

THE PARSEE IN PUBLIC LIFE

Author, lawyer, politician and indefatigable fighter for the right cause, MINOO MASANI

Does not like to call himself a Parsee at all, as he explains in this article where he traces the singular contribution of this highly individualistic community.



They fought the censors — with their lawyer (From l to r) C. R. Irani, A.D. Gorwala, Soli Sorabjee, R. M. Goenka and Minoo Masani.

IN January 1934, I found myself lodged in Arthur Road Prison after being sentenced by a magistrate to a year's rigorous imprisonment for my crime in presiding over a meeting of an illegal organisation, namely, the Bombay Provincial Congress Committee, as its President. Arthur Road Prison was then a kind of transit camp from which political prisoners were sent to various other places, such as Yeravada and Nasik Prisons. I had two fellow prisoners with me, both of them colleagues of mine at the High Court Bar, Pheroze Bharucha and Keki Bharucha, who also had been sentenced to a similar term for some other political offence of a like nature.

Shortly, after our conviction, the *Jam-e-Jamshed*, then as now the main Parsee newspaper, published an editorial in the course of which it commiserated with the fathers of these three irresponsible young Parsees who had disgraced their families and their community and observed that their fathers must now no doubt be regretting the money that they wasted on their education as Barristers-at-law in London. According to the *Jam-e-Jamshed*, our parents would have done

better to have made us tram conductors or invested in a hairdressing saloon in which we could have functioned!

My father, who was a great Liberal and did not approve of my political activities but believed in Voltaire's principle of defending another man's right to express his own views, approached the other two fathers to join him in sending a letter to the *Jam-e-Jamshed* protesting against this libel against their sons. One of the two fathers readily signed the letter but, alas, the third of our elders refused to do so, saying he agreed with the *Jam-e-Jamshed*! Although in retrospect this is hilarious, I must record that at that point of time the humour of the situation eluded the unfortunate son of that angry father!

This story illustrates what is a well-known fact — that the Parsees have, by and large, been loyal to the rulers of the day. When the British were here, almost every middle-class Parsee home had a portrait of the King or Queen, as the case might be, decorating their drawing rooms. 'Apro Rajo' and 'Apri

Rani' were household words. Which is why those of us who stuck our necks out in opposing the British Raj under Gandhiji were often told that we had ceased to be good Parsees and had become Hindus!

When, however, the British went and the Congress took over, there was a corresponding surge of loyalty for the new regime. Lessons in Bharata Natyam took the place of the piano and violin lessons from which we children in earlier generations had benefitted. When I started criticising Jawaharlal Nehru as Prime Minister from 1950 onwards, many Parsee friends asked me what was wrong with me and why I could not see the beauties of our great and unmatched Prime Minister!

Now, there is nothing particularly wicked or strange about all this. Throughout history, very small communities like ours in India or the Jews in the countries of Europe, have hewn close to the government and were the most loyal supporters of the local King or Prince, because they felt insecure, surrounded as they were by a large

Flash Points

NEWER PERSPECTIVES

by ANEES JUNG

EIGHT weeks away from India — from family, from friends, from familiarities. The reality explodes, newer dimensions of it emerge. Images get diffused but the pull to what I have left behind endures. Newer realities do not overpower. They acquire a focus, a sense of their own place. London is not cold and grey. The October winds blow without the chill. The men at Heathrow airport are polite, unsuspecting. Yes, I have come to London but not to stay — only to see, to perceive, to 'become' a little more. I go to stay in a house of friends in Chelsea. It is one of a row of houses with a deck-like terrace. My window frames the spires of a church, constant white scudding clouds, moments of sky blue and autumnal golds amid the fading summer greens. Chelsea is a groovy area they say — for fashionable people, for rich people. Across the street is the Queen's Elm pub where the English gather in the late mornings and evenings to drink ale almost by the gallons. Around the corner is an elegant Italian restaurant where handsome waiters from Spain serve pasta and spaghetti to be washed down with bottles of red and white wine. No Indians live in this part of Chelsea it seems — they only cross the street, carrying babies and bloated bags of groceries. When I run into them on the street they do not look at me. They keep walking, looking straight ahead, the way Londoners do. Is it the English milieu that makes them so or is it really a latent fear of exposure, a need to conceal some

inadequacy, some age-old inhibition that may acquire awkward proportions in these parts? Something happens to people when they get away from their roots. Their faces do not speak as naturally. They become wan or acquire a needless colour that ultimately pales. I turn away from them to delve into the life of the city — London like an old dowager surviving with a graciousness which one marvels at but does not understand. Piccadilly continues to glitter with red, yellow and white lights. Young people with cultivated bedraggled looks sit around the famous fountain as they have done year after year. It fails to signify anything anymore. Images of the Queen and the Royal family, the English flag and other insignia that symbolise patriotism are all over the city. It is the Jubilee Year and the English want to remember it with gusto and grandeur. However at the Haymarket theatre Alec Guinness remembers another England — Alan Bennett's 'The Old Country' — its virginal landscapes the Lions' tea houses that are rapidly closing down. "Thank God, the vegetation is not going international!" he exclaims. In another West End theatre Terrence Rattigan's 'Cause Celebre' brings back to life the morality of the thirties when in Bournemouth sexual intercourse was politely referred to as 'congress'. Glynis Johns portrays the evil Mrs. Rattenbury who becomes the target of public malice for seducing a young boy of fourteen. Bournemouth society fails to see her as a woman who desperately seeks love to realise a life

that has none. Her vices amount to more of an affirmation than all your virtues, is the final verdict of a man who watches. His statement finds an echo in probably each of us who realise the truth but are afraid to voice it. Away from London a sense of the countryside is preserved — country churchyards, country ways, tea houses that serve butter scones in late afternoons, country pubs and large indifferent English cows that graze on the green regardless of the invasions. In the small quiet lanes of Eton I see young school boys walking around in black tail coats and ties. Those below a certain age are not to be seen with hands in their pockets. That is a privilege for the upper ranks. Mannerisms here are as important as the uniforms they wear. Only the tourists wear blue jeans in Eton. In a country lane we discover the Rykote chapel that is now named as a national monument. Every chapel in those days was attached to a manor house where the lord of the area lived and reigned. The family pew in old wood is still part of the chapel. The manor house stands but seems deserted. Will it become one more transient residence for the affluent visitors who come here from distant parts to taste tradition and history?

Across the Atlantic, in Canada, the question of history and tradition takes another form — the longing for roots, for identity, a sense of the national self. French Canadians feel separate from the English Canadians and all Canadians seek a spiritual separateness from America, the large affluent

neighbour whose policies mould the quality of their lives. McDonald's hamburgers and Colonel Sanders Kentucky fried chicken are as integral to Canadian life as are the food cities, the super stores and the affluence of over-choice. And yet Canada is different. Underlying its abundant lifestyle is a quality of caution, of restraint, of a disquieting placidity which is quivering to find a way out. Does this stem from an awareness that what it has come to call its own is not totally self-generated, is a reflection of the exuberance that booms beyond its southern borders? Canada's two solitudes, strangely enough, have not affected the Indians who have come here to make this their home. Theirs is another separateness. It arranges them in a world where work means money, and money means more comfort, a better life. I visit Indian families where fathers leave home before it is light and return after dark. Mothers leave home to work eight to ten hours. Children go to schools and return to well-stocked lonely homes to eat peanut butter sandwiches and drink sodas. They all gather in the TV room sometime at night before they collapse into bed to emerge the next day — for more work, more money, more comforts. They live in a groove whose wider visions are lost in a haze of nostalgia and dreams of returning home, someday before they die. Canada is a good country. But I leave it with a sense of incompleteness. Three pleasant, comfortable weeks—few visions, few perspectives.

mass of a different ethnic or religious origin. The Christian in Europe could sometimes afford to be a rebel, but the Jew hardly ever. This desire to conform and enjoy the goodwill of the ruler need not therefore be taken too tragically.

I for one have always prided myself on being an Indian first and last. Since the achievement of Independence, I have failed to see the importance of being a nationalist or a chauvinist, because this, in the changed conditions, would involve a certain measure of inferiority complex. We are now on the way to 'One World' and it is high time we made ourselves, at least psychologically and emotionally, world citizens. That is perhaps why Prof. W. H. Morris Jones in his book *The Government And Politics In India* pays me the compliment of saying that "no figure in Indian public life could be more unambiguously modernistic than its (Swatantra Party's) secretary Minoo Masani." Gerhard Kulke endorses in his book *The Parsee in India* with the description of myself as "by far India's most modernistic politician."

Despite this background, I must confess that, in fairness to the Parsees, credit must be given to them for having developed certain qualities, such as outspokenness, to a somewhat higher level than can perhaps be claimed by the mass of the people in India. Thus, in my political memoir, *Bliss Was It In That Dawn...*, which was published in October last year, I could truthfully write: "The Parsee of that time, like other Indians, was conscious of British racial arrogance but, unlike other Indians, he was aggressive in his resistance to it. This was typical of another member of the (Wadia) family, namely Jamshedji the builder, who found the expression "black fellow" commonly used by some of the Englishmen in Bombay. He felt so strongly about this that, according to Lt. Col. John Briggs' book, he carved on the ship *Cornwallis* the following: This ship was built by a d—d Black Fellow, A.D. 1800."

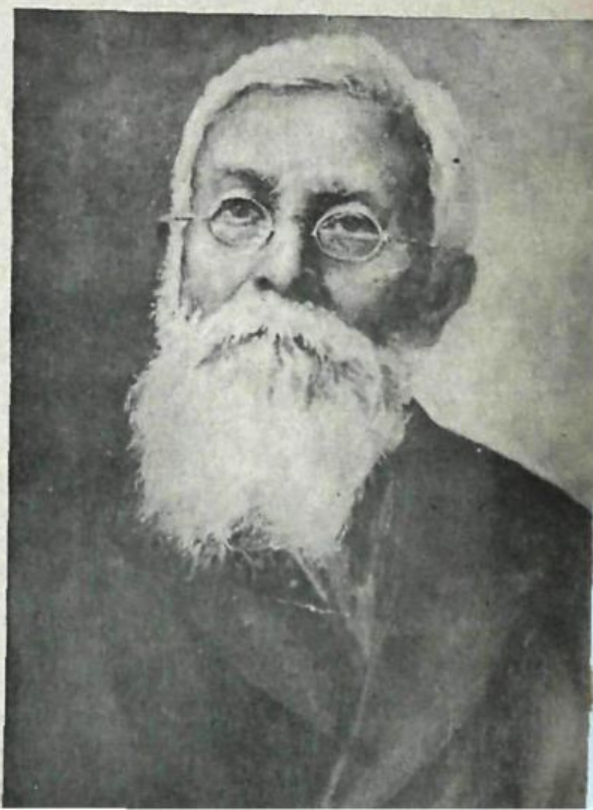
It was perhaps in the same spirit of self-confidence that Sir Homi Modi and I, as members of the Constituent Assembly, never for one moment thought

of asking for seats in Parliament or the State Assemblies to be reserved for us either by election, as demanded by the Harijans, or by nomination, as claimed by the Anglo-Indians. We were quite prepared to take our chance with free and equal elections along with our compatriots. Our faith was thoroughly justified because, by and large, the Parsee has always been over-represented, populationwise, in all elections. Never in my whole political career lasting four decades have I ever come across a single example of my ethnic origin or religion being used as an argument against me in any election for which I have stood.

The record of the Parsee in Indian public life has, by and large, been an honourable one. The pioneer in the field was, of course, the 'Grand Old Man of India', Dadabhai Naoroji, who first asserted that "Swaraj is my birth-right and I shall have it". It was he who wrote the book *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*. The British Liberal Party, to its credit, put him up for the British House of Commons and he was duly elected, to the annoy-

Below: Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Indian to get voted to the British House of Commons in 1892 beat his English opponent from his London constituency by a margin of five votes for which he was nicknamed "Narrowmajority", but to Indians who were jubilant at this victory, he became the 'Grand Old Man of India'.

Left: A metal plaque which commemorates Dadabhai Naoroji's election to the House of Commons.





Dinshaw Wacha, organisational genius, who gave an impetus to the Bombay Presidency Association and later the Indian National Congress emphasising the need for a sound economic policy. His statue which stands at a prominent vantage point at Churchgate today, is in danger of being deported by over-zealous trawc cops.

ance of the Conservatives. He was once referred to by one of them as "that black man", at which the Liberals published a photograph of Dadabhai Naoroji, who was extremely fair, side by side with that of the swarthy Lord Salisbury, the Tory leader, with the caption: "Which is the black man?" My father, who was later to write the only definitive biography of Dadabhai Naoroji, had the picture and used to show it to me when I was a boy.

Indeed, though I cannot say that I learnt my politics at the feet of Dadabhai Naoroji, I had as a matter of fact played at his feet with his grandsons in his garden at Versova next door to our own cottage without knowing what a great man he was. He was very old then. Those were his last years and, when we boys made too much of a shindig, he would gently but firmly re-

monstrate: "Chhokrao, etlo awaj na karo" (boys, don't make so much noise).

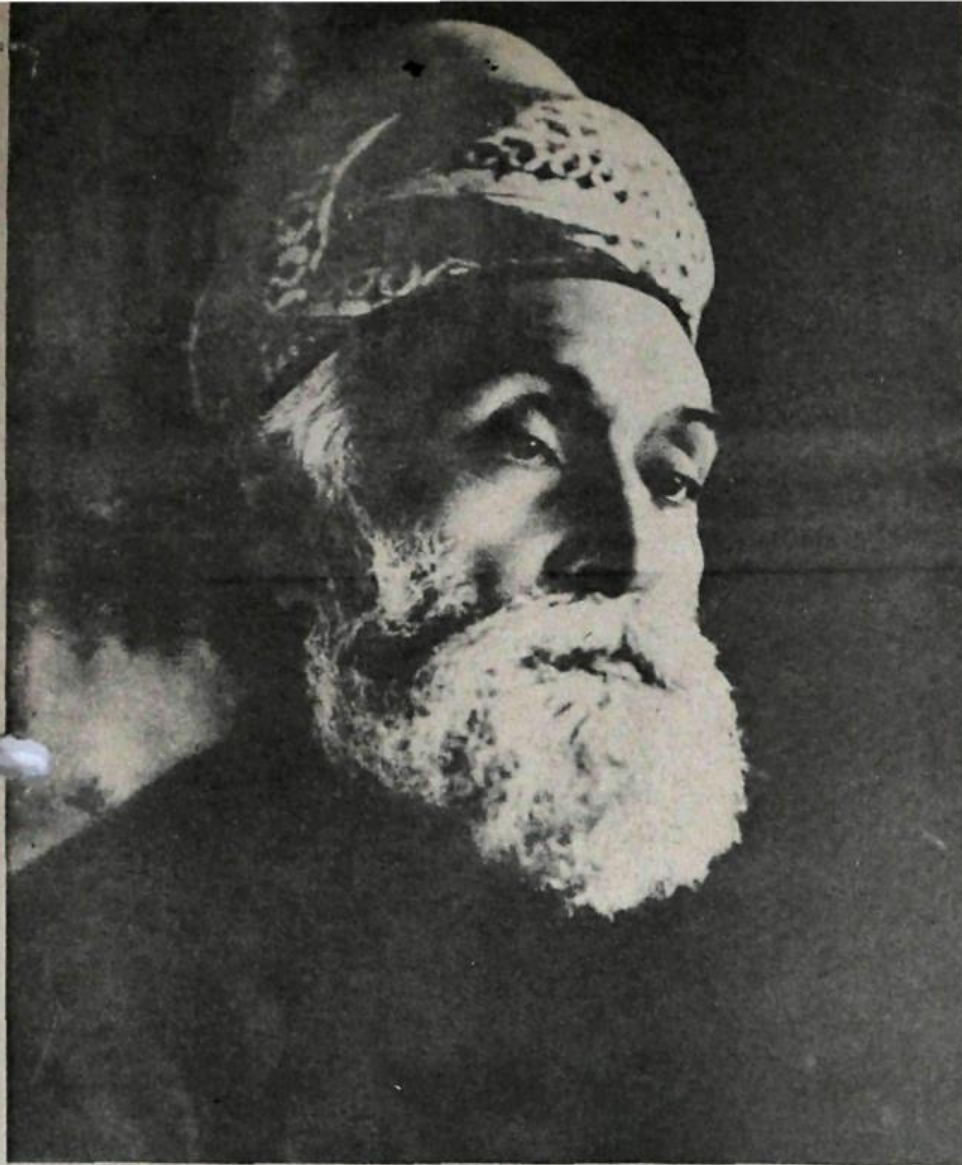
Perhaps second in eminence to Dadabhai Naoroji was Sir Pherozeshah Mehta who was called "the uncrowned King of Bombay" because he dominated the Municipal Corporation of Bombay over a long period. There again, because my father was Municipal Secretary at that time, I was able to listen from the gallery to Sir Pherozeshah Mehta thundering away to a attentive and somewhat docile Corporation.

The third in that eminent series was Sir Dinshaw Wacha who made his main contribution in the form of books and essays critical of the Raj on economic matters.

The British House of Commons was to have two more Indians as its members, and again both happened to be



Pherozeshah Mehta, brilliant lawyer and debater who played an active role in the Bombay Presidency Association.



Jamshedji Tata, founder of the House of Tatas. He was a firm believer in the need for attaining economic freedom before political freedom and built up the Indian steel industry, giving his name to Jamshedpur. He also established the Indian Institute of Science at Bangalore.

Parsees. The Conservatives, not to be out-smarted by the Liberals, produced their pet Parsee M.P. in Sir Muncheree Bhowmuggree.

The third Parsee member of Parliament was Comrade Saklatvala, better known as 'Comrade Sak'. I knew Saklatvala as a young student in the London School of Economics and had occasion, as President of the India Society at LSE, to invite him to address one of our meetings.

I saw him again in the summer of 1935 when I visited London as Secretary of the Congress Socialist Party. We Socialists were then described by the Communist Party of India as "social fascists". But Saklatvala was a bold and heretical communist. He asked me to address the Marx Memorial Library, a communist educational front. He took the chair for me and

throughout question hour protected me from the angry communists in the audience. He threw his weight generously on my side. A little later, he wrote appreciatively about my visit to my good friend Kamalashanker Pandya, who was then Secretary of the Gujarat Congress Socialist Party. Saklatvala's friendly and generous comments about what I was able to do for the Congress Socialist Party in London are to be found in my memoir *Bliss Was It In That Dawn*. . . .

It would be fair to say that, whether in the field of industry — where Jamshedji Tata was pre-eminent as a pioneer — or that of education or journalism or law ("apro Nani") or music ("apro Zubin") or the Indian Civil Service, whether as Mayor or otherwise, the Parsee has made his fair contribution to Indian national life.

To come a step nearer to our own day, during the late lamented Emergency (may it never recur), the Parsee didn't do too badly during those dark days either. While most of the press and its editors chickened before Mrs. Gandhi's censors (about which we have learnt a little more from the evidence recently given before the Shah Commission), there were a few honourable exceptions. At the risk of making the Parsee blush — which he is hardly ever capable of doing! — it must in fairness be recorded that among the few journalist heroes of the Emergency, the Parsee stood out somewhat prominently.

There was our great old man A.D. Gorwala, Editor of *Opinion*, and there was my friend Cushrow Irani, Managing Director of the *Statesman*, who has won international recognition for his sturdy resistance.

One can be bold and brave as an Editor and cock a snook at the censor provided one has the lawyers to stand by one and the judges to hand out justice and protect them. We editors in Bombay were lucky because we had a champion in Soli Sorabjee, now Additional Solicitor-General to the Union Government, who appeared for me as Editor of *Freedom First* and won my case for me and then successively for several other editors at a time when one was supposed to require courage to take such a brief, apart from the great financial sacrifice, because we editors are a poor tribe. Then of course, there had to be the judges to listen to us and our lawyers. If there was one class of people in India who showed courage throughout those days it was the judges. All honour to them. It was perhaps no coincidence that in the case of *Minoo Masani v/s Binod Rao* (the censor), the senior Judge in the Division Bench of the Bombay High Court who handed down a historic judgement vindicating the freedom of the Press also happened to be a Parsee.

The bourgeoisie in any part of the world acts as a bulwark of civil liberties and freedom of expression. Where there is no bourgeoisie there is no free society. The Parsees are perhaps the most bourgeois of the Indians and share the strong and weak points of that class. It is encouraging that, alongside of a large number of affluent and comfortable philistines, there is to be found a sprinkling of heretics who are prepared to stick their necks out for whatever values or ideas — right or wrong — they consider valid and socially desirable. The Parsees would be a dull lot if they did not manage to produce the occasional maverick.

ZARATHUSTRA

by PIROJ WADIA

"Zarathustra was the first prophet," wrote Tagore, "who emancipated religion from the exclusive narrowness of the tribal God, the God of the chosen people and offered it the universal man..."

cious made their appearance. The linguistic evidence provided by the "Gathas" or Divine Songs said to have originated from Zarathustra himself, however pushes this date back to 2000 B.C., a date favoured by Parsee scholars. The similarities between the Gathas and the hymns of the Rig-Veda said to have been composed around 1400 B.C. give credence to this belief. It also lends support to the theory of a schism driving the early Aryan tribes from their common homeland to their separate destinies, probably as a result of Zarathustra's teachings, the one entering India and continuing their worship of the Daevas or Divs or devils as their opponents called them, the other branch going into Iran as followers of Ahura Mazda, the lord of Life and Wisdom, revealed by Zarathustra, and becoming the Asura worshippers, to their detractors.

All that can be asserted with certainty is that Zarathustra seems to have lived during a period of transition when a traditionally nomadic way of life was being replaced by an agricultural one. His father's name for example was Pourushaspa or "Owner of many horses," while his Mother Dughdova was a "Giver of Milk." Zarathustra himself, whom



WHEN Zarathustra was born, it is recorded that a peculiar radiance enveloped him, as it had also done his mother, Dughdhova. And the first thing that this child of light did was to laugh and at this sound, the very air, and water, and all the myriad forms of nature that represented the works of the Good Creation, rejoiced, for they knew that the coming of Zarathustra, which had been foretold through numerous omens, marked the turning point in the battle against the evil principle represented by the Devil, Ahriman.

From this first, joyous response to the world, Zarathustra's message has been a positive, life-affirming, active principled one, which demands

not so much belief, as action on the part of every individual in the eternal battle against evil. The details of his life which have come down only in fragments, recorded several centuries after his death, are perhaps best considered as working examples of his message, rather than as matter for controversy since it has not even been possible for scholars to find an acceptable date of his existence. Some Greek sources place him six thousand years before Plato, while others make him a contemporary of Pythagoras which means he would have been alive about 600 B.C., a nice period for prophets to be around in the world as it was during this time too, that the Buddha and the Chinese Confu-