

What sets Zoroastrian Iranis apart
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PUNE: "Irani Zoroastrians? Never knew they were a separate community?" said a colleague. He is not the only one. For, most people use the terms 'Parsi' and 'Zoroastrian' interchangeably. The fact is that all Parsis are Zoroastrian, but not all Zoroastrians are Parsis. Some of them are just Irani Zoroastrians, sometimes simply called Iranis.

"Though both are Zoroastrian, the main difference lies in the time the two communities came to India ," explains Sanobar Irani, secretary, Zoroastrian Youth Association (ZYA).

Those who left Iran soon after the advent of Islam to escape persecution, reached the shores of Gujarat 1,373 years ago. Their descendants are the Parsis.

While the Zoroastrians who migrated to India from Iran relatively recently — 19th century onwards — are called Irani Zoroastrians. The Parsis have, therefore, imbibed Indian culture and traditions much more than the Iranis. Even some of their customs are similar to Hindu customs. The differences are evident in wedding ceremonies.

While Parsis mainly speak Gujarati, many Irani Zoroastrians speak Dari, a dialect of Persian. "It is very easy to set apart Irani Zoroastrians physically, as they are heavier-built, fairer and have sharper (Archemenian) features," said Sanobar.

Dara Irani, who has been president of the Poona Parsi Panchayat for over a decade, said, "There may be a difference in our looks, the languages we speak, some of our customs and the way we pronounce our prayers. But, ultimately, we are all Zoroastrian and just the same deep inside."

In fact, many present-day Iranis do not speak much Dari, or follow Irani customs, he said.

Irani Zoroastrians are increasingly marrying Parsis and seem to have integrated well with each other. "When my grandfather wanted to marry a Parsi, there was a lot of opposition. But, today, if our children want to marry Parsis, we will not bat an eye-lid," said an Irani Zoroastrian. Pune has over 2,000 Irani Zoroastrians, who are a very closely-knit, fun-loving community.

Unlike the Parsis, who are more focussed on services, most Iranis are business-oriented. Who has not enjoyed a cuppa at the friendly-neighbourhood Irani restaurants? Or Shrewsbury biscuits and mawa cakes at Kayani Bakery. Iranis are also into other businesses like fabrication, stone quarrying and farming (orchards).

"I am proud to be an Irani, as I think we are stronger, dedicated and sincere," said Arnavaz Damania, a well-known businesswoman and sportsperson.

However, the main worry of the community is that most of its young are migrating to countries like Australia , New Zealand and Canada. "A decade down the line, Pune is likely to have few young Iranis or Parsis. Our youngsters do not have enough opportunities here. They are forced to look for greener pastures," said Dara.

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