

The Times, Sep 30, 1905; pg. 4; Issue 37826; col F

The Phrase "Tower Of Silence." R. P. *KARKARIA*..

Category: Letters to the Editor

Full Text: Copyright 1905, The Times

THE PHRASE "TOWER OF SILENCE."

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES.

Sir,—I have read with considerable interest as a Parsi the enthusiastic letter in your paper of an old friend, well known and esteemed in Bombay, Sir George Birdwood, received by to-day's mail. He therein states that "there is not the slightest doubt of Robert Xavier Murphy's having invented this poetical phrase," and he fixes the date at some time before he came to Bombay again in 1854-55 after 14 years' absence. He states that "the local tradition in the mouth of such men as the Rev. Dr. Wilson . . . was that the happy phrase was coined by Murphy." I venture to assert that there must be some mistake in this "local tradition in the mouth of Dr. Wilson" or also in Sir George's report of it now at the distance of half a century. In the course of my researches for a "History of the Parsis" on which I have long been engaged, I have been able to trace this phrase, "Towers of Silence," a little earlier than Sir George, and in a different writer, to whom, in my opinion, belongs the merit of having coined it. The earliest use of this phrase which I have been able to discover occurs in a work, published in 1839, called "Western India in 1838," by Mrs. Postans, a popular writer on Indian subjects in those days. She there says:—"The Parsees, as worshippers of elemental power, can neither bury nor burn their dead; with tears and lamentation therefore, they bear them to the 'towers of silence' as a prey to the eagle and the vulture" (Vol. I., page 11). This book was published in 1839 in London by Saunders and Ottley. The very next year it occurs in an article by another lady writer, the famous Emma Roberts (1794-1840), who also wrote much and well on Indian subjects. "It is in these fastnesses that the hyenas find secure retreats, and the Parsees construct their 'towers of silence,'" writes Miss Roberts in the *Asiatic Journal* for August, 1840 (page 222). This article was republished in her book called "Overland Journey" during the next year. Thus

called "Overland Journey" during the next year. Thus the phrase was invented and in use before Sir George Birdwood had left Bombay for England in 1840-41.

As to the local tradition in Bombay mentioned by Dr. Wilson to Sir George, the possible explanation is that Robert Murphy must have taken up this phrase from the sources I have mentioned above and given it currency in Bombay literary circles after 1843. This supposition is supported by the fact that Dr. Wilson did not know the existence of this phrase in 1843; for in his famous work on the "Parsi Religion"—the first work on our religion written by an outsider who had a first-hand knowledge of the Parsi sacred languages, Zend and Pahlavi—he does not mention it, and still calls the *dokhma* by the old-fashioned, clumsy periphrasis of "repositories of the dead" (page 299) and "sepulchres of the Parsis" (page 315). If Murphy or anybody else had used the phrase "towers of silence" in Bombay before 1843 Dr. Wilson would surely have adopted it in his work, which was printed in Bombay. Immediately after publishing this book Dr. Wilson went to Europe in the beginning of 1843, and did not return till September, 1847 (Dr. George Smith's "Life of John Wilson," pages 39, 424). Whilst in Scotland in 1846 he published an edition of his sermon to the Parsis originally delivered at Bombay, on the memorable occasion of the first conversion of two Parsi youths in 1839, one of whom, the Rev. Mr. Dhaujibhai Nowroji, is still alive and moving in our midst at the venerable age of 83. In this Edinburgh edition of the sermon, "The Doctrine of Jehovah addressed to the Parsis," the first mention of this phrase by Dr. Wilson occurs—"The custom of exposing the dead in their *dokhmas*, or 'towers of silence'" (page 7). Thus I think I have made it clear that during the first period of his residence in Bombay (1829-42) Dr. Wilson was not aware of the existence of this phrase. If Murphy had invented it in Bombay before Mrs Postans had used it in 1839, Dr. Wilson would have been the first person to know it and use it in his great work in 1843, when he had so much occasion to use it. He devotes nearly 20 pages (pages 299-317) to the discussion of these "towers." He evidently did not know Mrs. Postans's use of the phrase.

These *dokhmas* were already called towers by the famous French writer, the Abbé Rayal (1713-96), in his widely popular "History of the European Settlements in the Indies" (Vol. II., page 31, Jusamond's translation, 1798). "The East India Gazetteer" of Walter Hamilton, published in 1828, also calls them towers—"To be consumed by birds of prey on the towers where they

be consumed by birds of prey on the twers where they are exposed" (Vol. I., page 609). Mr. Elwood, in her "Journey Overland," published in 1831 says that "the exterior of the building, both in size and appearance, exactly resembles one of the Martello towers on the Sussex coast" (Vol. II., page 265). As late as 1836 a writer who knew how to throw a halo of romance around Indian subjects calls these towers 'cemeteries' (*Oriental Annual* for 1836, page 216), and he was just the man to use the poetic phrase "towers of silence" if it had been invented. I think I have succeeded in tracing it to a source earlier than that given by Sir George Birdwood—namely, Mrs. Postans's work of 1839; and very likely this is the original source, though perhaps modestly she does not claim the credit. Perhaps the 'silence' in the phrase was suggested by a recollection of Rousseau—"Un silence absolu porte à la tristesse; il offre une image de la mort"; or of Volney—"Le silence des tombeaux c'est substitué au murmure des places publiques" (*Ruines*, II).

One word about Robert Xavier Murphy. Sir George says that he "had originally come out to Bombay as a master under the auspices of the Native Education Society." There is a slight error in this. The late J. H. Stocqueler, who was a journalist in Bombay in the twenties of the last century, and who co-operated with Murphy when the latter was a master of the Native Education Society in 1829, says in his 'Memoirs of a Journalist,' that he had originally come out as a private soldier; and this is confirmed from what I have heard from old Indian friends here who knew Murphy well. Writing of 1829 Stocqueler says:—"I put myself in communication with a clever young Irish friend, who had come out as a private artilleryman (and had devoted himself to the study of Hindustani and Maathi), in view to the formation of a general library. Robert Xavier Murphy was an Irish Catholic and had probably been intended for the priesthood.

'Doomed his father's soul to cross,
By penning stanzas when he should'—

he studying the breviary, he was spoiled for the Church, but he made an excellent interpreter in the Supreme Court at Bombay. Law gained what theology lost" (*Bombay*, 1873, page 67).

Lastly, I may say that there are no signs at present of the Parsis' giving up their ancient mode of disposing of the dead in those *dokhmas*, or towers of silence, and that the recent agitation in favour of cremation has met with almost universal indignation in our community. The Parsis are not yet prepared to give up this custom, which is hallowed to them by hoary antiquity. The Parsis are fortunate in drawing the special attention of *The Times* to themselves recently, and I can assure you, Sir, that your article of a few weeks ago on "Parsi Burials"

your article of a few weeks ago on "Parsi Exclusiveness" has had a wholesome effect. I have special reason to be thankful to you, as you did me the honour to quote from my writings on that subject in that article, and now do me the further honour of publishing the present communication. I am faithfully yours,
Tardeo, Bombay, Aug. 26. R. P. KARKARIA.