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## “Like Sugar in Milk”: Zarathustrians in Pune<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The present article is devoted to the history of the community of Zarathustrians of Poona (Maharashtra). Although individual Parsi settlers had appeared there also in earlier times, their presence became clearly manifested there at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has continuously lasted in that city for more than two centuries now. The first fire temple in Poona was established in 1824. However, not only fire temples and towers of silence marked Zarathustrians' arrival. One of the precepts of their religion is charity and the Parsi community have engaged in it on the Indian land for centuries. Some of wealthy Parsis have arranged for extensive water works or supported the construction of educational institutions and hospitals. The Zarathustrian community have been contributing to the development of Poona exactly in this way, thus becoming part and parcel of the history of the city.

**Keywords:** Parsis, Zarathustrians, Pune/ Poona, Bombay/Mumbai, charity

### Introduction

King Jadi Rana to the refugees seeking permission to settle in his country sent a vessel filled to its brim with milk. The meaning was obvious: “there is no place for you in my kingdom”. The milk bowl was sent back, but one of the priests of the newcomers added a small quantity of sugar to it. In this way he wanted to show that as there was no overflowing but the milk got sweet, in the same way the emigrants would not cause any disturbances but, on the contrary, they would make the life of the king and his subjects richer.

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The protagonists of this legendary account transmitted orally are the Zarathustrians<sup>2</sup> who persecuted by Muslims fled from their home country to India and a certain Yadava<sup>3</sup> king called simply Jadi Rana (Sanskrit. *yādavarāṇā* – a king of Yadavas). It is not certain when the community of Zarathustrians known as Parsis<sup>4</sup> came to the present day Gujarat and Sindh. It could have been between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., although the archaeological evidence seems to confirm that the early or mid-8<sup>th</sup> century could be the date of Zarathustrians' arrival to Sanjan.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the earlier newcomers from Persia or other regions where Persian culture was established,<sup>6</sup> they have retained their ethnic and religious identity. Then, from different places in the north-west India, some of them moved southwards. The biggest community of Parsis grew in Bombay/Mumbai.<sup>7</sup> They came there together with the English East India Company, which in 1678 transferred its headquarters from Surat to Bombay. For centuries they shaped this city, donating money for different buildings, structures and roads. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the Third Anglo-Marathan War won by the East India Company, some of the Parsis came from Bombay to Poona and settled in the city. For some other Parsis still living in Bombay, Poona, because of its climate and location, was an ideal place for short holiday stays, especially during the monsoon season. They built there their impressive seasonal residences, in this way having an impact on Poona's architecture. Enough to mention the spectacular mansion of the Jejeebhoy family, which now houses the Sadhu Vaswani Mission.<sup>8</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries other Zarathustrians migrated from Iran enlarging the Indian population of Parsis in different places, among them in Poona. They are known as Iranis.

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<sup>2</sup> I do not use the Greek-influenced term, a Zoroastrian/Zoroastrians as the Parsis whom I talked with called themselves exclusively Zarathushtis or Zarathustrians.

<sup>3</sup> Yadavas – some communities and royal lineages claiming their descent from mythical Yadu and the Yadava clan, e.g.: Cedis, Haihayas, Vidarbhas, etc.

<sup>4</sup> The ethnonym *pārasika* to describe Persians was used in the *Mahābhārata*, then in other Sanskrit texts, although very often it referred to Arabs or Turks, just meaning a foreigner. The Zarathustrians speaking the language of Persia (Sanskrit. *pārasī*) were called Parsis.

<sup>5</sup> R. Nanji, H., Dhalla, *The Landing of the Zoroastrians at Sanjan. The Archaeological Evidence*, [in:] *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, eds. J.R. Hinnells, A. Williams, London–New York 2008, p. 54.

<sup>6</sup> These were Magas, known in India as Śakadvipa Brahmanas; the recent article by J. Bronkhorst, *The Magas*, “Brahmavidyā: The Adyar Library Bulletin” 2014–2015, no. 78–79 (Radha S. Burnier Commemoration Volume), is devoted to this subject.

<sup>7</sup> In the 1990s the anglicised names of several Indian towns were changed and Bombay has become Mumbai whereas Poona is spelled as Pune. I use the toponyms Bombay and Poona when referring to the pre-1990s and Mumbai and Pune thereafter.

<sup>8</sup> J. Diddee, S. Gupta, *Pune. Queen of the Deccan*, Pune 2000, pp. 192, 193.

## Zarathustrians in the History of Poona/Pune

### 1. The Past

The presence of Zarathustrians became clearly visible in Poona at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> At first mainly shopkeepers and traders settled there. In 1824 Seth Sorabji Ratanji Patel, an influential Parsi under Baji Rao II Peshwa,<sup>10</sup> established the first fire temple in Poona. Jamaspji Edulji of Navsari<sup>11</sup> was the first dastur or priest of it and at the same time the high priest of the whole Deccan region. The temple (Fig. 1, 2) was consecrated on June 5, 1843, obtaining the rank of adaran, namely becoming a second grade temple in the hierarchy of sacredness of fires housed in it.<sup>12</sup> On the death of the first high priest in 1846, his son Dastur Noshirwan Jamaspji took over and officiated for 38 years. He rebuilt the temple at his own expense and also built the Patel Hall opened on June 6, 1867. Several other halls named after prominent members of the Parsi community, namely Seth Cowasji Jehangir, Seth Jehangir Ardeshir Wadia, Lady Dhunbai Cowasjee Jehangir, Seth Anklesariya and Heeramai Yahewala, were added subsequently. After Sadar Dastur Khan Bahadur<sup>13</sup> Noshirwan’s death in 1884, his younger brother, Dr. Hoshang Jamaspji (1833–1908) was installed as a dastur. Besides the in-depth knowledge of Avestan and Pahlavi, as all his predecessors of the Poona JamaspAsa line studied these languages, he was a scholar of Sanskrit, Marathi, English, German, Hebrew and Latin. For 18 years he held a post of a Professor of Oriental languages in the Deccan College, a well-known institution in India and beyond. He was a holder of Ph.D. degree from the University of Vienna awarded in 1886.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Single Parsi settlers used to appear in Poona also in earlier times, see for instance in B.G. Gokhale, *Poona in the Eighteenth Century: An Urban History*, New Delhi 1988, p. 84.

<sup>10</sup> Baji Rao II Raghunath (10 January 1775 – 28 January 1851) was the last Peshwa of the Maratha Empire. More about the Peshwas, the Maratha Empire and the history of Poona in B.G. Gokhale, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Navsari, the town in Gujarat, the history of which is strongly connected with Parsis. According to one of the explanation of its name, Parsis, who settled there at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, liked it so much that they started to call it Navsari, which means New Sari (Sari – a town in Persia). Navsari was the birthplace of Jamsetji Tata, the founder of Tata Groups, Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy, the co-founder of Jeejeebhoy Groups and Dadabhai Navroji, a Member of Parliament in the House of Commons of the United Kingdom.

<sup>12</sup> Read more about the sacred fires and the temples housing them in: M. Boyce, *On the Sacred Fires of the Zoroastrians*, “Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies” 1968, no. 31(1).

<sup>13</sup> In recognition of his services and the support for the British during the Indian Rebellion of 1857 this hereditary title was given to Dastur Noshirwan by Lord Francis Napier in 1873 (J.R. Hinnells, *Changing Perceptions of Authority Among Parsis in British India*, [in:] *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, eds. J.R. Hinnells, A. Williams, London–New York 2008, p. 106).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem.*

The second fire temple or agiary<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 3, 4) was founded by Jamsetji Jeebhoy<sup>16</sup> family and consecrated on November 29, 1844. The third and the last fire temple in Pune was built in 1893 and consecrated in the same year on October 18. It was Poona Kadmi & Shehenshahi Anjuman Dar-e-meher.

However, not only fire temples and towers of silence (*dakhma*)<sup>17</sup> have been indicating the Zarathustrian presence which has continuously lasted in Pune for more than two centuries. The Parsis, who probably landed at the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century in the place where Sanjan was established, fulfilled their promise. They have made the lives of many Indians better. They have been successful merchants, who got fortunes and used their money not only for meeting their own needs. One of the precepts of their religion with very ancient roots is charity. In this article we concentrate mainly on this particular feature through which the presence of the Parsi community has manifested on the Indian land for centuries. John Ovington, a chaplain on the East India Company's ship, in his *A Voyage to Surat in the Year 1689* speaks about this admirable characteristic of Parsis:

For they show a firm Affection to all their own in Sentiments of Religion, assist the Poor, and are very ready for the Sustainance and Comfort of such as want it. Their universal Kindness, either in employing such as are Needy and able to work, or bestowing a seasonable bounteous Charity to such as are Infirm and Miserable; leaves no Man destitute of Relief, nor suffer a Beggar in all their Tribe...<sup>18</sup>

David White in his article devoted to Parsi philanthropy in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Bombay tries to analyse the effects of gifts and the mechanisms of gifting in particular contexts. He formulates a set of questions, such as:

What is the *form* of a particular donation? Is the wealth given to be used to buy food, clothing, or other daily necessities, rest house, well, or temple? Does the gift produce other gifts? If so, how are the products of the gift to be used (e.g. payments for rooms at a rest house or donations to a temple)? Do forms change over time? Who makes the donation, an individual or a group, i.e. what is the scale of the donating group? And finally, can we say anything about the *effect* of the donation(s)?<sup>19</sup>

Taking into consideration Rustomjis' family, he notices the change of the gifting patterns with the flow of time, in the changing political, social and economic context. First, in Surat, it was gifting in a crisis (as for instance assisting the poor), then, in Bombay, there was no infrastructure to allow the Parsi community to be

<sup>15</sup> The term agiary comes from Gujarati (*agiyārī*). The same meaning has the term *dar-e mehr* recorded in Persian *Rivāyats* and Parsi writings in Gujarati (M. Boyce, *Dar-e mehr*, [in:] *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, online edition 2011, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/dar-e-mehr-a-zoroastrian-term-first-recorded-in-the-persia>; access: 17.06.2019).

<sup>16</sup> Jamsetji Jeebhoy (spelled also Jamshedjee Jijibhoy) (15 July 1783 – 14 April 1859) – the first Indian knight and baronet. More about this prominent figure in J. Palsetia's article *Partner in empire: Jamsetjee Jeebhoy and the public culture of nineteenth-century Bombay*, [in:] *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, eds. J.R. Hinnells, A. Williams, London–New York 2008, pp. 81–99.

<sup>17</sup> In Poona there are two towers of silence: the first one was build in 1825 and the other one, larger, in 1835.

<sup>18</sup> J. Ovington, *A Voyage to Surat in the Year 1689*, ed. H.G. Rawlinson, New Delhi 1994, p. 218.

<sup>19</sup> D.L. White, *From Crisis to Community Definition: The Dynamics of Eighteenth-Century Parsi Philanthropy*, "Modern Asian Studies" 1991, no. 25(2), p. 305.

Parsis. So the same family founded agiaries and dakhmas, supplying continuously their community with resources needed in a new situation. The crisis gift shifted to a routine gift, which finally helped to “instill a sense of unity and belonging to a separate and supportive community; that is, gifting helped to define the community, to establish its boundaries”.<sup>20</sup> There were also some other effects of gifting. It contributed to the Parsis higher status, giving an aura of honour and showing them as men of wealth and status. As such they were reliable partners for Englishmen.

Jesse Palsetia discussing Parsi charity mentions that it provided not only moral and material support of Parsi community life but:

Parsi charity tailored itself to the requirements of the larger community, for example in providing famine relief and building hostels and wells for Indians.

Parsi charity functioned to foster internal community bonds and acted as a lubricant of good inter-community relations.<sup>21</sup>

All these statements are also valid for the Poona context, although the fact that the history of a bigger Parsi community in this city started as late as the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century gives us mainly the picture of routine gifting, even if some disastrous situations made some Parsis willing to use extra funds to alleviate the suffering of people because of draughts, floods, etc. At the beginning, as was already mentioned, the most important task was to create ambience for Parsi religious life. And this was done by Poona-based Parsis and the philanthropist from Bombay, Jamestjee Jeejeebhoy. Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy also arranged for extensive water works in Poona to protect the Poonaites from severe droughts.<sup>22</sup>

The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century again modified the Indian patterns of charity. As Jesse Palsetia notices, British colonialism “encouraged new forms of Western-style charity that included the contribution to educational institutions, hospitals”.<sup>23</sup> That tendency is clearly visible in Poona, too. Many hospitals, schools and colleges in Poona were founded by the Zarathustrians eager to share their smaller or bigger fortunes or use their education and time in service of other people.

John Hinnells, in his article *Parsi Communities i: Early History* devoted some space to provide details concerning early benefactors funding and supporting schools and colleges in Poona. These were: Rustom Jamsetjee Jigibhoy, who in 1863 gave a donation to a convent school in Poona; then in 1864 Sir Rustam Jamsetjee Jigibhoy gave a considerable amount of money to the Deccan College in Poona; in 1865 C.J. Readymoney funded the building of an engineering college and in 1869 a science college; in 1878, Byramji Jeejeebhoy founded a medical school;<sup>24</sup> in 1889 Sir Dinshah M. Petit gave a plot of land for a bacteriological

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 319.

<sup>21</sup> J. Palsetia, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>22</sup> J.R. Hinnells, *Parsi Communities i: Early History*, [in:] *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, online edition 2008, [www.iranicaonline.org/articles/parsi-communities-i-early-history](http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/parsi-communities-i-early-history) (access: 30.12.2016).

<sup>23</sup> J. Palsetia, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

<sup>24</sup> Now it is the government B.J. Medical College.

laboratory as part of the Science College. The Sardar Dastur Noshirvan School for Zoroastrian girls started in 1893. Sir D.J. Tata (1859–1932) and Sir R.J. Tata gave money for the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Poona and to the Institute for a Persian and Arabic Department. In 1930, with the help of Sir Dorabji Tata Trusts, a Tata section in agricultural economics was established at the Gokhale Institute for Politics and in 1943 a college of commerce, and a year later a big donation for a national chemical laboratory was given. In 1932 Sir Cusrow and Sir Ness Wadia founded the Naoroji Wadia College, which is now a part of Poona University. As for medical care institutions, Hinnells mentions donations by Dinbai, widow of N.M. Petit, who funded two leper wards in the David Sassoon Asylum and ten cottages for the use as a sanatorium at Lonavla, near Poona, donated in 1896 by J.H. Mody.<sup>25</sup>

## 2. After-Independence Period

This part of my article is based solely on pieces of information obtained during my stay in Pune in December 2016. According to my knowledge there are no studies devoted exclusively to Parsis' involvement in creating after-independence landscape of Poona, although they contributed largely to that chapter of its history. Still the philanthropy is a remarkable trait for this community, one could say one of the factors defining their identity, and a lot of medical and educational institutions were established thanks to Parsis donating their money or land or devoting their time to create and develop them to serve Poonaites. The industrious Parsis are also the owners of different firms which contribute to the economic development of the city.

Among the hospitals the Jehangir Hospital should be mentioned. The story begins with the Jehangir Nursing Home, which was founded on the property donated by Sir Cowasji Jehangir Readymoney (16 February 1879 – 17 October 1962)<sup>26</sup> and his wife Lady Hirabai. Its founders asked the eminent Dr. Edulji H. Coyaji to make it a place which could offer medical care of high quality at an affordable price to the people of Poona. On the 6<sup>th</sup> of February, 1946, with only a few beds, it became the first significant private hospital in Poona. Soon the Jehangir Nursing Home increased considerably because of high demand of patients. In June 1988 Sir Cowasji Jehangir, 4<sup>th</sup> baronet, became Chairman of the Board of Trustees and in 1995 the Hirabai Cowasji Jehangir Medical Research Institute (HCJMRI) was founded. A large number of patients are treated free of charge as a part of various research programmes. In 1998 the 180-bed Jehangir Hospital tied up with the Apollo Hospitals Group. Now it is a 350-bed hospital providing high standard healthcare.

Dr. Keki Byramjee Grant (1920–2011) was one of the first cardiologists in India. Educated in Poona, Mumbai and Boston, Massachusetts, USA, he started his practice in the Jehangir Hospital. Quite soon he decided to start his own hospital, which opened for the public in 1959. His and his wife Tehmi's dedication resulted

<sup>25</sup> J.R. Hinnells, *Parsi Communities...*

<sup>26</sup> Sir Cowasji Jehangir was the 2<sup>nd</sup> baronet of the Readymoney prominent Bombay family.

in bringing a small four-bed hospital to the status of the first nationally accredited hospital in Pune, namely Ruby Hall Clinic. Converted from a private institution to a public charitable trust, namely the Poona Medical Foundation, in 2000 it has become a part of the Grant Medical Foundation. As Shirin Venkat states in the biography of Dr. Grant:

The Chairman and Founder of Ruby Hall Clinic, Dr. K.B. Grant, has steered the hospital single-handedly and has made it into a self-sufficient medical empire.<sup>27</sup>

In 1966 the encouragement and support of Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, the 4<sup>th</sup> baronet, as well as the generosity of Lady Hirabai Cowasji Jehangir and Dr. E.H. Coyaji helped to establish the N.M. Wadia Institute of Cardiology as a Public Charitable Trust.

In 1966 the Serum Institute of India manufacturing immunobiological drug and vaccines was founded by Dr. Cyrus Poonawalla, a businessman from Poona, the chairman of Poonawalla Group. As is stated on the website of the Institute:

The Philanthropic philosophy of the company still not only exists but has been proliferated to bring down the prices of newer vaccines such as Hepatitis-B vaccine, Combination vaccine etc., so that not only India's, but the entire under-privileged children of the world are protected from birth onwards.<sup>28</sup>

To provide a quality education at affordable residential schools and offer the children with potential a chance to be successful citizens was a priority for some Parsi philanthropists.

Dastur School for Zoroastrian girls started in 1893, as was mentioned above, then in 1912 the Sardar Dastur Hoshang Boys' High School was built as a residential school to provide education not only to local pupils but also to boys from outside Pune. In 1953 Bai Najamai Noshervan Dastur Primary School, which is co-educational, was founded under the Charitable Minority Trust. It admits pupils without any distinction of caste and creed. The motto of Dastur Schools and Junior College: “Humata, Hukhta, Hvarshta (good thoughts, good words and good deeds)”<sup>29</sup> stresses the Parsi principles of these institutions.

The National Model School was founded by N.D. Nagarvala and Dr. Erin N. Nagarvala on June 18, 1947. It was only after the death of Mrs. Erin N. Nagarvala that the name of the school has been changed, in order to honour her devotion to the school. Thanks to the School website<sup>30</sup> one can become acquainted with the life sketches of both the founders, whose thoughts and deeds were fully dedicated to teaching.

<sup>27</sup> F. Master, *The Making of a Legend. Biography of Dr. K.B. Grant*, Pune 2004, p. 192.

<sup>28</sup> [http://www.seruminstitute.com/content/about\\_us.htm](http://www.seruminstitute.com/content/about_us.htm) (access: 17.06.2019).

<sup>29</sup> The triad which in short summarises the teaching of Zarathushtra (A.V. Williams Jackson, *The Ancient Persian Conception of Salvation according to the Avesta, or Bible of Zoroaster*, “The American Journal of Theology” 1913, no. 17[2], p. 204). The three words are used in Parsi rituals (E.S. Drower, *The Role of Fire in Parsi Ritual*, “The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland” 1944, no. 74[1/2], p. 78).

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.nagarvalaschool.org> (access: 17.06.2019).

The J.N. Petit Technical High School was founded by Nusserwanjee Ma-neckjee Petit in September 1888 to commemorate his son, Jamshedjee Nusserwanjee Petit, who died in that year. The school was established on his own premises at Lal Baug in Bombay with the aim to help orphaned Zarathushti children. In 1948 it was shifted to the present location in Poona. In 1962 the School opened to students from all castes, creed and religions but it provides hostel facilities to Parsi students exclusively. The School offers additionally such technical subjects as electric wiring, welding, carpentry, etc.

Parsis have also been the owners of different shops and workshops in Poona, which became the real landmarks in the city. One of them is definitely Dorabjee's store, today a modern three-storey building on Moledina Road (Fig. 5). Its history goes back to 1911, when Dorabjee Pallonji Patell took over the British-run Treacher Company. It was a tin-roofed shop at the beginning but introducing new wares and expanding all the time gave it an important place in everyday life of Poonaites. Soon it has been associated with a good brand by inhabitants of Poona. As Dorabjee Patell had no children, his property was inherited by his nephews: Rustam, Savak and Fali. They ran the family business together. Rustam died in 1981, Fali retired in 1984 and Savak continued until 1988, when he decided to hand over the business to his daughter-in-law, Thrity Poonawalla, who now manages the company together with her son Farsheed Burjor Patell, helped by her daughter Tina and her son-in-law Neville. The company has opened a new branch recently. The Dorabjee's always have been introducing many new products on Poona's market, among them imported goods one can hardly find in any other shop. On the other hand, interest in certain products made businessmen in India willing to start their production in India. This is the case of ABC Farms, a Pune-based undertaking founded by Parsis: Rohinton Aga, Adi Bathena and Eruch Chinoy. They produce different varieties of cheese, such as peccorino goat cheese, cumin cheese and many others. It is worth mentioning that Rohinton Aga became the owner of Thermax D. Ltd., an energy and environment engineering company established by Adi Bathena. After the death of Rohinton Aga, his wife Anu Aga was the chairperson of the company and now her daughter Meher Pudumjee leads it.

## Conclusion

I have discussed very shortly how the Zarathustrian community has been contributing to the development of Pune for centuries, becoming part and parcel of the history of the city. I have mentioned just a few families and the undertakings of some of their members in the sphere of promoting education, medical care and business. I am well aware that in fact it is only a tip of an iceberg, however, taking into account the limited space of this article, I decided to summarize all these achievements.

Definitely, Parsis contribute to the well-being of the members of their own community as well as other Indians on a great scale, especially in comparison with their numerical amount. Their philanthropic attitude has become the characteristic defining the whole community. Among Parsis there is awareness of the fading memory of the community's distinct identity, history, and contributions to the city among



other inhabitants of Pune. Their population in India is getting smaller year by year and they face different problems but the memory of their achievements kept fresh can help in the maintenance of Parsis identity and pride of their lineage.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> During my stay in Pune I did not meet Zoroastrians as self-critical as Tanya Luhmann shows in her book *The Good Parsi. The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society* (e.g. see p. 127) but perhaps more research is needed among the wider strata of the Zoroastrian society, including a considerable number of young people. Hopefully, such research will be undertaken by anthropologists.



Fig. 1. S.R. Patel Fire Temple, Nana Peth, Pune (photo: Lidia Sudyka)



Fig. 2. At the courtyard of the S.R. Patel Fire Temple, Nana Peth, Pune (photo: Lidia Sudyka)



Figs. 3 & 4. Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy Fire Temple, Dastur Meher Road, Pune (photo: Lidia Sudyka)



Fig. 5. Dorabjee's Super Market, Moledina Road, Pune (photo: Lidia Sudyka)