



HI, DARLING!

Portraits of ageing Parsis living in Navsari, Gujarat—dhaakad men and women with a ready smile and zest for life in spite of being lonely

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Let me comb my hair first. Should I change my dress? I keep myself busy by making this thread. It's enough to take care of my expenses. My husband passed away and daughters are married off. This Parsi Baug is good and everyone takes care of each other. Thank you for taking my photograph."

Snatches of a typical conversation with any one of the single, ageing Parsis living in a Baug (Parsi colony) or an old age homes in Navsari, Gujarat.

In January, I visited some Parsi family friends living in Navsari and happened to come across a few old age homes in the area. The idea to work on a series of portraits on the community took root since most of the work on this

'dying tribe' has been done by Parsis themselves. I thought an outsider's perspective would be interesting.

Parsis from cities across Gujarat and Mumbai are choosing to settle in this Surat's twin city, Navsari, among the company of new found friends, some bedridden, some just old. Even though almost each one of them nurses their sadness at being lonely, their voices light up in loud, crisp and cheerful greeting, "Hi Darling!" at the chance of a conversation with a stranger.

After visiting two old age homes, one Baug and a firm promise not to reveal details (including names) of the members on the behest of those who run these homes, I found that the 100 or so people I met, came to Navsari because it is cheaper to survive here. Many also

indicated that facilities are better in the way of care, there is more of a personal touch and the community is more closely knitted in this town than anywhere else specially Mumbai.

The Irani Zoroastrian community, or Parsis stem from a 3,000 year old religion from the days of the Persian empire. Yet they are an alarming and dismal 0.0006% of the population in India today. According to the Jijo Parsi, Government of India supported scheme to arrest the decline in population of the Irani Zoroastrian Community in India, more than 30% of Parsis never marry, and each Parsi woman of child-bearing age has less than one child. The community's fertility rate is 0.8, compared to a national rate of 2.5 children per woman, according to the World Bank.

While the Parsis have integrated themselves in the Indian society, they remain stringent about their ethnicity, preferring to maintain their Persian roots by avoiding intercaste marriages.

Perhaps this is the reason why many of the ageing Parsis have no extended families, or relatives to take care of them. Some have been abandoned by their families and some chose to live the last phase of their lives away from their children, so that they are not the reason for marital discord in their children's lives.

"My knees hurt now, but I am healthy otherwise. And very single. Help me find a girlfriend no...the ones here are too old for me," requests one of the men I met proving that in spite of all their loneliness, the spirit of being a dhaakad (fearless) Parsi lives on.



1: His knees may hurt, but his heart still desires to get a girl.

2: 93-year-old 'Mumma' as everyone calls her is one of the oldest members in the old age home she stays. She loves to give feedback on day's meal menu and suggest changes.

3: Barely able to hold his cup of tea steadily, this gentleman does not like to engage in a conversation and is referred to as 'sunky old bawa' by everyone in the home.

4: This lady makes some money by weaving the 'kusti', a sacred cord

5: Restless but cheerful, this Parsi lady enjoys being able to live with so many friends in one home.

6: It's not just the very old Parsis who live in old age homes in Navsari, Gujarat. Some of the younger people who have no one to turn to are also shifting in.

7: They call themselves 'The Three Stooges'. They are glad to have found each other in an old age home.