

A DIP AT THE SANGAM

REUBEN LACHMANSINGH



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my eldest granddaughter, Jet Lachman, who will be touting it after long after I'm gone.

The author is a graduate in Biology of the University of Toronto and an Honourary companion of the University of Guelph.

He's worked as a civil servant, science teacher, multi-award-winning motelier, entrepreneur. In his free time he travelled the world, practised Taekwondo and played League as well as Oldies International cricket tournaments for a Canadian and Australian team, earning two medals.

CHAPTER ONE

Calcutta, 1869

Raja would have made a fine soldier for the British. Instead, the much heralded year of 1869 had ended in infamy. Thugs had captured him to make up the quota for a shipload of indentured servants bound for Demerara, where they would be doing the work of former slaves.

One morning, with the desire to escape weighing on his mind, he pressed an eye against the barricade.

“Keep away from the fence!” a guard shrieked.

Staves that ended in pointed spikes would have been difficult to scale anyway, despite Raja’s six-foot frame.

He retreated, but with the guard’s back turned, he seized the branch of a lone magnolia tree that stood just inside the compound. Back and forth he worked it until it snapped. With his bare hands and feet, he tore off twigs, pared the limb down and planted the pointed end in a dug-up area.

The stick’s shadow was at its shortest at noon when the sun was at its peak. At that time, one squad of guards replaced another. They

clicked boots and presented arms. Just before the ceremonial change, Raja observed that they became sweaty and restless.

At noon, he retrieved the stick. Working a minute here, a minute there, he tried prying two laths apart. Tightly woven in and out of three horizontal strands of wire rope, they shifted just enough for a mouse to squeeze through. He replaced the stick in the soft dirt, where it would be available for him to dig his way out of the compound.

More than forty guards in blue turbans, armed to the hilt with shouldered muskets or bamboo rods, patrolled the quarantine depot—all under the command of British officers in khaki shorts and knee-high hose socks. Raja shook his head at what appeared to be an uphill task.

Days later, after he'd discovered the stick missing, he broke off two other limbs and pelted one hard against the fence, hardly disturbing it. With clenched jaws, he used the pointed end of the other to dig around the area, merely scratching the surface.

A guard tapped him on the shoulder. "You get buckshot in your buttocks if you try anything."

Raja sneered at the man. "Don't your masters need fit men to work as slaves on their overseas plantations?"

The guard delivered a glancing blow to Raja's thigh. He would have to be more careful about what he said. Massaging the sore spot, he scuttled away and found himself in the midst of a group of young men gawking at the women dressed in attractive saris.

News had filtered down that recruiters had bribed the manager of the Calcutta Temple Bazaar for his dancing girls. Those recruiters in turn had received triple commissions for the females, a scarcity in the compound.

Raja figured that the Indian women, eager to seek their fortunes in a foreign land, were needed to provide a continuous supply of labourers to work on the sugar plantations.

One beautiful dancing girl with hazel eyes had become the centre of attention. Slim and of medium height, she flitted about, chatting with one woman after another, flipping her green embroidered shawl over her shoulder. She smiled at Raja showing her even teeth.

At that moment, Raja truly believed that no one could replace his wife, Savitri, who lived with his parents back in Bihar.

The young men soon formed a circle around the women and clapped while they danced. Raja was in no mood for pleasure. As soon as the young men paired up with the dancers, a young officer in a rumpled suit and drenched in sweat shook his head. He beckoned a senior security guard and shouted, "Take those lechers over to the next compound!" He scribbled on a document. "Show this paper to the officer in charge."

"You're a disgrace!" the guard yelled. "Don't you have sisters?" He summoned help from four of his colleagues, and together they seized the men by their kurta shirts and dragged them toward the gate.

"Let them make up the quota for Mauritius!" the officer shouted. He pointed in the direction of a ship. "That schooner has been waiting two hours for a few more coolies. Demerara or Mauritius! It makes no difference to me."

Raja was appalled at the insult. *So I'm Demerara bound. I have no idea where it is, and that man doesn't care where the coolies end up.*

A seagull cried and hovered over the depot, an ill omen perhaps of what awaited him. The stench of the compound was overpowering. He knitted his brows and kicked up a cloud of dust toward the officer, who paid no heed. Curiosity led Raja to a young man who stood alone. "What brought you here?"

"I was walking along the road when a man asked if I wanted to make something of my life."

Some men standing nearby leaned forward to hear more of the conversation.

“What happened when you got here?”

“He told me that in a couple of weeks a ship would take me to a real paradise.”

“Did he explain how such a journey would improve your lot?”

“He said that in five years, when my indentureship contract is over, I would return as a man of wealth.” The young man’s head pivoted from side to side as he spoke.

“That recruiter who brought you here feeds upon poor folk,” Raja said.

To him, the depot was a large animal pen, nothing natural about it. The magnolia blossoms had long disappeared. No birds came to sing, certainly not the koel. Whatever grass had once grown on the clay soil had been trampled. Even a goat would have found nothing to nibble on.

The compound had two open, thatched buildings. The kitchen staff prepared food in one of them, and the doctors, nurses, and depot officials stored their equipment in the other.

Their job was to screen the recruits, checking them for infectious diseases that could put the entire trip in jeopardy. After they’d examined one batch of depot people, the medical staff separated some two dozen men and a few women and children. Whatever diseases they had, Raja could only guess.

Perhaps he didn’t have to break out after all. *Why not pursue a novel way to avoid boarding that ship?*

He inched toward one of the men. Before he could say a word, the man turned aside, retched and vomited.

Raja approached after the man had taken a huge gulp of air. “Why did the doctor put you here, babu?”

The man gestured to the others. “We are all sick as you can see. They need healthy young men like you to cut sugarcane in Demerara.”

That set Raja thinking. He sauntered over to the magnolia tree and gathered several of its leaves. He squeezed their juices, licked some and rubbed the rest over his body to create an unhealthy look.

Soon his turn came to be examined. The doctor placed a funnel-shaped device on Raja's chest and instructed him to inhale. He managed to throw up some of the magnolia juice and faked a coughing spell.

"You're healthy as a horse," the doctor said. "Get over there!"

Raja couldn't believe what he was hearing and headed for the group of sick people.

"Not there!" the doctor shouted. A few nurses fell over laughing.

The staff handed a document and a few coins to each of the sick adults and said, "Find your way home." They applauded their sudden change of fortune. Some who had been limping danced a jig.

Raja shook his head. His good health had worked against him.

Around noon, he wandered over to the cookshack, where a helper was chopping green chili peppers and onions. Though Raja's eyes watered from the onion fumes, he still had a good look at the knife and the storage cupboard above.

As he turned to leave, he bumped into a man who had been eyeing the food. He told Raja that he lived right there in Garden Reach at the Kidderpore Docks. In response to Raja's puzzled look, he said, "The sea was my home. If a captain ever came around and asked for a good sailor, I usually got hired on the spot."

"So you were a ready-to-go sailor."

"For most of my adult life."

Raja studied the ex-sailor, who introduced himself as Sen. "Why turn your back on the sea to work on a sugar plantation?"

Sen's voice quavered. "Better than handling opium."

"You transported opium?"

"From Calcutta to Canton. Chinese tea was draining silver from the British coffers, so they paid with Indian opium."

"Then why did you leave?"

"You would too if you'd seen how the opium addict in Canton would sell his possessions to support his habit." To further questions from Raja, Sen said, "A seaman's life is a burden when his ship becomes a prison." Sen looked away for a brief moment as if collecting his thoughts. "I have no wife, no family nor friends to come home to." His head stayed bowed as if to hide his loneliness.

Raja was grateful that he at least had a wife, parents, and a brother. Now this man needed his support. "I'll be your friend," Raja said, resting his hand on Sen's shoulder.

Sen's eyes glowed with warmth. "As a sailor, I've always answered the call of the sea. Now it beckons me no more."

Raja took a long, hard look at Sen. Was the man tired of living? "It puzzles me why you'd want to join a shipload of coolies."

"To get to a better place," the ex-sailor said, with a dreamy look in his eyes.

"Better place?"

I take pity on this man, but I could make use of his knowledge of the ocean and boats.

In the morning Raja sat on his haunches waiting for breakfast. The line of young men, a few women, some with babies, and older children stretched from one side of the bamboo fence to the other.

A server scooped a helping of rice from a large pot and dropped it onto a banana leaf in front of Raja. Another server following behind poured a cupful of yellow dal into the tiny pond Raja had created on his rice heap. This was Raja's first good meal since his kidnapping.

He ate hungrily and had just taken his last mouthful of food when Sen walked up saying the words he longed to hear, "Let's go look at the ships."

They chatted as they walked along the edge of the compound toward a sandy hill littered with dead seaweed and scum in full view of seagulls and cormorants that skimmed the surface of the Hooghly River.

"Those seagulls are a fisherman's curse," Sen said. "There are few fish left in the river because of them."

Echoes of their screeching cries filled Raja's ears, in sharp contrast to the monotonous lap-lap of waves against the mangrove shore.

A ship with square sails attached to four poles caught Raja's attention. Anchored in the water like a ghost, it stood out from the rest. He lifted a hand in its direction. "I wonder if that is the SS *Arcot*."

The man from the Calcutta docks raised his eyebrows. "Who mentioned that name to you?"

"A recruiter. He said the SS *Arcot* would be taking the depot people to Demer-ra-ra or some such place."

"I'll look for my man. Perhaps he knows how to read English lettering."

Sen led Raja to the top of the hill and shaded his eyes. "There he is." He pointed at a short, thin man dressed in kurta and tie. "Let's catch him before he disappears."

They ran over, and Sen, out of breath, jabbed a finger in the direction of the vessel in question. "Babu, can you read out the name of that four-masted schooner with the bold black letters?"

The recruiter spelled out, "There's an S and another S." He hit his forehead and made an about-turn. "I know someone who can help."

Raja tried his best to restrain a grin. "You treat that recruiter as though he's your peon."

"I earned him a commission," Sen faked a punch at Raja's chest, "now he'll do handstands and cartwheels for me." He wagged a finger at the crew of Indian sailors scrubbing the deck on their knees. "That's

what I did before and throughout each voyage whenever the weather held up." He then gazed upwards at the sailors poised in the rigging. "I hated climbing masts like a monkey except in emergencies."

At that moment, the recruiter trotted up to Sen and pointed. "That is the SS *Arcot*."

"So I was right," Raja cupped his mouth, "and if those scoundrels ever drag me on board, you think you could find me a hiding place on deck?"

"What for?"

"So I can dive and swim ashore."

Sen raised his eyebrows and stared at Raja. "You'd never make it."

"I used to swim long distances back home."

Sen's brief laughter turned into a sneer. "That was down a quiet river. Here you'd have to contend with the Portuguese man-of-war and the powerful undercurrents of the Bay of Bengal."

"Bhai, I'd do anything to get back to my family."

"Are you out of your mind?" Sen's voice must have really carried, for it soon brought the crunch of a guard's boots.

"You two, break it up," the guard yelled.

Later, with the man nowhere in sight, Sen said, "Think before you act. Unlike me, you have a life ahead of you, a family, bhai."

That evening, as Raja lay on his jute bag on the beaten earth, sleep evaded him. A sprinkling of stars shone above while mosquitoes pestered him. Back in Belwasa, he would have smoked them away. He gritted his teeth and prepared himself for the task at hand.

He got up, inhaled the cool night air and looked around. In the dim light cast by a lantern, with guards sipping chai out of clay cups, the smell of spices from the kitchen rose to his nostrils.

He crouched and tiptoed to the shed. Sprawled out on a sheet, fast asleep, was a watchman. While he snored, Raja sidestepped him and

passed his hands over the chopping table in search of the kitchen knife. Satisfied it wasn't there, he reached for the cupboard above. In his haste, he knocked the knife off a shelf onto the table. A loud crash and a sting on his finger made him wince. He held his breath.

The guard mumbled, "Darned rats," and Raja quickly dropped to the ground. *All praises, the man has resumed his snoring.* Raja tucked the knife in the folds of his dhoti and darted for his sack. Now, with a new moon just days away, he had a weapon that could come in handy, providing no one missed it.

At noon the following day, when the guards were about to change, Raja made a trip to the back of the latrine. With the sun directly overhead, he pulled out his knife and chipped away at a bamboo stave. In no time, he made a circular ring on the hard shell just below the joint. To camouflage his action he hugged the fence, but there was no need because the smell from the latrine seemed to have kept the guards at bay.

Around midnight, with the night guard occupied elsewhere and the others taking their usual chai break, Raja headed again for the latrine before swerving toward the bamboo piece he had been working on.

A man on a mission, he used all his strength and cut neatly through the bamboo's tough fibres. Pulled apart and jammed together, the cut portions fitted flush. No one could have detected the break in the joint without careful inspection. He collected the chips and scattered them.

After five nights his palm had developed blisters, but he didn't care a whit. He had cut through enough pieces that, when separated, would allow a man to pass through.

The time had almost come for Raja to flee the compound. If more than one person were involved, it would provide a distraction. All he had to do was choose trustworthy people bent on escape.

He had just returned from breakfast, when he witnessed an argument among a group of men, several of whom were in favour of a revolt. Raja's

eyes widened as the guards attacked the rebels with their batons. They singled out three. A struggle ensued as the guards put them in leg irons and marched them over to a trapdoor that led to an underground holding cell. This was the punishment pit Raja had heard so much about.

Two days later, the guards removed the overhead planks. The poor wretches staggered to their feet and, with trembling hands, shielded their eyes from the sun. An odour of urine and excrement wafted in the air. Despite covering his nose against the stench, Raja couldn't hold down his earlier meal.

A plump man with a hangdog expression caught his attention.

"What's bothering you?" Raja asked.

"A recruiter lured me here with jalebis."

"Jalebis!" Raja could hardly suppress a smile.

"How he guessed my craving for those sweets, I couldn't tell."

Raja patted the fellow's waistline. "I think I know. What did he say once you got here?"

"He told me that after a short boat trip," the jalebi lover wagged his head in rhythm with his singsong accent, "I would arrive in a country called Demerara where, for only three to four hours of work a day, I would earn big money."

Raja broke out into a wide grin. He held the man's shoulder. "That's a pack of lies. We have to find some way to escape."

The man's eyes got all watery. "I think I've been fooled. I'm with you, babu."

"Stay close to me," Raja said.

Later, he ran into a group of people taking part in a discussion. He introduced himself and whispered, "How many of you came here willingly?"

"None," one of them replied. "Those who are happy to board ship keep to themselves." Like Raja, he came from Bihar and spoke Bhojpur.

“Trust me, I too will not board,” Raja said. “Bhai, are you with me?”

The Bihari conferred with the person next to him. “If you are thinking of a breakout, you can count on Muhammad and me.”

Raja took those two men and the jalebi lover to a soft spot away from everyone. With a pebble, he drew a sketch in the dirt showing the barricade, the cane field, and the settlement. He outlined the escape plan and swore the men to secrecy. “Tomorrow at midnight,” he said, “we’ll meet at the fence, behind the latrine.”

The Bihari replied, “Leave it to me. I will gather up the others.”

“Sleep next to me,” Raja said to him. “I’ll nudge you and you can go get the men.”

Around midnight, with the lanterns dimmed, a lowing wind whispered into a moonless night. The stars provided the only light, and Raja sensed that the conditions were right.

He placed his hands together in silent prayer. A rooster at some distant farmhouse shrieked “cocorico,” although dawn was still hours away. Fortunately, the others did not pick up the chorus.

Inside the compound, several guards snored while others, their muskets slung over their shoulders, sipped chai brewed over an open fire. Just as they turned their backs to get refills, Raja gave the signal to the Bihari, who crawled away to find the others.

“What took you so long?” Raja whispered when the Bihari returned with the men.

“This Lunghiman kicked up a fuss.”

The man’s bare chest and bright red lunghi skirt tied at the waist did not find favour with Raja, whose preferred garment for this venture was the loose fitting dhoti. “You should have left Lunghiman,” Raja mumbled. Rather than create problems at this stage, he said, “Chalo! Let’s go!”

They made a dash for the fence and within seconds reached the break in the barricade. Fortunately, the sentry was nowhere in sight and the wind direction was favourable, wafting the stench away from them.

Raja sniffed the chilly night air before he raised each of the cut-off tops of bamboo, exposing the opening.

“Now hurry through, and don’t leave a piece of your clothing behind.” He discovered he had to cut through another bamboo stalk to allow Jalebiman to pass through. “You should have cut down on those jalebis,” Raja scolded.

“I’ll take this stave along,” the Bihari said, placing his hand around the pointed end of one.

“No! It would cut down your speed and leave a gap,” Raja said, as he dashed across the swamp where visibility was no more than a few feet. “First we’ll aim for the cane field then regroup,” he said over his shoulder.

The plunk-plunk of footsteps broke the silence of the night as Raja waded through the weed-clogged marsh, the soft muck massaging his bare feet.

If only he could reach that settlement!