

3. My Parents And Home Influences

My father, Bakhshi Ramyad Sinha, was born in 1831, and passed away in 1897, at the age of sixty-six. Like his elder brother, he also received his education and training at Benares. He was a scholar of the Persian and Hindustani (Urdu) Languages, but he also knew Hindi well, and had even a smattering of Sanskrit and English. He qualified himself, like his elder brother, for Government service, at the early age of twenty, and he made such a great impression on the examiners (the commissioner, and the Judge, of Benares) that he was straightway appointed as an Executive and Revenue Officer, in 1851, and posted to serve in the Jaunpore district of the Benares Commissionership. He served in that capacity in various eastern districts of the province, for a period of about ten years. Meanwhile India had passed in 1858, as the result of the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny, from the control of the East India Company to that of the British Crown, and my father told me that he was present at Allahabad on the historic occasion when Lord Canning (the Governor-General, who was also the first Viceroy of India) read out Queen Victoria's memorable Proclamation on the 1st of November , 1858, which was until not long back regarded by the many of the politically-minded Indians as the greatest Charter of their religious liberty and political freedom. The site at which Lord Canning had read out the Proclamation, near the bridge over the Jamuna, at Allahabad, was converted many years back into a fine park, in which there stands a monument commemorating that great event in the history of modern India.

After resigning Government service, in 1861, my father settled down to practice at the Bar in the district courts at Benares. Being well versed in law, and possessing some of the essential requisites that conduce to success in the legal profession, including ten years experience of criminal and revenue administration, he soon secured an extensive practice, and in a couple of years from the time of his joining the Benares Bar, he came to be regarded as one of the leading legal practitioners. The Dumraon estate in the Shahabad district, with which my ancestors had been connected for centuries past, has some landed properties also in the Benares Commissionership (of the now province of Agra), and for this reason the then Maharaja of Dumraon had given a retainer to my father for conducting all his legal business in the courts at Benares. The work that my father did in that capacity gave complete satisfaction to the Maharaja of Dumraon and so, in 1865, when the leading lawyer of Dumraon raj, at Arrah, retired, owing to advanced age, the Maharaja not only offered that post to my father, but insisted that he should transfer his practice from Benares to Arrah, as he was anxious that my father should hold office as his chief retained lawyer. It was in these circumstances that my father left Benares, and removed himself to Arrah, where he lived for more than three decades, until his death in 1897.

When my father came to Arrah, in 1865, he had two daughters but no son. Like the average Indian he was anxious that a son should be born to him, and there were naturally great rejoicings when I was born six years later. At that time my father was one of the leaders of the Bar, and was living in a house belonging to the Dumraon estate, overlooking a spacious tank-known after a former Judge of the district, as Dean's Tank. It is still there, but the site at which there stood the house in which I was born, had long since been built over for a thriving educational institution, called the Town School. My father was in his fortieth year when I was born, and my mother was about twenty-five. My earliest recollections of my parents I recall even now with pleasure and gratification. Being the youngest child, and the only son, in the family, I was naturally made much of, and my parents love was lavishly bestowed on me. But very fortunately for me my mother was a strict disciplinarian according to her lights. When I was just about five years of age, I was offered by someone a folded betel-leaf with the usual spices enclosed in it, with which it is chewed, and the effect of which is to leave a red tint on the tongue, teeth and lips. The chewing of betel is a universal custom amongst the people of India (of all castes, classes, and communities), and seeing other people doing it, I saw no harm in following their example; but my mother, when she saw my red lips, seemed to be annoyed at my having chewed betel. She called me to her, asked to put out my tongue, and the moment I did so, she caught hold of it, and gave it a sharp twist which made it tingle, and called forth tears in my eyes. That was the first, and the last, occasion on which I indulged in the pastime of chewing betel, and I am sure, I have been all my life much the better for my mother's reprimand.

Scarcely can a non-Indian realize the many disadvantages accruing from being addicted to the habit of chewing betel, and I forbear from inflicting them upon the reader. But I may add that being convinced in early life that chewing betel was not only a habit injurious to health, but that it conducted to insanitary surroundings, (by reason of the red liquid generally spat out by chewers of betel attracting to it swarms of flies, and spreading infection thereby), I tried to interdict this habit, so far as I could, by directing (when I was a member of Government in charge of Law and Justice) that no betel-sellers be allowed to have their stalls near the courts. My orders naturally led to a great uproar, and protest, not only from amongst betel-sellers, but also lawyers, and officials (including Indian Judges and Magistrates) who all felt very happy when my term of office was over, as they knew that my successor (who himself was an inveterate betel-chewer) would set aside my order, if only to maintain his consistency with the habit he was addicted to ; and, as a matter of fact, *that* was the very first thing he did. In fact, that was his first, and also his last, order, in the Department of Law and Justice, as he retired long before the completion of the full term of his office, and the cancelation of my order is the only thing which stood to his credit.

Under the levelling influence of British rule, educated Indians-particularly those who were English-knowing-had got rid of a number of their more or less injurious, objectionable, or inconvenient customs and habits, which were not at all adapted to modern conditions of life in the country. To mention but one instance, the old Indian system of smoking tobacco through *hookahs* had been very largely replaced by the more conveniently portable-though possibly every so much more injurious-cigarettes, cigars, and pipe. Even amongst the daily dwindling number of people who affect the old Indian style of living, *hookahs* had practically disappeared, and been replaced by the western style of smoking, and you find in many well-furnished houses (as for instance, that of the Right Hon'ble Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, at Allahabad) artistically and well-designed smoking cabinets, replete with the manufactured goods imported from famous firms of tobacconists (like Dunhills) in London. But so far as chewing of globules of betel-leaves, mixed with aromatic spices and herbs, is concerned, it is still the order of the day in almost all social circles in India, and there is not a pin to choose between the Hindu, the Muslim or any other Indian, for the matter of that, in any part, of the great sub-continent of India of India-the Punjabees being the last to have come under the evil influence of the betel-leaf-called *pan*. In some parts of the country, the expression "pansupari party" is generally used as a synonym for a social gathering.

British officialdom in India-which had long since discarded the taint of many Indian customs and traditions which it once followed at the Indo-Moghal Court, at Delhi, and also at the courts of other ruling chiefs and princes, until the abolition of the East India Company in 1858- was still under the domination of the betel-leaf. At the greatest and most important official function-called a Darbar-the betel-leaf still reigns supreme in all its pristine glory. After the main business of a Darbar is concluded, the Chief Secretary conducts, one after another, to the Governor, the noblemen of the highest social position, and the great representative of the British Crown, habited in his tight-fitting political uniform, stoops a little to the bowing figure before him and offers him the betel-leaf globule covered with gold leaf, and served on a big silver tray. The holders of the rank below that of the recipients of the betel globules at the hands of the Governor are then similarly treated to the same delicacy by the Chief Secretary, and the rank below those served by the Chief Secretary by the Under-Secretary. All this takes considerable time, during which you are expected to be on your best behaviour, and not even smile, when watching sheepishly this dull and silly performance, which enables British officialdom to soothe its qualms of con-science about India being under the foreign domination of the British, which they persuade themselves cannot be true, so long as gold-leaf covered *pan* is served, on silver salvers, to the Darbarees, by British officials, including in the case of some by the Governor himself.

What wonder then if in the light of so glorious an example by British official-dom, even the most cultured and enlightened, and politically most advanced Indians, revel in the luxury of chewing betel. The higher the position the worse the offender. I have seen some Right Hon'bles-members of His Majesty's Privy Council-and also some of the greatest Indian political leaders, indulge in this luxurious pastime, during their stay in London, where they arrange to receive regular supplies from India, by airmail, of fresh betel-leaf, with the usual spices and other ingredients it is chewed with. Indian members of the Governor-General's, and Governor's Executive Councils, (the latter now replaced by Ministers), Judges of the High Courts, members of the Indian Civil Service-regular competition-wallahs too, for the matter of that - leading advocates and political leaders of the eminence, who command the applause of listening senates, are all steeped in the pastime of chewing betel, and generally squirting the red-coloured liquid of the betel-leaf. I have no doubt that it is because of it all that on maps of India, the British-Indian provinces are invariably coloured in red tint, as a compliment to, and an acknowledgement of, what may not unjustly be regarded the national colour of the country, judging from the tremendous partiality of the vast bulk of the Indian classes and masses alike to the chewing of betel-references to which widely-prevalent custom are found in Indian and Anglo-Indian literature.

Before passing to some other topics connected with my birth and boyhood, I would like to mention an interesting incident. My father and Harbans Sahay (of whom I shall say more) being intimate friends agreed that if the wife of one of them was brought to bed of a male-child, and the wife of the other of a female child, they would be married, in due course. But Fates were against my marrying a child of my father's friend, as the child born to him was also a boy! This was a great disappointment to the two friends, but they put the best face upon the matter, and accepted gracefully the arrangements ordained by Providence. They offered to themselves, however, a solatium by choosing for both the new entrants into the world the same name Sachchidananda. The name was chosen by my father, he being a Vedantist, as it represents the three sublimest attributes of the Divinity, according to the philosophical conceptions of higher Hinduism- the word being a compound (according to the rules of Sanskrit grammar) of three words, namely *sat* (truth), *chit* (consciousness) and *ananda* (eternal bliss). But though the best Hindu name from the philosophic standpoint, it is the very worst I could have been given from that of spelling or pronunciation! As regards its spelling, I myself never could write it correctly; until in 1890, when on a visit to Professor Max Müller, at Oxford, he tactfully conveyed to me (by spelling the name as I do now) on the cover of a letter addressed to me, thereby sparing my feelings, by not pointing out directly that I could not spell my name correctly. I tore up my old cards at once, and

have stuck heroically to the correct spelling since then-with its double *ch* as prescribed by the great savant and orientalist, in place of one *ch* only.

No European friend of mine had been able to educate himself to spell my name properly. They all pronounce it as “Sachinanda”- thus dropping the second *ch*, and also the first *da*. I have often received invitations even from the Government Houses in Calcutta, Delhi, and other places, with my name misspelt, in spite of the care usually taken by Government House authorities in spelling Indian names correctly. Nay, may Hindus also-not familiar with Sanskrit-had bungled both in spelling and pronouncing my name. As for Muslims, all my friends (except one to whom I shall presently refer) cut the Gordian knot by corrupting my name into “Sastanand” (or “cheap happiness!” *O tempora, O mores!*). Even my life-long and intimate Muslim friends though they tried their best, and often succeeded, in spelling the word correctly invariably mispronounced it as “Sastanand” or corrupted it still further by abbreviating it into “Sasta” (or “cheap and nasty”), thus eliminating from it all trace of the philosophic conception of “eternal bliss”! The only exception was my esteemed friend Sir Ahmad Hussain (Nawab Amin Jung Bahadur, of Hyderabad, Deccan) who being conversant with Sanskrit, not only spelt and pronounced my name correctly – but, thoroughly appreciating its philosophic significance, wrote to me in one of his letters:- “Sachchidananda! What a beautiful name you have got.”

