SOCIETY

Young adherents of Zoroastrianism, a religion that traditionally forbids intermarriage and refuses to recognize converts, often find themselves struggling with matters of the heart and the soul, wirtes **DEENA GUZDER**

Keeping Faith

Parsis In America

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GROWING UP in Milwaukee, Wis., Jasmine Bhathena led an all-American life of Coca-Cola afternoons and slumber party weekends, but she always knew she was a little different.

Bhathena never left home without wearing a soft cotton undershirt and a hand-woven wool cord – external symbols of her Zoroastrian faith. And, every evening, while her classmates were finishing their math homework or watching their favorite sitcoms, Bhathena joined her family in lighting a floating candle and reciting ancient Persian prayers as her ancestors have done for centuries in Iran, where Zoroastrianism, the world's oldest monotheistic religion, originated.

Her Iranian mother and Indian father shared their ancient religion with her by celebrating the Persian New Year every March and sending her to Zoroastrian summer camps in Chicago. And, like most Zoroastrians, they taught Bhathena that she must preserve her faith by marrying within the religion since neither converts nor interfaith children are traditionally accepted by the tight-knit and often self-secluded community.

"For over 20 years, my parents told me that Zoroastrian boys are best," Bhathena says.

When Bhathena left for the University of Wisconsin-Madison, her father heard through an aunt that a Zoroastrian boy from India was also attending. "My parents kind of set me up with this guy with the hopes that something would work out," Bhathena says.

They became fast friends and occasionally went out for dinner and beer at the student union, but something was missing. "We had a lot in common and we enjoyed each other's company, but there was just no chemistry," Bhathena says.

She eventually fell in love. But she fell in love with the wrong boy – Carlos Marquez, a Christian of Bolivian and Mexican heritage. "My parents' first reaction was utter shock," Bhathena recalls. "They said, 'We sent you to college to study and instead you met a boy? And he's not even Zoroastrian!' "

Five years later, Bhathena is still dating Marquez and very much in love. "I know people say that you can make a conscious choice about who you fall in love with, but I don't believe that anymore," said Bhathena, a 24-year-old law student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "All of the factors in my relationship with the Zoroastrian boy and my boyfriend were the same … but getting romantically involved with the Zoroastrian boy was never even a possibility."

Bhathena is one of the thousands of Zoroastrian young adults who feel a deep obligation to preserve their dying faith but are torn by their community's demand that they marry within a small, rapidly dwindling number of adherents.

QUESTION OF CONVERSION

Despite their shrinking population, Zoroastrians remain fiercely divided over whether to recognize interfaith families, let alone accept nongenerational Zoroastrians. And the question of conversion is creating a deep rift as some Zoroastrian clusters liberalize faster than others.

"Conversion is not part of our religion," says Ramiyar P. Karanjia, principal of Dadar Athornan Madressa in Mumbai. "We have always been small but steady in numbers and there's no need to allow conversion."

Yet, in India, home to the majority of Zoroastrians, the community is declining by about 10 percent every decennial census, according to a report

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FACES OF FUTURE: Top, A group of Zoroastrian youth at California Zoroastrian Center. They say they are proud of their identity and want to keep the faith alive by marrying within the community despite shrinking numbers. Left, Zoroastrian women in Yazd, Iran, where the religion originated. Facing page, Meher Amalsad, one of the 11,000 Parsis in the U.S. prays at Zoroastrian Center.

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"We have survived as a very close community only because we refused to assimilate in the ethnic sense," says Jal Birdy, a priest in Corona, Calif., who refuses to perform weddings of mixed couples.

released by UNESCO. There are as few as 124,000 Zoroastrians worldwide, according to a survey in 2004 by Fezana Journal, published quarterly by the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America.

On the other side of the world, in New York City, some of the world's most liberal Zoroastrians are already embracing outsiders. While many Zoroastrian communities allow only generational adherents to observe their ceremonies and rituals, the weekly prayers held by a New York group are often frequented by those who were not necessarily born into the Zoroastrian faith. Unlike in Iran and India, where only children of two practicing Zoroastrians are allowed to visit places of worship, the 250 households that constitute the Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York include children of mixed marriages.

Three of the organization's democratically-elected governing board members are interfaith couples. Ferzin Patel is one board member who decided to break an unspoken taboo by marrying outside of her tightly-knit community when she fell in love with Rajan, who is a Jain.

Today, Patel runs a support group for 25 interfaith couples who meet five times a year for a potluck and discussion group. "The mission was to integrate people into the community and help them come together as well as show the spouses what they have in common," she says.

Patel, who has a 4-year-old son, says many outsiders are intimidated by Zoroastrians, given the community's reputation for self-isolation. "There's a falsehood that we are not accepting of those born outside of our fold, so it's important to support interfaith couples and outsiders interested in Zoroastrianism," she says.

FEAR OF ASSIMILATION

Many conservative priests are shocked by the new level of tolerance in their once carefully-sealed-off religion. "We have survived as a very close community only because we refused to assimilate in the ethnic sense," says Jal Birdy, a priest in Corona, Calif., who refuses to perform weddings of mixed couples because he believes religion and ethnicity are interlinked and nontransferable.

A conservative priest in Houston, Texas, who wished to remain unnamed, said he is angry at the liberties taken by his fellow Zoroastrians in New York. He insists conversion is strictly forbidden in Zoroastrianism. "Who am I to go against what God gave me at birth?" the elderly priest asks. "If I am to convert from one side to another, I am forgetting that God gave me my religion for a reason."

Although the vast majority of Zoroastrian youth contacted for this article said they want their religion to become more inclusive, orthodox priests are at no loss for sympathizers among the younger generation.

"Intermarriage is one of the biggest sins in our religion," says 22-year-old Neville Cyrus Saiwalla, a student at the University of Mumbai in Kalina, Santa Cruz. "My principle is, if I don't get a pure Zoroastrian girl, I'll remain single forever but I will never dilute my blood and make it impure with a non-Zoroastrian. A person who has married outside the faith will face severe punishment because his soul will not be able to go out of this world" since the death prayers will be ineffective."

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ABANDONDED HOMELAND: Top, a Zorastrian fire temple in Tehran, Iran. After Muslims rose to power in the 7th Century, seven boatloads of Zoroastrain refugees fled Persia and landed on the coast of India in the year 936. Left, a priest of the Tehran temple. Facing page, a Navjote ceremony where two Zoroastrian boys are formally introduced into the faith.

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GETTY IMAGES

While many Zoroastrians in Iran, India and North America remain unwelcoming of converts, members of the New York group say they pride themselves on their diversity.

Kaikhosrov D. Irani, a professor of philosophy at the City University of New York, who, at 83, is considered one of the world's pre-eminent scholars on Zoroastrianism, believes unyielding priests and their young sympathizers misunderstand the teachings of their faith. "You can inherit your height, the tone of your voice and a genetic disease. But how can you inherit a belief?" he asks.

Irani has spent his life studying Zoroastrian liturgical scriptures and translating the Avesta into English.

"The fundamental point is we must respect the judgment of an individual's conscience," says Irani who is in favor of his community embracing anyone who accepts the Zoroastrian faith as his/her own. "Who is to say what another may believe? The conservative priests are trying to turn a universal religion into a tribal cult."

Irani believes Zoroastrians once allowed conversion but years of persecution made the religion artificially self-isolated.

NEW YORK DISSENTERS

While many Zoroastrians in Iran, India and North America remain unwelcoming of converts, members of the New York group say they pride themselves on their diversity and believe tolerance is the best way to keep their faith alive.

Kaizad Cama, a 25-year-old member of the New York group, says his community does a huge disservice by worrying about who can and cannot call himself a Zoroastrian. "Bastardization of our beliefs is more likely to come from within our community than from the outside. So I don't think intermarriage is any more dangerous to the preservation of our religion than having two 'Zoroastrian' parents who do not understand their own religion," says Cama who teaches Zoroastrian children religion classes in Pomona, N.Y.

Many children of interfaith couples say Zoroastrianism plays an important part in their lives but they wish their community was more welcoming.

"Internal racism and segregation is destroying the community, not intermarriage," says Dina Collector, 22, a Houston resident who was born to a Zoroastrian father and Christian mother, but who considers herself fully Zoroastrian. "People will choose not to be the victims of prejudice by turning away from the religion."

As the question of conversion and acceptance continues to divide an already tiny community, many Zoroastrians in New York say they will keep their doors open to all those interested in learning more about their ancient faith.

"In social matters, the community should treat people who accept Zoroastrianism with decency," Irani says. "Of course, if one is bigoted this will not be the case but I hope the bigots will eventually evaporate. I believe reason will ultimately prevail because that is what Zoroastrianism teaches us."

Bhathena says she hopes to one day marry the love of her life, Marquez, and teach their children about both Zoroastrianism and Christianity – while ultimately letting them decide which faith to follow. "I want my kids to be part of a larger Zoroastrian community," she said, "but, more importantly, I want to protect them from being hurt or mistreated by people who should accept and embrace them."

GETTY IMAGES

DEEP-SEATED FAITH: A Parsis woman prays to figures of "knights," the guardians of a fire temple in Mumbai on Navroze, the Parsi New Year on Aug. 20. Left, a Parsis priest in front of a marble plaque of religious inscriptions at a fire temple in Mumbai. Facing page, a Zoroastrian priest in Chicago temple tending a fire, which is symbolic of purity, and reciting prayers.

Anicient Faith

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Origin of Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism was founded 3,500 years ago by the Prophet Zoroaster in ancient Iran.

Basic beliefs

Zoroastrianism professes humankind is designed to evolve toward perfection, but is thwarted by evil forces such as greed, lust and hatred. These evil forces must be challenged proactively by developing a "good mind" and embracing a life of good thoughts, good words and good deeds.

Key rites

The Navjote is the initiation ceremony where a child between 7 and 12 receives his or her sudreh (cotton undershirt) and kusti (hand-woven wool cord).

Religious book

The Avesta is the collection of the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism.

Place of worship

Fire is seen as the supreme symbol of purity and sacred fires are maintained in fire temples (agiaries). There are 46 agiaries/dadgahs and four atash behrams in Mumbai. No Zoroastrian ritual or ceremony is performed without the presence of a sacred fire. These fires represent the light of God (Ahura Mazda) as well as the illuminated mind, and are never extinguished.

Numbers

Worldwide, 124,000; India, 75,000; and U.S., 11,000.

Spread across the world

About 75,000 Zoroastrians live in India, 11,000 in the United States, 6,000 in Canada, 5,000 in England, 2,700 in Australia and 2,200 in the Persian Gulf nations.