



The Hushed History of Oblivion

My homage to the victims
of the slave trade from
my neighbourhood
and beyond

Sosa Joseph

I was born and raised in the Kuttanad region of Kerala, India. So was Anima. Though she was born there almost two centuries before me. When she was sixteen, she was abducted while asleep in her hut, trafficked to Cochin, and sold into slavery in that city in 1811. I was to live and work in the same city two centuries later. Naturally, when I came to know of her - from a book I happened to pick up during the pandemic - there was no forgetting. Two hundred years after she was sold as a slave, I found myself painting her.

Growing up in Kerala, one never hears how rampant slavery and the slave trade were in the past of the region, and our past as a people. Even the textbooks on 'social studies' in schools remain tight-lipped about it. In the pages of a still-emerging history, I wanted then to look for other victims of a slave trade that struck close to home but has largely been forgotten. With help from a friend experienced in historical studies, I managed to glean information from various sources of currently emerging scholarship about the slave trade from my part of the world. I found nameable people like Anima, quite a few of them.

Mani and Itti Kali were Izhava girls, eleven and thirteen years old; when they were sold as slaves in Cochin in 1753, they were re-christened Christina and Helina by the Dutch private traders who bought them. A large number of such transactions and transitions of identity from young people of low caste in Kerala - then called Malabar - to slaves with European names can be found in the sources. Eight-year-old girl Chakki of Vettuva caste, from interior Kerala, became Rosinda, and a five-year-old Paraya boy, Koran, became Februarij. The same year, Komaran, a sixteen-year-old Izhava boy, was to be a slave called Januarij, and Ayyan, also sixteen but a Pulaya boy, was to be Februarij again, following their sales in Cochin. People who were thus robbed of their identity after their sale as slaves in Kerala and other parts of the subcontinent were sent far afield.

In the sources, one meets Lorenzo de Malabar, a Malayali slave who worked at the port of Manila lading the galleons around 1607. In Mexico, we find Tomaz, a slave from the Malabar coast, who was sold to a sugar hacienda and lashed by his Spanish overseer for not being able to keep pace with his fellow black and mulatto slaves in pushing sugarcane through the rollers.

Also found in Mexico are Anton de Goa, who was tried by the Inquisition in 1651 for standing up in a church during the Mass, Maria de la Rosa, who ran away in 1660, and Lucia, who was tried by the Inquisition in 1626 for assaulting a crucifix. One of these slaves of Indian origin, a nine-year-old girl who was kidnapped from an undetermined location on the subcontinent around 1610, brought to Cochin for transshipment to Manila and then sold in Mexico nine years later, was to become an uncanonised 'popular saint' in Puebla at the time of her death in 1688. Known as Catarina de San Juan and China Poblana, she was venerated by Catholics in Mexico until the Inquisition prohibited it; she is still remembered there.

A large number of slaves from the Indian subcontinent, Malayalis included, can be found in the archives in the Cape Colony as well. Jacob van Malabar, a Malayali who was whipped in 1767 for trying to escape, Thomas de Croes van Tranquebar, possibly a Tamil slave, whose hands were cut off before he was hanged and dragged in 1719 for retaliating against the owner who was assaulting him, and Aron van Bengal, a Bangla slave who was charged with arson, half-strangled and then burnt to death in 1717, are just a few of them. Indeed, there are thousands of unnamed slaves from Kerala, the Indian sub-continent and the Indian Ocean rim in the records. Among the impossible to forget are the fifteen unnamed female slaves - all owned by one man - who became pregnant during a single voyage to Acapulco on the Manilla Galleon, and the five former soldiers of Travancore (the southernmost kingdom of Malabar then, where both my parents were born before it was ceded to India) who were shipped by the British to St Helena as slaves, but hanged themselves from a tree soon after their arrival on the island.

One finds slaves originating from the Indian subcontinent in Ceylon, Jakarta and several other Dutch holdings on the Indonesian archipelago, Malacca, Macau, Brazil and other Portuguese-controlled territories, the Philippines, Mexico, Peru and other parts of erstwhile Spanish America, St Helena, and the Mascarene islands such as Mauritius and Reunion, besides Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, Britain, and France. While no generalisations are possible across periods about the age, sex, and ethnicities of the enslaved, rare studies exist about people trafficked

from specific regions during certain periods. Based on an analysis of the Dutch archives of Cochin, we know that about eighty per cent of the slaves acquired by private traders in Cochin in 1753 were young, with an average age of thirteen, and belonged to the caste segments of Pulayas and Izhavas. Most others came from castes such as Paraya, Mukkuva, Kanakka, and Vettuva, thus clearly indicating how the lowest people in the caste hierarchy were preyed upon and sold as slaves.

It's been estimated that about five hundred thousand slaves were traded in the Indian Ocean by Europeans, with significant numbers originating from peninsular India. The bulk of these slaves originated from Kerala, and the coasts of Coromandel and Bengal. Starting from the first decade of the sixteenth century this trade remained operational until the middle of the nineteenth. From their *Cidade de Cochim* ('City of Cochin', now known as 'Fort Kochi'), besides Lisbon and Brazil, the Portuguese sent slaves mainly to Malacca and Manila from where the Spaniards transhipped quite a few of them to Mexico. After the Dutch VOC (United East India Company) acquired the town from the Portuguese in 1663, Dutch traders shipped slaves to Ceylon, Batavia, and other Dutch holdings in the Indonesian Archipelago, from where many were transhipped to the Cape Colony. Those days, half of the population of the City of Cochin was made up of slaves owned by burghers, and captives waiting for ships were put in irons in the disused Catholic churches now used as warehouses. The British mainly exported to St Helena, and the French to Mascarene islands such as Mauritius and Reunion.

Except in cases where European slave raiders directly captured and carried away people - such activity is in evidence, especially in Bengal, and at sea - who sold most people from Kerala into slavery? We Keralites did. How, one wonders, could such large-scale trafficking in people take place from Kerala, a place known for the pepper trade and not the slave trade? An equally important and perhaps even more disturbing question is how such heinous trade conducted over three centuries could largely remain unknown to the people of Kerala? Such a 'culture of silence' and historical amnesia are indeed concerning. A large-scale supply of chattel slaves certainly wouldn't be possible without the existence of a social system that

preyed on the weak and sold them into slavery. Here is the gist of what I was to discover about the background and mechanisms of the slave trade originating in Kerala, which informs this body of work.

Slavery and the slave trade were well established in Kerala centuries before the arrival of the Portuguese, the first Europeans to reach the Indian Ocean. We have royal grants extant from the ninth century, giving a Christian church in Kollam tax exemptions on slaves kept by it. 'Caste-slavery' was the norm that supplied labour for much agricultural production, wherein low-caste populations of Pulayas, Parayas etc, were treated as chattel slaves. For this reason, Kerala could well be called a 'slave society' at the time. Though still not widely known in Kerala today, the domestic slave trade was prevalent even in the early decades of the twentieth century. Although the so-called 'caste-slaves' such as Pulayas were usually sold with the land to which they were attached, much like serfs in feudal Europe, ample historical evidence exists to establish they were also independently sold, pledged, donated, and even given away as part of the dowry when the slaveholder's girl children got married. Across Kerala, various rulers of kingdoms gave owners absolute rights over their chattel slaves; masters could punish slaves brutally, and kill them with impunity. The brutal murder of Madathi, the pregnant Pulaya woman who crumpled and died in a rice field in Travancore as the result of being yoked with a buffalo driven by a whip, is a case in point. The rulers of various kingdoms of Kerala themselves owned slaves in large numbers. The Government of Travancore, for instance, where my family hails from, owned 15000 slaves, even during the lifetime of my great-grandparents. In slave markets of Kerala, including that of Changanassery - barely ten miles from the house I was raised in - owners sold their slaves, and parents driven to destitution sold their children into slavery. Many churches auctioned slaves - presumably those donated to them - after Mass for devout churchgoers to buy.

Besides acquiring 'caste-slaves' sold by their masters and people selling themselves and their children to escape starvation, abduction seems to have been a significant supply mechanism employed or relied on by the slave traders to meet increasing demand. Evidence of widespread

kidnapping and trafficking, especially of children, can be found in the British archives from across South India including Kerala, particularly around Cochin, Mahé, and Tellicherry.

When one goes looking for things in the past, one finds what one wishes one didn't. This is why, I think, it's been said that facing history takes courage, besides honesty. Anima, the sixteen-year-old Pulaya girl abducted from Kuttanad where I was born, and sold as a slave from Cochin where I live, was subsequently released from her captivity, thanks to the intervention of a British magistrate in north Kerala, then called the British Malabar; the English East India Company had abolished slave trade in territories controlled by them by then. Thousands of others who were sold into slavery in Kerala weren't that lucky. Cultivating wheat, barley, rye and grapes in the Cape Colony, working as porters at the port and as nurses and grave diggers at the VOC hospital in Cape Town, working cargo in the port of Manila, toiling in sugar and cocoa haciendas and the notorious *obrajes*, peddling sugar and other produce through the streets of Acapulco and Mexico City, they walked into oblivion, with not even their countrymen remembering them, even collectively. They weren't given the kindness of a historically accurate remembrance; called 'Freed blacks' in the Cape and 'Chinos' (as all Asian slaves in Spanish America were called including East Indians) in Mexico and other parts of Spanish America after manumission, they lost all traces of their identity, and became a forgotten and lost people, as history remained silent on them for centuries.

This body of work is for them, portraying a few of those long-forgotten people as I imagine them in moments from their lives as slaves, and presented here with the regret that I could cover only very few of them. These are my tribute to the victims from Kerala, the rest of India, and the much larger context of the relatively unknown Indian Ocean slave trade. These works are also a form of remembrance, to honour the people subjected to prolonged oblivion. Because, as has been rightly said, 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.'

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Sosa Joseph was born in 1971 in Kerala and lives between Kochi and Bangalore. She studied at the Raja Ravi Varma College of Fine Arts, Kerala, and the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. Previous solo exhibitions include *Where Do We Come From?* at Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke, Mumbai (2022), and *What are We?* at the Setouchi Triennale, Japan (2016), among others. Group shows include *Woman Is as Woman Does*, Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation, Mumbai (2022); *Art of India*, Clarinda Carnegie Art Museum, Iowa (2021); the 21st Biennale of Sydney (2018); *Mémoires des Futurs / Modernités Indiennes*, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2017); *Kamarado*, Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam and Clark House Initiative Bombay (2015); and the first Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2012). Her work is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum, New York.

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