

**Book Review: THE ZOROASTRIAN DIASPORA
– Religion and Migration, by John R.
Hinnells. Oxford University Press, 2005.
ISBN :0-19-826759-2. Hardcover, 865 p. \$250.**

The Ratanbai Katrak Lectures, the Oriental Faculty, Oxford, 1985.

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John Hinnells worked on *Zoroastrian Diaspora*, a book dedicated to his mentor, Professor Mary Boyce, for 20 years – a third of his life. He undertook this research because the Zoroastrian diaspora has been ignored by scholars and Zarathushtis all over the world will not fail to recognize it as a labor of love. Hinnells acknowledges the fact that records kept by Zoroastrian associations in the diaspora eased his work and hopefully that should inspire them to continue doing so. He ably refutes the contentions of scholars who maintain that the Parsis do not constitute a diasporic community.

A very unique feature of the book is a synopsis of the political history of each country of the major diasporas, very much like the Father of History, Herodotus, has done in his epoch-making history of the Greco-Persian wars in *The Histories*. Hinnells' work also may well become an epic for Zarathushtis. I learned so much from this work, although at first I thought there might be nothing much to learn for an informed reader.

It is impossible to do justice to a 865-page book, especially when the editor has consigned only limited space to me; so I can only highlight its main topics and findings.

Zoroastrian Diaspora deals with: Parsis in Post-Independence Bombay, The Global Diaspora, The Parsis in Hong Kong and the China Seas, The Parsis of Karachi, Zoroastrians in East Africa, The Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe, Zoroastrians in the United States and Canada, Zoroastrians in Australia, as well as Globalizing Trends and a Conclusion. The book also contains an 18-page questionnaire used for this study, as well as a 5-page bibliography on Zoroastrianism, which is invaluable for us.

India. While the Parsis have adjusted will to the changing political and cultural situations in post-independence India and Pakistan, their numbers are decreasing; deaths exceed births and one in three marriages in India are outside the community, especially among the wealthy and the educated.

Hinnells finds the orthodox movement in Mumbai today even stronger than before, which however, may be due to the squeaky wheel making more noise,

1 First published in FEZANA JOURNAL, WINTER 2005.

and reformists by nature not inclined to be feisty in their approach, as observed by the first reformist, K. R. Cama. Hinnells does observe some evidence of the influence of the diaspora in Mumbai, “partly in debates over Joseph Peterson and the film *Wings of Fire*, but also in personal contact by telephone, letters and visits to family and friends in the new countries. The major debates in Mumbai, as well as in the diasporas, are about intermarriage and conversion.

Hong Kong. The Parsis in Hong Kong helped poor Chinese and Mother Teresa’s order, but most of the charities of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Parsis were for various Parsi causes in India. In terms of resources per head, “the Hong Kong Anjuman is the richest (Zoroastrian) community in the world. It is determined to use that money wisely.”

The Council of Hong Kong’s Indian Association petitioned to the Governor in Council in 1985 to allow its 6,000 Indian members to use their passport to settle in Britain because of their great contribution to the colony: four Indian merchants’ presence at the raising of the British flag, Indians’ faithful service in the armed forces and civil service, starting Star Ferry, the University, the first bank, Seamen’s Institute, donating the statue of Queen Victoria, as well as building schools and hospitals. Although the Parsis were not involved in this petition and were not active in this Council, “in fact it was they who had been the leaders in each of the contributions to Hong Kong specified in the petition” [p. 184].

The Hong Kong Parsis have maintained a strong link mainly with India.

Pakistan. While living in Pakistan has not subjected the Zarathushtis to as severe restrictions as faced by them in Iran, there are few opportunities for social exchanges between them and the wider Pakistani society. Topics of intermarriage and purity laws often lead to debates about the status of those marrying out. The Parsis, as a group, have not been targeted for any hostile act. The Karachi Parsis have gone through various phases as pioneers in building Karachi, leadership roles in the early history of the nation, to a growing concern about fundamentalist trends and rampant gang violence.

The young are migrating to the West if they can. Deaths exceed births and the number of deaths per year increased from 32 in 1999 to 46 in 2000. As the numbers decline, so do the number of donations and the use of communal facilities.

East Africa. Before becoming the Sultan of Zanzibar, Barghash had been exiled by the British to Bombay, where he befriended many Parsis whom he invited to Zanzibar upon becoming Sultan, circa 1875, but Parsis had migrated to Zanzibar even before that.

An American traveller, Osgood, to Zanzibar in 1854 commented on:

... the Parsis’ quiet energy, industrious habits, courteous address,

tolerant loyalty and good morals.

Than a Parsee, can be found no more faithful and enduring friend, no more assiduous catcher – and at the same time liberal squanderer - of money, no more skillful merchant or mechanic ... a handsome man.

Burton provided another account of Zanzibar Parsis in 1857:

The late Seyyid was so anxious to attract Parsees who might free him from the arrogance and the annoyance of ‘white merchants,’ that he would willingly have allowed them to build a Tower of Silence, and to perform uninterrupted, all the rites of their religion.

An Anjuman was established in Zanzibar in 1875, and a priest brought from Udvada in 1881. The foundation for a *dakhma* was laid in 1886, but the Consul General objected to it on grounds of hygiene and the court upheld it, and so the *dakhma* was never built. Later the Aden- walas built a fire-temple which is in disuse now, as there are no priests or Parsis to attend to it.

In a farewell function, Basil Cave, Consul General, commented in 1908:

I am struck by the large number of Parsee gentlemen in the official, legal, and mercantile worlds with whom we have come into contact, and whom, happily we have been able to count as friends.

Ethel Youngusband commented in 1908:

By far the most superior of the natives of India who have come to Zanzibar are the Parsis, mostly from Bombay. They are a most interesting people, quite different in nearly every way from the other children of India. They are, to begin with, very much lighter in colour, most of them being as light as the people of Southern Europe, and some even lighter..

Now many Parsees follow various professions, viz., that of the law, medicine, or engineering; most of them, though, are merchants and contractors, other clerks, many of these last, in Government employ. Some of each have settled in Zanzibar. The barristers dress absolutely like Englishmen, but the others still retain their headdress ... The women still retain their national dress in Zanzibar.

Parsees generally are noted for their kindness, generosity and benevolence towards others less well off than they are; they build many public institutions and subscribe liberally to funds for any worthy object. They attain their position by hard work and good business faculties, perseverance being one of their strong points

Such adulatory comments about Parsis, even when living far away from India, are noteworthy.

Hinnells finds other sources that confirm the professional status of the Parsis in Zanzibar. However, this does not mean the Zanzibar Anjuman had a smooth sailing. "The divisions were public and acrimonious, and once more concluded in court action." A member of the opposition party who wrote eleven ascorbic articles in a local weekly was ordered by the courts to apologize for his defamatory statements against the Anjuman president and secretary in the Zanzibar Voice which announced the installation of a Parsi as Speaker of the Council in the same issue, thus "undermining the good public image of Zoroastrians."

In 1988, the District Attorney in Mombasa had to cancel a community meeting after three warnings because of disorder.

Similar problems with public disputes and lawsuits have been noted in other centers too.

In 1903, the Parsis were successful in appealing to the German government to include them into the same jurisdiction that was granted to the Europeans.

In 1963, when a new regime came into power after a brief revolution, the new president pleaded over a radio broadcast not to harm the Parsis, because of their contributions to the the development of Zanzibar. Although no Parsi was harmed, the volatile political situation made it impossible for them to continue living in Zanzibar. Most moved to England – among them Bomi and Jer Balsara, and their young son Farokh, who went on to become rock superstar Freddie Mercury.

A navjote and wedding were performed in Zanzibar in 1969, even after most Parsis had left.

England. The first Zarathushti (and the first Indian) to go to England was Naoroji Rustomji Maneck, in 1724. He stayed for a year in London, until he settled his grievance against the East India Company in his favor. From the 1840s, many Parsis visited Britain to learn about various technologies, sciences, law, medicine and commerce. In 1861, a Zoroastrian association was formed – the first Asian religious association founded in Britain.

Hinnells describes in detail the accomplishments of the three Parsis who

became Members of Parliament in Britain. After reading Prof. John McLeod's biography of M. Bhownaggee, Hinnells has changed his previous perception of Bhownaggee as one who merely toed the British line, to one who was a true patriot, as devoted to India, as was Dadabhai Naoroji.

Australia. Hinnells' painstaking review of New Zealand and Australian immigration rules, even before Zarathushtis started migrating there in the 1960s and 1970s, is very illuminating, which is aptly matched by his step-by-step description of how Zoroastrian associations came to be formed there and how the darbe mehr was finally built in Sydney, despite many objections and obstructions.

Hinnells does not mention who migrated to Australia first, but as a child, I knew an old relative in Siganpore village, Dosabhai Cooverji Patel (brother of the founder of E. C. Patel & Co. in Aden and Patel Girls School in Surat, and also brother of the founder of Dorabjee (Patel) & Sons in Pune) who somehow, according to legend, "smuggled" himself in a steamboat sailing to Australia from Bombay in the late nineteenth century or so, and thrived there selling ice-cream until he retired in Siganpore, circa 1930s.

USA and Canada. Hinnells excels in his treatment of events in North America, as he has visited many places there and even attended a few congresses and meetings there. He provides illuminative facts about how FEZANA came into being, as well as about its antecedents since the 1960s, which would have soon become forgotten, as the first generation immigrants as a rule, have already reached retirement age. Almost anyone who played a significant role in forming FEZANA and kept it going, will find themselves mentioned in his mammoth, epic-making work.

Hinnells has come to know (and even live with) many of them, or for that matter, with many, if not most, Zoroastrian leaders in all the five continents, and yet he has remained as neutral in his observations about them as is humanly possible, which is no mean achievement while dealing with a very fractious and individualistic people. I got first-hand experience of his neutrality two decades ago at a North American congress when he utterly surprised me by personally apologizing to me for one of his non-Zoroastrian colleague's getting too vocal in criticizing me after my session. He even told me he let his colleague know in no uncertain terms of his displeasure. Without such a strong sense of impartiality and objectivity, such an undertaking would be worthless for historicity. In my own case, his in-depth coverage of the Peterson navjote is both fair and neutral.

The tremendous amount of data his questionnaires have generated could prove useful in accurately gaging the community's mood and preferences, which of course will change with the times, as the new generation will soon replace the old, but Hinnells' pioneering research methodology could provide

inspiration to others to carry out similar fact finding projects in the future.

Hinnells has noted the efforts by various associations in North America, Australia and UK to engage in interfaith movements as well as provide religious education to the young, unlike in the other diasporas he studied.

Conclusion. In all diasporas, the Zoroastrian associations seem to function more as social clubs, rather than as religious organizations on the whole.

Hinnells' masterly treatment of the issues facing Zarathushtis in North America and Australia is worth reading as well as preserving for future generations. It will be hard to challenge his conclusion:

There is no single Zoroastrian diaspora, for the different groups in various countries sometimes contrast greatly with each other. Indeed, Zoroastrian associations in a single country can differ significantly ... There are many Zoroastrian diaspora communities; they are all different, but together they form a rich tapestry.

I do not know of any Zarathushti, or for that matter, anyone else who has so deeply cared over the years, to study Zoroastrians and their diaspora, as John Hinnells has. It is hard to find any fault with his painstaking and exhaustive research. If it seems repetitive at times, it is mainly because of its research design.

This is the *summum bonum* of his work on Zoroastrians, for which he will be remembered forever.

Ushta té (Happiness to you) and *darego jitim* (long life) to you, Mr. Hinnells!