

Despite Birth Bonuses, Zoroastrians in India Fade

By AMY WALDMAN

BOMBAY, India — This nation of one billion plus has tried just about every population disincentive known to man, including paying people to stop having children. So how to explain that one community here is paying its members to have more?

Call it a sign of demographic desperation. The Parsis are followers of the prophet Zarathustra and descendants of Persians who took refuge in India a millennium ago. Never large in numbers, they are now dwindling, by most accounts.

In this city, where more than two-thirds of the approximately 75,000 Parsis in India live, about 1,000 Parsis die every year. Only 300 to 400 are being born. One cartoonist called them Sparsees.

So for a decade now, the Parsi council here has been offering money — 1,000 rupees, or about \$21, a month until the child turns 18 — to any Parsi family that has a third child. About 100 families are on the rolls.

Few, however, think the third-child assistance scheme will stem the erosion of what has been one of India's most distinctive minorities. The community is aging: in 1901, one in 50 Parsis was over 65; less than a century later, one in 5 was.

Parsis, especially in Bombay, are educated, urbanized and prosperous. As a result they marry late, if at all, and have few children.

One in three Bombay Parsis now marries outside the faith. With the community so small, said Jehangir Patel, the editor of Parsiana Magazine, finding a Parsi spouse is like looking for a pin in a haystack.

About half of those who marry out are women, whose children, under the strictures of the priests, have not been considered Parsis. That exclusion has long rankled many.

So when a group of high priests issued a resolution last month reiterating their opposition to mixed marriages, an uproar ensued. It was all the louder because the resolution proclaimed that the children of men who marry non-Parsis should also not be accepted in the community.

A debate is now raging over the best way to preserve a group that survived domination by Muslims in Persia and migration to India but that may not survive modernity. The key question is on intermarriage.

The Parsis have been a group apart since a few boatloads of them came to the shores of India seeking the freedom to practice their religion. As folklore has it, a Hindu ruler sent them a full bowl of milk to suggest there was no room for them. They sent the milk back with a gold ring in it, to suggest that they would enrich the land without disturbing it.

There is no record of a promise that they would not proselytize, but to retain their identity, and avoid alienating their hosts, they never did.



The Parsis have been a remarkably successful minority, yielding the founders of some of India's most illustrious industrial houses, like the Tatas and the Godrejes. There is an increasingly far-flung diaspora, because more and more Parsis are emigrating. Their members include Zubin Mehta and Rohinton Mistry, and the late Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of Queen.

Driven by Zarathustra's injunction Happiness to him that brings happiness to others, the Parsis have pursued philanthropy with a passion. They founded India's first cancer hospital and many other institutions, and Bombay is full of the housing colonies, hospitals and schools Parsis built for themselves.

They still adhere to ancient rituals. Zoroastrians worship the elements, particularly fire, and Bombay has about 50 fire temples, open only to Parsis. Upon death, the bodies of Parsis have traditionally been fed to vultures, to avoid polluting earth with burial or fire with cremation.

On a recent morning, Rashna Thanewallah, 30, en route to work as a marketing manager, stepped inside the gate of a fire temple to pay her respects. She goes every day. It gives me contentment, she said.

In the early evening Bomi Plumber, 75, worshiped an Arabian Sea set alight by a descending sun, folding his hands and bowing his head. He comes each spring, he said.

Then he offered, unprompted, We are a dying community.

And so the high priests issued the resolution. It warned that if the trend of intermarriage continued, the community's identity would be diluted and subsequently wiped out.

The only reason the community had survived for 1,000 years was that it did not intermarry, said a high priest, Dr. Firoze M. Kotwal. He wore a priest's white cap and white garb, and had a woolly white beard.

We would have been absorbed in the vast ocean of Hindus and Muslims, Dr. Kotwal said.

The more delicate issue is danced around: the fair-skinned Parsis see themselves as an ethnic group as well as a religion, and many orthodox argue that they have a duty to preserve what one priest called their genetic distinctness.

If the trend continues, you won't be able to recognize a Parsi, said Noshir H. Dadrawala, 42, who is among the community's most vocal opponents of mixed marriages.

But some advocates of intermarriage whisper that generations of in-breeding have hardly done wonders for the community's genetic pool. Reformers also argue that notions of separateness amount to a doctrine of racial or ethnic superiority.

The best way to ensure the religion's survival in India, they say, is to welcome people into it, particularly those who marry in — or at least not to exclude the children of those who marry out. If they would accept our children we would grow so much more, said Meher Amersey, the president of the Association of Intermarried Zoroastrians.

In Mrs. Amersey's grand mansion, a group of confident, prominent women, all married to non-Parsis, gathered to support her position. In the meantime, they have found a priest willing to bless weddings to non-Parsis; perform the navjote, or initiation ceremony, for the children of mixed marriages; and pray for their dead even if they choose to cremate them.

The priest, Framroze Mirza, was laid up with a bad back but spoke passionately. I will continue, he said, noting that mixed marriages had been occurring for decades.

The high priests had pressured him to stop his work, and even put up notices excommunicating him. They provided free publicity that he was willing to defy their dictates.

Now, he is busy. A call came in, for a December wedding between a Parsi and a non-Parsi. I am famous for this only, he said from his bed.

Now they have to wait for me

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