



FRAMJI DADABHOY
ALPAIWALLA MUSEUM

BIPS

Workshop

The Legacy of Parsi Women in India

(Attendance by invitation only)



F.D. Alpaiwalla Museum (Mumbai), 27-28 November 2026

The Legacy of Parsi Women in India

A Workshop at the F.D. Alpaiwalla Museum, Mumbai

The Legacy of Parsi Women in India: Workshop

This Workshop will discuss some of the key areas in which women participated in the development of Indian society and culture during the 19th and early 20th centuries and the impact this had on modern professional, domestic and devotional life. It will consider how the role of women grew in a society that was in transition. How did women become the agents for change during this period? What persuaded some Parsi women to lead the way out of the more repressive aspects of two prevailing systems: colonial rule and Parsi patriarchy?

Speakers from across India with a few from the UK, USA, and Hong Kong, will address the different areas in which Parsi women gained agency and prominence in the fields of law, education, medicine, literature, politics, theatre, media, and in domestic and devotional life.

F.D. Alpaiwalla Museum

The F.D. Alpaiwalla Museum, administered by the Bombay Parsi Panchayat (BPP) - the apex administrative body of the Parsi community in India - will host the Workshop at its premises in the Memorial Building, Kharaghat Colony, Malabar Hill, Mumbai.

The museum was restored, upgraded and reopened on 27 March 2025 with a generous grant from the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. It is the only archaeological and ethnographic museum in the world dedicated to the Zoroastrian community. Its collection includes a firman issued by the Mughal Emperor Jahangir, coins, excavations from a dakhma in Iran dating from the 17th century, Chinese porcelain and a substantial library. Items, such as the inner sanctum of a fire temple commissioned for the Everlasting Flame exhibition at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS in 2013, and in the National Museum in Delhi in 2016, have also been donated to the Museum.

The British Institute of Persian Studies

BIPS is the UK's foremost learned organisation dedicated to promoting and supporting scholarship and research excellence on all aspects of Iran and the wider Persianate world, and to increasing public understanding and knowledge of this region.

BIPS is one of the British International Research Institutes (BIRI), supported by the British Academy.

Provisional Programme

Friday, 27 November 2026

9.30-9.50 AM	Arrival
9.50-10.00 AM	Introduction and Welcome
Session 1	
10.00-1.10 PM	
10.00-11.00 AM	Jesse Palsetia , University of Guelph - Keynote <i>Parsi Women, their Supporters and Collaborators in the Progress of Women's Emancipation in Society, and the Difficulties and Ironies of their State</i>
11.00-11.20 AM	Coffee Break
11.20-11.40 AM	Leilah Sohrab Vevaina , The Chinese University of Hong Kong <i>The Social Impact of Women's Financial Power</i>
11.40-12.00 PM	Rusheed Wadia , Independent Researcher <i>(Title and abstract tbc)</i>
12.00-12.15 PM	Discussion
12.15-12.35 PM	Mridula Ramanna , Former Head, Department of History, SIES college, Mumbai <i>Emergence of Parsi Women as Medical Professionals</i>
12.35-12.55 PM	Perveez Mody , University of Cambridge <i>Parsi Women and Marriage</i>
12.55-1.10 PM	Discussion
1.10-2.10 PM	Lunch

Session 2

2.10-5.20 PM

2.10-2.30 PM **Dinyar Patel**, SPJMR, Mumbai

A Parsi Woman's Grand Tour: the travel diaries of Serene Cursetji

2.30-2.50 PM **Jenny Rose**, Research Fellow, Claremont Graduate University, C.A.
Parsi Women's Education 'à l'Europe'.

2.50-3.10 PM **Discussion**

3.10-3.30 PM **Tea Break**

3.30-3.50 PM **Pheroza Godrej**, Hon. Advisor F.D. Alpaiwalla Museum
Seen and Unseen: Parsi women and artistic practice in modern India

3.50-4.10 PM **Meher Mistry**, University of Mumbai
Wielding the Pen: the legacy of Parsi women writers to Gujarati literature

4.10-4.25 PM **Discussion**

4.25-4.45 PM **Shernaz Cama**, Parzor
Parsi Women in Transition, the Revolutionary and the Reformist: Madame Bhikaji Cama and Hilla R. Faridoonji

4.45-5.05 PM **Firoza Punthakey Mistree**, Independent Researcher, Hon. Advisor F.D. Alpaiwalla Museum
The Nature of Fragile Dissent, Two Parsi Women at the Cross-section of Colonialism: Lady Avabai Jejeebhoy and Ruttie Petit

5.05-5.20 PM **Discussion**

7:30 PM **Dinner**

Saturday, 28 November 2026

Session 1

10.00-1.00 PM

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| 10.00-10.20 AM | Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis , BIPS, BM
<i>Goddesses and Queens on Coins: representation without empowerment</i> |
| 10.20-10.40 AM | Murali Ranganathan , Independent Researcher
<i>Parsi Women in Iran: travelogues from the early Pahlavi era</i> |
| 10.40-10.55 AM | Discussion |
| 10.55-11.15 AM | Coffee Break |
| 11.15-11.35 AM | Kerman Daruwalla , TISS-Parzor, Mumbai
<i>Women's Participation in Priestly Ritual</i> |
| 11.35-11.55 AM | Sarah Stewart , SOAS, BIPS
<i>The Domestication of Priestly Ritual</i> |
| 11.55-12.10 PM | Discussion |
| 12.10-12.25 PM | Closing remarks and plans for publication |
| 2.00-4.00 PM | Excursion tbc (optional) |



Abstracts

Jesse Palsetia

University of Guelph

Parsi Women, their Supporters and Collaborators in the Progress of Women's Emancipation in Society, and the Difficulties and Ironies of their State

The history of women and women's roles in history now forms a large and rich corpus of works and historiography. Barely 150 years ago, the idea of women in history was hidden and an afterthought in the light of men's progress. Yet, amongst an insightful few, women's place in society and their development was considered a synchronized march to the progress of society. Among the Parsis, some of the first proponents of Indian women's rights emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century. At mid-century, a new generation of Parsi reformers was intent on promoting education and the creation of Parsi-run schools for boys and girls. This paper will examine the Parsi involvement in female schools and the philosophy that motivated women's rights among select Parsis. It will note their achievements and the challenges Parsi men faced in the quest for women's rights from society.

Jesse S. Palsetia is Professor of History at the University of Guelph, Canada. He teaches the History of India and the history of British Empire. His research specialises on the Parsis of India, and the history of Bombay City. He is the author of *The Parsis of India* (Brill: 2001, reprint Manohar: 2015) and *Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy of Bombay* (Oxford University Press: 2015).

Leilah Sohrab Vevaina

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

The Social Impact of Women's Financial Power

While Parsis are renowned for their charitable giving, it is often forgotten that Parsi women have made enormous contributions to the community and to many civic institutions. What is remarkable is not simply how much they gave but their innovative techniques of giving that have nurtured their legacies beyond their natural lifetimes. By utilizing instruments like the charitable trust to harness real estate and invest their financial assets, the effect of this giving is lasting and has marked the community in India in multiple ways. This presentation will examine the types, techniques, and impacts of a few cases of Parsi women's financial power and acumen.

Leilah Vevaina is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her first book, *Trust Matters: Parsi Endowments in Mumbai and the Horoscope of a City*, was published by Duke University Press in 2023. She is currently writing her second book entitled, *Necrofinance*, on Zoroastrian death rituals and infrastructure in the diaspora.

Rusheed Wadia (title and abstract tbc)

Mridula Ramanna

Former Head, Department of History, SIES College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Mumbai

Emergence of Parsi Women as Medical Professionals

Parsi women were at the forefront, when Grant Medical College, Mumbai admitted women in 1883, consequent to the initiative of the Medical Women for India Fund. It is significant that they presented a petition calling for the curriculum to be on par with what was being taught to male students at the College. Some of them trained further in England. The trajectory of their careers is interesting. Though top positions in public hospitals remained the monopoly of the British into the 1930s, Parsi women doctors carved out a niche by providing medical aid both in private practice and as honorary physicians. Some women served in princely states. Doubtless their presence made western medicine more acceptable to women patients. They contributed to discussions on maternal and infant health at conferences and initiated and participated in women's organizations.

Mridula Ramanna has thirty-four years of teaching experience and has published extensively. *Bombay Presidency, 1850-1920: Disease, Sanitation and Public Health Personalities*; *Parsis and Public Health in Colonial Bombay*; *Facets of Public Health in Early Twentieth Century Bombay*; *Health Care in Bombay Presidency, 1896-1930*; *Western Medicine and Public Health in Colonial Bombay, 1845-1895*.

Perveez Mody

University of Cambridge

The Life and Work of India's First Female Lawyer, Cornelia Sorabji

By her own account, Cornelia Sorabji (1866- 1954) was of “Parsi nationality”. Her parents were avid educationists; her father Sorabji Kharsedji was instrumental in admitting women to the University of Bombay; her mother ran schools for the children of the poor in Poona. Cornelia succeeded in becoming the most educated Indian woman of her time – succeeding at Oxford University as the first woman to take the graduate Bachelor of Civil Law examination, receiving her degree many decades later in 1932, and becoming India's first female lawyer. Her success was a struggle at every stage on the grounds of being a woman, and yet she managed in colonial times to achieve what few woman could: a professional career, independence and an interesting life. This paper will explore her biography, academic achievements and legacy as a legal champion of secluded women in India.

Perveez Mody is Associate Professor of Social Anthropology and a Fellow of King's College at the University of Cambridge. She has written an ethnography of love-marriage in a district court in India and more recently has published on ‘forced-marriage’ in the UK. Her books include *The Intimate State* (2008).

Dinyar Patel
SPJMR, Mumbai

A Parsi Woman's Grand Tour: the travel diaries of Serene Cursetji

Within the University of Mumbai Library is a collection of fragile diaries which has been completely unexplored by modern scholars and, until recently, unknown even to its custodians. The diaries of Serene Cursetji (1845?-1939) provide an unrivalled glimpse into the life of an elite Parsi woman in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The daughter of Manekji Cursetji, Serene was one of the first Indian women to attend an English-medium school. As a teenager and young woman, Serene accompanied her father on extensive tours through Europe, probably becoming one of the first modern Indian women to set foot in locales like Milan, Berlin, St. Petersburg, and Moscow. These travels are meticulously documented in her diaries, demonstrating how Parsis partook in early modern tourism, navigated Victorian-era gender norms, and entered—with stunning ease—into the social world of European royals and the elite.

Dinyar Patel is Associate Professor of History at SPJIMR. His book, *Naoroji: Pioneer of Indian Nationalism* (Harvard University Press, 2020), won the 2021 Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay NIF Book Prize. He has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Fulbright Foundation, and the American Institute of Indian Studies.

Jenny Rose

Claremont Graduate University, C.A.

Parsi Women's Education 'à l'Europe'

This presentation will focus on the rise of formal education for Parsi girls and young women in Bombay during the 19th century. Spearheaded by Maneckji Cursetji Shroff, who instituted a school for 'young ladies' in his home with an English governess, along with other Parsi community leaders including Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, and Dadabhai Naoroji, this potentially liberating development was somewhat restrained by local societal and cultural norms, as well as by contemporary British attitudes towards the 'proper' education of women. The paper broaches some comparisons with the state of female education in late Georgian era - Victorian period England, and the realities for educated women in both societies.

Jenny Rose is a Research Fellow at Claremont Graduate University, California. Her books include *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction* (I.B.Tauris, 2011), and *Between Boston and Bombay: Cultural and Commercial Connections of Yankees and Parsis, 1771-1865* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). With Albert de Jong and Sarah Stewart, she co-edited *The Zoroastrian World* (Routledge 2026).

Pheroza Godrej

Hon. Advisor F.D. Alpaiwalla Museum

Seen and Unseen: Parsi women and artistic practice in modern India

Parsi artists occupy a relatively underexplored space within the histories of modern Indian art and visual culture. Within this already dispersed field, the contributions of Parsi women have received even less sustained attention. The talk explores this history through a selection of Parsi women who worked across photography, painting, architecture, sculpture, textiles, craft, music, research and cultural documentation. From pioneers such as Homai Vyarawalla, Cumi Dallas, Perin Jamshedji Mistri and Pilloo Pochkhanawala, the talk considers the varied ways in which Parsi women participated in and shaped India's changing artistic and cultural landscape. It then turns to figures such as Nelly Sethna, Maxie Cooper and Coomi Wadia, among others, to explore practices that extend beyond conventional art histories into textiles, design, music and cultural preservation. Across these diverse practices emerge recurring questions of memory, community, place and Parsi identity. Rather than offering an exhaustive catalogue, the talk considers what has been seen and what has remained unseen. By bringing together women working across diverse artistic fields, it proposes a broader understanding of Parsi artistic practice, one that moves beyond a handful of recognised figures to uncover the many ways Parsi women have created, documented and interpreted their own worlds.

Pheroza J. Godrej is a Mumbai-based art historian, curator, author and environmentalist. She founded Cymroza Art Gallery in 1971, championing modern and contemporary Indian art. A scholar of ancient Indian culture and Zoroastrian heritage, she has curated exhibitions, written extensively, supported museums, and promoted urban greenery and conservation. She is also an advisor to the F.D. Alpaiwalla Museum and supports mental-health initiatives. She is Chairperson of Godrej Archives Council and Advisor, Godrej Mangroves Cell.

Meher Mistry

R. J. College, University of Mumbai

Wielding the Pen: the legacy of Parsi women writers to Gujarati literature

The reform movement in Bombay helped Parsi women to gain access to modern education from the middle of the nineteenth century. Parsi women soon began to express themselves in Gujarati which was generally their medium of instruction and also the language of their home. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Parsi women started contributing prolifically to magazines like Rast Goftar, Stri Bodh, Masik Majah, Fursad and Madhurvachan. Women from families who were involved in the publishing of magazines helped to manage the publication and when opportunity arose went on to serve as editors of these magazines. The case of Sirin Kabraji and Putlabai Kabraji, who edited Stree Bodhe and Bai Bhikhaiji Palamkote of Masik Majah, can be cited as instances. Women also began to make a mark in the field of novel writing. The paper will examine the literary contribution of Parsi women in the Gujarati language.

Meher Mistry is Head, Department of History and Associate Professor at R.J. College, University of Mumbai. Her research interests focus on History of Parsis, Gender and maritime history of Gujarat. She is also associated with the TISS-PARZOR programme on Culture & Civilisation: A Zoroastrian Perspective.

Shernaz Cama
Parzor Foundation

Parsi Women in Transition, the Revolutionary and the Reformist: Madame Bhikaiji Cama and Hilla R. Faridoonji

This paper explores the changing roles of Parsi women during a transformative period in the Indian Freedom Movement. It discusses two women, Madame Bhikaiji Cama, famous revolutionary & Hilla R. Faridoonji, the quiet reformist. Representing distinct dimensions of women's engagement in Indian life, they illustrate the movement from revolutionary nationalism on the international stage to social transformation through education of women. Madame Bhikaiji Cama transcended conventional social boundaries through her international advocacy for India's freedom struggle unfurling the Flag of Freedom at the International Socialist Conference, Stuttgart, Germany, 1907. Hilla R. Faridoonji's work reflects reform & consolidation of women's participation in Indian public life. Through their lives and contributions, we see how Parsi women negotiated national concerns, community identity, tradition & modernity. Their contrasting journeys demonstrate the diverse possibilities available to women at a time of profound social and political change, highlighting the significant contribution of Parsi women to modern India.

Prof. Shernaz Cama, Founder Director, Parzor Foundation, is a distinguished educator, researcher and heritage specialist. She founded the TISS-Parzor Programme on Zoroastrian Studies and has led UNESCO initiatives on Parsi Zoroastrian culture. Author, curator and filmmaker, she has received several international awards for her contribution to Zoroastrian culture & education.

Firoza Punthakey Mistree

Independent Researcher, Hon. Advisor F.D. Alpaiwalla Museum

Dissent: two Parsi women at the cross-section of colonialism, Lady Avabai Jejeebhoy and Ruttie Petit

This paper examines how the non-conformist actions of Lady Avabai Jejeebhoy the wife of the first Parsi Baronet and Ruttie Petit the wife of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, renegotiated gender boundaries and exposed deep-seated communal anxieties within Parsi society in colonial Bombay. Living at the height of colonial rule, Lady Avabai leveraged her husband's immense wealth and formidable community stature to secure institutional legitimacy, effectively expanding public horizons for Parsi women. Conversely, navigating the twilight of the colonial era, Ruttie Petit's marriage to Muhammad Ali Jinnah caused a profound socio-religious rupture. This defiance triggered her systemic erasure from both communal chronicles and elite Bombay society, illustrating the precarious and short-lived nature of her dissent. By analyzing both women primarily through the lens of the Parsi community, this paper demonstrates how non-conformity was differentially absorbed or punished based on the perceived threat to communal boundaries and the fragile Parsi identity.

Firoza Punthakey Mistree works for Zoroastrian Studies and is the Honorary Advisor to the F.D. Alpaiwalla Museum in Mumbai. She co-edited with Pheroza Godrej: *A Zoroastrian Tapestry: Art, Religion & Culture* (2002), *Across Oceans & Flowing Silks from Canton to Bombay 18th–20th Centuries* (2013), and *Painted Encounters, Parsi Traders and the Community* (2016) and jointly edited *The Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination* (2013). In 2018 she authored Dastur Kotwal's biography and co-edited *The Selected Scholarly Writings of Dastur Firoze M. Kotwal*.

Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis

BIPS, BM

Goddesses and Queens on Coins: representation without empowerment

Representations of female figures focus on two categories in Partho-Sasanian art: 1. images of divine beings and 2. Images of royal figures. Following the Hellenistic /Roman tradition, as well as the Babylonian and Elamite traditions, goddesses are frequently shown as terracotta figurines, and they also appear on seals. In Parthian-period Elymais, they appear on architectural reliefs. On coins, goddesses play a particularly prominent role on the back of silver tetradrachms struck in Mesopotamia and at Susa. Here, they appear in their role as protectors of the king and present him with various symbols of kingship. Representations of the kings' consort, on the other hand, are rare but are known from coins of King Kamnaskires III of Elymais of the 1st century BCE, and coins of Phraataces of 2BCE – 4CE. In the early Sasanian period, images of the goddess Anahita, whose temple at Stakhr was the centre of worship of the royal family under Ardashir I and his immediate successors, are found on reliefs, coins and statues. Particularly interesting is the art of Varahran/ Bahram II (273-293 CE) where we find many representations of a female figure. We will address the question whether we are dealing here with the king's consort, a goddess, or Daena, the good inner self, the maiden of conscience

Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis is Curator Emerita of Middle Eastern Coins, The British Museum, Joint Director of the International Parthian Coin Project, the *Sylloge Nummorum Parthicorum*, Senior Advisor of the SOAS Shapourji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies, and she is Vice-President of the of the British Institute of Persian Studies (BIPS).

Murali Ranganathan

Independent Researcher

Parsi Women in Iran: travelogues from the early Pahlavi era

Iran became a popular travel destination for the Parsis in the 1920s and many travelogues and guidebooks to Iran were soon published in Gujarati and English. However, Parsi women travellers to Iran were still a rarity. In this context, I propose to examine two Iran travelogues written by Parsi women in Gujarati. While Kunvarbai Dhalla describes a journey in 1921 when the Qajar regime had just been displaced, Meherbanu Anklesaria writes about a tour undertaken in 1930 by when the Pahlavi dynasty had consolidated its power over Iran. The two journeys, undertaken in dramatically different circumstances, illustrate the fast-paced changes which took place in Iran during this ten-year period, particularly from a Zoroastrian perspective. The two travelogues will also be contrasted with travel accounts written by Parsi men and European women who did not have access to spaces which these two Parsi ladies could enter.

Murali Ranganathan is a historian, writer and translator. His interests include printing history and culture, travel accounts, and urban history. He has written extensively on Mumbai and its communities including the Parsis, the printing history of Mumbai and on themes related to book history and travelogues.

Kerman Daruwalla

TISS-Parzor, Mumbai

Women's Participation in Priestly Ritual

Zoroastrian priestly rituals are almost exclusively performed by male members of the priestly lineage; however, the female members of priestly families play a vital role in the priestly ecosystem. Among the important functions are those related to the procurement and preparation of food items which are kept as offerings in the ceremonies, and the observance of purity rules which are integral to maintain the sanctity of the ritual sphere. Another key role is during the early years of priestly training of a child when the main training is imparted by women in priestly homes. This talk will explore such themes to present a view on the evolution of the women's participation in priestly ritual in India, based on interviews conducted with priests and female members in their families.

Kerman Daruwalla is the Academic Coordinator and Lecturer for the TISS-Parzor Academic Programme on Zoroastrianism in Mumbai. He is also a post-doctoral researcher for the Avestan in India (AVINDIA) Project at the School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.

Sarah Stewart

SOAS, BIPS

The Domestication of Priestly Ritual

This talk will explore two distinct areas in which priestly ritual is brought into a domestic context. The first is historic and concerns the rituals performed by women that centred on the traditional hearth fire, designated for worship, that used to exist in Parsi households. Through prayer and song, they demonstrated a familiarity with both the liturgy and the performance of the inner rituals of the faith performed by qualified priests within the ritual precinct of the fire temple. The second concerns the role of the panthakey, the priest traditionally responsible for a panthak or parish, or today a group of families within the community. Priests in this category were often hereditary, serving the same family through generations. In addition to being responsible for all the religious requirements of the family, or families they served within their district, they also performed a pastoral role acting as mentors and mediators more generally.

Sarah Stewart is reader Emeritus at SOAS, where she taught Zoroastrianism in the Department of Religions and Philosophies. She was co-founder of the SOAS Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies in 2017. Her publications include *Voices from Zoroastrian Iran*, Vols. 1 and 2 (2018, 2020) and *The Zoroastrian World* (2026).

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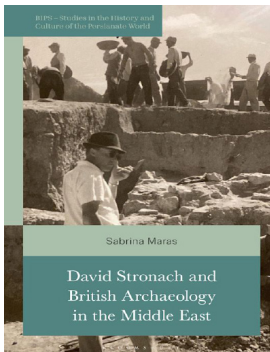
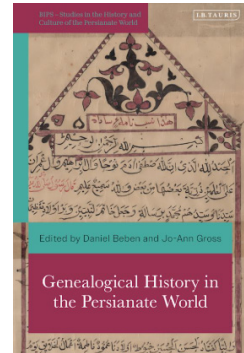
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Genealogical History in the Persianate World. Edited by Jo-Ann Gross and Daniel Beben. Published: June 2025.

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David Stronach and British Archaeology in the Middle East. By Sabrina Maras. Published: June 2026.

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