



ZOROASTRIAN PHILOSOPHY

Irach J. S. Taraporewala

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ZOROASTRIAN PHILOSOPHY

ZOROASTER had been renowned throughout the ancient world of Greece and Rome as one of the greatest Sages of the world, and he was thus known to tradition all over Europe right up to the year 1771. In that year was published the first authentic translation of the Zoroastrian Scriptures by the Frenchman Anquetil du Perron.¹ Nearly a century and three quarters have passed since this first publication and during this period much solid work has been done by great and devoted scholars in interpreting these ancient writings scientifically and critically.

We need not go into the question of the date of Zarathushtra. (Throughout this essay I have used the Iranian name of the Prophet — ZARATHUSHTRA). It is enough to state that he was contemporary with the Sages of the earliest Vedic Hymns of India. It is not the date that matters so much as the message that he gave to mankind. The Prophet of Ancient Iran was proclaiming the Eternal Truth (which has been proclaimed by all the Great Teachers and Saviours of Humanity). He speaks of the Eternal Laws of Life laid down since the Dawn of Creation. His is a message addressed to all mankind of every age and every clime and not merely to the people of Ancient Iran at a particular period of their history. On account of this message Zarathushtra has been reckoned among the Saviours of Humanity from remote antiquity, and, indeed, his message has a lesson for even our 20th century.

Of course there had been great Prophets and Teachers before Zarathushtra who had taught mankind the Eternal Law of God. As always happens in the history of every Prophet, human beings have exceedingly short memories. Religious Teachers teach us how to lead the true spiritual life, always a most difficult task. So human beings easily slip into ritualistic observances and ceremonial, which are ever so much easier to follow. And as time passes we notice that this message of Spiritual Life gradually gets more and more dim and at the same time the name of the Teacher is more frequently invoked and with ever-growing vehemence. The net result is that men remember the Messenger

¹ Le Zend-Avesta, ouvrage de Zoroastre, traduit en Français sui l'original Zend, 3 vols. (1771).

but *forget the Message*. The ceremonial and ritual branch out variously and give rise to mutually warring factions. And priests find a satisfactory means of livelihood by multiplying the ceremonial.

Such was the state of "religion" in Iran just before the advent of Zarathushtra. Thinking men and women were distracted amidst the warring factions each upholding its own special deity as the only Redeemer. This confusion is very finely described in the opening verse of the First GĀTHĀ (Chant) of Zarathushtra, where distracted humanity (poetically named "the Soul of the Cow" or "the Soul of Mother-Earth")² approaches the Supreme Creator and complains to Him about the evils that encumber our Earth :

To You the Soul of Mother-Earth complained :
 "Wherefore Ye gave me birth ? Who fashioned me ?
 Passion and rapine, outrage everywhere,
 And violence enmesh me all around ;
 No other help than Yours I see, Ye Lords ;
 Reveal to me a strong One who can save."³

The Supreme Lord thereupon asks the great "Angels" around Him if they could name any soul who could undertake this task. They are unable to do so and so the Lord Himself names ZARATHUSHTRA as the one person He would choose because he is "the only one who kept all Our Commands". After some hesitation the "Soul of Mother-Earth" accepts this Saviour.

After this "Prologue in Heaven" the Prophet is born upon earth in the Royal Family of Iran, and he takes up the task and delivers his message — the message of the Eternal Law of God. This message is contained in the Five GĀTHĀS of Zarathushtra. These Five Gāthās (or Chants) constitute the oldest portion of Zoroastrian Scriptures and are rightly regarded as the Fountain-head of Zoroastrian Religion. These Chants have to be interpreted in the light of their own contents. Unfortunately the earlier commentators have brought down the whole of this message to

2 This is an ancient Aryan fancy. The same word (*gāv*) is used to indicate "cow" as well as "earth". The same imagery has also been employed extensively in the Scriptures of India.

3 This translation, as well as other verses given elsewhere, are from my book on *The Gāthās of Zarathushtra* (Text with a free English Translation) (Bombay, 1947).

our earthly level, and so the Teaching has been interpreted as the fostering of agriculture and the care of cattle.⁴ But we must not for a moment forget that the Gāthās are *spiritual* in their contents and are to be interpreted as such. “Read the things of the flesh with the eyes of the spirit, and not the things of the spirit with the eyes of flesh”.

Fully realising the impossibility of reconciling the mutually hostile worshippers of the various Powers of Nature Zarathushtra swept them all aside as of secondary importance. He was well aware of the ancient Aryan tradition that saw “the One Reality” behind all these deities, the Supreme Being, whom “the wise call by many names”. He therefore enjoined the worship of the One Supreme Lord and of none besides. That Supreme Being was called AHURĀ-MAZDĀ. This name is a *double* name. It signifies “the Lord of Life (and) the Lord of Creation”, in other words the Supreme Lord of Spirit as well as of Matter. The so-called “dualism” of Zoroastrian Teaching is clearly seen in this double name of the Supreme. The dualism of Spirit and Matter is the basic fact in our world. The Prophet has recognised this basic fact and at the same time he has recognised that *both* (Spirit and Matter) have come from the One Source, had One Creator. The Supreme Ahurā-Mazdā creates and sustains both Spirit and Matter.

Necessarily this Supreme Being is formless, and so must be intangible to any of our senses, and incomprehensible to our human mind. So Zarathushtra “revealed” (or explained) Him in His various “Aspects”. The whole of his Gāthās revolve round the Prophet’s teaching about the AMESHĀ-SPENTĀ (the “Holy Immortals”). They are not merely “personified attributes” of the Godhead (as many scholars have hitherto assumed them to be), neither may they be compared to the “Archangels” as understood in other religious systems. They are best understood as “Aspects” of the Supreme, or as “Rays”

⁴ This has been more or less the traditional interpretation of the Pahlavi commentators of the Sasanian days (3rd and 4th centuries of Christ). An interval of at least fifteen centuries separates these commentaries from the Prophet. This was long enough to have made the later writers forget the true inner significance of the Gāthās. And they naturally interpreted these ancient documents in the light of the beliefs they themselves held and the ritual and ceremonial they themselves followed.

from the central Luminary. The greatness and depth of the Prophet's mind is evident from the names as well as from the arrangement of these "Holy Immortals". They are six in number, and the most remarkable point about them is that three of them are *masculine* in their nature and attributes and three are *feminine*. They represent respectively the Father-side and the Mother-side of the Godhead. What is more, these six together with the Supreme constitute a HEPTAD. In the Gāthās these Seven have been invoked more than once as "*the Mazdā Ahurās*" (in the *plural* number), thus emphasizing the fact that they all are "Aspects" of the same Supreme Lord. In several of the later Texts it has been clearly stated that these Seven are ever "of one accord" and that their "thoughts and words and deeds are identical". The three Holy Immortals on the Father-side have been described in great detail by the Prophet in his Gāthās. This helps the ordinary human being to understand clearly and correctly the essential "Aspects" of the Supreme.

There has also existed a very ancient "Sacred Verse", which tradition says is pre-Zoroastrian.⁵ This verse has been regarded as most sacred in all Zoroastrian Scriptures. In it the three "aspects" of the Father-side have been mentioned by name. This very verse is famous by the name AHUNA-VAIRYA. The First Gāthā of Zarathushtra is a sort of detailed explanation of this Sacred Verse and is named Gāthā AHUNAVAITI in consequence.

The first "Aspect" or "Ray" of Ahurā-Mazdā is named ASHA. This name has been translated as "Righteousness". It has to be understood in the higher spiritual sense as used by Jesus in his "Sermon on the Mount". The name implies TRUTH, the ETERNAL LAW OF GOD. Truth is assuredly an "aspect" of God, when one realizes Truth one would also know what God is. Lord Tennyson in the last stanza of his great poem *In Memoriam* has spoken of

That God, which always lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,

⁵ Many scholars (notably Bartholomae) have thought that this "Sacred Verse" was composed after the time of Zarathushtra. I personally am inclined to hold the traditional view that it represents "the First Word of God".

And one far-off divine event
To which the whole creation moves.

This is very close to the idea of Asha as given by Zarathushtra.

Asha, therefore, stands for Truth, which is indeed God Himself. To search for Truth, to strive to realize it, is one of the ways to approach God. In one of the later Texts (which orthodox Zoroastrians recite at dawn) the aspirant prays : "Through the Supreme Truth, through the Highest Truth, may we catch a glimpse of Thee, may we come near to Thee, may we be in union with Thee". This indicates the "one far-off divine event, to which the whole creation moves."

ASHA VAHISHTA (the Supreme Truth) is also the name given to the Sacred Fire, which is kept ever-burning in Zoroastrian Fire-Temples. Nowhere in the Avesta Texts is the Fire (ĀTAR) to be understood in the sense of physical fire. It is always the Inner Fire of the Supreme (the "Son of Ahurā-Mazdā") found in the heart of every human being. The Gāthā is quite clear on this point :

Thine Inner Fire, Ahurā, to see
We yearn ;—He blazes mightily through Truth,
He has Thy Strength ; our Goal and Hope is He ;
He lights the Faithful clearly through Life,
But, Mazdā, in the hearts of Infidels
He sees the hidden evil at a glance.

The Fire in the Fire-Temples represents also the Divine Spark within each human being, a Spark of the Great Fire, who is God Himself.

The realization of Asha demands the pursuit of Spiritual Knowledge, and in the Gāthās very often the name also implies the "Path of Knowledge". It is a strenuous pursuit, demanding one-pointed devotion.

The second "Aspect" or "Ray" of Ahurā-Mazdā is VOHU-MANŌ. The name is usually translated as "Good Mind", but that seems to miss the essential point. There is an obsolete Aryan verb, *vas-*, to love,⁶ from which is derived the

6 This Aryan *vas*-remains unchanged in Sanskrit, but changes to *vah-* in the Avesta. The verb itself is not found in any text either of Iran or of India. But several derivatives are known in both lands. In India the derivatives of the verb seem to have been "degraded" in sense, and there is an implication of "illicit attachment" in some of the derivatives.

first half of the name (*Vohu*). In later Texts the word *vohu* does mean "good". But in the Gāthās it does not necessarily imply mere "goodness". The rendering "Good Mind" is somewhat colourless, but "Loving Mind" is something far more definite. Vohu-Manō is, in short, the LOVE "aspect" of the Supreme. God is Love. In the very first prayer Zarathushtra utters in the Gāthās he expresses the wish :

Fain would I, Mazdā-Ahurā to You
Reach up through Vohu Man', devoted Love.

There are a few favoured souls amongst us, to whom "God has whispered in the ear", who can love the invisible, intangible God in the abstract. The average man, however, needs something visible, on which to pour out this love. The Love for God can be best expressed as Love for our Brother-Man. This is the fundamental teaching of all great religions.

As a matter of fact on reading the Gāthās we get the impression that the whole teaching is based on Vohu-Manō or Love. And it may be noted that in the later Texts Vohu-Manō definitely stands in the first place, immediately after Ahurā-Mazdā though in the Gāthās Asha occupies that position.

Vohu-Manō implies not merely love of man, but his activity covers the whole of living creation. In later Theology his special province is the animal kingdom, particularly the creatures who are useful to man.⁷

The cultivation and the realization of Love is best possible in the lives of wedded pairs upon earth. Hence wedlock has always been regarded as *holy*, for it is the first step along the Path to God. In a later Text we read that a married person is dearer to Ahurā-Mazdā than an unmarried one. There is a beautiful verse in the Fifth Gāthā which brings out this ideal of wedded bliss :⁸

These words I speak to maidens truly wed
And to their comrades young ; bear them in mind,

7 On days sacred to Vohu-Manō (the 2nd, 12th, 14th and 21st of each month) orthodox Zoroastrians, though normally meat-eaters, abstain from flesh.

8 This verse is from the Fifth Gāthā, which has been regarded by many scholars to be a "Wedding Hymn".

And understand them deep within your Souls ;
 Bring down Vohu-Man' in your lives on earth ;
 Let each one strive the other to surpass.
 In Asha's Truth, in Vohu-Manō's Love ;
 Thus each one surely shall reap rich rewards.

In the later Texts this idea of Love seems to have developed in another direction. Zoroastrians are enjoined to recite their prayers five times a day. With each of the five divisions of the day⁹ one "Lord" of a "social unit" is associated. These Lords are, in order : 1. Lord of the House ; 2. Lord of the Village ; 3. Lord of the Province ; 4. Lord of the Country ; and 5. the Supreme Teacher of Religion (Zarathushtra). These five Lords represent ever-widening circles of duties and love. The last — the Supreme Teacher (Zarathushtra) enfolds the whole of humanity in his loving embrace.

Realizing thus both Truth and Love, one is not to rest content with his own attainment. He has to translate the Truth and the Love he has attained into Action — into loving SERVICE of Humanity. That is the third "Aspect" of the Supreme — His KSHATHRA. The name means "Power" or "Strength" of the Lord. This Strength is derived from the Lord Himself and is inspired by Love. Hence in the Gāthās the name Kshathra often has the adjective *Vohu* attached to it. The action or service done must be inspired by love. Such service brings as reward "the Kshathra of Ahurā" Himself. In other words the highest reward for service is power to render greater service.

Thus the Father-side of the Supreme is summed up in these three "Aspects". In human life these are best expressed by the three verbs — *to know, to love, to serve*.

The Mother-side also shows three "Holy Immortals", but in the Gāthās they are not treated in so much detail as the three on the Father-side. The first of the Mother-side is the most important as she is closely associated with ASHA.

ĀRMAITI (usually translated "Piety") is the first "Aspect" on the Mother-side. Her name merely implies "correct mental attitude". She represents firm, unshakeable FAITH in God's

⁹ The day of 24 hours, beginning at midnight.

Eternal Law and Justice. She is implanted and dwells within the heart of each human being. She stands by and “resolves our doubts” as they arise. Zarathushtra admonishes us to keep our ears open to her whisper in our hearts. In later theology Ārmaiti represents the firm solid Earth, typical of the inner firm Faith which nothing can shake. The Zoroastrian, when initiated into the Faith, “chooses” Ārmaiti as guide through life. And after death the body is left in her loving arms and the soul passes into her protection.

The names of the remaining two “Holy Immortals”—HAURVATĀT and AMERETĀT—mean PERFECTION and IMMORTALITY. They represent the ultimate goal of human life and endeavour. These two are regarded as Twins, always together, because the attainment of Perfection must bring Immortality and the conquest of death. They represent the reward a man earns through his efforts to tread the Path of Asha. They bring as rewards “spiritual strength” and “life renewed”, which are also regarded as the two precious gifts of Love.

Such is the wonderful and poetic Teaching about the Holy Immortals, through which Zarathushtra strives to give mankind some idea of the essential nature of the Supreme Power. We may sum up this Teaching thus: “Every human being must strive to understand the Eternal Law of Truth and Righteousness (Asha) and must try to realize it in his daily life. In order to do this he must cultivate Love—universal Love—(Vohu-Manō) and realize it deep within his Inner Self. This Truth and Love thus realized must be next translated into Acts of Service (Kshathra). All through one must hold fast to firm unshaken Faith (Ārmaiti)—Faith in the essential divinity and goodness of all creation. And thus one attains to Perfection and Immortality (Haurvatāt and Ameretāt), and becomes perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect and conquers death.”

Besides the Holy Immortals and the Fire, Zarathushtra has mentioned another “deity” in the Gāthās. He is SRAOSHA. The name signifies “Obedience” (to the will of the Supreme). In the Gāthās he is called “the Greatest Servant” of the Supreme. The Obedience here implied is not the blind and slavish obedience

of the fanatic, but the *willing* obedience of the understanding mind. In later theology Sraosha ranks next after the Holy Immortals.

Zarathushtra emphatically maintains that each one of us must discover the Truth *for himself*. He has certainly claimed to be the Teacher appointed by Ahurā-Mazdā, but he has never said that a person should follow a particular course of life and conduct because *he* had said so. His own words are quite clear and precise :

Hear with your ears the Highest Truths I preach
And with illumined minds weigh them with care,
Before you choose which of two Paths to tread.,
Deciding man by man, each one for each.

This is the Charter of Spiritual Liberty for all mankind. Man is given absolute freedom in the choice of the Path he wants to tread because he possesses the most precious gift of God —MIND—which enables him to distinguish Good from Evil.

This problem of Good and Evil has been solved by Zarathushtra in a unique manner. And that constitutes Zarathushtra's greatest contribution to the religious thought of the world. His Teaching is best given in his own words :

The First created were the Spirits Twain
As Twin Co-workers they reveal themselves,
Yet in each thought and word and deed these Two
Are ne'er agreed ; — one's Good, the other Bad ;
And of these two the Wise do choose aright,
The Unwise choose not thus — and go astray.

And when together did the Spirits Twain
Foregather at Creation's early dawn,
LIFE did One make, the Other made NOT-LIFE ;
And thus Creation's purpose is achieved ;
Dark is the mind of those that cling to False,
But brightly shines the mind that holds to Truth.

Zarathushtra has said in so many words that *both Good and Evil have been created by Mazdā*. The essential character of these Twin-Spirits is revealed in what they have "made" — LIFE

and NOT-LIFE. The *negative* form of the latter is full of deep significance. The Evil Spirit is the Spirit of Eternal Negation. Goethe in his *Faust* has described Mephistopheles in words which might have been taken straight from the Gāthās. Mephistopheles is the Spirit that evermore denies. He claims as his own domain “all elements which ye Destruction, Sin or briefly Evil name”. And further Mephistopheles says that he is “part of that power that still produceth good while ever scheming ill”.

This is exactly what Zarathushtra has taught. The Plan of God is that ultimately every Soul shall attain Perfection and Immortality. But this is to be achieved *by each one's own effort*. And *the initial choice is left absolutely free to each human soul*.

This freedom of choice necessarily implies *full* responsibility for all one's thoughts and words and deeds. And here we find the LAWS OF KARMA (of Action and Reaction) stepping in. Zarathushtra calls them “the Laws of Happiness and Pain,” because, as he has explained,

Falsehood brings on age-long punishment,
And Truth leads on to fuller, higher life.

The Twin Spirits indicate the fundamental difference between Life and Matter (Not-Life), between things heavenly and things mundane. The Arch-Deluder (the Evil One) is ever at hand to delude mankind when their ears are filled with loud songs of the earth, which drown the whisperings of Ārmaiti in their hearts. Lured by the Deluder, and blinded by the earthly glitter, men become deaf to the call of Asha and of Vohu-Manō and dash away along the Path of Wrath and Hatred¹⁰; and thus do they “pollute our mortal life”. But the inexorable Laws of Happiness and Pain never spare any one, for “none may deceive the Omnipotent Lord”. After death Souls have to pass over the “Judgment-Bridge”, where their earthly lives are reviewed and rewards and punishments meted out. There, at the “Judgment-Bridge”, the Inner Selves of sinners “shall chide them as they fall”. Punishment for evil is but the natural result of evil done—it is the Law of God. Evil does triumph very often for a time,

¹⁰ Desire for the joys of earth leads a person to strive to gain them. When frustrated in this attempt, Wrath and Hatred arise in his heart against those who have thwarted him.

but in the long run frustration awaits the follower of Untruth, and all his triumphs are "brought to naught by Truth". From that moment shall his mind retrace its steps, for

Then, Mazdā, Lord of All, Thy Law Supreme
Shall be revealed to them by Vohu-Man',
Then, O Ahurā, shall they learn, indeed,
To give all Falsehood into Asha's hands.

Then, indeed, shall Love replace Wrath and Hatred in their hearts.

After years of frustration, tribulation and mental agony experienced in this "Abode of Untruth" (our earthly existence) the Soul at last learns the great lesson that Hatred is conquered by Love alone. Once that lesson is learnt the upward progress towards the Realm of Light, the Abode of Vohu-Manō, is assured. Thus even the worst sinner must, and ultimately does, attain Perfection and Immortality. There is hope for all ; none shall be left out.

In India, as natural corollary to this Law of Karma, the idea of reincarnation has been stressed. But no such stress on repeated lives on earth is found in any of the Zoroastrian Scriptures. In fact only one verse (out of 239) in the Gāthās, and, indeed, out of all the Avesta Texts, might be interpreted as speaking clearly of a return to this "Abode of Untruth"¹¹. So we may assert that the idea of repeated births upon earth is nowhere emphasised in any Zoroastrian Scriptures. This doctrine of rebirth, though quite logical and though undoubtedly very comforting in our moments of distress still does certainly tend to make a person somewhat slack. One is apt to imagine that with several lives still to come there need not be any occasion for strenuous effort. Zarathushtra has all through laid great stress on *constant strenuous action*. In one of the Gāthā verses he says quite clearly :¹²

Within the space of this ONE life on earth
Perfection can be reached by fervent Souls,
Ardent in zeal, sincere in their toil.

11 and 12 It would be fair to state here that other scholars have translated both these verses very differently.

We can therefore conclude that we may *infer* the teaching about reincarnation from the other teachings of Zarathushtra, but the idea of rebirth is not at all emphasized anywhere in the Avesta Texts.

The Three Commandments of Zarathushtra — good thoughts, good words, good deeds — are often mentioned in the Gāthās. And of the three *deeds* are specially stressed :

Who strives to understand and reach true Life,
Should preach the Laws of Mazdā to mankind
Better by acts of Service than by words.

As long as the high ideals of Zarathushtra's Gāthās remained a living inspiration to the nation, so long Iran continued to prosper ; and she became the Mistress of the Ancient World. But as happens with every nation, in course of time these high ideals were forgotten. The prosperity following in the wake of a huge empire and the consequent riches that gathered in Iran led to the decay of Iranian character. The pure and vigorous teaching was gradually replaced by superstition and ritual. In the final phases of Zoroastrian Religion in Iran under the Sasanians (226-642 A.C.), the religion became full of complicated ritual and superstitious fear. This fear was perhaps necessary in preventing evil, but the Teaching of Love in the Gāthās was far superior, inasmuch as it *inspired* good. In later Zoroastrianism this fear has become an obsession. Human life from birth to death (and even beyond) meant an unceasing struggle against the demon hosts, and was regulated accordingly. This fear was the prime cause for the crumbling of the huge fabric of the Sasanian Empire at the first touch of the desert Arabs inspired by the fresh and vigorous gospel of Muhammad.

After the Arab conquest the "official religion" of Iran changed but not the spirit of the nation. The Arabs had conquered Iran but not her spirit. Islam became the "official faith" of Iran, but Iranian Islam was very different from Arabian Islam. The spirit of Iran blossomed forth in the wonderful mystic poetry of the Sufis which reminds one of the teaching about Vohu-Manō as given by Zarathushtra.

The Zoroastrians who emigrated to India (over a thousand years ago) have until now continued to practise the customs and rituals of the Sasanian days. Until within living memory practically all the ancient rituals were observed and enforced rigorously. The impact of Western thought, however, has profoundly modified these old ideas of Sasanian days.

The Zoroastrians both in Iran and in India had stuck to the traditional Pahlavi interpretation of the ancient Avesta Scriptures right up to the sixties of the last century, when the great Zoroastrian scholar, K. R. Cama, taught some of the learned priests of Bombay the critical and philological methods which he himself had learned from Western Iranists. Cama's labours helped considerably in removing many superstitions which had continued through many generations. Cama's pupils in their turn trained a new generation of scholars in India who have been working to reinterpret the Sacred Literature of their own religion in the light of the latest researches of Western scholars. Many of these younger scholars themselves have received training under Western masters. It is now established that the fountain-head and core of Zoroastrian Faith is certainly to be sought in the Gāthās of Zarathushtra. The labours of many scholars have enabled us to separate the original teaching of the Prophet from the later accretions that have grown up around it. Of course the majority of the Zoroastrians still cling to the old "orthodox" ways, but the younger people have begun to appreciate more and more clearly that the true teaching is to be found only in the Gāthās. A clear movement has been inaugurated emphasizing a return to the Gāthās, and in it lies the best hope for the future of Zoroastrians all over the world.

This essay on "*Zoroastrian Philosophy*" was originally contributed by the late Dr. Irach J. S. Taraporewala to the book entitled "*A History of Philosophical Systems*" edited by Vergilius Ferm and published in 1950. It is reprinted by kind permission of the publishers of the book, Philosophical Library, Inc., 15 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y., U. S. A.

The publication of this essay synchronises with the publication of a revised and enlarged edition of the author's book entitled "*The Religion of Zarathushtra*", which also contains a free translation in English verse of all the Gāthās of Zarathushtra and essays on "Three Forgotten Religions" of Iran—Mithraism, Manichaeism and Mazdakism.

This essay is for free distribution, and its publication will be regarded as well-rewarded if it satisfies the reader's hunger for elementary knowledge of the religion of Zarathushtra, which is one of the oldest living faiths in present times.

Copies of this essay are available from :

B.I. Taraporewala, Flat No. 14, 3rd Floor, India House No. 2,
Kemp's Corner, Gowalia Tank Road, Bombay 26.

