

# The Sethna Agiary, Tardeo: Muncherji Saith Agiary

1796

Mumbai Legacy Project  
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Located approximately one kilometre from Grant Road railway station in Tardeo, the Muncherji Saith Agiary is one of the first few Zoroastrian fire temples built in Mumbai. As a significant institution of the historic Parsi community, it has biographical value because it is associated with some well-known family trusts. The temple serves as a venue for social and religious gatherings, providing community members with opportunities to meet, greet, perform in sacred rituals, and exchange information on daily affairs and commerce. As a custodian of the highest number of fire temples in the world, Mumbai is responsible for preserving and protecting these institutions. The city is home to around 50 fire temples, among which some of the oldest are within and around the Fort area.

The Muncherji Saith Agiary was constructed in November 1796 by a famous Paris businessman, Sorabji Maneckji (1748-1798), descendant of Rustom Maneck, the renowned broker to the East India Company in the 17th century who had established his base in Surat, at Shaikh Memon Street in the Bahar Kot outside the Fort area of Bombay, in the sacred memory of his father Seth Muncherji Bomanji Seth, to provide Parsis with a place for divine worship and celebration. A charitable Trust, Waqfnama was established, to manage the agiary. (Rodrigues, The Sett and Sethna Family of Rustom Maneck 2014, 92). The present Trustees of this agiary are Minocher. R. Sethna, Dinshaw M. Mistry, and Burjor. F. Mehta (Interview with Minoo and Rupa Sethna 2023).



## Muncherji Saith Agiary

Seth Sorabji became the second Mutavali (Trustee) of the Charity Trust and managed its affairs at Surat from 1759. Seth Sorabji came to Bombay and took charge of the Trust in 1785. He had a vast field near a salt-water well behind Mota Bazaar outside the Fort. Seth Sorabji allowed Zoroastrian families to settle in this barren place at a nominal rent. On the request and desire of these tenants, he constructed a fire temple in the name of his father, Seth Muncherji Bomanji Seth, and inaugurated it on 24th November 1796. The inscription plaque was placed at the agiary in the Gujarati language.

In 25 years, the population of Zoroastrians gradually increased, and a larger area was necessary. To accommodate the Zoroastrians, the heirs of Sorabji, Seth Nowroji Bomanji and Seth Framji Sorabji, merged the premises of the fire temple with the newly acquired adjacent land. They also constructed a building and enthroned the sacred fire there on 19th November, 1822 (Patell 1888, 82).



After a period of nearly 74 years, the fire temple building was in a dilapidated state and needed immediate attention. Hence, in October 1896, on the occasion of the centenary of the agiary, it was rebuilt for the second time by the Trustees Framji Hormusji, Edulji Nusserwanji, and Jamshedji Edulji Sethna, spending an amount of 30,000 rupees from the Charitable Trust Funds, on October 31, 1896. Well-known architects of Bombay, Messrs. Shapurji and Munchersah Nusserwanji Chandabhai, designed this new building. The contractor was Mr Burjorji Jamshedji Patel (Jame Jamshed 1896). The structure of the building was beautiful, having the appearance of a palatial mansion in the modern style of that period. On this occasion, one of the Trustees, Seth Framji Hormusji and his niece, Bai Bachubai, donated a silver afarganyu (fire urn) worth 6,000 rupees for the sanctum sanctorum of the Bahar Kot Sethna Daremeher (fire temple) in memory of their ancestors. (Inscription plaque placed at the Agiary; Rodrigues (Ed.) Institutional Philanthropy 2014, 96- 97).

Gradually, there was a sea change in the population near the agiary precincts and in the Bahar Kot area. The population of non-Parsis in this area was on the rise, leading to the movement of Parsis to other areas. Many residential buildings of non-Parsis came up near the fire temple, which disturbed the sanctity and functioning of the activities of the agiary. The Trustees, therefore, resolved to shift the fire temple from that site to another suitable place. Consequently, after obtaining permission from the High Court in 1923, the Trustees sold the building and its adjoining land for 4,75,000 rupees, and a new place in Jaifalwadi, Tardeo, was purchased for 3,11,000 rupees. Then, at Gowalia Tank Road, at the junction of Tardeo and Forjett Street, a new building was constructed for 1,50,000 rupees, followed by the consecration of the atash kebla on 27th March, 1927. The Trustees also built a public hall near this building. While the work was in progress, they preserved the 'sacred fire' of the fire temple for some time in the fire temple of Seth Sohrabji Thunthi at Walkeshwar (Patell 1888, 168).

The Sethna Agiary Trust, once a barren piece of land, is now a bustling commercial district near Zaveri Bazaar. The relocation of the Sethna Agiary to its current place in Tardeo, prompted by the shift in the Parsi population, highlights the evolving social geography of the city. The vulnerability of the fire temples lies in the land attached to them, often spanning several acres. Unused land in densely populated neighbourhoods like Tardeo is bound to attract developers, posing a potential threat to these structures. Additionally, under the draft Development Plan (DP) 2034, a blueprint outlining land use in Mumbai for the next decade, the agiary in Tardeo risks losing a portion of its land.



*References:*

*Inscription plaque placed at the M.B.Saith's Agiary, Tardeo, Mumbai (in Gujarati).*

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