



## PARSI GUJARATI: A MARKER OF A MINORITY

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### ABSTRACT

Parsi Gujarati, the spoken language of the Parsis of India, is a dialect of Standard Gujarati which has kept alive the memory of a community for over a thousand years. A unique blend of Pahlavi, from their original homeland of Persia and the Gujarati of the workers in the field with whom the refugees first mingled, it is a blend of the poetic Persian language and the earthy, often crude spoken Gujarati of the outcaste 'Dubra' field workers. While it kept alive stories, jokes, even metaphors for centuries, today with migration from Gujarat and the shift to the global language, English, it is according to UNESCO standards, 'Critically endangered.' The youngest speakers are grandparents and the transmission of language to the future generations seems to be at the point of being completely lost. Primarily an oral language, its survival today depends upon little hymns or *monajats*, which are still sung to children and carry core teachings of the faith and the values of the culture. *Monajats* are family based cultural transmission even before a child has learnt to read. This informal experience bonded the joint family on the verandahs of *mofussil* towns and villages. Today, when the community has become almost completely urban, the *monajat* tradition is kept alive through classes on culture and religion. The Parsis are facing demographic extinction and Parsi Gujarati, the marker of this tiny minority in India needs documentation and recording so that this linguistic and cultural thread in the fabric of India is not lost to time.

### KEYWORDS

Parsi Gujarati  
Oral  
Endangered  
Monajat

The Parsis came to India over a thousand years ago, a period almost contemporary to the landing of the Normans in England. Yet Indian diversity is such that while today there has been total assimilation and no one knows who is a Norman or a Briton in England, the Parsis who landed as refugees, not only keep their identity but even a very special dialect called Parsi Gujarati (PG). It has many jokes, some of which are unprintable; it has some lovely songs and is a unique mixture created in India, a land where multiple identities can co-exist, as shown by this special way of speaking.

What do we know of Parsi history? The *Kisseh -i- Sanjan*, a Chronicle in Pahlavi couplets by Dastur Behman Kaikobad Sanjana, of Navsari, dating to 1599, recounts in detail the story of Jadi Rana, the Hindu Raja, giving permission to the Zoroastrians, refugees from religious persecution in their homeland Persia, to settle in India on conditions of acculturation: the adoption of Gujarati as their mother tongue, the adoption of the clothing of India, the surrender of all weapons and finally, a seemingly odd request, that Parsi wedding processions be held in the dark<sup>1</sup>.

A far more popular and vivid account of this meeting between the Persian refugees and Jadi Rana, is found in the Gujarati *garbas*; songs and dances enacted by Parsi women, though composed mainly by men.

Individuals like the Parsis had entered the multiple diversity of India. How had their hosts reacted? Was it with problems and conflicts or was it with adaptation on both sides? What is remarkable is that a conflict of cultures, seen across the world today where refugees are moving in great numbers, apparently did not occur. The adaptation of the Parsi Gujarati language is just one of the stories which make Indian culture unique and worth preserving.

It is only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when Parsi Gujarati has become a 'Dying Dialect' that research has started in earnest about its creation, peak of productivity and decline. The refugees from Iran spoke Pahlavi, the poetic language of the Persian Zoroastrian Court. They were very different in appearance from the Gujaratis who gave them refuge: they ate meat, carried weapons and spoke another tongue. From anthropological and genetic studies such as "Like sugar in milk: reconstructing the genetic history

of the Parsi Population", by Gyaneshwer Chaubey et al in *Genome Biology 2017*,<sup>2</sup> conducted by researchers of Cambridge and Estonia, it is seen that the first interactions were between the tribal populations of the coastal area and the newcomers. This is why there is, in Parsi Gujarati, a strange mixture of courtly pleasantries and very crude, sometimes embarrassingly explicit, earthy language used in the fields, by those with whom the Parsis mingled.

Parsi Gujarati is a predominately colloquial language that serves as an identity marker of a specific, dwindling ethno-religious community of Indian Zoroastrians. It possesses unique morphological, phonological, lexical and syntactical features that distinguish it from Standard Gujarati, a written and literary language used by the majority in the Indian state of Gujarat. It concerns linguists with the common South Asian predicament of the difference between a *Language* and a *Dialect*. Some scholars see P.G. as a creole language, rather than a dialect, since its formation came as a result of language shift - from Pahlavi to Old Gujarati, through transferring and intermingling features of a distinct ethnic group and their language, into a new tongue.

PG is an overwhelmingly spoken language, which evolved in its present form only in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and remains predominantly a vernacular. PG has been seen by its practitioners as a language with no literature and even by educational reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a language, somehow less pure than Standard Gujarati (SG). This is why, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this led to educational authorities compelling Parsis to use pure Gujarati.

Yet, Gandhiji would call Parsi poet, *Kavi Ardeshir Khabardar*, the first "National Poet", of India because of his love for the land. At the same time, the social reformer Behramji Malabari frequently used pure Gujarati poetry not Parsi Gujarati as a medium of social uplift. His *Nitivinod* or *The Pleasures of Ethics* is in the pure Gujarati of the Nagar Brahmins.<sup>3</sup> Fardunji Marzaban (1787-1847), became the pioneer of the vernacular press in India. His newspaper the *Mumbai Samachar*, 1822, is today the oldest daily extant outside the United Kingdom. Naoroji Chanderao (1808-1859), was a Gujarati journalist, while Asphandiarji Kamdin (1751-1826) translated the historical *Sanskrit Shoklas* into Gujarati and wrote the *Kabisani Hakikat*.

Therefore, after centuries in India, were the Parsis assimilating or did their Iranian Zoroastrian ethnicity come first? In some cases, such as *Kavi Khabardar*, the two fitted seamlessly into a single identity, but an anxiety about being swallowed up by the huge tide of India, can be seen in the way they have clung to Parsi Gujarati.

In the Gujarati Grammar by Rev William St. Clair Tisdall's, *A Simplified Grammar of the Gujarati Language* (1892) Tisdall, distinguishes Parsi Gujarati as a separate language: "*Parsi Gujarati, the language as spoken and written by the Parsis... differs from ordinary Gujarati in that it contains more Arabic and Persian words in considerable numbers....., and that its grammar is in a very unfixed and irregular condition.*"<sup>4</sup>

Most importantly, PG was seen as the language that epitomized a unique Parsi cultural discourse, unfamiliar to any other Standard Gujarati speaker. To quote Modi's Preamble, '*Someone is a Parsi, because (s)he speaks Parsi-Gujarati...*'<sup>5</sup>

From 1850, a new period begins. It is a rather schizophrenic period, particularly for the Parsis in Bombay, for while on the one side, it is the richest period of Gujarati writing by the Parsis and the flowering of Parsi journalism with great impact on the social movements of the country, it is also the time when, moving to a larger cosmopolitan identity, Parsis rejected their roots in Gujarat to believe that their Gujarati brethren were "*unreformed*" or non-Westernized. They whole heartedly adopted the belief that, "*we want the English Language, English Manners & English Behaviour...for [even] our wives and daughters and until these are supplied.....the present gulf between the Englishman and the Indian should remain as wide as ever.*"<sup>6</sup>

Yet, as stated, this was the time of the Parsi literary artiste and dramatist. The social history of modern South Asian Theatre and thereafter Cinema is intimately linked with that of the Parsi community and Parsi Theatre of this period. Beginning as a tool of reform for the citizens of Bombay, Parsi Theatre rapidly grew to become the subcontinent's primary source of entertainment and education, catering to a growing middle class. *Rustom Zabooli and Sohrab*, 1853, was the first play performed in this genre and dealt with an ancient, tragic Persian story from the *Shahnameh*, as did several early plays which followed. But it was in the parodies or farces which followed these plays, that the world of Parsi India and then rapidly, all India entered. Drama became a method for the reformation of society and the *Gyan Prasarak Mandali* (Society for the Diffusion of Knowledge), as well as the *Rahnumai Mazdayasnan Sabha* (Religious Reform Association) and the journal *Rast Goftar*, all functioned as mechanisms for socio-cultural change. Westernized Parsis of Elphinstone College, such as Dadabhai Naoroji also reproduced Shakespeare, as well as Persian and Indian Classics. The language of Parsi Theatre began with Gujarati, but swiftly moved to Urdu and Marathi. *Harishchandra* and *Alauddin*, it is said, were even appreciated by Queen Victoria and Edward VII in London.

However, in just a hundred years, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the overall decline in Gujarati literacy among the new generation of Parsis turned Parsi Gujarati into a purely conversational language. It has become a language primarily spoken by elders, inextricably linked with their unique Parsi identity reflecting their culture.

Parsi Gujarati is linked with several traditional narratives developed exclusively by the Parsi community, such as singing of folk songs known as *Monajats*, the methods and names of particular embroideries and handicrafts, such as making of sacred Zoroastrian clothing garments, and the daily life lexicon, especially various forms of oral expressions, idioms, saying and curses semantically unintelligible for SG speakers. It is also the language of discourse affiliated with rituals specific to the Parsi Zoroastrian community, such as marriages, initiation rites or funerals as well as Parsi humour best reflected in PG plays enacted by the community on 21<sup>st</sup> March, Navroze or the Spring Festival and the New Year in August. Once this language is lost, "*the cultural milieu is lost, and the speakers of the language too lose their cultural identity. Language death is thus symptomatic of cultural death; a way of life [of the Parsi-Zoroastrian community in India] disappears with the death of a language.*"<sup>7</sup>

UNESCO has been examining language loss for the last two decades, for it is seen that language death is a primary maker for the end of a culture. Linguistically, language death or extinction comes in stages: speakers become bilingual, gradually shifting allegiance to another language till the traditional language is lost and the language of greater prestige or utility remains alone. Attrition occurs when intergenerational transmission of the native language stops. An in-between step to complete loss is when its use is relegated to traditional songs, poetry and prayers. Language death can also happen when a community becomes demographically extinct.

There are specific stages listed by UNESCO in the *UNESCO Atlas of World Languages in Danger*, 2011.<sup>8</sup>

These stages are linked with intergenerational transmission of language.

**Safe**- Language spoken by all- Intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted

**Unsafe** – Most children speak the language but it is restricted to certain domains – i.e. home.

**Definitely endangered**– Children no longer learn the language as a mother tongue in the home.

**Severely endangered** – Language spoken by grandparents/ older generations- parent generation understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves.

**Critically endangered** – Youngest speakers are grandparents and older and they speak it infrequently.

**Extinct** – No speaker left.

Today it is tragically proved by UNESCO that every fourteen days a language becomes extinct. 3000 of the world's 6-7000 languages are liable to be lost before the end of this century. Yet language preservation is nowhere near the top of the linguistic agenda. There is, particularly in India, complacency, even indifference to this issue. Language death has occurred throughout history but at present there is a dramatic upsurge in loss because of rapid globalization and the economic importance of changing to the dominant language. There is finally, through the current loss of Parsi Gujarati, a realization in the community of the importance of this language and the need to safeguard a community's linguistic heritage.

Parsi Gujarati if not recorded, will be lost in the next generation, given the critical demographic situation in the community, rapid pace of emigration outside of the P.G. language area and quick language shift among the young Parsis. This stage of loss has also been closely linked with the assimilation of the Parsis into a global identity, and their loss of a Gujarat related traditional base.

Scholars have therefore called for urgent documentation of Parsi Gujarati as a separate language, stating that virtually nothing has been written on the subject and its difference from Standard Gujarati has been practically unrecognized.

When the Parsi Zoroastrian community in India is estimated at 57,264 by the 2011 Census and there are only older members conversing in PG, this need for recording has become very essential for social historians, linguists and anthropologists.

This paper therefore wishes to draw attention to the importance of a primarily oral language and the need to safeguard the Parsi Gujarati linguistic heritage. It draws upon David Crystal's book *Language Death*<sup>9</sup> (CUP, 2000) to urge linguists to pay urgent attention to PG and its impending loss.

The oral heritage of a community carries its culture, its songs, stories, prayers, folk tales, jokes and wisdom, with its loss a community loses its cohesion and identity. Linguistically, as seen in PG, language death or extinction comes in stages: speakers become bilingual, gradually shifting allegiance till the traditional language is lost. Attrition occurs when intergenerational transmission of the native language stops. An in between step to complete loss is when its use is relegated to traditional songs, poetry and prayers. Language death can also happen when a community becomes demographically extinct. The Parsi Zoroastrians of India are facing demographic extinction.<sup>10</sup> This paper looks at the stage when the use of PG in traditional songs called *monajats* has become the one link left with the Parsis to PG and its linguistic history.

To go back far into history, we need to see the importance of orality in the maintenance of the Zoroastrian tradition far before the Parsis came to India. In 331 B.C.E Alexander of Macedon defeated Darius III in battle. Alexander the Great in the western world is Alexander the accursed to the Persians, for he destroyed the original religion by killing its teachers and quenching its fires. He caused irreparable damage by burning the palace at Persepolis, the entire library with its collection of scriptures, perished in the flames. So the religion and culture remained alive in a few scattered texts but mainly through the oral tradition and in memory for centuries. Only in Sasanian Iran (4 C.E.), were the texts recorded and published in 21 *Nasks* or Divisions and declared to be the *Avesta*, or '*Authoritative Utterance*.'<sup>11</sup>

So for many centuries in Iran, oral transmission was the main methodology of keeping the Zoroastrian culture alive. Along with prayers and rituals, ethical beliefs and cultural practices were passed orally across millennia. Even in India, the most famous Parsi myth is that of the landing of this community in Sanjan. Preserved in oral legend, song and dance is the story of the sugar in the milk. Jadi Rana signified with a bowl full of milk that his country was full to the brim. The priestly leader of the refugees in turn carefully stirred a spoon of sugar into the bowl, signifying that like the sugar the refugees would mingle into and sweeten the life of their adopted land. Since they came from Pars in Southern Iran, these people became known as the Parsis.<sup>12</sup>

Over the centuries in India, the languages of Avesta and Pahlavi were forgotten except by the priests. The community still recited the prayers but without access to meaning, while the new spoken language was the Parsi Gujarati Dialect. A unique blend of imperial Pahlavi and Dubra or out-caste Gujarati, its mixture was created through contact with agricultural workers who actually tilled the soil along with the refugees. Yet this dialect succeeded in maintaining traditions, a unique lifestyle and core beliefs for centuries. The Parsi Gujarati dialect was not taught; it had no texts or dictionaries. It was absorbed by generation of Parsis and carried within the meaning of prayers, ethical beliefs and cultural practices. Its use in the form of little songs called *monajats* is important, because *monajats* have carried for Parsis the memory of their culture.

The *monajat* has a long history. The early Zoroastrian New Persian poet, Zartost Bahram Pazdu, is credited with composing the first Zoroastrian devotional poem or *monajat*. Its genre comes from literary association with the 11th Century Sufi poet Khavja Abdullah Ansari. The earliest examples of Zoroastrian *monajats* are poetic compositions, which begin with passages praising Ahura Mazda or Zarathushtra. Pazdu's *monajat* was originally part of his *Arda Viraf Namah*, but was appropriated into later *monajat* Collections and *Khordeh Avesta*.<sup>13</sup>

The *monajat* is the simplest form of transmission of the Zoroastrian religion to its own people. Learnt in childhood, when children picked up *monajats* as a fun-filled part of the day, it helps transmit core teaching into a Parsi child's inner consciousness. Important Avestan words, concepts from Zarathushtra's *Gathas* are included very simply. Yet in David Crystal's words on Oral Performance, "its knowledge content can be enormous."<sup>14</sup>

As in the case of the epic or bardic tradition, we know little about the creators or origins of the Parsi Gujarati *monajat*. Some are found in manuscripts at the Meherjirana Library in Navsari, but their dates and authors are often omitted. A few are ascribed to Dara Pahlon, some to the Dastur Jasmsp Asa family and to Dastur Erachji Meherjirana (1840-1860) and some to one Behdin Navroji Meherji Homji (1809).<sup>15</sup>

The *monajats* which survive today are those which were sung regularly, since the written texts do not contain their music. Learnt in childhood when children hear *monajats*, it is the oral equivalent of cultural transmission even before a child has learnt to read. It has no teacher or priestly guide. It is a family centered transmission, a very informal system which children absorb almost by osmosis. Above all it was an experience, which bonded families together in music. At home, children first absorbed the tune and words. Slowly the essence of the religion and its ethics would enter through these sessions in early childhood.

The first prayer a child learns is the basis of the first *Monajat*:

#### The Ashem Vohu Prayer

*Ashem vohu, Vahishtem aisti  
Ushta Usti, Ushta Ahmai,  
Hyatashai, Vahishtai Ashem.*

It means:

‘Truth is the highest good. Happiness comes to those who work with truth for the benefit of others.’

The Gujarati *monajat* says this more simply.

#### Ashem Che Ashoi

*Ashem che ashoi, bhalayi nu naam  
Che serve thi uttam, ne sukh no pegam  
Kharu sukh aa jag ma te pame taman  
Ashoi ne khatar asho jena kam.*

The concept of *Asha* is from Avestan, Truth – *sukh*, happiness is a Gujarati word, as is the word *kam* or work. This *monajat* tells the child about three cardinal beliefs, *Asha* or Truth, *kam* or work/ deeds and wisdom which comes when we work with truth.

In the 21st century, where Gujarati has been replaced by a global language, English, in most of the Parsi community, English *monajats* have now been created which are used both in India and in the Diaspora.

Kem Na Mazda<sup>16</sup>

*Kemna Mazda! Mavaite Payum Dadar  
Protect me from evil, O! Mazda  
Let the Holy fire guide me to Asha  
Give me strength through the sacred Avesta*

*I pray for your help with devotion  
Come and guide me on the path of truth  
with the teachings of Ahura Mazda  
Let Ahriman be gone from my heart*

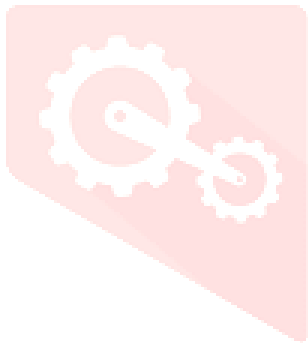
*I must always think good thoughts  
And life will have happiness and joy  
(Nemascha ya Armaitish Izacha  
Love, Devotion to you O! Ahura Mazda) (2)*

Crystal notes how highly we value little linguistic scraps of personal documentation, a grandparent's diary and lines at the back of a photograph. These provide us with our ancestry, and we take pride in their preservation.<sup>17</sup>The English *monajat* may preserve the Zoroastrian religion, but Parsi culture is an amalgamation of Zoroastrian and Indian identity as well as language. When a native language is lost, it cannot be replaced and there is a diminishing of both the world's diversity and knowledge.

India is unique: birth place of numerous religions, home to people of diverse races, creeds and languages, this land has willingly absorbed and nourished cultures for millennia. This assimilation continues even today, if we think of the Tibetans in the 1950s and the Afghans in the 1980s. *The Sugar in the Milk* in Parsi myth is repeated *ad nauseam* at all Parsi Seminars, but myths have a great ability, not just to act as metaphors, but to keep narrative alive.

The Parsis have been allowed to keep their difference, never letting it become a division from their homeland India. In this country differences of every kind have always co existed and been accepted. We are not a melting pot but a tapestry woven of many colours. The Parsis are just one tiny, but distinct, thread in a glorious weave. Yet each thread is integral to maintain the unity of a fabric and each thread here carries a language.

It is hoped that the world's realization about the apparent loss of PG will encourage other communities to preserve their vernacular traditions and act immediately. Each part of India needs to start documenting its orality before it is too late.



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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>*The Kisseh-e-Sanjan* by Bahman Kaikobad of Navsari 1600 AC is in Persian verse. It has been translated into Gujarati and English. See Dr. H.E. Eduljee. (1991). *Kisseh-a-Sanjan*, Bombay: K.R. Cama Oriental Institute.
- <sup>2</sup>“Like sugar in milk”: *Reconstructing the Genetic History of the Parsi Population*. (2017). Gyaneshwer Chaubey<sup>1</sup>, et al, *Genome Biology: Biomed Central*, 18:110.
- <sup>3</sup> Daniel J. Sheffield, *Primary Sources: Gujarati* in ed. Michael Stausberg &Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina with Anna Tessmann. (2015). *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*. Oxford/ Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 553.
- <sup>4</sup> Rev William St. Clair Tisdall. (1892) *A Simplified Grammar of the Gujarati Language And Vocabulary*, D.B. Taraporewala & Sons. Bombay, 147.
- <sup>5</sup> Bharati Modi. (2011). *Parsi Gujarati - Vanishing Dialect: Vanishing Culture*. Mumbai: LINCOM.
- <sup>6</sup>Framjee Bamanjee *Lights and Shades of the East, or a Study of the Life of Baboo Harishchander, and Passing Thoughts on India and its People*. (Bombay, 1863), p. 94: in Eckehard Kulke. (1974). *The Parsis in India: A Minority as Agent of Social Change*. New Delhi, Vikas Publication House,105.
- <sup>7</sup> Bharati Modi, *Parsi Gujarati - Vanishing Dialect:Vanishing Culture*. Mumbai, Preface.
- <sup>8</sup> UNESCO Atlas of World Languages in Danger, 2011, (<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000192416?posInSet=1&queryId=d34dcde8-602b-4ff5-883b-cd7d9baff389>).
- <sup>9</sup>David Crystal. (2000). *Language Death*. Cambridge Univ. Press.
- <sup>10</sup>The Census of India 2011, shows there are just 57,264 Parsis left in India which is less than half the Parsi population of the 1941 Census.
- <sup>11</sup>Mary Boyce. (1979). *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs & Practices*, London: Routledge, 3.
- <sup>12</sup>*The Kisseh-e-Sanjan* by Bahman Kaikobad of Navsari 1600 AC is in Persian verse. It has been translated into Gujarati and English. See Dr. H.E. Eduljee, *Kisseh-a-Sanjan*.
- <sup>13</sup>Daniel Sheffield, "Primary Sources: New Persian", in Stausberg and Vevaina, *Wiley Blackwell: Companion*, 537-538.
- <sup>14</sup> David Crystal, *Language Death*, 43.
- <sup>15</sup>Bamanji Nasarvanji Dhabhar. (1923). *Descriptive Catalogue of all Manuscripts in the First Dastoor Meherjirana Library, Navsari*, Bombay, 11, 25,93,96, 116.
- <sup>16</sup> Created by the teachers of the *Farohar* Classes for Children, Delhi Parsi Anjuman, New Delhi, India. The *Kem na Mazda* prayer is the first of the three *Kusti* prayers said by a child at the initiation or thread ceremony called the *Navjote*. This ceremony is done for both boys and girls, after which the child becomes a full member of the community.
- <sup>17</sup>Crystal *Language Death*, 41.