

Reining in the radicals - II

The executive council meeting of the all-India Federation slammed WZO-UK for not restricting membership to Parsi-Irani Zoroastrians

Text: Parinaz M. Gandhi • Photographs: Jasmine D. Driver

“WZO (World Zoroastrian Organisation) — UK wants to remove fellow Zoroastrians and take up the cause of neo Zoroastrians,” announced Nozer Meherji, vice president of WZO-India (WZO-I). He had brought the grievances of the India chapter before the executive council meeting of the Federation of the Parsi Zoroastrian Anjumans of India on October 9, 2010 hoping the anjumans in attendance would support their “battle to protect Zoroastrianism.”

Perturbed that the international body has chosen to “throw open its doors to all and sundry” when the Indian chapter has restricted its membership to only those born of both Parsi/Irani Zoroastrian parents, Meherji reiterated, “We need to safeguard ourselves. We need to keep the vision of our forefathers and protect ourselves.” He was further worried as to “what would happen to the brand name of Zoroastrianism?... to the work of our predecessors?” Whilst Meherji was expressing his fervent lament, most of the delegates were busy enjoying the post-lunch Amul sundae served to them.

According to the historical backdrop provided by him WZO-UK was established 30 years ago and WZO-I five years later. Though both are independently registered they had a common constitution and membership clauses until 1993 when the UK body changed its

constitution to permit membership to non-Zoroastrian spouses and children of one Zoroastrian parent. “With aspirations to be a world body,” in 2002 they again felt the need to change the membership clause to include those who “profess the Zoroastrian faith.” This proposal was rejected by WZO-I in 2003 and “until 2008 this issue kept simmering.” In 2010 WZO-I convened a Special General Meeting (see “War of the worlds,” *Parsiana*, June 21, 2010) attended by more than 400 members who unanimously voted against this change.

Alerting the council members on how certain antisocials in the West tried to misrepresent themselves as Zoroastrians Meherji wondered, “What would stop a fundamentalist Muslim organization from claiming to be Zoroastrian and then carrying out terrorist activities?” The Students Islamic Movement of India did a lot of social activities until the outfit was hijacked by militants. “We should have the foresight to see into the future,” advocated Meherji.

The constitution requires that a two-thirds majority should favor a policy change like the membership clause. Since they don’t have the requisite majority “they have started chucking out members,” noted Meherji according to whom the strength of the Indian body is around 2,500 while WZO-UK has 800-900

members. WZO-UK holds its annual general meeting with six people and 180 proxy votes. In India there is no system of proxy votes. As per the earlier rules, until WZO-UK chose to sever connections with WZO-I, those who signed up as members in India were automatically deemed as members of the international body.

A member of the WZO-UK board until he was “unceremoniously removed,” Meherji maintains he was served a show cause notice and his candidature refused as also that of WZO-I president Rusi Bhumgara and joint honorary treasurer Percy Mistry on the grounds that their “thinking was not in consonance with the UK board.” Insisting that through “my objections I voiced my views democratically,” Meherji announced that the membership amendment is sought by only a few and the “peace loving Zoroastrian community is not the one behind these activities.” He sought support from all major anjumans that are “far more representative than WZO: Write letters, express your views. Many may feel I’m becoming paranoid. I’m not trying to scare you. Let the voice of the majority be known... At least pass a resolution condemning (them).”

WZO-UK is seeking “to disenfranchise you and me from what they want to promote. Nozer is fighting for a cause,” reminded Federation joint honorary secretary, Bombay Parsi Punchayet (BPP) trustee and World Alliance of Parsi Irani Zarthoshtis (WAPIZ) founder Khojeste Mistree mentioning the WZO-UK is being funded by wealthy non-Zoroastrians. “By severing their ties with mother India, WZO-UK is opening the doors willy-nilly to the likes of Brazilian nudists...*naagaa loko* (naked people) who do jashans, and Latin American pedophiles who have become Zoroastrians. A group of Mexican convicts



Clockwise from top left: Nozer Meherji, Dinshaw Mehta, Jamsheed Kanga, Firoza Punthakey and Khojeste Mistree



claimed that Zoroastrianism enjoins drugs. Zoroastrians in North America are suddenly very worried. The chickens have come home to roost.”

Those seeking conversion “want to become Zoroastrians not because they have studied the religion profoundly but because they want political stability. There are hundreds of thousands of people who want to become Zoroastrians. There are over 2.4 million Zoroastrians according to many encyclopedias. Zoroastrianism is seen as a designer religion. There are many laid back Muslims who want to claim Zoroastrian identity because Islam is seen as a terrorist religion in the western world. If they say they are Zarathushti they get a visa but not if they are Muslim...Historically this is the religion of the Iranian people. To universalize religion is the flavor of the day. Changing religion to humanism will affect us... We have to defend our community from those like Ali Akbar Jafarey who believe in converting to Zoroastrianism. We have to be born into what our forefathers have given us by way of legacy. We have to recognize ethnicity and not just religion. Has any religion survived without ethnicity?” he challenged, de-

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manding to know whether “we want to uphold heritage or some hybrid version of the religion. In the Federation of the Parsi Zoroastrian Anjumans of India we have the privilege of being both Parsi and Zoroastrian,” Mistree impressed upon the members.

As vindicated by the High Priests and scholar priests, “for 1,300 years we have never accepted converts,” pointed out Federation president and Bombay Parsi Punchayet (BPP) chairman Dinshaw Mehta who was in favor of the Federation passing a resolution against the “monumental historical blunder” and to convey “its strong objection” to WZO-UK whilst asking it to abolish the amendment with immediate effect. When Zarsis Udhawala of Thana recommended that

all the other countries also be taken into confidence, Meherji was “damn sure 75-80 percent feels like us.” Declared Federation west zone B vice president and WAPIZ chairman Areez Khambatta, “Start with India and show to the rest of the world.” Those objecting to the spirit of the resolution were asked to rise. Since there were no standees, it was assumed that everybody was in favor.

“What is the advantage for a Parsi/ Irani Zoroastrian from India to become a member of WZO?” enquired Jamsheed Kanga who was representing Satara. When told the WZO-I is mainly concerned with sociocultural activities to bring Zoroastrians together, Kanga demanded, “If a non-Zoroastrian were to come to the picnics and parties organized by WZO-I will the heavens fall?”

Countered Mistree: “WZO-UK has a one-point agenda: to convert to Zoroastrianism. They want a free hand to do that.” Fearful of Jafarey’s allegedly multimillion outfit, the Zoroastrian Brotherhood, becoming the most powerful Zoroastrian lobby, Mistree insisted the proposed move by the UK body “is much more sinister. The heavens will fall. But since you seem to endorse conversion (Kanga being one of the peti-

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tioners who has challenged the BPP trustees for banning the 'renegade' priests from performing ceremonies on their premises) I can understand where it's coming from."

Since Mistree had earlier claimed that the activities of WZO-UK were being funded by non-Zoroastrians, Kanga could not understand the logic of objecting to funds from non-Zoroastrians financing the activities of both Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians. After the 26/11 calamity in Bombay, the Tatas have set up a fund to help not only their own Taj employees but all those affected by the terrorist strikes, stated Kanga, declaring that they have displayed true Zoroastrian philanthropy. "Why aren't you objecting to that?" asked Kanga.

Interjected Firoza Punthakey Mistree (present as an invitee) even whilst Kanga complained that he had not finished his say: "The Tatas are an industrial (enterprise), not a community organization. For any community body, its first and foremost duty is to Parsi Irani Zoroastrians. There are thousands of Parsi Irani children who are dying with no sudreh



Sammy Bhiwandiwalla:
"truth is bent"

or food. It annoys me to no end that people cannot think of their own community first... Charity begins at home..."

Shot back Kanga, "In that case you should pass a resolution asking the Tatas to desist from helping everybody."

Argued Tannaz Parakh representing Khergam, "If a trust is going against its constitution we should

definitely oppose that organization."

This part of the Federation's two-day deliberations got maximum coverage in *The Times of India* (TOI) of October 11 when in an article, "Parsis say no to conversion," Nauzer Bharucha wrote: "A gang of Mexican drug smugglers, a sect of Brazilian nudists, a group of pedophiles — they have all professed to be Zoroastrians. Shocked and to stop such 'infiltrations' about 35 Parsi-Irani anjumans ...passed a resolution against conver-

sion into the community after the UK based WZO recently changed its rules to allow any person to convert to Zoroastrianism...Recently WZO's India wing severed ties with WZO-UK...Just a couple of years ago a cartel of Mexican drug smugglers when caught with marijuana claimed to be Zoroastrians and falsely said the drug was meant to be used in an ancient religious ritual..."

This report provoked Sammy Bhiwandiwalla, former chairman of WZO-UK to write to the TOI editor but his letter was not published. Asserts Bhiwandiwalla, "WZO is an international organization representing Zoroastrians and their needs...and has never engaged in conversion nor is it our function to do so...Parsiism is not Zoroastrianism...In

publishing this tripe you are insulting and attacking the genuine adherents of the faith within the Parsi community..."

continued on page 48

"It was WZO that broke relations with WZO-I and not the other way around and had nothing to do with conversion"

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