

Education among Parsi Women and its Consequences on the Community

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Parsis are the descendants of Zoroastrians of Persia, who migrated to India in the 8th century A. D. in order to escape religious persecution under the invading Arab conquerors. Since then the community has made India its home; flourishing and contributing towards society. Parsis were one of the first Indian communities to develop close association with the British and one of the first ones to be Anglicized. Parsis were in the forefront of imparting western education to females, although even traditionally Zoroastrian women were granted considerable freedom and equal status. Armed with education, Parsi women soon entered the professional realm. This progress led to increased age of marriage among girls or no marriage at all and less number of children, all of which produced disastrous consequences for a miniscule Parsi community. The paper briefly traces the progress of Parsi women and endeavors to establish a link between high female education and the present scenario where the community is virtually on the brink of extinction, at least in India. The paper does not try to bemoan the educational and professional achievements of Parsi women, nor does it advocate a reverse trend.

[Key Words: Aryans, Anglicization, Anglophilia, Parsi, Zoroastrianism]

The paper traces the early head start of Parsi women in education, which led to their overall development in all fields. However, the offshoots of this development were late or no marriages and less number of children, among others. For a miniscule community like that of Parsis, this is a disastrous trend,

which has now brought the Parsi community virtually at the point of extinction, at least in India.

The alarming decline in the population¹ is worrisome not just for the community, but government of India as well, as is evident from the fact that the Ministry of Minority Affairs has recently announced a grant of rupees ten corers towards boosting Parsi population² (Chakrabarty, 2013).

The history of Parsis, their religion, the story of their migration and their contribution to India has been amply documented. I have not come across any paper linking the education of Parsi women with population decline, although references have been made about the connection by several scholars like Kulke (1974), Palsetia, (2001), Luhrmann, (1996) etc.

I, being a Parsi and an academician, am at an advantage, as I have the insider's as well as the outsider's view. I am exposed to Parsi press and also to informal discussions and debates going on in the community more frequently and am also able to comprehend the fears, apprehensions and subtle nuances that may slip the eye of a non-Parsi. I shall be giving a brief history of Parsis for the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with the community.

Backdrop

The word 'Parsi' implies 'a person from Pars/ Fars', a province in ancient Persia. Parsis follow the Zoroastrian religion as propagated by Prophet Zarthusht/ Zoroaster. Zoroastrianism is believed to be the world's first revealed prophetic faith (Writer, 1993).

Parsis are the descendents of the Indo-European branch of Aryans who inhabited the Arctic region about 10,000 years ago or even earlier. When these Aryans began fanning out, some tribes continued to live in the northern parts of Persia while another group of people migrated further south to inhabit the Indo-Gangetic plains of India. Thus, Persians and Indians belong to the same racial stock, sharing religious and linguistic similarities (Dhalla, 1938; Balsara, 1963; Desai, 1977; Nanavutty, 1977; Kamerkar, & Dhunjisha, 2002).

Persian Empire flourished under various dynasties, notably the Sassanian and the Achemenian dynasties. However, by 7th century A. D., due to several factors, the mighty Persian Empire gradually weakened and was completely overtaken by the Arab invaders, who followed the policy of forceful conversion and

subjected the Persians to severe atrocities. Persian Zoroastrians began migrating out of Persia, to save themselves and primarily to protect their faith (Dhalla, 1938; Nanavutty, 1977; Kamekar, & Dhunjisha, 2002).

Arrival of Parsis in India

A band of Zoroastrians arrived in Gujarat, India around 8th century and were granted asylum by the local Hindu King, Jadi/Jadhav Rana. Here they settled and prospered for centuries (Kaikobad, 1559).

When the European powers arrived in India, particularly the British, Parsis sensed good economic prospects and many of them migrated from Gujarat to (then) Bombay. Parsi community became one of the first communities to develop close association with the British and consequently the community flourished and began leading an increasingly lavish lifestyle (Luhmann, 1996; Palsetia, 2001).

Anglicization of Parsis

Close association with the British led to rapid Anglicization of the Parsi community. In fact, Parsis have, throughout history, time and again demonstrated their ability to co-exist peacefully and have had socio-cultural interactions with their sister communities. Greek historians have described the ancient Iranians as the people with the greatest ability to adapt to foreign habits and customs (Kulke, 1974).

Under the British, Parsi community witnessed several social reforms, most noteworthy among them were those regarding emancipation of women.

Status of women in Zoroastrianism

Since ancient times Persian women were fairly emancipated. Zoroastrian women played a prominent role in Persian society and the same has been immortalized in the stories of the famous Shah Nameh. Historians have noted that the credit for the immense progress made by the Persians goes to the fact that female sex was highly respected in their society (Dadachanji, 1997).

Europeans noted that Parsi women were entrusted fully with the economy of the house and men were not allowed to interfere in that matter. Under the British influence, Parsi women of (then) Bombay developed hobbies and indulged in leisure time amusement that were similar to English. They were allowed to go out unaccompanied in open carriages, a luxury considering the

social scenario of India in the mid-nineteenth century. Most Parsi women received Gujarati education and a few, particularly from the wealthy families, were privileged enough to get English education as well. Some Parsi women ably managed the businesses started by their husbands and several widows completely took charge of the commercial establishments and agencies left behind by their late husbands (Briggs, 1952).

Parsi widows were allowed to remarry and there were not many restrictions for widows regarding dressing style, unlike the Hindus. However, a widow gave up on adorning herself with most of her ornaments and donned them only after remarriage (Briggs, 1852).

Parsi women under British

Parsis were decades ahead of all other communities in India in terms of female education. 'Student's Literary and Scientific Society', established by Dadabhai Naoroji and other reformers in 1848-1849 had 475 Parsi female students out of a total of 740 girl students (Kulke, 1974). Towards the end of 19th century, over 1000 Parsi girls had already received secondary education (Kulke, 1974).

Among the first batch of matriculates from Bombay University were Tehmina and Jaije Dadyburjor, Banoobai Seervai and Jerbai Vicaji. Avanbai Mehta and Navabai Mehta in 1891 joined Grant Medical College as first women students. Dosabai C. Jassawala became the first Parsi girl to attend private English school founded by Mrs. Wood in 1842. Lady Meherbai Tata, deeply concerned for the welfare of women and an ardent advocate of female education founded the National Council of Women, later affiliated to International Council of Women, She was the leader of the first Indian delegates at its meeting in Geneva in 1927 (Kamerkar & Dhunjisha, 2002).

The first English medium school for girls was established by a Parsi, Manockjee Cursetji, in his own residence, Villa Byculla, on 1st September, 1863, a period when Indian women were mostly confined to their homes. The school was named The Alexandra Native Girls' English Institution and had 13 pupils to begin with. One of its most illustrious alumni was Madame Cama, the famous nationalist who is credited for giving India its first national flag.

Anglophilia among the Parsi community was so widespread that by the middle of 19th century, wives and daughters of

influential and wealthy families like the Cama, Naoroji and Cursetji, were allowed to attend public dinners and similar such functions (Kulke, 1974). Widespread English education among women also led to quick and rapid Anglicization of the Parsi women. They were encouraged to adopt the English style and mannerisms and in fact it was considered a sign of being refined (Kulke, 1974).

Parsi ladies participated actively in sports. Lady Meherbai Dorab Tata played competitive tennis all over Europe in her *saari* while Lady Serenbai Petit was the first Indian woman to fly a plane solo in 1929 A.D. Many Parsi women had pilot licenses during that era. Mrs. Homai Vyarawalla, born in 1913 A.D., is credited with being the first Indian woman photo-journalist. She daringly took photographs during the Second World War (Dadachanji, 1986; Luhrmann, 1996).

Madame R. K. Cama, one of the most famous Parsi women, came from a wealthy family of Bombay. By the age of 27 she had separated from her husband. During her travels in Europe, she came in contact with the revolutionaries. At one time she became such fierce a revolutionary that Hindus regarded her as an incarnation of Goddess Kali. In 1907, while addressing the International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, she unfurled the Indian tricolour, which later became the Indian national flag after independence. In spite of her English education and a 35 year stay in Europe, she remained deeply nationalistic and advocated Hindi as the uniform language and Devnagari as the uniform script for India. In early 20th century, she published '*Talwar*' and '*Bande Mataram*', revolutionary periodicals, which were published in Geneva and daringly smuggled in India via Pondicherry. She became an inspiration for a number of women, so much so that they were kept under the political surveillance by the British (Kulke, 1974).

Mithuben Petit joined Civil Disobedience movement, while Perin Caption, daughter of Dadabhai Naoroji, led processions, held meetings, picketed shops selling foreign goods like clothes and liquor. She was appointed as the first women president of 'War Council' of the 'Bombay Pradesh Congress Committee' and mobilized women during salt *satyagraha* (Kamerar & Dhunjisha, 2002).

Following the Zoroastrian doctrine of philanthropy, number Parsi women were active in the field of social work. Mrs. Dinabai Vajifdar, renowned social worker was the first Parsi lady of Karachi (undivided India) to receive the “*Kaiser – E- Hind Medal*” for her yeomen services during the World War I. Other Parsi women active in the field of social work were Mrs. Dinbai Patuck, co founder of *Stree Jarthosti Mandal*, which provided employment to women with little education, thereby making them self reliant. Mrs. Khorshedbanu Dinshaw not only donated lacs of rupees in charity, but actively worked on welfare committees and various hospitals. She personally examined every case and ensured that no deserving needy ever went empty handed. She provided medical, educational and monetary relief to the needy and ran a hostel for the Mama Girl’s school for 37 years entirely at her own expense (Dadachanji, 1997).

Jai Vakeel was awarded Padma Shri for her pioneering work with the mentally retarded children. The school founded by her has a nursery section, vocational section and an all India teacher’s training centre to train teachers in handling mentally challenged children. Meher Banaji founded the Happy Home for the Blind. Mrs. Avabai Wadia has been a longtime president of India’s Family Planning Association and president of International Planned Parenthood Federation. Miss Mehroo Bengali was the first woman vice-chancellor of University of Bombay (Dadachanji, 1997).

Padma Bhushan Mrs. Mitha Lam was the first Indian women Barrister³. She was an active member of All India Women’s Conference for 40 years and was elected its president in 1960. Mrs. Vera Cowasjee of Karachi was the first lady in the sub continent to have acquired Ph.D. degree in archeology from London University.

Parsi women took the lead in the field of medicine and allied areas too. Notable among them were Dr. Freany K. R. Cama, the first woman to become a Licentiate of Medicine and Surgery from University of Bombay in 1892. She traveled to England and Belgium for further training. After a brief stint at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, she returned to India and joined the Cama and Albles hospital. Dr. Dossibai J. Dadabhoy was the first Parsi lady to acquire a M. D. degree in Gynecology from the University of London. In 1933 she established “The New Hospital for Women” at Opera House, Bombay. Dr. Roshan Master became the first lady

Fellow in Psychiatry from the College of Physicians and Surgeons. She headed the Psychiatry department at B. J. Medical College Poona for 25 years. A great orator, it is said that if a member of an audience was late for her lecture, that person would have to stand for an hour as the hall would have no empty seats left. For her contributions in understanding mental health and illnesses, she was awarded D. L. N. Murthy Rao Oration Award, which is the highest award bestowed by the Indian Psychiatry Society. Dr. Mehru J. Mehta became the first doctor to obtain a M. S. degree from Poona University in 1949. She was one of the first surgeons to deal with resections for cancer and to treat portal hypertension with surgery. She has to her credit largest series of colonic bypass operations for oesophageal obstruction. Dr. Nargesh Motashaw pioneered Gynecological endoscopy and modern Laparoscopy in India. For a decade from 1983 to 1993, she was the President of the International Federation of Gynecological endoscopy. Avabai Wadia was born in 1913 in Colombo in a well to do and respected family. She completed her schooling in London and later cleared her honours degree of L. L. B. from University of London in 1934. She became the first woman in Ceylon to pass her bar examinations and only after her was women allowed to study law in Ceylon. She along with her mother moved to India during World War II and soon was drawn towards nationalist movement (Antia, 2005; Thakkar, 2005).

Consequences of Upward mobility

The purpose of the above discussion is to draw attention to a very curious effect the progress of Parsi women has had on the Parsi community. Undoubtedly, the progress of women is considered as one of the most important benchmarks of the progress of that particular society and Parsi society is not exception. The community greatly benefited from the high educational levels of its women. Perhaps the reason why the community has remained largely unaffected by social ills like dowry deaths, honour killings and bigamy – all of which are detrimental to woman's self-respect and her very safety – could also be attributed to Parsi women being fairly educated and self-reliant.

However, for a miniscule community like Parsis, upward mobility of its women has produced paradoxical consequences.

Ever since Parsis were granted asylum in India, they have remained a minority in the vast ocean of Indian population. However, since the second half of the 20th century, the Parsi population has witnessed a steady decline. Some of the reasons, among others⁴, most often cited in Parsi press and in informal community gatherings, as also by empirical studies, are late marriages, large number of unmarried men and women and less number of children (Sayeed, *et al*, 2009).

When these above cited reasons are probed further, the common factor that emerges is the high level of female education.

It is widely accepted that educated women tend to marry late and produce less number of children and Parsi women are no exception to this phenomena.

Several scholars like Kulke (1974) have pointed that owing to their high educational levels and professional aspirations, Parsi females tend to marry late, often in their late twenties or thirties and tend to produce their first child even later.

With relatively high education, Parsi girls generally aspire for higher career goals. The desire to be highly qualified coupled with equally high motivation to achieve professional seniority invariably pushes the age of marriage further. It is not uncommon for a Parsi woman to postpone her marriage due to professional reasons.

Moreover, if and when, she does decide to marry, she may look out for a man who matches her qualifications, professional status and earnings. Parsi parents being relatively more tolerant of single sons and daughters, there is little pressure on Parsi girls to marry. Thus, many Parsi girls prefer to wait till they 'find their match', so to say. This often leads to very late marriage, often well beyond the child-bearing age, or no marriage at all.

Married Parsi couples tend to produce less number of children, often just one child. Nuclear and dual-career families pose a problem of effective care-givers for small children. High standards of living coupled with increased cost of living make it difficult to raise more than one child. In fact it is sometimes argued within the community that the community declined not as much because of single Parsis as it did because of married Parsis who chose to produce few children. However, this has not been empirically verified.

Effect on Community

According to the Census of 2001, Parsi population in India was 69,601. Parsis account for only 0.0058% of the Indian population. With an estimated decrease of 10% to 12% in every decade, there may be only about 36000 Parsis by 2050 and a little less than 20,000 by 2100. These startling figures have shaken up the community, which now tries to desperately search for solutions to arrest the population decline and boost growth (The BPP review, October, 2013, cover story). Several matrimonial services are offered by and matrimonial meetings organized by institutions like The Bombay Parsi Punchayet, private individuals and on-line internet sites, most of them free of cost or with nominal fee. Organizations like the ZYNG (Zoroastrian Youth for Next Generation) regularly organizes tours, picnics and fun filled programs that enable the youth to interact and thereby find prospective life partners within the community.

Empirical work

In the comprehensive research conducted in early 21st century by the Parzor Foundation, under the aegis of UNESCO, it was found that the youth in the community viewed marriage as desirable but not absolutely necessary and something which can be delayed or done away with all together. The females expected their prospective life partners as having high qualifications and earnings to maintain a high standard of living, among a list of other factors like owning a house, unorthodox, good looking, etc. The worrying part that the research revealed was that most females were ready to wait till their exact demands were met, instead of scaling down some of their expectations. In contrast, men looked out for ‘home-loving’ girls, a rarity in the community that values professional excellence among females. While most Parsi girls perceived Parsi men as ‘lagging behind’ in education, income and job profiles; Parsi men viewed Parsi girls as ‘demanding, aggressive and having superiority complex’. Clearly, the expectations from prospective life partners among Parsi men and women were found to be incompatible (Bharat, 2008).

Study conducted by Sayeed, *et al* (2009), on behalf of the International Institution of Population Sciences, Mumbai, too found similar trends. The mean age of marriage for Parsi girls has consistently remained higher (around late twenties) as compared to

mean age of marriage for females for rest of India (around late teens). The birth rate too saw a steady decline in the decades from 1960s to 1990s. The study suggested that increasing the number of married women in the community and increased fertility might reverse the population trend among the Parsis (Sayeed, *et al*, 2009).

Conclusion

Late marriages, less number of children, tolerance of the community towards single men and women, migration to foreign lands, inter-faith marriages are some of the causes cited by empirical studies as well as by informal observation. At least some of these factors are a direct offshoot of higher levels of female education in the community, leading to much debate, among Parsis and non-Parsis as well.

Declining population brought up several issues of the community to the fore. Should the community accept the children of inter-faith marriages?⁵ Should the community allow conversion of willing non-Parsis into Zoroastrianism? These apprehensions have also once again given rise to the debate on whether a Parsi and a Zoroastrian are synonymous or can they be mutually exclusive?⁶

Parsi press like the *Jame Jamshed*, *The Parsi Times*, *Parsiana*, *Hamazor* and *FEZANA*, e-journals like *Parsi Khabar* and websites like www.parsiworld.com frequently dwell on these issues, with articles and letters being contributed by learned scholars of Zoroastrianism, High Priests and the laity alike. It is not unusual to witness heated arguments in informal community and family gatherings.

The pleasant outcome of these debates is that it has led to increased introspection among the Parsis. While religious scholars dig into the religious texts and scriptures to search for answers to present apprehensions within the community, some Parsis prefer to organize themselves and take recourse to Courts of Law, for example, AIMZ (Association of Intermarried Zoroastrians). An ordinary Parsi engages in informal discussions during community gatherings and their opinions are often swayed by the media reports.

But irrespective of personal views and opinions, most Parsis, and some non-Parsis too, seem eager to increase their population.

The paper does not try to demean the upward mobility of Parsi women nor does it blame them for the population decline. It merely tries to establish a link between the two factors.

Notes

¹ 2001 census showed Parsi population at 69,601. Although the data for Parsi population for the 2011 Census is not available, it is estimated at about 61000-63000 out of which 45000 reside in Mumbai, where majority of Parsis in India reside.

² The Ministry of Minority Affairs of The Government of India launched 'Jiyo Parsi' scheme on 23rd September 2013 under which Rupees ten crores were allotted to boost the fertility among the Parsis. The scheme will be implemented by The Parzor Foundation along with The Bombay Parsi Punchayet.

³ Mrs. Mithan Lam, daughter of Hirabai and Ardeshir Tata, studied at London School of Economics in 1919 A.D. and joined the Lincoln's Inn in 1920 A. D. After three years she joined the bar and worked with famous solicitor Bhulabhai Desai. In the first half of the twentieth century, people did not have much confidence in a women lawyer and thus she found it difficult to find clients. She eventually got her first brief from a client who was confident of winning, and wanted to humiliate his opponent at being defeated at women's hands (*Parsiiana*, 7th October, 2009: 28).

⁴ Other reasons include migration to foreign lands, lower fertility rates and general tolerance of the community towards remaining single.

⁵ Parsi community has been traditionally accepting children of Parsi men and non-Parsi women. The present dilemma is whether to accept children born of Parsi women and non-Parsi men.

⁶ This debate is not new. In fact, in the landmark judgment delivered in the famous Parsi Punchayet Case – 1909, Justice Davar categorically stated that in India, a Parsi and a Zoroastrian mean the same as Parsis have practiced strict religious exclusivity and have never followed the policy of conversion (The Parsi Punchayet Case, *Petit v/s Jeejeebhoy IX*, Exclusion of Converts, Pg 23, 24).

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