

The passing of Burjor Jal Avari MBE – 1938-2019

Paying tribute to my elder brother Burjor at his funeral on 12 April 2019, Ms SuAndi of Black Artists Organisation in Manchester described Burjor as “A mountain disguised as a man; a trojan horse infiltrating colonial history with the truth of multiculturalism; your weapons were honesty; your goals peace and mutual respect; when we speak of modesty we speak of you - humble and unassuming, yet pushing aside bureaucracy; when we speak of learning, it is the knowledge we gain from you; when we speak of friendship it will always be our nickname for you; we will miss you in the smallest moments - when passing a lecture theatre or looking into a classroom, or taking a coffee in Costa after Tesco shopping. Your spirit will always be with us in every way of every day; this is not goodbye, it is au revoir”.

Burjor was a pioneer in fearlessly promoting multiculturalism in the UK. His true moment came in 1987 following the race riots in various towns and cities of the UK. He passionately felt that the peace and tranquillity of the UK society must somehow be continued to be preserved by drawing together lessons from history. This gave rise to his fame by becoming a champion in the promotion of multi-culturalism.

Burjor was born in 1938 in pre-independent India to Parsi Zoroastrian parents in a small, but a historic town called Navsari in Gujarat. Also born in the same street in Malesar, Navsari, many years earlier was that another iconic Parsi Zoroastrian, Dr Dadabhoy Naoroji—who came to be known as the “Grand Old Man of India”. Naoroji went on to become the first Parliamentarian of Indian origin to take his seat in the British House of Commons in 1892; he was the first Indian to utter the words “My people are clamouring for swaraj” (i.e.self-rule) in Parliament.

As a young boy of three, Burjor travelled with his mum from Navsari to Mombasa in Kenya to unite with his dad. Some of his early years were also spent in Zanzibar, before the family finally settled in Mombasa in 1948. Despite the difficulties caused all over the world on account of the Second World War, Burjor’s early childhood both in imperial India and colonial East Africa was fun and full of homely love. The colonial Government, despite its philosophy of promoting separate development, nonetheless valued the importance of good education for its citizens. Burjor was fortunate to be taught by highly dedicated Asian teachers of the old order. Learning tables by heart up to forty, reciting page by page words from the Oxford English Dictionary, and cramming line by line Shakespeare’s immortal plays, were part of Burjor’s education and growth in the early formative years. It won him very good results in his Cambridge

Overseas School Certificate examinations (equivalent of GCE “O” Levels). It qualified Burjor for a full British Government scholarship to proceed to the UK for further studies. With the assistance of the British Council in Kenya, Burjor became the first Parsi Zoroastrian from a small community settled in Mombasa to travel to the UK in 1955 on the Union Castle Line ship, Braemar Castle.

Upon arrival to the UK, he was enrolled at Portsmouth College of Technology and read five “A” levels, including classical Latin. This meant admission to Manchester University, where he read history. After graduation, the Colonial Office, being the funders of Burjor’s education in the UK, insisted that he obtained a formal qualification in Education. Burjor there upon proceeded to Oxford before returning to Kenya in 1961. In Kenya, he became one of the first Asian teachers to teach in a prestigious all black school. He was asked by the Department of Education in Kenya to take up the task of updating the secondary school history syllabus in readiness for the Kenya that was soon to become independent in 1963. One of his first recommendations was that the revised history syllabus should carry a greater emphasis on the slave trade that commenced in the Tudor period, as opposed to children having to learn by heart the names of the of the six wives of King Henry VIII! In Burjor’s mind, it was important that the black kids should acquire a good sound knowledge of how the black people came to be associated with Europe and America.

A few years later, Burjor returned to the UK to continue his teaching career, largely in Manchester. Despite all the problems faced by the Thatcher Government in the early years of her administration with the miners, the print workers, and the dockers, nothing was more fearful than the ugly race riots that tore apart the peace and tranquillity of the UK society in 1987. The late Lady Thatcher, despite her many brush ups with different sectors in the society, recognised that the race issue had a more disturbing underlying reason, which needed to be understood and properly contained.

Taking advantage of this new climate, Burjor wrote a paper for the Department of Education recommending that the school syllabuses required to be overhauled. His paper promoted the concept of emphasis on multicultural education in every subject across the school curriculum. So, for instance, history lessons should not be merely confined to the study of European history, and geography lessons should cover the study of the entire globe. In domestic science, the kids should learn about the different foods of the different cultures, and so on and so forth. Burjor’s paper was enthusiastically received, leading to the establishment of the first and only faculty in the UK of multicultural studies at Manchester. In the same year, Burjor also gave a series of talks to the Manchester Police, so that the police may address, in a proportionate manner, the subject of crowd control made up of multicultural protestors. His reasoned

and temperate language promoted in his lectures moved the Head of Manchester Police, to write to the Prime Minister in praise of Burjor's work in promoting multiculturalism in the New England that was now emerging, with the increasing arrival in large numbers of people from different ethnic communities, originating largely from the former British Colonies. This led to the late Lady Thatcher putting forward Burjor's name for inclusion in the 1988 Queen's Honours List, when Burjor was invited to the Palace to receive his MBE.

Thereafter, Burjor spent many years in promoting multiculturalism and interfaith activities, particularly in Manchester. Burjor began writing for a wider public, including producing his three outstanding books. Mr Peter K M Ma, a Senior Community Officer working for the Hong Kong Office in London, wrote in respect of Burjor's book "British Soil – Chinese Roots", being a fruit of many years of research and refined writing by Burjor Avari and the Buckleys, themselves the best example of integration of two cultures – a partnership of two worlds."

Burjor's second book printed in 2007 on "India: The Ancient Past – A history of the Indian Subcontinent from c.7000 BC to AD 1200" was described by Professor (Lord) Bhikhu Parekh of the then University of Westminster, as being "A balanced and well researched book – a most reliable guide to the period of Indian history that it covers. It displays considerable mastery of primary and secondary literature and distils it into a wonderfully lucid exposition. This book should be of interest to both lay readers and academic experts".

Then in 2013 appeared "Islamic Civilisation in South Asia" – a history of Muslim power and presence in the Indian Subcontinent. Describing the book, Professor Francis Robinson, of South Asian History at the Royal Holloway College, University of London, wrote: "The author's story is extremely well told. This will be a most accessible book most pleasingly, his exposition, working over some heavily contested areas of history, is very well balanced".

Burjor cultivated strong and lasting friendships in the academia. At Manchester, he became a close friend of the late Professor John Hinnells – one of 20th century strongest exponents in the UK of the Zoroastrian faith; as well as the late Professor Ali Mazrui, who to his great credit in the academic world generally also went on to become the first black Professor of Political Science in the entire Continent of Africa, when he took his seat at Makerere University College in Kampala, Uganda.

In regard to his own Zoroastrian Community in Manchester Burjor was the founding member of the North West Zoroastrian Community – NWZC – alongside with his wife Zarin, Mr Eruch Cavasji and Mr and Mrs Zomorrody. The current Chairperson, Mr Derius Dastor, paying his tribute said: “Burjor was an iconic Parsi within our minute community and a true Zoroastrian in spirit and action. His selfless kindness and generosity of spirit and his intellect, left us in awe, as did his powers of oratory and his desire to help others. We had sadly lost not just a fellow Parsi and friend but an individual who made the most laudable impact through his years by our side and through his works and his interaction with his fellow man.”

In his Eulogy delivered at Burjor’s funeral on 12 April 2019, describing their sixty year friendship, George Gheverghese Joseph, an Economist from Manchester, said Burjor was “a restless spirit at times - he was at his best involved in thinking, writing and debating subjects, which usually had a universal theme. He was a multiculturalist at heart, passionate in his advocacy, but willing to listen to those who had different views. His intellectual incorruptibility in argument was amazing. He had an impish sense of humour, particularly effective in puncturing pomposities. He had an uncanny way of dealing with people who felt that they had been slighted, but my abiding memory of Burjor remains the last time I saw him at the door of his house, when he gave me a hug. During the sixty years of close friendship, we had dispensed with physical demonstrations of affection, including even handshakes. And that was the true measure of the man”.

And then again, William Martin Whalley, a Senior Lecturer in Micro Biology at Manchester Metropolitan University, speaking at Burjor’s funeral both for himself and his wife, Anna, and for Emeritus Professor Nels Hamilton Granholm of South Dakota State University, USA, said “Our combined friendship with Burjor began twenty nine years ago. A fellow graduate of Manchester University, he first entered its portals in 1957, five years before I did. He studied in the Department of History, whereas I started life in the sciences, eventually moving to lecture in microbiology at the Manchester Metropolitan University. We both relished the history of this city. Myself, very much an amateur, mainly concerned with the restoration of its historic network of canals, whilst Burjor investigated the whole range of sociological issues associated with the rise of Manchester to international fame. Together we attended one of Burjor’s celebrated “Town and Gown” evening lectures, advertised as “multicultural studies”. Burjor firmly believed that inter-racial harmony, and religious tolerance, could be achieved provided people took the trouble to listen to each other’s point of view. Burjor and I also maintained regular contact via telephone, email, letter and a card. We often met for coffee

or lunch at our old University haunts, and more recently in a little Italian café in Didsbury. Our one-to-one seminars lasted anything up to two hours, over two different slices of cake, each halved and shared; we covered everything from politics, via religion, to Brexit (Burjor being very much a man of socialist principles, and me somewhat on the opposite side). Never a cross word was uttered and each difference usually ended with laughter. Four days before he passed away, Burjor looked at me and said one word “Brexit”! Had he changed his mind? Burjor, you were the brother I never had and we shall stay in touch with your lovely family as long as we live.”

The outpouring of all the tributes and kind words reached its finale when Professor (Lord) Bhikhu Parekh suggested that a Fund should be set up in memory of Burjor to arrange an annual Memorial Lecture on the theme of multiculturalism, where eminent speakers from around the world should be invited to the Manchester Metropolitan University. This suggestion was immediately endorsed by Catherine Danks, the Senior Lecturer in the Department of History, Politics and Philosophy at the University. Burjor Avari Memorial Fund will soon be opened where everyone would be invited to contribute to this worthy cause in our troubled and strife ridden world.

Burjor endured his long battle with cancer for almost fourteen years, during which period, after various chemotherapy sessions, upon returning home he would not curl up in bed but instead sat at his computer, which culminated in the publication of his various books. He leaves behind, the loves of his life - Zarin, his wife and childhood sweetheart to whom he was married for forty-nine years, and their two lovely daughters, Rushna and Anahita. They have always been his pillars of strength. Burjor was universally loved by all his wider family and will be sincerely missed.

At his funeral, his niece from Canada wrote: “Burjor Uncle was a man of the people – he loved the colourful tapestry of people in his life; especially the residents of Coronation Street. He was a huge Corrie fan – when the story of Deirdre Rashid being jailed for fraud was aired, I remember him calling our home since he was sincerely concerned about Deirdre. A lively conversation ensued with my dad but Burjor Uncle clearly had the pulse of the nation! My Uncle was a kind man - always standing up for the underdog in society. He was a gentle man - he did not judge and he never raised his voice. We should all endeavour to be a little more like him”.

NOSHIR J AVARI

23 April 2019