

Tangible Intersections of India & Iran: The Meherjirana Library

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Abstract

The hybrid culture of the Parsi Zoroastrians, with its ancient oral traditions yet seamless acceptance of modernity, privilege, and position from the 19th century onwards and then facing drastic demographic decline from the 20th century, has enough paradoxes to call for an in-depth analysis by cultural historians. This article focuses on the cross-national cultural heritage represented in our tradition. The research observation primarily revolves around one of the most significant pieces of Zoroastrians tradition, namely The Meherjirana Library.

Keywords: Meherjirana Library, Zoroastrianism, Parsis, traditions

Cultural memory reflects the similarities and diversity of people across boundaries of time and space, but it is fragile. Every day, irreplaceable parts of this memory disappear forever. UNESCO, the world agency responsible for protecting the world's cultural and natural heritage, in 1992, launched the Memory of the World Programme to guard against a globally growing “collective amnesia”.

Fortunately, tradition is no longer an inappropriate word; it has been accorded a new legitimacy in the post-modern world, while academic discourse today acknowledges the need for a more holistic approach towards culture. Each of us ‘lives at the intersection’ of many narratives, but the hybrid culture of the Parsi

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Zoroastrians, with its ancient oral traditions yet seamless acceptance of modernity, privilege, and position from the 19th century onwards and then facing drastic demographic decline from the 20th century, has enough paradoxes to call for an in-depth analysis by cultural historians.

Iran stands at a meeting point between East and West. It had become an essential stop on the old Silk Route. When the Zoroastrians left Iran for India, there had already been an intersection of cultures. However, when Arab invasions destroyed the ancient Zoroastrian temples and texts, it was oral memory that kept the religion alive in the new homeland. Navsari, *Dharam-ni-tekri* or Pinnacle of religion, became the center of the priesthood and at its heart, along with the Atash Behram, was the repository of priestly knowledge: The Meherjirana Library.



Navsari Atash Behram



The First Dastoor Meherjirana Library

This library is named after one of the most significant figures in the history of the Parsi community. In 1534 AD (905 AY), a boy was born in Navsari into a priestly family. The son of Rana Jesang, he was called Mahyar (Meherji) Rana. Meherji Rana, adopted into the priestly lineage of his paternal uncle Vaccha Jesang, was a man renowned for his piety and learning. According to a Persian biography in the library of the *Māhyārnāma* (Manuscript F-81), Meherji Rana was chosen by the Mughal governor at Surat to have an audience with Emperor Akbar to explain the Zoroastrian religion. The Emperor and the priest shared the Persian language, which perhaps brought them closer. As Akbar was

interested in creating a syncretism of all religions and thoughts, he was keen to learn more about the Zoroastrian faith of his Persian ancestors.

He invited Dastur Meherjirana to his Court at Fatehpur Sikri; this history has passed down not just in oral tradition but in the Manuscripts and *Firman* from Emperor Akbar to the First Dastur Meherjirana. This *Firman*, given as a token of the high esteem with which the Mughal Emperor regarded this hitherto unknown Zoroastrian priest, was probably presented during Dastur Meherjirana's visit to the Imperial Court at Fatehpur Sikri in 1578.



Akbar Sanad



The 16th Dastoor Meherjirana stands before the portrait of the First Dastoor Meherjirana reciting the Vanant Yasht, which was recited at Akbar's Court

An astonishing collection of correspondence in Persian is available at the Meherjirana Library, which provides links not only with the Mughal Court but also with the Iranian Zarthushtis. It contains letters by Akbar's Prime Minister Abul Fazl, Persian verses in praise of Emperor Jehangir composed by Kekobadji Mahiar Rana, various stories ranging from 17th centuries stories for children such as the "*Tuti-Nameh*" (*Tales of a Parrot*) to the tale of *Gulistan* and *Laila*

Majnun. There are important manuscripts on Divination as well as Medicine, Persian Lexicons, Persian histories, various treatises on astronomy and astrology, and even a Cookery book and a book by a Parsi Priest on Yoga.



A Depiction of ritual from an Avestan Manuscript at the MRL

The Persian books on Zoroastrian Theology, such as the manuscript written by Sheikh Abdul Samad of Hansot, revealed that Zoroastrianism was being discussed in the intellectual circles of Mughal India. Religious discussions and debates are reflected in manuscripts on Sufism, Christianity and Islam. Some of the Persian documents were presented to the library by descendants of Ervad Hormasji Behramji Dastur Meherjirana and included the *Sanads, Firmans, Parvanas* and other aspects or transfer of property dealing with the *Jagir* (large estate) bestowed by Akbar on the First Dastur Meherjirana.

It is little known how deeply Meherjirana and the Zoroastrian faith influenced Akbar. Legend has spoken of the importance of Zoroastrianism in the *Din-I-Illahi*, the religion that Akbar attempted to create out of all the philosophies of the Indian subcontinent. Here we had proof of the historical connections, manuscripts and letters from this period provide important documentation of the cross-cultural syncretism, which was the base of the Mughal Empire at its zenith.

During his stay at the court from 1578-9 AD, Meherji Rana impressed the emperor so much that according to the Mughal court historian ‘Abd al-Qādir al-

Badā'ūnī, the emperor ordered his vizier Abu 'l-Fazl to keep a fire burning day and night at the court. According to the traditional account found in the *Māhyārnāma*, Meherji Rana thwarted the sorcery of a Hindu priest called Jagatguru, who, according to the story, had caused a plate to levitate into the sky, appearing like a second sun. A famous *Khyal* (song) of Tansen describes the legend of Dastur Meherjirana's miracle in destroying this black magic at Akbar's Court. Before Meherji Rana left the court, he was presented with a *jāgīr* or land grant by the emperor, receiving property in an area called Ghelkhadi, near the modern town of Navsari.



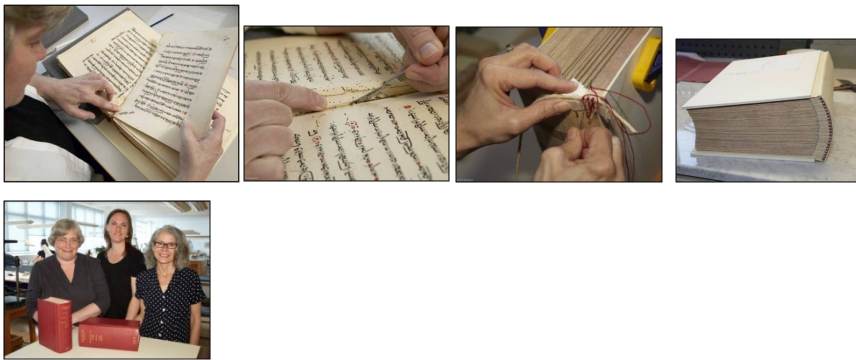
Depiction, with close up of Dastoor Meherjirana defeating evil at Akbar's Court

Meherji Rana's presence in Akbar's court was a great historic incident for not only the Parsis of Navsari but for the whole Parsi community. Appreciating this, when he returned to Navsari, all the priests accepted him as the head of the Navsari priests. For the first time, the title of High Priest, Vada Dastur, was bestowed. Therefore, he became famous as the First Dastoor Meherji Rana, beginning a priestly lineage that continues to the present day. For almost 50 years (1960-2010), the Navsari community was served by Marhum Dastoor Meherji Kekobad Dastoor Meherji Rana, the sixteenth member of the Meherjirana family

to bear the title Dastoor. On January 25, 2010, Kaikhushroo Navroze Dastoor was chosen as the seventeenth Dastoor Meherji Rana. Today, after his demise, the 18th Dastur Kaikhushru Ravji Meherjirana is now the Head Priest in Navsari.

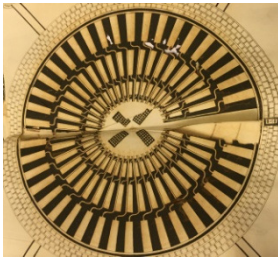
The First Dastoor Meherjirana Library has been continuously serving the people of Navsari, as well as the Parsi and scholarly community, for more than 135 years. In 1872, a wealthy Mumbai Parsi, named Navsariwala Seth Burjor Bamanji Padam commissioned a building to be erected on his own land, known as Lakkad Falia, and the First Dastoor Meherji Rana Library was born.

The Meherjirana Library is unique in that it was established by the scions of the Meherjirana family of Dasturs who have not only collected but also often themselves transcribed a large collection of manuscripts. Dasturji Erachji Meherjirana's collection covers not only outlines of Zend grammar, explanations of the Yasna, various versions of the *Khordeh Avesta* and such ritualistic details as the consecration of Atash Behram's or the *Varasio*, (sacred bull), but also displays his interest in the esoteric art of the *Jamaspi*.



Restoration of T- 54, Yasna, at the Royal Library in Copenhagen, Denmark, during the period 2008-2011

The most important link in the Library between the Parsis of India and the Zoroastrians of Iran are the *Rivayats* or letters exchanged between the Dastur's of India and the Dastur's of Iran. These are the first recorded correspondences between these two sets of Zoroastrians and delineate questions regarding religious thought and practice. It is interesting to note that the earliest *Rivayats* are always questions from the Indian Parsis to the Zoroastrians of Iran. However, over the centuries, as the Parsis prospered and began to build great Fire Temples, while the Zarthushtis of Iran became less educated and lost their property, we can see a complete reversal. The later *Rivayats* are questions from the Iranian side, answered by the Parsi priests. Through the *Rivayats*, today we have written documentation to prove the oral tradition of both ritual and belief.



T-35, Rivayat of Dastur Darab Hormazdyar - It describes the creation of a Dakhma or Tower of Silence



T-35, Rivayat showing position of implements for rituals

As the Library's collections grew, the original building was found too small, and in 1906 Jamshedji Kavasji Dastoor Meherji Rana gifted the present building, located near the Navsari Atash Behram, to the library. In September 2009, with the assistance of the UNESCO Parzor Project, a new annex building was constructed from funds donated by Sir Dorabji Tata Trust wherein various modern facilities have been incorporated, including a new reading room, a conference hall, apartments for visiting scholars, and a laboratory for the preservation of the library's many rare books.

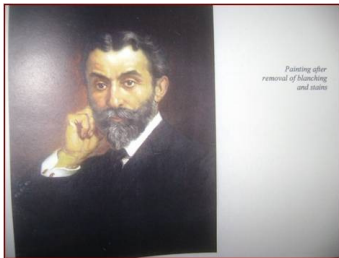
The First Dastoor Meherjirana Library is home to one of the most important collections of manuscripts relating to the Zoroastrian religion in the world. The library's oldest manuscript, an Avestan manuscript written in Iran of the *Vištāsp Yašt* (G-18), dates to the year 693 AY/1323 AD. The manuscript collection of the First Dastoor Meherjirana Library has grown. Most of the original donations of manuscripts came from the Meherjirana family itself, principally from Dasturs Jamsetji Sorabji and Framji Sorabji Meherjirana, Rustomji Kekobadji Meherjirana, and Edalji Navroji Meherjirana. The greatest number of manuscripts was donated by Dastur Erachji Sorabji Meherjirana (1826-1900), who served as the librarian of the Mulla Feroze Library in Bombay and copied more than seventy-five of the manuscripts in the library in his own hand. Dasturji Erachji, in his capacity as a poet, has left us Monajats in the *Ketab-I- Kulliyat*. He has gathered stories recording Zoroastrian travellers from Iran and their history, as well as stories of royal visits, which have made available to us the history of a period that is otherwise unrecorded.

Later manuscript donations to the First Dastoor Meherjirana Library have come from several sources. Extensive collections from Jamshedji Maneckji

Unvala and Meherji Navroji Kutar were both been generously given to the library sometime after Dhabhar's 1923 *Catalogue* was published. More recent donations have come from various families in Navsari, as well as manuscripts from the collection of Vada Dastur Firoze M. Kotwal. It is hoped that the library's collection will continue to be enriched in the years to come.



Jer Kutar of the USA requested only gifts of cash for her 100th birthday and gifted them to Parzor. With this money, the portraits of the Meherjirana Library were restored.



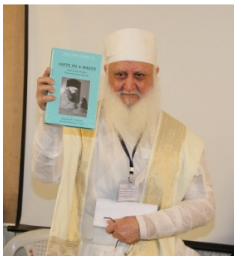
Restored portrait of Sir Dorabji Tata

Today, the manuscripts of the library are maintained in two catalogs. 1923, Ervad Bamanji Nasarvanji Dhabhar was commissioned by the Library Committee to catalog all the library's manuscript collections. These, at the time, amounted to 469 MSS. Since 1923, a number of generous donations from private individuals have greatly enriched the manuscript collections of the library. The work of cataloging these manuscripts was begun some years ago by Dastur Dr. Firoze Kotwal, to whom the credit of identifying most of the texts is due. In November

2008, Dan Sheffield made further identifications, reassembled those manuscripts that had become disordered, and, with the constant assistance of the Librarian, Mrs. Bharti Gandhi, prepared a preliminary descriptive list of 157 manuscripts the library has received in the last 85 years. Therefore today, scholars can access online both these which are:

- Dhabhar, Bamanji Nasarvanji. 1923. *Descriptive Catalogue of All Manuscripts in the First Dastur Meherji Rana Library, Navsari.*
- Kotwal, Firoze, Daniel Sheffield, & Bharti Gandhi. 2008. *Preliminary Descriptive List of the Manuscripts Donated to the First Dastur Meherjirana Library since 1923.*

The First Dastoor Meherjirana Library, as one of the world's foremost research institutions for the Zoroastrian religion, also contains printed books on Zoroastrianism and Oriental Studies in Western languages, as well as Gujarati and Persian, ranging from the 18th century to the present day. Some of the rare and important books in the library's collection range from 19th century illustrated & lithographed *Shāhnāmas* and the complete 10 volumes of the *Parsi Prakash* to the more recent publications such as Pheroza Godrej & Firoza Punthakey Mistree; *A Zoroastrian Tapestry* and Shernaz Cama; *Threads of Continuity: Zoroastrian Life and Culture.*



Release of the Festschrift ed. Prof. Jamsheed Choksy on Vada Dastur Kotwal at the Meherjirana Library

The library's complete collection, which is constantly enriched with new acquisitions and donations, amounts to over 50,000 books. In addition to housing rare manuscripts, the library also functions as a lending library to the local Navsari community. Books of a more general interest include books on philosophy, psychology, astronomy, medicine & anatomy, astrology, etc. The library has extensive collections of classic and contemporary fiction in English, Gujarati, and Hindi. The library caters to school and college-going students by providing them access to encyclopedias, dictionaries, publications of academic interest, and internet facilities for research. The library also subscribes to a number of newspapers and magazines for the general reading public.



Library reading room

In recent years, the First Dastoor Meherjirana Library has been engaged in a number of significant projects to preserve and provide greater access to the important heritage that it houses. With hard work over 20 years and magnificent funding gathered by the Parzor Foundation and Ms. Pилоo Jungalwalla, the Library successfully completed the microfilming and digitizing of the ancient and precious manuscript collection. Parzor, has in the last several years, helped it connect with scholars, such as Professor Alberto Cantera and his students from

the Universidad de Salamanca, to digitize certain important Avestan manuscripts through the *Avestan Digital Archive Project*. Many of these manuscripts are now online and viewable from all over the world.

In 2013, Parzor and its Fulbright scholars, Dan Sheffield and Dinyar Patel, worked with the Meherjirana Library to create a conference entitled **Celebrating a Treasure: 140 Years at the First Dastoor Meherjirana Library, Navsari**. In recognition of its 140 years of service, and in celebration of the completion of a new annex and conference center in the library complex, the Librarian and Board of Trustees of the library, along with the UNESCO Parsi Zoroastrian project, welcomed Indian and international scholars of Zoroastrianism and the Persian tradition, while Amitav Ghosh, the Chief Guest, gave the Commencement Address.

The purpose of the conference was twofold. It would encourage scholars who have visited the Meherjirana Library in the past, as well as those who are interested in learning about this culture, in gaining experience at the library, to acquire an appreciation for its ongoing projects, and to forge and renew links with international and Indian scholars and community members. Second, the conference was meant to foster an understanding of the current state of scholarship and raise awareness in Navsari and in India about the crucial importance of the research that is currently being undertaken around the world from and through the Manuscripts at the Meherjirana Library.

The Presentations at the conference related the strengths of the First Dastoor Meherjirana Library's Collections, as well as portrayed different periods of Zoroastrian religious history. They covered the history of Western India and the Parsi community, art and archaeology, and the field of manuscripts studies, book

history, and library science. The Conference was accompanied by an Exhibition of the MRL Manuscripts, there were Curated Walks around the historic town, and over 150 experts saw for the first time the living crafts and cuisine of a people they had studied for a lifetime. As Navsari is the hometown of Sir Jamshetjee Jeejeebhoy, Dadabhai Naoroji and Jamshedji Tata, the activities around the Conference showcased how the Parsis, once refugees from Iran, helped create commerce with China which built the city of Bombay. Dadabhai Naoroji became the leader of the Indian National Congress and the first to speak for Indian Freedom in the British Parliament, while Jamshedji Tata created the Industrial base of modern India.

Today, Navsari stands at a crossroad; developers eagerly wait to buy Parsi homes and build modern flats and apartments. Yet, this little town holds in itself the history of a people. At its center and preserving its history is the First Dastoor Meherjirana Library at Tarota Bazar.