

PARSIS

The vanishing breed

The Parsis are vanishing. So are the qualities that made them wealthy businessmen.

JEHANGIR S. POCHA

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Many Parsis don't want new converts as that would dilute available resources and affect the social security net.

SANJIT KUNDU

He is uncommonly seen but much beloved, the brunt of many jokes and the beneficiary of much respect. He is the one we love because he donated the benches in the neighbourhood park, the one who causes road-rage by honking at the potholes on the road. Often rumped, always eccentric, and never lacking for a unique turn of phrase, the Good Parsi has long occupied a place in Indian hearts far disproportionate to his number. So it almost seems unfair that when India Inc. is facing new and seemingly infinite horizons, the fortunes of one of its oldest and most successful business communities is waning. Or is it?

The Parsis, once indomitable figures in India's political, economic and social life, are locked in an emotional debate over how best to preserve their community, while also moving with the times. Though the community has always been microscopic, its population is expected to slide from the current 70,000 to 25,000 by 2020, mostly as a result of its educated and increasingly secular youth marrying late and/or outside the community, and also because of its refusal to accept converts. "If this happens

we'll be classified as a tribe," says Khushroo Madon, a self-described reformist priest in Mumbai.

Critics also say Parsis are losing the spirit and innovation that powered them to become one of the wealthiest communities in the world. "I look at young Parsi men these days and they seem content to just loaf around ... they think small and don't do things like they did in the old days," says Roxanne Pavri, 23, in Cusrow Baug, a serene Parsi housing colony in the heart of chaotic Mumbai. Between the 1650s and 1947, Parsis, in their distinctive white duplees and richly embroidered gara sarees, established India's first steel mill, stock exchange, political party, university, public hospital, newspaper, printing press, film studio, private electricity plant, airline, modern dance company, movie theatre, construction company, bank, insurance company, and feminist movement. The community also dominated professions such as law, medicine and accounting, and Parsi traders were the first Indians to establish trading posts across the world.

Significantly, Parsis were honest, patriotic where they focused their energies, and generous in sharing their success. The Tatas, the community's first family and the country's premier business house, famously asked: "What does India need?" rather than "What will make us the most money?" And despite the community's close association with the British, Parsis such as Dadabhai Navroji were instrumental in kick-starting the Independence movement.

Numerous portraits and marble statues of these and other intrepid and altruistic Parsi men and women still dot Mumbai in mute testimony to their accomplishments and benefactions. But few statues are being erected for Parsis of the later generations.

The truth of Pavri's words echo in almost every home around her. Cusrow Baug was originally built as charitable housing by the Wadia's of Bombay Dyeing fame. Now many of its residents, despite having progressed into the upper-class, twist laws and ethics to retain their hold over these homes. Their kids restrict their dreams to buying a Royal Enfield, and landing a safe job at Jet Airways. And the Wadias themselves, once the princes of Indian industry, fail even to make the list of India's top industrialists. Not surprisingly, the ratio of Parsis in India's best schools, professions, and top jobs is falling rapidly, even though it remains proportionately higher than for any other community.

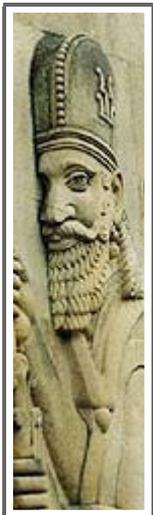


Chasm Over Change

Madon says he is trying to goad Parsis into responding to the possibility of their demise: "We must become more broad-minded and welcome children of mixed parents into our community." To Zoroastrian conservatives, this is heresy. "Purity is more important than numbers," says Khojeste Mistree, a Zoroastrian scholar in Mumbai. "Our religion is interwoven with our ethnicity (and) can only be passed on through a Zoroastrian father." To many, this doesn't seem sensible or fair. "I would have looked seriously at Zoroastrianism when I was choosing my spiritual path," says Sita Mani, 33, the daughter of a Zoroastrian mother and a Hindu father. "Its basic tenets - good thoughts, good words and good deeds - are so sound." But since Mani was banned from even entering a Zoroastrian 'fire' temple, she says her interest in the religion waned, and she now practises Buddhism. With the Zoroastrian community losing thousands of would-be members like Mani, Madon says he has started performing the navjote (a thread ceremony-like religious initiation) of children born of Zoroastrian mothers and non-Zoroastrian fathers. Other Zoroastrian groups, such as one run by Ali Jafarey, a Los Angeles-based Pakistani, have also begun to accept converts from other religions. But the blowback over this has been fierce.

Looking Back As A Way Forward

The seeming contradiction between this myopic ethno-religious conservatism and the socio-economic progressiveness of the Parsis is rooted in their refugee mentality, says Mani Kamerkar, a Zoroastrian historian and author of *From the Iranian Plateau to the Shores of Gujarat, a chronicle of Zoroastrian migration to India.*



Though Zoroastrianism, generally considered the world's oldest prophetic religion, flourished in Persia (modern-day Iran) for millennia, greatly influencing Judaism, Christianity and Islam, it was virtually destroyed by the Arab invasion of Persia in 651 AD. Some Zoroastrians remained in Iran, facing varying degrees of prejudice over the centuries. Others fled, mostly to India. Legend has it that when these fierce-looking warriors landed in Gujarat 1,400 years ago, the local king, Jadav Rana, sent them a goblet filled with milk to show that there was no room in the country for them. But an astute Parsi priest answered by dissolving a handful of sugar in the milk, impressing Rana enough for him to grant the Parsis permanent refuge.

Though Parsis assimilated peacefully into Indian life, they did not intermarry with local communities and maintained their faith against overwhelming odds. Now "Zoroastrians have become obsessed with the idea of saving themselves, keeping apart from the 'Other'," says Kamerkar, who is married to a non-Parsi.

Many modern Parsis are increasingly pushing for change, but conservatives such as Mistree say their "over-westernisation and over-secularisation is killing our Parsipanu", or way of life. This finds resonance with many Parsis who believe the best way to secure their community's future is to hold fast to the past. For example, more and more Parsis (myself included) have begun visiting Iran in an attempt to reinvigorate their affinities with Zoroastrian Persia's grand past.

This has given rise to what I call the Über-Parsi. Über-Parsis cruise public libraries and surf the Web to excavate obscure facts and reacquaint the world with the ancient Persian Achaemenian, Parthian and Sassanian dynasties, which were the cultural and military superpowers of their times, eventually outlasting their rivals, the Greeks and the Romans. Über-Parsis are easily made, for Parsis are not defined by how small they are in number, but by how great they are in mind. But curating history can only go so far in energising a community.

In many homes the attempt to cull present meaning from Persian history descends into farce. These are homes where glossy picture-books on ancient Persia lie strategically on coffee tables, a silver bookmark from Tiffany's thrust

carelessly between pages never opened. If at all the books are read, it is to satisfy the thirst for that latest trend of Parsi parents - the quest for a 'different' name with which to name sons and daughters. Names like Artaxerxes, Sohrushmani and Cambyses bludgeon friends with their ancient authenticity and reassure parents that their children will always be regarded as 'special', and they, as refined Parsis.

Renaissance

Zoroastrianism is undergoing a mild renaissance in the region of its birth, Central Asia. Though leaders "have tried for centuries to sweep away all trace of Zoroastrianism, many people still feel it in their hearts," says Sohrab Yazdi, a Zoroastrian community leader in Yazd, a quintessential Zoroastrian town with its adobe houses and looming minarets, where most of Iran's 30,000 Zoroastrians live.

From outside the shattered splendour of Persepolis, the ancient capital of Persia, Bahram Agahi talks of how many Iranians want to rediscover the faith of their forefathers. "People are tired of the mullahs....," he says. "I challenge the government to allow conversion out of Islam for even one day. It is unlikely to see that day, for Iran bans the conversion of Muslims by punishment of death. Yet that some Iranians practise Zoroastrianism in secret is a fact."

There is also evidence that some Kurds, whose Yezidi religion is centered around the town of Sinjar in northern Iraq and which closely resembles Zoroastrianism, are returning to what they call "ancient faith". Hameed Akhtari, an Iraqi Kurd living in Iran, says he has been smuggling Zoroastrian books into Iraq since 1995. But he was at pains to emphasise that the books were used "only for academic research".

Zoroastrianism has also been experiencing a creeping renewal in southern Russia and some Central Asian countries such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan, which were historically part of the Persian Empire. Some leaders in these republics, particularly President Imomali Rahmonov of Tajikistan, are very supportive of this, partly in the hope of attracting investment from Indian Parsis and partly to offset the influence of Islam.

Many Zoroastrians are pleased to hear of their faith's resurgence. But some are concerned that it may bring the Zoroastrian communities in Iran and India into conflict with Iran's Islamist extremists or Indian chauvinists, who oppose religious conversion. That is something the community does not have the wherewithal to face. "You must understand our apprehension," says Yazdi. "We are like a small fish in a big pond. One wrong move and we will be eaten."

A Net Too Safe

Though Parsis are simultaneously an ancient and urbane people, very little of their present culture is their own. Most authentic Zoroastrian culture was lost in Iran. The syncretic Persio-Hindu creed Parsis developed in Gujarat - where they first landed as emigrants 1,400 years ago and where they mostly lived until the 1800s - was cast aside in favour of Anglophilic norms under the British. As British influence in India faded, one of the central inspirations behind (Anglo-) Parsi culture disappeared, and the community struggled to find a replacement for it.

And self-described 'liberal' Parsis having little interest in, or knowledge of, their community's inner dynamics, strayed towards a broad secularism. In doing so, they left the home field to conservative Parsis who wanted no change, says Minoo Shroff, chairman of the Bombay Parsi Panchayat, the community's apex socio-religious organisation.

Recently, at a Parsi wedding where everyone was gazing disinterestedly on priests murmuring prayers in a dead language, I commented on how devoid of anything personal, or even remotely romantic, the ceremony seemed. I was immediately shushed. "This is the way it has always been," a friend said. "We have to preserve our ways." I was struck by the significance of what my friend said, even though, given the rapt attention with which he poured himself another shot of Johnnie Walker, he himself was not. It suddenly became clear to me that Parsis have reached the nadir that a community can reach: the point at which the perfect mimicking of an old custom, rather than any innovation, becomes the ultimate accolade.

Kamerkar says this fear of change and lack of initiative is partly rooted in Parsi philanthropy. Wealthy Parsis have endowed the community with free housing, education, health care and religious infrastructure worth more than \$500 million, according to Shroff. Kamerkar says that over the years the assurance of inheriting free homes and a social safety net has robbed the community of motivation and fuelled a selfish desire not to dilute resources by accepting new converts. To sidestep this, she suggests new Zoroastrian converts could form a separate sect and should not claim any Bombay Parsi Panchayat funds. Her argument is that while being a Parsi or Irani means something specific (that is, being a Zoroastrian from Persia whose ancestors settled in India), anyone can become a Zoroastrian if they choose. This is hard to argue with as Zoroastrianism has no Pope-like figure with divine authority over the faith.

This urge to preserve old wealth and advantage is rooted in a widespread belief amongst Parsis that they will never again be able to acquire the riches and standing that came to them under the British. Most Parsis feel something mysterious happened when the British left India in 1947, something that sapped the confidence of the community. It is this constant feeling of having the sun at one's back that is casting a shadow over the entrepreneurial dreams of many young Parsis today.

Rejuvenation?

Perhaps Parsis overlook that it was not they who changed as much as their environment. In the colonial era, it was a favoured practice of the British to empower minority communities. This allowed the British to win local allies while keeping the majority of the country out of power. This, coupled with their own capabilities, accounted a lot for the Parsis' success. When things changed with Independence, it was only natural that there would be a period of adjustment. But there is nothing wrong, weak or wounded in the basic Parsi ethos that is rooted in a surprisingly modern and can-do philosophy.

At its core, Zoroastrianism emphasises personal initiative, both in making the right choices in the metaphysical universe and in securing happiness in the material world. It is a faith that asks one to live in and enjoy the material world, while not being seduced into forgetting that the higher purpose of life is to take the side of right in the battle of Spenta Mainyu (the Good) against Angre Mainyu (the UnGood).

From Zoroastrianism, one can easily conjure the ideal modern man, what someone once called a kind of Zorba the



The young Parsis of today think small. They don't do things like they did in the old days.

Buddha - a contemplative man in touch with his spiritual side, yet completely at home in the material world, a man who knows the value of ethics as well as the rate of the euro, a man who knows how to raise money from investors in Paris and how to lapse into meditation, who serves his own and also cares for others.

This philosophy is as alive in the community today as it ever was, even though this may be easy to miss, for it often articulates itself in small ways - the young widow who returns her husband's rented office to his landlord friend, or the father who encourages his daughter's modern choices. There is, already, a new generation of Parsis that has learnt to live and thrive in changed circumstances, both in India and abroad. These youths are not only looking to preserve their heritage, but to grow it. They are excelling in business, the professions, academia, the arts, entertainment, journalism, science and sport, and many of them continue to give generously to their community and the wider society.

As India opens up to the world, there is every indication that Parsis could once again place themselves at the forefront of economic and social development. The community's high education levels, its familiarity with global culture and aptitude for the arts position it perfectly for success in the information and media economy. If this happens, it will be not be the first time the community rejuvenates itself. In 330 BC, Alexander destroyed Persepolis, the Persian capital, but his successors were expelled by resurgent Persian dynasties. In the 650s, the Arabs conquered Persia and Egypt, but while they Arabised Egypt, they got Persianised. And, of course, Zoroastrianism itself survived, then flourished in India.

From amid the swelter and flour-scented air of the cosily antique Yazdani bakery in Mumbai, Zend M. Zend, baker extraordinaire and an Irani well known for his earthy philosophical views, says the time has come for the Parsis to stop "this moaning and groaning" about survival. "Zoroastrianism has been left for dead many times. Each time it was our zest for life, our life-celebrating attitude that saw us through," he says. "As long as we have that, we'll be fine."