

The Journey Continues

By Piroj Wadia | Jam-e-Jamshed Weekly | September 26th, 2004

How best can one describe Sooni Taraporevala? Other than the hat she wears each day of homemaker - wife to Dr Firdaus Bativala and mother to Jehan and Iyanah; she's easily the most accomplished face for a long while, that of an internationally acclaimed script/screenplay writer and as a professional photographer.

When she first conceived her book PARSIS: The Zoroastrians of India - a Photographic Journey she did so with not an inkling of the publishing business. But at the urging of celebrated photographer the erstwhile Raghubir Singh and the keen support of her husband Dr Firdaus Bativala, Sooni went ahead to create a niche for herself and her fledgling company Good Books in the publishing world. Good Books according to Sooni is a value addition to the Zoroastrian trilogy of Good Words Good Thought Good Deeds.

What went in Sooni's favour was that PARSIS was the first ever visual portrait of the community. Perhaps the real blessing came in the form of a guardian angel called Zarir 'Zed' Cama, then CEO of HSBC, who bought 200 copies and initiated corporate sales of the book.

What is appealing about PARSIS: The Zoroastrians of India - a Photographic Journey is that it is a faithful depiction of the community across ages, vocation and social standing. But most importantly it is an unbiased, informed chronicle which sometimes narrates, sometimes depicts and all the time informs the reader about the antecedents, the rituals and the social fabric of the Parsis as a community. A faithful and accurate depiction indeed.

During the interview Sooni Taraporevala averred that: " I have personal opinions about what's happening in the community. But have very consciously stayed away from putting it in the book, because I wanted the book to be a forum which united Parsis rather than fracture them because that's the need of the hour right now I wanted the Parsis to come together." Now that's a thought to follow.

Excerpts:

Q: How was the first edition received?

A: It was received very well. I was sold out in six months of publication. But what was really nice about the first edition was that a lot of people came up to me and identified the people whose pictures I had used. I had just photographed them on the street.

For instance there is a picture of a very distinguished old man in a suit with his man Friday by his side; I wasn't going to put it the first time around. I wasn't sure if he was a Parsi, I had taken it at the Hanging Gardens. My husband Firdaus liked it very much and said he would find out for me who the man was. Firdaus is a dentist and has so many people come in and out of his clinic. He actually found a person who knew that gentleman very well and he got all the information which I included in the caption.

For a lot of the readers it was a sentimental experience as well. I was very grateful about the warmth with which it was received. Some mothers particularly liked reading the Introduction to their children.

Q: You have made some changes in the second edition -- included Homai Vyarawalla in the second edition. What was it like for you to meet her? After all she was the pioneer woman photographer in India.

A: Absolutely...I was amazed when I met her as to how young she was, despite the fact that she's 90. I was really amazed at that. I loved her talk, I loved her sense of humour I loved her courage she's a fantastic lady. There is no book exclusively about her, but I had seen some pictures in various places.

Q: The inclusion of the cricketers - Nari Contractor, Rusi Surti and Polly Umrigar.

A: I am not a cricket person. But it was my husband Firdaus who said: 'What's wrong with you? You have to include these.' I was lucky that Rusi Surti was also here so I got all of them at CCI.

Q: You changed the cover too.

A: Frankly, this picture is my top of the pops. But last time we hesitated using it because it was the back of a figure; and Zed Cama preferred the boy raising his hand. Also it was my first book, so I played safe. Now Overlook Press my publishers preferred to go with this one as it gave a face to the community and the book.

Q: Your book is really the first of its kind. Now you have done a second edition and would you consider a third edition?

A: (Laughs) I would like to make a fresh start. Because I think now this is it for this book. This one has taken all my time and energy. It's a big thing to bring out a book. The other great thing about this journey for me is that I love books, I grew up with books, my grandfather had a library and for me to be a publisher was as much of a high as it was as the book was well received. The whole journey of how a book is made, how to produce it, how to print it, all the elements, was a fantastic learning experience for me. But now if I did it again it would be about the Diaspora.

Q: There is a vacuum of writing too on the Parsi Diaspora. Is that something you would like to tackle. Considering we have really a large number of Parsis living in UK, USA and Canada.

A: I would love to do that but with two small kids, I voluntarily don't enjoy traveling and it would involve traveling. So I may take it up sometime in the future.

Q: What are your plans now for this book. This time you have a publisher too.

A: This book has been co-published with an American publisher called Overlook Press and he has also bought over a press in England called Duckworth Press. So half the print run my company posted and the other half went to New York - for distribution in USA, UK, Canada and hopefully Australia. So that will be released end of October. I want the book to reach university libraries around America and also among the non-Parsi population. I went to college in America and I know it would fit into the libraries there because it is the first visual portrait of the Parsis. So that's my hope for the American edition. And over here in India I just hope that Parsis continue to love it and buy it.

Q: How did distribute it overseas last time?

A: I didn't have a system in place. So I would Fedex 10 copies at a time which was very expensive to my cousins in Canada and Detroit, and from their basement and through the internet they would sell it. Now it will be available on-line on Amazon as well at select book shops. So the distribution will be less homemade now. Even in India I have IBD which is distributing it all over India.

Q: Who do you think this book will be picked by? A lot of the younger generation?

A: I would hope so. A lot of my peers and older people. Cyrus Oshidar of MTV said that: " This is the first time I feel proud of my people." Overseas the Parsis liked the book as they could show the non Parsis who we are, where we come from, how we worship...