



Peer-Reviewed Journal

Longing, Loss and the Diminishing Parsee Community in Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow*

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Article Info

Received: 20 Mar 2026,

Received in revised form: 19 Apr 2026,

Accepted: 23 Apr 2026,

Available online: 27 Apr 2026

Keywords— Parsee, British, Bombay, English, Nostalgia, disability, Westernized

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Abstract

The novel, Trying to Grow (Kanga, 1990) is a microcosm of the Parsee community, its dilemmas and mixed feelings of living in India. They are too westernized for the common run of people around them and yet India is their home. By itself the novel doesn't pretend to have any revolutionary political views, but the Bombay shown in the novel has vanished and along with it the Parsee community which was thriving there has all but vanished. There is an air of the transience of that world in the novel. The Parsees were very much like the secular Indians of post-independence India. The Congress party under the leadership of Nehru, Gandhi, and later Indira gave daily sermons on unity in diversity. The essentially secular ethos which it embraced had a place for all religions be they Hindu, Muslim, Parsee or Christian. The world which has been banished by the emerging belligerent politics of current day India, where the ruling regime is proposing a majoritarian, pro-authority, where dissent is a sin not to be attempted, where even the neutral appellation of India must be replaced by the Sanskritic Bharat. This world view is narrow and parochial. The paper identifies with the nostalgia the book evokes, unknowingly in the children born in the 70's because they recognize the lost world of an inclusive, secular, less commercialized, more free and more forested, less peopled, greener, more Westernized India with no pollution.

It is said by Devdutt Pattanaik that Bharat is a reference to the tribes of Bharat of Aryavratt, a narrow reference to only certain tribes, but the neutral term India refers to the geographical location south of Indus, a more accurate description of Greek origin. (Pattanaik, n.d.) The current regime which has run out of ideas to debate and distract now has even mulled changing Delhi to Indraprastha, again in keeping with a greater emphasis on the Sanskritization of the

north and further marginalization of the non-Sanskrit, tribal and other schedule castes, Persian, Mughal, Christian, Parsee identities. Bombay of British India has been changed to Mumbai. But for the Parsee community of the 70's it will always remain Bombay just like Brit and Dolly's own official and nicknames, where the parents name the elder one Dolly and subsequently search for a Parsee name and come up with- Daulat Bano. They think of Darius for the younger one, but Dolly

settles on Brit for her younger brother, short for brittle bones. But it suits him to the Tee because he is highly British in his ways, down from his mannerisms to his love of western classical music and Enid Blyton, a favourite novelist of 60's and 70's kids.

With the coming of belligerent form of majoritarian politics would sit heavy on the Parsee world depicted in the novel. The Parsees are like honorary citizens of India, fled from Persia to escape conversion and sought refuge in Gujrat, were accepted by the Indian rajas, made it their home but never gave up their Zoroastrian religion and believed in endogamous marriage. The Parsees of the 20th century are quite British in their ways, influenced by the centuries of British rule. Their attitude to the British is quite different from the upper caste Hindu and Muslim animosity to the British we find in India; we find in them a more nuanced yearning for the pre-independence past. They certainly wouldn't have appreciated the current desire of the regime to eliminate English and impose Hindi in websites, banks, post offices, government forms, stations, universities, parliament. The colonial language is being kept simply because of resistance to Hindi in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. With this we also see the south becoming more tolerant and having a better standard of living than the north. The proposed delimitation exercise aims to destroy this seeming autonomy of the south.

The world depicted of the 70s is an exciting time, war with Pakistan, Sera is saving British Guineas, but they are no use post-independence. Sera is British loyalist who has images of the Queen and royal brood in her cabinets and mantlepiece. While the visit the Gateway of India, Sera reads the inscription on it, erected to commemorate the landing in of their imperial majesties King George V and the Queen Mary. Her husband mocks her fondness for British currency, and she shuts him saying that they ought to be loyal to the king as they took the boy scouts oath. And he loves to go around in suit, but his wife reminds him the British left 25 years ago, now it's his turn to remind her about loyalty to British ways.

Sam's father, Brit's grandfather, was almost like royalty himself, made a forest officer to his Highness the Maharajah of Mazab. He was handsome and distinguished but became an avid hunter and even killed 100 tigers for which he was cursed and right after his marriage to Cooverbai, the Diwan's daughter, he became the prey to a tiger. Karma caught up with him, believes Kanga. Before his death though he impregnated his wife and Brit's father Sam was born and as is often the case Sam was quite the opposite of his macho father. He was a mild tempered young man, who chose a practical profession like banking quite unlike his flamboyant father.

Cooverbai or Kuku, Brit's paternal grandmother was a rich lady wasted all her inheritance on romancing a Britisher around Europe and died poor but at least left the Kotwal family a flat in Kolabba. *Trying to Grow* is not your typical colonial novel about the loss of the days of the Raj but does embody an awareness that things are not so glamorous anymore. The impressive Imperial Bank has become the drab State bank. Historically the Central Bank was started by a Parsee, and it's main branch had an impressive colonial architecture.

Sera and Sam meet at a fire temple and then again at the Golwalla Baths where Sera goes to swim; their romance blossoms between chocolates and swimsuits. The westernized Parsee community fed on a diet of Hollywood fare, Sam openly admires Sera's 'Betty Grable' legs, and she his 'Gregory Peck' looks as the handsome couple is frequently called. Sam was also a very big perambulator, he loved his walks anytime he wanted a break from his family or works, like the westerners who love walking so does he, another fun hobby he has is an aeroplane (models) collection which gives him a hard one as Brit tells us, the frank sexuality is a welcome break from the stodgy morality one is accustomed to.

Scenes which are totally normal to the Indians are foreign to their French friend when she sees the crowds at the Gateway of India rushing towards her, she imagines a revolution just like the storming of the Bastille in 1789 but it is none other than the multitudes moving one side of Bombay to

the other after a day's work. His sister Daulat Bano or Dolly was a very mischievous, high IQ girl who loved to throw chewing gums on the people passing below her school verandah; she was also punished for putting erotic poetry between a text of the highly serious and sorrowful *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*. The erotic is ever present in the family set up of the Kotwal family. The frank sexuality is more a subject of banter and jokes than any real promiscuity. The children are quite fond of reading and Brit gets all his information from the Readers Digest which used to be a staple for Indian families. Jerro their aunt has a daughter Tina, whom she keeps away from sex and sexuality, Jerro is frigid and hates all men and in a funny incident of her teenage years she imagined that her brother had impregnated her, when he had only laid a hand on her stomach in his sleep. What follows is a funny episode where we learn that Parsee women too had strict dos and don'ts about sex and marriage and most of them were sexually innocent as they went to Covent schools run by British nuns. (The missionaries in India were the first to make education accessible to the masses.)

Like most societies, of the time, virginity was a prerequisite before marriage. Both Sera and Jerro were virgins, and Jerro gifted a book on the facts of life to Sera for her wedding. Parsees in India battle low birth rates and have disabled children because of strict endogamous practices. Unfortunately, Firdaus had no siblings even though Brit has a sister in the novel.

Jerro is even glad her husband died after 2 years as she couldn't stand sleeping with him, Dolly's attitude is the complete opposite and calls out her aunt Jerro's frigidity in a lighthearted manner and tells her aunt she can hardly wait for her time.

Brit is dying to see adult English movies, but his father showed him a Hindi one for kids with Raj Kapoor which he has no taste for. And since Raj Kapoor did copy Charlie Chaplin's act without acknowledgement it does make sense to see the original, he feels, but the real reason is that Brit wants to catch a few adult scenes in the English movies. Every now and then we remember Brit's painful disability as he describes his battles with broken bones and pain vividly. Brit hardly

indulges in any self-pity at all. And he faces all the heartbreaks and deaths in his life with the same courage and equanimity. That's what makes the novel so remarkable. Despite going through pain, loss of family members, loss of lovers, Brit has sunshiny smile, blue tearless eyes and translucent smiley teeth. One more loss he never confronts openly is the loss of his dear city Bombay and his departure to England, which is out of the scope of the novel, but very much prevalent in the readers' mind who miss the westernized cosmopolitan city of the 70s.

Madame Manekshaw, comes as Brits tutor was an Indira Gandhi look alike, through Brit we get to know the aura of Indira Gandhi, Indira Gandhi was loved and admired. Adulating crowds followed her wherever she went. She looked like a Parsee, so Madame Manekshaw a rich Parsee lady who agrees to be Brit's tutor models herself on Indira Gandhi and even streaks her hair gray at the centre, she imitates the cotton saree with the pallu over the head like Indira Gandhi when she went to the rural interiors of India. Madame Manekshaw is a philanthropist in her own right, and the natives love and cheer her on when she goes to villages for her philanthropic activities. And it's no coincidence that Parsee General Sam Manekshaw played an important role in Indira Gandhi's legacy, he being the chief of army staff when Bangladesh was formed and under his leadership the war was fought and won. It can be mentioned that the fictional Madame Manekshaw bears no relation to the historical Parsee general Sam Manekshaw or Sam Bahadur as he was so fondly called (Singh, 2002). Neither one mustn't forget the role of the Jewish Lt general Jack Farj Rafael Jacob, Jack Jacob, who is best known for his skilled negotiation which led to the surrender of 93000 Pakistani troops. (Jacob, 1997). Two religions which sought refuge in India, were given a home, they contributed immensely to modern India and their 2 sons Gen Jacob and Gen Sam Manekshaw led us to victory against Pakistan, a piece of history worth remembering. There is mention of the 71 war aplenty in the novel, how the jets would fly in the sky, and Sera would hoard supplies, because

of her scarcity mindset, fond memories of his mother which Brit cherishes.

Madame Manekshaw promises to train Brit for his entrance exam to the privileged Champion school. Champion school in Bombay is named after a 16th century Jesuit is run by the strict Jesuits and run by foreigners of Spanish and Irish descent. Sera Kotwal chooses the best school for her disabled son Brit paving the way for him to become an accomplished writer, Brit is asked about his Enid Blyton tales from Toyland, a favourite of educated children before the days of cell phone addiction. Madame Manekshaw expresses some reservations about it being an all-boys school and would incline Brit to homosexuality an objection Sera rightfully ignores. Here we slide into the nature, nurture debate around homosexuality, while the leftists believe that gender is a construct, debates which have been won by gender critics like Judith Butler who are on the non-scientific non theoretical side of the argument believing that gender is a construct ,she argues that gender and by extension sexual orientation is not an innate essence but is socially constructed through repeated performative acts, effectively prioritizing culture and social processes over biological determinism in the formation of gender identity (Butler Judith, 1990) .Butler influenced many queer critics into adopting this non-essentialist stand. An argument they are losing badly as transgenders with gender confusion are shooting down schoolmates and parents after being pumped with hormones and puberty blockers. And it has become acceptable to challenge the theoreticians who believe that reality is not real, gender is not real and there are more than 2 genders. A stance disproved by science many times.

Madame Manekshaw laughs at Seras love of missionary schools run by foreigners but is shut up by Sera who thinks Manekshaw is pretending to be British herself, and we learn that Sindhis and Gujaratis all go to Christian schools after paying donations, even though they hardly become secular or tolerant in their outlook .Father Ferra takes Brit in because he is a cripple, showcasing his Christian, religious beliefs in the process, not to forget Brits love for reading which impresses

him too. During his school life he is given awards at many functions, partly because he's handicapped, which embarrasses him a lot.

Here we find Brit just wants to be treated like an ordinary child not in any special way, an appeal which all handicapped people make to the insensitive abled people who surround them.

Brit talks about his travails getting things on his own, especially those which were kept at a higher level. His parents never make the house disabled friendly because they love to fag for him and many a time he blackmails Dolly to run chores for him even when she is tired, especially this one time he feels he must see the Siberian migratory birds and needs Dolly to get his binoculars. Brit blackmails her that he would reveal her crush to all and sundry and Dolly gives him the binoculars, out of fear of Brit revealing all her girly secrets.

The tragedy of Mrs. Manekshaw and her husband is rather bizarre when read, but if one knows India well enough one knows how badly the Indians drive and how cruel the roads are even for the well off like the Manekshaws.

The Parsees who fled Persia when Islam conquered their Persian lands, rather than convert they choose to flee and found themselves in India, where they were accepted by the Gujaratis, Sindhis, and Maharashtrians. The Parsee held on to their unique identity and even refused to mingle with the locals, following strict endogamic laws. This practice along with cousin marriage resulted in quite a few birth defects. Fortunately, Parsees have now started marriage outside their community as well, even though there is fear that this may result in diluting their religious and cultural identity. Cousin marriage was especially widespread in middle east communities to keep wealth, and culture confined within the tribes.

The Kotwal family living in cosmopolitan atmosphere of the 70s in post British Bombay, do not feel at all out of place. There is no feeling that this is not home, but with the rise of Hindu nationalism and the decline of a secular India, this would not be the case forever. Though politics and the future of India are taboo topics we do see clearly that the country the cosmopolitan Kotwals

hold dear no longer exists. Brit Kotwal is an amazing piano player too, though because of his disability he cannot press the piano pedals. The Parsees excelled in the local / Bombay philharmonic orchestra. The philharmonic orchestras of the time kept the legacy of western classical music alive in India.

The process of changing names given by the British was initiated by the Congress, such as the breaking of statues from Queen Victoria's to Mahatma Gandhi's post Independent India, but the Congress being led by broad minded secular leaders did not erase the names of the British to the extent, the subsequent Hindu Nationalist governments did. They show an ideological and religious hate to Christian missionaries, ignoring the years of good done for the upliftment of the masses done by these missionaries. Rajiv Gandhi, himself had a Parsee father, married an Italian Catholic was broadminded and pro Christian, not so the current regime. Current regime is razing historical monuments built by the British and changing Mughal names with a vengeance unheard of till the turn of the millennium. Most recently, the bust of the architect of New Delhi, Lutyen was removed quite recently, though the all the minsters and their cronies still reside in spacious British Bungalows.

The Parsee identity of his cousin Tina makes her vulnerable to her falling victim to a trafficking gang. Tina is literally dumb, unable to speak at all. She falls in love with Rohit Gupta, they share one long shouldering kiss; Brit's eyes almost pop out witnessing it. But her naïveté and disability make her vulnerable to be sold in the brothel, Rohit Gupta who speaks English with a Hindi accent is responsible for her fate, it is he who takes advantage of her muted disability and sell her off. By making the only prominent Hindu character a sex trafficker, Firdaus Kanga shows his suspicion of the people around him. The urchins of Bombay form a backdrop to his date with Amy. They stare at this unlikely couple, a crippled man with a gorgeous, young Parsee woman. Their remarks range from utter disbelief to blaming Brit's past life Karma to his disability.

The Parsees and Indians are not very different from each other when it comes to believing in healers, miracle men, shamans to cure Brit of his disability. Most of the time they discover they have been conned. Ruddy Regina, the breathing generator, convinces Sera that she has the electric currents in her veins which will cure Brit. Dolly and Defarge call her a dead current. Wagh Baba, another miracle man whom Sam takes Brit to, has many gullible supporters and turns out to be crazed sex addict who fondles his female patients' breasts. The miracle men in Brit's life are unable to affect any miracle for Brit. Sam, his father gives Brit powdered pearls to eat. Brit's teeth are one of the most striking things in his appearance; they are translucent, a symptom of his disability (osteogenesis imperfecta) as are his blue eyes.

Dolly, Brit's tall, pretty sister doesn't want to get married so she can look after Brit. She rejects a big brawned Parsee, Dinsu Dinshaw mostly because he's not her intellectual equal and because she did not want to leave the disabled Brit alone in life. The children discuss Zoroastrian funeral practices openly, not appreciating the Hindu burning of ashes or the Christian chewed by worms but prefer to be eaten by vultures. Sadly even vultures have not been spared, poisoned by farmers using diclofenac which has been banned thankfully. The dark humour on vultures eating carcasses is quite typical of the novel. The rice ladies of Gujrat bewitch the Parsee ladies with their Indian trick and rob them of hundreds of rupees and leave them with no rice to boot. Defarge calls them Mandrake the magician, the prototype for tricksters. There are numerous references to bygone books and comic strips, which are part of the novel's charm. Brit imagines his drawing in his first cigarette as if he were sucking Raquel Welch's nipple is sensual. Cyrus, his new friend tells him those people who want Kraft cheese, primrose sausages, imported liqueur chocolates, caviare and champagne wants to move as far from anything Indian as possible have got it wrong, it's much more enjoyable to walk down a peaceful, moonlit street with a dear friend. Cyrus is as sophisticated as his friend, Brit and Brit naturally has a crush on him. Cyrus for whom Music is a

passion and is violin maestro but gives up his music to study law out of some silly sense of duty, of taking the difficult path and not the easy one. Brit too is a talented pianist, but his feet cannot touch the pedals. Brit is torn between Cyrus, Amy and Ruby. He says he's gay, but women fascinate him as does Cyrus. Bombay is the preferred destination for Cyrus who loves Bandra and the sea waves, the Gateway of India to Delhi with its dirty stream, the Yamuna. It's the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Bombay the Parsees love to the Hindi /Urdu culture of Delhi; the Anglo Indians and Parsees were also quite active in the film industry of the day.

Brit makes a new friend Jerry whose mother Rati Davierwalla says her husband was from Palestine. Brit is shocked and walks as if on eggshells while conversing with her so as not to offend her, when she says she had to return to her husband's place after her marriage. Brit tries to get more information on Israel, but in keeping the controversial nature of the war in mind, he even refuses to name Israel and names the cities of Haifa, Jerusalem and Nabulus instead. Rati is thoroughly confused and now it comes to pass that she meant her husband was a good man but an uncultured Philistine not Palestine. This incident is mentioned not just for the laughs it evinces but because the references to West Asian conflicts are still relevant as a battle rages on in west Asia. It was the Islamist regime of Iran which gave logistical support to the 7th October attacks which started an endless cycle of war with the fastest of bombers and retaliation going on from the Israel and American side, India found itself close to the deadly waters almost losing its neutrality when an American ship torpedoed an Iranian frigate, the first it has done so after the second world war, about 80 Iranian sailors lost their lives. About 30 were saved by the Sri Lankan navy after the frigate sent out distress signals. They had come for a naval exercise in Kochi or the Ernakulam harbour, invited by the Indian navy. 2 more Indian ships have been targetted in the meantime. Neutrality though a geographical and financial necessity must not become an excuse for moral shortcomings, when India fails to condemn the

Iranian regime for causing the executions of so many youngsters for protests and conversion to other religions such as Zoroastrianism, Bhai, or Christianity. The matter becomes highly relevant when we realize the Parsees fled Persia in the seventh century to escape the sword of Islam, which compelled them to convert.

Dolly, now an air hostess who has touched 30, convinces her family of her desire to marry the broadminded Salim who lives in New York, she falls in love with a Muslim much to the consternation of Sera who cannot forgive Muslims for what they did to the Zoroastrian faith and how the Islamists literally purged Persia of its original religion, persecuted the Zoroastrians till they fled their land and sought refuge in strange lands. The Parsees did not forget their great emperors like Cyrus and Darius of the Achaemenid empires and still name their children after these two great kings. Fortunately for Sera and Sam they did not live to see the Islamic leftist revolution of 1978, when the Bhai's too fled Iran after mass executions, it would have broken their hearts to see their land and people oppressed again by the Ayatollahs (in the 70s right up till the present). And the Islamic Revolution is not mentioned in the novel.

Like his fictional sister, Firdaus Kanga too migrated to England in search of a more comfortable life. Most of the Parsee population has migrated in search of a better life to western countries, not because of persecution in India but for desire for amenities not available in India and a good decision too, as the landscape in India has become non-secular and had Brit stayed on, he too would start feeling like a non-citizen in India. Although the reasons are not given, it's not hard to guess that with a blatant and in your face resurgence of Hindu identity, the Parsees and Anglo Indians thought it better to migrate, feeling more at home in the west. What with all the slow tightening of the noose around freedom's neck, the income inequality of India becoming worse than it was under the British, with 1 percent owning 40 percent of wealth (Bharti, 2024) and again by the Economic Times (Reuters, 2024) . One can only remember Winston Churchill's opposition to Indian Independence and his distrust of Indians

whom he considered scamsters. (Churchill Winston, n.d.). Brit's family is mulcted quite often by con artists like the magical Gujrati rice sisters, and not to mention many Babas who promise a miracle cure for Brit; Sam even feeds Brit expensive powdered pearls to cure his disability. Cheating is not limited to Babas, Rohit Gupta, supposedly passionate lover of Tina, carries out the ultimate betrayal of selling the mute girl to a brothel, from where Tina disappears to the interiors. A stark reminder how dangerous places like India and Bangladesh are for the disabled. One is reminded of beggar gangs who kidnap abled bodied children and cut off their limbs to make them beggars in these countries.

Sadly, the condition of the UK where Kanga migrated is not too good either just like where Dolly has migrated, New York. New York's Muslim mayor Mamdani is now under criticism for his wife's condoning of the 7th of Oct 2023 attack on the Jews. Mamdani has made the current day New York into an Islamic stronghold, (Mek Amy, 2025) and it is said that his wife appreciated sick photographs of brutality inflicted on the Jews. England is in a worse condition than America, here underage girls have been raped by Pakistani gangs on an industrial scale, well documented and explained in Wikipedia in towns like Rochdale, Rotherham, Telford, Huddersfield, Oxford etc (Wikipedia, n.d.) and those following the same ideology, Islamists who persecuted the Parsees and caused them to flee their homeland Persia in the seventh century onward have now migrated to the west and imposed their strict ideas of religion and Islam on the west. The west is suffering from low population growth, a result of greater focus on individualism, and focus on career growth. It is said that Europe has literally given up its power and weapons to the migrants from West Asia and Africa for fear of being called racists. Migrants arrive daily in dinghies is a fact documented in the house of commons library, (Esme Kirk-Wade, 2026) and it is feared that it is only a matter of time when the Islamists will gain leadership positions in Europe and America, helped by 'feminists' who welcomed them in the first place.

CONCLUSION

Getting back to the novel a sense of loss pervades the novel, the original deprivation of leaving Persia is never forgotten, it encompasses the loss of Bombay and to the erosion of the cosmopolitan India he loved to a more narrowminded claustrophobic one evident from the removal of the hymn Amazing Grace loved by Mahatma Gandhi which was played for many years at the beating of the retreat but is now expunged. This is never mentioned in the novel but its as if the author had anticipated it and emigrated. What is mentioned but never dwelt on for long is his unspoken sorrow of losing of his friend Cyrus to Delhi, his parents who die one by one, his sister Dolly who emigrates to New York and his friends Ruby, his cousin Tina to prostitution is never forgotten and fortunately Amy remains to "push, push, push" his wheelchair, he resents her and keeps her at arm's length but she's there for him. Amy and Brit accept their deep infatuation with Cyrus led them to each other, it's time and again mentioned that Brit sees a remarkable resemblance in the features of Amy and Cyrus. And now Cyrus has left them to go to Delhi to be a lawyer much like Soli Sorabjee, and Fali Sam Nariman the last notable Parsees whose passing coincides with the passing of the secular lawyers of the Indian Supreme Court. Both wished to live and die in a secular India. And certainly, it would be a great loss for the nation if all the Parsees, Jews, and Anglo-Indians were to migrate abroad because the Westernized India they knew no longer existed. Another point worth noting is the recent heavy-handed attempt being made to expunge English from all official and government communication, be they government websites for job applications or tenders etc., along with the Hindi imposition which is happening in higher education. This would never have gone down well with the secular, non-religious, pro-British Parsees. All these shortcomings of post-Congress India Brit never experiences as the tale is set in the 70's and 80's but we as readers do see the irony of it all and appreciate the bygone Congress era. Yet the tale is cheery one where Brit doesn't dwell on

negativity and sorrow for long. He appreciates daily life overcoming his disabilities in numerous little ways, witty as ever ragging/ trolling his friends and lovers and keeping darker forces of pessimism at bay.

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