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When no one is left to tell the story,
would there be no history?

On History:
Fact,
Fiction,
&
Factions

Fact, Fiction &
Faction:
A Selection
of Published Works

**Totaram Sanadhya's Experience of Racism in early
White Australia
(a transcreated narrative)¹**

Purushottama Bilimoria²

Abstract

This essay falls outside the genre of the usual scholarly and analytical paper or article. Here I wish to indulge my readers in a narrative, a story, that is somewhat fictionalised,³ albeit from real events that took place and chronicled in the journal (issued shortly after as a book in India in Hindi (mere fījī dvīp me ikkis vars, Chaturvedi, 1914)⁴ of an itinerant Indian nationalist activist, the late Pandit Totaram Sanadhya (*totarām sanādhya*). Pandit Sanadhya happened to be returning from the colonised islands of Fiji in 1914, after his sojourn there of some twenty-one years among the Indian sugar-cane plantation indentured coo-

lies. He was lured to the backwaters of the Empire deceitfully by British recruiters who he believed were taking him to the Caribbean. Beginning as a humble indentured labourer he rose to become a sardar or plantation overseer, while also servicing the subaltern Indian community as a bona fide *pandit*: indeed, one of the few in the colony to have received the acclaim from the Indian community of being an 'ardent Ārya dharma lecturer and debater'. He was instrumental – in collaboration with C. F. Andrews – in bringing to an end the horrendous indenture labour system in the colonies (often dubbed as 'the second abolition') which since its inception had effectively replaced the erstwhile slavery system.

Chale Aastalia (Let us go to Australia)

As the steamship rolled into Sydney harbour and the sun broke through the Pacific horizon, the lone traveller from distant shores, Pandit Totaram Sanadhya, breaking his long journey back to India to join Gandhi's nationalist movement in Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, exiting the land of the secondary colonisers for King George V, rubbed his weary eyes to gain a better vista of the approaching civilization. With some bewilderment, he could just make out what his fellow-travellers on the open berth were babbling on about and excitedly pointing to. It was an overly-large bridge, it seemed, shaped like an inverted moon crescent or a women's comb of the kind the Indian village women stick between their scalp and the protruding hair-bun. Usually, he pondered, bridges are built from concrete slabs spanning across the opposite ends of the banks of a river or a creek, with the supporting poles strutted under the structure; but here amazingly, he could not see a river as such: Chalo hoga koi pool...saale gore log sab cheez ulti pulti aur apne liye badi se badi banaate hain. ('Well, it must be some kind of bridge; the white fellows make everything for themselves upside down and in large size'), he ruminated to himself, half-wondering what the fuss was all about. Of course he had never seen photos of this 'Wonder of the World' or of the even more strikingly challenging (not though to Indian sensibility at least that knew only of the Taj Mahal as the greatest single edifice the human race ever erected) by then the universally-acclaimed Golden Gate Bridge joining San Francisco to Marin County.

However, as he looked across at the port his memory jolted for a bit.

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² I am grateful to Sudesh Mishra (University of the South Pacific) and Julia Prendergast (Deakin University), for advice on the narrative structure; to Brij V Lal (Australian National University) for letting me have copies of Totaram Sandhya's *Fiji Dwip Me Mere Ikkis Varsh* (4th Hindi edition, 1963; since I have long possessed only an English edition) and also Sanadhya's *Bhūṭlen kī Kathāi Gīrmit ke Anubhava* (New Delhi, 2012) and to Apoorva Haṣṣī (New Delhi) who helped with Hindi iterations.

³ This is a work of semi-fiction or faction, and thus does not cohere to the chronology of historical studies but draws on a range of events and personalities in connection with the central theme of the story. Rather, I have made an intersectional play of narratives, stories and recollections (as of the cultural collective, even if the dates do not jell or cohere), and so the events may appear a little jumbled. For a more academic and analytical study see Bilimoria et. al. (2015).

⁴ See also Sanadhya's *Bhūṭlen kī Kathā Gīrmit ke Anubhav* (or *Bhooṭlen ki Katha*, or *The Story of the Haunted Line*) (in Hindi, edited by Brij Vilash Lal, et. al), and the English translation of both the Hindi texts (Kelly and Singh, 1991).

Then he recalled that this was the very harbour where the local Theosophical Lodge, as it was called, had built a sizeable amphitheatre just for the occasion of receiving and welcoming the youthful Jiddu Krishnamoorthi (formally known as Jiddu or just J. Krishnamurti) on his much-touted first visit to Australia. Totaram could scarcely contain his smirk as the next thought passed through his mind: Krishnamoorthi had been picked out among the many boys who were staying in the Adyar Lodge with their parents while playing innocently with his siblings, as all children around Madras do, on the beach. This jackpot spotting of the supposed divine aura around this boy, circa around April 1909, fell to the good fortunes or *divya-cakshu* (blessed eyes) of the controversial ex-Anglican priest, Charles W. Leadbeater - an ardent follower of the expatriate Russian mystic, Madame Blavatsky, who founded the Theosophical Society (in New York in 1875). Leadbeater informed Annie Besant, who had just taken over as the President of the Theosophical Society, after its headquarters moved to Adyar (outside Madras, now Chennai, in South India). Besant was equally enamoured, indeed taken by the handsomely intelligent disposition of the lad, and shortly after, despite the objections from the father, whisked the young unsuspecting Andhra boy to Sovereign England where he would be groomed for the high stakes of the expectant World Teacher and made ready to assume the messianic throne of the 'Star of the East'. The much prophesied plan was that the avatarically-chiselled Krishnamoorthi would disembark the ship while still at some distance from the harbour and miraculously "walk on the water" across to the piers - yes, like Jesus two millennia before him on the expansive lake (they called it the Sea of Galilee) - making his way straight onto the amphitheatre where a motley crowd of 2000-odd ardent Aussie and Kiwi theosophists, spiritualists and onlookers would be awaiting eagerly to greet and garland him. Totaram chuckled again to himself as he reached the climax of the story, recalling that the little Jiddu (magic-boy) waited until the ship berthed and then just simply and nonchalantly walked down the ramp onto the concrete platform: *Is jaadugar ko kyun avatar bana diya, ye mamuli sa madras bacha? Wah re wah, krishan ji ki pathar moorti!* ('Whereforth did they make this magic-walker into an avatar, this ordinary southern boy, jee-wiz, some stone idol of Krishna!?)

He too walked off the ramp like Krishnamoorthi some ten years before him, though there wasn't any visible crowd in an amphitheatre or any such construction expectantly looking forward to welcoming him and falling at his Guru-blessing feet. There were throngs of people for sure excitedly awaiting his fellow-passengers from the upper decks to descend; but they were all of the *Angrez* (Anglo-) kind, and the passengers they

greeted in welcome were of the same colour and profile. His arrival was conspicuously absent of any ceremonial display - such as, for example, the gallant reception afforded to Gandhi when he arrived in South Africa (that was the second time, he checked his memory of Indian national history, not the first time, whence he was thrown off the train after reaching Johannesburg); or of the kind afforded to him on his own departure from Fiji after his twenty-one year sojourn there.

The truth is that, as he wrote in his diary while passing time on the long lonely sea-journey, he found himself in the impoverished islands quite by accident, being deceptively recruited as a *girmitiya*⁵, indentured "coloured" recruits, classed under the more general vernacularised term "coolie", from India (an arrangement or agreement that was contractually to last five years with a return passage guaranteed); five years later at the end of his contract he became a leading activist in the 'Haunted Line' and re-invented himself as an emissary of the Servants of India Society dedicated to uplifting the woeful condition of emigrant Indians in the Empire's little lacklustre jewel. And he worked with Charlie (C.F.) Andrews to have the indentured system, which merely substituted the outlawed practice of slavery and 'blackbirding', abolished once and for all in the colonies of the Empire. Totaram, however, understood that the practice was continuing in some form in Australia despite the second abolition. Just as he averred a form of slavery of the Africans was still prevalent in parts of North America, especially in the southern resistant states. The fledgling nation was plunged into a bloody civil war to fight over the right to continue slavery, and here the Britishers are shamelessly continuing indentured labour as a surrogate to slavery, that only his great heroes, D. Gopal Krishna Gokhale and disciple Mohandas K. Gandhi rightly stood up against, - and more recently he too of course, after serving as one himself...Ooops, please be excusing me, he apologised as he brushed and bumped his way through the almost stationary crowd.

Anyway, the lonesome traveller was feeling a little seasick and needed to get to his hotel to wash-up and rest, and indeed to do his *mantra-puja*, the rite of chants. As he walked towards the nearby hotel he wondered about his countrymen who had migrated to Australia, much like the Indians in the island colony, though the former started arriving twenty-to-forty years before he reached the forsaken *dwip*, the outpost is-

⁵ A corrupt form of the English term 'Agreement', into 'Girmit', used mostly in Fiji but spread across to other colonies as well where indentured workers were present; it seems Gandhi was aware of this term while in Natal, though he did not coin the term as some have suggested; he did use it for himself.

land to the other outback/antipodean colonies (later federated states) in Australia, not as indentured coolies or labourers known as girmityas, but as recruited domestic servants and camel drivers along with hordes of 'Ghans or Afghans, Pathans, Baluchis, Sikh and Muselman Punjabis, and as plantation workers in the hinterlands. Some, mostly Sindhis, even came later as free immigrants, made money managing their own general stores that supplied imported Indian wares to their brethren hawkers and pedlars in the outback. He expressed a desire to himself visit these motley bevy of Indians in whichever vicinities or neighbourhoods near Sydney they may have taken up residence. He made a mental note to himself to pursue this matter on another day. Meanwhile, a passer-by helped him locate the corner street where his nominated hotel was situated. Good thing, he thought, they speak English here and understand the Indian accent . . . well, only just.

Checking-in at the bed & breakfast wharf-side hotel was not such an ordeal as Totaram had expected because he carried with him a letter of credentials and good character from a sympathetic Australian executive with the Colonial Sugar Refining Company back in Fiji (the Company, as it was known, that was largely responsible for the exploitation and insufferable conditions of the Indian planters. Ironically he had served as a front-line sardar (over-seer) for the Company, but with much diffidence and in defiance even as he agitated as an ardent activist for the rights of the coolie force – a movement that spilled over in the subcontinent as well and gained momentum more widely across the colonies). The good gorasahib had the foresight and generosity also of 'loaning' him money in Australian currency. He handed the letter with the customary greeting (having been in Fiji for so long, the native greetings rolled off his tongue): 'Bula Ratu.. arrr Maramma'.

'No, this is not Bulla Route and I am not Marianne; you are in Sydney Harbour and my name is Sandy, Sandy Hore'. He wondered why Sydneyites would be so open about their embarrassing names, like naming one-self 'Chappan-cchuri (56-knives)'. Nevertheless, he offered his British Subject passport that all Indian nationals were entitled to, although his was procured in Fiji. Still rather bemused, the young attendant at the front desk could not help bursting out aloud at the sight of the photo and the alien look-alike staring in her face, with a stereotypical aside. 'G'day Stranger... so your name is Mr Toot-a-raam Sundayahoo, toot-toot? But you all black, got no soap, Mister Gad-fly?' While the sea-fared guest felt offended at being mistaken for an alien and a black man – given that he was a shade or two paler and a British Subject – even more blasphemously, for being stridently maligned with the brazen "god-fly" – the fei-

sty rebellious demi-god, as recounted in an apocryphal epic he knew well from his scriptural learning – he remained silent. "Toot-a-raam" was presently not in the mood to make any sort of considered response or defence, as he would have back in Fiji, that might ruffle the feathers of the unknowing apostate, or mar the first minutes in the otherwise promising lodge he felt he was lucky to be taken into – despite the stringent persistence of the 'White as Snow' policy.

Once in his room, as a good Brahmin or Thakur would, he prepared to do his rituals and ablutions or the necessary purification rites using water; emptying his jholly (jute-satchel), he set out the moortis (idols), gheelamp, the copper mandala-(bearing geometric engravings), dhoop or tiny cubes of sandalwood incense, a small lota (brass receptacle), alongside a few little items of dried fruits, nuts and two still-intact bananas, as his temporary Kashi-Vishvanath shrine. He also carried with him a spare larger lota that he would fill from the faucet (or the village well, as the case maybe) and take with him whenever he was moved to answer the other holy nature's call. In those days, the outhouse (euphemistically called by Americans 'Restroom' or 'Bathroom'), was situated a little further away from the main dwelling towards the rear end of the small pocket-garden (or dirt-bed as it was also called). One reached it via a narrow concrete path and small steps. While he was inside for the humanly natural ablu-tion function, other guests of course needed to use the 'dunny'– as it was also called in the antipodes, – as well, and one such lingered around expecting the unknown guest to evacuate and vacate at any moment. But Totaram, even though he was aware of the singular waiting-in-line vagabond, was taking his time (time was not in any rush as his protracted journeys across the seven seas had taught him; and eternity can never run out of time either, the Lord willing otherwise).

The now rather desperate guest hanging around outside noticed to his utter bewilderment a trail of water running out and down from under the door of the dunny-house; this is most unusual, he thought to himself in refined Irish accent (as he too was an intrepid or perhaps a recent immigrant just arrived seeking to make a decent livelihood in the antipodes). Something seemed not right, perhaps untoward; so he rushed back inside the building and enquired of the owner-manager at the desk, whether some accident might have become of the incumbent, whoever that might be, occupying the grand throne in the dunny-chambers.

Don't see u'ater comin out of the dunny, ain't we?

Hhhmmm, the bloody darkie Indian or Ceylonese shod is up to somethin'

unwieldy there'

Cor blimey, has he soiled the seppo then? Or the bugger missed the bowl... got the trots?

Holy shit; fair dinkum ma'te?!

A larikan from India, me thinks.

Before the conversation went too far, the self-purified much-relieved itinerant Indian advocate of human decency emerged, only to be affronted by the irate king of the castle himself, who he noticed sported a felt hat with a largish rim which strangely had bottle-corks drooping off it; and there was the Irish strongman standing next to him providing moral support and a muscular arm, if needed. The big boss almost stuttered as he tried to roll out the word 'water' in high pitch, each time that he touched on it in his kangaroo-court interrogation.

So what you suppose, Mr Ghandhi, you have been doin' inside the dunny of ours? Spoiling our bog, yeah? Where is the wo'tta comin' out-from, you nigger? There is just a bloody hole in the ground and a 4-gallon hollow drum over it, no wo'tta in-there, mai'te.

Never-mind, he thought, the prickly gaddhi, royal throne or holy see, patched together with sawn-off bits of ply-wood from imported Indian tea-chests or Bengal rum crates that he had just escaped falling off from his padmasana lotus pose, before settling for the Indian police-squat position. Startled, the Thakur (though a Brahmin he assumed the status of a Thakur back in India for ease of recruitment) now began to feel affronted if not polluted by the sheer fact that a person without doubt of a lower-caste than his warrior status (he had the Irishman in mind while he was doing his morning business) could dare to cross his path. What could be a worse slight than now another mleccha (of barbarian stock) snorting his overly-large nose in his disha, direction, to cross-exam him about his washing habits even as he prepares for, or is about to, his next calling, which is to offer the routinely daily sandhya or obeisance to the Hindu gods. He retorted thus with an air of diplomacy.

He'yr, from this lota; I carry water to clean myself....

This was such a shocking pot breaking news cast to the lodge manager and the bystander alike, as would be were the little wireless tuned to Radio Australia (unmistakeably blurring from the scintillating cathode-tubes

on one side of the counter), for instance, to announce that Martians have landed on Sydney Harbour Bridge with an armoury of German-supplied weapons portending a holocaust in the penal outpost! Could the lightly-turbaned "darkie" be serious about cleaning himself in the loo?

Shoot me dead... wo-tta? lo-tta? What ar'ye talking about, ye bugger? Youu took some wo'tta from the house, what for... to clean your back passage, uuh up-shit-creek mai'te? We don't have enough wo'tta to drink, Shire Gungodean coolie: you reckon w've your holy Ganges flowing down our backyard, or somethin',? Why don' ye go do yu'r ablootion rights behind the bush there, pundit Hindoo?!

Totaram's attention stopped at the mention of 'coolie', an unbecoming appellation he had heard a million times over in the islands; 'So', he muttered to himself: 'If I am a kooley, what is he, a chamaar (leatherworker), bhang (scavenger), probably the son of a penal colonist?' After a short pause in which he composed himself, in a learned tone, but in as calm a voice as the avowed Gandhian principle of ahimsa coupled with satyagraha would dictate, he questioned the manager himself.

What is the difference, Mr John (all white men to him seem to be called John or Tom)? I will be washing myself otherwise in the bathroom only; better to do [the] rite after the action, no?

You bloody Inzians, you're a menacing curse on the Empire and now you are dread-set to destroy God's own country...

Totaram heard 'dead' in place of 'dread' in proportion to the angst welling up in his chest at that precise moment; but he did feel the characterisation of the antipodean land as '*Gods' own country*' a trifle overdetermined, for he had always believed that that description was reserved by the gods of Sanskrit for India, as *apna Bharatdesha*. Never-mind that silly slippage; Totaram did not have time for this fracas, and excused himself, muttering in his immaculate sonorous Benarasi Hindi that echoes off the Ganges' ghats (s), to the effect: *but this was no crime, I was merely following my custom, as prescribed in the ancient texts, and did not use bleach-filled paper, or tufts of grass, which the mlecchas and some of the lower class use*. Thereafter he entered his assigned room and bolted the door from inside. Soon though it was breakfast time and the bell in the dining room summoned all the guests to that common hall. The sugarcane field veteran fighter and self-proclaimed ambassador of the Indian Diaspora in Oceania had just finished his rituals and so was ready for a bit of *naashta*. He paced gently across to the hall with his little jholly

which he popped down by his side on the floor, for, as per his experience on the steamer, he thought he might want to reach inside it for certain provisions he would likely need to supplement the contents of the sparse breakfast he expected he would be served (and eggs and bacon are not his cup of tea).

While waiting for the Darjeeling-picked tea (called Bushells in the colonies) that would arrive first, he noticed a strange metal object on the table which bemused him no-end but also troubled him as it carried an air of inexplicability about it. He bent over to examine it more closely and noticed that it had a rather corrosive look about it; parts of the silver-coating seemed to have fallen off, possibly with age or disuse or abandonment, and it looked every bit incongruous sitting there. Ahaha, he suddenly figured it out: it was a short, simple, book-holder or at least a rack for placing chapters for a book as they evolved; he thought to himself: now I am a learned self-made pandit and have been writing my own memoirs of my long years in the benighted colony next door, well in imperial terms anyway for it is run virtually by the Colonial Sugar Refining Company headquartered in Sydney or Brisbane with its myriads of sugarcane loaded trains that chuck along the railway lines humming, 'compaany ki ma...' (he couldn't utter the unspeakable slang in his own high-brow company). And yes, I am calling the book "Mere Fiji Dwip me Ik-kis Varsh" (My Twenty-one Years in Fiji); this will be the first such book on the atrociously impoverished life of the indentured subalterns in the Empire, and I pray to God that the original Hindi version which I will publish in Varanasi finds its way to Australia, even just one copy, in the hands of the descendants of us girmityas, or one of my compatriot's grandsons in their university. Four chapters have been written, another planned, and three are yet to come which will be finished' – Totaram prophetically assured himself – by the time I am reaching my longed-for motherland.

So this ingenious invention of the industrial era, he thought to himself, could come of much use; its presence here is probably totally wasted and, besides, no one would notice its absence. Thereupon he moved the metallic object to one side and let it glide into the other hand which lowered itself and deposited the new-found treasure into the jholly resting on the ground (almost as though it was his clandestine cobra that he was surreptitiously feeding from the brekkie table). Done, he thought, and imagined how the emergent chapters from his book on his antipodean sojourn (few year less than the time Gandhi spent in South Africa) and other memories would look like when they are completed; indeed, Shri Banar-sidas Chaturvedi would not waste a moment giving him a lucrative con-

tract and carrying away the chapter-rack with the pages intact to his office for re-transcribing, editing and printing, even if the British government in India moves to proscribe and possibly ban the book because of its subversive, anti-colonial undertone (the Kunti story – notwithstanding the dubious sexual assault allegations she has made against a white overseer and *sardar* at the plantations –, I will also underscore as a symbol of the *dalit*-subaltern cry for the 'second abolition' of the oppressive mass labour industry and the systemic abuses within it). Pray to the Almighty, the English version when it is translated by Sri Chaturvedi's son or gotten done by his good friend Rev C. F. Andrews or whoever, wherever, later on, will be read by these whitefellas in this country as well, if they are at all literate.

No sooner had he finished this dreamy thought, then a large-bulgy person of indiscernible gender – for an oversized apron and a white-cap hid parts of the body that would otherwise disclose the creature's physiognomy – carrying a tray on which sat a tea-cosy and some other items, appeared by his table. S/he with a heavy thud propped the tray on the table, and immediately as s/he reached out towards the spot where the metallic implement would have been sitting, intuiting by a mode of non-perception its stark absence, enquired in no mean pitched tone:

And where is the bloody thing-me-bob gone from here?

From the squeakily husky voice bellowing out of the fire-pump belly, the somewhat startled Totaram could make out that his intruding second-in-command host by his table that was otherwise nicely draped over with hand-embroided white cloth, which he was just now admiring, was none other than Madame Dragonfly herself.

What "think-me-god", Madam?

Her voice reached a pitch higher as the dialectic unfolded.

You bloody-well know what I meant, you scum: the toast-rack! I cleaned it this morning as I do every morning and putit h'ree, right on this spot... where is it? Or, I'll screw your tiny neck, Mr India, or Mr Ceylone... I never know what damn coolie country these niggers come from.

As she was finishing the line, her head turned slightly towards the guest at the next table, hoping for an approbating nod to the ambiguity just expressed in respect of the land of origin.

Oh, that suchmuch thing, the book-holding item... it is falling off the ta-

ble, Madame, being of no use at brekphaast, I let it to be on the floor, only.

Well, well, let me tell ye, Mr Hindoo Shakespeare, it ain't no book-holder, you stupid illiterate coolie; you wouldn't know what a book looks like if you saw one, you still-dirty scoundrel.

Before she could finish the lexical explicative that without doubt is absent in the Hindi or Sanskrit semantic treasures that he is aware of, Totaram was moved to assert his status, which the literate tradition of India had cultivated over two millennia as distinct from the mere one millennium history in Western culture, and maybe extant only just in the European-settled Australia.

I write books, Madam...here look at the chapters of my happen-coming memoir

I am not interested in your book or writing or the Baghdad-Guitar like them theo-sofists come on the wireless with their Masters' nonsense, what they call them Maitariye and Krishnimooti..... the toast is getting cold and moist, and I need to go and serve the other real guests... put it back up here or I'll stuff your little mouth with these toasts I am holding in my hands...

The raucousness attracted the family dog that looked more like a fox than of the normal canine kind, who in a curious haste galloped over to the table-side of the *cause célèbre* and proceeded to sniff out the bulky jholly. Dismayed, the resident canine guest who is treated better than phoren guests, let out a couple of disagreeable sneezes, most likely due to an allergic reaction to the odour of some remnant camphor in the satchel, a white aromatic substance made from saturated terpene-ketone into small goblets that the devout god-fearing Hindus ritually use for *aarati*, the finalé to the twice daily mantric supplication to the gods. A dog, however, in lieu of a god hovering around the food table signalled an added bad omen.

As the stage-frightened learned Thakur-turned *pañḍita* while in the colonies reached into his jholly and shuffled out the implement he would have used as a ruin or spoil from the major Oceanic colony to bolster the gift of learning and writing true to his own cultured civilization, blessed by Goddess Saraswati herself (they called her Sophia is Greece and Luba in Russia), the imposing manageress could not hold back one last invective, a faux pas, as the memory of the morning's incident inside or outside

the dunny relayed to her by her husband-owner and the Irish seaman, was woefully still fresh in her chef's mind. In flat-pan deride she howled:

Crif[e]key man, throw another shrimp in the barbie...; you come to my hotel to spoil everything, take precious little wat'r we have from the bathroom to the dunny house... and then not wash yourself in the bathroom; have you no soap, or sand-soap even as your people use? We don't want your kind here in our house; go stay with 'em Inzians in the bush or the outside town, in Marysville... plenty of y'ur type out there, dark and dirty, niggardly and with filthy habits, and stealing our things, and fighting among themselves, like the Inzians and Muhammadans around your loin-clothed Mr Ghandi.. ppphhooo, you stinking Inzians, make-troublers: that's what you all are. But don't come here to make trouble to us!

Totaram of immense self-esteem that even his compatriot, the Rev Charlie Andrews, England's own self-exiled Jesus helping Gandhi and Tagore in the freedom struggle, had acknowledged in no small terms, could not take it anymore. Without engaging in any sort of contestation, he could not however dismiss the emergent thought in his mind even as he tried to swallow down his palpable fury: *ye gore logoin ka ghamand iis desh me bhi kam nahi hean, yahi inke company-walle baap jo Fiji-dweep me hum bhartiya ko ganne-ke pattiyo se taang dette hein, aur yaha wahi tarah ka bakwaas karte hean.. hum ko bhi toost-reck-pheg se taang denge ye log.. toh yaha se bhaagna-chahiye.* (These white folks have no less such self-deceptive cheek even in this country; the same lot, their Company fathers, who in Fiji islands would hang us Indians using sugar-cane leafs, carry on dastardly here also.. lo, they'd probably hang me by the toast-rack.. better I flee from here). With that self-sermon he reached down, grabbed his jholly and dashed to his room; within a few short minutes he had his tin suitcase readied and the motley puja-accountments repacked in his little jholly, then exited as abruptly as a prey would avoid a predator. At least he had learnt now of the next destination, wherever; he would get out into the street and jump into a cab, and ask of the cabbie: 'I am told Indians in the plenty are seen outside the city, Mary's-anvil I hear; could you just take me there?'

With that he hailed a cab, and got into the back seat. No sooner had the destination been amicably negotiated with the attentive driver, the fugitive Totaram, dropping his head down as if into a deep meditative state (always his saving grace, and the Lord be with him), began the self-reflection, albeit in low audible frequency: *They are sure to treat me better, for the honoured dignitary and learned ātmā (soul) – even if never proclaimed to be Mahatma – that I am and well-recognised by the hum-*

ble and humblest of people, my own and the natives as well... and I'm sure they have in their stores a better quality book- holding think-me-god than what the hotel could afford for its guests. The driver could barely understand let alone care to follow the soliloquy that ensued in the back-seat; besides, he had to focus his consciousness on the road, as at any moment a callous Indian might rush out from the sidewalk to cross the carriageway just when a vehicle or two happen to be approaching. Maybe they bring this habit from India, the driver had strongly contended on many such occasions when he just missed running over a brownly miscreant.

Once they reached the outskirts and Totaram began to behold people on the streets of various shades and colours, mostly Indians and Chinese, and a few South Sea Islanders as well, he felt relieved and comforted that he was more among his own people than among the acrimonious and very prejudiced gorewalle (whitefellas). And indeed, he remembered also that the real leader, sometime President, of the Servants of India Society, who had risen up the ranks of the Liberal (Tory) Party of India when Gandhi was thrown into prison by the Britishers, thereby leaving a vacuum in the Indian reformist-cum-freedom movement, had walked these very streets. Going by the name of Right Honourable V. S. (Valangaiman Shankararayana) Srinivasa Sastri [Shastri], this Indian diplomat, to be precise a Tamilian Headmaster from a family of orthodox Vaidik Brahmins, with a captivatingly mellifluous tongue that spoke faultless Queen's English, was one-time member of the Madras Legislative Council and the Imperial House of Legislature, later to be hailed as the widely celebrated jubilee-boy, or to be more precise, the 'Silver-tongued orator of the Empire'. And that honour was earned him because he did not see things eye-to-eye with the Mahatma and rejected the extreme nationalists' call for India to break-away from the British Isles. He recalled from the conversation he had with the great, somewhat off-beat savant when he was passing through the Fiji Islands *en route* or after New Zealand, that he had just visited Australia. To be sure, Sastri was on a veritable mission to plead the cause of Indians in the colonies and to enlighten the Colonial Governments of the local *girmitiya* Indians' entitlement to their natural rights precisely because they were British Subjects like those of European descent, domiciled territorially anywhere in the Dominions of the Empire. Apparently, he was officially deputed by the Colonial Indian Government on the invitation of the Australian Premier of the time, what was his name? *Billie the Hugh-es*; they had met at the Imperial Conference in London where the stalwart of the Empire made quite an impression on the Australian parliamentary leader with his pontifical concern for Indians scattered

across the diaspora, including Australia, although – permitting the colonialists this moot face-saving point –without as much as passing any remarks or innuendos about the rampant racism prevalent in South Africa or, for that matter, the unmentionable White Australia policy downunder past the Pausengi seas.

In any event, Sastri was welcomed with aplomb by the resident Indians in the suburbs of the very metropolis Totaram now found himself moving about in lonesome self-company. On their behalf the acclaimed Right Hon Sastri had delivered thundering speeches to the national Parliament and adroitly campaigned with the media, Liberal Party politicians and the Church, all of whom he somehow managed to formidably impress, following his tryst with Hugh-es (as Totaram pronounced the last name to himself) in South Africa – much to the chagrin of a very reticent General Smuts then at the helm in South Africa - , with his impeccable English and upper-crusted Brahmin attire, in the form of an achkan, a longish button-up dark frocky-coat adorning what came to be known as the 'Nehru collar.' Through his gallant efforts and cunning argumentation he had succeeded in procuring votes for Indians (the first non-whites to be given universal franchise in Australia), as well as rights to purchase property, apply for permanent residence, bring their spouses and children from India for re-union, and establish their own business and cultural institutes. And what was this clever self-educated southern Brahmin's argument? It was that, since Indians here were, again, bona fide British Subjects, and India being the jewel in the crown but also soon to be (at least that was his unrequited dream) a Dominion, yes a Dominion, there was no basis to discriminate against Indians, on parity with the full citizenship that white Australians enjoyed within the British Empire! But there was a caveat that passed through Totaram's mind as he had a much closer first-hand encounter with the colonies than Sastri had.

Sastri was, in Totaram's humble estimate, this flighty privileged diplomat of one single argument, or to put it in another way, the coy-admirer of the greatness of the European civilization whose role of educating the Indians and coloured peoples everywhere was inexorably providential. He likely had no idea, despite the pervasiveness of caste-ism and the patriarchal gender-bias in the subcontinent, of the exact and deep ramifications of racism, colonisation, disenfranchisement, and marginalisation. Sastri refused to acknowledge the existence and predicament of the native Aboriginal people in the sixth continent – whose plight in some ways was even worse, having been victims of genocide and the 'stolen generation' criminality at the hands of the same colonisers and internal colonists. Sastri had avowed to turn a blind-eye to historicism of the Lockean *terra nul-*

lius judgment that soon after the European "discovery" of terra australis led to the dehumanisation of the very people who had inhabited and preserved this continent over some 80,000 years, and against whose wishes the British government dumped petty criminals to what they first used as a panoptican-wired penal colony before turning it into a sovereign colony (or colonies) for their own settlement and aggrandisement. How could Sastri have been so blinkered to the persistent prevalence of the '*Shveta Aastalia pality*'? So much so that he did not once make a reference to this pernicious apartheid proclivity of the majority population with a Parliamentary mandate (even though Westminster wasn't entirely sanguine about this departure – hence the quizzical agenda of the Imperial Conferences). The condition of the – to be sure non-indentured – desis or the desiporias in Australia must not have been due to the White Australia exclusivism but rather owed it to a minor shortcoming within the Australian constitutional pragmatism and pending reformative adjustment within the Empire! While the indigenous inhabitants were not constitutionally-mandated as citizens of the newly-federated nation (if they were even accorded the full status of right-bearing human beings), Indians somehow pre-empted the remaining Aboriginal tribes by being accorded – that is the argument – the status of British Subjecthood with equal rights on a par with other members in any of the Dominions. Whereas Totaram, having been a witness to and scarred by two decades of expropriation, racism, and marginalisation in the South Seas, and more influenced by Gandhi's determinations towards moving to a robust discourse of (human and labour) rights and self-governing Indian polity, could have taught Mahopadhyaya, or better Maharaj, Sastri a lesson or two. But the well-heeled and officially-courted diplomat did not have enough time, due apparently to his busy schedule according to his ever-accompanying personal Secretary, one G. S. Bajpai, to have deeply meaningful and profound dialogue with his countrymen. To be sure their concerns and legal wrangling with the authorities, without doubt, were foremost on his mind; but he had a clear agenda, which only a British-minded freedom fighter, like Annie Besant could – that even Gandhi having failed to – understand. The ruminations on Sastri continued as he looked out the window.

The poor fellow of impeccable polished black Johnny Walker leather shoes, ardent devotee of the Empire, had forgotten that the Britishers had stolen the land from coloured natives. Oh well, never-mind that oversight, as Totaram tried to dismiss any negative thoughts or ill-will towards the greatly admired scorn-free national hero, a disciple of the towering Indian leader, albeit pre-Gandhi, Gopal Krishna Gokhale (also a guide later-on

to Gandhi), who was a pukka British-Indian quasi-nationalist patriot. In the township teeming with hard working Indians would that Totaram himself be a beneficiary of the victory clinched by Sastri in his erstwhile momentous visit to this country about the same time that Annie Besant had brought Jiddu Krishnamoorthi to this land? His elephantine memory made one small addition to the theosophical coincidence as the taxi came to a halt: *The trio had actually met briefly on a railway platform in the middle of the desert-skirting country as their respective trains stopped for uploading supplies or whatever.* By now the driver had assumed a self-imposed deafness to the deft noise emanating from the rear.

Sir, your destination has been reached; your compo is 1 guinea, called out the cab-driver from the front seat, whose accent indicated that he too was a migrant from some region in Eastern Europe maybe, or an in-exile Jew fleeing from Germany perhaps, and so even though he didn't follow a word of the solo-chatter in Hindi that went on in the back-seat, he could humble himself to address another alien-looking wanderer or hopeful migrant as 'Sir'. While the thought did pass through his mind, he was too preoccupied with his own concerns to ask of the driver if he was subjected in his adopted taxi-land to the type of anti-Semitism that was rife in Europe. But the thought that registered sanguinely in his mind as he was about to alight the passenger's seat was that that no one since his arrival thus far had addressed him in such honorific terms. On the contrary, he was called names, many insufferable names, that very morning within an hour or two of his arrival. *God help this unlucky country...*

Handing the cabbie the calibrated fare which needed some fast calculation in terms of the miles traversed as it seemed exorbitant by the standards of India or Fiji, Totaram disembarked on the footpath. Taking a deep breath as if celebrating a sense of comforting relief, he merrily wandered off with his tin suitcase and jholly in the direction of shops that displayed amateurish sign-boards in English and in Hindi and a couple also in Gurumukhi for the benefit of the Sikhs, advertising wares such as 'Indian SiliK Clo-thing', 'India Otencils', 'Singhs' Farm Hardwear,' 'Patel Oil', 'Sindhi Jewelers', 'Bulsar Saddlewalla', 'Billimoria Bootstore', and so on. He felt this was the moment of his home-coming that he had longed for when he left the accidental escapade in an equally accidental Ramnik Dwip (the island of banished exiles), even though India, his true destination, was another some 7,500 miles and many sea-months like light-years away. However, he reminded himself coyly as he paced along the uneven footpath with unevenly laid concrete slabs, a few more chapters of his sojourn in the Pacific and Indian Ocean waters remained to be completed before he would reach Ahmedabad. Yes, Ahmedabad, and not his erst-

while city of lights and panda-thugs Kashi, as he had decided, indeed avowed, that he would live in Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram where he would throw the whole force of his soul and the learning experiences from his overly prolonged sojourn across the Kālāpānī (Black Water) behind Gandhi's 'Quit India' Movement: the sun must set, sooner rather than later, in the axial of evil they call the British Empire.

Have a civilization.

No, thank you, we have our own.

Author

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