

Good Deeds

by Jason Ferguson | Orlando Weekly | April 11, 2004

Parsis: The Zoroastrians of India
By Sooni Taraporevala (Overlook, 252 pages)

For a somewhat more intimate and uplifting look at Bombay than the one provided by Maximum City, Sooni Taraporevala's stunning photo essay documents the small but influential community of Zoroastrians in the city. Although Parsis is titularly about Zoroastrians throughout India, most of the photos – with the exception of a chapter on Parsi village life in Gujarat – were taken in and around Bombay. This makes sense, as Bombay is home to more than half of India's Parsis, with the Zoroastrian "Towers of Silence" still a formidable element of the Bombay landscape.

The Parsis escaped to India hoping for a new life far from the persecution and prejudice that was visited upon them when their Persian homeland was overtaken by Arab conquerors. As Taraporevala puts it in her eloquent introduction, "so completely was Zoroastrianism routed out from the country of its birth, that in current popular thinking, the thought of an Iran that was not always Islamic, is inconceivable." However, the thought of a Bombay without the Parsis is equally unimaginable. Accounting for less than one half of 1 percent of the city's population, Parsis have nonetheless massively influenced the city. The community has long been well-represented in the city's upper crust, and their charitable and philanthropic works are renowned. Whether founders of the massive Tata Corp. or the internationally famous Zubin Mehta, Parsis are far more integral to Bombay's vitality than their numbers would have you believe.

Taraporevala captures Parsis in and around Bombay, and she tells us as much about the city as she does about the people. This is a cozy, personal and sentimental book, and the sense of dignity and pride inherent in the subjects – whether gleeful children, pensive artists or busy executives – comes through remarkably. Parsis was originally published in 2000, and its run then was so small it was nearly impossible to find if you weren't in the photographer's Rolodex. With its current wide re-release, it again opens a window into a world that may well be ending. There are only 100,000 Parsis in the world and most of them live in Bombay. If the city loses them – through assimilation or simple attrition – the essence of the city would be forever altered.

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