



PARSI COMMUNITIES II. IN CALCUTTA

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In comparison to the Parsis of Bombay, other Parsi communities of India have received less attention. From the 19th century onward Bombay became the principal Parsi center and the headquarters of the Parsis of India. In fact, the Parsis or Zoroastrians of India settled extensively across India from the time of their arrival in the subcontinent, which by Parsi tradition was in the 8th century (Seervai and Patel, 1899, p. 85; Palsetia, 2001, pp. 3-4). Calcutta became a center of Parsi settlement from the 18th century. Dadabhoy Behramji Banaji is recorded as the first Parsi to have come to Calcutta from Surat in western India in 1767. Banaji came to Calcutta to trade in Bengal and open commerce with East Asia (Madan, 1990, p. 63). The rise of the Parsis of Calcutta paralleled the consolidation of British power in eastern India. The British took possession of Calcutta in 1690, as an incipient center of trade and secured all of Bengal by 1765 through military conquest and the collaboration with Indians (Bayly, 1988). Calcutta became the capital of British India up to 1911. In the 18th century, Calcutta became the hub of the Eastern Triangular Trade between India, East Asia and Europe that witnessed Indian goods, principally opium, exported to China and other parts of East Asia towards the purchase of Chinese tea, which was then bound for India and Britain (Greenberg, 1951).



The Parsis were an important component of this trading network and European commercial success in India (White, 1987, pp. 183-203). From the 17th century, the earliest of Parsis in contact with Europeans had functioned as supply agents, translators, and brokers; and so much so that a 19th-century observer noted “the bent of the Parsi community is purely commercial” (Briggs, 1852, p. 25).

Parsi firms were established in Calcutta to broker or transship the consignment of goods bound for East Asia. Up until 1834, the British East India Company (BEIC) held a monopoly on the China trade. Parsis were part of the private traders known as “country traders” permitted to engage in the China trade subject to terms imposed by the BEIC. With the end of the BEIC’s trade monopoly, the China trade became the preserve of the country traders. In 1756, the brothers Hirji Jivanji and Mancherji Readymoney established the first Parsi commercial firm in Canton. The prominent Parsi families Banaji, Readymoney, Wadia, Bharda, Cama, Patel, Vikaji, and Parakh were all involved in the China trade (Karaka, II, 1884, pp. 45, 54, 55, 57, 59, 125-126, 144, 246, 257-58). The most famous Parsi involved in the China trade was Jamsetji Jejeebhoy who had his own shipping fleet based in Bombay and Calcutta (Karaka, II, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-89). The China trade also witnessed the migration and settlement of Parsis to various centers in East Asia such as Canton, Macao, Hong Kong, Amoy, Singapore, Penang, and Batavia. In 1822 a Parsi cemetery appeared at Macao, and in 1845 the Canton Zoroastrian Association was started, as the first Zoroastrian community organization in Asia outside Iran and India (Hinnells, 2002, p. 460).

Calcutta also emerged as a center of shipbuilding in the late 18th century. The Wadias became synonymous with the rise of the Bombay Dockyard with the arrival in 1736 of the shipwright Lowji Nusserwanji by invitation of the British (Wadia, 1964, p. 1). In 1837, Rustomji Cowasji Banaji bought the Kidderpore and Shalekin Dockyards in Calcutta for six lakhs (Rs. 6,00,000). He brought Parsi shipwrights to Calcutta from western India, including D.R.M. Wadia who built the new and faster clipper ship. Parsi shipwrights had indigenous skills and a few studied engineering in Britain. Parsi shipbuilding contributed to transforming India into the most productive shipbuilding center in Asia (Bulley, 2000, pp. 285-87). The wealth of the China trade furthermore provided for the expansion of Parsi business into other areas outside trade. The jute and cotton industries, banking, and early industrial sectors all benefited from Parsi financial diversification from the China trade (Morris, 1982, pp. 553-676). By



the 19th century, the Parsis' commercial preeminence had transformed minor traders into merchant princes and civic notables.

As in other parts of India, the Parsis of Calcutta and Bengal built the moral infrastructure of community. The erection of Parsi religious institutions was essential in fostering community life wherever the Parsis migrated. In 1822, Nowroji Sorabji Umrigar is recorded to have built a tower of silence or *dakhma* in Calcutta (Seervai and Patel, *op. cit.*, p. 253). The tower of silence is a circular walled structure containing platforms and a central well that functions as a repository for the Parsi dead in line with the Zoroastrian funerary practice of exposure (see CORPSE; Modi, 1922 [repr. 1995], pp. 49-82). The erection of the tower of silence reflected the growing importance of Calcutta as a place of sojourn or permanent domicile for Parsis. In 1839, R.C. Banaji built the first Parsi fire temple or *agiary* in Calcutta at 26, Ezra Street (see *ĀTAŠ* and *ĀTAŠKADA*; Modi, *op. cit.*, pp. 199-230). The vicinity around Banaji's fire temple became a Parsi residential area and familiarly known as Parsi Church Street. In 1890, Dhunjibhoy Byramji Mehta maintained a sacred fire in his house at 65, Canning Street on behalf of the Calcutta Parsis. In October 1912, the Mehta family and the Parsi community or *anjuman* of Calcutta funded the erection of a fire temple in honor of Dhunjibhoy Byramji at 91, Metcalfe Street. This fire temple remains the functioning temple for the Parsis of Calcutta (Giara, 2002, p. 84). The small population of Parsis did not warrant the consecration of the most sacred of fires and fire temples in Calcutta, that of the *Ātaš Bahrām*; albeit, in 1830 the Parsis of Calcutta provided fire for the consecration of the Wadia *Ātaš Bahrām* in Bombay. The fire from a lightning strike was maintained by a priest in the home of Mehrwanji Limji in Calcutta for two years before being transported with Zoroastrian rites to Bombay (Dastur and Mistree, 2002, p. 307).

In 1837, the first official record of the Parsi population of Calcutta noted forty Parsis out of a population of 229,705 inhabitants (Nair, 1989, p. 737). In 1901, the Parsi population was recorded as 274 individuals; and in 1921 the Parsi population of Calcutta reached its historical height at 620 individuals (*Calcutta*, 1988, p. 9). As in other parts of India, the Parsi influence on the life of Calcutta was inordinate to its size. The *Calcutta Courier* of 24 May 1837 noted the Parsis to be "an active, intelligent and enterprising race ... whose enjoyment is the satisfaction of spreading the influence of their wealth among the community in which they live" (Choudhury, 1978, p. 19). Generosity in charity distinguished the small Parsi population of early Calcutta. Parsi relief charity



in times of famine and drought, the building of rest houses and water tanks and wells was extensive throughout India (White, 1991, pp. 303-20; Hinnells, 1985, pp. 261-326). The Calcutta *Phoenix* of 6 May 1837 noted that the hands of the Parsis are “ever ready to be stretched out in the support, and their purses opened in the relief of suffering humanity” (Choudhury, 1978, p. 18). Parsis were also active in Calcutta civic life. In 1835, the British appointed R.C. Banaji among twelve Justices of Peace at Calcutta (Nair, *op. cit.*, p. 736). In the 19th and 20th centuries, Calcutta Parsis attained the position of sheriff of Calcutta, and were leaders in the commercial, educational and entertainment spheres (Madan, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63).

The Parsis of Calcutta emerged as a Westernized and progressive community. Broadening opportunities for Parsi females in society was a hallmark of the Parsi progressive outlook. From mid-19th century Parsi schools for males and females started in all the major centers of Parsi settlement. *The Statesman* of Calcutta on 7 June 1883 noted “the Parsee girl to be the best educated among her Indian sisters” (Choudhury, 1987, p. 63). The Parsis also contributed to the rise of the newspaper press in India. Calcutta was the birthplace of the English-language newspaper press with the start of the *Bengal Gazette* in 1780. Bombay emerged as the center of the Parsi-run newspaper press beginning in 1822 with the Gujarati-language *Bombay Samachar* of Fardoonji Marzban. The Bombay Parsis benefited from the literary and newspaper standards begun in Calcutta. B.G. Horniman of *The Statesman* was enticed to Bombay to edit Pherozechah Mehta’s *Bombay Chronicle* (Jejeebhoy, 1932, pp. 272-86; Karanjia, 2002, p. 483). Parsis were also involved in the rise of the modern Indian film industry. Parsi involvement in the film industry grew out of Parsi participation in theater. Parsi contribution to film had its beginnings in Calcutta with the establishment of J.F. Madan’s theater empire. Jamsetji Framji Madan had begun work as a prop boy in Calcutta Theater. In 1902 Madan held a projection show in a tent in Calcutta, and by the 1930s Madan and his sons controlled a theater empire across India that included 126 theaters (Rangoonwalla, 2004, pp. 9-14). In post-Independence India, the Parsis of Calcutta and India continue to be active in all aspects of civic and national life. The Parsi population of Calcutta is about one hundred individuals out of 69,601 Parsis recorded in the 2001 Indian Census (*The Telegraph*, Calcutta, 19 Sept. 2004). Notwithstanding demographic decline, the Parsis of Calcutta and India continue to preserve a resplendent heritage.



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