

His father's son

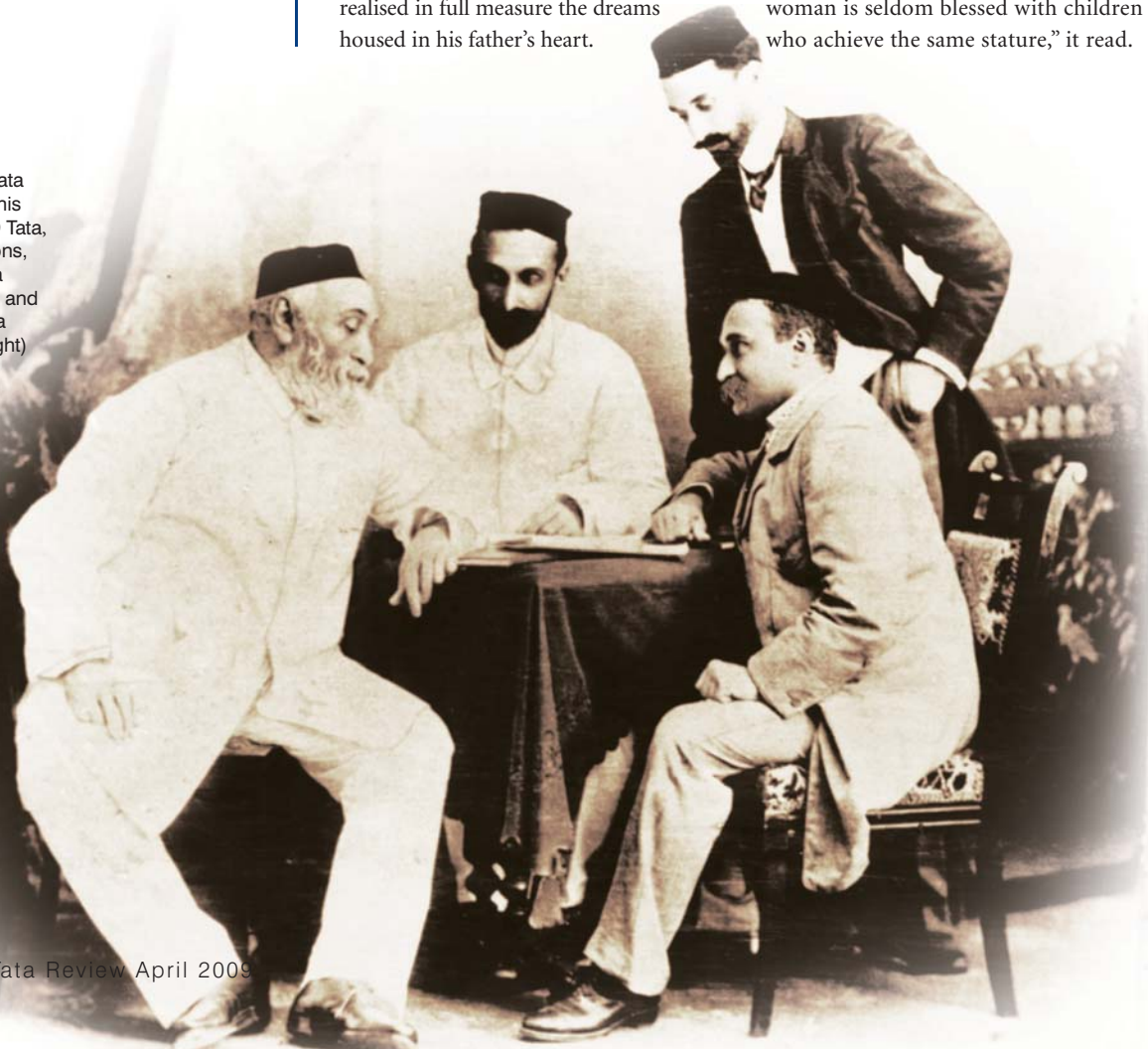
Dorab Tata was a business magnate and an aesthete, a sports lover and an altruist, but it is as the executor of Jamsetji Tata's pioneering vision that he is best remembered

Sons have always a rebellious wish to be disillusioned by that which charmed their fathers," said Aldous Huxley, the British writer. Not so Dorab Tata, the first-born son of the founder of the Tata business conglomerate, Jamsetji Tata, and the steadfast disciple who realised in full measure the dreams housed in his father's heart.

Jamsetji was a visionary and a pioneer, a remarkable man who saw beyond the morrow. But Jamsetji's fame and prominence could not have been secured without the devotion to duty and the loyalty to legacy that Dorab displayed throughout an adult life distinguished by its commitment to causes pursued, it can be said, more for his father's sake than his own. It can also be said that, for all of Jamsetji's trailblazing exertions, Dorab's may have been the harder road to tread.

A tribute that appeared in the *Sunday Standard* in October 1959 to mark Dorab's 100th birth anniversary got it eloquently right. "A great man or woman is seldom blessed with children who achieve the same stature," it read.

Jamsetji Tata (left) with his cousin RD Tata, and his sons, Ratan Tata (standing) and Dorab Tata (seated right)



“History tells us all too rarely of an Elizabeth Tudor or an Alexander Dumas the Younger. Far more usual is the story of the son dissipating the wealth earned by his father’s genius and work; the daughter growing neurotic in the shadow of a splendid mother. The child born to Jamsetji Tata one hundred years ago was a rare exception to this understandable rule...”

Aesthete and magnate, sportsman and altruist, Dorab was, of course, more than the responsible son of an illustrious father. Born on August 27, 1859, when Jamsetji was just 20 years old, Dorab attended the Proprietary High School in Bombay. In 1875, at age 16, he was sent to a private tutor in Kent in England. At 18, he attended Gonville and Caius College at Cambridge — he was elected an honorary fellow there in 1922 — where he completed his matriculation while excelling in a variety of sporting disciplines.

Dorab returned to Bombay in 1879 and joined St Xavier’s College, from where he completed his bachelor’s degree in arts. Jamsetji was not willing to throw his son into the deep end of business just yet, encouraging him instead to broaden his horizon with a stint in journalism (he worked at the *Bombay Gazette* as an editorial trainee). In 1887, along with Jamsetji, younger brother Ratan and cousin RD Tata — the father of future Tata group chairman JRD Tata — he became one of the four partners of the newly established Tata and Sons.

In 1894, when he was 25 years old, Dorab was dispatched to Nagpur, location of the Empress Mills, then the biggest entity in the fast-expanding family of Tata enterprises. The aim was for him to, in the words of a contemporary chronicler, “receive training in the technicalities of the cotton business”. The Empress Mills apprenticeship would come in handy when Dorab was given the task of seeding a textile project in Pondicherry.

Dorab would go on to head Empress Mills and, later, manage the Swadeshi Mill at Kurla in Bombay. Under his charge it was one of the few factories that kept functioning during the bubonic plague that hit Bombay in 1896. Dorab was away from the city, celebrating



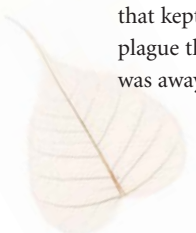
Educated in Bombay and England, Dorab Tata joined his father’s firm in 1887 at age 28

Christmas at his family home, when the plague struck, but — in a display of obligation and courage that came to characterise him — he returned to run the mill in this most trying of times.

Business would take a backseat to nuptial matters when, in 1898 at the age of 38, Dorab married Meherbai Bhabha, the daughter of HJ Bhabha, inspector general of education of the erstwhile Mysore state. It can be truly said that Dorab had found the love of his life. Meherbai was not the sit-at-home kind. A keen tennis player and a socially active livewire, she would get deeply involved in issues concerning women and Bombay. “Throughout their married life Dorab’s great preoccupation was to afford her the fullest opportunity for developing her natural talents,” said a press report from the early 1930s recounting the relationship.

Dorab’s interest, though, would remain focused on furthering and bringing to fruition the grand plans and passions of his father. There were three that stood out: creating the steel plant that would help India take its place in the league of industrialised nations, getting the path-breaking hydroelectric project near Bombay going, and setting up a research institute in Bangalore to serve as a cradle that would nurture Indian talent in science and technology.

Jamsetji would pass away in 1904, long years before any one of his three magnificent obsessions could be realised (the steel plant started production in



1913, the first units of power from the hydroelectric project were drawn in 1915, and the Indian Institute of Science began functioning in 1909). The steel plant posed the most severe difficulties. In 1903, when he was in his early 40s, Dorab went prospecting for months in the jungles of Orissa and the Central Provinces. The story goes that he was convinced of the potential of finding iron ore in Orissa after a chance discovery — made while killing time at a Nagpur museum — about the state's geological formation and related data.

Wrote Stanley Reed, British parliamentarian and editor of *The Times of India* from 1907 to 1924, in an obituary of Dorab. “The dogged tenacity with which Dorab Tata and his expert advisers searched the Central Provinces for ore surprised even his closest friends; for he was born to easy days... British enterprise does not come well out of the test. Though the existence of the required materials was established beyond doubt, and the home market justified the establishment of large-scale manufacture, British capital was timid and exacting, and no progress was possible. Fortunately, on the crest of the *swadeshi* wave, India took this opportunity to itself and subscribed the money with an ease which surprised everyone... The same wave of constructive enthusiasm launched the hydroelectric works with Indian capital.”

Reed reckons Dorab “was a rather reluctant partner in the manifold activ-



Dorab Tata found his lifemate in Meherbai Bhabha, the daughter of HJ Bhabha

ities into which his house launched” yet “rose to the occasion and placed his private fortune behind the Iron and Steel Company when the dark days came”. The reference was to Dorab staking almost all that he had by way of material possessions to save the steel venture when, in 1924, it slipped into trouble. Help arrived from many quarters, including the colonial government and Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohammed Ali Jinnah, two gentlemen who rarely agreed on anything.

The dark clouds would soon pass and the ‘house of Tata’, as one commentator called it, would stand tall once again. In 1925, it was estimated that Tata enterprises as a whole had an aggregate capital commitment of £50

million, almost all of it Indian money. At the time of Jamsetji's death, the fledgling Tata group operated three textile mills and the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay. Under Dorab's stewardship were added the steel plant and enterprises in power, edible oil and soap, cement, insurance and aviation. [His expansion ideas included Bombay House, the Tata headquarters in Bombay. Land for the building was acquired in the boom period following World War I for the then princely sum of Rs1,700 a square yard].

The values and ethics that have come to define the Tata way in business owe at least as much to Dorab as they do to his father. When the board of directors of the Tata Industrial Bank (which was later amalgamated with the Central Bank of India) proposed to raise new shares at a high premium before the newbie enterprise had declared a single dividend, Dorab sided with shareholders opposed to the scheme and threatened to resign if it was carried through. The proposal was dropped.

Dorab was knighted in 1910 by the British Empire for his contribution to the industrial advancement of India. A few years later, with the advent of World War I, he would prove even more valuable to the British. “The production of steel at Jamshedpur in the Great War was an asset of incalculable value to the Allies, for it enabled India to send to Mesopotamia, East Africa and elsewhere vast quantities of railway material and other essential supplies,” stated a report in the *Times* of London.

Despite his proximity to power and powerful people, Dorab refrained from getting involved in politics, on principle it is said. And he was not overtly fond of the colonial ruling class. The same *Times* report adds: “Sir Dorabji shared his father's sensitiveness as to any slight, general or individual, on Indian *amour propre*, and favoured American and other non-English technical advisers.”

His views on India are best rendered in his own words, spoken on this occasion at a meeting of Tata Steel shareholders in 1918: “So far we have but scratched the surface of this great land... is it not time that all of us



The Empress Mills, one of the earliest and biggest enterprises of the house of Tata

should... do something within our individual, humble spheres to raise metaphorically two blades of corn where one grows; produce out of the fullness of our own land, and with our own labours... something that will raise the comfort and the standard of the people; something for which those who come after us in life will be happier, healthier and more prosperous than we are today? Is it not time to stir ourselves, to wake up to the great opportunity and the stern duty before us: the task of India's regeneration?"

These were not empty phrases because Dorab, at every opportunity that presented itself, put his money where his sentiments lay. Sometime before his death on June 4, 1932, he bequeathed most of his personal wealth — including one of his most cherished possessions, the Jubilee diamond, which he had purchased in England for about Rs30 lakh in the late 1920s — to the newly registered Sir Dorabji Tata Trust. The amount totalled Rs1 crore and he wanted the trust to work for the benefit of all Indians (this was not well received by a section of the Parsi press in Bombay).

Dorab also set up a trust in his wife's memory, the Lady Tata Memorial Trust, which he endowed with a corpus of Rs25 lakh for research in leukaemia, and he donated more than Rs20 lakh to a clutch of institutions. In the words of the Governor of Bombay, Sir Frederick Sykes, "he put the coping stone on his life's policy of assisting those less well endowed with this world's goods".

Dorab and Meherbai did not have any children and this may have led Jamsetji's son to describe himself as "the last of his house". When his wife died in June 1931, something of Dorab went with her. He reserved a site beside her mausoleum in Brookwood Cemetery in England; the wait to fill it would not be long. On April 11, 1932, Dorab sailed for Europe; on June 4, close to the first anniversary of his wife's passing, he died of heart failure at a sanatorium in Bad Kissengen, Germany. Dorab Tata was two months short of his 73rd birthday. ●



A sporting life

"I have always taken greater pride in being called a sportsman than in anything else," said Dorab Tata at a meeting held at the Parsi Gymkhana in Bombay in 1919. "I would much rather be the president of the MCC [the Marylebone Cricket Club, the institution that lorded it over the game in those days] than be the viceroy of India."

Dorab's fondness for sports — it has to be in the plural because he loved and did well in many of them — began early; as a young lad he was encouraged by his father to take part in the annual athletic meet held at the Oval maidan in Bombay. But it was in England, where he completed his matriculation, that Dorab acquired his multiple sporting skills, and an enduring interest in a motley mix of sporting disciplines.

During the two years he spent at Cambridge, Dorab won honours for cricket, rugby and football. He also played tennis, became an expert rower, had top finishes in sprint events and was a good horseman. Following his return to India, he captained the Parsi Cricket Club in Bombay. It was as a patron and supporter of the Olympic movement in the country, though, that he made a lasting impression.

India's participation in the Olympic Games at Antwerp in 1920 was mostly thanks to Dorab, who selected and sponsored two Indian athletes for the trip: J Chogale, a middle-distance runner, and PC Banerjee, a sprinter. He also financed the Indian contingent that went to the Paris Olympiad of 1924. When the Indian Olympic Association was set up in 1927, he became its first president.

Wrote AFS Talyarkhan, the late sports journalist and commentator, on Dorab's 100th birth anniversary in August 1959 in *The Times of India*: "I think we can rightly argue that [Chogale and Banerjee's] Olympic venture was a Tata entry... One hundred years ago an Indian was born who quickly grasped the import of sport, but it was not the mere leisure of inherited affluence that turned his gaze towards games."

Dorab helped found, among other institutions in Bombay, the Willingdon Sports Club, the High Schools Athletic Association, the Bombay Presidency Olympic Games Association and the Parsi Gymkhana, which he served for over 30 years in various official roles. Additionally, he was a member of the International Olympic Committee and the MCC.

Dorab's fascination for sport was no trifle. He recalled how he could not, when asked by his father, remember the number of bales of cotton shipped by Tata companies without referring to his accounts. But he could, without any assistance from books, recount in great detail all of the centuries of the legendary WG Grace.