrete to what extent Zoroastrian Parsis understand the meanings of such old prayers or to what extent these important prayers influence their thought and behaviour in their everyday life. Nor does it show us specifically whether or not there have been some modification or changes in their meanings.

Religion is to be studied in terms of not only religious doctrines or rituals but also a socio-cultural integration view-point. Religion can exist in the form of socio-cultural integration. From this hypothetical point of view, an intensive research should be carried out to discover new facts about the above-mentioned issues.

2.2 Research

2.2.1 Problem

The purpose of this research is to analyze prayers of Zoroastrian Parsis in Navsari, Gujarat, India in terms of coherence and modification of religious meanings.

2.2.2 Subject

The subjects are Zoroastrian Parsis living in Navsari. Their ritually prescribed private prayers are materials for our study.

2.2.3 Research Design and Methodology

Three hypothetical questions will be discussed for the purpose of analyzing coherence and modification of religious meanings :

(1) Hypothetical Question 1

The religious meanings which have been believed to be most important in a community are put in an easy common language for the members to maintain their coherence down the ages.

(2) Hypothetical Question 2

The religious meanings which have not been believed to be most important in a community are modified to a greater degree.

(3) Hypothetical Question 3

The prayers which have been believed to have maintained most important religious meanings are concerned with as many aspects of their everyday life as possible in a community.

2.2.4 Research Procedures

The method to clarify coherence and modification of religious meanings is an individual interview research using a questionnaire of our own for two reasons ;

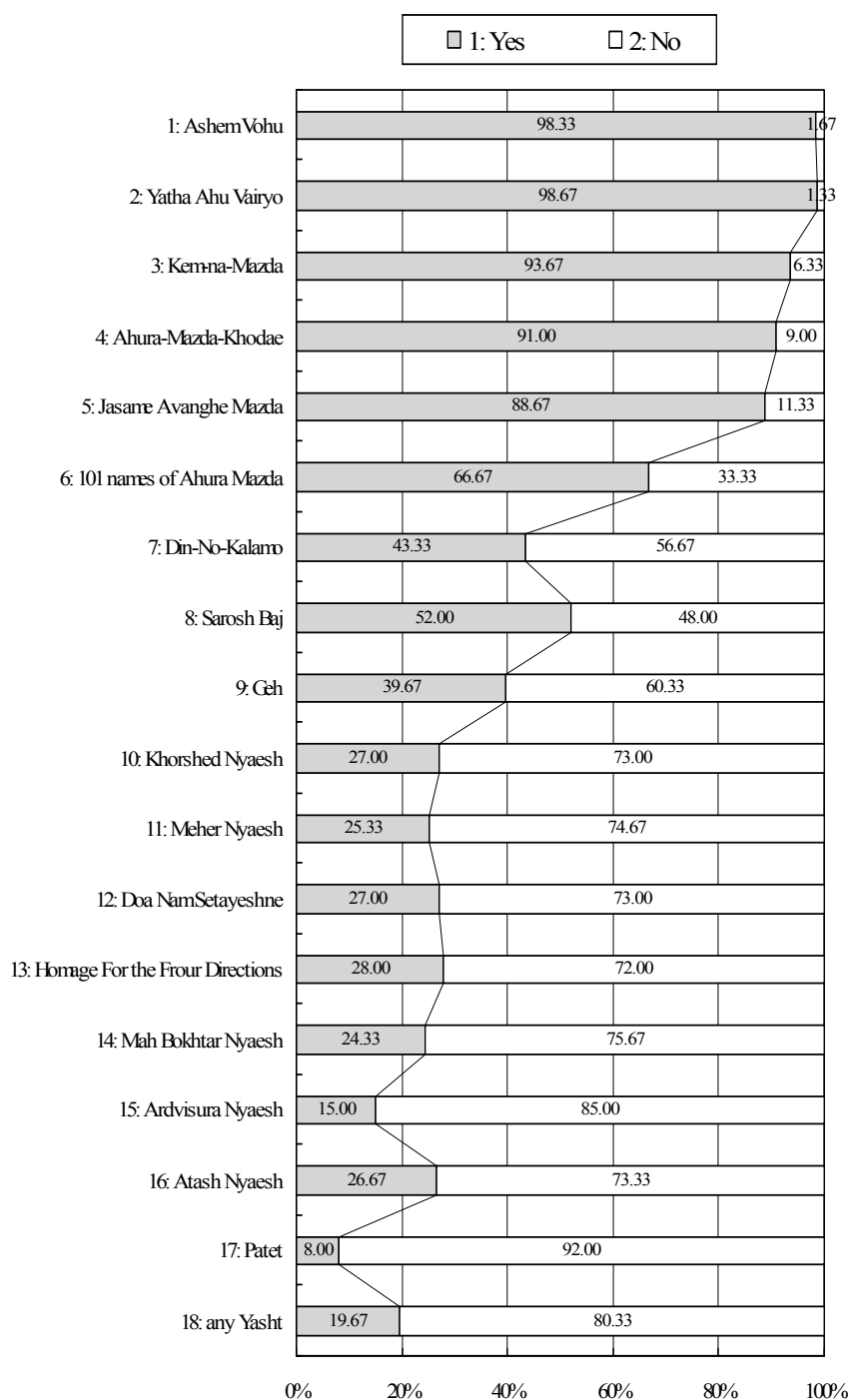
- (1) there is to be as much reliable data as possible needed for our purpose. 300 cases, which is one-tenth of the Zoroastrian Parsi population in Navsari, can be adequate for the raw materials for a tentative analysis of Zoroastrian prayers.
- (2) subjects should be kept from referring to some books or from asking somebody else for their answers.

The research covers the 300 representative samples as follows :

- (1) 150 cases are to be collected in Motafalia where *Mobeds* are living and another 150 in Lunsikui where *Behdins* live.
- (2) As good a balance as possible is kept not only between the age-groups of 12-19, 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60 and over but also between gender differences for a tentative analysis.
- (3) The questionnaire is written in Gujarati because it is Parsi mother tongue and very few misunderstandings of the questions are possible. This was proved through our pilot survey in the previous year.
- (4) The research period was from August 10 to September 15 in 2004.
- (5) Two sympathetic Parsis informants and the present author went and see a Parsi for an individual interview research using a questionnaire of our own.

2.2.5 Results

- (1) Daily prayers of high frequency are : See Q1: Prayers which you pray every day:



(2) To what extent are the meanings of these most sacred prayers understood by existing Zoroastrian Parsis? See Questionnaire Q3.

(2)-1 *ahunavar* (as stated above)

Age groups	12-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 and over	
No. of cases	2	3	0	3	3	10	7%

(2)-2 *ashem vohu* (as stated above)

Age groups	12-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 and over	
No. of cases	1	1	0	2	1	4	3%

(2)-3 *Kem-na-Mazda*

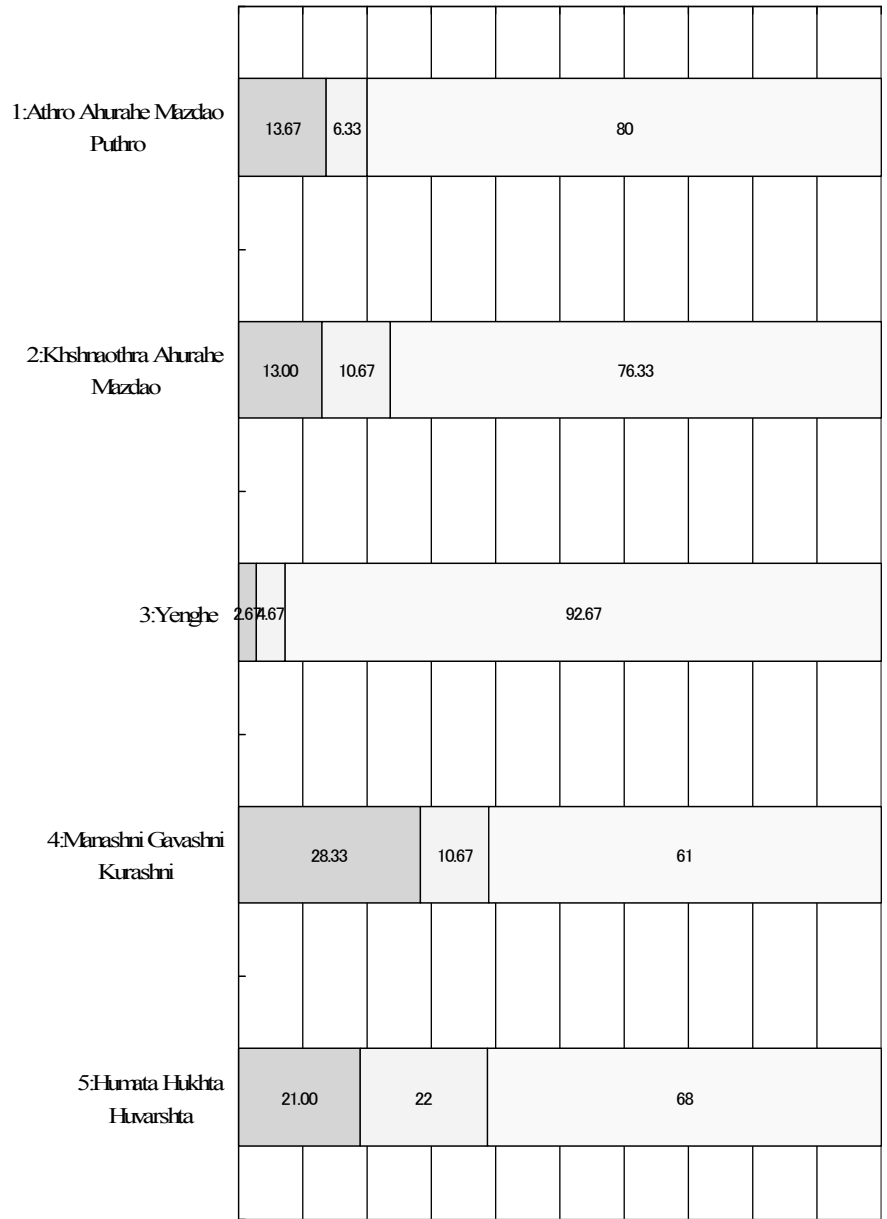
“Whom O Mazda have you appointed protector over me, when the evil-minded followers of falsehood threaten me with violence. Who other than your fire of good thoughts (will protect me)through the working of which your eternal law is fulfilled? O Ahura declare clearly to me this sacred doctrine for my inner self.”

Age groups	12-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 and over	
No. of cases	0	0	0	0	1	0	≡0%

(3)To what extent are the meanings of important words or phrases in the most sacred prayers understood by existing Zoroastrian Parsis? See Questionnaire Q4. and Footnotes

Q4 First, check the phrases you know. Second, give the brief meaning to each phrase you know.

<input type="checkbox"/> Checked with some descriptions
<input type="checkbox"/> Checked with no description
<input type="checkbox"/> Not checked

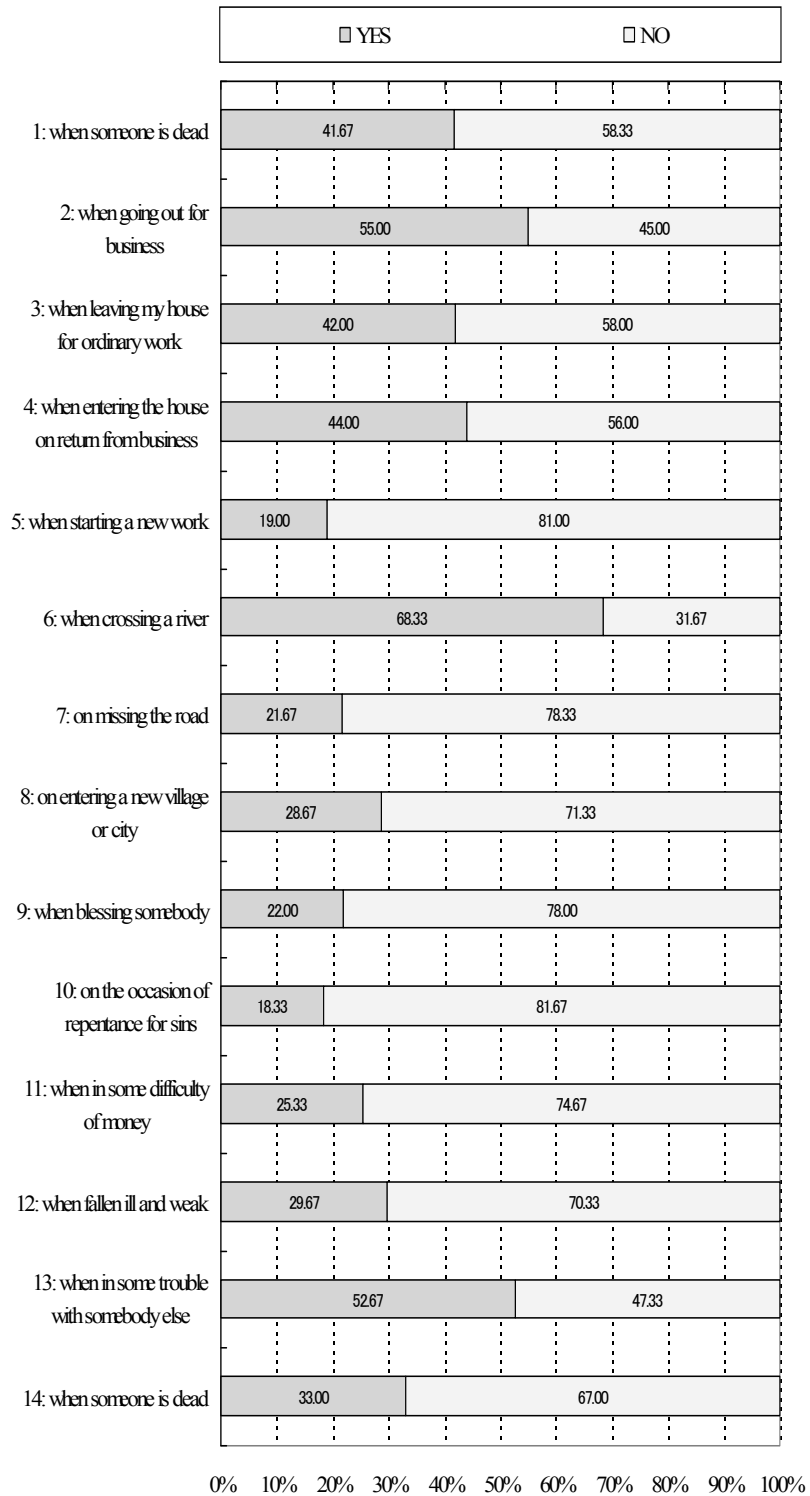


0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

(4) The occasions on which the most sacred prayers are said : See Questionnaire Q5 and Q6

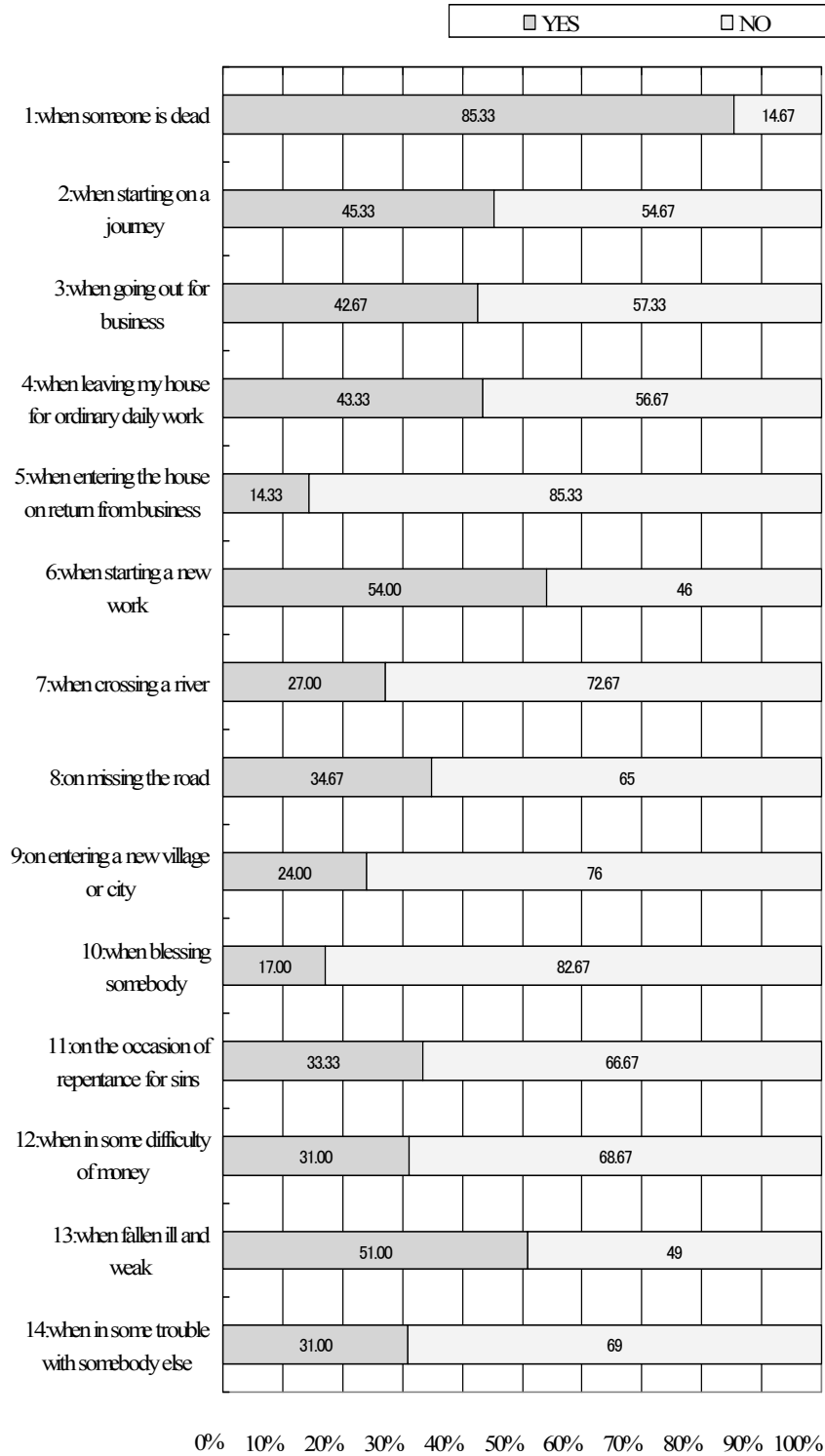
(4)-1 *ahunavar* or *Yatha Ahu Vairyo* are to be said on the following occasions.

Q6. Check the occasion on which you pray *Yatha Ahu Vairyo*.



(4)-2 The occasions on which Zoroastrian Parsis pray *ashem vohu* are as follows.

Q5 Check the occasions on which you pray Ashem Vohu



2.2.6 Discussion

The results show that Zoroastrian Parsis in Navsari pray *ahunavar*, *ashem vohu* and *Kem-na-Mazda* with greater frequency but without any knowledge of their literal meanings.

They can say by heart every word of these traditional important prayers but almost none of them knows the meanings of the prayers. These prayers are included in the prayer book (*Khordha Avesta*) which has been used by Zoroastrian Parsis in Navsari. *Khordha Avesta* is written in Gujarati in which every word of Avesta is transcribed into Gujarati instead of translating Avesta into Gujarati.

2.2.7 Conclusions

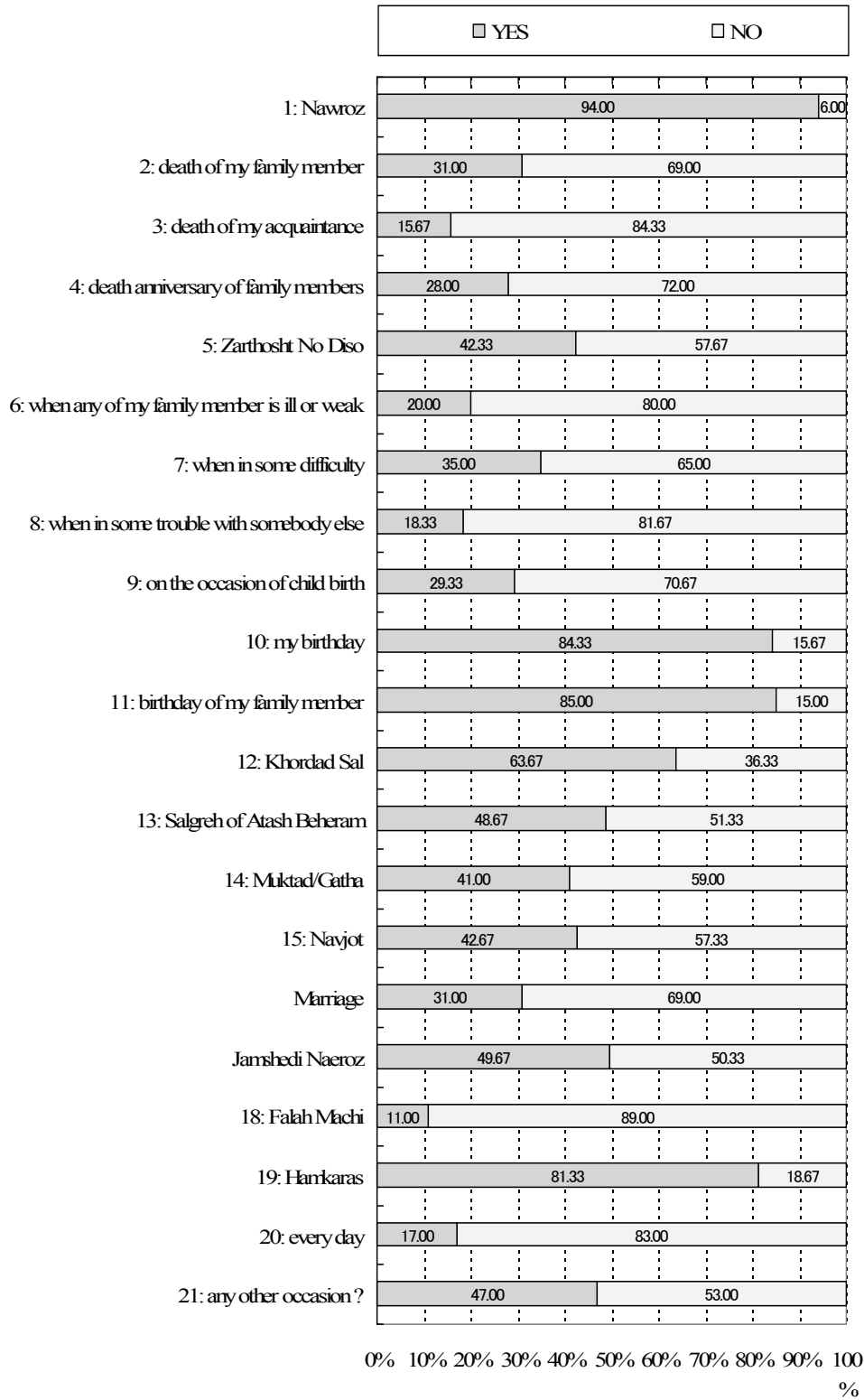
Though Parsis have been saying the prayers the meanings of which they do not know at all, they know to some extent for what to pray them or on what occasion to pray them.

As the following research results show, Parsis go and say prayers at *Atash Beheram* or *Agiary* where sacred fires of different degrees have been kept burning or on such occasions as confession and death ceremonies, etc.

See Questionnaire Q7 and Q8

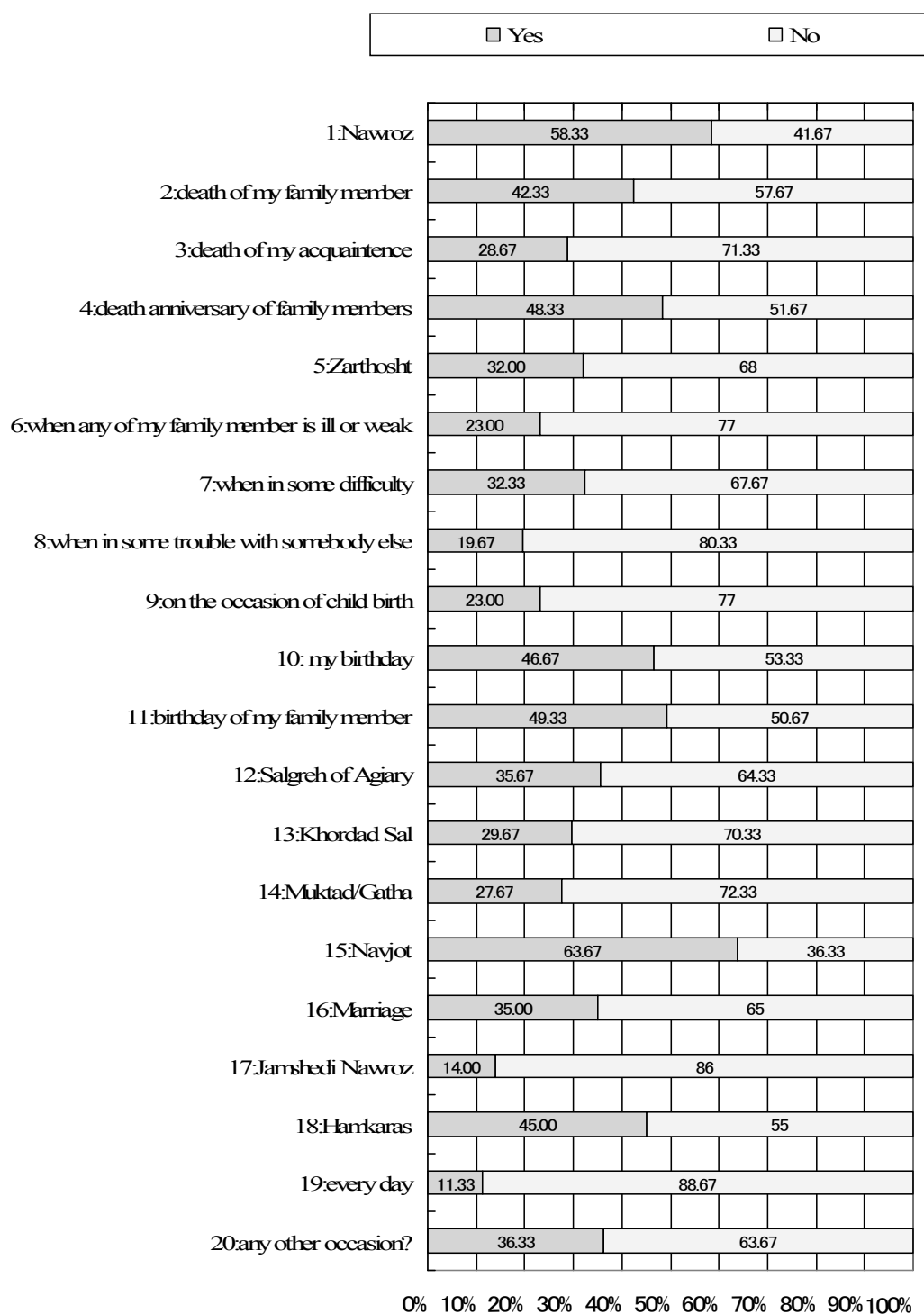
Q7 Check the occasions on which you go to *Atash Beheram* in Navsari.

Q7. Check the occasions on which you go to Atash Beharam in Navsari.



Q8 Check the occasions on which you go to *Agriary* in Navsari.

Q8 Check the occasions on which you go to *Agriary* in Navsari



III Results

Zoroastrian Prayers in Parsi community in Navsari have been changed into manthric recitation. Parsis, *Mobed* or *Behdin*, do not know the literal meanings of Zoroastrian prayers. A Parsi says, “We are sometimes told that our prayers are just like medicines. Even if we don't know any meaning of each prescription, when taken properly, they are effective.”

Parsis learn by heart all the required prayers and know when to utter each prayer. Parsis must have taught younger generations rough meanings of prayers and main occasions on which each prayer is expected to be said. This is the case with their prayers uttered in front of sacred fires.

The Avestan phrases and sentences of each traditional Zoroastrian prayers have been maintained as they were used to be in ancient times. Even today, *ahunavar*, *ashem vohu* and *yenghe hatam* are said throughout such an old Zoroastrian liturgy as Yasna. These Avestan recitations have been uttered by *Mobeds* who are qualified to perform religious ceremonies in Zoroastrian communities. *Behdins*, especially after they came to entrust *Mobeds* with religious ceremonies in conformity with their *panthak* system, did not work on their prayers as they used to in those days.

IV Discussion

Then why are not the meanings of Zoroastrian most important prayers understood or maintained by Parsis in Navsari?

First, it is because Parsis did not translate their traditional prayers into Gujarati to transmit their meanings from generation to generation for the practical reasons below.

- (1) The major part of their important prayers are written in Avestan words which are very difficult to understand properly from the linguistic point of view.
- (2) The distinguishing features of a historical document of Avesta. Only one fourth of Avesta has been left for our study.
- (3) Parsis did not carry out a proper religious education through Gujarati even after Gujarati became their mother tongue in India

Second, it is because Parsis have not been engaged in mission work or have not allowed any conversion to Zoroastrianism. Only those Parsis who are born between a Parsi father and a Parsi mother and confess Zoroastrianism are qualified to be Parsis. If not, he or she cannot be admitted into Parsi community. Parsis in Navsari have maintained their community members only through religious marriages instead of allowing non-Parsi marrying-in or Parsi marrying-out. This traditional marriage custom did not encourage Parsis to propagate the meanings of their prayers or their religious experiences among non-Parsis.

Third, it is because Parsi did not carry out a proper religious education even though there had been left sufficient commentaries of Avesta for them to learn the meanings of their prayers and hand them down from generation to generation.

The Parsi community is composed of the *Mobeds*(priests and their descendants)and the *Behdins*(laymen and their descendants). The *Mobed* have come down from the *panthaks* which have been divided into five genealogical *pols* or stocks. These five genealogical stocks have been separated into smaller lines which function as a social unit of Zoroastrian Parsi life in this world. The *Behdin* have been related to the Parsi community through their *panthaks* which enable them to follow Zoroastrian beliefs and practices. Upon the basis of *panthaks*, Parsis have divided the days and even the hours and their residence has also been closely connected with their own *panthaks*. The *Behdin* have entrusted the *Mobed* with almost all the religious practices, which in turn introduced an excessive centralization of religious knowledge on the *Mobed*.

V Conclusions

1) Findings

The literal meanings of Zoroastrian oldest and most important prayers are not understood or maintained by Parsis in Navsari. In this sense, their Avestan prayers are *manthric* recitation in expectation of some effective power or influence.

2) Feedback on the study

This is to be conducted in September, 2005 in Navsari. The research has been supported by Zoroastrian Parsis patient and sympathetic cooperation as well as carefully constructed critiques of various drafts. Through proper feedback another collaborative research will be conducted over again in Navsari.

3) Study Review

Three hypothetical questions are not fully tested in this research. Moreover the major part of research results still remains to be analyzed further.

4) Issues to explore in the future(problems to be resolved)

There is great need to do research on ritually prescribed collective prayers in order to test the hypothetical questions.

VI Suggestions for further studies

An intensive research on anxiety is to be done for further clarification of prayers. In this connection, ritually not prescribed optional private prayers are also to be included for our tentative analysis.

Questionnaire has been worked out for a pilot survey this year.

Footnotes

- (3)-1 1 □ *Athro Ahurahe Mazdao Puthro*
(fire, the son of Ahura Mazda)

	Age groups	12-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 and over	
	No. of cases	7	6	5	5	10	22	18%
(3)-2	2 □	<i>Khshnaothra Ahurahe Mazdao</i> (for the pleasure of Ahura Mazda)						
	Age groups	12-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 and over	
	No. of cases	9	7	5	9	10	20	20%
(3)-3	3 □	<i>Yenghe hatam aat yesne paiti vangho Mazdao Ahuro Vaietha Ashat hacha Yaonghancha tancha taosecha yazamaide</i> (as stated above)						
	Age groups	12-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 and over	
	No. of cases	2	2	1	2	3	8	6%
(3)-4	4 □	<i>Manashni Gavashni Kunashni</i> (thoughts, words and deeds)						
	Age groups	12-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 and over	
	No. of cases	18	17	10	14	17	32	36%
(3)-5	5 □	<i>Humata Hukhta Huvarshata</i> ([with]good thoughts, good words and good deeds)						
	Age groups	12-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 and over	
	No. of cases	17	12	6	9	12	30	29%

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