

ROGUES AMONG THE RUINS

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NIYOGI
BOOKS

Published by

NIYOGI BOOKS

Block D, Building No. 77,
Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-I,
New Delhi-110 020, INDIA
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Text © Achala Moulik

Editor: Sucharita Ghosh

Cover design: PealiDezine with inputs by the author

Design: Shashi Bhushan Prasad

ISBN: 978-93-89136-69-2

Publication: 2021

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Printed at: Niyogi Offset Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, India

Those who toil under blazing sun and furious rain to feed us
Those who guard our frontiers on land, sea and air to protect us
Those whose tireless labour swells our national wealth
The silent dedicated thousands who keep the
machinery of government running
Those artists, musicians, sculptors, writers who keep
alive our diverse heritage
The doctors and nurses who endanger their lives for us
Those who love our country without expectation of reward

To them this book is humbly dedicated.

*Thy seat is empty today,
Oh brave one, assume thy place*

—Rabindranath Tagore (1939)

*Sad are the times when
Common decency was called courage*

—Evgeny Evtushenko

PART I

LIFE AMONG
THE RUINS

September 1939

The great poet Rabindranath Tagore looked sadly at the young man and asked: 'Are you certain that you are following the right path? You will have a solitary struggle if you oppose Gandhiji.'

Subhash Bose looked gravely at Rabindranath Tagore. 'I do not believe in squabbles, *Gurudev*. The liberation of India must not begin with unseemly strategies. We will struggle for freedom with dignity and courage.' Bose bent down to touch Tagore's feet in homage.

Tagore touched Subhash's head in benediction. His vast eyes brimmed with unshed tears. This was the kind of son he had wanted, a man of courage, compassion and stern dignity. Regarding Subhash pensively, Tagore murmured, 'I will compose a few lines for you, my son.'

'May I be worthy of your words, *Gurudev*.'

Rabindranath watched Subhash stride towards the waiting jeep and join his palms in *namashkar* before alighting on the vehicle.

As the jeep drove away the poet glanced at the September sky filled with the last of monsoon clouds. He felt a strange pain stir within him. This pain came in frequent waves now, replacing the effulgent creativity that had attended him even amidst grief and desolation. In his insomniac hours he heard Nazi bombs dropping over the European cities he had seen and admired, where he had been honoured and

welcomed. He could not see the Creator amidst the debris of cosmic destruction. Perhaps it was time to leave the world he cherished.

Rabindranath Tagore went inside, sat by his window desk and composed lines for Subhash Bose:

‘Thy seat is empty today,
Oh brave one, assume thy place.’

By the Waters of Babylon

My name is Elangovan. Born when British Orientalists were exploring the ancient heritage of India, my father explored temples and epigraphical records which revealed enigmas of our past. This life of idle scholarship was possible because his fertile lands yielded enough rice for our needs and selling the surplus. He came to the notice of Sir Alexander Cunningham, founder of the Archaeological Survey of India; the two men became friends and I, Elangovan, was offered the post of assistant archaeologist in the Archaeological Survey of India.

I worked in the Pallavur Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) which then encompassed entire South India. I married a timid maiden who was a contrast to my virago mother. Between their warfare and my archaeological journeys, my wife and I brought five children into the world of which Raman, the eldest, was the most promising. In time I grew to love my work more than anything else in the world.

Life among the ruins had a romance of its own.

The monotony of our lives was dispelled, not by the outbreak of the Second World War, but by consternation in

the Archaeological Survey of India. Sir Alistair Mackenzie, director general of the Archaeological Survey, a man who had presided over its destiny for four decades was now returning to his half-forgotten England. Nobody appeared suitable to take his place; some were considered too junior and others not adequately qualified to manage this multi-dimensional organization. When Viceroy Lord Linlithgow was informed of the impending calamity by Archibald Blandford, his civil secretary, he was astounded. Forgetting patrician manners, the King-Emperor's Representative-on-Earth-and-India exploded.

'Need I remind you, Archie, a war is going on? There is desertion from the British Indian Army to the Bloody-Hind-Fauz. The Japs are at our frontiers, the Huns are overrunning Europe, and you dare tell me about the care of ruins! *The whole bloody world is in ruins!*

The viceroy's civil secretary sighed and wiped his clammy forehead and thought: the pre-monsoon swelter has affected the viceroy who was not *normally* unhinged. Blandford resumed his plea. 'We cannot have a vacuum in the Survey, my Lord. Some very important work is going on there. We require a DG to safeguard the work ... and secrecy.'

The granite-faced viceroy regarded his secretary with angry disbelief. He said icily, 'Have you not understood what I said, Archibald Blandford?'

In response to the viceroy's fulminations, Blandford spoke patiently. 'I understand Your Lordship's anxieties about Europe, but in India we have our own problems. We need a suitable person for military reconnoitering in the North-West Frontier Province and also to lead and guide the Survey.'

His Lordship shook his head, exasperated. 'I haven't the foggiest what you are saying, Blandford! But go ahead and get a new director general!' He paused. 'Will it be some woolly-headed don from Oxford?'

Blandford smiled smugly. 'No, my Lord, I have asked Dr Julius Norton to take charge immediately. If he agrees we will fly him out from Mesopotamia. He served in the army as a major and saw action in Belgium in 1940 where he won his spurs. He was discharged after being wounded.'

'A soldier for archaeology?' the viceroy shouted again. 'Has the heat got you, Blandford?'

Blandford smiled wryly. 'I am accustomed to the heat, my Lord. Military men do a good job at the digs, especially in war-time.' He paused before saying, 'The founder of the Archaeological Survey was General Alexander Cunningham. In Britain, General Augustus Pitt-Rivers initiated new methods for excavations.'

Not bothering to conceal his disgust, the viceroy said, 'That's why we are losing the empire. It seems the army chaps now prefer to dig for broken cups rather than fight the Huns and Japs.'

Archibald Blandford could not resist saying, 'The technical word, my Lord, is potsherds, not broken cups.'

'Go to bloody hell!' His Lordship sputtered and turned to the more urgent task of saving the empire.

Dr Julius Norton was directing excavations near Nineveh in Iraq, when he received a telegram from the office of the Viceroy of India, inviting him to be director general of the Archaeological Survey of India. He read the communications

with mixed feelings. Archaeology in Mesopotamia had opened new frontiers of historical knowledge. He wanted to make a name here, as his guru, Sir Leonard Woolley, had done decades ago. As a student, Norton joined Sir Leonard in Mesopotamia in 1930. This had led to spectacular discoveries on Sumerian civilization.

Julius Norton remembered the excitement when they excavated forty feet below the ground; they found royal Sumerian tombs, burnt clay tablets with archaic scripts, painted pottery-ware in al'Ubaid. These treasures led to deeper knowledge of ancient Sumer and Babylon which had developed in the lower reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Sumeria's main contribution to civilization was the wheel and the cuneiform alphabet. British archaeologists found the capital where ruled the lawgiver King Hammurabi.

Sitting on an undisturbed *tell*, Julius Norton gazed at the mounds that concealed buried cities. He wondered if his dream of excavating these was to be abandoned. But to be director general of the Archaeological Survey of India - who could refuse such an honour? Perhaps in India he would find the remains of another ancient civilization that had ties with Sumeria.

As dusk now fell upon the excavation camp Julius Norton went inside his tent. Familiar scenes, sounds and smells assailed him; of men drawing water from oasis wells, lighting of charcoal stoves, the hiss of goat meat roasting on spits, aroma of Arabica coffee, figs and dates. Attendants sang mournful ancient tunes that remembered images of Hammurabi's raftered halls.

Inside the lamplit tent, Athena Norton scrutinized a cuneiform tablet. She glanced up as her husband entered,

and gave him the swift bright smile that had enchanted him when he first met her at her grandfather's 'dig' in Knossos nearly three decades ago. Her grandfather Theodore Milianos was a Greek-Cretan, who had worked with Heinrich Schliemann who found the Troy of Homer at Hisarlik. Then he joined the excavations at Knossos where Norton's father worked. There, the schoolboy Julius heard Cretan legends from Athena, Milianos's orphaned granddaughter, who ran around barefoot in summer, sunburnt and windblown, anxious to find a home in her grandfather's nomadic existence.

After graduating from Oxford, Julius returned to Knossos to work with the famous epigraphist Michael Ventris. There he found seventeen-year-old Athena Milianos, learned and fully formed, like the goddess Athena from the brow of Zeus. When twilight glinted on ancient ruins Julius sat on mimosa and lemon scented hillsides and learned the Minoan script from the precocious Athena. He decided to take her home, as guide and bride. When Theodore bluntly refused, the English archaeologist arranged abduction – not in the style of Paris of Troy – but with assistance from a Greek Orthodox priest. Athena had looked forward to a home; she found that she had exchanged one nomad's life for another as Julius Norton went from one excavation site to another. Amidst these expeditions they produced son Justin and daughter Elena, and several books on the Minoan civilization. Athena was now reconciled to the life of a nomad.

Julius watched her for a few moments before asking, 'Would you like to go to India as wife of director general of archaeology?'

'Why not?' she responded lightly. 'And to Troy as the wife of Hector, and to Amarna as wife of Akhenaton.'

Julius Norton gave her the telegram from the viceroy's office. Athena read it carefully and then looked at him. 'Are we going?' she asked, hoping he would decline the offer.

'Let us go and see if we like it. Who knows what ancient grandeur we may find there?'

The Nortons were excited during the journey from Basra to Bombay. British warships guarded the gulfs of Persia and Oman. The other passengers comprised British army officers going to India for work and those seeking sanctuary in India from Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's swiftly advancing Afrika Korps. German victories under the brilliant Rommel in North Africa and the rapid advance of the Samurais in South East Asia caused deep anxiety in Britain and the British officers on board.

As the small P&O liner steamed through narrow straits towards the monsoon-tossed waters of the Arabian Sea, Julius and Athena read about India. They studied remains of the ancient ports of Dilmun and Magan where Sumerian ships once carried rice, spices and carnelian from Meluhha, perhaps the Sumerian name for west coast of India.

After the ship's dinner, when brandy was served and cigars lit, Julius expanded on his theory of the links between Mesopotamian and Indus Valley civilizations.

'We were planning some maritime explorations along the gulf coast when the war intervened,' Julius told the officers.

'One sunken ship with remains of merchandise tells more about trade than a pile of documents,' Athena added.

The men looked at her with surprise; the faded beauty did not look like a scholar. Women passengers regarded her with reluctant respect. When the P&O liner entered the Arabian Sea, Julius and Athena decided to get acquainted with their new milieu. India was terra incognita to them. It had the

charm of the unknown for Athena; for Norton India was a name in school books and later in Oxford an object of vague veneration. It was also a vital part of the British Empire, the well guarded jewel in the crown.

‘Can we excavate ancient sites in India?’ Athena asked eagerly.

Dr Norton shook his head. ‘Excavation, without prior knowledge of a civilization, is like whistling in the wind. We must get to know more about the country where great civilizations have flourished and which are now under foreign rule.’

‘Foreign rule can erase identity of a people,’ Athena murmured.

‘Foreign rule can bring unintended benefits,’ Julius replied quietly. ‘Two centuries ago East India Company adventurers came to take India’s fabled textiles, gold, metals, spice and saltpetre. India’s wealth, like Italy’s, has been her worst enemy, inviting invaders to traverse formidable mountain passes and sail on uncharted seas. Some invaders plundered and left, others remained to rule, built edifices over razed temples and exulted in the triumph of their divinity. The British had no inclination for iconoclasm. They plumped their purses and swelled their nation’s coffers on the riches of the conquered realm – until a strange man headed the empire in India.’

‘Who was that strange man?’ Athena asked.

‘In Freudian psychology, Warren Hastings would be analyzed as a schizophrenic, like a man who violates a woman and then banishes the sordid memory by praising the victim’s beauty. Schizophrenia notwithstanding, Hastings also wanted a place in history. He wanted to attain immortality by building a great empire for his native island. With a chilling brilliance, Hastings set about to build an

empire that he hoped would rival Rome's far-flung domains. Every weapon and method was used for furthering this purpose. One Indian state after another was annexed to the territories of the East India Company.'

'He sounds more than strange - he sounds sinister,' Athena replied.

Julius Norton smiled. 'And then he fell in love - with Indian metaphysics. Warren Hastings had been in love before - with himself, then with the frail woman who had borne him a son and a daughter, and then with Baron Imhoff's wife whom he married. These attachments did not bring him closer to comprehension of life. Nor had they assuaged the grief of his children's deaths. Neither had it dispersed the grim prospect of inevitable death. Waiting at Benaras to annex the raja's territories, he read the Bhagavad Gita which described how the immutable soul lived on after its liberation from the body.'

Athena listened intently.

'Hastings annexed Benaras and sent its treasury to the East India Company. After that he pondered over the words of the Gita and the spiritual fortitude of a people who had refused to be destroyed. As Ashoka Maurya had built Sanchi in atonement for the carnage at Kalinga, so Hastings established the Asiatic Society soon after the annexation of Benaras to study and to let others study the wellspring of Indian civilization.'

Athena nodded and murmured, 'It was not enough to ravish the body of India; he wanted to understand her soul!'

Julius Norton sighed. 'Will I be able to understand the soul of such a complex entity as India?'

The Norton family arrived in Delhi a week later. The rains had come, ending the blazing heat of Delhi summer. For two brief months, the arid landscape would be lush and green;

birds would come out in large flocks to splash their withered wings on puddles and fountains, the scent of rain-drenched jasmines would add a feminine aroma to this rough city of pomp and power.

One of the oldest cities of India, Delhi is mentioned as Indraprastha in the ancient epic *Mahabharata*. Fleeing from revolutionary Bengal where the East India Company had built a stately capital in Calcutta, the British built their new capital around the Rajput-Moghul remains. The broad, tree-lined boulevards, spacious bungalows with large lawns, and the massive sandstone edifices of the Central Secretariat flanking the viceroy's palace had impressed Julius Norton though he disliked the medley of architectural styles. Monuments, he felt, should capture the spirit of the times and not make half-hearted attempts at diplomacy. Anything false loses its relevance in the crucible of time.

Was the British Raj trying to adopt local styles? Too late for that, he mused.

The Quit India movement had swept away British illusions of the fidelity of Indians – except for a few servile souls who lurked in the corridors of power.

Julius Norton surveyed the scene from the veranda of Eastern Court, a government guest house. Athena came out and joined him, wearing new clothes she had purchased in Connaught Circus. She disliked wearing thin cotton gloves that were intended to conceal her broken nails and darkened fingers. 'I am a *Cretan-Greek archaeologist* and am not expected to look like an English countess!' she mused. Both looked at the street below, with cars, cycle rickshaws, pedestrians carrying umbrellas, Indians in saris, pyjama-kurta, dhotis, and white men and white women in their version of tropical attire.