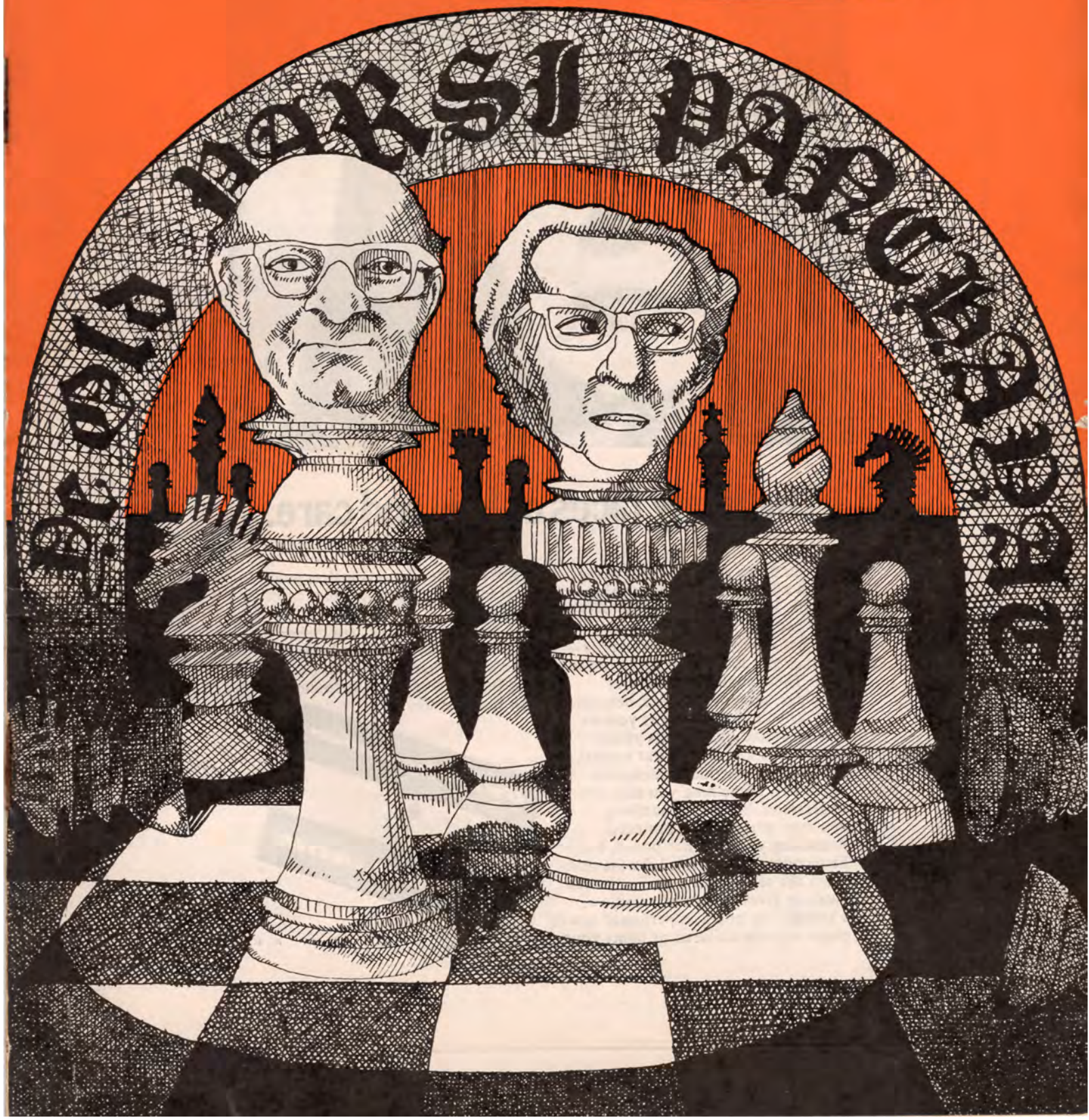


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AI. 6128A

Parsiāna

February–March 1974

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editor's column

Greetings readers. It is the year of the Panther 1353—a year of war. Your Editor ushered it in with members of the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjuman, one of the few associations whose functions he can attend without fear of being lynched. There was an air of conviviality about the Fasali Atash-Kadeh as members congregated for the annual affair. Dinshaw Irani, vice-president of the Anjuman, told those gathered they were free to ask any questions regarding the annual report and that no information would be withheld. And Major Aderbad Irani, president of the Anjuman, chatted freely with members, patiently and courteously answering their questions regarding trust property. Perhaps our Parsi trusts could follow their example.

Our cover story this month is incomplete but the fault is not ours. Both the principal characters involved, Ms Nelie Noble and Boman Kavasji Boman-Behram refused us interviews. We wrote to both congratulating them on their election victories and requested their views on the

community and the elections. Boman-Behram replied that he "regret(ted) that it will not be possible for me to give an interview as the matter is *sub-judice* and the election petition filed by some of the members of the Anjuman Pax is still pending in Court. The Trustees of the Parsi Panchayat including myself are parties to the petition." A phone call made on behalf of Ms Noble expressed the same sentiments. Now while it is clear they cannot express their views on the election, surely there is no need to be silent on the community. After receiving such an overwhelming mandate, even though the percentage of voters who turned up was small, the community is entitled to know what their plans are. If the case drags on in court, as cases do, will their reticence continue even if it is counter to the best interests of the community? As for the arrangements on the election day, that much maligned, over-worked, underpaid bureaucracy, the Parsi Panchayat, must be given credit for the systematic manner in which the voting was conducted, that prevented long queues and bottlenecks.

The article on the Bangalore Parsis in this issue brings to mind the relationship between Capt. Khurshid Lalkaka and my grandfather, Nusserwanji Dinshaw. Lalkaka used to smoke cigars, favour burial and had converted to Christianity for a time. Whether it was my grandfather's mediating influence that brought him back to the fold, we'll never know as both men are long gone, one to the cemetery, the other to the *dokhma*. My grandfather was an ardent orthodox who kept his head covered at all times except when bathing (he never greeted us if our heads were bare). But the two of them were the greatest of friends. So much so that my grandfather would gift cigars to Lalkaka, who would then faithfully smoke them in his presence, occasionally directing whiffs of smoke in my grandfather's vicinity.

There is something about the old orthodox, a certain tolerance, the ability to laugh, to overlook faults, to fight for a principle without wanting to destroy those who oppose it, that commands our admiration. Perhaps it is the differences with their children over the years that mellows them. Perhaps they better understand human limitations and the futility of trying to shape people to fit any mold.

As the controversy over the disposal of the dead seems to occupy ninety-five per cent of our energy, the remaining five per cent being utilized to rush for food at weddings and *navjotes*, *Parsiana* now offers a bold and novel solution. We hit upon the

solution one morning in the office when someone accidentally stepped on an ant. The question arose as to how to dispose of the body. Someone suggested we feed it to the cockroaches. But then a non-Parsi member of the staff objected and demanded that the carcass be burned. As emotions mounted, someone suggested burial but I pointed out for this we required municipal permission. By late afternoon no solution had been arrived at. Office work was piling. Everyone was irritable. Staff members threatened a *gherao*. The management considered an indefinite lockout. And then the hand of fate came in. The floors were being swept and the ant's corpse was brushed onto a dust pan and dumped into the wastebasket.

To avoid such a recurrence, we worked night and day on a solution for the disposal of the dead. I was opposed to the *dokhmas* for fear my decrepit body would give any vulture indigestion. Cremation was ruled out on account of the acute fuel crisis. As far as burial in land or sea, the argument was we had polluted the good earth enough in our lifetime and so should spare it in death. The logical and obvious alternative therefore is—*pyramids*. Hygienic, ancient, providing employment for thousands, the plan may prove so successful that the Indian government may consider exporting it. Actually, a deep study of our ancient texts, including the last few issues of *Parsiana* would show that the first pyramid ever constructed was built by a Parsi: Jehangir Pyramidwalla. Those wishing to follow the Parsiana Pyramid Plan are advised to start storing up on stones from now.

Parsis often lament the dearth of literature available on the community. Most books are out of print and available only at exorbitant prices. By and large Parsis deserve the fix they are in. As Godrej Dotivala, author of the series on Parsi Pioneers notes, "Parsis have no sense of history." Dotivala, who has been collecting information for the last twenty years on the pioneering aspects of Parsis for a book entitled *Parsi Pioneers*, says he found some of his most valuable material,

Photo : Farokh Reporter



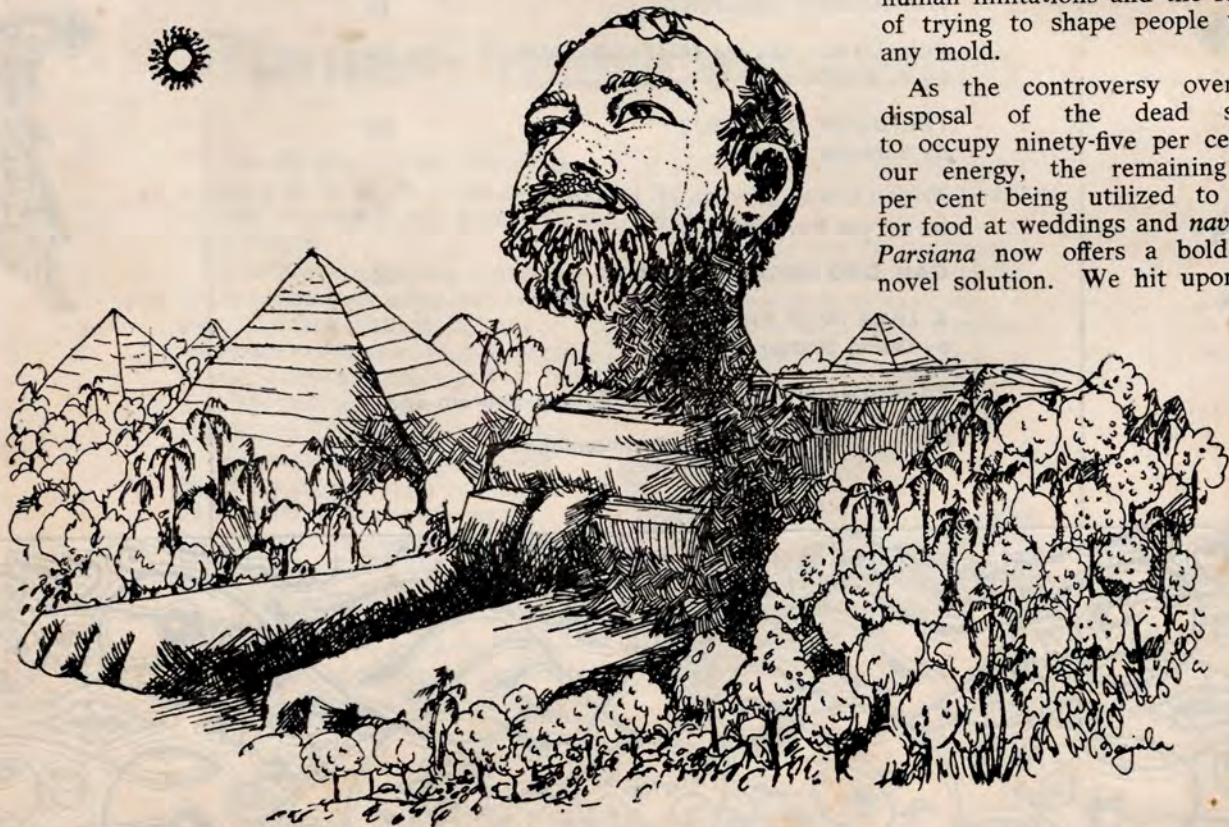
Dotivala: 'No sense of history.'

original letters written by men like Dadabhoy Naoroji and Sir Pherozeshah Mehta, in the garbage lot of his building! They had been dumped by a neighbour and would have landed up, in the normal course of events, at the municipal dumping grounds except that a few stray letters buffeted by the wind caught Dotivala's attention. He salvaged those but

the ones consigned to the dump on the days before are lost forever.

Even now when Dotivala seeks information from people, he finds "by and large people don't bother. They think they are doing you a favour by giving you information or an interview. But there are those who have been very helpful and courteous. People have even written in from America."

In the past, authors who devoted their lives to chronicling the events and personalities of the community seldom received their full due. H. D. Darukhanawala who spent the latter part of his life on his monumental two volume series *Parsi Lustre on Indian Soil* today languishes a poverty-stricken destitute in a Navsari home for the elderly. The one-time sportsman and author of *Parsis and Sports*, he owes much of his present subsistence to the young people he coached in roller-skating, often buying skates out of his own money for those who could not afford them. In his later years he broke both his



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Date : March 1, 1974. Sd- (JEHANGIR R. PATEL)

legs and now moves about with the help of a stick.

"He was too good-hearted. He left his job, everything. He became a pauper, basically on account of these two books," says Dotivala, who has no intention of following in his predecessor's footsteps. He is the manager of the Bombay Branch of Paper Products Ltd. "I've been writing the book as a hobby."

Dotivala's purpose in bringing out *Parsi Pioneers* is to acquaint the young people with the past of the community. "There is a tendency amongst us to magnify all our weak points. The good points are never brought out." To this end Dotivala requests people to send him information (904-B Surya Apartments, 53 B. Desai Rd., Bombay 400-026) on details of the pioneering achievements of Parsis, past and present. The nucleus of the book will be around 12 to 14 articles on Parsis of national standing; the latter part will feature 400 to 500 Parsis, who were 'firsts' in various walks of life such as Dr. Rustom Jal Vakil (Medicine), Sohrab Modi (films), Dolly Nazir (swimming), Shapoorji Pallonji (construction), Dara Khurody (dairy), Jal Pardiwalla (athletics) and countless others.

"The information I have collected will carry me over for another two or three months and then we'll go in for publishing,"

says Dotivala.

In out-of-station news, the Delhi Parsi Anjuman's Vice-President Zal Nowsherwanji has written in to say two additional rooms are being constructed in the Dharamsala. At present there are 18 rooms, of which two are used as Priests' Quarters. Nowsherwanji writes "The Dharamsala caters to the needs of Parsis from outstations at very moderate boarding and lodging charges. Visitors and tourists coming to Delhi and, more important, the young people who come to Delhi for employment and business, stay in the Dharamsala until they make their own arrangements, which takes about four to six months' time.

"The need for adding more rooms in the Dharamsala is felt strongly because the occupancy, particularly during seasons, is full and sometimes the passengers are denied admission for want of vacancy.

"In all, four more rooms can be added to the present Dharamsala. Realizing the pressing need, the Delhi Parsi Anjuman has committed Rs. 45,000 to add two rooms.

"Even this is not enough to meet the demand for reservations at the Dharamsala, and, therefore, the trustees of the Delhi Parsi Anjuman appeal to the Parsi community to give us a helping hand, by donating generously for this

worthy and laudable cause. Donations in cash, drafts or cheques, may be sent to the Honorary Treasurer, Delhi Parsi Anjuman, Bahadurshah Zafar Marg, Delhi Gate, New Delhi-1, who will gratefully acknowledge the same. The donations of Rs. 1,000 and above will be commemorated by inscribing the names of the donors on the marble tablet in the Dharamsala."

And in Nasik, the Boys' Town Public School is keen on enrolling more Parsi students for the next term. The school has its hands full "but we always try and accommodate boys from the community," says Keki P. Mehta whose father, the late Pirojsha N. Mehta, founded the school. Mehta, who is the managing trustee, notes financial aid is given mostly on the basis of need, as well as on merit. The monthly fee is Rs. 230 but most of the 100 Parsi students receive aid in one form or the other. The total number of boarders is 310 with 156 day students. The 27 year old school, which is situated on 21 acres of land, offers the standard academic courses from pre-primary to the S.S.C. as well as subjects such as radio technology, woodwork, typewriting and agriculture. An acre of land is set by for farming, notes Mehta. Religious instruction is given in various faiths. The students recite not only their own prayers but those of other religions as well. Those wishing information on the school may write to the Principal, Boys' Town Public School, Nasik 422002.

Recently Iran Air commemorated its twelfth year of service as a national airline with a week of festivities at the Taj Rendezvous. Parsiana staff members attended the function of the airline whose emblem is the mythical Homa bird with the long horse-like ears and mane. Manjula Padmanabhan reports on the evening:

The menu card sported the photograph of an Iranian miniature painted on ivory. From behind the scalloped curtain over the dance floor came an odd assortment of loud percussive sounds and the sudden sharp trills of an electric organ. Seated with us was an exotic looking raven-haired girl, distinctly Eastern

AN APPEAL

This is an earnest appeal to the educated and erudite but misguided members of our community who indulge in needless controversies and dissipate their energies in futile hair splittings over such trivia as the merits and demerits of *Dokhme-Nashini*, Crematoria and burial grounds, to stop worrying over the trivial issue of the dead compared to the more crucial questions facing the existence of the community like housing, education, medical care, cheap legal aid, marriages outside the community and most important of all, gaining employment for all employable Parsis. These critics should direct their energies to one or other of the above constructive programmes, for which they may be qualified. They are as free as a lark to decide on the mode of disposal of THEIR OWN dead bodies for, *apres moi, le deluge*.

Will the critics display this elementary discretion by picking out first things first, and work for the living Parsis rather than the dead, who are gone in any case, each mode of disposal of whom other than *Dokhme-Nashini*, our elders have found to be inconsistent with the tenets of our dear religion.

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Ms Tavoos: cube sugar

despite her backless blouse and perilously high heels. Ms Tavoos was the dancer who had performed for the first two days of the 'Week' and was part of the twenty-five-member troupe which Iran Air had flown in for the function. "They spend the whole day shopping here," remarked Mr. E. Khatchikian, Iran Air Manager for India. "One girl bought eighteen sarees today and tomorrow she wants to buy some more!"

Dinner was an unusual blend of French and Iranian cuisine, with a main dish of *Shirin-e-Pulao*, which translates literally as "sweet rice" with a chicken curry lavishly flavoured with cloves,

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cinnamon and angelica—while the entrees consisted of typically French *paté*, stuffed tomato, and crêpes violettes for dessert. The music, which had started by this time, proved to be an unusual repertoire of broadly contemporary music ranging from *Quando Quando* to strident jazz rock numbers which have not yet graced the sub-continent. The Iranian band members sang in English though they did not know the language. Dominating the lime-light, however, was Ms Ramesh, who came on in the second half of the programme. Tall, dressed in clinging white and entirely at ease on stage, she sang a medley of Iranian tunes. The performance ended on an appropriate note with a great deal of applause and several piercing wolf-whistles from Ms Tavoos.

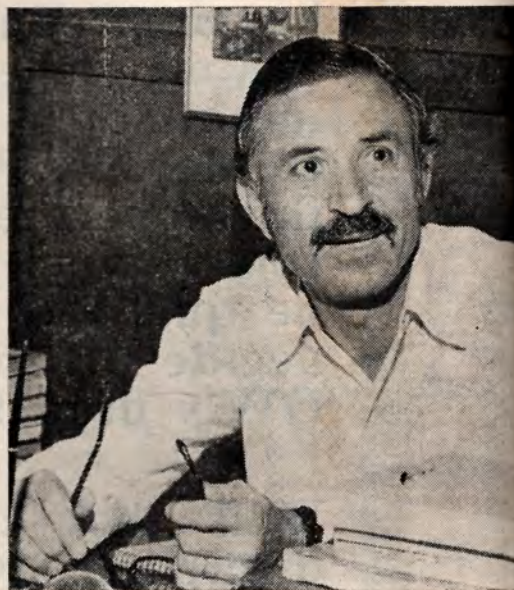
Khatchikian, who has been in Bombay one and a half years now, along with his wife and three children, notes that the interest Iranians have had in India, so far as settling is concerned, has spanned over 1,200 years. "There are four kinds of Iranians settled in Bombay. First the Parsis; then those who came around 300 years ago; then those who came around 30 years ago as business men and now recently students who come to India to study." One of the factors he feels, that deters a greater influx is the language. Most Iranians speak only Pharsee and learn English as a second language in school. Ms Tavoos supplied an example of some of the difficulties that arise: "She was in the restaurant," translated Mr. Khatchikian, "and wanted a cup of coffee. But she likes to have cube sugar with her coffee and the waiter, he couldn't understand what she wanted." So she had to resort to making noisy crunching gestures to make herself understood.

In other Iranian news, Dr. Sayed Mehdi Gharavi, director of The Iran Culture House bids adieu to India after an almost six-year stay. Aside from his consular duties, Gharavi undertook an exhaustive study on India's contribution to Iranology, which he submitted to the Bombay University as a doctoral thesis. Researched under the guidance of Dr. B. M. Gai, the paper will,

when approved, earn Gharavi his second Ph.D.

"Iranology," explains Gharavi, "refers to the pre-Islamic period of Iran. After the spread of Islam there was too much Islamic and other influences." The study of Iranology owes much to the interest the Shah has taken in the ancient Iranian culture and traditions, Gharavi notes. Prior to that, "in Iran we did not have the opportunities Parsi scholars had in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. There was too much trouble and opposition to the government." Scholars like Mulla Firuz, K. R. Cama, Jivanji Mody, D. P. Sanjana and M. N. Dhalla were in their heyday.... "They had facilities, better relations with the west and stability at home," says Gharavi.

Photo : Farokh Reporter



Gharavi : 'In old Iran'

While India and Iran have greatly influenced each other, Gharavi notes that the study of Iranology is confined to Bombay. "In India the Persian language (of the Islamic period) is important. It is part of the Indian culture. More than 40 colleges and universities teach the Persian language and Persian studies. India started printing Persian books before Iran.

"This is a big country and people here are also mentally big. There is a tolerance that everyone might appreciate." Gharavi says he, his wife Parvin and their three children Sara, Ameneh and Reza, do not feel as though they are in another country. "I feel as though I am in old Iran."

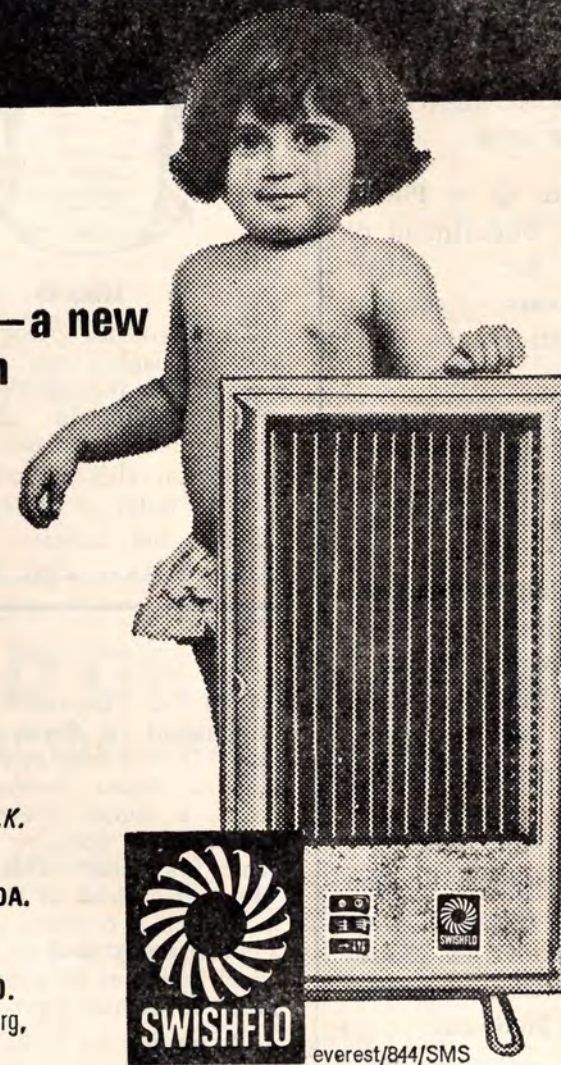
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Interviews in Bombay :
Mornings 16th, 17th and 18th May 1974, 5th Floor, K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, Fort, Bombay.



Hinnells

Thank you for giving us an unbiased insight into Zoroaster's time and life through the interview with John Hinnells. Zoroastrianism, by itself, is a most scientific and logical religion. However, what we see today is an envelope of customs and traditions which the orthodox sadly cling to for the

LETTER S

sake of psychological security. *Parsiana* should continue giving us unbiased and informative articles which reveal the true depth of Zoroastrianism and which can dispel the cloud of ignorance among our younger set today.

The cover design was excellent.
Ms Kashmira B. Baria

Parsiana makes good reading. Your article 'The Religion of the Good Life' really taught me more about my religion than I knew. Your article in the form of an interview with Mr. John Hinnells was well done.

Dinshaw B. Irani

Elections

It is strange why only one per cent of the Parsi community should have the privilege to elect the Trustees of the Parsi Panchayat. If the Panchayat is desirous of securing the votes from a small number of the Parsi Community, then there is a

consensus of opinion amongst the most enlightened Parsis that only the Wealth-Tax payers should have the right to do so!

It is most unfortunate that there seems no unanimity amongst the seven trustees of the Parsi Panchayat. The last straw which broke the camel's back is due to the embolden step of preserving the inspection of the Towers of Silence by Shiavax R. Vakil. The disposal of the corpses is the most heinous practice. It is high-time now that Parsis should stop believing that the rays of sunshine, which beam on the corpses during the meridian sun for barely a couple of hours would do the needful. The situation is further aggravated during the monsoon as it rains for days and weeks continuously. The Doongerwadi land is a vast jungle, which could easily accommodate the latest style of crematorium.

The Parsi Panchayat is in possession of Funds worth crores of

Rupees, pertaining to various trusts. There are thousands of unfortunate Parsis who are clamouring for accommodation. It is a grave corollary, that a child born of a Parsi male member through his marriage with a *dubree* be considered a Parsi, while the children of a lady of a respectable family married either to a Prince or Duke outside the Parsi community, be considered untouchable Harijans.

T. B. Daruwala.

Good Will

There are many in our School who have fallen in love with *Parsiana* which portrays the Parsis, their culture and way of life with which, alas, few of us are familiar with even though this brilliant community has been with us in India all these centuries.

Broadminded, gentle, never asserting their 'rights' and claiming 'privileges', never seeking 'seats' in assemblies and clamouring for

'weightages' or reservation of posts and relying solely on their own inherent worth and capabilities—this is the only minority community in India that evokes our respect and goodwill.

S. M. K. Wali
T. T. School for Boys and Girls
Jaipur.

The Rajkot Incident

Today, under the pretext of bodies lying untouched, enemies of the religion are giving unnecessary weight to one or two such instances which occur in faraway places and are trying to lead the community on the wrong path. We can inform the people who have started this wrong movement that in Surat, Navsari, Udwarda, Broach and innumerable other old towns the good custom of *Dokhmanashini* is functioning as of old—the birds come, and consume the bodies very rapidly. What these gentlemen are saying is not true. No such com-

Guess Who?

"It's an impressive picture, reminiscent of Parsis of yesteryear. It is a very intelligent face with a broad forehead, white beard, a simple eye-glass frame and a dress worn by those who came in contact with the west. The more I look at this face the more clear it becomes that he had a pure heart and a pure mind which led him to good thoughts, good words and good deeds.

"I am led to believe the picture is of Dr. Dadabhai Naoroji, the Grand Old Man of India, the first Indian member of the British Parliament, one of the founders of the Indian National Congress, a man who dedicated his life in the service of his country."

So writes Rustom R. Marshall in response to our "Guess Who" contest featured in the last issue. Among the others who wrote in and correctly identified the photograph are E. H. Engineer, Dara K. Rajwadewala, N. D. Seervai and eight-year old Purvin Darbary who sent the above sketch asking us to guess the person's

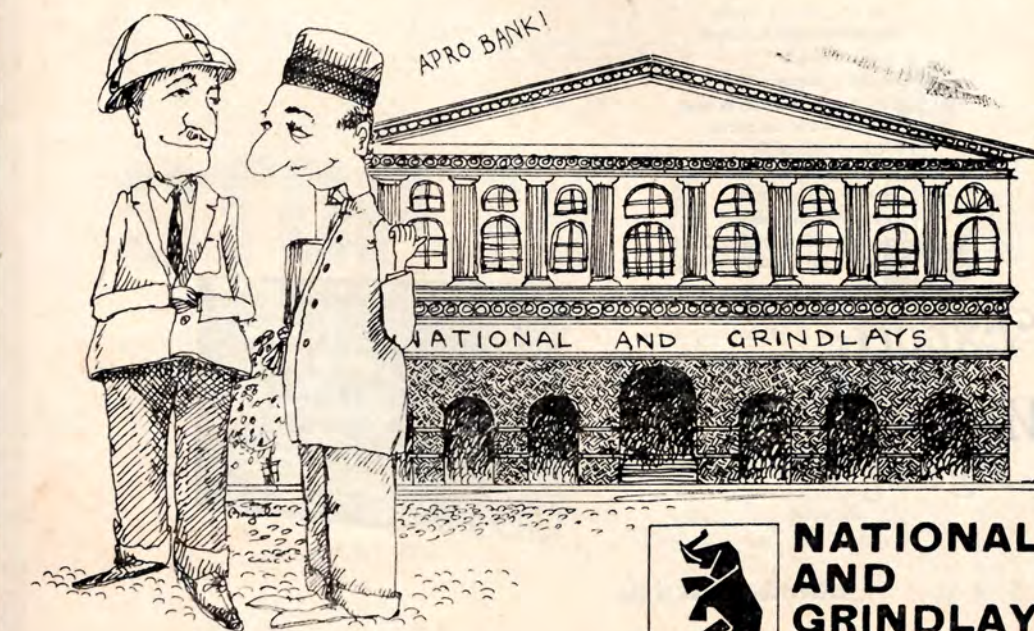
identity. "Answer! Dadabhai Naoroji as I draw him." Engineer also noted the photograph was taken of Naoroji when he was an M.P. in London.

For having correctly identified the photograph, the contestants



will receive a copy of *The Essential Principles of Zoroastrianism* by Jehangir Ranina and *Let us Pray to Ahura Mazda* by Noshir H. Vajifdar.

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- Shivaji Path, Jambhli Naka, Thana.
- Smitkiran 377, Swamy Vivekananda Road, Vile Parle.
- 43, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Ghatkopar (East).

plaint is heard there and even today the lucky souls go through *Dokhmanashini*. These men who are lying may be right once in a way but that doesn't mean that the *dokhmanashini* system is at fault and useless, and so we should use some other system of disposing the dead. The fault lies with the trustees and the *Anjuman* who run it, they commit mistakes and are careless. For example, round the *dokhma* there's insufficient place and lack of cleanliness. The bodies should be laid in a clean way and over and above that there are mistakes made and wrong methods used because of which there seem to be faults in the system. Instead of finding the solution, these gentlemen are out to destroy the system and the community should not pay heed to them.

Ardeshtir Hormasji Talati
Dinshaw Darasa Kapadia
Eruch Bahadurshah Lakdawala
Dinshaw Pirojshaw Daruwala
Kersasp Dastur Marzban Nalladaru
Dastur Nadirshaw Pestonji Sena
Farokh B. Turel
Darabshaw H. Mevawala.

Conversion Allowed

"Zoroastrian denotes religion, Parsi denotes community. There is no Parsi religion in existence." —Justice Davar.

The Zoroastrian religion allows conversion, the Parsi community denounces it. If an alien were to convert himself outside India and profess the Zoroastrian religion he would have the right to enter the Fire Temple and the right to have his last rites at Doongerwadi, if he so desired. Who can challenge that?

Some orthodox Parsis may claim that in India the Fire Temples are restricted to Parsis only. Then, why do we allow the Iranis settled in India to enter them? They are not Parsis! This only goes to show that the Fire Temples are for Zoroastrians; whoever they may be.

Our whole concept of thinking is wrong; we are Zoroastrians first and have only acquired the name Parsi when we landed in India—it means, 'people who came from Persia.'

Rustom S. Dubash

Not Separate

People in India should identify with one another, and not think that they are separate from the soil and the people of India. After all, if Parsis do shine, it is also because Indians have kept them in peace for over thirteen hundred years, and it is India's secular attitude from time immemorial that has helped them to exist and prosper. In many other countries, they would have been just wiped out with the regular religious persecutions, as in Europe. So, the minorities must also feel that they owe something to this great country. Unfortunately, most of them do not and this certainly does not help weld the Indian nation into a whole. However, maybe, it is just a passing phase for everyone who feels this way.

Ms Usha Gratry
Geneva.

I would request Mr. B. R. Pavri (letters column, last issue of *Parsiana*), to refer to "*The Religion of Zarathushtra*", by Dr. Irach J. S. Taraporewala, to verify when the *Vendidad* was written.

(Continued on page 21, col. 3)

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THE WAILING WALL

An ill wind was blowing at Doongerwadi Sunday evening, 21st April. In its wake the one lakh rupee, reinforced cement concrete superstructure built to screen Sethna's Tower lay in shambles. The brain child of the Parsi Panchayat, the wall was built to prevent future residents of the three Grand Paradi skyscrapers from viewing Parsi corpses.

A few days prior to the crash, workers, it is said, complained that the structure was swaying. They reportedly refused to work on the wall and therefore, fortunately, no casualties occurred when the accident took place. An examination of the crash site revealed large quantities of sand and sea-shells mixed with the cement. The lumps crumbled if held tightly in the fist.

The trustees, several of whom had gathered that evening along with over 100 Parsis at the Hotel President to felicitate B. K. Boman-Behram on his Mayoral victory, summoned the architect retained

by the Panchayat, J. F. S. Engineer, to their fortnightly Tuesday meeting. An advance of Rs. 25,000 out of a total of close to a lakh had been paid so far. At Doongerwadi guards prevented visitors from approaching the site and the entrance from near Ridge Road was closed for part of the day, causing an inconvenience to motorists.

The idea for the wall originated some time in mid-1972 when the Grand Paradi Apartments were making their mark on the fast growing Bombay skyline. The trustees visited Sethna's Tower to ascertain how much of the *dokhma* would be visible. It was decided a wall about 70 to 80 feet in height and 110 feet in length consisting of a trellis-like framework supporting a screen, was needed.

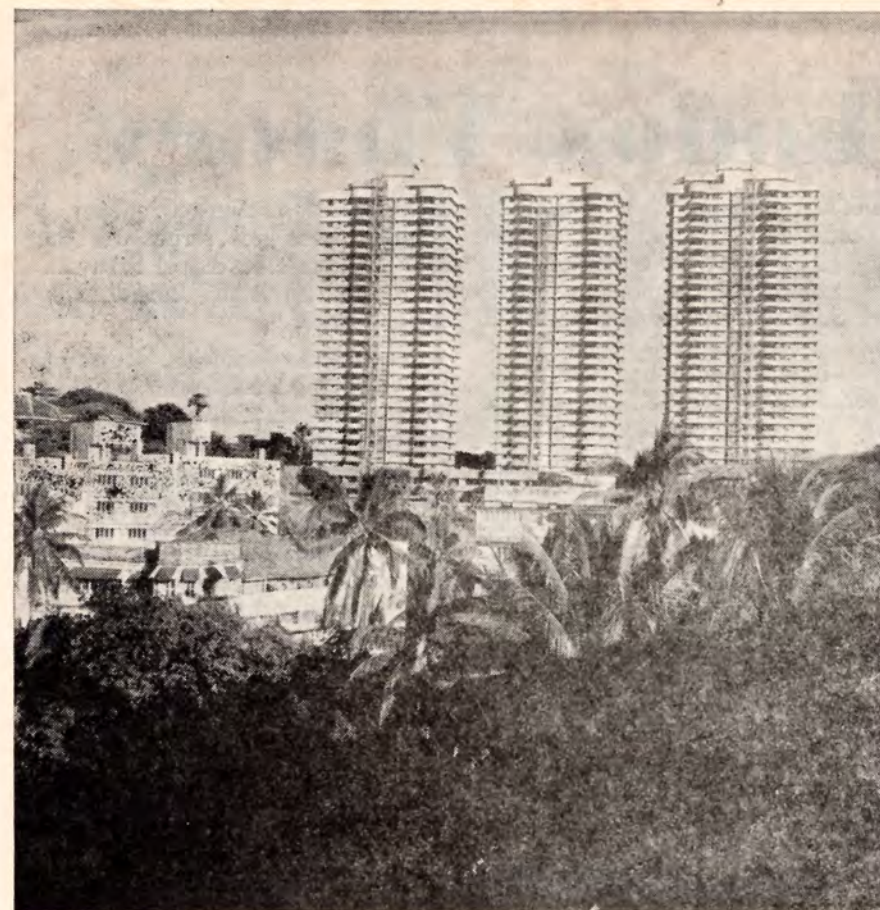
Tenders were invited and from the three received, Robust Construction Rs. 68,981.85, D. S. Dolikuka Rs. 68,460 and Manek Dinshaw Rs. 53,156.78, the last

was chosen. Due to some changes in plan, the costs had to be revised. The wall was scheduled to be completed at the same time as the Grand Paradi Apartments. Work was delayed owing to several reasons, among them being the wait for a no-objection certificate from the airport authorities! The cement itself lay in the open for a long time and only after persistent urging by Panchayat officials was it placed in a makeshift godown.

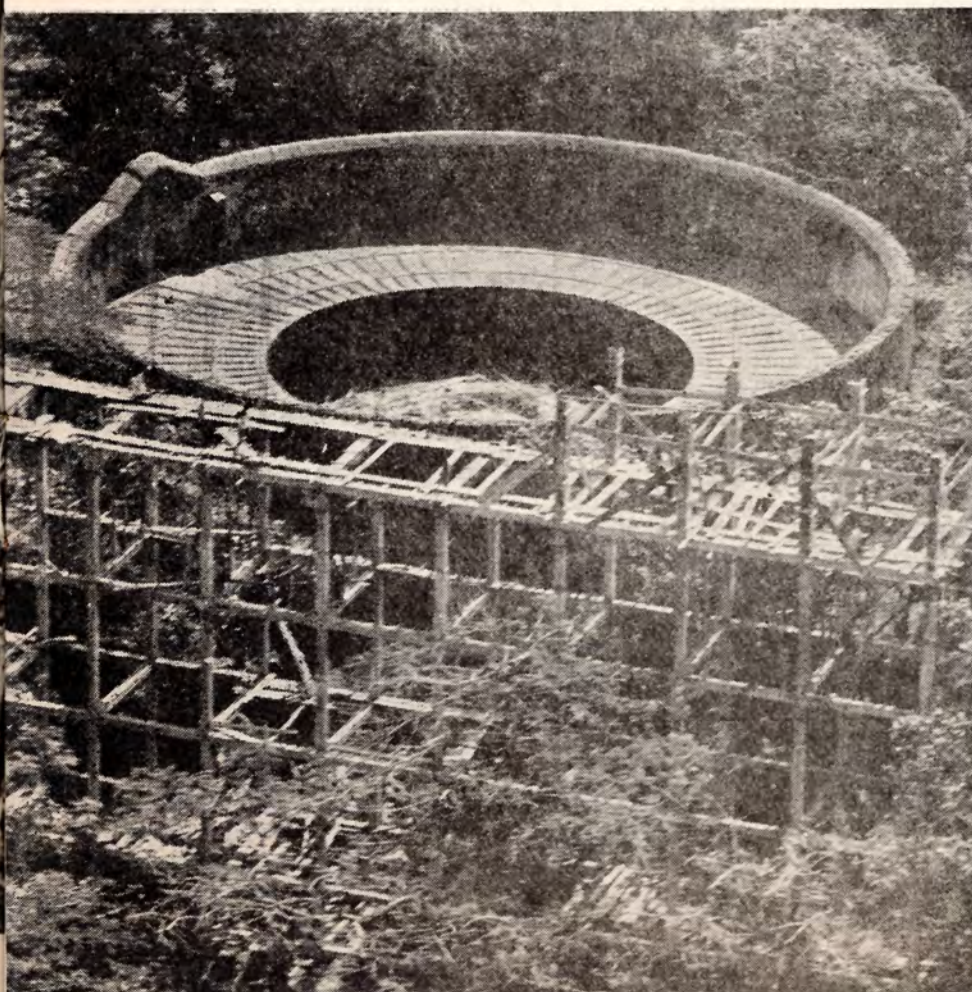
Whether the trustees will renew their efforts to build the wall is not known. With spiralling construction costs and other high-rise apartments springing up in the vicinity of Doongerwadi there is a limit to the number of walls the Panchayat can throw up. And with the economic woes besetting the community today, the walls—even if they stand—may only bear testimony to the insensitivity and stubbornness of the Panchayat trustees.



GRAND PARADI PHOTO BY DHUN MEHTA



Left: Rubble of collapsed wall. Sethna's Dokhma in foreground. Above: Grand Paradi Apartments from which two Dokhmas are visible. Below: Sethna's Tower and the former wall being constructed to prevent Grand Paradi residents viewing corpses.



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The Orthodox Victory

They called themselves the Independent Orthodox. Banded together under the leadership of the fiery and religious Nelie Noble and the veteran politician Boman Kavasji Boman-Behram, they swept the polls at the last Panchayat elections. At public meetings, in newspaper advertisements and in handbills distributed throughout the length and breadth of the community the group focussed their campaign on one issue: the controversy over the Towers of Silence and the man who raised it, Shiavax R. Vakil.

With a court order in their favour and boycott call by the opposition, the Independents won all the seats on the A, C and D registers. Indeed the drive was executed with such machine-like precision that such stalwarts as Homi Banaji, a former trustee of the Parsi Panchayat who ran independent of any party, received only two votes and Major S. R. Bamji, a member of the newly formed Doongerwadi Committee, Pheroze Bookbinder of *The Times of India*, Khurshed J. Birdi,

chief accountant and executive director of Godrej and Dr. Sarosh R. Wadia who was recently made a fellow of the Hahnemann Medical Society of America, received only around a 100 votes each. The Independents had submitted over a 1,000 names alone on the last day for registration. On election day many of the voters were provided transport to and from the Panchayat office, given their certificates and instructed to mark 'X's, next to the requisite numbers. Boman-Behram topped the list with 1,115 votes and Ms Noble was second, trailing behind by a few votes.

The elections provided high drama till the eleventh hour. Four members of the Anjuman Pax, the old guard which for years controlled the nomination and election of candidates to the 'E' register, filed a suit in the Bombay City Civil Court "that the election on 23rd. February was invalid and of no effect and further for an injunction restraining the Trustees of the Parsi Panchayat from holding the election... until the Trustees hold the same in accordance with the scheme." In a pile of legal papers weighing close to two kilos, the plaintiffs accused the office holders of the Bombay Parsi Panchayat with "utter inefficiency" in the maintenance of the all important election rolls and stated that "no valid and fair election can be held or should be permitted to be held on the basis of these registers." The specific allegation against the seven trustees of the Parsi Panchayat was that they had not "applied their minds" to the provisions of the electoral scheme.

The plaintiffs advocate, Ashok Desai* stated in the course of his argument that "Three-hundred-and-sixty-five dead people are on the rolls including trustees of the Parsi Panchayat (Maneck Mistry and Pestonji Hansotia). Surely they (the Panchayat) know which of

their trustees are in good health!" Among those not struck off the lists is the late Ms Bapsi Sabavala, the colourful and indefatigable social worker.

One of the plaintiffs, Rustomji H. Mullan, contended "(The Trustees) maintain a register of deaths of Parsees and even issue certificates of the registration of such deaths on payment of the prescribed fees. They have therefore, firsthand notice of the deaths of the Parsees. Notwithstanding the same they have not cared to remove the names of the deceased voters from the said registers. Apart from the utter inefficiency in the administration which is disclosed by the mode and manner in which the Registers are maintained, the appearance of the names of dead voters are conducive to unhealthy malpractices and voting on behalf of deceased persons can

The A B C D of the Elections

Above the raucous street sounds of hustling hawkers and lumbering traffic on Dadabhoy Naoroji Road stands the office of the Parsi Panchayat. From its winding wooden staircase to its ancient lift, to the racks of paper that vie with portraits of stately Parsis, the accent is on the past; of the times when clerks scurried to the footfalls of Readymoneys and Jeejeebhoy's and of the days when a Trustee was king and the Panchayat his kingdom.

In his *The Parsi Panchayat And Its Working* Sapur F. Desai, a former joint secretary of the Parsi Panchayat, notes, "In the beginning the Panchayat was a quasi-judicial-cum-social body dispensing justice and enacting *bundobusts*. Between 1775 and 1825 it was a powerful social organisation. In the absence of the laws of the land it dispensed people's justice to the wrong-doers of the community in social and religious spheres."

Over the years the powers of the trustees were pared. Laws and customs came more and more under the jurisdiction of the courts. Desai notes, "In the beginning of the present century a serious chal-

lenge was thrown to the Trustees in the Bombay High Court... that the right to appoint Trustees was vested in the general body of Zoroastrians in Bombay and that a scheme be framed for the appointment of Trustees, for the due administration of funds and properties.... Until then the Trustees were not elected but they were appointed by the surviving Trustees whenever vacancies arose. In 1910 the scheme was finally approved by the High Court whereby 4 Registers known as A, B, C and D came into existence. 'A' Register stood for those donors who gave to the Trustees a donation of Rs. 500 and more but less than Rs. 5,000, B Register included titled gentry, Gazetted Officers, etc; C embraced graduates and D like *demos*, embraced all those above the age of 21, whether male or female."

From these four registers a hundred were appointed to the "E" Register, also known as the *So-nu-Mandal*. The elections for the "E" Register are held every seven years. The "E" Register in turn votes along with members of the "F" Register, people who have donated Rs. 5,000 and over to the

Panchayat, for the trustees. "The E and F Registers formed the electoral college of the Trustees and in the year 1911 the first seven Trustees of the Parsi Panchayat were appointed. They were all males. The scheme was later amended in 1931 and 1935," noted Desai. "By the amendment of 1935 the community could appoint not more than one lady as a Trustee." A trustee's term is for ten years after which he can seek re-election if he wishes.

As the years passed by, the number on the "F" Register, the donors, exceeded those on the "E" Register, the elected representatives. To ensure that both donors and elected members were equally represented, the High Court ruled in 1970 that the numbers on the "E" Register be the same as those in the "F" Register. As a sop to women's liberation, the number of women trustees permitted at any one time was raised to three, thereby ensuring always a male dominated Panchayat. Also the "B" Register, consisting of titled gentry, gazetted officers etc., was scrapped, its members being absorbed in the other registers.

be made on production of certificates there being no method of checking the same...

The lawyers for the defense noted that around Rs. 20,000 in expenses had been incurred by the Panchayat in the printing of ballots and other preparations for the next day's election and that people from out of Bombay had been arriving in town since the morning. They stated the rolls had been maintained and that redress could always be sought from the Trustees of the Parsi Panchayat.

The Pax members alleged that 1,000 names had been submitted for registration by Ms Noble after office hours on December 1973, the deadline for registering voters.

According to information received by the plaintiffs they alleged the Panchayat office "declined to accept the large number of 1,000 applications... as they were received after office hours, pointing out that it was impossible for them to check them and accept the applications after the closing of the office. As a result of this Defendant



Ms Noble 'Our community is sound'

No. 10 (Ms Noble) phoned Defendant No. 4 (Boman-Behram), one of the Trustees of the Parsi Panchayat, complaining against the refusal. (Boman-Behram) having undergone a major operation, was convalescing at his residence and on receipt of the phone call came down to the office... resting on a walking stick, with his sister, long after the office hours and ordered the members of the staff... to receive the aforesaid applications."

Both Boman-Behram and Nelie Noble denied the charges in their respective affidavits, Boman-Behram stating he attended the office on the request of Nadir Mulla, president of the Panchayat. "At his request I went to the office of the Parsi Panchayat between 3.45 and 4 p.m. on the said date when several applicants including (Ms Noble) were present. At about 4.20 p.m. I telephoned (Mulla) informing him that I was in the office of the Parsi Panchayat and inquiring whether he would be able to attend the same. (Mulla) informed me that he was held up by some urgent legal work and requested me to carry on... I was in the office of the Parsi Panchayat upto 5.50 p.m. I gave instructions to the Joint Secretary, Mr. Antia and his assistant, Mr.



Boman-Behram: The top vote getter.

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Anklesaria not to accept any application forms for enrollment on the register of voters after 5.45 p.m. ... I say that (Ms Noble) has acted in the matter on her own and not at my instance, as alleged ... The Plaintiffs belong to a group called the Anjuman Pax (Party) of which I was formerly a member. On 22nd November 1971, I, with twelve other members, resigned from the said Pax because of certain irregularities in its management of which we did not approve. Since then the Plaintiffs and certain other members of the Pax have been carrying on a campaign of vilification against me ... in January/February 1974 about 14 other members have also resigned from the said Pax."

Judge Guttal of the Bombay City Civil Court after a lengthy hearing refused to grant the injunction. On February 22nd, one day prior to the elections, Justice Apte of the Bombay High Court after deliberating over the proceedings for three hours in which close to an hour was spent on the complexities of the Panchayat election system also denied the injunction. The Pax leader, Bomanshaw H. Minocherhomjee, then called upon his group to boycott the elections.

For the moment the Independents, who are a loosely knit conglomerate of several orthodox groups with an electoral understanding, intend to concentrate their efforts in unseating Vakil for his statement on the *dokhmas*. A signature-collecting drive is in the offing. As to whether they can unseat him constitutionally is doubtful. Vakil himself is adamant he will not resign on the issue of *dokhmanashini*. But if he is no longer effective in the Panchayat he says he will step down in favour of another.

As to what the Independents long-range plans are, it is hard to say as both Boman-Behram and Ms Noble refused to speak to *Parsiana* on the grounds the matter was *sub judice*. The election case is still pending in the courts.

Given the set-up of the Panchayat today, the Independents may not get a chance to flex their newly found muscle in the near future. It is possible that Nadir Mulla,

the president of the Parsi Panchayat, whose term expires this year may seek yet another ten year term, his fourth. Similarly with Lady Jehangir. Mulla has refrained from making his views on the community known publicly and has thereby escaped arousing the wrath of any particular group. The trustee the Independents would most want to oust is Erach Nadirshah, whose term ends in two years. Ms Noble may then seek the trusteeship. But given the fast changing world of Parsi politics all crystal-ball gazing is futile.

REPLY TO THE "SO-CALLED TRUTHS" OF SATYAWADI SAVAKSHA (S. R. VAKIL) TRUSTEE OF PARSİ PUNCHAYET

Dear Fellow Zoroastrians,

We have to invite your attention to a very serious situation created by the newly elected Trustee of The Parsi Panchayat Mr. S. R. Vakil.

Mr. Vakil was elected a trustee in November 1972. The trusteeship of the Parsi Panchayat is the highest honour the community can confer on one of its members. Has Mr. Vakil proved himself worthy of the honour or the confidence placed in him by the electorate? We leave it to the community to judge after reading what we have stated hereunder.

In his recent cyclostyled statement (part of which appeared in Gujarati in Bombay Samachar dated 16-9-73) he has maligned our system of *Dokhmanashini* and attempted to create a lurid but totally incorrect picture of the interior of the *Dokhmas*, thereby trying to mislead the community.

There is absolutely no truth in Mr. Vakil's statement that vultures at Doongerwadi are becoming scarce. On the contrary, when we the undersigned visited the *Dokhmas* on a number of occasions, we observed 100 to 120 vultures in the vicinity of the tower in which the body was to be consigned. Moreover it has been officially ascertained by the Panchayat that the total number of vultures in the area varies from 250 to 300.

Pamphlet distributed by Independents

Whatever the Independent's program, if they wish to maintain all the ancient institutions, rituals and customs of the community they face an uphill task. The *Doongerwadi* estate alone runs at a deficit of Rs. 25,000 a year, the salaries of the *khandias* and *nassesalars* alone totalling a lakh of rupees. And in the light of tall buildings sprouting around the *dokhmas* (Time Magazine in its April 1st issue published a photograph taken from a skyscraper being constructed on a plot of land formerly belonging to a trustee of the Parsi Panchayat, showing pallbearers carrying a Parsi corpse into a *dokhma*) there is a limit to the number of walls the Panchayat can build. The wall being built

between Sethna's Tower and the Grand Paradi Apartments will cost them, when completed, around one lakh. The Panchayat will have to decide whether priority should be given to more walls for the dead or housing for the living. If non-Parsis can now view Parsi corpses, should the ban preventing other communities from paying their respects at the last *darshan* be continued? These and related questions and developments are fast overshadowing the controversy Vakil raised.

To date: In Rajkot Dr. Kersi Dastur removed his father's corpse from the *dokhma* when after 24 hours he found it and other corpses that had been lying there for months, untouched by vultures. The Dahnu Anjuman has voted in favour of an *Aramgarh*. The Parsi Zoroastrian Anjuman of Secunderabad and Hyderabad circulated a questionnaire among members of the Anjuman asking them whether they were in favour of *dokhmanashini*. In Madras Phiroj Nogi Clubwalla was cremated with full Zoroastrian religious rites even though a *dokhma* exists. In Bulsar the government wishes to acquire part of the *dokhma* lands. And on the *Doongerwadi* lands, it is now reported, a *Varasijai*, the albino bull whose urine is used for religious ceremonies, has been buried after the *geh sarvanu* ceremony, a right denied to Parsis who wish to be buried or cremated.

The Independents will also have to contend with various other problems that afflict the community: an increasing Parsi beggar population, unemployment, housing shortage, dwindling numbers, too many *agiaries* and not enough Parsis, the plight of the *mobeds*, and nineteenth century Parsi institutions trying to cope with twentieth century problems.

How the Independents intend to deal with all these problems is not known. Boman-Behram will be fully occupied for the next year carrying out his mayoral duties. As for the others, a clue to their approach may be found in a circular signed by Ms Noble and seven Independents. They noted, "attacks on our religion and our customs have been made in the past but they have proved futile

(Continued on page 21)

ALL THIS AND MAYOR TOO

At 59, the fruits of a lifetime's labour must taste sweet to Boman Kavasji Boman-Behram. Aside from sweeping the Panchayat polls, the energetic bachelor realized the ambition of many stymied years: the Mayoralty of Bombay. As The Indian Express headline summed it: "Boman Mayor, at last."

In a keenly contested, see-saw battle that almost shattered the electoral understanding between the opposition parties, the twice defeated tenacious politician defeated his only Congress rival 85 to 49. By doing so he becomes the first Parsi Mayor of Bombay since Independence. He also carries on a family tradition: his uncle Sir Jehangir Boman-Behram was Mayor in 1931.

Boman-Behram has served as a municipal councillor since 1957 and is a former member of the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly. In 1960 he started the Civic Centre to help redress civic grievances. He has also been active in seeing that buildings in danger of col-

lapse receive urgently needed repairs. He is the author of *The Decline of Bombay*, *The Educational Controversies in India* and *The Rise and Growth of the B. D. Petit Parsi General Hospital*.

A lawyer by profession, he is associated with over 30 social and educational institutions. He is leader of the Civic Forum, a political organization consisting of independent and rebel Congressmen. Traditionally an independent, Boman-Behram joined the Congress Party for a brief spell. He has fought ardently over the years to prevent encroachment on the few remaining open spots in this crowded city.

In his inaugural address delivered before the Municipal Corporation, the Mayor noted, "Bombay is no longer beautiful. Bombay has become a slum and even its finest localities are under the impending threat of being turned into slums. Our city must not be allowed to go the way of those which have passed into historical oblivion." It is ironic that the fear Boman-Behram expressed for the city's survival should be similar to the one facing its Parsi inhabitants today.



STUDIO CONCEPT



Seated under the still shade of a marquee, the audience fanned themselves with programmes and listened to the slight, impeccably dressed woman. Ms Rodabeh Leslie Sawhny, the trace of a French accent showing as she spoke, proposed the vote of thanks and wished the newly opened training centre at Deolali for the Leslie Sawhny Programme of Training for Democracy, every success.

"I want it to grow beyond a memorial," she said, a few days later, over a convivial cup of coffee. "It must not remain something just for my husband. He would have wished it to go beyond him." The Programme began shortly after Colonel Sawhny's untimely death in 1967. "We wanted to do something in his memory," reminisces Ms Sawhny, "but when we sat down to discuss it, we found that he had been interested in so many spheres that it was difficult to choose. Then Minoo (Masani) said, 'He believed in freedom in all senses of the word, so why not have a course that gives freedom of the spirit?'" And so it was that the Leslie Sawhny Programme of Training for Democracy was conceived. A

THE LEGACY OF LESLIE SAWHNY

similar programme had been in its infancy while Sawhny had been alive, in which he had been interested, and was thus considered the most fitting tribute to his memory. "We thought we would do it for five years only, but now we have gone beyond five years because we felt it had already gathered a small following."

Over 110 camps and seminars have been sponsored by the Programme since its inception in April 1968. Held for participants ranging from college undergraduates, to businessmen, to tribals, the seminars are basically concerned with spreading the concept of liberalism, and are patently non-partisan. "It's not that people don't know about it, it's just that the lectures open out new horizons," Ms Sawhny says. "Everyone who has been to them, whom I have met, has been very impressed. The idea was to make them think independently, to form intelligent opinions, not just mouth the usual slogans and clichés." Concerning the success of the Programme, she feels, "Well, they are fine lectures, and it is good to come and rub shoulders for 10 to 12 days at a camp, but I don't know whether we make a big enough dent or not. I mean, they (the participants) are from all over India; the lectures sort of push aside a veil, but unless they keep up the contact, depending on the lectures, depending on the person, it gradually fades away." She feels however, that it should still continue because it is better that some people are affected by it, even if the majority forget, rather than if no people were to receive the benefit of the courses.

The man for whom the course, is named, Leslie 'Duggy' Sawhny, was born in Murree, in the Punjab, to a well-known Punjabi family. His mother was English, making him, says Ms Sawhny, "very Indian and at the same time, very European in his ways." He was educated at Simla and later at the Government College in Lahore. At 19 he joined the Indian Military Academy and joined service with the army as a career officer. "He was extremely popular with

his men" Ms Sawhny recalls, and in the space of twelve years became a full-fledged colonel. It was during World War II, when he used to return from Burma on leave, that he met his wife-to-be, Rodabeh Tata. She had recently returned from France, where she had been with her mother for much of her youth. "I was living with my brother-in-law and sister, and he used to stay with us when he came to Bombay." They knew each other eight years before marrying. "It just happened. I hadn't wanted to get married, but one day I just said 'yes'." They were married at a simple civil ceremony at home and later had "a big reception at my brother-in-law's place. The officers of my husband's regiments came, and all our friends."

By this time, Col. Sawhny had retired from the army to join Killick Industries Ltd. "He used to say, 'I wouldn't be able to sell a bar of soap,' but he was brilliant as a manager and a fine administrator." Later, in 1960, he joined the Tata group of industries at the urging of Ms Sawhny's brother, J. R. D. Tata, in which he stayed for the remaining seven years of his life. "Whatever he did, he did extremely well. Whether in the office or in the factories, he had this link with people, this human contact. He was extraordinarily warm. It's difficult to explain, but he was one of those people, who, when they enter a room, everything seems to lighten. If any of the staff members was sick or had some worries, he would go and see them personally, his secretaries used to love him, there were always young people coming to him with their problems—he was always in touch with people." Sawhny was keenly interested in politics, though he never went into it actively. "He was a staunch Indian and he wanted to see India prosper." Among his closest friends were Nani A. Palkhivala, the noted lawyer, and Minoo R. Masani, a leading national political figure. "My husband admired Minoo very much," says Ms Sawhny, "he has one of the clearest, most lucid minds in India and he is absolutely honest and

by Manjula Padmanabhan

sincere. Maybe that's why he got on so well with my husband."

For the seventeen years that they were married, says Ms Sawhny spontaneously, "It was great fun. Life was very alive, we were surrounded by friends, the men and women who were drawn to him by the 'aura' he made around him." They lived at Somerset Place, along with a menagerie of "ill or unhappy animals, which we used to adopt because we both loved animals." Though they had no children, Ms Sawhny feels, "We had an ideal marriage. I always want to tell young married couples that they should have a marriage like ours had been. We always had things to tell each other, we respected each other, and were very much on the same level. It was always growing in depth." There had been "no opposition" from Ms Sawhny's relations to her marriage to a non-Parsi. "My family was delighted. They knew him well and liked him very much." Sawhny who was Protestant held similar views on the subject



Ms Sawhny, N. A. Palkhivala and M. R. Masani at opening of Deolali centre.

of intermarriage. "In a marriage," says Ms Sawhny, "it's the people who count, it's the qualities that matter." She is in favour of liberalising the strictures on allowing non-Parsis to the fold. Her own mother, who was French was the last person to be legally accepted as a Parsi, though the Panchayat later raised an objection and she was debarred. "Zoroaster never said anything against intermarriage," says Ms Sawhny, "though now the community is small, like

a family; maybe, if they allow others to come in, that tight family would dissolve." Ms Sawhny is "very proud to be a member of this community. It is respected and highly-considered. It will be a pity if it disintegrates." Of religion, she says, "I'm not religious, but I do go to the fire-temple. Zoroastrianism is a fine, spiritual religion. I don't think it's right, personally, that it should be closed to others."

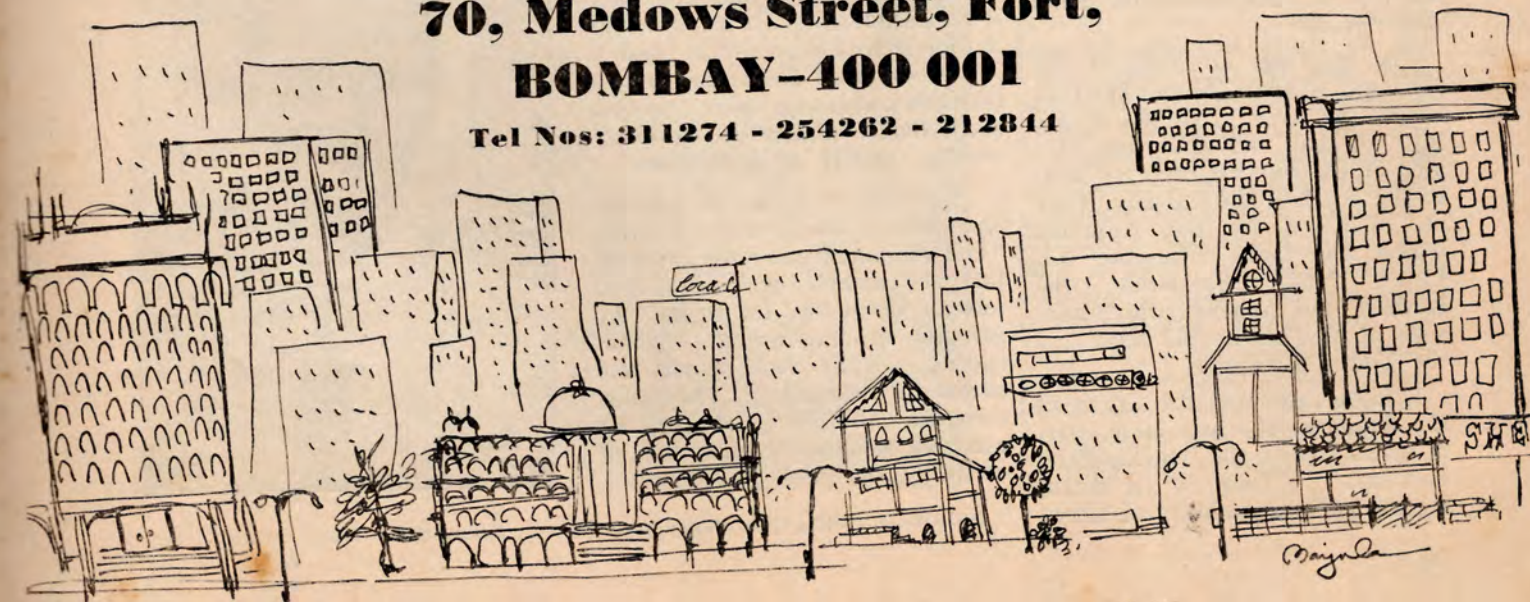
(Continued on page 21, col. 3)

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Parsis of Garden City

"Parsis should have come to Bangalore twenty years ago," says Behram Sidhwa, president of the Bangalore Parsi Zoroastrian Anjuman, "unfortunately they did not. That glamour of Bombay is always there. Today prices are ten, twenty times higher. We missed the bus."

There are 450 to 500 Parsi families in this teeming Southern metropolis, once a city distinguished for its temperate climate and beautiful parks. Most of the Parsis are retired or hold jobs, while a handful are in business. Around sixty families own property, mostly bungalows. "With the advent of so many industries, new families are coming," notes Nadirshah Unwalla, *panthaki* of the local *agiary*.

"Whenever a new Parsi comes to town, we ask them to become members of the Anjuman," noted Unwalla. All members have voting rights and trustees are elected every five years. The Bangalore Anjuman is obliged under its trust deed to follow the Bombay Parsi Panchayat in policy matters.

"Parsis have a good name here," notes Sidhwa who was with the Central Bank before he retired. "There is no canker between us. There is tolerance." Get-togethers are held every Sunday under the auspices of the Bangalore Parsi Association.

The meetings are held at the Jehangir Kothari Memorial Hall across the street from the *agiary*. Both the hall and *agiary* are situated on the choicest property right in the heart of the old city. They are managed by the Anjuman which also looks after the B.J. Entee Parsi Dharamsala, the Kothari Hall Annexe—which consists of nine residential flats, and the Tower of Silence.

Sidhwa estimates the assets of the Anjuman at thirty lakhs, part of which is with the Bombay Parsi Panchayat. "There is an excess income over expenditure of fifteen



The Bangalore *agiary*: The choicest location.

to twenty thousand rupees," he says. "We have to spend it." The Anjuman gives Rs. 115 every month to four or five needy families. Scholarships are given on merit and need. A great portion of the Anjuman's wealth derived from the phenomenal rise in land prices over the years as people poured into the city. "In 1950 a square foot of land sold for one rupee. Today it is fifteen rupees," says Sidhwa. With the largest railway yard in India and the greatest number of cinema theatres, numbering around 120, Bangalore is afflicted with a common urban ill: housing shortage.

"Parsi couples who come to Bangalore on their honeymoon want to settle but there is no accommodation," notes Ms Manijeh Unwalla. "If they pay a thousand rupees for a two bedroom flat it is possible to get a place within a four mile radius of the *agiary*. A decent place costs one to two lakhs on ownership basis." Around sixty Parsi families are property owners, mostly of bungalows.

"You have to go to the suburbs and satellite towns," notes Sidhwa. "The Anjuman can't do anything for newcomers. We can't find jobs or businesses for them. We are not running an employment agency. They must come and search for themselves. They must take the initiative. The Anjuman can only welcome them to be one of us."

Sidhwa recalled how many years

ago the Anjuman set aside eight to ten acres of land. "They advertised for Parsis to come and develop it. You could have had a poultry or vegetable farm. Nobody responded. It is deplorable Parsis don't go out of Bombay. I can't understand why. It is *still* fruitful to migrate to a place like Bangalore."

The housing scarcity has given rise to several related phenomena: dwindling numbers, as Parsis either don't marry or marry late or marry out of the community.

"Within one year, seven Parsi girls have married out of the community," notes Sidhwa. "There



Sidhwa "We missed the bus."



Unwalla "I may be orthodox"

are not enough boys; no proper inducements to get married." The girls complain the "boys don't earn much," says Unwalla or the boys go abroad and marry out.

Both Sidhwa and Unwalla are against liberalizing the laws forbidding children of Parsi women married to non-Parsi men from coming into the community. "You need some restrictions," says Sidhwa, "to act as a check on the girls marrying out." Unwalla who has persistently prevented children of such unions from entering the *agiary* feels if reform is desired the Bombay Parsi Panchayat must call a meeting and decide the matter. "I may be orthodox, but



Bangalore Dokhma: "Has not forced a rift."

I can't go against the law."

Unwalla, who says he has not eaten in a restaurant in Bangalore in the last 40 years on religious grounds, notes the liberal and conservative Parsis live in peace in Bangalore: "We have not forced a rift." He recalls the 'quarrel' in 1937 when some members of the Anjuman wanted to build a *dokhma* in Bangalore. Uptil then Parsis were buried in the *aramgarh*. There was opposition to the *dokhma* but not enough to prevent the raising of funds and the opening of the Tower of Silence in 1940 on 14 acres of land.

"The membership of the Anjuman did not have to pay a cent," noted Unwalla, the money being donated by individuals. "We have never forced a single Parsi to go to the Tower of Silence." But Unwalla notes he will not perform the necessary religious rites if a person chooses a mode of disposal other than the *dokhma*.

Sidhwa feels "personally it is wrong" not to say the prayers "but as president I go with the majority." As for the people who believe in the *aramgarh*, Sidhwa notes, "We don't come in their way and they don't come in our way. We are a compact and united community of Parsis in Bangalore."

(Sawhny Continued from page 19)

Sawhny held the community in high esteem. "He loved people," says his wife, "all people." Ms Sawhny recalls, that last day in December 1967, when Sawhny had been playing at a golf tournament. "It was his ambition to win the golf championship. He enjoyed sports, especially golf, and he was playing wonderfully. Then around the 11th hole, he didn't feel well, so he came back to the golf-house. We had some tea and he said he'd rather go home. And on the way home, he had a terrific stroke. He died the same day in hospital. It was a terrible shock to all those who knew him. I got more than 2,000 letters from all sorts of people, people I didn't know who had known him, small people, less important people. He was almost like a legend."

Victory (Continued from page 17)

because the heart of our community is sound. The faith the community has in our great ancient religion is the bedrock on which assaults against it have gone to pieces." Noble sentiments, but whether they will suffice to overcome the many difficulties faced by the community today, will have to be seen.

Letters (Continued from page 10)

"The *Vendidad* (a very important work on social customs and on ritual) though in the Avesta language, belongs to this (Sassanian) period. In its language even it bears the stamp of having been a much later composition than the hymns of the *Yasna* or the *Yashts*. And though it does not contain a core of very ancient tradition still the spirit of the whole book is as different from that of the *Yasna* as it is possible to be. We cannot be sure that everything that is contained in the present recension of the *Vendidad* dates from an earlier period... Contrasted with the lofty idealism of Zarathushtra's Message or even with the later hymns of the *Yasna* and the *Yashts*, the *Vendidad* clearly indicates a lowering of ideals... The human heart needs the bread of Divine Love and Grace, and the *Vendidad*, offers merely a stone instead."

Mahyar B. Patel



The Rajkot Incident

by Feroza Paymaster

"is in a very dilapidated state." It is located in the city but on an open spot not surrounded by buildings. There are no *khandias* or *nassesalars*, so bodies have to be carried in by volunteers. "There were four uneaten bodies when I entered. One was of a person who had died four months before on the very day I was in Rajkot. The others had been lying there for one to one-and-a-half-years. The bodies were dried up and uneaten. There was a slight stink as in the dissection room of a medical college; it's not obnoxious. Rajkot is very hot. The temperature rises in summer and so the corpses are dried," said the doctor.

"There are approximately 100 Parsis in Rajkot," notes Dastur and the numbers are declining. "Deaths occur once in six months so people still use the *dokhma*. There is a burial ground for Parsis which was used in the past but since the *dokhma* was constructed it has been lying idle.

"The above facts I am bringing to the notice of the Parsi Public with the hope that they will arrive at an alternative form of disposal in respect of the several *dokhmas* in the mofussil areas where there are no vultures and where bodies are lying untouched for months and years."

Dastur's critics take a less sanguine view of the matter. In a pamphlet published by eight Surat Parsis (see Letters page) Dastur is labelled an "enemy" of the religion "out to play mischief with our unchangeable laws." They question his motives in burying his father's body instead of carrying it to the Surat *dokhma*, about a day's journey away, where vultures are in plenty and no bodies remain uneaten.

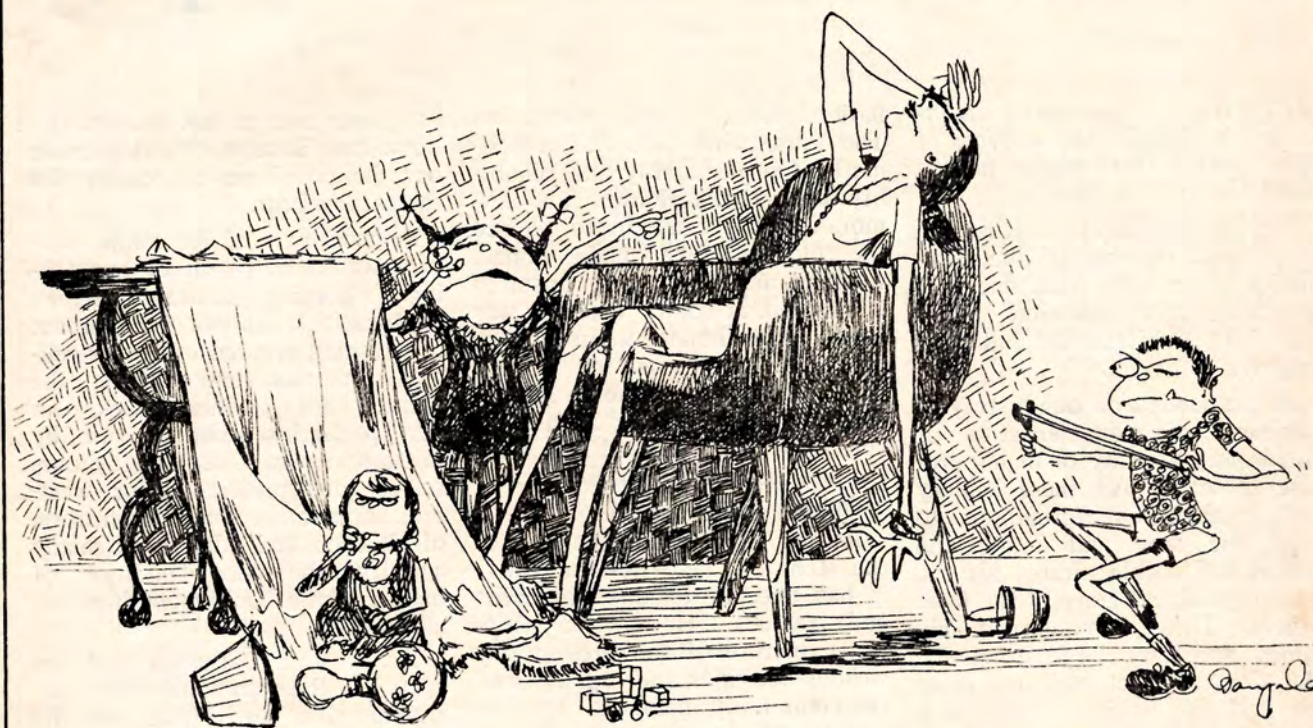
"A *moted* wrote to me recently," said Dastur, "and noted that even if you bury a body and open the grave after two years it will be half eaten. But why should I open it? For what? In my opinion vultures, cannot devour a complete body. The skull, brain, skin, bones remain intact" says Dastur. "The argument is brought up, that famous ornithologists have said

it is a hygienic method of disposing of the dead, but how can they say it is hygienic when they have never been allowed to go in? I think it is all priest-craft, the *nassesalars* have joined forces with them. In Bombay, the *khandias*, put the bodies in the *bhandar* and it becomes a mass grave. Just like the mass grave of the Jews. Our aim must be to achieve quick and hygienic disposal of the body. The most scientific is donating your body to a medical college. The second is doing it by means of an electric crematorium. I think the *dokhma* system in Bombay must be abolished. Most priests—the younger group, have been in favour of this. What we are asking for is a impartial committee to investigate the situation in Bombay. Then we should do something. It is up to the Panchayat to do something. If we don't, the Government and Municipality will remove it. The public staying around are bound to take objection that it is an unhygienic system, and the Government will not hesitate because they have their eye on it anyway." As for the wall that was being built round the *dokhma*, Dastur says "it is stupidity—a waste of money. It will further drive away the vultures."

"I feel that the place should remain in the same way; the *Bunglis* etcetera should be left. Only in place of the *dokhma*, we should build a crematorium, no matter how expensive it is. Otherwise one fine morning you might find the Shiv Sena camping at Doongerwadi, at Hodiwalla or one of the other *Bunglis*. Once the crematorium is built, the land is secure."

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Plain Talk on Parsi Problems

By Dr. P. B. Warden

Founder Editor of Parsiana



(Report and comments on a symposium held under the auspices of The Youth's Own Union at the Cama Institute in March.)

The first speaker, R. S. Rustomji an eminent member of the community began with what one may summarise as a tabulation of failings of the Parsi families and their progeny.

He expounded on our history of hardness of man, chastity of woman and veracity of man's promise to man. All these healthy traits enabled our forefathers to cross the seas and brave the storms and tackle pirates for the greater good and glory of the forefathers. Thus they earned big money and gave large heartedly. The Contract Act was not there nor had the habit of concealing money for default developed. Clapping of palms (*talli marvi*) in confirmation of intention to carry out a contract was morally and conventionally binding. Trade pursued in cloth, cotton, scraps of ferrous and non-ferrous metals made the community prosperous from abroad and agriculture and liquor trade stabilized prosperity for a long time. Prosperity in its wake introduced relaxation in character and laxity in home life and western influences introduced new and unknown factors of disintegration.

After Independence due to intense competition the community found itself unprepared for the struggle of life as its members were not conversant with the wide range of industries which were cropping up and nobody made any effort to guide them along the new range of human activities even in common industries to profit by them. The question of sophisticated industries is unique and outside the pale of the masses. Prosperity receded in the wake of in-

flation, taxation and relaxation. The Parsi who once was a hallmark of respectability and reliability began to deteriorate. The new morality that came in to replace the old morality made honest working more and more unsuited to the task at hand. Where it was easier to be honest when rich or contented, they now fell in line with those people who propagate the view that it is fair or fashionable to be dishonest and rich. That the end justifies the means became a dictum of practicality.

Rustomji dilated on the evils of the Rent Act and how adversely it has affected tenants, landlords and trustees. He gave a panoramic picture of the present day various activities and lethargies of the community members.

The younger generation seek cushy jobs which will not crumple the creases of their pants (that applies to both sexes now). Fixed incomes at moderate levels with lots of leisure hours are preferred to hard work with brighter prospects. The outlook for small scale and cottage industries has not developed. These are our mental handicaps in the expensive environment of modern life that need to be remedied. In the absence of such solid practicality the community gloats over its verbalised intelligence, substituting expressions for matter-of-fact wisdom of the world and by this self-imposed impediment off-sets the solid advantages of a hard life nobly lived.

We have been clamouring for *gallas* in Industrial estates and shops for the younger generation and as a source of investment for retired persons to invest their provident fund and gratuities and as an opportunity to continue working. Establishing teaching institutions is not enough. Others steal

a march over us not because their know-how is superior but because our juniors have no outlet for their know-how.

A good part of Rustomji's lecture was a narration of our failings: housing shortage; falling birth-rate; lands not built upon; diminishing reverence for our religion, customs and creeds, the blame for which lies in our preferring schools run by missionaries to those run by ourselves; our preference for westernisation rather than Parsification of children and adults; too many agaries; the poor condition of *mohed* class; Dokhmenashini vs. alternatives.

Dr. Rustom Daruwala made an appeal to the community that they should give up relying on the Panchayat and fight their way out in life relying on their arms and shoulders to overcome the burdens of life. Daruwala had written to Daniel Moynihan, the U.S. Ambassador to India requesting President Nixon to set apart Rs. 500,000,000 out of the huge accumulation of PL 480 Funds in India towards financing a housing scheme for the Parsis. It was a venture doomed to disappointment as such partiality for an isolated group out of the vast and varied multitude of India would be international sacrilege. It is true that due to the housing shortage, our community is being depleted in number, but Daruwala's plea, that such munificence should be looked upon as an ethnological experiment in the preservation of a decaying breed by financial aid, is not tenable. Survival cannot be bestowed by protection—it can only be secured by being fit to survive. Nature, though portrayed as benevolent, is, as Darwin noted,

(Continued on page 25, col. 3)

THE DELHI DIALOGUE

A *shamiana* spread between the Dharamsala and the Agiary at the Parsee Anjuman grounds in Delhi. Under its benign shade stood two trestle tables awaiting to be laden with high tea. Across the way members of the Delhi Parsee Anjuman and delegates to the Federation of Zoroastrian Anjumans of India made their way into Bhiwandiwalla Hall for the evening reception and get-together. The executive council of the Federation had met earlier in the day for their bi-annual meeting from which the press had been barred.

Shiavax P. Nargolwalla, vice-president of the North Zone of the Federation of Zoroastrian Anjumans in India noted the aim of the Federation is "to look after the interests of our community and also to look after the economic and social welfare. We are sincerely trying to solve our burning problems".

The Federation originated out of a proposal made at the Second World Zoroastrian Congress in 1964. It came into being in 1971. Fifty-two Anjumans have joined the Federation and to facilitate administration it has been divided into four zones with a vice-president at the head of each zone.

Nadirshah R. Mulla, president of the Federation spoke on the various problems facing the community "the first problem, particularly in Bombay, is poverty. Upto ten years ago you never saw a Parsee beggar. It's partly due to too much charity. They collect sufficient money to go on from day to day." He gave the instance of the Parsee beggars clamouring for alms outside Albless Baug. The authorities could only stop the beggars if there was an official complaint lodged. "No one complained," he noted. "We are encouraging begging, if I may put it strongly, which was not there before.

"Another problem is employment. Parsees were pioneers in industry once. But not today. It is our wish to help and encourage young Parsee entrepre-

neurs. Another problem in Bombay is housing.... half the Parsees are housed in charity blocks... but we are only at the fringe" of solving the problem he noted.

Dr. R. R. Marshall, secretary of the Surat Parsee Panchayat asked why *behidins* could not become priests, and be allowed to perform only simple ceremonies. He commented on the fact that there were no Parsi missionaries but only priests who earned their living by priesthood. He reminisced on the past glory of the Parsees and spoke on the declining Parsee population. He felt it was partly because many young girls were marrying out of the community. When they were asked why, they replied that there are not many intelligent young Parsee men to marry.

Questions were invited from the audience and Major Banker asked about the system for the disposal of the dead. M. J. R. Gheyara, vice-president of the west zone noted "In Surat we have sold some of the Dokhma lands. There are 60 deaths a year—20 from outside Surat and 40 from Surat. I for one feel that some of the assets should be used in a more productive manner. We should be bold enough to act practically. Are we still so orthodox? We are not. I don't know why we are afraid to take the step. I am glad the fire is lit in the hearts of our younger generation. This is a time when everybody will ask a question and expect a reply—that two plus two equals four—so you can't answer that in the *Vendidad* it was so and so."

"The last thing I expected to discuss today is what happens after our death," said Mr. Mulla. "We are concerned with our community not what happens to them after death. This controversial question is not to be discussed today."

Mr. Nargolwalla added that "In Delhi when I first became president the rule was that when a burial took place, non-Parsees had to sit outside and were not allowed to pay the last respects. Gradually it was possible to change this system. It may not be possi-

ble in an orthodox stronghold like Bombay but the winds of change are there."

The concluding speaker, Dadi Mistry, Trustee of the Delhi Anjuman noted "The Federation is seized by a revolution in the thinking of the community." He felt the problems discussed that evening would be tackled by the Federation and not shelved.

Sanober Marker

Warden (Continued from page 24)

ruthless in her demands for fitness to survive. In contrast to Darwin stands Prof. Kuropotkin's theory of Compassionate Aid to make as many as possible fit to survive. Dr. Daruwala appeals on the one hand on compassionate grounds and also proposes to promote our welfare by sheer strength of sinew.

Dr. Homi Mehta of the B. D. Petit Parsi General Hospital narrated that his hands were full with work but his palms were empty. Uptil now he had begged and borrowed to run, maintain and expand the hospital. He felt himself defeated by the demands of the inmates and the flocks of their sympathetic visitors who over-crowd the lobbies and sometimes defiantly and at other times clandestinely violate all hospital decency and discipline. He uttered a word of warning that Donors now appeared exhausted in resources and patients must learn to rest content with less and less.

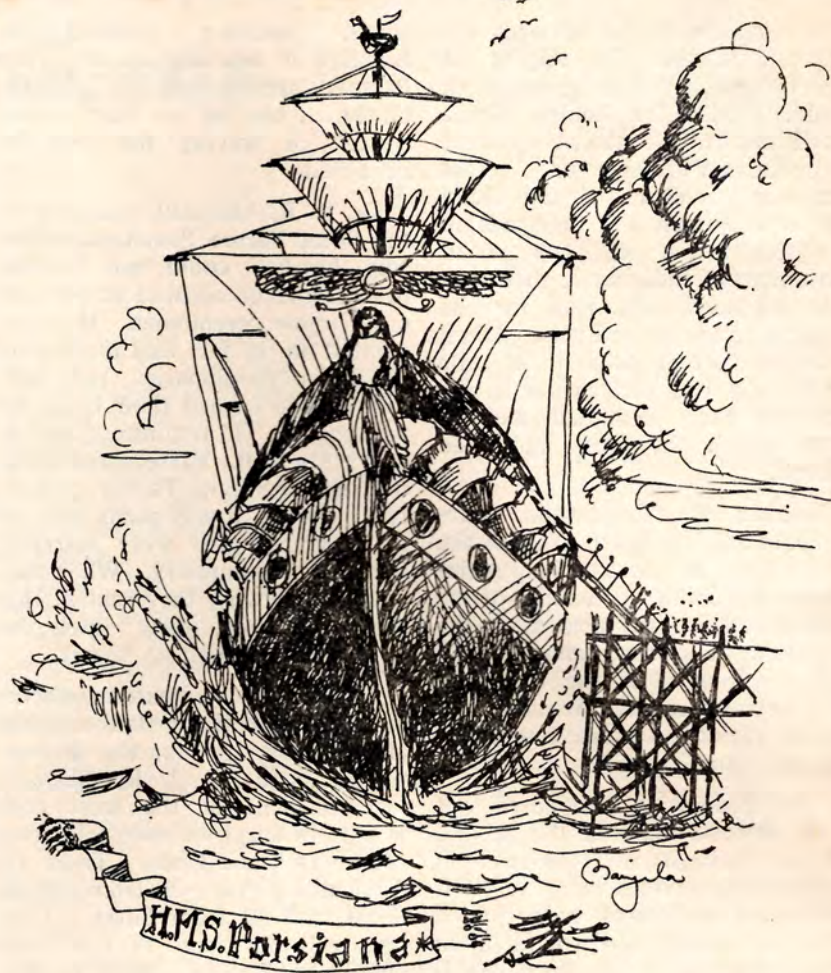
Jal Heerjibendin, editor of the *Kaiser-e-Hind* who summarised the minutes of the meeting felt the housing problem was acute but not hopeless. His lament was that most of our institutes are run by committees which lack harmony. They differ and differ indefinitely and finally agree to disagree. Nothing gets done. Work piles up. Inquiries are never answered. Efficiency is at its lowest. Heerjibendin believes that at the root of all our troubles is our archaic, senseless election system which needs to be scrapped as it is non-representative. It is too restrictive to be truly representative. He promised support through his weekly to any movement to reform the election system. Parsis must now awake and arise or be forever fallen.

SHOULD PARSIS LEAVE BOMBAY?

by Feroza Paymaster

Over the years Parsis have been gradually migrating. Most of them leave in search of greener pastures away from the strife and struggles of life in India. Yet it is in India that Parsis have realized their full potential in all walks of life. Will they fare as well overseas or are they better off here? Will the community and the religion continue to exist if the exodus continues? With these queries in mind, we asked our seven interviewees this month whether Parsis should leave Bombay.

The interviewees were chosen to represent a cross-section of the community. They are not a random sample and, therefore, deductions as to what per cent are in favour of leaving or staying cannot be drawn.



Rati Kapadia, 46, Head of Ratan Tata Industrial Stall

"I wouldn't mind going to some place in India itself, if I had better work opportunities, but I would not go abroad. The latter may give me a chance of seeing foreign countries, but the companionship, warmth and unity which is found here, cannot be found there." If she left Bombay, Ms Kapadia says she would like to go to a place where there are other Parsis: "Not that I would hate others or think they are unfriendly, but it would give me moral courage if our people are there. If there is no *dokhma* or fire temple, I would still go. God is within us, and one can always sit at home and do the necessary. Trusts and charities are

always there to support the fire temples" if the Parsis left but the community would certainly disintegrate.

Ms Kapadia feels that there are enough job opportunities in Bombay. "Nowadays industries have improved a lot, and if one really tries, he can push his way through. The housing problem is the same everywhere." The main attraction in Bombay is family ties. "It's the main reason for my not wanting to leave Bombay. However, once the children are settled, it would be alright." But she would definitely return for a visit. "Bombay is my birth-place and I would really miss it."



Dhanoo Khusrookhan, 28, Marketing Research Officer, Air-India

"In the present circumstances one would say leave the country. Parsis are sixth on the list for kickouts. Although Bombay has been safe upto now, you tend to wonder what's going to happen. Will we be accepted after 20 years?" Dhanoo feels it would be lovely to move to a place where there are other Parsis. "In a place like London one has lots of friends and relatives but if you leave you want to leave for material prospects. Job prospects are good in Australia, I'm told that one can earn and save at the same time. But the choice is really between family ties and material prospects."

Dhanoo says it is not necessary that there should be a *dokhma* and fire temples in the place she

chooses to settle. "You don't need fire to pray. It is in your heart. As it is there are so many here in Bombay, and how often do we visit them?" If Parsis moved out, "the trusts would still be there to support the fire temples. It is only the *mobeds* we are supporting. The thing to do would be to leave the top five (fire temples) and close down the rest. Yes, the community would disintegrate if we were to leave. We are so adaptable that our children would not get the hang of occasions like *Pateti* and *Navroze*."

If she left, Dhanoo says she would come back to Bombay for a visit. "I don't hate the country or the people, it's the Government."



Hoshi Driver, 23, Clerk, Central Bank of India

"I think we should stay in Bombay. Parsis have been the main founders of commerce in the city, and the community has established itself here for years. I for one wouldn't want to leave my family, job, all the amenities I enjoy here, unless I really had better opportunities. Bombay is quite safe. It all depends on how we live. If we stay together, it is better."

Driver feels that job opportunities are "easily available in the

city, but housing is the main problem. In every metropolitan city it is the same. The trusts of the community should be resourcefully utilized to meet this need. We have land here."

If he were to leave, Driver says he would like to go to a place where there are other Parsis. He would also require the presence of a *dokhma* and fire temple. "I don't think I would particularly come back to Bombay to get married, but I would come and visit my family here."



Goolbai Master, 65, Housewife

"I'm in favour of our leaving. Even after getting a degree it is not easy to get a job. There's too much favoritism. Influence is needed to secure a good position. Also from what we read in the papers the safety of Bombay appears to be rather doubtful. I don't think we could be much better off in other Indian cities. If we go abroad, we would be appreciated much more. There are good opportunities for bright students, and they are very well paid. To maintain their standard of living they would certainly have to work hard and would have to do without the luxury of

servants."

If Parsis did leave, the community may break up "but family ties can be maintained by regular visits and correspondence." The *agiaris* would still be supported by the trust money. Ms Master says she would want to go to a place where there are other Parsis. Her first preference is England. "I'm very devoted to religious things so I'd very much prefer to have a fire temple. Of course it is impossible to expect a *dokhma* abroad." She would want to come back to Bombay "for a visit. How often would depend on the finance."



Noshir Jesia, 49, Business Partner, Trading Company

"Looking back at the 27 years of Independence I feel that those who want to make it good—have a better life—should go. They should go to the western countries where life is much more systematic and rewarding. Though I have known of Parsis who have gone abroad and then returned. There would be no point in moving to another city in India as Bombay holds the greatest attraction. It is also the safest Indian city.

"At this stage I would think twice before leaving. Years back I had thought of going, but I am not technically qualified," says Jesia. If he left now, he would want to go to a place

where there are other Parsis. The presence of a fire-temple "would be a consideration". The *dokhma* "is not a necessity but I'd prefer it since it's an age-old custom."

The chances of the community disintegrating would "depend on how many Parsis leave." Jesia feels, however, that family ties are not so strong abroad. As for the plight of the *agiaries* he says, "if Parsis do leave nobody will look after them and they will lie there just like some of the churches near Bassein Fort."

If he did leave Jesia says he would come back for a visit "depending on what I leave behind."



Arnavaz Kermani, 21, Student Nurse, B. D. Petit Parsi General Hospital

"On the whole I think we must stay here since our living condition is quite high. I wouldn't leave Bombay, I am very comfortable here. It's safe where I live. If I had to leave Bombay, like if I was getting married to someone outside Bombay, I would. That's different." If she were to leave Bombay, Arnavaz says she would go to a place where there are Parsis since they would "look after other Parsis," and also where there are fire temples. As for *dokhmas* "it would not make any difference.

"The Parsi community would not break up if Parsis left. They would be scattered but they would

be there. However, they should stay in India. If everyone keeps going abroad, India is going to come down a little." Supporting the *agiaries* would be "a problem. I suppose Parsis can donate by money-order from other parts of India."

"The families would feel the distance in the beginning but they would get used to it." If she left, Arnavaz says "I would come back to Bombay for a visit. Also, if I didn't have someone there, if there were no Parsis around, I would come back to Bombay to get married."



Dhun Mehta, 69, Retired

"No, I feel Parsis should remain in Bombay. They have thrived here for the past many years, and in Bombay with its cosmopolitan outlook there's plenty of room for the progress of the community. The city is congested, but deserving Parsis have chances of securing jobs, for the simple reason that employers in private enterprises attach greater importance to merit and hard work than to communal outlook. Also as far as Indian cities go Bombay is comparatively safe. Parsis can maintain their standard of living, if they don't get over-extravagant.

"Parsis have a future here and they should build up their country instead of going abroad. The community being so small it can ill afford to export Parsis from Bombay.

"I would not like to leave Bombay at all," says Mehta who has been here since 1953. "If at all I left I would go back to Calcutta." If he had to go to another place, Mehta feels "the climate would be the deciding factor, more than the presence of Parsis, fire-temples, and *dokhmas*."

"I would like to come back once in 3 to 4 years, to see how much uglier Bombay has become—for curiosity's sake."

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TATA ENTERPRISES



Can God Speak English?

by Geeta Doctor

"Our prayers as they exist are in dead languages," says Noshir H. Vajifdar explaining how he was inspired to rewrite them in one of the most living languages today—English. Entitled, *Let us Pray—to Ahura Mazda* the book contains a free rendering of prayers as they should be for a Zoroastrian, for whom the book is primarily meant, but its clear and simple style makes it accessible to any person who is interested in prayer.

Originally the Prophet revealed the word of God in Avesta and while this would have been perfectly adequate in those times, the tendency to cling to the original prayers in Avesta or even in some of the other languages into which they were translated such as Pazand or Pahlavi has led to a situation when Parsis have simply "ceased to pray," says Vajifdar. "Very few (if any at all) understand what they pray, or even know if they are using the correct pronunciation, intonation or punctuation," he notes. "Since our arrival in India almost 1300 years we have remained stagnant and no real effort has been made to move with the times and bring our religious ideas, practices and prayers in line with modern thought and development." This also explains why he feels that translations whether in Gujarati or English have a limited value, for unless they take into account the "mental environment" for which the prayers are meant, they become mechanical exercises lacking the beauty and depth of the original.

"I am not unprepared for vehement criticism from orthodox Zoroastrians at this attempt to 'profane' our sacred prayers," says Vajifdar who feels that the chanting of prayers in an ancient tongue has a magical effect which people might find soothing but which also has a tendency of rendering them meaningless. "Some people pray without realising what they are saying, so that their prayers become entirely irrelevant."

Soft spoken and mild, Vajifdar does not look like an iconoclast



Mr & Ms Vajifdar outside their Ooty home.

and it would perhaps be incorrect to describe him as such, for his radical views spring not so much from a desire to debunk existing modes of thought as from a deeply felt conviction about the necessity and value of prayers. He attributes this to the religious training of his school-days in Karachi, when each morning began with a prayer in Avesta, followed by a translation of it in Gujarati and English. "From these early days I took to saying my prayers in Gujarati from any translation I could lay my hands on, and even then I realised that some of the prayers carried little meaning in today's world." Much later when he visited the Parsi Mecca, Bombay, he describes the shock he received at the manner in which religious matters were conducted. "I was able to see for myself how our religion had degenerated, and how everything was left to the *mobeds*. The way they prayed and disposed of the various ceremonies left me thoroughly disgusted. Religion seemed to have been reduced to the fooling of the people and a mockery of God."

By this time Dr. M. N. Dhalla's book *Homage Unto Ahura Mazda* had been published and was to make a deep impression on him. "With its texts in Avestan,

Gujarati and English, and its simple yet attractive language and ideas, I took to it immediately. I gradually started praying in English."

It was only after his retirement in the quiet seclusion of his eucalyptus shaded cottage, in Ooty that Vajifdar had the idea of following the example of his Guru though of course in a much more modest form and with the specific intention of rekindling the attention of those who for one reason or the other had lost interest in the religion. "I was strengthened in my resolve to do something to preserve our religion when I saw young Parsis go over to Christianity because they said they did not know what their religion was all about. I have also a host of relatives and friends who have migrated out of India and I realise that for them, the religion of Zarathustra means little or nothing and still less to the children born in foreign lands.

"If today's leading Parsis and scholars took an interest and realised the futility of doing everything in a dead language there would be no need for Parsis, young or old to look outside for solace." Apart from the prayers the book, therefore, also attempts to provide in as brief and com-

(Continued on page 36, col. 1)

Extracts from "Let Us Pray"

Yatha Ahu Vairyo or the Ahunavar

Dear Ahura Mazda, men in this world lay claims to greatness for many a varied reason but the truly great man in Thine eyes is the one who is wholly righteous, who has acquired an insight into Thy Law of Asha and who guides and helps others along its path. Thy gift of Vohumano is vouchsafed unto them who serve Thy cause

N.B.—The above two short prayers contain the very essence of our religion. The two basic tenets of Zoroastrianism are (a) the practice of righteousness and (b) serving God's purpose in life, i.e., by serving humanity and specially by helping the poor and lowly. The first aims at purity within one's self, i.e., strictly following goodness in thought, word and deed, until it becomes natural or instinctive to one's self. The second directs us towards active goodness, i.e., to do good to God's beautiful world and all those inhabiting it. Purity of one's own conduct and active goodness to others sum up the requirements of a perfect Zoroastrian.

The words *Ashoi* and *Asha* as used in the Avesta convey something more—much more—than mere righteousness. In the Avesta, Ahura Mazda himself has been described as the one "who has advanced the farthest in *Asha*." "The Supreme is also pictured as journeying along the Path of Asha at the head of all His Creation." Asha is there "the changeless Eternal Law of God, His First Plan according to which all this Universe has come into being and obeying which, it is progressing towards its destined fulfilment. The best definition of this Asha is contained in the last inspired stanza of Lord Tennyson's "In Memorium":

and purpose in life. Thy very strength and power are reserved for those who succour the poor and lowly.

Ashem Vohu

Righteousness (*Ashoi*) is not only good but it is the highest blessing which Thou, Ahura Mazda, hast bestowed upon man. The supreme bliss which lies in *Ashoi* comes to them who practise it for its own sake, that is, for the pure love of it, without thought of fear or favour, or of punishment or reward.

'That God which ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,
And one far off divine event
To which the whole creation moves.'

Asha and the Law of Asha have therefore a deep spiritual significance indicating the Law which governs the entire Creation of the Supreme Being or Ahura Mazda, the law of progress, movement, harmony, goodness, justice and love. It is an all-embracing spiritual law which governs everything and everyone everywhere.

The quotations given above are from Prof. Iruch J. S. Taraporewala's *Ahuna Vairya and The Argument of the Gathas*.

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A dancer is movement, just as a fountain of water is movement, though water itself may spring from hidden pools of stillness. Talking to Asha Coorlawala one immediately became aware of this, as her hands, her eyes, her delicately arched eyebrows moved in sympathetic unison to explain what she said. And yet, one sensed in her, a central core of stillness. This apparent contradiction is what modern dance technique exploits with its emphasis on stress and anti-stress, and what gives a special significance to the name Mandala, that Asha has chosen for her



A LEAP INTO THE LIGHT

By Geeta Doctor

modern dance troupe which recently performed in Bombay. Mandala can mean many things, very simply it can mean a circular design, but at a deeper level it can mean resolving the inner core with the outer reality, the centre of the circle with its circumference.

"I feel that I am the product of two cultures," said Asha speaking of the synthesis that Mandala is seeking to bring between Western and Eastern forms of dancing. "Both of them are a part of me. Why not combine the techniques of both these cultures to express what I am? It is not something that I am doing merely to be different. Modern dance is basically a revolt against subjects and attitudes that are too conservative. It has to be if it is to make itself relevant to the times. When I choreograph a dance I have to work at it till I find the exact movement which will express my idea. No other movement will do. Only then will it be true to the idea. True to itself."

Asha is not the first dancer to attempt such a synthesis. In India, Uday Shanker, Ram Gopal and Mrinalini Sarabhai to name only a few have also tried, but whereas their interpretations consisted mainly of grafting technical innovations on a traditional foundation of Indian dance, Asha seeks to evolve a new form altogether, combining her knowledge of modern dance with her study of Bharat

gramme which was a weeding-out process between the merely enthusiastic and the truly talented. "Few students are selected for the apprentice programme. The level of the class at the Graham school is very strict," said Asha vividly recalling her first audition before the grande dame of modern dance, Martha Graham.

"The door opens and you are sent in alone. At first I didn't even see Martha. You feel terrified. And then you see her and she gives this very special incredible feeling of support to a person. You forget everything else and just dance." Asha, who has

since then studied under several other famous dancers such as, Merce Cunningham, Pearl Lang and Yuriko, finds that her feelings towards Martha Graham are inclined to be ambivalent. "She is like God. No one can humanly reach out to her. I respect her as an artist but not very much as a person. She exhausts people."

In the Mandala dance group, there is "nobody in charge." All of them are trained professional dancers who contribute their ideas towards the evolution of a new dance. "Most of us are between twenty-five and thirty-five and all of us have had formal experience in various dance companies. We find that working together in this manner is much more rewarding."

Describing how she choreographed "Yakshi" she said, "The first time I heard Ananda's *Snowflower* I said, 'I've got to dance to that' and listening to the sound of the music she would try out the movements flowing from it, noting 'I like that movement' and then going on to the next."

"I respect the human body and don't feel that it should be hidden or covered too much. The body can never lie. That is why I felt that I could never get used to the violence that was expressed in some of the dance forms," said Asha explaining some of the reasons why she felt glad to be back in India. "You know the sheer physical violence of it," she emphasized suddenly contorting her body into a spasm of pure animal

rage. "I felt it was something I could not understand. Life is so much more gracious here," said Asha looking serene again in the cool seclusion of her green and white bedroom, "I just don't feel that kind of tension in me."

"That's a weird question" said Asha replying to whether she had any strong feelings about being a Parsi. "I've never had to question the fact that I'm a Parsi. That's just what I am. When people ask me about my nationality, I say I am an Indian, and if they ask me about my religion, I say I am a Zoroastrian. I don't say I'm a Parsi because they're probably not familiar with the term."

"I can't wear a *Sudra* with a leotard," confessed Asha who felt that since she spent almost seven hours a day in a leotard and had to change her costume five or six times daily it would be impractical for her to continue wearing a *sudra-kusti*. But talking of the need to preserve some of the traditional Parsi customs, Asha emphatically advocated maintaining the Towers of Silence with their ancient rituals of disposing the dead.

"I think its beautiful. It brings us so close to Nature and to primitive Man. Primitive rituals can be beautiful." Asha denied that this line of reasoning could be taken to mean that she would advise a return to living in caves and other such primitive forms of existence. "If I were to choose my dream house I would have a whole lot of very antique pieces and combine them with a completely modern type of furniture with chrome fittings," she said explaining that it was a combination of the primitive with the modern that she saw in having the Towers of Silence in the context of today's society. "Besides, ecologically also I think it's very good. It gives us that whole, big park over there. It doesn't pollute the air. I think it's more beneficial. Particularly in big cities where there is so much pollution from the exhaust pipes of cars and from factories. If possible it would be good to have them in other cities also. Though I realise that in a place like New York it might not be possible."

"People should have a right to (Continued on page 36, col. 2)

INTERPRETATIONS



"We wish you to respond to our performance spontaneously," says a note to the Mandala Dance Theater Company introducing their repertoire of modern dances. Two girls sitting behind us obviously took this to mean that they were expected to give a running commentary of their impressions, and, watching Guest Artist, Yuriko, interpreted her movements thus—"She has lost something—she is searching for it—she can't find it—so she is torturing herself by pulling her hair and scratching her body—now she is trying to kill

herself." In fact this dance was meant to represent "End of Blossom time and Angry Sea". Their reactions were however on a higher level than that of a gentleman sitting in front with his family. He responded spontaneously by gently nodding off to sleep while his brood concentrated on consuming remarkable quantities of popcorn and wafer chips.

It is perhaps unfair to comment on the performance from two such random examples of audience reaction. As unfair perhaps as to put up a performance in a strange

language and expect the audience to understand it. For there is no doubt that modern dance is speaking in a new language and the audience is doubly inhibited from making a response, firstly because it does not understand the language, and secondly because it is embarrassed to admit that it does not understand it. This leads people to take up extremist positions where they might say (as some did) "I don't like all this modern dance business. Why do they have to fling their arms and legs about so much?" or, more mildly, "I'm afraid I like classical dance much better. It's so much more graceful," which is as absurd as saying that because one only understands English one does not like French. These difficulties could have been overcome if at some point in the performance the members of the Mandala Dance Theater Company could have come forward and explained the scope of modern dance as Asha Coorlawala and her partner, Major Burchfield, demonstrated earlier during a lecture demonstration at the Sydenham College last July. This was a very instructive and interesting session as it explained the whole vocabulary, as it were, of modern dance in comparison with the movements of ballet. While one cannot quarrel with the purist who will insist that good art does not require an interpreter, there is no doubt that in this case a little explanation would have made it easier for the audience to respond better.

Under these circumstances we can only evaluate the performance in terms of what it sought to achieve than in what it actually achieved, for regardless of individual reactions there is no denying that under the dedicated and idealistic guidance of Asha Coorlawala, the Mandala Dance Theater Company could provide the impetus for a whole new approach to dancing in India. As the programme notes, Indian dance, "though vastly expressive and beautiful in its mythological mooring does not seem to admit or accept the present" which is what modern dance with its relentless search for new dance forms and emphasis on individual expression seeks to assimilate into its consciousness. No art can afford to

ignore reality and it is by focussing attention on this fact that modern dance could add a new dimension to Indian dance.

The group was remarkable in many ways not the least of which being the high degree of professionalism that each of them brought to the work as a whole. Each dancer contributed a highly individualistic, deeply personal interpretation to the performance, so that every facet shone with an equal but distinct impression. There was, for example, the tragic intensity of Yuriko's performance, which was closest to the Martha Graham manner, especially in a dance like "The Cry" with her long, dark red-blooded dress and severe hairstyle, and yet very Japanese in her kimono-like garments and samurai stance in a dance such as, "End of Blossom time and Angry Sea." Yuriko's performance compelled the audience to share the high degree of concentration that modern dance demands both from the performer and the audience. Indeed with her rigid, highly precise movements she wove a steely web of emotions that held the audience almost effortlessly within her grip.

In the same way Rebecca West brought the rippling strength of a panther in the act of springing, to her movements, while Asha Coorlawala exemplified grace in quite another manner, more gentle, more smiling, more static, like the imperceptible movement of a flower about to open. And yet (without going into detailed descriptions of the individual qualities of the others) all of them could submerge their individual personalities and orchestrate their movements in the total composition of the dance as for example in "Celebrations" where with the dancers, both men and women, in identical costumes, one no longer became conscious of them as dancers, but as particles in a bright pattern of movement that caught the gaiety and light heartedness of the mood indicated by the title.

Paradoxically, the most significant contribution of the Mandala Dance Theater Company's performance, that is to say their use of dance to explore inner states of consciousness, was from the

audience's point of view the most unsuccessful, though this should not lessen its importance. It was perhaps inevitable that dances such as "Forgotten One" or even the starkly symbolic "Events... Enter... Trapped... No Exit" should fall flat. For even though they may have been exploring apparently universal problems such as those of loneliness and the futility of life, they did so purely in Western terms so that to an Indian audience which has not yet had to face the problem of alienation or which believes life to be an endless cycle of rebirths, signifying cause and effect, dances such as these appear almost meaningless. Yet one cannot but commend the very austerity of their approach and the exciting possibilities it could suggest in opening a hitherto unexplored region in the realm of Indian dancing. The possibilities are immense for, as everyone knows, there exists a very strong and unique tradition of dance in India and this could well become an instrument for exploring hidden streams of Indian consciousness.

This was what made "Yakshi", choreographed by Asha Coorlawala, of special importance to Indian audiences. In this dance, set to the vibrant tones of Ananda Shankar's composition, Asha is seeking to explore her idea of Indian womanhood using the symbols of modern dance. It is a deeply interesting experience where as a dancer Asha comes into her own, revealing herself to be a dancer of unusual integrity and sensitivity. But even "Yakshi" is a promise of things to come rather than an achievement in itself, for it seems almost too brief to be entirely satisfying and except for Asha who alone seemed to flow into the spirit of the dance, the others appeared to harden into Indian dance poses that were as expected as they were facile.

This is of course a danger that anyone who tries to synthesize two divergent forms, such as modern dance and Indian dance, must face—the danger of producing an artificial mixture that will do justice to neither form. This is, however, a challenge that Asha is only too

(Continued on page 36, col. 3)

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God (Continued from page 30)

prehensive a manner as possible an idea of the basic tenets of the Zoroastrian faith. There are also 12 prayers in the original from Dhalla's book and a section entitled "Some Poems of Piety" where the author has adapted poems from various sources to show that the basic humanism behind the Zoroastrian faith is one that finds an echo in people's minds the world over.

In fact Vajifdar, who throughout his career as a senior official in the State Bank of India, has travelled extensively, is of the opinion that Parsis would do well in adopting some of the religious practices of other communities. "Some of my most emotional experiences have been while listening to the singing of hymns in the Gurdwaras of Delhi. Why couldn't we introduce music in our prayers?" asked Vajifdar who is himself a keen musician. He also believes that some effort should be made to introduce congregational prayers. "In Karachi, for example, the last 10 or 15 days of the year which are reserved for prayers of the dead, the Parsis of Karachi used to congregate at Jehangir Bagh for a brief period of 20 minutes. This congregation normally attracts more than a thousand people each day which goes to show what we are missing in not having this form of prayer. This system was actually introduced by the late Jamshed N. R. Mehta."

The most important qualification however feels Vajifdar is that whatever prayers are said they should be understood by the person concerned. "I want my religion to be practical and a part of my daily life and routine. I like to feel that I am talking to my Creator, person to person, with feeling and understanding, and I want my relationship with him to be free of all ideas of mysticism and magic. There is no need to do away with tradition but it should not do away with reality." In his book Vajifdar maintains that he has used as little Avesta terminology as possible. He has worked mainly from translations and by adding to or modifying these, has strived to "preserve the spirit and sub-

lime philosophy" of the originals even while rendering them in simple English which will appeal to the understanding and emotions of anyone who reads them.

Living in the midst of a small community, as he and his wife Freany do in Ooty, emphasises the need for each member of the community to contribute something himself and not delegate certain responsibilities to *mobeds* or priests who might not be there notes Vajifdar. In this context he relates a small instance of the impact that his book has made. "At a recent funeral at Ooty, after the usual Avestan prayers, I recited the English funeral prayer given in my book and said these prayers slowly and with feeling, as they should be said. After the funeral, some of those present asked me for a copy of this prayer but one Parsi lady younger than me, made me promise that I would say these prayers for her when she died. This was more eloquent a tribute than I could expect." ●

Asha (Continued from page 33) go wherever they want to" says Asha commenting on the fact that many Parsis are now leaving the country and settling abroad, particularly in America. "Besides its not just the Parsis who are doing this. A lot of Hindus and people from other communities have also settled down in America and are living there quite happily. It's just that the world has become a smaller place."

"I'm all for integration" explained Asha whose own dance group is fully integrated racially. "I think all this business of pure blood and people not being able to marry outside the community is just bullshit." Asha felt "very definitely" that the Parsi community could do with some radical changes in attitude. "All this nonsense must stop. Why can't there be any conversions? Who knows what the Parsis were originally? People should have the right to choose whom to marry. If they want to marry non-Parsis they should be allowed to. It works both ways. Either you can say that in such a marriage you will have two backgrounds to draw your strength from, which makes it so much richer, or you can say that the one background may be

weakened and that it may stop developing in the new environment. It depends on the person." She did not think that Parsis were more inclined to accept foreigners marrying into the community than Indians, even though the children in such a situation turn out to be more "fair". "I think that's part of the whole Indian thing and not a characteristic of the Parsis alone, this idea that a fair child is more beautiful and that it's desirable to have a light complexion. My Grandmother for example would be much happier if I married an Indian because then she feels I would remain in India." ●

Interpretations (Continued from page 34)

aware of and there is no reason to suppose that with her sensitivity and dedication, it cannot be overcome. Any search is fraught with obstacles but this does not mean that the search should not be undertaken. The Mandala Dance Theater Company's performance represents a search for a new mode of expression and it is in this context that we applaud Asha Coorlawala's spirit as a pioneer who has chosen the difficult task of "finding new paths to tread on."

Geeta Doctor

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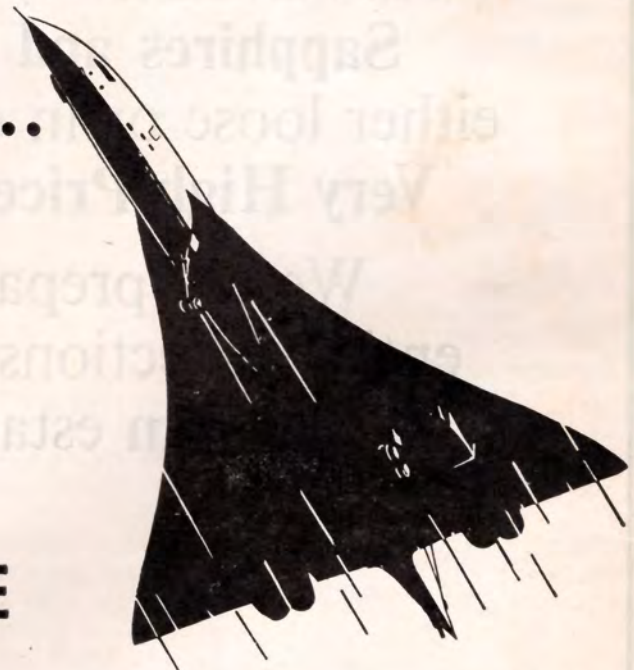
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