

# EVIDENT AFFINITIES BETWEEN THE PARSIS AND THE BRITISH LEADING THEM TO CLOSE RELATIONS

Dr. Kersey Antia, Aug 11, 2019; updated Sep 29, 2019

As noted earlier, Parsis form the first ever link between the East and the West following the Greco-Persian contacts in the fifth century B.C. and even in India they were the first to come into close contact with the Portuguese, Dutch, English and other Europeans who came to India. The Portuguese even had a battalion of Parsi soldiers in Tarapore. Their ancestors also fought several times with the Romans, not allowing them to win more than fifty percent of the time in all, the Roman emperor even regarding the Persian king as “brother”, as I have detailed in my yet unpublished paper on the subject. Thus, as the English were not the first Europeans the Parsis ever met but were really the last, Luhrman basing her unscientific anthropology theory entirely on the Parsis' relations with the English rulers is not very logical, especially as there are other factors that are responsible for their present predicament, as pointed out by me. Even when the Parsis moved to England, as John Hinnells notes, “most came to what they perceived as a culture that was not alien, from which they could learn, but to which they could also contribute.” And so it was a two-way street and not just a one-way exchange between the two as Luhrman makes it out to be. (*The Zoroastrian Diaspora, Religion and Migration*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 338). A good example of such a mutuality is an English lady, Miss Grace Darling putting on Parsi dress and playing as a Parsi actress and singing “Rutee Madam Is My Name”. (*Hamazor* – Issue 1, 2003, p. 34). As Hinnells notes, English writers such as Samuel Laing, one time Minister of Finance for India, wrote books about the relevance of Zoroastrian principles and asserting “it was in accord with the highest ideals of Christian Britain.” (p. 336). Hinnells cites a petition by the Parsis to the German East Africans, for changing their legal status on par with the Germans, “with the explicit support of Sir Basil Cave”, emphasizing “the shared Zoroastrian-Christian ideals” (even though this was not as firmly established by then as in later periods). The fact that the Parsis were successful in securing an equal status with the Europeans speaks a lot at least for establishing mutuality here. (I have referred elsewhere to a similar incident in the U.S.A. roughly around the same time when a Parsi was allowed to be a citizen of the United States on similar grounds though it was then restricted to the Europeans only.)

John Hinnells unveils real reasons for the affinity of the British with

the Parsis. It shows initially it was the British who saw them as “kindred spirit” in their earliest contacts with them when they had no idea they will end up as their rulers.

The early Protestant British travellers to India were so struck by the similarity between Protestant Christianity and Zoroastrianism that they returned home to write sympathetic portraits of the Parsi community, according to Professor John R. Hinnells. This was apparent from the manuscripts in the British Museum and the India Office in London, he observed.

It was perhaps the distinctiveness of the community along with the philosophy of monotheism and the high moral standards of the Parsis that endeared them to the British who considered them as “kindred spirit,” which I doubt can be said of other colonised people Tanya writes about.

He added that the British interest for the community remained strong only in the initial stages. Later British visitors to the country were perhaps more arrogant about their status as rulers, though by the 1800s, the Parsis had emerged as a strong commercial force in the country. This shows the Parsis often had to stand up for themselves and prove their worth and fight for it. (*Times of India*, January 20, 1979).

I happened to visit India then and attended all Hinnells' lectures and he had much more to say on this subject than the Times can report. See my writings on the influence of Zoroastrianism on the Judeo-Christian tradition for further information.

Hinnells reports a similar petition made by the Parsis of Baroda State to the U.S. authorities to found a separate “Colony of Parsees” “where they can without the slightest impediment preserve and follow the religion of their forefathers. They claimed they “do not fall even a whit behind their immediate neighbours the Englishmen and their distant fellow-men the Europeans wherever the spirit of noble enterprise and great undertakings is concerned.” (p.448). Hinnells notes that an English judge, C.A. Kincaid even held that, “like the British, Parsis had derived their qualities from the Greeks” from the time of Alexander's invasion of Persia, (p.338), though he does not explain it further, but as I have narrated elsewhere, Alexander himself was so impressed by the Persians that he continued many of their customs and organizations. Also see Wieseffer and Briant for it.

As Hinnells notes, the Parsis were not uncritical of the English or England. While visiting England in 1840, A.C. Wadia complained of “the dirty state of the road (in London) compared with Bombay.” He adds: “Wadia in 1840 and Malabari in 1893 were forcibly struck by the dirt and poverty of London and expressed their gratitude that India was not as bad.” Malabari's pathetic impression of the English, however, far

surpasses the pathetic figure the Good Parsi cuts with Luhrman.

Unlike Tanya, Reverend James Moulton who came to know the Parsis very well by his long residence in India, observes is quite in line with most of the non-Parsi scholars' views than Tanya's and further reinstates the affinity between them: "Both the Eastern and the Western elements in their environment have profoundly influenced the Parsis. They are justly proud of their accessibility to new ideas, and there is no section in India which knows so well how to make use of what the West can give. But they are thoroughly Oriental, for all that; and the combination of qualifications gives them unique advantages as intermediaries between East and West. Unfortunately they have only used this faculty in the sphere of practical life, especially in the field of commerce. Such shining examples as B.M. Malabari and Dadabhai Naoroji show what the Parsi mind can do in politics and social reform by virtue of this gift. Incalculable benefits would come to the Parsis, and to India, if there were given to this keenly intelligent and accessible people a man of religious genius and religious fervour." (*The Treasure of the Magi, A Study at Modern Zoroastrianism*, James Hope Moulton, London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1917 p. 173).

It seems the good Parsi's dissatisfaction with post-colonial India is rooted in their dissatisfaction with their own selves as as a result of turning materialist and Westernized and forgetting the very purpose they risked everything to settle in India to preserve their faith.