

BOMBAY



The Parsis who settled in Bombay in the 17th Century came in search of work.
Scene in Bombay Aqua Tint by R.M. Grindlay.

In the mid-sixteenth century, Bombay was a fragmented, inhospitable archipelago of seven small independent islands. This malaria-ridden expanse of jagged rocky outcrops, shifting tidal flats, and dense mangrove forests was beset by harsh climatic conditions. For centuries, the Portuguese and early British empires viewed Bombay as a desolate outpost suitable only for the locals who lived there in scattered pockets.

Dramatic change was brought about by the entry of the East India Company and the traders and merchants who came to Bombay to work for the Company in the 1700s. These itinerant traders and artisans who came to Bombay first helped to build the docks of Bombay. The most celebrated Parsi family involved with the building of the docks was the family of Lovji Nusserwanji Wadia, who came from Surat and later became the main shipwrights to the East India Company.

In 1782 a land reclamation project called the Hornby Vellard project was approved to prevent the destructive tidal waves of the Worli/Mahim creek that beset the islands. Earlier an extensive stretch of lowlying marshy tract known as the 'Great Breach' separated the main island of Bombay from the island of Worli. This was the start of land reclamation projects which continue to date in an effort to extend the shore line of Bombay and push back the constantly encroaching seas. Over time the seven isolated islands became a single large contiguous island connected by a network causeways and embankments, allowing Bombay to expand northwards giving easy access to the people travelling from one island to the other..

By the 1900s, Bombay emerged as a cosmopolitan city where trade was the name of the game. The cotton boom made Bombay the premier maritime city in Asia where fortunes were made and lost. Gothic



Scene in Bombay Aqua Tint by R. Reeve.

Revival architecture, and Neo-classical buildings as evident by the Victoria Terminus and the district around Flora Fountain became the business heart of Bombay. The thriving textile industry, a busy port, the rising stock market, and the presence of merchants from around the globe, fuelled a thriving cosmopolitan economic environment.

By the nineteenth century, Bombay was a vital urban centre, home to Armenians Parsis, Arabs, Afghans and Persian and Chinese merchants, sailors traders and a host of local and European officials, minor nobility and adventurers seeking their fortune. They collectively formed the economic, and cultural tapestry of the city and its diverse identity. It became a city of many languages and many cultural traditions were nurtured on these shores.

The many different people and castes confidently built their own distinct sacred places and institutions. The wealthy Parsi China merchants built Zoroastrian fire temples, Jewish synagogues were built by the Bagdadi Jews, a Shinto temple and a Chinese cemetery were indication of the presence of traders from the Far East and the many mosques celebrated the presence of a large number of Muslim elites.

As generations of Parsis settled in Bombay, they learned to navigate the complex colonial landscape, bargaining effectively with British authorities to preserve their status as the city's leading merchant class. This successful adaptation helped the community to prosper and grow and enabled the Parsis to thrive as a distinct group, while preserving their faith and cultural traditions.

The Parsi community is lauded for its disproportionate philanthropic and civic contribution, in the institutional development of Bombay.

Although the community faces severe demographic constraints, with the population dwindling to about 55,000 nationally and 45,000 in Mumbai, these figures are contentious within the community, as the birth rates are generally guesstimates and the death rates are officially recorded; leaving a margin of error in the calculation. Crucially, the population has never exceeded 140,000 in India and given the high incidence of out-migration the population in Bombay has diminished over time. Historical records indicate that an established Parsi populace existed well before the late 17th century, a presence verified by the construction of a Tower of Silence (dakhma) in 1671. Consequently, the Parsis have exerted an enduring influence on the evolution of Mumbai's educational, scientific, and cultural institutions.

This trajectory of resilience, cultural preservation, and civic adaptation is showcased in the ‘*Bombay Room*’ of the F.D. Alpaiwalla Museum and it is a tribute to the women and men who have been a part of the growth story of the Parsis in Bombay .