

THE PARSEE VOICE

Vol. I. 12

16 – 31 January 2004

For Private Circulation

THE PARSEE POPULATION PARANOIA Nature's Mysterious Ways!

The one subject that some Parsees, who count, never tire of talking today, is their number. This obsession with numbers may have different reasons, like, some may be genuinely concerned about the annual death rate far exceeding the birth rate, others may want children of different religions and communities to be adopted, so as to augment the numbers, but the large majority, who talk about depleting numbers, are those who have a whopping axe to grind: they are the protagonists of mixed marriages and conversion, both of which please **Ahriman!**

The highest common factor in all these groups is the superficial observation of a phenonemon, which is unique and peculiar to the Parsee community, defying demographic norms. The peculiar phenomenon is this: No body has any idea what was the number of Parsee Zoroastrians, at the time of their advent in India, 1300 years ago, or 500 years later, or even when **Mobed Baman Kaikobad** wrote his **Qissa-e-Sanjan** in 1599. Those were the Rajput, Moghul, Maratha periods. It was only during the British rule, that census figures of different communities in India, are available. The figures give a hint of what Nature has in store for us. But before coming to the all-India census figures, it is at once interesting and pertinent to note what the Parsee population of Mumbai was in the middle and late-nineteenth century.

The earliest figures available are that of a place called Chaul, near Thane, where there were just two Parsees in 1640. In 1780, the Parsi population of Bombay was 3000 and in 1811, about 10,000. In 1833-1834, the Government undertook a census of the population of Bombay with the police going to every household, to check the numbers. The Parsee population was estimated at 7,396 in the Fort area and 6,264 outside it, making a total of 13,660.

In 1864, however, with the influx of Parsees from Gujarat,

Bombay population shot up to 49,200. It went on increasing through the years.

The first official census figures, available for the entire country, showed the Parsee population at 89,887 in 1891. The decadal census thereafter, for the next 70 years is given below:

1901 : 94,190; 1911 : 1,00,096; 1921 : 1,01,778;
1931 : 1,09,752; 1941 : 1,14,890; 1951 : 1,11,791;
1961 : 1,00,772; 1971 : 91,266.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

It should be noted that the figures upto 1941 are those of undivided India. In 1947, after partition, a few thousands automatically became the citizens of Pakistan. But between 1951 and 1961 and 1971, the figures clearly show a tapering trend.

According to Parsee demographer and a former Secretary of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet, Mr. Sapur F. Desai, "since 1951, the number has kept going down at the rate of 1% a year." Again, "By 1955, the number of deaths in Bombay started to exceed the number of births." Mr. Desai says that, "a population is judged by the number of births at its recruitment age for every 100 of population." He then goes on to show the percentage of Parsee population for three age groups in 1971 as under:

Age Group	Percentage of Population
0 to 15	17.84
16 to 49	51.57
50 and over	30.59

(In 1911, group 0 to 15 constituted 28.2% of the population and 50 and over, 14.5%). Thus, "longevity has increased but the recruitment age is losing. The community is in a regressive state of population growth." Mr. Desai, who has authored many articles and works relating to the Parsee population, sounded the caveat 30 years ago, in

his *magnum opus*, "History of the Bombay Parsi Panchayet 1860-1960", from which most of the above statistics have been sourced, when he wrote, "The present impasse the Parsis find themselves in, is an inevitable result of fewer marriages, late marriages and many other contributing factors... Of the total Parsi population over 50% are unmarried... If the Parsis want to survive they must have atleast 3 children per couple. At present (1977) Bombay seems to have even less than 2."

As against this, the late Sir Jivanji J. Modi, who was also the Secretary of the BPP for 37 years (1893-1930), wrote in his two-volumed Gujarati *opus*, "*Mumbaini Parsee Panchayet ni tavareekh*", that, in February 1811, Sir James Macintosh in his "Note on Preliminary Discourse", on the occasion of the inauguration of the Royal Asiatic Society, mentioned the Bombay Parsee population age-group figures as: Between the age of 20 and 80, about 7000 and upto the age of 20, about 3000.

We have a definite purpose for labouring our readers with the above statistical data. Notice the 1811 figures of Sir James Macintosh. When, as we all know, child marriages were rampant in all communities, including the Parsees (children of age 3-4 were married, when even their Navjotes were not performed – before the **Ashirwad** ceremony, the children were temporarily invested with Sudreh-Kusti, which were removed later, as, such tiny tots could not perform the Kusti ritual. Later, after the age of 7, a proper Navjote used to be performed!), isn't it strange that young Parsees upto the age of 20, were less than 50% of those above 20 and upto 80? Assuming the then puberty age to be 13-15, married girls of this age must have conceived more than once, or even twice, before they reached 20! Then, what happened to those many children who must have been born, before their mothers attained the age of 20? Surely, all of them, mother, father and child/children could have been included in the age group "upto 20 years" by Sir Macintosh? Yes, what happened? The answer could only be: many, if not most of them, died during their childhood. In other words, child mortality rate must have been very high.

This view is being supported by the death figures given by Dr. Sir Jivanji Modi for the early 19th century. For example, in 1801, 62 Parsee men and 40 Parsee women died, as against 166 children who died; in 1804, it was 145 men, 133 women, against 285 children, and so forth.

NATURE'S MYSTERIOUS WAYS

All of us, and particularly those, who glibly talk about our dwindling population, and even more glibly suggest ridiculous solutions, like accepting all children of mixed-marriages, conversion, etc., should first ask

themselves, these two questions: (1) In the last about 1300 years' stay in India, have we really declined drastically in numbers? (2) If not, what is the secret of the tiny Parsee community surviving and prospering in a vast ocean of humanity for these 13 centuries?

Put aside all your biases and pre-conceived notions and ponder seriously what follows: The late Mr. Sapur F. Desai, mentioned above, in a lecture before one of the World Zoroastrian Congresses, indicated that according to the rule of Statistical Probability, **if only 10,000 Parsees had come from Iran in the 8th century, in about 1100 years, their numbers should have been about 25-26 lakhs!! Yet, this has not happened!**

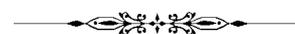
Our numbers, as per records available have never exceeded a hundred and fifteen thousand! The whole purpose of this exercise is to show once and for all to our readers that throughout the 13 centuries, Parsee population figures have fluctuated, there have been highs and lows, **but there has never been nor ever will be, a vacuum. For, Nature abhors a vacuum!**

In reality, what happened in the 19th and early 20th centuries was that inspite of a veritable "Cricket XI" being produced by every second family, epidemics of various kinds – cholera, plague, malaria etc., and even, at times, famine, claimed a lot of young lives, Nature always maintained a certain balance in the Parsee population.

Today, in 2004, because of high longevity and a low mortality rate, because of Partition of our country, the heavy incidence of emigration to the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand in the eighties and nineties, and more and more mixed marriages, **Nature still continues to maintain a balance!! Why? Are we the "chosen ones" to survive till the Good Times come? Don't forget that in these turbulent, materialistic age, the most exalted and ancient Religion, simply cannot be at the top! Its followers, who numbered in crores, have to be in very small numbers during such a "Qayamat"!**

All that the faithful Zoroastrian has to do today is to wait patiently for the Spiritual Gardener to come to nourish our 1300 year-old tree, with the elixir of life!

If pessimists and agnostics in our community, with their justification of mixed marriages, and conversions, have their day, we shall be foolishly committing racial harakiri! Natural death is always preferred by wise men!



Lessons To Be Drawn From A Century Gone By... The Hypocrisy Of Parsees Married Outside! Present BPP Trustees must stop this arrant "Affidavit" Nonsense!

(Continued from last Issue)

In 1990, when Ms. Roxan Shah passed away, she was denied the use of any **Dakhma**, by the BPP. For more than a year, wordy missiles flew to and fro, between those who supported the BPP's action and those who wanted her body to be consigned to the Tower of Silence.

On 30th May, 1991, conservative bodies like the Bombay Zoroastrian Jashan Committee, the Athornan Mandal and the Dadar Jashan Trust organised a highly successful public meeting at the Birla Matushri Sabhagar, to protest against a resolution of the BPP of 9th April, 1991, in the matter of the use of Doongerwadi facilities by Parsee women married to non-Parsees. The trustees did not relent. Their stand was that, "after due deliberation and mature consideration of all aspects... the Trustees resolved in the matter as they did." And what did they resolve? That, the disused Modi Vatcha Gandhi Dakhma be earmarked for the use of dead Parsee women married to non-Parsees, and that Parsee Zoroastrian relatives and friends could use the Doongerwadi 'Bunglis' for the performance of the obsequies of such women.

This was strongly objected to by the three above-mentioned organisations. The gravamen of their charge was that, in the past, such women's bodies were placed in the "Chotra" (an unconsecrated **Dakhma**, which exists to this day) and no 'Bunglis' were permitted to be used for their obsequies. Besides, the seven High Priests of India had, in their joint memorandum of 27th October, 1990, expressly stated that such women were not entitled to the use of any religious institution.

But the BPP trustees were adamant. They were assisted in their stubbornness by the backing received from the well-known solicitor Mr. Rustom A. Gagrath (who passed away recently), who had taken up cudgels on behalf of the 30 women married under the Special Marriage Act of 1954, and the full support given to them by Jehan, in his column "Parsi Tari Arsi", in the Bombay Samachar Weekly.

THE ABOMINABLE AFFIDAVIT

What was most galling was that in early 1992, the BPP trustees were emboldened to write a letter to different Public Notaries, enclosing a draft of an affidavit, which was to be signed by the nearest relative of the deceased.

Wrote Dr. Aspi F. Golwala, Chairman of the BPP, inter alia: "As you may be aware, my, colleague trustees and I on the Board of Trustees of Parsi Punchayet Bombay have resolved that the dead body of a Parsi lady married to a non-Parsi will be allowed the use of the Bunglis and the last rites facilities inclusive of the consignment of dead body at Doongerwadi Towers of Silence subject to the making of an Affidavit..."

The draft of the 'Affidavit' read: "I _____ residing at _____ do hereby solemnly affirm/make oath and say as follows: "(1) That I

am the husband/brother/father/mother/next of kin of the deceased Mrs. _____ who expired on the _____ day of _____ 19____.

"(2) I say that the late Mrs. _____ who was a Parsi Zoroastrian was married to _____ under the Special Marriage Act, 1954/Indian Christian Marriage Act 1872 which permits a person marrying under the said Act to retain the Zoroastrian faith.

"(3) I further say that till her demise the said Mrs. _____ had not renounced the Zoroastrian religion.

"(4) I further say that all arrangements will be made by the relatives of the deceased for the performance of the funeral rites and other and other ceremonies by the Priests at the Tower of Silence.

Signature"

Our whole purpose in raking up this subject after more than a decade, is that this "affidavit" in use to this day, can be faulted in more ways than one.

Firstly, the Special Marriage Act, 1954, does not expressly "permit" a Parsee marrying a non-Parsee to practise his/her religion. The so-called 'permission', is, at best, inferential. As mentioned in one of our previous issues, the earlier Act expressly made the spouse renounce his/her religion, before signing on the dotted line. The present Act is silent on that point! That's all! **Secondly, and more importantly, the BPP has thoroughly misused, nay, abused the use of this "affidavit."**

The whole concept of an "affidavit" came up in a totally different context. In 1981, a few Zoroastrian women married to non-Zoroastrians, filed a suit against the BPP, claiming that they, too, had a right to vote at the Anjuman Committee's elections, and that, therefore, their names should be included in the electoral register.

Their plea was dismissed by Mr. Justice Guttal of the City Civil Court. The plaintiffs immediately rushed to the Bombay High Court. Since it was past the Court's time in the evening, and the then Chairman of the BPP wanted a result that evening itself, so that the elections to be held the next day need not be postponed, Mr. Justice P.B. Sawant heard the counsels for the two sides in his Chamber. He then gave the Consent Order that the lawyers should file an affidavit with the BPP for every woman who wanted her name to be on the electoral register, stating that she professed and practised the Zoroastrian religion.

10 years later, in 1992, the BPP trustees who included Dr. Golwala, Mr. Eruch Desai, Mr. Jamshed Gazdar, Mr. Jamsheed Kanga, etc., conveniently grafted the affidavit for a purely religious purpose!!! If this is not a gross abuse of and an unwarranted distortion of the Consent Order of Mr. Justice Sawant, the present-day trustees should tell the community, what is? Even as

late as mid-December 2003, a Parsee girl married to a Christian, who died in a tragic accident, was consigned to the oldest **Dakhma** of Mumbai with all obsequies performed in Bennett Bungli No.6! **We strongly urge the resourceful Chairman of the BPP, Mr. Minoo Shroff to stop this practice, which has neither any religious nor any legal backing, whatsoever! We also ask all Parsee ladies "married" to non-Parsees, to inquire of their**

conscience, why, after flouting the very fundamentals of our great religion, are they so scared that their souls will be in suspended animation after death, if they don't get the benefit of the Dakhmas and the ceremonies thereafter? What rank hypocrisy is this?!

(Concluded)

You're Telling Us!

Mr. Rustom S. Gae on Adoption & The Role of the CEO, BPP.

Sir, – "The Parsee Voice" makes interesting reading (showing "the other side" of the picture) regarding religious, financial, cultural and other matters of our miniscule community. The community has the right to know about issues affecting them. It is gratifying to note that the issues raised by you highlight various matters of interest to the community. **Acts and omissions** (not merely omissions) of the BPP as the apex body of the community should be brought out in an objective manner focusing the readers' attention on the subjects concerned.

A few observations on adoption are called for, primarily in view of some statements on the subject reported in 1-15 December, 2003 Issue of The Parsee Voice. The custom of taking a **palak** (adopted) son prevailing in the erstwhile Baroda state is no longer recognised in India. It is now well established that the custom of adoption does not prevail among the Parsis residing in India.

Adoption is an area in which we Parsis really need a personal law. The community is fast dwindling. The birth rate **vis-a-vis** the death rate is extremely low. That has assumed greater and greater importance in the community, necessitating prompt action. Unfortunately no progress has been made in this matter.

We Parsis have not had a general law of adoption in spite of repeated representations. We are back to square one. This is primarily due to lack of consensus in the community on the subject. Parsis anxious to adopt a Parsi child find it extremely difficult to find one (specially a male). This has left them with no alternative but to adopt a non-Parsi child. Such adoption gives rise to several problems. Various disabilities ensuing therefrom create an embarrassing situation for an adopted child, being a non-Parsi, under the personal law applicable to the Parsi community. Amending law on the subject is the crucial problem facing the community. A general law on the subject applicable to Parsis is desirable.

The policy of the Government of India is not to interfere in the personal law of any minority community unless the community itself asks for an amendment. This can only be done when there is a meaningful consensus, if not unanimity, in the community. We must wait for such a consensus. It will all come in time if the community is to survive.

The role of Mr. B.T. Dastur, the CEO of the BPP, at the last meeting of the Federation at Bardoli needs attention. He is an executive officer of the BPP. He may be requested by the Chairman to be present at a meeting of the Federation. His presence is in his capacity as an officer of the BPP and not as a delegate at the meeting. He is as such required to clarify or elucidate any point as a required by the Chairman at the meeting. He expresses his views as a responsible officer of the BPP – and not in his personal capacity. He is not required to express his views on any matter **suo moto**, much less any views in his personal capacity. His role is akin to that of the secretary at a meeting of the Board of Directors of a public company. If he goes beyond his brief it is for the Chairman to restrain him and keep him in his proper place.

In his Circular letter dated 25.6.2003 issued by Mr. Dastur as Chief Executive of the BPP he expressed views on certain matters and the delegates were informed that these were his personal views – and not the views of the BPP Trustees. This letter was sent to various Anjumans. It is thus difficult to believe that the letter expresses his personal views.

It further appears that he, of his own accord expressed some views on very controversial issues like conversion and adoption. Is it proper for an executive of the BPP to express views on such matters at a Federation meeting? A specified number of Trustees of the BPP, delegates, representing members of the Federation and special invitees are the only persons entitled to attend Federation meetings and they have to play their respective roles at such meetings as allotted by the Constitution of the Federation.

It is for consideration whether the CEO of the BPP has any **locus standi** at the meetings of the Federation and if so, what, and whether he exceeded his brief at the Bardoli meeting. As a journalist and well wisher of the community you should investigate the matter and elucidate the position for the benefit of the readers of The Parsee Voice as well as the Chairman of the BPP.

R.S. Gae

આવતા અંકમાં ગુજરાતી વિભાગ જરૂરી વાંચશે!