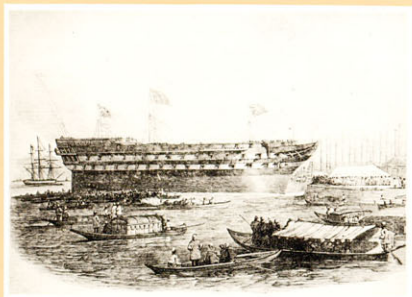


The first hundred years



Above: Asia, one of the many ships built by Wadias in Bombay. Right: The Wadias designed and built some 335 ships, including 16 men-of-war for the British Navy

A late 19th century portrait of Nowrosjee N. Wadia, founder of Bombay Dyeing, reveals a man in the full vigour of life. The nose is straight and partizan and descends into a carefully brushed, luxuriant black moustache and beard, which the passing years have tinged with grey. Beneath even brows, the widest eyes appear to be focused on infinity. They suggest introspection and great distance, as if the subject's thoughts were turned to the past or looking ahead into the future. Perhaps both. For it is clear that this man is the product of two cultures and two worlds.

His dress provides a clue. One of these two worlds vanishes into the mists of prehistory, into long millennia of the Parsis, that tiny but impressive minority, refugees from ancient Persia, which was to exert on India an influence out of all proportion to its number. In the picture, Mr. Wadia has paid his respects to the past by wearing the Parsi *paghri*, which rises majestically above his forehead, its glossy fabric polka-dotted in the traditional style. Except for the turban, however, his garments are strictly European: a dark coat cut in the English style of the period with wide lapels, a stiff white collar and a silk cravat. They speak for the new world that has overwhelmed India and that has led this Parsi to establish the textile works which he and successive generations of Wadias will expand into one of the greatest and most progressive in the country.

Uncounted and uncountable centuries went into the making of this man. The historical context is important to any catalogue of the achievements of his brief lifetime, which covers a mere half century. It begins with the arrival of the first Parsis on India's west coast, an event of which the date cannot be accurately fixed but which probably occurred nearly 1,300 years ago. The Parsis, numbering fewer than 100,000 today in a land of 650 million, pride themselves on being the descendants of a benevolent and powerful people who ruled Persia centuries before Christ. At one time their land equalled half modern Europe in area and touched the waters of seven seas: the Mediterranean, the Aegean, the Black, the Caspian, the Indian, the Persian and the Red. Under Darius Hystaspes (sixth century BC), one of the greatest of the Persian kings, the Parsi empire spread down into the Punjab and the whole valley of the Indus. The very name Parsi invokes that empire, which was known as Pars or Fars (later corrupted into Persia).

Their prophet, Zoroaster, lived in the 14th century BC and committed to writing two million verses which became the Parsis' holy scripture, the Zend Avasta. Contrary to popular belief, they do not worship fire. Fire to them, like *mithra* the sun, is only a symbol of Ahura Mazda, their divinity, the quintessential light from which all things, good and evil, flow.

In 641 AD, at the battle of Navahand, Persia fell to the Arabian Khalifs, and the Parsis, whose faith was proscribed by their Islamic conquerors, were forced to flee, taking with them the sacred fire. For more than 100 years they wandered, until at last a small fleet of their ships beached on the west coast of India, near Sanjan, 100 kms northeast of Bombay. Some historians give the year as 716 AD. Very likely it was not the first Parsi landfall on the Indian subcontinent. According to the writings of a Zoroastrian priest, recorded in 1600, they first arrived at Diu, a little island on the Gulf of Cambay, south of the Kathiawar coast. There they remained for some 20 years, picking up the habits and the customs of the people. From Diu they migrated south to Gujarat until reaching Sanjan.

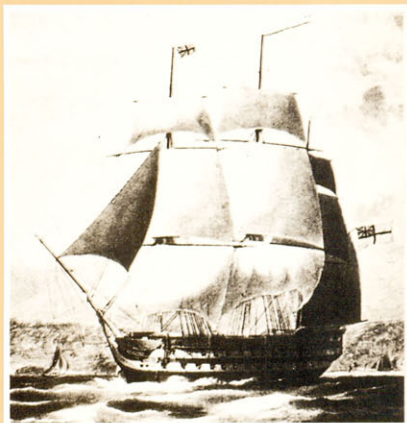
The Parsis anticipated a cordial welcome from Sanjan's ruler, Jadav Rana. Already they had assimilated some of the culture, the language and the ways of the Hindus, and they not only knew that Jadav Rana came from the same Aryan stock as they, and was therefore predisposed in their favour, but also that he was a man renowned for his religious tolerance.

In this expectation the Parsis were correct. The refugees were warmly received,* and lived in harmony and peace for the next 300 years. It is not surprising that the Hindus accepted these amiable travellers from an alien shore. They showed great enterprise. The Parsi religion enjoins its adherents to be liberal in good works and charities and to look up all men as brothers. A Parsi proverb reads: "Our neighbours are like our fathers and mothers." Such beliefs surely earned the outsiders a respected place in their adopted community, as did the Parsis themselves, a remarkably industrious, far-sighted and adaptable people.

With the overthrow of the Hindus by the Muslims c 1305, the Parsis had to flee again. Three centuries passed before they re-established themselves in Surat, accompanied, as always, by the sacred fire whose flames have never ebbed (if one credits the legend) since they first danced more than 4,000 years ago. Surat was a fateful conjunction. It was there that the Parsis were exposed to two important historical forces that, in their interplay, were destined to enrich both the Parsis and India. One was shipbuilding, a craft nearly as old as the Indus civilisation; at the time, Surat was the centre of India's

maritime construction. The other was the Parsis' encounter with the Europeans — Portuguese, French, Dutch and English — who in successive waves had been disturbing India's peace for hundreds of years.

India was building great seagoing vessels as early as the fourth century BC and carrying on a lively sea trade with Arabia, Egypt, Africa and Rome; some of their ships may have touched the west shore of Mexico. Writes one present-day historian: "Ships were made in India and manned and navigated by Indian sailors and were sailing the Indian and Pacific Oceans in the centuries when the very existence of the country was almost legendary in the Western hemisphere." It is probable that among the cargo these ships bore were fine home-spun cottons from Calicut, wool shawls from Kashmir and silks and muslins from Dacca so delicately made that an entire sari could be drawn through a woman's ring.



By the 14th century, Indian-built ships capable of carrying 700 passengers were ploughing the waves. In the early 17th century, when England, then the greatest sea power in the West, was building ships of 300 to 350 tons, the dockyards at Surat and also at Dabhol were floating craft four times that weight.

The 16th century arrival of Parsis in the port of Surat coincided with the last chapter of India's distinguished history as a maritime power. They came in time, however, to lend considerable substance to that final chapter. They took to marine construction as if they had been born to it — as possibly they were. Soon enough, their reputation had spread 400 kilometres south to Bombay.

* A charming and probably apocryphal story is told that, in conferences with the visitors, Jadav Rana expressed doubt that his crowded land had room for them. "Where shall we fit you in?" he asked; and, to dramatise his point, sent the visitors a brimful bowl of milk. "Here is how we shall fit in," said the leader of the Parsis — and dropped a fistful of sugar into the bowl.

Bombay was then in British hands. Portugal had beat England to India by a century and had seized large parts of it, including Bombay, which was then a scatter of seven small islands called the Kolis after the fishing folk who first settled there. (From one of the seven islands, Mumba Aai, named by the Kolis after their patron goddess Mumba Devi, the city of Bombay took its name.) England first acquired Bombay as a gift of the Portuguese, part of the Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza's dowry in her marriage to Charles II of England in 1662, but thought so little of it that it was leased to the East India Company for £10 a year. The city did not formally pass to British control until 1665.

Concerned with developing Bombay into a shipbuilding centre the equal of Surat, the Bombay Council, in a letter dated 10 January 1736, requested of Surat the services of a number of journeymen carpenters and shipbuilders. The letter specifically asked for one Lowji Nusserwanji, a Parsi, whose reputation had preceded him to Bombay. Two months later, Lowji arrived in Bombay accompanied by ten Parsi ship's carpenters — among them five Wadias, including a younger brother. With his arrival began the dynasty of Parsi shipbuilders that was to endure for the next 150 years, well into the age of steam — and that, more important to this history, was also to direct one of Lowji's descendants, Nowrosjee Wadia, into another field of endeavour entirely. Wadia is a corruption of the Gujarathi word for shipbuilder, *wadia*, but it was not until 1774 that this Parsi family adopted it as its surname. Nowrosjee Wadia's ancestry can be traced directly, through six generations, to the first master shipbuilder: he was, in fact, Lowji Nusserwanjee's great-great-great-great-grandson.

Lowji was the first Wadia to be honoured by appointment to the post of "master shipbuilder" in Bombay's dockyards. The British Government in India was to bestow it on six more. Among them they designed and built some 335 ships, including 16 men of war — the first ships of the line constructed for the British Navy outside England. More than a few of the Wadia vessels sailed into legend. Built of Malabar teak, which was found to be stouter than British oak, they "so far exceed any in Europe for durability that it is usual for [Wadia] ships to last 50 or 60 years." The statement comes from an 18th century English visitor to Bombay, one Abraham Parsons. A Wadia frigate, the *Salsette*, built by Jamssetjee Wadia in the late 18th century, withstood undamaged nine ice-locked weeks in the north Baltic Sea in 1809; every other sister vessel on that hazardous voyage was crushed and foundered.

It was on another Wadia ship, the *Cornwallis* (74 guns, 1,809 tons, crew of 590), that the Chinese signed the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, ceding Hong Kong to

England. Long before then, she had distinguished herself in the American-British War of 1812 as the flagship of the British fleet.* In 1815 she fired the last sea cannon in that conflict. So fast was the *Cornwallis* that her target, the American sloop *Hornet*, was forced to jettison her cargo, her anchor, the ship's launch and her guns in order to escape. Fitted with a steam engine and a screw, the *Cornwallis* saw action in the 1855 Baltic campaign against the Russians and was one of the ships which successfully reduced the Sandham Forts at Sveaborg.

In 1865 the *Cornwallis* sailed to England on her last, somewhat ignominious mission: to form a part of the landing jetty at the Sheerness Dockyard in Portsmouth. At the advanced age of 144 years she was broken up in 1957 — and found to be as tight and seaworthy as the day of her launching in 1813. Her name lives on to this day in Bombay's *Cornwallis Fleet Canteen*, established by Sir Ness Wadia during the second world war for Indian Navy seamen. Another Wadia ship, the *HMS Trincomalee*, built in 1817, is still afloat. Re-named the *Foudroyant*, she serves as a training vessel for British Navy cadets in Gosport, England.

Such was the Wadia-built ships' reputation for speed that John Willis, owner of the British clipper *Cutty Sark*, added two of them to his fleet. One was the *Punjab*, of 1,745 tons, which had been constructed in 1854 by Nowrosjee Wadia's great-grandfather, Cursetjee. Under her second name, the *Tweed* — she was also known as *Willis's Wonder* — this vessel made the London-Melbourne passage in 83 days, a record unbroken to this day by any sailing ship of her class.

In Surat, and later in Bombay, the adaptable Parsis proved to be indispensable middlemen in the already-flourishing commerce between India and the West. Highly literate, free of the cast prejudices that bound their foster land then as now, quick to learn the curious manners and tongues imported by the first rapacious sails from Europe, energetic and eager, they were in every way well suited to the role. In a short time they were filling it, with fine disregard for the overtones of colonialism implied by serving foreign masters. Are not all men brothers?

"Either the Parsis had the knack of ingratiating themselves in the favour of the Europeans or they were selected by them for their intelligence, business habits and integrity," writes Dosabhai Framji Karaka, himself

* At least one other Wadia man-of-war, the *Minden*, launched in 1810, fought in that war. It was on her deck that the American poet Francis Scott Key, as a guest of the British during the shelling of Charleston, West Virginia, composed what later became the American national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner."

a Parsi, in his two-volume *History of The Parsis*, published in London in 1884. "The Portuguese, French, Dutch and English factories all employed Parsis as their chief brokers; and without them it may be said that they found it almost impossible to conduct their trading and banking operations."

Their contact with Europeans "opened up an unexpected field for the energy, industry and enterprise of the Parsis," adds Historian Karaka. Just as the Wadia family had installed themselves as master builders in the dockyards of Surat and Bombay, so now, with the same success, other Parsis fanned out through every facet of colonial Indian life — generally from the top. The record of Parsi accomplishment is too long for inclusion here and is best suggested by a few of the more notable achievements:

* The first type-founder in a vernacular tongue, the first compositor in English, the first Indian to become manager of an English newspaper, and one of the proprietors of the Times of India (founded in 1838) were all Parsis.

* The first Indians to be entrusted with a State mint were Parsis, the Merjis — possibly the only family, Indian or European, ever to engrave its initials on national coin. One such silver coin, struck in the mid-19th century, bore the initials of Pestanji Merji and became widely known as the *Pestan shai*.

* A Parsi, Jijibhai Dadabhai, introduced steam navigation for commercial and passenger traffic along India's west coast.

* A Parsi, Jamshedji Dorabji, ranks among the charter promoters of the Indian railway system and by the mid-19th century employed a force of 17,000.

* The first Indian Fellow of the Royal Society of London (1841) was a Parsi and a Wadia: Ardeser Cursetjee, son of a Wadia master builder and Nowrosjee's grandfather. A gifted engineer, he designed and built in his youth a one-hp steam engine that actually worked. He also introduced gas lighting to Bombay. In March 1834, his bungalow and gardens at Mazagaon were so brilliantly lit for a visit by the Earl of Clare, Governor of Bombay, that the Earl's carriage was delayed for hours by the crowds of the curious that blocked its route. Among the sights illuminated for the guest was a garden fountain whose graceful spray was produced by a steam pump built by the host.

* The first Indian to be knighted was a Parsi: Sir Jamshedji Jijibhoi, upon whom the title was bestowed by the Empress Victoria in 1842. This same distinguished

gentleman, of whom Karaka writes that he "shed the greatest lustre on the Parsi race in India," was also raised to a baronetcy shortly before his death in 1859 — also the first Indian to receive this honour. In passing, it should be noted that Sir Jamshedji was the great-great grandfather of Bai Jerbai Wadia, wife of the founder of Bombay Dyeing.

* The first Indian appointed to India's High Court — then the country's supreme authority — was a Parsi and a Wadia: Khurshedji Rustomji, a first cousin of Bombay Dyeing's founder and a man of great independence of spirit. At a time when capital punishment was commonly meted out by the High Court, Khurshedji, whose humanity rejected this sentence, so consistently refused to pronounce it that the British Government all but commanded him to do so. Instead of compromising his principles by obeying, he resigned his office.

* The first Indian to open a paper mill was a Parsi: Sorabji Framji, who erected his factory in 1854.

No record of illustrious Parsis would be complete without the name of Rustomji Dorabji, whose insurpassable contribution to India was to rescue Bombay. In 1692 the city was stricken by a plague so severe that the Sidis of Janjira, taking advantage of this circumstance, organised bands of pirates along the Malabar Coast and wrested the city from the British. On his own initiative, this bold Parsi mustered a militia from the local fishermen and drove out the invaders. For this singular feat, Rustomji Dorabji was granted the hereditary title of Patel (lord or chief) of Bombay.