



Maneckji Limiji Hataria

*SAVIOURS OF
ZARATHUSTIS IN IRAN*

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The women in Iran after the Islamic invasions were the worst affected. Men were beheaded but women were taken to the slave markets of Medina and sold as sex slaves. After the Islamization of Iran, the Iranians whose ancestors had by force converted to Islam, after a few generations knew very little of their history and acted according to the holy instructions in the Quran. Zarathushti women were abducted and married to Muslims for it took the Muslim a step closer to heaven.

Young Golestan Banu was one such candidate for abduction. Her father Kai Khosrow Yazdyar had fled from Kerman to Yazd in 1779 CE to avoid the political turmoil after the death of Karim Khan Zand. He begot a beautiful maiden whom he named Golestan. In time Golestan's beauty was noticed by the Muslims who considered it a sin to let such a beautiful girl remain a Zarathushti. In 1796 Kai Khosrow once again fled, this time with his young daughter Golestan to Bombay. There they were given refuge by Edulji Dorabji Lashkari. Kai Khosrow returned to Iran thrice and managed to bring his entire family to Bombay. In due course, Golestan was married to Faramji Bhikaji Panday.

Faramji's father Bhikhaji Beramji Panday was a respectable Parsi shopkeeper, who had long before given shelter to another refugee girl by the name of Firoze. The parents of Firoze had been forcefully converted to Islam. Unable to escape, they sought to save their two daughters from this fate; and this they managed by entrusting them to a German traveller, who had fallen in love with his elder daughter. He succeeded in bringing Firoze safely to Bombay and the Panday family sheltered her. Firoze was later married to the valiant soldier Rastamji Dorabji (who held Bombay for the English in 1692) ¹

Golestan Banu and Faramji had five sons and four daughters. Golestan instigated in all her children the affiliation to Iran and the Zarathushtis in Iran. Shakarbai one of her daughters was married to Sir Dinshaw Petit. In 1834 her eldest son Barjorji Faramji Panday started funds for Iranians in Bombay and her third son Mehrwanji Faramji Panday started a second fund in 1854 for those in Iran. It was called the *Amelioration Society*. In Iran, it was known as the '*Anjoman-e-Akaber-e-Parsian*'. *Society of Parsi Nobles*. Golestan Banu now known as GulBai had been a successful ambassador of the Zarathushtis of Iran. It was this society that engaged Maneckji Limiji Hataria to go investigate the condition of the Zarathushtis in Iran.

Maneckji was despatched on the 31st of March 1854 with explicit instructions to inquire into and report upon the social, political, and intellectual condition of the Zoroastrians in Persia.²

From the Panday family, we have among us in North America Roshan and Rohintan Riventa and their children.

MANECKJI LIMJI HATARIA

Maneckji son of Limji Hushang Hataria was born in the village of Mora Suvali in 1813 CE. (1813-1890). His ancestors had migrated from Iran to Surat during the Safavid period (1501-1722).³ He started

working at the age of fifteen. His first reported travel experience was up the Indus river to Hyderabad, as a cashier/accountant (*şanduqđār*) for military expenditures.⁴ This event corresponds to the medical/diplomatic mission of Dr James Burnes. He was hoping to be able to visit Iran while on duty. His expedition took him up to Kabul in 1840 and when the military withdrew from Kabul he retired from his post after about 12 years of service. Thereafter he travelled as a successful merchant hoping to one day make it to Iran.

Maneckji had married Hirabai and had two children a son, Hormozji (b. ca. 1838, who would come to Iran with him), and a daughter, Dosibai. ⁵ He was in his forties with ample experience and resourcefulness when he was appointed by the Amelioration Society to visit Iran and report on the condition of the Zarathushtis of Iran. His desire to visit Iran played a role in his acceptance of the mission. He left his business with a relative who due to mismanagement lost all his fortune in 1873.

Physically he had a sturdy and solid build which made him endure the rough condition of travel in those days and age. His British passport gave him extra insurance in many quarters but with thugs and bandits on the roads, it did not matter although he travelled well-armed. He was devoted to his faith and did everything he could with sincerity for his co-religionist in Iran.

His honesty integrity tact and perseverance made him a successful negotiator and he was welcome in many rival quarters. His opinion and understanding were even sought by Bahauallah who at that time was establishing his religion. His communication with Bahauallah is cherished and studied to this day by the Bahai community.

When he reached Yazd and Kerman he found the condition of Zarathushtis there was in a dire state. He realized that the Jazieh tax (infidel tax) had the community at the mercy of the tax collector and the governor. The Zarathushtis were forbidden to learn to read and write and if found to be able to read and write were severely punished, except for the Mobeds. They were not allowed to repair their Fire Temple and the Atash Varahram of Yazd and Kerman were in a depleted state. Within a year of his arrival, he had managed to get permission and put the Yazd Atash Behram in order as per the inscription dated 1855. He did the same in Kerman by 1857. He did not find the Dakhmas adequate and he built a new one on its adjacent hill in Yazd in 1864 which is known as Manakji's Dakhma. He also built one in Sharifabad. He restored and built many local Adaran in far-flung villages like Khoramshah in Yazd and Qanat-Ghesan of Kerman. He also acted as the agent of individual Parsis to build shelters for pilgrims at centres like Peer e Sabz and Peer e Banu. He built schools for boys and girls and arranged for Parsi teachers to come and teach. Latter he arranged to pay the salary to the local teachers and this arrangement continued till the 1960s.

Maneckji was on good terms with the Ambassador of Britain, France and the USA and they held him in high regard as a learned and wise man. Especially Sir Henry Rawilson the British Ambassador was of immense help to Maneckji in his endeavours.

Maneckji did a lot to improve security and reduce assaults committed against the Zarathushtis. Once when the Yazd governor was not able to do justice to the murder of some Zarathushties he convinced the Governor to let him take the ruffians (Luti) to Tehran and demand justice. In Tehran, he found out that no Muslim would suffer the death penalty for murdering an infidel and that the blood money for an infidel was less than 10 tomans. While for a Muslim it was upwards of 1000 Tomans.

The spirit and resolution which had led the Zoroastrians of Persia to withstand over 1,200 years of persecution were to be found in their women as well as in their men and sometimes baffled the kind philanthropist when they would not accept his charity unconditionally.

Zoroastrians were not allowed to learn to read and write. Maneckji worked on it and finally, in 1870 the ban on Zoroastrian schools was lifted. By 1882 he had established twelve Zoroastrian schools in Iran including primary schools in villages and a boarding school in Tehran, staffed by qualified Parsi teachers from India offering secular education based on reading, writing and arithmetic.

His most important service to the community was his efforts to abolish the dreaded Islamic Jizyah tax. The efforts for Jizyah's abolition lasted 25 years from the middle of 1857 until nearly the close of 1882. In the autumn of the latter year, the "jizyah" was abolished, to the unspeakable joy of those who suffered from it and of those who had agitated for its abolition. ⁶

It is appropriate here to give an account of the immense effort that was put in collectively by the community in India, London and other well-wishers led by Maneckji.

EFFORTS TO ABOLISH THE JIZYAH - THE INFIDEL TAX

All Human Beings are born equal it is God that differentiates between them through his Prophets. Allah in the Quran requires his followers to fight the unbelievers till they embrace Islam and if they are believers in an alternative book (Sura 9:29) make them pay the "Jizyah" until they feel subdued.

Fight against those who (1) believe not in Allah, (2) nor in the Last Day, (3) nor forbid that which has been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger (4) and those who acknowledge not the religion of truth (i.e. Islam) among the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians), until they pay the Jizyah with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued." ⁷

In case of doubt, the Quran repeats them over and over again.

"Thus you are ordered by Allah to continue in carrying out Jihad against the disbelievers till they embrace Islam." ⁸

That is exactly what His followers were doing who cannot be blamed for it. They had already given the benefit of the doubt by considering the Zoroastrians as people of the book. The Jizyah had to be so high to subdue the non-believer into submission. The results were positive, except for the last 7000 nonbelievers who for over 1200 years had resisted and suffered, the rest had fled or submitted or were killed.

Maneckji Limji Hatavia had taken up a colossal challenge. He had to convince the Shah to go against the dictates of the Quran. It was only his perseverance and the help of well-wishers backed up by a system of indefatigable memorialising that kept it going. On one occasion the Shah personally interviewed Maneckji Hatavia, under the auspices of Major-General Sir Henry Rawlinson, British ambassador at the Court of Tehran, when the skilful agent (Maneckji) introduced the subject with so much tact and good sense that His Majesty's heart was moved to sympathy, and he ordered a reduction of one hundred tomans from a total claim of nine hundred and twenty tomans, (about 2000 Pounds) the joint contribution annually wrung from the populations of Yezd and Kerman. ⁹ Here is a report of the interview.

With great patience and perseverance, Hataria waited three long years, before he ultimately succeeded, through the offices of Rawlinson, in obtaining his first audience with Nasir al-Din Shah, which took place on 15th May 1860. Initially, Hataria was asked to present himself at the Qajar Court with the petition from India on 14th May 1860. He was accompanied by Sir Henry Rawlinson, and six other Parsis and waited all day to see the Shah, but in vain. The next morning Hataria was there again and after waiting until 3 pm, was summoned alone to meet the Shah.

Later Hataria described the meeting to Rawlinson;

After bowing to the Shah several times, Hataria stood a distance of about 20 steps from the Shah.

Nasir al-Din Shah exclaimed, "Is this Manekji?"

Hataria bowed low and said, "Yes, I am the one who is always willing to sacrifice himself in the bejewelled dust of Your Majesty's feet."

At this stage, the Shah had a short conversation with his courtiers.

Meanwhile, Hataria advanced step by step towards the Shah and placing the silver casket at his feet removed the cover.

Hataria opened the address sent by the *Akabars*, the leaders, of the Parsi community of Bombay, which was wrapped in brocade, and displayed it to the Shah.

After it was replaced in the silver casket, the Shah enquired,

"Do you know Farsi?"

"Yes, *Kebla* of the World", replied Hataria.

The Shah enquired, "Do you belong to the Zoroastrian tribe? Is your religion Zoroastrian?"

"Yes, Protector of the World" replied Hataria.

The Shah asked, "What are the main directives of your religion?"

Hataria responded, "***The main directives are similar to the Shariat of Islam. There is some difference in the prayers. But in essence, both are the same.***" 10

At this stage the Shah addressed the *amirs* standing in the front right row; "These people are good, pure and holy and have survived from very ancient times".

Then the Shah asked Hataria, "Are you worshippers of fire?"

Hataria replied, "No, Your Majesty. We consider the *atash*, the fire, as the *Kebla*, in the same way, that the followers of Islam consider *Kaaba* in Mecca as the *Kebla*."

"What, you do not consider fire as God Himself?" enquired the Shah.

Hataria responded "No Your Majesty. One must know God through his creation. Water, fire, sun, and moon are all created by Him. Through them, we worship the Creator Himself."

"Then don't you worship the fire?" enquired the surprised Nasir al-Din Shah.

"No Your Majesty. We stand in front of the Fire or the Sun and offer prayers to their Creator" replied Hataria.

"Why do you pray standing in front of the fire?" enquired the Shah.

Hataria replied, "These are *noorani*, lustrous objects. We consider each lustrous ray, a ray from the Holy Creator. Hence we consider it best to offer prayers in front of these manifestations of the Creator Himself."

"You mean *roshni*, light?" asked the Shah.

"Yes, Your Majesty," informed Hataria,

The Shah enquired, "Do you follow *Roza*? Do you fast?"

Hataria responded, "No Your Majesty. We do not remain hungry during the day and eat well after sunset as do the followers of Islam. But, we have directions to eat a few morsels less and give the food so saved to the poor."

The Shah enquired, "Do you undergo *nekah* while taking a wife?"

Hataria replied, "Yes, Your Majesty. Like the followers of Islam, we too have *nekah*. Our *mobeds* tie the nuptial knots."

The Shah enquired, "Do you perform *namaz*?"

Hataria replied, "Yes, Your Majesty, we follow the directions of the Creator and offer prayers six times during the day and night."

The Shah asked, "Are you a tradesman?"

Hataria responded, "Yes, Your Majesty, I trade on a small scale. But the main work of this servant is to guide the few remaining Zoroastrians of Iran on behalf of the *Parsi Akabars* of India."

The Shah enquired, "In what occupation are the *Parsis* of India mainly involved?"

Hataria responded, "Most of them are traders. A few are writers in the service of the English." After asking a few more questions, Nasir al-Din Shah observed, "The people of this group are very loyal and are originally of Iranian descent."

Concluding the meeting, Hataria made the following submission:-

"I am one who is always willing to sacrifice himself at His Majesty's feet. Though the *Parsis* of India have, over a long period, been away from the Iranian land, still they consider the Shah of Iran as 'a shadow of the Creator' and have kept friendly relations with Iran. Hence, in this royal durbar as splendid as King Solomon's, this small representation is like an insect flying at night. We pray that it be sympathetically considered by Your Majesty."

"Very well, very well", responded Nasir al-Din Shah.

When the Shah saw Hataria following Qajar court practices, he exclaimed, "This person appears to be noble and deserving."

In this first audience with Nasir al-Din Shah, Hataria created an excellent impression.

After Manekji met with the Shah, the tax was reduced by 100 tomans. Usually, the tax collector and the governor illegally added their share to the tax, which if not more, was equal to the central government's share. After a lot of pleading, through his contacts with Rawlinson and the French ambassador, Count de Gobineau, Manekji obtained an agreement for the entire amount to be remitted from Bombay, directly to the treasury in Tehran. Hence preventing the excesses of the tax collectors in Yazd and Kerman. In the first two years, the tax collectors avoided the instructions of the Shah and collected their share of the tax which after appeals to the Shah was finally stopped and the Zarathushtis were able to breathe a sigh of relief.

Another and still more memorable interview with His Persian Majesty took place during his visit to England in 1873, when the managing committee, ever on the alert drew up a memorial to him, adorned with gold leaf and inscribed in golden letters, in which were outlined in the most flowery and choicest Persian phrases the poverty and sufferings of their unhappy co-religionists in his country, owing to the "Jizyah" being still in force, and winding up with the prayer that His Majesty would extend his mercy by abolishing the tax "by way of a propitiatory offering designed to ward off evil from his most royal person." This memorial, together with one from the Parsis then resident in England, was presented to the Shah at Buckingham Palace, on the 24th of June 1873, by Messrs. Naoroji Fardunji, Dadabhai Naorozi, Ardeshir Kharshedji Wadia, and Dr Rastamji Kavasji Bahadurji who, being then in London, were deputed to do so by the Bombay committee. It should be added that the exertions of the Parsis in London were powerfully supported by the hearty co-operation of two distinguished and generous-minded English officers, viz. Sir Henry Rawlinson and Mr E. B. Eastwick, M.P; who had both been at a previous period prominent representatives of the British Embassy at the Court of Teheran. ¹¹ This meeting was acknowledged by a letter from Buckingham Palace on behalf of the Shah.

"Buckingham Palace, 5th July 1873.

"I am commanded by His Majesty the Shah to acknowledge the receipt of your memorials, praying for the application of measures which are calculated to improve the condition of the Zoroastrians in Persia.

"His Majesty will give this subject his best attention on his return to Persia, and if he finds that your co-religionists are subject to any undue severities, he will take care that redress is afforded them.

"His Majesty is aware of the high character which is borne by the Parsi community both in England and India, and he is glad that he numbers among his own subject as so many members of that enterprising and loyal race.

"His Majesty is gratified by the expression of your good wishes in regards to him."

(Signed) "MALCOLM.

"To Naorozi Fardunji, Esq.,
15 Salisbury Street, Strand."¹²

After returning to Tehran the Shah was not able to take any action because of the strong opposition of the Ulama, the Islamic clergy. Upon Maneckji's request Sir Dinshaw Petit, husband of Shakarbai daughter of Golestan Banu, approached Lord Thomas Northbrook, then Viceroy of India to apply diplomatic pressure on the Qajar king. The viceroy obliged because of the growing political influence of the Parsis in India. On instructions of the Viceroy, the English ambassador to Tehran, Ronald F. Thomson raised the matter of the Zoroastrians' plight with the shah. ¹³

ABOLITION OF JIZYAH

Finally, a petition of May 1882, containing a prayer to His Majesty for its abolition, met with the desired result, and the Jizyah' was declared to be finally doomed. A communication to that effect, dated 27th September 1882, was received by Mr Dinsha Manakji Petit, president of the Zoroastrian Amelioration Fund Committee, from Mr Ronald Thomson of the British Embassy. With Mr Thomson's letter was also transmitted a copy of the royal firman in Persian, decreeing the immediate abolition of the impost, together with an English translation executed by the translator to the Embassy.

Below is the British ambassador's letter conveying this welcome announcement, and the royal firman which promulgated the same glad tidings.

“ TEHRAN, September 21st, 1882.

“ Sir

With reference to the letter addressed to me by the Committee of the Persian Zoroastrian Amelioration Fund on the 8th of September 1881, I have much pleasure in transmitting to you herewith a copy and translation of a firman which has been issued by the Shah wholly abolishing the “Jizyah” tax, and relieving the Zoroastrian community from its payment from the commencement of the present year the 21st of March 1882.—

I am, Sir, your most obedient humble servant,

(Signed) “Ronald F. Thomson.¹⁴

“ The President of the Committee,
Persian Zoroastrian Amelioration Fund.”

ROYAL FIRMAN ISSUED BY HIS MAJESTY NASAREDIN SHAH relieving the Zoroastrians of Persia from the payment of the tribute annually levied from them under the name of Jizyah.

“ In consideration of the many favours and blessings which it has pleased the Almighty to confer upon us, and also as a thanksgiving to Him who has bestowed on us the Royal Crown of Persia, and has granted us the means of affording relief to its inhabitants, it behoves us to provide for the ease and comfort of all our subjects, of whatever tribe, race, community, or creed, so that they may be strengthened and refreshed by the waters of our special favour.

“ Amongst these are the Zoroastrians, residing at Yezd and Kerman, who are the descendants of the ancient population and nobles of Persia, and whose peace and comfort it is our Royal desire now to render more complete than heretofore.

“ Therefore, by the issue of this Royal firman, we order and command that the same taxes, assessments, revenues, and all other Government imposts, trading dues, etc., which are taken from our Mahomedan subjects residing in the towns and villages of Yezd and Kerman, shall be taken in like manner from the Zoroastrians who also reside there, and nothing more nor less.

And whereas in consideration of this arrangement the exaction of the sum of eight hundred and forty-five tomans (845) which was annually levied under another’s name from the said community will be abolished. Therefore from the beginning of the present auspicious year of the Horse, we remit this sum, and absolve the Zoroastrians from its payment henceforward and forever; and now we hereby order and command our Mustaufis and revenue officers of the Royal Exchequer to strike out the said sum entirely from the revenue returns of Yezd and Kerman.

“The present and future Governors of these provinces are to consider the claim for the payment of this tribute as now surrendered forever; and during the present year, and hereafter, should this sum or a part thereof be exacted, they will be held responsible and punished, and in levying the tithes and assessments on water and landed property, all the trading dues, etc., the Zoroastrians must be dealt with in the same manner as our other subjects are treated.

“Given at Teheran in the month of Ramzan, 1299 (August 1882).—Translated by
(Signed) “J. Ibrahim.”¹⁵

During a period of twenty-three years, the managers of the Persian Amelioration Fund had spent about Rs. 109,564 in contributions towards the payment of the “Jizyah.” ¹⁶

OTHER INTERESTS OF MANECKJI

After 1868 Maneckji declined to accept a salary for his labour ¹⁷ a move which may have enhanced his freedom of action. Self-supporting through his merchant activity, Maneckji helped poor Zoroastrians out of his resources. ¹⁸

Maneckji Limji Hataria was interested in history religion and the promotion of the pure form of the Persian language without Arabic words. He was in contact with most of the intellectuals of his time in Iran like Jalal-al-Din Mirza, a Qajar historian and freethinker, the fifty-fifth son of Fath-‘Ali Shah Qajar. He was also interested in all the spiritual leaders of different denominations. Like the spiritual leader of the Ne‘matollāhi order of Sufis, Zayn-al-‘Ābedin Raḥmat ‘Alīšāh, who bestowed on Maneckji a Sufi title, “*Darviš-e fāni* (lit. “transitory dervish”) and the likes of Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh who said religion was believing in superstition. He was also interested in Baha-Allah with whom he had communicated.

He was also instrumental in collecting many manuscripts some of which ended up with Dastur Jamaspji Minocherji JāmāspAsa who has thanked him. He is known to have written a few books and edited some others.

After Hirabayi died in India, Maneckji married an Iranian Zoroastrian from Kerman, Farangis Hormazdyār Ḳosrobandar and he thereby assimilated into the local community. She died a year before him in 1889.

Being a British subject, Maneckji Limji Hataria was under the protection of the British Ambassador to Iran. Nevertheless, there were several attempts on his life, but despite these, he managed to survive to the age of seventy-seven. Maneckji passed away in Tehran on 15th February 1890, seven years after the

abolition of the *jizya tax*. His body was consigned to the local towers of silence. Sadly, after his death, his only son Hormuzji was murdered in Bander Abbas. Hormozji, participated in his father's work in Iran from the very beginning, but details of his life are few; he had two daughters.¹⁹

Even in his old age, Maneckji's commitment to the amelioration of the Zoroastrians of Iran was total, because many of the discriminatory laws against Zoroastrians remained. By the time Maneckji died, the majority of these laws were abolished. The memory of Maneckji Limji Hataria and his work is still remembered today by the Zoroastrians of Iran. A bust of his is displayed in the Yazd Fire Temple. The Dakma built by him is now a tourist attraction and is named after him. His achievements were unprecedented. Maneckji had undertaken a task reported to be "beyond human capacity." Gobineau, the French ambassador had said:

"There was needed nothing short of a miracle to save the *Guebres* as the Zoroastrians were called by the followers of Islam. **Maneckji Limji Hataria performed that miracle!**"



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- 1 History of the Parsis 1884 Dorabji Faramji Karaka Vol 2 pg 52
 - 2 History of the Parsis 1884 Dorabji Faramji Karaka Vol 1 pg 73
 - 3 Shahmardan History of Zarathushtis pg 618
 - 4 Shahmardan History of Zarathushtis pg 619
 - 5 Shahmardan History of Zarathushtis pg 641-42
 - 6 History of the Parsis 1884 Dorabji Faramji Karaka Vol 1 pg 74
 - 7 Quran 9:29 translated by Mohsin Khan <https://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=9&verse=29>
 - 8 Quran 47:4 translated by Mohsin Khan <https://corpus.quran.com>
 - 9 History of the Parsis 1884 Dorabji Faramji Karaka Vol 1 chap. 11. Interviews with the shah. Pg.75
 - 10 ***Here we see the trend to show Zoroastrianism as not different from Islam. This trend is to be found everywhere and in most Pahlavi manuscripts penned after the Islamic invasion of Iran.***
 - 11 History of the Parsis 1884 Dorabji Faramji Karaka Vol 1 pg 75-76
 - 12 History of the Parsis 1884 Dorabji Faramji Karaka Vol 1 pg 77
 - 13 Šahmardān, pp. 632-33
 - 14 History of the Parsis 1884 Dorabji Faramji Karaka Vol 1 pg 79
 - 15 History of the Parsis 1884 Dorabji Faramji Karaka Vol 1 pg 80
 - 16 History of the Parsis 1884 Dorabji Faramji Karaka Vol 1 pg 81
 - 17 Stausberg, 2002, p. 155
 - 18 Šahmardān, p. 639
 - 19 Šahmardān, pp. 641-42

