



## BOMBAY PARSI PANCHAYAT

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**BOMBAY PARSI PANCHAYAT**, the largest Zoroastrian institution in modern history. Originally founded in the 17th century in order to maintain Zoroastrian family and social values at a time of dramatic change, when Parsis were migrating from rural Gujarat to cosmopolitan Bombay, in the 20th century it has become essentially an institution for implementing the fundamental Zoroastrian virtue, charity; in 1983 its assets were estimated at Rs. 88,090,560, and its offices in Bombay employed a staff of about 200 people.

A panchayat is a traditional Indian form of caste or communal government by five people. The earliest Parsi panchayat in Bombay is commonly considered to date from the 1670s (Davar, chap. 1; Desai, 1981, p. 2; Karaka, p. 217; Modi, 4.4), but no 17th-century records are extant. Until 1787 the authority of the Panchayat was based on the fact that it implemented bundubusts (*band o basts*), or community rules promulgated and agreed upon at public meetings called *anjumans* (*anjomans*). The senior member was known as a *davar* (*dāvar*), a term used in contemporary Indian society for a magistrate. In 1787 the British delegated authority over community matters to the panchayats of the various caste groups. The Bombay Parsi Panchayat was then empowered to administer sanctions against wrongdoers: fines, public humiliation (e.g., requiring an offender to wear a dirty necktie, to scratch his nose with a shoe, or publicly to beg forgiveness from the Panchayat), beatings with a shoe, or excommunication (Modi, 6.II.2). The Panchayat dealt most often with family issues: protection of the rights of husbands and wives whose spouses had deserted them and of women whose husbands had taken second wives (a



practice that was legal in India at that time but contrary to Parsi tradition) or had remained away for many years on trading missions. In addition, it was responsible for certain communal matters: caring for the very poor and destitute and representing the community in dealings with the government, as when an East India Company official trespassed on the funeral grounds (Davar, pp. 1-38; Jeejeebhoy; Modi, *passim*).

After the death of the respected leader Hormusji Bomanji Wadia in 1826, however, the authority of the Panchayat declined steadily. Members were no longer elected by the community at *anjumans* but instead inherited their posts from their fathers. As a result, the Bombay Parsi Panchayat, which had previously been widely respected for its impartiality, was now perceived as issuing judgments favoring friends of the members. The widespread disaffection was expressed particularly by Cursetji Maneckji Shroff, in a series of letters published between 1844 and 1845 in the *Bombay Times* under the name “Q in the Corner,” in which he documented the wrongdoings of members of the Panchayat (condoning bigamy among friends, denying justice to the poor, and refusing to transact Panchayat business openly). In 1848 Sir Jamsetji Jijibhoy (known as Sir J. J.) also described the failings of the leaders, in his book *Kholas-i-Punchayet*, which was published anonymously.

In 1849 Sir J. J. founded the Parsi Benevolent Institution (Hinnells, pp. 271-74), by far the largest charitable foundation in the community; the board of management included many of the same individuals as the Panchayat, and the two bodies were thus effectively merged. Nevertheless, public respect for the Bombay Parsi Panchayat remained low. In 1837 the Parsis, who had no formal legal code, had been placed under the jurisdiction of British law in questions of distribution of the property of a person who had died intestate. In 1856, however, the judicial committee of the Privy Council judged that Parsis were not covered by the marriage laws of the Bombay Supreme Court. These decisions left the Bombay Parsis without any form of community tribunal or regulation. In order to remedy this situation, the Parsi Law Association was formed in 1855. After a legal code had been formulated (1859), the Bombay Parsi Panchayat petitioned for authority to administer it. Nevertheless, the government, after lengthy consideration, denied the Panchayat’s petition because of widespread lack of respect in the Parsi community. Instead, the Parsi Matrimonial Court was introduced in 1865; this event marked the effective end of the Bombay Parsi Panchayat’s traditional role as guardian of community law. Sir J. J.’s son, the second Sir J. J., never displayed the qualities



of leadership or commanded the respect that his father had enjoyed. In 1877, at a public meeting attended by some of the Parsi intelligentsia and most of the wealthy Parsis, the third Sir J. J. was proclaimed leader of the community and chairman of the Panchayat, but the institution continued to suffer from lack of authority (Dobbin, *passim*). As a consequence of weak leadership, the community drifted all through the second half of the 19th century.

In 1906 the Panchayat brought a suit (no. 689) in the Bombay High Court challenging the right of the French wife (Susanne Brier) of R. D. Tata to be initiated into the Zoroastrian religion and to gain access to religious and charitable institutions, including those maintained by the Panchayat: for example, funeral grounds and temples. The defense in turn questioned the validity of the Panchayat members' selection and hence their authority. The court found against Mrs. Tata but also ruled that the Panchayat members had not been legally chosen; in consequence a new electoral system was initiated. All Parsis are entitled to vote for members of an electoral college, which in turn selects the members of the Panchayat; votes are, however, weighted according to the funds donated to the Bombay Parsi Panchayat. To a limited extent, this change led to a revival in the prestige for the institution in the 20th century, when it has again been active in pressing for legal reform in such matters as marriage and divorce (Desai, 1981, chaps. 4-6).

The main basis for the prestige of the Bombay Parsi Panchayat in the 20th century is, however, its substantial charitable work, inaugurated at the time of the link with the Parsi Benevolent Institution but much increased since then. In 1961 it was estimated that the Bombay Parsi Panchayat administered the funds of approximately 1,000 endowments, including a number in the rural areas of Gujarat. In the 1980s it administered a total of 1,797 flats; gave substantial support to hospitals, hostels, schools, and a madressa (*madrassa*), or training college for priests; maintained industrial, employment, and vocational bureaus; sponsored various publication projects; and provided funds for temples, funeral grounds, and countless individual subventions to poor Parsis. Its work is overseen by twenty-four committees (Desai, 1963; 1983 *Report*, pp. 33-40). In a federation of the panchayats and *anjumans* of India formed in 1971 the Bombay Parsi Panchayat holds a preeminent position, primarily owing to its traditional authority, which is nevertheless still questioned at times, and because of the magnitude of its resources.

Some traditional Parsis who have migrated overseas continue to view the Bombay Parsi Panchayat as the senior Zoroastrian body, but this view is



coming increasingly into question, especially in Great Britain, the United States, and Canada, because of a feeling that the Panchayat's concerns are limited to "the old country" and that the ideals it fosters are inappropriate to life in the West, for example, opposition to intermarriage and conversion. Furthermore, it was regarded as ineffectual in efforts to help Iranian Zoroastrians leaving Iran after the fall of the shah in 1979. Iranian Zoroastrians do not, of course, acknowledge the authority of the Bombay Parsi Panchayat in their affairs. Beginning with the World Zoroastrian Congress in Tehran in 1961, there was a movement to establish a worldwide governing body; the World Zoroastrian Organization was founded in 1977 with headquarters in London, and there has been continual tension over its authority relative to that of the Bombay Parsi Panchayat. But, as long as India remains the main center of Zoroastrian population, it seems probable that the Bombay Parsi Panchayat will remain the single largest and financially most influential Zoroastrian institution. Furthermore, it has sought to assume a coordinating role in worldwide Zoroastrianism, sponsoring international Zoroastrian conferences in Bombay in 1964, 1978, and 1985.

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