



FOLKLORE PREVALENT AMONGST THE PARSIS OF INDIA: THEIR IMPACT ON PARSI IDENTITY

Dr Zarin Sethna

Associate Professor and Head, Department of Psychology, Patkar-Varde College (autonomous-affiliated to University of Mumbai) Mumbai, India

Email - zarinsethna93@gmail.com

Abstract: Parsis are the descendants of ancient Zoroastrians, who migrated to India from Persia (now Iran) around 7th century AD, following the Arab invasion. They arrived as refugees and adopted India as their home. Being a miniscule minority, prompts them to strive harder to keep their Persian roots alive in any possible way. Legends, myths and folklore form a part of their oral tradition. The present paper is an attempt to document select legends and myths popular within the community.

Key Words: Parsis, identity, Kisse-e-Sanjan, folklore, legends, myths.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Parsis are the descendants of ancient Persians¹, who followed the Zoroastrian religion, propagated by the Prophet Zarathustra/Zoroaster. Several dynasties, namely – Achaemenians, Sassanians, Peshdadians – ruled over the vast Persian Empire for centuries. However, by 7th century AD, the empire began to weaken due to several factors and was eventually invaded by the Arabs. Religious prosecution began under the Arabs and forceful conversion was rampant. In order to preserve their religion, Persians² began migrating out of Persia, some of whom arrived in India. These migrants came to be known as ‘Parsis’, literally meaning ‘people from Persia’ or ‘people from Pars-a province in ancient Persia (Balsara 1963: 1; Nanavutty 1977: 1-12; Writer, 1993:1; Kamekar & Dhunjisha 2002: 1-17; Hinnells & Williams 2007: 1, 273).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Since the paper attempts to document the folklore popular amongst the Parsis, I have relied mostly on oral tradition and narratives prevalent within the community. Being a member of the community, I have grown up hearing most of these from the elders. During my doctoral research, I had an opportunity to trace the origin and evolution of some of these legends and myths. Presented below is a brief review of literature.

*Kisse-e-Sanjan / Qissa-e-Sanjan*³, (henceforth Kisse) is the earliest record of the arrival of Zoroastrian migrants in India (Ahmed J. 1964). It is a long poem, written in Persian by a priest named Boman Kaikobad, in 16th Century AD; almost eight hundred years after the said migration. It is a semi-historical document that narrates the circumstances of the migration and settlement in Gujarat, India. The narrative is based on oral history, that the author heard from his elders⁴, and considering it was written eight hundred years after the event occurred, it may not be historically accurate. However, barring the details, there is no reason to not believe the broad narrative. Also, irrespective of its historical validity, Kisse continues to be firmly etched in the minds of the Parsis. The incidents mentioned in the Kisse are passed on to each generation by elders and also the Parsi press to each new generation, till date, mainly to acquaint the youngsters with their roots and how and why they migrated to India.

¹ Modern day Iran was formerly known as Persia

² Iranians

³ The version referred to by me was translated into English by late Sri Jameel Ahmed, Director of Research of The Lutfuddawlah Oriental Research Institute, Hyderabad. Sri Kazim Ali, another scholar of the same Institute translated the poem into Urdu.

⁴ As per his own admission in the poem



While some scholars like B. N. Bhathena opine that Kisse is just an imaginary poem written by a poet and cannot be considered as a historical document (1944), other historians like Allan Williams accord it far more merit (2009). Williams calls it as ‘a collective memory of a community’.

D. N. Patel (1916), Pilloo Nanavutty (1977), H. K. Mirza (1987) and D. M. Master (1998) all have analyzed the legends associated with the migration and the meeting of the Parsis with the local King.

Irrespective of whether the incidents mentioned in Kisse occurred or not, Kisse remains one of the most influential texts for the Parsis. Besides being the first record of the migration, it also outlines the reasons for migration, the ordeal faced by the migrations before and during the voyages, the sacrifices made in order to protect their religion and the promises made to the King while accepting asylum. These form the core of the Parsi identity and therefore of immense value in socio-cultural context.

Besides Kisse, I have referred to other scholars like Mirza, Master and Patel (Mirza 1987: 316, 317, Master 1998: 192-197 and Patel 1916: 25-28), for the understanding of the rise of some legends, particularly regarding the communication between the local King and the asylum seekers. The community believes that when the Persians asked for refuge in Sanjan, the King sent a bowl filled with milk to indicate that his kingdom is already overpopulated. The wise priest from amongst the refugees, stepped forward and added a pinch of sugar/ gold ring in the milk bowl. Both these versions are erroneously attributed to the Kisse by a large section of the community. However, both these stories seem to be a later addition. According to Mirza (1987) and Master (1998), Kavi Khabardar, a poet highly admired in Gujarat and amongst the Parsis in particular, popularized the version of ‘sugar-in-milk’ story, in his poetry⁵ that describes the meeting of the refugees with the King. This poetry, which is very similar to the Kisse, gained popularity and therefore the confusion amongst the people.

Similarly, a noted kirtankar⁶ of 19th century, D. N. Patel, states that in order to invigorate the religious zeal amongst the youth, he would organize several musical shows, where he recounted the story of migration. By his own admission, he would sometimes modify the version to retain the interest of the audience. In his version, the Parsi priest slips the gold ring in the bowl of milk (Patel, 1916).

Both, sugar-in-milk and gold ring-in-milk, have completely diverse implications and are poles apart in terms of their interpretation of Parsi identity. This is discussed at length in the later sections below.

2. MATERIALS :

Material used is largely secondary sources, obtained from books. The author has also referred to the primary data obtained from her doctoral research (Sethna, Z. R. 2016). Primary sources are obtained from oral traditions of the community.

3. METHODOLOGY :

The source of this research paper is largely secondary in nature. Books and articles form a major part of the bibliography. Inputs are also derived from the doctoral thesis of the author, comprising of primary data in the form of survey of a hundred Parsis and a hundred non-Parsi respondents, twenty percent of who also gave elaborate answers to qualitative questions.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION :

This section attempts to discuss the various folklores, legends and myths prevalent amongst the Parsis.

4.1 Folklore, Legends and Myths

According to Oxford dictionary, folklores are, “the traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word of mouth.”

(<https://www.google.com/search?q=folklore>)

⁵ Shreeji Iranshah no Pavado is a long poem written by Kavi Khabardar. It too describes the story of migration of the Parsis from Persia to India.

⁶ Singer, who mainly sings religious songs



Folklores are essentially stories shared by a cultural or subcultural group. They include tales, poetries, jokes, proverbs and narratives. They may contain the finer socio-cultural nuances of a particular community and therefore are best understood and often best preserved within the community itself. They are valuable source of social heritage and immensely helpful in preserving oral history of a community (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folklore#Customs>)

According to Oxford dictionary, the word legend means, “A traditional story sometimes popularly regarded as historical but not authenticated”

(<https://www.google.com/search?q=legends>)

Legends are human stories that develop over a period of time and spread orally over the generations and are well-known within a specific social group. They may actually trace its origins to some historical event, which is later romanticised by adding imaginary characters and plots. They are spoken in local dialects and therefore have a wider reach compared to historical records that follow rigorous academic standards.

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legend>)

Myths are “stories from ancient times, especially one that was told to explain natural events or to describe the early history of a people”, according to Oxford dictionary.

(<https://www.google.com/search?q=myths>)

Myths often contain stories of Gods or supernatural powers and they narrate events like the origin of human race or the rise of various religions. Myths are narrated and listened to with awe and reverence since they speak of entities who are worshipped and looked up to within a particular society. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myth>)

History may not accord much value to folklores, legends and myths, but these are immensely beneficial in the understanding of human societies, human interactions, and social structures. These stories become a part of popular consciousness within a community and shape the identity of the people; they tell us who we are, where we came from and where we are heading, as a community and as a society.

It is towards this objective that this paper attempts to document some of the popular legends and myths within the Parsi community. The author, being a Parsi herself, is aware of these and being a social scientist, is in a position to critically dissect the implications they have on the psyche of the community.

4.2 The legend of sugar/gold ring-in-the-milk

A popular Parsi folklore revolves around the communication between the King and the migrants. Parsis first arrived on the shores of Diu, an island on the off-shore of South Gujarat, and lived there for nineteen years, before they embarked on a journey towards mainland Gujarat. They landed on the shores of Sanjan, a Kingdom in South Gujarat, then ruled by King Jadi/ Jadhav Rana.

As per the legend, the band of asylum seekers were presented before the King, who asked them the purpose of their arrival. The leader of the group, perhaps a wise priest, explained to the King who they were and asked for the permission to stay in his kingdom.

Upon hearing the appeal of the asylum seekers, the King offered them a bowl filled to the brim with milk, signifying that his kingdom was too populated to grant foreigners asylum. In response, the priest slowly added a pinch of sugar in the bowl, signifying that just like sugar mixes with the milk and sweetens it, they too shall settle amongst the host communities.

Another version of the same legend involves a gold ring. Apparently, when the bowl filled with milk was presented to the group of Zoroastrian migrants, the priest slipped his gold ring in bowl. The ring settled at the bottom of the bowl, signifying that the migrants shall settle in the kingdom without disturbing the peace and in fact enrich it with their presence, much like the gold ring enriched the milk.

In spite of there being no historical document to substantiate the above claims, both these stories are firmly etched in the minds of the Parsis and have survived through oral transition from generation to generation. Both these stories have



had a deep impact on the Parsis and how they view themselves in their adopted country.

The sugar-in-the-milk story signifies peaceful assimilation of the Parsis with the host communities. However, it also implies the danger of total assimilation and the danger of losing their separate identity, the very reason why the migration happened in the first place. Perhaps, it was in response to these fears that another version of gold ring-in-the-bowl developed that encouraged Parsis to maintain exclusivity and at the same time contributing constructively towards their adopted land.

Parsis have maintained strict religious exclusivity while simultaneously adapting to the socio-cultural milieu of India. The community believes that the primary objective of migration was to preserve their faith⁷ and the gold ring-in-the-milk bowl confirms to this belief. They pride themselves on having been successful in preserving their ancient religion in an alien land for twelve centuries and also contributing to their adopted motherland in various fields.

4.3 The legend of the four conditions

As per the Kisse, after due deliberations between the King and the migrants, the King lays down the following four conditions for granting asylum:

1. The migrants will be required to adopt Gujarati as their mother tongue
2. Women will be required to give up their native costume and wear *sarees* like those of Gujarati women.
3. The refugees must surrender their weapons
4. The marriage ceremonies would henceforth be performed after sunset, as per the Gujarati custom

Scholars are divided in their opinion regarding the above conditions, on were these actually laid down by the King or were they later self-imposed by the Parsis themselves?

It seems probable that the King would ask the refugees to disarm, for the safety of his kingdom and by the same logic, also insist on the foreigners to give up their language. The Parsis probably spoke Persian or Dari (a Persian dialect) or any of its variants, which could have been an alien language for the people of Sanjan. The King would want to protect his kingdom and its people from conspiracy, if any, and therefore could have laid down this condition.

What is baffling is that why would the King want to comment on something as mundane as the sartorial style of the women or the timing of their marriage ceremonies? Also, why would the King specifically mention women's dressing style and not comment on men's attire? What significance does it hold for the King?

Some scholars are of the opinion that these conditions could be self-imposed and later attributed to the King to gain legitimacy. The physical appearance of the migrants would have been different enough to make them stand out amongst the host communities, considering that they came from a different geographical location. In addition, their attire too would be visibly distinctive, making them conspicuous by their presence. For the safety of their women folk, the men might have wanted them to dress up like the host communities, in order to be less noticeable (Kamerkar & Dhunjisha 2002: 27)

In ancient Persia, marriages were typically performed at the dawn, in contrast to the customs of Gujarat, where they are performed after sunset. The migrants might have wanted to draw less attention to themselves and therefore they may have voluntarily decided to alter their custom. Or it could be as a mark of respect for the local customs. In any case, it is probable that this custom could be self-imposed and attributed to the King (Nanavutty 1977:42, 43).

Irrespective of whether these conditions were laid down by the King or were self-imposed, they are a part of collective consciousness of the Parsis. It reminds community of what they gave up in order to protect their religion and also teaches tolerance and socio-cultural assimilation to its youngsters. They also emphasise peaceful co-existence, in the form of the promise made by the refugees to the King in exchange of asylum.

⁷ Although there may have been other reasons for doing so, namely trade and commerce



4.4 The legend of *Yath Ahu Vairyio*

Kisse narrates that Parsis landed and lived in Diu for the initial nineteen years. Then one day an astrologer predicted that Diu was no longer safe for the Parsis. This prompted the community to leave Diu and set sail for mainland Gujarat. Kisse mentions while on their voyage, they were caught in a horrific sea-storm. The elders of the group began praying and reciting *Yath Ahu Vairyio*, considered as one of the most powerful Avestan prayers. After a while the storm subsided and the passengers safely landed on the soil of Sanjan.

After a few days or months, some of the non-Parsi co-passengers of the previous journey, who were a witness to this 'miracle' of *Yath Ahu Vairyio*, were again caught in a similar sea-storm. They obviously did not know the Avestan prayer, but remembered parts of it and began reciting *Parsi taro thabaryio* (in Gujarati, meaning, O Parsi, hail thy *Yath Ahu Vairyio*) and this time too, the storm subsided and they landed safely. This story spread and is popular in parts of Gujarat to this day.

This legend is often narrated within the families to instil religious fervour amongst the youth. This legend is particularly popular as it demonstrates the power of the Avestan invocations, when faithfully recited, even if they are linguistically and grammatically incorrect.

4.5 Customs and Traditions

In addition to the above-mentioned myths and legends popular within the community, there are several customs and traditions followed by the Parsis, many of which originated as a result of centuries of co-habitation with non-Parsi communities, including the British. However, they have become quintessentially 'Parsi' now, so much so that a section of the community actually believes them to be original Persian customs⁸. Some of these are discussed in this section.

As mentioned earlier, Parsi women began wearing sarees, much like their Gujarati counterparts. However, the material, design and the style of draping the saree itself changed over the centuries, incorporating the Persian, Oriental and British elements, in addition to the Hindu-Gujarati ones. Thus, while Gujarati women wear their sarees with a waist-length *pallu* (the end of the saree) in the front, Parsi women extended the *pallu* of their sarees till their ankles. In addition, Parsi sarees typically were adorned with borders – usually hand embroidered with designs inspired from Persian and Oriental art – and these came to be associated so much with the community that they are popularly known as 'Parsi borders'⁹. Eventually, Parsis also pioneered a type of saree called 'Gara', an off-shoot of the trade with China. Gara sarees are of a material called 'Tanchhoi' and heavily embroidered with designs inspired by the oriental art¹⁰ (Desai 2002: 577-595).

Close association with the British had its impact on the blouse patterns worn along with the sarees. Many photographs of a Parsi woman clicked during the British period will invariably show her wearing a blouse with high, frilled collar, long sleeves and other embellishments like buttons, bows and laces, much like the ones that adorned the dresses of the European women during the Victorian era (Godrej & Mistree 2002: 607-609 and 611).

This overall style, with Europe-inspired blouses, China-inspired designs and Gujarati-inspired saree amalgamated in what popularly came to be known as 'our style' within the community, and perhaps amongst non-Parsis too.

Similarly, married Parsi women began wearing red glass bangles, an adopted custom from the Gujaratis. These too were modified. While Gujarati women wore several thin bangles, Parsi women often wore a single, wide bangle¹¹, along with gold ones.

⁸ As a member of the community, I often encounter these misconceptions in my interactions. The same was mentioned by some Parsi respondents in the survey conducted by me for my doctoral thesis.

⁹ A cursory internet search with the words – Parsi borders – opens several sites, with images and articles on the borders that adorn the sarees worn by Parsi women.

¹⁰ For example, scenes from a Chinese market or the flora and fauna of the East.

¹¹ These broad-brimmed glass bangles are known as 'patla'



One of the most prominent features of a Parsi home would be rangoli at the doorstep. This practice is unheard of in Iran. This too seems to be an adopted practice. While Hindus adorn their doorsteps with rangoli on special occasions like festivals or marriages, Parsis made it an everyday affair. Adorning the main door of the house with floral garlands too is an adopted practice, inspired by sister communities (Maneckshaw 1996:17; Randeria 1993: 118,119).

It is not known exactly when and why these above-mentioned customs were adopted by the Parsis, neither is it within the scope of present discussion. What is important is that all these have been enthusiastically followed by the community. Each of these practices have been moulded sufficiently to distinguish them from their original source and they are now external markers of Parsi identity.

5. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION :

Parsis, like most diasporic communities, have been for most parts of their stay in India, a micro-minority, within the vast majority of the Indian population. From mid-twentieth century onwards, their population has been rapidly declining due to increased inter-faith marriages, migration to western countries and disproportionately large number of single, never-married individuals. This has given rise to fears of extinction within the next few decades, prompting the community to take active interest in finding solutions to stall the population decline. Increased introspection has led to renewed interest in the history of the community, its migration story and early years after settlement in India and the various other aspects of Zoroastrianism and Parsi community.

This renewed interest in the community by Parsis and non-Parsis alike has helped in reviving and bringing to forth some of the folklores of the Parsis. Each of these legends have been around for centuries within the community, perhaps because they are so intricately tied to their sense of identity. These stories try to instill religious zeal in the youth. Some of these stories act as a guide to behaviour considered appropriate within the community. From sociological perspective, these myths and legends are of immense value as they define the who and how of a group of people.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS:

The present research paper focuses on a very limited number of folklore prevalent amongst the Parsis. A much more detailed analysis is recommended and in fact, it can be taken up as a major research project.

Parsi families residing in rural Gujarat, particularly need to be interviewed. Especially those families who have lived within Gujarat since many centuries. These Parsis would have many more folklores to share. These need to be recorded and documented for posterity, not just for its inherent value but also for the reference of future scholars. Stories thus collected could throw more light understanding of the evolution of the Parsi identity.

Considering that Parsi population is rapidly declining, in the unfortunate event of their extinction, these stories will help the future scholars to fathom the kind of people Parsis were.

¹⁰ For example, scenes from a Chinese market or the flora and fauna of the East.

¹¹ These broad-brimmed glass bangles are known as 'patla'

REFERENCES:

1. Balsara, P.P. (1963). *Highlights of Parsi History*. The Y.C.Z.A. Educational and Charitable Fund, Bombay.
2. Nanavutty, P. (1977). *The Parsis*. Director, National Book Trust. India, New Delhi
3. Writer, R. (1993) *Contemporary Zoroastrians: An Unstructured Nation*. University Press of America, USA
4. Kamekar, M. & Dhunjisha, S. (2002) *From the Iranian Plateau to the Shores of Gujarat—The story of Parsi settlements and absorption in India*. The K.R.Cama Oriental Institute, Mumbai.
5. Hinnells, J. & Williams, A. (ed) (2007). *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*. Routledge South Asian Religion Series, USA.



6. Ahmed, J. (1964). *Qissa –e- Sanjan, The Story of Migration of Zoroastrians from Iran to India.* (Originally *Kisse – e – Sanjan*, written in Persian in 16th century by Kaikobad, B.) The Lutfuddualah Oriental Research Institute, Hyderabad
7. Bhatena, B.N. (1944). Paper submitted to the 12th All India Oriental Conference held at Benarasin 1943-44, titled, “*Kisse-Sanjan- a Palpable Falsehood.*” This paper was later published in the book form in 1944 by Bhatena, B.N. at Bombay.
8. Williams, Alan (2009) *The Zoroastrian myth of migration from Iran and settlement in the Indian Diaspora – Text, translation and analysis of the 16th century Qesse- ye Sanjan ‘The story of Sanjan’.* Brill, Netherlands.
9. Patel, D. (1916) *Kisseh Sanjan* (Gujarati) Fort printing press, Bombay.
10. Sethna, Z. R. (2016). *Parsee identity vis-a vis ‘Non-Parsees – Perceptions and Interactions.* Adoctoral thesis submitted to and accepted by the University of Mumbai and awarded with Phd.
11. Mirza H.K. (1987) *Outlines of Parsi History.* Amalgamated Enterprises. Bombay.
12. Master, D.M. (Edited) (1998) *Sanchalika- Kavi Khabardarni Kavyayatra’.* Rashtrakavi A.F Kahbardar Janmashatabdi Prakashmala Gujarati Sahitya Academy, Gandhinagar.
13. Desai, K. ‘The Tanchoi and the Garo- Parsi textiles and Embroidery’ from Godrej, P.J. & Mistree, F. P. (2002) *Zoroastrian Tapestry- Art, Religion and Culture.* Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., Ahmedabad.
14. Mistree & Godrej. ‘Style and Elegance- Parsi Costumes in the 18th and 19th Centuries’, from Godrej, P.J. & Mistree, F.P. (Edited) (2002) *Zoroastrian Tapestry- Art, Religion and Culture.* Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd, Ahmedabad.
15. Maneckshaw, B.J. (1996) *Parsi Food and Customs.* Penguin Books, India (P) ltd. New Delhi.

Web References:

- <https://www.google.com/search?q=folklore>
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folklore#Customs>
- <https://www.google.com/search?q=legends>
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legend>
- <https://www.google.com/search?q=myths>
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myth>