

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF AUTHORITY AMONG PARSIS IN BRITISH INDIA

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This chapter looks at the changing patterns of religious authority during the social transformation of the early nineteenth century in Bombay Presidency. There are several words with overlapping meanings – authority, power, influence, leadership – each having either religious or secular connotations – or both. By both authority and power I mean in this context the ability to effect change or determine policies; influence may indicate the standing to affect authority; leadership is normally an ability to inspire others through charismatic personality, or in the religious sphere through respect for an individual's devotional life or scholarly attainment.

Sasanian Iran was noted for its law books and sophisticated codes with clear lines of authority in which the king was at the pinnacle of power and a powerful chief priest oversaw religious matters.¹ However, we know little about the authority structure of the Zoroastrian community in the transition period after the first arrival of the early Parsi settlers in India until the early fifteenth century. It was then that Changa Asa, the (lay) leader of the community in Navsari, organized the transfer of the Iranshah fire from remote Bansda to Navsari. This was a sacred fire consecrated soon after arrival in India as an act of thanksgiving for their safe arrival and settlement and was known as the King of Iran, 'Iranshah' – in exile. Changa Asa also arranged for a Parsi, Nariman Hoshang, to visit Iran with a series of religious questions for the Zoroastrians in Yazd: thus started in 1478 the first of a series of *Revayats*, letters of advice from Iranian priestly leaders, which terminated after the 26th *Revayat* in 1773. Changa Asa and his son are said to have been thought of almost as kings in Navsari (Vajifdar 1974: 23–4). *Dastur* (= High Priest) Meherji Rana was recognized as the senior *dastur* from approximately 1578 following his visit to the court of the great king and noted syncretist Akbar. Meherji Rana appears to have impressed Akbar with his account of Zoroastrianism, for which the emperor granted him land in

Navsari (Besania 1993; Modi 1903). Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Parsis in Gujarat were agriculturalists and craftsmen. But in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when many Parsis migrated to cosmopolitan Bombay, which was emerging as a major commercial center, and fortunes were made through trade, the question of authority became difficult.

From the early days in Bombay a Panchayet was formed to oversee community matters. A Panchayet was a traditional form of community governance, theoretically by five (*punch*) chosen leaders. We do not know the exact date of its formation in Bombay but it is generally assumed it was in the early days of Parsi settlement, though it was not formally established by Government until 1787 (Davar 1949; Modi 1930). Until the 1830s its authority was respected. Perhaps the main aim of the Bombay Parsi Panchayet (BPP) was to ensure that, in moving from the tight social structure of villages, migrants did not desert community ideals. Indeed, if anything, the BPP was stricter in enforcing monogamy (and making provision for the divorced wife) and excluding Hindu practices, than was observed in the rural areas. This was done at least partly to show the British that Parsis had a family value system as honorable as theirs. The fear was that individuals who achieved considerable economic success might consider themselves free from conventional social restrictions. The BPP was therefore involved in both religious and social matters and imposed punishments such as humiliation, requiring public apology, or Parsis could be made outcastes.²

These measures appear to have been reasonably effective until the 1830s, when respected BPP leaders resigned because they thought some of the *nouveau riche* on the Panchayet, which included Jamsetji Jijibhoy (hereafter Sir JJ), were ignoring the blatant flouting of the values by some of their friends who were, for example, openly taking a second wife. Protests began to appear in the press, notably by 'Q in the corner', alias Cursetji Maneckji, and an anonymous publication, the *Kholas-i-Panchayet*, which it was later discovered had been written by Sir JJ, tracing the failings of the Panchayet from 1823 to the 1840s (Davar 1949).

The BPP complained that many Parsis were going over their heads and appearing in British courts, so in 1832 the Panchayet urged the Government to give them more power, but this time, unlike in 1787, they sought this in vain. Instead Government pressed the community to produce its own laws on marriage, divorce and inheritance and introduced in 1865 a Parsi matrimonial court, consisting of appointed Parsis but overseen by an English judge to ensure compliance with the law (though the Parsi Law Association had begun to draw up guidelines in 1855). The British did not wish to get involved in family law but preferred that each community draft its own laws and preside over them. Thereafter the importance of the BPP declined, until in the twentieth century it became an administrative body overseeing the distribution of charitable funds. By establishing his Parsi Benevolent Institution (1849)

Sir JJ in a real sense took over the BPP, naming most Panchayet Trustees as his Trustees, and within a couple of years the two Trust funds were merged and Sir JJ was declared President of the unified body for life.

Anjuman meetings/communal assemblies

First it will be helpful to give a brief account of Anjuman meetings. An Anjuman was an assembly which met for various communal occasions, for example that of the *uthumma* (memorial) ceremony of an important person or to appoint a *dastur*. A Samast Anjuman was a bigger occasion: for example in the eighteenth century such an Anjuman met to approve a man taking a second wife. The Anjumans could function as a legislative assembly and therefore such Anjuman meetings were more authoritative than most Parsi histories have acknowledged. In the nineteenth century the Panchayet board was increased from the theoretical 5 to 12 or 18 members appointed by Government from a list of 24 nominees given by the community, including some priests. When the larger number was assembled it was known as a Samast Panchayet. Who had the authority to call such meetings and the extent of their powers is a theme which will recur in this chapter. Preliminary work for such meetings was undertaken by a Panchayet which also meted out punishment to offenders. The Panchayet administered the rules, and their workers were the *nasarsalas* who functioned not only at funerals but also in conveying messages about meetings and of *bundobusts* – agreements made at Anjuman meetings. If someone was to be summoned to the Panchayet then a Panchayet priest was sent (Modi 1930: 3).

Long-standing priestly authority tensions: Sanjanas and Bhagarias

From an early date Gujarati Parsis were divided into five priestly divisions or *panthaks* within which a group of priests had sole responsibility for liturgies. This originally simple agreement (the date of its introduction is unknown, probably thirteenth century – Modi 1905: 15) became complicated with migration across boundaries which caused much tension concerning religious rights. Navsari was the region of the Bhagarias (= ‘sharers’, i.e. of the income of liturgies in the Navsari *panthak*). When the Iranshah fire was taken to Navsari in 1516 CE, its Sanjana *mobeds* moved also.³ The original agreement was that the Sanjanas undertook duties relating to Iranshah and the Bhagarias continued with their existing responsibilities to families. At the request of *behdins* (laity) some of the Sanjana priests began undertaking some Bhagaria duties, leading to riots and physical violence which spread to Surat. The implications will be discussed later so it is worth giving some details. During this conflict in Surat a priest went to the *hakim*, or local Muslim judge, who imprisoned one *behdin* and had eleven others whipped. When the priests saw

their treatment they pleaded for the freedom of the *behdins*, so they in turn were whipped. The *behdins*, seeing that there had been such hurt on both sides, came to an agreement and a notice was promulgated on 8 February 1687 saying that *behdins* could have their rites performed by the priest of their choice. Later the Bhagarias objected again to the agreement and appealed to a local judge to suspend it. But not all Bhagarias agreed and a second Bhagaria group was formed, led by Minochehr Homji.⁴ The dispute continued until 1733, when Iranshah was moved to fortified Surat because of a Maratha raid on Navsari. It remained in Surat until 1736, but the disputes broke out again and so in 1740 it was taken to the town of Bulsar, and eventually to the small community of Udwada. Why Udwada was chosen is not clear. The legend goes that it was taken there in glory, but it seems rather it was moved in the middle of the night because of the powerful and not wholly charitable nature of one Shahpur Shamra, or the 'Black Shahpur' (Hodivala 1927: 195–351). Udwada was in Sanjana territory so that responsibility for its care was undisputed. Perhaps also to avoid dispute, the two priests from leading families who carried the fire were both made *dasturs*, which is why Udwada to this day has two *dasturs* associated with just one Atash Bahram.⁵

More Atash Bahrams

The consecration of the second Atash Bahram at Navsari in 1765, this time under Bhagaria care, has been documented (Cereti 1991; Patel 1906: 11).⁶ The third Atash Bahram was consecrated in Bombay by Mulla Kaus Rustom Jalal in 1783 according to Kadmi⁷ rites; in 1794 he handed the dasturship over to his son, Mulla Firoze, and he went to Deccan Hyderabad. In 1768 father and 10 year old son had gone from their family home in Broach to Iran, sent by a wealthy Surat Parsi, Dhunjisha Munjishah, to study Zoroastrian law and in particular the calendar. Munjishah had been interested in calendar issues raised by the visit of two Iranian Zoroastrians, Mobed Jamasp Velayati and a *behdin* Jamshid (1720 and 1736 respectively). They had raised the question of the discrepancy between the Iranian and the Parsi calendar. This started a furious debate in Surat, and in 1767 the arguments grew so fierce that the 'traditionalist' Parsis complained to the court at Broach where the Nawab referred the question to the Panchayets of Navsari and Surat. They asserted the Parsi or Shenshai ('royal') tradition and the Nawab told all Panchayets, including Bombay, to follow this practice. This is an early example of Parsis referring religious disputes to external authorities. On arrival in Iran Kaus Jalal left his son, Peshotan, for four years in Yazd studying the sacred literature and liturgies (*Avesta*, *Yasna*, *Vendidad*) and he underwent the *navar* (first priestly 'ordination') ceremony in 1771. Father and son later went to Isfahan where Peshotan studied Arabic and Persian. One Muslim teacher is said to have been so impressed by Peshotan's

intelligence that he gave him the title 'Feroze [Victorious] Mulla'. After three years in Isfahan they moved to Shiraz and stayed there for three years, where it is said they managed to persuade the court to release the Zoroastrians from the *jizya* (poll tax). They proceeded to Baghdad for 18 months where Peshotan studied Turkish and tradition has it that the Caliph of Baghdad was so impressed with father and son that he conferred on both the title of 'Mulla'; thereafter Peshotan took the name of Mulla Feroze. Since such powers of a caliphate had long since lapsed there are clearly some legendary elements to the narrative (Paymaster 1931).

When Kaus Jalal and Peshotan returned from Iran, convinced of the correctness of the Iranian calendar, Munjishah, who by then had moved to Bombay, called them there and Kaus Jalal oversaw the consecration of the Dadyseth Atash Bahram in 1783 and was made its first *dastur* (*PP*. I: 63, for 29 Sept. and Patel 1906: 15). Kaus Jalal handed the dasturship to Peshotan in 1794 and he held this post until his death in 1830. His language skills earned him high respect in Bombay so that he was appointed to the Panchayet in 1794. At a meeting of the elders of the Panchayet in 1818 it was announced that henceforth the *naujote* (initiation) of illegitimate children could only be performed with the permission of the BPP; among the 13 signatories Dastur Mulla Feroze stood second.⁸ At an Anjuman meeting on 18 October, 1823 it was resolved that on public occasions Dastur JamaspAsa would have the first chair, Dastur Mulla Feroze the second and the third was to be held by Dastur Sanjana. Thus, in Bombay a sequence of priestly authority and honor was laid down among the *dasturs* as it had been in Navsari, but the order in Bombay was different. Mulla Feroze published the *Desatir* in 1818, which he and his father had brought from Isfahan: it was originally proclaimed as a long lost 'authentic' mystical Zoroastrian text, but later seen to be a relatively modern Sufi text with some Zoroastrian elements. He was respected by the British also. Mountstuart Elphinstone appointed him to the earliest education body established in Bombay, namely the Native School and School Book Society, in 1820. From 1824 to 1830 he was paid by the British to write the *George Nama* in 40 Persian couplets, an account of the British in India up to the reign of King George. The Calendar controversy flared again in 1826, and he was involved in that. His Iranian studies and relations with the British gave him a position of popular authority (Paymaster 1931).

At Surat there are two Atash Bahrams: one is Kadmi (followers of the Iranian calendar), the other Bhagaria. Their consecration was disputed. Two persons each wanted to consecrate an Atash Bahram. The debate was, first, whether or not it was permissible to have two Atash Bahrams in one place, and second, as to which was to be built first. One was built by the widow of Jamshedji N. Mody, a relative of the influential family of Jamsetji and Hormusji Wadia. Their plans had been drawn years earlier but they had difficulty in locating a site. In the meantime P. K. Vakil decided to build an Atash Bahram because he was ill and vowed to erect such a temple. The

court found in favour of Vakil but the Wadias appealed to the High Court in Surat where it was agreed that the Wadias and Mody's widow should build theirs first. The D. N. Mody Atash Bahram was consecrated on 19 November 1823 when it was estimated 20,000 people were present. The second, just over a week later, was the P. K. Vakil Atash Bahram which was consecrated according to Kadmi rites on 5 December (Patel 1906: 34–9; *PP.* I; 161f.). Again an external court was consulted in a religious matter.

The JamaspAsa lineage of priestly authority

For reasons that will become apparent it is important to consider the situation in Navsari. Dastur Meherji Rana is said to be a direct descendent of the first priest to come to Navsari, Kamdin Zarthosht. Note has already been taken of his recognition as leading *dastur* after his visit to Delhi (1578–9, Modi 1903). But there were other *dasturs* in Navsari. Sources refer to the three high priestly chairs of Navsari: the first place was taken by Dastur Meherji Rana, the second by Dastur Pahlan, and the third was held by the JamaspAsa lineage. This chapter focuses on the JamaspAsa lineage because it was the lineage which became central in Bombay and in Poona (for this lineage see above all Jamasp Ashana 1912, on which the following account is based).

The oldest ancestor of the JamaspAsa lineage for whom records exist was Ervad Ashaji Faredunji (b. 1659), a priest who was involved in the Sanjana/Bhagaria disputes in Navsari. The first to bear the title Dastur JamaspAsa was his youngest son, born in Navsari in 1693. Anjumans did not necessarily appoint the eldest son; it sometimes chose another son, brother or even an Acting Dastur as will be seen below. This reinforces the point concerning the authority of Anjuman meetings. JamaspAsa studied Persian, Sanskrit and astrology from a pundit, and in 1812 he went to Broach to study Avestan and Pahlavi under Dastur Jamshed Kamdin and later studied Arabic. He became well known in Broach literary circles. He used to read the *Shah Nama* for the Nawab, arousing the jealousy of the Maulvi, and in 1719 he returned to Navsari. He was controversial because he was prepared to translate Avestan texts into Gujarati for *behdins*, unlike his priestly contemporaries. Feeling isolated in conservative Navsari, he resolved to go to Delhi, but his father persuaded him to stay. In 1719 he wrote 11 questions to the Dasturs in Iran, thus generating the *Revyat* of JamaspAsa. He was also controversial for some of his opinions on calendar issues and for arguing that *behdins* should be able to study their religion, and even become *dasturs*. In 1721 Dastur Jamasp Velayati arrived from Kerman bringing the answers to JamaspAsa's questions. He noted the discrepancy between the Iranian and Parsi Zoroastrian calendars but did not make the subject widely known, for there were already disputes concerning funerals.⁹ Velayati took three students into his confidence: a *dastur* from Broach, Dastur Kumana of Surat and Dastur

JamaspAsa, all of whom studied with him. Because he considered Dastur JamaspAsa to be the most scholarly he gave him his Pahlavi *Nirangistan*. He was appointed *dastur* in 1734 and was considered to be the leading *dastur* of Navsari at that time, teaching several other *dasturs* including three of the Sanjana and two of the Meherji Rana lineages. He enjoyed writing *Monajats* and Sanskrit *Shlokas*. He made a large collection of manuscripts and said in his will that they were not to be dispersed among his three sons but that the whole collection should go to the most scholarly of them. Unfortunately the brothers disagreed and the collection was dispersed among them.

He taught his son, Jamsetji Jamaspji, who became widely respected as a linguist, studying Avestan, Pahlavi, Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit. After his father's death in 1753 Jamsetji Jamaspji sought the dasturship, but the Anjuman paid his application no heed. Thereafter he often conflicted with the Anjuman, notably when he objected to the consecration of the Navsari Atash Bahram, saying that there should not be two Atash Bahrams in a radius of 125 miles. He refused to attend the consecration of the Atash Bahram, even though he was promised the dasturship in return. He agreed to give a talk on fire afterwards, for which he was honored. His reputation spread, so much so that when the Gaekwad visited Navsari he asked Jamshedji to recite the *Shah Nama* to him, but he was criticized by jealous pundits who challenged the Gaekwad for sitting next to someone who ate flesh and drank alcohol. Jamsetji in turn challenged them to a debate, which he won, and they recognized his authority. He traveled to Bombay on foot in 1781 and stayed as the guest of Bomanji L. Wadia and wrote five books. Many *agiarys* (Gujarati: *agiary* means 'house of fire') including the Maneckji Seth Agiary in Bombay, were consecrated under his directions. He had problems with the Anjuman because he was 'independently minded'.

The first of the Poona JamaspAsa line, Dastur Bomanji Jamsetji, was appointed in 1816 and held the position for nine years. Most Poona *dasturs* were raised in Navsari before taking the dasturship in the Deccan, and most studied the classical languages. One, Sadar [= senior] Dastur Noshirwan Jamasp II (1818–84), actively supported the British during the so-called 'Mutiny' (or as some call it 'The first war of Indian Independence') and he was decorated by the British for his services. Others of this lineage joined the services of the Nizam. But the one with the outstanding reputation for scholarship was Sirdar Khan Bahadur Shams-ul-ulama Dr Hoshang Jamasp (1833–1908) who was Professor at the Deccan College in Poona for 18 years and was awarded a Ph.D. from Vienna in 1886.

For the purposes of this chapter it is the Bombay line of JamaspAsas which is the most relevant. The first was Dastur Khurshedji Jamshedji who started for Bombay from Navsari in 1801. There was then no Shenshai *dastur* in Bombay. Khurshedji was appointed *dastur* in 1812 and served for 28 years, for 11 of which he was an *Akabar* ('Manager') of the PUNCHAYET (*PP*. I: 218 for 24 May 1829). He was the only priest authorized by the PUNCHAYET to

solemnize second marriages once the Anjuman had given approval (Dastur Mulla Feroze had a similar role for the Kadmis). In the 1820s Dastur Khorshedji J. JamaspAsa (1747–1829) was ranked by the British as the Parsi equivalent of the leaders of the Muslim and Hindu communities and was therefore given a monthly honorarium of Rs. 30 in acknowledgment of his standing (Modi 1930: 9.II.III.10). There was then no Atash Bahram, so his son Rustomji was based in the Banaji Dar-i Mihr. The JamaspAsas were considered the senior Shenshai *dasturs* of Bombay, but whereas most Dasturs' authority 'lies within the walls' of their temple, the JamaspAsas were Anjuman *dasturs*.

It is worth looking in a little more detail at the debate between the Sanjanas of the Wadia Atash Bahram and the JamaspAsas at the Anjuman Atash Bahram. In 1803 there was a major conflagration in the Fort area of Bombay, which destroyed many Parsi homes and temples. Hundreds were forced to live elsewhere: a number settled in Chandan Wadi and the need for a Dar-i Mihr became evident. This was built by H. B. Wadia and consecrated in 1805, with two members of the Sanjana priestly family taking part in the consecration. Wadia left instructions in his will that this fire temple was to be made into an Atash Bahram and it was consecrated in 1830; Edulji Dorabji Sanjana was made *dastur* over it. He was a scholar of Avestan and Pahlavi and a firm opponent of the Kadmis, rejecting vigorously the teaching of Dastur Mulla Feroze. He was caught up in much controversy. He argued that because the Wadia Atash Bahram and that in Navsari were of equal status boys need not go to Navsari for their priestly initiations (*navar/maratab*) because this could be done in the new Bombay temple. This directly questioned the traditional religious authority of Navsari. His proposal was rejected by the Navsari Bhagarsath Anjuman (PP. I: 243 for 4 January 1832). On a tour of Gujarat, while distributing largesse in 1850, Sir Jamsetji Jijibhoy asked for Navsari's agreement to the proposal, but even Sir JJ, on such an influential occasion, was refused (PP. I: 545, 1 May). Sanjana proceeded to initiate boys into *navar/maratab* in Bombay, which caused major disputes.

Sanjana was involved in another dispute. The priests who worked for Dastur Sanjana in the new Wadia Atash Bahram assumed that the money left by worshippers at the *boi* ceremonies (the 'feeding' of the fire with sandalwood five times daily) would be shared between all, as in Navsari. Sanjana refused and kept this money for himself. The dispute eventually went to court in 1883, which found in favour of the priests (Kanga 1932: 111–43). But Sanjana remained obdurate and some priests left the Atash Bahram and moved to the Dadyseth Atash Bahram. In 1884 Sanjana and his Trustees took two leading priests to court and accused them and 13 others of violence. The two priests were imprisoned. It was assumed that the motive was to discredit Sanjana's priestly opponents. The brilliant lawyer and famed politician, Sir Pherozeshah Mehta, appeared for the priests; those imprisoned

were released, fined and the 13 were warned (see *PP.* III: 121, 15 June). The priests were made even angrier.

There was evidently tension between Dastur JamaspAsa and Dastur Sanjana, as followers of the two *Dasturs* each spread rumours about the other to the extent that the brother of Dastur Sanjana was sent to prison for libel in 1869 (*PP.* II: 307, 30 Nov.). In 1882 Sanjana issued a handbill condemning Dastur JamaspAsa for performing the *naujotes* of nine children of *juddin* (non-Zoroastrian) mothers (*PP.* III: 41, 26 June).

It then appears that Dastur JamaspAsa, the Anjuman Dastur, and the disenchanting Bhagaria priests from the Wadia Atash Bahram, joined forces to establish a Bhagaria temple where the priests could perform ceremonies. At a meeting among ‘the elders’ in Bombay in 1884 a petition, dated 11 April 1884, was drawn up with 241 signatories, first among which was J. M. JamaspAsa, calling for the establishment of a temporary agiary; a permanent Dar-i Mihr was consecrated in 1887 and plans were made for making it into an Atash Bahram. The Bhagarseth Anjuman in Navsari acceded to the request for *alat* (sacred items for use in the consecration) and sent a new *varasya* (sacred bull kept in large temples for its hair and *nirang* – urine used for purification). They could not use the Kadmi *varasya* because they did not accept the validity of Kadmi rites of consecration (Kanga 1932: 179–244).

The Wadia Atash Bahram Trustees and their *dastur* were unhappy at this development, and in order to counter it planned their own Dar-i Mihr in Navsari to gain influence there. This matter went to court in Navsari, there, and on subsequent appeal to the Baroda High Court, the judgment found against the Wadia Trustees.¹⁰ The plans to consecrate the Anjuman Atash Bahram faced difficulties. Dastur Sanjana wrote a pamphlet saying that it was wrong to have two Bhagaria Atash Bahrams so near, and he argued that the plague then raging in Bombay was a divine punishment for these plans.¹¹ With only one newspaper (*Satya Mitra*) supporting the new Atash Bahram, fund raising was difficult. Dastur JamaspAsa persuaded various individuals to fund certain parts of the temple: Dadabhoy N. Contractor funded a hall above the sanctuary and Mobed Jamshed S. Kookadaru, a close associate of Dastur JamaspAsa, donated a hall for the performance of ceremonies.¹² Others funded the frontage, portico and verandah. On Sunday 17 October 1897 it was finally opened and the fire was moved from the Dar-i Mihr to the Atash Bahram sanctuary. Dastur Jamaspji led the thanksgiving *jashan* ceremony and delivered a lecture after the first *boi* ceremony, and in 1898 he was appointed *dastur* of the Anjuman Atash Bahram.¹³ Patel (1906: 479, 489–93) quotes the *Times of India*, that whereas all other temples had been built and owned by individuals, a whole community or Anjuman now did so: ‘for the first time . . . a fire temple has been established which they can now call their own’. The *Times of India* comments on a picture of ‘Dustor Jamaspjee Minocherji, now recognized as the high priest of the entire community . . .’ and the article later repeats the description ‘the head priest of the

Parsees . . .'.¹⁴ However, the controversies were not at an end. In 1903 Dastur Kaikhusroo Jamaspji performed the *naujote* of Suzanne Brière, prior to her becoming Mrs Tata, triggering the law case discussed by Mitra Sharafi in this volume.

Originally the Managing Trustees had intended that *mobeds* of other panthaks, and followers of Minocher Homji, should be allowed to perform ceremonies in the Anjuman Atash, but the Bhagaria priests protested and took advice from a distinguished Parsi lawyer who prepared a case. But he persuaded them to settle out of court and asked M. P. Khareghat to arbitrate, which he did in 1912. He found in favour of the Bhagarias, a position supported by the Bhagaria Anjuman at Navsari and confirmed by the Bombay Court on 12 July 1915.¹⁵

Religious issues and secular courts

One striking feature of this narrative is the use of Muslim, Hindu or British courts, to settle religious questions; this process long predated the 1908 Bombay and the 1925 Rangoon case involving Bella. I have avoided mentioning the 1908 case because of Mitra Sharafi's chapter in this book (see also Palsetia 2001: 226–51). But it is noteworthy how the *obiter dicta* in that case have been seen as authoritative not only in Independent India but even in the diaspora, for example when a Christian, Joseph Petersen, converted to Zoroastrianism in a well-publicized event in Chicago in 1983 (Hinnells 2005: 478–83). The first example I have found of resorting to a secular court is in 1788 when the PUNCHAYET complained in the Mayor's court that the heirs of Maneckji Seth were not administering their trusts properly with the result that the PUNCHAYET sought the court's permission to take over the trusts. Their appeal was upheld but the heirs appealed to the Governor in Council, who annulled the previous judgment; the PUNCHAYET in its turn appealed to the King in Council, who found in favour of the Seths in 1797 (Modi 1930: 5.13). As we have seen, resort to external courts was taken regarding the calendar, the building of a second Atash Bahram in Surat and the Anjuman Atash Bahram, even concerning which priests could perform what ceremonies in the Atash Bahram. A further case was triggered when the Wadias, who had built and renovated the Atash Bahram at Udwarda, closed a door leading from that Atash Bahram to the Sir D. M. Petit Dar-i Mihr; this ultimately raised questions of ownership of the Atash Bahram. The *mobeds* argued that the ownership of the Atash Bahram itself was not in the hands of the Wadias, but that it was theirs. It resulted in a long court battle in 1903, where the final judgment was that no one could own the Atash Bahram, but the priests had the duty of care, and the Anjuman of Udwarda had overall management of it (*PP*. III: 860f., 20 October). The secular courts were resorted to because there was no clear line of religious authority despite the theory of the seniority of the respective *dasturs*' chairs at Navsari and Bombay.

Changing geographical loci of authority – the increasing religious authority of Bombay

In 1749 disputes arose in Bombay concerning questions about the positioning of the legs of a corpse: should they be laid straight or in the bent meditative position? This was referred to the Navsari Anjuman, although it said that they should be laid out straight, Bombay, in this instance, ignored Navsari and allowed people to choose: this is said to have caused unhappiness back in Navsari (Modi 1930: 5.3–5). Until 1755 priests in Bombay had to go to Navsari on foot to have a *bareshtnum* (9-day purification ceremony). Bombay sought permission to consecrate a *varasya* for the *bareshtnum* and for higher liturgical ceremonies and wrote to Navsari on 7 September 1776. The Navsari panthak simply sent a *varasya* and did not answer the question of permission to consecrate, but permission was granted in 1791 (Modi 1930: 5.7 and 6.1 respectively). The first *Nirangdin* (consecration of *nirang*) in Bombay was celebrated a year later (*PP*. I: 870). In 1777 there was an unusually high number of deaths in Bombay because of the plague, so the Bombay Panchayet wrote to the Navsari Anjuman seeking permission to build a wall around the *dokhma* to lay the dead bodies within a larger space. Permission was granted (*PP*. I; 55, 21 May). Hence until the end of the eighteenth century it can be argued that Navsari was seen as the authoritative priestly centre.

By 1820, however, Bombay was asserting its religious authority. On 7 July 1820 a petition was sent to Bombay from Bulsar concerning a priest who had taken a second wife who was already married. The BPP resolved that he be required to take the woman back to her husband and that if this was not done he, his family, the priest who performed the second marriage and everyone else involved should be made an outcaste. The Bulsar Anjuman protested that among them second marriages were accepted, but the Panchayet threatened action in a European court, so everyone involved had to take a *nahn* purificatory ceremony and recite the *Patet* prayer as signs of penitence (Modi 1930: 7.7). In 1824 there were signs of jealousy between Bombay and Navsari Anjumans. In a letter dated 17 January 1824 the *dasturs* at Udwada refused to perform the *bareshtnums* of Godavra *mobeds* who had migrated to Bombay, because so many were migrating to the metropolis, and they feared loss of standing and income. The *mobeds* appealed to the Navsari Anjuman. It was first agreed that they should be given the *bareshtnum* in Navsari – but not in Bombay. But the Navsari Anjuman finally refused, thereby removing the possibility of the *mobeds* performing ceremonies and thus denying them income. The final solution was that the *bareshtnum* was performed at Surat; the priests then made their way to Bombay on foot and administered the *bareshtnum* to other Godavra *mobeds* in Bombay. In 1826 a Dar-i Mihr was consecrated for them in Bombay. As Sir Jamsetji Jijibhoy later renovated this Dar-i Mihr it was known both as the Godavra or the Sir JJ Agiary (Modi 1930: 9.IV).

Other events in 1824 also highlighted the increasing religious importance of Bombay. The *dastur* of Kalyan was seen attending a dance programme and an explanation was called for. He protested that he did not have the *bareshnum* so he had done nothing wrong. He also protested that he had been compelled to go to the dance. To this the Bombay Panchayet responded to the effect that if the priest had no *bareshnum*, then he was not a *dastur*. The outcome was that they required him to undergo the *bareshnum*, but not until six months had elapsed, depriving him of his income for that period. It is interesting that it was Bombay not Navsari which made that judgment (Modi 1930: 9.V.1). In the May of the same year, Parsis in Poona sought permission from the BPP to build a *dokhma* and a Dar-i Mihr; permission was granted on condition that the Bombay policy was followed, notably not to initiate the children of *juddin* mothers and not to eat meat on *hamkar* days. In 1826 a similar request was received from the Diu Anjuman: the same conditions were again laid down, together with the requirement that the legs of the deceased should be laid straight and not bent, as some Udwada and Navsari priests argued (Modi 1930: 9.V.2–7). Such was Bombay's authority that in December 1831 it was resolved that any *moted* who had his *navar* (priestly initiation) performed outside Bombay, was to be re-examined in Bombay before being allowed to practice there in order to ensure that they were properly trained. The following year Navsari at last gave permission for *navar* ceremonies to be performed in Bombay (Modi 1930: 10.VI.1–4), though in practice some priests, for example the present Dastur JamaspAsa, chose to have their *navar/maratab* performed in Navsari. One important step on the path to the increase of Bombay's authority was the huge conflagration in Surat in 1834. The charitable funds raised were lodged with the firm of Jamsetji Jijibhoy and Sons, but so much was collected that not all the money was needed and the surplus became the Surat Panchayet funds, overseen by the Trustees of the Panchayet in Bombay: thereafter – and down to the present – the Surat Trustees are not elected in that city but appointed from Bombay. All this indicates that by the 1830s in practice the seat of religious and communal authority had become the then relatively new cosmopolitan city of Bombay, just at the time that the Panchayet there was imploding.

Authority to discipline priests

The disciplining of priests, which has been a rarely discussed feature of Parsi religious authority, has in fact been more common than is generally appreciated. The example quoted above, of a *dastur* being required to undertake a fresh *bareshnum* after six months, is not unique. In May and June 1796, in three Samast Anjumans, it was decided that the priests who held the *bareshnum* could not drink toddy, even if they had prepared it themselves. If they were found to have broken this rule then no one was to give him a further *bareshnum*; he was to be forbidden to perform ceremonies and no one was to

make him welcome (Modi 1930: 6.I.8). A priest who took his children to a mosque was banned from working for a year (Modi 1930: 9.II.II.5). In 1830 an Anjuman meeting agreed a resolution that any *mobed* who initiated the child of a non-Parsi woman should be barred from the priesthood for the rest of his life (*PP.* I: 897, August 11; Modi 1930: 10.II.1). In May 1851 the priests of the Muncherji Seth Agiary were banned from entering Atash Bahrams or other *agiarys* because they participated in the Hindu festival of Holi. With the support of people living in that area they sought forgiveness and asked for a *bareshnum* so that they could resume their Zoroastrian activities: permission was granted (Modi 1930: 12.X.5). A dispute between Dastur K. Bejonji, *dastur* of the Kadmi Banaji Atash Bahram and a *boiwalla* (a priest who performs the five times daily ‘feeding’ of the sacred temple fire) was taken to court: this ruled that, as *dasturship* was not a position for life, if the managing trustees and *dastur* could not work together the latter could be dismissed; however, the court ruled against such a step in this instance because not all the managers had been consulted (*PP.* III: 410–13, 6 September). In 1897 Dastur Mulla Feroze was told that he must resign because he had performed the wedding ceremony of H. N. Wadia with a close relative (his father’s step-sister), which was illegal under the Parsi marriage act (*PP.* III: 658f., 14 November). My personal contacts tell me that one Dastur was asked to resign early in the twentieth century for indebtedness, fearing that this could result in dishonesty – though there was no imputation of actual dishonesty. In 1910 the Bhagarseth Anjuman met in Navsari to discuss whether Ervad Sohrabji Maneckji Dastur Meherji Rana could be permitted to undergo a *bareshnum* as he had traveled by sea when returning to Navsari from his position as Panthaki at Colombo (see the chapter by Choksy in this volume). The Anjuman concluded that he could not, as ‘they could not change long standing customs of venerable ancestors’ (*PP.* IV: 101, 14 December). When Dastur Kaikobad Adarbad of Poona performed Bella’s *naujote* in Rangoon in 1914, his Trustees insisted he apologize and promise not to do anything like that again, or be faced with a Samast Anjuman to rebuke him (*PP.* V: 10, 7 May). In contrast, a meeting of the Athornan Mandal, a group to represent the views and interests of priests, met in 1922 to discuss the wedding of R. D. Tata to Suzanne Brière and the subsequent *naujote* of their children by Dastur JamaspAsa. It was resolved that the case of Tata ‘should be considered a special one’ and no action was to be taken against the priests involved (*PP.* VI: 64, 28 January). In 1916 the Bhagarseth Anjuman in Navsari met to discuss the ‘misbehavior’ of Vada Dastur Kaikobad Dastur Meherji Rana; it was decided that he should go and live elsewhere for a period ‘to improve his behavior’. A priest was sent with him to report monthly and an Acting Dastur was appointed in the meantime (*PP.* V: 37, 14 October). Priests and even Dasturs were, therefore, subject to the authority of Anjuman meetings.

An illustration of the power of an Anjuman meeting, though this time not as a disciplinary institution, occurred in 1925. When the *varasya* died at

Udwada all higher liturgical ceremonies at the Atash Bahram were stopped until a new *varasya* could be consecrated, but the *dastur* could not consecrate one until the Anjuman had met to agree (*PP*. VI: 9, 9 November). There were clear, if unwritten, guidelines about conduct at such meetings. In 1937 the BPP convened a prayer meeting on the coronation of King George VI at the Wadia Atash Bahram, but when Dastur Rustom Sanjana demanded the congregation stand and recite a prayer he had composed (even though acting in his own Atash Bahram) there was much debate and several people, including Sir P. K. Sethna and R. A. Wadia, refused. Sanjana wrote a letter of resignation which the Trustees accepted (*PP*. VII, Pt 2: 365, 12 May). In 1942 when Dastur JamaspAsa and Dastur Framroze Bode, after performing the *Bansda naujotes*, attended a prayer meeting at the Wadia Atash Bahram for Allied success in the war there was uproar until they left and only then could the prayers begin (*PP*. VIII: 45, 6 September). Even *dasturs* could be excluded from a prayer meeting by those assembled if they were thought to have acted improperly.

Some aspects of secular authority

Having looked at priestly authority, a brief note is appropriate on secular authority, apart from the BPP. Jesse Palsetia has shown how JJ sought to exert influence on the British by establishing joint charitable projects (notably the hospital) to be seen to be working alongside the British (Palsetia 2005 and above). Sir JJ was not always successful, but another route he pursued was through lavish balls and dinners at his palatial residence to which leading British officials were invited. In 1822 the Governor Mountstuart Elphinstone was invited to his sons' weddings (*PP*. I: 159, 11 February); he held a ball for J.H. Crawford on his return to England (1824, *PP*. I: 183, 22 November); in 1836 he gave a ball for the wedding of two sons (*PP*. I: 287, 14 January); in 1840 the new Governor called on Sir JJ in his home and JJ then gave a ball in his honor (*PP*. I: 351, 29 January and 9 March); again in 1843 he gave a ball in honor of the new Governor (*PP*. I: 411, 6 February), as he did once more in 1849 (*PP*. I: 517, for 22 January). As his physical mobility decreased with age and his fame spread, the new Governors were wont to call on him at the start of their governorship (Lord Elphinstone 1854 *PP*. I: 628, 3 January), even in 1857 at the time of rising tensions before the 'Mutiny' (*PP*. I: 730, 19 June). Later, other Parsis followed this example, but such social prominence gave Sir JJ hitherto unrivalled influence and thereby the power to affect Government policy.

Sir JJ (I) was, as noted above, recognized head of the community but his immediate heir, Cursetji or Sir JJ (II), was not and the custom was only re-established with the election of Sir JJ (III) in 1877. Davar (1949: 55) gives no reason for this, but from reading Cursetji's letters in the Bombay Jijibhoy archive he seems to me to have been more interested in socializing with

upper-class British gentry with whom he identified, and with ordering numerous horses, buggies, cigars and large stocks of alcohol, than with community or social affairs.¹⁶ His later heirs were recognized as heads of the community at Anjumans on the occasion of the *uthumna* of the previous JJ, for example the recognition of Sir JJ (IV) 1898, and Sir JJ (V) in 1908 (*PP*. III: 701, 7 August and IV: 27f., 26 July respectively). But even holding such a position his authority was circumscribed. Thus in 1916 Sir JJ (V) called a Samast Anjuman to mourn the death of Sir Pherozechah Mehta without consulting fellow trustees. The day before it was due to be held, C. J. Readymoney Jr., J. B. Petit, J. J. Vimadalal, B. N. Gamadia and ten others summoned a meeting which was attended by an estimated 5,000 Parsis at the Dadyseth Atash Bahram. It was resolved not to recognize the following day's meeting as one called by the Anjuman, that it should not be put on the record of the BPP and that no resolutions were to be passed. It was stressed that this was not intended as any discourtesy to Mehta but as a protest at the independent action of Sir JJ. A letter was sent to Sir JJ saying that his action was intentionally insulting, illegal, unconventional and discourteous. One hour before his intended meeting crowds of Parsis filled the hall, verandah and spilled out on to the pavement, preventing Sir JJ from entering, forcing him to try to hold the meeting on the steps of the building: eventually he had to give up (*PP*. V: 16, 8 April). The authority of even a Sir JJ could not be taken for granted. Even though he was recognized as the head of the community he did not have the personal authority to call an Anjuman meeting. Sir JJ wrote a long letter arguing that as head of the community he did have the right to call such an Anjuman meeting. Desai (1977: 175–80) shows that the right to call Anjuman meetings thereafter became a matter of controversy. By the 1920s Sir JJ's status was declining and that of the Adenwallas, Readymoneys and M. P. Khareghat was increasing. In his obituary in *PP* (VII/383) Sir JJ (V) is described as 'very independent minded' – a character flaw which made him unpopular.

In 1921 there were widespread Parsi protests against the BPP's involvement in the welcome for the controversial visit of the Prince of Wales, the protesters arguing that the trustees had no right to claim to represent the community without calling an Anjuman meeting. The visit was so unpopular that there were three days of rioting and three Parsis were killed, many were injured and homes and sacred places attacked. The protests from the Parsis were not so much against the royal visit (unlike the Hindu and Muslim rioters) but against the BPP trustees acting unilaterally without a meeting and therefore without authority (*PP*. VI: 36f., 17 November).

In 1933 Sir Pheroze Sethna wanted to call an Anjuman meeting to condemn intermarriage. The trustees invited resolutions and speakers. Some people wanted to submit amendments to the resolutions but these were refused by the trustees who said that a clear yes or no vote to the resolutions was what was required. Legal counsel was taken, which advised that amendments

could be refused but also that any agreements were not authoritative or binding on the community (Desai 1977: 180–4, documents 371–6). Thus the long-standing tradition of the authority of the Anjuman was undermined by two issues: who had the right to call such a meeting and how the business was to be conducted.

Individual authority

It is worth noting that many community heroes did not carry authority within the community. Even the venerable Dadabhoj Naoroji held no office, although he was once used as an arbitrator in a religious conflict. But he had previously faced opposition for his reformist views: for example he published a booklet against the use of *nirang* (*PP* I: 595, 13 June) and Sir JJ (I) disapproved of Naoroji's early moves for female education. Even Sir JJ (I) was at times somewhat unpopular, despite his later saintly image: for example when he brought his ladies 'out' into wider society at a ball in his home. Similarly, though Pherozechah Mehta was prominent in the Bombay Municipality and was even re-elected several times to the Governor's Legislative Council and referred to as 'Bombay's first citizen' (*PP*. IV: 61, 2 December), he nevertheless came bottom of the poll in the first Panchayat elections to be held following the 1908 law case, despite having been nominated by Sir JJ and seconded by Sir D. M. Petit. He received only 47 votes, whereas the third candidate received 137 (*PP*. IV: 28ff., 14 March, the election was not held until 1911). He clearly did not command the affection of many within the community. Other famed heroes also faced intense religious opposition; for example in 1922 a Parsi Cremation Society was started, Rs. 400,000 collected and a request was submitted to the Government for land. Those involved included most of the Tata family, the Petits and the famous scientist Homi Bhabha. There were widespread protests and the Government was urged to refuse the land, and when it was denied a thanksgiving *jashan* ceremony was performed at the Wadia Atash Bahram (*PP*. VI: 76, 24 July). Even some figures who are nowadays quoted as heroes and role models for the community lacked authority in their own day.

Conclusion

This overview indicates the somewhat chaotic nature of authority among the Parsis: the locus of 'power' has moved from the Panchayat, even from the Anjuman, to the law courts – Muslim, Hindu and British; it moved from the Navsari Panthak to Bombay, from family to family – from the Wadias to the JJ's to the Readymoneys and Adenwallas. Within the priestly lineages there were clear lines of authority directing which priest held the first, second or third chairs, but these were different between Navsari and Bombay. One of the strongest bodies of authority, not often commented on by Western

academics, was the Anjuman meeting. Even the *dastur* at Udwada could not consecrate a new *varasya* without the prior meeting and agreement of an Anjuman. The Anjuman chose, and could dismiss or suspend, a *dastur* or priest. But there were differences of opinion on who had the authority to call Anjumans. For reasons of space this study has not raised the issue of individuals competing for power. For example, Mr Justice (Sir) Dinshaw Davar, having been elected for life to the BPP, publicly criticized families for giving charity to non-Parsis, saying they should keep it within the community. Was it mere coincidence that the Tatas had just, in 1908, given huge donations to facilitate scientific study among all India's communities (*PP*. IV: 21f., 26 May)? Though nowadays the Tatas are held up as heroes of the community, they were highly controversial for their marriages out of the community. The age-old foci of authority, particularly the BPP and the Anjuman meetings, have lost their authority and nothing has taken their place. Even in the days of their 'strength', their authority was such that people resorted to external, i.e. Hindu, Muslim or British, courts for judgments on religious issues. The contemporary community has no clear concept of authority; that was lost in the period 1830–1930. The problems began in the early days of settlement, when no clear line of authority was established after the migration from Iran, but became worse with the crumbling of authority in the nineteenth century.

Notes

- 1 Christensen 1944: 97–178; Frye 1983: 287–338; Boyce 2000: 101–44.
- 2 Modi 1930: 7.9; Jeejeebhoy 1953; Dobbin 1972: 99–112; Palsetia 2001: 65–104; Stausberg 2002: 34–44.
- 3 Modi 1905: 44–5 but the date is debated; see Hodivala 1920: 18–36; Palsetia 2001: 22 accepts the date of c. 1492.
- 4 Kanga 1932: 22, 30–4; Paymaster 1954: 97–106; Cereti 1991: 103–11.
- 5 Or 'Cathedral Fire Temple' Hodivala 1927: ch. 12 and see the Obituary of Dastur K. Minocherji in B. B. Patel's *Parsi Prakash* [hereafter *PP*], VI: 109, May 16, 1923.
- 6 There is uncertainty concerning the name of the Atash Bahram. Popularly it has been known as Desai Cursetji's Atash Bahram because he took the lead in raising the funds which he administered before and after consecration. But the funds were raised from the Anjuman (the term here used in the sense of 'community'). The question of ownership led to a court case in 1891 (Kanga 1932: 77–8).
- 7 The Kadmis follow a different religious calendar which is intended to reflect the ancient Iranian calendar from which, they claim, their opponents the Shenshais have deviated.
- 8 At a Samast Anjuman held on 11 August 1830 it was resolved that in future *naujotes* of children born to parents who were not legally married would not be performed.
- 9 Specifically whether the *padan* (mouth cover as worn by the priest tending the fire) should be tied on the corpse and whether the legs should be straight or bent (in the meditating position); see p. 112.
- 10 Another example of a religious dispute taken to a secular court, see Patel 1906: 334.

- 11 Despite their names the Sanjanas were Bhagarias (*PP.* III: 636, 1 June 1897); for Sanjana's letter see Kanga 1932: 318–21.
- 12 Popular tradition relates that he funded this by a miracle of finding a gold bar. In the twentieth century he has become a popular saintly figure whose prayers are thought to work miracles.
- 13 For the opening see *PP.* III: 650ff., 17 October.
- 14 See also Modi 1930: 9.II.II.x.
- 15 Suit no. 22 (Kanga 1932: 111–480; *PP.* V: 87, 9 August).
- 16 See the following volumes in the JJ archive in Bombay University Library: 360, 366, 368 and 371.

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PARSIS IN INDIA AND THE DIASPORA

*Edited by John R. Hinnells and
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 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2008
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2007.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.”

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-203-93450-4 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0-415-44366-0 (hbk)
ISBN10: 0-203-93450-4 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-44366-1 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-203-93450-0 (ebk)