

Hindu Caste: Custodian of Parsi Survival in India

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In the light of the Parsi experience, the question is frequently posed: how did the Parsis survive in India in safety, without persecutions or reductions in their original numbers? Indeed, what is the secret of the success of Parsi domicile on the Indian sub-continent over the past one thousand years?

There are in truth several, interlinked causes of Parsi survival in India, but I would like to discuss one specific, intrinsically Indian social mechanism which I suggest is the central, thematic rationale underpinning the longevity of this small community in this vast land: and that is the immemorial institution of caste.

While a great deal of intellectual and emotional debate on the rights and wrongs of caste might engage the minds of several Indians, I would argue that if the Parsi refugees had landed in any other land, their survivability as recognizable Zoroastrians, a thousand years hence, might, indeed, be debatable. I will argue that they have remained a distinct and distinguishable part of the fabric of Indian society precisely because in the first instance, Raja Jadav Rana welcomed them and gave them safe refugeⁱ; and in the second instance, the host nation's social mechanism allowed them the space in which to live, to develop and ultimately contribute to their land of adoption. The operational mechanism of 'caste' began to apply, and this was the protective umbrella under which the Zoroastrian immigrants, on their way to developing into 'Parsis', were to live.

Any study of the Parsi community (as distinct from the Zoroastrianism practiced by the Parsis) ought to place in context the fundamental principles governing caste, and the Parsis' own level of acceptance of the rules and obligations pertaining to it, as well as their position within the caste structure.

In the Judgement delivered by Justice Beaman in the Parsi Panchayet Case Suit No. 689 of 1906 in the High Court of Bombayⁱⁱ, it was the considered opinion of the English jurist that the controversy over the conversion of aliens to Zoroastrianism which was being tried in his court, had at its root the issue of caste. Unequivocally he stated:

...the term Parsi, which now seems to me to have as distinctly a caste meaning as essentially a caste connotation as that used to denominate any other great Indian caste.
(p.152)

If this was the judicial ruling, there was agreement from another quarter of the sentiments expressed. *The Parsi* (February 1905) editorialized:

We are afraid our Parsi friends have lived too long in the country of castes, and surrounded by the caste associations of India, not to show traces of such influence themselves.

If such diverse sources maintained that the Parsis had evolved into an 'Indian caste', the institution of caste and particularities of the Parsi community in India deserve closer scrutiny.

F.F. Conlon has defined caste as:

...the distinctive moral system of India which defines the population in birth ascribed, hierarchically ranked corporate units.ⁱⁱⁱ

Indian civilization from earliest times had a sophisticated system of social stratification and occupational demarcation which coincide with the concept of *varna*: a Brahmanical division of society into four unequal, stratified parts; and *jati* which contains a notion of 'birth' and 'kind', and is applicable to the multitudinous sections of society. This latter term is coterminous with the concept of caste. Many writers stress the difference between caste of *varna* of the Vedas, and *jati* as it appears in living Hinduism.^{iv}

There are three main characteristics of caste:

1. The separation of a social group by endogamy
2. Demarcation of labor, from which group members can depart only within limits
3. Hierarchy, which designates each group as superior or inferior in rank to the other^v

Above all else, *jati* (caste) is birth ascribed, and it is consolidated by strict adherence to endogamy. The principal characteristic of caste is therefore, expressed by the ingrained obligation to marry within the *jati*, upon all members. The adherences to endogamous unions thus erects caste barriers which clearly demarcates one social group from another, creating a sense of exclusivity through descent. The status of the group is reinforced by the endogamous principle and being 'self-reproducing' they strengthen the hierarchical aspect of society which arranges them in order of birth. Hierarchy ranks caste^{vi}. Endogamy thus becomes an adjunct of hierarchy.

India is, in consequence of caste demarcations, a hierarchical society. Underlying the divisions is the Hindu religious emphasis on 'pure' and 'impure' which relates to the four *varnas*, categorizing men into four groups with the Brahmins or priests at the apex, followed by the Kshatriyas or warriors, then the Vaisyas or merchants and then the Sudras [Dalits].

It is the various castes which comprise the hierarchical structure where each is ranked relative to the others. Here the theory of pure and impure introduces itself, in that each caste will consider other castes as potential contaminators of its purity. Endogamy demarcates caste groupings, taken together with commensality, it is the caste mechanism for shutting out the pollution of lower castes.

Following from this is the fixity of occupations, in theoretical terms at least. Caste members traditionally followed caste professions, e.g. *lohar*, blacksmith; *nai*, barber, etc. Occupational hierarchy reinforced the hierarchical division of the society in its totality.

The concept of caste is thus the most fundamental ideological principle of Indian society. By being born into a particular caste, the individual is immediately ascribed a ritual status which is his religious status throughout life.

Having outlined the salient features of the Hindu caste structure, it remains to critically analyze whether the Parsis are a part of Indian caste.

The Parsis as Zoroastrian immigrants to India came initially to preserve and practice their ancestral faith unhindered. Having experienced persecution in the ancestral land, they considered themselves fortunate to have secured a safe haven where they were permitted to remain and practice their Zoroastrian religion. Unquestionably therefore, it was their Zoroastrianism which was at the heart of Parsi identity.

If the fundamental causative factor for caste is the Hindu religious system, Zoroastrianism has not known such a social mechanism. The Hindu concept of 'karma' which determines whether a soul is born in human or other guise, determines the status of this human by placing him within a specific caste which then ascribes status to the individual throughout this life. Central to this philosophy is the principle of reincarnation, or the deeds of a past life reaping dividends for a betterment in the next incarnation, or a decline, as the case may be.

Zoroastrianism doctrinally, operates on another set of assumptions. There is but one life given to individuals who must consistently, using their *Vohu Manah* (Good Mind) weigh the good and bad, take full responsibility for their thoughts, words and deeds, which upon death are judged; the soul then ascribed accordingly to heaven or hell. There they must remain until the final cleansing of the world of *Ahrimanic* influence. Upon the *Frasho kereti* (renovation) having been completed, all human souls return to the cleansed world, where goodness is then deemed to exist in perpetuity.

It must be accepted initially that the premises upon which the two religious systems are based are distinct. How then are the Parsis described as an Indian caste? The assumption of Indian identity by virtue of domicile is the political dimension of their status. The creation of this new label of nationality has of necessity meant an acceptance of certain fundamental and seemingly inalienable socio-cultural instruments of the indigenous society: chief of which is caste. The 19th century juridical definition of caste may be applied:

Caste comprised any self-defined native community governed for certain internal purposes by its own rules and regulations.^{vii}

Parsis, as indeed all other groupings in India, would then fit into the system of caste.

However, the Parsis acquired an empathy for the caste structure, insofar as it complimented their particular religious and social conventions, and refrained from accepting such caste strictures as were antithetical to their group persona and interests. Social customs such as commensality and endogamous marriages are the most striking illustrations. They came therefore, to be perceived as another Indian caste, but because they were theologically foreign to the notion of caste, their adjustment to this Indian mechanism was peculiar to themselves.

The early Iranians did indeed divide themselves according to their professions. Initially there were three classes, and later four classes were to be found in society. The three-fold division was:

Athravan – priest

Rathaeshtar – warrior

Vastrya – agriculturist

to which was later added *huiti*, artisan.^{viii}

We learn from the *Letter of Tansar*^{ix} that under the founder of the Sasanian dynasty, Ardeshir Babagan, original strictures forbidding fluid movement by persons from one profession to another without prior permission of the state, had been reintroduced. Indeed, this was one of the several protestations addressed in the *Letter* by the king of Tabaristan to Dastur Tansar, which the latter justified on the grounds that such social divisions were designed to preserve order amongst the people.

Tansar elaborates upon the four classes:

1. *Ashab-din* (master of Religion) which included:
 - a. *Hakam* – judges
 - b. *Sadane* – keepers of temples
 - c. *Mu'alliman* – teachers
2. *Muqatil* (soldiers), divided into cavalry and infantry
3. *Kuttab* (writers, learned men) which included writers, accountants, doctors, poets, astrologers
4. *Mohne* (labourers) which included traders, cultivators, merchants.^x

However, while the four classes were delineated, there is no reference to inter-dine or intermarry. The injunction on marriage is confined to the 'righteous' refraining from marrying the unrighteous.^{xi}

It would accordingly, be impossible to discover a *varna* stratification of Zoroastrians. Whilst ancient Iran, like India, divided society into four groups, the Iranian refugees did not bring with them social stratification. The only groups which were then and now distinguishable among the Parsis and Iranian Zoroastrians were: the priests and laymen. The hereditary Zoroastrian

priesthood is not based on a theological assumption of superiority of this caste, and hence a Zoroastrian *mobed* is not set apart from his society in the strict sense that the Brahmin is.

Zoroastrianism has, like Hinduism, strict definitions of pure and impure. In Zoroastrianism however, any aspect of life which is seen as having fallen under *ahrimanic* influences is considered impure. Therefore, the monthly menstrual cycle of the woman leaves her temporarily impure. The occurrence of death, the ultimate triumph of *ahriman* is accordingly, the ultimate contamination, where the dead body is deemed *nasa* (polluted). Thus the '*nassesalars*' or pall-bearers, because of their professional association with dead bodies are deemed impure. This impurity may be cleansed by a ritual *bareshnum*, implying therefore, that one is not born into a caste or systemic grouping which is impure; rather one acquired it and can correspondingly lose it. This is a fundamental distinction between the Zoroastrian and Hindu systems.

Hindu caste maintains hierarchical divisions as an essential feature of the system. Lacking as it does, prescribed, divisional boundaries between groups which constitute the societal whole, Indian Zoroastrians have not adhered to the strict occupational hierarchy as their Hindu compatriots. Thus, even the son of a *mobed* may not necessarily practice in the priesthood, but may (and now increasingly more often does) specialize in some other secular profession. This is the case in several Brahmin families as well. In strict sociological terms therefore, Parsis do not exhibit any substantive assimilation into their group persona of the ideology of caste. This is so with one exception: endogamy.

The endogamy which the Iranian migrants practiced in India might conceivably have started out as a defense mechanism which prevented their tiny numbers from becoming assimilated into the vastness of Hindu India. It thus marked them as a distinct and particular clan, identifiable by their particular physiognomy which was retained through generations by marrying within the group. This particular feature of the Hindu caste system worked to Parsi advantage and was therefore, readily accepted by the latter. Equally, the injunction of Hindu caste would have prohibited unions between a caste member and an alien. The host society, by the operation of its own social maxims, imposed upon the Parsis the practice of endogamy. There was thus in the Parsi adaptation to the Hindu caste structure a mutual reciprocity between their own preference for strict endogamy and their host's traditional partiality for the same. The parameters of Parsi 'caste' were solidified around the institution of marriage within the Parsi community.

Precisely because a strict adherence to the caste structure inhibits social mixing of inter-caste groups, the preservation of the Zoroastrian religious traditions and an evolving communal identity was engendered. It is the Zoroastrian religious rituals and texts which are crucial to the symbolism relating to the Parsi community, indeed they are the very cornerstone of the community's religious persona. This religious dimension of group identity being at the very core of its self-perception and the perception of them by outsiders, may have served to keep at bay

the full-scale incorporation of genuine caste characteristics as exemplified by the complex Hindu structure.

While Parsis have in town and village held positions of power; while the ideas of purity and pollution are not absent in Zoroastrian theology, together these aspects of group life have lent an aura of high-caste attributes. In the final analysis, the Parsis have remained external to the caste system. This is because certain significant features of the Parsi social system do not equate with the Hindu or other non-Hindu communities of India. Most important in this regard is the complete absence of internal stratification of Parsi society, whereas this is an essential ingredient of Hindu and non-Hindu society in India. Where caste boundaries may have been expected to develop between *mobed* and *behdin* [laymen] categories, they can and do intermarry. Actual divisions between the two have not developed. The prevailing distinction between *athornan*[priests] and *behdin* owes its existence to the four social classes of Iran. Upon migration, the lower three merged into one and the *athornans* retained their separate identity.

Zarathustra's revelation, in its original form, is monotheistic. His dichotomic world view leads him to specify between the present world and eternity as well as the material and spiritual. The contrariety between *Spenta Mainyu* (Bounteous Immortals) and *Angra Mainyu* (the destructive spirit/impulse) is what makes this world the *casus belli* between good and evil. The ultimate triumph of good at the end of time will be achieved only when every individual human being exercising his free will makes the choices of good, defends it actively and thus defeats evil. Despite the presence of evil, the here and now is not an earthly vale of tears. The ethical imperatives of Zarathustra's teachings accordingly, call for an active, optimistic battle on behalf of goodness. The moral code: 'good thoughts, good words, good deeds', contain within it the injunction to truthfulness, righteousness, faithfulness, purity, diligence, peaceableness and charity. Central to the practice and embodiment of such a philosophy is the rejection, unequivocally, of earthly renunciation and ascetism. How can man actively do battle against the forces of evil and negativity if he is emasculated in body and mind? This then, is a fundamental distinction between the Zoroastrian conception of the centrality of the material world and man's place in it, from the Hindu and Buddhist conceptions.

The question posed at the outset was: how did the Parsis survive in India in safety and without persecution? While points of similarity – though not a oneness – in the Zoroastrian and Hindu conceptions of society have been pointed out, namely ideas on pure and impure, an earlier stratification of social classes in Zoroastrian Iran; points of dissimilarity in theological terms must equally be acknowledged. Yet, the Parsi present arguably, one of the most promising test cases of long-term domicile in the country of adoption where the host society and the refugee/immigrants have lived alongside peaceably. The Hindu caste structure, where each grouping is theoretically at least, to live within its own boundaries, established the early pattern of the Parsi re-settlement process in India, which has now developed into the distinctive Parsi community on the Indian sub-continent.

Parsi history bears no testimony of persecution or pogroms, contrary to the experience of the Zoroastrians who remained behind in Iran. This very fact was to make a major impact on the Parsi communal persona. The place and stature of a minority community is dependent in no small measure on the role it chooses to, or is compelled to play; as much as it does on the societal structures of the host society and its willingness or otherwise to accept the minority. The compartmentalization of Hindu society has led to the high level of tolerance of the various minorities since they are not perceived as a monolithic force which would endanger the indigenous peoples: their culture, beliefs, societal structures and religious beliefs. Hindu society's internal mechanism therefore, do not produce the "scapegoat phenomenon".^{xii} The very durability of the Parsi community as a distinct, recognizable ethno-religious group which at the height of its population growth in India numbered no more than 120,000, and are currently estimated at 71,630^{xiii}, testifies to the value of the Hindu system in offering safeguards to the many and diverse peoples who have, over the centuries, sought refuge in India.

The distinctive feature of the Parsi community in India over centuries has been its demonstrable ability to maintain its coherence. This has been achieved through some major adjustments in its practices by borrowing from the majority peoples surrounding them but without relinquishing essential features of their own particular Zoroastrian civilization. The size of the community might have helped: it was small enough to adjust itself to the values and practices of the dominant culture; it was mindful, at all times, of the initial reason as to why they were in India, the preservation of their faith and their race. They adjusted themselves to the caste structure which surrounded them and of which they were deemed to be a part. They used this complex social system to work for them by erecting impregnable caste boundaries around themselves as a safeguard against absorption. Within the confines of their caste edifice they continued in the religious practices of their fathers and over time, acquiesced to certain Hindu social mores. Just as in the latter centuries they acquired specific English customs, habits and values. The caste structure had thus far served the Parsis well.

Within the Zoroastrian world and without, among laymen and scholars, Zoroastrians are perceived as a religious group. This is irrefutable, the Zoroastrian religion being the very *raison d'être* of these people and the infrastructure upon which they built and established their group. They formed themselves into a community based upon their religion and their ethnic uniformity. This then, provided the outer parameters of their consciousness. Over time, this religio-ethnic community developed a recognizable identity and nurtured a specific culture. History played its part as it does in the story of all peoples. The distinctive elements which developed among the Indian Zoroastrians and their Iranian kinsmen were as much the product of history as of geography. In both these countries they remained a minority group with declining numbers on the margins of society, never becoming entirely incorporated into the larger Hindu and Muslim entities surrounding them. In the case of the Parsis, the Hindu social institution of caste played a crucial role in their evolution as a distinct Indian community. The dynamic of Parsi community life, forged by its Zoroastrian religion and attendant beliefs, values

and customs, has interacted with the Hindu environment, so that there is today a growing body of Parsi opinion which affirms its patriotic pride in belonging to India.^{xiv}

(A section of this paper is reproduced from the author's book, *Contemporary Zoroastrians: An Unstructured Nation*, University Press of America: Lanham, Maryland, 1994).

ⁱ S.D. Hodivala, 1920, *Studies in Parsi History* (Bombay), pp. 102-3.

ⁱⁱ *Parsi Panchayet Case, Suit No. 689 of 1906*, "Judgement of Justice Davar and the Hon'bl Justice Beaman Delivered Friday 27th November 1908", Bombay.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frank F. Conlon, *A Caste in a Changing World: The Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins, 1700 – 1935* (Berkeley, CA, 1977), p. 4.

^{iv} *Penguin Dictionary of Religions*, J.R. Hinnells (Ed.), see section on 'caste'. For further literature, refer *The Facts on File Dictionary of Religions*, J.R. Hinnells (Ed.), 1984, (Facts on File, Inc., USA), see section on 'caste', pp. 76-7.

^v Louis Dumont: *Homo Hierarchicus: An Essay on the Caste System* (Chicago University Press, 1970), p. 21.

^{vi} *Ibid*, p. 21.

^{vii} D. F. Mulla, *Jurisdiction of Courts in Matters Relating to the Rights and Powers of Caste* (Bombay, 1901), pp.2-3.

^{viii} J. J. Modi, "Was There Any Institution in Ancient Iran Like That of Caste in India?" in *Anthropological Papers*, Anthropological Society of Bombay, 1929, p. 201.

^{ix} Mary Boyce (transl.) *The Letter of Tansar* (Rome, 1968), pp. 38 – 41.

^x *Ibid*, pp.37-40; also refer J.J. Modi, *op.cit.*

^{xi} J.J. Modi, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

^{xii} See Eckehard Kulke, *The Parsis in India: A Minority as Agent of Social Change* (Vikas Publishing, New Delhi, 1978)

^{xiii} 1981 Indian Census, "Household Population By Region of Head of Household".

^{xiv} Rashna Writer, *Contemporary Zoroastrians: An Unstructured Nation* (University Press of America, Maryland, 1994), pp. 154 -170.