
The Parsis of Bombay: their history and religion under British rule

Professor J.R. Hinnells of the University of Derby has been visiting and researching Bombay Parsis since 1971, and has laid the foundation of personal contacts, notably with the high priest Dastur (Very Revd) Dr K.M. JamaspAsa. His current project is to write a history of the community and the religion of Bombay Parsis. Parsis are mentioned in passing in most histories of India concerned with politics, social reform, and economic history. They were pioneers in education, the industrial revolution in India, the founding and early development of the Indian National Congress and its liberal breakaway, the Western India Liberal Foundation and the Independence movement. But they are rarely studied, and little has been written on the religion and cultural values that were at the foundation of much of their achievement. The project is conceived as a collaborative exercise – as well as being a personal friend, Dr JamaspAsa has an inside knowledge of and unique access to community records that no historian has previously used.

Professor Hinnells describes his methodology thus:

The basic method of working is to identify the key issues, then we each work on our respective sources, Dr JamaspAsa on the Parsi Gujarati (which is quite different from 'ordinary' Gujarati) sources and myself on the English ones (there are many both in India and the British Library). I write the text of the chapters, Dr JamaspAsa reads and comments. With the chapters on religion, I research and write on the doctrinal material (because of the problems of perceived partisanship within the Parsi community). For the liturgical material, he – as high priest – takes me through the inner (temple) rituals in word or rehearsal. Because of the purity laws, non-Parsis cannot enter the temples. We go to public rituals (weddings, initiations) together. He also gives me access to

his family records (his is one of the three oldest priestly lineages in the community) for the historical dimension. I question him from a comparative religion perspective and we produce an agreed manuscript written by me.

He and I have worked together on previous publications, and we know the wealth of unused material that exists, and want to write a history that has never been attempted in this way. Another unique dimension of this work is the material from the Parsi diaspora [from a book currently being completed by Professor Hinnells]. Others have seen the diaspora as peripheral to Bombay Parsi history, but in fact it was crucial, supplying the wealth and much of the expertise that went into the development of the community – for example from the China and East Africa trade.

Professor Hinnells has completed the first phase of his research, and an extract from his interim report is given below.

My autumn research focused on checking bibliographies, indexes, and so on at the British Library and SOAS, to ensure I had a comprehensive list, especially of primary sources. In India, I checked materials in the three main Bombay libraries. I also spent a week in Gujarat checking sources and found records for approximately 200 years in three key Parsi areas. All these records are in old Parsi Gujarati, which few can understand (even in the local Parsi community). My high priestly collaborator, Dr JamaspAsa, can, but because I have found so much material, he cannot spend sufficient time in Gujarat. We will, therefore, arrange for files to be sent to him in Mumbai, or raise funds in the community for a research assistant working under his guidance and supervision. These materials undoubtedly make the original contribution of this book yet greater. Unfortunately bouncing around in a jeep for a week visiting centres where there are no roads (or even worse, roads not properly maintained) triggered a medical crisis and I was hospitalised on my return to Cambridge. However, the Oriental Institute sent a package of books each day to me and the result was that I read more than I would have done without the medical problems (losing out on the more social dimensions of the visit). I looked only at sources from Indian small-scale or private publishers, which are not available in Britain. These were mostly on eighteenth century Bombay history (including one superb source, which amounts to a local early history of the Bombay Fort based on records not used by others, and to which I have never before seen reference). I also read through the entire proceedings of three important nineteenth century law cases involving Parsis and which were of religious significance; in London libraries, only brief newspaper accounts/summaries are available.

Another change became necessary. I had planned to complete the work which Dr JamaspAsa and I had started in England, going through the details of, and theology behind, virtually all religious rituals. Dr JamaspAsa had been one of three high priests, and the least outspoken of them. Now he has become the most prominent due to the age and personal circumstances of the other two. He is therefore much busier than expected, especially as one of the fiercest religious disputes I have known (over funerals – all the vultures have died due to a virus) has broken out.

There was, however, some remarkable benefit arising from some sad circumstances. He invited me

to stay with him and his family in Mumbai. To our knowledge this is the first time an outside academic has stayed with a high priest (made so unusual because of the purity laws). Two weeks prior to my visit his mother-in-law died and so the family was engaged in the second stage of strict traditional mourning rites. While I was there, his father-in-law also died, so I was in their home while the first two weeks mourning rites were undertaken. I offered to move into a hotel out of sympathy with their grief, but even more so because of the purity laws. Both he and his wife insisted I stayed, being, they said, 'part of the family'. I could share their grief because I knew both parents. Further, I was staying with them over New Year, and was present when domestic rites associated with new ventures were performed, which are not mentioned in the available books. (When talking about rituals to the community's main RE teacher at the end of my stay, I found not even he had known of this traditional high priestly practice.) From a strictly anthropological perspective, it was a unique experience. The rest of the work on the rituals will be done either on my next visit, or during a possible visit by him to Britain.

We now plan to include another range of original sources. The new material is the collection of the oral traditions relating to temples and associated miracles. Previously we had intended to focus on the conventional history – the buildings, their foundation, development, and analysing the use of 'sacred space' etc. But talking to practising Parsis, and visiting old temples in the remote villages, it became apparent that what made the buildings important for the daily lives of practitioners was not their antiquity, but the firm belief in miraculous events associated with them. In one sense this relates the sort of oral histories collected by Kreyenbroek and Munshi (*Living Zoroastrianism*, Curzon, 2001, work also supported by the British Academy) concerning individuals, to other such materials concerning the major centres of the religion. I have also unearthed a range of old Gujarati poetry and traditional cradlesongs which furnish fascinating materials relating to popular belief and practice, a great contrast with the institutional records I unearthed.

In a recent update, Professor Hinnells reports that he has traced an archive in Toronto of nineteenth century handwritten letters ('loads of them') from Dadabhoi Naoroji, a Parsi who became the first Asian MP at Westminster (MP for Finsbury, 1892–5) and led the Indian National Congress movement for two decades. Why the letters have ended up in Toronto is unknown.