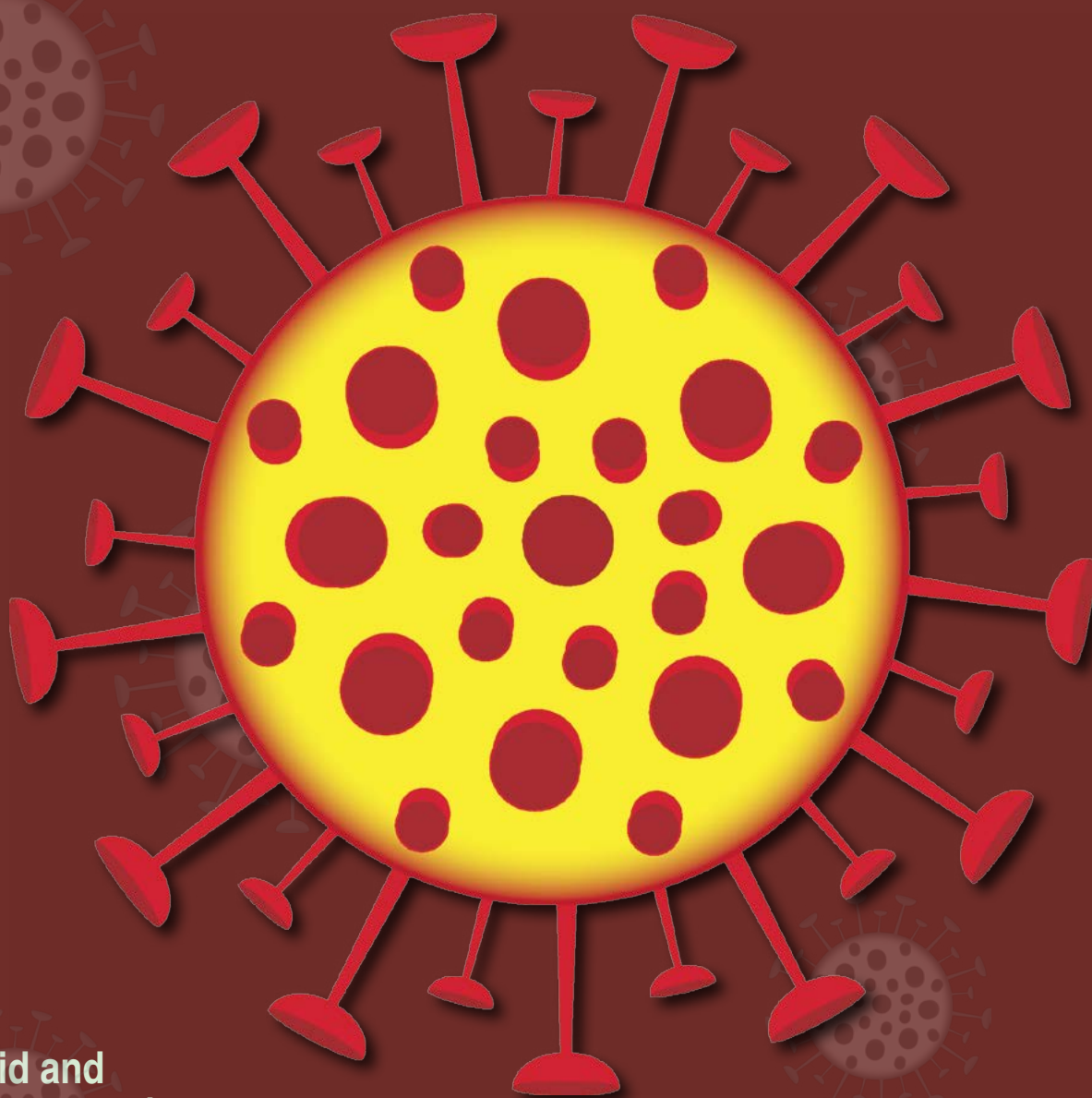
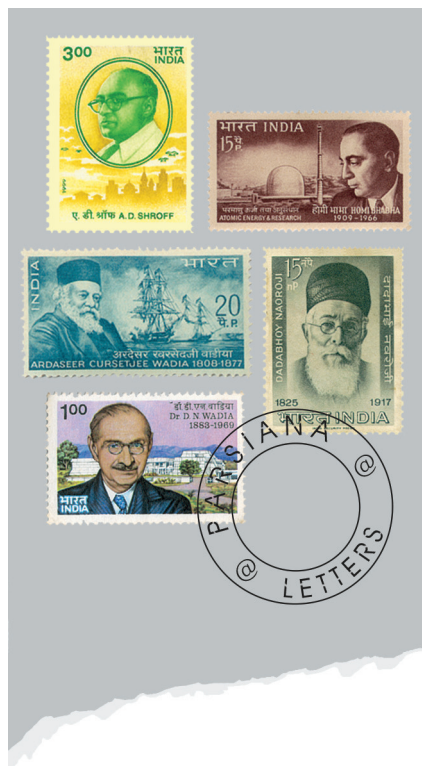


Parsiana

APRIL 7-JULY 6, 2020



Covid and
the community



Readers' views are welcome on any subject of interest to the community and should be sent to the Editor, Readers' Forum, *Parsiana*, either by e-mail to info@parsiana.com or by post at G. P. O. Box 892, Bombay 400001. Letters are subject to editing for reasons of space and clarity. Letters and e-mails must bear the full name and address of the writer.

"A question of survival"

In her article, "A question of survival" (*Parsiana*, March 7-20, 2020), Khorshed Javeri has put into logical, simple, rational and clear words what every Parsi and their friends need to realize. The question remains as to why such an "enlightened community" (in the views of Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi) is so heavily weighed down by the prejudices and closed, narrow minds of some of its members?

NAWSHIR KHURODY
ndkhurody@gmail.com

Khorshed Javeri's "A question of survival" (*Parsiana*, March 7-20, 2020), written from the heart, hits the nail on the head. The misconceptions prevalent in Parsi thought, rituals and behavior have their roots in rural Gujarat where the caste differential determined our space in the societal hierarchy. This continues in the orthodox elements of Bombay Parsis

who are loath to forego this perceived privilege.

We will survive and the truth shall prevail as long as rational and logical thought of the good mind, as espoused by Zoroaster, lives on.

HOMI IRANI

hjirani@gmail.com

"Nariman felicitated"

In the item "Nariman felicitated" (Events and Personalities, *Parsiana*, March 7-20, 2020), Dastur Khurshed Dastoor is quoted as having stated that Justice Rohinton Nariman was the first Zoroastrian priest to occupy a bench of the Supreme Court. This is incorrect.



Justice Dinshaw Pirosha Madon (pictured) was the first Zoroastrian priest to have been elevated to the Supreme Court where he was a judge from March 15, 1983 till his retirement on April 6, 1986. Incidentally, he was also the first Zoroastrian judge of the Supreme Court of India.

DINYAR MADON

dinyarmadon@gmail.com

The editors reply:

Parsiana regrets the error.

"Memoirs of a naturalist"

In the article "Memoirs of a naturalist" (*Parsiana*, March 7-20, 2020) I had made reference to a monkey trespassing in our premises in Bombay. Another incident involving a monkey also deserves mention.

A nomad had captured a baby monkey in order to teach him some tricks. A foreign lady bought this monkey and brought him up in an affluent, comfortable environment. However, six months later she had to return to her home country and it was not possible for her to take the monkey with her.

As my team of ecologists was proceeding on a tour of forests, she requested us to take the simian along and release him in a forest that had a troupe of his own species. On locating such a spot, we tried to release the animal but he refused to go, tightly clinging on to a member of the team. It seemed extremely cruel to leave him in a totally strange environment where the other monkeys might not accept him. Forcibly pushed out, he sat on the bonnet of our Land Rover, begging us not to desert him.

A tea stall owner in the vicinity came to the rescue. We requested him to either keep the animal as a pet or to release him in the forest after some days when he got used to the new environment. However, I strongly suspect that such abandoned primates eventually find their way back to centers of urbanization.

Thoughtless actions by man against nature can play havoc. Snatching a baby animal from his mother is a heinous crime, as is cutting down of forest trees, causing the bats that live in them to move closer to human dwellings. The deadly virus carried by the flying mammals then knocks at the door of human settlements.

Dr V. M. MEHER-HOMJI

"The 'right' priests?"

The Editorial Viewpoint, "The 'right' priests?" (*Parsiana*, February 21-March 6, 2020), makes abundantly clear the effects of early religious conditioning on the minds of the orthodox. It is a wonder how people who can take rational decisions in various aspects of life cannot change where their opinion regarding religion is considered. They simply refuse to listen to any argument which goes against their preconceived notions. Unfortunately, this conditioning comes down through the generations. The orthodox seem to be shackled and chained by their conditioning.

It was heartening to read about Dastur (Dr) Maneckji Dhalla, a man who was steeped in orthodoxy but had the courage to admit that he was wrong after his stint abroad to obtain his doctorate degree. This erstwhile high priest of Karachi who later wrote the classic *Homage Unto Ahura Mazda* had the moral intelligence to realize that orthodox ritualistic religion did not represent the true aspects of Zoroastrianism. Dhalla is known for the lectures he delivered in Bombay and abroad.

One unfortunate incident cited in the editorial is of Dastur (Dr) Faramroz Bode who was ridiculed and heckled during a visit to Bombay. I remember the incident well. An acquaintance I used to meet at Dadar's Rustom Faramna Agiary had asked me to join a bunch of hooligans to heckle Bode. When I refused because such behavior is not in keeping with the principles of Zoroastrianism, he became very annoyed with me. Evidently, he was far gone.

In the same issue one religious tutor states that they don't mind making peripheral changes. I suppose by peripheral changes he means subjective picking and choosing of changes. Take the case of behdin pasbaans. This concept was created only when they could not find mobeds to take care of agiaries in far off places. Until that time no behdin was permitted to perform the duties of a mobed.

It may be asked how, if the conditioning is very deep, can one blame the mobeds or orthodox Parsis? I personally feel one cannot morally lay the blame at their door. What is required to be done to get rid of such conditioning? After all rituals are necessary and mobeds are needed to perform them. It may help if one contemplates the life of Zoroaster who established our religion. Maybe one may change when one learns about the humility, compassion and tolerance of a man who was eons ahead of his time. One may change when one reads about the trials and tribulations he went through before he established this universal religion. But then, this is only my personal opinion.

YAZDI KOHIAR

yazdikohiar@yahoo.co.uk

No justice, no peace

That the politicians and other office-bearers of the world's most powerful country, the United States, and the most vaunted constitution sit impotently watching President Donald Trump and his cohorts destroy both, is chilling. It belies all the security and solace the trustees of the great institutions and edifices of the nation have provided the majority of its citizens who have taken them hitherto at face value.

Now, even if only briefly — until it is likely snuffed out by state power, just as Afro-American George Floyd's breath was by the police in Minneapolis — it is the ordinary people who have emerged as the true leaders and upholders of values, ideas and institutions that need not be enshrined in historic documents such as the constitution nor reside in towering, awe-inspiring governmental monuments and apparatuses to attain an iota of legitimacy.

Fundamental ideas and ideals of humanity — universal fairness, justice, liberty, equality — need not be inscribed in fancy verbiage on historic parchments in the halls of government. They are more permanently etched and inscribed in the hearts and minds and souls of all human beings who, for that reason, rise in unison against any abrogation

of those immutable ideas and aspirations. For them, the rococo writings on parched palimpsests in the Halls of Congress and other co-equal nodes of governance matter less than the greater truth in graffiti

“Snatching a baby animal from his mother is a heinous crime, as is cutting trees, causing the bats that live in them to move closer to human dwellings”

Dr V. M. MEHER-HOMJI

spray-painted on a wall, shining bright, as the sun itself, in this otherwise benighted country: No justice, no peace.

ZEND LAKDAVALA

Las Vegas, USA

zocrateszend@yahoo.com

Scylla's silent succor

For me, Scylla Vatcha's passing away on March 17, 2020 is like the end of an era. She was one of the most inspiring women that it was my good fortune to know. Her brother, Nowshir Jungalwalla, was my aunt Piloo Nanavutty's husband. He was the only son of the family and greatly loved by his four sisters.

It was after the tragic death of my father, Dr K. A. J. Lalkaka, the psychiatrist, in a hit and run incident at Marine Drive on March 17, 1969 that I came in closer touch with her. She would very unobtrusively check on my welfare, often inviting me to her lovely home for tea. She would enquire about my numerous activities at Elphinstone College and I would enthusiastically launch into a discussion of my favorite subject — ancient Indian art and culture. She would listen attentively to my chatter and was always very encouraging. I once mentioned that I was saving to buy Heinrich Zimmer's *The Art of Indian Asia* in two volumes, as it was quite expensive; Rs 300 was a princely sum in those days! As I was leaving she slipped an envelope into my hands and told me to buy the books. I have never felt so grateful to anyone as I did to Scylla that day! Every time my eye falls on this work I look back in time to the excitement of going to Strand bookstore to buy it and

the thrill of holding the two-volume set in my hands.

Years later, when my aunt Naja Nanavutty lay dying of cancer at The B. D. Petit Parsee General Hospital (PGH), Scylla stood by us and was a tower of strength to my mother, Preen Lalkaka, and to me. She saw to it that Naja masi (maternal aunt) got the best treatment possible.

At PGH I met many poor Parsis and was saddened by their tales of woe. One gentleman in particular seemed to be worse off than the Biblical character Job and I was moved enough to visit him in his house in Andheri. God seemed to have abandoned him altogether! I rushed to Scylla and begged her to do something for him. She said she would look into the matter and a few days later told me that she had given him some monetary assistance. “But,” she said gently, “he has been getting a lot of money from innumerable charitable trusts.” I was quite taken aback and, without being lectured to, learnt a valuable lesson about human nature.

In the true spirit of Zarathushtra, Scylla silently came to the aid of a countless people. She will be sorely missed and remembered for generations to come for her dedicated service to the poor and needy.

ABAN MUKHERJI

mukherji.aban@gmail.com

Respect nature

Please respect our universe. We humans thought we were more powerful and could conquer any part of this world and other planets as well. But the tiniest invisible form of life, the coronavirus, seems to be controlling us right now. Where has our so-called power gone?

We have given mother earth a lot of pain by use of plastics, harmful chemicals and pesticides, to mention just a few examples. So, in return, we get deadly viruses. Humans must learn a lesson from this. We must conserve our water resources, maintain fresh air by growing more trees and taking care of birds and animals. If we respect nature, our planet will be a much better, healthier place to live on.

Zoroaster's core teachings include the threefold path of asha: humata, hukhta and huvarshata which mean good thoughts, good words and good deeds. These are the key to a good life.

JASMINE M. BARIA

Surat

jasbaria@yahoo.co.in

continued on page 30

In his service - II

Berjis Desai

(On his way to perform a navjote, a fifth generation mobed dies of dehydration in a forest; just like his father who perished young in eerily identical circumstances. Successive personal tragedies did not deter this impoverished family from serving the holy fire with passion.)

Darkness appears intense at dawn. In a span of 40 years, there were sudden deaths of four young people in this priestly family, at the ages of 44, 42, 36 and 24. Sufficient to turn even the most devoted into cynics and sceptics. Near starvation level poverty made matters worse. And yet, each survivor, without exception, battled fate with a smile.

The stoic matriarch, widowed at 32, was devoid of the slightest bitterness. Barely literate, just enough to write a five-paise-stamp bearing postcard to her four daughters, married into middle class families in Bombay, Surat and Bharuch, she retained her unflinching faith in the holy fire throughout her long life of 84 years. This steadfastness was transmitted to her surviving children. And then, His blessings started to materialize.

Each of the four daughters had long and steady marriages with understanding husbands and loving in-laws. Each bore two children, all of whom imbibed the family values of humility, thrift, hard work and frugality. The Gujarati medium of instruction in Navsari schools notwithstanding, these children began to scale heights.

One is a rank holding chartered accountant who prospered in Kuwait. The others include a top level management official in a leading British bank; an award winning surgical healthcare worker in a celebrated hospital in Boston; and a software genius in the hospitality industry

in Toronto.

None forgot their native Navsari. Every alternate year they visited their grandmother who lived in a small and modest house in one of the congested mohallas of Navsari, continually bleeding its Parsi ethos, now brutally cosmopolitan.

The story of the three children of the young lady who had succumbed to leptospirosis is even more remarkable.

Their father continued the family tradition of priesthood by serving lifelong as a mobed in the Navsari fire temple. His meager earnings could not even ensure daily bread for his two girls and a boy. As in the case of their aunts, the Bai Avabai Framji Petit Girls' High School at Bandra would make ladies out of the sisters. Their brother, barely three, was a different story. He was placed in a tiny

makeshift orphanage at Nargol, a kilometer away from the beach connecting it to Udvada and Valsad. This writer has witnessed firsthand, along with many others, the boy cheerfully conversing with his unseen mother at dusk, when dim bulbs were lit. The mother was guarding her youngest orphan from some astral plane.

The Dadar Athornan Madressa took over soon. A group photo of the Madressa students, in 1968-69, shows this little boy sitting in the front row, smiling. He grew to be a fully ordained priest and is now a panthaky in a south Gujarat agiary. Ensnared in the love of his sisters, aunts, father and grandmother as also countless others who spontaneously helped him, he continues to experience the protective aura of his mother and, of course, the many holy fires he and his forefathers served. Bombay Parsis on a day trip to the Navsari Atash Behram visit the sanatoria, called baugs, to bathe and eat. The young priest and his highly accomplished wife, also from a Navsari priestly family, managed one of these baugs to great acclaim. The guests often wondered how the couple managed to serve such delicious repasts for a fraction of Bombay prices.

Their son, also a fully ordained priest from the Madressa, is today an investment banker with a leading foreign bank. His sister stood third at the S.S.C.E. exams in the state of Gujarat. Her mother politely told the Press and television crews who swarmed into their one-room tenement in Navsari not to photograph the family, as they did not want any publicity. The girl continued her stellar career and is about to commence practice as a super specialist dentist.

No fancy education, no tuitions and special classes, no nutritional supplements, no extra-curricular facilities. Yet, such stellar performance! Navsari has seen many such miracles in the lives of those in His service.

Berjis Desai, author of *Oh! Those Parsis* and *The Bawaji*, occasionally practices law.



Illustration by Farzana Cooper

Covid concern

While caring for their own, Zoroastrians in the diaspora have also been assisting their local populace and others

Parinaz M. Gandhi

When congregation became impossible, connectivity proved crucial. For Zoroastrians in the diaspora, the lockdown period necessitated the use of electronic gadgets and software to stay globally connected and informed. From North America to Australia, associations and individuals rallied to assist the less fortunate. An appeal for help from community members in Iran resulted in co-religionists from across the globe coordinating to rush them supplies. Initiatives by thoughtful associations ensured there was a steady supply of food/medicines for the elderly members living alone. Sustained efforts were also made by Zoroastrians in India, Pakistan, the UK, North America, Hong Kong, Australia and Singapore to render aid to their local populace.

Solace was additionally offered through religion. Jashan prayers were recited by priests in isolation at the local dar-e-mehers. Prayers for Ava and Adar paravs as also rituals for other important days in the Zoroastrian calendar were either relayed on Zoom or via YouTube to encourage the community to pray together. Religion classes, annual general meetings (AGM), as also committee meetings over Zoom became routine.

After writing to associations in March/April and seeking updates in the second week of June, *Parsiana* has been able to collate a global account:

Pakistan

"We have advised all the colonies which are under the control of the Karachi Parsi Anjuman Trust Fund (KPATF) to follow social distancing but somehow the residents don't understand the gravity," regretted chairman Byram Avari who was concerned that some positive cases are emerging in the community.

A circular from the chairman and trustees of the KPATF sent to every apartment to accentuate this mandatory

distancing stated, "Please refrain from getting together either in each other's homes or on the benches or staircases of the Parsi Anjuman Baugh, Jamshed Baugh and Ghari Khata for a quick get-together or to share a drink/meal. Please also restrict your kids from doing the same. Social distancing is of utmost importance as we do not know if we are carriers of Covid-19... You are putting others at risk apart from yourself. We care also for our senior citizens hence we look forward to your serious cooperation."

Expecting the situation in Pakistan to take a long time to resolve "unless we as a country and our political leadership take drastic actions," Avari stated that five of their Avari group of hotels (two in Multan, one in Faisalabad, one in Islamabad and another 210-room hotel in Lahore) "have been closed down by us for lack of business and to reduce energy and other costs. As done by us during the 9/11 days... and the last worldwide downturn, we have sent 3,000 staff home but with full pay. This is an unbelievable burden for us which will continue till this pandemic is resolved."

Iran

Currently the Iranian government has cautiously permitted the reopening of most government offices, religious places and public businesses although the health ministry continues to stress on strict social distancing, quarantine rules, etc, responded Mobed Mehraban Firouzgary on June 8,

Prof Zubin Sethna volunteers for food delivery in the UK

2020 when *Parsiana* sought to ascertain the global impact of the coronavirus on the community. The Federation of Zarthoshty Anjumans of Iran, obeying the edicts of the Council of Iranian Mobeds, "stopped some recent attempts to reopen sports grounds attached to prayer halls and even the pilgrimage to our popular Pir e Chak Chak, the annual season for which is approaching," he added.

"During March and April, our community in Iran lost nine behdins," stated the senior priest. While nearly 50 Zoroastrians were afflicted by the virus, "mainly from close-knit families and those who had attended sports events... almost all have recovered or are convalescing thanks to the medical assistance from our Parsi brethren," appreciated Firouzgary.

Trying to resume their activities, the website *Berasad.com* invited Zoroastrian children aged five to 12 to participate in the Zoroastrian Virtual Music Festival by sending in video entries until July 26.

United Kingdom

"The Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe (ZTFE) Zartoshty Brothers Fund played a vital role, together with Dr Shernaz Cama of UNESCO PARZOR, our honorary life member Dr Cyrus Poonawalla of the Serum Institute of India, Dr Yousuf Hamied of Cipla, our patron Lord Karan Bilimoria, Homa Zartoshty and the Federation of Zoroastrian Associations of North America (FEZANA) president Homi Gandhi, in donating ventilators, accessories and medicine, which were airlifted in the last week of March from

Delhi to Tehran for the Shahid Sadoughi University Medical Hospital, Yazd, to help Iranians, including Zoroastrians, infected by Covid-19," reported ZTFE president Malcolm Deboo.

Keen to help their co-religionists, the ZTFE initiated a fund-raising venture realizing, "We in the UK are blessed with the NHS (National Health Service), sadly Iran isn't and Covid-19 has hit our



Zoroastrian community disproportionately in Yazd,” pointed out Deboo.

Yet another fund-raising drive was initiated by ZTFE and FEZANA for the Masina Hospital that had appealed for funds to treat Covid-19 patients in specially erected Porta Cabins as these units are called, to be used by patients and the medical personnel attending to them.

“Sadly self-isolation has also left many of our senior citizens worried about how to cope,” pointed out Deboo. The Care in the Zoroastrian Community (CZC) core team with its motto “No one should feel alone!” is determined to encompass all those in need. “For older people without family in the vicinity (some no family at all), this means that they find themselves without provisions or food. The CZC team (in partnership with Rangrez — an Indian restaurant run by Harman Singh Kapoor, as well as other such providers in the UK) has mobilized a “fresh food drop” service to those who truly need it. So far, 20 vulnerable people across the whole of the UK (not just in London) have had freshly cooked food delivered, free of charge, to their homes every two days by a small team of volunteer ‘delivery’ drivers,” reported CZC volunteer Prof Zubin Sethna who along with other community members has been working with Kapoor to deliver meals to individuals, care homes and hospitals. The CZC core team appreciates the donations (financial as well as uncooked food) that have also come in from the wider Zoroastrian community to support this cause.

Fortunately, the CZC team with volunteers from the Zoroastrian Senior Citizens Care Home subcommittee, Z Club, Young Zoroastrians and Fun Club has built up a social network to assist senior citizens who may need to talk, keep in touch or help with their groceries. Contact was established with more than 300 ZTFE members, over 65 years old, to ensure that they were safe and well, and to enquire if they needed assistance with collection of medication, delivery of food parcels, or if they’d appreciate a weekly ‘check-in’ telephone call. “The demand is growing as is the appreciation from those we reach out to,” conveyed Sethna. Unable to convene their annual “Together Old and Young Zoroastrians” event this year, ZTFE initiated “Penpal

Zoros” — where pairs of inter-generational Zoroastrians (one above 60, the other below 12) will be matched and invited to write to each other.

“Places of worship in the UK will be open for private worship from June 15, but not for ceremonial worship until July 7,” clarified Deboo, adding, “The ZTFE managing committee is in discussion about community activities in the coming months.” Meanwhile, “Our resident priest Ervad

Yazad Bhadha at the Zoroastrian Centre daily invokes names of those who are unwell, while reciting the *Doa Tando-rasti* benedictory prayers.” On important hamkaras, they arranged for the boi ritual followed by a hambandagi to be screened live on YouTube. “Some volunteers have managed to use technology to enable our older people to listen to the recent live prayer broadcasts by Ervads Bhadha, Jimmy and Fali Madon which brought a lot of much-needed calm and solace,” added Sethna.

While fund-raising efforts for deserving causes will continue, realizing that “as a charitable organization we need to consider and preserve our finances and trust monies carefully,” the managing committee decided to place some of their staff on furlough leave from June 1, 2020. “The office of the ZTFE secretariat will remain closed for the foreseeable future,” they announced.

North America

The FEZANA AGM 2020 that was to be hosted by the Sacramento Zoroastrian Association from May 1 to 3, 2020 was rescheduled as an online event on June 20, conveyed president elect Arzan Wadia. The 18th North American Zoroastrian Congress that was to be held in Houston

in December 2020 will now be held in 2024. The 17th Zoroastrian Games that were to be held in Washington in the summer of 2020 have been deferred to the summer of 2021.

“At times like these, it is important for our community members to come together in prayers to draw strength and courage, to bring hope and light and to stand in solidarity with the world population; specially the ones that are affected by the virus, their care-givers and medical professionals who provide selfless service to our communities,” noted a communiqué from the North American Mobeds Council (NAMC) assuring help to “anyone who needs our services.” Zoroastrians were urged to unite in prayers at the change of each gah.

Following the change of FEZANA office bearers in end June, they will initiate a series of monthly talks and discussion forums online with a focus on the youth. “FEZANA member associations have been hosting a lot of collaborative events” like their religion classes to get a bigger turnout and to benefit from different teachers, noted Wadia.

The Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York (ZAGNY) initiated its annual general meeting online. “We had over 70 members who all joined in for the 90-minute meeting that we did over gotomeeting.com and it turned out very well,” Wadia had conveyed earlier.

Further, the ZAGNY board has been meeting over video conferencing calls, has been continuing its *Gatha* classes live on Zoom every alternate Sunday, the ZGoldies group has their monthly meeting on Zoom with virtual Bingo games. The funds raised from those games will be donated to ZAGNY.

“Personally I know of at least four

Religion class teachers in New York coordinate on Zoom

The motto “No one should feel alone!” is to encompass all those in need



or five Zarathushtis in the Greater New York area who have been affected by coronavirus. Two of them had to be hospitalized, but are back on their way to full recovery. They are all young adults, so the recovery was quicker,” stated Wadia. “The only person who I have heard about, who passed away from coronavirus (as yet) is Viraf Darukhanawala of Chicago.”

ZAGNY members were part of a live event, “Soothe The Soul,” organized by FEZANA, where Ervads Pervez Patel, Cyrus Pavri and Porus Pavri recited prayers with translations while Mani Rao sang monajats. Over 360 people tuned in from all over the world to watch the event.

Since visits to dar-e-mehers are not permitted, devotees can now Zoom in at the assigned time for prayers, maachis, Sunday School sessions. The Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington, Inc (ZAMWI) has introduced a weekly “Community Chat” beginning March 30 when every Monday between 8-8:40 p.m. members are welcome to interact with the ZAMWI board and share ideas to make the “community stronger and more connected.”

The Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Chicago has formed a special Covid-19 Task Force aimed at supporting “the most vulnerable members of our community with the help they need, and ultimately reducing the risk of exposure within our small but resilient community.” Besides conducting telephonic wellness checks, volunteers will assist those who do not have the facilities by carting provisions and medications. “Sometimes just a 15-minute conversation can bring joy to someone’s life! Now is the time to show you care, to be a Zarathushti, and call on your fellow community members who you think may be in need,” advised their newsletter.

Team Masketeers in Houston have been busy stitching and supplying home-made masks to hospitals. Others have been participating in 24-hour prayer vigils. “To accommodate the spiritual needs of our community, we are accepting maachi requests, which will be conducted remotely via Audio or FaceTime,” notes their newsletter. Boi ceremony and humbandagi were streamed via Zoom from the Bhandara Atash Kadeh.

The Zoroastrian Association of Hou-

ston CARES (Crisis Action Response) team has assured support realizing that “lifestyles are changing and depression can set in even before you realize it.” Members are reminded that “self-help

“Sometimes just a 15-minute conversation can bring joy to someone’s life!”

books on how to be happy flourish, and products to reduce anxiety and sadness are constantly marketed. And no wonder that Google has a ‘Chief Happiness Officer,’ and Yale University’s most popular course is ‘The Science of Being Happy’ taken by a million students so far and even offered online. Instead of working hard at being happy, let us just be grateful for the many blessings we still have.”

Houston real estate developer Feroze Bhandara offered the hospital premises that he owns for use in these times of Covid-19 isolation. Originally the Westbury Community Hospital, it functioned as the Hopebridge Mental Hospital from 2010-2017 until Hurricane Harvey caused the building to be flooded.

Convinced that laughter is the best medicine, the Toronto Parsi Drama Group of the Ontario Zoroastrian Community Foundation planned “*mastimaja* (fun) without corona,” by arranging for a viewing of the 2018 recorded version of the play *Madan Ni Mansik Hospital* for 24 hours starting 7 p.m. on April 18 on YouTube. On April 21, using YouTube Livestream they broadcast Atash nu parav prayers from their Darbe Mehr. The Zoroastrian Society of Ontario hosted an online Quiz Night on April 12 using the Zoom platform.

Australia

The current pandemic resulted in the Business Association of Western Australian Zoroastrians (BAWAZ) to hold their first monthly meeting on Zoom in April. They decided “to meet every Wednesday now on Zoom, just to keep in touch with our committee and other members also,” reported president Firoz Pestonji. “By keeping communication lines open and supporting them morally,” BAWAZ repeatedly coaxed members not to move out of their homes and to keep in touch on phone and WhatsApp instead.

BAWAZ would have liked to send funds for the Zoroastrians in Iran but could not do so “due to the delay in news reaching us. By the time we got in touch, material had been dispatched to Yazd,”

stated Pestonji. But locally, they extended financial support to the Federation of Indian Associations of West Australia, an umbrella body of almost 60 Indian centric associations that has been daily providing over 100 free vegetarian meals to international students, mainly Asian, who were stranded in Perth plus over 50 meals to elderly people in lockdown. Earlier the Zoroastrian Association of Western Australia had provided financial assistance to the Red Cross in its work for Covid-19.

The heads of Australian and New Zealand associations convened a Zoom meeting on April 13 “to discuss points for finalizing the constitution by-laws, etc” for the proposed Federation of Australian Zoroastrian Associations, added Pestonji.

Although inter-state movement was not permitted even in mid June, most states were permitting gatherings of up to 100 individuals while maintaining social distancing and other norms. Restaurants, pubs and travel sites are gradually opening but international travel is expected to resume only end of the year unless there is an emergency, noted Pestonji.

Hong Kong and Singapore

After discontinuing all activities of the Zoroastrian Charity Funds of Hongkong, Canton and Macao from February to May due to Government guidelines on social distancing, the trustees have announced a couple of gahanbars in June. Convinced that “strict social distancing” is the need of the hour “as one just doesn’t know who is going to be the next victim,” president Neville Shroff stated, they were “fully committed to the health, safety

continued on page 27

Relief efforts undertaken in Singapore



Coping in times of Covid

The pandemic that shut down much of the world did not deter Good Samaritans from assisting their brethren

Farrokh Jijina

Despite the hardships people faced due to the national lockdown imposed since March 25, 2020, individuals and anjumans assisted community members and others to cope with the challenges the confinement posed. Some helped the elderly and housebound with cooked food and groceries, others eased loneliness with phone calls. Some provided succor to migrant workers and the marginalized while others used social media to keep their community upbeat and connected. *Parsiana* spoke to representatives from 11 anjumans with sizable community members to compile this all-India report.

Among the individuals who are serving the needy of sister communities, perhaps Khushroo Poacha of Nagpur leads the pack. The full-time railway employee is a social worker by conviction. With Facebook and a fund-raising platform, the social entrepreneur has mobilized donors to contribute over 1,23,000 food packages (estimated at Rs 90.38 lakhs by him) containing staples for those unable to access food, he stated. "The Parsis of Abu Dhabi contributed an equivalent of Rs 11.50 lakhs," he said, adding his appreciation of Nagpur Parsis who contributed Rs 1.25 lakhs. His network of 30 volunteers, banded together under "Seva

Kitchen," has reached out to thousands of stranded migrants, brick kiln workers, tribals and the malnourished around Nagpur in Yeotmal, Melghat and Pandavkavda. Poacha's volunteer network was roped in by a nongovernmental organization and a cookie manufacturer to distribute buttermilk, water and biscuits to migrants passing through the city's railway station. Geographically, Nagpur is in the center of the country and most east-west and north-south trains ferrying migrant workers to their home towns pass through that city.

From food supplies to assisting in social causes was a short leap for Poacha. "We got the daughter of one beneficiary of our food parcels (who committed suicide due to poverty) married and helped her settle down with basic necessities in her new home," he told *Parsiana* on June 9. Appreciation for his work has come from both beneficiaries and well-wishers: one migrant worker helped by Poacha's network named her newborn baby Seva! India's Swachh Bharat Mission called him a "Supply Warrior" on their social media platform while union railway minister Piyush Goyal tweeted his appreciation of Poacha's work.

Having been made aware of his efforts and his four-year-old

welfare initiative, Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray phoned Poacha on April 7. "*Aap bahut achha kaam karté ho* (you are doing very good work)," the politician told the social entrepreneur. "I was awe struck...I was only doing what I thought was right," the normally reticent Poacha told us shortly after that call. The politician queried him about difficulties his volunteers were facing in the distribution of food and told him, "*Aap ko jo bhi chahiye* (Whatever you need), please keep in touch with the (state) principal secretary."

"We are connecting those who need help with those who can assist," Bombay Parsi Punchayet (BPP) trustee Kersi Randeria told *Parsiana* about their helpline set up on March 29. There have been 1,013 calls, including repeats, for aid as of June 10, Randeria explained. Assistance with "cooked food, groceries, medicines... these were the kind of requests we got," said the trustee. Calls received at two designated phone numbers manned by BPP staffers were forwarded to the volunteer group of the area where the caller resided. Such groups were formed in "almost all colonies," confirmed Randeria. Volunteers also assisted in case of calls received from nearby localities outside the colonies. "During the first two days, calls were mainly to enquire how the trust could



(Clockwise from above) Nagpur's Khushroo Poacha: "I was only doing what I thought was right;" Seva Kitchen volunteers at the city railway station; Poacha (in red shirt) supervising team at station

assist them,” the trustee said, adding that “one lady even requested for the delivery of a pumpkin, yellow, not too soft!” The background work involved

“We are practicing social distancing, but not social isolation”

getting police passes to facilitate the travel of volunteers.

Approximately 20 volunteers drawn from Zoroastrian areas and colonies supplied about 6,000 meals between May 4 and June 10, when the service was stopped due to easing of movement restrictions. Those who could afford to were encouraged to pay for the meals. “Of the 190-200 meals supplied during the last 10 days, 45 were paid for,” Randeria told us on June 10. “This may seem like a small effort, but the food service was hugely appreciated,” he said.

Bands of volunteers were formed to assist families of those who may have tested positive for Covid-19. “Our volunteers will also be checking on the psychological health of the patient or family as we know these can be very trying times,” stated a BPP circular.

The welfare associations, managements and volunteers of most residential colonies made arrangements to supply their tenants and homeowners with basic necessities so that they would not have to step out into markets when open (see “Covid and the colony,” Events and Personalities, pg 13).

The residential seminary Dadar Athornan Institute sent off its students to their respective homes before the



lockdown. “I messaged the parents to come and collect their wards by March 22,” principal Ervad (Dr) Ramiyar Karanjia told *Parsiana* in early April. “We are looking forward to receiving updated government guidelines for boarding schools,” he told us on June 10. The principal keeps the parents of his students updated with information on academic matters received from The Dadar Parsee Youths Assembly High School where the priests-in-training get their non-religious education. “Online classes may start in mid-to-end June,” he hoped, looking forward to opening the doors of the Institute to boarders by August this year.

Fire temples had to keep their doors closed but boi ceremonies were held regularly, stated the priests and anjuman leaders *Parsiana* spoke to. All atash behrams, agiaries and dadgahs in Bombay and New Bombay have been supplied with kathi during the lockdown period by at least two suppliers, stated a few practicing mobeds. Farrokh Govadia of H. Sidhwa and Company that supplies the wood confirmed to *Parsiana* on June



Volunteers of the Bombay Parsi Panchayet distributing food items to the housebound: “hugely appreciated”

10 that he has adequate stocks. He normally keeps stocks for a year, “*sukavva maaté* (to dry the freshly cut wood)” but said “*havé maal ochho aavsé* (now there will be less supplies)” as no baval trees were cut during the lockdown.

The Surat Parsi Panchayat (SPP) started a helpline a few days after the BPP did. Calls were largely from families in need of cooked food which was provided gratis, said SPP chairman Jamshed Dotivala. The quarterly assistance for the deserving provided by the Panchayat was enhanced by an additional Rs 1,800 for Surat residents and Rs 600 for those outside the city. The residents of the Surat Parsi Orphanage for boys and the Nariman Parsi Girls’ Orphanage returned to their homes, while the SPP’s Nariman Home (infirmery) continued to care for its long term residents. None of the senior citizens went back to their homes, said Dotivala.

Participation increased when jashans, prayers for the departed and social events at the Delhi Parsi Anjuman (DPA) went online, noted their president Ava Khullar. “At a recent uthamna ceremony conducted in our Anjuman hall there were 50-60 participants online, (with) friends and relatives from out of Delhi and abroad joining in. Normally the immediate family and close friends would number much less,” she wrote. DPA vice president Adil Nargolwala informed *Parsiana* on June 15 that “during the lockdown



Keeping the residents of colonies well stocked: views from Cusrow Baug

Fire temples had to keep their doors closed but boi ceremonies were held regularly



noted.

“Soothing frayed nerves”

“We practiced social distancing, but not social isolation,” said Jehangir Bisney, trustee of the Parsi Zoroastrian Anjuman of Secunderabad and Hyderabad. With the help of their local community directory and volunteers, they identified elderly couples and singles who had little support. “Some proactive youngsters took on the responsibility to check on the elders to ensure that their basic essentials and medicine stocks are regularly replenished,” he noted. Those living outside the three colonies in the city “were kept in touch with over the phone and we

provided them with whatever necessary and possible help we could.” Adding that he has personally identified such persons, Bisney said “a phone call to each one of them once in a while went a long way in soothing frayed nerves... We did well. The Anjuman office is now functioning regularly with employees maintaining social distancing to the extent possible. Life is slowly coming back to ‘normal!’” he updated us early June.

Dinshaw Tamboly, who heads the WZO (World Zoroastrian Organisation) Trust Funds that runs three senior citizens’ homes in Navsari, commented that “the residents were all very cooperative” in following the instructions regarding restricted movements. “We wholeheartedly acknowledge that senior citizens who have walked before us have given so much to society and made possible the life we enjoy,” he observed. “In spite of the lockdown all staff members reported for duty, for which the centers’ administration requested for special permission from the authorities.” He added that the Navsari Samast Parsi Zoroastrian General Fund distributed around 400 packets of essential items (oil, wheat, pulses, rice, tea, sugar) to poor Zoroastrians in that South Gujarat city on March 30.

Tamboly, who is also trustee of the Worli Prayer Hall adjacent to the Bombay Municipal Corporation run electric cre-

there was a worry about scarcity of firewood for our Dar-E-Meher. Our head priest Ervad Cawas Bagli came to my farm to cut logs from a fallen tree and took some in his own car to tide over. The rest



was then sent later by truck. We donated over three tons of wood.” Since they could not hold their Navroz and annual gahanbar, talks on wellness, a meditation session and quiz programs took center stage. Ashdeen Lilaowala, Feroza Jassawala, Kainaz Engineer of the DPA social center “are not letting lockdown blues dampen their spirits,” stated the president. Rustom’s, the Parsi eatery that serves as the canteen of their Mengusi Dharamshala, has opened its kitchen for take-aways, she wrote on June 10. The president said that no fresh bookings were taken for rooms at the Dharamshala but long-term residents were looked after during the lockdown by the permanent staff staying on the premises. Nargolwala told *Parsiana* that three doctors involved in Covid care at nearby hospitals were lodged at the Dharamshala currently. He added the guesthouse had also accommodated “12 medical students but currently as institutions are closed they have gone to their hometowns.”

Community members kept in touch with seniors. “Most managed well,” Khullar said. The Anjuman helped sports historian and commentator Novy Kapadia, who is ill and unable to move, by getting his caregivers access passes to reach Kapadia’s home. Canine friends were not forgotten. “We have two warm hearted animal lovers, Shernaz Italia and Frenny Khodaiji who live in Connaught Place and for years have been feeding over 200 stray dogs there... This number has now grown to 400 dogs a day but they are valiantly carrying on,” she noted. The DPA opened their kitchen to Italia and Khodaiji for preparation of food for their canines till the women made alternative arrangements.

The overall “scene was pretty smooth” in Delhi, Khullar commented. “Time will tell what steps the DPA takes in future to further open up its activities. At present it is one step at a time till a new dawn appears on the horizon,” she

Top: Dadysett Atash Behram (l) and Mithaiwalla Agiary: bereft of worshippers; center: jashan in progress at Katrak Dar-E-Meher, Delhi viewed online; along-side: Ervad Cawas Bagli (l) and Adil Nargolwala: providing firewood for the Delhi fire temple



Community members kept in touch with seniors. “Most managed well,” Khullar said. The Anjuman helped sports historian and commentator Novy Kapadia



The minuscule Calcutta community bonding virtually

matorium in Bombay told *Parsiana* on June 10 that since the lockdown began, families of nine Covid-19 victims had last rites for their dear ones performed there. Corpses of those who succumbed to the virus have to be cremated.

Shiraz Gimi, honorary secretary of the Nagpur Parsi Panchayat (NPP), ensured that financial aid which is given on a regular basis to the deserving members of the community continued uninterrupted, noted Khurshid Dalal, editor of their Gymkhana's *bawabuzz*. The salaries of staffers of the Panchayat were paid on time, she stated. "The outlet of Dinshaw's (ice cream) shop which is in the colony was opened up with due police permission so that the residents could have easy access to daily essentials like milk, bread, yogurt, etc," she elaborated.

Along with friends at his social group SOS Bikers, Nagpur's Cyrus Watchmaker joined hands with some Rotarians to collect food from a Sikh gurudwara for relatives of patients being treated at Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital. His wife Dr Jerestine helped the community by making house calls in case of emergencies. "Monika Bhagwagar lent a helping hand to the management of Tuli Institute of Hotel Management which has opened up its hostel to the migrant workers and other people in transit," Dalal said. In the Tata Baug residential colony, "people help each other out, especially the old people, by buying, ordering of vegetables, groceries, medicines, etc for them." The monthly bulletin of the Rotary Club of Nagpur shared with *Parsiana* by Gimi commended the efforts of "Covid Warriors" Gymkhana president Shiraz Doongaji, and Naushad and

Tauby Bhagwagar for their assistance to migrant workers.

Fortuitously, the financial assistance provided by the Ahmedabad Parsi Panchayat (APP) to the needy on their list of beneficiaries was distributed just before the nationwide lockdown came into effect, shared APP trustee Shirin Kanga. Other trusts in the city are also assisting the needy, she said, notably the Dhanjishaw and Manijeh Gamir Charitable Trust and the Mowdawalla Trust. Also a trustee at the Ushta-Te Foundation, Kanga said that the Foundation has arranged to provide groceries to the old and incapacitated from stores close to their residences. She singled out Armin Commissariat who, faced with closure of her food take-away business that opened this January, catered subsidized meals for the needy supported with public donations. "The police would tell her where the food was needed and she would supply it," stated Kanga on June 10.

The Shree Vaddodara Parsi Panchayat (SVPP) was not able to distribute salaries to their staff and financial assistance to their regular constituents in the early stages of the lockdown. Former SVPP president Baman Cama said that they attempted to obtain the banking details of the beneficiaries to enable transfer funds electronically. "We send out messages to community members to take care of their health," he said.

The office bearers of the Poona Parsee Panchayat (PPP) "kept in touch periodically with the social workers of King Edward Memorial Hospital, Ruby

Hall Clinic and Jehangir Hospital in their city to ascertain if there were any Zoroastrian patients admitted to their facilities," noted PPP chairman Polly Patel. "We were not equipped to do more" than ensuring cleanliness and enforcing restrictions on entry of outsiders at our properties. Passes were arranged for pall bearers and hearse drivers to take bodies of the deceased to Doongerwadi. The Panchayat arranged for fruit and vegetable vendors to sell their wares outside their housing colonies. PPP's regular financial assistance to the deserving was paid in advance, in view of Jamshedi Navroz that fell on March 20 this year. "We have had no unfortunate situation so far, touch wood," Patel said in early June. "We have adequate stocks of kathi for all our three fire temples," the chairman noted.

"There is very little that we can actually do, though we want to...that is the conundrum," said Zarin Mistry, honorary secretary of the Madras Parsi Association, during the early days of the lockdown. Stating that the community has not set up any emergency response system, she mentioned that committee members were instructed to keep in touch with each other over weekly phone calls. "We are all okay," she told *Parsiana* on June 10.

Meeting the world

When the Calcutta Zoroastrian Community's Religious and Charity Fund (CZCRCF) invited the elders of the community to move into their Bow Street Dharamshala, the response was lukewarm. CZCRCF chief executive officer Noshir Wadia had suggested that senior citizens struggling with "lack of domestic help or... regular meals" could avail of the lodging facilities till things got smoother. "Nobody wanted to leave their homes," Prochy Mehta, president of the Calcutta Parsee Club told us. Prochy's husband Numazar is a senior trustee at CZCRCF. The West Bengal capital has a high percentage of seniors within their community.

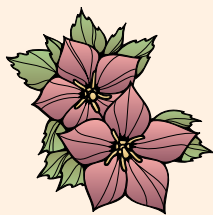
Anjuman trustee Cyrus Madan told *Parsiana* on June 10 that a few elderly folks did move into the Dharamshala temporarily in the later stages of the lockdown. Ratan Postwalla and Shara Madan ferried food from the Dharamsh-

"At an uthamna in our Anjuman hall there were 50-60 participants online"

ala to those who needed it, twice a week, Cyrus noted. No physical visits could take place to the community's elders, he said, referring to the Fund's highly regarded care program staffed by volunteers and spearheaded by Navaz Gherda. "We kept in touch with them regularly via phones." The Fund was able to disburse all welfare payments either in cash or via bank transfers, Cyrus noted. The community lost three members during the lockdown period. The families of all opted for cremation, he said.

The Parsis of Calcutta who "as a community used to meet for sports and just *gupsup* (chitchat) at least three days a week, are now also meeting community members settled all over the world," thanks to the extensive use of social media, revealed Prochy. Online activities include fitness, quizzes, Bingo sessions, virtual dance parties, sing-along sessions, *antakshari* (film music game shows)... basically whatever we can think of," she stated, all spearheaded by the Club's entertainment-in-charge Behnaz Bulsara Dugar (see "Grounded but bonded," Events and Personalities, pg 13).

"We have to do whatever we can to keep our morale up in these bleak times," added Prochy. ❀



With
best wishes
from

**Farah
&
Tanya**

COVID CONCERN

continued from page 19

and well-being of all our members here.

"We trustees wear several hats and are responsible for the well-being of our Parsi/Zoroastrian community, our staff, our tenants in our building. Hence, we have had to make decisions and judgments very carefully even at the risk of being unpopular," added Shroff whose "philosophy is to be proactive rather than reactive... If we fail in our duty to do the right thing, it reflects on our leadership."

Rather than risk a fatality within the community, in compliance with the social distancing measures recommended by the HKSAR (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region) government and health authorities, the Jamshedi Navroz celebrations and all events thereafter at the Zoroastrian Building were postponed although some felt that the community should pray together for Ahura Mazda's blessings in these difficult times. Finally the jashan was held but the trustees recommended members not to attend. "Fortunately, nearly all members respected the decision and did not attend."

Of the strong opinion that members should stay indoors till the situation subsides, the president recommended, "Whilst we should not panic, we should exercise caution and vigilance in ensuring the safety and well-being of ourselves, our families and loved ones... We

Online attendance (below) for the jashan conducted by Ervad Percy Khambatta in Singapore

"If we fail in our duty to do the right thing, it reflects on our leadership"

should be able to help one another; not be selfish and self-centered as we have a bigger duty to our frontline and health workers. By doing what we feel like doing we are posing a great risk to their life and destroying their families."

A YouTube recording and news clipping of the travails of Hong Kong based journalist Rhea Mogul being compelled to spend a week in quarantine at

Chun Yeung Estate beginning March 21 as a precautionary measure reflected on the government's efforts to contain possible infection by isolating individuals who had come in contact with Covid-19 cases.

The Parsi Zoroastrian Association of Singapore (PZAS) held its AGM on March 15 and members who could not attend in person called in over a telecon number provided, stated PZAS secretary Natasha Karanjia. Since the last three months, committee meetings are now conducted on Zoom as are the weekly prayers and monthly get-togethers. The annual jashan on May 1 was led by Ervad Percy Khambatta from his residence instead of the Parsi Burial Ground in earlier years. Over 35 families joined on Zoom to seek blessings.

In February, "four members from the Association joined the interfaith community in Singapore to pack medical supplies to be sent to Hubei, China. If and whenever manpower support will be needed, our association will provide," assured Karanjia.

In April, the Association sent a consignment of fruits for the migrant workers affected by Covid-19 in Singapore. "We just donated \$ 1,000 collected over a Bingo evening to Foodbank Singapore in May 2020. Our committee has decided that whatever we collect from our monthly activities will be donated towards a Covid-19 cause in Singapore," added Karanjia. ❀

