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Azar Mahloujian is an Iranian expatriate writer and librarian living in Sweden.

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 Sjoblom

2004

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Iran

The Enduring Fire (Part II)

Azar Mahloujian (Writer and Librarian)

In her last column, the Iranian refugee writer Azar Mahloujian told of her long interest in the Parsis, the descendants of Iranians who fled persecution in their homeland and, in the 8th century, found refuge in India. She wrote, as well, of her recent trip to Bombay, the home of India's largest Parsi community. In this column, Azar continues to describe her journey to better understand the Parsis' way of life and to seek out her own country's pre-Islamic history.

Upon arriving in Bombay, one of my first stops was at the Parsi residential community Cusrow Baug. There, I had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of a retired university professor named Noshirvan Saiwalla. Unlike most Parsis, Professor Saiwalla speaks my own first language of Farsi, which he learned from visiting Iranian students during the time of the Shah. The professor told me a wonderful story about when the Parsis first arrived in India, which deserves to be passed on.

Having fled from religious persecution at the hands of their homeland's Islamic conquerors, Iranian refugees came to Gujarat in the 8th century. There, they asked the Hindu king Jadav Rana for protection. It is said that the king held up a

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glass of milk and said, "Do you see that the glass is full?" by which he meant that there was no place in his kingdom for the refugees. One refugee came forward and put a spoonful of sugar in the glass, saying, "We are like this sugar: we will mix with your people, we will not take up a lot of room, and we will make life in your kingdom sweeter."

It was only later in my trip that I learned that this is not the only version of the story. According to another telling, the refugee who came before the king put not sugar but a gold coin in the glass of milk. The refugee then said, "We are like this gold coin. We will bring luster and wealth to your kingdom, and we will not get mixed in with your people."

Which version is the correct one? I'd say both. Probably the incident is more legend than fact. But each way of telling the story expresses some truth about the Parsis' experience in India. The refugees and their descendants became part of Indian society, yet they maintained their own way of life, including their religion of Zoroastrianism. For me, it is interesting how both versions, each in its own way, recognize the benefits of a multicultural society.

In any case, King Jadav Rana gave refuge to the first Parsis. Beginning as farmers, the Parsis, over time, gravitated toward the realm of commerce, as merchants, business owners and manufacturers. Many made their home in Bombay, where now about 50,000, more than a third of all Parsis, reside.

Bombay is a city of some 15 million people. Although they constitute a small percentage of the population, the Parsis have been, and continue to be, highly influential in the life of the city. They are responsible for the building of factories, schools, hospitals, museums and centers for scientific study. Statues of prominent Parsi citizens -- politicians, civic leaders, philanthropists, patrons of the arts, and so forth -- dot the city.

Zoroastrians try to live according to the motto: Good thoughts, good words, good deeds. Their religion tells them that good and evil battle eternally, and the task of human beings is to work always for the good. The material success of so many Parsis is connected to a religious outlook that enjoins them to take responsibility for shaping their own fate. At the same time, their success in maintaining their cultural identity is largely a consequence of their sense of mission in preserving their Zoroastrian way of life. But they were also fortunate to have found refuge in India, a country more tolerant than most, a land of both unity and diversity.

Still, even after centuries in India, I found among many Parsis a feeling of being outsiders, a sense that in some way they didn't belong. I thought this kind of nostalgia for one's homeland was unique to new refugees, like myself. Now I understand that such feelings are common to all refugees, whether their diaspora began a thousand years ago or twenty.

After a few days in Bombay, the sense of being overwhelmed by the city dissipated. I discovered the city's charms -- the beauty of its buildings, the vitality of its crowded streets, the colorful dress of its inhabitants. Then there were the small details, like the way the people shake their heads in small, smooth movements to indicate agreement, happiness or satisfaction. Shortly before my departure, a poet I got to know observed, "You became a friend of Bombay because you dared to stay on." He was right. As I was leaving, I remembered a term coined by Mahatma Gandhi -- *sarvodaya*, the well-being of all -- and I said the word as my departing wish for this extraordinary city.

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