

# Some stray observations about the Parsi (Zoroastrian) settlers in North America

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## Migrations to North America

Roughly about ten percent of Zoroastrians are now settled in North America, and so it is understandable that I was requested to write about them, a task that I can undertake only as one man's stray thoughts and impressions.

While I for one have settled in the states since 1965, some Parsis migrated there as early as in the Nineteenth century. Dasturji Dhalla studied in Columbia University for his Ph. D. In Avestan studies at the turn of the century and in his autobiography, he makes a mention of them as well as of a very affluent Parsi gentlemen. Mr. Saklatwala. The most valuable research on this subject is made by Mr. Jamshed Pavri of Vancouver, B.C.

Since the British were the rulers of America until 1776 when The Parsis had already become their contractors and confidante and since Americans replied heavily during its Civil War on cotton from India to offset the loss of cotton from their South. Some Parsis may well have been the first Indians to set their foot on the American soil.

The ships built by the Wadias, such as Minden, served the British navy in the war of American independence and it won't be surprising if the British navy retained the services of its Parsi artisans for serving them. Pestonji Framji Daver, according to Pavri, was the first Parsi to settle in U.S.A.

He seems to have been a very wealthy businessman of San Francisco. He married a Catholic lady there. His son, James Edward Daver, a Catholic himself, died in 1980, when, according to the will of Pestonji Daver, his estate worth about 5-1/2 million U.S. Dollars, went to the Bombay Parsi Panchayet to be used for cosmopolitan charities, perhaps the only one of its kind and magnitude ever received by this Panchayet. The son's estate of about one million U.S. dollars, however, went to his Catholic church, as per his will.

When I visited New York in the Sixties, I remember seeing photographs of one Mr. Nasli Heeramaneck and his wife Alice in the prestigious *New York Times* which described him as a foremost collector of Indian antiques in his time. Per Pavri, Nasli came here in the 1920's with only a few cents in his pocket, and slept in the subway. Jamsetji Tata visited the steel city of Pittsburgh to seek American collaboration for his steel mill. The first Zoroastrian association in North America was started by Saklatwala on November 10, 1923 in New York with seven Parsis present on the occasion. However, Saklatwala's

sudden demise, and the great depression, led to the eventual demise of the association also. My wife and I had the pleasure of meeting one Mr. Wadia in 1966 in New York. He started an Indian hotel decades ago in New York, perhaps the first of its kind in the USA, and runs it still.

However, as Dasturji Dhalla observes in his autobiography, which also happens to be the first autobiography ever written in the Gujarati language, our ancestors since time immemorial were not in the habit of keeping historical records as other nations were; our knowledge about our Achaemenian dynasty comes almost entirely from Greek historians, who unfortunately are partial to their own race. It is absolutely imperative therefore that the Zoroastrian associations in North America keep accurate records of their members and their history. Pavri has made an extensive effort at collecting such data for his Vancouver area immigrants but I know not of any other such effort. However, the Zoroastrian Association of Chicago was fortunate enough in having an undergraduate student of professor John Hinnells of the University of Manchester coming to Chicago in 1986 at her expense and living with various Zoroastrian families including mine, to study and eventually publish the history of the association. One hopes each association here will strive to make such an arrangement with local colleges or universities or encourage their own young members to take up this valuable research.

The real migration however took place in the 1950's and 1960's when the restrictions against the immigration of Asians were lifted. When the U.S. prohibited non-whites to migrate here, some Parsis successfully proved in the courts that they belonged to the white race, but that did not help to swell their rank. Most of the early settlers, like myself, were students, who found such excellent job opportunities in their field in the New World, that they preferred to stay on at least for a while. Many settlers married Americans or Canadians, but it seems apparent that an overwhelming majority of them went back home to find a spouse for themselves, and then settled down in the New World with their Zoroastrian spouse. Some of them had the navjote of their children performed in North America, but many more returned home for the same, because of strong family ties. This is in such a sharp contrast to the fact that most European settlers came to America with no ties whatsoever to their native land, never to return there in their entire lifetime.

## **Dar-e Mehers as centers of religious activities**

Thanks to the munificence of late Arbab Rustam Guiv and his wife late Moravarid Guiv, as well as philanthropist Zarhosti brothers, almost every major center of Zoroastrian population now have a Dar-e Meher (house of worship) in North America, such as New York, Toronto, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Vancouver. These Dar-e Mehers are not only used as house of worship, but

also for conducting religious classes and lectures for children and adults, celebrating gahambars, New Year functions, weddings, navjotes, muktads, religious seminars or lectures, and similar events. Since Zoroastrians in North American cities are scattered over an area of 50-80 miles, not all of them attend the Dar-e Mehers regularly, but only on certain occasions.

### **A new tradition of honorary priests:**

None of these Dar-e Mehers however. Have a full-time or even part-time paid priests to serve the local population. Fortunately, however, there are quite a few priests who have become navar/martab (priest) in the old country, and have the zeal to serve the community as volunteer priests as and when needed. In our entire history it is quite a unique phenomenon that ten percent of our total population is for the most part being served fully and free of charge by a volunteer priest force. How long will this admirable tradition continue is indeed a question mark. However, the sons of some of the priests, who were born and raised here, have shown interest in sacrificing their time and school work. And becoming navar in India, as has my son Mazda. So that they can serve the local community as priests, which has generated immense respect for the priests here.

In Chicago, for example, voluntary priests serve the Dar-e Meher every Sunday, in addition to serving all other ritual needs of the community as and when necessary. Which of late often means conducting prayers in Chicago for the souls of the dear ones who pass away in far away India, Iran, or elsewhere. They donate whatever is given to them for their priestly services to the local Zoroastrian association. Moreover, they give the entire income generated by our tradition of *chamach* during *boi* ceremonies, for the upkeep of the Dar-e Meher, without which it will be difficult to maintain it.

### **Lack of unity in religious matters**

While the priests are fully devoted to their work, they are not fully in agreement about the advisability or otherwise of making changes in our religious practices so as to adopt them to the American milieu. Since there are no Towers of Silence in North America for apparent reasons, and since the government rules here would not allow us to build one even if we can afford to, the priests as well as the laity have resigned themselves to the inevitability of accepting cremation and/or burial, for the disposal of the dead. In Chicago we have made special arrangements with a funeral home to let us do the *sachkar* (ritual cleaning). But since only the authorized personnel of a funeral home or crematorium can handle a dead body, as per the strict government rules, contact with non-Zoroastrians unlike in India can hardly be avoided after death. Moreover, the non-Zoroastrian friends and neighbors of the deceased

often attend the funeral ceremony, though there is no uniformity in this practice, which very often depends on the views and preferences of the individual priest performing the ceremony. There is no uniformity among the priests or laity about which method of disposal. Cremation or burial, best represents the Zoroastrian philosophy. Often both methods are employed as when a deceased is cremated and his or her ashes are buried. The Zoroastrian Association of Chicago has bought a few burial lots in a local cemetery, as well as made arrangements for cremation with the crematorium serving the same cemetery. It seems it will be far more in the true spirit of Zoroastrianism to scatter the cremated ashes of all the deceased in a certain area or a garden plot, just as the remains of all the deceased Zoroastrians are kept in a tower of silence, instead of burying them in individual lots, thus continuing unity in death, and avoiding greater pollution of the earth as well as unnecessary expenditure after the departed one.

Due to such new and uncharted routes that the North American community often has to take, the need was felt for the priests to get together and agree upon certain essential matters and practices. They met in large numbers in November 1983 in Toronto and agreed upon certain matters, but could not agree about everything. This reminds me of an attempt I witnessed as a child nearly forty years ago when my guru, Dasturji Dabu along with Sir Rustam P. Masani tried to get fourteen out of a then total of sixteen high priests to come to agreement about important religious matters and principles. The attempt did not succeed in the end, and even got adverse publicity in certain Parsi press. Forty years later the situation is not much different in North America. In view of the lack of a central religious authority in India and Iran for so many centuries, uniformity in religious matters and views sadly seems to elude our grasp either in the old country or new.

### **The challenge facing us:**

However, a 'secular' attempt at forming a federation of all North American associations met with a much better success in May, 1986. The Federation itself is the result of five conferences held by all the associations here about every 2-3 years. Inasmuch as, however, the bottom line for our survival here will be the existence and ability of a strong, central religious institution preferably manned and guided by a full-time, learned Dastur who would visit and maintain on-going liaison with Zoroastrians in disparate areas, the existence of a Federation by itself may not suffice to ensure the survival of Zoroastrianism here. When the present generation is gone from the scene, the need to socialize or form associations and federation may cool down, but hopefully the need for soul searching, piety, and spiritual enlightenment will not dwindle. Unfortunately, then, the first generation of immigrants will not be there to guide the next generation in their religious undertaking and

understanding. There is no religious system which is so ancient as ours and no nation so modern as U.S.A. or Canada. We in North America are therefore literally the last link between the old and the new. If we do not fulfill our obligation to our progeny by guiding them well in their spiritual sojourn, and equipping them with a good grasp of our religion and religious practices, we might leave them so confused and bewildered about our ancient religion and practices that they might become an easy prey to the ever-present evangelical efforts of Christian and other missionaries. For this reason the material prosperity or religious devotion and steadfastness of the present generation will be of far less significance for the survival of Zoroastrianism on this continent than their willingness and zeal in transmitting their devotion to, and understanding of, the basic principles of their faith to their children. Unless this happens, the same fate will meet us as the one that met the second- and third-generation Zoroastrian immigrants to England and Australia, who are all lost in the vast ocean of Christianity surrounding them. I can only conclude with the fervent prayer that the present generation in North America will rise to the occasion, and not let the precious one-tenth of their total population be lost to Christianity, for what they could still do to avert such a sad possibility.

Such a loss would be even sadder in view of the fact that historical research both in Christianity and Zoroastrianism is finally finding its way. However slowly, in popular books and is emphasizing the fact that Christianity and Judaism are so much rooted in Zoroastrianism. The last such book to come on the scene as recently as in late in 1986 – *The First Coming – How the Kingdom of God became Christianity*, by Dr. Thomas Sheehan – is fast becoming popular here. Dr. Sheehan maintains that Christianity is undergoing a theological crisis which grows out of fact now freely admitted by both Protestant and Catholic theologians, that as far as can be discerned from the available historical data, Jesus of Nazareth did not think he was divine, did not assert any of the messianic claims that the New Testament attributes to him, and went to his death without intending to found a new religion called “Christianity.” What Jesus taught, he asserts, was what Zoroaster had taught long time ago, especially about life after death, resurrection and other eschatological ideas. Let us hope that our children will come to learn these facts and will ever feel so proud to belong to a religion without which the western world would have remain so religiously impoverished. This is not to imply that the adults and the children here are not striving hard to study their religion. Rather, if the Zoroastrians elsewhere tried half as hard to study and understand their religious roots as we try to do here, they would certainly bring about a significant religious revival there. But trying unusually harder to hang onto our religious heritage is the price we have to pay for living in unusual circumstances.

As the Visparad advises us, we have to keep our feet, our hands, our intellect, and our spirit ever ready for timely action in the service of the

religion so as to be always able to adhere to the religion of Asho Zarathushtra. Nowhere in the entire world today but in North America is man faced with a real crisis of choice – choosing between the forces of Spenta Mainyu and Angra Mainyu, between the good and the evil – and the need to make the right choice as Asho Zarathushtra exhorts us so repeatedly and so vehemently in the Gathas. His message is as appealing and meaningful to us today as it was in his times.

May Ahura Mazda and his Benevolent Spirit, Spenta Mainyu, guide us to make the right choice for adhering to the religion of the right choice for ever! Amen!