

Bai Virbaijee Soparivala Parsi High School. 150 Years.



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A Sesquicentennial Centenary – 150 years from 1859 to 2009.

By Mehelli B. Dinshaw

On 23rd May 2009 The Bai Virbaiji Soparivala Parsi High School celebrated 150 years of continuous teaching excellence; a Sesquicentennial centenary from 1859 to 2009..



“... 150 years – what a momentous milestone. This institution is not just a part of Karachi, it is the heart of Karachi, in fact it is Karachi; a building more than 104 years, trees more than 100 years and knowledge imparted that cannot be measured in time” ... so said the Principal Mrs Kermin Parekh.



Celebrations for this special day, a milestone in the School history, commenced with a Jashan ceremony in the late afternoon by nine priests, and were followed in the evening by an impressive function and sumptuous dinner on the School grounds. It was a day not only of celebration but also a day of humble remembrance of the great founder of the school, Seth Shahpurji Hormusji Soparivala, and his two illustrious sons, Seth Khurshedji Soparivala, Seth Jamshedji Soparivala, who were personally responsible for the later expansion of the school.



At the function the Chairman, Major General Kaizad M Soparivala praised the vision of his great-great grandfather, Seth Shahpurji Hormusji Soparivala for starting a small 'balakshala' in 1859 and later in 1870 for donating his personal house for the education of Parsi children in Karachi. He named it the Virbaiji Parsi School after his wife who had expired a year earlier. In 1906 his equally illustrious and noble sons, Seth Khurshedji and Seth Jamshedji, carried on his pioneering work of offering quality education to Parsi children of Karachi and expanded the School by constructing the magnificent school building, making it into the Bai Virbaiji Soparivala Parsi High School, the pride of Karachi Parsis and the Soparivala family.

In 1959 when the School celebrated its 100 years, Khan Bahadur Sheriarji Contractor the Honorary Secretary, wrote in the Centenary Volume: "...The far sightedness and generosity of this great yet humble man, Seth Shapurji Soparivala, the founder of this prestigious school, perceived that it was only on sound education that the security and destiny of the Karachi Parsi community rested, and that education was an inseparable companion and finally an investment in knowledge alone pays the best dividends ..."



To commemorate the sesquicentennial centenary, the Philatelic Bureau brought out a special Rs5 commemorative postal stamp with the school building, the school shield and motto, and a first day cover. The daily, DAWN, Pakistan's premier newspaper, published a special colourful four-page supplement with the heading, "Bai Virbaijee Soparivala Parsi High School, 150 Years of Excellence in Education". Special messages of congratulations were received from The President and Prime Minister of Pakistan, Governor of Sindh, the City Nizam, the Minister of Education and senior officials of the Education Department, the Karachi Anjuman Trust Fund, the Zarthosti Banu Mandal, leading schools of Karachi and a host of others. Every guest, all teachers and students were presented with a memento bag, a specially produced sesquicentennial centenary school calendar, pens and key-rings and coffee cup, all emblazoned with the school's badge and motto, "Towards that Best Light".

Parsis in Karachi

Parsis started coming to settle in Karachi around 1835 while it was still a small town with a new military cantonment, little commerce and a minor fishing industry. As was usual when the Parsis increased in numbers anywhere, they first established a dokhma in 1848 and an agiary followed the next year. This shows that by the middle of the nineteenth century the Parsi community of Karachi had grown considerably.



Seth Shahpurji Hormusji Soparivala

Legend has it that Seth Shapurji came to Karachi in 1854 from Bombay by camel caravan through the Rann of Kutch. He is said to have started work as a billiards marker in the Cantonment Officers mess and soon progressed to be an assistant in the firm of Mr W E Chamberlain. An enterprising man, he started selling tea and eatables in the mess and soon ventured into business by taking contracts for the British Army; starting as a bedding supplier he soon became the principal supplies contractor to the British Army Commissariat. Being a kind and sociable person he also took a leading role in the welfare of Karachi Parsis, and built a 'sugdi' (fireplace) at the 'Dokhma', repaired the 'Nasasala' quarters and dug wells.

The 'Balakshala'

The Parsi residents now felt the need to open a school for their growing number of children, to impart religious education and knowledge of Gujrati. It was decided to establish a small school through subscriptions. The principle donor was Seth Shapurji Soparivala, and on 23 May 1859 a small 'balakshala' was started in the house of one Mr Dadabhoy Pallanji Paymaster in Saddar Bazaar on Frere Street. The first secretary was Seth Nanabhai Shahpurji Spencer and three years later this important post for the running of the 'balakshala' passed on to Seth Shahpurji Soparivala. The 'balakshala' then shifted to the Sargent's house which was on the plot where the present Saddar Agiary stands. The School was not part of the Agiary as is wrongly assumed by some, as at that time the Saddar Agiary was initially started in the Hirjikaka building opposite the site of the present Agiary. When the 'balakshala' was shifted to the Soparivala house, the new Hirjikaka agiari was built on the site of the old Sargent's house.

Parsi Virbaiji School



With the Parsi population fast increasing in Karachi there was soon need for larger school premises. In 1870 Seth Shapurji had taken upon himself the responsibilities of a Secretary, had been so far the greatest benefactor and patron of the 'balakshala'. Till now the small primary school had been under great stress for want of suitable larger premises. Seth Shapurji came forward in his usual public minded spirit, and donated his personal two-storey house on Frere Street, which in those

days was worth Rs10,000 to be called the Parsi Virbaiji School in memory of his wife Virbaiji. Although Seth Shahpurji could not be called a very rich man in comparison to other Parsi gentlemen in Karachi, he had donated his meager wealth and that of his family, to start a school that was to provide the best form of education for Parsi children. This single philanthropic act by him towards his community consolidated the seat of Parsi education in Karachi..

The Parsi Virbaiji School in its new Frere Street location was opened on 24th September 1870 by the then Commissioner of Sind, Sir William Mereweather. On this occasion the Parsi Anjuman of Karachi presented a 'Shawl of Honour' to Seth Shahpurji, and the then Educational Inspector of Karachi, Mr J H Muir, appreciated the educational efforts of the Parsis of Karachi.

The School was coeducational and a 'Vernacular' school, meaning all teaching was in the Gujrati medium. Subjects taught were Gujrati, Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, History, Geography and needlework (to girls). From 1875 with the encouragement of Mr Fultan, the then Educational Inspector of Karachi, an English teaching section was opened and the school now became an "Anglo-Vernacular School". The census of 1872 shows there were only 777 Parsis in Karachi, 427 males and 350 females. The School strength is recorded as having only 82 students, with 54 boys and 28 girls, and the fees varied from annas 4 to Rs1 per child and some indigent parents exempted.

On 1st Jan 1877 after the Indian mutiny, when India came directly under the British Imperial rule, Queen Victoria assumed the Title of Kaiser-e-Hind, and annually awarded certificates of loyalty to her subjects. Seth Shahpurji was one of the first in the city of Karachi to receive this certificate.

The great founder, Seth Shahpurji, finally retired from active service but continued to keep a benevolent eye on the school. He is said to have traveled widely in India and died in Karachi on 25 March 1895 at the age of 72. The Parsi Anjuman called a special meeting to mourn his loss and in 1897 a special portrait of this great man was hung in the Saddar Agiari. Every year on his death anniversary the school holds a special Jashan in his memory. There is no historical document to tell us of his early life or schooling. He is said to have lived a hard life which usually started with prayers at four in the morning. His place of business was opposite the Empress Market where the rich and poor called on him for advice. His personality was said to be striking and he was a fair complexioned man. A lovely marble statue in the School entrance displays his gentleness and kindness.

School Expansion to new building



By the start of the 20th century the Parsi population of Karachi had increased considerably and there was urgent need for a much larger school to cater for their children. In 1904 a piece of land measuring over 9,000 square yards was acquired near the then Artillery Headquarters on Victoria Road. Once again the greatest contribution towards the building fund came from the sons of the great founder, Seth Khurshedji and Seth Jamshedji, and the Government came forward with a building grant of Rs20,000 and the Karachi Municipality gave Rs2,500.



On Monday 10th October 1904 Seth Khurshedji Soparivala laid the foundation stone for a new school, ground plus one floor. The architect in charge was the famous member of the Society of Architects, Mr Moses Somake and the building contractor was Messrs Abdulhusein Alibhai. The opening ceremony was performed on 24 March 1906, the 11th death anniversary of the founder Seth Shahpurji Soparivala. On this great day the whole Parsi community was invited first to a Jashan ceremony of thanks to the memory of the Late Shahpurji, and was followed by the consecrating and opening ceremony of the new School building. Had it not been for the tradition started by Seth Shahpurji and so religiously preserved by his large hearted sons, Seth Khurshedji and Seth Jamshedji, the Parsi Virbaiji School would never have expanded and moved from its small Soparivala house premises on Frere Street.

On commencement in the new building, the School records show that now there were three departments, the coeducational Gujrati primary section and the middle school English section separate for boys and girls. The primary section from an infant class up to class four had 68 boys and 62 girls. The middle school English section for boys and for girls had only three classes having 39 boys and 29 girls in each. The separate girls school was housed on the first floor.

Bai Virbaiji Soparivala Boys High School

Dr Pithavala period

Till about 1919 the Virbaiji Boys School was still an Anglo-Vernacular Middle School. After completing middle school at class seven level, the students took admission in High schools in Karachi. The boys usually went to NJV Government High School or St Patrick's, and girls to the Convent high schools. As boys were finding difficulty in getting entrance to high schools, it was decided to start high school classes for boys. An appeal for this was made to the Parsis of Karachi for funds to make this possible, as it was poised by the need of the hour to be converted into a full fledged Boys High School. The credit for this leap into becoming one of the most progressive boy's high school of Karachi goes to the benevolent and munificent philanthropy of the Soparivala family and the vision of a great Headmaster.



On 1st June 1920 the Managing Committee of the School appointed Mr Maneck B Pithawala of Poona as Headmaster, who had the privilege to preside over its destiny for the next quarter century. Within three years he had worked out all the modalities to transform the School into a complete High School. Once again the Soparivala family came forward with a most generous offer of Rs200,000 to add a second storey to the School building and make it into a proper High School. After the death of Seth Khurshedji in 1915, the head of the family and Chairman of the School was now his brother Seth Jamshedji. Not many know that this great offer by him and the sons of his late brother, the family had to sacrifice considerably and sell their personal holdings, so that the Parsi community of Karachi could reap the benefits of a better education, and preserve the sacred memory of the great founder. The Soparivala's had donated generously and not only in the shape of money but personal service as well towards the maintenance, upkeep and extension of the School. In fact to everyone in Karachi, Parsi education and the name Soparivala were now synonymous.



On 12th November 1923 in the presence of a large gathering, a Jashan was performed and the second storey was declared open, and a special presentation and casket was given to the Soparivala family. The crowning part of the function was the prayers offered and the Presidential address given by Shams-ul-Ulema Dastur Dhalla. The School was thereafter renamed the Bai Virbaiji Soparivala Boys High School.



The School now had 246 pupils and its strength rose to 428 by 1936. Mr Pithawala gradually took the School to great heights and the period 1920 to 1946 was momentous having the full support of the Managing Committee. He introduced a host of extra curricular activities which he strongly believed were required to build strong characters. He started religious education, introduced the school prefect system, 'House' system, and scouting and cubing. Three scout troops were formed, through the generosity of the Soparivala and Cowasjee families. There was the 2nd Karachi Cowasjee Variawa's Own, the 3rd Karachi Soparivala's Own and the 4th Karachi Darius's Own Scout Troops. In 1927 Fakirjee Cowasjee created the Cowasjee Variawa's Own (school band). In 1932, Pithawala gave the School its motto, "Towards that Best Light". Physical culture and cricket coaching was introduced and the Karachi Parsi Institute offered their grounds for practice and matches.

In the mid-30's Fakirjee Cowasjee started the "Cowasjee and Virbaijee Variava Bhojan Fund" giving free lunch to deserving boys which continues till today, In 1940 Rustom Cowasjee secured for the School a spacious playing field on Sangster Road opposite the KPI grounds, and built a pavilion. In his appreciation the new sports ground and pavilion was called the "Fakirjee Cowasjee Playground and Gymkhana Pavilion". The new sports grounds saw the start of the Schools "House" system. Pithawala finally retired on 20th November 1946 at the age of 60.



It may be of interest to mention here that today Karachi's oldest living Parsi gentleman, and oldest Virbaijeeite is 101 year old Mr Dhunjishaw Dadabhoy Mama. School records show he joined the school in the year in 1919 when the school was still an Anglo-Vernacular School. He is the nephew of late Khan Bahadur Ardeshir Hormusji Mama who founded the Mama Parsi Girls High School.

Girls school seperated.

The Parsi Virbaiji School was still a co-educational and an Anglo-Vernacular School when it moved into its new premises. It was soon realized that with growing number of Parsi girls now studying, the School could no longer be capable of teaching both boys and girls, and the School was therefore bifurcated into a Parsi Virbaiji Boys School and a separate Parsi Girls School. The Girls school was separately housed on the first floor of the new School building. Very soon a larger and separate premise for the girl's school was required and donations were received to build a separate Parsi girls school in Karachi. The principal donor with Rs 300,000 was Khan Bhadur Ardeshir Hormusji Mama, and a further sum of Rs150,000 came from the N N Pochahji Trust Funds (Messrs K & J Soparivala and K B Nusserwanjee R Mehta). With the necessary funds secured, land was purchased on Bunder Road and the school building construction began. In 1918 the girls school now called the Mama School was shifted out of the Virbaiji Parsi School building first to Mama Mansions (now known as Kothari Mansions), on Victoria Road (now Abdullah Haroon Road), and very soon moved into its new building and was called the Mama Parsi Girls High School. The 'balakshala' of old had now mothered two off-springs, one for its sons and another for its daughters. The two institutions ran independently but both having the same primary goal, the education of Parsi children of Karachi.

Partion, Pakistan & our School opened to all.



In 1947, after the partition of India, the Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah the founder and first Governor General of Pakistan, made a survey of the schools in existence in Karachi and drew up his plans to provide education for the huge bulk of children who came in with the events of that year. He met the Karachi Parsi elders and requested them to take the entire Parsi community of Karachi into confidence to temporarily open both the BVS Boys School and the Mama Girls School to children of the Muslims of the new nation until new schools could be build. A 'Samast Parsi Anjuman' meeting was called and it was unanimously agreed that since schools

were established to educate children, there could be no discrimination on the grounds of race and religion. The two Parsi schools immediately opened their doors to all non-Parsi children of Karachi, not temporarily but permanently.

Behram Sohrab H J Rustomji period & further

Pithawalla was followed by Behram Sohrab H J Rustomji (1946-65), another fine teacher, an all-rounder and a great humanist. He nurtured the School following Mr Pithwala's good work of the last 26 years. He saw the School suddenly expand with the admission of non-Parsi children after the creation of Pakistan and maintained its great name and reputation. He was a dynamic person and introduced technical training classes in basic engineering and setup a separate workshop building for which he successfully obtained a gift of modern electric workshop machinery from the Ford Foundation.



The School celebrated its Centenary in 1959 with a grand function. Mr Mehmood Husain the Education Minister was Chief Guest and he read out a message of the President of Pakistan, General Ayub Khan. A special Centenary Golden Plaque of the School was presented to Khan Bahadur Sheriarji Contractor for his invaluable services to the School, and long service medals were also given to senior teachers of the School. Mr Rustomji's period was an eventful one, of great challenge for the School and its management which was tackled skillfully and successfully. Mr Rustomji retired after 19 years in 1965.

Then came Behram Minwalla and Russi Divecha, both of whom were there for a very short time. Dinoo Mistri (nee Soparivala), the great-grand-daughter of the founder Seth Shahpurji, took over as Principal in 1972. Computer classes were started in 1995 initially for the senior school and in the next four years every child from class one was attending these classes. The number of students had by now increased to nearly 1,000 and every class had three sections. Mrs Mistri retired in December 2004 due to old age and ill health.

The BVS High School today – Mrs Kermin Parekh period



Mrs Kermin Parekh was appointed Principal from January 2005. With the full support of the Managing Committee she was asked to immediately embark on a course to modernize the School to meet the challenges and needs of the 21st century. Her enthusiasm to carry out this mission was soon visible in every part of the new and revitalized School. New Syllabi have been introduced for English Language and Literature, Science, Mathematics, Social Studies,

Urdu and Religious instruction, enabling the students to become thinkers rather than rote learners. Some changes have been inevitable and sadly the Technical section and the Montessori have been closed..

Mission Statement and Philosophy

The Mission Statement of the BVS Parsi High School today is a “child-centered education where the emphasis is on making the child a thinker”. The new school philosophy is to teach by providing an environment which is intellectually stimulating and fosters a positive attitude towards learning, and contributing to the growth of a healthy and well-balanced member of the society who is aware of global issues and is eventually a global citizen. Teaching methodology has changed in the past four years by moving away from the archaic teaching ways and today all subjects are now taught through a multi-sensory multimedia method, which is activity based, with emphasis on experimenting, exploring and discovery for intellectual growth and creativity.

A new Cambridge section was opened in 2006, and the first batch of the students sitting for CIE Exam will graduate in 2012. The management also decided to move away from the Karachi Board of Secondary Education, where the syllabus that has not changed in the last three decades and depends on rote system, to the Aga Khan University Education Board (AKU-EB) from 2012, where the examination system lays emphasis on the thinking and analyzing ability of a child.

The school has two computer labs with 36 computers each, one for the Primary section and one for the Secondary section and every student from class one onwards attend computer classes. The computer departmental also maintains school records, and tabulates the examination results and updates the school's vibrant website.

From 2006 two libraries managed by four librarians now serve the junior and senior sections, and each is equipped with 12 computers for students research. An annual library budget ensures new books, magazines and newspapers are available for the students

The Art Department has dramatically come a long way in the last four years. Four teachers, all trained artists, have introduced new techniques and mediums to the students, bringing the artist out in every child.

Four new trained physical education teachers have been engaged to rejuvenate the school's sports and games. The Schools Inter-school sports participation has now moved beyond a cricket and volley-ball team, to teams for foot-ball, swimming, rowing, basketball and futsal.

School building – Renovation and New Constuction



In preparation for sesquicentennial centenary celebrations this year, the 100 year old lime stone exterior of old main School building has been cleaned. A comprehensive new building programme in three phases has started to cater for the extra classrooms needed for the newly introduced Cambridge and AKU-EB sections. Phase-I completed in 2006, adding new classrooms, old corridors were widened and a new staircase was built. Phase-II completed in time for the sesquicentennial

centenary celebrations on 23rd May 2009, adding more classrooms, toilets blocks, staff rooms, conference room and an office. Phase-III, to commence soon, will see even more classrooms, three new science labs for the Cambridge section, an audio-visual room and multi purpose auditorium for the whole school. All renovations and new constructions have been carried out ensuring that the early 20th century Raj architectural essence of the main school building prevails everywhere.

In 150 years the BVS has changed with time and today as this great School celebrates its sesquicentennial centenary of educational excellence, we are sure that the great Founder, Seth Shahpurji Soparivala and his equally illustrious sons, Seth Khurshedji and Seth Jamshedji, must surely be proud of the educational institution they started in 1859 being so carefully nurtured and maintained today in the 21st century