

Saga of a Great Soul

by Roni K. Khan



There were three unexpected and unusual mourners at the Paidust on the sad morning of August 1, 2001 at Mumbai's sacred Doongerwadi. The body of the dear deceased had been laid for the last sezdo on the raised stone platform in a paved clearing in the forest. For the last time his face was uncovered for the last goodbye, and then the pall-bearers swiftly bore his mortal shell into the consecrated Dokhma (Tower of Silence) standing hardly a stone's throw away.

Within two or three minutes of his family and friends vacating the clearing, the unexpected mourners emerged from the forest and stalked into it. Three peacocks! While two of them kept a vigil walking around the clearing, one unfurled his gorgeous tail into a huge fan and danced, danced, and danced for at least fifteen minutes directly facing the stone platform which the dear deceased had just occupied!

Even Nature recognizes and pays tribute at the passing of a great soul. After all, this was the Paidust of the Zarathushtrian sage, savant and scholar, **Behramshah Dinshahji Pithavala**.

Behramshah, born on November 13, 1905, was 95 years of age (96 running) when he left his body at 10:15 P.M. on July 31, 2001 in the I.C.C.U. ward of the Sheth Bomanji Dinshaw Petit Parsi General Hospital, with his close ones taking turns to continuously whisper the blessed Ashem Vohu, our maantra of salvation, into his ear. He transited (he always preferred the word transition to death!) this life as gracefully and peacefully as he had lived it. It was all over within a mere four hours.

What a remarkable life! Without doubt, he was one of the most advanced Zarathushtrian souls of the past century. The noted scholar and educationist, Ervad Bejonji N. Desai of Boys Town, Nasik, correctly calls him a *salek* and a *drigu*. It was my great good fortune and privilege to be close to him during his lifetime as well as during his transition. Some of his relatives recall that he had predicted the period of his own death and also that I would be at his side during his passing.

It is therefore my duty, through the courtesy of your columns, to record for posterity a few facts about this great Parsi's life. These comprise not only my personal impressions but also some of his own words culled from hundreds of letters written to me over the years - note that all textual matter in double-quotes is from the latter.

Despite (or rather, because of!) his deep spiritual realizations and vast knowledge, he was modest and humble to the core. To the casual acquaintance he would appear to know little or nothing. Humility is one mark of the spiritually great, and an absence of craving for material tinsel is another. Behramshah possessed both. On occasion, however, he would give a flash of his real stature. I recall the time I had engaged in a discussion with him, at the scholarly philological level, about some verse from the holy Gathas. After patiently hearing me out and then explaining to me the true inner meaning of the verse, he quietly added in his gentle way: "You see, *Roni*, you read only the lines. But I read also between the lines." Touché!

The hallmark of his writings is a unique combination of high scholarship with amazing spiritual insights obviously drawn from direct inspiration from Above. As he candidly wrote to me once, "I am very much convinced that some hidden source, some Invisible Master, has come to my help by way of inspiration given to me", and he similarly also wrote to me of "some kind of hidden Entity who wanted to help me."

His magnum opus '*In Search Of Divine Light*' (Mazdayasnie Monasterie, complete edition Bombay 1995), which he said comprised his allotted lifework and which is a masterpiece that is almost an encyclopedia on our Religion, is a case in point. Although a product of meticulous and brilliant scholarship, it is not dry as dust as such tomes often tend to be, because it is also a product of divine inspiration and this is why it has the power to change the lives of ordinary folks like you and me. With his unaffected modesty, Behramshah would feel embarrassed when called a scholar, and would remonstrate, "*No, no. I am only a student!*" But despite his protests, a scholar he truly was, and a true sage as well all rolled into one peerless package.

The perceptive reader will comprehend the real stature of the man who could write a masterpiece like '*In Search Of Divine Light*' when I inform you that he was a 'matric-fail'. In other words, he failed to pass out of High School! As he put it, "*Fortunately or unfortunately (I cannot say now) I failed. And there ended my formal education. I was so disappointed that I did not even care to find out what were the total marks obtained by me nor in which subject I had failed.*"

The writing career of this 'matric-fail' began in his native Navsari, spurred by his lifelong tryst with Astrology over which he later attained acknowledged mastery. "*I became deeply engrossed in this Divine Science. This eventually led me to the revered Ardeshir N. Billimoria who became the master and guru of my boyhood days. He also edited a monthly journal, Cherag. I got my first job under him at the princely salary of Rs. 15 per month. Ardeshir gave me a small para in English and asked me to translate it into Gujerati. He was so very pleased with my translation that he gave me a piece in English on Hazrat Ali and my Gujerati rendering appeared in Cherag.*"

Thereafter, Behramshah came to Bombay from where he wrote for the famous Wynn's Astrological Magazine of the U.S.A. Such a fruitful period, he recalled. "*But all that ended with World War II. Thereupon, I started contributing articles, original and research-based, to Dr. B. V. Raman's astrological magazine.*" In addition, he wrote some brilliant pieces on Zarathushtrian topics, e.g. his monograph on the derivation of the Sanskrit alphabet from Avestan characters, etc., now preserved in the Bodleian Library at Oxford courtesy his great admirer Prof. Ms. Meher Master-Moos.

In his middle years, Behramshah's literary career underwent a hiatus due to family responsibilities, but took a sharp upswing one fateful day, when, praying at the Dadisett Agiary, he received just a stray thought to write an article on our key Daily Prayers (Rojindi Bandagi) which was published in the Jam-e-Jamshed newspaper on January 20, 1976. The rest, as they say, is history. As time passed on new ideas came like flashes and it went on for years together. What went on were flashes that spanned a quarter of a century, involved at least 250 articles, and ended precisely two days before his death when the last section of his final four-part article was published in the Jam-e of July 29, 2001. The master's very last words in that final section speak for themselves: "*If there is any other solution to this moot question, please let me know. I would like to learn something new even at age 96. Thank you.*" Shaabaash, Behramshah, shaabaash!

What was the man behind the mighty pen really like? Well, to start with, may I assure you that never was there a gentler soul, at least, in my experience. A cruel or vindictive thought or word or action was alien to his nature. Even to those who had wronged him, he duly made them understand their error but still continued to offer them his love. To those who helped him he gave his heartfelt gratitude, and to those who hurt him he gave his heartfelt forgiveness. He never bore any ill-will to anyone.

His aura was so serene and pure that to bask in it for an hour or two in his company was a spiritual therapy in itself. His equanimity was remarkable. He could take the thick and the thin of life, the wheel of happiness and misery (a phrase he was fond of quoting from the holy Gathas), without undue fuss in either of the two cases. Not that his life was a bed of roses. Of his six children, he lost three during his lifetime one an infant girl, another a teenaged boy who has just finished his school-leaving S.S.C. examination, and then a middle-aged son. Also, his adored wife.

Besides, as he disclosed to me in one of his letters: "*I was born in a very poor family. My very beloved father worked in Bombay as a sort of kitchen supervisor, bringing articles from the bazaar, etc. Of course, I stayed with my revered mother at Navsari till I had to come to Bombay very very reluctantly in search of work.*" And yet, he never ran after money and not a penny went into his pocket either for his hundreds of articles in the Jam-e, or for his magnum opus, or for the astrological readings, the wise advice and the precious nirangs that he disbursed to supplicants. These were all freely given as

a service to his beloved Community and Religion. He was un-purchasable, and his integrity on all other counts was equally un-impeachable.

A perfect gentleman of the old school, he was grace and kindness personified. Staunchly orthodox (*Grk. orthos = right, upright, straight + doxa = doctrine, opinion*) in his views as well as in his personal lifestyle, it is but natural that he sometimes came under fire for some of his beliefs. These he defended to the hilt, but in a most dignified manner at the high level of issues and not at the petty level of personalities. When attacked, he fought. But he fought righteously and without the slightest trace of malice, vindictiveness, venom or any form of impropriety towards his opponents either in his spoken or written word. In every way he was the ideal Zarathushtrian *nar asho*. Truly, he lived his Religion just as much as he preached it.

What did Behramshah do for a living? What was his working life? In his tender youth he left Navsari forever in search of employment. *"Overnight I found myself in Bombay. My brother, who was a local train guard in the G.I.P. Railway Co, sent a wire to immediately come down to Bombay for some job. But after a full year's wandering from V.T. to Matunga, I failed to get a job with the Railway Co. Fortunately, I had done the theory of Dutton's 24-Hour Shorthand System, so I joined the Bamji Class Course for three months."*

In the early days he was employed by Mr. R. P. Mehta *"in whose firm I worked for 27 long years and I remember Mehtasheth with deep gratitude."* And then came another association that lasted even longer - for nearly 45 years. This was with the famous lawyer Mr. Nani A. Palkhivala. Behramshah recounted: *"I joined Nanisheth as his personal stenographer and worked at his place of residence. But at no time did he ever interfere with my religious views."* And then he added, with his innate modesty and greatness of heart: *"I do not know of any other employer who has done so much for his employee in return for so little done by the latter."*

I close with placing on record two more snippets from dear Behramshah's personal letters to me. The first is the comment of a man who was the epitome of service that is truly selfless, being devoid of all self-publicity and self-promotion. The second is the comment of a man who had penetratingly observed the goings-on in our Community for almost the whole of the twentieth century.

"If you sincerely offer yourself to render selfless service of any form or nature, the Great Ones do come forward to guide and assist you."

"The Community is going to the dogs: our only consolation is the covenant of Ahura Mazda given to his chosen Prophet Asho Zarathushtra that He will send Rainidars from age to age to restore our exalted Daena to its pristine purity."

- Behramshah Dinshahji Pithavala.
