

## **SIR JAMSETJEE JEJEEBHOY – LESSER KNOWN FACTS** **ABOUT HIS MULTIDIMENSIONAL PERSONALITY**

by  
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It is difficult to imagine how a grief-stricken orphan boy rose to be the first Indian knight and baronet and also a standard-bearer of catholic charities. Unable to afford the priceless boon of early education, in later life, however, he became a pioneer in female education by endowing schools for boys and girls. His father Jejeebhoy Vatcha who was an ordinary weaver had married Jeevibai. They were blessed with five children, of whom Jamsetjee was the youngest. He was born in Navsari on July 15, 1783 (some of his biographers state that he was born in Mumbai). Little is known about his youth except that he had to face devastating tragedies at a very young age. In 1799, he lost his beloved mother when he was only 16 – this was followed by the death of his father within the next six months. Thus, circumstances forced him to leave Navsari for Bombay in 1799. Devoid of any formal education, he joined his maternal uncle, Framji Batliwala, who was in the business of selling empty bottles. But this soulless task would never quench the fire of adventure that had ignited his spirit. He embarked on trade with China in spite of several adversities. Through dint of hard work, integrity and foresight, he amassed a large fortune. But what distinguished him from others was his unbound generosity – he gave back to society what he had earned. And the more he gave, more was given unto him. This merchant-prince endowed schools, colleges, hospitals, dharamshalas, waterworks and more.

He married Avabai, daughter of Framji Batliwalla, to whom he had been betrothed in his infancy. They enjoyed a long and happy married life for fifty-six years. Of their seven sons and three daughters Cursetjee, Rustomjee, Sorabjee and Pirojbai survived while the first four sons and two daughters died in their infancy.

The East India Company appreciated his immense contribution to India and recommended his name for knighthood. Thus on May 25, 1842, he became the first Indian to be presented the Patent of Knighthood. Furthermore, as a token of appreciation for his munificence, public spirit and patriotism, he was once again honoured in the evening of his life. In her Birthday Honours List of May 24, 1857, Queen Victoria graciously conferred baronetcy on the first Indian knight. Having lived an eventful and noble life, on April 15, 1859, Jamsetjee passed away at the age of 74. To this day, his legacy is being continued by Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, Eighth Baronet, through various institutions.

The above are only a few snippets from the life of this renowned Zoroastrian. By and large, Jamsetjee is remembered merely for his philanthropy. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to throw light on some of the lesser-known aspects of his multifaceted personality.

## **I. Patron of Education**

Jamsetjee was a renaissance man. India passed through a dark age in education till 1820. Thereafter, a few attempts were made to launch some basic educational institutes. It was only from 1827 that Jamsetjee began to take an active interest in education. Being a patron of education, he donated generously to set up educational institutes in various parts of India. He charted a new course in the realm of education by sponsoring the Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy Parsi Benevolent Institution (SJJPBI). This was a pioneering effort in institutional philanthropy. By endowing a huge amount of Rs. 4,40,000/- a Deed of Settlement was signed on January 9, 1849. Initially this Institute was meant only for boys, as the Trustees were hesitant to open its doors for girls due to the prevailing prejudice against educating girls. But it was the indomitable spirit of Jamsetjee, which prevailed over the decision of the Trustees by opening two schools for girls in 1850.

When the University of Bombay was established on February 21, 1857, Jamsetjee was appointed one of the five Indian fellows. Once again his pioneering spirit drove him to open the floodgates of creativity – he wanted Indians to be trained in art, drawing, painting, sculpture, diamond cutting, wood engraving etc. He, therefore, offered a princely sum of Rs. 1 Lac to the government to set up a school of art. Hence, on March 2, 1857, when the Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy School of Art was launched, it was another signal contribution to the cultural life of India.

## **II. Political Awakening and Furthering the Cause of India**

The Bombay Presidency experienced the first glimmer of political activity on August 26, 1852 when a meeting was convened to form a political organization. It was named the Bombay Association and Jamsetjee was elected the Hon. President of this Association. The main purpose of this organization was to inform the rulers about the grievances of the people.

Moreover, Jamsetjee would always seek opportunities to promote the larger cause of India. He would subtly work in this direction when he met British aristocrats who would be invited to his lavish parties. We are provided a clear insight into this concern when in the course of a speech addressed to Lord Keane, he clearly stated, "I trust...that he will bear in mind the cause of India, and by watching over the interests of its inhabitants, still add to our debt of gratitude".

## **III. His Secular Credentials**

Since Jamsetjee hailed from a clerical family, Zoroastrian values were deeply embedded in his psyche. He was truly a protector of the poor and in doing so, he left his signature on the concept of philanthropy – this being a significant Zoroastrian virtue.

Whether it was the famine of Ireland (1822), the floods in France (1856) or the fire, which ravaged both Bombay (1803) and Surat (1837), this beacon of altruism gave graciously to one and all without discriminating on the basis of caste or creed. At the end of the day, he had donated more towards cosmopolitan charities and public works than for his own community. The

figures speak for themselves. Whilst he donated Rs. 11,75,015/- for communal charities, his donations for cosmopolitan and public works amounted to Rs. 12,84,721/-.

Moreover, for many years, his father-in-law, Framji Batliwala was his partner. This prospering partnership ended when Framji expired on September 17, 1818. Thereafter, he introduced two new partners, Motichand Amichand and Mahomedali Rogay. The fact that he accepted a Hindu and a Muslim as partners in his own business proved his secular credentials – he had transcended the communal divide, which was quite unusual about 200 years back.

#### **IV. Leadership means Service**

His life was a hymn of service and a paean of duty to the Parsi community as well as to all other communities of India. Being a towering personality who possessed character, competence and conviction, it was a great asset for the Parsi Panchayat when he became a Trustee. He was only forty, when he joined as one of the four Trustees in 1823. He served as a Trustee for 35 years till 1859. He soon became a principal voice and came to grips with the problems of the Panchayat.

To his amazement he found that the Panchayat was mismanaged, run inefficiently and there was apathy in running its affairs. He stood for morality and accountability in public life. He, therefore, tried his best to see that the donations that were received by the Panchayat were invested carefully and which in the long run proved effective.

In 1843, Jamsetjee published his Kholaseh-i-Panchayat in which he was very critical about many issues facing the community. This in turn also made him unpopular. He constructively criticized the clergy for their ignorance and rapacity as well as the laity for their narrow-mindedness and credulity. He was also against the policy of giving doles to able-bodied men. In 1843, he appealed to both the Panchayat and the people to take greater interest in the affairs of the community. He had left his imprint on the working of the Panchayat when he left it in 1859.

As the Parsis in India did not possess a code of laws, it was deemed necessary to seek the help of the legislature in this matter. Hence, in 1865, the Parsi Marriage and Divorce Act and the Parsi Intestate Succession Act were passed.

#### **V. An Advocate of Non-Violence**

His roots lay in Zoroastrian values. And one of the principles of this ancient religion is nidhaasnaithishem, non-violence. A firm belief in this principle always formed the cornerstone of all his activities.

In 1855, under royal patronage, the Patriotic Fund was launched to aid the wounded soldiers and widows of those who had died in the Russo-Turkish war. Jamsetjee donated Rs. 5,000/- for this cause. But some remarks from

his speech on this occasion are most significant: "Of none of the great evils which afflict our race do we form such inadequate conceptions as of the evils of war. War is exhibited to us in the dazzling dress of poetry, fiction, and history, where its horrors are carefully concealed beneath its gaudy trappings; or we see, perhaps, its plumes and epaulettes, and harlequin finery, we hear of the magnificence of the apparatus, the bravery of the troops, the glory of the victors, but the story of the wholesale miseries and wretchedness and wrongs which follow in its train is untold...What nation is not groaning under war-debts, the greatest of national burdens! Had the inconceivable sum wasted in the work of human butchery been applied to promote individual comfort and national prosperity, the world would not now be so far behind as it is in its career of progress...Our duty to relieve the sufferers in this great war would have remained the same whether the war had been a just one or not; but, considering the nature and objects of this war, we extend this relief now more as a privilege than as a duty...To the call of our gracious Sovereign, and to the call of humanity, the Parsis, my lord, will cordially respond".

His non-violent attitude or positively put, his loving kindness extended also to the animal kingdom. His benign and compassionate nature would not allow any form of cruelty towards animals. The East India Company introduced a rule "for the annual destruction of dogs in Bombay island, and a considerable number were from time to time destroyed, in spite of frequent petitions from the public". This mass dog killing led to a serious riot. To alleviate this suffering, Jamsetjee together with others founded Panjrapol on October 18, 1834.

#### **VI. Benefactor of Journalism**

Due to his broad horizon, he realized the importance of journalism. Even in this field, he had been a significant benefactor by encouraging various newspapers. When Furdoonji Marzban, pioneer of Indian journalism founded the Bombay Samachar in July 1822, Jamsetjee gave a substantial donation. The Bombay Times was launched in 1838 by a syndicate of persons, which included Sir Jamsetjee. In 1861, it was renamed The Times of India. Jamsetjee also donated handsomely to the Jam-e-Jamshed Press when it was founded in 1859. Besides this, he had supported the publication of religious texts and other books.

#### **VII. Pioneer in Women's Education and in Granting them Freedom**

Jamsetjee was at the cusp of making history when it came to women's education. At a time when few thought of educating women, it is heartening to note that his daughter, Pirojbai was one of the first Parsi women to speak English.

He was also the first Parsi and Indian to grant freedom to women. It was a defining movement when on March 9, 1840, it was for the first time that ladies from his family were seen in public amongst men of other communities. This was on the occasion when Jamsetjee held a banquet to celebrate the marriage of Queen Victoria with Prince Albert. At this function, he introduced Lady Jejeebhoy and his sons' wives to the guest of honour, Sir James Rivett-Carnac, Governor of Bombay and others. This landmark event took place

when Dadabhai Naoroji was nine, Sorabji Bengallee was nine and Behramji Malbari was not even born. It is pertinent to note that the latter three were some of the most prominent social reformers of India.

Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy Parsi Benevolent Institution was launched in 1849. On August 17, 1850, he opened two schools for girls – one of these was located in the Fort area and the other at Alhaibaug. When Jamsetjee passed away in 1859, there were nineteen schools run by the Institution: five of them were in Bombay (two for boys and three for girls) and fourteen in the various towns of Gujarat (eleven for boys and three for girls). By spearheading this movement, he would certainly be remembered as one of the pioneers of women's education in India.