



The Contribution of Parsis to Indian Society

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ABSTRACT - The Parsis have always demonstrated that even as a micro minority community, if a minority community endeavours, it can become an agent of social change, that a minority community, which came as refugees, can be an agent of embellishment and cultural as well as national growth.

Keywords - Contribution, Parsis, Indian, Society, Embellishment.

The Parsis arrived on the West coast of India, specifically Sanjan in Gujarat between the eighth and the tenth centuries AD. There is a famous 'sugar in the milk' story about the arrival of the Parsis to Sanjan. It is believed that the local Hindu King, Jadi Rana saw the band of Zoroastrian refugees and showed their leader, the priest, a jug full of milk in which the Parsi priest dissolved sugar. Thus, indicating that the new refugees to India, the Zoroastrians, would merge into the Indian milieu without causing any hindrance whatsoever. The King then, pointed to the jug, which was full to the brim, stating that there was no space in his kingdom to accommodate new people. The Zoroastrian priest, thence, put a golden, jewelled ring into the jug, manifesting that the Zoroastrians would not just merge into the Indian milieu but would also add value to it. The Hindu king then imposed a few conditions on the Zoroastrians, who came to be known as Parsis, as people from the Pars region of Persia. These conditions included that the Parsis would not convert any person from another religion into Zoroastrianism, that their women would adopt Indian dress, that is, the sari. It also included that the men would lay down the arms and the refugees would adopt the local language, Gujarati, and that their priest would explain the Zoroastrian religion to the king. And one last condition was that the Parsis would conduct their marriage ceremonies after sunset, ostensibly not to attract the local populace.

The Parsis agreed to all these conditions without any hesitation. In current times, in 2022-2023, or even a century ago, acceptance of these conditions by the Hindu king, Jadi Rana may be considered as religious persecution. However, in the various literary texts that this researcher has read, Jadi Rana is hailed as a hero. This researcher asked Novy Kapadia, Parsi scholar, in an interview about this social phenomenon. Kapadia replied that "We, Parsis, always respect those who give us refuge." Thus, the fact that the Parsis do not

convert people from other religions into Zoroastrianism in India, is not seen as religious persecution. It is seen as a promise made to the King Jadi Rana over a thousand years ago, when the king gave refuge to the Parsis who arrived from Iran.

It is also noteworthy that this 'sugar in the milk story' about the Parsis stated above was written in a poem in the late sixteenth century, at least six to seven centuries after the arrival of the Parsis to India. There are no historical records to prove that this legend ever took place. However, the Parsis have kept to the promise and have believed in the legend. The population of the Parsi community from the first Census of India in 1891 to the latest Census of India has been abysmal across the country. Their population peaked in the 1941 Census at 114,000 persons across the country.

In current times, there have been debates about the Triple Talaq Bill issued by the government and there have been talks about the age of consent as also the Uniform Civil Code. The usual debates revolve around if it is proper and incumbent upon the government of the land to mediate in personal laws and related matters. However, this researcher would like to point out to a very curious social and historical fact. The Age of Consent Bill 1891 which raised the age of consent for Hindu girls from the age of ten to the age of twelve was raised due to the efforts of a Parsi, the poet, journalist and social reformer, Behramji Malabari. A person no less than the stalwart, Bal Gangadhar Tilak was opposed to the raising of age of consent and questioned Malabari's locus, who was a Parsi. In the 1880s and the 1890s, it was Berhamji Malabari who ran concerted campaigns about the condition of the women and about raising the Age of Consent. He believed that if social and religious communities did not themselves initiate social reform, then it was the duty of the state to initiate social reform in the interests of the people of the country. Malabari's aggressive campaigns for raising the age of consent in Hindu society.

As the matter got heated up-- there being a member of the minority community advocating social reform in the majority community—as is also normal, there were questions raised against Malabari and his locus standi in the issue. After all, he was not a Hindu himself. To these questions asked about his locus standi, Malabari replied thus:

If my Hindu friends take this line of argument—that I am 'only a Parsi', I will be forced to reply that I am as good a Hindu as any of them, that India is as much my country as theirs, and that if they do not give me a 'locus standi', in the case, I will take my stand on the higher ground of humanity. I have not taken up the work as a holiday pastime, and I am not going to be bullied out of it by the holiest of Brahmins. I respect their right of action and will continue to do so, but at the same time they must not question my right of eliciting discussion nor attempt in a sinister manner to stifle such discussion.¹

¹ The Indian Spectator (March 7, 1885), page 186, quoted in *The Parsees in India: A Minority as Agent of Social Change* by Eckehard Kulke, Weltforum Verlag, Munchen, 1974, page 114

Malabari, thus, believed that if social communities did not initiate reform, the government should do so. It was due to his singular efforts that social change was initiated. Later, Behramji Malabari was made an offer of knighthood by the Viceroy, which he refused, as he was born humble and lived a life of simplicity.

The case of Behramji Malabari is just one example of the immense contribution by this micro minority community of the Parsis. One finds names such as Darashaw Noshirwan Wadia, or D. N. Wadia, who was a pioneering geologist and in whose honour, the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology in Dehradun is named. Yet another illustrious Parsi gentleman was the architect, Cyrus Jhabvala, who designed the Kirorimal College as well as the Delhi Parsi Anjuman buildings among others. His wife was the Booker Prize winning author, Ruth Praver Jhabvala and as a professor at School of Planning and Architecture, one of his students was the author, Arundhati Roy. In fact, when Roy made the movie, *When Annie Gave it to Those Ones*, the character of Cyrus Jhabvala was played by the veteran actor, Roshan Seth. This is just to illustrate the social impact of the Parsis in different walks of life in the country.

In the World Development Report issued by the World Bank, there is a reference to the ‘sugar in the milk story’ of the Parsis and there is also a pertinent quote by Antonio Guterres, ex-Secretary General of the United Nations:

The priestly leaders of the Parsis were brought before the local ruler, Jadhav Rana, who presented them with a vessel full of milk to signify that the surrounding lands could not possibly accommodate any more people. The Parsi head priest responded by slipping some sugar into the milk to signify how the strangers would enrich the local community without displacing them. They would dissolve into life like sugar dissolves in the milk, sweetening the society but not unsettling it. The ruler responded to the eloquent image and granted the exiles land and permission to practice their religion unhindered if they would respect local customs, and learn the local language, Gujarati.—Parsi legend

As a global community, we face a choice. Do we want migration to be a source of prosperity and international solidarity, or a byword for inhumanity and social friction?

António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, 2018²

In a world today, which is plagued by issues of migration as also by conflict, Guterres asks if minority communities may follow the example set by the Parsis, of being a community, which migrated out of Iran as refugees. But a community that stood for peace and prosperity in their adopted homeland, India. Or if migration should be the cause for conflict and social disorder? This is an important and a central question for our times and the stellar example of the Parsis demonstrates how a minority migrant community can be an agent for social change.

Mahatma Gandhi is understood to have said that the Parsis were beneath contempt in numbers but stellar in their philanthropy. The concept of giving back to society lies in the ethos of the Zoroastrian religion as such.

². <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2023>, page 6

The trope of assimilation of the Parsis to the Indian milieu gets reinforced also through political leaders in the country. Recently, on June 14, 2022, at a function organized by the Mumbai Samachar, to celebrate two hundred years of its founding, the Hon'ble Indian Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi spoke glowingly of the Parsi community and put out a tweet³ from his official handle to that effect. He said that there cannot be a better example of assimilation of a community than the Parsis, who have strengthened their country of arrival. He added that the contribution of the Parsis is significant from the freedom movement to their role in the development of modern India. To quote him, "In numbers, this community is a micro minority but in terms of capability and service, they are quite big⁴. He continues further in Gujarati, "In Gujarat, I always say this to the people that if anyone has taught us, Gujaratis, how to laugh, those people are the Parsis. Parsi theatre meant that you are in splits laughing. If you have ever known a Parsi family, you would always find them a cheerful people."

It is a well known fact that the Bombay Cinema, or Bollywood as it is popularly called, owes its origins to the yeoman work of the Parsi theatre. Parsis adapted Shakespearean and other English plays with song and dance sequences, with mirth and enjoyment for the audiences, which led to the birth of these unique sequences to Bollywood. Thus, even in the context of popular culture, such as Bombay cinema, the Parsis melted like sugar in the milk and they also added value to Indian culture. Somnath Gupta, Kathryn Hansen and Rashna Nicholson among other important scholars have carried out important research about the pivotal role played by the Parsi Theatre.

Thus, the Parsis have always demonstrated that even as a micro minority community, if a minority community endeavours, it can become an agent of social change, that a minority community, which came as refugees, can be an agent of embellishment and cultural as well as national growth.

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³ <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1536761190701211653?s=20> : "India cherishes the outstanding contribution of the Parsi community in different fields," June 14, 2022.

⁴ Translation by this researcher from the Hindi and the Gujarati spoken by the Hon'ble PM.

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