

# Sir Phiroze Sethna

(1866 - 1938)

Mumbai Legacy Project  
D Ward



Sir Phiroze Sethna was a business tycoon in Bombay in the 1900s and led companies of cotton, insurance, iron and steel, facilitating large-scale economic development in the city. As a respected political figure, he strongly advocated for the Indianisation of various branches of the British administration (Sarkar 2008, 208), supported public welfare-oriented programmes, and served as a member of the Council of State and Central Legislative Assembly.

Phiroze Sethna was born on 8th October 1866 in Malabar Hill, Bombay. He was seven when he accompanied his grandparents to Calcutta, where he completed his schooling at St. Xavier's School. He pursued his Matriculation from Calcutta University and then returned to Bombay, graduating from St. Xavier's College in 1887 with a Bachelor's in Arts (Sethna 1932, 1-4).

In Bombay, his political career began in 1907 when he joined the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) and served it for over thirty-one years (Sarkar 2008, 208). In 1910 and 1913, he was a Standing member of the Municipal Committee, and in 1911, he became the Chairman of the Committee. He served as the President of the Corporation in 1915 (Paymaster 1939-1940, 441-442). He was a liberal democrat who strongly relied on constitutional politics. However, he seceded from the Congress after the rise of Mahatma Gandhi and his politics of mass agitation. Along with some others, he formed the National Liberal Federation, one of the three National Parties of India in the 1920s and 1930s, along with the Indian National Congress and the All-India Muslim League. He was also a Bombay Port Trust Corporation representative from 1920-21 to 1926-27 (The Bombay Chronicle 20th September 1938).



Sir Phiroze Sethna built a bungalow in the 1920s in Malabar Hill and named it Sun Beam. Behramji Gamadia, the great-grandson of Sir Phiroze Sethna, proudly states that the legendary British Cricketer, Douglas Robert Jardine who played 22 test matches for England, captaining the side in 15 of those matches between 1931 and 1934, lived in a house before the property was sold to Sir Phiroze Sethna. Sun Beam was built in the same location. Behramji Gamadia further states that Sir Phiroze Sethna also attended the First Round Table Conference (November 1930 - January 1931) in London. (Interview with Behramji Gamadia, great-grandson of Sir Phiroze Sethna 17th December 2023)

He was on the Board of Bombay City Improvement Trust and served as the Justice of Peace (Thos 1932, 127) and Sheriff of Bombay (Paymaster, Vol. VII Part IV 1937 -1938, 474). He advocated the Indiansation of the Port Trust (Sethna 1938, 208), boycotted the Simon Commission and attended all three Round Table Conferences in London, but preferred dominion status to complete freedom. In 1915, he was nominated to the Bombay Legislative Council (Sethna 1938, 15). In 1917, at his initiative, the Legislative Council passed a resolution to formulate proposals for the Prevention of Professional Beggary and a Committee was appointed with him as its Chairman (Rodrigues 2014, 191).

Phiroze Sethna was an acknowledged expert in the field of insurance due to his long association with Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada as its General Manager for India, Burma and Ceylon for thirty years till his retirement in 1933 (The Bombay Chronicle 17th September 1938). He was appointed by the Government as a member of the Insurance Experts Committee in November 1936 (Darukhanawala 1939, 140). He was the Director of the largest National Bank, the Central Bank of India and, later on, its Chairman for 17 years from 1921 till his death in 1938 (The Bombay Chronicle 1938).



Phiroze Sethna was also the Director of more than fifty leading public companies, including Tata Iron and Steel, New India Assurance, Bombay Telephone, Bombay Steam Navigation, Union Bank of India, Andhra Valley Power, Indian Cement, Indian National Airways, Western India Match Company, and various cotton mills and industrial units (Paymaster 1937-1938, 442). He was a member of the committee of the Indian Merchants Chamber from its very inception and was elected President in 1924 (The Bombay Chronicle 19th September 1938).

With a keen interest in aviation and the cinema industry, he, Niranjana Pal, Himanshu Rai, Devika Rani, F. E. Dinshaw and Franz Osten founded the pioneering movie company in India, The Bombay Talkies Limited (commonly known as Bombay Talkies) in 1934 in Malad and served as the Director of this company (The Bombay Chronicle 17th September 1938, 4; Sarkar 2008, 208). As a public limited company with a high-tech movie studio, it made tremendous progress and became highly profitable. He was also the President of the Motion Pictures Society of India from 1936 until his death (Interview with Siloo Gamadia and Aloo Reporter, 23rd February 2010, cited in Rodrigues 2014, 190).

As a social activist, he was proactive with various charities, committees, associations and institutions. He supported the development of art in India (The Bombay Chronicle 19th September 1938). He was appointed as a Joint Secretary when an exhibition was held in old Bombay during the visit of the Honourable Emperor George V in 1911 (Paymaster 1939 -1942, 442). He worked as an Arbitration officer for almost two decades. When the authorities nominated Honorary Magistrates for Mumbai, he was chosen to be one. He also became the Honorary Secretary of the Honorary Magistrates Society.

Phiroze Sethna was the Chairman of the Prince of Wales Museum for six years till his death (The Bombay Chronicle 27th September 1938). He was a leading Freemason and was Grand Master Depute for the Indians All Scottish Freemasonry during the last two years of his life. He was also the honorary Senior Grand Deacon of the Grand Lodge of Scotland and a member of the Rotary Club. He was the first Indian to be nominated as Governor of the Rotary International for the 89th district of India, Burma and Ceylon (Paymaster, Parsee Prakash 1939-1940, Vol. VII, Part V. 442, 474).

Phiroze Sethna also enjoyed significant positions on various committees. He was a member of the Mumbai District Benevolent Society's Managing Committee (Paymaster Parsee Prakash 1933-1934, Vol. VII Part II, 153). He was the Hon. Treasurer of the Peace Celebration Fund, the Fund of the Welcoming Committee for the Duke of Connaught and the Fund of the Welcome of the Prince of Wales. He had provided such a valuable service during the war that his name appeared in the Commander-in-Chief's Despatch of the ten names chosen for such services and published in the London Gazettes, he being the only Indian selected (Paymaster 1939-1940, 442).

He also played a vital role in the welfare of the Parsis. In 1934, Sir Phiroze Sethna proposed a bill in the Council of State to amend the Parsi Marriages and Divorce Act of 1865. The Council passed the bill successfully in 1936 (Parashar 1992, 192). He acted as a Trustee of the Mumbai Parsi Punchayet Board from 1931 till his death. He worked enthusiastically for various trusts, especially in finance, and supported the education of Parsi boys, providing work for the unemployed youth, reforming the existing laws in the legislative assembly and so on. He was also a trustee of the Sir Ratan Tata Charities, Nusserwanji Maneckji Petit Charities, Anjuman Atash Behram and various other trusts (Paymaster 1939-1940, 442-444).

Phiroze Sethna's immense contribution in various fields commanded respect and honour not only from the Indians but also from the British in India. He was awarded the title of Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1916. He was a leading liberal and thoughtful personality in the Council and the public sphere. For years, he served the Government and people of the city and state. He was concerned for the public and always fought for their welfare. He was a strong supporter of the Government, so the Government conferred on him the prestigious title of Knighthood on 3rd July 1926 (Paymaster 1939 -1940, 443). He also received the Shahanshahi Silver Jubilee Medal (Paymaster 1935-1936, 239).





Sir Phiroze Sethna passed away on 16th September 1938 at his residence due to heart failure. The then Congress President, Subash Chandra Bose, termed his death as a 'serious blow to industrial life'. Tributes paid to him by various classes of people and institutions like BMC, Congress President, Council of State, Legislative Council, Natal Indian Congress, Parsi Panchayat, and Zoroastrians in Udwada, Navsari, Surat, Ahmadabad, Calcutta, Karachi and Lucknow demonstrate the immense respect and popularity he commanded throughout his life (The Bombay Chronicle 22nd September 1938; 19th September 1938).

*References:*

*Darukhanawala, H. D. Parsi Lustre on Indian Soil. Vol. I. Bombay. I. G Claridge & Co. Ltd. 1963.*

*Interview with Behramji Gamadia, great grandson of Sir Pheroze Sethna. 17th December 2023.*

*Paymaster, Rustam Burjorji, (Compiler). Parsee Prakash, Vol. VII. Part III, (1935-1936), Bombay, Sanj Vartaman Press. (Gujarati). 1941.*

*Paymaster, Rustam Burjorji, (Compiler). Parsee Prakash, Vol. VII. Part IV, (1937-1938) Bombay, Sanj Vartaman Press. (Gujarati). 1942.*

*Paymaster, Rustam Burjorji, (Compiler). Parsee Prakash, Vol. VII. Part II, (1933-1934) Bombay, Sanj Vartaman Press. (Gujarati). 1939.*

*Paymaster, Rustam Burjorji, (Compiler). Parsee Prakash, Vol. VII. Part V, (1939-1940) Bombay, Sanj Vartaman Press. (Gujarati). 1942.*

*Rodrigues, Louiza. et.al. The Sett and Sethna Family of Rustom Maneck (18th to 21st century) Institutional Philanthropy, Mumbai: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute. 2014.*

*Sethna, Phiroze. As I Look Back. Bombay: D.B. Taraporewala & Sons. 1938*

*Sarkar, Sumit. Modern India. Chennai, Macmillan India Ltd. Reprint 2008.*

*The Bombay Chronicle, 27th September 1938.*

*Thos, Peters (Ed.). Who's Who in Western India, Bombay. Sun Publishing. 1932.*

Project Conceptualization and Design | G5A

Text, Research, Editing | Prof (Dr.) Louiza Rodrigues and team

Photographs | Behram Gamadia

