

Most importantly, it was the Indo-Chinese trade that provided the Parsis with a costume which they could call uniquely theirs - the *gara*-embroidery. *Gara* is the Gujarati word for sari. The Parsis wore theirs by using embroidered Chinese textiles which were brought back by Parsi traders. *Gara* motifs were drawn from the rich repertoire of traditional Chinese textile motifs. Chinese characters, which are taken to be the embroiderer's signature, appear on some saris.

*Gara* from China needed more care and maintenance and could not be washed as the colour bled. To protect them from insects, they would be wrapped in muslin or stored in wooden chests with peppercorns tied in muslin cloth and sandalwood sticks for fragrance. It was probably the effort needed to maintain these *gara*, coupled with the appeal of French chiffons, georgettes and lacy fabrics that led to a decline in their demand during the early to mid 20th century. Many old *gara* were cut up and used to make blouses.

During the past few decades, however, interest and pride in wearing *gara* saw a revival. Designers initiated and revived *gara* embroidery in India, replicating old motifs, this time in colourfast materials. Embroidering a *gara* can take up to several months, depending on the intricacy, fineness and elaborateness of the design. Though expensive, they are likened to buying a piece of jewellery, which can be handed down through the generations. Many *gara*, dating to the late 19th century are precious heirlooms of the past, a celebration of the Indo-Chinese trade and the Parsis heritage. ✕



Jamevar (shawl)  
Late 19th or early 20th century  
On loan from Mr. & Mrs. Noshir Mistri.



Ceremonial Ses  
Taken from the book "A Zoroastrian Tapestry", ed. Pheroza J. Godrej and Firoza Punthakey Mistree.  
Photograph courtesy of Fram Petit and Sanjeev Prabhu

- 1 Ascetic practices refers to preference for simplicity in dress, manner and food, that is, not indulging in physical pleasures.
- 2 Monasticism refers to observance or practice of the monastic life or system, especially in a monastery
- 3 Avestan language is the eastern dialect of Old Iranian (the ancient Persian language). Avesta is the sacred text of Zoroastrianism.
- 4 The Sasanian Dynasty is a Persian dynasty (A.D. 224-651) and was the last line of Persian kings before the Arab conquest. The Sasanian era was marked by wars against Romans, Armenians, and Huns and by the revival of Zoroastrianism and Achaemenid custom.

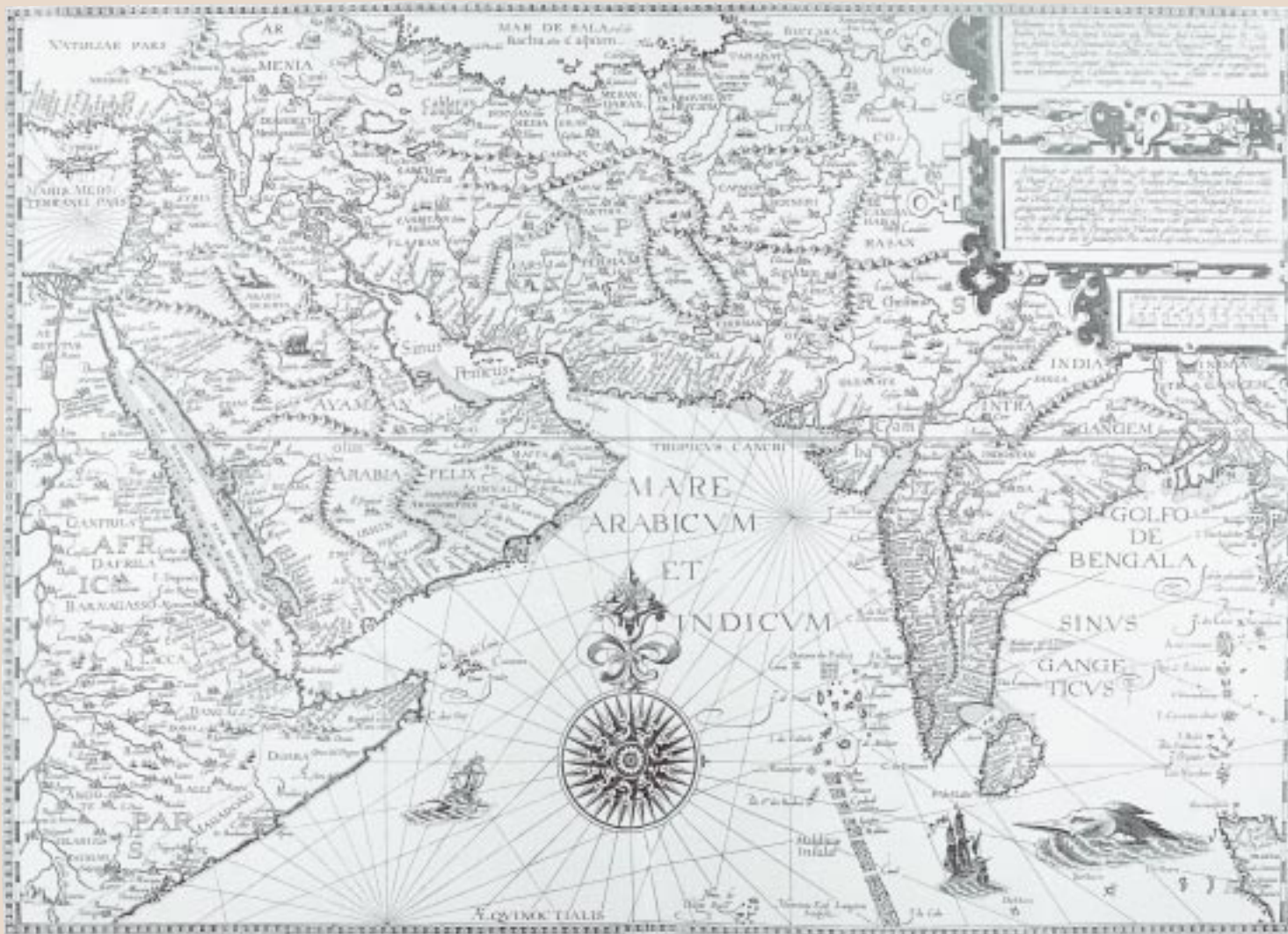
# Flame of the Faith

An Insight into the Parsi Zoroastrian Tradition

Hairani Hassan, Assistant Curator (West Asia)/ Asian Civilisations Museum



Portrait of Prophet Zarathushtra  
Collection of H. B. Wadia Atash  
Taken from the book "A Zoroastrian Tapestry",  
ed. Pheroza J. Godrej and Firoza Punthakey Mistree.  
Image courtesy of Fram Petit.



Map of India, Persia and Arabia by Jan Huyghen van Linschoten (1563-1611) Taken from the book 'A Zoroastrian Tapestry', ed. Pheroza J. Godrej and Firoza Punthakey Mistree. Image courtesy of Sanjeev Prabhu

### Who are the Parsis?

With a current population of only 200, the Parsis form one of the smallest, but growing minority groups in Singapore. ethnically Iranian in origin, the ancestral line of the Parsis can be traced to the province of Khurasan in Iran. The word 'Parsi' was first coined by the people living on the West coast of India, which refers to the Iranian refugees who settled there after having fled from their home in the 10th century - 300 years after the Arab conquest of Iran. This name has remained with them over the centuries. Today, the word Parsi refers to a group of people who profess the Zoroastrian as their religion and whose ancestors have settled in India.

### What is the Zoroastrian religion about?

Zoroastrian beliefs are reflected in the devotees' actions. Zoroastrianism requires that followers practise a three-fold path which incorporates good thoughts, good words and good deeds. Virtues include justice, self-reliance, compassion, charity, service and civic virtue. Unlike many other religions however, there is no ascetic<sup>1</sup> aspect of Zoroastrianism. Fasting, celibacy, and monasticism<sup>2</sup> are all absent. Marriage is considered a virtue and physical cleanliness is highly valued. This system of values is due in part to the idea that a healthy

body will aid a healthy soul - in Zoroastrianism, the body and soul are closely linked.

### Who is Zarathushtra?

The Zoroastrian faith was preached by the Iranian Prophet Zarathushtra around 1200 BCE and is probably one of the oldest religions in the world. According to tradition, Prophet Zarathushtra received his first revelation at the age of thirty. Upon receiving the revelations, Zarathushtra began composing hymns as a way to reach out to his disciples.

These hymns, known as the Gathas were written in the form of exalted poetry and have been faithfully preserved. For centuries, they have been orally transmitted down in an unchanged form by his followers. The Gathas were probably first systematically written down as late as the 6th century when the Avestan<sup>3</sup> alphabet was invented during Sasanian times (A.D.224-651).<sup>4</sup> Ahura Mazda was the name by which Zarathushtra addressed God. Literally translated to mean 'The Wise Lord', Zarathushtra proclaimed that there is only one God - the singular creative and sustaining force of the universe. At the centre of Zoroastrian beliefs lies a duality of conflicting forces - Spenta Mainyu, the force of good versus Angra Mainyu,

the force of evil and darkness.

Zoroastrians believe that time is divided into three ages. The spiritual state of creation is the first age where all are believed to be created pure. The second age is the period of struggle between good and evil in the physical world; and the last age is the coming era, when Ahura Mazda will triumph. By then, the forces of evil will perish and all will be restored to a state of joy and immortality. The purified and cleansed souls will be rewarded in heaven. On the other hand, hell is seen as the house of deceit and is a place of temporary purgatory for the wicked souls.

### Parsis in Singapore

Parsis began settling in Singapore during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. One of the earliest Parsi pioneers, Navroji Mistri (after whom Mistri Road and the Mistri Wing of the Singapore General Hospital are named), arrived in 1912. An engineer by profession, Navroji was sent to Singapore from Bombay by the United Engineers Ltd to construct the Keppel Wharfs. After the completion of the project, he set up his own aerated water factory called Phoenix Aerated Waters. During the 1950s, he gave a large part of his wealth to charity, including a donation of \$1 million to build a pediatric wing at the Singapore General Hospital, which was named after him.



Navroji R. Mistri (1885-1953)  
Photography courtesy of Mr. & Mrs. Noshir Mistri

Another Parsi by the name of Cursetjee Framjee was the founder-partner of Little Cursetjee & Co. This retail business was later renamed John Little and Company. John Little is still operating as a thriving department store in Singapore today. Two other notable Parsi philanthropists in Singapore were Dhunjibhoy Hormusji and Byramjee Hormusji Cama. They set up and ran an English school in Tanjong Pagar for less fortunate students.



A Parsi family on a picnic outing  
Photograph courtesy of Mr. & Mrs. Khushroo Dastur.

In 1889, the Parsis in Singapore started a charity fund called the Parsi Lodge Charity. Initially administered by the Parsis themselves, it was transferred to the Muslim and Hindu Endowments Board before it was passed back to the Parsi Association, which was established in 1954.

Over the years, more Parsis migrated to Singapore and many of them entered professional fields like banking, medicine and computing. But even as the numbers grow, the community remains closely-knit and has been committed to preserving their unique religion, distinct customs and their own sense of identity.

### Parsi Costume

Having left Iran for India around mid 10th century, the Parsis eventually settled in Sanjan, a western coastal state of Gujarat in India. While still retaining their religious customs and beliefs, the Parsis gradually assimilated some elements of the local culture.

Although primarily involved in agriculture, the Parsis of the 18th century saw the possibilities of employment and growth in the urban development of Bombay (present-day Mumbai) under the British. As a result, many families moved south and became engaged in commercial, industrial and mercantile activities, especially in the then flourishing trade with China in cotton and opium. By the early 19th century, Parsis owned many shipping companies and plied a profitable trade with China. Parsi traders started to trade in China and Hong Kong and returned with beautiful Chinese products, which are found in Parsi homes even today.



Parsi lady in a gara  
Taken from the book 'A Zoroastrian Tapestry', ed. Pheroza J. Godrej and Firoza Punthakey Mistree.  
Photograph courtesy of Gautan Rajadhyaksha.