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Faith, Migration, and Survival: Zoroastrians from Qajar Iran to South Asia, 1789–1925

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ABSTRACT

The period under consideration (1789–1925) is the Qajar period in Iran and the migration of Zoroastrians to South Asia. This study explains the motivation behind the mass departure of the religious minority from their homeland, the means by which they traveled, and the life they established upon their arrival in South Asia. The Qajar period was a turning point: migration to the Indian subcontinent had earlier roots, but during the Qajar period, movement became a consistent community-level response to conditions that threatened not only the physical survival of Zoroastrians but also their cultural continuity. Zoroastrian decline under Islamic rule was a gradual process that resulted from more than a millennium of discrimination, and by 1789, when the Qajars consolidated power, the community's population was already limited to a handful of thousands in the two desert provinces of Yazd and Kerman. South Asia was, in effect, the only possible destination: the established Parsi community in Bombay and in Karachi was the only place in the world that could provide co-religious solidarity, institutional support, legal protection, and real economic opportunity. By offering a narrative that is neither solely driven by persecution nor solely by the geography of opportunity, this study confronts an uncomfortable truth: the very community boundaries that helped the Parsis to survive for centuries, including endogamy and opposition to accepting converts, also help to explain the demographic downfall that today sees the community in India at about 57,000 and in Pakistan at fewer than a thousand.

1. Introduction

Zoroastrianism prevailed in Iran since the epoch of the Prophet Zoroaster, but after the Muslim

conquest, Zoroastrians faced marginalization in society, leading to their migration to different



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regions, especially during the Qajar period, to South Asia. Most of the studies reviewed migration and settlement separately and rarely connected the two to explain how opportunities in South Asia attracted migrants. This study explores the migration pattern, settlement behaviour, and coexistence of the Zoroastrians in the social, economic, and cultural arenas, and it follows the migrants to their less-studied destination across the Arabian Sea to Sindh and the city of Karachi, where a small Zoroastrian community became one of the most visible minorities of a great colonial port and, today, one of the most acutely endangered.

The argument, developed throughout the paper, has two parts. First, migration became, under the Qajars, a rational, community-wide choice rather than a matter of desperation for isolated individuals, and South Asia was not one option among several but effectively the only place that combined co-religious solidarity, institutional support, legal protection, and economic opportunity. Second, the same community boundaries that ensured survival across a millennium and two migrations have, under altered twentieth-century conditions, become the drivers of the community's decline. The study proceeds from the religious and historical underpinnings of Zoroastrianism (Section 2), through its long decline under Islamic rule (Section 3) and the specific conditions of the Qajar period (Section 4), to the routes and patterns of migration (Section 5) and the settlement, adaptation, and present condition of the community in South Asia (Section 6). Ultimately, this comprehensive synthesis is intended to serve as the essential historical and theoretical framework required before the next phase of localized oral history and micro-level archival research can begin

2. Religious Foundations of Zoroastrianism

To comprehend the importance of Zoroastrian migration, it is essential to have some knowledge

of what Zoroastrianism actually means. Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions in the world, originating in Iran and Central Asia; the prophet Zarathustra founded it, and his teachings were unusual for his time, as he preached monotheism and taught about making right choices, telling the truth, and being righteous.¹ Modern scholarship, based on careful philological study of the Gathas, tends to situate Zarathustra around 1200–1000 BCE, on the steppes of Central Asia or north-eastern Iran, in a pastoralist, semi-nomadic society very different from the later urbanized cultures of western Iran.²

The central doctrine of Zoroastrianism is the belief in a single supreme deity, Ahura Mazda. The name is significant, for *Ahura* means "Lord" and *Mazda* means "Wisdom". The most intellectually distinctive aspect of the theology is the concept of cosmic dualism: the universe is organized around two forces, *Asha* (truth, order, righteousness) and *Druj* (falsehood, chaos, corruption), and all thoughts, words, and actions either promote *Asha* or further *Druj*. Angra Mainyu, the spirit of evil, is not another god equal to Ahura Mazda but a destructive force that is ultimately temporary and destined to be overcome; this separation makes Zoroastrianism more monotheistic than truly dualistic.³ The whole moral system is rooted in the idea of human free will: each human being can choose good or evil, no priest or ritual can make the choice, and each is judged by their own thoughts, words, and actions a genuinely radical idea that places moral accountability directly on everyone, regardless of social status, gender, or priesthood.⁴

The sacred scripture is the Avesta, a large body of texts in Old and Young Avestan grown over many centuries; some scholars believe that about three-quarters of the original was lost, especially during the Arab-Muslim conquests of the 7th century. The most ancient and revered part is the Gathas, seventeen hymns composed by Zarathustra himself, whose linguistic archaism is proof of

¹Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism, Vol. I: The Early Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 1–35; John R. Hinnells, *The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 20–45.

²Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism, Vol. I*, 1–4; Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1979), 17–20.

³Almut Hintze, "Monotheism the Zoroastrian Way," *JRAS* 24, no. 2 (2014): 225–32; William W. Malandra, *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion* (Minneapolis, 1983), 17–25.

⁴Jenny Rose, *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 38–44; Prods Oktor Skjærvø, *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 8–12.

their antiquity. The Avesta was preserved for centuries through the memorization and oral transmission of the priests before being written down, probably in the Sasanian period.⁵ Faith was not, for Zoroastrians, only a personal affair: it is a holistic way of life expressed in the triple commitment to Humata (Good Thoughts), Hukhta (Good Words), and Hvarshta (Good Deeds), and in a ritual life centred on fire, called *Atash* worshipped as a reflection of the purest form of Ahura Mazda's presence but not as a god, wisdom, and light. Rules of ritual purity, detailed above all in the Vendidad, touched nearly every aspect of life.⁶

Zoroastrianism also possesses one of the most extensively developed eschatological systems of any religion. When a person dies, the soul remains by the body for three days and then crosses the Chinvat Bridge of Judgment, where its good and evil deeds are assessed; the righteous go to the House of Song, the wicked to the House of Lies, while those in balance wait in Hamistagan for the renovation of the world. The final vision is Frashokereti, the eternal defeat of Angra Mainyu, the final rebirth of humanity, and the ultimate purification of everything ever created — widely regarded as the first known statement of apocalypse in religious history and a model for later Jewish, Christian, and Islamic visions. Its distinctive feature is its optimism: no evil will last, and even the condemned are ultimately purified rather than destroyed.⁷

Doctrine, however, is never the only place where a religion lives; it becomes real in community, institution, and shared identity. The fire temple *Atashkadeh* or *Dar-e Mehr* is the institutional centre of Zoroastrian communal life, home of the sacred fire kept perpetually by the priests, the *Mobads*, whose most important task was preserving and transmitting the Avestan texts across generations. The wearing of the *Sudreh* and *Kusti* by every initiated Zoroastrian, and funerary

practices such as the *dakhma* or tower of silence, sharply set the community apart from its neighbours.⁸ And the question of who is a Zoroastrian has been one of the most persistent debates in the community's life: the traditional Parsi view holds that anyone born into a Zoroastrian family is a Zoroastrian and that the religion has no need of converts, while reformists and Iranian Zoroastrians have been more liberal. This dichotomy between an exclusive, ethnic view and a more universal, open one runs throughout Zoroastrian history and, as later sections show, it became decisive for the survival of a small, scattered, and demographically declining community. The close connection between what one believes and what one does was no luxury for a minority under pressure: it was its most important means of survival.⁹

3. From Conquest to Decline: Zoroastrians Under Islamic Rule, 651–1789

The Sasanian Empire (224–651 CE) marked the end of Zoroastrian Iran, the era when Zoroastrianism was the defining basis of empire and statecraft; the priesthood advised the King of Kings and guarded a state-funded network of fire temples, and in this period, the canon of the Avesta was compiled in twenty-one books, or *nasks*.¹⁰ This was the world that was lost. After the battles of Al-Qadisiyya and Nahavand, coordinated Sasanian resistance ended, and with the demise of the final king, Yazdegerd III, in 651 CE, the community moved from imperial masters to a subjugated minority in the new Islamic polity. Zoroastrians were accorded a measure of religious autonomy as *dhimmis* (protected non-Muslims) in exchange for the *jizya*, poll tax a tax with not only an economic function but also a role as an instrument of pressure encouraging conversion.¹¹ The conversion process began slowly but gathered pace, and by around 1010 CE the basic conversion of Iran had been accomplished, with roughly a

⁵Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, 1–5; Helmut Humbach, *The Gathas of Zarathushtra* (Heidelberg, 1991), 3–11.

⁶Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 70–75; S. A. Nigosian, *The Zoroastrian Faith* (Montreal, 1993), 42–54.

⁷Georgios Kakouris, "Frashokereti," *Ancient Iranian Studies* 3, no. 8 (2024): 43–53; Nigosian, *The Zoroastrian Faith*, 95–100.

⁸Michael Stausberg, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to*

Zoroastrianism (Chichester, 2015), 518–25; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 6–12; Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 87–96.

⁹Hinnells, *Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 41–52.

¹⁰Rashna Writer, *The Story of the Zoroastrians: An Historical Perspective* (2025), 61.

¹¹Writer, *Story of the Zoroastrians*, 89; Kayla Dang, "'Alī and the 'Sons of Ādhurbādh,'" *Medieval Worlds* 17 (2022), 99.

fifth of the population still non-Muslim.¹²

Under the Abbasids, the priesthood, seeing the danger of complete annihilation, initiated a literary revolution started in Middle Persian (Pahlavi), in which texts like the *Dēnkard* were rendered, all in an effort to promote Mazdaean teaching; a Zoroastrian leadership even maintained a court near the caliphal court in Baghdad.¹³ The emergence of autonomous Iranian dynasties, like the Samanids under whose patronage Ferdowsi composed the *Shah-nameh* prompted a reassessment of pre-Islamic glories but did not bring legal equality, and with the coming of the Sunni Turkish dynasties, such as the Ghaznavids, pressure and religious bigotry returned, driving the community into rural, isolated villages, above all in Yazd and Kerman.¹⁴ The thirteenth-century Mongol invasions swept over Iran indiscriminately, destroying the last great collections of religious scriptures; yet it was in this period that the community reconnected with its co-religionists in India, beginning the *Revayats*, the body of correspondence, opened by the arrival of the Parsi envoy Nariman Hoshang in Yazd in 1487, from which we get a picture of both communities and their determination to keep the faith.¹⁵

The introduction of Twelver Shi'ism as the official religion of the Safavid dynasty was another watershed: in the state's eyes, Zoroastrianism was officially dead. The low point was reached with the definition of ritual impurity, *najes*, which held that Zoroastrians could not come into contact with food and water intended for Muslims or use shared facilities such as baths; in cities such as Kerman and Isfahan, they were confined to a separate quarter, the *Gabr-Mahalla*, outside the city walls.¹⁶ Extortion and forced labor were increasingly used against them; the economic

strain assisted mass conversions, and in 1699, entire districts of Isfahan were compelled to convert.¹⁷ The Afghan invasion of 1722 ended the Safavid system in a bloody manner, and in the ensuing chaos, the population fell to its lowest level: by the mid-nineteenth century, only about 7,000 to 8,000 remained.¹⁸

The history of the Zoroastrians from 651 to 1789 was not one of continuous persecution; it was cyclical, with phases of relative accommodation and others of increased pressure, but with a consistent overall trend of slow, steady contraction. The *jizya*, the stigma of ritual impurity, the intermittent violence, and the forced conversions were not random events but features of the relationship between Islamic government and non-Muslim minorities across successive dynasties. What is remarkable is the community's response organized resistance, and the maintenance of the literary tradition when open practice was unsafe. The community's isolation in the remote deserts of Yazd and Kerman saved it, but also isolated it. By 1789, the Zoroastrians of Iran were a threatened remnant: a small minority, but one that still had a strong institutional identity. The Qajar-period migration was thus not an instant response to a new crisis but the long-term response of a community that had been starving of space for more than a millennium.¹⁹

4. Zoroastrians Under the Qajar Dynasty, 1789–1925

Agha Mohammad Khan established the Qajar dynasty in 1789, and its religious policy was not moderate: it rested on ties to the Shi'a *ulama*, and to keep that alliance the Qajars accepted the prevailing discriminatory attitudes and left it to local governors and clerics to impose humiliating restrictions without interference from the centre.

¹²Sarah Bowen Savant, *The New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran* (Cambridge, 2013), 3–4; Andrew D.

Magnusson, "Fire Temple Desecration," in *Zoroastrians in Early Islamic History* (Edinburgh, 2022), 133.

¹³Gianfilippo Terribili, "Dēnkard III Language Variation," *Open Linguistics* 3 (2017), 397; Albert de Jong, "The Dēnkard and the Zoroastrians of Baghdad," in *The Zoroastrian Flame* (London, 2016), 223.

¹⁴Writer, *Story of the Zoroastrians*, 106; C. E. Bosworth, "Political and Dynastic History," in *Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 5 (1968).

¹⁵János Jany, "Political Power of Iranian Hierocracies," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 83 (2020), 101; Writer,

Story of the Zoroastrians, 111; Kiyan Foroutan, "Yazd and its Zoroastrians," *Iranian Studies* 56, no. 4 (2023).

¹⁶Kioumars Ghereghlou, "On the Margins of Minority Life," *BSOAS* 80, no. 1 (2017), 1–2; Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina, "Purity and Polemics," *Iran* (2021).

¹⁷Ghereghlou, "On the Margins of Minority Life," 2, 11; Fahimeh Shakiba, "The Social Life of Zoroastrians in the Safavid Era," *JHCAR* 8, no. 2 (2019), 266.

¹⁸Laurence Lockhart, *The Fall of the Ṣafavī Dynasty* (Cambridge, 1958), 72–73; Ghereghlou, "On the Margins of Minority Life," 1.

¹⁹Writer, *Story of the Zoroastrians*, 163.

The weak and decentralized Qajar state, in many respects, proved worse for Zoroastrians than its more powerful predecessors.²⁰ The restrictions were pervasive and daily: Zoroastrians were not allowed to ride horses, carry arms, wear certain colours, build houses taller than those of their Muslim neighbours, open shops in the bazaar, erect new fire temples, or even wear eyeglasses or watches; they could not testify against Muslims in court; and the idea of *najes* was extended to them systematically, barring them from public baths and from contact with food sold to Muslims. Many built their houses at or below ground level so as not to overlook Muslim buildings.²¹

The most degrading of these taxes was the *jizya*, or poll tax, imposed on non-Muslims. Those unable to pay suffered immensely. Children were beaten, religious books burned, and community members humiliated into conversion, and the tax was not merely a financial burden but a means of degrading Zoroastrians and making them second-class citizens in their own country. As evidenced by the preserved correspondence of the Parsi emissary Maneckji Limji Hataria and the documented lobbying efforts of the Indian Parsi community through British diplomatic channels, the *jizya* was finally eliminated for the Zoroastrians of Iran in 1882—a delayed concession that starkly illustrates the Qajar dynasty's structural indifference to its Zoroastrian subjects.²² Economic exclusion had its own logic: in the urban centers, a bazaar economy excluded Zoroastrians from most activities, and the logic of *najes* was extended to the marketplace, where non-Muslims were perceived as ritually polluted, placing their economic role at the periphery. The community was not just poor; it was structurally incapable of becoming non-poor.²³ In addition to legal degradation and economic exclusion, there were moments of violence and forced conversion that created an existential threat. Recorded cases of mob violence, the forced conversion of girls and young men, and the desecration of sacred

sites. By 1850, the Zoroastrian population of Iran was estimated at 7,000.²⁴

The question is not just why Zoroastrians fled Iran under the Qajars, but why they fled to South Asia. This was not a natural or clear-cut decision; the answer lies in what South Asia offered that no other region did. The most basic resolution is the prior existence of the Parsi community — the Parsi Zoroastrian population, which had migrated from Iran, was established in Gujarat and Sindh and had spread to Bombay by the 1800s, creating one of the wealthiest and most institutionally organized minorities in Asia. When Zoroastrians in Iran considered leaving, they were not thinking of the unknown; they were thinking of a community that shared their faith, mother tongue, and cultural heritage.²⁵ The Parsis, too, were united in their efforts: the Society for the Amelioration of the Conditions of the Zoroastrians in Persia was formed in 1853 by prominent Bombay Parsis, and its emissary, Hataria, in Iran from 1854 distributed charitable funds, petitioned Qajar officials, built schools, and reported to Bombay. In this context, migration was not a sudden flight but a systematic movement supported by an institutionalized transnational co-religionist network. The British legal landscape was just as important: when they arrived, Zoroastrians obtained the rights to property, to give evidence in court, to freedom of religious practice, and to commercial life on an equal footing with other subjects, exactly the rights denied in Qajar Iran.²⁶

The alternatives were not real alternatives. As an Islamic state, the Ottoman Empire would have imposed *dhimmi* restrictions similar in scope, and there was no Zoroastrian community of any size to receive migrants there; Central Asia and Afghanistan were less secure and less endowed with networks; the Parsi presence in East Africa was small; and Europe was, geographically and culturally, unfamiliar. South Asia was thus not

²⁰Encyclopaedia Iranica, "Zoroastrianism ii. Historical Review"; Janet Kestenberg Amighi, *The Zoroastrians of Iran*, 5.

²¹Encyclopaedia Iranica, "Zoroastrians of 19th-Century Yazd and Kerman."

²²Encyclopaedia Iranica, "Zoroastrians of 19th-Century Yazd and Kerman"; Masoud Dadbakhsh and Hossein Moftakhri, "Separation in the Zoroastrian Society of Iran during the Qajar Period" (2018).

²³Amighi, *Zoroastrians of Iran*, 5.

²⁴Encyclopaedia Iranica, "Zoroastrians of 19th-Century Yazd and Kerman."

²⁵Amighi, *Zoroastrians of Iran*, 5–6; Encyclopaedia Iranica, "Kerman ix. History in the Qajar Period."

²⁶Encyclopaedia Iranica, "Hataria, Maneckji Limji"; Encyclopaedia Iranica, "Zoroastrians of 19th-Century Yazd and Kerman."

merely the most available choice but literally the only place that offered co-religionist solidarity, institutional support, legal protection, and economic opportunity. The Parsi community was the migration scholars' bridgehead: the first settlement that reduced the costs and risks of future migration.²⁷ These forces combined made migration a community solution, and South Asia the only option.

5. Migration Patterns and Routes to South Asia

Zoroastrian migration from Iran to South Asia was gradual and phased rather than a dramatic exodus. It is generally divided into three stages. In the first, from the late 1700s to the early 1800s, most migrants were single men or small family units, merchants and traders already linked to Indian ports such as Surat and Bombay, who moved quietly and steadily. The second, from the 1840s through the 1880s, saw the scale increase as news of conditions in Yazd and Kerman reached Bombay, triggering a concerted Parsi reaction through the Amelioration Society and Hataria's mission. The third, from about the 1880s to 1925, was the period in which migration assumed the characteristics of a community: the sailing dhow had been superseded by the faster and safer steamship, and the repeal of the *jizya* in 1882 led to a new influx. This last stage produced the most distinct group of Iranian Zoroastrians, identified in contrast with the established Parsis as *Iranis*.²⁸

The migrants came overwhelmingly from two cities and their villages: Yazd, in the heart of the plateau, and Kerman, further south-east, forbidding desert regions that had become strongholds of a population that once ruled all of Persia. Yazd was a fortress and a refuge; Mary Boyce, who spent a year in the Zoroastrian village of Sharifabad near Yazd, described it as at once a prison and a shelter.²⁹ Reaching a port from Yazd or Kerman was a long journey across an extremely difficult plateau of salt deserts, mountain ranges,

and tribal lands in which travelers were unprotected, and for an unprotected religious minority, bandits and hostile officials could easily prey upon them. The most frequently used route ran south from Yazd through Kerman to Bandar Abbas, the chief Gulf port, along a caravan track of roadside rest-houses; a second route ran north-east toward Khorasan and the Afghan borderlands; and a third, used chiefly by migrants bound for Sindh and the lower Indus rather than Bombay, ran south-east from Kerman through the Baluchistan uplands to Karachi a track Malcolm noted was virtually impassable in summer for lack of water.³⁰

By the mid-nineteenth century, the sea route was the primary mode of transport to South Asia. Sea trips began at Bandar Abbas or Bushehr; for centuries, small wooden sailing boats called dhows had crossed the Gulf carrying merchants, pilgrims, and goods, and a Zoroastrian migrant might arrive as a paying passenger on such a merchant ship. There were two general routes: the older, longer one via Muscat in Oman and across the Arabian Sea to Bombay or Surat, and a shorter, more direct crossing that was more exposed to the monsoon, whose storms could be life-threatening.³¹ Everything changed with the coming of steam. Tracing the operational expansion of the British India Steam Navigation Company (founded in 1862) reveals a pivotal turning point in this diaspora: the company quickly established subsidized mail and passenger services on fixed schedules between Bombay, Karachi, and the Gulf ports. These maritime developments revolutionized the journey, transforming it from a perilous weeks-long endeavor into a predictable passage of just a few days. The steamship era made family migration feasible for those with resources, though for the poorest Zoroastrian farmers, a steamship ticket remained too expensive.³²

Migration does not occur solely in response to

²⁷Encyclopaedia Iranica, "Zoroastrians of 19th-Century Yazd and Kerman"; Amighi, *Zoroastrians of Iran*, 5.

²⁸George N. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question* (London, 1892), 1:264–71; Encyclopaedia Iranica, "Zoroastrians of 19th-Century Yazd and Kerman."

²⁹Napier Malcolm, *Five Years in a Persian Town* (New York, 1905), 36–41; Hinnells, *Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 700; Mary Boyce, *A Persian Stronghold of Zoroastrianism* (Oxford, 1977), 7–9.

³⁰Boyce, *Persian Stronghold*, 10–13; A. V. Williams Jackson, *Persia Past and Present* (New York, 1906), 366–69; Malcolm, *Five Years*, 49.

³¹Jackson, *Persia Past and Present*, 375; Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, 1:278–82; Hinnells, *Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 701–3.

³²Jackson, *Persia Past and Present*, 380–82; Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, 2:237–41.

conditions at home and abroad; it occurs because people know there is a place to go and someone to turn to on arrival. That knowledge reached the migrants largely through networks of merchants, kin, and, above all, those already settled in Bombay and Gujarat.³³ Hataria was, in effect, the communication infrastructure of the migration: he knew who was thinking of leaving Yazd, what the journey entailed, and what to expect on arrival. Beyond his formal role, migration was fostered by chain migration, in which successful migrants prompted relatives and fellow villagers to follow as with Ardeshir Mehraban, born in Yazd around 1848, who came to Bombay as a boy of twelve, was educated there, passed the Bombay University matriculation in 1866, and became a commercially prominent figure whose success back home made him a visible role model.³⁴ The trip was rarely direct: migrants settled for a time at transit points, chief among them Muscat, with its small community of Parsi traders, and Karachi, which grew in importance as a British colonial port after Sindh was annexed in 1843. By the early twentieth century, a small but growing group of Iranian Zoroastrians was established in Sindh, distinct from the Parsi communities of Bombay and Gujarat; some families who reached Karachi simply stayed, finding there the economic opportunity they sought.³⁵

The migrants were not a monolithic group. The first and most mobile were merchants and traders with business connections in India; a second category was the priests, who followed to serve the growing diaspora; and by the end of the century, a third and largest group, artisans, craftsmen, and agricultural workers, those with the least to lose and the most to gain, were on the move. Early emigrants were almost exclusively young men, who took the rougher overland routes; women and children came later, especially after the steamship era made the safer sea passage desirable.³⁶ Each step of the journey was fraught

with real danger, and some did not make it across: the overland legs saw temperatures reaching 47°C, dehydration, sandstorms, and bandits, while at sea, the dangers were monsoon storms and disease. It was, for those who made it and those who did not, a rite of passage and a test of endurance.³⁷

6. Settlement, Adaptation, and Present Condition in South Asia

After the British annexation of Sindh, the Parsi settlement in Karachi started to grow in the second half of the 19th century. The housing arrangement was not haphazard but rather structured, and the community established what could be termed a "managed enclave" within a much larger and more varied city.³⁸ The Zoroastrian community of Karachi bought a special residential space, the Katrak Parsi Colony, in 1920; it occupied 96,000 square yards and was meticulously laid out with 58 plots, broad roads, and a central community space with a garden and a library, a physical manifestation of a new urban community of identity and prosperity. The economic profile had two registers: the established Parsis occupied a mercantile and professional niche, while the Irani Zoroastrians who arrived later found stability in different trades, setting up bakeries and cafés in Karachi, in the manner of the tea houses they had known in Iran. Small and friendly, these establishments sold *bun maska* and strong tea to all classes and religions; some, such as the Yazdani Bakery, endured into the twenty-first century. The community also invested significant resources in institutional infrastructure charitable trusts, schools, and fire temples institutions that provided real welfare and, at the same time, maintained the social boundaries that sustained the community's unity over generations.³⁹

Zoroastrians in South Asia are sometimes described as a successful case of integration, and in some respects, they are: the community

³³Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, 2:245–48; Jesse S. Palsetia, *The Parsis of India* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 12–16.

³⁴Encyclopaedia Iranica, "Hataria, Manekji Limji"; Nasser Mohajer and Kaveh Yazdani, "From Yazd to Bombay—Ardeshir Mehrabān 'Irani' and the Rise of Persia's Nineteenth-Century Zoroastrian Merchants," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 34, no. 1 (2024), 4–9.

³⁵Mohajer and Yazdani, "From Yazd to Bombay," 10–12; Jackson, *Persia Past and Present*, 388; Palsetia, *Parsis of*

India, 28–30.

³⁶Hinnells, *Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 709; Boyce, *Persian Stronghold*, 16–19; Malcolm, *Five Years*, 55–56.

³⁷Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, 1:261, 2:261; Hinnells, *Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 701–3.

³⁸Alan V. Williams, *The Zoroastrian Myth of Migration* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 15.

³⁹Palsetia, *Parsis of India*, 22–23; Mitra Sharafi, *Law and Identity in Colonial South Asia* (Cambridge, 2014), 13.

embraced the languages, dress, and cuisine of the subcontinent while retaining its religious identity. When early immigrants arrived in a Gujarati-speaking area, Gujarati became their vernacular, eventually producing a distinct Parsi Gujarati; Persian remained the language of worship, and English, introduced under colonial rule, gave the educated community an edge in the colonial job market. Parsi dishes such as *dhansak* and *patra ni machhi* are among the most visible examples of cultural fusion.⁴⁰ Notwithstanding its small size, the community's intellectual and political contributions were remarkable: in 1892 Dadabhai Naoroji went to the British House of Commons as the first Asian to be elected to parliament and formulated the "drain of wealth" theory; Pherozech Shah Mehta was one of the founders of the Indian National Congress; Homi J. Bhabha established India's nuclear research programme; and the Tata family established the biggest industrial group in India.⁴¹

Yet despite this deep integration, the community also maintained strong social demarcations, the most important of which was endogamy. Throughout much of its history in South Asia the Parsi community was unwilling to receive converts, and the children of Parsis who married outside the faith were not considered Zoroastrians by the orthodox leadership, not only a religious stance but a social one, linked to the community's perception of itself as a separate group with a definite ancestry, and directly linked to the demographic downturn the community experiences today.⁴²

In India, the picture is one of steady decline only partially masked by achievement: the community fell from about 114,000 in 1941 to 57,264 in the 2011 census, and the decrease has been caused by late marriages, by both wanted and unwanted childlessness, and by significant emigration to North America, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Besides, the strict orthodox policy of not accepting converts and not recognizing the

children of Parsi women married to non-Zoroastrians further hampers any chance of the recovery of the natural population; the Indian government has treated the matter as a national issue through the "Jiyo Parsi" scheme.⁴³ Things are much more precarious in Pakistan. The Zoroastrian population, mainly residing in Karachi, is around 800 according to community leaders quoted in a 2023 report, of whom some 60 percent are over 65. In the past, the Parsi community was an important part of the city's commercial and civic life, constructing schools, hospitals, and public institutions in colonial Karachi; but after the late 1970s, the population began to drop precipitously. The military coup of 1977, in 1979 the Islamic Revolution occurred in Iran, and the subsequent Islamization policies of General Zia-ul-Haq led to the increasing marginalization of religious minorities in Pakistan. Zoroastrians who lived, dressed, and practiced their religion in an obviously non-Islamic manner found it more difficult to live in Karachi; many emigrated, and those who stayed saw their status lowered.⁴⁴ Internal pressures, the resistance of the orthodox community to accepting converts or recognizing the children of mixed marriages, aggravate external pressures such as emigration and demographic aging. The community is in a dilemma: it wants to maintain its unique character, but doing so is actually causing it to deteriorate.⁴⁵

7. Conclusion

The Zoroastrian movement from Iran to South Asia between 1789 and 1925 was neither easy nor uniform. It was the result of a thousand years of compressed pressure, brought to a head by the Qajar period and enabled by a very specific set of opportunities that only arose in South Asia at that precise historical moment: theology, geography, economics, colonial politics, and the behind-the-scenes efforts of community networks that extended across the Indian Ocean all shaped the migration. It created one of the most intellectually

⁴⁰Nazneen Engineer and Veera Rustomji, "Practice, Faith and Forgetting in Pakistan's Zoroastrian Community," *Hybrid 6* (2024): 63–76; Palsetia, *Parsis of India*, 27–28.

⁴¹Hinnells, *Zoroastrian Diaspora*, 703; Kulke, *The Parsees in India* (Delhi, 1974), 22.

⁴²Sharafi, *Law and Identity*, 15.

⁴³Office of the Registrar General, *Census of India 2011: Religion Data*, Table C-1; Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi,

"Declining Parsi Population" (Rajya Sabha, PIB, 2022).

⁴⁴"Pakistan: What Happened to Zoroastrians in Karachi?" *National Herald India* (republished from DW), 24 September 2023.

⁴⁵"Parsis in Pakistan: A Fading Community and the Silence of Survival," *The Friday Times*, 25 February 2026.

and commercially successful minority communities in South Asian history, and it brought that community an existential challenge that no amount of historical achievement can simply solve. The conclusion of this study is that the endurance of a small religious community over the centuries is not solely based on faith: it requires institutions, networks, legal protection, economic access, and the willingness to adapt without losing what is most essential. The

Zoroastrians preserved this balance for a very long time, and in very difficult circumstances. But the same community boundaries that helped them survive for centuries are now helping them fade away, and the pressures of the twenty-first century are not political but demographic and internal. The story chronicled here shows a community that has been through tough times before and has overcome them; whether it can do so again is the question it now carries forward.

Conflict of Interest

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