

Zoroastrians search for their roots
By Zubair Ahmed
BBC News, Mumbai

Khojeste Mistree of Mumbai (Bombay) is a known Zoroastrian scholar and historian.

He is a self-proclaimed conservative member of India's tiny Zoroastrian Iranian or Parsi community, trying to uphold the rites and traditions of the pre-Islamic religion of Iran.



Chakchak mountain in central Iran is a top pilgrimage site

A few years ago, he began taking young and old Parsis to Iran to rediscover their religious roots.

He says: "These pilgrimages are a wonderful way to teach people something about their roots and religion." He wants the Parsis to feel "proud to be Zoroastrian".

Growing trend

The idea seems to have caught on. Every year, hundreds of Indian Parsis are going on a pilgrimage to Iran where they visit Zoroastrian holy sites.



" I think there's a general love in the world
for people to discover their roots."
Khojeste Mistree

And much to Mr Mistree's satisfaction they come back as "proud Zoroastrians".

Noshir Dadrawala, who takes a group of people to Iran once a year on behalf of a non-profit making organisation, says the demand for the pilgrimage is growing.

"This year for the first time we are hoping to conduct a second tour in early September," he says.

Other tour operators also report a growing interest in the pilgrimage to Iran.

Persis Dadbhoy, of Madras, who went on her first trip to Iran a few weeks ago, says: "A lot of my friends and relatives have inquired about this tour and want to go to Iran as well."

The community is fired by a mix of angst about their dwindling numbers worldwide and yearning about their roots.

The Parsis' collective memory of Iran may have faded after 12 centuries of integration with the Indian mainstream, but Mr Mistree says there is a "genetic memory one has about Iran and ancient Zoroastrian history".



The Zoroastrian Festival of Fire is celebrated in Iran

Parsis who have been on pilgrimages say it is a journey of self-discovery.

Sarvar Irani, who still has some relatives in Iran, says: "When I go I feel like I'm back in my own country."

Mr Dadrawala says a lot of Parsis come to him with religious fervour.

They want to go to southern Iran to see the ancient fire temples that still exist.

"India is our adopted motherland but Iran is the spiritual motherland of all Parsis," Mr Dadrawala says.

Rituals

Zoroastrian Iranians came to India 12 centuries ago to avoid Islamic persecution.

They settled in the western state of Gujarat.

Today the majority of the 69,000-strong community lives in Mumbai in the neighbouring state of Maharashtra.

They speak Gujarati but many of their religious rituals are preserved.

Mr Dadrawala says cultural differences do divide the Indian and Iranian Zoroastrians.

But he says: "In terms of religious beliefs it is the same. We say the same prayers, probably with a different accent but the mode of worship is the same."



History comes alive in the mountains [of Iran] and in the rock carvings and inscriptions of the great kings."

Noshir Dadrawala

Mr Mistree says the desire to rediscover roots is a trend prevalent in all faiths.

"The process of discovery is to find out who one is."

Others point to travel becoming cheaper and that Islamic Iran is more relaxed about Zoroastrians visiting holy sites.

Most of the pilgrims are pleasantly surprised that their religious heritage has largely been preserved by the Iranian government.

On his first visit, Mr Dadrawala saw the sites were being renovated but noted the tolerance of the Islamic republic.

"There is a translation of an inscription of Darius which read, 'the Great God is Ahura Mazda', which shows how faithful the Iranian authorities have been to preserving Zoroastrianism."

The call of the faithful appears to be so strong it has influenced Iranians as well.

Mr Mistree says he has seen Iranian Muslims on the Zoroastrian sites "who go there to rediscover their own Iranian roots".

Visitors to the sites say the experience is uplifting.

"History comes alive in the mountains over there and in the rock carvings and inscriptions of the great kings," says Mr Dadrawala.

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