

6th ZOROASTRIAN RETURN TO ROOTS

ANNUAL TRIP REPORT
INDIA 2020





Zoroastrian Return To Roots Trip

6th Return To Roots Trip
India, 2020





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THE ZOROASTRIAN RETURN TO ROOTS PROGRAM IS A PARZOR INITIATIVE



Zoroastrian Return To Roots

Established in 2012

Return to roots is a youth-initiated program designed to strengthen community identity amongst zoroastrian youth the world over.

The idea of a Zoroastrian Return to Roots Program was born out of the increasing disconnect between those Zoroastrians in the diaspora with their ancestral communities in Iran and India. It is a unique means of fostering community links and identity by taking small groups of youth on trips to explore their religious, social and cultural heritage.

6th edition

India, 2020

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The Programme

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Welcome

“With an open mind, seek and listen to all the highest ideals. Consider the most enlightened thoughts. Then choose your path, person by person, each for oneself”

- Zarathustra ¹

A trip like Zoroastrian Return to Roots (RTR) is a once in a lifetime experience for young Zoroastrians to follow the wise words of Zarathustra and seek out the highest ideals with an open mind. Each participant has their own unique experience and impressions from attending the trip, and the trip’s long-lasting impact is evident in many parts of the Zoroastrian community.

On 7th March 2020, 19 young Zoroastrians from the global diaspora met in Mumbai to begin their journey across Zoroastrian settlements in Maharashtra and Gujarat in India to discover their rich, extensive culture whose roots were sown in India by their ancestors.

The 15-day journey is the sixth edition of the RTR programme, which took its first step in the year 2012 with a small group of young, passionate volunteers and the support of the Parzor Foundation. The inaugural trip was held in December 2013 to coincide with the 12th World Zoroastrian Congress in Mumbai.

RTR provides a transformational experience to its participants, creates long lasting friendships and helps form a strong interest in our youth to embrace their faith and culture. This is all possible thanks to the generous support we receive every year from our sponsors, volunteers, participants, and generous supporters. We hope this report will give you a better idea of the impact this programme has on everyone involved with RTR and how it is a vital initiative of our community.

Sincerely,
The Zoroastrian Return to Roots Team, 2020.

¹ Gathas

The Return To Roots (RTR) Initiative

Zoroastrian Return to Roots (RTR) is a youth initiative designed to strengthen the idea of Zoroastrian identity among the global youth. The birth of the programme emerged out of an increasing disconnect between Zoroastrians in the diaspora and their ancestral communities in Iran and India. The trip is a means of fostering community links and identity by taking small groups of youth to explore their religious, social and cultural heritage.



Vision

Return Zoroastrians to their roots

- Visit a combination of historical, cultural, religious and community sites in Mumbai and Gujarat as well as smaller communities in Delhi, Pune and other cities in India over the course of a 2 weeks trip.
- Meet Zoroastrian academics, researchers and local guides.
- Discover ways in which one can be part of the larger Zoroastrian community.

Reconnect Zoroastrians to their identity

- Bring together young Zoroastrians from across the world to recognize their commonalities and traditions.
- Participate in educational and community-service oriented activities, which reinforce and reinvigorate community links and identity.
- Discover one's own personal connection to Zoroastrian values and traditions.

Revive the Zoroastrian Community

- Help realize opportunities for the Zoroastrian diaspora in India.
- Encourage Zoroastrians to take an active role in community development through Zoroastrian entrepreneurship and charity.
- Support and encourage local Zoroastrian enterprises.
- Take advantage of and contribute to Zoroastrian academia, music, art, oral traditions and business.



Acknowledgements

The 6th edition of this trip would not have been possible without the support of the countless people who have now become the backbone of the programme. We would like to extend our gratitude to all our supporters, patrons, donors, and to the volunteers who have helped in building this programme.

To Neville Shroff and his fellow trustees at the Incorporated Zoroastrian Charities of Hong Kong, Canton and Macao for their continued support over the years.

To Homi Gandhi, the President of FEZANA, for providing us the time, space and support to ensure RTR was well understood and embedded within the FEZANA networks, and continues to be one of our most helpful supporters as we build Roots in North America in partnership with FEZANA.

To Rooky Fitter, FEZANA Treasurer who has so capably lent her support in the role FEZANA plays to assist the Roots programme in all its financial management in North America.

To Dinshaw and Bachi Tamboly and Aspi Ambapardiwala of the World Zoroastrian Organization Trust Funds India for their continued support and for taking us to see the various sights in Navsari and the hinterland villages.

To Astad Clubwala and the Board Members of the Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York (ZAGNY) for their unstinted support since the inception of the programme.

To Kermin Parakh, Meher Cawasji and the Board Members of the Karachi Zoroastrian Banu Mandal (KZBM) for their continued support through the years.

To the Trustees of the Hommie and Jamshed Nusserwanjee Charitable Trust for their valued assistance to individual participants.

To Feroze and Shernaz Bhandara of the Bhandara Foundation for their contribution to the RTR programme.

As the programme involves a great deal of travelling and making sure every participant is comfortable throughout the trip, we would like to extend our gratitude to our travel and logistics partner Trail Blazers India(TBI); in particular, Mrs. Hutokshi Marker, Mr. Kurush Charna, Mr Homa Mistry, Mr Cyrus Parbhoo and Mrs Morina Fernandes.

We are particularly indebted to Vada Dasturji Khurshed Dastur for aiding us in expediting the visas of many participants and ensuring they could reach India in time and for spending time with the participants in Udvada.

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Thanks to Mr. Bomi Patel from BB Travel Experts for making our travel arrangements for overseas participants, and for his constant assistance to the team and participants.

Special thanks to Mr. Hoshang Jal for welcoming us to Cusrow Baug and helping make the beginning of our journey a memorable one.

Our deep gratitude to our dear friends and programme mentors Mr. Khojeste Mistree and Mrs. Firoza Punthakey Mistree for their hospitality and guidance, which has assisted in building the structure of the programme since its inception. Special thanks to Khojeste in particular, for the knowledge imparted to us during the visit to the Doongerwadi, a very engaging session at the Mistree residence explaining the intricacies of our religion, and for an amazing open bus tour and guided walk of the heritage precinct of Mumbai city.

To Mr. Yazdi Desai and his fellow Trustees of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet(BPP) and Mr. Vistaspar Mehta, Manager of the Doongerwadi, for granting us permission to visit.

Thank you to Mrs. Shernaz Acharia and her wonderful staff for a tour of the Ratan Tata Institute (RTI), a behind-the-scenes look at the effort involved in making Parsi food and embroidery, and for sharing with the participants their ingredients while allowing us to work in their kitchen.

To the World Zoroastrian Organization Trust Funds India (WZOTF) for their generous time and showing the participants some of the great initiatives in place for Parsis in the rural areas of Gujarat.

To Ervad Dr Ramiyar Karanjia for enlightening us during our visit to the Dadar Athornan Institute about the training of young priests.

To Binaifer Sahukar and everyone involved with the Empowering Mobeds programme, for spending time with the group and explaining the work they do towards an amazing cause.

To our dear friends and programme mentors, Jimmy and Delna Mistry and their family, who welcomed us into their home in Mumbai, treated us to the finest of Parsi hospitality while inspiring our participants to dream big, and generously hosted us at the Della Adventure Park and Della Adventure Training Academy (DATA) resort in Lonavala. Thanks to Pearl Mistry for an exciting tour of their upcoming furniture business "Della by Jimmy Mistry", which the participants enjoyed a lot.

To our alumnus Jamshed Bhagwagar for helping us plan our first visit to Baroda.

To Jeroo Contractor and Ervad Kersi Bhesania for their generous time and presentation about the history of the Contractor Agiary and the work carried out for the community.

To Jeetendrasingh Gaekwad for enlightening the participants about the strong ties between the Parsis of Baroda and the Royal Family.

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To Niloufer and Kersi Mandviwalla of Jamshed Baug and their staff who hosted us for several delicious meals in Navsari.

To Navaz and Khorshed Bamji for sparing their valuable time and giving an insightful toran and kusti making demonstration in Navsari.

To Katy Antia and the Trustees of the Meherjirana Library in Navsari for welcoming us.

To Behzad Suraliwala, who's help and logistical support always makes our visit to Navsari a memorable one.

To Yazdi and Vera Karanjia and Mahrukh Chichgar of Surat for their hospitality and hosting our group in a lovely manner.

To Mr Neville Borzu of Ahura Restaurant for the fantastic hospitality and the tasty treats they give every year to our participants.

To the staff and management of the WZO Sanatorium in Sanjan, as always, for the delicious lunch.

To Adil Cooper of Ahura Educational and Corporate Solutions and Uraaz Irani for gifting t-shirts to our participants.

To Anita Contractor, our deepest thanks and gratitude for her effort and action, beyond the call of duty to bring the Pakistani participants back to Karachi safely.

To Meher Noshirwani for her coordination of the Pakistan component of the RTR 6 programme, and to Cyasp Noshirwani for accompanying the Pakistan participants on the RTR 6 trip.

To Rukhsana Lawyer, our immense gratitude for all the hours she has cheerfully put in to support Roots from its inception, and to Suwapee Duanjam, for her kind assistance in this process.

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Amongst our Alumni, we would like to thank the wonderful volunteer team who helped put this trip together and without whom this trip would not be possible: Tanya Hoshi, Kayras Irani, Zubin Gheesta and Sheherazad Pavri who organized, accompanied and assisted the participants on this trip.

The writing and compilation of the RTR 6 Report was a team effort; special thanks to Meher Noshirwani who led the Report writing process along with Leea Contractor, who was responsible for the design. Sheherazad Pavri and Tanya Hoshi for their valuable perspective as Alumni's into the Report, and to Zruvan Chothia, Zubin Gheesta, Safna Virji, and Zeritta Mavalvala, for their input to the report. This amazing new avatar is a combined team effort of dedication to the RTR programme.

To our amazing co-chairs Aban Marker Kabraji and Dr Shernaz Cama and Programme Director Arzan Sam Wadia, our grateful thanks for the leadership, oversight, and coordination of the programme at all levels.

And finally, thank you to our Donors who have given so generously over the years to enable youth from every corner of the globe to share in our journey across India, forge lifelong bonds with their fellow participants and take back the best parts of their experiences to share with their communities at home.

SIR CUSROW WADIA PAVILION

The Trip



Day 1 – Mumbai

The 6th Return to Roots (RTR) Programme began on a cool morning in Mumbai, with participants from the UK, Pakistan, USA, Canada, UAE and India beginning a journey which would change their lives forever. Two weeks of intensive, challenging, and exciting activities had been planned to immerse the young Zoroastrians to learn about the religious aspects, traditions, culture and history of Zoroastrianism. The group consisted of both Parsi and Irani Zarathushtis and had 4 Alumni from earlier RTR Programmes and 2 co-ordinators who guided and nurtured the participants throughout the trip.

Cusrow Baug

RTR 6 officially began at the Cusrow Baug Pavilion. The participants walked around a typical Parsi housing colony, commonly termed as a *Baug*. Situated in South Mumbai, Cusrow Baug was built in 1934, a visionary initiative of Bai Jerbai Wadia, who recognised the need for low cost housing for Parsis and Iranis.

The RTR session commenced at the *Baug's* pavilion with an overview of the history of Cusrow Baug and the Wadia family. Mr. Hoshang Jal, Secretary of the Cusrow Baug Sports and Welfare League, spoke about the contribution of the Wadia family towards the development of the city of Bombay, and the housing colonies they had constructed for the benefit of low income Parsis.

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We provide you with the opportunity to hear different positions, and perspectives, and leave it to you to decide for yourselves
”





The RTR Programme focuses on diverse aspects of the Parsis in India. History, culture, religion, business, traditions, and social dimensions are the main themes that are woven into the trip by visiting specific cities, and places and meeting particular people. In this context, the focus on the historical contribution of Parsis to the development of Bombay, began on the first day and this thread was continued throughout the trip at different places in the form of buildings, statues and institutions.

A welcome and introduction to RTR 6 was done by Aban Marker Kabraji, Co-Chairperson of RTR and Arzan Sam Wadia, Programme Director, who briefed the participants about the origins and objectives of RTR while highlighting its key features. They emphasised that the group should keep an open mind, listen to different perspectives and decide for themselves, as they would be exposed to a wide range of scholars, priests and individuals with different perspectives. *'We provide you with the opportunity to hear different positions, and perspectives, and leave it to you to decide for yourselves.'*

This was followed by the alumni volunteers Tanya Hoshi, Zubin Gheesta, Kayras Irani and Sheherazad Pavri reminiscing about their experiences as RTR Fellows and elaborated on what they hoped the participants would gain from the programme while expressing their belief in its success.

Each participant was asked to formally introduce themselves, briefly elaborate on their reasons for participating and explain what they hoped to gain from the RTR experience. Responses ranged from an interest through a positive impact on someone they knew who had participated in an earlier RTR, to wanting to explore and connect with India, as their predecessors and some family members were born there. Some were in search of answers since they felt disconnected in the diaspora, while a few had a little knowledge about Zoroastrianism and wanted to learn more. However, a recurring theme of their responses was to understand their identity in an ever changing world where Zoroastrians living around the globe feel the need to find a starting point with which they can connect.

The introductions ended with a group photograph outside the pavilion after which the participants were led through the Baug, where they passed by the Karani Agiary, as they headed to the bus for the next stop on the trip.

A tour of Doongerwadi, the Towers of Silence, with Khojeste Mistree

The *Doongerwadi*, is a unique space within the bustling city of Mumbai. Located on Malabar Hill, amidst tall trees and abundant foliage, it is where the traditional Zoroastrian method of disposal of the dead, known as *Dokhmenashini* is practised. Khojeste Mistree, a renowned religious scholar, met the group and explained in detail the reasons why this mode of disposal is still practised and has been adopted by Zoroastrians. He emphasised that it is the most ecological method for disposal of the dead. The temporary triumph of evil over good, the theology regarding death in Zoroastrianism, and the after death rituals were explained. The *bunglis* or houses used by the family of the deceased during the prayers and a model of a *dakhma* (the wells where corpses are consigned) were also shown to the participants. This was followed by a guided walk through a part of the *doongerwadi* to see a functioning *dakhma* from the outside. The group was made to understand the challenges this method currently faces, and the steps taken to preserve this system. Khojeste also mentioned the biodiversity within the area, the trees, the animals and a few species of plants that had been identified which were not seen anywhere else in India. He spoke about the link between nature and the Zoroastrian ethos of ecology.

For the RTR programme participants, the focus was on understanding the Zoroastrian religion, and this was another thread which would be woven into the trip through visits to various sacred places over the next two weeks.



The trip to the Doongerwadi focussed on understanding the concept of death in our religion



Sir Ratan Tata Institute

The rest of the afternoon was spent at the Sir Ratan Tata Institute (RTI). The first stop was at the embroidery section where beautiful hand embroidered towels, sarees and household items were on display. The embroidery section was a lovely large room, with a cool breeze coming through open windows, long benches and a few old Parsi ladies working on sewing machines and hand embroidering towels, napkins, and handkerchiefs. Speaking to these ladies, we discovered that they had great pride in having spent their lives working at RTI, restoring *sarees*, and sewing beautiful clothes. We learnt more about this later when the history of the institute's inception was explained to us.

Lunch at the RTI cafeteria was the beginning of many feasts of Parsi food on the trip- *Dhansak*, chicken Russian cutlets, vegetable cutlets, spinach quiche, *lagan nu achar*, *lagan nu custard*, lemon tarts and some Parsi cold drinks were among the mouth-watering dishes served on the first day!

After lunch, the administrator of RTI, Shernaz Acharia introduced her team to the group and gave a brief history about the organization. This was followed by a demonstration on how *bhakras* (Parsi cookies), pastries and savoury tarts are prepared. The participants were able to have a hands-on experience on how to prepare these snacks under the watchful eye of Hooma Billimoria, the Head Chef. The aroma of fried *bhakras*, the laughter and enjoyment of the participants, and the opportunity to feel the texture of the dough was sheer pleasure.

This was followed by the programme orientation, led by Rosheen Kabraji, one of the founders of RTR. She discussed the history of RTR, its growth and success over the years, Parsi and Irani identities, and how they play a part in the RTR process of understanding what it means to be Zoroastrian. She spoke to the group about the essence of the programme saying, *'what does this mean to each of you? Only if you get something out of this, will this programme succeed.'* She told the group to *'respect each other, give each other space and look out for each other on the trip and have fun'*.

At the end, Arzan Sam Wadia told the participants how RTR has been supporting Zoroastrian businesses and entrepreneurs since its inception, including the travel agency, hotels and restaurants, which was a deliberate attempt to support and encourage local Parsi business. On the RTR programme, the focus on the role



The aroma of fried *bhakras*, the laughter and enjoyment of the participants, and the opportunity to feel the texture of the dough was sheer pleasure

of institutions began here; yet another thread that was taken forward as the trip unfolded.

This set the tone for the group to be excited for the Navroze sale at Cama *Baug*, where they proceeded. This is an annual community sale where goods prepared by home-based businesses of Zoroastrians are sold. Amid the fascinating varieties of religious artefacts, savouries, stalls supporting charities and the latest collections of Indian wear, it was a shopper's delight!

Day 2 – Mumbai

Open Deck Bus Tour and Heritage Walk in South Mumbai with Khojeste Mistree.

The second day began with a guided tour of South Mumbai on an open double decker bus. The group assembled outside Cusrow Baug and the tour began from Colaba Bus Station towards Flora Fountain. Khojeste Mistree gave an insightful narration of the Parsi buildings, statues, and landmarks while highlighting the contribution of Parsis to the development of the city of Bombay as the group proceeded towards the Bhikha Behram Well. The contribution of the Parsis to the development of the city of Mumbai was clearly visible, and it continued with the theme of understanding the role the Parsis had played towards the same.



Bhikha Behram Well

The Bhikha Behram Well, commonly known as the *kooa*, was the first stop of the bus tour. Built in 1725 C.E. by a Parsi merchant Bhikhaji Pandey, it is a well-known site for the Parsis of Mumbai. Its cool and serene atmosphere in the early morning was the perfect place to begin our *kusti* prayers. Khojeste Mistree explained the history, origins and religious significance of the Well while pointing out how



it was a peaceful oasis in the chaos of the neighbouring business district. After saying our prayers, lighting *divas* and absorbing the stillness of this sacred place, the group moved on towards Churchgate where they marvelled at the sight of the statues of Parsi stalwarts, such as Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy and Sir Dinshaw Wacha and learnt of their contributions to Indian society.

Khojeste continued the walking tour and guided the participants to multiple points of interest across South Mumbai. The landmarks covered included the Framji Cowasji library, Anjuman and Wadiaji Atash Behrams, Crawford market, CST Station as well as the Vatcha and Dadyseth Agiaris. The tour concluded at Flora Fountain where the Dadabhai Naoroji statue stands. It was here that Mr. Mistree explained how the “Grand Old Man of India” had been instrumental in the Indian Freedom Movement after becoming the first Indian to be elected to the British Parliament. Having learnt many historical facts and much in awe of their forefathers, the group proceeded towards the iconic Horniman Circle for lunch.



Jimmy Boy

The exquisite smell of Parsi food filled the air as we sat down to begin our meal of *Saria* and *Achar*, *Kid gosh*, *Dhandar*, *Patio*, cheese balls and *Kulfi* at the Jimmy Boy restaurant. To add to the excitement, we were offered the famous cold drinks associated with the Parsis in Mumbai- Ice Cream soda and Raspberry soda. We sat upstairs with a view to the restaurant, laughed and got to know each other better, made friends, and gradually the group began to bond. This was another link in the chain of Parsi and Irani food places included in the programme. After lunch we assembled in our bus and headed towards the Dadar Parsi Colony to have a meeting with the Empowering Mobeds group at the Dadar Athornan Institute.

Meeting with the Empowering Modeds(EM) group at Dadar

The Mobeds of our community play an integral role in keeping the faith alive, conducting rituals, tending to the fires in our Agiaries and Atash Behrams, and their devotion to the religion is not appreciated enough. Meeting the EM group at the Dadar Athornan Institute was a unique opportunity to learn, interact with and understand from the young Mobeds their perspective and the lives they lead in supporting the religious aspects of the community. The initiative is a collaboration between the WZO and Athornan Mandal and is a platform for Mobeds to connect with each other and build a better link with the *Behdins* (laity). Binaifer Sahukar, Co-ordinator for EM, explained the initiative and the discussion revolved around how they have been developing soft skills of the Mobeds through workshops involving communication skills, counselling and etiquette to tackle various issues. The Mobeds said that the only connection the youth had with their priests was during a child's *Navjote* (religious initiation), when children are sent to them to learn their prayers and are therefore given a lot of respect. The conversation began to focus on the training of a Mobed, which was said to be difficult and involved a lot of discipline and determination. Some of the Mobeds present practised *Mobedi* part time and had other professions such as journalism and interior designing.

They spoke of the importance of oral tradition, and how the Mobeds have preserved the continuity of rituals, practices and the



The eye opening empowering Mobeds session reminded us about the integral role that our priests play in keeping our fires burning



intricacies of Zoroastrianism. The Mobeds also mentioned that there were times when they had personal problems, such as a sick family member, and yet must continue performing their duties. This was a revelation to us, as we often tend to take them for granted. We went ahead with an interactive Q&A session where the group shared their personal experiences of interactions with Mobeds from the places they had come from and asked questions to the EM group. As a whole, this was an inspiring session and we left with a greater understanding and respect for our Mobeds.

Della Tower, Maachi at Dadgah and Meet and Greet with Jimmy Mistry and family

We walked through the Dadar Parsi Colony, a leafy shaded oasis with parks and old houses with balconies, and elderly Parsi couples sitting on verandas enjoying the evening. The next stop was Della Tower where we met Jimmy Mistry and his family. Della Tower is a beautiful intricately designed building, tall and majestic, inspired by Persepolis and ancient Achaemenian design.

We attended a *Maachi* (ceremony) in the *Dadgah* wherein the Mobed performed a *Tandarosti* prayer for the RTR group and the Mistry family. Thereafter, the evening was

spent interacting with Jimmy Mistry and his family, who graciously host us every year at their beautiful home and resort. Jimmy spoke to the group about his entrepreneurial ventures and initiatives, scaling up projects and emphasised on giving back to the community. Tea and snacks were served on the garden rooftop, and it was a truly memorable and enjoyable evening.



Day 2 of the RTR programme continued to showcase its themes seen through the heritage tour, which provided a visual journey of the historical contributions of the Parsis to the creation of Mumbai, practising the faith at the Bhikha Behram Well, the joy of Parsi cuisine at Jimmy Boy, understanding the religion with the EM group and meeting a contemporary business family at Della Towers.

Day 3 – Mumbai

Meeting with Khojeste Mistree for a discussion on Zoroastrianism and its practise

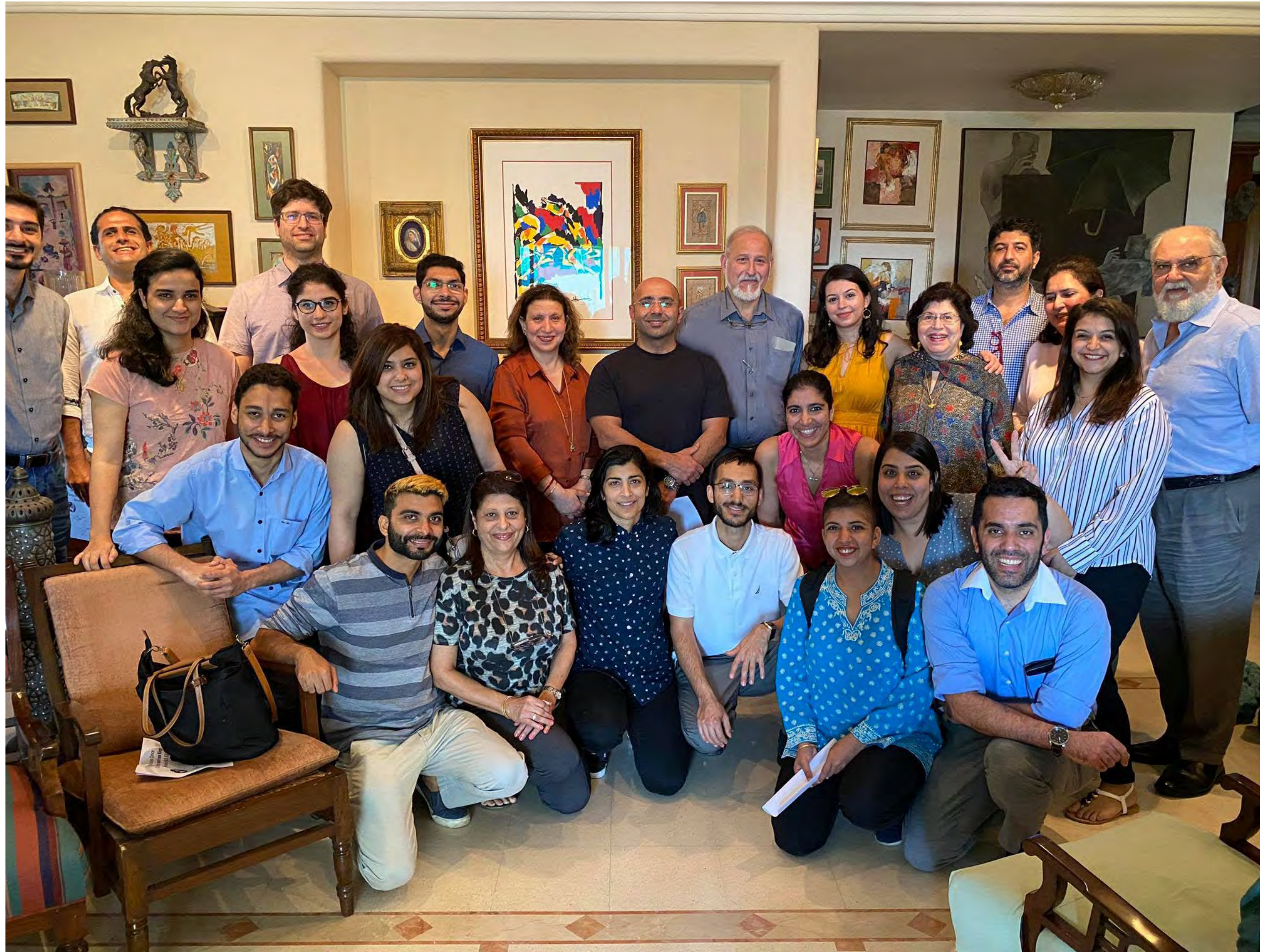
Continuing with the understanding of Zoroastrianism, a session with Khojeste Mistree provided the group an opportunity to learn more, ask questions, and understand the history and tenets of Zoroastrianism.

Khojeste met the group at his home and began by giving an overview of our religion. He said the message of Zoroastrianism is to *'uphold the path of the highest truth'*, which is reflected in the *Ashem Vohu* prayer. He mentioned the harmony between the material and spiritual aspect of life and described Ahura Mazda as the Lord of Wisdom and Knowledge. He spoke about the concept of dualism, the conflict between good and evil, the respect for the fire, the importance of the *Atash Niyaesh* prayer, and the role every individual plays in upholding the religion's tenets through the choice of their actions and words. He patiently explained and answered many questions and ended by saying *'the practice of the religion keeps it alive, not the theory'*.

“

The message of Zoroastrianism is to *'uphold the path of the highest truth'*

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Meeting with Ratan Tata, Chairman Emeritus, Tata Trusts

One of the highlights of this RTR was meeting Mr. Ratan Tata, at his office in the World Trade Centre, which was a rare opportunity for the participants. The meeting began with an overview of the RTR programme by Aban Marker Kabraji, who briefed Mr. Tata about the programme, its development over the years, and mentioned how the programme has grown, with the diversity of participants from various countries who had joined the trip this year. It was an interactive session and each participant had the opportunity to ask a question to Mr Tata.

During the discussion Mr. Tata told us about his childhood, his early years in the business, the philosophy of the Tata business, and encouraged the participants by saying that *'you want to be the role model you want your employees to be'*, especially to those pursuing entrepreneurship. He complimented the RTR programme and gave valuable advice to the participants. It was an inspiring experience and being in the presence of such a powerful yet humble person, left a long-lasting impression on the entire group. The interaction ended with a lovely group picture with Mr Tata.



Lunch at Ripon Club

Our stop for lunch was at the Ripon Club. Founded in 1884, the Ripon Club is a beautiful colonial Parsi club having its own charm, with reclining wooden cane planter chairs, portraits of Parsi stalwarts, wide open rooms with wooden balconies, and a view of Rajabai Clock Tower. For lunch, we had salad, pasta, cutlets with tomato gravy, sweet curd, and Limca, raspberry, and other cold drinks typical to Mumbai. We talked, laughed, and shared experiences of the trip so far, and absorbed the ambience of the club which seemed unchanged for a century. The arm chairs seemed really fascinating and some participants took a quick nap in them before the next session began.

Presentation and discussion on the History and Anthropology of Parsi Food and Settlements by Kurush Dalal and Rhea Mitra

The afternoon proceeded with an interactive and informative presentation by Kurush Dalal and Rhea Mitra.

Kurush, a well known archaeologist, historian, food anthropologist and raconteur, shared his experience from the excavations at Sanjan and explained that since we only have vague knowledge of historical events in the form of a Persian poem written in the 16th century called "*Kisseh-i-Sanjan*", the line between legend and fact had blurred over time.

The main intention of the excavation was to prove whether the Parsis landed in Sanjan and had an actual settlement there. A brief history of the establishment and movement of the Iranshah Fire was shared to give the participants an idea of the painstaking efforts taken by our forefathers.

Rhea Mitra, a blogger, freelance writer and a food entrepreneur, began her session by narrating one of the oldest Parsi folktales "Sugar in Milk" and weaved her way into a discussion with the participants about how food integrally connects us to our roots. She added how food has played a major role for Parsis in shaping their identity and connects them with their roots and culture as well as a link to many fond memories. When people move to new places, they naturally try to recreate their food as it binds them to their roots and is also familiar and comfortable. Rhea explained how there were multiple influences that have shaped and evolved the Parsi Cuisine which included British, Dutch, Portuguese, Persian and even Goan.

Having such an interesting presentation was quite a treat in itself as the participants were taken down memory lane by Rhea, who explained the significance of many familiar dishes in our culture for auspicious occasions and even during death rituals. The presentations then concluded with a brief Q&A session, after which the participants enjoyed a free evening in Mumbai.





Day 4 – Lonavala

Della Adventure Park and Della Adventure Training Academy (DATA)

After spending three days in Mumbai, the group moved on to Lonavala for an exhilarating day at Della Adventure Park and DATA where we were graciously hosted by Jimmy Mistry. The adventure park was fun for all participants, with daring experiences such as zip-lining, motorbike riding, a bungee swing and target shooting. Afterwards, the group proceeded to the gallery which exhibited the soon to be launched design and furniture business of the Della group.

The excitement continued as the group was led to the DATA centre after journeying in an army truck and crossing a lake in a pontoon. We were welcomed to the luxury glamping resort designed to train civilians with self-preparation, survival skills and techniques needed to combat real life hostage situations.

After tea and snacks, the rest of the evening was spent in military cadet uniforms



completing the obstacles on the courses. Amid the fun and frolic, the group was really inspired by the inscriptions of tributes paid to the Tata family, the Indian Army, and the First Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw.

The activities of this particular day were completely different to the rest of the trip, or even what we had seen and done so far. Walking around Della Resorts and the Academy we noticed a tribute to the Tata family, which is engraved at the entrance which said, 'We at Della Group have been inspired by the contribution of Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata and JRD Tata, to the development of the country. We humbly hope to follow their footsteps'. This connection between past and present, between the old and contemporary, between Parsi business families, their philosophy of the 'creation of wealth', and giving to others, of generosity, of hospitality, and supporting the Parsi community, supports the theme of business and entrepreneurship; which is another focus of the RTR programme.





Day 5 – Pune

A tour of the Tata Central Archives

The Tata Central Archives in Pune displayed to the group the history of the Tata family, the growth of their businesses, their contribution to the development of India as well as their influence and philosophy as a global conglomerate. The Curator explained this history through framed photographs and memorabilia. The Tata Central Archives is a repository of documents, photographs, manuscripts, awards, paintings, books, letters, and video recordings of the development of the Tata group. Reading the narrative of each display and walking through the archives, the scale and diversity of the Tata businesses became more evident to the group. As the group proceeded for lunch to the adjoining garden, JRD Tata's message of serving the needs and interests of people by fair means was etched in their minds. *'No success or achievement in material terms is worthwhile unless it serves the needs or interests of its people and is achieved by fair and honest means'*. Here we also saw the Tata crest which has the words *Humata, Hukhta, Hvarshta*, (Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds) on it, reflecting the tenets of Zoroastrianism.

After this lesson in history, a sumptuous lunch consisting of *tamota pur eeda*, *rotli*, *dhansak*, *lagan nu custard*, and cold drinks, was served to us, which we enjoyed in the adjoining garden.

Serum Institute of India

After the inspiration from the Tata Archives, the RTR group was further surprised to learn that the Serum Institute they would be visiting is the world's largest vaccine manufacturer and a Zoroastrian owned business. Established by Mr. Cyrus Poonawalla in 1966, the Serum Institute of India is the world's largest vaccine manufacturer and produces a variety of vaccines.

The group was taken around one of the manufacturing units and given a brief explanation on the preparation of vaccines after which short films about the history of the institute and the CSR initiatives of Dr Cyrus Poonawalla and his family were presented in the boardroom. Dr Vistasp Sethna conducted a Q&A session with the participants and highlighted how their company is making the world a better place. The group was very grateful to receive copies of the *Khordesh Avesta* with an English translation, on behalf of Dr Cyrus Poonawalla.



The focus was on serving the needs and interests of people by fair means



Dinner at Dorabjee's Restaurant

Later that evening, the excitement built up as the participants gathered on the bus to go for dinner to the famous Dorabjee's, a quaint old Parsi restaurant tucked in a lane in Pune. The group talked about the day's activities, shared their thoughts and impressions, laughed and bonded over some delicious *Sali keema, biryani* and *kulfi*. The day ended with a surprise cake cutting for RTR co-ordinator Kayras Irani's birthday.

At the end of the first part of the RTR trip in Mumbai, Lonavala, and Pune, the recurring themes of understanding Parsi institutions, religious sites, contributions made by Parsi families to society, and the joy for food laid the foundations for the second part of the trip to Udvada and Gujarat.

Day 6 – Pune

Visit to Forbes Marshall Industrial Plant

After an early night, the participants gathered in the reception, excited to visit another Zoroastrian enterprise, the Forbes Marshall factory. Established in 1950, and based on producing machinery for the energy sector, Forbes Marshall is a leader in energy conservation for the processing industry. The group was taken on a tour of the factory where they saw the scale of the machines. Rati Forbes, the Director, presented the CSR activities of the company which had a special focus on women's empowerment in the nearby tribal villages. She emphasised the need for companies to be involved in their local community. It was inspiring to hear about a Zoroastrian-owned business that contributed generously to the local community.

The company's strategy to link its CSR work with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were highlighted by Farhad and Naushad Forbes, which led to an interactive Q&A session. The group was encouraged to focus on good values in their daily life and to do the right thing for the environment and community, since the Forbes family's philosophy is *'to do the right thing for the environment, community, and society.'*

Drive to Udvada

The group began the next leg of their trip to Gujarat after a sumptuous lunch at the factory. The journey from Pune to Udvada was a long eight-hour bus ride. This was made entertaining with some singing, dancing and everyone's favourite game -Mafia. It is an RTR tradition to stop en-route at the famous Hotel Ahura for dinner, an Irani owned restaurant with a menu that ranged from *akoori* and *cutlets*, to *dossas*, sweet *dahi*, chicken and mutton *khari*. The food was delicious and the variety and portions were overwhelming. Attached to the restaurant was a bakery that sold fresh biscuits and masalas. As we left the restaurant the owners Neville and Mitra Borzu generously gifted us each a set of their masalas.

At roughly 10 pm we exited the highway and headed towards Udvada village, where we passed through narrow roads and the recently renovated Udvada railway station. As we entered Udvada we felt as if we were gradually moving back in time, as the low roofed wooden houses came into view with veranda's and wooden doors, and steps leading down to small gates. After checking in, the participants took a short stroll around the neighbourhood to soak up the calm and quiet ambiance that filled the narrow streets of Udvada.



Day 7 – Udvada

Udvada, a place that means so much to so many of us. For some of the participants, it was their first visit and a dream come true.

The JJ Dharamsala, a low roofed building, with wide corridors, and windows for cross ventilation, large rooms, and a circular veranda, reflects the ambiance of the small town of Udvada. Framed photographs of Udvada, depicting the life and pace of this holy place, adorned the walls. Breakfast every morning consisted of traditional *sev*, and *doodh puff*, a speciality of Udvada, and lunch and dinner included the special *boi machhi*- a well-known fish of this seaside town. Traditional food was served each day, and the Dharamsala was a lovely change to the hotels we had been staying at during the trip.

The first stop that morning after a quick revision of the *Kusti* prayers was to the Iranshah Atash Behram. The spiritual core of the RTR journey, and the heart of the religious dimension of this trip, the change in mood and emotion shifted as the group walked towards the holiest of fires. To pray at the Iranshah Atash Behram is a wish of Zoroastrians from every generation. To have the opportunity to kneel and pray in the presence of the *Atash*, and to stand in silence and have a *tandarosti* prayer done, is a rare opportunity for those who came from distant lands. Some of us had brought lists with names of family and friends who wished to get their prayers done. And so, we prayed, and spent as much time as we could in the peaceful, calm and spiritual sanctum of the Atash Behram.



Meeting with Vada Dasturji Khurshed Dastur

After praying, the group met Vada Dasturji Khurshed Dastur, the High Priest of Udvada at his residence. He shared the history of Udvada and the arduous journey undertaken by a dedicated group of Zoroastrians in safeguarding the Holy Fire from invaders since its inception in Sanjan.

Presentation on the Global Iranshah Initiative.

The afternoon was spent learning about the Global Iranshah Initiative through a skype presentation and discussion with Tinaz Karbhari, the Youth Ambassador and Representative from Hong Kong. In 2017, the Iranshah Initiative was launched to provide global financial support to continue the legacy and heritage of the Iranshah. Based on 5 goals, it seeks to preserve the sanctity of the Iranshah by creating a continuous stream of funds to support the Mobeds and sustain various costs related to the preservation of the premises. The youth were encouraged to get involved by raising financial support and awareness among their families, friends and their local communities. You can learn more about the initiative on <https://iranshahinitiative.com/>

To have the opportunity to kneel and pray in front of the Holy Iranshah fire is a rare opportunity for those who came from distant lands

Presentation on the Neo-Zoroastrian Movement

A research study conducted on the historical origins and development of the Neo-Zoroastrian movement in Europe and North America, was presented by Ruzbeh Hodiwala, one of the fellow participants. His ethnographic study focussed on the interactions between the 'old' and 'new' Zoroastrians globally. The research methodology, key findings,

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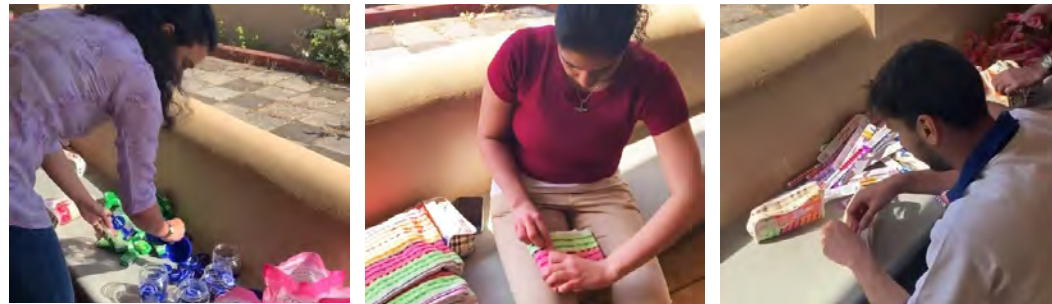


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Team building activity of packing toiletry kits

During every RTR trip, participants and volunteers assemble kits and provide monetary donations, which are handed out at the orphanages and infirmaries in Surat, Navsari and the Parsi General Hospital in Mumbai. The participants were divided into two teams, each given boxes of supplies which included toiletries and were instructed to assemble the items into individual kits in 30 minutes. This was a fun team building activity for a good cause.



Mid trip discussion

The group gathered on the veranda of the *Dharamshala* for a feedback session over tea about the programme which had reached its halfway point. This was led by Arzan Sam Wadia, the programme director, and each participant gave their opinion regarding the trip so far. The importance of Udvada to our religion, and for the RTR programme was discussed, because staying in Udvada played a significant part in the 'return to roots' dimension of the programme.

Clean & Green Udvada Initiative

After this discussion, the participants were introduced to the team of the Clean & Green Udvada Initiative, whose mission is to make Udvada cleaner and educate local citizens about efficient waste disposal. Zarine Bharda and Filly Bapuna briefed the participants on how the team's efforts had made a change in the landscape of the town. Everyone participated in a 2-hour clean-up of the streets of Udvada and gained a better understanding of the importance that education and infrastructure play in a clean environment.



Ushen Geh Maachi at Iranshah

At midnight, the group attended the *Ushen Geh Maachi*. The Iranshah was lit with *divas* (oil lamps) at night which gave it a beautiful appearance. The glow of the fire, the clear voice of the Mobed reciting ancient prayers, as we bowed our head in reverence and prayed, will remain a memory that will last a lifetime.

Day 8 – Nargol and Sanjan

The group travelled to Nargol the next morning where they visited the Poonjiaji Agiary. After prayers in the serene environment, the participants met and interacted with the *Panthaki* (presiding priest) Ervad Darabshaw Govadia and his brother Ervad Rusi Govadia. The discussion focussed on the history of Nargol which once had a sizeable Zoroastrian population, most of which was agrarian. Situated among the rural areas of Gujarat with narrow winding roads, the Agiary is nestled among palm trees and a beautiful old building with a calm and quiet atmosphere. Each stop at an Agiary illustrated the existence of many Parsi settlements across Gujarat.

From here we proceeded to the banks of the Varoli river. The place where the river meets the Arabian Sea was the approximate spot where the Zoroastrians from Iran landed in Gujarat. Steeped in history, we could imagine the 'Sugar in Milk' folktale, and posed for what has now become an RTR tradition - a drone picture in the formation of the roman numeral VI, denoting the 6th edition of the programme. A quick, fun boat ride was arranged in a local fishing boat at the end of which a *Humbandagi* (group prayer) was prayed in gratitude towards our forefathers. Sanjan, another special place in the history of Zoroastrianism, continued the link to history, and religious perspectives of the RTR programme.

Lunch was at the WZO Sanatorium, after which the participants were taken to the Sanjan Stambh next door. This is a beautiful 50-foot column, which marks the arrival of the Parsis in India. The group then visited the Sanjan Agiary, and said their prayers. On the return journey to Udvada, we stopped at Daman beach where the group spent time watching a beautiful sunset. Hot corn on the cob, and coconut water sold on the beach, ended the day filled with devotion, history, adventure and lots of fun.



Day 9 - Navsari

Navsari Atash Behram

The group bid adieu to Udvada in the morning and left for Navsari, another important town in the history of the Parsis. A stronghold of religion for the last few centuries, it was here that the Iranshah fire was brought from Vandsa, and housed for over 200 years. The beautiful and picturesque Bhagarsath Atash Behram, built in Achaemenian style, was the first stop of the day. Both the religious and historical significance of this place continued with the theme of learning and practising our religion.



Meherjirana Library

After this, the group went to the First Dastoor Meherjirana Library. Established in 1872, it is a treasure trove of rare Zoroastrian religious books, manuscripts and important documents. Situated in an old building in Navsari, this beautiful library has wooden and glass cupboards stacked with books, framed paintings of various important Zoroastrian personalities, and a dedicated team of librarians to preserve these old valuable manuscripts. Here the participants were briefed on the preservation process of these invaluable documents by the local priest Ervad Farzan Antia, who explained why the library was a unique archive for scholars on Zoroastrianism. The group was fortunate enough to have the chance to look through the pages of ancient religious texts which were centuries old.



Vadi Dar-e-Meher

Down another winding lane in Navsari, we were led to the Vadi Dar-e-Meher, where young Zoroastrian priests are ordained into priesthood. This Dar-e-Meher, currently 850 years old, is the oldest known in India and is used to ordain priests as *Navars* and *Martabs* (the first and second stages respectively of initiation into priesthood).

The importance of this place was the fact that it was here that stalwarts Jamsetji Tata and Dadabhai Naoroji were ordained. RTR co-ordinator Sheherazad Pavri showed the group around the premises and explained the long process of a *Mobed's* initiation from his own experience and spoke about the *Nirangdin* ceremony. At the back of the building, the Holy albino bull, *Varasyaji*, which is an integral part of Zoroastrian rituals was shown to the group.



J. N. Tata House

Having visited the Tata Archives in Pune, a visit to the J.N. Tata house, the birthplace of Jamsetji Tata, increased our understanding about the humble beginnings of the global conglomerate. Walking through the small house, with a low roof, and narrow stairs indicated the simple lifestyle of a family of Parsi priests, who would go on to become one of the world's business tycoons.



Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy House

The ancestral home of Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy is also in Navsari and has been converted into a small museum, with many artefacts to display his contribution to education and philanthropy. Another simple and small house which illustrated the way of life of these pioneers, who contributed so much to the community by leaving behind a legacy of institutions and entrepreneurship.

Lunch at Jamshed Baug

Jamshed Baug, a *dharamshala* built in 1849, was our stop for lunch. The manager Niloufer Mandviwalla had prepared some delicious *Mutton Curry Chawal* and *Egg chutney Pattice* with some ice cream to cool the palate.

Toran and Kusti Demonstration

After the scrumptious meal, the participants gathered in the common room for a demonstration on making *Torans* (garlands of glass beads) and weaving a *Kusti*. Navaz Bamji, a local Parsi lady, explained how the *Kusti* is made of lamb's wool, which is spun into fine yarn with the help of a drop spindle. She demonstrated how to weave the *Kusti* while using a wooden *Jantar* or loom. After demonstrating the technique, the participants were given the opportunity to weave part of a *Kusti* themselves. This was followed by a demonstration by Khorshed Bamji on how to make a *Toran*. Both these demonstrations showed the importance of traditional arts and crafts of the community.



Prayers at night at the Atash Behram

Later that night, a few of the participants decided to visit the Atash Behram, to attend the *Ushen Geh Maachi*. Just like the *Iranshah*, the midnight prayer at the Bhagarsath Anjuman Atash Behram was a breath-taking experience.

Day 10 - Navsari and Surat

WZO Senior Citizen's Home

The next morning, the group visited the Senior Citizen's Home in Navsari. Run by the WZO, under the guidance of Dinshaw Tamboly, the institution is run in an impeccable manner. The group was given a tour around the facility and the participants spent time talking to the residents who were thrilled to speak with youngsters about their lives. Since this is a regular stop on every RTR,

some of the elderly women had recognized the RTR alumni and were delighted to see them again. The participants then gathered in the common hall where Mr. Marzban Giara, one of the residents and a history buff, gave an explanation about the collection of books he had authored.

The interaction with the elderly was an introduction to the great work carried out by the WZO in Navsari. Toiletry kits for the residents of the Navsari infirmary were handed over to the manager and it was an enjoyable morning. After this, we made a quick stop at a Zoroastrian-owned cafe called Yazdan for *Falooda* and ice cream, before going on to Surat.



Surat Orphanage

Early in the afternoon, the group arrived in Surat where they were greeted over tea by Mr Yazdi Karanjia, the Chairman of the Surat Parsi Panchayet. Mr. Karanjia briefed the group about the activities of the Panchayet and the orphanages. Donations collected for the orphanages and infirmaries were handed over to him. The evening was full of fun and games as we visited the boys and girls' orphanages. We played cricket with the boys and danced with the girls to Bollywood songs, and toiletry kits packed for the infirmary were handed over to the manager.

The visit to the orphanages left a lasting impact on the entire group. It was not only a wonderful evening spent with children, but also an opportunity to see the institutions that were transforming lives and providing facilities to the less fortunate of the community. The enthralling evening ended with the participants trying out a *Gujarati Thaali* at the famous Sasooma restaurant.



Day 11 – Villages of Navsari

Early the next morning, dressed in bright yellow t-shirts gifted by a generous donor, the group left for the villages on the outskirts of Navsari. They were introduced to the members of the WZO Trust which has been changing the landscape of the villages by generating employment opportunities for the Zoroastrians who have lived in poverty for decades. The first stop was at the village of Mahuva where a quick snack was followed by planting sandalwood trees. The WZO Trust is building a corpus through its plantations to support its various activities, and Dinshaw Tamboly told the group how the WZO encourages Zoroastrians in the rural areas to pursue agriculture, as well as businesses like brickmaking, livestock and dairy produce, small retail shops and taxi services by providing interest free loans. The group also had the opportunity of entering a defunct Dakhma in this village.

The afternoon was spent visiting some of the villages to meet the beneficiaries. This rural life reflected the hardships faced by the less fortunate members of our community. Participants made various purchases at local shops to support these family owned businesses.

Lunch was on a beautiful property owned by a Parsi who operated a brick production plant on the grounds. Surrounded by coconut trees and some livestock including cows, the group enjoyed their meal. Later a demonstration on brick making took place, and we were encouraged to try and cast a brick and understand the process.



Ajmalgadh

The last stop of the day was to visit Ajmalgadh, another of the Iranshah's resting places on top of a hill. Observing the beautiful landscape, they realized that the forest had once been a challenging temporary residence for Zoroastrians. We could imagine the sacrifices our ancestors made to sustain the livelihood of Shreeji Iranshah. Finally, the group assembled around the monument of Paak Iranshah Saheb, and a memento of thanks was presented to Dinshaw Tamboly.



Day 12 - Baroda

Contractor Agiary

The next day the group went to Baroda, where we visited the Contractor Agiary, and were given a tour by Jeroo Contractor who is a Trustee. The beautiful property included an imposing brick structure from the 1920s designed by V.R. Talwalkar, a residence building for the priestly families and a dharamshala that was currently unused. Jeroo Contractor outlined the history of the institution and the work carried out for the community while showing us around. With an abundance of parking, plenty of clean well water and drainage infrastructure in place, this was an exceptional example of a well maintained Parsi owned plot.

Lunch was served at Cafe Local, run by the Contractor family, after which the group proceeded for some sightseeing in Baroda.



Lakshmi Vilas Palace

RTR alumnus Jamshed Bhagwagar, a Baroda local accompanied the group to the stunning Lakshmi Vilas Palace, the home of the royal Gaekwad family of the Princely State. We arrived at the grounds of the Palace and gazed at the grand architecture of the 130-year-old palace built by Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad in the name of his wife Lakshmi Bai. The group went on a tour of the gardens, with water fountains and lush trees, viewed in-built marble sculptures, paintings and showcases. The guide explained the palace's amenities which were original and the quality of craftsmanship was superior and long lasting.



Talk with Royal Family Member Jeetendrasingh Gaekwad

Jamshed led the group to the original residence of the Late Faramji Contractor, the earlier trustee of the Agiary. The lower section has now been converted into a beautiful coffee shop by his descendant Niketan who runs the family business. He gave an insight to the Parsis of Baroda and pointed out the contribution of his predecessors. The group was introduced to Jeetendrasingh Gaekwad, a member of the Royal Family who is an avid historian. He spoke at length on the strong ties between the Parsis of Baroda and the Royal Family and encouraged the group to be proud about their rich culture and heritage. It was no coincidence that while leaving Baroda, we travelled along a road named after a Parsi- Contractor road!

Day 13 - Surat

Visit to the Shahenshahi and Kadmi Atash Behrams

The next morning the group got an opportunity to visit the two Atash Behrams in Surat. This was the final part of the journey before going back to Mumbai. On the way back, we stopped at the delightful Ahura restaurant that had prepared packed lunch boxes. Before leaving, the group bought their favourite spices, tea and biscuits to take home for their families.

Day 14 - Mumbai

Britannia & Co.

At the last stage of the trip in Mumbai, we visited the Parsi General Hospital in the morning to drop off kits for the residents of the free wards. At lunchtime we went to the famous Britannia restaurant, and enjoyed authentic *Berry Pulao*, with *Boomlas* (fried Bombay duck), *salli boti*, and Rogers soda, another Parsi brand of soft drinks. The group felt the absence of the previous owner, Late Boman Kohinoor. He used to be an RTR favourite, recounting tales of the “good-old” days of the British Raj and his incessant love for the Queen. Boman uncle’s son Afshin now runs the restaurant and was delighted to receive a card signed by all participants to honour the memory of his father.



Dadar Athornan Institute

The last stop for RTR 6 was at the Dadar Athornan Institute. It is the only existing seminary that trains young boys to become *Mobeds* who have been serving fire temples across India and in other countries. The group was welcomed with some tea and shown around the institute. Later we met Ervad Dr Ramiyar Karanjia, the principal, who spoke about the history and types of Atash, responsible use of *Khoré* (the blessings of Ahura Mazda), and the importance of *Asha* (righteousness) in Zoroastrianism. Dr Ramiyar is one of the authorities on Zoroastrianism and happily answered our questions in an interactive session. The group also met young students, each of whom were given a hand-written card with messages from the participants. This was the end of the RTR 6 trip, and the group left Dadar for the hotel in Mumbai.



Conclusion

The Return To Roots programme was an experience of a lifetime and one that will be cherished for all that we learnt. It encompassed information and knowledge, which increased our understanding about our religion, culture and contributions, and we formed deep connections and bonds with an amazing network of community leaders, fellow participants and members of our community.

There were multiple recurring themes that surfaced through the course of the journey. Initially the focus was on business, entrepreneurship and the legendary generosity and contributions of Parsi run businesses and organizations. Half-way through the programme, the focus was more inclined towards our religion and history as we visited multiple Agiaries and Atash Behrams. Towards the end of the trip we focussed on giving back to our community.

Overall, the program took a holistic approach in helping Zoroastrian youth from all over the world to Return to their roots, Reconnect with the community, and Revive cultural and religious bonds that will last a lifetime.

The RTR Fellows





Bakhtafriid Cavas Panthaky - lives and works in Vancouver B.C. Canada. He drives for the transit system and owns a machine shop where he manufactures products out of mainly plastic but also foam and wood.

“ I would have never known most of what I know now about our religion if it wasn't for RTR. It has helped me respect and understand more about our religion and customs. I also made new friends in the community ”



Cyra Dumasia - is from Karachi Pakistan, where she teaches at a preschool. She loves playing sports, visiting new places and meeting new people.

“ I would recommend this trip to everyone because we get to meet new people from around the world and also meet great people like Mr Ratan Tata, Mr Jimmy Mistry, Mr Khojeste Mistry. Not only that, you get to know so much about our religion and culture, while visiting new places and making new friends ”



Danny Zarir Pohwala - is from Karachi, Pakistan, where he is currently leading power generation units at Pepsi. He has completed his Bachelors of Engineering in Electrical Engineering and his MBA in Finance.

“ The RTR programme has created in me a sense of pride of being a Zoroastrian after witnessing colossal contributions our ancestors have made in the field of education, entertainment, literature, corporate sector, medicine, architecture and literature. Visiting the Atash Behrams was truly spiritual and once in a lifetime experience, especially for me, a Pakistani for whom coming to India has always been a dream unfulfilled. The trip opens up one's mind with interacting Parsis coming from different parts of the world ”



Faranaz Solan - is from Karachi, Pakistan and is currently pursuing a career in banking and finance. Her curiosity for knowing more about her religion, traditions and culture as a whole brought her to The Return to Roots 2020.

“ RTR has definitely brought me closer to my religion. I try my best to do my Kusti daily, I have made many amazing friends and I am lucky to know them all. Moreover, my desire to service my community has definitely grown. My sense of religion and its impact on humanity has definitely improved through RTR ”



Fereshteh Bulsara - lives in Montreal, Canada where she works as a massage therapist and Osteopath. She was a competitive athlete in Olympic-style weightlifting and coached lifters and fitness enthusiasts for 8 years before returning to school to study osteopathy.

“ I would recommend RTR for all the learning and eye opening things about India, the Parsis and Zoroastrianism - especially for those who haven't grown up in India or Pakistan ”



Homi Sethna - was born and brought up in Karachi, Pakistan. After completing his bachelor's degree from the Institute of Business Management, Karachi he worked at a local bank for a few months. Later in 2020, he will be moving to the United States to pursue a Master's in Computer Science degree.

“ After this trip, I consider myself so blessed to be born in the Zoroastrian faith. A sense of giving back to the community has emerged in me and I feel the need to get actively involved in organizing communal activities. RTR provided us with many diversified viewpoints and left the decision entirely on us to make and follow the path we feel is right. It is undeniably a trip that every Zoroastrian youth should experience, at least once in their lifetime ”



Leea Contractor - graduated from Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in 2017, with a distinction in communications design and was also awarded the prestigious Founders award along with The Agha Hassan Abidi award, for demonstrating a high level of compassion, humility and generosity towards her fellow human beings. She is currently working as an Associate Creative Manager for the Creative Department at Dawn Media Group in Pakistan. Leea has a deep interest in reconnecting Zoroastrian Youth to their roots. Her Bachelor's Thesis, titled "Jamjoji" is a compilation of food memories and recipes that have been painstakingly collected from the Zoroastrian community. This was her inspiration to be a part of the Zoroastrian Return to Roots Program

“ Before the Return to Roots Program, I felt that my knowledge of our religion was quite limited and rather basic. However, through this program, I have a much better understanding of what it means to be Zoroastrian. Not only was this program focused on the religion, but it introduced me to our extremely rich history and unique culture. The activities planned during the trip allowed me to form connections and long-lasting friendships with the other Zoroastrians attending. Overall this trip reshaped my view on Zoroastrianism and allowed me to gain more confidence in the way I am able to speak about my religion ”



Mahfrin Burjor Santoke - is from Orange County, California and a member of the Zoroastrian Association of California. She is an elementary school instrumental music teacher and teaches 4th and 5th graders how to play string and band instruments. She is also a free-lance flute player.

“ RTR has allowed me to feel very inspired about the religion. Seeing it thrive and seeing other young people taking a genuine interest to come and learn about it made me feel like our traditions are not outdated and motivated me to participate with them and be proud of them ”



Parinaaz Navdar - is part of the Communications and Behavioural Insights team at Dubai's Knowledge and Human Development Authority. She has also served as project manager for all animal rescue related events at Volunteer in UAE, and a committee member of Emirates Zoroastrian Youth - a community group for Parsi youth in the UAE. When not working, Parinaaz is usually planning her next holiday.

“ This trip was an eye opening experience in so many ways. Hearing from some of the foremost scholars in our community, visiting sites that are of great significance to Parsis, hearing about the contribution of our community towards the economic and social welfare of the country has made me more appreciative of our rich history. Because of RTR, I finally have friends within the community who are accepting of different viewpoints and are supportive of everyone's personal joys and struggles as we all try to figure out what it means to be a Zoroastrian. Any Parsi who has grown up outside of India would benefit from this trip, no matter what they're looking to gain from the experience ”



Ruzbeh Vistasp Hodiwala - was born and brought up in Ahmedabad, India, and is currently pursuing his doctoral studies in History, Religions & Philosophies with a specialization in Neo-Zoroastrianism at SOAS, University of London. He completed his Bachelor of Art in Economics from St. Xavier's College, Ahmedabad in 2015, and Master's in Iranian Studies from SOAS in 2017. Ruzbeh who was a recipient of American Field Service (AFS) cultural exchange scholarship to Italy, has represented Zoroastrianism at various national and international conclaves on interfaith harmony. He has a keen interest in Indian polity. After the completion of his MA in London in 2017, he returned to India and worked as an assistant to a Member of the Legislative Assembly in the Gujarat state of India. His academic interest lies in the field of Cultural Anthropology of Religion with a focus on new adherents of Zoroastrianism; Migration & Diaspora Studies; History, Culture and, Politics of Iran.

“ Being a participant on this trip has given me better insights into what Zoroastrian identity means ”

to different individuals. It allowed me to meet fellow Zoroastrians from across the globe, interact with scholars and individuals who have not only contributed to the community but to society as a whole. I would encourage every Zoroastrian to undertake this trip if they want to know their roots and understand what it is to be a Zoroastrian in the 21st century ”



Safna Naozer Virji - is from Karachi Pakistan, a doctor by profession and is currently undergoing her specialty training in general surgery.

“ RTR is a great way to visit India and experience being among the largest group of Zoroastrians worldwide. It gives you the chance to appreciate the rich cultural heritage of our community, and to be able to share this experience with other Zoroastrians of the same age group from all over the world. I hope to give back to the community more of my time and have become more appreciative of all that our ancestors have done, that we are, who we are in today’s day and age ”



Shaun Walker - is a journalist for The Guardian, currently based in Budapest after more than a decade living in Moscow. His book *The Long Hangover: Putin’s New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past* was published by Oxford University Press in 2018. His mother is Parsi and he joined the trip partly for personal reasons and partly as research for a Guardian story about Parsis/Zoroastrians.

“ I learned a lot, both from the tour and the separate conversations I had with people on the sidelines. Travelling to Navsari and Udvada was extremely interesting, as I have never been out of Mumbai before. I would recommend RTR for halfies like me, but would have to warn people that they would miss out on quite a bit! ”



Viraf Soroushian - is a Management Consultant based in the USA. He grew up immersed in the Iranian Zoroastrian faith. As a youth, he was selected as a pre-Mobedyar and as an adult he spent substantial time studying religious texts and learning from some of the most revered Mobeds in North America and Iran. He has actively participated in Zoroastrian congresses, camps and sports olympics over the years.

“ RTR was a truly memorable and defining trip. My three goals while attending RTR were to Better understand the Parsi Zoroastrian tradition, Develop a greater appreciation for my religion, and Meet and bond with interesting and good people. I believe I accomplished all three ”



Zeritta Mavalvala - hails from Karachi, Pakistan. She has a Bachelor of Architecture degree from the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi. She is an architect currently working for Mundist, an interdisciplinary studio that provides residential, commercial, landscape and interior design services. As an architect, she believes in giving Mid-century designs a contemporary twist. In her free time, she enjoys sports, sketching and travelling to cities all over the world. She also has a passion for community service.

“ RTR has provided me with a platform to nurture my Zoroastrian identity and begin my spiritual journey. My mind has been expanded and my roots have become stronger. I now feel a sense of belonging and acceptance in our global Zoroastrian community. I have learned about the intricacies of our customs and traditions, our distinctive cultural heritage, our reconstructed history and the sacrifices made by our forefathers. I finally received answers to the questions I have pondered upon and cleared certain religious misconceptions. RTR has made me enthusiastic about volunteering and supporting different associations and youth initiatives of my local Zoroastrian community. It has been a truly invaluable experience forming everlasting friendships, creating community networks and treasuring fond memories ”



Zruvan Chotia - is a general contractor working with builders usually in the residential sector. He has a metal recycling business, and tree cutting /firewood service based out of Bradford Ontario. His hobbies include helping others, organizing workspaces for efficiency, woodwork, sorting of used metals, working on diesel engines, trucks, motorcycles, playing guitar, and swimming just to name a few.

“ RTR redefined me as an individual. It was a beautiful path to my connection into the Devine, and brought me to realize that God was within me all along. I understood that Zoroastrianism is vastly more than Good thoughts, Good words, Good deeds. That individuals WILL have multiple views and interpretations of the faith but in the end require to come together and attain harmony ”



The Team





Aban Marker Kabraji - Co-Chair, Return To Roots Program

Ms Kabraji is currently the Regional Director for IUCN Asia and Director of the IUCN Regional Hub for Asia-Oceania. She oversees and maintains an active presence in 15 countries, and is responsible for more than 70 wide-ranging environmental initiatives. With more than 30 years of experience, her leadership has been instrumental in bringing awareness to vital conservation issues such as gender, culture, and sovereignty. In 2018, she was a recipient of the Tamgha-i- Imtiaz Pakistan Civil Award in recognition of her outstanding contributions to conservation and development in Pakistan. Ms Kabraji serves as Co-Chair of the Mangroves for the Future initiative. She is also a member of the Advisory Committee of the United Nations Centre for Regional Development and was the Chair of TRAFFIC from 2015 to 2017. She led the External Review of the International Institute for Environment and Development (2011-2012) and sits on the Green Economy Coalition Steering Group. Recently, Ms Kabraji was appointed Team Leader of the Special Policy Study on the “Green Belt and Road Initiative and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” under the China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development. She was also appointed by the Jeju Special Self-Governing Province to sit on the Global Environmental Advisory Committee for Jeju Province. Ms Kabraji is a member of the External Advisory Board for the Yale Global Institute of Sustainable Forestry, a McCluskey Fellow, a visiting professor with the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, and a sought-after lecturer worldwide.



Dr. Shernaz Cama - Co-Chair, Return To Roots Program

Shernaz is an Associate Professor at Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University. Shernaz has edited and authored several books and has assisted international senior scholars in their research projects on Zoroastrianism.

As honorary Director of UNESCO Parzor, she guides research in Zoroastrian culture and demography. Shernaz has been awarded the Mazda Education Foundation Award and Mancherji Edalji Joshi Memorial Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Zoroastrian community.

She was Co-Curator of the SOAS Everlasting Flame exhibition for India 2016 and Coordinator for the National Everlasting Flame Parsi Programme. She is also the National Coordinator of the Government of India’s Jiyo Parsi programme.

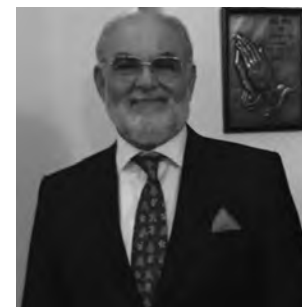


Arzan Sam Wadia - Program director, Return To Roots Program

Arzan is a licensed architect and runs his practice as an architect and urban designer in New York City, where he currently lives. Along with his architectural practice, Arzan also runs a technology consulting business providing complete solutions to the CAD and BIM industry.

Arzan has been involved with the Return to Roots program since its inception and as Program Director he oversees all aspects of the running of each trip and the overall RTR Program.

Arzan is the President of the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America. (FEZANA). Arzan is the founder editor of Parsi Khabar (www.parsikhavar.net), an online portal about Parsis.



Dr. Cyasp Noshirwani - RTR Coordinator 2020

Dr. Cyasp Noshirwani has been practicing medicine in Pakistan since 1991. He has established private practices at ASR Clinic Karachi since 2000, and at Doctor’s Plaza Karachi from 2011. He received his Doctor of Medicine (MD) degree from Pontificia Universidad Catolica Madre Y Maestra, Santiago, Dominican Republic in 1990.

He was designated as Deputy Medical Director of the Bomanshah Minocher Homji Medical Relief Association (Parsi General Hospital) Karachi, from 2007 – 2015 and as Medical Director BMH, PGH from 2016-2018.

“ The program was a unique experience, inspiring, enjoyable, exhausting and well managed. I would recommend that young Zoroastrians attend this wonderful program to gain a better understanding of our religion and form connections with other youth from around the world ”



Kayras Darayush Irani - RTR Fellow 2015, RTR Coordinator 2016, 2017, 2018 & 2020

Kayras has been a Paramedic with the British Columbia Ambulance Service for eleven years and has served an equal amount of time as a volunteer with the Zoroastrian Society of British Columbia. At the local level, he has taught

classes on Zoroastrian religion to school-aged children and has organized social gatherings for the community including youth and seniors; as well as organized a Youth Professional's Retreat in 2013. At the global level, Kayras has volunteered and/or been a speaker at seven different congresses from 2009-2019. He has proudly helped run four Zoroastrian Return To Roots trips by providing logistical and medical support for the participants. In August 2019, he represented FEZANA by attending the 68th UN Civil Society Conference in Salt Lake City, Utah. Kayras is ecstatic to help his wife Sanaya organize the second installment of WZYLFF and hopes to encourage the new participants to take on projects they feel passionate about and to inspire the upcoming leaders of tomorrow!

“ This trip was truly special and left us all with special memories. What impacted me most on this trip was the generosity of the participants. Each group I have been a part of has always been charitable in one way or another, but this group did not put an end to their charity. When they gave everything we asked from them, they stepped it up and gave even more. I am honestly speechless ”



Meher Marker Noshirwani - RTR Coordinator 2020

Meher Noshirwani is a specialist on conservation and environmental management, with a particular expertise on gender. She has a Masters in Sociology from the University of Essex, United Kingdom, and has advanced women's issues, gender, development, environment and climate change, in Pakistan, the region and globally for over 30 years. She serves as Regional Vice Chair for Asia, and Chair of the Specialist Group on Gender, for the IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic, and Social Policy (CEESP). Meher also serves as a Board Member and Chair on numerous committees, institutions and programmes; Board member of Hisaar Foundation; Technical Advisor to Trust for Conservation of Coastal Resources, (TCCR); Treasurer and Board member of The Karachi Conference Foundation. Meher lives and works in Karachi Pakistan.

“ I would recommend the RTR to all the youth of our community. It is a very valuable experience, and a rare opportunity to be able to visit places like Udwada, and Navsari, and see the historical,

religious, and cultural aspects of the Parsis in India. It provides a unique opportunity to immerse yourself in an exclusive Parsi experience, and understand the many dimensions of our community ”



Sheherazad Rohinton Pavri - RTR Fellow 2016, RTR

Coordinator 2017, 2018 & 2020

Ervad Sheherazad Pavri was a student of the Dadar Athornan Institute, where he underwent his priestly training along with his studies at the nearby DPYA High School. After completing his degree in Biotechnology from Jai Hind College under the University of Mumbai, he pursued the road of entrepreneurship where he runs his business building distribution systems over an e-commerce platform. All this while being well versed in higher liturgical ceremonies which he regularly performs as part of his priestly duties. Sheherazad was a participant of RTR 3 in March 2016. It was this experience that enthused him to volunteer which he did in all the subsequent trips. He has attended the last 2 Youth Congresses held in Auckland and Los Angeles and was also a participant of the 1st World Zoroastrian Youth Leaders Forum in Gloucestershire, UK. Sheherazad is a core member of the Empowering Mobeds initiative which holds training sessions for improving the soft skills of Zoroastrian priests and grooming them with communication and leadership skills. He loves travelling, trying out new adventures and bringing smiles on people's faces.

“ With every RTR I am part of, my pride about my identity grows. It was heartening to see the devotion the participants had. Everyone respected differing viewpoints and though it was a small group which made this easier, these same participants will be respectful to fellow community members while being involved in their local communities which is a great achievement ”



Tanya Hoshi - RTR Fellow 2017, RTR Coordinator 2018 & 2020

Tanya is an award-winning film and web series producer/director based in Toronto. Tanya is currently a Producer at Shopify Studios in Toronto, which allows her to travel and film stories that inspire entrepreneurship. Tanya was an RTR participant in 2017 and has volunteered her time

in 2018 and 2020 as the trip's official coordinator, videographer and social media manager. She was a participant during the World's First Zoroastrian Youth Leaders Forum in 2018, and a panelist and presenter at the World Zoroastrian Youth Congress in 2019. Tanya is proud to be the recipient of the FEZANA Performing and Creative Arts Scholarship in 2019 and FEZANA's upcoming Chief Social Media Officer.

“ RTR has allowed me to have a better understanding about the historical impact my religious community has made in India. Although we are small in number, our impact is large. I have learned more about our customs, rituals, and the accomplishments Zoroastrians have had in India. I recommend every young Zoroastrian attends the RTR programme at least once, in order to have the opportunity to strengthen their pride and understanding about their culture and religion. If you're having an identity crisis, or never felt connected to your community, this trip will allow you to have the opportunity to discover your religion and community on your own terms. Best of all, you will get to meet other Zoroastrians in the diaspora who are also there for similar reasons. ”



Zubin Pervez Gheesta- RTR Fellow 2015, RTR Coordinator 2016, 2017, 2018 & 2020

Zubin was born and brought up in Bombay. He is a fitness consultant by profession, which majorly includes transforming people into better and healthier versions of themselves. He is also associated with a fitness teaching institute by the name of the Exercise Science Academy where he happens to take some exercise practicals on form & technique. He also assists his institute in conducting symposiums, certifications, workshops with other gyms or on a particular aspect of fitness.

“ The fact that this is my 4th trip as a volunteer, speaks a lot about my interest and belief in this programme. It has given me a lot in terms of my identity, and an opportunity to get to know so many people around the world sharing the same religion. I would recommend each and every Zoroastrian, be it Indian or anyone from abroad to attend this knowledgeable, fun filled, perspective changing kind of trip. ”



Post Trip Updates



RTR Program Director, Arzan Sam Wadia, was elected as the President of The Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA).

RTR Coordinator, Kayras Irani, was elected to the Board of the Zoroastrian Society of British Columbia (ZSBC) in Vancouver, Canada. He joins the Board along with RTR Alumni Aubtin Yazdegardian (RTR 4) who was also elected recently. Kayras also wrote for the FEZANA Journal, Summer 2020 issue, sharing his thoughts in an article titled 'Safeguarding RTR Delegates During A Pandemic - A Paramedic's Story'.

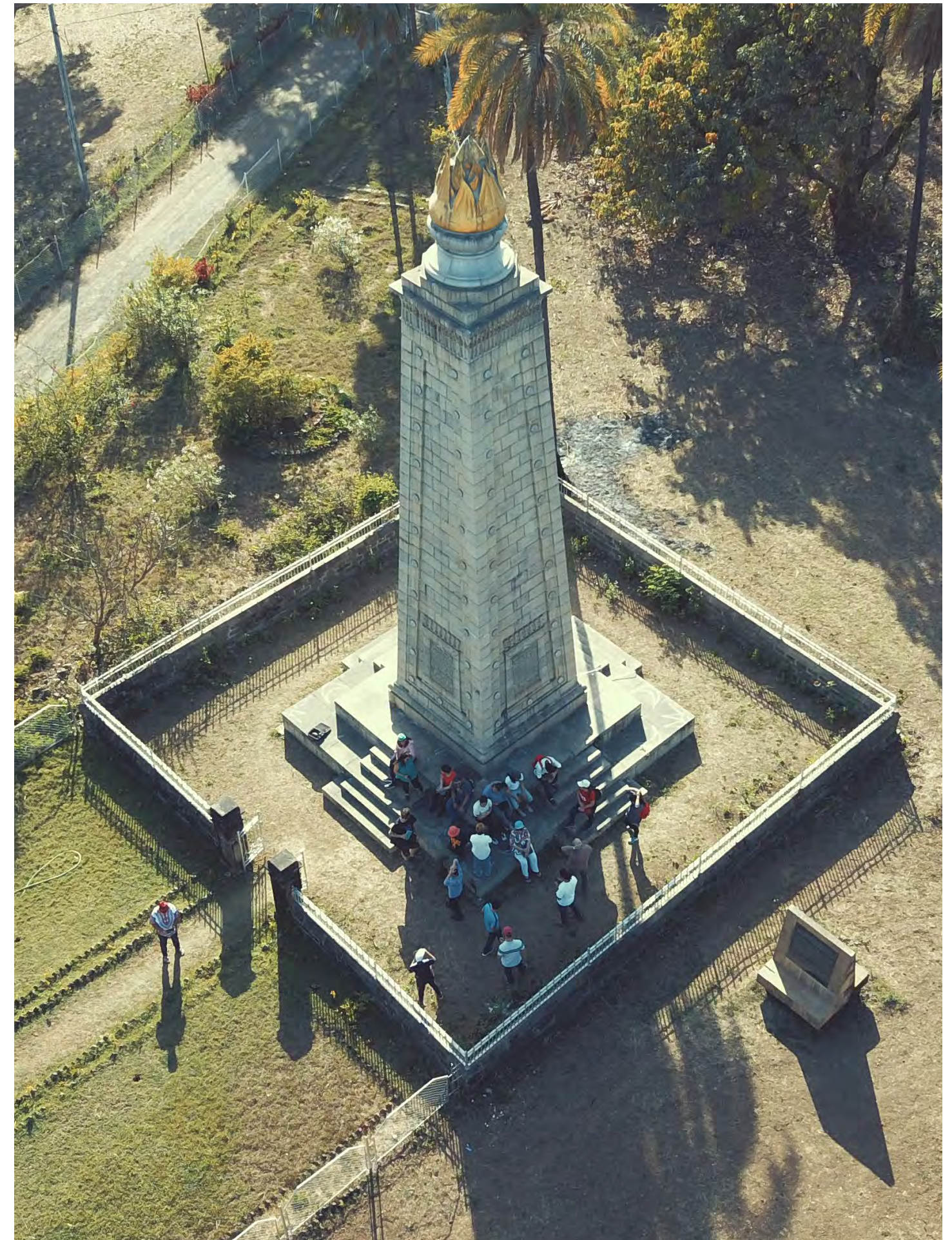
RTR Coordinator, Tanya Hoshi, was appointed as FEZANA's Chief Social Media Officer. She is taking the lead to organize online panels on behalf of FEZANA and the World Zoroastrian Youth Leaders Forum. Later this year, Tanya plans to launch her second Zoroastrian-focused business, which will feature Zoroastrian-themed stories and designs.

RTR 6 Participant and journalist, Shaun Walker, wrote an account of his journey on RTR as part of a longform article in the Guardian titled "The last of the Zoroastrians" which has garnered over half a million views in the very first month of it being online. You can read the piece here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/06/last-of-the-zoroastrians-parsis-mumbai-india-ancient-religion>

RTR 6 Participant, Leea Contractor, joined the Global Iranshah Initiative as a Youth Representative for Pakistan. She is also working as a designer for the upcoming 12th World Zoroastrian Congress as well as the 8th World Zoroastrian Youth Congress. In the future Leea hopes to launch her website 'Jamjoji', a compilation of food memories and recipes that have been collected from the Zoroastrian community.

RTR 6 Participants, Homi Setna, Safna Virji and Zeritta Mavalvala wrote a short article for the FEZANA Journal Summer 2020 issue.

RTR 6 Participants, Homi Setna and Zeritta Mavalvala wrote an article on the 6th Return to Roots (2020) trip which was published in the "What's On" newsletter, a monthly newsletter produced by Karachi Zarthosti Banu Mandal.



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Until next time!