

## **The Scottish Jutewallah**

*Dr Bashabi Fraser*

The story of jute is the tale of two cities - Dundee and Calcutta (Kolkata), with their fortunes inextricably interwoven, where the global Scot played a crucial role. The crop grew in the deltaic region of Bengal and at the beginning of its imperial story, the raw material was transported to be processed in the Dundee mills. When the Crimean War created an urgent need for jute sandbags, it became cheaper to have the production factories where the crop thrived, in and around Calcutta. Dundonian workers opened a mill at Serampore, on the south bank of the Hoogly river in 1855. When World War I broke out, Calcutta had 38 mills with 184,000 workers, including 1,000 Scots (Fry, 2001, p. 324). So jute, like tea, was processed where it grew, in India. Both tea and jute were dominated by Scots. Calcutta jute mills were tied to Scottish firms. 'Jute offers a rare example of a great industry which emerged in the Empire and trounced its rival back home, standing on its head the theory of imperial exploitation.... transforming Calcutta from a trading and financial into a manufacturing centre.' (Fry, 2001, p. 325).

The story of the Scottish Jutewallah in Bengal, challenges the centre-periphery dichotomy of imperial constructs. Dundee faced intense competition from Calcutta and the European centre changed after 1904, shifting to Calcutta, the Oriental second city of the British empire, so '[t]he narrative begins and ends in Calcutta'. (Stewart, 1998, p. 7).

Eurocentric narrative framings reflecting colonial perspectives, become problematic in a consideration of the Scottish Jutewallah, as the position and positioning of the Scottish diaspora complicate imperial notions of hierarchy. The colonial and postcolonial encounter in the Calcutta jute story, affected by changing world markets accounts for the Dundee-Calcutta fortunes being asymmetrical. The cultural exchanges and interactions were complex and as Stewart says, '[i]mperialism must be "deterritorialized" in order to uncover and understand the unique position Scots occupied in the 'established' schema of the colonizer and the colonized' in Bengal. (Stewart, 1998, p. 194)

The regional affinities of Dundonian Jutewallahs, was a bonding factor as their ethnic identity accounted for their solidarity in India, which helped them to create a robust united front that established supremacy for the jute industry in Bengal. Their produce was marketed across the world, from America to Australia, as they utilized the imperial network of banking, insurance, transportation by river and railways and shipping, able to flourish in and manipulate the world trade. P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins note that '...[T]he jute mills of Calcutta were connected to Leadenhall Street in the City, country houses in Devon and grouse moors in Scotland, as well as the harbours of Montevideo, New York, Hamburg and San Francisco'. (Stewart, 1998, pp. 3-4). Dundee never recovered its earlier position, defeated by the Scottish diasporic association of Jutewallahs in Bengal.

The Scottish Jutewallahs held, in Bhabha's term, an in-between place in India, as they were not of the public school, Oxbridge or Sandhurst group. As skilled and trained engineers and mechanics, they took pride in their work. They had Scottish trained Indian

foremen and Indian doctors in charge of health care. As they slowly faced competition from Indian jute merchants, such as the Birla group from the 1920s, they learnt to trade with and alongside them. Scots were recruited beyond 1947, and many stayed till the 1960s, retaining their 'Scottishness' till they left. As temporary economic migrants in India, they were held together by that skein of being Dundonian/Scottish..

Diasporas have often entailed enforced dispersal as a result of catastrophic historic events, signified by 'a collective memory and myth about the movement, and a desire of eventual homecoming.' (Bultmann, 2009, p. 2) Apart from the desire to return home, there is no resemblance between the enforced migrations with the Scottish jutewallahs in Bengal. The Scots form a substantial group of European diasporic settler colonies. The Scots in India had no intention to settle. Their migration was influenced by economic considerations. The collective memory was there in the regional affinities, but 'home' was not a place dreamed of with intense nostalgic longing as jutewallahs went on home leave regularly, paid for by their company, according to their position. The sense of victimhood was absent in what was considered a better career in the east.

In relation to diasporic communities, Brubaker suggests three core elements as constitutive of the phenomenon. The first is dispersal in space; the second, orientation to a 'homeland'; and the third, boundary maintenance (Bultmann, 2009, p. 3). Scots conglomerated along the banks of the Hoogly in jute mill compounds and in Calcutta, so they were dispersed in a demarcated space. They retained their regional identity as they mixed and associated with fellow Scots from the same region. They maintained links with 'home' through letters, home leave, and were sustained by the thought of retiring to Scotland. Pat Arthur and Elizabeth Grant (daughters of Peter Gownmill from Dundee, posted at an Indian jutemill, 1940s-1958) wrote regularly to their relatives back in Scotland. They saw new releases of films in Calcutta cinemas before their relatives saw them in Scotland, so their letters home contained 'news of the latest blockbusters'. It was considered a privileged position.

The boundary maintenance was more complex as Scots benefited from the imperial set up, worked closely with their Indian associates, while retaining their Scottishness in the St Andrews's Dinners they attended or the jutewallahs clubs they frequented. The boundary of the jute compound was real. It was the place of work, of association with fellow Scots, as wives visited each other's houses and children played within these walls. The Gownmill sisters recall how they played with other children in their jute compound, mixing freely with Indian children, but were not allowed by guards to go outside the gates, since it was considered 'far too dangerous'. William Norrie (assistant-in-charge of the mechanics, Barnagar jute mill of George Henderson & Co., 1949-55), recalls how he enjoyed life in India, but felt that 'the confinement to the compound was hard to bear although he realized that it was necessary because in the villages outside there was danger and slaughter'.

There was this clear line between the safe haven of the jutewallah's world and the one outside the walls. However, within the walls a strict hierarchy was in place according to the position of the men. Charles Lorimer (with Bird & Co., in India, 1951-1962) speaks

of the 'caste system among the Scots' which 'was very strong, especially for some of the women. The salesman who worked in the office was the top man, and was above the mill manager – he had the best house on the compound, air conditioning, a chauffeur driven car for his wife to use...The salesman was often snobbish and moved in different social circles to managers'.

However, the bond between the Scots remained strong, as Eugenie Fraser's book, *House on the Hoogly* recalls the busy social life she led (from 1937 till 1963), in which all her associates were mainly fellow Scots. William Norrie confirms 'he was always with other Scots, most came from Dundee and a few were from Forfar and Arbroath'. David Miln who born in Dr Gow's Elgin Nursing Home in Calcutta in 1933, remembers his 'idyllic childhood in India'. He witnessed the 'great feeling of brotherhood among the Dundee workers, every adult in the compound was known to him as Auntie or Uncle, and Christmas was great fun, had the Scottish touch to it'.

Apart from of the social life, there was not much to do for the Scottish Jutewallah's wives. They worked for the War effort or did charity work. David Miln recalls that his mother 'never worked in India' though she had been a foreman at Baxter's office before she married. Mrs Brown, whose husband worked for Andrew Yule & Co at Barnagore, was one of the few who did work. She was a secretary in Calcutta. The mill compound life did not provide working opportunities for women and the social position did not allow it.

Through colonial times, Scots crossed the boundaries of nation, moving easily between their ethnic associations and that of their British associates and Europeans, brought together by the complex fabric of empire, while remaining at a distance from Indian employees and their families, adding a new dimension to their transnationalism – as they were able to identify with their imperial and regional affinities as the moment demanded.

Eugenie Fraser's story echoes the story of many Scots who spent the war period in India and stayed on after decolonisation. The changing times were apparent in the widening of the circle of Scots when most British left after 1947 and Indians entered posts as they trained to take over industries like jute and tea, which had been dominated by Scots. The Scots, once again, were able to move between nation boundaries in post-independent India, associating with Indian colleagues, while still bonding with Scottish colleagues in and outside their own jute compounds. This becomes evident in Fraser's memoir and in the interviews of Scots held in Dundee University Archives.

Mr and Mrs Brown who were in India between 1946 and 1963, noticed how after Indian independence, regulations changed in the dress code, as they became more relaxed. 'There was a different way of life...and the gate that separated the office and the mill staffs' accommodation blocks was dismantled, before one had to be invited to the compound'. Whereas earlier, most jutewallahs from Scotland had been trained in the Dundee Technical College, Mr Brown noted that 'increased numbers of Bengalis travelled to Dundee Technical College to study'. Yet the Scot who stayed on after 1947,

was comfortable in his position, retaining the clubhouse culture, an insider-outsider in a new nation.

The Scots' perception of their own position put them within a regional affinity. However, the jutewallahs were never considered as empire builders, at a par with the civil servants or army personnel. They remained in their insider-outsider status. The '[jute wallahs]...sat at their committee meetings in the boardroom of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, or drinking gin and tonics at Firpo's restaurant on Chowringhee or as they reverentially attended the annual St Andrew's Day dinners in Calcutta to listen to speeches about empire and Scotland's role in building the raj will provide a textured account of the jute wallahs' perspectives on the economics and cultures of empire.' (Stewart, p. 7) They could not be members of the Bengal Club or Tollygunge Club, but were able to enjoy the Saturday and Swimming Clubs, which were open only to Europeans. Stewart Gordon notes that '[t]he expatriate jute community played an apparently minor, and sometimes despised role in the empire' (Gordon, p. 195). They met in their jute clubhouses, where Indians were not invited. John Morris 'remembers the compound as an 'oasis', beautifully maintained, with bowling green, tennis courts, etc.... Leisure facilities were excellent: tennis courts and a swimming club, library, dances, snooker, films were shown on the compound, two golf courses, Gleneagles and Angus, for Thomas Duff employees'. Fraser recalls Saturday evenings in Calcutta (just as William Norrie does in his interview), visiting Firpo's for sandwiches, the cinemas and the races. In fact, the Race Course, Firpo's, Trinca's and Flury's, the New Empire Theatre, New Market in Calcutta were products of the empire, where the Scots met fellow countrymen and were at ease amongst their British confederates and European businessmen, served by Indians, retaining their identity while enjoying the exclusive spaces of westerners. Their distinctive ethnicity was reinforced on special occasions when they met at St Andrew's Day dinners, organised by the Caledonian Society in the New Empire Theatre, the very name reminiscent of the Raj.

Transnationalism took on wider connotations as the Scot would travel across continents, going where r job opportunities beckoned. Bill Soutar, who had worked as a clerk in a jute mill, did clerical work in Africa and 'when the opportunity to go to India arose he jumped at it'. He arrived in India on Independence day. His wife, Dot, joined him in Calcutta a few months later. They returned to Scotland in 1968. Mr John Norrie travelled to Kenya during the War. He wanted to travel and knew that Indian jobs offered better money. His teacher at the Technical College in Dundee helped him to get a good position there. He was in India from April 1951 till November 1963.

Though India has not figured greatly in studies of diasporic Scots, a fraternity was established through relatives who inspired an interest in their Indian destination and life through letters home and stories brought back on visits and retired lives in Scotland. Fraser notes 'Calcutta, that great metropolis of the East, was not altogether alien to me...I used to hear many tales about the mysterious land of India from my mother, whose brother, Uncle Henry, had left Scotland for India .... Being close to each other, mother and Uncle Henry (a broker) kept up a steady correspondence, mostly postcards, showing in turn many aspects of life in India and Russia' (pp. 14-15) – an example of the

transnational Scot corresponding across national boundaries, while retaining fraternal links.

Mrs Pollard's grandfather, Alex Wighton from Dundee, went to India in 1892, and was general manager for Sumnuggar, Titaghar and Victoria mills till 1906. His son travelled to India before the World War One and worked as a jute broker in Calcutta for Thomas Duff and Co. Mrs Jean Scott's father was works manager for Bird & Co. and though she spent her young life in Glasgow, she (with her sister) went to live in India when she was fifteen, and later married a Scot. living in the Barrakpore compound from 1930. In both cases, we have two generations in India. Mrs Audrey Bennett, whose father went to work in India for Andrew Yule & Co. in 1899, had several family members who had lived and worked in India from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The 'here' and 'there' take on different connotations in the 50s and 60s, for Calcutta was no longer the 'here' as in the 1920s and 30s, as Dundonians once worked with a sense of the land of the Hoogly being their 'place' of lived lives, their 'home' as Fraser's book title endorses, while Scotland remained the 'homeland' they wished to return to after retirement. Mrs Diane Reid's father was one of the last remaining Jutewallahs in Calcutta, working for Andrew Yule & Co. till 1970. In Reid's interview, we see how conscious she was of her Scottish roots, noting there were no Scottish children in the compound, but 'there were a few Scots children' in her Calcutta school. In the film *Brian Cox's Jute Journey*, there are interviews of Scots who worked along the Hoogly, who regret the lack of open communion with their Indian employees, which they were keen to rectify on subsequent visits to former friends and colleagues. As a transnational economic migrant, the Scottish jutewallah re-/crossed boundaries of nation, stayed in touch with the 'homeland', benefited from the international network of trade in countries where fellow Scots had settled, and made the transition to a decolonised structure, while maintaining a regional identity in India through time. Today, the names of compounds of the companies still tell the story of the Scottish links in the story of Calcutta's slowly revived jute industry which remains closely tied to Dundee, where there are houses with names reminiscent of life on the Hoogly.

## References

Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York, 1994) rpt. 2006.

Tanja Bultmann, Andrew Hinson and Graeme Morton, *Ties of Blood, Kin and Country: Scottish Associational Culture in the Diaspora* (Guelph: Centre for Scottish Studies, 2009)

Eugenie Fraser, *A Home by the Hoogly* (Edinburgh: Corgie Books, 1989).

Michael Fry, *The Scottish Empire* (East Lothian: Tuckwell Press and Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 2001).

Gordon T Stewart, *Jute and Empire* (Manchester and NY: Manchester University Press, 1998).

The recorded and transcribed interviews are from the Bengal Jute Industry Interviews, at the Dundee University Archives.

### **Consulted Books**

Bhabha, H.K. ed. *Nation and Narration* (London and New York, Routledge, 1990).

Bruner, J., 2001, 'Self-making and world-making' in Brockmeier, J. & D. Carbaugh (eds), *Narrative and identity: studies in autobiography, self and culture* (John Benjamin's Publishing Company, 2001).

Cain, Alex M., *The Cornchest for Scotland: Scots in India* (Edinburgh: The National Library of Scotland, 1986).

Gupta, Sujoy, *Yule Musings* (Kolkata, Andrew Yule Ltd, 1997).

Angela McCarthy, *Personal Narratives of Irish and Scottish Migration, 1921-65* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007).

Dominique Schnapper, 'From the Nation-State to the Transnational World: On the Meaning and Usefulness of Diaspora as a Concept', trans by Denise L. Davies, in *Diaspora*, 8:3 1999.

Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).