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A Tale of Two Federations

The venue was the Fariyas Hotel in Bombay's Colaba area. The gathering comprised of the leaders of the Parsi community throughout India, with the exception of the Bombay and Surat Parsi Panchayat representatives. The purpose was to determine the future of the community's apex body, the Federation of the Parsi Zoroastrian Anjumans of India.

Due to an unprecedented chain of events dating back to the holding of the Third World Zoroastrian Congress and even to the formation of the Federation itself, the two major Panchayats of the country had withdrawn from the Federation. The Bombay trustees resigned on the grounds that the Federation served no purpose and was a dissenting force in the community ("The Big Lie", *Parsiānā* February 1978) and the Surat Panchayat ostensibly on similar grounds but primarily because as its president, Maneck Gheyara, noted, they always follow the Bombay Panchayat's lead.

From the start of the two-day meet on April 8 and 9, it was apparent that the 11 odd delegates representing the Anjumans of Delhi, Calcutta, Madras, Ahmedabad, Pune (Poona), Elav, and the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjuman, had come to determine the causes for the abrupt withdrawal of the BPP and to persuade the trustees to reconsider their resignation. While the delegates were annoyed with the BPP for not taking them into confidence before taking such a drastic step, the bulk of their resentment was reserved for the controversial president of the Delhi Parsi Anjuman and Federation

vice-president, Shiavax Nargolwala, whose frequent attacks on the BPP, especially at the World Congress in January, were viewed as one of the main causes of the split. Indeed when Ardeshir K. Batliwalla, the Calcutta representative and Federation vice-president from the East Zone, proposed Nargolwala's name to chair the meet, the motion was vociferously opposed by Behram Sidhwa, president of the Bangalore Parsi Zoroastrian Anjuman, Dr Sarosh Anklesaria, president of the Ahmedabad Parsi Panchayat and Dinshaw Irani, vice-president of the Iranian Zoroastrian Anjuman. They stated that Nargolwala had "provoked the Bombay Pan-

"We had (always) been working together ... it was unfortunate they did not take us into confidence."

chayat's resignation" and, therefore, his chairing the meet would further prejudice the Federation's case and diminish the chance for a rapprochement. But as Nargolwala pointed out, the constitution of the FPZAI only permitted him or Batliwalla to occupy the chair and as Batliwalla was reluctant to do so, he was left with no choice. "The chairman has no privileges," Nargolwala assured the delegates. "He only has a casting vote if there is a tie."

The doleful meeting then began

with Nariman Vacha, the executive secretary of the Federation, noting that no action had been taken on any matters since the September meeting of the executive council in Pune as the Federation president and BPP chairman, B. K. Boman-Behram had not signed the minutes. "This is the first time in the history of the Federation," lamented Batliwalla, "that the minutes have come six months late." Ms Mani Clubwala, the Madras Anjuman representative, said that Boman-Behram's heart attack and the holding of the World Congress in Bombay probably did not leave the chairman time to attend to the minutes. Nargolwala, however, noted that Boman-Behram's heart attack occurred in December and not October, but requested the delegates not to speculate as to the reasons for the delay as they had agreed to avoid controversial matters. But the delegates were aware that it was the pressure brought from certain sections of the Bombay community, who were opposed to any free discussions taking place at the World Congress, that had caused the chairman not to officially give his consent to the minutes by signing, even though Boman-Behram had agreed at the Pune meeting to a free and frank discussion taking place so long as there was no threat of disorder.

The delegates then turned to the next item on the agenda, the resignation of the BPP trustees from the Federation. The six-to-one decision of the BPP trustees on 25 January came abruptly with no prior notice to, or consultation with, the members of

the Federation. "We had (always) been working together," noted Batliwalla, "it was unfortunate they did not take us into confidence." Nargol-

"No resolution of the Federation has over-riding powers. Every Anjuman is autonomous."

wala defended his criticism of the BPP at the World Congress. "I simply said that the election system was faulty... (it) was not turning up good leaders. The fact that the Bombay Panchayat has appointed a committee (to consider reforms in the election system) shows my criticism was justified."

But Ms Homai Pudumjee, the Poona Panchayat representative said the BPP's election system was "an internal matter. What business have we to criticize... our goal is unity." Nargolwala contended that "people have a right to criticize. Do you deny my right to make a statement."

"As a matter of etiquette," said Sidhwa, "we should not criticize the Bombay Panchayat trustees." "I did not criticize any trustee," replied Nargolwala. But Pudumjee noted that Nargolwala had circulated cyclostyled copies of the BPP trustees'

sheras (notings) which originally appeared in *Parsiana* ("The Pateti Papers", *Parsiana* Dec.-Jan. 1977) in which three BPP trustees had personally maligned one another. "Why should you wash dirty linen in public?" asked Pudumjee. Nargolwala replied that Boman-Behram in his note of January 12 addressed to his co-trustees, in which he stated his reasons why the BPP should resign from the Federation, had made personal allegations against him. The note, which reiterated a charge that Nargolwala supported former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's caucus during the Emergency, was published in *The Jam-e-Jamshed*. Along with the sheras, Nargolwala circulated articles from *The Bombay Samachar* attacking the BPP and a six-page letter dated March 30, refuting Boman-Behram's narration of events and charging the Bombay Panchayat leader with putting his "political ambition ahead of the welfare of the Federation and of the community as a whole."

Furrokh Bamji, the co-opted member from the South Zone, noted that the BPP trustees were peeved about Nargolwala's statement at the World Congress that if a world body were to be formed, the headquarters should not be in Bombay. "This was an insult to Bombay," said Anklesaria.

Ms Clubwala said that she had

talked to three trustees of the BPP since arriving in Bombay the evening before and noted their grievance was that the Delhi Anjuman trustees "have consistently brought controversial subjects to every forum." Bamji concurred that in his meeting with the BPP trustees over the course of the past three weeks they had voiced similar grievances. "Even at the zonal conferences, controversial subjects were raised."

"The time is not ripe for controversial reforms," noted Sidhwa. "Do things for solidarity... the Federation brought (everyone) together. (Before) the Bombay Parsi Panchayat trustees sat in their ivory towers. If we said we were coming to Bombay and wanted to meet them, we got no response... I'm fighting a losing battle in Bangalore. My Anjuman told me to walk out if Nargolwala took the chair. After spending so much money (to fly here) should I walk out? Please don't go after the shadow, go for the substance. I see a great body disintegrating before my eyes. I am so charged with emotion. Tomorrow I may not be here. I don't know what my Anjuman will do." Sidhwa felt that Nargolwala should not have attacked the BPP at the World Congress. "They wanted some excuse (to leave the Federation)." He suggested the resignation be withheld and the constitution of the Federation be amended to exclude

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Puppet created by Dadi Pudumjee

"Before the Bombay Parsi Panchayat trustees sat in their ivory towers. If we said we were coming to Bombay and wanted to meet them, we got no response."

"controversial subjects being taken up... only time can make (old customs) change."

Nargolwala noted that within the existing framework of the constitution, if the Bombay, Surat and one or two other Panchayats or Anjumans opposed discussion of a controversial subject, it could not be taken up. The only time a controversial subject was ruled out, he said, "was by me" when he chaired the Federation once in the absence of Lady Hirabai Jehangir, a former president of the BPP and of the Federation. "It is wrong to say I am encouraging" controversies. Nargolwala also noted that "no resolution of the Federation has over-riding powers. Every Anjuman is autonomous."

The meeting then adjourned for

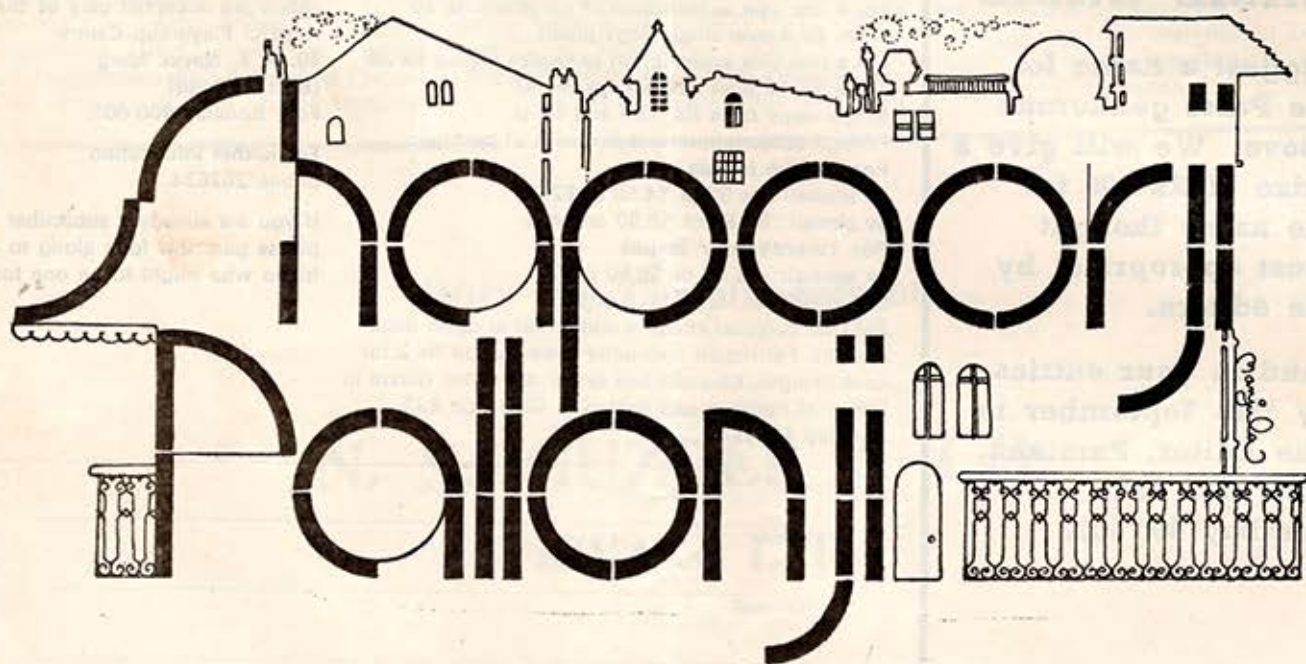
lunch but when the delegates regrouped in the afternoon they were reluctant to take any decisions on pending matters so long as the possibility of the BPP withdrawing its resignation remained. The delegates agreed that the items on the agenda could be taken up at the next executive council meeting which they tentatively scheduled for June 10 and 11 in Delhi. "We are living in a fool's paradise," Anklesaria said. "If the BPP leaves, many other panchayats will also leave." Irani, who laid the blame for the present state of affairs squarely on the Parsi Press, requested the delegates to be "sweet-sweet and goody-goody to the Bombay Parsi Panchayat." Several of the representatives suggested a delegation from the Federation meet with the trustees of the BPP to try and iron out differences.

Ms Clubwala was assigned to contact BPP trustee Jamshed Guzder and try and arrange a meeting.

When the delegates gathered at Fariyas Hotel on Sunday morning, many of them were perturbed to find Nargolwala's letter of March 30 addressed to the Federation members, published in *The Bombay Samachar*, *Parsi Tari Arsi* Sunday Editor's column. The day previously, *The Jam-e-Jamshed*, which refused to send a reporter to cover the meeting—the paper has never sent its representative to a meeting—carried an editorial stating the Federation be destroyed.

Despite the strained backdrop, the delegates drafted a resolution requesting the BPP to reconsider its resignation. A telephone call was made by Ms Clubwala to Gheyara in Surat, informing him of the resolution and requesting his Panchayat to rejoin. But Gheyara answered that "if Bombay stays out, we stay out."

Some of the delegates requested Nargolwala to strengthen their position by apologizing for his remarks at the World Congress. But Nargol-



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wala noted the remarks were made "in my personal capacity. I am willing to stand by what I say." Referring to two resolutions passed by the Delhi Anjuman, one which permits the anjuman to bestow honorary membership on any individual who has rendered service to Zoroastrians and Zoroastrianism and the other permitting non-Zoroastrian spouses membership in the Anjuman but without the right to use the fire temple or the *aramgarh*, Ms Pudumjee asked Nargolwala if he was "trying to get a following of people who think like you?"

"Boman-Behram has done a lot for the community and the city of Bombay... I say we respect each other's views."

"No," replied Nargolwala "we are a self-sufficient unit." He noted that unlike the BPP trustees who went against the law of the land in initially denying the use of Bombay's Cama Baug for the *navjote* ceremony of a Parsi child born of a Parsi father and non-Parsi mother and the priests of the Iranshah fire temple who permitted a German woman married to an Iranian Zoroastrian to enter the sacred *Atash Behram*, the Delhi Anjuman believed in observing legal and democratic norms. Ms Clubwala, however, said that as vice-president of the Federation, Nargolwala should not take up controversial subjects. Bamji termed the resolutions "another bombshell. The position of Mr Sidhwa and myself becomes very embarrassing... in the South, people say you are the Federation and the Federation is Shiavax Nargolwala."

"Give a holiday to controversial subjects," said Irani. "Nargolwala wants to have a following. Why are you rushing to the (news) papers. You are trying to show you are the champion of the reformers."

"You (Nargolwala) are undermining the standing of the Bombay Parsi Panchayat. That is what they are saying," said Ms Clubwala. "Yesterday, when I phoned Jimmy Guzder to convey our request for a meeting, he was very happy. He promised to bring Mr Boman-Behram and the other trustees... today I am afraid there has been a change," on account of Nargolwala's letter in *The Bombay Samachar*. "Mr Boman-Behram told Mr Guzder that Nargolwala was

accusing him of being a liar. 'You mean to say I want to come to somebody's house to fight with Mr Nargolwala?' Mr Boman-Behram asked. 'I will come if only Mr Nargolwala does not attend.'"

Nargolwala noted he had nothing to do with the timing of his letter's appearance in the *Samachar*. "I only defended myself. If Boman-Behram had not published his note, I would not have had to defend myself."

Noting that both Boman-Behram and Nargolwala had "gone through great strain," Ms Clubwala asked if Nargolwala had the magnanimity to forgive and forget "for the betterment of the Federation and the community." She suggested that Nargolwala meet with Boman-Behram separately at a later date. Nargolwala agreed to do so, adding that "Boman-Behram has done a lot for the community and the city of Bombay... I say we respect each other's views."

That evening at Guzder's house the Federation delegates—minus Nargolwala—met with the trustees of the BPP and despite intensive lobbying by the delegates, the trustees pointedly refused to reconsider their resignation.

"In the South, people say you are the Federation and the Federation is Shiavax Nargolwala."

Boman-Behram reportedly refused to meet with Nargolwala. The trustees suggested that the delegates expel Nargolwala from the Federation. But the delegates said the Panchayat should have done it instead of resigning. The trustees offered to create another national body under the aegis of the BPP. At first Guzder stipulated that no *anjuman* could belong to both the national bodies, but when the delegates objected to this clause, he expressed willingness to drop it. Trustee Erach Desai, who opposed the BPP leaving the Federation, reportedly kept silent throughout the meeting and took copious notes while BPP Trustee Jal Vimadlal, who clashed with Nargolwala at the World Congress, was said to have vehemently opposed reconciliation. The new association was reportedly to be formed before the June 10 meeting of the Federation in Delhi. The Delhi meeting was later postponed to 15 and 16 July. At the time of going to press no information has been received on the new association.

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European Zoroastrians

By Peter E. Dinshaw

The future of Zoroastrianism is a topic for earnest discussion in many circles of Bombay at present. The recent survey of Zoroastrians in the U.K. will have drawn the attention of Zoroastrians there, even if briefly, to the question of the future of our religion.

One of the fundamental features of Zoroastrianism is its inherent flexibility. During the course of its long history, it has survived the worst vicissitudes of time and adapted itself to the circumstances which its followers have found themselves in. The increasing number of Zoroastrians arriving in Europe are immediately faced with the choice of abandoning their religion or continuing to profess it. Unless a Zoroastrian is strong-minded concerning his religion, the temptations to abandon it may eventually prove too great especially in a society where it is easiest, and also the norm, to profess no religion.

The Zoroastrian in Europe, particularly the one who through distance or choice, has little contact with Zoroastrian House in London, typically finds himself in a situation where there is no temple for worship, few ceremonial or communal occasions and no local priest to perform religious duties. There are often no Zoroastrians in the neighbourhood and in addition, many Zoroastrians may marry non-Zoroastrians. At this point, allegiance to a particular creed might well collapse.

The smallness of the Zoroastrian community has been one of its main features since the downfall of the Sassanian Empire. Zoroastrianism proved that it could adapt itself from being a large, universal religion to having a small following. But never before has Zoroastrianism been faced with such a high degree of worldwide fragmentation and declining numbers as today. Beginning with the precept that Zarathustra's teachings are a valuable addition to world knowledge and should be kept alive, every think-

ing Zoroastrian, especially those who have made a new start in the West, should ask himself, "What can I do to ensure the survival of Zarathustra's message to mankind?" The divine status accorded to Zarathustra's teachings only emphasizes the responsibility of those who consider themselves his followers to consider this question.

Before venturing into the hazardous area of how Zoroastrianism might adapt and survive the pressures of modern society, it should first be established what can and what cannot be changed. What we cannot change and do not wish to change are the essential principles as taught by Zarathustra, embracing all that is fundamental to Zoroastrianism. Anything in addition to this has been created by societies past and present, in order to satisfy the social needs of man. Our criteria in examining the "non-inherent" aspects of Zoroastrianism should be, "Is this practice good or bad? Is it consistent with Zoroastrianism? Is it beneficial to man or harmful, or just superfluous?"

Zarathustra's teachings are moral and philosophical, whereas these "non-inherent" aspects of Zoroastrianism, those created by men other than the Prophet and are not in the *Gathas*, broadly fall into three categories: ceremonies, rituals and customs; methods of transmitting religious knowledge and methods of ministering

teachings, and the onus is clearly on the individual to discipline himself to do what is best. This means that no one should be afraid to speak his mind on any matter concerning his religion. Those living in Europe are no longer expected to maintain the level of social conformity to the degree demanded in the more traditional centres.

Ceremony, ritual and custom are the most obvious aspects of Zoroastrianism which disappear among Zoroastrians in the U.K. or begin to differ from those practised in India and Iran. This absence of traditional ritual from everyday life however, provides the opportunity to reappraise the form and significance of these rites and to bring their value into new perspective.

Zarathustra taught in his own vernacular. True enough, Avesta and Pazand sound more beautiful than English or Gujarati and even Farsi, but the only people who lose out by not understanding Zarathustra's teachings and prayers are Zoroastrians. It is up to the Zoroastrian in Europe to lead the way in reading and understanding Zarathustra's teachings in the vernacular and to encourage the formulation of revised ceremonial which embodies the true spirit of Zoroastrianism in a manner comprehensible to all. The spirit of our enquiring age demands this at least.

There is one more point which in

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the religion.

Zoroastrianism is a religion in which there is no dogmatism from without, and in which blind faith is explicitly discouraged. It is a religion based on the comprehension and practice of

these days of ever shrinking numbers, must command the attention of the "thinking" Zoroastrian. It is the subject of proselytization. All our ancestors must have been converts at one time. We owe it to them, in acknowledge,



by this system, but there can be no doubt that on the whole it has led to a lack of inquiry and even a degree of insincerity and corruption. The ignorance of many priests about their own religion is at times scandalous. It is difficult to see how a more tolerant and enlightened outlook can ever be attained when many of the guardians of the faith are themselves both at a disadvantage educationally and unwilling to undertake the task of improving themselves and their position. The example of the Christian Church might be taken, where the priesthood is open to anyone who by conviction or choice wishes to become a priest. The number of priests might decline in future, but these would receive a stipend for their services, and not depend on voluntary contributions. This would work, provided the community was large enough to warrant the services of a full-time priest. Where the community is too small to support a full-time priest, the answer would be a system of lay-priests qualified to perform simple

Being a Parsi is not necessarily concomitant to being a Zoroastrian.

ceremonies and also continue in their own occupation.

The declining number of candidates for the priesthood is a well-known problem in Bombay. With the present system of uncertain income and out-dated training methods it is no wonder. Essentially, it is only the Bombay Parsi Panchayat which has the means to initiate any change in this area but it is still the responsibility of Zoroastrians in Europe to put forward suggestions for the future. This responsibility should not be shirked through fear or lethargy, through cowardice and complacency. Zoroastrianism has proved over and over again that it can withstand all manner of questioning and inquiry and that it can adapt to the needs of diverse societies if its followers are prepared to listen and accept the necessary changes.

Peter Dinshaw, 21, is studying Modern Arabic and Development Economics at the University of Durham. Born in England, he is descended from the Viccaji and Pestonji Meherji family of Hyderabad.

ment of the rightness of their choice, and also to those who shielded the religion from adversity, to show that we value Zoroastrianism as much as they did. One way to do this would be to allow all peoples to share in Zarathustra's wisdom fully. And Zoroastrians living in the West should also remember that exclusivity is decidedly against the practice in the modern world and is often most unpalatable to the younger generation.

Many fear that a number of people would become Zoroastrians in order to take advantage of the large charities of Bombay. This is unlikely. The policy of accepting converts could be one of conversion by request, not by invitation. The numbers involved would likely be small in Europe, mostly being spouses. The suggestion that the new recruit would then rush to Bombay to claim his share of charity is very dubious, especially if he were a resident of a "welfare state". In any case, these charities are set aside for Parsis; being a Parsi is not necessarily concomitant to being a Zoroastrian. If this is accepted, then the way is clear for a cautious expansion of numbers.

Linked with the problem of comprehending the meanings of ceremonies and prayers is the problem of transmitting religious knowledge, particularly to children. The traditional system of learning prayers by rote can no longer be expected to satisfy young minds. Smallness of number will prevent any institutionalization of teaching methods in Europe. Therefore the task of transmitting knowledge to children rests with parents, and it is the attitudes which they instill into their children which will largely determine the future of Zoroastrianism in Europe.

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