

# The Banaji and Mehta Families: Forging the Parsi Community in Calcutta

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In October 2011, the Parsi community of Calcutta (today's Kolkata) began celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of their local place of worship, Ervad Dhujeebhoy Byramjee Mehta's Zoroastrian Anjuman Atash Adaran (Fig. 1). Begun in 1911 and opened to the public on 28 October 1912, the *atash adaran* remains, along with the Cursetjee Manockjee Shroff agiary in

\* John Hinnells has contributed greatly to our understanding of Parsi philanthropy and the Parsi diaspora; it was only fitting, I thought, to write on a subject matter that concerned both themes. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Calcutta was very much a remote, diasporic outpost for Parsis, and the individuals mentioned in this article helped turn it into an established community centre. I am deeply thankful to Professor Hinnells for his kind assistance to me with my doctoral dissertation on Dadabhai Naoroji.

An earlier, briefer version of this paper was submitted in 2012 for the hundredth anniversary commemorative volume of Ervad Dhujeebhoy Byramjee Mehta's Zoroastrian Anjuman Atash Adaran, which has yet to be published. Another version was presented at a January 2013 conference at the First Dastoor Meherjirana Library in Navsari, Gujarat.

I must thank several individuals for the help they gave me while writing this article. The late Noshir Gherda in 2006 and again in 2011 generously shared many of his insights on and memories of the Calcutta Parsi community's history; he also lent me a sheaf of valuable notes and old articles. Rustom Bharucha joined me on a detailed exploratory tour of the neighbourhood around the Banaji agiary on Erza Street in November 2011, showing me several old synagogues and landmarks and helping me scout out 65 Canning Street, the Mehta family's old residence. Homi D. Patel of Andheri, Mumbai, tutored me in Gujarati as I began wading through *Pārsī Prakāsh* in fall 2011. My wife, Parinaz Madan, helped me tease out some complex and archaic Gujarati passages in *Pārsī Prakāsh*, as well. My great-aunt and great-uncle, Jeru and Bahadur Postwalla, have hosted me innumerable times in Calcutta and have attended to my persistent questions on family and community history in the city. Murali Ranganathan provided his valuable comments and insights on the finished article and has allowed me to cite from one of his unpublished papers. Nauzer Batlivala has allowed me to include photographs he took during the 2012 *atash adaran* centenary celebrations.

This article is also written in memory of my grandmothers, Khorshed Patel (1913–1998) and Mehru Parakh (1926–2010) – both longtime residents of Calcutta – who, when I was a child, told me many stories about Calcutta and the Parsi community and thereby instilled in me a very early interest in Parsi and Indian history.

Jamshedpur, the only functioning Zoroastrian fire temple in eastern India. Buried within the fire's embers is an important chapter in the development of the Calcutta Parsi community – as well as a strange riddle. The fire temple evolved from the piety and philanthropy of one of the leading Parsi families in Calcutta in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Mehta family. In 1889, Dhanjibhai Byramji Mehta (1826–1907), the head of the family and its multifarious commercial and industrial activities, decided to set up a private *dar-e-meher* in his home on Canning Street. That December, in order to carry out Dhanjibhai's wishes, Bhagaria *mobeds* from Navsari began a three-month odyssey transporting *alat* (ritual objects and implements) overland to the eastern metropolis. When they reached the Hooghly River, then spanned only by a pontoon predecessor of the Howrah Bridge, the priests took care to cross the waterway only at midnight and while wearing special sandals made of iron.<sup>1</sup> From 1890 until 1912, the *atash* that they consecrated resided at the Mehta house on Canning Street, before Dhanjibhai's son, Rustomji Dhanjibhai (R.D.) Mehta (1849–1930), fulfilled his deceased father's wish and erected a proper temple for it on Metcalfe Street in the vicinity of Bowbazar.<sup>2</sup> When it was duly inaugurated, the *atash adaran* served as a fitting monument to the munificence and philanthropy of the Mehta family. But it was not the city's first fire temple. That honour belonged to an *agiary* established in 1839 by Rustomji Cowasji Banaji (1790–1852), the most prominent Parsi in Bengal during the first half of the nineteenth century, which functioned on nearby Ezra Street until the 1970s. Hence, the riddle: why did Calcutta, home to a relatively small number of Parsis, have two functioning fire temples for much of the twentieth century?

In investigating the probable answer, one has to go to the very heart of the Calcutta Parsi community's history. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, Calcutta saw the arrival of its first Parsi settlers, who – like the Armenians, Baghdadi Jews, and members of other mercantile communities – were drawn eastward to Bengal to exploit new commercial opportunities available under British rule. Parsis were, evidently, particularly quick to seize upon such opportunities. By 1797, as AMALENDU GUHA estimates, a mere handful of Parsis controlled a whopping 11.2 percent of Calcutta's non-European export trade with London – local Hindu Bengali firms, in comparison, eked out a slightly higher 11.4 percent.<sup>3</sup> These Parsi merchants were itinerant residents in the city, shuttling back and forth to home ports in western India as well as destinations further east in Burma and China. As the city boomed and expanded, however, more Parsis set out from Bombay and Gujarat in order to join their wealthy coreligionists, and more of them began settling down for years and decades at

1 PAYMASTER 1923, p. 191.

2 Metcalfe Street, a tiny alley, is also popularly known as Bandook Gali (gun lane), hinting at a far more colourful past.

3 GUHA 1970, p. M107.



Fig. 1: Noshir Tankariwala (left), senior trustee of Ervad Dhunjeebhoy Byramjee Mehta's Zoroastrian Anjuman Atash Adaran, pictured with Dasturji Firoze M. Kotwal (right) at the atash adaran's centenary celebrations.

a stretch. One of these migrants, Rustomji Cowasji Banaji, built a mighty commercial empire in the early 1800s from shipbuilding and the China trade – a trade that centred around opium smuggling. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Dhanjibhai Byramji and R.D. Mehta pumped family capital, which had also derived from the China trade, into the cotton and jute industries, in the process becoming two of Calcutta's most wealthy and prominent citizens. Both the Banajis and the Mehtas translated their commercial success into political and social capital by taking part in Calcutta municipal affairs, forging friendships with the city's Bengali and British elite, and earning honours and appointments from the government. And both families established long traditions of philanthropy, donating land and establishing agiaries for the Parsi community as well as initiating public works meant to benefit the entire city.

Their individual successes, however, appear to have put the Banaji and Mehta families on a collision course of sorts. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the families began jockeying for positions of leadership within the city's Parsi community. Calcutta never had a large Parsi population: census figures show 141 Parsis in 1881 and 274 Parsis in the city in 1901, although the figure expanded to over a thousand in subsequent decades.<sup>4</sup> But it was, both commercially and

4 According to census figures, the population reached 1,623 in 1951. See *Calcutta – A Quest For*, Calcutta 1988, p. 10. CYRUS J. MADAN estimated the population as “just about

politically, extremely influential during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, something that compensated for low numbers and added prestige to positions of community leadership. In the very first decade of the twentieth century, family rivalry degenerated into litigation between R. D. Mehta and the descendants of Rustomji Cowasji – featuring accusations of bribery, theft, and defamation. This might help explain why Calcutta had two functioning fire temples. The Banaji agiary was controlled by a private family trust in the hands of Rustomji Cowasji’s children and grandchildren – including those involved in the tussle with R. D. Mehta. When the Mehta family opened their atash adaran in 1912, experience of interfamily conflict might have played a role in their decision to entrust the fire temple to Calcutta’s Zoroastrian *anjuman*, effectively making it a community institution rather than a private one.

The history of the Banajis and Mehtas in Calcutta provides a revealing and occasionally cautionary note about Parsi philanthropy, community leadership, and civic involvement. By establishing agiaries, Rustomji Cowasji and R. D. Mehta contributed in invaluable ways toward the consolidation of Parsi religious and community life in eastern India.<sup>5</sup> These temples sustained Parsis in the city as well as in neighbouring locations such as Darjeeling and Dhaka. Rustomji made a further valuable contribution by bucking social conventions in the mid-1800s and bringing from Bombay his entire family – including women – to live with him in Calcutta, setting down permanent roots for the community. Through his liberal donations and participation in civic affairs, Rustomji established a reputation for the Parsis in Bengal as being responsible, philanthropic citizens. R. D. Mehta built on this legacy not only by taking up public offices and making his own philanthropic bequests, but also through his involvement in early Indian nationalist activities. In the mid-1880s, around the time of the establishment of the Indian National Congress, Mehta was in regular contact with Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917), the prominent nationalist leader who helped found the Congress in 1885. Mehta, in many ways, served as a vital link between Naoroji and the Bengali intelligentsia, illustrating how Parsi nationalists relied on community bonds for broader political purposes. The Banajis and the Mehtas made the Parsis an important and visible part of colonial Calcutta’s stunning diversity: the Banaji agiary, appropriately, was in close proximity to four Jewish synagogues and the city’s Armenian church. But much

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a thousand strong” (1990, p. 62). Within the community, I have heard much higher population estimates prior to Calcutta’s economic decline in the 1960s and 1970s, which sparked significant migration to Bombay as well as to Australia, the United States, and Canada. Most community estimates put the current population in the neighbourhood of 500 to 600 people – and rapidly dropping since it consists largely of seniors.

5 My own maternal grandparents were married in the Banaji agiary. One of my maternal great-aunts, who attended the agiary’s hundredth anniversary celebrations in 1939, remembers that the fire temple had an arched-roof basement where domestic animals were kept.

of their family wealth – and subsequent social stature – derived from opium smuggling and related activities. Rustomji Cowasji in particular benefited handsomely from the first Opium War of 1839–1842. Furthermore, interfamily rivalry might have played a role in spurring both the Banajis and the Mehtas to aspire for particular positions and make certain liberal donations, most notably the atash adaran. Nevertheless, the history of the two families – and the individual achievements of Rustomji Cowasji and R.D. Mehta – illustrates how Parsis forged new communities in distant and foreign locations, compensating for their tiny numbers by achieving a remarkable degree of commercial and public prominence.

Little of this history is remembered today. Among the Parsis who attended the hundredth anniversary celebrations of Ervad Dhujeebhoy Byramjee Mehta's Zoroastrian Anjuman Atash Adaran in 2011 and 2012, few – aside, perhaps, for two centenarians present – knew much about R.D. Mehta's life and contributions. In my discussions with the city's elderly Parsis, I have encountered only residual community memory, shorn of substantial detail, of discord between the Banaji and Mehta families. Since the shuttering of the Banaji agiary and its subsequent encroachment by electronics hawkers, the Banaji family's legacy in Calcutta has dimmed considerably. The atash adaran, and the related R.D. Mehta trust that continues to help fund community activities and institutions, remain the only significant links with these early stalwarts in the Calcutta Parsi community.

### Calcutta's first Parsi family: the Banajis

Outside of western India, Calcutta has one of the longest documented records of a continuous Parsi presence. Like merchants from other trading communities, such as the Armenians, Parsis were attracted to the city in the late eighteenth century as it transformed into the political and economic centre of British Bengal. The first recorded Parsi resident of Calcutta, Dadabhai Behramji Banaji (d. 1788), dropped anchor in the Hooghly's muddy waters in 1765 – precisely the same year as the Battle of Buxar, where the British East India Company consolidated their control of eastern India by defeating the Mughal emperor Shah Alam – and departed in 1773. Little is known of his short period of residence, where he acted as a merchant on behalf of his family business in Bombay (it is likely that Dadabhai was lured to Calcutta through his connections with Armenian traders). The few surviving details of Dadabhai's life, however, are of great historical significance. Firstly, as a Banaji, he was a member of one of the most prominent families of the Bombay Parsi community: his grandfather was Banaji Limji (d. 1734), one of the first Parsis to settle in Bombay. Banaji Limji was a founder and *davar* (head) of the sleepy island town's first Parsi Panchayet;

he also, in 1709, established what is now Bombay's oldest surviving fire temple, the Banaji Limji agiary in Fort. It is with little surprise, therefore, that we learn that Dadabhai had enough stature and clout to establish friendships with the political elite of Calcutta. One of his good friends was John Cartier, the governor of Bengal from 1769 until 1772. Dadabhai even named one of his ships after Cartier.<sup>6</sup> Thus, from the very beginning, Parsi merchants in Calcutta established close political connections. Aside from Dadabhai, there are a few other records of early Parsi residents in Bengal during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While in Calcutta, for example, William Jones claimed to "have often conversed ... with [his] friend Bahman," a man well versed in the Pahlavi language, on topics such as Zoroastrian religious texts and the ancient languages of Persia.<sup>7</sup> Dorabji Rustamji Patel and his brother conducted business in Calcutta, Pegu, Rangoon, and China – in 1793 he probably stopped in Calcutta before sailing east to Chinese ports.<sup>8</sup> That same year, another Bombay merchant with China connections, Jamshedji Kukaji Majaina, who had previously passed seven years in Madras, relocated to Calcutta, where he reaped a "great fortune" serving as a *dalal* for a British firm. Jamshedji passed away in Calcutta in 1810, necessitating his son-in-law, Nasarvanji Kavasji Petit,<sup>9</sup> to spend one-and-a-half years in Bengal, where he managed Jamshedji's estate and conducted further business activities.<sup>10</sup> The first Calcutta Parsis, therefore, were almost all wealthy Bombay merchants who regularly used the city as a springboard for trade with ports further east, especially in Burma and China.

In 1812, nearly five decades after Dadabhai Behramji Banaji sailed up the Hooghly, another Banaji family member, Rustomji Cowasji, undertook his maiden voyage to Calcutta. Rustomji serves as a perfect example of how early Calcutta Parsis established themselves both as commercial barons and respected public men. Born in Bombay, Rustomji was the youngest of seven sons born to Cowasji Behramji Banaji. His eldest brother was Framji Cowasji Banaji (1767–1851), the well-known Bombay merchant, public citizen, and Powai landowner. It was Framji Cowasji who initially forged important connections with Bengal and points further east. Having already travelled to China at least twice as a *dubash*, Framji in 1806 set up his own business to deal in the "China trade" – which, by the early nineteenth century, had become a euphemism for trade in opium (although Framji also dealt in cotton) – and established a Calcutta branch in 1811. He sent several of his brothers to both Calcutta and China as agents; in 1812, it was Rustomji's turn to sail to Calcutta. Around 1819, after trips to Ceylon and China, Rustomji decided to settle permanently in the city, where, along with a British merchant, Robert Turner, he established an independent

6 PATELL 1888, p. 69; KARAKA 1884, p. 55.

7 MURALI 2014.

8 PATELL 1888, p. 98.

9 *Pārsī Prakāśh* occasionally renders this surname as "Piti" (પિટી).

10 PATELL 1888, pp. 116, 147.

commercial firm and bought out Framji's Calcutta branch.<sup>11</sup> *Pārsī Prakāśh* tells us a little about his specific lines of business: Rustomji engaged in activities such as compressing bales of cotton, manufacturing paper, and processing indigo.<sup>12</sup> At a later date, the *Calcutta Review* notes that Rustomji owned a factory with "a large assemblage of buildings" in Cossipore (Kashipur) "with one steam engine, and a chimney which has long been unconscious of a fire."<sup>13</sup> By 1827, he diversified his business by establishing a separate firm in China in the name of his sons Dadabhai and Manekji.<sup>14</sup>

But Rustomji's most significant commercial ventures occurred in the 1830s. After helping float the Union Bank of Calcutta in 1829, he joined leading European residents to start the first insurance companies and societies in India. One such company, Sun Life (founded in 1834), became a family affair, with one of Rustomji's sons managing an office in China and Framji Cowasji dealing with affairs in Bombay.<sup>15</sup> Rustomji's second major venture was into shipbuilding. In 1836, he joined four British merchants and sunk Rs. 0.6 million into purchasing vast docks in Kidderpore, where he established a new firm, the Calcutta Docking Company.<sup>16</sup> In order to design and construct the ships, Rustomji turned to the Wadia family of Bombay's Mazagaon docks, employing Dadabhai Rustamji Wadia (d. 1858) as his "master builder." Rustomji himself owned anywhere from 27 to forty ships<sup>17</sup> which, in turn, were involved in the China trade. China proved to be a source of wealth in another important way: in 1839, the British government commissioned some of these vessels for battle in the First Opium War. Furthermore, the British relied on the Calcutta Docking Company for repairs and fittings of ships. Wadia earned high praise for his work at Kidderpore: a wartime government agent described him as "a complete Master of his profession in all its Branches," further burnishing his employer's reputation as a leading member of the Calcutta mercantile community.<sup>18</sup>

Rustomji astutely converted this business success into political and social capital, becoming one of the most prominent "natives" in Calcutta society. As a sure sign of his civic prominence, Rustomji in 1835 became one of only twelve Indians in Calcutta appointed by the government as justices of the peace. He was elected a member of the city's Asiatic Society in 1837, becoming the first

11 BANAJI 1892, pp. 14–15, 18.

12 PATELL 1888, p. 594.

13 JOSEPH 1881, p. 702.

14 PATELL 1888, p. 594.

15 BAGAL 1933, pp. 23–25.

16 "Calcutta Docking Company," in: *Calcutta Monthly Journal*, January 1837, p. 34. AMALENDU GUHA believes the Calcutta Docking Company to have been the first Indian-owned modern shipbuilding firm (1970, p. M111).

17 *Pārsī Prakāśh* notes that he had 27 ships (PATELL 1888, p. 594), while JOGESH BAGAL states that the number was forty (1933, p. 24).

18 PATELL 1888, p. 646.

Parsi – and one of the first Indians – entered on its rolls.<sup>19</sup> So respected was this Parsi *seth* that his houseguests included governors-general of India.<sup>20</sup> He was a close friend of Dwarkanath Tagore (1794–1846), the prominent Bengali business leader and public citizen – as well as Rabindranath’s grandfather – and the two men were the only Indians involved in the establishment of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce. JOGESH BAGAL, who wrote an impressively detailed article on Rustomji in the *Modern Review* in 1933, argues that Rustomji might have also known Rammohun Roy, as he certainly imbibed his social and political ideas.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of whether this is the case, Rustomji enjoyed enough pride of place amongst the emerging Bengali intelligentsia that he gained the moniker “Rustomji babu.” In the realm of civic affairs, he was a member of several committees designed to make the city more sanitary and immune to fires. It is to Rustomji that we must give some credit for the abundance of aquatic bodies in Calcutta: for purposes of sanitation and water supply, he built a canal in the north of the city, and in order to tackle the fire problem, he dug out several tanks at his own expense.<sup>22</sup> For these efforts and others, Rustomji helped found a tradition of Parsi charity and civic-mindedness in eastern India, establishing a good name for the community in the wider context of Bengali society.

But Rustomji’s most significant accomplishment was helping the Calcutta Parsi community put down permanent roots. Up through the 1830s, the “community” was ephemeral, comprised of men there on business who, upon terminating their commercial activities, retired to family homes in Bombay or Gujarat. In a few instances, these merchants brought their young sons along with them: sometime in the 1810s, for example, Shapurji Navroji Bengali, the son of Navroji Sorabji Umrigar – and the father of social reformer Sorabji Shapurji Bengali – was packed off for Calcutta and educated in the city.<sup>23</sup> Rustomji himself appears to have brought his young son, Manekji Rustomji (1815–1891), to Calcutta in 1837.<sup>24</sup> Female family members were never allowed to venture to the eastern metropolis – nor much anywhere else outside of established Parsi settlements in western India. Consequently, Calcutta’s Parsis survived with the bare minimum number of community and religious institutions, mostly geared toward funerary purposes. In a community largely devoid of family life, deaths were the only occasions that necessitated proper ritual and ceremonial procedure. Navroji Sorabji Umrigar built a *dakhma* in 1822 – he brought a priest

19 MURALI RANGANATHAN notes in his unpublished paper: “As with most other Indian members, Rustomjee made no pretensions to scholarship and is recorded to have visited the Asiatick Society only once in the early years of his membership.”

20 PATELL 1888, p. 594.

21 BAGAL 1933, p. 22.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 26–28.

23 PATELL 1888, p. 248.

24 PAYMASTER 1920, p. 391.



from Bombay to help consecrate the structure – and his sons later erected a *sagdi* (funerary chapel) in the same compound.<sup>25</sup> In this sense, Calcutta's Parsis were similar to those in other far-flung outposts of the community, such as Macao – where itinerant Parsi opium traders opened a burial ground in 1829<sup>26</sup> – or even London in the 1860s (Parsi merchants in Britain, after all, founded the modern-day Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe in 1861 for the explicit purpose of buying a cemetery plot). In Calcutta, at least, Rustomji forever disrupted this somewhat morbid state of affairs when, in 1838, he bucked social conventions and brought his entire family to the city, including women. Rustomji's decision caused a minor sensation in the press. As the Calcutta magnate's wife and other female relatives prepared for a long sea voyage in inclement monsoonal weather, the *Bombay Gazette* noted approvingly:

to those who remember that but a few years ago no Parsee female of respectability would proceed even to the Deccan, the contemplated trip of these fair voyagers will afford much food for speculation upon the rapid change which the march of opinion has effected ...<sup>27</sup>

Rustomji soon broke another social taboo by letting the Banaji womenfolk fraternize with his non-Parsi friends and acquaintances, including Europeans and even the Indian governor-general.<sup>28</sup>

By settling his family in the city, Rustomji encouraged other Parsi merchants to bring their relatives eastward, thereby transforming Calcutta – in the eyes of fellow Zoroastrians – from a remote mercantile outpost into a true hub of the community. Now, with women and children resident, Calcutta Parsis required further community institutions, and in September 1839 Rustomji opened the city's first fire temple, located on Ezra Street in the vicinity of Burabazar. This was not Rustomji's first association with a fire temple: in 1823, he played a small but significant role in the enthronement of the fire at Surat's new Modi Atash Behram. One lazy evening in May of that year, lightning struck Rustomji's cotton compressing compound on the Hooghly. Rustomji and his Parsi friends, seated nearby enjoying the river breeze, sprung instantly to contain the resulting fire from a burning tree – not for the purpose of mitigating property damage, but rather to attain this essential ingredient, fire from lightning, for the Surat atash behram. Maintaining the fire initially with cotton along with *sukhad* (sandalwood) and other wood, Rustomji, Navroji Sorabji Umrigar, and four other Parsis secured passage on a ship and carried the fire to Bombay, where two *bedhins* transported it northward.<sup>29</sup> This early association

25 PATELL 1888, pp. 159, 248.

26 GUO 2003, p. 56.

27 Quoted in PATELL 1888, p. 323.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 594.

29 The Calcutta Parsis wrote about their experiences securing and transporting the fire in an article published in the *Mumbai Samachar* (PATELL 1888, p. 170).

with the Modi Atash Behram probably encouraged Rustomji to loosen his purse strings for the Calcutta community's religious needs. The fire temple (or "Parsee Church," as it is referred to on the dedication plaque) was unique in the sense that Rustomji allowed for both *shehenshabhi* and *kadmi* rites to be performed – a controversial move at a time when the *kabisa* intercalation controversy still rankled community members, but also an eminently practical decision given the miniscule number of Parsis resident in Calcutta. Rustomji also invited non-Parsi merchant friends and contacts to the inaugural ceremonies. The Banajis, furthermore, extended their generosity and philanthropy well beyond Bengal. On the same day that Rustomji opened the fire temple, his brother, Framji Cowasji, held a *jashan* at the Dadiseth Atash Behram in Bombay, where attendees donated around Rs. 4,500 for poor Parsis in Surat – once more strengthening the family's ties with the spiritual needs of the Gujarati port town.<sup>30</sup>

Through his philanthropic activities and commercial endeavours, Rustomji Cowasji Banaji became a significant actor in Calcutta's development during the first half of the nineteenth century. Like his fellow *sethias* in Bombay, Rustomji translated his fortunes – much of which was derived from opium smuggling and related ventures – into civic projects that benefited the broader public. Unfortunately, Rustomji died penniless, a victim of the crash of one of the banks he promoted, the Union Bank, in 1848. After closing down his businesses, Rustomji "led the life of a recluse" during his final years. The Calcutta *Englishman*, in a brief obituary notice, praised his kindness and philanthropy, while the *Friend of India* noted his "freedom from the prejudices of the East and [...] a European caste [*sic*] of thought peculiar to his countrymen among Asiatics."<sup>31</sup> His legacy lives on in Calcutta. There are still at least four geographic landmarks bearing his name: Rustomji Street near Ballygunge Phari; Parsi Bagan, the site of his bungalow, on Upper Circular Road; Rustomji's Ghat in Cossipore, probably the site of his factory compound; and Rustomjee Parsee Road in the same neighbourhood. The Banaji agiary on Ezra Street was a vital centre of community life before it began to lamentably fall into disrepair in recent decades; however, another great religious institution that Rustomji helped sponsor, the Banaji Atash Behram in Bombay (1845), remains a thriving centre of Parsi religious life. But Rustomji's most tangible legacy remains the Calcutta Parsi community itself, a community that can trace its true beginnings to a monsoonal day in August 1838 when Banaji family members first disembarked from a ship anchored in the Hooghly and made their way to a new home.

30 The funds were to be used for covering *muktad* expenses. Framji Cowasji made a donation of Rs. 800 on behalf of Rustomji (*ibid.*, p. 345).

31 *Ibid.*, p. 594.

## The Mehta family: commercial success, interfamily fights, and a new fire temple

As the Rustomji Cowasji family fortunes sank, another Parsi, Dhanjibhai Byramji Mehta, was lured to Calcutta in search of wealth. Like Rustomji, Dhanjibhai came from a prominent Bombay Parsi family: his paternal grandfather, Manekji Mancherji, was a secretary for the Panchayet, enjoyed a close working relationship with the Wadia family, and was among the first to allow his grandchildren to undergo the *navar* priestly initiation ceremony in Bombay rather than in the traditional priestly bastion of Navsari.<sup>32</sup> Significantly, the Mehtas, like the Banajis, were also involved in the China trade. One of Dhanjibhai's brothers, Kaikhushru Behramji, was based out of Hong Kong.<sup>33</sup> Dhanjibhai first came to Calcutta as an employee of the Camas – another family that had reaped fortunes from opium – before setting up his own businesses in 1868. The Parsi connection with opium, specifically, began to peter out by the 1850s<sup>34</sup> but the Mehtas were one family that retained other mercantile connections with China. In 1860, Mehta relocated his Bombay-based family to Calcutta. Amongst the family members to make the long sea voyage around the subcontinent – there were, of course, still no extensive railways then – was the young R. D. Mehta.

R. D. Mehta was, primarily, an important figure in Calcutta's industrial development. After his schooling, he joined an Armenian firm, Messrs. Apcar & Company,<sup>35</sup> later switching to his father's company, which dispatched him to Hong Kong and Japan. As the family's China connections shrank, R. D. Mehta helped shift the firm in a decisively different direction. He travelled to England in 1877 to purchase machinery with which, in the following year, he helped construct the Empress Cotton Mills in Serampur, the first truly state-of-the-art cotton mill in Bengal.<sup>36</sup> Significantly, this cotton mill posed a challenge to Bombay's hegemony in the cotton industry. The *Times of India* editorialized:

32 PAYMASTER 1923, p. 191.

33 PATELL 1888, p. 321.

34 Parsis instead concentrated their capital on the emerging cotton industry. For a good account of the rise and fall of Parsi involvement in the opium trade, see FAROOQUI 2006.

35 The Apcar family originally hailed from Isfahan in Iran, where the Safavid shah, Shah Abbas, had established special precincts for Armenians (New Julfa) as well as Zoroastrians. Relations between Parsi and Armenian merchants, especially in major trade centres such as Surat and Calcutta, would make for a fascinating study.

36 There is the distinct possibility that this visit facilitated R. D. Mehta's first contact with Dadabhai Naoroji. Naoroji presided over a commercial firm in the United Kingdom that dealt in cotton and supplied machinery to some of the first Indians to set up cotton mills in the country.

Others ... are now endeavouring to teach the Bengalis how to spin golden thread out of the fibres of the cotton-plant, and it cannot but be interesting to our Bombay mill-owners to learn something of what Parsee enterprize [*sic*] is doing in Bengal.<sup>37</sup>

In spite of the common sentiment in Calcutta society that the expensive mill would be a flop, it turned into a great commercial success, even attracting the attention in 1884 of a visiting Australian official who, at a public gathering, invited R. D. Mehta to set up a mill for Australian woollen goods.<sup>38</sup> By the turn of the century, father and son had built on their success in the cotton industry by diversifying into jute. We find some mention of this in – of all places – the *New York Times*. “The two great modern industries of India are cotton and jute,” the *Times* mentioned in an article published in 1902. “The Petits and the Wadias had captured the cotton on the Bombay side. It remained for the Mehtas to cross over to the Bengal side and capture the jute.”<sup>39</sup>

By the 1880s, R. D. Mehta had achieved a degree of commercial prominence in eastern India. He now followed in Rustomji Cowasji’s footsteps by playing a more active role in Calcutta civic and political affairs, becoming a leader of the Calcutta community and their spokesman on issues of municipal and regional importance. This development appears to have had one unintended consequence: it put him in conflict with the Banaji family, Rustomji’s descendants, who still staked a claim to community leadership. The Banajis and the Mehtas were already engaged in some minor quibbles: Manekji Rustomji Banaji, Rustomji’s son, and Dhanjibhai Byramji Mehta both served as trustees of the Calcutta Zarthoshti Anjuman Fund, founded in 1864, but Dhanjibhai soon resigned over an unspecified difference of opinion.<sup>40</sup> From the very few extant sources on the Calcutta Parsi community in the first decade of the twentieth century, we learn that the Banajis and the Mehtas were involved in a bitter dispute that devolved into litigation. In 1900, R. D. Mehta was appointed as the Persian consul in Calcutta, a largely ceremonial diplomatic post. The very same year, Cowasji Dadabhoy, the Persian vice-consul in Bombay, accused Mehta of being behind an article in a Calcutta Persian-language paper that blamed Cowasji for pilfering the property of the Persian government, including a carpet (valued at the exorbitant sum of Rs. 60) and a portrait of the shah. Mehta shot back that Cowasji had, in fact, offered him the Persian consulship for a bribe of Rs. 5,000–6,000. The so-called Consul Defamation Case ensued, filling up columns of newsprint for the next year with Parsi family dirty laundry that was on view at the Bombay high court. A Mehta-Banaji family dispute was clearly

37 “Editorial,” in: *Times of India*, 21 September 1878, p. 2.

38 “Parsis and the Calcutta Exhibition,” in: *Times of India*, 14 April 1884, p. 3.

39 “Millionaires of the Orient: Vast Wealth of Indian Parsees, the Progressive Merchants of the East,” in: *New York Times*, 12 October 1902, p. 11.

40 PAYMASTER 1923, p. 191.

apparent: Cowasji was the cousin of the current head of the Banaji family in Calcutta, Hirjibhai Manekji Rustomji (Rustomji Cowasji's grandson). Furthermore, Hirjibhai and his father, Manekji Rustomji, had been the Persian consuls in Calcutta prior to Mehta. Mehta tellingly acknowledged in court that he was "not on favourable terms with Mr. Heerjibhoy."<sup>41</sup> It appears that both the Mehta and Banaji families were, by the late nineteenth century, jostling for official honours and posts. Manekji Rustomji, for example, became sheriff of Calcutta in 1874. R. D. Mehta took over this office in 1893 but in 1901 it went back to the Banaji family under Hirjibhai.

There is, of course, nothing unusual about Parsis – and Parsi families – fighting with one another: infighting has been one of the principal driving forces of the community's history. For the purpose of our story, however, the Mehta-Banaji dispute is significant for one main reason: it might offer a clue as to why Calcutta had two functioning fire temples for so many years. The Ezra Street temple was run by a private Banaji family trust. Mehta's atash adaran also began as a family affair – a private dar-e-meher established in Dhanjibhai Byramji's house at 65 Canning Street in 1890 (however, it does appear that the Mehtas occasionally opened the dar-e-meher to the Parsi public. In a letter that R. D. Mehta wrote to Sambhu C. Mookerjee, editor of the Calcutta newspaper *Reis and Rayyet*, on 1 July 1890, Mehta mentioned that, "By the blessing of Great Hormuzd we will be performing one of our sacred services in our new church tomorrow morning, where our Parsee community will congregate [...]"<sup>42</sup>). But when R. D. Mehta transferred the fire to the new temple on Metcalfe Street, it became the Ervad Dhujeebhoy Byramjee Mehta's Zoroastrian Anjuman Atash Adaran – controlled by the community rather than any particular family. Might his dispute with the Banaji family have played a role in R. D. Mehta's decision to consecrate a new fire temple and to entrust its management to the public? Unfortunately, we have no way to know for sure, but there certainly is the possibility that this quarrel might have been a factor.

## R. D. Mehta the public citizen: community, Calcutta, nation

Aside from being the Persian consul and sheriff of Calcutta, R. D. Mehta was involved in a diverse array of community and civic activities. According to the *Cyclopedia of India*, a biographical dictionary from the early twentieth century, he was recognized as "a tower of strength to the Parsi community of Calcutta,

41 "The Vice-Consular Case: The Accused Convicted," in: *Times of India*, 8 March 1901, p. 3. Cowasji Dadabhoy never filed any direct charges against R. D. Mehta, although Mehta figured prominently in the case's proceedings. The editor of the newspaper was convicted of defamation and sentenced to prison for three months.

42 SKRINE 1895, p. 358.

who recognize in him their leader and the exponent of their views.”<sup>43</sup> The atash adaran was only one of the physical structures that he helped give to the community. In 1910, he secured land for the erection of a new dakhma at Beliaghata, then on the outer fringes of Calcutta (once more demonstrating the Calcutta Parsis’ persistent ties with China, the dakhma itself was built by Hormusjee Nusserwanjee Cooper, a merchant partly based in Hong Kong).<sup>44</sup> The laying of the dakhma’s foundation stone was a major event for the community: around 800 Parsis, including 300 from out of town, attended. After the ceremony, Dasturji Kaikhusro Jamaspasana, Calcutta’s high priest, gave a talk at Dharamtolla Street’s Corinthian Theatre, owned by the film baron Jamshedji Madan.<sup>45</sup> Mehta also endowed a trust in his name that, under the management of Calcutta anjuman members, continues to support the upkeep of Parsi institutions such as the atash adaran. Beyond the affairs of the Parsi community, Mehta was an important figure in the public life of Calcutta, taking part in ceremonies to honour the popular departing Indian viceroy, Lord Ripon, in 1884, as well as his less-popular successor, Lord Dufferin, in 1888. He was a member of the Asiatic Society and a vice president of the Indian Association – one of Calcutta’s premier political associations – and served as the municipal chairman for Maniktala in the city’s north.

What is less known is R.D. Mehta’s involvement in early nationalist activities. His obituary in *Pārsī Prakāsh* states that he joined the Indian National Congress in 1886, the same year that Dadabhai Naoroji presided at the organization’s Calcutta session.<sup>46</sup> While sifting through Naoroji’s papers – held at the National Archives of India in New Delhi – I have come across several letters that reveal Mehta’s significant role in Calcutta politics around the time of the Congress’ foundation in 1885. During the 1880s and 1890s, Mehta, it appears, was one of the most important points of contact in Calcutta for Naoroji. Naoroji relied on his fellow Parsi’s extensive ties with the Bengali political elite, including the Tagores, Surendranath Banerjea, Manmohan Ghosh, Narendranath Sen, and W. C. Bonnerjee.<sup>47</sup> For example, when the Conservative MP Lord Randolph Churchill visited Calcutta in early 1885 – just a few months before he became secretary of state for India – Naoroji turned to Mehta in order to put together an Indian appeal to Churchill, asking for a meeting with Calcutta’s leading citizens. Mehta began organizing a reception and private interview for Churchill (who

43 *Cyclopedia of India*, vol. 1, Calcutta 1907, p. 351.

44 PAYMASTER 1923, p. 299.

45 “Tower of Silence: Stone-Laying at Calcutta,” in: *Times of India*, 28 December 1910, p. 8.

46 PAYMASTER 1939, p. 460.

47 Surendranath Banerjea (1849–1925), one of the most prominent early nationalists in Bengal, was president of the Congress in 1895 and 1902. Manmohan Ghosh (1844–1896) was a barrister in Calcutta and a member of the Indian Association and the Congress. Narendranath Sen (1843–1911) was the owner and editor of the *Indian Mirror* of Calcutta. W. C. Bonnerjee (1844–1906) was the first president of the Congress and, like Dadabhai Naoroji, campaigned on behalf of Indian political reform in London.

ultimately declined to attend either function) and suggested to Naoroji that they lobby the Tory MP in favour of admitting Indians as commissioned officers in the military.<sup>48</sup> Two years later, Naoroji sought Mehta's help for planning the visit of W.S. Caine – a vocally pro-Indian member of the British House of Commons – to the city, asking Mehta to recruit support from various Bengali leaders.<sup>49</sup> One of Mehta's most important deeds – from the standpoint of the future trajectory of the Congress – was introducing Naoroji to Henry J.S. Cotton (1845–1915) in March 1886. Cotton, then a Bengal civil service officer, would go on to become the president of the Congress in 1904 and one of the Congress' staunchest supporters in Great Britain. "I have been asked by our mutual friend Mr. R. D. Mehta to write to you," Cotton opened his letter of introduction to Naoroji, adding that he hoped to see Naoroji at the upcoming Calcutta Congress.<sup>50</sup> In spite of these useful Calcutta connections, one of Naoroji's closest confidantes, the social reformer Behramji M. Malabari (1854–1912), advised against working too closely with Mehta, noting that a mutual Parsi friend "does not give Mr M. a good character and advises caution in any important matter."<sup>51</sup> Naoroji does not appear to have paid any heed to Malabari's counsel.

The Naoroji-Mehta correspondence also helps reveal R. D. Mehta's particular political views. He was, in many ways, a typical early Congress moderate, clamouring for political reform short of more ambitious claims like self-rule (indeed, the British government rewarded Mehta with the title of C.I.E., "Companion of the Indian Empire," in 1897). Mehta threw his support behind Lalmohan Ghosh (1849–1909), who waged an unsuccessful campaign to enter the British Parliament in 1885. "I sincerely wish that he gets in[;] he or any one from India if once gets in the Parliament then I think the time has fairly come for India to raise a hue & cry for having representative Councils [*sic*]," he wrote to Naoroji. "The matter then should be agitated thro' the length & breadth of India & not allowed to drop till we have gained our points."<sup>52</sup> At other times he despaired about the prospects of nationalist activity in Bengal, accusing wealthy Bengali *zamindars* of cosying up to the British establishment.<sup>53</sup> By 1906, when Naoroji was elected president of the Congress in order to help heal rifts between the moderates and radicals, he appeared more despondent.

48 R.D. Mehta to Dadabhai Naoroji, 19 January 1885 and 29 January 1885 (Dadabhai Naoroji Papers, National Archives of India, New Delhi).

49 Naoroji to Mehta, 25 August 1887 (Naoroji Papers). In turn, Mehta relied upon Naoroji for help and assistance during his several visits to the United Kingdom. In June 1891, for example, we find a letter addressed to Naoroji on R.D. Mehta's letterhead, which has a seal emblazoned with the words: "A Clear Conscience is a Sure Difference." In the letter, Mehta thanks Naoroji for his help in getting him elected as a member of the National Liberal Club of the United Kingdom, an organ of the Liberal Party.

50 Henry J.S. Cotton to Naoroji, 15 March 1886 (Naoroji Papers).

51 Behramji M. Malabari to Naoroji, 30 September 1886 (Naoroji Papers).

52 Mehta to Naoroji, 29 January 1885 (Naoroji Papers).

53 Mehta to Naoroji, 5 March 1885 (Naoroji Papers).

“The Bengalees are fighting among themselves & any one & every one poses as a Leader,” Mehta claimed. “In the lot we have some very good men & some self seeking. I am sure your presence would tend to settle the matter down smoothly.” Correspondence from 1906 also indicates that Naoroji stayed with the Mehtas – most likely at 65 Canning Street – when in Calcutta for the Congress. Alluding to a portrait of Naoroji that must have existed in the Banaji fire temple, Mehta wrote on behalf of his family that, “We would not say how very pleased we would be to put you up and to show you your likeness gracing and ornamenting our agiary.”<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

R. D. Mehta, in short, was much more than a man who endowed a trust and helped construct a fire temple in his father’s name. He was part of an early Calcutta Parsi tradition of matching prominence in business with deep involvement in public affairs, a tradition that helped the Parsis gain political clout in eastern India far disproportionate to their tiny numbers. Whereas Rustomji Cowasji Banaji played a significant role in the affairs of the community and the Calcutta municipality, Mehta was able to expand his scope to involve national – and early nationalist – politics. In spite of the evident quarrel between the two families, the Mehtas shared much in common with the first family of Calcutta, the Banajis. Both families were involved in the China trade – an important reason why so many Parsis came to Calcutta at such a relatively early date. Both established close, cordial relations with the Bengali intelligentsia as well as with British officials and businessmen. And, of course, both the Mehtas and Banajis left a tangible legacy to their community by endowing fire temples in the city.

We know very little about R. D. Mehta after he and his widowed mother, Khorshedbai, laid the foundation stone of Ervad Dhunjeebhoy Byramjee Mehta’s Zoroastrian Anjuman Atash Adaran on Sunday, 17 September 1911. Later that year – and in a tragically ironic occurrence – a roaring fire tore through the family’s Empress Mills, reducing it to ashes. The mill company was liquidated in 1913. Mehta family members continued to live in Calcutta for decades after R. D.’s death in 1930, although there are no descendants in residence today. The original Mehta house at 65 Canning Street – where the atash was kept from 1890 until 1912 – still stands, although it is in a decrepit condition and functions as a wholesale electronics bazaar (Fig. 2). Similarly, the imposing Mehta Building – erected by Dhanjibhai and R. D. Mehta at 55 Canning Street, supposedly the

54 Mehta to Naoroji, 24 September 1906 (Naoroji Papers). There is the distinct possibility that, depending on how liberally Mehta defined “agiary,” he was referring to the still-private dar-e-meher at his Canning Street house.



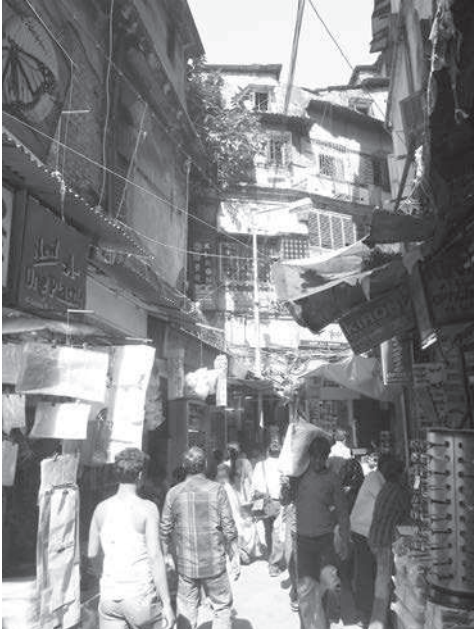


Photo: Dinyar Patel (2011)

Fig. 2: Dhanjibhai Byramji Mehta's house was 65 Canning Street, located at the end of a tiny lane just north of Canning Street. The Mehta family dar-e-meher was in this house between 1890 and 1912, and Dadabhai Naoroji likely stayed here during visits to Calcutta. Today the house is in a ramshackle condition and has been taken over by electronics vendors.

site of the house of Lord Canning, the governor-general of India during the mutiny-rebellion of 1857 – is now overflowing with electronics and medical stores, having been sold off by the R.D. Mehta trust a few years ago (Fig. 3). It was from this building, the headquarters of D.B. Mehta & Co., that R.D. Mehta composed most of his letters to Naoroji and other nationalist contemporaries. Nine Rainey Park, the family's later residence built in the more breathable environs of Ballygunge Circular Road – has also been sold off and demolished. Evidence of the Mehta family, its businesses, and its political connections are long gone and a distant memory.

The legacies of the Banaji family are even more heavily buried under the dead weight of history. Kidderpore's sprawling docks, where Rustomji Cowasji reaped the fortunes of Sino-British conflict and the opium trade, today are largely derelict, with Calcutta's dwindling port activity having moved further downstream to Haldia. As Parsi families began leaving the increas-

ingly chaotic environs of Ezra Street in the decades after Indian independence, the Banaji agiary started to lose its centrality in community life. Sometime in the 1970s, as the family trust that controlled the property ran into financial difficulties, the fire temple went defunct. Mirroring the fate of the Mehta family properties nearby, electronics wholesalers soon encroached upon the site. Today, it is difficult to distinguish the Banaji agiary from the other ramshackle commercial structures that line Ezra Street (Fig. 4). When I visited the agiary in November 2011, its once spacious interior courtyard had been divided up among hawkers selling gaudy chandeliers and other light fixings: merchants had even formed their own cooperative society on the encroached property, the 26 No. [sic] Ezra Street Electric Traders Tenant Welfare Association. The temple's sacred *kuvo* (well) now had a jerry-rigged plastic pipe inserted into it to provide



Photo: Dinyar Patel (2011)

Fig. 3: The Mehta Building at 55 Canning Street, where Dhanjibhai Byramji and R.D. Mehta conducted their family business, was sold off by the R.D. Mehta trust a few years ago.



Photo: Dinyar Patel (2011)

Fig. 4: The Banaji agiary, located at 26 Ezra Street, has today largely been obscured by commercial hoardings and stalls that have cropped up both inside and outside of its premises. The tree that sprouts from its courtyard can be made out at the top centre of this photograph.



Photo: Nauzer Bativala (2012)

Fig. 5: A new stained glass window recently installed inside the Mehta atash adaran. The atash adaran has several such windows, which have all been designed and created by community member Katayun Saklat.

some fetid water to stall owners. Aside from being used to dry clothes and rags, there was limited encroachment within the agiary structure itself. Its spacious portico, which is held up by Doric columns, lined with wrought iron railings, and protected from the sun by slatted French windows – three architectural motifs that the agiary has in common with thousands of other colonial-era buildings dotting Calcutta – was dark and empty. Peering inside the building through a broken window, I noticed that the *afarganiyu* remained in

the *kebla*. On either side of the entranceway doors, bolted firmly shut, were tiny dedication plaques, one in Gujarati and the other in English:

IN THE NAME OF THE HOLY HORMUZD  
 THIS FIRE TEMPLE WAS BUILT AT CALCUTTA BY  
 RUSTOMJEE COWASJEE BANAJEE ESQ<sup>RE</sup>  
 AND CONSECRATED ACCORDING TO THE RITES OF THE  
 MASDIASNA RELIGION  
 FOR THE SERVICES OF GOD AND THE OBSERVANCE OF  
 SACRED RITES OF THE ZOROASTRIAN RELIGION  
 IN THE 3<sup>RD</sup> YEAR OF THE REIGN OF  
 HER MAJESTY QUEEN VICTORIA  
 ON THE 17<sup>TH</sup> DAY SHUROSH OF THE  
 1<sup>ST</sup> MONTH FURVURDEEN KUDMEE  
 THE YEAR OF YEZDEZERD 1209 & OF ZOROASTER 2229  
 CORRESPONDING WITH MONDAY THE 16<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER  
 OF THE CHRISTIAN YEAR 1839.

Above both plaques, the stucco and paint were gently peeling away, revealing internal brickwork probably not seen since the late 1830s.

Since it is still controlled by a private family trust, now in the hands of the lone Banaji descendant who resides in the city, the Calcutta Parsi community and its anjuman have been unable to salvage the Banaji agiary. It is unlikely, in any case, that the dwindling and aging community would be able to utilize a second fire temple located in one of the most fiercely congested areas of

Calcutta. Therefore, R. D. Mehta's decision to give control of his atash adaran to the Parsi public was, in hindsight, extremely fortuitous: the fire temple on Metcalfe Street has been beautifully maintained and remains the hub of the Calcutta community's religious life (Fig. 5). The R. D. Mehta trust and the fire temple are now the only tangible legacies of Mehta that survive – they represent a complex history of commercial success, political activity, and interfamily rivalry, a history distantly remembered as the city's Parsis celebrated the hundredth year of their atash adaran in 2011 and 2012. Given how both institutions have sustained the local Parsi community for a century, they serve as appropriate monuments to a man who played such an important role in the development of Calcutta.

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