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The Parsis, their History and Contribution towards the Development of India

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Abstract:

The Parsis are India's smallest minority community, yet they have exercised a huge influence on the country. They had a long "journey" from Iran to the Western coast of India. The vast majority of the Persian people made compromises with the ruler of the new land. Parsis became very close with British ruling class since they were well-known for their honest and loyal dealings and credible interpersonal skills. Even before the arrival of the British the Parsis had made their mark as middle men for the Portuguese, French and the Dutch traders in India. As they got more trading opportunities a substantial number of Parsis moved to Bombay. From then onwards Mumbai or Bombay served as a base for expanding their business activities throughout India and abroad. As pioneers in education in nineteenth century India, and as leading figures in banking and commerce, medicine, law and journalism, they were at the forefront of India's industrial revolution. After 1990's the fears of an average Parsi in India are about the homogenizing conservative outfits, like Right wing political parties which treat them as foreign people, exploiters of the nation. This resulted the emigration of the Parsi people in large numbers to western countries.

Keywords: Journey, British rule, Bombay, Contributions, Education, Emigration

1. Introduction

1.1. History

Parsi is a tiny religious minority community in the world. Worldwide there are some 100,000 Parsis. According to the 2001 census, India has less than 70,000 Parsis. They are the followers of Prophet Zoroaster: hence they are called Zoroastrians. They had migrated from Iran to India during the 8th century AD to avoid religious persecution by the Muslim invaders. They had settled 1st at Diu but soon moved to a place in South Gujarat called Sanjan with the permission of local king. The king granted them land and they began a new life. They were called Parsis to denote the region from where they had come (Persia). They lived in various villages and towns of Gujarat. However, they had to abide by the rules imposed by the king. Here they remained as agricultural farmers, weavers, and carpenters for about 800 years. Now they are scattered in various cities in India.

Over the centuries, the Parsis have integrated themselves into Indian society and adopted many Hindu customs such as Parsi women dressed like their Indian counterparts and they even wore nose rings. They simultaneously maintained their own distinct customs and traditions and preserved their ethnic identity. They are Indians in terms of national affiliation, language and history but not typically Indian in terms of cultural, behavioral and religious practices.

In modern India, the Parsis are the most urban, educated elite and wealthy of almost all the religious groups of India. Following the commercial treaty in the early 17th century between the Mughal and the British East India Company, British obtained the exclusive rights to reside and build factories in Surat and other areas. Many Parsis, who until then who had been living in forming communities and pretty trade moved to the British-run settlements to take the new jobs offered. This provided an ideal opportunity for Parsis to engage in occupations that they had never attempted before. Farmers became traders and chief native agents, carpenters became ship builders. An adventurous few left Surat and moved to Bombay. Here they acted as brokers between the Indians and the Portuguese.

In 1668 the British East India Company decided for setting up their first port in the East coast of Bombay. They transferred their head quarters from Surat to the new Port area. The Parsis followed and soon began to occupy the posts of trust in connection with the government and public works. The establishment of British school in India made many Parsi youths to be well educated and became familiar with British establishment. These capabilities were useful to Parsis since they allowed them to "represent themselves as being like the British". The Parsis were very closely associated with British ruling class since they were well known for their honesty, loyal dealings and credible interpersonal skills. Thus they became one of the most Westernized communities in the British India.

2. Contributions

In 1702 Rustom Maneck was appointed as the first broker to the East India Company. In the following years he and his Parsi associates widened the occupational and financial horizons of the larger Parsi community. As a result many of the principal merchants and owners of ships at Bombay and Surat are Parsis.

Thus by the mid of 18th century, the brokerage houses of the Bombay Presidency were almost all in Parsi hands. Gradually certain families “acquired wealth and prominence”, many of which would be noted for their participation in the public life of the city, and for their various educational, industrial and charitable enterprises. They were no longer weavers and petty merchants by now were established and ran banks, mills, heavy industry, ship yards and shipping companies. Moreover, while maintaining their own cultural identity they did not fail to recognize themselves as nationally Indian.

The Parsis, had been considered as the most progressive and socio-economically advanced community in India. The Parsis have made considerable contributions to the history and in the development of India. India is richer today due to the contributions of this tiny community. Among the Parsis, there was also a strong spirit of nationalism and many Parsis took part in the Indian freedom struggle. Some eminent freedom fighters were Mrs. Madam Bhikhaiji Cama was the first Indian (and Parsi) to unfurl the Indian National flag in Germany (1907) was exiled by the Colonial officials. Her “Vande Mataram” newspaper was spreading the message of revolution. The first elected Indian member of the British Parliament in 1892 was Dr. Dadabhoy Naoroji. He was among the founders of the Indian National Congress, the party that led India's freedom movement. Sir Pherozeshah Mehta was elected, on several occasions, President of the Indian National Congress, the Bombay Corporation and Bombay Presidency Association.

Parsis have played a significant role in the economic development of India. Some of the biggest names in Indian business are Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata, Godrej and Wadias. Jamsetjee Tata was regarded as the father of Indian industry. Tata's gave India not just its first steel industry, but also hydro-electricity. The Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, for example, gave India its first Institute of Science in Bangalore, the first cancer hospital in Bombay, the first institute of social sciences, the first institute of fundamental research and a National Centre for the Performing Arts. Late Jehangir Ratanji Dadabhoi Tata popularly known as JRD Tata, JRD was the first Indian to start a national airline (Tata Airlines) that later became Air-India. He was honored by Government of India with Bharat Ratna the highest civilian award. The Godrej Group, India's leading manufacturer of soap, home appliances and office equipment, is Parsi-run. The Wadias, who made their mark in shipbuilding 250 years ago, own textile mills and an airline company. Most of these families who generated wealth through industrial development put back the wealth in trust for the welfare of the people.

Dr. K.N. Bahadurjee was the first Indian to pass the M.D. examination in London and worked tirelessly during the plague in Bombay, laying down his life at the age of 38. Dr. Rustom Jal Vakil has been referred to, in International Journals, as "the father of Indian Cardiology".

The Parsi community has given India several distinguished military officers. India's first and only Field Marshal has been Sam Hormusji Jamshedji Maneckshaw. Admiral Jal Cursetji was the first Parsi to be appointed as the Chief of Naval Staff, of the Indian navy. Air-Marshal Minoo Engineer was the most highly decorated air-marshal in Indian air-force history.

Dr Homi Bhabha a brilliant Parsi scientist, regarded as the Father of Indian nuclear programme. So India's first Atomic Research Centre is named after him. Homi Nusserwanji Sethna was an Indian nuclear scientist and a chemical engineer. He was the primary and central figure in India's civilian nuclear program as well as the construction of nuclear power plants. He was awarded the second highest civilian award the Padma Vibhushan in 1975, by Government of India.

Zubin Mehta is well known for his Western classical music. The youngest to become music director of a major American orchestra, the first and so far the only music director of the Israel Philharmonic. In 1967 the Indian government awarded him its highest cultural honour, Padma Bhushan.

Nani Palkhivala was a genius and his incredible success as a lawyer has inspired many generations of youngsters. “The Law of Income-tax” continues to be a best-seller decades after it was first written. He served in the chambers of the legendary Sir Jamshedji Behramji Kanga in Bombay. Soli Jehangir Sorabjee, is an Indian jurist and former Attorney-General of India. He has been honored with Padma Vibhushan for his defense of the freedom of expression and the protection of human rights. Sorabjee has held several offices in organizations of national and international repute.

When British colonialists first introduced cricket to India, the first Indians to take up the sport were Parsis. The cricket players who played for the Indian National team were Russy Mody, Polly Umrigar, Nari Contractor, Farokh Engineer, Russy Surti.

Parsi writers in India have contributed a lot to the literature of the country. There are several Parsi writers whose work in English has brought them immense fame and placed them high in the social structure. From among the top Parsi writers in India writing in English includes Rohinton Mistry, Boman Desai, Perin Bharucha, Fordaus Kanga, Dina Mehta, K.N Daruwalla etc are the prominent names.

3. Conclusion

The contribution of this dynamic Indian community in all spheres of Indian life – arts, science, politics, business, medicine, sports, armed forces, literature, in social commitment and philanthropy has been phenomenal. Despite their meager number the Parsi community did not seek any special privileges under the Constitution, and yet played a large role in the development of the country.

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