

GODREJ – A HUNDRED YEARS, 1897-1997

By B. K. Karanjia

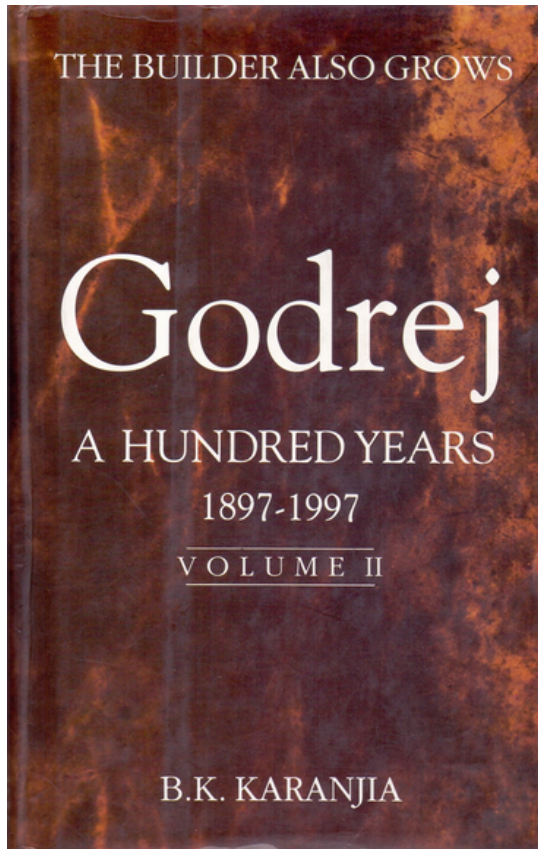
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A Book Review

By Kersey H. Antia Orland Park, Illinois

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These two volumes, written by a noted journalist, depict in detail the interesting saga of the hundred years of the famous Godrej industrial empire in India. The author worked as a publicity manager with Godrej for six years

before joining *Filmfare* as its editor, much to the regret of his bosses at Godrej. To make up for it, he is now chronicling the story of Godrej in these volumes.

The founder, Ardeshir, son of a real estate businessman, was born in Bharuch in 1868. (I believe, like the Tatas, the Godrejs also hail from a priestly family.) Ardeshir became a lawyer, but found himself unable to twist the truth even in favor of his client, while in Zanzibar, East Africa, fully realizing that it meant the death knell of his legal career. He then tried his hand at making various things, including ‘unpickable locks’ and safes, soaps free of animal fat and canned foods. He even tried agriculture and planting vineyards on a mass scale.

He came into close contact with Tilak and Gandhiji, whose advice of using only Swadeshi (Indian-made) products he took very seriously for the rest of his life, and tried his best to develop Indian industry – a commitment his family has faithfully carried out to this day. He was a dreamer and tried his hand at various things. He bought a 600-acre lot near Nasik for vineyards and production of canned foods. But he did not live long enough to develop it.

Most people recognize Merwanji Cama as the founder of Cama Athornan Institute, but few know that he was also the one who lent money to Ardeshir just for the asking. When Ardeshir tried to repay it, Cama refused to accept it, but suggested that his nephew Boyce, be employed in the company; hence the name *Godrej and Boyce Company* (though Boyce dropped out of it soon). One wonders if Cama had not helped Ardeshir, a fellow Bharuchi, would we ever had heard of Godrej?

Ardeshir died in 1936, leaving all his wealth to the Bombay Parsi Punchayet. His brother Pirojshah, 14 years younger, who had joined Ardeshir in his ventures, had to buy out Ardeshir’s share of the company, albeit at a discounted price.

300,000 to the Tilak Swaraj Fund In 1921, which led the British to secretly ban all Godrej products for their Government use, which Gandhiji rightly decried. Gandhiji added: “Not a day has passed without Parsi donations ... Parsi ladies and gentlemen are also making door to door collections.”

Ardeshir was an idealist and did not believe in inheriting or bequeathing wealth. While he was a dreamer, Pirojshah was a practical man with vision and great organizational skill. He bought lots of useless marshland in the early 1940s, just outside Bombay and developed it into a well-planned, industrial town with gardens and residential buildings for his employees. In Bombay, no other large-scale employer offers residential facilities to even the lower level workers.

No wonder, therefore, that when President Carter, then a Senator in Georgia, approached the US Vice-President Hubert Humphrey and others for securing

an appropriate placement for his mother, Lillian, as a Peace Corps volunteer nurse, the name of Godrej turned up as the best choice. Karanjia writes about her work at Godrej, which is very much what Lillian had described to me and other Indians in the USA when we supported her son Jimmy's candidacy for the Presidency. Soon afterwards, I happened to visit India and as I knew her friend, guide and neighbor at Godrej, Kersey Mowdawalla, having guided him at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in 1959 as his senior, I tried to obtain a first hand view of her work at Godrej and spent a few days there, relying mostly on the kind and unfailing assistance provided by his wife, Aloo, as he had then passed away of cancer. The book mentions their contribution to Godrej, but few know that President Carter knew Kersey Mowdawalla's name by heart because of his and Aloo's close friendship with Lillian and had even sent a gift for Kersey with a Bombay businessman he met at a Lion's Club meeting in the USA during his Presidency. Lillian loved Kersey and Aloo and doted on their only son, Percy, and talked about them and Godrej nostalgically. She enjoyed the dinner invitations to the Godrej homes, which she observed thoroughly, as was evident from her comments like: "Soonu likes modern furniture, but Jaiben prefers old pieces."

Perhaps even fewer know that because of Lillian's association with Godrej, Carter learned about Zarathushtis and was quite concerned about their safety during the Iranian revolution. I still have a letter from the US Defense Department in this regard in response to mine at the time. Godrej has thus benefitted their community in more ways than one. Lillian liked what I chronicled about her work at Godrej and we later met regularly on her visits to Chicago, mainly for attending receptions by the Indian community and for promoting the candidacy of democrats such as Alex Seith. When my wife could not join me on one of her visits because of morning sickness, alacritous as she was, the first thing she asked me was: "What will you name the child?" and I blurted out: "Jimmy". She wrote a nice letter to us when my son Jimmy was born.

Pirojshah and his sons and grandsons and even all the female members of the Godrej clan have over the years expanded their business to include a vast array of products. Their insistence on quality and good labor relations and welfare of their workers and their families, has earned them a reputation for integrity, philanthropy and high quality. Godrej is the largest privately-held company in India, with perhaps one of the largest charitable contributions towards causes such as environmental protection and conservation. They have also introduced professional and modern management at Godrej and hired capable and self-motivated professionals irrespective of caste or creed, as can be seen from the details provided in Volume II. Shy of publicity for years, they have finally realized the Zeitgeist (the spirit of the time) and opened up a great deal now, these volumes bearing testimony to it.

The Godrej ladies religiously attend to the welfare of the workers' families at Pragati Kendra (Activity Center), and also attend attentively to the business. In the early 1960s I used to run a Pragati Kendra myself, along with all welfare activities for the Tatas, but the personal touch and genuine caring of all the Godrej ladies and men, make their welfare activities perhaps unique in the whole of India, as eye-witnessed by me.

They do not neglect their own families – even distant family members. I know it first-hand, because after summing up my research on Lillian at Godrej in 1977, my scheduled session with Soonuben Godrej had to be delayed as she was busy taking care of an aunt's final rites. As a matter of fact, the success of the company is due to the Godrej clan holding so well together, this also being the last wish of Naval Godrej.

Karanjia gives a detailed picture of all family members in addition to that of all the prominent Godrej executives. Some members have married out of the community but they seem to be very accepting of their spouse and children, setting a good model for their community.

The Godrej story dispels doubts about the community's ability to survive and prosper in the highly competitive Indian economy today. May the Godrej tribe prosper as the country will prosper along with them.

These volumes are a welcome addition to any library, but a must for all institutions where young minds are inspired to attain Ardeshir's arduous aims and Pirojshah's pragmatic, progressive and purposeful practices. The book is well-written, but some repetition seems unavoidable because of its format. The author's familiarity with the Godrej family and employees has benefited both him and the reader in obtaining a first-hand and reliable view of both, which can especially help those doing business with Godrej or aspiring to work with Godrej. These volumes could also come in handy for the orientation of new higher-level employees at Godrej. They are a product of a symbiotic relationship between the author and the Godrejs, but they do not lack in objectivity. One does not come across such authentic works too often.

It has been a labor of love for Karanjia to write these volumes. For me, it provided an opportunity, not only to learn about the Godrej company from an author who has known it for decades, but also to get further evidence of my long-held thesis as both a psychologist and a life-long student of the Zarathushti Din, that work devoted to one's ideals that also promotes others' well being and happiness, when willingly and ceaselessly carried out, is the very essence of modern-day spirituality.

The Gathas exhort us [*Ys 30.9*]:

“Let us, therefore, be those who bring

about the renovation of this world”

There is so much similarity between the emphasis on action (karma) in the Gathas and the Hindu Gita, The Godrej family have been true to the nation, their workers, their environment and their clients, because they have been true to their ancient religious heritage, having contributed willingly for its preservation as well.

