



An Indian Zoroastrian, or Parsi, woman carries her child as she walks past figures of "knights," guardians of a fire temple, on the occasion of Navroze, the Parsi New Year, in Mumbai on Aug. 19, 2008.

PHOTO: AFP

## Racing against time to preserve India's Parsi past

High in the hills of western India, Homi Dhalla looks around the Bharot Caves complex, pointing out the cracked and crumbling stone in the roughly hewn rocks.

"If we wish to save these caves, the world community has to stand up and do something about it now before it's too late," he says, as the Web video fades to a still image of two Parsi priests worshipping in one of the stark gray vaults.

Time and neglect have left the ancient caves in a dangerous state of disrepair that now threatens them as a place of pilgrimage for India's fire-worshipping Parsi community.

In the 14th century, their ancestors fled to the caves with the sacred fire of their Zoroastrian religion to escape a Mughal invasion.

According to legend, the Iranshah — the first fire to be consecrated in India — stayed lit throughout the 12 long years they were there.

So far, 3,000 people have signed a petition on the www.zoroastrians.net portal — where Dhalla's video is shown — which will be sent to the Archaeological Survey of India, urging it to repair the protected caves.

"If we have 7,000 to 8,000 [signatories] I will be happy," Dhalla, the founder-president of the World Zarathushti Cultural Foundation, said in an interview at his home in Mumbai.

"There is an urgent need to conserve the caves for posterity without delay or else this sacred heritage will be lost forever."

Whether the caves near Sanjan, close to the state border of Maharashtra and Gujarat, survive or collapse further into the hillside is not just dependent on funding.

The project — and others like it — more than anything depends on people.

Zoroastrians, who follow the prophet Zarathustra and worship Ahura Mazda as the creator of the universe, fled persecution in ancient Iran and arrived in India in the 10th century.

*The population of India's most successful and celebrated minority group has been in steady decline, with numbers in the country down to just under 70,000, according to the last census*

BY PHIL HAZLEWOOD  
AFP, MUMBAI

They have risen to prominence over the centuries as industrialists, philanthropists, teachers, musicians, artists and writers in India and abroad.

Famous Parsis include the Tata family, which owns one of India's most successful business houses, the conductor Zubin Mehta and the late Queen singer Freddie Mercury.

But the population of India's most successful and celebrated minority has been in steady decline, with numbers down to just under 70,000 in India, according to the last census in 2001.

As the birth rate falls and Parsis marry outside the community or migrate, experts say they face a race against time to catalogue the distinctive religion and culture for future generations.

Kainaz Amaria has seen the decline firsthand, particularly in rural areas where once-thriving Parsi communities have died out and their homes and fire temples now lie abandoned.

The 32-year-old photojournalist, who comes from a family of Indian Parsi priests, arrived in Mumbai last year and has been documenting everything from wedding ceremonies to water rituals in the close-knit community.

"I like to focus on the customs and the cultures and the traditions that are typically Parsi," said Amaria, who is in India on the US government's Fulbright scholarship

program as part of her master's degree in visual communication.

Comparing her experience growing up on the US west coast and Parsi life in India, she said all it took was her parents to emigrate and one generation for some rituals to disappear.

"If they're not documented they'll fade away," she said. "This is my little way of giving something back to the community. I feel a very strong sense of responsibility."

The decline in Parsi numbers doesn't mean that nothing has been done to preserve tradition.

A Zoroastrian Information Center has been built at the coastal town of Udvada in Gujarat, where the Iranshah still burns at one of the most important Parsi fire temples in the world.

The UNESCO-backed Parzor project has saved damaged or decayed ancient manuscripts at the Meherjirana Library in nearby Navsari and transferred them onto microfilm.

It is also recording oral history and charting the lives of famous Parsis while scholars from around the world are taking an increased interest in the endangered Parsi-Gujarati dialect.

Dhalla has led archaeological digs in Sanjan, where the first Zoroastrians settled, and unearthed artifacts shedding light on their trading past.

His foundation's other areas of concern include recording and reviving religious chants and traditional Parsi songs, calligraphy and promoting the community's linguistic heritage.

Other work includes new breeding programs for vultures, which Parsis depended on to eat their dead on "Towers of Silence" before bird numbers plummeted to near extinction in India.

But the head of the Parzor project, Shernaz Cama, sounded pessimistic as she told of lost skills such as traditional Parsi embroidery.

"Whatever one is trying to do it's a race against time," she said. "This has been our biggest problem."

[ SOCIETY ]

## For World War II aviator, the sky's still no limit

*His life story has been a pure 'Boy's Own' adventure — but can Wing Commander Ken Wallis, 94-year-old former Royal Air Force flying ace, beat another speed record?*

BY PATRICK BARKHAM  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

"I'll do some slow passes for you," promises Wing Commander Ken Wallis, wheeling from his shed a contraption that looks rather like a bicycle with a propeller on top. In a shirt and tie and with his white hair rakishly slicked back, the 94-year-old hops on to a narrow seat below the rotor and straps an ineffectual-looking safety belt around his waist. "Stand back. I don't want anyone walking into the propeller and damaging it," he barks and his self-built autogyro, *Zeus III*, roars into ear-splitting life.

Hunched over the controls of this miniature magnificent flying machine, Wallis taxis past his fine Georgian house and into a field of buttercups, where man and machine are thrown into the sky as if plucked away by an invisible hand.

Whizzing demonically across the wide Norfolk sky in eastern England as free as the swifts darting above him, Wallis turns and hurtles low over his airfield. He throws a few "look no hands" poses, slipping both legs coquettishly over one side of his machine, gives a thumbs up and then regretfully brings *Zeus III* back down to earth. "I'm sorry, I probably flew over 110kph for a moment. I didn't notice the speed limit," he says impishly, hair still immaculate. Despite the absence of helmet and goggles, his eyes are not even watering.

If a screenwriter invented Wallis they would be told to come back with a more realistic character. Part Biggles, part Captain Flashheart and part Doc Brown, Wallis' life as an inventor and flying ace has seen his involvement in all kinds of historic moments from the 20th century — World War II, the hunt for Lord Lucan, the atom bomb, the Loch Ness monster, the Cold War and the invention of Concorde. He takes his autogyros to heaven and back as often as he drives his car, and last month celebrated the centenary of the first recorded flight of the "Wallbro monoplane," built and piloted by his father and uncle with a party at the aviation museum in Flixton, Suffolk. (Wallis regularly flies to the museum from his home.) After they witnessed the Wright brothers' first flight in France in 1908, the Wallis brothers hoped to win a US\$1,565 prize for the first all-British airplane. They missed out by a couple of months but still took to the skies in their innovative flying machine. Wallis inherited "the family vice": a love of speed. But he also wore an eye-patch over what he casually calls his "defective eye," in which he has very limited vision.

In 1936, this impairment led to his rejection by the RAF. Undeterred, Wallis customized and sold a "rather racy" Bentley car and spent the money training for his pilot's license. Tested again after war broke out in 1939, Wallis sneaked a look at the bottom line of letters on the test chart with his good eye when the doctor glanced down at his notes. He cheated, and passed. "I've been very lucky," he grins.

Hanging in the hall of his home are a mangled piece of metal and a parachute ripcord: "My Wellington that I left in a hurry in 1941," he explains. He had been dispatched on a bombing raid of Frankfurt but it was too foggy to see the military targets so the bombers were instructed to fly home. Returning with this extra weight, they ran short of fuel. Before his bomber crashed in Lincolnshire, Wallis and his five crew bailed out. They all survived, although three other Wellington crews perished that night. After surviving another wartime crash when his plane was struck by lightning, Wallis applied to fly Mosquito bombers at night. This was a big mistake. His night vision was tested and "all hell let loose — you've been flying with a bomber crew and you can't see properly!"

He was sent to the RAF's top medic. "He said, 'Wallis, I'd rather have a man with a bit of fire in his belly who wants to fly than some of the perfect specimens I get here who don't.'" And Wallis carried on. Seconded to America at the height of the Cold War, he flew B-36s laden with nuclear bombs over the North Pole. "That was a creepy business," he admits.

While in the States, he discovered designs for the autogyro and set about building his own. Unlike a helicopter, an autogyro's overhead rotor is unpowered, and air flowing through it causes it to rotate, which provides lift. Thrust is then supplied by the engine-powered propeller at the rear. In flight, autogyros are a bit like an ultra-mobile miniature helicopter, as James Bond demonstrated in *You Only Live Twice*. In one of the most memorable Bond scenes, Sean Connery unpacks *Little Nellie* from a couple of suitcases and fights baddies in orthodox helicopters, zipping around an active volcano in Japan. *Little Nellie* was also built by Wallis and named after him (during the war, anyone called Wallis or Wallace was nicknamed Nellie after the 1930s musical hall star Nellie Wallace) and the James Bond at the controls in the film is, of course, Wallis himself. He still has 19 working autogyros he built himself in his cavernous shed, jostling with a treasure trove of other inventions and bits and bobs salvaged from German jet engines. One autogyro that will take a passenger and another is so quiet that Concorde engineers visited him in the 1970s to discover his noise-reduction techniques.

During the 1970s, he worked for a radar company that pioneered a type of aerial photography that could detect where bodies were buried. Wallis was dispatched to hunt for Lord Lucan over the Sussex Downs, and to Devon to look for a missing mother and two children. He was also employed to scan Loch Ness for the monster. If he has a regret, it is that no company ever produced his autogyro for the mass market. "These are aircraft that can do useful jobs," he insists.

Wallis has crashed his autogyros a few times but he insists they are perfectly safe: "I feel rock-steady on them." Despite his scrapes, the only thing he has broken is numerous records. Wallis has flown an autogyro at 5,750m. He has piloted an autogyro the length of the British Isles. Now he wants to break his own 206.6kph world speed record for an autogyro, which he set aged 89. He is aiming for 224kph. The problem is red tape: The Civil Aviation Authority has ruled that certain types of autogyro mustn't exceed 110kph, and Wallis' machine must be flown by one of their test pilots first. He hoped to celebrate the centenary of his father's flight with a new record but feels defeated by these regulations. You sense nothing will stop Wallis, though: If the CAA won't change its mind, he hopes to take his machine abroad. "I might have another go, but it's such a business to lay on the official timekeepers. It's a bit easier when you're Richard Branson."

Whether he gets a new world record or not, it would take a hard heart to deny Wallis his freedom to fly. A widower, he lives alone with his magnificent machines but dines with his daughter, who lives nearby, every other night. Does he have anyone to whom he can pass on all his incredible engineering knowledge? "No, not really. It's a shame," he says, sounding sad for the first time. But the sharp eyes of Wing Commander Ken Wallis — one perfect and the other faulty — still do not water.