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## **The Marginalised Society in Cyrus Mistry's “Chronicle of A Corpse Bearer”**

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**Abstract:**

*Cyrus Mistry, an Indian Parsi novelist, conjures up within the campus of his DSC prize winning novel “A Chronicle of A Corpse Bearer” the appalling conditions of the nearly invisible community of Parsi corpse bearers, the khandias. Mostly the ordinary penury-afflicted Parsi people take up the job of khandias for alleviating their aching poverty. They do such an emergency service as the corpse bearing. They carry the bodies of the deceased from the bereaved family to the Towers of Silence for performing the ritualistic purification of the corpses and then leaving them exposed to be eaten by the scavenger birds, the vultures. The khandias are the marginalized sub-caste of the Parsi community. They are described as the socially outcast, ‘the god of unclean’, ‘the untouchables to the core’. They are deprived of their due payment and hypocritically convinced of the benevolent mentality of the Parsi Panchayet.*

Cyrus Mistry, was born into an Indian Parsi community. He was commissioned to write a proposal about the life of khandias for channel4 documentary. Though the film was never made. A novel titled “A Chronicle of A Corpse Bearer” took its birth out of this documentary from the mighty pen of Cyrus Mistry. Mistry is the second after Jeet Thayil to win the annual DSC prize amounting \$50,000 for the South Asian Literature at the Jaypur Literature Festival, 2014 for the novel. Set in Bombay in the first half of the last century, against the backdrop of the Independence Movement the riveting novel spans 60 years of Mumbai's history from the early 1940s to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most parts of the novel are enveloped with the details of the Parsi corpse bearers, the khandias despite the scanty political references to Mahatma Gandhi's 'Quit India' movement and the Parsi priests of the fire temple, the tragic love accounts, betrayal and revenge theme. The khandias are the lowest marginalized sub-caste of the already small Parsi community. This marginalized community is seen as the 'untouchable' 'god of unclean' and 'sources of contamination who are forbidden from normal interaction with others'. Parsis do not cremate or bury their dead bodies. It is their religious customs for the dead bodies to be carried to the Towers of Silence from the bereaved family, purified in the funeral chamber of the Tower, exposed to decompose and to be eaten by the scavenger birds, the vultures. All the rituals relating to the dead bodies are rigorously and unflinchingly maintained by the Khandias and Nussesalars, a small 'invisible' sub-caste of the Parsi community. They are allotted small quarters to reside inside the premises of the Towers of Silence. Cyrus Mistry throws light on the wretched plight of this most humiliated, isolated, segregated and deprived so-called 'untouchable' sub-caste of the Parsi community in his chronicle.

Naturally the poor downtrodden people of Parsi community seek the job of khandia for their livelihood and safe living quarters. Temoorus, formerly a 'known frofligate and hooligan of the locality' married Rudabeh, a rejected sister of a Parsi headpriest of a fire temple. Because of the excessive drinking habit of Temoorus the unhappiness and severe penury led Rudabeh to seek assistance of her brother Framroze to find a job. At the mercy of the Parsi Panchayet and with the help of Framroze, Temoorus got a job of a khandia at the Towers of Silence. From then on Temoorus and his successors became socially outcast and so-called untouchables in the eyes of the so-called high Parsi community, though they were initially not so. Similarly Phiroze Elchidana, a son of headpriest of a fire temple, willingly embraced the job of a khandia for marrying Sepideh, a daughter of the khandia, Temoorus and became socially ostracized. Kobaad, another member of the corpse bearers, was the son of a small trader who moved to Mumbai to improve his fortunes by trading. But by irony of fate, after his father's unexpected demise under the ferocious feet of a mad bull, he had to take up the job of corpse bearing and reside at the quarters allotted for the khandias at the enclosed premises of the Towers of Silence. Rustom, the most senior member in the group of the khandias, in his previous life, lost his father, mother and sister, took street as his living place. But with the help of a worker at the Parsi Panchayet he got the job of a khandia.

The job of the Khandias attracts mental courage and patience. After bringing the dead bodies to the Towers of Silence they have to pass through the stringent customs dictated by the holy Scriptures. According to Phiroze, 'It's a job that takes courage and strength, .....rubbing the dead man's forehead, his chest, palms and the soles of his feet with strong-smelling bull's urine, anointing every orifice of the body with it before dressing him up again in fresh muslins and knotting the sacred thread around his

waist. All the while making sure the pile of faggots on the censer breathes easy and the oil lamp stays alive through the night; all this, before we retire ourselves past midnight’.

The work of the Khandias is physically very strenuous and rough. There are thirteen khandias in total and a hearse-driver, Jungoo. There is only one hearse for corpse carrying. The hearse almost all the time lays defunct. Then the khandias are to carry the human carcass along with the solid heavy iron bier weighing nearly eight pounds on their shouldiers all the way to the Towers of Silence from the mournfull family. All the corpse are not lean by death. Some positively swell gaining weight. They have to reach to the Towers before the sunset with this accumulative weight. With this they have to endure the smell of sickness and pus and the stinking corpses. During the carriage of the corpses they do not even get a single minute to take rest or drink. During one such corpse bearing under the glaring sun Phiroze topples the corpse off the bier being physically exhausted and faint. As a punishment Phiroze along with all other corpse bearers are given letter of suspension and an inquiry is pending into this ‘disgraceful’ incident. All of them are called to the office of the Parsi Panchayet. All expect Phiroze are released from the liability. But Phiroze can act the job ‘on probation’.

The Khandias are perennially oppressed and deprived of their due wages, incommensurate with their back-breaking hard aching labours, by the Parsi Panchayet Trustee. They are actually very poor. They cannot meet both ends together-‘from week to week, even day to day’. Many have large dependent members. They get meager financial support from the trustee for their corpse bearing. They are to work almost whole day without overtime compensation and without any leave. When Jungoo, the hearse driver, got entangled in a accident with a lorry with no fault of him but for the fault of the lorry-driver on way to the corpse collection and became hospitalized, the trustee refused to pay expenses of the hospital as compensation. To suppress the would-be agitative disturbances among the khandias for not getting the due wages they are hypocritically brainwashed that they will get reward in the next lifetime for their service in this lifetime. They say if the nussesalars perform their duties scrupulously, he will forever not tread the ‘cycle of rebirth, decrepitude and death’. Above all the Parsi Panchayet treats the khandias as its ‘own children’. The khandias save the corpses from the recontamination at the hands of the over emotive mourners. They also prevent the ‘living’ from the contamination supposedly spewed by the corpses. They save the corpses and their mourners at the risk of his own life. According to the Scripture ‘All corpses radiate an invisible but harmful effluvium’. The nussesalar performs the prescribed ‘ablutions, prophylactics and prayers to protect the general populace and themselves from the noxious effects of the dead’.

Though the corpse bearers do such an important work, they are treated abusively and contemptuously by the other Parsis of the society. They almost always fall prey to humiliation and insultation due to the slightest encroachment upon the others’ jurisdiction. Khandias must perform the rituals of self-purification on daily basis if they are to interact with others, but often they do not venture out of their claustrophobic living quarters at Doongerwadi atop the Malabar hills. Whenever they bear corpses along the general public ways, the pedestrians hatefully swerve from their path. They are considered ‘as shit, the very embodiment of excrement.....untouchable to the core’. The khandias can not share the benches with other members of the Parsi tribe. If they do so, they are ‘fined by Coyaji or even thrashed by self-important and wrathfull members of their tribes for taking rest on a bench intended for public use or merely leaning against a wall in one of the pavilions during large funerals that teemed with mourners’. Even after the purification job of his own mother’s dead body Phiroze could not share the same benches which was occupied by his own father Framroze and his brother Vispy. He had to take other single chair supplied by Temoorus. They cannot even unattentively touch on their way out of the Towers any part of the mourners the purification of the dead body of whose family they have just finished. Mistry gives a pathetic example of humiliation Phiroze suffers at the hands of one of the mourners. When coming out of the very chamber of the Towers after the purification work Phiroze unattentively brushed the shoe of the one of the mourners seated on a benches along with crowds of family and friends, the man sprang to his feet immediately from his closed- eyes-rumination and began trembling like a ‘leaf’. He lost no time to hurl abusive words at Phiroze and protested in all possible way ‘his defilement at’ his hands. But he abstained from any further attack on Phiroze in fear of any further touch. When Framroze, Phirozes’ father, listened to the Phiroze’s intention of marrying seppy, daughter of a khandia, and becoming a khandia-cum-nussesalar, he said that ‘You would..remain an outcast, don’t forget. Ostracised from society, unable to meet your family...’ and also said ‘Even if you went through all the purificatory rite and rituals, and even if I[Framroze] was sure you had been through them diligently and precisely, without being lax or slipshod, I still wouldn’t want you to enter my temple...do you understsnd?’

When to get out of this deprivations Phiroze and Rustom, on behalf of all the khandias, chalked out a charter of reasonably modest demands for “eight-hour working day, overtime compensation and a fixed entitlement of ten day’s casual leave in a year” and submitted it to the Parsi Panchayet office, Phiroze and most senior Rustom are sent the dismissal letters thinking two of them the ‘ringleaders’. To protest against this dismissal letters and for their rights all the khandias went on strike. Finding no way out and facing criticism from all corners the Parsi Panchayet granted all of their demands and unconditional reinstatement of Phiroze.

## References

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