

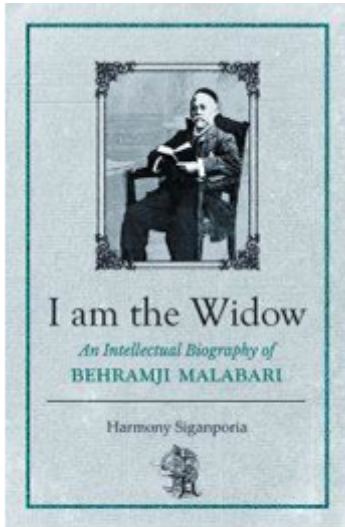
Our Parsi Rich Have Fallen on Evil Days: A Sharp Account of the Community in the 19th Century

An excerpt from the book 'I am the Widow: An Intellectual Biography of Behramji Malabari' by Harmony Sigantoria.



Behramji Malabari (1853-1912) was a social reformer, journalist, poet, travel writer/ethnographer and vital catalyst of change, who did much to shape the national reform discourse in late-19th century Western India. Born in Baroda and raised in Surat, Malabari moved to Bombay at age 15 and the metropolis became the central site of his myriad investigations into identity and reform, including questions on what it meant to be a Parsi in this city, at the heart of Empire, as opposed to in rural Gujarat.

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Harmony Siganporia,
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We now turn to Malabari's reading of the Parsi community in his chapter on them in *Gujarat and the Gujaratis* (1882) which marks the beginning of a career-spanning musing about the writer's community, its place in India, and his place within it as a social reformer. The chapter essentially deals with the condition of the rural, more conservative Parsi community settled in Gujarat, and not their peers in 'reformed' Bombay. Sounding a note of ominous doom at the outset, Malabari starts by saying that the Parsis of Surat – long the “head-quarters” of the community – “have fallen upon evil days”. This is largely because the “Shettia” or aristocratic class has become “by training, lazy, listless, gregarious... grovelling for generations in one and the same groove”. To his mind, this class cannot understand patriotism, by which he means more than mere loyalty to the British crown: patriotism here seems to be invested with that spirit of public service which marks – to one such as him – the entire colonial enterprise. Neither do they remember the virtue of “charity...the very basis of their grand old faith”. His choice of the distancing ‘their’ can be read as follows: he does not, by virtue of habit and present circumstance, number himself in the list of Parsi ‘Gujaratis’. This can be read as a further bid to place or project himself as Parsi, but simultaneously and importantly, more than Parsi; to stake a claim for himself as a national reformer.

Malabari explains his grievances by elaborating, “No doubt our Shetts are loyal to the British Crown; but to what ruling power have they ever been disloyal? Loyalty is their policy, their interest”, and not a matter of ethical or philosophical consent. Tongue firmly in cheek, he adds that he has no further quarrel with these ‘Shetts’, who are largely “honest, peace-loving citizens” who seldom beat their wives, and have only a few “old-gentlemanly vices” to counterbalance their many “old-gentlemanly virtues”. The Sheths in Bombay, he holds, come out a little better than the ones in the countryside, but even they are not spared from the problems that are attendant to ‘priestly influence’. Malabari then proceeds to discuss the relative merits (or lack thereof) of the Parsi Panchayat as an institution. It is, he says, “a highly respectable body” before qualifying the statement by adding, “but it seems to be a body without a soul”. Making clear the disdain in which he holds the orthodox faction which controls this institution, his description of the Panchayat Sheth is as hilarious as it is acutely sarcastic. He writes that this Sheth is, as a rule:

A prim old man, well shaven, well washed, and well scented. This faultlessly white being walks as if he were a basket of newly-laid eggs...(and) seems to be in dread of progress, of the very motion of life...he hates action of any kind (and) hugs indolence, rejoices in its company and revels in its seductive bosom. When, once in six months, he is required to attend to a little public business, he helplessly turns to his steward and asks broken-hearted, “Oh! What’s to do again?” as if only an hour ago he had done some tremendous deed of heroism for his country. The Shett sits down with a grimace, stands up with a yawn, salutes with an ogle or with a rather original parting of the lips, which process he flatters himself is a smile. He is sensitively nervous about his health. He will not get out of his carriage till a few minutes after it has stopped; this is to avoid any internal agitation which might follow a hasty descent...Except in these respects, the Shett is a very worthy citizen, and a thoroughly loyal subject of her Majesty. But he has no strength, no stamina. He can look no man in the face.

Towards the end of crafting out of India a “mighty, puissant” Malabari says that a “glorious middle class” which is educated and “goes on educating itself” is the only way forward, and besides keeping abreast of the latest advances in the arts and sciences, people (here, the Parsis) have to learn “patriotism and to *abjure priestcraft*,” replacing in the process, the current system with a “new national church, founded on the simple tradition of *good thought, good word, and good deed*, bequeathed by Zoroaster. Let them weed their scriptures of its verbiage”. His translation of *humata, hukata, hurvashta* (‘good thoughts’, ‘good words’ and ‘good deeds’ respectively) as the foundational creed of the ‘new’, ‘purged’ Zoroastrian ‘church’, without the Dastur as intermediary, while echoing Dadabhai Naoroji and other reformers, goes some way towards explaining the discomfort Malabari clearly caused in some quarters of the Bombay Parsi orthodoxy. These views clearly contributed to his ‘omission’ from any major role when the history of the community was variously narrated in and after the twentieth century. The ‘ideal’ community, Malabari says, cannot come about until there is “sincerity in all we do” and a “rational scheme for life”, neither of which the Parsis could then lay claim to...

Next, the reader is provided with a note on the ‘Reformed Parsi’ of the period. In the interest of objectivity, this sketch is as critical as the ones preceding it. Malabari says he doubts whether young or ‘Reformed’ Parsis are Zoroastrians at all. Were these youth to live outside the ambit of organised religion altogether, but live lives of purity and honesty, Malabari says he would mind it a lot less than their present behaviour. However, he is quick to attribute this to the fact that there is currently underway a “transition period” in national existence which has led to “wavering” and indecision “at every stage of thought and action”.

Apart from this, the bane of the Parsi youth’s existence remains, as ever, the *Dastur* (priest). On this note, the keen ethnographer launches into a full frontal attack on the lowest kind of priest, tracing en route “his origin; rise; decline; his fall unfathomable; his ways of life; his sympathies, antipathies, and miseries; (and) what to do with him”. This title fairly sums up not just the content, but also the tone of the text which follows it: sarcastic in the extreme, resorting to devices of over and understatement to establish the non-credentials of the priestly community or, as Malabari puts it, “the *ignis fatuus* (literally translated, ‘foolish fire’) of the dark ages of religion”, a line clearly illustrating why the Parsi orthodoxy – then or since – have no love lost for Malabari... In addition, the dastur is an immensely hypocritical creature who will “never eat or drink with the Hindu or Mussalman, though he may take a cup of tea or a glass of ice-cream with a European official”, an attitude indicative of the axis along which the Parsis would have themselves aligned. It was convenient even for then-contemporary histories of the Parsi community (from those by D.F. Karaka to Darukhanawala, and European scholars like C.A. Kincaid writing about the community as ‘the lost Greeks’ in *East & West*) to focus on the ‘alien-ness’ of the Parsis despite their lengthy stay – and obvious assimilation – in India, because it suited their purposes to be seen/placed or acknowledged, alongside the English, as fellow ‘outsiders’ to the Indian ethos. This rendered the community both useful to the English as well as ‘different’ enough from ‘Indians’ to allow for different rules of engagement with the rulers to apply to them.