CHAPTER III

FICTIONALIZED FACTS

In the process of entertaining the people of the time literature reflects social realities and the society at large. It captures the conflict, the struggle of the people to preserve them for posterity. Despite his status as one of Canada's most successful writers over the past fifteen years, Rohinton Mistry writes very little about Canada itself. Instead, he focuses almost exclusively on India, and on the state of the Parsi community within that country. Even when he writes about Canada in his short stories, he often represents the migrated land as the site of a Parsi diaspora, a place where immigrant Parsis search for their identities and their relationships with one of India's most endangered communities. He captures in his novels the life and struggle for survival of the Parsi community.

The Parsi community of Bombay, defined by Zoroastrian faith and Persian heritage, would already have been in decline in 1952, when Mistry was born. The small ethnic group that had flourished under the British rule found themselves out of favour when India gained independence in 1947. Independence effected for this thoroughly Westernized cultural group, a move from the centre of political and economic power, which the British had bestowed on them, in measures disproportionate to its population. Consequently the Parsis migrated to other parts of the world especially to English speaking countries. The declining birth rates, cross-cultural marriages as well as the mass emigration have resulted in a serious decline in the Parsi population and the Parsi culture
in India. There are now only 60,000 Parsis in India and future predictions for the population are grim. Moreover, their cultural decline cannot be compensated for by conversion because Zoroastrianism neither allows converts nor does it support proselytism.

Depending on one's perspective, the course of Mistry's life and his art can be seen either as reflecting that decline or as defying it. Mistry grew up in Bombay (now Mumbai). The Parsi Baag or colony that is mentioned in almost all his works is a distinctive feature of the Bombay cityscape, an apartment complex, usually with a community courtyard that signals the cultural and religious affiliations of its inhabitants, at once unifying and isolating, as Mistry's fiction attests.

In emigrating, Mistry followed a demographic trend that has been blamed for the decline of Parsi culture; however, his emigration also led to his remarkable success as a Parsi writer. In Canada, while working as a bank teller, he followed his true inclinations, studying English and Philosophy at the University of Toronto. Soon after graduating, he began to be acknowledged as a strong voice in the developing multicultural literary landscape.

To do full justice to Mistry's writings it is important to be acquainted with the history of the Parsi community. The Zoroastrians fled from their homeland Iran, during the Islamic conquest and got refuge in various countries including India. The Arabs attacked Persia continuously
between 638 A.D and 641 A.D and conquered it. Thereby they made Islam the religion of Persia and Islam was also imposed on the Zoroastrians. Migration was the only option to the Persians to safeguard their age-old religion, civilization, culture and their identities. A small group of Zoroastrians reached the western coast of India carrying with them urns containing the sacred fire, their symbol of faith.

They made a pact of understanding with the local ruler of Gujarat, Jadav Rana, who granted them permission to settle down in that place, of course with certain compromises. They include: the Parsi priest explaining their religion to the king, giving up their native language and speaking the local language, exchanging their Persian costumes to that of Indian, holding their wedding procession only in the dark. However, with the Mughal conquest of India, the Persian language and culture was introduced into India. Persian remained the official language of India till the mid-nineteenth century before it was replaced by the language of the new colonizers, the English.

The Parsis’ intimacy with the British colonizers resulted in the huge impact of western culture and manners on them. However, the acceptance was rather slow and could be seen mainly in the urban metropolitan cities. In Boman Desai’s *The Memory of Elephants*, a stark contrast between the urban-rural, Indianised-Westernised could be felt. The protagonist Bapaiji symbolizes rural Parsis, sticking to the rules of Jadav Rana whereas her daughter-in-law with all her western robes is a symbol of westernized English-speaking Parsis.
in the centuries since the first Zoroastrian refugees arrived in India, the Parsis have integrated themselves in the tapestry of that which is called "Indian", while simultaneously maintaining their own customs and traditions, to which they feel bound by the promises rendered in exchange for asylum. This in turn has given the Parsi community a rather peculiar standing - they are Indians in terms of national affiliation, but non-Indians in terms of ethnicity, traditions and customs.

The Parsis are intimately connected with the history of Bombay. From the 16th century, Surat became a major centre of trade, and more and more Parsis migrated to this town. The newly arrived European traders preferred to conduct business through this community, since their status as a minority gave them the necessary flexibility in their new role as brokers. The first record of a Parsi, Dorabji Nanabhai, settling in Bombay dates from 1640. After 1661, when Bombay passed to the British, there was a concerted effort to bring artisans and traders to settle in the new town.

A large part of the Parsi migrants to Bombay in these years was constituted of weavers and other artisans. In 1673, the British handed over a piece of land in Malabar Hill to the Parsi community for the establishment of their first Dakhma, Tower of Silence.

In 1735 Lowjee Nusserwanji, a master shipbuilder, was granted land in Bombay by the East India Company. He took the name of his trade, Wadia, and moved into the developing town. Incidentally, the Wadias built the ship Minden, on board which Francis
Scott Key composed the US national anthem "Star Spangled Banner". In 1780, 9.2% of the population of Bombay were Parsis. A first wave of migration followed a famine in Gujarat in 1790. By 1812 the number of Parsis in Bombay had quadrupled. In 1837, a second large wave of migrations to Bombay followed a huge fire in Surat. Today, more than 70% of all Parsis live in Bombay. The cotton boom was largely fuelled by Parsi entrepreneurs. The oldest newspaper in Bombay, "Bombay Samachar", was run by Parsis. Congress stalwarts like Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozeshah Mehta and Dinshaw Wacha were Parsis. One of India's biggest industrial houses was founded by a Parsi, Jamshedji Tata. Even the physical shape of Bombay was determined by donations to build causeways, roads and buildings by members of the Jeejeebhoy and Readymoney families.

In approval of their efforts on behalf of the freedom struggle in South Africa and in recourse to their continued support, Gandhiji noted the heritage of the Parsis of India:

“It is one of the supreme wonders of God that, though the Parsee community does not number more than a hundred thousand in the whole world, it has made a name for itself everywhere by virtue of its many illustrious qualities. It can be said that it is this community, which holds power in India. Bombay is the real capital of India, (and) it owes its property mainly to the Parsees”. (From ‘Indian Opinion’ 20.2.1909, in The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, 193-4.)

The arrival of the Iranians into India, where they came to be known as Parsis, had posed the dilemma of how to maintain a sense of common identity in the midst of co-
existing and integrating into the broader fabric of Indian civilization. The Parsis association with Indian Nationalistic Movement shows the evolution and maturation of the Parsis towards a broader sense of identity.

The path of the Parsis since their immigration in India is impressive. Starting out as a rural community consisting predominantly of farmers, weavers and carpenters, the Parsis quickly became wealthy merchants and industrialists. As a matter of fact, their rise as a community is closely connected to the British penetration of India. Parsis’ knowledge of trade and about the country became a crucial instrument in the British development of the Indian market. The community made a name for itself by serving the colonisers as cultural translators. The British, as well as other European powers preferred to transact their business with the Indian vicinity through Parsi agents and ‘brokers,’ who, on the one hand, had at their disposal the necessary knowledge of land and language, but whose minority role in Indian society, on the other hand, gave them the necessary flexibility in commerce with foreigners.

When the British shifted their centre of trade from Surat to Bombay, the Parsis, as shipbuilders and industrious merchants, were encouraged to settle there. They played an important part in the development of Bombay where they built the harbour and owned it for a long time. As a consequence of their entrepreneurial success, the Parsis became India’s most urbanised and most prosperous community. With their assistance, Bombay developed into the centre of Indian economy and industry and became the focal point of Parsi life and culture.
It has been noted that the Parsis were a colonial elite. The British took a liking to the small community of the Parsis whose identification with Western ideas made them eligible. Moreover, the Parsis felt a close affinity to the British because they were committed to a monotheistic faith. In order to reckon as ‘English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect,’ the Parsi elite status also depended on issues of education, or rather Western education, which became available to the Parsis in the 1820s and has remained a central asset of the community in postcolonial times too (Karaka 2-34).

Mistry along with some of the other Parsi diasporic writers like Bapsi Sidhwa, Farokh Dhondy, Firdaus Kanga, Dina Mehta and Boman Desai has succeeded in making the minority Parsi community visible to the mainstream culture of India and to the world. As Bharucha notes in the book *Indian English Fiction 1980-1990: An Assessment*:

> These texts as such are making a ‘last grand stand’, asserting the glorious Persian part, the Indian connection and finally the more recent western experience. This discourse also deals with the increasing tensions between the Parsi minority and the dominant section of Indian society (43)

The very first line of Mistry’s novel *Such a Long Journey* starts with Gustad Praying to God
The first light of morning barely illumined the sky as Gustad Noble faced eastward to offer his orisons to Ahura Mazda. The hour was approaching six, and up in the compound’s solitary tree the sparrows began to call. Gustad listened to their chirping every morning while reciting his *Kusti* prayers. (*Journey 1*)

A child born of Zoroastrian parents is not considered a Zoroastrian till he is initiated into the fold by the *Navjote* ceremony. The word *Navjote* means a new initiate who could offer Zoroastrian prayers. The ceremony of initiation consists of the investiture of the child with the sacred shirt called *Sudreh* and a sacred thread called *Kusti*. The *Navjote* ceremony is performed at the age of seven or nine or eleven, up to fifteen. Therefore, the child continues to wear the *Sudreh* and *Kusti* and perform the *Kusti* ritual with the prescribed prayers, throughout life. The *Sudreh* is made of pure, white muslin or cotton while the *Kusti* is woven of seventy-two threads of fine lamb’s wool. In the Pahlavi Texts, the *Sudreh* or Sudra is described as ‘Vohu Manik Vastra’ meaning ‘the Garment of Good Mind’. The word *Kusti* means a waist band. Being tied thrice round the waist, it points to the trinity of good thoughts good words, good deeds. These form a barrier insulating the individual from all that is evil. Once a child has had the *Navjote* performed, he or she is spiritually responsible for his or her own salvation through an observance of the morality and rituals of the religion. In *Such a Long Journey* there is a scene where Mistry explains how to do *Kusti* prayers.
He recited the appropriate sections and unknotted the *Kusti* from around his waist. When he had unwound all nine feet of its slim, sacred, hand-woven length, he cracked it, whip-like: once, twice, thrice. And thus was Ahriman, the evil one, driven away- with that expert flip of the wrist, possessed only by those who performed their *Kusti* regularly. (*Journey 5*).

The *Navjote*, or initiation of the child into full membership of the Parsi community

Zoroastrians build Fire Temples as places of worship. There are three grades of Fire Temples: Atash Behram, Atash Adaram, Agyary or Dar-e-Mehar and Atash dadgah or the house hold fire in every Zoroastrian home. The holiest Fire Temple in India is the Atash Behram at Udvada, about one hundred miles from Bombay, where the Sacred Fire
brought by Iranian refugees from Iran has been continuously burning since 1741. The earliest Fire temple in India is the Atash Behram at Sanjan believed to have been consecrated around 790AD. The sacred fire must be kept burning continually and has to be fed at least five times a day. Prayers are also recited five times a day. The founding of a new fire involves a very elaborate ceremony. There are also rites for purification and for regeneration of a fire. Mistry gives a detailed picture of the Fire Temple in all his works:

Even as a child, Mehroo had adored going to the fire-temple. She loved its smells, its tranquility, its priests in white performing their elegant, mystical rituals. Best of all she loved the inner sanctuary, the sanctum sanctorum, dark and mysterious, with marble floor and marble walls, which only the officiating priest could enter, to tend to the sacred fire burning in the huge, shining silver *afargaan* on its marble pedestal. She felt in their dance of life, seeing the sparks fly up the enormous dark resembling the sky. It was her own private key to the universe, somehow making less frightening the notions of eternity and infinity. (*Lessons* 12,1.3)

The Zoroastrian sacred text is the *Avesta* ("Book of the Law"), a fragmentary collection of sacred writings. Compiled over many centuries, the *Avesta* was not completed until Persia's Sassanid dynasty (226-641 AD). It consists of liturgical works
with hymns ascribed to Zarathustra (the Gathas); invocations and rituals to be used at festivals; hymns of praise; and spells against demons and prescriptions for purification.

Zoroastrians pray to one god Ahura Mazda, meaning the "wise lord", to help them in the dualistic battle between Spenta Mainyu, the “Bounteous Spirit” and Angra Mainyu, the “Destructive Spirit”. Humans are free to follow either spirit but, according to whether they commit good or bad deeds, are finally responsible for their fate: after death, the soul is judged and passes into either a heavenly kingdom or to hell like regions of horror and darkness. They are ordained, therefore, to lead an industrious, honest and charitable life. Also, since the world created by Ahura Mazda is deemed essentially good, they are encouraged to live well and enjoy themselves. The Zoroastrian concept of God incorporates both monotheism and dualism. Ahura Mazda charged Zarathustra with the task of inviting all human beings to choose between him (good) and Aura Mainyu (evil). Though Zoroastrianism was never as aggressively monotheistic as Judaism or Islam, it does represent an original attempt at unifying under the worship of one supreme god. The religion is polytheistic comparable to those of the ancient Greeks, Latins, Indians, and other early peoples. The chief ceremony, the Yasna, essentially a sacrifice of haoma meaning ‘the sacred liquor’, is celebrated before the sacred fire with recitation of large parts of the Avesta. There also are offerings of bread and milk and, formerly, of meat or animal fat.

The hereditary clergy is divided into Dasturs (high priests) and Mobeds. There are no monastic orders, nor are there women functionaries. Priests can marry. Becoming a priest is a long and strenuous process involving several purification rituals and the
memorization of texts. Since the male offsprings of priests today prefer to enter the modern economy, the community is facing a critical shortage of qualified functionaries.

Unlike the glitters and pomp of festivals of other religions, the Parsi festivals are highly restrained, Zoroastrian festivals are not public ceremonies, and there would be no loud music or celebrations. Parsis are a very close-knit community and their festivals are limited to their community only. They are celebrated within the homes, temples and community centers. Non-Parsis are not allowed into the Zoroastrian temples, by rules (Karaka 42-54).

Mistry wants to show the stark difference between Christianity which does not show any religious distinctions and is all welcoming and Zoroastrianism which is not tolerant towards other religion
Gustad learned more about the church, how it had a tradition of welcoming Parsis, Muslims, Hindus, regardless of caste or creed. Mother Mary helped everyone, She made no religious distinctions. (Journey 263)

In the meantime he also makes it a point that he remains a Parsi and wants to remain one. He also voices for his age old tradition:

The first time, Gustad was quite intrigued by the church and its rituals, so different from what went on in the fire-temple. But he was on his guard, conditioned as he had been from childhood to resist the call of other faiths. All religions were equal, he was taught; nevertheless, one had to remain true to one’s own because religions were not like garment styles that could be changed at whim or to follow fashion. His parents had been painstaking on this point, conversion and apostasy being as rife as it was, and rooted in the very history of the land. (Journey 28)

Mistry is very proud of his oldest religion and he says all the other religions are influenced by his own. We could find many similar rituals in other religions like the Parsis praying to their God facing east like the Muslims, their tying of Kusti resembles the poonal of Hindu Brahmins, the tying and untying of this during Kusti prayers
resemble the *sandhyavandana* prayers of the Hindus. But according to Mistry, the other religions have taken few rituals from the age old Zoroastrianism. He goes on arguing that his religion is the oldest. He compares the Church with the Fire temple in the following lines.

So Gustad quickly decided that while the music was good and the glittering icons and sumptuous vestments were highly impressive, he preferred the sense of peaceful mystery and individual serenity that prevailed in the fire-temple. Sometimes it made him wonder, though, if Malcolm was not making an amateurish, half-hearted attempt at proselytism.

.....Christianity came to India over nineteen hundred years ago, when Apostle Thomas landed on the Malabar Coast amongst fishermen, said Malcolm. ‘Long before you Parsis came in the seventh century from Persia,’ he teased, ‘running away from the Muslims.’

‘That may be,’ rejoined Gustad, ‘but our prophet Zarathustra lived more than fifteen hundred years before your Son of God was even born; a thousand years before the Buddha; two hundred years before Moses. And do you know how much Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?’ *(Journey 28)*
Zoroastrians are very much devoted to their religion and strictly follow its rituals and customs. Lots of traditions and customs are associated with Zoroastrians festivals and Parsis are very particular and meticulous about them. There are large number of festivals and holy days in Zoroastrianism. Dates of these festivals are calculated according to Zoroastrian calendar. There are twelve equally divided months and five festival days in Zoroastrian calendar. All the days in Zoroastrian calendar are regarded as special and pious as each day has its own importance and is presided over by the guardian angels.

There are six seasons in a Zoroastrian year and each season has one major festival. These festivals are interesting affairs with temple worship, elaborate rituals, community interaction and charity. Zoroastrians specially perform charity and follow justice during the festival. Zoroastrian feasts are known as *Gahambars* and are treated as religious (Palsetia 56-59).

![Parsi children in typical Parsi costume](image)

Parsi children in typical Parsi costume

Parsis also follow few rituals of blessing good health and good luck to the younger ones which resembles the *ashirvad* of the Hindus. Mistry pictures one such ritual in his novel.
Before leaving, he had been adorned with a vermillion dot on the forehead, and a garland of roses and lilies. Dilnavaz did the *overnaa* and sprinkled rice, presenting him with a coconut, betel leaves, a dry date, one areca nut, and seven rupees, all for good luck. She stopped a lump of sugar in his mouth, then they hugged him and murmured blessings in his ear. (*Journey 67*)

An elderly Dustoorji blessing a Parsi boy, who carries coconut and betel leaves

Parsi marriage is known as 'Lagan' and is conducted with great zeal and fervor. The customs and traditions observed in the Parsi marriage makes them a lot more fun and interesting and are quite different from the traditional Hindu marriage. The rituals performed during the wedding are quite simple otherwise and provide full opportunity for
enjoyment. However, like other religion marriages, Parsi marriages also have a number of rituals which extend over a week.

The Parsi wedding rituals begin with *Rupia Peravanu* ceremony. This is the unofficial engagement between both the families. Ladies from groom's family visit the bride's house and gift her silver coins and *shagun*. This ceremony is repeated at the groom's house as the bride's family visits them. After this, *Madhavsaro* is observed. According to this, the families of the bride and the groom plant a tree in a pot individually. This pot is kept at the entrance of their houses and watered everyday till the eighth day after marriage and then planted somewhere else.

This is followed by the ritual of *Adarni*, wherein the groom's family visits the bride's place and gives her gifts like clothing and jewelry. The guests are treated with *sev* and *dahi*, boiled eggs and bananas. Just a day before the wedding *Supra nu Murat* ritual is performed. This ritual is similar to the *haldi* ceremony organized in Hindu marriages. The groom and the bride are applied turmeric paste by five married women. Next is *Nahan*, in which the couple takes purifying bath after which they get ready for the wedding ceremony.

A stage is set for a Parsi wedding either in a *haug* or *Agiary*, the Fire Temple. Before the groom steps on the stage, the bride's mother performs a ritual called *Achumichu*. She holds a tray containing a raw egg, *supari*, rice, coconut, dates and water. She circles all these items, except water, seven times around the groom's head and throws on the floor. The water is thrown on either side. This is repeated by the groom's mother
for the bride. This is followed by Ara Antar, in which the bride and the groom are seated facing each other, with a cloth in between. At this point, the priest circles the couple with a string seven times. On the seventh round the couple is supposed to throw rice at each other from over the curtain. Whoever does it first, is supposed to rule the household. Now the couple sits beside each other with the seven strands of string binding them. Oil lamps are lighted on each side and the priest begins the prayer ceremony. This is followed by a shower of rice and rose petals, after which the couple exchanges rings. This is called Chero Bandhvanu. Next is Haath Borvanu, in which the bride's sister puts groom's hand in a water glass, throws milk on his shoes and removes the seven strands binding the couple, in lieu of token money.

In the post-wedding rituals the reception is held in a grand manner with varied menu of food, drink and music. The relatives and friends enjoy the dancing and feasting throughout the night. The menu mainly comprises of traditional Parsi dishes like sarya (crisps), achaar - roti (pickle and rotis), patra ni macchi (steamed fish), salli murgi (chicken with potato crisps), lagan nu custard, pulao-dal and ice cream. The wedding ceremony ends with the couple being accompanied home by the bride's family and achoo me echo being performed once again by the groom's mother for the well being of the couple (Palsetia 72-76).
Each community has its own rituals especially during the times of birth, marriage, and death. And while focusing on the cultural elements of any community, it is necessary to elaborate on some of these rituals. Parsi writers like Bapsi Sidhwa and Boman Desai give elaborate description of Parsi marriage ceremonies in their works but Mistry does
not give a detailed description of the Parsi wedding rituals in his works. Though few weddings are portrayed like Nariman’s marriage with Jasmine Contractor in *Family Matters* and Dina Dalai’s marriage in *A Fine Balance*, Mistry does not elaborate on them.

Parsis prefer only fair skinned. According to them, only the low caste *ghatis* are dark skinned. In *A Fine Balance* Nusswan’s wife Ruby is dismissed by her husband’s grandfather just because she is little dark in colour. This is reiterated in the *Lessons* thus:

I was saying, it was lucky for me to become ayah in Parsi house, and never will I forget that. Especially because I’m Goan Catholic and very dark skin colour. Parsis prefer Mangloeran Catholics, they have light skin colour. For themselves also Parsis like light skin, and when Parsi baby is born that is the first and most important thing. If it is fair they say, O how nice light skin just like parents. But if it is dark skin they say, *arre what is this ayah no chhokro, ayah’s child.* (46)

The Parsis also believe in ghosts, and the priests do exorcism. There is an instant in the short stories, where exorcism is done by a *Dustoor*. Also in *Such a Long Journey*, Kuptitia guides Dilnavaz in doing black magic inorder to bring back peace at her home.
Dilnavaz took it home and separated the extra quarter for the mixture. First came the *taveej* from over the front door. She sliced the lime into thin wedges, chopped the chillies, then proceeded to grind it all to a fine paste. The round stone rumbled and groaned as she dragged it back and forth over the flat slab.

The paste blended well with the milk, giving it a pretty pale green tint. Next she measured seeds into the mortaranise, bishop’s-weed, poppy, fennel, mustard- and pestled them to powder. The remaining ingredients were already in powder or liquid form: *kunkoo, marcha ni bhhuki, harad, dhanajiru, papad khar, shahjiru, tuj, lavang, mari, alichi, jyfer, sarko, garam masalo, andoo, lassun*. She stirred briskly; everything must be well-mixed, Miss Kuptitia had insisted. *(Journey 322)*

Every religion in the world gloats over its way of disposal of the deceased the way they like and practice. The Christians and the Muslims take pride in burying the dead and the Christians remember the dead on 2nd November every year considered as All Soul’s Day. The Hindus prefer cremation. The Parsis neither bury nor cremate. They have a peculiar system of submitting the dead to the mercy of the elements by which long-necked, hairless vultures consume the flesh of the dead in an isolated spot called ‘The Tower of Silence’. The remaining bones are being disposed of. This habit of the Parsis is peculiar to them and cannot be found in any other race. This action has a bearing
The Parsi system of disposal of dead bodies is unique...They are exposed to sun’s rays and are offered to birds on the same platform so that a king’s corpse may lie side by side with that of a pauper. All are equal and no monument is erected to tell the glory of the great as no costly funerals or coffins distinguish the rich and the poor.

(Kumar 26)

Though a long period, of at least three thousand years has elapsed since the time when most of the religious commandments of the Parsis were first issued, and though the community has, during that interval, seen many vicissitudes of fortune, they have adhered well-nigh faithfully to many of their ancient religious customs. Among these, is their custom of the disposal of the dead, which, however peculiar it may appear to the followers of other religions, appears to them to be the most natural and acceptable, supported as it is, even now, by the best scientific test of advanced sanitary science. At the bottom of their custom of disposing of the dead, and at the bottom of all the strict religious ceremonies enjoined therewith, lies the one main principle, viz., that preserving all possible respect for the dead, the body, after its separation from the immortal soul, should be disposed of in a way the least harmful and the least injurious to the living.

For a proper appreciation of the ceremonies of the first kind, one has to look to the Zoroastrian or Parsi ideas of sanitation, segregation, purification, and cleanliness, as expressed in the Vendidad, one of their Avesta Scriptures. One must also appreciate the
idea of simplicity observed in these ceremonies which inculcates a lesson in the mind of
the survivors, that, as a Persian poet sings: Death levels everybody, whether he dies as a
king on the throne or as a poor man without a bed on the ground. Mistry expends several
pages over these death rites in his novels. Dinshawji’s and Major Bilimoria’s death rites
performed in the “The Tower of Silence” as portrayed in Such a Long Journey is an
example and Mistry uses this chance to comment on the disposal method of the dead.
Though in his other novels also there are references to it, a detailed description is
recorded in Such a Long Journey.

A short time before death, the dying person is sometimes made to drink a few
drops of the consecrated Haoma water. Haoma being a plant symbolic of immortality, a
few drops of the water prepared with its juice by the priests performing the Haoma
ceremony in the Fire-temples, are gently poured into the mouth of the dying person.
Sometimes the juice of a few grains of pomegranate, which is considered essential in
some of the Parsi ceremonies, is dropped into the mouth of the dying person. A short time
after death, the body of the deceased is washed whole throughout with water, and a white
clean suit of cotton clothes is put over him.

The solemn hour of death and the ceremonies that follow naturally form the most
important and the most impressive part of the ritual in every religion. Among the
Zoroastrians it is the foremost bounden duty of the nearest relations at such a moment to
repeat into the dying ears the sacred verses Ashem Vohu and Ahuna Vairya. The person
dying if conscious is also required to join in these prayers. As soon as the breath has left
it, the body is regarded as impure, for it begins then to decay and to fall to pieces. It has therefore to be destroyed as soon as possible and in a manner as may be the least harmful to the living. Dead matter very soon becomes a centre of corruption and hence in the disposal of a dead body care has to be taken that none of the pure elements of Ahura Mazda is contaminated. The Mazda worshipper is enjoined 'to expose the dead body to the Sun'. Hence the body is not to be burnt, neither is it to be buried, nor thrown into water. Therefore the structures known as the 'Towers of Silence' are erected, wherever Parsis are congregated in any numbers, in which the dead are exposed without violating either the sense of decency and propriety, or any of the well thought out rules of the Zoroastrian religion.

Soon after the spirit has departed, the body is bathed and dressed in old worn out garments of white cotton. After the sudreh is put on, the nearest male relation (usually the eldest son) puts on the kusti reciting the appropriate prayers. The entire body is then swathed in a long white robe only the face and the ears showing. In the meanwhile a room in the house has been washed and in a corner sand is sprinkled on the floor or slabs of stone are laid thereon, and on this the body is reverently deposited, until the hour of its removal has come (Randeria 121-125).

The next process is that of making the "sagdid" that is the seeing of the dog. This consists of making a dog see the dead body. A four-eyed dog is spoken of in the Avesta in connection with the ceremonies of the dead. By the four-eyed dog is meant a dog with
two eyes-like spots just above the two eyes. Mistry also brings in this particular ceremony in his novel.

In his white *dugli* and maroon prayer cap the boy-man blended with the congregation, except at the moment when the *dustoors* gave the cue for the ritual of the dog. The Doongerwadi dog was led to the bier, the *char-chassam* dog, who, with his preternatural eyes, would contain the *nassoo*, the evil of death, and assist the forces of good.

*(Journey 297)*

The body cannot be carried to the Tower except in the daylight hours and the usual time for the funeral is either in the morning or in the afternoon. As long as the body remains in the house a priest sits near reciting prayers, and keeping alight a fire in which incense and sandalwood is constantly burnt.

Two men entered with the body, white-clad naw, and laid it on the low marble platform. The face and ears were left uncovered by the white sheet. A priest arrived and lit an oil lamp next to Dinshawji’s head...The priest picked up a sliver of sandalwood, dipped it in oil and held it to the flame. He transferred it to the thurible and sprinkled *loban* upon it. The fragrance of frankincense filled the room. The priest started to pray. *(Journey 292-293)*
None but the two ‘Nasasalars’ (corpse-bearers) can henceforth touch the body, and none may approach within three paces of the dead.

The sezdoe ended. The nassasalers entered, clad in white from head to toe. They wore white gloves and white canvas shoes. People moved aside to give them a wide berth, fearful of contact. Dinshawji’s face was covered and the bier of iron carried from the prayer bungalee. (Journey 298)

After the removal of the body to the Tower all the members of the family are required to bathe. Fire is generally kept burning for three days at the spot where the body was placed before removal. Fragrant sandal and incense are burnt over it. We have spoken above about the good attributed to the fire in destroying the germs of the disease lurking at the spot where the decomposing body was placed. Again, the spot where the body was placed before removal is generally set apart and not used for some time. Nobody is allowed to go on the spot for a period of ten days if the season at the time be winter, and for a period of thirty days, if the season be summer, when the decomposition and contamination are generally more rapid.

Near the spot where the body is placed, a lamp is kept burning for a period of four days and nights. In a small pot full of water fresh flowers are kept and changed every morning and evening. On the expiry of the above period the chamber is washed throughout.
The first and most important thing, the dustoorji had said, was to light a small oil lamp at the head of Minocher’s bed; this lamp, he said, must burn for four days and nights while prayers were performed at the Towers of Silence... “For the first four days the soul comes to visit here. The lamp is there to welcome the soul. But after four days prayers are all complete, you know, and the soul must now quickly-quickly go to the Next World...” (Lessons 63-64)

At the appointed time two ‘Nasalars’ come in with an iron bier, on which the corpse has to be carried; and two priests stand at the door of the room and, facing the departed, recite aloud the Ahunavaiti Gatha from Yasna, and when the recital is over the assembled friends and relations take the last leave of the departed, bowing low before the dead. Then the bier is covered over with a white sheet and carried out. There are other men to help the two ‘corpse-bearers’, but these may not touch anything except the long handles of the bier. It may also be noted that the carriers of the body, the priests who say the prayers and the friends who follow up to the Tower of Silence, must be dressed in white, and they must always go in pairs, holding a white handkerchief between them. The colour of the dress indicates Purity and the going in pairs implies mutual help in the hour of sorrow. Arriving at the Tower the procession halts a certain distance from it, the bier is laid down, and the face is exposed for the last time. All assembled bow low in the last salutation; and then the two ‘corpse-bearers’ carry the bier into the Tower. None but
these two may go inside. There the body is placed within its proper ring and denuded of all its clothing. For naked were we born into the world and naked must we go out of it.

The body must be exposed and left without clothes as to draw towards it the eye of the flesh-devouring birds and may fall an easy prey to them, so that, the sooner it is devoured the lesser the chance of further decomposition and the greater the sanitary good and safety. The clothes thus removed are never used for any purpose whatever, but are thrown in a pit outside the Tower where they are destroyed by continued action of heat, air and rain. In Bombay they are also destroyed by sulfuric acid. The corpse-bearers are not allowed to remove the clothes from the body of the deceased with their hands, lest they may catch contagion from the decomposing body and be the means of spreading it in the town. They do it with the help of metallic hooks and instruments meant for the purpose.

The men approached the stone platform, still linked in twos and threes, the way they had walked up the hill, and bowed three times in unison without letting go of the white kerchiefs. Then the four shouldered the bier again and climbed the stone steps to the door leading inside the Tower. They entered and pulled it shut behind them. The mourners could see no more. But they knew what would happen inside: the nassalers would place the body on a pavi, on the outermost of three concentric stone circles.
Then, without touching Dinshawji’s flesh, using their special hooked rods they would tear off the white cloth. Every stitch, till he was exposed to the creatures of the air, naked as the day he had entered the world. Overhead, the vultures were circling, flying lower and lower with each perfect circle they casually described. Now they started to alight on the high stone wall of the Tower, and in the tall trees around it. (Journey 301)

These Towers of Silence are usually of a squat cylindrical shape, about 20 to 30 feet high, enclosed all round by a thick wall and open to the sky. The only entrance left is an iron gate situated on the eastern side of the wall, which is kept securely locked. Inside the Tower is a platform of solid masonry divided into three concentric rings, and right in the middle is a deep circular pit going down into the earth right up to the foundations. This pit also is constructed of solid masonry. The inner platform is made to slope uniformly and gently towards the central pit. In each of the three concentric rings shallow depressions of three different sizes are arranged radially. The outermost ring contains the largest of these and they are meant to receive the bodies of men, the middle ring has somewhat smaller depressions, which are meant for women, and the innermost ring contains the smallest sized depressions and these are meant for the bodies of children. Between these three rings there are narrow raised ledges running all round, separating them one from the other; and these serve as paths along which any part of the interior may be approached without stepping over the bodies already exposed there. There are
also narrow channels connecting each of the depressions with the central pit, along which all fluids may ultimately drain into it. The bottom of the central pit is covered over with layers of sand and charcoal so as to make it a perfect filter; and from here also radiate four underground channels, which also contain filter beds. These channels ultimately lead deep down into the soil, and thus all fluids that ultimately enter the soil have been thoroughly filtered and rendered harmless.

When the Nasasalars have done their work in the Tower they get out and lock the gate. On a notice being given to all those, who have accompanied the funeral procession, and who have by this time taken their seats at some distance from the Tower learns that the Nasasalars have finished their work, get up from their seats and finish the "Baj,"

At the Tower, the chief nassasaler clapped three times: the signal to start the prayer for Dinshawji’s ascending soul. While they prayed, the vultures descended in great numbers, so graceful in flight but transforming into black hunched forms upon perching, grim and silent. The high stone wall was lined with them now, their serpent-like necks and bald heads rising incongruously from their plumage.

The prayer books were handed back, the white handkerchiefs folded and put away. The mourners had to make
one last stop: to wash their hands and faces, do their *Kustis*,
before returning down the hill to rejoin the world of the
living, *Journey 302)*

The Tower of Silence, being open at the top, gives free access to birds of prey—the
creatures meant by God to devour dead bodies. Incidentally it also emphasises the
Zoroastrian virtue of charity even in death by feeding the birds with our cast-off bodies.

A deep central well in the Tower, 150 feet in circumference, the sides and bottom
of which are also paved with stone slabs, is used for depositing the dry bones. The corpse
is completely stripped of its flesh by vultures within an hour or two, and the bones of the
denuded skeleton, when perfectly dried up by atmospheric influences and the powerful
heat of the tropical sun, are thrown into this well, where they gradually crumble to dust,
chiefly consisting of lime and phosphorus; thus the rich and the poor meet together on
one level of equality after death.

There are holes in the inner sides of the well through which the rain water is
carried into four underground drains, at the base of the Tower. These drains are
connected with four underground wells, the bottoms of which are covered with a thick
layer of sand. Pieces of charcoal and sandstone are also placed at the end of each drain,
which are renewed from time to time. These double sets of filters are provided for
purifying the rain water passing over the bones, before it enters the ground thus observing
one of the tenets of the Zoroastrian religion that the Mother Earth shall not be tainted.
The vultures do their work much more expeditiously than millions of insects would do, if dead bodies were buried in the ground. By this rapid process, putrefaction with all its concomitant evils, is most effectually prevented. According to the Zoroastrian religion, Earth, Fire, and Water are sacred and very useful to mankind, and in order to avoid their pollution by contact with putrefying flesh, the Zoroastrian religion strictly enjoins that the dead bodies should not be buried in the ground, or burnt, or thrown into seas, rivers, etc.

The rain washes out the Tower and the water running into the pit is filtered through the filter beds, and through the four channels and ultimately reaches the soil pure and clear.

In accordance with their religious injunctions, the Parsis build their Towers of Silence on the tops of hills if available. No expense is spared in constructing them of the hardest and the best materials, with a view that they may last for centuries without the possibility of polluting the earth or contaminating any living beings dwelling thereon. However distant may be the home of a deceased person, whether rich or poor, high or low in rank, he has always a walking funeral — his body is carried to the Tower of Silence on an iron bier by official corpse-bearers and is followed in procession by the mourners, relatives and friends, dressed in white flowing full-dress robes, walking behind in pairs and each couple joined hand in hand by holding a white handkerchief between them in token of sympathetic grief (Randeria 125-129).
The importance of doing the final rites in the Tower of Silence is brought out by Mistry in *A Fine Balance* during Maneck’s father’s funeral.

THEY SAT on the porch while she told him about the funeral arrangements for the next morning... dustoors were coming from the nearest fire temple, which was still a considerable distance. It had been an effort to find two who were willing to perform the ceremony. Most had refused the assignment when they discovered the deceased was to be cremated, saying their services were available only to Zoroastrians bound for the Towers of Silence- never mind if it was a long trip by railway. (*Balance* 575)

At first sight, the details may appeal irksome, but from the standpoint of sanitation and health, most of them, though enjoined about 3,000 years ago, appear essential and indispensable. Every precaution is enjoined, so that, in disposing of the dead body, no contamination or injury may result to the living. After a certain time after death, no man, except the official corpse-bearers, is allowed to touch the dead body or to come into any contact with it. If somebody accidentally or unavoidably does touch the body he is enjoined to keep himself aloof from others and not to touch them before he bathes and undergoes a prescribed ceremonial of different washings. We may as well say here that the ‘Nasasalars’, who come into contact with the dead body and carry it into the Tower, are generally provided with separate buildings to stay in. They do not go to the chief Fire-
temples, which are frequented by a large number, until they purify themselves with several washings, and segregation and retreat for nine days and nights. In public feasts they generally do not take their meals with the rest.

For three days after death the family abstains from meat, and takes food chiefly consisting of vegetable and fish, that is complete abstinence. Not only do the family, but even nearest and dearest friends abstain from meat diet. The abstinence is observed as a sign of mourning. Up to recently in Bombay, and even now in some of the mofussil towns, no food is cooked in the house where death has taken place. The nearest relations of the family prepare the food for the bereaved family and send it over to the place.

The hygienic value of this system has been proved amply through centuries of usage. The Towers, as has been enjoined, are built upon an eminence near the town, but far from human habitation. This is to ensure that any possible stench may not offend the living. But even in places like Bombay and Calcutta, where the Towers are now surrounded by dwelling houses, there has been any complaint of any smell or of any other sort of nuisance.

This much for the disposal of the body; but Zoroastrianism regards the Soul as infinitely the more important. On the morning of the fourth day after 'the departure' the Soul crosses over the 'Chinvat-bridge' where the good are separated from the bad, and on the other side it is judged by the Great Judge, ‘Mithra’ and ‘Rashnu’, while ‘Sraosha’
watches over them all. The Judges give the departed the exact reward for all acts done
during the earthly life.

In town where there is a considerable Zoroastrian population such birds are
encouraged to build their nests in the vicinity of the Towers. In places like Bombay the
birds finish off the flesh within half an hour, and the bones are completely bleached by
the sun and the air within a few days. These are then collected together and deposited
within the central pit, where they crumble to dust. Thus rich and poor, saint and sinner,
man, woman and child all find the same level at the long last and mingle their dust
together. No monument is erected so that the rich may be marked out from the poor even
in death.

In Delhi, the Parsi Anjuman has very strict social rules for members and trustees.
Only Zoroastrians are allowed entry into the temple. A few feet away from the Fire
Temple, history takes another turn and leads to a gate with an inscription that reads: “The
Parsee Tower of Silence, Built AD 1869”. The **aramgah** or cemetery is a reminder of
how the Parsis of Delhi were open to change as early as in the 19th century. A couple of
years ago, pictures of a rotting corpse at Mumbai’s Tower of Silence sparked off a flaring
debate in the community. Parsis prefer to put their dead bodies in the Towers of Silence,
so that vultures can devour them. To bury them would be to defile the earth and burning
would pollute the fire, the most sacred of all elements. But since Delhi had no Tower of
Silence and the vultures were fast disappearing, the dead were put to rest in the aramgah.
This old cemetery is now shut and the Parsis have had their burial ground near Khan
Market for about 45 years now. If only these graves could speak, they would have told the story of Delhi’s Parsi community, a community in transition.

But the Tower of Silence in Mumbai has had problems of its own. Once regarded as an efficient system of funeral, it has now become a health hazard because vultures who were welcomed to devour the dead are few and far between. “There are horror stories of bodies piling up over weeks and months as vultures have stopped visiting the Towers of Silence,” said an anxious corporator of the Bombay Municipal Corporation. In Mumbai, where a majority of the 100,000-odd members of the community are concentrated, bodies are fed to the vultures at the Doongerwadi crematorium. Once hundreds of vultures hovered in the sky near the Parsi Tower of Silence. They are not seen much now. The Tower of Silence or Dakhma, where Parsis place their dead, is in the Malabar Hill in Mumbai. This is the home to film stars, politicians and stockbrokers. This has made the debate more acrimonious. The problem is not confined to merely Mumbai. This is true for the whole country.

Without vultures, Mumbai’s Tower of Silence now relies on solar concentrators to magnify the sun’s effect on the bodies, which to many is not acceptable as according to their tradition. But the real problem is the smell emanating as the body shrivels in easy of the sun. The Parsi panchayat faces a threat of lawsuit from the local community regarding the smell. The panchayat is looking at the problem from administrative, managerial, and hygienic points of view. It is not looking at it as the Parsi’s problem alone. It argues that
their priority is towards the living, and not towards the dead. But the Parsis are worried of losing their ethnicity. They fear that if the ethnicity is lost, their identity is lost.

For the Parsis in Kolkata however, there is a silver lining after 20 vultures were spotted in the city. For sometime at least, they can feel secure about their ethnic rituals and belief.

The question of a long-term solution however remains whether the vulture culture will exist or an alternative way will be found. They were last seen three years ago. It seemed that they had gone into oblivion with their flapping wings and long curved and sharp beaks. The Parsis were in a problem and environmentalists were worried. But they are back. Parsi nature lover and researcher Dhan Baria has found 20 of them in and around the Race Course near the Alipore Zoo in Kolkata.

Parsis are Zoroastrians and believe that after the soul leaves the body, it should be disposed off with minimum harm to living beings. This is because of their strict ideals of sanitation, pollution and cleanliness. The idea of Tower of Silence is a product of their ideals and thoughts as nature lovers and love for living beings on the earth. The tradition is called Dokhmenishin and dates back to the 16th century. This may be due to accidental poisoning of the birds or due to burgeoning urban development taking place around the Tower of Silence posing a threat to mating and breeding of the vulture population. This has left the Parsi community divided over their dead and to decide the best way they can remain committed to their faith.
The Parsi tradition of keeping bodies in the Tower of Silence to be devoured by vultures was under threat as birds of prey had gone almost extinct in Mumbai. Now, the Bombay Parsi Panchayet has decided to import and begin breeding vultures, on which Parsis rely to dispose of their dead. The project is being led by scientists at the Bombay Natural History Society, who have seen recent success in breeding the endangered birds in conservation centres in Haryana. Once governmental permissions have been obtained, about a 100 of the almost extinct scavengers will be brought into Mumbai at first and will be housed in three aviaries, two of which will be at the Towers of Silence. Leaders in the community and 98 per cent of all Parsis still opt for the traditional method of disposal - that is, consigning bodies to the Towers. So breeding vultures, they say, will not only ensure they are fulfilling their religious duty, but also helping ecological conservation. "It's a win-win situation for the community, maybe now, instead of 98 percent, 99 percent of Parsis will come back to this method of disposal," said Khojesti Mistry of World Alliance of Parsi and Irani Zoroastrians (Randeria 142-147).

The priest believes that open burials are a fulfillment of the central tenet of his religion, which is to practice good deeds. With a forlorn expression, he notes that, 3,000 years after the tradition of open burials began, there are not enough Zoroastrians left alive to keep the tower in Yazd open. Instead, today’s Zoroastrians who want to observe traditional burial practices must request in their will that their body is sent to a forested suburb in Mumbai, India, where the last Tower of Silence still operates.
It is a benefit for us all to learn about the funeral customs and traditions of others because it opens us up to new possibilities and helps us to see our own culture in a new light. An excellent example of cultural differences in funeral customs is the 3000 year old Zoroastrian / Parsi tradition of sky burial. Sky burial is a custom that is considered wonderful, kind and proper in one culture, and a repugnant desecration in many others.
Morbid reports are often made in Mumbai suggesting that the vultures in the city drop limbs on the balconies of the posh areas of the city near the Towers after stopping for a snack.

‘Your vultures!’ the tenants complained. ‘Control your vultures! Throwing rubbish on our balconies!’ They claimed that the sated birds, flying out from the Tower after gorging themselves, invariably snatched a final bite to savour later. And if the tidbits were lost in mid-flight, they landed on the exclusive balconies. This, said the indignant tenants, was absolutely intolerable, considering the sky-high prices they had been charged for their deluxe flats.

(Journey 373)

Of course, no one had proved conclusively that the morsels from the skies were human flesh. But before long, relatives of various deceased parties heard about the skyscraper scandal. They protested that they were not paying funeral fees to have their dear departed ones anatomized and strewn piecemeal on posh balconies. The bereaved insisted that the Punchayet do something about it. Meanwhile, the debate was also raging between the reformists and the orthodox. These two camps had a history of battling lustily in newspaper columns, in letters to the editor, in community meetings- any forum where they were welcome. When the vulture controversy erupted, the orthodox and
reformists heartily joined the fray, delighted to sink their teeth into something after long inactivity.

Mistry uses this second funeral to write with black humour on the vultures who eat Parsi corpses and the debate in the community between what he calls ‘the vulturists’ and the opposing group who objected to such disposal methods of the dead.

The orthodox defence was the age-old wisdom that it was a pure method, defiling none of God’s good creations: earth, water, air, and fire. Every scientist, local or foreign, who had taken the trouble to examine the procedure, using modern hygienic standards, sang its praises. But the reformists, who favoured cremation, insisted that the way of the ancients was unsuitable for the twentieth century. Such a ghoulish system, they said, ill became a community with a progressive reputation and a forward-thinking attitude. *(Journey 374)*

Though the Parsi dead have no monuments erected to their memory, they have something far more glorious than any stone structure could be- the loving remembrance of their fellow men whom they had served.

Mistry also gives some of his findings of the Parsi society like he says that Parkinsonism and Osteoporosis are prevalent diseases in the society. . There is some
evidence, too, that they have particularly high incidences of mental illness and haemophilia, both perhaps exacerbated by their defensiveness as a community and some degree of inbreeding. He uses Kersi in Lessons to voice out his views.

“Mummy used to take good care of Grandpa, too, till things became complicated and he was moved to the Parsi General Hospital. Parkinsonism and osteoporosis laid him low. The doctor explained that Grandpa’s hip did not break because he fell, but he fell because the hip, gradually growing brittle, snapped on that fatal day. That’s what osteoporosis does, hollows out the bones and turns effect into cause. It has an unusually high incidence in the Parsi community, he said, but did not say why. Just one of those mysterious things. We are the chosen people where osteoporosis is concerned. And divorce. The Parsi community has the highest divorce rate in India. It also claims to be the most westernized community in India. Which is the result of the other? Confusion again, of cause and effect” (230).

It is hard to accept the fact that the age-old Parsi community is facing its extinction. An injunction against accepting converts is threatening to erase Zoroastrianism and there are no more than a hundred thousand Zoroastrians around the
world. In India, their religion is struggling to survive. Furthermore, Parsi numbers, always small, are now diminishing at an alarming rate. In 1971 there were 91000 Parsis in India, by 1981 the figure had fallen to 71000, and one in five Indian Parsis is now over 65. Emigration, Non-marriage, late marriages, falling birth rates, the growing tendency to marry outside the community have all contributed to the decline, the major reason for which is perhaps the career-mindedness of highly educated Parsi women. Mistry, on his part, gives some valid suggestions to check the decreasing birth rate. Through his characters in *Family Matters* he voices out his ideas thus:

“Well,” said Dr.Fitter. “Your demographers will tell you, the more educated a community, the lower the birth rate.”

Then we need to fix that. I have two suggestions. First, our youth must be prohibited from going beyond a bachelor’s degree. Give them cash incentives to study less. And those who want to do post-graduate studies, tell them they will get no funding from Punchayat unless they sign a contract to have as many children as the number of people over age fifty in their family. Maximum of seven—we don’t want to spoil the health of our young women.”

“I see,” said Dr.Fitter. “But what about those who might have medical problems, inability to conceive?”

“That’s no excuse,” said the inspector. “Not these days, with in vitro fertilization and all those mind-boggling
technologies that result in multiple births. We can produce six and seven Parsis in one shot, I’m telling you.”

“Ah,” said the doctor. “A very interesting proposition.” (Matters 414)

In all the works of Mistry, he takes special care to make it a point that the characters use only reputed Parsi products, be it a soap or an electrical appliance like refrigerator.

Next, they began comparing brands and features for kitchen appliances. Roxana liked the Maharaja line of Turbo Mixie, Juicer, and Toaster. Yezad was adamant that the refrigerator be a Godrej, a venerable Parsi product. As for air-conditioning, they would have two Voltas units, one each for the dining room and drawing-room. More could be added later, for the bedrooms. (Matters 452)

Mistry plays a double role. Though he wants to protect the dying religion of his, he is always against the orthodox Parsis and he gives a subtle remark against their purity business through Murad in Family Matters:

He says that perhaps the League of Orthodox Parsis could invent a Purity Detector, along the lines of the airport metal
detector, which would go beep-beep-beep when an impure person walked through.

“You think the question of purity, the life and death of our community, is a joking matter?”

“I think bigotry is certainly to be laughed at.” (Matters 486)

The establishment of a college at the Byramjee Jeejeebhoy Parsee Charitable Institution marked one of the community's few forays into post school academic education in Bombay. Parsi schools are aplenty (though sadly not Parsi students) but colleges unfortunately were not given priority. In community news the installation of the solar concentrators at Bombay's Doongerwadi demonstrated the community's ability and willingness to come up with a practical solution to a highly sensitive issue. The greening of Doongerwadi, with the assistance of the House of Godrej, demonstrated the community's commitment to the environment.

Whether one believes in God or not, throughout the novel there are anecdotes related to gods and goddesses, and miracles like that of St. Thomas who landed on the Malabar coast amongst the fishermen nineteen hundred years ago and who spread Christianity among the Hindus, Brahmins, Sadhus and Acharyas. (Matters 29-30) The Mount Mary and St. Haji Ali episodes are equally religious. One of the most important things Mistry wants to emphasize is religious tolerance on the basis that all religions are equal.
The first time, Gustad was quite intrigued by the church and its rituals, so different from what went on in the fire-temple. But he was on his guard, conditioned as he had been from childhood to resist the call of other faiths. All religions were equal, he was taught; nevertheless, one had to remain true to one’s own because religions were not like garment styles that could be changed at whim or to follow fashion. His parents had been painstaking on this point, conversion and apostasy being as rife as it was, and rooted in the very history of the land. (Journey 28)

The pavement artist, who has painted gods and goddesses from all religions of the world on the wall, is one through whom the Indian secularism is reinforced. The morcha director shouts: “The wall of Hindu and Muslim, Sikh and Christian, Parsi and Buddhist! A holy wall, a wall suitable for worship and devotion. Whatever your faith!” (384) Mistry’s concept of faith cannot be questioned. About religious tolerance he makes the pavement artist speak thus:

Using assorted religions and their gods, saints and prophets: Hindu, Sikh, Judaic, Christian, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Jainist. Actually, Hinduism alone can provide enough. But I always like to mix them up,
include a variety in my drawings. Makes me feel I am doing something to promote tolerance and understanding in the world. *(Journey 216)*

It is a benefit for us all to learn about the funeral customs and traditions of others because it opens us up to new possibilities and helps us to see our own culture in a new light. An excellent example of cultural differences in funeral customs is the 3000 year old Parsi tradition of sky burial.

Zoroastrianism, rather the Parsis who practice it, is against Inter-caste marriages. Purity, in fact, is central to the Parsi ethos. Parsis believe in keeping their race pure, and frown on intermarriage. Orthodox Parsis believe in excommunicating Parsis who marry outside of the clan. As more Parsi women marry later, if at all, and have fewer children, the Parsis face the danger of dying out. Some members of the community additionally contend that a child must have a Parsi father to be eligible for introduction into the religion, but this stand is considered by most to be a violation of the Zoroastrian tenets of gender equality, and may be a remnant of an old legal definition of Parsi. Nonetheless, many no beds (priests) will not perform the Navjote ceremony - i.e. the rites of admission into the religion - for children from mixed-marriages.

*Family Matters*, Mistry's new novel, charts the effects of religious bigotry and rigid traditionalism as they work their insidious way through generations of a family. In the prime of his life Nariman Vakeel was compelled by his parents and their orthodox
Parsi circle to give up the woman he loved, a non-Parsi Goan, and marry the more appropriate Yasmin, a widow with two children, Jal and Coomy. "No happiness is more lasting than the happiness that you get from fulfilling your parents' wishes," a family friend tells him, and he allows himself to believe this lie.

Much rejoicing had erupted when his parents announced that their only son, after years of refusing to end his ill-considered liaison with that Goan woman, refusing to meet decent Parsi girls, refusing to marry someone respectable—that their beloved Nari had finally listened to reason and agreed to settle down. *(Matters 11)*

The orthodox association in *Family Matters* takes stem steps to check intermarriages and other problems against their age old practice

The League of Orthodox Parsis and the Association for Zarathustrian Education meet once a week. He returns from their sessions to tell us in detail about the agenda considered and the action taken, the petitions circulated and injunctions filed, the campaigns to be waged against films or publications that have given offence. *(Matters 466)*
His subsequent loveless marriage blights the family for decades. When the transformed highly religious Yezad is suspicious about his son’s love towards a non-Parsi girl he goes wild and he tries various dialogues to make his son fall in line with him.

Yesterday, Daddy told us over dinner that the League had discussed the 1818 case of a Parsi bigamist - married a Parsi. “For his crime he was excommunicated by the Panchayat,” said Daddy, raising his hand to signify the gravity of the punishment. “And his father was told to disown him or he, too, would be.” “.... The point is, our committee members have agreed unanimously to challenge the Reformist propaganda- we will campaign to reintroduce a strict policy of excommunication. Parsi men and women who have relations with non-Parsis, in or out of marriage, will suffer the consequences. Excommunication will be reversed if they repent publicly with the shoe punishment.”

(Matters 466-467)

He also makes sure that his son understands how pure his religion is.

“Because we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet, and mixed marriages will destroy that.”

“You think you’re superior?”
“Inferior or superior is not the question. Purity is a virtue worth preserving.” (Matters 482)

Whereas Intermarriages are not tolerated by them, Widow Remarriages are permissible in the Parsi society like that of Nariman Vakeel in Family Matters marrying Yasmin Contractor, the widowed lady with two children, and the offer for Dina Dalai, the young widow in A Fine Balance for a second marriage which she eventually turns down.

“What do you know how fortunate you are in our community? Among the unenlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage. If you were a Hindu, in the old days you would have had to be a good little sati and leap onto your husband’s funeral pyre, be roasted with him.” (Balance 52)

Being great lovers of good food, the Parsis turn gluttons by consuming a variety of non-vegetarian food, including the Indian Hindu’s sacred Cow. “Someone chuckled loudly that where Parsis were concerned, food was number one, conversation came second.” (Balance 38)

Lucky for us that we are minorities in a nation of Hindus.

Let them eat their pulses and grams and beans, spiced with their stingy asafetida- what they call hing. Let them fart.
their lives away...we will get our protein from their sacred cow. *(Journey 27)*

Mistry portrays the Parsi women to be docile beings, real homemakers and sacrificing mothers. Dilnavaz, Gustad Noble’s wife in *Such a Long Journey* is portrayed in the novel as busily cooking or filling water.

At water-tap time Dilnavaz awoke automatically, and her first thoughts were about Gustad and Sohrab...Exhausted, she stumbled sleepily to the bathroom. Water, water. Drums to fill. Hurry. Kitchen tank to fill. That big bucket. And milk to buy.... *(Journey 74)*

As a responsible mother, she could even conspire with Miss Kutpitia, the spinster in the neighbourhood in creating spells for her family’s well-being. She is so concerned for her husband and children that she succumbs to Ms.Kutpitia’s ‘jadu-mantar’ and does everything with limes, chillies and even with lizard’s tails.

In *Family Matters*, Roxana is a typical Parsi woman with a typical Indian spirit. She loves her family and devotes her entire self to cater to their needs. Almost all the women characters portrayed in the novels of Rohinton Mistry are home lovers and are not earning members except for Dina Dalai in *A Fine Balance*. She moves from a protected girlhood under her father to the harsh reality of reductive femaleness under the protection
of her brother. The awareness of her autonomous existence does not allow her to the
patriarchy that her brother imposes on her and selects her own husband, of course an
economically unsuccessful Rustom Shroff. And he being killed in an accident, she faces
life unarmed and tries hard to earn her living.

Parsis are known for their family affection. Every Parsi family is close knit even
when there are sufferings, which normally humans cannot withstand. Parsi Psyche
permits acceptance of sacrifice in the name of family bond, a reference to which the
following incidents are quoted. From the vantage point Roxana in *Family Matters* was
able to watch the scene,

...nine year-old happily feeding seventy-nine..........She felt
she was witnessing something almost sacred, and her eyes
refused to relinquish the precious moment, for she knew
instinctively that it would become a memory to cherish, to
recall in difficult times when she needed strength.

*(Matters 113)*

Mistry also draws the reader’s attention to several men and women of Parsi
community remaining unmarried or single even at an advanced age. Many men and
women remain thus like Jal, Coomy, Daisy in *Family Matters*, Ms. Kutpitia, Ms. Villie
in *Such a Long Journey*. 
Mistry makes possible the introduction into the text of hundreds of ageing Parsi single women like Villie, who eke out their lives, looking after ageing parents and at times spice them with harmless little flirtations with men and gambling risks. (Bharucha 183)

Mistry is anxious about the Parsi youth of today. His works also highlights Parsi idiosyncrasies and bloody-mindedness. Among Indians, Parsis have a not undeserved reputation for eccentricity and even testiness. He uses Dr. Fitter in Family Matters to mouth his opinion:

Parsi men of today were useless, dithering idiots, the race had deteriorated. “When you think of our forefathers, the industrialists and shipbuilders who established the foundation of modern India, the philanthropists who gave us our hospitals and schools and libraries and bags, what luster they brought to our community and the nation. And this incompetent fellow cannot look after his father. Can’t make a simple decision about taking him to hospital for an X-ray.” (Matters 51)

The distortion of the religious impulse into an instrument of prejudice and exclusion propels the novel and its characters; indeed, everywhere in Mistry's work a
retreat into ritual indicates spiritual impoverishment. In *Family Matters*, Parsi fundamentalism wrecks the family's harmony and pollutes the very air at Nariman's flat in the ironically misnamed Chateau Felicity apartment building, while beyond Chateau Felicity, Hindu fundamentalism, in the form of Shiv Sena thugs, wantonly ruins the lives of thousands. The thoughtful Nariman is especially wary of the threat posed by zealotry: he admonishes Coomy, for example, for referring to acts of God, observing that she was getting into the bad habit of burdening God with altogether too much responsibility and that is good for neither God nor them.

The majority of Rohinton Mistry’s pieces in his first major work of fiction, the collection of short stories *Swimming Lessons* (1987), are set in India, more precisely in a block of flats in Bombay. The inhabitants of Firozsha Baag are mostly Parsis, a fact that has not escaped critical attention. Thus while praising Mistry’s stories for their universalism, critics also emphasize that they are resonate with Parsi culture. In their cultural specificity, Mistry’s tales challenge and resist the totalization of the dominant culture within India. As a matter of fact, the setting of *Lessons* inverts the situation of the Parsi community in contemporary India. While the Parsis constitute a tiny minority in demographic decline within the multicultural mosaic of the South Asian’s subcontinent, the community for once constitutes the majority in the microcosm of Mistry’s fictional Firozsha Baag. Three out of the collection’s eleven stories are concerned with the emigration/immigration experience of members of the Parsi community who have previously lived in Bombay’s Firozsha Baag. In a process of negotiating the implications of adaptation and assimilation to the radically new environment of Canada, the question whether difference is a useful strategy or an obsolete and counter-productive way of
dealing with the Canadian multicultural reality becomes a pressing one. The three stories discussed in this chapter, “Lend Me Your Light,” “Squatter” and “Swimming Lessons,” reflect distinct and complex attitudes towards cultural difference.

With dwindling figures looming large and the latest census putting their number merely at a few thousands, Parsis here have set up a fertility clinic to preserve — and hopefully expand — their community. The clinic in Mumbai Central is the brainchild of the Bombay Parsi Panchayat, a body officially inaugurated today. It is an attempt to raise awareness among Parsis, especially young couples, about the availability and necessity of fertility treatment. The seriousness of this problem is highlighted in Mistry’s Family Matters.

“Yes? The orthodox and reform argument?”

“That’s only one part of it. The more crucial point is our dwindling birth rate, our men and women marrying non-Parsis, and the heavy migration to the West.”

“Vultures and crematoriums, both will be redundant,” declared Dr. Fitter, “if there are no Parsis to feed them.

What’s your opinion?”

“I’m not sure,” said Jal, reluctant to be drawn into a debate over this explosive topic. “We’ve been a small community right from the beginning. But we’ve survived, and prospered.”
“Those were different times, a different world,” said Inspector Masalavala, not in a mood to tolerate optimism. “The experts in demographics are confident that fifty years hence, there will be no Parsis left.”

“Extinct, like dinosaurs,” said Dr. Fitter. “They’ll have to study our bones, that’s all.”

Jal smiled. He liked the doctor despite the gruff personality and bluntness. His humour epitomized the Parsi spirit, he felt, the ability to laugh in the face of darkness.

“...Parsis seem to be the only people in India who follow the family planning message. Rest of the country is breeding like rabbits.” (Matters 412-413)

The contribution of writers of fiction like Mistry, opens a window on Parsis in India for their Canadian and other western readers. His account of the Bombay Parsi community and its travails is the favourite subject of Mistry’s Canadian-Indian fiction in English on which he concentrates in all the three fictional works of his. His fiction tells us more about the Parsi community in Bombay than a book of sociology possibly could. Mistry is able to project the emotional life and personal relationships of the Parsis as a valuable part of the wider human experience at the international level by writing about these things from across the worlds. Jaydipsinh Dodiya in his essay “The Parsi Community in Such a Long Journey” observes:
The Parsi writers are also sensitive to the various anxieties felt by their community. Rohinton Mistry has demonstrated this in responding to the existing threats to the Parsi family and community, and also to the country. He presents his community through the different narratives of his characters who invariably express their concern for their community and the changes that affect their community.

Mistry’s works provide authentic and scholarly insights into the Zoroastrian faith and some of its tenets. Further, it attempts to explore the distinctive character of the Parsi men of the current era in India. Rohinton Mistry entertains while he exposes the frailties of his characters with his gentle humour and an eye for the comic in human. It reveals that this minority community has to cope with hegemonic forces, identity crises and the struggle to create its own space. All the concerns of the community—declining population, brain-drain, late marriages, inter-faith marriages, funeral rites, attitude to the girl-child, urbanization, alienation, modernist vs. traditionalist attitude to religion and the existence or non-existence of ethnic anxieties, marginalization of the Parsis in the recent years, dilution of values, isolation in the urban scenario and the influence of massive commercialization—are aptly delineated in the works of the Rohinton Mistry.