



A city is often associated with the luminaries who developed it, and for Bombay, one such personality is Jagannath Shankarshet. Passionate and nostalgic about his city, Bombay, Jagannath Shankarshet, known fondly as Nana Shankarshet, devoted his life to the city's political, social, educational, cultural and economic development. A statue, school, street, chowk and ghat in and around the city testify to his great contribution. He lived in a large wada or neighbourhood in Girgaum. This area was demolished in 1964 to construct a high-rise building.

Jagannath Shankarshet was born in a wealthy Murkute family of goldsmiths on 10th February, 1803 in Murbad. He completed his education in Pune and higher studies in Bombay. By the time he was eighteen years old, he was fluent in English and Sanskrit (David 2011, 117). Hailing from a business family, Jagannath Shankarshet started his career as a successful merchant and learned trading norms. He managed his trade and business with great success and respect. (Koppikar 2015).

He contributed immensely to the civic life of Bombay. Nana was at the forefront of procuring the privilege for Indians to be a part of the Grand Jury, the first privilege obtained by Indians when, in 1826, he sent a signed petition to the British Parliament to protest against the exclusion of Indians from the Jury, when trying criminal cases. Consequently, the British Parliament enacted a law enabling the inclusion of Indians in the Jury (Shirodkar 2009, 3).



The sprawling Victoria Gardens, housing a zoo, botanical gardens and the Bhau Daji Lad Museum, was the product of his vision and efforts. At a public meeting held in the Town Hall in 1858, Nana discussed the idea of a garden and museum. Under the guidance of eminent personalities of Mumbai, among whom Nana was one, the Agri-Horticultural Society of Western India was established by the Governor, John Malcolm, in 1830. Jagannath was instrumental in organising and developing gardens of his own, one flower garden on the premises of his residence and the other horticultural garden at Matunga, where plants from different parts of India were brought and nurtured. He conducted successful experiments on sugarcane by importing seed from Mauritius and cultivating it in his garden. His garden became a part of the Victoria Gardens, of which he was the architect. He initiated a fund collection drive and was the first contributor, offering Rs. 5000 for setting up the Victoria Gardens (Transactions of the Agri-Horticultural Society of Western India 1843, 78); (Sunthankar 1988, 98-99).

Likewise, he was also instrumental in constructing the Prince Albert Museum, now named Bhau Daji Lad Museum, in Mumbai. When European officials George Buist and Dr. George Birdwood approached Nana with this idea for a museum, Nana immediately appealed to the government about its significance. At a public meeting organised to inaugurate the Garden and the Museum in 1862, Sir Bartle Frere, the Governor, bestowed the honour on Nana by requesting him to perform the opening ceremony (David 2011, 116).

He was the first foremost promoter of female education in Western India since 1832. Sir Bartle Frere remarked that he helped further the cause of education by establishing the Mumbai Native Education Society in 1824, the first of its kind in Western India. It was renamed and reinvented several times until it came to be known as the Elphinstone Educational Institute or Elphinstone College. The Students' Literary & Scientific Society, established in 1849 by a group of educated men, promoted female education in Bombay by setting up Parsi, Marathi and Gujarati schools with the support of Jagannath Shankarshet, Dadoba Pandurang and Dr. Bhau Daji. Jagannath Shankarshet's cottage house was the premise for the society's schools. To set an example for the public, he encouraged his daughter and his friend's daughters to attend the schools (Proceedings of the Students' Literary and Scientific Society 1854- 56, 10), (Preeta 1999, 485-494). Later, as the number of girls increased, a guesthouse meant originally for his business friends visiting Bombay was converted into a girls' school. Nana gave the guesthouse away for free to run the school, said Vilas Sunkersett, a fifth-generation descendant of Nana (DNA 2018).

Nana personally covered the expenses for establishing a school for the Kolis or fishermen. He also insisted that the Board of Education pass a resolution to make special efforts to provide education to the underprivileged. He emphasised the need for vernacular language as the medium of instruction to the Board of Education on 1st May 1846, as recorded in the minutes (Sunthankar 1988, 220-221). Due to his contribution to vernacular education for women, a topper in Sanskrit from the SSC Board, who continued further studies in Sanskrit, was granted a scholarship in his name. Sita Ajaonkar won the much-coveted Jagannath Shankar Sheth scholarship at the Matriculation in 1919 and was the first woman to secure this honour (Moorthi 2003, 1113).



Besides education, his other notable contribution was the cultural development of Bombay. At his initiative and a few others, the government, using the sale proceeds of the Elphinstone Circle Theatre, built the Grant Road Theatre in February 1846 on a plot donated by Shankarshet. Initially, it displayed English plays until an actress-cum manager, Mrs Deacle, was specially invited from England to manage the Grant Road Theatre as its first lessee. The theatre began to attract even Indian audiences. The charges per head were Rs. 5 for the box, Rs. 3 for the pit and Rs. 2 for the gallery. The performances took place between 8:00 pm and 9:00 pm. Fifty years later, they converted the theatre into a bakery. (David 2011, 204) Vilas added, "He was known to give land and space to people when needed. He set up the first native dispensary, first law college, first native theatre, and was associated with setting up Grant Medical College, JJ Hospital and JJ School of Arts" ("A look at legacy of city's father" 2018). His benevolence also finds reflection in the innumerable temples in Girgaum (David 2011, 117).

He was the founder member and the first president of the pioneering political association in Bombay and western India on 26th August 1852, which became the forerunner of the Indian National Congress (General Department 1852, 175-175). Under his leadership, people sent several petitions to the local government and the British Parliament on issues related to administration, education, judiciary, commerce and civic life. Nana's British friends, who had retired and were living in London, took a keen interest in this and formed the Indian Reform Association on 29th October 1870 with Keshub Chandra Sen as President to educate the British people and the Parliament about conditions in India. However, the association's activities suffered a setback due to the Revolt of 1857. Jagannath Shankarshet and Bhau Daji were suspected of being involved in this conspiracy, although there was no evidence against them (Rodrigues 2007, 129 -144).

He played another significant role in the infrastructural development of Bombay by establishing the first railway in India. As the first Indian Director of the Great Indian Peninsular (GIP) Railway, Nana tended to its initial troubles and even housed some railway departments in his mansion during the initial stages. In 1845, along with Sir Jamsethji Jeejeebhoy, Nana formed the Indian Railway Association to establish railways in India. This Association was incorporated eventually as the Great Indian Peninsula (GIP) Railway, presently Central Railway. Nana and Jeejeebhoy were the only Indian Directors of GIP Railways. Nana participated in India's first train journey between Mumbai and Thane on 16th April 1853 (David 2011, 117). "I have seen his signature on the minutes of the meeting of those times.", said Vilas, with pride ("A look at legacy of city's father", 2018).

Jagannath Shankar Sheth Dispensary was founded in 1858 in Girgaum and offered free medical aid. Amla Navrekar Vilas's wife remarked that the idea of the dispensary was to get medicines to Indians. Earlier, the English doctors treated only the rich Indians ("A look at legacy of city's father", 2018). Nana held prestigious positions in organisations. He became the third Indian Member to join the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society in 1845, which was exclusively for distinguished Europeans (Sunthankar 1988, 97 -98). Jagannath Shankarshet and Jemshedji Jeejabahai were amongst the first 12 Indian Justices of Peace (Kanerkar 1966, 432). Jagannath was also one of the three Indian Directors of the Bombay Steam Navigation Co. in 1845 (David 2011, 139).

Nana's monumental achievements stand as an exemplary role and guide to posterity. He passed away in Bombay on 31st July 1865. A year after his death, the Asiatic Society of Bombay erected a marble statue to honour him. A road, Jagannath Shankar Sheth, and a junction, Nana Chowk, are named after him in South Mumbai. He rightly deserves the title of 'Maker of Modern Maharashtra'.



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