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# Exploration of Religious and Cultural Heritage of the Parsi Community

Dr. Someshwar V. Wasekar,

Department of English,

Bhiwapur Mahavidyalaya, Bhiwapur.

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## Introduction

In India, the Parsis are an ethnic and religious minority. With a population of about a million, they are arguably the tiniest community in the whole globe. A native of Pars or Fars is referred to as a Parsi. Southern Iran contains the ancient Persian province of Pars. They departed their nation to protect their faith from being forcibly assimilated by Arab Muslims who invaded their territory in the seventh century A.D. The Parsis are devotees of Zoroaster, also known as Prophet Zarathustra.

**Keywords:** Zoroaster, Mazdeism, Humata, Hukhta, Hvarshta

The Parsis take great pleasure in being the main Asiatic nation of their period and the descendants of the powerful Aryan tribes that controlled Persia ages even before Christian era. They assert that their monarchs were the strongest, smartest, and most kind of all kings, and that their predecessors had received education in all the fine skills of civilized life. They take pride in the fact that their dominion was eight times larger than Babylonian. The Mediterranean, Aegean, Black, Caspian, Indian, and Red Seas are all touched by it.

According to historians like Annie Besant, Zoroastrianism was established about 7000 or 8000 B.C. whereas Aristotle states that the date about at 9,600 B.C. According to L.H. Jackson's book "*Zoroaster*", Zoroaster was born around 660 B.C. and passed away in 600 B.C.

Albert S.G. Canning makes a statement in the book *Words on Existing Religions- An Historical Sketch*:

“That Zoroastrianism existed at the earliest birth of time, while its serene sublimity, its wise and practical beneficence, its peculiar humane tendencies and its freedom from fantasies and superstitions, which debase and enslave the human intellect, have elicited warm applause and cordial admiration at all periods of its existence”.<sup>1</sup> (Sharma and Sharma, 1999, p.5)

As has been mentioned in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the title “Zoroastrianism” was first used in Archibald Sayce’s *Principles of Comparative Philosophy* in 1874. Thomas Browne (1605–1682) is credited with making the first living mention of Zoroaster (Zarathustra, Zarathoshti) in Western academia. He did so in his *Religio Medici* (1643) work. The word “Mazdeism”, which refers to a religion that recognizes Ahura Mazda’s divine power, is a relatively new phrase (The Wise Lord). The word “Mazdeism”, which may have been derived from the French word “mazdeisme”, is listed in the March 2001 draught version of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The Avestan language word Yasna, which means “worship”, is combined with the prefix Mazda to form the Zoroastrian name for the religion, Mazdayasna.

Zoroastrians or Zarathustrianism are the terms used by followers of this religion to identify themselves. The adherent states in a Creed statement.

“... I profess myself a devotee of Mazda, a follower of Zarathustra”.

According to Zoroastrians, Ahura Mazda is both the start and the finish. He is portrayed as the one source of truth, the creator, the supporter, all-encompassing, eternal, pure, and all-knowing. The prophet recognized loyalty to only Ahura Mazda in the Gathas, the holy books of Zoroastrianism that are said to have been written by Zoroaster himself.

In one sentence, Zoroastrian morality may be perfectly described as: “good thoughts , good words, good deeds”.<sup>2</sup> (Humata, Hukhta, hvarshta in Avestan). Good words and acts are born from good thinking. Qualities like love, serenity, tranquility, modesty, devotion, etc. are born from good thinking.

Work ethic, honesty, generosity, happiness, sobriety, frugality and truth are a few of the most significant Zoroastrian values. The quality of industry or labour is given the highest priority.

The Creator of the World is always working for that. Since performance is the key to release in God's universe, man too has no choice except work. Honesty should go hand in hand with work or industry. The ultimate level of happiness is the fulfillment that comes from doing honest work.

The teachings of Zarathushtra predict a universal resuscitation, a final judgment, and an everlasting period of World peace. Humans on Earth can make decisions according to their wish. A decision to support with the forces of good is one's own. It involves leading an active, charitable lifestyle. The beliefs are comparable to Christian beliefs of life after death. The righteous will be led into Paradise, while the wicked will be led either into Purgatory or directly into Hell. In a presentation given to Vision TV of Canada on May 26, 1995, Keki B. Sroff demonstrated how Zoroastrian concepts were crucial to the advancement of Western philosophy. He mentioned a few theological ideas that Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity all share in common.

The following are the shared aims.

- Faith in a single, benevolent God.
- The concept of Hell and Heaven, along with personal judgment.
- The final victory of right over wrong, a rigid system of morality and ethics.
- The Messiah who will eventually complete the restitution.
- The ideas of eternal life, judgment and rebirth.
- Terms such as Satan, heaven, preacher, and amen have Zoroastrian roots.

Parsis in India mostly merged into the Gujrati culture. However, they also adhered to their own customs that had been passed down through the years verbally. This oral tradition consists of rites of passage, prayers, traditions, and heroic tales. The majorities of Parsi women choose to wear their saris in the Gujarati manner, with the pallu crossing the chest from the right shoulder and tucked behind the left waist. Numerous Gujrati social and cultural traditions including those found in dance, music and cuisine have assimilated into Parsi culture through the centuries. However, their religion has not changed, and their fundamental beliefs have kept them apart from the majority of Indians.

It was formally declared in 1908 that being Parsi requires birth; conversion is not permitted. As a result, Parsis were forced to marry within their small group and as a result their

blood became a breeding ground for genetic disorders. The community is now dealing with some major issues that pose a significant threat to its future. Hemophilia, osteoporosis, cancer, deaf, silent, and dumb people are some of these issues. The neighborhood is also dealing with issues like unemployment and subpar housing.

The Parsis have displaced all over the World in the last fifty years in search of better opportunities and access to higher education. They are currently present in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Persian Gulf, Europe and the Far East. No matter where they have moved, they have been successful in the businesses and professions they have chosen. They have devoted much of their time to develop the nations; they have chosen to call home.

Parsi has made contributions to all artistic disciplines, including music, painting, literature and theatre. Many Parsi authors have made their marks on readers' thoughts in the world of literature, including Keki N. Daruwala, Firdaus Kanga, Gieve Patel, Cornellia Sorabji, Adil Jussawalla, D. F. Karaka, Meher Pestonji, Dina Mehta, Nergis Dalal, Bapsi Sidhwa, Boman Desai, Rohinton Mistry and Farruk Dhondy.

Only 0.016 percent of India's overall population was counted in the government of India's 1997 Census. However, they have strong senses of group identification and play important role in the social, cultural, and economic lives of both Pakistan and India. Nani A. Palkhiwala witnesses in his work *The Nation: The Lost Decades*: "History affords no parallel to the role of Parsis in India. There is no record of any other community so infinitesimally small as Parsis, playing such a significant role in the life of a country so large". (317)<sup>3</sup>

The people of the Parsi community are wealthy and mostly urbanized group. The Parsi community was an innovator in India in the transport, flying, banking and cooking, canning and dairy industries. A number of notable Parsis and legal luminaries have also existed, including Rustamji Jivanji Gorkhodu, he was a close friend of Mahatma Gandhi, K.F. Nariman, he was a zealous supporter of the Swadeshi Movement, Dadabhai Naoroji, member of the Indian National Congress, Sir Dinshaw Eduljee Wacha, and Sir Pherozeshah Mehta. Another noteworthy aspect is that, although being a minority, the Parsis in post-independent India are never requested for any type of reservations in employment or admission to universities. Nevertheless, the Parsi community

nevertheless upholds the sense of collective identity and togetherness despite such a modern outlook and comparative riches.

Understanding the conflicts, identity crises and problems that the Parsis in India are facing that are ably mirrored in Parsi literature requires taking a historical perspective. The Persian Zoroastrians were fled to India in the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. when Persia, which is now Iran, was invaded by Arab invaders. They are the ancestors of the Parsis. Conquering Arabs converted the defeated Persians to Islam after the collapse of the Persian Empire at the Battle Nahawand which was taken place in 642 A.D. As a result, many Zoroastrians left Iran and took safety in our country. According to some historical texts, Parsi Zoroastrians first landed in the Port of Diu in the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. after escaping from Madyan i.e. law of Iran. They remained there for almost 19 years until setting ship for Gujarat's port of Sanjan in the year 785 A.D. King Jadhav Rana, a liberal ruler was in charge of Sanjan at that time.

The Dastur (Priest) in charge of these immigrants went to King Jadhav Rana told him about their plight and begged for permission to live. The Dastur explained the fundamental principles of Zoroastrianism during a public meeting. At first, Jadhav Rana was originally hesitant to provide refuge to the Persia refugees because he was unsure how his own subjects would respond. The initial answer from the King was his regretful inability to give permanent house to the Zoroastrians at Sanjan owing to a lack of available space.

The Priest asked the King Jadhav Rana that the Parsi-Zoroastrians will bring even more richness to that region if given refuge. The King was motivated by the religious priest's justification and invited the Priest to describe their true needs. The Dastur responded that they wanted land for farming so they could become self-sufficient, freedom of worship and freedom to raise small children according to their own customs. While accepting these requests, Jadhav Rana put forwarded five requirements before permitting Zoroastrians to reside in Sanjan.

The list of the five demands was as follows;

1. To implement the language of Gujarati.
2. Women will wear sari.

3. Men will leave their weapons.
4. Worship the cow.
5. The wedding ceremonial shall be executed at night.

The fragile but wise Dastur approved these terms and conditions and then performed one more symbolic act to re-assure the king of their loyalty and attentiveness. He said, “we shall try to be like this insignificant amount of sugar in the milk of your human kindness”. Such honest dedication led King Jadhav Rana to give the refugees shelter. The Dastur made an appearance and given the following promises on behalf of the people to the King: “Hame Hindustan rayrbashim, We shall be the friends of all India”.<sup>4</sup> (Dipanjali, June-December 1996,11)

Nilufer Bharucha, a renowned Parsi literary critic recognized the group’s distancing such as accepting native languages and traditions, refusing intermarriage, and never conversion. She says that unequal conditions in the host country led to feelings of uncertainty and alienation, worsened during the colonial period when Parsis got English education, leading to mourn and migration to the West in the 1950s and 60s.

However, it’s clear from Parsi literature; both Parsis who migrated to the Western countries and those who remained in our country have struggled with uncertainty and identity issues. In India, this community must contend with the dominating influences as shown in the literatures of Dina Mehata, Firdaus Kanga, Boman Desai and Bapsi Sidhwa. Parsi literature captures all the key issues, goals, dreams, ambitions and biases of the community in India and the West.

In a research published in Asian Age on May 13, 1997, Madhavan Kutty Pillai claims that the Parsis in India are suffering as a result of richness, thriving egoism, late marriages, urbanization, low birth rates and outdated laws. According to statistics, Parsi is the most urbanized community in India. It is observed that 94% of the Parsi community lives in cities. Beside, number of Parsis in India have decreased from around 1,14,890 (1941) to between 70,000 and 80,000 (1997). Kersi Limathwala, a Parsi demographer, is quoted by Madhavan Kutty Pillai as discussing the Community’s falling numbers. It has been mentioned that though there are no definite figures available at present, a rough estimate is that in a year there are 1000 deaths and 500 births.

## **Conclusion**

Assuming these circumstances and elements, the law of numbers dictates that this race will eventually be eliminated. It appears doubtful that the Parsis will experience another era of transition if views do not improve. In these conditions, Parsi literature would be preserved the heritage for the future generations. This has been stated by Rohinton Mistry in a talk. This applies not just to Mistry's works but also to those of other Parsi authors like Bapsi Sidhwa, Firdaus Kanga, Dina Mehta and Farrukh Dondy.

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