



PARSI IDENTITY: MYTH AND COLLECTIVE MEMORIES

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ABSTRACT This article discusses the politics of identity and narratives of the Parsi minority community in India, who are Indian Zoroastrians on the brink of extinction. The mapping of the mythical construction of the Parsis by the Parsis themselves is contrasted with representations by popular culture. The main concern is that when there are no more Parsis left in South Asia to participate in this dialogue regarding the manufacture of identity, unchallenged stereotypes will persist, to the disadvantage of the community. Specifically, the character of the mad Parsi (*yeda*) in Hindi cinema will remain predominant in popular imagination, while narratives of great Parsi entrepreneurs will be absorbed into general narratives of the nation, and collective memory will privilege the queer, the fool, the drug dealer or the anti-Christ.

KEYWORDS: *collective memory, culture, identity, myth, Parsis, Zoroastrians*

Introduction

When a community is rendered voiceless, not due to disempowerment but due to extinction, one of the major sources that remains to resurrect its past reality is textual evidence. Often, much of the textual evidence that informs collective memory originates from oral traditions that eventually attain mythical status. This article is part of a research project with a broader scope that attempts to understand how the Parsis will be remembered when the community is extinct, by approaching the problem from two angles. It explores the nostalgic memories of the Parsis of India, many of whom have migrated elsewhere, constructing their particular ethnic identity through their own myths, and examines popular culture that informs the collective memory of how other people perceive and regard the Parsis of India, if at all the Parsis are remembered as Parsis. While a specialist academic literature documents Parsi identity (Boyce, 1996; Hinnells, 1996; Palsetia, 2001), people on the streets of India simply do not know, for example, that the Tatas are Parsis.


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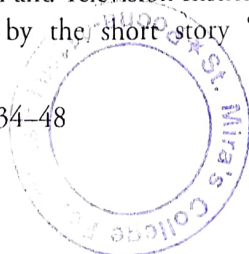
The article argues, using oral and textual evidence, including extensive interview with common people in India, that over the years broadly four paradigms have evolved that tend to stereotype Parsis as the queer, the fool, the entrepreneur or drug dealer, and the anti-Christ. The research problematises the portrayal of a once prominent minority community that may be extinct in India by the end of the present century. The author is herself an Indian Zoroastrian, also known as a Parsi, and hence is writing from inside the culture, having grown up within the community as a practising Zoroastrian. Culture, here, simplistically, signifies the way we live and includes lifestyle, food, rituals, religion, sartorial markers and even certain locales. An insider portrayal of Parsis may include certain assumptions on Parsi culture which researchers on the outside of the community may question.

In addition to ethnographic evidence, textual material, which in itself is broad in scope, is used here. Although literature is fiction, fabricating stories that are not necessarily true, it draws upon real people and real situations to construct this simulacrum or mirage of a world that existed at some point in the past. However, such constructs are always steered by power. Thus, who writes and for whom, at what point in history are they writing, what time in history are they depicting, and why? What is the dominant discourse of that time? How are people remembered and by whom? Are they remembered differently? These are important questions which this article addresses, seeking to anticipate how the Parsis will be remembered.

Memory and Remembering

Evelyn Ender (2005: 2) remarks that if a memory disappears, a person's life becomes meaningless: 'Remembrance casts things into a narrative pattern and creates a self'. Hence, stories are not mere fiction, they are an imprint of one's self and how one would like to be remembered as opposed to mere nostalgia. Often, deep concern about how minorities are remembered, represented, forgotten and erased motivates a specialist literature.

Maurice Halbwachs (1950) asserted in his seminal writing that family, class, religious communities, the nation and perhaps even political orientation, gender and sexual orientation can form the 'Collective', something like 'community', but this is always an entity that contains both internal and external views and perceptions and thus circumscribes what is widely known as ethnic characteristics. Crucially, it is 'the collective' that decides what is valuable and hence, by extension, what must be remembered. For Halbwachs, cultural memory of the collective is based on socially organised mnemonics, institutions and media. Thus, there is popular cinema and advertising, as opposed to the Parsis' own efforts to construct memory through myths, museum exhibitions, Parsi magazines like *Parsiana*, and local Parsi sales of food and clothing. It even includes short films like *Afterglow*, a National Award-winning short film from the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), directed by Kaushal Oza and inspired by the short story 'Condolence Visit' by the



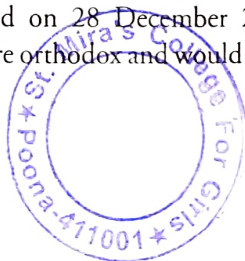
well-known Parsi writer Rohinton Mistry of *Tales from Firozsha Baag* fame (Mistry, 1987). The film captures, as the title implies, the glow that remains after the light has disappeared, signifying the memory of the Parsis as an almost extinct community, whose demographic crisis has been highlighted by several writers (Desai, 1948; Sayeed et al., 2008; Visaria, 1974). Since memory, according to Halbwachs (1950), is a social product, and individual memory is based on society, social norms in minority groups are often aligned with those of the dominant community.

Alessandro Portelli (1991) has suggested that oral history talks less about events and more about their meaning. We often reimagine a past, which then reconstructs us. Even more precarious, by extension, others reimagine a past for a minority, to reconstruct an inflated identity for themselves to reinforce their own power. This happens every day, sometimes innocuously, at other times overtly.

While memory is inescapable, a related assumption is that remembering as a more or less conscious act inadvertently involves agency. The subject consciously selects sites of remembering, as Pierre Nora (1989) theorised. But in that determinate selection from memory, there is also a deliberate amnesia or forgetting, which collectively, over time, can lead to erasure. The present research explores sites of erasure that paradoxically become potential sites of remembering. Ricoeur (2004) identified three levels of abuse of memory. The first is blocked memory, a form of Freudian repression. The second is manipulation of memories through specific narratives, which is what the present study is mainly concerned with. Narratives can vary from news reports to history lessons or religious lectures. The present research on non-Parsi representations of Parsis focuses primarily on oral histories, fictional autobiographies, novels, cinema and interviews. Narratives are selective and at the same time allow for variation, as no two people will tell the same story.

Ricoeur (2004) argued that abuse of memory results from the manipulation of memory through master narratives. The third abuse of memory is thus connected to the categorical imperative, which means that it is one's duty to remember. Coercions like 'you must remember' or 'you must not forget' tend to threaten the truth claims of memory. This last form of abuse is extremely significant for Parsis, who are in a dual state of flux, between the demand to remember the commitment to the purity of the race/community and its culture and the ostensible promise to the local Indian king who first accepted the Parsi refugees as residents in India, while demanding that they assimilate to the local culture. Both factors led to the precariousness of the community's very existence, plummeting towards an inescapable erasure, as most probably by the end of the present century, the Parsi, as a pure-blooded Indian Zoroastrian, will be extinct.

This raises the question to what extent oral history is able to operate as a tool of subversion of collective memory. As in most narratives, the Parsi stage has many actors speaking contradictory scripts across the country, but cohering in their particular locale. During personal interviews conducted on 28 December 2017 in Udvada in Gujarat, several Parsis declared that they were orthodox and would proudly



face extinction rather than dilute the purity of the race. As was learnt in a focus group discussion with Pacy Dagina, Bahadur Postwalla, Noshir Wadia and Sam Medora on 7 November 2017, Parsis in Kolkata, already on the brink of extinction with an average age of about 75 years, are inviting young Parsis to shift residence to Kolkata, luring them with lodging and jobs. The Parsis in Kolkata are extremely inclusive and tolerant of mixed marriages, while for orthodox Parsis, any Parsi female who enters a mixed marriage is lost to the community.

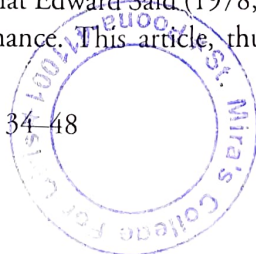
Culture, Power and Memory

The intersection of culture, power and memory construction is at the heart of the present project. Stuart Hall's extensive work on cultural and national identity as well as the power of representation is pertinent here (Hall, 1997a). Clearly, Parsis have reinvented their identity over hundreds of years in India, despite not having a king or a single head priest, evolving from refugees to merchant princes to eccentrics, and perhaps that explains why they have survived this long as a separate community in India.

At the same time, the process of communal identity formation was notably reinforced by an intriguing process in which 'the Parsis worked from within and through the colonial state' (Sharafi, 2014: 6), so that '[b]y the end of colonial rule in 1947, Parsi law consisted of distinctive legal institutions and substantive law, all of which came about through Parsi-led initiatives or new professional opportunities exploited by Parsis' (Sharafi, 2014: 5–6). In short, South Asia's legal structure with its colonially manipulated personal law system, mainly for Hindus and Muslims, now included an explicitly recognised Parsi legal culture as well.

But precisely this special ethnic state of being 'another' also poses risk factors for this small community, which always needed the support of others, while they were also competitors in certain domains (Guha, 1970a). In this regard, Luhrmann (2002: 861) argues that Parsis as a community, 'whose members have never forgotten that they are outsiders in an adopted land', subsequently 'made efforts to represent themselves as being like the British, and they did so more diligently and more effectively than perhaps any other South Asian community'. Luhrmann (2002: 861) further observes that '[t]his impulse is well understood in the anthropological literature as the phenomenon of native identification with the colonizer'. She also provides important comments about observance of Parsi practices, referring to an unpublished dissertation from 1987 by Taraporevala on Bombay Parsis (Luhrmann, 2002: 870). The critical point here is that the Parsis, as a long-established minority in India, did not really assimilate to the Hindu majority, but skilfully navigated their own existence and separate identity, albeit never without some more or less critical concern, from the British, the Hindu majority community, as well as some internal Parsi critics.

If we ask further how the dominant group depicts the margins between different sociocultural groups, one finds that Edward Said (1978, 1993) identified the strategy to maintain majoritarian dominance. This article, thus, not only raises questions



about how the identity of the Parsi community in India has been formed vis-à-vis the colonial rulers and the Hindu majority but also asks how much of this has been determined by the Parsis themselves, as opposed to being constructed by the respective 'other' or dominant power, whether Hindus, Muslims, the British, Western academics or contemporary colloquial discourse.

Who Are the Parsis? Myths of Identity Formation

Every family, let alone every community, allows stories to grow symbolically and to take on mythical stature which positions them as various types of heroes. Finnegan (2006: 178) established several paradigms under which these stories grow. There is the 'last straw' incident, the courtship ritual often leading to a 'love-at-first-sight' or 'test-between-competing-suitors' variant, quarrels and feuds. Migration that separates people enhances the symbolic depth of the selected memories. Those who enunciate and guard these traditions and narratives are not 'passive transmitters but active creators' (Finnegan, 2006: 178), and the myths that evolve may not be accurate in factual terms, but they definitely mould the family or in this case the community's view of themselves and their experiences.

There is no doubt that Zoroastrians have an ancient history (Boyce, 1996; Hinnells, 1996; Kulke, 1978; Nanavutty, 1977). The Iranian epic *Shahnameh* by Firdausi, translated by Warner and Warner (1910), further contributes towards myths of Zoroastrian origin. However, the Parsis are unique as Indian Zoroastrians, who share origins with those of the same faith in Iran but later evolved their own specific culture and identity, extremely different from that of other Zoroastrians (Palsetia, 2001).

A recent narrative of the ancient trajectory of the Zoroastrian religion is chronicled by the Indian film director Sooni Taraporevala (2000: 10–19) as part of the Achaemenian Empire (559–330 BC) in Persia. It was threatened 200 years later by Alexander the Great, who sacked their capital Persepolis. The religion was resurrected five and a half centuries later by Ardeshir from the Sasanian dynasty, which ruled from 226 AD to 641 AD. While led by a 20-year-old youth, Yazdegerd, this dynasty was threatened in 632 AD by Arabs from the south. This particular invasion was so complete and overpowering that people today cannot conceive of a non-Islamic Iran.

There are numerous intriguing hints that, much earlier, there were various Iranian connections with India through early seafarers and traders (Desai, 1948: 2). Archaeological evidence, as observed by Sharafi (2014: 17) with further references, indicates that 'there had been trade between Persia and Gujarat for centuries before. Zoroastrians may have come to western India in part because they were already familiar with the region through earlier commerce'. This also explains the continuing confusion in the literature about the precise date of the Parsis' arrival in India, sometimes given as 636 AD, or 716, and more prominently 936. The most familiar story of 'the great exodus' (Desai, 1948: 2) is that a small band of devoted Zoroastrians fled over

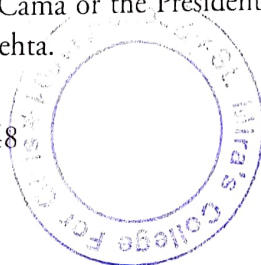
the mountains of Khorasan in Iran and sailed to India to seek refuge there. Their first port of call was Diu in Gujarat. After residing there for 19 years, they journeyed to Sanjan, near today's Navsari, in 936, where the local Hindu ruler, Jadi or Jadhav Rana, gave them asylum under certain conditions. They promised to completely integrate themselves, yet retained their unique identity, including the protection of their sacred fire. Later, they fought alongside their Hindu neighbours when the Muslim Sultanate invaded and sacked Sanjan.

Parsi Myths

The famous sugar and milk parable, describing the arrival and integration of the Parsis, has been used as much by Parsis as well as non-Parsis to highlight and praise their ability to assimilate, not only creating a foundational myth but also inventing traditions. The story goes that Rana showed the Parsi head priest a glass of milk as a metaphor for his land, claiming that the land was full, with no place for refugees. The head priest requested a spoon of sugar, which he carefully stirred into the milk. He prophesised that the Parsis would mingle and sweeten the land as did the sugar for the milk. Rana yielded, on the condition that the community adhered to certain promises (Sharafi, 2014: 17).

These conditions, often alluded to, are that Parsis would adopt the Gujarati language, ways of dress and culture, which they did. Other promises were that marriages would be after sunset, the community would keep its culture and religion private, and there would be no conversion. With time, the community thrived and, thanks to later British patronage, they flourished and became very wealthy. Undeniably, there is a sense of superiority within the community, not just because of their English-speaking abilities and high levels of education but also because of a sense of contiguity with power and the colour of their skin. This notion of superiority due to skin colour is never openly articulated but is conveniently assumed as part of the narrative for preserving racial purity, leading to the demographic decline of the community.

The Parsis' later cooperation with the East India Company gave rise to trading and shipbuilding ventures, which changed the fortunes of the Parsis who migrated in large numbers from Gujarat to Bombay (Desai, 1948: 3–8; Shroff, 1991: 40; Tajaldini, 2021), where they still dominate the landscape in particular parts of the city. The main industry was shipbuilding, pioneered by Lovji Nusserwanji Wadia, and the opium trade led by the merchant prince Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, who was a far cry from a mafia don or the character of the wheeling-dealing drug pedlar in the 2005 Hindi movie *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, which was based on the 1857 revolt. Narratives of Parsi fascination with British royalty often overshadow their contribution to the freedom struggle, whether regarding the efforts of Dadabhai Naoroji, Behramji Malabari, Madam Bhikaiji Cama or the President of the Indian National Congress in 1890, Sir Pherozeshah Mehta.



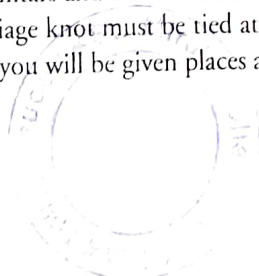
Qissa-i Sanjan: A Narrative of Nation and a Continuity Myth

The most popular myth that informs Parsi identity based on its arrival on Indian shores and the community's future and social conduct on Indian soil has its source in the *Qissa-i Sanjan*. This Persian text, translated into English by Shahpurshah Hormasji Hodivala and originally published in Bombay, is now available in an electronic edition of 2000, prepared by Joseph H. Peterson. Hodivala (1920) refers to an earlier English translation of the *Qissa* by E.B. Eastwick, published in the first volume of the *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, as being far from correct. According to him, the Gujarati version by Dastur Framji Aspandiar Rabadi in 1931 is better. Hodivala relied mainly on the manuscript of Dastur Dorab Hormazdyar's *Rivayat*, written in 1680.

The *Qissa* was first written around 1600 by Bahman Kaikobad Hamjiar Sanjana. The 854-line poem is an account of the emigration of the Zoroastrians from Iran to India and their settlement in Sanjan in 936 AD, the promises to Jadi Rana and the battle with the Muslims during the sacking of Surat, which took place in 1465. It also describes how the sacred fire *Iranshah* was saved and moved to Navsari. The next section of the *Qissa* declares that it will tell one part of the wondrous tale of the coming of the men from Khorasan to India, which has been recounted by Parsi priests (*dastur*), religious/community leaders and ancient sages. It alludes to Sikander (Alexander the Great), who burnt all the scriptures threatening the religion till about 226 AD, when Ardeshir seized the kingdom and revived the faith only for it to lose currency until King Shahpur III (309–379 AD) came to power. After his death, the *Qissa* claims, Iran was shattered and all Zoroastrian laymen and priests had to go into hiding for about 15 years. The sage Dastur prophesised, by looking at the stars, that their tenure in Iran had come to an end and to survive, they must flee along with their women and children to Hindustan. The *Qissa*, in addition, outlines the genesis of the *Iranshah*, considered to be one of the most sacred fires in the Parsi faith. Zoroastrian priests as stargazers with the ability to prophesise are a recurring trope in Zoroastrian mythology that connects to the myth of the biblical Magi, following the star to Bethlehem to witness the birth of Christ.

As mentioned, on landing in Sanjan, the refugees met the generous and virtuous Raja Jadi Rana. However, he was wary of these strange people with alien customs and extracted five promises which have in present-day myth been diluted to three quite different ones. Hodivala (1920: 8) reported:

Let me first of all see what your beliefs are and we will then arrange for your residence here. Secondly, if we gave you shelter, you must abandon the language of your country, disuse the tongue of Iran and adopt the speech of the realm of Hind. Thirdly, as to the dress of your women, they should wear garments like those of our females. Fourthly, you must put off all your arms and scimitars and cease to wear them anywhere. Fifthly, when your children are wedded, the marriage knot must be tied at evening time. If you give a solemn promise to observe all of this, you will be given places and abodes in my city.



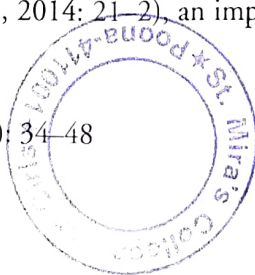
The *Qissa* does not mention the sugar and milk parable, nor is there any censure on conversion which people claim to be one of the original promises made to the Raja. To quell the Raja's misgivings, the *dastur* explains their flight and plight. He elaborates that they honour the cow, fire, water, sun and moon. He goes on to describe other rituals, like using a sacred woven thread (*kusti*) that Zorastrians tie, while praying, around their waist over a white vest, known as a *sadral/sadreh*, in order to ward off evil and protect the wearer (Luhrmann, 2002: 870, n. 18; Sharafi, 2014: 322). He also describes how menstruating women kept themselves aloof. The kind Indian ruler was convinced by the priest that the newcomers would assimilate and allowed him to choose a fine spot for their dwelling, which was thereafter named Sanjan.

The next section deals with Shah Mahmud, who sent an army against the Raja of Sanjan, who was helped by the Parsis. The *Qissa* ends with a thanksgiving and a declaration that the *Iranshah* remained at Navsari for 200 years thereafter. The deeper significance of this historical narrative is that it establishes that, by 1465, the Parsis shared an allegiance in terms of cultural and religious memory not with Persia but with their adopted motherland, which they integrated into their identity to the extent of a willingness to die in battle to protect certain internal frontiers within South Asia.

The Parsis as a Community and Contemporary Myths of Identity Formation

Parsis have evolved their own idiosyncratic culture, which has made them both loved and respected but also the butt of fond and gentle ridicule. The concern now is that a community which contributed so much to the sciences, arts, literature and architecture will disappear after struggling for thousands of years to survive. In addition, their identity may be usurped, reinvented and distorted. The Parsis, in order to counter popular culture and the stereotype of the 'mad Parsi' (*yeda*), must preserve and document their identity and history extensively and repeatedly, for all historical fiction is the act of constantly erasing and rewriting history. In this process, one must preserve the trophies as well as the scars of a community.

Typically, the Parsi myths, little known to outsiders, celebrate the Parsis as heroic, evolved and superior, as all mythical heroes are. However, what happens to the identity of a minority community when myths of heroism are replaced by tales of buffoonery and corruption that become part of collective memory? The answer is that such tales live as a mythical foil, often to justify the dominance of and erasure by the majority. The consequence of such erasure can lead to usurping of ideal as well as material domains. The material sphere includes valuable properties in prime urban areas owned by Parsi charitable and religious trusts, one of many serious concerns within the community (Sharafi, 2014: 21–2), an important topic beyond the scope of this article.

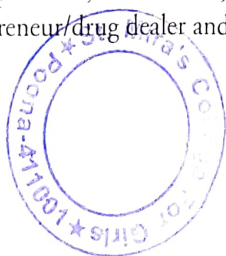


This part explores how popular culture informs the collective memory of people, which sometimes exploits the representation of minorities. In particular, the research project focuses on written evidence in novels under four paradigms of the queer, the fool, the entrepreneur/drug dealer and the anti-Christ, each with the concern that the Parsis may be reconstructed to feed the appetite for sensational and exotic images. Since there will be no living voice to object, Parsis could be museumised and their identity usurped, used for purposes that might be against their will. Due to their extreme minority status, as ostensibly the number is at 75,000 and dwindling, and their alterity, the chances of them being positioned as prominent leaders of the nation despite their contributions will be slim. What will persist, most probably, as my extensive fieldwork indicated, is the image of the clown of cinema, who has entertained audiences for centuries.

On strolling through the Parsi Panchayat in Mumbai, mighty yet dusty paintings of grey-bearded Parsis in richly embroidered (and now faded) clothes stare intensely at you, and more nurtured portraits of dearly departed hang in the *Agiary* or fire temple, but these are for the Parsi gaze only. Non-Parsis mainly view the caricatures available in mainstream cinema. The character of the effeminate *yeda* Parsi, dominated by his scolding shrew mother, or on rare occasions his wife, is a recurring trope. A person who stands up for principles that are no longer meaningful, he polishes his ancient vehicle that is no longer manufactured and yet in mint condition, dressed in his *sadra* and *topi*, an inner vest of fine muslin of religious significance, and a velvet prayer cap. The mighty statues of Parsi Seths that guard over sacred wells like the Bhikha Behram Well merge with the architectural landscape and have simply become part of urban Mumbai. However, it is important to question cultural paradigms or stereotypes, as these tend to become problematic. Commonly known as a wealthy, relatively honest minority community that has done a great deal of charity work, which again is in itself a stereotype, the Parsis have not experienced overt discrimination, yet have certainly not escaped competitive hostility (Guha, 1970a).

Efforts are being made to resurrect the glory of the past, so it overshadows the burlesque of the present. This is being done through narratives of the community and emphasis on origin. In March 2016, *Threads of Continuity: Zoroastrian Life and Culture*, a remarkable exhibition organised by Parzor and Dr Shernaz Cama, was held at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in New Delhi. The exhibits came from around the world and the exhibition was sponsored by Dr Cyrus Poonawalla. In addition, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), along with the Ministry of Minority Affairs of the Government of India, also supported the exhibition.

Endangered as the Parsis are, they definitely have a greater chance of being remembered than many other minorities in India, especially tribals. However, inevitably, what overshadows the narrative of the community will be that of the nation and its dominant culture, which perceives, as indicated, four stereotypes of the Parsi, as the queer, the fool, the entrepreneur/drug dealer and the anti-Christ.



The Queer

Perhaps because the Parsis are ostensibly a relatively progressive community or maybe because of inbreeding or simply due to a genetic inclination, there have been significant numbers of Parsi homosexuals who have had the courage to be publicly queer. In an autobiographical book, Hoshang Merchant (2011) opens a window into that world, inadvertently resonating to the unknown Parsi, Freddie Mercury (1946–1991) of 'Queen' fame. The dominant discourse tends not to read this as a narrative of personal suffering, but rather treats it as an unnatural racial flaw and one cause of the community's demographic decline. Others relate the decline to the powerful and economically self-reliant Parsi women, who have no patience for the effeminate 'mama's boy', and hence have looked outside to greener pastures, also in marriage. Both of these are stereotypes. Clearly, to label the entire community as queer and blame their extinction on inbreeding renders a great disservice to the community.

The Fool

The externally ascribed category of the fool has many traces. At one level, it resonates back to the Elizabethan fool, who was slightly touched in the mind and hence given the licence to blurt out facts that people thought but dared not utter, which is visible in the quintessential image of the mad Parsi (*yeda*). Hindi cinema has captured this character, often with an odd Gujarati/Hindi diction, in movies like *Qurbani*, *Khatta Meetha*, *Pestonjee* and more recently in *Munna Bhai M.B.B.S.*, *Ferrari Ki Sawaari*, *Shirin Farhad Ki Toh Nikal Padi*, *Being Cyrus*, *Bombay Velvet* and *Little Zizou*. The number of such movies tellingly reinforces how dominant this stereotype is. However, there has been a distinct change in the portrayal of the Parsi. Earlier films, like *Khatta Meetha* (1978), are very generous in their depiction of Parsis, who despite their quirks have great dignity, decency and honesty. Family values override petty personal politics. With time, the quirkiness gets amplified from obsessive carom players in *Munna Bhai M.B.B.S.* (2003) to pathological homicide in a Parsi family, as in *Being Cyrus* (2005). Contemporary Indian cinema now seems fascinated with the Parsi as the diabolical criminal, whether in *Bombay Velvet* (2015) or the most recent biopic *Sanju* (2018), blaming the misdemeanour of the bad boy of Hindi cinema, Sanjay Dutt, on his Parsi friend. In stark contrast to these representations of Parsi 'idiots', Rohinton Mistry (1991) sketches his character of the idiot Tehmul at a more serious and sensitive level.

Foucault (1975) also argued that the outspoken madman has a great role to play in the society, as he has the courage to speak the truth, which the sane dare not. Foucault was understandably concerned that a society tries to coerce people to conform to dominant normative standards. Perhaps that is what the label *yeda* Parsi attempts to do, for it is a label given by non-Parsis. However, by good-naturedly allowing this epithet, perhaps the Parsi has exploited it, taking a licence to behave in ways that are not permitted to others.

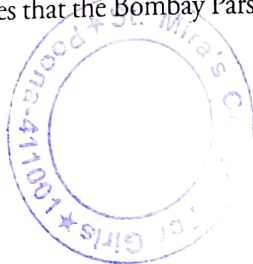
The Entrepreneur/Drug Dealer

The Parsi entrepreneur will live on, thanks to the Tatas, Godrejs, Wadias, Poonawallas and others (Guha, 1970a), who have become part of great narratives of the nation, however, leading people to forget that these names belonged to Parsis, as in the case of B.J. Medical College in Pune. The erasure is that the initials stood for Byramjee Jeejeebhoy, a crucial detail which people have forgotten. These doyens of business and leadership are remembered for their class and status, not the religious community they belong(ed) to. On the other hand, perhaps it will be the character of the wealthy opium dealer Bahram portrayed by Amitav Ghosh (2011) in *River of Smoke* and his wife Shireen in *Flood of Fire* (Ghosh, 2015) that will live in the imagination of a certain educated reading class of people. The Hindi movie *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005) depicts a Parsi in the role of a collaborator with the British and their opium trade, exploiting Indians, a representation that cannot be generalised for the whole community (Guha, 1970a, 1970b; Tajaldini, 2021). As mentioned, forgotten are activists like Behramji Malabari (1853–1912), Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917) and Madam Bhikaiji Cama (1861–1936). Sir Dorabji Tata (1959–1932) donated all his money to charity, which now is a huge part of the Tata Trust, which till date supports art, education, sport and agriculture, not just in India but around the world.

The Anti-Christ

Finally, the title of Nietzsche's famous book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche, 1974 [1896]) has nothing to do with the Parsi prophet Zarathustra but appropriates his name to loosely signify a kind of anti-Christ, proclaiming that God is dead and man is superman. Ironically, the Parsis will be dead, nobody will read Nietzsche's book, but popular imagination will remember Zarathustra's sayings because of what Nietzsche brought into existence in this book. Sooni Taraporevala (2000) notes that her own writing 'has its genesis in that childhood desire to hold on tight to what is precious, not allow it to change or disappear', and for her that is possible through photographs that 'freeze time and survive death' (Taraporevala, 2000: 9). Any culture is precious, but that which is on the verge of extinction must be treated with extreme care, lest it disappear forever or, worse still, gets distorted and disfigured beyond recognition.

Taraporevala commented in her interview with the author on 3 May 2018 that part of her childhood school banter involved her being called a 'mad *Bawaji*', a colloquial label for Parsis. She even narrates a comic anecdote from when she was studying in America, where on mentioning the name of the Parsi prophet Zarathustra, her fellow students would say, 'Zorro who?' (Taraporevala, 2000: 11), and she would clarify this by referring to Nietzsche (1974 [1896]) and the famous composer Richard Strauss who, inspired by Nietzsche in 1896, composed a score called *Also sprach Zarathustra* (Thus Spoke Zarathustra). This music score was used in the 1968 Stanley Kubrick film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Ironically, neither has anything to do with the prophet. Comically, Taraporevala (2000: 11) writes that the Bombay Parsi Panchayat enthusiastically ordered



several hundred copies of Nietzsche's book, only to discover to their horror that neither did it have anything to do with the prophet nor could they understand it.

The music score most blatantly appropriates an exotic name, based on an Orientalist assumption that none of the original ethnic followers will read or understand what is written. Nietzsche could have invented a name or taken an ordinary 'everyman's' label but used an unusual name of an ancient community to legitimise his theory, without considering that he was violating the sentiments of a living community, which in his mind did not exist, inspiring other people to create something in that name while knowing nothing about it.

What will happen when that community really does not exist? All these paradigms become traces of the signifier 'Parsi'. Yet exploring which one will dominate over the others to generate a simulacrum that will persist in the minds of future generations remains the main concern of the present research. The introduction to Hall (1997a) elaborates on the politics of representation and highlights that the effects and consequences of the discursive approach of studying cultural knowledge and representations are that power regulates conduct, makes up and constructs identities and 'defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practised and studied' (Hall, 1997a: 6). Theorising the fascination with 'otherness', Hall (1997b: 234) identifies four theoretical accounts that justify why difference matters. The first comes from linguistics, specifically Saussure, stating that meaning is possible only through binary opposition, so that one is non-Parsi because one is not a '*yeda* Parsi'. For Hall (1997b: 258), '[s]tereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power'. While Parsis have considerable wealth and power, they are so few in number. Moreover, they constantly silence themselves, because that is how the community has survived all these years.

Notably, such comments and theorising presume the physical presence of the 'Other', similar to Foucault's revolutionary redefinition of the circulation of power as being available for anyone to seize, which also assumes the presence of another. However, in the case of the soon-extinct Parsis of India, neither will they be around to participate in the dialogue nor can the dead seize power. Thus, the regime of representation will neither be challenged nor contested or reformed within the Indian public space.

Contemporary Reworking of Continuity Myths

This section concerns first of all the myth of the Magi as the three wise men connected to biblical stories (Keith, 1915). From a Western perspective, when considering the delightful short story 'The Gift of the Magi' by O. Henry (1905), it is completely erased that the Magi most probably were Zoroastrian kings. History, the writer belonging to the dominant community, and even the fifth edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's English Dictionary* of 1996, defines the Magi merely as 'three wise men from the East who brought gifts to the baby Jesus' (p. 706), all have that obliterating effect.

Even more problematic is T.S. Eliot's 1927 poem 'The Journey of the Magi' (Eliot, 1939: 99), which deals with the imaginary angst of the kings rejecting '[t]he old

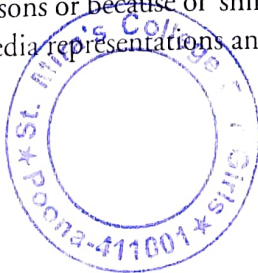
dispensation. With an alien people clutching their gods', as the lines of this poem go. At no point does the imagination of the dominant majority accept the presence of the minority. Instead, they speak for them, imagine their emotional upheaval and write their alterity as primitiveness. What could have been a narrative of the Magis' magnanimity, religious tolerance and respect for a miracle of survival turns into self-loathing through Eliot's eyes, indicating something more dangerous than erasure, more a 'remembering'. If the Magi have been distorted so badly by the English, any future memory of the Parsis in Hindu-dominated India looks indeed bleak.

Another highly significant distortion is found in the 2006 Hollywood movie titled *300* (directed by Zack Snyder and based on a 1998 comic series by Frank Miller) and its 2014 sequel *300: Rise of an Empire* (directed by Noam Murro and based on Miller's unpublished graphic novel *Xerxes*). This was the subject of a focus group discussion with faculty at Lady Shri Ram College in New Delhi as part of the fieldwork in 2017. One may argue that both movies are plain action and fantasy. Yet there are clear racist overtones, where the blond brave bare-chested Greeks are contrasted with the dark-skinned black-clad Persians, metonymic for America versus Iran. First, the Iranian rulers referred to in the movie are Darius and Xerxes, who were Zoroastrian kings, akin to the Magi who went to pay respects to Christ. Kaveh Farrokhi (2004) critically notes that the film falsely portrays the Greco-Persian Wars in binary terms of the democratic, good, rational 'Us' of Greece versus the tyrannical, evil and irrational 'Other' of the ever-nebulous (if not exotic) Persia.

In the sequel, the god-king Xerxes is made to look inhuman and freakish, 8-feet tall, clad chiefly in body piercings and garishly made up. The entire race is dehumanised through the representation of the treatment of the slaves, who are chained to the oars and whipped, while the Greeks are depicted as free. The success of such films is evident from the fact that a sequel was made and the film was nominated for best picture at the MTV Awards. The problem is that the number of people who will check historical facts and research what the Zoroastrian Iranian kings were really like is miniscule, compared to the number of people who watch such movies and believe the stereotypes they are fed.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to bring to light the dangers the Parsi community of India will face in the future. It may appear fatalistic, as it presumes the death of the community when there are still Parsis in many parts of the world. However, this makes the tyranny of the image even more potent, as questions of identity are at stake in India for this now nearly extinct minority community. Recently declared a notified tribe, Parsis have always occupied a liminal space, with their identity shifting from kings to stargazers to refugees to warriors to entrepreneurs to fools. In the future, maintaining any kind of adequate memory of Parsi identity will become increasingly impossible, whether for demographic reasons or because of 'shifting identities' and distortions by all kinds of self-interested media representations and powers.



So what stories about themselves can Parsis create when they are no more? What stories will be told about them and why? What memory of the Parsi will the world inherit and will Indians remember? Will they disappear like the Magi, distorted into self-rejecting Magi, or will they become akin to the anti-Christ who claims that God is dead? Or will people remember some merchant princes? All are possibilities. Descartes famously said: 'I think therefore I am'. In the case of the Parsis, this will translate as '[t]hey remember, therefore we are'. The main question, however, remains how the Parsis will be remembered in India. It is likely to be the collective and 'others' that will decide such issues, because the Parsis will be no more.

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