



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## POSTCOLONIAL INDIA AND THE ANXIETY OF PARSIS: AN ANALYSIS OF ROHINTON MISTRY S *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY*

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**Abstract:** In the present paper I have tried to locate the Parsi community in post-colonial India and the challenges they have to face. India is known for its multicultural coexistence and harmony. It provided shelter to every needy person. Arabs attacked Iran in early eighth century and conquered it, in result, a group of Parsis escaped and reached to India. They requested and got shelter and became a part of India. Parsis, for centuries have enjoyed liberty, brotherhood and communal harmony. But in postcolonial India the community is facing multiple political, cultural and social challenges. Vote bank politics have left the community crippled. Being a dwindling community both their voice and presence is ignored. Rohinton Mistry in his novel *Such a Long Journey* deals with happy past of Parsis as well as the rising anxiety over being appropriated controlled, disempowered, humiliated, devaluated, discriminated and dislocated.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial India, multicultural existence, minority, harmony, anxiety.

### Introduction:

The suppression of culture, community and nation is not something new. It had have been happening since the emergence of civilizations. Accordingly, the communities have been living in exodus since ages. Exodus has been of two types. Indentured and self willed. In indentured exodus one is forced to migrate from one's native land or country. Contrary to it in the second type, one migrates from his or her native land on his own will. Parsees had been the worshipers of Ahura Mazda and believer in Humata(good thoughts), Hukata (good words) and Huvarasta (good deeds). They lived in Iran, "a country ruled by Shah Kai Vistap." (Burjor 3) The Arabs attacked and invaded them. They forced Parsis either to be killed or to convert into Islam. Hence they are the victim of indentured migration.

A group of Parsis escaped from their native country and reached to Sanjanpur, Gujarat. The most aged, wise priest of the group appeared in the court of Jadhav Rana, the king of Sanjanpur. On King's order the attendant brought a glass, full of milk, symbolizing that their country is full of people and offers no space for the foreigners. The wise priest added some sugar to the milk of the glass, indicating that they will mix among the people of the country like the sugar in the milk. The King got impressed and allowed them to board on the land with following conditions:

- 1- They would have to lay down their weapons.
- 2- The leader or the priest would have to explain their belief and religion to the King.
- 3- The men would have to wear turban and women would have to wear sari.
- 4- They would have to give up their language and learn local language.

5- The marriage would have to be completed during night only.

Parsis, who had their own land and water, were left to adopt themselves on another land and culture. During the Mughal and the British reign, Parsis were the most educated community and accordingly they were posted at important posts. However, after the independence of India situation changed. Vibhooti Wadhawan writes, "With the knowledge of impending independence the community's paranoia regarding their minuscule minority grew with the departure of the British.( Wadhawan 43-44) Pointing on the role of the government and society after independence Lalit writes:

There were great hopes that, after Indian independence, the secular government of India would change ...through law. Such change has been disappointingly slow and even when New Acts were brought in, they proved difficult to enforce against the weight of religious and social tradition and the force of vested interest.

The novel, *Such a Long Journey* starts with an epigraph that is taken from Firdausi's Shahnama. It carries the nostalgia of Parsees and sorry state of them at present.

He assembled the aged priests and put questions to them concerning the kings who had once possessed the world. 'How did they,' he enquired, 'hold the world in the beginning, and why is it that it has been left to us in such a sorry state? And was it that they were able to live free of care during the days of their heroic labours?

Late marriages, strict rules of community against those who want to marry outside the community, and non-acceptance of them, have made the Parsi community a minority which is in dwindling position. After the independence, the growing tussle, fanaticism, resentment, and intolerance are raising a sense of insecurity, anxiety, fear, uncertainty among Parsis. Rohinton Mistry deals with happy past of Parsis as well as the rising anxiety over being appropriated controlled, disempowered, humiliated, devaluated, discriminated and dislocated.

The novel *Such a Long Journey* is set in Khodad building in Mumbai. In the background of the novel there are multiple political, historical and ideological events. The war between India and Pakistan, the emergence of Bangladesh, war between India and China, the life of common people as well as Parses are the main events. Gustad Noble, his son Sohrab, friend Bilimoria and Dinshawji are the central characters of the novel. Gustad Noble is concerned about his family, friends, community, society and country. He witnesses several ups and downs throughout the novel. Commenting about Gustad Noble P. Selvam writes, "He cherishes the values of friendship, condemns the scourge of war, and denounces unscrupulous, corrupt, and hypocritical political leaders..." (P 32)

Dinshawji is a very close and loyal friend of Gustad. Mistry expresses his concern through Noble and Dinshawji. Dinshawji is very possessive and concerned about parsi names, culture, living style, and community. He has a good humorous sense and feels proud of his heritage like English education, music, language, living style, and aesthetic sense. He is extremely hurt with the changes taking place in system and hierarchy after the English left India. He expresses his concern and frustration on the changes of position and legacy of Parsis. There was a time when Parsis were the right hand of the English in the field of Banking and Business. But after the independence of India they were not given the importance that they deserved. Dinshawji expresses his mood as he comments, "Parsis were the kings of banking in those days, such respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since Indira nationalized the banks. Nowhere in the world has nationalization worked. What can you say to idiots?"(P 38)

Indians started entertaining reactionary politics and it lead them to be trapped in caste, religion and power politics. In such scenario democracy may not serve the common people in real sense, it may be biased or may change in autocracy on the support of majority people. In this case the vote bank becomes very important in democracy. However, Parsis are minuscule minority and there vote is so less in number that it does not attract political parties to take decision in their welfare. They are always open to threat, bullying and appropriation. Mumbai had been lauded for trade, economy, multi-Cultural society, free speech, liberty, and

social stability. But it is turning into a place of social and cultural disharmony. Dinshawji says that under the ages of Shiv Sena and BJP the harmony of the society is disappearing and fascism is being imposed upon the minorities. He expresses his concern, “And today we have that bloody Shiv Sena, wanting to make the rest of us into second-class citizens.” (P 39) He expresses his anxiety further, “In the bank we thought our innings were over when the *goondas* broke the window...They were shouting, “Parsi crow eaters, we will show you who is the boss.”( P 39) Commenting upon the rise of Shiv Sena and its effect upon minorities and migrated Nilufer E Bharucha Writes:

When large parts of Northern India were convulsed by Hindu-Muslim riots in the wake of partitioning of India in 1947, Bombay had remained relatively trouble - free. This however, changed in 1960 with the rise of the extreme right-wing political parties like Shiv Sena in Bombay...the religious other, the Muslims, the linguistic other.(Bharucha 127)

It was the reaction of the fascist, right- wing politics that instigated and led to the demolishing of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and targeting minorities. Parsis had nothing to gain but a lot to lose. The rioting and serial bomb blast in Mumbai hurt the sense of harmony and brotherhood. The minorities were soft target. Commenting in this regard Nilufer E Bharucha writes, “ the destruction of the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya ...Has generated an anxiety among the minorities and even those Parsis who thrown in their lot with Postcolonial India have began to display a certain nervousness about their future in a Hindu dominated/ BJP ruled India. (Bharucha 29)

Vote bank politics has been a great set back to Indian democracy. It promoted appeasement politics. Political leaders have focused more on caste, religion, region instead of real issues, development and ease of life. In divisive politics mostly the minorities are ill treated. Dinshawji expresses his resentment and accuses Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India for promoting the majority community and singing to their tune. He says:

She began encouraging the demands for separate Maharastra. How much blood shed, how much rioting she caused. And today we have that bloody Shiv Sena, wanting to make the rest of us into second class citizens. Don't forget, she started it all by supporting the racist buggers.(p 39)

With great efforts and sacrifices Parsis have earned name for being a community of non-violence, good words, good thoughts and good deeds. They have given top most priority to remain honest and true to their duty. The postcolonial India has become a place of continuous tussle. The minorities have to prove their loyalty to the government as well as the majority citizens. In such chaotic scenario Parsis are the most soft target. The fictional character of Jimmy Billimoria is based on a real character of Sohrab Nagarwala. The story is connected with a real money laundering case during Indira Gandhi's reign. Sohrab Nagarwala was a cashier in State Bank of India. He was prime accuse in this case. He confessed in the court, that he had received a phone call from the Prime Minister's office. And was instructed to hand over a large amount of money to a messenger, but his explanation was never accepted and he was convicted of embezzlement. This charge and punishment was a great blow to the reputation of Parsi community. The community never believed it to be true. They treated it a type of conspiracy against the community. Dodiya writes, “The Nagarawala incident, because it involved a Parsi, jolted the self image of the community no less... The Parsees were deeply anguished by the ambivalent role Nagarwala had played in the sordid story.” (P 46-47)

However, despite the confession of Nagarwala, Parsi community believes him to be innocent. They accused Indira Gandhi to tarnish the image of Parsis. Dinshawji rates her to be like her father, “His feud with his son –in- law, the thorn in his political side was well known. Nehru never forgave Firoze Gandhi for exposing scandals in the government.( P 11) Every civilian is equal in the eyes of the state and no one should be treated contrary to it. The safety and security of them should be the top priority of the state. However, in the postcolonial India the things have turned up to be more chaotic. People like Dinshawji remain in anxiety of future, “In the banks we thought our innings were over. When the *goondas* broke the windows.” (P 39)

Commenting about Parsis Lalit writes, “Traditionally, Parsis are liberal and secular...there is hardly any example of their defiance towards other religion or belief. They are very friendly and tolerant people.” (58) The surrounding wall of Khodad building has turned up into a symbol of cultural tolerance, harmony, and brotherhood. It also stands for pre independent time of India when Parsis were in commanding position, safe and secure. The demolition of the wall symbolizes the departure of Englishmen from India. Both the departure of the English and demolition of the wall left the Parsees insecure, anxious, uncomfortable and open to everyone’s question.

The dwindling Parsi community is facing multiple challenges in Hindu majority India. The rites of leaving the dead at Dokhma or the Tower of Silence have been a matter of conflict between the Parsis and other civilians. Parsis leave the body on The Tower of Silence to be devoured by vultures, and the remains are left to decompose under the sun. Parsis believe that by doing so they do avoid defiling water, air, fire etc. But other civilians complain that the vultures take the flesh and fly in the sky and sometimes they drop it at their houses. Therefore, they oppose the dead body to be put on the Tower of Silence to be devoured by the vultures. During the pandemic of COVID-19 the issue of Parsis traditional way of burial has reached in the Gujrat High Court and the court has rejected to allow the traditional way of performing burial of the person died of COVID-19. The Court had made the ground of safety and security of other people. However, the community filed a plea in Supreme Court and the Court allowed them to perform the traditional burial with certain conditions.

Through the generational confrontation between Gustad Noble and his son Sohrab, Mistry dramatises the anxiety of minorities in postcolonial India. Sohrab Passes the IIT exam but refuses to take admission. Gustad is unable to understand his son. Sohrab belongs to younger generation and very less concerned about his future. He is more concerned about his choice. Gustad belongs to older generation and he is more anxious about family status and security. He states in resentment, “no future for minorities, with all this fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense.” (P 55) Commenting about Gustad’s concern Jyoti Yadav writes, “Gustad’s evaluation of his position as belonging to an ethnic community which is being ignored and sidelined in post-colonial India makes him equate their position with the Negroes in America, a perception which is perhaps not shared by his son Sohrab.” (Yadav 116)

**Conclusion:** Contribution of Parsis to Indian judiciary, politics, economy, business, astronomy, science, freedom, harmony, charity had been commendable and extraordinary. They have proved to be a great asset to the nation. However, Mistry in his novel *Such a Long Journey* portrays the enigma and anxiety that is looming around the community. Presently in postcolonial India they are facing many cultural, political and existential problems. They are a dwindling community but a great treasure to India, in fact to the world. Parsis have lived like a phoenix and perhaps they will overcome the growing challenges that are in front of them or against them. With the passage of time they have been improving their faith and culture. Now they prefer to use distilled water instead of Gomez (cow’s urine) to wash the body of the dead. The role of the government should be strictly adhered to provide them a society of communal harmony, brotherhood, inclusive, accountable and progressive. To increase the population of Parsis the government of India established “Jiyo Parsi Scheme” in 2013 under the Minority Welfare Department. It provides online dating site and motivates the Parsi girls and boys to marry and to have kids. The scheme is running successfully.



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