

ZOROASTRIAN RETURN TO ROOTS

Sasan Jahanian & Diana Vania

The Zoroastrian Return to Roots (RTR) program is a youth-led initiative that brings together students and young professionals to experience the past, present, and future of our admired and successful community. Designed for Zarathushti youth who live in the diaspora, the RTR program aims to **'return, reconnect, and revive'** the religion and community. The first-ever Roots trip took place from 23 December 2013 to 6 January 2014 and included the World Zoroastrian Congress. During the inaugural tour, RTR Fellows from Canada, the United Kingdom, USA, and Pakistan explored various significant Zoroastrian historical, religious, cultural, and archaeological sites. With the support of scholars and archeologists, Fellows travelled along the paths of their Parsi ancestors from *Nargol to Sanjan, Udvada, Surat, Navsari, and Mumbai* over a period of two weeks. For many of the participants, this experience provided insight into the positive influence the Parsis have had on the development of India, as well as enabled them to learn about our different religious practices.

RETURN

As the 2013 Zoroastrian RTR program neared its inaugural tour, Fellows were excited and anxiously awaiting the start of the program. For some participants, this was their first time to India. Some had visited with their families before, but very few have had the chance to be immersed in our history and culture, which made this adventure fascinating.

Participants were eager to visit the exact spot where Zarathushtis landed on the Indian shores of Nargol (Fig. 1). They also followed the path to Sanjan where Zarathushtis were granted asylum by the Hindu king **Jadav Rana** in the famed "sugar in milk" story. Standing at Nargol Beach, **Bezan Irani (Canada)** expressed that *"visiting where our ancestors arrived was majestic and should be experienced by all Zoroastrians"*. It is at this place where Iranian and Indian Zarathushtis alike can appreciate the journey and struggles of our community. It is here where the RTR Fellows returned to their roots and saw how a small community has made a huge impact on such a vast population.



Figure 1. RTR group visiting Nargol Beach, where Parsi ancestors first landed. *From left to right: Cumbysis Tampal, Anahita Sidhwa, Farzin Avari, Armeen Mistry, Binaifer Daji, Hutokshi Marker, Shireen Havewala, Diana Vania, Bezan Irani, Aban Marker Kabraji, Rosheen Kabraji, Dinsha Mistree, Semira Jahanian, Sasan Jahanian, Fareeza Doctor, Rustom Kapadia, Vandad Pourbahrami, Shahyan Dastur, Rukshana Nanji, Kurush Italia, Kaiyan Mistree, Jenny Rostami, Jehangir Madon, Burzin Tampal, Farroakh Govadia, Khojeste Mistree, and Kurush Charna.*

RECONNECT

Reconnecting with our culture and traditions is important for the Zarathushti youth living abroad who might not normally get the opportunity to experience our customs and rituals. Visiting agiaries and Atash Behrams allowed RTR Fellows

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to partake in the religious customs, while learning about the history of Parsi establishments such as the Taj Hotel, Britannia Restaurant, Bombay House (TATA headquarters), Jimmy Mistry's house, Dotivala Bakery, Meherjirana Library, and Munshi Farms enabled participants to see the presence of the Parsi community in India (Fig. 2). Above all, Fellows were educated by "renowned speakers about our history and its important role in the development of a world class city (i.e. Bombay)" (Burzin Tampal, Canada).



Figure 2. A guided tour of Munshi Farms.

During the tour, the Fellows visited eight agiaries and Atash Behrams in Mumbai and Gujarat (Fig. 3). While each fire temple resonates differently with each person, the Iranshah Atash Behram in Udvada imparts a stronger connection and had the greatest impact on participants. For **Jenny Rostami (US)**, "being in the presence of such an ancient fire was absolutely a life changing experience." In addition to learning about the history of how the flame was carefully transported from Iran and the care it takes to keep the fire going over the centuries, Fellows attended two of the highest Zoroastrian religious ceremonies, the Nirangdin and the Boi. **Fareeza Doctor (Pakistan)** says that witnessing these ceremonies was the highlight of her trip, and she has "never been so proud and fortunate to be a Zoroastrian."

Over the two-week journey, Fellows experienced their own transformation and strengthened their bond with the religion as well as with the community. Visiting the different institutions and businesses, RTR members were able to learn of the impact the community has made in the development of Mumbai and India. Welcomed into the home of Jimmy Mistry, **Farah Irani (Canada)** stated, "the interactions with Jimmy Mistry really helped me understand how one Zoroastrian entrepreneur can make such a big impact in the community." Seeing how an individual, such as Mr. Mistry, developed a business empire and gave back to the community has left a mark on many of us, while instilling the desire to do the same.

Learning about the many entrepreneurs led **Rustom Kapadia (UK)** to feel that "one of the most important aspects learned from the RTR trip was a sense of identity and enjoyment in being a young Zoroastrian. Understanding my religion on a cultural, political and social level gives me a great sense of pride and ambition to become more involved in the community. It has also inspired me to work on giving back the way our forefathers and previous generations have."

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REVIVE

As the trip slowly came to an end, each member reflected on their experience, evaluating the impact that the RTR



Figure 3. Visiting the Atash Behram in Surat.

program has made on them. The program, for many, went beyond educating. Vandad Pournahrami (Canada) explains that he has “gained a better sense of identity and a great network of motivated, fun and like-minded Zoroastrians.” As the tour involved us spending every waking hour together for two weeks, we also felt we became a family, and we have all found that our meaning of being a Zarathushti has changed. Moreover, Semira Jahanian (US) felt that “the program has fostered a sense of belonging to a global community educating the religion while forging long lasting friendships.” For Fareeza Doctor (Pakistan) the program had more of a spiritual experience where she learned “that prayers are a link and continuity with the past, taking us back to our prophet and our ancestors.” The trip has not only strengthened her views as a Zarathushti but it reminds her of why it is important to practice our faith.

Living away from India, many have lost a sense of this rich culture, history, and even the faith. But the RTR program, as Jehangir Madon (US) describes it, “helps young Zoroastrians develop an identity that is becoming lost as many assimilate into the mainstream culture. We must strengthen our community so that with each generation we maintain our identity as Zoroastrians”, he explains. As a small group we have thrived, but now “we have to make a better effort outside India to keep the customs going and to have our community in our mind everyday” (Kurush Italia, US).

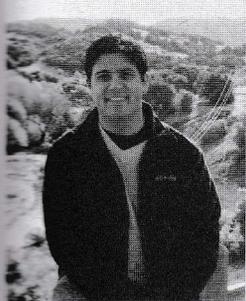
This first Zoroastrian RTR trip was extremely successful, with all participants benefiting from learning about our religion, history, and impact on the greater Indian society. Recollecting a quote from Mahatma Gandhi: “*Parsis: In numbers beneath contempt, but in contribution beyond compare,*” **Cumbysis Tampal (Canada)** feels after this trip he and his

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new RTR family have developed a appreciation of the contributions their ancestry and community has made in the country. After completing the program, Fellows hope to impart knowledge about our small but powerful community, spread awareness about the RTR program, and help garner funds and sponsorship for subsequent Roots trips.

The RTR program is essential in order to maintain our Zoroastrian values, ideas, and traditions for future generations. Each member from the first RTR trip sincerely hopes that more Zoroastrian youth from around the world are able to engage in future trips. We hope to form a global network of RTR alumni who are committed to serving their local Zoroastrian associations, giving back to the community, and encouraging other youth to participate in RTR. As we constantly hear about our dwindling population size, it is imperative that we support our youth in returning to, reconnecting with, and reviving our community.

The next RTR trip will take place later this year. If you are interested in supporting us or in becoming a Fellow for the next trip, please visit our website for more information: www.zororoots.org.



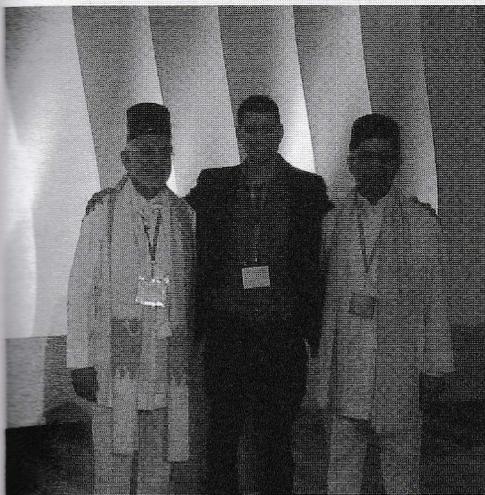
Sasan Jahanian: Sasan is an Iranian Zoroastrian born in Baton Rouge, La, growing up in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. He has recently completed his Masters in Biology while developing a non-profit outreach program providing oral hygiene education to rural and low income families in California.

Diana Vania: Diana is a Global Health graduate student from Canada. She is interested in health and social policy in India. She was born and raised in Toronto, but has visited India several times and hopes to move to Mumbai in the future.



Religions for Peace

Different Faiths, Common Action.



From left Homi Gandhi Ervad Poruz Khambatta and Jehangir Sarosh

The Religions for Peace World Assembly was held on November 20th through the 22nd in Vienna, Austria. In attendance were over 600 religious leaders and people of faith as well as representatives of the UN, UNICEF and numerous world governments. I had the privilege of serving as one of ten youth delegates chosen to represent North America at the assembly. We were selected based on recommendations from senior leaders in our religious community and our past accomplishments. Before the Assembly began, the North American Youth Delegation met with the other youth delegates from around the world at the Youth Pre-Assembly. At this event, we shared our experiences and aspirations as young people representing a diverse assortment of religious traditions from every corner of the globe. It was inspiring to meet such driven, accomplished young people and brainstorm with them ways we could create a more just and harmonious society through youth-led, grass-roots initiatives.

The Assembly gave me newfound hope that Peace is possible, and that religion can be a powerful engine driving us towards Peace. At the Assembly, I had the honor of being