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Iran


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Torn Pictures, her account of her flight from Iran to Sweden and her life in exile, was published in Swedish and German. Her new book, *Do You Love Someone Else?*, is about love and politics in Tehran and Stockholm.

Photo by Birgitta Sjblom

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The Enduring Fire (Part I)

Azar Mahloujian (Writer and Librarian)

In the 7th century C.E., Iran was invaded by Arabs, who changed its state religion from Zoroastrianism to Islam. Iranians were forced by the occupying power to convert to Islam, and the religious persecution that followed forced some groups of people to leave. They emigrated to different places, some even to China. The largest group traveled by boat to the coast of Gujarat in the neighboring country of India. In their adopted home these newcomers were called Parsis, meaning those who have come from Pars, or Persia.

For a long time I had been curious about this group of ancient immigrants, and three years ago I began to seriously research their history. All I knew was that they had remained in India, built their fire temples, and practiced Zoroastrianism, which they have preserved until today. Zoroastrians are sometimes called fire worshipers because this element symbolizes Ahura Mazda, the highest divinity of their religion. A fire must burn around the clock in Zoroastrian temples and priests are charged with keeping these flames going. Rituals are also performed in front of the enduring fire, which, according to Zoroastrian tradition, will become contaminated by the presence of an outsider. This has created an alluring mystique

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around the religion.

Recently, I visited India in search of the Parsis -- and my own country's pre-Islamic history. I sought to gather research on this small but influential minority in one of the world's most populous countries. My journey began with a visit to the Indian embassy in Stockholm. There I was presented with a one-month visa instead of the two months I had requested. I wondered what might be the cause. Even six-month visas to India were not uncommon. The only conceivable motivation was my place of birth.

"Why are you discriminating against me?" I asked the person in charge. "Iran is not at war with India." She responded that the authorities in New Delhi had not cited a reason when issuing the visa. But as soon as I mentioned the purpose of my visit, things changed completely and she became very friendly. "In India, the Parsis are a highly educated and very successful group," she said, and promptly extended my visa to six months, wishing me a pleasant journey. This experience was a harbinger of things to come in India. Every time I mentioned the Parsis in conversation, they were praised as educated people, trustworthy businessmen and generous benefactors.

Since 50,000 of the world's 130,000 Zoroastrians live in Bombay, that city became my first stop. But I was shocked as soon as I walked out of Bombay's Sahar Airport, where a huge slum stretched out before me. Unbelievable! Kilometers and kilometers of slum, thousands upon thousands of people of all ages sleeping, buying, selling, washing, cooking and eating -- in raw poverty. Only the women, proud and graceful in their brilliantly-colored dresses, gave life to the dust and the darkness of this grim spectacle.

Sitting in a taxi, I thought back to the slums in Tehran during my student years. My friends and I were determined to visit

these poor areas despite threats of arrest by Savak, the Shah's secret police. Savak interpreted our interest in the lives of slum-dwellers as being anti-Shah. So we changed our dress and disguised our appearance to blend in and not draw attention. The Shah hid these slums by erecting high walls around them. This was his way of both solving the problem of poverty and securing a reputation he desired -- the modern ruler of a rich nation. His successors are also not willing to allow such poverty to be visible, especially to the curious eyes of the tourists. In Bombay it seems the opposite. Poverty, in all its nakedness, is here for any foreign traveler to see! The Indians have given up, I say to myself, they have accepted it. I don't know which I loathe more, the hypocrisy of the Shah or the indifference of the Indian politicians.

My visit to Bombay then shifted to the affluent district of Colaba, location of a Parsi residential colony. Over the years, prosperous Parsis have constructed several such colonies for their less-fortunate compatriots. Their generosity is especially appreciated by Parsis living in Bombay, where housing is scarce and the rents sky-high. This particular colony included 550 apartments, a meeting place, a food shop and a fire temple. It had been built by the Nowrosjee Wadia Foundation in the 1930s. Even in Bombay, a sprawling city of 15 million, these relatively small enclaves are conspicuous.

Over the large entry gate to the colony was a sign: "Cusrow Baug. Building for Parsees." I recognized the first two words. Cusrow is the name of a Persian king and *baug* means garden. I passed by the gatekeeper who barely noticed me. Maybe because I looked like a Parsi? Inside the gate I presented myself to some elderly men who sat talking on a bench. They lit up with happiness when they heard that I was from Iran. Everybody wanted to talk to me. They asked if I were Muslim, if I supported the current regime and how I came to live in Sweden. Everyone I spoke to had an ancient Persian name,

mostly those of kings. We conversed in English and they apologized for not speaking Farsi. I noticed that they were interested in our long-ago kings and glorified the past. I asked if I could have a look around the colony.

"Only if you do not go inside the temple," they admonished, "it is forbidden for non-Parsis!" I promised I wouldn't and took a direct path to Agiari, a fire temple located at the far end of a nearby rectangular garden. Some stone steps led to the temple's entrance. I stood outside. No one was around and the men couldn't see me from where they sat, but I decided not to betray their confidence.

(To be continued in my next column.)

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