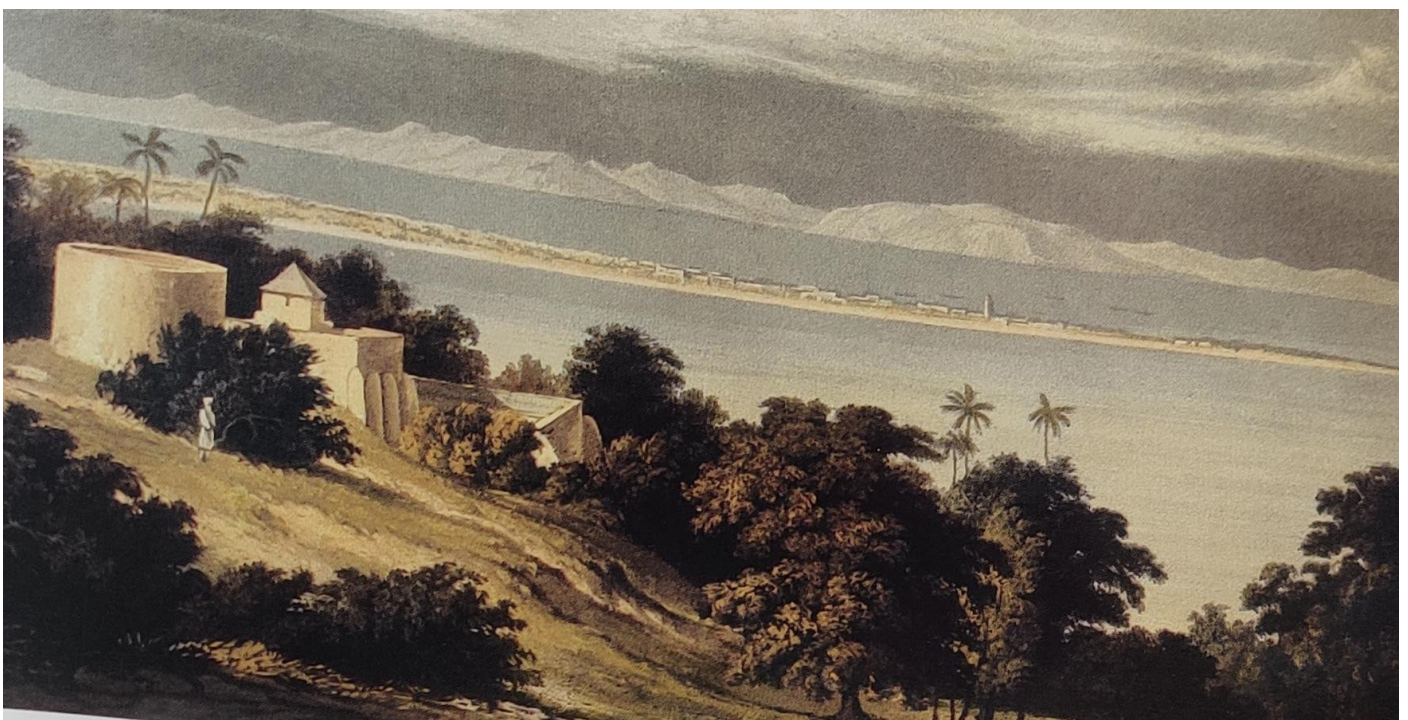




The 1600s saw a great deal of migration and change in the cultural composition of Bombay, which served as a base for what later transformed into a cosmopolitan metropolis. Among the various groups migrating to Bombay at the time was a small yet enterprising group, the Parsis. Followers of Zoroastrianism and descendants of ancient Persia, the Parsis faced a pivotal moment in the 7th century when the Islamic army of the Khalif of Baghdad gave them the choice of either converting to Islam or facing death. Given this dilemma, many Zoroastrians opted for conversion. However, a resilient group chose to escape to Khorasan, eluding capture for nearly a century.

Several Zoroastrians from Khorasan eventually sought refuge in Hormuz, situated on the Persian Gulf, from where they embarked on a journey towards the shores of India. According to the Kissah-i-Sanjan, the most credible source documenting the Parsis' arrival in India, they initially landed in Diu, where they resided for 19 years. Later, they made their way to Sanjan, where Jadi Rana, the local chief, graciously granted them asylum. In this newfound sanctuary, they lived without persecution for approximately 300 years and assimilated into the population. They had also moved to places like Surat, Cambay, Chaul, Thana and other areas. While at Surat, the community began to dabble in business and merchant activities and became shipbuilders, carpenters and traders. Over time, they moved to Bombay for better trading opportunities (Karak, 1884, 2, 23, 24).

The government urged the merchants and bankers to establish their business enterprises in Bombay. They were offered several incentives, including exemptions from import and export duties for specific durations. Notably, Parsis received special encouragement aimed at the growth of the shipbuilding sector, ensuring a consistent supply of textiles to British merchants. This initiative garnered a positive response from the British authorities. Additionally, Parsis from Navsari were invited to Bombay to contribute through their expertise as master weavers for the company



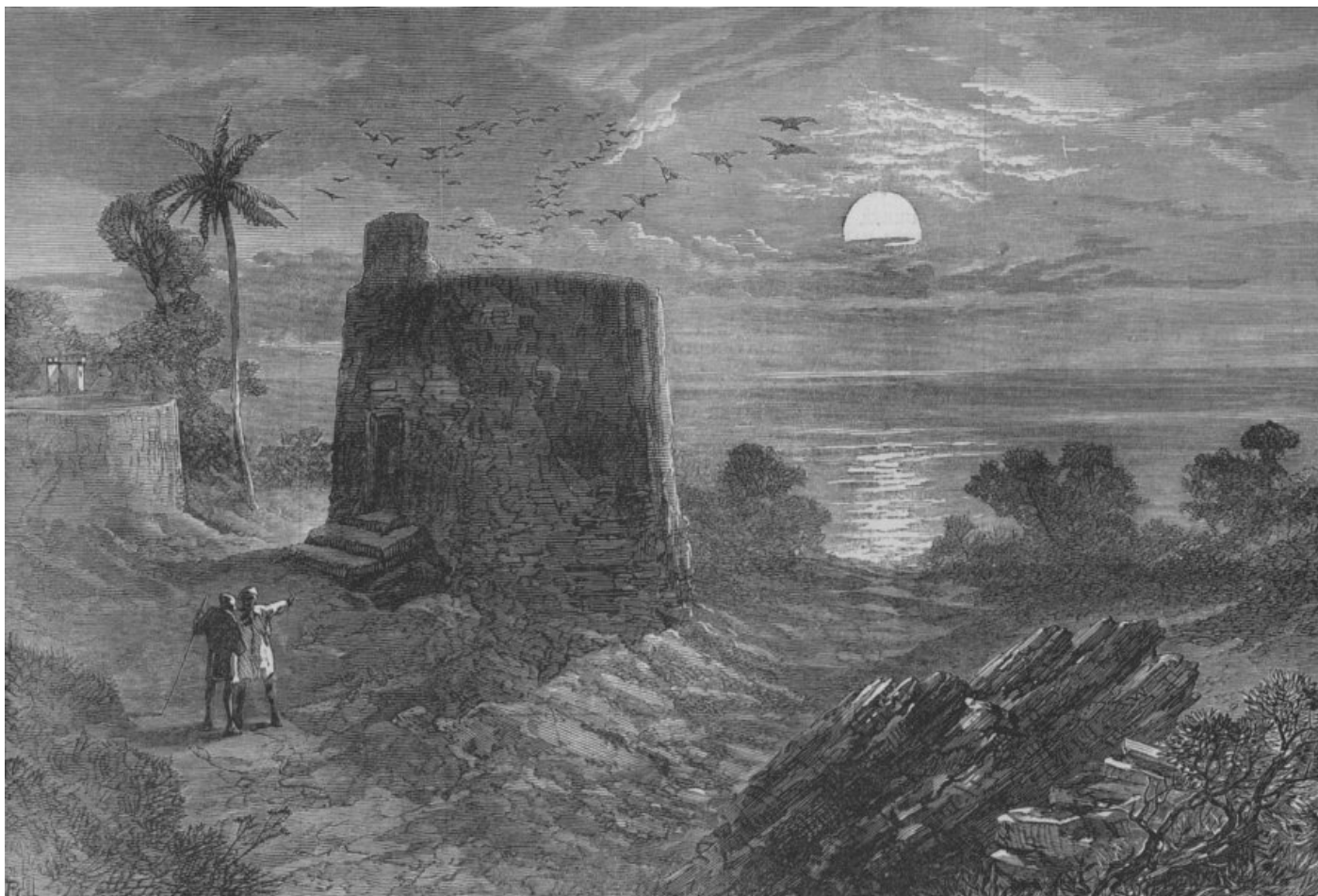
(Karmarkar, 2006, 54). The migration and spread of culture marked the beginning of a new era in Bombay, which actively contributed to the economic growth of the city as well as its overall development. As the Parsi population grew, so did the need for a place to lay their dead to rest. In 1672, the English Governor of Bombay, Gerald Aungier, designated a tract of land at Malabar Hill as a space to establish the Parsi community burial ground (Karmarkar, 2006, 54).

In 1792, a European resident in Bombay ascended the wall of the Tower of Silence and peered within. This breach of privacy greatly offended the Parsis, prompting Governor Sir Robert Abercromby to issue a proclamation. It cautioned potential intruders that if they desecrated a “native” temple or tomb in any way, the East India Company would suspend their services (Rohatgi et al., 2006, 17).

Archaeologist and food anthropologist Dr. Kurush Dalal said during an interview, “Doongerwadi was first built 3 kms outside the walls of Bombay. It was built out of charity and while a lot of people have been trying to get their hands on it over the years, the trust deeds are so solid over that plot that even the Parsi Panchayat cannot break that trust even though they may be administrators of that trust”.

The stone towers play a crucial role in the funerary practices of the Parsi community, an ethnoreligious group and adherents of the ancient Zoroastrian faith. Rooted in the teachings of the prophet Zoroaster and the worship of Ahura Mazda, Zoroastrians believed that burying bodies could contaminate the soil. According to their doctrine, when a body dies, Nasu, the corpse demon, is thought to enter the body, spreading pollution to everything it touches. To maintain the purity of the earth and sacred elements like water, fire, and air, the Zoroastrians devised an unconventional method for disposing of corpses, establishing stone towers known as dakhma. These structures facilitate sky burials, a tradition that, despite its folklore origins, reflects an environmentally conscious approach dating back thousands of years. This practice aligns with the Zoroastrian commitment to keeping the elements clean and unpolluted, contributing to the eco-friendly aspect of their longstanding funerary customs (Yazdi, 2023). In the traditional Parsi funerary ritual, deceased community members are placed on elevated, open platforms on the towers. The bodies exposed to the elements, especially the sky, undergo natural decomposition, aided significantly by the scavenging activities of vultures (Yazdi, 2023).





Attending the actual consecration ceremony of a dakhma is considered a virtuous act. On 3rd June 1831, the Parsis gathered at Malabar Hill to witness the consecration of the Framji Cowasji Banaji tower. As reported by the Bombay Samachar, not a single individual ritually impure was allowed, as they were prohibited from direct contact with sacred elements such as earth, water, or fire. A sacred precinct was meticulously established within the tower by a team of Zoroastrian priests. These priests performed specific rituals to ensure containment and prevent any defilement by the deceased (Rohatgi et al., 2006, 17).

The Parsi method of disposing of the deceased understandably piqued the interest of both European travellers and the British authorities. In 1875, for instance, the Prince of Wales and his entourage visited the Towers of Silence to personally assess the necessity of preserving such an unconventional disposal method. A detailed model of a tower was presented to His Highness (later Edward VII), accompanied by an explanation from the then secretary of the Parsi Panchayat regarding its internal structure and the theological rationale behind its usage. According to Zoroastrian doctrine, death is a temporary manifestation of evil. Therefore, the deceased is allowed to dry and then swept into the central pit. This pit, lined with a layer of lime, facilitates the rapid disintegration of bones. (Rohatgi et al., 2006, 18) However, the impact of urbanisation over the years has led to significant changes in environmental conditions, directly affecting the sustenance of various species of flora and fauna, which resulted in a marked decline in the vulture population in India. The changing landscape and human activities have disrupted the ecological balance, contributing to challenges in the continuity of age-old sky burial practices, as the diminishing vulture numbers threaten the efficiency and sanctity of this traditional method of disposal (Karakia, 2015).



Dr. Dalal also shared an interesting anecdote, “Next to it is another big Parsi Baug called Khareghat Colony which is the only place that has a small tunnel under the road with a direct entry into the towers of silence. Hence, the most in- demand flats in the Khareghat colony were the ground floor flats because final rites could then be said at home and the body could be taken directly to the towers of silence and prayers wouldn’t need to be said there. Over the years, the tunnel needed to be gated because people began to use it as a thoroughfare”.

Although it may be hard to envision, the wooded slopes of Malabar Hill were once home to abundant wildlife. Even today, the secluded vicinity of the dakhma exudes an aura of tranquillity. Its peaceful atmosphere prompted this structure to be called the Towers of Silence (Rohatgi et al., 2006, 19).

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