

Parsis and Ritual Innovation

Zoroastrian Funerary Practices in Mumbai during the Pandemic

MARIANO ERRICHELLO

The implications of the COVID-19 outbreak for the diverse ethnoreligious communities of India are varied. This essay examines the debates surrounding ritual innovations due to the impact of the pandemic on the funerary practices of the Parsis in Mumbai, India.¹ Zoroastrians dispose of the bodies of their beloved ones in circular structures known as Towers of Silence, but they have been forced to change this practice in order to contain the spread of the virus. The Parsis are the descendants of the Zoroastrians who fled to the west of India after the Muslim conquest of Iran in the seventh century CE. Between the eighth and tenth centuries, groups of Zoroastrians settled principally in Gujarat and, from the seventeenth century, a large part of the community was established in Bombay, which was turning into one of the main business centers of India ([web figures 14.1](#) and [14.2](#)). Nowadays, around forty thousand Parsis live in Mumbai (Government of India 2011).

Having become a key partner of the European trade companies, the Parsi community progressively gained social prestige and flourished into a wealthy community (Dobbin 1972, 2–3; Metcalf and Metcalf 2006, 44–47). The proximity to colonial power greatly exposed the Parsis to European culture, leading to the appropriation of Western forms of knowledge and customs. Furthermore, during the nineteenth century, Christian missionaries began to attack the Zoroastrians of India by ridiculing their religious practices and sacred scriptures in order to legitimize the biblical message and promote conversions (Hinnells 2008). The extant Zoroastrian corpus that survived until modern times represents just a portion of the original scriptures, making its canonization a difficult



To access additional resources for this essay, scan the QR code or go to <https://manifold.uhpress.hawaii.edu/projects/coronasur/resource-collection/14>



14.3. While reciting prayers before the sacred fire, Zoroastrian priests wear the *padān*, a cloth nose-mouth mask that prevents the saliva or breath from contaminating the purity of the fire. Credit: Mariano Errichiello, 2019.

task and converting orality and ritual enactment into central elements of the transmission of the Zoroastrian religion. As a consequence, the response of the Parsis to the missionaries' attacks was fragmented and exposed the lack of a normative theology. In this context, the need for understanding what authentic Zoroastrianism was arose among the Parsis, triggering different strategies of canonization and interpretation of sacred scriptures that led to a hermeneutical

pluralism. Such pluralism prompted heated debates on rituals, including funerary practices, which are still ongoing.

Soul and Body in the After-Death Ceremonies

According to the Zoroastrian eschatology, when a person dies, the soul separates from the physical body. At the same time, as death represents the triumph of evil, the physical body becomes polluted. During the three days following the death, the soul remains seated at the head of the physical body; then, on the morning of the fourth day, it begins its journey towards the spiritual realms accompanied by divine entities. A female figure (*daēnā*) appears to take the soul to the House of Song or House of Lies, depending on the way the departed has conducted their earthly existence. If the departed has followed the religious tenets, the female figure materializes as a beautiful maiden; otherwise, as an ugly woman. At this stage, the soul goes through the Chinvat Bridge, which connects the material world with the spiritual realms (Lüddeckens and Karanjia 2011, 41, 51–58; Shaked 1998, 565–569). The mourners accompany the journey of the soul by performing a set of funerary practices that include the recitation of prayers to aid the progression of the soul of the departed as well as the open-air exposure of the corpse to sunrays and to birds of prey (e.g., vultures).

Since ancient times, Zoroastrians have disposed of corpses in raised circular structures called Towers of Silence (*dakhmas*; Boyce 1993, 279–286). The Mumbai Tower of Silence (*doongerwādi*) was built more than 350 years ago on an extensive piece of land, fifty-five acres in Malabar Hill, south of Mumbai ([web figure 14.4](#)). The top of this tower is open and its walls surround three concentric rows of platforms where bodies of the deceased are disposed of. The bones of the corpses are accumulated at the center of the structure and are periodically vacated ([web figure 14.5](#)). While several priests are required to participate in the funerary practices, the pallbearers (*nasāsālārs*) are the only ones who can work in the proximity of the corpses and handle them (Lüddeckens and Karanjia 2011, 65–87).

Disposal of Corpses: A Long-Standing Issue for the Zoroastrians of India

As there is for many other communal issues such as intermarriage or conversions, there is a heated debate among the Parsis about funerary practices. In 1994, the Bombay Parsi Punchayet (BPP), which administers the Mumbai Tower of Silence, distributed a pamphlet named *Towers of Silence* ([web figure 14.6](#)). It contains articles by distinguished members of the Parsi community as well as contributions by

non-Zoroastrians that endorse the use of the Towers of Silence as the most hygienic method of disposing of corpses. The first edition of this pamphlet was published in 1899, confirming the extent and relevance of the debate on funerary practices for the Parsis from colonial times onwards. During the last few decades, the progressive diminution of the vultures' population in Mumbai has made the open-air ex-carnation of corpses more difficult. After proposals to build an aviary for vultures were evaluated and dismissed, the BPP installed solar panels to speed up the process of dehydration of the corpses. However, for some Parsis this solution did not prove to substantially accelerate the decomposition of the corpses, and as a consequence, burial and cremation began to be considered as alternative methods of disposal. Nevertheless, a large part of the community fiercely opposes such adaptation of funerary practices. According to a report published by the UNESCO Assisted Project for the Preservation and Promotion of Parsi Zoroastrian Culture and Heritage in 2004, the Tower of Silence was still the preferred place for disposal for more than 90 percent of Parsis living in Mumbai (Lüddeckens and Karanjia 2011, 11–12). In fact, the vast majority of the Parsi community maintains that burials pollute earth and that cremations contaminate fire. Earth and fire are considered sacred elements of creation, and the rationale behind the use of the Towers of Silence is to keep sacred natural elements pure by avoiding their direct contact with the polluted corpses. Therefore, either burial or cremation of corpses is considered to be heretical. However, in 2015, the Parsi Prayer Hall in Worli, south of Mumbai, was established to provide a place of worship for those opting for cremation.

Cremation: Necessary Evil or Unforgivable Heresy?

At the end of March 2020, as part of its measures to counteract the pandemic, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, the governing body of the city of Mumbai, informed the BPP about the decision that all Covid victims must be cremated (Wadia 2020). While the general restrictions have triggered the move of some liturgical activities from the temples to social media channels (Engineer 2020), the imposed cremation of COVID-19 victims unleashed harsh protests from those Parsis who place great emphasis on the after-death ceremonies. The BPP is the main governing body of the Parsi community in Mumbai, and many Parsis were expecting it to adopt an adversarial position in order to negotiate an exemption or a waiver for the community due to the religious implications of cremation. Nevertheless, the BPP decided to assume a mediating position with the government of Mumbai and advised Parsis to follow the proposed measures.

The prayers for those who died from COVID-19 are now performed at the Parsi Prayer Hall of the crematorium in Worli. Yet, in order to alleviate the grief caused

by the forced cremations, some priests decided to introduce the recitation of one of the main prayers of the funerary ceremonies right outside the Tower of Silence. This was considered an unacceptable liturgical innovation by some groups of Parsis who are particularly concerned with the preservation of customary Zoroastrian rituals. The initiative of those priests has therefore raised the level of the debate within the Parsi community. Funerary practices began to be actively scrutinized, in the fear that further initiatives could set precedents for liturgical innovation. On September 3, 2020, following a writ petition filed by the BPP, the Bombay High Court ruled in favor of the Parsi community, granting permission to perform the ceremony for the Day of Remembrance (Fravardian) in the Mumbai Tower of Silence, as long as the norms of social distancing were observed (Kashyap 2020). An important ceremony for the Zoroastrians, the Day of Remembrance consists of annual prayers to be recited in the Tower of Silence for those who have passed away during the previous year. The decision of the Bombay High Court was positively received by the Parsis, who could visit the facilities in groups of fifteen to twenty persons during the ceremony. Yet, the forced cremation for COVID-19 victims remained in place.

As the number of cases and deaths from the pandemic in India reached dramatic figures in the first half of 2021, the restrictions have been kept in place and the communal debate has continued. An article was published on May 1, 2021, in *Parsi Times*, the community's weekly newspaper, by Vada Dastoorji Khurshed Dastoor, the high priest of Udvada (one of the most prestigious roles in the Zoroastrian priesthood). Given the extraordinary times, the author proposed opening negotiations with the authorities of Mumbai in order to get permission for the burial of COVID-19 victims. In case of a positive outcome, Dastoor proposed allocating a section of the land of the Mumbai Tower of Silence ([web figure 14.7](#)) for this purpose (Dastoor 2021). This proposition has raised opposition from a part of the community. For instance, the editorial team of the *Parsee Voice*, the newsletter associated with the followers of the esoteric group called Science of Bliss (Ilme Kṣnum), promotes negotiations with the city authorities that would prevent cremation of those who died from COVID-19. They suggest, rather, vaccinating the pallbearers operating in the Mumbai Tower of Silence, enforcing new safety procedures, and disposing of the corpses of COVID-19 victims in the unused Towers of Silence covered with a net to prevent birds of prey from entering the facilities and spreading the virus.

Loss upon Loss

As COVID-19 forces the world to adapt to new ways of conducting life and work, religious communities are also required to make concessions. Over the years,

Zoroastrianism has been granted a somewhat privileged status in India, with relative freedom from interference by government authorities. However, COVID-19 has no regard for the delicate balance once struck between state and religion and has created new power asymmetries. This pandemic has certainly changed the way Parsis mourn the deaths of COVID-19 victims; in addition, it has sown further division within the community. Proposals to adapt funerary practices to these unprecedented times have not reached a consensus, but they have endowed the role of priests with a creative element that goes beyond the customary performance of rituals. This newly acquired agency triggered further debates and fragmentation, questioning the sedimented issue of power relations within the Parsi community. Deprived of the customary disposal of corpses in the Towers of Silence and of traditional ways of mourning, the Zoroastrians in India are compelled to find ways around these obstacles to make sense of grief.

Notes

1. The author is grateful to Fondazione Giorgio Cini, in Venice, Italy, where this article was drafted during the residential scholarship at the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities in 2021.