

Reining in the radicals

To garner support for their pending legal cases, the Bombay Parsi Punchayet trustees got the all-India Federation to pass resolutions condemning the acts of the reformists

Text: Parinaz M. Gandhi • Photographs: Jasmine D. Driver

“Much of our time is going into religious aspects of the community because of the fight between two groups — the orthodox and the radicals. There is a third group — indifferent. It is not only religion that matters but also culture,” pointed out Indore Anjuman president Bomi Heerjee. He was addressing the delegates of the Federation of the Parsi Zoroastrian Anjumans of India but making a pointed reference to the trustees of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet (BPP) who were hosting the two-day executive council and annual general meeting convened at Bombay’s Banaji Atash Behram Hall on October 9 and 10, 2010.

Availing of the presence of 35 anjumans with four zonal vice presidents who attended the Federation meeting, president Dinshaw Mehta who is also the chairman of the BPP sought through a resolution an “endorsement and support of the action taken” by the BPP against the “renegade priests” in conformity with the “directives of the High Priests.” Co-trustee and Federation joint honorary secretary Khojeste Mistree read out the letter dated August

27, 2009 signed by five of the six High Priests (circulated to those present on the first day of the meet) who declared, “The imposition of a ban on Ervads Khushroo Madan and Faramroze Mirza (sic), who continue to offer their services for performing after-death ceremonies for those who opt for cremation in Mumbai and who facilitate the conversion of non-Zoroastrians by performing navjotes of juddins, should be strictly implemented by the BPP board.”

A second resolution condemned Dr Meher Master-Moos for upsetting the “religious sentiments of the Parsi Zoroastrian community by doing the barashnum of a Russian Mikhail Chistyakov... in flagrant violation” of long standing traditions, manners, customs and practices whilst endorsing the letter by the six High Priests “decrying her actions as heresy.” Both these resolutions were announced as being “unanimously” passed, since no opposition was expressed, and meant to lend weight to the BPP’s case in the legal battles over the renegade priests and Master-Moos’ conversion activities.

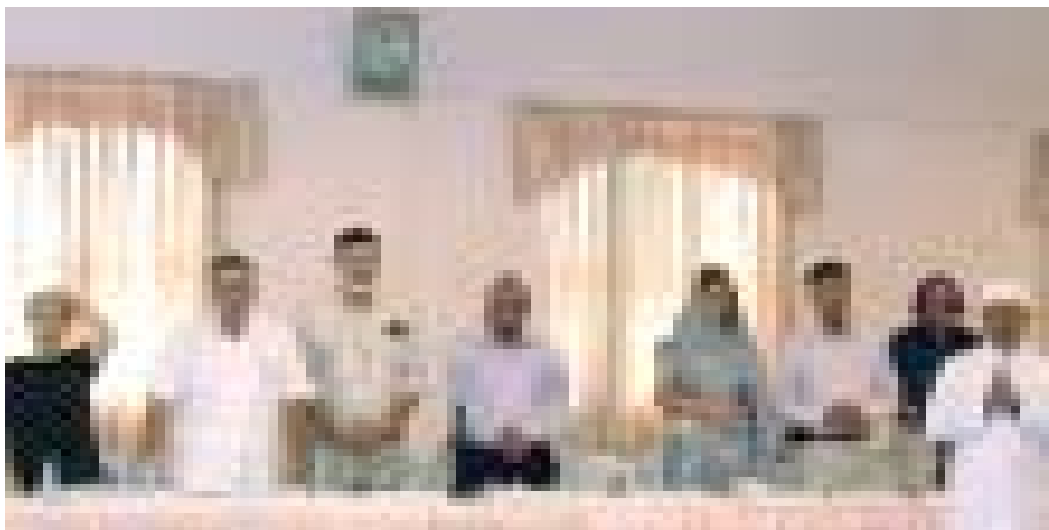
“We will not allow this kind of farce on our religious legacy... We will have to fight up to the Supreme Court, if necessary... We have to spend charity funds to defend our stand, to protect our own legacy,” stated Mehta elaborating on how the new trust board has to spend time and energy on “putting out fires set up” by the reformists.

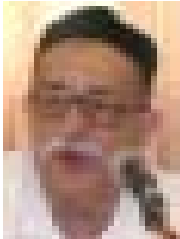
A third resolution, whilst not officially drafted, expressed solidarity with members like Nozer Meherji of World Zoroastrian Organisation — India who sought to challenge the actions of WZO — UK for accepting into their fold any Zoroastrians and not only Parsi Irani Zoroastrians as was the practice earlier and thereby consciously severing their ties with the Indian offshoot.

Whilst these resolutions swayed by emotion and religious sentiments were instantly carried, the one passed on the previous day authorizing the Federation office bearers to appoint a person to sue or defend the Federation interests in court in matters of movable and immovable property was passed after protracted rational discussion. Former BPP trustee

Jamsheed Kanga representing Satara suggested the Minorities Commission at the national and state level could authorize the Federation to intervene in land areas where no Zoroastrians remain.

From left: Armaity Tirandaz, Areez Khambatta, Khojeste Mistree, Dinshaw Mehta, Arnavaz Mistry, Tehmton Anklesaria, Kerfegar Antia and Ervad Yezdi Panthaki





Above: Federation meeting in session; (alongside, from left): Dinshaw Mehta, Areez Khambatta, Porusasp Mehta, Tehmtan Anklesaria, Kerfegar Antia

Disclosed Mehta, “The State Minorities Commission (in Maharashtra) is a big joke. Besides the president and vice president I am the only member when there are supposed to be 11 members. They are only concerned about Muslims and nothing else.”

Although he was not aware of a Zoroastrian representative on the National Minorities Commission, Dadi Mistry, president of the Delhi Parsi Anjuman, announced that Keki Daruwalla had been recently appointed. Those attending the Federation meeting were overheard asking each other, “Who is he?” Retired Indian Police Service officer, Daruwalla was a special assistant to the Prime Minister on international affairs, served on the cabinet secretariat and retired as additional director in the Research and Analysis Wing.

The Valsad Anjuman would also have appreciated the Federation’s proactive support in the Goolrookh Gupta case where she has claimed a right to enter the religious precincts on grounds that she continues to profess the Zoroastrian religion even after her marriage to a non-Parsi. But no resolution was passed in their favor. They had to rest content that vice president of the Fed-

eration Areez Khambatta is guiding them as also the BPP.

The next meeting of the Federation will be held in Valsad either in March or April 2010. When the delegates were given a choice of either Jabalpur who also offered to host the meet as versus Valsad, the majority preferred the latter venue. Dadi Mistry enquired why Delhi’s offer to host the meeting in 2010 had been bypassed on the explanation that “the dates were not suitable to Khojeste.” Mistry though maintained that since Delhi asked for a change in dates he was not able to reorganize his schedule.

After years, the membership of Mount Abu, Vandsa and Tavri were finally confirmed on the all-India body whilst Lonavla’s papers have yet to be processed and Sanjan showed its eagerness to join the Federation fold.

The next meeting of the Federation of Zoroastrian Youth Associations of India will be held in Baroda from November 6-8, 2010 announced FOZYA president Mabrinn Nanavatti. The one in 2011, being the 20th FOZYA meet will be hosted by the Zoroastrian Youth for the Next Generation (ZYNG) in Bombay. Their grand program “Dance Bawa Dance” at St Andrew’s Auditorium on October 9,

gave a platform to the youth from all over India to showcase their dance talents, announced Tashan Mistry who with Darayus Tirandaz made a brief presentation on ZYNG activities for the benefit of Federation members.

Defunct anjumans

Pleased that “for the first time we have been able to show results on the defunct anjumans front,” Surat’s Sorab Katpitia gave a detailed report of the sale of land at Dharwar which earned the Federation Rs 1,20,00,000. He was well organized with his documents to present facts before the Federation body but was repeatedly asked to be brief as delegates were getting restless to finish the agenda by 5 p.m. on Sunday.

He had barely given a progress report of properties in Beena, Bhusaval, Dharwar when Maki Kapadia of Belgaum conveyed the misgivings of the father and son duo of Ervads Hoshang and Jehangir Dalal, one of whom serves as the priest at Belgaum and the other at Hubli. Whilst commending Katpitia’s ability and expertise to progress in the matter, they “were shocked that the land had been sold.” Contrary to the impression created that the father-son duo



Alongside (clockwise from top left): Nozer Meherji, Jamsheed Kanga, Dadi Mistry, Bomi Heerjee, Mabrin Nanavatti, Marzban Giara, Tannaz Parakh, Jenai Banaji, Maki Kapadia and Sohrab Katpitia;
Below: Keki Daruwalla

wanted to swallow the property Kapadia announced, “Today if the Dharwar land can be sold it is only because they have protected it at their cost all these years.” They further wanted to know “Who signed the agreement of sale and under what authority? Has the buyer been informed that the land is a Parsi *shmathan* (burial ground)? Will the cemetery plot with graves remain with an access road... With all land transactions being done in two dimensions, how will the cash component be accounted for?”

“The prospective buyers were brought before the BPP trustees who fixed the amount,” responded Katpitia. “The decision of trustees is binding on all. I never interfere.” “All transactions are only done by cheque,” confirmed Mehta, adding that the agreement for Rs 1.25 crores has yet to be finalized as “we are not sure of the title and bona fides.” When Kerfegar Antia confirmed that the Dalals have been offended that Hubli will not get a single rupee from this sale deed, Mehta responded that 20-25 percent of the income could be given to Hubli/Belgaum as the neighboring anjumans.

As the youngest trustee of the Parsi cemetery in Kashmir, Jenai Banaji sought the Federation’s assistance to maintain the property. With not a single Zoroastrian now residing in the area, the Federation offered to intervene after studying the title papers and ascertaining whether the land is free from encumbrances and can be used for any other purpose.

“The Federation should be well off if they tackle the defunct anjumans intelligently,” summed up Mistree, giving

credit to the vice presidents for “taking much more serious interest.”

Succinctly giving an overview of the 13 north zone anjumans was vice president Tehmtan Anklesaria to whom Indore was a model anjuman where Heerjee manages anjuman properties like the fire temple, dakhma and dharamshala as if they were his own bungalow. While the rich Mhow anjuman, blessed with property, has accepted the custodianship of the Federation the scheme proposed by its erstwhile president Dr Behram Masani is awaiting court sanction. Ratlam has less than 15 Parsis and “we are happy we don’t have (trust) property,” noted Anklesaria. Neemuch has an agiary and graveyard but due to infighting there is scope for improvement. The well managed Jabalpur Anjuman is wealthy, has a dharamshala



in a prominent locality and has leased out 28,000 sq ft of its property to a local nursing home that earns it a monthly income of Rs 1,20,000. Bhopal which has a burial ground has its last Parsi family residing there. The biggest north zone anjuman, Delhi is very rich and well managed. Regretting that he

was unable to visit Lucknow, Anklesaria mentioned that the defunct properties of Harda and Itarsi within his jurisdiction are being attended to. “This is the principal meeting and every anjuman must come,” reiterated Anklesaria, wishing there were a vada mullan in the community like amongst the Bohris who would make attendance mandatory.

West zone A vice president Poruspas Mehta of Poona reported on

behalf of his 16 anjumans that “all were facing the same problems all over India,” land encroachment being a major bugbear. He urged his anjumans to “keep in touch with the vice president for better coordination.”

Vice president Areez Khambatta of West Zone B did not dwell on the issues facing his zone except for making a brief reference to Rajkot whence hails his daughter-in-law. He was more concerned

about expanding the Poverty Amelioration Scheme (PAS) which he has introduced. As per the note he circulated, 113 beneficiaries from 19 towns and cities are being helped with Rs 500 every month. Urging anjumans to identify genuine cases in isolated areas for help from PAS he reported that Valsad Anjuman implements PAS from their own resources. He was also keen that the Agiary Adoption scheme be implemented. But in the absence of data, commitments for adoption were not finalized. The Federation secretariat was hopeful that member anjumans would fill in the forms enclosed with the circular and minutes requesting information on the anjuman and its properties.

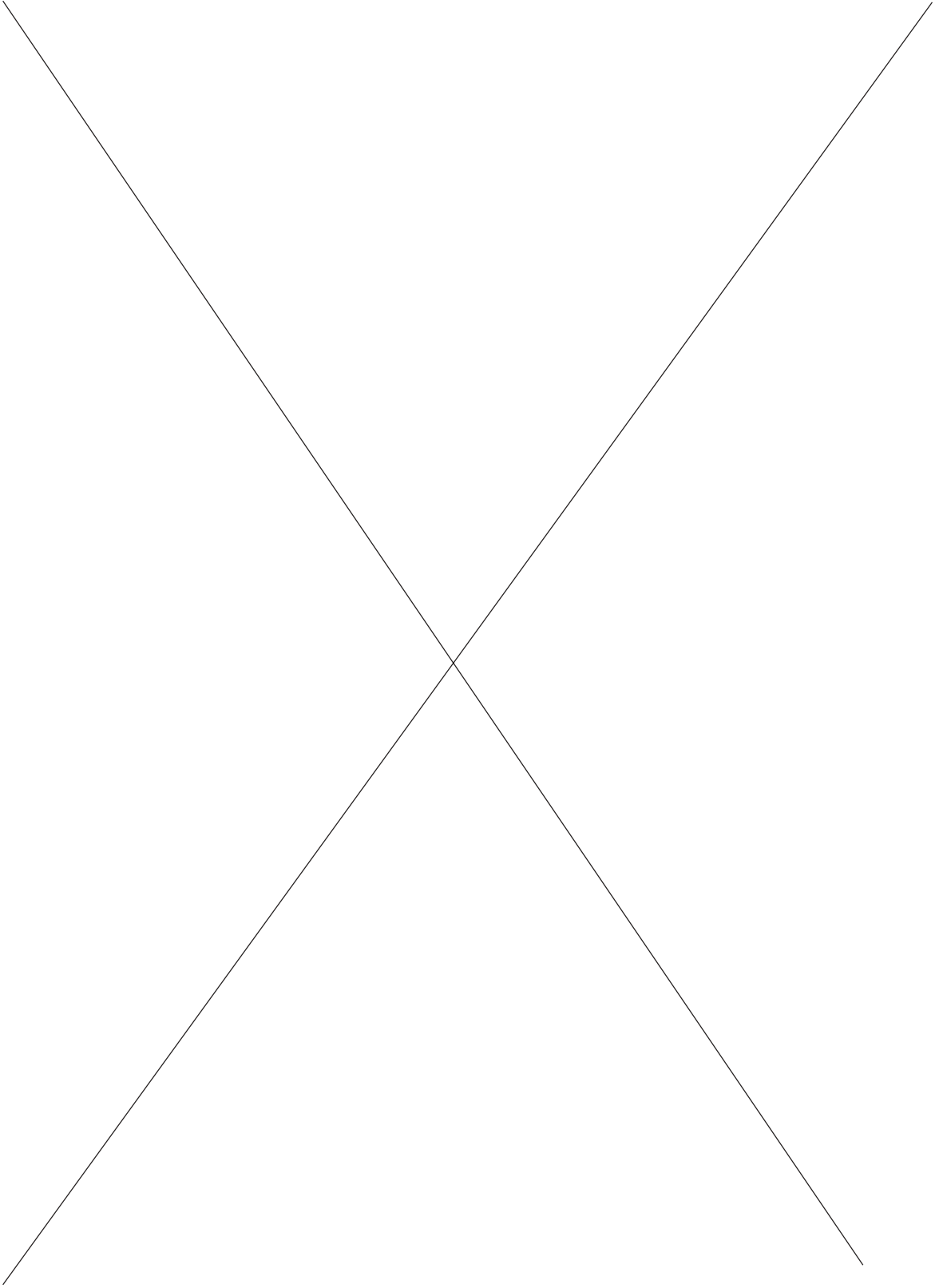
Until the afternoon of the second day only 23 of the 35 forms had been received, announced Dinshaw Mehta who recommended that Khambatta finalize a detailed scheme for agiary adoption. But the self-professed “man of action” was not interested in “accelerating and braking and thereby wasting petrol.”

Kerfegar Antia, vice president of south zone, mentioned that 17 forms from Secunderabad-Hyderabad and one from Madras have been collected for the PAS. Requesting his anjumans to respond to his letters he was best able to give an overview of the assets managed by the community in the twin cities.

Piqued with Parsiana

In response to Valsad’s representative lamenting that *Parsiana* carried the photograph of litigant Gupta on the front

“*Parsiana* is well known to be heretical. There is no way we can control them”



cover and was not presenting their side of the story, Mehta commiserated, “*Parsiana* is well known to be heretical. There is no way we can control them.”

Added Khambatta, “There was a suggestion today that my photo should appear on the front cover of *Parsiana*. (Prior to the meeting Kanga had jested that if *Parsiana* were to carry him on the cover the issue would surely sell out for Khambatta would buy all the copies!) When I advertised (Rasna range of products) with them for 20 years, no photo came. I got bamboo.” (*Parsiana* had done a cover story on Rasna in its issue of November 1990.)

The choice of individuals featured on the *Parsiana* covers in 2010 seem to have rankled many of the orthodox members present at the meet. They were irked that “heroes were made” of Chistyakov and Roshni Maloo’s children who were initiated despite being born of a Zoroastrian mother and Christian father.

Bombay resident Tannaz Parakh who



ZYNG spokespersons Tashan Mistree (left) and Darayus Tirandaz

represents Khergam complained, “This is a community publication. This is not secular Press. They are taking a stand and a very strong stand... What can we do to combat them?... to counter the power of the pen...?”

With this query addressed to guest speaker and former BPP trustee Burjor Antia who in his speech had chastised the community media for glorifying such misdeeds, the response was: “You start another publication. This is the democratic way. This may be the costlier way.”

To the shouts of “boycott *Parsiana*,” Khambatta responded with a childish ditty, “Tit for tat and butter for fat.”

Community historian Marzban Giara was peeved that Anu Aga of Thermax was carried on the cover when she won the Padma Shri despite having made a public statement earlier that she is not a practicing Zoroastrian who believes in rituals.

Reminded of the seven candidates of the Adult Franchise for Progress who were contesting the BPP elections, Khambatta was keen to get another resolution passed condemning “these highly educated AFP top seven who are always encouraging these renegade priests... If you agree with me, raise your hands.” Instead of an overwhelming show of hands as in the earlier two cases, there was a lukewarm response with Khambatta announcing, “The president says ‘This is too much. Forget it.’”

(A detailed report of the proceedings will appear in future issues of *Parsiana*.)

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