

A Zoroastrian resurgence

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Forty years in the lifetime of a publication is not a great number in itself. But when those 40 years represent tumultuous changes both in the country in general and the community in particular, they acquire a different hue.

These have been exciting years with many new, far-reaching developments. Just when the sun appears to be setting on the community, there is a resurgence of energy.

Three more fire-temples have been added in the last 10 years. Publication of books, exhibitions, seminars, world congresses, youth meets, television programs, the formation of the World Zarathushti Chamber of Commerce, the blueprint for a Zoroastrian world body, the revitalization of the Indian economy and strengthening of democratic institutions have all taken place in the last decade.

When in November 1994 Parsiana listed the major community developments in the 30 years since the magazine began publication, it was hard to imagine such a frenzy of activity would occur in the next 10 years. Perhaps one such indication is the keen contest for trusteeship in the Bombay Parsi Panchayet (BPP) elections and the increasing demand for universal adult franchise (UAF).

Candidates are finding it difficult to justify denying a direct vote to the community. UAF, if it were to come about (and there appears little chance of that) would galvanize the Bombay community. A people denied the vote are apathetic to the electoral system. Give them a say, empower them and they respond. But like the world body, UAF too has eluded the local Parsis even though it is prevalent in nearly every Zoroastrian center throughout the world. Scanning through the past issues of the magazine founded by Dr Pestonji Warden in November 1964, one can view the highlights of the community over the past decade. The most notable community achievements on the global scale would be the hosting of the World Zoroastrian Congresses in Tehran, Iran and Houston, Texas, USA, and the formation of the World Zarathushti Chamber of Commerce.

The next item would be the dar-e-mehers constructed, renovated or relocated both in the New World and in India. In Bombay itself three new fire-temples, two of them dadgahs and one agiary, have been consecrated. The consecration of the Shapoorji Fakirji Jokhi Agiary, amongst the largest in the world, at Godrej Baug, was undoubtedly the major religious event of the decade. Thousands of Parsis lined the road from the Vachaghandhy Agiary at Hughes Road to the agiary site at Nepean Sea Road, a distance of around two kilometers. Many faithfuls accompanied the fire from Navsari in Gujarat to Bombay, a journey that took two nights and a day.

For a community that's dwindling in numbers, the spiritual flame appears to burn brighter than before. And the Jokhi family's ties with India were also evident in their largesse to the B.D. Petit Parsee General Hospital in Bombay. They donated and continue to give generously. The Jokhis are not the only Hongkong connection. Even the Incorporated Trustees of the Zoroastrian Charity Funds of Hongkong, Canton and Macau, the richest Zoroastrian association in the world, have donated millions to community causes in India and elsewhere.

The Zartoshty brothers Mehraban and Faridoon, as Arbab Rustam Guiv before them, have proved to be amongst the largest benefactors of the community both in the New World and India.

The Jokhis, Guivs and Zartoshtys are the modern avatars of the Jejeebhoys, Cowasji Jehangirs, Wadias and Petits, the community saviors of old.

Of course Indian philanthropy abounds. People like Jamshed Guzder and NarYman Dubash have supported countless causes and individuals and given unstintingly of their wealth. So have many other individuals. Organizations such as the BPP and the World Zoroastrian Organisation assist the needy, the sick, the homeless and those in search of a better quality of life. The Venture Capital Fund launched by the Federation of Parsi Zoroastrian Anjumans of India under the auspices of the BPP may not have met with much success but the effort is symbolic of the community's desire to help their brethren.

Less well-endowed charitable trusts and individuals have tried to develop their resources to generate funds for community causes. The Salsette Parsis Association along with the site property developer Hosang Mistry built probably the largest Parsi housing complex in the world: 750 flats at Andheri, a Bombay suburb. And in Poona, the Grant family set up one of the city's most prestigious hospitals, Ruby Hall Clinic.

A Zoroastrian Tapestry: Art, Religion and Culture tome was a mammoth intellectual accomplishment, as was the exhibition of Parsi portraits at the National Gallery of Modern Art a tribute to artistry. The PARZOR Foundation, assisted by UNESCO and established in Delhi with its minuscule Parsi population, has undertaken major programs in various parts of the country including Bombay, its crowning achievement being the launch of the five-rupee coin honoring the Grand Old Man of India, Dadabhai Naoroji. In collaboration with the BPP (whose chief executive Behram Dastur mooted the idea) the coin was released by the finance minister of India this October on Mahatma Gandhi's birthday.

In terms of recognition of the Parsi contribution to India, this was one of the highest honors the country could bestow.

Zoroastrians achieved other accolades as well. Justice Sam Bharucha was appointed Chief Justice of India and Justice Sam Variava was elevated to the Supreme Court. Soli Sorabjee was once again appointed attorney general of India and Tehmtan Andhyarujina held the post of solicitor general. Abroad, President's counsel Kairshasp Choksy was named finance minister of Sri Lanka and in South Africa Dr Frene Ginwala continues as speaker of the South African National Assembly.

The Royal family paid its first visit to London's Zoroastrian Centre and Zoroastrians are present for Royal and Commonwealth state occasions in the UK.

Jamsheed Marker of Pakistan was named the United Nations Secretary General's Special Envoy to the troubled island of East Timor; Karan Bilimoria of Cobra Beer was named by the London Chamber of Commerce as its Entrepreneur of the Year; Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Ice-Candy-Man* was made into a movie, *1947 Earth*, and her play *Sock'em with honey* was performed at London's Cockpit Theatre, the first play written by a Zoroastrian to be staged there. Novelist Rohinton Mistry was twice nominated for the prestigious Booker award;

Kaizad Irani's design for the Heroes Park at the new World Trade Center to be constructed in Manhattan was selected from over 400 entries.

India's first indigenous made automobile, the Indica, rolled out of the Tata stable and its Bombay landmark, The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel observed its 100th year. The House of Godrej also completed 100 years of existence and set up amongst other things the Confederation of Indian Industry Naoroji Godrej Centre of Excellence in Vikhroli. The Zoroastrian Co-operative Bank became a scheduled bank and has extended its services to 10 locations. Dr Firuza Parikh's pioneering work in stem cell research established her as an authority on reproductive assistance.

In community news the installation of the solar concentrators at Bombay's Doongerwadi demonstrated the community's ability and willingness to come up with a practical solution to a highly sensitive issue. The greening of Doongerwadi, with the assistance of the House of Godrej, demonstrated the community's commitment to the environment. The establishment of a college at the Byramjee Jeejeebhoy Parsee Charitable Institution marked one of the community's few forays into post school academic education in Bombay. Parsi schools are aplenty (though sadly not Parsi students) but colleges unfortunately were not given priority.

The High Priests' resolution ostracizing interfaith marriages and their progeny and the subsequent retraction by three of the priests was a religious watershed. For the first time an edict by the clergy was treated with both scorn and outright contempt. The retraction underscored the realization that priests cannot expect people to comply with religious dictats issued without first ascertaining ground realities.

Our community now extends to the resurgent Zoroastrians of Tajikistan, Ukraine and Russia and the neo Zoroastrians in South America and elsewhere. This is their decade. The 3000th anniversary of Zoroastrian culture celebrated under the aegis of UNESCO was mooted by the Tajiks. And so our tribe increases.

At Parsiana, NarYman Dubash's largesse made it possible to substantially extend editorial coverage on the community's young in this issue. Normally, on account of restricted financial resources, the number of editorial pages is determined by the amount of advertisements published. By having a sponsor, Parsiana was able to more than double editorial coverage.

Though this meant a considerable workload for our small but highly dedicated staff, the returns outweighed the difficulties encountered. If the coverage appears uneven it is because we have undertaken this type of venture for the first time. If we obtain sponsorship for future issues this experience will stand us in good stead.

In our list of accomplishments over the past decade we must have left out many deserving events and individuals, both in India and abroad. To them we offer our apologies. It is only because we are hard pressed for time and pressured that the omissions have occurred. Readers are welcome to write to us to share their views on the past 10 years' achievements.

Parsiana is exceedingly grateful to all its well-wishers, readers, subscribers, advertisers, donors and sponsors for the generous assistance they have rendered us over the past four decades. We survive because of you.

And so on to the next decade. What will it bring? We can't be certain. Everything is so unpredictable. Maybe we'll get a world body. Maybe interaction between Zoroastrians, old

and new, will increase. Technology will drive communication and communication will drive change. For a long time India lost the lead in matters Zoroastrian to North America. But now there seems to be a resurgence in India. As this sleeping giant India awakens, so does the community. We are no longer a third world country to be scoffed at. There is a sense of pride in our accomplishments, perhaps more than ever after the first euphoria of Independence.

Even if the Zoroastrian community continues to shrink in numbers here, one thing is certain: we won't go quietly!

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