KALA BAGAI

An Early Indian Woman in America

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In late October 1983, numerous publications carried news of *jhaiji's* death. Jhaiji, or grandmother, had died earlier in the month at the age of 90. She had been living in Los Angeles for years and, as one of her obituaries read, '[t]he Indian community of Southern California [had] lost one of its founding members.' Her home, we are told, had been a 'little India' to diasporic Indians and she herself 'Mother India'. She was survived by one of her sons, seven grandchildren and nine great grandchildren.[1]

Jhaiji was Kala Bagai Chandra who, in September 1915, became one of the earliest Indian women to immigrate to the United States of America. While the overwhelming majority of early South Asian immigrants were men, it is crucial to not ignore the experiences of women. Compared to other women who immigrated to the United States from the Indian subcontinent, Kala Bagai was, in many respects, fortunate. She was financially secure at a time when most immigrants from British India tended to come from straitened circumstances. Finances never seem to have given her anxiety throughout her nearly seven decades in the United States. That of course should not lead us to conclude that she did not have her fair share of tragedy: her first husband, Vaishno Das Bagai, committed suicide and two of her sons, Brij and Madan, predeceased her. Regardless, and from all accounts, she persevered, led a rich life, and—in full measure—made the United States her home.

Kala Bagai was born in Amritsar and her father later moved the family to Benares after failing to advance his business. It was in Benares that Kala married Vaishno Das before she had

even turned 12; her husband himself was only six months older than her. Vaishno Das' family came from Peshawar and were prosperous. Their surname was originally Bagga, which they later changed to Bagai. Kala's family were still facing financial challenges and when her mother was unable to provide a decent dowry, her mother-in-law refused to accept any and said she was only looking to welcome her new daughter into their home. Kala moved to Peshawar after getting married to be with Vaishno Das and her in-laws.

Vaishno Das had, pretty early in life, resolved to leave India. He told Kala that he did not desire to live as a colonised subject and so, once he got his share of the family's assets, decided to immigrate to the United States. Vaishno had heard of Indian immigration to North America and one of his friends had been on the *Komagata Maru*, the ship carrying hundreds of Indian passengers intending to immigrate to British Columbia in Canada but who, with the exception of 20 individuals, were refused entry into the country. The *Komagata Maru Incident*, as it came to be known, happened a year before the Bagais would themselves arrive in San Francisco in 1915.

Vaishno Das' family initially did not want him to take his wife and children along, but he rejected their suggestion. In September 1915, the Bagais arrived on Angel Island, San Francisco. Since they reached their destination over the weekend, they were held in detention and only allowed to disembark when the next working day came round. It was obviously quite a change for all of them but it was especially so for Kala, given the exceedingly small number of Indian women in the United States at that point.

The San Francisco Call had, only five years prior to their arrival, carried a news piece entitled 'Hindu Women Next to Swarm to California'. That might have been a bit of an exaggeration as, according to the same article, there were only four Indian women residing in California.[2] The West Coast of the United States had become home to a number of Indians and, while there were some students amongst them, most happened to be working-class individuals employed in the lumber mills of Washington and Oregon and the farms of California. Even when their numbers were inconsiderable, the

Picture courtesy Rani Bagai and the South Asian American Digital Archive

Indians became the target of White supremacy with Bellingham, Washington, recording the first instance of an anti-Indian riot in the United States in September 1907. On the other hand, the Pacific Coast also became the site of a global struggle against racism and imperialism. Founded in Astoria, Oregon, and later headquartered in San Francisco, California, the Ghadar Movement comprised diasporic Indians taking on the might of the British Empire. Their intentions were made abundantly clear by the name they had chosen for their party, *Ghadar*, which was Hindustani for 'rebellion' or 'mutiny'.

It was no surprise therefore that Vaishno Das, who detested being a colonised subject, became involved with the Ghadarites. It is possible that his involvement with the Ghadar Movement was his only 'profession' in his initial years in the United States.

The Bagais had arrived in the country with a fair amount of money and lived comfortably, first renting a furnished room and later an apartment. Seeing their atypical financial circumstances led some Indians to accuse Vaishno Das of being an English spy. When they eventually purchased a house in Berkeley, California, their neighbours locked the house and prevented them from moving in. This was their first major brush with undisguised and violent racism in their adopted country. Following this experience, Kala refused to live in that neighbourhood—fearing for the well-being of her children—and convinced Vaishno Das to move them elsewhere.

There was a colour line operating globally that discriminated against those who were not White. This is, of course, not to suggest that racially subjugated communities were monolithic and had no hierarchies of their own, but only to indicate that merely having the means would not, to draw from the experience of the Bagais in Berkeley, assure one a secure life. The Bagais relocated to nearby San Francisco where Vaishno Das purchased a house and operated a store below on Fillmore Street. Vaishno Das named his general store 'Bagai's Bazaar' and also began running an import business. In 1921, he became a US citizen but, following the US Supreme Court's decision in *United States v Bhagat Singh Thind*, Bagai was deprived of both his citizenship and his right to own property. The *Thind* decision held that Indians were not White and thus ineligible for US citizenship. In 1928, five years after he became denaturalised, Vaishno Das rented a room in San Jose—not far from San Francisco—turned on the gas, and killed himself.

In a letter to the *San Francisco Examiner*, Vaishno Das protested his loss of citizenship. 'I came to America,' Vaishno Das wrote, 'thinking, dreaming and hoping to make this land my home.' Over the years, he went on to write, his family had made themselves 'as much Americanised as possible'. Now, he had no home and not even a valid passport to return to India; he was, in effect, stateless. He held himself and the American government responsible for the dreadful state of affairs facing him and his family.[3] The *Hindustan Times* thought of Bagai's act of killing himself as a form of protest in patriotic terms. In a separate letter he wrote to Kala, Vaishno Das stated that he could not bear the

thought of becoming a British subject again; he had given up his British subjecthood and passport for good and was not going to pledge, once again, his allegiance to His Majesty.

Following Vaishno Das' demise, Kala was, understandably, lonely. However, she soon busied herself by taking English lessons and attending night school. Vaishno Das had made arrangements for his family's welfare and had given Kala instructions, which at the time she had found puzzling, to receive his insurance money. Kala also benefited from the kindness of friends and strangers in her new home. When she went to San Francisco to collect the insurance money and explained her situation to the banker, he was keen to help her out. He invested the money in stocks so that Kala and her family would continue to have a source of income. Then there were the Meyers. Mr and Mrs Meyers, a German couple, housed Ram, the youngest son of the Bagais, for a few years when he was little. Ram would fondly call Antoinette, or Mrs Meyers, 'Auntie' Meyers and Mr Meyers 'Daddy Meyers'. According to Kala herself, the Meyers adored Ram and loved him as their own, often taking him on tram rides and treating him to ice cream. Unsurprisingly, at the end of those three or four years, Ram spoke fluent German.[4]

Still, life as a single mother in a country where she was putting down her roots was challenging, especially for a woman in her time. So, for reasons of companionship and security, Kala Bagai decided to remarry. She married Mahesh Chandra, who was a friend of the family and, like her late husband, a Ghadarite himself. Mahesh wanted to get married immediately but Kala wished to find brides for her sons first. She eventually relented but not before extracting a promise from Mahesh: on their trip to India to look for prospective brides for her sons, he was not to disclose their marriage.

Kala Bagai found a bride for her eldest son Brij. Her middle child Madan, who happened to be one of the first South Asians to study at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), wanted to, and eventually found, work in India, frustrated as he was with American-style racism. Never mind that he was returning to a colony of the British. In India, Madan felt bitter about being supervised at work by a less-qualified Englishman. There was really no escaping the global colour line. An incident involving Kala, Madan, and Madan's superior might offer some insight into

what made Kala Bagai 'jhaiji'. Madan was, at the time, working in Agra and Kala, on a trip to India, had travelled from Amritsar to her son's town in order to meet him. Madan, anticipating his mother's arrival, had left instructions with a domestic staff to cater to her. When they finally met, Madan apologised and told his mother that he would be unable to spend time with her as he had to go on a work tour with his English superior. Kala, rejecting this, said that she was going to speak to Madan's superior herself. When the Englishman arrived, Kala explained to him that she had come all the way from the United States and expected to spend time with her son. Madan's superior readily agreed and said he would take someone else along.

Before departing, Kala left some money with Madan and proposed that he return to the United States if he did not like living in India. Her son decided to stay behind and Kala's family eventually arranged for Madan to get married. Sometime in the early 1940s, Kala and her family in the United States received a telegram informing them that Madan, sadly, had passed away. What was perhaps even more tragic was that Madan, who used to regularly write to his mother from India, had already mailed postcards before his untimely passing that continued to reach Kala for a month or two after his death. In those days, the mail could be, from today's point of view, agonisingly slow. As a result, Madan continued communicating with his mother even after his death, as if he were still alive.

Kala Bagai's eldest son Brij, along with his wife Smita, returned to the United States. As if more evidence was needed of Kala's ability to face challenges and get things done, she purchased a laundrette, or laundromat in the United States, and had new laundry machines and clothes dryers installed. She did this for Brij to be able to support himself and his family. Kala would also help Brij out in the laundrette.

Kala Bagai eventually left San Francisco for Los Angeles to be with her youngest son, Ram. After finishing his engineering degree at Stanford, Ram Bagai moved to the University of Southern California in LA to pursue a master's programme in cinematography. Years later, Kala's youngest son would attempt to popularise Hindi films among American filmgoers, especially in California. To further this enterprise, Ram established an

organisation called Films of India. He also kept himself involved in the politics of both India and the United States. When the then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru toured the United States in 1961, Ram met both Nehru and his daughter, Indira Gandhi. Indeed, in a photograph from that state visit, Ram and his daughter Rani can be seen with Nehru and Indira Gandhi. In 1965, Ram Bagai wrote to Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy conveying support for the Civil Rights Movement. In the letter, he stated that 'your dream is our dream—that your prayer is our prayer'.[5] Ram Bagai had more than words to offer: he resolved to donate the entire proceeds from the New York premier of the 1957 Hindi film *Do Aankhen Barah Haath* ('Two Eyes, Twelve Hands') to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organisation cofounded by King, Abernathy, and other civil rights activists.

Along the way, what Vaishno Das had been dispossessed of, Kala and her two surviving sons finally came to have. The Luce-Celler Act of 1946 made Indians eligible for American citizenship, which they were granted. In the 1950s, Kala purchased her own property in LA and continued to be a prominent face in the South Asian community. Of course, by this point, the composition of the community had changed: members began arriving, until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, in very small numbers but they did so from the independent countries of India *and* Pakistan. Kala, an observant Sikh woman who was not even five feet tall, made and retained friends from all social and religious backgrounds. South Asian students from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) could often be found at her house. She was famed for her hospitality and, despite being vegetarian herself, cooked meat for guests. The United States and her American friends no doubt made an impression on Kala as well. She began playing tennis, developed a taste for Mexican food, and came to enjoy the American holiday of Thanksgiving.[6]

Even though one could have excused her for doing so, Kala Bagai Chandra did not spend her time simply socialising. She was deeply involved in philanthropic, relief and socio-cultural work. Kala happened to be an active member of the American Wives of India, an organisation dedicated to promoting cultural understanding. Among the many things they did was raise funds

for famine relief and Partition refugees in India. Her son Ram's wife, Leona Bell (Parr) Bagai, was Vice President of the American Wives of India. The organisation was 'especially interested in developing appreciation of the culture of other nationalities and other races'.[7]

In an interesting historical footnote, Bhagat Singh Thind—the man at the centre of the *Thind* case that led to Vaishno Das and a number of Indians losing their American citizenship—became, later in life, godfather to two of Ram and Leona Bagai's children, Rani and Robin. One wonders if Kala and Bhagat Singh Thind ever spoke of Vaishno Das Bagai. Kala Bagai, Thind and Vaishno Das belonged to a generation of Indian Americans whose lives in their adopted homeland were also informed by the lives they had left behind in the colonised land of their birth. A resolve to see India and, indeed, the world free of imperial rule remained a priority for them.

In November 2022, I spent a little over two weeks in Berkeley, California, researching at the university's archives. Every evening after I finished work, I would walk a block to the Downtown area and casually stroll until it was time for dinner. In the process, I would pass Kala Bagai Way, sometimes stopping at the corner and letting my mind wander. In September 2020, 105 years after the Bagais first arrived on the West Coast, the Berkeley City Council renamed one of their streets after Kala Bagai. The proposal for the name change had the support of, among others, Corrina Gould, an indigenous American activist belonging to the Confederated Villages of Lisjan/Ohlone. The same town that had been unwelcome and even hostile to the Bagais had now institutionalised the memory of one of them.

Indians who came to the United States in large numbers following the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 have all too often been forced into a 'model minority' stereotype which is that of a depoliticised and hardworking population that 'contributes' and does not create 'trouble'. They are then contrasted with African Americans and Latinos who are depicted as communities that have fallen behind after having failed to take advantage of the opportunities that life in the United States affords. This is not only ahistorical but also disregards American immigration policy which favours professionals and already privileged classes from countries such as India. Most of all,

it obscures in the American imagination the historical existence of a different type of Indian American: a highly political and defiant sort that challenges attitudes of docility, a kind embodied by Kala Bagai. It is therefore unfortunate that she remains an unfamiliar name to most Indians, both in India and the United States. Kala Bagai overcame personal grief and racial discrimination to create for herself a life of dignity and joy. Moreover, in providing service to others in her community and beyond, she also demonstrated how one could lead a full life.

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NOTES

1. *India West Magazine*, 1983. '"Mother India" Dies in L.A. at Age of 90', 28 October. Box 5, Folder 18, page 16, South Asians in North America Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
2. *San Francisco Call*, 1910. 'Hindu Women Next to Swarm to California', 15 May. Box 7, Folder 17, South Asians in North America Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
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