A Race Nearly Finished

The remarkable Parsis helped build modern India, but their old-fashioned ways now might doom them

By MASEEH RAHMAN Bombay

With his broad forehead, aquil-ine nose and flowing silver beard, Dastur Firoze Kotwal looks like central casting's version of the wise man from the East.
Except that Kotwal is really and truly one of the planet's l ast surviving Magi, the high priests of the ancient, fire-venerating Zoroastrian religion that was once the predominant faith in a large swath of the civilized world stretching from Kabul to Jerusalem.

Today only about 125,000 people still follow the faith first propagated by the prophet Zarathustra (or Zoroaster) in Central Asia some time between 1500 and 600 B.C., and the largest concentration is in Bombay where Kotwal resides. They are known as the P arsis-the people from Pars, or ancient Persia-the land they fled during the Middle Ages to preserve their religion amid the spread of Islam. But the Parsis are once again faced with the threat of extinction; this time, ironically, it is Zoroastrian high p riests such as Kotwal who are partly responsible for the community's fall toward oblivion.

What's dooming the Parsis is a tragic combination of factors: a low birthrate among its generally well-off members, a rising death rate as the community rapidly ages and-most critically-an injunction against accepting converts to the faith. At the current pace, this prosperous and highly accomplished group (members include conductor Zubin Mehta, novelist Rohinton Mistry and the late rock star Freddie Mercury) will disappear some time in the next century. But Kotwal and his like are unbending in their beli ef that Zoroastrianism prohibits conversions from the outside. He insists his duty is to ensure the religion and Parsi "race" are preserved. "It's not a game of numbers," he says. "It's quality, not quantity that matters. What we've been doing we've been doing for millennia."

The amazing rise of the Parsis from peaceable agriculturists and artisans to key builders of modern India helps buttress the belief within the community that they are a chosen people. After the exodus from Persia (now Iran), the fortunes of the community changed a second time with the rise of British power on the subcontinent. The Parsis, less suspicious and hostile toward the new arrivals from the West, became arbiters and agents for the colonizers. They embraced modern education and amassed fortunes in commerce and industry. They went on to make contributions in a variety of fields, from politics, law and nuclear physics to cinema and sport, while their philanthropy helped build Bombay. Today, India's biggest industrial empire, the Tata group, is headed by a Parsi, as is Godrej, the country's largest privately owned conglomerate. The late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's father also came from the community. The zeal with which the Parsis still pursue certain trades is best exemplified by their unique surna mes-a community directory lists not only Printer and Purveyor, but also Readymoney, Screwwala and even SodawaterBottleOpenerwala.

The exceptional success of the small but insular community, however, has carried the seeds of its own destruction. The most Westernized of all of India's ethnic groups, the Parsis tend to be well-educated and middle-class.

They generally prefer to marry l ate and, like modern couples everywhere, typically have just one or two children, or none at all. The prohibition against religious conversion compels most Parsis to choose partners from within the group, and generations of in-breeding have contributed to genetic-related disorders. Religious tradition also blocks Parsi parents from adopting non-Zoroastrian children. The result: a steadily aging and shrinking population.

The Bombay journal Parsiana keeps track of births and deaths among the Parsis-last yea r it recorded around 1,000 deaths in Bombay, and only about 500 births among the city's Parsi population of roughly 55,000. "Even in the rural areas the population is dwindling," says the journal's editor, Jehangir Patel. "One day we will inevitably disap pear as an ethnic community."

Despite such omens, the Magi cling to their beliefs. "It's a kind of collective death wish-the decisions of the orthodox leadership go against the long-term survival of the Parsis," says Ava Khullar, who has written extensively on the demographic death tr ap. Indeed, many experts feel the Magi's strict interpretations are not in keeping with the tenets of the faith.

"The religion does not prohibit conversions," says K.D. Irani, a U.S.-based scholar. "But many Parsis in India view the community as if it's y et another exclusive caste to which you can belong only by virtue of your birth." Religious conversions now are being done only in North America, mostly on the initiative of migrants from Iran's small, surviving Zoroastrian community. In India, the high p riests-adopting a practice more typical of the Hindu upper castes-do not permit non-Zoroastrians to enter their fire-temples, or even the stone towers where the Parsi dead are still consumed, as in ancient times, by vultures.

To help save the Parsis, a secular council of community leaders in Bombay, the Parsi Punchayat, created a novel scheme that subsidizes Parsi parents who want to bring up a third child. "A desperate situation called for a desperate remedy," says Punchayat chairman Jamshed Guzder. He says 40 Punchayat-sponsored babies have been born in the last five years, including a set of triplets. But the plan isn't likely to stem the slide. Once members of a mature community opt for late marriages and fewer children, s ays demographer Malini Karkal, "it's almost impossible to reverse the trend." Odds are against the Parsis ever getting a savior named BabyBoomwala.