

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Leaving India

My Family's Journey From Five Villages to Five Continents

By Minal Hajratwala

(Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; 430 pages; \$26)

Abraham Verghese, Special to The Chronicle

Friday, March 13, 2009

"In the psychology of diaspora many pathologies have been defined: disorientation, alienation, difficulty in assimilating. ... Is the grief I have felt, sometimes, in this writing, a kind of transmitted nostalgia - a mourning for what was lost, against the narrative of progress and accomplishment that characterizes most contemporary stories of our diaspora?"

So reflects Minal Hajratwala early in her book, as she sets out to trace how from her great-great-grandparents' origins in villages in Gujarat in India, the second and third generations would migrate to Fiji, Aden, East Africa and South Africa, the fourth to Britain, United States, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong and New Zealand, culminating in the fifth - the author's generation - and her presence in the United States, in San Francisco.

Hajratwala's study of the peregrinations of her family can be generalized to the legions of other Indians whose origins are also in Gujarat, and whose gifts as traders and merchants made them emerge as a visible (and sometimes resented) expatriate business class. But "Leaving India" gives us a means to understand the forces that took so many Indians (my parents included) away from their birth land; it helps us see how generations of "Indians" who never set foot in the motherland still maintained their "Indianness" most often by inter-marriage.

There are echoes here of V.S. Naipaul's "A House for Mr. Biswas" and indeed of so many South Asian writers in the narrative of the joint families and mingled business interests that characterized Hajratwala's family in Fiji and Durban. Hajratwala arrives eventually at her own generation, where the boundary lines of race and class and nationhood are looser; there is integration, there is an openness to issues of sexuality that scandalizes parents and grandparents.

August 1, 1834, was Emancipation Day in the British Empire; the abolitionists had succeeded after centuries in doing away with slavery. But the crisis in manpower this created in the colonies gave birth to a new kind of slavery: the coolie. "Casting about for a practical solution, the imperial eye landed on India. There, legions of peasants were languishing in idle poverty, eager for work, if only they could afford the sea passage. So it was decided: they would mortgage the trip with their years. ... The Indians signed up for five years' bonded labor, six days a week, nine hours a day. In return they received round-trip passage on a converted slave ship plus a small wage, with deductions for food and illness. Those who enlisted called it the *gimit* system, a mispronunciation of the word *agreement*. ... Thousands more boarded the same ships as free agents ... By a quirk of economics and tradition and groupthink, many hundreds of these travelers came from Gujarat, from the region where my ancestors lived. They were ineligible for indenture, since bonded workers could be recruited only from the provinces the British found to be teeming with excess population. So they went as paying passengers: traders, entrepreneurs, skilled workers."

In a seven-year period before the abolitionists did away with the indenture system, the colonies were populated by thousands of eager workers. Enough of them had emigrated to form a stable work force to continue to meet the needs. But there were problems, particularly in South Africa.

"The ordinary Coolie ... is introduced for the same reason as mules might be introduced from Monte Video, oxen from Madagascar or sugar machines from Glasgow," editorialized the *Natal Witness*, the newspaper of the planters, in 1875. 'He is not one of us, he is in every respect an alien; he only comes to perform a certain amount of work, and return to India.' "For the British government, the problem was how to control the spreading of Indians

all over the empire, and yet not do anything to forfeit the loyalty of the Indians, or of the colonists. It was these injustices imposed on Indians in South Africa that made an unknown barrister, Mahatma Gandhi, into an activist who would eventually end British rule in India.

Inventive literacy "tests" were administered by immigration officers to keep Indians out. "If the would-be immigrant was white but illiterate, the officer waived the test. But if he was swarthy, or otherwise undesirable, the test was given." Soon Australia, New Zealand and Canada put in place a similar test. The United States, unbound by British civility, opted in 1917 simply to exclude all Asians. The closed-door policy had the unintended effect of entrenching the Indian populations in these countries even more - by the 1920s, three in five Indians in South Africa were born in the new country.

Hajratwala's narrative follows each branch of the family, traces their success and failures in Fiji, in South Africa, in New Zealand, in Gujarat. The fascinating characters of these men and women are only hinted at in the antique studio photographs and snapshots that grace the book. From humble eateries and tailor shops grew department stores and business empires. Fortunes were made and lost, often because of resentment by the "native" population and changing political power, but also by infighting and bad management.

At times the writer's many threads are confusing, and the narrative could have been more tightly edited; nevertheless, "Leaving India" is a rich, entertaining and illuminating story. Toward the end of the book, Hajratwala writes of her trials as a youth growing up in Michigan and later of her awakening to her sexuality while a college student in California. She writes, "I am also a first. As far as I know, I am the only lesbian, and the only writer, in the recorded history of our clan. It is only now that the circumstances conducive to my existence have come into being." The reader is grateful for those circumstances.

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