

You will be free one day, my dearest India.

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In 1896 the bubonic plague spread across Bombay and I had been working tirelessly to try to provide care for the afflicted. I myself contracted the disease and this made me feel weak, even hopeless, but I had to continue. I was not going to ignore the suffering of my people.

I know what they thought of me. I saw them sneering at me as though I was stupid for not making my marriage to a pro-British lawyer work. A man of stature, they thought; just because he was viewed in high regard by the East India Company, but I had no respect for him. He was an Anglophile; a traitor.

'Daama, a so called Philanthropist!' he would say, but it did not bother me. It was more the sarcasm in his tone, which hinted at a sense of misogyny that irritated me. It was like he knew I would be tainted by the divorce. Becoming a divorcee was like walking around with a sign on your head, which read 'whore'.

I was sent to England in 1902 to seek medical care. I woke up each morning in London to the singing of a chaffinch. This striking bird had welcomed me to a foreign land and woke me up just after sunrise every morning. I do not know if it was luck or perhaps a gift from God. I had been given a second chance. I was weak, but healed. I desperately wanted to return home, but I was there for a reason and it is almost like the bird reiterated this point.

And, that's where my story begins. It was a Thursday morning and I stood in Hyde Park, awaiting the infamous Kavana to begin

his speech. He was not very popular for challenging the British economic policy in India, but after being married to a man who made excuses for the British invasion, I was honoured to listen to someone who was honest and fearless.

I looked down at the green grass beneath my feet.

'You prosper and grow, whilst my land cries,' I whispered.

'Resistance to aggression is not simply justified, it's imperative,' said Kavana boldly, as he stood upon the stage in front of hundreds of people. I had heard about his nationalist speeches, but when he opened his mouth, it was as though he was calling out to me.

As he came to the end of his speech, I caught his eye. I knew that meant I must wait to meet him. I felt tingling in my fingers and toes as I walked towards the stage and as people exited the park, I noticed Kavana talking to another Indian man. He had a long beard, looked serious – like someone important.

'Do you not fear for your life?' I said.

Kavana's eyes widened.

'I'm sorry, do I know you?'

'I apologise for my being forward, I am Daama... powerful words.' I squeezed his right hand as he held it out.

'Honoured to meet you young lady, please let me introduce you to the president of the British committee of the Indian National Congress, Mr. Naorobi.'

'It is a pleasure to meet you madam.'

It could not be a coincidence that I met these men. Mr. Naorobi offered me a job as his private secretary and I accepted.

My work began. Writing letters, filing important documents, as well as attending all his speeches. I learnt a lot from Mr. Naorobi, who insisted I was involved in all meetings. It was from these meetings, that we founded the Indian Home Rule Society, but for me this had consequences.

Dear Madam,

It has come to our attention that your participation in nationalist activities is a concern. Your actions are seen as a threat to Great Britain and we urge you to sign a statement declaring that you will

no longer participate in such activities, or else you will be prevented from returning to India.

The chaffinch continued with its melodic call outside my window every morning and I knew what that meant. I refused to cooperate. I would not be silenced and my work with Mr. Nairobi continued.

The next speech by Kavana was an important one. We gathered in Hyde Park, the sky grey, white flakes falling from the sky. The ice cold breeze whistling.

It seems the wind of this land is against us, I thought as the howling intensified, but fortunately, this did not stop the hundreds from gathering at the park. Banners raised high. A mixed crowd of both indigenous and migrant-folk stood together on the wet land, which was decorated with white flakes.

‘Our voices will not be silenced,’ he said. The crowd roared and the people came alive. Arms waving in the air, voices raised in agreement.

I felt a cramp in my stomach as it began churning. I made my way towards the stage. I needed to get to Kavana. But, it was too late. The shot sent the crowd into a frenzy.

How could a man with a revolver go unnoticed when security was surrounding the park?

He laid still, blood seeping from his body.

‘You need to get to safety, Daama’ said Kavana. ‘Now...’

They had killed Mr. Nairobi.

The night was restless. I could not sleep. I saw the light outside the window, but there was no singing. I made my way to the window and slid it open.

The chaffinch was motionless on the ground. I hurried outside. I held the creature and kissed its forehead. I felt a cold breeze sweep by my face and in that moment I could not stop the tears from rolling down my cheeks. I buried the dead bird and then sat in silence alone, but my contemplation was interrupted by the sound of the telephone ringing. I went back inside.

‘You do know it’s no longer safe for you here, Daama?’

‘Kavana, I have to carry on his work.’

‘You need to leave the country, or else you will be next.’

I decided I would travel to Paris. Kavana had a friend who lived there and I hoped I could continue my work.

I soon learnt that the members of the movement for Indian sovereignty were living in exile in Paris and I was introduced to them by Rana, Kavana's close friend. He was also an activist; a man I could trust. We would meet up every week to discuss our next move. We called ourselves '*The Paris Indian Society*'.

'How can we get through to the people,' said Rana one night and then it occurred to me. 'Literature... we can educate folk by writing,' I said.

So, I began working on my first newsletter. This was going to be a piece that challenged the East India Company. It would tell the whole truth about the genocide and I hoped it would be revolutionary. The problem was I did not know how I was going to get the newsletters across to India. I continued writing and Rana made enquiries.

I began writing about ideology. The fact that British officials justified the invasion by stating it was a civilising mission infuriated me. I needed my people to know that the real reason they were there, was because they were looting the country.

'I have a friend who works for the French colony of Pondicherry and he has agreed to smuggle across the newsletters,' said Rana.

It was just the breakthrough I needed. The first piece was sent:

Our people have needlessly lost lives. The British have blood on their hands, I wrote.

I began to gain a female following initially, but soon gained support from further communities. I heard about an execution of an Indian activist back home, which only further motivated me, so I continued with my newsletters:

How do you allow the British to claim sovereignty in your country? They claim they are better and superior and yet they show us savage behaviour. Do not allow them to justify their claim to rule.

My words seemed to ignite a spark in many communities and the rebellion slowly began. Villages lost family and friends, as they defied their oppressors. But the sacrifice would pay off. I believed it would. I had to believe it would because I was the one who instigated the riots. I wanted change. I wanted an Independent India.

My published work had been noticed and I was invited to attend the second socialist congress at Stuttgart, Germany. This was another opportunity to tell the truth. I had to prepare, so I designed a flag. This would be a flag that celebrated Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism and it would show a united India. The colours of green, yellow and red, with images of the crescent and sun, along with eight lotuses.

The flag was ready.

On the 22nd August 1907, I stood up at the second socialist congress and said;

My people suffer due to devastating effects of famine. Enough is enough. We are equal and deserve to be an independent nation.

I then lifted the flag. There was silence at first, but then this was followed by a round of applause.

Perhaps, my words have been well received, I thought.

But, I was wrong. I returned to my temporary home in Paris, only to learn that Rana had been arrested.

'You need to come with us,' said a police officer as he pushed me against the wall and handcuffed me. I was sent to Vichy where I was incarcerated.

How could they do this to me?

I had been betrayed. France and Britain had become allies, which meant it was no longer safe for any member of *The Paris Indian Society*. I lay in the cold damp cell. My body ached and my brain felt defeated as it thumped vigorously, causing me a great deal of pain. But, I could not give up. How could I give up after coming so far? My health began to further deteriorate, so I sat and prayed. Prayer was my only hope. I could not die alone in a jail cell.

It seems my supplication was answered, as I was released and sent to Bordeaux, where I had to report weekly to the local police.

I then began to petition. I wrote to the British government:

I urge you to allow me to return back to India.

I really believed that I would receive good news. I waited and waited but received no response. However, after a few weeks, I received a letter. I stood staring at the words on the paper and my body began to shake. They were trying to punish me.

Dear Daama,

You will remain exiled in Europe. You are not permitted to

return to India, under any circumstances. If you attempt to leave the country, you will be imprisoned.

The letter flew out of my hand as I fell to the ground.

I was paralysed.

I lay motionless on the bed for the next month.

Would my pride lead to my death in a foreign land?

I could not allow my life to end far away from India. I know they were scared that my words were having an influence on the people, but this was all the more reason for me to return and show the people the importance of fighting back. I could not move my body, but my mind was still alive.

One night, I dreamt I was lying under the sun, the scent of fresh herbs in the air. It was almost like I could taste the spinach in my mouth. I thought I was home. But, I woke up and looked at the bare walls around me. I felt like I could not breathe.

I had to approach the government again, but it meant I had to agree that I would renounce seditious activities. I knew that my literature had become widely available, so I worried little about agreeing to the requirements set by the British government.

This time, the response came more quickly,

Dear Daama,

Your request to return home has been granted.

They were just words on a piece of paper, but these were the words which granted me freedom. My life was in the hands of the colonisers. My journey to Egypt promoting suffrage had made sweat trickle down the foreheads of British officials. They had kept me away from my home for so long, afraid that I would ignite a feeling of courage within communities. I was promoting a united India, where people of all religions lived together peacefully, which, of course, would make it harder for them to divide and conquer. A woman from India, who had a voice, was a notion that made their bones weak. I was a problem that needed to be taken care of. So I wondered, had they shown me mercy? Or maybe, they knew that my death was imminent.

Their intentions did not matter much now. All that mattered was my return. My people needed me. They needed to understand that my sacrifice was essential as the conversation about gaining an independent nation had begun.

I returned to the blessed land in November 1935. I took off my shoes, as I stepped out on to the warm ground. The hot air hit my face and as I looked up, I noticed the colours, green, yellow and red in the far distance. It looked like a mirage, but as I stepped forward, the flag became visible and I said,

‘You will be free one day, my dearest India.’