

[Home](#)

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Feature

[about us](#)[databank](#)[back-issues](#)[contact us](#)[south asian shop](#)

'Spirit of India'

[Parsi Community of India](#)

Society &amp; Culture

[Sufis - Poetic Wisdom](#)[South Asian Women Leaders](#)

Music

[Music in Pakistan](#)  
[A story of five decades](#)

Health

[Fast Foods - the 'E' Cuisine](#)

Wildlife

[Royal Bengal's last roar?](#)

Books

['Parsis-Zoroastrians of India](#)['Silk Road on Wheels'](#)[Editor's Note](#)[The Shop](#)[Old Prints](#)

Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds

## Parsis - the Zoroastrians of India

by

Sooni Taraporevala

### About the Author:



**Sooni Taraporevala was born and brought up in Bombay. She studied Film and Photography at Harvard University and received her Masters in Film Theory and Criticism from the New York University, after which she returned to India and worked as a freelance still photographer. She wrote her first screenplay *Salaam Bombay!*, which was nominated for an Oscar. Her second screenplay *Mississippi Masala*, won the Osella award for Best Screenplay at the Venice Film Festival. Her other screenplays are *Such a Long Journey*, (for which she received a Genie nomination from the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television), *My Own Country*, and *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar*.**

### [To the Main Article by Sooni Taraporevala](#)

#### Brief Introduction

The contribution of this dynamic Indian community in all spheres of Indian life – arts, sciences, politics, business, and foremost of all – in social commitment and philanthropy - has been phenomenal. Despite their meagre numbers, the Parsi community did not seek any special privileges under the Constitution, and yet played a large role in the development of the country. Jamssetji Tata, JRD Tata, Godrejs, Wadias, Dr. Homi Bhabha, Zubin Mehta, Retd. Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, Admiral Jal Cursetji, Air Marshal Engineer, are all from this very distinguished community. Indira Gandhi married into the community and so did Mohammad Ali Jinnah's daughter, Dina Wadia.

Parsis are Zoroastrians who arrived in India 1200 years ago from Persia. They were fleeing persecution at the hands of Arab conquerors invading Persia. They landed in Diu, off the coast of Gujarat in India, carrying nothing but a holy flame from their Temple they had left behind. From Diu they went to Sanjan in Gujarat, where the local Hindu ruler granted them land and they began a new life. They were free to follow their own religion and erected their first Fire Temple soon after. They were called Parsis - to denote the region from where they had come - Pars, (Persia).

From these humble beginnings emerges a grand chapter of progress, growth, expansion, diversification, accomplishments and achievements unsurpassed by any

other community in India. Through hard work and social commitment, they founded business empires, colleges, hospitals and research institutes – and in the process a very vibrant business culture in Bombay. Jamsetji Tata and JRD Tata, the Godfathers of India's industrial development, were true visionaries – combining business with philanthropy. Dr. Homi Bhabha, Zubin Mehta, the Wadias, the Godrejs, Retd. Field Marshal Sam Maneckshaw, Admiral Jal Cursetji, Air Marshal Engineer, are all from this very distinguished community, which is guided by three principles in life – Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds. Today, their numbers are fast decreasing – the community faces the threat of extinction – for reasons that are linked to the belief structure of their clergy. Zoroastrianism is a non-proselytising religion – there are no converts. One can only be born into it. Marriage outside the community is not encouraged. Parsi women who have married outside their community are 'derecognised' and are not allowed into the Fire Temple. The birth rates are declining and the community is fast ageing. Inter-marriage within the community has increased the incidence of certain genetic disorders – people are marrying late, or not at all.

This feature is a tribute to the contribution of this dynamic Indian community in all spheres of Indian life – arts, sciences, politics, business, and foremost of all – in social commitment and philanthropy. Despite their meagre numbers, the Parsi community did not seek any special privileges under the Constitution, and yet played a large role in the development of the country.

[next page](#)

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### **[Parsis - The Zoroastrians of India](#)**

#### **[The story of the Ancestors](#)**

#### **[Arrival in India and the beginnings of a new life](#)**

#### **[The Early Entrepreneurs of Bombay](#)**

#### **[Pioneers of Modern India](#)**

#### **[Eminent Parsis of India](#)**

#### **[What is Zoroastrianism?](#)**

#### **[Who was Zarathustra?](#)**

#### **[Rituals, Customs & Manners](#)**

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[Home](#)