

# MR TULSI'S STORE

*a fujian journey*

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BRIJ V. LAL



Australian  
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For

*Sam, Kamla and Rajendra*

and for

*Manju and Bahini*

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older  
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated  
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment  
Isolated, with no before and after,  
But a lifetime burning in every moment  
And not the lifetime of one man only  
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.

T.S. Eliot, 'East Coker'

## *Acknowledgements*

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*Brij V. Lal*  
*Canberra*

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## *Preface*

*This collection of essays* and stories represents my attempt, from the vantage point of an impending half-century, to revisit a time and a place I have taken for granted or ignored, to reflect on an experience not recorded in written texts but which was, at the time, profoundly important in shaping the life of the post-war generation of Indo-Fijian children: that is, the experience of growing up in a sugar cane village, poor, vulnerable and isolated; the expectations and hopes of a community struggling to escape the legacy of hopelessness and servitude following the end of indenture; the petty humiliations and deprivations they encountered along the way.

The world that formed me is alien to my children. They find it hard to believe, for instance, that I was born in a thatched hut on my father's farm, delivered by an illiterate Indo-Fijian village midwife; that I grew up without electricity, running water or paved roads; that for us village people, often the only window to the outside world was a week-old newspaper; that our generation's motto, a painful reminder of our

unpredictable and uncertain condition, was 'one step at a time'. This collection, then, is both a record and a reminder: a record of a world that has now almost vanished beyond recognition, and a reminder of the long journey we have travelled and the transformations we have undergone.

In recording my experiences, I have privileged truth over accuracy, attempting to catch the thoughts and emotions rather than dry facts about village life. For obvious reasons, some names have had to be changed and some conversations imagined. I have tried to recall the past creatively, imaginatively, rendering factual, lived experience through the prism of semi-fiction. I call this kind of exercise 'faction' writing. It is the most satisfactory way I know of remembering a past unrecorded in the written texts.

My journey may seem improbable to many: from the cane fields of Labasa to the capital of Australia, from peasant to professor just two generations after the end of indenture. It is improbable, I would agree, but not exceptional. Its routes and roots would be familiar to many of my generation, although we will all have different points of departure and different destinations. I hope that memories I have retrieved here will prompt others to recall and record their own experiences.

'One does not have to be solemn to be serious,' Oskar Spate used to tell his colleagues. Spate was the Foundation Professor of Geography at The Australian National University, and a distinguished humanist. Spate examined my doctoral thesis on the migration of Indian indentured labourers to Fiji, and continued to take a keen interest in my work and progress. Fiji, he said, was close to his heart. 'One must always wear one's learning lightly,' was Ken Gillion's advice to me. Gillion, a respected historian of the Indian indenture experience in Fiji, was one of my dissertation supervisors. The wise words of these two respected scholars have remained with me.

Both Spate and Gillion belonged to an earlier generation which was genuinely concerned to communicate research in the intelligent language of ordinary discourse to an audience beyond the halls of the

academy. Regrettably, their example runs counter to the currently fashionable trend in the academy for word games and jargon-laden, obscurantist prose, the converted talking to the converted, pandering to the educational establishment's demand for narrowly defined, peer-reviewed research, publishing to get ahead, or get funded, not necessarily read. Some of this specialisation is, of course, necessary; but it is dangerous and distorting when carried to extremes, especially in the humanities. This collection of my essays and stories is a small act of rebellion against the current orthodoxy. It celebrates life in all its diversity, entertains the possibility of hope and progress in a world of bewildering change, and searches for complete explanations and universal truths without apology.



# Tabia

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'  
We are not now the strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'Ulysses'

*I was my grandfather's favourite grandchild.* Two of my older siblings had died during childbirth. Aja suspected an evil hand at work. So relying on remembered knowledge, he instructed Maria, the village midwife, to purchase me as soon as I was born. She did, for three pennies. I survived, old ways had worked, the chain of evil had been broken, there were no more deaths. Aja was reportedly ecstatic. Six days later, when I was first introduced to the world, my mother bought me back for six pennies, but Maria continued to claim me as her own son. Years later, when I was about to leave for university, I had to perform a special *puja* and give gifts to her to seek her permission to return formally to my own mother. It was an emotional ceremony performed, at mother's insistence, in the presence of all my relatives and important village folk.

Aja took me over when I was still an infant. I slept in his bed, ate from his plate, listened to his stories of his own childhood, helped him to walk to the river to carry out his ablutions. He protected me from my siblings and my parents when they tried to punish me for

my errant ways, chasing them away with his walking stick. There was a special bond between the two of us, father used to say, the like of which he had not seen before. I suppose my interest in things past began with that association. I was beside Aja when he died in his sleep early one May morning in 1962. After his death, our relatives divided his remaining material possessions among themselves: bits and pieces of silver, wooden sandals, the stringed bed. My father chose for himself his father's walking stick and some indenture coins. I have them now.

My grandfather was a *girmitiya* (indentured labourer) about whom I have written elsewhere in this collection. After he had completed his indenture as a stable hand in Batinikama, Vunivau and Tuatua, all sugar districts surrounding the Colonial Sugar Refining Mill on the banks of the Qawa river in Labasa, he moved to Tabia in 1929. His tattered marriage certificate, another of my father's valuable possessions which he kept in a green metal box underneath his bed, records that Aja married on 23 September that year. Marriage is a complicated word in this context. The truth, which the family recalled in hushed, even embarrassed tones, was that he had eloped with the wife of his friend with whom he had shared his living quarters, during *girmit* (indenture). There was nothing unusual about that; the lack of women on the plantations produced multiple partnerships. The two men remained friends, however, visiting each other occasionally long after indenture had ended. Aji, a short, fair-complexioned woman of fine features, fiery temper and perpetual frown, remained aloof from these unions. Aja called her 'Pagli', the mad one.

In 1932, Aja obtained his native lease of ten acres. The European surveyor, no doubt with neat compactness of boundary lines in mind, offered to include several more acres of adjacent agricultural and hilly land, but Aja refused. It was a sin to have more than you needed, I remember him saying. The surveyor persisted but Aja remained unmoved. Where would other village folks graze their goats and cows, or gather wood for cooking? That decision was both

a curse and a blessing for us. Curse because the small block kept us in perpetual poverty, unable to support a joint family of two brothers and a dozen school-age children. And blessing because it forced us, and other families in the village, to look for alternatives. A larger block and, in all likelihood, we would still be on the farm. It was on that farm that we were all born and grew up. Tabia was the place of my childhood. Now it is a labyrinth of evanescent memories.

Tabia to which Aja came after *girit* was a raw place. There was no sugar cane then; that came much later in the early 1950s, and therefore little income. Men travelled up to seven miles on foot each way to work for the CSR farms in Tuatua. There were no roads then, or bridges, no regular transport and thus little contact with the outside. People planted maize, lentils, rice and vegetables and carried the produce on their shoulders to the Nasea market nine miles away, a feat of physical fitness often recalled by an older generation, not as a reminder of their own hardship but as a rebuke to the perceived physical weakness of their children. Tabia has changed beyond recognition since the 1950s. A tar-sealed highway runs through it now; there is piped water and electricity, bustling modern primary and secondary schools; people have travelled widely and some have overseas connections; the thatched bures with matted bamboo walls have been replaced almost entirely by concrete structures; the old attire of lehanga, dhoti and pagri have disappeared; and the modern world touches life — through radio, television, video — unimaginable a generation ago. The once great landowning families, the Guddu Lals, the Ram Dayals, the Fiji Lals, owners of trucks and buses and taxis, too, have gone. They were once the envy of the entire village. Tabia now is like any other Indo-Fijian settlement anywhere in Fiji.

I describe Tabia as a village, but in truth it is a collection of separate settlements under an overarching administrative name. These included Vatudova, Vunivacea, Laqere, Soisoi, Movo and Tabia proper. To outsiders, these internal configurations were invisible and inconsequential: we were all peas in the same pod. But to us, these

distinctions and differences mattered greatly, flaring up around annual inter-village singing or soccer competitions, when tempers frayed and fists flew as people taunted rival teams. There was also a clear but unspoken hierarchy among the different settlements.

The people of Tabia proper, for instance, thought themselves superior. They had the village school, the mosque, the hot spring, '*garam pani*', where devout Hindus conducted special ceremonies for Lord Shiva and celebrated Shiva Ratri. Many of the early leaders came from there. We in Vunivacea were, as I recall, ridiculed by others for our apparent lack of physical prowess and ability to put up a good fight. '*Badhia*' is what unfriendly people called us, limp, like castrated bulls. We, in turn, saw ourselves as a rung or two above Laqere across the river, and definitely superior in every way to Soisoi, a quasi-feudal, self-contained village where a few large families, with a fearsome reputation as bullies, held sway unfettered, or Movo, a remote South Indian settlement near the mangroves by the sea, and virtually out of contact with the rest of the settlement.

The earlier boundaries of isolation and prejudice blurred with new developments, forging an overarching sense of a cohesive community. The new school for the entire settlement brought people together as they took turns keeping the compound clean, erecting new buildings, raising funds. The opening up of a central rice milling facility or a shop well stocked with the staples encouraged interaction between villages. So did the creation of a Rural Development Committee, which forced people to find the best person to represent them irrespective of where he lived. And the development of Nasea town also reinforced broader settlement-wide loyalties as Tabia fielded a single soccer team in Vanua Levu-wide competitions, and participated in such events as the Labasa Jaycees' week, the Mosquito Campaign week, the Sangam festival and the Miss Labasa festivities. By the early 1960s, a disparate collection of isolated villages with different histories and levels of development, with their own prejudices, had gained a strong semblance of a single identity.



Tabia was a predominantly Indian settlement, largely self-sufficient and driven by the energy and initiative of its members rather than stimulus from outside. The older generation was suspicious of the government. Being illiterate, many were ignorant of the way the district administration worked, baffled by all the paperwork, and unable to communicate directly with the officers who made important decisions about their lives. The *girmit* experience cast a long shadow. For the most part, they preferred managing their own affairs, settling boundary disputes, assessing compensation for damages caused to crops by straying cattle, arbitrating petty disputes involving neighbours, disciplining young men on the prowl for promiscuous sex, keeping an eye out for thieves and rogues who threatened to ruin the village's reputation. People entrusted decision making to respected village elders who constituted the panchayat, a five-member committee, which met whenever the need arose. Often its decision was not contested; the price for asserting independence was heavy. The person could be ostracised. No one would attend the wedding ceremony or other social functions in his family. He would be shunned in village meetings. His cane would be cut last. The threats were endless. It was a brave man indeed who dared to stand up to the panchayat. Few did.

The panchayat not only adjudicated disputes, it also enforced community standards and morals. Once a family had given its word for some undertaking — a marriage proposal, for example — its members had to honour it. Religious groups had to be prudent in the public profession of their faith so as not to give offence to others. People were asked to slaughter cattle and pigs away from the public eye. Potential for conflict in matters of faith was closely monitored. By and large, things worked out well. But as the older *girmit* generation passed away and people became accustomed to the methods and machinery of government, as families expanded and wealth and education came to the settlement, the power of the panchayat declined. It is now a remote, vanishing memory.

Fijians were at the outer edges of our consciousness. There was a Fijian *koro* (village) by the Tabia river, but we had little to do with it. On the rare occasion that we saw it from a safe distance while on our way to some other place, we marvelled at its neat lawns, its well-maintained rows of brooding bures, cheerful children, its open environment. But that was it. Growing up, I can recall only two Fijians, one with a sense of fear and the other with great affection. Semesa struck fear in us. He was a middle-aged man, grey and hairy, who travelled shirtless from his koro across our settlement to the sea several miles away to fish. Armed with a knife and several spears, he would pass by our house very early in the morning and return at dusk with a string of fish slung around his shoulders. He never stopped by or talked to anyone. It is that figure, walking alone, slightly hunched, uncommunicative, perhaps even grumpy — never responding to our *Ni Sa Bula Turaga*, Greetings, Sir — that accentuated his mysteriousness to us. His name was used by our parents to strike terror into our hearts whenever we misbehaved. ‘Semesa will take you away’ was enough to ensure silence and compliance from us.

The figure I remember fondly is a Fijian woman, tall, dark, flat-nosed, who had adopted my father as her younger brother. We called her ‘*phua*’, father’s sister. Phua was playful with my mother — her ‘*bhauji*’ — and openly affectionate towards my father — her ‘*bhaiya*’ — often admonishing him about this or that, and always taking our side when we were threatened with punishment. She came home regularly, with a bundle of fish or crab, and went away with clothes, rice, sugar and spices and special gifts during festivals. We treated her as a regular member of our extended family. I am sure there was a Fijian *phua* in every Indo-Fijian family. I have often regretted not looking her up after I left Tabia. But that was the extent of my interaction with Fijians, which I now deeply regret. We had no opportunity as children to play together. We went to an Indian school, and Fijian children to their racially exclusive provincial schools. Regrettably, our paths never crossed.

Besides being an Indo-Fijian settlement, Tabia was a predominantly Hindu one as well, Sanatani, orthodox Hindu. I grew up in a fairly orthodox Hindu family. Our neighbour across the road, Mr Shamsher Ali, was a Muslim, though. We called him '*phuffa*', father's sister's husband. Our relations with him were cordial, if not always close. The consumption of beef and pork divided us. The cow for us was sacred; the pig to them was the filthiest animal on earth. The children, of similar school-going age, were closer. We visited each other during Eid or Diwali and during marriages or birthdays. We played and swam together. The Shamsher family took much pride in our success at school and praised us publicly for our good manners. The old man always came home whenever I returned from overseas, curious, full of innocent questions, about life in the land of the sahibs, asking me when I was returning to live in Labasa. Still, for all that, the pragmatic closeness of a near neighbour, rather than the warm togetherness of a community, characterised our relations. Relations are still cordial today, but there is a greater consciousness of religious identity among the younger generation on both sides now than before. The paths have diverged.

Our religious calendar at home was cluttered with endless *puja* or ceremonies performed to mark an important or auspicious occasion — celebrating Lord Rama's and Krishna's birthdays, for instance — in fulfilment of some personal or family wish, or a rite of passage. Mother also performed the annual Shiva Ratri ceremony in honour of Lord Shiva at the hot springs down the road with a devotion that we could not fathom. She was especially devout when she was carrying one of us, believing that noble thoughts heard and contemplated during pregnancy improved the child's character. Recent medical research has confirmed my mother's rustic wisdom. Father was punctual with the Satyanarayan and Hanuman *puja*, performed by the family priest at a specially prepared mound under the mango tree, the spot marked by a red pennant proclaiming our religiosity. Our major festivals were Holi and Diwali. Holi, sometimes called Phagua, was a colourful spring festival

celebrated over a fortnight. We burnt the effigy of the evil witch Holika, and sang specially composed songs (*chautal*) to the accompaniment of dholak, majira and dhandtal, going from house to house on the final day singing and spraying each other with coloured water.

Diwali, the thanksgiving festival of lights, less commercialised then, was our favourite. On that day, mother would be up at dawn and cook special sweets and vegetable dishes, especially for that occasion: gulab jamun, lakadki ke mithai, halwa, ghugri, puri, gulgula, bada, kadhi. The children were exhorted to display their best behaviour on the day, not to cry, fight or swear because, we were told, how we behaved on that day would determine our behaviour for the rest of the year! We dutifully obliged. In the evening, we lit *diya*, and prayed to Goddess Lakshmi for good fortune and good luck in schoolwork. And then, as the *diyas* brightened the moonless night, we exploded home-made firecrackers. To my great shame, I admit to placing firecrackers in toads' mouths and seeing them explode from a safe distance.

Ramayan recital was the most regular feature of village social and religious life, binding the community together. Each settlement had its own '*mandali*' association, sometimes several, to cover the more isolated homes. The text was popular not only with the people of our own village but with Hindus throughout Fiji. Part of the reason was its simple, morale-enhancing story-line of Rama, a noble prince, virtuous in every way, exiled for fourteen years for no fault of his own, who eventually returned triumphant after a hard-fought victory over the demon king Ravana.

Rama was what every son, brother, husband, ruler could ever hope to be. In Rama's story, the *girmitiyas* saw hope that their own exile, their ordeal on the plantations, would one day come to an end. Rama was the king of Ayodhya, in eastern Uttar Pradesh, from where the bulk of the migrants came, so there was social and cultural familiarity with Rama's region as well. The text, moreover, was written in accessible Avadhi, the language of the Indo-Gangetic plains, which

could be read by anyone who was literate, unlike the more esoteric Sanskrit texts comprehensible only to the learned few. And Ramayan recital was a social activity, the text recited rhythmically by a group of men to the accompaniment of harmonium and dholak. The occasion provided entertainment as well as spiritual enlightenment, enhancing social bonding.

Each *mandali* had its own set of rules. Our *mandali* required the household hosting the recital to keep it 'clean' for seven days. Clean meant no deliberate killing or injuring of animals, and no consumption of meat or alcohol during that period. The injunction was easily observed, for meat and alcohol were unaffordable, and offenders subject to strict penalty. They could be punished by the threat of boycotts and sanctions against the family, powerful instruments in a community whose members depended upon each other for social and economic survival. But rules changed with the times. They had to. As people found employment in town, and more money circulated in the settlement, the injunction against meat and alcohol became unsustainable. Some people, impatient with the rigidity of the old ways, broke away to form their own *mandalis* with less restrictive, more liberal rules. Predictably over time everywhere, the stipulated number of 'clean' days declined. Now, a day or two is enough.

Over time, the Brahminical form of Hinduism, celebrating vegetarianism and clean, ritual worship, took hold on the settlement, but even as late as the 1950s, many people continued to practise rituals and ceremonies associated with their particular caste groups. A neighbour, for example, annually sacrificed a pig to appease his caste (Chamar, low caste) deities, while others sacrificed goats and chickens. A week or two later, the same people also hosted Ramayan recitals and performed various *pujas*. They saw no contradiction in what they did. The practice of animal sacrifice died with the older generation. But superstition and the practice of magic and witchcraft — *jadu tona* — continued. People consulted a spirit man to cast a spell on enemies or secure a favourable personal outcome. To cure

headache, dog bite or jaundice, people went to the spirit man rather than to medical doctors. Everyone did it. Childless parents sought the assistance of a *pir*, a Muslim spirit man, who dispensed his services in return for a healthy rooster of specified colour (red, white, black). Ghosts and evil spirits — *bhuth pret* — were an ever-present threat, and we were told not to walk alone at night, or whistle. Nocturnal whistling attracted evil spirits roaming the earth. These things do not exercise the same terror now as they once did.

The celebration of various rites of passage gave families great joy. The birth of a child, especially a boy as the first born, was an occasion for unrestrained celebration. Many rituals associated with childbirth have disappeared altogether or been modified beyond recognition. For instance, some families, professing to be of the higher castes, did the '*garbha sanskar*' when pregnancy was confirmed. The family priest officiated, in the presence of family members and neighbours, and prayed for the health of the mother and safe delivery of the child, both important considerations as children of my generation were born at home without the benefit of proper medication or even adequate sanitation. That ritual has disappeared. We all associated childbirth with '*chatti*', the celebration which marked the sixth day of the child's birth. Until that day, both the child and the mother were confined to the house, perhaps because the first six days were considered most life-threatening for both of them. On '*chatti*', the child was ceremoniously introduced to the world. Women and men sang, the child was given gifts — baby powder, soap, napkins, baby oil, clothes — while the mother received a sari and other ornaments, including a gold sovereign, or several, if the family was well-to-do, for her part in perpetuating the family line.

On that day, too, the family priest was called to consult the astrological chart to identify the child's '*rashi*', astrological sign, and suggest a name. The way names have changed over the years tells a significant story about the social evolution of the community. The *girmitiya* names followed no discernible pattern. Often people were

named after objects (Tota, or an Indian bird) or something personal (Bipath, meaning hardship, Sukhai, happiness, Garib, poor) or after days of the week. A person born on Monday, Somvar, was named Somai, Samaru or Sumeria. A child born on Tuesday (Mangalwar) could be named Mangal, Mangru, Madho, on Wednesday (Budh), Budhai, Budhram, on Friday (Sukh), Sukhram, Sukh Deo.

*Girmitiyas* continued the pattern of their childhood, but they also began to name their children after gods in what the sociologists would recognise as the process of 'sanskritisation' and upward mobility: Ram Avatar (Incarnation of Lord Ram), Ram Sharan (Taking shelter in Ram), Shiva Prasad (offering to Lord Shiva), Ram Lakhan (Ram and Lakshman) Arjun and Saha Deo (from the *Mahabhart*a), Indra Deo (after Lord Indra, the God of Rain). One could not tell a person's caste background from these names. A subtle, perhaps deliberate, levelling process was at work. Our parents went a step further, naming their sons after prominent personalities and film stars: Jawaharlal, Rajendra Prasad, Kamla, Ashok, Uma Datt, and so on. The next generation broke all conventions by choosing names not with cultural association or astrological calculation in mind, but which sounded modern, westernised, fashionable: Shalwendra, Avikeshni, Shayal. Westernisation was replacing sanskritisation.

Many children of my generation grew up in joint families. The *girmitiyas* wanted to maintain the system they had themselves known. It was their way of reclaiming and remembering their past. A large social unit was also important for social and economic reasons. More men meant more hands weeding, hoeing, planting cane and rice, protecting the ripening mangoes and watermelon or root crops like dalu and cassava from thieves. A joint family moreover represented status and power. The bigger the social unit, the greater its cohesiveness, the greater its chance of dominating the cane-cutting gang or swaying some other important decision in its favour. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, the joint arrangement was beginning to crack. Most of the *girmitiyas* had gone by then, and with

them the moral glue of tradition which had sustained the structure. New opportunities and domestic friction, caused by the desire for more independence and control over individual income, contributed their own share. Sometimes the parting was amicable, but some cases went to court over the appropriate sharing of the property, after village elders had failed to resolve the dispute. Now, the joint family survives only as a distant memory for people in the village.

For most of us, the village itself was our joint family. Everyone was an uncle or an aunt or an older brother, and they all assumed a collective responsibility of teaching children proper manners, including thrashing them for some transgression or breach of social norms. Our parents did not interfere or intervene. Older people were never called by their names. That habit has remained with me. Sometimes they were given nicknames which we could use without giving offence. Thus, Mr Bisun was called 'Chillar' for some unknown reason, and for us he became 'Chillar kaka'. We called Shiu Prasad 'Double Drive' because he had two wives. Mr Ram Saran, a tall, thin man, was called 'Lumpet' and another, tall and dark-skinned, 'Regna', after a variety of cane. The village money lender, Mr Budh Ram, was called 'Taang Toong'. Why, I have no idea. Mr Jai Narayan we all knew simply as Magellan for his insatiable curiosity about the world, and Mr Ram Dayal was dubbed Patel, after A.D. Patel, the great criminal lawyer and Indian leader, for his uncanny ability to dredge up an obscure fact to win an argument in his favour.

We never called our older siblings by their names either, and this habit has persisted in our family. Nor did wives address their husbands by their names. My mother never called my father by his name. When someone asked about his whereabouts, mother would reply 'So-and-So's father is in the field.' When speaking directly to him, mother would say something like '*Are suno*', 'Oh, listen'. Whenever in the presence of others, my mother always covered her head with '*orbni*', a light shawl. Not to do so was seen as a sign of rudeness and defiance, reflecting badly on the family's reputation.



Women talked to their neighbours through their children, never directly. An interesting situation developed when the bus came to Tabia. Younger married women travelling alone couldn't pay their fares directly to the driver; talking to him or making eye contact was unthinkable. They would cover their heads with a shawl or their sari, place their fares on a metal plate and sit down. The driver would send the change through another passenger, usually a child.

A woman's world was tightly regulated, her field of action narrow. Always a mother, a daughter or a daughter-in-law, she was never — nor was she allowed to be — an individual in her own right. Her family's welfare was her sole concern. In public she was always expected to be deferential; even a minor assertion of independence was disapproved by the village. In the domestic sphere, though, mothers and wives exercised far greater influence than outsiders would allow or recognise. They managed the household besides working in the fields planting rice or weeding cane fields.

Age brought women greater freedom from the customary restraints, especially for women from happy, established households. They were valued as teachers and custodians of culture. My own mother, for example, a fine singer of folk songs and deeply knowledgeable about important rituals and ceremonies, was always in demand in the extended family scattered throughout Vanua Levu. Marriage songs — *sohar* — were her speciality for which she is remembered even now. At home, she was the emotional centre of the family whose counsel and wisdom were always heeded — and needed — but which were never publicly paraded or acknowledged. Father was, as he had to be, our undisputed public face. And there was a level of understanding and tolerance between my father and mother that would surprise many even today. Father was a teetotaller and a lifelong vegetarian, for all practical purposes, a man of the cloth. Mother, on the other hand, smoked, drank the occasional bowl of yaqona or beer, and ate meat. Her habit was never a matter of dispute or disagreement in the family. I recall with great tenderness my non-smoking father gently lighting mother's '*suluká*',

home-made cigarettes, towards the end of her life when she was frail and disoriented.

The greatest cause of family gathering was marriage. Marriage today is a simple enough affair. The boy and girl find each other, inform their parents of their choice, seek their approval and have a civil marriage later solemnised by a religious ceremony. Parents readily go along, happy to pass on the heavy responsibility to their children. It reflects changing times and needs. Most married couples establish their own households soon after marriage, without attracting social opprobrium. The extended family is a thing of memory for them. Income and education, rather than the social standing or wealth of the family, play a larger part in the choice of partners than before. And social sanctions are no longer easy to deploy to enforce compliance and conformity.

Things were different a generation ago. Marriage then was regarded as too sacred an institution to be left to the whim of youthful love. Marriage joined families and much more, not just individuals. One's spouse was chosen by the family or the community elders whose principal criterion was the reputation — the good name — of the family in the wider community. Girls had to go to good homes because, once married, there was no possibility of return, no matter what the circumstances. Children were informed, rather than consulted, about their marriage. For many years after indenture, child marriages were common, repeating a practice prevalent in rural India. My father's older brother, I was told, was carried to his betrothal ceremony on his uncles' shoulders. My own mother was betrothed at thirteen and married two years later. Girls were married early. A pre-marital misadventure would ruin the prospect for other marriages in the family besides damaging the reputation of the village. Moreover, a proper '*kanya daan*', gift of a daughter, was decreed in the scriptures to be the noblest gift parents could ever give.

The social status of the family was important, but there were other considerations as well. A consciousness of caste status played

a part in the early years, although caste, as a system of social organisation, had collapsed in Fiji, unable to survive the levelling experience of migration and indenture. The higher castes intermarried, because they had to, but marriage between a low caste, such as Chamar, and a Brahmin, was unheard of. Lower castes themselves opposed the practice because they thought marrying above their caste was somehow wrong or sinful and likely to invite divine retribution. Old beliefs, inculcated through the centuries, persisted stubbornly in the new environment.

Marriages were also taboo between the families of *jahajibhais*, *girmitiyas* who had come to Fiji on the same *jahaj*, ship. They practically regarded each other as blood brothers, with all the expectations and obligations that relationship entailed. The practice disappeared as *girmitiyas* died and as the community expanded. Inter-cultural marriages were also rare. North and South Indians did not intermarry. Colour played a part, the generally fairer-skinned North Indians regarding themselves as better than the darker-skinned Southerners. Sanatanis, orthodox Hindus, stayed away from Samajis, the reformists, and the distance, though diminishing, remains. Among South Indians, Malayalis, self-regarding, preferred their own to Tamils and Telugus. Hindu-Muslim marriages were — and still are — practically non-existent. Marrying Gujaratis and Punjabis, late-arriving free migrants, was also unheard of. The community was a series of concentric circles, each with its own separate identity, each keen to protect its sense of self. Fijians were on the outermost fringes, and inter-racial marriages simply beyond the imagination.

Marriage ceremonies were long drawn-out affairs, involving great cooperative effort and expense. The pattern has changed. Now most marriages are conducted during the day, and both men and women accompany the groom's party to the wedding. A gaudily printed card announces the event to close family and friends, seeking their blessing. Not all villagers are invited, unheard of during my time. A generation ago a father with marriageable children would first

approach family and community elders. Word would spread and, in the course of time, several prospective names would appear. Discreet enquiry and discussion would narrow the list over several months. When a name was settled upon, a party of senior family members would make the visit. Sometime during the course of the proceedings, the girl would enter the gathering with a tray of tea and home-cooked delicacies. An elder from her side would let it be known that this was the girl they had come to see. The men might glance discreetly at her half-covered face, but say nothing. Behind the curtain or perhaps in the kitchen women would assess and scrutinise. The decision would come a week or so later. The first public step towards a wedding took place three weeks before the actual event in a ceremony called '*tilak*', akin to engagement. The symbolic act of union was captured in '*lawā bhujni*' during which unhusked rice brought by both sides is mixed and thrown ritually into the fire, *agni*. Rice represents fertility. Once the date was settled, a '*nau*', a messenger, would be hired to take the invitation personally to people in the village, the invitation taking the form of turmeric-coloured rice. He would get rice, dhal, sugar, salt, sometimes a piece of cloth in return. Often the '*nau*' was a colourful character, a joker, a clown, unthreatening, from a poor family, a dog's body, advising on protocols to be followed, acting as the groom's protector and servant.

The marriage ceremony proper took place over three days, '*telwaan*', '*bhatwaan*' and '*shadi*'. From myriad, whirlwind activities amidst buckets full of yaqona and endless cups of syrupy tea, some things stand out in my mind. Mysterious prayers at dusk led by female members of the family seeking the blessing of secret family deities one had not heard of. The groom, wearing a turmeric-stained shirt, sleeping on a grass bed on the floor, marking the last day of his hard bachelor life, or equally plausibly, preparing him for the hard life ahead! The ceaseless '*dhammak dhammak*' and women's singing that announced the festivities to the world, the midday meal on the second day when the groom passed a partly eaten plate of food to his younger

brother, identifying the next one in line for marriage. A tearful mother sad at losing 'her baby' to another woman, being consoled by her brother during the '*imligothani*' ceremony, promising to be her guardian always. The '*dhaag paat*' ritual involving a respected male elder from the groom's side placing a garland around the bride's neck with the promise to protect her like her own father and swearing, there and then, not to speak to the woman till his dying day unless she was in dire straits and his intervention unavoidable. The '*dwār puja*' with the bride's senior male relatives ritually washing the groom's feet before the female members did the '*arti*', welcoming him to their extended family. And heart-rending cries of the bride's family as she took leave to start a new life among strangers from which, they all knew, there would be no returning. The severance of the umbilical cord was for good.

Some things about the wedding ceremony remained a mystery for me until much later. Among them was the ritual associated with the construction of the '*mandap*', the place where the actual ceremony took place. It was a raised mound of earth leavened with fresh cow dung paste and four crepe paper-covered bamboo poles creating a square structure. In the centre of the raised portion was planted a banana stem surrounded by bamboo branches. Both the mother's and the father's sides of the family together planted the stem as a sign of family solidarity. The earthen *mandap* floor was liberally sprinkled with coloured rice. Why these things? The banana plant, virtually indestructible — suckers sprout freely — I learned, stood for the continuity of the family tree. Bamboo bends, it never breaks; so, it was hoped, would the new family. Rice symbolised fertility, and the coconut was considered the purest form of offering that could be given to the gods because its water was untouched by human hands. Cow dung was used because, coming from mother cow, it was considered clean by Hindus. Now, most weddings take place in hired halls during daytime, dispensing with items and rituals once central to the ceremony.

Some things, though, have not changed. The thirst for good education is one of them. Today, Tabia boasts a well-equipped secondary college as well as a flourishing primary school. Its students have become prominent members of the Labasa community. Some have even migrated to Australia, New Zealand and North America. It is an achievement of immense magnitude which is all the more remarkable considering how humbly and haphazardly it all began. From very early on, village people, themselves illiterate, realised the importance of schooling, but nothing happened because they had no money and few contacts, and the colonial government was indifferent, preferring Indians to remain on the farm. The village people had other ideas, however, knowing that the rented land held no future for their children. Self-help and keenness got them started. Sahadeo and Butru, literate *girmitiyas*, taught whatever they could, in return for help with domestic chores, chopping wood, feeding the cattle, fetching water from the well.

In 1943, a holy man from India, Sadhu Sharan Das, visited the village in the course of a year-long cultural tour of Fiji, and stressed the need for a proper school. His advice, one villager recalled, was: 'All men are equal, love them and serve them, be proud of your origins and maintain your identity.' Revolutionary words in the context of the times, when you come to think of it. The Sadhu inspired people. Funds were raised, a villager donated five acres and the Tabia Sanatan Dharam School got started. Yet, despite its name and the predominantly Hindu population of the village, the school was non-sectarian. Its head teachers included Muslims (Munshi, Ashik Hussein), a Punjabi (Mehtar Singh), Christians (Simon Nagaiya, Austine Sita Ram), South Indians (Subramani Gounden, Gopal Pillay). Good character mattered more than the faith of the teacher. That aspect has not changed, though there is community expectation (and pressure) now that the head teacher of the school should be a Sanatani Hindu.

The school cemented the community, made the people immensely proud. Its sportsgrounds hosted inter-settlement competitions. Plays were performed as well as festivals celebrating the

birth of Lord Rama and Krishna. I recall enjoying the role of a minor monkey in Hanuman's army planning to invade Sri Lanka! Visiting dignitaries and religious leaders from the subcontinent held week-long discourses. The Colonial Sugar Refining Company's mobile film unit showed documentaries extolling its innumerable virtues to us children sitting on sack mats in the playground. I have happy memories of my time at Tabia Sanatan: arriving early for a game of '*gulidanda*', soccer or rounders, the midday siestas, the vigorous and entirely tuneless inter-class singing competitions, camping at the school for several months and cramming prescribed texts for the dreaded entrance examination, the enormous pressure on me to perform to keep the school's scholarly reputation up, terrorising tiny tots as the head boy, acting as a relief teacher for the lower grades.

Memories survive along with copies of books we read in primary school in the 1950s and the 1960s. We began, in grade one, with the 'Caribbean Readers', picture books written, the preface said, 'for children of the West Indies, British Honduras and British Guiana', about Mr Joe and his family of animals: Miss Tibbs the Cat, Mother Hen, Mr Dan the Dog, Mr Grumps the Goat, Master Willy the Pig, Cuddy the Cow and Percy the Chick. The book was designed to cultivate the idea that 'learning to read is great fun'. That it certainly was, and those characters in the book have remained with me. For the next several years, we read the 'Oxford English Readers for Africa'. The books were intended to extend our vocabulary of the English language, and to give 'systematic training in the manipulation of those heavily-worked phrase forms and clause usage which are essential to fluent self-expression'. The content emphasised how the world worked, using examples that transcended geography.

So we read stories on lifestyles in towns and villages, on different types of plants and animals, on seas and their importance to humans, on communication ('How messages are sent'), the major canals of the world and the purpose for which they were created, the role of the post office, different designs of buildings, bridges and

roads. And they introduced us to the history and literature of ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, to William the First, the Duke of Wellington and Napoleon, Columbus and Magellan (Men Who Made the World Larger), to Shakespeare (*Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar*, especially Mark Antony's speech to the Romans, which I remember to this day, having memorised it in primary school).

The books also taught us our civic responsibilities. An essay on 'Good Citizenship' for grade six students is instructive. The State, we were told, was the natural order of civilised society: 'Even the most uncivilised people find it necessary to organise themselves into some simple form of State, because human beings cannot live for long in safety and in health if they try to live alone. The necessities of life are water, food, shelter from the weather and safety from enemies. It is easier to obtain these things if men work together as friends. That is why even uncivilised people, in far-off times in the past, formed little communities which were simple States, with a leader or ruler to see that each member obtained his rights and performed his duties.'

The State was 'working for the good of all of us', and it was our duty to pay our taxes, help the police maintain the safety of life and property, to help the law courts to give justice, and to obey the laws. 'The good citizen is he who is a good householder, a good villager, a good townsman, and a good subject of the King. A bad citizen is he who thinks too much of his own rights and nothing at all of the rights of his fellows, or of his duties to his neighbours.' We were being trained to be doers, not thinkers, cogs in the wheels of the colonial bureaucracy. The ironic thing is the emphasis on obedience to authority, discipline and order, maintaining the status quo when colonialism was on its way out in Asia and Africa and eventually the Pacific.

Nonetheless, the same texts which exhorted us to obey the laws imposed upon us, also encouraged us to read books, to cherish the pleasures of the imagination. Nothing is more dangerous to an established order than an unfettered mind. 'A book is a very wonderful thing,' grade five students read:



Some kinds of books are worth more than gold and silver, because they bring to us the knowledge which was gained by clever men who died long ago. If there were no books, that knowledge might be lost. Other books enable us to explore lands beyond the sea, without ever leaving our homes. From books we can learn about mountains and plains, rivers, and streams, in places which probably we shall never see with our eyes. If we are in doubt about anything, we can get a book about it and find out the truth. If we wish to inquire about anything, and there is nobody in our town who knows the answers to our questions, we can buy books and they will give us all the information we want. A person who owns some good books can see more and travel farther than the richest man in the world, for the rich man who just travels about may forget much that he sees, but the person who has the books need never forget. Therefore, we should treat all books with great respect. We ought not to throw them on the ground, or make them dirty. We should not bend them back so that the leaves become loose and fall out. We ought not to tear their pages or cover them with dirty finger-marks. When we have read a book, we should keep it carefully, for our memory of what is in it may fail, and then we may want to read it again. Books are the storehouses of all the knowledge in the world. If we buy good books, we can have the greatest thinkers, the greatest engineers, the greatest scientists for our friends.

That advice, received so early in my life, influenced me greatly. The beautifully crafted sentences, evoking exotic images — of elephants, tigers, the moors, the palaces — worked magic for me. Even though we lived in a small, impoverished village, I could

imagine and inhabit other worlds. We felt part of a larger world, and were proud of all the red spots on the map which marked the British Empire, our one happy family of colonies.

I read wherever and whenever I could, while grazing cattle by the roadside or late at night by the light of the wick lamp — *dhibri* — engaging in endless imaginary conversations with characters I had encountered in the texts, thinking about the life of the Eskimos in the 'Arctic Wastes', the pyramid of Kephron, the pygmies of Central Africa who, we were told in grade five, were 'a backward race', the great stones of Brittany, majestic steamers and sleek fighter planes. A bookworm was how some people characterised me. Shakespeare, Tennyson and Matthew Arnold became — and remain — a part of my inner world, and part of my Tabia. They were joined later by Chinua Achebe, V.S. Naipaul, George Eliot, John Steinbeck and many others.

There was nothing much in the English texts about our own immediate cultural world. That came in the Hindi '*pothis*', books written by Pandit Ami Chandra during World War II. These simply written texts introduced us to Hindi poetry, Indian fables, prayers (recited every morning before class) and to the heroes and heroines of Indian history and mythology: Sati Savitri, Lakshmi Bai, the story of Lord Rama, episodes from the *Mahabharata*, the Mughal emperors Akbar and Aurengzeb and their great deeds, the majestic beauty of the Taj Mahal. Sprinkled among them were a few accounts of the Indian presence in Fiji, but this subject was avoided partly because, I suspect, it was controversial and partly because it might not have been thought worth studying.

The books offered practical advice as well on how to keep our homes and gardens in order, the importance of physical exercise and good neighbourliness. Good citizenship required obedience to authority, respect for elders, sacrifice for the greater good and individual enterprise. The books also inculcated pride in our history and heritage. The texts were intended for school children. In fact, they educated the community as well, as illiterate parents asked their

children to read to them stories about their forebears' past. My interest in Indian culture and history and language comes from these books. I am grateful to them for opening our horizon, for enriching our imagination, for making us feel part of a larger humanity. Whenever we meet now, people of my generation re-visit the texts and recite poems we had once learnt by heart, much to the amusement of our children, poems about alcohol and alcoholics (*Pea kar madak madakchi ek, Chala kabin ko lathi tek*), about bananas (*Lamba phal hota hai kela, meetha phal hota hai kela, Is ko kha khush hote bacche, Ma se peni lete bacche*) and about bicycles (*Do pahiyee ki cycle, Daur lagati khel, Dena padata hai nahi, Is me paani tel*).

My contact with Tabia diminished over time as I moved to Suva for higher education, and then overseas. The death of my parents and my brother Ben weakened my emotional links. Each time, I returned as a stranger among people with whom I had grown up, re-formed and influenced by other experiences beyond their comprehension. I have often wondered how we were able to escape the place to forge the life we have. Fate, chance, accident? One step at a time: that could have been the motto of my generation. My journey may sound improbable, but it is not exceptional. The details will vary, and there will be many points of departure, but the broad contours of the transformation in our lives would be recognisable to many of my generation. We broke barriers our parents could not have contemplated. A career as a lowly paid civil servant, a bank clerk and, if lucky, a secondary school teacher, was all they could imagine. That one day we would cross our own *kala pani* to live in the land of *kulambar*s, CSR plantation overseers, would never have entered their imagination.

The gulf between the world we inherited and the world we now inhabit could not have been greater for my generation. Tabia was where I began my journey. It shaped my destiny, but not my destination.



## *Bahraich*

Our deeds travel with us from afar,  
What we have been makes us what we are.

*Indian saying*

*My grandfather was a girmitiya.* I have vivid memories of him. He was a tall, handsomely built man, with a massive handlebar moustache and a perpetual week's growth of white beard, a thinning close-cropped head of hair, deep-set (almost) blind eyes fixed perpetually on something in the distance, clad in white flowing cotton kurta and dhoti, with a well-rolled home-made *suluka* in one hand and a walking stick in the other. Over 80, although he reckoned he was nearly 100 before he died on 8 May 1962, he was a creature of habit. He would be up at the first light of dawn, just as he had done under indenture, carry out his ablutions in the fields by the river, rinse his toothless mouth with salt water, bathe at the well, offer a prayer and a ceremonial *lota* of water sprinkled with tulsi leaves to the sun, the eternal source of energy, have a *pijala* of sweet red tea and retire to his stringed bed under the huge mandarin tree behind the *belo*.

In the afternoon once a month or so, a few other *girmitiyas*, all grizzled, dhoti-clad men of similar age, would gather at our house, smoke huqqa — I am now certain it was ganja — and talk vaguely

about their evanescent past in a strange language no one else understood. Once in a while on some ceremonial occasion when the entire village got together — for Satyanarayan Puja, Ramayan Recital, Bhagvada Katha, Ram Naumi, Shiva Ratri — people would plead with the *girmitiyas* to sing *bhajan* as only they knew how. On these occasions, Aja would take the lead; he was an accomplished *bhajania* as well as a *sarangi* and *khajhadi* player. We would be seated on the *paal* against the wall, mesmerised as Aja and his fellow *mulkis*, compatriots — Jwala, Madho, Butru, Dhanessar, Nanka — sang their haunting Kabir *bhajans* about love and loss and grief (*Koi thagwa nagariya lootal ho*), about the longing of the soul for freedom from the entanglements of *maya* (*Rehna nahin des virana hai*), about the ultimate pointlessness of life without faith (*Sumiran bina gota khao ge*), about the futility of the body weeping for the soul it has lost (*Taj diyo prān, kaya kahē roye*), working themselves into a trance as the evening wore on.

There was something strange, something incongruous about these people. Now in their mellow twilight, they seemed to be shipwrecked by fate in a place they did not, perhaps could not, fully embrace, and they could not return to a place they so dearly loved. They were a people caught in-between the tensions of culture and history, resisting assimilation into the ways of their adopted homeland by re-enacting archaic customs from a remembered past. Aja, for instance, never shaved himself, but waited every Sunday for another *girmitiya*, a *hajam*, barber (Chinnaiya by name), who lived across the river in the adjacent village of Laqere, to shave him and collect his customary remuneration in kind, usually some rice and mung dhal. Every year after the family Satyanarayan Puja, Aja would donate a calf to the family Brahman priest in the prayerful hope that his children and grandchildren would be able to cross the dreaded Baitarini river from this world into the next by holding on to the tail of the animal. On some particularly auspicious occasion, such as the birth of a grandchild, he would hold a huge *bhandara* to which all our far-flung

relatives and immediate neighbours would be invited. And for thirteen days during the month of *Pitara Pakh*, when the graves gave up their dead and the souls of all the recently departed family members returned to roam the earth, he would fast and pray and make ritual offerings of food on banana or taro leaves at a specially prepared prayer mound under the mango tree. These and other customs, with which I grew up, have now vanished almost beyond recall.

Aja had come to Fiji in 1908 as an indentured labourer on a five-year agreement to work on CSR sugar cane plantations. He was entitled to return to India at his own expense at the end of five years or at government expense after a further ten years of 'industrial residence' in the colony. Aja had hoped to return, one day, never expecting or wanting to leave his homeland permanently. He continued to correspond with his relatives back in Braich until the 1950s, and occasionally sent whatever little money the family could save. But that day of decision never came. Our family was always in financial difficulty. Aja had married a woman from another caste, and knew the dishonour this would bring him and his people back in India. He had a family of his own to raise, rent to pay for the ten-acre native lease. And so time passed and memories of home faded, and, in the course of time, an intended temporary sojourn was transformed into permanent displacement.

My grandfather was one of 60,000 men, women and children, who had come to Fiji between 1879, when indentured migration to the colony began, and 1916 when all indentured migration ceased. Fiji's migrants themselves were a part of one million Indian indentured migrants who had crossed the *kala pani*, the dark dreaded waters, to the 'king sugar' colonies in the Indian and Atlantic oceans. Some were enticed by the tall tales told by unscrupulous *arkatis* (recruiters) of easy fortune awaiting them in Mirich Dvip (Mauritius) or Chini Tapu (Trinidad) or Demerara (Guyana), or Fiji, sometimes called the Ramnik Dvip, the colourful islands or islands in paradise. But most were simple folk, down on their luck, seeking temporary respite from

some personal difficulties. Perhaps the crops had failed or cattle had died in a drought, perhaps the *zamindar* was threatening them with eviction for arrears of rent or the village *mahajan* was demanding his dues. Perhaps some were members of the 'Huqqa Pani Band' brigade, escaping social ostracism for some breach of caste protocol. No doubt some were in trouble with the law, and some were young unattached souls in search of adventure. They all knew that they were going to some place they had never heard of before, but they would be back one day, long before their absence was noticed in the village.

Aja came from Bahraich, a poor district in an impoverished region of northeastern India, the principal supplier of indentured labour to the colonies after the 1870s, taking over from Bihar. From then on, it was such districts as Basti, Gonda, Azamgargh, Sultanpur, Faizabad, names synonymous with destitution and despair even now, which supplied the bulk of the migrants. Today, people comment harshly on the extreme poverty and backwardness of the eastern districts, and on the lethargic, perennially unenterprising attitude of its inhabitants, India's real 'wretched of the earth'. Given this widespread perception, it surprises most people to learn that hundreds of thousands of people from this region upped and left for the colonies last century, showing the courage, enterprise and determination those remaining behind are alleged to be lacking. Within India itself, the region furnished millions of workers to the Calcutta jute mills, the Assam tea gardens, the Bihar coal mines, and the Bombay textile mills.

Bahraich was not a major contributor of indentured migrants to Fiji. Of the colony's 45,000 North Indian indentured migrants, only 750 came from the district. But in many respects, it was a typical eastern Uttar Pradesh district: predominantly Hindu, poor, illiterate, agricultural, its population dominated by such cultivating castes as Ahir, Kurmi, Kori, Kahar, Lodh, Murao as well as Brahman and Rajput peasants. Shaped like an isosceles triangle, with an area of 2647 square miles, almost exactly the size of Vanua Levu, Fiji's second-largest island where Aja eventually settled, but with a population of



over one million, Bahraich, like most of Oudh, was a *taluqdari* (feudal) district; four landlords owned more than half the total area. Half of the land was cultivated by tenants at will, and half by those who paid their dues in kind. The district is littered with lakes and *jbils* (swamps) and thus vulnerable to malarial fever; cholera, officials often noted ruefully, was 'never absent from the district'. A lot of the district was under forest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but there were also large groves of mangoes — *mahua*, *shisham*. I knew from the stories that Aja used to tell that the district was full of animals — leopards, tigers, wolves, wild hogs, antelope. He described them lovingly as if they were members of his own extended family.

The Emigration Pass, that indentured visa card-cum-passport, lists Aja's age at the time of migration as 26, which was about the average age of the emigrating population. As a young unmarried man, he had been out and about, looking for a job. 1907–1908 was a particularly bad year even for a district no stranger to misfortune. Bahraich was stricken with a drought, its misery worsened by a succession of bad harvests. Aja had wandered off to the local *thana* looking for something to do, and there heard about wonderful opportunities in a *tapu*, an island. Would he like to go there just for a few years and see what it was like? Aja agreed, whereupon he was taken to Fyzabad for registration on 13 January 1908. Soon afterwards, along with other recruits, he undertook his *chalan* (journey) to Calcutta. At Daryaganj, the Depot Surgeon, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Indian Medical Services, certified that 'we have examined and passed the above-named man as fit to emigrate; that he is free from all bodily and mental disease; and that he has been vaccinated since engaging'. On 25 January, Fiji's Emigration Agent in Calcutta, W.J. Bolton, certified that Aja 'has appeared before me and has been engaged by me on behalf of the Government of Fiji as willing to proceed to that country to work for hire; and that I have explained to him all matters concerning his engagement and duties'. That being so, Aja was certified to proceed 'as in a fit state of health to undertake the voyage to Fiji' on 18 February 1908.

Aja had been recruited for Demerara, I remember him telling us, which is not surprising. Often, one agent recruited for a number of colonies. But when he reached Calcutta, Aja was told that the Demerara quota had been filled. And so he was transferred to the Fiji Depot. I don't know whether he actually understood the terms and conditions of his engagement. Some of those who had accompanied him from upcountry balked when the reality of a long voyage to a distant place dawned on them, and some bolted from the barracks. But Aja stayed put. He had eaten the *arkati's* salt, he said, and he would honour his word. He was not a *namak haram*, an ingrate. Honour, *izzat*, weighed heavily with Aja. Five years would pass like five minutes. Didn't Lord Rama spend fourteen years in exile? He emphasised the point by quoting some disjointed lines from the *Ramayana*: '*Chaudah baras Ram ban basi ...*' He boarded his ship with resolve but not without apprehension. SS *Sangola* was his ship's name. The immigrant ships have magical names, some derived from classical mythology, such as *Leonidas*, *Pericles*, *Syria*, while others were named after great rivers such as *Ganges*, *Indus*, *Sutlej*, *Elbe*, *Danube*, *Rhine*, *Clyde*, *Avon*, all of them especially fitted to carry human cargo over long distances. 'Floating caravan of barbarian tourists', someone called these ships, while some *girmitiyas* remembered them as floating funeral processions: *chalta firta, jeeta jagata janaza*.

The confined spaces of overcrowded cabins confounded a people who had never seen the sea before. Inevitably, the ship became the site of a massive social disruption. All the old rituals and ceremonial observances of village India began to crumble in that crucible. No one could be certain about the true caste of the *bhandaries* (cooks). They all ate together in a *pangat*, seated single file, drank water from the same container, shared and cleaned the same toilet, and took turns sweeping, hosing, cleaning the deck. The voyage was a great leveller of hierarchy and status: the immigrants were all coolies in the eyes of the sahibs. Some protested, and others tried to cheat their way through or bypass the normal channels, but to no

avail. Aja used to tell a story about a man of high caste who stole some onions and potatoes to cook by himself to avoid pollution. He was caught. Making an example of him, the Surgeon Superintendent paraded him on the deck in front of all the other passengers, his mouth stuffed with a raw potato. How Aja used to laugh telling this story. He also recalled another incident when people were having their evening meal on a particularly stormy night. Suddenly, the ship heaved and food spilled all over the place. That ended all the pretense of observing commensal restrictions.

But amidst all the disruption and dislocation, new relationships were being formed, none more important than the bond of *jahajibhai*, shipmates, a bond which neither time nor circumstance would be able to erase. It became the foundation of a new enduring and intimate familial relationship. It was for good reason that the colonial authorities dispersed the *jahajibhais* among plantations scattered around the country. But somehow, the *jahajis* kept in touch with each other long after indenture had ended, and walked long distances on foot for reunions and reminiscences. I recall these meetings as deeply emotional occasions. The *jahajis* treated each other like blood kin, with all the obligations and responsibilities that such a relationship entailed. The bonds disappeared with the *girmitiyas*.

Aja served most of his indenture at Tuatua in Labasa, opened to sugar cane plantations in the early 1890s by the CSR which erected a cane crushing mill there in 1894. Indenture was generally a hard, brutalising, disorienting experience, but indenture in Labasa was pure *narak*, hell. The *girmitiyas* there were more vulnerable because they were on another island, remote, isolated: out of sight, out of official mind. Government supervision and inspection of plantations, provided for in legislation, were ineffectual in practice; overtaking, violence and abuse broke many. Aja served the first few years of his *girmit* as a field labourer, but his plantation, he said, was lucky in its *kulambar*, overseer, an experienced and humane man, who took a paternalistic interest in those under his charge. Some of them were

like that. When things went out of control, the *girmitiyas* went straight to the *burra sahib*, the chief manager, who could always be counted on to put things right. Aja was also lucky to come to Fiji when the worst days of indenture were over, days of death, disease, heartbreaking infant mortality rates, excessive overtasking. But fortunately for him, Aja did not remain a field labourer for long. He was good with horses, it was discovered; he had been a champion horse racer in his youth. And so he was transferred to the CSR stables, and served the rest of *girmit* looking after draught as well as racing horses. On 18 May 1913, exactly five years after arriving in Fiji, he became a free man, master of his own destiny. He left the Tuatua plantation and leased a ten-acre plot of land in Tabia just on the outskirts of the cane growing area. It was here that he settled, and raised his family. It was here that he died in 1962.

A lot of history is concealed autobiography, the distinguished Australian historian K.S. Inglis has written, more so in my case than most. Growing up in a rural farming community in a remote part of Labasa, I saw the relics and legacies of indenture all around me. My parents, like so many of their generation, had grown up in the shadow of indenture and bore the mental and emotional scars of *girmit*: the isolation, the poverty, the unending struggle to make ends meet, a sense of helplessness and vulnerability to forces beyond their control, the controlling power the Colonial Sugar Refining Company had over the lives of the cane growers. Being his ears and eyes, I was very close to Aja. (I was sleeping beside him in his bed when he died very early that May morning.) From early on, I was intrigued by his stories and reminiscences, and by the sight of his compatriots, all funny old men wearing funny dress, speaking a funny language. Who were these people and how in the world did they end up in Fiji, thousands of miles away from India? Why had they come, and why had they stayed behind? There was no written history about them, just hazy memories, a collage of conflicting testimonies about a past that seemed remote and irrelevant. I wanted to re-visit that vanishing past.

That opportunity came when I embarked on my doctoral research at the Australian National University in 1977. A careful reading of the written records disproved the pervasive myths about the *girmitiyas*. These were not the ‘flotsam and jetsam’ of humanity, ‘riff raff’ picked up from the streets of Calcutta but a cross-section of uprooted rural peasantry on the move in search of better opportunities somewhere, anywhere. Fortunately, postgraduate training in those days required field work, which for me meant a year in India visiting the regions from where the *girmitiyas* had come, getting a sense of the place, collecting written and oral accounts of migration. I was excited about returning to Aja’s homeland, a journey he himself had intended but was unable to make. I was determined to make the pilgrimage to Bahraich, for his sake as well as my own.

By the time I finally reached Bahraich late in 1978, I had been in India long enough to be acclimatised to its many idiosyncrasies that assault one’s senses: the crowds, the noise, the stench in the alleys, the urban squalor, the rush of grotesquely deformed beggars, the taxi drivers driving at night without their headlights on to save the battery, the corrupt office wallahs used to having their palms greased, the craze for things ‘phoren’. It is Naipaulian jitters, you might say, but for me, too, on first contact India is an area of darkness. Soon, though, one gets desensitised. I am amazed at my newly acquired ability to look past unpleasant reality. Beggars are ignored, certain byways avoided, peons paid to do the basic chores, buying groceries or fetching cinema and rail tickets. I think nothing of eating greasy *dhaba*, roadside, food from sooty restaurants or drinking sweet syrupy tea in mud cups. To deal with the intrusive Indian obsession with status and hierarchy, to avoid irritating interrogation about my ‘good name’ and background, I simply assume different names and identities at different places. If all else fails, I say I am from the South. That, I quickly discovered much to my relief, was a real conversation stopper in the North.

But there is another side to India that grows gradually and imperceptively on you. Its influence is overwhelming and humbling as

you begin to realise that behind all that heat and dust and noise, there is so much life and history, reflected in the ruins that litter the landscape. In the graveyards of Indian history lie buried the dreams and aspirations of once powerful empires. India has survived countless invasions over centuries and yet managed to keep its soul intact. There are times when, surrounded by so much history and the depth and richness of Indian culture, I experience a vague sense of loss, of being somehow incomplete. The sheer variety of sounds and colours of various festivals, the shape of the landscape, people at home with multiple (but to me incomprehensible) languages are astonishing to someone born on a tiny island in a shallow, uprooted immigrant culture.

I recognise the broad contours of Indian culture, its art, music, literature; I have grown up with the songs of Lata Mangeshkar, Mohammed Rafi, K.L. Saigal, C.H. Atma, Hemant Kumar, Mukesh, Manna Dey: their music still fills my house. And what Indo-Fijian boy of my generation did not secretly aspire to be like those popular screen heroes Dev Anand or Raj Kumar, Balraj Sahni or Dilip Kumar? I have read Premchand's *Godan*, Gift of a Cow, in Hindi and was moved to tears by Hori's plight, and I know in my heart that Phaneshwar Singh Renu's unheralded *Maila Anchal*, Soiled Borders, will one day be recognised as one of this century's great novels. But I know that my India is the India of yesteryear, frozen at a particular moment in time (my childhood); I like the *idea*, not the *reality* of India. Contemporary India, with its politics of caste and communalism, the hijacking of Hinduism in the cause of fundamentalist political causes, the destruction of places of worship in the name of cultural renaissance, has no meaning for me. My grandfather's country is not mine. Curiously, it is in India that I discover the depth of my Fijian roots, the influence of an oceanic culture on my being: a deep commitment to egalitarianism, a certain impatience with protocol and ritual, a zest for living here and now, humility and tolerance, and compassionate concern for fellow human beings as kindred travellers in the same canoe of life.

Bahraich is at the back of beyond. No one in Delhi has heard of it. When I tell people about it, they recognise it patronisingly as a backward region of the most backward state of India, and express puzzlement at my interest in the place. Even in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, Bahraich is a vague name associated with one of those wretched, caste-ridden places in the east that gives the state, and India, such a bad name. There are times when, hearing all this, I am tempted to abandon my quest, but to have come this far and not go on would be a mistake. I pore over the maps and plan my journey. From Lucknow, I will head east, through Sultanpur, Fyzabad, Basti and Gonda before reaching Bahraich. I will pass through the heartland of the area that supplied the bulk of Fiji's indentured migrants.

I leave Lucknow on 6 March 1978. The bus is scheduled to leave at 6am and I am advised to be at the depot at least half an hour early. Obviously, the ticket I have already purchased is a licence to hunt for a seat on the bus, nothing more. I leave my apartment at 5am. The depot is dark, more like an abandoned warehouse, without a soul in sight. Half an hour later a few people arrive, and I learn that in the colder months buses usually leave late. We depart at 7:30. But as soon as we are out of the depot, and out of sight of the police and the public transport authorities, the driver stops to have a leisurely breakfast, while we sit cramped inside. I would encounter this irritating habit over and over again in the next few weeks. I feel like shouting, but that won't help. '*Bas aise chalta hai,*' an old man sitting next to me said, 'that's the way it is around here.'

The bus is crowded with dirty dishevelled passengers, dusty and sprayed with paan spit. The aisle is clogged with luggage, with little bundled-up children sitting on them. People cough, clear their throats and shoot well-aimed missiles of spit through the open window, nudge you in the ribs to make room for yet one more passenger in an already overflowing vehicle. Men don't hesitate to ask the driver to stop the bus to answer the call of nature. They get out,

turn their back towards the passengers, open their fly or lift their dhoti and let go, in full view of women and children. There is no comment, no embarrassment; everyone does it, even I after a while. Better that than the discomfort of a full bladder on a long, bumpy road. Women generally remain seated inside; perhaps they have stronger bladders. We pass through beautiful, rich country of sugar cane, millet, maize, wheat, barley, arhar and sarso fields yellow in season; vast, well-watered alluvial plains, flat, the flatness broken by groves of mango trees, rivers, bodies bent weeding, the ubiquitous cows, and clusters of mud houses hovering on the horizon. It's very much like travelling through the Canadian prairies, the same monotony and vastness of space, but without the ever-present wheat silos. The road is tar-sealed, but apart from that, I suspect, nothing much has changed in these parts since Aja's time.

We reach Bahraich late in the afternoon. The town is surprisingly modern, with up-to-date radio sets and cooking utensils neatly displayed in the shop windows, and much cleaner than any of the other eastern districts I have passed through. It exudes an unexpected air of prosperity. I am anxious to make preparations for my trip to Aja's village the next day. I know that Bahraich is divided into four *thanas*, police or administrative divisions, and Payagpur is one of them. That's reassuring but whether the village — Pahalwara — still exists, I do not know. Early in the evening, I venture out into the main street to find out. I could not believe my luck when I discovered that my rickshaw driver came from Pahalwara! I hired him on the spot as my guide, and arranged a taxi for an early expedition to the village next morning. That night, I slept fitfully, anxious about my impending visit to Aja's village.

We left town by taxi around ten the next day. Payagpur was about 30 kilometres away. The taxi sped along the narrow tar-sealed road snaking through a vast plain of green-golden wheat fields, overtaking bullock carts full of mud bricks. It was a beautiful view, this place of Aja's childhood, but my mind was elsewhere. I felt all the



anxiety of a nervous student about to sit a major examination. I got off at the junction of the thana of Payagpur and took a rickshaw to Pahalwara a kilometre away. The road led to a well-maintained brick house. I mistook it for the village *mandir*, temple. It was in fact the village school teacher's house, who also happened to be the village pandit. A dozen or so people were having a lunch to celebrate a *moodan*, head shaving, ceremony for a newborn.

As I approached the compound, a man came out to meet me, and after a brief conversation, asked me to wait while he went back into the house. I had given him a letter from the Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh outlining the purpose of my visit. Presently, I was joined by two men, one of them with a gun slung over his shoulder. They sat on each side of me on a stringed bed under a mango tree. I said nothing as they gave me hostile, fear-inducing sidelong glances. Later, I discovered the reason for their strange behaviour. A few weeks back, a landlord in a neighbouring village had been beheaded by some radicals of the Marxist revolutionary Naxalite movement, and it was thought that I — a young, educated person with horn-rimmed glasses and a well-tended goatee, looking the archetype of a Bengali student activist — might be a Naxalite agent, or a government informer, a source of potential trouble.

A little while later, a man in his 30s came out and shook my hand. He apologised for the inconvenience caused by the delay, and invited me into the house for a meal. I opted for a glass of water instead and started walking with him towards the village, now accompanied by a dozen or so curious, cheerful, barely clad children running along a foul-smelling meandering path full of fresh cow dung and wheat straw. Word had gone ahead of a stranger coming to the village. By the time I arrived, the *maidan*, village centre, was packed, small children perched on their fathers' shoulders. They all looked the same to me, dressed alike in dhoti and cotton kurta, with close-cropped hair and dirty turbans, *pagri*, wrapped around their heads. A vanished world resurfaced, for the scene reminded me of Aja and

his friends back in Labasa. But the *girmitiyas* had changed, adapted and moved on; people here seemed stranded in time. Deeply furrowed foreheads, cracked feet and calloused hands told the predictable story of hardship and struggle.

I felt deeply moved to be among them. Who knows, had fate not willed otherwise, I might have been there, standing in the crowd, a dhoti-clad, prematurely aged withered son of the soil. But that thought also filled me with horror. Later I was to learn that this village was far more prosperous than many others in these parts; it had a school of its own and good infrastructure; many of its residents worked in the town; some had made a big name for themselves in the state. But all that made little impression on me; my reference point, formed by other experiences, was different. All eyes were on me, and I was stumped for words, surrounded by people talking a strange language.

I spoke about my grandfather who had migrated and become a *tapuha* a long time ago, and never returned although he used to write home occasionally. One of the names my father had mentioned to me was that of Chotu, my grandfather's brother's son, and I wondered whether he or any of his children were still alive. Yes, there was a man by that name, people replied, but he and his eldest son, Halka, had gone on a *barat*, a marriage party, to another village and would return later in the day. There was commotion in the crowd after I finished speaking. Village elders came forward and embraced me, shook my hands with both of theirs as a mark of respect and affection and asked me to sit on the *charpai*, a wooden plank, under the tamarind tree in the centre of the *maidan*. I was given a piala of sarbat and the inevitable cup of syrupy tea as we talked about Fiji, where it was, how big, what it looked like, what it was like to fly in an aeroplane.

About half an hour later, there was another commotion in the crowd as people made way for a very old woman heading towards me, a hunchback with dishevelled white-yellowing hair and deep-set eyes, walking with the assistance of a stick. My story had been relayed to her after she had enquired about all the fuss in the *maidan*. She remembered

hearing about Aja from the village folk, she told me and everyone present, and how the *Jajman*, the village head, had asked him to return to resume his rightful place in the community. He was needed back in the village; he would not have to pay any penalty for leaving without telling anyone. She pointed to a small mud-thatch hut in the distance which, she said, was on a small piece of land once reserved for Aja. She also told me about another member of the family who had gone to Bengal when she was very young, and returned after about twenty years. He had died a pauper. His two Bengali wives had returned to Calcutta, and nothing was heard from them again. Bengali women, I recalled, were feared (and avoided) in Fiji as mythical daughters of the sacrifice-demanding goddess Kali, who dabbled in magic and witchcraft, *jadu tona*.

I was offered lunch, which I initially refused because I had dysentery and had to be careful about food. People protested: it was customary to welcome a long-lost family member with a home cooked meal. I then realised that refusal could be interpreted as rejection, and a great personal embarrassment to 'my family'. A playful, sharp-witted woman, whom I assumed to be in a joking relationship with me, perhaps a 'sister-in-law', threatened to rob me of my watch if I refused to sample her cooking. '*Ka samjhat ho hamka*,' she said, 'Don't underestimate me.' Thus pressured, I fiddled with the food — rice and soupy bean-and-potato curry — as the whole village watched.

Late in the afternoon, Chotu and Halka returned, but somehow they had already been told about me. Chotu approached me with tears in his eyes, and began to sob uncontrollably as he embraced me. We held on to each other for what seemed a very long time. He introduced me to Halka. Like his father, he was a short man, brisk and agile; he gave me the impression of being the pillar of the family. It was Halka's wife who had joked about taking my watch earlier. I was taken around the *maidan* and introduced to all the members of the extended family, including my various aunts and nieces, and playful sisters-in-law with surprisingly well-formed features and flirtatious eyes, as well the various village elders.

Chotu kaka remembered receiving letters from Aja, telling the family how he was an old man now and spending his time with his grandchildren. He would not — perhaps could not — return, and asked that his share in land be distributed among the remaining brothers. But after the late 1950s, and especially after Aja's death, all contact was lost. Until now. '*Tum ka dekh ke hamar dil gad gad hoi gawa,*' he said through his emotion-charged voice, 'My heart is full to the brim to see you.' I enquired about his family. His granddaughter was getting married, or rather betrothed. She would have been no more than thirteen or fourteen years old. I contributed one hundred rupees towards the cost of the ceremony. The custom of child marriage surprised me, and when I raised the topic with a Bahraich professor later, he remarked on how things had actually improved in that regard in recent times. He could remember the time when children were married even before they were born. And not so long ago, they were betrothed at the age of two or three, carried to the ceremony on their father's shoulders.

Chotu kaka and other village elders asked me, and all our family, to return to India to live in Bahraich so that we could all be together again. Things were improving gradually and there would be room for all of us. I could easily find employment as a teacher at the village school. Such touching innocence. I promised to return before leaving India, but didn't have the heart to tell them that their India was an alien country to me, and that the break was for good. Chotu kaka and Halka and other family members walked me to the junction of the highway. They were such a spontaneously warm and affectionate people, happy and grateful that I had come all the way from such a faraway place to make contact. Chotu kaka embraced me, his voice cracking with emotion. Halka gave me a double hug on each shoulder, and then made the gesture of touching my feet as a mark of respect. A surge of emotion came over me and I lost my composure momentarily. Then it was time to leave.

I got into the waiting taxi, physically exhausted and emotionally drained, and headed towards the town in the growing darkness. I was

glad I had made the pilgrimage, not only for myself but also for my father and my grandfather as well. The trip solved many puzzles of my childhood and renewed my acquaintance with a vanished world. The strange cacophony of sounds I heard the *girmitiyas* speak as a child are still spoken in these parts today: the 'awa-gawa' of Bahraich, the 'aiba-jaiba' of Gonda, the 'aibo-jaibo' of Basti, and the 'ailee-gailee' of Ballia, Azamgarh and Ghazipur. The *lehang*a dance which men dressed up as women performed on some festive occasion, such as marriage, is still danced here. The ballads of *Allaha Khand*, about brothers fighting heroically for the hand of the women they want to marry, and sung to the accompaniment of *Nagara*, have disappeared in Fiji, though they were very popular with the *girmitiyas*, but are still sung in parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh. The same with the game of *kabaddi*, which I vaguely remember some folks playing in inter-village competitions.

As I travelled through the impoverished regions of Uttar Pradesh, I gained renewed respect for those hundreds of thousands of men and women, ordinary people from all walks of life, who took fate in their own hands, shouldered their little bundles and marched off to the far-flung corners of the globe in search of a better life for themselves and their children. The amazing resilience and fortitude and tenacity of these people to endure so much hardship and deprivation and yet keep their dignity and integrity intact. I understood better the spirit of the *girmitiyas* and why and how they were able to survive, indeed triumph over, the brutalising ordeals of indenture. Aja had lived life in the raw, at the edge, without the comforting safety net of an extended family and community, in a remote country to which he had come accidentally. But he was not embittered by the rough hand fate had dealt him. Instead, he met the challenge of starting life afresh with courage and determination, laying a more secure foundation for his children and grandchildren. That is his greatest and most enduring legacy.

The *nouveau riche* of New Delhi and the nattering nabobs of Lucknow are quick to consign the *bhaiyas*, their poor country cousins

from the east, to the unlovely fringes of civilised society as a people with no enterprise, no industry, nothing, an embarrassment and a national disgrace. How sadly and cruelly mistaken they are. These are the same people whose *girmitiya* cousins in the colonies were able to break the oppressive shackles of caste and communalism and through their sweat and blood lay the foundations of many a new nation in the Third World. Their children and grandchildren are ornaments to their chosen professions: Sir Seosagar Ramgoolam, Cheddi Jagan, Sridath Ramphal, Rohan Kanhai, V.S. Naipaul. There was nothing inherently defective about the *girmitiyas* just as there is nothing inherently wrong with the *bhaiyas* of eastern Uttar Pradesh. It is the system and the values they engendered, which condemned the people to a life of permanent subservience, that were at fault. Unfortunately, both are still with us today.

*Notes*

1. Suluka: rough cigarette with tobacco wrapped in a pandanus strip.
2. Lota: brass pot.
3. Tulsi: basil leaves regarded as sacred by Hindus.
4. Piala: enamel cup.
5. Belo: guest or reception house. The word is peculiar to Labasa.
6. Bhandara: large ceremonial feast.
7. Huqqa Pani Band: signifies social ostracism when a man is not allowed to smoke the common pipe and draw water from the communal well.
8. Kulambar: overseer, from 'Call Number' which the overseers asked the girmitiyas to do every morning.
9. Awa-gawa, aibo-jaibo, aiba-jaiba, ailee-gailee: all regional variations on the standard Hindi aya-gaya (come and gone).
10. Nagara: a large drum played with sticks.
11. Lehanga: common dress worn by village women in India.
12. Girmit: from the Agreement that brought the indentured labourers to Fiji.
13. Paal: rough mat of stitched jute sacks.
14. Sarangi: Indian violin.
15. Khajadi: a small drum held in one hand and played with the other.





## *Mr Tulsi's Store*

There are no acts of treachery more deeply concealed than those which lie under the pretence of duty, or under some profession of necessity.

Cicero, '*In Verrem*'

*It is gone now.* The place looks deserted and forlorn. All that remains of Mr Tulsi's store, at the side of the Seaqaqa Highway facing a small overgrown creek, are grey planks of burnt wood and twisted corrugated iron scattered about the place. It is a far cry from the days when the store was the heart of Tabia's village life. *Tulsi Ram and Sons: General Merchants*, the dust-caked 'Craven A' billboard proclaimed proudly. As the only wooden and iron structure in the entire settlement full of thatched houses, the shop was the village's symbol of progress. People were very proud of the building.

The store was also a site of history. *Girmitiyas* used to gather there in the evening, smoke the huqqa and reminisce about *mulk*, their motherland, and about events of their evanescent past in Fiji. In the evenings once a month or so, they used to sit on the verandah wearing dhoti, kurta and pagri and sporting a week-long growth of beard, and sing *bhajans* or play *bujhauni*, the Indian game of riddles. Even much later, men met there to discuss village affairs. Mr Tulsi's

store was more than a shop: it was the nerve centre of the entire settlement.

Mr Tulsi was one of the few men in the village who could read and write Hindi. As a young man, he wrote letters for the illiterate *girmitiyas* to their relatives in India, and helped them send small postal cheques. When letters arrived from India, *girmitiyas* would hug each other and cry with excitement as Mr Tulsi read their contents aloud. Mr Tulsi was the chairman of the local school committee and president of the village Ramayan Mandali. He often spoke at marriages, festivals and funerals. He was knowledgeable about Indian culture, and could quote an appropriate line from the *Ramayan* or the *Puranas* to underline a point or close an argument. People also feared Mr Tulsi for his ability to use his position, and turn other people's misfortune to advance his own interests.

He did this mostly as the chairman of the local *panchayat*, a five-man council of community elders which mediated in petty civil disputes. This institution was a relic of village India resuscitated by the government after indenture to address the everyday problems in Indian settlements scattered far and wide. These settlements had emerged haphazardly wherever Indians could lease land from the Fijians or the Colonial Sugar Refining Company. Keeping a tab on their activity was an administrator's nightmare. So the authorities relied on a time-tested mechanism to maintain peace in the community, about whose internal affairs they otherwise cared little.

How the men were chosen to serve was not always clear. During *girmit*, they were handpicked by CSR overseers for their authority and firmness in dealing with workers, and their effectiveness in implementing company policy. After *girmit*, the district colonial officials chose them on the basis of their social and economic status in the community. In Tabia, Mr Tulsi was a natural choice, educated, wealthy, well-connected. Other members were Udho, one of the few Indians from Labasa to have served in the Labour Corps during World War II; Jwala, a prosperous cane grower who owned the

village's only Bedford truck; and Bansi and Sukhraj, from the adjacent villages of Laqere and Soiso.

*Panchayats* derived their power from the moral authority of their members and the force of tradition, reinforced by the absence of other alternatives. For most village folk, the rituals and paraphernalia of European courts were alien and forbidding. They much preferred resolving disputes in a familiar, culturally sanctioned way. *Panchayats* dealt mostly with minor civil cases involving land boundary disputes, compensation for damage to crops caused by stray animals, family squabbles. The *panchayat's* decisions were rarely contested; and it was a brave man, indeed, who challenged the authority of the acknowledged community elders. 'It was foolish to pick a fight with crocodiles while in water' was how the people put it.

*Panchayats* were also about enforcing community standards and values even if their decisions were sometimes unfair or costly to the individuals concerned. Once a Hindu in the village was accused of selling an old milch cow to a Muslim, causing outrage. Selling a cow to a Muslim, even if it was not for meat, was like sending your own mother to the gallows. The hapless man, Sumera, was hauled before the *panchayat*, found guilty, and fined. He was forced to shave his head in mourning, and give a *bhandhara*, a ceremonial feast, to the entire village in atonement for the error of his ways. Sumera was penniless, saying that he had sold the cow to pay school fees for his five children. But the *panchayat* had spoken, and there was little Sumera or anyone else could do. As expected, and as so many had done before him, he turned to Mr Tulsi for money to give the feast.

On another occasion, people in the village were unhappy with the Education Department posting a Muslim teacher to a Sanatani school. The school committee had not been consulted, and they were determined to reverse the decision. They approached the *panchayat* for advice. After a series of late night meetings, an insidious rumour spread that the Muslim teacher, Mr Jumessa, was making improper sexual advances on girls. He was accused of 'cutting', that is, winking

at young girls in a sexually provocative way. Mr Jumessa denied the charge and protested his innocence when he was hauled before the *panchayat*. There was no proof and no witnesses, and in fact no truth to the allegations, but his reputation was ruined. He left the village at the end of the school term. It was said later that Mr Jumessa had left teaching altogether to become a truck driver.

This is the story of a *panchayat* which sat in Tabia, at Mr Tulsi's store, 30 years ago. The *panchayat* was convened to resolve a dispute involving two brothers, Munna and Arjun. They were *girimitiya* Mangru's sons. Mangru came to Fiji at the turn of the century, completed his term of five years working on the CSR plantation at Tuatua, on the outskirts of the mill town of Labasa, had leased ten acres at Tabia sometime in the late 1920s and settled there. The land was registered in Arjun's name because the CSR gave cane contracts only on ten-acre blocks owned by a single individual. But it was understood that seven acres belonged to Arjun and three to Munna. A few years later, Mangru had bought four acres across the river in Laqere and registered it in Munna's name.

The arrangement had worked well. The extended family lived on the main farm at Tabia, and ventured across the river whenever work was to be done there. Everything was done jointly. There was a single kitchen; work was shared. And groceries, clothes and other such necessities were purchased in bulk for the entire extended household. That was the way Mangru wanted things to be, the way he himself had grown up in India. The joint family represented continuity with tradition, a source of solidarity and cohesion, and a bulwark against the outside world when the community was still young and uncertain about its future.

The pattern was beginning to fracture in some places because of changing needs and circumstances. Sometimes, expanding families could not be accommodated on a single farm. Family friction pushed some people out. Sometimes people were attracted by better opportunities elsewhere, such as better schools or more productive or

bigger plots of land. Arjun was proud that his extended family was still intact. He knew that things would change one day, but that was a long way away. Arjun was an uncomplicated man of simple habits. Often his heart ruled his head. He could be stubborn and uncompromising. His extended family meant everything to him. He wanted to keep it that way as long as he could.

But then things began to change. Mangru died. When he was alive, Mangru had always insisted that his sons live together under one roof. His presence, and all that it represented — history, culture, tradition — were important in holding the family together. A lot of it disappeared with his death. Not long afterwards, Munna's wife died during childbirth, leaving behind several young children. She had long suffered from tuberculosis and merciless beating by her husband. Munna's beatings distressed people, but there was nothing anyone could say or do: it was his own wife, not someone else's, that he was thrashing, Munna would retort when reproached. So, to those who knew the family, her death was a relief rather than a tragedy.

A year later, Munna married a divorcee from Batinikama. His new wife was a short, fair-complexioned woman of strong will and even stronger temper. Mrs Munna was a modern woman. There was something about her that announced independence and self-confidence. Unlike Arjun's wife, or other women in the village for that matter, she refused to cover her head with *orhni*, a shawl, in the presence of older men. She was determined not to remain a part of the extended family for long. She had not divorced her first husband to find herself embroiled in the machinations of another extended family. Munna said nothing. He seemed a different person now, and people wondered what hold his new wife had over him.

The *panchayat* sat on the wooden *charpai* in the verandah of Mr Tulsi's store. Mr Tulsi began the proceedings, his ample stomach parked comfortably on his knees. 'It is a simple matter, Arjun,' Mr Tulsi said. 'Munna wants to sell his share in the land here and move to Laqere.' Munna wanted to be independent. 'Things are no

longer the way they used to be,' Mr Tulsi continued. 'Everyone wants to be independent these days. It's happening everywhere. It's the way of the future.' The other members nodded in agreement. 'It is good to resolve these problems amicably. After all, we are like brothers to each other,' said Madho. Munna had come to the right place.

Arjun listened intently, his forehead furrowed even more deeply than usual. He was perplexed: why had Munna not discussed this with him directly? In the past they had been able to talk freely about family matters. What had changed between them that Munna had to go to outsiders? He looked at Munna with questioning eyes; Munna kept his head down.

'What you say is true, *kaka*,' Arjun said after a long silence. 'Things are changing.' He had some inkling that things were awry in the family. He was vaguely aware that his *chotki*, Munna's wife, seemed unhappy. But small misunderstandings, common in every family, would be resolved; it was all a matter of time.

'Arjun, the problem is more serious than you think,' Udho said. '*Chotki* wants to leave as soon as things can be arranged. And the sooner the better.' Munna had told the *panchayat* that his wife felt she was on trial, and somehow always found wanting. If it was not her cooking, it was the way she talked (loudly) or the way she swept the *aangan*, the compound, or the amount of time she took washing clothes at the *kuan*, well. She could never win. She had married Munna, not the extended family, she kept telling anyone who would listen. She wanted to be the mistress of her own household, not a domestic help in someone else's. She resented her own stepchildren continuing to look to Arjun's wife, their *badki amma*, for emotional comfort (because none was forthcoming from her).

Mrs Munna was unhappy for another reason too. It was said that Munna's house was haunted by the ghost of his deceased wife. Strange wailing noises were heard at night, the sound of bangles, a swish of the dress, soft knocks on the bedroom door at odd hours. Someone always put extra salt in the curry and sugar in the tea, for

which Mrs Munna received the blame. She felt that someone wanted her out of the house. There would be no peace for anyone until she left.

These complaints surprised Arjun. Still, he did not question them, accepting that he had largely ignored this private side of his extended family life. 'There is nothing I can do to stop Munna,' he said, to no one in particular. But he needed time to raise money to buy out Munna's share. He asked for six months.

He explained his predicament. Mangru's funeral had been an expensive affair, involving donations of money, cloth and a milch cow to the family priest. Things had to be done in the proper Hindu way. Building fees for the new school had to be paid in full, at the beginning of the school year, otherwise his children, four boys, would be refused admission. And he had to think of the expenses for the marriage of his only daughter, Munnakki — sweet raisin — to whom he was devoted. Marriage talks had already started with a family in Daku.

Arjun spoke clearly, straight from the heart. '*Bat to sach hai,*' Mr Tulsi said, what you say is true, 'but your plans don't suit Munna.' Then, after a bowl of yaqona, Mr Tulsi looked at Arjun and said, 'Munna and I have talked about it, and although it is excessive, I will pay \$1200 for the three acres. Of course, I will sell it back to you when you raise the money. I don't need the land, as you well know, but I want to help out whenever I can. After all, we have always been like brothers, haven't we? There has always been trust between us.' Mr Tulsi's gesture was greeted by the *panchayat* by '*Sach hai, Sach hai.* It is true, it is true.' It was in fact true that the relationship between Mr Tulsi's and Arjun's family went a long way back. Mangru and Mr Tulsi's father Bhola were *jahajibhais*, shipmates, who had arrived in Fiji on SS *Sangola* in 1908. They were like blood brothers.

Every argument had been carefully rehearsed, every angle covered, Arjun realised slowly. How much *daru-muruga*, eating and drinking, bribery, was involved, he wondered. He pleaded with the *panchayat* for a little more time. 'There you are, Arjun,' Bansi responded with frowning eyes, 'thinking just of yourself and your own

family. What about Munna and his plans for his own family? He, too, has young children to feed and educate and marry. He, too, wants a little bit of security and stability in his life. He is not asking for much, just what is his.' 'Arjun,' Sukhraj said, 'as the older of the two, you should be more understanding.'

'No *kaka*,' Arjun replied immediately, 'you people misunderstand me. Ask Munna if I have ever been unfair to him. He gets his share of rice from the farm. He always accompanies me to collect the cane money. Every purchase of everything, onions, potatoes, rice, flour, salt, everything, is accounted for. There is a docket for everything. He knows exactly how each penny in the house is spent. Isn't that true, Munna?'

Munna kept looking at the wooden floor of the verandah, his head bowed. There was nothing he could say, for Arjun had spoken the truth. Still, he wished he could tell his older brother the reason for the urgency, but there was no point; Arjun would not understand. Arjun was living in the past, hankering for a world whose time had passed. For Munna, the past was history. He wanted to be his own man on his own terms in his own house.

No one questioned Arjun's good intentions, Jwala reassured him even before Arjun had finished speaking, but Munna's wishes could not be ignored either. 'What can I do,' Arjun said helplessly. 'I have no money. All I have is these obligations to take care of. Munna,' Arjun said, looking straight at him, 'I give you my word. We'll sort something out, as we always have. Just give me some time to think things through.' Munna did not respond.

'Well, what about my suggestion?' Mr Tulsi asked again.

'Selling? That is out of the question.' Arjun was adamant, defiant. This was his father's land, and he would never let it pass into the hands of strangers. He would safeguard his father's bequest with his life. This was the land on which he was born; this was where he would be buried. 'You know what will happen to my cane contract if I part with the three acres, don't you?' They knew. CSR contracts were



given out on ten-acre blocks; anything less and the contract would be revoked. 'When that happens, what use will this land be? What crops will I grow? Peanuts and beans? Who will feed my children?'

'Well, how about a compromise,' Mr Tulsi suggested. He would pay Munna \$1200 in return for the assignment of cane payment on the three acres. Arjun would have his land back as soon as the debt was paid. 'That way, Munna gets his money, you keep the land, and everybody wins.' It wasn't the ideal situation from his point of view, Mr Tulsi said, but in the interest of neighbourly relations, he would go along with it.

There was a trap and counter-argument at every turn. Assignment sounded fine in theory but was ruinous in practice. There was something deeply degrading about being beholden to someone, to live on someone's charity, especially someone like Mr Tulsi. Arjun knew that, with him, he would never win, entering a vicious cycle of deepening debt and degradation. Many in the village were indebted to him, and other members of the *panchayat*, one way or another, some for decades; few had ever managed to extricate themselves from their clutches. Arjun wasn't going to be one of them.

'I can't do anything right now,' Arjun said. 'I have to think about it.'

'What is there to think about?' Mr Tulsi asked, showing anger and irritation. He had done all the thinking there was to do.

'This is family land,' Arjun said firmly and with a tone of finality that took everyone by surprise. 'It has been in the family since Dada moved here. I won't let any outsider lay claim to an inch of it, even for one minute. Never.' Mr Tulsi knew that Arjun couldn't be moved.

'Well, that's your problem now,' Mr Tulsi said, getting up from the wooden *charpai*. 'I have done my best. If something happens, don't blame me.' Still, disappointed as he was, he gave Arjun a week to see what he could do. Arjun left the meeting devastated. He had never imagined that his cherished world would collapse around him like this. He had bought some time, but sooner or later he would have to face reality.

The cane harvesting season was about to start. As in the past, the cane committee had decided the order of harvesting, which depended on such things as the sweetness of cane, the location of the field, the grower's track record. Shamsher would go first, then Ram Dayal and then Arjun. The order pleased Arjun because it would mean early cane payment. The committee had estimated his cane crop at around 140 tons, about half of which would be harvested during the first round and the remainder in the second round.

The first day of harvesting went well. Two truckloads of about six tons each were sent to the mill, filling the quota for the day. After lunch, the gang harvested another ten for the next day. The rest would be cut next morning before sunrise. But that plan was disrupted when Mr Thompson, the sector CSR overseer, arrived at the farm early, looking agitated. Mr Tom, as everyone called him, was a young man in his 30s, slim, of medium height, and hot-tempered. People feared him as he barked out orders in broken CSR Hindustani. The overseers were no longer the *mai-baap*, parents of the growers, as they had been during *girmi*; but they were still powerful.

'*Arjun kahan baitho,*' Mr Tom asked, surveying the harvested cane on the ground. 'Where is Arjun?' When Arjun arrived from the edge of the field where he had been feeding the cattle *kantaap*, green cane top, Mr Tom took him aside and talked to him for about five minutes, pointing to the cane and throwing up his hand often enough to suggest that something was wrong. Then he walked towards the gang which was heading to a shady spot under the mango tree. '*Ghare jao sab koi,*' he said. Go home everybody. '*Ganna kato khalas.*' No more cane cutting.

Arjun was shaking and perspiring profusely as he walked home without saying a word to anybody. The whole plot, the ambush, became blindingly clear as he reflected on the events of the past few days. As he later found out, Munna and Mr Tulsi had gone to the CSR office at Tuatua to inform it of Munna's intention to sell his share to Mr Tulsi. The sale would breach the terms of the contract,

and Mr Thompson had no alternative but to stop further harvesting until the matter was cleared.

The fear of losing his contract would bring Arjun to his knees, begging forgiveness for his effrontery, Mr Tulsi thought, teaching him a lesson that he and the village would remember forever. Half the cane was still on the ground, and several tons lay harvested and drying in the sun. After five days, the CSR would refuse to take the cane; in any case, its weight and value would have declined, fetching a fraction of the normal price. Arjun would then surrender. Mr Tulsi would either get the assignment or buy the land outright. It was a trick he had tried many times before. There was no other person in the village, or in the neighbouring settlements for that matter, who could lend such a large sum at such short notice.

Going to the local Bank of New Zealand, the only commercial bank in town, was out of the question. Arjun was uneducated, and what he did not understand, he feared. He thought of friends and relatives whom he could approach, such as Ram Charan in Waiquele and Dulare in Naleba. They both offered to loan \$300 each, without security and with minimal interest. Arjun was that kind of person: open and honest and dependable, inspiring trust. It was a touching gesture at a moment of great need, and Arjun wept with gratitude. Still, what they offered was not enough, and Arjun did not know others who could help.

Someone — perhaps it was Arjun's wife, Dhanraji — suggested Sahadeo, across the river in Laqere. Arjun hadn't thought of him, for Sahadeo was not known as a moneylender. He approached him without hope, but miraculously, Sahadeo came through, offering to loan Arjun the entire \$1200 at 15 per cent interest. No one ever knew why Sahadeo had done this. Perhaps it was because Sahadeo had seen Mr Tulsi ruin the lives of so many others in the village. Perhaps he wanted to set himself up as a rival moneylender. Perhaps he wanted to break Mr Tulsi's hold on the flow of rural credit. Perhaps he had political ambitions. Whatever the reason, Arjun was elated. Within

days, the storm clouds on the horizon had lifted, saving Arjun's most precious possession, his land.

When the *panchayat* convened a week later, everyone thought the outcome was a foregone conclusion. Mr Tulsi was confident. He had planned to tell Arjun that he would loan money to pay the school building fee as well as the marriage expenses. Mr Tulsi invited Arjun to sit on the wooden *charpai* facing him. Arjun was unshaven and haggard. He looked at each member of the *panchayat* one by one for what seemed a very long time, assessing, questioning, condemning.

Then, turning to Munna, Arjun broke down. 'Here,' he said, 'I hope you will be happy now,' as he handed him a paper bag full of notes which he had carried in a jute bag, *jhori*. 'From now on, Munna is dead for me.' With that, he walked down the steps of the verandah and left. Something had snapped inside him. He was no longer angry, just sad, drained, broken. He had endured much pain and poverty in his life, but Munna's behaviour, an act of treachery by his own brother, broke his heart. He resolved, as he walked back slowly, that he would never ever speak to Munna again.

As time passed and memories faded, Arjun's wife and children pleaded with him to break his vow. Munna had been misled, they said, and had recognised the error of his ways. In any case, nothing had happened. The farm had remained in the family, and the debt had been paid. Those who had wished them ill were either gone or forgotten, whereas they had not only survived but prospered. The boys had done well at school and it was only a matter of time before they landed good jobs in town.

Munna himself had gone deaf and blind. They said he was haunted by the past and what he had done. It was rumoured that he was crying a lot at night, sometimes sobbing uncontrollably like a child. He wanted to atone for his mistakes, and make amends while he was still alive. There was nothing Munna wanted more than to touch his elder brother's feet and ask for forgiveness. Arjun listened to these pleas but he remained unmoved. For him, there was no

forgiveness, not after such betrayal. The only time Arjun 'saw' Munna was at the latter's funeral. Munna had hanged himself.

Diwali came a few months after the *panchayat* had sat. This is the joyous festival of lights, a kind of Thanksgiving. People pray to Lakshmi, the goddess of good fortune. Firecrackers pierce the silence of the moonless *Ammavas* night. There was no celebration in the Arjun household, just a small *puja*. But a greater tragedy struck Mr Tulsi. A wayward firecracker had landed in the cane field near the shop, starting a fire. A steady, dry southwest breeze fanned the flames into an unstoppable conflagration. In a matter of minutes, Mr Tulsi's shop, with all the records of credit and debt, were razed, as he ran about helpless and hysterical, crying for help. '*Bachao, bachao.*' No one came. Punishment from the gods, people said later, or was it something less than divine intervention? It did not really matter.

Mr Tulsi was never the same again. A few months later, unable to bear not only the loss but also the sudden strange indifference of people who had once looked up to him, he moved to Seaqqa, the new area over the mountain ranges being opened up for cane farming. The school committee bought Mr Tulsi's land to build additional classrooms to meet the villagers' increasing thirst for more and better education for their children. In time, the school buildings became the centre of village life in Tabia, its new symbol of progress and achievement.



## *Labasa Secondary*

Where is the life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

T.S. Eliot, 'Choruses from the Rock'

*Subhash was a boy we all admired.* He was the first one from our village to complete high school. Short, immaculately dressed in starched white uniform and shining black shoes, he stood by the roadside for the school bus, a book in hand, concentration writ large on his face. We talked about him in hushed tones, keeping a respectful distance, as is appropriate between gods and mortals. He had achieved an A grade pass in the Fiji Junior Exams, and was equally successful in the Senior Cambridge. When the University of the South Pacific opened in 1968, he was in the first batch of students to attend. With that transition, Subhash moved from being a figure of awe to a figure of legend. And a legend he remained for me for many years. I continued to watch and admire him from a distance. He is now a senior figure in the Fiji Sugar Corporation. I followed Subhash's footsteps, becoming only the second boy from Tabia to complete university.

By the late 1960s, high school was not beyond the contemplation of most parents. It was somehow expected that those who passed the dreaded Entrance Exam would continue with higher

education, a dream made possible by government scholarship for children from poor backgrounds. We, and certainly our parents, had no idea of what career lay ahead or what future we would create for ourselves. But one thing was certain: there was no future on the ten-acre leased land for all the children, and that fact, perhaps more than anything else, forced us to consider other alternatives. With some secondary schooling at least, the chances of landing a cash-paying job would improve. That was the hope of a generation emerging from the shadows of indenture. Our parents' lives had been damaged by poverty and the petty humiliations of rural, underprivileged life, and they wanted a better future for their children.

Tabia Sanatan Dharam School had a bumper year in 1966. Everyone who sat the Entrance exam passed, a record that remained unbroken for many years. But that success was no accident. Our headmaster, Mr Subramani Gounden, had driven us hard, giving extra tutorials during weekends, going over old exam papers, conducting a trial run. For several months before the exam, he asked us to camp in school so that we could study together at night, knowing that the moment we left the school compound, we would be doing household chores, fetching water for cooking, chopping firewood, feeding cattle, pounding yaqona, too tired, after all this, to concentrate on school work. We studied but we also engaged in extra-curricular activities that should, I think, remain classified information! Some secrets parents should not divulge to their children. Young boys, eating and sleeping together in a small room, can conjure up the most bizarre.

All six of us passed, but only three had marks good enough to qualify for a place at the Labasa Secondary. That school was the prize we all aimed for. Labasa Secondary was a government school, the only one in Vanua Levu, with a colony-wide reputation for academic excellence, often at par in external exam results with Suva Grammar, Marist Brothers and Natabua High. As a government school, Labasa Secondary enjoyed better qualified teachers and better facilities, with well-equipped laboratories and a well-stocked library. My other three



Tabia colleagues went to Sangam High, across the road from us. That school was a private initiative of the Then India Sanmargya Ikya Sangam, a South Indian cultural organisation founded in 1926. Struggling and underfunded, the school provided, like so many other such private schools started by Indian cultural and religious organisations, an opportunity that would otherwise have been denied many. Over time, I lost contact with my Sangam colleagues. And at Labasa Secondary, my two other Tabia colleagues eventually dropped out, leaving me as the sole survivor of that bumper crop.

Labasa was only nine miles from home, but it was for us village boys an alien place, full of shops stocked with alluring but mostly unaffordable goods, tall concrete buildings, running water, electricity, Chinese restaurants and buzzing (fly-infested) tea shops, picture theatres, the marketplace by the river. Nothing happened in Tabia; there was no money, no adventure, nothing, but our daily routine of homework and housework. In the village, our parents and older brothers watched our every movement like hawks. Visiting other folks in the neighbourhood or meeting up with friends for fun — raiding fruiting mango trees, swimming in the river, fishing: these activities were discouraged, punished even, for fear that we might pick up bad habits from other boys. Good boys stayed home. If lucky, we would be invited by father to accompany him to the market once every three or four months, but that was it. The memory of the visit would linger, the chaotic, garbage-strewn market scene and the friends and relatives we had met, replayed over and over in our minds, suitably enlarged and embroidered to impress my younger siblings about the strange, beckoning world that lay beyond the hills. We jostled among ourselves to secure the next trip to town.

Labasa Secondary was in town, but the daily bus ride, 20 cents each way, was expensive, and cash at home was always in short supply. So my brother Ben rented a small flat in Namara, the low-cost housing area at the edge of the town, and it was from there that I completed my high school education. It was a move that distressed

my mother who worried about her young child left alone to fend for himself away from the comforts of care, but she understood the reality of poverty that was our family's lot. Namara was not all bad. Being away from home spared me those dreadful after-school household chores, for which I was grateful — cutting grass, feeding the cattle, weeding cane. Staying alone, I quickly learnt to become self-reliant and resourceful, doing my own cooking, washing and ironing my own clothes, learning to enjoy the pleasures of solitude, spending spare time reading books borrowed from the local municipal library, sneaking quietly into movie theatres when the attendants were not around or were secretly watching the movie themselves. But absence from home had its costs as well, which I did not fully realise at the time. It increased the gulf between me and my brothers. Each time I returned home a bit more of a stranger, a boy with serious things on his mind, self-absorbed, unable to participate in their antics as I had once done. The gulf increased with time and travel and the accompanying social and personal experiences. I feel the loss now when my brothers reminisce about their childhood days, about their youthful pranks, the things they did during festivals, weddings and school holidays, acting as monkeys in Hanuman's army during Ram Lila, playing soccer matches in rough, dry paddy fields.

I have vivid recollections of my first day at Labasa Secondary. After a sleepless night, I was up early, had a bath and did the customary *puja*, seeking divine blessing for continued success in school work. Mother made special vegetable dishes, and packed my lunch of roti and curry. Father took me to school that day. Fees had to be paid, texts purchased, papers signed. Father was uneducated, without a word of English. I could sense that he was ill-at-ease in this surrounding, perspiring profusely, not engaging with other equally perplexed and uncomfortable fathers waiting their turn to register their children. He stood with me in the queue in the hot sun on the freshly tar-sealed courtyard as we waited our turn to visit the principal's office. We did not exchange words. Indian fathers of my

generation were emotionally parsimonious, awkward in showing emotion to their children; and I was self-conscious about being too emotionally dependent in public as well. I wanted to show the other boys that I wasn't a 'sissy'. After completing the formalities and affixing his thumb print to some documents handed to him by the school clerk, Jamuna Prasad, father left, looking back only once. For the first time, I felt I was on my own. I felt frightened.

By the end of the first day, we had been sorted out into our different 'forms'. These academic streams were intended to be permanent. There was no career counselling, to use the modern terminology, and no one asked us about our choices and preferences for subjects. The teachers knew best and they decided our future for us. The only criterion of differentiation was the marks we had achieved in our entrance exam. It was as simple as that. Those with good marks were placed in the A stream, and the rest in B. The A graders were the cream of the crop, carrying the school's hope for success in external exams. We felt pampered and privileged and superior. We considered ourselves the proud flag bearers of the school. We looked at the others from a pedestal that the teachers had created for us — we carried their expectations. The A graders did science: Chemistry, Physics, Maths and English, and in the lower grades Geography and History as well. The B graders did Biology and some other sciences as well as metalwork and woodwork. We were training for an 'academic' career; they were marked for a vocational life.

I was probably the only student at Labasa Secondary who saw life from both sides of the academic divide. I began in Grade A, doing the science subjects as well as Geography and History. In the third year, I had to make a choice between History and Geography. I loved Geography and was good at it, good at names of distant cities, rivers, systems of agriculture, trading patterns. But History tugged at my heart. On the day I had to make a decision, Krishna Datt, our new history teacher, arrived in class with a well-worn, brown briefcase bulging with papers. 'Those of you not taking History, please leave the class,' he said brusquely. There

was something about his manner, confident, purposeful, authoritative, that caught me. Krishna seemed to promise excitement and adventure. I stayed behind; Geography lost, and I became hooked on History.

In the final year of high school, I had to make a further choice, between Physics and History. Again, I was reasonable at Physics, but History was where my heart lay. Mr Sarwan Singh, my Physics teacher who was also the principal of the school, urged me to stick with Physics. His arguments were compelling: there was a future in science; I would get better marks in science than in History and thus a better chance of getting a university scholarship; I could read History on the side. I was a bright boy. With History, all I could aspire to was a career as a high school teacher, but with science, my choices were unlimited. But I persisted, and in the end Mr Singh relented. He allowed me two weeks' leave to 'try' History out. He would have me back if I decided to change my mind. I made the switch. But to do History, I had to join the B stream, which I did. It was then that I experienced first-hand the feeling of being treated as stepchildren, second best, that B graders had lived with all these years.

We were the first generation of Indo-Fijians to attend — and complete — secondary school. We were pioneers although we were not conscious of this fact at the time. And A graders, we liked to feel, represented the best and the brightest of us. The brightest boy from my primary school, I was now a bright boy among numerous bright boys from all over Vanua Levu. We were all self-conscious of this fact, quietly assessing our place in the pecking order, determined by our academic performance. An informal hierarchy quickly established itself. We all acknowledged Vinod Chunilal as the undisputed star of our class and of the school. Vinod had joined us from Natabua. He was good at everything he did; he was untouchable. He is now an electrical engineer. After him, ranking fluctuated by subject, but there was a group of five or six boys who were known as the 'highbrows'. I belonged to that group. There was no jealousy or nasty competitiveness: we were there because we were the top students in the school.

The emphasis on excellence drove home an important lesson. Among our group were many boys from wealthy backgrounds: sons of shopkeepers, school teachers, senior public servants, bankers, prominent people in the community, some recognised by the Queen for their distinguished contribution to this cause or that. They came to school in neatly ironed clothes, wearing nice shoes, carrying their books and papers in stylish briefcases. I secretly envied them their comfort and wealth. There were times when I wondered about why we were fated to be so poor. But in the end all that mattered was our performance in the classroom. That classroom was a great leveller of social hierarchy and economic status, and a powerful encourager of individual effort. We realised that we could achieve whatever we wanted, provided we applied ourselves. We could create our own destiny. For a boy from a poor background, cooped up in a rented room at the outer edges of the town, deeply insecure about himself and his future, that realisation was immensely liberating. And empowering.

I suppose our indentured grandparents must have felt something similar upon arriving in Fiji. In India their lives had been defined by their caste and community, their place in society determined by past deeds and misdeeds. There was no possibility of change in their own lifetime. But crossing the *kala pani* (dark, dreaded waters) had disrupted the old strictures, and the rigours of daily plantation life had further destroyed the basis of the social hierarchy. The lowly leather tanners, skimmers of dead animals, and the twice-born Brahmins were all equal in the eyes of colonial law. In these green islands, private enterprise and individual initiative rather than social status determined whether a person survived and prospered. The *girmitiyas* from the ancient land realised, possibly for the first time, that they could create their own destiny, rather than live one decided for them by the privileged pandits. They were all children of the same God, equal in their humanity and divine potential. Obvious to us now, it must have been a revolutionary realisation at the time, the taste of

freedom from the oppressive shackles of custom and tradition. Indenture, ironically, forged a new, more egalitarian world for an earlier generation. The modern school system did the same for ours.

Most of us were from the farm — Shambhu, Naresh, Liaquat, Shiu, Duruswami, Mahend, Satish, Puran, Emmanuel, Somaiya, Venket, Mal Khan, Bijay. And the girls, too: Sushila, Mumtaz, Sushma, Gyan, Maya, Firoza, Daya, Kamrul. Such beautiful, evocative names. We kept our distance from them. There was no mixed socialising at recess or lunch. We did know of some romantic interests and fluttering hearts, about letters being exchanged, flowers being placed in discreetly exchanged library books, surreptitious after-school meetings behind the municipal library by the river, but we kept the secrets to ourselves, making excuses for the love birds when someone enquired about their whereabouts. Outside school hours, when we met the girls at some function, especially at weddings, we behaved as if we were strangers. Even the most casual conversation or eye contact could be easily misinterpreted, to the girls' disadvantage, potentially threatening her school life. I have sometimes wondered where those girls, now middle-aged and married, are today.

The boys did well, and some girls, too. Our graduating class of 1970 was the most successful in the school's history, sending the largest contingent to the recently opened University of the South Pacific. There were some, though, who left school midstream to join the local bank, the field staff of the South Pacific Sugar Mills, or the public service. Some went to the Nasinu Training College. I lost contact with them. But those who went on to university did exceptionally well, becoming academics, lawyers, high school principals. Many now live in Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada, thanks to the political turbulence of the 1980s. We had crossed our own dark waters from Vanua Levu to come to Suva, uncertain and insecure, but determined to succeed, knowing that there was no going back. We carried on our shoulders the hope of so many we had left behind. We were making a journey not dissimilar to that made by our forebears a century ago.

The overwhelming majority of students at Labasa Secondary were Indo-Fijians. Most schools in Fiji are like that, monoracial. That was a reflection of both demography and geography as well as race. Labasa was a predominantly Indian sugar town. There were a few Part-European boys from the Simmons family and a few Chinese, the Lees and the Zoings, but that was about it. I can recall only one Fijian boy at school, Kalivati Bakani, the son of a medical doctor posted to the Labasa Hospital. That was the reason why he was with us. Most Fijian children went to their own racially exclusive schools in the districts. And from there, the successful ones went to the elite Queen Victoria School in the isolated but picturesque, sea-lapped retreat in rural Tailevu, or to the more vocational-oriented Ratu Kadavu Levu School, which, too, was for Fijian boys. Just as we spent the formative years of our lives in a predominantly Indo-Fijian environment, the Fijian children spent theirs in an exclusively Fijian setting. We remained ignorant of each other's culture and language, assessing the other community through the lens of prejudice and stereotype. And yet we, the cream of the post-independence generation, so poorly equipped with cross-cultural skills, would be called upon to play a vital role in nation building, as teachers, administrators, political leaders. No wonder Fiji has stumbled so often in its post-colonial history.

Labasa Secondary, being a government school, received the best qualified teachers, which meant mostly teachers trained in New Zealand and sometimes Australia. Educationally, we were a colony of New Zealand; Australia was remote for us, a racially exclusive white man's country. We were lucky in our teachers. They seemed to us totally dedicated to their calling, up to date, always well prepared, enthusiastic and keen for us to do well in exams. There was something about them that announced professionalism. Among the teachers were local boys who had done well. Krishna Datt and Subramani were from Labasa. We admired them and secretly wished to emulate their careers. Krishna went on to become a prominent trade unionist, a founding member of the Fiji Labour Party and a Member of

Parliament. Subramani, after further studies in Canada, became a professor of English and Literature at the University of the South Pacific. Vijay Mishra, from Nausori, went on to do higher degrees in English and Medieval Indian literature, and is presently a professor of comparative literature at Murdoch University in Western Australia. Our Chemistry teacher, Amraiya Naidu, from Labasa, later became Fiji's permanent secretary for Education and, in the late 1990s, Fiji's representative to the United Nations. The school principal, Mr Sarwan Singh, later became head of the Fiji Institute of Technology and a Labour Senator in Fiji's 1999 Parliament. Others, such as our Mathematics teachers Venket Raylu and Gurdial Singh, joined the central secretariat of the Education Department.

Our teachers inspired us, both by what they did and who they were. Driven men themselves, they drove us hard, forcing us to the edge so that we too could realise our full potential. Their implicit belief that we could amount to something, despite the barriers of economics and geography, was an important reason for our success. They had spent their formative years in other countries, and they were acutely aware of the possibilities that could be exploited by us. That broadening experience of overseas education, with all that it entailed, informed their approach to teaching. Comparisons can be distorting and even odious, but I doubt that today's teachers have the same degree of professionalism and commitment to excellence that drove the earlier generation. Teaching as a profession does not seem to be as highly regarded as it once was, frequently seen as a stepping stone for a career elsewhere in the public service. It no longer attracts the best and the brightest. Teachers in Fiji now are working in a deeply polarised culture where political patronage rather than merit influences decision making about appointment and promotions. Coups and the convulsions they have caused have not only demoralised many but have also sent people into other professions. Whatever the reasons, the students of Fiji are the losers.

We completed our secondary schooling in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The country was then moving inexorably towards



independence, after deeply contested constitutional conferences called to consider the form of Fiji's future constitutional arrangements, racially charged by-elections, and the threat of racial violence by those opposed to independence. Race is always a charged issue in Fiji. The Colonial Sugar Refining Company, which had determined the shape of our communal and social life for nearly a century, was being hauled before an arbitration commission chaired by Lord Denning to give cane growers a better deal than they had received before. Independence came in 1970, and the CSR, unable to accept Denning's decision, departed in 1973. But these historic developments meant little to us. Their significance was never explained. No one discussed politics in school, or the future of the country we were destined to shape in different ways. We were living the legacy of a colonial education whose main aim was to train 'manpower', teachers, doctors, accountants, administrators, cogs in the wheel for the new nation, not politically conscious thinkers asking disturbing, destabilising questions about nationalism and nation building. It was not until much later that I learnt of discreet discussions about party politics among teachers, but it is their public silence that remains with me, their unwillingness or inability to alert us to impending developments that would affect our lives so profoundly.

But our teachers did well the things they were trained to do. They opened our horizons in other ways. We were exposed to new sports, such as hockey, cricket and lawn tennis. Every term, the school was taken to one of the local theatres, the Elite and the Majestic, to see a movie our teachers judged worthy. So we saw, but did not understand, *El Cid* and *Ben Hur*, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, and *Ulysses*. Their subject, the language of the screen, their cultural and historical context — Michelangelo, the Sistine Chapel paintings — were beyond us. *Wuthering Heights*, with Lawrence Olivier as the raging Heathcliff, was discussed in class because it was one of the books set for that year, but not the Hindi classic *Ganga Jamuna*, played memorably by Dilip Kumar and Balraj Sahni, about a family feud between two brothers in

village India, whose theme resonated in our own experiences. But whether we understood them or not, we were grateful to get away from schoolwork into the darkened magic of the theatre. Krishna Datt, our History teacher, started the school's first Student Council, opposed, we understood, by the principal. Vincent Naidu was its president and I was elected secretary. I cannot now recall precisely what we achieved, besides feeling important, being taken seriously by our teachers, and leading the occasional delegation to the principal's office about some minor matter, such as the improvement of the tennis court, or more hockey sticks and balls for the players.

Vijay Mishra, our English teacher, organised a 'Heretical Society', of which I was elected president. We had no idea what the word meant, but that did not matter; the excitement of doing something new and adventurous and slightly subversive captivated us. Every month, we debated some topic that the teachers thought important. Once we took the negative side in the debate on whether 'Alcoholics Should Have a Place in Society'. We lost, we consoled ourselves, because one of the judges was a History teacher, who later died prematurely from alcohol-related complications! Yet another time, we debated whether Science or Religion provided better insights into the human condition. I cannot recall which side we took. On yet another occasion, I led a team which won the debate that students should be allowed to wear flip flops, thongs, to school. We were allowed into the school compound either barefoot or in sandals and shoes, nothing else. We used such esoteric words as 'elite' and 'working class' to make our point. The principal, Mr John Sharan, was reportedly displeased but Vijay assured him that it was only a student debate! Less controversial than these debates were the events organised by the Music Group and the Biology Club. Listening to sweet, syrupy Hindi songs by Naresh and Babu Prasad, dissecting cane toads or inspecting the anatomy of insects were bound to be less contentious. Still, not all teachers approved of such extra-curricular activities. They felt that the time taken up with debates and field excursions was time

wasted. We should spend every minute of our time doing school work, completing homework, preparing for exams. Marks mattered most: we were at school to learn, not to debate issues not prescribed in the curriculum. Some students felt the same way, too. But I am glad theirs remained the minority view.

Each school day began with a morning period between 8:30 and 9am before classes began. What happened in that half-hour depended entirely on the class teacher. Our class teacher, Vijay Mishra, was creative. Freshly graduated from Victoria University in Wellington, he was a stylish man, always well dressed, sporting a tenderly nurtured goatee beard, handsome, awesomely fluent in English and westernised in his manners. I never heard him utter a Hindi word within our hearing, and we wondered among ourselves whether he knew the language at all. With a \$2 contribution from each one of us in the class, Vijay started a class library of English and European classics. We were all assigned a book, and asked to talk about it during the morning period. The selection made no concession to our cultural or educational background or the level of our (in)competence in the English language. So we read books by Jane Austen, Emily and Charlotte Bronte, John Galsworthy, Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, James Joyce (*The Dubliners*), Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, William Golding, Patrick White, Randolph Stow, Joseph Conrad, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Balzac, Emile Zola and many, many more.

The list is daunting, I know, and many mysterious stomach aches were reported on the day of presentation. But for many of us, these books opened up new horizons beyond our joyless villages and fed our imagination, inculcating a love for the written word that has remained with me despite the bewildering changes brought about by modern technology. I retained a sense that all learning and knowledge come from the printed page. I went further than other students by ordering books from the Western Regional Library in Lautoka. Years later I met a man who remembered sending book parcels to me,

wondering about the boy, in Labasa, of all places, who was interested in books by Russian authors. One day, when Vijay found out I was reading *Anna Karenina*, he was genuinely surprised, and asked me to speak about it to his combined English class of two forms. To stand up before the class and talk about a book — in effect, do a book review — was itself an experience, a first rudimentary lesson in public speaking.

We did not know it then, but we were being given an education that was rare in Fiji. Just one comparison with the Mahatma Gandhi High in Suva underscores this point. There, a friend told me, girls were discouraged from doing the hard sciences. Biology was fine, but definitely not Physics. Her English teacher, a prominent national politician, was hardly ever at school. Even when she was, she was distracted and snobbish, as India-born teachers could be towards Fiji Indians, peddling the shibboleth that science students did not need to have good English, and blaming the students themselves for their poor performance. The principal, also India-born, was a middle-aged bachelor, narrow and pathologically conservative, who cut out pictures of models in the *Time* magazine before placing them in the school library, for fear that these pictures would corrupt the morality of the girls and boys under his charge. Moreover, he played up to the patrons of society, always pampering and favouring kids from wealthy homes. He was less an educator than an ageing enforcer of socially conservative morality. Girls, he felt, were at school to prepare for careers as good wives and mothers; the idea of a career for women was alien to him. A teacher such as Vijay Mishra, who caused a minor furore in our school for making available a copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to his brighter students, would have been lynched at Mahatma Gandhi High!

We finished high school the year Fiji became independent. We were thus the last generation to study the colonial curriculum, sitting papers set by educational authorities in New Zealand. Before us, students did papers set by the Cambridge Syndicate, designed for primary and secondary students in British colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. After us, students would sit papers with

more local content in the humanities and the social sciences. 'Relevance' gained greater currency than was the case in our time. The social sciences curricula for the junior students after us had a different aim. They emphasised such themes as learning to live in a multicultural state, resolving conflicts, and the history and geography of Fiji. The history section is interesting. There was a separate course on the history of Fiji. Students looked at Fiji at the time of contact with the outside world: the so-called voyages of discovery, the beginnings of European settlement, the introduction of trade and a new religion and the 'main effects of such contact on the political structure, tribal wars, health and the birth of new ideas'; political developments from contact to Cession in 1874, the causes and consequences of Cession and the problems and challenges facing the administration of the first governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, the development of a separate Fijian Administration for the indigenous community, the advent of the sugar industry and 'the main issues of the indenture system including recruiting procedures and work conditions, and the constitutional development of Fiji from Cession to independence'. The depth of detail is impressive.

Students in Geography were expected to 'know and understand the main geographical features of Fiji', and 'relate in personal terms to the geographical patterns and processes in their own country'. They learnt about such topics as location, population, land use (semi-subsistence, village agriculture, commercial agriculture, sugar cane, coconut planting, dairying, beef cattle raising, climate and soil), about such industries as fishing, forestry, mining and manufacturing, and about communication and transport, including major routes linking Fiji with the rest of the world by sea and air. A new focus on Social Science aimed to 'prepare the students to cope with modern life while at the same time retain much of their identity'. Tolerance, understanding and goodwill towards others, confidence, self-esteem and a sense of responsibility, respect for individual and human rights and a willingness to accept changes within the existing

system of law and order, were some of the values the curricula tried to foster in the students. And English curricula offered a 'South Pacific Option', which introduced works by local writers and others from the Third World (such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o *Petals of Blood*) as well as extracts from local newspapers for comprehension exercises.

All this — so local, so familiar — was alien to me as a school boy. My exposure to things Fijian and Pacific came at university, and much later. In high school, I learnt nothing that even remotely touched the world I grew up in. Fiji might as well have been Mars. Take the Geography curriculum, for instance. Students in the 1960s learnt about Burma, Central China, Malaya, Singapore, Manchuria, Southwest Asia, about East Anglia, the Midland Valley of Scotland, South Wales; about Brittany, Denmark, the Mediterranean coastlands of France, the North Italian Peninsula, the Ruhr; about California, the Canadian maritime provinces, the corn belt of the United States, about Florida and the St Lawrence Valley. There was a section on New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific Islands, and in 1962, students sitting for the School Certificate were expected to know about the variety of landscapes in Northland, scientific dairy farming in Auckland, a high country run, water races and irrigation in Canterbury, coal mining in Westland, the Snowy River Scheme, irrigation farming around Renmark, South Australia, and the transport problems of the Cook Islands. It was the same pattern year after year, with students memorising relief maps of Australia, New Zealand and Europe, the industrial strengths of Liverpool and Manchester, and the sheep industry in New Zealand and Australia.

History was similar. In the early grades, we studied the rise of the Liberal Party in New Zealand, the importance of the refrigeration industry to New Zealand agriculture, the economic policies of Sir Julius Vogel, the Wakefield Scheme, the Maori Wars, the life and achievements of Sir Apirana Ngata, about John Macarthur, merino sheep and squatters; the effects of the Victorian gold rushes and the rapidly expanding wool industry, topics like that. In higher grades we

left the Antipodes to focus on the grand themes of world (but mostly western) history. So we studied the unification of Germany and Italy and the contributions of Bismarck, Mazzini, Cavour and Garibaldi to the making of their countries' histories; the Crimean War, the First World War brought about by the shift in the Balance of Power in Europe and the disruption of the Armed Peace in the first decade of the 20th century, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the contribution to it of Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky, the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy, the emergence of the trade union movement in the United Kingdom and, briefly, the rise of new nations in Asia.

Krishna taught the subject with infectious enthusiasm. He opened up his own personal library to us, lending us books by Geoffrey Barraclough, Dennis Mack Smith, Percival Spear, L.C.B. Seaman, A.J.P. Taylor. I am not sure we understood the complex arguments and themes these historians espoused, but that was not the point. The books opened up a window to a past — even if that past was remote to all of us — that connected us to a wider world, other human experiences in history. The process of learning, I suppose, was more important than the content. Krishna also had a marvellous sense of theatre. I vividly recall him turning up to class one morning with a large placard around his neck with the opening words of the *Communist Manifesto*, 'Workers of the world unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains.' And he created a minor furor in the school by suggesting that Hitler's birthday should be remembered because he was an important — evil but important — figure in 20th century history.

In our English classes we studied both literature and language. I did not take much to grammar. I could not get enthused about co-ordinate clauses, auxiliary, infinite and intransitive verbs, possessive adjectives and pronouns, predicate and prepositions and subordinate conjunctions. The knowledge was necessary but dry. Try teaching a farm boy, with a rudimentary knowledge of English, the difference between effected and affected, laudable and laudatory, ineffective and

ineffectual, precipitous and precipitate, continuously and continually, observance and observation, dominating and domineering!

Literature was something else, especially the way Vijay Mishra and Subramani taught the subject. With Vijay we explored John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* as well as William Wordsworth ('The Daffodils'), Lord Tennyson ('Ulysses'), Samuel Taylor Coleridge ('Ancient Mariner': *Water, water, every where, nor any drop to drink*), Edgar Allan Poe ('Raven'), D.H. Lawrence ('The Snake') and Shakespeare (*Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*). Subramani introduced us to Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, to T.S. Eliot ('Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and 'The Wasteland'), and to *Hamlet*, whose soliloquy we all memorised. I recall Subra playing in class a scratchy gramophone record of T.S. Eliot reading his Prufrock poem. Such was his dedication to his subject. Vijay was intellectually agile, cool and instinctive whereas Subra seemed more scholarly, brooding, withdrawn. Both were excellent teachers who taught us to cherish the pleasures of the imagination, to cultivate the habit of reading and reflection. From them I learned that a life of reading and writing was not a life wasted, that teaching was a noble profession. From them, too, I learned that books could be instruments for inner growth, constant, uncomplaining and accessible companions in the darkest hours. No wonder both went on to enjoy distinguished academic careers in their chosen fields.

All this good teaching, liberating and humanising, was geared to one end: to enable students to pass the external exams. Everything depended on that single event spread over a long fateful week. There was no concession to personal circumstance, such as death in the family or illness or some other misfortune, and no account was taken of the work done over the course of the year or years. We all hoped and prayed that nothing unexpected happened before the exams. A day or two before the exam, the classroom partitions would be removed to create a huge, impersonal hall, with wooden desks and chairs arranged in neat rows. On the appointed day, several neatly



coiffured elderly white ladies would appear in cars packed with sealed boxes containing the exam papers. While we waited anxiously outside, they would open the boxes and place the papers on the desks. Then we would be called in, our palms sweaty, our hearts racing. The supervisors would read the rules: no communicating with anyone, all notes to be handed over, no one to leave the exam room during the first hour. Then after the mandatory ten minutes reading time, we would begin.

The questions were not entirely unfamiliar as we had covered the topics in school. Still, in that tension-filled environment, even straightforward questions could appear curly, and facts at one's finger tips before the exam unable to be recalled. The longer essay questions in history, for example, calling for a discussion of the effects of the Maori wars on the Maori people, the causes of the 1929 Depression, the circumstances leading to the federation of Canada or Australia, the meaning of the 'Partition of Africa', or the contribution of Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin to the history of Soviet: these questions were manageable. But shorter ones, asking for a comparison of the policies of Gladstone and Disraeli regarding social reform, Ireland, parliamentary reform and foreign policy, or factual description of the *Import Duties Act* of 1931, the gold standard, the Abdication crisis, the 1928 *Parliamentary Reform Act* or the Irish Free State could flatten us, as they often did.

It was much the same in English. The literature section, covering prose, poetry and drama, was broadly familiar to us because we had studied the texts in class. From the list of prescribed novels — *Jane Eyre*, *Silas Marner*, *Oliver Twist*, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Lord Jim*, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, *Animal Farm*, *The Pearl*, *Man Alone*, *King Solomon's Mines*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Typhoon*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The War of the Worlds*, *Vanity Fair*, among many others — we could provide an outline of the main story and 'choose a very important episode, perhaps a climax, and in about half to three-quarters of a page give an

outline of the episode'. In drama we could select a play by William Shakespeare, Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Sheridan, George Bernard Shaw, J.B. Priestley, Thornton Wilder or Terence Rattigan, identify a prominent character and write his or her character sketch in an episode in which he or she was prominent. In poetry we knew enough — or were supposed to know enough — about rhythm, meter, free verse, iambic tetrameter and pentameter, heroic couplets, sonnet and ballad, and about symbol, allusion, allegory and metonymy, to get by. It was the section on 'composition' that got us. Try as we might, we found it hard to write a long meaningful paragraph on modern art, the astronauts, western films, the bottle drive or collecting for Corso, about the main stand at the flower show, the case for or against television in the home, a climbing adventure, babysitting or, of all things, a winter morning! In hot, humid Labasa. Come to think of it, it was a miracle that we passed our exams, and with good marks, too.

After the exams, we all went home to our villages, to spend the hot, humid summer months helping with field work, planting rice, weeding cane, working as hired hands for wealthier neighbours. For two months or so, we would be completely cut off from our friends and the rest of the world. It was a very lonely experience, after all our school work, to return to a place where nothing happened, where no one had any idea about what you did, and the new imaginative worlds you were exploring, the new friends you had made, the romantic flutter of the adolescent heart. To keep your sanity, you read whatever was available, and engaged in countless conversations with yourself or with the characters you encountered in the texts, memorising poetry and lines from the *Ramayana*. We could not wait for the school year to start again.

Our teachers continued to take an interest in our careers after we left school, in a protective, big-brotherly sort of a way. Some of them have become friends, but interaction is characterised by a certain respectful reserve. That is appropriate because the old teacher-pupil relationship never quite goes away. We treated our teachers with complete respect, bordering on reverence, never daring to talk back,

never using their first names, making ourselves scarce whenever we saw them at social functions. But I have lost touch with most of my fellow students. Whenever we meet in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane or Auckland — in the Fijian diaspora — we invariably talk about Labasa and the whereabouts of our school mates and teachers, swapping thigh-slapping stories, recalling moments that have remained with us. The other day, Suresh recalled how one teacher was fond of punching students who could not memorise the atomic weight of minerals in the Chemistry class. That reign of terror had scared him. As a teacher himself, he had vowed never to use violence in the classroom.

I recalled the day in grade twelve when a girl we all were in love with, walked out of the room at recess with a spot of red on the back of her dress, and did not return to class that or the following day. I knew it was blood, but how did she get hurt, I muttered to Emanuel sitting next to me. Emanuel shook his head in surprise and gave me an education in female biology. Such innocence, or ignorance, so late in life. Satish recalled a story about Liaquat, a squat fellow with an impish sense of humour. One day, just before morning recess, Liaquat had an erection. He could not do anything about it. As we got up to go outside, he remained seated, helplessly pointing to the bulge in his pants. We laughed uproariously which caught the attention of the teacher. He walked up to Liaquat to inquire what all the fuss was about. Liaquat, remaining seated, complained to him about a stiff foot and a massive headache!

I have few regrets about the kind of education I received in high school, partly because I was able to catch up on the things I had missed out on earlier, devoting my professional life to the study of the history and politics of Fiji. I do feel though for my contemporaries who chose other careers, never having learnt a word about their society and culture, going through life ignorant of the broader historical forces that had shaped their destinies. Labasa Secondary ended our cultural and intellectual isolation. It opened worlds beyond

the village horizon, joined us to the broader sweep of historical developments, inculcated a commitment to the pursuit of excellence, and reinforced a firm belief in individual initiative and self-reliance. These values, acquired so long ago, have shaped my life and work. For me, as for most of my contemporaries, western education did not erase our own cultural landscape. At home, we continued to read the *Ramayana* and the Hindi newspapers, perform our *pujas*, observe the ritual calendar of Hinduism. After nearly twenty years of living away from Fiji, I still speak, read and write Hindi — have even published a book in it — enjoy Hindi music and Indian food. Western education sharpened my consciousness of my particular multicultural identity.

Whenever I reflect on my childhood days, I always think of Subhash, that short, serious boy by the roadside, waiting for the early morning school bus. He left an indelible imprint on our youthful memories. In white uniform, he was an inspiration and an example we all wanted to follow. One of us, he was pursuing a path that promised to lead him away from the mentally deadening routine of village life. He was the first one of our generation from our village to continue the journey of exploration and discovery begun by our forebears. After Subhash, there was no going back. The past was past.

## *From Labasa to Laucala Bay*

The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;  
The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep  
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,  
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world...  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.

Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'Ulysses'

*Ben flung the Fiji Times across the verandah* to me as he got out of the car. That was his daily routine. He would leave for work early in the morning with a roti parcel in his hand and return late in the evening with a rolled-up copy of the national daily. On this day, a wry smile on his face hinted at the news I had been expecting for more than a month, the results of the New Zealand University Entrance Examination. I had not done as well in the exam as I could have, and was therefore not sure if I had passed. My heart racing, I rustled through the paper to the page with the results. So many schools, so many names in such small print, all so confusing; it took me a while to find Labasa Secondary School. And then my name, in black and white. I punched the air with a joyful shout. I looked at my name again — and again — just to check that I was not dreaming.

Then, after the truth had sunk in, I looked at other names on the list. Most of my friends had also passed, but since they were scattered around Labasa, there was no way I could contact them until the following Saturday, a long, restless wait. We met in town at the

bus stand near the marketplace, all puffed up, shaking hands, playfully slapping each other on the shoulder, excited, happy, anxious about what lay ahead, while also feeling deeply for friends who had failed. And girls we knew we would never see again, girls like Gyan, meaning knowledge, a dark exquisitely sculptured beauty from Naqiqi, who, like so many of them, would soon be lost to marriage and maternity.

We had passed, but did we have marks good enough to secure a government scholarship? That was the next question. We headed to the school to meet with our teachers, who we knew would be expecting us. They were all there. We felt proud that we had somehow vindicated their faith in our ability, all their hard work over the years, and they were thrilled that we had got through. Labasa Secondary had, once again, topped the list of passes in the colony. No longer mere students, we saw ourselves, and our teachers saw us, as scholars in the making. Their smiling approval and handshakes made us feel important, special. Some of them, for the first time, spoke to us in Hindi. It was their way of expressing affection and intimacy.

At home, everyone was happy for me, especially my younger brothers who no doubt dreamed of following my path one day. But my future remained uncertain. A pass was good, but I knew that without a government scholarship I would not be able to continue. There was some vague talk of my finding a job — any job — straight away to contribute to the family's meagre coffers, help my younger siblings still in primary school, and lessen Ben's financial burden now that he was married and had a family of his own to look after. Father was advised to follow this path by some neighbouring village elders, our ill-wishers, who publicly professed admiration for my achievements but secretly hoped that I would remain marooned in Labasa so that our family would not get too big for its boots, upsetting the village's long-reigning hierarchy. Both Ben and mother disagreed. I should go on, they said, but only if I managed to get a scholarship. I understood their predicament, but could not bear the thought of spending my life

as a subaltern in the civil service or the local bank, while all my friends had gone. To my unexpressible relief a few weeks later, I won a government scholarship to go the University of the South Pacific to do a Bachelor of Arts degree in Education, majoring in History and English.

The choice of subjects and a career as a high school teacher caused much amused comment in the village. Why did I need to go to *university* to become a teacher, people asked, as they recalled names of teachers who had no tertiary qualifications at all? Why had I not chosen something big, like medicine or the law? My marks were not good enough, it was gleefully surmised, which was why I had to settle for History and English, the subjects for true no-hopers. My parents, both unlettered, with absolutely no idea what university education entailed beyond the prospect of a good salary and a white-collar job, were perplexed but said nothing. I assured them that my arts degree would be just a stepping stone to an eventual law career. I was serious about law. Lawyers were important people, they lived in huge, well-furnished houses in town with servants to attend to all their needs, they dressed well with tie and neatly pressed shirt, talked smoothly and knowledgeably about many things, gave long speeches on important public occasions, knew all the people who mattered, and were held in esteem by the village people. I wanted to be like them. The doubters were silenced.

Farewell preparations began as soon as the date of departure was settled. Clothes had to be bought or tailored. An obligatory *puja* had to be performed a week before I left to seek divine blessing for the next phase of my life. A *Ramayana* recital was organised and a *bhandara*, vegetarian feast, given. Then on the eve of my departure, extended family members from various parts of Labasa came home to say goodbye. A goat was slaughtered and the party went on till late at night. Female members of the family teased me about my marriage plans, whether I would bring a *memia*, a white lady, home, and about girls I was leaving behind whose parents had approached father about me as a future son-in-law. Others asked me to be wary of the wayward

ways of Suva, an unsafe place full of thugs and derelicts and wicked women. It was a night of fun and laughter that I still remember with great fondness, now made more poignant by the passing away of many who had made the night so memorable.

Next morning, a hired 'Jungi' bus took us to the Waiqele airport. It was an emotional farewell of a kind I had not experienced before. I was the first one from our family ever to leave Labasa for Viti Levu, our local overseas. I was going to a place where I knew nobody. Friends and family were genuinely concerned about my loneliness and vulnerability. People put money in my jingling pocket as their farewell gift. Tears flowed as we embraced each other. Mother was mother, her steel grey hair dishevelled in the wind, eyes red and puffed from the previous night's crying, but I had never seen father or Ben cry as they did on that day when I walked toward the tarmac. I did not know it then, but as I mounted the steps of the patch-scarred Heron bound for the Nausori airport, I was embarking on a journey of permanent alienation from the place of my childhood. Perhaps my family better appreciated the significance of my journey than I did.

The plane journey itself was not as dramatic as some people we knew had said it would be. We did not have to be strapped to our seats to preserve the balance of the plane's weight, and prevent it from tipping to one side or another. People could smoke without incinerating the aircraft. There was no problem holding our bladders for the 45-minute flight. Our ears were clogged, but our hearing was not impaired. The pilots made announcements about the estimated time of arrival, and from the aisle we could see them talking and laughing as they toyed with a frightening array of gadgets. And the aircraft sliced through the cotton balls of cloud without shaking and shuddering.

Nausori airport, a curious collection of colonial-era buildings, dark and damp, was not the bustling place I had imagined it to be. The tar-sealed road from the airport to the city, full of smoke-belching cars and buses, was new, as were the miserable lean-to huts in the



gulleys along the road, I saw no cows or horses or cane fields, but I got used to their absence in time. Suva from the bus as it meandered along Edinburgh Drive past Walu Bay was forbidding, its alienness accentuated by the miserable, overcast rainy weather. Too many people, too many tall buildings. The city, especially the area around the market, appeared like a poked beehive. In time, I came to accept that city people were businesslike, less open and welcoming than the folk back home. For the most part, though, Suva remained at the edge of our consciousness. Cooped up on the Laucala campus, with assignments to prepare and tests to sit, a future to think about, we hardly ventured out — often could not afford to — except on the very rare occasion to have a much cherished Chinese meal of egg fried rice at the Peking in Victoria Parade, or the occasional Sunday when we went to the neighbouring water-logged Burkhurst Park to watch local soccer matches.

For many of us, that was the extent of our outings in the early years. When we returned home during the long holidays, people pestered us with questions about life in the city. They were especially curious about people from the other Pacific islands, their mannerisms, the clothes they wore, the way they dressed, the food they ate, how they looked, the languages they spoke. Had we met any cannibals among them? Did they frighten us? We obliged, sometimes with tall tales of our own, about all the drinking we did, the nightclubs we patronised and the wicked women we had been warned about!

From the Fiji Airways office, I took a taxi to the Laucala campus. It was a short ride, but the complex maze of streets with strange names — McGregor Road, Knolley's Street, Flagstaff — increased my apprehension. Labasa was a one-street town, and that had required some getting used to. The car deposited me at an old, white building where new students were being registered. Peter Beveridge, Dean of Preliminary Students, a plump man with red face, greeted us. His New Zealand accent took some time to understand. Ahead of me in the queue were two Suva girls, Tarun Lata and Champa Narsey.

Fashionably dressed and confident in manner, they were comparing their University Entrance marks. My heart sank when I overheard them saying they had marks in the 90s in Mathematics and Chemistry. Blame my rustic prejudices, if you will, but the idea of girls being academically brighter than boys was alien to me. I was slightly reassured, however, when they moaned of low marks in English, somewhere in the 30s. I knew the hard road that lay ahead. Being a bright boy from Labasa was one thing; making a success of myself, to stand out here, would be another thing. I went to bed that night full of doubt and genuinely worried about the future.

The University of the South Pacific had been in existence for four years when we enrolled in 1971. It was a remarkable, and a remarkably successful, experiment in regional cooperation whose contribution to the Pacific islands has been outstanding. Historians are fond of talking about turning points in history. In Pacific islands history of the 20th century, there are two such turning points. One was the Second World War, which broke the isolation of the islands by opening up air, sea and modern cable links, increasing the mobility of its people and fostering a gradual consciousness of a new decolonising world on the horizon. After the war, the Pacific would not be the same. The other turning point was the opening of the University of the South Pacific. Before then, only a handful of students from Fiji attended university overseas, mostly on scholarship, to train for high school teaching careers in the sciences and social sciences. USP opened up opportunities for us on an unprecedented scale, especially to bright students from poor families and to girls whose parents would not have countenanced sending their daughters overseas. These graduates filled positions in the expanding bureaucracies of the newly independent island nations, and went on to become presidents and prime ministers, senior diplomats and regional and international civil servants.

The idea of a university had been around Fiji since the mid-1950s. In 1956, the visionary Indo-Fijian leader A.D. Patel had urged

the South Pacific Commission to establish a University College of the South Pacific to prepare a 'wise and competent indigenous leadership, essential for the solution of the problems facing the territories and [for] the general advancement of their own communities'. When his plea fell on deaf ears, he began talks with the Indian Government to start a senior college in Fiji to prepare students for universities in the United Kingdom, and a rudimentary start was made with a University Tutorial College in Tailevu in the early 1960s. Patel was persistent, continuing his push for a local university. A local university would produce local graduates who would be 'looking for local employment and fulfil local needs,' he argued. 'Our problem is that many students go abroad, receive higher education, receive qualifications and then settle down outside of Fiji because they get more remunerative employment.'

By the mid-1960s, a consensus developed for a local university. Sir Charles Morris led a Higher Education Mission in 1965 and his report laid the foundations of the new institution. The University of the South Pacific started in 1968 at the site of the Royal New Zealand Air Force base at Laucala Bay. The two hundred or so buildings at the 192-acre campus were converted into residential blocks, laboratories and classrooms. The massive hangar at the lower campus served for many years as the venue for graduation ceremonies and other public performances hosted by the university, the most memorable being the 1971 graduation ceremony when the massive, profusely perspiring King of Tonga had to be cooled by air pushed through an ice cooler. The wooden structures, now replaced by modern, technologically sophisticated buildings, served as lecture halls for the first decade. The present site, filled with landscaped gardens, road humps, a distinctive Pacific-style architecture, will be unrecognisable to students of my time for whom the campus was full of white weatherboard buildings with peeling paint, few trees, rough green gullies and close-cropped lawns.

Several early decisions shaped the future direction of the university. The first was the emphasis on its regional character, involving the English-speaking, former British, Australian and New Zealand

territories in the South Pacific. It was an important decision of far-reaching effect. For us, the new students, its most immediate, and at first quite terrifying, manifestation was the residential policy in the accommodation blocks. Each room in the barrack-like cement structures was divided by a curtain into four cubicles, each with its own wardrobe, chair, table and bed. The communal toilet and washing facilities were located at the end of the block. Each cubicle housed a student from a different ethnic and regional group. My companions were Edward Masika from the Solomon Islands, Sefarana Fatiaki from Rotuma, and Filip Koloï from Tonga.

We were all very awkward at first, complete strangers, completely unfamiliar with each other's habits. But fear and apprehension disappeared with time. As we got to know each other, we spent many a late night, doped with grog or, especially during weekends, with surreptitiously acquired beer from 'Faty's' across the road. We talked freely about ourselves, where we came from, what we wanted to do. We were all different in our own ways. Filip was the mysterious one, very bright but slightly sullen, hiding his perennially puffed, sleep-deprived eyes behind dark glasses. After the first year, he went to New Zealand to do engineering. I heard a few years ago that he had died. Sef left for Auckland to do accountancy, and Eddie completed his degree to return to the Solomon Islands to work for the radio station there. He is now working on his own.

By the end of the first year, we had become good friends, our friendship cemented by the shared innocence of being first year students. This was an important, broadening experience for me. It was the realisation of how much we had in common as human beings, despite all the differences of cultural background and historical experience, that has remained with me. As we left university after the first preparatory year, we wrote each other little notes. I have kept mine. Eddie remembered my 'dramatic logical reasonings' — without doubt very late at night after several beers had been drunk. 'The magic formula "To foresee is to Rule" is the one you have grasped,'

he wrote, 'and I wish you luck that it will germinate within you as you grow to maturity in this harsh world of ours.' Sef remembered me as a 'boozing partner and a keen supporter of the invincible Vanua Levu team'. 'The magic formula "Procrastination is the thief of time" has certainly taken root in your mind and thus you are very dedicated to your studies and to this extent the path to future academic success has truly been laid in this academic year of preparation.'

Filip wrote: 'Life is just like a flower. Early morning, it grows to form a bud and shines. Sunrise, it swings and delights. Afternoon comes, it is shrivelled and cries. Early evening... the young flower dies. A mermaid would have to lay and rise but the young flower would wait for the dawn to pass — virgin??' I still don't know what he meant, but was impressed by his poetic skills at the time. Morris Samuela, my next-door neighbour, a chubby, funny fellow with jelly-like stomach, always dressed in a wrap-around floral cloth, often shirtless, who wrote his address as 'Valley of Love, Raro', penned an intriguing farewell. Regretting that the 'paper is white, but you're a guy,' he wrote, 'I wish I was a golden apple, Hanging on your tree, And every time when you pass my room, I always think that you're the guy.' This, too, must have been written on a very late beer-soaked Saturday night! Joe Hewson, from Bua, remembered me as a 'person of extremes', one who 'at one extreme is very hard working, industrious and capable in terms of your school work, while at the other extreme, a very sociable character who is able to adapt and take part in any "mischief" that arises; especially when you, your room mates and I used to gossip over those cups of world-wide famous drink (HB: Home Brew) and then go crazy.' Meeting Sef, Eddie, Filip, Morris and Joe was certainly an important, culturally enriching part of the education at USP.

There were other boys from other parts of Fiji whom I got to know gradually. At first we were all self-conscious, assessing each other quietly. The Indo-Fijian boys from Ba, that big, boisterous province with an unbeatable soccer team, were a confident lot, cocky even, who stuck together in the early days, aloof from us. Being from Ba was

their badge of pride. To be from Labasa, for them, was to be someone who was earnest if a bit simple, socially unsophisticated. I found it easier to make friends with boys from Sigatoka and Nadi, rural sugar districts similar to our own. But distinctions of place and status did not last long as we plunged in to our studies. I recall fondly the wicked habit we continued from high school of nicknaming people. A boy with a toothbrush moustache we called 'Hitler'. Another was named 'Politics' for his enthusiastic interest in contemporary affairs. One Indian boy we simply called 'George', and another 'Proper' because whenever we asked how things were, he always replied, '*Sab proper hai*'. Everything is alright. Those names come up whenever we meet, puzzling children and wives unaware of our past antics.

Strangely enough, we did not get to know the Fijian students as well as we should or might have. There was always an edge to our relationship, perhaps sharpened by the racially divided nature of our national politics. We assumed they supported the Alliance party, and they undoubtedly regarded us as Federation supporters. We thought in terms of stereotypes. Fijian students had won government scholarships with fewer marks than us, which rankled especially when we thought of our friends whom we had left behind. I suspect our total commitment to study, to achieving good grades and getting ahead, reinforced in their minds the stereotypes about hard-working Indians. Perhaps they were negotiating their own ways around their own internal social and cultural boundaries. There were some who managed to project a cross-cultural appeal, people like Jone Dakuvula, but they were few. And, to our great shame, we derided Indo-Fijian students such as Robin Singh who wore the sulu, spoke Fijian and preferred Fijian over Indian food, as social misfits not worthy of our affection and company. In retrospect, not getting to know Fijian students better, understanding their fears and hopes, I count as a sad missed opportunity.

We all belonged to the Student Association which organised concerts and dances and film evenings that introduced us village boys

to things western for the first time. Clubs for runners, chess players, cross-country hikers, field enthusiasts and biologists attracted students from all ethnic groups. We climbed Mount Korobaba and Joske's Thumb across the bay from Suva, went on a week-long trip to the historic islands of Bau and Ovalau (which, if truth be told, is where I met my future wife!). Hockey, cricket, rugby, badminton, table tennis, basketball, softball, lawn tennis, karate, pool and judo introduced us to new sports and new people, though most of the time I watched people play from the sidelines. The student newspaper, *Unispac*, provided a creative outlet for poems, short stories and the occasional, obligatory, diatribe against the university administration. I was its editor for a year. Occasionally, we participated in strikes about improving the quality of food or demanding greater accountability from the university administration about student matters. I am not sure we fully understood the issues, but it felt good and fashionable to rise up against the establishment.

We campaigned and voted for student leaders not of our own ethnic group: Paula Kunabuli, Setoki Cainituraga, Maika Toga, Robert Papa, Tip Sun Loo, Edward Kingmele, Joseph Hansell, Oberia Menke. They campaigned on the basis of a platform, a vision, a program, all neatly scrawled on a piece of paper slipped underneath our dormitory door at night, pledging to improve the quality of food in the dining hall, the laundry service, sports facilities, study rooms for day scholars. Important things like that. The fact that Setoki, an indigenous Fijian, could be elected president of the student association, when the majority of the students were Indo-Fijian, made a deep impression on me, my first exposure to non-racial politics. And this despite the fact that socially we kept away from the Fijians.

I also learned that, the ideology of a united sisterhood notwithstanding, women did not necessarily vote for women. Padma Narsey stood for vice-president. Most boys voted for her, and most women for the winning candidate, Vijay Naidu. We could be persuaded to rally behind a candidate who came from our part of the

world: attachment to place was important. Somehow, we Vanua Levu boys, Fijian and Indo-Fijian, stuck together on public occasions, supporting each other in social events and rugby and soccer matches, united by a lingering suspicion that boys and girls from Viti Levu thought us a rung or two below them in social sophistication, mocking our speech, our dress, our clumsiness with knife and fork at the dining table.

Still, for the most part, we moved within our own social and cultural orbit. Shared interests in music and food and faith, or common historical experience and cultural expectations, kept us together, strengthened the bonds of friendship. It was the same with everyone else. Perhaps the group with whom we found most in common was the Solomon Islanders. They played soccer as we did. And they were such a spontaneous lot, unconscious of hierarchy and rigid cultural protocol, independent-minded free thinkers. Samoans and Tongans appeared to us to be more reserved, more conscious of their status and place among us. After all, they came from deeply stratified, ranked societies about which we understood very little, and still don't. They also had perhaps an exaggerated reputation for heavy drinking during weekends and for fierce brawls that left the pavements littered with broken glass and dried blood. Students from Kiribati and Tuvalu, few in number, were friendly in a distant sort of a way, but I remember them, especially the frequently shirtless Tebororo Tito, later president of Kiribati, as great players of lawn tennis.

The dining hall, a huge rambling building in the centre of the campus, was also a novel experience. Rain or shine, we had to turn up for food at specified hours or miss our meals altogether. To have jam and buttered toast with scrambled eggs and bacon for breakfast was heavenly for kids from farms where the normal, boring, fare was roti and vegetable curry all year round. The kitchen was divided into two sections: Indian and islander. The Indian section consisted of roti, rice, meat and vegetable curry and dhal, while the island corner offered boiled root crops, beef, pork, tapioca. For the first few years,



prisoners of our cultural and culinary habits, we kept to our respective streams, eating with our own group, but things changed gradually as we developed a taste for chop suey or sweet and sour dishes. In the last year, I regularly signed up for fish and lolo and lovo food served on the island counter. And non-Indians increasingly began to take the opportunity to sample curry and roti. Years later, I meet island students who still talk fondly about Indian food. When visiting Suva, they eat nothing else.

Within our group, girls stuck together, and we boys rarely shared a meal with them, even boys who had steady relationships. Most, however, carefully camouflaged their romantic interests until the relationship was secure enough for public display. Before then, the meetings were confined to weekends, after-library hours, under trees in the evenings, in the darkened corners of wooden buildings. Once formed, the relationships were expected to last for life. For all practical purposes, they lived as a married couple, without the knowledge of their parents, of course. Often things worked out, and many of those early love birds are still together. But there were occasions when relationships faltered because boys demanded the patriarchal privileges of having all their domestic chores taken care of — clothes washed and ironed, food cooked on weekends. When girls refused, for whatever reason, they were dumped immediately and sometimes beaten up. The tragedy was that no Indian boy hence would touch them because they were seen as ‘damaged’ goods, an already exploded firecracker — *phuta pataka* — as we used to say, displaying all the male prejudices we had acquired in the village. We envied the freedom with which island boys and girls mixed socially on the dance floor or in musicals and could form new relationships unencumbered by their past and without being ostracised.

Along with the dining hall, the university library, then located in the former RNZAF Officers’ Mess, now the site of the Institute of Pacific Studies, was another institution around which our lives revolved. It was popular for many reasons. Boys and girls falling in

love, or trying to, could spend a few precious hours together away from the public gaze, complete assignments, exchange notes. I, too, had my secret romantic interests and aspirations. It was in the library that I got to know my future wife! It was my good fortune that, like me, Padma, too, was a driven student. Padma was an important reason I spent most of my waking hours in the library.

But there was a deep intellectual attraction as well. The idea of a building full of books, on virtually every topic under the sun, was heavenly for someone from my reading-deprived background. For the first time, I could lose myself completely in books for hours on end, without guilt, undistracted, absorbed. That habit caused disapproving, dismissive comments about me being a 'bookworm', an 'academic', uninterested in the wider university scene. Some actually pitied me. If only they knew of the goings-on in our block, or talked to Sef or Eddie or Filip! I was simply indulging a passion I had acquired in high school. I read deeply around the subjects of my assignments, delved into encyclopaedias and reference works and historical and anthropological texts on Fiji.

Then there was reading for sheer pleasure: novels, poetry, mostly by Indian, Caribbean and African writers, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, V.S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, Alan Paton. Fortunately, it is a habit that has persisted, the pleasure increasing with the passage of time. I also remember reading magazines and newspapers from other regions. One that caught my attention was *Tapia*, a journal of creative expression and political commentary from the West Indies. Brinsley Samaroo, whom I met years later, was one of its regular contributors, writing about the struggle for political and social equality of the Indian community there. Those articles ignited my interest in our distant Indian cousins in the diaspora. But what struck me at the time, perhaps more than anything else, was the sight of familiar names, though written in a form that made them appear idiosyncratic — Samaroo, Ramharaksingh, Sahadeo, Mahabir — in print, writing fluently, with power and persuasion about culture, politics

and society, while I was still learning the alphabets of elementary composition. I wondered whether I would ever be able to follow their example.

At the university, some of our own fellow students — Raymond Pillay, Sashi Kant Nair, Anirudh Singh, Dhurup Chand — were writing poems and short stories with local themes which appeared in *Unispac*. Raymond was my favourite; he was everyone's favourite. His stories, such as 'Muni Deo Devil' and 'Brief Skirmish', were about romantic longings, hapless teachers and the frustrated search for marriage partners. They rang so true. We understood the names of the characters: Moti, Parvati, Bangaru Naidu, Brij Mohan. They could have been from our own village, even been our own relatives and friends. And his language was so precise and evocative. 'Black as a *baigan*' [eggplant] required no interpretation to us village kids. Parmesh Chand used Hindi words which caused great amusement amongst us because we were unused to seeing our rough language in print. '*Bahut thanda lage ka yaar?*' You feeling very cold or what? '*Bahut jor.*' Very much. These writers alerted us to the creative possibilities of places and emotions we had not contemplated before. In her carefully crafted and entirely plausible short stories, Vanessa Griffen introduced us to the world of Fijians and Part-Europeans. Her word pictures were perfect: 'This Fijian woman, any Fijian woman, was a common sight on the sea wall, sitting crouched, with faded cotton skirt billowing in the wind, or standing tall against the sky. Beside her, in a basket plaited out of green coconut leaf, she kept her bait.' It could be Suva Point or Stinson's Parade or anywhere around the Suva harbour. And then there was Dhurup Chand, a diminutive boy from Lautoka, a dreamer at heart, troubled by unrequited love, whose haunting poems about love and loss left us with tears:

Sometimes I hear the wind talking.  
Only a few lonely dreamers are seen  
Out where they are walking

Amid the red and blue and green  
The wind tells me things that happened  
A long, lonely time ago.  
About those people who lived and loved,  
Whose names I do not know.

No more than 17 or 18 years old, Dhurup was studying science.

The university routine required readjustment. A few lectures and tutorials during the day left a lot of free time. At first, managing time was a problem because of so many distractions. Many students lost their way, content just to pass their courses. But for the more intellectually curious and ambitious, lectures were merely the starting point for further enquiry. It was so for me. I often sat through the lectures as a matter of habit, to have my presence in class registered. Attendance was mandatory. Real learning took place through individual reading, often beyond the prescribed texts, and in tutorials. Our interest also depended on the lecturers we had. They were all different in their own ways. Walter Johnson, the great American historian who taught us for a semester, paced the classroom, his white, shoulder-length hair neatly combed back, speaking without notes but with eloquent authority about recent events in American history. He knew or had met the characters he talked about: Adlai Stevenson, Senator William Fulbright, Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago. He talked about the Watergate affair with deep conviction and passion. Walter was a scholar in action, committed, engaged, inspiring. Ron Crocombe, Professor of Pacific Studies, was lean, restless, vital, passionate, a live wire. He, too, talked about people and places with intimate, anecdotally rich knowledge. Less intellectually disciplined, he wandered widely in his lectures. A lecture on prehistory could often end up with ruminations on contemporary developments. Ron had little time for disciplinary boundaries. History, for him, was a tool to understand the present and improve the future.

June Cook, a lecturer in history, was completely different in her approach. A chain-smoking, chubby English lady, she had come

to USP after a period at the United Nations. Fluent in French and Japanese, she taught us European and world history. She used to arrive for her lectures dead on time, place her carefully handwritten lecture notes on the lectern and read them word for word, one perfectly balanced sentence after another, never taking her eyes off the text. Her style took some getting used to, but once we got accustomed to it, her lectures were mesmerising. There was no concession to our background or to our facility with the English language. She might as well have been talking to American and English students. There was something encouraging, even inspiring, about that.

June took a personal interest in me, convinced that I had a flair for history. She would invite me to her flat, pour a stiff scotch for both of us and talk about history. She introduced me to the books of great English historians such as G.M. Trevelyan and A.J.P. Taylor and Christopher Hill, to the writings of the Indian diplomat-historian K.M. Pannikar and to the Cambridge historian of India, Percival Spear. She would assign me readings outside class and discuss them, one on one, after hours and during weekends. She wanted me to leave the Pacific and study European or Asian history. The Pacific was too small for me, she felt, and I was destined for bigger things. She often took me along to plays at the Fiji Arts Club and once or twice to art movies at Phoenix Mini in Suva. It was her way of broadening my cultural experience. Such interest, such concern was as touching as her belief in my ability in history was daunting. It is teachers like June who make a profound difference to one's life. And they are so rare.

By the early 1970s, a handful of locals had joined the staff. Ahmed Ali, in history, was one of them. Over the years, I have had profound political and intellectual differences with him. But as a teacher of undergraduates, Ahmed was different. He was passionately anti-colonial and even anti-British. His course on the colonial Pacific, with Fiji as the centrepiece, provided a perspective we had not encountered. The colonial establishment came in for a scathing attack, and the British bore the brunt of his anger for their policies,

which had kept the Fijians and the Indo-Fijians apart. The British had made 'no effort to bring the two races together by the third party which posed as the guardian of both. Separation and isolation rather than integration was the aim.' 'It is crucial to recognise,' he continued, 'that colonialism was organised racism. It exalted the European purely on the basis of race. In the natural order of the colonial environment the Europeans, their gods and values, sat on a pedestal while others squatted on the floor.' Arresting imagery to our impressionable minds but the blame game was inadequate, I thought even then, as a framework of analysis and understanding of Fiji's complex history. He introduced us to Franz Fenon's *Wretched of the Earth*, and encouraged us to do original research in newspapers and at the archives. And he once loaned me a copy of his doctoral dissertation on the history of constitution making in Fiji. I had had history teachers before, but here was Ahmed, one of us, actually *writing* history, our own history. Those neatly typed words on crisp white paper, bound together in a thick tome, made a huge impression on me. For the first time, I thought of one day writing history myself.

Besides teaching and writing history, Ahmed was also active in national politics. He had been secretary of the ruling Alliance Party before embarking on an academic career, and he continued to write and speak on political matters. That combination of scholarship and active engagement, too, has remained with me. In the early 1980s, Ahmed entered Parliament and became the Alliance government's controversial Minister for Education. He blazed a trail that others followed, including Satendra Nandan, Tupeni Baba, Meli Waqa, Ganesh Chand, Isimeli Cokanasiga, Wadan Narsey, Esira Rabuno, Jo Nacola. This list does not include others who were politically active in a variety of other ways, as advisers, speech writers and campaigners. The campus was alive with suitably concerned political talk, with a few invited presentations by prominent political leaders and occasional protests about this and that. *Unispac* also carried a few articles on Fiji politics. I particularly remember a piece by Imam Ali,

from Labasa, on the Fiji Senate which he labelled 'a piece of sublime mysticism and nonsense', 'an artificial political machinery', 'sheer waste of time and money' and 'irrelevant at the same time'. Brave words in the context of the times when our national leaders were especially sensitive about criticism.

There was more serious discussion as well. A few students and some left-leaning Australian expatriates living in Suva, and tangentially associated with the university, produced a booklet titled *Fiji: A Developing Australian Colony*, which highlighted the dominance of Australian economic interests and institutions in the Fijian economy and indirectly implicated the Fijian Government in the dependent relationship. It predictably attracted wide publicity and a hostile reaction from expected quarters. The publication was mentioned in the Fiji Senate. In 1973, the university organised a large seminar on the nature and meaning of development for the newly decolonising region, and attended by distinguished academics (Raymond Firth being one), national planners, academics, lawyers, aspiring leaders, student activists. 'What kind of life do we want for ourselves?' asked Amelia Rokotuivuna, the perennial Fijian free-thinker and activist. Jone Dakuvula pleaded for 'freedom to examine and criticise', in Pacific societies marked by rigid rank and hierarchy. After all these years, Jone is still at it. Karam Ramrakha, the intellectually restless member of the National Federation Party, reminded us that 'being dependent or dominated is very much a state of mind', and asked us, the younger generation, to 'free ourselves from a servile mentality'.

We felt that, by raising these questions, we could make a difference to the ongoing discourse of nation building. People would listen to us. We were so naively optimistic about humanising the development process, developing a social conscience, persuading national leaders to set aside their vested political interests in the cause of the greater good. Emerging Pacific leaders among us — Barak Sope of Vanuatu, the self-styled future Fidel Castro of the Pacific, clad in

Maoist garb complete with the cap, comes readily to mind — espoused appealing rhetoric about class struggle and people's welfare. The 'Pacific Way' of doing things was both eminently desirable as well as within reach, if only we would try. We, the young educated elite, imbued with the right values and a crusading zeal to set things right, could actually make history in our own lifetime. History had a role to play, a therapeutic role 'in promoting the rehabilitation of the Pacific peoples because it restores their confidence and self-respect, and enables them to take their place in a new changing world,' wrote Sister Mary Stella, Raymond Pillay and Asesela Ravuvu, our seniors. It would promote national unity and integrity. The future, we felt, was within our grasp. Such youthful idealism, sadly so short-lived.

In our classes we confronted texts that brought our own historical experiences and the dilemmas of development closer to home. Adrian Mayer's *Peasants of the Pacific*, about rural Indo-Fijian society, interpreted our own heritage for us, and the struggles of an immigrant community coming to terms with the social and cultural realities in a new homeland. Ken Gillion's *Fiji's Indian Migrants* provided a glimpse of the original Indian indentured migrants and their journeys and travails on the plantations. It was history close to home, as we read the names of places and events and festivals and rituals which our grandparents used to talk about. I had heard Aja use the word *jahajibhai*, the brotherhood of the crossing, and how important it was to him, but to read those words — and others such as *kala pani*, dark waters, *kulambar*, plantation overseers, *giriti*, indenture — in a book was a thrilling experience. As it turned out, Ken was later to become my thesis supervisor, glad, he said, that one of us, descendants of the *giritiyas*, was writing our own history.

The geographers and anthropologists tackled the problems of development in a multi-ethnic society. Ray Watters' *Koro* dissected the distress, anxiety and bewilderment of the Fijian people facing the realities of the modern world, and the troubling conclusion that the 'stability and coherence of their social system will no longer persist in



the face of disintegrating tendencies'. Cyril Belshaw wrote similarly about the 'storms of economic and political insecurity' facing the Fijian people. The old shelter of the traditional bure was no longer viable. 'The people have cradled new children and generated new enterprises, but they have no other shelter, and the products of their inventive still perish as they lean against the shaky posts, and the rains come through. They want to plant more useful trees than the ivi, and to build a shelter of more modern, less confining, design.' Such accurate analysis in so evocative a prose, so relevant today, nearly half a century later. The makers of our nation heard these voices, but did not act. They did listen, though, to E.K. Fisk's views about 'three Fijis', racially compartmentalised, and his narrow, race-based prescription for economic development.

Such engagement with real issues of change and development in our own country and in the region came naturally to us because the University of the South Pacific was required by its founding mission to train manpower to meet the anticipated needs of the rapidly decolonising region. Its charter provided that the 'objects of the University shall be the maintenance, advancement and dissemination of knowledge by teaching consultancy and research and otherwise and the provision of appropriate levels of education and training responsive to the well-being and needs of the communities of the South Pacific'. For that purpose, the university adopted the structure of broad developmental schools rather than the conventional departmental or faculty structure. The three founding schools were the Schools of Natural Resources, Education, and Social and Economic Development.

The philosophy of social science teaching was essentially pragmatic and utilitarian, to prepare students for careers in the region's public service as economists, sociologists, administrators, school teachers, to give them some understanding of the social and economic characteristics of the South Pacific region. Political awareness of the students was a part of the academic mission, to make them 'more effective, balanced and understanding participants in what will inevitably

be the quickening pace of political development in the countries of the region'. Broad cultural development of the individual was recognised, along with the need for some specific disciplinary training 'to a level that would be acceptable for graduate courses elsewhere'. But these objectives were secondary, and graduate training intended for a select few. The emphasis on *content*, as opposed to the *process* of learning, was understandable in the context, but it also deprived us of a deeper introduction, a theoretical probing, of the disciplines we were studying. We 'did' history, acquired the relevant information and learnt the facts, but knew virtually nothing about the discipline's philosophy or methodology, the foundations of historiography. That kind of knowledge, so necessary at the postgraduate level, indeed taken for granted, had to be acquired privately, painfully, in a haphazard way. And gaps remain.

Public engagement with the important issues of the day was exciting and interesting and important, no doubt; but sometimes it took over to the point where scholarship became a diversion. It is a tension found in the universities of most developing countries in Africa and the Caribbean. It is hard to remain a neutral, detached observer of your own society caught in the ferment of change. There is an obligation and a responsibility to speak up, to show your hand when it matters. I understand that. Had I remained in Fiji, I have no doubt that I, too, would be a part-time academic dabbling full-time in politics. Yet, a certain regret gnaws at the heart about the missed opportunities to produce enduring, fundamental scholarship which the university was so centrally situated to produce, making it the premier centre of Pacific learning. And now, with the uncertainties and anxieties spawned by the coups and the exodus of staff and the best graduate students, the gap widens.

All this is a repudiation of the promise the university represented when it first started. There was a genuine commitment to excellence then, to seeing the experiment of higher learning succeed, just as there was a commitment among Fiji's leaders to seeing the fledgling

experiment of a newly independent multiracial democracy succeed. We had something to 'prove', that we could be just as good as our counterparts elsewhere. Periodic reviews and assessments by internationally distinguished academics lauded our performance. We, both the staff and the students, felt proud. But once our standards were vindicated, we slipped, became complacent, generally indifferent to outside perceptions, arrogant about our accomplishments. And the Fijian turmoil has traumatised the spirit that informed our idealism and our unbounded youthful optimism about the possibility of unlimited progressive change. So much potential, so little of it realised. The commitment has gone, at least for now. Erstwhile colleagues now ask me about jobs overseas. In many cases their families have already gone.

The University of the South Pacific was where I began my intellectual journey. For that reason, a certain deep and intense nostalgia about the place remains. I want my alma mater to flourish, to be the shining light on the hill. I want its students to take their rightful place in the international community of scholars. That is my private dream. But the overwhelming emotion is one of loss and betrayal of promise, sharpened by the passage of time and my own experience of other places. The absence of those who were there at the beginning of my hopeful journey 30 years ago magnifies those missed opportunities.



# *The Other Side of Midnight*

To travel hopefully is better than to arrive.

R.L. Stevenson

*14 May 1998.* The date marks the 117th anniversary of the arrival of Indian indentured labourers in Fiji as well as the 11th anniversary of the coups there to depose a month-old government in which the Indo-Fijian community, for the first time, had more than token representation. But my thoughts are elsewhere as my American Airlines jet cruises high above the Atlantic. I am on my way to the Caribbean, to Trinidad, Guyana and Suriname, on a journey of diasporic exploration.

The Caribbean lies at the other end of the world. I am embarrassed, as I look at the maps in the in-flight magazine, at my ignorance about this part of the world. I have heard of Caracas, but Curacao? Antigua, yes, but Anguilla? Our ignorance is mutual. People in the Caribbean have heard of Fiji but don't know its location. Is it near Guam, someone asks. No. Then Mauritius, perhaps, or Java or the Andaman Islands? Tahiti is the best they can do. Ms Boodhea, a young desk attendant at the Park Hotel in Georgetown, is staggered to know the distance I have travelled to be in her part of the world. She herself is dreaming of leaving one day. 'But you are on the other side of midnight,' she says, amazed.

Our ignorance underlines the enormous geographical spread of the Indian indentured diaspora. It is remarkable, when you come to think of it, that so many immigrant sailing ships, loaded with human cargo and aided only by primitive navigational technology, travelled such great distances through so many islands and so much uncharted water and found their precise destination with such little casualty.

Among the million *girmitiyas* who crossed the *kala pani* was my own indentured grandfather. He was in fact recruited for Demerara, but when he reached the depot, he found his ship full. The next available vessel took him to Fiji. A century later, I am undertaking a journey my *girmitiya* grandfather was drafted to make.

Trinidad is my first stop. It is a hot, feisty little island with an attitude, riding the boom of oil-fuelled prosperity. About 2000 square miles in size, it is crowded with over one million people, 40 per cent black and Indian each. It is easily the most prosperous of the Caribbean islands.

The contrast with Guyana is stark. After years of massive misrule, the country's infrastructure is in tatters, its economy is floundering, its people deeply divided and drifting. Guyana is a big country of 83,000 square miles, but with a population of only 700,000, living mostly in a thin strip along the Atlantic coast. Like Trinidad, Guyana is bi-racial, and locked in a deadly game of ethnic rivalry.

Suriname lies across the Coryntine river from Guyana. Once a Dutch colony, its population is about a third each black and Indian, and the rest made up of Javanese, Creole and Ameri-Indians. Although Suriname shares with Trinidad and Guyana the history of Indian settlement, its soul is Dutch. The Netherlands is its spiritual home. The game of cricket, the passion of the British Caribbean, has no meaning here. Suriname, like Guyana, is flat along the coast, and criss-crossed with canals, now stagnant, neglected and overgrown. The Dutch imprint is clearly visible. Its weather, like much of the Caribbean, is clammy. The low-lying clouds are ever pregnant with rain. The countryside is lush green.

Each place has its own cultural peculiarity, but it is the similarities that startle me. In Guyana I was taken to meet the chairman of a local municipality. It was around midday Sunday, but he had already gone through a bottle of cheap rum. The Caribbean generally is a place of hard-drinking men. He shook my hand, looked at me quizzically, assessing, and said, 'You are a coolie-maan from Fiji?' The words took me by surprise at first, but I knew what he meant. It was a term of recognition, a reference to our shared history of indentured servitude. I was one of them. I was welcome.

There is something distinctive about us diasporic Indians that binds us together: our essential egalitarianism, our openness and adaptability, our zest for living here and now, our impatience with ritual, protocol and hierarchy. And our complex, problematic relationship with India. We do not regard ourselves as the children of a lesser god, banished into exile for some misdeed in previous life. We are not *'naqli'*, fake, Indians. We rejoice in the myriad influences that define our identity. Our shared prejudices cement friendships.

Everywhere, I am reminded of the contribution Indian people have made to the economic and social development of the countries where they live: in agriculture, commerce, the professions. People recite the story of success proudly, and with good reason. The statistical evidence of achievement is impressive. And the point is often made to underline the under-achievement of other communities, their dependent mentality. Yet Indians in all three Caribbean countries have a deep sense of ambivalence and alienation. Even after a century many do not feel fully accepted as part of the region. The situation varies from country to country, but it is a difference of degree, not of substance. The most obvious marker of uncertainty is the emigration of large numbers of Indians to North America and Europe. In Guyana and Suriname, most Indians would leave if that were possible, I was told. The same in Fiji. People talk about commitment and belonging. A T-shirt proclaims: 'I live in another country but I am 100% Guyanese.' But it is tourist talk. The reality is different. As in Fiji, the wealthy and

the well-connected are living well, their children and financial investment safely away somewhere else.

Indian intellectuals are contesting the long-held view of Caribbean identity being essentially black, especially in Guyana and Trinidad. The defiant expression of Indian cultural and religious identity at the popular level is also striking. Temples and mosques dot the landscape. Some places have been re-named: Benares, Faizabad. Hindu homes fly multiple *jhandis* to proclaim their religious identity. Indian food is the fast food of the Caribbean, at least in these three places: bus-up shut (roti) and double (deep-fried roti stuffed with vegetables), aloo paratha, dhalpuri, delicious curries, popular among both Indians and blacks. The most popular restaurant in Paramaribo is Roopram's Roti Shop.

A hundred years of isolation from India have resulted in many changes. In Trinidad and Guyana, and to a lesser extent in Suriname, Hindustani or Bhojpuri has been lost, and there is deep regret about this. We miss Hindi bad-bad, a man says to me in Trinidad. He is culturally stranded, helpless. He sings melodious Hindi songs well. He has mastered the rhythm but does not understand the words he is singing. They are mostly sad, sentimental songs of love and loss. Rafi, Hemant Kumar, Mukesh. He is genuinely moved when I explain the meaning to him. So am I, at our shared diasporic loss.

In all three places, the ideology of cultural assimilation, of the melting pot, is being rejected in favour of cultural retention and pluralism. Religious texts are translated into English or Dutch, and recited. *Pujas* are done regularly. Hindu and Muslim festivals are celebrated. Indian music and Hindi films form a part of the Indo-Caribbean culture. There are inner tensions and conflicts among the different groups, between Arya Samajis and Sanatanis, and between Sunnis and Shias, but these are muted. The shared sense of deprivation and neglect during a long period of black rule has produced a degree of cultural and ethnic solidarity.



Indo-Caribbean people are returning to their primordial roots, a scholar tells me in Trinidad. I meet several people who are using the documents of indenture to trace their Indian roots. Creative writing is flourishing here as in few other Indian diasporas. Poems, novels and short stories deal with the violence and chaos of the post-indenture period. The drunken violence against women and women's central nurturing role in society, depicted in the literature, is especially striking. Understandably, much of this imaginative reconstruction, mostly by expatriate Indo-Caribbeans, is tinged with romance and full of anger at the outside world. Still the emotional and intellectual engagement with the past is impressive.

My month in the Caribbean is over quickly. It is an exhilarating, learning, enriching experience. I have struck friendships that will endure. I have memories of people, of places, sights and sounds, that will remain with me. I remind myself, as I travel in the region, that had the ship not been full, my grandfather would have gone to Demerara. And I wonder where I would have been. Perhaps somewhere in that part of the world, on the other side of midnight.



## *A Sojourn in Hawai'i*

The desire of the moth for the star,  
Of the night for the morrow,  
The devotion to something afar,  
From the sphere of our sorrow.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

*'Look out the window, Dad,'* our six-year-old daughter Yogi said to me as our Continental jet prepared to land at the Honolulu International Airport around midnight on 1 August 1983. Looking at the multicoloured lights down below, she exclaimed: 'It's like a thief has spilled jewels all over the place!' It was a beautiful description of Honolulu from the air at night. But I was preoccupied with other thoughts.

This was my first visit to the United States, to take up a tenure-track position in Pacific Islands history at the University of Hawai'i. I had attempted, unsuccessfully, to come to the University of Hawai'i before. In 1973, after completing my undergraduate degree at the University of the South Pacific, I had applied to pursue graduate studies in history in Hawai'i. The History Department, which I was now joining as a faculty member, had refused to accept me even as a lowly Teaching Assistant in its World Civilizations Program, despite the recommendation of one of its own most distinguished members, Walter Johnson (formerly chairman of the History Department at the

University of Chicago). Walter had taught a course in recent American history for a semester in Fiji and, pleased with my performance, had encouraged me to come to Hawai'i.

Fortunately for me, this minor setback turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Soon afterwards, I received a full graduate fellowship to do my Master's degree at the University of British Columbia. The reason for the rejection of my application for graduate work, I was later to find out, was that I had only a three-year Bachelor's degree, while the normal undergraduate degree in the United States was four years. I had made matters worse for myself by taking overloads and completing my undergraduate course in two and a half years. On top of it all, no one had heard of the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. A university in Fiji? What was the language of instruction? Were classes conducted in grass huts? Was the faculty any good? Isn't there something strange about a three-year degree? So I had fallen victim to North American ignorance of an Anglo-Australasian system of education south of the equator.

I was neither the first nor the last to suffer from the ignorance of Hawai'i's academic administrators. Sometimes, the results could be hilarious. One example illustrates this well. All foreign students admitted to the University of Hawai'i are required to pass the TOEFL examination (Test of English as a Foreign Language). When an English student applied for admission to the graduate program, he was asked to take the TOEFL. At first, he thought this was a joke and refused. After all, English was his mother tongue. But rules were rules, the bureaucrats said: all foreign students had to take the TOEFL. In the end, a compromise of sorts was reached. The exam was waived, but only after the Englishman demonstrated mastery of his mother tongue to the satisfaction of the authorities.

Ten years after my initial unsuccessful application, I was on firmer ground, having secured a PhD at the Australian National University and having taught for a couple of years at my alma mater, the University of the South Pacific. In 1983, I resigned from there to

take the Hawai'i offer, the resignation coming after the University declined my request for a year's leave without pay so that I could gain the experience of teaching at another university. Needless to say, I was very anxious and worried, having burned my bridges in Fiji. Thus I had no alternative but to make a success of myself in the new, alien environment. What if I failed? That thought was too terrible to contemplate.

A mixture of motives, ranging from frustration to a desire for adventure, impelled me to leave my country and my alma mater. I had returned to USP from Australia. I had received a couple of offers for junior teaching positions in that country and a postdoctoral fellowship in New Zealand but had turned them down. I had dreams and an exaggerated, in retrospect embarrassingly naive, belief that I could make a difference. In 1981, I was only the second Fiji national in possession of a doctorate degree in history. I began my academic career as a Junior Lecturer at the bottom of the hierarchy. Within a very short time, I began to feel disillusioned. There was little creative sustenance and stimulation. Intellectually, USP seemed to be a cul-de-sac.

The problem caused by the intellectual shallowness of the university environment was compounded by many others. For me, one of the most acute was the demands made upon my time and resources to contribute to social and political projects in the wider community. As one of the few 'doctored' locals at USP, I was frequently invited to give high school graduation speeches, address a variety of community gatherings, and proffer advice on matters that I knew nothing about. (Do you think my son should do Accounting or Economics? Do you think we should plant a tree to commemorate this event or construct a bus shelter? How about a talk on 'Fiji in the Year 2000?' Could you arrange for my son to be enrolled in the Foundation pre-degree program?)

I did the best I could to fulfil my social obligations, and I can't deny the private satisfaction of seeing my name appear in the local papers once in a while, or from the occasional invitations I received

from Suva's flourishing cocktail circuit. Life was comfortable and, with proper care and attention, I could, perhaps in a few years' time, secure a small niche for myself as a minor local celebrity. At the university, I served on important committees, giving out research grants, refereeing papers for the local scholarly journal, making decisions about personnel. I had even managed to rise to the rank of Assistant to the Head of the School of Social and Economic Development. A prominent career up the academic administrative ladder seemed assured, if only I was patient enough.

Yet these accomplishments, such as they were, gave little inner emotional or intellectual satisfaction. Having spent three intensive years writing a dissertation under the supervision of first-rate scholars at a first-rate university, I knew that I was not really doing serious scholarship at USP. I was spending too much of my time on projects that would ultimately be meaningless. My ego was involved as well. The terrible 'fear of extinction and insignificance' that V.S. Naipaul has written about regarding his own childhood in Trinidad, which he had to escape to find himself, the feeling that one should do something enduring and useful with one's talents, began to haunt me more and more. I felt that I had to 'prove' myself in a more demanding intellectual environment. And I should make the move before it was too late. What could be more demanding than a stint of teaching at the University of Hawai'i? I know that mainland Americans would barely be able to suppress a wry smile at the thought that Hawai'i has a demanding intellectual environment, but I was coming from a small ex-British colony, which attained political independence only in 1970, after 96 years of colonial rule; a place where, until the 1960s, the highest job local people could aspire to was junior-to-middle ranking positions in the colonial civil service. And that, too, after a great deal of grovelling and greasing of appropriate palms.

At first, everything about Hawai'i was different, even strange. Nothing, not even five years of living in Canada and Australia, had

prepared me and my young family for what we encountered there. People drove on the wrong side of the road! That got us into trouble on several occasions as we looked in the wrong direction while crossing the road. We were surrounded by strange accents, sights and smells. After Australia, the American beer was terrible. The traffic jams, the double-lane highway, the tall skyline of Waikiki: one could easily forget that Honolulu was located on a small island. We did not know a single soul in Honolulu. We were complete strangers in a strange place, unfamiliar with the lay of the city and cooped up in the impersonal, sparsely furnished ambience of faculty housing. We learned to adjust our mental and social compasses very quickly, but it was not easy. It never is in a foreign country.

I went to the History Department a day after arriving in Honolulu, and I have vivid memories of that occasion. The chairman, Harry Lamley, a mild-mannered and very gentle historian of China, introduced me to my other colleagues as the Department's newest 'professor'. I found the sound of my exalted title startling. The Anglo-Australasian system, in which I was trained, is still very feudal. A department usually has one professor, a kind of constitutional monarch, who is the most senior member of it, while other members congregate at the low-to-middle ranks of the hierarchy. To attain the rank of professor is to reach the pinnacle of one's career ladder, and only a tiny proportion of the faculty ever do. The title took some getting used to, but I now think that it is an entirely fair description of one's job. A professor is one who professes a discipline or subject, and should be so addressed. Why should a department have only one or two professors? The principle that anyone with ability and accomplishment, measured in terms of one's teaching performance and the quality of research output, can reach the top of his or her career ladder is one that I find personally appealing. The attainment of a professorship should not be a privilege of an exclusive club of a few grey-haired, administratively adroit men, but the right of anyone who meets the necessary qualifications.

I was also staggered by the size of the Department. There were well over 30 full-time members of it, making the History Department one of the largest on the Manoa campus. I was surprised because history departments in my part of the world tend to be much smaller: my own former department at USP had only three historians. The leap from three to thirty was quite a big one, and this too took some getting used to: it took me about a year to learn the names of all my colleagues. So also did the formality of protocol. From where I came, and even in Australia and New Zealand, there was a certain egalitarian social ethos that usually did away with the formality of addressing one by one's title. Academic and non-academic staff usually addressed each other by their first names. Not so in Hawai'i, or at least not in my department. After nearly a decade of teaching in the History Department, all the secretaries still addressed me by my title. This was surprising as I had always imagined the American environment to be more relaxed and informal. Still, my colleagues remind me that the degree of formality in Hawai'i is nothing compared to what exists in parts of mainland America, let alone the still more feudal European scene.

There were other surprises as well. When I was appointed, I was told that I would teach the Department's bread-and-butter World Civilizations course as well as graduate courses and seminars in my own specialty, Pacific Islands history. It was only when I began to prepare myself for my courses that I realised the enormity of the task ahead of me. I realised that nothing in my background and training had prepared me for the task at hand. I had taken a few basic survey courses in Western history and had taught a freshman course called Contemporary History, but the World Civilizations course I was to teach required a much deeper grounding in the subject than I had ever had. When I was told that I might expect more than 300 freshmen in my class, most of whom had never done history, and had even less interest in the subject, and that my performance in the course would be an important factor in my contract renewal, I nearly panicked. Yes, I had wanted to test my talents in a more demanding



environment, but this was going to be torture. And there was no escape.

A quick perusal of the Department's guidelines informed me of the general scope of the course. The course was expected to concentrate on the development and distinctive features of all the world's major civilisations; provide a sense of historical development on a global scale, emphasising the enduring influence of traditional civilisations and the dynamics of modern world history; focus on such global themes as agricultural and urban revolutions, emergence and growth of civilisations, and such topics as imperialism, decolonisation and industrialisation; and, in the end, create a context of understanding of the contemporary human experience. In this regard, the instructor was to 'emphasize the varieties of the human experience' and 'encourage sympathetic understanding of the foreign', and 'prepare students to draw upon the collective human experience in their efforts to understand the contemporary world'.

Altogether a very tall and daunting order, especially for one completely new to the field. The course was divided into two parts and taught over a year. The first part, World Civilizations 151, covered the pre-modern world, from antiquity to around 1500 AD, and the second part, 152, dealt with the period since then to the present. The first year I taught the course was simply an exercise in endurance, and I considered myself lucky to be a lecture or two ahead of my students. Topics with which I was completely unfamiliar had to be covered at breakneck speed: the early beginnings of human society, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Roman, Greek and Hellenistic civilisations, Harrapa and Mohenjadaró and the Maurayan Empire, the Han period and Confucius. The next semester was equally fast-paced: Renaissance and Reformation, the intellectual, political, economic and scientific revolutions of Europe, the voyages of discovery and the creation of colonial empires, the emergence of modern China, India and Japan, the political and military conflicts of the twentieth century. Not only had I to master the material but also to present it

confidently to a largely uninterested audience. Uppermost in my mind was the need to keep my students interested and engaged, not always an easy task, especially at 8.30 in the morning!

In the beginning, I viewed my assignment in the World Civ Program as a limited suspended sentence, which I would serve out in a few years' time. That was how I was informally advised by my colleagues to approach my task. If there was no rioting in the course, no major complaints, I'd be fine. In any case, no one really took undergraduate course evaluations seriously (except when wanting to get rid of a bad departmental citizen). That reassured me somewhat. But as time went on, my attitude changed. I became intellectually committed to the Program as I began to realise its important place in a broad-based humanities curriculum. I was converted. Commitment was one thing, however, and the resources with which to carry it out quite another. I found the textbooks to be inadequate and deeply Eurocentric. Very often, what passed for world history was actually the history of European thought, values and institutions, with little in-depth coverage of non-European civilisations, giving the impression that everything worthwhile in modern life originated in Western Europe. African and pre-Columbian American civilisations received a passing mention, but there was nothing at all on the accomplishments of the societies of Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands. If my Island region was mentioned at all, it was in the context of European 'discoveries' or the achievements of such explorers as Captain Cook or as the place where Europeans found Noble Savages.

This struck me as odd, especially in a place like Hawai'i. The emphasis on European history may be appropriate, perhaps, at mainland US colleges with substantial Caucasian student populations. But in Hawai'i, this emphasis tended to have a very negative, demoralising effect on students from the Islands. A local student expressed his frustrations to me this way: 'Eh Brah, how come only the haole got history? How come we not in the history books?' He had a point with which I, as someone born in the Pacific Islands,

sympathised. I was reminded of one of Henry Kissinger's statements about Micronesia in 1971: "There are only 90,000 out there. Who gives a damn?"

To redress the balance between Western and non-Western societies, I decided to spend about half the course on the great movements of Europe and the other half on non-Western societies. This underwent further revision as students responded warmly to my experiment. Oceanic peoples found more and more space in the syllabus. When talking about the great European voyages of discovery, I also talked about the great navigational feats of the Polynesians. When talking about the achievements of Captain Cook, I also talked about the reasons why he died at Kealakekua Bay. And lectures on the origins of modern European colonialism would be accompanied by presentations on the cultural dispossession and physical destruction of the indigenous populations of Australia and the Americas. We talked about the causes of great migrations in modern human history, but we also found time to reflect on their social and environmental consequences. A lecture on the origins of the Cold War would be followed by consideration of the politics and processes of nuclear testing in the Pacific Islands. France was the centre of the Enlightenment, the promoter of the ideas of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, but it was also a colonial power in the Pacific Islands and tested nuclear devices there.

Purists might query my unorthodox approach, but my students appeared to appreciate my efforts to place the historical experience of the Islands in the broader context of human history. I found this redirection intellectually satisfying and stimulating. Moreover, I actually enjoyed the experience. It was quite ironic that someone who had once viewed teaching in the World Civ Program as a limited sentence, to be escaped from at the earliest possible opportunity, should be appointed the Director of it, and receive a nomination for a distinguished teaching award! There is no doubt in my own mind that I have become a better teacher as a result of the

World Civ Program. Among many things, I have learnt that one does not have to be solemn to be serious. I still remember with some puzzlement what one student wrote anonymously in his/her evaluation of the course some years ago: 'Professor Lal is like President Reagan. I am not saying he is telling lies, but he is so funny and persuasive!'

Teaching graduate courses and seminars in my own field was a wonderful experience, but here, too, there were many hurdles to overcome. In the Anglo-Australasian system, no course work is required for the PhD degree; it is earned entirely by a research thesis usually done under the supervision of a single scholar. One is, therefore, understandably selective in one's reading and quite narrowly focused. The sole aim of the doctoral exercise is to produce a competent and largely original piece of work that makes some 'contribution to knowledge'. This is at least theoretically different from the situation in the US where a student works with a committee, representing his/her field of interest, and the thesis itself is a part, albeit an important one, of the total graduate exercise. There is an additional problem. In Australia and New Zealand and the Islands, Pacific history is often interpreted to mean the history of the South Pacific. The historical experiences of the islands north of the equator are seldom featured in the reading lists, or only in a tangential fashion. For many students I encountered in Hawai'i, the opposite was often the case. They had a greater awareness of the history and culture of the islands of Micronesia and considerably less familiarity with the historical experience of islands in the South Pacific. Many of my graduate students were older than I, and some of them had lived in the Islands and were familiar with their histories. I therefore had to work twice as hard to acquaint myself with the broader field. The experience of teaching at the University of Hawai'i has thus broadened my horizons and increased my understanding of Pacific Islands history in ways that I am sure would not have occurred had I remained south of the equator.

I have often been asked, by my colleagues both at Hawai'i and elsewhere, of my impressions of the quality of graduate students during my eight years there. They expect a pessimistic, even a negative response. Without doubt, the very best students that I taught in Hawai'i would compare favourably with the best students anywhere; the weaker ones would have difficulty getting admitted into graduate programs at most institutions. I told my senior graduate students that, in my seminars, they were making a transition from students to research scholars. Consequently, I fully expected them to make original contributions in their research papers. I suspect that some of them found my high expectations somewhat startling at first, but they responded warmly when they realised that I took them seriously. The quality of their work showed in the fact that papers submitted for my seminars regularly won international as well as local awards for excellence, and have been published.

It will be clear by now that there are many aspects of American academia I admire very much. Perhaps what I most like about it is its democratic environment. There is an element of openness that I particularly appreciate. Productivity does not go unrewarded. A productive scholar and good teacher can rise to the top of his/her profession. Good teaching is emphasised and course evaluations by students are taken into account, but it is my impression that, in the final analysis, it is the quality and output of research that really count. This is the case elsewhere as well, but I believe that, at least at some Commonwealth universities with which I am familiar, teaching undergraduate classes is given greater weight and recognition than at Hawai'i. Another appealing aspect of teaching at the University of Hawai'i was the freedom one enjoyed in devising and delivering one's courses. No one required me to submit my course outlines and exam questions to the Head of Department for approval, as I was required to do in Fiji. Nor did I have to defend my grades before a Board of Studies at the end of the semester. I did not have to justify to anyone why, say, in an exceptionally bright class, a good number of students

received very high marks. In Hawai'i, it seemed, students were presumed to be potential A-graders unless they proved themselves otherwise; in Fiji, it seemed the other way around. The difference in approach pointed starkly to the contrasts between an elitist and a democratic intellectual environment.

If I have a criticism of American academia as I experienced it at Hawai'i, it is the absence of a sense of a community of scholars collectively engaged in the communal pursuit of scholarship. My own department was not a department in the conventional sense of the word, but rather a collection of individuals, each doing his or her own thing. Some of my colleagues were very accomplished and well known in their fields, but they never bothered to share the fruits of their research with their colleagues. In the eight years I was there, my department did not have a single seminar series for its faculty. This was (and is) in marked contrast to my experience elsewhere, where such things are a regular part of academic life. So one learnt about one's colleagues' accomplishments through newsletters or by word-of-mouth, but never in a scholarly seminar. I suppose part of the reason for this state of affairs lay in Hawai'i's isolation from the rest of the United States, with the result that my colleagues had their eyes firmly fixed on international conferences and professional gatherings on the mainland. Little was to be gained by performing on the local stage. A pity.

Another aspect of the American system which can lead to negative results is the emphasis on productivity. I have no quarrel with the requirement that scholars should publish regularly, but sometimes this leads to a tendency to publish just for the sake of publishing, just to score another point in the arithmetic of social science indices, to fatten the volume of one's curriculum vitae. It encourages narrow specialism, a deeper and deeper burrowing into a narrow field, and sometimes sheer superficiality. An eminent historian in the department once said to me that all his knowledge of the Pacific Islands could easily be written down on one side of an envelope. I think he meant what he said. It probably didn't occur to him that he

was saying this on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, and he had been living there since the mid-1960s! This attitude also indicated the importance that many in the Department attached to my field. A colleague once remarked to me, only half jokingly, that there couldn't be a field of Pacific Islands History: it was all either anthropology or politics. Another remarked that there was a lot of water between Hawai'i and the mainland of Asia. It was another version of Henry Kissinger's remark mentioned earlier. Had I remained based solely in the History Department, I would have found the limited vision of my colleagues problematic. Fortunately, I was also a member of the University's Center for Pacific Islands Studies, whose seminars, conferences and publications served as a link to the wider community of Pacific scholars and thus helped to alleviate my sense of isolation. My association with the Center was one of the highlights of my time in Hawai'i.

Three years after my appointment, I was tenured and promoted. I had published my books and articles in refereed journals; I had reviewed manuscripts for university presses, given papers at conferences and seminars, and taught my courses. In short, I had met all the criteria for tenure and promotion. I was on my way up: promotion to full professorship was just a matter of time. Yet, despite this success, I still felt vaguely unsatisfied. This was partly because of my own intellectual and political inclinations. I am not attracted to abstract, detached scholarship; I prefer sailing close to the wind, where scholarship and practical involvement interface. I have always been 'politically' engaged with subjects I have studied and written about, and I have taken a political stance, whether on the coups in Fiji or the anti-nuclear movements in the Pacific Islands. It was this, a sense of practical engagement, which I had once sought to escape, that I began missing in Honolulu. I observed and quietly supported the various peace demonstrations on campus, and even subscribed to some of the literature on Central and Latin America. I also observed the various sovereignty and indigenous rights movements in Hawai'i. But I could

be no more than an interested bystander in their activities. For me, sympathy did not, and could not, translate into passionate engagement.

I felt even more alienated in the aftermath of the coups in Fiji. The coups destroyed many assumptions and values that one had always taken for granted: freedom of speech and conscience, the value of political pluralism, rule of law and the sanctity of the ballot box. One's country was engulfed in a major conflagration of historic proportions, with profound implications for other Pacific Islands. Yet in Hawai'i, news and commentary about this most dramatic event in recent Pacific Islands' history were perfunctory. I gave a few seminars on the topic on the campus, wrote an article for one of the local newspapers, and eventually a book about it. These brought some emotional relief, but they also served to heighten my sense of alienation. My graduate students, with whom I discussed the topic in seminars, were adamant that what happened in Fiji was just and necessary, a struggle for indigenous rights against the political and economic dominance of an immigrant majority.

My effort to alert them to the complex underlying factors, which had more to do with the personal ambitions of defeated politicians, with intra-Fijian rivalries, than with race, failed to make any impact. It seemed to me that their minds were made up, influenced by their particular experience in Hawai'i (and some other parts of the Pacific such as New Zealand and Kanaky), and it was pointless for me to confuse them with facts. It was much later, when political developments in the aftermath of the coups substantially confirmed the broad thrust of my analysis, that they changed their position; but by then my cup of disillusionment with Hawai'i was nearly full.

There were other things that I realised I was missing in Honolulu after a year's sojourn in Australia in 1990: the familiar cultural and social landscapes and signposts of my childhood: the Commonwealth connection. Take sports, for instance. My colleagues in Hawai'i's History



Department were passionate about sports of all kinds: baseball, basketball, football, volleyball. Sport, not religion, is the opiate of the masses, even the educated ones. Names and deeds of sporting legends are mentioned in great detail. But the names of Babe Ruth and Joe Di Maggio and Abdul Kareem Jabbar meant little to me, for the sports they played were not what I grew up with. I grew up with football (called soccer in the United States) and learnt to love cricket and rugby. Viv Richards and the Chappell brothers, Pele and Franz Beckenbauer were my sport heroes, but their names meant little to my colleagues. World Cup soccer excited little passion, and no one knew anything about cricket Test Matches. One colleague thought that cricket was a primitive form of baseball for the indolent upper classes of England. He didn't know of the passion that cricket excites in the West Indies! One kept in touch with these things vicariously through letters from friends south of the equator. A year in Australia accentuated my sense of loss of things I began to cherish much more after the troubled recent history of my country.

Coinciding with, and contributing to, my increasing disillusionment with life in Hawai'i was my and my family's tiresome battle with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) about visas. From the very beginning, I was plagued by the problem of getting an appropriate visa to work in the United States. The fact that I had taken a tenure-track position on a temporary visa (arranged by the University) aroused the suspicions of the INS. In their eyes, I was trying to flout the rules to gain permanent residence through irregular channels. After more than two years of paper work, my situation was resolved when I was granted permanent residence. But not that of my wife, a professional in her own right. Accompanying me on a dependent-spouse visa, she could not under any circumstances seek employment on the open market. Our efforts to get her visa changed were stonewalled by the INS. Their view was that, as a Third World person, I should consider it a privilege to be in the United States at all.

While we were battling the INS, the Australian National University awarded me a Senior Research Fellowship in 1990, and we

moved to Canberra. My wife had no difficulty obtaining an appropriate visa to work in a senior research position in her field of environmental economics. And I enjoyed the opportunity to work in a fine university with an established reputation for excellence in research in the field of Pacific studies. We thus killed several birds with one stone, and decided to live and work in Australia.

After nearly a decade in Hawai'i, writing this just two weeks before my scheduled departure (I returned for a semester to complete my obligations to the University), I leave the islands with mixed feelings. I wish I could say that the University of Hawai'i will become a truly international institution in the composition of its faculty and in the quality of the programs it offers in many areas. Its distance from major centres of learning, the prohibitive cost of living in Honolulu, and a certain parochial island mentality are all factors that will prove detrimental to the University in the long run. There are, of course, some exceptions. The University's Center for Pacific Islands Studies, of which I have been privileged to be a member, has an established international reputation for the quality of its scholarly publications. And the Pacific Collection of the Hamilton Library, built up over the years by the untiring efforts of Rene Heyum, and now in the equally capable hands of Heyum's successor, Karen Peacock, is quite simply the best collection of its type in the world. These, and other such islands of excellence, need to be carefully maintained if the University of Hawai'i is to make its mark in the wider world of scholarship.

I have had to readjust social and mental compasses since returning to Canberra, just as I had to do when I landed in Honolulu. I had to refamiliarise myself with cars being driven 'on the wrong side'. And I had to re-learn the social and academic conventions with which I once was intimately familiar. Perhaps I no longer am. Things change, even — or especially — for historians.

## *Sunrise on the Ganga*

Who breaks his birth's invidious bar,  
And grasps the skirts of happy chance,  
And breasts the blows of circumstance,  
And grapples with his evil star...

To mould a mighty state's decrees,  
And shape the whisper of the throne.

Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, LXIV

*Sunrise on the Ganga.* The romance of the idea, to see Hinduism's holiest river, to bathe in it, in a mist-shrouded dawn. I last saw Ganga twenty years ago when I first visited India. I had then bathed in the river and done *puja* for my *giritiya*, indentured, grandfather. That had been my father's wish. I had also brought for him a bottle of Ganga water, which he regarded as one of his most precious possessions. He put it carefully alongside the green tin which contained important family papers: lease for the native land, birth certificates, a few religious texts wrapped in red cloth, old imperial coins and other relics of the past. My father, like many devout Hindus, believed that a drop of the Ganga on the lips of a deceased person would ensure a safe passage for the departed soul on its journey to the next world. Since my last trip, my father and mother and my two older brothers had passed away. I feel I need to do the pilgrimage for them as well. It is the right thing to do as the eldest male in the family now, whatever my own personal doubts and reservations.

This time, we are travelling with our children. At 21 and 15, Yogi and Niraj would be making their own journeys of discovery. At first they are hesitant and tentative, not knowing quite what to expect. But they are determined to be open-minded. Their mature reaction catches me by surprise. They are enthralled by what they see. They look beyond the poverty and the squalor, the dust and the noise, and accept India for what it is: a confusing collage of contrasts. Some things though offend their sense of values. The culturally sanctioned subordinate status of women is one of them. There are others: the institutionalised hierarchy and difference of the caste system, the religious fanaticism rampant in society, the disregard for the damage to the environment caused by rapid industrialisation, the lack of civic consciousness, the pollution of public places, the gulf between the private fetish for personal cleanliness and total indifference to public sanitation. They are astonished by all this, sometimes even outraged, but never judgmental. 'This is India,' they say, only half jokingly. It is their way of coming to terms with the realities of another culture whose contours they vaguely recognise, but of which they are not a part.

For me, twenty years later, some things remain the same or have changed for the worse: the clogged roads have become impossible; greasing the palm is now an accepted way of life; the obtuseness and insolence of public servants have not changed; the pollution of urban areas has become a health hazard; and India, on the whole, has become less a cohesive nation committed to an overarching vision than a coalition of caste, communal and class interests, locked in various combinations of convenience, all devoted more to ensuring their own survival than to promoting national development. This fracturing and fragmentation is, of course, not peculiar to India; it reflects the condition of many developing countries witnessing the resurgence of primordialism. These things do not perturb me as much as they did on my first encounter. I lack passion, my children chide me, and in a sense they are right: I am not as easily disturbed by

poverty and pollution and corruption now. They are someone else's problem. The resignation which accompanies age, you might say.

But some things are new. The resurgence of aggressive Hinduism is among them. The ideological commitment to a secular India, once invoked proudly as a mantra for India's future, has weakened unmistakably. Bal Thackeray, the head of the fundamentalist Shiv Sena, is a household name in India. He is committed to making India a Hindu nation. His '*sevaks*', workers, as members of the Bajrang Dal, Sangh Parivar, the Hindu Vishwa Parishad and other such organisations, disrupt meetings, terrorise members of other faiths, burn Christian churches, kill European missionaries, dig up cricket pitches to prevent Pakistanis playing on Indian (Hindu) soil. They try to impose a moral code of conduct based upon an essentialised reading of Hinduism.

This public, fanatical demonstration of faith in posters plastered on concrete walls, idols displayed in cars, buses, shops, even government offices, is unsettling to one who is essentially non-religious, at least in the formal sense. Perfectly reasonable people, western-educated, well-travelled, thoughtful, quietly endorse a Hindu identity for India. Hinduism will not solve India's problems, people say, but then, they continue, man does not live by bread alone. People's minds are made up; it is useless trying to change them with facts. The alleged ever-present Chinese threat in the north-east and a nuclear Pakistan flexing its muscle in Kashmir make it easy for the fundamentalists to enlist popular support for their causes.

Another noticeable change in the last two decades has been the impact of technology. Now, India's remotest villages have international telephone booths. The cultural revolution caused by multi-channelled television has been enormous. Western news channels and soap operas of westernised Indian popular culture reach remote villages. A sad casualty of this has been the radio, in the past rural India's contact with the outside world and among the best broadcast services in the world. The effervescence of popular culture has pushed India's classical culture

and heritage further into the background. Tradition is for tourists, a vendor tells me.

The opening up of the Indian economy has brought changes and introduced goods into middle-class homes unthinkable two decades ago. The ubiquitous Ambassador cars now jostle on the roads with a dozen other models with Korean and Japanese names. The craze for things 'phoren', so striking twenty years ago, has subsided as modern electronic gadgets once found only in the west are no longer a novelty. Internal tourism has increased by leaps and bounds, with 'luxury' and 'deluxe' hotels sprouting everywhere. These labels should not be taken literally though. Often deluxe means nothing more than that the rooms have western-style toilets, as opposed to the squatting Indian style with water but without toilet paper. The provincial hotels, pricey, leave much to be desired in the quality of service and the standard of comfort they offer, but at least they are there.

Yogi and Niraj are fascinated by the relics of the past they see all around them, in caves, monuments, paintings, forts, castles and temples. Products of the modern electronic age, they seem visibly moved by the sight of *maqbaras*, mausoleums. They are particularly taken in by the 'Chand Bibi ka Mahal' in Ahmednagar in Maharashtra. It stands high on a hill, silent, forlorn, unregarded, containing the remains of an emperor's wife and their young children covered with green and red cloth. What romance, what chivalry. They visit Fatehpur Sikri, a haunting city of empty, pigeon-nesting buildings deserted after a few years when water ran out. And the Taj Mahal. Why didn't they learn about these monumental achievements of this ancient civilisation in school? What legacy will our contemporary civilisation bequeath to future generations, they ask.

We travel to Bahraich, the district from which my indentured grandfather went to Fiji at the turn of this century. It is still at the back of beyond in a state still notorious for its economic backwardness and social stagnation, a symbol of everything that is holding India back. Caste politics is rampant. The roads are lined

with billboards announcing the dates of *sammelans*, conventions, of this or that caste or sub-caste. The Brahmins and Kshatriyas and other higher castes accuse the state government of pandering to the whims of the numerically dominant lower castes. They want monuments erected to their cultural heroes as well. Uttar Pradesh is bad, people say, but Bihar is worse, the name synonymous with lawlessness and criminality. People get some satisfaction from not being at the absolute bottom of the Indian social and political pit.

We drive through the eastern parts of the state in a hired car, a comfort I could not afford twenty years ago. The alluvial plains, partly obscured by a thick fog, are yellow with sarso flowers stretching into the distance. The mango orchards are still there. There is still much idleness, people standing around, drinking tea, lighting small fires to keep themselves warm; the energy and the purpose, the sense of things being on the move, so evident in Maharashtra or Haryana, are absent here. But there is some development, sign of small industries, especially brickworks along the highway.

Our village in Bahraich hasn't changed much, with the exception of a few television antennas protruding from thatched roofs. The unpaved roads leading to the village are still covered with raw cow dung and straw. Children are still running around naked and barefoot. People still cover themselves in rags against the cold. Some have found seasonal employment in faraway places like Punjab. They have returned with new attitudes and styles, but they will leave permanently if they can. The older people who had welcomed me so generously have all gone, including Chotu kaka. Their absence is saddening, reminding me of so many others who have died in the last two decades, including members of my own family. I have difficulty establishing a rapport with the younger generation. I am a stranger among them. We have nothing to say to each other except talk about the weather and the crops. I feel slightly embarrassed at the scene around me, and upset at the people for feeling sorry for themselves, hoping for handouts and for miracles to happen. We, the descendants

of *girmitiyas*, have moved on, but these people, our ancestral cousins, have stayed put, caught in the quagmire of destitution and desolation. There is so much opportunity, so much potential, so little of it realised.

My children are moved by the kaleidoscope of sounds, smells and sights they encounter, but for them this is essentially a strange place full of strange people. Their family genealogy, they tell me emphatically, begins in Fiji, not in this village. Still, they are happy to have made the journey, but enormously thankful for the fate which led their great grandfather to leave. I share their feeling. I embrace people in the village as we take leave after sipping syrupy red tea from a tin cup, knowing that this is my final farewell. It is too painful to tell the people gathered around me, but I know that I will not return to my grandfather's village again. The break is final.

Bahraich had been the highlight of my trip to India twenty years ago. This time around, it is our visit to the Ganga. Benares is cold in winter, this year wrapped in a heavy blanket of fog, *kohra*, disrupting traffic schedules and delaying airplane departures. Benares is the oldest continuous city on earth, our taxi driver tells us proudly, eternal, indestructible. Its narrow, crowded gullies are plastered with election posters and advertisements for everything from modern drugs to a herbal cure for impotence, and crammed with tiny temples and small coves selling holy trinkets. The sacred and the profane, the profound and the mundane, hope and despair mingle in this sacred cradle of Hinduism.

The temples are disappointing. They are not places of silent prayer and solitude and spiritual communion. They are more like busy fish markets. Religion is the main business here, and touts are everywhere. Something about us, the way we dress and walk, our expensive-looking shoes, the backpacks we carry, seeking directions in accented Hindi, reveals our foreign identity. But worse are the *pandya*, professional priests, who prey on the credulous and the gullible and the innocent. They hassle and harass, pull you in different directions to their own temples for special divine benediction.



We are up early, and take the waiting taxi to Dasashvameath Ghat, the main *ghat*, place of prayer and bathing, of Benares. The taxi meanders its way through narrow, foggy streets, honking, overtaking cattle, rickshaws and people making their way to the river. Govind, our driver, who doubles as our guide, has already made arrangements with a boat owner to take us down the river. Touting starts as soon as we get out of the car, but we are guided through a thickening crowd of people to the edge of the river. The water looks muddy grey in the misty early light, the soil slushy and full of rotting marigold flowers. Already people, devoted Hindus as well as tourists, are heading out in hired boats, cameras and candles in hand. There is much confusion and commotion. The boatman, an elderly man wearing dhoti and loose kurta and wrapped in a dirty white-brown shawl, buys the material needed for *puja* as we wait. Then we head out into the river.

Before too long, he stopped the boat to pick up a *pandya*. This was not planned for, nor were we informed about it beforehand. I enquire, but the boatman is insistent: there can be no *puja* without a *pandya*; and he was getting us the best *pandya* there was, especially for us. We have heard that before. There is no point arguing: what will be done will be done. The *pandya* is an elderly man, his forehead covered with holy sandalwood paste. He, too, is covered in clothes reeking of sweat and unwashed for days, perhaps weeks. His mouth, surrounded by yellow-white unkempt beard and stringy moustache, is red with the mark of betel nut juice, and his teeth black from years of chewing rough tobacco. I regard the man as an intruder on a private moment of special emotional and spiritual significance for me, and so say nothing to him. The *pandya* looks at me out of the corner of his eyes, assessing, establishing my identity in his mind. He is eager to strike up a conversation. As we make our way to another *ghat* where we will have our dip in the water, he asks me in Hindi where I am from. The South? He guesses South India because of my darker skin. I nod in agreement, to the amusement of my children who have seen me play this game so many times. But like other touts, he senses I am from

overseas. Unable to contain his curiosity, he asks whether I have been living abroad for a while. Yes, in Europe, in Liverpool, I say. He nods appreciatively. He tells me he had suspected from the very beginning that I was from England. I didn't ask how or why. I sometimes wonder what he would have said if I told him I came from Australia.

The fog is still thick as our boat weaves its way past other boats and people on the bank paddling in the water. Niraj sights partially submerged carcasses of a couple of rotting cows on the way. He points them out to Yogi who quickly covers her face with a shawl and looks away. The thought of having a dip in the same water a couple of hundred metres downstream fills both of them with horror. The smell of incense wafts through the air. We see people sitting motionless in meditation. The *pandya* leans forward and, in a voice barely above a whisper, talks to me about the importance of the ceremony we are about to perform. It has to be done right, he says; otherwise the souls of all the departed ones will not rest in peace. And particularly since I had come from so far away, I should observe all the rituals and perform all the ceremonies. One must do it with a clean and compassionate heart. I say nothing.

As we reach our bathing *ghat*, the *pandya* and the boatman disembark and head to the top of a flight of stairs. A couple of people have lit a small fire to keep themselves warm, and there is a *chai wallah* (tea stall) nearby. By now, Yogi and Niraj have decided, completely of their own accord, to have a dip as well. They are adamant; having come this far, they will do what they think is right. Yogi laughs out loud as she sees the words on my bathers 'I am the boss'. How typical of Dad, she says, wanting to be the boss wherever he goes. Niraj and I go in first, making our way into the river through sinking, slushy mud. A couple of metres in, and we hold our noses with our thumb and forefinger and take a dive. My body is almost numb with cold and my mind completely preoccupied with the act of the moment. A few minutes and several dips later, we return to the boat, and Padma and Yogi take their turn. We change back into our dry clothes and head to the small fire at the top of

the stairs. About 15 minutes later, Padma and Yogi join us, as we head back to the boat with the *pandya* and the boatman.

The *pandya* performs the *puja*. After the preliminary invocations in Sanskrit, which I don't understand, he asks me the names of our deceased parents. He repeats them and asks us to place small amounts of *puja* material into the fire after he calls out each name. We follow the instructions as most people do on occasions such as this without fully understanding the deeper meaning of what we are doing. At the beginning, I am self-conscious, as other boats full of tourists pass us, gawking, clicking their cameras. But soon I am engrossed in the act, completely oblivious to external intrusions. In the windless mist the tiny yellow flame is hypnotic, mesmerising. A once-familiar but now vanished world flashes across my mind. I see the pictures of numerous gods and goddesses plastered on bamboo walls of our house in Tabia, alongside the portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and famous film stars of my childhood years. I recall the endless *pujas* (*katha*) we used to perform at home with tiresome regularity. Our parents had their reasons, but we children used to look forward greedily to the end of what appeared an endless ceremony so that we could grab the fruit and food offered at the *puja*. We paid scant attention to the wisdom and sage advice of the scriptures. The sanskrit mantras, recited by the priest with such holy, practised fervour, meant nothing to us.

The flame reminded me of other, terrible, flames I had seen before: flames from funeral pyres of my own family: my parents and my two older brothers, one of whom had died just a few months before this trip. Each of the four cremations was vivid in my mind, the way in which I had received the news of the death, the rituals we had followed on each occasion, the anguish and pain the deaths had caused, how each funeral pyre was lit. I experienced each loss anew, and felt privileged and honoured to perform ceremonies for people who had meant so much to me.

After about 20 minutes, the *pandya* stopped, and asked me to make a gift (*daan*) to him. Giving gifts on occasions such as this is

customary, but usually it is done at the end of the ceremony. I was perplexed. What sort of *daan* and how much? Oh, it depends, he said. People had given him 50,000 rupees and more. Some had made donations of houses and other property. That I did not believe: this foul-smelling man in dirty clothes could not be a millionaire, as he claimed. There was no way I could make that sort of donation. He looked at me and we haggled; 25,000; 15,000; 10,000. I looked at Padma who was visibly angry at being put in a situation like this. She felt it was an elaborate trap set up by the *pandya* and the boatman. She volunteered 101 rupees. The *pandya* gave out a little derisive laughter. *Bahenji*, sister, you must be joking: what would that small amount fetch these days? But why hadn't the amount been mentioned earlier? It was not good form to talk about these things at the beginning of a sacred journey, the *pandya* said. Unpropitious maybe, but he had a greater hold on me now in the middle of a ceremony than he would have at the beginning. Learned *pandyas* like him were rare and very expensive, but he was being reasonable. When Padma refused, the *pandya* asked her to keep quiet; I was the one to decide, I was the head of the household, and I was performing *puja* for my parents. That was not true, but he had seen me hesitate, and pounced upon it.

I felt awkward, arguing like this in the middle of a ceremony which I had travelled all this way to complete. I offered 1,001 rupees. There was a certain symmetry about the sum, if nothing else. The *pandya* nodded his head accepting it immediately; from the look on his face, I knew that he knew he had done very well: a thousand rupees for half an hour's work; and it was still just breaking daylight. I offer him 500 rupees straight away, but he says that he will collect the full sum from the hotel later, fearing that 500 was all that he might get. He then continued with the ceremony, but I am distracted and do not pay attention. I knew my family was unhappy, even angry; they had been ambushed many times in the past few weeks, and their patience was wearing thin. But there was little I could do.

As we headed back to the bank of the river, the *pandya* had become all soft and solicitous. He talked gently about the importance of gifts. For gifts to have any meaning at all, they had to be given with a good, clean heart; gifts given grudgingly were not good, he said, as he cast a sideways glance at Padma. Yogi, still angry at the whole affair, pointedly looked away. *Gupt-daan*, gifts given in strict secrecy, should not be talked about. Specifically, I should not tell anyone how much I had promised to give him. I said nothing, which he took as consent.

On our way back to the car, I exploded at Govind, accusing him of being a part of the ploy to defraud us, but he said he knew nothing about it and we believed him. In fact, he said to us, he had asked the boatman to take us straight to the *ghat*; there had been no talk of a *pandya*. These people had given Benares a bad name, he said with disgust. Our angry reaction had unleashed something deep in Govind. The *pandya* who had accompanied us, he said, was a useless man, a drug addict, a rat. Doped all day, he would bathe in the Ganga at dawn every day, wash off his daily sins, and then prey on some unsuspecting person to indulge his habits. That was the way it was around here. I said nothing.

At the hotel, I reported our misadventure to the manager, holding him partly responsible for what had happened; Govind was the hotel's driver. The manager, O.P. Khanna, listened to our angry complaints. I felt used, ambushed, terrorised. I was adamant: I will pay the *pandya* nothing more than what Padma had offered: 101 rupees. Khanna nodded, and asked the door boy to call the *pandya* in. He walked through the glass door hesitatingly, suspecting that his ploy had gone awry.

'How much do you want, *pandya ji?*' Khanna asked in a sharp, prosecutorial voice. 'Fifty thousand rupees?' 'Saheb ki marzi,' he said, it was entirely up to me. I could give 50,000, or 500,000. He looked at me. I felt disgust: I did not expect to find fraudulence in men of the cloth. 'I see,' Khanna said, his face reddening visibly with rage. 'Here, take 101 rupees and get out. Fast.' Pointing at the door with his finger

shaking with anger, he said 'Get out, or I will have you put in.' He meant the gaol. These vultures, they give us all a bad a name, he says to no one in particular as he returns to his paperwork. Govind, who had been watching all this from a safe distance, laughed heartily later when we went out. '*Sahib, aap ne unko khoob chutia banaya.*' 'Sir, what a fool you made of the fellow.' He was happy that, for once, someone else other than the *pandyas* had got the upper hand.

Contemporary India is full of people like the *pandya*, the taxi drivers, the rickshaw pullers, the guides at tourist spots, the sellers of trinkets, people cutting corners, fleecing people, on the make in the quickest possible time. The froth and fluff of popular pop culture, cheap imitations of American television dramas, invade the screen. The other, perhaps idealised, India of my youth and imagination is languishing in the background. I feel a stranger now, more so than 20 years ago.

My most enduring memory of this trip is my visit to the Ganga. That image of a small, flickering flame in a tiny earthen vessel, drifting away from me into the distance, gradually devoured by the mist, mingling with others as it makes its journey down the river out into the open ocean. It is a metaphor for life itself, I suppose. It also sums up the way I feel about my grandfather's land. There was no sunrise on the Ganga.

## Ben

Why, what is pomp, rule, reign but earth and dust?  
And, live we how we can, yet die we must.

Shakespeare, *III Henry VI*, Act V

*The phone rang around dinner time* on a cold Canberra day. Kamla, my younger brother, spoke from Adelaide. He appeared cool and collected as usual. After exchanging the usual pleasantries, he said he had some sad news to convey. I waited expectantly. Ben, our older brother, has had a brain haemorrhage, he said. I was stunned, and wanted more information. We all knew that Ben wasn't well, but none of us quite knew what the problem was; certainly we had no idea of its seriousness. Kamla was as puzzled and anguished as I was. One of Kamla's doctor friends had told him that if Ben pulled through the next 48 hours, he might be all right. Otherwise... the thought went unspoken.

By now, my family had gathered around me, hushed. The tone of my conversation with Kamla had suggested that something was seriously wrong. They were as shocked as I was when I told them what had happened. Yogi was anxious, tearful. She knew from her studies that a brain haemorrhage could mean death, or perhaps permanent brain damage. Either way, the situation was horrible. I, too, lost my composure and leaned on her shoulders. My wife

Padma regained her composure to say that we will have to just wait and see what unfolds, hinting that one of us might have to fly off to Fiji soon. Niraj, just eight years old, stood uncomprehending, bewildered, his innocent face stained with tears. The children were experiencing the first family tragedy in their young lives, and they were deeply distraught. That night, Niraj slept in our bed and I slept in his. Just before midnight, I noticed a slight flicker, a momentary dimness of light in the room. A premonition of some sort perhaps, or was my exhausted mind playing tricks?

The last time I saw Ben was in June 1992, when I had gone to Fiji to observe the general elections. As usually happened on these occasions, I had gone to Labasa for a day to see father. As my taxi stopped in the compound, where I had disembarked a hundred times in the past, father came out. He embraced me and kissed me on both cheeks, but asked me not to enter the living room of the main house, not yet. Something was going on. Mohan, my cousin, was sitting on the mat with a short, dark, shrunken-looking man, an *ojha*, a spirit man. A big bowl of yaqona and a carton of cigarettes were lying about in the room. Almost instinctively, I headed toward the kitchen. I asked Ben's wife, my *bhabhi*, what was up. This man had come to have a 'look' at Ben, she said. Obviously, someone had cast a spell on him, and the *ojha* was going to get to the root of the problem.

About half an hour later, Ben came out to meet me in the kitchen, where I sat sipping sweet black tea. Hugging me, he began to cry as I had never seen him cry before. He was very sick, he said to me, tired of life. That scene still haunts me, the sight of my older brother, sick, helpless, weeping. He seemed so completely alone and desperate. There were times, he said, when he felt like taking his own life. He hoped he would go soon, with his dignity intact. I muttered some words of consolation, and enquired more about his illness.

He invited me into the living room, where I met the *ojha*. My first impressions were hostile. My pointed but polite questions revealed that he was from Bua or some such place, unemployed. His furtive



glances, his reluctance to look me straight in the eye, suggested that he was very uncomfortable in my presence. So, what was the problem, I asked him. Well, someone had 'done something', he said unhelpfully. What?, I asked. He didn't quite know, but he sensed something. Oh yes, I thought, but he was also getting money, gifts, bowls of free yaqona and cigarettes as well.

These tricksters materialise out of nowhere, and like vultures swoop upon the gullible and desperate in their moments of need. I didn't say much, out of respect for father and Ben, but both Mohan and the *ajha* knew what I thought of the whole thing. Another time, I would have skinned him alive.

Father was an uncomplicated, trusting kind of person who could be persuaded to believe in these things. But Ben? I never thought he believed in this humbug. Ben read my thoughts and seemed a little embarrassed. But what could he do, he said. He had tried everything, even been to Suva to get the best medical advice, but nothing seemed to be working. So, like a drowning man, he was clutching at every passing straw. The doctors couldn't diagnose his illness, so in desperation, with father at his side, he turned for relief to the forces of the underworld. Ben was losing his eyesight, and eye specialists, even the best ones in the country, couldn't understand why. And he was losing his memory, too, becoming forgetful. That was why he had taken leave from his job at Vinod Patel's hardware store, afraid that momentary losses of concentration, more and more frequent, might land him in big trouble.

Next day, I saw my cousin Vijay, the (real) doctor, and asked him about Ben. He couldn't be sure, he said in his cautious medical tone, but all the symptoms — the failing eyesight, loss of memory, sudden attacks of anxiety — pointed to hypertension. I was perplexed. Hypertension? In Labasa? Ben? I now can't recall what I told Ben, but I do know that I warned him against relying on quacks. He agreed. I think I also said something to the effect that, sometime soon, we would get him over to Australia for a proper medical check-up. The remainder of that morning

we spent talking, wandering around the town, running into family members, having coffee. It was like old times between the two of us, relaxed, close, happy in each other's company. In the afternoon, we borrowed a friend's car and drove to the airport. Ben and father saw me off. It was an emotional farewell, with the usual promises of seeing each other again soon, the urgency now heightened by Ben's deteriorating condition. I stood sheltered in the dusty terminal as he drove away towards town in the yellow Datsun, leaving behind a cloud of red Waiqe dust. That was the last I saw of Ben.

Ben had seen me off at that airport so many times in the past. I still remember vividly the first time I left Labasa, to go to the University of the South Pacific in 1971. Virtually the entire extended family from various parts of Vanua Levu had come to the airport in a hired bus to farewell me. Ben had cried then, for that was the first time any member of our family had ever left home. Suva, where I was going, was a strange town in a strange place, and I was so green. Three years later I left for Canada, and he was there then as well, crying for a younger brother going to a distant, alien land. Then to Australia, and later India and Hawai'i. So many departures and so many arrivals and so many disruptions. Ben was always there, solid as a rock, standing by the dusty airport fence and waving me goodbye. And he was always there when I returned, ready with goat curry-and-rum parties that went long into the night.

Ben was three years older than me but that somehow seems not quite right. I always thought of him as much older, for the responsibility of educating and bringing us up had rested on him from an early age. Poor fellow, his childhood was truncated to serve the interests of his siblings. Ben was bright at school, but he was a bright boy in a family of bright boys. He passed his Entrance exam but didn't go to secondary school because father couldn't afford the school fees and the bus fares. Actually, that is not quite true. He did attend Labasa Secondary for two terms, but was forced to leave in the third term. After staying home for several weeks and helping on the farm, during which time he had

missed valuable schoolwork, father, at mother's persistent urging, asked Ben to return to school, just in time to sit the annual exams. But Ben refused. He would be humiliated, I vaguely remember him saying, knowing that almost certainly he would fail when all his friends, no brighter than him, would pass. I still think he made the wrong decision.

Soon afterwards, a new chapter opened in his life. Ben began work as a grocery hand at N.D. Rana, the general grocery store in Labasa. His salary was \$4.00 a week (or was it a month?). Unable to afford bus fares from home and with no one else to stay with in town, Ben rented a small room at the back of the N.D. Rana warehouse, where he slept next to rotting onions and potatoes. It must have been a wretched time for him, but he didn't talk much about those dark days. It was all a learning experience, an apprenticeship, he said, and left it at that. Then, he joined Ashik Husain and Company, a hardware store, where he remained for a long time. He had picked up bookkeeping on the way and knew the nuts and bolts of the business very well, earning the trust and affection of his boss and his friends. Those were happy years for him, at work and at home: secure employment and a growing young family. In later years, he moved to other jobs, but by then I had left Labasa.

The hard lessons he learnt early in life shaped Ben's vision. He did not want any of his siblings to go through what he had experienced, insisting that we should complete our education so that we could stand on our own feet, away from the shadow of petty humiliations and poverty that had damaged the lives of our parents. He could easily have decided to go his own way, after he married and had his own family, leaving Mum and Dad to fend for themselves, or having one of us look after them. That, after all, was and still is the trend. But he stayed put while we travelled on. For that I am more grateful than I can ever put in words. His compassion, concern and generosity of mind and spirit are, for me, his enduring legacy.

Kamla, Sam and Rajen, my younger brothers, will, as they sometimes do, tell their own fun-filled stories about their growing up

together in Tabia, or boarding in rat-infested houses in the town. They had more fun with Ben than I ever did. Fun is not a word that comes to mind when I think of Ben. After I left Labasa in 1971, I returned home only intermittently, pursuing education in a world that was as far removed from that of my siblings as it could possibly be. Distance and different social and personal experiences increased the gulf between us. But later, especially in the last ten years, Ben and I had become close, not necessarily as brothers, perhaps more importantly as friends. We confided in each other about family matters. He trusted my judgement. I think he also took some pride in my accomplishments. I wish I had told him more often how grateful I was to him, how much I loved him. I thought we had plenty of time, no need to hurry with plans for a big family get-together. Now those plans will remain merely as reminders of things never to be completed.

In Canberra, early next morning, Kamla rang again. Bad news bro, he said simply; and I knew the end had come. My knees sagged and I had a lump in my throat. Of course, I will go, I told Kamla who himself was making arrangements to fly out of Sydney later in the day. I put the phone down and looked at my family now gathered around me. We held each other, and shared the dreadful news. Despite their comforting presence, I felt alone, unsupported and helpless in an alien society, away from my extended family. Uncharacteristically, Yogi took charge, and made my bookings. I would fly out of Canberra later in the day and, with Kamla, take the Qantas flight to Nadi that night.

I met Kamla at Sydney airport. We talked about Ben, but grief is personal, and airports, even at the best of times, magnify isolation and solitude. Among thousands of people, waiting for loved ones to arrive from overseas, on their way to vacations, conferences, family reunions, with gaiety and laughter, movement and excitement, you stand alone, lost in thoughts of a world that has vanished.

Kamla told me what his doctor friend had said. If Ben had pulled through the next 48 hours, he said, he had planned to fly him over to Suva, get expert advice and the necessary medical insurance

papers in order, and then fly him over to Australia. I was touched by his concern and amazed at his ability to think so clearly and strategically. It was at the airport that Kamla told me of the dream he had the previous night. Feeling that something was not quite right, he had rung Fiji to talk to someone in the family, perhaps Ben himself? He couldn't reach him, so had left a message for a reverse call. The phone did ring early in the morning, and woke Kamla from fitful sleep. It was a call from Labasa alright, relaying the news of Ben's death.

We reached Nadi late, past midnight. Since we had to take the early 7am flight to Labasa, we took a taxi to Suva immediately. The driver appeared to be a speeding maniac, puffing like a chimney, his eyes red from lack of sleep and his dark, leathery skin cracked by excessive kava drinking. In Suva, we met Rajen and his family, and Kamal and Subhas, my nephews. It had fallen to Rajen, the only one of us then living in Suva, to make the travel arrangements and the 7am flight was the only one available. Labasa had, for the first time, won the inter-district soccer competition, and a lot of its supporters from throughout Fiji were returning home for celebrations on Saturday. We were lucky to get seats at all.

From the air, Labasa looked its usual self, a sleepy, shimmering little town surrounded by a sea of green cane fields and embraced by the snaking Qawa river. As soon as the plane landed we took a taxi home. We had travelled this road so many times in the past that I knew its every twist and turn. On it, so many years ago, I had learned to drive in Ben's battered old maroon Cortina. In those days the roads were more treacherous because they were not tar-sealed. A slight pull of the gravel around a bend and the car would land in a muddy ditch, as it did on several occasions, especially when we had a few bottles of beer under our belts. What fun, what agony.

Ben was not a patient teacher. He would get terribly cross when I did something silly, such as changing gears without depressing the clutch! How could one do so many things at once, depress the

clutch, change gear, hold the steering wheel steady and look ahead to avoid oncoming traffic, I would protest. But I eventually got my licence on the second try. I looked after that damned car well, secretly hoping that my good deeds might earn me more opportunities to drive. As we passed the rivers I remembered how Ben and I had tried to learn to swim. And impromptu picnics at the beach, which had to be abandoned because some Fijians threatened to beat us up for trespassing on their property. And fierce soccer matches in dry paddy fields. How father would fly into a rage and thrash us with *chapki* when he saw our injuries or found out about childish adventures.

As we turned onto the road leading towards home, I can't recall exactly what went through my mind. A tin shed had been erected and there were some close relatives and village folks sitting around. As we disembarked, father came forward, disconsolate. I couldn't save my son, he said to me, as if he were somehow personally responsible for Ben's death. Then, from the direction of the kitchen came the heart-rending wailing of women. My widowed sister-in-law was there, dishevelled, disoriented. Roshni and Reshmi, Ben's two daughters, and our eldest sister came forward, their eyes red and their faces anguished. Arvind, Praveen and Ravin, Ben's three sons, were sitting at the edge of the verandah, weeping. We embraced in shared grief. Things will turn out all right, I remember saying. We are all together in this. We are a strong family. We'll take care of you. But words are empty at times like this. What can one say to a woman whose husband has died so unexpectedly, to young children whose father is no more?

Father told us what had happened. Ben had been out in the field, helping prepare a plot of land for planting rice. After about half an hour, he returned home, ate his breakfast and then complained of a severe headache. Suddenly, he began vomiting blood and soon afterwards collapsed into a coma. Immediately he was rushed to the hospital, but it was all too late: Ben died at the hospital that night, without regaining consciousness. Just imagine a father's unfathomable agony about his son's condition, the endless waiting for some news,

any news, Ben lying unconscious in some impersonal hospital room, the terrible, merciless suddenness of it all. At least he went quickly, we consoled ourselves, no consolation at all. There is something jarringly unnatural about children dying before their parents.

Later in the afternoon, father and I went to town to buy material needed for the cremation. He insisted that he and I do this together. He needed me by his side. We needed each other. Fortunately there are stores that specialise in these things. They know what is needed, in what quantities. Yes, twelve bottles of ghee will do, a dozen packets of camphor, five packets of incense. They had a standard list, and in no time we had what we wanted. Then to buy fresh garments to clothe the body. It is such a strange, incongruous thing. There we were, father and I, buying new shoes, socks, shirt, tie and pants for Ben. Father was adamant: he was going to send his son off in the finest clothes. Only the best would do. Cost was of no consequence, he said, as tears rolled down his creased, unshaven face.

What must have gone through his heart as he bought all these things, I cannot say. I knew, as I watched him, that in a similar situation, I would have cracked. My father had endured so much grief in his life: death of his beloved *girmitiya* parents, loss of two children at birth, mother's death a decade ago, and now Ben's untimely departure. Poverty and the betrayal of friends and relatives. Yet, through it all, he had remained a pillar of strength and reassurance to all of us. What courage of the heart amidst such anguish and ruin.

The last time father had bought clothes for Ben was when Ben was getting married. That was in 1970. I remember that occasion well. It was the first time I was given what seemed a princely sum, I now can't recall how much, to buy myself a pair of trousers. I bought myself tight, dark green terylene pants and a pair of black shoes, my very first. After Ben, I was the next in line for marriage in our family. As Ben's younger brother, I would sit with him in the *mandap* throughout the ceremony. Perhaps some girls from my school might be there. Who knew whose eyes would be on me! There had been such excitement

then, such happiness at the prospects that lay in store for me. For father, it was his son's wedding. He was walking in the clouds. Now, 20 years later, we were clothing Ben again but for a different purpose. And without the warm, comforting presence of my mother.

By late afternoon, when we returned from the town, a crowd had gathered at home. Families and friends and village people. I was struck by their spirit of community. Like a well-rehearsed play, everyone knew what to do. Since no fire could be lit at home until the body had been cremated, village people brought hot food, tea, bread and fruit to feed the bereaved family. They did not need to be asked: it was the way things were done. I had forgotten how tragedy in a village brings people together. People introduced themselves as they came and sat down in the shed, assessing me with sidelong glances, a stranger who was once one of them. How things had changed. Boys I had grown up with were now middle-aged men, though in my mind's eye they remained frozen at a past moment. Children I had once terrorised as the school prefect were now householders, married with children of their own. These tiny tots came forward to shake my hand and called me grandfather (*ajja*). Some village folk had moved away to other places, and perhaps a few had migrated to Viti Levu; but most were still there. I felt strangely uncomfortable among them.

In the evening, the village gathered to sing *bhajan*, simple rustic religious songs about man's purpose in life, the entanglements of *maya*, the illusory world, the indestructibility of the soul, the permanence of grief in human affairs, the importance of *bhakti*, devotion, the everlasting mercy of God, all intended to console the bereaved. We picked up the verses and joined in, to the accompaniment of harmonium and tabla and *dandul*. *Yaqona* flowed in copious amounts. People in the village had drunk *yaqona* for as long as I could remember, but not in this quantity, surely. Now, I was told, many people had become addicted to this mildly narcotic drink, which can produce a soporific effect. As one fellow told me in a matter of fact way, there were some people in the village who secretly prayed for a



tragedy like this, for then they could be assured of yaqona for a fortnight or more. I am glad the people came. Their conversation and recollections of old times with Ben lightened the atmosphere, and helped me to reconnect emotionally with the place of my birth.

The next day began early, businesslike. A few people left for the cremation ground to prepare the funeral pyre from wood collected from the forest the previous day, and some of us left for the hospital to get the body. We waited outside the mortuary for about half an hour for two other bodies to be washed and dressed and taken away. Some delay was caused by one group which had bathed the body but had forgotten to bring the clothes. We ambled about and chatted across the street, waiting for our turn. Then we went into the morgue. There 'it' was, on a cold, grey stretcher. The eyes were closed but the mouth was slightly open and the forehead furrowed in pain. It must have been a difficult death. I broke down. Ben had aged considerably in the last five years, I noticed, the hair on his chest grown grey. I had forgotten that he was a big man, handsomely proportioned, fleshy. But no one talked of Ben, the man, now; they talked of 'the body', something cold and impersonal and distant. The body had to be washed and dressed, and we all took our turn. A job to be done, so businesslike.

I remembered the last time I had 'bathed' Ben. That was when he was getting married, and we had to perform the ritual of bathing and feeding him, because custom demands that, on the day of his marriage, the groom should have all his needs taken care of. For that one special day in his life, he is the undisputed king. My day in the sun would come one day, hopefully in the not too distant future, I dreamed. I recalled the gaiety of that moment: how the women of the family had taken turns to rub *haldi* (turmeric) on Ben, and tons of glistening oil too. I remembered how Ben had mingled with the crowd clad in his turmeric-stained white T-shirt and *dhoti*, how mother had sung sad songs about losing her son to another soul. And I remembered especially well how we had splashed him with

bucketsful of well water till he begged for mercy. Mother had to intervene to protect her soon-to-be-married son from our water treatment. It had all been so much fun then, so innocent.

An hour later, the body was ready. We placed it on a simple home-made bamboo-and-reed structure. This had been Ben's wish. He had told people that he did not want his body to be cooped up in a casket. He wanted to go to the funeral pyre in the traditional Hindu way. Perhaps he had seen the end coming. There was a time when caskets were commonly used; that was how we had brought mother's body home a decade earlier, I remember. But things have been changing in the last few years. Now people are going back to the traditional ways of cremation. Expense is part of the reason, but there is also a resurgence of interest in culture and tradition. We put the body on an open truck, with about a dozen people sitting around it, and left for home. We drove slowly, around 20 miles an hour. Cars and trucks coming from the opposite direction stopped or slowed down as a mark of respect for a man making his last journey. This was new in Labasa, and was very touching because it was so unexpected.

Hundreds of people had gathered at home by the time we arrived, women sitting in the shed and men wandering outside. Nearly all members of my extended family were there, some of whom I had not seen in more than two decades, or at least since mother's death a decade earlier. Inside the shed there was loud, unceasing wailing. The women of the family were almost hysterical with grief. I went around the crowd and greeted friends and relatives with a simple handshake. What was there to say?

Around midday, the *pandit* arrived. He was a youngish man, in fact had been Ben's classmate. What conjunction, saying final farewell to his classmate. He delivered his funeral oration with practised eloquence. A soul is the gift of God, eternal, indestructible. Death simply means the departure of the soul for another life, for Ben a better life. He was a good man, the *pandit* said, a dutiful son, a responsible brother, a devoted householder, a friend of many. Why

he had to go so early, no one knows. God works in mysterious ways. We are all hostages to our karma, cogs in a cosmic wheel. Ben's former fellow workers brought a wreath, as did Roshni's classmates from Labasa College. This was something new. As I recalled, wreaths were associated with Christian funerals. Labasa was changing.

After an hour or so, it was time to leave for the cremation ground. A slow, sad journey, stopping periodically to light camphor along the route. The funeral pyre had been prepared earlier in the day. About a dozen coconuts had been slit in half and placed at the bottom of the pit, apparently to catch the ghee and keep the fire going. A truckload of wood had been carefully arranged. Whoever prepared the pyre had done it many times before. We placed the body on it. Then, as the *pandit* chanted some *shlokas*, sacred words, from a book covered in red cloth to wish the departed soul well on its next journey, and after we observed a minute's silence, Arvind, Ben's eldest son, lit the pyre. Custom demands that only the eldest son perform the last funeral rites. That is why a son is an absolute must for all Hindu families. Arvind led the way, and we joined in, lighting the camphor and pouring the ghee. Within minutes, with a strong wind blowing, the pyre was alight, the heat growing increasingly intense. We moved away, and stood in silence in the shade of some pine trees, as flames, pure and purifying, leapt into the sky.

Half an hour later, people began to scatter and leave. We stayed on for another hour or so, and then walked back home. As we walked across the Tabia school grounds, I remembered the great times we had there as children, arriving early in the morning for a game of soccer or *gulidanda* before classes began. I remembered, too, the house competitions, the compulsory midday siestas, the singing lessons, and the beatings by teachers, some of whom, such as Master Bhujang Rao, struck terror in our tiny hearts. This was the late 1950s and 1960s. I remembered how Ben and I had to share our school lunch from the same aluminium *sispan*, and how he used to hate that. I was a nuisance to him, an embarrassment, in the way younger siblings can

be, always saying the wrong things at the wrong time. There was no secondary school in Tabia then as there is now. Those who passed the dreaded Entrance exam went either to the Labasa Secondary or to the lesser option (as it seemed) of Sangam High.

Next morning, we went to the cemetery to complete the final rite, collecting bones and ashes for disposal in the river. Ultimately, all journeys, however grand or humble, end here, I thought. The funeral pyre is a great leveller of hierarchy and status and power and wealth, reducing all to ashes. How profound the ancient truths: ashes to ashes, dust to dust. It was a deeply humbling experience to contemplate the impermanence of life. A whole vanished world flashes past your eyes in the blink of an eye. You think of all the things you should have done and said, of all the missed conversations and opportunities. You think of all the laughter and fights of your childhood years, the little secrets you shared, and little pranks you played on unsuspecting others, you think of the good times past, and how time moves on. So quickly.

After placing flowers and bones in the river, at exactly the same spot where we had placed mother's last remains, we trudged back home slowly. As we crossed the rice fields and passed the mango trees we used to invade during the fruiting season, we laughed and talked about the old days, telling stories of our pranks to children born much later. At night, village people came home to sing *bhajan* as they would for the next thirteen days, the traditional period of mourning, after which life would return to a semblance of normalcy.

The following day, Kamla and I had to leave Labasa to return to Australia. Saying goodbye is always a difficult thing, don't you think? But saying goodbye to your widowed sister-in-law and her orphaned young children is impossible. We embraced each other through tears, with promises to keep in touch. I left more conscious than ever of my new responsibilities and obligations, and diminished by Ben's death. Another familiar, dependable signpost had gone from my life forever.

## *Submissions*

No philosopher's stone of a constitution can produce golden conduct from leaden instincts.

Herbert Spencer

*3 July 1995. It is 9am* and we are at the Sigatoka Town Council Chambers, having made the two-hour journey from Suva early that morning. A crowd of curious onlookers, local community leaders and prospective speakers is ambling about the two-storey building just outside the town on the way to Nadi. We are greeted politely as we ascend the stairs into the main chamber, a thick folder of written submissions in our arms. Inside, everything is already in place. The Commissioners' table, with name tags, is at the back. Sir Paul Reeves, the Commission Chairman, sits in the middle, Mr Tomasi Vakatora on his left and I on his right. This will be the pattern throughout.

To our right, at a separate table, sit the Legal Counsel, Alison Quentin-Baxter and Jon Apted. Commission secretary, Walter Rigamoto, is at the same table, to their right. Walter marshals his troops and orchestrates the smooth flow of paper to us, deciding the order of submissions. Directly opposite him, to our left, are the Hansard reporters with their equipment, who will preserve for posterity the verbatim record of the proceedings. The table for the

speakers and interpreters is directly in front of us. We are ready. Sir Paul starts the proceedings, welcoming everyone. This, he says, 'is the beginning of a long process of listening to our people and organisations who wish to come before us'. There is silence in the room, the air thick with anticipation as the first speaker is called and makes his way towards us.

We have a long journey ahead of us. How tense and fraught that journey will be, we have no sense of just yet. But already we have travelled a long way. Just to reach this stage is a miracle of sorts. There was a time, not too long ago, when most people were pessimistic about our prospects. But our appointment is generally well received. Our three-member Commission has been appointed to review Fiji's Constitution, promulgated by a Presidential decree in July 1990. We have been asked to make recommendations for a future constitutional arrangement for Fiji which would promote national unity, racial harmony and the social and economic development of all citizens of the country. But in doing so, we have also been asked to guarantee the protection and promotion of the rights, interests and concerns of the indigenous Fijian and Rotuman communities, to have full regard for the rights, interests and concerns of other communities, and to take into account internationally recognised principles and standards of individual and group rights. The constitution we recommend should meet the needs of Fiji as a multi-ethnic and multiracial society.

It's a tall order, and we are under no illusion that we have been asked to 'square the circle'. We are constantly reminded of the heavy burden of responsibility that rests on our shoulders; such a chance comes but rarely, we are told; we cannot afford to fail. We must show the way forward by reaching consensus amongst ourselves, something that has eluded the political leaders for so long. We have our sympathetic well-wishers, but there are cynics as well. One, a knight of the realm no less, writes in his weekly column that we are a million dollar farce waiting to happen. Even some submitters tell us to our face that we are a farce, which prompts Mr Vakatora to reprimand

them sternly in his own inimitable Speaker's way. Why bother appearing before us if we are a farce? 'People will always say such things,' he assures us. He knows: he is a battle-hardened former politician. But I suppose our critics have a point. They have seen so many commissions come and go in the last few years, the fate of their reports sealed at the moment of conception. But we are undaunted. We have our Terms of Reference, unanimously approved by Parliament. We have our staff. We are in business.

We spend the first month planning our work. Critical decisions about the method of our work have to be made. The public debate that our reference requires us to carry out: how should that be done? Someone somewhere suggests that all the hearings should be in camera, out of the public eye, to prevent posturing and the politicisation of the process. The process of public consultation should be brief and largely symbolic; after all, we all know what the attitudes are; we could glean them from submissions made to previous constitutional commissions. Nothing much has changed between 1990 and now. We reject that option. Public consultation, the Commission agrees, must be fair, open, transparent, inclusive and thorough. Moreover, we should pro-actively reach out to the people, visit their provinces, districts, villages and settlements, wherever they want us to come. The people should be bound into the process for, after all, it is their constitution that we are reviewing. No one should have any reason to feel excluded.

Mr Vakatora, who has done this before as a member of the Falvey Commission in 1987, gives us the benefit of his enormous practical knowledge of the geography of the country, the logistics of travelling, when, where, how. Our itinerary is announced over the air and published in all three main languages in the newspapers. Walter swings into action. Venues for public hearings are arranged, vehicles and drivers assembled, photocopying facilities rented from local bodies, paper and ink purchased, interpreters hired, Hansard reporters and technicians borrowed from the Parliament, hotel accommodation

for the Commission booked. The sheer professionalism of the office staff is impressive. By the time we reach Sigatoka, all the i's have been dotted and all the the t's crossed.

Mr Isikeli Nadalo is the first to make a submission before us. I know the name, of course: farmer, founding president of the Nadroga Cane Growers Association in the late 1950s, long-time member of the National Federation Party, former parliamentarian. Karam Ramrakha, an erstwhile NFP leader, once told me that Mr Nadalo had one of the most astute political minds in Fiji. I see him in person for the first time. He is formally attired, black pants, white shirt and tie; he has a sad, weather-beaten look about him, with a steel-grey thinning crop of hair. I feel deeply moved to see him at the table in front of us, with all that wealth of experience of battles won and lost, witness to so many dashed hopes and vanished dreams. And yet, despite all the setbacks and heartaches and all the calls to ethnic chauvinism, he still has that unvanquished flicker of optimism in a multiracial future for Fiji.

Mr Nadalo welcomes us to Sigatoka. 'We know that the task before you is tremendous and challenging but we rely entirely on your wisdom for a much better constitution that will be produced after the whole work is completed,' he says to us in his deep, sincere voice and beautifully cadenced English, a legacy of solid education of the colonial days. He has given us his written submission, and now proceeds to amplify and amend points already made in writing. Fiji should continue to be a sovereign democratic state; the Presidency should be rotated among the four traditional confederacies of Kubuna, Tovata, Burebasaga and (as yet to be recognised) Nakuravakarua. Mr Nadalo is baffled by the logic underpinning the distribution of seats under the 1990 Constitution. His own formula, based on population size is 35 seats for Fijians, 30 for Indo-Fijians, 4 for General Electors and 1 for Rotuma. He explains that the 'distribution of seats, as far as democracy goes, should be based entirely on population, because Parliament is the law and here we are dealing with the people'.



Fiji, Mr Nadalo says, must be home to all the different races who have settled there. He seeks reversion to the old system of mixed communal and non-communal voting. The Senate should be retained as a House of Review, its composition as under the 1970 Constitution. *The Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act* should not be entrenched legislation because it infringed the rights of landowners to reclaim their land when the leases expired. And finally, there should be a periodic review of the constitution, say every ten years, to take account of the changing circumstances. We ask questions, seek clarifications, probe — and provoke — new lines of enquiry. From his responses it is clear that Mr Nadalo wants a constitution reflecting the spirit of the 1970 document. His allotted time of 15 minutes is up. Mr Nadalo gathers his papers, bows and walks out of the chamber. He has some business to attend to in town before heading off to his village. We don't see him again.

We resume after morning tea. Local leaders of the Arya Samaj, a reformist branch of Hinduism, are next. In a well-prepared submission, which will be repeated — worse, read word for word — countless times in the days and weeks ahead, the Commission is told about the hardships facing the Indo-Fijian community and why the 1990 Constitution is not acceptable to them. After a brief recital of the history of the Samaj, its philosophy and contribution to the development of modern Fiji, the presenters get to the point. They reject the Constitution because it was imposed on the Indo-Fijian community 'who had no meaningful say in its formulation'. The Constitution discriminated against them, denied them fundamental human rights, deepened their sense of alienation; affirmative action policies discriminated against them. Their people 'did not come here as colonisers or conquerors but as indentured labourers (which is an euphemistic word for slavery)'. It was humiliating to be told four or five generations later that their rights are inferior to those of the other communities in their own homeland.

So what was the way forward? The new constitution should recognise the multi-ethnic character of the country, provide for power

sharing by all communities; it should 'enable Fiji to solve its serious social and economic problems such as land, unemployment, poverty, homelessness, et cetera'; guarantee the security of agricultural leases; provide specific recognition of a permanent place for the Indo-Fijians, secure adequate racial representation for them in the armed forces, promote the values of democracy and equality, heal the communal wounds of the past and treat men and women equally, move towards a non-racial electoral system, and sanction institutions and processes to ensure open, accountable, effective administration. It is an exhaustive list. The presenters, or whoever wrote the submission, have done their homework. We did not know it then, but the concerns expressed in this submission would be repeated in different ways and to different degrees in most Indo-Fijian submissions throughout the country.

The Fijian submissions, at least in Sigatoka, are less formally structured and generally shorter; sometimes, Fijian elders sitting at the back of the room are spurred to spontaneous submissions by what they have just heard. Ratu Isoa Makutu, a gentle and soft-spoken high chief, speaks through the interpreter and welcomes us to Nadroga. He wants a less confrontational type of democracy in Fiji, greater devolution of power to the provinces, and the progressive reinvigoration of the Fijian traditional system 'to protect our indigenous rights, not to hold us down in the dark ages'.

Mr Tomasi Matainadroga, representing 18 Methodist congregations in the Sigatoka circuit, is firm. The 1990 Constitution is quite acceptable to this country because it allows the recognition of the rights and aspirations of the indigenous Fijians whereas, during colonial leadership era, the indigenous Fijians were deprived of such rights as they were given to foreigners. The land issue should not be debated in Parliament; Sunday Ban should be maintained in a strict observance of the Sabbath; non-Fijians should have the freedom to carry out whatever businesses they wish, but they 'should be mindful of giving a fair share of their return to the indigenous landowners from [whose land] they are operating [their] businesses'. Ratu Jalesi

Dredre and Ratu Tevita Dikedike, Tui Nabuavatu and Tui Davutukia, respectively, raise the issue of Fijian war service in the cause of the British Empire. Chiefs 'had been blessed by the Almighty God to the leadership of our country', and unless chiefly leadership was given its due recognition, 'problems will arise among the different races living in this country'.

We finish late and head for a night's rest at the Fijian Resort before moving on to Nadi the following day. I am exhausted and not a little apprehensive about what lies ahead. Already, I can see the faint outlines of two entrenched and seemingly irreconcilable positions before us: change versus no change, or only minimal change. There would be voices seeking the middle ground, counselling moderation and emphasising values common to all humanity, but these would be rare. Gradually the momentum builds. The radio and newspaper coverage is extensive, often highlighting the more sensational bits, but it's the television coverage that is unique. Television is new to Fiji, just a few years old, and the object of national fascination. Every night, for weeks, we are a regular feature on the evening news. The words, the gestures, the emotions are dissected. Which group is making how many submissions, where, how; how much air time is given to the different communities; will the Commission be swayed by the sheer volume of submissions given by the different groups? For us, the novelty soon wears off; it's all in a day's work.

Having decided to go to the people, we plan to travel extensively throughout the country to all the major centres of the two main islands, to all the provinces, to important centres within provinces. We travel by car, by aeroplane, by boat, all the recording equipment and staff in tow. The three Commissioners travel in separate vehicles, which gives us time for reflection, for catching up on the written submissions already received, for making connections between submissions and notes of points to be clarified, for gauging the pulse of the public. Each submission is read and re-read for what is said and, sometimes more importantly, for what is left unsaid. I make

mental notes of the tone and tenor of the oral submissions, and the intensity of the exchange between the Commissioners and the submitters. We don't discuss the submissions amongst ourselves; each of us keeps his own counsel. It would remain that way throughout. We talk about many things, about sports, the weather, the landscape, everything except what we have heard or what we think of what we have heard. We will each make up our minds independently. Meanwhile, having taken our oath of secrecy, we will have to deal with any inner doubts by ourselves.

In my case there are many. As a historian of Fiji, I have a fairly good understanding of the dynamics of the country's history. I am aware of the previous attempts at constitution making, the kinds of issues that were raised and the kinds of solutions proposed; and reading, analysis and synthesis are part and parcel of my trade. Still, I am apprehensive about my handicaps, a lack of practical experience of politics, the enormous amount of private catching-up to do in areas I know little about, such as international conventions which bear on human, civil and indigenous rights, the unspoken pressures and expectations from the public. I constantly remind myself to be alert to new opportunities and fresh perspectives, not to be trapped by old and exhausted orthodoxies of the past. I am sometimes overwhelmed by the intensity and loneliness of this exercise. Writing a dissertation for three anonymous examiners is bad enough, but this is madness. A failed thesis is a private failure; but failure in an exercise like this would bring upon me a fate worse than death.

We see a lot of the country, places I had never visited before, places I am not likely to visit again. I am beginning to see how diverse and beautiful Fiji really is. Taveuni, the Garden Isle of Fiji, is just magical; Rotuma has a rugged tropical charm of its own; Lomaloma, surrounded by the turquoise blue sea, is really — take my word for it — as pretty as the picture postcards depict it. The interior of Viti Levu is awe-inspiring, with its majestic mist-draped mountains and valleys, the sparkling rivulets that meander through the valleys; people on horseback

going about their business; the blue smoke from cooking fires rising in the distance and drifting towards the hills.

Labasa, my own home town, is dry and dusty, with a stunted and deserted look about it; jobs are few and most of the younger people have left for Viti Levu; some have even migrated overseas, which would have been unheard of a decade ago. But the exuberant growth of Seaqaqa, with tar-sealed roads, shopping centres and schools, surprises me. There was a time, not too long ago, when Seaqaqa was bush, at the back of beyond, the subject of much patronising comment from us sophisticated Tabia residents. No father in his right mind would entertain marrying his daughter in that remote bush-village, unless, of course, there was some good reason. Not anymore; it's the other way round. Now, Tabia is the one that is caught in a cul-de-sac while Seaqaqa is going places.

Mr Vakatora's knowledge of Fijian geography and history is staggering. He knows the folklore and cultural peculiarities of virtually every place we visit, and he shares them generously. He is a deeply proud Fijian and a very knowledgeable man. I am sometimes embarrassed at how little I know, how much more I have to learn, how bookish my knowledge of the country has been. I realise that the written history of Fiji is but a minute fragment of the lived human experience in the islands. An obvious point, you might say, but this experience powerfully underlines it. I wonder, too, how much the non-Fijians really know about the intricate patterns of Fijian culture, the role and place of structured, ranked relationships and symbolism in it, the absence of malice inherent in the generosity of the Fijian people. I think we are the poorer for not embracing the finer aspects of the taukei culture as our own.

We receive submissions in a variety of places. In urban areas, it is usually in municipal chambers. In Indo-Fijian settlements, it is usually in a school building or a community hall. The atmosphere in these places is often less formal, businesslike. But in many Fijian areas, it is different, daunting. By the time we arrive, people are already seated on mats, and

usually the room is full to capacity. We are greeted with a formal welcome ceremony. We have our own *matanivanua*, herald, and a bundle of yaqona as *sevusevu*, ceremonial presentation. We respond, and make our humble offering. After a few meetings, I begin to recognise the string of words that are spoken, the gestures that are made, the particular way hands are cupped to clap. After the speeches, yaqona is ceremonially prepared in an impressive *tanoa* placed in the centre of the room.

Each province has its own distinctive way of preparing the drink. Gradually I begin to appreciate the central importance of yaqona to Fijian cultural and ceremonial life. Indo-Fijians do not attach much customary or cultural significance to yaqona beyond (as I remember from my childhood years) offering the first bowl to the invisible but ubiquitous '*taukei*' in the corner of the thatched house, symbolically appeasing the spirit of the land; but they are addicted to it now. So much so that several submitters ask us to ban the consumption of yaqona in public places. Sir Paul is offered the first bowl, then Tom and then (often but not always) me. By the time the welcoming ceremonies are over, an hour has passed. The western-trained academic in me sometimes regrets the loss of work hours. But I remind myself that it is I who is driven by the clock, even enslaved by it; and these ceremonies performed with such solemn grace and deportment are ancient. I should cherish the moment. I am getting a valuable lesson in cultural education.

I am impressed by the seriousness and respect with which we are treated everywhere, even, or especially, by people who are opposed to our work or cynical about its eventual fate. I am touched by many simple rural folk who have gone to great lengths, and expense, to appear before us. They are unfamiliar with our procedures; many probably have never seen the inside of a courtroom before. But they come in, say their piece and then leave. Each of them, irrespective of who or what they are, is given equal time and attention. Sometimes, people articulate local concerns which have little relevance to the task at hand. Rapists should be castrated, someone asks us to recommend. A disgruntled

student in Navua asks us to recommend a more lenient pass mark for law courses at USP. Someone suggests that it would be a good idea to have everyone wear the Fijian dress: he wanted the public face of Fiji to be symbolically Fijian. A submitter in Nausori urged us to recommend against the immigration of Chinese who were threatening their lifestyle in the hills, while another person wanted us to say something about stray animals which were damaging good neighbourly relations.

Many Indo-Fijians are deeply concerned about the impending expiry of native leases, under-representation and shrinking opportunities in the public sector, the paucity of university scholarships for students, the vandalism of places of worship, increasing incidents of domestic violence. They say that they get along well with their Fijian neighbours; it is the leaders in Suva who are causing all the problem. In Fijian villages, there is concern with royalties from the extraction of minerals or from logging, compensation for environmental damage caused by indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources, the breakdown of the traditional order, the problems of youth, the desire to prevent the marginalisation of the Fijian people in the land of their ancestors, and the discord and dissension caused by the arrival of new Christian sects in the villages.

People use many metaphors to express their thoughts. Perhaps the most common metaphor used by the Fijian submitters is that of a house. Fiji is likened to a house, and the Fijian people its owners. They will welcome outsiders, generously share whatever they have, treat them kindly, but everyone should know who is the owner (*taukei*) and who is the guest (*vulagi*). An urban Fijian puts the same thought differently. 'A guest can't be governor, doc,' he says smiling, obviously pleased at the concision with which he has expressed his view. Unless that fundamental distinction is understood, we are told, there can be no lasting solution to Fiji's constitutional problems.

Some Indo-Fijians use the metaphor of Fiji as a mother: we are all her children, each equal in her eyes and worthy of equal love. Some use the metaphor of the human body to emphasise the reality of

interdependence: we need eyes to see, heart to dream, limbs to move, brain to think. We would be the poorer without any of these. Some use the metaphor of a flower garden. One lady likened the process of nation building to a bank balance: if you keep withdrawing without putting something in, you will soon become bankrupt. 'The rice is cooked,' one woman says, drawing our attention to the futility of raking over the past. One person wanted 'peace without pollution', while another wanted to 'Ask for what is right, not what is more'. There are no bad parliamentarians, just bad voters, we hear someone say. Another urges caution and sensitivity in speech by using the analogy of bullets: once fired, you cannot get the bullet back. Such wisdom so eloquently expressed. Ilai Kuli, the fiery Naitasiri parliamentarian, says that Fiji is big enough for 'both Peter and Prasad', while someone else says that 'You can't make bread without a tiny bit of yeast'.

We asked one person who was extolling the virtues of the 1970 Constitution why the coup occurred if that was such a perfect document. Without blinking an eyelid, he said: 'The people who overthrew the constitution will be able to answer that.' A lawyer asks me not to ask him about the Bill of Rights. 'Ask me about Bill of Sales.' I think he meant it, too. One person said that there should be no Indians in Fiji's Parliament. Why?, I ask. 'We follow the parliamentary proceedings in India. There is no other race represented in their Parliament.' In Naitasiri, Ratu Sakiusa Navokaroko, Tui Nabobuco, was drawing our attention to the need for his people to get more royalties from the extraction of resources from his area. Mr Vakatora asked him: 'You said that the landowners' ownership of the land should go right down to the bottom of the earth. What about the air above, do you want to control that, too?' Out came the instantaneous reply: 'We want the ownership of land and sea and all that is in them. The Confederacy of Burebasaga could be given the ownership of the atmosphere.'

My own favourite example comes from Labasa. Three representatives of a women's association arrived early in the morning



and sat at the back of the room. One of them was from my own village, a year ahead of me in primary school. As they watched the proceedings, they decided, they told me during the lunch break, that they would not make any submission, daunted by the prospect (as they saw it) of hostile questions from us. But just as we were about to close for the day, they came forward: 'Today we waited and waited and were given the last [time slot] to give our submissions. From eight o'clock we have been here and we were allowed to speak just a couple of minutes ago.' 'That's a very long wait,' Mr Vakatora said. 'That shows what men are,' they said with a straight face! Pleased with their newly found courage, they said it was quite outrageous that there was not a single woman on the Commission. They quieten down when Tom points to the presence of Alison at the table.

Most of the Fijians who appear before us, even those with a perfect command of English, speak in their own language. It is a symbolically powerful demonstration of the vitality of the Fijian language, a people's deep pride in their own culture and heritage. Many would be happy to make Fijian the national language. Most Indo-Fijians prefer to speak in English. I am surprised at their fluency, and note that the older generation has a better command of the language. But sometimes, what is meant is not what comes out, and we enjoy a light moment or two.

One person said rather forcefully that we must eliminate this 'academic' of violence, which alarmed me, but he meant 'epidemic'. Another, trying to impress the Commission with the contribution his community had made to the economic development of Fiji, said that Indians were the 'backside' of Fiji, meaning 'backbone'. There was one person who demanded the death penalty for 'sedation', meaning 'sedition'. In Seaqaqa, an old Indian man was asked about what young men were doing in the villages where we saw no visible signs of employment. 'Oh, they just fuck around,' he said in a matter-of-fact way, using the omnibus village expression for idling around. One man said that the 1990 Constitution, like good wine, should be left for

sometime to mature, when someone else responded that bad wine left for too long turns to vinegar. One person said that the voting age should not be reduced to 18 because then Parliament would be full of school children. He himself was a parliamentarian. Tom asked another parliamentarian whether he believed in affirmative action. Yes, came the reply, 'I believe in firm action'.

The process of local consultations is exhaustive and exhausting. By the time it is all over, we have received over 800 oral and written submissions, all of which will have to be re-read and understood. Looking back, I am amazed at how much we were able to achieve in such a short time. I recall the tension and the theatre of the staged confrontations, the gestures of some hostile submitters with agendas of their own, who would later put their arms around my shoulders after a bowl of grog, and say: 'It's all politics, doc, don't mind.' They were looking for free publicity for their own causes and election campaigns.

I also remember friends and family members sitting in the audience, watching me, assessing my performance with a quizzical smile on their faces. I recall Mr Deo Narayan and Mr Santa Prasad Mangal, my secondary and primary school teachers respectively, hugging me proudly as one of their pupils who had made good. 'You have put us on the map,' they said, echoing what the Chairman of the Macuata Provincial Council, Ratu Emosi Vuakatagane, had said about 'one of us' from the much neglected Vanua Levu region being on the Commission. I remember seeing my aged illiterate father, a tower of strength and reassurance to all his children, sitting at the back of the audience in Labasa, watching his son in sahib's dress of tie and suit, talking a language he couldn't comprehend, clearly ill at ease in a quasi-judicial ambience. He died a week before we finished our work. I sometimes wonder what he would have thought of our report.

In the beginning we were a commission of complete strangers. But the shared ordeals of hectic travel, continuous commissioning and sustained interaction on a daily basis enabled us to understand each other a little better. The earlier tentativeness and caution in

conversation gave way to a more relaxed mood, our talks sprinkled with laughter and jokes. The ice was broken. One of my greatest and most unexpected rewards has been my friendship with Mr Vakatora. It developed gradually, over many months. At first we were naturally suspicious of each other, being put on the Commission by two opposing sides. We are as different from each other as chalk from cheese, separated by culture, age and experience. He is a formidable seasoned politician, while I have no practical experience of politics at all; he has never been to university while I have spent all my adult life in university classrooms. But in an ironic kind of way, our different backgrounds brought us together as we appreciate and learn from each other's talent and expertise.

Mr Vakatora is a tough man of explosive temper, as many a submitter discovered to their enormous discomfort. He is particularly tough on those who try to be clever. I recall the first of our formal Commission meetings. It was a pleasant enough encounter. 'See, there is no blood on the floor, Tom,' I said, pleased at the way things had gone. Back came the immediate reply: 'Not yet'. 'What have I let myself into,' I say to myself. But over time, I begin to see another side of him, as a thoughtful, sensitive and fundamentally fair man with an overarching, inclusive vision for Fiji. I come to realise, as I listen to him, that we are not really as far apart as the public believes we are. We are both determined to find a common, mutually acceptable ground, encouraged by Sir Paul. If you two agree among yourselves, I won't stand in your way, he says to us. With time, respect is transformed into trust, and trust into friendship. The most touching moment for me came the day before we submitted our report. Tom skippered a boat from Walu Bay to Nasilai Reef, with Wai, Padma and me. We go to where the *Syria* was wrecked in 1884 and later visit the site where the drowned were buried. The graves by the sea are covered with bush, which saddens Tom. 'Our people saved your people,' he says to me proudly, 'and together we will save all our people now.' We both share a quiet laugh as the enormity of that statement dawns upon us.

We have gathered a massive amount of material. Cacophonous voices, a blurred collage of conflicting testimonies linger in the memory along with the collective, inchoate desire of most people from all ethnic groups and walks of life to escape from the predicaments of contemporary Fijian politics caused by a destructive obsession with ethnicity. Will we be able to square the circle? Will we be able to come up with a unanimous report? These questions remain uppermost in my mind. Once I asked someone for specific guidance on how the various suggestions he was making could be formulated more precisely. Back came the quick reply: 'Sir, you are the cook. I have told you what I want for dinner. It is your job to prepare it, not mine.' Fair enough. For the next six months, we would sit each day behind closed doors, out of the public gaze, and discuss the questions that human beings have asked for centuries, about the nature and purpose of government, about the values, assumptions and understandings that should inform political relationships in complex societies, about the tension between the rights that individuals want to keep to themselves and those they voluntarily cede to the state, about the need to preserve the unique — and uniquely rich — traditions and cultural heritage of a country within the overarching collective of values that humanity has embraced as universal. We talk about what we had heard in the submissions, and try to come up with a recipe that would find broad acceptance among the people of Fiji.

## *On the Campaign Trail*

I am sufficiently behind the scenes to know the worth of political life. I am quite an infidel about it, and shall never be converted.

Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

*It has been a hard day on the campaign trail.* We began early to reach the remote, rural sugar cane village of Daku in north Vanua Levu at around 10am. The meandering road is a monstrosity, full of boulders and huge potholes as we bump along in a crowded jeep. Nothing much has changed in these parts since I left Labasa 30 years ago: the same sprawling cane fields now slowly creeping up the dry mountain slopes in the distance, rusting iron rooftops barely visible above the cane top, cows and goats grazing among overgrown grass by the roadside, men on cycles or horseback going about their business.

We arrive an hour later to find about a hundred men sitting on wooden benches on the school verandah, smoking, drinking yaqona, talking. These are simple rural folk, prematurely aged sons of the soil with furrowed, sunburnt faces and leathery skin cracked by excessive kava drinking. I grew up among them; I recognise some people in the crowd as my distant relatives whom I haven't seen for decades. They approach me, introduce themselves, and shake my hand with both of

theirs as a gesture of respect. We move inside. People stub their cigarettes, have one last bowl of yaqona, clear their throats and follow us, sitting at their children's or grandchildren's desks.

The meeting starts with the party prayer about unity and peace. Then the speeches begin. The points have been well rehearsed and presented with practised ease. The party's strength and achievements are contrasted with the alleged weaknesses of the opponents. Subtlety and truth, I quickly realise, are among the first casualties of an election campaign. The crowd is attentive and respectful and in awe of some of the candidates with university degrees from the land of the sahibs in subjects they have never heard of. Such as economics. Supporters of the opposing camp are at the back of the room listening intently, noting points they will refute and rubbish in their own meetings. Some of the older men watch the speakers with a wry smile; they have heard many such speeches full of fire and promise before.

Things have gone well, the candidates say over grog later. The planted questions — such are the tricks of the campaign trade — are fielded with flair. We leave the school for lunch around 3pm at the home of the party's local branch president. Key supporters have also been invited. We sit on a *paal* (mat of stitched rough sack covers) on the cold cement floor of the shop verandah. The candidates seek advice, plant ideas, and promise to return. Families of opponents are identified. They will be flooded with propaganda in the weeks ahead, cajoled and coerced into coming on board. Lunch, which we eat with our fingers in a dimly lit kitchen, is delicious piping hot fish and chicken curry. Women who have prepared the meal are behind the curtain in the adjacent room. Cultural protocol in rural areas even now demands that women maintain a discreet distance from strangers. A boy keeps piling our plates with food until we can eat no more. Such touching generosity, such loyalty to the party.

We leave for another meeting in town with full stomachs and fuller bladders. The thought of sitting through another set of thoroughly rehearsed speeches drains the spirit. The local candidate,

recently retired from the civil service and a political novice, promises a good turnout. Only a dozen or so old men turn up. The speakers go through the tired routine. A local doctor, defeated in one of the previous elections, approaches me: he was my father's physician. Why wasn't he standing? I ask him. The voters are treacherous bastards, he says loudly. They will drink your yaqona, eat your pulau and vote for someone else. The doctor is drunk, unsteady, embittered. Stand for elections? I can't even get this to stand, he says grabbing his crotch with both hands, a limp cigarette dangling from his lips. I move on to mingle with others.

The meeting finishes around 10pm as we head for dinner at a candidate's place in a small rented and still incomplete ground-floor flat in a nearby suburb. Yaqona is served, but I have had enough. Miraculously, a bottle of local gin appears. It is rough but effective, and desperately needed. People review the day and prepare for the next amidst much banter and relaxed talk. One candidate with poor English looks worried. When pressed, he turns to me and says, 'Doc, please tell us how to penetrate the womenfolk.' He was anxious about the absence of women from the rallies; hardly any had turned up at meetings that day. I gulp my drink and burst out laughing. Others join in, even the speaker after he realises his faux pas. But he had a serious point. Women in rural areas are house-bound, often unlettered and unversed in matters beyond the family and the village, and dominated by men. Yet they will all vote — voting is compulsory — and each vote counts. But politics here is a man's game.

More meetings, more speeches, more irregular hours, more greasy food from sooty kitchens, bladder-bursting marathon yaqona sessions, and endless cups of sweet syrupy tea in the days and weeks ahead. Each new audience will demand to hear the candidates, shake their hands and test them out. No matter how exhausted, the candidates will dig deep, fake seriousness and make points they have made a thousand times before as if they were saying it for the first time. It is a gruelling experience like none other. I marvel at the madness and

the majesty of democracy in action as I travel around the country. I feel strangely enthralled to see a new political culture emerging under a constitution based on the report of the Fiji Constitution Review Commission, of which I was a member. Fiji is back in the Commonwealth and once more receptive to the principles of representative democracy and international human rights conventions. It is so good to see the country moving in the right direction once again.

From coup to constitutionalism within a decade is not a journey many coup-scarred nations have managed to undertake successfully. Fiji's political transformation is remarkable. So, too, is the transformation of its political leaders. Sitiveni Rabuka, the coup maker of 1987, is fighting the election alongside Jai Ram Reddy, the Indo-Fijian leader most feared and distrusted by the coup supporters, seen as the evil genius behind Dr Bavadra's victory. Labour leader Mahendra Chaudhry's coalition partners include the Fijian Association Party whose candidate he had refused to support for Prime Minister in 1992, lending his numbers instead to Rabuka, whom Reddy had opposed. A combination of fate, history and circumstance has produced this strange permutation unimaginable only a few years ago.

Preparations for the elections begin soon after the promulgation of the Constitution in July 1997. Twenty-one parties and nearly 300 candidates are vying for the 71 seats in Parliament. But the main contest is between two coalitions, one led by the Labour Party under Mahendra Chaudhry and the other led by Sitiveni Rabuka and Jai Ram Reddy. The others are minor parties, ephemeral, some with such improbable, entertaining names as Multiracial Dynamic Party, Coin Party, the Party of Truth, the Natural Law Party. Their presence frustrates the main players, but it is the way of the future. Democracy — once dubbed demon-crazy by nationalist Fijians — is alive and well in Fiji.

The campaign has a carnival atmosphere, free of the racial tensions and hostilities of the past. One candidate's approach captures the mood. He has his campaign slogan written in bold letters on a white cloth wrapped around a dozen cows grazing in scorching sun



along the Queen's Highway. 'It's Time for a Change', the slogan says. 'No Bull'. Poor cows. All major leaders preach multiracialism, which has dampened extremist rhetoric. They have gone through a lot together in the constitution review, and the cross-cultural friendships are evident on the hustings. But inter-coalition rhetoric heats up as the campaign progresses.

Rabuka's record is ridiculed by his opponents who recite a long and dreary list of failed enterprises, scandals, abuse of office and arrogance of power. Labour has rehearsed its lines well: its message is sharp, focused and simple. Rabuka has to go, and with him his partner, Reddy. Fijians regard the SVT leader as a man who has overreached his culturally sanctioned authority and station: he is not duly deferential to his chiefs. Adding insult to chiefly injury, Rabuka, a commoner (albeit an uncommon one), claims he has achieved chiefly status for his accomplishments, as his forebears did in pre-colonial Melanesian Fiji. Moralising opponents point to the Prime Minister's rampant Bill Clinton-style philandering. A local newspaper carries the headline 'I am not Kama Sutra, says Rabuka,' reporting an escapade that allegedly took place at the local golf course. The publication is timed for maximum embarrassment: on Easter Friday. But Rabuka escapes serious electoral damage; bed-hopping is a common pastime in Suva these days. An envious Cabinet Minister says to me, only partly in jest, 'How come he gets all the luck!'

Criticism of Rabuka is relentless, unforgiving, hurtful. It is as if he is fair game. No other public figure in living memory has been ridiculed so severely. Some of the criticism is hypocritical. Christian Democratic Alliance leader, Poseci Bune, until recently a public servant and Fiji's permanent representative at the United Nations, accuses Rabuka of corruption, but he himself is the only permanent secretary so far to have been investigated for misuse of office. Other opponents, now self-styled champions of multiracialism, such as Viliame Gonelevu, Apisai Tora, are singled out by Rabuka as his coup-making associates, pricking their politically expedient multiracial

balloons. Some cannot forgive Rabuka for his past sins, for staging the coup which he insists he carried with others' blessing, and for which he asks forgiveness. He was the fall guy who refused to fall, he tells a meeting at the Girit Centre in Lautoka. Others condemn him for embracing multiculturalism and betraying the aims of Fijian nationalism.

But if not Rabuka for Prime Minister, then who, ask his supporters and the National Federation Party, which presents him to skeptical Indian audiences as the leader best equipped to take the country into the next millennium. By contrast, Fijian Association's Adi Kuini Bavadra, the remarried widow of the founding Labour leader Timoci Bavadra is unwell, untested and erratic. Apisai Tora is a serial, record-holding party swapper, having belonged to virtually every party in a career spanning four decades; and Labour's intellectualising Tupeni Baba is new to politics and considered a lightweight. Rabuka stands tall among them, his supporters argue: a transformed man, a true messiah of multiracialism.

Each party has prepared a manifesto which is carried over the air and in the local dailies. But they are not taken seriously. These are things parties have to have, formalities of a campaign. Manifestos are forgotten the moment voting begins, a veteran politician says to me. The real issues in rural areas are not about high principles but about roads, bridges, water supply, better hospitals, the price of bread, about how many times a politician has visited the area, attended funerals and marriages and donated to local charities. 'You can't eat a constitution,' a man says to me. 'Anyway, what has the constitution done for me?' he asks a candidate preaching its virtues. I know how he will vote.

The campaigns have changed in character over the last three decades. In the 1960s, major speeches were given at a few strategic places in theatres, public parks and school compounds. They were grand affairs. Hired musicians sang specially composed songs extolling the party and its leaders. People travelled miles and waited for hours to listen to candidates. A rally was a major event in the local social

calendar. But grand rallies are increasingly becoming a thing of the past. Now, village pocket meetings and intense small group discussions with key individuals are the norm. What is said in these small gatherings, what propaganda and distortion go on, no one knows. Sometimes, major speeches are taped and distributed, which is a godsend to novices who repeat them parrot-fashion without fully understanding their content. Advertisements on air and on television have started, but the pocket meetings remain the prime site for campaigners.

Voters are demanding, and cynical about big promises by big names. They want people like themselves in Parliament, not high-fee lawyers and smooth-talking political salesmen. 'Campaigning is a demeaning experience,' one candidate says to me. Voters are easily swayed, he says, they care little about national issues, they are selfish and ungrateful, always seeking the path of least resistance. In Labasa, a rally demands food and drink. One of the dailies reports the people as saying: 'If they cannot provide refreshment now like other parties are doing, then what will they give us when we vote them into Parliament.' Voters can be deceptive as well. A Labour strategist tells his supporters to pluck coconuts (Labour symbol) by climbing the branches of the mango tree (Federation symbol). Translation: drink your opponents' yaqona, eat their food, go through their sheds but vote for Labour. It is effective advice, as many candidates later discover to their cost. Demeaning it might be for candidates, but voters are smarter than most people think.

Campaigns are serious business, but they are also about theatre. People want information as well as entertainment. Politicians know this, and the good ones are good actors. In the Yasawas, a predominantly Fijian constituency, Ratu Eteuate Tavai describes the mercurial character of his opponent Apisai Tora by invoking the image of cooking roti — Indian leavened bread. First you flip the bread on one side, then the other. Flip flop, flip flop: that was Tora. The audience roars with laughter; there is no need after that to say more about Tora's party. In

Nadi, a candidate talks animatedly about all the things his party would do for the people if he was elected. He would get schools and hospitals built, scholarships for school children arranged, roads repaired, bridges built. All this is too much for a man who has heard big promises before. 'Bhaiya [brother], what's the use of a bridge when we have no river here?' he asks. The candidate replies without missing a beat, 'Well, in that case, I will have a river dug as well.'

At a meeting in Ba, a candidate is grilled about his credentials to stand in the constituency. 'You are from Labasa, your family lives in Australia, you work in Suva, and you are standing from Ba?' he is asked. A fair point. The candidate, thinking quickly, points to a prayer pole flying a red pennant. He asks the questioner if he believed in God. 'Yes' came the reply. Have you ever seen Him? 'No.' But you believe that God hears your prayers and answers your needs? 'Certainly.' The candidate closes the trap. That is exactly right, he says. 'I am like that. You may not see me here but, like the invisible God, I will be looking after you where it really counts, in the corridors of Parliament.' Ripples of laughter sweep the audience, obscuring the larger point about representation and constituency accountability. In Lautoka, a candidate is attacking the leader of the opposing party for being too consistent and inflexible. Consistency, the man says, is not always a virtue. Politics is like fishing. If you fail to catch anything here, you pull up your anchor and move to some place else. You keep shifting your anchor until you get what you want. The audience is rapt until an old man at the back pipes up, 'How would you know, *beta* [son]. You don't have any anchor at all.'

Humour is a great campaign weapon, but it has to be used judiciously. It should not be used to debase debate or detract from the credibility of the candidate. Voters expect their candidates to be serious, to use sharp language when the occasion demands it. Name calling, character assassination, taunts and jibes all provide spicy grist for the rhetorical mill on the hustings. Usually, religion and culture and ethnicity are not touched, but people have found ways around

them, especially in pocket meetings with like-minded people. 'Why another when you have your own' is a code word to vote for a candidate of your own cultural, religious or ethnic group. It is a repeat of the campaign strategies of the 1950s which the Fiji-born used to defeat A.D. Patel, a Gujarati immigrant and not a *girmitiya*.

Fijian and Indo-Fijian campaign styles differ, sometimes causing friction and confusion in the open seats. Fijian campaigns are a formal affair. Meetings are usually planned for mid-morning. By then many a bowl of yaqona has been drunk. Chiefs and other prominent people sit apart, at the head of the gathering. The conversation is subdued, punctuated by occasional thigh-slapping laughter. There is a hush when the speakers arrive, a slight shuffle of feet. Formal ceremonies invoking ancestral spirits and establishing clan genealogies, welcome them to the occasion. Yaqona flows, hands are clapped, and speeches begin. The points are made in broad terms, the attacks on the opponents indirect and allusive so as not to offend their *vanua*. The voice is not raised: to speak loudly is unchiefly behaviour. So while not much may be said, much is conveyed and discussed over numerous tanoa of yaqona late into the evening.

Indo-Fijian campaigns, on the other hand, reflect the individualistic lifestyle of the community, and an ancient tradition of robust democratic debate. Meetings are full of personal attacks and aggressive verbal jousting. People expect rousing, fiery rhetoric. Couplets from the scriptures and snippets of folk wisdom are enlisted to underline points or close an argument. Much yaqona is drunk, but without ceremony or solemnity. Mixed Fijian-Indian meetings are restrained affairs, good diplomacy triumphing over good argument. Sensitive issues are avoided or raised indirectly. Indians are concerned about the imminent expiry of leases on which generations of their families have lived. Fijian speakers assure them that everything will be resolved through dialogue and discussion. Precisely how and when is left unstated. Indo-Fijians oppose the reversion of state land to native land. Fijians welcome the move for it was, after all, their land before

Europeans came. For Indo-Fijians, state land is state property, to be used for the benefit of all, especially to re-settle displaced tenants. The tension is there, but divisions are smoothed by feel-good talk of racial tolerance, mutual understanding and national unity.

Fijians have long used regional, provincial and confederacy ties for political purposes to mobilise support or raise funds during elections. Indeed, the Constitution provides for the election of 23 Fijians from within provincial boundaries. Provincial sentiments, loyalties and connections are thus effective campaign assets. Ties of blood and kinship matter. People of Lau say openly that they will vote only for the candidates loyal to the Tui Nayau household. That is why the otherwise liked and effective parliamentarian Viliame Cavuibati lost to novice Adi Koila Mara Nailatikau. Parties seek the blessings of leading chiefs in their provinces even though the latter's actual electoral influence has been waning.

Among Indo-Fijians, cultural and social divisions are not institutionalised. Indenture destroyed caste as the principle of social relationships, replaced in time by other categories of differentiation and association, such as religion (Hindu, Muslim, Arya Samaj, Sanatan, Shia and Sunni) and the regional origins of the migrants (Gujarati, Panjabi, North Indian, South Indian). It was not good form to exploit these divisions in elections, though the selection of candidates often reflected the composition of Indo-Fijian society. In this election, however, culture and religion are exploited as never before. The NFP is a party of the South Indians, Labour rallies are told. It is time to have a North Indian leader of the community, which it is claimed, has always been led by outsiders: A.D. Patel, a Gujarati; Siddiq Koya, a Muslim; Reddy, a South Indian. And that leader is Mahendra Chaudhry. I have no doubt that other groups are using similar tactics among themselves, all at the expense of divisions that will take a generation to heal.

Parties pitch candidates from the same cultural community against each other wherever there is a large presence of a particular

group. You cut steel with steel, a party strategist tells me. Some have it both ways, like a North Indian candidate in Nadi who is married to a South Indian woman: a '*bhaiya*' among North Indians and an '*anna*' among the Southerners (brother in Hindi and Tamil respectively). In Tavua, a Muslim Labour candidate is popular in the electorate. A sitting parliamentarian, a good community worker, he will be hard to dislodge. He goes to funerals and attends Ramayan recitals, where he makes small donations, as is appropriate. Ten dollar notes are common. Some Hindus in the rival camp attempt to neutralise his appeal by concocting a totally false, malicious story. This Muslim candidate, they tell people, is laughing behind their backs, telling Muslims how cheap the Sanatanis were, selling their votes for just ten dollars. But justice prevailed; the Muslim candidate won by a landslide.

Rumour, innuendo, outright fabrication, unfounded assertions transformed into unassailable facts right before your eyes, deliberate deception, cutting corners and shading the truth, are all a feature of this campaign. Politics without principles is the sixth sin, Jai Ram Reddy says over and over again, quoting Mahatma Gandhi, frustrated at the manner in which his message is neutralised by the opposition. But many in his own party do not share his view. For them, politics is not about morality or principles, it is about winning. One candidate who studied the history of the Third Reich at university tells me of Goebbels' philosophy about a lie repeated a thousand times acquiring an aura of truth. He is practising it in this campaign. It's all politics, he tells me nonchalantly.

Voting has become compulsory in Fiji, which annoys some and confuses others. There is a \$50 fine for not voting. A man turns up at a meeting brandishing a fresh \$50 note from the bank, saying that he would rather pay the fine than vote for the party in government. 'Why?' the candidate asks, perplexed. 'Because this government has not done anything for the people: the roads are bad, there is no piped water, no electricity,' the man replies. The candidate says, 'Why waste money, why not vote for another party?' 'Can I do that?' he asks.

Another man asks his wife which party she would vote for. The one whose symbol is the tree, she says. The man is pleased, thinking she would vote for the sprouting coconut tree, symbol of the Labour Party. But he wants to be absolutely sure, so he returns after a few minutes and asks her which tree. 'The mango tree, of course,' she replies, for the NFP. The man says he would rather pay the fine than 'allow' his wife to vote for the 'wrong party'.

Candidates have their own eyes and ears in the electorate, friends, confidants, hangers-on. Their influence varies depending on their proximity to the candidate. They make contacts, devise strategy, raise funds, act as a sounding board. Some are prominent in the community, either retired or of independent means, who accompany the candidates and party leaders to meetings, lending prestige and authority to the occasion. Many are genuine, but some are in it for public recognition and social prestige. They have their own interests. If their party wins, they will make their move, asking to be nominated to statutory bodies, endorsed for municipal council elections, appointed to rural advisory committees, selected as justices of the peace or, in a few ambitious cases, appointed to the Senate. There are agendas within agendas, personal ambitions carefully camouflaged behind party interests and platforms.

At long last, the campaign is coming to an end. The candidates are exhausted, hoarse. The early enthusiasm has given way to quiet cynicism about people and politics, about the frustration of reducing everything to the lowest common denominator, about having to counteract mischievous lies propagated by their opponents. It is always the other side, never one's own, that is trimming the truth, spreading malicious rumours. Campaigning together under intense pressure, and with so much at stake, has produced friction, criticism and disenchantment among candidates, and it is beginning to show. The newcomers have been sizing each other up, forging alliances, assessing their future prospects and mapping out a route to the top. But in a few rare instances, the campaign has also enhanced respect and created friendships which will endure after the dust has settled.



The initial enthusiasm for the coalition arrangement has waned; campaign styles clash, tempers are frayed and disappointment aired to anyone who will listen. In Nadi, an Indo-Fijian open seat candidate complains bitterly about not being able to have direct access to the Fijian voters. She is anxious about how they view her. Her only contact is through a chiefly intermediary, a yaqona-crazed man, who assures her that all the votes are in the bag. He was wrong. 'I wish we were not in coalition with these fellows,' she says with resigned anger, but it is too late. Throughout Viti Levu, Indo-Fijian candidates and parties are complaining about how Fijians have approached the campaign. The NFP feels that the SVT is not pulling its weight behind the coalition, and Labour is bitter about Apisai Tora. 'Everything is set,' a Fijian campaigner tells a clearly worried Indian candidate, which makes him panic even more. There is urgency, anxiety and the desire to make a last-minute effort to reach the voters on the one side, and a relaxed, she-will-be-alright, we-will-get-there attitude on the other. There are reports of landlords threatening their tenants. In Sabeto, one threatens her Indo-Fijian tenants with eviction if they do not go through her shed and vote for her party. The tenants go through her shed alright, but vote Labour whose candidate defeats the party leader Tora. It is treachery, you might say, but it is sweet treachery: the revenge of the weak and helpless against the threats of the rich and powerful.

The last few days of the campaign are like the last stage of writing a thesis. All the ideas have been canvassed, research completed, points made. It is now about getting the niggly details right, the footnotes checked, the glossary prepared. It is the same with campaigns. In the last week, thought shifts from speeches to the practicality of getting voters to the booth. Sheds have to be erected, trusted people hired to staff the polling booths, scan the rolls and issue registration numbers to voters. Food has to be prepared for the campaign workers. Usually it is vegetable pulau and tomato chutney, neutral fare for both Hindus and Muslims. Vehicles have to be hired and reliable drivers secured.

When voting was made compulsory, party leaders had hoped that they would not have to transport people to the polling booths, but they were wrong. Voters will have it no other way. Nothing can be done about this: the voter owns the vote. Names of people who have already voted are crossed out, vehicles sent to new locations. Party workers look anxiously at each other's sheds to estimate the size of the crowd to see how well they are doing. Rough and ready estimates abound. 'It is 50-50 around here,' people say, it is touch and go. That spells desperation.

Voting is spread over a long and exhausting week full of confusion, anxiety, doubt and fluctuating fortunes. Candidates watch and wait — and await the people's verdict. It is quite a sight to see a politician, helpless, lost for words, waiting. Some glow with optimism, some know they are gone, most are on auto-pilot. Long queues form outside the polling booths, people waiting for hours in the scorching sun as counting officials deal with administrative cock-ups. It will be over soon. In a few hours the candidates will know whether they will go to Parliament or rue their loss and await another turn five years away, or leave politics altogether.

I carry with me a collage of images, a cacophony of speeches and a blur of faces as I leave the campaign trail. As I write this in my wintry Canberra office, I recall the sight and smell of simple food cooked in huge aluminum pots on open fires. I remember a candidate offering me sumptuous pulau and apologising for the lack of chairs and tables, saying 'Doc, please don't mind. Eat like a scavenger. After all we live like scavengers.' His own prosperity was protruding prominently. I remember a jovial roly-poly chief in Nadroga welcoming me in Hindi, asking one of the men to serve me yaqona. '*Chalao sale ke*,' serve the bugger (the drink, not me!), '*talo mada*.' '*Ham hiyan ke raja baitho*,' he says to mirthful applause, 'I am the king of this place.' I remember a toothless, almost blind, Fijian man in Nabila welcoming Jai Ram Reddy with old farcical songs in Hindi and Tamil, accompanied by an Indian man making '*dhammak dhammak*'

drumming music with his mouth. I have never seen Jai Ram laugh so heartily as he did that day. I remember a man in Tau approaching him crouching in mock respect, saying playfully '*Prabhu ki Jai*,' 'Hail to the Lord!' I remember a young Fijian man with Rastafarian gait and matted hair wearing a T-shirt proclaiming a handwritten slogan '1999 General Election'. I remember a candidate praising Sitiveni Rabuka as a well-trained draught '*undoo*' (uncastrated, virile) bull who did not need to be broken, unlike his '*badhiya*' (limp, useless) opponents. I remember...

I rejoice at the triumph of democracy in Fiji, despite all the tensions and frustrations and misunderstandings and miscommunications. I celebrate the majesty and the madness, the mayhem and the method, of democracy at work. I leave Fiji elated and grateful to be present at a decisive moment in its history.



## *Kismet*

The bond between us  
Is chimerical surely  
Yet I cannot break it.

W.H. Auden, 'You'

*Class of 1969.* There is for me something very special about my first group of students at the Labasa Secondary School, unforgettable, like the first kiss, the first dizzying puff of a cigarette or the first taste of beer. The students seemed innocent and full of promise, and I was fresh out of college. A cultural desert, my Viti Levu friends had said about Labasa, a dry, dusty, one-street sugar town, at the edge of everything. A haven for misfits and missionaries, someone else had remarked. But scholarship boys like me had no say about where we were posted. At least, the school had a fine reputation, and I saw my time there as a limited sentence, a starting point for an eventual career in the Education Department, hopefully as an Inspector of Schools. In the end, I remained at Labasa Secondary for only one year. What a year it turned out to be.

I have often wondered where my students are now. They were such a likeable lot, respectful of teachers and full of earnest ambition. I remember them well: Satish, Mahend, Liaquat, Vinod, Radha, Sambhu, Mustafa. Some of them went on to university, but many left

school midstream to join government service, the local bank or the field staff of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company. And the girls: so deferential and delectable in their neat white dresses. They had such magical names: Gyan, Daya, Maya, Naz, Saira, Sushila, Feroza, Priya. The boys were at school to prepare for jobs but most of the girls, or their parents, had a good marriage and a secure domestic life uppermost in their minds. If husbands agreed, a minor career as a bank officer or as a typist might be possible, but no more. Such a waste, I always thought, beautiful promise lost forever to children, husbands and mindless domesticity.

Of all the girls, Mumtaz stood out for me. I fell in love with her the moment I set eyes on her. Love at first sight, you could say. Something about her marked her out as special, proclaiming rare defiance and playfulness. Darker skinned and taller than most, she had an exquisitely chiselled face: liquid brown eyes, sad and haunting, sensuous, well-formed lips, and long, dark, wavy hair. She was smart but erratic, often daydreaming and invariably late with homework, the first one out of the room at recess and lunch and the last one in. She was the leader of the pack who promised adventure to her friends. Yet, there was also a hint of sadness about her that seemed to hide a deeper pain. It was that curious mixture of daring and sadness, of pain and playfulness — or play acting — that I found most attractive. I looked forward to my morning class, knowing that Mumtaz would be there, in the last row, sitting neatly behind the wooden desk, pony-tailed. I used to miss her whenever she was absent. I did not know if she had any boyfriends. Probably not, for Labasa was notorious as a murderous place where cane knives had lopped off a few unsuspecting lovers' heads. I did not want to find out.

My feelings for Mumtaz grew with time, causing heartache and anguish I had not experienced before, did not know was possible. Whenever we met in the corridor, I felt self-conscious and awkward. Mumtaz would avert her eyes, smile and say, 'Good morning, Mr Akash'. A few paces down, the girls would break out into a giggle.

Once or twice, I caught them looking back at me teasingly. Was I making my feelings *that* obvious, I sometimes wondered, anxious and vaguely embarrassed, but also helpless. I often wondered whether Mumtaz understood how much I was in love with her. Hopeful signs came at the end of the first term. I detected a change in Mumtaz. Now, she would often be the first one at her desk and the last one to leave. A few times I caught her looking straight into my eyes, unblinking, searching. Not a word passed between us, just silent glances, perhaps suggesting a deeper longing. Whatever it was, it was delicious.

In the second term, I began to look for opportunities to be alone with Mumtaz. Knowing that my colleagues preferred the Staff Room at lunch, where they talked, ate, smoked and played cards, to library duties at the same hour, I volunteered to fill in for them. Typical of me, they thought, the earnest, studious 'professor'. I played along. In return, they shouted me drinks and drove me around to weddings and parties on weekends. Mumtaz followed me to the library, often the only one, with a novel or an exercise book in hand. I felt immensely happy to be alone with her. We communicated to each other through an awkward smile. I relished the joyful anxieties of these surreptitious moments together. Mumtaz was an avid reader of Mills and Boon. Once or twice she asked me if I approved of her taste. Did I like romantic stories? I did, I replied, but not Mills and Boon!

That year we 'did' *Wuthering Heights* for the School Certificate. That book remains one my favourites to this day, its haunting tale resonating with twists and turns in my own life. Sometimes, I imagined myself as Heathcliff, plagued by a deep inner turmoil and a fierce, raging love for a woman he could never have, but who never gave up trying. I roamed the windswept moors in my mind as I paced the room. Mumtaz seemed genuinely intrigued by the novel. How could a woman know the deepest feelings of a man's heart, she once asked. A good question to which I still don't have an answer. Was it ever possible to love someone so madly? Heathcliff's madness of the

heart defied description. 'The heart has a mind of its own,' I replied, fending off further questions. 'Does the mind have a heart of its own, too, Sir?' she asked, not missing a beat. Her quickness surprised and pleased me.

One day during library duty, I asked Mumtaz whether she liked music. She did, especially songs played over the radio late at night: *Farmaish*, Requests, and *Bhoole Bhikhre Nagne*, 'Songs of Yesteryear', Songs by Rafi, Talat and, of course, Lata Mangeshkar. I knew these programs, which featured sad romantic songs that often tore at the heart in the unlit stillness of the night. As you listened to the names of people requesting sad numbers, you realised just how many lonely hearts were out there. Mumtaz sometimes asked if I shared her taste. When I mentioned something about reality, she interrupted me abruptly. 'Love is not about reality, Sir. It is about dreams, even impossible dreams. When the hope of true love burns bright, all difficulties dissolve.' Probably a mangled quote from something she had read somewhere. Why wasn't I like the other teachers, playful, relaxed? Why did I read so much? What secrets did I hope to discover from books? Some questions have no answers. '*Kismet*,' I replied, fate, and left it at that.

From songs to films. Mumtaz, like most girls of her age, was intensely curious about them. What did Waheeda Rahman look like on screen? And Dilip Kumar? What was that much-talked about film *Admi* all about? And the tragic triangular love story *Sangam*? Indian films are long and syrupy, their plots mindless, meandering, but that was the only entertainment available in town. So one day I asked her whether she would like to see a movie with me. Mumtaz shot a glance that needed no answer. And then she turned her head away towards the window. 'Oh, you need not worry about that. There will be something for you in the book I am lending you.' I meant a five dollar note for her bus fare and the movie ticket. Mumtaz remained silent. After a long pause she said, 'They wouldn't allow me to come to town on Saturday alone.' Her family, she meant. 'Good girls' stayed home and helped with housework. 'Then bring your mother along.' 'Thank



you, Sir,' Mumtaz smiled as she sprinted out of the library. Mother or no mother, all I wanted was to be with Mumtaz.

We usually went to the morning matinee at one of the town's two theatres, the Majestic and the Elite, such improbable names for this rustic place. I would stand discreetly near the entrance, taking the seat next to Mumtaz just when the lights were beginning to be dimmed. All week, I lived for this moment of darkened bliss: the songs, the casual touching of hands, the soft sighs, the gentle, rhythmic tapping of the floor, a smiling glance, sweet squeeze of the forearm. With time, we got more adventurous. Mumtaz would send her mother to the vegetable market while she escaped to the municipal library next to the river near the fire station. Except she never went there. Instead, we sneaked behind the building to the huge tree on the bank of the river. There, sitting against the knotted trunk, with our backs to the world, we talked about everything and nothing, the way people in love do, revelling in the feeling of gradually increasing affection between the two of us.

Teacher-student love affairs are not common, I know, and rarely condoned by society. They are seen as unnatural, immoral, a breach of some unspoken understanding and trust. Teachers not only teach but are also expected to act as the guardians and enforcers of society's morals. They are substitute parents. I knew what was expected of me, but there was nothing I could do about how I felt about Mumtaz. The head has no control over matters of the heart. I was also aware of another hurdle, religion. In Labasa, Hindus and Muslims never inter-married. Even Sanatanis and Arya Samajis, orthodox and reformist sects of Hinduism, North Indians and South Indians rarely intermarried, because of ancient prejudices about colour and caste. The Hindu-Muslim relationship, however, was beyond contemplation. How this hardening of attitude came about, despite the common levelling experience of indenture and later village life, was beyond me. The line drawn in the sand was firm, not to be crossed. But I was not daunted by these difficulties. I knew that at the end of the year, or soon afterwards, come what may, I would marry Mumtaz.

Towards the end of the second term, just before the school break, Mumtaz asked to see me for a couple of hours on the weekend. I didn't ask why, but borrowed Krishna's battered old blue Falcon and waited for her at the river end of the market. Then we drove across the Vunika flats towards Malau, the nearest picnic spot to the town, once pristine but now made filthy from the smoke and sawdust from the timber mills. We walked gingerly on the pebbles, holding hands for the first time. Mumtaz was quieter than usual, as we sat at the edge of the jetty, legs dangling, casting bits and pieces of wood into the water below. 'I am afraid, Mr Akash,' she said at long last. Of what? 'About you and me and the future. About us together.' 'Nothing to be afraid of,' I said, waiting for more. '*Jab Pyar Kiya To Darna Kya*,' I somewhat flippantly quoted a favourite Lata song, 'Why be afraid of being in love.' '*Chup Chup Aben Bharna Kya*,' 'Why sigh in silence?' Mumtaz was unimpressed.

'You don't understand, Sir, I am a Muslim.' I did. 'But what's that got to do with you and me,' I said, struggling not to betray my emotion too much, vaguely sensing what was coming. Looking into the distance, Mumtaz replied, 'My brothers will kill me rather than let me marry a Hindu. You don't know them, Sir. My own mother will disown me. That's the worst thing that can happen to a daughter. We have a saying in our language that the road to heaven is through service to one's mother. No one will come to our *Milad* and *Daras*, invite us to *Eid*. No *Salaam Dua*, no place at the mosque. We will be treated worse than lepers.'

Mumtaz had chosen her words carefully. Having thought about all this for a long time, she was now confronting the truth. Trapped and helpless, she spoke with a touching earnestness. Words failed me. After a long silence, all I managed was, 'Love should have nothing to do with one's faith.' 'I know, I know,' Mumtaz mumbled. 'But life is not like that, is it, Sir?' She meant with her family. 'They will never understand. You should meet my brothers,' she continued, and I got the hint of terror and violence. Big and burly, they guarded their sister like bull terriers, threatening to smash anyone's head who dared as much as look in the

direction of their compound. Mumtaz herself was frequently beaten for looking towards the road when men, even neighbours, passed by.

'Sir, will you do *nikah* with me?' Mumtaz pleaded. Without that Muslim ceremony, the marriage would be '*haram*', impure, cursed. The children would be outcasts. Poverty had already put the family on the fringe; marriage to a non-Muslim would put them beyond the pale. I knew that family honour, especially the chastity of unmarried girls, weighed heavily with the rural folk of Labasa, and was the reason for many headless or mutilated bodies floating in the Qawa river. But I had to be true to myself. I am not a religious person in the ordinary, temple-going sense. Spiritual yes, but not religious. One's faith was a private matter, and God should not police matters of the heart. I would never ask Mumtaz to change her faith. Mumtaz burst into tears as she leaned on my shoulders. She said she often prayed for Allah's guidance, beseeching Him to see things her way. 'Wasn't I [Akash], too, God's son?' she would ask. Didn't her father always say '*Ram-Rahim, All the Same?*' '*Ya Khuda,*' she said despairingly.

I was too drained for words as we drove back to Labasa, riddled with doubt, confused. Was I being stubborn? I was angry, too, angry at the world for erecting and policing barriers that compartmentalised us into our racial and religious identities, that negated our common humanity. Why does one have to choose between one's faith and one's love? Before she left the car, Mumtaz handed me a small brown envelope. 'Goodbye, Mr Akash,' she said quietly, as she disappeared into the dusty market crowd. I was afraid to open the envelope straight away. When I did at night in bed, I found ruled note paper containing the lines of a haunting Rafi song:

*Who dur ke musafir, ham ko bhi saath lele, ham rahe gaye akele*  
*Tu ne jo de diya gam, be maut mar gaye ham,*  
*Charo taraf lage hain udasiyon ke mele*  
*Ham ko bhi swath lele, ham rahe gaye akele.*

The words and the emotions they conjure are untranslatable. The singer is pleading with her beloved to take her away with him to some faraway place, away from all the cares of the world. He is her everything. Without him, her world is engulfed in unbearable sadness, unendurable. I felt immensely helpless and uncomfortable throughout that long, drizzly night, torn and pulled in different directions.

A few days later, I received a call from Nausori saying that Ramu kaka had died. I had to go and decided to combine my trip with the coming term holidays. I wanted to tell Mumtaz about my plans, but how? I did not know her address. I also remembered Mumtaz's brothers and what they might do to me if they found out. I would be back soon, I thought, and Mumtaz would understand.

I returned three weeks later, expecting to find Mumtaz at the Saturday matinee. She was not there. I would see her on Monday, I told myself. It turned out to be some Monday. I knew the moment I entered the school compound that something was not right. Colleagues avoided direct eye contact, walking past me with a pretended busyness. Then, when the head boy came to fetch me, I knew it was all over. John Sharan, the principal, shut the door, seated me on a chair in front of his paper-strewn table, and asked me to start from the beginning. How did it start? How long had it been going on? How far had it gone? Did the teachers know about what I was up to? I told him the truth and my desire to marry Mumtaz and to seek another posting somewhere in Viti Levu.

John Sharan exploded after I had finished. I had let him, and the entire school, down, he fumed. How could I? He had such high expectations of me, and I had such a bright future. Why was I so stupid to think that my affair would remain hidden? This was Labasa, not Wellington: everything was everyone's business. I couldn't stay at the school, he said after a long harangue; I had to go, for my own safety. Sooner or later they would come for me with their sharpened cane knives. I told the principal that I will go at the end of the term. I had to leave immediately, he insisted. I resigned from the school but stayed in Labasa for a few months.

I left the principal's office knowing that my career as a teacher was over. My reputation was damaged beyond repair. Colleagues sympathised. Krishna, my best friend, was distraught at the thought of losing me, but he knew that in Labasa I would not be forgiven or forgotten. He was right; he was from Labasa. But I couldn't leave without first finding what happened to Mumtaz. My heart cried at the thought of the terrible, merciless beating she must have endured at the hands of her brothers. For all I knew, she might have been murdered to protect the family's reputation.

I was determined to find out before I finally left Labasa. I even dreamed of plans to take Mumtaz with me. On the pretence of returning her books and papers, I borrowed Krishna's car again and drove to Tabia, about nine miles out of Labasa. Someone there would know her address because there were so few Muslims in that settlement. When I enquired at Mr Tulsi's store, people pointed me to Mr Shamsher Ali. He was a man of substance, a big cane grower with a solid iron-roofed house and owner of the village's only Bedford truck. His Haj skull cap and stylish beard and handsome body belied his 60 years. After a customary cup of sweet black tea, he asked me the usual Indian questions about my parents, where I came from. I lied about myself: I was Krishna, the friend of the disgraced teacher. I began calling him '*Chachá*', 'Uncle'. That broke the ice. It is the polite Indian thing to do, to treat older people as relatives. We talked about how Akash had resigned and left the school. Mr Shamsher was surprisingly understanding, saying the government was heartless posting young unmarried men to strange places. As I left, he asked me — instructed, actually, in the old-fashioned village way — to visit him regularly. 'Treat this as your own home, *masterji*.' I readily agreed.

Over the next few weeks, Mumtaz's story revealed itself. Mahmood, Khalid Hussein's son, was the one who had spilled the beans. Apparently, Mahmood himself, a Sangam High student, was interested in Mumtaz, and his family had even thought of making a formal proposal to Mr Shamsher. Mumtaz's indifference to his

assertive overtures had enraged Mahmood, who then told his family about Mumtaz's romantic involvement with me. In no time, the story spread like wildfire, and heads of Muslim families descended on Mr Shamsheer to do something about an affair which threatened to bring disrepute to their community. Mr Shamsheer had no choice but to act. He saw Mr Rahiman, chairman of the school's Board of Governors. It was Mr Rahiman who told the principal that my resignation was the only acceptable price for peace.

I wanted to know about Mumtaz's family, and this is what Mr Shamsheer told me. Mumtaz was the youngest daughter of Mr Ibrahim. A Tamil Muslim married to a Malayali, he had come to Tabia from Ba. Why or when, no one knew, or cared to ask. After a few years, Labasa had turned sour for him. Mr Shamsheer took pity and hired him as his field hand, housing him and his family in a rough, rusty lean-to structure at the edge of the farm across the road. Everyone seemed to like Mr Ibrahim. He was not fastidious about his faith. He drank yaqona, smoked and attended Hindu functions. He even sang *bhajans*, which surprised the village folk. The more I learnt about him, the more I realised that Mumtaz was her father's daughter. Mr Shamsheer said that Mr Ibrahim was planning to lease a sugar cane farm in Seaqaqa across the mountain range from Tabia. But one day he died, just like that, of a heart attack, and his family disintegrated. The two boys, never much good, drifted away, leaving Mumtaz and her mother to fend for themselves.

Mr Shamsheer decided to 'keep' the family on the side, more out of pity and concern, he said. I believed him. Mumtaz's mother worked as a domestic help, washing clothes, planting rice, minding young children and infants. They got by. Then, things began to change. It was rumoured that Mrs Ibrahim was seeing other men in the village to make ends meet. At first, Mr Shamsheer was not forthcoming, only saying things like a poor man's wife being everyone's sister-in-law, fair game for the village men. The gossip about Mumtaz's affair with the Hindu teacher broke the camel's back.

Any affair for an unmarried girl was bad enough, but an affair with a Hindu was unforgivable. 'But, *Chacha*, what has religion got to with love?' I asked. 'It's Allah's will, *masterji*,' he said with the authority and conviction of a community leader. 'Everything has a purpose and a place. People are born in a faith and they must die in it. Giving up one's faith is a thousand times worse than death.' Reason has no business interrogating faith, I realised. And Mr Shamsheer's mind was made up anyway. '*Khandaan ki barbaadi*,' is how Mr Shamsheer described the whole thing, disaster for the family. The Ibrahim family had to leave. Mrs Ibrahim pleaded for more time. They had nowhere to go. But Mr Shamsheer's heart had turned to stone.

No one knew precisely where in Ba Mrs Ibrahim had gone to. '*Udhre kahin gai hai*.' People said, she has gone 'somewhere around there'. That Christmas holiday — and for several years afterwards — I went to Ba, spending days at the town market next to the river, hoping to find Mumtaz. But to no avail. Once or twice, I was so full of despair that I thought of killing myself, but that would not bring Mumtaz to me. At least alive, I had a chance of one day finding her. That thought kept me going.

I left Labasa vowing never to return to that wretched place. I was not only unemployed, I was unemployable as a teacher. 'Cradle snatchers' have no place in the classroom, people said. But my heart had also gone out of teaching, knowing that I would always be looking for Mumtaz among my students, haunted by her memory. I returned to Nausori, broken and dispirited, a social leper, a huge embarrassment, to family and friends. I moved to the town, rented a small room at the back of Makaanji and Sons warehouse by the Rewa and took casual jobs as a salesman for Court's Hardware Store, as a driver for Patel and Company, as a bookkeeper at Burns Philp. To keep my sanity, I attended evening history and literature classes at the University of the South Pacific. And when troubles began in 1987, I applied for a migrant visa to Australia. For reasons that I still do not know, I was successful. I arrived in Australia in 1990 to live in Liverpool.

Liverpool was a natural choice for me. It is a mini-Fiji, with its temples, mosques, churches; its spice and grocery shops, video outlets, fashion houses selling sari and salwar kamiz, restaurants and takeaway joints. A variety of social and cultural organisations, cacophonous and competing with each other for membership and funds, serves the community. Cultural evenings of song, music and dance, the celebration of festivals such as Holi, Diwali and Eid, are regular fare there. Newspapers proliferate, disseminating news about forthcoming events, soliciting contributions for this cause or that, announcing news of deaths, births and marriages. Pettiness and bickering, the bane of our community, are alive and well there, causing fissures and frictions which enliven the mindless suburban life.

The Liverpool shopping centre in the heart of Northumberland Street is my favourite place to gauge the ebb and flow of our community. I go there every Saturday. I see people in bright floral clothes, marvelling at the range of goods displayed in the cheap shop windows, women haggling over the price of gaudy clothes, men bunching up around key street corners, surveying the passing human, especially female, traffic in a quintessentially Fiji way, leering. Keeping up with the Joneses, people compare notes about what they have, what they want to buy: which brand of car or refrigerator or furniture. I also hear sadly of young people on drugs who clog the local court. And I occasionally see boys with knotted hair, trendily torn jeans affecting the Rastafarian gait, and wonder how and why they have lost their way.

I was walking along Northumberland Street one day about a year ago when I saw a figure that looked vaguely familiar. She was assessing a salwar in one of the clothes shops. I instinctively stopped to take a discreet sidelong glance. Could it be Mumtaz? I could not be absolutely certain after the long passage of time. I wanted to find out, but thought it inappropriate at the time. Cultural protocol, even in Australia, discourages directness, especially with Indian women; and I am not exactly the extrovert type. Still, the figure — golden brown



skin, hair stylishly knotted back, a slight flair of the hips from children — remained with me as I headed for my apartment, bringing back memories of a past I had nearly forgotten, the smell and touch of village life, of friends who had dispersed to various corners of the globe, the heartache of Labasa. I knew, as the week went by, that I wanted to find out if it was indeed Mumtaz I had glimpsed.

I returned to Northumberland Street early the following Saturday morning and went straight to the shop where our people go to buy their bhindi, dhal, atta and spices. In the local parlance, it is the shop for all reasons and all seasons. Time flew as I paced the pavement smoking incessantly, feeling slightly awkward and nervous, like a person preparing for an important interview. Then just before midday, she appeared from around the bend and headed inside the shop. It had to be Mumtaz, I followed her, weaving my way through the narrow space between the shelves, pretending to buy things myself. Getting close to her, picking up a packet of dhal, I asked gently, 'Mumtaz?' She looked at my eyes for what seemed a very long time. 'Mr Akash?' she said tentatively. My smile answered her question as we embraced.

'It is so good to see you, Sir,' she said as she pressed my forearm with both her hands. 'I am no longer your teacher, Mumtaz,' I said, as we headed to a coffee shop across the street. 'So just plain Akash will do.' 'Playing with words again, are we?' she shot back laughing. *Akash* means the sky in Hindi. We talked for hours like two excited children. Mumtaz looked graceful, at ease with herself; conversation came naturally to her. But I was all nerves, stuttering, unable to hold my coffee cup steady. I felt awkward, after the passage of so much time. Obviously Mumtaz was married. Her clothes and stylish manners gave her away. She must have married a European, I reckoned; Indian men would not 'allow' their women the freedom Mumtaz evidently enjoyed. I was bursting to find out more, but common sense and courtesy dictated a more delicate approach. We exchanged phone numbers and promised to keep in touch. Mumtaz was genuinely

pleased to see me, I think, but what did she feel? Was the past forgotten? Was her pleasure simply the pleasure of meeting a man who once loved her? Did she, after all these years, recall her Labasa days with the same intense fondness as I did? I was afraid of the answers. Perhaps the past should be allowed to rest in peace. Mumtaz has a new life, I said to myself, and I have my memories. As I returned to my apartment late that day, I resolved not to re-open closed doors.

But my resolve melted when Mumtaz called early the next day inviting me to lunch. She was working as a project assistant in the inner city. 'And how is Mrs Akash?' she asked, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. 'You should have brought her along. I would love to meet that lucky woman.' 'There is no Mrs Akash,' I replied. 'No? Never?' 'Never married,' I ventured, 'but I have known a few women, if you must know.' Mumtaz tilted her head and, with her trademark flutter of the eyelids, said, 'A pity'. 'What? Never married or the few casual encounters?' I asked. 'Nothing much has changed, has it Mr Akash?' she said, laughing. It certainly brought back the old memories. Mumtaz herself was married, to an Australian of German descent. But her tone discouraged further probing. She was so pleased she had met me, she kept repeating. She dreaded and despised Indian men, she said emphatically. 'I haven't met anyone like you, Mr Akash,' adding, 'And I don't want to anymore, either.'

Over the next few months of regular meetings over coffee and lunch, we re-established the old closeness of the Labasa years. But there was no physical intimacy. Both of us wanted it that way. I wanted to know how she had ended up in Australia, when. Mumtaz deflected my questions. She had come to Australia as a babysitter for her uncle's children. That sounded unconvincing. I persisted: I wanted to know her true story. 'That past has a place of its own, sir. It is now, this moment, that matters. And the future.' But she read my mind, and agreed to talk. 'Just this once. Promise me never to ask about my past again.' I did.

Mrs Ibrahim had returned to Ba, to her elder brother's place, an unwelcome, burdensome stranger. Indian society was like that: once

married, Indian women belonged somewhere else as someone else's responsibility. Mrs Ibrahim made herself useful as a domestic hand, washing, cleaning, chopping wood, weeding the garden, working in the fields. She didn't complain; it was her '*kismet*', fate. But Mumtaz was different. People resented her independence and vibrancy. She was frequently hit for playing soccer with the boys, climbing trees, talking too much or too loudly. She was trouble waiting to happen. So when Mrs Ibrahim became a defacto wife of another man in the village, the uncle wasted little time despatching Mumtaz to a distant relative in the squatter settlement in Waiyeve Lautoka. It was a dreadful place for a young girl, exposed to endless squabbles among neighbours, open promiscuity among her own friends and relatives, scrotum-scratching men groping, making advances, an attempted rape by her own distantly related brother-in-law. Mumtaz somehow managed to escape unharmed.

Mumtaz missed her mother. She was the only constant, loving presence in her life. She was protective of her, instinctively taking over the role of her father, calm, reassuring. The pain of her mother's complete dependence on an uncaring man, bearing all the taunts and jibes reserved for '*rakhails*', 'kept' women, distressed her. She asked her mother to leave. Together they would be able to make ends meet. She could wash clothes, mind children in the neighbourhood, do anything; at least they would have their dignity intact. And they would have each other. Mrs Ibrahim refused, knowing that there was no other place to go. But for Mumtaz, the hardships and the humiliations only stiffened her resolve. The only solution was to leave this wretched place and migrate with her mother. The happiness of her mother had become an obsession with her. But how? Mumtaz was unskilled.

One day, Ateca, a Fijian friend of hers, mentioned the name of an Australian man she had met who wanted to marry her. She herself was not interested, but Mumtaz might be. She was. A week later, she wrote to the man: 'Sir, my name is Mumtaz Ibrahim. I am 23 years old. I want to come to Australia. I want to marry an Australian man.'

I will be very happy if you could help. Please write back. I hope you like my photo,' Frank — short for Frankenstein — a tailor and casual labourer, in his early fifties, liked what he saw. He knew that Mumtaz would make a wonderful trophy for him. Within a few months, he sent the sponsorship papers along with a one-way ticket, but not his own photo. Mumtaz was anxious about the new, strange world ahead of her, but she had little choice. Her mind was made up. She left Fiji, without tears, she said, and without once looking back.

Frank was hardly the man of her dreams, Mumtaz discovered when she met him at Sydney airport. He was old enough to be her father. 'I locked my heart and threw away the keys,' she said, tears welling up. But with nowhere to go and no one to turn to, she, too, resigned herself to '*kismet*'. Frank lived on a farm on the fringes of suburban Sydney, making his living as a handyman. He was a man of simple, unsophisticated habits. Shooting rabbits for food and fun was among his weekend hobbies. He guarded his new bride jealously like a hawk, monitoring her every movement. For Mumtaz, her new life was as far removed from rural Fiji as it could be. Everything familiar had disappeared from her life: the festivals, the films, the food, the friends. Once or twice she remembered some other families in the sprawling suburbs of western Sydney who were distantly related, but she was too embarrassed to meet them. Would they want to meet her? And how would Frank react? Probably fly into a rage and abuse her in public. So she spent the next three years on the farm, trapped, vulnerable, dependent. She planted vegetables, cooked, cleaned and occasionally got into fierce fights with Frank's children, some older than her, who resented her presence among them.

Mumtaz was nothing if not enterprising. She got her Australian passport at the earliest opportunity and, with Frank's assistance, sponsored her mother. Later other members of the family arrived, through sham marriages to Mumtaz's Australian friends whose fares she paid to go to Fiji: they got their paid holiday, and her brothers got their visas. Bringing her family to Australia became her obsession for

several years. Her relations with her family had later soured, embroiled in petty jealousies which hurt her deeply but that, Mumtaz said, was another story. One day, after Frank had thrown one of his regular tantrums in a supermarket and left her, almost penniless, to find her own way home, Mumtaz decided that enough was enough. She bought herself a packet of cigarettes and a lighter, which said 'I am single and I love it'. The words lodged in her mind like a rock.

The next day, she left Frank, not knowing where she would go, but she had to leave him. Frank, full of rage, followed her for several months, threatened to burn down the apartment where she had sought refuge, begged her to return, but for Mumtaz there was no turning back. The end had come. The next few years were hell for her, without employment, without support. The Salvation Army took her in, fed and clothed her and found her casual employment. To this day, she remains grateful to them for helping her in her moment of desperate need when others had looked the other way. After about three years of an aimless anxious life, she met David, an accountant. Seven years later, they were still married.

Happily?' I couldn't help asking. 'What is happiness, Mr Aksah, what is love?' And then the thrust, 'I once loved a man whom I could not have, who never bothered to come looking for me.' If only she knew the truth. David was a good husband, understanding and supportive. She had no reason to complain, she said. Complain? 'We have had our ups and downs,' she said. There was nothing wrong with David, but the closeness had gone. The routine of marriage had snuffed out the physical and emotional intimacy of the earlier years. 'Cross-cultural marriages can be like that,' I volunteered. 'All marriages are like that,' Mumtaz responded emphatically. What she yearned for, spontaneous picnics, dancing on the kitchen floor, all-night parties, were missing. Now she was trapped in a mortgage and a moribund marriage. David was self-contained. He loved his golf and the occasional outing, but not much else. Mumtaz wanted, more than anything else, to recover the lost years of her childhood: Hindi music,

Indian food, social gossip, parties. David did what he could to oblige. He went along to social functions and entertained Mumtaz's family and friends at home, but without understanding or cultural empathy for their way of life.

I realised, as she talked, that despite her modern, westernised appearance — the smoking, the drinking, the expensive clothes, the nightclub scene — Mumtaz was essentially a traditional girl at heart. She told me of her fascination with Hindi movies. Remembering Labasa, that did not surprise me. I had lost interest in them long ago, except in the new wave art films by Shyam Benegal and Mrinal Sen: *Nishant*, *Akrosh*, *Junoon*, *Manthan*, movies like that. These held no appeal for Mumtaz. She liked the syrupy ones with long drawn-out romantic twists and happy endings. Why? She liked them because they helped her imagine what her life might have been, what she would have liked her life to be. She, too, would have liked a proper wedding, the *mehdi* on her palms, a big feast, the traditional send-off, the sort of things most village girls dream about. She, too, would have liked to be a *dulhan*, a bride, in a big family, spoiled, with lots of children and adoring grandparents. She hankered for a world that fate had denied her. It was all a dream in her heart, though, for she knew that, in reality, she had little time for Indian men and the male-dominated values of Indian culture.

Mumtaz's is an improbable story of willpower and survival. I know; I come from a similar background of hardship myself. But for a girl, the ordeal must have been all that more difficult. Mumtaz's journey reminded me of the Indian indentured women, including our own grandmothers, who had rejected violence and poverty and the constant taunts of intolerant in-laws and, shouldering their little bundles, had left for unknown destinations a century ago. Such courage, such determination. Mumtaz having to sleep with a lawyer, from her own community no less, to get visa papers for her family processed, recalled the rampant sexual abuse of Indian women on the plantations by European overseers as well as their Indian subordinates.

I understood perfectly why Mumtaz despised Indian men. Her personal tragedy, she lamented, was that after they had got their visas for Australia, her family had distanced themselves from her, disapproving of her independence and superficially westernised ways. Mumtaz was not bitter, just sad at the way things had turned out, sad that all the personal and financial sacrifices she had made over the years now counted for nought with her family.

'I am a survivor,' Mumtaz kept saying. That seemed to have become her motto. I could see her sharply developed survival skills. Her sharp tongue and an incredible ability to think fast on her feet were her handiest instruments. She told me about distantly related married Indian men who rang her for a date, knowing that she was married with a child but assuming that she was — must be — fair game, a loose character, just because she had married an outsider. Most times she would ignore them or quickly change the subject. But when they persisted, she would cut them down sharply. Like the man who, trying his luck, remarked casually to Mumtaz at a wedding reception that she must be a very 'experienced' woman, having married a white man, and he would not mind learning from her. 'Yes, I am experienced,' Mumtaz replied without missing a beat. 'I have a good teacher. Send your wife to my husband. He will teach her, and then you can learn from your "experienced" wife all your life!' I couldn't hide my amazement at her quickness and my surprise that these things happened here. 'I come from the gutter,' Mumtaz said. 'I understand the gutter mentality.'

Mumtaz was more than a survivor. She had triumphed over life's petty adversities, and managed to keep her head high amidst all the betrayal and tragedy visited upon her by friends and family. She was a restless soul, though, marooned, desperately wanting to turn the clock back to her adolescence when life had been so full of promise. 'What might have been: Don't you think they are the saddest words in the English language?' she once asked me. I nodded in agreement, as we talked wistfully about the lost years. Life with Mumtaz would not

be easy, I knew, as I got to know her over the months. She was strong-willed, feisty, pig-headed, touchy to the point of rudeness when she felt slighted or challenged. She could be manipulative and vindictive as well. She had an indulgent self-consciousness about her own physical attractiveness, which she flaunted frequently to taunt and torment Indian men whom she thoroughly despised. And her casual attitude to her past marital indiscretions troubled me.

But Mumtaz was also soft of heart, and to friends generous to a fault. She had an infectious zest for life, an innocent exuberance and physical vitality that promised adventure and fun. With her, there wouldn't be a dull moment. I couldn't help but be attracted to her once again, fatally, like a moth to a flame. One day during one of our regular meetings in our favourite coffee shop in a quiet corner of Northumberland Street, I asked Mumtaz somewhat diffidently if we had a future together. It was a question that had to be asked. Mumtaz looked away. 'There is nothing in the world I want more than to be with you for the rest of my life.' I couldn't resist asking why. 'Because you give me my *bachpana*,' she said, my youth. With me, she continued, 'I can imagine myself to be anything: a little girl, a woman, a friend, a soul mate.' I was what she always imagined her ideal man to be, attentive, non-judgmental, unafraid of her independence. 'But?' 'Reality, Mr Akash,' Mumtaz said with a tearful smile, recalling our conversation all those years ago. Her commitments and responsibilities to her family. She would move one day, but not now. I knew, too, that despite their present feuds and fights, Mumtaz would one day return to her extended family. She secretly hankered for the imagined emotional closeness of her childhood.

She also did not want to break our relationship hoping it might bear the fruit we both desperately wanted. 'Can we still be friends in the meantime though?' Mumtaz asked with a pleading look in her eyes. I looked away with a welling sadness in my heart, knowing how difficult that would be for me. Lovers, or people in love, cannot be just friends. It is a cliché, I know, but it is also true. It would be



impossible to continue a relationship like this without physical intimacy and definite commitment. I was also running out of time. In five or ten years time, I would not be the man I am now. I did not have the heart to tell Mumtaz this, but I had been diagnosed with diabetes, and we all know the havoc that disease can wreak on the human body.

I was overcome by a feeling of betrayal and emptiness, tortured by the thought of having to give up something I had lived for all these years. The prospect of a life with Mumtaz I had imagined for so long was now vanishing before my eyes. How I wished things had turned out differently. Perhaps some things are simply not meant to be. 'Everything has its time and place,' I recalled Mr Shamsher Ali saying all those years ago, as I left the café in the gathering darkness. '*Kismet*.'



## *Fare Well, Fiji*

The fading light of a summer's night  
Stirs my heart to memories  
Of child moments, tears, laughter,  
Forming and deforming our innocent lives.

The mind wanders and the heart contracts  
Unable to clasp,  
Or buckle together my longing and desire  
For words, gestures, a glance forgotten.

I remember Budhai, the golden voiced thief,  
Who sang and stole with equal fervour;  
And Mr Ramjan, the village Mahajan,  
Weaving his net of debt and deception.

Endless havans for this goddess or that,  
Soccer matches in dry fields, bruises in place of trophies;  
Feeding Lali, the motherly cow, immovable,  
The garden patch, tended to perfection.

Mother's endless tears for her departing son,  
Ben at the airport, deep, sad, silent  
Staying put while we moved on;  
Both now gone, never to return.

I miss them, as I miss the touch of smell and sound:  
The pungency of cane fires, embers reddening the ground,  
The feel of warm rain on grass freshly mown,  
Swimming in swollen rivers, menacing, brown.

The list goes on, inscribed in agony,  
Of faces vanishing beyond recall,  
Uprooted, unwelcome, on the move again  
Waiting for their turn in the scorching sun.

*Ni sa moce*, goodbye, my land,  
As I consider my fate's rough hand,  
Seeking respite from storms of memory,  
Before fading light darkens my farewell.

## Sources

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