An Avichal Heritage Initiative

10-12th January 2020

Tracing Ro(u)tes

in Migration

AN ARCHIVE
AT RHODESIA
HOUSE
Indian women in Southern Africa during 1910-1940s

The socio-political-economic times when Chanchalben first moved to Rhodesia, the now Zimbabwe were changing rapidly influenced by multiple external factors. She was at the time among only 150-200 women of Indian origin in British Central Africa/Rhodesia.

While she persevered in the conservative role of wife and mother it is important to lay cognisance to her strength of spirit in the changing landscapes and situations of both India and Africa.

“The migration of Indians to the various countries of Southern Africa took place at different times, for different reasons along different routes.

Gradually, countries in the region experienced the settlement of Indians who contributed extensively in diverse areas of activity in their adopted homes.

Indian women, along with their menfolk, actively participated in various local sectors that helped them establish a firm footing in the new countries.

Even during the early period in South Africa, Indian women took active part in politics aside from their involvement in the economic sector.”

discouraged by male members of their community, who saw it as derogatory to their manhood if they sacrificed their women in raising a law that was directed only against men (Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Sayyagraha in South Africa. Ahmedabad: Navjivan Press, 1961, p11). During the Second Sayyagraha Campaign of 1913, Indian women from various religions, sects and linguistic groups played a pivotal role in supporting their men against the Stark Judgment, which invalidated all non-Christian marriages, that is, all Hindu, Muslim and Zoroastrian marriages were declared null and void (Rajab, 2010, ibid). This meant that most married Indian women in South Africa were reduced to the status of concubines whilst their progeny were classified as illegitimate and deprived of all rights of inheritance, property, assets and legal claims. On 23 September 1913, sixteen women were arrested, tried and sentenced to three months imprisonment with hard labour in Pietermaritzburg Jail. According to Wells (ibid), as women were acting in defence of their religion and domestic role, their participation was condemned and even encouraged. Overall, the campaign of passive resistance was a qualified success, as it eased the most irksome restrictions on Indian mobility and succeeded in having the offending ruling overturned.

Until the late 1930s, Indian women were still largely tradition bound. However, by the beginning of the 1940s, confronted by changing socioeconomic conditions, the first signs of political activity amongst a small group of educated and politically conscious individuals appeared. In this period, a large number of working-class households depended on female breadwinners due to high male unemployment. This provided a stimulus and platform for Indian women to become politically motivated and challenged the myth of them being just “docile” and “passive”. Between June 1946 and May 1947, over 1700 individuals, 20–25 years of age, of whom 297 were women, served jail sentences some as many as four times (Surendra Bhana, Gandhi’s Legacy: The Natal Indian Congress 1894–
In memory of

Chanchalben Kishorbhai Patel (1907 – 1992)

THE Matriarch of the

Somabhai Mooljibhai Patel family

Early life
(1907-1923)

Born in Karamsad, Gujarat to Kishorbhai Vallabhai Patel and to Arkhaben in a family with four brothers and two sisters, Chanchalben was married at an early age of only 16 yrs.

She was the second wife to Somabhai Mooljibhai Patel, who had recently returned to Dharmaj, Gujarat from Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) in February 1923. It is at a time between the day of his arrival and late June that he married Chanchalben.

If curry is spoilt, the day is spoilt, if pickle is spoilt the entire year is spoilt, and if the wife is spoilt, the entire life is spoilt.

Grooms house may be of gold, but her parent’s home was priceless.
Chanchalben’s first passport was issued on 16 July 1923 at Bombay, India under the authority of Government of Bombay. On the bearers page she is identified as “Chanchalben wife of Somabhai Muljibhai Patel”, a British Subject by birth, wife of a British Subject. Entry in Somabhai’s passport dated 24 July 1923 by Government of Bombay states “Travelling to Southern Rhodesia, via Beira”. While the specific matrimonial date has been lost, it can be confidently deduced that the wedding occurred between the months of March and June 1923.
Soon after their marriage, Somabhai Patel and his newly wedded wife Chanchalben departed together for Southern Rhodesia in late July by ship from Bombay to Beira followed by train, reaching Salisbury (now Harare) at end of August 1923. Bhimjee Naik as usual would have an agent waiting to meet the ship to assist people of Indian origin with local accommodation and onward travel.

While for Somabhai this was his third return voyage, for Chanchalben, this journey must have been both awe inspiring as well as heart wrenching. Not knowing when she would next meet her kins, her first crossing of the Indian Ocean - of what was to turn out to be many over the course of the next several decades- meant arriving in a world far removed from her growing years.'
Although in unfamiliar surroundings with few people who could speak her own language, she had to quickly learn “Chi-Lapa-Lapa”, a language officially known as “Fanagalo”. This locally used pidgin language, considered the lingua-franca of Southern Africa combining words from English and local Bantu languages such as Shona is necessary to enable her to communicate with the indigenous population and fully function in her new surroundings. She in fact became fluent in this language to the extent that she taught her many children and grandchildren to speak it over the course of the next decades.

FACTSHEET
In the Republic of South Africa there are nine written languages which are widely used.

Fanagalo is, for all practical purposes, the only "communication" bridge between these numerous and diverse languages. Fanagalo is the lingua franca of Southern Africa. As such it is used every day by hundreds of thousands of Whites and Bantu. It has, in fact, been spoken since the turn of the century.
Chanchalben during her first decade in Rhodesia had also immersed herself in the activities of the growing local Indian community and the duties and tasks involved in creating and running a new household and in raising the first two of her eight children: Lalita and Vimala. She experienced her first tragedy when she lost her first son (3rd child) to disease around 1929 or early 1930. Her early struggles would have been somewhat ameliorated with the formation of the Hindu Society of Salisbury in 1926 in which she was an active member.
Life in Rhodesia: Community

In those days, in order to create a life and culture they were familiar with, they had to grow, harvest, clean all their own Indian groceries and ensure there were fresh hot meals at each time of day. The home was always full of visitors that Somabhai would bring from the station to ensure that the Indians who arrived, had the support to settle and thrive, while establishing his own business.

1923 onwards

THE HINDOO SOCIETY

The degree of unity achieved in the Hindu community, considering the depth and pervasiveness of caste in traditional Indian society and culture. In all of the settlements large enough to support an Indian i.e. Hindu Association, a community hall has been built from which no one is categorically excluded. For such social events as a marriage or entertainment of important public guests from India, it is taken for granted that everyone will be invited. In public meetings called to discuss political questions, no one is excluded by caste or religion, and no one hesitates to have his say because of his caste.
ENTREPRENEURS OF RHODESIA & THEIR WIVES

Balubhai Patel was in partnership with Somabhai under the trade name Patel Bros & co.

AVERBHAL PREMBHAI PATEL, merchant; b. Varad, died. Surat, Sept. 14, 1905, s. of Prembhai Karrabhai Patel. Was arrested in the Moslem riots in Mysore. He was a cotton exporter. He was a member of the Indian Society. He lived in Surat. His wife was Ambabai Patel.

BHULABHAI BHAVANBHAI PATEL, merchant; b. Varad, died Surat 1905; s. of Bhavano Nanjji Patel, was a prominent member of the Surat business community. He was a member of the Indian Society. He lived in Surat. His wife was Lakhmabai Pati Patel.
India-Africa journeys
Many ocean crossings over the next several decades

Kampala at Bombay (Mumbai) painted by artist Gordon Frickers, Marine paintings, British India Steam Navigation Company

**Kampala British India Line**
*Built: 1947 by A Stephen & Sons, Glasgow, Scotland*
*Gross tons: 10304*
*Length: 507ft (155m) Width: 66ft (20m) Depth: 27ft (8m) Speed: 16kn Power: 9700 shp Propulsion: Steam turbines twin screw Passengers: 60 First 180 Second 825 Third End of service: Scrapped 1971*

**Karanja British India Line**
*Built: 1948 by A Stephen & Sons, Glasgow, Scotland Gross tons: 10294*
Chanchalben and Somabhai returned to India in 1930 to take care of the education of their two daughters. The young girls had been left behind in India under the guardianship of Somabhai’s elder brother Fakhirbhai, who lived in Dharmaj.

In September 1938, Lalita and Vimala were reunited with their parents, and for the first time met their younger siblings Prabha (1932), Sushila (1934) and Sarla (1938), all born in Salisbury, Rhodesia. On this occasion, perhaps due to the start of World War II and to provide the five daughters with a modicum of parental support, Somabhai is known to have remained in Dharmaj for an extended period, departing in July 1941 for Southern Rhodesia.

“Rhodesia House”, the new home built in Dharmaj with the support of Fakhirbhai, was built from the economic prosperity seen with the expansion of Patel Bros & Co Ltd., Somabhai’s business in partnership with his brother, Narharibhai and friend/elder Baboolalbhai (also from Dharmaj and migrated to S. Rhodesia in 1907) with one of his sons, Jasbhai.

Life at Rhodesia House was generally at a gentle pace, in keeping with the era, and revolved around school schedules, farms and temple life. Chanchalben, a phlegmatic person by nature, was very fond of horticulture (a trait passed down to her children and some grandchildren) and she ensured that an extensive planting of fruit trees (which still bear fruit today) and a seasonal vegetable patch within the gardens of Rhodesia House was undertaken. All kinds of seasonal local produce was grown for the house dinner table.
For the household at Rhodesia House in Dharmaj, the period from the late 1930s to mid-1940s were happy and joyful years.

A possible reason for Somabhai and Chanchalben’s return to India in 1938 must have been to find suitable grooms for their daughters Lalita and Vimala. Although both were still in their teenage years, as was the custom among the Patidar community of Charotar at that time, they married at a young age. Suitable grooms were found from nearby Sojitra: Dhirajlal for Lalita and Manulal (Doctor) for Vimala, who were then pursuing further studies at Baroda College. Manulal (also known as the “Doctor”) had continued successfully with his medical studies after his wedding following which he first practiced at Baroda.
Chanchalben, with the assistance of local staff, set about recreating a mini-Dharmaj in the African bush for herself and the family. An extensive fruit and vegetable garden was laid, with fruit trees both local and those imported from India of mangoes, chikoo, black berries (kala jambun), apples, peas, oranges and avocado adorning her backyard.

It is during this period, in 1949, that Hemlata, the youngest of the eight children was born at Salisbury.

Throughout this period, Meyrick Park frequently hosted visits from the grandchildren then born and living in Northern Rhodesia.

For those grandchildren who spent their childhood holidays at Meyrick Park, this remains among the more vivid experiences to this day. The household was always teeming with visitors, either passing through Salisbury or arriving for many social occasions coinciding with special Hindu festivals.

Chanchalben returned to Rhodesia House with an ailing Somabhai in 1965 who subsequently passed away in 1967. She returned to stay in Zimbabwe with her youngest son Vishnuprasad for the remaining years.

Chanchalben watched and maintained her matriarchal duties over these less tumultuous years.

Chanchalben was to visit Dharmaj one last time, in 1990, to attend the wedding of her granddaughter, Heenaxi.

She breathed her last in 1992 in Harare, Zimbabwe at the age of 85 in the country she had now adopted as her own.
If the story stirred memories then.....

A complete book on the 100 years of the Chanchalben Family generations of Rhodesia House is available for purchase.

Please contact the front desk for the same.