

I have written this essay for my husband and our four children so that they might have an introduction to their oriental heritage and legacy, which is there for them to discover and enjoy if they wish to do so.

Pennsylvania, Christmas 1980

Grandpa and his sister are Parsees. This means that they were born into a religious community in India whose members have the name Parsee. The word Parsee means Persian because the community originally came from an area in Persia called Fars.

The type of religion that the community practices is Zoroastrianism. Today one can find people all over the world who are Zoroastrians, in North America, Europe, Australia, Africa and the Far East. However the big centres of the religion are in Iran and Bombay, India.

Zoroastrianism is a very old religion, in fact it is one of the oldest prophetic religions known to humankind. It is so old that there is much controversy about when the founder of the religion, Zoroaster, was born. Some Parsee writers say that Zoroastrianism is 6,000 years old and some Western writers say that it is only 2,600. For myself I think that it most probably as old as the Parsees writers say it is and I have a sneaking suspicion that it may be older than that because the origins of human's intellectual development are lost in the mists of antiquity.

Zoroastrianism is of interest because the ideas one finds in its religious tenets are also to be found in those religions that followed it e.g. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although the origins of the religious beliefs of the latter can be documented fairly accurately, the same cannot be said for Zoroastrianism because it is so old. One day, perhaps, Archaeologists, Historians, etcetera will be able to unravel the mystery of the origin of Zoroaster and where he came into contact with ideas that gave rise to the tenets of Zoroastrianism.

Mary Boyce has written a very readable, and I think accurate, account of Zoroastrians in a book called 'Zoroastrians Their Religious Beliefs and Practices'. If you should ever want to read the book it is published by Routledge and Kegan Paul. Mary Boyce suggests that 'Zoroastrianism is the 'oldest of the revealed world religions, and it has probably had more influence on mankind, directly and indirectly, than any other single faith'. She also states that 'Zoroastrianism was already old when it first enters recorded history; and it has its roots in a very distant past. Indeed, so tenacious are the Iranians of tradition that there are elements in living Zoroastrianism which go back, it seems, to Indo-European times. These elements, blended with later revealed doctrines make it a richly complex faith, knowledge of which increases understanding of human's spiritual progress over millennia'. This may sound very boring to you now but you will understand what it means when you are older.

Zoroastrianism became the state religion of the great Persian Empires and its influence was felt from Northern India across the Middle East and into Europe. The effect of its influence is greatly underestimated by Western Historians and Social Scientists. Please read what they say with an open mind. For over 1,000 years Zoroastrianism was, in political terms, one of the foremost religious powers in the world. In the middle of the 7th century the Arab invasion brought this era of Iranian history to a close and Islam became the state religion in the place of Zoroastrianism.

The fate of Zoroastrianism under Arab rule was one of oppression. Social and economic oppression were the means used by the Arabs to try to convert the few remaining Zoroastrians to Islam. The

occasional periods of toleration were counter balanced by times of fierce political persecution. In the year 1,000 A.D. a group of Zoroastrians left Persia to find a new land to settle where they could practice their religion in peace. They settled in the northwest of the sub-continent of India. There the Parsees have preserved their identity and maintained the Zoroastrian religion up to the present day. Today approximately 17,000 Zoroastrians remain in Iran; there are about 5,000 Parsees in Pakistan; 3,000 in the U.K.; approximately 2-5,000 in North America; and other communities scattered around the world in places such as Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, and Africa. I see that I have already mentioned this fact. Perhaps a little bit of repetition will help you to remember what is in this essay.

Parsee tradition is that the founding fathers of their community landed on the coast of Gujarat in Western India on Bahman day of the month, Vikram Samvat 992, which is 936 CE. Please note here that in the local script of the 10th and 11th centuries the number 9 could be written with a symbol very much like the modern one for 7. This date came to be read V.S. 772 i.e. 716 CE with the resulting confusion for Parsee chronology. The incorrect date is still reproduced hence my warning about reading Western literature on the Parsees with an open mind. A good example of this is E. Kulke's book 'The Parsees in India'.

The Parsees spent nearly two decades (20 years) on the island of Div, where Gujarati was spoken, and when they had learnt the language they were able to present their case to the local rajah, one of the Silhara dynasty, who were famed for their tolerance and encouragement to foreigners to trade and settle. He allowed the Parsees to make a home by the seashore where they had landed on the main land mass of India. A settlement was founded called Sanjan after their home town in Khorasan.

The main source of the history of the landing in India is from the narrative poem 'Qissa iSanjan' composed by a Parsee priest, Bahman, in 1600 CE, from the oral traditions of the community. It tells how, some time after landing, the Zoroastrians were able to establish an Atash Bahram (Fire Temple) and sent back messengers to Khorasan to fetch the necessary ritual objects for the ceremonies of consecration. These gave their new fire a link with the sacred fires of the mother country, Persia. The Qissa also states that the priests who had been among the original settlers were better able to perform their tasks because several parties and laymen of righteous life had also arrived at the place. Mary Boyce says, 'that there is no doubt that the Sanjan settlement attracted other Zoroastrians, probably both from Iran and from those who had already sought refuge in India. Sanjan became the area where the Parsee community established itself and began to flourish in India'.

The Qissa go on to state that 300 years passed during which the Zoroastrians spoke Gujarati as their mother-tongue, adopted Indian style of dress but with some differences; the priests still dressed in white and the layman too wore white for religious occasions. The women still kept their hair covered by a kerchief both indoors and out.

As the Sanjan settlement prospered groups of laymen began to leave to make new homes for themselves at ports and small towns elsewhere, mainly along the coast. Tradition names Vankaner, Broach, Variav, Ankles, Cambay and Navsari as their main centres. The extent to which the community prospered can be deduced from the works of the learned priests who began to translate the religious texts into Sanskrit.

However this era of prosperity was not to continue due to the arrival of Muslim forces in Gujarat in 1297. The region was ravaged and a period of religious intolerance began. It has been suggested that the Parsees survived as a religious community in India through the times of zealous Muslim conversion because they were such a small community amongst millions of Hindus and Buddhists. Whatever the reason, they survived and in 1550 a Dominican friar, Jordanus, stayed in Gujarat on a journey to the Malabar coast, and he noticed the Parsees and he wrote about them.

The waves of Muslim invasions into India continued and it is supposed that the Parsee community suffered along with all the other Indian communities. Eventually the risk that the community might be wiped out by the invaders became so great that the sacred fire was taken to the hills and protected by jungle and sea. The Parsees guarded the fire for 14 years. Eventually it was decided to take the fire to Navsari, which became the centre of Farsi religious life for the next 400 years until the fire was taken to Udwada in 1742 where it has burnt ever since.

When the sacred fire was moved to Navsari contacts were made with Iranian Zoroastrians to consult them over religious matters and this contact was maintained down the centuries until the present day. It is important to remember that because they did not suddenly become world travellers in the 19th century but they maintained contacts with the world outside India from the 14th century onwards.

In the 16th century the Portuguese rounded the Cape of Good Hope and began to look for trading bases in India. In 1535 the Emperor Humayun invaded Gujarat and conceded to the Portuguese the port of Bassein and its islands, including Bombay, in return for their help. They won more concessions from the ruling Sultan which included the district of Sanjan. One can imagine the pressure put upon the local inhabitants to convert to Roman Catholicism by the Portuguese. About this time a Portuguese doctor noticed the Parsees in Cambay and Bassein and he described them as merchants and shopkeepers, who originally came from Persia.

In 1572 the emperor Akbar, Humayan's son, invaded Gujarat and within one year he had put an end to its independence. During the siege of Surat he met some Parsees and dealt with them graciously. The rule of the Mughals was to mark the beginning of their rise to prosperity. The Emperor Akbar was a remarkable man but I will leave you to find out about him for yourselves.

There are a number of comments about the Parsees in the 17th century made by Europeans, rivals in trade of the Portuguese. They record that most Parsees at this time were husbandmen rather than merchants and, on the whole, they preferred not to stir abroad. They lived in humble dwellings and did not care to invite unbelievers indoors. They were very industrious and diligent being careful to train their children in their skills. Ovington (1689) notes that 'they are the principal men at the loom in all the country, and most of the silks and stuffs at Surat are made by their hands'. The other comments that I have included were made by Fryer (1672-1681); Streynsham Master (no date). Although they were hard workers they had not lost their zest for enjoyment and had become great 'toddy' drinkers, that is the fermented palm juice. It is important to remember this connection with alcohol because a considerable amount of Parsee wealth, during the British Raj, was made from the alcohol trade. After independence in 1947 the Indian state declared prohibition and this hit the Parsee community especially hard.

Back to the 17th century when the Europeans established their trading factories in Gujarat, Hindus and Parsees readily entered their employment. In 1620 a Parsee clerk at the English factory in Surat interpreted between a priest of Zoroastrianism and an English chaplain. The English chaplain wrote down what he had learnt in 'A Display of Two Forraigne Sects in the East Indies' Henry Lord 1650.

The Parsee colony at Cambay was extinguished in 1606 and Surat took over as the centre of the Parsee population for the next 150 years. In 1774 a Dutch sea captain, Stavorinus, estimated the number of Parsees in Surat, at about 100,000 people (approximately one fifth of the population), If this is accurate there were a greater number of Parsees in India then than there are today (approximately 82,000 in 1976).

In 1661 Bombay became a British possession and was administered by the East India Company from Surat. They set out to make it the most, flourishing port in India and to achieve this end it was declared religiously free. Thus a steady flow of Hindu and Parsee settlers came to the relatively inhospitable island to escape from religious harassment by the Muslims and Portuguese. Your aunt lives in Bombay today. Her married name is Wadia and her husband's famous ancestor, Lowji Nassarwanji, moved to Bombay in 1735 and played a leading part in developing the dockyards there. The name Wadia means shipbuilder. Perhaps I should mention at this point that Parsee names usually have a meaning as does your family name. It is quite interesting to ask Parsees if you meet them what their name means; sometimes it tells you the name of the village that their ancestors came from.

I should also mention the fact that I have not discussed the Zoroastrian religion and its system of beliefs. This is a very complex area and if you want to know about it I think that you can go and investigate for yourself. To me it is of interest because of the relationship it has with modern 'revealed' religions but I have no interest in its 'meaning' and so that I do not unduly influence you in this regard I think it best that you investigate the matter for yourself.

The 19th century saw great changes for the urban Parsees because of the growth of commerce and industry and contact with Western education and Protestant Christianity. The East India Company had banned missionaries but in 1813, its charter was renewed only on condition that this ban was lifted. The first missionaries arrived in 1820. The introduction of Christianity had immediate consequences for the community with the conversion of two Parsee boys to Christianity in 1859 by John Wilson. They were attending his school which was situated near the Parsee section of Bombay. The community petitioned the British Government to ask that no minor should be permitted to be converted to Christianity without his guardian's consent.

Of course the Government refused and rather than fight a lost battle the community set about developing its own schools and religious education programme. Parsee children continued to attend non-Parsee schools and institutions, the most famous being the Elphinstone Institute. They supplied most of the pupils there throughout the 19th century and thus there was formed a Western educated Parsee middle class, numbering doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists etcetera among its ranks. Today the Parsee community continues to value education and in a survey conducted in the UK in 1976, it was found that 71% of the respondents had attended some form of higher education institution with 63% who had studied in a university!

Now back to the 17th century for a while. The caste restrictions of the Hindus prevented the flowering of trade between them and the British so the Parsee community filled the gap and they also acted as middlemen between the Muslim rulers and the British. These early traders became known as the 'Jews of India! Whereas the Muslims and Hindus occupied themselves with internal trade in India, Britain controlled the trade routes to Europe, the Parsees opened up lucrative trade routes to the East and traded especially in cotton and opium. This trade and the supplying of provisions to the British army and navy laid the foundations of the rising fortunes of the Parsees. One middleman Rustom Maneck Seth, was very successful until the British failed to honour their debts to him. His son Naoroji Rustom Maneck Seth sailed to England in 1724 and obtained redress for this wrong at the Court of the Governors of the East India Company. He was said to be the first Indian to visit England.

I am now at that point where I should start to talk about some of the famous Parsees of the 19th century but I am spoiled for choice. I have chosen two: the first because he demonstrates the Parsee involvement with charity and the second because Grandpa was educated to follow in his footsteps. Sir Jamset Jamsetji Jijibhoy Bart, was the first Indian to be knighted, a baronet and a Freeman of the

City of London. He was orphaned as a young man and started in the second hand bottle business with his uncle. However he made his fortune in the opium trade and as supplier to the British Armed forces. His enormous wealth was dispensed with amazing charity, both within his own community and beyond. These charities concerned themselves particularly with the poor and emphasised education. One of the charitable foundations alone ran 21 schools and in these schools poor children had priority over rich children (in terms of getting a place)

Secondly Pheroseshah Mehta (1845-1915) was trained as a lawyer at Lincoln's Inn, London but his major contribution to India was in the political arena. He dominated Bombay politics and these were the bases of his power in provincial and imperialist councils as well as in the Indian National Congress. His extraordinary rhetorical talent made him in the eyes of his contemporaries the leading statesman and politician in India. According to Gandhi it was Mehta who paved the way in Bombay and Poona for his political agitation in South Africa.

By the time the 20th century was well under way the golden age of prosperity of the Parsee community was over, with the Hindus and Muslims now competing strongly where the Parsees once led. The end of British rule in the sub-continent of India in 1947 brought great changes to the community. The Parsees in Pakistan had to live with a Muslim state. Those in India were worried about the survival of a community whose wealth was based on capitalist enterprise in a socialist state. A number emigrated to Europe and North America. However the majority remained, contributing in proportion to the size of the community a striking number of public figures; soldiers, airmen, scientists, engineers, industrialists and journalists.

Today the Parsees feel their identity is threatened for a number of reasons; the dispersal of the community around the globe; the falling birth rate; late marriage; increase of secularism among its members; marriage outside the community. However the older Diasporas in places such as London and Hong Kong have had Zoroastrian associations for many years and in the new ones associations are growing up. The World Zoroastrian Congress was held in Tehran in 1960 and has been held at intervals ever since. I think that the latter organisation would have proved beneficial to the world community but with the doors to the outside world being slammed in Iran one wonders what will happen now. The Shah had been very generous in supporting the World Congress and the Zoroastrian community in Iran. It is of interest to note here that under the late Shah and his father there were many Zoroastrians who rose to high positions in Iranian society and they generated great wealth for some members of their community. Until the downfall of the Shah the Iranian community was much wealthier than the Parsee community in India. This poses a sociological problem of why should the Parsees and Iranian Zoroastrians rise to power in countries that are changing from an agricultural economy to a modern industrial economy? It can be answered but I will NOT bore you with the details now so you will be spared another of Mother's lectures! It is worth noting that they interface between the East and West and that you are the inheritors of this unique tradition of belonging equally to the Orient and the Occident.

Here is the point in the essay that I want to start talking about your own relations that is Great Grandpa and Great Granny. Their daughter, your great aunt, 'Aunty', has written to me about them and I will use her letter to compose the next section.

Grandpa and Aunty's father parents had died by the time he was 9 years old. His mother had been the second wife and a cousin of the second wife of Sir Pheroseshah Mehta. (When Grandpa and Aunty were children they used to meet Lady Mehta on their father's infrequent visits to Bombay). When little, Great Grandpa had a married step-brother and his wife asked him to peel vegetables and generally help around the house. Aunty says a futile effort because he had been his parents pet! Imagine how you would feel if I asked you to help around the house and I am your Mother! When

she, step brother's wife, asked him to peel the skin off little garlic cloves Great Grandpa upped and ran away. He walked to the house of another relative or may be very close connection, a Petit (a prominent Parsee family). The lady that he ran to understood his plight and just at the time the Petit Orphanage for Boys was being founded (by this family) and he was enrolled as the first boy. It was, of course, free, and became a very well-known school for Parsee boys, orphans or not. It is still one of the big Parsee philanthropic institutions and is not an orphanage. Grandpa and Aunt's cousins went to this school.

Great Grandpa reached matriculation standard (I think that is equivalent of English o-level examinations today) when he was 16 or 17. He was a very big, strapping, strong young man he went to work in Aden for a Parsee shipping concern. It was a growing business and later became famous as the Cawasji Dinshah Adenwalla (note here a Parsee name that means comes from Aden which was a God forsaken hot rock with not a blade of grass or greenery anywhere and very little water. Today there are rock tanks. It needed much physical endurance to live there. It was on a strategic shipping lane and was a key point in preserving the British Empire east of Suez. It was the first stop for bunkering of coal burning ships which then went on to Bombay within a week, on to Colombo and thence to Singapore and China or to Australia.

Aunt says that the few bits of conversation she remembers having with her father about Aden seemed to show that he thoroughly enjoyed his work, even though it was very hard. However, he was on his own and he could do what he liked and he took full advantage of this freedom. She says that it sounds as if he was rather uncontrollable! To me he sounds full of energy and a zest for life. I now see that Aunt says he was no sober sides!

The work in Aden, was hazardous and Aunt vividly remembers him saying that he had to visit, periodically, the nearby port of Hodeida (as arid an Arab land as any). He had to go in a small boat and judge the exact movement of the sea swells and jump onto the jetty. If he missed he would fall into the strong water and he could not swim.

Great Grandpa's employers kept an eye on him and when he was earning well. They arranged his marriage. Aunt does not say how old he was but in my memory I seem to recall that he was not very old when Grandpa was born, twenty five years? So your Great Grandparents were married young as were your parents!

Aunt talks about her mother but does not tell me her name. A long time ago Grandpa made a family tree and I put it in a safe place last summer when we were decorating upstairs. Now I cannot find the safe place! Perhaps Grandpa will make us a new one so I cannot find Great Grandma's name on the family tree. However, she came from a family who had origins in the small townships of Bulsar and of Cambay on both her father's and mother's side of the family. Her mother was considered a great beauty and she ruled the 'roost' according to Aunt. Her father was small in stature and not particularly handsome. The Cambay connection was interesting because some members of the family were very close with the Nawab of Cambay, a lesser Muslim prince. Cambay had a very good harbour and a flourishing port which however, gradually got silted up, as Bhavnagar on the other side of the Bay began to develop. Cambay soon became neglected and poor. Today with off-shore drilling for oil being so successful near Cambay it may rise again in importance.

Great Grandma's parents had at least 6 children whom Aunt knew as Uncles and Aunts but there may have been miscarriages as well. Great Grandma was the eldest and that involved her in a lot of work with her younger brothers and sisters. She resented it very much and by the time she was seven or eight years old, she had to bathe and look after the little ones, do cooking or whatever housework, was given to her. Great Grandma wished intensely to be in school and learn, but had a

much interrupted school career. Great Grandma felt critical of her mother due to this but her father made it up to her a lot and talked to her as an adult and opened up her mind.

In those days, the Salvation Army was prominent because of so many Europeans in India and they used to have bands go marching by. Great Grandma heard the music and loved it and from this beginning her taste for music grew. When she was a little girl of about 5-4 years she had a bad accident when the wheel of a cart ran over her foot. For two years she could not walk and it was thought that she would never do so properly again. However, she recovered fully thanks to her grandmother's careful nursing.

An interesting relation on her father's side was a very redoubtable lady known as Madame Bhicaiji Cama who in those years, had travelled to Europe, spoken strongly for Indian independence and had to be more or less exiled in Paris, otherwise the British would have clapped her in jail. She was the person who made up and sewed the first Indian national flag in defiance of the Union flag. Her centenary was celebrated in India some years ago and one of the best roads in Bombay was named Madame Cama road.

Aunty says that her mother had a very affectionate relationship with her paternal grandmother who looked after her while the mother was procreating all the time. The father was very gentle and not a go getting type. At some stage he got a job in Aden as manager of a newly established ice factory and the family lived there for some years. Of course the Cawasji Dinshahis who were the top Parsees there, knew them and the girls who were growing up. Through their good offices a marriage between Grandpa's and Aunty's parents was arranged. It took place in Bombay. She was about twenty years old and he was twenty three or twenty four years old.

Grandpa was born a few years later in Cambay and his mother had a very thin time of it in care and comfort, but he was such a lovely baby everybody was happy. It seems that within a very few days, when the birds chirped in the nearby eaves his head and eyes would move towards the sound. In all this early and even later history, the fact remains that everybody was as poor as church mice. But Great Grandpa was a tremendously hard worker: his work was his hobby too and he was very strong. The result was that he made his way steadily. In Aden an opening was offered in a shipping company in Colombo, one of the shipping magnate Lord Inchcape's businesses. It was involved in bunkering, coaling and watering ships on the long sea routes between the West and the Far East, on which depended the power and wealth the British Empire. Great Grandpa went to Colombo in the spring of 1902 with Great Grandma following with baby in 1903. A sea voyage of 12 days in a small coastal ship.

In Colombo they had a small house in a forest of coconut palms, isolated, with just a small boy as a servant. Being such a verdant area, lots of insects (UH! Pennsylvania is bad enough that must have been horrid) in those days of heavy vegetation the thunderstorms and monsoon rains were terrifying, especially as Great Grandpa had a peculiar duty rota of 24 hours and she would be on her own. Great Grandpa learnt a lot about his work under British managers and, in fact, caught one of the Brits in some 'hanky panky'. He also kept order in the labour force through his confident looks and strength; once he snatched away a knife from one of the labourers. He had a manager called Mr. Ridge whom he really looked up to, and who, in turn, trained him very well.

Grandpa was a little boy and he grew up and went to school, which is how Aunty and Grandpa and their parents in Colombo came into contact with a lot of the 'outside' world, in the sense of not just being with the community with the few Parsees there. The trend became cosmopolitan and continued over the years, culminating with living in England and then further travels. Aunty says that our family has become 'universal' in this sense though 'we are comfortable with our roots, and our

Parsee and particularly our Indian heritage. India itself is universal in its composition and in its outlook where there is no 'establishment but an ocean of many colours where ideas and beliefs are concerned'.

As the years went by Great Grandpa was more and more absorbed in his work and the outside world, leaving Great Grandmother housebound. She developed her own interests, gradually and even defiantly, since Great Grandpa was not encouraging. Also because her interests were entirely outside the normal orbit of their circle, namely an interest in philosophy and religion, which received a very appropriate framework in Theosophy, but also in music and art in general. As Grandpa grew up these interests were shared by mother and son. Much later Aunty came into the picture. Grandpa was 11 years old when she was born, one year before World War 1.

Grandpa was a brilliant student and stood first in the island, Ceylon, in his Junior and senior Cambridge examinations (English examination system). Aunty says that we can get all this from Grandpa but it is very hard to get him to talk about his childhood and early manhood. I will try to get him to tell me more. Aunty says that she will tell me a few funny stories about him one day.

'The interest in Theosophy with its emphasis on universal brotherhood and the study of comparative religion (ideas which were 'avant-garde' and very shocking to missionaries) 'has had a strong influence on moulding our (Grandpa and Aunty) 'attitudes and thoughts even though for decades now we have not been in touch with it'. Theosophy itself has dwindled. There were many offshoots in India of the Theosophical movement such as working for the education and equality of women which Aunty and her Great Grandma took entirely to heart. They were especially interested in the idea of home rule and self-government in India. Dr Annie Besant spearheaded the Home Rule movement but diverged from Mahatma Gandhi who wanted Independence, and 'he was right and prevailed'. Nevertheless all those developing movements influenced thousands and the young Grandpa and Aunty too.

Aunty and her Mother left for England in May 1928 and these influences gave them a perspective which stood them in good stead for the entirely new environment they had come to. In those years one only saw an Indian face once in many months and it was quite a thrill for Aunty and Great Grandma when they did so. Also, there was a lot of prejudice and racial ignorance in the very 'Best Empire style'. Aunty says that in spite of these difficulties the English years were full of new impressions and adaptations. But on the whole, for them, they were a continuation and development of the early trends.

Aunty does not tell me about the history of her school career in the U.K but I know she did very well and trained as a lawyer at Lincoln's Inn, London, where she graduated top of her year and was the youngest ever to qualify as a barrister. She was too young in fact, to practice law. As a young woman in England she gave talks about Home Rule for India. Now she is the President of an NGO in India and that is why she travels the world so much. We hope she comes to the U.S. again soon and perhaps I can get her to tell me more about herself.

Grandpa went up to Cambridge, England, in 1921 and because he did not have a birth certificate he was unable to take up a scholarship. Parsees used Horoscopes instead of birth certificates but this was not acceptable in England. The case was taken to the House of Lords but to no avail. I am not sure what he studied but he has read law, chemistry and history as well as having a career as a classical pianist. Again I am not sure of the details but hope to write it down for you one day. '

Granny and Grandpa met on a ship on the way to India in 1938, and they were married in England in 1939. Their children were born in the UK and grew up there.