

Establishing the Tower of Silence

Mobed Behramji Unvalla and Mobed Noshervan Unvalla Consecrated the Paak Dokhma of Bangalore.

Mobed Behramji Unvalla (Sanjana Mobed, Udvarda), Kersasp P Tarapore were very close disciples of Ustad Saheb Behramshah N Shroff. Both these disciples have written about their interactions with Ustad Saheb Behramshah N Shroff in the "Ustad Saheb Behramshah Shroff Memorial Volume". Given below are rare photos of the Tana ceremony..... The Mobed with the big white beard and round metallic spectacles is the Sanjana Mobed Behramji Unvalla. The Paak Andheri Dakhma mentioned in the article below was consecrated by the Mobed Navroji Dastoor Meherjirana, father of Dasturji K N Dastoor Meherji Rana (Navsari).

HISTORY form "The Bangalore Parsis"

BY
DASTURJI NADIRSHAH P. UNVALLA

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Bangalore is known for its salubrious climate. This attracted more Parsees to come and settle here. The total number at the beginning of the 20th Century was about one or two dozen, which steadily rose to 125 by the time the Agiary was built in 1924. In 1937, the population rose to over 300.

Several immigrants were hesitant to stay on in Bangalore, as there was no facility for the disposal of the dead in the 'Zoroastrian way' by use of Dokhma. Amongst them were Sir Hormasji Adenwalla, Seth Dinshaw Cawasji and Mr. A. D. Hakim. This prompted the Anjuman to think of constructing a Dokhma in Bangalore. In those days the Anjuman had no funds to erect the Dokhma, which would require a vast piece of land and lakhs of rupees. A meeting of the General Body was called on 19th August 1937 to consider this problem. At that meeting it was resolved by a majority of the members that work should begin on the construction of a Dokhma. A minority of the members did not oppose this resolution but appealed that at this time the erection of a Dokhma was not necessary.

Soon thereafter the Anjuman formed and appointed the Dokhma Committee, consisting of Seth Dinshaw Cawasji, President; Dr. T. P. Kapadia, Hon. Treasurer; and my father was appointed as the Hon. Secretary and Mr. N. Pestonji; Mr. N. D. Manekji; Mr. Ruttonshaw Furdunji and Mr. Nusserwanji N. Boyce were appointed as Committee Members. It was this committee that set up the Dokhma Fund, which started with an initial contribution of Rs. 5,000/- from Sir. Hormusji. Adenwalla.

Some Parsees, who were against Dokhmenashini, formed a Party by the name of “Anti-Dokhma Committee” with Mr. R. H. Irani as Chairman. There were serious arguments between the two groups. The Anti-Dokhma adherents tried their best not to get donations to erect the Dokhma. Despite this controversy, the committee for the Dokhma Fund had successfully collected Rs. 80,000/- in a year and a half. The Dokhma Committee then thought of purchasing a big plot of land suitable for construction of a Dokhma with a ‘Bangli’, ‘Sagdi’, ‘Koowo’ (well), etc. The Committee found three or four suitable sites and even paid the earnest money, but these options did not work out. At last they found a vacant plot of land where the Dokhma exists today.

In those days the city of Bangalore had expanded up to Mehkri Circle in the north, Lalbaug in the west, City Market in the south and The National Dairy Institute in the east. Farmers occupied most of the vacant land. The Dokhma Committee needed about 10 to 15 acres of land but it was not possible to purchase so many acres from a single farmer, hence the present land measuring about 14½ acres was purchased from seven farmers by negotiating with them through a Legal Advisor, Mr. D’Souza.

Next, the Government of Mysore was approached for permission to construct the Dokhma. At that time, Sir Mirza Ismail was the Dewan of Mysore. The Government was mostly run by the Dewan and three other officials who were the First, Second and Third Members. The Dokhma Committee, with the help of Bombay’s well-known Parsis drafted a

memorandum and took an appointment to meet with the Dewan along with Sir Hormusji Adenwalla on the 23rd of November 1938 in his office at 'Carlton House', his official residence on Palace Road. The Dewan received the memorandum and magnanimously extended an offer to the committee that he, on behalf of the Government, would build the Dokhma.

In this memorandum, the committee did not hide anything but openly mentioned that whenever the Parsee population of a place increased they built a Dokhma for the disposal of their dead according to their scriptures. The Zoroastrian religion was founded millennia ago and the main principles of the religion are purity and righteousness. This religion considers fire, earth, and water as the prime elements of nature that need to be kept pure and undefiled. After explaining all this, the memorandum was submitted to the Dewan. The Dewan was very happy to meet our community members and assured his full support to them.

By mid-January the Dokhma Committee received a letter from the Government dated 10th January 1939 sanctioning permission to erect the Dokhma on the proposed land with only one condition that the Dokhma should be built 75 feet away from the center of the road. Necessary instructions were sent to the Amildar.

In the Anti-Dokhma committee there were a few Parsee members who had good relations with the Government. They were under the impression that the Government would not give permission for the Dokhma. When they came to know that the Government had sanctioned the project without any conditions attached, they approached the Government with a request that as their relatives were buried in the cemetery they should be allowed to use the burial ground. The Dokhma Committee received one more letter dated 6th February 1939 informing the Dokhma Committee that – "Permission now accorded does not prevent the use of the burial ground for further burial". The Dokhma Committee had nothing to do with the second letter, as the Committee's business was to erect the Dokhma.

The Dokhma Committee fixed 10th March 1939 to start the construction work on the Dokhma with a “Kodali Marvani Kriya”. Kodali Marvani Kriya represents the marking of the land where the Dokhma is to be built. The photograph below is enclosed showing almost all the members of the Anjuman taking part in the Jashan and Baj ceremonies.

Tano Purvani Kriya

The Dokhma Committee with the help of the Trustees fixed 9th April 1939 for “Tano Purvani Kriya”. For the Parsee community this occasion is a very rare event. The Anjuman therefore announced the date for this ceremony in the Bombay Parsee papers. All the community members were informed so that those eager to watch this ceremony could arrive. About a thousand Parsee Zoroastrians gathered in Bangalore. ‘Yozdathregar Mobeds’ performed the Tana ceremony. For this ceremony three Mobeds were again brought to Bangalore in a car with **‘Bareshnum’: Behramji Unvalla, Noshirwan Unvalla and Dinshawji Unvalla.**

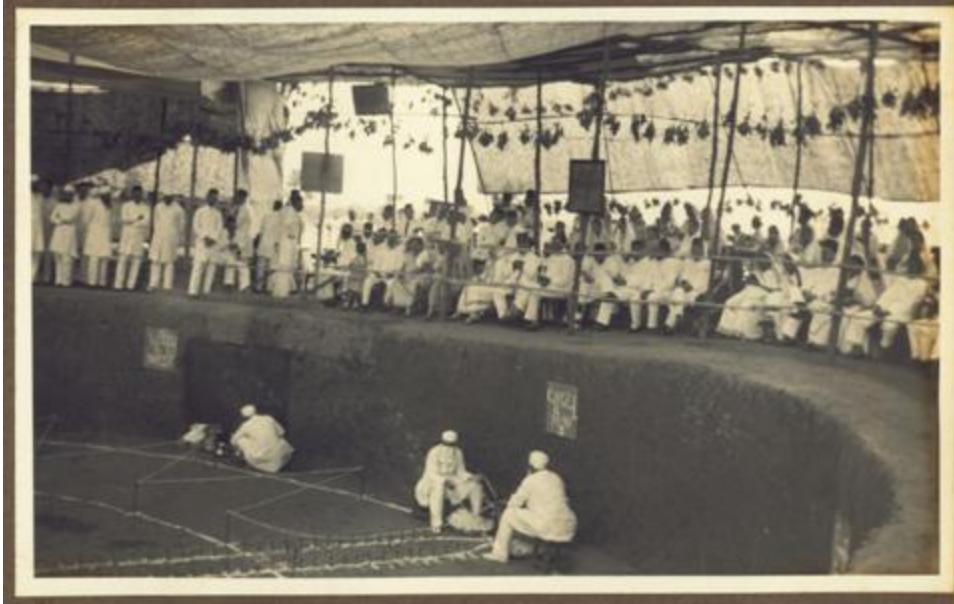
For the Tana ceremony big bundles of raw cotton thread are required. Seth P. N. Mehta supplied this from his mill (Sri Ram Mills). He was also the founder of the Nasik Boy’s Town School. These bundles of thread were purified with ‘chokha’ water from a well and kept ready in big copper ‘thallas’.

In addition 301 iron nails were required for the Tana ceremony. These were ordered from the Empress Iron and Brass Works and had to conform to certain specifications and weight. The centre nail was to be made having a weight of one ‘maund’. The other four corner nails were of quarter maund each with holes. All these iron nails and the iron gates of the Tower of Silence compound were donated by the Proprietors of the Empress Iron and Brass Works, M/s Burjorji Pestonji & Sons.

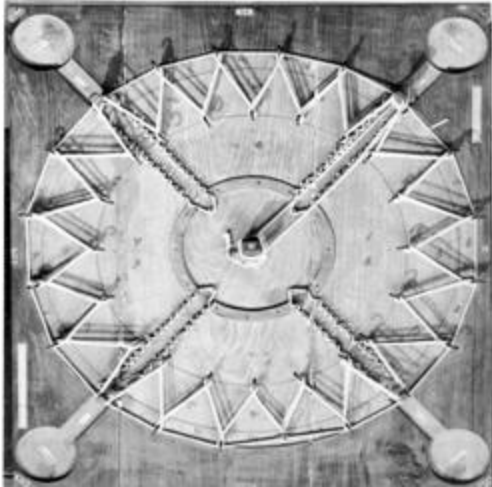
The Tana ceremony took nearly three hours. This was followed by a Jashan ceremony performed by Sirdar Dasturji Norshirwan Kekobad of

the Deccan, along with eleven others Mobeds. The Parsee Zoroastrians witnessed all this with great religious zeal. In the afternoon a community lunch was served to all the guests who numbered around 1000. The cost of serving the lunch came to Rs.1/- per head at that time.









A Miracle

Four days after the Tana ceremony there was torrential rain in Bangalore. Everyone was afraid that the Tana ceremony portion, which was about 8 feet below the surface and joined only by cotton thread, would have been damaged. But by the grace of Ahura Mazda, despite the heavy rainfall, the Tana was completely intact!

Appointment of Architects & Contractor

After the Tana ceremony, the Dokhma committee wanted to start construction work. First they took the help of Mr. **Kersasp B. Tarapore**

of M/s Taraporewalla & Co., Architects, who drew the plans for the main Dokhma, Anushe Rawan Bangli, Sagdi, etc. Mr. Kersasp Taraporewalla suggested the name of Mr. Nadershah Dorabji Guzdar as the one who should be entrusted with the construction work. Mr. Guzdar had given his services for the **Andheri Dokhma in Bombay**. A small farmhouse was constructed where Mr. Guzdar lived with his wife, Sherbanoo and two sons for one year and completed all the buildings including the main Tower and the compound wall.

This Hebbal land, which was purchased in 1938, was in a remote area about 9 km from the General Post Office. There was no habitation in the vicinity and Mr. Guzdar was very courageous to stay in such a place with his family.

Construction of the Dokhma

The construction work of the Dokhma and other properties started immediately after the Tana ceremony. At that time, (in 1938) there was no public transport in Bangalore, not even a taxi. It was the “horse and carriage age” so it was difficult for the contractor Mr. Guzdar to make trips to and from the city. The Dokhma Committee resolved to purchase a second-hand car from the Manager of the Mysore Bank at Rs. 450. It was the Hupmobile (an American car) a 1932 model (today one can't buy a second-hand cycle for this amount). A driver was engaged at a monthly salary of Rs. 20/-. The car was given to Mr. Guzdar for his daily use, mostly for purchases of small building material such as handles, hinges, stoppers, window glasses, etc.



Here, I would like to inform the present generation as well as future generations that, at that time, the price of petrol was 12 Annas per gallon — not litre. After completion of construction work, the car was used rather infrequently. If the Anjuman had to keep and maintain it for Anjuman work, it would prove very expensive. Therefore, the car was sold for Rs. 150/-. In those days, trucks, or public carriers were not available. We depended on bullock carts to carry cement and other materials. The price of a bag of cement was Rs. 2.50 and for our solid construction cement was required in tons. It was transported by bullock cart, 20 bags at a time at Rs. 20/- per cart-load, requiring considerable effort. Cement wagons were unloaded at the Yelahanka Station, being closer to Hebbal and the Dokhma than the Cantonment Station.

For the Dokhma Pavis and walls we wanted to use good unpolished granite. The local granite was not of good quality so granite stones were purchased and brought from Doddaballapur. For the Pavi granite slabs of six-foot length were used and for the wall, granite of 1½ inches by 1½ feet. Today, the Bangalore Dokhma is considered to be strong and well built.

The Dokhma Committee was very cautious in spending money and all construction had to be completed within the amount collected for the purpose. After completing the construction, some members of the committee felt the need for a compound wall all around this land of 14 ½ acres. Mr. Guzdar suggested that a nearby quarry was available. So we hired the quarry for Rs.125/- and with the help of Dynamite, we got sufficient stones, which were brought to the compound in bullock carts. The whole compound wall around the nearly 15 acre site is 5 foot in height and cost Rs.15,000/-. Labour at that time was Rs.1/- per day and 150 to 200 labourers were employed to expedite the work.

The entire construction was completed but the donation drive continued. The Committee was able to save Rs. 26,000/-, which was then handed over to the Bangalore Parsee Zoroastrian Anjuman after a proper audit of the accounts.

To lay to rest the controversies with the Anti-Dokhma Committee the audit work was given to Mr. P.A. D'Vitre, a Parsee Bank Manager, who had slight leanings towards the Anti-Dokhma Committee. Mind you readers, this gentleman took 15 months to complete the audit work keenly assessing the records for any signs of misappropriation. I am happy to say that the auditor was not able to find any fault either in the accounts or in the rates. But in his remarks he stated that some of the vouchers were without revenue stamps. We found that those were not purchase vouchers but, as mentioned above, they were amounts paid to the 150 to 200 daily labourers who were working on the compound wall. Their total wages per week came to Rs. 200/-. To clear his doubts, we sent all those labourers vouchers to the contractor, Mr. Guzdar to sign after affixing 20 paise stamps.



Consecration of the Dokhma

The time had come to consecrate the Dokhma and declare it open for people to see from inside. The 23rd of March 1940 was the day fixed for this great event. Again, two Yozdathregar Mobeds, **Mobed Behramji Unvalla and Mobed Noshervan Unvalla** were brought by car with Alat and Bareshnoom, a week in advance. They started the consecration ceremony from Roj Meher Mah Meher daily performing one Yazashne and one Vendidad. On Behram Roj, Sirdar Dasturji Norshervan of Pune and 9 Mobeds performed a public Jashan. After the Jashan, a big function was held on the spot. A big shamiana was put up to accommodate nearly 1000 guests from all over the country. Two

Dasturjis from the Udvarda clan and two High Priests from Pune graced this function. During the function, Dasturji Norsherwan of Pune spoke about the system of Dokhmenashini. It is a rare event indeed to see and an unusual opportunity in a man's life the construction of the Dokhma, the four channels and all the arrangements inside. It is a custom that on completion of the construction people throw cash or jewellery in the *bhandar* as a donation. During the 'Tana' ceremony and on completion of the construction at the Jashan Ceremony, an amount of over Rs. 5,000 was collected, which was duly credited to the Dokhma Fund.

On the day of the Jashan, many Parsee dignitaries, Dasturjis and several Mobeds had come. They were gifted with shawls and honoured with gifts. Three silver caskets were ordered from **Kotwal & Co.** of Bombay and the caskets were presented to

(i) The proprietors of Jame Jamshed — Mr. Adi. P. Murzban and Mr. Rustom P. Murzban,

(ii) Panthaki Ervad Pestonji Unvalla

(iii) Mr. N. D. Guzdar, the contractor (as a token of appreciation for completing the erection work of the Dokhma along with other appertaining buildings namely: the Bangli, Sagdi, rooms for the Parsee caretakers, bathrooms, compound wall and strong iron gates).

Here it will not be out of place to mention that during the construction, the Dewan Saheb of Mysore Sir Mirza M. Ismail, who was casually going around the city, early morning on horseback, twice visited the Tower of Silence property and admired its construction. At one point he said that when the Dokhma was so nicely built with good quality granite, why was a barbed wire fence put around the Dokhma and why were raw vertical stone slabs used? We were astonished to know how minutely he noticed the construction!

On 24th May 1940, a 25-year-old student of the Indian Institute of Science named Noshir Doctor, hailing from Bharuch, tragically, expired in a motorcycle accident. He became the first person whose body was consigned to the Dokhma.



[Tower of Silence Today

The Bangalore Parsee Zoroastrian Anjuman acquired a plot of land measuring about 14.5 acres purchased in the year 1938 at a price of Rs. 6000/-. At that time it was way beyond city municipal limits and our Tower of Silence (Dokhma) was constructed there. Bangalore has grown rapidly and it is said that this city is now the fastest growing city in Asia. The Government of India thought of constructing a new International Airport to meet the heavy flow of traffic and cargo. The Central Government in consultation with the local Government selected a place in Devanahalli about 35 kilometres from the city for the new airport. The access road to the airport passes by the Tower of Silence. This road is being upgraded to a six lane highway for which they have acquired about 31,000 square feet of our land and paid the Anjuman about Rs.17 lakhs. This is not adequate compensation given the current land values in the area. The Anjuman has accepted the current compensation under protest for the present.]

<http://www.bpza.org/>

Courtesy : K F Keravala