

“If you think you’re too small to make an impact, try going to bed with a mosquito in the room!”

What are your thoughts on the World Zoroastrian Youth Leaders Forum (WZLYF 2.0) that is due to commence shortly at the ASHA Centre, which you’ve founded?

A. I’ve just read the biographies of the 30 young Zoroastrians from all over the world who are coming to the ASHA Centre to take part in the second World Zoroastrian Youth Leaders Forum from May 24 to June 2, 2024. I am in awe of them! They are all brilliant. They are enthused with the idea of service not just to our community but also taking responsibility for our shared planet. They are true Zoroastrians: proactive, creative, full of dynamic energy and generosity of spirit. Our faith is safe with them!

You are currently the President of WZO UK. What are the highlights of your term—and what lies ahead?

A. The highlight of being WZO President is bringing together of the Iranian and Parsi Zoroastrians to celebrate our great religion that has survived against all odds. Although born in India and bought up in England, my family were Iranis from Yazd. It’s my mission to bridge both communities that make up our vibrant diasporas. I also hope that my being a woman is a clear signal that we Zoroastrians practise what our Prophet preached—equality of the sexes.

I have used my position as WZO President to talk and interact with the wider community, especially among other faiths about the beauty and profound nature of our faith. We are so ancient and yet so modern in our outlook. I believe we have in our DNA the need to be at the forefront of action to care for our planet, to ensure equality and protect diversity for all, to be generous and bringers of joy and true happiness.

I am proud to have researched and executed a fabulous exhibition of our Zoroastrian good-and-great from around the world, from different periods of history, to grace the World Zoroastrian Organisation building in Feltham, UK. Visitors marvel at the influence and sheer goodness of our people past and present. There may be very few of us, but our contribution across every field of endeavour and sheer zest for life is amazing.

As Freddie Mercury said “We are the champions of

ZERBANOO GIFFORD, who is hosting the World Zoroastrian Youth Leaders Forum (WZLYF 2.0) at her ASHA Centre in UK this week, talks about making a difference in the world and furthering our Zoroastrian legacy



the world”! We nurtured Jamsetji Tata (the greatest philanthropist of modern times), Dadabhai Naoroji (the first Asian to be elected to the British Parliament and the Grand Old Man of India), Farhang Mehr (former Deputy Prime Minister of Iran), Jamsheed Marker (Chair of the UN Security Council and renowned Pakistani diplomat), Dr. Cyrus Poonawalla (the Vaccine King) and Sohrab Godrej (the wildlife visionary)... the list just never ends.

Encapsulate your vision for the ASHA Centre...

A. My vision for the ASHA charity was to be flexible and respond to the needs of those often forgotten; the disfranchised, the homeless, women, those surviving in conflict zones and, most importantly, to educate and encourage the young to change their world by their own efforts.

We built a home for street children, taught drama to young South Africans who took their play about the history of their country to Mandela’s home. We have worked with Arab and Jewish youngsters on peace missions, and young people in conflict zones in the Caucasus and Balkans. But our finest work has been at the ASHA Centre

in Gloucestershire in Britain. The ASHA Centre was recognised as the main provider of the European Union’s Erasmus Plus Education Programme. We had young people train with us from every country of the world and without exception they said their lives were enriched. For most it was the first time they ever heard of Zoroastrianism and saw Zoroastrianism in action. Now that Britain has foolishly left the European Union we are reinventing the ASHA Centre as a place of wellbeing and spiritual practises. The ASHA gardens and house are stunningly beautiful and an inspiration to all those that come and spend time with us in our haven. Being situated in the Royal Forest of Dean we are blessed with nature in all her glory.

What other projects are you currently working on?

A. I’m working on a major project to help digitalise our history and the stories of our people with first hand stories and personal memories. I regret that many extraordinary people I interacted with have gone and I never recorded them. I also hope to create an interactive museum for the young to enjoy and learn from. This will fill the rest of my life!

I will, of course, also do other work which takes my fancy such as learning to tango and working on projects to empower women in the political system.

What keeps you going? Where do you get your drive and energy from?

A. I keep going because it’s all I know! My energy comes from the universe and my DNA. I come from strong, wonderful Zoroastrian stock. We kept our faith alive against all odds in Iran and in India we flourished. We refused to be cowed by anyone or anything. We know that nothing is accomplished without Ahura Mazda’s grace.

Your journey in public service has been amazing. How did that begin and where do you see it taking you?

A. When young I used to come to Poona every summer holidays from England to be with my darling Bapai, who I loved so much. I used to cry seeing the poor children begging and picking food off the ground. When I returned to London I told my parents I was going to do something. I was seven.

Most parents would placate their child and put them off. Not Mummy and Daddy—their response was: Great, what will you do? I made little flags and stood outside our London hotel and sold them. I collected £10 pounds. Daddy helped me send it to Pandit Nehru (Prime Minister of India) for the poor children of Poona.

A few weeks later I received a handwritten letter thanking me and saying if every girl thought of poor children then there would be no poverty. That instilled in me the knowledge and determination that I could make a difference. Later in life I was elected to political office in Harrow—the same place where Nehru studied at the famous Harrow School. On Nehru’s centenary celebrations I received the Nehru Centenary award for humanitarian services. That closed the circle!

Any parting thoughts...

A. Our Zoroastrian faith is about action in this world. So act with goodness, as you will make a difference. It’s easy to be overwhelmed by global and local problems but your efforts can help change lives. If you think you’re too small to make an impact try going to bed with a mosquito in the room!

The 208th salgreh of the Saronda Agiary was celebrated with much zeal and fervor, followed by lavish ‘lagan-nu-bhonu’ for all attendees hosted by Chief Guest Justice Shahrukh Kathawalla (Retd.)

“We have to take the spiritual legacy of our ancestors ahead,” said Chief Guest Justice Shahrukh Kathawalla (Retd.) at the 208th salgreh of the Saronda Agiary on May 4, 2024. Kathawalla added, “Our tiny ethno-religious community has earned immense name and fame. We are the pride of this country and other communities talk of the Parsis with a lot of affection and awe. This is because of the good deeds of our ancestors who uncompromisingly followed the faith.”

Justice Kathawalla further stressed: “It is my firm belief that it all begins at home. It is the duty of Parsi parents, wherever in the world they may be residing, to imbibe the essential tenets of our religion within their children in their formative years, especially stressing upon the importance of wearing the Sudreh-Kusti. Parsi parents must also insist that their children learn basic Gujarati and attend Dharmagyan classes.”

A Jashan was performed in the morning at the Saronda Agiary by Panthaki Soli Panthaky Saheb, followed by a religious programme organised by the Saronda Parsi Anjuman led by president Aspi Pastakia and ably assisted by trustee Kekhushru Tavakuli and former trustee Jehangir Mandviwalla. BPP trustees Dr. Adil Malia (who is himself from Saronda and delivered a sterling speech) and Maharukh Noble were also present, along with other dignitaries.

Dr. Malia, in his inspiring address, said that a tree has to grow from both sides. Just because the roots are not seen it doesn’t mean that the roots have a lesser role. Stronger the roots, sweeter the fruits. So is it true equally for human beings. Spiritual and corporeal lives, though distinct, are inseparable albeit invisible. Spiritual intelligence is as critical as corporeal intelligence, Dr. Malia revealed.

After the function, almost

Salgreh Celebrations in Saronda!



Justice Kathawalla addressing the gathering



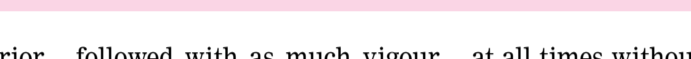
Dr. Adil Malia delivering his speech



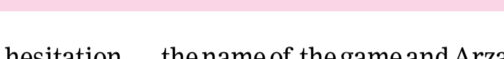
President Aspi Pastakia felicitating the Panthaki of Saronda Agiary



The 208-year-old Agiary at Saronda



Lavish lagan-nu-bhonu!



Cricket match on the day prior

250 humdeens partook of lavish ‘lagan nu bhonu’ solely sponsored by Justice Shahrukh Kathawalla (Retd.) in his personal capacity and catered by Shehzad Marolia.

The day prior, on May 3, a Nargol v/s Saronda cricket match was held at the Parsi Memorial President Gymkhana grounds. Saronda, of course, won the match by a handsome

margin and sheer superior performance. Saronda and Nargol were once bastions of Parsi civilization where hundreds of Parsi families played cricket and lived in harmony with their Gujarati friends. Nargol and Saronda have produced several top class Parsi cricketers when quadrangular tournament matches were played and

followed with as much vigour as their contemporary sibling - the IPL tournament!

Dr. Adil Malia addressed the youth of the village after the match and shared his mantra for success. He said the formula was simple: those who succeeded in changing times were agile, they reflected drive, were innovative and valued learning in all its forms and

at all times without hesitation. He wished the youngsters good luck and success.

Arzan Nagwaswalla, the Parsi player from Nargol, who got selected for the India reserve team under captain Virat Kohli, was the ‘Star Invitee’ present at the event. In his humble way, Arzan stressed on the need for young cricketers to practice, practice and practice! Focus is

the name of the game and Arzan advised all young cricketers to drastically reduce the use of mobile phones, which are an avoidable distraction.

All in all, it was a memorable weekend in Saronda thanks to the unstinting efforts of Aspi Pastakia, president, and the trustees of the Saronda Parsi Jarthosti Anjuman who were at pains to ensure its success.



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