

Parsiāna

New Rochelle, New York: Quivering with about as much nervousness as any 10-year-old at his navjote, Joseph Peterson, 27, chemical engineer from Minneapolis, Minnesota, ran through *ashem vohu, yatha ahu vairio, kemna mazda, ahura mazda* and *jasame avenghe mazda*, put on a sudreh and kusti, and — in his eyes as well as of the about 100 guests present — became a Zoroastrian.

If he and the four mobeds presiding over the ceremony, held Saturday, March 5, at the Darbe Mehr here, went past the *manashni, gavashni, kunashni* before realizing Peterson had failed to gather up the kusti simultaneously in its characteristic scales shape, they quickly recovered.

As the rite ended with the dastoors Kersi Antia of Chicago, Illinois and Noshir Hormazdiyar of Danbury Connecticut, reciting *tandarosti*, Antia leaned over to hand Peterson a bouquet of red carnations and whisper in his ear, "Congratulations. You are now as much a Zoroastrian as you want to practice."

The whisper, magnified by microphones, seemed to melt the tension that had enveloped the gathering until that moment, a result of the intense opposition the navjote had drawn from certain members of the Zoroastrian community. Like airplane passengers who had just come through a particularly bumpy flight, the guests burst into applause.

In speeches afterward, both Antia and Hormazdiyar — mobeds Bahman Shahzadi and Bahman Bahmky from Iran played supporting roles in the



Hormazdiyar followed by Peterson and Antia before the navjote.

The Navjote of Joseph Peterson

Porus Cooper

ceremony and did not speak after it — justified the navjote, which for weeks was a matter of bitter contention among liberal and conservative Zoroastrians. The former were nearly all from Iran, and the latter likewise from the Indian subcontinent. In fact, barring Hormazdiyar and Antia, there were few others from the subcontinent among the guests.

"I examined all the reasons for not doing (Peterson's) navjote and didn't find one that was convincing," said

Antia. Avowing that in the same circumstances he would perform such a navjote "any time, any place," Antia remarked, "Not to do this navjote would be an act of rebellion against Zoroaster's teachings — if we know his teachings." Quoting from the Gathas, he asserted the prophet always intended to proselytize.

Later Antia, a psychologist by profession, told *Parsiāna* that his decision to perform the Peterson navjote was prompted by his analysis of American

society. It is not enough that a child be born Zoroastrian in America, he will not remain Zoroastrian unless his religion appeals intellectually to him, Antia said. "We (in India) demand too little of our religion."

Anticipating more to marry outside the community than not in the years to come, Antia said a policy that put the religion off-limits to many, including spouses and children of mixed marriages, would be suicidal to the community in America.

Hormazdiyar summoned the authority of both the scriptures and the late Arbab Rustam Guiv, the patron of several Zoroastrian communities in North America, in support of the navjote. He said the event marked an overcoming of "moral trepidation" for many and "may be judged by future Zoroastrians as a milestone."

And in remarks clearly aimed at those who had stayed away in protest, Hormazdiyar added: "Arbab believed that we must accept those who want to join us. Note my word — *accept*, I did not say *convert*."

That refrain — "Peterson came to us, we didn't go to him," said one — was taken up with this reporter by several others both before and after the ceremony. That must be emphasized, counseled Kaikhosrov Irani and Shahriar Merabi. The latter, as secretary of both the New Rochelle Darbe Mehr's board of trustees and the Rustam Guiv Trust of California, was a prime mover of the Peterson navjote.

Their main concern, as of some of those who wouldn't attend, was that news of the initiation of a non-Zoroastrian into the faith might become a provocation to Moslem fundamentalists in Iran. They urged leaving the Iranian mobeds at the ceremony out of any photographs I took. Again and again they stressed that the man accepted at his request into the Zoroastrian faith was a Christian, not a Moslem. Merabi candidly remarked he would have been "a little afraid" to accept Peterson had he belonged to the Islamic faith.

Peterson himself tried to ease the strains his navjote had caused in the Zoroastrian community in the United States and Canada. "I believe the spirit of brotherhood can transcend our difference," he told the gathering, having changed from the all-white of his navjote to a brown suit.

As for his new faith, he likened his discovery of it to getting a first pair of

glasses and getting the first glimpse of the leaves on the trees outside his window.

He said he came across a translation of the *Avesta* quite by accident in his school library when he was 15. Later over a navjote dinner of *dhandar* and Iranian delicacies — all vegetarian, which he is by choice — he told *Parsiana* he considered encountering that book part of "a divine plan" for him. He read more and eventually made himself a sudreh and kusti and practiced the religion in favour of the Christianity of his birth.

In fact, he claimed, it wasn't until about two years ago that he met the first Zoroastrians. Peterson became something of a household name among the continent's Zoroastrians after he described his spiritual quest to the conference of North American Zoroastrians held in Montreal, Canada, in April last year.

Those who were to take up the cause of his navjote and see it to fruition cite as evidence of Peterson's sincerity the amount of effort and ingenuity he has evidently put into his self-conversion. (He claims to be about two-thirds of the way to putting a transliteration of the *Avesta* on a computer's magnetic disks. Along the way he has constructed an index of most-used and least-used words in the book, a device which enables him — and would enable others — to accelerate a study of the archaic language of the *Avesta*.)

Add to that his soft-spokenness, clean-cut looks and youthfulness, and even to many of those who were detractors of his navjote, he presents a "good boy" image. He responds with an equal absence of rancour when referring to those who opposed his navjote, some of whom subjected him

to nocturnal phone calls begging him to change his mind. "They were well-meaning," he said after his navjote.

The anger of the critics, many of whom were interviewed before the navjote, seemed uniformly to be directed at the sponsors of the event, the Arbab Guiv Trust of California, not at Peterson.

"I am not against converting anybody," said Noshir Karanjia, a mobed who lives in southern New Jersey state, "but you cannot do it by taking people's vote." Karanjia was alluding to an incident at the Zoroastrian conference in Montreal last April. As for Peterson, Karanjia, like many others opposed to the navjote, described him as a pawn in the hands of politically motivated people.

A retired official of the Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York, who refused to be quoted by name, complained that the navjote's advocates were forcing their views on the com-



"We must accept those who want to join."

Photographs by
Porus Cooper.



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munity. "It's a pattern ... this thing follows that pattern," he said.

Underlying his dismay was a feeling shared by other Zoroastrians from India who spoke to *Parsiana*, that their Iranian co-religionists, many of whom control the money Arbab Guiv left to benefit the Zoroastrian community, have been using this wealth as a lever to influence community decisions. To them the Peterson affair was the most egregious example of this trend. Thus, as the Peterson controversy smouldered, new claims and counter-claims flared up on the subject of legal title to the Darbe Mehr property in New Rochelle.

Dolly Dastoor, president of the Zoroastrian Association of Quebec, summed up the feelings of the naysayers to the navjote in a letter addressed to "All Zoroastrian Associations of North America" and "All leaders of the community."

"Though we fully sympathize with and appreciate the sincere intentions of Mr. Joseph Peterson to become a Zoroastrian, and we also know fully that Mr. Peterson has extensive knowledge of the religion, and has been practicing its philosophy for the



With wife Candy and Dr Kaikhosrov Irani of ZAGNY (behind).

past 10 years in an exemplary fashion, we do not wish that Mr. Peterson be caught in the cross-fire of unpleasant controversies."

She proceeded to dissociate her organization from the navjote "at the present time."

That qualification, spoken or unspoken, appears to be attached to nearly every criticism of, and quibble with, the Peterson navjote. Jehan Bagli, editor of *Gavashni*, a journal of opinion on Zoroastrian life in North America, published from Quebec, wrote Merabi to point out that while nobody could stop a mobed from performing any ritual, "we feel there are more demanding priorities in the resolution of this problem. Navjote of

a non-Zoroastrian is a natural corollary to the evolution of this change, as a last step."

Erach Munshi, chairman of a recently established "religious advisory council" of the Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York, said he would rather see efforts made first to initiate the children of mixed marriages into the Zoroastrian religion.

He accused the organizers of the Peterson navjote of giving little notice of it to the community. He said the navjote plans were revealed only in late January. There was no time to educate the community as to its merits, "and now they (the organizers) are telling us that we are backward," Munshi noted bitterly.

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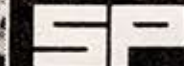
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Munshi's memory may not serve him right as to the date the community was made aware of plans for the Peterson navjote — Bagli's letter of caution to Merabi is dated January 25 and responds to one from Merabi dated December 15, 1982 — but he seems to have gauged accurately the feeling of those who felt the navjote was untimely and the result of a monumental misunderstanding on the part of Shahriar Merabi and others on the Arbab Guiv Trust, including the chairman of the trust, Rustam Sarfeh.

Munshi insisted Merabi and the others had misread the intent of those who had met in the Montreal conference last year. The progressivism on display there — the host association in Quebec and Bagli's influential *Gavashni* have fostered that reputation by freely discussing controversial issues such as conversion — was relative, Munshi seemed to say.

"Shari (Merabi) has the habit of jumping the gun," he remarked, expressing concern that the action would undo years of effort on his part as well as of others to forge the unity of Iranian and Parsi Zoroastrians in North America. Bagli's letter to Merabi endorses that fear.

"Please allow us to clarify the situation," Bagli wrote. "In your letter you said, (the Peterson navjote) will be a great step towards what you and your group in Montreal were wishing to accomplish in our latest congress.

"Let us mention at the outset that what transpired at the congress, ensuring the paper of Mr. A. Davar, was an extemporaneous expression of opinions of various individuals. Some of them had little or no background knowledge of what was being discussed.

"We in Quebec (Montreal) accepted the responsibility to put some order into that random discussion. We agreed to collate opinions and arguments of learned people on both sides of the question. While we are in the process of doing that, any haphazard action in this matter can actually jeopardize our efforts and endanger the unity of North American Zoroastrians."

The spectre of a split in the community does not appear to concern those who advocated the navjote. In fact Hormazdiyar is on record at one of the meetings of the New York religious advisory council of actually advocating one, a position that has earned him some opprobrium even

among some of those who otherwise backed the navjote.

"We have several groups already," Hormazdiyar is reported to have told the meeting, naming Shahenshahis, Faslis and Kadmis, among others. "I do not believe that there should be a reformist group," he said, hastening to add, however, that he did not advocate "disintegration" of the community.

A reform group, he continued, would have its own temples and mobeds and, in fact, such a development would prevent "hurt feelings" in the future.

Sarfeh of the Guiv Trust of California, who insisted on a public navjote for Peterson when some of the other sponsors were anxious to conduct it outside the glare of publicity, claimed the hurt feelings are all on his side. Over the phone from his home in La Jolla, California, the 75-year-old retired physician complained bitterly that "a minority of orthodox Parsis" was causing problems. "I thought the Parsis who have come here were more intellectual," he said, "but I am very much disappointed."

Of Peterson he said, "A man comes and says, 'I have read the Gathas and Avesta and I have practiced the religion for six years.' There is a qualified mobed who is ready to initiate him. Who are we to refuse him? Under what pretext do we stop him? Do we use force? Does religion belong to any individual?"

But what about those who counseled going slowly, creating an infrastructure of Zoroastrian life in North America — a network of agiaries, mobeds, funds and educational institutions — before addressing the conversion issue? "We are not going to create Udwada here; I hope not," Sarfeh retorted.

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Among Zoroastrians,
for the first time in my life,
I felt a stranger.

'What Do You Think?'

Porus Cooper

"But what do you think?" Both those for and against the Peterson navjote asked me that question without an exception. I parried their inquiry in the only way I know — by claiming a reportorial privilege to hide my feelings in the interest of "objectivity," that nebulous and superficial standard by which journalists are judged by non-journalists, and often judge themselves.

But if ever objectivity was a god that failed me, it was this time. While my report alongside was contrived in a spirit of inquiry that I tried my professional hardest not to colour with my feelings, I'll be the first to admit that that wasn't entirely possible.

For I am a Zoroastrian, a Parsi from Bombay, brought up in a family that visits the agiary more often than most Parsis I know. Would they countenance the navjote of a Joseph Peterson? I haven't asked them lately, but I doubt they would.

So far their word on matters of religion has been good enough for me. If the evidence has often suggested otherwise, I have always considered my religion so minor a factor in my daily life that I never bothered to marshal a contradictory case. If everybody at home and the neighbours in the Parsi colony were happy, for what purpose to break the peace? So to those who asked, "But what do you think?" here's the answer:

Truth to say, I have seldom given a straight hour of thought to my religion. Oh, I always mean to. I have plenty of books on the religion of Zarathustra, on the Parsis in India, on the various rituals of my religion, and even an English translation of the celebrated *Shah*

Nameh. Nearly all are unread.

My sloth is understandable. Remember I am a Parsi from Bombay, the one place on earth where each Parsi is reassured every day that there are others of his ilk in the world. What more spiritual sustenance does a Bombay Parsi need? What more proof that all's well with the religion, barring minor heartaches such as whether non-Parsis ought to be allowed to see the faces of Parsi dead.

Why change something that works?

So the benefit of a liberal education, instead of sparking inquisitiveness in me about my religion, curiously enough caused me to rationalize, abandoning all probing. My unwritten rule of behaviour in public has always been: Don't talk religion.

It's a safe rule, and very convenient. I refuse to get caught up in controversies that have nothing to do with my daily life. And, conveniently, I am spared the trouble of answering questions about my religion such as, "What do you think?" I have nothing to say and I say that with much intellectual hubris.

Only small minds are occupied by the relative merits of exposing the dead in the dokhmas and burying them in the earth.

Besides, I know the people I know. They are for the most part Parsis from places like Bombay and Karachi. Their names, like mine, are quaint but reassuring conglomerations of English, Persian and Hindu — Cooper, Mehta, Patel, Toddywalla, Engineer, Mehli, Lovji, Pesi, Soli, Erach, Shahnaz, Dolly, Jasmine and Freny.

The Zoroastrians from Iran are less

than distant relatives, they are complete strangers to me, as they seem to be to many Parsis. Their names are often unpronounceable. We eat *dhansak* and *pattio*; they eat *dolme* and *ku-ku*. We lapse into Gujarati; they into Persian.

Then, for reasons I can only speculate about, they seem to be more "liberal" than most Parsis. I have theorized to myself that it is because Iran's proselytizing Moslem society does not brook aloofness as willingly as India's Hindu society, which rather encourages separateness. Forced to assimilate at home, many Iranian Zoroastrians seem to find virtue in assimilation abroad. Or perhaps it is what the mobed Noshirwan Hormazdiyar, one of the priests who performed Peterson's ceremony suggested — that Iranian Zoroastrians, suppressed at home, are more eager than Parsis to spread their religion abroad. Then again it may just be that the Iranians leading the fight to throw open the doors of Zoroastrianism to all just happen to be individuals of that particular bent of mind.

But of course the hangups are not unique to me.

I remember the irritation an elderly Iranian friend once confided in me when she found herself the only Iranian at the Navroz dinner of the local Zoroastrian association, dominated by Parsis. They all seemed to speak in Gujarati. Now she much prefers to travel 100 miles to New Rochelle, where the Iranians muster on such occasions in respectable numbers and she can launch into Persian.

In fact Shahriar Merabi, chairman of the board of trustees of the Arbab Rus-

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The BPP's 15-Point Programme

Hutokshi D. Doctor

Fifteen problems which affect the community have been identified by the Bombay Parsi Punchayet for a thorough analysis and study, noted the BPP trustees at a press conference held on March 11, the third such conference called to break down barriers in communication between the Punchayet and the community.

"Such detailed studies will enable the Bombay Parsi Punchayet in chalking out definite Schemes and Projects for the uplift of the Parsi Community in various fields like education, employment, social welfare, etc. and thereby to put the funds available for charitable objects to maximum effective utilization," notes the press release.

The project studies to be undertaken by "bodies such as the Zoroastrian Community Development Institute, as well as any other Parsi or non-Parsi institutions/bodies working in the field of research" will involve:

- * Reviving the spirit of enterprise
- * Migration from rural to urban areas and from India abroad
- * Amelioration of the priestly class, imparting more religious scholarship to priests and training them for missionary roles
- * Better maintenance of fire temples
- * A medico-socio genetic survey of the community
- * Determining whether Parsis have moved away from the mainstream of life in India
- * Whether trust funds shall be given as doles or used to create further wealth for the community
- * Incentives for increasing dwindling Parsi population and also achieving qualitative excellence
- * Luring Parsi children to Parsi trust schools and bringing these schools on par with the best schools
- * More efficient utilization of the community's trust resources

- * How to prevent inter-community marriages and keep Parsis in the faith
- * Reviving zest for sports and
- * Preventing the large number of divorces, late marriages and non-marriages.

Matrimonial Bureau

To help solve the last of the above-mentioned problems which is "affecting the quality of life of the community" the Punchayet proposes to start or sponsor a matrimonial bureau which will provide "an opportunity for timely identification of and meeting with suitable partners," according to the press release. Trustee Jamsheed Kanga hoped that the matrimonial bureau would provide channels for communication between "a large number of Parsi boys (who) are abroad (with) no means of communication with families of eligible girls... In fact the ideal thing would be to computerize it. This would be a very scientific way."

Davar Trust

What Golwalla describes as a "wind-fall" has been received by the BPP in the form of the Seth Pestonji F. Davar Charitable Trust which was set up and registered in January this year. This new cosmopolitan trust will be administered by the trustees of the BPP. "All told an amount of Rs 63,32,000 has been received by the Bombay Parsi Punchayet from a Mr. Pestonji F. Davar of U.S.A... to be used for the poor, needy and blind of Greater Bombay," notes the press release. Already the trustees are considering loan assistance to persons for "setting up kiosks, investigation programmes to assess the extent of blindness in the Parsi community, starting of a Low Vision Clinic, (and) carrying out of a survey of low vision and squint-eyed children at some selected schools."

Housing Allotment Norms

The Punchayet continues its campaign for increased housing facilities described in the press release as "the most burning problem of the community." But the criteria for eligibility have been revised.

The applicant must not possess any residential accommodation/flat in his own name or in the name of any member of the family who is going to reside with him; for a one room + kitchen flat with a carpet area below 400 square feet, the total income of the family should not exceed Rs 2,500 per month; for flats of two rooms + kitchen, with a carpet area of 450 square feet and above, the total family income should not exceed Rs 3,500 per month; and the applicant and the persons to reside with him/her should be Parsi-Zoroastrians only.

Changes have also been made in the "categorisation description and its percentages and Merit Scheme Points marking," notes the write-up, "with a view to do justice to all." Those interested may contact the Punchayet office for details.

Practising mobeds have been allowed a five percent reservation in allotment of housing "as a concrete measure of making a beginning...(in the) amelioration of the conditions of the practising priestly class." Eighteen staff quarters will initially be built for mobeds of the Doongerwadi staff. "I am going to approach a Parsi

Practising mobeds have been allowed a five percent reservation in allotment of housing.

philanthropist, himself a builder," said Golwalla in this connection.

Already under construction are 72 flats in Contractor Baug, Mahim and 12 Transit Camp Rooms at the Dadar Parsi Colony notes the press release, while 40 one room and kitchen flats are likely to be constructed by June 1983, and 70 two rooms and kitchen flats will be completed by early or middle 1984 at the Pirojsha Godrej Baug, Napean Sea Road. Forty-eight ownership flats are also scheduled for construction at Khareghat Colony on Gibbs Road.

"The time may come when we have to look out for more land to satisfy

the housing needs of the community," said Golwalla.

"By constructing buildings at Godrej Baug and Mahim we will not be able to cater to the weaker section of the community which has been our aim. The trustees have agreed that the persons in the welfare colonies who are paying low rents of approximately Rs 30 per month and who can afford to shift to the new flats should do so, so that the old two-room flats can be given to the homeless," said trustee Dr. Nellie Noble. Those who can afford it will thus be "in a new construction in a good locality," noted Golwalla. Even rents which are subsidised to around 50 percent of the standard rent in places like Godrej Baug will be beyond the means of several needy persons in the community.

World Body

The scheduled visit of a delegation of the World Zoroastrian Organisation "to meet the Trustees of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet" was announced at the conference. "Let us see what they have to say," said Golwalla. "In any federal set-up there has to be a pyramidal structure," said Kanga, "and the World Federation should be the apex." But with this "self-proclaimed" Federation, as Kanga terms it, "the opposite has happened...First we must have a Federation for India, then a Federation in other countries with sizeable pockets of Zoroastrians, and then we can have a World Federation representative of all."

In pursuance of the trustees' decision to invest its existing assets in "higher-interest-yielding" avenues, over one crore has already been invested in the Unit Trust scheme, notes the write-up, and investments in public sector companies which yield a higher percentage of returns will be made on receiving the Charity Commissioner's permission.

The Punchayet's tercentenary celebrations which were inaugurated in November 1981 by M. Hidayatullah, vice president of India, drew to a close with the felicitation of 15 eminent Parsis in Bombay last December. The Punchayet has published booklets containing the citations and replies to them "in order," the write-up notes, "to spread the message and to fulfil the object of that...unique and historical function."

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tom Guiv Darbe Mehr volunteered when asked about a "split" in the community that it was already split by language and culture. I wouldn't argue. Zoroastrians in Los Angeles and Chicago seem to have come to the same conclusion. More than one organization represents them in those cities. All this is sad, and the two nationalities must try harder to get to know each other. Still, the division exists.

So when I entered the Darbe Mehr for Peterson's navjote it was with some trepidation. Among Zoroastrians, for the first time in my life, I felt a stranger. For they did not speak my language and for the most part did not even look like me. Some of them who knew I was coming, I knew, would have preferred not to have me there at all.

For a strange dichotomy governed the Peterson navjote: On the one hand its organizers did not hesitate to make it a public affair. The sponsorship of the Guiv Trust ensured that. On the other, they were palpably scared of the unpleasant consequences, real or imagined, of news of the ceremony getting around.

When Hormazdiyar wanted to conduct a quiet ceremony at his home, the Guiv Trust insisted on holding it as a matter of principle at the Darbe Mehr, which is the headquarters of the Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York. Many of ZAGNY's officials opposed the navjote or counseled a delay in holding it until their religious advisory council came up with guidelines. Their entreaties were brushed aside and, without exception, they stayed away.

We eat *dhansak* and *pattio*; they eat *dolme* and *ku-ku*.

Having boldly invited the controversy, the navjote's organizers began worrying about Ayatollah Khomeini's sensitivities. Alas, their solicitousness did not extend to their co-religionists who balked at the navjote.

Now with the deed done and over with, one thing is clear: Blissful nonchalance is no longer possible.

"Joe Peterson is the best reason why our children should remain Zoroastrian," remarked Kersi Antia, the other mobed who conducted the navjote.

Antia surely was referring to the inspirational aspect of Peterson's great

labours to imbibe the teachings of Zarathustra. I prefer to take the Peterson affair as a warning to the many of us who are still smug about our birth into the religion. If it doesn't stay alive in our heads as well as hearts, it will not survive, at least not in America.

That the navjote was held in public is not upsetting to me. On the contrary, I'm glad it was. Secretiveness, for one thing, would have been the best way to arouse the suspicions of malefactors in Iran or elsewhere. That the navjote was held at all doesn't bother me either. Not even Peterson's most ardent well-wishers expect a repeat performance very soon, or very often. And, all said and done, who could have asked for a more worthy recruit?

If what Peterson says is true — and I use the "if" only because, not knowing him well, my professionalism compels me to — he has a remarkable accomplishment to his name. His quest has been far more arduous than that of the garden variety American "seeker" who buys painless nirvana from the first itinerant guru who comes along.

What upset a lot of Parsis and some Iranian Zoroastrians — as it would upset me if religion were a more important part of my daily life than it is — was the high-handed manner in which the affair was conducted. The navjote's advocates, well-meaning as they were, accomplished the incredible: They weighed Peterson's 12-year spiritual odyssey against 1,400 years of Zoroastrian experience in another foreign land — India — and found the centuries-old strategy of communal self-preservation wanting in sense.

Perhaps it is possible that 100,000 Parsis in India are living a lie. Frankly, I don't know. I am willing to be convinced, as are many I spoke to, but the supporters of the navjote will have to do better than they have. Some of them may not have made up their own minds, for they remain members of the New York advisory council, which is still working on finding "guidelines" for the community. What if the "guidelines" reject future "acceptance" into the religion? Then the navjote would have been a disservice to Joseph Peterson more than anybody else.

About the author: Porus Cooper is on the editorial staff of *The Courier-Post* in New Jersey. A former editorial staff member of *The Times of India* in Bombay, Cooper worked with *India Abroad* after receiving a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University. Cooper covered Peterson's navjote at *Parsianna's* request on an honorary basis.

Bharucha's Reply to the Inquest



I have read the letters published in the *Jam-e-Jamshed* and *Bombay Samachar* by our learned Dastoorjis on 'A Quest for Zarathustra'. At the outset I would state firmly that the thoughts put forward by the Dastoorjis are totally correct and I wish to assure them that the film which is being produced is absolutely on the same lines and thoughts which they have expressed in their letters. In order to clarify the Dastoorjis' anxieties which they have expressed stating that they wrote the above-mentioned letters based on press reports of various interviews given by me, I would mention that I have been misquoted at many places by the Indian press.

I have undertaken this film because I have a strong belief about the greatness of the Zoroastrian religion and portraying of Zarathustra as a prophet of the religion is one of the major themes of my film which also examines the history of our people. The scholars and the community may rest assured that I have no desire to portray Zarathustra in any other light. All prophets, apart from having a divine inspiration were also great thinkers and philosophers and reference to this fact is only indicated to bring out this aspect and not to detract from the fact that Zarathustra was divinely inspired and received the concept of the religion during his lonely sojourn in the wilderness.

I have always been very proud of the fact that our prophet was the first man to make mankind aware of a single God and it is on the strength of that, that this film is being made for the world. Zarathustra was the world's first great prophet and that is exactly

how he is being portrayed. In fact, we have a scene in the film where he is clearly being "enlightened" by the river. In no way do I demean his stature or position as one of the great prophets of the world.

The other cause of worry seems to be wound up in the conversion question. In no way does the film deal with conversion but it talks only about the "freedom of choice." This I am sure everyone will agree, is one of the great concepts of our religion and in no way does that constitute the acceptance of conversion. If I were not to deal with this concept of freedom of choice which Zarathustra gave to his people I would have failed in my duty to project the fundamental concept of our religion. This film has so much to say about the doctrine and history of our religion that at no time does it propagate controversial sentiments.

The curing of King Vishtasp's horse is a legend which nearly all Zoroastrians grow up with. It appears allusively in the *Denkart* (DK VII 4.70) but is fully developed in the *Zardusht Nama*. In the film we are using this story to dramatize a point. In no way are we suggesting that this single act (curing the king's horse) is the only reason why Vishtasp accepted Zoroaster's religion, no more than a single scene in 'Gandhi' showing the use of "non-violence" outside a mill in Gujarat was the breaking point of the British in India. In no way would we like to portray Zarathustra as a veterinary doctor. The whole scene used in the film to dramatize this point shows the spiritual power of Zarathustra when he cures the horse of Vishtasp.

If we want to show that our religion has strength then we have to confront it with the most challenging of questions and think the answers through to prove its worth. I am sure that what I have explained should satisfy everyone. I did not immediately contradict the misrepresentations which appeared in the *Society* journal in the belief that they did not require such attention. If by this act I have hurt the feelings of the learned scholars whose knowledge of religion I respect, then I wish to offer my regrets to them. A film is a work of art and should not be judged from the piecemeal examination of the script. I would therefore request the learned scholars who have made comments to please see the film and pronounce their verdict thereafter.

At this point I would mention that Dr. Kotwal who is one of our scholars has contributed enormously to the sensitive points in the script and I would look forward to his further valuable suggestions.

This is the first time our religion is being put on film in a major way and it is a once in a century chance. So please let us all work together instead of quarrelling over press interviews and gossip magazines. I am proud to be a Parsi and a Zoroastrian and therefore would never do anything to harm or embarrass our religion.

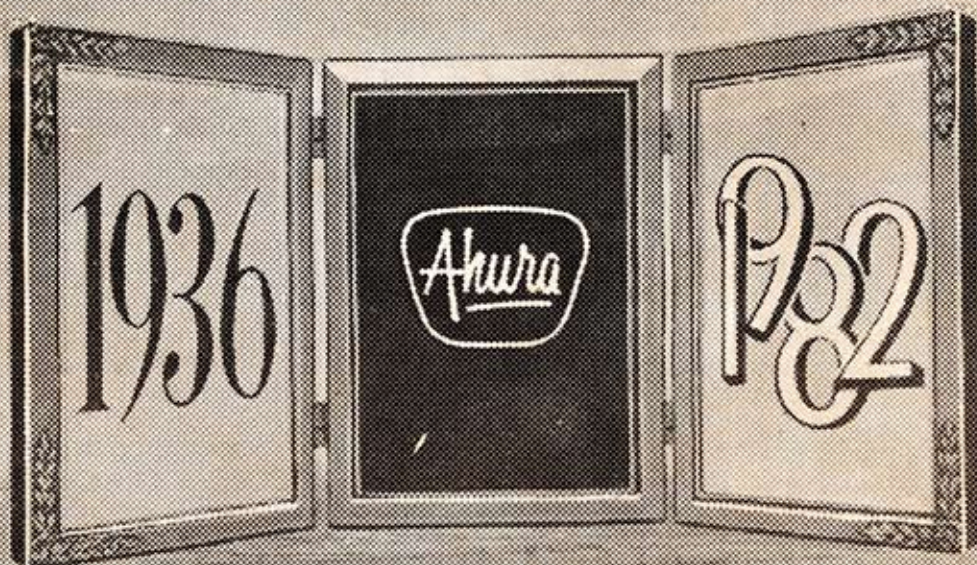
Cyrus H. Bharucha
Executive Producer

Addendum

Subsequent to the interview given by Bharucha to *Parsiana* in January ('Bharucha's Quest for Zarathustra' published in the March 1983 issue), Bharucha informed us that the subject of conversion would not be touched upon in the movie. He therefore requested we drop the concerned paragraph pertaining to conversion in the interview. However due to a technical oversight, the paragraph was struck off from the photostat copy of the bromide but not the bromide itself. The error is regretted.

Bharucha also informs us that he is working closely with the priests and the Bombay Parsi Punchayet and is taking the utmost care while filming to avoid offending the community's sensibilities—Editor.

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