

Photos open eyes to plight of the dead Birds' decline hits a funeral custom

By Ramola Talwar Badam, Associated Press | September 20, 2006

MUMBAI, India -- For centuries, the Zoroastrian dead have been wrapped in white muslin and left at a leafy funeral ground on downtown Mumbai's Malabar Hill, where they are devoured by vultures. Only then, according to the tenets of the ancient religion, can the soul be freed.

But with just a handful of the endangered birds remaining in the city, and with solar panels installed to speed up decomposition working poorly during the monsoon rains, some Zoroastrians are demanding a change.

Pictures of corpses piled at the funeral grounds, secretly snapped by a mourning woman, have sparked a furor over the ancient rituals.

When Dhun Baria learned her mother's corpse would take at least a year to decompose, she slipped into the grounds -- a place few Zoroastrians are allowed to enter -- and took photographs and video footage that have shocked her community.

Orthodox elders of the religion, whose followers are also known as Parsis, say the funeral system is working fine.

But Baria challenges that with her stack of pictures, a 15-minute video clip, and thousands of handbills she has been distributing in the community showing decomposing remains.

"Would you like to have the bodies of your mother, father, daughter piled up in a horrible state?" asked Baria, whose mother died nine months ago.

"It is a terrible sight, the stench is horrible. It's as if the bodies have been tortured. The dead have no dignity," she said.

Since 1673, Parsis have placed their dead in a "dhokma," or Tower of Silence, to await the vultures at Malabar Hill, now the city's wealthiest neighborhood.

Followers of the Bronze Age Persian prophet Zarathustra, Parsis consider fire a symbol of God's spirit, so cremating the dead is a mortal sin, while burial is seen as a contamination of the earth. But the vulture is precious to Parsis, who believe it releases the spirits of the dead.

Over the past 15 years, millions of South Asian vultures have died from eating cattle carcasses tainted by a painkiller given to sick cows. Conservationists estimate that more than 90 percent of India's vultures have died, creating havoc for Parsis' funeral rites.

The IUCN-World Conservation Union lists India's three species of vulture -- the oriental white-backed, long-billed, and slender-billed vultures -- as critically endangered, the category for animals closest to extinction. It could not provide exact population figures.

Three to four Parsis a day die in Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay, a city of 16 million. It is clear that there are nowhere near enough vultures to consume the corpses.

While bodies are coated with lime, scattered complaints are now heard about odors wafting through the affluent neighborhood.

Baria and others are demanding that the Parsi Panchayat, or council governing the community's affairs, permit burial or cremation within the funeral grounds.

She says that to allow bodies to decompose for months is a violation of the tenets of the religion, which says souls join the spirit world four days after death.

“After four days, the bodies of your loved ones should mix with the earth or how will their soul be released?” asked Baria.

But Burjor Antia, a Panchayat trustee, says Baria has committed a religious offense. “Naturally you will find dead bodies there, and not a valley of flowers,” he said.

Antia insisted, “We cannot cremate or bury -- that is breaching our sacred religious injunction.”

Orthodox members are upset that Baria entered the Towers of Silence, amphitheater-like-structures set on pillars amid the lush 55-acre garden cemetery atop Malabar Hill.

Antia acknowledged the solar panels don't work well during the annual rainy season, but said the elders were working out a more advanced system to dehydrate bodies and speed decomposition.

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Parsis split over disposal of dead

By Monica Chadha, BBC News, Mumbai Published: 30.10.2006

It is a matter of life and death for India's dwindling and tiny Zoroastrian Iranian or Parsi community in India's financial capital, Mumbai.

There are only 130,000 Parsis left around the world, of whom about 43,000 reside in Mumbai.

With deaths outweighing births, Parsis may be a dying community demographically but they are quite high on the Indian social ladder.

Leaders have been battling the group's steadily declining population for years and are encouraging members to increase their numbers to prevent their race from dying.

Now they must deal with the issue of how best to dispose of their dead as the centuries-old tradition of leaving the corpses to be devoured by vultures does not seem to work anymore.

With an average of three bodies being taken up daily to the Towers of Silence - the funeral place of the Parsis - and the vulture population in the city nearly extinct, a corpse takes months to decompose.

The issue has sparked off a furious debate within the community specially after 65-year old Dhan Baria released photographs of bodies lying in big heaps, half-eaten by other scavengers inside the Towers.

The graphic pictures show rotten, uncovered bodies in vivid detail.

Ms Baria says she decided to pursue the "sensitive matter" after being told that her mother's body would take a year to decompose as there were not enough vultures in the city to consume the corpses.

"My mother died in November, 2005. Next month, it will be a year since her death but I know that her body is still lying there, uncovered, amongst numerous other bodies. Is this how we want to treat our loved ones?" she asks.

Ms Baria is appalled: "From the pictures you can see how the bodies are lying in an open, rotting state. They are none other than our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters and sons. After their death, do they not deserve to be treated with respect and dignity?"

While the photographs have shocked the community, what has surprised them even more is how Ms Baria managed to get the pictures of an area where only the designated pall-bearers are allowed to go.

Ms Baria says she did not take the pictures herself, but has received them from an anonymous sender who believes in her cause.

Now she has demanded that the community's governing council, the Bombay Parsi Panchayat, allow burials or cremations within the funeral grounds.

Her demand has divided the community right down the middle.

A large number of Parsi liberals are supporting Ms Baria and her cause.

Editor of community-based Parsiana magazine, Jehangir Patel, says the issue has touched a raw nerve and people are beginning to get concerned about the failure of the system.

"Most Parsis are becoming vocal about the issue of leaving the bodies of their loved ones in the towers. They sense that they have compromised for too long so now they want change and are willing to fight for it."

But the conservatives believe tradition has been followed until now for a reason and the prevailing system should not be altered to suit modern needs.

Managing trustee of the Zoroastrian Studies Institute in Mumbai, Khojeste Mistree, says people are free to dispose of their dead in whatever manner they deem suitable but it is unfair to ask the governing council to legitimise something that is wrong.

"I don't think it is right for the liberals to expect change by infringing on the religious sentiments of the majority," he says.

Meanwhile, the Parsi Panchayat has said it will set up a committee comprising both liberals and conservatives to try and find a solution to the problem acceptable to both sides.

Parsis, followers of Zoroastrianism, are a small religious community which exists mostly in Mumbai. According to their faith, death is seen not as the work of God but the temporary triumph of evil over good.

Since the earth, fire and water are regarded as sacred elements, they cannot be defiled by the dead. Therefore, the bodies are left in the Dokhmas or large cylindrical stone towers, with a pit in the centre, to be consumed by vultures.

But the vulture population across the country has fallen rapidly in the last few years. The decline has been linked to the birds eating animal carcasses containing traces of an anti-inflammatory chemical, diclofenac.

The community has put up solar panels in the Towers to ensure speedy decomposition of the bodies.

But this has been only partially successful as the panels get little sun during the monsoons and do not work efficiently during the rains.

Giving new life to vultures to restore a human death ritual

Gardiner Harris, The New York Times | Updated: November 30, 2012 15:14 IST

Mumbai: Fifteen years after vultures disappeared from Mumbai's skies, the Parsi community here intends to build two aviaries at one of its most sacred sites so the giant scavengers can once again devour human corpses.

Construction is scheduled to begin as soon as April, said Dinshaw Rus Mehta, chairman of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet. If all goes as planned, he said, vultures may again consume the Parsi dead by January 2014.

"Without the vultures, more and more Parsis are choosing to be cremated," Mehta said. "I have to bring back the vultures so the system is working again, especially during the monsoon."

The plan is the result of six years of negotiations between Parsi leaders and the Indian government to revive a centuries-old practice that seeks to protect the ancient elements - air, earth, fire and water - from being polluted by either burial or cremation. And along the way, both sides hope the effort will contribute to the revival of two species of vulture that are nearing extinction. The government would provide the initial population of birds.

The cost of building the aviaries and maintaining the vultures is estimated at \$5 million spread over 15 years, much less expensive than it would have been without the ready supply of food.

"Most vulture aviaries have to spend huge sums to buy meat, but for us that's free because the vultures will be feeding on human bodies - on us," Mehta said.

Like the vultures on which they once relied, Parsis are disappearing. Their religion, Zoroastrianism, once dominated Iran but was largely displaced by Islam. In the 10th century, a large group of Zoroastrians fled persecution in Iran and settled in India. Fewer than 70,000 remain, most of them concentrated in Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay, where they collectively own prime real estate that was purchased centuries ago.

Among the most valuable of these holdings are 54 acres of trees and winding pathways on Malabar Hill, one of Mumbai's most exclusive neighbourhoods. Tucked into these acres are three Towers of Silence where Parsis have for centuries disposed of their dead.

The stone towers are open-air auditoriums containing three concentric rings of marble slabs - an outer ring for dead men, middle ring for deceased women and inner ring for dead children. For centuries, bodies left on the slabs were consumed within hours by neighbourhood vultures, with the bones left in a central catchment to leach into the soil.

Modernity has impinged on this ancient practice in many ways. That includes the construction of nearby skyscrapers where non-Parsis could watch the grisly scenes unfold. But by far the greatest threat has been the ecological disaster visited in recent years on vultures.

India once had as many as 400 million vultures, a vast population that thrived because the nation has one of the largest livestock populations in the world but forbids cattle slaughter. When cows died, they were immediately set upon by flocks of vultures that left behind skin for leather merchants and bones for bone collectors. As recently as the 1980s, even the smallest villages often had thousands of vulture residents.

But then came diclofenac, a common painkiller widely used in hospitals to lessen the pain of the dying. Marketed under names like Voltaren, it is similar to the medicines found in Advil and Aleve; in 1993 its use in India was approved in cattle. Soon after, vultures began dying in huge numbers because the drug causes them to suffer irreversible kidney failure.

Diclofenac's veterinarian use has since been banned, which may finally be having an effect. A recent study found that for the first time since the drug's introduction, India's vulture population did not decline over the past year.

Still, the numbers for three species have shrunk to only a few thousand, a tiny fraction of their former levels. With so few vultures left, the Parsi community set up mirrors around the Towers of Silence to create something akin to solar ovens to accelerate decomposition. But the mirrors are ineffective during monsoon months. So an increasing number of Parsis are opting for cremation, a practice many Parsi priests believe is an abomination since fire is sacred and corpses are unclean.

Desperate to maintain one of their most important rituals, Parsi leaders have created detailed plans to build the aviaries near the Towers of Silence, each housing 76 vultures. Parsi leaders say they are waiting for formal approval from community members, doctors and priests before beginning construction, approvals they expect to receive over the next several weeks.

But Homi B. Dhalla, president of the World Zarathushti Cultural Foundation, has promised to fight the plans. He helped to develop the tower solar collectors and said they were working well. And he is worried that once the government provides vultures for Parsi aviaries, bureaucrats will try to seize the land.

"Why endanger our property?" Dhalla asked. "Who is going to fight the government?"

Another concern is whether Parsis can be persuaded to stop using diclofenac. Nearly all of the roughly 800 bodies brought annually to the towers come from two Parsi hospitals, and doctors and family would have to certify that the deceased had not been given diclofenac in the three days before death. There is no simple test to detect the drug, and if vultures in the aviaries die from diclofenac poisoning after eating Parsi corpses the government has promised to end the effort.

Parsi medical leaders were cautious in their comments about the vulture program.

"As a hospital," said Dr. S.K. Dhingra, superintendent of B.D. Petit Parsee General Hospital, "we cannot tell our patients, 'You can do this, or you can do that.'"

Khurshed Dastoor, one of five Parsi high priests, said that he was not sure members would adhere to a diclofenac ban.

"For 10 years, I have been trying to educate the community to turn off their cellphones before they go inside our most sacred fire temples, and I have failed," he said. "And now we think the community will give up diclofenac in a couple of months?"

Other Parsi leaders, however, said they were pushing ahead because of the importance of restoring the tradition.

"We must hope for the best," Mehta said.

(Sruthi Gottipati contributed reporting.)