Anurag Subramani

Mr. Jones

Everyone – the members of his household (most of them), the Fijian villagers who lived near Dus Numbar and the itinerant salesman who frequented the settlement from time to time selling cheap Chinese toys, imitation perfumes and jewellery, plastic ware and bundles of cloth - called him Appa, but to me he was always Mr. Jones.

Mr Jones was really born Yenktaya Sami Gounder in 1937, in a place called Bale Basoga, the fourth child in a family of eight children, and the eldest of four boys. The day he announced his arrival into the world with great bellowing, his father, Kanappa Sami Gounder, went to the Naag Temple and poured five gallons of fresh cow's milk in a crevice in the temple floor as an offering to the snake God who was reputed to live there, for finally blessing him with a son after burdening him with three wanton daughters. During his seventh year, his father went back to the same temple and poured five gallons of paraquet or weed killer down the same crevice, cursing the snake God who was reputed to live there, for delivering unto him a 'laymaar'(good-for-nothing) for a son.

The problem with Mr. Jones was that he had a very big heart and sometimes took philanthropy to an extreme by donating everything – the tinned goods stacked neatly in the kitchen shelf, packets of soap and toothpaste that sat in the food safe, the kitchenware, the sacks of sugarcane fertilizer piled in the barn and even the clothes off his own back – to the Fijian villagers living nearby. "Pura jaati bange (he's became a total Fijian)," his eighty-four year old albino grandfather, Pachappa Sami Gounder, used to say, his eighty-one year old charcoal-black

grandmother, Kaliamma, nodding in agreement. During his twelfth year he ran away to Dus Numbar to live with his maternal uncle, Permal Sami, a machine operator at the Labasa Sugar Mill. He began to caddy for the 'sahibs' playing in the nearby golf course. One day as he was weeding the gardens of the big white bungalow on the hill that belonged to a white overseer, he saw a girl – Bachi, his future wife – breaking guavas in a grove nearby with other village belles. He instantly fell in love, although the girl took an immediate dislike to the scruffy character. However, three years later they were married. My uncle was sixteen and my aunt fourteen.

Exactly one year after their marriage, the first of eight children arrived with the same bellowing sound with which Mr. Jones had arrived two decades earlier; an eggplant purplish-black (hence he would be referred to by all as 'Kariya Baigan' – black eggplant) and angry looking boy whom they decided to name Kaliappan. Thereafter, one child arrived every year for the next seven years until at the end there were a total of four girls and four boys. Apart from the eldest daughter Muniamma, the rest of the children were guided by the matriarchal wisdom of the head of the household, which decreed that father and husband should be treated with a mixture of disrespect and mild loathing. But the youngest child – Munna – who was a veritable mama's boy and hence the most distant from his father - showed open contempt for his father by addressing him by his name or a curt 'eh' and reporting all his movements to his mother. In a culture where a man was king of his shack, Bachi reigned supreme, marching up and down, up and down the corridors of the house all day long like a lioness, keeping an eye on her young but particular watch on the activities of her mate, whom she was certain was forever plotting to remove an item of value from the food safe or shelf in the kitchen to give to the Fijian villagers who lived nearby. But despite the treatment that was dished out to him, Mr. Jones bore no ill will towards the members of his family and loved his spouse and all his children equally.

All his life Mr. Jones travelled everywhere barefoot. No one in Dus Numbar ever recalls having seen him with shoes on his feet. During the cane payment day, he would put on his best white shirt, starched and neatly ironed by his eldest daughter Muniamma, a pair of brown shorts

held up by the same rope that was occasionally used to tie up the family goats, his hair plastered to his scalp with castor oil, the putrid oil dripping down his forehead and the sides of his face, his bank book wrapped in a sheet of newspaper and carefully tucked inside a secret pocket on the inside of his shorts near the crotch region, and make his way – barefoot - to town some ten miles away. Sometimes the sugarcane train driver, Gandhi, a resident of Dus Numbar, would invite him to catch a ride with him. Mr. Jones would sit on top of one of the sugarcane carts, dangling his feet precariously close to the tramline, chewing sugarcane with gay abandon and spitting out the dregs into the wind. No matter how he got there, as soon as he reached town, he would quickly make his way into the ANZ Bank near the busy vegetable market and bus stand, and sinking into one of the sofas would enjoy the cool air-conditioning – some people say he frequently went to town just for the purpose of sitting in the bank and enjoying the air-conditioning - before joining the queue to withdraw the money some twenty minutes later. Upon his arrival at home, his wife would swoop down on him like a bird of prey and seize the money he had withdrawn and hand it to her eldest son Kaliappan for safe-keeping. She simply could not trust her husband with all that money. "Sala kaibiti long ke dai di," (the bloody fellow will give it to the Fijians) she would say.

Whenever I visited his home, Mr. Jones would be extremely delighted to see me and make great efforts to welcome me in English. He had not gone past class two in school and his command of the language was very rudimentary, but what he lacked in knowledge, he made up for in enthusiasm. "Hello Mr. Jones (hence the name I started calling him by)," he would say to me in a deliberate American accent. He would turn to his wife and in the same accent say: "Make the tea please." This would greatly irritate my aunt who truly believed that the main purpose for her husband's existence was to irritate her. One day when I visited the settlement after my father had become principal of a high school, he said to me: "Father big shinetishhhh (scientist) now, eh!"

While everyone around him aged visibly, Mr. Jones seemed to be getting younger with every passing year. Dressed in his starched white short-sleeved shirt and brown shorts he looked like a schoolboy and

his shenanigans, instead of decreasing and ceasing altogether with his accumulating years, on the contrary increased to a point where his wife, sometimes reaching the limits of her tolerance, drove him out of the house with a sasa broom or 'belna' (rolling pin), whichever was at hand. These were times he would spend in the nearby village, enjoying the company and attention of the villagers – the children with protruding bellies and runny noses who would skirt the 'koro' screaming 'appa, appa' in a flawless Indo-Fijian accent and the men and women who would gather around him urging him to tell them his tales about his many adventures around Vanua Levu, which he told in Fijian with all the subtleties and nuances of a native speaker of the language - returning only when he sensed the 'temperature had decreased at home' (his words). But upon his return his wife would taunt him more: "Heh! Malicha bull khai ke ai ge," (the dirty bugger has returned after eating beef).

Despite his wife's unwavering aversion for her spouse, Mr. Jones had many likeable qualities and what I especially liked about him was his ability to spin a good tale and I looked forward to them with eagerness. He once told me about the time he was pursued by a group of villagers and policemen in Bale Basonga who mistook him for the renowned poultry thief, Prabhu Dayal. Now 'mistook' is a wrong choice of word, for it was Mr. Jones himself, who, in an effort to instil terror in the hearts of the children walking home from school, spread the word that he was the notorious Prabhu Dayal. Little did he know that over the years Prabhu Dayal had added peeping into outdoor bathrooms while village maidens were bathing to his repertoire of skills and that he was being eagerly sought by the police and extremely irate husbands. Stealing chickens was one thing but casting eyes on the fine assets of the village maidens was intolerable. When the village children mentioned to their parents their encounter with Prabhu Dayal down the road, a lynch mob got together to apprehend and mete justice to the rogue. When Mr. Jones saw the mob approaching he thought it was a welcoming party, but his opinion quickly changed when some in the group began hurling abuse at him aimed at his mother, while others tried their hand at especially large rocks. Wasting no time to find out the exact nature of their antagonism towards him, Mr. Jones charged through several sugar

cane fields, clearing neat paths where none had previously existed, bolted up and down several steep hills, swam across several treacherous rivers until he reached Dus Numbar some twenty miles away in the middle of the night, totally exhausted, his clothes in tatters and covered from head to toe in mud. Not wanting to wake up his wife who he was sure would mete out more injustice, he got into the goat pen and fell asleep amongst the bemused ruminants.

Mr. Jones was short but strongly built and he had a face on which one would perpetually find, irrespective of the weather or personal situation, a toothy smile. The soles of his feet looked like the soles of an old pair of Cebo sandals – thick, rubbery and worn out in places. Apparently every night, as he slept blissfully on top of the pile of sugarcane sacks spread on top of his wooden bed, field mice visited him, and nibbled on the soles of his feet, scurrying away hurriedly when he released one of the mighty explosions from his nether end. It was only these explosions that prevented his soles from being eaten completely in a single night. But Mr. Jones was really a harmless man who wished no evil for anyone. He kept living and enjoying life, even though this enjoyment seemed to annoy his wife. His most well-known locution was "Hastein, paadte, jio zindagi" which translated would be "laughing, farting, live life." What I remember most about Mr. Jones was his capacity to remain totally calm in the midst of the most life-threatening crisis. During a particularly strong hurricane that tormented the North, we – minus Mr. Jones - were huddled together in the family living room praying that the roof would not be blown away. Sometime during midnight, Mr. Jones emerged from his bedroom towards the back of the house wearing his starched brown shorts held up with a rope, his torso bare, a towel wrapped around his head like a Sardarji's turban, and with a toothy smile and an American accent said to his wife: "Make some shoop (soup) please." She was of course not amused.