

Taboo: Ancestral Baggage

Kamalamani

This is for my Nan, my late maternal grandmother. She was born in Benares in India in 1918, emigrating with my mother, grandfather and great-grandmother to the UK in 1947. I send her love and long for an end to the oppressions and taboos tangled up with caste, class, ethnicity, wealth, and status, which have created weighty trans-generational ancestral baggage (1) for my family and billions of others. Writing this has helped give reluctant voice to the clashing taboos within me.

1978

I am told the tale for the first time by my Nan - she sucks her cheeks in proudly as she tells it - that I am descended from a Spanish princess, which is why I have dark hair, dark eyes and pale skin. I frown. I'm not at all sure about the lacy thing she ties in my hair in honour of my 'Spanish' legacy. I'd rather be outside playing with the dog.

1979

Nana - my Dad's Mum - knits, sews, bakes, studies the bible, and prunes the roses. Nan - my Mum's Mum - rolls parathas, lets us stay up late watching horror films, grows peonies from seed and argues with God.

Nana doesn't talk much about the past, she looks sad when she does, but happier when she remembers the cycling trips of her youth. Nan tells endless tales: ghosts, tom-boying on horses and motor bikes, being accidentally locked in the Taj Mahal with her boyfriend, and playing in prison gardens with Indira Gandhi whilst she's visiting her imprisoned father. Nan does the sucking-in-cheeks-thing as she talks, so I guess that I'm supposed to be impressed by the Indira Gandhi story (*'Indira who?'*...it's lost on me.) I prefer the one where she's escaped from boarding school and nearly gets squashed hiding under the sofa in the local bakery, because the nuns who run her school come in to eat cake.

1980

'Nan, I'm a bit Indian, aren't I?' I stupidly expect a simple *'yes, love'*. My Nan's eyes narrow to fury in a millisecond. She immediately corrects herself, pulling herself upright, drawing back her shoulders and pursing her lips: *"we're British"*, she points her finger at me *"you must always tell people we are British - people are ignorant, just because we're from India doesn't*

mean we are Indian". I don't get it. It's always been totally obvious to me I'm a bit Indian, how come she doesn't think so? Even my Mum doesn't get it.

1982

Everyone asks where my Nan's from. Why does my Nan have to sound different? She sounds faintly Welsh, faintly 'plummy', with lightening outbursts in Hindi or Urdu when she's angry, cursing under her breath.

1987

I squirm realising that I'm born partly of a post-colonial family of the British Raj. I support causes and am hell-bent on righting wrongs. I'm sick of shame. I have heated debates with my Nan's late cousin about the rights and wrongs of colonial rule. *'What rights?'* I argue. I don't get it, he's a big-hearted man who spends more time with Hindi than English speaking friends. I wince at my grandmother's proud pronouncement *'but we were kind to our servants'*.

1994

Nan cries when she tells of losing her home and coming to England. Not the crocodile ones; the real thing. She also tells of the hearts she broke, with her naivety in love. She re-tells the story of the theft of a family trunk during the passage from India, containing all the family photos, jewellery and bits and pieces that meant something. She cries again. In transition from partition India to post-war England she struggles to become newly-acquainted with being one of the crowd - no one to rule but her family - with ration book and umbrella in hand.

1995

I spend years studying international development as an undergrad and postgrad. I lecture in International Development. When I'm not 'in the field', doing project work in rural Africa, I'm happiest teaching students from all over the world, exchanging experiences and exploring clashes in dynamics and customs.

1999

I'm sitting under a canopy of banana leaves in the middle of a fascinating exchange with the founder of a farm - a great example of a sustainable, integrated



farm, in fact - in the Gazipur region of Bangladesh. I'm surrounded by palms and rice fields, eating jack fruit. I'm part of a team undertaking a feasibility study for a small British-funded training and microfinance aid project. I often get to do the best bit: spending hours in beat-up Land Rovers on bumpy roads, visiting small businesses in remote areas, talking to people about their work, hopes, fears, family, life. It's my first time working in Asia. I feel uncannily at ease and at home.

2005

Nan is dying. She has a recurring dream about visiting Jeolikot, north-east of New Delhi, her home town. She thinks she's on a school trip. She meets a kind, gentle monk who is showing her and her friends round and tending to his flower and vegetable garden. '*He was so kind - so kind*', she cries. A day or two before her death she has sudden, shocking moments of softening. She looks intently at me: '*we did okay - we were friends, weren't we?*' There's slight desperation in her look. I gulp and hold her hand '*yes Nan, we were friends*'.

Three months later I am ordained as a Buddhist and given the name Sanskrit name Kamalamani: 'red lotus jewel'. I leave my old family name behind.

2006

Three years after my Dad's death I am preoccupied with researching his/my ancestry. Thanks to social mobility and a post-war, PTSD-fuelled family rift, all I know is the rumour that "they were a funny lot" (*not* funny 'ha, ha') and that my Granddad taught science to the late actor, Cary Grant. Not a lot to go on. I don't know where he was/I am from. Helpfully, my Dad's, Dad's, Dad's, Dad's, Dad's Dad's, Dad's, Dad all lived and worked within a stone's throw of Bristol and are remarkably easy to track down. They don't seem all that funny: ha ha or peculiar. I've a body of two halves. My newly-discovered locally-rooted left side and my ex-pat, disoriented, emigrant 'other' on my right.

2008

The truth of the Spanish princess surfaces. I've been researching my ancestry in India. I tell a fellow researcher and distant relation about the family myth about the princess. He laughs out loud - he's heard *that* before. In fact, my great great grandmother on my maternal granddad's side was of Luso-Portuguese descent, living in Cittagong in Bangladesh.

He tells me that 'Luso-Portuguese' means that she was part Indian, part Portuguese, which her photo confirms. I found her! I *am* a bit Indian. I am taken aback realising how chuffed I am when I have the

passing thought that my great great grandmother would have known the meaning of my name, Kamalamani. She wouldn't have asked the normal "*oh! what does that mean?*" - or worst still, half-smiled awkwardly and looked away. She would have known. I feel a strong, unfamiliar sensation of letting go deep in my bones and I sink into the chair. The beginning of the end of the ancestral cover-up.

2012

I'm at the PCSR 'Dialogue' conference. I'm uncomfortable in my skin. Itchiness I can't scratch away. I feel acutely both the great privileges and the extreme disadvantages of my background and its ancestral and other, intertwining, taboos. How does someone who - in youth - has been dubbed 'an English rose' :-(- but who has always identified more with the rose's tangled undergrowth - have the right to complain about her 'white', itchy, eczema skin?

2013

I'm at the PCSR 'Taboo' conference. I feel that familiar PCSR conference feeling: appreciation at being stretched and challenged: a pickled inner dialogue and whirling gut - '*do I think this? Or that? I haven't got a clue! Phew*' - relief and a fleeting shard of grumpiness because I could be tending both my introversion and garden at home. Despite the discomfort and growing pains, more than ever I am glad I am amongst people who want to give time to understanding themselves, others, and the world.

Note

(1) Thank you to Isha McKenzie-Mavinga for her use of the term 'ancestral baggage' in her keynote. It was her use of this term that stirred me into taking action and writing this piece, which has been forming slowly for sometime.



Nan with her beloved tree peony.