



# SANDS OF TIME

VOLUME VII, ISSUE 4, 2008

TATA CENTRAL ARCHIVES NEWSLETTER

## HARDELOT – J.R.D. TATA'S OLD HAPPY CHILDHOOD HAUNT



*Hardelet-Plage - original circa 1915, digitally enhanced 2009.*

We are part of a rich history that needs to be shared and preserved. The stories we narrate are important sources of self-identity and enable us to explore and relate our past.

Remembering the past brings a new awareness to the present. Memories can be explored in many creative ways that place value on a person's unique life experience.

This article narrates J. R. D. Tata's experiences and attempts to recapture significant events of his stay at Hardelet.

"My first important memories from the point of view of a growing child, blessed with a

fairly observant and inquisitive mind, were about cars and aeroplanes," says J. R. D. Tata.

R. D. Tata decided that the family needed a home of their own in which to spend the holidays, and he picked on a new and developing beach resort on the Channel Coast of France, South of Boulogne, called Hardelet.

Every summer in post-war France the family went to their home on the beach resort of Hardelet. A golden sandy beach ran absolutely straight for a few miles South of Boulogne. Behind this little resort rose a forest rich in trees.

R. D. not only bought a villa

but later on built a number of villas and shops as a real estate developer. In fact, one of the two main streets of Hardelet was officially named "Avenue des Indes" (Avenue of India).

The legendary Louis Bleriot, who acquired world fame in 1909, by being the first to fly a plane across the Channel, also chose Hardelet for his family's summer resort.

The Bleriot's built a fine villa close to the Tata's home and the children were good friends.

When J. R. D. was between fifteen and nineteen years of age, he had two good friends. One was Louis Bleriot Jr. and the other Zent D'Alnoys. Young

*Continued on page 2...*

### Inside this issue:

HARDELOT - J. R. D. TATA'S OLD HAPPY CHILDHOOD HAUNT	1
EDITORIAL	2
MEMORIES OF HARDELOT	3
DOWN MEMORY LANE	4
EMBEDDING AN INTERNATIONALIST VISION: SOONI TATA AND THE TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY OF THE TATA FAMILY 1902-1923	6



## EDITORIAL

The first part of the article by Dr. Magedera in our last issue generated considerable interest and we are happy to present the next section of Sooni Tata's story. Her quest for an unique identity in the well known Tata family is certainly remarkable.

The research at the Tata

Central Archives is constantly bolstered with interesting queries from around the world. Answering these questions sometimes opens up new facets and vistas of business history.

The story of Hardelet is inspired by an email from a resident of J. R. D. Tata's

childhood summer retreat whose grandparents now own the Tata residence. We complement this discovery with J. R. D's memories of Hardelet, France through his letters. His passion for fine cars like his favourite Bugatti and aeroplanes during his teenage years later matured into refined traits that led him to

develop engineering and aviation within the Tata Group.

Indeed, Plutarch, the famous Greek biographer has rightly commented, "Character is simply habit long continued."

Deepthi Sasidharan

## HARDELOT – J.R.D. TATA'S OLD HAPPY CHILDHOOD.... contd. From pg.1



Bleriot 1909.

Bleriot was his playmate on the beach, and J. R. D. joined him in pushing the aeroplane into their hangar.

"Occasionally, a Bleriot aeroplane would land on the beach, to everyone's great excitement. It was flown by his chief pilot, Adolphe Pegoud, the first man to loop-the-loop. From then on I was hopelessly hooked on aeroplanes and made up my mind that come what may, one day, I would be a pilot," says J. R. D.

In August and September, 1921, the children visited Hardelet to spend their holidays. During this vacation J. R. D. wrote letters to his father (R. D.) in which he says: "...We had important tennis championships in Hardelet

lately, and I played in it, in singles, and in mix doubles, with Ginette Bleriot. In singles I fell at the second turn 6/0-6/0! And it was not shameful at all, for the man who beat me, beat also all the others and was the final champion of the tournoi. So you see! In mix double we fell also at the second turn, and that time too against very good players. Bad luck wasn't it? I hope to do better next year, if we come back to Hardelet..."

In September, J. R. D. writes: "Since about a week we are having in Hardelet a middle

summer weather and I haven't seen a cloud since five days. It reminds me a bit of India with the exception that it is cooler. The sea is beautifully calm but cold, and I swim like an "enrage". When I go to England I want to take a few lessons of narration, because I want to learn classic and regular swimming."

He goes on to say: "We are all in very good health and Darab has darkened as much as us and is not far from being chocolate. He has learnt in hardly an hour to ride a bicycle and he is mad about it."

"I FIND THAT A GREAT PART OF THE INFORMATION I HAVE, WAS ACQUIRED BY LOOKING SOMETHING UP AND FINDING SOMETHING ELSE ON THE WAY."

FRANKLIN P. ADAMS  
AMERICAN COLUMNIST

In August 2008, the Archives received an e-mail from Scholastie D'Herlincourt, who lives in Lille, France.

About fifty years ago, her grandfather Pierre Motte, bought a house in Hardelet from "Prince Tata".

As her grandparents are getting older, the family decided to celebrate and have an Indian party on September 14, 2008, with Ignace Motte, the owner of the house. She also forwarded the Archives a photograph of her family dressed in Indian attire.

To make the party interesting, Scholastie looked for some information about the house. She was surprised to discover that Hardelet is mentioned on the tata.com website and then got in touch with TCA.

We at the Archives were happy to know that, somewhere in France, some people remember that J.R.D. Tata had spent time in Hardelet.

She requested the Archives to forward some more details and images of the Tata family connection in Hardelet so that she could share the information with her family.



# MEMORIES OF HARDELOT

*Papa chéri*  
*Here am I back in my regiment after the most topping day I have lived since I left Larie a month ago.*  
*I had naturally every reason to be happy*  
*1. I was on leave*  
*2. I was with the family*  
*3. I was at Hardelet*  
*4. With all my old friends*  
*and 5. With the most extraordinary day I could dream of.*

Vienne

3rd September, 1925

Papa chéri,

....I reached Paris on Thursday 27th morning. Went to the flat, changed into a suit went to the Scemamas from where Renee was first leaving for Hardelet by train. Max and I followed only at about eleven in the Bugatti. I drove most of the way and by Jingo I never enjoyed a drive so much. It was the first time I ever drove such a topping car. Apart for the changing of one plug we had of course no trouble. We arrived at about 4 o'clock at Hardelet amidst enthusiasm. Everybody was mad over the car. But nobody as mad as myself!!

I left Hardelet by train Monday at 12. Those four days naturally seemed terribly short of me, but I went off with a light heart as I really could not complain after having enjoyed myself so much!

Sylla must have come back yesterday with the children and Scemamas partly in train and partly in the two cars. Edgar de Frantignan came back with them with his closed Citroen.

The children were all in good health at Hardelet and bronzed. To my idea Dabeh seemed the best. Sylla has not fattened. Darab & Jimmy are well too. I think you will have to force Sylla to keep a little more

she will tire herself one day. She won't admit anybody to tell her so.

Please don't say anything to her in your letters as she would be frightfully angry with me. Moreover it would not change anything as she naturally sees she is in good health. I think Bel Air will do her good as it is more or less an antidote to Hardelet with its quiet life and quiet people. It will do good to Darab and Jimmy also as they are quite as excitable as before and as Sylla. Dabeh seems to me the only quiet one.

*Perhaps one of the things I enjoyed most at Hardelet, was food. By jove it was ripping! And I ate like a pig! If I had eaten like that for a month I don't think I could possibly have helped to get a little fatter.*

Perhaps one of the things I enjoyed most at Hardelet, was food. By jove it was ripping! And I ate like a pig! If I had eaten like that for a month I don't think I could possibly have helped to get a little fatter. If once I am liberated my present appetite remains I have renewed and high hopes.

I found at Hardelet your letter I expected but have not got anything this week. I hope Sylla won't forget to send it on to me....

At Hardelet were the

quiet when we are together again. She is terribly like mother and all the time on the move either for work or play. She is in good health indeed, but

Bleriots, (your dear Simone excepted as he was with Hubby at Carlsbad). The Sirots though Hector only on week ends, Edgar de Frantignan. The Sirots had let their villa this year so Madame Sirot stayed at the Bleriots, and the two boys hired rooms in a Villa near the Post Office with Edgar whose people have sold their villa. That shows that we are faithful to this dear old place and I hope our friends and ourselves will always whenever possible on summer go to this old happy haunt of our childhood and youth. It is funny that there are very few distractions there and yet we always enjoy ourselves.

A new friend added to our gang is the daughter of Francois-Marsal, ex Minister, ex President of Council, who has bought the villa next to ours on the left facing the sea. The Francois-Marsals came to Hardelet for the first time last year and I saw them at the hotel during the few days I was not ill. I was introduced to their

daughter then 16. She is plumpy and a perfect devil a garcou manque! She is still at the "age ingrat now", but I believe she will become extremely pretty though rather on the fat side. She certainly has got fine eyes.

Most people whom I had seen last year at Hardelet and not since, congratulated me for looking so well.

I always mean to write but as I always do my Indian Mail on Wednesdays or Thursdays I never seem to find the time after having written to you...

*Good bye Papa chéri. I hope you are very well and soon coming. The first of November is the best time to come.*  
*Adangis*





## DOWN MEMORY LANE



Top Row (L to R): 1. A sketch by J. R. D. Tata of the plane flown by Louis Bleriot. 2. Hardelot Plage, Villa Bleriot, l'Escopette. 3. Villa De Tata, Hardelot, 1917. 4. J. R. D. Tata - circa 1926.  
 Centre Row (L to R): 5. The Bleriot family, 1910. 6. Scholastie D'Herlincourt with her family dressed in traditional Indian attire (Refer to box on page 2). 7. Rodabeh and Darab, Jimmy (centre) at Villa Tata - circa 1920.  
 Bottom Row (L to R): 8. The tennis courts at Hardelot - circa 1915. 9. Bleriot 1909.



## EMBEDDING AN INTERNATIONALIST VISION:

### SOONI TATA AND THE TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY OF THE TATA FAMILY 1902–1923



Ian Magedera a lecturer in French at the University of Liverpool, UK worked with the French correspondence in the JRD Files at TCA.

The first part of the article was featured in the previous issue of "Sands of Time".

The second installment is being reproduced for the benefit of the readers.

#### A Frenchwoman in British Bombay

Before considering the transmission of languages and culture, it is necessary to investigate the language beliefs and practice of the woman who was primarily responsible for that transmission. As Sooni Tata is on SS Imperatrix on her way to Mumbai in December 1902, she feels the absence of the French language keenly and looks forward to a time when she and her mother will be able to converse again in the mother tongue: 'nous causerions en mon français si cher et si beau, que je suis forcée d'abandonner un peu pour parler anglais, puisque malheureusement le Français n'est pas compris de tous. Avec Ratan je ne puis parler le même langage qu'avec toi ma petite maman, je dois employer des mots justes correctes [the wayward 'e' here is struckthrough], ne donnant pas une double entente' [We would chat in my beloved and beautiful French, which I am forced to abandon somewhat to speak English, as, unfortunately, French is not understood by all. With Ratan (R. D. Tata) I cannot speak the same French as with you dear mum, I have to use exact and correct words which leave no room for ambiguity]. Although it is clear that she feels keenly the lack of native speaker and a confidante who is her linguistic equal in French, she moves forward on two fronts as she integrates herself into the various social circles in Mumbai that open to her. It is clear from her letters that she is very much in touch with French people in the city and in India more generally. She is aware of the latest news in the lives of the French diplomatic corps in India and she comments sympathetically on a Mademoiselle Bougard who was to become the wife of the French Ambassador. As time went on, and despite the constant departures from Mumbai, this French role



Sooni - original circa 1920, digitally enhanced 2009.

intensified and in 1907, there is an account of a Saturday afternoon invitation for Sooni and R. D. Tata to take tea on board one of the French Navy's destroyers which was on a stopover in the port. It is clear that, despite her not having her principal residence in France during the period 1902–1907, Sooni Tata continues with French traditions, such as celebrating Bastille Day on 14 of July. Indeed, she displays particular glee to see the French tricolour she has had put up fluttering from the Tata residence in the middle of a neighbourhood of what she perceives as English-type houses.

Sooni Tata's pride in France is based on a sense of French and Parisian style and how it compares favourably to what she sees as rather stodgy British taste. However, during the

coronation celebrations of 1 January 1903 which were marked all around India, Sooni Tata remarks on the splendour of Mumbai lit up in honour of Edward VII and the Delhi Durbar. This made her imagine what the splendours of the Raj would have been. It is interesting that in 1903, this Frenchwoman already views the Raj as something which belonged to the past.

Despite her lifelong affection for her mother tongue and pride in her nationality, there appears never to have been a blind chauvinism as far as Sooni Tata was concerned. Given her existence as an expatriate Frenchwoman who has married outside French culture, she levels criticism at a certain type of contemporary French person who is content to stay at home:

*Continued on page 7...*



# EMBEDDING AN INTERNATIONALIST VISION... contd. from pg. 6

'en général le Français d'aujourd'hui est pot au feu [sic] et craint de quitter de vue son toit. Où donc est-il ce Français audacieux et chevaleresque? [In general the Frenchman of today is the stay-at-home type and is afraid of venturing to a place where he can longer see the roof of his own house. Where has that breed of bold and brave Frenchman gone?]

It is interesting that she chooses to hark back to a bygone pre-republican age when she refers to this using the word 'chevaleresque' which literally means 'knightly'. Sooni Tata is a woman of an avowedly elitist disposition. It will become clear in the course of this essay how she sees herself marrying into not only to a wealthy family, but also into a religious and quasi-ethnic group which she assumes to be set apart and above society at large. Her sense of pride at being French and her confidence in the superiority of her taste compounds her attraction to her understanding of the privileged socio-economic situation of the Parsis. The only people attracted by elites are people of an elitist disposition themselves. This accounts for the way in which she embraces her understanding of her 'Parsi' identity such as signing her private letters to her mother 'Soonai' or 'Sooni' when she could have kept her birth name Suzanne.

In historical terms the reference to 'bold and brave' Frenchmen might well be referring to what French scholars call the first wave of French colonialism or the Ancien Régime overseas empire established under Louis the Fourteenth (hence the naming of Louisiana in 1682) and fundamentally undermined at the time of the 1789 Revolution and given the coup de grâce after Napoléon Bonaparte's defeat in 1814. In the post-1880 period this defunct empire was remembered with rose-tinted spectacles though its heroes.

Men such as Mahé de La Bourdonnais (who added to his name the epithet of a town on the West Coast of India after capturing it for France and Claude Martin (who bequeathed schools in Lyons, France and also in Lucknow and Kolkata).

Upon hearing that one of her French friends, Marie d'Abadie, has married an Englishman and that she too will no longer live in France on a permanent basis, Sooni Tata muses: 'Voilà toute cette génération qui se marie qui s'éparpille aux mille coins du monde, comme c'est bizarre de regarder la vie quelquefois et de la voir changer [So here's all of this generation getting married and being scattered to a thousand corners of the globe, how strange it is to look at life sometimes and to see it change].' As we have seen, there is nothing unusual about women marrying outside their home nations, but as we have mentioned before in the early years of the twentieth century increased women's liberation for the highest socio-economic groups, coupled with technological advances and an increase in scheduled passenger services across the world made them attain new high levels of mobility as married women. As Sooni Tata intimates in her choice of words, the concrete change is wives being scattered not to the four corners of the earth but to a thousand corners; and also them finding the means to come and go from those locations alone, with their husbands and/or with their families. Sooni Tata travelled in all three of these ways.

## Multilingual Mumbai, a rich 'language repertoire

Her arrival in Mumbai is a time of excitement, but also of upheaval. She is delighted by the warmth with which she is welcomed into her husband's family. However, this notwithstanding, there is a cacophony of languages flying around 'le Goujerati de ma belle mère que je ne comprends



"Yours very affectionately" - Sooni, February 1917, digitally enhanced 2009.

pas, le français petit nègre d'une aya qui me tutoie et que je n'écoute pas et des chamailleries avec le reste des domestiques qui ne me comprennent pas [the Gujarati of my mother-in-law that I do not understand, the pidgin French of a children's nurse who uses the familiar form to address me and to whom I do not listen and the bickering with the rest of the servants who do not understand me]. Even more than this, she has a sense that she is not only in-between cultures, but also that everyone is scrutinizing her: 'Moi qui ne suis ici ni chien ni chat, Française pour les Parsis, Parsi pour les Françaises je dois être d'une extrême prudence, lorsqu'on est le point de mire d'un peu tout le monde, le moindre fait [...] court, grandit, devient grand [...] [I, who am neither fish or fowl here, a Frenchwoman for the Parsis and a Parsi for the Frenchwomen, have to be extremely careful; when one is the object of almost everybody's gaze, the slightest fact, sprouts feet and runs

Continued on page 8...



## EMBEDDING AN INTERNATIONALIST VISION... contd. from pg. 7



Sooni - original circa. 1907, digitally enhanced 2009.

### 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:

The Chief Archivist  
Tata Central Archives  
1 Mangaldas Road,  
Pune 411 001

Ph: 91-20-6609 2019  
E-mail: [tca@tata.com](mailto:tca@tata.com)

along by itself, getting bigger as it goes]. Allied to this multilingual environment which she cannot completely penetrate is a fundamental factor which governs her future attitude to it: she is in a society which values learning and actively engages in it: 'C'est extraordinaire la facilité et la persévérance avec laquelle les Parsis apprennent les langues [the ease and determination with which Parsis learn languages are extraordinary]. Thus the new Mrs Tata resolves to follow the example given and be neither cautious nor passive. She begins to learn Gujarati: 'Ma petite mère. Hier matin donc j'ai pendant une demie heure étudié le Goujerati (c'est dur) [Mother dearest, yesterday I studied Gujarati for an hour and a half (it's difficult)]. There is a charming

1905 postcard to her husband with French words written in Gujarati script. He was in the spa town of Royat les Bains in Central France and Sooni Tata was visiting her friend Madeleine in Cabourg, Northern France. It is typical of her sense of humour to address a postcard in-between languages – using the script of one to make the sounds of another. It is indicative of her status in between languages and cultures that she chooses the secondary languages Gujarati and French to communicate with her husband, the Parsi whom she met in Paris.

The language-mix that Sooni Tata commands does not stay static, even during the concentrated period between 1902 and 1907 which is covered by her correspondence with her mother. After her arrival in Mumbai the English language makes an appearance in the letters which also record her interactions with English speakers an

acquaintance has enquired after Sooni Tata's mother and he 'demande si tu es à Bombay et prie Lady Jenkins de te présenter ses hommages, kind regards en English. Voilà! [asks whether you are in Bombay and asks Lady Jenkins to offer you his compliments, kind regards in English. There we are, done!]. Due to the fact that there are no references to English language reading materials or lessons in her correspondence (all the books she refers to are in French), it would appear that Mrs Tata made do with the competence in English that she possessed before she travelled to India for the first time in 1902. It is fortunate, however, that a short letter in English that she wrote to Meherbai Tata in 1903 (the wife of Dorabji Tata) survives; this allows a more objective assessment of the level of competence in the

language at the start of her marriage. The letter is quoted here exactly how it was written:

'I receive your kind letter with great pleasure. Ratanji is in Paris since six weeks and you must think how happy I feel. We have now an 'épouvantable' weather [sic] always raining and windy and cold. I hope I was in India! We are all well and expecting something new next week probably - Ratanji and Navajbai will return in India end of September and 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 leave with us. How are you getting on and Hirabai and Jamsetji? I hope she feels better now, it is so painful to see her suffer so much. 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.'

From this letter we can see that Mme Tata's command of English was passable, but far from fluent. There is a vocabulary breakdown in the use of 'épouvantable' instead of 'terrible', several spelling mistakes ('leave' for 'live', for instance) and the register used is basic with stock phrases forming the majority of those being used. The content of the letter shows, however, how well integrated she is within the core of the Tata family. Viewed in a longer perspective, it is interesting though, that although she had no interest in formally improving her English skills, she notes precisely this as an ancillary effect of her married life: in one of her later letters, dated, 8 June 1906, she notes that English words come to her before those of any other language.