

21. Bishop Ryan's Journal

Home Again

Once back home Robynne started to pull everything together; a couple of weeks later she provided Mr Govinden with a detailed report so that he would be up to date with all that we had found and be able to continue his search. Now that Marie-France had made such a strong link to the name Peersaib in the book *Diocese of Mauritius* (Curtis 1975), we wanted to go back to the journals to see if we could confirm whether this Peersaib was James or Samson. Robynne started searching more broadly for the Christian Missionary Society records and any records relating to Bishop Ryan online. She also had the *Diocese of Mauritius* book and started to read it cover to cover. It's very interesting to see what she uncovered.

The Bishop's Arrival

In 1854 Bishop Ryan was appointed the first Anglican Bishop of the Diocese of Mauritius. On his arrival in Mauritius he described the Mauritian scenery:

The scenery of the island is very fine and varied; several distinct ranges of mountains, generally wooded to the summit with wide cultivated plains between them, extensive gorges and deep ravines, furnish a great variety of beautiful landscapes; while many of the bays and inlets of the coast, fringed with palm trees above the white beach and girt in to seaward with a line of reefs, on which the waves dash with incessant surges, present combinations of beauty and Grandeur which must be seen to be appreciated.

He wrote fairly extensively about his day-to-day interactions as he began to establish the Anglican Church and Christian Missionary Society in Mauritius. He talked about his daily work with Indian immigrants who he had hoped to preach the gospel to and convert to Christianity through baptism and the handful of Indian Catechists he had working for him as interpreters, preaching the gospel to the Indian people, in an effort to baptise them into the church. This work was related to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in foreign lands which was given its Royal Charter in 1701.

N.B: The SPG is also noted in Uncle Nesam's letter to Auntie Becky Murray in 1948.

The Bishop's journals are rich in their content giving great details about life in Mauritius at the time, including some insight into the people he came in contact with and some of this was specific to our search.

One Saturday morning a week after getting home from Mauritius, Robynne was searching online for references to Bishop Ryan – a long shot but worth a try. It paid off! She found a website which outlined some of Bishop Ryan's journal notes from his time in both Mauritius and Madagascar.

Robynne: While excitedly scrawling through all the information as quickly as possible, with a sense of anticipation that this was that one in a million moment that something amazing was about to be discovered, there it was!

The Bishop and the Mohammedan

Bishop Ryan writes:

14 December 1855

As I was writing in the vestry, a very striking Indian entered the vestry and came and stood before me and in a *deep thrilling voice said he was a Mohammedan*, but an unhappy one and he wished to put on Christ by baptism. He turns out to be a well-read man and has gone through very keen trial the *last eighteen months*, which he has interpreted as a punishment for his hardness of heart when under Christian instruction in India. He had *been a monitor for eight years* in a mission-school and appears to have endeavoured to believe that Christianity was not a *bad* religion, but that Mohammedanism was the true one. The question which has lately given him no rest is, "If Christ fully revealed the will of God and made a perfect propitiation, what need could there be of Mohammed's teaching?"

He afterwards wrote a letter to me, in which he spoke of the privilege he had enjoyed in the instruction of *the school at Madras*; and when I had another interview with him, I found that his mother had been "learned in explaining the Koran," because *her father was one of those who knew it by heart*. Her principles were used to blot out the instructions received at school, but still some things remained and here in his distress he remembered them and wished very much to become a Christian. He was baptized early in the following year.



N.B: I have specifically highlighted those points in these quotes, that are most specific to our search.

No names were mentioned yet in this passage, but please continue on:

1 July 1856

Six Bengalees were baptized, with several peculiarly interesting circumstances; such as a nine years' certificate of excellent character, brought by one of them from his master and the connection of two others with efforts made by Mr. Banks. It is quite pleasant to look at our baptismal register now, with its interlacing of Indian names. The spirit of inquiry seems to me to be spreading and to be very earnest. A fine youth of sixteen is now in the school with turbaned head and Indian dress, among those who are preparing for the work of teaching by and bye. *Another has just been brought to me by his Uncle (Peersaib),* just landed--a boy of sixteen, who reads English well. Caste is not quite broken here. The youth first mentioned above declined boarding with our catechist because of caste--(he is not yet a Christian, but very earnest in his desire to read the Scriptures).

The Bishop then wrote of the pleasing work of the Indian catechists:

Wednesday 4 February 1857

At Port Louis, the annual meeting of the Indian Christians' Association was held. It was to commemorate the anniversary of this Society that we met. I occupied the chair; Mr. Bichard and Mr. Vaudin were the only other Europeans there. The weather was too rough for Mr. Hobbs to be present. It was a very pleasant sight. More than fifty adults and more than thirty young persons and children attended. A hymn in Tamil was sung to a familiar tune; then one in Bengalee; next the Report was read, in Tamil by Mr. Taylor, then in Bengalee by Charles Kooshalee. Mr. Joachim, a highly respectable young man from the Immigration Office, who has always helped the work, made a speech in Tamil; after him Isaac, the well-educated native from Bombay, whom we rescued from coolie labour, addressed the Bengalees in Hindoostanee, I believe; Anandappen, an able schoolmaster, with spectacles, then in Tamil; C. Kooshalee in Bengalee. Then I spoke and Mr. Taylor interpreted in Tamil; after which I ventured on speaking in Creole to the Bengalees, most of whom could understand what I had to say. Mr. Joachim's brother said a few words in Tamil and *James (the catechist who came to me for baptism after his troubles at Black River, his Indian name being Peersaib).* The proceedings were terminated by another hymn in each language and by the Blessing, interpreted as I delivered it and responded to by a fervent "Amen." I felt a deep and thankful interest in this my first meeting

with the representatives of the Indian Church here. Oh, that we may be enabled to be faithful, affectionate and single-minded, in the endeavour to build up a Church for Christ among these strangers in the land!

And there it was at last! Bishop Ryan is talking about James Peersaib. James was a *catechist* for the Anglican Church in Mauritius as mentioned in the early passage found by Marie-France in the book *Diocese of Mauritius*. He was especially singled out by Bishop Ryan, the first Bishop of Mauritius, along with Kooshalee and Anandapen, as the three Indian Christians who left their mark on the early part of the history of the diocese in Mauritius – the three who worked alongside the first Bishop of Mauritius, to establish the Anglican Church there in Mauritius, interpret for him, and preach the gospel to their Indian countrymen and women.

Mid May 1861

Those who heard my statement in England will remember my account of the *Mohammedan who came to me in the vestry and said that he greatly desired, by baptism, to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

On Saturday last (mid May 1861) I had a most satisfactory interview with him—one that made me thank God and take courage. He brought me a book of subscriptions for an Indian school, set on foot by himself, *of which the patron is the magistrate*, whom he has served for some time; the treasurer is a planter near at hand and the subscribers are the gentry around and labouring Indians. What a blessed result! Just what we hope and pray for—that those who have received the truth themselves will do their utmost to spread the knowledge of it amongst others.

I find that he holds a service, a kind of cottage lecture, among the Indians every Sunday. On questioning him further about his early days, he told me, that when first he heard his own religion decried, he felt very much grieved; but as he did not know his own religion, he had to inquire of his mother, who knew it well. He then described his reading the Koran, the instructions of the Missionaries, &c. I promised to help him in his school after I had visited it and seen its working and encouraged him to work on in the cause of that Heavenly Master, who will require of us hereafter an account of our employment of the talents entrusted to our keeping.

The Quran

Bishop Ryan's journals give a good account of James Peersaib and his life in India and Mauritius. James hailed from the city of Madras on the south-eastern coast of India (this is the region of Tamil Nadu), where he was born into a Mohammedan family. James's father knew the Quran off by heart. According to

our Mauritian advisor Abdool Cader Kalla this means he was possibly what is known as 'Hafiz-Huffiz-Hafiz-Hafeez' which is 'a most sought after distinction among Muslims'. The Quran is divided into 114 chapters containing 6236 verses and the Hafiz are able to recite any passage randomly when called upon to do so, or tested, not knowing which verse or phrase they may be asked to recite.

James was educated in a Christian school against all that his Islamic faith stood for, however at night his dear mother worked hard to instil in him the teachings of the Quran and their Islamic principles in an effort to 'blot out' the Christian teachings. James struggled with his Mohammedan teachings as opposed to that of Christianity but eventually turned to Christianity with the guidance of Bishop Ryan.

Robynne: This sounds so much like our own people on Aboriginal missions, who by day were learning the teachings of Christianity and abiding by white man's laws and policies; but at night by firelight in their own homes, some chose to pass on their age old traditional knowledge, culture, language and oral history to their children. An example of how two cultural groups, oppressed by the British, strove to hold onto their traditional heritage and spiritual belief systems, amidst the pressures of British colonisation on their traditional lands.

It is noted in Bishop Ryan's journal that James Peersaib was a school monitor in his work in Madras prior to leaving for Mauritius. A school monitor is something like a teacher's assistant; not unlike those who worked alongside Grampa at Maloga and Cummeragunga, including his daughters Miriam, Nanny Pris and Becky.

Work Records

The Blue Book government records show that James Peersaib commenced work with the Plaines Wilhem Magistrate Edward Henry Martindale as an Interpreter on 1 February 1859. However, in Bishop Ryan's journal entry for mid May 1861 it was noted that James had been 'serving' the Magistrate for some time already. It seems that James had been working for the Magistrate for some years before he became an 'official' Interpreter and government employee.

Christianity in Southern India

Christianity came to the western coast of Southern India in the first centuries after the life of Christ, when a very early migration of Christians from Palestine founded a community in Kerala. Over the centuries, the descendants of this community have been known as St Thomas Christians, after their founder, and later as Syrian Christians. With the arrival in India of European colonisers in the 16th century, a whole new group of Christian denominations were introduced. The Portuguese on the western Konkani coast (near Kerala) and the French on the eastern Coromandel Coast brought Catholicism while the later British East India Company traders, arriving in the 17th century, brought very active Anglican and other Protestant missionaries to the west coast (near Madras) and to the inland higher areas where cities like Bangalore developed between the two coasts of the peninsula of southern India.

So by the 18th and 19th centuries, there were strong communities of both Muslims and Christians as well as Hindus in the eastern state of Tamil Nadu and particularly in its main city of Madras. Here there were long traditions of learning among Muslims, including high levels of Scholarship in the Quran and the supporting traditions of commentary like the Hadiths. At the same time, there were new and prestigious Christian schools, to which parents of all religions sent their children in order to have them learn the new ideas coming out of Europe at this time. It was not surprising to have both students and staff of many religions joining in the new schools and Colleges to foster the education of young people. While there was pressure to convert from one religion to another, particularly from the Christian missionaries, there was also shared respect and recognition of the learned traditions.

Grampa's Father

We started out looking for Samson and Miriam Peersahib, but had not found any record of either – except Samson the boy. However, there was now growing evidence of the life of James Peersaib – in the Bishop Ryan Journals; and on Samson Peersahib's birth and death certificates where James *and* Esther Peersahib were noted as his parents. If we could locate Grampa's birth certificate, we could cross check against Samson's and confirm their connection.

Robynne: Keep in mind that the constant changes in the spelling of Peersahib are deliberate on our part, and relate to the records we are speaking about at that time, or the person who is reporting to us each time the name is mentioned throughout the book.

The Cyclone of 1868

John Linko from the Archdiocese of Mauritius eventually got back to us to advise that he had found record of a woman named Miriam, who was believed to be Miriam Thomas. During 1868 there was a horrendous cyclone in Mauritius. Many lives were lost and the damage was enormous. During this cyclone, a woman named Miriam, known as a bible woman, was badly injured. Church records note that: 'Bishopthorpe College stood fairly well and is tenanted at present by native Christians who lost their homes. *Abdool Hacq* (C.M.S. Catechist) and *Miriam* (C.M.S. Bible Woman) are there, severely wounded. Plaisance C.M.S. Orphanage is much injured, but the main house stood well.' (Curtis 1975).

Could this have been Grandmother Miriam? We now know that James was deeply embedded in the Anglican Church through the Christian Missionary Society and its Christian Indian Association. So it is highly possible that his wife Miriam or Esther was also making her own personal contribution as a bible woman in the community, visiting the needy, including the children in the local orphanage (which is also in the Plaines Wilhem region of Mauritius where James was working for the Magistrate). Of course there is no evidence that this Miriam was actually Grandmother Miriam/ Esther, but we can leave no stone unturned. In fact, this could be a clue to *when* Grampa's mother may have passed away. But let's put that aside just for the moment while we continue the search.

Diocese of Mauritius and the Thomas Family

It's important to note that the book *Diocese of Mauritius* contains a range of information about the Thomas family, in particular Uncle Manuel Thomas (Miriam/Esther's brother) and his sons Gamaliel (Gami) and Paranesam (Nesam).

On 28 May 1899 Uncle Manuel, a Deacon of the Anglican Church, was ordained as a Priest at St James Cathedral in Port Louis.

On 24 September 1911 Uncle Gamaliel was made a deacon and joined the Indian army afterwards as a chaplain. He was ordained later in his life in India where he spent a great deal of his time in Bangalore.

William P. Thomas is also noted in the book as being ordained and later working in Ceylon. Uncle Nesam signed off as W.P. Thomas in his letter to Auntie Becky in 1948 so we assume this is him.

The Report

After receiving Robynne's report in May 2012, Mr Govinden was able to search new avenues. He used James Pursaib's Identification Number as provided by Lisette from the St Thomas Church to see what information he could uncover at

the Mahatma Gandhi Institute. He found that the name attached to that number was James Peersaib (not Pursaib as spelt at the church), and found his date of arrival in Mauritius; the name of the ship he travelled on; his father's name; a physical description; and reference to his marriage to a woman named Lokheea. Those details along with all other findings in relation to James Peersahib are outlined in the following summary.

Our Summary

Let's stop for a minute and take a breather to gather our thoughts. There is so much information fast unfolding here, it would be good to now provide a brief summary of all that we now know about James Peersaib/Pursaib/Peersahib. Keeping in mind that we have not yet confirmed that James is Grampa's father; nor whether Samson Snr even existed:

- James Peersaib was born at Madras India in approximately 1832 and attended a Christian school there.
- His mother was learned in the Quran and tried to keep him in touch with his faith, after hours, in an effort to 'blot out the Christian teachings' as noted by Bishop Ryan.
- Her father knew the Quran off by heart and so he may be a 'Hafiz'.
- The name Peersaib/Peersahib means 'noble man' or high priest.
- James worked as a school monitor in a Christian school in Madras.
- He arrived in Mauritius from Madras, on 2 April 1854, as an *indentured labourer*, aboard the ship *John Brightman*.
- He was placed at Black River as an indentured labourer and times were hard.
- He is described on his arrival documents as tall, 24 years of age, with a 'pock marked' face.
- James arrived in Bishop Ryan's vestry in December 1855 wanting to 'put on Christ' and was baptised early the following year.
- The Bishop noted that as of December 1855 James had been in Mauritius for 18 months. Mahatma Gandhi Institute immigrant records show he arrived in April 1854. This means he was an indentured labourer for a 20 months before becoming a catechist for the Anglican church in 1855/56.
- He was noted as one of three special Indian Christians who were integral to the establishment of the Anglican diocese in Mauritius alongside Bishop Ryan, the first Bishop of Mauritius.
- He gained financial backing for the establishment of a Christian school in Mauritius in May 1861.
- James brought his nephew to meet Bishop Ryan, a boy of 16, who 'reads quite well' on 1 July 1856.

- James officially started working for the Magistrate at Plaines Wilhem on 1 February 1859.
- Grampa Thomas Shadrach James was born in Moka Mauritius on 1 September 1859, so it is possible that his father James sought more permanent work in February 1859, because his wife was pregnant. We are still to confirm whether James is in fact Grampa's father.
- There was a cyclone in Mauritius in 1868, when a woman named Miriam – a CMS Bible Woman – was seriously injured.
- The Thomas family were Christian Tamils; and Tamils marry Tamils.
- Samson Peersahib was born on 9 February 1861 and died on 31 January 1875. His parents were James and Esther Peersahib.
- James Peersahib owned seven properties according to family in Mauritius.
- James Peersaib married Lokheea – a woman aged 26 on 16 March 1878.
- Lokheea was only 3 years old when she arrived in Mauritius on the ship *Thomas Hamlin* from Calcutta in 1855 with her mother Rajcoowary who died at Moka in February 1864. Her father Reetburrin was already in Mauritius.
- Their land of origin was in Dinapore India on the banks of the Ganges River, on the outskirts of Patna India.
- Blue Book Government records show that James Peesaib started receiving a pension in 1897. He would have been 63 to 65 years old then.
- James Pursaib died on 5 March 1905
- James 'alias' Pursaib is buried at St Thomas Church at Beau Bassin, Mauritius. Identification Number: 132719. However the location of his grave is not noted on Church records.
- There is an unaccounted for gap in James Peersaib/Peersahib's life from 1854 (arrival in Mauritius) to 1878 when he married Lokheea. Is this the period of his marriage to Miriam/ Esther?

Indian Immigration to Mauritius

According to Govinden Vishwanaden of Mahatma Gandhi Institute in Moka Mauritius, the first contingent of Indian migrants to Mauritius dates back to 2 November 1834 when 36 Hill Coolies arrived by the ship the *Atlas*, and were recruited to serve G.C. Arbuthnot for a period of five years. The indenture system took a new dimension with the arrival of 135 Indian labourers the following year by the ship *Vesper*. Those indentured labourers were 'half slaves bound over body and soul by a hundred and one regulations'¹ (Joshi, P.S. – 1942).

The labourers left India under an apparently voluntary acceptance contract which stipulated the terms of agreement to serve for five years with wages for

labour, and an optional free return passage back home. Moreover, they left India under a firm conviction to return as soon as they had acquired sufficient fortune in the land of promise. Many did return because of their family ties, but for the majority the colony became their adopted home. This system of immigration was suspended for a short period after the government of India drew the attention of local authorities to the ill-treatment of Indian labourers in 1839. The planters demand for labour saw it re-open in 1842 to 1910, during which time over 450,000 indentured Indian migrants arrived in Mauritius.

James Peersahib probably migrated with the intention to better his living condition like many other Indians deceived by the economic situation. His life is a story of great success; the story of a man who came to Mauritius as an indentured labourer, and eventually created an abundant life for himself and his family. Most were not so fortunate.

Islam in Southern India – from 734 AD

The philosophy and ideals of Islam came to India very early. Islam arrived on the coast of Southern India when traders and seafarers from Arabia came within the lifetime of Mohammed himself. Southern Indians, on the south-eastern Coromandel Coast of what is now Tamil Nadu, took up this new religion and the first mosque was built in 734 AD. Muslims were a substantial part of the Tamil population long before the Mughals, from Central Asia, arrived in India in 1526 from the north, through Persia and Kashmir, and founded a great empire based in Delhi and stretching across northern India and far into the South. Muslims in Southern India were in communication with the Mughal Emperors and as well had their own even longer traditions of Islamic worship and learning in the South. Islam is an egalitarian religion, in which there is equality between all people who are within the *Umma*, or community of shared beliefs. As well, Islam places great store on learning and on relating to the other religions and communities who were neighbours. The first mosques in Tamil Nadu, for example, were built before the later, better known Mughal style of architecture and were instead built in the Dravidian style of Southern India.

Further information can be found in the extensive works of Dr J. Raja Mohamad, former curator of the Government Museum, Pudukottai, and recipient of the *Kottai Ameer Communal Harmony Award 2012*, awarded by the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu for his role in fostering goodwill and amity among Hindus, Muslims and Christians. His works include: *Islamic Architecture in Tamil Nadu* (Chennai Museum, 2004) and his 2010 doctoral thesis: *Maritime history of the coromandel Muslims: a socio-historical study on the Tamil Muslims 1750-1900*, Pondicherry University. (Goodall)

The Journey Ahead

We had found a range of wonderful information about James Peersaib/Peersahib/Pursaib, but it meant little to Grampa's story if we could not confirm that he was Grampa's father. The time had come to find some evidence of James Peersahib's life with Miriam or Esther and confirm whether they were the parents of Grampa Thomas Shadrach James.

The records had left a large enough gap in James's life, as noted in the recent summary, to fit an earlier marriage and family. The dates fit nicely and the second marriage to Lokheea could be the marriage that caused Grampa to flee to Australia. If Grampa left after March 1878, when his father married Lokheea, he would have been 19 years of age.

Our quest going forward was to finally confirm, once and for all:

- that James was Samson (if Samson did exist)
- that Esther was Miriam (if Miriam did exist)
- some record of Miriam or Esther's life
- that James and Esther were Grampa's parents
- that Grampa and Samson were brothers
- and some record of Grampa's sister Ruth and her life.

In the meantime I will continue to write this story, just as the information comes to light. You are still literally taking this journey with us, as the information is uncovered. Fingers are crossed that we find what we're looking for!

Mauritius: Africans, French, Indians and the British, 1810–1968.

Mauritius is a large island in the Indian Ocean east of Southern Africa, south of Madagascar and known to Arab seafarers and other Indian Ocean travellers for centuries before the Portuguese, Dutch and later the French claimed it or settled in. Mauritius, with its neighbouring island Reunion, was in French control from 1710 to 1810, during which time French planters grew sugar cane in plantations using enslaved African workers whom they took from Southern and Eastern Africa. The British took over Mauritius in 1810 during the Napoleonic War because the Island was on a strategic sea route. Then the lucrative sugar-cane plantations offered a profit but the British government abolished the slave trade in the 1833. However, the new British and European middle classes, growing richer on expanding trade from the colonies, still demanded sugar as a fashionable marker of 'modern' tastes. So, as a substitute for enslaved workers on its colonial sugar-cane plantations, the British Government decided that in the Indian Ocean, a form of 'contract' could be used to 'apprentice' or 'indenture' workers for many years. This meant that the workers could be said to be 'free' because they had signed a contract but – because in reality they had little choice – they were in fact trapped in the conditions of indenture just as if they were slaves. The workers who could be trapped in this way were the newly unemployed and impoverished working people of India, whose industries and farming patterns had been so severely disrupted by the British East India Company and its plantations and monopolies. This system forced over one million Indians to become bonded labourers in British colonies overseas, from the Caribbean to South Africa, Mauritius and Fiji, between 1837 and the 1920s.

The colony of Mauritius was the experimental ground for this system. From 1837, the British began bringing unfree workers – in the form of Indentured labourers – into Mauritius from Calcutta and later other ports in India to work the sugar-cane plantations alongside – and eventually to replace – the enslaved Africans who had grown sugar previously. This British control brought with it many active Anglican and other Protestant missionaries. This was ironic as it had often been the Christian groups in England who had campaigned against slavery before 1833! As well, the British set up a complex colonial administrative system, because the colony had to handle not only the commercial development of the plantations, but also the management of thousands of indentured labourers and the control of shipping in this strategic sea port. All this required bureaucrats and interpreters for the many language groups who now lived on Mauritius, as well as the teachers who had come because the missionaries set up education systems as well as churches across the Island. With the remaining African and French populations, this all contributed to the complex society of 19th and 20th century Mauritius. (Goodall)