

The Parsis

The Parsis, an ethnic-religious population currently residing in India, fled religious persecution in Persia after the conquest of the Sassanian Empire by the Muslims. In the seventh century the Parsis refugees arrived on the island of Ormuz, located at the mouth of the Persian Gulf (Whitehurst 225). In the eighth century these Zoroastrian refugees arrived in the land of the Raja [king] of Sanjan, Jadi Rana, ruler of an area around modern day Gujarat (Menant 133-134). The story of the arrival and encounter of the Parsis is recorded in the *Kisse-i-Sanjan* [Tales of Sanjan]. In it Jadi Rana asks several questions of the *dasturs* [priests] concerning their religion before allowing them to remain within his land and build a fire temple (Menant 138).

There were, however, several conditions that the Parsi population had to adhere to in order to gain permission from Jadi Rana. They had to learn the local language while giving up their own, the women would have to adopt the *sari* as their dress, they had to dispose of their weapons, and they had to perform their marriage rites after sundown (Writer 129). While these were the requirements prescribed by Jadi Rana, the Parsis also adopted other local customs such as “staining of the forehead with vermilion on auspicious occasions; the wearing of red bangles by married women... child marriage; and the adoption of the 'Panchayat' system, whereby community social and legal disputes were settled” (Writer 129).

The Parsis sided with their new king when the Muslim Sultan of Ahmedabad began an invasion. With the fall of Sanjan, a short period of hardship occurred, during which the Sacred Fire was moved from location to location (Menant 134). During this period the Parsis became reacquainted with their religious brethren in Persia thanks to the efforts of a wealthy layman (Menant 134). The period of Mughal rule saw the social and economic well-being of many Parsis rise. After having performed jobs primarily dealing in agriculture, there was a sudden change in becoming extensive landowners and traders (Menant 135).

The period of British control over India can be seen as the high point of many Parsi careers. Large numbers of Parsis used their new found wealth to gain a higher education when the British opened the Elphinstone College, in 1829 (Writer 130). Originally used by the British as traders, the Parsis soon began to find themselves in positions of authority in the governance of the colony. In 1842, Jamshedji Jijibhai, whom was famous throughout India for his charitable work, was knighted; later, in 1857, he was made a Baronet. The title of Baronet was the first to ever be granted to a native colonial recipient (Menant 135). By 1911 the Parsi population that resided within the Bombay Presidency had attained a literacy rate of 71% (Writer 130). By 1989 only three Indians had been elected to the British House of Commons by English constituents, and all three were Parsis (Writer 130).

Parsis also found common cause with the regular Hindu population. In 1893 Dadabhai Naorroji delivered a presidential speech to the Indian National Congress, a pre-independence political party. The speech places an emphasis on unification of all religious groups: “Whether I am a Hindu, a Mohammedan, a Parsi, a Christian, or any other creed, I am above all Indian” (Writer 130). It is important to note that Dadabhai considers Parsi, not Zoroastrianism, to be his “creed” (Writer 130). Social reformers of the period were often Parsis. Behramji Malabari was a large part of the reason that the newspaper, the *Indian Spectator*, became so widely read across the nation (Menant 139). Malabari also led the fight against child marriage, succeeding in having the “Age of Consent Act” passed in the British House of Commons in 1891 (Menant 140).

The Parsis are one of only two remaining groups that practise Zoroastrianism [the other is located in Persia (Menant 141)]. Zoroastrianism contains a strict monotheism. This monotheistic God has many names, including: Mazda, Ahura, and Ahura Mazda (Menant 142). Ahura Mazda is claimed to have revealed himself to the philosopher Zoroaster, who recorded the religious books of the Zoroastrians, the *Avesta*. Zoroaster preached a version of dualism, meaning there is a good principle, the Spenta-Maynu, and an evil principle, the Angra-Maynu, both of which are subservient to Ahura

Mazda (Menat 142).

The spiritual well-being of the Parsi population is entirely their own responsibility, due to the belief that God granted free will to all of mankind (Menant 143). Parsis believe this free will allows them to determine their own fate, and whether they are granted paradise or admitted to hell. These notions gave rise to the three fundamental tenets of Zoroastrianism: “Manashni, Gavashni, [and] Kunashni [Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds” (Shahani 3463)]. At the end of times Zoroastrians believe the messiah will arrive, purify, and then restore the entire world. The dead will be resurrected, and immortality will be granted if the recipient is found deserving (Menant 143).

The worship of Zoroastrians consists of recitations of Sacred Words, to be performed with or without a ritual. Offerings during these periods of worship may consist of: fruit, flowers, milk, incense, and the liquid of the Haoma plant (Menant 143). The item of foremost importance for Zoroastrians during worship is fire. It would be blatantly incorrect to be label them as worshippers of fire (Menant 143-144). Zoroastrians believe that the glory and light that fire both represents and physically possesses is the best representative for Ahura Mazda. The important ritual fires are housed in temples, of which there are three distinct levels based on kinds of fire required to ignite the central pyre. The highest grade of temple requires sixteen different types of fire to be gathered. Two examples of the types of fire required are: fire used in cremation of a body, and fire brought from heaven [meaning started by lightning (Drower 76)]. The middle grade requires four different fires from the households of four different classes of Parsis: a priest’s, a ruler’s/warrior’s, a peasant’s/farmer’s, and an artisan’s. The lowest of the three temple grades can be lighted using any household fire (Drower 76). In the higher grade temples laymen are not allowed to feed the fire, they are not even permitted to be in the central fire chamber [the lowest grade is fine for laymen to feed].

The Parsis are not obligated to visit temples in order to worship; they may perform their prayers where ever they please. Parsis would often head towards the seashore of Bombay [Mumbai] to worship. They were able to do this because priests are not needed for prayer (Menant 144). This is the result of an Old Iranian belief that all of nature is a temple (Menant 144). Temples are the scene of an initiation ritual that is performed by priests and Parsi children at the age of seven. This ritual is called the *navjote*, during which the child affirms their status as a worshipper of Ahura Mazda, a follower of the prophet Zoroaster, rejects the *daevas* [false gods], and is placed under the laws of Ahura Mazda (Menant 144). One of the most important features of this ceremony is the child gaining possession of the *sudeah* [white shirt], and *kushti* [a girdle made of many threads to be tied and worn]. The priests also perform weddings. These weddings have all of the outward appearance of Hindu weddings (Menant 144). After a deceased has died funeral rites are performed, ending with the Zoroastrian being placed on a Tower of Silence [either a set of high walls, or a raised stone platform (Menant 144)]. Once the dead are placed on these Towers of Silence carrion eating birds are allowed to feast upon them; these methods are designed to prevent spiritual pollution.

Prior to 1901, there was a diaspora of Parsis that established communities in Canton [Guangzhou], Macao, Hong Kong, Penang [Malaysia], Rio, Mauritius, Cape Town, Madagascar, Australia, and London (Menant 146). More recently the focus of the Parsis community has been on the rapid decline in population. Words like “purity,... alien women,... and *other* religions” have begun to appear more and more often in conservative Parsi circles (Shahani 3463). Westernizing influences have been blamed for the decline in population, with some reasons being listed as: the emigration that has been taking place, the proper use of birth control among Parsi couples, and increasing divorce rates (Whitehurst 231).

There has been a developing trend among Parsis women to never get married. This has been ascribed to the increase in education among Parsis women, and those educated women imposing stricter requirements on their suitors (Whitehurst 231). Another argument has been made that the level of education has little bearing on the likelihood of marriage, and that the contributing factor resides in the financial well-being of the woman involved (Gould 1068). As further evidence to this argument

Gould shows that women with higher education are actually more likely to marry within the urban setting (Gould 1068).

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

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