

Religion, state and politics in India  
by Moin Shakir. Ajanta Publications. 1989  
(Prof. G.N. Sharma Felicitation Volume)

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## THE PARSIS

*Adi Doctor*

The Parsis constitute one of India's most interesting ethnic groups. Over 1300 years ago the Parsis landed at the small fishing village of Sanjan on the border of Gujarat and Maharashtra. The Sassanian Empire in Iran, which accepted the teachings of Zarathushtra, as their official religion, thrived for many centuries, A.D. 226 to A.D. 615<sup>1</sup>. Then with the Arab invasion of Iran and the forcible conversion of Zoroastrians to Islam, the empire collapsed and the subjects fled first to the Persian Gulf port of Hormuz where they lived for a decade and a half, then to the island of Diu to the extreme south of Kathiawar. After staying 19 years in Diu they set sail for the west coast of Gujarat landing at Sanjan in A.D. 785<sup>2</sup>. It was here that the local king Jaddi Rana gave them shelter.

Both the Kiss-i-Sanjan (the Story of Sanjan) which is a chronicle of couplets composed by the high priest or "dastur" Navsari, Behram Kaikobad Sanjan, in 1600 and Gujarati "garba" songs sung by Parsi women on festive occasions like Navjote etc., relate the tale of how King Jaddi Rana commanded the Parsi refugees to his court and how the small group of refugees (about 500) requested their high priest Nedyosangh, to act as their spokesman and request the king to grant them three boons — their freedom to worship as per their own faith, the freedom to bring up their young ones according to their own customs and traditions and the gift of a small piece of land which they could cultivate to attain economic self-sufficiency. The "garba"

songs relate how the good hearted king readily granted them their request, asking them what they would do in return for their adopted country. In reply, the chief priest Neryosagh asked for a bowl of milk to be brought to him. When the milk was brought to him he stirred a spoonful of sugar into the milk, dissolving it without letting a drop of milk spill over and said, "We shall try to be like this insignificant amount of sugar in the milk of your human kindness."

The early history of the Parsis in India has a lot to do with their subsequent political attitudes.<sup>3</sup> In keeping with the word given to the king they endeavoured to "sweeten" the country enriching it with their good deeds; they never tried to disturb the Indian identity or ethos, never sought to convert, they mingled and became one with the inhabitants while still retaining their distinct culture, religion and life-style.

During the first 600 years of their history in India, before the advent of British rule, the Parsis took to various peaceful vocations like farming, fruit cultivation, carpentry, weaving, banking and shop keeping. Since the beginning of the 16th century, Surat which was developing as an important trading centre for both the Mughal empire and the European trading companies began to attract Parsis. During 17th century—18th century, Surat became the largest Parsi settlement. Europeans transacted their business with the Indian hinterland largely through Parsi agents and brokers. Later with the decline of Surat as a trading centre and with the British beginning to develop Bombay, Parsis from Surat and other places started moving into and settling in Bombay. By 1780 Bombay recorded a population of 33,444 of which 3087 (9.2%) were Parsis. Ever since, Bombay city has shown the largest single concentration of the Parsis—more than 70% of the total Parsi population.

It was largely with the advent of British rule that the community began to show remarkable changes and became a most significant agent of social, political and economic change. This paper seeks to trace the impact this microscopic community made in the realms of social reform, public welfare and economic development; the role it played in national politics and the extent and effect of its political participation.

The Parsis were perhaps the first Asiatic community to

bring about radical social change, first, in their own ranks and then endeavour to improve/reform the Indian society at large.

It all began with the introduction of English education (about 1820) and the liberal politics of Bentick, Elphinstone and Macaulay. By 1850, a group of young reformers, predominantly Parsi, who styled themselves as "Young Bombay" started practising and spreading reform. They set up the "Students Literary and Scientific Society" to disseminate, propagate and educate people in new ideas and scientific thinking. Dadabhai Naoroji, in 1848, set up the "Dnyani Prasarak Mandali" (Society for Diffusion of Knowledge) to spread the message of social reform among Gujarati speaking people. In 1851 he started the "Rast Goftar" (Herald of the Truth) for the same purpose. While in 1852 he and the young Parsi reformers were mainly responsible in founding the Bombay Association as the first political platform and mouthpiece of the reform movement. Other leading Parsi lights of this early reform movement were : in addition to Dadabhai Naoroji, Furdonji, S. S. Bengali, K. N. Cama, K. R. Cama, Ardesher Framjee Moos and others.

The Parsis were the first Asiatic community to make 'Bigamy' punishable (the Parsee Marriage and Divorce Act 1865). Similarly, the Parsee Succession Act of 1865, for the first time, made provisions for inheritance by widows and daughters. It may well be pertinent to indicate here that these reform measures were no mere aping of western customs. They were widely discussed and debated and accepted as necessary justice to women folk. They constituted selective assimilation.

By 1890 Parsis had emancipated their women and their interest now turned towards their fellow-countrymen. They felt they were also in some measure responsible for the progress of the whole Indian society.<sup>4</sup>

The Dnyan Prasark Mandal began to propagate widow re-marriage among the Hindus. It is not insignificant to note that it was in the home of a Parsi, that for the first time, around 1895, a Muslim woman publicly took off her purdah.<sup>5</sup> The most prominent Parsi Hindu reformer was Behramji Malbari. Malbari was convinced that the root of Hindu society's internal weakness lay in its social abuses. From 1884 to 1891, Malbari endeavored to bring together the various associations involved

in social reform and scattered all over the country and through the medium of his paper "The Indian Spectator" crusaded for social reform. To a good extent Malbari succeeded in his endeavours. He managed to obtain the powerful backing of progressive Indian princes, the Maharajas of Gwalior, Patiala and Bikaner as well as of leading Brahman intellectuals, persons like Mahadev Govinda Ranade from Maharashtra and Sir. T.M. Iyer from Madras.

The extent of Malbari's success in rousing social awareness among the Hindus can be gauged from the fact that social conservatives like Lokmanya Tilak were obliged to intervene and condemn these attempts to reform the Hindus by a foreign government and a non-Hindu leader. To such charges made by the social conservatives, Malbari hit back through the columns of his "Indian Spectator (28-9-1884, p.773) thus: "If my Hindu friends take this line of argument that I am only a Parsi, I will be forced to reply that I am as good a Hindu as any of them, that India is as much my country as theirs, and that if they do not give me a locus stand in this case, I will take my stand on the higher ground of humanity. I have not taken up the work as a holiday pastime and I am not going to be bullied out of it by the holiest of Brahmans. I respect their right of action...but at the same time they must not question my right of eliciting discussion."

Once when Malbari was politely told to concentrate on Parsi reforms, he retorted, again through the columns of his paper Indian Spectator (7-3-1885): "We Parsis have got rid of infant marriage, bigamy, polygamy...And it is after having reformed ourselves that we are appealing to the educated sons of the mother community to do likewise."

Malbari's greatest success came in 1891 when the Age of Consent Bill was passed. The bill raised the minimum marriage age of girls from 10 to 12. After attaining this goal Malbari retired from active public life. One of Malbari's last acts was to found jointly with Dayaram Gidumal, in 1908 (four years before he died), the institution of Seva Sadan. Seva Sadan was modelled after the Christian Missionary Order and its objectives were to spread education, medical aid and care for Indian women and weaker sections of society. The Seva Sadan's main area of operation (the institution is still active)

stayed confined to Western India.

### The Parsis and Public Welfare

Perhaps no other community in those days showed such a remarkable sense of public concern or public welfare as did the Parsis. From the early days Parsis used their wealth for public good. The large number of roads, bridges and fountains they built in the city of Bombay, with which the Parsis came to be increasingly identified, stand testimony to this fact. The Parsis organized and endowed foundations for long term public welfare purposes like education, medicine, science and study abroad. In 1851 C.N. Cama offered a prize, during the small pox epidemic, for the best essay on the use and advantage of vaccinations and then had the prize winning essay printed and distributed in the entire Bombay presidency at his own cost. Other Parsis like Sir Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy, Sir Dinshaw Manockjee Petit and Sir Cowasjee Jehangir Readymoney became a byword in India in the 19th century for their generosity in setting up hospitals, schools, libraries and university buildings.

Later in the twentieth century, the Tatas were to set up several foundations continuing the tradition of cosmopolitan Parsi generosity. In 1907, the Tatas set up the first technological university in the country—the Indian Institute of Science at Bangalore. In 1936 the same house founded the Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work, which brought out the leading Journal *The Indian Journal of Social Work* while in 1945 Tata munificence was to endow the nation with the famous Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, a leading institute even today in the field of mathematics and nuclear physics. In addition to the Tatas a number of other Parsi philanthropists also rendered service to the wider community through generous funding. To name only one, the N.M. Wadia Foundation has, since the early twentieth century been funding and helping causes ranging from succor to earthquake victims to aid for cancer patients.

Today after independence the state has stepped in to perform welfare functions. But this in no way belittles the Parsi contribution made in an era of "a negative state" primarily

concerned with the maintainance of law and order. The most positive aspect of Parsi charities lay in the extensive welfare system they helped develop in an era of negative state.

The early Parsis also showed considerable interest in the promotion of the welfare of the working class. They were among the first to advocate progressive social and factory legislation. S.S. Bengali, as early as 1878 presented his own draft of a factory law to the Bombay Legislative Council. When the Council turned it down, Bengali went to England to campaign and mobilize support for it. Thanks to his effort the Indian Factory Act of 1881 finally came to be enacted. The Act has been hailed for having heralded the Indian Labour Movement.<sup>6</sup>

Another great friend of Labour in India was B.P. Wadia, a close associate of Annie Besant. Wadia founded the first modern Trade Union in India with permanent membership fees and strike funds. This was the Madras Labour Union in 1918. Wadia was also a strong advocate of a Labour Party for India and pleaded for separate representation for labour in legislatures. Wadia dreamt of a labour movement in India which would be free from all such narrow considerations as caste and religion. Unfortunately, his own Madras Labour Union could not withstand the onslaught by caste groups and had to be disbanded in 1926 due to caste differences. Wadia's work was continued by S.H. Jhabvala who founded a number of trade unions in Bombay and in 1927 attempted to found a Workers and Peasants Party. But perhaps the time was not yet ripe for these efforts to meet with significant success. Nevertheless efforts of men like Bengali, Wadia and Jhabvala laid the foundations on which succeeding generations of Indian socialists were to build.<sup>7</sup>

A highly public spirited people, the Parsis, also played significant role in the development of journalism, theatre and sports. It was the Parsi Bhimjee Parikh who first brought a printing press and a printer to Bombay city through the agency of the East India Company.<sup>8</sup> Much before the first Marathi newspaper (*Dig Dursan*) appeared in 1837 and the first Hindu-Gujarati newspaper appeared in 1849, there were already four Parsi-Gujarati newspapers in circulation (these rose to six in 1849). Of these two even now continue to be widely read—

*The Bombay Samachar* and *Kaiser-E-Hind*. The initial stages of journalism in Western India was almost exclusively Parsi dominated: and Parsi press and journalism played an important role in bringing about social change within the community and in the country as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

As in case of Gujarati journalism, so also in case of the Gujarati theatre, the Parsis were pioneers. As Kulke indicates, "The development of modern Indian vernacular theatre is unimaginable today without the role of the Parsis."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the Parsi role in the development of new sports—swimming, cycling, motor sports, flying, cricket etc.—is now well documented and acknowledged.<sup>11</sup>

### The Parsis and Economic Development

But perhaps the most highlighted achievement of the community has been its spectacular contribution to the development of modern industry and entrepreneurship. Many explanations have been forwarded for this phenomenon ranging from "their rare intelligence and enterprise" and lack of caste, to "British auspices".<sup>12</sup>

Parsi pioneering effort laid the foundations of modern industrial India by building up an indigenous shipping industry, textile industry, iron and steel industry, Insurance and Banking.<sup>13</sup>

Lowjee Nusserwanji Wadia set up the Bombay ship-yard, the Mazagon dock and built over 350 ships in the nineteenth century. In 1841, Jeejeebhoy Dadabhoy introduced steam navigation to India and set up a highly profitable coastal shipping concern—the Bombay Steam Navigation Company. Among the best known Parsi families associated with shipping were the Banajis. Rustomji Banaji, the merchant prince of Calcutta and a great friend of Dwarkanath Tagaore, bought the Kidderpore docks and built the Shalekia docks for about six lack rupees.

The pioneering name in the field of textiles was Cowasji Nanabhoy Davar, who founded the first textile mill. The Wadias soon became a name to reckon with when they set up over ten mills besides the famous Bombay Dyeing and Century Mills. The Tatas made their entry in textiles with founding the Central Indian Mills at Nagpur. Parsi contribution did not

only lie in investing in textiles but equally importantly in management of the textile industry. The Parsis were often the managers and managing agents of mills started by non-Parsis.

The story of the iron and steel industry in India is a saga by itself. Once Tata came to know through Sir Richard Temple's report of the rich deposits in the Central provinces, he endeavoured with the help of German and American experts to set up a 30,000 pounds trial plant. In 1920 he went to London to study the conditions for the expansion of the project and after obtaining favourable reports from experts went ahead to set up the first iron and steel industry without any government assistance and without any government guarantee.

As in the case of iron and steel, so also in the case of generation of electricity through hydal power, the Tatas were the pioneers. J.N. Tata got the idea of converting the water power at Lonavala into electric power when he happened to see the electric works at Cauvery falls in Mysore which supplied power to the Kolar gold mines. He dreamt of supplying power to run electric trams and provide electric lighting to the city of Bombay. The practicability of his schemes was fully demonstrated by his sons who carried out the projects.

Finally mention must be made of the pioneering Parsi efforts to introduce modern banking and insurance to India. Cowasjee Nanabhoy Davar pioneered three banks : Commercial Bank in 1845, Mercantile Bank in 1853 and Brokers and Banking Co. in 1861. Dadabhoy Jeejeebhoy was a private banker who enjoyed the reputation of being able to supply a draft on any place from Cape Comarin to the Himalayas, while Byramjee Jeejeebhoy in co-operation with J.A. Forbes established the First local Fire Insurance Company in Bombay.

The 19th century was the Parsi pioneering era and Parsi capital entered every new venture—cement railways evoking Sir John Malcolm to observe, "There is no body of natives so remarkable for their enterprises as the Parsis".

The remarkable feature of the Parsi impact on industrialization was not only their pioneering enterprise, but also their keenness to introduce labour welfare measures (Parsi enterprises were the first to introduce pension schemes, fair wages, housing for workers etc. and their zeal to promote indigenous research



(for example the Tatas' eagerness to experiment with growing long staple Egyptian cotton in India and with developing an indigenous silk industry by adopting Japanese processes to Indian conditions).

Although the British succeeded to some extent in winning over the loyalty of the community to the crown through generously conferring knighthood etc., the community as a whole showed remarkable awareness of where its roots lay. Thus when in 1892, the English General Deshwood described the Parsis as foreigners in India, the Rast Gofdar vehemently protested. "We have time and again exposed the absurdity" wrote the paper, "of regarding the Parsis as aliens to India. They occupy a peculiar position which binds them with the ties of the strongest interest to the ruling race (British). But they are the children of soil...." On yet another occasion the Iran League Quarterly (October 1931) was compelled to give an even stronger rejoinder: "Politically . . . the Parsi has quite greater right to her (Indian) citizenship than either the Hindu or the Muslim. These claim it by right of conquest, for the Hindus conquered from the Dravidian, and the Moslems from the Hindus. But the Parsis claim it by right of treaty, sacrifice and service; and so their claim on India is more sacred more certain and more deserved than of any other people"<sup>14</sup>.

In fact from the early beginnings of self rule, leading Parsi intellectuals primarily considered themselves to be Indians first, and urged their sister communities to develop a similar consciousness in order to avoid chaos and prepare for genuine self-rule. The Parsis never had a theocratic approach to the state. It is interesting to note here that Parsi prayers refer to the concept of an ideal or good ruler in highly secular terms thus: "A good government in that which keeps and directs the country to be prosperous, its poor to be without distress, its laws and customs to be just . . . which keeps going as usual the worship of God and the performance of good and meritorious work . . ."

### **The Parsis and political participation**

A good index of the community's whole some attitude towards the nation and nation building is the extent of political

participation by the community at all levels of politics, local state and national.

From the beginning of local self government the Parsis showed a very degree of political awareness. A study of Bombay's Town Council from 1872 to 1940 shows that compared to their size the Parsis were very well represented in that body as the following table shows :<sup>15</sup>

Year	Total Membership	Parsis
1872	64	17
1880	66	18
1890	72	22
1900	72	22
1910	72	17
1920	72	22
1930	108	21
1940	117	15

Two things are worth noting about the early Parsi participation. The first is the fact that the Parsis played this significant role without preferential treatment by the British and mainly on the strength of their socio-economic position. The second is that in spite of their strong numerical representation (particularly in the early Municipal Councils) and the extremely important role of individual Parsis like, Pherozshah Mehta "the uncrowned king of Bombay (four times Chairman and town councillor for 43 years without interruption), D.E. Wacha and N. Furdoonji, they did not band together as a community nor ever adopted a communal stance on any issue.

Even after independence the Parsis have not done badly. Thus for a people of about 70000 strength, they could succeed in winning one or two seats in every Municipal election.

It was in India's metropolitan centres that the first awakenings of political consciousness took place and there emerged the demand for equal and active participation in the new political system that the imperial masters were setting up. The signs of this new awakening were the setting up of various political associations—The Zamindar Association (1837), Bengal British India Society 1843) and the British India Association (1851) in

Eastern India, the Madras Native Association (1851) in the South, and the Bombay Association (1852) in Western India. The Bombay Association was formed primarily with the support, memberwise and financial, of the Parsis.

Of its founding members 16 were Parsis, 6 Hindus, 2 Muslims, 2 Goans and 1 Jew. The next Year saw the Association membership grow to 62 members of whom 37 were Parsis, 16 Hindus, 5 Muslims, 2 Goans and 1 Jew. With the re-activation of the association by Naoroji Furdoonji in 1867, Chitpawan Brahmans from Maharashtra also began to participate actively in Bombay politics, leading among these being Telang, Bhandarkar and Ranade. The Bombay Association discussed and opined on various economic, social and administrative issues and came to exercise considerable influence in legislation and administration<sup>16</sup>. For almost fifty years the Parsis were continually presidents of the Association. Its more active members were P. Mehta, D. Naoroji, D.E. Wacha, J.N. Tata, K.R. Cama, B.M. Malbari, K.N. Kabraji, J.B. Marazban and D.N. Petit. Of its three secretaries, Mehta, Wacha and Telang, Mehta was to emerge a dominant figure not only in Bombay but also in National politics. The remarkable point to be noted is that in spite of their considerable domination in the Association, Parsi approach to problems was remarkably non-communalist. The Parsis provided the Bombay Presidency Association with a moderate secular and liberal approach to national problems — an approach which was to influence the Congress in the first twenty years of its formative stage.

### **The Parsis and the National Congress**

Parsi participation in early national and Congress politics was by any yardstick, conspicuous. Thus in the year 1901 when Parsi population was 94,190, the average number of delegates per year worked out to be 12.5 while the number of delegates per million population was 132.69.<sup>17</sup> However, when one thinks of the Parsis and Congress, three names prominently stand out—Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozeshaw Mehta and Dinshaw Wacha.

Naoroji's main concern was to inform the British voter and the public about India and its problem and thus bring about a

more just rule over the Indian subjects. Naoroji was confident that the innate love of the British for liberty would one day—if properly approached and informed make them see the need to give equal status and freedom in India. In this sense he never looked on the connection with the British to be a permanent one.

Gradually as Naoroji found that the British were turning a deaf ear to his pleas, that the “drain” of wealth from India to Britain remained undiminished, that the economic drain was also producing a ‘moral drain’ in the form of lesser ‘opportunities to the Indians and lesser experience to be gained from working their own government, Dadabhai became more extremist in his criticism of the British and began to speak of the triple evils of British rule, viz. loss of wealth, wisdom and work.<sup>18</sup> His classic work ‘Poverty and un-British Rule in India soon became the dogma of a whole generation of Indian national economists—R.C. Dutt, Ranade, B.V. Joshi etc.<sup>19</sup>

It has been customary to describe Dadabhai in terms of liberalism versus extremism. This, however, misses the central contribution of Dadabhai to Indian politics, namely, his role as the founding father of constitutionalism and secular nationalism.<sup>20</sup>

If by constitutionalism we understand adherence to the principles of established customs and law, Dadabhai was a constitutionalist par excellence. He had a great respect for the established principles of Common Law and as his biographer Masani notes, regarded the Queen’s proclamation as a constitution for India. Whatever the cause, whether he has pressing for the Indianization of the Civil services or for representative institutions, or for equal financial relations with Great Britain he never spoke in terms of “Natural Rights” but always in terms of the “pledged rights of the British”, linking up all his demands with the various royal proclamations and solemn pledges held out by the British statesmen to India.

Dadabhai never tired of fighting for the rights and freedom of his people. When the government began to take action against Tilak and his paper, Dadabhai condemned this gagging of the press as not only suicidal but as a departure from the principles on which British rule was supposed to be conducted.

The second aspect of Dadabhai's legacy to Indian politics was "secular nationalism." Dadabhai considered a thorough political union among the Indian people of all creeds and classes to be an essential prerequisite for attaining swaraj. He wanted people to sink their religious and communal differences: "All the people in their political position are in one boat. They must swim or sink together." He tried through his speeches and letters he wrote to dispell the fear among the Muslims and the Parsis that freedom would mean Hindu rule. He strongly criticised the attitude of indifference characteristic of certain Parsi leaders. Thus in a letter to Wacha dated 20-12-1988, Dadabhai wrote, "I have been much distressed about the view some Parsis have been taking that we should disassociate ourselves from the Hindus and the Mohomedans. Nothing could be more suicidal. We are India's and India is our mother-country and we can only sink or swim with, and as, Indians." Later when Dadabhai learnt from Malbari that his fears of the Parsi opposition to Congress were ill-founded, he replied to Malbari expressing his joy that there were "thirty-six Parsi delegates to the Congress." "This is good news to me for the sake of the Parsis themselves."

The platform on which Dadabhai tried to unite the people was secular. It was politico-economic rather than religio-spiritual; the focal point round which he tried to unite people being the violation by the British of "the solemn and pledged rights". In his endeavours Dadabhai did meet with considerable success and he did succeed in rousing a distinctly national feeling in his countrymen.

The other two leaders in the triumvirate of Parsi Congress politicians were P.M. Mehta and D.E. Wacha.

Mehta was an interesting contrast to Dadabhai. Whereas Dadabhai was a gentle patriarch whose actual influence was not easily directly perceptible, Mehta's was a forceful and dominating personality whose strong influence in the Congress had to be acknowledged by his contemporaries. Gokhale, for instance, in a letter to Mehta stated. "I have already assured you of my loyal support in whatever you think proper to do in this matter. And I repeat I would rather be in the wrong with you than be in the right with myself." During the period

1900 to 1905 Mehta was the Congress and ran its affairs with the aid of his secretary Wacha who ran the organization as according to Mehta's instructions.<sup>21</sup>

### The Parsis and Extremist Politics

Quite some leading Parsis also took part in extremist and revolutionary politics, of whom, particular mention may be made of Madame Cama, Shapurji Saklatvala and K.F. Nariman.

Madame Bhikaiji Cama, settled in London since 1906, did not begin as a revolutionary. In an address to the members of the Minerva Club at Waldroff Asteria Hotel in October 1907, she claimed that she initially abhorred violence, but "owing to the heartlessness, the hypocrisy and rascality of the liberals that feeling is gone. Why should we deplore the use of force when our enemies drive us to it", she told a gathering at India House in 1908.<sup>22</sup>

Madame Cama was the first to unfold the Indian tricolour at the International Socialist Congress, Stutgart, Germany, in August 1907. At the end of her speech condemning the "terrible tyrannies under the English Capitalism and British Government", she unfolded "the Indian National Flag", a tricolour in green yellow and red with the words "Bande Mataram" in middle band. Later she always spoke in public after unfurling the flag saying "she was in the habit of speaking under the flag."<sup>23</sup>

In 1909 she started the monthly *Bande Mataram*, through which she propagated revolution, swadeshi and Hindu-Muslim unity. A friend of Veer Savarkar, she contributed liberally to the Abhinav Bharat Society which preached a violent revolution and encouraged the Indians to take to physical training and shooting and which was responsible for the murder of Mr. Jackson at Nasik. During the years 1902—1910, she kept sending revolutionary literature and arms to India often via Pondicherry. Manmohan comments, "She was at this time the recognised leader of the revolutionary movement and was said to be regarded by the people as a re-incarnation of goddess Kali."<sup>24</sup>

Like Madame Cama, Shapurji Saklatvala, who was initially a liberal, later came to abandon the "liberal mausoleum"

because of "their liberal bankruptcy, their hypocrisy vis a vis the interests of the Indian people. He first joined the independent Labour party and later Communist party when he suspected the latter to be not genuinely interested in the working classes. Saklatvala was the third Indian to sit in the British parliament, "the only one" says one commentator, "of whom it could truly be said he represented the masses of India".<sup>25</sup> At a Garden Party on 16-1-1927 at Congress House he said, "I look forward to the day when Congress House would not only be the National Government House but the Soviet House from where the common people could direct their destiny." He spent his life exposing British capitalist exploitation and oppression of India and imbibing Indian students who came to UK with patriotism and "new ideals". Believing that real freedom from colonial rule would come when workers and poor agriculturist would control their own destiny, he worked hard to foster and develop a genuine trade union movement. In a letter to Gandhiji dated 8-3-27 he wrote; "The methods adopted by other countries of organizing labour and peasantry and guarding and leading the workers in factories or farms to obtain their rights have produced far more benevolent and efficient results in human life than the two annas a day charka movement will ever do."<sup>26</sup> But though a communist he also urged, "All must get into the Congress, whatever might be their difference"...for.... "We should have a strong united National Congress representative of all the classes and interests."<sup>27</sup>

The third Parsi revolutionary was F.K. Nariman. He too condemned the early Congress liberals for their faith in the British and for their attitude of "Ask and you shall be given".... He believed that the British rule was based on power (Did not the British pride themselves in their naval supremacy?) and power could only be met by power. In his booklet *What Next?* Nariman writes, "It is true that very often a preparation and a show of fight will prevent actual fighting but a student of politics will search in vain the historical records where there has been a willing abdication of power." In *What Next*, Nariman traces the lessons India can learn from the revolutionary struggles of other people, the Russians, the Turks, the Egyptians and the Irish (Sinn-fein) and upholds the Irish revo-

lutionary De Valera as "our political model for future policy and action".<sup>28</sup> Nariman remained a strong advocate of "direct action" in preference to "constitutional methods" to the very end. He welcomed Gandhi's "Dandi march" and "bon fire of foreign cloth" but felt that the time had now come to go beyond this "preparatory stage" of direct action. The important question, Nariman asked is, Should not the next programme be more aggressive, militant, better fitted to achieve independence?" He suggested "parallel governments". He was not opposed to the "new Councils" under the Act of 1935, provided those joining them kept up "the high level and revolutionary standard" like the De Valerites in nationalist Ireland".

The above account of Parsi moderate and extremist leaders, does not exhaust participation by Parsis in national politics. There were a reasonably large number of Parsis—both men and women who contributed in numerous small ways to the cause of freedom and growth of a healthy secular polity.<sup>29</sup> Thus among Indian women in South Africa who joined Gandhi's Satyagraha—the second batch to seek entry into Transvaal—was Mrs. J.K. Doctor. Then there were Mrs. Hirabai Tata and Mrs. Mithibai Tata who were sent by the Women's Committee in 1920 to England to express the feelings of Indian women on the granting of suffrage to Indian women. The saga of the origin and expansion of the Godrej industrial concerns, founded around 1909, was largely a response to Gaddhiji's call and campaign for swadeshi.

### **Parsi Politics after the stalwarts**

After the withdrawal of the Parsi stalwarts (Naoroji Mehta and Wacha) from the scene, Parsi involvement in national politics continued though not on such a glamorous scale. It must be mentioned here that a few community leaders proposed the founding of "A Grand League of the Smaller Minorities of India" (the Parsis, the Sikhs, the Christians, the backward communities etc.) which would operate as a "third power" and a moderating influence between the Hindus and the Muslims. But nothing much came of it and only a handful of Parsis backed the proposal.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly from 1900 to 1930 there was some talk of separate



electorates too by a few Parsi leaders. Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, for instance, in 1917 submitted a memorandum to Secretary of State Montague demanding separate electorates, while Sir Cowasjee Jehangir, pleaded for a qualitative rating of the different communities according to education standards and tax paying capacity. But several enlightened Parsi leaders categorically opposed such ideas. Sir H.P. Mody, Prof. A.P. Wadia, Faredun Dadachandji and B.F. Bharucha openly campaigned against separatism among the Parsis and urged the boycott of the Simon Commission. At the Round Table Conference Sir Pheroze Sethna forcefully opposed the idea of separate electorates and boldly asserted that the Parsis could look after themselves politically just as well without this guarantee. Again in 1942 Prof. A.P. Wadia sent a petition to the British prime minister stating that the Parsis did not claim any separate representation in the Councils.

After freedom Parsi participation in politics ceased to be spectacular. This was inevitable in a democracy where numbers count for most. Still this microscopic community continued to be reasonably alert and active. The late Feroze Gandhi was an M.P. and an active member of the Congress. Another Parsi Congressman, Homi Talyarkhan, was minister of Education in Maharashtra in 1962-67. The Parsis were also active in the socialist and communist parties. Noshir C. Bharucha for instance was an active Praja Socialist Party member from 1957 to 1962. Similarly, Homi Daji was elected M.P. in 1962 on the Communist Party of India ticket from Indore. Lastly, many Parsis were activists in the Swatantra party founded in 1959. M.R. Masani was the Secretary General of the party till 1968; the late Homi Mody also belonged to the inner circle of the party's leadership; later his son Pилоo Mody became president of the party. Even today, many Parsis, are actively associated with such citizen groups as "The Indian Liberal Group (Bombay-1), Civil Liberties Union etc.

Taking into account the numerical strength of the community, it may unhesitatingly be said that Parsi contribution and participation in national politics was remarkable. However, it must also be stated that it was certainly not as if all Parsis supported the emerging nationalism. The Parsi conser-

vatives and the Parsi aristocracy tended to be pro-British. The arguments put forward by the Parsi aristocracy were generally two fold: One, the British were preparing India for a better future; they were laying the foundations of a new economic order which would bring about economic development and were working for badly needed social reform. Second, they argued that the Parsis in the Congress were as little representative of the community, as the Congress Hindus were for all Hindus of the Indian nation.

Another small section of the Parsis advocated strict political neutrality arguing that the traditional policy of the *community had always* been one of political abstinence and that such a policy was necessary for the community's survival.

Although Parsi intellectual opinion was divided over the issue of participation in nationalist politics, this fact did not produce any schism in the community. All that took place were a few sharp exchanges between the Congress Parsi leaders and the Conservative aristocracy. A sharp schism, split or political polarization in the community was not possible because of high ethno-centrism of the community.

On the whole the Parsis as a community lived in perfect peace with sister Indian communities, enjoying their trust and faith, contributing immensely to social change, economic development and with a remarkable record of political participation. This remarkable role they played depended not only on their own innate abilities but to a good measure on the structure and attitudes of the majority community as well. The Hindu society is itself so structured that it is made up of numerous "minorities" within a majority. It was, therefore, not difficult for the majority community to accept the Parsis as a "fire-worshipping" minority. From the majority community point of view the racial origin of the Parsis has also been a helpful factor. To those Indian scholars who viewed India as the home of the Aryans, the Parsis, as Dr. P.S. Sastri argued, "have merely returned home". Speaking of the many people who came from outside India as invaders, Dr. Sastri speaks of the Parsis as the only exception because "the tradition and culture of the Parsis did not materially differ from those of the Indian Aryans. The Parsis were received back into the fold, back

into the original home.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Guru Golwalkar, speaking at an RSS and citizens rally in Rajasthan on 2 September 1967 said, “They (the Parsis) have not only played a magnificent role in India’s industrialization but have also made a substantial contribution to our struggle for freedom. The manner in which they have identified themselves with the hopes and aspirations of this country and eventually became true sons of Bharat should serve as a source of inspiration and emulation to those others for whom the adoption of an alien faith has resulted in the development of extra-territorial loyalties.”<sup>32</sup>

The other reason why the Parsi minority never became a political problem was perhaps the community’s preference for “self-isolation”. This preference was in conformity with the norms of Hindu society which, in fact, institutionalized self-isolation. Hence the fact that the Parsis did not marry outside the fold or convert others to their faith became plus points making for acceptance and cordiality. This explains why even today the community hardly faces a problem of identity crisis.<sup>33</sup> The real problem confronting the community is not political but demographic—one of steadily declining numbers. As per the 1981 census there was a sharp decline in Parsi population to 71,630—a decline of 20,000 in ten years, or average decline of 2000 a year. No thorough study of this phenomenon has been made but the generally cited and possible reasons for this are : inbreeding, reduction of fertility rate, late marriages, and out of community marriages. It is estimated that about 500 Parsi women are marrying outside their faith every year.<sup>34</sup>

### References

1. The Zoroastrian era of Persian history is mainly the 6th century B.C. and ends with A.D. 7th century. The 6th century B.C. was the epoch of Cyrus (contemporary of Zorastre). The Achaemenides (since Darius I) followed the teachings of Zorastre but did not give it any particular state patronage. The empires that followed, viz. Selucid (330 B.C. to 250 B.C. and the Parthian-Arsacid (250 B.C. to A.D. 226) also gave no spectacular patronage to that faith. It was with the rise of the Sassanian dynasty (A.D. 226 to A.D. 651) that Zoroastrianism became state religion and prospered. (Vide *History of the Parsis*, D.F. Karaka, MacMillan & Co., London, 1984. Vol. I, Chaps. I & II).

2. J.J. Modi, *A Few Events in Early History of Parsis & their Dates*, Bombay, 1905 pp. 9-10.
3. Parsi Historians are also very conscious of the common Aryan heritage they share with the Hindus. Vide, *Davar, India and Iran through the Ages*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay 1960s.  
The Mahabharat, for instance mentions Parasikas (Parsa-Sakas). The Girnar Karli and Nasik inscriptions also speak of the Persian emigrants called "Pahlavas" who later (as Hinduised Pallava) established an empire in the South. In the Bhavishya Purana, there is reference to the Magha tribe whose customs are identical to the Zoroastrian Magis or sun-worshippers, viz. prohibition of touching the dead, wearing sacred thread etc. Even today the Magha Brahmanas of southern Marwar are considered to be descendants of Persian immigrants. Vide K.A.N. Sastri, *A History of South India*, Oxford, 1960; also A.S. Altekar, "The Extent of the Sassanian Political Domination in India." In *Kharegat Memorial*, Volume I, Bombay, 1953.
4. Vide L.H. Hejmsath, *Indian Nationalism & Hindu Social Reform*, Princeton, 1964, pp. 147-161.
5. Wide Dayaram Gidumal, *The Life and Work of Behramji M. Malbari*, Bombay, 1888. Also Sohrab Katak, *Who are the Parsis?* Karachi, 1958.
6. S.M. Sharma, *Labour Movement in India*, Delhi, 1963, pp. 50-51.
7. Vide N. Pattabi Raman, *Political Involvement of India's Trade Unions*, Bombay, 1967. It may be mentioned here that when the Congress Socialist Party was formed, M.R. Masani became its General Secretary, in 1936. Another Parsi, S.S. Batlivala was the earliest Parsi to join the Communist Party of India and was a member of its Central Committee till 1945.
8. Vide J. Natarajan, *History of Indian Journalism: Report of the Press Commission*, part II, Delhi, 1954, p. 58.
9. The Rast Goftar advocated social reform while *Kaiser-e-Hind* ranked political emancipation above social reform and in general was the mouthpiece of Indian nationalism. *The Bombay Samachar* was primarily interested in social and economic matters. While the *Jame Jamshed* aired the conservative Parsi view point.
10. Kulke, *ibid*, p. 107.
11. Vide H.D. Darukhanavala, *Parsis and Sports*, Bombay, 1935; M.E. Pavri, *Parsi Cricket*, Bombay, 1901.
12. Vide A.V. Desai, "The Origins of Parsi Enterprise", *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Dec. 1968, p. 307 ff. Vera Anstey, *The Economic Development of India*, London, 1952, Daniel H. Buchanan, *The Development of Capitalist Enterprise in India*, New York, 1934.
13. For the account that follows I have largely relied on the book, *Famous Parsis*, published by Natesan and Co., Madras, 1930. Other

books referred are : R.A. Wadia, *The Bombay Dockyard and the Wadia Master Builders*, Bombay, 1955 and R.M. Lala, *The Tata Story - The Creation of Wealth*, IBH Publishing House, Bombay, 1981.

14. E. Kulke, op. cit., p. 139, ff. 29.
15. Ibid, p. 151.
16. Vide B. Majumdar, *Indian Political Associations and Reforms of Legislatures, 1818-1917*, Calcutta, 1965.
17. Kuike, op. cit., p. 172, Table XXXIV.
18. Vide A.H. Doctor, "Dadabhai Naoroji—More than a Moderate" in *Organizer*, 7 Sept. 1964, Delhi-6.
19. Vide Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India*, New Delhi, 1966.
20. Vide A.H. Doctor, "The Legacy of Dadabhai : Constitutionalism and Secular Nationalism", *Opinion*, 25 July 1957, Bombay.
21. Wacha played a leading role in national politics upto 1920. As a student of the Indian economy he propagated the theme of India's economic exploitation in the Legislative Council and before the Welby Commission as well as in the Indian National Congress.
22. Manmohan Kaur, *Role of Women in the Freedom Movement*, Sterling Publishers, Delhi, 1968, p. 109.
23. Government of Bombay, *Source Material for a History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. II, Bombay, 1958, p. 526.
24. Manmohan Kaur, op. cit., p. 110. For Madame Cama also see S.P. Sen (Ed.), *Dictionary of National Biography*, Institute of Historical Studies, Calcutta, 1972, pp. 240-242.
25. P. Saha, *Shapurji Saklatvala—A Short Biography*, Peoples Publishing House, Delhi, 1970, p. 10.
26. Ibid., Appendix, p. 68.
27. Ibid., p. 38.
28. *What Next?* Bombay Book Depot, 1934. Also see R.C. Majumdar, *History of Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. III, Firma K. C. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1963.
29. See J.P.F. Shroff, "Mahatma Gandhi and the Role of the Parsis in the Struggle for Freedom", *Parsiana* (monthly), Vol. IV, No. 12, Oct. 1968, pp. 22-23 and Vol. V, No. 1, November 1968, pp. 5-6.
30. Kulke, op. cit., pp. 192-196.
31. *Astrological Magazine*, October 1969 issue.
32. *Organizer*, issue of 2-9-1967.
33. It is interesting to note that when the magazine *Mirror* conducted a survey interviewing a few eminent community members like Behram Contractor (the veteran columnist "Busybee", Dr. Nanabhoy Davar, Director and Principal of Davar's college, Mrs. Homai M. Chat,

Administrative Co-ordinator of the Sir J.J. College of Commerce, etc., none could seriously indicate the prevalence of an identity crisis (except in such terms as "breakdown of religious structure and tradition" etc.) and all uniformly stated that they considered themselves Indians first. Vide *Mirror*, January, 1986.

34. Vide the article (Report) in *Mirror* (Monthly from Bombay), issue of January 1986, p. 49.