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'Our culture is dying': culture shortage threatens Zoroastrian burial rites

Inadvertent poisoning of scavengers across Indian subcontinent is forcing some communities to give up ancient custom



A funeral procession for a member of the Parsi community at a prayer hall in Mumbai. Photograph: Indranil Mukherjee/AFP/Getty Images

Traditional Zoroastrian burial rites are becoming increasingly impossible to perform because of the precipitous decline of vultures in India, Iran and Pakistan.

For millennia, Parsi communities have traditionally disposed of their dead in structures called *dakhma*, or "towers of silence". These circular, elevated edifices are designed to prevent the soil, and the sacred elements of earth, fire and water, from being contaminated by corpses.

Bodies are placed on top of the towers, where they decompose, while vultures and other scavengers eat the flesh on the bones. After being bleached by the sun and wind for up to a year, the bones are collected in an ossuary pit at the centre of the tower. Lime hastens their gradual disintegration, and the remaining material, along with rainwater runoff, filters through coal and sand before it is washed out to sea.

"We are no longer able to fulfil our traditions," Hoshang Kapadia, a Karachi resident in his 80s, said. "We've lost a way of life, our culture."

Kapadia explained that the purpose behind the Parsi burial customs was to "take less and give more" to the world. "The whole idea is not to pollute the earth," he said



Vultures gather on a Parsi 'tower of silence', circa 1880. Offering one's deceased body to the birds is regarded as the devout Zoroastrian's ultimate act of charity. Photograph: Sean Sexton/Getty Images

Karachi, which is built upon a river ecosystem on the western bank of the Indus River delta, is home to only 800 Parsis out of a population of 20 million people. The city has just two remaining towers of silence, both barely functional.

Another Karachi Parsi, Shirin, said: "The vulture's mystical eye is believed to aid the soul's cosmic transition, and offering one's deceased body to the birds is regarded as the devout Zoroastrian's ultimate act of charity."

"The massive urbanisation and environmental changes in Karachi have led us to revisit our burial rites, as *dakhmas* were usually built on top of hills in locations distant from urban areas.

"Our tradition is dying. Our culture is dying in a time of increasing environmental change."

Unlike many scavengers, vultures are classified as "obligate". This means they do not opportunistically switch between predation and scavenging, as their mammalian counterparts do, but rely solely on locating and feeding on animal carcasses.

In recent decades, vultures have been **dying in large numbers across the Indian subcontinent**, primarily due to inadvertent poisoning with the anti-inflammatory drug diclofenac, which is extensively administered to cattle in India and Pakistan.

When these cattle die, vultures feed on their carcasses and ingest the drug, which causes painful swelling, inflammation, and ultimately kidney failure and death in vultures. Research in 2007 estimated that about 97% of the three main vulture species in India and the surrounding region had disappeared.

The Parsi community in India is exploring captive vulture breeding and the use of "solar concentrators" to expedite the decomposition of bodies. As the solar concentrators only work in clear weather, some have been forced to opt for burial instead.

Kapadia said: "Parsis in Karachi [are forced to] opt for alternative methods of disposal, such as cremation or burial in designated Parsi cemeteries, as the two towers of silence in Karachi are barely functional". He added that when vulture numbers declined at the towers of silence, some community members suggested creating a small captive group of vultures in an aviary to continue the traditional practice.

To prevent the extinction of vulture species, scientists have recommended banning the use of diclofenac in livestock, a move so far taken by India, Pakistan and Nepal. Captive-bred vultures have also been released into the wild in India in a bid to boost the threatened populations.

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