

## **MEMORIES THAT STILL LINGER** **from those times long, long ago.**

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### Daily Loban Ritual - burning sandal wood & incense

One of the daily ritual in a Parsi/Irani homes in India of the early 20th Century, that brings back happy memories of our childhood, of a bygone era, when the days had more hours, families had more members, dinning tables had more chairs, we were more religious and the community felt like being a large close knit happy and contented family, always in concert with each other, always helpful.

Reminiscing of those days, in my minds eye, I caught glimpses of mom or grand mother glide by at sun-down with the silver or German-Silver afargan through each room as did the grayish-blue smoke, fragrant with sukhar (sandal wood), loban (incense), agar that when mixed with the sent of tube-roses, or jasmine or 'motia.' (Arabian jasmine) from the cut flowers on the prayer table or in the rooms was a heavenly experience . With one small hand we, brothers, sister, aunts and uncles, would cover our heads and with the other add a pinch of "whair" , loban or agar, then hurriedly putting both hands together, say an Ashem Vohu. Then with both hands, we would pull the smoke towards us. At the end of the round of the house, the Afargan was place at the "prayer table" and before the charcoal embers died they'd be transferred to the coal burning "choohlow" ( stove ). In the 1930 there was no gas or electric stoves except in parts of Bombay or Karachi. The LOBAN did the round of the rooms in the morning also, but we were then well on the way to school.

The prayer table was where mom or dad , who so ever got 'ready' first in the morning, would light the "Divo". The kids got their turns on their birthdays. The divo used to be a short glass partly filled with water topped with either, pure ghee, cooking oil or special oil-lamp media with a long 'kakrow', ( i.e. wick) held by a metallic clip or a floating 'kakrow' on a cork float or even a candle that were kept alit perpetually. As pure ghee became expensive, ghee was only used on festive occasions or on birthdays.

In our uncle's house in Bombay the 'divo' was suspended from the ceilings in all the main rooms, in an old fashioned chandelier, like you find in some of the Atash Behrams. Maybe it was something left over from the pre-electricity days and these were the lights that the BATTIWALLA's as a profession lit.

### Chom-e-shvva

In our scriptures there is a mention that 'it was obligatory, as thanks-giving' to save a bit of the meal at the end for the dog - during Sassanian times, it was called the "Chom e shvaa". Those who did not have a pet dog , used to carry the saved food to the back door 'paachhloo baannu' to give it to the stray dog.

My parents, did the same in Delhi. Besides the dogs of which he had many, my father had a handsome pet Rhode Island Red cock who would walk in at breakfast time to peck at the piece of omelette on toast, or "charveloo eedo with rotli".

My wife carries on the tradition here in California. Before she has a bite at breakfast, she offers our dog a piece of toast that is held out on a fork, you should see the dog gently walk up to her, sits down and then delicately slips the bread off the fork with the side of his mouth, without ever touching the fork. Then with an expression that conveys a silent "thank you", without waiting for a second helping he softly tip-toes away to the entrance room where he sits at the window as the self-appointed guardian. We sometimes wonder if this four year old did come to us from a "finishing school".

Breakfast time is when we have several winged visitor at our back door waiting for the daily hand out of bird feed. Sometimes on weekends when we are late for breakfast, the inquisitive squirrels would come scratching on the dinning room door to remind us that we have delayed their mid-morning hand out.

Some readers may frown on such acts, but this daily ritual with our pet, this insignificant act of kindness passed down to us, gives us a tremendous sense of joy, a great lift-off to a beautiful day.

My late octogenarian father-in-law Dinshaw Burjorji Karbhary in Valsad used to feed crows and "mynah" birds after breakfast. They would fly into the first floor balcony in time to see if the old man was at the table. Dinshaw and his wife Gool had given each bird from the group, an identifying Parsi name. It was really wonderful seeing the birds assemble in a row on the parapet awaiting their piece of "malhai-nay-rotli" or just "rotli" from the old man's hand. When making the ROTLI my mother-in-law Gool, would always say, " Ah-ay chalia-o-nay-varey chai".i.e. this is for the birds. The birds would share the "nastoe" and fly away. Sometimes a bird or two would linger on, the old man would tell his wife , "Gool, Muncherji nay Cawasji nay varey please rotli laoso kay? Aaje A' logono hisso koi beejo khai gee-yo"? ( Translated: Gool. Will you please bring bread for Muncherji & Cawasji; today someone else ate their share.)

It was so wonderful watching the old folks happily excited and delighted hosting this daily Rotli parties for the birds. The dogs had their day at night time from the 'Kutra nay varey Bhonu" that was saved from dinner to be equally divided amongst the dogs that would be waiting.

Talking of "PAACHCHLOO BAANNU", and dogs, takes me back some sixty years or more in Delhi (1940s), when I was still wearing short pants. After the dogs were fed the left-overs from dinner ( like your "FOOi" used to), we remembered that we should give some hot milk to the six pups that were about a month old. I gave four annas ( a quarter of a rupee) to the servant to get hot milk from the nearby "Halwai" ( that is a meethaiwalla nee dukaan). Those days 4 annas would get you one SEER of milk, that's about one litre. Hot milk is better than hot chocolate for the North Indians especially on a cold Delhi night. So when the servant brought the milk and went to feed the pups, I

wanted to make sure the man did not gulp down half of it before feeding the pups, so in the darkness flanking myself with the PAACHCHLOO BAANNU I was peeping out to watch. It was then I noticed what appeared to be a long line of black ants carrying their white eggs along the corner of the BAANNU. Ants do that when the seasons change. Looking closer I was petrified, when I realised I was staring into the beady eyes of a snake when his forked tongue shot out, trying to get a taste of this young Parsi. Quickly backing off, I called the cook, who would not do anything as it was against his religion to offend the snake, I called my father who came and sent the snake to his heavenly abode. I wonder if future generations of Z's will have any knowledge of these beautiful little rituals like "Chom e-shvaa" or have time or inclination to follow them with the same love and reverence as our forefathers did. Will they ever experience the transcendental joys inherent in these little Zoroastrian acts ?

### IDEAL RESTAURANT ....a gastronomic heaven (Still there in 2009,

But shifted about 100 mtrs away and inside from main road.)

(The IRANI Restaurant... quintessentially Zarathushti Restaurant of old.)

It was an old building standing guard –resolute and proud – on Hornby Road, a street that was and still is the main artery of Bombay. It used to have a typically Victorian façade, elaborately decorated in stone and brick, an edifice that was not only a symbol of times gone by, but a fine Irani Restaurant I first set foot in, before fire reduced it to a shell. They called it the IDEAL RESTAURANT Building thought it had another name.

It stood at the corner of Hornby Road and Ghoga St, next to the DadySeth Agiary, at Flora Fountain. Just a hundred yards down the road lived my uncle Ardershir Sorabji, on the top floor of the Kalfati Mansion and this is where we spent most of our vacations during the 1930 /40's.

Often after visiting the Agiary, the aroma of the freshly baked wine cakes, cheese cakes, chicken patties lured us into the restaurant with our parents in tow. For these little perpetually hungry Parsis coming from North India, the Irani restaurant with its Faloodah, Ice cream, Irani Daram-No-Juice, Fresh Khari Biscuits, Batashas, mouth drooling chicken or mutton puffs, Kheema-na-pattice, wine “cake”, warm cheese “Cakes” with a crispy cheese crust, luggan –nu-custard, Bun/Muska, etc., was like being in a gastronomic heaven.

What I found peculiarly interesting if not amusing was that the waiters and the staff were all Iranis or Bawas very much like us, dressed in traditional black velvet “bhunva-ni-topees”, white Bundis (jackets), long white shirts on top of wide flowing white “lay-gas” (pajamas) with the long ends of their Kustis trailing behind. Only the Manager or the boss man, the man at the counter near the entrance /exit, to whom you paid your bill, was dressed in a coat type “Duglo” and wore thick horned rimmed spectacles . And when

waiter came to take your order they spoke grammatically incorrect Gujarati. We had a tough time trying to choke our laughter.

Another peculiarity I noticed was that at the end of the meal no bill or cash-memo was presented. But no sooner you got up to go, from the corner of the huge sprawling hall, some one would shout in a sing song voice, giving details of what you ordered and the total amount you had to pay. We never could figure out how they did it. It is said no one ever escaped the shouter's watchful eye or got off without paying. If one happened to walk into the restaurant and walk out without buying or eating, all could hear the loud sing-song chorus as the person passed by the cashier's counter, " this one did not eat or drink".

Another thing we found amusing was, we kids were addressed as, "BOO-CHAAS" & "DICK-RAAS"! No body referred to us or called us so in the Delhi restaurants.

This may interest some of the readers who in Jan 2007 paid RTI, Rs.15 for a mutton Puff or a pastry, or cutlets, or Rs 35 for packet of wafers or Khari biscuits,

In the 1940's at the Ideal Restaurant we paid:

Large glass of Faloodah with ice cream or Pomegranate Juice Annas 2= (Rs 0.125)

A large portion of Custard or 'Kheema na pattice' Annas 2.5 = (Rs 0.16)

A full breakfast with 2 eggs, bun, muska & tea, also cost the same.

Cheese Cake as big as a standard muffin was 5 Paisa or Annas 1.25 = (< Rs 0.08)

Pastry same size as today, chicken/mutton/vege puffs, packets of 8 khari butter biscuits, Nan khatais, packet of batasas or wine cakes, were just Anna One each; that was the price also for a large 5 inch fresh bun with a liberal helping of muska (butter) with a hot cup of tea.

Many a times as we were leaving after a spicy meal, the good natured man sporting the black horned rimmed thick glasses would politely enquire in his grammatically incorrect and broken Gujarati ; "Khaadhaa? Gumyaah"? meaning "khaadhu? Gumyou"? i.e. Did you like what you ate?

And then hands out small packs of 4 English toffees or caramels. On other days it would be cubes of Gaaz from Iran. In response to our shy 'thank yous' he'd say, "God Bless you my child".

We, it seems lived in a World then full of Zarathushtis who derived joy from simple & natural things.

NOTE:

While selecting a table in the Ideal Restaurant we would choose the Hornby Rd side, sitting so we could watch the double decker trams & buses pass by, and also to walk

down to the vendors on the side-walk to pick up British comics, war books and penny dreadful.

In later years and until the 70's, these sidewalks were my happy 'hunting grounds' for things foreign like watches, calculators, electronic gadgets, imported fabrics etc. Here sometimes you found good bargains and often got cheated.

Other of the now disappearing Irani Restaurant we frequented during the World War II days in Bombay was the "Badsha's", opposite Crawford Market. This used to be one of the best place for Faloodah and Mango Juice.....(STILL HERE IN 2009).

There was another, Irani Restaurant that we frequented for lunch, was called Standard or something, it also was on Hornby Road, opposite Evan's Frazer, (Handloom House, in later years).

The Ripon Club. Mumbai. ( STILL HERE IN 2009).

Tucked away in a Victorian building behind the Prince of Wales Museum, at Kala Ghora, and unknown to most Zarathushtis in Bombay and elsewhere is this rare, exclusive, nearly 140 years old Parsi Club that is a vital link to a very different time.

I was first introduced to the club one summer afternoon some forty plus years ago. The old fashioned, dimly lit elevator pulled us up, groaning and moaning too!

What seemed like the 15th floor, though this building was no more than 4 or 5 stories high, for from the roof terrace it provides a good view of the majestic buildings of the Bombay University.

(THE ELEVATOR, FURNITURE, LOBBY, DHAN-SAK ETC. IS STILL THE SAME—COMFORTABLE PLACE WHERE HURRYING IS FROWNED UPON EVEN TODAY).

Entering the hallway of the club was like being transported into the Victorian era.

The furniture, the wall hangings, the clocks, the decorations, picture frames, the billiard table, the book cases and the books all looked no younger than 100 years but well preserved. The fans with long wooden polished blades rotated in three quarter time as if keeping in tune with the music of the Queen's era. Long easy-chairs with folding leg rest, resembled more a gynecological examination table. However, the pictures on the walls of eminent Parsis of Bombay, and faces of those seated or relaxing in the easy chairs reminded you were in a Parsi place. There were no ladies present. Was informed that membership was then restricted to Parsi gentlemen only, and there was a long waiting list.

My next visit was in 2001 or so. Everything looked just the same as in 1960's except for the addition of the T.V. that was out of place. My wife & I, were invited by my friend,

former boss & mentor late Dr. Keki Hatthi of Godrej. It so turned out that now the Club had opened its doors to the Parsi Ladies. In our large and extended family, amongst all the ladies, my wife Villy is the only one who has visited this Club.

We were extremely fortunate that our visit that day coincided with the Club's "All You can Eat Dhansak Day" And Dhansak is what the Ripon Club is now very famous for. The taste of Ripon Club Dhansak and kababs served with "kutchoobar" spiced with wine vinegar stays ever after in your mind as a meal to judge all other meals!!

The charges of just Rs. 50 for this Parsi delicacy of such global renown, richness and flavour was an insult to the dish. I'd be happy to dish out Rs 500 for the same meal. It may interest some readers to know that you can still get the once famous Rogers Soda for Rs 50 at Ripons. In 2007 the prices for their other mouth watering dishes like, Sali Boti, Masoor Ma Gosh, Gravy Na Cutlets is only Rs 58.00 each.

My request for permission to video tape or take pictures was turned down to protect the privacy of the members stretched out on the easy chairs after their gastronomic orgy.

### B.E.S.T. TRAM RIDE

Bombay in the 1940 had an excellent network of bell clanging electric trams and buses.

They were coloured red and all were marked BEST.

They were short single deck and long high double decked.

These were originally horse drawn but in 1906 were driven electrically through over-head power lines.

The tramways criss crossed through the City that then stretched, from Sasson Docks in the South to King's Circle in the North which was the extreme end of the continuous city.

King Circle had a Cinema (still has in 2009 - "Aurora"). Even as late as 1946 beyond Kings Circle going North, was fallow land. Towards the East was the lone -- Harbour Line Station of "Vadala".

Starting at the Sassoon Dock end, the single decker short tram transported one comfortably along Colaba Causeway for just one Paisa (a quarter of an Anna ) to the Prince of Wales Museum where it turned around back to Sasson Dock.

From the Prince of Wales trams departed for many destinations. We'd take the double-decker going furthest North through the bazzars\* and industrial belt\*\* of Bombay to Dadar Tram Terminus, also popularly called Kodadad Circle. Probably named after an important Zarathushti personality of Bombay, of whom I know nothing. It cost one Anna. The fun of the tram ride was to get three seats right in the front on the top deck, from where one got an un-obstructed 180 degree view and all the fresh cool air especially on a

humid summer day. Of the important land marks that were pointed to us as the tram progressed northwards, one that amused us most was a statue on a high pedestal called “The Ubha/Khadaa Parsi”—It is at Byculla bridge and is still called the same.

He had a name but all fondly preferred to call him that and still do.

From Khodadad Circle we boarded another single deck to Kings Circle passing through, the comparatively new freshly painted double story building of the Dadar Parsi Colony. Cost of the ticket one Paisa. On good days this leisurely ride from one end of the City to the other, took under an hour and a half. Total cost 6 Paisa or Rs 0.0937.

During my business trip to Bombay in 1964/5 just before the trams were retired from service, I was able to take a last sentimental BEST tram ride along with my wife and one year old son.

Note:

BEST = Bombay Electric Supply & Tramway Co.

Bazzars\* Bhindi, Null, Chor,

( Chor Bazaar was paradise for antique hunters, we were later told.)

\*\* Several Cotton & Textile Mills with smoke belching high chimneys

*What is nostalgia but an attempt to preserve that which was good in the past? The past has served us well.*