

*The story of an Indian family restaurant in the Paris of 1937-L'Inde A Paris— and their trials and tribulations through Occupied France are captured in this compelling historical Memoir for readers around the world.*

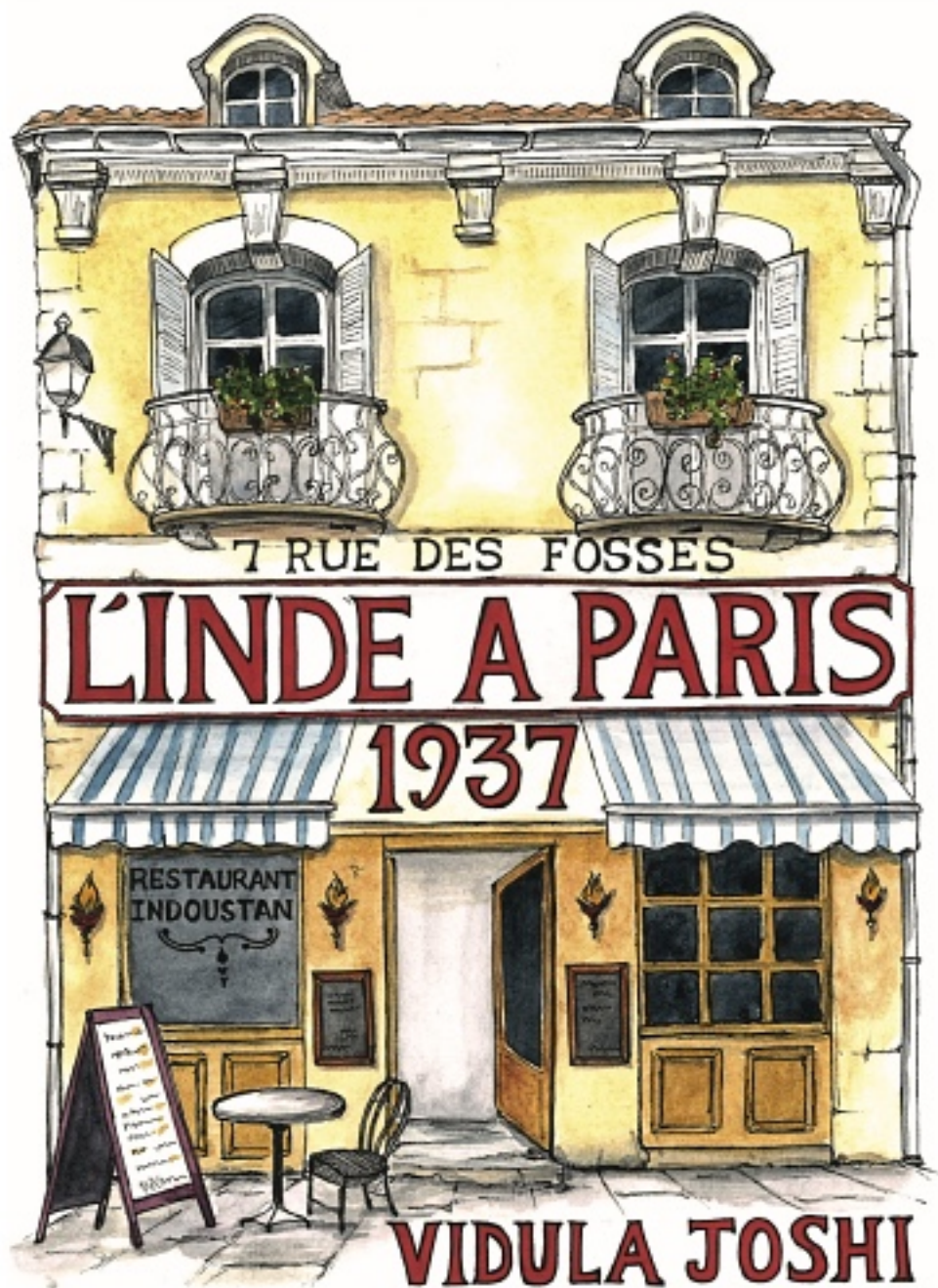
## **L'Inde A Paris 1937**

By Vidula Joshi

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7 RUE DES FOSSES

**L'INDE A PARIS**

**1937**

RESTAURANT  
INDOUSTAN

**VIDULA JOSHI**

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First Edition

## **The Journey - Part I**

It happened in 1933. A Marathi man of modest means and big dreams left his native Ahmadnagar, India for Paris. In 1935, he returned from his maiden voyage with a renewed hunger for the French capital. So he left for France a second time taking his beautiful wife and three boys aged 13, 11, and 5 with him. His name was Narayan Vinayak Chaukar, born 13<sup>th</sup> November 1900 in Ahmadnagar. His wife Kamala Narayan Chaukar ( also known as Ambutai) born 16<sup>th</sup> March, 1908, their eldest son Yashwant born 18<sup>th</sup> December, 1923, their second son, Vidyadhar born 24<sup>th</sup> November 1925 and their youngest, Raghunath born 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 1931. This is their story.



## Time

I am history. I am Time itself. I will insert myself in this story because I am the canvas on which people scribe their life events. So have the Chaukars. They came into this world nearly a hundred years ago, and left me a keeper of their words, their actions, their triumphs, their defeats, their fortunes and misfortunes, until I said enough—time to brush the dust off my old creaky bones and speak up.

At times I will speak for the real people in this story because they can't possibly know everything can they?—I can, so I will give them voice. I'll be *Them*—in that crucial middle—when I absolutely must.

And finally only once, I'll assume the persona of this particular building in Paris which I consider my personal favorite. Why? Because, I haven't been able to ravage it yet. Isn't that simply amazing? It is.

So listen. For the sake of posterity, for the sake of an unknown story of courage, ambition valor and grit—***this must be told***—follow the Chaukars and their remarkable journey through time. Settle in, dear twenty-first century reader. Read.

**7, Rue des Fossés Saint-Jacques, Saint-Jacques Paris-75005**

Don't get me wrong. Don't blame me for picking up the pen. The soul that writes has its own compulsions. Mine will set me free and so will you my reader.

As a house, I am walls, concrete and a neat façade. Being a historic building in the Latin Quarter of Paris I am pampered. I undergo regular maintenance. Rue Saint Jacques has seen better days. It has seen worse days. For starters, I don't lie. As a solid object I cannot make up something that never existed. That is your domain, dear human. Remember all those times you fought wars, when you took over what was not yours when you made promises you did not keep? I tell the truth. Truth is all I tell.

Nowadays travelers come to France's capital searching for a French experience. Banal! They peek inside a store. "This is a happening place," travel sites scream online." Sheer nonsense, if you ask me. To add salt to the wound, a few blocks down from me is the setting of a popular show which brings the vilest of followers, selfie takers—oh my goodness let me not go there. Let's not even mention the rise in hotel prices around me owing to this show, now in its third season. Dommage!

But that's not why I am strutting like a proud peacock here. No. A picture haunts me. It is the picture of a turbaned man with a beautiful mustache wearing a double breasted suit. He is holding the hand of a charming six year old boy. The man looks foreign. He stands under my awning. Believe you me (I can't believe I am talking like this already. Pardon my march into the future), it's his soul I can't forget. I cannot let it slide past me that the Indian gentleman painted a bright

sign over my dull yellow façade that read, let me inhale, “L’Inde a Paris” The year: 1937.

The man is a Maharashtrian, (resident of the Indian state of Maharashtra) from Ahmadnagar, India. His name is Narayan Vinayak Chaukar, a mouthful, but who am I to complain? I am French. Hah! And as a French turned Indian turned French I have seen it all, taken it all in, without a whimper and here I stand, a block of concrete *avec un certain sentiment de, je ne sais quoi, indifférence?* What do you call it in Marathi? *Asach kahitari, pan jaoo de.* And for yours truly I would say. “It happened here that there lived a proud man with a beautiful wife and three young boys who sailed all the way from Mumbai, India to make me their home.” Just as some left in pursuit of the American dream, Narayan Vinayak Chaukar left in pursuit of Paris, France, for freedom and his country.



## Kamala

I have wondered.

What is it to be brave?

To be brave is to dream

To be brave is to move away

To be brave is to believe

To be brave is to wake each day and sleep each night in  
God's hands

To be brave is to plan for success

To be brave is to fail and fail again

To be brave is to return home

To be brave is to say good bye

To be brave is to journey back

With what you have

To be brave is to let go of what didn't stay

To be brave is to rebuild

We are all brave

We were all brave

But you are braver. See how you win and I surrender? So I said yes to France Your France. Soon, we will pack our bags and leave. I know you want it for us and our country.

But first I have to go to the Siddheshwar Mandir and the Ganesha Mandir. I want to make sure nothing comes in the way of my seeking God's blessings. We have very little time. And I will not embark on this voyage without visiting the temples first.

I feel settled now. I can take charge of my fears and doubts; my worries and panic; my dread of the wide world about to unfold before me. I get busy. What will we need to take with us? How much can we carry? What can we expect on this sea voyage? What does the great big ocean look like? What do I wear? How big is the ship? Does it rock? How

much? What do we do if we are caught in a storm? My real concerns surface from time to time, but mostly I sweep them off into the vast ocean of Faith. Faith will sustain.

Before we know it the sun has risen over the horizon on the last day of our life in Ahmadnagar. I water the tulsi one more time. I make the rangoli in the dirt by the back door. I bathe. My husband Narayan, who we call Baburao, performs the puja. I cook food to take with us. I do all these things like I never intended to stop doing and prepare to leave. The boys wake up, dress, pack and repack their bags one last time. We all do. Then we step over the umbra—that small wooden raised step between the living room and the terrace—and arrive at the last exit point of our home.

Then we cross over.

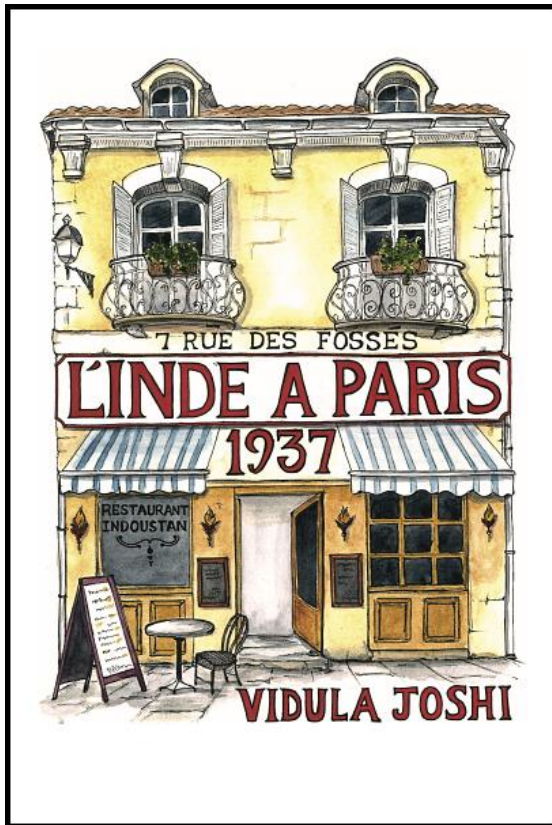
## Time

On a hot day in October 1936, the fancy Italian liner Victoria set sail for Genoa Italy, carrying a young family of five on the voyage of their lives.

Victoria was the first of its kind: Modern, outfitted with luxurious first- and second-class cabins, lounges, and air conditioning. It was the only match for the more celebrated transatlantic ships of the day. Victoria carried passengers to and from the Far East, India, and Africa to Italy. In fact a few Britishers chose the Italian vessel over the more celebrated English ships.

The day of travel, Victoria awaited its departure from the port of Bombay. It was set to take the route from Bombay to Aden, Port Said and Napoli and ending in Genoa, Italy. Like everyone else the Chaukars and Kamala's brother Krishnaji Biniwale (known as Bhau) who was traveling with them, gathered on the deck to view the ship's first movement away from land. The captain blew the horn. A sea gull took flight and the giant vessel moved. The Chaukars began their journey in the second class cabin of Victoria with a tug and a fierce goodbye. Kamala grabbed the folds of her sari as Yashwant turned away from the shore and seaward. Vidyadhar gazed at the swirling water under the ship, while Raghunath held Baburao's hand and together they waved at the people left on the pier.

Kamala waved one final goodbye because her arm hurt from moving it for so long. She waved at her brother who had come to see them off. Babasaheb waved back. He appeared to say something to his sister but she heard nothing. Then she turned her back to her shackled nation and faced the waters ahead and, along with it, everything else she did not know but would have to find out.



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