Chapter One

Introduction

All objects, all phases of culture are alive. They have voices. They speak of their history and interrelatedness. And they are all talking at once!

- Camille Paglia

Gieve Patel, an acclaimed Indian poet, playwright, and painter is one of the eminent Parsi writers in English of the Modernistic period. His Parsi tradition has been uniquely portrayed by his “collective unconscious”(42) in the Jungian sense, in all his artistic compositions whether in poetry, paintings, sculptural engravings or in plays. The critics view him as a social realist, who through his writings offers an unprejudiced critical account of manifolds of reality in totality - the frenzied terrain of the human body, its weaknesses, absurdity and the fragile state of mind and also of the vulgar inequalities of social order that continue to overwhelm the post- independent India. His achievements are a manifestation of the quality of his Parsi consciousness. He has a legitimate claim to be reckoned as the voice of the Parsis.

A physician by profession, Patel has the power of observation, recollection and a methodical execution in his works. His haunting Parsi consciousness makes him a spokesperson of his community. He is a strong living voice for his people. His uniqueness, among the modernistic writers, shoots from his belief in values, insight into human psychology and a vision of life – all of which he expresses with a great commitment in his works. But, at the same time, there prevails an unknown anguish over the lost glorious past and a subconscious longing for it. Being a conscious creative master, he admirably explains the plight of the Parsis and their struggle for space and
survival through his compositions with a rare vigour, vitality and hope to nurture the Parsis with new faith and expectations.

The dissertation entitled “Locating the Cultural Transitions in Gieve Patel’s Select Narratives” establishes the significance, relevance and the intention behind the topic statement. The thesis aims to analyse how far the writer, Gieve Patel, in his creative writings intends to preserve his Parsi identity that includes the socio-cultural and religious entities of the Parsi past and the transcultural realities of the Parsi present in the Indian context. The close textual analysis on locating culture, transculture, and the historical theorization of Parsi people’s social life and their religion – have been carried out on the primary sources of the thesis drawing evidences from the sacred Scriptures, from the legend \textit{Qissa-e-Sanjan}, from historical and religious traditions as documented by a spectrum of writers, like Dosabhai Framji Karaka, Delphine Menant, Maneckji Nusservanji Dhall, Ervad Sheriarji Dadabhai Bharucha, Sir John Malcolm, John Fletcher Hurst, John R. Hinnells, Mary Boyce, Maganlal A. Buch, Dhunjibhoy Jamsetjee Medhora, Henry Smith Williams, Sir Jivanjee Jamshedji Modi, Christine Dobbin, Bernard Lewis, Luhrmann T. M., Jesse S. Palsetia, Rashna, Mitra June Sharafi, and Parvaneh Pourshariati, and from the culture theory propounded by Homi K. Bhaba, Jeff Lewis, Simon During, William Safran and Martin Bulmer.

Patel’s growing years were spent in a rural coastal town Nargol, in Gujarat which is very close to Sanjan, another coastal town in which Parsis are believed to have settled first in India. His interaction with his local people as well as his awareness of class differences among the landowning and the land tilling people find their way into both his poetry as well as his drama. He continues to characterise the Parsi community as being a composite whole that has absorbed both the good and the spiteful characteristics of the British. There has also been the influence of Gujarati culture especially the Parsi dialect
in the use of language which also adds to the syncretism of the Parsi community. The uniqueness of the Parsi culture marked by its plurality of thought and eclectic openness to ideas is vivid in all his writings. Hence a close textual analysis of Gieve Patel’s select narratives is set using socio-cultural and religious approach.

The objective categorises Gieve Patel’s cultural awareness and the conscious reflections of his social milieu in his works based on the concepts of Parsi settling in India, Parsi adaptability and resistance, Parsi identity and Parsi transcultural notions. Through historical perspective it is aimed to bring in the Parsi community’s migrating history and the facts behind the Parsi cultural transitions that occurred diachronically over various eras starting from the Persian Zoroastrian Empires. Thus the review encompasses the exodus of Parsi ancestors from Persia, their settlement in India, the intermittent locational disturbances within the host country caused by the change of rulers and colonisation, the transitional impact on the community, the socio-political milieu in different sets of contacts, the entanglement with the Indian way of life, and the strenuous difficulties in maintaining the Parsi ethos and religious identity.

The study has as well been made to show the advancement of the Parsi culture, its unique behaviours and exclusivities in various perspectives. The age old Parsi culture, the subjugation, domination, and displacement of their ancestors, the Parsi diaspora, their imbibing spirit of adaptation to the host culture, and equalling determination to preserve their religious and ethnical exclusivities in the Indian soil – are naturally enduring lessons for the enhanced living and thinking of the universal society at large.

Patel’s creative works, especially his poems and plays, are considered narratives in broader sense of what Martin Mc Quillan has explained in his book, *The Narrative Reader* (2000). Patel’s narration is not merely narrowed down to the domain of traditional story telling but it also contains the social, historical, cultural and religious
aspects of the Parsi people who were exiled, displaced, scattered and settled in some other unknown land. And so, his narratives are specifically cross cultural and may well match with the definition of narrative stated by Roland Barthes:

The narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances – as though any material were fit to receive man’s stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting . . . , stained-glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation. Moreover, under this almost infinite diversity of forms, narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. All classes, all human groups, have their narratives, enjoyment of which is very often shared by men with different even opposing, cultural backgrounds. Caring nothing for the division between good and bad literature, narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself. (109)

Patel’s people in his writings are partly of Persian origin in India and partly of local Indians and are, no doubt, transhistorical and transcultural. Hence, the researcher attempts to study his select writings based on the perspectives of Parsi culture in the Indian setup. Accordingly, his narratives make the readers recognize the realities of the world wherefrom his characters have been drawn.

Importance is given to the Parsi notion of moral and cultural superiority over the host country, their social problems, the complex state of mind, the pain of exile and
homelessness, the unfriendly surroundings, the ambivalence, the longing, the prominence and affluence in the colonial era, the pain and agony of being sidelined from the mainstream after Indian Independence, the longing for the glorious past, the cultural clash in a multi-cultural situation, the determination to preserve the ethnicity and religious exclusiveness, the intergeneration conflicts within the community, the declining numbers and the dilemma of the endangered community. Gerald Prince says: “By giving its own form of order and coherence to a possible reality, narrative supplies models for that reality’s transformation or redescription and mediates between the law of what is and the human desire for what may be” (129). Gieve Patel, through his narratives, indulges in preserving and carrying forward the sensibilities of the Parsi minority for the current as well as future generations to trail upon.

The contours of the Parsi sensibilities are traced with the view to reveal and exhort the severity of the crisis they underwent and undergo as well to retain a tradition of their own. It also unfolds the trials and tribulations that befell the earliest Parsi ancestors in their great journey necessitating desertion of and displacements from their homeland. The approximations between their culture and the Indian culture significantly point out the basic similarities in their attitudes and vision, though they operate in a different cultural context.

Culture generally refers to a state of manners which have been socio-politically developed. It is defined as the political and social forces possessing suitable contribution in influencing the human beings of a community. The way of clothing, eating and habitat may alter, but the gentle innate values possessed by a person remain unchanged since those are deeply rooted in the body, mind, heart and soul as the gift of one’s culture. It grows in an ambience of freedom, equality, recognition and acceptance of the other. Culture, according to Ayappa Panicker, is:
resistance to tyranny, to centralization, to hegemony, to the domination of one over the many; . . . True maturity or wisdom consists in imbibing the spirit of the other, without surrendering one’s individuality and identity. The imposition of a hegemony we call imperialism; the surrender of autonomy we call colonialism. Neither imperial nor colonial is true culture. (34)

Culture is central to the experience of living in an environment different from one's own and it flourishes in an atmosphere of shared existence amidst differences and conflicts. To Homi K. Bhaba:

A range of critical theories suggest that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history - subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement - that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking. There is even a growing conviction that the affective experience of social marginality – as it emerges in non-canonical cultural forms – transforms our critical strategies. It forces us to confront the concept of culture outside objects d'art or beyond the canonization of the ‘idea’ of aesthetics, to engage with culture as an uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value, often composed of incommensurable demands and practices, produced in the act of social survival. (246-247)

Simon During observes that “For victims of colonialism, culture means strategies of survival as much as heritage, so that the gap between inherited or official meaning (ideology) and its individual performance provides room for resistance and individuation” (189). In the act of social survival in a colonised or dominant society, there could thus be a huge distance between the life-ways of the struggling subalterns and the privileged theorists.
Parsis are the followers of Zarathustra, and the descendants of the ancient Persians who immigrated to India on the conquest of their country by the Arabs, about the year 720 A.D. “These Persies are by another Name term’d Gaures, or worshippers of Fire, because of their Veneration for that Element” (Ovington374). They are perceived as ancient Persian Aryans by race. A. C. L. Carleyle claims:

. . . the Parsis who entered India as colonists . . . are the lineal representatives of the ancient Persians, and of the “Airyanem Vaejo,” of the Zend Avesta. The Parsis are therefore, genuine, pure, and typical Aryans. They are genuine, because they truly represent the ancient Aryans of Persia. They are pure, because they have been obliged to marry among themselves. They are typical, because the very characteristic features and general physiognomy which mark the Parsis, and . . . show us the features and dress of the ancient Persian Aryans. (102)

Parsis take pride in terming them as belonging to a presumably superior race of Persian Aryans and progeny of the mighty race that ruled the vast Persian Empires for several centuries spanning before and after the Common Era. Porus Homi Havewala, a contemporary Parsi writer and author of *The Saga of the Aryan Race*, a semi-fictional historical epic focusing on the history of the Zoroastrian and Aryan people, seeks to inculcate a feel of pride to the community’s youth by aligning them in the name of race. Martin Bulmer famed editor of *Ethnic and Racial Studies Today*, in his commentary for Question Bank on ethnicity rightly observes:

The idea that an objective classification of mankind's major biological categories into 'races' is either possible or useful, and that in turn individuals can be assigned to such categories, has been progressively discredited. Though there are discernible differences in skin colour, head
form or type of hair among members of the human species, no satisfactory
general classification of 'races' exists to which individuals may be
assigned on the basis of these characteristics.(3)

“Race” is a controversial term much disputed and denounced. Peter Ratcliffe asserts that
he, in his writings, “retained the term “race” for theoretical debates involving . . . social
structural concerns, while describing particular collectivities as “ethnic groups” (97). He
elaborates and argues that:

“Ethnic group” has to be seen for what it is, simply a less pejorative label
representing categories of people defined on the basis . . . of geographical
origin. A theoretically convincing measure of “ethnicity” would be a
different matter entirely, implying a consciousness of group membership.
For Bulmer (1986:54) it is a more inclusive concept than that of race. An
“ethnic group” is a collectivity within a larger society having real or
putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past, and cultural focus
upon one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity,
such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical
appearance. (97-98)

The idea of belonging to a particular ethnicity and claims of superior qualities of virtues
as a sequence of such belonging are significant for the group. Membership of an ethnic
group is thus something which is subjectively meaningful to the person concerned, and it
becomes the principal basis for ethnic categorisation. This review therefore consciously
distances itself from the controversies of “race” and seeks to trace and recognise Parsis as
an “ethnic group” without in any conscious attempt to embark on disputing or
undermining the community’s claims of superiority.
It is pertinent to note that like the Parsis, there is another ethno-religious Zoroastrian community called “Iranis” in India. Both the Parsis and Iranis are Zoroastrian immigrants who could trace their origin to Iran and are settled predominantly on the west-coast states of Gujarat and Maharashtra. Yet the two are distinctly different by language, socio-cultural traditions, time of arrival, legal status and even appearances. The major difference lies in the time the two communities came to India. Parsis emigrated to Indian sub-continent mainly from Greater Khorasan about the year 720 AD, soon after the advent of Islam and the complete rout of the Sassanid Empire; Iranis are among those Zoroastrians who stuck to their ancestral homeland until 18th century when religious persecution by the ruling Qajars grew rampant and arrived in India only during the later 19th and early 20th centuries. Iranis eventually remain culturally and linguistically closer to the Zoroastrians of Iran, in particular to that of Yazd and Kerman and speak the Dari dialect. Parsis have a structural and ethnic similarity to Gujarati and Sindhi people as they have resided in Gujarat and Sindh for centuries; Iranis are mostly heavily built like the Irani Muslims. Parsi people are governed by the Parsi Punchayet whereas the Irani people are not and do not have access to the Parsi trust and charities. Parsis have socially and legally evolved as a distinct “caste” within the Zoroastrian community and the present work deals with this particular brand of Zoroastrians, the Parsis, of whom Gieve Patel deals in his works.

An understanding of the evolution of the ancient Zoroastrian religion, its teachings and practices and of the history of the rulers of Persia, form the base for this study. Zoroastrians enjoyed the political patronage of the Persian empires for several centuries preceding and succeeding the start of the Christian Calendar Era. A study of the Persian kings and the Zoroastrian religion of fire will proffer a glimpse of and serve as guide to understand the religious and cultural traditions, and the ethos as acquired from Persia by
the farthest Parsi migrants to India and handed down to and imbibed by their descendant inheritors in India.

A shift in culture entities usually happens when another culture is absorbed into the current one whereby they considerably make an impact on the social and cultural norms. Eventually the Parsis blend to make a different culture to recognize and respond to the challenges of social and cultural adjustments. The consequent cultural transition that the Parsi community has undergone in the land of settlement reveals three major dimensions. Primarily, the community tactically agreed to abandon its language and adopt the local language, Gujarati; its women adopted local dress and its men ceased to bear arms as a part of its original covenant; it diligently adapted to the common habits of purity, commensality and symbolic rituals – which either have no specific religious connotations or do not confront its religious beliefs – as prevalent in the neighbouring habitat. Secondly, some local practices which are per se alien to and inconsistent with those of the Parsis, permeated into the community overriding the community’s resistance and efforts to get rid of them. Thirdly, the community makes a conscious and concrete refusal to concede when it involves preserving the community’s ethnic and religious identities.

As a diasporic people, Parsis had kept a low profile and did their best to please their Hindu hosts. Parsis seriously differ from other diaspora who nurture or boast of an idea of return to homeland. The diasporic people, as William Safran suggests:

. . . are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it . . . they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendents would (or should) eventually return when conditions are appropriate. (83-84)
The Jews the world over, for instance, are seen as fond of returning to their homeland resonating the Jewish customary liturgical phrase, “Next Year in Jerusalem,” though only a small number ever seriously contemplate moving back to Israel. However, as Safran rightly observes that Parsis “have no myth of return to their original homeland” (89). Oftentimes, members of a diaspora suffer issues of acceptability because of doubts about loyalty to their homeland or host country.

Robin Cohen in his *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, brings out a consolidated list of nine common features of a diaspora, namely: dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign regions, expansion from homeland in pursuit of work or trade, collective memory and myth about a homeland, idealized view of said homeland, frequent development of a return movement to the idealized homeland, strong ethnic consciousness, tense relationship with host country, sense of empathy and responsibility for co-ethnic members, and the possibility of enriching life in the host country. Cohen, however, cautions that “not every diaspora will exhibit every feature listed, nor will they be present to the same degree over time and in all settings. These are the main strands that go into the making of a diasporic rope” (16). On the societal behaviour, some ethnic groups may be inclined to adapt and others may strive to resist and retain their exclusiveness:

Many members of a particular ethnic group may intend to and be able to merge into the crowd, lose their prior identity and achieve individualized forms of social mobility. Other groups may intermarry with locals, adopt or blend with their religions and other social practices (creolize) and thereby slowly disappear as a separable ethnic group. (16)
A strong or renewed tie to the past or a block to assimilation in the present and future must exist to permit a diasporic consciousness to emerge, while the active fraction of the incipient diasporic must have time to mobilize the group concerned.

Cohen finds that the Parsis “are not so much a travelling culture, as a travelling religion” (153); this could be the basis for Parsis not fostering an idea of return to homeland. Moreover, as Nilufer E. Barucha observes: “The way back to Iran was sealed by the consolidation of Islamic rule and return there has never been central to Parsi consciousness” (59).

Parsis have seen ups and downs in their host country and have no doubt undergone differing circumstances in a dominant society; but like the traditional “sugar in the milk” they have enriched and assimilated into Indian culture. As immigrants, Parsis did not taste a tense relationship with host country. The Indian culture of plurality, the built-in tolerance, and the all pervasive caste system provide a fluid matrix where embedding is possible. The Parsi adaptability makes it more resilient and the element of hostility on the part of the host society eventually becomes indiscernible against the Parsis. The caste customs, the class variances and the diverse languages and cultures prevalent in India – all living along in a thread of tolerance and acceptance – in fact, both encouraged the Parsi assimilation and quite contrarily fostered its isolation and exclusiveness as well. This congenial atmosphere in the host country could also have been a major catalytic for the community in obliterating its imaginations about and ideas for return to homeland. However, the memory and ties with the old country, Iran, continued as the Parsis sought priestly guidance, if not accepted or observed in full, especially on ritual matters; they travelled there to study and then to campaign, for their oppressed Iranian co-religionists, and in more recent times they have gone on pilgrimage there to the holy sites. Images of Iran are evident in both Parsi homes and temples.
Rashna Singh rightly describes the experience of the Parsis in India as “one of acculturation, rather than assimilation.” According to her:

They maintained their distinct religious, cultural, and social identities even while blending in and borrowing traditions from their local host communities. Transplanted to a new country, their identity required continuous negotiation, their selfhood strategized for historical and cultural reasons. (1223)

The Parsi ability to adapt to the social and cultural norms of the Indian setting reflects the extent to which they have successfully integrated into the Indian society.

The Parsis’ adoption and use of language of India was the most conspicuous example of their assimilation. Persian was effectively abandoned and forgotten in favour of a dialect version of the Gujarati in Western India. . . . the Parsis followed the taboo against the eating of beef or pork, adhered to by the Hindus and Muslims respectively, according to . . . the Parsi neighbourhood. (Palsetia13)

Parsis have also been so receptive to several other Indian practices that it has become so difficult to sift and identify the antiquities of a good number of their social customs and practices as those that are Persian and those that are not. In his The Marriage Ceremony of the Parsees, Sir Jivanjee Jamshedji Modi declares: “After the several vicissitudes of fortune that the Parsee community has passed through, it is difficult to determine how many, and which, of their marriage customs are originally Zoroastrian or Persian, and how many, and which, are taken from their sister communities of India” (2).

Sir Modi, in The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees, claims that “Some families, following the Hindu custom observe the fifth day after birth, known as
pachory (i.e., the fifth day), and the tenth day, known as dasori (i.e., the tenth day), as gala days, but these days have no religious signification” (5). He cites a good number of Hindu traditions, which are followed among Parsis in their various ceremonies; it is not rare, for the Parsis “to resort to Hindu astrologers to name one or more auspicious days for the betrothal or marriage or such other auspicious events”(14); the Parsi bride and groom wear “the mark of a Kunkun (red pigment) on the forehead, a Hindu practice” (18); the once “customary washing of the feet of the couple and fun play around the removal and hiding of the bridegroom’s shoes”(35); the “repeat in Sanskrit of the matrimonial address, if so desired by the family, in reminiscence of the address in Sanskrit reportedly made to make it intelligible to the Hindu Raja and his courtiers when the Parsis first emigrated to India” (33). Parsis exhibited a remarkable adaptability to the neighbourhood. The Parsis, “while continuing the sacrifice of goats, had had to give up that of cows and bulls on settling among Hindu” (Boyce 173-174). Again in the ablution ceremonies, nirang / gomez, the consecrated urine of bull is used; the “urine is taken from a special pure white bull,” says Fischer (61); Parsis, perhaps influenced by Hindu traditions, also use the cow’s urine. Quoting Videvdad (19.21) Mendoza Forrest says that for purification:

\[
\ldots \text{the urine of an ungelded bull is used}. \ldots
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The use of gomez for purification is an Indo- Iranian custom that survives even today. The word gomez does not give us any indication as to whether this urine is taken from a cow or a bull. In India, cow urine is used, but it seems that bull’s urine was preferred in Iran. (123)

However, some of the social practices of the Indian setting delved into and stretched Parsi adaptability further, posing a threat to the Parsi exclusiveness; these are examples of the
encircling dominant cultures diffusing through the porosity of the community in spite of its stated resistive attempts:

Child marriage, bigamy, and the worshipping and frequenting of non-Zoroastrian religious sites were practices adhered to by some Parsis . . . as borrowed from Hindus and Muslims . . . and unsanctioned under Zoroastrianism. Repeated attempts would be made to remove these practices in the history of the Parsis. (Palsetia 13)

While the Parsis partially assimilated into the Indian settings as part of the covenants on immigration and they were blended for varied reasons with some of the Indian practices on acquaintances over a period of time, they fiercely protected their racial and religious identities through strict rules of endogamy and a ban on conversion to Zoroastrianism. Despite several interpolations in their social customs from other cultures, it “can be said with well-nigh a certainty, that the strictly solemn or the religious part of the ceremony, wherein the priests take part, is more or less originally Persian”(Modi13). Though the community abandoned its language in favour of Gujarati, significantly its “prayers and religious rituals continued to be recited in Avestan” (Palsetia13).

In sheer contrast to their general adaptability, Parsis preserve with pride their exclusive religious tradition and stoutly abhor deflecting from it, even braving the threat of extinction; it is primal to them and for the preservation of it, they did not hesitate to forego their homeland and did undergo a cycle of migrations. John Fletcher Hurst observes that, “Parsis could have remained in Persia, had they been willing to adopt the Mohammedan faith. But the religion of Zoroaster had too strong a hold on them. They would not sacrifice one of its tenets. They preferred exile to another religion” (135). Worship in fire-temple is restricted to Parsis; Jamsheed K.Choksy says: “Parsis do not permit nonbelievers or converts to enter fire temples. Devotees, who must possess
Zoroastrian paternity, are required to don prayer caps or scarves and perform the *padyab*, or purification, and *kusti*, or holy cord rites, before worship“(570). Thus, Parsi acculturation is a composite mixture of issue based assimilation, adaptation and resistance according to priorities, conveniences, influences, compulsions and convictions.

A glimpse of their religious practices shows how the Zoroastrian teachings immensely influenced the Parsis’ social life and how they remained intact and committed to their religion in spite of the adverse situation prevalent in the settled land. Zoroaster (Zarathushtra), born in Azerbaijan, North Iran, sought to reform the existing polytheistic beliefs of the ancient Persians. His thoughts and teachings, collected in their holy book, *Avesta*, also called Zend Avesta are the basis of Zoroastrianism. *Avesta* is a collection of ancient Holy Scriptures in the Avestan language and includes *Yasna, Khorda Avesta, Visperad, Vendidad*, and other fragments. Other major sacred literatures like *Arda Viraf, Bundahishn, Greater Bundahishn, Chidag Andarz, Denkard, Pazand Texts*, and the *Rivayats* are in Pahlavi (Mid-Persian) language. Zoroaster preached belief in a supreme being, the Ahura Mazda, who embodied the virtues of goodness and truth and was symbolized by light and fire. He saw the world as the scene of a spiritual combat in which man had to choose between Ahura Mazda representing good and wise, and Ahriman, the evil.

Zoroastrianism is the ancient, pre-Islamic religion of Persia. It survives there in the isolated areas but more prosperously in India, among the Parsis. It is the world’s oldest revealed religion predating Christianity probably by more than a couple of millennia. Since pre-history, it has withstood repeated persecutions, destruction of most of its recorded history and tenets, displacement to distant lands and the assimilation into alien customs and languages - still passionately holding intact its core beliefs “*Humata, Hukta, Huvarsta*” (Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds). The core beliefs have
remained intact because these beliefs are practical, life-driving forces. The Prophet demands his followers’ active participation in fighting evil wholeheartedly.

The Prophet saw fire to be the physical representation of “Asha” (Order, Truth, or Righteousness), and as a source of light, warmth and life for His people. As fire is of very special significance to them, all the religious rituals are solemnized in the presence of fire, the life-energy. In the Parsi temples, the sacred fire, “Atash Behram,” continuously burns emitting the sweet smell of scented sandalwood. A smaller ritual fire is also found in every Zoroastrian's home. Their worship of fire is the highest and purest symbol of the Divinity. The prophet saw pessimism and desolation as sin, in fact, as yielding to evil. In his teachings, man is encouraged to lead an active, industrious, honest and above all, a happy and charitable life. Chastity is a fundamental virtue of the Zoroastrian faith. It is also his duty to protect his subject from impending anger; to extend agriculture and industry by supplying cattle implements. It is their responsibility to help defenceless women and children and old men; and to erect hospitals and maintain hospitals and supply means of relief to sickness.

Next to their religion, Parsis harbour a sort of devotion bordering on obsession towards the Persian kings and kingdoms that patronised their religion before their ancestors fled Persia several hundreds of years ago. John F. Hurst asserts: “There is nothing of which the typical Parsi is prouder, next to the creed he gets from Zoroaster, than of his historical traditions. He loves to think of his old kings, Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius, and all the rest, when the world quaked beneath their armies”(151).

A look farther into the Persian History of the Zoroastrian ancestors of the Parsis will enable one to understand in the right perspective the ancestry, rich heritage and religious ethnicity of the Indian Parsis. Fars represents the little province of Parsua (forming part of the modern Iran), which has given its name and was home to one of the
greatest civilizations of antiquity, with historical and urban settlements dating back to 4000 BC. Persian Empire spanned from Egypt in the west to Turkey in the north, and through Mesopotamia to the Indus River in the east. By the 5th century B.C.E., it was the largest empire the world had ever seen; it gave rise to the three major dynasties – the Achaemenids, the Parthians, and the Sasanians.

Persia witnessed close interaction between politics and religion in one of the great historic cultures of the ancient world. Cyrus the Great, claiming descent from one Achaemenes, called Hakhamanesh in Persian, founded the Achaemenid Empire, also called the First Persian Empire, that ruled between 550 and 330 BCE. The empire marks the beginning of Persian history and is notable for including various civilizations and becoming the largest empire of ancient history, spanning at its maximum extent from the Balkans and Eastern Europe proper in the west, to the Indus Valley in the east. Cambyses II (r531 – 522 BCE), son of Cyrus the Great, and Darius the Great (r 522 – 486 BCE) were the other prominent rulers of the Achaemenid dynasty. The Achaemenids were patrons of Zoroastrianism, but were inclusive and tolerant of other religions and cultures.

Between 334 BCE and 331 BCE Alexander the Great defeated Darius III in the battles of Granicus, Issus and Gaugamela, swiftly conquering the Persian Empire by 331 BCE. Shortly after Alexander’s death in 323 BCE, his general, Seleucus I Nicator established the Seleucid Dynasty and took control of Persia. Soon the Zoroastrian faith faced its downturn. However, around 238 BCE, a Parthian tribal chief called Arsaces I of Parthia took over the Parthian territory, from Andragoras, the Seleucid rebel satrap of Parthia to form the Arsacid Dynasty - the starting point of the powerful Parthian Empire. The Parthians, a group of North Eastern Iranians, were heavily influenced by Hellenistic culture. However, Parthians patronized Zoroastrianism and the decaying faith again
revived under them; but the holy Avestan language was replaced by the Pahlavi, the Parthian language. Parthians are not zealous defenders of Zoroastrianism like their successors, the Sasanids. Malcolm observes that there was a general confusion on the observance of Zoroastrian virtues and the authority of the magi and “the worship established by Zoroaster had been neglected, and the nation was distracted by a thousand schisms” and “that several monarchs of the Parthian dynasty inclined to the religion of the Greeks” (74).

The dynasty of the Arsacides reigned until Ardashir, a Persian prince, founded in his turn a national dynasty, viz., that of the Sassanides (226 A.D). Ardashir came from the province of Fars (originally known as Pars) from where the Achaemenids came. The Sassanian Empire marks a turning-point in the history of Persia.

The name of Parthia, which western writers had given to Persia, after the death of Alexander, ceased at his elevation; and the kingdom which he founded was recognised as that of Persia. His countrymen deem Ardisheer the restorer of that great empire, which had been created by Cyrus and lost by Darius. (73)

Ardashir “not only laboured to restore the authority of the magi, but enforced, by sanguinary persecutions, a strict attention to the orthodox tenets of their religion” (74). Image worship was abolished; and a belief in one god restored. The remaining Avestan literature was collected and arranged. According to Malcolm, the poet Ferdosi has given the testament of the monarch, Ardisheer, in the form of a dying charge to his son, Shahpoor, and it exhibits the nexus between religion and government:

“Never forget,” said Ardisheer, “that, as a king, you are at once the protector of religion and of your country. Consider the altar and the throne
as inseparable; they must always sustain each other. A sovereign without religion is a tyrant; and a people who have none, may be deemed the most monstrous of all societies. Religion may exist without a state, but a state cannot exist without religion; it is by holy laws that a political association can alone be bound . . . .” (74)

Zoroastrianism was exalted to a state religion and was enabled to make inroads into the political authority; the primacy and influence of the religion are apparent in the words of William Hurd: “. . . such was the respect paid to them, that no king could take possession of the throne, till he had been first been instructed in their principles; nor could they determine any affair of importance, till it had received their approbation” (44). Bernard Lewis rightly holds the Persian theory of kingship as basically religious. According to him:

The Sasanids, in contrast to the Parthians, had introduced a kind of state Church, which in turn sanctified the royal power, and took an active part in social and political life. It was run by a minutely regulated hierarchy, under the supreme authority of the High Priest, exercising not only spiritual but also worldly authority, with lands, tithes, and privileges. The higher ranks of the priesthood also belonged to the aristocracy, and thus formed a kind of noblesse de ro. (136)

The Sasanian period forms a brilliant page in the history of Zoroastrianism and the “Zoroastrian faith and priesthood gained great power from this link with the state” (29).

The ancient Zoroastrianism thus enjoyed the patronage of the Empires for several hundreds of years and was:
the state religion of three dynasties that ruled over the ancient Persian empire; the Achaemenids (550 - 330BCE), the Arsacids or Parthians (247 BCE - 224 CE) and the Sasanians (224 - 651CE). Between the first and second dynasties came conquest by Alexander of Macedon, known among Zoroastrians as Alexander the Destroyer, around 330 BCE. (Sharafi 16)

The emergence of the new religion Islam (610CE), the formation of a theocratic state in Medina (622CE) and the consolidation of the Arab tribes by Prophet Muhammed (571-632CE) set the stage for the rise of Arabs against the Persians. The ruthless patricidal and fratricidal killings within the Sassanid royal family on the ascension of the last powerful and long serving Emperor Khoshrow – II (r 590, 591-628) – weakened the dynasty; the upheavals by the local clans against the central authority – caused disintegration into tinier territories which were eventually pocketed by the enemies in stages; the offshoot of Zoroastrian heresies undermined the cohesiveness of the state religion and the authority of the priests and created friction between the emperors and the clergy; and the machinations of the priests and nobles in overthrowing the emperor and manoeuvring the royal successions and ascensions – created chaos in the empire and all in turn weakened the rulers.

However, the real danger revealed itself and came to strike only with the advent of Islam, the formation of a theocratic Islamic state by Prophet Mohamed and the consolidation of the Arabs under the Caliphs, who had already conquered several provinces when King Yezdezard could make preparations for resistance. The Arabs succeeded rapidly, their troops were strengthened by hordes of Nomads joining them on the orders of the Caliph. The Persian army was entirely destroyed and the royal standard fell into the hands of the Arabs. Yezdezard III, the last Sassanian emperor of Persia fled to Hoiwan and Persia passed into the hands of the Caliphs.
The fissures and internal squabbles emboldened the enemies. The Arabs orchestrated several invasions between 633 and 651CE, pillaged the establishment, plundered the culture and the mighty empire evaporated into history. The Zoroastrian religion once nurtured under the shadow of the crown, met its downfall when the political authority is lost. The Nomadic Arabs under the garb of Islam developed an alien political climate which shattered, frightened and crumbled the Persian culture and the Zoroastrians were nudged into subjugation or forced to desert their homelands and flee away from the invaders to protect their tradition and religion.

Iranians, in fact, fought long and hard against the invading Arabs. Many provinces resisted the invaders, but none was able to repulse the invasion; there were continued rebellion, but reinforcements from the Caliphs succeeded in putting down all these rebellions and imposing the rule of Islam. Conversion to Islam was set in progress. In the process, many acts of violence took place, Zoroastrian scriptures were burnt and many “mobads” (Zoroastrian high priests) executed. The conquered nation was to accept the one or the other – Koran or taxes. Oppression forced people in thousands to renounce the faith of their forefathers in quick succession; the fire-temples and other sacred places were wiped out or converted into mosques. Bernard observes that the followers of Zoroastrian faith and their priests who enjoyed great power under the Sasanids suffered the consequences of this relationship when that state was itself overthrown and that:

The Zoroastrian priestly establishment perished with the Persian Empire. After the destruction of that empire by the Arab conquest, Zoroastrianism entered into a long decline, unbroken by any kind of revival, even by any share in later revivals of Iranian political and cultural life in Islamic times. (29)
The ruling political as well as the religious establishment was too weakened to offer any meaningful resistance. But certain amongst the Mazdiens offered resistance and even succeeded in remaining in their father-land.

Such religious resistance as was offered to the advance of Islam in Iran came not from the orthodox Zoroastrian priesthood, but rather from Zoroastrian heresies, that is, from those who were accustomed to opposition and repression, not from those accustomed to the exercise of authority. (29-30)

Others, unwilling to accept the law of the Koran, abandoned their hearths, and went and dwelt in the mountainous districts of Khorassan. As Delphine Menant puts it, “. . . the followers of Zoroaster V who would not accept the religion of Islam expatriated themselves. Those who could not abandon their country, and continued to cling to their old religion, had to resign themselves to frightful sufferings. These dwelt chiefly in Pars and Khorassan”(41). But persecution at last reached them even in those remote districts and they were once again compelled to fly from the enemies of their faith; a considerable number immigrated to the little island of Ormus, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Their stay at this retreat was, however, but of short duration. Here they procured vessels and embarked with their wives and children and at last determined to give up forever the land of their fore fathers rather than fall a prey to the invading religion. Bernard Lewis observes that:

The Zoroastrians, lacking both the encouragement of powerful friends abroad enjoyed by the Christians and the bitter skill in survival possessed by the Jews, fared badly. Some fled to India, where a small community of them, known as Parsees, remains to the present day. In Iran, orthodox Zoroastrians dwindled to a tiny minority. (218)
The Zoroastrian community was thus thrashed to a naught on the fall of the empire. The fall was largely traced to the infightings and failures of the rulers and the people paid for it. Menant asserts: “The people suffered from the carelessness of their kings; individual energy was powerless against the invasion of disciplined and fanatical tribes, commanded by generals like Omar and his officers. The Persian nation was singularly maltreated. The national unity was broken” (40).

Menant is categorical about maltreatment by the Islamic invaders; however, she plays rather soft on the failures of the Persian kings that bore the cascading effect of throwing their subjects into devastation; she chooses to brush their failures as carelessness. But, G. K. Nariman (1873-1933), a Parsi scholar and an advocate of friendly relationship with Islam takes a totally different view on Arab cruelties. He is highly critical of the Sasanian rulers and directly blames their vices for the fall of the Empire. Though Nariman utterly disregards the fact that history is replete with abundant evidences on the Islamic maltreatment of the Persian Zoroastrian, his views on misdeeds and failures of the Sasanian kings cannot be ignored. Dinyar Patel, quoting from Nariman’s *Persia and the Parsis* says:

Nariman shattered the idealized portrayal of the Sasanian Empire upheld by most Parsis, noting rampant polygamy, concubinage, slavery, and abuse of power in the last years of the Zarathushti era. Arab invaders, Nariman argued, hardly deserved their appellation as uncivilized barbarians and, in a similar vein; Islam could not be blamed for the supposed ‘fall’ of Iran: “A dispassionate comparative study of Sasanian Persia and Persia under Islam raises the question: Are those quite justified who lay the relative backwardness of modern Persia entirely at the door of Islam? Was Sasanian Iran in its later days so immeasurably superior in national ethics
and social organization? Why did then the mighty edifice collapse so hopelessly under the shock of a few thousand miserable ‘lizard-eaters’, veritably like a pack of cards? It came down because the moral foundations of the nation were sapped by religious maniacs and it ultimately survived the cataclysm because it had clung to some of the planks of shipwrecked Zoroastrianism.” (43)

However, in spite of the inexplicable miseries cast on their ancestors due to the indisputable failure of their kings, it remains that Parsis are prouder even today of the Persian Kings, next only to the religious creed.

The Indian subcontinent does not befall as a random destination by default or accident for the migrants in desperation, but appears to be a conscious choice for asylum. Menant extensively quotes from various sources that go to say that “Closer connection between India and Persia dates from the restoration of the Persian power under the Sassanide dynasty” (13) and asserts that the, “relations between Persia and India had been rather frequent, and it was precisely their former intercourse, rendered closer a few centuries before the Arab invasion, that made this migration possible” (11-12).

Given the fact that the spirit of persecution was more or less strong amongst the conquerors, it is scarcely probable that there could have been only one migration of the Persians; there must have been many such, at different periods, and the earlier commercial and social contacts facilitated such migrations. However, the traditions concerning this subject are vague and they are in:

. . . absolute ignorance as to the mode of their departure, and the number of those who, in despair, had to quit the Persian Gulf. The only information that we can get at concerning this subject is that contained in a book
entitled Kissah -i- Sanjan, written towards the year 1600 by a Mazdien priest called Behram Kaikobad Sanjana, who dwelt in Naosari. (17-18)

It is not unusual that immigrant societies without a verifiable record of history have, in the words of Rashna Singh: “their own originary tales and legends of arrival. The commonality in all of these apocryphal accounts is that they provide foundational myths that serve a metaphorical purpose in expressing community identity and adaptation to changed cultural contexts and circumstances” (1224).

The Qissa-i-Sanjan is such an apocryphal account of Parsi immigration. According to this legend, Parsis descended from a group of Zoroastrians from Iran who immigrated to Gujarat in western India during the 8th or 10th century CE, to avoid persecution by Muslim invaders. Diu, a small town on the Gulf of Cambay to the south of the Kathyawar coast, was the first port where the refugees landed. Here they dwelt for nearly twenty years, at the end of which they sought for another residence. There is a mysterious passage in the Qissa -i- Sanjan upon the second migration to Sanjan from Diu at the instance of an old Dastoor (high-priest) to leave Diu and seek another residence; no sooner did they leave the coast of Diu than a storm allegedly hit them. The Persians in desperation implored the aid of God and the tempest muted and they landed at Sanjan, a coastal town on the Western Gujarat. A Dastoor is said to have narrated to Jadi Rana also known as Jadav Rana, the ruler of Sanjan, their misfortunes and asked for his countrymen permission to settle in Sanjan:

Legend has it that when the newcomers first asked to live among his people, Jadav Rana sent a bowl of milk filled to the brim to signal that there was no space for anymore people in his kingdom. The people from Pars added sugar to the milk and returned the bowl. The message was that
they would dissolve like sugar without displacing the milk and, in fact, sweeten it and thus, symbolically the land. (1224)

Rana, it is said, was also not pleased at the strange warlike appearance of the refugees, and enquired of their usages and customs. During their sojourn at Diu, the Persians had learnt sufficiently well the customs and practices of the Hindus and could therefore satisfactorily answer highlighting the consistent common and non-affronting practices. J. F. Hurst observes: “The prince . . . gave them full liberty to reside and practise their religion in his province of Sanjan. They enjoyed three centuries of quiet, during which time they were reinforced throughout the Gujarat region” (135).

The permission to inhabit was on condition that the Persians adopted the language of the country and ceased to speak that of their ancestors; that their women should dress according to the Hindu mode; that the men should no longer carry weapons, and should perform their marriage ceremonies at night, according to Hindu custom. These conditions did not deter the people in quest for peace and rest; they accepted them without any inhibitions. They have adopted Gujarati as their mother tongue and adapted to the host society. They settled down in the vast tract of land not far from Sanjan, and with full hearts offered prayers to Hormuzd. They raised the altar for lighting the sacred fire in fulfilment of the vow they had made at the time of their memorable voyage from Diu to Sanjan. The Hindus, far from opposing this, helped to build the temple and Zoroastrian rites and ceremonies began to be performed from that time on Indian soil. The Parsis suffered no persecution at Sanjan and were peacefully allowed to prosper and grow. Over years, their numbers having increased, some migrated to other places: in the north, to Cambay, Ankleswar, Variav, Vankaner and Surat; in the south, to Thana and Chaul to name a few. Whenever they left Sanjan to settle elsewhere, they carried with
them a part of the Iranshah – the first fire they had consecrated on Indian soil. Islam came to revisit and haunt them even in India:

> When the Mohammedans from Persia, in their march of conquest, finally reached India, and set up the great Mogul empire in the valleys of the Ganges and the Indus, the Parsis were again in great danger. They feared the cruelty of the same hand which had made them exiles for ever from their native country. They allied themselves with the Hindu chiefs, and yet both Hindu and Parsi were captured. (135-136)

In 1465 Sanjan was sacked and destroyed by the Muslim Sultanate and many fled to the mountains of Bahrout, eight miles east of Sanjan; the cave where the sacred fire, the priests managed to rescue, was deposited. Parsis continued to apply themselves to agriculture following their doctrine and throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Parsis in Gujarat were agriculturalists and craftsmen.

In the midst of the calamities that followed the overthrow of the Rana of Sanjan, the Parsis faced further displacements in search of peace and security. But all climes were not as hospitable as Sanjan. In Sind, Ibrahim the Ghaznavid perceived the Parsis as a colony of fire-worshippers and attacked them. In Thana, which was ruled by the Portuguese, they were seen as idolaters and put upon by missionaries to convert to Christianity. The territorial dispersal of the community gave rise to difficulties in defining the limits of priestly jurisdiction leading to the formation in 1290 CE of five panthaks or districts - Sanjan, Nausari, Ankleswar, Broach and Cambay- each under the jurisdiction of one priestly family and their descendants. Continuing disputes over the jurisdiction over the Atash Bahram led to the fire being moved to Udwada in 1742, where jurisdiction is today shared in rotation among the five panthak families.
The Europeans on their arrival saw the wealth of the Parsis, their business acumen and reliability on all commercial matters; the wealthy region of Surat, the original home of the Parsi immigrants, attracted the European traders and Parsis became natural choice for doing business with. The Parsi-European connect benefitted both and was the beginning of the amazing commercial prosperity of the Parsis. The Parsi business guile came into play in interceding favours for the traders from the rulers accommodating the differences between the companies and the native rulers which otherwise would have run into rough weathers. In 1660, for example:

Rastan Manak the chief broker of the English factory in Surat, by a personal audience with the Mogul Emperor Aurangazeb, at his palace in Delhi, not only caused the removal of obstacles which the Hindu nobles were now placing in the way of the English, but secured a gift of land for building a factory and the freedom from duty of all imported goods. (137)

Following the commercial treaty in the early 17th century between Mughal emperor Jahangir and James I of England, the British East India Company obtained the exclusive rights to reside and build factories in Surat and other areas. Unhampered by caste prejudices, Surat provided an ideal opportunity for Parsis to engage in occupations that they had never attempted before. Many Parsis, who until then had been living in farming communities throughout Gujarat, moved to the British run settlements to take the new jobs offered; farmers became traders and chief native agents, and carpenters became shipbuilders.

When the Parsis first arrived in Bombay in the mid-seventeenth century, Bombay was then a Portuguese colony of only a set of small islands in the wilderness. Here, the Parsis acted as brokers between the Indians and the Portuguese. Meanwhile, Parsis in Thana had to face a threat of conversion in the hands of the Portuguese missionaries
whom the Parsis cleverly avoided by fleeing out of their territory only to return when Bombay became a British colony. The condition of Bombay then in the hands of Portuguese was pathetic; on first coming to take its possession from the Portuguese, in September of 1662, “as part of the dowry of the Infanta Catherine of Braganza to Charles II, Captain James Ley of the Royal Navy conveyed his disappointment at the sight of the paltry island” (Palsetia32). Palsetia further adds that as some of the first inhabitants, the Parsis, “. . . had better gleaned the potential of Bombay . . . and had brought some order to the physical environment even before the final British takeover in February of 1665. . . .” (32).

In 1668, the British East India Company obtained from the British Crown the seven islands of Bombay on lease and declared that all persons born in Bombay would become natural subjects of England; all communities migrating to Bombay were guaranteed religious freedom and were permitted to build their houses within the fort walls, alongside the British, where they would be protected from any hostile attacks. The Parsis were quicker to recognise and seize this unique historical opportunity and came to Bombay earlier than most others and in larger numbers. According to Gillian Tindall, the Parsi migration to Bombay “was almost, as if the Parsis sensed in the arrival of the English, a unique historical opportunity that was to be as momentous for them in the long run as the chance that had carried them to Gujarat a thousand years before” (73).

The British, as recorded in The ASI Report-1879, found the Parsis “peaceable in obedience to the tenets of their religion” (103) and from a narrower perspective held the Parsis as “genuine, pure, and typical Aryans” (102) and put themselves in the same illusionary plank with pride: “But, nevertheless, we British Europeans are Aryans, and far more pure and genuine Aryans than the Hindus . . . .” (104) and evinced greater interest in engaging with the Parsis. Besides the racial similarities and preferences, commercial
expedience played a role of convenience; Gerald Aungier, the then Governor of Bombay reports to his masters in England that the Parsis “are an industrious people and ingenious in trade, wherein they totally employ themselves. There are at present few of them [in Bombay] but we expect a greater number of them, having gratified them in their desire to build a burying place for their dead on the island” (Luhrmann85).

Parsis benefited from both British education and trade; many of the first Parsis who came to Bombay to make their fortune and name were the founders of great families closely connected with the development of the Parsi community. These Parsis were honoured with titles and emoluments from the British and they in turn encouraged the advent of other Parsis to Bombay. Drought and famine in Gujarat periodically witnessed the migration of Parsis to Bombay, and they were provided assistance by their fellow fortunate Parsis. Unlike the Hindus who were handicapped by caste taboos and the Muslims who suffered the psychological trauma caused by their defeat at the hands of the British, the Parsis had no difficulty in taking up any work or in aligning with the British. They were among the first Indians to accept English language and education and became one of the most westernised of Indian communities to work with the British. In turn, the colonising British who were into expansion of their territories found the fair-skinned Parsis more submissive, brilliant and co-operative and best suited as their deputies to handle the native Indians. Unlike the British, who were also migrants several hundred years before, the Parsis were settlers for succour with no desire to conquer. The patronage of the British brought about great social and economic success to the community and the Parsis utilized the opportunity the best for religious reforms and strengthening of Parsi identity and uplift and stormed into the power centre and gained financial supremacy.

Literacy for the Parsis, before the arrival of the British, had been an exclusive domain of the priesthood. The British schools provided the Parsi youth with the
opportunity to be educated in the greater sense of the term and to become familiar with
the peculiarities of the British establishment. Parsis elected to “represent themselves as
being like the British,” and they did it “more diligently and effectively than perhaps any
other South Asian community” (Luhrmann 861). While the British saw the other Indians,
“as passive, ignorant, irrational, outwardly submissive but inwardly guileful” (333), they
found the Parsis to possess those traits that the colonial authorities tended to ascribe to
themselves. James Mackintosh, Recorder of Bombay from 1804 to 1811, observes that:

The Parsees are a small remnant of one of the mightiest nations of the
ancient world, who, flying from persecution into India, were for many ages
lost in obscurity and poverty, till at length they met a just government
under which they speedily rose to be one of the most popular mercantile
bodies in Asia. (206)

The British were also enamoured of the people of this community because they were
quite adept in English and wore a good complexion as compared to their native
counterparts. Critic Coomi Vevaina observes:

The Raj highlighted their outsider position by creating in the Parsis a
‘fairer-therefore-better-than-most-Indian’ complex thereby alienating them
from most of their countrymen. Though many intellectuals resisted it and
even joined the independence movements against the British, most Parsis
gulped down the untruth and felt pleased with the preferential treatment
meted out to them by the empire builders. (338)

One of the enterprising agents Rustom Manock (1635 – 1719) who had already amassed
fortune under the Dutch and Portuguese in 1702 was appointed the first broker (so also
acquiring the name “Seth”) to the East India Company, and in the following years he and
his Parsi associates widened the occupational and financial horizons of the larger Parsi community. As James Forbes, the Collector of Broach, now Bharuch, would note: “many of the principal merchants and owners of ships at Bombay and Surat are Parsees” (79).

The Parsis achieved remarkable success in trade and commerce; they excelled in education, banking, law, medicine, journalism, led social reforms from the front, influential with the imperial rulers, and were the most generous benefactors to public charity; they maintained a well thought out unstinted loyalty to the British and never hesitated to acknowledge their insignificant numbers and to boast of their loyalty as a virtue: “Though the Parsees form one of the smallest sections in this great imperial family their loyalty has always been conspicuous” (Bengalee iv). The British in turn were proud to call the Parsis their fellow subjects and rewarded and fastened the Parsi loyalty further by elevating a number of Parsi families to noble rank. Their relationship with the colonial state of India has always been one of loyalty and being a miniscule minority, their survival largely depends on adaptation to the political authority. While guarding their own ethnic, cultural and religious identity with fierce pride, they are always mindful of their status and are friendly with the neighbours. This strategic conduct evolved them as successful mediators between the colonial power and the colonised Indian.

Parsis have no caste divisions and no religious restrictions about food. They have remained faithful to their Zoroastrian faith and are proud of their racial purity. Marriage with outsiders is rare. They strictly follow their customs, religious practices and related prayers. The navjote, or initiation into the religion, takes place before puberty between the ages of seven and nine for both boys and girls. It is the first time that the child wears the armour of the religion the “sudrah” (shirt), “kusti” (holy thread), which should then be worn every day for the rest of his / her life. Zoroastrianism believes that children cannot sin for they cannot find the difference between right and wrong. Once children freely
choose to be initiated, they become adults responsible for their own thoughts, words, deeds, which will determine the fate of their souls on judgment day.

Zoroastrians follow a distinct practice in the disposal of their dead. Once the dead body is taken out of the house after the recital of “Ahunavaiti Gatha” is complete, the room is sprinkled with cow’s urine for purification of the area. Parsis do not cremate or bury the dead, instead they leave their dead body on marble platforms inside Dakhma, the Tower of Silence, where they are then devoured by vultures and subsequently cleaned by the environment. This is done to ensure purity of the elements. It is observed that the Persian Zoroastrian Kings followed a procedure different from their subjects of the faith for the disposal of the dead. While discussing about the religious identity of Cyrus, the Great, Boyce argues that as regards “the rite of exposure,” the Achaemenians set a precedent for kings to regard them as above this particular religious law and that the Parthians and Sasanids followed it:

The fact that his corpse was not exposed according to the orthodox rite might seem at first sight to disprove his Zoroastrianism, but not only the Achaemenians, but also their successors, the Arsacids and the Sasanians, maintained a distinctive rite of embalming the bodies of kings and placing them in sepulchres of living rock or stone. There is no sanction for such a practice in the Avesta or in Pahlavi literature, indeed tombs for the dead are always referred to there with unqualified condemnation. . . . The preservation of royal bodies was probably linked with the concept of the king's royal khvarenah (divine mystical force), thought of as abiding at his tomb to the benefit of his successors and the people at large. There is scattered evidence for a special cult of the royal dead; and the practice of embalming their bodies. (52)
This idea of “khvarenah” and “mummying” is reflected in Patel’s poem “Grandparents at Family Get-Together.”

The Parsis have many festivals but no pilgrimage sites as such. The festivals are not marked by grand processions and music as is common to most of the other religions. According to the Parsis there are six seasons in a year and a significant festival occurs in each. Navroz is the Parsis New Year day. It is the time of piety, feasting and rejoicing. Pateti is in fact the Eve of the Zoroastrian New Year which provides an occasion to redeem oneself by offering patet or the prayer of repentance and prepare to greet the New Year with a clean conscience.

The major and distinct Parsi traditions on marriage, conversion, adoption, and other Zoroastrian practices have all undergone changes with the change in time, places, the rulers and the society they lived in. Similarly the image of any ballpark estimation of Zoroastrian faith, traditions, and rituals amongst its followers in general – cannot rightly be claimed to be representative of that of Parsi Zoroastrians in particular. Parsis have acquired this exclusivity from their co-religionists for and out of reasons of both adaptability and resistance as well to the cultures encircling them in the societies they lived in. There has been a mixed behaviour of selective mingling with and withdrawal from other cultures for varied social, religious, economic, ethnic, eugenic and legal reasons; this in turn blended the Parsis into an ethnicity of its own, distinct from people even of its own origin and religion. An analysis of ancient Zoroastrian traditions and of the community’s days in India will help to elucidate those that Parsis have retained as inheritance and those that have evolved and accrued during their transitions. Patel gives emphasis to all these in his works.

Zoroastrian ethics exhort active participation in life through good deeds and asceticism is not a religious virtue. This characteristic differentiates this faith broadly
from many other great religions of the world. “All forms of abstinence which lead to the
dimination of life-forces are rigorously excluded. Thus celibacy continued for a long time
is prohibited” (Maganlal 85). Ervad Bharucha, in an essay on the Zoroastrian Religion &
Customs, unambiguously summarises the ideologies on Zoroastrian marriage thus:

The Zoroastrian religion, as the supporter of Spentomainyush, or the
principle of increase, and as the opponent of Angromainyush, or the
principle of decrease, inculcates marriage as a sacred duty. Zoroaster in his
Gathas forcibly enjoins his own daughter and all his followers never to
remain unmarried. The Vendiad speaks of the giving of a sister or a
daughter in marriage to a good husband as a meritorious deed. In the same
work a married man is preferred to an unmarried one and celibacy is
discountenanced and reproved. (36)

Dhalla points out that unlike Mani, a Zoroastrian heretic of Parthian origin, for
whom “marriage was a vice for the priest, (and) a reluctant concession to the layman” to
the religion of Zoroaster, “it is neither the one nor the other; it is a positive virtue for
both” (268). It is a cardinal duty of every true Zoroastrian to marry, rear a family,
propagate lineage and do the work of Renovation. “Marriage is doubly an obligation,
being a religious duty to the Church, a civic duty to the State. Hence both the Church and
the State encouraged married life in Iran. It is considered a highly meritorious form of
charity to help a poor man to marry” (267).

A striking feature of ancient Zoroastrian marriages is marriage within relations
termed “khvetvadatha.” The Book of Arda Viraf, a Pahlavi text, contains the account of an
imaginary journey of Arda Viraf through heaven and hell, reciting of rewards and
punishments after death for deeds or omissions in life. It speaks of distinct “tracks” and
“places” for rewarding souls in heaven and of “punishments” in hell; “the souls of the
“liberal” find an exalted place “above the other souls.” Among these liberal souls is placed in “lofty splendour” and “sublime,” the “soul of those who contract next-of-kin marriages” next only to the souls of those who were steadfast in the religion, but before and above the souls of “good rulers and monarchs” and of “the great” and “truthful speakers” (Chapter 12). Contrarily the soul of a “wicked woman who violated a next-of-kin marriage” was attacked by a “grievous snake” (Chapter 86). The religious codes, including Dinkard, approve of the next-of-kin marriage as good work and denounce its dissolution as a heinous sin. The Pahlavi text Arda Viraf mentions that, “Viraf had seven sisters, and all those seven sisters were as wives of Viraf” (Chapter 2). The Avroman parchments - legal documents dated way back in 88 and 22/21 B.C., which were found in 1909 in a sealed jar in a cave near Avroman, in Persian Kurdistan – refer to next-of-kin marriages; the dating formulas in these documents which contain the throne name of the reigning king, the names of his chief wives, and their relation by birth, suggest marriages between brothers and sisters. Boyce says:

These formulas provide clear contemporary evidence that the Arsacids followed the Achaemenians in practising 'khvaetvadatha'. . . (that) the custom was not confined to princes is shown by the observation of Bardesanes, writing in the second century A.C., who cited the practice of next-of-kin marriages among the Persians of Asia Minor as an example of how people cling to ancestral customs even when dwelling in foreign parts. (96-97)

Maganlal Buch attributes eugenic as well as religious reasons for such marriages: “The custom was recommended because it tends to preserve the purity of race, to increase the compatibility of husband and wife, and to increase the affection for children. Another motive was to prevent perversions of faith”(130). He recognises these proximate
marriages as an instrument of enhanced harmony in the family and as a facilitator of intense religious adherence; he adds:

It is apparent that difference of race cannot secure an advantageous condition to pass life in connivance at defects, similarity of thoughts, participation in benefits or injuries occasioned to one or the other, and contentedness over what is earned . . . . Men should tie the knot of marriage with believers in the religion, so that strength might accrue to them and to the people of their race for deliverance from hell by means of prayers and devotions to God. (118)

Western scholars and modern Parsis differ over the meaning of the term khvetvadatha; for the former “it once meant the marriage between nearest relations, between parents and children and brothers and sisters” while the modern Parsis maintain that “it means and it always meant marriage between first cousins” (129). To Ervad Bharucha, it is the ‘unfortunate nomenclature’ khvetvadatha that led to the misgiving “that ‘next-of-kin marriages’ were allowed among the ancient Iranians” whereas “such incestuous marriages were never allowed among the Zoroastrians” (36). Bharucha quotes from Herodotus the instance of King Cambyses inquiring of the court judges whether there was “any law which gave the right to cohabit with his sister to any man who desired it;” Bharucha, therefore, argues: “If incestuous marriages had been allowed, even a king like Cambyses had no need of asking the opinion of judges” (36-37). However, this argument is stifled by the multiple evidences on observance of such a practice. Boyce states that according to Herodotus the royal judges conceded to King’s wish, “. . . while they could not discover any law that gave to a brother the right to cohabit with a sister, they had nevertheless discovered another law which gave to the king of the Persians the right to do whatsoever he willed.” Accordingly Cambyses married first this and then a
second sister (Atossa)” (54). Boyce, therefore, declines to accept this single instance as an isolated occurrence and holds that it “would be strange if a practice originating in the caprice of a single monarch should have come to be regarded as a religious duty, generally incumbent on the faithful” she states that “the practice of consanguineous marriages is widely attested among the ancient peoples” (54). She also suggests several instances of such marriages from history including those recorded in the Avroman parchments. And Maganlal acquiesces in as according to him “the foreign writers on Persia have testified to the existence of such a custom in Persia” and “there are unmistakable references to the custom in the Pahlavi writings” (129).

Boyce attempts to sew the gap between western and Parsi intellectuals over the matter: she explores and traces the evolution of khvaetvadatha as religious duty necessitated by hard choices “within the religion” constricted into that “within the family” and elaborates as below:

It seems just conceivable that at an early and struggling stage of its history – perhaps during the difficult times which followed the downfall of Kavi Vistapa – the Zoroastrian community, while earnestly promoting marriages between the faithful, found itself, because of their small numbers, solemnizing unions within the immediate family . . . these close unions actually strengthened the faith and so were meritorious. Such a hypothesis at least goes some way towards explaining why khvaetvadatha should have come to be regarded as not merely an acceptable social practice but a religious duty. (76)

Khvaetvadatha is attested in literature, documents and historical records, as having taken place “among princes, priests and commoners from the sixth century B.C. down to the tenth century A.C. (after which it survived only as the marriage of first cousins, still
the favoured form of union in Iran)” (54). Since then it has fallen into disuse altogether, as there are only marriages between cousins permitted; Parsi community still has a large presence of marriages between kindred and between persons related by marriage. W. D. Merchant states:

The Parsis are a strictly monogamous and endogamous group. . . . Given these restrictions and the small size of the community, it is not surprising that close consanguineal and affinal relatives are potential mates. Cross- and parallel-cousin marriages are permitted, as well as intergenerational marriages (between uncle and niece), though the occurrence of the latter is rare. . . . (228)

Nevertheless, Parsis are sensitive about and not so comfortable with this redundant practice and the meaning of the term Khvaetvadatha; to them it means “marriage between first cousins” (Maganlal129) at the closest.

The greatest problem faced by the community today is a decrease in the number of marriages, delayed marriages, decreasing fertility rate and deaths outnumbering births – in all resulting in an ageing population and decreasing numbers. This crisis is not caused by a single issue or at a particular point of time, but by a collection of issues accumulated over a period of time both from within and without the community’s arena. Empowerment of Parsi women through education, employment and socialisation from olden days, the limited choices within a small circle, inner marriages and its adverse impact on fertility, the ethnographic curiosities and the eugenic restraints, the Parsis evolving as a caste tightening recruitment and inflow through conversions, and the western connections and continued migration of youngsters post independence and post globalisation, to cite a few, have snowballed into a crisis not easy to revert. Inter-marriages are prohibited and do not enable an entry into the community; Parsi women
who marry non-Parsis are strictly excluded along with their offspring from the Parsi community. Conversion and adoption have, in most cases, a direct connection on marriages and have become a major issue for the community. Today’s Parsis claim that Zoroastrianism is not a proselytising religion and that conversion is not allowed; critics would immediately argue that had Zarathushtra not converted Maidhyoi - Maongha the religion would not have started. A look at the past will show that these contentious issues of conversion and adoption, which strike at the very root of the community’s existence, have seen different phases. No doubt, Zoroastrianism, the new religion was preached; it eventually took converts into the religion and flourished in its homeland Persia with the patronage of empires. “Zarathushtra traversed the length and breadth of Iran. He spoke, he discoursed, he conversed, he preached wherever he happened to be. . . . He was winning converts for his new religion” (Dhalla 22). Dhalla further says:

His victory was complete when ultimately he triumphed in winning as a convert Kavi Vishtaspa, the ruler of the land, together with his royal consort Hutaosa. This was the crowning event in the establishment of Zoroastrianism. Conversions to the new religion followed rapidly as a natural sequel, when it became known that the ruling house of Iran had embraced Zarathushtra’s faith. (23)

The sacred writings of the ancient Persian prophet Zirtusht also have records of conversion; Medhora states in his commentaries to the verses:

When the Yunani Sage heard all these words, he entered into the Faith . . . The accomplished man having returned back to Yunan brought over the inhabitants to the religion of that blessed prophet. . . . Chengerengacheh . . . was converted to the Good Faith, and returning to the land of Hind remained steady in this blessed religion. (95)
It’s but natural that the religion also witnessed inflows from other religions or sects while, with the patronage of the mighty empires, it ruled the roost in Persia until it fell with the fall of the political patrons as detailed earlier. Once the holding hands vanished, the religion was on the run; there were conversions from it and not into it. Bernard Lewis, an expert on the Middle East, gives a very valid perspective for the fewer conversions to Zoroastrianism; while followers of other religions could wear the regional colour, Zoroastrians wore a distinct nationality. He states:

By the seventh century, both the Christians and Jews of Arabia were thoroughly Arabized and part of the Arab community. The religions of Persia won few if any converts - not surprisingly, since the Persian religion was too distinctively national to have much appeal to those who were not themselves Persians. (47)

Moreover, the political climate in their homeland and other factors precluded any form of conversion. With Islamic Arabs taking control, freedom to profess Zoroastrianism was under severe curbs, leave apart proselytising. The original promise to the hosts in India, and their ethnical characteristics and curiosities also precluded the Parsis from doing any sort of propagation to carry their religion beyond their community. “Though the practice of an active religious propaganda had thus fallen into desuetude, the question of conversion does not seem to have died out entirely” (Dhalla369). The descendents of Zoroastrian Persians for sometime permitted religious recruitment not for reasons of spirituality, but, for temporal, and often clandestine reasons. Dhalla notes that the Rivayat literature has a record of “heated polemic carried on during the later part of the eighteenth century” regarding conversion; he states that “with the beginning of economic prosperity, the Indian Parsis . . . were in the habit of purchasing male and female slaves of low Hindu castes” (369). The community did not seriously organise a
proselytizing movement with the sole object of propagating their faiths, and the cases of conversion were:

. . . consequently confined either to the slaves brought up in Parsi families or to the children born to Parsi fathers of their non-Zoroastrian mistresses . . . (and) children born to them by illegitimate intercourse with non-Zoroastrian mistresses, or . . . others seeking a matrimonial alliance with alien women and . . . the children born of such unions. (370)

Thus, proselytizing fell into disrepute among Parsis as it came to be associated with questionable virtues and with acts presumed to erode ethnicity. Many objected to such recruitment for ‘racial’ as well as moral reasons; some took a more accommodating view that the slave converts admitted in accordance with the tenets of the religion should be admitted to the full benefits of the community. It is seen that the contesting parties sought and obtained advice from their coreligionists in Persia. The Iranian high priests, probably unaware of the syndromes of caste and Parsi ethos on preservation of ethnicity, had a more liberal view; their only concern was that “in all such conversions, no harm should thereby be done to the religion and to the community.” Dhalla elaborates that the priests of the homeland advised that:

It was certainly an act of great merit . . . to purchase alien children and bring them up as Zoroastrians. It was unfair and highly objectionable, . . . nay it was an inexpiable sin, to refuse these unfortunate people all the privileges of a believer after once admitting them into the Zoroastrian religious fold. . . . It was, therefore, the pious duty of every true Zoroastrian to help this great cause by leading all to the path of righteousness. In the face of such commands, they concluded, those who
denied to the proselytes the full rights of a faithful believer did not deserve to be called Zoroastrians. (370-371)

On a specific question about the conversion of low class people, the Iranians took the stand that “even a man who dug graves or followed the profession of burning the dead (two inexpiable sins according to Zoroastrianism), should be admitted into the Zoroastrian fold,” the only condition being that “his admittance would not be harmful to the faith” (370-371). So Iranian Zoroastrians continued to welcome conversions to the faith.

The opponents of conversion among Parsis argue that marriage for a Zoroastrian is a religious duty/discipline. It is an institution that pleases Dadaar Ahura Mazda, according to the “Vendidad.” Noshir H. Dadrawala, an ardent opponent of conversion, argues that “A number of religious texts, in particular, the Avestan “Vendidad” and the Pahlavi “Dinkard” have banned mixed marriages. These texts have considered “mixing of the seed” (intermarriage) as sinful.” He claims that the learned Dasturji Dr. Kaikhusroo Minocher Jamasp Asa in a letter dated 29th September, 1964, addressed to the Joint Secretary, Parsi Punchayet, Bombay, clarifies that:

The Zoroastrian religion considers marriage as a sacrament which necessitates certain religious ceremonies and, as such, does not recognize civil marriages. Marriages contracted between persons of different faiths may be considered legal by the secular state, but recognition of such marriages cannot be forced upon the community. (2)

However, for Parsis, the issue of conversion is not merely an issue of religion; it has collateral influences and burdens from sociological, ethnic and commercial aspects and it acquired a strong blend of “caste” and eugenic exclusion. It is strangely significant
that caste “does not have a place in the Zoroastrian community unless one interprets their attitudes to intermarriage as a caste-like feature” (Hinnells 27). The economic fortunes saw Parsis drift away from religious virtues and as seen earlier, conversions were carried out based on individual needs and greed and not as an observance of religious creed. The Parsi religious punchayets formed to adjudicate on community matters came to own large funds, properties and benevolent institutions. In the matter of conversion, differences erupted between and among the priests and members of the punchayet; the conflict devolved into one over admittance into the religion with priests administering the ceremonies and rituals, and the other over acceptance by the punchayet into the community with access to community assets and benefits.

Another side of the coin is the tussle over retention of the Parsi “tradition” and preservation of the “race.” As Mitra June Sharafi puts it, for supporters of the patrilineal tradition, “admission into the community required that an initiate has a Parsi father,” while for the advocates of “purity of race,” “it was the balance of blood on both sides that mattered” which eventually meant “disapproval of intermarriage between Parsi men and non-Parsi women” (8). Persian traditions adopt and accept a patrilineal hierarchy wherein “woman was no more than a vessel into which man cast his seed’ and so “the child of an Iranian male could be purely Iranian” (Boyce196). Much of the concepts and reactions over this religious issue stemmed from numbers and anxiety over matches from within. If Parsi men are allowed to marry outside, it is feared that the problem of finding a partner for the Parsi girls within the already numerically thin community, will aggravate. “Miscegenation (interbreeding) in many times and places has raised the but-what-about our-daughters alarm” (Mitra78). This anxiety existed for centuries now. Marriage has always been a highly contentious and protective issue for the community; an interesting
episode of discord between the “mobeds,” the priests and the “behdins,” the laity on the issue of marriage flared up to render Government interference necessary.

. . . the (Parsi) Panchayet of Bombay, with the consent of its community, in the year 1777, . . . prohibited the “behdins” from giving their daughters in marriage to the “mobeds” . . . in order to counteract the effect of an ordinance which the priests had passed among themselves, to the effect that they would continue to receive in marriage the daughters of “behdins,” but that they would not allow their own female relatives to marry with the laity. (Karaka 219-220)

The government then came to the support of “behdins” and curbed the selfish designs of the priests. However, the community later shed such restrictions.

The dogma on the religious function of conversion came to be interpreted to suit the convenience, choice and anxieties of the interpreter in finding a suitor for the interested and eventually the interpretations varied. Some invoke the legends on promises to Jadi Rana and contend that the Dastur promised no harm to the Rana’s people and religion, and hence no conversion. Those who are for conversion say that the “adding of sugar to the bowl of milk” symbolises intermingling, and therefore, conversion. Another version at variance is that the bowl of milk was not “mixed with sugar” but was “enriched with a golden ring” the primary object of seeking asylum being “the preservation of their Zoroastrian identity and faith” and to the opponents of conversion, separate identity means “no conversion.” Dadrawala says that the Dastur “gently dropped the ring into the bowl . . . This gesture in return symbolized the fact that just as the gold ring . . . in a corner of the milk bowl . . . , so also will the Parsis . . . maintain their distinct identity and continue to add lustre and richness all around” (10).
The issue why Parsis, as a community, are averse to inter-caste or mixed marriages can be addressed from the historical, political, religious and social perspectives. It is believed on the basis of the historical perspective that the main cause for the downfall of the once mighty Sassanian Empire in Iran was perceived as the inter-marriage among members of the Royal family.

There are numerous instances among the Achaemenians and Sasanians of kings taking foreign wives; and occasionally it is known that the wife kept her alien faith – although plainly all would have had to observe the Zoroastrian purity laws . . . however much the mother’s physical role might be diminished her capacity to mould a child’s thoughts and habits had to be acknowledged. (Boyce 196)

Dadrawala also quotes from Dastur Dr. H. K. Mirza’s Outlines of Parsi History, two instances of “foreign mothers” playing havoc to the empire: “Khushro’s (Kushro I) son Anoshzad was born of his Christian wife and had adopted Christianity. Instigated by his mother, Anoshzad rose in rebellion against his own father . . . He marched to the capital and getting help from the Christians and the Romans, he proclaimed himself king” (3). Secondly, Khushro II, known as Khushro Parvez, had to invoke the Roman Emperor, Maurice, for help to tackle the rebelling General Behram Chobin, and in the process took in marriage Maria, the Roman princess: “Intrigue, deception and lust for power and other dangerous vices were rampant. The princes instigated and actively supported by their mothers of foreign extraction and foreign faith, played havoc in the royal family, in aristocracy and in state affairs” (1).

During the later part of history, after the fall of the Sassanian empire, Zoroastrians in their effort to escape from Arab persecution, moved to China, Central Asia, Punjab and even as far as Europe.
Over time, they intermarried, lost their distinct religious and ethnic identity and faded into oblivion. The only group that survived was the one that came to Diu and later moved to Sanjan on the Gujarat coast . . . . The Parsis . . . flourished because they decided not to tamper with the fundamental ground rules they had laid down for their survival as a religious and ethnic community. (1)

On the basis of the social perspective, the Parsi aversion for mixed marriages need not be wholly linked with racial superiority or communal prejudice. For Parsis, marrying within the community is important from the point of view of self-preservation. Parsis are a historic people perpetuating a unique ethic of living. They are torchbearers of a rich culture and heritage; intermarriage leads to a dilution of faith and weakening of cultural bonds. Parsis do not claim racial superiority. Parsis treat all Indians as their brothers, but would prefer not to have non-Parsis as their brothers-in-law, through marriage and induction into the family as well as the community.

It is often rumoured about by heterodox Parsis that after their arrival in India Parsis began inter-marrying with members of the Hindu community, since there were little or no Parsi women accompanying Parsi men; many deny this as figment of imagination. Dadrawala borrows the words of eminent pathologist, Dr. P.K. Antia who in his paper, “Parsis and Blood Diseases” published in the Diamond Jubilee Volume of the B. D. Petit Parsi General Hospital, denies interbreeding from a scientific analysis of disease pattern:

It is wrong to assume as many do, that after landing in India, Zoroastrians had to marry with the local Indian population and there was hybridization of immigrant Zoroastrians . . . it is not plausible that they left their women fold to the mercy of the Arabic invaders. . . . Besides, the hospitable
Hindus had a parochial caste system, which would not allow inter-marriages even in their sub-castes, let alone outside racial or ethnic groups . . . . Thus, exceptions apart, the immigrant Zoroastrians did not marry outside their community. Hence the process of hybridization of racial mixing did not occur in Parsis. (2)

Any attempt by the colonists to intervene in the Parsi religious issues or traditions was stoutly resisted by a dominant set of Parsis. Parsi resistance was in the form of representation, persuasions, protests and legal contests. The British also were in a pliant mode with the friendly community; they gave all ears to the community’s requests. The community won over several concessions and exclusive legal recognitions from the British in the administration of common law and civil rights. Karaka recalls with pride that William Hornby, the British Governor of Bombay, on a petition by the Managers of the Punchayet of Parsis, empowered them through a letter dated 5th July, 1778 “to meet and enquire into all matters” committed by Parsis which are contrary to the majority view and to punish the offender in conformity with the rules of the Parsis, “so far as not permitting them to come to your feasts or beat them with shoes but no other corporal punishment” (219). The British also recognised the Parsi demands through Parsi Law Association of 1855 for special enactments to conserve their traditions on marriage and succession. Sorabjee Shapoorjee Bengalee claims that the three British legislations: The Parsee Chattels Real Act (Act 9 of 1837), The Parsee Marriage and Divorce Act, 1865 (Act 15 of 1865), and The Parsee Succession Act (Act 21 of 1865) “were prepared and passed at the instance and on behalf of the Parsee community alone” (Bengalee iii). The real transformation on Parsi identity and its exclusivity squeezing conversions into the community came from the colonial legal system. When a good number of Parsis took to British courts who also played safe without antagonising the community; in fact, the
pliant British courts made the process of conversion more stringent to the delight of the Punchayet:

As the colonial legal system claimed jurisdiction over internal religious disputes, courts repackaged Zoroastrian religious endowments as trusts. With this reformulation, much religious authority shifted from the Zoroastrian priesthood to the framers of trusts, trustees, and the lawyers and judges who interpreted trust terms in court. (Mitra 8)

The identity of trust legally delineates the Zoroastrians, as a religion and Parsis as a community and “the vast charitable sums made available to members of the Parsi community” (8) and there arose, significant material stakes attached to membership in the community. Orthodox opponents of the admission of outsiders predicted mass conversion by India’s impoverished lower caste masses, and the exhaustion of Parsi trust funds” (8). While one strand of the issue is commercial, Mitra holds the second strand as something “to do with eugenics” (8). She points out that J. J. Vimadalal, the Parsi solicitor leading the case against Bella imported theories on “racial hygiene” from European writings “to the Parsi context with specific reference to the intermarriage debate” with such conviction “that race theory does not seem to have been a super structural rationalization of the property claim, but an independent body of thought operating in tandem with it” (9). The Privy Council ruled that Bella “may have been able to become Zoroastrian by religion, but she could not become Parsi by ethnicity, her alleged natural father being Indian” (25). The issue of conversion came up again before the Bombay High Court in Sir Dinshaw Manockji Petit Vs Sir Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy (1908) when a French woman married into the illustrious Tata family and tried to convert to Zoroastrianism. The Court ruled that whether or not conversion was permitted by Zoroastrianism, no convert would be allowed to use Parsi trust funds, which, in turn, own and administer the fire temples and the
dokhmas. The ruling was rather on a safer commercial footing without dwelling on the issue of admission into the religion and draws a distinction between being a Parsi and being a Zoroastrian. “These privileges were governed by religious trusts whose terms were framed with reference to Parsis, not Zoroastrians. The former, being an ethnic term rather than a religious one, excluded ethnic outsiders by definition”(26). Thus legally the Parsis came to be a sort of separate “caste” within the Zoroastrian community, though the community does not foster any caste within.

Parsis, who once belonged to a religious ethnicity with no caste divisions within, have thus evolved and risen as a caste by itself to the exclusion of some of its other co-religionists. This has led to a dicey situation wherein, like most religions in India, at best one can convert to the religion Zoroastrianism but not merge into the caste, Parsi. The question of accepting children of such marriages, as well as converts to Zoroastrianism, is being vehemently debated among Parsis both in India and abroad. There appears to be a progressive attitude among the overseas Parsis that may in the future lead to a broadening of the definition of a Parsi. Gieve Patel in his plays discusses the practice of khedas and adoption and conversion from among such khedas, the strong presence of unmarried and childless women, and highlights the major arguments that prevail among Parsis in India on accepting converts to Zoroastrians as Parsis, and on marriage and renovation of the ethnic group.

Following the doctrines of Zoroastrianism the Parsis did much to help the poor and needy when they were in their heights. The maxim, “Parsi, thy name is charity” reveals, their greatest contribution, literally and figuratively, to their philanthropy. The striking feature about Parsi charity is not holding it throughout and giving out at the fag end of life bequeathing as an allocation of a part of the accumulations; it is giving while
living and in proportion to earnings and giving it big to ensure earning of adequate virtues for the heavenly abode. Hurst is in eloquent praise:

One of the most remarkable features of the charity of the Parsis is, that as a rule it takes place during life. If done by bequest it is an exception. The Parsi wants to see the growth of his work. He measures his benefactions by the rule of his business . . . and wishes to see perfect security before the vultures tear his spent body to pieces. . . . There seems to be no limit to their humane plans. (142)

Despite the formal rules of inheritance, it is common for wealthy Parsis to leave their entire estates for charitable purposes: endowing schools, hospitals, fire temples, or the like. The stress on generosity and a sense of communal responsibility for the weak and needy fostered during childhood finds its expression in wills and trusts. Hence there has occurred a continuous redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor. In the 18th and 19th centuries the Parsis had emerged as “the foremost people in India; of educational, industrial, and social matters. They came in the vanguard of progress; amassed vast fortunes, and munificently gave away large sums in charity” (Dhalla 483). Parsi charity is profusely appreciated and Hinnells finds it a major reason for acceptance of the community in India, unlike in the case of the Jews, the economic success of whom turned out to be a provocation for hostility in the countries of their migration: “Because Parsi charity has been so evident and widespread it has been argued that it is an important factor in the acceptance of the community in India. This is one reason given to explain why Parsis’ economic success has not provoked the Asiatic equivalent of anti-Semitism”(262).

The Parsi ladies of today are well-known for their good taste in dress and they are even proud of adorning their children as much as possible. Parsi food is the significant
part of the Parsi culture which adds to the variety and richness of the Indian cuisine. As they have a unique way of life they have a distinct food habits as well. The cuisines of the Parsis form a combination of a number of culinary techniques found in different parts of India as well as other parts of the world. Sweets are the inseparable part of Parsi cuisines. Even now in Bombay the unchanging Parsi core is the club in the imperial tradition where the Parsi members of the club “in the evening gather in small groups around the tables and eat cheese and sandwiches with their tea in the Princess Victoria Mary (PVM) at the Willingdon, the Cricket Club of India (CCI) and the Bombay Gymkhana” (Luhrmann42).

Patel gives emphasis to all these social conducts in his plays.

The legacy of the 19th century was a sense of self-awareness as a community. The Parsi cultural symbols of the 17th and 18th centuries such as language (a Parsi variant of Gujarati), arts & crafts and sartorial habits developed into Parsi theatre, literature, newspapers and magazines and schools. The Parsis then ran community medical centres, ambulance corps, boys scout troops, clubs and masonic lodges. They had their own charitable foundations and housing estates, legal institutions, courts and governance. They however did not fail to recognize themselves as nationally Indian, as Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Asian to occupy a seat in the British Parliament would note in his Lahore Indian National Congress Presidential Address,1893: “Whether I am a Hindu, a Mohammedan, a Parsi, a Christian, or of any other creed, I am above all an Indian. Our country is India; our nationality is Indian” (Bosma 36). No Indian community internalized the civilizing mission of the British as did the Parsis.

Parsis excelled in every field; prominent among them include Pherozeshah Mehta, Dadabhai Naoroji and Bhikaiji Cama in the Indian independence movement, Homi J. Bhabha and Homi N. Sethna, nuclear physicists, Jamsetji Tata, “Father of Indian Industry,” and Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw. In 1852, the Parsis set up the Parsi Natak
Mandali, which staged the first play in Gujurati, Sohrab and Rustom in Mumbai. Later on, the Victorial Natak Mandali and the Persian Natak Mandali came into existence. The basic function of the Parsi theatre was to entertain and orient the Parsi community towards social reform. The Parsis built libraries all over India— they built the National Gallery of Art. The Parsis have contributed to the all-round development of India in general and in the growth in the fields of industry, science, technology, art, music, creative writing and culture in particular. It is beyond doubt that the Parisis have left no field of creative work to which they have not contributed during the Colonial period.

However with the end of Colonial rule, the Parsis went into a kind of hibernation. The independence of India was won at a high cost and the country was divided into India and Pakistan. The carnage of Hindus and Muslims on both sides of the new border, made the tiny Parsi community feel very insecure, as it was spread out in both the new nations. So the Parsis withdrew into prudent silence. This silence was sometimes disrupted by stray stories and novels in English and plays in Gujarati, but was broken in a major way only in the late 1970s and early 80s.

In the Post-Independence period, they were in quick succession stripped of their primacy and authority, much of their wealth lost in governmental action and quickly sidelined leaving many of them to crave for the good-old times. According to Coomi Vevaina, “The post independence years left them feeling confused and bereft. While many emigrated to the white lands, those who remained in India needed to grapple with their loss and “fit in” as best as they could” (338).

It became an acute problem in the 1940s and 1950s, with the introduction of prohibition in 1947, because many Parsis earned their living in toddy or liquor or trade. The new land tenancy legislation, introduced in 1950, restricted the income a landlord could derive from his tenant, his right to claim back the land for his own use and also the
liberty to dispose of as the categories of person to whom he could sell, in order of priority was also determined. Traditional agricultural land holdings therefore put their ownership and profits under stress; a series of droughts and poor harvests in four out of the seven years between 1947 and 1954 devastated agriculture. When transport was nationalized, again a number of Parsis lost their livelihood. The result was real poverty. The young and able left Gujarat to seek work in Bombay, and the villages became the homes of the elderly, the disabled, the poorly educated and women who could not join a partner in Bombay. Gieve Patel in one of his poems, “The Servants,” talks about the plight of the Parsis, how they come of peasant stock from Gujarat to the city of Mumbai - a migration within the migrated country, having lost their roots, personal relationships in the process of migration – sit mute and without life-force, like animals. The issue of migration in search of a livelihood is also highlighted in one of Patel’s plays Princes. The later part of major Parsi migration from Gujarat to Bombay was marked throughout the twentieth century mostly caused by the increasing impoverishment of the rural Parsis.

Contradictions between the aspirations or beliefs, and actual state of the Parsi community became more and more marked in the years following independence. The new governments imposed Land Ceiling Acts and other Agrarian Reforms. The new Tenancy Laws, for instance, affected a large number of Parsi landlords with the loss of land directly cutting into their financial supremacy. It is at this background Patel’s plays, Princes and Savaksa move.

When Bombay evolved politically, the first major development that came into being was the bifurcation of Bombay Presidency into Gujarat and Maharashtra in 1960. Bombay eventually got linked not with Gujarat but with Maharashtra. The change was part of the national move to redefine state boundaries along linguistic lines. Bombay therefore moved away from its historical link with Gujarati to Hindi, as the official
language of post-Independence, and to Marathi, the regional language, after 1960. Maharashtra the new Maratha state began adoring Marathi, sidelining Gujarati. Parsis, who have adopted Gujarati as their mother tongue, but majority of whom are residing in and around Bombay (Mumbai) and parts of Maharashtra, felt insecure with the new found significance of Marathi. Parsis found themselves further sidelined and drifting away from the centre stage they were fondly occupying all along; many Parsis feared that their religion and culture were in danger. The change in language influenced and affected the local political ties and concerns; Marathi rulers favoured the Marathis in employment and education, etc. When the Shiv Sena, emerged in the 1960s as an anti-immigrant movement, its central stand was that the Maharashtrians suffer in the face of the wave of migrants who take jobs and other opportunities from the locals and that Maharashtrians be given preference in employment and education. The larger vision of a secular and unified India blurred and instead the views of the government narrowed and focussed on the needs of the majority in the region. The Parsis, who had built the city and contributed to its immense economic prosperity by their sheer dedication and hard work, are relegated into political insignificance. All these factors of course led the Parsis to develop an aversion towards the natives and the natives in turn could never accept them into their fold because of their elite and refined manners and hence the detached demeanour.

It is a fact that the Parsis were remarkably successful during the British rule; but their success came at the cost of discarding their adopted Indian identity in favour of a western one. As native colonial elites Parsis were more westernised than most other Indian elites and as displaced Persians they committed themselves thoroughly to a non-Indian sensibility. They have adopted as a community the ideals of the English gentleman and his wife. They had worn his clothes, taken his language, emulated his habits, and educated their women in his culture. But these days as the larger political winds have
shifted and the singularity of Parsi eminence has passed, they accuse themselves of being everything English and encompass a desperate attempt to locate a sense of control over an unimaginable world and there arise an embittered effort to defend their pride against the anxiety of decline, rather than a realistic assessment of their plight. Having been marginalised in the postcolonial world with an aching sense of a loss of status, of cultural genius, of their historical moment they feel unsecured:

In the 1920s and 1930s when Gandhian mass politics took centre stage, when many Indians had labelled the British as morally bankrupt, and when Hindu-Muslim politics made it clear that small minorities had no place at the centre of power, a self-denigrating tone emerged in Parsi literature. It is a remarkable tone. Parsis had perhaps always argued about their identity. Turn-of-the-century complainers whined that Parsis had gone as far as they should have, or had lost religion or tradition in the frenzy for success. But thirty years later, when independence becomes an inevitability, both content and ethos change: Why have we fallen from the top? Why are we not as we were? (Luhrmann 126)

And as the complaints mount in intensity and continue on into the present, they circle around the decay of the almost – English attributes of the late 19th century. The modern Parsi, it is said, “is not truthful, his purity has made him genetically rotten, his charities have drowned his ambition, he is stuck in his traditional, non progressive ways, and - most intriguing - his sons are effeminate and incapable. He is the reverse of the almost English gentleman”(126). Consequently:

. . . large chunks of undistinguished yesterdays - for instance, the first eight hundred years the Parsis spent in India - are ignored. Much cultural heritage - religious ritual and theology-has been determinedly forgotten by
those who identified the community, through Anglicized eyes, as progressive, modern, and rational. The reconstructed past now provides an important and valuable sense of capability. But it contains a destructive edge, for the construction of memory during the Raj served a purpose which is no longer relevant for the Parsis in modern India and what has been forgotten could perhaps more effectively serve the current needs. (64)

As the Parsis during the colonial rule in India adapted themselves to the British life style most perfectly, conforming to their basic credo of assimilation and adaptation, they suffered double alienations due to too much mingling up with the colonizers. The British never considered the Parsis as their equal and the mainstream Indians maintained a distance from the Parsis for their too much identification with the British. As said in The Good Parsi:

The despair of their experience lies in the double loss, for after Gandhi and Independence, they were deprived both of the moral rightness of the British ideal and of the hope that if they embodied that ideal, power would come to them at the end. The emotional involvement both in the desire and the rejection, and the simultaneous condemnation of both, that produces the impasse, has left the community in the destructive status. Had they rebelled, revolted against the colonizer, they could perhaps have freed themselves. But they did not and the past remains unaltered. Caught within these contradictory tensions and attachments, avoiding powerlessness by taking responsibility for the fall, shamed for their trespass but yearning for their former glory they use the past to define the relationships of the present- because the past is still profoundly present. (23)
As a result they started to use their past to define their primary sense of the present and notably in their current insecurity what they remember are their achievements: their power and greatness both in the Persian past and during the colonial rule.

Further, the change in the composition of the community because of late marriages and no marriages, combined with low fertility and small families, and a trend towards low mortality affect them more. Inter-community marriages have increased and there has been an increase in immigration too. The urban life style may be one of the reasons for their diminishing fertility, which is contrary to the explosion of population on the Indian sub-continent. Leela Visaria in her, *Demographic Transition Among Parsis 1881-1981* observes: “The Parsi population has been a remarkable exception in the general Indian demographic scene. Their fertility is so low that depicts high life expectancy, the number of Parsis has been declining for more than two decades” (28).

It is at this background the Parsi writers volunteered to protect their race from deterioration. Several writers from the seventeenth century onwards started safeguarding their culture through their writings and from mid - 19th century on the Parsi reformers were concerned with the movement for religious advancement. Their presence in Indian Writing in English is remarkable and their voices are audible within and outside India. They have imprinted a distinct literary identity of and for their community at the global level and have made people conscious of the problems and culture of their community. They have attempted at giving details about the lifestyles and culture of the Parsis wherever they get an opportunity in their writing. Among them Gieve Patel is unique. Being born into the traditional land owning authoritative Parsi family he underwent all the turmoil their community has been suffering within and outside the community, rises to the occasion by giving more importance to his community and humanity at large besides making use of his profession as a physician.
It is a pity that the adopted sons of the soil who have played an active role in the all round development of the nation have to face a threat to survival. Efforts are being made by Parsi social reformers to have a viable manifesto, which may enable them to survive for ages. The way the community is disappearing, no one knows how long the Parsis will survive. There are so many Parsi writers like Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, Firdaus Kanga, Farrukh Dhondy, Boman Desai, Perin Bharucha, Dina Mehta, Meher Pestonjee, Negris Dalal, Ardashir Vakil, Farishta Murzban Dinshaw, Gieve Patel, and Keki N. Daruwalla and many others who are fully conscious of the fact that their works should preserve their ethnicity for ages to come. Hence most of the Parsi writers assert their ethnic identity in their creative writing; dealing with their community, its religion, its customs and traditions, its likes and dislikes and their role in the development of the country to which they originally do not belong, for the posterity.

However, Keki N. Daruwalla is against the use of category as Parsi Literature. Since there is no Hindu Literature, Muslim Literature, Christian Literature as such, there should not be any favour of fixing labels on the literary creations of the Parsis, as a literary creative writing should be evaluated on its literary merits, aesthetic and moral values and not on the basis of ethnicity. Keki N. Daruwalla argues that the label of Parsi writing is not necessary and rightly observes: “Just because a dozen people from a particular community are writing well, does it mean we label their literature? . . . Aren’t Parsis merely a part of this and should their writing be nailed to a substantially oriented canon?” (81).

Popular Parsi tradition has it that the community has declined not only numerically but also in terms of influence in the course of the twentieth century. Creative writing has become a major media for them for the purpose and it is through their work they tried to preserve their ethnicity. Being a small community, it is amazing how the
Parsis have made a name for themselves in the literature community. From their past history, it may well be concluded that more and more famous Parsi writers will be emerging on the literary stage. The Parsis may be losing visibility owing to their shrinking numbers but the impact of their presence in the world of creative writing appears to be undergoing a renaissance through the Parsi writers and would continue to survive as long as human beings live.

The collections of plays and poems penned by Gieve Patel that are used as primary sources for the study are *Princes*, *Savaksa* and *Mister Behram* under the collection *Mister Behram and Other Plays* and selective poems from his three poetic collections namely, *Poems*, *How Do You Withstand Body* and *Mirrored Mirroring*.

Poems such as “Grandfather,” “Grandparents at Family Get-Together,” “The Prince Wishes His Father’s Death,” “On Killing a Tree,” “Servants,” “Evening,” “Catholic Mother (Your Child at Hospital),” “Nargol,” “Naryal Purnima,” “Old Man’s Death,” “Tourists at Grant Road,” “Seasons,” “Vistasp” and “To a Coming Love” from his Poetic collection, *Poems* and “The Ambiguous Fate of Gieve Patel, He being Neither Muslim Nor Hindu in India,” “Audience,” “Say Torture,” “Body Fears,” “Forensic Medicine,” “Public Works,” “City Landscape,” “Dilwadi,” “Soot Crowns the Stubble,” “What's In and Out (And Round About),” “Commerce,” “O My Very Own Cadaver,” “University” and “Continuum” from *How Do You Withstand Body*, and poems like “Unsolemn Prayer,” “God or,” “Mirrored Mirroring,” “It Makes,” “The Return,” “My Affections,” “Simpleton,” “Never Did,” “Simple,” “The Difficulty,” “My Affections,” “Squirrels in Washington,” “The Place,” “Of Sea and Mountain,” “Three Cries” and “Turning Aside” from *Mirrored Mirroring* are used for the purpose of this study.
A few of his creations of art, in the form of paintings and sculptures reflecting human situations, have also been examined to supplement and substantiate the textual analysis of the works of art in writing as cited.

The field of investigation is restricted to tracing the age old Parsi identity on the one hand and locating the culture shift on the other, as documented in Patel’s works. The thesis has been divided as follows:

The first chapter introduces the historical transition of the Parsis through time and comprehensively details the cultural background of the community.

The Second Chapter highlights the Parsi memories among the Parsi writers and Patel’s leanings towards the Parsis and his cravings for their well being. Parsi writers are studied under non-specific labels in order to make a distinction between Gieve Patel and other Parsi intellectuals seeking to excel their specific locale in the cultural cosmopolitanism with all their eccentricities.

The third chapter exposes the culture consciousness of Patel as reflected in his collection of plays: *Mister Behram and other plays* comprising of three plays namely, *Princes, Savaksa* and *Mister Behram*. It entices the readers to a great extent closer to the tiny community’s traditions, culture and customs, loyalty, philanthropy and religious faith and also manifests the Parsi experiences, the unconquerable spirit of mankind, endurances, acceptances, anxieties, adaptability and progressiveness as they live in a dominant situation.

The fourth chapter focuses on the culture shift witnessed in the Parsi community in the urbanised area notably Bombay in the post independent India as manifested in his poems. Patel exposes the difficulties the common man encounters each day, and the varied state of affairs he observes within his community and outside with ease. The
poems are the better documents of his contextual reflexives of the Parsi racial continuity and are also the reflections of the community’s aborted yearning for the glamorous merging into British identity espousing the nostalgia for the old times. Through the poetic attempt Patel treads onto the pains and anguishes of the community.

The last chapter sums up the findings of the study. It restates the significance, relevance and consequence of the key terms used in the topic statement.

Key phrases discussed in the thesis are culture, Parsi migration, displacement and settlement, exclusive religious ethnicity, Parsis’ glorious past, ambivalence, reminiscence, adaptation, culture shift, transcultural aspects, adoption and humanism in the global context.