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Hadokht Irani: A Zoroastrian's life from Iran to India to the US

The story of one of the only Zoroastrians, in a dying religion to experience the religion in three different countries.

A pot of water boils softly for tea, as Hadokht Irani cuts onions for an omelet she is making for me. The kitchen is filled with smells of Indian spices: cumin, cardamom, and turmeric. She finishes the rhythmic chopping, adding tea to the pot, and onions to the frying pan, managing both flaming blue units at the same time, as she quickly cooks for me. For me, she is simply Grandma, although she is actually my great-grandma. Even though she has shrunk to being less than five feet, and her hair has turned white, she can still cook the way she did twenty years ago, despite being almost ninety. Cooking has been at the center of Hadokht's life since she was young, and she knows many traditional Parsi and Iranian dishes from memory. When she is gone, it's possible the recipes will die with her. Hadokht is part of a dying culture of Zoroastrians, with only 120,000 members left in the world, according to Kumar, in *The New York Times*. Hadokht is one of the few left who has experienced Zoroastrian culture in Iran, India, and the United States.

Zoroastrianism, one of the oldest monotheistic religions, is on the decline. In 2022, Kumar's article in *The New York Times* showed how since the 1950s, the number of Zoroastrians and Parsis worldwide has declined steadily, with the population almost cutting in half. According to Romey in *National Geographic*, with this comes the loss of culture, one that has existed for 3000 years. This is not the only time Zoroastrianism has faced a loss of culture. From Alexander the Great's burning of Persepolis (Zoroastrians, including those in my family, call Alexander "The Butcher") to intense persecution from Islam during the Arab-Muslim conquest, Zoroastrian culture has been repeatedly attacked. In fact, the burning of Persepolis destroyed much of ancient Persian culture, including 20 of the 21 books of the *Avesta*, the core religious text of Zoroastrianism. By the 1930s, when Hadokht was born, she would have been one of the few Zoroastrians left in Iran according to Taraporevala in her book, *Parsis: Zoroastrians of India*. Sadly, Zoroastrian culture continues to shrink worldwide, with Hadokht being one of the few people who is a living witness of Zoroastrian culture in Iran, India, and the United States.

Yazd, Iran

To understand how Hadokht grew up, I interviewed Hadokht herself, along with Mary Anne Williams, a researcher on Hadokht and her life, as Williams has been writing a book about Hadokht for several years. Williams also happens to be my mother.

When Hadokht was a young child, she lived in a small rural community of Zoroastrians in the territory of Yazd, Iran. Villages in the territory of Yazd were cut off from the modern world until highways were built, connecting Yazd to the other parts of Iran in the 1980s. Williams explained why: “All Zoroastrians were subject to a special tax. They had been pushed out to this area in the middle of Iran called Yazd, over hundreds of years of really intense persecution...over many, many hundreds of years, they were pushed out to this very barren desert region.”

Because of this, Hadokht grew up essentially in the middle of nowhere, with no cars, electricity, indoor plumbing or modern medicine. When she was around six years old, her mother died following childbirth. According to Williams, “[Hadokht] and her sister were the only people that her father really had left, because their mother died...and...[Hadokht’s] baby brother died. And then their grandmother, who had been taking care of them, died... [Hadokht’s father] tried to remarry, and apparently, his new wife was extremely abusive [toward Hadokht and her sister].”

Sadly, Williams also informed me that women dying in childbirth or from childbirth-related causes was unfortunately very common in the villages in Yazd, due to the lack of advanced healthcare in the region at the time. She interviewed other elderly Iranian relatives for this story and many of them had lost a female family member to childbirth.

Williams went on to explain, “...it was in the middle of the war, when Iran was invaded by the Allies...the country was in turmoil, and so her father decided to... leave. He also had been in the Iranian military, which just completely imploded when they were invaded. So, he came to India because that was almost like the promised land for Zoroastrians, it’s where they felt safe. They had never been safe in Iran [for hundreds of years].”

Hadokht remembers very little from her years in Iran—she remembers watching her grandmother work on the loom in their home, wrapping the grapes on their property in cloth to protect them from wild animals, going down to the well to get water for the household, and watching the night sky from the rooftop, where the stars were huge. At a young age, Hadokht recalls that she already had many chores, such as feeding the many animals that her family had.

She also remembers it was difficult to practice their faith. To understand what she meant by this, it’s first important to understand that Zoroastrians have special items they wear daily to show their faith. These are called the *sudreh* and the *kusti*. The *sudreh* and *kusti* are key religious garments in Zoroastrianism that are typically worn everyday, after a child’s *navjote* ceremony

(initiation into religion). The *sudreh* is a thin cotton undershirt, with significant symbols embedded into its creation. The *kusti* is a cord made of wool threads and worn tied around the waist, under the clothes. To quote Williams, “[Hadokht’s] memories of practicing Zoroastrianism in Iran were scary, they would not even feel safe to wear the *sudreh* and *kusti* out. They would only wear it when they entered the temple. And so [the *sudreh/kusti*] would be hanging by the door, and they’d have to get a special key [to get into the temple].”

Hadokht also has a memory of riding on a camel, but she is unsure if it was for her mother’s funeral, or whether that was part of her journey from Iran to India during the 1940s. One of the strongest memories of that journey for her is the first time she saw a car. She had never seen one before, and she thought it was a monster. Hadokht believes she arrived in India around 1944. She would have been approximately seven years old when she arrived in India.

Mumbai, India

According to Williams, when Hadokht arrived in India, the Second World War was ongoing, and Hadokht remembers standing in line for rations of milk, kerosene, bread, and other necessities. She also remembers that the windows had to be covered in dark paper, and lights were rarely used after sunset, so they would not become a target during the war. Despite this, Hadokht’s time in India is the time that she remembers with the most joy. Perhaps this is, in part, because of the vibrancy of the Zoroastrian community in India during the 1950s-1970s.

Williams explained that in Hadokht’s first few weeks in India, they were connected to the community by a relative whom they called Banu Masi. Masi is a word for mother’s sister in Gujarati. Banu Masi worked for a wealthier family who would become an important part of Hadokht’s future life. As a widow, Banu Masi was poor, and wasn’t able to help the refugee family much. Hadokht’s father was sleeping on the floor of the cafe where he served, so he was unable to care for his children, and planned to put them in a Baha’i orphanage.

This is where being Zoroastrian helped Hadokht. The family Banu Masi worked for welcomed Hadokht and informally adopted her. According to Williams, “the reason this woman adopted her, even though she had five of her own kids, and was pregnant with a sixth, was because she believed that Zoroastrians, pure blood Zoroastrians, as [Hadokht] was, should be raised by Zoroastrians.”

Hadokht quickly began to assimilate into Indian-Zoroastrian culture, which will be referred to as “Parsi” culture from now on. Parsis were the group of Zoroastrians who had left Iran in the years of Muslim persecution, some 800 years earlier, and settled in India. In contrast to the wealthy, established Parsis, Hadokht and her family were called “Iranis” and were even given the last name of Irani, regardless of their actual last name, by the Indian government.

Hadokht enjoyed her new adopted Zoroastrian family. “We were always playing, fighting with each other, it was nice to be with them.” Hadokht told me. This was a sharp contrast to the small isolated community she had grown up with, where much of her family had passed away. The amount of children in her new family, in her building, and in the community must have felt vibrant compared with the sparse population in Iran.

India quickly became Hadokht’s home. I was able to visit Hadokht’s childhood home in 2019. What amazed me was that the community was so comprehensive. Hadokht lived in a compound which included exclusive Zoroastrian housing, separated by only a courtyard to a Zoroastrian *agiary*, (also referred to as a fire temple or *Dahr-e-mehr*) schools, shops and more.

Her adoptive family’s building actually had a direct, hidden passage to the *agiary*—the children could go to the temple without even entering the street. Fruit and vegetable sellers came directly into their gated community, a building full of other Zoroastrians. Hadokht’s adoptive mother, called Pilamai, enrolled Hadokht in a fully Zoroastrian school, called Sir JJ’s School.

During her interview, Hadokht recalled a time when she was able to learn Gujarati in less than a month: “I learned Gujarati in one month, you know, and my principal, they gave me dictation, like words in Gujarati to write, and all the words I wrote [correctly]. Spelling, everything, right. And then, [my principal], took me class to class to class, ‘See, this girl has been here a very short time, and she has everything right, and she speaks the language.’ And she appreciates, you know, she took me to all the classes, introduced me.”

In Mumbai, India, Hadokht also had the chance to be in a place where she could actively practice her religion. “When we woke up in the morning, we had to strictly do prayers, every morning, prayers, and then on certain days we had to go to our *agiary*. Prayer was a must you know... We used to live in the Zoroastrian colony. And all the Zoroastrian people lived there, and we used to go down [to the courtyard] in the evening, play with [other children], go to school with them. My principal also was living in our complex, you know, and sometimes we used to go with the principal in school and we walked together like 7-8 girls together to the nearby school. All Zoroastrian girls.” Hadokht’s first-hand account is confirmed in the BBC article “Why Is India’s Wealthy Parsi Community Vanishing?” where the author, Karkaria, focuses on the disappearing Parsi community, and how the interconnected communities that were once vibrant are beginning to fade.

However, during this time period, it was very clear, in the interview with Hadokht, how she relished being part of this flourishing community. “We were going to the Zoroastrian school, and they were teaching us all these Zoroastrian things. In the morning when we go, we have to do our prayer. When we leave the school, we have to again do the prayer. And they were giving us more religion...you know, like Zoroastrian practices.” She also learned, during this time, how

to cook many of the meals she makes to this day, from her adoptive mother, Pilamai, who had recipes both from Iran (like a dill, chickpea, black-eyed bean stew, called *osh*) and other specifically Parsi recipes like *Dhansak* (a certain type of Parsi lentil dish with specific spices, vegetables, and traditionally, chunks of meat floating in it).

Perhaps Pilamai teaching Hadokht these recipes was a nod to her future, because Hadokht's formal education was cut off after about a decade after she moved to India, when she was finishing the 8th grade. When she was fifteen, she was engaged, and married a year later. Williams helped explain it best, saying "So the Iranis were not very educated...they had a whole different set of cultural expectations, especially regarding women. So there was a belief they should be married off young, they shouldn't be too educated. They... didn't get to have a say in their education or in who they marry."

When Hadokht hit puberty, her father encouraged Pilamai, her adoptive mother, to find a man for Hadokht to marry. The match was arranged, and before Hadokht knew it, she was engaged, and pulled out of school. This was a shock for Hadokht, because she had to leave school, where she had excelled, and was married off to someone fifteen years older than her.

Hadokht herself has vivid memories of the experience. "I was 14, 15 years old. Younger than you, maybe. And the boy comes. My husband was 15 years older than me. They come, the parents and parents there. They ask the family. They ask, 'How is the boy? What is he doing? How many sisters? Brothers? How big is the house?' They ask inside, no? You know, girls or boys, they don't interfere, you know. And they find out [if the] family is good. This, that. Then they call the boy. Boy and girl sit [in] front of each other. They don't know each other. And if you like, if I like your looks. If you like my look. He says yes, I say yes. I like him from the look. From the look!"

Hadokht then later explained more of her marriage. Apparently, her future husband, Cawas, heard that Hadokht was about to be married off to a different man. Hadokht described Cawas's reaction when he heard the news, "My God, he's a bad guy. He's gambling, he's drinking. He's not a good character guy." After that, Cawas tried to rescue her from an unhappy marriage. According to Hadokht, "He... went and inquired for me. 'Who is this girl? I want to get married to her. He was 15 years older... he was 30 years old. I was 15 years old.'"

Hadokht was married off, pulled from school, and would now become a cook and caregiver for her own home. She also had to take care of her elderly in-laws. Despite this, Hadokht still enjoyed being surrounded by other Zoroastrians. The newly married couple settled down in the vibrant Indian Zoroastrian community. They raised two sons, who both moved to North America after going to schools like IIT (a renowned technological institute), one settling in Canada, and the other in the Bay Area. Then, after years of living in India, in 1990, and still in

her late 40s, Hadokht moved to the Bay Area to live with her youngest son after he and his wife had their first child.

California, United States

In the United States, Hadokht's life once again shifted dramatically, as the Zoroastrian community disappeared. She had fewer people she knew, with the only temple being miles away, secluded in the East hills of San Jose. The drive from her home is at least 30 minutes, and although she drove for a while, she was never comfortable driving on freeways, and no longer drives at all. The shift in Zoroastrian culture was also obvious to her, very quickly. "[Before, in India] the temple was close to our house, so many *agiaries*, all less than half an hour walking... [and we had to practice Zoroastrianism] very strictly you know, we have to follow religion very strictly. Everyday prayer...compulsory, wear *sudreh*, *kusti*, and we have to marry the Zoroastrian people. Yeah, pure Zoroastrian people. Not outsiders, we were not allowed to marry outsiders. Now they are allowed to. But in our time, they were very, very strict."

In California, not only is she not near any temples, but the few Zoroastrians that she knows are much less strict out of necessity. There simply aren't enough Zoroastrians around to form the kind of community she had growing up. The majority marry "outsiders" and as a result, Hadokht is watching the loss of culture in Zoroastrianism before her eyes. The isolation of her early years in Iran are an echo of her current experience.

Williams explained this best, by highlighting how the split between the orthodox and progressive Zoroastrians of today have transformed the religion and led to its demise, "...there's been so many Zoroastrians that have ended up all over the world. So the community is really splintered. It's a kind of diaspora." Zoroastrians have become a mostly divided community, with only a few small concentrated groups in India. Many of the few Zoroastrians who still have knowledge of the culture are in the much older generations, and their cultures are slowly dying out, as they are bringing their knowledge with them to the grave.

Between 1950 and today, the Zoroastrian population has halved, and is still currently declining. In India, much of the community is still fixated on maintaining the "purity" of the religion, and many are so orthodox that they do not accept converts, and think that Zoroastrians must marry other Zoroastrians—no outsiders. Hadokht is a great example of this, as she has become more orthodox in her thinking as time went on. According to Williams, "...it's, in part, because, at that time, if a Zoroastrian girl married a boy that was any other religion, she was basically cast out of the community completely... [she] would not be allowed in the fire temple again. Her children would not be allowed in the fire temple. She would not be even allowed to attend her parents' funerals. And so this became really controversial over several decades, as

more and more Zoroastrians married out, until it really broke the community in half between sort of the progressive Zoroastrians... and the Orthodox Zoroastrians... And I think that the reason [Hadokht] is sort of emblematic of that is that it happened within her family. And she is very divided on it. I've seen her say these very judgy things about [people who aren't full Zoroastrians] and I've also seen her talk about how awful it was when they would cast out some women who married out of the religion, including... her adoptive sisters.”

There is an endless debate raging about what is more important: the purity of the religion and the culture, or, the religion losing some heritage, but growing in numbers. Because if a religion doesn't allow its followers to proselytize or accept converts, and additionally if it doesn't accept the children of mixed-faith marriages, that will make the religion dwindle very fast. Many progressive Zoroastrians will point out that these old rules were clearly not followed by their prophet, Zarathustra, or Zoroastrianism would never have become the state religion of an ancient empire.

More recently and locally in the Bay Area, the community is opening up to allow more people to join. Williams explained, “...recently, in the community, there was a vote here, just in the Bay Area, with the Zoroastrian community, which is only a few hundred people. Some Orthodox families brought a vote about what a Zoroastrian really was, and they wanted it to be defined as two Zoroastrian parents, and *navjote*...and the community massively rejected it... it was not even by a little bit. They all wanted the children of mixed marriages to be able to have *navjote*, and they all wanted all of those people to be considered Zoroastrian...”

Here in Northern California, there is a tide of Zoroastrians trying to move toward a future with Zoroastrianism, even as the old Parsi and Persian Zoroastrian cultures begin to fade. Whether or not more Zoroastrians, including those in India, decide to try and implement a solution, one thing is certain: Zoroastrian culture is becoming in danger of being lost, and if this is not addressed soon there will be no turning back.

I am one of these—I had my own *navjote* at age 9, in 2019, even though I am the child of a “mixed marriage” where my father is Zoroastrian, and my mother, Christian. Even more recently, I participated in my youngest sister's *navjote*, where I explained the significance of the *sudreh* and *kusti* to family and friends who had gathered. Although Hadokht has mixed feelings about this new style of Zoroastrianism, she attended all the *navjote* ceremonies of our family, and was one of the first to hug us after we were welcomed into the religion. I would like to believe that the progressive Zoroastrians who allow these mixed marriages will somehow find a way to restore Zoroastrianism so it does not die out.

However, I have come to realize that even if some element of Zoroastrianism is saved, the Parsi culture Hadokht loved and cherished is dying, regardless. Hadokht herself is a symbol

of the religion, and one of the few people to have experienced the different forms of Zoroastrian culture across three vastly different countries. Her life perfectly documents the tragedy and beauty of the religion. She cannot go back to India as that lifestyle is gone—even her old all-Zoroastrian school now accepts children of all religions. However, the Zoroastrians she knows now are fundamentally disconnected from Parsi culture—my father and I don't speak the Parsi dialect of Gujarati, nor do we know how to make *Dhansak*.

Every day, Hadokht lives this reality, and this grief of a lost lifestyle, while still trying to pass on bits and pieces of both Iranian and Parsi culture to her family. She finishes the omelet and places it in front of me, pours the tea and puts away the spices before tending to the garden and feeding the hungry chickens outside.

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