

# THE PARSEES OF INDIA

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The great teacher of the Parsees and the founder of their religious cult was a Persian known to the world by his Greek name of Zoroaster — in his Iranian home-land he was originally known as Zarathustra — who lived and taught in the sixth century before the Christian era. He preached a reformed belief which yet retained some of the features of the primitive Iranian or Aryan folk-religion of his time. It was said of him that, wearied of the follies of mankind, he withdrew from their society and lived for a time in lonely solitude on a remote mountain peak. This mountain was later consumed by fire from heaven, but Zoroaster escaped unharmed and returned to teach a reformed and purified religion to the tribes of ancient Persia. Incidentally, he was further credited by the ancients with being the founder and originator of the occult wisdom of the Magi, the forerunners of those "Three Wise Men from the East" who, as pilgrims bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, were guided several hundred years later to a lowly stable in the village of Bethlehem.

The story of Zoroaster's withdrawal from the society of his fellows and his solitary meditation on a lonely peak closely parallels the legend of Gautama, the young Indian prince known to his followers as the Buddha, who also lived and taught in the same period, the sixth century before Christ. He had forsaken the easy life and vain pleasures of his father's court to meditate in the jungle in silence alone and, steadfastly repulsing all those sent to tempt him, at length returned to teach his doctrine of the Middle Way. The story of Zoroaster and his return from the burning mountain to teach a reformed religion to the ancient Persians also brings to mind the Biblical account of the descent from the smoking Mount of Sinai of the Jewish prophet Moses, bringing with him the Decalogue for the future guidance of the wandering children of Israel.

Whereas Buddhism had spread eastward only from its cradle in northern India, the teachings of Zoroaster were carried westward, in somewhat modified form, through the medium of a series of military conquests. The Persian ancestors of the Parsees, who migrated to India some centuries later, remained true and orthodox followers of their great teacher. But there had early developed in Persia itself a modified cult, an offshoot of Zoroasterism, the cult of Mithra, who was said to be an angel of light fighting valiantly on the side of Ahura Mazda.

This war-like conception of the character of the supernatural guardian of mankind appealed strongly to the early autocratic rulers of the Iranian plateau. They and their fighting men embraced Mithraism, which was carried westward by the conquering armies of Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes to Asia Minor and the Eastern Levant and took root there. As the Roman conquests extended eastward in the first century before Christ, the legions of Rome came in contact with it there and willingly adopted it. Thereafter it spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire, carried both by the Roman legionaries and by the Levantine traders who brought the products of the exotic East to Italy to enrich the lives of the Roman conquerors. It was carried even to remote Britain where, for a brief season during the earlier years of the Roman occupation, it superseded the Druidism of the native Celts. It may be noted that in quite recent months the London press has reported the uncovering, in southern England, of the ruins of an ancient temple once dedicated to the worship of Mithra.

As the strong rising tide of militant Christianity began to displace Mithraism elsewhere in the far-flung Roman dominions, so it did also in Roman Britain. From the early years of the third century of the Christian Era, the cult born on the Iranian Plateau lost support and rapidly weakened. Its central figure was mythical, not historic; and it assigned an inferior role to woman-kind. Its worshippers began to turn away in order to embrace the simpler and more humanitarian teachings of the Man of Nazareth. At the dawn of the fifth century after Christ the name of Mithra was practically unknown, and his worship was abandoned throughout the whole Roman world and the regions of its former conquests.

Meantime, back in Persia, the more orthodox followers of Zoroaster remained peacefully on the Iranian Plateau. Their religion became the State religion, and the head of their Church became the first person in importance after the King. Zoroaster had taught a simple but strict religion which recognized a future life after earthly death, where good deeds were weighted against evil ones and the soul of the departed enjoyed either eternal bliss or suffered eternal torture, in accordance with the balance of his earthly deeds. The prophet himself had paid small regard to rites and ceremonial worship, but his austere doctrine was too abstract for the common people, and the Parsee priesthood gradually developed and imposed on their disciples a system of rites and ceremonies, laws and ablutions which, as so frequently happens,

became more important than the basic teachings of the prophet himself.<sup>1</sup>

This state of affairs was rudely interrupted in Persia by the invasion of the fanatical disciples of Mohammed, the descendants of the Jewish patriarch Abraham and the Egyptian hand-maid, Hagar, in the Christian year 636. One of the most astonishing developments of all history is the speed and vigour with which this new religion — born in the Arabian Desert through the teaching of one who accepted the God of the Israelites but exalted himself as the last and greatest of the long line of prophets of that God — spread west into Morocco and Spain, east to Turkey, Iran and beyond, and south into the continent of Africa. Indeed, the Mohammedan conquest of Persia took place only four short years after the prophet's death and only fourteen years after the Hejira, his flight as a poor refugee from the city of his birth, the holy city of Mecca. Here in Persia as elsewhere the subjugated peoples were given the bleak choice invariably presented by the fanatical invading hordes of Islam: "The Koran or the Sword." This drastic ultimatum was not always fully enforced after the first wave of bigoted fury had passed, and thereafter the Parsee survivors experienced alternating periods of tempered tolerance and harsh persecution for stout adherence to their native belief. By 706 A.D., however, the remnant resolved finally to abandon their homeland, and there was a mass exodus to Kathiawar in western India. Only a very few stragglers remained behind in the land of their birth. From that date, early in the eighth century, India became and remained their adopted country.

The pilgrims, however, were not happy in Kathiawar, and nineteen years later, in 725, they again migrated, this time to Gujerat, where the land was more productive, where they were kindly received by the Hindu ruler, and where they decided to make their permanent abode.

## II

These early Parsees were for the most part tillers of the soil. They adopted for everyday usage the tongue of the Gujeratis, but in all other respects they remained a people apart. Their

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<sup>1</sup> The Parsees have often been referred to as fire-worshippers or sun-worshippers. Actually, the life-giving sun and the sacred flame religiously kept alive in their "fire temples" or places of worship were merely symbols — symbols of Ahura Mazda, the creative spirit which existed at the beginning of all material things, the Divine Good Spirit, the spirit of light and of life. That spirit was eternally opposed by his antithesis, his twin spirit Ahriman, equally creative but in a negative sense, the Spirit of all Evil, the spirit of darkness and of death.

persecution in Persia seems to have purified them of many ritual innovations. The hereditary priestly families, as distinct from the others as the tribe of Levi was among the children of Israel, kept alive the Persian tongue for the performance of all religious observances. They were strict fundamentalists and permitted no mixed marriages with the Hindu — and later the Moslem — families with which they worked and fished and traded. They remained as separate and apart from their neighbours as many modern colonies of Mormons, Mennonites, and Doukhobors have done, and for this the strict religious observances insisted on by the priesthood must be given credit, although it is true that their Hindu and Moslem neighbours also frowned on mixed marriages. Incidentally, it may well be that constant inbreeding among a small community is one reason why the Parsees of India have never increased greatly in numbers. The other is, of course, their unwillingness or refusal to accept proselytes from among their Indian neighbours.

In Gujerat they remained a distinct community, in typical dress and religious customs, for some nine hundred years. While they were for the most part farmers, there persisted among them a decided tendency, which has also been noted among some of their Semitic cousins, to embrace any opportunity available to break away from the land and engage in trade and barter. Some attached themselves in minor capacities, as suppliers and commercial agents, to the lesser Hindu and Moslem rulers, and some later operated even in the precincts of the court of the Great Mogul in Delhi. They neither bore arms nor became partisans in the bickerings and minor wars between the various local chieftains, and they became universally respected for their energy, integrity, and commercial capability.

A few Parsee traders had arrived in Bombay as early as 1640, to negotiate with the Portuguese merchants and religious orders which had been established there since 1534 but who had done little to develop the great potentialities of the port, fearing a possible competitor to their ornate capital at Goa. The latter city had been taken by a Portuguese fleet in 1510, and for more than one hundred years thereafter it had maintained its position as the greatest and richest emporium in the entire Orient.

In Gujerat itself the city of Surat had become an important sea-port and trading centre many centuries before the first Europeans arrived off the coasts of India, and here the commercially-minded Parsees built up a thriving sea-borne trade with other ports in India, Persia, East Africa, and even into the Red Sea as far as the Gulf of Suez. When a British fleet arrived off Surat in

1612 and opened a factory or trading-post, they became the intermediary agents and readily transferred their trading connections from the earlier Portuguese merchants to the new arrivals, the East India Company, and also to the Dutch who for a time maintained a factory there. They became the commercial link and diplomatic liaison between the British traders and the Indian potentates.

It was in 1662 that Charles Stuart, the newly-restored King of England, contracted marriage with the Infanta Catherine of Braganza, and agreed to aid England's long-time ally Portugal in her wars with Spain. One portion of the dowry that the Infanta then brought to the English Crown was the trading post and port of Bombay. This transfer was bitterly opposed by the resident Portuguese religious orders, and it became effective only in 1665. Three years later the Crown ceded its new possession to the East India Company, and from that date onward it steadily increased in importance, diverting to itself the trade channels both from Surat in the north and from Goa in the South, and gradually becoming the principal sea-port and trading centre of Western India.

The keen-eyed Parsees of Gujerat were not slow to observe the trend of events. They began to migrate in force from Surat to Bombay, and their great and prosperous merchant families became the principal factor in the commercial life of the latter city. At the present time there are only about one hundred thousand Parsees in the entire world, but of these roughly twenty-five percent are in Gujerat and fifty percent in Bombay. In the great entrepôt of trade and manufacturer of cotton piece-goods which Bombay eventually became, they found ample opportunity for the application and development of their innate and well-known flair for commercial activities. It incidentally afforded them wide scope for their traditional philanthropic tendencies.

It happened that the economy of the rival city of Calcutta was based on jute, first developed by canny Scots from Dundee. They clearly saw the great advantage of manufacturing with cheap labour in the country where the raw jute fiber was produced, and as early as 1854 they built on the banks of the Hoogli the first jute mill to be operated in India by mechanical power. At the present time there are well over one hundred jute mills strung out along the Hoogli, above and below Calcutta.

The short-sighted cotton manufacturers of Lancashire, on the other hand, long fought for the right to supply the enormous Indian market for cheap cotton piece-goods from their existing mills in England, not without some assistance from the home government, which discouraged the erection of cotton mills in

India. It was a Parsee merchant prince of Bombay, Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata by name, who first challenged this monopoly and built in Nagpur a large cotton mill that went into operation in 1878, the year Disraeli induced Victoria to accept the title of Empress of India. This mill, christened the Empress Mill, became immensely profitable and was followed by many others. But these were now built in Bombay, financed by the Wadias, the Jehangirs, the Tatas, and other rich Parsee families, with British and Hindu interests coming in later, making Bombay city one of the largest cotton centres in the entire world.

This J. N. Tata was India's pioneer industrialist. He set up the private limited company of Tata Sons in 1887 and extended his activities into cotton, cement, vegetable oils, hydro-electric plants, insurance, hotels, coal, iron, and steel. On his death in 1904, his unfinished schemes were brought to fruition by his sons, Sir Dorabji Jamsetji and Sir Ratan. The steel plant managed and controlled by the Tata firm is now the largest in the entire British Commonwealth, and their other interests are legion. The astute founder of the firm, having transferred his shares in Tata Sons Limited to his two male heirs, left his entire personal fortune to charity and to the establishment of an Indian scientific research institute at Bangalore. Sir Dorabji and Sir Ratan each in turn later left their personal fortunes to specific trusts, mainly for the assistance and care of Parsees less fortunately situated.

### III

It has been noted that the Parsees of India were fundamentalists. Despite their wanderings over the centuries they clung tenaciously to the teachings of Zoroaster, and the priesthood retained for all religious observances their ancient Persian tongue. All ritual ceremonies, other than funereal ones, were accompanied in the Oriental style by feasting on a grand scale.

It was their theory that a male child was not born a Parsee. He became one in his early teens by means of what was known as "the string ceremony," corresponding to Christian confirmation, by which he was received into the religious community. His body was encircled with the holy lace, and he then chose from the priesthood a spiritual guide for his after years. I have been invited to several of these string ceremonies, or rather to the subsequent feasting, because only Parsees were permitted to be present at the holy rite.

A Parsee wedding was usually quite a sumptuous affair, even if it meant putting the parents deeply in debt. Immediately

before the formal wedding, the bride was closely surrounded by her immediate female friends and relatives, completely disrobed by them, and again newly clad in raiment never before worn. She wore no head-dress but a cloth-of-gold sari, one fold covering the back of the head, and ornamental sandals on otherwise bare feet. The groom invariably wore a long, plain white coat and tight white trousers, and of course he wore throughout the ceremony the traditional shiny black hat of the Parsees, without which he would most certainly be showing gross disrespect to his bride, his religion, and the assembled concourse.<sup>2</sup>

The actual ceremony was usually performed on a slightly raised platform in the open air, the weather being always fine during the spring marriage season, in the late afternoon or early evening. The bridal couple stood side by side on this stage, facing a dignified bearded Parsee priest clothed entirely in white, even to his turban, and at his right hand a young priest similarly attired, holding a large bowl level-full of grains of rice. The senior priest then proceeded to deliver a long exhortation in the ancestral tongue, admonishing the young couple to be good Parsees, faithful to each other, bountiful to the poor, and to "be fruitful and multiply." As he intoned in a deep voice, without once interrupting the thread of his discourse, he from time to time picked up a small handful of rice and threw it full in the faces of the young couple, alternately addressing the male and female. The grains rattled noisily on the stiff head-piece of the groom, and they were propelled with sufficient force to cause the bride to wince more than once. This was with the Parsees an essential part of the ceremony, whereas with us the throwing of rice seems to have lost any original significance and, in effect, serves only to embarrass the shrinking and departing newly-weds, as they escape from the premises for their honeymoon. But it must originally have been intended to convey best wishes.

The ceremony was always followed by elaborate feasting, its scale depending on the social and financial status of the parents of the contracting parties. Instead of a plate it was common to have two large banana leaves, one half-way covering the other. The food was served on these leaves by servitors with large bowls who passed along behind the tables; and fingers took the place of knife, fork, and spoon. The more liquid portions of the repast

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<sup>2</sup> In India, with Parsees as with Hindus, the covered head always denoted respect; with servants, bare feet in the master's presence showed increased respect. Both in my office and in my home I have come unexpectedly on employees or servants resting uncovered from their labours, with the turban laid to one side. In every case the first reaction was frantic haste to restore the turban to the uncovered head before standing at attention to deliver the customary salaam.

were scooped up with broken pieces of a chapatty, which resembled a Mexican tortilla and was similarly utilized. At the conclusion two servants passed among the tables, one carrying a large dish-pan into which the other, with a deft twist of the wrist, flicked the soiled banana leaves.

#### IV

The great festival of Divali, marking the Hindu New Year, was for the Hindus an annual festival of light in which the light-loving Parsee community was naturally happy to participate. In fact, every place of business in Bombay, and most residences, were brilliantly lighted for the long three-day celebration, and the streets were thronged by good-natured milling crowds. Divali came at a different time each autumn, since it was based on the lunar year and the phases of the moon. We were invited to be present when it was celebrated in Bombay House shortly after our arrival in India, when the books of account for the incoming year were blessed and when my wife and I were both decorated by the officiating priest with a round red spot of betel on the centre of the forehead, to bring good luck during the New Year to us and our undertaking.

It was an old custom among the Parsees for close friends to show their sorrow and respect by visiting the home of late-departeds and sitting in silence along with others in the company of the bereaved family. In some cases our failure to do so would have been construed as rudeness; our silent attendance was a token and tangible evidence of our sympathy. In all such matters we were usually advised as to what was expected of us by some kind Parsee friends.

An amusing incident once occurred because my principals in New York were not similarly informed of Parsee customs. It was the custom of my chiefs to send Christmas greetings to each executive head in each country to which their operations extended. When the traditional celebration of all Christians arrived, I duly received from them the customary cable, but the senders in New York had also deemed it courteous to send a similar message to Sir Dorab Tata, the president of our new Parsee partners. Now, Sir Dorab was a keen business man but was somewhat lacking in a sense of humour. He called me up, asked me to come to his office, and with some severity made it quite clear that Christ and Christmas meant nothing whatsoever to a Parsee; he was surprised and rather affronted that any knowledgeable person should have sent him a cable wishing him



“cordial Christmas greetings.” I meekly accepted Sir Dorab’s rebuke, but it gave me secret pleasure to be able to advise my erring principals in New York of the gross *faux pas* they had unwittingly committed.

The Parsee community had none of the Mohammedan inhibitions about swine. Neither did they observe the taboo of strictly orthodox Hindus against flesh of all kinds and descriptions, since they did not believe, as the Hindus did, in re-incarnation; they had no fear of becoming involved with the return to earth, on a lower plane, of the soul of some remote or recent ancestor. Not even did they object to beef, although to the Hindu the cow is a peculiarly sacred animal. They ate everything we Europeans and Americans did, without reservation. The more emancipated of the younger set played golf and tennis, danced the modern dances, and mingled freely with the foreign colony. But they married Parsees.

Some of the more senior men came to office in English suits, but all without exception reverted to the customary plain white garments and traditional head-dress for all ceremonial occasions. Their features were Semitic, their hair a glossy black, their complexion a light olive. The more wealthy ones maintained fine bungalows in Poona and Matheran and travelled widely during the hot season in Europe but seldom, at that time, in America. They often sent their sons to Cambridge. They were keen and far-sighted in business, honourable in their transactions, and benevolent to the poor.

The baptismal names and surnames of the present generation of Parsees shed a revealing light on their early origin, their subsequent abodes, and the occupations of the heads of families when they first came in contact with the British traders into India. Indeed, the process of name formation and the acquisition of surnames was with them not essentially different from that prevalent in all western European countries. The baptismal names, usually two in number, were invariably of Persian origin, reminiscent of their ancient homeland and the influence of a powerful priesthood — names such as Jamshed, Framrose, Ardeshir, Manecksha, Hoshang, and Jehangir. But the same names were often carried forward in each family, with their order reversed. Thus the son of Jamshedji Hormusji might well be named Hormusji Jamshedji. Surnames, on the other hand, were either acquired or added to in India. Names such as Barucha, Balsar, and Damania represented place-names in Gujerat; it was quite common to add the respectful Indian *ji* or *jee* to the Persian name, as in Jivanji, Dorabji, Byramji,

Ruttonji, or Cursetji; some were euphonious combinations of Persian and Indian, such as Pochkhanawala and Darukhanawala, which rolled smoothly off the tongue; some adopted the Indian name for their business occupations, such as Shroff, or their domestic employment, such as Butliboi; others adopted literally the occupational names which appeared after their Persian names in the early pay-rolls of the East India Company, such as Driver, Guard, Surveyor, Captain, Doctor, and Engineer; still other surnames were indicative of the goods they purveyed to the English employees of "John Company" — Ginwala, Toddywala, Whiskeywala, Commissariat, and Commissariatwala.

One wealthy family there was whose ancestor had apparently come to the rescue of the spendthrift foreign employees of the company pending the arrival of pay-day, for it rejoiced in the name of Readymoney. This name survived until recent years when, the family head being created a titled baronet by an appreciative government, the distinctive English surname was discreetly abandoned in favour of the ancestral Persian middle name. However, there remains one prominent, titled Parsee family which still proudly bears the unusual surname of Jeejeeboi.

The women were erect and well-formed, with delicate hands and feet, complexion fair to light olive, bright flashing black eyes; many of them were really beautiful. Unlike their Indian sisters, they had never been "in purdah." They all wore the distinctive Parsee sari, often richly decorated or embroidered, reaching to but not sweeping the floor. Their feet were shod in sandals, worn over bare feet, with the toe-nails showing vermilion. Their long, glossy black hair, always neatly dressed or coiled, was worn uncovered except as to one fold of the sari. But what was particularly striking and attractive about all Parsee women, rich or poor, high or low, was their queenly carriage.

It was a joy to see them in motion. The body from the waist up did not turn, bend, or sway; the head was invariably held high; they gave the impression of floating through space. I once asked a Parsee lady of my acquaintance how this uniform effect was produced. She told me that as young girls, during the formative period, they were each obliged to walk about for long periods carrying a book balanced on their heads and were forbidden to touch it with the hands. This course of physical training was continued over the years, and that it was which was responsible for the head carried high and the splendid carriage.

The women, like their men, were generous but did not relish being imposed on. A story told to me on the unimpeachable

evidence of a titled lady who was present at the time of the incident illustrates this trait. A certain noble lord, the Governor of Bombay Presidency, was about to depart from India to take over a more important post in the Dominion called Canada. The social set of Bombay had decided to give his lady a going-away present, and elected as most suitable and typical a necklace of Oriental pearls, which had been drilled and matched in Bombay. When the money was collected and the pearls purchased, some of the female donors feared that the necklace did not look sufficiently impressive and so decided to ask Lady Tata to lend them a magnificent pearl pendant from her own necklace, purely for the purpose of the public presentation, on the distinct understanding that it would promptly thereafter be returned, and the Governor's lady was so advised by a close friend. The presentation went off as planned; not so the return of the pendant, despite some pointed reminders. So shortly before the appointed sailing date Lady Tata gave a large luncheon party in her palatial home for the Governor's lady, to which the principal donors of the necklace were also invited; and in compliment to them the guest of honour naturally wore the gift she had received from them.

During the course of the luncheon, where the number of bare-footed, white-robed butlers and assistants almost equalled the number of the guests, one of them, while serving the guest of honour, very clumsily caught his hand in her necklace and, quickly withdrawing his hand in apparent confusion, broke the cord on which the pearls were strung so that they cascaded in all directions to the floor. Immediately all the servants were on hands and knees to salvage the damage. It is of interest to relate that each and every pearl of the necklace was retrieved and returned to the guest of honour — all except the large and beautiful pendant which had disappeared as by magic and could nowhere be found. Lady Tata in the presence of her guests lectured the Gujerati servants most severely for their apparent carelessness and did not fail to apologize most humbly to the distinguished guest of honour. She carried off the whole affair most convincingly, although possibly with her tongue in her cheek.

## V

During the long, non-violent, civil disobedience agitation for *Swaraj*, or self rule, led by Mohandas Gandhi and his predominantly Hindu Congress party, which we were able closely to observe at first hand, the Parsee community of Bombay

occupied a difficult position. It had enjoyed great material prosperity and complete religious freedom under the even-handed justice of the British raj. But they were Easterners, Asiatics, a small Persian island in a vast Hindu sea. They could never expect to exert any important political influence in an independent India nor could they face the prospect of another migration if *Suaraj* were achieved. As a body they would have preferred to remain neutral in the political struggle, although some Parsee idealists, and some others who had suffered at the hands of junior British officials, became ardent Congresswalas, while the wealthy ones were regularly solicited for anonymous contributions to the Congress war-chest. Perhaps their general attitude could best be likened to that which in later years often confronted the aristocratic and autocratic Brahman, Jawaharlal Nehru, the disciple and successor to the puny, meek, and unpractical Mahatma: their heads were in the West, but their hearts were in the East.

It is curious to note that the Parsees, even after twelve hundred years of residence in India, were not regarded as Indians by the common people, although it is true that they so considered themselves. For this their distinctive dress, customs, and religion are probably responsible. A short story will serve to illustrate this point. One evening I had returned home from the office rather later than usual, to be told by my Gujerati butler that I had a caller who had gone off without following the well-nigh universal custom in India of leaving his calling card. I casually enquired, "Was he a European or an Indian?" and my butler answered concisely and decisively, "No, no, sahib. Was Parsee man."

## VI

The Parsees have been justly complimented on their business acumen and on their well-known benevolence. But the matter in which they have been most often and most harshly criticized is in their traditional and unusual mode of disposal of their dead. Every Parsee colony in India has erected on the highest nearby hill one or more Towers of Silence, low circular stone structures with a wide central well. The top of the tower sloped gradually inward toward this central well, and three rows of niches or depressions ran around the whole circumference, the largest on the outside for male bodies, the middle row for females, and the row of small depressions near the central well for children. Here the white-clad bodies of the departed souls were brought, always fairly early in the morning, borne on a litter and followed by the male

mourners, all on foot and all in pure white garments, walking in twos with a white handkerchief held between each couple as they followed the litter. On arrival at the Tower of Silence the litter was turned over to the Parsee attendants of the Tower, who stripped the body stark naked as when it was born, carried it by an inner stairway to the top of the tower, and there deposited it in one of the vacant niches to be devoured by the birds of prey, the vultures, who from long custom knew what was afoot and were roosting in the trees nearby, patiently awaiting their breakfast.

This unique procedure and its origin are little understood. I have already remarked that the Parsees of India are fundamentalists, and the gruesome rite I have described is in strict accordance with the instructions their great teacher Zoroaster himself delivered to his followers some six centuries before the birth of Christ. From that custom, despite their long removal in both time and space from the semi-arid plateau of Iran and the precepts of their pre-Christian religious guide, they have never departed. They have no burial ground because they need none.

Zoroaster had taught them that the elements — earth, air, fire, and water — are all sacred and should never be polluted by an inanimate body from which the soul has already returned to Ahura Mazda. The Hindu consigns his dead bodies to the fire, and afterward, if at all possible, dumps the ashes into the sacred Ganges. But not the Parsee. He still adheres to the Tower of Silence.

In Bombay during the 1930's there were several Towers of Silence, as the Parsee community there was large, rich, and influential. They were located on Malabar Hill, remote from the smaller city at the time they were built but now surrounded by large shade trees and not far from what is now a choice residential section.

The bungalow we ourselves used to occupy on Cumballa Hill faced westward toward Malabar Hill and the Arabian Sea. So each morning we were able to watch the flight of a great cloud of vultures, regularly between nine and ten o'clock, circling and wheeling high in the air as the flight progressed slowly northward over Back Bay — somewhat in the manner of an advancing tropical hurricane — on their way from Malabar Hill to the municipal slaughter-house for their second breakfast.

I have referred to the external structure of the Towers of Silence and to the exposure to the birds of the air of the naked bodies of the Parsee dead. It remains to be said that after the bones had been picked clean, the skeletal remains were thrown by

the attendants into the central well, to make room for new arrivals. Here elaborate precautions were again taken to see that no smallest corrupt impurity should seep back to Mother Earth. The bottom of the well consisted of a filter of sand and charcoal, and from its base tunnels ran out in the four cardinal directions, each similarly protected by filters. Thus the orthodox Parsees comply in fullest measure with the instructions of their great teacher, faithfully handed down and preserved inviolate by their austere priesthood over more than twenty-five long centuries.

Some there were among them, it is true, who inwardly rebelled against what the rest of the world had come to regard as a somewhat barbarous custom. Sir Dorab Tata, the head of a great industrial empire, for example, sometimes expressed a wish that he might die while in Europe, in order that his body might be decently interred there. This eminent and public-spirited man it was who had purchased the magnificent blue-white Jubilee diamond in 1926 for £95,000, not for purposes of ostentation, but rather in the expectation that certain of the wealthy maharajahs would join with him in donating it to the reigning Emperor of India.

My great and good friend Framrose Edulji Dinshaw held similar views. He had promised his ailing wife, who abhorred the very thought, that her body would never be sent to the Towers of Silence. Parsee orthodoxy had its stronghold in Bombay, but Dinshaw owned a fine summer place at Poona in the near-by Deccan; and when his wife died, he had her body buried there in her own beautiful garden she loved so well and was even able to secure the services of one of the less orthodox priests of the Deccan to officiate at the interment. He then brought a splendid piece of statuary of Carrara marble from Italy to mark her grave. His often-expressed desire was to be buried there beside her.

But when he died in the saddle one morning in 1936, during his customary stiff gallop on the hard sands of Juhu Beach, there was no one strong enough to do for him what he had done for his wife. Orthodoxy had been outraged by that defiant act, but now it was able to re-assert itself. Together with Sir Nowroji Saklatvala, who had succeeded Sir Dorab as the head of the Tata organization, I drove at once to the Dinshaw home on Malabar Hill as his body was being brought back there for the last time. The Parsee priests, the apostles of orthodoxy, had immediately taken over and were already busied with the customary final rites within the bed-chamber.

There was present in the shady garden and on the spacious verandas a large group of friends and business associates of all

faiths, mourning what was for each of them a heavy and irreplaceable loss. Dinshaw's brother-in-law, a distinguished baronet of one of the leading Parsee families, was one who made no pretence of hiding his tears. But it was the baronet's wife, Dinshaw's own sister, who took full charge of all arrangements. She was tall, with the splendid carriage of all Parsee women, and she moved quietly about the house, dry-eyed and serene of countenance, as she arranged everything in accordance with traditional Parsee custom. There was no room for interference by any outside party. Many there were who were not in sympathy with her arrangements, but I must admit she dominated the scene, and her composure and quiet efficiency compelled my unwilling admiration. Orthodoxy was unhappily triumphant.

Early next morning Dinshaw's body, followed by a long line of Parsee males from all walks of life, was sorrowfully borne to the Towers of Silence, in ritual compliance with the time-honoured procedure laid down so many centuries earlier by the Persian Zoroaster, the author of their unique faith and still, even in this modern age, the dictator of their most unusual religious rites and funeral observances.