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Pakistan's Dwindling Parsi Community

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Abstract:

The Persian Zoroastrians, adherents of one of the world's oldest surviving belief systems, are well-known as Parsis. Parsi is an ethno-religious community in Pakistan and is struggling for their survival in contemporary society. The present study is drawn with a desire to comprehend the question why Parsi Community is fast declining demographically in spite of an advance contribution in intellectual and socio-cultural life of Pakistan? The arguments behind the decline in the Parsi population within Pakistan are analyzed with a critical approach. The findings revealed that the dwindling numbers of Parsis is due to low birth rates, low marital fertility, inter-religion marriages and high level of immigration. The orthodox view of blood purity has also restricted community to own the children born out of inter-religion marriages. In the scenario the Parsi faith will tend to survive but Parsis will not.

Keywords: Parsis in the Indian subcontinent, Colonialism, Parsis in Pakistan, Parsi Minority in Pakistan, Demography of Parsi Community, Parsi Immigration, Parsi Exodus.

Introduction:

The lineage of the Parsis traces back to the ancestors of contemporary Iran's Zoroastrians, adherents of the Zoroaster, also known as Zarathustra. Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic faith with roots in ancient Iran and attributed to the teachings of Zarathustra from approximately 1500 to

1000 BCE, flourished as the principal religion in Iran during the reign of various kingdoms - the Achaemenian, Parthian, and Sasanian eras in medieval times (Hinnells J. , 1994). In the aftermath of the Muslim conquest of Iran from the 8th to the 10th centuries, followers of this faith sought refuge, embarked on a journey to safeguard their community (Visaria, 1974.). The earliest tangible proof of a Zoroastrian community in sub-continent, as exemplified by the Kanheri cave inscriptions, traces back to the tenth century (Palsetia J. S., 2001). Scholarly views on the primary reason behind the Parsi migration from Persia to India diverge (Hinnells J, 2007). Some scholars attribute it to Islamic persecution, others contend that trade served as the primary catalyst. Susan presents an alternate viewpoint, suggesting that both trade interests and the desire to establish a Zoroastrian community outside Islamic influence were mutually influential in the migration to India (Shroff Z, 2011).

The appellation 'Parsi' was bestowed upon the Zoroastrians upon their arrival in the Indian subcontinent, signifying 'people from Paras a time when Iran was referred to as 'Paras' (Rathore, 2020). Often recounted as a classic diaspora narrative, the Parsis' arrival in India began as they fled the Arab conquest of Persia, first landing on Diu, an island off Gujarat's coast. After 19 years, they navigated to Sanjan on the west coast of India in either 636 AD or 716 AD, a matter of debate within the Parsi community (Taraporevala, 2004). The prevalent narrative, as depicted in the Qissa-e-Sanjaan, recounts how an Indian ruler named Jadi Rana sent a glass filled with milk to the Parsi refugees, symbolizing that his realm was already full (N., 1986). In response, the Zoroastrian immigrants added sugar (or a ring in alternate versions) to the milk, indicating their intention to assimilate into the native society, akin to "sugar in milk" (N., 1986, p. 149). In contemporary India and Pakistan, this integration is evident through the adoption of local languages, economic assimilation, and the preservation of their ethnic identity while strictly adhering to endogamy practices (Framjee, 1858).

The Parsis remained elusive during the era of Muslim rule in the Subcontinent, their prominence only etched in history during Akbar's reign. In 1573, a pivotal encounter unfolded as Akbar met their Dastur in Surat (Vincent Arthur, 1917). Chronicling this momentous event, the Mughal court historian Badayuni also noted, "Fire-worshipers from Navsari arrived in the Mughal capital, proclaiming the religion of Zardusht as the true one" (Fazl, 1907).

Colonial Rule and Parsis:

With the advent of colonial forces, Parsis actively engaged in international trade alongside the Portuguese and Dutch. They diversified into related activities such as banking, brokering, and money lending (Luhmann, 1996). The East India Company, seeking to transform Bombay into a bustling trading and commercial hub, extended favorable terms to native communities for settling in the city. The Parsis were quick to recognize this exceptional opportunity and became the first native Indian group to settle to Bombay (Taraporevala, 2004). With the influx of more Europeans, the Parsis expanded their roles as intermediaries and traders, effectively bridging the gap between Indian and European interests (Palsetia J. S., 2001). Their active engagement in transshipping and country trade within the eastern regions of British India set them apart from other Indian communities, establishing closer business connections with Europeans (Palsetia J. S., 2001). Their significance wasn't solely confined to their commercial endeavors; their involvement in shipbuilding played an equally vital role. Their comparatively fewer caste restrictions granted them enhanced access to European communities and Western education. Coupled with their enduring principles of integrity and industriousness, the Parsis found themselves uniquely positioned to seize the new opportunities presented by British enterprise in India (Writer, 1994). Parsi entrepreneurs seized opportunities in various sectors, diversifying into new professions and achieving remarkable success and emerged as the foremost Indian industrialists (Taraporevala, 2004).

In 1835, Lord Macaulay articulated the aim of the new educational system to produce individuals who could bridge the cultural gap between the ruling British and the native population; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect (Taraporevala, 2004). The Parsis epitomized this ideal, embodying a fusion of Indian heritage with European behaviour. They passionately embraced Westernization, adopting European clothing, engaging in sports like cricket, and incorporating European dining customs such as using knives and forks (Hinnells J. , 1994). Beyond their economic influence, the Parsis held significant roles across various societal spheres even after Independence. Renowned for their respectability, the Parsis shared public offices and amenities with the British, and Anglo-Indians, solidifying their esteemed position in society (Naskar, 2016).

Parsis in Pakistan:

The exact date of their arrival to the present-day Pakistan is difficult to be determined. However, referring to the accounts in Parsi Prakash, it becomes apparent that Parsis commenced settling in Sind between 1820 and 1825 (Punthakey, 1989). In the mid-twentieth century, the end of British rule marked the emergence of India and Pakistan. This political shift posed challenges to the Parsis, endangering the cohesive bonds that had bound their community together (Boyce, 1979).

The Zoroastrian or Parsi community in Pakistan primarily resides in Karachi, the nation's economic hub and the provincial headquarters of Sindh, while there are a small number of Parsis in other cities too. In the years preceding Partition, there was a steady rise in Pakistan's Parsi population, positioning Karachi as home to the fourth-largest Parsi community in the subcontinent after Bombay, Surat, and Navsari (Hinnells J. R., 2005). After partition, their numbers initially surged, reaching 5,018 in 1951, but subsequently, there was a decline, dwindling to 4,685 in 1961. However, by 1972, the population rebounded, reaching 9,589. The community again dwindled in 1981 when they were 7007 and by 1998 Parsees declined intensively that they were excluded from census table and were regarded in 'others' (Bauru, 1998).

The Karachi Zarthosti Banu Mandal (KZBM), a community welfare organization, conducted Pakistan's first comprehensive Zoroastrian survey in 1995 under Toxy Cowasjee's supervision. According to Toxy, meticulous census records were maintained from 1995 onward and the data reported 2,831 Parsis in 1995, followed by 2,378 in 2001, 2,121 in 2004, and 1,675 in 2012. This data Excluded 47 students studying abroad in 2012, as Toxy believed they wouldn't return. Notably, 33 women who married outside the Zarathushti religion and their offspring were also not included in the population according to KZBM guidelines. The 2015 A & T Directory reported a further decline to 1,416 Parsis in Pakistan. However, Dr. Framji Minwalla, an academic, asserted the community's count had decreased to 1,092, indicating a significant reduction in the Parsi population in Pakistan (Minwalla, Parsis, 2021).

The Parsi community's demographic decline in Pakistan:

Social scientists, researchers, and anthropologists have identified various sociological and biological factors contributing to the decline of Pakistan's Parsi population. Some express

fatalism, seeing the community's survival as beyond their control. Others acknowledge the decline as significant but offer varying explanations. Foremost among these are migration, delayed and/or inter-religious marriages, and low fertility rate have been highlighted as key reasons contributing to the decline in the Parsi community's population (N., 1986). I'll delve into each position to better comprehend Parsi Zoroastrians.

Security issues:

Security concerns in Pakistan extend beyond a specific community. The escalation of violent terrorist attacks throughout the nation has made everyday life increasingly challenging, and Zoroastrians are fleeing to seek stability elsewhere. Former President of the Karachi Parsi Anjuman, Byram Avari (late), once emphasizes that emigration is primarily driven by apprehensions about security, as these concerns weigh heavily due to their disproportionate economic influence relative to their numbers (Ahmed, *The Exodus*, 2009). The older generation, grapples with these security fears more than the youth. While younger members like Cyrus Petigara acknowledge life beyond their sheltered "bubble" as disconcerting, they perceive security as a more significant concern for their parents. However, some, like Behroz Nusherwan, hold a contrasting view, believing that the lack of security holds little importance as fate determines one's life regardless of location.

Scholarly Exodus:

The issue appears to extend across socio-economic lines within the Zoroastrian community. Affluent families, in particular, frequently send their children abroad for higher education, with the implicit anticipation that they will eventually settle in the West (Lisa Mullins, 2012). Perceiving this trend, organizations like the Karachi Zarthushti Banu Mandal (KZBM) and some other organizations established by wealthy families, sponsor the education of cash-strapped Zoroastrian children. Zenia Minwalla of KZBM, notes that a mere 5% of students sent abroad, return over the last decade. Minwalla suggests that the less affluent are more inclined to emigrate, lacking strong attachments to elite comforts. Many established Zoroastrians abroad facilitate integration for newcomers due to shared liberal Western values in lifestyle and dress (Notezai, 2016). Emigrants often relocate to key community centers, however, mass

emigration's roots are not solely tied to the community's Western links; rather, many overarching reasons drive this phenomenon.

Professionalization:

Professional stagnation poses a significant challenge for Zoroastrians, as well as talented youth in Pakistan. Shahpur Kanga, a UK-trained lawyer, notes that bright, skilled young Zoroastrians opt to stay abroad because they perceive greater potential to utilize their talents where they can make a substantial impact. They cite the absence of such opportunities in a country where merit takes a back seat to bribery for advancement. Rumi Sarkari, highlights systemic issues in Pakistan. He emphasizes that governmental policies have inadvertently excluded many minorities from avenues for socio-economic and political progress, fostering an environment that fuels social discord and lays the groundwork for conflict seen in different regions of Pakistan.

Additionally, inadequate access to innovation and new advancements within the country motivates many young individuals to view emigration as a necessity. Roshni Mavalvala, interested in forensic anthropology, finds limited opportunities in Pakistan due to the field's absence or low demand. According to Parveez Parakh, available jobs lack satisfaction, while Fareedoon Noshirwani perceives greater challenges in establishing oneself professionally in Pakistan. Workplace discrimination based on religious beliefs, as shared by Farishteh, poses additional obstacles for many like her relatives.

Social Restrictions:

The evolving societal landscape, with a move towards a more closed culture in Pakistan, presents challenges for teenagers like Fareshteh Aslam. They express frustration with the prevailing social restrictions that curtail their desired social life, particularly in terms of everyday interaction between boys and girls. Perhaps, this perceived as an ultimate symbol of the “narrow-mindedness [and] judgementalism” Fareshteh complained. Almitra Mavalvala External Communications Manager at Unilever, attributes such feelings to the discord between the liberal upbringing these youth have received and the culturally conservative environment they currently inhabit. Formerly, individuals like Nariman Minwalla and Menin Parakh reminisce about the freedom they experienced during their youth and regret the increasing constraints imposed on their children. Moreover, for the remaining younger generation of Zoroastrians in Pakistan,

Behroz Sethna and Veruschka lament that over 70% of their childhood friends have left. They express deep concern that this percentage is likely to rise annually due to the prevailing trend.

Family Pressure to Migrate:

The widespread migration of Parsis to the West isn't solely a matter of personal choice. Young Zoroastrians interviewed indicated that their parents actively favored and encouraged them to relocate abroad. While parents like Rabadi and Parakh express sadness about their children leaving Pakistan, they believe it's the only feasible option (Parakh R. , 2021). Conversely, families deeply rooted in Pakistan, like Sethna's, encourage their children to stay and manage family businesses (Sethna, Parsees, 2021). However, these families are a minority, as most Zoroastrians now work for larger companies rather than owning their industries. As stated by Noshirwani, whose family once owned the famous Murree Brewery, recreating such enterprises is unfeasible. However, those who choose to stay often adapt and carve out niches where they can thrive. Individuals like Fiona and Cyrus find fulfillment in their jobs and experience respect in the workplace. Menon Rodrigues contends that Zoroastrians are highly valued, as they are seen as loyal and more appreciative of their jobs due to their minority status (Rodrigues M. , 2021). Despite this, the trend of emigration persists, especially among the younger generation determined to join the exodus.

Migration and Marriage laws:

Dr. Nusherwan anticipated the imminent disappearance of Parsis in Pakistan within the next two decades due to the substantial emigration of the younger generation without intent to return. He highlighted the scarcity of young Parsis, particularly those aged between 18 and 27. Moreover, the Karachi Parsi Anjuman Trust Fund (KPATF) supports couples under 40 to emigrate from the country. Dr. Nusherwan also underscored that the pure Parsi marriage law contributes to the community's declining population. For instance if a Parsi woman marries a non-Zoroastrian, she may face expulsion from the community and encounter various restrictions, including exclusion from religious and social ceremonies. Conversely, if a Parsi man marries outside the community; his children are accepted as Parsis, while his wife is barred from participating in any religious or social activities (Nusherwan, 2021). Similarly Fiona Engineer emphasized that being a Parsi is

also an ethnic identity, stating that while one can adopt Zoroastrianism, they can never truly be a bona fide Parsi (Fiona, 2021).

In addition to social constraints, Zoroastrians confront the challenge of finding suitable matches within their diminishing community. Consequently, young individuals find themselves contemplating options and are resigned to seeking a Parsi partner globally. The allure of the West is heightened by the fact that, in contrast to priests in Karachi and Bombay, clergy in Houston, Russia, and Canada are initiating conversions to Zoroastrianism, extending to prospective spouses. The policy of conversion is a matter of controversy, with the youth supporting it while the older generation remains hesitant, upholding the concept of being a born Parsi.

Despite resistance from traditional families like the Mehtas and Kandawallas, who have started accepting their children's marriages to non-Zoroastrians, the priests maintain an unwavering stance. A longstanding pact with the rulers, formed when the community first arrived in India, prohibits them from conducting conversions in the subcontinent, elucidating their staunch position. This conservatism stands in stark contrast to the perspective of the younger generation, molded by the forces of globalization.

Fertility issues:

Shernaz Cama, director of the UNESCO Parzor Foundation, underscores in demographic studies that Parsis have a fertility rate of 0.88, falling below the 2.1 required for community survival and 3 for growth. Cama points out that for every married Parsi, there is an unmarried Parsi, and the 'Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act' is perceived as patriarchal, particularly in cases involving Parsi women married to non-Parsis, resulting in children not being raised as Parsis. Alarming low fertility rates are attributed to delayed or absent marriages, immigration issues, intermarriage, and divorce within the Parsi community (Naskar, 2016).

Zhaleh Golwalla, a member of the Parsi community, conveyed her perspective on the decline in the Parsi population by highlighting that they excel in all indicators except fertility. Akin to youth in other communities, many have departed in search of improved educational opportunities, better job prospects, and a higher standard of living. She expressed concern that

population control has become a significant challenge for progressive communities, potentially leading to the extinction of the Zoroastrian community. While India initiated the Jiyo Parsi campaign to address the decline, she lamented the absence of proactive measures in Pakistan. Golwalla stressed that the Zoroastrians' history of migration makes confinement to any single state improbable. She believed that efforts to raise awareness about the population decline should have commenced earlier to potentially rectify the situation (Golwalla, Parsees, 2021).

Conclusion:

The enterprising character of the Parsi community, their ability to adjust to changing situations, their highly developed survival skills has helped them to navigate through diverse social environments while at the same time sustaining their distinct religious identity. Their commitment to both their own community and the broader multi-religious and multi-cultural society has been an important factor in ensuring their co-existence over the centuries. However, the study of community's demographic existence reveals that Parsi population is fast dwindling due to imbalance of death rates and birth rates. The lower birth rate leading inevitably to the decline of population as a significant portion of the community falls in the age cluster of 50 and 60, and their passing to the eternal life in the coming years will lead to the significance dwindling of their population in Pakistan. This situation raises concerns about the potential number of Parsi community in Pakistan, moving to western countries. While there are instances of individual Parsis choosing to stay, particularly in Karachi, the overall trend indicates an ongoing exodus, leaving behind an aging community, vacant homes, and family names gilding on crumbling buildings, a distressing reminder of a bygone era. In a conversation late Ambassador Jamsheed Marker, responded to a question; what future he could anticipate for Parsis? His reply was "what is happening to Pakistan is what is happening to Parsis." In good times or bad, their fates appear to be intertwined; as the country declines, so do the Parsis (Sheikh, 2017). Yet they have earned a respect for themselves as they are considered peace loving and philanthropist community in Pakistan, contributing potentially to the intellectual and socio-cultural development.

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