

# Dr. Cyrus I. Poonawalla

By PT. Editor Freyan Bhathena

For the longest time I have wanted to sit across the table from Dr. Cyrus Poonawalla and understand what makes a man so magnanimous in his Work, his Charity and his personality. It was the sad twist of events within the offices of the Bombay Parsi Punchayat that finally gave me a chance to escape to Pune to meet Dr. Poonawalla. But whatever the reason to meet him, I was determined to try and understand the man who would, at the end of this calendar year be addressing the starry eyed delegates of the World Zoroastrian Congress 2013.

As you all know Dr. Poonawalla, Chairman of the Poonawalla Group

it but the girls will admire me!

Turns out surprises are the flavor of the month! Hardly a month shy of the Congress, the racing season and the Turf Club elections had already been weighing down on the agenda for Dr. Poonawalla when his Sponsorship of the Congress led him down a completely new rabbit hole! He says, 'My initial interest to get involved in only the sponsoring of the World Zoroastrian Congress was evoked a few years ago when I was approached during the time of the last Congress. I therefore agreed that when the Congress came to Mumbai, my base city, I would like to be the Principal Sponsor.

There was no particular motive except to help the funding of the Congress. Sometimes organizers find it difficult to seek funds from so many people and so I decided to do my part.

I was expecting to just involve myself to the minimum in the Congress

but the Trustees of the BPP were at crossroads and they unanimously requested me to take over as the Chairman of the Congress so it would go on smoothly.'

Now the agenda is bursting to the seams, I think out aloud... to

which he assures me, 'Yes, it is a huge responsibility for me but I will manage it.'

I asked how that is turning out so far and he sighs.

'Well, the preparations are now back on track. All seven of the BPP Trustees have unanimously reposed faith in me to take decisions and take the programme forward and so I am doing that. Of course I took a few decisions and put a few things in place without fear or favour. We have called in one of the best in class event companies, Percept to handle the event and it seems like a good decision to lighten the burden of the managing committee. The process has had to be smoothed over.

If all goes as per plan, we expect that 1200 to 1400 delegates will be attending all the four days of the Event.'

You can see that the Congress is on Dr. Poonawallas' mind all the time. Throughout the length of our chat he comes up with ideas, sweetly even asks for my suggestions, taking decisions and brewing things in his busy mind.

I grew up in the city that owns a great deal of its gorgeous cultural

façade to the Poonawalla family and I ask Dr. Poonawalla how much of 'him' and his persona are going to be at an event which right now is plagued by controversy. He speaks about how controversy should not affect anyone's decision to be at the WZC 2013 and that he has always managed to maintain a safe distance from it all. 'But I suppose now the controversy can affect me because I have to deal with the different factions within the organization body!'

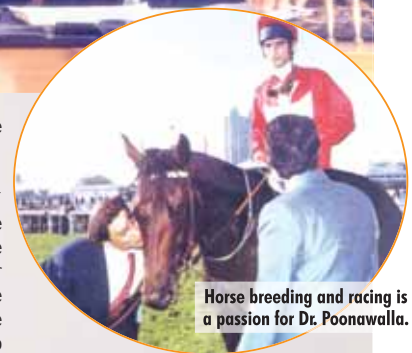
We continue a chat. Over green tea I get to see the latest version of the agenda. 'I would love to see more interaction with the audience on the agenda but the dye is already cast for panel type discussions. There are a huge number of subjects on the schedule and I hope that the audience gets to ask questions and interact,' he says.

Under all the glamour that is Dr. Poonawalla is a hard days' work filled with substance. This reflects in his agenda as the new face of the Congress as well. 'The Congress must be about subjects and topics that need change and less about being glamorous. Controversial issues have been left out. We have however made a lot of room for networking and interaction in the evenings and plus the tea lunch and coffee breaks.... This gives the delegates a pleasant space to interact in. I would have liked to add some meaningful site visits to the agenda as well.

A lot of people including myself would have wanted to discuss the two major issues that would have been of maximum interest; that is alternative disposal of the dead and the issue of the fate of children who have had or want to have their Navjotes, but are born by Intermarried Parsi girls who have married outside. However as these are extremely dividing issues, discussions on them have not been included in the Congress so that the occasion can remain pleasant and least acrimonious!'

There is a time and place for everything. The Congress should not be all work and no play and Dr. Poonawallas' eyes light up as he talks about the special event planned at the race course for all the Delegates. 'For the racing programme on the 29th

we are



Horse breeding and racing is a passion for Dr. Poonawalla.

really planning something elaborate and enjoyable. We have paid special attention to even the minutest of things like the seating arrangements! Parsis have always been a big part of racing history right from the inception of the Western Turf India Club by Sir C.N. Wadia.'

With less than two weeks to go before the eyes of the Zoroastrian Community across the globe is on his Congress, Dr Poonawalla says he is 'keeping his fingers crossed that nothing goes wrong now'

Dr. Poonawallas entire biotech business is aimed at helping vaccinate populations across the globe. By the year 2000 1 out of every 2 children across the globe has received medical



Seen here with his late wife Mrs. Viloo Poonawalla, son Adar (Executive Director Operations at the Serum Institute) and daughter-in-law Natasha.

which includes Serum Institute (India's grandest export in the world of Pediatric Vaccines) has graciously accepted the Chairmanship of the World Zoroastrian Congress, 2013 to be held in Mumbai from the 27th to the 30th of December.

I drove into the vast heart of his business empire and was asked at the gate if I had come to meet 'Cyrus Baba', indication of how Dr. Poonawalla is dear to and down to earth with his security staff. If it were not for that first interaction with his polite staff, I would not have guessed that humility could be a quality of a man who built the classic and rich landscape of the office premises that I now walked through. Each wall was covered with memories on the race track and each corner served home to a delightful and tasteful piece of furniture.

But humility wasn't the only pleasant surprise... the second was humour! During our chat we touched upon what he would say in his address to the delegates. He mentioned a few jokes he had thought of interspersing into his poignant message and then said... the young boys may hate me for



Cyrus and son with Bill Gates (centre) during his visit to the Serum Institute of India Ltd.



His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales at a private visit to Serum Institute in November 2013

► care from the vaccines created at his state of the art facility in Pune. The Indian National Programme of Immunization is largely dependant on the Serum Institute. Dr. Poonawallas' contributions have not gone unnoticed across the world. He has received award after award for his work and recognition from leaders in every sphere.

When I ask him about his idols, he is quick to reply that he truly admires Bill Gates. 'I don't have Parsi idols because people worthy of being idols were those who lived in the past when they build up the successful empires that are slowly being dissipated by their successors who sadly have not lived up their parents and grandparents achievements.'

Many heavy questions later I ask Dr. Poonawalla about what makes him happy to be Dr. Poonawalla... He laughs... and then thinks... and then says... 'I feel fulfilled that I have been able to grow from a very small beginning. My biotech company and my racing and breeding empire have been built without compromising on my principals of corporate governance and my ability to call a spade a spade. Without fear or favour... both with the government as well as with society.'

I bid farewell to Dr. Poonawalla who has within seconds of me turning toward the door already immersed himself in work with vigour. As the gates of the magnificent empire close behind me I cannot help thinking...

Dr. Poonawalla has been one of the best exports India has had. With his philanthropic work, with his horses and with his vaccination agenda, he has hosted the most prestigious of people at his home, one of the more recent being the Prince of Wales himself. Dr. Poonawallas' grounded nature and his ability to call things like they are, have not taken away but instead added immense value to his personality.

The World Zoroastrian Congress 2013 is no small deal. It must be, as its predecessors have been, a forum of decision making and great impact. With the hosting skills and the strong personality of Dr. Poonawalla atop of it, I believe the Congress can be everything it is cut out to be and more...

I leave once again reassured...



In 2005 receiving the "Padma Shree" India's fourth highest civilian honours from then Hon'ble President of India, Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam.