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Illusion of hope: Aisha and Bhaskar[1]

Padma Narsey Lal

Real courage … is when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what.

— Harper Lee[2]

The sugar industry was the reason why Indian indentured labourers were brought to Fiji in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For nearly a century, it formed the backbone of the country's economy, but in recent decades its fortunes have dwindled, and it faces an uncertain future due, among other things, to the nonrenewal of agricultural leases, the end of the preferential access to the European market, poor milling infrastructure, and politicised decision-making at all levels of the industry. In this chapter, Padma Lal looks at the human cost of the suffering and uncertainty that cane growers face. The experiences of Aisha and Bhaskar are replicated throughout Fiji where people continue to live with an illusion of hope. Padma Lal gathered material for this chapter as part of a research project on the Fiji sugar industry in 2002–03, but it captures the reality of the sugar industry for the preceding decade as well.

1 Originally appeared as 'Aisha', in *Bittersweet: The Indo-Fijian Experience*, ed. Brij V Lal (Canberra: Pandanus Books, 2004), pp. 287–303; and 'Bhaskar' appeared as 'Bhaskar's dilemma', in *Ganna: Portrait of the Fiji Sugar Industry*, Padma Narsey Lal (Lautoka: Sugar Commission of Fiji, 2008), pp. 171–78.

2 Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1960; New York, NY: Warner Books, 1982), p. 115.

Aisha

Aisha had just returned from the field to meet with me. Her deeply creased forehead, calloused hands and well-worn old blue ankle-length *lehnga* (long skirt), a white blouse and tattered *orhni* (shawl worn by Indian women) signalled that she was a struggling daughter of the soil. Aisha is a rarity in Fiji: she is an Indo-Fijian woman cutting cane. Until recently, cane cutting was an all-male, all-Indo-Fijian, occupation. But things have been changing in recent years. Now, many indigenous Fijians are working as 'substitute' cutters, often to raise money for community projects back home in the islands or on the mainland. For Indo-Fijian men, cutting cane now is an occupation of last resort. But an Indo-Fijian woman cutting cane? And a woman close to 70, at a time when people retire to savour their hard-earned sunset years enjoying grandchildren, dispensing advice to younger members of the family.

Aisha tells me she took up cane cutting after her husband died soon after the 1987 coups. The cane-cutting gang of which the family had been a member for several decades began to play up, exploiting her vulnerability. Sometimes, for no obvious reason, her crop would be the last cut. Sometimes, her cane would not be cut at all. So, both out of sheer desperation and to ensure that her voice was represented in the cane-cutting gang that made important decisions, she joined the gang and took up cane cutting herself. Village life has its undoubted virtues, I realised as I listened to Aisha, but it can also be brutally cruel for people who are poor and vulnerable, particularly today in Fiji when people seem to have lost all sense of compassion and appear to have become more selfish, focused exclusively on their own narrow, self-serving interests.

I had gone to Aisha's house to attempt to capture a typical cane-farming scene and an atypical cane-cutter's story; scenes that belong to another era, not likely to survive for much longer, despite all the talk of reforms in the sugar industry. Aisha sat down on the bench under the mango tree outside the *belo*—a traditional storage house for farm implements, fertiliser and weedicide used in the cane fields. She slowly undid her *orhni* wrapped around her head to provide some protection from the hot sun, and put it back over her shoulders and the blouse. Rural Indo-Fijian women even today cover their heads as a gesture of respect in the presence of strangers or elders. She wipes her perspiring face with the *orhni* and then we begin to talk.

'*Beta* what can I tell you,' she says with a tinge of sadness and regret. 'I am happy working and living here. This is where I've lived since I married Somu's father.' Somu was her eldest son who was still on the farm with his own family—a common scene in many cane families, usually following the son's marriage and the tension that develops with the daughter-in-law. Somu's father, as happened in many Indo-Fijian cane-farming families, had allowed his son to build a separate house on the farm. 'This is the only place I know. This has been our home for as long as I can remember. My late husband and all his 13 brothers and sisters themselves were born on the cane farm.' Aisha and her 10 brothers and sisters grew up on a cane farm not far away. 'That was the only world we knew. But now,' she says, 'it is a *kabarsthaan* (graveyard) of memories. Some part of me dies every day.' After a short pause she says:

> Past is all I have. There is no future for me here. My lease will expire next year. I don't know what will happen then. Where will we go if the lease is not renewed? There has been no word from the Native Land people.

She turned her head away from me and looked into the distance with tears in her eyes. My eyes, too, were moist.

Aisha is not alone in this predicament. Agricultural leases have begun to expire in large numbers since 1997 when the first of the leases automatically renewed some 20 years ago under the *Agricultural and Landlord and Tenant Act* (ALTA) expired. Since then, over 5,500 native ALTA agricultural leases have expired. Of the expired ALTA leases some 4,160 were cane leases and just over 20 per cent of these cane leases have been renewed to sitting tenants or their children as either cane land (743) or residential leases (105). The overwhelming majority—over 50 per cent—of the tenants, many of whom can trace their link to the expired lease for several generations, had to uproot their families, in some cases even their houses, to start all over again somewhere else, repeating the experience of their *girmitiya* ancestors a century ago—unskilled, unwanted, uprooted, on the move again.

'My children want me to go and live with them overseas,' Aisha says. Her two sons are abroad, one in Sydney and one in Auckland. They are among some 80,000 Indo-Fijians who have left Fiji since the 1987 coups for greener pastures in Australia, New Zealand and North America. Her sons want to sponsor her, though at her age a successful emigration visa cannot be guaranteed. Like so many people of her age, Aisha is apprehensive about making the move. 'What will I do there?' she asks. 'I have lived on this farm since I got married 50 years ago. Even though Somu's father is no longer on this earth, his soul is still here. I cannot leave him.' These simple, heartfelt words captured the essence of village family relationships that seem now to belong to another era.

'*Maan maryada,* respect, *rasmo riwaz,* our own way of doing things, are important to people of my age, *beta,* child,' Aisha continues unprompted. She has met children born and raised overseas and doesn't seem to like what she sees. She cannot relate to them. 'They do not seem to have the same respect for the elders as we used to have in our time.' I know exactly what she means, having lived in Canberra for the last decade and seeing how the younger generation interacts with their parents and relatives. The clash of values between two competing traditions, Indian and western, inevitably produces friction that can rupture relationships. No subject is taboo and young people express opinions in words and gestures that are at odds with values of deference and respect that we grew up with. From sex and sensuality, from individual rights to relationships—all get talked about in public, without embarrassment. It can be a very disconcerting experience for people from a more traditional background.

> Here I have my independence. I can go where I want to and when I want. I have people to talk to in my own language. What will I do overseas? English *baat jaanit nah hai,* I will become totally dependent on my children.

Seeing what a feisty and proud woman she is, I knew an overseas lifestyle was not for her. She would be a totally lost soul in the soulless suburbia of Auckland or Sydney. Listening to Aisha reminded me of my own father-in-law's experience. We had sponsored him to come to Australia to spend some time with us. We had hoped for an extended visit of several months, but soon after arriving in Australia, he began to miss his routine, his friends and relatives, even his animals. Being unlettered, he could not understand the new world around him, could not communicate with his grandchildren in his own language. He missed his beloved Tabia desperately, and returned after just a few weeks.

'This cane farm is my soul,' Aisha says when we return to the subject of cane farming:

> just as it was for my father and grandfather. I am a daughter of a *girmitiya,* grew up on a cane farm, married a canefarmer and had all my children on the cane farm. My husband too was born on a cane farm, a grandson of a *girmitiya.*

Aisha has vague memories of stories that old people told about the past. Like many in Fiji, she has no knowledge of where in India her ancestors came from, when, on what ship. That kind of knowledge was not valued then, and much of it is regrettably lost to history now. But she remembers that her family were always farmers, unlike some who had moved to the towns and ventured into other professions.

> *Khoon pasina se hum log e jamin ke sawara banaya hai, beta,* we have cared for this land with our blood and sweat. I never thought that after living a lifetime on this piece of land, I would ever have to contemplate finding another abode.

In that struggle, too, Aisha is not alone.

Aisha's farm has seen better days, I realise as I look around. It is not very lush nor properly weeded. It has an unkempt look about it. No new cane plants can be seen. I assume that the uncertainty of lease renewal has led to a lack of investment of time and energy in the farm, and the use of little fertiliser. It is a common enough response throughout the country. As leases expire, families wait during the grace period pondering their future. The grace period is nothing more than an extension of their agony. Not knowing whether they will be there the following year, growers just rely on the *ratoon* (second and subsequent) cane crop. In 2003, less than 10 per cent of the farmers had planted any new cane in contrast to the almost 80 per cent before the coups of 1987. The evidence of decline and decay is visible everywhere.

'Who in their right mind would plant cane today?' Aisha says reading my mind. 'Plant cane is too expensive. With *ratoon* all you need is to put in some *masala* (fertiliser) and weedicide and you can still get some returns.' During the 2002–03 farm survey, I was aware that in times of uncertainty farmers, particularly those whose leases were close to expiry, used small amounts of fertiliser, the bare minimum, far less than the recommended rate for *ratoon* crops. It was an understandable, if unfortunate, response for in the end productivity suffered.

'I should face reality,' Aisha says with sad resignation.

> After all, leased land is leased land. Leases will expire someday. It is just that I did not ever think that this day will come for me. We had no problems with renewals in the past. We did not even have to pay any goodwill nor did we have to run around to get our leases renewed. Before, our leaders had negotiated renewals on our behalf. Why is it that our *neta log* (elected leaders) today are unable to negotiate lease renewals on our behalf?

Before I could say anything, she continued unprompted.

> Everyone has to now pay goodwill. This time the *mataqali* [Fijian land-owning unit] has asked for $5,000 goodwill. We were lucky because we had to pay only $5,000 for a 10-acre block. Our neighbour had to pay $10,000 for his six acres. Hanif across the road paid $15,000 for his 10 acres.

I know that Aisha is forgetting that most of them did pay goodwill or premium, as they called it, to the chief. What is different now is that goodwill is also demanded by the Native Lands Trust Board (NLTB), which it euphemistically calls payment for New Lease Consideration. According to the NLTB, the new lease consideration is supposed to 'reflect the value of improvements on the land at the date of expiry' and 'landowners' goodwill to again give up their exclusive possession' of land. The tragic irony in this escapes the decision-makers. The very same people who made the improvements are now being asked to pay for the improvements they had made or else risk nonrenewal.

'I can afford to pay the extra goodwill because my farm is one of the more productive ones,' Aisha continues. Her land is Class I, which means cane yield is over 85 tonnes per hectare. From the Fiji Sugar Corporation records, I know that the annual cane output from her 10-acre (4-hectare) land has always been well over 500 tonnes. She is among fewer than 30 per cent of the growers in Fiji producing such large volumes of cane. Most growers in her sector and elsewhere produce fewer than 100 tonnes a year. 'I will be able to get a loan from the Sugar Fund and they know that I can pay off the goodwill from my cane income,' says Aisha. 'Many of my neighbours are in worse situations: *bahut kharaab haalat hai un ke.*' She mentions the names of two families who had to relocate when their leases were not renewed, and they could not pay the goodwill demanded by the *mataqali* and the NLTB.

Aisha considers herself lucky despite all the gloom and doom around her. She accepts her fate, her kismet with equanimity. 'My children live abroad. They are very successful. And all that because of the income from the cane.' She does not deny that the cane farm has been good for her and the family. Income from cane had sustained the family all these years, and continues to do so even today. Money from sugar cane made it possible for all the children to get educated, all but one having gone to university. Her house is made of concrete and her vegetable garden provides her daily requirements of beans, *baigan* (eggplant), *bhaji* (vegetables) and *mircha* (chillies). She makes her own coconut oil for cooking.

One grandson lives with Aisha. She worries about his future constantly. His parents had died in a car accident, and she has looked after him ever since he was a baby. He unfortunately did poorly at school and failed the Fiji Junior. He cannot get a job in town. The job market is glutted with graduates. 'Now-a-days, everyone wants a diploma or a certificate to hire someone for even a clerk's, or a salesman's job.' The grandson has three little children of his own. His prospects for migrating are low because one of his children is mentally handicapped. Besides, he has no marketable skills. The hope is that his children will be able to migrate. It is the hope of most Indo-Fijian families.

'I know I do not have long to live, but where will Ramu go?' Aisha asks forlornly. 'What will he do if the lease is not renewed?' But she is optimistic, as most desperate people can be, hoping against hope that her lease will be renewed, just as it was the last time. Her bigger worry is how will her grandson survive on the land. 'There are too many changes in the air,' she says.

> This restructure, that restructure. I hear the company (FSC) wants to get rid of rail transport. The daily radio talk is so confusing to people like us. And they speak in a language that poor illiterate people like me find hard to understand.

This year Aisha, like many others, had to convert from rail to lorry because FSC could not supply enough rail trucks on time, or, if supplied, the growers could not be sure if their cane would reach the mill within 48 hours as required. In recent years much of the cane reached the mill 48 hours after being harvested. With every day's delay, recoverable sugar decreases as the cane deteriorates. 'For generations our cane was transported via rail. This is the first time in a hundred years that this did not happen,' says Aisha. 'But we are happy that the Council had arranged FSC to pay some compensation for the extra cost of transporting cane by lorry.'

It may not be the last time if FSC has its way. FSC has deliberately neglected the rail system, and uses this as an argument to encourage farmers to use lorry transport, even though they clog up the road traffic. This is ironic. Elsewhere in the world, rail systems have been strengthened since they are found to be a highly cost-effective mode of transportation when high-volume goods have to be moved. It seems that the government, which has a 68 per cent share in the corporation, has provided a perverse incentive to the FSC to deliberately not invest in the rail system. Currently, the FSC pays a small lorry conversion rate; a rate that increases with 'air distance' and not the actual distance travelled by road. The rebate or conversion rate is nowhere near the actual cost of lorry transport. Perhaps the FSC has been able to get the government to surreptitiously reduce the sharing formula between the miller and the growers, just as the increase in the export tax from 3 per cent to 10 per cent did. Everyone knows that the FSC had been arguing for a reduction in the sharing formulae stipulated under the Denning Arbitration and the Kermode Award.

Aisha's thoughts wander back to one of her real concerns and she says playfully with a chuckle:

> What will happen when I am no longer on this earth? How will my grandson manage with cane farming, particularly harvesting? We are lucky because I cut my own cane with the help of Ramu. I can beat any young men of today in cutting cane, *Jawaan admin ke garda khawaye sakit hai.*

I know she is fortunate because she and her grandson both cut cane. They do not use hired cutters. This is not very common today. Before the 1987 coups, most families used to cut their own cane, today less than one in two Indo-Fijian families do so. Others rely on substitute cutters. Because of the shortage of cutters—another indirect effect of mass migrations since the coups—it is a substitute cutters' market. Substitute cutters are demanding a lot higher rate for the cutting of cane than has been agreed to by the gang and lodged as part of the Memorandum of Gang Agreement (MOGA).

Under MOGA, members agree amongst themselves before the start of the harvesting season about the schedule of farms to be cut in the first, second, third and, if necessary, fourth rounds, and the rates that growers would pay for the harvest of their cane. Despite the agreement, substitute cutters can demand almost double the MOGA rate for cane cutting as well as additional funds for buying things like shoes, knives, billycans and food. One gang in the Labasa district demanded \$5 a day for green cane on top of the MOGA rate of \$7 per tonne for green cane and \$6 a day for burnt cane in addition to the \$6 per tonne provided for in the agreement. Such a pricing system encourages the burning of cane before harvest.[3] Substitutes, who are assured \$12 per tonne, often force growers to burn their cane to lighten their own work. This demand, together with regular mill breakdowns and a late start to the cane-crushing season, puts added pressure on growers to burn their cane. It is not surprising that today more than half the cane delivered to the mills is burnt, compared to 15 per cent before 1987. Burning cane is not without risk; farmers may end up paying a penalty if the cane is not delivered within 48 hours. Delays occur with the frequently troubled lorry or rail delivery system. During the crushing season, cane trucks are found sitting in the sun for hours beyond the Passover points,[4] with every hour of delay meaning lower sugar extraction.

'I know the industry is not doing too well,' Aisha tells me. 'Nothing like this used to happen during CSR days. We used to complain about the price of cane we got then, but at least our cane was cut and delivered on time.' Memory is playing tricks on her, for it was not just during CSR days but before the coups under the FSC that cane was delivered within a reasonable time, when they could get cash advances as well as advice about best farming practice from the FSC. Nothing of this sort happens today. As a cost-cutting measure, the FSC stopped all extension work couple of years ago, and discontinued giving cash advances. Now even the banks are reluctant to lend to canefarmers because of possibility of the nonrenewal of leases and other uncertainties caused by the FSC arbitrarily declaring that it would accept only a portion—2.8 million tonnes of cane of an estimated 3.4 million tonnes. Shortage of funds perhaps could be another reason why few farmers are not planting new cane, and applying the bare minimum of fertiliser. Planting cane requires money, as does good husbandry. Very few farmers have ready cash.

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3 By burning cane farmers could jump the scheduled harvest and delivery queue, as mills give priority for burnt cane delivery.

4 'Passover Point' is in the mill yard where cane is technically 'handed over' from the farmer to the miller.

There is regular news of the mills breaking down, worsening the situation with the approaching rainy season. This causes deep concern to Aisha and many farmers like her. It is perhaps out of desperation that some farmers burn their cane to 'jump the queue' and get their cane quickly to the mills. But this does not help the farmers or the industry. While burning per se is not the problem, delayed burnt cane means mills cannot produce grade one sugar. And regular customers of Fiji sugar are getting wary of buying poor-quality sugar. Recently, even a trusted customer from the United Kingdom had rejected Fiji's sugar.

'We all have known about these problems for years. No one seems to be doing anything,' Aisha says with subdued anger.

> Everyone is blaming everyone else. The company (FSC) says the problem lies with us the growers because we burn the cane. But we feel we are the victims. The company does not give us the quotas on time, the rail system is unreliable, the mills keep stopping and the cane is not moved quickly enough in the yard. Go to the mills and see it for yourself. There is always a backlog of rail and lorry in the mill yard. You can see the trucks and lorries queued up for hours, sometimes days. You may even find lorry drivers sleeping under their lorries and wherever they can find some protection from heat and dust and rain.

She is speaking the truth. I am aware that at times the queue is so long that lorry drivers have to stay in the mill yard for two to three nights, with their wives or sons bringing in food; lorry drivers relieving themselves in the nearby bushes or in between the rakes of rail trucks. There is only one toilet—at the mill gate—which too does not function most times.

'On top of all this,' Aisha continues, 'we hear of outside threats of lower price for our sugar. What have we done to deserve this? Why is the world against us?' These, I know, are not merely threats but a likely eventuality after 2006, when the current Cotonou agreement expires. Under this agreement, previously known as the Lome Convention, Fiji's export amount was guaranteed in perpetuity, but not the price. The European Union—our main trading partner under the World Trade Organization (WTO)—is under considerable pressure to remove price support. Recently, major sugar suppliers—countries such as Australia, Brazil and Thailand—have taken the EU to the WTO Tribunal to make them remove the price subsidies that Fiji and other African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries have enjoyed for some of their commodities. 'Tell me, what should we do?' There is very little that can be done, as Fiji is a price taker and the push for globalisation is like a tornado. There is very little that a small country like Fiji can do. But surely, domestic issues such as mill breakdowns, delays in quotas and land lease renewals can be tackled.

'Have you talked to political leaders about this?' I ask tentatively. This touches a raw nerve. Aisha *chaachi* (aunty) is fed up with politicians. And she has a lot to say about them as well. 'They are feathering their own nests,' she says bitterly.

> *Pet puja,* self-interest. They are all playing games, scoring points off each other. They want us to believe they are genuinely interested in the farmers' welfare when they do not give a damn what happens to us. If they did, wouldn't you expect the Unions, the Council (Sugar Cane Growers Council) and the politicians to work together to help farmers. No, they would not. *Ek bole aam to dusara bole imli.* They cannot agree amongst themselves. If anything, you can always count on someone to stand up and contradict whatever is being said by someone else in the interest of the growers and the industry. Look what happened when the leases began expiring in 1997. Instead of working with the landowners to negotiate renewal of leases, some politicians encouraged farmers to leave their farms. In some cases even before their leases had actually expired. They were given all sorts of promises, promises of tickets to migrate, new aid money. After listening to them, some of the farmers from places like Wainikoro and Daku left their homes and their farms in 2000. Went to makeshift Valelawa camp, with faith in their leaders. Some whose leases had expired refused to be resettled at new sites in Naduri because our leaders had promised them bigger things. They stayed in makeshift houses, without jobs or land, with nothing to support their families. Children could not go to school. After waiting for months some of the families had to put their tail between their legs and go back to their own villages to start all over again. We all know that politicians' promises are like a sieve. Nothing stays.

'But do our people ever learn?' I interrupted Aisha.

> No they do not. Even though people realise that for us Hindustanis to live peacefully in this country we have to work together with the *Kai Vitis,* indigenous Fijians. Many people vote for the party that preaches racial policies rather than the party that represents cooperation and multiracialism. Look at what happened in recent by-elections.

I wonder if Fiji has lost its chance of 'being the way the world should be'.

Aisha's thoughts again return to her own immediate family, to her grandson's future. I realise, as she speaks, that this is something that really haunts her, the future of her grandson. 'How will my grandson make a living?' His future on the farm is not bright. He will have to learn new things, focus on producing cane with high amounts of sugar. Otherwise, his income will decline, because under the new cane payment system, the price he will get will depend on the amount of sugar contained in his cane. He will have to be extra careful with his farm management practices so that he produces the best output of sugar. He will have to choose appropriate sweeter varieties. He may have to think about getting contract harvesting because not many people in his sector might want to cut cane. Substitute cutters do not cut cane properly, often leaving large amounts of stump, the sweetest part of the cane on the ground. He will have to learn new skills in bookkeeping. In short, he will have to reinvent himself.

But I know that even if he were to reinvent himself, the future of the sugar industry would remain uncertain unless the government swallows some bittersweet pills and substantially reforms the industry as a whole. For one, the FSC has to be totally revamped. To do this, more than organisational restructuring is needed. Reorganising the FSC is like rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. Reform is needed all along the production, harvest, transport and milling chain. In the milling sector, changes are needed all the way from the top management (the board and the senior management) to the field—the field officers, the locomotive drivers and the mill workers.

Management at all levels has been allowed to deteriorate. From my analysis of FSC's milling performance and reports from the ground, it seems as if there the rot has set in to every part of the industry. The FSC has been running at a loss since 1999, even though the gross revenue has increased steadily. In 2002 the FSC made a record loss of $24 million, largely because of poor management decisions, allowing the recovery of sugar already contained in the cane produced by growers to decrease from the 90 to 94 per cent before 1989 to less than 85 per cent, and in one mill area to even as low as 78 per cent. There were also reports of corruption in the way quotas were allocated in the field. I received many reports throughout the mill areas that locomotive drivers deliver more trucks to certain areas than were released from the depots, with the locomotive drivers 'selling' the 'extra' trucks for $2 to $3 each.

If this is true then it is no wonder that some growers have to wait for hours and days for their harvest quotas, when their neighbouring gangs are able to finish their harvests well before the season is over. Every day's delay in quota and trucks means an increase in the cost of the cane harvest, because they have to provide extra *yaqona* (kava), tea, *gulgulas* (Indian sweets) and in some cases even meals while the gang waits around for the quotas to be delivered by the field officers. Such delays could add additional costs of anywhere from $100 to $200 to farmers such as Aisha. While this may not be that critical for Aisha, for small farmers producing less than 100 tonnes a year, the delays could mean an additional $2 to $3 a tonne in harvest costs. This, together with farmers not paying particular attention to farm husbandry, could mean that many farms may become financially unviable—even with the current price regime that Fiji enjoys of two to three times the world price. What will happen when the preferential EU prices end in 2006? But I keep these thoughts to myself.

'As long as my grandson continues to work on the farm and rely on himself,' Aisha says with vague, fatalistic hope, 'and continues the good practices he learned from me and my husband, I think he will be alright.' The quiet dignity and inexhaustible patience of women like Aisha—whom I began calling *chaachi* halfway through our talk as a heartfelt gesture of affection and respect—is touching in ways that words cannot express. Innocent people caught in a tragedy not of their making, living in a world over which they have no control, living in vanishing hope and on the sufferance of others.

'*Khuda Hafiz, beta,*' Aisha *chaachi* says to me as I take leave in the gathering darkness. 'I am glad I do not have long to live. *Bhaut din nahin bacha hai. Insha Allah.*'

Bhaskar's dilemma

'What more do we have to cope with,' thinks Bhaskar, a fourth-generation canefarmer in Fiji. Little does he realise that problems such as these in the milling and processing sector are nothing compared to what is really in stock for him and other canefarmers. Sadly, the worst is yet to come.

For months, Bhaskar has been worried, and at times even depressed, about what has been happening in the Fiji sugar industry and how he is going to support his family. He is one of the 15,510 active growers in Fiji who produced about 3.2 million tonnes of sugar cane in 2003. He is about 52 years old with a wife and three children to support—one of whom is mentally handicapped. The family lives in a small house made of corrugated iron on their 10-acre cane farm of rolling-to-hilly land. The house has no running water or electricity. Land is leased from the Native Land Trust Board. Bhaskar's lease, which was last renewed for 30 years under the Agricultural and Landlord and Tenant Act (ALTA), is due to expire in 2012. He does not know if his lease, which is one of about 70 per cent of all cane farms leased from indigenous Fijians, will be renewed. Judging by the recent trends in the industry, ever since 2003 when over 50 per cent of leases were not renewed, he does not have very high hopes.

Bhaskar's concerns about the future of his family grow more acute by the day, as he hears about the ongoing woes in the industry—mill breakdowns, cutters sitting around idle waiting for their daily quota, sugarcane lorries queued up at all mills, rampant cane burning. He knows that such incidents are not that uncommon in the sugar industry. Similar news of mill breakdown or burnt cane was reported by FSC even before the first coup in May 1987. The difference today is that such news is almost a daily occurrence. That, too, within just a few weeks of the start of the crushing season, when farmers and others know that the mills should be operating efficiently following necessary maintenance that would have occurred after the close of the previous milling season last December. The Fiji Sugar Corporation, the sole miller, has had some five months to do the yearly maintenance and service the different machines. But this year the 'maintenance period' does not seem to have had much effect on the mill operating hours.

Before the May 1987 coup, Bhaskar does not remember mills shutting down for more than a day a week, if that. Every mill had regular stoppages for cleaning and unexpected repairs, but on average mill operating hours were usually around 144 hours a week. Today, FSC would be lucky if the Lautoka Mill, where Bhaskar sends his cane for crushing and processing, runs for less than half that amount of time; Lautoka is the newest mill and with the most advanced machinery and technologies. Yet, it is the worst performing mill.

Such problems with the mills have flow-on effects, which further affect Bhaskar's bottom line. With mills stopping, there are long queues of 7-tonne lorries for almost a kilometre. Lorry drivers sometimes find themselves waiting for a full day to unload their cane, not to mention having to put up with personal discomfort, particularly when there are no amenities readily available. Delays in unloading also mean that lorry drivers end up making only a single trip a day instead of at least two trips, adding further to the cost of harvesting and transport. Further, regular mill breakdown results in the extension of the crushing season beyond the 22–24-week season, and into the beginning of the rainy season around the November–December period. Rain also means delays in cane harvesting as well as difficulty in delivering cane via lorries on unsealed roads through sloppy or reclaimed swampy land—all adding to the increasing costs of harvesting and transport borne by the farmers.

Bhaskar's and other farmers' woes do not stop there. Regular mill stoppages also mean there is delay in getting harvest quotas out to the cane cutters. Post the 1987 coups, cane cutters could be sitting around idle as late as 9 am. Before 1987, cane cutters would have had by then at least three hours of cane cutting under their belt, and getting ready to have a break for tea or grog and some *gulgula* or biscuits. Since 1987, growers still had to supply drinks and snacks irrespective of whether a full quota of cane cutting had been completed or not. Cane-cutter efficiency had decreased by almost 50 per cent. This, too, was also not unknown to the industry—but nothing was being done.

However, it is a cutters' market. Bhaskar knows this too well from first-hand experience. After his brothers migrated to Australia in 1989, he could not find regular cane cutters. He had to resort to hiring substitute cutters, usually people from the outer islands who were often lured into coming to the mainland during cane-harvesting seasons to raise money for their church, school or some other project for the village. It being the cutters' market also means that Bhaskar is at the mercy of the demands of casual cutters. He has to provide not only a place for them to stay but also three meals a day, not to mention other in-kind supplies such as a billycan, and a cane knife. In addition, he has to provide a bonus of several dollars per tonne of cane over and above what the 'harvesting gang' of growers would have decided during the annual gang meetings prior to the cane-harvesting season. Under the MOGA a gang sets the harvesting rate as well as harvesting schedule for the growers who belong to that gang.

These agreed and officially recorded rates with the Sugar Commission of Fiji (SCOF) do not bear much resemblance to the real cost of cane harvesting that growers have to meet. Many a time cane cutters also demand the burning of cane to ease their own effort. After 1987, almost 50 per cent of cane supplied to the mills was burnt, as compared with less than 20 per cent burnt cane before the first coup. In 2002, over half of the cane was burnt; in the 2006 season, 52 per cent of total cane supplied was burnt.

Before the 1987 coups, Bhaskar's harvesting gang usually comprised farmers or their relatives, and gangs relied on each other's family members for their cane harvesting. The gang used to work as a team, as a 'family', helping each other out on farm and off farm. Today, his gang, like almost all others in the country, comprises 'substitute cutters', who are not necessarily related to the cane growers, or have much experience in cane cutting let alone cane farming. No wonder the cutter efficiency declined from 350 tonnes per cutter pre-1987 to less than 200 tonnes per cutter in 2002. After all, outsiders do not know much about cane cutting, often leaving some 10–15 per cent of cane from the ground uncut, usually the sweetest part of the cane.

The industry, it was estimated in 2003, lost about $11 million due to poor harvesting practices. Such losses no doubt all add to the increasing cost of cane production and the farmers' bottom line.

Today harvesting and transport costs account for more than 50 per cent of the total cost of about $44 per tonne of cane delivered to the mill gate, which is almost a third more than $35 a tonne a couple of decades ago. Before the 1987 coups, the harvesting and transport cost was around a third of the average total cost. This meant that an average farmer in the Lautoka mill area who supplied about 150 tonnes lost over $1,500 a year compared to what he used to make 20 years ago for the same volume of cane. Bhaskar, producing about 250 tonnes a year, would have lost approximately $2,500 due to such inefficiencies.

Farm productivity has also decreased considerably, mainly due to the practice of using hired labourers to work on the farm. Instead of cane farming being a family affair, today the majority of farms rely on the use of hired labour, largely because of the migration of family members who normally would have worked on the farm. The use of hired labourers, often with little supervision from farm owners, has also meant the common occurrence of *din maro,* where labourers shirk work, putting in less than expected effort for a day's pay, or cutting corners when applying fertiliser or weedicide. Bhaskar knows that when he uses *masala,* fertiliser, he can easily apply about 12 bags a day, whereas, with hired labour, he can expect no more than six to seven bags a day. This, together with farmers' reliance on crops of over five to six years instead of newly planted cane on at least a quarter of the field, has resulted in a decrease in farm productivity, costing the industry almost $30 million a year in foregone production.

Further, all canefarmers get hit by a double whammy because of poor milling efficiency. Regular mill breakdowns also mean poor mill efficiency and thus a reduced level of recovery of the sugar contained in sugar cane delivered by farmers such as Bhaskar. The sugar recovery rate has been reduced from about 86 per cent in 1972 to about 80 per cent in 2004; in 2002, the average sugar recovery rate was as low as 76 per cent.

Each percentage decrease in sugar recovery means, at the 2003 sugar prices and the current volume of cane processed by FSC, a total loss of about $1.5 million. During the period 1986–2000, on average $6 million worth of sugar already produced in sugar cane was annually lost through milling 'wastes', bagasse,[5] mud, molasses and waste water; 70 per cent of this loss was borne by the farmers.

Bhaskar recalls the days before the 1987 coups when every part of the industry—cane cutters, lorry operators, locomotive drivers, mill workers (crushing/processing)—all worked in harmony. He proudly remembers the Fiji sugar industry being regarded as better performing than the Australian and even the Mauritian sugar industries. In the face of the EU's sugar trade liberalisation, Australia and Mauritius reformed their industries to the point of being among the best performing in the world. Fiji, on the other hand, has regressed to the lowest 15 per cent of the world's producers.

The new loan of $85 million that Fiji Government obtained from the Exim Bank of India in 2002 may bring about much-needed improvements, even if one questions the logic in obtaining such a loan at this time when Fiji is about to lose its preferential market access into the EU. Bhaskar wonders if the problems can be turned around with new machines replacing old ones. An analysis of FSC's own mill-operating performance shows that the recent poor performance of the mills was due largely to poor management and little or no accountability at all levels of decision-

5 Bagasse is the dry pulpy fibrous residue that remains after sugar cane has been crushed to extract the juice.

making—from factory floor, to mill management, to the FSC Board. In addition, nepotism and the discriminatory practices of the management in appointing mill workers based on ethnicity rather than merit have contributed to the problems. Thus, there is doubt if one can expect much improvement in milling operations with the installation of new machinery without also accompanying improvements in management.

But poor management does not seem to have stopped. In 2004, the local radio carried news that certain mill managers were reprimanded for not performing, or for poor accountability of activities, which resulted in the mill having serious breakdowns. What was most disturbing was that one of the mills that reported regular breakdowns and poor performance was the oldest mill, but which used to be one of the best performing ones in the country, despite being the oldest mill, until a new manager came on board in the 1980s.

The FSC reported a profit in 2006 following several years of losses. Bhaskar finds this hard to believe, particularly when the FSC has got a new loan to repay and most of the mills have more than usual breakdowns and shut downs. Further, the volume of cane produced in 2006–07 has been low compared to previous years because of the decrease in the number of active growers due largely to expiry of leases and the eviction of farmers from the cane belt. Bhaskar wonders if this is just paper profits generated by some creative accounting to show that the industry is being turned around under the Bainimarama Interim Government.

Bhaskar finds this reported profit even harder to believe when the price received from the EU has decreased by at least 5 per cent, the first of a few further decreases as a result of the expiry of the Cotonou Agreement, which replaced the original Lomé Convention. Fiji, like other ACP countries, is now scheduled to lose its favourable conditions of two to three times the world market prices, although the preferential access may remain. This must surely affect the bottom line of the FSC, not to mention the growers, the landowners and the economy as a whole.

With the projected decline in EU prices, canefarmers in Fiji can expect to see a decline in their gross income of at least 20 per cent. With such a decline in gross income, Bhaskar thinks he may still be able to survive and cover his costs plus still have about $1,500 net income, but not many farms will remain afloat. He will be one of about 2,000 farmers in the Lautoka mill area who expect to remain financially viable. It is reported that almost a quarter of the farmers are not expected to even meet their cash costs of farming, let alone cover other 'in-kind' costs, when the price reduces by almost 25 per cent. On the other extreme, after the projected reforms in the EU's own agricultural setup, which may result in Fiji's price decreasing by about 39 per cent, almost two-thirds of the farms would become financially unviable at farm-cost structures by 2004. Bhaskar knows that his family is heading for hard times as a net income of $1,500 would put him well below the basic national poverty line.

With such changes in the farming sector, major structural changes are expected in Fiji, affecting many rural towns. Bhaskar knows from his sister living in Tavua that towns such as hers and adjacent Ba and Rakiraki are already suffering. Many retail shops in these towns are no longer operating, and there is even talk of some of these areas becoming 'ghost towns'. Not only would the farmers' own income decrease, there is also very little hope of finding alternative employment in rural areas as the whole rural economy will decline. Unless farmers are able to reduce their farming, harvesting and transport costs, there is no future prospect for sugar in Fiji.

But there is very little chance of achieving lower costs unless farmers revolutionise their farming practices—major replanting must be carried out, improvement in hired labour productivity must occur, and efficiency in harvesting and transport must take place. There have been increased efforts to encourage farmers to plant new cane, make greater use of mechanical harvesters as well as lorry transport instead of rail. Much of this, it was hoped, would have occurred with the use of the $350 million Adjustment Cost project funding that the EU was to provide. This funding has been put on hold as a result of the 2006 coup and events following it. It seems there is little hope in the industry of seeing major improvements in farm productivity or in the morale of farmers in the country generally. As Bhaskar said, '*Jab dil toot gaya tab kaise dil lage ganna ke kisani mein,* once you have lost all faith then how can you put your heart into cane farming.'

Bhaskar knows that with expected decline in his income, his family is heading for real hardship. Living on the farm, at least the family could grow some of its own basic food and even make its own coconut oil for cooking and family use. But he does not know how he will pay for things such as his kids' schooling with changes to his cane income in the future. Even though in Fiji there are no fees in primary schools, there are always the building fees, clothes and books to pay for. And then there are the occasional medical expenses or transport costs of coming into town to got to banks, or to go to the local hospital.

Bhaskar wonders if the time has come for him and the family to leave farming and move to Suva, as so many other farmers from his village have done since 1997. As their farm leases expired, many families dismantled their houses, or at least whatever they could take, and migrated to Suva. Some families had gone to live in squatter areas in Suva on land that belongs to the state. Only the fortunate families, those that had some savings, or were supported by relatives, were able to get 5-acre (2-hectare) agricultural plots in places like Navua or Nausori. Reports suggest that these displaced families are doing well. Many of the resettled farmers, who were able to obtain blocks of land to farm in Navua or even near the Nausori Airport, took up planting *dalo* (taro) and vegetables for the local markets. Today, when given the choice of going back to cane farming even with extended land lease, these resettled canefarmers all refuse point blank. And with good reason too—they are reported to be earning a lot more than what they did on their cane farms.

This is a real dilemma for Bhaskar. He, too, feels he must leave cane farming. He does not have the heart to uproot his family. But, most importantly, he does not know where to go. He regrets not completing high school, like his two brothers who did and became school teachers. Their skills, as science mathematics teachers, were very much in demand overseas and they had no difficulty getting permanent resident visas. His eldest brother, Ram Bahadur, left Fiji to reside in New Zealand, following the then prime minister David Lange's decision to open the doors of his country to people of Indo-Fijian origin. He migrated two years after the first coup in May 1987. His second brother, Sanjeev, 10 years younger, left after the 2000 coup, frustrated and anxious for the future of his young family of three. His brothers had sponsored Bhaskar's family for migration. But because of his handicapped child, Australia had rejected the application. Fate always seems to work against those who already have very few choices in life.

Bhaskar realises he does not have enough savings to move to Suva or even to the Lautoka–Nadi corridor and make a fresh start. He will have to find a place to live. But renting in urban or peri-urban areas is very expensive. In any case, he will have to find a job first before he can support his family in any urban area. He thinks that at his age, with little education, no one will give him a job. He thought of trying to get a piece of agricultural land. But that, too, seems to be out of reach today. Two years ago, lease on a 5-acre block of state land at Waituri, near Nausori airport, was available for \$4,000. Today, for same piece of land the lease sale price is almost \$20,000–\$30,000. He knows he cannot raise such amounts from the Fiji Development Bank or any of the commercial banks. Bhaskar does not have any savings that would be required as a down payment or assets to use as collateral. Perhaps, he thinks, he may ask one of his brothers now living abroad to lend him some money. But, being a proud man, he is reluctant.

In the meantime, Bhaskar hopes that ongoing talks about diversification of the sugar industry become a reality and cane farming remains a profitable venture as the FSC generates more electricity to sell to the Fiji Electricity Authority, or the FSC begins to produce ethanol as biofuel. Perhaps with the increase in global crude oil prices to almost US\$100, ethanol production for cars and cogeneration might become financially viable and the demand for sugar cane would continue, if not for sugar than at least for ethanol or the electricity made from it.

Diversification into these other commodities could become a reality if the industry stakeholders—the FSC, farmers, the landowners and the government—can also agree on a partnership formula and then seriously take steps towards diversification, just like Mauritius had done once it became clear that the EU sugar trade liberalisation was going ahead. The last time they talked about forming a stakeholder-based company in 2002, to encourage landowners to have equity in the sugar industry to encourage renewal of land leases, the initiative fizzled out because politics, and perhaps greed, got in the way and the stakeholders could not agree amongst themselves on an equitable sharing formula. Bhaskar wonders if it is going to be any different in the future. In the charged atmosphere following the December 2006 coup, he wonders if the interim government and other stakeholders are capable of making rational decisions. He thinks not. Judging by the proposal to establish another sugar mill in Seaqaqa by the interim government at a time when the sugar prices are declining, farmers are leaving in large numbers, and the production, harvesting and transport costs are skyrocketing, there seems to be little hope of seeing any objective and rational decision any time soon.

What the future holds for families like Bhaskar's is anyone's guess. Perhaps it is *Ram ki marji,* God's wish. Bhaskar, a staunch Hindu, leaves his fate in God's hands. But also being a realist, he knows he has to do something, as nobody else will. But what?

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