

# **Excarnation and the City: The Tower of Silence Debates in Mumbai**

**Leilah Vevaina**

**Department of Anthropology, The New School for Social Research**

## **Abstract**

For the Parsis (Indian Zoroastrians) of Mumbai, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Towers of Silence is ferociously protected as a sacred site for the practice of *dokhmenashini*. Parsis dispose of their dead through excarnation, leaving the corpse in large towers to be eaten by carrion birds or left to desiccate in the sun. The practice reflects the Zoroastrian observance of not defiling natural elements with dead bodies. Although the Towers were once in secluded areas, the city today has grown around them leading to the questioning of the practice's viability on grounds of hygiene, the scarcity of birds, and how the valuable space should be used. Should the *dokhmas* receive Parsi women who have married out of the community? Is cremation a more "modern" way to dispose of the dead? Could a crematorium be placed on the same site? I argue that these debates reflect a growing anxiety about the boundaries of Parsi identity that are brought to the fore due to the twin pressures of urban space and declining demography. The debates show the competing strategies of Parsi orthodox and reform groups, who all propose different solutions for this sacred space.

For the Parsis of Mumbai, a minority group of Indian Zoroastrians, who were early settlers to the city, the twentieth century saw not only the fall of their financially successful collaboration with the British Empire, but also a steady decline in population, and rising pressures over their space and identity. Parsi community identity gathered and solidified its shape in colonial Bombay, and has since faced a crisis in the post-colonial city. As a religious and ethnic minority, the Parsis are experiencing rapid change and stresses on their cultural and social environment. Debates around the community's sacred space in the city have increased in the recent past as newer discourses relating to declining demographic strength, and very heated arguments over who exactly can even be counted as Parsi or Zoroastrian, have taken center stage.

Parsis were some of the foremost and most successful settlers of Bombay, claiming many spaces in south and central Bombay that are today highly valued pieces of real estate in the city. Although a numerically small minority in India (approx. 55,000 in Bombay, 75,000 in India)<sup>1</sup>, they have historically enjoyed disproportionate access to valued space throughout the city. Apart from private ownership, large tracts of land are owned and controlled by the Bombay Parsi Panchayat (BPP), an elected body that acts as the recognized community authority. Founded in

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<sup>1</sup> Hinnels, John R. *The Zoroastrian Diaspora: Religion and Migration*. Oxford University Press. 2005. p. 45.

the 18th century, the Parsi Panchayat of Bombay has been the warden of the community's codes of behavior, funds, trust housing, and maintainer of the Towers of Silence (Zoroastrian funerary grounds). The 17<sup>th</sup> century Tower of Silence, in Malabar Hill in south Bombay, is one crucial space that is ferociously protected by the Panchayat as a sacred site and a critical space for the traditional practice of *dokhmenashini*, the practice of excarnation in Zoroastrianism. Parsis, are one of the only communities in the world that has still kept up with this practice for a majority of the community, yet as this paper will show due to several fundamental changes in the landscapes of Mumbai and the community, there is no telling how much longer it will exist.

An analysis of the debates surrounding the *dokhmenashini* practice will show the intricate connection between the built environment and the community identity of Parsis in Bombay-Mumbai.<sup>2</sup> The debates not only reflect differing views of correct religious practice, but also a deep concern with public perceptions of this small community.

Critical to the contemporary importance of the *dokhmenashini* practice is the particular historical development of Parsi identity that grew to maturity within the landscape of Mumbai and within the legal structures of colonial and post-colonial India.

*Dokhmenashini* is one consistent ritual practice that marks the Parsis in India since their arrival on its shores. This traditional Zoroastrian practice involves the excarnation of the dead by leaving the corpse in large towers, or *dokhmas* to be eaten by vultures or other carrion birds, or left to desiccate in the sun. The practice goes back to ancient times in Iran and reflects the Zoroastrian observance of not defiling natural elements with dead bodies which are considered to be the ultimate impure material. The *dokhmas* themselves are massive open circular stone walled structures with a well in middle.

As Zoroastrians migrated and settled in Western India, they brought this cultural practice to their new environment. The first *dokhma* in India was built around 1300 in rural Gujarat to service the burgeoning community there. To transport the impure corpse, or *nasa*, are a special occupational class of Zoroastrians called *nasasalars*, who are the only ones allowed to touch and move the bodies after the four traditional days of funeral service, officiated by at least two

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<sup>2</sup> This paper will use Bombay or Mumbai in terms of placing the context before or after 1996, when the name was officially changed.

priests, before the body is placed in the *dokhma*. Hence, the proper practice of *dokhmenashini* requires priests, *nasasalars*, and vultures to devour the body.<sup>3</sup>

For literally hundreds of years, the Parsis lived in coastal Gujarat in relative peace with their neighbors, serving as farmers, weavers, palm tappers, and in some instances traders. Parsis seemed to reenter the annals of history only after the British arrived on the scene. In the late 1670s wealthier Parsis received permission to build the first towers of silence and fire temples in the city and also established powerful support networks for the increasing numbers of Parsi migrants from Gujarat.

By the eighteenth century, the majority of Parsis had settled in the Fort area, which along with the original fortified district, constituted Bombay Town. The prominent families of that time amassed great wealth from their partnership with the British and began to consolidate their large landholdings. Another large migration took place from Gujarat to Bombay in the middle of the nineteenth century, aided by the existence of support networks including homes, and employment with public works projects, that were established by the Bombay Parsis.<sup>4</sup> One factor that was key to the eagerness to migrate to Bombay was the availability of traditional ritual observances like *dokhmenashini*.<sup>5</sup>

In 1669, an application was made to the British colonial Governor Aungier, of Bombay to construct the city's first tower of silence.<sup>6</sup> The petition was made by a wealthy Parsi name Hirjibhai Vacha Modi, who had lands in Malabar Hill, a foresty plot on a hill in South Bombay. The space was deemed appropriate as it was rather out of the way, with only one road that led to the top, yet it was close to the Fort area where many Parsis had settled. The tower was functional by 1675 and later several other towers were built with nearby bungalows for prayer services. Modi dedicated the tower of silence complex to the Parsi community in Bombay. These structures along with the towers led to a consolidation of settlement in South Bombay, which spurred further migration from rural Gujarat.

Jesse Palsetia, a scholar of Parsi settlement and history in Bombay, sees the building of sacred spaces through charity as a commitment by wealthy Parsi families to create a potential

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<sup>3</sup> For more on *nasasalars*, see Palsetia, J. S. *The Parsis of India: Preservation of Identity in Bombay City*. Brill. 2001. pp.16-19.

<sup>4</sup> See Palsetia, 2001. Chapter 1.

<sup>5</sup> Palsetia, 2001. 43-45.

<sup>6</sup> Palsetia, 2001. 37.

place for the community to prosper.<sup>7</sup> A pattern was soon established of Parsi traders and businessmen acquiring huge masses of wealth, securing large land estates in Bombay from the British, and then donating it to the Parsi Panchayat to be used for communal housing or sacred space upon their death. Because of this unique pattern of the construction of the built environment, Parsi immigration to Bombay actually followed the geography of sacred space instead of the spatial structures themselves being built for the needs of the community.

Although several theories about the demographic decline of the Parsis circulate, including low fertility rates, and the genetic consequences of endogamy, Paul Axelrod has shown that social and historical factors play a greater role in this population decline. He notes that the Parsis of India have experienced one of the most dramatic declines in population ever recorded outside of Europe.<sup>8</sup> Today in Mumbai, one is more likely to attend a Parsi funeral than celebrate a birth, marriage, or *navjote*.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to literal demographic decline in Mumbai, the practice of *dokhmenashini* is also affected by the spatial pressures of the city itself. Although the towers of silence were once in secluded areas of Bombay, today the city has literally grown around them, to the discomfort of many of the neighbors. This tower complex encompasses sixty acres of land in one of Mumbai's most exclusive neighborhoods. The towers in Malabar hill, although massive structures immediately surrounded by trees, are today also bordered by high rise buildings inhabited by upper middle class Mumbaikers.. Some building residents claim to be able to see the corpses inside and have pressed the city authorities to remedy the situation. The Mumbai press occasionally also debates the unhygienic nature of the *dokhmas* with claims that the birds sometimes carry the corpse remains to other areas.<sup>10</sup>

Another result of urbanization on the practice of *dokhmenashini* is that the vultures, needed to devour the corpses, are not present in large enough numbers. Many are naturally steered away by the city's congestion and high rise buildings, but recently, a virus has attacked the vulture population and has decreased their numbers dramatically. Diclofenac, a drug used on cattle farms, has been found in the systems of vultures, is found to be the cause as it produces

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<sup>7</sup> Palsetia, 2001. 39.

<sup>8</sup> The historical demography of Parsi populations is made possible by their separate enumeration since the first public census in 1872. See Axelrod, Paul. "Cultural and Historical Factors in the Population Decline of the Parsis of India." *Population Studies* 44, no. 3 (Nov., 1990): 401-419.

<sup>9</sup> The ceremony performed for pre-adolescent Parsi children to initiate them into the religion.

<sup>10</sup> Hinnels, 2005.116.

renal failure and death in the birds.<sup>11</sup> So the Parsi Panchayat has since been a part of several debates on what should be done to either continue the practice, or find alternatives, often caught between the crossfire of orthodox and reformist groups in the community.

The Tower of Silence debates are a critical sphere where several aspects of community identity and perception from the outside are being expressed. Firstly, they reflect a constant anxiety of the Parsis in Mumbai, that their method of funeral is perceived not only as archaic, but barbaric, especially through the eyes of other Indians. Very practically, the practice of *dokhmenashini* is also becoming increasingly difficult to perform because of hygiene issues, as the decline in vulture population leaves the corpses for longer periods in the towers, and they begin to rot. Several investigations by high priests and Panchayat officials detail piles of corpses rotting under the heat of the sun, or worse in the monsoon.<sup>12</sup>

I claim that proposals put forth by different groups are very reflective of the current fractures in community identity and the priorities of different internal groups. The orthodox, insist on maintaining the practice of *dokhmenashini* and therefore their solutions lie with rebuilding the vulture population. Orthodox Parsi scholar, Khojeste Mistree has proposed a breeding program for the vultures involving the building of an enormous aviary to surround the towers. Although this solution is very acceptable to most Parsis in theory, others conclude that it would be prohibitively expensive and the threat of disease to vulture population would always remain.

A further proposal put forth from a lay Parsi wishing to retain the practice in some form was to install solar panels to dry and decay the bodies faster. This solution, although currently in use is maligned by those that claim that the bodies are then literally “fried” in the summer and left to rot during the cloudy monsoon season.<sup>13</sup> Others have called for a building of an electric crematorium on the grounds of the complex to have their relatives placed there after traditional prayers have been held. In my interviews with those of this argument, respondents claimed that the traditional rite simply was not practical or preferable since the towers were not functioning anymore.

Another debate that surrounds the towers of silence in Mumbai is that of access to the funerary rite itself. Since their reception in India, the Parsi community has limited access to its

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<sup>11</sup> Reddall, Braden. “Endangered vultures highlight Parsi culture clash.” Reuters. August 26, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Hinnells, 2005. 66.

<sup>13</sup> Hinnells, 2005. 117.

sacred spaces for Parsi Zoroastrians only. No one other than a Parsi may enter a fire temple or attend funeral services in the towers of silence complex. Hence marriage out of the religion becomes very problematic as one's family is then excluded from Parsi sacred space. As a traditionally patrilineal religion, Zoroastrianism can be passed from a Zoroastrian father to his children whether or not his wife is a Zoroastrian as well. The children of a Zoroastrian father may be given a *navjote*, and as such, be accepted into the religion and then have rights to funeral services. But exogamy for women and the rights that adjoin it are hotly debated in the community and relate closely to the politics around sacred space.

In 1990, this issue exploded in the Parsi press as Roxan Shah, a Parsi woman and devout Zoroastrian, who had married outside of the community, was killed in a car accident and had her remains refused at the tower of silence in Malabar Hill.<sup>14</sup> At first the Panchayat refused her remains on the grounds that she had married a Jain and had thus effectively renounced Zoroastrianism, but partly due to her young age, and the circumstances of her death, many in the liberal and reform circles flooded the Panchayat with angry letters. Orthodox Parsis claimed that she had chosen to marry out of the religion and had thus actively renounced her rights as a Zoroastrian, and therefore according to religious custom, should be excluded from entering sacred spaces. As almost one in four Parsi women intermarry, liberal Parsis contend that such customs are effectively further decreasing the extant population of Parsis in Mumbai, as the woman, and any of her children are then effectively not counted as Parsis.

Eventually, the Panchayat under much pressure from the liberal side issued a statement that allowed for the intermarried women to practice *dokhmenashini*, but whose remains would only be placed within one of the towers in the complex and not with the bodies of other dead Parsis. A key condition for this was that the families of the deceased provide a sworn affidavit relating the woman's practice of the Zoroastrian religion until her death. Liberal Parsis although temporarily assuaged, later pointed out that if a woman were to intermarry, she would then be automatically excluded from fire temples and thus not be able to perform the ritual practice of the religion outside of her home in any case.

Orthodox Parsis in Mumbai insist that the *dokhmenashini* practice is critical to religious life and must be maintained at any cost. To them, crematoria and cemeteries represent a watering down of ethnic identity that is already under such threat of disappearance. As Khojeste Mistree

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<sup>14</sup> See Palsetia 2001. 321-325.

has noted, “if ethnicity goes, the identity goes, and if the identity goes, we believe our religion will die.”<sup>15</sup> More liberal, or reformist Parsis hold that if religious ritual does not adapt to changing realities, the community will not be able to survive anyway. They point to the high numbers of intermarried Parsis and those that emigrate and adapt, as examples of people who find the strict practice too difficult to continue in present day society.

As this paper has shown, the practice of *dokhmenashini* is still crucial to the self understanding of proper Parsi practice even if the details are debated. The rhetoric of the debates shows a critical slippage or conflation between what religious practice and ethnic and social identity. As the geography of sacred space led the Parsis to migrate from rural Gujarat to the infant megacity, how will new pressures of space affect the way the community is constructed and Zoroastrianism is practiced in the future? In turn, if the ritual practice were to devolve into cremation, a funerary process practiced by millions of other Indians, would the religious protection offered to the land be removed and the government try to take over this prime piece of real estate in bustling Mumbai? Would being Parsi be emptied out of its spiritual content and become a secular label? Would the Parsi community cease to be, in their own eyes and under the gaze of the state?

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<sup>15</sup> Khojeste Mistree quoted in Reddall, Braden. “Endangered vultures highlight Parsi culture clash.” Reuters. August 26, 2005.