

Bed, Benevolence and Bhonu. 100 years of 'Parsee General'

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Read the remarkable story of a father and son duo, who dreamt of a hospital to treat the old and the sick in the Parsi community, and the fund-raising efforts of the hospital's core team that included staging theatre comedies.

As we leave the arched entrance of the hospital, a black-and-yellow pulls up along its leafy driveway. The unexpected October drizzle has given the well-manicured lawns a glossy glaze. A ward boy ditches his errand, as he rushes to help an old lady who is trying to alight from the taxi. After a few confused exchanges, he directs her patiently to the wing she wishes to visit.



What we witnessed is perhaps a tiny but telling side-act of the core values that live within the corridors of the 100 year-old The Bomanji Dinshaw Petit Parsee General Hospital in Breach Candy.



The corridors retain a calm and old-world charm missing in most of the city's hospitals

Safe haven

Circa 1896: India was facing its worst famine. Bombay was in the midst of a bubonic plague. Instead of relying on godly blessings to ward off the deadly disease, trustees of the Bombay Parsee Panchayat decided to take matters into their hands to help save their community, one of India's smallest at the time.



Major General (Retd) ML Malik, CEO of the hospital (left) on his rounds with Jal Adajania, General Manager (Finance & Administration)

Navroji Hormusji Patuck, Manager of the Petit Mills, owned by the benevolent and affluent Petit family, suggested they set up a hospital just for Parsis, offering to donate Rs 500 to initiate the fund. Dr Kekhushroo N Bahadurji and Navroji Nusserwanji Wadia were thinking along similar lines. The two added another Rs 10,000 on behalf of the Parsee Punchayat, to set up a temporary hospital in Parel.



The Student Nurses Museum

Even after the plague died down, Dr Bahadurji succumbed to fever, as the community grappled with finding a permanent solution. Several spaces including the Modikhana Hospital, Parel's Government Hospital, the Parsi Fever Hospital (New Khareghat Colony) and the Coronation Parsee Hospital acted as temporary respites. That a high percentage of Parsi patients had died in these hospitals didn't help matters.

Finally, after four meetings of the Parsee Panchayat, a series of recommendations emerged in April 1904, stressing the need for a general hospital for both, free and paying patients. Interestingly, Jehangir's mother Lady Sakarbai Petit had already instituted the famous Sakarbai Petit Animal Hospital in Parel. The Parsis would get their hospital, after all.

Visionary Extraordinaire

The photographer and I break for tea after a crash course on the hospital's origins from Major General (Retd) ML Malik, CEO of the hospital. The army man's impressive office, resembling that of a school principal's, is located in the Sir Dinshaw Maneckji Petit 4th Baronet Wing and is graced with citations, trophies and framed photographs from a sepia-tinged era.

"By 1905, Bomanji's far-sighted son Jehangir decided to take matters seriously by issuing under his signature an appeal to the community to raise funds for this new hospital. Bomanji came forward with a hefty donation of his immovable property called Cumballa Hill Family Hotel, as well as securities with a face value of Rs 50,000. Charity began at the Petit home and they ensured the community benefited," adds Malik, politely directing his PA to share photographs from their archival collection.

"The Provisional Committee approached and accepted this donation and agreed to name the hospital after Bomanji. Though the trustees of The Bombay Parsi Panchayat are holding trustees of the land, the administration and management of the hospital is conducted by an independent Managing Committee under the chairmanship of the President, Homi D Petit. General Malik, who has worked for some Army hospitals, and is in his ninth year at this South Mumbai landmark.

History lurks at every alabaster and pillar -- a plaque announces that the then Governor of Bombay, Sir George Clark laid the hospital's foundation stone in 1907. By now, we are joined by Jal Adajania, General Manager (Finance & Administration), who peppers our trail with anecdotes about life at 'Parsee General'. This nearly 50,000 square yard (valued at Rs 5 lakh at the time) landmark was thrown open on March 27, 1912, he tells us.

"Bomanji's total contributions towards this hospital added up to over Rs 6.50 lakh when it opened," he says excitedly. After Jehangir's glorious reign, his younger brother Dhunjibhoy and his son Maneckji carried his vision forward with similar enthusiasm. Maneckji's cousin Dinshawji took over later, and today, his son Homa is President of the hospital. He and the hospital's Managing Committee (see box) meet once a month to review the hospital's performance. An Executive (Core) Committee meets every Saturday to oversee daily operations, ensuring a democratic order.

The big plan

The hospital's Coat of Arms with 'We Serve' on its wrought iron gate grab the eye. Oak furniture, marble vases, Minton-tiled flooring and Victorian chandeliers lend the institution an understated opulence. The three wings of the original L-shaped heritage wing include the Jokhi Wing, the Main Wing and the A Wing" each has a ground floor plus two levels.

The first floor of the Main Wing houses male and female wards for 'free' patients, and is called the Hong Kong Wing after it was renovated by the incorporated trustees of the Zoroastrian Funds of Hong Kong, Canton and Macao. The second floor (Maneck Homi Italia Wing) provides hospitalisation at a subsidised cost.

A timeless calm pervades these far-from-clinical wards. The overkill of antiseptic is missing. Instead, the air is redolent with chuckles and smiles as doctors arrive on their Monday afternoon round. Aided of course, by an elaborate three-course non-vegetarian meal whipped up by their team of nutritionists, dieticians and sous chefs that patients

swear by. It's surreal for those familiar with the impersonal, rushed surroundings of most city hospitals.

Restore and revive

This main wing was renovated in 2009, under the supervision of Vice President Aban Petit (*nee Cassad of Nagpur*), architect Rusi Khambatta and contractor Cyrus Unwalla. Malik shares with us the plans for a nursing college within the premises that now constitutes the Central Stores Godown.

"Apart from the Main Wing, the hospital site is also home to a nursing school and quarters, laundry, nutritionist section, senior citizen's home, dispensary and doctors' quarters. Plans are afoot for a proposed OPD building," he adds.

The renovation, says General Malik, gave the hospital a lease of life. It now boasts of a 100 per cent back up power supply. The hospital also plans to have its own high-tension Sub-Station to lower electricity costs. Solar water heating systems and a revamp of the water supply network with provision for rain water harvesting, a fire hydrant system and structured cabling ensured the hospital is in sync with the times.

The first phase of this upgradation began in 1991 with the Jokhi Wing, the second phase for A Wing started in 1999, and with the renovation of the Main Wing in 2009, the refurbishment was complete. "We have tried to be a beacon of hope for the less fortunate so they can leave this oasis with a healthy body and peace of mind," says HD Petit.

But with charity care comes the question of funds; the core area of concern. "We try to stick to our goal of providing quality health care to the sick. Charity, you know, runs in the blood of every Zoroastrian," says Malik, before leaving for a meeting. The ward boy would know.

Did you know?

Freedom fighter Madame Bhikaji Cama spent the last eight months of her life at the hospital before she passed away on August 13, 1936. That was a decade before she could witness her dream of a free India fructify.

The men and women who run parsee general

Mr Homa D Petit (President), Mrs Aban H Petit (Vice President), Mr Hector H Mehta, Mr Zarir M Bhathena (both Jt Hon Secretary), Mr Nariman Ardeshir Vazifdar (Hon Treasurer), Dr (Mrs) Hakim Dina Sorab, Mr Bulsara Bomi, Mr Kanga Jamshed G, Ms Petit Sherina H, Mr Dadiseth Keki B, Mr Gagrat Maneck Ardeshir, Mr Ranina Homi Pheroze, Mr Malegam Yezdi Hirji Mr Sinor Hoshang N, Mr Khusrokhani Homi R (all members), Mr Kasad Noshir Rustomji, Mrs Jehangir Pervin R, Sir Petit Dinshaw M Vth Baronet (all Donor's Representatives), Mr Daruwalla Tehemton Nasserwanji (Hon Solicitor) and Dr Pardiwala BS (Hon Doctor's Representative)

Numbers at Parsee General

Man power: 27 resident doctors, 140 nurses (including 5 male nurses), 250 ward boys and women, countless honorary doctors, physicians, neurologists, cardiovascular surgeons, gynaecologists, administrative staff, medical superintendent, nursing superintendent, and other support staff across financial, personnel and administrative responsibilities.

Room service: 222 beds: 60 belong to A category (TV in some, attached bathroom), 11 are in the B ward, 94 free beds, of which 36 are reserved for women, 31 for men, 24 for geriatrics, 2 for paediatrics and 1 maternity bed; 25 beds are provided at a subsidised cost, 16 ICU beds, 12 for the hospital staff, 4 operation theatres

From ward to stage

Radiologist Dr Jimmy Sidhva, who served as one of the longest standing honorary doctors at the hospital, went ahead and staged natakas (that's what Parsis say when they mean 'plays') to raise funds for the BD Petit Parsee General in the 1970s.

Along with a few other doctors, including the late Dinyar Gamadia, his wife Dilnavaz, Dr Rustom Patel, Dr Burjor Pardiwalla, Dr Marzaban Nalladaru and a bunch of talented medical students, they revived plays like Manchu Macbeth and Hamlet no Omlet. These comedies raised

between Rs 70 to Rs 80 lakh, and the efforts continued until the early 1990s.

Also legendary for his charitable theatre acts was Dr Jehangir Wadia, who, along with a few amateur actors from among the doctors he worked with, raised Rs 50,000 that went towards helping reopen a closed wing.

JB Petit: One of Bombay's favourite sons

While Jehangir Bomanji Petit's contribution towards fulfilling his father's dream of opening a hospital is legendary, few know that he also set up the JB Petit High School for Girls, and the Victoria School for the Blind in Fort. JB Petit was also one of the founders of the Indian Newspaper Society, and a leading Bombay magnate.



He started a firm, JB Petit & Sons when he was just 19, and later became partner in the firm of DM Petit, Sons & Co. the managing agents of the Petit group of mills. He was also chairman of the Bombay Mill-Owners Association. His circle of friends included MA Jinnah, Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu and William Wedderburn.