

PARSI IDENTITY

(IRAN XXVII 1989, THE BRITISH INSTITUTE OF PERSIAN STUDIES)

The Parsi community in India is numerically insignificant. In the early centuries of their residence in India in the state of Gujarat they were, in the main agriculturalists and artisans, grateful for the refuge granted to them to continue the practice of their ancient faith. The safeguarding of the Zoroastrian religion by these Iranian migrants was the motivating factor in their initial departure from Iran. The religious dimension of their life may thus be assumed to have been the principal ingredient in the development of a community persona. The particularity of Parsi history on the Indian sub-continent over the past thousand years is the equally significant component in the creation, over time, of Parsi identity.

During the millennium of Parsi settlement in India, it is but natural that to some extent the community has become part of the Indian social structure. The earliest signs of Parsis acquiring Indian social attributes and customs dates back to the oldest document: the *Kisseh-i-Sanjan* (Tales of Sanjan) compiled in 1600 by a Zoroastrian priest, Behman Kaikobad Sanjana. This describes the arrival in India of the Parsis' ancestors, and the granting of religious refugee status to them by the Raja of Sanjan, Jadav Rana. The local King however, imposed five conditions on them:

- (1) The Parsi priests would have to explain their religion to the king;
- (2) The Parsis would have to relinquish their native Persian language and adopt the local language;
- (3) The Parsi women would have to give up their traditional dress for the Indian saree;
- (4) The Parsi men must lay down their weapons;
- (5) The Parsis must conduct their marriage ceremonies after sunsetⁱ

In accepting the protection of the Hindu Raja, the Parsis were by degrees to acquire a certain level of Indianization. Total assimilation into India, it can be argued, has never convincingly been achieved by the Parsis despite their long residence on the Indian sub-continent. This is in part due to the special and highly complex nature of Indian society as a whole. But for the small group of people, such outward manifestations of Indian influence as the adoption of the Gujarati language; the wearing of the saree; the staining of the forehead with vermilion on auspicious occasions; the wearing of red bangles by married women, are, without question, adoption of Hindu customs. The congenial environment of Hindu India as opposed to their collective memory of Islamic persecution suffered in Iran, encouraged the Parsis to accommodate themselves to the cultural milieu surrounding them.ⁱⁱ The acceptance therefore of such social practices as child marriage; separate dining of men and women; and the adoption of the 'Panchayat' system, whereby community social and legal disputes were settled, were among some of the concessions made to the host society.ⁱⁱⁱ The above illustrations, which are a small fraction of a fairly substantial list of borrowings by Parsis from the majority Hindu community, substantiate the intrinsic adaptability of these Iranian migrants. Concessions made by this minority, originally to conciliate the prejudices of their Hindu hosts, and gradually as a product of acclimatization to their adopted country, did not dilute their intrinsic Zoroastrian-ness in terms of national identity.

The complex creative process of Parsi identity was a result of their geographical dislocation as a consequence of historical circumstances. Their Zoroastrian religion was seen as the *raison d'être* of their

communal self. The reconciling of their religious beliefs and practices within their adopted environment marked their distinctiveness from other non-Hindu groups. It would be instructive to quote directly at this point from J.N. Farquhar: "The whole people [Parsis] tended to stand aloof from the other communities of India, making pride in their religion and race the reason for their exclusiveness".^{iv} The religion must therefore, be considered the infrastructure upon which was erected the evolving social patterns of the group. Their relationship with India and the other Indian peoples was conditioned by their internalized view of themselves as Zoroastrians: i.e. of Iranian stock and practitioners of an ancient Iranian religion. Their perception of fellow Indians therefore, ranges on a scale from indifference to insecurity.^v At a fundamental level the issue is: how Indian is the Parsi?

The assumption of Indian identity by virtue of domicile must be deemed the political dimension of their status. The re-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. Among these, caste is by far the most important. Thus, outsiders as well as community commentators have referred to the Parsis as an Indian caste.

In the Judgement delivered by Justice Beaman, Parsi Panchayat Case, 1906, it was the considered opinion of the English jurist that the controversy over conversion of aliens to Zoroastrianism which was being tried in his Court, had at its root the issue of caste. Unequivocally therefore, he stated that "the term Parsi, which now seems to me to have as distinctly a caste meaning is essentially a caste connotation as that used to denominate any other great Indian Caste."^{vi} If this was the judicial ruling, there was agreement from another quarter of the sentiments expressed. Thus: "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."^{vii}

It was the institution of caste which helped the Parsi community retain its distinctiveness in syncretist India. In spite of being outside the strict operational structure of the Hindu caste system, the Parsis were considered one among many castes. The nineteenth century juridical definition of "caste" is used here: "Caste comprised any well-defined native community governed for certain internal purposes by its own rules and regulations..."^{viii}

The overriding principle and rationale behind the Hindu caste system are Hindu religious precepts. India is, in consequence of caste demarcations, a hierarchical society. But this hierarchy is the result of religious values. The hierarchical structure of Indian society, with the Brahmans occupying the supreme position, and the Sudras [Dalits] deemed extremely impure servants, has solidified into a 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.^{ix}

Thus the fundamental causative factor for caste is the Hindu religious system. Zoroastrianism has not known any such social mechanism. Indeed, 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 the betterment in a next incarnation, or a decline, as the case may be.

Zoroastrianism operates doctrinally on another set of assumptions. There is but one life given to individuals, who must consistently, using their good mind (Vohu Manah) weigh the good and bad, take

full responsibility for their thoughts, words and deeds, which upon death are judged and the soul then ascribed accordingly to heaven or hell. There they must remain until the final cleansing of the world of *ahrimanic* influences.

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? By accepting the juridical definition of caste (see above), indeed all the groupings within Indian society would then fit into this system. 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 structures as were antithetical to their group persona and interests. 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 social mechanism was peculiar to themselves. We can thus perceive a clearly delineated and specifically applicable identity, acquired over centuries by these Iranian migrants in their adopted land. It was an admixture of their Zoroastrian heritage and acquisition of Hindu socio-cultural values and practices. With the advent of the British to India, first for trade and later to govern their colony, the Parsis were to come into close contact with these European peoples with whom they developed an affinity and established a mutually profitable working relationship.

The vehicle of communication was the Parsis' acquired fluency in the English language, and their eager embrace of western education. "Many of the Parsis speak and write English with a facility scarcely credible for foreigners".^x

When the Bombay Native Education Society which was responsible for starting a number of schools, and the Elphinstone College was founded in 1829, large numbers of Parsis saw the potential of future social and occupational betterment offered by this. The English educational system was "one of the greatest boons and blessings conferred by England upon India."^{xi}

This acceptance of western education, however, complicated the issue of Parsi identity. The community, which by 1911 had 71 per cent literacy among those resident in Bombay Presidency,^{xii} became conscious of their distinctness from the local population and perceived a closeness to the British. Just as within the wider Indian society, some intelligentsia distanced themselves from their Hindu roots, so too the Parsis.^{xiii}

The only three Indians to have been elected to the British House of Commons, from English constituencies, were indeed, the Parsis. The extent of "anglicization" of the community had become a recognizable feature of their group persona.

There were a few vocal, educated Parsis who, however, stressed their affinity with the land and ethos of India, as opposed to unquestioned loyalty to the British overlord. Men such as Dadabhai Naoroji [the first non-white Member of Parliament], Pherozsah Mehta [leading light of the Congress Party] and J.N. Tata [founder of the multi-national Tata group of companies] among others were, however, the exception to the general Parsi rule.

Naoroji's famous utterance in 1893 in his presidential speech to the Indian Congress Party merits quotation: "Whether I am a Hindu, a Mohammedan, a Parsi, a Christian, or of any other creed, I am above all Indian. Our country is India, our nationality is Indian."^{xiv}

Similarly, J.N. Tata was asked by a friend: “You can have no concern with the Congress; you are not a native of India”, to which the great industrialist replied: “If I am not a native of India what am I?”^{xv} The perennial question vis-à-vis Parsis thus remained: does residence of over a millennium qualify one as a “native” of the land? It is not that the criteria of citizenship is being challenged, rather the self-perception of Parsis, and the perception of them by their fellow Indians.

The crux of the matter is the marginal status of the Parsis: an ethnic-religious minority wherever they be, in the mother country and beyond.^{xvi} As defined by Stonequist: “The marginal personality is most clearly portrayed in those individuals who are unwittingly initiated into two or more historic traditions, languages, political loyalties, moral codes and religions.”^{xvii}

The Parsis were on the periphery of Indian society prior to the arrival of the British, then becoming significant intermediaries between the western rulers and the Indians. The British were prepared to cultivate the Parsis so far as it served their commercial and political purposes; but the British did not see the Parsis as “Englishmen”. With the approach of Indian independence, Parsis were indeed becoming disillusioned with Westminster at its seeming disregard of Parsi loyalty. This then further fueled the community’s feelings of isolation in India.^{xviii} In the game of twentieth-century independence politics, the Parsis’ numerical inferiority meant that they were no longer a major determinant in the complex shape that modern India and the newly created Pakistan were taking. Once again, the reality of minority status was being re-emphasized.

Zoroastrian history has a long record of loyalty to the state. The tradition has been maintained to this day by the Indian Parsis and Pakistani Parsis (some of whom have lost their lives as Indian and Pakistani airmen and soldiers in successive Indo-Pakistani wars). The stress of loyalty to the state is as much a result of long tradition as of political necessity. The spread of the community to the western world broadens the issue further: is one British, American, Indian or Parsi? Thus, a typical reply to a straightforward question posed to a Parsi lady: “Where are you from?” received this spontaneous reply: “My roots go back to ancient Iran.”

Parsi Zoroastrians have a deeply-ingrained awareness of their microscopic size. A millennium spent in India has not succeeded in making them a people *of* India. A subconscious empathy for Iran and a lost civilization has remained. A new and very uncertain chapter in a long history has recently been opened: migration to the West. The enigma of Parsi identity remains.

ⁱ S.H. Hodivala, *Studies in Parsi History* (Bombay, 1920), pp. 102-103

ⁱⁱ J.N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (New York, 1918), pp. 82-4

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p.83

^{iv} *Ibid*

^v P. Axelrod, “Myth and Identity in the Indian Zoroastrian Community”, *Journal of Mithraic Studies*, Vol. III, Nos. 1-2, pp. 162-3

^{vi} Parsi Panchayat Case, Suit No. 689 of 1906, Judgement of Hon. Justices Davar and Beaman, p. 152

^{vii} *The Parsi* (Bombay, February 1905)

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

^{ix} For literature on the subject see: L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: An Essay on the Caste System* (Chicago University Press, 1970); J.H. Hutton, *Caste in India* (Cambridge, 1946); F.F. Conlon, *A Caste in a Changing World: The Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmans, 1700-1935* (Berkeley, 1977)

^x H. Briggs, *The Parsis or Modern Zerdustians* (Bombay, 1852), p.21

-
- ^{xi} Dadabhai Naoroji, "Admission of Educated Natives into the Indian Civil Service", paper read before the East India Association (London, April 17, 1868), p. 6. For further reading on Parsis and English education refer to E. Kulke, *The Parsis in India: A Minority as Agent of Social Change* (Munich, 1974), pp. 81-91. J.R. Hinnells, "Parsis and the British", *Journal of the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute* (Bombay, 1978), pp. 42-59
- ^{xii} E. Kulke, *op.cit.*, pp.87-8
- ^{xiii} J. N.Farquhar, *op.cit.*
- ^{xiv} Reproduced in G.A. Natesan, *Famous Parsis: Biographical and Critical Sketches* (Madr, 1910), p.59
- ^{xv} F. R. Harris, *Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata: A Chronicle of His Life* (Bombay, 1958), p.249
- ^{xvi} E. Kulke, *op.cit.*, pp.242-8
- ^{xvii} E. V. Stonequist, *The Marginal Man: A Study in the Subjective Aspects of Cultural Conflict* (New York, 1961), p.3
- ^{xviii} *Hindi Punch* (Bombay, 18 January 1931).