

HOW WILL THE PARSIS BE REMEMBERED?

Oral Histories, Myths, Narratives and Representation

Summary of A Minor Research Project

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When a community is rendered voiceless, not due to disempowerment but due to extinction, one of the major sources that remains to resurrect its past reality is textual evidence. This minor research project attempts to try and understand how the Parsis will be remembered—when the community is extinct—by approaching the problem from two angles. The first part involves a textual analysis of key texts under various paradigms. The second part is a recording and qualitative analysis of interviews with non-Parsis from metropolitan cities across India to try and understand the power the dominant majority has on constructing and interpreting identity. In contrast, focus group discussions will be conducted with Parsis to see how the identity of their community exists in their imagination. Both are fictional projections of identity; what is significant, however, is to try and understand whether there is any gap—for that is where potential erasure lies as the overlap is the construct that will persist. Thus, the focus is on highlighting the difference between the non-Parsi versus the Parsi perception of the Parsi.

Textual evidence, in itself, is broad in scope as it varies widely from government documents in the archives, history books, academic articles, newspaper articles, features in magazines, personal family diaries, and correspondence to fiction, be it novels or stories. Louise Montrose's famous statement regarding 'the textuality of history' versus 'the historicity of the text' asserts that history is fiction and must be read in that way, by analysing the points of view and power structures, whilst literature can unveil various aspects of the past that are deliberately elided by history books.

Although literature is fiction, fabricating stories that are not true, it draws upon real people and real situations to construct this simulacrum or mirage of a world that existed at some point in the past. However, the construct is always steered by power. Who writes and for whom? At what point in history is the writing happening? What period in history is being depicted? Why? What is the dominant discourse of that time? How are people remembered and by whom? Are they remembered differently? These are important questions which the project

will attempt to address. Similarly, although mainstream history is suspicious about the credibility of oral histories and myths the latter become insights into the politics of a time that influence the interventions of memory.

The research project ‘How will the Parsis be Remembered?’ has been divided into five parts. To make the title more impactful and self-explanatory a subtitle: Oral Histories, Myths, Narratives and Representations was included.

The Introduction has been divided into the following sections namely: 1) The Demographic Crisis referring to Leela Vistaria’s research in 1974 to present day census. There is no doubt about the declining numbers and various reasons have been provided by researchers including endogamy and woman empowerment, 2) Memory and Re-membering: Its Importance draws on the work of Evelyn Ender and her book *Architexts of Memory*, 3) Collective Memory is based on Maurice Halbwachs’s *On Collective Memory*, 4) Testimonios and Oral Narratives refers to Alessandro Portelli, 5) Erasure and Forgetting is influenced by Pierre Nora and his concepts of Amnesia, Nostalgia, Hypermemory, 6) Culture Power and Memory draws on Stuart Hall. This section focusses on the myths and memories that chart the prehistory of the Parsis and their journey to India like the Aryan myth, *Shahnameh*, the “Sugar and Milk” parable, *Quissa-i-Sanjaan* and *Ilm-e-khshnoom* followed by the scope of the research, methodology, impact and an introduction to the following chapters.

Chapter 1: The Storytellers deals with the oral histories that have been recorded during data collection from Kolkata, Delhi, and Pune. The focus group discussions were conducted in Kolkata with the Trustees of the two major Parsi Trusts and members of the community to understand how the spaces were used and preserved. The attempt was to unearth narratives of loss and erasure and conflicting narratives particularly of those who belong to the margins like the body-bearers also known as the *Khandiyas* or children of mixed marriages. Discussions on demographic decline and allowing children of inter marriage into the fire temple and the various controversies were very fruitful. Sadly, the Kolkata Parsis have dwindled to 450 and about 70% of that population is over 60 years in age.

Already the community has lost one fire temple, the much beloved Banaji Agiary which has been overrun by merchants who sell electric lights. The focus group discussion with the Parsis was followed by a focussed group discussion at Jadavpur University with Prof Amlan Dasgupta and his research assistants who worked on the declining Jewish population in Kolkata. Certain parallels were drawn.

In Delhi Dr Shernaz Cama, the founder of *Parzor* which organised the remarkable exhibitions in Delhi called 'Threads of Continuity', was interviewed. Not only did she shed light on the community but she discussed how her research revealed the influence of the religion on the 18th C poet William Blake which is another source of erasure. She also talked about the *Jiyo Parsi* scheme introduced by the government as an initiative to save the community. The Parsis in Delhi are down to 250 in number with more funerals than Navjotes (initiation into the religion). The visit to the Parsi cemetery with its fresh graves drove home the fact.

Five professors from Lady Sriram College and the ex-Vice Chancellor of Nalanda University had a focus group discussion on how the Parsis would be remembered. One of the professors belonged to the Syrian Christian minority. It is interesting that Parsis do not feature anywhere in the syllabus except for a brief mention in school history books to Dadabhai Naoroji and as one of the religions of India. Focus group discussions were conducted with students from LSR to assess their memory of Parsis. It is a given fact that Bollywood dominates popular imagination but Boman Irani has won many hearts.

Professors from Jawaharlal Nehru University participated in a focus group discussion. They justified the use of Rigvedic Sanskrit in translating the *Gathas* written in Avestan. They were experts in Adivasi and Dalit studies and stressed that Parsis were no doubt a privileged minority as they are affluent and hence are represented in some way or the other. Professor Rustum Bharucha who is Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies at JNU spoke about his work on oral histories and the ethical problems associated with it especially in a small community like the Parsis where everyone knows everyone.

Professor Radhika Seshan, Head of the Department of History at Savitribai Phule Pune University was interviewed. She has specialised in ancient travelogues particularly from Persia and economic history and referred to points of erasure in that history like a gentleman called Bhimji Parekh who was influential and wealthy but disappears from that narrative.

A focus group discussion was conducted with students at St Mira's College. The priest at the Fire Temple in Pune along with the trustee of the chief benefactor to the Fire Temple, Dr Cyrus Poonawalla was interviewed. Another focus group discussion was conducted with older non Parsis and counter narratives of exclusion were unearthed. Dastur Pheroze in Udvarda, Dastur Turel of Wadiaji Atash Behram Mumbai and Dastur Dr Ramiyar Karanjia, Principal of the Madressa in Dadar were interviewed personally. In addition, various residents of Surat and

Navsari were interviewed including Behram Suraliwala manager of the Meherji Rana Library in Navsari.

Chapter 2: The Textual Constructors: primarily is an analysis of textual narratives and deals with the four paradigms of the homosexual, the fool, the entrepreneur/ drug dealer and the Anti-Christ. *The Man who would be Queen* is autobiographical in nature and comments on Parsi culture and the faith. It is story of Hoshang Merchant's exclusion and struggle due to his sexual orientation. Rohinton Mistry's *Such A Long Journey* captures life in a Parsi *baag* and the society idiot Tehmul who must be sacrificed to ensure the future of the normal healthy family. Sooni Taraporevala who wrote the screenplay for the movie *Such A Long Journey* was interviewed regarding the Parsi predicament, her movie *Little Zizou* and her book on the Parsis which is a photographic journey. Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy tends to give a distorted view of the Parsis as primarily Opium traders whereas historical evidence shows that it was the cotton trade that was the main source of income. In contrast Mr Taraporevala, head of Tata Trust and member of the Rajya Sabha Anu Aga were interviewed to explore narratives of Parsi philanthropy and entrepreneurship. Nietzsche appropriates Zarathustra as a mouth piece but what he makes him say is not even remotely connected to Nariman's book *Inner Fire* which is a translation of the Zoroastrian religious texts the *Gathas*. Justice Nariman's comments on the Magi (Maghi brotherhood) were extremely interesting. The Magi are another source of erasure as Christianity has appropriated these priests as the three kings who came when Christ was born without giving any religious credit to them. They were wise Zoroastrian priests not kings who converted.

Chapter3: The Visual Manipulators, deals with cinema in English and Bollywood portrayals of the Parsis. The trajectory has been interesting. In the case of Bollywood what begins as a generous representation of an upright community with fine family values in *Khatta Meetha*, will become a more exaggerated caricature as in *Munnabhai M.B.B.S* and will move towards a criminal portrayal as in the opium trader of *Mangal Pandey*, the land mafia in *Bombay Velvet* and the drug pedlar in *Sanju*. One of the reasons for this change in representation can be the decline in population for that is linked to decline in power. There are just not enough people to object and those who want to, will not because they will not be heard and if they are heard it is even worse because they are so few it will not count. Cinema in English is a little complex. There is no direct representation in Hollywood except for *300* and its sequel which show the Iranian Zoroastrian king Xerxes as a bald eunuch with body piercing. *Bohemian Rhapsody* the

most recent biopic on Freddy Mercury has glossed over his Paris and Indian roots. Irrespectively, the portrayals are unflattering and there are no stories about great Parsi heroes however there are a plethora about Parsi fools. No doubt there will be fools in the community but the proportion of them reflected in the world of representation is definitely imbalanced. Ironically, this is the community that gave the world Homi Bhabha, the nuclear scientist and Zubin Mehta, the world-renowned music conductor.

Conclusion: There have been definite areas of nostalgia and others of erasure. The *Parsiana* Parsi magazine has made a conscious and successful attempt at nostalgia like articles on a graveyard in Canton, China and various stamps based on eminent Parsis. The government has started *Jiyo Parsi* movements, Udvada Utsav and is renovating the Udvada station to preserve Parsi culture. However certain definite areas of erasure have already happened starting with the language, certain professions like the *Chasniwala* and loss of spaces and properties. The community has become less rigid and more inclusive towards mixed marriages however the demographics are declining. Prayers are now being said even if the body is cremated. In Pune, which has a greater population of Parsis, the number of funerals in 2016-17 were 43 whilst the initiation *Navjote* ceremony was down to 6 and even less marriages took place. Inclusion of children from mixed marriages, whose *Navjote* have been done, has started and entry into the Fire Temple is permitted in Delhi and Pune. Kolkata permits children of Male Parsis but all are welcome for community functions. Pune has started a lovely Fire Temple that is open to everyone of any faith. However, this has come too late and too many people have been excluded. The future is indeed bleak.

The intention behind this research is to publish four academic research papers titled: *The Parsi Merchant Princes: Past versus Present*, *Merchant Princesses: Parsi Women in Amitav Ghosh's Fiction (Ibis Trilogy Glass Palace)*, *Parsis: Representation in Cinema*, *Mysticism or Madness: Subverting Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathushtra*.

The paper "Remembering the Parsis" has already been submitted to the UGC recognised international journal *Asian Studies Review* and is under review. Justice Nariman has requested that his interview only be published after his retirement in 2021. At that time the project will be published in a book form. The researcher would like to apply for a major research project and collaborate with Sooni Taraporevala and go to Iran and trace through photographs as well as through oral histories the origins and erasure of the Zoroastrians in Iran. If not save the Parsis at least as many different possibilities of memories can be saved and recorded in as many different possible ways to ensure the memory lives.