

## **The Parsee Community of Kolkata – A Case Study on Social Geography**

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**Abstract:** The research paper focuses on the Parsee community, which is a religious and ethnic minority in Kolkata Metropolitan City. It is a migrant community and has migrated from Parsia (now Greater Iran) to the coast of Gujrat in Western India, to avoid religious persecution by the Arabs, during the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Now the Parsees are India's smallest minority living mostly on the west coast (mainly in the old Bombay Presidency) of India. They had scattered all over the state. Specially in Kolkata, Hydrabad, Pune, Bangalore etc. After the rising of the British Power in India, progress of Parsee Community was increasing gradually. They moved from their traditional roles to participate increasingly in international trade and shipping. The Parsees of Kolkata has been settled for more than two centuries (near about 250 years), but there are very little published works about them. As a geographer I want to draw out the reasons of their migration from their motherland. I also want to build maps about their migration routes which are followed by the Parsees to reach other countries. Why they choose the Indian subcontinent to settle and the motive of their concentration in Gujrat or Bombay Presidency and re-concentration in Kolkata and to study about their trading opportunities with the North West coast of ancient India (before the Arab Invasion) are also my objectives. The other objectives of study were to find out their history, heritage & socio cultural activity, the relationship and contribution to the larger host society of Kolkata and the reason of their gradual population declination. The Parsees deserve to be better known as their religious and cultural institutions are part of the heritage of this mega city. This study will perhaps fulfil that aim & will enrich the field of social geography.

**Keywords:** Parsee, Religious Organisations, Parsee Club, Ethnic Minority, Migrant

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Parsees, a community of Iranian descent are an important ethno religious minority group in India. Among two thousand ethnic groups, Parsee ethnicity has a prominent place. At present there are 69,601 Parsees in India and 417 Parsees in Kolkata approximately. The origins of this community was the Indo-European branch of the Aryans, who inhabited the high Pamirs of Central Turkistan. Then they arrived in Iran by 1000 B.C. When the religion Zoroastrianism spreaded all over the Iran by the prophet Zarathustra of the 7th century B.C., they are followed by the religion. Zoroastrianism had been in existence in Persia for well over a thousand years. There after the ancient Parsia and the Zoroastrians were invaded by the Arab Muslims in 652 A.D. The last Zoroastrian King, Yazdagird III of Sasanian dynasty was defeated. At that time numerous Zoroastrians or Parsees (called refugees) fled from their native land to China, Pakistan, India and so many places, to avoid religious persecution by the Arabs. Some of them who originated from Greater Khurasan (in north eastern Iran) fled to the mountains of Kuhistan and thereafter proceeded to the Parsian Gulf port of Hormuz, from whence they sailed to India. at first they sailed to the island of Diu near Kathiawar, Gujrat and finally they reached to the "Sanjan", a small village in Gujrat, where the immigrants were granted permission to stay by the local ruler "Jadi Rana" in 785 C.E.

An ethno-religious group is an ethnic group whose members are also unified by a common religious background. Ethno-religious communities define their ethnic identity neither by ancestral heritage nor simply by religious affiliation but often through a combination of both. An ethno religious group has a shared history and a cultural tradition of its own. In many cases ethno religious groups are ethno-cultural groups with a traditional ethnic religion, in other cases ethno religious groups begin as communities united by a common faith which

through endogamy developed cultural and ancestral ties. Some ethno religious groups' identities are reinforced by the experience of living within a larger community as a distinct minority.

In India, Parsees contributed a lot in nation building, though they are a very few in numbers. They are an integral part of our society, but their numbers are steadily declining probably because of their inter marriages,

slower birth rate and migration to other cities and countries, and in coming years they might completely vanish from our land.

In this critical situation of Parsee Community, I have tried to focus on their ancient heritage and Zoroastrian culture once again. People of the rest society have very little concern about the endangered race of Kolkata as very rare authentic previous study has been undertaken. I am interested all along about the ethnic communities in Kolkata especially about this active and intelligent Parsees. I think that it is appropriate to inform every one about their crisis and problems and have to find out the way of solution. I have taken face to face interview of several eminent Parsees (who are existed still now) to get their opinion and have tried to find out the solution about their gradual declination in my initial research. For these above reasons my study has started. I intend to preserve their ethnicity for future through this work as Parsees are fast disappearing.

## **II. STUDY AREA**

The study area where the field work has been carried out in Kolkata district. Parsees are scattered all over the city. Kolkata consist of 7 blocks, having 144 Municipal Wards that are grouped under 15 Boroughs. I have selected 3 Blocks A, B and D are predominantly populated with Parsee Community. The different localities that have been surveyed are Lindsay Street, New Market, Maidan, Chowringhee Road, Bowbazar, Ezra Street, Park Street, Canning Street, Esplanade, Chandni Chowk, Parsee Church Street, Madan Street, 84 Lenin Sarani, Khorshed Madan Manson, 6 Grant Lane, 1 Saklet Place (Chandi area), Dharmasala 9 Bow Street (Near Bow barrak) etc. have been specially mentioned.

## **III. SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS OF THE PARSEES OF KOLKATA**

Social and cultural organizations are established by the Kolkata Parsees to nurture their own welfare. Some important discussions about their organizations have been done here. The unity, good will and the spirit of co-operation among the Parsee community have increased due to the role of these organization.

### **3.1 Calcutta Zoroastrian Community's Religious and Charity Fund**

The Calcutta Zoroastrian Community's Religious and Charity Fund was founded on 1st July 1933 at 52, Jawaharlal Neheru Road, Kolkata. Mr. Noshir S. Wadia, The Chief Executive of the Fund informs that it is a non-profit organization whose primary objectives are philanthropy and social well being. Their volunteer activities that positively impact on the lives of Parsees, such as arranging student's education loan, giving assist to the aged and helpless people, satisfying the desire of the needy person etc. In a word this organization works for the relief of suffering humanity. People who are willing to contribute here, can contribute according to their capacity.

### **3.2 Calcutta Parsee Club**

The Calcutta Parsee Club was established on 4th November 1908 as a Cricket Club by five Parsee stalwarts of those days. name of the five persons are Byramjee Nalladaroo, Nowrojee Nalladaroo, Munchershaw Buttiwala, Hormasjee Kandawalla and keki Spencer.

According to the Parsee people, it is one of the only pure sporting institution left on the Kolkata Maidan. The Club celebrated its glorious centenary on 2008. Though it is one of the oldest club in Kolkata, is still looking young and new. The members of the club are very generous and helpful to each other. They also welcome the non member for most of the activities, in true Parsee style with warmth. Membership of the club is restricted to Parsees or Zoroastrians only. The club's membership now stands at over 700 and includes a number of outstation members, both in and outside India.

The first club tent was erected in 1908 on the Maidan, south of the present Mohammedan Sporting Club, was donated by J.F. Madan. Then in 1912 it was shifted to a location near the Shahid Minar. The Club's tent was shifted two times thereafter to different locations on the Maidan. Finally it ended up at its present site on P-49 Guru Nanak Sarani (Mayo Road) in 1922. Later in 1974, the tent was last expanded on reconstruction and is now one of the largest on the Maidan with 'Tennis Courts'. Name of the present president of the club is Mrs. Prochy N. Mehta.

The Calcutta Parsee Club, primarily a centre for Cricket, expanded its sporting activities to football, hockey, tennis, basket ball, badminton, table tennis, rugby and athletics. Initially, membership was restricted to males, but in 1932 ladies were admitted. Both male and female players have shown their efficiency in State and National levels in different time. They have brought honour for the club by winning gold, silver and bronze medals in State, National and World national Championships.

There are six categories of member in the club namely Patrons, Life members, Ordinary members, Up-country members, Junior members and Honorary Life members. The managing committee of the club is responsible to look after the administration. Members of the club also take part in many social activities including community dinners, get togethers and entertainment programmes. An Annual Children's Fancy Dress

Contest and the Annual Grand Parsee Bazar was opened to display their wares to all the members of the community in 2nd January 2000. It is the only place in Kolkata where all Parsees, young and old, from across the world are welcome in true Parsee style with warmth. Every Saturday and Sunday at 5 p.m. they meet and pass pleasant evenings in the company of their friends. 90% of the Parsees of Kolkata know each one another through the meeting of this club.

### **3.3 The Calcutta Parsee Amateur Dramatic Club**

It is the earliest cultural organization, formed by a group of respected Parsee thespian of Kolkata. Every year a Gujrati play is done free of cost for the purpose of entertainment of the Parsee community at Corinthian theatre on the occasion of their 'Navroz' [Parsee New Year]

The club founded on 14th September 1907. Late C. Ardesher, an eminent Parsee arranged a religious and cultural programme on this day, at Corinthian theatre. Next year the club gave its first performance presenting a Gujrati play named "Bholi Gool" which was performed on 13th September, 1908. In August 2007, the club celebrated its magical hundredth year with non stop performance, under the present president Mrs. Tehnaz A. Punwani. In spite of all difficulties, the members of the club have performed 'Natak' each and every year come hell or high water. In the early and middle years of its existence, long serious plays, tragedies and melodramas, filled with a number of songs were the sequence of the day. But with the passing of time, character of plays changed, and hysterical comedies without songs took over. The participation of female actress on the stage from 1955 was another major change.

### **3.4 Calcutta Zoroastrian Stree Mandal**

The Calcutta Zoroastrian Stree Mandal is the only Parsee women's organization in Kolkata with the principal object of social work and granting relief to the poor and indigent Zoroastrian families who are residing in Kolkata and its fringes both. This organization was set up in 1936. It has always assisted the needy Parsees in improving their condition, in the form of medicine, medical care, hospitalization, rations and food supplements, educational facilities like school and college education fees, cost of books, clothes etc.

The Stree Mandal is affiliated to the West Bengal Women's Co-ordinating Council and West Bengal Council of Women. Through these organizations the Mandal gives payment of the educational fees to a female child of the S.O.S. children's village, sponsors adult literacy programmes, education and vocational training of poor village girls of West Bengal. It also donates for the crippled and deaf children of different organizations and to other deserving causes like the Leprosy Mission, orphanages, hospitals etc. In times of natural calamities, the Mandal always contributes relief materials. All calculation relating to the income and expenditure of the Mandal are investigated annually. Donations, contributions and subscriptions help the Mandal to serve the needy. To collect fund the Mandal also organises 'Fete' occasionally.

In 1967, a two-storied building in Park Circus was acquired by the Stree Mandal for the indigent families. Huge generous and active support of the Parsee Community of Kolkata had helped to obtain the building. At present nine needy Parsee families are living happily in this building. Mrs. Homai Mehta (1936 – 1943) was the very first president of this organization while other members were also women. At present the Mandal has nearly 400 members containing of life, Ordinary and Associate members. A 18 years old Parsee lady can take the membership of this organization. Name of the present president is Mrs. Khorshed P. Modi. The Zoroastrian Stree Mandal offers help and assistance not only to the Parsee woman but also help the woman of any other community.

### **3.5 The Parsee Zoroastrian Association**

The Parsee Zoroastrian Association makes an attempt to preserve the unity in the community in different aspects. It wants to study and solve problems confronting the community. The Association has conducted several honest polls to obtain opinion of the community members on controversial matters. Philosophy and cultural aspects are patronized by the Association. The important objectives of the Association are to promote the religious, social, economic, intellectual activities of the Parsee community in Kolkata. It was founded in 1935 by the late Dr. D.N. Wadia (Head of the the Geological Survey), the late C.H.M. Rustomji and E.S. Olpadvala. The latter two persons were the Trustees of the CZCRFC (Calcutta Zoroastrian Community Residential Care Facility). This Association was elevated into a study group which has arranged a number of lectures and debates competition, inviting scholars of eminence in Bengal, Bombay and other places to address on philosophy, Ancient History and Religion. The Association's president Mr. Darayus J. Bapooji is an efficient person. Some authentic books by scholars from different parts of the world has been published by the Association. The State Government consults with the Parsee Zoroastrian Association in various civic matters including recommendation of names of the delegates to the Parsee matrimonial Court. The purpose of the Association is to help in various important community matters.

### **3.6 The Calcutta Parsee Youth League**

The Calcutta Parsee Youth League was formed in 1939 by Mr. Ardeshir Batlivala to fulfill the wish and requirements of the youths of the Parsee Community of Kolkata. The league has been serving for Parsee young people from its begging. It was a splinter group of the Parsee Zoroastrian Association, as the founding members realized that formation of a union was compulsory for the youths to their overall development and activities. To make the youth of Parsee Community a little bit more close-knit was the primary intention of the organization. Other purpose of the league are to create opportunities to youths to exchange their opinions, ideas and views and share their knowledge or talents with others via discussions, contests, debates, lectures, elocutions and excursions. Now Mrs. Gulnar N. Mehta is holding the post of president.

The league has arranged several interesting programmes, drama and functions for its members and for the whole community from its initiation. Multiple items like plays, Dramas, Quizzes, Talent contests, Art contests, Debates, Scrabble and Creative writing contests, Elocution competitions, various functions, excursions and picnics are within the orbit of this highly creative body. Near about fifty years ago the league had formed a Dramatic group and a Music appreciation group with separate rules and regulations and managing committee. After few years catering a good performance the groups were ultimately dissolved due to diminishing interest or response of the members.

There are four categories of members in the league namely Patrons, Life members, Ordinary members and Continuing members. Any male or female Parsee who has the age between 17 to 41, shall be eligible to be registered as a member of the League. The League has a managing committee consist of the president, secretary, treasurer and four members. M.C. is elected at every annual general meeting and it can regulate all of the affairs and expenditures of the League. It gives helps and donations to the needy, less fortunate members of Parsee Community. After all the Calcutta Parsee Youth League offers enough opportunities to the youths of India and it is pledged to serve the youth to the best of its ability.

### **3.7 The Shaklat Physical Cultural Institute**

The Shaklat Physical Cultural Institute was inaugurated on 1st July 1933 to encourage and develop the character and physical evolution of the youth of the Parsee Community. Late Mr. Jehangirji Jiwani Modi (1933 – 1973) was the very first president, treasurer and Hony of this Institute while the Chairman was Late Prof. D.

Wadia. It is registered under the West Bengal Societies Registration Act 1961 and located in the Shaklat Building at 26, Prafulla Sarkar Street, Kolkata. This organization was founded in memory of Late Jamshedji Saklat, ‘Masaji’ of Late Jehangirji Modi.

Activities like gymnastics, swimming and scouting / guiding are practiced in this institute. Both the Gymnasium and swimming sections, which used to be very active in the past, are now unfortunately standstill due to some difficulties. At present scouting and guiding are the main activity of the Institute. The S.P.C.I. Scout troop was founded by Mr. Ardeshir Kakikobad Batlivala on 5th October, 1936. He was the main patron of the Scouts, Guides, Cubs and Bulbuls. The Scout Troop, under the First Calcutta District Association of Bharat Scouts and Guides was a grand entry in the Institution. A Cub pack was founded in July 1957, followed by a Bulbul Flock in April 1967 and a Guide Company in April 1968. Many children of the community took advantage of this world-wide movement.

Scouting or the Scout movement is a movement that aims to support young people in their physical, mental and spiritual development, that they may play constructive roles in society, with a strong focus on the outdoors and survival skills. [Founded in 1907, founder Lord Robert Baden-Powel, a Lieutenant general in British army] in 1910, a new organization, ‘Girl Guides’ was created for girls. ‘Scouts and Guides’ is a voluntary, not political, educational movement for young people and a worldwide association. A junior branch of the scout association, for boys aged 8 to 11 is called “Cubs” and for girls is called “Bulbuls”. Values like honesty, friendship, dignity, patience, integrity, discipline, kindness etc. and life skills like leadership, creativity, team spirit, physical fitness skills, handicrafts, first-aid and nature study are the basics of the Scouts & Guides. The Scout motto is : “Be Prepared” which means you are always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty.

Present president of the Institute is Mr. Noshir S. Wadia, who is a eminent Scout Master. Under his expert supervision the troop won all the competitions held by First Calcutta District Association and was judged the best all round Troop in Bengal. Many members or senior Scouts of the Troop are holding important position in their various fields of activities and in associations of districts and state.

In April, 2009 the Institute started a new chapter in their history to welcome children of parents whose mothers are Parsee Zoroastrians and whose fathers are non-Parsee, to become “Associates” in the Institute. The Institute wants to give a equal acceptance for the children whose mothers are Parsee only.

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