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Protest in peace

When artist Peter Schipperheyn named his nude sculpture 'Zarathustra', the Parsi-Zoroastrian community staged a protest — but only through emails

Manoj R Nair

In the last few weeks, two issues generated a lot of interest and debate in the Parsi-Zoroastrian community. One development reported by the World Press was the exuberant way in which Iranians celebrated Nowruz this year.

Parsi-Zoroastrians, who are part of an on-line community mailing list, received e-mailed photographs of Iranians celebrating a long discouraged festival that has its moorings in Persian culture that pre-dates Islam. In New York, Muslim Iranians joined Zoroastrians in celebrating a common cultural heritage by driving colourful tableaux through the city's streets.

The other issue concerned a sculpture inaugurated a few days back in Sydney, Australia, which had angered the small community. The four-metre bronze sculpture of a nude bearded man by Melbourne-based artist, Peter Schipperheyn, carried the name 'Zarathustra'.

Though Schipperheyn has clarified that his sculpture is not a depiction of the prophet of the Zoroastrian religion and that the name was inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's 19th century book Thus Spake Zarathustra, the issue touched a raw nerve in the worldwide Parsi-Zoroastrian diaspora.

However, a few days before the sculpture was inaugurated, the McClelland Gallery and Sculpture Park where the art was to be installed, asked the artist to erase the name of the prophet from the exhibit. The artist relented and the issue received a quiet burial.

The interesting thing to be noted here is that there were no angry threats to the artist. There were no rewards for the scalp of a man who used the name of the prophet in a nude sculpture.

What settled the issue was a worldwide e-mail campaign where hundreds of Zoroastrians wrote to the artist and the art gallery to persuade them to change the name of the sculpture so as not to hurt their religious feelings.

One person belonging to a group called 'Distressed Zarthushtis', wrote to the sculptor: "I came across an article on the website about you sculpting a large bronze statue of Zarathushtra in his naked form and I along with other Zarthushtis are most appalled and upset to say the least that an artist like you should steep so low as to blaspheme our Prophet and our religion.

"However, we Zarthushtis pray that God grant you some good sense in realising what wrong you have done and that you take measures to unveil the naked statue without Zarthushtis's name on it," the mail concluded.

There were a few angry letters to the artist. One of the e-mails went: "Surely, you might say that an artist can take liberty to sculpt what he fancies, but that does not give you, or anyone for that matter, the right to blaspheme a religion and hurt people's sentiments. A true artist is supposed to be sensitive with good aesthetic sense. What you did was not only an insult to the Zarthushti religion/community, but brought disgrace to your field and fellowmen."

However, most letters were moderate. One writer Arzan Wadia said: "This is a piece of art and it has to be seen in that context. Trying to waste our energies in fighting battles that do not exist is foolish."

Another community member, A Nariman, wrote to the sculptor from Sydney: "In the name of decency and respect, Peter, please cover up the offensive parts of the sculpture, (and) rename it."

Before he withdrew the name of the sculpture, the artist wrote back to the community: "At the time, I did not know who Zarathustra was. I wondered why Nietzsche called the protagonist of his book Zarathustra, this led me to research who Zarathustra was. And when I began to understand a little of the power of his ideas and from reading the research of scholars in these areas, it is plain to see the influence of his legacy — Judaism, Christianity and Islam."

Thus, the issue was resolved. What an example for the rest of the world!

*** Manoj R Nair writes on the multiple communities in Mumbai**

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The sculptor with his four-metre bronze work that generated controversy

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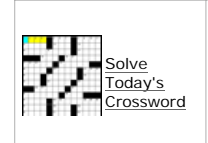
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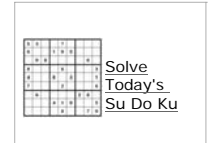
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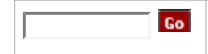
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This is with reference to the article 'Creating a talent zone' (April 3, 2006). As compared to [More](#)



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