



“Thy name is Charity”: The Historical Sociology of Parsi Philanthropy in India

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Abstract

The Zoroastrian community in South Asia, concentrated in India and commonly referred to as the ‘Parsis’ or ‘Parsees’, has exerted a disproportionate impact on the country’s socio-economic landscape, especially considering its minute size. This paper explores the dimensions of Parsi Philanthropy regarding its sense of belonging, the community’s minority status, and the defining characteristics of major philanthropic groups in Mumbai. The paper uses an in-depth, open-ended qualitative survey method utilised via grounded theory to understand various motivators of philanthropic activities. Whilst existing scholarly literature attributes Parsi philanthropy to some degree of religious altruism, the following paper examines the phenomenon through a historical and sociological lens to better understand how the Parsis used philanthropy to propagate communal coherence and to cement themselves as members of the civic elite. The paper analyzes the changing nature of Parsi societal aspirations, from first building and supporting the community to then creating institutions and businesses to support the constitutional and developmental goals of Independent India. Tracing the legacies and continuities of philanthropic commitments from colonial period to present day India, the paper focuses on Parsi philanthropy’s evolving dynamism, internal shifts, and static moral principles that continue to inform some of the largest philanthropy in India.

Introduction

Numbering at roughly 57,000 individuals (see Table 1), the size of the Indian Parsi community renders it one of the smallest established religious communities in the country, especially with such a rich history dating back thousands of years (Hinnells, 2008). Despite this fact, the community boasts significant wealth and enjoys unrivalled prominence for its diminutive nature. From founding India’s largest business conglomerate, the Tata Group, to constituting 4 of India’s 20 richest in 2020 (Mogul, 2020); from producing India’s first knighted subject (Palsetia, 2008b) to raising the father of the Indian nuclear programme (Pant, n.d.); it is evident that the Parsis hold disproportionate institutional influence. The following paper aims to address this very dynamic, between Parsi power and size, through an unlikely vehicle: philanthropy.

Table 1: Total Population of Parsi/Zoroastrian population in India as per the Census 2011

	Persons	Males	Females
Total	57,264	28,115	29,149
Rural	1,958	1,034	924
Urban	55,306	27,081	28,225

Source: India - C-01 Annexure: Details of Sects/Religions Clubbed Under Specific Religious Community - 2011, 2021 (<https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/11397>)

The aphorism from which the paper takes its title, "Parsi, thy name is charity," was in wide circulation in nineteenth-century India (Palsetia, 2008a, p. 665), giving an insight into the longevity of this prominent phenomenon. Broadly, philanthropy can be considered the use of private wealth for public benefit. The following paper will regard philanthropy - through Payton and Moody's (2008) *Understanding Philanthropy* - as a "voluntary action for the public good". Though open-ended, the aforementioned definition captures the practice as one that operates outside both the market and the state. Osella (2018) argues that giving in South Asia has often been misread through a Euro-American framework that treats philanthropy either as an exchange with expected returns or as a purely disinterested act, and that neither captures what South Asian communities actually do when they give. Whilst the paper returns to this argument at greater length in a later section, it is worth noting that Parsi philanthropy sits inside this South Asian pattern while carrying its own distinctive features, which the paper's subsequent sections set out.

The essence of Parsi giving can be found in a sixteenth-century Parsi migration epic poem *Qissa-i-Sanjan*, composed by the priest Bahman Kaikobad. The poem is associated with the Milk and Sugar parable, in which the arriving Zoroastrian refugees respond to the local Hindu king Jadi Rana's bowl of milk [presented to them filled to the brim, signifying that his kingdom was full] by adding sugar to it, promising to enrich his people without displacing them (Kaikobad, 1599/2009). Though previous literature [including Writer (2016) and Hinnells (1985)] usually regards Parsi philanthropy as a religious mandate, the following paper provides the unique insight that philanthropy was a foundational method of Parsi integration within the larger Indian community, but also something that spurred their rise to become indispensable members of the civic elite. The scale of this achievement stands out against a community that has shrunk sharply over the past century and that has long resisted conversion, and it is essential to understand and protect the social and religious history of this community which has played an essential role in India's development.

Research Design: Questions & Objective

The existing literature on Parsi Philanthropy is largely communal and archival in nature, with a focus on independent inquiries into specific institutional histories. This paper reads the act of Parsi Philanthropy against three existing bodies of knowledge: the theological literature of Zoroastrian giving, the institutional history of the Parsi community in India focusing on both its business and politics, and the alarming decline of the population of the community. Instead of analysing these dimensions in their independent effects, the paper aims to bring together a cohesive perspective foregrounding a deeper sociological and political understanding of Parsi giving in India. In this sense, it identifies historical and contemporary continuities and discontinuities like giving *vis-à-vis* the changing landscape of society and politics in India from colonial times to its current global avatar.

Two specific questions that bind the overall objective of the paper together are:

Q1. As an Indian minority, how did the Parsis establish themselves as civic elites, and how has this changed from the period of colonialism until the present? How was philanthropy used as a tool to drive the communities' changing aspirations within society over time?

Q2. How did Parsi philanthropy negotiate the community's identity as both intermediaries of British commerce and as active allies to the pro-independence movement, whilst building businesses and philanthropic institutions side by side?

Research Methodology

Exploring the phenomenological dimensions of Parsi philanthropy, this paper strives to capture the unique characteristics of Parsi giving firsthand. Moreover, this study utilises convenience and snowball sampling done via detailed questionnaires covering common themes about Parsi Philanthropy with about 20 questions. Each of these were sent to 20 different individuals or groups, of which 9 individuals responded either directly to the questions in writing or agreed to conduct online interviews. The questions focused on the general dimensions of community identity, family history, business legacies, transnational networks and colonial history. Further specific questions tailored to specific trusts were asked in an adaptive format with respondents who agreed for in-depth recorded interviews. This method for sampling has been advocated by Biernacki and Waldorf (1981), and very recently in Gierczyk et al. (2024), particularly in the context of studies involving relatively small and socially powerful categories. The lack of any structured list regarding Parsi philanthropists was resolved using a discretionary-based sampling framework, working as a pragmatic solution. The population data was accessed through existing sources such as the Census Survey of India, depicted in Table 1, 2 and 3.

The transcripts of the recorded interviews and the direct responses were collated and analysed through grounded theory, which involves multiple readings of the data and contemplation over their generalisable and comparable patterns. (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2014). The interview data and video transcripts were analysed *vis-à-vis* the abductive framework of the theoretical claims, where the specific interview quotes have been triangulated with the text,

keeping in mind the consensus of the respondents on dimensions of Parsi life that have been explored in the paper. As Charmaz (2014) claims, the true analytic process of grounded theory does not lead from the data directly to induction, but to the formulation of a provisional hypothesis based on existing perspectives in the literature, a method that facilitates explanations of surprising or perplexing theoretical ideas, then tested against the available data. In this study, that logic is made apparent in several places where some of the detailed transcripts resulted in a response perched on the edge of the classification. Every one of these cases led to the creation of a new provisional category, which was then compared with the remaining transcripts and was retained, modified, or eliminated based on the fit. Hence the analytic categories, which organized this article, grew out of this abductive process of both data collection and reading of secondary resources, not as something preconceived in advance by the analyst. Indeed, the interview questionnaire was open-ended and adequately covered the respondents' lived experience and their sense of self, belonging and philanthropic activities. In accordance with the ethical practice, informed consent was obtained from the respondents during interviews. The identity of the respondents has been anonymised in the text except for where the respondents have deliberately agreed to be referred to with their names and identities.

Colonial History of Parsi Philanthropy (1700-1950)

In order to explore and ascertain the extent and importance of Parsi Philanthropy today, this section analyzes the historical periods and conditions that fostered the development of the Parsi community in India. Under the British Raj, the community's commercial prominence brought both the wealth to fund their civic institutions and the political complexities that came to define its engagement with the empire. The Parsis amassed their wealth through partnerships with British trade, a relationship later characterised by Marxist historians, most notably Amalendu Guha (1970a; 1970b; 1984), as an intermediary class whose fortunes hinged on this partnership. However, this reading of the Parsis as a homogenous group acting on behalf of the empire is not entirely accurate. During the same period, the community produced several key figures in the Indian independence movement including Dadabhai Naoroji, whose "drain of wealth" argument provided the Indian National Congress with its central economic argument against colonial rule (Naoroji, 1901). This shows that Parsis had internal differences amongst them which further translated into their political and business choices. Occupying both sides of colonial rule, as close affiliates of the British empire and as early leaders of the Indian national movement, the Parsis situated themselves in a unique and contradictory position. Rather than unrelated occurrences, these facts serve as an interconnected background for the phenomenon which is better seen once Parsi philanthropic institutions began to play a central role in independent India.

Though Guha (1984) observes that the Parsis were latecomers to trade and finance in comparison with the Chettiars, Bohras, and Gujarati-Marwari Baniyas, their rise to commercial prominence began earlier than most expect. The Parsis became the earliest Indian community to enter modern industries, a lead they held until the end of the First World War. Their entry into European commerce began in seventeenth-century Surat, and by 1746 all Parsi trading there was operating under European protection (Guha, 1984). The migration of the community to Bombay accelerated after the East India Company acquired the island in 1661: by 1780, the

Parsi population of the city had reached 3,000 and steadily rose to 29,000 by 1844 (Guha, 1970a).

From the very beginning, this ascent was tied to European trade as opposed to any indigenous Indian network and was accompanied by charitable spending on institutions. Considering the community's minute size, philanthropy served as an efficient means of integration, with both European partnership and strategic charity defining the Parsi commercial sphere in the decades that followed. The clearest illustration of this philanthropic pattern is the opium trade with China. Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, who was born in 1783 to an economically modest Parsi family in Navsari, made five voyages to Canton between 1800 and 1807 and founded Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy & Co. in 1818 (Palsetia, 2008; Encyclopaedia Iranica, n.d.). By the 1830s, his firm held a virtual monopoly of Malwa opium shipped from Bombay to Canton, and his partnership with William Jardine (of Jardine, Matheson and Co.) had come to dwarf every other commercial relationship that Matheson and Co. maintained (Palsetia, 2008a). Moreover, by the late 1830s, eleven Parsi companies were operating in Canton: more than the combined American and European totals of the time (Palsetia, 2008b). Jejeebhoy himself became the first Indian to be knighted in 1842, and the first to receive a baronetcy in 1857¹ (Palsetia, 2008b).

A part of opium fortunes were then channeled directly into charity - between the 1830s and the 1930s, Parsi philanthropy was behind the construction of more than four hundred schools, libraries, hospitals, and medical facilities: either directly or indirectly through funding (Palsetia, 2008a). These institutions were, however, primarily for the use of the Parsi community. At the same time, over two hundred projects for non-Parsi causes were initiated, in what Palsetia (2008) sees as an effort to "[shape] new public images of the old opium dealers and their descendants as civic philanthropists." Though Palsetia (2008a) evidently views the non-Parsi projects as a manner to save face, a representative of a notable Parsi philanthropic family offers a different view, stating:

"Whatever the family has done has been for all Indians and not just the Parsi community, a secular orientation that I am very proud of."

(Respondent, personal communication, 2026).

In an earlier article, Amalendu Guha (1970b) described the Parsi role as that of a *comprador*, a domestic commercial class whose wealth depended on brokering foreign capital's access to local markets and whose fortunes fluctuated with the imperial trading economy that employed them. Guha went on to nuance the framing in a later paper (Guha, 1984), arguing that Parsi merchants were *comprador* "only in a limited sense." Unlike their Chinese counterparts, they ran independent lines of business that at times competed with British firms whilst simultaneously serving the Empire.

Nevertheless, Guha upholds that Parsi merchants rose within the imperial system and were shaped by it, while retaining real economic independence of their own. It is worth noting,

¹ Baronetcy is a hereditary British honor that gives the holder the title of "Sir".

however, that this *comprador* position was not entirely loyal to the British Raj, and may have even expedited the gradual shift towards Indian independence. In another article, Guha (1970b) observed that "the growing contradictions between Parsi and British capital" went on to "produce nationalist leaders like Dadabhai Naoroji from amongst the Parsi Seths." Naoroji was elected to the House of Commons for Finsbury Central in 1892 and went on to write *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (Naoroji, 1901). This was the book that supplied the Indian National Congress with its central economic argument against colonialism (the 'Drain of Wealth'), that British rule was systematically stripping India of its resources. Pherozeshah Mehta (1845–1915), another prominent Parsi political figure, co-founded the Congress and served as its first president; Bhikaji Cama unfurled an early version of the Indian flag at the Stuttgart Socialist Conference in 1907; and Ardeshir Godrej, whose ventures were shaped by Gandhian trusteeship principles, funded the Tilak Swaraj Fund and aligned his firms [Godrej and Boyce at the time] with Swadeshi (Guha, 1984), a major part of the independence movement, at a moment when such an alignment was commercially costly (P. Godrej, personal communication, 2026). Dr. Pheroza Godrej, a prominent member of the family, clearly articulates this argument:

"Even the families who worked closely with the British often justified it through a civic logic - we are building institutions, schools, hospitals, docks. The Godrej version of that logic was just routed through nationalism rather than imperial collaboration."

(P. Godrej, personal communication, 2026).

The fact that the same small community which served as a *comprador* bourgeoisie was also responsible for major figures in the anti-colonial movement seems to be more of an expected consequence than a contradiction: from the time of the 17th century, the Parsi commercial class had treated their relationship to colonial political power as an instrument rather than an ideological duty. This phenomenon allowed for the community to adjust their public standing as the ruling authority changed, whilst still fulfilling their long-term ideological goals of independence more discreetly (P. Godrej, personal communication, 2026). At least in the beginning, the Indian nationalist movement did not require Parsis to sacrifice their monetary interests, but rather to recognise the clear drain of overall Indian wealth under the Empire. Naoroji was elected to the British House of Commons in 1892, sitting as member for Central Finsbury, by an electorate at the heart of the empire whose economic policies he criticised. The notion that the same community occupying a *comprador* position under the empire also produced the theorist who supplied the anti-colonial movement with its central economic argument is the puzzle the paper's analysis of philanthropy sets out to resolve.

It would therefore be logical to see Parsi philanthropy and its institution-building nature as a mechanism by which the community reconciled the facts that they were enriched by their oppressors, whilst simultaneously producing the key economic criticism of colonial rule. By converting commercial wealth into public institutions, both the British coloniser and the colonised Indians could not easily contest. Philanthropy therefore allowed the Parsis to occupy the imperial economic order, cementing themselves as members of the civic elite, whilst simultaneously critiquing it from the same position.

Post-Colonial History of Parsi Philanthropy (1950s-1990s)

In the time between Independence and the economic liberalisation of the early 1990s, the Parsis retained a civic and economic prominence that stood in sharp contrast to their shrinking numbers. Luhrmann (1996) captures this condition succinctly: "Now they [Parsis] feel marginalized in a postcolonial world, with an aching sense of a loss of status, of cultural genius, of their historical moment" (p. 2). The paradox of the period is that while the community lost the direct political access it had enjoyed under empire, it consolidated an alternative mode of civic authority, exercised through perpetual, professionalised trusts that continued to shape Indian institutions long after the passing of the individuals who founded them.

Perhaps the most substantial illustration of this phenomenon is the industrial expansion under Jehangir Ratanji Dadabhoy (J.R.D.) Tata. Tata undertook the role of chairman of Tata Sons in 1938 and remained in that position until 1991. Under his leadership, the Tata Group expanded from 14 companies at the time of his appointment to 80 by 1990, generating around \$4 billion annually (Tata Trusts, n.d.). Institutional philanthropy mainly funded through the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust produced the Tata Institute of Social Sciences [renamed 1944, deemed university 1964], the Tata Memorial Hospital [1941, funded almost entirely by the Trust until 1957], the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research [1945], and the National Centre for the Performing Arts [founded in the late 1960s] (Tata Trusts, n.d.; TISS, n.d.). As established in a 1937 meeting which birthed the Tata Memorial Hospital, J.R.D. Tata's foundational philosophy considered research to be "almost as important as treatment" (Tata Trusts, n.d.). This quote appropriately captures the essence of early Tata philanthropy, funding the structural systems for long-term change rather than a superficial one-time donation. This philosophy was evidently greatly successful and replicated amongst other Parsi-led firms. For instance, Rati Forbes [Director, Forbes Marshall Ltd.] confirms the impact of Tata philanthropy on other large philanthropists, especially on the late Forbes Marshall co-founder Darius Forbes:

"My father-in-law [Darius Forbes] particularly was very influenced at that time by the way the Tatas looked at philanthropy. Second, my father-in-law had a very strong feeling - and not only a feeling, but he actually practiced it: that the community around was as important as the well-being of the employees. The community where our factory was first set up was as important. So, the first initiatives he took in the area where our factory was built in the early sixties were street lighting, putting toilets into homes, and so on."

(R. Forbes, personal communication, 2026).

However, this philanthropic model arguably wielded the most influence in the scientific field: after receiving the help of the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and the government of Bombay, Parsi physicist Homi J. Bhabha co-founded and directed the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in 1945 (Pant, n.d.). By the time of his death in 1966, Bhabha had cemented himself as the "father" of the Indian nuclear programme, with accomplishments ranging from becoming the first chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission [AEC] in 1948 to overseeing the founding of what would become the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre in Trombay (BARC, n.d.). His successor as AEC chairman, Homi Sethna, supervised the 1974 Pokhran test that was instrumental in making India a nuclear power (Radhakrishna, 2010). Former chairman of the Indian Space Research Organisation M.G.K. Menon's assessment of this arrangement is direct: "Without support

provided by Jeh [JRD Tata], history would have been very different. Homi Bhabha may not have stayed on in India; TIFR may not have come into existence, as it is now" (Rodrigues, 2021). This is clear evidence that the Parsi elite's institutional influence had directly seeded the technocratic core of the new independent Indian state, and the community continued to occupy the same through their forward-looking philanthropy. Most importantly, this system of arrangement was congruent with the constitutional objectives of independent India and was working in tandem with the Nehruvian vision of the new nation. In this sense, one can clearly see this understudied middle space of institutional politics: that Parsi elites were deliberately occupying both as a virtue of their ethical and religious dispositions and as bearers of political modernity.

Though the Tatas played a substantial role in establishing post-colonial Parsi philanthropic principles, they are certainly not the only family to do so. During this period, the Godrej's also championed a parallel pattern in separate industries. Pirojsha Godrej's acquisition of around 3,000 acres of land in Vikhroli created Pirojshanagar, an industrial township with subsidised worker housing, dispensaries, a school, and the Pragati Kendra welfare centre at its core (Rodrigues, 2024). In the eyes of the Godrej family, this philanthropy was crucial in producing a mutually beneficial relationship, with workers feeling acknowledged and satisfied whilst the enterprise was trusted and economically strengthened:

"The township at Vikhroli was built because [the] Late Pirojsha Godrej believed that a worker who had decent housing, whose children went to a good school, whose family had access to a dispensary - that worker was a more productive and more dignified human being. So yes, there is business logic embedded in it. But it also reflects a paternalist tradition, and I use that word descriptively, not pejoratively, in which the industrialist saw himself as responsible for the whole life of his workforce, not merely their hours on the factory floor."

(P. Godrej, personal communication, 2026).

It is during this same period, however, that the Parsis dwindled even further in size. Standing at 114,890 in 1941, the community fell to 111,791 by 1951, then 91,266 in 1971 and drastically to 76,382 by 1991 (Unisa et al., 2008; see Table 2 & Table 3). In four decades, the Indian-Zoroastrian community lost roughly a third of its population, whilst the national population more than doubled (Haub and Sharma, 2011). This demographic decline was exacerbated by both a falling birthrate, with total fertility falling to 1.12 by the early 1980s (Unisa et al., 2008), as well as emigration to the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and the United States by the end of the century (Hinnells, 2005). Commenting on this decline, a respondent from the community says:

"[T]here is little doubt that the upper echelons of Parsis were by and large close handmaidens of the colonial establishment and when British rule was over in 1947, the community felt orphaned, and there was great uncertainty about what will happen to us as a minority, and this is when you see our migration beginning to increase."

(Respondent, personal communication, 2026).

As a result of such a sharp plummet in population, Parsi philanthropy was forced to adapt. According to Vevaina (2018), Parsi giving was compelled to move away from ‘traditional’ philanthropic practices such as “subsidizing education, medical care, and welfare to the poor.” Instead, after the 1970s, the focus of charity rested toward “the pursuit of communal reproduction, both biological and social,” with the Bombay Parsi Panchayet becoming the main vehicle for this inward turn. As one of Bombay’s largest private landowners, the Panchayet controlled over four thousand charity flats across the city (Patel, 2015), held within a network of Parsi ‘baugs.’ ‘Baugs’ refer to the historical gated residential colonies built for Parsis, created to “[provide] affordable accommodation to community members and also nurture the Zoroastrian culture and traditions” (Yazdi, 2013). Many of these Baugs had been donated by philanthropic families such as the Godrejs (responsible for Godrej Baug), and the Wadias (responsible for Ness, Cusrow, and Rustom Baug, amongst others), and then handed to the Panchayet to allocate to Parsis below a set income level. The Baugs arguably became the community’s most consequential welfare infrastructure in the post-colonial period, especially when considering Vevaina’s (2023a) “no house, no spouse” formulation. The formulation produces a simple conclusion: without subsidised housing, lower-income Parsis could not remain in central Bombay, and without remaining in Bombay they could neither marry within the community [due to its geographic concentration] nor raise Parsi children in it (BPP, n.d.; Vevaina, 2023a).

Meanwhile, other large industrial trusts, primarily the Tatas, continued to fund secular institutions that served the wider Indian public rather than the Parsi community itself (Tata Trusts, n.d.). Although this contradicts Vevaina’s aforementioned claim of a shift towards inward-looking philanthropy (2018), this secular giving could be seen as a different means to the same end: whilst prominent families used their wealth to keep the Parsi community alive in Bombay, the industrial trusts used theirs to maintain the community’s relevancy in a rapidly evolving India.

It is fair to say that, in the time between Independence and liberalisation, Parsi philanthropy had become something entirely different from its nineteenth-century form: under intense demographic pressure, it no longer resembled a symbol of an established civic elite. Rather, charity acted as a multidirectional instrument of survival: inward, through housing and welfare securing the culture’s continuation, and outward, preserving the Parsi influence on institutions it had helped first build. The inward turn was not welfare alone: because trusts and the Panchayet controlled housing, welfare and the eligibility rules governing access to both, they also held considerable authority over who counted as a member entitled to draw on them. The changes in Parsi philanthropic practices during this period adequately mirrored, as well as actively contributed to, the community’s shifting social position from a colonial gentry to a postcolonial steward hoping for intra-communal preservation.

Table 2: Size of Parsi Population, 1901–2001, India

Year	Persons	Male	Female
1901	94,140*	—	—
1911	1,00,096*	51,123	48,973
1921	1,01,778*	52,355	49,423
1931	1,09,329*	56,366	52,963
1941	1,14,890*	58,248	56,642
1951	1,11,791	56,137	55,654
1961	1,00,772	49,425	51,347
1971	91,266	44,803	46,463
1981	71,630 (86,013)**	35,328	36,302
1991	76,382 (77,353)**	37,736	38,646

2001	69,601	33,949	35,652
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*Undivided India.

**Estimated based on reverse survival method using the age-group 0–9 of 2001 Census.

Source: Unisa et al. (2008), p. 62.

Table 3: Decadal Growth Rate of Population in India and among Parsis

Decade	All India	Parsis
1951–1961	20.40	-9.86
1961–1971	24.80	-9.43
1971–1981	24.66	-21.52 (-5.75)
1981–1991	23.86	6.63 (-10.07)
1991–2001	21.34	-8.88 (-10.02)

Source: Unisa et al. (2008), p. 62.

Note. Figures in parentheses for 1971-2001 are adjusted growth rates from Unisa et al. (2008), based on reverse-survived population counts.

Parsi Philanthropy in the Modern World (1990s-Present Day)

Since the 1990s, the model of Parsi philanthropy as a custodian of Indian public institutions has evolved in distinct directions. During this time, the previous outward dynamic of preserving influence had become more professionalised, and more difficult to attribute directly to the Parsi identity. The inward-looking, community-based philanthropy also solidified, especially with the introduction of state-led schemes to incentivise proliferation. A third direction has also emerged in recent years, focused neither on Parsi welfare nor the larger Indian public. Instead, this direction aims at Zoroastrianism itself as a dwindling yet sacred and scholarly tradition. The steward role which was built over the course of Indian independence has gradually split under demographic decline and foreign dispersion.

The outward turn now dominates most contemporary Parsi charity: this is evidenced by Rati Forbes, who notes:

"[T]here are very few Zoroastrians who are giving to Zoroastrian causes... in the past Parsis possibly supported one hundred percent of their philanthropy; [it went] to Parsi causes... but today it's very much the reverse."

(R. Forbes, personal communication, 2026).

Furthermore, in the Tata Trusts, now funding cancer care, rural development, and higher education, the Parsi identity of the donor has arguably disappeared from public view (Tata Trusts, n.d.). Dr. Pheroza Godrej describes the underlying orientation as "stewardship over ownership," a formulation in which the family understands itself to hold its assets "in trust for workers, for the city, for future generations, for the natural world" (P. Godrej, personal communication, 2026). Vevaina (2018) reads this trajectory as a shift in what counts as "good" giving inside the community: community-facing donation has come to feel smaller and more parochial, even as the infrastructure it supports has become indispensable.

The inward-facing turn has hardened correspondingly. The demographic decline that began in the 1950s has continued - by 2001, a reported 69,601 Parsis remained - and the Bombay Parsi Punchayet's housing remains the main mechanism holding the community together in Bombay. What is new in this period is that the government has entered the picture as a philanthropic partner through the Jiyo Parsi scheme. This scheme, launched in 2013 by the Ministry of Minority Affairs, provides medical assistance and public advocacy aimed at raising Parsi fertility. Since it began, the scheme has facilitated 534 births (Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2026). This marked a remarkable shift: communal reproduction, which had until then been the exclusive concern of trusts and citizens internal to the community, is now a policy object of the Indian state.

The third direction serves as the most diverse frame. The Shapoorji Pallonji Group's restoration of the Iranshah Atash Behram at Udhwada, undertaken at the request of the Vada Dasturji [The Religious Authority and High Priest of the Parsi-Zoroastrian community], was aimed at sacred heritage rather than welfare or national institution-building (K. Colah, personal communication, 2026). The same group's endowment of the SOAS Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian

Studies extends this logic outward, funding the transnational academic study of Zoroastrianism as a field. Vevaina (2023b) documents Parsi philanthropic flows moving in reverse, with Hong Kong trust wealth returning to Bombay as endowment. On this evidence, the community is now looking after Zoroastrianism itself as a sacred tradition and an intellectual object rather than only Indian institutions or Parsi welfare.

Until today, the custodian role still occurs yet has grown to become multi-directional in the last few decades. At the same time, the community's collective wealth is now directed at the nation its ancestors helped build, at the community's own biological continuation, and at Zoroastrianism as a heritage, including the priestly class itself, whose sustenance has become a distinct object of giving through initiatives such as Zar Amroli's funding of the 2026 SOAS programme for emerging priestly leaders and recent Poonawalla-supported efforts.

Religious & Moral Foundations of Parsi philanthropy

Existing literature has typically framed Parsi philanthropy as a religious responsibility, or as one which is ingrained as part of a moral code. Though these two framings are related, it is important to distinguish between them to better understand how Parsis approach the idea of philanthropy. On the one hand lies a religious lens, where communal giving is completely tied to doctrinally motivated ethics which are not shaped by the demographic and historic circumstances of Parsi settlement in India. On the other hand, viewing charity as part of an ever-evolving moral code focuses on unique Parsi socio-cultural norms internal to the community and highlights the historic significance of how the community used giving to shape its civic standing. This distinction matters for the present study, since several of the philanthropic families discussed here are secular in their orientation, and the language of religious duty they inherit cannot be read as solely an evidence of religious motivation.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber (1905/2013) argued that the strict Protestantism of early modern Europe encouraged hard work, thrift, and the careful management of money as religious duties in their own right, and that this philosophy helped shape the rise of European capitalism (Weber, 1905/2013). Eckehard Kulke's 1974 study *The Parsees in India: A Minority as Agent of Social Change* applied this frame to the Zoroastrian case, drawing on Weber's brief remarks on Zoroastrianism in the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* [*Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion*] to argue that Zoroastrian ethics produced a similar business-minded disposition, in which honest work and the responsible use of what it earned carried religious weight in their own right (Kulke, 1974). What made the Zoroastrian version distinctive, according to Kulke, is that it did not require the Calvinist doctrine of predestination to do its work, since its doctrinal machinery was simpler and more direct, hinging on the triad *humata, hukhta, hvarshta* [good thoughts, good words, good deeds] which treats commerce as ethically continuous with worship and builds a pull towards the public good into the very definition of wealth honestly earned. The triad's content, however, is filled in by those invoking it, and merchants, priests and industrialists have read "good deeds" in markedly different ways which suggests the ethic legitimated Parsi commercial practice as much as it produced it. John Hinnells' 1985 essay *The Flowering of Zoroastrian Benevolence: Parsi Charities in the 19th and 20th Centuries* remains the fullest empirical demonstration of what this ethic produced on the ground, since Hinnells works across two centuries of the Parsi

charitable record and concludes that the philanthropic scale the community achieved represents the ideals of the religion implemented at a level perhaps unmatched by any comparably sized minority in the modern world, running on a consistent set of values that includes care for Ahura Mazda's good creation and a durable emphasis on truth, honesty, industry, and learning (Hinnells, 1985).

Writer (2016) examines Parsi philanthropy through a sustained religious lens. She posits that the Zoroastrian notion of living 'the good life', combining "an encouragement to create material wealth with the accompanying social obligations to put it to good use", explains the extensive welfare system the Parsis established in India. The article draws upon well-established doctrines of the Zoroastrian faith: affirming 'living' life rather than counselling withdrawal from it, praising industry, condemning idleness, and treating commerce conducted with integrity as ethically continuous with religious observance. As a result, honestly earned wealth carries a genuine social obligation to assist others. In Writer's view, that doctrinal argument meets a particular historical condition: after the Arab conquest of Iran and settlement in India as what she characterises as "a most minuscule minority", self-help became a survival mechanism, and the Parsi welfare network came to operate simultaneously as reaffirmation of religious tradition and as insurance for a community whose numbers left it exposed to attrition. Parsi giving was never purely domestic: the Society for the Amelioration of the Conditions of the Zoroastrians in Persia, founded in Bombay in the 1850s, directed community wealth toward Iranian co-religionists from the outset. Writer draws Weber directly into the argument here, treating his conceptualisation of "economic ethics" in Protestantism having its parallels to Zoroastrianism (Writer, 2016).

The moral foundations of the two establishments are related but distinct and are approached through Osella (2018). Osella's central methodological claim is that the study of giving in the region has been distorted by the Euro-American gift/charity binary, in which philanthropy is treated either as a transactional exchange whose returns can be measured in social capital, or as a purely disinterested act whose value lies in its moral gratuitousness (Osella, 2018). Neither model, in the eyes of Osella, captures the actual patterns of giving that South Asian communities have generated over the past two centuries, and neither can accommodate the way religious and civic motivations tend to reinforce each other in practice. Osella argues that giving in the region is embedded in regimes of hierarchy, reform, and community-making, and it continues to do political and social work even when the idioms it uses are doctrinal. Applied to the Parsi case, this framework dissolves what has otherwise been a tired opposition in the literature between piety and status-seeking: a debate that has run through anthropological writing on Indian gift-giving from Mauss (1925) through Parry (1986) and into contemporary treatments such as Bornstein (2012), and allows Parsi civic donation to be read as a mode of building the community's public face in colonial Bombay, in which religious duty and civic positioning worked as the same impulse expressed twice.

The most durable literary form this posture takes is the *Qissa-i Sanjan*, the sixteenth-century Parsi migration epic composed by the priest Bahman Kaikobad, and specifically the Milk and Sugar parable in which the arriving Zoroastrian refugees respond to the local Hindu king Jadi Rana's bowl of milk [presented to them filled to the brim, signifying that his kingdom was full] by adding sugar to it and promising to enrich his people without displacing them (Kaikobad,

1599/2009). Alan Williams' authoritative translation and analysis of the poem reads the parable as mythological self-theorisation rather than as historical record, characterising the narrative as one that prioritises theological motifs over empirical reconstruction (Kaikobad, 1599/2009). He finds that the parable does not describe how the Parsis arrived so much as how the community wanted itself to be understood once it had, and to sweeten the public, in the parable's logic, is to enrich the commons without asserting difference. Institution-building follows naturally from that framing, because a hospital or a school is the kind of gift that sweetens without staining, benefiting the wider public and outlasting its founder in a way that compounds the moral effect of the original gift across generations.

Future of Parsi Philanthropy

This paper has traced the trajectory of the Parsi community, from a colonial elite to its postcolonial integration into broader society, as well as the trajectory of its philanthropy, from a manner of self-preservation to its pluralistic nature in the present day. However, the future of Parsi philanthropy is yet to be determined and will be decided by a unique combination of factors.

In order to capture the dynamics of future philanthropic trends within the community, the first factor worth considering concerns charity recipients. As the Parsi collective declines in population, coupled with growing interfaith marriages (Vesvikar, 2019, p.19), the inward-facing model that has held the community together in Bombay will run into a straightforward mathematical problem. The Bombay Parsi Punchayet's housing operates on the assumption that there is a community of formal members waiting to be housed, and that this community reproduces itself at a rate the trusts can serve. Two distinct pressures are at work; the first is demographic which is the absolute number of Parsis is falling. The second is definitional: the current membership rules exclude the children of Parsi women who marry outside the community, so the population eligible to draw on Punchayet housing shrinks faster than the population itself. The trusts' beneficiary pool is therefore contracting for two reasons at once, one of which is a matter of birth rates and the other a matter of rules the community could in principle revise. Both assumptions are weakening, because if the number of Parsis who meet the current membership rules continues to fall, and if the children of Parsi women marrying outside the community remain formally excluded, the pool of eligible recipients will shrink faster than the population as a whole. The trusts will eventually be left with charitable capital that no longer has a community of the size their founding deeds envisaged. This creates a question the community's institutions have not yet had to answer directly: whether the inward-facing philanthropic model can survive without loosening the rules that define who counts as a beneficiary.

Informed by this contradiction of falling membership, one can conclude that the future of Parsi philanthropy will largely depend on how the philanthropic elite foster trust between Parsis and non Parsis and overcome the binary of member based philanthropic activities and general-purpose philanthropic activities that have shaped the socio-political trajectory of modern India since colonialism. Furthermore, as India aspires to become a developed nation, the significance of philanthropic capital needed for investment in education, research and healthcare will only increase (Dhawan and Aggarwal, 2026). As a result, it may be beneficial for



the Parsi elite and the government to form a cohesive secular consensus, similar to their relationship immediately after India's independence. Future research on this subject can focus on how functional alliances between philanthropic elites, government and public sector organizations can be deepened through endowment funds, public private partnerships and corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies for efficient and equitable goals. Parsi philanthropy is undoubtedly unique, and its visionary, institution-building nature renders it an admirable potential model for all Indian philanthropy in the decades to come.



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