

Discovering the Zoroastrian e-diaspora

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e-Diasporas Atlas

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David Knaute is writing his PhD thesis on Zoroastrianism for the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris. More specifically, his research concerns the outmigration of Zoroastrians from Pakistan and contemporary diaspora communities in the UK and USA. David spent ten months in Karachi, Pakistan, in 2009–2010. During this time, he was also introduced to Zoroastrian communities in Gujarat, and has met Zoroastrians in Paris, London, Manchester and Boston.

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Plateforme e-Diasporas

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Abstract

Zoroastrians are an ancient ethnic-religious community that goes back to the prophet Zarathushtra. Today they number some 120,000 people, based in India/Pakistan and Iran; diaspora communities are settled in North America, the United Kingdom, Australia. On the Indian sub-continent, where Zoroastrians are known as 'Parsis', communities are ageing quickly, due in particular to a low fertility rate and massive outmigration. Projections show there will be virtually no more Zoroastrians in Pakistan in a few decades, and figures in India may drop to 20,000 individuals by 2050. For such a scattered community, the Internet represents a unique platform to discuss community matters and bring together far-flung groups. Zoroastrians use the Web and other digital media to organize themselves and remain connected to their homeland. This e-diaspora not only highlights some traditional characteristics of Zoroastrian communities, it intertwines with the apparition of a new leadership. It also accelerates the emergence of a universal conception of what it is to be Zoroastrian, transforming the Zoroastrian socio-cultural and religious identity and reshaping past and present divisions.

Keywords

diaspora, internet, web, zoroastrianism

Mots-clefs

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Zoroastrians form an ancient ethnic-religious community, which can be traced back to the times of prophet Zarathustra (Zoroaster in Greek), who founded the religion bearing his name around the 6th century BCE, in Greater Iran. Zoroastrianism long remained one of the world's largest religions. Today, Zoroastrians represent only a tiny group of approximately 110,000-120,000 people. About 26,000 of them, corresponding to 20% of the overall population, live in the diaspora¹:– Iran (current estimates) 15,000-24,000

- United Kingdom (2004 estimates) 5,000
- Australia & New Zealand (2004 estimates) 3,000
- North America (2004 estimates) 15,500
- Elsewhere (2010 crude estimate) 2,500
- Pakistan (2010 figures) 1,766
- India (2001 figures) 69,601²

Parsi Zoroastrian communities³ in India and Pakistan are ageing quickly, due particularly to a low fertility rate and a massive outmigration, which results in the rapid dwindling of population figures in both countries. Projections show that there will be virtually no more Zoroastrians in Pakistan within a few decades and that numbers in India may significantly reduce, perhaps down to 20,000-40,000 individuals, by 2050.

Many Zoroastrians make use of (or at least have access to) the Web. This is a general trend as far as Zoroastrians living in the diaspora are concerned. Such a high-level of “connectivity” is partly due to the high level of education of Zoroastrians. The Internet is however a unique platform for such a scattered community, serving to discuss community matters and bring together groups living

1. By diaspora, we will refer to Zoroastrians originating from India, Pakistan and Iran, who migrated to other parts of the world from the 19th century onwards. Until 1947, India and Pakistan were both part of the British Empire. There is also a historical diaspora which took place from the mid-7th century CE, when Zoroastrians fled Persia, their original homeland, to find refuge on the Gujarati coast (now India) in order to escape the Muslim Arab invasion. Zoroastrians living in India later became known as “Parsis”, while those who stayed in Persia (now Iran) are referred to in this article as Iranian Zarthushtis.

2. Dinyar Patel, “Jaago/Bidaari: Rescuing Our Community from a Demographic Crisis”, 2010.

3. Most Parsis, as Zoroastrians are referred to in India and Pakistan, now prefer to be called Zoroastrians among other things not to discriminate Iranis, who are Zoroastrians from Iran who migrated from Iran from the 19th century onwards.

far apart. It is also a way to give a higher profile to Zoroastrians whose community is, at a global level, threatened with disappearance as a result of the demographic crisis it faces.

The interaction between Zoroastrians from India, Pakistan and Iran has, in recent times, greatly increased, with the constitution of mixed communities in the diaspora, especially in North America from the 1970s onwards, and later in Australia and New Zealand. The Zoroastrian diaspora in the United Kingdom can be traced back to the mid 19th century and represents the oldest Asian diaspora community in Europe; its composition was also reshaped during the 1970s when Zoroastrians settled in the British Empire (especially East Africa) massively came to the United Kingdom, followed by Iranian Zarthushtis.

Like many other diaspora communities, Zoroastrians extensively use the Web and other digital media to organize themselves and remain connected to their homeland. This e-diaspora, in addition to highlighting some traditional characteristics of Zoroastrian communities, clearly intertwines with the development of a new balance of power, with diaspora communities becoming more and more influential. It also accelerates the emergence of a universal conception of what it is to be Zoroastrian, which greatly transforms the Zoroastrian socio-cultural and religious identity, and reshapes past and present divisions between various Zoroastrian communities.

Ethnicity and geographical origins in the corpus

What immediately comes out of the *visual analytics* of the 159 websites which form the corpus is the high concentration of websites based in the United States and Canada (37.1%). This shows the growing importance of the North American diaspora, which so far represents only about 10% of the overall Zoroastrian population but has already become very influential. Indian and Iranian websites make up 20% of the corpus each. Graph 1 shows that the concentration of nodes is less dense in the section 1, where Iran-based and Persian-language websites are represented. Graphs 2 and 3 show that most Persian-language websites are actually based outside Iran.

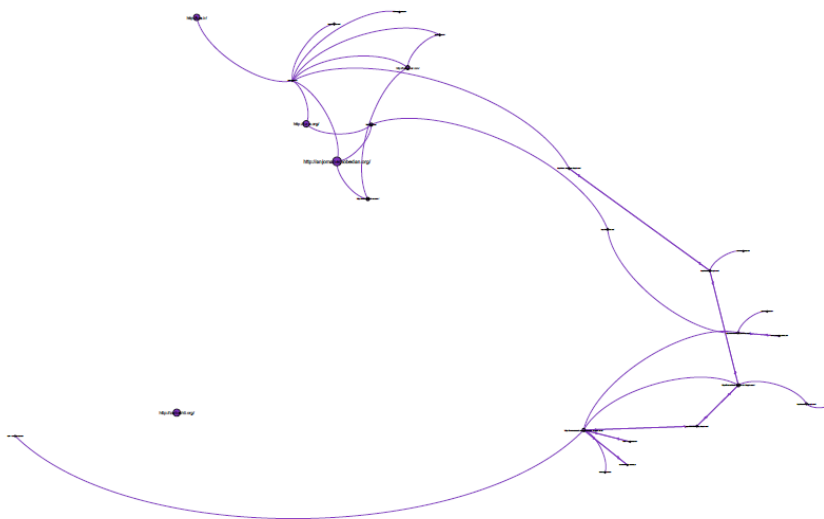
Does a community need the Internet to thrive, or are both elements independent from one another? North American Zoroastrian communities



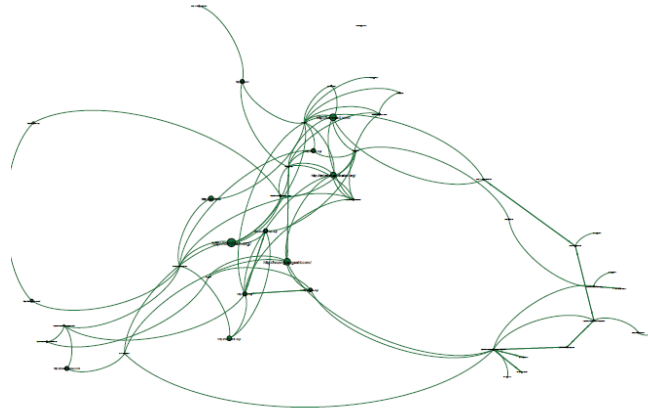
Map 1: Distribution of websites per ethnicity
(in yellow: Parsi websites; in green: Iranian websites)

benefit from an easier access to the Internet; in addition, using the Internet is a necessity for them to connect isolated communities to one another, while the clustering of Zoroastrian communities in India and Iran reduces this need. As noted by Robin Evans in an interview with Zoroastrians from North California, a major

difficulty for Zoroastrians today is that they seldom see one another: “In our day-to-day lives we don’t meet other Zoroastrians. My children never met a Zoroastrian in school through the 12th grade,” reports Mrs Silloo Tarapore of Lafayette, California. “So we drive long distances to



Map 2: Persian-language websites



Map 3: Iran-based websites

meet others.⁴ In the United Kingdom, maybe due to the concentration of most Zoroastrians in London, the 5,000 individuals who compose the community gather around one unique organization, the Zoroastrian Trust Fund of Europe⁵ (ZFTE), which also has the only website available for British Zoroastrians⁶. The World Zoroastrian Organization (WZO) is also based in the United Kingdom and has its own website, however its outreach is global, as will be discussed below.

There are several indications that Zarthushtis in Iran are isolated from the Parsi section of the Zoroastrian community. Firstly, out of 33 Iran-based websites and blogs, only six are in English or include an English section.⁷ Only few Parsis can speak or read Persian, so they have no access to most Iran-based websites. In addition, there is a majority of blogs among Iran-based websites⁸ (see map 4), while blogs represent less than 10% of the rest of the corpus. This may reflect the fact that few people have the means to create and update elaborate websites in Iran, where the level of State censorship is very high and particularly targets minorities.

The corpus also includes three websites exclusively in Persian and based outside Iran: two are based in North America, including one which has its English correspondent,⁹ and one is based in Sweden¹⁰. There are also 8 websites that include a Persian section, 5 of which are based in North America,¹¹ 2 in Norway¹² and 1 in Belgium.¹³ In total, more than one third of the corpus is ethnically Iranian, which is a high proportion considering the estimated number of Zarthushtis living in Iran. Out of 48 Iranian websites and blogs, 15 are based outside Iran and only 5 are designed exclusively in English.¹⁴

The contrast is stark with India-based websites, all of which are in English. Compared with Iranian Zarthushtis, Parsis widely speak English and most received their education in English, including higher education. Most Parsis in India (as well as in Pakistan) speak Gujarati, but few can read or write it.¹⁵ In the diaspora, it takes little

4. <http://www.rcevans.me/zoros.html>, *San Jose Mercury News* (25 Dec. 2004).

5. The Zoroastrian Trust Fund of Europe exclusively represents the Zoroastrian community in the United Kingdom in spite of some level of interaction with few Parsis living in other European countries, <http://www.zfte.com>

6. The North West Zoroastrian Community (Zoroastrians from North-West England) also has its own website, but its outreach is very limited, <http://www.nwzc.org.uk>

7. <http://www.fravahr.org>; <http://www.w-z-info-c.page.tl/>; <http://www.amordaden.blogfa.com/>; <http://www.farevahr.freesevers.com/>; <http://www.berasad.com>; <http://shiraz.freesevers.com/zor.htm>.

8. The content of these blogs remains unknown to the author.

9. <http://www.zartoshti.org/> (Persian) and <http://www.zoroastrian.org> (English).

10. Stockholm's Zoroastriska Förening, <http://szf.se>

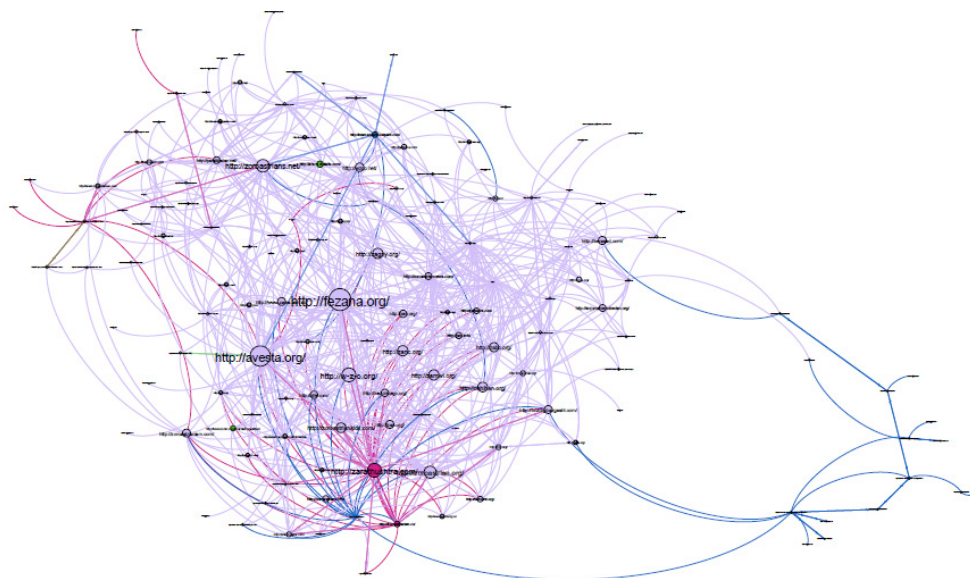
11. <http://www.oshihan.org>, <http://czcjournal.org>, <http://zoroastrianbornagain.com>, <http://www.zoroastriannews.com>, <http://zsws.org>

12. Bozorg Bazgast Organization, <http://www.bozorgbazgast.com>; Det Norske Zarathushthriske Trossamfunn, <http://www.dnzt.org>

13. European Centre for Zoroastrian Studies, <http://www.gatha.org>

14. <http://www.californiazoroastriancenter.org>; <http://www.pzo.info>; <http://www.farvardyn.com>; <http://arbabrostan.homestead.com>; <http://priest.yasna.com/>.

15. The only site which offers downloads in Gujarati is the online version of Frashogard – the Journal of Ilm-e-Khshnoom, <http://www.frashogard.com>. See for example: <https://skydrive.live.com/?cid=a4c89cbd09eb9afb&sc=documents&id=A4C89CBD09EB9AFB!401>



Map 4: Predominance of blogs among Iran-based websites
(blue links on the right side of the map)

Number of Zoroastrian associations
which have developed a website, per country of origin (2011)

Country of origin	Number	Percentage (%)
India	6 ^a	14,6
Pakistan	1 ^b	2,4
Iran	5 ^c	12,2
North America	20 (15 in the US ^d and 5 in Canada ^e)	48,8
United Kingdom	2	4,9
Australia and New Zealand	3 (2 in Australia ^f and 1 in New Zealand)	7,3
Sweden	1	2,4
Russia	1	2,4
Kuwait	1	2,4
New Zealand	1	2,4

a. Delhi Parsi Anjuman, Poona Zarhosti Seva Mandal, Youth Group of the Bombay Parsi Panchayet, Baroda Youth Group, Bombay Parsi Panchayet, Bangalore Parsee Zoroastrian Anjuman

b. Karachi Zarhosti Banu Mandal

c. Tehran Zoroastrian Anjuman, Kerman Zoroastrian Association, Elabad Zoroastrian Association, Zoroastrian Association of Shiraz, Ashtad

d. Zoroastrian association of Houston, Zoroastrian Association of Greater Boston Area, Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Chicago, Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington, Zoroastrian Association Of Pennsylvania And New Jersey, Zoroastrian Association of California, Zarthushti anjuman of northern California, Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York, Zoroastrian Association of South Florida, Zoroastrian Association of Kentucky, Ohio and Indiana, Zoroastrian Association of Michigan, Zoroastrian Association of North Texas, Zoroastrian Society of Washington State, Zoroastrian Association of Arizona, San Diego Zoroastrian Web Site.

e. Zoroastrian Society of Ontario, Zoroastrian Society of British Columbia, Zoroastrian Youth of British Columbia, Zoroastrian Association of Quebec, Ontario Zoroastrian Community Foundation

f. Zoroastrian Association of Western Australia, Zoroastrian Association of Victoria

time for a family to stop using Gujarati since host countries for Parsis are exclusively English speaking (apart from pockets of individuals living in France, Germany, etc.) and young children born in the diaspora often do not learn Gujarati at all.

The role of Zoroastrian associations

The key feature of Zoroastrian communities in the diaspora is the creation of local associations to organize a community in a particular area. Almost all of these associations have their own website. In the United Kingdom, ZFTE was founded in 1862 and is one of the few associations whose scope is national, together with the Auckland-based Zarathushtrian Association of New Zealand. Zoroastrian associations in the United States and Canada are very recent compared with ZFTE. The following table presents the number of associations which have developed a website, by country of origin¹⁶:

Among Zoroastrian associations based in North America, most were founded by Parsis; however a few were also founded by Iranian Zarthushtis, such as the Zoroastrian Society of Washington State. In other countries, most associations have also been founded by Parsis, with some exceptions, including Stockholm's Zoroastriska Förening in Sweden. In France, the Centre Culturel Zoroastrien in Paris has now become a full-fledged association, run by Iranian Zarthushtis, and has a Facebook page¹⁷ which gives a link to the website of the World Zoroastrian Council¹⁸, also put online in 2011. What comes out of the study of these websites is that Zoroastrian associations need to be visible *online* to bring together the community *offline* and let people know of their existence; websites also provide many ways for Zoroastrian community members to initiate a variety of activities and build up the particular identity of their association. This said, some associations websites remain under utilized by the associations members and could play a greater role in organizing the community. In an interview with the author in April 2011, Nazneen Spliedt,

president of the Zoroastrian Association of North California (ZANC) confirmed this observation:

Our Website here is mainly for the use of our members and for sending information on events we organize. I expect we could do more, but there is not much interest in doing blogs or having conversations online, even though we have a lot of “techies” here and members who work in the IT field. Members of the association, students, people interested in learning about Zoroastrianism or wanting to join or visit the Dare-Mehr use the website. We do get many inquiries from people outside the community about our religion and the practices or from the school students, who want to do research for their school projects.

In India, Parsis are concentrated in the city of Bombay and the State of Gujarat (cities of Surat, Ahmedabad, Navsari, etc) with other significant groups in Pune, Hyderabad or Delhi. Many reside in residential areas (*baghs*) or neighbourhoods where mostly Zoroastrians are living. In Pakistan, virtually all Zoroastrians live in Karachi.¹⁹ Community matters do not need to transit via the Internet to reach out to all community members. The situation is similar in Iran where, however, the structure of Zoroastrian communities is less known than in India and Pakistan.

On the contrary, the Web is crucial to support the constitution of a cohesive diaspora, in which community members may feel they belong to the same group. A few cross-country associations, aimed at bringing Zoroastrians together and which have become central in the community's history for the past few decades, gained a lot of visibility by developing their own website. The most important cross-country association is the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations in North America (FEZANA), which brings under the same roof all Zoroastrian associations in North America. Its website plays the role of a *speaker* for Zoroastrians from all over the United States and Canada, who may find all kind of information relating to Zoroastrians on the continent, including a very comprehensive online directory. This idea of a federation for Zoroastrian associations in North America was born in the 1960s and represented a key objective for all Zoroastrians

16. Some websites were not identified by the Web browser before the corpus was closed in August 2011. One example is the Parsi Zoroastrian Association of Singapore, <http://www.pza.org.sg/>

17. <http://www.facebook.com/CentreCulturelZoroastrien>

18. <http://w-z-c.com>

19. See David Knaute, the 2010 household survey: Analytical report of the household survey carried out among the Zoroastrian community of Karachi, March 2011, <http://www.unescoparzor.com/images/documents/karachi.pdf>

from the diaspora until FEZANA was created and registered in Illinois in 1987. On the association's website, the editors state:

Canada and the United States welcome citizens migrating from different countries, races, religions and ethnicities who are able to maintain their own identity and yet live in harmony to create a wondrous mosaic. The Zarathushti community in North America is a microcosm of this wider social reality. We have here traditionalists and reformists. We have young energetic creative minds working with the wisdom of an older generation. FEZANA needs to be inclusive of all these entities.

Formed in 1980, the World Zoroastrian Organization (WZO), whose declared objective is to "inform all about Zarathushtra and Zoroastrianism, and improve the circumstances of the needy Zoroastrians around the world through charitable and social activities", rapidly became a central as well as controversial organization. The reason for such controversy is that it was initiated by individuals who supported particular ideas concerning the community's development, and not by representative bodies. This presumed lack of legitimacy led some to call for the creation of the international Zoroastrian federation, but this has not yet come to reality. Today, the World Council of Zoroastrian Federations is being established by the Federation of Zoroastrian Anjumans of India. The World Zoroastrian Council (see above) is an initiative on the part of Iranian Zarthushtis in Paris, but its scope is, despite its name, local rather than global.

At the Global Working Group²⁰ that took place in Bombay in January 2010, elected community representatives from FEZANA, ZTFE, Bombay Parsi Punchayet (BPP)/Federation of Parsee Zoroastrian Anjumans of India (FPZAI) and representatives of United Arab Emirates²¹ (UAE), of World Zoroastrian Chamber of Commerce (WZCC) and others invitees, agreed on the following:

[...] that the Parsi/Irani Zarathushti identity should be strengthened globally, by upholding our culture, traditions and religious beliefs. It was also suggested that an integrated com-

munity database be established via a universal Parsi/Irani Zarathushti portal. The participating bodies agreed to share the cost towards this project.²²

The Zoroastrian religion on the web

A major difficulty for communities established in the diaspora is the absence of consecrated fire temples (*agiari*) and, to some extent, of Towers of Silence (*dokhma*), which are traditionally used as funerary sites. In India, Pakistan and Iran, Zoroastrians visit their fire temples on a regular basis, and even though prayers can be performed at home, special ceremonies require a visit to the temple or at least the presence of priests (*mobeds*). Towers of Silence are still popular in India and Pakistan, although other burial practices such as cremation or cemeteries are in use outside Bombay and Karachi (the only places where Towers of Silence still function) and are more and more widely accepted by community members. The disappearance of vultures and other socio-economic factors may accelerate the most likely discontinuation of Towers of Silence in the decades to come. In the diaspora, however, few communities have secured a properly consecrated burial site. The Zoroastrian community of the United Kingdom obtained burial rights at Brookwood cemetery in 1963, and the Toronto Zoroastrian community consecrated in 1989 burial and scattering grounds in Glen Oaks Memorial Gardens.²³

As the corpus shows, several initiatives were undertaken, especially during the first decade of the 21st century, by particularly ambitious communities striving to bring the fundamentals of Zoroastrian religion overseas. The success of such projects greatly depends on the communities' capacity to raise funds, since these usually involve the construction of costly infrastructure. A multi-million pounds project was put back on the shelves in the United Kingdom when ZTFE board members decided that time was not ripe to mobilize community members for the construction of a consecrated fire temple in London. Instead, they opted for a temporary solution, with the purchase of a massive building which has a

20. A legacy of the 8th World Zoroastrian Congress (WZC) in London in 2005

21. The Zoroastrian community in Dubai (UAE) organized the 9th WZC in December 2009

22. http://www.fezana.org/files/pressreleases/Global_Working_Group.pdf

23. Jesse S. Palsetia, *The Parsis of India: preservation of identity in Bombay city*, Manohar Publishers and Distributors (2008), Bombay.

prayer room and in which the Zartoshty Brothers Hall can host all sorts of community events.

In the United States, several religious institutions have been established, all of which aim to establish religious buildings or train priests: these include the California Zoroastrian Center (<http://www.californiazoroastriancenter.org>), the Persian Zoroastrian Organization (<http://www.california-zoroastriancenter.org>), the Zarathushti Cultural Center of Delaware Valley established for members of the Zoroastrian Association of Pennsylvania and New Jersey (<http://www.zacuce.com>) and the Houston Traditional Dadgah.²⁴ The latter has an elaborate website (<http://www.myzdgroup.org>) which sets out the project's ambitions and brings it to life before the construction even begins:

Dear Friends and Fellow Parsi Irani Zarathustis. Welcome to Houston, the future Home of the first and only Perpetual Burning Fire Temple this side of the Western hemisphere. The MYZD Group is spearheading this effort to establish the first ever Traditional Dadgah to fulfil the spiritual void in our community in North America and more so for our young children and future generations so that they can experience the beauty of our sublime faith just like we did back home in India, Pakistan and Iran.

Many Zoroastrians born in the diaspora only have superficial knowledge of the Zoroastrian religion. Most have them may have done their *navjote*²⁵; Parsis go back to India and Pakistan for the occasion, or at least invite close relatives to attend this key event. Some even wear the *sudreh* and *kusti*.²⁶ But when it comes to the understanding of the spiritual value of Zoroastrianism, or the knowledge of prayers and sacred books (the Gathas), many feel much frustration about their ignorance, or do simply not feel concerned. Discussions on the Internet reflect this situation:

Zoroastrian organizations must actively strive to encourage youth and young people to take up studies in Zoroastrian history, philosophy, rites and rituals. We should encourage trips to India and Iran to keep our historical roots alive. We have been proactive in these measures to keep the community in contact. The

most important and necessary change will have to come from the parents of young children to make an earnest and honest attempt to imbibe the religious tenets in the children.

While Zoroastrian associations and other institutions play a key role in maintaining a minimum level of awareness of the religion, the Web also represents a gold mine for many Zoroastrians to access information and find direct answers to their queries. Some website managers put online very elaborate tools to help their coreligionists learn about Zoroastrianism. One example is *Abura-Mazda.com*: An objective of the website is to create awareness amongst Zoroastrians; with an interactive prayer book, people can pray while at work. People, young and old use the website for teaching, reading, doing assignments at the university.

FEZANA developed an electronic format of prints on different aspects of the religion, thereby increasing awareness of the religion and religious practices within the community:

The FEZANA Information Research & Education Systems (FIRES) is a centralized collection of Zarathushti books, manuscripts, literature, magazines, and scholarly research. FIRES is located at the Zoroastrian Association of Houston (ZAH) library at the Zarathushti Heritage and Cultural Center in Houston, Texas. With a centralized venue and an online catalogue, FIRES provides reference materials to facilitate research related to the Zarathushti religion and its history, culture, and community. The online catalog, which currently has 700 titles, contains books and visual media available in the ZAH library. We plan to catalog and link collections from libraries located at other FEZANA member associations.

Finally, the Web also gives space to esoteric schools of thought, which also exist *offline* but remain quite underground. It has to be noted that esoteric beliefs are particularly popular in India. The corpus includes 13 websites or webpages that partly or fully fall under this category: Zoroastrianism (Za-rath-ush-ti) Basics, the online version of Frashogard – the Journal of Ilm-e-Khshnoom, the Traditional Zoroastrian Website, Fravahr (study of the Aryan History), the Saga of the Aryans Home Page, the Association for Revival of Zoroastrianism, Parsi Avaz, the World

24. Sacred fire burning.

25. Ceremony performed before the age of 10.

26. A white vest and holy thread tied around the waist, at all times.

Zoroastrian Information Centre, the Association of Avestan astrology about zoroastrian faith, Zoroastrian magazine Mitra, azaintis, the Zoroastrian college, the website on Zoroastrians and Parsis in Science Fiction.²⁷

Intra-community divisions

The e-diaspora clearly reflects the complexity of intra-community divisions between different Zoroastrian communities and schools of thought. In that sense, the Web is not a solution to the long-standing opposition between “orthodox” and “liberals”, which is particularly characteristic of Parsi communities in India and widely reproduced in the diaspora. Not surprisingly, as John Hinnells noted in 2003 in his study of the Zoroastrian diaspora,²⁸ most sites include only one view. The orthodox favour the strict preservation of the community’s ethnic-religious identity. This formally means the banning of inter-marriages and conversions. On the contrary, the liberals are more flexible and allow non-Zoroastrian spouses to attend community events and permit their offspring to do their *navjote*. For them, Zoroastrians should not give priority to rituals over substance, which may be summed up in the religion’s ethical message of “good words, good thoughts, good deeds” (*Humata, Hukhta, Huvarshata*).

Fierce debates can also occur in some chat rooms or Yahoo group sites. John Hinnells gave the example of a reference by a liberal to the Orthodox “ludicrous mentality”, comparing “wanting to preserve the race to the mentality of Hitler and the Klu Klux Klan”. Some orthodox websites, such as the Traditional Zoroastrian website, on the contrary, contain attacks on what it calls “the liberal-controlled WZO”. These debates are fortunately restricted to the Web and are the product of *pure players*, who develop a Web-specific discourse, which does not reflect the reality of interactions between various sections of the

Zoroastrian community. Most websites, which clearly represent a single view, tend to be primarily informative, putting online erudite information on prayers, sacred texts and relaying information on other community affairs for people with like views.

The Zarathushtrian Assembly is one of the most popular liberal movements. Founded in 1990, it presents itself as “not a protestant, sectarian, or denominational movement, a separatist move to split apart from an existing body”. However, its website includes many articles by Ali Jafarey, a controversial figure and considered by many orthodox Parsis as “an enemy of our religion”.²⁹ Ali Jafarey, in an article entitled “The Good Religion and Institutionalized Zoroastrianism”, sets out his understanding of how his message differs from that of “orthodox” Zoroastrianism:

The Good religion is a universal, progressive, and modernizing religion meant for the humanity at large. The Institutionalized Zoroastrianism, in its present traditional form, is an ethnical, static, and closed religion of a specific community. The two stand apart in their outlook.³⁰

For such leading figures in the Zarathushtrian Assembly, it is Western scholars who have uncovered the teaching of Zarathushtra. Several websites, usually representing the liberal view, post articles by non-Zoroastrians, usually academics, who are writing about the religion and/or the ancient history of Zoroastrianism. Other websites are also run by non-Zoroastrians, who can be converts, such as *Avesta.org*, which is run by Joseph Peterson, the first American who did his *navjote*, in 1984, or Ronald Delavega, who runs the Restored Zarathushtrian Community of Miami (*also referred to as the New Age Zoroastrian Society*³¹). There are few Iranian Zarthushtis on the orthodox Zoroastrian websites, but a substantial number on those produced by the Zarathushtrian Assembly and linked sites, for example the English Zoroastrian website.³² In contrast, orthodox websites, such as The World of Traditional

27. <http://vyoman-wwwzblogcom.blogspot.com>, <http://www.frashogard.com>, <http://ahuramazda.com>, <http://www.fravahr.org>, <http://saga.parsizoroastrianism.com>, <http://www.arzglobal.com>, <http://www.parsiavaz.com>, <http://www.w-z-info-c.page.tl/>, http://www.asha-piter.ru/08_02_Zoroastrizm/08_02_Zoroastrizm_01.htm, <http://mitra-piter.narod.ru/>, <http://azaintis.shawwebspaces.ca/>, <http://www.indiayellowpages.com/zoroastrian/>, http://www.adherents.com/lit/sf_zor.html,

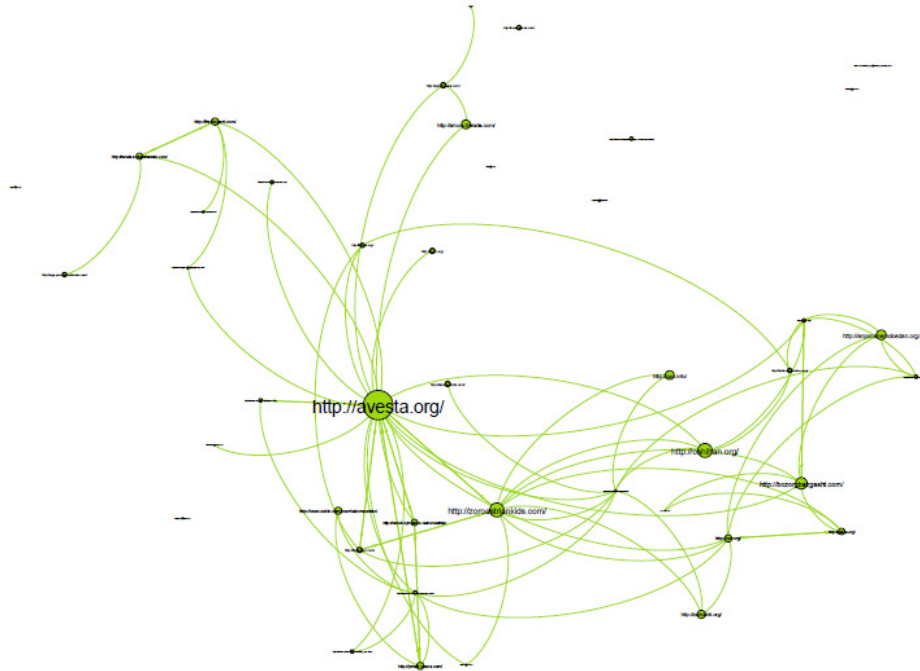
28. John R. Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora* Oxford University Press (2005), Oxford.

29. <http://www.fravahr.org/spip.php?article182>

30. http://www.zoroastrian.org/articles/The_Good_Religion_and_Zoroastrianism.htm

31. <http://www.zoroastrianism.cc>

32. <http://www.zoroastrian.org.uk> (this website was *not identified as part of the corpus*).



Map 5: Religious websites

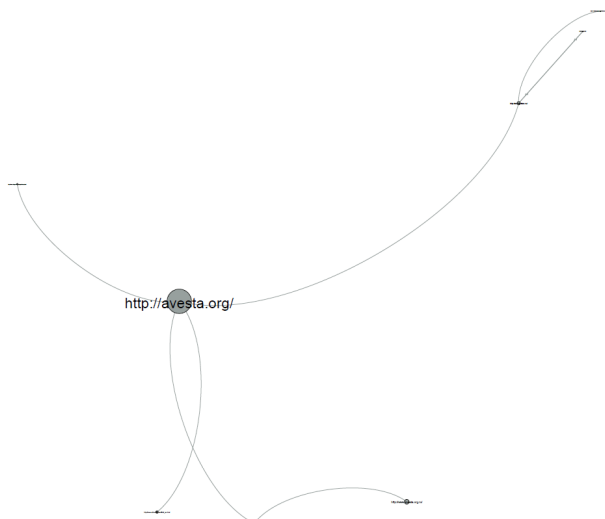
Zoroastrianism,³³ have articles mostly by Parsis, in particular from India.

The issue of conversion

The issue of conversion is very controversial and strongly opposed by the orthodox. Alternatively, many liberals tend to support arguments, particularly documented history, in favour of conversion. As mentioned above, the debate revolves around the issue of intermarried couples and the

inclusion of their offspring into the Zoroastrian faith. More than anything else, the Web highlights a very contemporary trend, which is the conversion of non-Zoroastrians, mostly Westerners, to Zoroastrianism. Such movements are completely rejected or ignored by the great majority of Parsis, however the position of Iranian Zarthushtis (whether living in Iran or in the diaspora) appears much more ambiguous. Iranian mobeds supporting conversion do not hide and do not hesitate to be publicized on websites dedicated to conversion or promoting a more liberal outlook. Also, many Iranian Muslims from the diaspora assert

33. <http://www.zoroastrianism.com>; <http://parsizoroastrianism.com>



Map 6: Websites run by Westerners

that deep down they are Zoroastrians, and some request Zoroastrian associations to assist them in their conversion. The answer of most associations, for instance ZTFE, which receive many such requests, is clearly negative.

The analysis of the corpus interestingly shows that the religious website with the best references (also one of the only hubs in the corpus) is Joseph Peterson's website, while others remain quite marginal. These few are also the most referenced websites among those run by Westerners. Peterson, a convert himself, initiated his website in June 1995, making it one of the oldest websites in the corpus, with the purpose of sharing e-texts and letting the original source works speak for themselves. He affirms that his intent is to avoid modern controversies, and not to act as a spokesman for the community (see maps 5 and 6).

In 2006, Ronald Delavega created his own conversion Yahoo group, which claims 469 members.³⁴ According to his wording, the group is "dedicated to spreading information on Zarathushtrian Faith and Doctrine. It is for converts, those who might be interested in conversion and for any one who wishes to discuss the original doctrines of Zarathushtras found on his Hymns, the Gathas. Let us all, Zarathushtrians and not, practice the motto of Good Thoughts, Words and Deeds."

Other pro-conversion websites or blogs put online testimonies of recent converts, such as <http://zarathushtiinfluenceinmoderntimes.blogspot.com>, which published an article by G. Papadopoulos, My Spiritual Journey to the Zarathushti Faith, in which he writes:

I hope that all my Parsi brothers and sisters will realize the necessity for recognition of genuine self-desired initiations. The theory that man is born into a certain religion, means acceptance of fate, & loss of free reasoned choice; something the Zarathushti faith does not suggest. I hope therefore that you recognize this fact & also recognize that conversions did take place in Zoroastrianism in the past (Kirdir, Mihr Nasre), that they were enjoyed by the Persian Rivayats and accepted by the Irani community as a whole. May we all be united in our struggle to bring goodness to

34. <http://dir.groups.yahoo.com/group/zoroastrianacceptance2/?v=1&t=directory&ch=web&pub=groups&sec=dir&slk=10>, accessed on 1 October 2011.

our world.³⁵

The one comment by a Parsi is quite revealing:

Dear Georgios,
I am very impressed, I can not help admiring,
I wish you success in good deeds,
Best Regards
N. Zandi

Since the late nineteenth century, the revival of Zoroastrianism and the early development of diaspora communities had caused a renewed interest for the religion among scholars. A variety of spiritual movements then derived their dogma from Zoroastrian beliefs. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 sparked a renewed interest for Zoroastrianism, especially among nationals from Russia or Central Asian Republics (formerly part of the Persian Empire) who discovered their ancestral roots. The case of Russia and neighbouring countries, such as Belarus, is striking in the sense that the connection between Russian cultural heritage and Zoroastrianism is less obvious than in Central Asia or the Caucasus. One factor may be the translation and diffusion in Russian language of many Zoroastrian sacred texts. The groups of Russian converts that formed are well referred on the Web.³⁶ They claim that there are presently 100 Zoroastrians living on the territory of Russia and the former USSR Republics. The converting individual has to be of age, traditionally 15 years old for those who grew up in Zoroastrian families or 21 years old for non-Zoroastrians.

The Zoroastrian community of Saint Petersburg, founded in 1994, has a website with an English section³⁷; so does the website of the Russian anjuman,³⁸ which declares on its front page that:

The first Sedreh-Pooshi, the ceremony of accepting Zoroastrian Faith, in the former USSR, took place in late 1990s in Tajikistan. Later, such ceremonies were organized in Minsk (Belarus, 2001), Moscow (Russia, 2005), Alma-Ata (Kazakhstan, 2006), and

35. <http://zarathushtiinfluenceinmoderntimes.blogspot.com/2010/04/my-spiritual-journey-to-zarathushti.html>

36. <http://www.avesta.org.ru>; http://www.asha-piter.ru/08_02_Zoroastrizm/08_02_Zoroastrizm_01.htm; <http://mitra-piter.narod.ru/>; <http://www.avesta.org.ru>; <http://zardusht.narod.ru>; <http://www.zoroastrian.ru/>; <http://www.blagoverie.org>

37. <http://www.zoroastrian.ru/en>

38. <http://www.blagoverie.org/eng/index.phtml>

Tashkent (Uzbekistan, 2006). Each of the listed events were conducted by the Moobed Kamran Jamshidi and the Anjoman “Bozorg Bazgasht”³⁹ (“The Great Return”). The rituals conducted by Moobed Jamshidi are recognized by traditional Zoroastrians of Iran and by the Anjoman Moghan Iran.

Intra-community marriages and matrimonial websites

For many orthodox but also mainstream Zoroastrians, the best way to prevent conversions and the dwindling of the global Zoroastrian population is the promotion of intra-community marriages. Zoroastrian communities have indeed had to face a harsh reality with a growing number of Zoroastrians remaining unmarried and/or compelled to marry non-Zoroastrians. This new phenomenon has been a logical consequence of outmigration, since many Zoroastrians living in the diaspora are isolated from the rest of the community and even have few occasions to meet Zoroastrians. In any case, they all live in extremely mixed societies and socialize in all sorts of circles not related to the Zoroastrian community. Communities in India and Pakistan are not spared, simply due to the above-mentioned demographic crisis (the average age is over 65) but also due to socio-cultural transformations, including the indirect impact of outmigration on home countries’ communities.⁴⁰

Traditional matchmakers are still used to facilitate meetings between unmarried Zoroastrians. However, their use is rarefying. Physical encounters in one’s personal social network remain of course common, and while they are becoming more difficult, there are also new opportunities to meet other Zoroastrians as social networks expand. Zoroastrians living in different parts of the world now meet on the occasion of international events such as World Zoroastrian Congresses⁴¹ or youth competitions, which have multiplied over the past few decades. This trend is the direct result of both the growth of diaspora com-

munities and the advent of the Internet, which make it logistically possible to organize complex events bringing together people from all over the world.

The web has certainly proved to be revolutionary in the field of matchmaking, since it has allowed many Zoroastrians living far apart to meet online. The creation of matrimonial websites dedicated to unmarried Zoroastrians looking for a Zoroastrian of the other sex to marry with have been at the forefront of this development. Such websites facilitate marriages between Zoroastrians residing in the diaspora and/or a home country, or even between two Zoroastrians living in the same country. The Zoroastrian Matrimonial Page,⁴² which may be the most advanced matrimonial website, has been active on the Internet since early 1996. On its front page, it proclaims that:

By Dadar Ahura Mazda’s Divine Grace, around 200 marriages between our Zarathushtri men and women have occurred through this page, the FIRST of its kind on the internet since many years, and a page that is totally FREE. We have THOUSANDS of members, Zarathushtri men and women from around the world and we are growing every week.

Online information for Zoroastrians

Zoroastrians extensively use the web to keep informed about community matters and other news connected with Zoroastrianism. Some websites have been specifically designed to serve as platforms where information from India, Pakistan and Iran is centralized and disseminated to diaspora communities. These websites, most of which have an international readership, are often based in India or Iran, which shows that diaspora communities feel strongly about what is happening back home. The main Zoroastrian publications, which have a worldwide readership and a substantial influence on the community’s opinions, have their own websites. The main media in India is *Parsiana*, a magazine published for the first time in November 1964 and which publishes twenty-four issues a year. Its editorial line covers a wide range of topics, from politics to religion and art to business. *Jam-e-Jamshed*, a Gujarati-language weekly founded in 1833 and one of the oldest newspapers in Asia, now has an English

39. <http://www.bozorgbazgasht.com/>

40. See David Knaute, the 2010 household survey: Analytical report of the household survey carried out among the Zoroastrian community of Karachi, March 2011. <http://www.unescoparzor.com/images/documents/karachi.pdf>

41. The past WZC took place in: London (2005), Dubai (2009); the next congress will take place in Bombay in December 2013

42. <http://matrimonial.parsizoroastrianism.com/>

section to cater to the new generation. Since 2010, the new editor of *Jam-e-Jamshed*, Shernaaz Engineer, has taken up the task to revisit the editorial line of the newspaper; however the website⁴³ so far seems to be abandoned.

Other informative websites, which can be referred to as *living-dead websites*, are abandoned or have not been updated for a long time. These should be differentiated from *showcase websites*, which were created to present specific information and are not intended to be updated over time. One such website is, for example, *Ahura.thelalis.com*, which gives access to the Zoroastrian calendar in both English and Gujarati.⁴⁴ The Parsi Chronicle,⁴⁵ presented as the most visited site on Zoroastrians since its creation in late 2003, has not been updated since April 11th 2010, as its author, Ader Gandi, prefers to focus on the other websites he manages. Parsi World⁴⁶ has not been updated since June 2009. It is presented as a “dedicated effort to help Parsis, Iranis and Zoroastrians all over the world find out what’s happening in the community through real time news feed”. The editor adds that the website uses “the term Parsis, Iranis and Zoroastrians interchangeably and [does] not really see any distinction between them”. The analysis of the corpus shows that two websites, out of the 14 websites which focus on sharing information, have more nodes than the others: Zoroastriansnews.com,⁴⁷ and Zoroastrians.net,⁴⁸ both created in 2007. The later, created by Yazdi Tantra, includes a chat service in order to facilitate communication between Zoroastrians around the world. It proudly states on its front page:

They say the community talks a lot – so, to Chat Online with Zoroastrians – Just Click and chat live! They also say the community is becoming smaller, but Zoroastrians are all over the World Wide Web! Our objective behind this is very simple: Bring the Community under one Roof. This blog seeks to be the largest aggregation of Zarathushti / Zoroastrian – Parsi / Irani websites / information available online. Most of the material on this

blog refers, and links, to other websites.

One of the Yahoo groups that claims the most members (6692), the Zoroastrian News Agency (ZNA⁴⁹), also specializes in information sharing; the group was created in June 2006, however it was not possible to identify where it is based:

As the need for the Zoroastrian community to keep in touch with its members globally is rapidly on the rise, we have set forth to establish the Zoroastrian News Agency (ZNA), which will cover unbiased news related to all aspects of our greater community worldwide. The news may be of local, national and global interest on events and issues affecting the community. This information may include but will not be limited to a wide variety of topics such as births, engagements, weddings, great achievements, Sedreh Pushi/Navjotes, deaths, community events, public service announcements, celebrations, ceremonies/Jashans, media links, etc.

The Web has also served as a platform for innovative initiatives helping Zoroastrians worldwide to reunite or get together in other ways than simply sharing information. One such initiative is *The-missingParsi.com*,⁵⁰ a website created in 2005 by Ader Gandi, who offers a free tracing service for any Zoroastrians searching for the whereabouts of far-away relatives or friends. The website has a Facebook page,⁵¹ and claimed, as of October 2nd 2011, 422 cases, over 50 per cent of which have been solved.

Another interesting project is the Youth Leadership Enhancement Project (YLEP), initiated at the *9th World Zoroastrian Youth Congress*, hosted in Dubai in December 2009. The Congress provided “community youth between the ages of 23 to 35 years an opportunity to be responsible future leaders, but also served as a platform for young Zoroastrians of varied professional and cultural backgrounds to interact and connect with each other, thereby establishing a strong foundation for the future of our community worldwide”.⁵² The initial phase of the project comprised the

43. <http://www.jamejamshedonline.com>

44. <http://ahura.thelalis.com/>

45. <http://theparsichronicle.com>

46. <http://www.parsiworld.com>

47. <http://www.zoroastriannews.com>

48. <http://zoroastrians.net>

49. <http://dir.groups.yahoo.com/group/zna/?v=1&t=directory&ch=web&pub=groups&sec=dir&slk=1>, accessed on 2 October 2011.

50. <http://www.themissingparisi.com>

51. <http://www.facebook.com/people/Missing-Parsi/100002437887842>.

52. <http://www.fezana.org/node/198>

development of a comprehensive website containing a database of all the needs of the members of the Zoroastrian community in India; by the end of September 2011, it seems that no website was operational yet; only a LinkedIn was accessible to YLEP participants.⁵³

The Web and cultural heritage

Last but not least, the Web has played an important role in the preservation of the Zoroastrian cultural heritage and in strengthening the solidarity between Zoroastrians worldwide. As mentioned above, organizations such as WZO or concerned individuals make it their responsibility to help destitute Zoroastrians, be it in India, in Iran or other parts of the world. With the advent of the Internet, swift initiatives can be undertaken, such as the worldwide e-mail campaign initiated in 2002 by Jamshid Varza, a Zoroastrian living in San Francisco Bay Area. The campaign led to the preservation of a historic site in India. During an interview, Varza said: "I tell people, 'Wherever you are, get a digital or video camera, go out and capture the village, the community. Talk to old people. Get their stories and memories.' With the Internet, we can bring it all back and build this better source of information."⁵⁴

The preservation of the Zoroastrian cultural heritage is one of the major challenges for Zoroastrian communities worldwide. The dwindling of Zoroastrian populations, in particular in Gujarat, where in some localities there are virtually no Zoroastrians left, makes the Internet a powerful platform for safeguarding some traditions and other forms of knowledge or more tangible heritage. The Parsi community of New Delhi, India, shows great awareness of this depressing reality by counting the number of community members left in the region, on the anjuman's website⁵⁵:

There are just 733 Parsis left in our region of Delhi, Gurgaon and Noida – men, women and children included. Admittedly this number is scary. And we have to do something about our dwindling numbers, or we will be close to extinct in the next 100 years. Fact: in the past 18 months we have had 1 Birth, 22 Deaths, and 1 Marriage. If you have any thoughts on the

subject, and would like to share them with the community, please comment on the site.

The corpus shows that the 12 websites dedicated to Zoroastrian heritage are nevertheless quite isolated.

One example is a website created by Zoroastrian families who settled in Australia on the Parsi community in Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh, in Central India.⁵⁶ The most advanced and resourceful project is Parzor (Unesco Parsi-Zoroastrian project⁵⁷), initiated in 2002, which aims primarily at preserving tangible and intangible heritage in India. The networks and pools of experts maintained by its executive director, Dr. Shernaz Cama, and the excellent materials produced by Parzor, prove that the project reached its main objective. There are, however, still no projects that bring together the entire Zoroastrian community, including those living in the diaspora.

53. <http://www.linkedin.com/groups?home=&gid=146935>

54. <http://www.rcevans.me/zoros.html>

55. <http://delhiparsis.com>

56. <http://www.parsisinhansi.com.au>

57. <http://www.unescoparzor.com>

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