

## The Wadias of India

The Parsis in India have had the tremendous good fortune of practicing their religion and customs generally without ostracism and persecution. This freedom has given them an opportunity to establish themselves in a country that not only refrained from proselytizing but also showed considerable tolerance towards all religions. Having been given this opportunity, they also had the encouragement of the British colonial rulers of India to develop their entrepreneurship skills and political savvy. The elevation in stature of the Parsis was undoubtedly one of the main causative factors in the small community's escalating fortunes.

The recorded history of the Parsis of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries has shown them to have the inspiration to venture into uncharted waters with boldness, garnering their energies to establish a better life and advancement for their families, their community, and the countries of their origin and adoption – Iran and India. Their unique character could be attributed to three essential factors – their Irani-Zarathushti heritage, their Hindu-Indian socio-cultural adaptations, and their eager acceptance of Western (specifically) British educational and temporal values. The Industrial Revolution was the backdrop against which the Parsis of the 18th, and 19th centuries proved their prowess in education and entrepreneurship, and continued the trend into the 20th century.



Maneckji Lovji, second Master Builder

The ships they sailed on to reach India presented to the Parsis the bounties of the seas. At the height of the power under Achaemenian King Darius the Great, Zoroastrians mastered shipbuilding and learned much from the seafaring Phoenicians. The ability to build seafaring vessels eventually opened up the world of international trade. They founded many industries. By the time India achieved its independence in 1947, a mere 100,000 Parsis, in the subcontinent's population of over half a billion people dominated major industries like the steel industry, the aviation industry, the textile industry, the movie industry, and the fields of medicine, science and law.

The Wadias, the Tatas, the Jeejeebhoys, and the Godrejs are among several families that have contributed in no small measure towards the industrial and economic advancement of their community and their country. One such family has for the last 250 years taken on the challenge of industrial entrepreneurship with great success and provided tremendous resources for their country's well-being – that family is the Wadias.

## Lovji Nusserwanjee Wadia (Unknown – 1774)

The Wadia (*'shipbuilder'*) family had established itself in Surat for many centuries. Surat was a very important seaport on the west coast of India where British East India Company was first established. The Portuguese, Dutch, French and British maintained trading centers in the city from the 15th century onwards. Since all trade was done by sea, the shipping industry started to flourish. The foreign traders knew Lovji Nusserwanji Wadia for the high standards he maintained for shipbuilding workmanship. The British East India Company secured the services of Lovji for building docks and ships in Bombay in 1736. The Bombay dry-dock, the first dry-dock in Asia, was built by Lovji and his brother Sorabji in 1750. Bombay began to be considered a viable trading port for all ships from the West and East.



Jamsetji Bomanji, third Master Builder

Lovji has rightly been called the founder of the shipping industry in Bombay, passing away in 1774. His sons **Maneckji** and **Bomanji** built on his reputation of integrity, industry and ability.

A branch of the Wadias stayed on in Surat and continued to develop the shipping industry and became leaders in the building and construction of bridges, dams and buildings. Between 1840s and 1940s the shipping and building industry in Surat was dominated by **Cowasji, Burjorji, Behramji, Rustomji, Hormuzji, Nusserwanji and Pestonji Wadia**.

Pestonji's sons **Framroze, Firozeshah, and Dhanjishah** continued in the building and construction business. Their charities include nursing homes, building free institutions of education and hospitals.

While the British ruled India, the French had a couple of small holdings, one on the east coast and the other on the west. In 1929 Khan Saheb Pestonji Wadia bought the west coast region overlooking the Tapti Sea from the French. This included a huge mansion which the family used. Several years later this mansion was donated by the Wadia family for education of women. The **Zal F. Wadia College** in Surat, was established in memory of young Zal, who passed away at the age of 27. In 1935, Dhanjishah built the first cement concrete road to be built in India, the Prince of Wales Drive in Poona in honor of the visit of Prince Edward VIII of England. (The author is Dhanjishah's daughter).



Nussarwanji Maneckji Wadia, oil on canvas, by a Chinese artist in Bombay, ca, 1803, Peabody Collection in Essex Museum, Massachusetts, USA.

Seven generations of Wadia master-shipbuilders have constructed ships in Bombay that have plied the seven seas from the shores of the New World to the ancient shores of the China Seas. Many ships were built for the Indian and British Navy. When their connection with the Bombay Dockyard ended in 1913, the Lovji Wadia family had left a legacy of ships, from sloops to schooners, merchant ships and man-o-wars, cutters and clippers, frigates, water boats and steamships – over 400 ships!

According to a publication in 1955 of *The Bombay Dockyard and the Wadia Master*, the ship *HMS Trincomalee* was built by a nephew of Lovji - **Jamshedji Bamanji Wadia** and launched on October 12, 1817, for the British Navy. Later the ship was named *Foudroyant* (1897). It served the British well during the Crimean War (1852-1857) and World War II (1939-1945) and now rests in Britain, soon to be converted into a museum.

**Jamshedji, Nowroji, and Dhanjibhai Wadia** have been the outstanding shipbuilders of the 19th century British India, building 22 ships for the British Navy alone.

Like the *HMS Trincomalee*, the *HMS Cornwallis*, launched on May 2, 1813, saw active battle in the British-American War of 1812 and twenty years later as Flagship of the British Fleet in the China Seas, she led an expeditionary force during the “Opium War” of China. The historic signing of the Treaty of Nanking, ceding Hong Kong to the British took place on *HMS Cornwallis* August 29, 1842.

Several other warships like the *HMS Asia* saw action in various parts of the world.

**Nusserwanji Maneckji Wadia (1753 – 1814)**

Grandson of the great shipbuilder Lovji Wadia opened up trade through shipping with foreign countries.

Other descendants of Lovji -

**Jehangir, Nowroji, Dossabhoy, Dhunjibhoy and Cursetji** further developed worldwide trade with Europe and America.

[Refer to **The Yankee Connection** below]

In 1834 **Ardeshir Cursetji Wadia** was the first to introduce *gas* to Bombay. He became the first Indian Fellow of the Royal Society of London in 1841.

[Refer to **The Yankee Connection** below]



Photograph of young Wadia cousins - Jehangir Naoroji and Hirjeebhoy Meherwanji with Uncle Dorabji Mancherji on the left, ca. 1838.



Wadia Family, Bombay, ca. 1870s. Cursetji Naoroji Wadia (seated center), grandson of Jamsetji Bomanji Wadia, third Master Shipbuilder.

## **Nowroji Nusserwanji Wadia (August 30, 1849 – December 19, 1899)**

Educated in England, he soon proved his engineering skills by establishing the well-known *Bombay Dying Manufacturing Co.* for manufacture of textiles in 1879. Several mills were opened under his banner – such as the National, the Neriad, the Dhun, the E. D. Sassoon, the Presidency, Calicut, Century, to name just a few. His efforts for the underprivileged are legendary. He went beyond helping the Parsis exclusively. As a member and chair of various government and educational bodies, he introduced programs for better schooling; introduced the kindergarten system of education; advocated physical training for boys and girls; better administration of hospitals etc. His munificence made many socio-economic programs possible. In 1889 he was awarded the honor, “Champion of the Indian Empire” (CIE) by the British government. There was not a charitable institution in Bombay to which Nowroji was not connected.



Dhanjishah Pestonji Wadia, ca 1928. (1905 - 1981)

## **Cusrow and Ness Wadia**

Naoroji's sons Cusrow and Ness expanded the textile business to become the largest textile operations in India, and were known as much for their philanthropy as for their business acumen. In the 1920s, Ness established a wireless service, forerunner of the telephone, the India Radio and Communication Company, linking India and Britain for the first time. He was the first Indian to be awarded the Knighthood of the British Empire in 1919.

The **Wadia women** played no small role in utilizing their skills in business to leave a legacy of philanthropy that still stands as a gigantic monument to their endeavors.



Sir Ness Wadia (seated on left): First Indian to receive Knighthood of the British Empire, ca.1919.

## **Motlibai Maneckji Wadia (October 30, 1811 – May 24, 1897)**

Born a Wadia, she married her cousin Maneckji, but was soon widowed at the age of 26. She devoted herself to take up the reigns of the family estate. Her inherent business acumen and sterling good sense increased the family wealth and charities. She gave large sums for maintenance of Doremehers and built one in Bombay in memory of her father Jehangirji. I 1894, she rebuilt the Udvada Atash Behram and set aside sums for the future upkeep. She established dispensaries and in particular, the Bai Motlibai ObstetricHospital. Land and money was given to orphanages and donations flowed freely for emergency relief of citizens due to fire, famine and flood disasters. One of Motlibai's dreams was to personally gift a fine collection of old coins to Queen Victoria, but she was unable to fulfill it during her lifetime. After her death, her son Naoroji did so on her behalf.

### **Jerbai Nusserwanji Wadia (1852 – March 8, 1956)**

She was a pioneer of low-cost housing complexes (Baug) that are an intrinsic part of Zarathushti life today. The Lal Baug and Nowroz Baug were built through her initiative and donations. In 1917 Jerbai established the Naoroji N. Wadia Building Trust Fund which helped in building the Rustom Baug and Jer Baug. Her sons Cusrow and Ness continued her mission and built Cusrow Baug and Ness Baug. She donated generously to help build several clinics and hospitals. After her death her sons built the Bai Jerbai Wadia Hospital for Children in her memory.

### **Lady Hirabai Cowasji Jehangir (August 22, 1893 – June 9, 1976)**

Born into the Wadia family, and married into the affluent Readymoney family, she did not while away her time in leisurely pursuits, but chose to do something for the betterment of the Zarathoshties and non-Zarathoshties. She established nursery schools, the Wadia-Vatcha School and the Sir Cowasji Jehangir School in Bombay. She set up the Sir Cowasji Jehangir Rural Home for boys and another one for girls and opened the Cowasji Jehangir Nursing Home in Poona. She promoted the arts and sciences and put her heart into setting up the Sir Cowasji Jehangir Institute for Science and the famous Jehangir Art Gallery, leaving behind an enduring legacy for the people of Bombay.

The B. F. Wadia Sons Company started in the early 1920s by the Surat branch of Wadias and moved to Bombay, is one of the leading timber companies in India today.

K. Wadia Jewelers have established a solid reputation as leading Zarathushti jewelers for more than 70 years.

**Neville** and **Nusli Wadia** have done an admirable job of continuing their family's tradition of building industries, promoting causes and setting up charitable trusts.

Many generations of Wadias have considered it their duty to extend a hand to their fellow human beings and consider it an honor to share their good fortune. The Wadiaji Atash Behram and Wadiaji Agiari are the result of their generosity. The Ness Wadia College and the College of Technology in Pune, Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology, Neville Wadia Institute of Management Studies and Research (1991) are just some of the many institutions of research and learning.

The N.M. Wadia Charitable Trust (1909), caters to Zarathushties and non-Zarathushties alike. Some of the donations have gone towards relief of Indians in South Africa, earthquake victims in Burma, famine victims in Oxford, flood relief in Sri Lanka, Japan, Iran and Holland.

**Dr. Noshir H. Wadia**, of Bombay has been considered the leading neurologist of India and acclaimed by his peers as one of the top neurologists in the world today.



Two young daughters of Rustomji Wadia of Surat, Tehmina Banoo, ca. 1919.

The love of arts, music and drama prompted the **J.B.H. Wadia** and his brothers to found the first movie studio in India – Wadia Movietone, bringing in artists, actors and actresses from abroad and also encouraging national and local performers.

### **The Yankee Connection and a Brush with American History**

At the end of the 18th Century many American ships from Boston and Salem began visiting Bombay to trade. There, Nusserwanji Maneckji Wadia (1753-1814), grandson of the great shipbuilder Lovji Wadia, founded a family business specializing in the markets of these newcomers to Bombay.

[Record of these first encounters between Yankee traders and their Parsi business associates have been preserved in a collection of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, the most extensive repository of sources on Indo-US trade in this country].

In 1799 George Nichols, a merchant from Salem, Massachusetts, went to India as business manager of the cargo ship *Active* which was to carry back a shipload of cotton from India. In his autobiography Nichols wrote:

“The business was carried on by Parsis, some of the most intelligent people I have ever known, rich and very honorable in their dealings. The merchant with whom I did business, Nasservanji Maneckji was a very fine man.”

Nusservanji gave Nichols a beautiful striped exquisite muslin piece for the latter’s bride which he brought back to Salem to fashion into a wedding dress for her. He also gifted the bride and groom with beautiful Kashmiri silk wool shawls. (Mrs. Nichols’s wedding dress and both the shawls are now part of the Peabody Essex Museum).

In 1803 Nusserwanji became one of the first foreigners to make a donation to the collection of the East India Maritime Society Museum (now the Peabody Essex Museum). That same year Captain R. Dalling gave a portrait of Nusserwanji painted in Bombay by a Chinese artist. This portrait is on view in the Central Hall of the Museum where it has been continuously for almost 200 years!

In about 1815 Nusserwanji’s sons followed their father into the American trade and began opening business ventures with France and other European countries. Captain William Augustus Rogers who arrived in Bombay with the trading ship *Tartar* recorded his impressions in a journal now in the Peabody Essex Museum. He refers to Nusserwanji as “a man who sustained a most estimable character.” He wrote about visits to the Lovji Castle, and the Wadia family estates in Bombay.

In 1839 other grandsons of Lovji took up the family specialty in American trade. **Dossabhoy Wadia** with his brothers **Dhanjibhoy** and **Cursetji** under the firm name Dossabhoy Merwanji Co., developed their foreign business largely concentrating

on trade and sales of imported goods. So revered was Dossabhoy’s name beyond India that President Ulysses Grant honored him with a personal visit at his company on February 15, 1879, while on a tour of India. Dossabhoy was appointed Vice-Consul for USA in Bombay in 1852.

The first Parsi to visit USA was **Ardeshir Cursetji Wadia**, grandson of Nusserwanji's brother in 1849. He visited the home of Mr. Mrs. Howard of Salem. Their daughter Caroline Howard King, noted in her memoirs, the pleasant wonder of these encounters:

*"Among the strange foreign visitors of those days, we were somewhat startled one evening by a friend's bringing a real live Parsee, with a tall calico headdress, to take tea with us.*

*It was rather a revelation to me that a fire worshipper could take tea like ordinary mortals. But he was a harmless lion, and roared very gently, and drank his tea and ate his bread and butter quite like other folks and told us many interesting thing about his life in Bombay.*

*I remember we all spoke very distinctly, as if we were talking to a child, and that he answered us in a very low cultivated refined voice, using much better English than we did".*

The one ship that the Wadias built and of most historic significance for Parsis is the **H.M.S. Minden**. *The Bombay Courier*, June 23, 1810 wrote:

"On Tuesday last His Majesty's Ship, the "Minden" built in the new docks (Bombay) by Jamshedji Bomanji Wadia was floated into the stream at high water, after the usual ceremony of breaking the bottle had been performed by the Honorable Governor Jonathan Duncan.

In having produced the "Minden", Bombay is entitled to the distinguished praise of providing the first and only British ship of the line built out of the limits of the Mother Country; and in the opinion of very competent judges, the "Minden", for beauty of construction and strength of frame, may stand in competition with any man-o-war that has come out of the most celebrated Dockyards of Great Britain. For the skill of its architects, for the superiority of its timber, and for the excellence of its docks, Bombay may now claim a distinguished place among naval arsenals".

A young American lawyer, Francis Scott Key was sent on board the British ship "Minden", in Chesapeake Bay to negotiate the release of a friend who had been captured after the defeat of the US forces in Maryland. Key was detained on the ship overnight while the British attacked Baltimore. "At the dawn's early light" amidst the "rockets' red glare", he saw the American flag still flying high over Fort McHenry which inspired him to hurriedly scribble on an envelope a poem, that was to become the **Star Spangled Banner, national anthem of United States of America!**

There were members of the Wadia family that took up the challenge of the New World and settled down in foreign lands outside of India. In the 20th century they came to USA for further education. The first Wadia on record who came to USA for education was **Burjor Wadia** in 1916. He joined the University of Michigan and later became a top- ranking engineer with Ford Motor Company. He spent 5 years in USA and another 5 years in England with another automobile company before returning to India.

Several others followed, like the late **Burjor Ghadiali**, whose late mother Banoo was a Wadia. Burjor arrived in Canada in 1947 and soon rose in ranks to become the Chief Engineer of Ontario Hydro, in Canada. **Maneck Bhujwala** of California, (also from the Wadia family), has done well in serving the Zoroastrian community here in the West.

**Prof. Maneck S. Wadia** of Del Mar, California who has been in USA since the 1950s is an internationally prominent professor, author, speaker and consultant to over 300 organizations companies here and abroad. He is also a very successful entrepreneur with diversified interests and an author whose books on management are used by over 150 universities worldwide. He has served as Director of numerous corporations, having been listed in “Who’s Who of Contemporary Authors, American Men of Science, Marquis’ Who’s Who Dictionary of International Biography Who’s Who in the West.



Dr. Maneck Wadia

**The legacy of the Wadias, as with other families, should, in the final analysis, be measured in terms of benefits not just to their own society and country, but how those benefits relate to the well-being of humanity at large.**

[Bombay is now known as *Mumbai* and Poona is now known as *Pune*]

#### **Source Materials:**

1. Extensive collection of records pictures at Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, USA  
Courtesy of curator of the museum, Dr. Susan Bean.
2. Ruttonji Ardeshir Wadia, *The Bombay Dockyard the Wadia Master Builders*, Bombay, 1972.
3. H. D. Darukhanawalla: *Parsi Lustre on Indian Soil*, Bombay, 1939.
4. Dr. Hormazdyar Dastur Kayoji Mirza: *Outlines of Parsi History*, Bombay, 1987.
5. Dr Rashna Writer’s: *Contemporary Zoroastrians: An Unstructured Nation*, University Press of America, Maryland, 1994.
6. Private correspondence of the Wadia family with friends and relatives.
7. Dr. Maneck S. Wadia’s article on the *Star Spangled Parsis*.
8. Roshan Rivetna: *The Wadias, Master Shipbuilders*, FEZANA Journal, Vol. 8, No.4, Winter 1995.
9. Select photographs of the Wadia family, courtesy of FEZANA Journal.
10. Selection of photographs of the Wadia family, courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA

Courtesy : Dara