

The complex environmental impacts of human activity are now of global proportions. These impacts do not consist in a general deterioration of the environment for everyone on the planet in the same way (on a hill, one breathes more freely than in a basin). Changes are occurring that are fatal to some forms of life, such as the vulture population in India decimated by chemicals in their natural diet. Since the mid-1990s, vulture populations have been in decline not only in India but also in the neighbouring countries. In-depth research has pointed to the cause, which is the diclofenac compound used in painkillers and also in veterinary medicine. Vultures are endangered by this substance contained, among other things, in a well-known ointment, when they consume the carcasses of cattle treated with these medicines. The extinction of vultures in India and the neighbouring countries has serious environmental consequences on many levels. Along with the vanishing of the natural wealth, some specific elements of human cultures and communities that are linked to them are disappearing, such as the traditional burial of the Parsis which depends on the presence of vultures,

This is a message that must be perceived with the utmost urgency, but also with the knowledge that this is not a phenomenon unprecedented in history. For example, the ancient *Epic of Gilgamesh* in which we see the gradual vanishing of cedar forests in Lebanon reflects the widespread changes in natural conditions brought about by the human factor. However, the main difference today, compared to the past, is the extent of human influence on the environment, the speed with which these changes are taking place and, above all, the growing *awareness* of these connections. Unlike the ancient Egyptian pharaohs who used Lebanese cedar wood for their monumental buildings, we now know that once a forest has been cut down, it will not grow back in certain climatic conditions.

However, despite being able to recognize these connections, we are unable or unwilling to prevent them. In the dilemma that lies before the community of the Parsis, we can see a metaphor for mankind that has come to the realization that the conditions of life set by it are moving towards extinction. The main problem of the Parsis is not only how to bury their dead in accordance with tradition. A much bigger problem is how to keep their tradition alive in the first place.

The Parsis, as their name suggests, came to India from Persia in the second half of the 8th century and settled on the north-western coast of India, in port cities of the present-day state of Gujarat, where they could draw on their trading experience from the opposite coast of the Arabian Sea. The arrival of the Parsis was a consequence of the expansion of Islam into the region of Persia. As the followers of Zoroastrianism, they were persecuted for their ideas of the world as a space made up of sacred elements in which the forces of light and darkness, good and evil, were locked in a cosmic struggle.

Despite the fact that Islam eventually arrived in India as well, the Parsis have managed to preserve their traditions to this day. In historical sources, including accounts by medieval European travellers, the Parsis are depicted as "worshippers of fire" which plays an important role in their cultic life. The relationship to the elements of fire, water and earth reflecting the legacy of the Indo-Iranian culture also crucially influences their way of burial. This is to prevent ritual contamination of these elements by contact with dead bodies. For this reason, the Parsis were traditionally ritually buried in so-called towers of silence,

circular, flat-roofed structures built outside the settlement. Inside these structures, bodies were placed in concentric circles and exposed to the sun and vultures, which aided in the rapid decomposition of the bodies. The skeletal remains left were deposited in central communal pits.

Due to the circumstances which consist not only in the disappearance of the vulture population but also in the expansion of settlements in the vicinity of these formerly used towers, the Parsis have to change their burial customs. Instead of "towers of silence", they either cremate the bodies (a choice also made by Freddie Mercury, probably the most famous Parsi in this country), or they place the bodies in concrete vaults that prevent their contact with the sacred earth.

The Parsis in India today form a small ethno-religious community numbering approximately 57,000, according to a 2011 census, and probably even fewer today. In recent decades, the numbers of the Parsis has dropped sharply, mainly due to the stringent requirements for belonging to this ethno-religious community. One has to be born a Parsi, and in the paternal lineage. With declining numbers, finding an unrelated spouse is becoming increasingly difficult, and therefore a significant proportion of the Parsis remain single throughout their lives. Offspring born from the unions of a Parsi mother and a non-Parsi father are not accepted as full members of the community and generally cannot participate in its ritual life. It should be noted that the Parsis belong to the economically well-off sections of Indian society, so exclusion from its structures and the associated potential socio-economic consequences can be very discouraging. A possible change in such a strict notion of belonging is perceived as unacceptable by conservative guardians of tradition, unlike an acceptable change in burial rites.

Since 2013, the Indian government has been trying to increase the birth rate among the Parsis through a media campaign and a special medical programme, but without any palpable effect. There are also voices from more progressive parties that criticise the government's media campaign, saying it only reinforces a patriarchal model of community based on the idea of racial purity. As a solution to the question of how to preserve Zoroastrian traditions, they offer the possibility of opening its gates not only to the children of Parsi women and non-Parsi fathers, but to all who show interest in it, so that it can continue to be preserved as a living tradition. From the perspective of the more progressive Parsis, this would be a welcome revival of an aging community, yet in the eyes of conservatives this "concession" equals its virtual demise.

As a metaphor for the global conditions of the Anthropocene, the story of the Parsis and the challenge faced by the community invite reflection on the environmental starting points of our civilization. Like the Parsis considering the limits of their own identity, mankind faces the question of how far the "traditional way of life" needs to be changed from the ground up in order to preserve it in as many diverse forms as possible.