Twelve

A Hundred Years in a Lifetime

All memories are finally about loss. We don't write of the past except when we've been ejected from it

Carol Joyce Oates

Florida, Utah, Montana, Louisiana, Gladstone, Victoria, Eve, Plato, Jacob. Names of esoteric places and famous people, you might say. That they are. But they are also the names of the first Indian children born in Fiji. They were born not in Rewa or Rakiraki or Raralevu, later to become important centres of Indo-Fijian settlement on Fiji's main island of Viti Levu, but on the remote, tiny island of Rabi, on planter John Hill's estate, the biggest employer of the first batch of Indian indentured labourers to arrive in Fiji. The new migrants were sent there because other European employers who were expected to recruit them were angry with the government for prohibiting the employment of Fijian labour and so they refused to have anything to do with the new migrants. Sir Arthur Gordon, Fiji's first governor and the chief architect of the indenture scheme—he had seen its operation in Mauritius and Trinidad where he had been governor before coming to Fiji—was disappointed but not despairing. By the 1880s, the prospects in the nascent colony brightened considerably with the expansion of the recently arrived Australian-owned Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), which would go on to dominate not only the industry but also Fiji's economy for nearly a century until its departure in 1973.

Between *Leonidas*' inaugural voyage in 1879 and *Sutlej V's* last in 1916, 87 ships, especially designed to carry human cargo in difficult conditions over long distances, ferried some 60,000 men, women and children from Calcutta and Madras to Fiji. They had such magical names after rivers and classical figures: *Danube, Elbe, Ganges, Jamuna, Rhine, Avon, Syria, Pericles, Leonidas*.

Remarkably, only one of the ships, the *Syria* in 1884, perished through negligent navigation, on the reefs at Nasilai, claiming 59 lives, though the journey itself—three months by sailing ship and one by steamship—broke many land-locked lives and disrupted irreparably the settled habits, practices and thoughts of ancient village India. The voyage across the *kala pani*, the dark dreaded seas, was a great leveller of hierarchy and protocol. But the destruction also contained within it seeds for rejuvenation, for from the fragments of a common past and a mutual predicament, a shared destiny and a common destination, emerged other bonds. None was more emotionally powerful than the bond of *jahajibhai*, brotherhood of the crossing, as intimate and comforting as real blood kinship which men cherished well into their twilight years as a mark of solidarity against the uncertainties of the outside world.

In the end, some 24,000 of the indentured migrants and their families (some born in Fiji) returned to India at the conclusion of their indenture, but the majority stayed on, attracted by the promise of possibilities in their new homeland and the fear of reception they might receive in India having broken taboos—marrying across caste lines, eating food cooked by unknown hands, doing work considered ritually polluting—taboos still sacrosanct at home. Many talked well into their old age of one day returning, but the day of decision never came as memories of the past frayed and faded and the realities of life in a new place took hold. The *girmitiyas* and their descendants faced these new realities with resilience, often on their own, without a helping hand. In time, their labour laid the foundations of the Fijian economy, illiterate thumb-prints seen most visibly in the undulating seas of green cane fields across vast, often inhospitable, stretches of previously untamed terrain, in the damp paddy fields of the Rewa and Navua deltas, in the slowly emerging market towns in the cane belt, precursors to modern urban centres, in rudimentary structures on their way to becoming ground-breaking primary and secondary schools, in the steady stream of school children leaving the village environment to enter the world of the professions beyond the imagined horizons of their parents and grandparents.

My direct link with Fiji begins in 1908. That was the year my grandfather came to Fiji as a *girmitiya*. *Aja* (grandfather) was lucky in one respect: he arrived in Fiji when the worst abuses of *girmit* were over—the heart-rending infant mortality rates of the 1890s, the excessive over-tasking, the physical violence on the plantations, an uncertain life on the raw edges of extreme vulnerability. In 1907, there were 30,920 Indians living in Fiji, of whom only 11,689 were under indenture. The freed population—*Khula*—were cultivating 17,204 acres of land on their own, 5,586 devoted to cane and 9,347 planted with rice. In time, sugar cane cultivation would become the principal occupation of the Indian

population. By 1911, of the 40,286 Indians, 27 per cent had been born in the colony, the Fiji-born proportion of the population increasing rapidly with time, until, by 1946, they became outright majority of the population, spawning the threat of 'Indian domination' that would bedevil the country's complex political negotiations as it lurched towards independence in the 1960s.

As young children, we heard stories about indenture from *Aja* and other *girmitiyas*—the hard work from the break of dawn, about overseers good and bad and indifferent, the fractured family life in the estate lines, the cultural confusions and transgressions that pervaded plantation life, the ways in which they attempted to make sense of their predicament. I heard these stories long before I read scholarly accounts of the indenture experience at university. These accounts, most famously Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery*, captured our imagination. I read it in the final year of my university undergraduate studies. That book, with its catchy, memorable title, emotionally appealing but intellectually suspect, set the tone of the new historiography. *Girmit* was slavery by another name, nothing more, nothing less, the book informed us. The indentured labourers themselves were gullible simpletons from impoverished rural backgrounds, hoodwinked into migrating by unscrupulous recruiters (*arkatis*), and brutalised by the unrelenting pace of work on the plantations, their sufferings ignored, their women molested by the overseers and *sirdars* (Indian foremen), their families separated, their dignity in tatters.

This rendition of *girmit* was reinforced for me by the centenary celebrations of 1979 marking the arrival of Indian people in Fiji. I was then a graduate student at The Australian National University. The overall tone was understandably grim. Until then, the word *girmit* had not been a part of the general vocabulary of the Indo-Fijian community. For most people, the word was synonymous with shame and slavery. The word acquired a new vitality during the celebrations as people used it to pry open a past about which much was quietly assumed but little actually known. But that past was viewed through the lens of a troubled present in which Indo-Fijians were increasingly being marginalised from the mainstream public discourse through the vagaries of racial politics. Consequently, a complex and contested history was pressed into the service of an ideology designed to portray Indians as victims of history, without voice, without agency. The 'whips-and-chains' story is still a dominant part of the public discourse and understanding of *girmit* even though the new indenture historiography casts serious doubts about its explanatory value. There is of course undeniable truth in the indenture-as-slavery thesis. Many *girmitiyas* were broken by work, claimed by disease or wrecked by human violence and greed. Suffering and pain were an integral part of indenture. All this is abundantly clear from the historical record. But it is not

the whole story. It is possible to acknowledge hardship while granting *girmitiyas* agency as a people who had a hand in shaping their history.

A central plank of the slavery thesis is that deception and fraudulence played a key role in the recruitment process. Migration was not an integral part of Indian society or psyche, the argument went, and no one in their right minds would therefore ever leave their home for places unknown or unheard of. The Indian peasant was a landlubber, bound to home and hearth by strict codes of ritually-authorised behaviour, not an intrepid explorer of unknown, pollution-threatening worlds. That view is archaic, for even in medieval times, as Irfan Habib and others have shown, peasants moved about in search of better opportunities and to escape the depredations of predatory landlords.[1] In the 19th century, rural India was in the throes of profound change caused by, among other things, the introduction of new notions of private ownership of property, increasing fragmentation of land holdings, deepening indebtedness among the peasantry, the effects of natural calamities. Places in eastern Uttar Pradesh, which furnished 45,000 of Fiji's 60,000 migrants—the remainder came from South India after 1903 when sources in the North had begun to dry up—were particularly adversely affected. As employment opportunities there diminished, people moved about in search of a better life elsewhere. It was the natural thing to do.

And so, large numbers left—for the Assam tea gardens, the Calcutta jute mills and factories, the Bihar coal mines and the Bombay textile mills. Between 1891 and 1911, many districts in the Indo-Gangetic plain—Faizabad, Gonda, Allahabad, Azamgargh, Benares—experienced population decline, which officials attributed partly to emigration. In Gonda, migration had become 'a natural way out of the difficulties with which the population did not know how to grapple;' in Sultanpur was being used to restore 'fallen fortunes or ease off a redundant population which have long been familiar to the inhabitants of the district;' and in Ghazipur, 'immense numbers of people leave their homes every year to find employment in or near Calcutta and in the various centres of industry in Bengal and Assam, while many weavers and others report to the mills of Bombay. The extent of this migration is astonishing and its economic influence is of the highest importance since these labourers earn high wages and remit or bring back with them large sums of money to their homes.'

The indentured labourers to Fiji and to other places came from this uprooted mass of peasantry. Most of them were registered in their own provinces rather than in large distant cities as critics alleged. But not all those who registered migrated. In Gonda and Basti, two of the largest indentured emigration districts, nearly 50 per cent did not migrate, while elsewhere, nearly a third remained

behind either because they were rejected or because they refused to enlist. The high failure rate gives some agency to the recruited. This is not to say by any means that the unscrupulous recruiters did not snare the gullible and the greedy and the unwary into their nets. They did, but perhaps not to the extent the slavery thesis alleges. Migration to the colonies was, I would argue, an extension of the massive movement of people within India. I vividly remember *Aja* telling us how he happened to come to Fiji. He was up and about, a young man in his early 20s, when a friend told him about golden opportunities awaiting him in the *tapus* (islands). What opportunities, he did not ask. He was footloose and free, and the lure of adventure attracted him. He eventually ended up in Calcutta, in the batch bound for Guyana (Demerara). That ship was full, so he took—or was put on—the next one to Fiji. I have no doubt that he had no idea what or where Fiji was, but that somehow did not seem to matter to him. He knew that he would be back one day soon, after he had earned enough to get started on his own. As it happened, the break for him was permanent.

Fiji was spared the massive cultural dislocation that accompanied slavery (and even indenture) in the Caribbean and elsewhere. Fiji was, after Surinam, the last major importer of Indian indentured labour. By the late 1870s, the darkest period of indentured emigration was over, the period of an almost complete break from India a thing of the past. Fiji was lucky to escape the horrors of its sister colonies in the Caribbean. The *girmitiyas* never completely lost touch with their cultural roots. As early as the 1890s, only a decade after the beginning of indentured emigration, the basic texts of popular Hinduism and folk culture were circulating in the main areas of Indian settlement in the sugar belts of Fiji. These included *Ramchritramanas*, *Satya Narayan ki Katha*, *Surya Purana*, *Devi Bhagat*, *Danlila*, *Durga Saptshati*, *Indra Sabha* as well as stories from *Baital Pachisi*, *Salinga Sadabrij* and *Alaha Khand*. The texts were recited communally at social functions and other occasions when people got together to celebrate life or mourn its passing. From very early on, *Holi* (*Phagua*) and *Tazia* (*Mohurram*) were observed as public holidays on most plantations. Religious leaders, both Hindu and Muslim, established centres for spiritual instruction (*kutis* and *dharamshalas* and *madarasas)*. Informal gatherings of like-minded men later materialised as cultural and social associations which made enduring contributions to the growth and development of the Indo-Fijian community.

Religion became both an instrument of survival as well as a tool of resistance. Despite their best efforts, Christian missionaries, associated in the *girmitiya* minds with the excesses of the CSR overseers and the racially discriminatory practices of the colonial government, never made much headway in the Indo-Fijian community.[2] They refused to convert because they saw their own religion as

superior. This was in marked contrast to the Indian experience in the Caribbean where Christian missions, especially Presbyterians, enjoyed far greater success among the Indians, providing them, through education, a powerful vehicle for self-improvement and upward mobility. In the Caribbean, an immigrant culture weakened by long separation from its ancestral roots and almost total dependence on the plantation system, fell easy prey to external temptations; in Fiji the roots, though frayed and planted in a shallower soil, were allowed—through indifference as much as anything else—to nurture themselves unhindered.[3]

There was another important contrast with the Caribbean. Whereas the indentured labourers and their descendants there lived on the plantations for generations—and reminders of the dominant influence of the plantation system are still visible in Guyana—in Fiji, the period of dependence was limited to five, or at most ten, years. The point to underline is that in Fiji, *girmit* was a limited detention, not a life sentence for several generations, that it was in parts of the Caribbean and in the case of slavery. Those freed from indenture from the mid-1880s onwards began to establish free settlements, mostly around the sugar mills on the two main islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. These places remain the principal centres of Indian settlement in Fiji even today, still dependent in one way or another on the sugar industry as growers, casual labourers, mill workers. Besides providing the former *girmitiyas* with individual opportunities, the free settlements were also symbolically important as beacons of hope for those still under indenture, a visible reminder of the reality of freedom that lay so near. The rapid growth of free settlements meant that the period of complete isolation for those under indenture was limited, and with time the boundaries, both physical as well as emotional between the indentured and the free, became porous.

For many immigrants, indenture, for all its hardships, still represented an improvement of their condition in India. This was particularly so with the lower castes who were permanently consigned to the fringes of rural Indian society as untouchables, tenants-at-will, and landless labourers with little hope of betterment in this life—or the next. The routine of relentless work on the plantations was nothing new to them as strenuous physical labour was their permanent lot in India. In Fiji, at least, their individual identity was recognised and their effort rewarded on the basis of achievement rather than a preordained status. For them, the levelling tendencies of the plantation system heralded a welcome change from an oppressive past and promised a future in which they and their children had a chance. Others, perhaps those who were victims of natural calamities, such as famines, floods and droughts, or of exploitative landlords, welcomed the peace and security that the new environment offered them. Reflecting on his indenture days, one labourer told the anthropologist Adrian Mayer in the 1950s: 'The time

of indenture was better than now. You did your task, and knew that this was all. You knew you will get food everyday. I had shipmates with me, and we weren't badly off when there was a good sirdar and overseer. Of course, if they were bad men, then you had to be careful. But now what do I do? I have cane land, bullocks and a home. Yet every night I am awake, listening to see if someone is not trying to burn my cane, or steal my animals. In indenture lines, we slept well, we did not worry.' [4] Both oral evidence as well as archival records indicate some lower caste labourers, especially *sirdars*, taking revenge against their high caste compatriots for the social oppression they had experienced in India. So, at one level, the *girmitiyas* were all peas in the same pod, but they were also a socially differentiated group from diverse backgrounds and with divergent experiences and expectations of what life was all about, what it had to offer. *Girmit,* then, was a simultaneously enslaving as well as a liberating experience.

Aja became a free man in 1913, after serving his indenture as a stable hand for the CSR at Tua Tua in Labasa. Like most other freed *girmitiyas*, he continued as a mill hand for the CSR for a few years more before eloping with his best friend's wife, leasing a ten acre piece of land and starting on his own in the newly opened settlement at Tabia. He planted rice, lentils, maize, beans, eggplants, watermelon, pumpkin, and peanuts until sugar cane arrived in the late 1930s. It was on that sugar cane farm, raw, without paved roads, running water or electricity, that we were all born and raised. Now the farm is gone, taken back by the Fijian landowners. This has ruptured my sense of the place of my birth, diminished the intensity of my association with it, reminding me of the temporariness of things, the transience of life itself. *Aja* went to Tabia not because he had friends or family or fellow caste members or *jahajibhais* there but because land was available for lease. Geography, the availability of productive agricultural land and its proximity to markets and roads and other facilities, determined the pattern of territorially and socially scattered Indian settlements in Fiji, rather than caste brotherhood or religious affiliation or some other criteria. This meant that the pattern of village India, with socially ranked clusters of houses with clear caste-based rules defining access to common facilities, formulating and enforcing rules of appropriate behaviour, could not be reproduced in Fiji. The fragmentation of the Indian village world, begun in the depots of Calcutta and Madras, and accelerated on the plantations, was completed in the post-indenture period.

I knew *Aja* as an old man of perhaps around eighty, although he reckoned he was well over a hundred in the way most old men do. Some things I can say about his life with absolute certainty, from personal experience, while others I deduce from my own reading and research. *Aja* spoke his own language (a mixture of *Bhojpuri* and *Awadhi*) with other surviving *girmitiyas*. He spoke Fiji

Hindi with a distinct provincial Indian accent. My Fiji Hindi, incorporating more English and Fijian words, would be incomprehensible to him. He always wore Indian clothes—*dhoti* and *kurta* and *pagri*. The Indian garment would disappear with him and his generation, replaced by western clothes of shorts and shirt that became the standard for my father's generation. Women's jewellery and finery—*bichwa* (toe-ring), *payal* (anklet), *jhumka* (earing), *nathini* (nose-ring), *bajuband* (armlet) would also disappear with the *girmitiya* women, replaced by a single string of gold sovereigns—*mohur*—which women displayed as a sign of status and prosperity. In rural areas of Fiji, they still do.

Aja's world was full of ghosts and demons and evil forces—*bhoot* and *shaitan*, and *jadu tona*—which had to be pacified through a variety of precise ritual performances, that would disappear with him. He continued to invoke, in (to me) incomprehensible language, the names of village and clan or caste deities—*gram devtas* and *kul devtas*—for some blessing or to ward off an evil or impending misfortune. To cure headache, jaundice, fever or dog bite, he consulted the local magic man; he had faith in him; that after all was how things were done in India. He knew nothing about western medicine, which was expensive and inaccessible anyway. He still remembered *bhajans*, devotional songs, which he and other *girmitiyas* sang with great fervour on special occasions. And although caste as a basis or determinant of social relationship had been jolted in the crowded depots of Calcutta and in the crowded cabins of the immigrant ships, finally crashing on the plantations[5]—because work rewarded productivity, not caste status, because sanctions could not be imposed for breaches of behaviour, because paucity of women necessitated cross-caste, even cross-religious marriages and because the plantation management was intolerant of caste restrictions which interfered with the deployment of labour—despite all these, *Aja* continued to practice some minor customs from his childhood, perhaps to retain a vanishing connection with a remembered past. So, he never shaved himself but waited every Sunday for a *hajam,* a professional barber by caste, a fellow *girmitiya,* to shave him and collect his fees in kind, usually some rice and lentils.[6] That practice died gradually as the *girmitiyas* moved on and as new forces of change (education, improved communication) entered the community. So, too, did the practice of seeking marriage partners for children from roughly comparable castes.

Life in Fiji must have been very different for *Aja* and others like him, in some ways a complete contrast to what they had left behind. The physical landscape of an island surrounded by sea, cris-crossed by rivers and streams, full of forbidding forests and brooding mountains, and inhabited by a people who looked strange, must have been alien to a land-locked people from the flat, settled Indo-Gangetic plains. Perhaps the pace of work on the plantations may not have been new to

those who came from labouring and farming backgrounds, though its relentless pace, in the absence of a vibrant, organic community, must have taken its toll. Within the domestic sphere, traditional notions of proper relations between men and women were re-negotiated, as they had to be, as women worked alongside men in the fields and assumed other responsibilities they would not have countenanced in India. Caste, minus its minor ritualistic aspects, had gone, and boundaries of social and cultural inclusion and exclusion were drawn more flexibly. New, pragmatic, cross-caste and cross-religious relationships had to be established in a new environment. In that new environment, the *girmitiyas* were more on their own, more alone, making their way by adapting the metaphors and strategies of a remembered, evanescent, past. My enduring memory of *Aja* is of an old man lying on a string bed in the shade of the mandarin tree behind the thatched house where he slept, looking vacantly into the distance, his near-blind eyes focussed on some imaginary point, always talking about the world of his childhood, sometimes crying, wandering aloud about what his friends and family might be doing back home, hankering hopelessly for a past that was truly past, but unable—perhaps not knowing how—to embrace the new world that was his home. He died in 1962.

My father was born around 1918. No one knew the precise date; that did not seem to matter. Whenever asked about it, he would say he was born during the *Badi Beemari*, the Influenza Epidemic of 1918. That rough approximation served the purpose. His generation grew up in the shadow of indenture. They were formed and deformed by the experience of poverty and uncertainty on the unformed edges of a slowly evolving community, still uncertain of its identity and character but making strenuous efforts to establish and enforce standards recalled from a remembered past. They grew up in a largely enclosed and culturally self-sufficient world. Once indentures had expired, Indians had ceased to be of much concern to the colonial administration. Left to their own devices, the Indian community developed its own voluntary associations and self-help projects—forming settlement committees to harvest cane, establish temples and mosques, build schools, construct cemeteries, start annual festivals, organise *Ramayan* recital through village *mandalis*. *Panchayats*—a five men council of village elders—were started in the early 1930s with official encouragement to maintain a semblance of order in village life. They resolved petty issues—settling land boundary disputes, adjudicating fines for damage caused by stray cattle, intervening in family quarrels, punishing extra-marital relationships—and enforced community standards. Suspicion of alien legal institutions and practices, the cost of court cases, fear of social disapproval and ostracism—a mixture of all these—forced people to resort to time-tested ways. The *panchayats*

worked effectively for a while when the village world was still isolated, but lost their authority and rationale in the post-war years as joint families cracked, education and income increased, and improved communication connected the village to the outside world. Now, they are a distant memory. Litigation became a prominent, fractious feature of Indo-Fijian life. As it still is.

The self-absorption of the Indo-Fijian community came from the particular circumstances it encountered in the post-indenture period—the scattered settlements, the hard struggle on the cane farm, the absence of outside helping hands, the indifference of the colonial state—but it also resulted from a colonial policy which restricted contact with others, most notably and damagingly, within the indigenous community. Sir Arthur Gordon's 'Native Policy' as it came to be known, created a separate system of administration—in effect a state within a state—which curtailed Fijian mobility and limited opportunities for employment outside the authorised chief-dominated order in order ostensibly to shield the indigenous community from the corrosive effect of contact with the outside world.[7] When Indians transgressed village boundaries and established *de facto* relationships, Fijians were reprimanded and often fined, and Indians expelled from the vicinity of the *koros* (villages).

Deliberate colonial policy designed to keep the two communities in separate compartments compounded the problem of cultural disrespect and suspicion that resulted from racial prejudice and cultural difference. There were some exceptions in some parts of Fiji, but separate development and compartmentalised existence for the two communities became the norm. There was a Fijian *koro* on the outer fringes of our settlement: a row of brooding bures surrounding a neatly manicured *rara* (open green), but we never entered it for fear—of what I cannot say. There was a Fijian woman who had somehow adopted my father as her younger brother and was openly playful with my mother, her *bhauji*. We called her *phua*, father's sister, and treated her like a member of the extended family. But that was about it. We children had no Fijian friends. In the absence of any meaningful contact, we continued to view things Fijian through the prism of prejudice. The Fijians reciprocated our ignorance.

My father's world, like that of most of his contemporaries, centred upon a ten acre plot of land leased from the Native Land Trust Board. It was only a lease, so obvious in hindsight, but we never thought that the land wasn't our own, that it wouldn't always remain our own. The notion that it might revert to the owners—as it has now done—never once entered our minds. The ten acre plot was the CSR's idea when, facing labour shortage after the end of indenture, it decided to get out of cane growing to concentrate on milling.[8] The CSR was clever. It wanted to relinquish cane farming, but not control over the industry.

It reasoned that with careful husbandry, the limited acreage could be made big enough to be economically viable, but certainly not big enough to make us too big for our boots. On that ten acre farm, we grew sugar cane and rice, had a cow or two, some goats and chicken for meat and vegetables for domestic use or for selling to neighbours to raise cash. That was about it. Like other people in the village, we did not get anywhere very far, but we got by. J.W Coulter, the American geographer who carried out field research in Laqere, the village across the river from our own, captures the daily routine of farm life in the late 1930s and early 1940s accurately:

> The regular work of Indian farmers in Fiji is in contrast to the irregular, easy going life of the Fijians. The Oriental rises at half-past five, harnesses his oxen, and plows from six to eight. He breakfasts at home or in the field on roti and milk and tea (roti is bread made from flour and fried in ghee). He resumes plowing until ten; at that time his oxen are unhitched to lie in the shade during the heat of the day. Shortly after ten he milks his cow, and from ten-thirty to twelve hoes weeds or cuts fodder along the ditches or road-side. At noon he lunches on rice, dal or rice curry, and milk. In the early afternoon he hoes again, cuts more grass, or does odd jobs about the house. From three to five he plows. Supper at six consists of rice curry and chutney and milk. There is smoking and conversation by a kerosene lamp until bedtime at eight. In the evenings groups of Indians who have been working in the fields all day trudge home in the dusk, carrying lunch pails.[9]

The details might vary from place to place and from time to time, but the overall picture will be familiar to anyone of my generation who grew up on an Indo-Fijian farm in the post-war years. WEH Stanner, who closely observed the Indian community in the mid-1940s, also captures the problems and aspirations of the community accurately. Thousands of families suffered 'under a crushing burden of private debt,' he writes. 'Peasants and labourers lived frugally, worked long hours for extremely low wages or incomes, and saved with desperate application to keep alive, to repay loans and mortgages, to buy freehold land, to remit funds to India, to discharge customary social obligations requiring expensive outlays, and to acquire a competence for old age or return to India.'[10] On the social side, Stanner notes, caste barriers had almost disappeared. 'High and low castes might sit together at school or in other assemblies or live together in unsegregated neighbourhoods. Restriction on vocation and occupation had greatly modified.

European dress was widespread among men except in rural areas. Women no longer veiled and their costume, too, had altered. The *purdah* was unknown. Religious ceremonial had simplified and shortened, especially the ritual purification, Hindu-Muslim separatism had so far weakened that members of the two religious communities sat together in amity on public committees, often took the same line of policy, co-operated politically (especially on educational matters) and mingled fairly freely socially.'

Some old customs, observed by our grandparents' generation, were on the way out. Stanner has noted the diminishing relevance of caste in everyday life. There were others. Polyandrous relationships were not rare during indenture because women were few and competition for them was intense. But as the sex-ratio improved and the community stabilised, monogamous marriage became the strict rule, the breach of which often led to violence, occasionally murders. During indenture, again because of the shortage of women, Hindu-Muslim marriages were not uncommon—and tolerated—but this practice, too, ended in the post-indenture period as the two groups began to establish 'morally correct' behaviour for their followers and as debate about religious identity engulfed the community. Inter-religious marriages are rare today. The practice of child marriage, common in my grandfather's generation, and continued from village India, also ceased. The legal age of marriage for boys was increased in 1961 from 16 to 18, and for girls from 13 to 14, though in practice most marriages took place later than the stipulated legal age. Girls' education was still frowned upon. In 1940, only 11 percent of the girls (1,430)—compared to 20 per cent of the boys (3,607) attended primary school. This situation changed within a decade. In 1959, for example, of the 77,000 pupils in primary schools, 20,000 were Indian boys and 15,000 Indian girls. The remaining gender barriers would crumble soon as the value of education, even if it was not for a career, became entrenched in the community and as the expectations of the women's role in the home and in the community at large expanded.

The leased farm was the only property our parents had, but it was clear that there was no future on it for all the children, six boys and two girls. We were encouraged to seek alternatives. Education was the key to that quest. Our parents started community schools—nothing fancy, just rudimentary structures of thatched bures of bamboo walls and cow dung-plastered floor on a piece of land donated by some generous villager. By 1956, there were 154 Indian schools in Fiji, of which 129 were run by non-denominational settlement committees. Some partially literate village elders assumed the role of instructors in Hindi and elementary arithmetic in return for help with house and farm work. The spectacle of poor parents with nothing, making sure that the life of their children

was better than theirs, is moving. Things improved with time and government assistance. By the early 1970s, over 500 primary and secondary schools were run by Indo-Fijian settlement and denominational bodies.

I have for some years been interested in the colonial texts which instructed our fathers' generation, to see the kinds of ideals and ethos the colonial officialdom tried to instil in them, its conception of the ideal colonial subject. I recently came across a copy of texts which were used in Fiji Indian primary schools in the 1930s. They are instructive. Here is just one example from the *School Journal*, *1930*. There are stories and anecdotes in it from Indian history: about Siddhartha, Rama, Harish Chandra, Tulsi Das, Guru Nanak and other figures of legend and myth. The emphasis on things Indian is important; it was a marker of our collective cultural reference point. The government was keen for the Indian population to retain its links with its cultural heritage (and then complain that the Indians did not assimilate into the mainstream colonial society!). The *Journal* also carried stories about Fiji, excerpts from the governor's addresses, announcements about coming events, but these were brief, dry and uninteresting. Much more interesting were the stories about the Empire, Our Empire, marked by red patches on the *Clarion* atlas. The geography of Samoa and Hawaii featured in some of the texts as did items on Casablanca and the Ford Motor Factory at Detroit, the White Cockatoo. And then there were tips on how to be good citizens, law abiding, respectful of authority, appreciative of the great things that the 'Mother Country' was doing for its children in the colonies. Items on the best way to cultivate maize, banana and tobacco, the precautions to take during hurricanes and floods, the importance of keeping wells clean, were designed to teach people about clean, healthy, hygienic living.

If you were training to be an Indian primary school teacher in 1930, you would be expected to know, among other things, two virtues for which the Chinese are famous, why ANZAC was celebrated, what things the people of Nigeria and Fiji had in common, how the Union Jack came into existence, the names of some of the finest buildings in Auckland, where the missionary John Williams was born, what religious festivals Rumanians enjoyed most and how they celebrated it, how David Livingston got his education, what Florence Nightingale's favourite game as a child was, what pupils knew about the children of Labrador, the importance of the Chrysler Building in New York, the number of talons or claws a cat had. If you were sitting your Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination in 1936, you would be expected to know, among other things, the name of one of the best known governors of Roman Britain who encouraged the building of houses, towns and markets, the name of the British General who captured Jerusalem in 1917, the name of the brave French Commander who was killed in the same

battle as General Wolfe, the name of the Roman Empire revived by Charles the Great, the name of the highest mountain in Australia, the chief export of New Zealand, the capital of Fiji before Suva, two ways in which disease could be spread. Highly relevant, dry and topical things like that! This sort of education was for the chosen elite of the community, the primary school teachers. The idea was not to 'educate' the populace but to train cogs for the colonial bureaucratic wheel. Apart from the court clerks and assistants and interpreters in the district administration, primary school teachers were people of respect and status in the community. Most people of my father's generation aspired to know just enough to read and write letters or sign their names to official documents.

Besides education, the earlier generations devised other ingenious means to erase barriers to social mobility and obliterate marks of social differentiation based on caste or some other such criteria. One way of doing this was the names people gave to their children. *Girmitiyas* had names which a careful observer could use to decipher a person's social status. The lower and middle castes were named after objects, days and months, a particular emotion or event or state of affairs in the household or the village at the time the child was born. Thus such names as Dukhia and Bipati (sadness/hardship), Gendia and Phulbasia (after flowers), Hansa (a mythical bird), Bhola, Bhullar and Jokhu (simple ones), Mangal, Budhai, Sanicharee, Mangru, Somai, Sukkhu (after days of the week), Gulab and Gulabi (after a colour), Bahadur, Shera (brave one), Sundar (pretty one). Other names with no particular connotation that I can decipher included Kalpi, Bisun, Tahull, Jaitoo, Jhinul, Chagun, Aleemoolah, Ulfat, Chaitu, Umrai. The *girmitiyas* named their children after gods and goddesses and great mythical figures, which threw the old patterns into confusion, making it difficult to establish one's caste from the names. These names were common in my father's generation: Ram Prasad, Ram Saran, Ram Autar, Arjun, Hari Prasad, Ram Piyari, Bhola Nath, Bihari Prasad, Ganga Din, Jamuna Prasad, Sukh Raji, Suruj Pati, Shiv Lal, Mata Prasad, Tota Ram. No one could tell whether Ram Prasad was a Chamar (a tanner) or a Kurmi (cultivator). The higher castes maintained their caste surnames—Sharma, Singh, Mishra, although oral evidence suggests that these names were sometimes appropriated by those below them in social hierarchy. Sanskritisation was clearly at work here. Our parents named their children after film stars and famous personalities—Rajendra Prasad, Raj Kumar, Jawahar Lal, Vijay Singh, Rajesh Chandra, Mahendra Kumar, Satish Chand, Surendra Prasad, Sunil Kumar, Biman Prasad—thus obliterating the last vestiges of caste distinction.

In some areas, though, distinctions and differences were being institutionalised. This was particularly so in the fields of cultural and religious identity.

With the end of indenture in 1920, a number of religious and cultural associations emerged to provide a semblance of order and regularity to a rapidly stabilising Indo-Fijian community. Arya Samaj and Sanatan Dharam had been established at the beginning of the 20th century, but Muslim League and Sangam, the umbrella organisation of the South Indian community, came in 1926. As the community began to set down roots, the different groups engaged in an intense effort to 'define' the proper code of religious conduct, the proper observance of rituals and ceremonies. Conflict erupted. Samajis, followers of Swami Dayanand Saraswati's reformist branch of Hinduism, clashed with the more orthodox, ritual-observing, idol-worshipping Sanatanis.[11] Shia and Sunni Muslims clashed over whether the appropriate successor to Prophet Mohammed were members of his own family (his son-in-law Ali and his sons Hussein and Hassan) or the Caliphs. Hindu-Muslim tensions, reflecting the political developments on the subcontinent in the inter-war period, were visible but restrained, though as the divisions hardened and pressure mounted to conform to strictly prescribed codes in food and dress and prayer and worship—not least because of the arrival of religious teachers from India—the more relaxed interaction and easy friendships of earlier years 'when we were all brothers' suffered. Faith became an important marker of identity in time, erasing and superseding other markers such as regional origin. And so it has remained.

The enclosed and socially isolated world of my father's generation began to fracture when my generation arrived in the post-war period. The values and practices which had enthralled my father's generation, embroiled them in acrimonious debates with other sections of the community, defined their sense of identity and place, gave them meaning and purpose, had less relevance for my generation. Arranged marriages were, for us, a thing of the past, as were large families (a baker's dozen was not uncommon in many families). Daylight marriages of short duration became the norm for us, but were unheard of in the past. Our conceptions of women's role in public and private life would have been alien to the earlier generations. Compulsory shaving of head and facial hair as a public sign of bereavement was observed, but not enforced. Strict rules about diet—little beer but definitely no beef—were beginning to be observed in the breach. Village moneylenders—*mahajans*—who had exercised such a baleful influence in the past became a distant memory for us as banks spread their tentacles around the country. The great debates of the late 1940s about whether prohibition should continue to be imposed on the Indo-Fijian community—an issue that deeply polarised people and wrecked political careers—meant nothing to us. Whether the meat you ate was *halal* or *jhatk*a, an issue that had strained Hindu-Muslim relations in the past, had no relevance for us. Similarly, whether

Sanatanis greeting Arya Samajis with a *Namaste* rather than the customary *Ram-Ram* would be seen as a sign of defeat or subservience, seemed petty to my generation. Christmas—*Bada Din* (Big Day)—became for my generation an excuse for exuberant, drunken celebration, eating fresh goat meat and drinking rum—only the poorest of the poor ate chicken or duck on that day—a much anticipated feature of our annual calendar.

We spoke a 'new language.' Words and concepts used during my father's generation were forgotten: *kakkus* (toilet), *bhuccahd* (silly, stupid), *chachundar* (loose woman, a flirt), *bhong* (dumb), *behuda* (fool), *jahua* (con man*), lokum* (gaol), *bailup* (place for cattle), *Black Maria* (police van), *bagrap* (buggered up), *lifafa* (envelope). We had no idea what *tanzeb*, *nainsukh*, *motia*, once the pride of female jewellery, looked like. *Lehanga naach* (male dancers dressed as female) which was performed during marriage ceremonies to lighten the mood, *gutka* (stick dance) done during festivals, *tassa*, *hudda*, *nagara* (all folk musical instruments) were for us a part of a vanishing past. Unlike our parents, we did not require permission from the colonial officialdom to drink alcohol. Aubrey Parke, who was district commissioner in Labasa when I was completing my primary schooling in the 1960s, tells me about the distinct categories of permission you required: one which allowed you to drink beer only, one which permitted the consumption of both beer and spirit in a pub, one which entitled you to buy a dozen bottles of beer a month and, if you were really somebody, you had the permission to buy a dozen bottles of beer and a bottle of spirit—Dozen and One—a month. That world was gone when we were teenagers. The older generation mourned the passing of a culturally-ordered world which had been built from the memory of a remembered past, but there was little they could do about it.

Improving communication—better roads, bridges and regular public transport—joined us to an expanding world beyond the village horizon. Radio came in the 1950s and Hindi newspapers—*Jagriti, Jai Fiji*, *Shanti Dut*, *Kisan Mitra*. And films: *Alam Ara*, *Anarkali*, *Baiju Bawra*, *Awara*, *Shree 420*, *Jagte Raho*, *Pyasa*, *Mother India*, *Ganga Jamuna*. Films had been coming to Fiji since the late 1930s—eight of the ten cinema houses were run by Indo-Fijians in the 1940s—but they were viewed mostly by people in the urban areas.[12] Going to movies was a major social event of the week, an occasion to display the latest fashion in clothes and jewellery, to meet the elite of society, to know who was who in the community. The Hindi newspapers, Hindi movies, the religious functions we performed with mundane regularity, kept us intact as a community, gave us purpose and cohesion. We in the villages, closer to our cultural roots, thought ourselves superior to the urban dwellers who had, so it appeared to us, drifted away and embraced western ways.

Expectation of what life was—or what it could be—had risen for our generation. By the early 1960s, for instance, primary education was within the reach of most children who wanted it, and secondary education, too, for those who passed their entrance examination. We now could, if we were any good—and our 'goodness' was judged solely on the basis of our performance in external examinations—contemplate a lowly career in the public service, in the banking sector, in the sugar industry as trainee overseers and in the teaching profession, possibilities that were beyond even the imagined horizon of our parents. In the early 1960s, university education was restricted to a select few—perhaps ten a year—who were sent on government scholarship to New Zealand (rarely to Australia) to train as high school teachers, administrators and economists. They were the cream of the crop, who returned from overseas after few years, proclaiming themselves culturally disoriented, social misfits, unable to speak their language, ill at ease among their own people, even embarrassed about their past. For all their idiosyncrasies, though, they made a huge impression on our youthful minds, representing possibilities that could be ours if only we tried hard enough. Many became our role models.

But all this changed with the founding of the University of the South Pacific in 1968. That event must be counted as one of the turning points in the modern history of the Pacific islands. It opened up opportunities for higher education to thousands of children from poor homes who would almost certainly have otherwise missed out. It brought us into contact with people from other parts of Fiji and from other parts of the Pacific, which had, until then, remained forbidding names on paper, nothing more. A new generation had come of age at a critical time in the region's history as islands were on the eve of independence. We were trained—and destined—to play an important part in our countries' and our region's future.

Our world was more diverse than our parents'. Those who went to Christian or urban schools lost the Hindi language, were more exposed to modern influences, were more at home in cross-cultural friendships. Those of us who went to rural schools or schools run by various Indo-Fijian cultural organisations, retained firmer links with our culture and language. This, I now realise, had its obvious advantages, but it also imposed limitations that dawned upon me much later. Just as we went to predominantly Indian schools, Fijian children went to predominantly Fijian schools—Queen Victoria and Ratu Kadavulevu. In 1960, when I was in grade two, there were only 88 non-Fijians in the colony's 325 Fijian primary schools, and only 53 non-Indians in Indian primary schools. We thus grew up engrossed in the ethos of our own society, untouched by cross-cultural influences, completely ignorant of the values, interests and concerns of

the Fijians, blind to the complex, inner impulses of their society. And yet, we were a part of the generation which was called upon to play an important role in national life in the post-colonial era—as teachers, administrators, politicians. No wonder Fiji has faltered so often in its recent postcolonial journey.

We were the last generation of Fiji school children to complete high school before independence. We were the last to study the colonial curriculum. Senior Cambridge was the exam high school children sat until New Zealand Entrance came in the late 1960s. Once again, the emphasis was on learning other peoples' pasts and experiences. So in geography lessons, we had lessons on Burma, Central China, Malaya, Singapore, Manchuria, East Anglia, the Midland Valley of Scotland, about Brittany, Denmark and the Mediterranean coastlines of France, about California, the Canadian maritime provinces, the corn belt of the United States, Florida and the St Lawrence Valley, about the Snowy River Scheme, irrigation faming in Renmark, South Australia, the transport problems of the Cook Islands—they had transport problems there?—the relief maps and the sheep industry in New Zealand and Australia. I did not do well in geography because, among other things, I did not the name of the highest mountain in Australia. I knew that it began with a 'K' but wasn't sure whether it was Kosciusko or Kilimanjaro. Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie confused me. And try as we might, we could not spell Murrumbidgee. What kind of name was that?

In history in the lower grades, we studied the rise of the Liberal Party in New Zealand, the importance of the refrigeration industry to New Zealand agriculture, the Wakefield scheme, the Maori Wars (as they were then called), about John Macarthur, the 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 modern history. So we studied the unification of Italy and Germany, the Crimean crisis and the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution, the rise of Adolf Hitler and Mussolini, the emergence of the trade union movement in Great Britain and, briefly, the rise of new nations in Asia. Pupils ahead of us by a few years studied the causes of the 1929 Depression, the Partition of Africa, the social reform policies of Gladstone and Disraeli, the significance of the 'Import Duties Act of 1931,' the Gold Standard, the Abdication crisis, the Irish Free State.

In our English classes at secondary school, we studied both literature as well as language. Language was dry, antiquarian, but literature was something else, good, solid, untrendy stuff that would be dismissed today as hugely Eurocentric: novels, short stories, poems and plays by John Steinbeck (*The Pearl*), William Golding (*Lord of the Flies*), Emily Bronte (*Wuthering Heights*), Joseph Conrad (*Lord Jim*), William Wordsworth (*Daffodils*), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (*Ancient*

Mariner), Edgar Alan Poe (*Raven*), DH Lawrence (*The Snake*), William Shakespeare (*Hamlet, Macbeth, Merchant of Venice, Romeo and Juliet*), TS Eliot (*Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*). The list does not end there. Reading, broadening our imaginative horizon was fun, but writing short composition pieces could be tricky. For instance a long meaningful paragraph on modern art, the astronauts, western films, the bottle drive of collecting for Corso, about the main stand at a flower show, the case for or against television (when we had no idea what this creature was), a climbing adventure, baby sitting or, of all things, a winter morning. In hot, humid Tabia of all places! A few years back, I met a man in Brisbane who had sat the Senior Cambridge in the mid-1960s. There was an essay question on the 'Phenomena of the Beatles', the musical group. Not paying heed to the spelling, he proceeded to write a long and (he thought) a meaningful paragraph on the 'Phenomena of the Rhinoceros Beetles!' With misunderstandings like this, it was a miracle that we passed external exams, and with good marks too.

We were introduced to the global sweep of the human experience in history and literature, to the creative genius of the great minds of the world, but I am not at all sure we understood what we were reading. The subject matter was alien. We read to set standards; cramming was what was required of us to pass exams, not free-ranging exploration of new worlds the books were opening before us. We were taught to learn, not question, the value of colonial education. Still, for all their cultural biases, the western texts opened up new worlds for us. They awakened our imagination, emphasised our common humanity across boundaries of culture and race, and sowed the seeds of future possibilities. The idea of the fundamental oneness of humanity has remained with me. So, I don't cringe at the colonial texts we learnt parrot-fashion; I am grateful for the windows they opened.

The metaphors of our own culture and allusion to our own past had no place in the higher colonial learning, although in primary school we learnt Hindi and learnt about our ancestral culture and history, about various gods and goddesses and the heroes and heroines of Indian history. We had enough of the language to read the *Ramayana* and Hindi newspapers to our unlettered parents. The language connected us to our cultural roots. Indian school children played an important part in keeping the culture alive. There was no Hindi in high school in the late 1960s. I regret that now, but it did not seem to matter then. And I have, through private effort, continued to read, write and speak Hindi. But the sense of loss is palpable among those who have no Hindi at all. Some, now in middle age, are making an effort to learn the language.

More regrettable, for me, was the complete absence of Fijian culture and history in the curriculum. We heard occasional hair-raising anecdotes about the

notorious cannibal Udre Udre who reportedly ate one hundred humans, marking each feast with a stone heaped in a pile, or about Maa'fu, the mercurial Tongan, who nearly colonised Fiji and Cakobau who so gracefully ceded the islands to Great Britain. But that was about it. Fijians remained for most of us objects of fear and suspicion, their names invoked by mothers to send unruly children to bed. 'If you don't go to bed, Timoci will take you away.' We all had a Timoci in our families. To us, all Fijians were peas in the same pod. I did not, until quite late in life, know about the inner configuration of Fijian society, its rituals and ranking systems and precise protocols, its political divisions and rivalries. I am sure it was the same with the Fijians who saw Indo-Fijians as *Kai Idia*, an undifferentiated group descended from an enslaved past. For many of them, Gujaratis and *girmitiyas*, the *Kurbis* and the *Madrasis*, were one and the same thing. That said, the post-colonial generation is becoming more aware of things Fijian, thanks to an increasing number of multi-ethnic primary and secondary schools, the multi-ethnic university campus in Suva, and broader social interaction in the workplace and in the community at large. In their attitudes and relationships, their habits and moods, the Indo-Fijians, while retaining their 'Indian-ness' are becoming more conscious of the 'Fijian-ness' in their hyphenated identity.

There was nothing in primary or secondary education about Fiji history, so that generations of children grew up knowing virtually nothing about their past. History—and the Humanities generally—was for no-hopers; bright students did the hard sciences. But there is, I think another reason for the absence of Fiji from the curriculum. There was no shared understanding of the country's past, no consensus on its commonalities. Thanks to colonialism's stratagem, there was not one Fiji but three, each with its own distinct place in the colonial compartment. While one group lauded colonial rule, the other castigated it. One demanded primordiality as the basis of political culture, the other espoused secular, egalitarian ideology as the principle of political relationships. One asserted paramountcy as the principle of political representation, the other wanted parity. One owned the land, the other was landless. And so the divisions went. No wonder the educators edited local history out from the text books. Learning someone else's history was safer. Fiji has paid a heavy price for the ignorance of its history.

For Indo-Fijian children, education became a profound agent of social change, just as indenture had been for the *girmitiyas*. The classroom was a great leveller of hierarchy. Before the Second World War, education, especially higher education, was largely the prerogative of the wealthy and the well-connected in the Indo-Fijian community. Wealth, status and power came from owning property or proximity to officialdom. The early generation of leaders came from this privileged background: lawyers, landowners, businessmen such as Badri Maharaj, the Grant

family, the Deokis, the Ramrakhas, the Mishras, the Singhs of Ba, the Sahu Khans, the Tikarams. But the expansion of educational opportunities opened up the field to children from poor, nondescript backgrounds. Talent and merit became the markers of success and ladders to power, and that has remained the case. The old, well established families, whose names were once synonymous with status and sophistication and fame and fortune, have gone and are now largely forgotten.

As we grew up, the world of our parents began to recede into a vanishing past—joint families, proper and periodic observance of rituals and ceremonies, the comforting bonds of a cohesive community, family solidarity, respect for age and authority, politeness in the presence of pandits, extreme carefulness in the management of money, healthy fear of the unknown. The gap widened with time in much the same way as it had done when our parents moved away from their parents' world. The change was inevitable—and liberating. And it continues unabated. As mobility increases and modernity touches nearly every aspect of life, the Indo-Fijians are becoming more aware of their complex and confusing identity. Living in a society corroded by the ravages of racial politics, they continue to nurture the roots of the Indian cultural heritage as a matter of pride and choice, though perhaps not with the reverence and understanding of their parents and grandparents. Indian music, dress, food, and art are being interpreted and re-interpreted through a different and distinct lenses, touched by modernity and the inevitable forces of globalization that would have been feared and forbidding to the earlier generation. Western cultural values, alien and alienating to our forebears, also continue to be embraced and incorporated, not the least because it opens up doors to other opportunities.

Perhaps what will surprise the earlier generations most, as they peer down the corridors of time—surprising in view of the prejudices and stereotypes and entrenched attitudes that had to be overcome—is the way in which their descendants have accommodated themselves to the ethos and mores of a society, deeply informed by its indigenous past, in ways they could not, or were perhaps unable and unwilling to. They will be surprised at the extent to which their children and grandchildren have taken to drinking *kava*, enjoying Sevens Rugby, eating *lovo* food, wearing the *sulu*, conversing in the Fijian language and being familiar with Fijian cultural protocols. They will be disbelieving of the depth of inter-racial friendships in the community. They will, I am sure, marvel at the long, troubled, unpredictable, confusing, depressing and exhilarating journey from being an Indian to being an Indo-Fijian.