

THE GENESIS AND HISTORY OF THE PROPHET-MOCKING FILM—A QUEST FOR ZARATHUSHTRA

It would perhaps surprise many Parsees today, but the idea to make a film on our prophet dates back almost 30 years. In 1954, there were some moves by some ill-informed people who wanted to make a film on the life of our dear prophet Zarathushtra. Fortunately, the ill-conceived idea met with the fate of infant mortality, thanks largely to the direction and guidance given at that time in "PARSI-AVAZ." Thus, it was explained in the issue of the Avaz dated September 27, 1959, that it would be fool hardy to make a film on the life of the prophet whose status was that of a Yazata, who took human form at will. Earlier, the "Avaz" had published, through the Columns of "Porso-pasokh-ve Nuktechini", a detailed note on the divine status of our prophet, and on his life and works.

The present revival of this idea, to make a film on our Prophet, took birth in North America in the beginning of 1982. In the initial stage, the Zoroastrian Association of Greater New York Inc. (ZAGNY) agreed to be one of the forerunners, proponents and supporters of the film. ZAGNY also took upon itself, the task of being the custodian, administrator and dispenser of the funds collected from individual donors and other Associations. A script committee was also set up at the 4th North American Zoroastrian Congress, held in April 1982. This Committee comprised about 11 "advisers" and was concerned with the deliberations about the welfare of the film. The Committee selected Mr. William Humble, a professional script-writer, to work on the script for the film.

In an interview given by Mr. Humble in "USHTA" — a Zoroastrian Studies publication Newsletter (Vol. No. I of May 1983), Mr. Humble has honestly admitted that he knew

nothing about Zoroastrianism and that he had only heard about Zarathushtra when he met Mr. Cyrus Bharucha, the director of the film, who gave him a couple of books to read on the subject! Mr. Humble has also analysed in that interview about how he proceeded with the assigned task. Initially, he went to Washington and had a four-day conference with academics and specialists is revealed when Mr. Humble puts it rather mildly: "I wondered how I could do any programme on religion when no one really agrees with what they are arguing about!" Be that as it may, Mr. Humble wrote the first rough draft of the script in 3½ weeks, during which he had to go back to Washington to face some more controversies from the academics.

Meanwhile, it was announced that Mr. Zubin Mehta, the well known conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, would play the lead role in the film as a man in search of his roots. When Mr. Mehta came to Bombay with director Cyrus Bharucha in December 1982, it was also announced that the priest's role in the film would be played by Mr. Khojeste Mistree, an Oxford educated former Chartered Accountant, who fancies himself a latter-day religious revivalist. Now, Mr. Mistree was a totally unacceptable entity to the original script committee, as Mr. Mistree had on a previous occasion, blasted the conversion caper in America. Some of the original committee members resigned in protest, as director Bharucha had accepted Mr. Mistree's advice and had introduced variations in the original script. Consequently, the pro-proselytisation moneyed gang in North America refused to donate the sums promised earlier and withdrew their support to the film.

Meanwhile, in Bombay, Mr. Bharucha had already given interviews to Bombay papers and magazines, which created a big controversy

amongst the Parsees of Bombay regarding some of the scenes in the film. In a rare outburst of anguish and concern, three respected Dasturs of Bombay, viz Dr. Hormazdiar Mirza, Dr. Firoze Kotwal and Dr. Kaikhushru Jamaspasa, made a joint declaration against the film, in a splendid article which was published in the Parsee press in February 1983, castigating some of the scenes in the film.

Later, a public Protest Meeting was held on 10th June, 1983, at Jivanji Modi Hall (Cama Oriental Institute), Bombay.

Many messages received from various Anjumans throughout India were read at the meeting, which included a message sent by Dasturji, Dr. Firoze Kotwal of Wadiaji's Atashbehran.

The meeting, interalia, passed a unanimous resolution expressing its resentment towards the proposed film.

As a result of the adverse comments of the three Dasturjis and the spontaneous public outcry, the script was once again changed.

As stated above, Mr. Bharucha had given interviews to some papers and magazines in Bombay. Subsequently, Mr. Bharucha and Mr. Mistree met a group of Zoroastrians for a discussion in the matter. It was clarified by Mr. Bharucha, that the final materials were supplied to Mr. Humble for the script, amongst others, by Prof. K.D. Irani, Dr. James Russel, Prof. Ali Jafarey, Khojeste Mistree, Dr. Farhang Meher, Allan Williams and Dastur N. Minocherhomji. With a view to verify the exact contents of the script, the group of Zoroastrians requested for an inspection of the same, but this was, refused by the Director, Mr. Bharucha and Mr. Mistree. However, from the various interviews given by Mr. Bharucha and from the interview of Mr. Humble published in ZS newsletter, the following main points were glaringly evident.

- (i) That Zoroaster is not being portrayed as a prophet but only as a great thinker and a philosopher, perhaps the first, in the Bronze Age;
- (ii) That Zoroaster was after all a mere mortal;
- (iii) That the main theme of his teachings was that "Man must first think for himself before he can believe — Thus Spake Zarathushtra.
- (iv) That because he tended his father's live stock, he could cure the horse — paralysis in King Gushtasp's Court — and was hence being portrayed as a veterinary doctor;
- (v) That God — Ahura Mazda — is all knowing and very powerful, though not all powerful and therefore, evil exists in the world.
- (vi) That he performed no miracles (including the curing of the horse) — because otherwise he becomes a christ-like figure !
- (vii) That Zarathushtra actually preached the concept of "Freedom of Choice" and
- (viii) That the role of Zarathushtra, who was a Yazata, would in any case, be played by an ordinary, sinful, mortal. (It was subsequently announced that Mr. Nigel Terry would play the role of Zarathushtra in the film). Unfortunately, all well intentioned advices and suggestion fell on deaf ears and the unit proceeded with the actual filming.

Towards the beginning of 1983, Dr. Aspi F. Golwalla, the chairman of the Bombay Parsi Punchayet assured the community while addressing the Parsee of Bangalore (as reported in Jame-Jamshed) that B.P.P. will not finance or assist in any way, the film, if it hurt the feelings of the community, However, just a few months later, he allowed part of the film to be shot in the

premises of the B.P.P. ! Not only that, the B.P.P. donated a sum of Rs. 1 lakh to the "oriental Heritage Trust", which Trust openly promoted and financed the film. It is pertinent to note that this financial assistance was made out of the Seth Pestonji F. Davar Charitable Trust, which was vested in the Trustees of the B.P.P. The funds of the said Trust, according to its objects are to be applied to help the poor of Bombay, India, preferably the needy and blind, without any distinction as to caste or creed. It is difficult to accept that the Trustees properly dealt with the funds of the Trust. However this is not the forum to discuss at present the propriety of the issue under review.

Meanwhile, the shooting of the film proceeded briskly. The unit shot the film extensively in Bombay as well as outside, wherever Parsee population lived in large or small pockets, be it in Navsari, Udvada, Surat or Poona. The unit adopted a novel ploy, to make it look easier and cheaper. It advertised and appealed in the Parsee press, requesting the laity and the priests to come and participate in the shooting of the film whenever, large numbers of Parsees required in group scenes. Some important individuals who commanded respect and following, were also cleverly roped in by offering some crumbs of roles or some prominence in the making of the film or in the list of honours in the cast.

However, as it turned out, the unit, in the course of the shooting, fell short of funds. Appeals were made, and some Businessmen and Business Houses readily responded. But the lacs that flowed in the coffers of the film-makers were still not enough to make the two ends meet. In the last week of August 1983, a motely group of people was invited to the Ripon Club, for a Dhansak dinner. (by Mr. Bharucha), when slides of the film, already in the cans, were shown to the invitees. One of the scenes showed Zarathushtra only in a loin cloth, behind prison bars, wailing away that no one was listening to him — in other words, as a weak helpless, mortal convict ! Even without the audio and musical effects, the scene must have been so repulsive, that some

people within the audience of hand-picked invites protested to projecting the Prophet in such a ridiculous and sacrilegious manner. But Mr. Bharucha brushed aside the protest and is reported to have said to the effect that it was a point of high drama, when the emotional element came to the fore ! Yet the funds collected were nowhere near the estimated requirements of editing-cum-processing of the film, providing special effects, composing of the music, etc. So, a slick, glossy folder was brought out, showing some of the scenes from the film. Despite these efforts, the acute shorttake of funds kept haunting the unit.

As stated above, one of the persons won over by the film was none other than Dasturji Dr. Firoze Kotwal. We have pointed out earlier that in February 1983, the same Dr. Kotwal, alongwith two other Dasturjis in a written article, published widely in the Parsee press, had strongly and openly criticised the making of the film. It is difficult to envisage, what exactly happened after Dr. Kotwal signed the above declaration

26 69 02

Phone : 26 73 61

26 25 30

WESTERN INDIA TYPEWRITER CO.

DEALERS IN EVERYTHING FOR

Typewriter and Duplicator
Accessories, Repairs of any make of
Typewriter-Speciality

General Assurance Building,
232. Dr. D. Navroji Road,
Fort, BOMBAY-400 001.

against the film alongwith the two other Dasturjis. But soon afterwards, whenever someone approached Dr. Kotwal for his comments and rejoinder, he gave a stock reply to the effect that he need not be asked or told anything about the film anymore, as "everything was settled." But it is heartening to note that though "everything is settled" in Dr. Kotwal's views, the other learned Dasturji's, it is presumed, still hold their own earlier views. The change of heart, it seems, is only in the case of Dr. Kotwal, who has, since, "everything is settled", associated himself with the film.

As a part of the film, the Director, Mr. Bharucha, wanted to shoot the scenes of the post-mortam Zoroastrian rituals, depicting the entire death ceremony, from Sachkar upto the final dokhmenashini. Earlier, Mr. Bharucha, with the obvious intention of avoiding the public glare, had asked for permission from the Navsari for shooting these scenes in those places. But the wise trustees refused to give such permissions. Finally, Mr. Bharucha approached Dr. A.F. Golwalla, chairman, B.P.P. to grant such a permission, which was spontaneously given, and on Wednesday, 23rd May, 1984, the shooting of the mock funeral ceremony took place in the Albless Bungli, under the supervision of Dasturji Dr. Firoze Kotwal!

Later, in a press conference held by the B.P.P. on 11th August, 1984, a special representative of a Fortnightly, submitted written questions to Dr. A.F. Golwalla to elicit his official answers. The questions were :

- (a) Did Dr. Golwalla give the permission to shoot some scenes at Doongarwadi, to the film unit?
- (b) If the answer to the above is in the affirmative :
 - (i) did he do so in his individual capacity?
or
 - (ii) did he do so on behalf of the Board of Trustees? or
 - (iv) did he at least consult his colleagues on the Doongarwadi Advisory Committee (D.A.C.)?

- (c) Did he ask for Dr. Kotwal's advice or was such an advice given by Dr. Kotwal without his asking ie. gratuitously by Dr. Kotwal? Not surprisingly, the chairman of B.P.P. did not feel comfortable and simply brushed aside the queries!

Subsequently, it appears that some of these questions have been indirectly answered thus, the permission was in fact given by Dr. Golwalla. It is also apparent that Dr. A.F. Golwalla gave the permission in his individual capacity, without taking into confidence his colleagues on the Board or on the Doongarwadi Advisory Committee. Evidently, this unilateral action appears to be a clear breach of Trust, but this is for the future to determine.

Meanwhile, a large section of the Parsees feel hurt at the pathetic state of affairs in the body-politic of the community. The insult to the status of the Prophet is naturally quite humiliating and a few Associations, Madals and enlightened Parsee individuals are considering ways and means to stem the rot.

UNIQUE ENTERPRISES

Authorised Voltas Dealers for
Crystal room airconditioners

And
Tushar water cooler

Off : 633, Girgaum Road.
Opp. SILK HOUSE
Dhobitalao, BOMBAY-400 002.

Tel : 313084/258245