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Of Religion and Technology: Karachi's Parsis Take a Unique Approach to COVID-19 Limitations

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Cover Page Footnote

Anushe Engineer is a junior at Scripps College in Claremont, CA and is majoring in Politics. She hails from Karachi, Pakistan and is a fall editorial intern at Samaa Digital, a news agency in Pakistan. This is an expansion of an article she originally published in Samaa Digital.

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Limitations
Anushe Engineer

Natasha Mavalvala is standing on the upper floor of the H. J. Behrana *agiari* in Karachi's Saddar district, singing hymns for the souls of the departed. Her audience is a camera, recording her recitations of the *humbandagi* prayer. The hall, which used to be packed with Parsis, echoes with her solo voice.



Figure 1: H.J. Behrana agiari in Karachi

She sings by herself because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Coronavirus cases in Karachi spiked in June 2020, putting pressure on already inadequate healthcare facilities in the sprawling metropolis of 18 million residents. Government efforts at imposing “smart lockdowns” – shelter in place recommendations in certain residential districts – were effective to an extent. Restaurants and non-essential services were ordered shut till further notice by the government, a move that hurt the livelihood of thousands of daily wage earners. In a country where 60 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, families wondered which would kill them first: coronavirus or starvation.

For Parsis seeking some form of normalcy in their spiritual lives, technology has been a blessing: it has enabled them to listen to Mavalvala and conduct the annual communal prayers. They chose to replace in-person *humbandagi* prayers this year with video recordings because even with social distancing, as many Parsis are elderly, the general consensus was that it would be putting them at risk by holding the sessions at the *agiari*.

Parsis are those who live in the subcontinent and follow Zoroastrianism, the oldest monotheistic religion in the world. Members of the Parsi community in Pakistan estimate that there are less than 1,000 Parsis living in Pakistan presently.

When it was confirmed that the *humbandagi* (or communal prayer in Gujarati) would not be held, Tushna Patel approached the *agiari*'s trustees. "Let's not break this chain we've had for so many years," she told them. She pitched the idea of recording the sessions and sharing them online.

In *humbandagi*, Parsis gather to sing verses of the *gathas* - hymns - in the 10 *mukhtad* days before Navroze, the New Year for those of the Zoroastrian faith. It is believed that during *mukhtad*, the souls of the departed descend to Earth to bless their loved ones.

"You cannot see them but [the souls] make their presence felt, and the reading of the *humbandagi* holds you together," Mavalvala explained. "It gives peace to them in a religious sense. You're not just praying for their soul but your soul too."

Usually, a lead singer begins promptly at 7a.m. Mavalvala has been fulfilling this role for the last six to seven years. She sings one *gatha* at a time, first solo and then with the audience repeating after her. A translation follows before the recitation of the second one. *Gathas* are the conversations believed to have taken place between the prophet Zarathustra when he was alone with Ahura Mazda, who Zoroastrians worship as God.

A total of 39 *gathas* have to be completed every year, meaning three to four *gathas* have to be recited each of the 10 days before *Navroze*. Everyone in the room is expected to remain standing throughout the session which takes no more than twenty minutes.

Natasha Mavalvala, like Tushna Patel, has been attending *humbandagi* her whole life. She recalls the excitement she experienced as a child, attending the sessions in uniform with her brother and father before hurrying to school with her friends. Most Parsi children during the 1970s and 80s attended Mama Parsi Girls Secondary School or BVS Parsi High School, both of which are within walking distance from the *agiari*.

This was also a time when the majority of Parsis lived in Saddar and so it was convenient for parents to bring their children to the *agiari* before heading to school or office at 7:30am. As Karachi developed beyond the communal hub that Saddar once was, Parsis also relocated to spacious neighborhoods. Morning *humbandagi* prayers at the *agiari* - once a stone's throw away for many - was now an arduous task that only a handful chose to commit to.

"It was just once a year, 10 days in the year, but it brought a lot of us together," said Mavalvala. "I remember it as a happy time, not as a religious time, but we learned a lot from it. We used to sit there and hear Godrej Sidhwa giving a sermon all 10 days."

Godrej Sidhwa, a prominent Zoroastrian priest in Karachi who has passed away, used to pick out passages from the *gathas* and tell them as stories, often incorporating them into his sermons.

Once he retired from his priestly duties and grew elderly, the sermons that followed *gatha* recitation ended altogether, marking the end of an era.

A mere two or three dozen Parsis have been attending *humbandagi* in recent years, compared to the hundreds who used to pack the prayer hall. “Ours is an aging community and the age bracket now is 70 years and above. People can hardly walk up the stairs to the main hall,” Mavalvala said. “A lot of emigration has also taken place.”

Karachi’s dwindling Parsi population is the result of constant emigration over the decades, a number that has steadily increased over time. Young families have left Pakistan in search of a more prosperous life abroad, leaving behind older generations contempt with living out their last years in Karachi.

Pleasantly enough, though, Mavalvala and Patel have realised that by going online, the number of Parsis praying the *gathas*—albeit from the comfort of their homes—is far greater than could ever be physically possible in the *agiari*.

Mavalvala sent the daily prayer video snippets to an email chain of hers with around 500 people, while Patel did the same thing through a WhatsApp group with almost 200 members. Both women said that what they had initially expected to be circulated among a few hundred Parsis in Karachi has instead reached well over 1,500 worldwide, reaching Parsis in Australia, Canada, USA and the UK.

“The response was totally overwhelming,” Patel said. “People are telling me not to shut the [WhatsApp] group because along with *humbandagi*, I’ve been posting other information, prayers and prayer books.”

Both women received messages from Parsis all over the world, grateful for being able to reconnect to their childhood memories of the *Saddar agiari*. Aside from that, people like Rashna Gazder, a well-respected piano and language teacher, who moved to Karachi from Bombay 30 years ago, are appreciating that because of the technology they can pray at any time. “I told Tushna, I got involved [in *humbandagi* prayer] after a very long time,” Gazder added.

Patel reckons that they will have to continue for those people who will not come to the *agiari* next year also. “We’ve laid the foundation for it and I think we have to continue with it.”