

## The Parsis: Their Arrival in India

### Who are the Parsis?

The Parsis are ethnically of Iranian origin with an ancestry that can be traced back to the province of Khorasan known in ancient times as Parthia.

Due to religious persecution a group of Parsis set sail and arrived on mainland India in 936 A.C., whereupon they sought refuge from the Hindu King of Gujarat, Jadav Rana. The people of Gujarat addressed the new arrivals as "Parsis" from the Persian word *Parsi* a term used in those days by the Gujaratis for any person who came from Iran. The word *Parsi* denotes race and is applicable today to a group of people who profess to follow the Zoroastrian religion and whose ancestors chose to settle in India.

### A Common Misconception

Most Parsis believe that their ancestors came to India over thirteen hundred years ago and not in 936 A.C. The reason for this popular misconception lies in the fact that most Parsis presume that their arrival date is linked to the year in which the *Shenshai* calendar was started. The *Shenshai* calendar was in fact introduced in 631/2 A.C., upon the coronation of the last Zoroastrian Sasanian King, Yazdegird III. It is hardly likely therefore that in the rule of a Zoroastrian monarch a group of Zoroastrians would have fled from Iran because of religious persecution, when indeed the state religion of Iran was Zoroastrianism till the fall of Yazdegird III in 652 A.C.

### An Important Historical Document

The *Qissa-i-Sanjan* is an important historical document on early Parsi history, which was compiled and written in verse form by *mohed Bahman Hormazdyar Sanjana* according mostly to the information he gained from the oral tradition circa 1600 A.C. It is stated in the *Qissa* that after the fall of Yazdegird III in 652 A.C., a group of Zoroastrians wandered around for a hundred years in Kohistan owing to religious persecution. They then fled to the

town of Hormuzd where they spent another fifteen years before setting sail for India. Thus according to the information gleaned from the *Qissa*, it seems unlikely that the Parsis could have arrived in India over thirteen hundred years ago. In fact the arrival date as collated from the *Qissa* would have had to be at least 786 A.C., which is nearly twelve hundred years ago.

Fall of Yazdegird III	652 A.C.
Wandering in Kohistan	100 years
Settled in Hormuzd	+ 15 years
Set sail for India in	767 A.C.
Settled on the island of Diu	+ 19 years
The earliest tentative arrival date in India	786 A.C.

### The Twelve Hundred Year Fallacy:

It seems unlikely that the first group of pilgrim fathers would have arrived in India twelve hundred years ago, as the Zoroastrians were still struggling for their survival in the ninth century A.C. According to the Muslim historian Ibn Isfandiar, a Zoroastrian prince named Mazyar led a rebellion against the Caliphate armies from the mountainous regions of Khorasan. This rebellion was crushed some time in the mid-ninth century A.C. In 854 A.C. another prince from Tabaristan, owing to Muslim persecution, finally yielded to Islam. It seems hardly likely for the Parsis to have abandoned their ancestral homelands over a century earlier (652 + 100 = 752 A.C.) if as late as 854 A.C., there was sizeable Zoroastrian resistance against the Caliphate armies in the province from where it is believed the Parsis originally came.<sup>1</sup>

During the ninth century A.C., many important treatise were compiled and written about the religion such as the voluminous *Dēnkard*, the *Dādestān-i-dinīg*, the *Shkand-gumānīg Wizār*, the *Epistles of Manushchih* and many other Middle Persian texts. The climate of the ninth century A.C. hardly reflects the nomadic

1. Ibn Isfandiar 157, *Zoroastrians* p 153.

fleeing mood of the Zoroastrian community; more so if one holds the view that the Parsis fled during the eighth century A.C. Furthermore, great books of scholarship are usually not written in an environment of insecurity and persecution.

Another Muslim historian, Abu Zaid al Balkhi, recorded of the province of Fars: "The Zoroastrians have preserved the books, the fire temples and the customs of the era of their kings, thanks to an uninterrupted succession; they retain their ancient usages and conform to them their religion. There is no country where the Zoroastrians are more numerous than in Fars, because that country is the centre of their power, rites and religious books."<sup>2</sup>

It is also known from historical sources that during the reign of Umar II (717 - 720 A.C.), the Arab governor of Iraq was offered a bribe of forty million *dirhams* in order that he would not destroy the numerous Zoroastrian fire temples located in his province.<sup>3</sup> This surely indicates that there must have been a very sizeable Zoroastrian community which must have worshipped in these fire temples, and therefore sought to protect them by liberally bribing the Arab governor.

### The Correct Date of Arrival: 936 A.C.

#### Shapurji Hormasji Hodivala's Brilliance

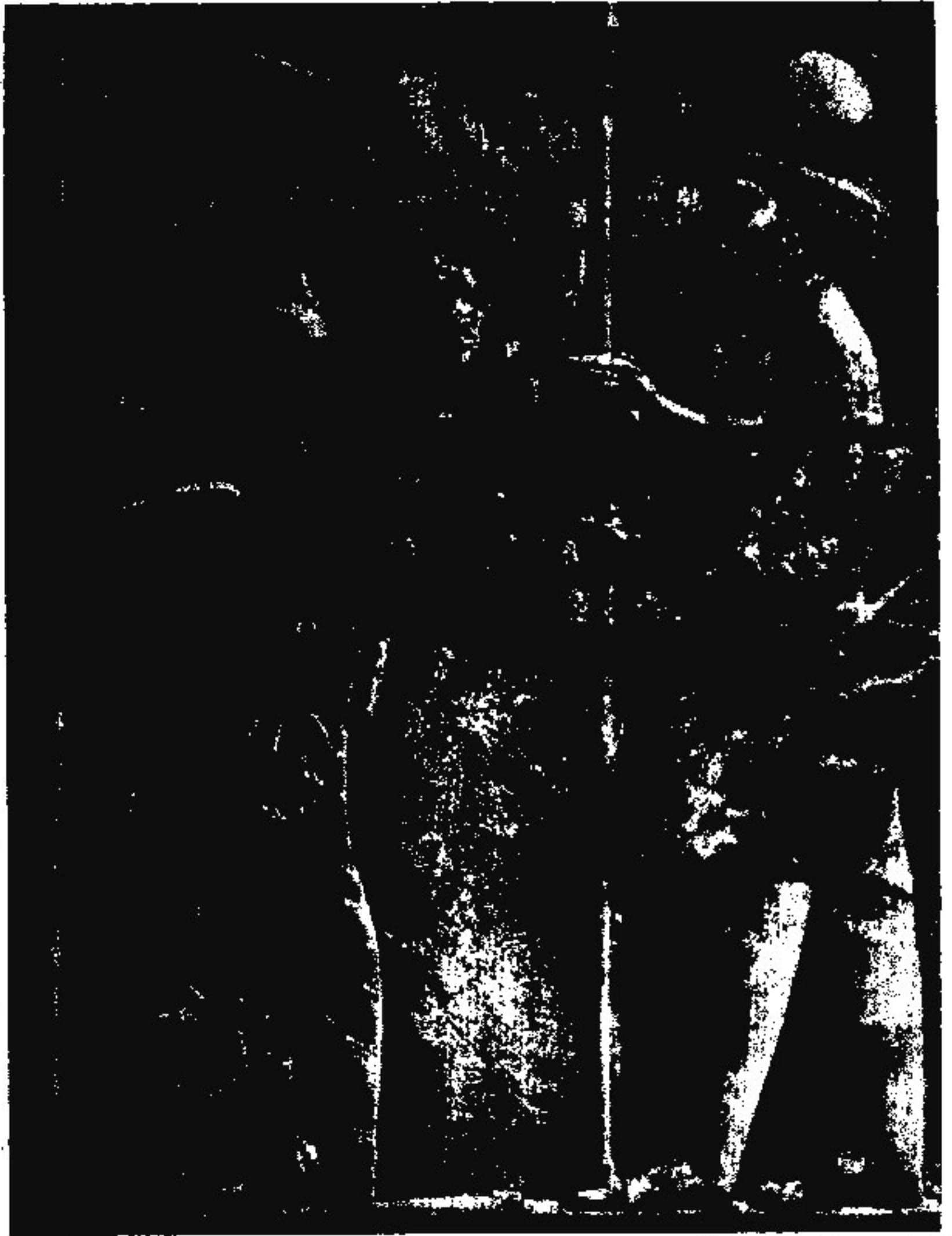
The Parsi date of arrival of 936 A.C. was first suggested by Shapurji Hormasji Hodivala in a series of lectures which he delivered in Bombay in 1913 A.C. Shapurji is said to have discovered an eighteenth century hand-written note on a blank page of a manuscript which had originally been published by *Dastur* Aspandiar Kamdin in 1826 A.C. In this note was contained a reference to the Sanjan landing being on Bahman rōz Tīr māh of the Hindu *Vikram Samvat* (V.S.) year 772. On re-

flecting upon this date Shapurji suspected that the numerals 9 and 7 in the *Devnagri* script could have been misread and mistaken for each other. Hence he postulated that the numerals V.S. 772 should actually be read as V.S. 992. He proved his point by bringing to light a similar mistake that had occurred in the dating of the Shillahra Mamvani temple near Kalyan, where V.S. 982 was misread as V.S. 782. From the Hindu date of V.S. 992 Shapurji subtracted 56 years to synchronize the *Vikram Samvat* date with the Gregorian calendar and hence he calculated the proper Parsi arrival date to be 936 A.C. Moreover he discovered later that Bahman rōz Tīr māh coincided with the Hindu *Tithi* only in the year 936 A.C., which further confirmed his findings.

Shapurji also set about examining the historical evidence of the period particularly in connection with the Shillahra Kings, who it is believed ruled the north Konkan area from circa 830-1260 A.C. He discovered that according to the Muslim historian Ma'sudi, the fifth Shillahra King was called Jhanjha who ruled in the year 916 A.C. and who was succeeded by Goggi, the sixth Shillahra ruler. The seventh King was Vaj-jada-Deva whose name aroused Shapurji's interest. He plausibly conjectured that the prefix and suffix of "Vaj" and "Deva" could have been dropped for linguistic reasons, leaving the name "Jada", who he correctly guessed was none other than Jadav Rana of the *Qissa* fame. (The early Parsi settlers would not have used the word "Deva" as in Avestan the term means demon, an inappropriate word surely for the refugees to have used to address the King who had so readily given sanctuary and hospitality to them). Shapurji also discovered from a Shillahra inscription (1003 A.C.), the words *Kharasan Mandli* which he translated to mean "the people of Khorasan". If the Parsi pilgrim fathers had migrated earlier in the seventh, eighth or ninth centuries, then there would have been some evidence to indicate their arrival. The earliest Pahlavi inscriptions dated 1009 A.C. have been found in the

2. Nyberg 9, *Zoroastrians* p 153.

3. *Zoroastrians* p 150.



*Parthian and Median guards (3th century A.C.)*

Kanheri caves near Bombay. Furthermore, according to the *Qissa*, the Navsari community of the Parsis grew within 300 years after their arrival in India. The first settlement in Navsari appears to have taken root circa 1182 A.C. This gives additional weightage to the 936 A.C. arrival date.

Most scholars today have accepted Shapurji's well-researched findings; namely, that the first group of Parsi Zoroastrian refugees set foot upon mainland India on Bahman rōz Tīr mās in the year 936 A.C.

## Appendix I

### Highlights From the *Qissa-i-Sanjan*<sup>4</sup>

- Page 99 – After the defeat of Yazdegird III (652 A.C.) the “faith was rendered desolate.”
- ” 100 – *Dasturs* and laymen went into hiding for the sake of the religion.
- ” 100 – They wandered around in Kohistan for a hundred years.
- ” 100 – A group of Zoroastrians, owing to persecution, fled to the town of Hormuzd where they spent another fifteen years.
- ” 100 – The chief priest realized that he and his group of men, women and children had to leave their country.
- ” 100 – They set sail for India.
- ” 100 – In due course they sighted land and anchored off the Western coast of India on an island known today as Diu.
- ” 101 – The religious refugees lived here for nineteen years after which, upon the advice of their wise *dastur*, they set sail once again in order to reach mainland India.
- ” 101 – They were caught in a nasty storm. The *dasturs* were thrown into consternation. They prayed for help and promised to build a Bahrām fire if Bahrām, the *Yazata* for victory, delivered them from this storm.
- ” 101 – Their supplication was granted and a gentle wind brought them to a point upon the Indian coastline.

- Page 102 – They sought refuge from the Hindu King Jadav Rana, who it is believed was the seventh Shilahra ruler.
- ” 102 – The king asked for five conditions before granting refuge to this migrant group.
- ” 102 – First, “What are the customs of your creed, which of these are open and which concealed?”
- ” 102 – Secondly, “You must abandon the language of your country.....and adopt the speech of the realm of Hind.”
- ” 102 – Thirdly, “....as to the dress of your women, they should wear garments like those of our ladies.”
- ” 102 – Fourthly, “You must put down all your arms and weapons and cease to wear them anywhere.”
- ” 102 – Fifthly, “When your children are wedded, the marriage knot must be tied at evening time.”
- ” 103 – “If you give a solemn promise to observe all these, you will be given places and abodes in my city.”
- ” 103 – The *dastur* readily agreed to these conditions proffered by the King.
- ” 104 – The King gave the Zoroastrian pilgrims fertile land to live on. “A spot in this wilderness was chosen, of which the soil was excellent and there they made their abode.” This abode they called Sanjan (in memory of the place they originally came from, in North West Khorasan).

4. Translated by Shapurji Hormasji Modivala, *Studies in Parsi History*, Bombay 1920.

- Page 105 – One day the *dasturs* went to the King to ask for land to build a fire-temple in order to fulfill their promise to Bahrām.
- ” 105 – “The land must be cleared for three *farsangs*, so that the ceremonies of the *Nirang* may be duly performed. No alien should be there present, save and except the Wise men of the Good Faith. No person belonging to another creed might be there. Then only, will the fire be consecrated.”
- ” 105 – The Raja bequeathed the land and “.....all the unbelievers within three *farsangs* were removed, and no one remained there except the people of the good faith.”
- ” 105/106 – “For several days and months they recited the *Yasnas* and *Yashts* and worked with great energy.” “Several parties of *dasturs* and laymen had also arrived on the spot. In their company were several alchemists.....”
- ” 106 – The fire was eventually consecrated and made sacred, with all the appropriate ritual objects (*ālāt*), *nirang* and ash, which were brought from Iran.<sup>5</sup>
- ” 106 – During the next three hundred years, the Parsi community grew in and around Sanjan.
- ” 107 – Gradually groups of Parsis moved out and settled in all directions fairly close to the Western coastline. “In this manner were spent two hundred years in prosperity, joy and quiet.”

5. Contrary to popular belief, no consecrated fire has ever been brought from Iran; only the *ālāt*, *nirang* and ash were brought by the *dasturs*.

- Page 107 – The most famous priest during this period was Khujastah “.... whose (sole) delight was the performance of the ceremonies of the *Bāj* and the *Barsom*.....that saintly person left good repute, may he possess joy and bliss in paradise.”
- ” 108 – Five hundred years after the Parsis had arrived in India, Mahmūd Begada attacked Sanjan, when the Parsis sided with the Hindus to fight the Muslims.
- ” 113 – The Hindu King was defeated and the Parsis of Sanjan had to flee together with their fire to a hill named Bahrot. “.... twelve years thus passed and they had carried the Irānshāh along with them.”
- ” 114 – Subsequently, the fire was moved to Bānsdāh where it was housed for the next fourteen years.
- ” 115 – Changa Asa, a layman, convinced the *dasturs* to move the fire to Navsari “.....as great hardship is endured going to Bānsdāh, for there is heavy rain during that month (*Ādar*), and it is difficult for us to go there then.”
- ” 117 – The narrative ends by Bahman Kaikobad Hormazdyar Sanjana declaring, “In telling this tale, I have ever observed the ways of the truthful. Pronounce then befitting blessings upon me, whenever you peruse this delectable narrative of mine.”

The *Qissa-i-Sanjan* seems to be one of the earliest extant sources in which historical information is to be found about the life and times of



*A Khwarezmian led by a Persian guard*

the first Parsi settlers. An interesting point to bear in mind is that no explicit or implicit promise was made by the Parsis to the Hindu King on the issue of conversion. The five conditions that were asked by King Jadav Rana in lieu of granting refuge were:

1. Information and explanations about the Zoroastrian religion;
2. That the pilgrim fathers should adopt the language of the realm;
3. That the Parsi women should wear the local dress;
4. That the Parsi men should lay down their weapons;
5. That the Zoroastrian marriage ceremony should take place after sunset.

The fifth condition seems to be an odd one, as there appears to be no rational reason for the clause to have been included. In spite of a few anomalies, the *Qissa* still remains the main source of historical data on the first Parsi migration to India.