

THE ENGLISH OFTEN NEEDED PARSIS MORE THAN THE PARSIS NEEDED THEM, AS THEY HAD SURVIVED WELL WITHOUT THEM FOR A LONG TIME

Dr. Kersey Antia, Jul 7, 2019; updated Aug 10, 2020

The prosperity of Parsis was due more to their own enterprising world-affirming spirit inculcated by their ethics and religion as so many European writers have often noted, too numerous to be listed here, than to the English. Actually, the English were the last in the line of European traders the Parsis came to establish business ties with. Surprisingly my research on the subject of silk trade land and sea routes and intense Roman-Sasanian rivalry for seizing of Chinese silk arriving at Sri Lanka (Ceylon) by ships and the Persians never ever letting the Romans seize the trade, made it so obvious to me, as I have detailed in a paper (to be yet published) that the Parsis honed their skill in international trade and had settled on the western coast in India even before the Arab conquest of Iran. It is not surprising to find that all European traders tied business relations with them, which is indeed well documented. For instance, as Eric R. Wolf notes, the English “had neither the organization nor the capital to build new forts and to man warships.” When “the warlike Marathas seized much of Surat’s hinterland” and “rebellion and political disorder began to interfere with trade from Surat to the West, the English, followed by their Parsi trade partners, moved to Bombay” (pp. 240-1). “The East India Company” was already in serious debt to the English crown for monies lent in the course of the conquest of India. To meet its obligation, it borrowed money from rich Parsi bankers. There developed a complex triangular trade whereby emerged private agency houses of “country traders” run mostly by Parsi and Scottish merchants. In 1776, however, the American Revolution cut England off from the supply of American silver. At the same time, cotton from northern China began to flow into Chinese textile production at prices lower than those of Indian cotton. The answer to the Company’s financial prayers was opium from India.” Here again “Malwa opium reached Canton through Parsi merchants from Bombay.” (p.257). “The initial growth of the Indian machine-textile industry----- must be understood in terms of India’s role as a major English base of commerce with China,” “and trade in cotton became” “the most important after the trade in opium declined.” (The Parsis even established their colony near Hong Kong and their fire temple still occupies a busy street there.) Indians invested their fortunes from

China trade in the development of textile industry, “the only industry in India that owed its birth and development to the initiative of domestic capital and domestic entrepreneurship.” (Saini 1971:98). “The center of this new textile industry was Bombay.” “Bombay soon gained a commercial importance with the settlement of (Parsi) merchants from Diu and Surat and with a growth of a colony of Parsis.” “The first mill, using English technology but financed by Indian, mostly Parsi-capital, went into production in 1856.” (pp. 288-9). Thus, Parsis were not beholden to the English for any favors, but were quite often rather of assistance to them – even for lending them money when in need as already seen. Even in the late nineteenth century Sir Cowasji Jehangir, Baronet, came to be regarded by them as Sir C.J. Readymoney, for lending them silver ingots when they needed it badly. There are many more instances to prove that the rise of the Parsis was more due to their own entrepreneurship than to the English. It is for this reason that John Hinnells, the English expert on the Parsis history opined that the Parsis were the only subject people the English treated as equal, partying together with the governor of Bombay, etc., *The Times of India* even reporting how it often got wild. As R. Kennedy explains at length, the Parsis' prosperity was due to their ethics more than anything else (“The Protestant Ethics and the Parsis”, *American Journal of Sociology* 68(1) 11-28). The same view is expressed by John Hinnells in his *Zoroastrian and Parsi Studies*, (Ashgate, England, 2000, pp. 117-139, etc.).

As a result of their contact with English and other Europeans, the Parsis came to know about their own history, scriptures and scriptural languages and were thus able to regain their heritage and became proud of it and indeed not only they found it astounding, but even the Europeans' savants told them so often. They could thus regain their confidence in themselves and could even stand up to their English rulers whenever they felt they were unjust, as already noted. However, what the English really did for the Parsis is well illustrated by Nowrojee Furdoonji (1877-1885). “This liberal and enlightened government has conceded several important and valuable privileges...the first is civil and political liberty, which consists in the power of thinking and acting with perfect independence, just as we deem fit, without any restraint or control on the part of our rulers... The second is religious liberty or toleration, which is the free right of adopting and maintaining opinions on religious subjects ... without any interference or control on the part of government or any private individual. It cannot be denied that these privileges were either withheld *in toto*, or greatly abridged and unjustly curtailed under the former dynasty of rulers...” (*The Parsis*, D.F. Karaka, London, 1858, pp. 155-6). Such a tolerant policy led them to seek the help of their English rulers in 1834 for prevailing upon the kings in Iran to stop discrimination against the Zoroastrians in Iran. I have detailed elsewhere how even the English officials in Bombay so

readily helped the Parsis in this cause, which had never been done for them in their long history. As they were increasingly getting westernized in the 19th century, they came to appreciate western values.

In the hoary history of the Parsis Lührman is not the first writer to raise the subject of their “degeneration”. Long ago that honor of bearing “fake news” about the Parsis went to Xenophon who berated the Persians he encountered after being so eulogical of King Cyrus in the Epilogue of his *Cyropaedia (The Education of Cryus)* six long generations after Cyrus: “The Persians of today are less religious, less dutiful to their kindred, less just towards other men, and less valiant in war.” And the list goes on. As Harold Lamb remarks: “like Herodotus, who had an easier journey, Xenophon picked up stories as he went” - (much as Lührman did?). “There are few facts to go on, however, and Xenophon really drew the portrait of a young Greek in the setting of Asia. (His book is often called the first historical novel of record) --- he interpreted his Hellenic fantasy with bits of Achaemenian facts.” Lamb observes: “In his Epilogue, Xenophon indulges in a little editorial musing. Be it said, however, that Xenophon can be whimsical”, which possibly cannot be said of Lührman's work, however subjective, or lacking in a sound historical view or in sound empirical methods, placing Parsis on a par with distant colonials, sans an acceptable rational, but she is always avowing to be quite empathetic to the Parsis which indeed is so obvious. However, few authors so empathetic to the Parsis have been drawn to so passionately and painstakingly paint Parsis' pathetic present problems prominently in terms of rigid, unfitting, subjective anthropological views when there is really an urgent need to save them from extinction once again by focusing on the real reasons for their decline which I have succinctly alluded to here, as the Raj is not going to return and there is little sense in dwelling on it and the good Parsi knows it too well though his pleasing nature often leads the Parsi to ease him/herself into catering to a Western academic's preferences or perspectives. As I have noted elsewhere, the research of Briant Pierre and Joseph Wiessehoffter have clearly proven not only Xenophon wrong but also all other Greek writers reveling in Xenophobic notions about the decadent Persians. In my research (unpublished) on the fall of the Sasanian empire, I have often found similar observations attributing the defeat of the Iranians by Arabs to their decadence, if not degeneration and because of it even falsely claiming they welcomed Arabs to their ancient land as mentioned in my paper on the Arab Conquest of Iran in which I have tried to establish the fallacy of such contentions, but alas the history belongs to the victor.

What Lührman portrays as a post-colonial Parsi is not what most Parsis portray themselves as. For instance, writing about “Parsis And The Raj,” in the popular *Jam-e-Jamshed Weekly* (August 20, 2006),

Mr. Bejan Minocher writes: “Indian independence ushered in gradual decline in their prospects and overall status. At the time, it was alleged by some vested interests (?) rather gracelessly and vituperatively that the Parsis were pro-British colonial lackeys and sycophants whose experience of independence was an experience of loss, no matter how much relief, joy, hope and optimism they had found in their newly gained freedom from the foreign yoke and a kind of human bondage. After all, these self-appointed castigators had reasoned, for more than a century, the Parsis as a community, had identified themselves with the British and had held them as their ideals, mentors and role-models, and thereupon reaped the benefits of this unique symbiosis, and now, in the absence of their imperial masters, a deep void had been created, a vacuum which would be very arduous for them to fill. Be that as it may, it is highly commendable and a matter of great pride for the community that many ambitious Parsi young men of that era, who had served and honed their skills under the British imperialist, invariably went on to reach the pinnacle of their professions on pure merit, in post-independence India. Many of these dynamic young men of steely resolve and indomitable courage rose to the zenith of their careers the hard way, on their own steam, by the sheer dint of their hard work, grit and dedication to the nascent Sovereign Democratic Republic of India. Shining and outstanding examples abound” and he provides quite a few.

Minocher seems to represent the views and sentiment of the modern-day Parsis more than the biographical cases selected by Luhrman (and indeed no Parsi seems to have taken ANY issues with them even though they appeared in a weekly that is the oldest and most widely read by the Parsis: “Though numerically minuscule now, the Parsis are a very well loved and respected lot in India today. All thanks to the unique synergy that existed between our diligent and visionary fore-bearers who worked in unison for a better and brighter India, India owes a lot to Britain for her earlier development and the rich legacy of culture, learning and architectural marvels she left behind.” Indeed there are reasons for the Parsi to be dissatisfied with their current lot and of course the life in post-independent India is hard on them but the present generation is hardly even half aware of their achievements and life under the British rule and few indeed care to read about it in our times of television, videos, etc. And even the best of biographical interviews by most objective academicians such as Luhrman cannot always be devoid of some bias coming in or a conscious or unconscious need to fit into the cognitive style of the interviewer. It is quite obvious that the Parsis are not quite as well off as they used to be under the British Raj, though the Parsis are perhaps still the wealthiest people in India. But it is much more meaningful to find the real reasons for it, at least some of which I have already pointed out. However, one salient reason often overlooked is the fact the Parsis being among the first to

westernize faced little competition in all fields in the British era unlike today. John Hinnells whom I knew well and deeply admired, finds Luhrman “one of the most self-consciously 'methodological' contemporary writers” (*Zoroastrians and Parsi Studies*, Ashgate, 2000, p. 22) and he appreciates her research on the Parsis. It will be therefore so meaningful if she resumes her effort to dig into the real reasons for the current Parsi dilemma, as so sincerely she seems to be interested in researching the Parsis' present problems when few are.

There is substantial evidence of Parsis helping out the Portuguese as well as the English in a big way, the reverse is hardly the case. For example: In about the year 1739 A.D., the Parsis of Sanjan entered the battle-field for a second time. Senhor Francis Muniz, an old Portuguese writer, says: “In 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-Hbhrat (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 Parsis became closer.” (*Deshai Khurshedji's Diary*, Samvat 1922, p. 12, Rawarikh-i-Nvsari, S.M. Desai, p. 42).

(*Extracts from History of Holy Iranshah* by Hodiwala BPP, 1966). I do not know of any act by the British that can match this incident, rather there are incidents of the Parsis when some land in their Doonfarwadi (final resting place) in Bombay was illegally occupied by others when their five temples and residences were attacked, etc., as already noted.