

Peabody – The Bombay Link.

Cowasjee Jahangir Readymoney, Kt ,CSI, “Peabody of the East” and

M C Murzban, ICE, FRIBA, a founder of charitable housing in Bombay,



In 2012 I came across a statue of “Peabody of the East” and after some research this uncovered a link between two Parsi citizens of Bombay. They were contemporaries, philanthropists and both linked to Peabody. Cowasjee Jahangir Readymoney (1812 – 1878), was a wealthy Parsi philanthropist living in Bombay. In his biography his adopted son writes “When a man has fairly earned by the admission of his contemporaries the title of a “Peabody of the East” as the late Sir Cowasjee Jahangir Readymoney Kt. CSI. did, any apology for telling the story of his life would be unnecessary”

Cowasjee was the son of Jahangir Hirji and Mirbae Readymoney, born into a wealthy and established Parsi family in Bombay. His grandfather and two grand uncles originated from Navsari near Surat, moved to Bombay, and made their fortune dealing in the lucrative opium trade with China. The name Readymoney is thought to have been attributed to them due to their business and trade deals and later was formally adopted by the family. Cowasjee also entered the world of business and worked as a broker for leading European firms before trading on his own and becoming well established in the colonial hierarchy in Bombay where he also acted for the authorities overseeing the collection of tax.

There is a history of philanthropy among wealthy indigenous families in Bombay at this time which was often aimed at their own communities. Whilst following this tradition, Readymoney generally ensured the benefits were available to all and this was in conjunction with the planning vision of the British colonial rulers of the day. His son writes “It was a noteworthy feature of his charity that that no discrimination was to be made between race and religion”. This closely resembled the wishes of George Peabody, laid down in his instruction to his trustees in 1862 which stated the management of the fund should not be determined by religion or politics. An unusual example was a donation in 1870, following the Franco-Prussian war and made via the governor of Bombay, Sir Bartle Freer, for the sum of £1,000 to be equally distributed between the wounded of both armies.



Readymoney Pyaav on old tram route, Mumbai



St Thomas Cathedral Fountain
Mumbai

Water charity was a widely recognised form of benevolence in late 19th century Bombay enabling the creation of public drinking fountains known as “pyaavs”, serving local inhabitants and on occasion livestock by means of lower troughs. More ornate fountains were also provided such as the St Thomas fountain gifted by Readymoney. It was unusual for a Parsi to be associated with the Christian church and with the symbolism of a cross on the top the displeasure of the Parsi community was expressed by giving the fountain the nickname of “Cowasjee Cross”. In all Readymoney created 40 drinking fountains around the city, imported from Britain, and available for all to use. A survey conducted in 2008 could only identify 6 remaining in Mumbai but it is still possible to view an example of these in London, as in 1869 he arranged for the erection of another fountain in Regents Park, located on the Broadwalk. Now known as the “Readymoney Fountain” it was gifted “as a token of gratitude to the people of England for the protection enjoyed by him and his fellow Parsee countrymen under British rule in India”



Readymoney Fountain, Regents Park,

Readymoney was however better known for his donations which enabled the provision of educational and health services. These included the University Convocation Hall Bombay, the Byculla Ophthalmic Hospital, the Hyderabad Lunatic Asylum and the Mori Road Public Gardens. Although there is a reference to ownership of residential housing estates in Bombay I am not aware of any link between him and the provision of social housing. It appears the title “Peabody of the East” is a reflection of his philanthropy and not related to housing.



Elphinstone College, Mumbai.



University Convocation Hall with statue of Sir Cowasjee Readymoney by Sir Thomas Woolner to the front.

However the provision of housing for the poor was an issue. Khan Bahadur Mucherji Cowasji Murzban (1839 – 1917) was a Parsi engineer and architect who worked for the Bombay Public Works Department (PWD) from 1857 to 1893. He had a successful career, becoming president of the PWD and Executive Engineer for the Municipal Corporation of Bombay and was responsible for the design, commonly in association with English architects, and supervision of many of Bombay's ornate Victorian public buildings and works.

A skilled engineer he successfully redesigned the foundations and support structures of the General Post Office that had been based on an English architect's drawings sent out from Britain but which developed major structural faults during construction and otherwise would have led to collapse. In 1874 he travelled to Europe and visited the construction of the Dundee Rail Bridge and his son notes that in his diary he recorded his concerns fearing the bridge would collapse. In the event it did so, as was famously recorded by the Scottish poet William McGonagall;

“That your central girders would not have given way,
At least many sensible men do say,
Had they been supported on each side with buttresses”

The construction of Elphinstone College and State Record Office, 1889, provides a link between these two men, being a building that was designed by Murzban in his official role at the PWD together with English architect John Adams and primarily funded by Sir Cowasjee Readymoney. I am not aware of any reports or letters to confirm if they communicated directly during this period but they came from within the same Parsi community, occupied a similar senior position within the colonial hierarchy, were both active philanthropists and will have been aware of each other's positions.

Unlike Readymoney, who appears to be more closely linked to the colonial planning vision of the then governor of Bombay, Sir Bartle Freer, the philanthropy shown by Murzban, unrelated to his official work, was primarily aimed at the Parsi community and in particular he recognised the need for good quality housing. An article in the *Indian and Eastern Engineer* in April 1903 records “...it was apparent to him that the best means of improving the sanitary condition of Bombay, was to provide suitable sanitary dwellings...” and it continued “....They are constructed on the principle of Peabody's homes in England”. An earlier article in the *Times of India*, March 1889, more specifically referred to Peabody, stating Murzban “put himself, through one of his friends, in communication with the trustees of The Peabody Donation Fund to become fully acquainted with the way in which houses built from the Peabody Donation Fund for the use of the poor in certain parts of London had been let and otherwise managed....”



M C Murzban



Murzban Colony at Gilder Road
Tardeo, Bombay 2006

His housing schemes, known as “colonies”, started with the Cheap Residential Quarters for Parsis in 1887. The land in Falkland Road was gifted by Mr Framjee Petit and subscriptions were received from wealthy Parsi families together with many smaller donations. The rents on the initial buildings were allowed to accumulate to enable further building to take place on the site. This first scheme was followed by 2 colonies in 1890 at Tardeo and Jacobs Circle. A further colony was created at Gilder Lane, Tardeo in 1899.

George Peabody had initiated the Donation Fund using his own capital. Murzban did not have such wealth but with his contacts raised funding by subscription from members of the Parsi community. The buildings were named after many of the individual benefactors and separate buildings within a colony while of similar style could be of an individual design and commonly were named after the individual, family or group that had sponsored it. This was unlike the Peabody estates of London which had the recognisable architectural style of their main architect, Henry Darbishire and there is no evidence that Murzban used Peabody building design ideas in any significant way. The occupiers were not the destitute but artisans, craftsmen and workers on low wages and additional facilities for their use included laundries, a school and a dispensary. In her study of the making of British Bombay the author, Preeti Chopra, suggests that Murzban had fathered a tradition that enabled the provision of charitable housing in Bombay that by 1966 was estimated to house half of the Parsi population of the city.

In the biography of Murzban there is an appendix listing the significant endowments from 1889 to 1909 to the trust for housing the Parsi poor and in whose memory they were made. There is no record of any donations by or to commemorate Readymoney, which further suggests his charity was not to be restricted to any social group or caste.



As mentioned I first came across these links when Dr Andrew Fraser, a historian and friend of my family mentioned he knew of a statue titled “Peabody of the East” in Edinburgh University which I traced to a room in the Old Quad. The archivist could not find a direct connection with Edinburgh University although he did trace the document detailing the gift in 1874 by a Dr Birdwood, who had close links with Bombay. In addition the University Principal at the time, Sir Alexander Grant, had also been Professor of History and Political Economy at Elphinstone College. The statue is by Sir Thomas Woolner, as is the statue of Readymoney which still stands outside the Convocation Hall in the University of Mumbai.

Returning to the biography of Readymoney his son also writes “There are implied in the sobriquet of ‘a Peabody’ a large minded benevolence, a sympathy with human suffering, and a sensitive appreciation of the wants of others that may fairly be styled exemplary and that must excite general admiration”. Although somewhat dated and stilted as an epitaph it still rings true.

Ralph Lucey

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