

Firangi

Just before the lockdown of 2020, I ordered and received a book on “The First Firangis” by Jonathan Gil Harris, around the same time the paternal family tree also came in.

Through the days of the lockdown I have been reading the book as and when I please and it has touched many a chord.

The genealogy dates our family’s existence all the way back to 328 AD, and ever since it records that they have been following Jainism, though there is a mention of *gotra* and *kul devī* which seem to circumvent everything else in India.

Based on the profession of my ancestors the family name (surname) has changed over the centuries. But either way, the professions they chose, must have had them in contact with visitors from other lands even as far back as 328 AD. Rathore became Mehta, Mehta turned to Parakh/Parekh and it is only my grandfather’s generation that took on the Parikh surname. The Rathore’s were based out of Rajasthan. By the time the accounting Mehta’s and valuator Parakh’s were active, the family had already moved to the flourishing capital of Patan. Several centuries later they were settled in Limdi in the Saurashtra region.

If you study the physique of the men in this line, the one’s I have shared time on the planet with, they are all slim, tall, with what Indians would consider a fair complexion, sharp noses and distinctive eyes. In fact some of their current descendants are unnaturally tall for the Indian build.

I believe that these people descended from the Scythian folk of the Eurasian steppes also known in India as the Saka. The Jain manuscripts in the western Indian style have regular references to the Saka, the foreigners, who are not depicted with the extended eyes, but slanted eyes, never en profile and garbed in tunic and boots.

This, generations of interaction with the foreigner and probably being considered foreigners at some point themselves has made us of the current generation quite comfortable with other cultures.

My mother’s family is descended from a similar stock from an area known as Persia. They are tall, fair, sharp nosed and bright eyed folk, a mix of the steppe people, Arabs and Jews. The genealogy here is not as extensive, but her father inherited the Dalal last name from his realtor father and her mother from her grandfather who moved from the town of Bhilad and thus went by the name of Bhiladwala.

There are overriding distinctive features/genetics from the various peoples, no matter how much they may have mixed genes in former centuries. My confusion, therefore, with the word “Firangi”, most peoples will integrate; try to merge in with the predominant culture within which they find themselves, like chameleons.

As the book of Harris describes the body will make adjustments, eat differently, clothe differently from what it was accustomed to and therefore almost take on a different persona.

Besides revisiting my own years as a migrant and experiencing change (my vocal range changed since I picked up Dutch), my first thought was of the two men closest in my life that went through these travails. My husband, a very well-travelled Dutch man, had been exposed to many cultures and climate zones, who made India his home and resting place. Though he claimed to love Indian food, given a choice he was a steak and potato guy (also when in his home country as his mother found out when she took her young son to a fancy Indonesian restaurant). He definitely preferred Indian dress while in India, *pyjamas* and *kurtas* as much as possible handed down from Dr. Sarosh Anklesaria. An addition was a napkin over one shoulder to wipe off the constant sweat and rubber *chappals* flapping at his feet. He tanned, nodded his head and repeated *achhā* as often as he could in agreement to a conversation. The urge to be able to follow the written word in India with its sprinkling of Indian words, started a notebook of these typical words that ended into a proper database and printed dictionaries.

The Dictionary: the first of its kind to be A-Z and not *ka-ha*, with the Devnagri input being secondary. It has standardised the way one spells an Indian word in the transliterated Latin script, providing diacritics only to make pronunciation easier. Syllabification is indicated, as Devanagri cannot be hyphenated, but a transliterated word can. Grammatical instances are explained with examples, the words etymological source is provided and a bibliography of the tomes referred to have been listed. Some supplements were added to the first book and the second one became so extensive that we forwent the supplements.

What started out as simple data compilation in Dbase III and progressed to Dbase IV with a typesetting program called TeX converting the data to a well laid out book in dual script.

Ofcourse the actual process is far more tedious and complicated than briefly explained here, but this is the gist of it. And this procedure demanded physical adjustments when worked on in India and in The Netherlands where the bulk of the work was carried out.

Another side step in this story, are the parallels drawn by various people between us and a former occupant of the same building (de drie bloeiende korenaar – Hoogte Kadijk, Amsterdam) Jakob Haafner. He lived there at the end of the 18th century and wrote his travel books to India and we produced the dictionaries from 88 till 94, a huge coincidence.



I am sure the two men enjoyed Indian music; Wagenaar certainly did and filled the house with cassettes and CDs of vocal and instrumental *ragas*, *ghazals*, *qawālī*, etc. As coincidences go, I narrated the story of the Haafner – Wagenaar connection to a Dutch *tablā* player (yes another interloper), after he heard me out, tells me he was writing a musical on Haafner and had been provided a twist to the tale by me. It would be something to see the two men at the first show of this musical. Would they be discussing the different India's they encountered? What it was to know a village belle in the south in the 18th century and the 20th century ones from the more cosmopolitan areas?



The other person is my son. Born and bred in India with a Dutch passport, which meant regular trips to the dreaded FRRO office for visa extensions till finally age permitted an OCI. I knew what it meant to be born of two different communities where, on a one to one basis it was fine. The moment it came to community gatherings, those same people had no idea what to do with a Hindu name, darker complexion and Indian features at a Zoroastrian gathering. At other community gatherings, still stood out as sore thumb in my typical Parsi party frock, socks and shoes.

So my very fair European looking son was a confusion for the family even before he was born, with my grandmother worrying how should would connect with a possibly blue eyed, blond haired great grandchild. Fortunately he was born with a mop of dark hair and dark eyes, but extremely fair.

Being born and raised in India, he speaks the local languages, but somehow his fair skin makes people deaf to his words. It happened to me with in laws who did not expect me to understand them as I looked alien and were shocked when I replied in accent less, fluent Dutch.

So here is a kid that has tried to fit into his worlds, in India he had the *kurtā* phase and the phase where he folded his hands and welcomed one and all with a soft *pranām* and called me *māji* or the time he went to the US and got his hair dyed blond and had to shave regularly to ensure that the black beard was not too contrasting (somehow people did not notice the eyebrows or lashes). Now he is in his fatherland and fits in, but does not speak the language. His taste buds are attuned to *pataat*, *rookworst*, salami and such, with the *roti*, *dosā* and peri peri on his fries.

The people of Europe and Asia were always connected, the gene pool of Genghis Khan and Attila the Hun are witness to this. The silk route and the many territorial gains and losses have ensured that not one of us can guarantee where we could find our DNA links.

Being an art historian from Leiden University, I have read and written on David Pierre Giottino Humbert de Superville, a Dutch artist and art scholar (also a mongrel of European genes, just look at his name). De Superville is said to have laid the foundations for the department of Art History at Leiden University. These foundations rest on theories based on diaries, note books, letters with sketches, drawings, paintings, sculptures that came back from the colonies in his lifetime.

These are the people who are spoken about in Harris' book. Communication was slow and complicated back then and so getting feedback on one's theories was close to impossible. But today we can have conversations in the minute with any corner of the world, yet we do not understand each other, often do not even attempt to. Whereas, back then De Superville and his ilk tried to figure out what made people so different from each other create large sculptures with similarly elongated ears (Easter Island giants and Gomateshwar from Shravanabelagola – India). Letters flowed back and forth with questions and possible answers.



Greek sources, Islamic studies, Indian treatises were all making the rounds for ever. These facts are known where one quotes from another and builds upon the existing theories or refutes them. Religions have moved like desert sand sometimes silently and sometimes violently. Nothing has remained within borders; borders were and are still shifting.

Why then this firangi/alien term? Why have we not been able to let go of it? This lockdown if anything should have brought home this one message, we are one people. How long will we use excuses of he did-she did to continue destroying our one home, a planet we named earth?

My fascination of the North Sentinel Islanders is based on some notions I have of them, becoming a bit of De Superville here. How could this island have survived as is at a time that every other corner is affected by modernity? How did we miss them? How do they maintain the human-nature, male-female balance of their island? Are the laws of nature so powerful if left unhampered? For this one reason I will be happy to remain the unwanted outsider for ever and leave this paradise untouched by our evolution. To those who worry about the cannibalism on the island, I would like to ask, if they think killing each other in war for greed and power is not cannibalism, then what is?

Firangi Gauri!

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