
FROM JOHANNE TO JANAKI: BRINGING VIKINGS TO VARANASI

NILAMBRI GHAI
Independent Scholar
nilambri.ghai@gmail.com

Received: 26-11-2014

Accepted: 30-11-2014



This book is about Johanne Nielsen, who was born on November 27, 1873, and who spent her childhood and youth in her father's house in Fiolstraede, a district located in the inner part of old



Wedding photograph

Copenhagen. It was not common then for parents to educate their daughters and she was one of the first young women to have completed the *studentereksamen* and the first year of a university program known as *Filosofikum* that entitled her to sign herself as a “Candidate in the Subject of Philosophy”. Her parents were proud of her achievement, and were ready to send her for higher education.

This all came to an abrupt end when, at the age of 21, Johanne met Bulaki Rama Chopra, a young barrister from India at a conference in Stockholm, and fell deeply in love with him. It is not clear why she was attracted to him. He was shorter than she was, and did not have the stereotypical physical attributes that women look for in men. He might have been the very first man from India that Johanne had ever met. Perhaps it was his brilliance and creativity that attracted her to him. He was a sculptor, a Sanskrit scholar, an innovative thinker, and a writer. Regardless of the socio-cultural and linguistic differences that separated them, she felt deeply committed in her love, and informed her parents of her wish to marry him.

The story goes that Johanne's parents tried to keep her away from Bulaki Rama by sending her to a convent from where she was forbidden to leave. Bulaki Rama and his friends quietly sent her a message to jump over the wall of the convent while they waited below with bed sheets to catch her when she jumped. Later, after reassuring letters from Bulaki Rama, Johanne's parents reluctantly

agreed to the alliance. However, they would not allow the wedding to take place in Copenhagen, perhaps to avoid the scandal that such a wedding would have had on their business and social status. Johanne and Bulaki Rama were thus married very simply in a Sikh Gurudwara in London (UK) even though neither one of them was Sikh. It happened to be the most convenient form of a wedding ceremony since it did not require religious conversions. Following their wedding in 1895, the couple left for India.

It could not have been easy for young Johanne, whose name was changed to “Janaki.” She was in a country bitterly engaged in moving toward independence from British rule. Many of the people she knew and admired were repelled by the presence of foreign, white Sahibs who controlled the lives and careers of the darker “natives”. Johanne was probably viewed as a “pharangi” (foreigner) and a “gori” (fair complexioned woman) who had ensnared Bulaki Rama by her commandeering, Nordic appearance that awarded her a seemingly huge advantage over her husband.

Johanne’s journey of love from Copenhagen to Hafizabad, Dehra Dun and Benaras (Varanasi) also led her into a new world of Theosophy, traditional Hindu caste differences, and Indian nationalism. Her letters describe close connections with some of the best known thinkers and writers from Punjab - Bhai Veer Singh, Professor Puran Singh, and Dr. Khudadad - who met regularly to read from their works, and who planned their struggle to shape a future vision of the country. Due to the influence of her friends, Bhai Veer Singh and Professor Puran Singh, Johanne was greatly drawn toward the teachings of Sikhism. Although a combination of multiple beliefs shaped her mind, she found that Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism could easily co-exist within the parameters of the principles of Theosophy, a way of thinking that was passed on to her by her friend and mentor, Annie Besant.

The book is based on letters from Johanne and her family and from interviews with people in Denmark and India. It describes the impact of World War I and the struggle of people waiting to gain independence from colonial rule. It is about a European woman adapting to a new culture, embracing it, and yet maintaining her heritage and the love for the two countries she called home: Denmark and India. It is about how she finally left Bulaki Rama, and found employment through the help of her friend Annie Besant, at the Theosophical Society in Benaras (Varanasi). Living alone with her four children, away from the man for whom she had left her land of origin, was an

incredibly courageous decision made by Johanne. The book is a tribute to this courage, and is an attempt to revisit the Danish identity lost by Johanne's children growing up in India. The book is also a search for connections between the life of the author, Nilambri Ghai, who like her grandmother Johanne, moved from the East to the West – from India to Canada, and who also felt the loss of her home culture and language. The book draws parallels and seeks to reclaim lost identities and lost memories.



Dera Ismail Khan: 30 December, 1897:

*“Dear Father and Mother: We wish you all a happy Christmas and New Year. Wish it may become a really pleasant year for you, for all your own and for us here. It is fixed that we shall now see each other this summer. Everyone will be in good health. Little Sakuntala sends New Year greetings and kiss to all of you and to cousin, Neil. ----
Johanne*

During her second visit to Denmark, in November 1902, an article on Johanne was published in *Damernes Blad* commenting on the unusual story of a young Danish woman who had given up her family and culture to follow the man she loved to India. Johanne and Bulaki Rama's daughter, Sakuntala, was six years old. It was not uncommon for girls to be married at that young age, and this explains the seemingly strange fact described in the article that Sakuntala had already started to receive proposals. When a young girl was married, she stayed with her parents until puberty, after which time, she moved permanently to her husband's home. Sakuntala would have received

proposals only from the warrior or the *Kshatriya* caste, second after the Brahmins. The caste system in Indian society was fairly rigid, and led to various forms of discrimination. As mentioned in the article, Johanne was considered “impure” since she had eaten beef in Denmark. Many of the women would not eat with her. Some would “not even touch her.”



Translation of the article from *Damernes Blad*:

“Eight years ago, she followed the man whom her heart had chosen – a man who belonged to another race, and whose country was thousands of miles from her own country. The man was a Hindu advocate, and the country was India. As it may be of interest to our readers to hear about the home and way of living of this woman in the far east, we visited the lady, who is for the moment on visit here, and we met her in her childhood home, in a cosy old-fashioned flat in Fiolstraede. The fact that Mrs. Chopra has so well integrated in India is probably due to her will and ability to assimilate with the Hindus in as many ways as possible. She quickly learned the language, became a vegetarian, wore all Indian women’s clothing, following all daily life’s details, especially by converting to Hindu beliefs. Therefore she is also on very good terms with all her husband’s friends.

Their wives, the Hindu women, play such secondary roles that their behaviour is of no importance. As a curiosity, we ought to mention that since Mrs. Chopra before her marriage had eaten beef (in India the cow is worshipped through the God Krishna who as a child lived for a long time with cowherds), the women consider her impure, and none will eat together with her, yes, some not even touch her. The lady’s husband, whose acquaintance she made during a trip to Sweden, is, besides being an advocate, a doctor in Sanskrit. After his father’s death, he has taken over the running of all his important land properties. Their dwelling,

from which we bring a picture above, is in Punjab, the five- river country near Lahore. The villa has a certain European style, as well as some furniture. During summertime when the heat is the strongest, they go to the Himalayan Mountains. An adorable little girl with the beautiful name of Sakuntala (songbird) travels together with her mother, and seems to be happy among her small Danish cousins. With her dark, soft eyes, her fine graceful body, her multi-coloured gold-sewn clothing, she does seem like a little tropical bird; a bird that can sing in Hindi, English and Danish. Even though she is very young, she has already had three proposals of marriage, all belonging to the same caste as their father, namely the warrior caste. But they have all, to their parents' grief, received a refusal. This shows that the Hindus are in no way unfriendly towards European culture. Sakuntala, through her upbringing and birth, has taken a special stand among Hindu women who normally can neither read nor write. Immediately after Christmas, Mrs. Chopra will return to her country, followed by her family and friends. Best wishes for her future happiness. Happiness ought to follow this woman who, in order to follow her husband, sacrificed all that is of value for an European woman: country, parents, beliefs, all the environment an educated woman grew up in and to which she was attached with deep roots."

"Fru J.B. Fajzada Chopra." (Sunday, November 30, 1902) *Damernes Blad*. no. 48, 5th Edition. pp 572-573.

Note: Credits for photographs, translations and background information: Knud and Jeannette Greiersen