

***THE PARSIS*, Vol. III By Delphine Menant**

Translated from the French by Anthony D. Mango

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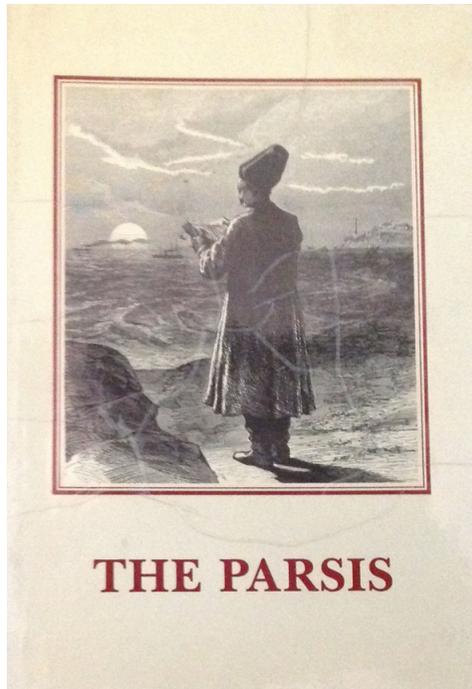
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A Book Review

By Dr. Kersey A. Antia Orland Park, Illinois

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This is a labor of love by Delphine Menant, who was so enchanted by her father's scholarly work on the Zarathushti religion, and by a few Zarathushtis that came to confer with him, that she sailed from France to India almost a hundred years ago to study the Parsis first hand.

This volume is especially important because it was never published in English, and nobody even knew of its existence. Credit goes to Jeroo (Billimoria) Mango, proprietor of the popular Mumbai bookshop, Danai and her husband Anthony Mango, the Greek Consul General in India, for securing and translating the rare French copy.

It was in 1993 that Jeroo Mango chanced upon a translation of Menant's *Les Parsis* by M. M. Marzban written in 1917, in an old bookshop in Delhi, and reprinted it a year later as Volumes I and II. However, it was Professor Mary Boyce, who pointed out that Marzban's work only covered the first three chapters of Menant's work, and five other chapters, perhaps the most interesting, had never been translated into English.

Over a cup of tea at Mary Boyce's house in the UK, Jeroo immediately said: "That's no problem, my husband will translate them." "And so it was," says Anthony Mango, "that a Greek from Constantinople found himself translating from French into English, a book on the Parsis." We owe them all a world of gratitude for opening up a window to our past which we did not even know existed.

Few books I have read on our recent history provide us with first hand and authentic information about Parsi life and history in the 18th and 19th Centuries, as this work. The book is a veritable mine of information for this period in Parsi history. It is regrettable that there are no more volumes by Ms. Menant, and the accounts of various events and personalities mentioned in the existing volumes seem rather terse, though they were perhaps adequate when written 100 years ago. The account does not cover any period after 1902, as that is when Ms. Menant visited India.

How one wishes her efforts would inspire someone, especially a North American youth, to write such a book or do a Ph.D. thesis on our history here. A hundred years hence we will have much less capacity and resources to do so.

The author has given references for all her observations, which too will prove so very valuable to historians. She is obviously enchanted by the Parsis, but does not fail to be critical of them, if needs be, which is however very rare. This may pamper our pride in ourselves, which seems to be our pastime at present.

It is interesting to learn about our customs and practices, including birth, death, Navjote, wedding ceremonies, as observed 100 years ago, as also about the rise and fall of the Parsi Panchayet. (Upto 1823, the Panchayet was empowered by the British, to beat up a Parsi sinner with shoes, or declare him an outcaste; later the judiciary took over these functions). Accounts of distinguished Parsis in commerce, literature, education and public service also make good reading.

While she writes about the achievements of the Parsis in the 18th and 19th

centuries, she also points out that just as the British started showering titles on them, they were losing their grip on national and international trade already, in the late 19th century, as other communities by then started competing vigorously. The decline in trade seems continuous since then, but historians have often found such declines inevitable, especially for a microscopic race.

The book gives us an idea of how cohesive and productive the community was just 150 years ago, when it was not beset with the full impact of westernization and dispersions to the diasporas in the West. Even J. N. Tata, per Menant, reserved his scholarships for three Parsi students every fourth one being a non-Parsi. If we were to believe my Pahlavi teacher, the late Bejanji Chacha, J. N. Tata had even specified in his will that all those from the priestly families of his native town of Navsari, be given first preference in any of his companies as they in essence functioned as an extended family. My grandfather invested almost all of his savings in Tata Steel, though it did not bear any dividends until World War I, due to the opposition by the British.

The community then was more symbiotic, cohesive, and productive a force than even Japan Inc. in our times, and had our numbers been just a couple of millions, we would have surely put India well ahead of Japan. For example, the Tatas started stiff competition to the P&O Steamship company, as also steel, cotton and hydro-electric companies in the 19th century.

A perusal of this book makes us wonder if it is the same community any more. But that is the price we have to pay for westernization and for westward migration.

The book cannot possibly fail to impress us with the greatness we had just a hundred years ago, and the promise of such greatness in our future, if we can only learn to seize the opportunity. That is what makes this book compulsory reading in every Zarathushti household, especially in the West where it can be the best gift we can bequeath to our children.

If we do so, the labors and devotion of a non-Zarathushti author will also get the deserts they so richly deserve. Alas, in the humdrum of daily living, it is so easy to neglect the significance of such works and such labor of love.

I had the privilege of growing up in a family that had its own library of books, and now I have one of my own, but even those that are not bibliophiles should grab this book, not just for themselves, but as a bequest to their children – some obvious spelling errors in translating from the French notwithstanding.

What can be a greater tribute to our ancestors than a first-hand account of our heritage by a scholarly French daughter of a renowned French scholar, not even known to have existed but for the kind efforts of Mary Boyce, the doyen of all scholars on the Zarathushti religion, in our times.