

"THE CHINAMAN HAD NO FAULT EXCEPT THAT THEY
WERE CHINESE": AN INDIAN VIEW OF AUSTRALIA IN 1888



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In exploring travel writing at the height of European imperialism, Mary Louise Pratt has elaborated the notion of the contact zone as:

The space of colonised encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict. (Pratt 6-7)

Much of the writing she analysed was that of the colonisers, writing about their colonies and colonised peoples. Antoinette Burton has written about Indians visiting and writing about "the heart of empire" (Burton 1998). This and other recent work in new imperial history has located the metropole itself as an important site of imperial histories, recognising that imperialism did not happen only in the colonies. Furthermore, much recent work has focussed upon relationships between metropole and colony, drawing attention to the way that colony and metropole are "simultaneous constitutive of the other" (Tinkler 218). However relatively little work has explored relationships between different colonies (Allen 2000; Ballantyne 2001).

India and the Australian colonies were both important and very different colonies within the British Empire in the later 19th century (Walker 1999). Relatively close to each other, they were

differently placed within the Imperial system. The sparsely populated Australian colonies were settler colonies, sharing a "racial" affinity with the colonial power. India, with its vast population and immense resources was important as a colony of exploitation, but also conferred great prestige upon its British overlords. The difference between these two colonies is an important element in the history of empire. Leela Gandhi has pointed out that settler societies such as the Australian colonies did not stand "in the same relationship to colonialism as those societies [such as India] which [...] experienced the full force and violence of colonial domination" (169).

In the later 19th century, Australians could travel to India, using the new arteries of empire, namely the steamships and the railways which linked Australian ports and Colombo, Bombay and Calcutta and stations at Colombo, Bombay, Delhi, Madras and Calcutta. Indians also travelled to Australia. Often these were small traders and hawkers, who travelled back and forth between the two countries and were able to use the opportunities offered by empire, to make a living. While some were literate, they left no accounts of their travels. However a highly literate Indian man, Nunda Lall Doss toured Australia in 1888 and published an account of his travels. His visit thus saw an Indian subject of the British Empire writing about Australian subjects of that Empire. While Antoinette Burton has focussed upon the visits of Indians to Great Britain and the accounts they made of these visits, there has been little analysis of writing by those from colonies of exploitation, such as India, about settler colonies such as those in Australia. The record of this visit is particularly rich, as journalists in the various Australian colonies also wrote about Nunda Lall Doss in the local press.

Here indeed is a "contact zone" of empire. While the relationships were not necessarily "on-going" in the way Pratt suggests and nor were they characterised overtly by "coercion," they illuminate much about the operation of empire at the time

and the relationships between Australia and India. In particular we see Nunda Lall Doss and the Australians he met, negotiating the racialised hierarchies of the British Empire.

Nunda Lall Doss, was probably from East Bengal and seems to have been associated with the activities of the Australian Baptist Missionaries in that area as well as the London Missionary Society and Congregationalists. He was a Christian of many years standing, and he must have been converted in 1857, as when on a brief side trip to Paris in early 1888, he marked the date as the 31st anniversary of his conversion. Clearly he had extensive training in Christian teachings. Sometimes he was referred to as the Reverend Nunda Lall Doss, but I know little of the nature of his education and training.

Under the auspices of the London Missionary Society, Nunda Lall Doss had toured England, Scotland and Wales, giving sermons and talks in aid of the missions in the latter part of 1887. He made a quick side trip also to Paris and then he continued his tour in the Antipodes. He visited Tasmania first before going on to New Zealand. He returned to Sydney in May 1888 at the time of great agitation against Chinese immigration. Nunda Lall travelled on by train to Melbourne, where he had an extensive speaking program. In late June, he arrived in Adelaide, in South Australia, where he passed some three weeks, speaking in churches in the city and suburbs. In addition, he travelled to a number of rural centres to give talks and sermons and returned to India in mid-July.

In 1893 he published *Reminiscences, English and Australasian: Being an Account of a Visit to England, Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania, Ceylon etc.* It was published and printed by M. C. Bhowmick, at the Herald Press in Calcutta. While this may have been a local newspaper press, it was most likely that of a Christian mission. Indeed, Doss was clearly identified on the title page as being "of the London Missionary Society." So this text was produced in relation to his trip, which was carried out under the

auspices of this organisation. In Australia, he was the guest of Australian Christians and their churches. Where he was critical of what he saw in Australia, it was most probably easy for him to air that if it was a criticism also made by Australian Christians. However, in some instances his criticisms might have been muted and understated. Thus any reading of the text must be carried on with an appreciation of the politics of its production.

Like Yasmine Gooneratne's mythical character, Grandfather Edward, Nunda Lall Doss visited the Australian colonies at the time of anti-Chinese agitation (Gooneratne 1991). Indeed Doss's visit to Sydney in May 1888 coincided with the protests against the Chinese immigrants on the ship the *Afghan*. On 3rd June about 40,000 marched in Sydney against these Chinese people being allowed to land. While ultimately, some of the Chinese, who held the appropriate papers or who were Australian residents were allowed to land, most of these would-be immigrants, like the refugees on the Tampa so many years later, were not able to land. These protests led to an inter-colonial conference, which limited Chinese immigration to Australia. This conference might be seen as part of the moves to form a federated Australia. Indeed, Myra Willard noted "the desire to guard themselves effectively against the dangers of Asiatic immigration which drew the Colonies together" (Willard 119).

But of course Doss did not come to discuss the migration policies of the Australian colonies, he was on a missionary visit for the London Missionary Society. Missionary visits were a staple of the missionary venture. They served to raise funds, support an enthusiasm for the cause. Often too they were a travel show and an opportunity to speak of "the exotic others" who peopled missionary lands. Lantern slides and the showing of artefacts often featured strongly as part of this genre.

However, with the visit of Nunda Lall Doss, the missionary himself was one of the "other." He was an exhibit in a couple of different ways. As a convert, he was evidence of the success of the

missionary venture. His great knowledge of Christian teachings and the Bible was apparent in the sermons and talks he gave on his tour. So while he operated from within the Christian discourses, his body was marked by the racialised discourses of the time, he was marked as different. Newspaper accounts consistently referred to his body, to his appearance. His tour and the manner in which he was represented by Australian journalists raises a number of interesting issues which will be explored elsewhere. This paper, however, focusses upon his own representations of Australia and Australians. His text appears to be unique in presenting the views of an Indian subject of the British Empire upon white settler colonialism in Australia. This paper explores his ambivalence towards the Australian colonial project.

In Australia, Doss felt that he was coming towards the end of his long journey and entering climes and vegetation like those of his homeland. The Moreton Bay Fig trees reminded him of the Banyan tree, and in Sydney gardens he saw "the Hybiscus, or the Red *Jaba*, and other flower plants of Bengal." He was surprised to meet "the *amrool*, the little weed with acid leaves that grows in shady places in Bengal [...] so far from home. All these continually reminded me of Bengal" (193). The "clear blue sky," the bright sun and the temperature, "All these circumstances combined made me almost feel I was in India again" (193).

He was impressed by particular features in Australia. He admired the great new cities with their fine public buildings and urban parks. The railway system linking many of the colonial capitals was also admirable, but less impressive were the open sewers in the city of Melbourne and the way in the cities, the rivers were treated as "mere sluices for the discharge of the foul waters of these towns" (184).

He was a man who had seen a lot of the British Empire and could cast a critical eye over what some of the colonials, with their more limited experience, thought was splendid. His visit to

Sydney coincided with the celebration of the Queen's Birthday holiday in 1888. He wrote, "The colonials, like all true Britons, celebrated the national festival with the ceremonies usually observed by Her Majesty's loyal subjects all the world over." There was a review of some 2,000 troops and the firing of the royal salute. He understood that for "the immense crowd" of Sydney-siders who turned out for the event that this was a "rare sight," but for him it was quite tame:

Accustomed as I was to see much grander displays of military strength and resources of the English in our own country, the whole affair, excepting the gathering of the crowd of spectators, looked very tame; and what rendered the scene very dull and monotonous was the lack of variety in the colour and fashion of the uniform of the soldiers and in their complexions, which is so conspicuous in the native soldiery of the various races of India, when assembled in a grand review. Here the soldiers were all Englishmen, and looked so like one another, both in dress and complexion. (194)

Here the Englishmen looked all alike and their pale complexions were monotonous when he compared them with the many hued and richly coloured soldiery of India. Significantly he focussed here upon "racial" differences between Indians and the Australians, whom he refers to as "Englishmen."

He was aware that his own difference was marked within the Australian community and that his appearance drew attention from passers-by. Wherever he travelled in Europe or in the Australasian colonies he was noticed:

I need not mention that I was noticed by almost everyone on streets. My dark complexion and my chupkah which I retained throughout the whole of my travels [...] attracted everyone's notice. They looked at me and it was quite natural for them to do so. (37)

At the Queen's Birthday celebration in Sydney May 1888, he tried to imagine how he was being viewed by other spectators:

While looking at the review of troops I was none the less viewed by such of the spectators as I came across. The peculiarity of my dress and the darkness of my complexion naturally attracted their notice and I wonder what they thought of me. Perhaps they took me for one of the aborigines metamorphosed or a South Sea Islander visiting their city. (194)

Here, as he imagined, the spectators' speculation upon his right to be there in the crowd in Sydney, he was very aware that he was an outsider in Australian society. Indeed, running through his discussions of the Australian colonies was a discussion of the racial attitudes of the colonists and the policies of exclusion that were being developed. It is not surprising that Nunda Lall Doss should explore these issues in relation to the Australian colonies. White settlers had taken over the lands of the Indigenous peoples, killing many of them as they did so. Furthermore, they were in the process of seeking to establish a White Australia which would refuse entry to his fellow countrymen, as well as to others defined as "Asiatics" and those from Africa and the Pacific, who wished to settle or work in Australia. I link this to his discussion of labour to argue that a muted critique of the nascent White Australia Policy is threaded through his discussions of the Australian colonies.

His account of the reasons for the Australian workers' growing opposition to Chinese immigration might seem simply descriptive and neutral, but takes on a different complexion when we consider Indian readers, probably Indian Christians, like himself. He noted that the society was dependent upon emigrant labour and that "the wages of labourers [were] excessively high [...] the wages of a labouring man in Australia, for one day, is therefore equal to what we pay for a man of the same class in this country for a whole month" (182). In comparison with the wages of labourers, "The wages of tradesmen and mechanics are proportionately higher, and they over-jealously guard against all competition and the intrusion of foreign and cheaper labour in the market" (182). Here the term "over-jealously" can be read as indicating some cupidity and selfishness on the part of these tradesmen. His account of the Chinese workers, reproduced here at some length, seems to re-iterate the views of the Australian workers or as he puts it the "English Australian," but a critical note also creeps in,

The teeming hives of China are always ready to send in their swarms, wherever they can make a living and turn an honest penny. They have sent them not only across the Pacific to the shores of the New Continent, but they have sent them, to these shores in the Sothern [sic] seas, and they would send many more if they were allowed. But the English Australian is jealous of the Chinaman, and looks upon him as a formidable rival. He can labour and live upon much smaller wages. His almost vegetarian diet, his abstemious habits, and his industry and frugality enable him to do so, while his skill as an artisan helps him the more to successfully compete with the Englishman in the labour market. The Englishman therefore will not have him in Australia. His very existence there is ruinous to his own prospects in the land of his adoption. Of late there has been a great deal of heart-burning at the influx of Chinamen into Australia, and there have been many instances of cruel unkindness shown to them there. I shall mention, in its proper place, a notable instance of this, which came under my own observation, while I was in Sydney. The English Australian will not tolerate any encroachment by the Chinaman upon his favourite preserves, and in a land in which democratic principles are on the ascendant, it is no wonder that measures are being adopted, which will eventually oust the Chinaman altogether out of Australia. (182-3)

The Chinese are seen as coming from "teeming hives," a term indicating sub-human characteristics for the Chinese people. Doss participated in the racialised hierarchies and discourses of empire (Spurr, 1993) and on a number of occasions distinguished Indians from the Chinese, seeing the Indians as superior. As Burton notes,

For Indian travellers as for Britons of many classes, ranking people of colour was a way of displaying not just knowledge of colonial hierarchies, but a certain claim to civilization on the basis of distinction [...] as well. (137)

Certainly he claimed an Aryan heritage, often telling his Australian audiences in relation to the English Australians and the Indians, that "both peoples had sprung from the same old Aryan stock" (*Christian Weekly* 29 June 1888). But in the passage above, he also represented the Chinese as wanting only "to turn an honest penny." He reported that the Chinese lived simply and frugally and that their work was skilled. The reference to an "almost vegetarian diet" probably resonated with Indian readers. Indeed another Indian traveller of the time, Pandita Ramabai

commented upon the Americans' cruelty to other creatures, attributing it perhaps to "their habit of eating meat" (132).

Doss writes of the Chinese arousing the "jealousy" of the "English Australian," who determines to bar him from "the land of his adoption." Here the reader is reminded that Australia is not really the home of the Australians, but merely one that has been taken over as – "his favourite preserves." The picture that emerges is one of these Australian workers jealously wanting to keep Australia for themselves. In order to do this, they treat the Chinese with "cruel unkindness."

Significantly in the very next paragraph, Doss discussed how Australian employers used labour-saving machinery to save on labour costs.

To save labour in reaping their corn, they use a machine called a Stripper, several specimens of which I saw in Gawler, a country town of South Australia [...] One of these Strippers, worked by four horses and one man, reaps ten acres in one day. (183)

Here the Indian reader must think of how many people could make a living by reaping the corn by hand. Indeed Doss made this connection himself,

The Australians think that their reaping process by means of machinery, is the cheapest in the world; but in arriving at this conclusion, they must have left India out of calculation. Many of them took it for granted, that like them we in India use machinery in reaping our corn, and they were therefore very much surprised, when I told them that all the farm work in India was done with labour of the hand, and it still costs us much less, than it did in Australia with its machinery. (183-184)

In this section, Doss mentioned meeting an old man, a colonist of 45 years, on a ship going to England,

The object of his visit to England was to get a machine made, which he had devised in his own mind, for not only reaping the corn, but also putting it into sacks at the same time, by the one and the same process. (183)

This old man thought so much of saving labour costs and making money, that he would undertake such a great journey to do so. This reading of this incident is underlined when read in the

context of some critical comments he made upon the English in India. Their god was that of "getting on." He said "You see, Englishmen go out to India with the idea of making a fortune" (*Adelaide Observer* 30 June 1888).

In Sydney in May 1888, he witnessed the demonstrations against the Chinese passengers on the *Afghan*. He began his discussion of this with a passage representing the Chinese emigrants to Australia as harmless and in-offensive:

They come into all the Australia colonies, in order to earn an honest livelihood by the hard labour of their hands. They generally work as market gardeners or mine labourers, and a few of them become cabinet makers and general traders. So after making a little money most of them return to their native land [...] and there invest their earnings in trade, or live in comparative ease and comfort on the savings they make in Australia. (195)

There were thus always a number of Chinese in the colonies and Doss reiterated the arguments made by Australian workers about the ability of the Chinese to live on low wages. He noted again their tendency "live upon much lighter and less expensive food." There was a fear, shared also by the higher classes, that the Chinese would take over Australia. The legislature had passed measures "in the shape of a heavy poll tax and other restrictions" to stem the flow. Once more he emphasised the faultlessness of the Chinese.

The Chinaman had no fault except that they were Chinese, and not English or Scotch, and that they could live on much smaller wages than their fellow craftsmen of the English race. (196)

Pandita Ramabai made similar comments about anti-Chinese sentiments in the United States. She wrote about Chinese immigrants, "They are very moderate in their conduct and spending habits" (Ramabai 117).

Referring to the incidents in Sydney in 1888, he described how two ships carrying a number of Chinese were prevented from landing their passengers and the development of what amounted to mob-rule:

The people held monster meetings to adopt measures for preventing these Chinese inroads. A very crowded and excited meeting was held

in the Town Hall, under the presidency of the Mayor of Sydney; and that gentleman had the weakness to yield to the populace, and was led to walk at their head to the house of the Premier of the colony, in order to present a petition to government for taking effective measures at once to send these Chinese away. (Doss 196)

He outlined what he saw as the "most scandalous friction" between the "highest court in the land" and the executive arm of government. When some Sydney Chinese took the matter to the Supreme Court, which decided that the Chinese should be allowed to land, the Premier of New South Wales disagreed with this judgement and refused to release the passengers from the ships (See Curthoys, 30-1). Doss says he does not know how this matter ended. He concluded by ridiculing the subsequent colonial premiers' conference; they "put their heads together about this much vexed Chinese question" (197). The tone here undercuts the urgency and pomposity of the conference – "This solemn conclave of premiers." He further ridiculed this topic as a great matter of state, by claiming that the only Australians sympathetic to the Chinese were the housewives:

I heard many ladies say, that they did not know what to do when "John" as they call the Chinaman there, went away, for he grew very nice vegetables and sold them so much cheaper than the English gardener. (197)

His last mention of the Chinese in Australia is where he presents an idyllic picture of a Chinese market gardener and his garden, all the more idyllic because Doss had just previously visited a coal-mine,

Leaving this region of stygian darkness we were glad to visit a Chinaman's vegetable garden, situated at a little distance from the foot of the hill. There the indefatigable "John" was constantly at work. The rich green vegetables that luxuriantly grew and covered the whole place spoke of his industry and skill. He lived on the spot in a little hut. A little rill that flowed through his garden helped him to irrigate it and keep his vegetables so green and fresh. (199)

This representation of the hard-working, productive and essentially harmless Chinese market-gardener making a humble living in Australia works as a challenge to the earlier discussion of

these people as a dangerous threat, against whom urgent conferences and stringent measures were required.

Finally, I will turn to discuss Nunda Lall's treatment of Australian Indigenous peoples within his text. Here, as with the Chinese, he reiterated the opinions he heard, that is the common knowledge among the settlers about Indigenous people. Indeed he appeared to subscribe to many of these views. Like many of his hosts, he saw the Aboriginal people as savage and inferior, having nothing in common with him. However, here again there is a certain ambivalence, such as when he reported the speech of an Aboriginal outlaw.

He saw very few Aboriginal people in Australia. He saw some people dressed in European clothes, whom he supposed were English until he saw their skins,

They were dressed as Englishmen, in hat, coat, and trousers, with boots and necktie to complete their European garb. If it were not for their black complexion, I could never have made out that they belonged to the aboriginal race. (185)

He speculated that perhaps these were "half-castes." Disappointed not to meet some more "traditional" Aboriginal people, he was told,

The aborigines have receded with the advance of the English, and now occupy only the out of the way places, mostly in the northern part of the island, where they live undisturbed in their native wildness. (186)

He reported purchasing a booklet, entitled "Kings and Queens of Victoria," which must have featured photographs or illustrations of some Aboriginal people of Victoria (possibly an early version of Perkins c1890). Here he viewed them in terms of dominant imperial racialised notions, finding them ugly, grotesque and lacking in civilisation. He commented sarcastically,

What beautiful specimens of royalty they were! [...] Every one of them had a dark and clumsy appearance, as savages may be expected to have, and whether king or queen, each had a native Boomerang, club or long stick in hand the ensign of royalty, which took the place of the sword or sceptre of their more civilised brethren. (186)

He described the Indigenous people's nomadic way of life, and their unwillingness to take "civilised modes of living themselves" (186), even when they were in contact with the settlers. He reported that they "squander all their earnings in drink" and could not understand the concept of planting potatoes in order to reap more in the future (187). Then he turned away from this perspective to represent an Aboriginal point of view.

This is perhaps an interesting example of the ambivalence of the colonised subject. In a long passage, he quotes from a "native outlaw" who has made a statement in a court where it seems he may have been charged with murder. Thus, Doss makes a space for an Indigenous point of view. Such expression has been rare in writing about Australian society until the last two decades and the fact that it was included in the later 19th century, in a text by a representative of another people colonised by the British, indicates an understanding and sympathy for the views expressed. It is quoted here in full:

The view which a native takes of the encroachment of his father-land by the English colonists, and his attitudes towards him therefore, may be very well imagined from the following speech made by a notorious native outlaw. Before a high law officer of the crown, in defence of his own conduct. "Why do you white people," said he, "come in ships to our country and shoot down poor black fellows who do not understand you? You listen to me! The wild black fellows do not understand your laws; every wild animal that roams the country and every edible root that grows in the ground is common property. A black man claims nothing as his own, but his cloak, his weapons and his name. Children are under no restraint from infancy upwards; a little baby as soon as he is old enough, beats his mother, and she always lets him. When he can carry a spear, he throws it at any living thing that crosses his path; and when he becomes a man, his chief employment is in hunting. He does not understand that animals and plants can belong to one person more than another. Sometimes a party of natives come down from the hills, tired and hungry, and fall in with strange animals you call sheep; of course away flies the spear, and presently they have a feast! Then you white men come and shoot the poor black fellows! For every black man you white fellows shoot, I will kill a white man! The poor hungry women have always been accustomed to dig up every edible root, and when they come across a potato garden, of course down comes the *Wama* (yamstick), and up

comes the potato, which is at once put into the bag. Then you white men shoot at the poor black fellows. I will take life for life." (187)

The subsequent comment from Doss is very telling. He merely writes, "The speech speaks for itself" (187). He follows this powerful statement with a return to praising the work of the missionaries, but reminds the reader once more of the cruelty of the settlers,

As soon as the black man was dispossessed, and he ceased to be dangerous, the heart of the white man relented towards him and he commenced to look after the remnants of the tribes. (187-188)

He concludes that due to the efforts of missionaries and philanthropists,

The wonderful regenerating power of the gospel has worked like leaven in the hearts of many of these lowest of mankind, and through the patient labours of the missionaries and the constraining love of Jesus, small Christian churches have been formed, and civilised communities of the aborigines settled around many a mission station. (188)

Despite this recuperation, the statement from the "native outlaw" stands as a challenge to the goodness of the missionaries and philanthropists and the Australian colonial project.

Doss's account of his travels in the Australian colonies in 1888 reveals an Indian view of the White Australian project at the point of its inception. Doss participates in the racialised hierarchies of the contemporary empire, locating himself as an Aryan like the English and superior to the Chinese and to the Indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, his ambivalence towards the racist policies of the Australian colonists emerges at a number of crucial points in his text.

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