

PROLOGUE

Frank Sinatra, that loveable old rascal, said: When lip service to some mysterious deity permits bestiality on Wednesday and absolution on Sunday, cash me out.

Like old Blue Eyes, I'm terribly impressed with myself sometimes. I have a good reason but it's not my singing voice. When you belong to a community, where, outside of it, you're met with zero comprehension of the word 'Parsi,' it's hard to hold on to your self-esteem or sense of identity. Hindus and Muslims and Christians loveable have similar issues, do they? Everybody in the world knows who a Hindu is thanks to the Beatles, Muslims are the soup du jour for political discussion and Christianity penetrated into every aboriginal jungle and colonial school it could find. But Zoroastrianism had its heyday in Iran many many blue moons ago. What's left now is a watered down, dishonest, much-convoluted version of what might have possibly once been the truth. And Parsis are part of that unrecognisable past. (You do have the odd cracker who says he's got it all figured and it's the gospel. If I ever meet him or her, it's safe to say, knuckle shall meet face.)

Parsis are odd creatures. They have been carrying the burden of the entire holier-than-thou Persian civilisation on their frail shoulders, ever since they were old enough to speak and read. At the same time, they're semi-integrated into a very ethnic Indian society which constantly battles them on account of their obvious Western affinities. Instead of rowing in the opposite direction, on to the Mother Ship (England. I challenge you to find a Parsi who will refute it with any conviction.) the fleeing refugee boats somehow stopped at a port in Gujarat, India. As a result, fitting into a culture, a country and an idea all at the same time has always been a lot of spaghetti for Parsis to twirl around their fork. While multiple identities is a beautiful global concept, harmonising them is harder than finding a good Parsi doctor on weekends. This, I promise you.

I've lived in different countries at different stages of my life, including India. Wherever I've been, this particular question mark has followed me around like an allergy. And then suddenly, one small spark of recognition, when the name Zubin Mehta is mentioned.

-Oh, but isn't he Israeli?

-No, he used to conduct their orchestra.

-Are you sure he isn't Jewish?

-Yes I'm sure. He's a Parsi. Okay, how about Freddie Mercury?

-But he was an atheist, wasn't he? And he was gay!

-But he was also a Parsi.

-Is that like a special gay thing?

Long frustrated pause while I contemplate murder, before answering.

-Yes, yes, indeed. That's exactly what it means.

You know, when you right-click a word and the dictionary options don't give you Parsi but Paris instead? You're definitely a minority. When Indians think of Parsis, a caricature instantly springs to mind. A man in white clothes with a funny, brimless top-hat perched on his head, speaking old-fashioned proper Queen's English - and I mean Queen Victoria - using words like 'heretofore.' The other image is of a Falstaffian character, the court jester, in Indian films or plays or books. A genteel bumbling sort of fellow, who really can't do much besides comedy, while flinging about foul language in English or Gujarati. I don't discount any of this, for all of it is absolutely true. But there's also another slightly less base side to the Parsis. Why always the fool? Why never the erudite educator, the ethical nation-builder, the efficient doctor, the artistic genius or the judicious advocate? Almost always, the bumbling, pathetic fool. This, I resent. After I finish laughing.

Depending on physical appearance, language and choice of dress, the travelling Parsi has few or many questions to answer. Add to that, the semi-British accents, quick and frequent references to England, Shakespeare and Mozart and you've got yourself a fine riddle. I mean, would you look at Zubin Mehta and Freddie Mercury and think they'd have anything in common besides music?

Now, I'm well aware that my argument won't go down well with a great many people, including members of my family I know and don't know. But I've always been allergic to the concept of fear. So I've written about the things that made me consciously think about this community, disengage from the bullshit and engage with the goodness of it. If you can appreciate that this book isn't an attack on any religion or community, I'll be impressed. If you don't like what you read, feel free to give me a piece of your mind.

I encourage argument.

Catholics believe life begins at conception. Atheists believe that life begins at birth. Jews believe that life begins when the children leave home and the dog dies.

-Author Unknown

THE COSTUME PARTY a.k.a. NAVJOTE

The Jews will get the big deal about this. The Catholics too, perhaps, but the Jews definitely will.

When I was about seven, I remember my mother asking me to sit before her, hands joined in prayer, repeating words that sounded foreign. They were. I was a child whose mother-tongue was supposed to be Persian originally; at the very least, Gujarati, but was in fact, English. Confused, reader? Well, imagine how confused a seven year-old was. I was supposed to be a good Zoroastrian child but since I was educated in a Catholic convent, I desperately wanted to be Roman Catholic. I was a child who was supposed to know how to read the holy book for Zoroastrians, called the 'Avesta' but instead I preferred the Bible and thought 'Silent Night' was the best thing I'd ever heard. I loved hearing the story of the journey that the Magi undertook to see the Baby Jesus. I loved the wafer dipped in wine that was offered at the end of mass in school. On the other hand, I wasn't so hot on the idea that a cow stood over baby Zarathushtra, and protected him, and hence Parsis weren't supposed to eat beef. Now I would never know what an American burger tasted like or what was the rare part of a steak. How was this fair at all?

So you can see my how mother had a major problem on her hands. Please note, I said mother. Not parents. You'll see why. Picture my mother now. Gool (pronounced gul as in bull) of the tiny, diminutive stature, always dressed in well-coordinated skirts and blouses, well-shod, soft-spoken, pitch-perfect, spoke grammatically correct English and always had graceful, well-manicured hands. On most days, she was fervent about upholding her religious values, except the days when I suffered violent asthmatic attacks and she probably cursed God in private. She tried to visit the fire-temple or the agiary, as Parsis call it, every single day. This is the hallowed temple with an eternal sandalwood-fed flame in it- and bugger the environmental carnage against sandalwood- and priests who walk about being self-important and talk in hushed lofty tones until the cell phone rings and they begin the conversation with Kem Maaderchod, long time. (Hey motherfucker, long time. All right in the old days it was the profanity minus the cell phone.) You dare challenge me on this and I'll show you two priests I've actually caught speaking that kind of language, within the four walls of a fire-temple, when I was attending a family friend's funeral.

The fire-temple is a place forbidden for entry to all non-Zoroastrians. No outsiders or 'parjaat' as they are called, most derogatorily, I might add. No matter what the constitution of India says about religious freedom, this rule still sticks in place and you'd better not be caught breaking it. I should know. I tried sneaking a Muslim friend into it once, when I was just eleven or so and received quite a thrashing.

Back to my Navjote. This is a religious initiation ceremony, like a baptism, the Hindu thread ceremony or the Jewish bar mitzvah; whatever you choose to understand. My mother's horror at her child's clearly un-Zoroastrian bent of mind was palpable. She wondered if she could blame her irreligious husband for it, or herself for not indoctrinating her stubborn child earlier. So, issuing threats of no telly, no playing with friends in the garden, no new clothes- and the worst of all- no new books, she got her sullen daughter to learn the prayers, in preparation of her Navjote.