

# 7TH ZOROASTRIAN RETURN TO ROOTS

Annual Trip Report  
*December 2023*



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# ABOUT ZOROASTRIAN RETURN TO ROOTS

Est. 2012

The Zoroastrian Return to Roots (RTR) is a youth initiative designed to strengthen the idea of identity among the global Zoroastrian youth. The birth of the program 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.

## THE JOURNEY

The Zoroastrian religion, although ancient and numerically small in its population of believers, is a religion that illustrates in its longevity, characteristics of tenacity of belief, survival, adaptation and the pursuit of knowledge. The organizing teams of RTR have faced several challenges in making the 7th RTR trip a reality; bringing 28 international participants together in India across today's divided geography and the demands of travel and inflation in a post-COVID world was not a simple task.

After seven cycles of RTR, we find ourselves in awe of the generosity and hard work of our board, alumni and our sponsors who in sharing our vision, have let the wings of the RTR *fravashi* soar high. As RTR celebrates this auspicious number of seven, let us remind ourselves of the roles emulated by the seven creations and the Amesha Spentas with regards to guiding the Zoroastrian spirit within the RTR framework.





# THE VISION

## *Return Zoroastrians to their Roots*

Visit a combination of historical, cultural, religious and community sites in Mumbai and Gujarat as well as other smaller communities over the course of a two-week trip.

Meet Zoroastrian academics, researchers and local guides.

Discover ways in which one can be part of the larger Zoroastrian community which is increasingly evolving.

## *Reconnect Zoroastrians to their identity*

Bring together young Zoroastrians from across the world through the program which brings forth their commonalities and traditions.

Participate in educational and community-service oriented activities, which reinforce and reinvigorate community links and identity.

## *Revive the Zoroastrian Community*

Help expand on the opportunities available for the Zoroastrian diaspora in India.

Encourage young Zoroastrians to take an active role in community development by embodying the values of Zoroastrian entrepreneurship and charity.

Support and encourage local Zoroastrian enterprises.

Take advantage of, and contribute to, Zoroastrian academia, music, art, oral traditions and business.



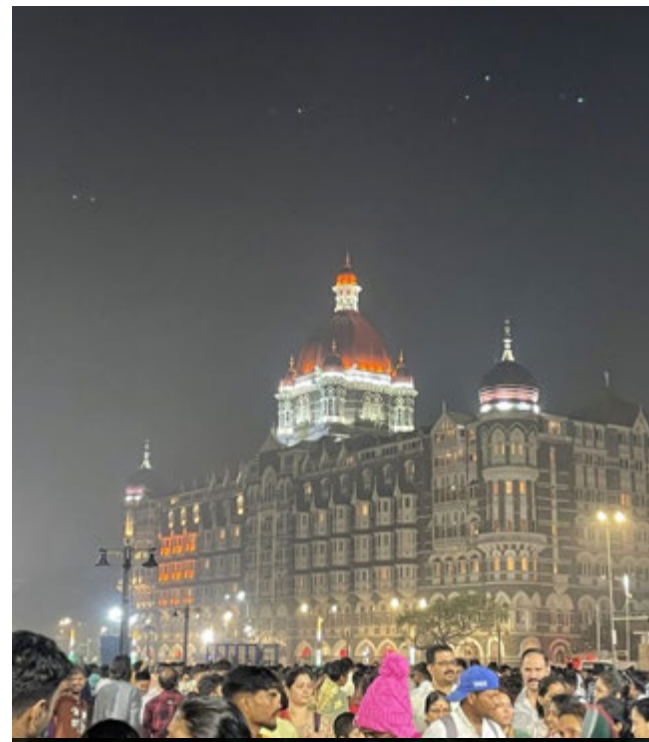


With an open mind, seek and listen to all the highest ideals.  
Consider the most enlightened thoughts.  
Then choose your path, person by person, each for oneself

**Zarathustra (Gathas)**









# RTR 7 AMESHA SPENTAS

## Vohu Manah

Entrusting that all Zoroastrians should be governed by good thoughts and intentions, the symbol of cattle for Vohu Manah represents the necessity of humans extending care towards all of God's creatures. A central tenant in RTR is charity and generosity which year after year is visualized through visits to the Surat Parsi Panchayat Boys and Girls orphanages, the Parsi Infirmary and the WZO Senior Center in Navsari. RTR fellows gain in learning the values of compassion and generosity through these visits. Additionally, by comparing the vast economic wealth in Mumbai through Parsi entrepreneurs with smaller communities in Gujarat, the RTR itinerary showcases why it is integral to distribute wealth to those Zoroastrians who struggle and need support.

## Asha Vahishta

An integral experience of RTR is the visit to the Atash Behrams and especially the midnight boi ceremonies. After 7 cycles of RTR, our fellows have unanimously said that one of the highlights of the trip is having the privilege to pray and meditate in front of some of the oldest *atashs* in the world within Gujarat and Mumbai. The RTR program recognizes the Amesha Spenta of the cosmic order of fire which reverberates the unifying practice of prayer and hence fellows during RTR 7 were given the time and space to visit and learn the history of the Atash Behrams in Udvada, Navsari, Surat and Mumbai as a unique opportunity which they may not have again.

## Kshatra Vairya

As the creation of the sky which represents honesty and the dominion of righteous authority, the 7th RTR would not have become a reality if it wasn't for the honest and dedicated individuals behind the program who literally held the roof over our heads together. Our tour guide agency, Trail Blazers India (TBI) spent an incredible amount of time ensuring our two-week trip was planned immaculately. No RTR would also be possible without our visa sponsors who selflessly invest their valuable time in ensuring our safe arrival in India. It is through the unfiltered honesty and shared belief in furthering the values of Zoroastrianism which bind our fellows together with the personnel in charge of curating our trip.

## Haurvata

The values of wholeness and health as represented by consecrated water was very much a significant backdrop during the 7th RTR. We were fortunate to experience a beautiful jashan on the Arabian Sea, allowing us to connect with each other spiritually. Furthermore, having participated in cleaning up the Udvada beach through the Clean & Green Udvada initiative, we recognised the environmental impact of ensuring the waters around the ancient Iranshah Atash Behram are kept clean so that sites of Zoroastrian history and veneration are safeguarded from pollution for future generations to witness.

## Spenta Armaiti

Being conscious of embodying right mindedness as depicted by the creation of earth, RTR integrates significant projects into the itinerary which are built on this belief. This year, RTR 7 fellows were introduced to the sandalwood and babool tree plantations at the unoccupied Zoroastrian village of Mahuva which showed us how organizations such as the WZO Trust Funds are re-purposing land and enriching culture by thinking about the future of supplying wood to our fire temples. During our visit to Parsi designer Ashdeen's business in Mumbai, we were fascinated to learn how the craft of Parsi gara has been revived, preserved and pays homage to the history of Parsi mercantile families who contributed immensely to the economy of the South and South East Asian landscape through trade.

## Ameretat

Symbolized through plants to represent immortality, the Zoroastrian religion advocates for ecological well-being to sustain a long life. During our visit to the Godrej & Boyce facility, RTR 7 were fortunate to see how this principle guided the ethos of the Parsi entrepreneur Pirojsha Godrej who had set up the largest mangrove enclave in India on the west bank of the Thane creek in the 1940s. During a guided tour of the enclosure by Godrej & Boyce, RTR 7 fellows were introduced to the scientific value of mangroves and saw how today it exemplifies an ecologically driven business. It is also worth mentioning during our tour of Sanjan, we were hosted at the WZO Sanjan Sanatorium which boasts a large garden composed of multiple varieties of plants and trees. Many of the RTR 7 participants took long walks in the garden and we realized how important a green and healthy space is for the Parsi residents of the Sanjan Sanatorium.

## Spenta Mainyu

The element which is devoted to the creation of the human and the human mind represented by a priest who possesses the bounteous spirit. During the RTR tour of India, we were fortunate to engage with priests and scholars who are extremely well-read and professed limitless knowledge on Zoroastrianism. Our meetings with Vada Dasturji Khurshed Dastoor, Ervard Dr. Ramiyar Karanjia, Khojeste Mistree, the Empowering Mobeds Initiative and even the scholar Kurush Dalal allowed us the privilege of having our questions about religion, ancient scriptures and the community answered in a personal format. We met priests who struggle in their journeys but represent the values of piousness, allowing RTR fellows to look up to their strength and reverence in faith.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The 7th 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 **Arzan Sam Wadia**, 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 and financial sponsors as we build Roots in North America in partnership with FEZANA.

To the trustees of the **World Zoroastrian Organization Trust Funds** for their financial and logistics support. Special thanks to **Dinshaw and Bachi Tamboly** and **Aspi B. Ambapardiwala** for their continued support and for taking us to see the various sights in Navsari and the hinterland villages.

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 Mansi Shroff**.

We are particularly indebted to **Kersi Deboo**, Zoroastrian Representative on the National Minorities Commission of India for his help with visas for our Pakistan based participants.

We thank **Vada Dasturji Khurshed Dastoor**, High Priest of the Iranshah Atash Behram 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.

To **Mehernaaz Shovir Irani**, for being our local sponsor for visas and for putting in a great deal of time and effort in ensuring the visa process went smoothly.

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 landmark, Ratan Tata Institute (RTI); explaining the intricacies of our religion, and for an amazing open bus tour and guided walk of the heritage precinct of Mumbai city.

To **Mrs. Armaity Tirandaz**, Chairperson and 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 Buhariwala, Kaiyosh Keravala** and their 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.

Thank you to **Pheroza Godrej, Nailini Kala** and others at **Godrej & Boyce** for a fantastic visit to their headquarters in Vikhroli, Mumbai. The visit to The Godrej Mangrove Forest, Godrej Archives and the Godrej Aerospace Plant were a highlight of the trip. We also thank them for their hospitality in hosting us for lunch.

Thank you to **Zubin Mistry** and **Munira Patel** for their help in arranging our visit to the Tata Xperience Center at Bombay House, the Tata Group HQ.

A huge thank you to our dear friend **Ashdeen Lilaowala** for inviting us to his showroom and spending hours explaining his craft and indulging the participants in trying out his creations.

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 **Fili Bapuna** and the **volunteers of Clean and Green Udvada initiative** for welcoming us and organizing a service event to clean the beach in Udvada.

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

To **Mr. Xerxes Dastur** and the **trustees of the Ripon Club** for welcoming us for lunch.

To **Dr. Kurush Dalal** for his insightful presentations on the history and anthropology of Parsi food and settlements.

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, Ervad Farzan Antia** and the **Trustees of the Meherjirana Library** in Navsari for welcoming us.

To **Ruzbeh Umrigar** of INTACH Navsari for the Heritage Tour of Navsari.

To **Behzad Suraliwala**, whose help and logistical support always makes our visit to Navsari a memorable one.

To **Yazdi Kasad** for the visit to the **Navsari Infirmary**.

To **Neville and Dinaz Kolah** for their hospitality in welcoming the group to **Yazdaan Cold-Drink House** for refreshments.

To **Sam Phiroze Wadia** for hosting us for lunch at the **Wadia Farms** in Village Anklaach, Navsari District, Gujarat.

To **Behzad, Rhea and Yohaana Kharas** for their hospitality and hosting us for breakfast in Surat.

To **Cyrus Dotivala** for welcoming us to the **Dotivala Bakery** on every single trip and giving us a detailed behind-the-scenes of this legendary establishment

To **Murzy Patel** for hosting all RTR 7 participants and team members at his restaurant **Golden Dragon** in Surat.

To **Yazdi and Vera Karanjia** of Surat for their hospitality and hosting our group in a lovely manner and showing us around the **Surat Parsi Panchayat Boys and Girls Orphanages**. We would also like to thank Yazdi for facilitating the visa process for participants.

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 **Mr. Homa Petit, Lt. Col. M. Ganguly, Neville Jamshedji and others at the B. D. Petit Parsee General Hospital** for welcoming us and giving us a tour of the facilities.

To **Mr. Burjis Wania**, Committee Member of the **Parsee Gymkhana** for allowing us to visit and see the Gymkhana facilities and use the space for our debrief session

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

To **Shahveer Byramji** and the **Bai Gulbai Nusserwanjee Mehta Education Fund** for their continued support towards the Pakistani participants.

To the **High Commission of India, Islamabad** for facilitating the visa process for our Pakistani participants.

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 **Feroze and Shernaz Bhandara Charitable Trust** for their contribution to the RTR programme.

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

To the **Zoroastrian Association of Houston** and its president **Aderbad Tamboli** for their support of our programme.

To **Kayras Irani** and the **Board of the Zoroastrian Society of British Columbia** (ZSBC) for their unstinting support for the program over the last many years.

To **Vira and Burjor Santoke** for supporting our programme.

To **Fabian Dias** for his support in the complicated administrative and logistic process for the Pakistan participants.

To **Rukhsana Lawyer, Abdul Jalil Baig and Ehtasham Ul Haq** for compiling the Financial Report, and supporting the coordination of the Pakistani participants' visa process. We would also like to extend our thank you's to **Jas Travel Group** who organized the travel and tickets for the Pakistani contingent.

To **Homi Khushrookhan, Zarir Cama and Bapsy Dastur** for their constant support and guidance over the years.

To our amazing Chair of the Board, **Aban Marker Kabraji** and Programme Director **Arzan Sam Wadia**, our grateful thanks for the leadership, oversight, participation and coordination of the programme at all levels.

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: **Mahfrin Santoke, Veera Rustomji, Sheherazad Pavri, Zubin Gheesta, Tanya Hoshi and Kayras Irani**, and who organized, accompanied and assisted the participants on this trip.

The writing and compilation of the RTR 7 report was a team effort; special thanks to **Veera Rustomji** who led the report writing and editing process with RTR 7 alumni, **Mahya Sethna** who was responsible for the design and layout. They were ably assisted by **Sheherazad Pavri** with his valuable perspectives as both alumni and RTR Board Member and RTR 7 volunteer **Mahfrin Santoke** for her additions. We would also like to thank **Aban Marker Kabraji** as well, for her editorial input.

And finally, thank you to **all 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.





# DAY 1

## Arrival In Mumbai

All RTR participants had checked into Fariyas Hotel prior to the start of the itinerary. They had made their way to Mumbai from Australia, Canada, the USA, the UK, Iran and Pakistan. Naturally, we eagerly awaited to meet each other at the first breakfast. As young Zoroastrians ran into others they knew from their home countries, or glanced around the Fariyas buffet room for others who looked like they may be part of the trip, the group began to gel immediately, as everyone was friendly and excited to get to know each other.

## *Cusrow Baug A model example of the Parsi endeavor in India*

A short walk's distance from Fariyas, stood our first stop, Cusrow Baug, Nowrosjee N. Wadia Trust Buildings for Parsis. Built in 1934 and continuing to provide subsidized housing for more than 500 Parsi families, its immense archway is unmissable on main Colaba Road. We gathered at the Pavilion of Cusrow Baug and were given a history of the *baug* (compound), how it started, its facilities such as the Seth Nusserwanji Hirji Karani Agiary and how the *baug* is run today. For young Zoroastrians from the diaspora, the idea of housing communities, built for Parsis by the late Wadia family, was inspiring. The history of Parsi entrepreneurship and their wealth being generated and circulated within the community was exemplified by Nowrosjee N. Wadia and his wife Jerbai Wadia whose generosity and wealth were donated to build Cusrow Baug. The discussion on the Wadia family marked the occasion for RTR 7's first day as a step forward towards understanding the legacy of Parsis donations towards the community.

While at the Pavillion, we also conducted formal introductions where each participant spoke a little bit about themselves, their professional and educational backgrounds as well as why they joined RTR. The Program Director, Arzan Sam Wadia, gave us an overview of what we could expect over the next 15 days. We learned that RTR 7 was an RTR of many firsts; the largest RTR 7 group at 28 participants and being the first trip with a high Irani-Zarthoshti population, including two participants who live in Iran. We were encouraged to fully immerse ourselves in all the experiences and forget about our everyday lives back at home for the next 15 days. We were also encouraged to be open to new and different perspectives and to remain respectful, but to continue to discuss and consider perspectives that may be different than our own.













## Tour of the Doongerwadi

### *The Towers of Silence, with Khojeste Mistree*

Our first immersive experience of the trip was a tour of the Doongerwadi, with religious scholar, Khojeste Mistree. The Doongerwadi at Malabar Hill is where Indian Zoroastrians traditionally dispose of the bodies of the dead. It is a large urban forest of about 55 acres encircling around the Towers of Silence (dakhmas). This beautiful, quaint location is a testament to how Dokhmenashini is a way of disposing of the dead which, attributing towards the flourishing of nature, negates any pollution of fire and allows the body to decompose without defiling the earth. Mr Mistree guided us through the process a family would go through to perform the last rites of their departed, starting with the houses on the Doongerwadi grounds for families to stay in and the final point where the corpse is laid before entering the dakhma. We saw a model of the dakhma, learned about the 'Tano' system, the allocations of 'Pavis' and what are the responsibilities of the mobeds (priests) and the Nasâsâlârs (corpse bearers). Many of us had questions about rituals and philosophy around Dokhmenashini and one by one, Mr. Mistree answered them all quoting Zoroastrian liturgical texts, scholarly studies and his own research. Contrary to popular belief, there are no vultures remaining in Mumbai to consume the body, and the sun is the primary component in its deterioration which Mr Mistree explained works very well and is sustainable. Quoting scientific studies, he also debunked myths about Dokhmenashihi and emphasized that the Zoroastrian system of using the Doongerwadi is the most ecologically sound system of disposal.

As we were given a tour around the grounds, Mr Mistree also pointed out some of the specific species of trees and butterflies within the grounds and outlined how the Doongerwadi were the lungs of Mumbai. The peaceful atmosphere made it easy to forget that we were standing in the middle of an otherwise loud and busy city. While some participants were skeptical about starting our tour on a morbid topic, we came out of this experience finding the tour of the Doongerwadi grounds to be peaceful and enriching in which we could take pride in our religious customs and traditions.

## The Sir Ratan Tata Institute (RTI)

### *Where entrepreneurship meets sustainability and community service*

One of the goals of RTR is to support Zoroastrian-owned businesses and Sir Ratan Tata Institute (RTI) is one such example. After our tour of the Doongerwadi, we set out for RTI and were greeted by Hooma Billimoria, Kaiyosh Kerawala and Shernaz Buhariwala. Our induction into RTI started with a scrumptious, traditional Parsi lunch and a range of continental items as well. We were lucky to visit some parts of the RTI kitchens where the employees were hard at work. With many female employees smiling at us and welcoming us into their workspace, we were given a demo on how the RTI makes traditional *bhaakhras*, a cookie-like snack, alongside other pastries. They even let us try our hands in the kitchen, rolling dough and making our own piping hot *bhaakhras*, which we then got to sample.

We were told that RTI was created with the intention of giving employment to women, using traditional skills women had learned such as sewing, embroidering, and cooking and hence after the kitchens, we went to the sewing rooms to see employees hard at work embroidering and restoring sarees. RTI employees also create new designs for men, women and children's clothing as well as tableware etc. Some employees had been working for RTI for most of their lives and were proud of their work as they are truly the definition of artists dedicated to their craft. Thrilled to see our interest in the skills employed to do their jobs, one happy RTI employee we met has been present for all previous RTR trips - to her surprise, we showed her old pictures we had of her from past 6 RTR trips. We left RTI with a better understanding of traditional Parsi fashions and snacks, how they are created and with a sense of pride that the Parsi, Ratan Tata was forward thinking enough to recognize women needed employment and to create opportunities for them to further community and individual success stories. We were also struck by the high standards of hygiene and employee fulfillment in this self-sustaining business.





# DAY 2

## Setting the foundations of Zoroastrian religious history, its cultural evolution and noteworthy contributions from the community.



We began our day meeting eminent scholar, Mr. Khojeste Mistree again at the RTI Institute for a '101 on the Zoroastrian religion'. Mr. Mistree is the co-founder and trustee of Zoroastrian Studies (ZS), The Athravan Educational Trust (AET) and the World Alliance of Parsi-Irani Zarthoshtis (WAPIZ). Mr. Mistree and his scholarly wife, Firoza Punthakey Mistree, have been guiding RTR fellows since its first cycle in 2012 within all fields relating to Zoroastrian studies as well as Parsi contributions towards India. It was a privilege to have a second audience with an individual who has lectured at some of the world's most prestigious educational institutes.

After mapping the origins of Zoroastrianism and the prophet Zarathustra's teachings, Mr. Mistree aptly began his lecture with underscoring how the essential tenets of Zoroastrianism lay emphasis on ecological consciousness. As today's youth has a heightened awareness of global warming and environmental catastrophes, which will largely affect the future quality of life, Mr. Mistree connected the ancient philosophy of Zoroastrianism to modern dilemmas of the 21st century. By explaining the seven Amesha Spentas aka the "Bounteous Immortals" (fire, sky, water, earth, plant, cattle and the human being) which resonate with the Holy Spirit of Ahura Mazda, Mr. Mistree explained how and why Zoroastrians should strive to live in harmony with these creations of Ahura Mazda.

As many of the RTR fellows have an interest in Zoroastrian culture and rituals which propels them to sign up for the program, participants have a penchant for understanding history and the role Zoroastrian empires had in carving out our present day visual identity. Mr. Mistree led us through the most salient features of the Pishdadian Dynasty, the Kayanian Dynasty, the Medes, the Achaemenid Empire, the Parthians and finally the Sassanians. We were briefed about how Zoroastrianism is an "ethno-geographic" religion as the prophet Zarathustra preached to only those within the vast Persian landscape. He shared fascinating facts about Darius I and the achievements of Zoroastrian kings.

Furthermore, parts of his lecture looked at rituals, the priestly acts of worship and sacred Zoroastrian literature. For many of us, this was the first time we were given a simplified yet accurate illustration of the 16 stages of building an Atash Behram, the most venerated of consecrated fires in Zoroastrianism. Utilizing diagrams of the Fravashi, Sudreh and Kusti, Mr. Mistree took initiative to guide us into an in depth understanding of sacred symbology and garments in the Zoroastrian religion and how to wear and read these core elements in accordance with the Avestan scriptures. Mr. Mistree concluded his holistic presentation with a focus on the migratory tangent of the Zoroastrians, the Parsis and outlined cultural distinctions which set our minority community apart from other religions in South Asia. We were given a glimpse into contributions of the Parsis in the arts, economy, judicial and philanthropic sectors of India. This was just a preliminary induction, preparing us for the future days which would bring RTR participants closer to these monumental achievements.



# The Fravashi

*Right hand pointing upwards is to urge Zarthostis to follow the path of truth.*

*Four tiers of the wings represent the four tiers of Iranian society*

*Ring in left hand represents sovereignty and the covenant to follow the good religion given by Ahura Mazda to the Iranian Prophet, Spitaman Zarathushtra*

*Human head represents the good mind and human consciousness*

*Three tiers of the tail represent Good Thoughts, Good Words & Good Deeds*



*Large circle in which the body of the Fravashi is framed represents the Ancient Iranian land of Airyana Vaejah*

*Wings represent swiftness and glory in the spiritual world*

*Two ribbon-like features on either side of the tail represent the golden mean, moderation and balance that every Zarthoshti must seek to lead a righteous life*

**Image Credits** Iranshah A Legacy Restored, by Zarin Amroliya, published by Shahpoorji Palloonji

## Lunch at the Ripon Club

Although the RTI provided us with snacks and drinks, our tummies were rumbling for a Parsi lunch and we were not disappointed. Venturing onto the famous Ripon Club for a delicious lunch of Dhansaak, kachumber (salad) and custard for dessert catered by Tehmtan and Shernaz Dumasia. For a few of us with Irani heritage, this was the first time sampling the hallmark Parsi lunch trio! The Ripon Club itself was established in 1884 by famous Bombay Parsi entrepreneurs such as Phirozeshah Mervanji Mehta, Jamshedji Tata and Dinshaw Maneckjee Petit in the N.M. Wadia Building in Fort, Mumbai. It is known for its British-India colonial interior design with ornate pillars, busts of its founders, marble countertops and antique furniture including lines of armchairs which have been utilized since decades by Parsi members for a snooze after a heavy meal. Our lunch at Ripon Club gave us an insight into what the Parsi dining experience was like in the late 20th century with the economic boom within the community that led to such establishments.



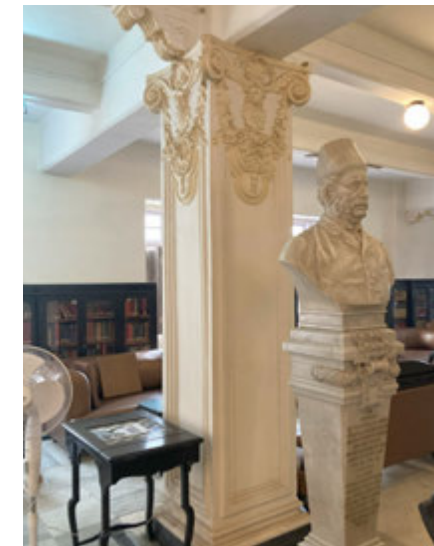


## *What is Parsi food and how does the cuisine link with our historical migration?*

At the Ripon Club, which embodies the culture of Parsi food by cementing community engagement in India, our next educational component was a presentation by archaeologist and food anthropologist, Dr. Kurush F. Dalal. Leading us through findings from the 2002 excavations at Sanjan, he brought to light fascinating linkages between the Iranian Zoroastrian migration to Gujarat and archaeological settlements in Sanjan through the examples of food, ingredients and the etymology of language and colloquial sayings in Gujarati. Dr. Dalal walked us through the excavations through images and showed us diagrams of the archaeological dakhma which exacted a flourishing Zoroastrian settlement in Sanjan that was dated approximately from the 8th - 12th AD. Dr. Dalal outlined some unique attributes of the excavations such as the presence of jewelry on the skeletons found in the dakhma, the brick structure of the dakhma itself and antiquities which suggested trade with both Persian Gulf as well as China. As most of us had not been to Gujarat yet and had not read about these details from the Sanjan excavations, Dr. Dalal's informative guidance on the site was a first step towards looking at scientific data about the arrival of the Parsis. Most of us Parsis have grown up hearing about the Qissa-e-Sanjan which is a romanticized poem about the story of migration and the survival of the Iranshah Atash. Dr. Dalal talked about the crafting of the Qissa, its elusive meaning and lack of factual accuracy but at the same time the central role it has to play in oral mythology. It is through the Qissa-e-Sanjan, Dr. Dalal emphasized that Parsis created a sense of belonging in South Asia. Taking this forward, we then looked at the continuous morphing the Parsi cuisine which took place in three major stages;

- 1) **8th - 16th c. AD** the arrival and amalgamating of the Zoroastrians
- 2) **16th - 18th c. AD** marking Dutch and Portuguese influences vis a vis the arrival of international traders and colonial entities such as the European East India Companies
- 3) **17th - 20th c. AD** which included British influence and eventual governance in India that led to the Parsi mercantile class and maritime trade. This era also gave way to the second major wave of Iranians to India and the eventual shift of prosperous Parsis to Mumbai.

Under these three chronological umbrellas, Dr. Dalal looked at food items and drinks such as *Popatjees*, *Toddy*, *Saasni Machi*, *Ravo* and the substitution of meats with the shifts in occupations of the Parsis from agricultural to becoming traders. Special emphasis was placed on trademark items such as rice, fish, rose essence and dried fruits from our Iranian ancestors which have been adapted within South Asia.







## ***Bombay House The TATA Group legacy***

After this invigorating lecture of culture which left us with a definitive understanding of the flavors of our roots, our next stop was Bombay House, the HeadQuarters of the Tata Group for 100 years. As we walked inside, we were greeted by the wagging tails of a few street-dogs adopted by the Tatas who are allowed within the ground floor of the premises with provisions of food and water. The sensitivity towards the well-being of all of Ahura Mazda's creations was so well illustrated by the Tata philosophy and it led us to think about how for profit businesses owned by Parsis in India have inculcated ethics of care and socio-economic responsibility within their mandates.

Our tour of The Tata Experience Centre (TxC) was led by Priyanka Shetty and we were amazed to see the level of multimedia and preservation employed to display memorabilia of the Tata Family. We were educated through the exhibition about the foundations of the family enterprise set up by Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata in 1868 and gained insights into the contributions of Dorabji Tata, Ratanji Tata, Naval Tata, Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata, and Jehangir Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata. As Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata was dubbed the 'Captain of Indian Industry', RTR participants were able to see how the different sectors of production such as steel, transport, education and sport have become synonymous with the Parsi reputation of determination and success in India, especially in helping Mumbai climb the ranks to be a major cosmopolitan city. The exhibition on display featured medals, awards, personal letters and artifacts from the Tata family archive and while some speak of the grandeur and power of the industrious family, other notable items share snippets into the personal lives and struggles of the Tata family.

We were lucky to receive some wonderful merchandise from the Tata Group and free coffees. The day was certainly a deep dive of an introduction into Zoroastrian history and Parsi culture, preparing us for the many experiences and opportunities to exchange knowledge for which the trip had yet for us to discover.





## DAY 3

We began our third day with a visit to the Cusrow Baug Karani Agiary. Despite the early morning start, many of us felt more centered and focused by meeting our fellow RTR participants for group activities to begin the day.

### Ashdeen's Showroom

#### *Understanding Parsi textiles, heritage and heirlooms*

We moved on to visit the designer Ashdeen's showroom. Ashdeen Lilaowala is one of the best known designers of Parsi fashion and sells high-end items, such as hand and machine embroidered *garas*, scarves, accessories and contemporary Eastern wear. While much of the RTR tour engages with institutes based on charity and goodwill, a part of the itinerary welcomes participants to engage with understanding the legacy of trade and economic wealth of the Parsis that has formed a distinct visual culture. Ashdeen showed us archived heritage pieces which were a testament to Parsi mercantile relationships between Canton and South Asia. He described the Silk Route trade in which the Parsis had a crucial role to play in. Outlining the relationship textiles, dyes and embroidery had with items such as tea, camphor and opium, it was interesting to learn how Parsi men and their involvement in trade influenced the designs/pieces women wore - some on display at his showroom. Using these pieces, Ashdeen showed his expertise in history and art by highlighting the symbolism of animals and birds in the embroidered patterns of the saris such as cranes, peacocks, phoenixes and dragon-like creatures. We were also taught about the trademark Parsi-Gujarati designs such as the "Kaada Papetaa" (referring to the phrase of onions and potatoes which is a yellow and white polka dot design), and "Cheena Cheenee" which translates to male and female figurines from China under Pagoda structures.



Many Parsi families have heirloom saris and understanding how the *gara* embroidery was conceptualized and modernized was beneficial in valuing the sari as a form of art. We truly appreciated Ashdeen's tactile presentation about traditional Parsi designs, his generosity in showing his own family archives and what Ashdeen himself and his company are doing to revive the craft of *gara* and Parsi fashion on a global scale. Ashdeen and his staff then graciously offered to allow anyone to try on one of his *garas*. Every female participant, and even a few of our boys, took him up on his offer. We enjoyed being draped in his luxurious designs, and it was an especially enjoyable opportunity for some of our Irani participants who were trying on Indian clothing for the first time.







## Lunch at Britannia & Co. A hallmark Irani cafe

After Ashdeen's amazing hospitality, we headed over to Britannia, a Parsi-Irani restaurant co-owned by the late Zoroastrian Boman Kohinoor whose family hailed from Yazd. As we learned from Dr. Kurush F. Dalal's talk, Irani cafes are vestiges of the Zoroastrian immigration story in Mumbai's urban landscape. We felt extremely privileged to have multiple tables saved for us in this bustling cafe and to that we owe our thanks to TBI, our tour-guide managers. The interior of Britannia & Co. is akin to its name with flags of the British Empire, posters of the British royal family alongside Iranian and Indian flags, chandeliers, *fravashis* and pictures of Zarathustra. One of the most iconic dishes served at Britannia is their famous berry palau, a perfect example of a Parsi dish with an Irani twist. The palau is similar to biryani, but mixed together rather than layered, and has dried berries added to rice which is popular in Persian food due to their climate. The food was scrumptious and the hospitality was friendly.







## A discussion with Empowering Mobeds Committee at Dadar Parsi Colony

With full bellies we went to meet with Empowering Mobeds at the Dadar Athornan Institute. Empowering Mobeds is an initiative focused on transforming the image of *mobeds* through targeted workshops on mental health, soft skills, education and leadership. We were introduced to Ervad Hormuz Dadachanji, Ervad Kaizad Karkaria, Ervad Firdaus Pavri, Ervad Kerman Fatakia as well as Empowering Mobed's core team members, Binaifer and Karl Sahukar. Moderated by our RTR volunteer Ervad Sheherazad Pavri who is an ordained *mobed* and Binaifer, a therapist who also works with priests and takes care of their mental health, we started off by getting an introduction on what the Athornan Institute is: a boarding school (*madressa*) where young boys train to be *mobeds*. As we sat around in a large circle, the Empowering Mobeds' priests spoke to us about the lifestyle of priests-in-training in India, the legacy of the priesthood since the Achaemenid era and constraints that priests have endured. We learned that today, young boys at the Athornan receive a holistic education in that they also attend the nearby Dadar Parsi Youth's Assembly High School, for their academic studies whilst preparing for their *Navar* and *Martab* ceremonies.

*Mobeds* play an essential role in our faith and we discussed the challenges they are facing across the globe in all Zoroastrian communities. The core challenge being that the profession of being a full-time priest offers low pay as opposed to the long hours required to maintain the fire. They must perform the *boi* ceremonies in all 5 *gehs* (time of day), including *Ushain Geh*, which starts at midnight. They do not get days off or a full night's sleep and for these reasons, there are not many priests who want to take up the job. The Ervads further described the sense of fear they feel in that there may be a time when Zoroastrians will face a shortage of *Mobeds* in the agiaries and Atash Behrams in Mumbai.

Participants had an opportunity to share experiences with *mobeds* from their own hometowns. From the 28 RTR participants, some came from communities with many *mobeds* and some with none at all. We shared perspectives on what we can do to help the load the *mobeds* in India are facing and connected with them over the difficulties that every professional faces - i.e. financial sustainability and the need to feel valued. This conversation was perhaps one of the most essential platforms RTR integrated into the itinerary as it highlighted a possible avenue for RTR participants to contribute towards outlining how to integrate and value our priests better.



# DAY 4

## Let the journey towards Gujarat begin

At the crack of dawn, we were out of Fariyas Hotel and into our buses enroute to Gujarat. But with such an early start (remarkably punctual as well!) came the rewarding breakfast at Ahura, a famous Parsi owned highway-side restaurant. Bun Maskas, eggs in a multitude of ways, choi and minced meat were consumed to the hilt. We were generously hosted by the owners, Neville and Mitra Borzu who attended to us with great hospitality.



## Nargol *The first footprint in the sand*

Soon enough after our brunch, we arrived at the Nargol Agiary which was at the time being restored and renovated providing us with an opportunity to observe the architecture of the space. A small and isolated agiary, this place of worship highlighted for many of us RTR participants how the dedicated *mobeds* of the fire temple live a life that is extremely difficult with little interaction from community members, quite contrary to the thriving Parsi culture of Mumbai. We were greeted by Ervad Darabsha Gowadia and were struck by how lonely life can be as a Parsi, in a location of immense historical importance but little to no community members. This was the first of many crucial learnings for RTR participants that exemplify why traveling to smaller villages in Gujarat are important experiences. The fading heritage of Zoroastrian practice in areas such as Nargol, let us see for ourselves that not all Parsi communities and neighborhoods are thriving in India.

From the agiary we had a short journey to the coast of Nargol where the Varoli River meets the sea. Walking down the pathway of a fishing village lined with hundreds of rows drying “*Bumla*” aka the Bombay Duck, we stood at the edge of the gray sandy shores lined with local vessels. Amidst the strong sea breeze, RTR participants were told about the historical value of this seemingly insignificant fishing village with the arrival of Zoroastrians onto the Subcontinent. It is at this beach, where historians and archaeologists have hypothesized through evidence in Sanjan, the gradual arrival of Zoroastrians from Iran as having previously established maritime trade links for spices and valuable metals through the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea. We recalled Dr. Kurush F. Dalal’s presentation on the *Qissa-e-Sanjan* which was written in 1599 by Bahman Keikobad of the Sanjan priestly lineage of Navsari.

At Nargol, we were told about how the tale narrates that Iranian Zoroastrians had to forsake their empire and illustrious gardens of Persia to look for a new home. They first took refuge in the island of Dib (now called Diu) west of Nargol. Having stayed here for 19 years, they arrived in Gujarat. This journey is narrated to have been one of extreme hardship, ridden by storms and a great lamentation of a lost homeland. Some say that the refugee migrants arrived in one boat while others say it was three or ten.

The arrival of Zoroastrians in India is remembered by many Parsis through stories orally related to them as the infamous encounter of the Zoroastrian priest leading the migrants with the local Hindu King Jadev Rana. By adding sugar to a cup full of milk, the priest demonstrated that although the community was small it would add infinite value to the land. Having been permitted to stay if they adapted to certain rules, the *Qissa-e-Sanjan* further narrates the establishment of the sacred *Atash* and its survival in India. However for RTR, the coast of Nargol serves as a physical site to show the fellows as a way to link the orally transmitted story to a place. Much of the RTR tour and selection of sites encourages fellows to educate themselves with facts as well as mythology. Although the Nargol coast today does not offer deep anchorage to make it a recognisable port and aside from the agiary there is no architectural evidence that point towards Zoroastrian occupation in Nargol itself, it is very much a highlight for many RTR participants year after year, as a site of physical memory.





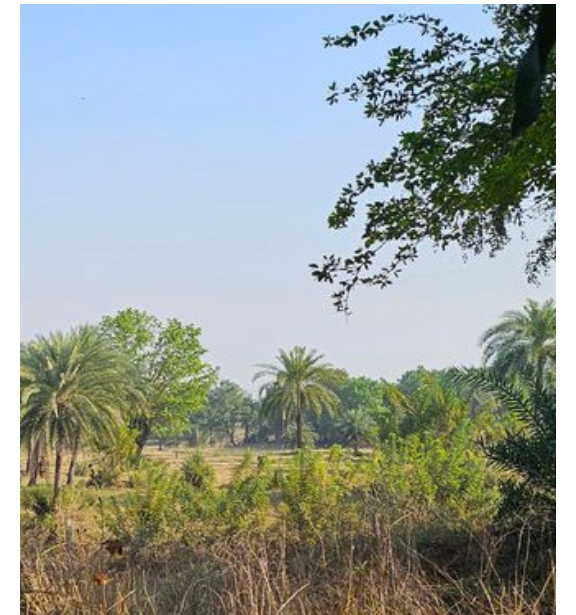






## The remnants of Sanjan attesting to Zoroastrian occupation

Our next site on the itinerary was the archaeological excavation at Sanjan, on the north bank of the Varoli River. Walking through a tiny village of inhabitants we arrived at the grassy expanse north of the Bahrot Caves. At this ambiguous landscape, we stood around a debenture in the land which was the brick *dakhma* that Dr. Kurush Dalal had previously shared valuable field notes from. The excavation itself was funded by the World Zarathushti Cultural Foundation from 2002-2004 and Parsi archaeologist Dr Rukshana Nanji who had previously taken RTR fellows to the site has continuously worked on ceramic artifacts from Sanjan, and contributed her findings through conversations with RTR fellows. Radiocarbon and stratigraphic studies aligned the dakhma to about the 11th century AD whereas the skeletons that Dr. Dalal had previously spoken about were dated to as early as the 15th century AD. The incredible experience of standing within the vicinity of arguably the first Zoroastrian settlement in Gujarat and the first *dakhma* of India gave many of us goosebumps. Although covered in tall grass, the mound, much like Nargol, was yet another physical site for RTR participants to link the oral stories they grew up with visuals and memories they could experience on a first hand basis.





## A meal at the Sanatorium and the Zoroastrian Stambh

The immersion in history left us hungry and we were extremely grateful for a beautifully home cooked meal prepared by Firdose, Zenobia and Mazdiyar Tavadia at the Sanjan Sanatorium. The institution is a large building renovated by the WZO Trust Funds from the generous Trustees of Bai Maneckbai P. B. Jeejeebhoy Deed of Settlement Fund. The Sanatorium became operational on 23rd September 2001 and has over the years become a popular retreat for community members. It has a number of rooms and recreational spaces as well. Aside from the building itself, the gardens with its mango orchard, coconut trees and palm trees were a testament to the Parsi dedication in providing spaces of comfort and solace to its community members.

We then walked to the Sanjan Stambh which is a 50 ft. high monument made of Vadodara granite erected by the Parsi community and completed in February 1920. The dates of the construction of the column and its location do not align with the archaeological proof of the Sanjan *dakhma* but the purpose of this structure serves as a living memory of the Parsi arrival. With inscriptions in Gujarati, English and Pahlavi on three sides of the column, the text harkens back to the tale of the *Qissa-e-Sanjan* and the journey from Iran to India. With a sculpted golden fire emanating from a vase atop the Sanjan column, the RTR participants have a ritual of taking their group photo against this backdrop, highlighting the relevance of the site and its continued cultural significance.





## Arrival at Udvada

As the sun was setting on the long but enlightening day, we arrived at Udvada and unpacked at the Sir J.J. Dharamsala. To most of us RTR participants who had never been to Udvada before, this quiet village of abandoned homes, paved narrow walkways with the occasional free roaming cow, seemed so distant from the illustrious Parsi presence in Mumbai. Udvada is a coastal village which became home to the Iranshah in 1742 and with this holy fire brought the settlement of many Parsis who wanted to live in close proximity to the agiary. However, towards the night, we were to enter the Iranshah Atash Behram for the midnight boi ceremony and witness the truly magnificent relevance of Udvada.

For all Parsis, to see Udvada and the Iranshah Atash Behram is one of the most desired religious experiences. With the recent renovation of the Atash Behram building from 2019-2022 by the Shapoorji Pallonji Group, the architecture of the venerated building has been updated with exacting detail. In many ways the RTR program centers itself around the journey of the Iranshah Atash Behram and having found its permanent home in Udvada places the site at the apex of our young Zoroastrians experiencing the RTR journey. In the evening, our RTR volunteer and participant Ervad Sheherazad Pavri guided us through a simple explanation of kusti prayers which gave RTR participants more confidence and reassurance of how to conduct themselves in an *Atash Behram*. This was a key bonding moment where RTR participants could share their concerns about rituals and ask questions.



## The midnight boi devy at Udvada

At midnight, we bundled, showered and walked down quiet alleyways towards Iranshah. Performing our kusti prayers in pin drop silence amidst the moonlight we climbed up the staircase of the building to find the hallway of the agiary lit with oil lamp chandeliers. With the glimmering light reflecting off the white marble floors and the dark polished wooden furniture we found our way to the soft maroon carpet around the *kebla*. Watching the priest perform the *boi* ceremony in the sanctum is an experience that would be futile to describe in words. It is the silence provided by the darkness and the permeating strength of the Iranshah Atash against the resounding voice of the *Dasturji* that etches a multi sensorial experience with all RTR participants, year after year.

The *boi* ceremony involves feeding the fire at the beginning of each of the five *Gahs* (times of the day) with *sukhur* (sandalwood). We watched as the veteran priest went around the *afringanyu* (the vase of the Atash), ringing the bell and artfully feeding the fire with metal tongs and a ladle, leaving us with yet another reminder of the necessity of skill and practice the priests require for the boi ceremony. Spellbound, we left the Iranshah that night with an iconic experience of bonding, spiritual healing and immense gratitude.





# DAY 5

## Christmas at Udvada

We began our Christmas morning by visiting the Iranshah Atash Behram again. Even though Udvada is a small town, the Atash Behram had many visitors, many of whom had come from out of town. The slight hustle bustle amongst the narrow streets and smiling faces from fellow Zarthoshtis coming to pay their reverence to the Iranshah was a different experience from visiting at night during the still darkness. We were able to admire the beautiful, newly renovated front and pay closer attention to the portraits in the hall.

## A discussion with Vada Dasturji, Khurshed Dastoor

After our visit to the Atash Behram, we had the amazing opportunity to visit Vada Dasturji Khurshed Dastoor. He presented us each with a book he contributed towards and told us about his life and responsibilities as the Vada Dasturji. He encouraged us to ask questions and was easy to talk to despite his intimidating and scholarly position. He reflected on how he too finds inspiration in multiple religions and encouraged us as young Zoroastrians to work towards developing our own unique pathway to praying and venerating God. Vada Dasturji had a positive outlook on the future of Zoroastrianism and left us with this important lesson: when praying to God, don't ask for specific things, like "give me wealth" or "help me find love". Pray to God and ask, "please do what is best for me" and leave it in His hands to decide what is best for you. Many of us, if not all, came away from this talk spiritually enlightened and amazed at how such a high authority in religion could be so approachable and warm.

## *Packing gifts as part of our contribution towards the charities in Gujarat and Mumbai*

As the spirit of giving and circulating wealth equally was well alive in our hearts, we organized ourselves on the veranda of the J.J. Dharamsala packing kits for the children of the Surat orphanages and the patients of the infirmaries and senior centers in Navsari which we were to be visiting later on in the itinerary. We packed kits with hygiene items, such as toothbrushes, toothpaste, and napkins. Participants worked together to set up an assembly line and enjoyed team building while working. These kits were then distributed to the infirmaries and hospitals in Surat, Navsari and Mumbai.











## Joining Hands with the Clean & Green Udvada Initiative

Our second activity based on giving back to the community was helping the Clean and Green Udvada Initiative which is a local Parsi initiative to clean the beaches and streets of Udvada and to educate the residents about efficient waste disposal. We met with Filly Bapuna and Zarine Bharda who gave us t-shirts, gloves, and garbage bags and we set to work picking up trash at the beach. Participants filled several trash bags worth of waste and it was rewarding to see the results of our hard work leaving the beach cleaner than we had found it. A critical takeaway from this activity is how the Zoroastrian philosophy of respecting nature, the role of the Amesha Spentas and Bundahishn point towards keeping our waters, earth and sky as clean as possible. With the oldest Atash Behram of the subcontinent a couple of minutes away from the Udvada coastline, it is easy to justify why keeping the beaches of Udvada clean is essential.



## Mid-Trip Discussion *The Impact of RTR*

We ended the night with a midtrip discussion at the J.J. Dharamsala. All participants were present and we sat around through a group discussion, one by one stating our takeaways from the trip so far. Amidst eating our delicious Christmas tea snacks, many participants mentioned they felt at home with the new friends they had made and emphasized how much they had learned over the last few days. As the itinerary requires participants to constantly be on their feet, the mid-brief session allowed us to share our perspectives on personal growth and how being a Zoroastrian was such a privilege as the RTR program allowed us to meet and discuss subjects of religion, entrepreneurship and community engagement with a range of individuals. The essential impact of RTR is finding a personal sense of belonging as the Zoroastrian religion is under a minority status in every country. Hence as the RTR concept is based on young Zoroastrians coming together from all over the world, many participants vocalized that the RTR trip was providing them with a sense of grounding as being with fellow Zarthoshtis consistently made them feel less isolated.











# DAY 6

## Enroute Navsari *A town rich in Zoroastrian history*

The two nights at Udvada were for the participants invigorating to say the least. On our final morning, we went to the Iranshah Atash Behram for our final prayers and were immensely grateful for an opportunity which not all Zoroastrians can avail. Over the last breakfast of *akuri* and peppermint tea at the Sir J.J Dharamshala, we discussed how the visit to Udvada had altered our notions of spiritual and religious inclinations. With newfound energy we journeyed towards Navsari.

Our first stop in the busy town of Navsari was the Navsari Bhagarsath Anjuman Atash Behram built in 1765. Its facade has pillars and cornices engraved with Achaemenid era symbolism recalling the majesty of the Persian empires. Navsari's vital role in the Parsi presence in Gujarat came into being with an eminent Parsi of the name Changa Asa. We learned of how the Iranshah fire was being hidden in the obscure hills of Bahrot Caves and Ajmalgadh, Changa Asa petitioned and worked to bring the holy fire to safe keeping in Navsari which had a growing Parsi community. It is over here that the Iranshah fire was attended to for almost 300 years. Changa Asa is also said to have been one of the first known Parsis to financially support the writing of the Persian Rivayats. The Rivayats were a series of correspondence between the Parsis and the priests of Iran that ran between the 15th -18th c. AD. The conversations of the letters pertained to questions and answers about ritualistic practice and guidance needed from the Iranian authorities as Parsi communities flourished in Gujarat. Hence these letters are one of the many historical episodes which cement Navsari as an important location in the RTR program as a town where traditional knowledge and contributions towards sustaining Zoroastrianism. Having paid our respects in this beautiful Atash Behram, we were reminded of the illustrious history of Parsis in Navsari with the countless portraits hanging in the hallway. It seemed that with each fire temple we were able to do our kusti prayers at, the more we recognised each space had its own unique characteristics and personality.





## The Vadi Daremeher & First Dastoor Meherjirana Library

Continuing the legacy of Navsari's role in upholding and furthering Zoroastrian scholarship and practice, our next stop was the oldest *daremeher* in India, the Vadi Daremeher aka the Bhagarsath Anjuman Daremeher. The building includes a quiet courtyard but reverberates with memories of an 850 year old history. The RTR fellows were taught how the establishment was made and used for training and initiating priests as *navars* and *martabs*. Even though the structure has been painted over, remnants of the names of the priests who had graduated from the institution were noticed inscribed into the wooden columns. Remembered by some as the equivalent of the "Oxford" of priestly training in India, RTR participants had the opportunity to learn about the stages of priestly training and the level of competency required to practice and ordain certain rituals.

A descendent of Changa Asa was Meherjirana the founder of the Dastoor family at Navsari and most notably the only documented Parsi to have an audience with the Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great. An incredibly important repository of literature and rare historical documents in Navsari is the First Dastoor Meherjirana Library in which a scroll lies that was signed by both Akbar the Great and Meherjirana. This was our next stop and we were warmly welcomed by the library staff who provided an orientation of the space. The building was commissioned in 1872 by a wealthy Parsi, Navsariwala Seth Burjor Bamanji Padam and he named it after Meherjirana. Much known for his scriptural knowledge and piety, he was a revered religious scholar and his influence on Akbar the Great's philosophy on religion was significant. Since the building's conception, the remarkable collection of books has been relying on donations and community contributions. We were taken towards the conservation and archives section and shown two previous books: the Shahnameh written in Farsi and the Khordeh Avesta which was written in Din-Dabireh. The beautifully illustrated manuscripts provided the Iranian contingent of RTR to flex their Persian language skills and sure enough, could comprehensively read and translate excerpts of the texts for us. It was in moments such as these where history bridged the gap of time, allowing RTR fellows a closer connection to the past through tangible artifacts and shared knowledge.

## The Sir Jamsetji Jejeebhoy Memorial Museum

It quickly became clear to us that while Navsari was nowhere near as urban and modernized as Mumbai, its bustling streets dotted with unique architectural structures and prominent Zoroastrian buildings had a very special role to play in the religion's roots in Gujarat. Our final visit before lunch was the Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy Memorial Museum which was inaugurated in 2008 by Vada Dasturji Meherjirana. The museum is a well preserved home of Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy's birthplace where he was born in 1783. Key pieces of furniture, the tiny room in which the philanthropist was born in, the low hanging ceilings and the original wooden scaffolding of the museum were a testament to the passing of time. We are usually only accustomed to seeing 20th century Parsi *seths* through grand portraits but seeing the actual humble space in which one of them grew up made the RTR participants realize the extent to how different their lifestyles and environments were to ours.

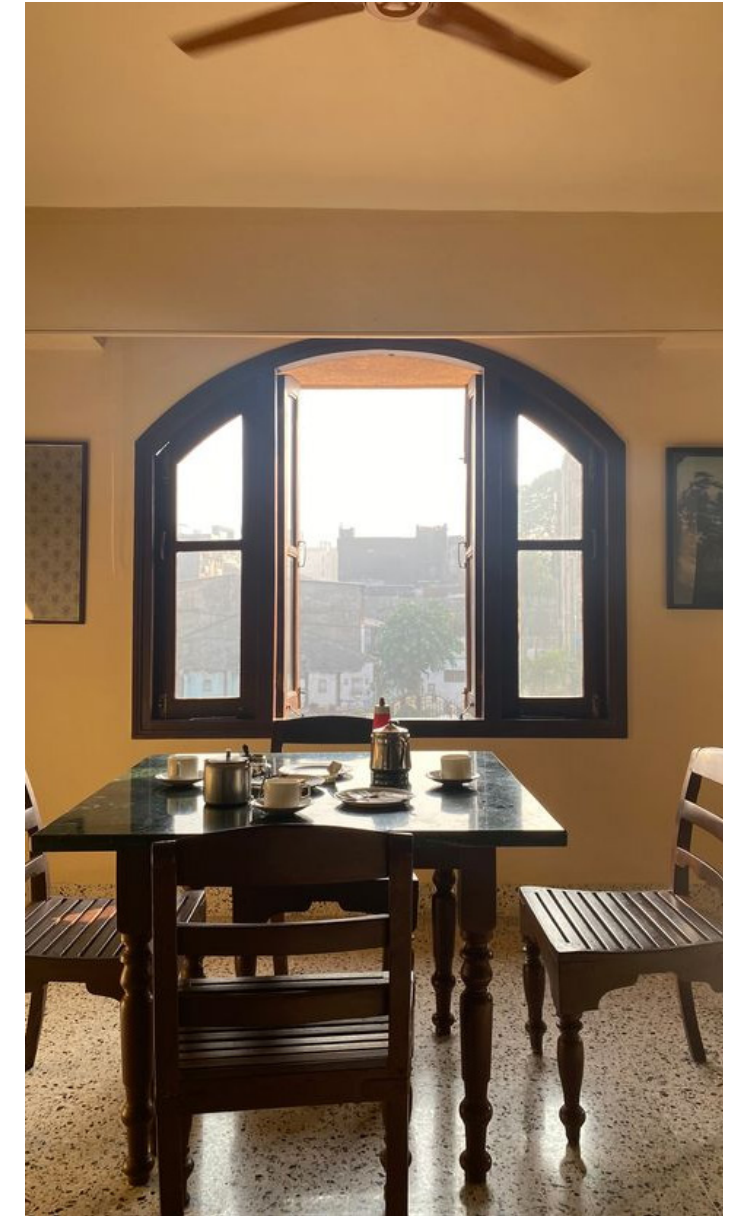






## Jamshed Baug, Navsari

We had a much deserved lunch at the Jamshed Baug Dharamsala which was constructed by Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy in 1849. Having served the Parsi community for decades, it is a community center where many *ghambhars* and ceremonies have been held over the years. As a Parsi establishment catering to the community for decades, it's also a vital space for many Zoroastrians who visit Navsari for the Atash Behram and many families have fond memories of Jamshed Baug. Each year, RTR is generously hosted by Niloufer and Kersi Mandviwalla.







## The heritage of Navsari through a walking tour

After our lunch, the RTR 7 participants were lucky to get another dip into the cultural fabric of Navsari and ventured onto the streets of Navsari for a guided tour of the town by Ruzbeh Umrigar from INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage). We started off at the Seth R.J.J High School, a large campus which stood as a testament to Parsi philanthropy and dedication towards education. As we walked through the streets and saw many abandoned homes which were occupied in another time, the J.N Tata Birthplace Museum held its ground as a monument that allowed all of us who had never lived in the heyday of Navsari's Parsi dominance, to connect with the past. The legacy of the Tatas at Navsari continued as we walked to the Tata Boys High School only to discover beautiful fragments of columns and archaeological pieces safeguarded in the school's compound. Our tour of the lasting impact of the Tatas in Navsari's educational and cultural institutions ended with a talk by Umrigar on how Parsis of India have always safeguarded history for future generations to learn from. This fun filled day ended at Yazdan Cold Drink House where we were treated to their famous *faluda* and a multitude of home-made ice cream flavors.

## The midnight boy devy ceremony at Navsari

With the memories of the midnight *boi* ceremony at the Iranshah Atash Behram still fresh in our minds, we were eager to have a second opportunity for the experience at the Navsari Atash Behram. And so, at midnight we piled into our bus in the now quiet and dark streets of Navsari for the prayers. Mentally prepared for the overwhelming silence within the Atash Behram and the tranquility with which everything comes to a standstill we once again, sat as a group around the Atash spellbound by the priest and his swift skill of passing the *sukhur* into the crimson fire. The *boi* ceremony left our clothes with the sweet smell of the burning sandalwood and we went to sleep that night cherishing the opportunity to have been together as a group in such a sacred environment for the second time.







# DAY 7

## Learning about WZO Trust Funds' (WZOTF) involvement with senior citizens.

Day 7 was dedicated towards community and charity. We started our day with visiting The Bai Maneckbai P.B. Jeejeebhoy Senior Citizens Centre run by the World Zoroastrian Organization (WZO) Trust Funds in Navsari which is a boon for Zoroastrian community members in their twilight years. The WZO Trust Funds was established in 1991 and its purpose is to support and provide the financial means to those Parsis who are less fortunate and are in need to build sustainable forms of income for themselves and their families. Their range of projects cover rehabilitating farmers, helping our Zoroastrian mobeds, providing assistance towards education and medical conditions and setting up small businesses for Parsis in villages outside of the larger towns and cities. Every RTR trip, the group is welcomed by the WZO team, our long standing supporters. A sumptuous breakfast was served where the participants got an opportunity to taste *Vasanu* - a healthy Parsi winter fudge preparation. The evergreen Chairman of WZOTF, Mr Dinshaw Tamboly greeted the group and gave a gist of their social initiatives. The group got the opportunity to interact with the residents and gained a glimpse into the facilities of the institution. As volunteers for a few hours, we could not change the quality of their lives but we knew for a fact that our presence brought joy and laughter to their day by having conversations with them. They were curious to know about us and where we were from, and we learned that many of them were not originally from Navsari, but had come to the center specifically for a place to stay, highlighting the crucial need for this space and WZOTF's fantastic work. Some enthusiastic participants decided to cheer up the Parsi senior citizens and joined them in a yoga session. The WZOTF team showed everyone around the place showcasing their physiotherapy room and solarized rooftop. It was heartening to see participants spend time chatting with the inmates and getting to know them. The group viewed the humanitarian work undertaken in the villages of Gujarat through a photo album which was passed around. It showcased the sad state in which so many community members had spent their life. Later on the trip, we would get to see the transformation when we would visit the villages and meet the beneficiaries of this philanthropy.







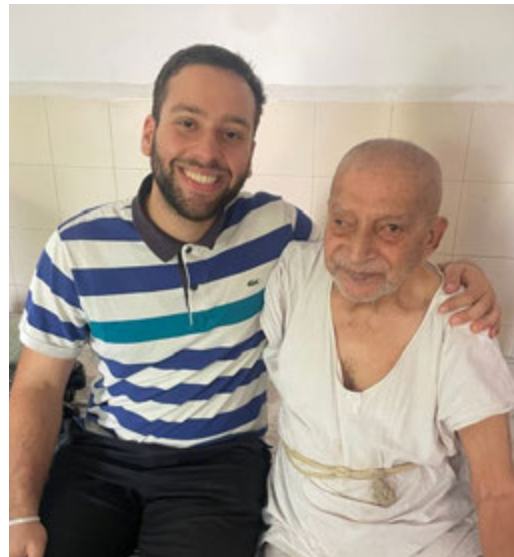


THE W.Z.O. TRUST FUNDS.  
BAI MANECKBAI P. B. JEEJEEBHOY SENIOR CITIZENS CENTRE





We moved onto The Abuwala Parsi Infirmary which is another jewel on the map of Navsari dedicated towards the service of the Zoroastrian community. Ailing senior citizens who cannot take care of themselves and require medical assistance are housed here. Many of them are treated completely free of cost while the rest have to pay nominal charges. The participants handed out the pre-prepared toilet kits to every resident as a humble gift. Interacting with the seniors struck an emotional chord to some who were overwhelmed with tears. The beautiful structure had undergone a renovation and there was a notable makeover from what was seen by some volunteers on previous trips. One elderly man with lots of spirit sang old Parsi songs for us, including *Chaiye Hame Zarthoshti*. As some participants spent time bonding with the residents, others pondered in silence and soaked in the bittersweet moments gazing at the mango plantations in the backyard. It was a touching experience to be there to cheer them on. To witness and understand the critical work which WZO undertakes in Gujarat is essential for the RTR program.



## Lunch at Jamshed Baug With a demonstration of Toran and Kusti making

Lunch for the day was catered for us by Niloufer and Kersi Mandviwalla. We enjoyed traditional Parsi food with fresh, local *achaar* (dried, pickled fruit) and handmade rotis. This was followed up by a demo of *toran* and *kusti* making. To make both *torans* and *kustis* requires an incredible amount of skill and practice. We were shown the amount of threads and beads required for *torans* as well as the weaving structure to make the *kustis*.



# DAY 8

## More insight into work by WZOTF

Leaving Navsari behind, our morning began with a long road trip towards Surat, our final destination in Gujarat. However before we were to arrive at Surat, this day was dedicated towards understanding the work of the WZOTF in a few villages enroute. The WZOTF have had some immense success stories; one of these is the plantation of sandalwood and babool wood trees at the *Doongerwadi* land of Mahuva which used to be an extension of an old Zoroastrian village. WZOTF have been re-utilizing the land, to provide Zoroastrian fire temples with the wood needed to keep *Atashs* burning. We were shown around the plantation by WZO Committee Members, Aspi Ambapardiwala, Sharmin Tamboly, Sarosh Gazdar, as well as the Mahuva Anjuman Members; Hosi Bajina, Shehan Bajina, Jal Mogul, Firdosh Bacha and Meherzad Jiwas. Currently, at the plantation, 3 unused *dakhmas* lie and are well preserved and safeguarded by the WZO Trust Funds. The most recent one ceased to be used in the 1970s. It was amazing to see this contrast of a new plantation that can provide for future generations within the lands of an unused *Doongerwadi* that stands as a relic of the past. Our next stops took us to Waghai and Vansda villages where a few Parsi families reside. We saw the homes and the small businesses the WZO Trust Funds have financed helping these families lay the foundations for having their own sources of income in the future. It was at these villages that the RTR fellows learned how simple and small initiatives such as educating the children of Parsi families, building homes or small businesses for them, can drastically change the lives of these families. We also saw and prayed at the Ardeshir Bhikhaji Patel *Daremeher* on the outskirts of Mahuva. Our very own RTR fellow Yazad Unwalla who is a part time mobed attended to the *Dadgah* fire here with us all contributing our recently purchased sandalwood from Navsari and Udvada.

The hospitality of Gujarat continued as we had lunch prepared by the WZO Trust Funds at RTR Director Arzan Sam Wadia's family farm at Bansda. Amidst the lush greenery our lunch of *cutlets* and *salan* (gravy) many of us were very grateful to have seen the kind of work WZO had been doing in these villages as the quality of life for these Parsis is again, extremely different from the grandeur seen within the Bombay Parsi landscape.







## Ajmalgadh

### *A lesser known home for the Iranshah Atash*

Our final stop in tracing the journey of the Iranshah Atash was up the hills of Ajmalgadh where the Iranshah was housed for approximately 14 years (1405-1418 c. AD). It is here that the Parsis who fled from conflict at Sanjan and the Bahrot Caves found a temporary home up in the hills which are about 1200 feet above sea levels. To mark the stay of the *Atash* here, a large column similar to the Sanjan Stambh has been erected here with engraved Persian iconography of the crossing swords and the *fravashi* on the pale pick pillar. A map of the Iranshah's journey is featured on a plaque of black marble helping visitors trace the timespan of the holy fire across Gujarat. Stepping onto the edge of Ajmalgadh hills, we looked onto the vast green expanses trying to imagine what it would have been like for the brave Parsis to live here in the 15th century safeguarding the sacred *Atash*.

A long drive awaited ahead of us as we headed towards Surat. For dinner we were impressed by a Gujarati *thaali* and the local vegetarian cuisine of whole spices, yogurt, gram flour and delectable snacks. Once we reached the Marriott Hotel at night, we were happy to rest and start exploring the Zoroastrian cultural history of Surat the next morning.





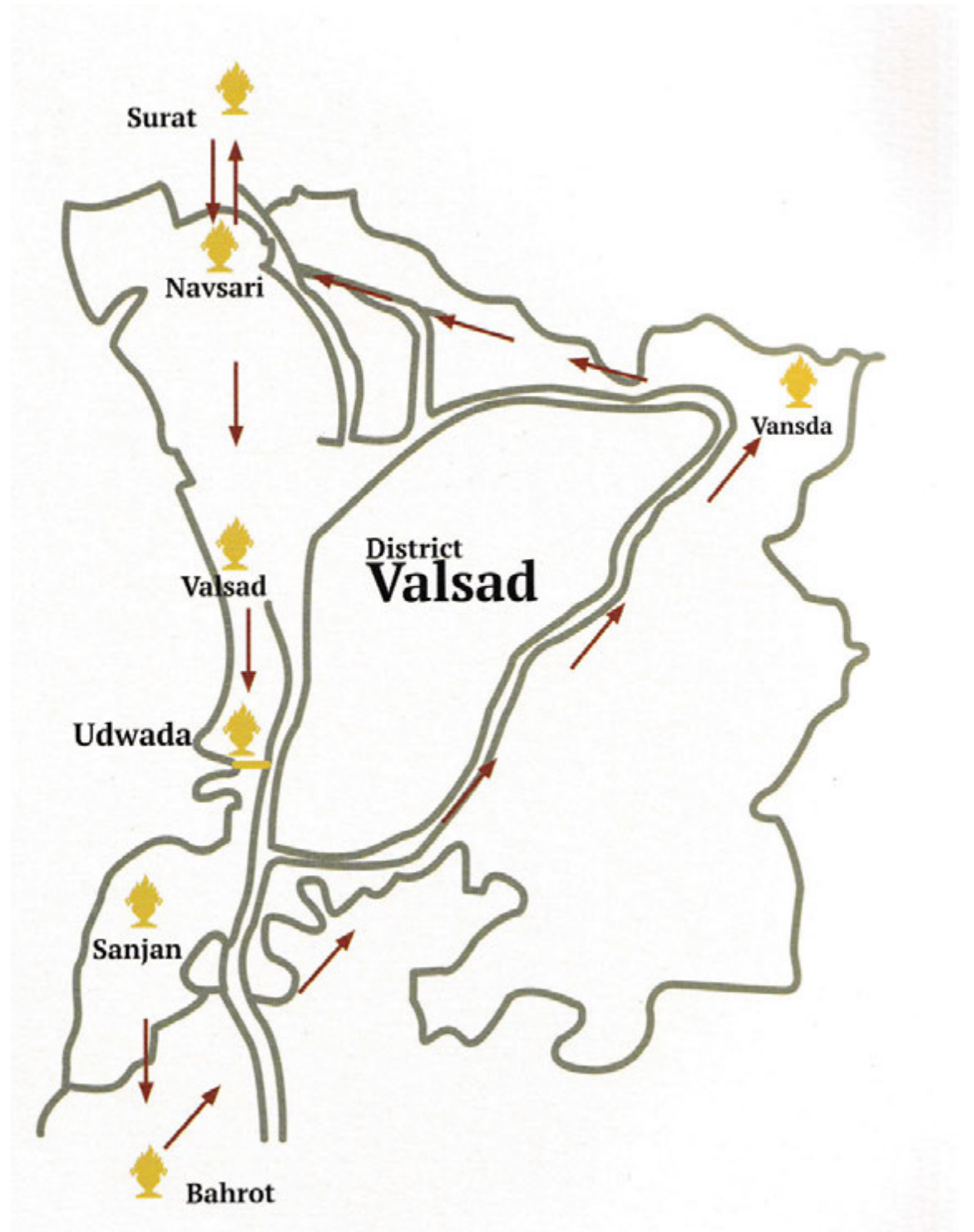
# THE JOURNEY OF THE IRANSHAH FIRE

“When the Iranshah was brought to Navsari, the caretakers were three dasturs, Nagan Ram, Khurshed Kamdin and Chaiyyan Saer. The privilege of serving the fire remains with nine families, all descended from three priests”

**Cited by late Marzban Jamshedji Giara**

*in the book ‘The History of the Holy Fire Iranshah and Udwada Gam’*

1. **Sanjan** 699 years
2. **Bahrot Caves** 12 years
3. **Ajmalgadh in the Vansda Forest** 14 years
4. **Navsari** 313 years
5. **Surat** 3 years
6. **Navsari** 5 years
7. **Valsad** 1 year
8. **Udwada** Since 1742, the last 280 years











# DAY 9

## A Surati Breakfast and visit to Kadmi and Modi Atash Behrams and Goti Adaran

We began our day with a catered breakfast provided by local architect and designer Behzad Kharas at the Surat Parsi Panchayat. A spread of interesting bites, chutneys, sandwiches and *ravo* were laid out in front of us *ghambhar* style. We then walked to the Vakil (Kadmi) Atash Behram and were surprised to see a beautiful *navjote* ceremony commencing. Further down the streets we were once again greeted by another family celebrating a *navjote* at the Modi (Shenshai) Atash Behram. We saw beautiful Parsi-style chalk designs on the steps by the entrance of the two Atash Behrams and *haars* of flowers across the entrances. At the Modi Atash Behram, a local Surati three piece band was outside the gates, performing a processional as the *navjote* child and family walked in. Needless to say our RTR participants joined in on the dancing. Amongst the uplifting spiritual veneration of praying to the Atash Behrams, it was additionally special for the RTR participants to witness the happiness from the host families. We felt welcomed after the families invited us to take photos of their child's ceremony and watch the initiation prayers - the celebratory occasion was contagious, setting a joyous mood for the day and a reminder of the vibrant Surati Parsi community and cultural lifestyle.









## Dotivala Bakers and Confectioners

### *The Parsi dedication to all thing 'Pav'*

Next on our list for discovering the legacy of Parsi history in Surat was the Dotivala Bakers and Confectioners. We remembered how on our second day, Dr Kurush Dalal had taught us about maritime trade in the 18th century which led to major colonial influences in the Parsi diet. He had explained that the Dotivalas were in fact, India's first local bread makers and bakers, having picked up on bread, biscuit and pastry recipes from the Dutch and then the Portuguese using the sap of the Toddy palm. The Gujarati word 'pav' for bread is actually derived from Portuguese. And so, a couple of hundred years later after colonial rule and the exchange of ingredients, the Dotivala bakery is a testament towards entrepreneurship and the eclectic cuisine of Parsis as a mix of colonial and regional influences. Current owner, Cyrus Dotivala who has shown each RTR cycle around the facility, graciously gave us a tour of the bakery so we could witness the process of creating their baked goods such as batasas, loaf cakes, chocolate pastries and vanilla wafers. They used old but efficient equipment, such as large, commercial mixers. In each new area we visited, they generously offered us samples of their sweet biscuits and cakes. Surati hospitality and generosity clearly left a lasting mark on us!



## Golden Dragon

### *A Parsi owned Chinese restaurant*

While we weren't exactly starving, having had many samples at Dotivala, we were in the mood for something a little 'non-Parsi'. Hence we stopped for lunch at a Parsi owned Chinese restaurant called Golden Dragon. With its old school dark wood polished Chinese inspired furniture we sat for a typical Indo-Chinese meal consisting of nostalgic dishes such as hot and sour soup, prawn tempura, spicy sauces and of course, prawn crackers. It was interesting to see the Parsi owner's success in running a business that wasn't selling Parsi food yet was still modeled on the business and drive of Parsi entrepreneurship.



## Visit to the Surat Parsi Panchayat Offices

### *With Yazdi Karanjia*

After our food coma break, we headed back to the Surat Parsi Panchayat and met with the chairman, Yazdi Naoshirwan Karanjia. Mr Karanjia is a well known Parsi actor and comedian who has been awarded the Padma Shri for his work in Gujarati theater. But his generosity and spirit in community service makes him an even bigger star. Mr. Karanjia currently invests much of his time in running the orphanages and we were honored to have an audience with him to hear about some of the work the Parsi Panchayat strives to take forward for the Parsi children in these facilities. Our RTR participants collected a small contribution for the boys and girls orphanages hoping it would make a difference to the Parsi Panchayat.

## Visit to the Surat Parsi Panchayat Boys and Girls Orphanages and the Surat Parsi Hospital

The visits to the boys and girls orphanages were both enjoyable yet touching - many participants called it one of the highlights of the trip. We were told in the introductions that the vast majority of the children are not in fact orphans and could visit family in the vacations. The orphanage is more of a boarding school for Parsi children from villages. Here, they are able to get an education and have more opportunities than their villages would be able to provide.

We started at the boys' orphanage where we played games of carrom and ping pong. We taught them to play "monkey in the middle," a game they seemed to be familiar with. The boys were, on average, around 11-15 years old and were active and fun loving. We then made our way to the girls' orphanage. The girls started out very shy and it took them a while to warm up to us. We asked them about which Bollywood actors they liked and shows they enjoyed watching, to which they enthusiastically replied, "cartoons!" We then organized a game of Kho Kho, a game which involved teams and running around. We partnered up and had a dance competition leading both the RTR participants and the girls to have a great time. Before we left, a group of girls performed a Bollywood dance for us, taught to them by an instructor who comes to the orphanage. We walked next door to the Nariman Home and Infirmary to visit some of the elderly community members while they were having dinner. Our conversations with the few residents there involved us getting to know more about their struggles, their medication and how they passed their time. It was good to know that all of them said that they were well taken care of. When leaving, the girls from the orphanage waved goodbye to us from the top floor where their rooms are. Looking up at them, we wished them the brightest of futures. It was a fulfilling and meaningful evening to learn about these children's lives, the difficulties they have to endure and the work the Surat Parsi Panchayat is doing to alleviate those pressures.















# DAY 10

## Heading back to the Parsi HQ of India *Mumbai*

We left Surat early in the morning saying goodbye to the lovely Marriott Hotel which for many of us was the epitome of luxury - a true privilege to have enjoyed during the trip. With a pit stop at Ahura for lunch, the RTR 7 participants now had the opportunity to try the heavier lunch style dishes which included butter chicken, *palak*, *daals*, *patra ni machi* and mutton. Ahura also gave each of us gifts from their famous confectionery, masalas and baked goods shop which many of us were thrilled to take home for our family as tasters of the restaurant's vast cuisine.

After a full day's drive we arrived back at Mumbai and checked into Fariyas Hotel which became our home for the rest of the trip. Catching our breath from the whirlwind of experiences Gujarat had to offer, we rested in preparation for the next chapter of Mumbai.







# DAY 11

## Tracing the legacy of the Parsi imprint on Mumbai

We began our New Year's Eve with a heritage walk and bus tour of Mumbai which was an informative and inspiring afternoon. Khojeste Mistree guided the tour, highlighting contributions Parsis have made in the city of Mumbai, pointing out landmarks such as statues of notable Parsis, including Dadabhai Naoroji, the first Indian Member of British Parliament, Irani cafes and Parsi businesses as well as buildings designed and funded by Parsis. We made a stop by the Bhikha Behram Well, which was built in 1725 and participants performed their *kusti* prayers in the peaceful setting the well had to offer. At the Bhikha Behram Well, Mr Mistree explained the infrastructure, drainage and connective urban systems of Mumbai and used the successful functionings of Parsi religious centers such as the Bhikha Behram to illustrate how well integrated the Mumbai Parsis are with the city. As we walked past the statues, Mr Mistree emphasized that most eminent Parsis lived humble and private lives despite their colossal contributions which has led to the reputation of Parsis being regarded as honest and hardworking in India.

After the fulfilling tour, participants enjoyed a scrumptious, traditional Parsi lunch of *Dhansaak*, kebabs, cutlets and fizzy drinks at Jimmy Boy, a famous Irani restaurant established in 1925 situated on the corner of a street off Horniman Circle.

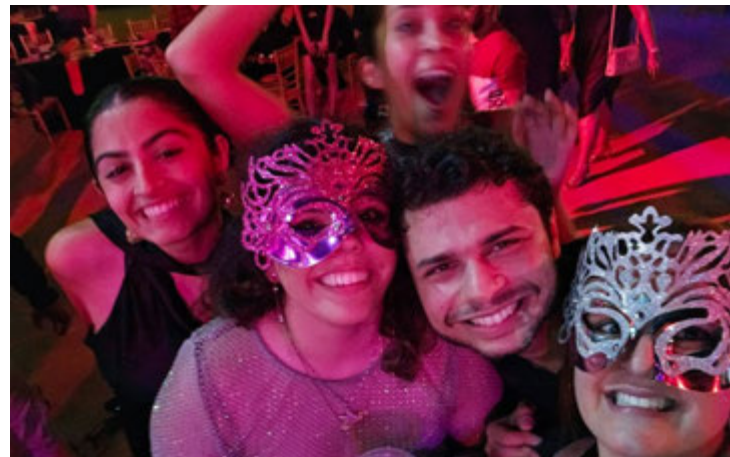




## NYE at at Dadar Parsi Colony

*Starting 2024 on a high note*

New Year's Eve was a highlight of the trip and an incredible start to 2024. Participants, now having spent 10 days together, rang in the New Year with hundreds of other Zoroastrians at the Dadar Parsi Colony's New Year's Eve festivities. We danced the night away to an energetic mix of Bollywood, Top 40s, and old time hits from the 80s and and 90s! We enjoyed yet another delicious meal of biryani, *kulfi* for dessert, and lots of dancing and laughter.







WELL



WELL



DO NOT POLLUTE  
THE WELL



# DAY 12

## Paying homage to the Atash Behrams in Mumbai

Participants began the calendar of the new year as many Parsis around the world do, by visiting their fire temples. We covered 3 out of the 4 in Mumbai, which included the Banaji Atash Behram, Wadia Atash Behram, and Dadiseth Atash Behram. Participants gave generous amounts of both, monetary donations and *sukhur* bought from Udvada, Navsari and Surat to each fire in Mumbai. Each Atash Behram was peaceful and full of spiritual energy but it was also particularly impressive to see that each Atash Behram was built with finances from successful Parsis and their donations towards community well being. Recuperating from last night's late night festivities, participants enjoyed a relaxing afternoon at Ripon Club.





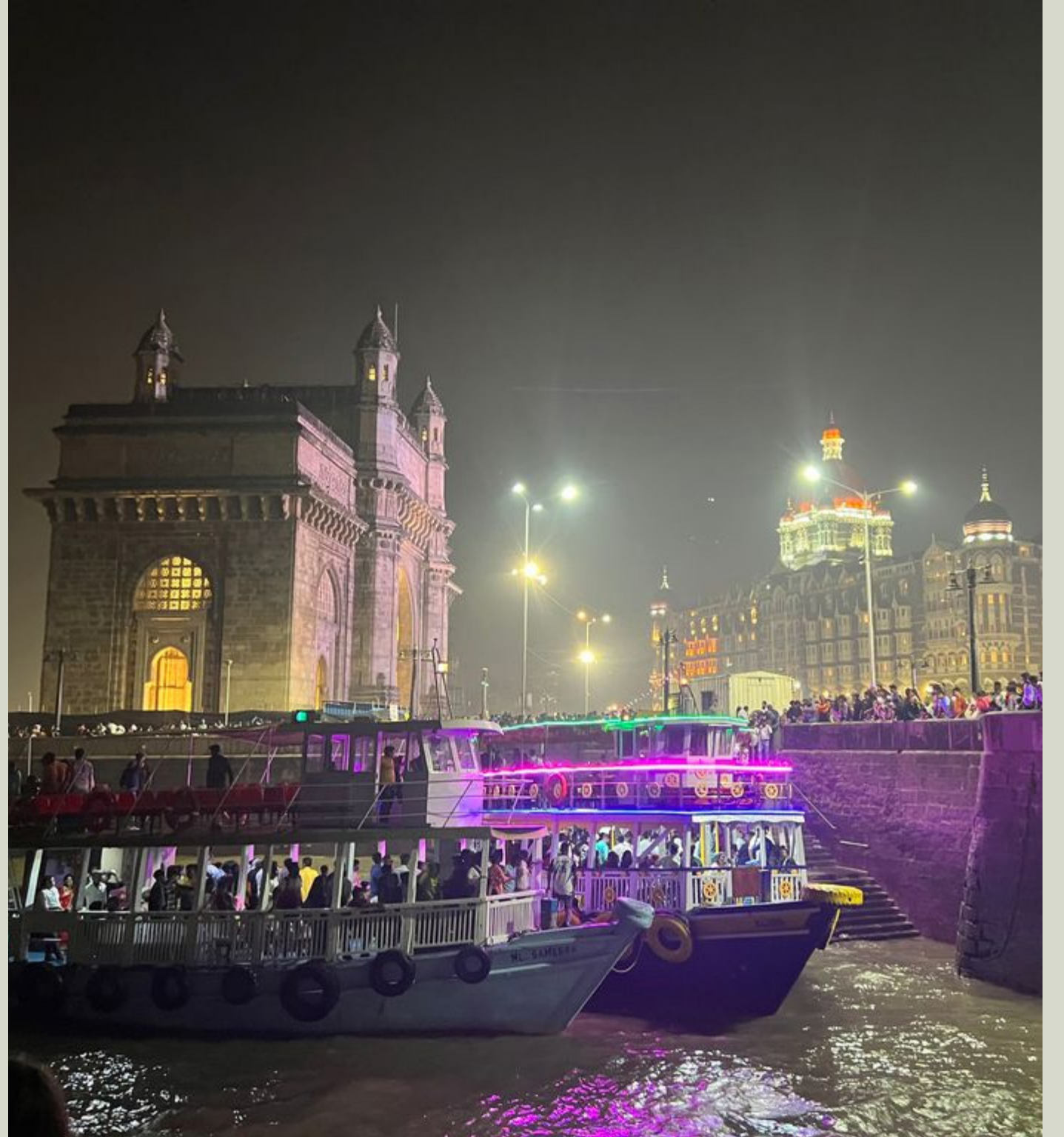


## Gateway of India *Jashan at Sea*

After lunch at the Ripon Club, participants walked through the buzzing streets of Mumbai on New Years Day, to the Gateway of India, where we boarded a boat and participated in a *jashan* at sea. The *jashan* was performed by our two priests as part of the RTR team - RTR volunteer Ervad Sheherazad Pavri from Mumbai and RTR participant, Ervad Yazad Unwalla, from London. While *jashan* ceremonies are traditionally performed on land to represent the earth, the element of earth was represented on the sea by placing a bowl of fine mud with the other offerings. The ceremony ended with the prayer, *tandorosti*, in which all the names of the attendees were recited. After the ceremony, participants enjoyed *chashni*, fruit and nuts that were placed as an offering during the ceremony. It was an incredibly unique and special ceremony made all the more special getting to experience this together as a group in the beautiful Arabian Sea, performed by our very own RTR Mobeds.









# DAY 13

## Godrej & Boyce

### *Reigniting the fire of Parsi entrepreneurship, novelty of ideas and sustainability*

RTR 7 was the first group to visit the offices of Godrej & Boyce in Vikhroli. We began with a tour of the mangrove enclave, a stretch of 5,000 acres covered with mangrove trees ranging from different species such as the (primarily) *Avicennia Marina* followed by the *Rhizophora* and *Aegiceras Corniculatum*. A short introduction was given on the Godrej family and their businesses which launched through a surge of risks and hard work during the late 19th century. One of the passion projects for Shri Pirojsha Godrej was to utilize the land of Vikhroli in a way that it contributed towards the ecology yet still created job opportunities for his employees. In the 1940s Godrej officially created a mangrove sanctuary along the west bank of the Thane River Creek where we stood marveling at the hundreds of fiddler crabs beneath us. Guided by Godrej employees, we learned about how the mangrove sanctuary is a massive relief to the industrial pollution of Mumbai and the Vikhroli lands are sandwiched between two of Mumbai's largest landfills. Godrej's mangrove sanctuary safeguards the livelihoods of local fishermen and pumps blood into the ecological value of the delta. We went up a watch-tower in 3 groups to see the heights of the *Avicennia Marina* species of mangroves and were surprised by the vastness of the mangrove forest. We then headed over to the Godrej & Boyce offices where we gained an understanding of the company and their values and heard from their own employees about what Godrej & Boyce are known for today. Our first extensive show and tell was via the Godrej Archives spearheaded by Firoza Godrej. The exhibition cataloged the first advertisements and products made by the Godrej brothers and mapped the growth of the company from making locks, soaps, fridges to parts of rockets. We learned that the archives department recycles 99.5% of everything, down to the debris and dust that is eventually turned into bricks. Our second stop at Godrej & Boyce was the Aerospace Engineering Department. We saw how the wings of planes are made, complex fabrications and a part of the rocket which was made for the Chandrayaan-3 Mission commemorating India's landing on the moon. This tour was truly inspirational to see how a Parsi family started off manufacturing locks to manufacturing space equipment. Their values and commitment to archiving, restoration and ecological growth were for so many of us RTR participants a first to witness in the world of business. We were lucky to be joined by Firoza Godrej after lunch and it was inspiring to meet a Godrej family member who is deeply involved in documenting the legacy of the business.











## **The Legacy of Dadar Athornan Institute** *With Ervad Dr Ramiyar Karanjia*

After our visit to the Godrej offices, we headed back to Dadar for our second visit at the Athornan Institute. We were Guided by the Principal of the institute Ervad Dr. Ramiyar Karanjia, who gave us a verbal presentation outlining the role of priests in Zoroastrianism and why the Dadar Athornan madressa is unique and necessary. He showed us how the school functions and what the lives of the boys studying there looks like. Participants asked thoughtful questions about religious texts, mythology as well as showed a keen interest in learning about the challenges the institute and the students there were facing. Towards the end of the discussion, we got to meet some of the boys studying at the institute - Shahan Bhesadia, and Barjis Bharda. Many of the boys, such as the two we met, are not from Mumbai and come from other parts of India to pursue their *Navar* and *Martab* training here under Ervad Dr Karanjia's swift and compassionate guidance.





## Della Towers

### *Dinner with Jimmy Mistry*

We ended our day with a trip to Della Tower - the home of Jimmy Mistry, CEO of Della Group. He had graciously invited us all for dinner and continues to support RTR each year through hosting participants at his business centers, hotels and his personal home. We were greeted downstairs by Mr Mistry's son, Farhan, who took us to a theater-style room in the building for a presentation about Della Group's initiatives to promote leadership among youth. We then went upstairs to the 18th floor, where we met Mr Mistry and his wife, Delna. Not only were we hosted with such generosity, but Mr Mistry took the time out to talk about his business journey, his struggles, day-to-day routine and gave very specific advice on work ethic. He told us why he believes in giving back to his Zoroastrian community. In many ways Della Group and Mr Mistry carry the legacy of Parsi generosity and wealth distribution. He also sat with small groups of RTR participants and individuals, eager to know about their careers and ideas. Before dinner, he left us with one thought, that one day if we were rich and successful, to remember that he hosted us and to host other young people to inspire them to reach their dreams.







## DAY 14

### The iconic B.D. Petit Parsi General Hospital

Our last day was a bittersweet ending to the 14 days which brought 28 strangers closer together through learning, sharing and observing religious heritage. Many of us were not looking forward to the end of a trip that had added invaluable memories to our lives. The final institution which was part of the community service component of our program, was the B.D. Petit Parsi General Hospital which has been running for over a 100 years. An orientation was provided by the current Chief Executive Officer, Dr. (Lt. General Retd.) M. Ganguly, Medical Superintendent Dr. Anuj Agarwal and the General Manager of Finance and Administration, Mr Neville Jamshedji. We learned about how the Parsi General Hospital has gone from strength to strength, through donations and charity. It was also interesting and encouraging to hear about how the hospital dealt with Covid. It was heartwarming to see patients who were able to happily express that they were well looked after.

Taking some of the care packages we had pre-assembled, RTR 7 participants went around the hospital meeting senior citizens in different wards across the 3 floors of the hospital. One of the most recurring thoughts which came across our minds during the two week trip was the sensitivity and compassion needed to engage with our elderly community members in institutions such as the Parsi General Hospital who need company, empathy and mental stimulation to stay motivated.



## A final farewell

After a look around at the hospital's beautiful gardens, we headed off towards the Parsi Gymkhana for a final fantastic lunch of curry chawal, fried chicken, *sariya*, and some international cuisine. After lunch, the RTR 7 group sat around in a large circle for a final debrief and began to share their reflections of the trip one by one. For many of us coming from the diaspora, it meant seeking out pockets of Zoroastrian culture to engage with away from our homes to feel a sense of ethno-religious belonging. However, during this trip, Return to Roots provided us with concentrated time that showcased how widespread Zoroastrianism was. From new findings such as the educational lectures, to casual conversations during the bus rides, from sitting in prayer to discovering new foods together, the interaction with fellow Zoroastrians was what we all craved to feel centered and a sense of belonging.









# RTR7 BOARD OF DIRECTORS

## Aban Marker Kabraji Chair

As Chair of the RTR Board of Directors, Ms Kabraji contributes in multiple ways towards the sustainable and logistical development of the program. She leads RTR's growing network with its valuable supporters who share the program's vision in empowering Zoroastrian youth across the globe.

Ms Kabraji currently serves as Senior Advisor Climate Change and Biodiversity, 'The Triple Planetary Crisis', UN Development Coordination Office for Asia-Pacific (UNDCO) with a focus on Thailand, Pakistan, Samoa, and Fiji. Her strategic support and advice to the UN Resident Coordinators (RCs) for this project, has resulted in the 'Living Indus Initiative'.

She also serves as Senior Biodiversity Consultant to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in monitoring major investments and making AIIB a leader in green infrastructure financing. Until March 2021, she was the Regional Director for IUCN Asia and Director of the IUCN Regional Hub for Asia-Oceania - the largest region of IUCN. She was the Co-Chair of the multi-million dollar programme for the Mangroves for the Future (MFF) Initiative in collaboration with UNDP. Ms. Kabraji was also responsible for driving the strategic direction of close to 300 organizations as members of the Union in more than 70 wide-ranging environmental initiatives.

In 2018, Ms. Kabraji was a recipient of the Tamgha-i-Imtiaz Pakistan Civil Award in recognition of her outstanding contributions to conservation and development in Pakistan and services to international diplomacy. Ms. Kabraji was appointed as 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 (CCICED). Ms. Kabraji is also a member of the External Advisory Board for the Yale Global Institute of Sustainable Forestry, a McCluskey Fellow in Conservation and a visiting professor with the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, and a sought-after lecturer worldwide.

## Arzan Sam Wadia Program Director

Arzan Sam Wadia grew up in Mumbai, India and moved to New York City to pursue his Master's in Urban Design and Architecture. He currently runs an architecture and a technology practice in New York City. As the President of the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America Arzan heads a federation of 27 Member Associations and 14 Small Groups representing over 25,000 Zoroastrians in the USA and Canada.

Arzan was the Co-Chair of the 12th World Zoroastrian Congress held in New York City in July 2022. He played pivotal roles at the Twelfth North American Congress in New York and the Seventh World Zoroastrian Youth Congress in 2019. He was part of the first World Zoroastrian Youth Leadership Forum at the ASHA Center in the United Kingdom in 2018 and will be attending the 2nd one in May 2024 as a Mentor and facilitator.

Arzan is the Program Director of the Zoroastrian Return to Roots Program, an initiative he has been involved with since its inception in 2013. He is a founding trustee of the Zarathushti Entrepreneurship Development Foundation. Arzan has served on the Board of the Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York for over a decade. Arzan currently is a Trustee of the Global Council of Zoroastrians Trust (GCZT) and a member of the Global Working Group (GWG) As the founding editor of Parsi Khabar, the world's leading online news aggregator of all things Parsi, he has a deep understanding of the pulse of the community worldwide.

## Aban Rustomji Secretary

Aban Rustomji, raised in Quetta, Pakistan, immigrated to Houston in 1979 with her husband and two children. She holds a Master's degree in Library Science and is a passionate advocate for libraries and public education. Aban is the founding chair of the FEZANA Information Research and Educational System (FIRES), headquartered at the Zoroastrian Association of Houston (ZAH). Through FIRES, she has launched lecture series, an oral history project, and exhibitions. The initiative also collects books, manuscripts, and artifacts to promote Zoroastrian faith, history, and cultural awareness.

As an active member of the Zoroastrian Association of Houston, Aban has played significant roles in organizing North American Congresses. She was involved in the Seventh World Zoroastrian Congress in Houston and the 12th World Zoroastrian Congress in New York City in July 2022. She is currently co-chair of the Program Committee for the 18th North American Zoroastrian Congress in Houston in December 2024.



## Dr Rosheen Kabraji Treasurer

Dr. Rosheen Kabraji is currently an environmental and social development consultant. She received her PhD in Urban Studies from King's College London in 2023. She was previously Assistant Head and a Research Associate of the Asia Programme at Chatham House (the Royal Institute for International Affairs). She joined the institute in 2009, after working at the International Institute for Environment and Development. She has an MPhil in International Relations from the University of Cambridge and a BSc in Anthropology from University College London. Rosheen is a co-founder of the Zoroastrian Return to Roots program launched in 2012 and was listed on the ASHA Centre's Inspirational Women (2011).

## Dr Shernaz Cama

Dr. Shernaz Cama, has taught at Delhi University. She is Advisor, Fulbright Educational Programme, Executive Council Member, Temple of Understanding & Honorary Research Fellow, College of Humanities, University of Exeter. In 1999, Dr. Cama was invited by UNESCO to initiate a project on the Preservation and Promotion of Parsi Zoroastrian Culture and Heritage. As honorary Director of UNESCO Parzor she has guided, and continues to guide, researchers in Parsi Zoroastrian culture and demography in India and abroad.

Dr. Cama has produced several movies for the Parzor project, been Curator of the largest ever exposition on the Zoroastrians, Everlasting Flame International Programme, 2016, has headed and won the Multinational Candidature for the UNESCO Award, "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" for Navroze, the International Day of Spring. Her publications include the seminal Threads of Continuity: Zoroastrian Life & Culture.

Dr.Cama has won several prestigious awards including the Delhi Minorities Commission Award for Exemplary work done in the NGO Sector. In 2022, she was honored by the World Zarthushti Community for 'Pioneering Meaningful Change for Social & Humanitarian Causes & Being a Source of Strength in the Community' at the 12th World Zoroastrian Congress in New York City and in 2023 she received the WZCC Global Outstanding Zarathushti Social Entrepreneur Award in London. Dr.Cama has also received the Dr. Sarojini Naidu Award for Education in 2023. She brings a lifetime of lived experience, field work and academic research to the TISS-Parzor Centre for Cultural & Heritage Studies, in which her work will be handed on to the next generation of students, researchers and all those interested in the Heritage of Humanity.

## Tanya Hoshi

Tanya Hoshi is an award-winning Canadian filmmaker with over a decade of experience producing films, webseries, digital content and advertisements. Tanya's commercial productions have been viewed globally by millions, broadcast on NBC, and won a Telly Award. In 2023, Tanya produced her first feature film 'We Will Be Brave' via Telefilm Canada's Talent to Watch Program, which won the Audience Choice Feature Film Award at Reel Asian International Film Festival. Tanya made her directorial debut with the web series 'Blackout' which won Best Horror Series at WebFest Berlin. Tanya is currently a co-producer on 'BAPSI', a documentary about Bapsi Sidhwa.

In addition to her professional career, Tanya enjoys volunteering her time as a youth leader in the global Zoroastrian community. Tanya was appointed as the first Chief Social Media Officer of FEZANA in 2020 and is currently the Chair of the newly-formed Communications Committee. Over the past four years, Tanya has grown FEZANA's social media to become a leading and trusted source for Zoroastrian content online while mentoring several youth. Tanya has been invited as a speaker at the 2019 Youth Congress in LA, 2022 World Zoroastrian Congress in NYC, and 2023 Youth Congress in London. Tanya's commitment to her community and achievements in her career led her to be awarded the Outstanding Youth Award at the 2022 World Zoroastrian Congress in New York City.

## Zubin Pervez Gheesta

Zubin was born and brought up in Mumbai, India. 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 and technique. He also assists his institute in conducting symposiums, certifications and workshops with other gyms on particular aspects of fitness.

## Kayras Darayush Irani

Kayras Irani lives in Richmond, British Columbia, Canada and is a Paramedic with British Columbia Emergency Health Services. For over 15 years he has served members of his own community as a volunteer with the Zoroastrian Society of British Columbia (Z.S.B.C.). He has taught classes on the Zoroastrian religion to school-aged children and has organized social gatherings for the community. In 2013 & 2024, he helped organize a Zoroastrian Youth Professional's Retreat in Vancouver and in 2011, he volunteered with planning and fundraising for the 5th World Zoroastrian Youth Congress. Kayras has also volunteered and/or been a speaker at nine different congresses between 2009 and 2022. He has proudly helped run four Zoroastrian Return to Roots trips by providing logistical and medical support for the participants. He currently serves as the President of ZSBC and is happily married to Sanaya Master. They are both the proud parents of their three year old daughter Spenta.



# RTR7 VOLUNTEERS



## Sheherazad Pavri

RTR 3 Alumni, RTR Board Member & RTR 7 Volunteer

Sheherazad is an ordained Mobed, well-versed in higher liturgical ceremonies based out of Mumbai, India. In his corporate avatar, he is involved in spearheading business development with a climate tech startup based out of India. Sheherazad has been involved with RTR since 2016 when he was a participant and has volunteered on 4 trips thereafter. He enjoys spreading joy and bringing out the best in people. He has participated and presented at Zoroastrian congresses globally and is a core committee member of the Empowering Mobeds Programme. Sheherazad believes in leading by example and connecting Zarathushti youth with the right opportunities while building community bonds.

*I felt extra involved on this trip being the only volunteer from India. In that regard, what really stood out was the proactive nature of the participants to step up and help out. Be it for shopping for the donations to the institutions or getting everyone ready to leave. The bonding was great! My pride of being a Zarthushti youth has been enhanced by this trip. I realize how I have the opportunity to share this gift with the world and entuse others to get involved and give back. RTR is a part of my life which I would love to share with everyone!*



## Mahfrin Santoke

### RTR 6 Alumni & RTR 7 Volunteer

Mahfrin Santoke is from Southern California where she works as an elementary school music teacher and was a participant on RTR 6 in 2020. She felt deeply connected to the program and the initiative and wanted a chance to give back and hence volunteered with RTR 7 in December 2023.

*Returning as an alumni was an entirely different experience. Given that I knew what to expect from the sites and the trip, I was able to take a step back and relax into it more than I was the first time. I felt more deeply connected to all the sites and locations this time around, and was able to share the experience with a group of people that had very different perspectives than I did the first time. This tour is fun, informative, inspiring, and life-changing! However, I wouldn't recommend it to someone who isn't genuinely interested in learning about their roots. We go deep into history and information, and that is only fun if you are open to the experience. But for someone either wanting to connect to their roots for the first time or build a stronger bond with the connection they already have, absolutely! My biggest takeaway from the trip is that we should be proud to be Parsis! We have done so much for India and they love and respect us for it. While we will always be a minority, we have a place where we are seen for the impact we have made. It was very inspiring and I feel much more motivated to be involved in my community.*



## Veera Rustomji

### RTR 2 Alumni & RTR 7 Volunteer

Veera Rustomji (b. 1992) is an artist from Karachi, Pakistan. Her practice takes references from stories and archives creating scenarios that deal with gender, geographical power structures and religious iconography. She holds a BFA from the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVS) and an MA in Fine Art from Chelsea College of Arts at the University of the Arts London (UAL) and was a recipient of the Postgraduate International Scholarship Award. She currently teaches at the Fine Art Department of IVS, worked with the Maritime Archaeology Heritage Institute (MAHI) and the Pakistan Association of Women Publishers & Editors. She attended RTR in 2015 as a participant and returned in 2023 as a volunteer.

*The RTR journey for me started in 2015 as a participant - seeing the physical sites of Parsi migration in Gujarat alongside the archaeological data gave me the ability to believe and view my religion for myself. RTR has a unique approach in understanding Zoroastrianism by giving fellows the tools to place scientific evidence alongside oral traditions and intangible heritage. Karachi has a minuscule Zoroastrian population and being in India where the culture and religion is much more celebrated and venerated is heart warming because it makes you feel like you are part of a tapestry that spreads across geographical and political borders. RTR at the end of the day is an opportunity which provides privileged encounters with priests, businessmen and entrepreneurs as well as with ordinary families who work so hard in India. To have the time to interact with objects, artifacts, architecture and spaces with people who are experts in their fields is so much more than a way to "reconnect" to religion but it's a platform to grow and learn how the journey of Zoroastrianism in one's own life can be immensely beneficial to their personal happiness and fulfillment.*



# RTR7 FELLOWS



## Tarnaish Mahiyar Mehta

Tarnaish is a 24-year-old graphic designer and filmmaker residing in the vibrant city of Karachi. She is passionate about exploring new places and capturing the essence of moments through my lens. Beyond her creative pursuits, she shares her space with eight wonderful dogs who add joy and energy to her daily life. One of her proudest achievements is reaching the base camp of Nanga Parbat, a testament to her love for adventure and the thrill of conquering new heights. Each journey fuels her love for storytelling, filmmaking and creating memories that she is eager to share with the world.

*As a graphic designer and filmmaker, the visit to the Godrej Archives was particularly fascinating. It allowed me to witness the rich history of Godrej Industries and understand its evolution over time. The intersection of business, creativity, and heritage was palpable in this unique repository of historical records and artifacts. Words fall short in describing the profound experience at the Udvada Atash Behram. The first sight of the Atash surpassed all expectations, and the midnight boi, a recommendation I had received from many, turned out to be a truly otherworldly event. The recitation of prayers by the Dasturji, with the flame casting a warm glow over the entire fire temple, created a magnificence that will stay etched in my memory. In essence, this trip left me with a deep sense of connection, not only to the wonderful individuals I met but also to the rich cultural heritage that I had the privilege of exploring. Witnessing the resilience and unity within the Zoroastrian community, particularly in efforts to uplift those in need, has deepened my appreciation for our shared values. Creating new friendships was fantastic, not to mention the delicious food that I truly miss. In summary, I highly recommend this tour for its well-thought-out schedule, eye-opening experiences, and the chance to dive deep into the vibrant tapestry of Zoroastrian culture.*



## Persis Bhada

Persis Bhada was born and raised in Miami and currently lives in Seattle. She works as a Strategy Officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, where she supports domestic education and economic mobility work. Persis was previously a consultant in the social sector, focused on public health, education, and social equity topics. In her free time she loves hiking, painting, dancing, and trying new foods.

*The highlights of the trip were the food, moments in Udvada, and the evenings playing cards and bonding with the other participants. Food is the way to my heart and I thoroughly enjoyed the things I ate. But more than just that, eating Parsi cooking in India was nostalgic and made me appreciate my parents' cooking. It was powerful to understand how simply making a Parsi omelet is part of a much larger tradition and culture. I also thoroughly enjoyed Dr. Kurush Dalal's presentation on the origins of Parsi food. I learned a ton. Udvada was a peaceful and spiritual place. The midnight Boi was incredible and I really enjoyed speaking with Vada Dasturji afterwards. It made me so proud to be Zoroastrian. Alongside the religious significance of being in Udvada, I was struck by the power I felt being in a town where Zoroastrians are the majority. The streets were quiet and peaceful and I was in awe at the sight of fire temples on every block and Parsi names on every house. I recommend this trip to any young Zoroastrian regardless of how involved in community activities or religious they are. Before the trip, I was nervous because I wasn't very involved, didn't know anyone else going, and wasn't sure how orthodox and stringent other people might be. I found that everyone on the trip was open and willing to meet me where I was. It was powerful to connect with other young Zoroastrians and to learn more about where I come from. I left RTR feeling proud of my identity, understanding my parents and grandparents better, and feeling more connected to the community.*





## Mazda Shahzadi

Mazda Shahzadi is 22 years old and from Australia. He is a student learning software engineering and works at NAB a bank as a frontend developer. He also enjoys reading and learning new things.

*I think the people we went with showed us that we are all human, wanting a connection and trying to make the most of our experiences. The Zoroastrian events were cool because we got to experience a lot of new things as well as India for the first time. I came out of my shell a bit too and was myself. I appreciate the variety of experiences I gained from the trip.*

## Aryan Farahi

Aryan Farahi is a structural engineer at DCI Engineers, thriving in Houston. Originally from Tehran, Iran, she made the move from Los Angeles to Houston two years ago after earning her master's degree at UCLA. Outside of work, she enjoys pilates, photography, baking and doing puzzles.

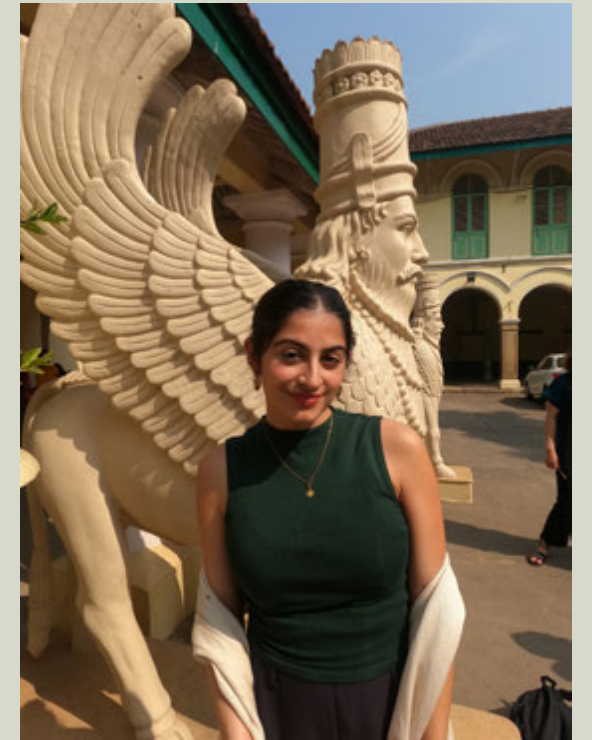
*The key takeaway was finding new friends. The first days we were strangers but at the end of the trip, we all made great friendships. I had never been with Parsis. It helped me to make great friendships and know more about some parts of their culture that are different from Iran. It has improved my understanding of Zoroastrianism and seeing it being practiced in India was insightful. The friendships formed during the trip, the bus rides were fun too!*



## Suhana Patel

Suhana Patel identifies as a Parsi Zoroastrian and was born and raised in San Francisco, California and is a part of Zarthosti Anjuman of Northern California (ZANC). She is an aspiring physician currently in her gap year working at University of California San Francisco Medical School as a Hematology and Oncology Research Assistant.

*My biggest takeaway from the trip was the knowledge which I now have about my identity. Throughout my life, I did not feel as if I knew enough to truly say I am a Parsi Zoroastrian. My attempts to understand the religion further, felt very overwhelming because there is so much information out there. Attending this trip provided so much of the knowledge which I hold great value for. I also felt as if it was taught to us in a way that is memorable. Being able to attend historical and religious sites really allows us to relive the experiences of our ancestors and gain a valuable understanding. I also felt a lot of personal growth in this trip in my mental health particularly. I think the connection to religion and being on the trip in general brought me a lot of peace. It has opened up this outlet for me to use such as prayer when I feel any emotion, positive or negative, which is something I've continued upon returning from the trip. This tour was truly a once in a lifetime experience that was so fulfilling and enriching. I would want my siblings and other young Zoroastrians to participate in this program for the sense of pride it creates around the religion, the strengthened sense of community, and the depth of valuable knowledge it gives.*







## Kimiya Shahzadi

Kimiya Shahzadi is the Co-Chair ZYNA (Zoroastrian Youth of North America), the Chief Social Media Officer of NAMC (North American Mobed Council), and the Social Events Co-Chair of ZAOM (Zoroastrian Association of Michigan). She has a Master's in Clinical Behavioral Psychology specializing in relationships and has built a company called Love Story that offers Zoroastrian matchmaking using the best knowledge from science.

*The biggest thing that shocked me was how successful Tata and Godrej are - bigger than Apple and Microsoft, richer than Elon Musk if they didn't donate profits and how much good they are doing in the world. I would encourage people to go on this trip and would encourage my future kids to go on this trip too. One of my grandparents is a Parsi and my dad was born in India, because my dad and his immediate family abused us horribly growing up. I didn't identify with Parsis and didn't connect with them as much growing up for multiple reasons. This trip helped me see all the beautiful amazing Parsi people and helped me be proud of being Parsi. I got the closure I needed and the reconnection and knowledge I needed. Feeling empowered.*

## Pejman Mehrshahi

Pejman Mehrshahi is 22 years old and was born in Yazd, Iran where his Zoroastrian ancestors hail from. Currently, he studies Mechanical Engineering in Tehran and works as a Control Engineer as well.

*I recommend this tour for anyone who wants to know much more about Zoroastrians and to build communication with people who are from all around the world. We were 28 Zoroastrian people from all around the world gathered together for a specific purpose and this created our own sense of a community. The key take-away was long-lasting friendships and a greater understanding of Zoroastrianism.*



## Fravash Chothia

Fravash Chothia has been living in Toronto, Ontario his whole life, has been involved with the Zoroastrian community since he was a child and has grown up volunteering and participating in events every year. Going out on trips like RTR, where we can meet individuals from around the world is a passion of his which he plans to do more in the future. He has been the Chair of the ZSO Youth Committee since 2019 and plans on continuing his involvement with the Zoroastrian community in the future. He has studied International Business and Management here at the Toronto Metropolitan University and is working full-time in home renovations in Toronto & GTA, assisting the family business.

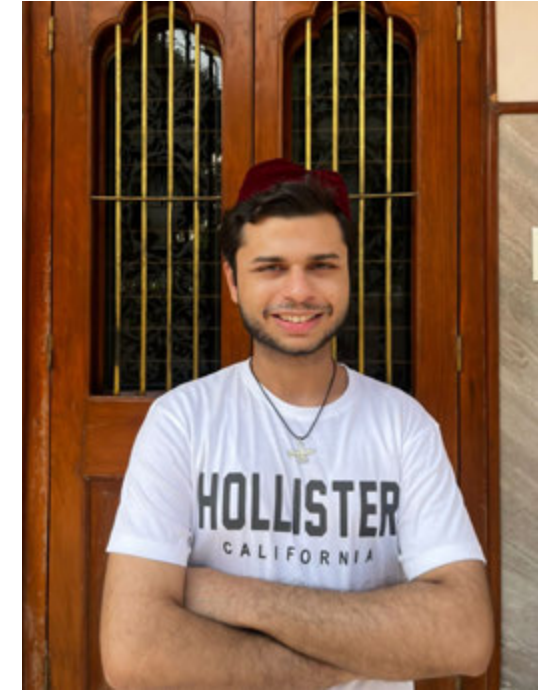
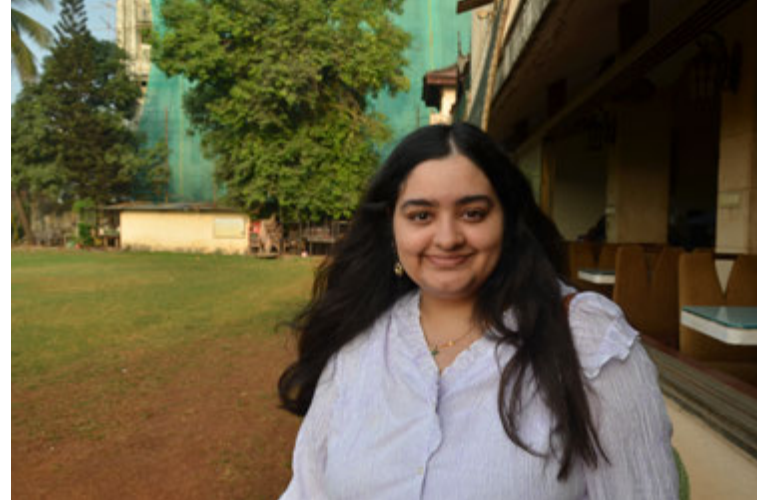
*My highlight of the trip was the first midnight boi ceremony at the Iranshah Atash Behram. This brought me a sense of calm that I have never before experienced. It was truly life changing. The second highlight was the New Years Eve party at Dadar Parsi Colony. This was a night I would never forget with so much dancing and socializing, I felt like I have never been happier that night. Lastly, meeting Pejman on the first night talking till 2:00 am was a truly surreal conversation on the differences in cultures and lifestyles that we both came from.*



## Zoish Unwalla

Zoish Unwalla is a Geography teacher in London and is also currently doing my MEd (Masters in Education) at the University of Cambridge. She is passionate about Education and truly believes in its transformative capabilities. She hails from a priestly family and has always been proud to practice her religion and learn more about it.

*The tour connects you with people from the Zoroastrian community and helps you to understand the religious aspect of our faith. Often in our own diaspora, things are done based on culture and not religion and this trip has helped me distinguish between the two. The midnight boi ceremonies were a great religious and spiritual experience that was very powerful and I enjoyed learning about the TATAs and visiting their HeadQuarters at Bombay House.*



## Jehangir Vakil

Jehangir Vakil is a 23 year old IT consultant by profession and a writer as a hobby, currently residing in Karachi, Pakistan. Can be found overthinking and day-dreaming in a café or in the comfort of his room, whilst definitely munching on some tasty treats. An ambivert by nature, who loves to party but could also easily spend the whole day cooped up in bed with mangas and anime.

*The two highlights for me were; Firstly the Iranshah Midnight Boi and the indescribable feeling of spirituality and connectedness I felt with my religion during the ceremony is something that brings me solace even today. It's a priceless and unforgettable experience that will continue to give me a sense of hope and guidance whilst constantly increasing my faith towards my religion. The second highlight was the Surat orphanage visits. During the visit to the Girl's Orphanage, we played various fun-filled games with the girls there, out of which one activity involved pairing RTR participants with the girls for dance-offs. I was paired with Shernaz, and together we immersed ourselves in laughter and dance throughout. This activity not only led to a profound and humbling realization, but also left me emotionally moved, especially towards the end. When we were departing from the orphanage, the girls were wishing us farewell from the balcony and windows, during which I heard Shernaz shouting my name and expressing gratitude for the moments shared. That memory, albeit brief but powerful, left me in a truly vulnerable and overwhelmed state, reflecting on the myriad of experiences I'd gained that day.*

## Bitu Kavooosi

Bitu Kavooosi is originally from Southern California, but now lives in Denver, CO, after attending university in Colorado. She is a Partner Development Manager for a business planning tech startup. To decompress, she works out and makes stained glass. In her spare time she likes to travel, cook, eat, read, hike, and backpack.

*The trip was particularly valuable with poignant moments - as there should be with a trip this long. I did learn a lot particularly about Towers of Silence as well as from Jimmy Mistry and his understanding of business/relentlessness in achieving goals, which was inspiring. Additionally speaking with Vada Dasturji at Udveda was a valuable takeaway.. He said that any way I practice my faith (spells and manifestation or regular prayer) is valid and good if it's how I feel connected to God. That conversation alone made the trip worthwhile.*





## Khorshid Gharaee-Kermani

Khorshid Gharaee-Kermani is a high school teacher living in Mississauga, Ontario and loves seeing her students reach their full potential. One of her personal goals has been to learn more about my Zoroastrian identity. RTR allowed her to do this and as a result she wanted to help her students become more curious to learn about their identity. She became more involved and reconnected with the Zoroastrian Community about two years ago. Her journey to reconnect started with taking NAMC Institute classes to work on prayer pronunciation and meanings. Soon after, she learned the next World Zoroastrian Congress would be held in New York, not too far away from her and couldn't pass up the opportunity to go with friends who were also curious to reconnect with the community. She met many amazing people from our community who inspire me to continue on this learning journey.

*I would recommend this tour and already have done so to a couple of people! It is truly a trip of a lifetime. No where else can you connect with such a small, intimate group of Zoroastrian youth from around the world in such a unique way and who are just as curious as you to learn more and feel more connected to their roots! You get to see, learn and experience what it means to be Zoroastrian from so many perspectives.*



## Mahya Sethna

Mahya Sethna, born and raised in London, is currently completing her Master's degree in Product Design Engineering at Loughborough University, in the UK. After graduating, she is planning to take a gap year, with the hopes of continuing to learn from the global Zarathushti community through continued travel, making more meaningful contributions and connections.

*RTR provided us with not only the opportunity to learn about our beautiful religion within open, honest and authentic spaces, but initiated a journey of personal and spiritual development as a result. It was truly a defining trip in emphasizing to me the diverse ways of identifying with Zoroastrianism, set against the backdrop of various scenic and significant locations for us. Although having arrived with limited knowledge and slight apprehension, the group radiated an atmosphere of respect and empathy, yet with such curiosity and excitement, which quickly developed into bonds that will last well beyond leaving India. RTR allowed me to experience an incredible sense of identity, completing a journey of transformative personal growth alongside some of the most interesting, passionate and driven young Zoroastrians from across the diaspora. Immersed within such a diverse collective, it was beautiful to understand how each individual differently practices their own religion and spirituality. The opportunity to learn from each other held just as much significance for me as learning from the institutions and professionals, with well-balanced conversations at every stage. I specifically appreciated learning about different interpretations of how to integrate scriptural teachings into my life, as a practical take away from the trip. But personally I think the greatest impact lies in having built up my pride in my religion, and my confidence in being able to share this, and speak about the successes and challenges facing our community*



## Meherwan R Patel

Meherwan R. Patel is a student of Philosophy, Anthropology, and Urban Studies in Singapore. He was born into a Parsi-Zoroastrian family in Karachi and was brought up there until he moved to Singapore for further studies. His experiences over the past 4 years (social, personal, academic, and spiritual) have brought him closer to his local and global Zoroastrian communities. He presented on Zoroastrian Philosophy at the 12WZC 2022 and 8WZYC 2023, and is closely involved in helping organize the 13WZC 2026 in Singapore! He is also the new host of “Zoroverse Podcasts”, which re-launches in March 2024. Academically, Meherwan continues to write papers on Zoroastrian philosophy, cosmology, politics, and architecture – Zoroastrian Philosophy and Architecture is also the topic of his final undergraduate dissertation.

*I really think this trip was transformative in both big and small ways. Within the larger scale of things, it was of irreplaceable value for me to be able to visit all the historic Zoroastrian sites and the Atash Behrams and Udvada, which would have otherwise been so tough for a Pakistani passport holder. I was able to reconnect with the spiritual history of the faith and it felt like a moment from a rite of passage. Everyone was on this journey together and I feel like we are all well-bonded – this means that we are keen to be with and grow relationships with each other, and this trip was just the start! I also gained a lot more nuanced knowledge of the faith, and left with more curious questions about its history, culture, and philosophy. I also got the chance to record some interviews for Zoroverse podcasts! I think this trip played the role of a crucial turning point in my life and has helped me develop a stronger sense of personal identity as a Zoroastrian. I also found Dr. Dalal and Khojeste's lectures really interesting and insightful, and the visit to Ashdeen really exciting! The generosity with taking us to the best places for meals was also much appreciated – the food was stellar. This trip was no short of life-changing. If you're interested in Zoroastrianism, go!*



## Arezoo Gharibshahi

Arezoo Gharibshahi is from the vibrant city of Yazd in Iran, pursuing an MBA at Sharif University while learning the ropes of her family's business. Inspired by Persian art, she finds joy in playing music, exploring historical sites and involving herself in organizing religious cultural events to preserve our rich heritage. She finds herself to be very grateful for the chance to contribute towards her religion in her own small ways.

*I have three lessons learned that are all closely related to each other. First, I deeply resonate with Ashuzarthust's quotation, 'You become happy when you make others happy.' Throughout my journey among organizers, attendees, and the people we visited, I saw this echoed. The other thing is each of us has a special role to play, like pieces of a puzzle, making our community and the world better. The solution? Being true to ourselves, listening to our hearts, and embracing our own paths to make a difference. The third thing is that individuals demonstrate their humanity most authentically when they follow through on their promises with actions. By witnessing committed organizers, successful Zoroastrian entrepreneurs, and dedicated Mobeds preserving our religion, this journey reinforced my responsibility to uphold these values—caring for the planet, serving the community, and building a world that reflects Zoroaster's vision. The Jashsan on the boat was a key highlight for me and I referred to that moment as the Zero Point because I found myself detached from thoughts of the past and unconcerned about the future. I was completely present, existing in a state of 'zero' mental clutter. I was grateful for the beautiful religion inherited from my parents and for the experience of praying on the boat alongside other peaceful beings.*



## Roxanne Unwalla

Roxanne is a dedicated individual with a passion for community engagement and cultural preservation. Born and raised in Southern California, she developed a deep appreciation for her heritage from a young age. She has been actively involved in various initiatives aimed at promoting and preserving Zoroastrian traditions and values. This includes being an organizer for 2 Los Angeles Congresses. Roxanne has also been an active member of the Zoroastrian Association of California (ZAC), where she has played a role in fostering a sense of unity and belonging within the Zoroastrian community. Her most recent contribution was being the ZAC Youth coordinator. She has also been an active participant in ZYNA since 2020, including attending the 2023 Toronto retreat and running seminars on resume writing and interviewing techniques. Professionally, she has brought a wealth of experience in her field of recruiting and has excelled in her career as a talent advisor for a top California health insurance company. Roxanne also hopes to use her professional skills with a strong cultural understanding to her new role as a member of the FEZANA Advocacy committee where one of her top commitments is to help Zoroastrian refugees from Iran. Outside of her professional commitments, she enjoys playing second base for our ZAC softball team finding inspiration and relaxation in various activities. She is a firm believer in the importance of maintaining a balanced lifestyle and nurturing personal growth. Return to Roots was an unforgettable experience for her and she hopes to one day return as a volunteer.

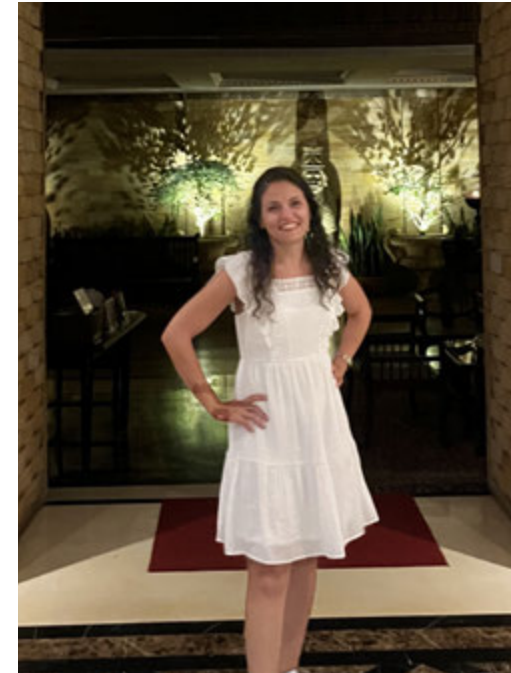


*This trip has definitely enhanced my understanding. I came in with a pretty decent understanding and strong sense of identity. I'm fortunate to be from an area with a large Parsi community so I've been very blessed. This trip gave me a stronger sense of belonging. I recently went through a bit of a health scare and in times when I felt helpless, I reflected upon and visualized the fire at Iranshah. It brought me a sense of peace and understanding that things would be ok. I found some recordings of Zoroastrian prayers on Youtube and played them in my hospital room late at night when I was by myself. If it weren't for RTR, I don't think I would have understood that this is what I needed to move forward and to heal. We also had amazing luck at both Atash Behrams in Surat as there were navjotes happening. That was so lovely to be a part of, especially at the Modi Shenshai one where we were greeted as honored guests.*

## Shirin Demehri

Shirin Demehri is 32 years old and was born and raised in Iran. She has lived in CA, US for the past 9 years and is a Data Analyst and works at KIA America.

The key takeaway was meeting with great human beings and the efforts from FEZANA put forth this trip as it was awesome and worthwhile experiencing in person.



## Arshan Daver

Arshan Daver lives in Sydney Australia and is studying a Bachelor of Commerce and Information Technology. He decided to go on the Return to Roots Program in order to learn more about where his parents lived and grew up and about Zoroastrianism which he sometimes felt disconnected from.

*The trip has transformed my understanding of Zoroastrianism from learning all about the historical sites such as the Sanjan where the first Parsi settlers arrived in India as well the religious customs, rituals and food. I feel more deeply connected with my religion and proud to be a Zoroastrian. The biggest takeaway of the trip I felt was developing a greater understanding of Zoroastrianism. Before coming to this trip I didn't understand a lot of the religious rituals and customs we have. This was achieved through visiting heritage sites throughout the trip as well as seeing local Parsi communities.*







## Yazad Unwalla

Yazad Unwalla has been an Ervad since the age of 13 and has served the Zoroastrian community in the United Kingdom for the past decade, continuing in his mother's and grandmother's footsteps. Additionally, he is a teacher of Politics, Economics and Religious Studies and is currently Head of Religious Studies at a school in Dulwich, London. He is a passionate gardener and enjoys growing scented flowers, roses, hyacinths, jasmine and peonies in particular, and fruit trees. Yazad strongly believes in the transformative power of education and believes that every child should receive a rich and diverse education that will enable them to fulfill their talents and abilities.

*The biggest takeaway for me were the friendships formed on the trip, the fun bus rides and seeing life in India. The trip improved my understanding of Zoroastrianism.*

## Sharmin Mistry

Sharmin was born and brought up in Mumbai and moved to Canada in 2017. Currently, she works for a global media agency, Publicis Media. She is also the Assistant Secretary of FEZANA, Co-Chair of the Service and Advocacy committee at ZYNA and a youth committee member at the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario. She has participated and represented the Zoroastrian community at the United Nations' Commission of Status of Women's conference in March, 2023 at the UN Headquarters in New York.

*My intention to attend the RTR program was to learn more about my roots and identity as a Zoroastrian and I am glad I was able to do that and know much more about the religion and culture than I thought. I definitely learned about our religion more than during attending my religion classes, back in school. It made me realize how rare we are as a community and how important it is to safeguard our culture and heritage. I would want my children to know everything I have learnt throughout the trip and contribute to the community like I did. The trip helped me in sharing my new-found knowledge with my family members, and friends which furthered in spreading awareness about Zoroastrianism. For me, the biggest takeaway was the sense of belonging and the power of our community. I came with an open mind and an eagerness to learn and left with a heart full of love and contentment. One really needs to earn this trip since it's a rare one!*



## Shirin Nouraein

Shirin is a PhD student in Bio-Engineering and Neuronal Engineering. Originally from Tehran, Iran, she came to the USA in 2017 and her first state was California and then moved to Houston, Texas to pursue her studies at Rice University.

*I recommend this trip because I learned a lot, and besides that, I had fun and was able to form a good friendship with my friends. Being an Iranian, if I had not decided to go to India as a Zoroastrian to visit and learn about Parsi culture and places, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to understand how they strive to preserve their religion and the struggles they have faced in an enduring journey. Learning about the resilience of the Zoroastrian community in India was truly enlightening. There are numerous reasons why I would encourage my friends to participate and have the same enriching experience I had on this trip. As an Iranian I followed my roots and learned how some parts of history changed and why there are some thoughts that Irani and Parsi are different - which I learned from this trip that they truly aren't.*





## Araash Chothia

Araash Chothia is from Toronto, Canada and is currently studying to get his Bachelors of Commerce, majoring in Marketing. For work, he's doing an internship at the Kimberly-Clark Corp. Canada, where he's helping the Supply Chain and Replenishment team. He is also the Newsletter Editor at the Zoroastrian Society of Ontario, where he gives a platform to interesting local Zoroastrians by giving them a platform to share their stories within the community and keeping the members in the know with the latest monthly publications. Araash likes to connect with people and likes to dive deep into topics he finds interesting like politics, business, nature, and religion

*I found my greatest takeaway was a newfound appreciation for my culture and Zoroastrian identity. I've come out with a newfound appreciation for the traditions of our religion. Growing up in a religious family, the religion can often feel forced upon us, so embarking on this trip had me develop my own appreciation for the religion separate from my familial influence. I would recommend this tour because of its organizational excellence, good planning and deep knowledge of India. The food and locations that we visited, with the prominent people we met, all exceeded my expectations. The relationships that I built on the trip are everlasting leaving an impressionable warm feeling in my heart when I left on the last day. I felt satiated and that I walked away with so much new learnings about people in general, India, relationships, storytelling and it left me wanting to explore my faith further.*

## Azita Patel

Azita Patel is a Medical Device Regulatory Affairs Specialist based in the Greater San Francisco Bay Area. Holding a Bachelor of Science in Biomedical Engineering from San Jose State University, as well as a Master of Science in Medical Product Development Management, she brings a robust academic background to her profession. Native to Sacramento, California, Azita demonstrated a proactive engagement with her community from a young age, volunteering with zeal at the Zoroastrian Association of Northern California and later assuming an active role within the Sacramento Zoroastrian Association. Presently, she holds the position of Vice President in ZANC, having previously served as a Member-at-Large on its Board of Directors since her tenure commenced. Azita further extends her commitment to cultural and educational endeavors by contributing as a "Z-Teacher" within the collaborative Z-Class program organized by ZANC and the Persian Zoroastrian Organization (PZO). In this capacity, she imparts knowledge of Zoroastrian cultural and religious studies to local middle school-aged youth, fostering a deeper understanding of their heritage and traditions.



*I wholeheartedly endorse attending RTR without hesitation. The wealth of knowledge offered during the program is vast, akin to a boundless pool. Even if one only manages to grasp a fraction of this knowledge, it significantly enriches their understanding of Zoroastrianism and its significance. Moreover, I believe it's particularly valuable for individuals lacking a strong sense of their Zoroastrian identity. Witnessing the transformation of attendees who were previously uninvolved in the community was inspiring. The trip significantly deepened my understanding of Zoroastrianism and strengthened my pride in identifying as a Zoroastrian. While I've always been proud to share my faith with others, I previously had limited knowledge to impart. Now, armed with the intricate details and insights gained during this journey, I feel better equipped to educate others about the richness of the Zoroastrian faith. By sharing this newfound knowledge, we can contribute to greater awareness and appreciation of our religion while reinforcing our own sense of identity and pride as Zoroastrians. The trip left me with many profound insights that are hard to put into words. One thing that stood out was how much it deepened my connection to my community. Going from being in the minority to the majority in some places was really eye-opening. Experiencing the joy of Parsi culture being celebrated and our importance recognized was amazing. Also, the trip made me realize how much I still had to learn about Zoroastrianism despite thinking I knew a lot already. It was a humbling experience that showed me how much I grew during the journey.*



## Bijan Kavooosi

Bijan Kavooosi lives in Edina, Minnesota, USA and works as an engineer in the semiconductor industry. He enjoys fishing, hiking, and going to the gym. He is a first generation American and his parents are both from Iran. He lived in Southern California up until summer of 2022 and when he moved to Minnesota and prior that he has been regularly attending the California Zoroastrian Center in Westminster, CA where he took youth classes in his time growing up as well as assisting with the Gambhar ceremonies.

*I am glad I had the opportunity to go on this trip and learn more about the Zoroastrian heritage. It was very well-organized with a great balance between team building, volunteering, knowledge-gaining from subject matter experts, and touring historic sites. Fantastic balance and overall, do not have complaints worth noting. My personal experience was really great and enjoyable despite my sickness which persisted nearly the entire duration of the trip. It gave me the opportunity to learn much more about the Parsi heritage and appreciate it much more due to my newfound knowledge. I also learned that despite some differences in the religious practice and rituals, they are very similar to Persian Zoroastrians in many ways. The knowledge gained on the Parsi heritage as well as the friendships I have built. I feel I will remember everyone from this trip forever despite only having met them and seen them for 15 days.*



## Danish Asphandiar

Dr. Danish Cyrus Asphandiar is a proud Zoroastrian born and raised in Karachi, Pakistan, known as the city of lights. As a dentist, he finds immense joy in bringing smiles to people's faces and ensuring their oral health. Beyond his practice he is deeply involved in volunteer work with various welfare organizations, aiming to provide dental care to those in need. Inspired by the concept of 'Return to Roots,' he has envisioned establishing an Instagram community to showcase the Parsi culture in Pakistan. From Karachi to Quetta and beyond, his goal is to offer a glimpse into the rich heritage and traditions through storytelling. Through this platform, he hopes to shed light on the invaluable contributions of the Parsi community to society, fostering understanding and appreciation globally. His passion for service and cultural preservation drives him to make a meaningful impact in both local and global Zoroastrian communities.

*One of the most profound aspects of the journey was visiting the revered Agiaries and Atash Behrams, where I gained a deeper insight into the spiritual essence of Zoroastrianism. The visit to the Doongerwadi (the Tower of Silence) was particularly impactful, instilling in me a sense of reverence and awe for the traditions and practices of my faith. Udvada, with its mystical charm and the sacred Iranshah fire, left an indelible mark on my soul. The midnight boi experience, suspended in time, was truly magical, a moment I feel incredibly fortunate to have experienced. However, the most profound learning for me came from visiting the orphanages in Surat. Witnessing the love and happiness radiating from the children there reminded me of the true essence of life. It reinforced the importance of spreading joy and love, even amidst life's challenges, and inspired me to carry forward this message in my own life. The RTR journey has proven to be profoundly impactful, especially for me. It has provided me with invaluable insights into both culture and religion. As a member of the Zoroastrian community, I feel deeply privileged after undertaking this journey. The historical narrative of Zoroastrianism, including our migration to India, holds immense significance and deserves to be shared widely within our local community. I wholeheartedly endorse the Return to Roots program and urge others, including my peers and friends, to consider supporting and participating in it. This program offers a unique opportunity to connect with our heritage and enrich our understanding of our roots.*







# CALL TO ACTION

Since its inception in 2012, RTR has run seven trips for Zoroastrians across the globe. We have been fortunate to have the financial support of generous Zoroastrian Associations, family trusts, and individuals to subsidize participants in all those trips. Over the last three trips alone, 100% of the participants needed and received funds to join the trip.

Our trip has produced some of the most active youth leaders involved in the Zoroastrian community today, who have gone on to create incredible initiatives for the betterment of Zoroastrianism.

However, we are now at a critical junction which requires action from our existing supporters and wider community as future trips are in jeopardy due to reduced funding pledges and rising inflation. We have aimed to keep costs as low as possible for our participants and can continue to do so only with the financial support of the broader Zoroastrian community.

We now call upon our supporters, funders and alumni to please consider donations to RTR to continue making these trips possible. As RTR alumni have experienced the transformative impact of the programme, we encourage them to spread the importance of these trips alongside this Call to Action amongst their local communities. Any donation, however small or large will be valued.

If you would like to make a contribution towards RTR, follow the link below

<https://zororoots.org/payment-portal/>





