

The Rediff Special/Amberish K Diwanji in New Delhi

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Are Parsis in self-destruct mode?

Every time a census report is released, the topic is raised all over again -- the declining numbers of Parsis.

One of India's smallest and arguably the best-known minority community, it has produced some of India's biggest names -- in politics (Dadabhai Naoroji); in business (Tata, Wadia, Godrej to name just a few); in the law (Nani Palkhivala and Fali Nariman to name only two of the most eminent); in the armed forces (India's first Field Marshal, S H F J Maneckshaw).

Will this community pass into the pages of history?

The Parsis number just in thousands.

India's Registrar General J K Banthia says the community is heading towards extinction in India, and, in effect, the world because Parsis are only found in India.

He says at this rate Parsis may not live to see the next century.

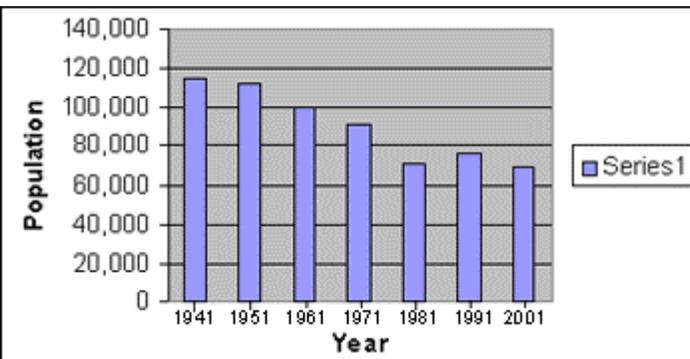
But not all Parsis accept such dire predictions.

One such optimist is Khojeste Mistree, who runs the Centre for Zoroastrian Studies in Mumbai.

"We must remember the Parsis were always a small community right from the time the first Parsis landed in Gujarat around 1,200 years ago. Our numbers have never dwindled drastically; certainly there were a little more of us earlier," he says.

From 1941, when the community probably peaked at 115,000, the 2001 census showed only 69,601 Parsis.

Jehangir Patel, editor of *Parsiana*, a community magazine, and a liberal voice in the community, believes the writing is on the wall.



"I doubt if our community will really survive beyond this century," he says.

In 1991, the census showed the Parsis had actually *increased* from the earlier census (see table), while declining every decade.

Mistree says this proves his point. "Our community has not been shrinking, it has simply been dispersing across the globe. There were huge waves of migrations in the 1960s and 1970s to the UK and the US. This trend declined in the 1980s, which explains the high 1991 census. Again migration picked up in the 1990s due to the tech boom, and hundreds of Parsis migrated West," he says.

Mistree says Parsis abroad are marrying other Parsis and the community's number is more or less stable at a little less than 80,000 but that it is much more dispersed now.

"As someone who talks on the Zoroastrian religion, I travel abroad and meet Parsis all over the world, who give me the number of their members abroad. For instance, around 1,000 Parsis moved to New Zealand in the last 12 years, another 1,000 to Australia in the last decade, and so forth. Add them all together and the figure is quite stable," he says.

Mistree believes it is more important to calculate the number of Parsis worldwide before jumping to conclusions that the community is shrinking.

Professor Ashish Bose, one of India's leading demographers, too worries about the Parsi community.

"The statistics are stark. I fear for the community's future. I have told the community that they need to increase their fertility rate to survive the next century," he says.

But is it easy to increase this prosperous community's fertility rate?

As any demographer will point out, there is a direct correlation between prosperity and fertility across the globe: more the prosperity, fewer the children; and vice-versa.

For instance, the fertility rate of prosperous Europeans has fallen dramatically as has that of Japan. In contrast, the poor continue to have more children, as is best illustrated by the rising Muslim population of India.

On the socio-economic and education front, Muslims and Parsis are at the extreme ends of the spectrum.

"The Parsi decline is the price the community is paying for its women's education and emancipation," says Patel.

Parsi female literacy rate is 97 per cent, the highest in India.

Parsi women tend to study more and marry late. They end up having fewer children. "One cannot push couples to have more children just to ensure a community's viability," points out Patel.

For Mistree, there is another problem -- the incredibly high number of bachelors and spinsters within the community.

"Too many of our men and women just don't marry, claiming they haven't found the right person. In such a small community, even if a few hundreds don't marry, the proportion is very high and this directly impacts the community's growth," he said.

He added that he has also told the Parsi Panchayat, which oversees the community's affairs, to come up with innovative ideas to help the community grow.

One such idea is to provide larger houses (more than half of the Parsis in Mumbai live in accommodation provided by the Parsi Panchayat) so that couples can have larger families.

"Mumbai forces people to live in small houses, but since our community is small with so much property, surely we can provide larger residences," he said.

But the final frontier is the question of allowing people to convert to Zoroastrianism, especially those persons whose one parent is a Parsi.

This question has divided the Parsi community right down the middle with the orthodox simply refusing any leeway, while the liberals argue that not reforming will simply ensure the community's extinction.

Dadi Vesuna from the northwest Mumbai suburb of Bandra says he is unaware that Parsis abroad were accepting converts. He thinks it goes against the very grain of being a Parsi.

He says the growing trend of marrying outside the community is wrong. He says the boys and girls going in for mixed marriages should be considered outcasts.

Yuzdi Badhniwalla, electrical engineer and an MBA, is also a purist. He feels the Parsis of India should not intermingle with Zoroastrians abroad and should avoid aligning with the likes of the International Zoroastrian Organisation.

"They don't understand or respect our beliefs. They accept converts because they feel our numbers are dwindling. They always take views diametrically opposite to those of Parsis. I mean the Americans and British. They might not have the land assets that the Bombay Parsi Panchayat has, but they have cash. This helps them garner support to their views. I don't agree with them. We cannot accept converts and we must not join the world body."

To understand the problem it is necessary to distinguish between Zoroastrianism and Parsi, words that are often used synonymously but are not.

The Parsis are descendents of Persians who sought refuge in India after the Arabs overran ancient Persia (now Iran) in the seventh and eighth centuries. Thus, there is an ethnic element: they are of Aryan stock that has managed to keep alive their distinct identity. The religion the Parsis follow is Zoroastrianism, founded by the Prophet Zarathustra or Zoroaster.

Traditionally, it is believed that when the first Zoroastrians came to India, they promised the Hindu king who gave them refuge, Jadi Rana, that they would not convert the natives to Zoroastrianism.

But another view is that refusing to convert was also a way to ensure that the race remained 'unpolluted.'

Modernity has broken down the walls that separated the different communities, more so in a city like Mumbai where a majority of Parsis live.

Now, almost every third Parsi marries out of the community.

The children of Parsi fathers and non-Parsi mothers can be baptised as Parsis (the ceremony is called the *Navjote*), but not the children of Parsi mothers and non-Parsi fathers.

Incidentally, the privilege to children of Parsi fathers was not granted by the community but by a Bombay high court ruling.

And since community leaders are unwilling to accept the children of Parsi mothers and non-Parsi fathers, the only way this will change is if someone goes to court and demands that there be no discrimination on the basis of sex, says Patel.

Mistree wonders how people who become Zoroastrians can be called Parsis, since one can only be born into an ethnic community, not join it.

"Such neo-converts can be called Zoroastrians but surely they are not Parsis. What the liberals don't understand is that even if we take in children with Parsi mothers and non-Parsi fathers, it does not solve their concern about declining Parsi numbers. We may increase the religion, but not the community," he says.

He has a point. For the Parsis of India, it is a tough call: should they keep alive their religion even as the Parsi ethnicity gradually disappears? Or keep things as they are and hope that the new generation of Parsi couples will have more children.

Perhaps Census 2011 might help the community decide the path it must take.

Additional reportage: A Ganesh Nadar in Mumbai

Photograph: Arun Patil