

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Hi Everyone! We're half-way through 2009 and winter is already here – wow - time really flies! The past few months have been eventful for ZAWA, and the following is a brief re-cap of activities:

In late 2008, a special meeting was held to gauge the community's feelings about submitting a bid to host the World Zoroastrian Congress in 2013. The general consensus was: yes, let's forge ahead and prepare a bid document. At this point we had less than one month to gather the necessary info and prepare a workable bid, and I must say I was very impressed with the tremendous effort the "Bid Proposal Team" made to see this document come to fruition. When the document was ready to send out, the membership approved it's contents at an Extraordinary General Body Meeting, and was subsequently sent to the Selection Committee for a decision. Ultimately, Mumbai "won" the right to host the WZC2013, but our efforts were not in vain – the Selection Committee commented that our proposal was well-prepared and indeed worthy of mention. For a short time, ZAWA was held up on the world stage by this bid – well done!

Just before the Christmas break began (and the associated annual exodus of ZAWA members to India), we held

another twilight picnic, this time at Trigg Beach. Although the sea breeze made the event a bit chilly, there was an impressive turnout, the food was great, and everyone had a good time.

After returning from the annual holidays, ZAWA celebrated the first gahambar of this calendar year, Paitishahem Gahambar, on Feb.14th. This was followed by the Ayathrem gahambar on March 15th. More about Gahambars later in this issue...

In March, ZAWA celebrated Jamshedi Navroze with a dinner/dance at the AAA Hall. The music was provided by the one-



man band, Apollo, and the fantastic catering was prepared by the committee (and their spouses). A great time was had by all!

In April some of the youth (Delara Mistry and Zeelnaz Parabia) organized the "Bollywood Night". With careful



planning and a small army of helpers to help set up, cook, serve, and clean up, the



evening turned out to be another memorable success.

In late May, ZAWA observed the annual Dae Mah Jashan. At this jashan, and at the earlier Paitishahem Gahambar, young Pearce Javat was introduced to the community as our newest navar. Pearce and his family had been in India a few months earlier for his navar ceremony – a hearty congrats to Pearce, and it’s fantastic to witness, first-hand, our age-old religious tenets being passed down to a new generation.



Speaking of the religion, by sheer coincidence in the past few months I’ve seen a couple of fascinating television shows that have mentioned our religion. Some of you may have watched the recent BBC series “The Story of India” on ABC



– in the first episode, the narrator discussed the earliest civilizations of the Indian sub-continent and tries to explain the similarities found between Sanskrit and various other languages, including

European ones. He then talks about how the Rig Veda describes an ancient



migration of peoples with horses and four-wheeled carts, from beyond the Hindu Kush. After piecing together various geographical clues, the narrator travels to an archaeological site in Turkmenistan where an entire Bronze-Age city is still in the process of being excavated. He shows the actual floor-space where Zoroastrian mobeds used to perform their ceremonies! At this point, the prominent Russian archaeologist in charge declares that, among other things, this was a Zoroastrian city, complete with a palace and several fire temples, and it had been abandoned sometime in the 2nd millennium BC! This city was built on the Aryan migration path from the north, on the way down towards India and Iran. This implies that before Hinduism came to India, the migrating Aryans were Zoroastrians, which would explain the many cultural and religious similarities (i.e. “kusti”, “navjote”, sacred fire, etc.). More importantly, this means that this citadel must have been built much earlier than 2000 BC, which also contradicts many modern scholars who believe prophet Zarathushtra lived in the 4th, or 6th century BC (or didn’t even exist at all!). This is one of many examples that demonstrate how much, or indeed how little, faith we can put into the purely academic study of our religion. If supposedly mythical tales of Shahnameh

heroes and their adventures give you a sense of pride, take it as being genuine history – when people say that Zarathushtra lived 6000 or 7000 BC, take that as the truth too - it's your heritage, your birthright! For modern western scholars, our religion is an object to be studied and dissected - this is how they make their living – they postulate new theories and then research to prove or disprove them. For us, our Zarthushti Din is a major (if not the ultimate) defining element in our lives – we must not allow our own personal faith to suffer at the hands of varying academic musings.

Another interesting program was an American documentary about the “Three Kings” who supposedly visited Jesus at his birth. The narrator of this show researches the topic, and shows that the Bible doesn't make any mention that there were three of them, nor that they were kings. It says that “Magi from the east” came to visit Jesus at his birth – the host explains that Magi is the word used to describe the Zoroastrian priests of ancient Iran. Using astronomical data, he also goes on to explain the “star of Bethlehem” and the Bible's description of it moving and guiding the Magi towards Jesus. The Magi were experts in astronomy, astrology and dream interpretation, and the star was in fact Jupiter entering into a particular constellation (an indication of a major event), then retrograding in orbit - so from the ground it appeared to have changed direction. Among many interesting facts, the show also explained the significance of the gifts of gold, myrrh and frankincense – basically, the myrrh and frankincense were the equivalent of our “loban” used in prayers, which was worth more than gold in that age! As a side-note, the program also mentioned that the English word “magician” is derived from “magi”, the ancient Persians were the ones who first began using the hand-shake as a greeting, and that the

wearing of pants was also a legacy of ancient Persia. Interesting stuff!

One more little story to tell – a personal one: while on our way to Bombay this past December, we were travelling thru Singapore and while making a day-tour booking at the airport, the elderly Chinese lady asked for our passports. Incredibly, she recognized our names and asked us if we were Parsis. As expected, I was shocked that an old Chinese lady would know who we are – when I asked, she said that yes indeed, all the Singaporeans of her generation knew who the Parsis are – one of the main hospitals there had an entire wing donated by a Parsi gentleman, and it was (or eventually became) some sort of children's hospital. She said that people like her knew first-hand about Parsi philanthropy!

In summary, our religion, culture and ethics is something we should all be fiercely proud of!

- Pervez Mistry
Chairperson, ZAWA Committee

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Announcements:

Birth:

- **Kaiz**, a son to Nozer & Tahera Irani, born on Aug.7, 2008

Navjotes:

- **Neil**, son of Nozer & Tahera Irani, in Mumbai on Dec. 17, 2008
- **Shayaan**, daughter of Vizak & Cornelia Irani, in Mumbai on Dec. 26, 2008.
- **Kaitlyn**, daughter of Mehernosh & Dilshad Buhariwalla, in Mumbai on Jan. 3, 2009.

Navar Initiation Ceremony:

- **Pearce**, son of Rohinton & Hufrih Javat, on Jan.10, 2009

A hearty congratulations to all the kids and their families!

Gahambars:

As mentioned earlier, this year we have been observing the Gahambars; there has been some confusion in the community as to what constitutes a Gahambar. There is a misconception that they are simply community meals - while a community lunch/dinner is usually a part of the celebration, the Gahambars are meant to offer thanksgiving to God for the various seasons - "the prosperity of the world depends on the regularity of the seasons". The following interesting info has been sourced from "The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsis" by J.J. Modi (1922), and may be of interest to the community:

There are six Gahambar periods in the year, each with a window of five days within which to celebrate. They are as follows:

- **Maidyozarem**, signifying mid-spring, and takes place between the 41st and 45th days after Navroze.
- **Maidyoshem**, signifying mid-summer, celebrated between the 101st and 105th days of the year.
- **Paitishahem**, celebrated as the time of reaping the harvest, i.e. autumn. It takes place between 176th and 180th days of the year.
- **Ayathrem**, during breeding season of the cattle and at a time of prosperity (after the harvest has been gathered). This Gahambar takes place between the 206th and 210th days.
- **Maidyarem**, during the season of mid-winter and at a time of rest since all agricultural activities generally cease. Takes place between the 286th and 290th days after Navroze.
- **Hamaspathmaidem** signifies the time of the vernal equinox, i.e. springtime, when the days and nights are about equal and the temperatures are moderate. Occurs between 361st and 365th days of the year.

There are two main features to celebrating a gahambar – the prayers, and the subsequent feast associated with it. The Afringan of Gahambar suggest that all Zoroastrians should participate in public gahambars. Quoting from J.J. Modi's book: "All may participate in these public gahambars. If one can afford, he may pay his mite, in money or in kind. For example, the Afringan says, if one can afford, he may offer as his mite, a fat healthy goat or sheep for the public feast. If he cannot afford even to do that, he may give a quantity of wine. If one cannot afford even to do that, he may give a bundle of dry wood or fuel for cooking the food. If one cannot afford to do that even, let him give even one piece of fuel. If a poor man cannot afford to give even this small thing, never mind, let him go there and participate in the celebration by remembering his God there."

Various religious texts mention that the celebration of the Gahambars is the most important religious observation. "The Bahman Yasht prophesizes that the non-celebration of the Gahambars will be an evil day for the world. To put into ordinary language, what it means is this, that it will be an evil day when man will cease to offer thanks to God for the creation of the phenomena of the seasons and for the different gifts that result from the phenomena. King Jamshid is said to be the first monarch of Persia who celebrated the Gahambars."

Indeed, celebrating the various Gahambars are an important aspect of living the religion."

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Entertainment Books:

This year ZAWA has begun selling the familiar Entertainment Books as a fundraising activity. A few are still available if anyone's interested – they cost \$65/each but as most of you know, that

cost can be recovered very quickly. A special thanks to Farzana Irani who, within the first week of fundraising, sold an outstanding 14 books in her office! Who knows if this was done by using the threat of force or with a friendly smile, but this is far more than anyone else in ZAWA has achieved! If you're interested in purchasing a copy, please contact Pervez Mistry at 9456-5761, or 0410-154-703.



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WZC2009:

The upcoming IX World Zoroastrian Congress will be held in Dubai between Dec.28th and Dec.31st 2009. The theme of the congress is "Unity Through the Sands of Time". These types of congresses are an excellent forum to meet old friends and to make new ones, as well as to discuss important issues facing our community. Early-bird registration ends on July 31st, 2009, so hurry to get the best deal! For more info, please visit the website "www.wzcongress.org" or email to "wzcongress2009@gmail.com".

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Parliament of World's Religions 2009:

Another grand international event, open to all religious denominations, will be held in Melbourne between Dec.3-9th 2009. All Zoroastrians are encouraged to attend and demonstrate solidarity amongst each other. For further details, please go to the website "www.parliamentofreligions.org" or alternatively email:

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Interesting Info:

Here's are parts of an article written by Ervad Jal N. Birdy (of Los Angeles) several years ago, and it contains some very interesting historical info not many of us know about.

Parsi Kingdoms and Settlements within Iran in Post-Sasanian Times:

Parsi Kingdoms in Eastern Iran:

Even after the downfall of the Sassanian Empire, there were small independent kingdoms in the mountainous districts of Kuhistan in eastern Iran viz., Mazandaran, Gilan, Tabaristan and Khurasan. The Parsi rulers of these kingdoms were the descendents of the Sassanian royal family and aristocracy and were called Sipahbads. There existed an effective alliance between these independent rulers. All the highlands were under their control and no one dared enter the highlands from the plains without their permission. Notable among these rulers were Sipahbads Sharwin and his son Shahriyar. They ruled in these districts for about 150 years as gleaned from their coinage bearing Pahlavi legends, which are in existence today.

Parsi Kingdoms in Mount Demavand:

A dynasty of Zarathushti priests, known as Masmoghan - Chief of the Mobeds or Magis, ruled in the mountainous district



of Tabaristan during Sassanian times and thereafter as independent rulers under Bay, who later retired himself into a fire

temple. These mountainous kingdoms, also called Kohs, were highly fortified and almost impenetrable. An account from an anonymous book written in 982 mentions the Kuh-I-Qarin containing over ten thousand very prosperous Parsi villages.

Although there are reports that the kingdoms in Mount Demavand were completely routed in the mid-fourteenth century, there is a strong belief held by many Parsis of India today that these Magis, now called Saheb-e-Delans, still exist in these mountains. These highly evolved personages periodically give audience, passing on their ancient religious teachings to selected Parsis. One such person was Mr. Behramshah Navroji Shroff of Surat, who had an audience with these Magis during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

In the Mountains of Kerman:

A chain of seven mountains, stretching from the sea to the city of Jiruft, was known as the mountains of Kerman. The Muslim rulers did not have a representative in these Parsi communities;



instead the chief collected the dreaded "jizya" tax for their rulers. The inhabitants developed a special language (spoken only), known as Dari, which could not be understood by anyone outside their community.

Parsi Kingdoms and Settlements Outside Iran in Post-Sasanian Times:

Parsi Kings in China:

After the murder of Yazdgard III, the last Sassanian Emperor in 652 A.C.E., his son Piroj, proclaimed himself king of Iran and took refuge in exile in the mountains of Tokharistan in Central Asia then under Chinese rule. The Chinese Emperor recognized Piroj as the king of Iran. Later, Piroj went to China and served as a captain in the Chinese army and built a fire-temple in China in 677 A.C.E. His son, Narsi, also lived in Tokharistan and later went to China in 707 A.C.E. The historian and writer, Masudi, recorded in 916 A.C.E., that there were Parsis living in China who worshipped in fire-temples. These early Parsi migrants to China have been totally assimilated into the local population.



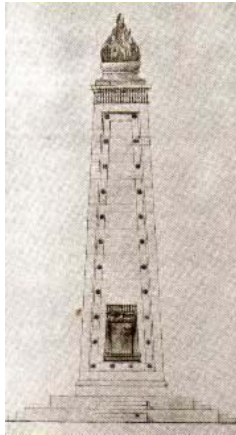
Parsi Migration to India:

In ancient times, Iran had come into political, cultural and trade-relations with practically all nations of the ancient world including India and China. During Sassanian times, Parsis were living in China, Central Asia, Pakistan (Sind and Punjab), northern India (Punjab) and western India (Saurashtra, Rajasthan and Gujarat). Apart from occasional archaeological relics discovered from time to time signifying they once lived there, there is no trace of these early settlers.

The ancestors of the present Indian-Pakistani Parsi community migrated to India after the downfall of the Sassanian Empire. A single date of this Parsi migration is not known, since it must have occurred over many years. Dates anywhere from 716 to 936 A.C.E. have been mentioned in various historical accounts.

The Settlement in Sanjan:

According to the traditional account recorded in the Kisseh Sanjan, after the Arab conquest of Iran, the ancestors of the present Indian Parsis took refuge in the mountainous districts of Kohistan in Khorasan for about 100 years. They spent about 15 years in the port city of Hormuzd on the southern coast of Iran, possibly contemplating migration. They finally left Hormuzd by the sea route and landed in India on the island of Div in southern Saurashtra. They stayed in Div for about 19 years, and thereafter, most probably due to the growing threat of an Arab invasion, left Div and settled on the west coast of India, near the place later to be known as Sanjan about 145 kilometers north of Mumbai.



There is again no evidence whatsoever as to how many immigrants actually came via the sea route. There is some evidence that the immigrants came with their families. Some accounts state that about 18,000 Parsis came in seven junks, five of them landing in Div, one at Variav near Surat and one at Cambay in Gujarat. Subsequently, more Parsis migrated from Iran and landed at various places on the West Coast of India. These various and gradual migrations might be the cause of inconsistency and confusion regarding the date of arrival and the landing place.

The local Hindu Rajah, known as Jadi Rana, permitted the Parsis to settle in his kingdom and gave them a vacant area in which they could establish their colony. Tradition states that the Parsis named their new settlement "Sanjan", after the cities bearing the same name in Iran. They

installed their Holy Fire, whom they named Iranshah or the King of Iran.

Invasion of Sanjan and Subsequent Migrations within Gujarat:

After 700 years of peaceful and prosperous stay in Sanjan, the Hindu kingdom was invaded by a fanatical Muslim named Sultan Mahmud Begada of Ahmedabad. About 1400 Parsis joined the army of the Hindu Rajah and fought valiantly to rid their land of the Muslim invader. Unfortunately, the Rajah's army was defeated and Sanjan was destroyed, the Parsis suffering much loss of life.

Those Parsis who survived the attack on Sanjan gradually migrated to other places within Gujarat and the West Coast. Their important settlements besides Sanjan were Navsari, Surat, Vankaner, Variav, Ankseshvar, Bharuch and Cambay to the north of Sanjan and Thana to the south.

The Establishment of Panthaks or Diocesan Jurisdictions:

Around 1290 A.C.E., the Parsi priests assembled in council and established boundaries for the following five Panthaks serving the migrants on the West coast.

- Sanjana priests of Sanjan serving from the River Dantora (near Dahnu) to the River Par (near Pardi)
- Bhagharia priests of Navsari serving from the River Par to the River Variav
- Godavra priests of Surat serving from the River Variav to the River Ankseshvar
- Bharucha priests of Bharuch serving from the River Ankseshvar to the River Cambay and
- Khambatta priests of Cambay (Khambhat) serving in and around Cambay.

The Journey of the Sacred Fire, "Iranshah":

The Parsis who survived the attack on Sanjan decided to move with their Holy Fire to Bahrot, a safer region located in the mountains close to Sanjan. They installed their Iranshah in a secluded cave in the mountains and stayed there for twelve years. Thereafter, the Parsis moved Iranshah to the more prosperous town of Bansda, where they remained for a further fourteen years.

The existing Parsi settlement in nearby Navsari, under the leadership of Changa Asha, allowed the Sanjana priests to move Iranshah to their town in 1419 A.C.E. The Sanjana priests guarding Iranshah were now under the jurisdiction of the Bhagharia priests of Navsari and it was agreed that they would only perform the ceremonies connected with Iranshah, while the Bhagharias would continue to perform other religious ceremonies for the community.



This arrangement lasted for about 320 years, after which there were quarrels between the two priestly factions.

Ultimately, the Sanjanas decided to remove Iranshah to some place within the jurisdiction of the Sanjana priests. In 1740 A.C.E., they chose to move to Bulsar where they remained for two years after which they moved Iranshah to Udvarda, where the sacred fire flourishes to this day.

The Tragedy at Variav:

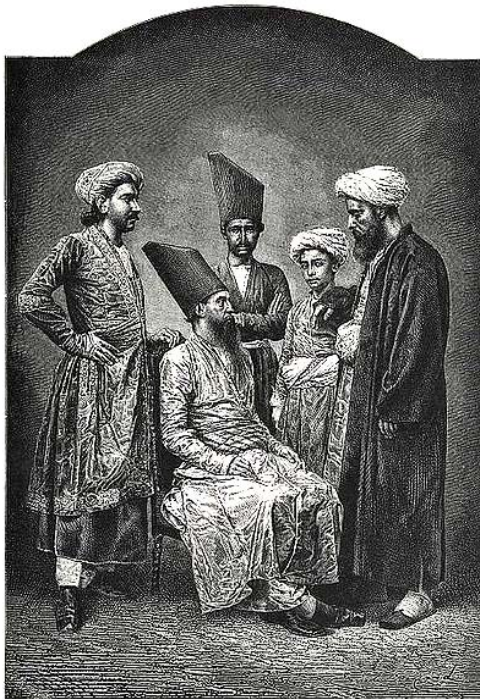
On one occasion, the Rajput ruler demanded a higher tribute from the Parsis of Variav, near Surat. When the Rajah sent his troops to collect the dues, they were repelled by the Parsis. A bigger force was sent on another occasion when the Parsi men were away to an out-of-town feast. This compelled the Parsi women to take up arms against the Rajah's men. They fought bravely and were on the point of winning, when a woman's helmet dropped exposing her hair. Seeing this the Rajput soldiers made a frenzied charge and the women preferring death to dishonor heroically leapt into the nearby Tapti River and drowned. Roj Ashishwagh, Mah Fravardin is commemorated even today in honor of the Parsi women who sacrificed themselves at Variav.

Lessons From Our Parsi Ancestors:

From the foregoing account, it will become clear how much hardship and suffering was borne by our ancestors in their fight for survival, both in Iran and also on the Indian sub-continent, and for the preservation of the Holy Fire - Iranshah. The decision by some of these ancestors to give up their beloved land of Iran and all their possessions and move to another country in order to save their religion and identity is equally commendable. How the Parsi migrants to the Indian sub-continent managed to achieve their objective in the face of tremendous odds is even more noteworthy. Our forebears were truly

men and women with backbone of whom we should be justly proud and grateful.

Just as Parsis migrated to the West Coast of India after the downfall of the Sassanian Empire, there have been accounts of similar migrations to other regions, principally Europe. It is remarkable that no trace exists of any such early migrants, except the Parsis who came to India.



The Parsis on the Indian sub-continent number less than a hundred thousand today and they have achieved their goal of preserving their faith and identity almost intact in a sea of some one billion non-Parsis for around thirteen centuries. Some may call it a miracle; others call it a result of their dogged adherence to certain tough rules of survival based primarily on their religion.

During their thirteen-century history on the Indian sub-continent, significant changes have taken place in their makeup. Their outer clothing, diet, customs, etc., have all undergone significant transformation. Despite these changes, they have managed to survive as a distinct

identity. Not only have they always moved with the times, in most fields they have also been pioneers and have stayed ahead of the times. But throughout their checkered history, they have always steadfastly adhered to their unique rules which remained unchanged and which has been their salvation.

Not only have they preserved both their faith and their identity, they have also played a full role in the development of their country. No one labeled them non-humanist, non-compassionate, pompous, bigoted, racist, or any other derogatory term, just because they wanted to preserve their identity. On the contrary, they have helped the indigenous population almost as much as they have helped their own community members and this has won them great acclaim from the leaders of their adopted homelands.

Historical portions of this article have been taken almost entirely from Dastur Dr. Hormazdyar Dastur Kayoji Mirza s "Outlines of Parsi History", published in 1987. The Tragedy at Variav is from P. P. Balsara s "Highlights of Parsi History", published in 1963. The author makes grateful acknowledgment to both of these sources.

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*Don't forget to renew your
ZAWA membership, a.s.a.p.!*

ZAWA Committee:

**Pervez Mistry
Persis Billimoria
Behram Cooper
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www.zawa.asn.au