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CHAPTER 1

The Ruse of Colonial Modernity

Anna Liberata de Souza

I was sure that Gandhiji's ghost was stirring the overturned steel cup under our fingers. It had arrived in the Ouija board that my older brother, a friend, and I, the youngest, had made. We knew it back then as "planchette," the newest occult rage among children living on the university campus in Ganeshkhind in Poona (Pune). Our collective age no more than thirty, we sat hushed and excited while Gandhiji, summoned by me, jerkily moved across the board answering our questions, choosing between yes, no, maybe, or enigmatic silence. The summer heat had raised our anxiety about forthcoming results on recent exams, and evidently only Gandhiji could tell us the truth, even if it was in Marathi, a language he had not known in his lifetime.

Every raspy movement of the cup, manipulated by our fingers, echoed in the stable whose mud floors were caked and cracked. The stables, several of them, were among the derelict outbuildings of the large estate attached to the bungalow we lived in. It had once been the palatial home of a British officer. Such lime-washed bungalows, complete with stables, servants' quarters, storehouses, and landscaped garden spaces, speckled the campus of the University of Poona (now called Savitribai Phule Pune University), which had once been the site of the bloody battle of Khadki in 1817 between the Marathas and the colonial British. These houses had been converted into faculty and administrative staff quarters, often too large for their modern, mod-

est occupants. Each bungalow had a tiny kitchen and a tinier storeroom that were dark and airless. These unventilated rooms were originally intended for the Indian cook and the ayah of the colonial British household; domestic manuals of the time warned a novice English wife in India, “The kitchen is a black hole, the pantry a sink.”¹

The Ghosts of Ganeshkhind

On this campus, in such a bungalow, my childhood unfolded in the 1970s. The abundant giant trees—pipal and banyan, neem and tamarind—and the abandoned outbuildings created an ideal setting for a rich supply of stories and encounters with ghosts and their doings. So we needed no persuasion to believe that swirling inside the overturned glass, predicting that we would all pass our exams, was Gandhiji’s spirit.

The colonial past lived here. The aged trees and structures all seemed to exhale 150 years of irreconcilable history. Half a kilometer away from my home was a low-lying rambling park with scattered old graves and stone benches, all under a canopy of trees, flanked by well-maintained tar roads. I had heard from a trustworthy source that here, a British memsahib dressed in white had fallen off her horse and died. Her white ghost roamed the grounds each night, looking for her saddle and hat. In later years I recalled this specter as symbolic of the empress perennially searching for her lost throne and crown. I have often wondered if ghost stories about colonial India were a masterly way for formerly colonized people to assert justice, poetic and otherwise.

Another few hundred feet away, beyond a small hill, was a majestic Italian-Gothic building with Romanesque arches and a central tower surrounded by lavish well-maintained lawns. I knew this structure as “Main Building,” home of the administrative offices of the University of Poona. In the evenings, after the offices closed for the day and watchmen became more lenient, the lawns were taken over by scampering children and cooing lovers. Long after the secret summonings of spirits in my childhood, I was to discover another presence in Main Building whose elusive truth would haunt me for decades. This presence was of an Indian ayah who had told vivid stories in the living quarters of Main Building when it was a stately residence one hundred years before I played on those lawns.

This haunting began in earnest in 1989, when Main Building suddenly reappeared before me in the American Midwest. In a less frequented aisle of a university library, I had just picked up a yellowing copy of a book, attracted by its maroon cover, which bore a thumb-sized image of a golden Ganesha



FIGURE 1. Main Building, University of Poona (Savitribai Phule Pune University). Photograph by Akshayini Leela-Prasad, February 2020.



FIGURE 2. Government House, Poona, circa 1875. Unknown photographer.

who was wearing a British crown. As I leafed through the first pages of *Old Deccan Days; or, Hindoo Fairy Legends, Current in Southern India*, published in 1868, I was startled to see a hand-drawn picture that looked like Main Building, captioned "Government House." At the bottom of the page, a line read, "Anna Liberata de Souza died at Government House, Gunish Khind, near Poona, after a short illness, on 14th August, 1887." Although the line itself referred to Government House in Poona, the picture depicted Government House in Parel, Bombay. Main Building, I soon learned, had at one time been called Government House, its construction commissioned in 1864 by Bartle Frere, the governor of Bombay from 1862 to 1867. British governors of the Bombay Presidency made Government House in Poona their monsoon residence from 1866, spending the rest of the year in Government House in Parel, Bombay (Mumbai).²

Anna Liberata de Souza: The First Sighting

Government House in Ganeshkhind is also where Anna Liberata de Souza, the subject of this chapter, lived and worked for eighteen months from 1865 to 1867 as an ayah to Mary Eliza Isabella Frere, Bartle Frere's daughter. In the winter of 1865, when Mary accompanied her father, the governor, on an official journey through the Deccan, she recorded the stories of *Old Deccan Days* from Anna.

As I stood in the library, captivated by the book, I quickly turned the pages and saw a pencil sketch of Anna. On the next page was Anna's autobiographical narrative, titled "The Narrator's Narrative." A first reading tells us this story: Two generations before her, Anna's family had been Lingayats, members of a Hindu sect that worships the deity Shiva. Her grandfather had moved from Calicut to Goa, at that time a Portuguese territory, where he had converted to Christianity, and consequently become ostracized by his family. Like many Goan Christians, Anna's grandfather and father had served in the British army; her grandfather had been a *havildar* (sergeant) and her father a tent lascar,³ and both had won medals in the battle of Khadki in 1817. At some point the family had settled in Poona. After a childhood that lacked nothing, Anna's destiny changed when she was married at twelve and widowed at twenty. With two children to raise, she became an ayah to British families. Already fluent in Marathi, Malayalam, Portuguese, and Konkani, Anna quickly learned to speak, read, and write in English. A year before Anna narrated the stories, her only son drowned in a river accident in Poona. Anna's narration ends on a philosophical note about the turns in her life.

As I browsed through the stories in the book, I remember being struck by the (curiously transliterated) phrase “mera baap re” (my dear father) and the name “Guzra Bai” (garland lady). I imagined how Anna might have told the stories at least partly in Marathi, the language of my childhood; the book inspired my MA thesis. The storied landscapes of nineteenth-century India continued to fascinate me.⁴ Ten years after I had first seen the book, the spell of *Old Deccan Days* returned. It took me to the British Library in London, where in the Oriental and India Office Collection (OIOC) I found the handwritten manuscript of *Old Deccan Days* and some correspondence between Mary Frere, various other individuals, and John Murray, the publisher.⁵ At the John Murray Archive (then held in London but now at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh), I found a trove of decades-long correspondence between the Frere family and Murray. Thus began my efforts to unfold the map of the making of *Old Deccan Days*.

Old Deccan Days: The Shaping of the Book and Its Voices

In early March 1867, after thirty-three years in India, Bartle Frere returned to England for good with his wife and their two older daughters, Mary and Catherine. He had become quite a favorite of Britain’s royalty and Parliament. Mary brought with her a nearly completed manuscript built on Anna Liberata de Souza’s stories. And Anna’s oral stories, which she had heard from her mother and her grandmother, traveled across the Arabian Sea, curved around the Cape of Good Hope, sailed up the Atlantic, and came to be fitted to a new life as a book commercially published on London’s Albemarle Street.

About seven months after they had arrived in London, Bartle Frere seems to have written to the publisher John Murray with a query about publishing his daughter’s manuscript. In a letter dated October 15, 1867, Murray accepted, adding a word of caution about tempering expectations, as the market was flooded with books for children. Three days later Bartle Frere indicated that his daughter would accept, with pleasure, Murray’s “very handsome offer to publish the Indian fairy tales at [Murray’s] cost and risque [*sic*], on condition of giving her half [the] profits in the event of its succeeding.”⁶ The letter puts on display right away the entrepreneurial spirit and creative talent of the Freres: “As regards illustrations, I think my daughter would prefer its coming out at first without profusion of them—which might make it more a picture than a story book. But if it ever reached a 2nd edition, she and her sister Katie would be able to furnish many illustrations of scenery and figures such as you describe.” And so a partnership of

the prominent was sealed. Frere's political stock was high, and he carried a reputation as a formidable statesman of the British colonial government. The John Murray publishing house had been in the business for a century. It had published authors of the stature of Charles Darwin, Jane Austen, Henry James Coleridge, David Livingstone, and Lord Byron and produced the trademark John Murray handbooks and travel guides, much used by travelers to Britain's colonies.

This collection of Anna's stories debuted in 1868 in London. Subsequent editions came out in 1870, 1881, and 1889, and the fourth edition was reprinted in 1898.⁷ The third edition (1881) settled on a structure that gave the book its permanent identity. This edition begins with a "Preface" that Mary Frere wrote when she was thirty-six years old. She recounts the circumstances in which Anna narrated the stories and describes the manner in which she had recorded them. The next is Bartle Frere's "Introduction," where he tries to elaborate authoritatively on Hindu beliefs and practices supposedly underlying Anna's stories for an English audience. The elaboration relies on his personal experiences in the Maratha country and his knowledge of European ethnology. Then comes "The Collector's Apology" by Mary Frere, containing her guarded defense of the stories against perceptions of Indian character. In addition, she provides a brief statement on transcription and orthography.

But the tour de force is "The Narrator's Narrative." It is Anna de Souza's life story, which Mary assures the reader "is related as much as possible in [Anna's] own words of expressive but broken English."⁸ Mary compiled and edited this story from conversations with Anna over the eighteen months that Anna worked for the Freres. Anna's twenty-four stories follow immediately after. The literary English of the stories, ironically, has nothing in common with the curated "broken English" of "The Narrator's Narrative" that has just preceded them. The irony may be explained by the manner in which the stories were transcribed: as Mary heard each story, she took notes, then she wrote up the story and read it back to Anna to check that she had "correctly given every detail."⁹ So we may with some certainty, then, say that the diction of the twenty-four stories is Mary's/European and the characters and the plots are mostly Anna's. "The Narrator's Narrative" presumably provides just that touch of colloquial flavor, while the stories, with Anna's presence dissolved, satiate the narrative tastes of Victorian audiences.¹⁰ In all this, it is critical we remember that Anna's "broken English" is in fact an accomplished act of translation. If Anna has narrated these stories in English, it means that she has translated a cultural world into an alien language system and renegotiated her cultural fluency for Mary's benefit.

The book concludes with “Notes” and a “Glossary” (from the second edition onward). In two longish notes in the section under “Notes on the Narrator’s Narrative,” Bartle Frere raves about the heroism of British troops in the battle of Khadki (“Kirkee”) and defends the economic policy of his government, respectively. Mary’s single note provides a translated text of two of Anna’s songs. Finally, the “Notes on the Fairy Legends” are glosses—sanctimonious micro-sociologies—by Bartle Frere on six of the stories and by Mary Frere on one story. Twenty Indian words form the glossary that closes the book. Five full-page hand-drawn illustrations, one of which is a portrait of Anna Liberata de Souza, are interspersed. This was the polished book I had chanced upon in the library.¹¹

Reinterpreting Anna through Sense Reading

Earlier writing on *Old Deccan Days*, mine included, came to the conclusion that it was a pioneering effort in ethnography: it presented a play of multiple voices in a fascinating heteroglossia; Mary Frere displayed a rare empathy for the depictions in the stories; and above all, the collection contextualized Anna the narrator with an autobiographical narration.¹² There were also some ironies in the book. Fellow anthropologist Kirin Narayan and I both noted that while Anna had “space” in the collection, it was not clear that the financial success of *Old Deccan Days* had improved her life. While she had a “voice” in the collection, it was severely mediated by both Freres, father and daughter. Despite these ironies, I admired the collection for its rarity as a new genre, and lamented that its methodology had not been emulated by even one of the dozens of collections of oral narrative that succeeded it in colonial India.

But the story I tell in this chapter takes a different turn. In 2016 I stumbled across a passage in a nineteenth-century memoir that changed my perception of both Mary Frere and *Old Deccan Days*. The memoir by Marianne North, a British woman traveler and botanical painter, described her experiences in India and Sri Lanka. North tells us that in 1878, ten years after *Old Deccan Days* was published, she ran into Anna in one of the bungalows of Government House, Bombay. Anna was then working for the family of Richard Temple, the governor of Bombay. Here is how she describes Anna:

The old ayah Miss Bartle Frere has made famous as the story-teller in her *Tales of Old Deccan Days* [sic] sat on the doorstep. People there said, the old lady was quite guiltless of any of the stories imputed to her; that the only thing she was famed for was idleness and a habit of

getting drunk on Sundays, when she said: "I Christian woman; I go to church." But Sir Richard Temple promised the Freres to keep her, and he did. I liked the old lady, as she never worried me by putting things tidy, but sat picturesquely on the door-step and told me of the wonderful things she had seen. She tried to persuade me to take her on my next travels with me: a female John! bottle and all!¹³

At this time, *Old Deccan Days* was in its second edition and continued to be a runaway success in England, but its financial success had clearly not reached Anna. North's denigrating remarks about Anna jolted me. Had I, in my earlier engagement with *Old Deccan Days*, been overly impressed by the apparent authorial generosity of the book? The autobiographical "Narrator's Narrative" had seemed singularly refreshing against the dehumanizing representations of Indians rife in colonial documentation. Had I unwittingly seen Anna Liberata de Souza through the eyes of a reading practice that is unaccustomed to admitting people like her as anything other than subaltern? Even if such a reading practice were to recognize Anna as a *speaking* subaltern subject, it would still allow us to see her only as an especially articulate servant whose life story provides nothing more than a rich social context for the audiences who read the stories she told.

Two questions surfaced. First, did Anna mean anything more to Mary than an old storytelling ayah, a source of unmined Indian lore? It is unquestionable that Mary was enthralled by Anna's stories—even writing to her from England for clarifications on names and seeking details on the Calicut song—and felt that the stories pushed back against prevailing negative images of India in England.¹⁴ She writes:

It is remarkable that in the romances of a country where women are generally supposed by us to be regarded as mere slaves or intriguers, their influence (albeit most frequently put to proof behind the scenes) should be made to appear so great, and, as a rule, exerted wholly for good; and that in a land where despotism has held such a firm hold on the hearts of the people, the liberties of the subject should be so boldly asserted as by the Milkwoman to the Rajah in little Surya Bai . . . or to meet with such stories as the Valiant Chattee-Maker, and "The Blind Man, the Deaf Man, and the Donkey," among a nation which it has been constantly asserted, possesses no humour, no sense of the ridiculous, and cannot understand a joke.¹⁵

At the same time that Mary admired the stories, there is a tint of condescension in her tone. Mary says that she (or Bartle Frere) has provided expla-

nations for things in the stories that could be rationally explained, but for things that are beyond rational explanation, Anna is “the sole authority.” But when Anna translates “Seventee Bai” as “Daisy Lady” (to help Mary understand *shevanti*, chrysanthemum, in the language Mary knows best), Mary comments that no botanist “would acknowledge the plant under that name,” and when Anna describes a place called “Agra Brum” as the “City of Akbar,” Mary opines, “No such province appears in any ordinary Gazetteer.”¹⁶ (Anna must have meant Agra Bhum, the land [*bhumi*] of Agra, where Akbar’s tomb lies.) But neither in the archives nor in the book do we see signs of a sustained relationship that could rescue an instrumentality of purpose. Nor do we find Mary expressing toward Anna the coeval ethics that makes fellow beings *fellow* beings.

The second question was provoked by Anna’s disquiet. Mary, anxious that stories such as Anna’s would be lost if they were not written down, appeals, “Will no one go to the diggings?”¹⁷ But Anna has a different view on the problem of the disappearance of stories and storytelling. To her, writing down oral stories is hardly the solution, for it destroys the integrity of the stories and ruins the aesthetic experience altogether:

It is true there are books with some stories something like these, but they always put them down wrong. Sometimes, when I cannot remember a bit of a story, I ask some one about it; then they say, “There is a story of that name in my book. I don’t know it, but I’ll read.” Then they read it to me, but it is all wrong, so that I get quite cross, and make them shut up the book.¹⁸

Anna’s discomfort is not limited to the “wrongness” of textualization, even as she finds herself entangled in it. It is the project of colonial modernity itself—its economics, its education, and its promise of progress—that causes Anna greater disquiet.

I retraced my steps in the archive, confronting the well-known limitations of colonial records: photographs, travelogues, fiction, minutes, reports, and surveys materialize Anglo-Indian person and policy in diverse ways, while the experiences of Indians are subject to recovery and recoverability, a process frequently needing the midwifery of special disciplines. The manuscript of *Old Deccan Days* presents its own complications as a colonial record. It is very close to the published version of the book, though it does not contain Bartle Frere’s introduction (which, one of Mary’s letters to John Murray tells us, was “delayed” and would reach him separately). While the stories in the manuscript are lightly edited—recall that Anna’s voice recedes in them—“The Narrator’s Narrative” is heavily edited. It explicitly displays Mary’s stitching together of discontinuous snippets that were gathered across eigh-

teen months into a linear narrative. Numerous numbered hash marks designate blocks of text that are assembled into the chronologically ordered narrative of Anna's life that appears in the book. Perhaps all chronologies intrinsically, inescapably have a fictive quality to them. Yet when the past is remembered disjointedly over time in the form of musings or as responses to contexts and questions, the sense of the person that emerges is different from the sense that comes from the tighter logic of a chronologically ordered story. Mary's seamless composition renders Anna as someone who once had a happy childhood of "plenty" but had become a hapless ayah, dependent on the goodwill of English Christians.

I began to revisit the same colonial record—the same archives, the same book—with a different instinct, more attuned to an ethics of recognition and acknowledgment. Rereading the elided material in Mary's handwritten manuscript helped me punctuate the record differently. With the chronology now disrupted with new pauses, the narrative acquired alternative meanings and affect that come from intuition, what the French phenomenologist Henri Bergson calls the "receding and vanishing image which haunts [the mind] unperceived . . . in order to furnish 'explanation.'"¹⁹ Against the Kantian insistence that the intellect is the fountain of *all* knowing, Bergson says that while "intellection" gives us insight into physical operations, intuition takes us to the "inwardness of life." This intuition is that "instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely."²⁰ The intuition is sympathetic in that it helps me see, for instance, the many shades of orange between red and yellow and thereby *sense* the spectrum of possibilities of color. The result of interpreting through intuition is a *sense reading*, a term I adapt from Michael Polanyi. In the theory of meaning that Polanyi calls tacit knowledge, "inarticulate meaning of experience [Bergson's intuition]" is the "foundation of all explicit meaning." Tacit knowing proceeds on sense giving and sense reading. Sense giving is the search for the words that will express the meaning I want to convey. Sense reading (akin to figuring out what that strange shape in the garden at night could be) is the striving to understand a text from "an inkling of a meaning" in it.²¹

My sense reading reveals an Anna who is robustly independent and audacious. She shows that life, with all its comeuppances and happenstances, could still be lived fully and happily, without either the largesse of colonialism or its opportunities for labor. Colonial modernity turns out to be a ruse. Christianity too, Anna shows, could still be salvific for her, but without its exerting a dominant control over the everyday arts of religious imagination. A sense reading reveals an Anna to whom dignity and belong-

ing mattered more than increased colonial wages. This Anna is ultimately sovereign because her speaking ability is indestructible and empowers her to critique and defy, and to create and dream. Even when Marianne North ran into her a decade after the book had found lucrative shores, the much older Anna was just as keen as before to narrate her stories and travel to new places.

Anna Liberata de Souza: Identifications

Old Deccan Days cast Anna in the mold of the “old ayah,” disregarding the way she saw herself. The image of an old ayah figures prominently in Anglo-India’s nomenclature for Indian domestics. The belabored logic of this nomenclature is anonymity, typification, and repetition.²² Memoirs and letters, novels and manuals in the hundreds talk about “the ayah” or “old ayah” (a ladies’ maid or children’s nanny) without mentioning her name and speaking of her as belonging to a class of individuals with a fickle moral makeup. Nonetheless, an ayah’s boundless capacity for care and love was seen as indispensable—indeed, restorative—for English children growing up in India. For instance, the imperial writer Rudyard Kipling, whose imagination is celebrated for its exquisite detail and nuance, felt destitute in England without his ayah, who had been his first muse. “In the afternoon heats,” Kipling recalls, “before we took our sleep, [the ayah] or Meeta [meaning “bearer”] would tell us stories and Indian nursery songs *all unforgotten*.” And yet, Kipling fails to tell us her name even after he had the opportunity to meet her again in his late twenties. He does not seem to know. She was just Ayah.²³

Actually, by 1818, when Mrs. Sherwood published her narrative on Indian servants *The Ayah and Lady: An Indian Story*, the ayah had already become a paradoxical necessity in the Anglo-Indian household, the so-called domestic empire. She was much needed but strategically distrusted. After the Indian Uprising of 1857–58, the domestic empire became more authoritarian in keeping with the aggressive tenor of British rule in India. By the time Anna worked for the Frere family, ayah protocols were well in place.²⁴ Soon, adding to journalistic, anecdotal, and fictional accounts,²⁵ prescriptive manuals on the Anglo-Indian domestic economy systematized duties and wages for an ayah, all based on the understanding that she was a lesser human. Mem-Sahibs like Catherine or Mary Frere headed the domestic empire in mansions such as government houses and officers’ bungalows. British homes in India, and in other colonies, ran on the energy and resourcefulness of

sizable contingents of overworked and ill-treated natives who were often compared to wild animals and wily semi-humans by their British employers. Frequently, like the nameless “Ayah,” they were simply referred to as Meeta/bearer, Bheeshti/water carrier, Chaprasi/sweeper, Mali/gardener, Dhobi/washerman, or Chokra/errand boy. The definitive ayah *shastra*, or manual, was *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888) by Flora Anna Steel and Grace Gardiner, which codified the ayah’s role, programming her diurnal existence. A sampling:

Her mistress’s room done, the ayah will see that the bathroom is set in order, squeeze out the sponge, dry and fold the towels, etc. . . . When the order is given for luncheon, she will take hot water to her mistress’s room, and at the same time ask what dress she proposes wearing in the afternoon and evening. At dusk she will go to the bearer for candle and lamp, draw the curtains, if necessary light the fire, and be ready on her mistress’s return.²⁶

In line with this colonial outlook on Indian domestic servants, reviews of *Old Deccan Days* were ambivalent about Anna while they widely praised Frere’s accomplishment. One review, perhaps stinging from Anna’s criticism of the rising prices of everything under British rule, including guavas, calls her “this uneducated Anna Liberata de Souza, living and developing her brain on guavas.”²⁷ For other reviewers, Anna is simply “the old woman” with a “very singular and amusing piece of autobiography.”²⁸ A reviewer who appreciates Anna says, “If this woman *still lives*, it may convey to her a true pleasure, *in the evening of a life* which has had sore troubles, to know that she has made thousands of English children happy, and that here, if not in her own land, her name will be remembered with feelings of lively gratitude.”²⁹

Amidst these crowds of evening silhouettes of the ayah figure, how did Mary depict Anna, the ayah whose life story she had sought out? After all, unlike Kipling and many others, Mary does not refer to Anna simply as “Ayah.” She names her. But in my understanding of how names embody persons, Mary’s naming remains sophisticatedly disembodied. In 1879, in a letter, Elizabeth Price, wife of the missionary Roger Price, excitedly shares with her children that she had met Mary Frere, “the writer of ‘Decan Days,’” at Governor’s House in Newlands, a suburb of Cape Town in South Africa. Price says, “She told me about her old ayah—how she would squat upon the ground, and recount all these stories from memory while she wrote them down.”³⁰ We do not know if Anna was named in this con-

versation, but the manuscript of *Old Deccan Days* is suggestive of what Mary actually thought. Among the sheets is a note written in 1872 that she marks “Paragraphs to be inserted in the Collector’s Apology after the words ‘City of Akbar.’” These paragraphs per se did not make it into any edition of the book. Instead, an intriguing modification appears in the preface to the third edition of 1881. Mary’s 1872 note describes the manner in which Anna narrated the stories:

If she was interrupted whilst telling a story by another person coming into the room or by a question being asked, the thread of memory would be broken, and she would be unable to go on unless all that she had just been saying was repeated to her or she herself repeated it without interruption from the commencement. It was as if by a strong effort of memory the mind was forced back into the past and if the present intervened the spell was instantaneously broken destroyed. Anna generally sat on the floor whilst talking, often with an entranced, far-away look on her face, as if she were actually seeing at that moment, all that she was describing. . . . As her grandmother died when Anna was 11 years old, it is perhaps the [*sic*] rather surprising that she remembered as much as she did of what she had heard from her than that she remembered no more.

In the 1881 edition, Mary reworks and publishes the paragraph for the first time:

While narrating [the stories], she usually sat cross-legged on the floor, looking into space, and repeating what she said as by an effort of memory. If anyone came into the room while she was speaking, or she was otherwise interrupted during the narration, it was apparently impossible for her to gather up the thread of the narration where it had been dropped. And she had to begin afresh at the beginning of her story as at the commencement of some long-lost melody. She had not, I believe, heard any of the stories after she was eleven years old, when her grandmother had died.³¹

The earlier description, more poetic, more empathetic, has diminished into the commonplace Anglo-Indian perception of ayahs. Gone is the sense that Anna’s “far-away look” means that she was entranced and “seeing” the stories come alive, and gone is the expression of admiration that Anna could remember so much. Instead, in the reworked description—the one that became public—Anna stares vacantly: her memory of the stories is feeble.

Anna, however, imagines herself very differently. In the “Narrator’s Narrative,” she tells us that listening to her sing, her father and brothers used to say, “That girl can do anything!” I hear the echo of that line in another confident remark of Anna’s. Looking back at how she had been trapped in the life of an ayah, she says, “If I’d I been a man I might now be a Fouzdar.”³² A *faujdar* was either a commander in the Mughal army or a chief of police in British India. Anna’s paternal grandmother suffuses her narrative: her grandmother is physically strong, has a capacious memory, is an inventive caretaker of her grandchildren, telling them countless colorful stories. I could relate. I was deeply attached to my maternal grandmother, whose quiet assertiveness and practical wisdom I grew up admiring. And I was told often that I was the living image of my paternal grandmother, who had died in my father’s childhood, and whose death anniversary coincides with my birthday. Similarly, Anna recollects: “It was after my granny that I was named Anna Liberata. . . . [She was a] a very tall, fine, handsome woman and very strong. . . . Her eyes were quite bright, her hair black, and her teeth good to the last.” Married to a *havidar* in the British army, she went with the regiment wherever it marched, going “on, on, on, on, on.”³³

There is the strong suggestion that Anna believes she resembles her grandmother—the same name, the same dark hair, the same love for storytelling, and the same resilience in the face of hardship. Anna proudly states, “a great deal hard work that old woman done.”³⁴ Anna’s mother (who knows fewer stories than the grandmother) does hard labor outside the home to earn money for the family. She is no less feisty than Anna’s grandmother and minces no words in standing up for herself. When quizzed by her husband why she had spanked little Anna (who had taunted Gypsies), she retorts: “If you want to know, ask your daughter why I punished her. You will then be able to judge whether I was right or not.”³⁵ It is this abundance of memories of the hardworking, independent, and principled women in her family, and not the Anglo-Indian construction of “poor old ayahs,” that shapes Anna’s self-perception.

Anna’s memory of time is lucid. She tells Mary that her grandmother lived till she was 109 years old (although Mary inexplicably strikes out the 109, changing it to “about a hundred” in the manuscript) and her mother till she was ninety. Anna was seven when she got a pet dog, eleven when her grandmother died, twelve when she got married, and twenty when she was widowed. And yet it is a matter of great surprise when she does refer to her own age: Did Mary never ask, or was that detail elided? The manuscript,

with its insertions and juxtapositions made in the interests of narrative flow or “relevance,” disregards Anna’s precise understanding of temporality in relation to her own life; it obfuscates the chronology of Anna’s life so that it is impossible to be certain about Anna’s age.

And yet—Lear had fumed, ‘Age is unnecessary’—to settle for Anna simply as an old ayah would be to disavow her personhood. So let us discern Anna’s age through her statements: “My husband was a servant at Government House—that was when Lord Clare was Governor here. When I was twenty years old, my husband died of a bad fever.”³⁶ At face value, this would imply that Anna’s husband died when he was a servant in Clare’s house. Lord Clare was governor from 1831 to 1835. If Anna had been twenty sometime during these years, she would have been born between 1811 and 1815.³⁷ This calculation, however, is inaccurate.

The handwritten manuscript shows that the sentence “My husband was a servant at Government House—that was when Lord Clare was Governor here” has been *inserted* before “When I was twenty years old, my husband died of a bad fever.” This conflation leads us to assume a synchronicity that in fact does not exist. If we move this insertion to the only other place where Anna mentions her husband, we get the following composite: “Then I was married. I was twelve years old then. My husband was a servant at Government House—that was when Lord Clare was Governor here.” This rearrangement makes Anna *twelve* (and not twenty) during Clare’s governorship. From this, we get a first range of dates for when Anna could have been born: 1819 to 1823. We get an additional clue from another detail she provides Mary. When Anna lost her husband at twenty, her brother-in-law (who was a personal valet to General Charles Napier in Sind) invited her to Sind (now Sindh). Since Napier was in Sind from 1843 to 1847, Anna would have been twenty years old sometime in this period. This now gives us a second range of dates for her birth: 1823 to 1827. The overlap of these two ranges (1819–1823 and 1823–1827) allow us to pinpoint her year of birth as 1823. She would have been forty-two when she started to work in the Frere household in 1865.

Anna’s portrait in the book drawn by Mary’s sister Catherine shows her with youthful features and jet-black hair (of which Anna is rather proud). In a letter to John Murray while the first edition was being readied, Mary mentions a photograph they have of Anna but says that the hand-drawn “likeness of ‘Annie’ (the narrator) is *much* more like her than the photograph.”³⁸ The youthful “likeness” further persuades me that Anna was in her forties at the time of the portrait. In 1878, when Marianne North was belittling her as



FIGURE 3. Anna Liberata de Souza. Reproduced from Mary Frere, *Old Deccan Days* (London: John Murray, 1868), xii.

“the old lady,” fifty-five-year-old Anna was still expressing her love for travel and stories, just as she had declared once to Mary Frere. Calcutta, Madras, England, and Jerusalem were still on her dream itinerary. She told North about “the wonderful things she had seen. She tried to persuade [North] to take her on [North’s] next travels.”³⁹ If she saw herself as I sense her, then when she died in 1887, she died young.

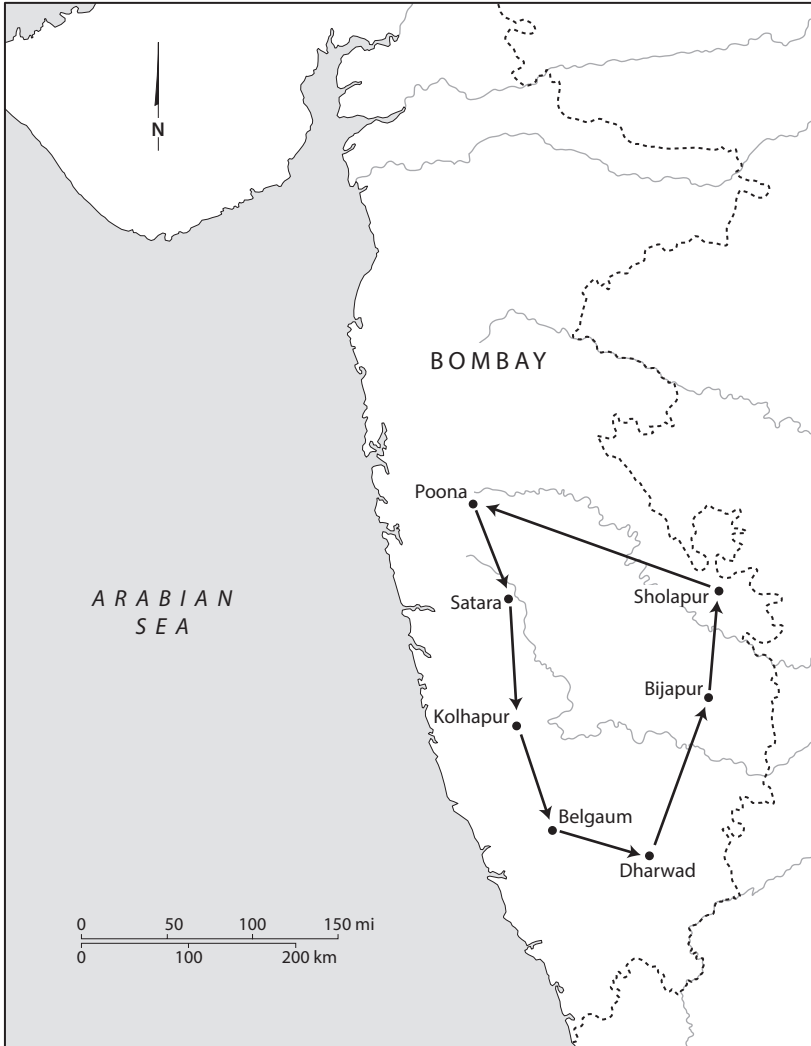
The Deccan Sojourn

"I have often been asked under what circumstances these stories were collected?"⁴⁰ writes thirty-six-year-old Mary in the two-page preface to the third edition of 1881. As she describes the official tour during which the collection of Anna's stories was inaugurated, we come face-to-face with a strange absence. Anna is present through the description of her mannerisms of narration, but as fellow sojourner she is absent. To get a sense of Anna's experiences of the intense journey, we must turn to the very account that has created the absence.

It had been a little over a year since eighteen-year-old Mary, the oldest of the five Frere children, had arrived in India with her mother, Catherine, to join Bartle Frere. Shortly afterwards, Catherine returned to England to be with the younger children, leaving Mary in charge of the domestic management of Government House in Bombay—or, during the monsoon, in Poona. This was a task she executed "with a tact and power singular in so young a girl," her sister Georgina proudly recounts, "owing to a very human interest in her fellow creatures, which took no narrow view of life and of its possibilities under all sorts of conditions, and she enjoyed the opportunities of meeting Native ladies in their Zenanas and Missionary workers at their Stations, as much as 'Society' in its more usually accepted sense."⁴¹

The journey through the Deccan turned out to be stunningly instructive for Mary, far exceeding her private education at Wimbledon. The governor and his daughter, and a few British officers, were supported by a retinue of six hundred retainers—cooks, camel divers, elephant mahouts, horse grooms, tent pitchers, and so on—and a multitude of assorted animals.⁴² From Poona, they went south in the direction of Satara and then to Kolhapur, continuing on to Belgaum and Dharwad. At Bijapur they turned north. From here, Bartle Frere hoped to make it to Sholapur "in three marches."⁴³ From Sholapur, they took the Grand Indian Peninsula Railway and returned home to Government House in Poona.

"I chanced to be the only lady of the party," Mary writes. "Anna Liberata de Souza, my native ayah, went with me. . . . As there was no other lady in the Camp, and I sometimes had no lady visitors for some days together, I was necessarily much alone."⁴⁴ (Georgina shares that Mary was also afflicted with ophthalmia during the three-month sojourn.)⁴⁵ One day, "tired of reading, writing and sketching," Mary asked Anna, her "constant attendant," to tell her a story. "This [Anna] declared to be impossible," but Mary persisted. "You have children and grandchildren, surely you tell them stories to amuse them sometimes?"⁴⁶ And Anna told her the first of the twenty-four stories



MAP 2. Anna and Mary's Deccan sojourn, 1865

Source: Map by Bill Nelson. Based on information from J. G. Bartholomew, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India: Bombay Presidency*, Volume 1. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909).

that bustle with human heroes and supernatural beings entangled in tricky predicaments. Mary's preface recounts the thrills of the expedition: In Kolhapur, she met the Rani in the palace. In Satara, she saw Shivaji's famous sword ("Bowanee," she calls it) which the goddess Bhavani had given him; in Karad ("Kurar"), the Buddhist caves; in Belgaum, the ruins of Jain temples; and in Dharwad, the nawab's cheetahs hunting antelope on the plains.

Bijapur (“Beejapore”) seems to have almost overwhelmed her. Here she saw the Pearl Mosque and the “Soap-stone” Mosque; the “vast dome” of the “grand Mosque,” which was “thirteen feet larger in diameter” than the dome of Saint Paul’s in London; the eleven-ton sixteenth-century gun so big “a grown-up person can sit upright”; the shrine with its three hairs of the Prophet Muhammad’s beard; and the massive library whose contents her father had “rescued” and relocated to the India Office Library in London.⁴⁷ We see her taking it all in breathlessly, caught between, on the one hand, rehearsing the arch-trope of orientalism that reproduces “the East” as a site of seductive paradoxes—barbarism and civilization, for example—and on the other, quite naturally experiencing wonder at the staggering diversity and richness of story and landscape. Anna’s stories would have fit into this larger experience of foreignness and wonder.

There is little doubt that at the same time Mary was continuing to be imperceptibly groomed in the everyday praxis of empire in which Anna could be only an attendant, a necessary utility, but not a companion—despite the predicament of their being the only two women in a camp of six hundred men. Empire, as Partha Chatterjee reminds us, “was not just about power politics, the logic of capital, or the civilizing mission, but instead was something that had to be practiced, as a normal everyday business as well as at moments of extraordinary crisis, by real people in real time.”⁴⁸ Tellingly, in the manuscript of *Old Deccan Days*, Mary revises the sentence “Anna Liberata De Souza, my native ayah, *accompanied me*” to “Anna Liberata De Souza, my native ayah, *went with me*.”⁴⁹ Vast privileges and protocols were available to the governor’s daughter—“the only lady,” as she has learned to see herself—in an imperial government in post-1857 India. The Indian Uprising had been ruthlessly contained eight years before this journey (with her father playing a significant role in its suppression), and the avaricious British Crown had replaced the mercenary East India Company, whose sun had set in the east.

While Mary’s journalistic reminiscence is graphic and attentive to minutiae, it betrays the habitual obliviousness Anglo-Indian writings show toward domestic servants. An anonymous article in *Temple Bar*, a leading literary magazine, confides, “We take little notice often of our servants in India, discussing things before them as we should not do before English servants; forgetting sometimes that they are not dummies, but living men and women, and perhaps taking an intelligent interest in all that is being talked about.”⁵⁰ Mary shows no curiosity about Anna’s experiences during the journey (which would not have afforded to Anna any of the comforts available to her) and certainly keeps no record of them. But if we draw on Anna’s narrative to punctuate the “Preface” and imagine some of *her* experiences during

the journey, we understand the “circumstances under which these stories were collected” in a markedly different sense. Anna becomes present, and not merely as the attendant who relieved the tedium of the journey for a young English lady.

For instance, Mary tells us that when they reached the Krishna and Bhima Rivers, the sahibs and the memsahib crossed safely in wicker-basket boats, while the native men and animals either swam across or used open rafts. How did Anna, the only other woman in the retinue, ford river waters? Did the sight of the river remind her of her handsome son who had drowned in the Mula River near Poona just “last year”? Sometime during the making of “The Narrator’s Narrative” she tells Mary, “That was my great sad.”⁵¹

As they passed through Bijapur and Dharwad—places that are historically important to the Lingayat community to which Anna’s family once belonged (a point that Mary herself notes)—did the sites somehow resonate for Anna? Kolhapur, where Mary recorded Anna’s first story and later sent it on to her younger sister in England, would surely have viscerally reminded Anna of the terror of the 1857 uprising, when she and her previous British employer had escaped in the middle of the night. She had fled with her two small children. Mary does not reproduce Anna’s story about the Kolhapur escape in “The Narrator’s Narrative.” The allusion appears through Anna’s remark, “but I’ve told you before about all that.”⁵²

This image of a widowed young mother, running with her children, scared for their lives, is the image that stays with me as I read “Punchkin,” the first story that Anna narrates (which Mary initially titles “An Indian Story”). It is about a smart princess named Balna, who through a series of misfortunes is abducted from her room in the palace by an evil magician called Punchkin, who has turned her husband and his six brothers to stone. Punchkin separates Balna from her beloved baby son and imprisons her for twelve years in a tower because she refuses to marry him. When the son turns fourteen and learns of his history, he sets out in search of his parents and uncles. Donning a disguise with the help of a gardener’s wife, he finds his mother in the tower and comes up with an elaborate rescue plan. “Do not fear, dear mother,” he assures her.⁵³ Eventually he rescues her and the rest of his petrified family by turning the magician’s magic against him and killing him. It is a story of a mother who is at last reunited with her son. I am transported to “The Narrator’s Narrative,” where Anna describes her son to Mary: “He was such a beauty boy—tall, straight, handsome—and so clever . . . and he said to me, ‘Mammy, you’ve worked for us all your life. Now I’m grown up. I’ll get a clerk’s place and work for you. You shall work no more but live in my house.’”⁵⁴

Mary tells her publisher John Murray that this story was the hardest to transcribe and write up because of the “many repetitions” it contained.⁵⁵ Was it hard for Anna to narrate too? Or was it one she immediately recalled for its echoes in her own life? I wonder, also, about Anna’s halting style, mentioned earlier. Narration was an “effort of memory,” Mary concludes, but she also says in the unpublished paragraph in the handwritten manuscript that Anna seemed as if “entranced.” Does Anna’s manner of narration connect to her own views on how we remember and how we forget? “I’m afraid,” she tells Mary, “my sister would not be able to remember any of [the stories]. She has had much trouble; that puts those sort of things out of people’s heads.” After her son’s death, she tells us, “I can’t remember things as I used to do, all is muddled in my head, six and seven.”⁵⁶ Anna, wearied by the memory of self-altering loss but also enlivened by the magic of the stories she is telling, reminds us that narration is in essence a fuzzy art, mingling real-life experiences with conjured enchantments. Anna is deeply present during the Deccan journey, which in the final account would need to acknowledge that it was a journey that was experienced by two women, although in vastly different ways.

A Frere Family Venture: Anna Disappears

Back in palatial Government House in Poona (and, after the monsoon, in their Bombay home), Mary rewrote Anna’s stories, seeking clarifications, she informs readers, from Anna. Anna continued to tell her stories—we may assume—in one of the inner familial spaces, which she was allowed to enter as an ayah, the only servant who had access to all rooms.

And then in England, in the Frere home at Wressil Lodge, Wimbledon, Surrey, the publishing of *Old Deccan Days* quickly became a robust family venture for the Freres. The archivist of the Murray archive in London told me, “In fact it seems the whole Frere family was writing to Murray and they appeared to be great friends.”⁵⁷ As I went through thirty years of this correspondence, which spanned four editions of the book, a universe of negotiations and discussions about topics from pictures to profits emerged. Among all these letters, there are precisely two references to Anna. The first asks whether it would be better to use a photograph of Anna or a sketch of her made by Katie, Mary’s sister. The second reference notes in passing Anna’s death in Ganeshkhind. In a larger discussion about what additional information should go into the fourth edition, Mary Frere writes to Murray, “I could add a word or two if wished about my dear old ayah’s death—but that would not be necessary but could come into a later edition.”⁵⁸ That is it.

The first edition was carefully curated to present the right look and feel, in line with the family's understanding of Anna's stories—and, indeed, of India. As the book moved through editions, and especially after Bartle Frere's death in 1884, Mary's tone becomes more directive about everything from the timing of a new edition to marketing strategies. In an annotation on one of her letters, John Murray writes a brusque note: "Impossible. Wd [Would] be a regular take in. Book must be very materially changed to justify being called a NE [new edition]."⁵⁹

Mary was perhaps not easy to work with. In the Littleton papers at the University of Witwatersrand, I found a curious letter from W. F. Littleton, who was private secretary to Bartle Frere in South Africa. Littleton, writing from Cape Town to his mother in England in 1879, complained that Lady Frere and Miss Frere "are fussy, meddlesome, inconsiderate to a degree; inconsequent and stupid."⁶⁰

The illustrations to the book were done by Katie, who had arrived in India soon after Mary and Anna's Deccan journey. Katie had perhaps joined Mary when Anna told the stories in Government House. Her thumbnail sketches bookended the stories. "Two narrow gold lines" on the cover would make the book "look unusual," she suggested to Murray (through Mary). Mary elaborated:

My sister has been trying a *great many* different designs for a title page—but has not succeeded in getting anything to her satisfaction. She tried introducing palm trees on the sides—and alligators, and snakes—but without gaining the effect she wished. She then tried sticks for the framework tied together with snakes. But this looked so common a design. She thinks it would have a good effect to have all the people and principal objects in the different stories collected together in a chain interwoven with a sort of light tracery of branches and leaves. . . . She begs we send you the enclosed little attempts at snake twists. No. II we thought the most satisfactory. The corners are made of a lotus and three leaves, and the little snake fills up the gap."

The many cobras, the lions and tigers, the twisted snakes, the sinuous vines, the owls and fortune-tellers, and the dusky maiden bathing by a pool provide the oriental aura of the book. As Mary presents the final image for the book, a note of embarrassment creeps into her tone: "This little cobra twisted into an M, my sister is particularly anxious should, if serviceable, be put into one of the nooks or corners which have been left unprovided for in the little design sent by Mr. Whymper!⁶¹ It might she thought either go at the end of the list of contents, or at the top of the 'Collector's Apology.'"⁶²

The M stands for Mary, and it appears on the outside cover of each of the five editions; the book has now become fully hers. Or so we think. Yet if we “sense read,” we know that the collection is animated by Anna’s spirit, and we also see an audacious irony at play in “The Narrator’s Narrative.” Anna, a supposedly lowly ayah lost in the pages of the book and the verandas of Government House—a grand symbol of the British Crown—turns out to be an outspoken critic of the economic progress claimed by imperialist policy, subtly challenging one of the most powerful governors of colonial India.

Government House and the Phantom of Economic Progress

Government House was the pet project of Bartle Frere. Lavish in concept and style, Government houses were an architectural feature of the global British Empire. In India, the oldest of these were built in Madras by Robert Clive (governor 1798–1803) and in Calcutta by Richard Wellesley (governor-general 1798–1805). During the tenure of the East India Company, when it was intent on squeezing out every bit of profit, and when the British were still half-kneeling to the ruling Mughals, the Company’s directors disapproved expensive building programs. After the British Crown took over the company, however, government houses came to be seen as representing imperial authority and were hence architecturally designed as imposing structures that commanded panoramic views and contained native labor.⁶³

Tipped to be the governor-general of India, which he ultimately never became, Bartle Frere began his long tryst with India when he landed in Bombay in 1834 after an adventurous land passage through Egypt. Both his grandfathers had been MPs for Norwich and Arundel, and he had been sent to the East India College at Haileybury (the recruitment academy for the East India Company), from which he graduated with distinction.⁶⁴ In India, he rose rapidly through colonial ranks—private secretary to the governor of Bombay, political resident of Satara, chief commissioner of Sind, and finally governor of Bombay. In 1844 he married Catherine Arthur, daughter of the then governor of Bombay, to whom he was private secretary. Bartle Frere’s heavy footprint is also seen in those things that colonialism likes to credit itself for: development projects such as canals for irrigation, trade fairs, the Sind Railway, and the Oriental Inland Steam Company, and even the first adhesive postage stamp in India, in 1852, called the Scinde District Dawk. But—from an imperial perspective at least—it was Frere’s role in suppressing the Indian Uprising of 1857–58 (he speedily sent troops to Punjab, taking a calculated risk on Sindh’s security) that secured him a knighthood and a prized appointment to the viceroy’s executive council for three years.⁶⁵

The construction of Government House began in 1865 with projected costs of £175,000 and a timeline of a few years. But soon, cotton prices crashed following the end of the American Civil War, and the British colonial government ran out of funds. The project was halted for several years. The building was finally completed in 1871 at nearly six times its projected cost. When it was finished, Government House—with its hundred-foot tower—sat in the center of 512 acres of land in Ganeshkhind in the midst of a colonial development. Trees lined the roads, and ornamental terraced gardens surrounded British-style bungalows for officers.

The four-hundred-foot-long Government House itself stretched north-south and had two double-storied wings connected by a central portion. In the south wing and the central parts were some of the large public spaces—a durbar area, a formal dining room with an arched ceiling, a ballroom, and an arcade opening to a large conservatory. Banquets and receptions and “Ladies at Home” socials were held here.⁶⁶ Guest bedrooms were on the upper floor of this wing. The larger northern wing housed the governor’s office and his private residence. The north wing was connected to the east wing via a 250-foot underground tunnel, at the end of which was the kitchen, the store, and the servants’ quarters.⁶⁷

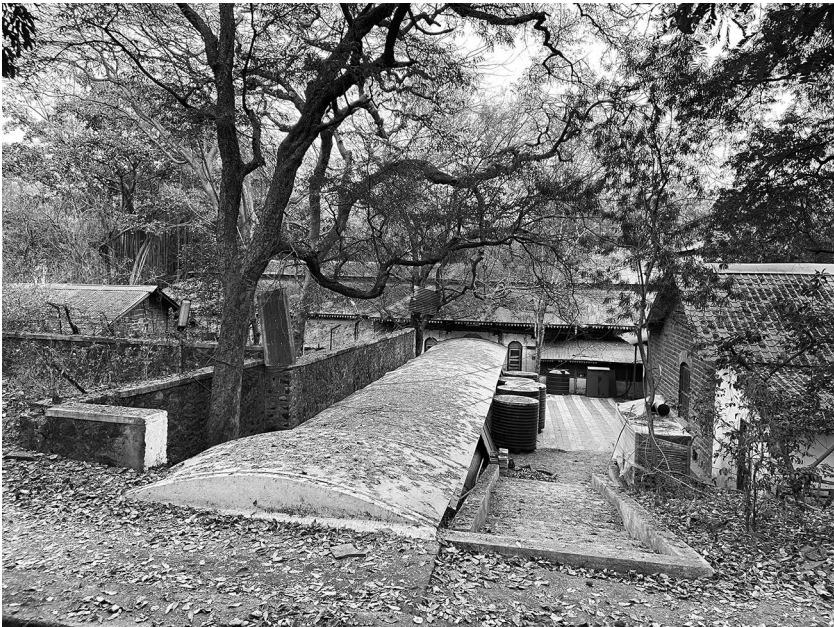


FIGURE 4. Visible part of the tunnel in the Government House that connected the north wing to the east wing. Photograph by Akshayini Leela-Prasad, February 2020.

In addition, four bungalows for the governor's staff, a guardroom with an ornate clock tower, European-style barracks for the governor's band, stables and coach houses were placed around the main building. One traveler notes that the building was a "Palace—if not quite a thing of beauty and joy for ever, at least a very imposing structure, with noble tower and fair frontage—state apartments of the grandest—conservatories, gardens fresh and blooming—placed on a commanding site, with a view over the undulating plains and strange tumultuous scenery of the Deccan."⁶⁸

There was evidently no problem housing servants in these vast bungalows. Edmund Hull's vade mecum for Anglo-Indian domestic life notes that the great advantage with Indian servants is that "no provision has to be made with regard to their board or lodging." Hull instructs that only one servant should sleep in the house at night—on a mat in the veranda. The cook could sleep on a shelf in the kitchen. The horse keepers should sleep with the horses in the stables, "always."⁶⁹ Anna would either have lived in one of the servant outbuildings or slept in the verandas of the north wing of Government House in Ganeshkhind, where Mary could have called her at will.

Bartle Frere had his critics to contend with, though. The British secretary of state for India censured the enormous expenditure on Government House in Ganeshkhind.⁷⁰ When the Prince of Wales visited India in 1875 (a tour that Frere had principally organized), Bartle Frere faced a few taunts standing in the very Government House that he had commissioned and supervised.⁷¹ His defense was that "he had built a very fine dwelling for future Governors, that he had acted within his legal powers, that he was not insubordinate, and that he had not spent all the money at his disposal."⁷² Naturally, Frere did not need to allude to the fact that Government House had been built amidst the debris of Bombay's great financial crash of 1865. When the cotton mills in Manchester were suffering during the American Civil War (1861–1865), Frere encouraged the cotton trade in India. Markets boomed and prices all around rose. Inflation crippled the common person in India. The *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* recalled the change in prices of common grains in those years: "Since 1842, *jvari* [millet] and wheat had risen more than 150 per cent, linseed about 50 per cent, and *kardai* or safflower and other chief oil seeds more than 200 per cent."⁷³ But worse was in store. Following the end of the Civil War, cotton prices dropped dramatically, the financial markets crashed, and the Bank of Bombay collapsed. People laid off by companies in Bombay returned to their villages, and Bombay's population dropped by 21 percent.⁷⁴

The lower cadres of Anglo-Indians like railway engineers complained about the economic policies of the English. But right there, on the veranda of Government House, there was a vocal critic telling the governor's daugh-

ter herself how colonial economic policy had in fact depleted the quality of everyday life. Anna Liberata de Souza furnishes a quotidian then-and-now arithmetic of this depletion. Prior to the rule of the British,

we were poor people, but living was cheap, and we had “plenty comfort.” In those days house rent did not cost more than half a rupee a month, and you could build a very comfortable house for a hundred rupees. Not such good houses as people now live in, but well enough for people like us. Then a whole family could live as comfortably on six or seven rupees a month as they can now on thirty. Grain, now a rupee a pound, was then two annas a pound. Common sugar, then one anna a pound, is now worth four annas a pound. Oil which then sold for six pice a bottle now costs four annas. Four annas’ worth of salt, chillies, tamarinds, onions, and garlic, would then last a family a whole month, now the same money would not buy a week’s supply. Such dungeree as you now pay half rupee a yard for, you could then buy from twenty to forty yards of for the rupee. You could not get such good calico then as now, but the dungeree did very well. Beef then was a pice a pound, and the vegetables cost a pie a day. For half a rupee you could fill the house with wood. Water also was much cheaper. You could then get a man to bring you two large skins full, morning and evening, for a pie, now he would not do it under half a rupee or more. If the children came crying for fruit, a pie would get them as many guavas as they liked in the bazaar. Now you’d have to pay that for each guava. This shows how much more money people need now than they did then.⁷⁵

There is another point that Anna makes: “The English fixed the rupee to the value of sixteen annas; in those days there were some big annas and some little ones, and you could sometimes get twenty-two annas for a rupee.”⁷⁶ A rupee was a silver coin and an anna a copper coin. The value of a silver coin depended on the market rate of silver on any given day. Similarly for copper coins. Depending on the fluctuations in the rates of silver and copper, when one exchanged a silver rupee for copper annas, a rupee could sometimes fetch more than sixteen annas—and sometimes less. In two ways, Anna’s remarks strike at a fundamental self-justification of colonial rule, which was that the empire would improve the natives’ quality of life, a self-justification whose duplicity was stoked most vigorously by Lord Dalhousie (1812–1860), under whom maximum territorial acquisition had occurred in British India.⁷⁷ First, Anna exposes how the quality of life has actually deteriorated with colonial policy. Second, she criticizes the standardization of the rupee to sixteen annas, a move that curtailed the monetary elasticity of the rupee

and robbed Indians of their agency in exchanging the rupee for annas when *they* determined it was best, that is, when the exchange rate from rupees to annas was optimal. Bartle Frere bristles at Anna's trenchant assessment of the economy. He attempts an explanation in a note that largely falls back on dismissing her remarks, which he says are "very characteristic" and a "specimen of a very widespread Indian popular delusion."⁷⁸ We may nevertheless say that Frere's invocation of "popular delusion" is itself "very characteristic" of his approach to Indian sensibilities and culture. The trope of dismissal serves England's self-image as civilized and civilizing, terms whose "usage necessarily also presupposed and demanded the existence of the institutions of the modern European state, and its goals, values, and practices, ranging from the pursuit of material progress to Civilized manners and clothing."⁷⁹ But the trope serves England's treasury, too, for it is well known that, as Gauri Viswanathan says, in the bigger picture, "however much parliamentary discussions of the British presence in India may have been couched in moral terms, there was no obscuring the real issue, which remained political, not moral."⁸⁰ Anna effectively showed Bartle Frere, the governor of Bombay Presidency, that English rule was an economic disaster for Indians like her.

Figments of English Literacy

A starlit sky on a clear wintry night, a wayside shrine to a Hindu deity, stories describing extraordinary lands and creatures, visits to the bazaar with her mother, hours in the sun taming pets: these are some of the everyday contexts of Anna's childhood, and through them we can begin to understand the distinction she makes between getting an education and acquiring reading and writing skills. Anna's distinction holds up the myth of English-language literacy, a key signifier of colonial modernity. Education, for Anna and her siblings, was in and through the everyday. There were no schools she could go to when she was growing up. A formative presence was instead Anna's grandmother, whose stories were her teaching tools. Anna says: "About *all things* she would tell us pretty stories—about men, and animals, and trees, and flowers, and stars. There was nothing she did not know some tale about." For example, she taught them to identify the constellations using their story names: Three Thieves, Hen and Chickens, or the Key, for example. How would Anna and her siblings ever forget the Pleiades cluster when it is remembered as the "Three Thieves climbing up to rob the Ranee's silver bedstead, with their mother (that twinkling star far away) watching for her sons' return. Pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat, you can see how her heart beats, for she is always frightened, thinking, 'Perhaps they will be caught and hanged!'"⁸¹

Anna's grandmother turned to the same starlit sky to teach them about their Christian faith—the cross, the ascension, and so on. A falling star meant the death of a great person, and good persons were the steadiest and brightest stars in the sky.

Learning also unfolded through an abundance of curiosity and through osmosis. Perhaps there was something powerful for Anna in watching her grandmother, a devout Catholic, stop to pray at wayside shrines to Hindu deities, saying, "May be there's something in it."⁸² It taught Anna that to be able to say "maybe" was a matter of self-confidence and openness, not fear and ignorance. The interflow between Roman Catholic and Hindu worship practices should not surprise us. Kristin Bloomer's ethnography shows that three women in Tamil Nadu who experienced Marian possessions were all "familiar with the widespread practice of deity and spirit possession in popular Hinduism."⁸³ The metaphor of siblings is part of local vocabulary to describe relations between Syrian Christian saints and Hindu temple deities, Corinne Dempsey finds in Kerala. A bishop tells Dempsey that the parishioners of his home church consider its patron, Saint George, to be the "brother of Visnu from a nearby temple."⁸⁴

But the compatibility between Catholic and Hindu approaches to the sacred through images and iconographic presence did surprise Bartle Frere as he psychoanalyzed the "practical belief of the lower orders" of Hindus.⁸⁵ The compatibility was also missed by Mary Stokes, who notes in *Indian Fairy Tales* (1880) that the Hindu and Muslim narrators who told stories to her and her daughter rarely mentioned the names of Hindu deities. Stokes concludes skeptically, and erroneously, that Anna, in contrast, "almost always gives her gods and goddesses their Hindu names—probably because, from being a Christian, she had no religious scruples to deter her from so doing."⁸⁶

Anna does not share these concerns. Years after her grandmother is no more, and Anna looks back, she is able to agree with her that *maybe* the extraordinary people of the stories did exist in the world at some time, even if not anymore. But Anna's immediate surroundings of course included others with whom she had to learn to coexist: Gypsies, for instance. Prancing alongside her mother in the bazaar, she calls them "dirty," "nasty" people who "live in ugly little houses." The comment draws a sharp reprimand from her mother: "Because God has given you a comfortable home and good parents, is that any reason for you to laugh at others who are poorer and less happy?" Anna's mother educates her by constructing an ethical relationship *in the present* between Anna and the "other" Gypsies.

Anna's childhood vignettes do something rather bold. They disrupt James Mill's assertion that Indians confused historic pasts and fabulous stories and

consequently lived in a decadent present. Mill said, “The offspring of a wild and ungoverned imagination, they bear the strongest marks of a rude and credulous people whom the marvellous delights, who cannot estimate the use of a record of past events, and whom the real occurrences of life are too tame to interest.”⁸⁷ It is to Mary’s credit that she presents to English readers the opportunity to engage Anna’s reflections on her upbringing, reflections that offer a sophisticated interpretation of history, and of life itself, as in-betweenness: between the real and the fantastic, between the possible and the plausible, between memory and imagination, and between oneself and another.

Although Anna did not go to school when she was growing up, Poona and Bombay were beginning to see a burgeoning of schools, and by 1865–66, the Bombay Presidency had nearly one hundred schools.⁸⁸ Anna herself had spent “a great deal” to send her son to school, and perhaps Rosie, her married daughter, was now talking about sending her children to school.⁸⁹ The “school” would probably have been some version of the Anglo-vernacular school—where a largely European curriculum was taught in both English and Indian languages to Indians.⁹⁰ Emboldened by the 1813 Charter Act, Bartle Frere’s predecessor and hero Mountstuart Elphinstone had rallied to set up “native schools” that broke away from the missionary-led Bombay Education Society (BES). Elphinstone had proclaimed, “There exists in the Hindu languages many tales and fables that would be generally read and that would circulate sound morals,” and these could be used in textbooks with the proviso that the government “silently omit all precepts of questionable morality.”⁹¹ Elphinstone’s sententious endorsement notwithstanding, in Anna’s view it was precisely the redaction of Indian stories that ruined them. Such compilations, rather than being educative, “leave out the prettiest part and they jumble up the beginning of one story with the end of another—so that it is altogether wrong.”⁹²

But beyond the annoying misrepresentation of Indian oral narrative, Anna challenges the (much-debated) grandiose imperial notion that by learning English, Indians would embark on a path of “progress.”⁹³ She would not have been aware of Thomas Babington Macaulay’s call for the formation of a class of brown bodies with English tongues (brown sahibs) to serve the interests of English administration in India, but she knew from hard experience what English-language learning could do for *her* economic class: “I know your language. What use? To blow the fire? I only a miserable woman, fit to go to cook-room and cook the dinner.” Her words throw me back to the stifling dungeon-like kitchen and pantry of the bungalow I grew up in. Thus, knowing English gave Anna at most the opportunity to become an ayah, moving from one Anglo-Indian house to another no fewer than eight times.

The first woman who employed her had taught her English—adding to all the languages Anna already knew—but even when Anna learned it well, her brother-in-law, who we recall invited her to come all the way up to Sind to work in the home of General Charles Napier, could only promise her the job of an ayah (an offer Anna declined).

Did Anna's realism about the retooling of Indian stories, and about schools and schooling, expose the hollowness of the modernity promised by colonialism? "Now I'm grown up I'll get a clerk's place," Anna's son assured her after completing his English-language education. How far could "English" schooling take a young man of Anna's economic class in the decades when she was raising her children? At least in 1832, the French botanist and traveler Victor Jacquemont, reporting on schools in Poona, describes a curriculum that focused on English, mathematics, carpentry, "Making Plans," and surveying. One can see how the brazenly utilitarian curriculum was doing nothing more than oiling the human wheels of the colonial machinery. Jacquemont observed that the government was the only employer. The *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* notes, "It was cruel to give poor children a high training, pay them to learn [both teachers and students were paid] and then to leave them without work."⁹⁴ Tellingly, when Jacquemont visited, a Portuguese student who was one of the best in the school asked to be hired as his servant. English schooling was designed to teach the language of servitude.

Yet colonialism had closed for Anna's son the routes taken by Anna's father and grandfather. "My grandfather couldn't write, and my father couldn't write, and they did very well," she tells Mary. They had, without knowing how to read and write, done honorably in their professions, provided "plenty comfort" for their families, and ensured happy childhoods for their children.

I return to a letter that Mary Frere hurriedly wrote to Murray on October 20, 1870, on receiving the proofs for the second edition, which she saw bore the new title *Fairy Legends of the Deccan*. Dismayed, she argued:

I would be very grieved for the title to be altered. 1st because it is the same book, and should therefore I shd. think have the same title. & I would no more willingly call the same book by a different name than I would call myself by a name that was not my own because it sounded prettier—besides (to my fancy) "Old Deccan Days" having been presented at Court, and made her debut in Society will have had all that trouble for nothing. I have to begin making friends on her own account again, if she changes her name. Then, to our Bombay ears, Calicut—whence the legends came, is not the *Deccan* but the *Concon*—

though the book may rightly be called “Old Deccan Days”—as being these legends told to Anna de Souza in old days in the Deccan (by her grandmother & by her to me). And “Old Deccan Days” seems to me a name that keeps in the memory easily. Not too long to say at a breath & to a certain extent distinguishes those ever-be upheld Tory principles of which you and my Father are such staunch supporters, and as one protest against the Ever shifting radicalism now so much in vogue I hope it may not be deemed advisable to change the Title of Old Deccan Days.⁹⁵

As I concluded in my earlier work, “the alliterative assonance of the title *Old Deccan Days* was about more than just the aesthetic of sound. The deep identification Mary Frere felt with the book coalesces into the practical anxiety that the ‘new’ book would cease to be associated with her name unless she made strong efforts to keep the association explicit.”⁹⁶ Ultimately, we realize how ironic Marianne North’s conclusion was that Anna was the “old ayah Miss Bartle Frere has made famous.”

A greater irony is that the record that smothered Anna in one part is the very record that allows us to discern her presence. If we follow that presence, Anna Liberata de Souza is the “girl who could do anything.” She is outspoken, expressive, and un-enamored with the glitter of colonial modernity. It is not a small matter that when she was made an offer that would have paid her almost twenty-five years’ worth of her ayah’s pay in India,⁹⁷ she firmly refused, honoring her better sense of belonging and dignity:

One lady with whom I stayed wished to take me to England with her when she went home (at that time the children neither little or big), and she offered to give me Rs. 5000 and warm clothes if I would go with her; but I wouldn’t go. I a silly girl then, and afraid of going from the children and on the sea; I think—“May be I shall make plenty money, but what good if all the little fishes eat my bones? I shall not rest with my old Father and Mother if I go”—so I told her I could not do it.⁹⁸

Pune, without the Ouija Board

In January 2018, I was in a hotel room in Guanajuato, Mexico on academic work when I got a call on WhatsApp. It was Trevor Martin from Pune. Although I had not been in touch with him for more than thirty years, I had turned to Trevor, a native Punekar and a former Jesuit priest, who had been my father’s MA student in the English department in Pune during the 1970s. Trevor had a lead. Was this the piece of information for which I had

looked for years? Over the course of my writing this book a curiosity had turned into an obsession: *Where had Anna been buried?* If I trusted the line in *Old Deccan Days* below the image of Government House that had arrested me decades ago, Anna had died in Government House, Ganeshkhind, on August 14, 1887. I told him Anna's story. He was excited. "I'd love to help," he said. As with archival records, burial records and graves of Europeans had been very easy to find. Holkar Bridge, Khadki War Cemetery, more choices. New Poona Cemetery in the 1880s did not allow Indian Christians to be interred there, as per new burial laws, we learned. A newsletter of the Diocese of Western India reported in 1881, "Next year we shall be obliged to provide a Cemetery for ourselves, as the Government have issued an order that in the Poona New Cemetery no native Christians can be buried."⁹⁹ Promisingly, somebody had donated a plot of land for natives to be buried in Ganeshkhind in 1882.¹⁰⁰ But nobody in Pune seemed to know about it, though everybody I asked voluntarily visited sites and pored over records.

After much legwork, Trevor had learned that Catholics of Portuguese origin in colonial India had mostly been buried at the Church of the Immaculate Conception, commonly known as City Church. He was now calling to say he had found out that the church had scrupulously maintained burial records. He and a friend who had become interested were going to look at them. There was a chance that although she was not Portuguese, Anna as a Roman Catholic would have been buried there. Trevor sent me images of burial entries from around 1887. The entries were in exquisite calligraphic Portuguese on large yellowed ledger pages. I do not know Portuguese, so each time I saw the name "Anna" or "de Souza," my heart raced. (These are common names in Portuguese). At Duke, I studied these entries with Larissa Carneiro, a Brazilian colleague. Sadly, there was no entry for Anna. My husband, Prasad, was in Pune at one time, and he too visited various graveyards. At Holkar Bridge cemetery the keeper said: "You're here to look for the record of the Goan lady, right? We didn't find anything. We looked and looked. But I'll keep searching." By "we" he meant that Trevor had already visited the cemetery. My brother, co-accomplice at Ouija board sessions in our childhood, put me in touch with Vincent Pinto, his friend from their Indian Air Force days. Vincent, a former intelligence officer who now lives in Pune, said, "I'd love to be involved in such a historic search."

Historic. My search, though still open, concludes for the moment with the realization that the sense of Anna I have pursued is the very sense that has motivated others to help "find" her. Like me, these persons, unconnected

with my project, feel justice is served when we are able to grasp a sense of a person—belonging, perspectives, creativity, struggle—that is beyond what can be captured by a label or a category, and in so doing reimagine the past with more equity and dignity. Without my childhood beliefs, but with the intuitions, I am coming to believe that it is time to invite Anna Liberata de Souza's spirit to the Ouija board that, at the end of the day, history itself is.