

“All we need is a welcome”

Zoroastrian NRIs have much to offer the community in India if invited to do so

Arnavaz S. Mama & Parinaz M. Gandhi

“We are trying to create a ‘Zarathushti Chaordica’ — bringing order out of chaos,” stressed Rohinton Rivetna of Chicago at the third “Coming Together Roundtable” convened by him to bring together concerned Zarathushtis from across the globe committed to preserving and protecting a worldwide “community without borders.” He hoped January 15, 2008, the day the members assembled at the Mancherji Joshi Hall of the Dadar Athornan Madressa for the Roundtable meet could be a signal “Zarathushti Pravasi Divas (Pilgrim’s Day).” As conveyed by him, “Fifty years ago we were oceans away, 25 years ago we were continents away, today we (are)...barely a click of a mouse away.” Like the barsom twigs which signify that strength lies in togetherness or the *payvand* (symbolic spiritual bonding),

L to R (below): Behram Pastakia, Rohinton Rivetna, Rustom Tirandaz, Rustom Kevala, Behram Nagarwala; Inset: Rustom Kevala; Far right: Firdosh Mehta (above) and Minoo Shroff

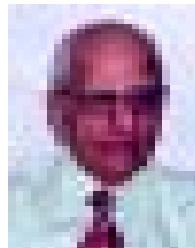


the community must come together and work in hamazori whilst ensuring that no organization or Zarathushti is left behind, he recommended.

“The responsibility to preserve and protect our community is something that we have not inculcated in our young,” regretted Rivetna as he urged better coordination and networking — “Dialog brings minds together and actions bring hearts together” — without forgetting the individual effort summed up in 10 simple two-letter words: “If it is to be, it is up to me.”

Global networking

www.zoroastrians.net is a new website introduced by Yazdi Tantra “to cover everything related to Parsis/Iranis...from Zarathushti businesses to babies and from religion to youth, there’s something for everyone.” Inviting Zoroastrians to visit this site and add useful links, he specified that he was bearing the cost of the undertaking as a community service. His



earlier project, www.theparsidirectory.com was able to list 63,000 Parsis/Iranis globally, even those scattered in areas like Nigeria and Bangkok. Through this website some members of the community have been able to reestablish contacts with friends, relatives, work colleagues. When Rustom Kevala, president of the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA), expressed concern about the security of information made available on this website, Tantra replied, “If someone feels his name shouldn’t be there, we’ll remove it. The user ID and password is only accessible to those registered.” Besides the data has been presented in such a way that only one name and address can be accessed at a time and there is no misuse of records.

World Congress RFP

Dubai, the venue for the next World Zoroastrian Congress in 2009, will, because of its location, “impose restrictions on what we say,” feared Kevala who was among the eight-member panel additionally comprising Rivetna, Dr Behram Pastakia, Firdosh Mehta, Minoo Shroff, Meher Bhesania, Dorab Mistry and Paurushasp Jila that had prepared a draft document such that a fair and equitable process be introduced for selection of host/venue for future Congresses. To ensure that hosts and locations are not decided at random, guidelines were drawn up for a Request for Proposal (RFP) to be issued by each successive host team.

Realizing the need “to refine the process and build on this document,” Rivetna suggested “careful screening” within four weeks and sought empowerment from different regions to make the document “move forward.” It was decided that a core committee be constituted to offer a global perspective on issues facing the Congress.

“Is a Congress meant only for socialization or do we want to achieve more than that?” enquired Kevala. To Jimmy Mistry of Johannesburg, “Keeping the Zoroastrian heritage within the fold” was of utmost importance while Minoo Shroff recommended, “Empowering the young...energizing the youth to take over the baton.”

Interfaith and UN programs

Just as FEZANA has earned non-gov-



*L to R: Marzban Giara,
Hutoxy Contractor and
Dinshaw Tamboly*

ber states.”

Pastakia also suggested that Zoroastrians avail of “two windows of opportunity”: observe a Season of Service (from March 21, Jamshedi Navroz/spring equinox to April 22,

environmental organization (NGO) status from the United Nations, other Zoroastrian associations too should seek consultative status as NGOs with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations, urged Pastakia of Washington, exhorting, “Think globally and act locally.” As explained by Pastakia in his note, “To be eligible for consultative status an NGO must have been in existence (officially registered with the appropriate government authorities) for at least two years, must have an established headquarters, a democratically adopted constitution, authority to speak for its members, a representative structure, appropriate mechanisms of accountability and democratic and transparent decision-making processes. Consultative status is granted by ECOSOC upon recommendation of the ECOSOC Committee on NGOs which is comprised of 19 mem-

Earth Day) to launch environmentally based action programs like tree planting, depending on the strength of the organization; celebrate a Season of Peace (from September 21, International Day of Prayer and Peace to October 2, Gandhi Jayanti, day of non-violence). Also voiced was a need for “some innovative approach” to make the Zarathushti presence felt with “a big splash” at the seven-day World Parliament of Religions in Melbourne in December 2009.

Coordination of welfare programs

“The needs of the community are infinite while the resources are finite,” pointed out Dinshaw Tamboly, chairman of WZO (World Zoroastrian Organisation) Trust Funds in India and trustee of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet (BPP) before elaborating on the three major issues in urban areas: number of indigent Parsis who

perform depend on doles; appeals for educational aid which are largely met by charitable trusts; and exorbitant medical bills for an aging/ailing community that requires members of the middle class to liquidate their assets. Centers for senior citizens — with a lively, vibrant atmosphere — are the need of the hour, he believed. In the semiurban areas, the youths, even if they are graduates, are not employed. They need help to be self-employed.

His observation, “Raising funds is never a problem, it’s only investigating (the genuineness of a recipient),” triggered the usual discussion on trusts unwilling to come together on a common platform to share their data resulting in some beneficiaries collecting much more than what they spend while other appeals fall by the wayside. As pointed out Freyaz Shroff, “An existing trust cannot be a liaisoning body for other trusts. Everything does not need to happen at the same time.” Initially trusts should just be asked to name the recipients they have helped without specifying the amount. Once “trust is developed between trusts” they can move forward.

When erstwhile BPP trustee Rustom Tirandaz was critical of individuals taking credit for others’ philanthropy, recommending instead “nameless, faceless

BHARUCHA & MOTIVALA (Poona) Pvt. Ltd.

Builders & Engineers

Boat Club Road, Pune 411001
Tel: (91) 020 26165383 Fax: (91) 020 26164181
E-mail: bmbe@pn2.vsnl.net.in

charity,” BPP chairman Mino Shroff opined, “Even if a person can mobilize funds, let’s give him credit.” He was more concerned about funds being diverted to subsidize the cost of students going abroad for studies (particularly when they don’t return) when equally good institutions with facilities are available in India. But as pointed out Dara Rivetna of Chicago, “It is much more difficult to get admission in India.” He then referred to the change in laws in the US which discourage migrants.

Students from Iran are desperately seeking educational facilities in India, remarked Khodayar Attaie of Tehran, a comment that evoked minimal response.

Apparently no one had been heeding his earlier e-mails either. But a forceful reiteration by Tirandaz resulted in a resurrection of this discussion with Tamboly committing to educate 25 Iranian students at the orphanage in Navsari.

Worldwide service program

Adopt a village in Gujarat and get the Zoroastrian youth from overseas and India to work towards its improvement during their vacation, recommended many seniors.

“If we can abolish the slavery of Parsi priests that would be a good accomplishment,” declared Pastakia who felt the community “was cruel to its priests” es-

pecially those serving the fire temples in remote areas with no assistance or substitute to relieve them. Parsi Resource Group (PRG) volunteers, present in large numbers, then referred to their mobed program where they expend large sums on the amelioration of priests by offering them medical benefits, pension and children’s education.

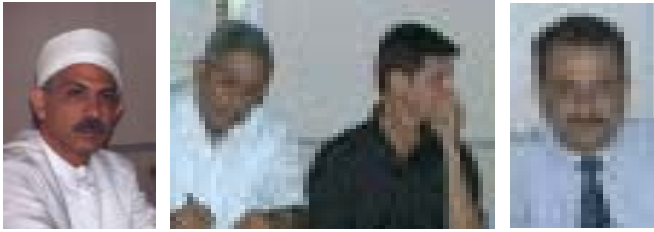
Follow-up and coordination

The need for follow-up on the annual conference has become a priority issue. Initially the consensus seemed to waver between foisting the “ownership” of follow-up on those who introduced the suggestions for action and the use of the website designed by Tantra until the latter noted, “Putting an item on the website is no problem but coordination and follow-up needs a human touch. The website can’t do it... within the structure (of the website) you can upload your own stuff.” However, a suggestion from Col Behram Nagarwala of Ahmednagar to appoint a coordinator at about Rs 15,000 per month with an offer to sponsor the first month’s salary, drew immediate response. Rivetna, Pastakia, Dr Homi Dhalla, Tamboly and Rustom Engineer of Houston between them ensured that the next eight months’ salary was also provided for with Tamboly underwriting three months’ pay.

As Pastakia noted, in the context of the 6th Indian Pravasi Day which he had attended by invitation in Delhi along with World Zarathushti Chamber of Commerce (WZCC) president Bomy Boyce, former FEZANA president Firdosh Mehta and Lord Karan Bilimoria of UK, “Earlier we were made to feel as traitors to the country, the brain drain... By supporting this NRI resource India stands to gain. Much more will come back from North America to India... All we need is some kind of welcome... Can Parsis have a similar approach?”

A roster of Zoroastrians settled abroad was the first task Rivetna wanted the proposed coordinator to undertake. Conceiving the office of the coordinator as a focal point, Rivetna noted, “When coming here many of us don’t have facilities. We need help to find hotels.” Sam Billimoria of California suggested that the individual could help locate cheap properties for those wanting to resettle in Bombay and also proposed the establishment of a rest house/dharamshala in the city. (The Panday Dharamshala at Charni Road exists for out-of-town Zoroastrians – editors.)

Ad: Kermani



L to R: Ramiyar Karanjia, Yazdi Tantra, Homi Dhalla and Kersi Commissariat

Pravasis and the rest

Citing the darbe mehrs bequeathed by Rustom Guiv to the Zoroastrians of North America and the funding of the Zoroastrian Centre in London by Mehraban Zartoshty, Pastakia sought reciprocal help from India to the diaspora abroad. He ran into flack from Jimmy Mistry: “You Zarathushtis overseas have the money. You did not go to preserve the religion. You should bring about what is needed here.”

“A lot of equipment we have got is from here. They are helping us in the best way they can,” Mehta noted soothingly and Pastakia acknowledged that BPP president emeritus Jamshed Guzder had sent an afarganiu from Gujarat to Washington DC at his own expense.

Cultural activities

A synopsis by Dr Homi Dhalla, president of the World Zarathushti Cultural Foundation, covered the projects and activities with which he is involved including the restoration of Sir Jamsetjee

Jejeebhoy’s birthplace in Navsari at the behest of the JJ Trust, the digitization of important old books and texts now out of print, the Sanjan excavations which he hopes to protect by building a wall around what he calls “the oldest archeological site of the Zarathushti community worldwide.”

Photographs and study of the Bahrot Caves, thanks to grants received from the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) and elsewhere has led to substantial information being compiled, noted Dhalla. The ASI has now officially written to the government of Maharashtra to provide a road to the caves so that necessary conservation may commence. The anticipated cost of 25 lakh rupees did not get much response from the community, he noted.

A book, *History of the Parsis of Navsari* by Capt Hormazdiar Desai is currently in the press, a film on distinguished artist Jehangir Sabavala has been proposed and a library of 1,200 books in Gujarati and English that he has

gathered together awaits transit to any Zoroastrian diaspora abroad in exchange for a reasonable donation for the Foundation to continue its activities, stated Dhalla. Learning a lesson from the nasty fire in the Library of Congress in the US when lots of books were destroyed, Dhalla has consistently advocated that the limited Zoroastrian publications, currently housed in two libraries in India — at the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute in Bombay and the Meherjirana Library in Navsari — should be replicated in other locations. Accordingly he has already set up substantial collections in Poona, Bangalore and Baroda. The Dallas association has already shown its interest in the books. Young people in the audience were more interested that the Gujarati books be translated into English.

Dhalla thanked Tantra for his help and guidance in launching a new website www.homidhalla.com from January 1, 2008 featuring “Thoughts from Zarathushti literature.” Nearly 600 moral precepts based on Zoroastrian scriptures are available on view, he noted.

Dhalla and Rivetna who are both deeply involved in interfaith work rued that Zarathushtis tend to shy away from the activity.

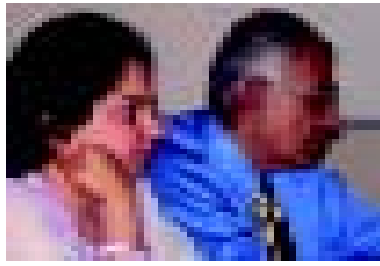
Mobeds

PRG was keen to discuss the mobed



“In appreciation of the great contribution made to the community by Parsiana magazine”

Hope Bagwadia



L to R: Khodayar Attaie, Freyaz Shroff, Sam Billimoria, Jimmy and Pervin Mistry and Rustom Tirandaz

issue. Speaking on behalf of the organization Prof Faredoon Kapadia sought a contribution of \$ 2 per day per NRI towards the education of the mobeds' children. Essentially, they suggest the adoption of a mobed child so that his/her education, health and career can be shaped to advantage. Seeing the plight of their parents, mobed children shy away from pursuing a career in mobedi. This attitude needs to be countered to ensure that the community has mobeds in future, noted Kapadia. He added that 1,411 individuals from mobed families were covered by PRG which had disbursed Rs 23 lakh towards a pension scheme and a further Rs 32 lakh for mediclaim benefits. According to Kapadia PRG has budgeted Rs 1.80 crore for the benefit of mobeds and youths.

The second prong of PRG's community strategy was the suggestion for the

adoption of an agiary per anjuman/association to ensure its maintenance and repair. It emerged that the PRG has already been in contact with the North American Mobed Council whose president Ervad (Dr) Jehan Bagli was then on a visit to India.

The question of the balance between financial benefits and social respect for mobeds was raised once more and it was agreed that education was the key to their amelioration. Tamboly reminded the audience that the WZO-Athornan Mandal partnership since the early 1990s provided financial incentives to mobeds ranging between Rs 1,500 to Rs 4,500 per month depending on the quality and status of the ceremonies they perform. Tamboly noted that the Maneckbai Jeejeebhoy Trust and Iranian philanthropist Mehraban Farangis had contributed Rs 50 lakh and Rs 40 lakh respectively to fund the scheme.

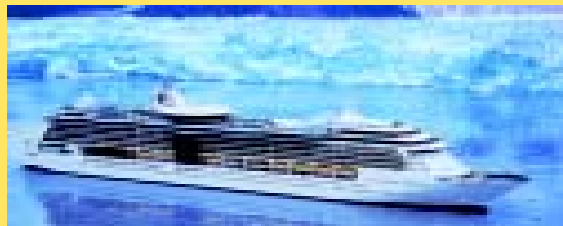
Ervad (Dr) Ramiyar Karanjia thanked the various social groups in the community that had brought about an awakening about the quality of life of mobeds in the past 25-30 years. As principal of the Dadar Athornan Madressa he said he could see the change coming in and emphasized that what needed to be done was to concentrate on the further education of working priests so that they could serve the community more effectively.

Udvada High Priest Dastur (Dr) Peshotan Mirza sought to educate the gathering on the difference between ervads, mobeds and dasturs as "the word dastur is very loosely used." He noted that the traditional function of ervads was to propagate the religion, of the mobeds, to maintain rigorous discipline in order to perform higher liturgical ceremonies. The dasturs were the leaders of the community, he noted. He urged the

An Invitation to Nature's pristine beauty...



Switzerland by Rail



Witness Glaciers calving and whales breaching on your

Alaska Cruise

Also available Land Tours to Anchorage, Talkeetna, Denali — Fair Banks, Kenai — Seward

Cascading Waterfalls, Turquoise Blue Lakes, and Dramatic Mountains Landscape of

Canadian Rockies



Egypt :A Journey along the Nile



Taste of Turkey

**Wishing all our Parsi and Irani Patrons
Jamshedi Navroz Mubarak**

Shree Yash Destinations Pvt. Ltd.

Contact Zubin Khambatta on 9820079585 or 2352 2373/2351 2459 • Fax: 022 2351 2387
Email: experts@yashdestinations.com

behndins to know basic tarikats and rituals properly and not argue with the priest in the atash behram/agiary when corrected. Under the Sasanian ministry of religion, Mirza noted, the holy fires, edifices and priests were maintained from the royal treasury.

Dhalla brought to the fore the diminishing interest in scholarship in Bombay, resulting in the lack of PhD candidates in Avesta/Pahlavi at the University of Bombay. He was worried about the lack of future scholars and noted that according to reports coming his way the priests in Iran are not educated. Kevala agreed that even in North America not many candidates were coming up: "Though scholarships were available for religious studies, there were not many takers."

Seeing the mobed problem as resulting from a lack of effective demand, Mehta asked, "How many of us arrange for ceremonies?"

While unable to respond to Dhalla's concern Mirza, who had returned from a recent trip to Iran, stated that at Markerabad in Yazd some land had been lost to the Muslims. "Something should be done to protect land bought with Indian money and donated to the local



anjuman," he contended.

Mirza was urged to write in the *Jam-e-Jamshed Weekly* to bring mobed problems to the consciousness of the community but with Tirandaz casting aspersions on the publication ("It's in the wrong hands") the resulting acrimony had Rivetna seeking Mirza to "lead us in good thoughts through prayer."

Youth network

Seeking to create a network of Zoroastrian youth across the globe, Freyaz Shroff spoke about the website www.zspeakerbox.narius.net as a "one stop shop" where one can communicate by writing on the wall. "There are 13 Zoroastrian youth yahoogroups. If you need to find out what they're thinking,

From left: Sarosh Contractor, Phil Madon, Adi Vakharia and Jer Gagrak

you need to talk their language."

Another PRG member spoke of their effort to arrange job placements, organize youth seminars, road shows, matrimonial meets, etc and sought mentors as well as funds for the program, hoping for a one to one relationship between an Indian youth and a mentor from the West.

Interfaith marriages

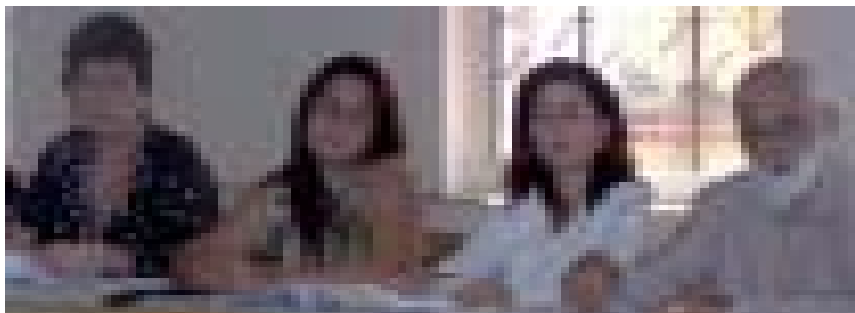
The blithely listed topic in the context of youth empowerment set the cat among the pigeons. Irate traditionalist from Toronto Pervin Mistry asked: "How can the youth discuss intermarriage? Do they know our religion, history?" Freyaz Shroff

Ad: Virjees

tried to placate her: "It's a discussion forum. No one is educating anyone on anything... PRG is only trying to get the youth off the ground. You as an educated member can log on and set the matter right." Nagarwala contended that intermarriage is a fact of life. One youngster's response was an essay in youth power: "You haven't tread the (writing on the) walls. We are the future... We discuss in a different manner."

"Fourth graders don't teach other fourth graders," shot back Mistry. As the argument deteriorated into the usual cacophony, Mehta interceded, "We are not here to get into local arguments. Mister chairman, please take control."

Noting that the taboo on intermarriage may not be subscribed to by the young, Mehta observed that intermarriage is really not in the community interest. The navjoted children of intermarriage are rarely to be found interested in the community once they reach their teen years. "And if they marry out, they are completely lost. Therefore the community suffers a 50 percent loss. Since the responsibility for maintaining the community has never been assigned to individual Zoroastrians, we have not inculcated it in our young," he said. "Perhaps we may see a difference if we do," he



added, confessing an ignorance on how to react to this situation.

Mehta's statements led Mirza to provide a history of the religion as perceived by the orthodox: "Our religion according to the *Avesta* is Mazdayasni Zarathushtrish," he noted citing the *Fravardin*, *Ram* and *Jamyad Yashts*. "The divinity appointed Zarathushtra as Prophet to renovate and restore the Mazdayasnan religion. There was no conversion of non-Mazdayasnis into the religion. Turanians and Iranians were divided on political issues, not religious..."

Civility and collective giving

Noting that sister communities in North America numbering barely 200 families are able to sustain churches, Rivetna rued that the spirit of collective giving had evaded the Zoroastrians. How do

Faredoon Kapadia (right) with PRG team members

we change the mode of thinking, was the question uppermost in people's minds. Adi Vakharia of Dallas, Texas noted that at the last FEZANA AGM there was a suggestion to start with a levy of two percent of individual income. "Maybe, our grandchildren will get into it!" he noted hopefully.

Suggestions made and hopes riding high, the community eventually dispersed to meet again another day. Houston and Dallas will jointly host the next Roundtable conference at the end of this year (as also the WZCC AGM). Engineer spoke of the 10th anniversary celebration of the Houston community center, welcoming everyone to join in the fun, with Vakharia supporting Engineer's invitation. ❁

Ad: Remedy Pharma

Burjor Framji & Company

Licensed Plumbers
Sanitary & Drainage Contractors

Marine Mansion, 1st Marine Street, Mumbai 400002
Tel: 22083207