

Parsiānā

C.E.R. Scheme for Electoral Reform

A shorter, six-year term of office for trustees, constituency-wise polling, and reducing the voting strength of donors to one-fifth are some of the reforms proposed for the Bombay Parsi Punchayet trustees election scheme by the Committee for Electoral Rights.

Other major changes include new simplified registers, restricting trustees to two consecutive terms of office, six-monthly meetings with members of the Anjuman Committee and Anjuman Committee elections every five instead of seven years.

The modified scheme prepared by the C.E.R.'s Electoral Reforms cell headed by noted lawyer Dadi Engineer, "is based on the Kanga-Engineer dissenting note" states *The Zoroastrian* issue of November-December 1982.

Engineer and Bombay Parsi Punchayet trustee Jamsheed Kanga had submitted a note of dissent several years ago, to the electoral reform committee formed by the BPP.

When no action was taken by the BPP, Kanga, Engineer and others formed the C.E.R. and successfully contested the Anjuman Committee elections in 1981. Both parties contesting the elections promised electoral reforms.

The 49-page cyclostyled scheme is being distributed for consideration and the C.E.R. has to decide how to proceed with the changes. If the BPP trustees agree to the reforms, the chances of the scheme being accepted and imple-

mented at an early date are favourable. But if the BPP trustees oppose the scheme, then the process is a lengthy and tiresome one.

According to the C.E.R. scheme, the present A, C, D, E and F registers would be scrapped and replaced by Registers I, II, and III.

"The name of every Parsi appearing on the latest Electoral Roll, prepared for the elections to the Municipal Corporation of Bombay should be entered in Register I without any further action on his or her part. Provided his or her name will not be entered in Register I if it is found that he or she is a donor whose name appears in the 'F' Register under the old scheme and in which event his or her name will be entered in Register II."

New entrants to Register II will have to donate Rs 5,000 or more to the BPP.

"All persons whose names appear on Register I shall elect, from amongst themselves not more than 400 (four hundred) candidates and all persons whose names appear on Register II shall elect, from amongst themselves and in the manner prescribed hereinafter, not more than 100 (one hundred) candidates."

"All the said 500 (five hundred) candidates elected by Register I and II shall be called the 'elected members of the Anjuman Committee'."

"The number of members to the Anjuman Committee to be elected by Register I shall at all times be four times the number of members to the Anjuman

Committee to be elected by Register II..."

The entire area of Greater Bombay and its suburbs shall be divided into fifteen (15) territorial constituencies, in such manner that the ratio between the population of each constituency and the number of seats allotted to it is, so far as practicable, the same throughout the said entire area of Greater Bombay and its suburbs."

Candidates can contest from any one area only.

Register II is subdivided into four sub-registers: (i) those donating Rs 5,000, (ii) those donating Rs 5,000 to Rs 10,000, (iii) those donating Rs 10,000 to Rs 15,000 and those donating Rs 15,001 and above.

"No person shall be entitled to have his or her name on more than one of the above sub-registers."

"General Elections to Anjuman Committee from each of the Registers I and II shall be held every five years as far as possible in the month of February. Elections for each Register shall be separately held."

Register I and Register II will jointly be referred to as Register III.

The trustees' term will be of six years in place of the present 10-year term and he or she "shall continue to hold office for six years from the date he (or she) enters upon office but will be eligible for re-election only once, that is to say, that no person shall be a trustee for a continuous period of more than twelve years."

Continued on page 11.

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The WZO Tour

The three-member delegation of the World Zoroastrian Organisation which visited several Zoroastrian strongholds in India this summer, reportedly generated considerable enthusiasm for the world Zoroastrian body with its headquarters in London.

"People thought it was the right thing, they all felt it was the right set-up... Right through India and elsewhere individuals want to join," said Shahpur Captain, vice president of the WZO which is chaired by Dr (Mrs) Shirinbano S. Kutar. The delegation, which included Sharokh Sharokh and Ms Ruby Contractor, joint honorary secretaries, visited Poona, Surat, Delhi, Calcutta, Jamshedpur, Madras, Bangalore and Hyderabad. With an existing worldwide membership of approximately 1000, according to Captain, the WZO succeeded in enrolling 150 to 200 members in their recent trip, quite a few of them life members.

"Many Anjumans have joined, like Madras, Hyderabad and Calcutta," while the "Bombay trustees even individually have not joined; they thought (the idea) was incongruous, ... (and) Delhi joined and then withdrew again... But Nargolwala, (chairman of the Delhi Parsi Anjuman) is an individual member and on the managing committee." Likewise, the trustees of the Surat Parsi Punchayet are individual members.

The WZO, which was set up in 1980, seeks to establish a working committee in India, consisting of approximately eight people from all over India, according to Captain, "to give us an idea of what is required in India, and help in setting up cells which will generate enthusiasm and get back to the working committee and then to the international body." The list of those selected to work on the committee will be available after a couple of months. "Everything we do we'll be directing through the working committee," he added. "In Pakistan there is a committee already. Other places we'll be working through (local) associations." Every individual member is entitled to vote for the office-bearers.

"What members can look forward to is that ideas can be received, analysed. If



The WZO delegation with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Dadi Mistry (extreme left), Captain (second from left), Ms Contractor (second from right), and Sharokh (extreme right).

they think they will receive 'y' for 'x' money, they are mistaken. To air and discuss questions, that's the purpose of the cells," said Captain, a chartered accountant, in his quiet, clipped tones, in reply to a question regarding the benefits of membership. In an article in the organisation's first quarterly newsletter, WZO member Dadi E. Mistry writes that the organisation can help Zoroastrians abroad in "establishing greater contacts with those in India and ensuring that they continue to retain their identities as Zoroastrians; while for those in India it would be assistance in more tangible form, chiefly economic."

The WZO proposes to work in the housing, educational and medical spheres, and has also considered the possibility of a youth exchange scheme. Towards the amelioration of the priestly class and the spread of religion "a most welcome start has been made with a handsome donation by the WZO to the Athornan Madressa in Bombay," writes Mistry. The assistance rendered by the WZO to Zoroastrian refugees who fled Iran after the Islamic Revolution has been lauded in a report on the WZO in the Gujarati daily *The Bombay Samachar* which notes, "The WZO prevailed upon the governments of U.K., United States, Canada and West Germany to give refuge and citizenship to these unfortunate Zoroastrians."

The WZO has already received a gift of £ 1,50,000 "to set up a central secretariat to complete and prosecute the functions of a world body on a world scale," said Captain.

Sharokh, an architect in London who visited India after 30 years, said he found the "ways of thinking of Zoroastrians here are different, the outlooks are different, but the beliefs are the same. There is greater unity there," and

Captain added, "Affinity is the word for it."

Captain found a "very thriving, progressive, (Zoroastrian) community in different parts of India, with differences in different pockets. They are very balanced, and firm believers," but still, he says, "I think the community's going through very bad times. I was shocked. The institutions have gone down, people are so disgruntled, the agiaries and chawls are not well maintained. Living conditions have become terrible."

"Everywhere they asked us about conversion, about *this navjote*," said Captain pointing to a copy of *Parsiana* which carried the report of Joseph Peterson's navjote on the cover. Another question which was frequently asked was the WZO's definition of a Zarthosti. On the conversion issue Captain said, "The question does not arise in our opinion."

"The Constitution of the WZO unequivocally states that only a person born in the faith and confirmed in it can be called a Zoroastrian. This means (the person) must belong to the Zoroastrian stock by birth, upbringing and conviction," notes a report in *The Bombay Samachar*. "Further the navjote ceremony of the person ought to have been duly performed. If it was the object of the WZO to encourage conversions they would not have kept this clause."

Captain found two definite groups, divided on the conversion question in the United States and Canada, when he was there last year. "There is no such group in India. Nobody's come up and said that's what we should do — not a single soul."

The next step, Captain says, is to appoint the local committee members in each country and through them achieve the WZO goal of "Zoroastrian Unity Worldwide."



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In a corner of the lofty library at the Cama Oriental Institute, with the sunlight streaming in the windows, Gabriele Schildheuer, a German student of anthropology and medicine measured the height of her 88th subject, the circumference of the skull, including detailed measurements of each

The community, though on the decline, has attracted the attention of anthropologists as "a very closed ethnic group," one of few groups to remain ethnically distinct.

facial feature, and then rolled black oil paint onto the palms of the subject's hands and imposed the prints onto crisp white sheets of paper.

During her three weeks in Bombay this April, the slim, blue-eyed and blond Schildheuer (28) subjected 100 Parsis, 51 men and 49 women, to this simple experiment, which reportedly generated casual curiosity in the community and some good-natured speculation as to whether the lady were a palmist or a CIA agent.

"These measurements of the morphological (structural) features are the first anyone has ever done of the Parsis," says Schildheuer, whose research is part of her doctoral studies in anthropology at the University of Vienna. In fact, she comments, "There were no anthropological records of the Parsis at all, until the study of J. Mavalwala, professor of anthropology at the University of Toronto," who made an anthropological study of Zoroastrians in Iran. This lack of information on the Parsis was one reason why Schildheuer chose the Parsis in India for her doctoral research.

Another reason for her interest in the Parsis is that the community, though on the decline, has attracted the attention of anthropologists as "a very closed ethnic group," one of few groups to remain ethnically distinct, largely because there have been relatively few marriages of Parsis without the community.

Through her experiments Schildheuer seeks to establish "the morphological features of the Parsis in India and to find out the same about maybe the Muslims in Iran and the Irani Zoroastrians." She will then



Ethnic Investigations

Hutokshi D. Doctor

study the extent to which these features are different from or similar to the ethnic groups the Parsis had contact with in the past.

"The finger-prints and patterns will recur in particular patterns for particular ethnic groups... We don't know which are the main patterns of Parsis in India and whether they have their own identity," according to Schildheuer.

"The investigation of the finger and hand prints is very difficult and will take a very long time," but she hopes to have her data collated and premises established after approximately six months. She has restricted herself to data on the morphological features and prints of palms because "The work involved in all the anthropological measurements would be impossible to undertake."

There is a lot of conjecture on the subject in anthropological circles, said Schildheuer. "Some scientists say that the Muslims in Iran are ethnically like the Parsis, but that's just a theory. There are two theories about the Iranis—one says that they intermarried

with the Muslims and others, not at all."

"These finger-prints and prints of palms would be of interest to physicians," says Schildheuer, who has special permission from her university to study the closely related fields of anthropology and medicine simultaneously. The connection between some physical disorders and certain genetic variations, which might be manifest in the form of extraordinary lines on the palms, is a vast field which is still being studied. Serological research on the Parsis would also be interesting, she said, referring to the Ashkenazis who were found to have a resistance to tuberculosis in the ghettos of Warsaw during the II World War.

Schildheuer, along with Rainer Krack, a German student of Indology, is also researching and writing an exhaustive article on the Parsis for a popular German magazine. Enthusiastic about research on the Parsis, Schildheuer found a corresponding enthusiasm in the Parsis she met in Bombay, and described their cooperation as "incredible, perfect."

Photograph by Homyar Mistry

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Troubled Times

Farok J. Contractor

Zoroastrianism: A Beleaguered Faith by Cyrus R. Pangborn, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1982. Pages 150, Price Rs 75.

At a recent dinner party in Bombay a person was describing the research of a Western scholar. He was said to have discovered a plant in Iran which, if eaten by cattle, has a mild hallucinogenic effect on them and they totter around unsteadily. We were told how the hallucinogen is concentrated and excreted in the cow's urine. The urine in itself is thus a more powerful concentrated stimulant than can be derived by fermenting the plant directly. Could this be the origin of the ritual of "nirang" practised by today's Parsis, linking it through three millennia to the ancient cult of Haoma or Soma — a practice which, incidentally, Zoroaster condemned? The topic formed an amusing counterpoint to the party's salted peanuts and idle, dangerous chit-chat. Suddenly a woman burst out: "It is this kind of research that is ruining our religion...there is too much investigation."

As I considered the woman's reaction, I thought of how many elements covered in Cyrus Pangborn's book *Zoroastrianism: A Beleaguered Faith* were present in the room. (The book is a scholarly review of Zoroastrian scriptures and theology, but it also connects them with the present-day condition of Zoroastrians everywhere, their socio-economic status and current religious practices.) The woman's sincerity and piety were not in doubt. But this piety was derived from an uncritical faith in the mantric qualities of the Avestan or Pahlavi prayers to which she attributed the magical and curative powers of consecrated nirang. By contrast nirang which had not been prayed over would not keep for more than a few days, we were told. Yet here she was, a Bombay businesswoman, having seen the world, her husband a marketing manager — a foot firmly in the modern, technocratic

world, but a string looped around the heart and mind stretching back to the dawn of recorded history. Her outburst betrayed its tension.

The contradictions which torment the Indian Parsi form an important part of the book which also surveys the condition of Iranian Zoroastrians and the few thousand in Europe and North America. Professor Pangborn is primarily a scholar of religion, having studied Zoroastrianism and Hinduism over a long career. But his talents apparently encompass those of the contemporary sociologist and social critic. The book's contribution lies in the connection it provides between ancient theology, reviewed in the first two chapters, current organization of the religion and its practice, covered in the next two chapters, and the morality, ethics and social concerns of today which are the subject of the last two chapters.

"The typical Zoroastrian," says Pangborn (in one of his rare lapses into generalization), "is a person who honours rectitude, charity, diligence and stewardship." This statement, by the way, is also an almost solitary betrayal of the author's underlying affection for Zoroastrians, a bias he successfully overcomes everywhere else in the book by his scholarly disinterestedness. However, the statement praising these virtues also illustrates the difficulties they create. At the dinner party a topic of conversation was how it is not easy to be an honest entrepreneur in India today. If this rectitude so recommended by Zoroastrian ethics produces a distaste for the hurly-burly of entrepreneurship in post-independence India then the only option is to join the ranks "of the employed middle class" which "everywhere in the modern industrialized world voluntarily reduces its birth rate in the interest of security." A couple at the party had only recently been reunited after the accountant husband's long absence in the Middle East. The

host and hostess themselves were eagerly awaiting notification of permission to emigrate to America. They were more fortunate than most, enjoying the rear quarters of a spacious and fashionably genteel apartment shared with the in-laws. With the keen eye of the social critic Pangborn observes how "many more live austere in tasteless quarters, making do with furnishings that were cheap when new and which, with age, are woefully drab."

There are several other examples of such inspired prose. However the reader looking for "an easy read" may be disappointed. Fortunately, the author has taken pains to remove academese — with only a few exceptions e.g. "Its idea-

In Pangborn, Zoroastrians have not a critic, but a sympathetic observer who presents several sides to issues but seldom betrays his own predilections.

tional base was thought about the world which yielded polytheistic conceptions generously laced with anthropomorphism." The general tone is scholarly, without being dull, and invites the same care and deliberation in the reader that the author has expended in the writing.

Do not neglect the footnotes, for in them the author reveals himself. Particularly entertaining are examples where he comments on the writings of others. In them one senses Pangborn's sorrow that among Parsis themselves there are few scholars of the subject, and of those that claim scholarship fewer still have the discipline to exclude conjecture from fact and jingoism from a proper appreciation of the religion. Yet he rarely says this outright, preferring irony instead. Take the case of the respected Parsi atomic scientist who also dabbles in Zoroastrian study: After quoting a particularly unfounded assertion — that Mazdayasnism began several thousands of years before Zarathustra — Pangborn heaps gentle scorn on such writings (and by implication on the credulous respect for author-

ity on the part of lay Parsi readers) by the simple expedient of mentioning all of the writer's long string of degrees in Physics. The irony is even more telling when one realizes that to an American audience, for whom this book is partially intended, quoting all one's degrees is bad form, except in particular circumstances. One can imagine poor Pangborn during his many visits to Bombay, because of his underlying affection for the subject, suffering silently the slings and arrows of outrageous scholarship, and in a quest for completeness, dutifully reading every tract and every assertion such as the one that in olden days with "Magi priests...people could fly in the air...(and) fire could be summoned to our kitchen as and when desired, etc."

This quest for disinterestedness and completeness makes parts of the book quite dry for the non-specialist reader, especially the chapter on 'religious ceremonies entitled 'The Cultus.' Even here, there are some delicious titbits such as the statement that animal sacrifice continued among Parsis until the mid-19th century and still continues in orthodox villages in Iran. There are other similar passages, fascinating to the reader not so much because they are *outré*, but because they reveal the lengths to which the author has gone to secure their description, as when Pangborn describes and estimates the costs of a Nirangdin ceremony with or without the bull being shared between fire temples. Or take his quote from another source, that in the "Rivayats" or replies from Iran in the 15th to 18th centuries to questions asked by Indian Zoroastrians,

**Animal sacrifice
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many of the questions and answers dealt with issues such as the closest a menstruating woman may approach a person doing the kustī. The answer from Iran: 30 steps.

And yet, in Pangborn, Zoroastrians have not a critic, but a sympathetic observer who presents several sides to issues but seldom betrays his own predilections. The present controversies on conversion, intermarriage and exposure

of the dead are treated comprehensively, and all opposing views are treated in Iran and in the West. But Pangborn does not linger over these matters. He is more interested in the institutional structure and the history which has created but cannot seem to resolve these issues.

So successful is the author in his comprehension that he is not a Parsi or a Zoroastrian, nor even an Indian. Yet, a Parsi could never have written so detached a treatise, nor perhaps been as tolerant and gentle with the chaff of history, or the whimsy of today. One also forgets, thinking back on the side range

of topics and detail, that the book has but a hundred and fifty pages. I have carefully put it on my shelf, awaiting the day my son develops an adult interest in the religion of his forefathers. There it sits. I know I will always identify it easily, as the book with the rubber band around it. Alas, the publishers have let this noble work down — even as I was reading the first chapter the binding began to come apart in my hands. It is not of great concern however. I try to reassure myself with the thought of the endurance of good works through history. Consider after all, the prophet's own words in the Gathas.

Bridging the Gap

Homi J. Rogers

Parsis — Ancient and Modern by F.K. Dadachanji, published in Karachi, 1980. Pages 184, price not stated.

Parsis in India have frequent opportunities — unlike their counterparts across the border — to revitalise their links with the past and go on an ego-boosting trip down history. Sporadic reprints of what may be best considered the student's Bible of Parsi history, P.P. Balsara's *Highlights of Parsi History*; an occasional book by an authority like Piloo Nanavutty which gets an excellent distribution through the government-controlled N.B.T. channels; or studies into the religion and its growth by foreign experts like Kulke or Pangborn, which are published and distributed by Vikas (whose contribution in this respect must be gratefully acknowledged) keep Parsis at home informed about their cultural roots and their contribution to the mainstream.

The Parsi in Pakistan, however, is not so fortunate. The new rash of books on Parsis available/published in India are not permitted for export, and as the author states in his preface, "We in Karachi have been totally cut off in recent years..." There is thus little scope to know about the community, especially its culture and achievement, and to share, armed with knowledge, in the pride of being a Zoroastrian.

It is in this context then that the book

under review printed and published in Karachi, makes a most welcome addition to the literature available on Parsi history, serving as it does the duofold purpose of bridging the lacuna for Parsis in Pakistan and informing co-religionists in India and over the world of the community's contribution to modern-day Pakistan: facts which were probably hitherto unpublished and definitely not read widely.

The book is divided, as its very title indicates, into two parts: the first, spread a little over 60 pages, deals with the Parsis in Iran and ends with the flight to India; the second, more voluminous, details the Parsi contribution in the sub-continent in modern times in the fields of commerce, industry, finance, social service, science, art and literature. This section aims to justify, and certainly succeeds, the book's subtitle: "Never before has so much been achieved by so few."

The early history of Iran makes for pleasant reading. Since much of this is supposed to be mythological and is based only on Firdausi's epic poem *Shahnamah*, the style — storybookish and brief — employed by Dadachanji to narrate these events is commendable. The wisdom of Jamshed, the tyranny of Zohak and his overthrow by Faridun, the wars between Iran and Turan, the chivalry of Rustam and the ultimate tragedy of killing his son Sohrab with

his own hands, are splendidly unfolded. Yet, it is both surprising and sad that little attention here is paid to the coming of the Prophet and the author does not narrate the life of Zarathustra nor focus on his teachings, but dispenses these events within a page. Even the now much-maligned story of how Zarathustra convinced King Vishtasp of his true and noble self by curing his favourite horse, does not appear, though the chapters in this section trace out important events in the life of Iranian kings.

The historical part of the "Parsi" rule in Iran reads more stodgily, largely due to the frequent recourse the author takes to quotations from encyclopaedias and stresses on the years of ascensions/deaths. Yet the valour and magnanimity of Cyrus the Great and his successors like Darius, who introduced the world's first postal system and conceived of the Suez Canal, are well highlighted in brief, clearly sub-titled paragraphs which make interesting and informative reading.

The second part of the book, but for some glaring sins of omission, leaves little cause for complaint: capsule biographies of many great Parsis, embellished with quotations from their contemporaries/biographers/encyclopaedias, trace their contribution to the mainstream in many fields. The book does not stop at the "usual" names like Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozeshaw Mehta, Jamsetji Tata, the Wadias and

Mazdak: the Parsi Karl Marx, as early as 500 A.D. advocated socialistic ideas of equality for all men and equal distribution of all property ("including women").

the Godrejs, but it brings to the reader's attention numerous famous Parsis from Dastur Meherji Rana, who was present at Akbar's court, to Nani Palkhivala and Zubin Mehta.

Though few books on such a vast theme can be said to be complete, in view of the extensive collation of facts undertaken by the author, it is disturbing to note that many a leading luminary has been overlooked. Journalism

amongst Parsis, for example, is accorded just one page, and the author does not mention the name of Naoroji Dorabji Chandaru, popularly known as Halaku, who started *The Bombay Vartaman* (later known as *The Bombay Chabook*) in 1830 (two years before *Jam-e-Jamshed*) and following an independent policy freely attacked the Parsi Panchayet. Yet another indomitable fighter missed out is A.D. Gorwala, the founder-editor of *Opinion*, the free-thinking magazine which withstood the Emergency despite all possible clamps on its printing and circulation. Similarly, in sports, one would have liked to read about Farokh Engineer, Rusi Mody as well as other cricketing greats who participated in the Quadrangulars/Pentagulars, before these games were stopped. And in medicine, while acknowledging the contribution of leading surgeons and top ranking doctors, Dadachanji omits mentioning Manchershaw Faramji Suraliwala (Madhiwalla), whose simple remedy of a "kick" for slip-disc, administered without X-ray photographs and other medical aids, has won overall admiration.

Incidentally, one pioneer who does not find favour with the author is Mazdak: the Parsi Karl Marx, who as early as 500 A.D. advocated socialistic ideas of equality for all men and equal distribution of all property ("including women"). Dadachanji denounces him as a heretic and hails his death sentence as one which saved Iran and the honour of its womanhood.

These are but some minor flaws and they do not, however, in any way detract from the total value of the book. But certain inane statements do. To cite an example: "Population must be increased by the natural process, i.e. biologically. Today there are world-wide organisations and funds to preserve wildlife. In order to save the tiger or the lion from extinction, special Reserved Parks or sanctuaries are kept for them where these wild animals can live their natural lives in natural surroundings and increase their numbers biologically."

Finally, the book could well do with the addition of an index. Since the second half is conceived as a veritable who's-who, an index would greatly assist in making the book a handy reference guide. A few additional pages of photographs too could be considered, if the publishers intend to bring out a second edition in the future.

Athornans Abroad Awaken



Ervad Khushnood Jal Panthaki after the Navar ceremony

There is an awakening amongst Athornans abroad, especially in the UK, USA and Canada, who are increasingly troubled by the question 'After us, who?' notes Ervad Rustom N. Panthaki, principal of the Athornan Boarding Madressa, Bombay.

"Athornans from abroad have recently been coming to India, spending thousands of dollars to make their sons undergo the Navar ceremony, thus becoming an Athornanzad," writes Panthaki.

Panthaki cites the recent example of Ervad Khushnood Jal Panthaki of Montreal, grandson of Mober Nasser-vanji F. Panthaki (Nargolwalla), whose Navar ceremony was performed at the Rustom Framna Agiary in Dadar last December.

"May we have many such priests abroad for the future generation," he concludes.

Calcutta Parsis: A Rich Heritage

Gautam Ghose

The city of Calcutta, apart from its historic importance, seems to have a charm of its own which has always drawn to its fold various types of people who owe their origin to numerous ethnic communities. Many an unknown tribe came and settled here and looked upon the city as theirs. They were witness to the birth pangs of a nascent urban civilisation and despite the obvious hazards of living in an unknown territory, the lure of the place soon caught up on them. But the Parsis, who like other communities made Calcutta their home, seem to be fast dying out.

In fact, a Parsi spokesman who has been a resident of Calcutta for the last 40 years says, "I know all the Parsis in the city, at least by face. After all — there are only 1,400 of us left here."

The first Parsi to come to the city is said to be Dadabhoy Behramji Banaji in 1767. An old Parsi businessman says: "Our men came by ships following the coast. Some of them even came over

The street adjacent to the old fire temple is still called Parsi Church Street.

land by bullock carts." The Banaji family was cut out for the wider world of trade and commerce.

Rustomji Cowasjee Banaji, who way back in 1839 founded the first fire temple in the city, built a shipping empire for himself and bought the Kidderpore dock. He thus strove hard to make trading with the far east easier. A pioneering entrepreneur, he was one of those rare men who blazed the trail of modern steam navigation and insurance in India. He was also an intimate friend of Prince Dwarkanath Tagore. The inaugural grand ball for this great philanthropist's palatial house on Upper Circular Road was attended by the then governor, Lord Auckland, and the area is still

referred to as Parsi Bagan. Subsequently, two streets in the city were named after him and the street adjacent to the old fire temple is still called Parsi Church Street.

Another eminent Parsi was J.F. Madan who was quite well known for his histrionic talents. He first came to Calcutta as a member of a theatrical troupe. He owned a hundred cinema houses all over India. Like Dinshaw Mehta and Sorabjee he too started catering contracts with the railways. A man of enterprising zeal, he brought across a number of young Parsis from Gujarat and fixed them up with jobs in Calcutta and thus increased the community population in the city.

The professional versatility of the Parsis is indicated by their surnames such as Doctor, Lawyer, Contractor—adopted during the days of the British Raj. In this context, mention may be made of Calcutta's only Anglo-Gujarati periodical *Navroz* which was launched in 1917 by Eduljee N. Kanga, and even in these hard days when shortage of newsprint and other related problems have already eaten into the vitals of the publishing business, the old press on Ezra Street is still ticking along. It still meets the weekly deadline of the magazine.

Sir Jamshedji Jeejeebhoy, the first Parsi baronet was also a Calcuttan. D.B. Mehta was another prominent man who built his own business empire. The second fire temple on Metcalfe Street was built in his memory in 1912. Mehta Atash Adaran with its immaculate marble flooring speaks volumes for the austere simplicity of Zoroastrianism. The custodians of the ancient tradition are the hereditary priests. Five priests who work under a high priest have been looking after the Calcutta temple for over three decades.

Navroz — New Year's day which comes usually in August is preceded by five holy days. The day is the biggest red-

letter day on the Parsi calendar and is eagerly looked forward to. "Time was when after the morning services we would visit each other's homes to exchange greetings and the Parsi Amateur Dramatic Club would put on a play or two in the end. Those days are gone now," says a handsome lady of this community. She fondly recalls that the Byron Company would give out soft

The Parsis, who like other communities made Calcutta their home, seem to be fast dying out.

drinks and sweets. The plays were always melodramas or farces. The theme was based on some fabricated story of murder, hatred or love. Yet the plays would evoke thunderous cheers and a capacity-packed auditorium was delighted and thrilled. In those days women did not appear on stage.

The Calcutta Parsi Club, initially started as a Cricket Club in 1908 and the Calcutta Parsee Youth League, founded in 1939—are two institutions busy trying to keep up the gregarious spirit of the community. According to a member, the club now organises a variety of activities. The garba folk dance provides a convenient meeting place for both the young and the old generations. An organiser of the Club's programmes said that it was very difficult to establish the Club "because the idea of boys and girls getting together caused to raise a few eyebrows." But not now; "today it is the stepping stone to a more fertile and passionate world," asserted another elderly Parsi. At any rate, as the community is shrinking it has no alternative but to throw its children so close together.

Gujarati, the adopted language of the Parsi is gradually falling into disuse.

Time was when every Parsi had to be able to read Gujarati as the scriptures in Avesta were printed in the Gujarati alphabet. When asked to comment on it, an educated community member moaned, "It looks as though the old values and the dedication on which our tradition was based are fast losing out to those of the western world. Some of us have already taken to studying the scriptures in English or Hindi. Decreasing numbers are also a source of anxiety. If you just care to look up the directory of community residents in the eastern zone published in 1974, you will come across a number of inked-in corrigenda which prove our shockingly high mortality rate."

An elected trustee of the community says: "The younger members no longer value our system. A lot of them have already migrated to foreign countries such as Canada and Australia. But we have stayed back because we have learnt to live with our surroundings. Our history shows that we were always loyal, beginning from the Mughal age down to the British days."

Extracts reproduced from the *Telegraph—Colour Magazine* (Calcutta), March 6, 1983.

Continued from page 1.

"It shall be incumbent on the Trustees to convene, once in every six months, a General Meeting of the Members of the Anjuman Committee...At every such meeting, the Trustees shall present a state of affairs address to the Anjuman Committee and answer the queries raised thereon by the members of the Anjuman Committee."

While the scheme falls short of any radical changes and denies direct voting for trustees, it is a slow but steady step towards democratizing Bombay's premier Parsi institution. The next step is to make even these limited changes into law.

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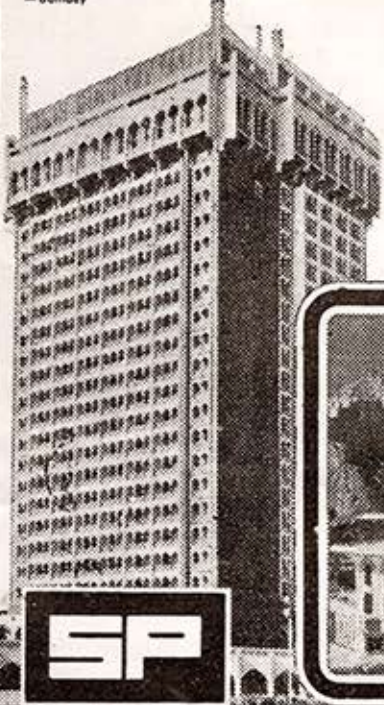
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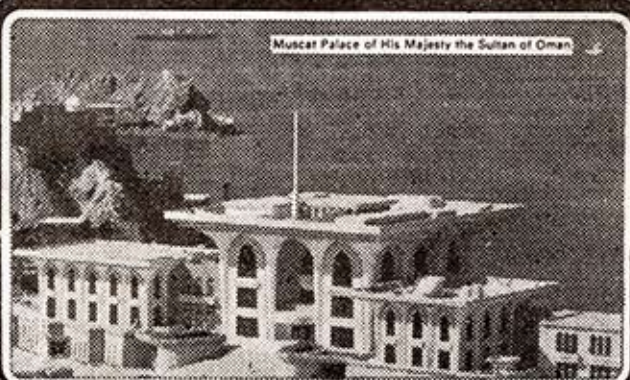
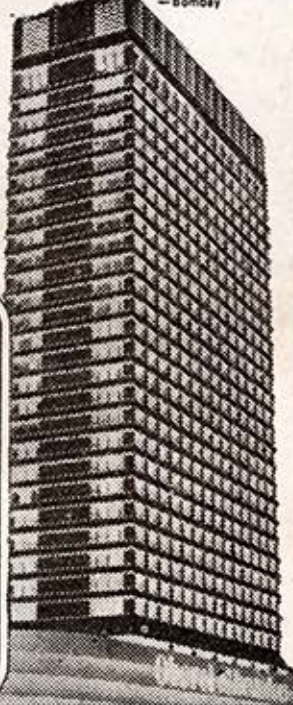
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