

## Parsees

PARSEES are those Zoroastrians who left Iran in the face of fierce persecution in the 10th century CE to try and maintain their faith and practices in a foreign land and were given permission by a local ruler to settle around Sanjan in Gujerat, India, (The legend of their migration was later recorded in the Qissa Sanjan). With Zoroastrians located in two centres (Iran & India) from the 10th century and with little contact between them until the last century, it is not surprising that certain beliefs and rituals evolved differently, with Parsees in India absorbing aspects of the caste practices with which they were surrounded, while cultural differences such as food, dress, and language became very pronounced. Nevertheless some Parsees realized that they had lost their way and between the 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries envoys and emissaries regularly travelled from India to pose important questions about doctrine and ritual and to return with the responses from senior priests in Iran.

Now, with many Parsees and Iranian Zoroastrians in the diaspora, the Indian culture has once again encountered its Iranian counterpart outside the traditional homelands and attempts are being made to bring the differing interpretations into line with each other.

The Parsee community has achieved great distinction in public life, considering their small numbers and there are many Parsee names which have become bywords for philanthropy and distinction. Bombay where their numbers are most concentrated has hospitals, schools, orphanages, parks, streets and districts named after them. The world famous industrial group Tata, as well as musicians such as Freddie Mercury, Zubin Mehta and Sorabjee are just a few of the world famous Parsees of more modern times. Of particular note is the fact that the first 3 non Anglo Saxons elected to sit in Parliament as British MPs in Westminster were Parsees representing the Liberal, the Conservative and the Labour party (the latter MP later became a Communist). India has several times seen Parsees hold the highest legal positions such as Attorney General or Solicitor General, and also the highest position in the armed forces of India.

The current estimated population figures show a large percentage of the approximately 65,000 Parsees in India as being over 60. This raises the question of the future of the community which is a matter of ideological controversy. Certain so-called "purists" appear to prefer to see the extinction of the community rather than adopt strategies which they see as compromise. Others who refer to the original texts for support advocate intermarriage, adoption, acceptance and are more tolerant, as are their Iranian counterparts.

Parsees are also found in Pakistan but the population figures there are estimated to be no more than 1660.

The language spoken by Parsees was until recently Gujerati and their prayer books are written in the script of this language. However in recent years, English has replaced Gujerati as the chosen language of communication with the younger generation who are rarely able to read Gujerati.