

A thread of unknown memories

Serving in incredible India, has in many ways been an enrichment to me personally. I however somehow avoided to visit Lucknow and its neighboring districts, as I was trying to run away from the sentiments of feeling 'the presence of my Indian ancestors who were taken away to work as Indentured laborers in Suriname'. During the covid lockdown, last year, like many, I also had time to reflect on life and watch many movies and in this combination I grew an admiration for Mr. Pankaj Tripathi, an actor who became my inspiration to gather the curiosity and enthusiasm in finding my ancestral threads in Uttar Pradesh. Knowing my great grandfather, Kanhai Ramoudh, was aged 5 years when he and his older brother were taken from Rae Bareilly, by their mother to Bhowanipore Depot (Calcutta) to board on a ship to the Dutch colony Suriname, I knew that tracing the thread would be difficult and certainly emotional. I took the support from the State government in helping me find, perhaps relatives in Simoura village, Rae Bareilly and planned my trip. A few weeks ago when I landed in Lucknow, I was gracefully received as a State Guest and paid my courtesy to the Honourable Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. The agenda to seek grounds for an idea to officially acknowledge Surinamese Bhojpuri, the language evolved and spoken by the Persons of Indian Origin in Suriname, fortunately was taken with much goodwill and the meeting took place in Hindi. Suriname's official language is Dutch. The warmth and interest of my host, for my PIO origin, was overwhelming. Many in my country have ancestors who were from Lucknow and Allahabad (now Prayagraj), so I made it my plight to roam around. The Bara Imambara and its sounding walls and *bhool bhoolaya*, became a breath taking memory. I had seen the name 'Barabanki' flashing on traffic boards while being driven around and I remembered that word from my *adji (paternal grandmother)*, speaking about a temple, as if that was the name of the temple as she had only heard it from an older relative, considering that she was born in Suriname and she was the daughter in law of Ramoudh, my great grandfather. 'Barabanki', was a district, I soon discovered from the kind driver, Mr. Tomar. Let me be honest, I was fixated on going to Rae Bareilly, yet I was told that no relatives had been found by the authorities. Over night and influenced by an array of impressions of the day in Lucknow, I changed my plan and decided to discover 'Barabanki' and its Nagdevta temple. I felt as if my forefathers were narrating my plan and soon I was on the road. The kind support of the District Magistrate, Shree Adarsh Singh and his team to facilitate my visit to the Manjeetha temple, in a small village in Barabanki District, is heartily acknowledged. There was an elderly man, whom spoke words with an accent similarly to many of his peers in Suriname. As if a miracle struck, I felt at home when Shree Dewki Nandan Ramdhaar introduced himself as the pandit of the temple and offered us some fruits to eat, as I was in the company of my daughter and a district representative. I felt as if I found an extended part of my family, or at least of my PIO people, in this village, as they spoke the same kind of Bhojpuri, with actually the same sense and accent as we do! A group of villagers curiously surrounded us, clicking selfies, realizing that we were important visitors, yet unaware of the sentiments I felt as if I found the 'Barabanki' of my adji, paying respects on her behalf, as she was the generation born to those who had actually been living on these lands or at least lands close enough to remember 'Barabanki'. So connected I felt to the ancestral thread and that one word has become a living memory and a vivid hope to reconnect with unknown memories of my ancestors. Unfinished business as I would like to say, yet satisfactory sentiments took over and with tears in my eyes, we departed for Lucknow. Mr Tomar suggested us to visit the Residency. I could not have ended my trip to Lucknow in a better way. Seeing the tangible imprints of bullets and cannon balls in the walls of the ruins, I made myself a witness to the images of the historical Indian Rebellion of 1857, in a time when my ancestors in fact were citizens of the Uttar Pradesh Region. Resilience of thought, courage on the mind and love in the heart, for that invisible thread that now I know is there!