

2001 census in India put Parsis at 69,600. There are some 35,000 or 40,000 additionally, mainly in USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Europe. Population estimates in India expect Parsis to come down to 20,000 by 2020. Apart from the UNESCO sponsored PARZOR (Parsi-Zoroastrian) project which is documenting the old Parsi traditions, there is no international-- nor at any other level-- effort (including within the minuscule community) to reverse the declining population.

This the story of a people, who out of a steadfast love of their identity, religion, beliefs, customs and ancient traditions and much more that goes to forming a people/nation, decided they would rather find refuge in a new land, than give up all that was precious and invaluable to them.

These were the Persian Zoroastrians, who after the debacle of the Sassanid Empire and the victory of the Arab conquerors, found they had lost king and country.

After the defeat of the Sassanid armies at Qadisiyyah in 636 A.D.([link](#)) and at Nehavand in 641 A.D.([link](#)) and the last Sassanid king, [Yezdegerd III](#) murdered in 651 A.D.([see the Conquest of Persia here](#)) the way was open for the Arabs, and the Persian Zoroastrian Empires became a thing of the past. (Very ironically, Yazdegerd's son Pirooz became a very senior general in the Chinese army and was allowed by the Chinese Emperor to maintain a court in exile, a sort of king in exile.-([link](#))

Years of warfare between Sassanids and Byzantines, as well as the strain of the Khazar invasion of Transcaucasia, exhausted both armies. With no effective ruler following Khosrau II, societal chaos, and problems in provincial administration (until Yazdegerd III), the Persian army lost potency. Yazdegerd III lacked experience and didn't try to rebuild the army. ([see fall of the Sassanids here](#))

The Arabs were not inclined in proselytizing for the new Islamic religion amongst what are considered "peoples of the book"- Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians were included, but with some reservations. This is evidenced by the several cases where local Zoroastrian populations were subject to considerable pressure to leave their ancestral faith.

Here is an example from [Islamic conquest of Persia](#) : According to Tarikh-i Bukhara 'The residents of Bukhara became Muslims. But they renounced [Islam] each time the Arabs turned back. Qutayba b. Muslim made them Muslim three times, [but] they renounced [Islam] again and became nonbelievers. The fourth time, Qutayba waged war, seized the city, and established Islam after considerable strife. They espoused Islam overtly but practiced idolatry in secret.'

During the reign of the Ummayyad dynasty, the Arab conquerors imposed Arabic as the primary language of the subject peoples throughout their empire, displacing their indigenous languages. This and the introduction of several enticements of being Muslim(like the new law that a person who becomes Muslim inherits property to the exclusion of the other inheritors who remained Zoroastrian or in other faiths.) Besides, harassment of Zoroastrians and the destruction of Fire Temples increased after more Persians became Muslims. It was a kind of harsh and definitive gesture that any ties with the old faith are fully severed.(there are instances quoted by Prof Mary Boyce in History of Zoroastrianism, for example, of a member of the royal family trampling on fire after conversion to Christianity, this before the Arab conquest.)

By the 8th and 9th century A.D. small bands of Zoroastrians from Zanzan in north-west Iran and Merv in present Turkmenistan (near present day Mary) and a little later from Sari near north east of present Tehran (they would later name their settlement in India as Navsari--new Sari) decided to travel south to Yazd and thence to the Iranian port of Bushire/Hormuz.

Here they finally set sail for India. [History of Parsis](#) to begin a new life in that hospitable land.



THIS [web page](#) IS A MUST READ



The monument at Sanjan to commemorate Parsis landing here in the tenth century A.D.

From the Iranian port of Bushire or Hormuz, the emigrants set sail for the western shores of India, landing at Diu where they sojourned for around 19 years before sailing to the port of Sanjan (named by them later as a recollection of their origin from Zanzan in northern Iran.) The probable date of this final stage of migration is placed at 936 A. D. see [History of the Parsis- arrival in Gujrat](#)

There is a legend, the local king Jadi Rana, a Rajput or Gujrati Prince, indicated his reluctance to accept these newcomers by handing them a large bowl of milk, filled to the brim- a gesture to show his kingdom has no place for more people. The High Priest, who headed the emigrant's deputation to the Prince, dropped some sugar in the milk, to indicate they would so mix with his people without overflowing that bowl !

The Prince was impressed. After taking an agreement from them to adopt the Gujrati language, wear Indian dress, give up their arms and hold religious rituals after dusk (the marriage ceremony, esp.), they were allowed to settle in this small kingdom.

Jadi Rana also allowed them a generous piece of land to build their temple, their first Fire Temple at Sanjan, the sacred fire was consecrated on an auspicious religious day, and still burns today at Udvada, a little to the north of Sanjan.

The early history of these Zoroastrians is centered around their sacred fire, attested by the fact that when invading Muslims from North Gujrat (1400 A.D.) could not be repelled by a combined force of

local and Zoroastrian men (and women!!!), the sacred fire was carried away to the nearby hills of Bahrot, and hidden in the caves there for around 12 years. This sacred Fire then travelled to Bansda nearby, then Navsari where it remained for over 300 years, then Surat and Bulsar, all this to prevent any harmful vicissitudes on the Fire, finally brought to Udvada in 1742, where it still "resides" in a splendid temple to this day. see my post [The Parsees and the Fire Temple at Udvada](#).

After 1400 A.D. more Parsis were leaving Sanjan and settling in other towns of Gujrat and later in Thana to the south,(now a suburb of Mumbai.) By the 15th century Parsis were wealthy enough to send 26 deputations to Iran from 1478 to 1773, twenty-six messengers took questions to Iran and brought back answers from the Zoroastrian priests in Iran.

Their presence in Gujrat was noticed by the great Mogul Akbar, who with his keen desire to know more of other religions, invited the Parsi learned priest from Navsari, the first Dastur Meherji, to learn about Zoroastrianism. Akbar wanted to set up a new syncretic religion he called Din-i-Ilahi, and incorporated the practice of keeping a sacred fire in his palace; he also conferred the honor title of Rana on Dastur Meherji and his descendants, High Priests of Navsari, are still the Meherji Ranas, High Priests of the Navsari Temple.

The first great leader of this community, who were now beginning to take on trade and business, farming, weaving, brokers and other trades, was one Chang Asa (1450-1512), who traded with the newly arrived Portuguese and English. Their growing influence is further attested by the fact that the English ambassador from the court of James I was accompanied to the court of Jehangir, Moghul Emperor, by a deputation of Parsis. They got the English permission from the Emperor to build a factory/trading post in Surat.

Parsis became agents par excellence, for the English, at the new factory at Surat, and later followed them to the newly acquired islands of Bombay.

The first Parsi to arrive in Bombay was Dorabji Nanabhoy (in 1640,) soon after the Portuguese established the town of Bombay. He worked as a manager for the Portuguese. In 1668, when Bombay was given to the British, Dorabji became the tax collector and his family held this position till 1834. After 1668, more and more Parsis came to Bombay from Gujarat and eventually it became the center of the Parsis in the 19th and 20th centuries. The arrival of the Parsis in Bombay coincided with the rule of the British over most of India.

Somehow, the steely determination of this migrant community, by now fully acclimatised in India, continued to steer them, and some of the "firsts" in the country are pioneered by Parsis.....the first docks and shipbuilding, contract for the first tracks, from Bombay to Thana, the first introduction of electricity in the home, electric generation by power of water from the nearby hills, the first cotton mill, steel mill, five star hotel on western standards, first airline, locomotive manufacturing, pioneer in nuclear energy , and a center for scientific research etc. all this spanning a period of atleast two centuries.

[History of Parsis in India](#)

This post is to give some idea how a small community of migrants- a total of some 100,000 at their maximum in the 1940s, and now (1950s onwards) dispersed, with only 69,000 (2000 Indian census) in India, could count so many outstanding individuals from their numbers

Mahatma Gandhi once said "Parsis, in numbers beneath contempt, but in deeds, beyond compare!"

[Famous Zoroastrians](#)

Prominent Zarathushtris



Dr Dadabhoi Naoroji, first Asian member of the British Parliament, followed by two other Parsis, all elected from seats in the United Kingdom. He was one of the founding members of the Congress Party that, with some interruptions has been India's ruling party till now.

Dadabhoi was elected to this Parliament on the 5th of July 1892 , and he spoke there of self rule for India. Dadabhoi was followed by two other Indian Parsi Zoroastrians; Sir Muncherjee Merwanji Bhowanagree and Sir Sorabji Saklatvala.

[Dadabhoi Naoroji link](#)



statue of Sir JJ at the Asiatic Society in Mumbai.

Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, First Baronet, made the Baron of Bombay by Queen Victoria, a great philanthropist, donated for hospitals, schools, Fire temples. trade with China. [link](#). Sir JJ Hospitals, JJ School of Arts, JJ School of Architecture.



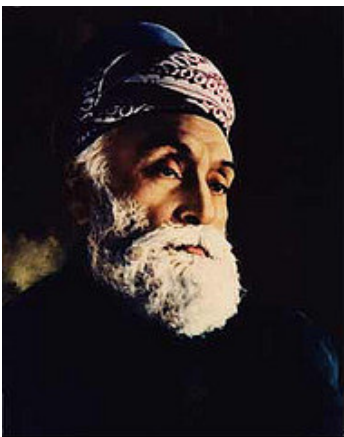
Sir Pherozeshah Mehta, helped to found the Municipal body of Bombay, by presiding over enactment of the Act to run Bombay as a Municipal/civic city. [Pherozeshah Mehta link](#)



Bhikaiji Cama, doyen of female freedom fighters, she designed the Indian national flag and served time in jail for the independence movement. [Madame Bhikaiji Cama link](#)

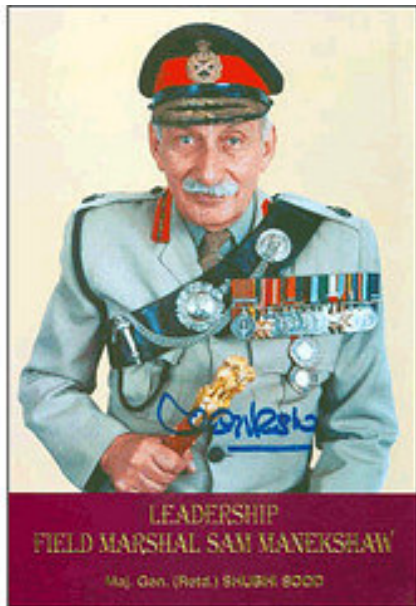


Homi J. Bhabha, nuclear scientist, set up India's nuclear energy infrastructure, [link](#).



Jamsetji Tata, set up a modern textile mill, the first steel mill, 5 star hotel, power generation from water collected in the nearby hills of Mumbai, and founded The Institute of Science at Bangalore; called the Father of Modern Indian Industry. [link-Jamsetji Tata](#)

J.R.D. Tata, started an air postal service from Karachi to Bombay, founded Tata Airlines that became Air-India. [see link](#). Literary, hundreds of Indians have gone to the USA and other western countries on scholarships by the Tata Trusts; Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Tata Cancer Hospital in Mumbai.



Field Marshall Sam Maneckshaw, Sam Bahadur, who planned the liberation of East Pakistan, now Bangla Desh. died on 27th June 2008 [link](#)



Sir Cowasjee Jehanghir, Baronet ; three Parsis, Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, Dinshaw Petit and CJ were created hereditary Baronets by the British crown. Cowasjee Jehanghir and his successors made immense wealth selling or renting their vast land holdings in Bombay. The Jehanghirs went on to finance the Elphinstone College, CJ Art Gallery in Mumbai and Jehangir Hospital in Pune.



late Freddie Mercury (Faredun Balsara) famous as the front man of the Queen band [link](#). In a 2002 poll by the BBC, voted by the public, he was listed as 58th in "100 Greatest Britons." In a Japanese national poll in 2007 he was voted the 52nd "most influential hero." This statue is erected in Switzerland and thousands from across the world gather annually in a memorial service here. Two of his songs have been voted as one of the world's greatest songs by Guinness Book of World Records. "He did for popular music what other Indians, Salman Rusdie and Vikram Seth did for literature."-Time Asia magazine. Unfortunately, his gay orientation did not go well within his community, and his contribution to music goes unrecognised there.



Zubin Mehta, conductor, presently Director of the Bavarian State Opera and conductor for life of the Isreal Philharmonic. [link](#). He wears the Wagner ring, an honour given to great conductors, particularly their interpretation of Wagner's music. He has conducted most of the world's great orchestras. For several years he had the great privilege of conducting the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra on New Years Day Concert, a distinction held by Willie Boskowski, Herbert Von Karajan, Claudio Abbado, Lorin Maazel, and other world's greatest conductors.. [Link](#).

Jamshed Mehta, founder of Karachi Municipal Council and President of this body for 12 years. [link](#).



Late Nani Palkhiwala , in his time India's highest ranking jurist. [see link](#).

Lovji Wadia, Known for his high standards of workmanship, Lovji Wadia secured contracts with the British East India Company to build ships and docks in Bombay in 1736. This, and subsequent efforts, would result in Bombay becoming a strategic port for the British colonial undertakings in Asia.The Bombay dry-dock, the first dry-dock in Asia, was built by Lovji and his brother Sorabji in 1750. [see link](#). Lovji Wadia and six further generations built ships,

amongst these the **Minden**-the American national anthem was composed on this ship..... Later generations of Wadias established top of the line textiles manufacturing, the **Bombay Dyeing** , the best confectionery on european lines, the **Britannia Biscuits Co.**, and also went into Indian film production-**Wadia Movietones**.

Ardeshir "Adi" Ratan Bulsara, is a scientist in the area of nonlinear dynamics. He studied under the Nobel Prize winner Ilya Prigogine. The 2007 International Conference on Applied Nonlinear Dynamics (ICAND), held in Kauai, Hawaii, was a festschrift held in his honor of his 55th birthday. In 2004, Bulsara was elected to Fellow of the American Physical Society (APS) "for fundamental contributions to the theory of nonlinear dynamics and the development of groundbreaking applications in classical, solid and fluid mechanics, neuroscience, and cognitive psychology. [see link](#)

Sir Hormusjee Mody helped with finances to build the University of Hong Kong.
Cowasji Dinshaw built the port of Aden.

Lord Karan Billimoria, first Parsi created a peer in modern times, founder of UK's Cobra Beer.

Ratan Tata, conceptualized and built India's popular cars, the Indica and Indigo, and is present Chairman of Tata Group, see tata.org

Rohinton Mistry, novelist, shortlisted for the Booker prize and has won several awards. [write up on his works in The Atlantic.](#)

Ardeshir and Pirojsha Godrej, household name in India, soaps, safety lockers, steel wardrobes, etc etc!!!

Sir Sohrabji Pochkhana walla, banker, founded or co-founded The Central Bank of India, The Bank of India and The Union Bank of India.

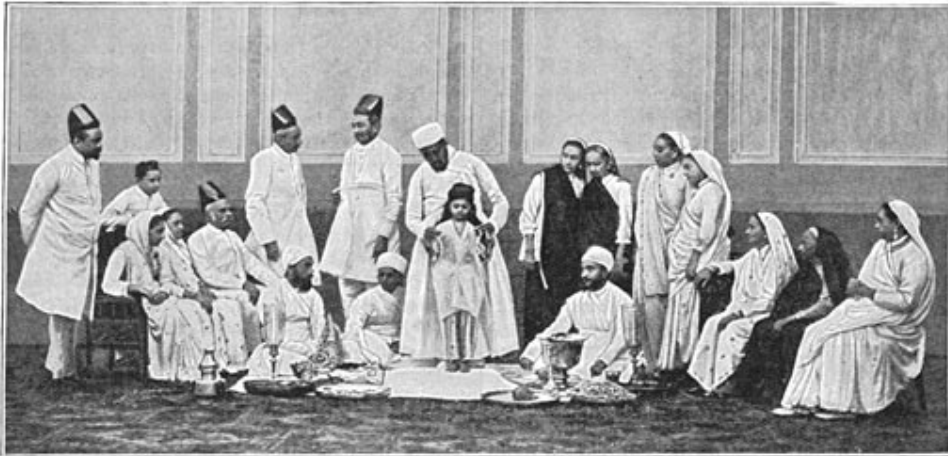
Bomanji Narielwalla, banker, first Indian manager(1930's) of Citibank, at Bombay, then called The First National City Bank of New York.

[Here](#) is a list of famous Parsis.



a late 19th/early 20th century Parsi Sethia (a form of respect.) He wears the pheta, a high top hard headgear covered with black silk; a dugli, full knee length loose coat made of white fine muslin and tied with bows; and dark red silk loose trousers. His side whiskers were a fashion all over the world that time.

late 19th/early 20th century Parsi wedding. Notice the mini-organ on the right corner. Except for the orthodox, Parsis increasingly wore traditional dress only for these occasions.



late 19th/early 20th century Parsi Navjote-initiation into the religion.



late 19th/early 20th century rural small town Parsi wedding, notice the ladies sit at the rear, but traditionally they have always 'ruled' the family.



late 19th century group of priests, the High Priest is seated extreme left.



late 19th/early 20th century ladies, notice the court shoes!!!

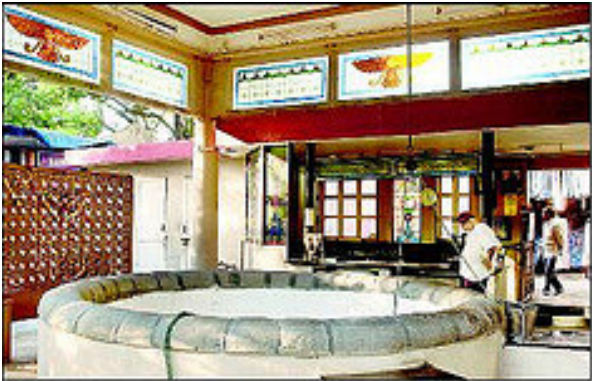


in traditional dress, all women then tied a white cotton cloth fully closing all hair, which was first tied in a bun. Falling hair was considered very unhygienic, just as indisposed cut nails. (chefs throughout the world wear a chef's cap to prevent hair falling in the cooking!!!)



High Priest Dr Dastur Firoze Kotwal. The office of High Priest,

for each of the 8 principal fire temples- (only the great temple at Udvada has 2 High Priests))- or for a region/diocese like Poona or Karachi, is hereditary or an appointment on the basis of the individuals' learning and scholarship. Dastur Kotwal is non-hereditary(?)



water is a sacred element , this well is covered by a sacred enclosure, it is in the heart of south Mumbai, dug in the 18th century.



a small town Fire Temple in Gujrat, western India.



entrance porch of a priest's home in Udvada.



a Parsi enterprise, Tanchoi sarees, named after the 3 (tan) Choi brothers.



another example.



tanchoi saree border.



a Parsi crafts master with traditional work.



traditional saree kor- border.



a Parsi "Ghara" saree, filled with embroidery.



all parsii engine crew!!!



typical small town Parsi home.



and this the Parsi diaspora. Parsis attending a community conference in New York

No story of Parsis can be considered complete without the story of Zoroastrian Iranians(Iranis) who migrated to India from the early 1900s ; they in turn are well known in Bombay/Mumbai for their unique restaurants and bakeries. Here is a blog that has documented their amazing flair for these roadside cafes and bakeries...enjoy [LINK](#).

This post "Parsis The World's Smallest Nation" has attracted some attention on GEC, and for those across the world who would naturally know nothing about Parsis, this addition would help to give more information.

*The Parsis, descendants of Persian Zoroastrians who migrated permanently to India in the 10th century A.D. are a very close knit community, **marrying within the community, because Zoroastrianism, as it evolved over thousands of years, forbid conversion, and a Zoroastrian has to be an offspring of Zoroastrian parents, at least in some "liberal" view, the child of a Zoroastrian father.***

A small community that numbers just 100,000 worldwide.

Parsi Milestones:

Tatas : branch descendants of the High Priest Dastur Meherji Rana of Nav sari who so impressed Akbar, Mogul Emperor, that the latter kept a sacred fire in his palace. Jamshedji Nusserwanjee Tata, a branch descendant of Meherji founded this business and philanthropic family. [genealogy of the Meherji and Tata families.](#)



Tata family with, anti clockwise,...Jamshedji, right seated , his sons Sir Dorab and Sir Ratan, and Ratan Dadabhoy Tata, a cousin, seated left. (the suffix "ji" as in Meher ji or Jamshed ji is a suffix attached to a name as a sign of respect in Indian custom.)



JRD Tata, son of Ratan Dadabhoy, above, founded Air India and many more industrial businesses. (the late JRD was quietly accepted as a Parsi by the orthodox although his mother was French!!!)



Ratan Tata, left, present Chairman of the group, conceptualized the new tata cars, the group is buying Jaguar and Land Rover, and has already acquired Tetley Tea, Corus Steel etc etc [see The Tata Group](#)



Tata Steel, flagship company of the Tatas, plant at Jamshed_pur, Jharkhand State, west of Calcutta/Kolkatta.



Tata Steel, another view.



from Tata Motors, "the Elegante"



Tata Motors, cheap car at US\$ 3000, the Tata Nano.



Mumbai. the flagship hotel of Tatas, the Taj Mahal.



the Tata funded National Centre for the Performing Arts, Mumbai.



interior, the NCPA (see above pic.)



Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai.



Tata Memorial Hospital for Cancer. Mumbai.

a typical housing for Tata employees in Mumbai.

The Petits, pioneers of textile mills in western India.



Petits, Parsi General Hospital., Mumbai, behind the old classical facade is a modern hospital with some free wards for poor Parsis.



Petit Sanatorium, actually a cheap stay-in for Parsis visiting Mumbai. My impression is it is largely unoccupied and in disuse.



The Petit Library, (the entire building houses a library), on the Mahatma Gandhi Road in south Mumbai.

Sir Cowasjee Jehanghir(and descendents), made their wealth through real estate in Mumbai.



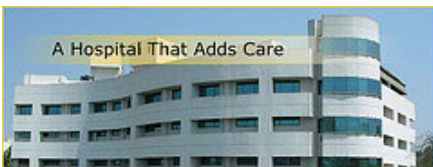
the Elphinstone College, Mumbai, the building funded by Cowasjee Jehanghir family.



another view, Elphinstone College.



Cowasjee Jehanghir Hall now houses the Mumbai chapter of the National Centre of Modern Art.



the Jehangir Hospital, in Pune, named after Jehangir, son of a later Jehanghir baronet, who died in an accident.



artists exhibit throughout the year at the Jehanghir Art Gallery opposite the CJ Hall (shown above.)

Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy, trade with China, created first Baronet of Bombay.

the Jejeebhoy Towers of the Bombay stock exchange.

J J Hospital, Mumbai, original wing.

J J Hospital, new wing, for some decades now the hospital is bequeathed to the State Government.

J J School of Architecture, Mumbai, draws students from all across Asia.

Wadias, shipbuilders, then in various businesses, textiles, confectionery, timber, chemicals etc., a separate branch in film making.



entrance to the Cusrow Baug, a massive subsidized housing for Parsis in south Mumbai.



another view, Cusrow Baug (baug means garden/lawn housing).



entrance to Jer Baug, in central Mumbai. The Wadia baugs would now account in millions of dollars in real estate terms.



an ariel view from GE of the Wadia Colleges in Pune, western India.



Eros cinema, of the best cinema complexes in Mumbai, Eros, then Sterling, Regal, Excelsior, New Empire and many more are/were owned by

Parsis.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN:- since the past 50/65 years.....

Parsis marry late, generally because of an initial reluctance to marry or after finishing post graduation studies; a large number don't marry. Another significant number marry out of the community which means the off-springs are out of bounds of the community and religion-- Zoroastrianism forbids conversion, or marrying out from the community means the off-springs cannot be considered Zoroastrian-Parsis.

In business, industry and enterprise, many Parsis have sold out their business, or given management of their business, to a very large extent, to "non-parsis" leading to a confused image, especially in India, that an enterprise is a Parsi run venture.....if , for example, you tell a Tata employee he is working for a Parsi pioneering enterprise, he just might respond with a confused puzzled look on his face!!!

Parsis, in India or elsewhere around the world, are very conscientious citizens, the term "nation" is used in an ironic and nostalgic way and on account of their very distinct identity.

Precious time is being wasted debating religious issues, mainly relating to treatment of children of parsi-non-parsi mixed parentage, and other disputes between the orthodox and liberals. No solutions are forthcoming, from within or outside the community, to solve the main crying problem of diminishing numbers.



a priest in full "vestments" standing at a temple entrance. And a special thanks to the owner of the photo- beD gNas.

link to my blog: geveandeveryootherthing!!!

photos, courtesy of the owners of these photos, their ownership of these remains fully acknowledged by me, thank you.

Geve Narielwalla