The Audacious Raconteur

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The Audacious Raconteur: Sovereignty and Storytelling in Colonial India.

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There are now many overgrown trails along the twenty-five years of the meandering research for this book, which began when I was a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. I start by thanking the late Roger D. Abrahams, who insisted that I convert the term paper I wrote for his course into a book proposal. As will be apparent, I have many libraries and archives across continents to thank. In India, I thank the Tamil Nadu state archives, Connemara Public Library, the Theosophical Society, the Madras Literary Society, and the Roja Muthiah Library, all in Chennai; Sabarmati Ashram Library in Ahmedabad; State Central Library, City Central Library, and Osmania University’s library in Hyderabad; and the Maharashtra State Archives in Pune. In the UK, my thanks to the University of Reading’s Archive of British Publishing and Printing, the John Murray Archive (now held by the National Library of Scotland), the India Office Records at the British Library, University College London Archives and Special Collections, and the archives of the Royal Anthropological Society, the Folklore Society, and the Inner Temple. A very special thanks to the staff at the University of Witwatersrand Historical Papers Research Archive, Johannesburg, who scanned and sent overnight letters from Bartle Frere’s family correspondence. My gratitude to Linda Purnell of Duke University’s inter-library loans department for her tireless efforts to procure rare copies of books from elusive holdings. I thank the following institutions for supporting my research through grants and awards: the American Academy of Religion, the American Philosophical Society, Duke University’s Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, the Josiah Charles Trent Memorial Foundation, and the North Carolina Center for South Asian Studies.

Following up on nearly every personal name or location mentioned in the prefaces of the works of the scholars I discuss in this book, I visited many homes in India—often on false trails—in search of biographical details. Sometimes my searches took me to dilapidated or re-utilized former colonial buildings and sites. The chapters will evoke the ambience of these searches, the serendipities of my discoveries, and above all, the friendships with the
families of three of the authors. I rediscovered Pandit S. M. Natesa Sastry through his grandson Gopalakrishnan, who translated Natesa Sastry’s novel *Dinadayalu* for me. It was a translation that made me think, rather fundamentally, about how the semantics of translation stretches into the past, or at least into what the past offers to the present. Getting to know Mr. Gopalakrishnan over nearly twenty years brought with it the joy of spending time with his wife, Anandha, and their creative son Chandrachoodan, aka Chandru or Shyam. I thank Dr. Babu and Mr. Karan Kumar, who showed me the threads leading back to their great-grandfathers P. V. Ramaswami Raju and M. N. Venkataswami, respectively—and to the rich conversations with Mr. Sundaresan and Mr. Lakshman Rao that shape the understandings I propose in this book.

One of the greatest sources of pleasure and surprise was the help I received from friends old and new, who threw themselves into the enigmatic searches for biographical traces, out of curiosity, love of history, and indeed, in some cases, old ties. I recount the stories and outcomes of such collaborations in individual chapters but record my thanks here to Trevor Martin and Vincent Pinto in Pune, Harshawardhan Nimkhedkar in Nagpur, and (then) army major Ravi Choudhary in Hyderabad. I am indebted to the late Mr. S. Muthaiah, who published my queries to him in his columns in the national daily *The Hindu*; it is because of his gesture that my book stepped out of the archives into the living spaces of the families of Pandit Natesa Sastry and P. V. Ramaswami Raju. In the same vein, I offer my thanks to Narendra Luther, who published my query about M. N. Venkataswami in his column in the Hyderabad-based newspaper the *Deccan Chronicle*.

At Duke, Larissa Carneiro helped translate nineteenth-century burial records in Portuguese that I got from churches in Pune, and David Morgan pointed me to Victorian postmortem photography. To both of them, my deep thanks. My students Zaid Adhami, Yael Lazar, Seth Ligo, Alex McKinley, Sungjin Im, Mani Rao, and Yasmine Singh provided laughter, assistance, and ideas—and love in their inimitable ways. Carter Higgins, visiting fellow at Duke, helped me at the proverbial eleventh hour. For instilling confidence in my belief that Anna de Souza, whose life was virtually irretrievable outside of a colonial record, could still be known alternatively through a “sense reading” of her life, my gratitude to V. Narayana Rao. I am indebted to Miriam Cooke, Bruce Lawrence, Ebrahim Moosa, and Mani Rao for their thorough, brilliant, and timely comments on drafts. I thank Ebrahim especially for the liberty I could take in sounding out ideas and snatches of rough writing for immediate opinions; it is a rare privilege. I am grateful to Ann Grodzins Gold, Brian Hatcher, and Ajay Skaria for their transformative feedback on the entire manuscript. In Jim Lance at Cornell University Press,
I have the pleasure of an editor who “got it” from the get-go; to Jim and to his colleagues Amanda Heller, Clare Jones, and Mary Kate Murphy, my sincere thanks. Some of the research and ideas I articulate in chapter 2 of this book are derived in part from “Nameless in History: When the Imperial English Become the Subjects of Hindu Narrative,” in *South Asian History and Culture* 8, no. 4 (2018): 448–60, © Taylor & Francis, available online: www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/19472498.2017.1371504.

While writing this book, I stumbled through a period of intense and sudden personal loss, and I am enormously grateful to friends who supported me beyond measure over that time: Maya Aripirala, Marc Brettler, miriam cooke, Joyce Flueckiger, Asma Khan, Ranjana Khanna, Jyotsna Kasturi, Sumana Kasturi, Bruce Lawrence, Uma Magal, Sangeetha Motkar, Ebrahim Moosa, Kirin Narayan, Aparna Rayaprol, Karin Shapiro, Deepshikha Singh, and Kena Wani.

The warm and steady support of my brother Chandramouli and my sisters-in-law Indira and Vijaya makes all my ventures possible, no less this one. To Shankar, my brother, who insightfully read every draft of every chapter, a reading that also understood, and hummed with, the loss of our father, a Shakespeare scholar and my best critic, “I can no other answer make but thanks, And thanks; and ever thanks.” To Prasad, my husband, my tenth muse, “ten times more in worth than those old nine.” Thank you, forever.

I completed this book because of the daily encouragement from my mother, Srimathi, a schoolteacher with an insatiable love for reading and a great skill with languages. She passed away when the book was about four pages short of being done. I had held a ticket to Hyderabad in my hands, and she had sent her suitcase over to my house in anticipation of my arrival. If this book breathes something of the imminent and the immanent, ascribe it to the same winter of 2018 in which I went on to lose another parental figure, my father-in-law, C. S. Rao, who was also awaiting the completion of this book.

I dedicate this book to my parents, Srimathi Nagarajan and S. Nagarajan, and to my daughters, Anandini and Akshayini.
THE AUDACIOUS RACONTEUR