



SANDS OF TIME

VOLUME VIII, ISSUE 3, 2008

TATA CENTRAL ARCHIVES NEWSLETTER

IMAGES FROM THE J. J. BHABHA COLLECTIONS



This page and next
Sooni Tata and Meherbai Tata
Circa. 1905
Platinum Prints
Studio Reutlinger, Paris

The Founder, Jamsetji Tata was a voracious traveller and his son Dorab Tata inherited this trait. Dorab and Meherbai were married on February 14, 1898. Wide and frequent travels abroad were a means of self-education which Meherbai

greatly enjoyed. The lessons carefully learnt in these travels bore fruit later on in the social activities which filled so much of Lady Meherbai Tata's later life.

In his mid-forties the hand of fortune took R. D. Tata to Paris where he hoped to trade in pearls. Wanting to learn the French language, Jamsetji recommended a teacher to him. At the teachers house he met a very

attractive young woman called Suzanne, just twenty years of age. He confided to Jamsetji, his affection for the young lady and his desire to marry her. R. D. and Sooni were married in 1902. After her marriage Suzanne's name was changed to Sooni because of her golden hair.

Sooni was delighted by the warmth with which she was welcomed into the Parsi community and into her husband's family. She struck up a close friendship with, Dorab's wife, Meherbai. In 1903, Sooni wrote this short letter to Meherbai "...We hope to see you and Dorabji in Paris very soon. We look for a larger apartment and if we find one, we shall be very happy to receive you to live with us. Hoping to hear from you very soon. I send you and Dorabji our best love and kindest regards. Believe me always your very sincere Soona R. Tata."

Reutlinger Studio, operated from 1850 to 1937 in the heart of the fashion capital, Paris, and was well known for providing celebrity images of actors, artists, musicians, composers, opera singers and ballet dancers of the period. The studio props consisted of palm trees, columns, tapestries, rugs, an assortment of steps and stairways on which the flowing trains from the ladies' gowns could be resplendently fanned out.

The two images featured in this article are platinum prints of Sooni and Meherbai Tata taken circa. 1905 form part of the J. J. Bhabha Collection

Continued on page 2...

Inside this issue:

IMAGES FROM THE J. J. BHABHA COLLECTIONS	1
EDITORIAL	2
EMBEDDING AN INTERNATIONALIST VISION: SOONI TATA AND THE TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY OF THE TATA FAMILY 1902-1923	3

"A GREAT PHOTOGRAPH IS A FULL EXPRESSION OF WHAT ONE FEELS ABOUT WHAT IS BEING PHOTOGRAPHED IN THE DEEPEST SENSE, AND IS, THEREBY, A TRUE EXPRESSION OF WHAT ONE FEELS ABOUT LIFE IN ITS ENTIRETY."

ANSEL ADAMS,
PHOTOGRAPHER

EDITORIAL

"PHOTOGRAPHY, AS A POWERFUL MEDIUM OF EXPRESSION AND COMMUNICATIONS, OFFERS AN INFINITE VARIETY OF PERCEPTION, INTERPRETATION AND EXECUTION."

ANSEL ADAMS
PHOTOGRAPHER

In March 2008, when Dr. Ian Magedera visited the Tata Central Archives to refer to the correspondence between Sooni and R. D. Tata for his research, we never anticipated that our animated lunch discussions would lead to a kind offer to write for Sands of Time. We present in this issue the first of a three part article examining his argument of

the transnational identity of the Tata family.

Inspired by Sooni Tata, we also decided to feature some stunning images of this golden haired French beauty with Lady Meherbai Tata, another visionary Tata woman.

The photographic images at TCA are a rich historical

resource for study of culture, visual narratives and as highlighted in the first story - textiles!

I hope that these two perspectives present fresh aspects of looking at the Tata history.

Deepthi Sasidharan

IMAGES FROM THE J. J. BHABHA COLLECTIONS... *contd. From pg.1*



in the Tata Central Archives.

Sooni is wearing the traditional "Gara" - an embroidered sari. The garas are considered Parsi family heirlooms, and have become a rare collector's item today.

The gara's history is as colourful as the garment itself. The gara was probably introduced in India by Parsi traders in the 19th century who used to trade with China.

The designing of a gara starts with drawing of the design on paper. Subsequently, a small sample in the actual colours is prepared and then traced on to the sari. A single design is repeated several times on a sari and adjusted perfectly to blend into each other.

Each gara has its own story in the form of pictures embroidered across the length of the sari. The popular motifs are trees, flowers, leaves, birds, figures, houses, bridges, each coming alive with the help of vivid colours and stitches. There are even distinct scenes of Chinese life - pagodas, shrines, riverbanks, soldiers and cranes. The intricate embroidery is so exquisite that that the background colour surfaces as an outline. Each sari is put on a loom at which 4-6 artisans work.

A gara could either be fully embroidered or have a border with embroidery sprinkled all over or just partially embroidered. The popular stitches are the crewel, stem and long and short stitch and the French knot.

The popular choice of thread is off-white. Pastels are also widely utilised. As many as 20-30 different shades of a

colour are incorporated in one design, perfectly blending them so as to give it the effect of a painting. The texture of the thread could be either cotton or silk although the latter is more effective. In certain garas, the border expands into the pallav of the sari which is draped in front when worn in the traditional Parsi style.

Making a hand embroidered gara takes two to eight months on an average, depending on the complexity and density of the design.

The original Chinese garas were considered quite bulky to wear as saris since they had embroidered borders on all four sides. The most favoured colours were purple or violet, wine red, navy blue, white or off-white with white embroidery in twisted cotton thread. At times, gold threads were also used.

Several years after the introduction of the gara in India, craftsmen in Surat, Gujrat managed to duplicate the embroidery. It is identified by its net and French knots which the Chinese ones did not have.

Source:
<http://www.india-crafts.com>
India Crafts, Textile Products, Gara Embroidered Saris-The Prize

EMBEDDING AN INTERNATIONALIST VISION: SOONI TATA AND THE TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY OF THE TATA FAMILY 1902–1923

When putting together an investment portfolio, the first principle, one so elementary that a professional in the sector would take it for granted, is diversification; judicious asset allocation aims to ensure a balance across a wide range of geographical localities and investment vehicles. This essay explores how a similar principle can be seen at work in the first years of the twentieth century in the choice of spouse by R. D. Tata and in the way that his family life was lived and his children were raised across the borders of language and nation. Let it be noted at the outset that the purpose of the essay is to analyse the public effects of personal choices about love, family life and childrearing. As far as the choice of a spouse is concerned, it would be frivolous to presume to provide a complete analysis of the reasons, intimate or otherwise, why one person marries another; indeed can anyone claim that all the reasons are known to the parties themselves?

As far as the historical context for R. D. Tata's 'marrying out' is concerned, it should be noted that princely families have followed the practice of exogamy and marriage as strategic alliance since time immemorial and so there was nothing remarkable about captains of industry like the Tatas doing the same; however, the documents which trace the integration into the family of the Frenchwoman Suzanne Brière from 1902, show, not a foreign acquisition, but an effect akin to an incorporation of an overseas element as an independent entity, valued precisely for its difference and potentially unique contribution to the enrichment of the whole group. The

broad parallels between this phenomenon and the acquisitions policy of the Tata Group in 2008 cannot escape us. In 1902, and all through the first two decades of the twentieth century, arguably one of the key challenges for the future of the Tata Group of Companies was to embed an internationalist vision for the first time. This is demonstrated by two letters (quoted below), written by B. J. Padshah (a Tata employee) to R. D. Tata in 1906 and 1918. This piece, however, argues for the addition of a crucial private dimension to this wider commercial phenomenon. This dimension includes the transformation of Suzanne Brière into Sooni Tata after her marriage to R. D. Tata in 1902 and the multinational lifestyle and language use choices made in their household from 1902 to 1923. These choices can be shown to be relevant to the Tatas right up to the present day.

In the field of language acquisition in Sooni and R. D. Tata's family, the Frenchwoman's integration, led to a multilingual mix in which all members learnt, not only Hindi, but also Gujarati, and not only English, but also French. A command of more than one Indian language was probably as widespread in 1902 as it is today, but this family aimed for both 'Eastern' and 'Western' bilingualism.

These choices about language should be set in the context of a family life lived between France and India and many other countries. Indeed, the sheer number of ports of call visited by Sooni and R. D. Tata between August 1902 and December 1907, make for a dizzying itinerary: Czechia (Carlsbad),

Switzerland (Montreux), London, US (New York City and Niagara Falls), Mumbai; [1903] Mussoorie, Mumbai, France (Vichy and Paris), London, France (Marseilles), Mumbai; [1904] Nice, London [1905] France (Paris, Chamonix and Marseilles), Mumbai; [1906] Matheran, Mumbai, France (Marseilles), Mumbai; [1907] Panchgani, Mumbai, Poland (Warsaw), Russia (Vladivostok), Japan (Osaka, Buzen, Nikko, Tokyo, Sagami, Tokyo, Osaka, Kobe), China (Shanghai), Hong Kong, Singapore, Sri Lanka (Colombo). Rather than it being a case of the couple having a home base from which they travel, on an annual or biannual journey to France from India for example, it is more accurate to speak of the Tatas as having a nomadic life in the first five years of their marriage.

While it may be argued that this near perpetual movement between August 1902 and December 1907 is a function of their wealth and privilege, it must also be acknowledged that their globetrotting was not always by choice. Their movements were partly dictated by concerns about Sooni Tata's health and by R. D.'s professional commitments, such as his involvement in mining in Japan. Travelling is enjoyed most when the traveller in good health and Sooni Tata's letters show the physical strain of travel for medical reasons: 'C'est cette maudite galopade qui m'a forcé à retourner vers la France et vers la science, qui j'espère me remettront sur pieds et me rendront mes forces perdues [It is this accursed mad rush which forced me to return to France and medical science which I hope will get me back on my feet again and give me back



Ian Magedera is a lecturer in French at the University of Liverpool, UK with research specialisation in how the French understand and write about India. Ian Magedera's work aims to shed light on the colonial history and post-colonial situation of India via the role of non-British Europeans. He has recently worked with the French correspondence in the JRD Files at TCA.

This article written by him is being reproduced in three consecutive issues of "Sands of Time" as we feel it would be of interest to the readers.

Sooni Tata with her husband R. D. Tata. Circa. 1905.



EMBEDDING AN INTERNATIONALIST VISION... contd. From pg.3



Sooni Tata with her five children: (from left) Rodabeh, Jehangir, Sooni, Jimmy, Sylla and Darab. Inscribed in blue ink on the photograph: "A chère Tante Irma (To dear aunt Irma), Toute la petite famille (all of our family)." Circa. 1917 Albumen Print

the strength I have lost].’ In a characteristically witty turn of phrase, she passes comment on her traveller’s life as she gets ready to leave Mumbai once again: ‘je suis de plus en plus dans les malles, je dirai même que j’y reste, j’y vis! [The trunks are becoming more and more of a second home to me, I daresay, you’ll not find me anywhere else; I live in them].’

It should not be forgotten that this constant travel implicated not only themselves but also their growing family: Sooni Tata had five children between 1903 and 1916. In general terms, and concentrating on their family environment, it would appear that R. D. and Sooni made the right choices concerning how to equip their children, and particularly their eldest son, Jehangir, for the world of international business. This particular internationalist element of their lifestyle and the advantages that it gave J. R. D. Tata meant that, R. D. Tata’s branch of the family enjoyed increased influence within the Group after 1938. Much has been written about the individual qualities of J. R. D. Tata and his achievements are fundamentally a result of those particular talents; however, it is also important to understand that his internationalist upbringing equipped him for many of the challenges that he faced at the helm of Tata Group from 1938 to 1991. And, as far as this essay is concerned, selected parallels will be drawn in its final sections between his comments on language, culture and transnational identity and those of his mother. This will show that the internationalist choices about spouse and

family were not only valid for Sooni and R. D. Tata’s generation, but also for the one which followed them. Other than J. R. D. Tata and his wife Thelma Vicaji, the prime example of the transnational phenomenon is Simone Tata (née Dunoyer), the French-born wife of Naval H. Tata, who came to India in 1955 and became a director of the Group’s cosmetics business Lakmé in 1961; in 2008 she is Chairperson of Trent Ltd..

Correspondence considered as a journal

Although only one side of the correspondence between Sooni Tata and her mother is available, taken together, these two hundred or so letters written by the daughter form a remarkable tool for analysing the life of a go-between who spans more two cultures and keeps moving between them. The sheer volume of the letters – there are many which are fourteen pages in length –, the weekly frequency of their dispatch and the daily frequency of their composition, means that they should be more properly considered as a journal, and valued as such. This interpretation is bolstered by the fact that an initial survey of the letters can find only very few references within them to the replies of the addressee, Mme Mathilde Brière. This suggests that, although they were sent with a daughter’s intention to inform her mother about her location and activities, it is also justified to understand this one-sided correspondence as not expecting a reply. Seen as a journal, these letters are Sooni Tata’s aid to self-reflection and to her

attempt to anchor her sense of self at a transitional period in her life. The letters which survive do not appear to be duplicates and were thus retrieved by the sender and bequeathed to her son J. R. D. Tata, who then oversaw their passage into Tata Central Archives.

As far as the letter writer is concerned, Sooni Tata was born Pauline Suzanne Geneviève Valentine Brière in Paris on 26 May 1880, she was the daughter of Mathilde Brière (née Tribout), who taught R. D. Tata French, the couple had a civil wedding in France in 1902 and the first part of the itinerary above before they reach Mumbai in December 1902 is their honeymoon. Given the importance of language learning in cultural consciousness, both of the individual and of the R. D. Tata family as a whole, it is important that language learning is the origin of the first contact between the Tatas and the Brières; or, rather, between Mr. R. D. Tata and two generations of the women of the Brière family. Also, it should be noted that, at the time, language learning both inside and outside the family was frequently the preserve of women. It was their role to teach their children mother tongues and to mint the currency of cultural contact. Therefore looking at how languages are transmitted across the generations is a way of valorizing the private sphere and of getting under the surface of the well-known Tata family tree which tends to foreground fathers and husbands at the expense of wives and mothers.

...Continued in the next issue

WAYS TO GIVE

The Tata Central Archives is built on contributions from the Group companies. We are the proud guardians of thousands of documents, carefully preserved paintings and several such collections.

To discover how your Company can get involved with the Tata Central Archives, please contact:

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