

PARSIS' ALLEGIANCE TO PARSIHOOD AND PARSI RELIGION AS A BOUNDARY THAT FAR SUPERCEDED THEIR ALLEGIANCE TO THE ENGLISH

Dr. Kersey Antia, August 11, 2019

Being quite familiar with the Jewish history, I see a parallel here with the Parsis. As Lester Grabber notes in his book, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian*, Vol I (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992, p. 170), even those Jews who were regarded “as the most extreme of the Hellenizers,” and indeed they were often as Hellenized as the Parsis were Anglicized, they did not reject the label Jew and “to be Hellenized” did not mean to cease to be a Jew. Take, for example, Philo of Alexandria, man with a good Greek education, who wrote and thought in the Greek language (probably knowing no Hebrew), lived a life whose daily habits did not differ from those of the Greek citizens of Alexandria, and yet who thought himself nothing less than a loyal and pious Jew (7.2.2). We might also ponder the message of the Letter of Aristeas says that Jews can be a part of the Hellenistic world without necessarily compromising their Judaism. A fine example is that of Jason who became high priest; he evidently considered himself a full and faithful Jew, yet he was the one who obtained permission for Jerusalem to become a Greek foundation.

One could make the same statement about many of the native peoples. Each ethnic group was unique and was just as attached to its own identity, culture, native language, and traditions as was the Jews' loyalty to religion, careful maintenance of tradition and custom, or continual contribution to Hebrew and Aramaic literature.

Moreover, in accommodating to Hellenistic culture the Jews always maintained one area that could not be compromised without affecting their Judaism, that of religion. In the Greco-Roman world only the Jews refused honor to gods, shrines and cults other than their own. Thus even those Jews who were most at home in the Hellenistic world, such as Philo or the author of Pseudo-Aristeas, found themselves marked—and marked off—by this fact. For the vast majority, this was the final barrier that could not be crossed; we know from antiquity of only a handful of examples of Jews who abandoned their Judaism.”

Indeed, this is so true of the Parsis living under the shadow of British colonialism, as already seen. They unflinchingly drew a line between their religion and the British's.

This is equally true for the Parsis in the Thane area that came to live under the Portuguese rule – they rather ran away at night from the Portuguese colony than submit to the Portuguese demand for becoming Christian despite becoming quite prosperous under them, a fact which is too well recorded to detail here. However, only a few historical data I quote in this context will suffice to reveal the extent of reliance of both the Portuguese and English on the Parsis at times as it was a two-way street, and prior to the British rule Parsis had perhaps as close a relationship with the Portuguese as their various diaries suggest. It was on a Parsi's advice that the last governor of Damaun readily surrendered to the army of the Indian Republic. For example, "in about the year 1739 A.D., the Parsis of Sanjan entered the battle-field for the Portuguese for a second time. Senhor Francis Muniz, an old Portuguese writer, says: "In the year 1739 the Mahrattas invaded Damaun. At that time Sanjan which belonged to the Portuguese possessed a Parsi battalion under the command of Daji Jesung. This battalion was at once called to fight the invaders, and the Mahrattas seeing the powerful and stout Parsi soldiers became nervous and retreated. The Parsis thus rendered yeoman service to the Portuguese in the nick of time." (*Times of India* dated 31-3-1920).

"Note: The Parsis had a fight with the Europeans in about the year 1748 A.D.; and there was ill-will-anger for the Parsis right up to 1739 A.D. But there was friendship now between them due to this timely help referred to in the above passage. In 1765 A.D., the English got shipwrecked on the shores of Vansi-Ubhrat (near Navsari). The English Captain and the negro crew were captured and brought to Navsari; the black crew were sold out as slaves. But the Englishman asked Shri Khurshedji Tehemurji for help, and he was set free, together with the slaves. From that time on, the friendship between the Europeans and the Parsis became closer." (*Deshai Khurshedji's Diary*, Samvat 1922, p. 12, *Tawarikh-i-Navsari*, S.M. Desai, p. 42)." (*Extracts from History of Holy Iranshah* by S.K. Hodiwala, translated from Gujarati by Dastur Navroz D. Minocheher Homji, Published by Bombay Parsi Punchayet, Bombay, (1966).

Despite Englishmen resenting them, Parsis established themselves in far away Karachi and Sind. *Hamazar*, Issue d, 2008, p. 48 quotes "a high ranking British officer" as saying (in 1893): "I notice that Englishmen living here do not speak well of the Parsis. While disagreeing with their opinion, I tell them frankly that Karachi should be proud of its Parsi citizens. Wherever I turn, I see Parsi leadership. The greatest business magnate here is a Parsi, whose business cannot be matched by the joint enterprises of anyone in the whole of Sind or the Punjab. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that even Bombay cannot boast of such an enterprise. The largest landowner here is a Parsi. The

biggest shopkeeper is a Parsi. A Parsi runs the largest aerated waters factory. The first to open a bookshop here is a Parsi. Printers and publishers here are Parsis. The most successful photographer is a Parsi. In short wherever I turn my gaze, I find that Parsis have reached a high status due to their pioneering spirit. In spite of that I cannot understand why Englishmen speak ill of the Parsi." Kabraji even provides his own list of prominent Parsis then in Sind in the same article. It reveals the Parsis established themselves well at least at times despite the English somehow resenting them and I have quoted other examples of it too.