

# The 1001 Names of Ahura Mazda:

An Avestan Calligraphic First

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**Abstract:** Having received an old Gujarati booklet at our High Sacred Fire Temple by serendipity, I was divinely inspired to re-introduce the 1001 Names of Ahura Mazda (Zoroastrian Lord Creator) to the community via calligraphy in the ancient Avestan script.

I got the booklet transliterated/translated by a respected scholar priest. Next, I transformed these Names into thousands of thumbnail sketches. With no art background, I was stumped with final design selection and rescued by a senior design mentor. India's typography legend too, encouraged me to publish the world's first Avestan calligraphy book: The Zarathushtrian 1001 Names of Ahura Mazda.

This paper covers script revival, type/graphic design, calligraphic exploration and design selection... The journey invites all to understand how someone with no formal art training could with dogged persistence and Divine Grace bring forth a global first. That itself is inspiration enough for an audience who thinks, lives and breathes typo design!

**Key words:** Avesta: Ancient Sacred Zoroastrian Script, Rediscovered old Gujarati Text, Transliteration/Translation, Avestan Calligraphic Exploration & Design Selection, Book Design Experimentation, World's First Calligraphic Book, Script Revival

## 1. Introduction

Ba Name Khuda. This ancient invocation means, In the Name of the Lord...

This presentation is about how the world's first calligraphy Book on the Zarathushtrian 1001 Names of Ahura Mazda in the ancient Avestan script evolved. I am not a designer, typographer, scholar, historian, grammarian or linguist. As a student of Shri Palav, I was inspired by his Modi thesis in 1996 and as a calligrapher I have strived for 25 years to revive my ancestral script. We Zoroastrians were the original migrants fleeing persecution in Iran. India gave us freedom of faith.

## **2. Overview of Avesta Script**

### **2.1 Avesta Script**

Avesta is the name generally applied to the oldest scripture of the Zoroastrians. The word Avesta means '*what was not known till then*'. (Pithavala, B., 1994)

The Pahlavi script containing only 12 letters was the script of Iran during the Parthian and Sasanian periods up to the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. A new and improved script was invented about the 6<sup>th</sup> century, which is the present Avesta script. The Avesta texts in existence in Sasanian times and which are recited today were handed down by oral tradition. We can conclude that the Avesta scripture was composed in what is known as absolute prehistory - during the time when writing was unknown, and the art of writing was not invented. The Avesta script has been with us since the 6<sup>th</sup>c. (Mirza, H., 1987)

### **2.2 Invention**

According to the great Arab historian Masaudi, Avestan letters were invented by Lord Zarathushtra to record his teachings. Tradition speaks of Jamasp Hakim taking down the Master's words on parchment in letters of gold. Avestan characters are not derived from Semitic languages as firstly, there is no resemblance between these scripts, and secondly, the Semitic scripts do not have specific vowel characters as in the Avestan script. (Pithavala, B., 1994)

### **2.3 Number of letters**

According to Masaudi, the number of letters in the Avestan alphabet is 60. Lepsius gives the figure 58. Other scholars vary between 45 and 48. These discrepancies are due to the inclusion or otherwise of unauthorised, corrupt forms, special semi-vowels, compound letters, etc. However, it is clear that there are 26 original letters others being derived from this group. (Bulsara, S., 1930)

## **3. Rediscovering an Old Gujarati Text**

April 2013, Mumbai. We stood silently in prayer offering a *kathi* to the sacred *Padshah* at Wadiaji Atash Behram. My family had just arrived from Pune as our twins would be going in for their *Navar* priesthood ceremony next dawn. A priest emerged and bade me follow indicating some books he wanted seen. We followed him into a large room wherein lay a pile of old, dusty books on a windowsill. The priest pointed to the unwanted texts and

commanded us to take whatever we wanted. Quickly, we perused the pile. I saw a booklet which distinctly looked like 1001 Names of Ahura Mazda but in Gujarati. My husband urged me to take it knowing my 101 Names Avestan Calligraphy was much in demand. The non-descript booklet entered our lives that auspicious day with Divine Grace. Once home, this Gujarati booklet by Er Edulji K. Karakia, foreword dated 19<sup>th</sup> August, 1951 by Dastur Dinshawji Dastur Meherjirana was carefully placed in my studio cupboard and forgotten.

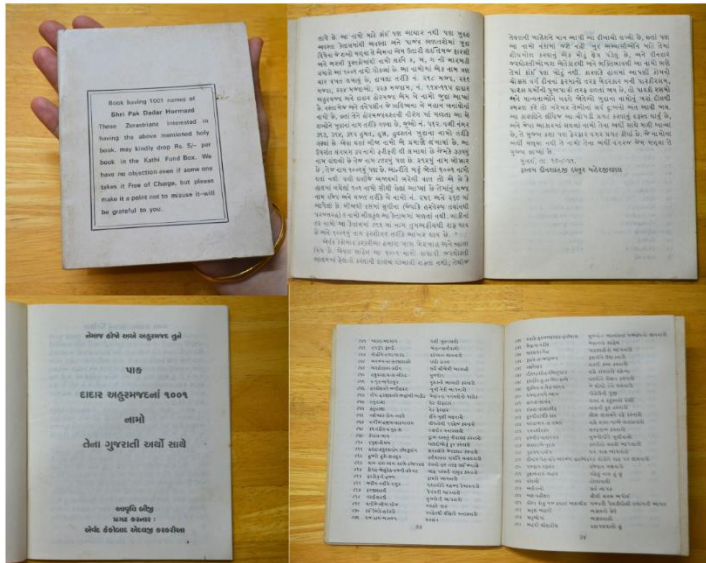


Figure 1. Small Gujarati text

#### 4. IGNC Delhi Exhibition Opportunity

Oct 2015, Pune. I met Dr. Shernaz Cama who I admired since 2003 when I worked for Parzor UNESCO program at Mumbai's NCPA for a sellout Avestan calligraphy exhibit. We discussed her requirements for *Threads of Continuity* exhibition at IGNC in Delhi. She commissioned a 101 Names Avestan calligraphy when by divine intercession I blurted that I had the 1001 Names of Ahura Mazda too, in Gujarati. Dr Cama's eyes widened as she (like almost all the Parsis I spoke too) had never heard of this. She willingly got it put into Avestan by Er Jamshed Sidhwa in Gurgaon and I was honoured to work on this historic artwork.

The exhibition opened March 21<sup>st</sup> 2017, the artwork was appreciated, and Parzor used it as end paper for their publication. Somehow the Names would not leave me be... I had started reciting them every month on Hormazd Roj since Jan 2016. For the next two years, I recited them almost daily as a prayer discipline. Their power was akin to a magic spell.



Figure 2. First 1001 Names artwork

## 5. Transliteration & Translation

Jan 2019. Next, I gathered up courage to request a valuable scholar priest mentor Dr. Rooyintan Peer to proofread the Avestan Names so as to compile it into a calligraphy book. He agreed, working long hours; painstakingly sifting through the Gujarati, transliterating into Avesta and gleaning the English translation. Though faced with literary challenges, he persevered with tenacity and professional integrity. Suddenly, my magic spells came alive with eternal meaning. End-January 2020, Dr. Peer handed over most of these Names to me at the Banaji Atash Behram. This meeting was providentially timed, weeks before Covid struck India.



Figure 3. Priest's notes

## 6. Thousands of Calligraphic Explorations

March 2020 India locked down. Unwinding at home, post twins ISC boards, I was very keen to comprehend the complexity and size of the 1001 Names textual matter. Over months, I managed to create two huge, beautiful pieces. The seed kernel of the Book germinated further.



Figure 4. 1001 Names artworks

On 12<sup>th</sup> June 2021, Hormazd Roj, I decided to begin. I spent hours daily, scribbling thumbnail calligraphy scribbles of each Name—often twelve to fifteen options! Rough paper, red ink and an old marker pen set the ball rolling. This labour of love went on for months on end. As the Book rooted itself in my consciousness, I knew I needed help.



Figure 5. Thumbnail calligraphy sketches

## 7. Perfecting Calligraphy Selection

Not possessing formal art training, I approached a mentor, international designer Zehra Tyabji. I required her critical eye to identify the best of the sketches to develop for final design. Exceptionally encouraging, she agreed to be Creative Consultant. Zehra spent months sifting through my sheets, ticking the finest sketches.



Figure 6. Final sketch selection

In her words, Zehra helped with “scrutinizing pages, some of around 10 to 15 varieties of the calligraphic Avestan symbols, one of which I had to choose for its intrinsic shape, strokes and beauty. I had to consider its legibility for printing even in a minute size. Going through 200 pages at a time, each filled with thumbnail sketches...Selecting, all in all, 1001 final images!” Zehra’s symbol selection was not done in isolation but in relation to the one preceding and following it. This prevented eye fatigue with a similar look page after page. Final selection thus involved reader psychology, attempting to keep visual boredom away by identifying varying forms.

## 8. Meeting the Legend

Dec 2021 saw simultaneous occurrences boost my efforts. I reconnected with my ex-advertising agency colleague after 30 years. Raju Gondhalekar entered the project as Book Designer. My uncle, Padma Shri puppeteer Dadi Pudumjee visited Pune for a family reunion post-lockdown. He was stupefied to see the scribble sheets and comprehended the cultural relevance of these thumbnail creations. Figuring out that this project was my personal calling, he came on-board as the second Creative Consultant. He swiftly arranged for us to get expert input from his NID teacher, the legendary Mahendrabhai Patel in Pune. Enthused,

the Master said we should proceed to design our book with the beautiful ‘rough’ scribbles itself! His appreciation meant everything.



Figure 7. Sheaves of scribbles receiving praise

## 9. Actual Artworks

20<sup>th</sup> April, 2022, an auspicious day saw me begin work on the FINAL artworks on special, acid-free Fedrigoni A5 sheets of paper. My tools were a thick marker, a ‘dry’ marker and a metal nib. Simple black ink. The style used is of our Indian manuscripts, not the more fluid Iranian version. Variations in the letterform and artistic license were employed to advantage. Having no formal art degree, my major role seemed to be over once I handed over the artworks for scanning. Yet the joy of book creation was about to begin.



Figure 8. Creating final artworks

## 10. Book Design Experimentation

The challenge for Raju Gondhalekar was enormous: to fit 1001 Artworks into a limited space while maintaining reader interest. Initial decorative designs were toyed with. Inspiration sparked in Leh when he saw a Buddhist monk pouring over a manuscript in a small monastery. The classic, calm layout struck a deep cord and the first look was born! Option 1, 2 and 3 took shape. One showed a set of 4 booklets, each containing 250 Names. Yet I wanted a complete presentation in its 1001 totality, as it was a global first. Later due to size and budget, the concept crystallised.

Our creative consultant Zehra Tyabji defined the basics. The grid for formatting and copy, alignments, columns and gutters were set. There was methodical and determined space between the paragraphs, headings and sub-headings. The look of the double page and that which starts a new chapter were planned. All pages reflected a continuity throughout. Colour distribution too was given importance as part of book design. The choice of Fonts for a particular subject had to be appropriate. Ideally ONE font in its various uses ie. bold, medium, light, size. Upper case, lower case or italics were finalized. When colour or photographs used and art paper required, they were placed so that they appear in and according to Forms/Sections that the book comprises of. Eventually, type of binding was decided along with end paper and jacket.



Figure 9. First decorative book design options





Figure 10. Book design inspired by a manuscript in Leh



Figure 11. Separate booklet options

## 11. Final Design

Months later, the final look was settled upon. Here is Book Designer Raju Gondhalekar's ideation, "We aimed for a reachable, coffee-table sized book, not a textbook. Design needed to be compact, user-friendly and attractive in presentation. I wanted to express Perin's expressions which were hand and heart-driven, not mechanical at source. The primary motive was to translate this purity of form into a valuable keepsake which would be an heirloom. The concept had to be delivered in an earthy yet elegant format, refraining from a commercial glitzy, glamorous feel. A hardbound 'serious' look was necessitated by the amount of pictorial matter, spiritual content and value addition. Colours used were in keeping with the auspicious subject, Perin's red logo and her earlier publication's red cover. The brown used reflected the wood offering made to the sacred Fires and the evocative foreign art textured

paper contributed to the overall natural effect. We settled on 8”x8” for substantial paper cost savings.”



Figure 12. Design development



Figure 13. Final book front and back with bookmark

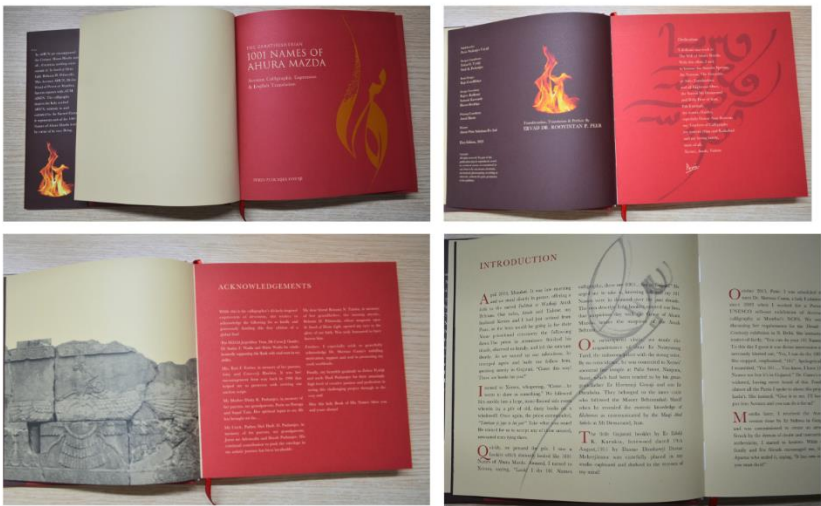


Figure 14. Initial pages of book

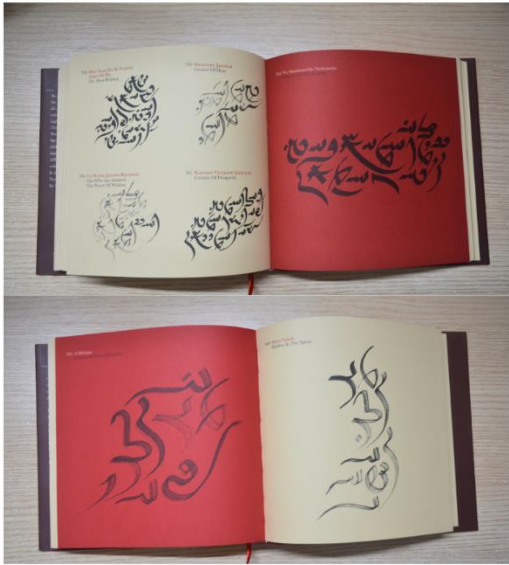


Figure 15. Sample pages

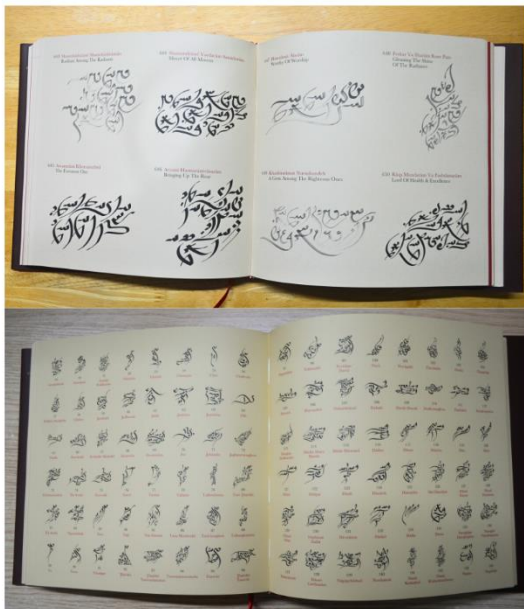


Figure 16. Page and listing page samples

## 12. Brilliant Scholarly Preface

The senior scholar priest Dr Peer scrutinized the final dummy xerox and placed a foundation below my fanciful calligraphic forms, lending tremendous credence to creativity.

While mentioning that 101 Names were part of daily prayers, Dr Peer explained, “As is mentioned in the original Gujarati Preface, the origin of this text is not known. The publisher himself mentions that he had acquired the same in some mysterious but divine circumstances. Besides this text, there is simply no other material available to ascertain the existence of 1001 Names in the present Zoroastrian scripture, although the writer of the Gujarati Preface mentions that one used to hear traditionally from the ancestors that in ancient times, there were 1001 Names in existence in the Avesta, but as was the fate of many Avesta texts, this has also been lost to us.”

He mentioned, “This writer had to bring to bear upon them all his expertise and experience in the prayer texts, scriptural languages and linguistic subjects in order to attempt to restore several Names to their likely original forms. Even then, this strategy could not be applied for the second group of Names, which, as stated above is totally non-understandable. The Names in this group are therefore retained as they appear in the original text, with no guarantee for their authenticity. The only clue available is that almost all the Names in this group have been translated into Gujarati, which has somewhat helped to render the same into English. Since even such Gujarati meanings are written in the old forms, and in an highly Perso/Arabic-influenced-Gujarati language, such terms are therefore not to be found in the usual Gujarati dictionaries, and were therefore quite difficult, first to understand the context, and then translate them into English.” (Coyaji, P. 2023)

## PREFACE

The present book is basically about the author, Mrs. Perin Puthanjee Coyaji's mastery over the art of calligraphy, and which she has expressed through the text of 1001 Names of Ahura Mazda, the Supreme Being and the Creator of the Universe, as envisaged in the Zoroastrian religion. So a few words about the said text of 1001 Names are essential in order to understand the entire work of the author in a proper perspective.

In the present Zoroastrian scripture, there are only 101 Names of Ahura Mazda available in a standard form, and which are largely in the Pazed version. These Names, each one eulogizing the unseen, but limitless spiritual expanse of the Creator, are to be recited as one of the *Yajnas* (compulsory) prayers daily by a Zoroastrian.

But as mentioned by the author herself in her introduction to this book, she chanced upon, by destiny, this text of 1001 Names in the Gujarati language at the Shri H. R. Wadilaji Atash Bahram (Fire-Temple) in Mumbai. The said text was published in the year 1951 by a very venerable Parsi *Mahad* (Priest)

Kaikhodad Edulji Karkaria, and quite a descriptive Preface was written to it by a well-known scholar-priest of that time by the name of Rustom Dinshahji Dastur of the illustrious family of Melshejizans, the High Priests of Navsari, and who was fondly known as “*Bhapaji*”. The English Preface by the present writer is therefore primarily based on the said Gujarati Preface, with suitable additions thereto.

As is mentioned in the original Gujarati Preface, the origin of this text is not known. The publisher himself mentions that he had acquired the same in some mysterious but divine circumstances. Besides this text, there is simply no other material available to ascertain the existence of 1001 Names in the present Zoroastrian scripture, although the writer of the Gujarati Preface mentions that one used to hear traditionally from the ancestors that in ancient times, there were 1001 Names in existence in the Avesta, but as was the fate of many Avesta texts, this has also been lost to us. He, in fact, cites the following Persian couplet in support of that contention:

*Khadar-Benamashkhar-0-yak hast  
Bahar nam khondanbushchamshadist*

Which means: “That Lord whose Names are One Thousand and One, and much help is receivable by reciting each one of them”.

Other than this, the only allusion to 1001 Names at present could be deduced from a ceremonial act in the Yasna ritual. During the preparatory section, the priest passes the ‘*rasuni-vo*’ (a ring tied with the hair of *Yasna*, the sacred white bull) in the vessel filled with water to the brigs, while reciting the 101 Names of Ahura Mazda QSCLE, in order to charge the water and the implements therein. But among the Bhasgaviya priests, belonging to the Navsari diocese in Gujarat, in the Yasna rituals performed during the *Nirangun*, one of the highest liturgical ceremonies, the practice of passing the said ring through the water is TEN TIMES the recitation of 101 Names, thereby translating the same into 1010 Names in a way.

The said text of 1001 Names could be broadly divided into three categories. Ejoim the beginning to the number 560, the first group comprises the words which are found familiar in the Zoroastrian prayers and ceremonies, and are from Avesta, Pahlavi,

Pazed, Persian and Arabic languages. The third group from 891 to the end also consist of similar types of words, and particularly the final 91 Names are the same 91 Names out of the present available 101 Names (The first 10 Names of the regular 101 Names are not to be found in that serial order). But the most difficult part of the said text is the second group, comprising of numbers 561 to 890. As is stated in the original Gujarati Preface also, the language of this group of Names is a very mysterious one, and is simply not understandable from any linguistic viewpoint.

Upon the request of the author of this present book, the writer of this English Preface, first converted all the 1001 Names from their original Gujarati script into the script of the Avestan alphabetical letters, then TRANSLITERATED the same into the Roman script, and tried to assign an English TRANSLATION to each of them to the best of his ability. One has to bear in mind that there is no academic or scholarly element attached to this text. Some of the Names are repeated, several others occur in different inflected

Figure 17. Preface page

### 13. World's First Avestan Calligraphic Book Presentation

This Book was released on 14<sup>th</sup> August 2023 by my parents. It has gained appreciation from academics, artists and commoners. It received media coverage by our foremost community magazine Parsiana and it has the honour of being presented to Typoday 2023 as a Sacred Script Paper submission. It will be discussed at a Zoroastrian Global Conclave in January 2024.



Figure 18. Book presentation at release programme

### 14. Cultural Importance of Script Revival

What is the importance of revitalising a historical writing system, especially that of a dead language?

1. Preservation of Cultural Heritage: Scripts reconnect societies with roots, ancestors, traditions and archives.
2. Language Revitalisation: Historical scripts are associated with endangered/extinct languages. By reviving scripts, communities can inject interest in native languages, preventing disappearance while ensuring linguistic diversity.
3. Identity/Belonging: It contributes to community identity/bonding among members. A revived script used in daily life acts as a visual representation of distinct cultural identity, fostering pride and unity.

4. Reclaiming Narrative Authority: Often communities use a colonial/imposed script that doesn't accurately represent their culture. Script revival reclaims narrative authority.
5. Furthering Access to History: Ancient documents, literature and inscriptions are written in scripts often no longer understood. Revival opens up a treasure chest of scholarly knowledge.
6. Art/Aesthetics: Visually appealing historical scripts are important aspects of cultural aesthetics. Revival leads to creation of unique artworks that celebrate heritage.
7. Educational Opportunities: GenNext can learn heritage, history and languages as their study is enhanced.
8. Cultural Exchange: Revival often facilitates cultural exchange between communities and regions, fostering enriching collaborations.
9. Countering Cultural Erosion: Modern society adopts dominant global cultures, leading to a loss of indigenous languages/scripts. Script revival effectively counteracts this erosion.

## **15. Conclusions**

Script revival is crucial to preserving cultural heritage, language diversity and ethnic identity. By revitalizing historical scripts, we pass the treasured baton of cultural legacy onwards. As mentioned above, revival of an ancient sacred script can be instrumental in the preservation of cultural heritage by reconnecting societies with roots, ancestors, traditions and archives. Other benefits are language revitalisation, nurturing community identity/belonging with pride in ethnicity, reclaiming often forgotten narrative authority, furthering access to historical documentation, preserving cultural art/aesthetics towards celebrating our varied heritage, improving educational opportunities for GenNext in areas of heritage, facilitating cultural exchange between peoples and enriching collaborations across the globe. Inevitably, all the above leads to effectively countering cultural erosion.

My work with Avestan calligraphy was motivated by the fact that our Zoroastrian thread ceremony/Navjote prayers are learned by children from books having Gujarati and Roman scripts. This inspired me to develop the world's first calligraphy Kusti Prayers book in 2005 for children. It showcased Avestan, Gujarati and Roman scripts with an English translation, so that coming generations can KNOW of the existence of this beautiful sacred script. I have worked in isolation with Avestan script revival for the past twenty-five years.

Therefore, if myself, with no formal design/scholastic/linguistic/research background, can draw deep on diligence and dogged determination to catalyse something so meaningful as an Avestan sacred calligraphy Book of 1001 Names of Ahura Mazda as a global first for my miniscule community; then surely super-talented typographers like yourselves can be inspired by this creation to move more mountains than one can dream of!

Kshnaothra Ahurahe Mazdao...

## **Acknowledgement**

I acknowledge Divine Grace & Spiritual Guides, Shri Achyut Palav, Er Dr. Rooyintan Peer, Zehra Tyabji, Padma Shri Dadi Pudumjee, Raju Gondhalekar, Dr Shernaz Cama, Dr Gulshan Deboo and my highly supportive husband Dr Xerxes Coyaji and our twins Atash and Tishtar.

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