

Followers debate faith's fade

Zoroastrianism: Falling birthrate and refusal to accept converts point to the extinction of ancient religion that influenced monotheism.

BOMBAY, India - For centuries this city has been the citadel where Zoroastrianism, the world's oldest prophetic religion, has preserved itself and prospered in the face of overwhelming odds.

Now, demographers say, Zoroastrians in Bombay and elsewhere face extinction, with a falling birthrate magnified by a tradition of not accepting converts. The threat has locked the tiny community into an emotional debate over how to maintain its faith and identity, while also moving with the times.

We must become more broadminded, says Khushroo Madon, a self-described reformist priest in Bombay where the Zoroastrian population is expected to slide from 60,000 to 25,000 by 2020. We must welcome children of mixed parents [and] maybe even some new converts into our community.

To Zoroastrian conservatives this is heresy.

Purity is more important than numbers, says Khojeste Mistri, a Zoroastrian scholar in Bombay. Our religion is interwoven with our ethnicity [and] can only be passed on through a Zoroastrian father.

Sita Mani, 36, the daughter of a Zoroastrian mother and Hindu father, says this isn't fair or sensible.

I would have looked seriously at Zoroastrianism when I was choosing my spiritual path, says Mani. Its basic tenets – good thoughts, good words and good deeds - are so sound.

But since Mani was prohibited from even entering a Zoroastrian fire temple (fire is considered sacred), her interest in the religion waned, and she now practices Buddhism.

With the Zoroastrian community losing thousands of would-be members like Mani, Madon says he has started performing the navjote (a bar mitzvah-like initiation ceremony) of children born of Zoroastrian mothers and non-Zoroastrian fathers.

Zoroastrians self-deprecatingly admit they squabble over most things, but this dispute has become exceedingly fierce.

A coterie of powerful conservative priests recently called for the excommunication of all Zoroastrians married to non-Zoroastrians. Though the priests backed away from their stand after its legality and practicality were questioned, the episode emphasized the chasm within the community.



From a dignified and fraying office in Bombay's Asiatic Society, Mani Kamerkar, a Zoroastrian historian, says the problem is rooted in Zoroastrians' refugee mentality.

Though Zoroastrianism was developed in the sixth century B.C. and flourished in Persia (modern-day Iran) - greatly influencing Judaism, Christianity and Islam - it was destroyed by the Arab invasion of Persia in 651 AD.

Some Zoroastrians went underground in Iran and some fled to India, where they came to be called Parsees. In both countries the communities struggled to maintain their faith and did not intermarry with local communities.

Zoroastrians have become obsessed with the idea of saving themselves, keeping apart from the Other, says Kamerkar, who is married to a non-Parsee.

While Parsees are generally religiously conservative, they tend to be socially progressive. Zoroastrianism's universalistic and rational nature melds well with modernity, and during Britain's colonization of India the Parsees adopted many Western ways. Cartoonists commonly caricature the Parsees as dressed in colonial-era garb, spouting Shakespearean prose and swaying to Strauss waltzes.

Most families are socially liberal and Parsee women are often better educated than the men. As a result Parsee women tend to marry late, outside the community and have fewer children. And with Parsees increasingly working and living abroad - there are about 25,000 in North America - many are also losing touch with their faith.

I don't care if my kids don't do their navjote as long as they take in the openness of our culture, says Dinyar Pochkhanawala, 37, a captain in the merchant marine.

Mistri argues that such over-westernization and over-secularization is killing our Parsee panu, or way of life.

Once, Parsees, with men wearing distinctive white clothing called daglis and women in richly embroidered saris, ruled Bombay's economic, political and social life.

Many of Bombay's oldest mansions, industrial houses, university buildings, schools, film studios, public buildings and hospitals boast statues or portraits of Parsee founders or benefactors.

Even as the community is shrinking, it remains a much-beloved part of Bombay, where citizens like to joke that Parsees are defined by how small they are in numbers and how great they are in their minds.

[They] are a wonderful and mad lot, says Jiten Gandhi, a stockbroker. Gandhi says he hopes Parsees survive because he could not live without Parsee jokes or bakeries, which are famous for grumpily serving patrons sweet tea and hot brun pau, a crusty bread. Like many Indians, Gandhi also lauds Parsees for their industriousness and munificence.

Minoo Shroff, chairman of the Bombay Parsee Panchyat (BPP), the community's apex organization, says rich Parsees have endowed numerous secular charities and given more than

\$500 million to their own community in the form of free housing, education, health care and religious infrastructure.

But critics say Parsee philanthropy is proving to be a double-edged sword.

Roxanne Pavri, 23, grew up in Cusrow Baug, a serene Parsee housing colony in the heart of chaotic Bombay. She says the assurance of free homes and a safety net is making many Parsees content to just loaf around. ... They don't do things like they did in the old days.

In Iran, Zoroastrianism's original home, the theological and practical questions of conversion are compounded by political intrigue.

Iran's Islamic leaders have tried for centuries to sweep away all trace of Zoroastrianism, says Sohrab Yazdi, a community leader in Yazd, where most of Iran's 30,000 Zoroastrians live. Pointing to the brilliantly domed Jame mosque in the city's center, Yazdi says it was built over a destroyed Zoroastrian fire temple.

But from outside the shattered splendor of Persepolis, the ancient capital of Persia, Bahram Agaheri, a Muslim, talks in elegiac rhythms about how many Iranians want to rediscover the faith of their forefathers.

People are tired of the mullahs. ... If we were allowed to convert, millions would convert to Zoroastrianism, Agaheri says. I challenge the government to allow conversion out of Islam for even one day.

He is unlikely to see that day. Islam punishes conversion to another faith with death.

There is, however, evidence that people in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and some Kurdish regions are rediscovering their Zoroastrian-Persian roots. A secularized version of Noruz, the traditional Persian New Year, has always been celebrated across the region and now many are also looking toward Zoroastrianism for spiritual guidance.

Some Zoroastrians, such as Mistri and Yazdi, fear that aggressive attempts at conversion could set off a dangerous political backlash from Iran's radical Islamists or India's Hindu nationalists, who also oppose religious conversions.

You must understand our apprehension, says Yazdi. We are like a small, colorful fish in a big pond. One wrong move and we will be eaten.

Zend M. Zend, 66, a Zoroastrian well known in Bombay for expounding earthy philosophical views from behind the counter of his family's 100-year-old bakery, says all this moaning and groaning is in vain.

Zoroastrianism has been left for dead many times. Each time it was simply our zest for life, our life-celebrating attitude that saw us through, he says. As long as we have that we'll be fine.



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