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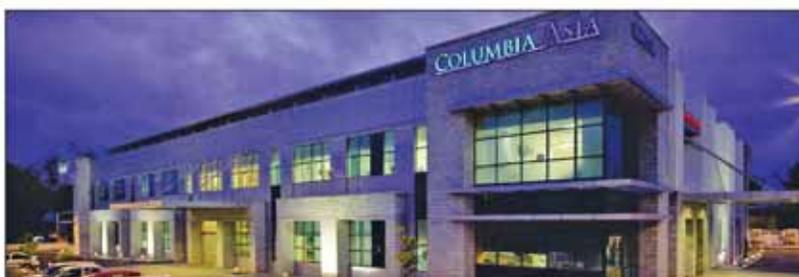
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Dr. Shernaz Cama



Parsi Times: You have been associated with the UNESCO initiated PARZOR as Honorary Director for a while now. In the larger scheme of things, how effective has the initiative been in relation to the Community?

Dr. Cama: My work on Zoroastrianism began in the 1980s with my PhD researches on William Blake and Zoroastrianism. That is when I realised the impact Zoroastrianism has had on world thought, philosophy and culture. It led me to speak and write about it, which led to my becoming part of the Interfaith movement, then UNESCO asked me and I started PARZOR.

At grassroots levels the impact has been very positive. It has led to discoveries which are now internationally recognized, i.e. the Tanka system of water harvesting, explained by Rohinton Jambusarwala of Bharuch. The Community has opened its homes and hearts to our researchers, photographers, and demographers. They feel that the world again sees the value of the environmental consciousness they have followed, the crafts of Kusti weaving, the techniques of embroidery, the revival of the Monajats... all this has happened through our working and learning from the Community across India, Iran, England, Hong Kong, the USA. Today Scholars from every great University come to the Meherjirana Library in Navsari... even Amitav Ghosh came to the PARZOR Conference there in 2013.

Across the world with Roots, the Dotivala Bakery, Yazdi Karanjia, have become household words. I need you to understand that it is a mistake we perpetrate when we say the Parsis became known because of trade in British Times, that is only the growth of Bombay. Parsis were trusted in India with the 2 most important aspects of civic life in Princely states- they looked after money and administration, as Diwans, and health, as Vaid, Hakims,

She is neither famous for being on a Zarthushti Board nor is she a member of the upper echelons of our Priesthood... and yet when **Dr. Shernaz Cama** speaks, people tend to not only listen but to understand. This dynamic lady from New Delhi is many things... a teacher to teachers, a student of some of the great scholars, a feminist and of course the Initiator and Honorary Director of the UNESCO PARZOR Project. She has worked with global bodies to understand how and where our Religion and Culture fit into the larger scheme of things. Today she and her team share the task of bringing Jiyo Parsi to the world. She shares her journey and her thoughts in this exclusive and empowering chat with **Parsi Times**.

Hadvaids.

This is part of our Zoroastrian heritage, not just of trust and truth but of our abilities as Healers renowned across Asia and Eastern Europe, the Magi or Wise Men who visited the Christ child were ,after all, Zoroastrians. That is the real value of our Bronze Age culture, it led in medicine, astronomy, music, agriculture, above all in caring for Creation. It also gave the world the Cyrus Cylinder; the 1st Charter of Human Rights, freedom to men and women , total self discipline and above

college, it makes me feel good, not old. Teaching keeps you young, because you have young minds around you all the time, you learn their slang, their anxieties, their joys. All my students are my *bacchas*, that's my term for them. They are my joy, the daughters I never had... they and my Fulbright Researchers, who live in India for years sometimes, are my global family. I am still in touch with students from my 1st batch, now a Grandma to their children, whom they bring from Germany, Japan to meet me. Its a profession I love and a job I

On the other hand, the Delhi Community is highly visible, very respected and it competes and proves its capacity with the best in the world.

So, I guess, a little more sensitivity and care for people in Delhi, a little more of stretching oneself and competitiveness in Mumbai, would create an ideal Community.

P.T.: The Jiyo Parsi Scheme clearly needs the Community, the Priesthood and the Trustees to be on the same page. How important a role do you think the Priesthood needs to play?

Dr. Cama: I have worked for decades with our Priests, both in India and Iran. I have great respect for them. The Community can be crassly neglectful of their core role in preserving Zoroastrian identity. As Prof. Mary Boyce used to tell me, 'They know so much, I learn from their Oral Traditions, but your people do not appreciate them at all.'

I have seen that it is the Priests who first pointed out the tragic demographics of our Community. 'Dikra, I perform *paidust* after *paidust*... where are the children's whose *Navjotes* I used to do... why are there no more couples to marry??'

The Priests, as you saw at the meeting, are very rational. They are hard working and sensible. We have very well trained minds there, due to the discipline of Madressa training. They have always supported our work, including Jiyo Parsi. We always keep them informed, ask them their views and they guide us in an unobtrusive way. I wish the Community Trusts treated them with greater care and compassion. So many of our Fire Temples are full of smoke, they suffer health problems related to smoking... it's time we worked on making more cross ventilation available. If we let our Priests lead on Religious matters, rather than Trustees across India, we would have a more cohesive Community. *This was how it was when Navsari was the Dharm-ni-Tekri*... the highest point of Faith. The urbanization of our Community transferred power to rich



Sethias... not unfortunately for the better in many cases.

P.T.: A lot has been said about the advertising campaign of the Jiyo Parsi Scheme, both good and bad. What would you like to say to the naysayers?

Dr. Cama: I say, read the FINE PRINT, NOT just the sarcastic slogan. The slogan is meant to sting, get you upset... the message is to make YOU think, make YOU choose how YOU want to live your life. The strident feminists either have not read the Ads completely, or sadly intentionally MISREAD them to suit their own agenda. The Ads are showing true situations. Those who think them offensive, should come with me to some of our Widows Chawls and see old, lonely people in Senior Citizens Homes. We have forgotten how abnormal our approach to life has become... Jiyo Parsi was created out of 10 years of research with hard data, collated by India's finest brains. If people would ask themselves the question Dr. Arvind Mayaram asked us at the BPP, 'DO YOU HAVE THE WILL TO LIVE?' they could be more honest about their reactions.

The whole Community needs to thank Sam Balsara and his team for forcing us to confront ourselves. The controversy has also created great awareness, across the world, from Washington to Tokyo, people write in, wanting to know more about our complex culture and psychology. They want the Ads translated into Farsi, German, Italian.

Of course, some want clarifications, which we provide. But its finally a tiny part of a huge programme. However, there is one important clarification needed. We are being maligned in absurd write ups for spending 10 crores of tax payers money on the Ads!

The whole Jiyo Parsi programme for 5 years is that amount.

1.3 crores is for Advocacy and Administration. We have a team at TISS, highly trained professionals, who are to travel across each baug of Bombay, each village, town, city... in this amount. We are making



At a Jiyo Parsi Press Conference

Picture Courtesy: Khushnum Bhandari

all the right to choose and the Responsibility to stand by that choice.

P.T.: Tell us a little more about your life as an educationist in New Delhi.

Dr. Cama: I began teaching at Lady Shri Ram College after my M.Phil, then went abroad for my Ph.D., came back to a job

cherish.

P.T.: The Community in New Delhi and the Community in Maharashtra and Gujarat area differ on many accounts. In an ideal world what qualities would you like to add to each of them from the other?

Dr. Cama: Respect for people, judging by a human's worth

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at Jesus & Mary College where I was for 11 years. Then, due to health reasons, I had to take some years off, and went back to full time teaching at L.S.R. IN 1995. I love my teaching, my students, my post graduate classes on Blake and Yeats at Jamia, Delhi university have all been great fun.

My teaching teachers, as a Resource Person or Expert for the CPDHE, the Centre for Professional Development in Higher Education, across India, is all very fulfilling. I am now teaching some of my earlier student's daughters at

not his/her bank balance, is what I love about Gujarat. It is still home for me. I have my ancestral place, Sir Nowroji Hall, in Ahmedabad. Each time I fly over it, en route to Mumbai from Delhi, there is a pull at my heartstrings. I hope to retire there some day, in a place where the shop keepers refer to me as my Grandmother's 'copy.'

The Deccani Community is also very closely knit, as is Kolkata.

Delhi has become a little flashy, because of its surroundings, the Mall culture.

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a film showing, like the Ads, real people and their stories. Madison, the photographers, the people who participated, all did it for their Community, free of cost. To malign them is a shame. We should be grateful, I am certainly very grateful.

We are a free Democracy, you can say you object to things I have said, but I still have the right to speak... just as you have the right NOT to hear. It's all about choice, if Jiyo Parsi chooses to point out our Community quirks, it's to make us re-look at ourselves, perhaps rethink our priorities. But do not comment on Ads, even before they are actually published.

P.T.: Apart from the fertility incentives under the Jiyo Parsi Scheme where else do you think the Government can help out the Community?
Dr. Cama: There are areas of Education, help in Schemes for the Aged, Vocational training, Revival of Handicrafts, Assistance to Orphanages... the list is vast. We need to start helping the Govt to help us by coming forward to work with India as it moves forward into the 21st century.

P.T.: You have worked under the famous Prof. Mary Boyce.

“ I do believe that true education, not just cramming for marks, is vital. It widens your horizon, makes you realize how little you know, how much there is to learn and how many teachers you can find... The lab or classroom, the library and life are all Educators. ”

Could you tell us a little more about the experience and what you took away from it?

Dr. Cama: Prof. Boyce was a strict disciplinarian, where research was concerned, but was also amazingly kind and very brave. She had this terrible disease of the spine, which kept her in constant pain, so she wrote and spoke lying down. Despite all this, she looked after her brother and she worked till the very end.

From her, I learnt to verify everything, I learnt to respect Orality and Tradition, I learnt to be kind to young students from her. I spent a whole day with her on a visit before she died. She had stopped meeting people, so the Parsis of London were very surprised; but she guided the plan for UNESCO PARZOR, watched over it and above all gave me the

confidence I needed to believe I could succeed in my work for the Community.

P.T.: How vital is Education in the Community? Where do we stand in that department and how do you suggest we improve upon it?
Dr. Cama: Education is much

“ We Parsis are very tolerant with others, we are intolerant among ourselves... all this is part of the crises we are in at present. We need to live and let live, within our Community. ”

more than a degree; it is self study, it is following traditions with awareness born of knowledge, it is compassion for all being. It is a Work Life balance. Degrees do not make you educated, J.R.D. Tata never went to college, yet he was one of the wisest of Indians.

Saying this, I do believe that true education, not just cramming for marks, is vital. It widens your horizon, makes you realize how little you know; how much there is to learn and how many teachers you can find... The lab or classroom, the library and life are all Educators.

Choose your teachers carefully, respect them, but also question them if you

disagree; work creatively and above all let Education teach you HOW to think for YOURSELF. Question everything, even your own decisions every now and again. Let Education teach you to be humble, and to believe in yourself... that is the true paradox of an educated mind and heart.

P.T.: As a Feminist, what is your view on the modern Parsi lady?

Dr. Cama: I am a post modern eco feminist. Having taught at 'Feminist' colleges for 32 years, I have done theoretical feminism in the classroom and lived life on my terms outside.

Eco-feminism, of whom my favourite poet is the American Adrienne Rich, and India's Vandana Shiva, one of the best writers and an agent of change globally, are strong women. We don't want to be like men! We

are proud of our differences.

Men have, in their competitive greed destroyed this Spenta Creation, our beautiful Earth, we need to nurture it back to life. Celebrate caritas, the Greek concept of care for all being bring back family values, of true interdependence, not just of men and women, but old and young, craftswoman and shop owner... this is true equality, it celebrates each contribution to life.

Stop whining about life being unfair, go out and do what you can to make it better,

love your children, they are the most creative reward of all that a man or a woman can ever achieve, because you give yourself to them unconditionally.

The Raymond Ad is a great pop culture symbol of the metrosexual man, who is not afraid to care... to then be strident about 'your' freedom from the 'dudgerdy' of family is very short sighted.

Parsi girls have the best of education, equal rights to religion, the last Gatha is addressed to Zarathushtra's daughter... read this.. and our marriage service, in translations which are available. Fight for the Truth not just for yourself... and do stop believing you ARE Nicole Kidman!!

P.T.: Parsi Times supports and celebrates inter faith harmony via our articles. Tolerance is a big issue we see within our Community. Any suggestions to create a more inclusive and accepting people?

Dr. Cama: I am the Zoroastrian Member of the International Temple of Understanding. We Parsis are very tolerant with others, we are intolerant among ourselves... all this is part of the crises we are in at present. We need to live and let live, within our Community. Think before we speak; and laugh at ourselves as we once did. Life is very short, at the end everyone wants to be happy, healthy, and loved. If we realise this brevity of life, we will stop carping about everything and realise how much Ahura Mazda has blessed us, and how grateful we should be for living in a Democracy.

P.T.: The Meherji Rana Library is a treasure trove for the Community. Unfortunately reading is not a high priority for the new generation. Is there any way we can cross

that hurdle to make the invaluable scriptures more accessible to them?

Dr. Cama: The Meherji Rana Library has led to the International Videvad Project, but everyone cannot be an Avesta or Pahlavi Scholar. Read on the Internet, watch films on it, but choose your sites well. The University ones are reliable, do not just stay with Wikipedia.

PARZOR is working on The Collected Works of Dastur Dr. Kotwal. When these 5 volumes come out, they will befor experts, but will also have DVDs to explain our ceremonies etc. Wait for them!

P.T.: Any message for the Parsi Press and suggestions you might have to make us more effective?

Dr. Cama: Stop reporting negativity... then the quarrels will start decreasing.. Publish translations of Gujarati classics, Mamai ni Musafari, etc. Talk about Interfaith issues, share other Community festivals/ history/ stories. We are all one humanity with the same joys and sorrows, so celebrate both our similarities and our distinct identities.

P.T.: Tell us about your own value system and what drives it?

Dr. Cama: I am a soldier's daughter, and also myself a proud soldier on the path of Asha, the Truth. It has not been easy to work all day, then do Parzor work all night, but I take care of my time. I love nature, animals, children and the mountains... they give me the strength to carry on whatever happens. I have great students, friends, and live in hope, that tomorrow will be a better day, if I do my best today.

P.T.: You take a lot of interest and give a lot of your time for the betterment of our Community. What advice do you give the Parsi Times Reader about living a good Parsi life?

Dr. Cama: Life is not easy, so start by hard work as your motto. Shyothenam, working is the word at which we tie our knot in the Kusti prayer. Girdle yourself to be a worker for Truth, enjoy your work, and enjoy your world. Take time out to serve others, 'SERVICE IS THE RENT WE PAY FOR LIVING', should be a sentence you remember each day. But above all find joy in little things, a friendly puppy, a child's smile, Tom & Jerry cartoons, The Big Bang Theory. Laugh... our Prophet laughed when he was born... don't take yourself too seriously. Do your best, leave the rest to Him.

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