

Rural Gujarat, Story of Parsis

Posted by: "Maneck Bhujwala" [Maneck Bhujwala](#) [dasdol4](#)

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Subject: A forgotten people: The Parsis of rural Gujarat

Last January, I accompanied the Young Rathestars to rural Gujarat. The Young Rathestars are a Zoroastrian charity in Mumbai that provide financial assistance to poor Parsis in Bombay and other places in India. The purpose of their trip was to distribute food grains, other essentials and financial aid to over 70 rural Zoroastrian families in the villages around Ankleshwar.

Unlike the Young Rathestars, I am not a social worker. I am a documentary filmmaker and for some time now, I have been documenting the realities of the existence of our community that seem all too obvious to me but somehow are not on the radar of those around me. One such issue I want to document is that of the people we love to dismiss as Dubras, the illegitimate children of Parsi fathers with their tribal mistresses. The history of the Dubras lies in the villages of rural Gujarat, and my purpose in accompanying the Young Rathestars was to take a first-hand look at the condition of the Parsis in these villages.

I had an idea what to expect. I had already made a documentary on the poor among the community in urban Pune. I had also seen an amateur video of the poverty in rural Gujarat, shot more than 10 years back. I had seen photographs of these people on the Young Rathestars website. I had been part of a Government-sponsored workshop that had discussed the issue of poverty among the Parsis in both urban and rural India. And yet, as it so happens, whenever I go on research for my films, despite knowing so much, I ultimately find out that what I know is oh so little. The situation turns out to be far worse than what I have heard or read about.

My perception of a rural Parsi village, and I'm sure it is of many others too, was of places I had visited before. Places like Davier and Tarapore and Gholvad and Udwada. Places with agyaries and dharamsalas, sanatoriums and old brick houses on whose porches old Parsis sit, lonely and forlorn. I expected that the names of the villages I was going to visit would be found in our surnames.

Instead we set out to places I have never come across in any surname. Lavet, Vankal, Boria, Zankhvav, Ambavadi, Ratoti, Devgadh, Jhakharda? Some of them weren't even villages but tribal hamlets. Off the main highways, down narrow village roads, tucked away somewhere deep into the interiors, these places used to be parts of the jungle not too long ago. If I was on my own, I wouldn't have been able to find these places. The large road map of Gujarat that I had with me didn't even list them. In such places, I was surprised to find Parsi families, sometimes one, sometimes a few, staying there for generations, eking out a living.

As we went from place to place, it wasn't the poverty of the families we visited that hit me ? their tattered clothes, their houses of straw and wood and mud, their wasted-away lives ? but the fact that we as a community had forgotten them. In our collective memories, these people do not exist. In our ideas of what Parsi identity should be, these people do not figure.

And strangely enough, it wouldn't have been too long ago that our families too would have been in similar circumstances. The Parsi baugs and colonies of Bombay are less than a hundred years old. They were established to resettle Parsi villagers escaping the Gujarat famine. In less than a hundred years, we have forgotten who we used to be.

Courtesy : Jehangir