

# A Brief Biographical Sketch of Dastur Bode (May 10, 1900-February 2, 1986)

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Dastur Dr. Framroze Ardeshtar Bode was a very active and learned reformist high priest of the twentieth century. He was the high priest of the Petit Fasli Fire temple in Mumbai, which he helped organize and consecrate.

Since his reformist teachings and actions were quite ahead of his times, including favoring Fasli calendar, he met with criticism, boycotts, and denunciation by the Parsi press in general. As Prof. John Hinnells notes: "Bode was a controversial figure. In the 1940's he was verbally, almost physically, attacked for his role in the Bansda Navjotes. --- Controversy continued to be associated with him in India, though he had a following in some diaspora groups." (*The Zoroastrian Diaspora, Religion and Migration*, Oxford University Press, 2005, footnote pp. 102).

Controversy over Bode's place in Parsi history has continued unabated. For example, in a scathing criticism of Mazdaznan movement and "the originator of the satanic movement – Otoman Zardusht Ha'nish--" Fariburz Nariman severely castigates Bode for his involvement with this movement and laments "and yet the editor of a certain daily is bent on projecting Bode more or less as a savior of the community, if not the world at large! Those who are misled by this editor's glorification of Bode, carried out with an overdose of humanism and finery of words, would do well to consider the observations of Prof. Mary Boyce quoted below. In a letter (dt. July 9, 1969) to Dr. Feroze Kotwal, who had given her his grandfather's mace as a present, Boyce writes:

I was visited this week by one of the London priests, Homi Dordi. Clearly an honest and well-meaning man, but sadly under the influence of Bode, who has been enlightening the London community this week. Dordi wanted to bring him to see me, but I declined. I did not like to think of your grandfather's mace looking down on such unorthodoxy.

When a gentle and orthodox English lady professor deems necessary to proscribe this anti-traditional Parsi after seeing through his activities, can we, as a community, afford to be so feeble-minded as to allow the said purblind editor to glorify that

very man? And what is more, the editor's glorification is repeated every now and then in the name of Zoroastrianism!

It must be said that with an anti-traditional predecessor and a counter-traditional successor, Bode forms the middle of the triad. And it follows that, the scholar who chooses to denounce the predecessor and/or Bode must perforce denounce the successor. In fact nothing would be more uncoordinated, both theologically and logically, than the acceptance of the successor and the condemnation of the other two, jointly or singly. In other words, by their writings, utterances, and actions all three stand or fall together. It may be added that "children" of this triad's parentage have also played havoc....<sup>1</sup>

One wonders whether there is an oblique reference here to Dastur M. N. Dhalla as Bode's predecessor, and Dastur Navroji Minocher-Homji as his successor, as well as not so oblique an attempt at blaming Bode via guilt by association.

However, as against the above negative remarks, a prominent Zoroastrian, Mr. Keki Bhote, settled in U.S.A. since early 1950's, and himself an ardent student of Zoroastrianism, exhorted me in an email dated November 15<sup>th</sup>, 2004:

"Tell your readers:

1. That Bode was the leading scholar of the 20th century, next only to Dastur Dhalla, on Zoroastrianism.
2. He explained Zarathustra's message in its purest form, devoid of the clad trap of ritualism and conventional interpretations.
3. He elevated the theology of Zoroastrianism above all other religions, and as one ideally suited to the yearnings of modern man.
4. He was fearless in his advocacy that Zarathustra opened the religion to *all mankind*, and that it was not the exclusive religion for narrow Parsee bigots.
5. Bode was the first and foremost Zoroastrian scholar that brought Zoroastrianism to North America in hundreds of lectures to American congregations, seminars, TV, and radio.

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<sup>1</sup> *Jam-e-Jamshed Weekly*, October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1988, pp. 10

6. After listening to Bode, his American audiences stated that they could easily embrace Zoroastrianism for its purity, its simplicity, and its eminent logic.”

Another ardent student of Zoroastrianism, Ms. Dina McIntyre emailed me on November 12, 2004: “I feel very proud of my grandfather’s (P.N. Mehta's) support of Bode, and also of the Gatha Society which was organized to increase knowledge of Zarathushtra's teachings in the Gathas.”

I, for one, have encountered many Parsis who tended to see Bode in favorite light as they outgrew their hardcore orthodox upbringing, and searched for ways to accommodate religion in the ever-protean, ever-changing modern world, especially when their own children began to marry out.

Irrespective of which view one holds of Bode, as his life history remains quite sketchy, any attempt at throwing some light on his life should prove productive for posterity, as except for his obituary in *Parsiana* (May 1989, pages 40-43) little is written about him recently.

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## **Bode's Background**

Dastur Dr. Framroze Ardeshir Bode was the high priest of Fasli Petit Fire-temple in Bombay. He was bom into a poor Bhagaria priestly family in Surat on May 17<sup>th</sup> 1900. He passed away in Bombay on February 2, 1989 after a protracted bout with Alzheimer’s disease. He lost his mother at a young age. He supported himself as a young man as a Yozdathregar (full-fledged priest) while studying Avesta-Pahlavi at the University of Bombay. He became a full-fledged Navar at age 17, and a Martab at 18. He obtained his B.A. in Avesta-Pahlavi from the University of Bombay in 1925, and also M.A. later. When I came to know him, he was honorary secretary of the Rahnumae Mazdayasni Sabha – a liberal forum started by Dadabhai Naoroji and K.R. Cama, and gave lectures every week on behalf of the Sabha, which I frequented. I was asked twice to fill in for him as a lecturer during his long absence from India, when I was a college student. He was also the honorary secretary of K.R. Cama Oriental Institute and many other organizations for many years. He expounded the liberal cause in various ways to the Zoroastrians of his day, who were quite orthodox in his time.

He was a strict vegetarian, and became the President of the Indian Vegetarian Society, and one of its annual conventions organized by him in the Esplanade Maidaan in Bombay was addressed by the then-President of India, and I attended it when in college. He was very close to the industrialist Mr. P.N. Mehta, who founded Boys' Town in Nasik, where he used to be a teaching consultant, as also at the Dastur School in Poona.

If I mistake not, he also taught at my alma mater, M.F. Cama Athornan institute at the beginning of his career. It was only from his writings that I learned that Sir Dorab J.N. Tata was actively planning to start an institute for priestly education, but Cama's sudden offer of twenty-five lacs of rupees dissuaded him from going ahead with his plan, which Bode seemed to regret. It is hard to imagine the later Tatas showing such an interest in the well-being and upliftment of their own priestly heritage – J.N. Tata, his two sons, Dorab and Ratan, and his cousin, R.D. Tata all being Navar (priests). The pendulum has swung so far away from those days of symbiosis between the Tatas, or for that matter, wealthy Parsis and the community.

He wrote many articles and his book, *Songs of Zarathushtra – The Gathas*, co-authored with Piloo Nanavutty,<sup>2</sup> lucidly presents the Gathic philosophy to the lay person. He was also invited in 1962 by the Teheran Zoroastrian Anjuman to lecture on Zoroastrianism, and the Iranians unlike the Parsis adore him to this day. The Irani Zoroastrians were quite enamored of Bode and his views. As a matter of fact this brief sketch of his life is written only at the request of Dr. Mehrborzin Soroushian to whom it is dedicated.

In the early 1950's he moved to Los Angeles, California and earned a doctorate degree there and taught eastern philosophy and Zoroastrianism thereafter from 1955 onward, but kept returning to India intermittently to continue his work there. He returned to India for good when he was coming down with Alzheimer's, and was cremated there according to his wishes. He was survived by his wife, Homai, who diligently supported his work, and lovingly looked after him during his long illness. He married in his later years and left no children.

Along with the famous Gandhite, B.F. Bharucha, he tried to awaken the conscience of the Parsi community in early 1942 by recognizing the pleas of 77 illegitimate children of Parsi landlords with non-Parsi women near Bansda, Gujarat for becoming Zoroastrian, as they were already following the Zoroastrian religion and customs. Similar Navjotes were performed on nine individuals in Mazgaum, Bombay on June 26, 1882 by a well-known JamaspAsa Dastur, Kekhushroo JamaspAsa of Bombay. However, the Parsi community was vehemently opposed to Bode's action, and never forgave him for it; the majority harshly criticized him for it throughout his lifetime. Yet along with B.F. Bharucha, he saw it as a moral duty to accept them in the fold. The progeny of these neo-Parsis have become very staunch and faithful Zoroastrians. At one of his lectures I attended at the Cama Oriental Institute, he presented one such lady who looked like a typical Parsi lady, and was so proud to be a Zoroastrian.

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2 London: Allen & Unwin, 1952.

The furious intensity which the Parsi community reacted to the Bansda navjotes is well illustrated by Mr. Shapur Desai, the then-secretary of the Bombay Parsi Panchayat as reproduced in *Parsiana* (July, 2004, p. 14):

Another bush fire made its appearance in Bansda. This controversy as long as it lasted, electrified the whole community and surcharged it with currents that forebode evil. It was the navjote of some 77 Parsis between the ages of seven and 60, alleged to have been born of Parsi fathers and alien mothers, and supposed to be within the Davar judgment definition. Forms signed by some 20,000 Parsis requesting the trustees to call an Anjuman meeting to protest against such navjotes, which could harm the fabric of the Parsi communal 'oneness.'

The trustees were though as between two stools. If they call a meeting as demanded, they might be hurting the rights of some legitimate cases falling under Davar's judgment; if they did not, they would be party to an act the majority did not subscribe to.

In order therefore to get at the validity of the new navjotes to fall within the limits prescribed by Davar's definition, the trustees asked the parties concerned to send genealogies of the navjotees. In the meantime, some 30 associations and anjumans sent their protest too against the navjotes to the trustees. And some anjumans, mostly nearby, moved the Maharaja of the Bansda state also. The trustees moved very cautiously in the matter, and even went to the length of taking opinion of two well known counsels. Dubash and his friends kept on urging the trustees to call the Anjuman meeting. One of the navjotees filed a suit in the High Court against the trustees of a Bombay agiary to enforce his rights to enter the premises for the purpose of making use of the same as an agiary, and for the purpose of saying his prayers and worshipping thereat. With this the matter became sub judice, and the question of the Anjuman meeting went into hibernation.

On August 2, 1942 athomans of all 'panths' of Bombay followed their kith of Udwada and Navsari to condemn the navjotes.

At one stage Sir Hormuzdiar Dastur, (a retired chief presidency magistrate) in his letter dated November 6, 1942 informed trustees that "no good purpose will be served by discussing the genealogical trees and other facts referred to in your letter, unless the trustees of the Panchayat are prepared to abide by the proof

of the said pedigrees.” And he wanted assurance to that effect. In their reply the trustees informed Dastur, among other things, that, “It is the duty of the trustees to investigate all the necessary facts and form their own judgement, and it would be a breach of their duty to promise any party beforehand that they would accept the truth of the facts as stated by that party alone.” Finally, Dastur agreed with this view.

The question after having gone into hibernation died out, although the gentleman who had filed suit in the High Court had withdrawn it for the reasons best known to him. But the dying embers kept emanating smoke from time to time, until the Mumbai Vartaman, now defunct, undertook to bring the two sides together and failed. The President of the Parsi Panchayat Sir Shapoorji Billimoria then tried and succeeded in putting cold water on the embers. He brought together the two principal parties Bode and Dastur Kekhushroo Kutar together to agree to the case law as at present prevalent (i.e. Davar's judgement), and to admit that it is harmful to admit into the fold persons bom out of wedlock with alien women.

But this good attempt at rapprochement also failed in the end. There were white-turbaned gentry who were against any kind of children, whether born in or out of wedlock with non-Parsi females. They agitated and wanted to hold meetings condemning even the case law. It seems Sir Homi Mody brought the two dasturs together to get over this and Kutar agreed, but later due to pressure or otherwise from the athomans, turned around and asked Bode to drop references to the Davar judgment part, but the latter did not agree. Kutar ultimately withdrew his signature.

Even though I knew him only slightly, by running into him when I frequented the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute in the 1950's, and by being distantly related to him, his uncle (Masa) being my father's first cousin, he went out of his way to help me get college funds from various Trusts, and wrote letters of recommendation for me, as was the vogue in India then. He was a good, forceful, and very engaging orator, but unfortunately he was born a generation Or two too early for his community to appreciate him. His detractors often angrily greeted him by throwing eggs and tomatoes at him. An Orthodox Parsi scholar even bragged not too long ago in the Parsi press that even Professor Mary Boyce had avoided meeting with Dastur Bode when he visited London, despite his many requests. However when I personally asked her when she was in Chicago if it was true, she did not confirm it, but seemed

surprised and sad that something like that was even published in the Parsi press.

The Parsis did not fail to criticize him for marrying someone who divorced her well-placed husband for him, but I have it on authority of her husband's first cousin, Mr. Keki Bhote that the two were not compatible in many ways all through their marriage. Mrs. Homai Bode was an outgoing socialite whereas, per Mr. Bhote, her first husband was very reticent and withdrawn. Even a great critic of Dastur Bode, erudite Professor Dinshah D. Kapadia, a great Avesta-Pahlavi scholar, as well as a Professor of Mathematics at a Poona University, and the President of the Committee for doing Research into Zoroastrian Religion, used to tell us the same when some critics of Dastur Bode will bring up this subject. That this subject came up in such a committee which met then (1959-60) in the very room at the K.R. Cama Oriental Institute which Dastur Bode occupied when he was in Bombay is indicative of the high emotions running against him amidst the Parsis then.

However, Mrs. Bode told me that all those who opposed him virulently came to appreciate him when their own children married out, which is so much on the rise nowadays. Sir Rustam Masani was his ardent supporter and a Navar himself, tried to mediate between the then fourteen high priests and induce them to come to some common agreement on controversial issues. Bode and Dabu agreed, but most others, headed by the late Dastur Mirza, opposed it for months in the Parsi Press, especially in the long-defunct orthodox weekly, *Parsi Awaaz*. Sir Rustam was himself suspect in the eyes of the orthodox, as his children had married out. Nevertheless, well-attired, well-educated, and well-spoken Bode was quite popular among the upper class. I remember Lady Homi Mody and her sister, Mrs. Jilobai Vakeel speaking good of him, and Zubin Mehta and his father, Meheli proudly telling me that Bode had performed Meheli's wedding. Zubin told me in 1982 that Bode used to attend the orchestra conducted by him in Los Angeles, and "I used to introduce him to my staff as my Pope."

She was from the Bhownagri family from Bhownagar, but I regret I never asked her if she was related to Mr. Mancheiji Bhownagri, who became the Member of British Parliament in early twentieth century, and came from the same family. I won't be surprised if he was her uncle. But alas I never inquired. She was every bit as gutsy and spirited as Dastur Bode, and supported him in all his moves, though she told me she did not view religion and religious views as he did. She was her own person, and yet was totally committed to standing by her husband in her own way, and fully believed in his mission.

She later told me that some conservatives were very critical, even threatening, when she tried to fulfill his wish to be cremated, as he did not feel

the Dakhma system was working as it should in the overcrowded city of Bombay due to various reasons. His wife corresponded with me regularly since 1984, and offered me whatever books I liked from his library. He had two cupboards full of books. He was very quietly sitting in a chair next to them when I was browsing the looks. His wife told me his illness was diagnosed as M.S. or Parkinson's, but I told her he looked more like having Alzheimer's to me. The only words he uttered after hours of total silence and self absorption as if in a trance-like state during my presence was "Do it gently, gently." He was then a different man from the dynamic man, almost manic in his disposition, that the world had known before. I noticed some lapses in memory and incoherence in his speech when the Zoroastrian Association of Chicago invited him in 1977 for the Second North American Zoroastrian Congress, but he did remember the name of a common relative of ours, and asked me if he was there. Rampant criticism of his views and actions over his lifetime had not dampened his spirit, even as the Alzheimer's was setting in, and he proudly spoke about performing the Navjote of a Jewish American in Japan, and advised the North American Zoroastrians to be open-minded if they wanted to survive in North America.

But he was very peaceful, passive, quiet, and as easily manageable as an Alzheimer's patient, unlike most diagnosed as the Alzheimer's patients I have worked with. Alzheimer's disease ran wild in his family, and affected his brother, a pious and life-long Yozdathregar priest at the Anjuman Atashbehram whom I used to know too, and also some of his cousins. And yet many of his critics won't leave him alone even in his death, and attributed his having Alzheimer's disease as God's punishment for espousing liberal causes. His sincerity and integrity were often questioned by his conservative critics, but on my inquiry, his assistant and secretary confirmed, through his son, that he was very sincere about what he preached and did. However, like many Parsis of his time, his thinking was colored by theosophy, Vedanta, and mysticism, perhaps intensified during his one-year stay at Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan, and working with Mahatma Gandhi at times, and certainly during his stay in Los Angeles where he also taught Vedanta, eastern philosophy, etc. He might have also worked for the Mazdaznan Movement when in Los Angeles, which too leaned heavily on eastern philosophy and yoga.

When Mother Gloria of the Mazdaznan Movement in the US and Germany visited Bode in Bombay sometime in the 1940's, he attracted lots of attention as well as criticism from the Orthodox Parsis, who resented Mother Gloria praying Ashem Vohu on Piano, etc. A friend and supporter of Bode, Ervad J.C. Katrak, one of my school teachers and an Avestan scholar, has written a book on Mother Gloria.

He often attended oriental congresses in India and elsewhere. He spoke enthusiastically on comparative religion, eastern philosophy, Sufism,

Mithraism, etc.. wherever he went. He traveled widely, and I vividly remember reading as a teenager his travel accounts of Norway fjords, etc., in *Jame Jamshed*. As my revered Guru Dasturji K.S. Dabu, a staunch theosophist and a rather conservative high-priest, aptly notes in his forward to Dastur Bode's book, *Man, Soul, Immortality in Zoroastrianism*, [a compilation of four lectures at the Cama Oriental Institute in Bombay in 1958]: “The author is well known as an enthusiastic spiritual guide of the Parsis, ever seeking new light and new fields of research; and courageously maintaining an independent attitude in propounding the tenets and principles of the Message of Zarathushtra, according to his own convictions based on deep studies. Dasturji Bode has for many decades undertaken (voluntarily and without extraneous consideration of reward or praise) the sacred mission of spreading knowledge of Zoroastrianism in India, Europe, and America. He often challenges old conventions and beliefs, where he thinks it necessary to do so. We admire him for this stand even when we do not agree with him on details.”

Dasturji M.N. Dhalla, though not a theosophist himself, had even kinder feelings and regards for, as well as greater affinity with, Dastur Bode, as he was the only other contemporary liberal high priest during Bode's time. Bode invited Dhalla often to Bombay for giving lectures which were arranged at C.J. Hall, the biggest lecture hall in Bombay at the time. They were packed to capacity. I considered myself so fortunate for having attended his lectures and felt his angelic presence even from so far away in the audience. Later I read all his books, but even as a teenager I often based my compulsory sermons at the Cama Athoman Institute entirely on excerpts from his autobiography, earning the nickname of “Dhalla” jokingly from my dear classmate, Firoze Kotwal, later Dastur Kotwal. How I wish these great priests were alive today to guide our young generation that face changes in this modern world that humanity has never witnessed before, and seek guidance to survive as Zoroastrians despite of it all. May God Bless the souls of all these Dasturs and may their souls still guide and inspire us! Amen!