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MALABĀRI, BEHRĀMJI MERWĀNJI

MALABĀRI, BEHRĀMJI MERWĀNJI, Parsi Zoroastrian who became a prominent Indian poet, author, and social reformer (b. Baroda [now Vadodara] in Gujarat, 1 January 1853; d. Bombay [now Mumbai], 1 January or at Simla 12 July 1912—birth and death dates are based on general consensus, since no official records are extant; Figure 1). His father Dhunjibhai Mehta, who was a clerk in the service of the *Gaekwad* "ruler, prince" of Baroda, died when Malabari was only five to seven years old. After Dhunjibhai's demise, Malabari's mother, Bhikaibai, returned to her parents' home in Surat and subsequently was remarried to Mehrwanji Malabari, a childless merchant who traded in spices and sandalwood from the Malabar coast. The stepfather adopted the young boy and gave him the new family name. After gaining a basic education in a local school, Malabari studied at the Irish Presbyterian Mission School in Surat and matriculated in 1871 (Gidumal, 1892, pp. 1-6). Moving to Bombay, Malabari initially served as a teacher at the Fort Proprietary School in 1876. Malabari married in 1874, and his wife Dhanbaiji and he had three sons and two daughters.

Malabari began his journalistic and editorial career after Sir Cowasji Jehangir, an eminent Parsi businessman, introduced him to Martin Woods, then the editor of the *Times of India*. Malabari also began writing a serial column for the *Indian Spectator*, an English language weekly magazine. He eventually served as editor of the *Indian Spectator* from 1880 until its merger in 1900 with

the *Voice of India*, a monthly magazine he had edited from 1883 onward with Sir William Wedderburn and the Honorable Dadabhai Naoroji. Malabari also edited another monthly magazine, *East and* West, from 1901 to 1912. To introduce Western scholarship on the history of religions to Indian scholars and clergy, Malabari worked with Max Müller in editing and translating the latter's Hibbert Lectures of 1878 into Gujarati and other Indian languages during 1881.

Even before moving to Bombay, Malabari had authored a collection of Gujarati poems titled *Nītivinoda* "Pleasures of Morality" or "Pleasures of the Right Path." Those verses about social reform were influenced by the Anglican preacher, missionary, and educator John Wilson, who arranged for the collection's publication in 1875. His friendships with Europeans in India helped Malabari comprehend the importance of understanding between the colonial masters and the Indian subjects. So his next publication of poetry, *The Indian Muse in English Garb* (1876), was well received in the West—especially by the English poet Alfred Tennyson. Then, seeking to facilitate a better understanding of Indians among the British, Malabari focused his sartorial talents upon conveying semi-fictitious descriptions of the residents of Gujarat. Undertaken at the request of Martin Woods, his editor at the *Times of India*, the resulting study was published as *Gujarat and the Gujaratis* (1882) and was intended to be a window into the lives of some of the British Raj's Indian subjects (Siganporia 2010). Nine years later, and after three stays in Britain, Malabari published *The Indian Eye on English Life*, in which he as a colonial subject sought to examine and better understand the colonizer, while demanding "the same equal treatment in the case of the nation as in the case of individuals" (Malabari, 1891, p. 65).

Like many Parsi Zoroastrian intellectuals of the nineteenth century, Malabari's worldview had been fundamentally changed by the secular British education he had received. Examining Indian society through the lenses of Western education and mores, Malabari concluded that his main calling had to be social reform within India. He chose to focus on women's rights, particularly on prohibiting underage or child marriages and on permitting widows to remarry. So, in 1884, he collected and published *Notes on Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood*, distributing it to prominent Indians and Britishers. He led a public demand that legislation be enacted to prohibit both practices. Malabari viewed both Hindu traditions and the Brahmins who upheld them as the perpetuators of centuries-long social injustice. His mission gained urgency

and added prominence through the Bombay High Court ruling against the quest for freedom from marriage by a child bride Rukhmabai in 1885, and subsequently by the death of an eleven-year-old Bengali bride Phulomnee in 1889. Through his writings and public speeches Malabari advocated that the State was morally obliged to initiate reforms. Two other widely-read publications were issued by Malabari to strengthen his cause—*Social Reform in India: Its Scope and Importance* (1886) and *An Appeal from the Daughters of India* (1890). Malabari also traveled to London to meet with British politicians and social activists to further champion the enacting reform in British India (Hunter, 1887). His activism resulted in the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 and the Age of Consent Act in 1891.

Essentially, from within the Western-oriented Parsi community, Malabari had positioned himself as a mediator between the British and other Indians in the cultural politics in the late 19th century. Yet, Malabari's social actions were vehemently opposed by many Hindu intellectuals of that era who opposed British and Indian minority groups having any say in their socioreligious traditions (Kulke, 1974, pp. 113-14). Kesav Bal Gangadhar Tilak, regarded by the British administration as the father of the Indian freedom movement, and other nationalists demanded that Malabari focus on his own community, which also practiced child marriage at that time. While it is possible that, by concentrating on the plight of Hindu women and children, Malabari was deflecting attention from the shortcomings of the Parsis, it is equally likely that, by propelling legal reform via the actions of India's majority, Malabari was also ensuring similar reforms became normative for all communities in British India. Indeed, Malabari's actions quickly led to Parsi Zoroastrians voluntarily turning away from both underage marriages and from forced marriages, even though many Hindu judges failed to enforce the legal reforms.

Malabari's endeavors within India and in Britain to rectify the lowly situation of Hindu women by transforming Indian attitudes toward child marriages and widows made him a most prominent social reformer (Karkaria, 1896). So when the second edition of Malabari's biography was published by the Sindhi metaphysical poet Dayaram Gidumal in 1892, Florence Nightingale, who had supported Malabari, wrote in her preface: "His work as a reformer of Indian social life cannot fail to set Englishmen, and especially Englishwomen, thinking of their duty towards their Indian brethren and sisters" (p. vii). Yet, Malabari chose not to extend his influence into the arena of national politics involving Indian independence. Although Malabari participated in the First

Session of Indian National Congress at Bombay in December 1885, he remained focused on freedom of the individual through changing archaic social customs rather than turning his attention to ending British rule (Darukhanawala, 1938, p. 332; Kulke, 1974, pp. 111, 113).

Ever true to his modest Indian roots and demeanor too, Malabari also declined the British Viceroy's offer of knighthood. Not surprisingly, upon hearing about Malabari's demise, King George V wired a tribute to Charles Hardinge (1st Baron Hardinge of Penshurst), then the Viceroy in India: "Please convey to the family of Malabari the sincere regret with which the Queen and I have heard of the death of our old friend. His death will be a loss to the country" (Giara, 2012).

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