

Parsi Philanthropy and Giving: Understanding its Locations in the Present

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Abstract

In this paper, I aim to capture key aspects of contemporary Parsi philanthropy and giving. I define the phenomenon in an expanded manner, both in terms of engagement (ranging from volunteering to CSR) and recipients (for Parsis and non-Parsis). Considering the broad scope and exploratory design of this research, I selected the qualitative methodologies of a literature review, a review of digital archives, and semi-structured conversational interviews. Just as there is an abundance of literature on the history of Parsi philanthropy, there was an abundance of explicit and implicit references to history in discussions I had with interviewees. Along these lines, an analysis of the research material led me to look at the broad themes of community and national responsibility, values and reputation, and concerns of the present and future. Ultimately, this paper provides an outline of a prominent slice of contemporary Indian philanthropy, offering an insight into the significance of the personal in the public.

Keywords: Parsi, philanthropy, giving, community, history, adage

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s), and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy or Ashoka University.



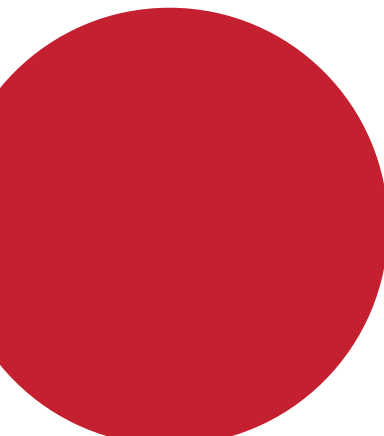
1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction to the Broad Research Problem

Considering that research on the history of Parsi philanthropy and giving is abundant and insightful, there is a compelling need for a broader investigation of the subject in the contemporary context. While Leilah Vevaina and Amit Kumar have each written informative and suggestive pieces on this topic, they examine specific areas; respectively, Parsi trusts and the Tatas.¹ For this reason, my paper attempts to characterise and present key aspects of contemporary Parsi philanthropy and giving, and thus create a base for further, more targeted research. This is not to say that this paper will abstain from specific points of analysis, but that a broad scope will be maintained, where the articulations of interviewees are presented for interpretation. I understand this as fundamental to the research, considering that Zoroastrianism, the religion of the Parsi community, does not lay out firm guidelines on giving (such as zakat in Islam).

1.2. Organisation of the Paper

The paper will begin with an introduction, followed by a literature review and a methodology section. In order to establish a context for the three discussion chapters, there will then be chapters outlining the historical narrative of Parsi philanthropy and the current state of Parsi philanthropy. The first discussion section will look at contestations between community and national identity in the context of ideas about social responsibility. The second discussion section will transition into an examination of the significance of perceptions of values and reputation for an understanding of contemporary Parsi philanthropy. The third and final discussion section will present diverse speculations about the present and the future of Parsi philanthropy, posing the question of whether an ancestral religious ethic will retain its relevance at a time when neoliberalism has fashioned such a powerful discourse around philanthropy. The paper will end with a conclusion section, with important additional material available in the appendix.



¹ Leilah Vevaina, 'Good Deeds: Parsi Trusts from "the Womb to the Tomb",' *Modern Asian Studies* 52, no. 1 (March 2018): 238–65; Arun Kumar, 'Pragmatic and Paradoxical Philanthropy: Tatas' Gift Giving and Scientific Development in India,' *Development and Change* 49, no. 6 (April 2018): 1422–46.

2. Literature Review

Parsi philanthropy is a subject that has received significant attention from historians over the past few decades, whether it be within a broader scope, such as Jesse Palsetia's *The Parsis of India: Preservation of Identity in Bombay*, or a narrower investigation, such as John Hinnells's 'The Flowering of Zoroastrian Benevolence'.² While Douglas Haynes' study on the politics of philanthropy in 19th century Surat did not focus on Parsis, the community naturally formed an important part of the piece.³ He notes, 'Parsi philanthropists in Surat, by contrast, engaged in much wider forms of charitable activity. One possible explanation is that the Parsis already possessed strong philanthropic traditions long before the nineteenth century.'⁴ In the same year, a similar piece – but Parsi-focused – was published by David White, where he observed how Parsi merchants rose to prominence in western India during the 18th century.⁵ Four years later, White sharpened his focus on Parsi community identity in the context of the community's 18th century philanthropy.⁶ More recently, in 2006, Rashna Writer wrote a similar piece about Parsi identity and philanthropy, but with a grander chronological scope (17th–20th centuries).⁷

A year later, Palsetia, acknowledging the attention that philanthropy and charitable giving as public-identity formation have received in South Asian historiography, examined the subject through the activities of an iconic Parsi merchant and philanthropist, Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy.⁸ In fact, this piece is just one of several essays in the seminal *Parsis in India and the Diaspora* that address philanthropy, community identity, public modernity, and nationalism. What is even more striking is that these four essays compose the entire chronological section that is 'Part II: Parsis in Nineteenth-century India'.⁹ Beyond these works of research on the history of Parsi philanthropy, there are two significant works – mentioned earlier – that look at the contemporary context, and thus served as an inspiration for my research. Vevaina puts forward a compelling anthropological thesis on the symbolic significance that Parsi trusts carry in the current context, while Kumar dexterously uses the case study of the iconic Tatas to illustrate how current Indian philanthropy is informed by a complex historical trajectory.¹⁰

An important feature of all this literature is the arguments about what influenced such pervasive and voluminous philanthropic engagement in the 19th and 20th centuries.¹¹ Scholars have identified a

2 Broad: Jesse S. Palsetia, *The Parsis of India: Preservation of Identity in Bombay City* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Eckehard Kulke, *The Parsees in India: A Minority as Agent of Social Change* (Munich: Weltforum Verlag, 1974); Narrow: John R. Hinnells, 'The Flowering of Zoroastrian Benevolence: Parsi Charity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,' in *Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce*, *Acta Iranica* 24, eds. H.W. Bailey et al., 261–326 (Leiden: Brill, 1985).

3 Douglas E. Haynes, 'From Tribute to Philanthropy: The Politics of Gift Giving in a Western Indian City,' *The Journal of Asian Studies* 6, no. 2 (May 1987): 339–60.

4 Haynes, 'From Tribute to Philanthropy.'

5 David White, 'Parsis in the Commercial World of western India, 1700-1750,' *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 24, no. 2 (June 1987): 183–203.

6 David White, 'From Crisis to Community Definition: The Dynamics of Eighteenth-Century Parsi Philanthropy,' *Modern Asian Studies* 25, no. 12 (May 1991): 302–20.

7 Rashna Writer, 'Charity as a Means of Zoroastrian Self-Preservation,' *Iranian Studies* 49, no. 1 (January 2016): 117–36.

8 Jesse S. Palsetia, 'Partner in Empire: Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy and the Public Culture of Nineteenth Century Bombay,' in *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, eds. John Hinnells and Alan Williams, 81–99 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).

9 Palsetia, 'Partner in Empire'; Hinnells, 'Changing Perceptions of Authority among Parsis in British India,' in Hinnells and Williams, *Parsis in India*, 100–18; Rusheed R. Wadia, 'Bombay Parsi Merchants in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,' in Hinnells and Williams, *Parsis in India*, 119–35; John McLeod, 'Mourning, Philanthropy, and M.M. Bhownaggee's Road to Parliament,' in Hinnells and Williams, *Parsis in India*, 136–55.

10 Vevaina, 'Good Deeds'; Kumar, 'Pragmatic and Paradoxical Philanthropy.'

11 Hinnells, 'Zoroastrian Benevolence'; Kumar, 'Pragmatic and Paradoxical Philanthropy'; Palsetia, 'Merchant Charity and Public Identity Formation in Colonial India: The Case of Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy,' *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 40, no. 3 (June 2005): 197–217; White, 'From Crisis to Community.'

range of factors, ranging from a theologically embedded orientation towards wealth production as positive, anxieties about self-preservation as a minority community, and a response to opportunities for influence in postcolonial India.¹² Palsetia, for example, put forward a 17th century European traveller's account that details the inherent charitable compassion of the Parsis, who wish to see 'no person suffer and beg'.¹³ On the other hand, Tanya Luhrmann characterised Parsi interest in philanthropy as a response to a diminishing fertility rate, where concerns about biological and social reproduction are sublimated through a focus on spiritual perfection, i.e. ethicised gift-giving.¹⁴ Finally, along similar lines, Homi Bhabha described Parsi philanthropy in terms of power, remarking on how the community's elite wielded 'soft power' to manufacture consent for projects of modernity in late 19th century Bombay.¹⁵

As argued by Palsetia in his research on merchant charity and public identity in colonial India, philanthropy, through its connection with reputation, became an indicative symbol of its own alongside familiar attributes such as loyalty, honesty, trustworthiness.¹⁶ My own research takes reputation as a key concept, understanding how the past, present, future, and philanthropy are fused in articulations around it. Articulations around reputation will include, but not be restricted to, any references made to legacy, power, influence, and prestige. More specifically, I take this slightly further in the present context, understanding philanthropy as a symbol that – by subsuming attributes like loyalty, honesty, trustworthiness, altruism, benevolence into its conceptual framework – clearly indicates a certain reputation.

Finally, I understand literature on broader issues of contemporary philanthropy – beyond Parsi philanthropy – as significant and informative for this research. Peter Redfield and Erica Bornstein's 'Introduction to the Anthropology of Humanitarianism' offers a persuasive characterisation of how humanitarian discourse has become increasingly secular, while nevertheless bearing the imprint and legacy of religious ideologies.¹⁷ Similarly, in *Charity and Philanthropy in South Asia: An Introduction*, Filippo Osella emphasises the importance of understanding the specific historical and political contexts in which charitable practices unfold.¹⁸ His use of the phrase 'economies of morality' is particularly enlightening, where he – much like Bornstein – unsettles the binary of religious morality and secular universalist humanitarianism, arguing that it is both difficult and unhelpful to distinguish drivers of philanthropy through this conceptual framework.¹⁹ The importance of detailed context when researching specific aspects of philanthropy is reiterated by Amy Singer in 'The Politics of Philanthropy', where she posits that 'all philanthropy is political in the sense that it emerges and is inseparable from the competition to gain, maintain, or increase influence through giving in any particular society and culture'.²⁰ This research follows her line of argument in attempting to understand the public and competitive aspects of 'benevolent' philanthropy.

12 Noshir Dadrawala, 'Parsi, thy name is charity,' *Parsi Times*, 14 August 2016, <https://parsi-times.com/2016/08/parsi-thy-name-charity/>; Hinnells, 'Zoroastrian Benevolence,' 262; Kumar, 'Pragmatic and Paradoxical Philanthropy,' 1426; Tanya M. Luhrmann, *The Good Parsi: The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 143; Palsetia, 'Merchant Charity,' 212; Writer, 'Zoroastrian Self-Preservation,' 133.

13 Palsetia, 'Merchant Charity,' 202.

14 Luhrmann, *The Good Parsi*, 143; Andrew Sanchez et al., "'The Indian Gift': A Critical Debate," *History and Anthropology* 28, no. 5 (October 2017): 569.

15 Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Sethias and Soft Power' (2013), cited in Vevaina, 'Good Deeds,' 250.

16 Palsetia, 'Merchant Charity,' 198.

17 Peter Redfield and Erica Bornstein, "An Introduction to the Anthropology of Humanitarianism," in *The Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism Between Ethics and Politics*, eds. Peter Redfield and Erica Bornstein, 3–30 (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2011).

18 Filippo Osella, 'Charity and Philanthropy in South Asia: An Introduction,' *Modern Asian Studies* 52, no. 1 (March 2018): 4–34.

19 Osella, 'Charity and Philanthropy,' 6.

20 Amy Singer, 'The Politics of Philanthropy,' *Journal of Muslim Philanthropy & Civil Society* 2, no. 1 (May 2018): 19.

Tying together this broader research, Bornstein's concept of relational empathy is significant.²¹ As argued by *The Routledge Companion to Humanitarian Action*, 'the great rationalisation project that has defined organised charity over the last two centuries has repeatedly failed to communicate and evolve with the impulses and pressures guiding the ordinary giving individual.'²² To counter this conceptual flaw – based as it is in the Western notion of liberal altruism – Bornstein suggests the concept of 'relational empathy', a model where a sense of personal connection is understood as central to giving.²³ This is elaborated upon by Ilana Silber in the contemporary context, where she argues that 'modern philanthropic giving is perhaps best understood as rooted in the urge for the expression of one's personal identity, at the same time it is also a deeply relational practice...an imagined interaction between oneself and an often-abstract group of others in and through the public sphere'.²⁴ Finally, this is not to say that we should ignore the overarching structural powers of charity as a form of governance, but instead examine how it in fact has a tremendous influence on one's sense of self.

²¹ Erica Bornstein, *Disquieting Gifts: Humanitarianism in New Delhi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 22.

²² Jessica Field, 'Charitable Giving,' in *The Routledge Companion to Humanitarian Action*, eds. Roger MacGinty and Jenny H. Peterson, 457-467 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 436.

²³ Bornstein, *Disquieting Gifts*, 151.

²⁴ Silber, *The Gift-Relationship in an Era of "Loose" Solidarities* (2001), 393, cited in Bornstein, *Disquieting Gifts*, 38.



3. Methodology

3.1. Framework

Considering the topic of interest, the breadth of scope, the specific research problems, and my own research experience, I chose purely qualitative methods for this exploratory study. In addition, I took a constructivist, emergent approach, where it is understood that individuals are in continuous dialogue with the meaning and understanding they attach to their experiences and actions. Furthermore, considering that one of the key research aims was to look specifically at self-perception and perception of others, the interviews I did were semi-structured. In other words, while a formal list of questions was drawn up, the interview approach was to begin with a formulaic couple of questions, before continuing in response to the participants' remarks; the question list order, the framing of the questions, and the number of questions were kept flexible. In addition, I attempted to present myself as both a 'friend of a friend' and a formal researcher.²⁵ This is echoed in my use of the first person and direct references to the research process (interviews) throughout this paper.

An extensive literature review ensured that the participant remarks were understood and framed in reference to social, cultural, and historical contexts. I was able to do this not only during the analysis, but also within my interviews. Finally, analysis was conducted following the inductive method; i.e. I made no pre-research hypotheses. Instead, themes were developed through systematic rounds of coding of fully transcribed interviews, in reference to major themes that emerged from digital archive material and the literature review. My analysis of these thematic findings followed the method of discourse analysis, wherein central focus is given to participants' views.

3.2. Research Methods

- A literature review of historical and anthropological research on a variety of areas: 1) philanthropy and giving in India; 2) drivers of philanthropy and giving in India; 3) history of Parsis in India; 4) history of Parsi philanthropy and giving; 5) religion and philanthropy in India; 6) philanthropy and nation-building; 7) Parsi ethical thought and practice
- Semi-structured conversational interviews with 36 individuals²⁶ from 1) community organisations; 2) corporate philanthropy; 3) NGOs. A considerable effort was made to ensure there was a wide representation: area of work, region, age, etc.
- A review of digital archives (newspapers, magazines, and other relevant publications)

3.3. Limitations

Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic caused various limitations for this study. The intimacy of in-person interaction, especially for interview purposes – but also for relations with peers and mentors – was missed. In addition, the severity of the second wave in May–June 2021 was a major disruptor to the rhythms of research, resulting in many interviewees postponing interactions or even not responding. Others, due to reasons such as time constraints, online meeting fatigue, and personal preference, declined an online interview, instead opting for email responses. Various additional limitations could be attributed to this study (e.g. a lack of quantitative methodologies), but it is hoped that

²⁵ Adrian Holliday, *Doing and Writing Qualitative Research* (London: Sage Publications, 2007), 154.

²⁶ 36 interviews breakdown = Group 1: 13 interviews; Group 2: 11 interviews; Group 3: 12 interviews.

the intended scope of the study renders them insignificant.

4. A History of Parsi Philanthropy: Merchants to Leaders

In most scholarship on the history of Parsi philanthropy, emphasis is placed on how Parsis were opportunistic and adaptive to the fluctuating landscapes of power, from the Empire's peak to its eventual downfall and the gradual rise of a new, independent beginning.²⁷ What is not denied – but what I would like to emphasise – is that the Parsis this refers to were, essentially, merchants and big businessmen. After disputes occurred between the priesthood and the laity during the 17th–19th centuries, and with members of the laity gaining prominence and respect through their politically conspicuous economic exploits and philanthropic engagement, they soon became the de facto leaders of the Parsi community.²⁸ Interestingly, this shift recalls the symbiotic relationship between Protestant sectarian processes and capitalism in Western Europe in the early modern period, where Protestant doctrine – as opposed to Catholicism (where human salvation was centred on respect for clerical norms and authority) – understood salvation as achieved through individual diligence, dignity, and 'worldly success'.²⁹

Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy is exemplar of how prominent Parsi merchants became community leaders, aided by the public prestige of philanthropy. As his career grew (most notably, when he was regarded as the chief Indian merchant during the time of opium trade with China), Jeejeebhoy's regular involvement in business affairs diminished and his commitment to charity increased, encompassing public works, non-communal charities, and Parsi-centred donations.³⁰ While the position of many Parsis as major merchants is posited as one of the conduits for the easy expansion of 'traditional Parsi giving' to public philanthropy, this fails to explain the whole story (after all, the Madras Dubashes and Calcutta Baniyas were also prominent merchant communities).³¹ For one, Vevaina argues that the British legal instrument of the trust worked well with Parsi giving practices since both understood inheritance as broad and public.³² White offers an alternative example of Parsi public orientation, describing how the general trader community in south Gujarat was hugely enthusiastic in their response to government requests for funds during the famine of 1899–1900, but, unlike Parsi traders, were apathetic towards appeals for money to finance sanitary works, public gardens, hospitals, etc.³³

Furthermore, White offered a convincingly detailed and precise account of how the specifics of Parsi economic history are a crucial piece of this puzzle.

²⁷ Kulke, *The Parsees*; Palsetia, 'Partner in Empire,' 81; Palsetia, *The Parsis*, 44; White, 'Parsis in the Commercial World,' 193.

²⁸ Hinnells, 'Changing Perceptions,' 101–02; Kulke, *The Parsees*, 61; Palsetia, *The Parsis*, 65–102;

²⁹ Katharyne Mitchell, 'Religious Charity and the Spirit of Homo Economicus,' *The Immanent Frame*, 24 July 2019, <https://tif.src.org/2019/07/24/religious-charity-and-the-spirit-of-homo-economicus/>.

³⁰ Palsetia, 'Partner in Empire,' 84. 'In fact, this even extended beyond the Empire. In 1842, he contributed some Rs 6000 towards fire relief in Hamburg.'

³¹ White, 'Parsis in the Commercial World,' 184.

³² Vevaina, 'Good Deeds,' 239.

³³ Haynes, 'From Tribute to Philanthropy,' 354.

First, Parsis did not parlay their economic success into zamindari status and/or revenue farming; Parsi landholding was restricted to obtaining urban land and renting out a few houses in Bombay. Second, Parsis did not become administratively connected with the colonial elite, but restricted their connections with the colonial power to economic functions. It is these two differences...which distinguishes the Parsis from similar groups and either forced or enabled them to concentrate on commercial pursuits.³⁴

To summarise, he writes, 'Parsis had two clear aims: to increase their social status and to increase their capital worth'.³⁵

Historians have long understood how gifting and resource allocation enables – or is even a precondition for – political organisation and legitimacy, through its endowment of status and prestige.³⁶ In other words, philanthropy was the key avenue for successful merchants to gain prominence and grow into leadership. A term commonly used in research on this subject in South Asia is *abru*, which carries the meaning of economic 'credit' through reputation.³⁷ For Parsi merchants, philanthropy was a crucial way to enhance *abru*, i.e. generate a reputation as not only wealthy, but trustworthy.³⁸ In addition, *abru* was critical to participation in an informal commercial economy where the lack of legally enforceable contracts meant that the perceptions of the personality and resources of its leading figure were crucial.³⁹

One of the earliest recorded donations by a Parsi was an amount of Rs 250, to provide famine relief in Ireland in 1822.⁴⁰ In the context of *abru*, it is unsurprising that the visibility of Parsi charity during this period has been emphasised by some scholars. For instance, Hinnells writes that 'sufferers who could be *seen*, be they poor Europeans, impoverished stockbrokers, or the orphans and destitute of other communities all met with generous help from Parsis'.⁴¹ He argues that 'it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that some, at least, were done for the sake of status rather than out of a spirit of benevolence'.⁴² However, others, such as Palsetia, present this differently, understanding the expansive nature of 19th century Parsi philanthropy as being rooted in 'the Zoroastrian life-affirming philosophy...to actively participate in the affairs of the world for the betterment of humanity'.⁴³

This is not to say that Parsi philanthropy was only or innately public facing and universalist (regardless of questions of motivation). Earlier, there was a clear intention of developing an infrastructure for their immediate religious requirements.⁴⁴ For instance, the most prominent Parsi commercial family of the 18th century, the Rustom Maneck family, initially focused their giving on settling Parsi migrants (primarily weavers from outlying villages in Gujarat) on their land near Surat and building gardens and accommodations for Parsi travellers in the immediate vicinity; later, they moved to Bombay and concentrated their philanthropy on Parsis there, constructing various religious structures and Parsi rest houses.⁴⁵ White describes the family's immense philanthropy work as having two significant

34 White, 'Parsis in the Commercial World,' 202.

35 White, 'Parsis in the Commercial World,' 202–03.

36 Palsetia, 'Merchant Charity,' 197.

37 Haynes, 'From Tribute to Philanthropy,' 342.

38 Haynes, 'From Tribute to Philanthropy,' 342.

39 Haynes, 'From Tribute to Philanthropy,' 342.

40 Palsetia, *The Parsis*, 44.

41 Hinnells, 'Zoroastrian Benevolence,' 284.

42 Hinnells, 'Zoroastrian Benevolence,' 284.

43 Palsetia, *The Parsis*, 44.

44 Simin Patel, 'Cultural Intermediaries in a Colonial City: The Parsis of Bombay c. 1860–1921' (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2015), 180.

45 White, 'Parsis in the Commercial World,' 194.

consequences. 'One, it helped solidify and develop the community. Two, it helped solidify and develop Rustom Maneck's leadership position within both the Parsi community and the wider communities of Surat and Bombay.'⁴⁶ Overall, we can understand the opportunities philanthropy, giving, and the circulation of money provided for establishing and defining a community – in particular, a small one that did not enjoy institutional support – by maintaining and developing the total capital, creating a shared infrastructural space, and so on.

It was only later, once this base was solidified, that we begin to see Parsi philanthropy taking on a more public form, with Jeejeebhoy and others investing heavily in the public domains of schools, hospitals, colonial law, theatre, and early Indian nationalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴⁷ While some scholars have interpreted this as power grabbing and collaboration with a colonial government, Bhabha has described how, through philanthropic action in the pre-Independence decades, Parsis convinced urban Indians that important institutions of native civil society could exist and thrive in India.⁴⁸ In post-Independence India, the history of Parsi public philanthropy continued to gleam, with 953 of the 5003 registered charitable trusts in Bombay in 1953 belonging to Parsis.⁴⁹

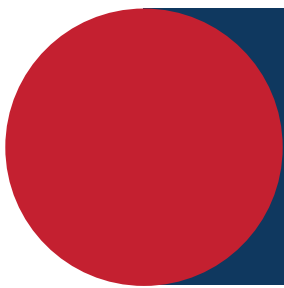


⁴⁶ White, 'Parsis in the Commercial World,' 194.

⁴⁷ Patel, 'Cultural Intermediaries,' 89.

⁴⁸ Bhabha, cited in Vevaina, 'Good Deeds,' 250.

⁴⁹ Vevaina, 'Good Deeds,' 56; Census of 1951 data: Parsis in Bombay constituted approximately 0.02 per cent of the population.



5. An Outline of the Present: Contemporary Parsi Philanthropy

In cities across the country with substantial Parsi populations (1000+)⁵⁰, apart from formal Parsi punchayets – which are fundamentally philanthropic⁵¹ – voluntary organisations and trusts are the core features of a definable Parsi philanthropy. To take the specific example of Ahmedabad (where many of those I spoke to were situated), apart from the Ahmedabad Parsi Punchayet (APP), there are the Parsi Youth League of Ahmedabad (PYLA) – which itself is part of Federation of Zoroastrian Youth Associations (FOZYA) – NGOs like Ushta-Te foundation, and a number of private trusts, mostly named after their respective founders (e.g. Dhanjishaw and Manijeh Gamir Trust). In Bombay alone, there are approximately 3000 Parsi trusts, which range in scale from the Tata Trusts (itself an amalgamation of multiple trusts), with an annual budget of approximately Rs 1500 crores, to smaller trusts which have annual budgets of as little as a few lakh rupees.⁵² Apart from these smaller-scale bodies, there are larger, global organisations, such as the World Zoroastrian Organisation (WZO) Trust Funds and Parzor Foundation, which occupy a significant place in the broad Parsi philanthropy sphere in India.⁵³

In the context of this study, the iconic Tata Trusts represent a bridge between small-scale community philanthropy and big business or corporate philanthropy. Apart from the Tatas, other big business names who continue to be philanthropically prominent include the Godrej Group, Shapoorji Pallonji Group, and Thermax Group. Finally, for the purpose of this research, I expand the definition of Parsi philanthropy to include the work of Parsi individuals who work for ‘cosmopolitan’ NGOs.⁵⁴

I would also like to clarify how the three primary spheres overlap, and thereby explain why I have not chosen to separate the three groups in the analysis (although I do remark on it when it is important). For instance, several people from community organisations were keen to emphasise that, on principle, Parsis were not their singular priority. ZYNG (Zoroastrian Youth for Next Generation) – which was the youth wing of the BPP before an acrimonious split in 2016 – was co-founded by choreographer Pearl Tirandaz in 2009.⁵⁵ Now 41, Pearl has handed over the reins to the younger generation, as she works with both Jiyo Parsi and her latest initiative, Good Deeds Project, started in early 2021.⁵⁶ In an online interview in 2017, she had stated, ‘The next natural progression for me is to broaden my horizons from being a community worker to social worker for the masses. I especially wish to work with women in distress.’⁵⁷ Similarly, in Ahmedabad, Ariz Bokdawalla has been doing voluntary work with the Parsi punchayet and a variety of trusts here. He explains, ‘This was the opportunity I got, but I

50 There are Parsi punchayets in five cities: Ahmedabad, Baroda, Mumbai, Pune, and Surat. Hyderabad is one of six Indian cities with a Parsi population of 1000+ but without a punchayet.

51 The foremost of the five Parsi punchayets is Bombay Parsi Punchayet (BPP). The main basis for the prestige of the BPP in the 20th century is its substantial charitable work, inaugurated at the time of the link with the Parsi Benevolent Institution but much increased since then.

52 Vevaina, ‘Good Deeds,’ 56; <https://www.tatatrusts.org/Upload/PDF/annual-report-srft-2018-19.pdf>; <https://www.tatatrusts.org/Upload/F/annual-report-sdtt-2018-19.pdf>.

53 Parzor Project for the Preservation and Promotion of Parsi and Zoroastrian Culture and Heritage.

54 I introduce the term cosmopolitan here since it was regularly used by interviewees to distinguish between philanthropy for Parsis and philanthropy for all. At times, I use the roughly synonymous term of universalist.

55 Pearl Tirandaz, in conversation with the author, April 2021; ZYNG was inspired by her father-in-law and ex-BPP chairman’s belief that ‘the future of the community and the world is in their [youth] hands’. He was insistent that the youth should have a voice. ZYNG’s aim was to bring together young Parsis through a variety of events, ‘be it a social service drive or working with senior citizens or adventure sports event’.

56 Jiyo Parsi, inaugurated in 2013, was developed by the Ministry of Minority Affairs and Parzor Foundation to arrest the decline in population of the Parsi Zoroastrian Community in India; For more information on Pearl’s Good Deeds Project, visit her website: <https://gooddeedsproject.in/>.

57 <https://wearethecity.in/inspirational-woman-pearl-d-tirandaz/>.

would also do [it] for non-Parsis if I get [the] opportunity.⁵⁸ The reverse case also applies: a few people from the groups of corporate philanthropy and NGOs clearly stated that they have also been involved with Parsi-specific initiatives. For instance, Rashneh Pardiwala, the founder of Centre for Environmental Research and Education (CERE), has worked towards the 'reafforestation of Doongerwadi in Mumbai since the past 6 years' and on 'rainwater harvesting projects in Deolali Parsi Sanatorium'.⁵⁹

6. The Community and the Nation: Philanthropy as Responsibility

6.1. Defining, Understanding, and Characterising Philanthropy

Early on in our conversations, when offering their own personal definitions of philanthropy, most people across the three groups gave pointedly universalist responses. That is to say, they did not identify a specific identity-based group the philanthropy was geared towards. Hoshaang Gotla, the founder of Xtremely Young Zoroastrians (XYZ), a community organisation that 'aspires to mould the children of the Parsi community between the ages of 5 and 15 years to become better individuals and inculcate the Zoroastrian values through fellowship and service activities', asserted: 'Philanthropy is not just giving money or things like big schools...but also your time, and useful resources.'⁶⁰ More emphatically, Aspy Unwalla, who works with the APP and various local trusts, described philanthropy as 'Charity. Serving humanity in a broad sense.'⁶¹ Yet, as the conversations developed, becoming expansive and entangled, axes of identity (community, religion, nation) began to appear and find their places in complex worldviews.

Before I look at these developments, it is important to note that there were a couple of people who did in fact identify specific recipient groups when defining philanthropy. Nayantara Sabavala, a former director of programme design at Tata Trusts, stated, 'Philanthropy for me goes far beyond giving. It means using one's own resources – both financial and intellectual – for the good of the community at the micro-level, and for nation building at the macro-level. Giving on the other hand is more short-term and is a response to a specific need.'⁶² By contrasting philanthropy with giving in terms of structure and scope, Nayantara elucidated the link between engaging in philanthropy and grappling with socio-political identities.

6.2. Nationalist Tinge

'First an Indian/Indian first' has become an increasingly common phrase, inserted into mainstream discourse by nationalists to pressure minorities into declaring their loyalty to the country.⁶³ It is perhaps only since the time of Independence that this has been so pervasive. At the time figures like

⁵⁸ Ariz Bokdawalla, in conversation with the author, April 2021.

⁵⁹ Rashneh Pardiwala, in email correspondence with the author, July 2021.

⁶⁰ <https://zoroastrians.net/2021/08/21/xyz-xtremely-young-zoroastrians-hoshaang-gotla/>; Hoshaang Gotla, in conversation with the author, April 2021.

⁶¹ Aspy Unwalla, in conversation with the author, May 2021.

⁶² Nayantara Sabavala, in email correspondence with the author, July 2021.

⁶³ See Appendix 3; Abdullah Khan, 'Are you Muslim first or Indian first?': How I discovered my identity,' Scroll, 25 December 2020, <https://scroll.in/article/977374/are-you-muslim-first-or-indian-first-how-i-discovered-my-identity/>; Meher Medora, in conversation with the author, June 2021. 'Exactly [worried about community activities]. One of our volunteers wanted to publish a study under Ushta-Te's name. Didn't want trust to get involved.'

Sardar Patel made statements such as ‘the time has come when the vast majority of the minority communities have themselves realised after great reflection the evil effects in the past of such reservation on the minorities themselves, and the reservations should be dropped’.⁶⁴ During the years preceding Independence, the leadership of the Parsi community was highly divided between nation-enthusiasts and nation-sceptics. In 1947, two years before Patel’s remarks, a ‘Parsi Nationalist Conference’ was held. At the event, A.D. Shroff, a prominent Parsi industrialist and economist, remarked, ‘Instead of claiming all sorts of concessions as a minority, we should completely identify ourselves with Indians, and make ourselves indispensable to the country.’⁶⁵ In May 2021, Ariz’s words to me were a striking echo: ‘We should be an example for other minorities also...so small but we have never wanted reservations, quotas despite the fact that we have donated to many institutions. Indira Gandhi, Nehru and all offered us quota but we still said no. We are in GC and we are proud of that.’⁶⁶ The irony of Sardar Patel’s reason for not allocating reservations to the Parsi community, in the broader context of Ariz’s anti-reservation remarks, is striking: ‘because they can make their way anywhere, and make their way in such a manner that they would get more than they would by any reservation or by any separate process of elections’.⁶⁷

While many implied this framing of identity (‘Indian first’) in their articulations (e.g. Ariz), it is noteworthy that two out of the three who explicitly used this phrasing were from community organisations; they were unabashed in their Parsi prioritisation, yet keen to make this loyalist assertion. The head of a major Parsi trust, Jehangir Bharucha, stated, ‘I am first an Indian and then a Zoroastrian. Proud to have been born in a community such as Parsis.’⁶⁸ Similarly, Pearl, the aforementioned co-founder of ZYNG, asserted, ‘We are Indians first. We don’t ask for anything in return, though we have been living here for so many years.’⁶⁹ After a brief pause, she reiterated, ‘We don’t expect anything in return. We are grateful.’ A similar expression of gratitude was made by Ariz: ‘This country has provided [for] us for so many hundreds of years now. It obviously was not our birth place but it has provided us with an embrace that no other country would at that time.’⁷⁰ Considering India’s structural and conceptual existence as a nation is a relatively recent historical development, the power of nationalist discourse and ‘meaning making’ here shines through. While Ariz expresses this gratitude, he also conceives of this as a symbiotic relationship, where the nation should also be grateful for its people: ‘we might be [in] lesser numbers but the quantity of contribution has been very big.’

6.3. Community Pride and Shame: A Mixed Bag

Meher Medora is now synonymous with her organisation Ushta-Te, which runs Parsi community initiatives in Ahmedabad (Zarthushti Awareness Group of Ahmedabad or ZAGA, educational loans, etc.).⁷¹ However, the bulk of her working years was spent working with cosmopolitan NGOs on issues such as rights of the disabled and women’s empowerment. Sherecounts that the idea for Ushta-Te ‘was given by my daughter because I kept telling my kids, “You people don’t follow the religion. What do we do about it?” So, she said, “Mother, why don’t you start something? You work for other communities

⁶⁴ V.P. Bharatiya, ‘Minorities Commission: Constitutional Metamorphosis?’ *Journal of the Indian Law Institute* 21, no. 2 (April 1979): 268.

⁶⁵ Murzban Jal, ‘Parsis and the Making of Indian Modernity,’ in *Essays on Marxism and Asia*, ed. Murzban Jal (forthcoming); Kulke, *Parsees*, 264; In 1893, the ‘unofficial ambassador of India’, the Parsi political leader Dadabhai Naoroji, famously said, ‘Whether I am a Hindu, a Muhammadan, a Parsi, a Christian, or of any other creed, I am above all an Indian. Our country is India, our nationality is Indian.’

⁶⁶ Ariz, 2021. GC stands for General Category. This is the government’s highest caste category, i.e. no reservations received.

⁶⁷ Mitra Sharafi, *Law and Identity in Colonial South Asia: Parsi Legal Culture, 1772–1947* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 27.

⁶⁸ Jehangir Bharucha (pseudonym), in email correspondence with the author, June 2021.

⁶⁹ Pearl, 2021.

⁷⁰ Ariz, 2021.

⁷¹ Meher, 2021.

so why don't you work for your own community." So, I said, "Okay." "Yet, her daughter chooses to work and volunteer with mental health NGOs, and feels:

frankly, nothing for the Parsi community. I feel we are all human beings. I feel we are all wonderful human beings. How do you call yourself superior? Why would you do that? A lot of people who want to work just for the Parsis, only for the Parsis. I have never felt like that...I would be very happy to help each and everyone.⁷²
 There are others, of course, who feel differently.

Bomi Sethna, who works with PYLA, was clear about why he does this voluntary work: 'I am Parsi. That is the reason. I would like to help my people. I would like to serve my people.'⁷³ When I asked Aspy about whether he feels a wider, national responsibility, he countered: 'But we are such a small community. The government are talking in millions of people. But for the Parsis how many people do they have to take care of? It won't take a lot to do.'⁷⁴ For context, he added, 'People may not know that there are many poor Parsi families living in rural areas of Gujarat. No harm in well-to-do Parsis helping needy Parsis.' The mixed expressions of enthusiasm and apathy for the community among Parsis are clearly troubling for people like him. He reminisced:

There was a time when it was that Central Bank and Godrej as a company were as good as Parsi Dharamshalas...but now the Parsis are an extreme minority. One of the reasons is that the management has started feeling that why should we just employ Parsis. They don't want to be seen as community-minded.

He pauses before smiling and humorously lamenting: 'I have even coined a phrase for it. You have heard of upwardly mobiles...but now among Parsis there are a lot of people who are outwardly mobile!' Aspy, whose father worked at Central Bank and 'would take pride in going to work in a daglo and topi', asserts, 'There are some people who take pride in saying we are world citizens. They are embarrassed to be associated with Parsi community work.'⁷⁵

On the other hand, this veneer of secularism that Aspy feels many Parsis have cloaked themselves in these days is at odds with the bond that prominent Parsis continue to maintain with the community. Pearl emphasised this attachment as such: 'If you ask anyone to take part in any activities, perform for Jiyo Parsi or whatever, they will always say yes. Anahita Shroff, the current editor of vogue magazine. Mehra Kohla, a top makeup artist. Shiamak [Davar], Boman [Irani]...they will come. They will just say, "Darling, I will be there." '⁷⁶ Many in the realm of big business, such as the Serum Institute of India's (SII) Poonawallas – or, humourously, the Vaccinewalas (Cyrus Poonawalla's son, Adar, has been thrust into the spotlight during the COVID-19 pandemic) – have been significant patrons for atash behrams across Maharashtra and Gujarat.⁷⁷ Cyrus is also reported to have rarely rejected a request from fellow Parsis. Most recently, he instantly accepted a request from an ex-BPP chairperson, Dinshaw Mehta, for SII to keep aside 60,000 COVID vaccines for their endangered, ageing community.⁷⁸

⁷² Nishmin Marshall, in conversation with the author, June 2021.

⁷³ Bomi Sethna, in conversation with the author, June 2021.

⁷⁴ Aspy, 2021.

⁷⁵ Daglo (white shirt) and topi (hat) are centrepieces of a traditional Parsi outfit for men.

⁷⁶ Pearl, 2021.

⁷⁷ PT Reporter, 'Pune's Sir JJ Agiary celebrates 175 glorious years!' *Parsi Times*, 7 December 2019, <https://parsi-times.com/2019/12/punes-sir-jj-agiary-celebrates-175-glorious-years/>; Apoorva Puranik, 'Iranshah Udvada Utsav: "Damn the tigers, save the Parsis!"' *Mid-day*, 28 December 2015, <https://www.mid-day.com/news/india-news/article/iranshah-udvada-utsav---damn-the-tigers--save-the-parsis---16810160>; Agiaries are standard Parsi fire temples, while atash behrams are prestigious fire temples which house the highest grade of fire.

⁷⁸ Coomi Kapoor, 'The Legend of the Poonawallas,' *Open*, 9 July 2021, <https://openthemagazine.com/feature/the-legend-of-the-poonawallas/>.

Of course, since the Government of India is in complete control of the vaccination drive, this never materialised.⁷⁹ This is reported differently by a columnist, who quips that in keeping with the true domicile of the Parsis – Indiawala – the BPP quickly declined the offer on behalf of the community.⁸⁰

As evident through the latest example, although contemporary philanthropy may appear to be of a secular, universalist character, it is ultimately embedded in community and national histories. For instance, if we understand that the privilege and wealth of this minority community is enmeshed in this country's national history, it is perhaps not surprising that this privilege does not protect them from the winds of nationalist discourse. Alternatively, the possibility that the younger generation is becoming less community-minded does not equate to an increase in nationalism; national and community identity – although entangled – do not function in opposition. Overall, although no neat picture of the contemporary community can be drawn in terms of how their identity is linked to their philanthropy, an element of opportunism and adaptability appears to be central to their articulations and actions.

⁷⁹ Kapoor, 'The Legend.'

⁸⁰ Gopalkrishna Gandhi, 'The Legacy of Indiawalas,' *The Tribune*, 9 February 2021, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/the-legacy-of-indiawalas-208442>.

7. Values and Reputation: The Importance of a Giving Narrative

‘Parsis were generous from day one,’ Bomi asserted, recalling the well-known Parsi adage, ‘Parsi, thy name is charity’.⁸¹ History is many things: an inspirational tale, a powerful proof, an intriguing narrative, a weapon of political rhetoric. This historical adage is similarly multivalent. In the context of philanthropy, its significance can be grasped when we centre the fact that the action of giving has been shown to be strongly influenced by perceptions of the self and those around the giver. As demonstrated in survey studies, a dispositional empathy is positively related to charitable giving.⁸² Perhaps more crucially, this is a circular phenomenon, where an engagement in giving is not only a result of this self-image,⁸³ but simultaneously reinforces this self-image. As Ariz put it, just as one feels gratitude for the community – and the nation – they are inherently grateful to us.

‘The foremost benefit I have got from being a member of the community...other people know that Parsis stand for something. Respect...being trustworthy. So obviously my moral duty is to give back to the community...not monetary sense, but values, beliefs, discipline.’⁸⁴ Ariz presents a compelling image here: of values and reputation in a circular process where the qualities of the community that he benefits from (by virtue of embodying them) are the benefits the community receives through him. He elaborates on how this plays out in daily life: ‘When I tell someone I am a Parsi...I am a Zoroastrian, the amount of respect and goodwill I get, the honour I get. The way people look at me or the way they expect me to behave. What they know a Parsi stands for. The integrity, honesty, the trust.’ When I wrote to Rashneh, asking what significance being Parsi has for her work, she responded: ‘I feel great pride in being Parsi since the community stands for a set of noteworthy values and stellar qualities such as integrity, loyalty, benevolence, philanthropy, and reverence for all the elements of nature.’⁸⁵ Ariz, whose full-time career is in banking, explains how this is relevant ‘especially for financial matters...you are seen as quite trustworthy’. While history is absent in these discussions, it looms large. A central component of the economic success and social prominence of Parsi merchants in the 18th and 19th centuries was the consolidation of their reputation (*abru*) as not only wealthy, but trustworthy.

7.1. The Importance of Adages

Ariz’s remarks were no anomaly, with various people I spoke to keen to assert their pride in a heritage that is ‘synonymous with integrity’. At times, these philanthropic traits were characterised as ‘inherent’, ‘instilled’, and a combination – of ‘inbuilt thing and brought up’.⁸⁶ These statements were made at different points during our conversations, but most directly in reference to the phrase ‘Parsi, thy name is charity’. It should be said that while I planned to weave a question around the relevance of this phrase into the conversation, on numerous occasions it was brought up before I had the chance: ‘I’m sure you have also been brought up with the phrase “Parsi, thy name is charity”. Right from childhood, that philosophy in life – your hand should always be up, giving. Never down. Haath upar rakho, haath neeche mat rakh.’⁸⁷

⁸¹ Bomi, 2021.

⁸² René Bekkers and Pamala Wiepking, ‘A Literature Review of Empirical Studies of Philanthropy: Eight Mechanisms that Drive Charitable Giving,’ *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 40, no. 5 (September 2010): 939.

⁸³ Bekkers and Wiepking, 939.

⁸⁴ Ariz, 2021.

⁸⁵ Pardiwala, 2021.

⁸⁶ Nerges Mistry, in conversation with the author, July 2021; Jehangir, 2021; Ariz, 2021.

⁸⁷ Delnaz Jokhi, in conversation with the author, April 2021.

Apart from this adage, which explicitly ties Parsis and charity together, the iconic motto of Zoroastrianism, 'Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds', is also understood by many as part of a philanthropic outlook and engagement with the world. For Rashneh, this connection is not at the core of only Zoroastrianism, but is found across religions:

The very practice of following the three basic tenets of Zoroastrian GT, GW, GD amounts to philanthropy and giving. Every single philosopher and every single spiritual prophet, guru and religion espouses philanthropy and a life of giving because ultimately that alone leads to fulfilment and happiness which is in sync with all the elements.

Pearl recounts how the philosophy of this phrase was imprinted in her upbringing:

This is what we have been taught for the longest time. As Parsis. This is what so many people do each day but it is not done consciously. You put out some water for birds but you are not doing it consciously. You have seen your parents do it. So, you just carry on doing it.

Her remarks are another reminder of the silent drivers of historical traditions. Tracing the roots of essence is a difficult task, since that which becomes essence is familiar, and therefore hard to identify. Again, it is important to reiterate that the power of adages in the context of morality lies in their ritual character, rather than their truth. If we recall that there is no prescribed obligation for giving in Zoroastrianism, then we might surmise that giving is spontaneous, and instrumentally driven.

The power of popular Parsi adages rewrites this narrative, and accepts the power of discourse – just as doctrine does – to create moral rituals. In fact, relevant adages are not just restricted to historical phrases, with Hoshaang at XYZ clearly understanding the power of catchy philosophical phrases for the inculcation of values: the acronym MAD for one of their initiatives, standing for 'making a difference', is also of course reminiscent of the association between Parsis and madness.⁸⁸ Nerges Mistry, the director of the Foundation for Medical Research (FMR), puts forward the argument succinctly, if slightly differently: 'There is no obligation as such. More a philosophy...happiness unto others. No rule, but this sort of thing requires talking about, particularly to a younger generation of Parsis. So historical tales, tales of generosity and so on.'⁸⁹ Interestingly, she uses another iconic, but less obvious, Parsi phrase here too – 'happiness unto others' – underlining the importance of popular philanthropic adages.⁹⁰ She also understands the active nature of this inculcation, rather than perceiving it as the unconscious, timeless inculcation that Pearl did. While this is partly due to Nerges' remarks coming at a time in the conversation when we were discussing the present and future generations, it is also noteworthy that she locates a philanthropic attitude as being embedded in 'tales', i.e. moral-historical stories.

On the other hand, there are some who feel the values that these adages uphold are either waning or no longer exist, or even that they never actually did exist. While this is a subject we will explore in more detail later, references to aforementioned iconic values are relevant here. Nishmin expresses her doubts: 'It is a very generalised thing. Yes, it can be true...generous, good time, humour, honesty. But sometimes I feel that we are very narrow-minded. We say we are broad-minded, but...'⁹¹ Tanya

⁸⁸ Hoshaang, 2021.

⁸⁹ Nerges, 2021.

⁹⁰ From the Avesta, the sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism: Y.43.1 – 'happiness unto him who gives happiness unto others.'

⁹¹ Nishmin, 2021.

Mistry, who leads her family business's CSR division, acknowledges, 'Yeah, in history Parsis have wanted to give back...and for sure religion has something to do with the idea of giving back.' But then she states flatly: 'But I guess because we also used to suck up to the British to get all the good jobs so then we felt a bit bad and then that's the reason we gave back.'⁹² My suggestion – and revelation – that many argue that an instilled generosity was central to this philanthropic disposition, was met with a dismissive 'Oh please'.

7.2. Social Responsibility and Wealth Creation

'The Parsi community has a rich history.'⁹³ This short sentence is how the interviewer begins one of his questions for Adi Godrej, chairman of the Godrej Group, and his son, Pirojsha Godrej. The assumption is that by 'a rich history', he denotes one that is substantial, varied, and well-known. Yet, it is the connotation of wealth that, for some, will hover powerfully over this turn of phrase. The Godrej Group are renowned for their historical commitment to philanthropy. A few years ago, in an interview by India Today with the aforementioned Godrej duo, Adi Godrej asserted, 'CSR is extremely important. 25 per cent of our shares of the holding company go into the Godrej Foundation.' Earlier on, the two of them were also asked this question: 'The Parsi community has a rich history. What's the community's future with ever dwindling numbers?' Both ended their short responses in a similar manner, echoing the discussion in the previous chapter. Adi: 'But, I like to look at myself much more as an Indian than Parsi'; Pirojsha: 'But, to me, it is not a very important part of my identity.' More pertinent for the current discussion, however, are the responses that preceded these. Adi: 'It's a very small community and extremely successful. The reason that the numbers are dwindling is because it is doing extremely well for itself, in terms of education, employment and income'; Pirojsha: 'I am not a very religious person. But, if you are proud of a community, of what it has achieved, it's certainly created a culture of working and success. And I do think that in the future Parsis will continue to do well and continue to survive.' While both assert that being Parsi is not central to them, the links between their own self-understanding, the Parsi community, and what they understand as success – career growth and wealth creation – are clear.

This open, positive attitude towards wealth creation is echoed by Zarine Engineer – who has worked on sustainability at the Tata Trusts for the past decade – when she says, 'It is also something mentioned in Zoroastrian theology'⁹⁴ ...very important for you to generate wealth, prosper, to be happy and do well. But you shouldn't forget about your sense of social responsibility.'⁹⁵ While it is interesting that she brings in Zoroastrian theology here, she also acknowledges the importance of her parents' sensibility, and how this articulation is perhaps a later adjustment of reckoning:

It may not be these words, of course I am only able to articulate the essence of what my parents were trying to inculcate in me now...the ethos that 'Zarine, do whatever you like, earn how much money you want, but please make sure you do something for the society you are part of'.

⁹² Tanya Mistry, in conversation with the author, July 2021.

⁹³ Dhiraj Nayyar, 'Adi Godrej in conversation with Pirojsha Godrej,' India Today, 14 December 2012, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/india-today-37th-anniversary/story/adi-godrej-in-conversation-with-pirojsha-godrej-124252-2012-12-14>.

⁹⁴ From the Avesta, the sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism: '42.2 When [a trader] buys for four drachms a single piece of clothing which is worth four drachms in one town, and he takes it to another town, and [in] the place where he takes it it is worth ten drachms, he sells it for ten drachms, and takes out of it wages and daily sustenance for himself and his horse, and he gives away what remains [of it] as a righteous gift, it is a [work of] great merit.' Writer, 'Zoroastrian Self-Preservation,' 119.

⁹⁵ Zarine Engineer (pseudonym), in conversation with the author, July 2021.

Here, family and theology are not in contradiction; rather, family are a key conduit in transforming theology into philosophy.

Dr Cyrus Shroff, whose family's eye hospitals began as a charitable eye clinic in central Delhi in the early 20th century, describes Zoroastrianism as having an 'underlying philosophy that the creation of wealth...was not done just for personal amassing of wealth. But when you generate that everyone must share in that.'⁹⁶ He clarifies that while theology has not been a direct inspiration in his life, the legacy and role model of his grandfather is a central inspiration for him and his brother as they maintain and expand the hospital's social responsibility through charitable satellite hospitals across northern India. On the other hand, it is important to understand how an explicit reference to theology can operate within the discourse as a way to substantiate an argument, or in this case, an idea of tradition. Right at the end of the WZO Trusts brochure, the phrase 'He who relieves the poor makes the Lord King' (a translation of a line from a core Parsi prayer, Yatha Ahu Vairyo) is highlighted in bold.⁹⁷

7.4. Trusts: A Philosophy

As mentioned earlier in the paper, Parsi trusts are a significant subject in the history and contemporary world of Parsi philanthropy.⁹⁸ One aspect that often made an appearance in remarks about current trusts – apart from their ubiquity – was respect for how they looked beyond the narrow horizon of the family and the near future to a wider community and distant future. Aspy, in his role as a trustee for an anonymous trust in Ahmedabad, stated that he has 'great respect for the original owners. They didn't come from rich backgrounds, but they slogged all their lives. They lived very frugally and they didn't have children of their own, so they decided to do this instead of giving away the money or blowing it up.'⁹⁹ As Ruzbeh Umrigar, a Parzor employee, affirmed:

A lot of people have money, but choosing to leave it for the future is different. It was something not thought about much at that time. So, we were the pioneers. That kind of thinking, for beyond your immediate family, is something inspiring. If tomorrow, I have got a million dollars I will strive to be something like that.¹⁰⁰

Trusts are an integral part of a landscape of symbolic pride in a socially oriented, public modernity, where – in Nerges's words – 'For every Parsi, our philanthropy is a living world. We see it all the time.'¹⁰¹

This section was an attempt to show how the contemporary echoes the past in the context of Parsi values, pointing clearly to the continuing significance of both self-image and public image for the Parsi community. In fact, this was evident even in my review of digital archives and popular culture. The most powerful of these examples was the book *Parsi Lustre on Indian Soil* ('Philanthropy' is even placed top-left, prime real estate, on the book cover), written in 1963, where the first three figures are all philanthropists: Ness Wadia, Cowasjee Jehangir, and Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy. Overall, while the veracity and significance of popular Parsi adages and a philanthropic disposition may be contested by some, they remain items of discourse through which contemporary Parsi values are positioned, located, and elevated.

⁹⁶ Cyrus Shroff, in conversation with the author, April 2021.

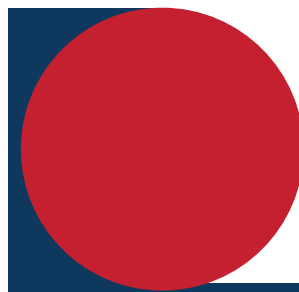
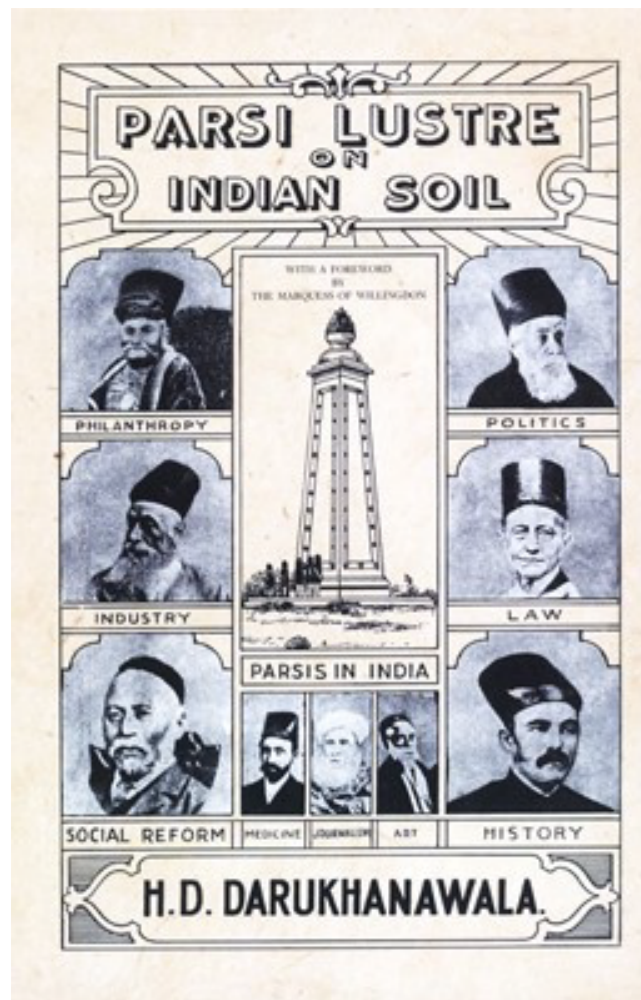
⁹⁷ World Zoroastrian Organisation Trusts, 2019, <http://www.wzotrust.org/download/WZO%20Trust%20Brochure.pdf>.

⁹⁸ Palsetia, *The Parsis*, 62–63; Vevaina, 'Good Deeds,' 238–65.

⁹⁹ Aspy, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Ruzbeh Umrigar, in conversation with the author, July 2021.

¹⁰¹ Nerges, 2021.



8. *Speculations on the Present: What Does the Future Hold?*

When speaking with younger Parsis (ages 25–45) about how they conceptualise and differentiate their involvement in philanthropy, delineating clear boundaries between themselves, their Parsi peers, and their non-Parsi peers was not an easy task for me or for them. This acted as a reminder of two things. First, that the historical narrative of Parsi philanthropy inevitably conceals a more fluid reality, and second, that neoliberal globalisation has accelerated the assimilation of the community's elite. In this context, many attributed to the personal realm of family and upbringing the inculcation of a certain ethos; the possibility that Parsi-ness has anything to do with it was neither dismissed nor emphasised. Tanya, 27, oscillates through our conversation:

Yeah, maybe religion does have something to do with it...but neither me or my mum are that religious, we are more spiritual. My mum is a really compassionate and humble person...a real inspiration to me. From a really young age...when I was eight or nine, we would go with WSD all over Bombay. On Sunday mornings, we would go to dirty dingy back alleys looking for injured dogs. It really opened my eyes.¹⁰²

8.1. *Exposure to Privilege and Inequality*

Yet, it was not just Tanya's parents' compassion that shaped her interest in philanthropy, but also crucially the realisation of the immense gap in wealth, privilege, and rights through her exposure to the wider world. 'For me, I think growing up...I never felt really that comfortable with how much I had. Just the inequality of it all. I never really understood why I came from so much. It made me feel at times ashamed.'¹⁰³ She goes on to identify YouTube as opening up a different, painful world for her as a teenager:

There was this one documentary that really stuck to me...I was maybe in 8th grade. It was on child soldiers in Africa. I remember they said those children were walking 20 km a day to go to a bus stop to sleep at the train station so that they would not get abducted. I remember watching that and getting really upset...I would look at my house and be like I have such a big house we could fit 100 people in this large room...why do we have so much and this and that.

What is clear is that, for a global business elite, the explosion of social media means that exposure to the depth of inequality in the world is impossible to ignore. Whether this is addressed with a veneer of philanthropy or a depth of social responsibility, is the more difficult question.

¹⁰² Tanya, 2021. WSD refers to Welfare of Stray Dogs, an animal welfare organisation.

¹⁰³ Tanya, 2021.

8.2. Social Media: Exposure or a Pose?

While this discussion may not appear Parsi-specific, to talk about social media-exposed wealthy youth is to talk about a demographic that has largely chosen to flatten and sideline their community background. Although Delnaz Jokhi, a PYLA volunteer, mentions social media in the context of contemporary philanthropy – just like Tanya – she remarks, ‘Nowadays, people want to go on social media to show off.’¹⁰⁴ In addition, in the context of a recent act of giving, she remarked humorously, ‘It is nowhere on social media...I mean, nobody in my family even knows about this. I am just telling you because you are interested in this subject.’ While a simple contrasting of their statements (one about profound exposure, the other about superficial exposing) may seem disingenuous – since they are locating opposite ends of a philanthropic trajectory (initial motivation vs ultimate action) – they nevertheless suggest a difference in perception of the young elite’s attitude towards philanthropy. For many sceptics, such as Ruzbeh, ‘Philanthropy has become more like a marketing strategy. On Facebook, it will have these many likes. Parsi form of charity was that one hand should not know that the other hand has done it.’¹⁰⁵ This echoes concerns expressed by scholars in their popularisation of the term ‘philanthrocapitalism’ to describe the current trend of the business elite co-opting the discourse of philanthropy to reinvent their political rubric in a more palatable manner.¹⁰⁶ One of the buzzwords of this new era, sustainability, was used multiple times in conversations I had with people from the corporate philanthropy space when talking about what they wanted to achieve.

8.3. A New Philanthropy: Consumerism and Sustainability

Some do not describe contemporary philanthropy and giving as superficial, but assert that it has in fact markedly decreased. When I asked Nayantara whether she feels the adage ‘Parsi, thy name is charity’ continues to resonate today, she stated, ‘There seems to be a growing detachment from the issues surrounding us and a more self-centred approach with regard to garnering and using wealth. This is possibly true of everyone and not just confined to the Parsi community.’¹⁰⁷ Aspy characterises the young generation as consumerist, stating matter-of-factly:

Consumerism has gone up like anything. The scope for spending money has increased. In the good old days, if you wanted to get a car you would get an Ambassador, Fiat...now a youngster dreams of owning a BMW, Mercedes. Travelling all over the world has become so easy. The desire to spend money on oneself and one’s own family has become much stronger. So, they feel that why the hell should I give it to charity. Let me give my wife and children a better life.¹⁰⁸

While his distaste is clear, he nevertheless does not assign blame to individuals in these final two sentences; instead, he lays out the realities of the neoliberal dream. Zarine’s reflections were similarly insightful, probing the reality of attitudes to giving for many of the young elite:

I was trying to think if I did not have this sort of upbringing from childhood where I saw Mum and Dad do it, would I be motivated to put aside some money...if I ask my peers...Parsis...it’s not something they have to do, you know. They are like ‘Ya, maybe later in life. We need to pay our rent, do this, do that.’ It is not a very deliberate effort to give.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Delnaz, 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Ruzbeh, 2021.

¹⁰⁶ Kavita N. Ramdas, ‘Philanthrocapitalism: Reflections on Politics and Policy Making, Society 48, no. 5 (August 2011): 395.

¹⁰⁷ Nayantara, 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Aspy, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Zarine, 2021.

The aforementioned Poonawallas are proud to be both consumerist and philanthropic, with Cyrus making this remark about the Cowasji Jehangir family in reference to them declining to use their iconic Readymoney surname: 'If you have such an illustrious name, why not use it?'¹¹⁰ For the Poonawallas, having the family name attached to the deed is an important indicator of their pride and commitment to the cause. While Aspy voices legitimate concerns, the language and vision of many of those involved in philanthropy is experiencing real change, wobbling, morphing, and expanding under advanced capitalism. Rati Forbes, who is both a director at Forbes Marshall companies and head of Forbes Foundation, explains her philanthropy philosophy:

It is not how much money you give or the cause you give to, but the approach you give with and the deeper intention. Sometimes people just give to a cause or a one-off event, because it makes them personally feel good...which is not bad, per se. But there is a lack of deeper meaning or sustainability in such an approach.¹¹¹

Similarly, Tanya recounted having lunch the other day with a friend (who also comes from a big business family) who said, 'I want to make a larger impact...and I want to do it in more sustainable ways.'¹¹²

8.4. Philanthropy for Parsis: Lingering Issues

I have spoken strongly of the Parsee Charitable Trusts – I wish I could write still more strongly – that my pen could be steeped in vitriol and my words burn themselves into the hearts of Trustees, for of all the evils that the community suffers from this indiscriminate beggar-producing 'charity' is the worst!¹¹³

These critical remarks are from a report commissioned by the Sir Ratan Tata Trusts in 1932. In 1935, Jal Bulsara offered a tempered, elaborate version of this criticism, with the bulk of his 455-page book – *Parsi Charity Relief and Community Amelioration* – offering various detailed suggestions.¹¹⁴ Fast forward to the present day and remarks from sceptics are strikingly similar. Meher Medora, after detailing the various loans that her trust offers, reserved her criticism for welfare charity: 'I don't believe in giving doles. We have made the community beggars giving doles. It's okay for a few people...but they get used to this charity mode.'¹¹⁵ I don't believe in this charity mode.' Ruzbeh quipped, 'Some are busy making a list of charity trusts that they can extort.'¹¹⁶ Zoru Bathena described the behaviour of such Parsis as 'entitled', recounting his recent volunteering experience with Parsis in need during the COVID-19 pandemic:

The quality of some of the requests were so ridiculous. One day, one lady called up and said, 'I want to eat masala dosa, nothing else.' Another day, a dastur called me up and abused me because the delivery guy came when he was doing his prayers...we are definitely a genetically flawed community. Welfare is good. I am happy that I helped somebody. But the entitlement that I should get something...people feel that they should get everything because they are Parsis.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ Kapoor, 'The Legend.'

¹¹¹ Rati Forbes, in conversation with the author, July 2021.

¹¹² Tanya, 2021.

¹¹³ Hinnells, 'Zoroastrian Benevolence,' 280.

¹¹⁴ Jal Feeroze Bulsara, *Parsi Charity Relief and Communal Amelioration* (Bombay: Sanj Vartaman Press, 1935).

¹¹⁵ Meher, 2021.

¹¹⁶ Ruzbeh, 2021.

¹¹⁷ Zoru Bathena, in conversation with the author, June 2021. Dastur is a Parsi priest.

Repurposing an iconic Parsi analogy, he lamented, 'Too much of good is also bad. Too much sugar in your tea will give you diabetes and ruin your health.'

Views on the present and future of Parsi philanthropy are expectedly complex, both in terms of philanthropy received by Parsis – as shown in the previous paragraph – and philanthropy given by Parsis. While the significance of community and national responsibility remains relevant, this section offers an alternative, important point about the socioeconomically upward Parsi community: that many of them occupy an elite space (e.g., all corporate philanthropists) where they participate in a global neoliberal culture that contains and emits its own narratives of identity, philanthropy, and social responsibility.

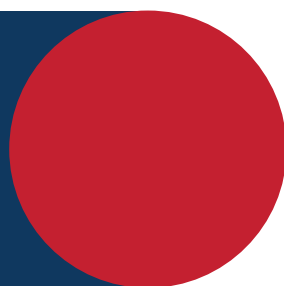
A large red circle graphic on the left side of the section header.

9. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to outline important characteristics of a broadly defined contemporary Parsi philanthropy. While the history of Parsi philanthropy is well understood, a contemporary comprehension is understandably murkier, situated as it is in a busier, more diversified sphere. Yet, this research illustrates how popular community discourse continues to invoke the importance of a philanthropic outlook. For one, the complex discourse around national and community identity – with a deep historical background – is shown to have links with an understanding of philanthropic responsibility. On the other hand, I attempt to present anecdotal sketches of how ideologies of neoliberal capitalism are increasingly influencing this sensibility, while also looking more broadly at prospects for the future. The middle discussion section, in a sense, ties this together, understanding how the past, present, future, and philanthropy are fused in articulations around values. The adages that carry these values appear to function as a mnemonic: a way of understanding and structuring a directed life philosophy. An investigation into the truth and influence of these discourses is of course beyond the scope of this paper.¹¹⁸ Overall, I hope this paper provides important insights into a small, but significant part of contemporary Indian philanthropy, and that it acts as one of many important reminders of the porous borders of the traditional domains of religion, politics, economics, and kinship, too often understood as separate in both academic and popular imagination.

¹¹⁸ For a variety of research suggestions, see Appendix 2.

10. Appendices



10.1. Appendix 1

This is just one version of the interview questionnaire, which was modified for each participant. It was a semi-structured interview, and therefore there was a loose order and not all the questions were asked (and some may have been added). Also, this was the original interview questionnaire (adaptations were also made during the course of data collection based on themes noticed; e.g., a question on social responsibility, relationship with the nation, etc.)

Interview Questionnaire: Contemporary Parsi Philanthropy and Giving

Agenda

This questionnaire is a central part of a research project on contemporary Parsi philanthropy and giving in India. It begins by exploring the participant's personal and professional background in order to locate their attitudes towards and participation in giving. Questions on their awareness of the history of Parsi philanthropy are followed by questions on their own and others' current practices of philanthropy, allowing a link to be created between the two. [approx. 40 mins]

Notes

- 1) If you feel uncomfortable or do not want to answer any of the questions, please let me know. No problem. You can also be kept anonymous if you would prefer that.
- 2) Would it be okay if I recorded this call for my own note-taking purposes?

Basic biographical info

Full name:

Age:

Place of birth:

Personal & professional background

- 1) What do you do currently?
- 2) What work have you done in the past?
- 3) What was your first job?
- 4) What has influenced you to reach this point?
- 5) What were the attitudes to giving of Parsis around you while growing up? (e.g. parents, other family, friends)
- 6) What has influenced you to reach this point?
- 7) What do the terms philanthropy and giving mean to you?
- 8) In that case, would you describe yourself as a philanthropist and/or giver OR neither?
- 9) What significance does being Parsi/Zoroastrian have for you and your work?

Parsi philanthropy and giving – knowledge & history

- 1) There's a popular quote about Parsis and charity that you may have heard. 'Parsi, thy name is charity.' Why do you think this catchphrase exists? Would you agree with it?
- 2) Is this rich history of Parsi philanthropy still relevant today? How so?
- 3) Why do you think Parsis have this philanthropic history/What influenced them in their philanthropy? (e.g. religious/community teachings, opportunism under empire/political gain/merchant capitalism, self-preservation as minority community, etc.)

Philanthropy and giving – current trends

- 1) Where do Parsis give now? For what causes? In which industries? (e.g. education, health, arts, religion, environment, entrepreneurship)
- 2) Would you say that Parsis continue to be prominent philanthropists/givers of money (to all communities)?
- 3) If so, would you say that philanthropic and giving habits differ between different sections of Parsis? (age, region, social class, income level, profession, etc.)
- 4) Do you think there has been a change in attitudes to giving among Parsis in the past 20–30 years? (Such as, movement away from outward social development, e.g. education, health, towards community work like JIYO Parsi, youth groups, etc. OR towards more outward-looking silent giving, i.e. secular or innovative giving and contributions.)
- 5) Do you know other Parsis who give substantially/are involved in philanthropy?
- 6) Outside of your work, have you given to a specific cause/person/organisation? If so, why? And to whom?
- 7) Do you or your family give to a family agiary/anjuman?

Final questions

- 1) What do you think are important aspects that this study should capture?
- 2) Do you have suggestions for other people/organisations to speak to in order to understand the range of different giving and philanthropy that currently takes place in the Parsi community?

10.2. Appendix 2

In addition, this paper is also an invitation for others to do more specific research on this topic. Various research areas that could follow from this include:

- One of the three groups outlined OR comparing and contrasting them
- The young generation (e.g. ages 18–30)
- A specific region, e.g. southern Gujarat
- Recipients of Parsi philanthropy, e.g. Tatas and projects in Jharkhand
- Using survey methodology to get more specific answers (e.g. quantitative data analysis of the question 'What has influenced you?')
- The function of social pressure in contexts where there is no religious obligation to give
- Conviction vs community? A controlled questionnaire could be developed with the separation of: 1) conviction = altruism, psychological benefits, and values; and 2) community = solicitation, reputation, and psychological benefits.
- Inefficient charity and claims of entitlement and mismanagement

- Are 'over-educated' wealthy Parsi women (i.e. who are denied most careers) central to a lineage of Parsi philanthropy? For instance, Nishmin remarked, 'I began when the children grew up and left home. I kept feeling that there is something more to me than looking after the family – there is much more to me. I kept asking myself that question. I would ask the universe – there is something more to me. Not just my husband, my-in-laws, my children.'
- Parsi sewa – community feasts (gambhars), agiary clean-ups
- Diaspora Parsi philanthropy and giving (e.g., Hong Kong Shroffs and Parsee General Hospital fall-out)
- The Parsi press has played a huge role as an agent of social change in the community – but what about now? Is it peripheral? If so, what has taken its place – to strengthen com-

10.3. Appendix 3

This screenshot below shows examples of results received when I searched the phrase 'First an Indian' on Twitter.



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