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**NOISE IN THE PARSI TOWER OF SILENCE: CONTESTING RELIGIOUS  
BIGOTRY IN THE *CHRONICLE OF A CORPSE BEARER* BY CYRUS MISTRY**

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines death and transition according to the Parsi community in India who believe in the traditional Zoroastrian system of disposal of the dead. It argues that in Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer by Cyrus Mistry, the caste of the Khandhians and the Nussesalars whose corpse bearing profession are discriminated and segregated upon both by the Parsi community and the Punchayet that employs them. I interrogate why the dead are respected and prayed for, but the Khandhians and the Nussesalars who prepare these corpses for the final journey in the Towers of Silence are discriminated. Using the Liberation theology, the paper hypothesises that the revolution in the Tower of Silence by the Khandhians, Nussesalars and the vultures is to purify the Zoroastrian religion from the corrupt Punchayet members who segregate and trade religious values for money. This revolt also asserts and articulates their place in the cycle of life, death and transition which is an edification of the vanity of life. As such, the Liberation theology will argue that their revolt re-enact the collective spirituality that should be preached and practised in the Parsi Fire Temples which engage the fight against religious bigotry and the unity of all Zoroastrian castes. The paper highlights that though the Khandhians and the Nussesalars are considered as the keepers of the unclean, their job is indispensable because the dead need to be taken proper care of given that their spirits continue to inhabit the world of the living. That is why Cyrus Mistry's narrative blends irony, humour and tragedy to satirise the spiritual dimension of the corpse revolution, suggesting new perspectives to successfully preserve Parsi traditions in modern India.*

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**Key Words:** Parsi, Khandhians, Nussesalar, corpse bearer, Fire Temple, Tower of Silence, Punchayet, bigotry.

### Introduction

India is a multicultural country with several castes, religions and belief systems operating independently within specific geographical locations. The Parsis who practise traditional Zoroastrianism stand unique because of the way they handle life, death and transition. According to the Zoroastrian Parsis, the spirit of the dead resides in the vultures at the Towers of Silence. Which is why when a Parsi dies, his corpse is considered unclean until it is purified by specific spiritual rituals. First, the corpse can only be transported by the Khandhians (a cult of corpse bearers) to the temples where the Nussesalars (cult of corpse cleaners) clean and ritually purify the corpse. Once purified, the family can now gather around, mourn and bid farewell to their departed. Then the corpse is taken to the Tower of Silence where it is exposed on the sacred platform for vultures to consume. Unlike Indian Christians, Muslims and Hindus who bury or cremate their dead, the Parsis give them to vultures at the Towers of Silence. According to the narrator in the *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*:

When it comes to disposal of the corpse, our religion is so sensible. We don't pollute the earth by burying, nor the air by cremating. Everything is so nice in our religion – must be the finest in the world: we are not asked to fast, avoid liquor, or congregate on Sundays for prayer. A happy normal life is all we are asked to lead. (125-126)

When the corpse is kept in the Tower of Silence, the family goes to the Fire Temples where they give the chief priest their prayer requests alongside gifts and money for continuous intercession for the repose of the dead. The spirituality at the Fire Temples is as elevated as their priests are reputed for prayers that have cured people from near-fatal illnesses, reversed cases of madness or demonic inhabitations, curses, etc. That is why visitors undergo different purification rituals before they can be permitted into the outer sanctums of the Fire Temples to hand in their prayer requests to the chief priest.

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Given the coordinated nature of the Zoroastrianism and the fact that the Parsis are a high and respectable caste, this paper interrogates why they ironically segregate against the Khandhians and the Nussesalars who handle their dead? Secondly, how does the Punchayet (a group of business magnets that recruit, lodge and pay the Khandhians and the Nussesalars) exploit and perpetrate the segregation of their Khandhians and the Nussesalars? To answer these questions, arguments propounded by Liberation Theologists like Valpy Fitzgerald, Bastian Wielenga, Christopher Rowland and Gustavo Gutierrez will be used. According to Charles Villa-Vicencio in “Liberation and Reconstruction: The Unfinished Agenda,” the choice of this theory should be reflected to answer the following questions:

Can liberation theology liberate the liberated – from both complacency and cynicism? Is liberation theology indeed a vehicle for liberating the poor not only when liberation is on the distant horizon but also when it is within grasp?

Can liberation theology be more than a theology of resistance? (154)

These questions will take into consideration the Parsi context to open ideological and contextual cleavages that liberation theologians have been able to hold together. The answers to these questions lie in the traumatic experiences of Cyrus Mistry’s narrator, Phiroze Elchidana. Phiroze, the son of a Parsi priest from a higher caste falls in love with Sepideh, daughter of a corpse bearer, and marries her against all attempts by his family to save him from such shame. Through this unholy marriage, Phiroze out of love takes the job of a Nussesalar at a Parsi Temple and narrates his experiences for over sixty years which guide my analyses of the different causes and consequences of the revolution that disturbs the peace in the Parsi Tower of Silence.

### **Keepers of the Unclean**

Why do you think there are so many strange, new, incurable diseases in the world? Why do people no longer live to be a hundred, or a hundred and fifty, or two hundred years old as they used to do in the olden days? Why do you think evil has been able to tighten its stranglehold on mankind? ... It’s because people have forgotten the conjunction between hygiene and spirituality... (29)

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This declaration by Framroze to his son, Phiroze Elchidana, who is the protagonist in the *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer* reveal the underlying problem that plagues present-day Parsi communities in India. Modernism has brought unprecedented greed within the Parsi community causing the Panchayet to segregate the Khandhians and Nussesalar who are caretakers of their dead. Traditionally, in the past, corpse bearers were a respected caste until the Panchayet modernised the corpse bearing business into an exploitative enterprise based on profit making at the expense of the workers. This has resulted to a general hatred of the caste of corpse bearers and anyone in the profession as Phiroze explains:

It had always been a hereditary profession. Generations of inbreeding within families belonging to the small sub-caste of corpse bearers – together with a self-imposed and socially enforced isolation – had rendered them freakish, awkward and genetically unsound. How completely sad and despairing then, that corpse bearers continue to squirm and thrash about while trying to find ways to escape its inherited tyranny. (7)

Their caste and profession are looked down by other Parsis who consider them as keepers of the unclean. People abstain from Khandhians and Nussesalars even on the roads and in offices to the point where members of this caste feel identifiable everywhere they go. The segregation they experience is what Gustavo Gutierrez explains in “The Task and Content of Liberation Theology” that:

From the beginning, from the perspective of the theology of liberation, we spoke of subjugated peoples, exploited classes, despised races, and marginalised cultures[...]. Thanks to such commitment we became more aware that ultimately - without omitting, of course, its social and economic dimensions - poverty means death, unjust and premature death. (24)

Ironically, though the Nussesalars are a highly spiritual people who purify and prepare corpses before burial, many Parsis still insult and segregate against them even though the same people will prepare their corpses for the final journey to the world beyond. Phiroze describes his shocking experience after a corpse purification scene when the man insults him that:

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Having once trained for priesthood myself, I was familiar with this routine practised by the most devout: the hallowed chain of prayer, they have been so diligently weaving must not be interrupted by the profane utterances of everyday speech: hence, the buzzing. In a ferocious dump charade, the man was urging me to keep my distance, to take my unholy self out of his sight, disappear from the very face of the earth [...]. Other mourners stood up too, shocked. (11)

Phiroze had accidentally touched the mourner on his way out of the temple after purifying the corpse of the man's relative for transportation to the Tower of Silence. The insults and disdain with which the mourner treats him publicly raises the question as to the relationship between living family members and their dead ones. According to Zoroastrianism, the dead are considered unclean which is why only the Khandhians and Nussesalars are permitted to handle them till the last purification rites are performed before family members can touch them. In response to the mourner's insults, Phiroze sarcastically reminds him thus:

Do you seriously believe you won't need me one day? Astride those emaciated shoulders rides the ghost of a corpse. You don't see him now, but it's only a matter of time, believe me, before your blood turns to ice, your limbs hardened like wood. Then, ask yourself, will your near and dear ones wash and clothe you for the final goodbye? No, sweet man, you'll have to depend on one of us. (11)

These questions which the mourner takes with disdain are based on a deep-seated segregation Khandhians and Nussesalars undergo in the Parsi community in Bombay. Paradoxically, Members of the Panchayet punish them for sitting on public benches or leaning on walls meant for mourners. Despite the important roles they play in their communities, they remain a lower caste. The difficulty in understanding why people believe in Gods or devote their lives in serving God is what Todd Tremelin describes in *Minds and Gods: The Cognitive Foundations of Religion*. To this critic:

Reflective beliefs are what people normally understand by the word "belief." Instead of being derived automatically and unconsciously, reflective beliefs

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come from conscious, deliberate reasoning or from external sources of authority like parents, teachers, and books. Reflective beliefs are usually explanatory and interpretative rather than descriptive. Reflective beliefs may or may not be fully understood or well-grounded and, consequently, people's commitment to them vary widely, from loosely held notions to dogmatic convictions. (137)

Tremlin argues that those people have good reasons for their beliefs, which is why religion doesn't need to become institutionalised and codified in the way that is so common today. He says elaborately developed religious systems like Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity may dominate, but there are still a number of localised, loosely organized, and minimally doctrinal forms of religions around. More importantly, religious people don't really need institutions and specialists to understand how religion works. Because religious thought and action are based on tacit knowledge shared by all, individuals are quite capable of handling religious concepts on their own. This is why the Khandhians and Nussesalars are segregated upon in India.

The established "uncleanliness" of the Khandhians and Nussesalars is further manifested in their children. In the Parsi communities, marriage is forbidden between the children of the Khandhians and Nussesalars with other castes. By so doing, no matter how educated they are, they cannot occupy high-ranking jobs or positions in the Parsi community. This is the case with Vera, the daughter of Rustom who is a Khandhian. After graduating with a diploma in secretarial studies, she is employed by the prestigious Gagrut, Limbuwala & Co. Solicitors and in the course of her career, she falls in love with Shapoor, the son of her boss. Despite their plans to eventually get married, her boss, Homiar Limbuwala, pays her off and sacks her without any prior notice the moment his investigations reveal her caste. In a conversation between Vera and her father who tries to comfort her that Shapoor will come back to her, she reminds him that:

And how do you think I will feel every time Shapoor touches me [...]. Knowing what he is thinking? And when we have children – if we do have children – am I supposed to hide from them who their grandfather was? Just

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because those puffed-up-potbellied moneybags hold corpses in revulsion?

Thanks but no thanks! (115)

With his ideology, Vera rejects getting married to Shapoor because the shame of her caste will remain forever. This shame is further intensified by the way the British colonial administration treated the issue of castes and education in India. According to Hayden J. A. Bellenoit in *Missionary Education and Empire in Late Colonial India: 1860–1920*, the British approached issues of religion and morality with a degree of bookishness and instead relied on statistical surveys and the testimonies of subordinate officials. He posits:

Official British attitudes and knowledge tended to be more removed, less intimate and more insouciant in cultural and human knowledge as the nineteenth century wore on. This can partly account for many of the confrontations and misunderstandings that occurred towards the later nineteenth century over, for example, temple management, the laying of sewage and water pipes, and sanitising health measures in urban centres. (34)

The result of this reluctance was that knowledge of students' cultural and religious tendencies, in addition to general colonial knowledge had become more ossified and removed. The British did not know that even the children of Khandhians and Nussesalars who had attained higher education like Vera were still segregated everywhere they went. Vera's predicament is not different from that of Phiroze especially when he insists and marries Sepideh, another daughter of a Khandhian, and his parents refuse to talk to him and avoid encounters where they may meet and converse as a family. On the day of his wedding with Sepideh, his father refuses to come. He tells us thus:

Framroze, my father, claimed to be much too busy to be able to take the morning off and did not attend. Though I knew, without anything having to be said, he was simply boycotting the wedding, protesting what he had described in my face as my 'everlasting imbecility'! (121)

The case of Phiroze is ironical because as the son of a Parsi Priest, Framroze, his father is supposed to preach against caste segregation and encourage intermarriages between them. Conversely, he disowns his son for marrying the daughter of a Khandhian. This is the

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motivational factor that pushes Phiroze to fight back segregation by becoming both a Khandhian and a Nussesalar because of his love for Sepideh.

Moreover, for some Parsis, becoming a Khandhian provides solutions to their poor living conditions. Even though the Khandhians and Nussesalars are segregated against, their job is controlled by the Punchayet. The Punchayet pays them, lodges them and ensures that their social interactions within the Parsi communities are well checked. Though the pay is very low, at least it is better than nothing for some families. This is the case of Kobaad who becomes a Khandhian after the tragic death of his father and the untold suffering his family plunges into. The narrator describes how Kobaad's mother secures this job for him in the following words:

The horror and pity of their recent bereavement, the feeling of intense piety it had inspired in her, the great natural beauty and peace she experienced and imbibed during the three-day obsequies at Doongerwaadi made her decide to seek a job for Kobaad that would rarely, if ever, take her son outside the boundaries of this safe haven; where, apart from everything else, the Punchayet would provide rudimentary residential quarters for the whole family. Her efforts bore fruit, and Kobaad was appointed corpse bearer. (131)

To Kobaad and his family, working for the Punchayet with low wages and having a roof over their heads is better than starving on the streets. Even the job itself is too demanding for the workers because they feed poorly, no health insurance and are not given holidays or leave of absences. Even in illness, they are expected to transport corpses on their shoulders because the lone hearse for the purpose is always broken down. The incident that betrays the treachery and exploitative nature of the Punchayet on Khandhians and a Nussesalars is the collapse of Phiroze during a corpse bearing process. The scandal of his predicament makes newspaper headlines in Bombay on August 6<sup>th</sup> 1942, as the narrator describes the newspaper report:

Eyewitnesses stood flabbergasted – some even terror-stricken – when an unfortunate corpse bearer toppled off a bier, falling flat on his face in the middle of a busy thoroughfare. Some claimed that the body immediately began to twitch as though in great agony. The corpse was quickly returned to



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its place on the bier, and carried into the sprawling [...]. One corpse bearer, who had momentarily lost consciousness – and was probably responsible for the bier's collapse – soon revived. (60)

The response of the Punchayet to save their face is the convocation of the four corpse bearers who are accused of drunkenness. To the Punchayet, Phiroze collapsed because he was drunk, which is not true because despite his attempts to explain that his health condition at the time was not good, no one gives him a listening ear. His little salary is suspended and they are all warned to abstain from alcohol or any spirits while on duty.

It is ironical that the Punchayet punishes them meanwhile they do not give them any health coverage despite their low wages. Furthermore, these Khandhians transport corpses over very long distances and hours. At times, some of the corpses are discovered in advance states of decomposition which makes the transportation process more complicated. In an encounter between Phiroze and one of their bosses, Buchia, who oversees the activities of the Khandhians and the Nussesalars for the Punchayet, Phiroze explains that:

Those damn biers we lug around – solid iron – each weighs nearly eighty pounds! And all corpses aren't emaciated by death, let me tell you. Some positively swell, growing more flaccid by the minute. Besides, how else, I ask you this, how else are the best of us to keep up this carrion work, this constant consanguinity with corpses, without taking a drop or two? The smell of sickness and pus endures; the reek of extinction never leaves the nostril. (2)

This argument is not accepted by Buchia and the Punchayet whose business interests come first and not the health of the Khandhians and the Nussesalars especially because in the Parsi community, corpse revulsion is very common. Only the Khandhians and Nussesalars are authorised to handle corpses and the families pay huge amounts to the Punchayet. That's why the Punchayet ensures that no mistakes are made by the corpse bearers and threats are frequently issued to them. Furthermore, the reason for their submission is because they are not very educated and cannot excel in their communities because they are a segregated caste. Such continuous subservience is what pushes them to revolt against the Punchayet and the entire caste system in order to secure better working conditions and possibilities for the

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children of the Khandhians and a Nussesalars to be respected and treated equally within the entire Indian society.

### **The Corpse Revolution and Non Conformism**

In Zoroastrianism, everything is well organised in such a way that in the Parsi communities, the stages a corpse goes through before final burial in the Towers of Silence and the string of prayers in the Fire Temples. Although death and transition remain in the hands of the Punchayet who recruit the different Khandhians, Nussesalars and Priests, the causes of death or the prevailing circumstances like pandemics or accidents are taxed differently. Accordingly, those handling these corpses deserve better pay from what the families pay to the Punchayet. Ironically, despite their efforts to work as much as sixteen hours every day, they are not well paid and even discriminated against. Such religious discrimination is common in India as Bastian Wielenga highlights in “Liberation Theology in Asia” that:

The struggle for justice and freedom in Asia is complicated through the multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of Asian societies. Religion plays a powerful role both in justifying oppression and in inspiring and sustaining thirst, and struggles, for justice. The oppressive role of religion is notorious in the legitimation of patriarchy and of caste. It further appears where dominant religions justify discrimination against religious minorities. (42)

Judging from Wielenga’s perspective, it can be concluded that Zoroastrianism plays a divisive and oppressive role in many social and political conflicts. The ethnic conflict among the Parsis has a religious aspect as Khandhians and Nussesalars are driven out of urban areas. In the *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*, Cyrus Mistry satirises the treatment given to the Khandhians and the Nussesalars by exposing their plight for the world to see the shame in Zoroastrian practices. In the conversation between Phiroze and Temoo, he is reminded that there exist what is called the Pandemic allowance for Khandhians and Nussesalars who handle many corpses at short periods. He says:

Our forefathers made provisions for this sort of thing... what do they call it?  
‘Pandemic allowance!’ bellowed Temoorus triumphantly, pleased that his memory hadn’t let him down. ‘Pandemic allowance... Trustees have made

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provisions for this kind of situation – its written in the fine print of the Punchayet deed – and Buchia, I daresay, is probably planning to pocket it all himself. Don't take this lying down, Son, I tell you. That warden will eat us alive.' (8)

These allowances are embezzled by the Punchayet and to compound their problems, the Punchayet refuse to repair the lone hearse that could be used to transport corpses. As such, the Khandhians and Nussesalars are bound to carry them on their shoulders across very long distances. In most cases, these corpse bearers do not eat or are given time to rest before taking another case. The narrator describes his traumatising experiences in the following words:

I had had nothing to eat since last night. Just before leaving the house in CusrowBaag, kindly neighbours of the bereaved family had handed us an earthen pot of fermented toddy – tart as hell, but I drank thirstily, my mouth was parched – and brown lumps of sweet jiggery tucked into rounds of soft white bread, sustenance for the long walk back. (15)

To the narrator, part of the problem why the Khandhians and Nussesalars find difficulties protesting is because they are not registered in the Labour Trade Union. The Punchayet ensures that this is not done so as to continuously exploit them through very low wages. In some cases, there are old women who volunteer to help work for the Punchayet as corpse cleaners but ironically, their pay is ridiculous as the narrator says, “and to think they still don't pay our women anything for this service ... Except that one hundred-rupee bonus, once a year at Pateti” (128). The accumulated discontentment over difficult working conditions, low pay and poor health coverage of the Khandhians and Nussesalars reaches the apex when Phiroze collapses because of exhaustion and they are instead suspended by the Punchayet. This push the angry workers to re-evaluate their fate as Boman posit:

Well, for one thing, they won't pay us for all the days we stand suspended... Most corpse bearers lived from hand to mouth, from week to week, even day-to-day. Many had large families to support. How can they do this to us?... They don't give us time to eat nor drink, make us work like donkeys! And if

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one of us faints in the midday sun, all five are made to pay the price! Is that justice? (64)

Understanding that their situation needs immediate action because the Panchayet will never negotiate with them on their working conditions, they plot out their protest strategies. The Khandhians and Nussesarars draw inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi's peaceful revolution against the British colonial administration at the time and baptise their revolution "peaceful non-cooperation" with the Panchayet and any corpse.

Their protests begin with a list of their demands like an eight-hour working day, overtime compensation and ten days of leave every year which they take to Buchia to transmit to Coyaji, the leader of the Panchayet. The fact that Coyaji comes down to their living quarters to address them is considered the beginning of a peaceful negotiation. Conversely, during the emergency meeting convened to that effect, their expectations and demands are disregarded as he reprimands them that:

We are all followers of the same religion. And our religion, the oldest and most influential in the history of mankind, clearly lays down all our rights and duties – not just yours as corpse bearers, but ours, too, as your guardians [...]. So let us not be hasty, let us not behave like ordinary rabble-rousers and undisciplined trouble mongers. Someone may have misguided you, I'm sure. But if you choose to follow such negative advice, it'll only bring us to ruin. Never once in the hundred-and-fifty-year-old history of the Panchayet has anyone raised such demands, remember that. (76)

Unable to digest the insults from Coyaji, the Khandhians and Nussesarars hold a second meeting after his departure to re-strategize. Coincidentally, news of an accident involving Jungoo, the hearse driver reaches them that he is seriously injured in the emergency word.

The fact that Buchia, Coyaji and the entire Panchayet refuse to assist this worker confirms to everyone the need for their revolution. To articulate their spirit of solidarity, they contribute for Jungoo's hospital bills and organise a welcome party to celebrate his recovery. Unable to bear the shame of the solidarity among the Khandhians and the Nussesarars despite their subservient position, the Panchayet send them two dismissal letters as Phiroze explains:

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The two fresh letters that Edul had delivered to us that morning stated that my services as Nussesalar were terminated forthwith, and that I should vacate my quarters in fifteen days' time, for indulging in subversive activities against the interests of the community even while on probation. (79)

As for Rustom, he and the other workers are warned of a similar dismissal should they attempt any further strike. Rustom's anger is motivated by the fact that he has served in that capacity as Khandhian for over twenty-five years and has never received any comfortable treatment from the Punchayet. Which is why by adding him to the sanctions, the Punchayet had made their biggest mistake. The narrator describes the coordinated revenge taken by the Khandhians and Nussesalars thus:

Our decision to 'down tools,' as it were – or rather, not to lift corpses – took Buchia, Coyaji and the entire Parsi Punchayet completely by surprise. They were so flummoxed that for the first twenty-four hours, they did not react, as if hoping against all evidence to the contrary that the next morning they would find things had returned to normal. Fortunately for us, in our line of work, no lockout or closure can be imposed by the management. For the assembly line of corpses keeps moving, regardless of whether the latter are disposed or not. Calls to Buchia's office, reporting deaths and asking for the corpse to be carried away continued as usual, followed by persistent and progressively impatient reminders. But no corpses were removed from the homes of the bereaved on that day, or for the next three days. (80-81)

With the increasing number of corpses abandoned in their houses for three days, the revolution of the Khandhians and the Nussesalars gain more support from angry mourners throughout the Parsi community. It equally gathers both sympathisers and critics from the Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities who express their opinions about the cremation or burial of corpses. On the other hand, all attempts by the Punchayet to recruit and replace the striking Khandhians and Nussesalars within such short notice fail because the precarious working conditions of the strikers are now in the open. The general social division created by the Khandhians and Nussesalars during this strike action confirms what Richard King

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describes as the ‘mystical East’ in *Orientalism and Religion: Post-colonial Theory, India and the Mystic East*. To King:

Today, there are perhaps two powerful images in contemporary Western characterisations of Eastern religiosity. One is the continually enduring notion of the ‘mystical East’ that we have been discussing – a powerful image precisely because for some it represents what is most disturbing and outdated about Eastern culture, while for others it represents the magic, the mystery and the sense of the spiritual that they perceive to be lacking in modern Western culture. The depravity and backwardness of the Orient thus appear to sit side by side with its blossoming spirituality and cultural richness. (97)

King argues that the image of Eastern religions which is increasingly coming to the fore in Western circles, is that of the ‘militant fanatic’. The image of the militant fanatic or religious ‘fundamentalist’ is because Western understandings of ‘the mystical’ tend to preclude the possibility of an authentic mystical involvement in the political struggle. This explains why the rising number of abandoned corpses attracts political discourses and newspaper headlines all over the country accusing the Panchayet of exploitation and blackmail with the backdrop of religious beliefs and practices. The narrator adds that:

This line of thought represented the reformist minority in the community who felt that mindless adherence to age-old practices and conventions had alienated its weakest section; that bigoted and inflexible views were endangering the entire community and, in fact, they were traditions which our forefathers had sought to uphold and protect. (81)

Even with the complaints and criticisms coming from all over the country against the Panchayet, they still launch a new strategy to undermine the revolution of the Khandhians and the Nussesalars. The fact that they pay many members of the community to march on the streets condemning the decision taken by the Khandhians and the Nussesalars and asking for all their immediate dismissal and arrest still does not succeed. The police instead rebuff and mock this new strategy by the Panchayet. Interestingly, the Gods take the side of the

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revolting Khandhians and Nussesalars through the intervention of the vultures at the Towers of Silence as the narrator highlights:

Remarkably, the vultures themselves seemed to know in advance that no funerals were scheduled. Instead of the scores of scavengers who collect at the Towers regularly, in time for the repast, the first morning of the strike saw only three or four circling the sky rapidly; and within a minute or two even those were gone. After that, for the next three days until the strike was over, not a single vulture was seen anywhere near the Towers of Silence. (82)

This unprecedented mystical phenomena by the vultures, just like the revolt of the Khandhians and the Nussesalars in the history of corpse bearing is interpreted by many as the God's siding with the segregated caste. Arguably, this could be considered Cyrus Mistry's call for change in Parsi communities all over India.

Another level of revolution is represented through the controversy over the burial of Joseph Maloney Kanga. Notably, Joseph Maloney's father, Nariman Kanga, is an Indian billionaire while the mother is an Irish. They are Roman Catholic Christians but throughout his adulthood, Joseph had admired and studied Zoroastrianism and on his death bed, wished to be given a Parsi funeral. This wish splits the Parsi community because the Panchayet consider his rich father's numerous financial donations to the entire Parsi community in Bombay. Ironically, Parsi Priests, Khandhians and Nussesalars responsible for the funeral disagree with the Panchayet openly and this attracts social media attention all over the country. But the Panchayet, a profit-making organisation under the umbrella of Zoroastrian orthodoxy is more interested in the financial donations that Joseph's father is offering if they respect the wish of his dead son. In revolt against the hypocritical Panchayet, Buchia plots with his Khandhians and Nussesalars and successfully steal the corpses of Joseph from the funeral shrine in the night. The narrator describes the scene of the discovery thus:

Next morning, when the mourners started arriving for Joseph's funeral, and his body was missing, all hell broke loose. Buchia whose injury had not been attended to all night, was trembling, and delirious with pain and fever. Many

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of the senior-most trustees including AlooPastakia, TehmtonAnklesaria, and the Punchayet's Chief Executive, BurzhinHirjibehdin, had decided to attend the funeral as a mark of respect and courtesy to Nariman Kanga. (165)

The presence of the elites and the Punchayet reveals the hypocritical nature of the Zoroastrian Punchayet who trade religious values for money. Buchia, the Khandhians and Nussesalars had buried the corpse of Joseph overnight in the Sewree Christian Cemetery after bribing the caretaker of the cemetery to facilitate their machination. The decision taken by Buchia and his men can be justified religiously because religious segregation in India is rooted even before colonialism. According to Peter Van Der Veer in *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*:

The division of the Indian population into religious communities was an aspect of colonial thought from the beginning. When the British sought to apply indigenous law, they made a clear-cut division between Hindu and Mohammadan law. This conceptual division was further institutionalised in the census operations, which established a Hindu majority and a Muslim minority that in turn became the basis of electoral, representative politics. The establishment of both the Hindu majority and the Muslim minority as social and political categories, however, was largely the result of the manner of classification, not of pre-existing facts. (19)

That is why it can be argued that the project of the colonial state created more divisions and this is not to say that there was no division of Hindu and Muslim communities in the precolonial period. The division was not a colonial invention but a way of counting these communities and to have leaders represent them at the emergence of religious nationalism. Consequently, though the burial succeeded after a fight between Buchia and the caretaker which got him mortally wounded, his desire was to ensure Joseph got a Christian funeral and not a Parsi. The confessions of Buchia on his death bed to Ignatius Strickham, the Commissioner of Police, charged with investigating the whereabouts of the corpse of Joseph, leaves everyone astonished as to the determination of Buchia, the Khandhians and Nussesalars to purify the Zoroastrian religion from the hands of the corrupt Punchayet. The



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fact that the corpse remains in the Christian cemetery and all charges dropped against the culprits show the acceptance and success of the corpse revolution.

### **Negotiating Space and the Final Passage**

The revolutionary actions of the Khandhians and Nussesalars against the Panchayet and the massive support from sympathisers all over the country push the Panchayet to accede to the demands of the Khandhians and Nussesalars. As a religion at the crossroads of modernity, Zoroastrianism needs to preserve its traditional and dogmatic ways of ensuring the cycle of life, death and transition of devoted Parsis. For this to be effective, the working conditions of the Khandhians and Nussesalars have to be improved upon. According to the narrator in *Chronicles of a Corpse Bearer*, the strike which runs for three-and-a-half-days put tremendous pressure on the Panchayet which forces them to grant the wishes of the Khandhians and Nussesalars. He describes the changes thus:

Initially, the mood amongst us was jubilant and celebratory. Most of us were working fewer hours, and our monthly incomes had gone up. When I resumed work, along with all the others, nobody said a thing to me; I was pleased to have come out of this sorry and slightly desperate chapter of my life cleanly.  
(82-83)

The different attempts put up by the Panchayet could not work because of the socio-political consequences of the riots in the Towers of Silence. Economically, the price of ice witnessed its highest boom from eight annas per kilo to six rupees per kilo because Parsis needed to preserve their dead ones in iced boxes given that Zoroastrianism forbids the use of conventional mortuaries. So, the Panchayet received criticisms from poor families who could not spend regularly on ice while waiting for the Khandhians and Nussesalars to resume their activities.

Furthermore, due to the strike action, the future of the children of Khandhians and Nussesalars is also assured as Phiroze opines that:

Right now, for instance, there is some plastering of my building going on. Whitewashing of all quarters every three or four years is a regular feature now. Children of Khandhians and Nussesalars are given free education up to high

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school, and easy loans or scholarships are available to those who show promise, or desire a university education. A new community room has been set up near the Albless pavilion, where there is a carom board, table tennis and a television set. (169)

With the new status of the Khandhians and Nussesalars clearly defined, they resume work. The schools and community centres built for the children of the Khandhians and Nussesalars equally respond to the bill passed in the Indian Parliament to ensure general education for all children as Victoria A. Velkoff explains in “Women’s Education in India” that:

The Indian government’s commitment to education is stated in its constitution with an article promising “free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of 14.” The National Policy on Education, which was updated in 1992, and the 1992 Program of Action both reaffirmed the government’s commitment to improving literacy levels, by providing special attention to girls and children from scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. (1)

The National Policy on Education is strictly implemented by the Ministry of Education which conducts regular censuses in the different parts of the country to ensure a maximum attainment of the scholarship plan by the children of the poor. From this point, Indian commentators who pronounced on the issue of caste reform promoted ‘uplift’ in campaigns to emancipate the unfree labourers whom they identified as members of ‘slave’ castes. According to Susan Bayly in *The New Cambridge History of India: Caste, Society and Politics in India From the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*:

The National Social Conference adopted a cautious resolution calling for the ‘uplift’ of India’s ‘pariahs and untouchables’. The call for a ‘progressive’ stance in regard to the ‘depressed’ or ‘backward’ classes was reaffirmed in equally vague terms at successive Conference sessions, but the reformist position on this aspect of caste persistently sidestepped the question of what it was that made certain classes of Indians ‘depressed’ or ‘untouchable.’ (181)

Bayly concludes that, Articles 330 and 332 make special electoral provision for these groups. This is paradoxical since the Republic based its political system on universal adult suffrage in

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place of the highly restricted franchises of the 1919 and 1935 Government of India Acts. The resolution of the problem between the Khandhians, Nussesalars and the Panchayet also has an impact on the vultures. The narrator tells us that even the vultures that had gone on strike with the Khandhians and Nussesalars come back in their numbers in the Towers of Silence to spiritually feast on corpses. Here, we see the mystical connections between these vultures, the Khandhians and Nussesalars because these vultures are intricately linked to the spirits of the dead that are purified by the Khandhians and Nussesalars before they eat them. Therefore, the segregation of the Khandhians and Nussesalars affect the spirits of the dead which incidentally is felt by these vultures. That's why they stopped eating corpses during the period of the strike in solidarity with the Khandhians and Nussesalars.

Furthermore, the ritual process carried out in the inner sanctum of the shrine is mystical and spiritual because corpses need specific religious purification processes before being taken to the vultures in the Towers of Silence. Phiroze explains that the ritual is important because:

All corpses radiate an invisible but harmful effluvium, according to the scriptures. Through prescribed ablutions, prophylactics and prayers, I'm supposed to protect the general populace – and – myself from the noxious effects of the dead; indeed, you could say the Nussesalar shields the community from that evil and putrefaction by absorbing it into his own being. In return for which noble service, the scriptures promise, his soul will not be reborn. (7)

The anointing of the corpse with bull's urine before dressing it in muslin and knotting the sacred thread around his waist begins the cleaning process of the corpse. Phiroze continues that:

I got down on my bunched, and described a circle on the floor at a radius of about three feet around the supine body in an anticlockwise direction. Fardoon tagged behind me at the end of the long white cloth tape, both of us softly reciting, in tandem, thirty-three YathaAhuVairyos – one of the prescribed ancient hymns that keeps the demon foulness at bay. This magic circle, once

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drawn, firmly seals in the invisible contamination emanating from the corpse.

(9)

At this point, they use a long white handkerchief which they sway from side to side chanting prayers of penitence asking for forgiveness from the Almighty on behalf of the dead. According to Zoroastrian practices, when the corpse is finally taken to the Tower of Silence and the mourning period over, the family of the dead now go to the Parsi priests at the religious Fire Temple to arrange for special prayers to be continually recited. It is important to note that the task of the Parsi Priest is to educate the bereaved family on the importance of living and praying together. This goes in line with the suggestions of liberation theologians as Gustavo Gutierrez concludes:

The question we face, therefore, is not so much how to talk of God in a world come of age, but how to proclaim God as Father in an inhuman world? How do we tell the 'non-persons' that they are the sons and daughters of God? These are the key questions for a theology that emerges from Latin America, and doubtless for other parts of the world in similar situations. (28)

Gutierrez was preoccupied by the experiences and challenges which Bartolome de Las Casas and many others posed in the sixteenth century following their encounter with the indigenous population of America at the time. These are the same challenges priests in the Fire Temples need to address as they pray for the repose of the souls of the dead.

Phiroze is the son of Framroze who is a Parsi Priest. Growing in the Fire Temple, he witnesses encounters between his father and bereaved families who come to pay for prayers to be offered to their departed ones. His description of his father reveals how busy Priests in the Fire Temples are as he says:

He was a very busy man, attending politely not only to those who came to his temple to requisition prayers for their deceased, but also arranging for other freelance Priests to fulfil some of these commissions at pre-arranged hours. Moreover, he had to maintain a small note book, in which he carefully noted the names of the deceased persons and all their relatives and ancestors whose names must be mentioned in the course of the recitation. (24)

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The spiritual powers of the ancient liturgy recited for the dead are very important in Zoroastrianism. For the process to be efficient, the Holy Well which is a room in the Fire Temple is lit by hundreds of wicks and oil lamps by the devotees with each representing an offering of thanksgiving. Phiroze tells us that there is a box on a table where devotees drop silver coins as alms which the Priests open once every month to count and use to run the affairs of the Temple. Furthermore, special sitting positions are provided to mourners in the temple whenever they book prayer appointments. According to the narrator, his father uses arcane manuscripts of a forgotten Avestan language to cast away demonic spirits during rituals in the Fire Temple. He describes the powers of these manuscripts that:

Hidden in these sacraments are vibrations so powerful that when recited aloud, they can make the impossible come true: the mortally ill healthy again, the impoverished discover untold wealth and the foolish find it in them to utter words that command respect from the wise! Only, strong faith is demanded in their recitations; the kind of faith that can manifest a towering blaze on sodden earth. (31)

Such faith is the type Sufi Baba has, and considered to be a saint because he combines these sacred scriptures with a spiritual dance whose drumming delivers all evil spirits that have possessed the patents brought to his Fire Temple. Witnessing one of such encounters, Phiroze describes how the rhythm of Baba's drumming spiritually makes patients to collapse and that "this was one unusual experience I had during my explorations of the city: my discovery of a revered nineteenth-century Sufi Saint whose grace relieved mental suffering through the medium of orgiastic drumming and dancing" (46). Even though the spiritual prowess of Parsi Priests in the Fire Temple is highly respected by everyone because they can communicate with the dead, the services of the Khandhians and Nussesalars who prepare the dead for final burial was not respected for a very long time. As such, it was necessary for the Khandhians and Nussesalars to organise their rebellion against the Panchayet so as to gain socio-cultural and religious recognition. With their new status, many young people now envisage a career in becoming Khandhians and Nussesalars in future. The economic advantages of the corpse

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revolution can be alluded to what Fitzgerald Valpy describes in “The Economics of Liberation Theology” that:

According to the liberation theologians, the construction of this new civilisation is to be initiated in our own time by an economic order based on the satisfaction of ‘basic needs as a fundamental human right. If the basic needs of ordinary people are not met, then whatever the legal and political institutions there are no real respect for human dignity and world peace is endangered. Allowing for cultural differences, the nature of these basic needs does not admit of much debate in practice: the minimum requirements of nutrition, health, education, housing and employment are self-evident to the poor. The satisfaction of these basic needs is thus the necessary condition for any model of true economic development based on human dignity, and thus must be achieved as a right and not as charity. Once these basic needs are satisfied institutionally in the first stage of the process of liberation, humanity is free to become what it wants to be – so long as what it desires does not become a new mechanism of domination. (221)

It can be argued that a contribution of liberation theology has been its success in solving problems in Indian shanty towns, land struggles, oppressed and humiliated groups, as well as areas of urban deprivation. These successes can be read in Cyrus Mistry’s *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer* as he suggests that Zoroastrian theology is more interested in thinking about and explaining the truth of faith. As such, commitment to the poor should become the context of reflection, and so practical discipleship becomes the dynamic within which theological understanding should take place.

### **Conclusion**

Zoroastrianism which is one of the oldest religions in human history which started in ancient Persia (Iran) and migrated to India witnessed metamorphoses because of the Indian caste system. The different measures taken by the Khandhian and the Nussesalarcaste to fight religious bigotry as represented in the *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer* by Cyrus Mistry reveals

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the challenges in sustaining ancient religious practices within a modern era. This paper has therefore argued that the respect deserved by all the Priests, Khandhians and the Nussesalars involved in the Zoroastrian cycle of life, death and transition to the spirit world is very important to uphold so as to build faith in the religion. This study has addressed Zoroastrianism from a theoretical approach and has gone to lengths to qualify that the notion of life, death and transition that Parsis encounter is founded upon difference. If we take the Khandhians and the Nussesalars as it is traditionally defined, as the creation of difference within Zoroastrian faith, then the Punchayet clearly blurred these distinctions. The Punchayet view the Khandhians and the Nussesalars through a religious lens which is grounded on segregation based on race and ethnicity.

In conclusion, attempts to read *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer* should not be seen as a sign of religious weakness and uncertainty, rather, it should celebrate religious heritage. Much of this seems to continue which is why this paper advocates more scholarly engagements with Parsi traditions and society in this modern era. Therefore, the revolt of the Priests, Khandhians and the Nussesalars reveals that there is more to admire in Parsi civilisations and their moral qualities. From this revolution, the idea of difference which characterised the encounter with the Punchayet is somewhat not religious but economical. The British colonial administration can also be accused of negligence because their idea of cultural imperialism was dangerously simplistic. They saw nothing worthwhile in Parsi culture and their contacts with them was strictly administrative and economic. Thus, the revolution of Khandhians and the Nussesalars in *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer* is a testimony to the vitality, adaptability and resilience of the Indian society.

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