



Sooni Taraporevala in conversation with Homi Bhabha
Thursday, October 25 @ 6 pm | Lecture Hall
Reception and booksigning with the artist to follow

Screening of *Little Zizou*
with director Sooni Taraporevala in person, Q&A to follow
Saturday, October 27, 2 pm | Harvard Film Archive

PARSIS The Zoroastrians of India, A Photographic Journey will be available for purchase at the Carpenter Center on the night of the booksigning, at the Harvard Museum of Natural History for a limited time during the exhibition, and also on Amazon.com.



This exhibition is made possible by the generous support of the Tata Group. Additional funding and support given by the South Asia Initiative at Harvard University.

IMAGES

COVER

Avan Yazad *parab*—the day of prayers to Avan, the divinity presiding over water. Each day and month of the Zoroastrian calendar is dedicated to a divine being who either presides over a natural creation or a human attribute. When the day and month dedicated to a particular divine being coincides, it is celebrated as a *parab* or a festive day by the Zoroastrians.

Marine Drive, Bombay, 1984
Archival pigment print, color
20 x 30 inches
© 1984 Sooni Taraporevala

INSIDE FOLD

Evenings at Cozy Building where I grew up in an extended family. My grandfather (with his eyes shut) and my granduncle (reading the paper) were the first generation to receive an English education. They traveled the world through their books without leaving India. Bombay, 1982

Archival pigment print, black and white
20 x 30 inches
© 1982 Sooni Taraporevala

PAGE 1 CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

High priest of Udvada, Ervad Kekobad Dastoor imparts some words of wisdom to Rustom and Kayrus Unwala after performing their *navjote*, the initiation into the religion.

Bombay, 1999
Archival pigment print, black and white
20 x 30 inches
© 1999 Sooni Taraporevala

Greeting a *navjote* child after the ceremony.

Bombay, 1985
Archival pigment print, color
20 x 30 inches
© 1985 Sooni Taraporevala

My grandmother Aloo Taraporevala praying.

Cozy Building, Bombay, 1984
Archival pigment print, color
20 x 30 inches
© 1984 Sooni Taraporevala

PAGE 3 CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

The man in the sola hat.
Bombay, 1985
Archival pigment print, color
20 x 30 inches
© 1985 Sooni Taraporevala

A devotee pays his respects to the portrait of Meherji Rana, the famed priest from Navsari who went in 1578 to a religious conference in the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar, to explain to him the tenets of Zoroastrianism. On the bench a priest's robe called a *jamah* has been spread out to dry. Hours of prayer in a room with a fire and no fans leaves the priests' robes soaking wet.

Navsari Bhagarsath Anjuman Atash Bahram,
Gujarat, 1982
Archival pigment print, black and white
20 x 30 inches
© 1982 Sooni Taraporevala

A conscientious Parsi employee in the Godrej typewriter factory listens to his typewriter, while his non-Parsi colleague teases him for working so hard. Godrej was the first company in Asia to make typewriters. Nehru used one of their first models at the Avadi Congress in 1955.

Bombay, 1984
Archival pigment print, color
20 x 30 inches
© 1984 Sooni Taraporevala

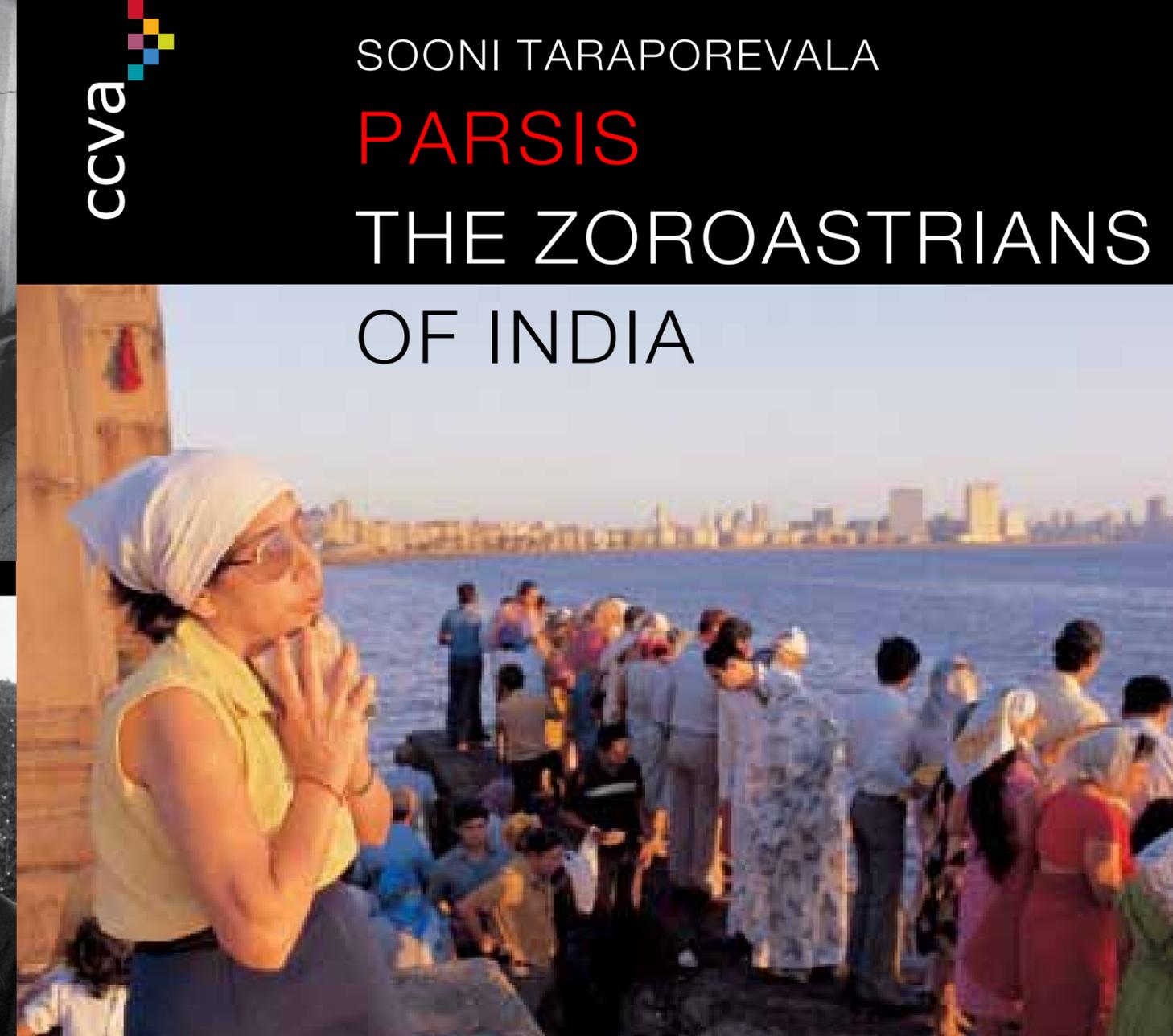
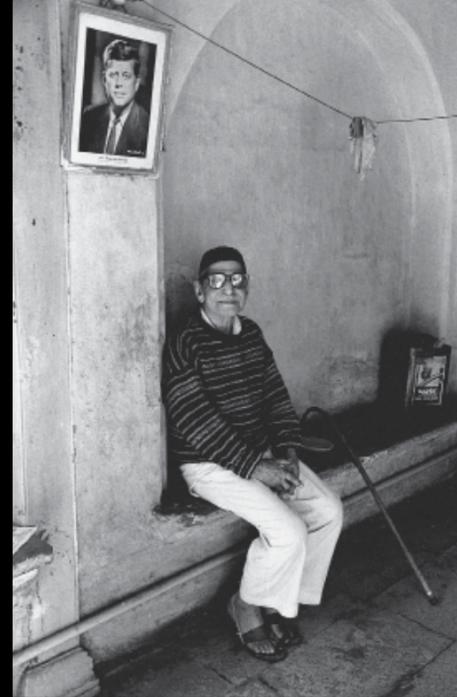
BACK

An admirer of JFK, who wrote to the American Center in Bombay for this portrait.

Udvada, Gujarat, 1998
Archival pigment print, black and white
30 x 20 inches
© 1998 Sooni Taraporevala

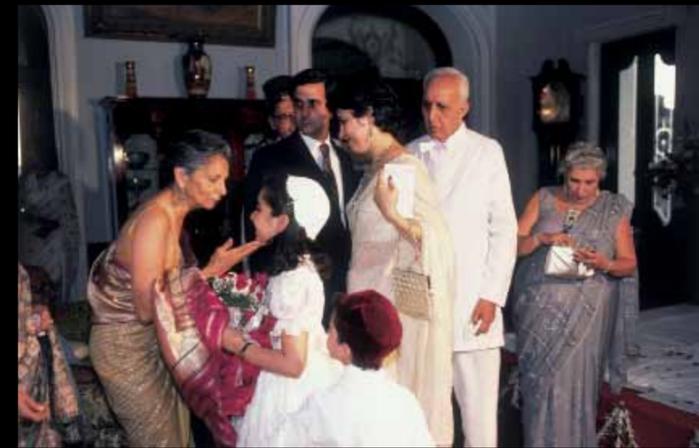
The late Jehangir Ratanji Dadabhai Tata, with maestro Zubin Mehta at the Parsi Panchayat function held to felicitate eminent members of the community. Universally loved and known as JRD, inheritor of the mantle of Jamsetji Tata, chairman of Tata Sons, father of Indian aviation, founder of Air India, believed that "No success or achievement is worthwhile unless it serves the interests of people and is achieved by fair and honest means." Zubin Mehta, a proud Indian and Parsi, always travels with his Indian passport and a bottle of chillies, and is "apro" our Zubin, collectively owned by every Parsi.

Brabourne Stadium, Bombay, 1982
Archival pigment print, black and white
30 x 20 inches
© 1982 Sooni Taraporevala



OCTOBER 25—DECEMBER 20, 2012

CARPENTER CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS, HARVARD UNIVERSITY



LETTER TO SOONI

Miles above the ocean, caught in the airplane cabin's neutral light everyone is shadowless. Continents slip by silently below, and it is difficult to keep track of the time of day. You are nowhere and everywhere. Nobody knows where you came from; everybody knows where you're going to. In such a state of suspension I turn to your Parsi photographs, and there is no immediate shock of recognition. I don't say *these are my people*—although a portrait of my beloved mother is amongst your beautiful photographs; and I don't cry out this is my city—although it is difficult to disentangle the lives of the *bawas*¹ from Bombay.

Being Parsi, for me at least, is a quieter thing. Our festivals do not send us out into the streets; our gods have no public shrines; our faces are rarely seen on Bollywood billboards or on political posters. We Parsis pray in relatively modest, unadorned fire-temples grimed with the smoke of the eternally burning sacred fire. Our walls are hung with pictures of our ancestors and images of the prophet *Zarathustra*. We are connoisseurs of a cultivated domesticity, absorbing our friends into the wider circle of the family and revealing our rare and delicious Indo-Persian cuisine mostly around the family dining table. For a community famous for its cosmopolitanism and its dominance amongst the professions—doctors, lawyers, accountants, businesspeople, journalists, bankers, financiers—we are remarkably attached to the virtues of being at home and making others feel “at home.” The celebrated philanthropy of the Parsis is an extension of their domestic hospitality. *Bhar no dhaiyo né gher no ghaylo* (perfectly gracious to the world, but diabolical at home) is as bad as it gets on the Parsi scale of moral censure.

There are, of course, other Parsi images of other Parsi worlds. In your book of photographs you have portrayed prominent leaders of the Parsi community; you have followed young Parsis to gaudy discos; and you have acknowledged the very wealthy at the racetrack or at *navjots* and *lagans*². But the photographs at Harvard display, in the main, the diurnal, domestic experience of the Parsis. With great sensitivity you capture the way Parsis live out their faith and extend their customary ways of life in unobtrusive rituals that provide a self-sufficient sense of inward composure.

Parsi customs, like Zoroastrian prayers, place great emphasis on performing the rituals of everyday life with rectitude and generosity. The simplest things must be done with sincerity, care, and an abiding concern for others. The image of the lady of the house focused on the fisherwoman shelling prawns on the

back porch reminds me of my Aunt Jali who ran the house and supervised the kitchens. Utterly selfless, her life revolved around the well-being of our family. She would oversee the fisherwoman herself so that no stale shellfish was smuggled into the day's purchase. “No point in being careless in choosing the fish and then blaming others when the family gets food-poisoning, *huh?*” Or take the calm repose in the photograph of your grandmother who is draped in the tropical easy chair turning her beads and saying her prayers. The television is probably blaring, there are most likely loud conversations within earshot, and yet she is quite immersed in praying and quite happy to share the space with a large and busy family.

You have caught not only the privacy of the Parsis but their ability to survive as a shrinking community. There are approximately 90,000 Parsis spread across the world today. Your photographs portray the vulnerability of a distinctive cultural group that strongly believes in the contribution it has to make, and yet struggles to survive its diminishing presence. The complex predicament of Parsi survival haunts the atmosphere of your images: it is present in the tone of evening light that spreads across the work; and you can see it in the musty, unrefurbished apartments in which people live.

All this is true. And yet, there is another perspective in these pictures that cannot be ignored. It is the presence of the city of Bombay (visible in almost every photograph) that provides Parsis with the support they need and offers them a taste of destiny obscured by their declining numbers. For Parsis, beyond their community, are a part of this great chaotic city of several fates and diverse fortunes. As long as there is this magical city by the sea, blessed by its sunsets and evening breezes, there will be Parsis who cast their prayers upon the water and wait until the rays of the sun are absorbed into the wine-dark waves.

Then, it is time to go home again.

Love,

Homi

Homi K. Bhabha
Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of the Humanities in the Department of English
Director of the Humanities Center
Senior Advisor on the Humanities to the President and Provost at Harvard University

¹ Slang for Bombay Parsis.

² Parsi initiation ceremonies and weddings.

