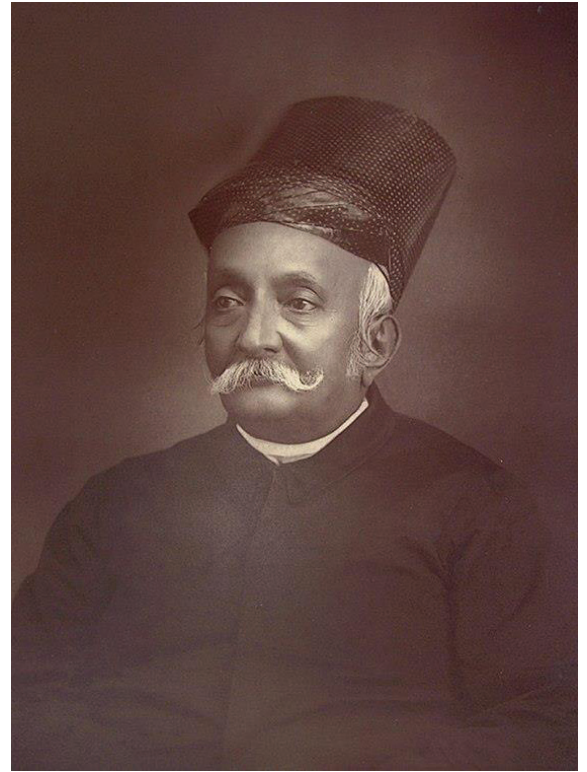




The Parsi community has contributed to Indian business and the economy and made several social interventions through philanthropy. Many families were instrumental to the development of British India as they took Indian products to other parts of the world through their businesses. A notable family in this community are the Petits, one of the few Indian families to be given a hereditary baronetcy by Queen Victoria in recognition of their work for the betterment of British India. The patriarch of the family at the time and the first Petit baronet was Sir Dinshaw Maneckji Petit, who was also one of the first Indians to start cotton textile mills in India.

Born on 13th June 1803 in his maternal grandfather, Jeejeebhoy Dadabhoy's house, at Bora Bazar Street, Fort, Dinshaw Petit was the eldest son of Maneckji Nusserwanji Petit. The Petit family got their unique surname from a nickname given to their ancestor by his French colleagues. Nasserwanjee Cowasjee Bomanjee, the ancestor of the current Petit family in Bombay, worked as a shipping clerk and interpreter for French and East India Company's vessels arriving at the Bombay Port. Due to his short build, the French would call him "le petit Parsi", thus immortalising his successive generations.



Petit was married at the young age of 14 to Sakarbai Panday in 1837. In their long life together of 53 years, they had six sons and eight daughters, who were all remarkable in their own right, constructing libraries, schools, sanatoriums, and medical facilities for people and animals. His daughter, Mithuben Hormusji Petit, was an activist in the Indian freedom struggle and participated in the Dandi March organised by Mahatma Gandhi. His son, also named Dinshaw Maneckji Petit because of the baronetcy law, which stated that all holders of the title would have to relinquish their names and assume those of the first Baronet upon succeeding, was known for the court case about tax evasion and setting up of shell companies for tax avoidance (Shetty 2021). The third Baronet, Fali, was married to Sylla Tata, sister to Jehangir Ratanji Dadabhoy Tata. His granddaughter Ratanbai Petit married Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. Their links to other important Parsi families like the Tatas and Wadias ensured their ever-growing prosperity (Bhargava 2022). Surprisingly, Petit was also an early importer of chikoo saplings, which he planted in his garden in Mumbai (Pati 2021).

Dinshaw Maneckji Petit was the first person to introduce looms in a weaving mill in the year 1855 and was a pioneer in the dyes industry. He started one of the first cotton mills in India in Bombay in 1858, named The Oriental Mill, and later the Manockjee Petit Spinning and Weaving Company in 1860 (Benjamin 2000, 872). Dinshaw Petit founded the Bombay Mill-owners Association in 1975, and under his leadership, the number of mills almost doubled from 43 to 82 between 1884 and 1898. With the money he earned from his companies and other ventures, he bought the Bombay Hydraulic Electric Press Company, Mazgaon Spinning and Manufacturing Company, Victoria Spinning and Manufacturing Company and a steamer named 'Romania' to supply his textiles to other countries.





His businesses ensured the family name would appear in history books, and his philanthropic efforts promised an entire chapter. The Parsi community is renowned for its contribution to social outreach, and this principle is seen clearly in the life and times of Dinshaw Maneckji Petit. At the end of the American Civil War in 1865, many people had lost their life-time earnings in the share market. Petit wrote off their debts, amounting to 30,00,000 rupees, and provided funds to people who incurred losses in this period. He was the founder and trustee of the Persian Zoroastrian Amelioration Fund, which was instrumental in abolishing the jizya tax to destitute Irani Zoroastrians in 1882 and convinced many to immigrate to India from Iran. Dinshaw Petit was also part of several associations and societies, such as the Bombay Association, the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Royal Asiatic Society, the Sassoon Institute, and the Parsi Chief Matrimonial Court. He was also the Director of the Bank of Bombay (Yonekawa 1987, 571), founder of Ripon Club in 1884, and the Vice-President of the Bombay Presidency Association in 1885.

In 1886, a notably important year in his life, he was appointed the Sheriff of Bombay, for which the Illustrated London News published a portrait and brief biography. The Bombay Gazette wrote the following: “During the past few years, there has hardly been a public movement in which Sir Dinshaw’s bountiful hand has not made itself felt, and the Jubilee festivities owe much of their splendour to his munificence. His private charities are even more

extensive, and many are the individuals and families, laid low by adverse fate, who have found in him a ready and willing supporter. The list of his charities is too long for reproduction; but it shows the magnificent total of fifteen lakhs of rupees, bestowed by the large-hearted generosity of the man whom the Queen has been pleased to honour, and of whom all Bombay justly feels proud (The Illustrated London News 1887)”.

Petit was also appointed the President of the Gaurakshak Mandali of Bombay (Menon 2017, 37). Remarkably, in December, he was the first Parsi to serve as an official of the Viceroy’s Legislative Council, and three years later, he received an invitation to the Viceroy’s Council in Calcutta. Naser-ul-Din Shah Qajar of Iran bestowed a Royal Diploma and the title “Shero Khurshid” upon him. In 1887, Queen Victoria knighted Dinshaw Petit during the Jubilee celebration at the request of Lord Reay, governor of Bombay. On 1st September 1890, a few days after his wife Sakarbai passed away, Queen Victoria made him a Baronet. Through this title, the family received a coat of arms with the slogan, “Consequitur quod cunque petit” which means “He obtains whatever he asks for” (Giara 2001).

Dinshaw Maneckji Petit passed away on 5th May 1901 at his residence in Malabar Hill, Petit Hall (The Bombay Gazette 1901). The uthamna, a Parsi condolence meeting, was held in different places around India, including Bombay, Thane, Lonavala, Pune, Indore, Calcutta, Hong Kong, Navsari and Surat. To honour his legacy, the people of Bombay funded the construction of a marble statue in his likeness in Tairsee Bhatia Baug near Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus. This act was a token of appreciation for his exceptional contributions as both a philanthropist and a captain of industry.



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