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‘The children of the wind’¹

A journey to Chattisgarh

We made no inquiries about India or about the families people had left behind. When our ways of thinking changed, and we wished to know, it was too late.

— V.S. Naipaul²

18 May 1901. Chiriya. Father’s Name Kuru. Age 17. A Bhumihar from the village of Bandarchua in Lohardaga district of Bihar, boarded the *SS Fazilka II* for Fiji. He was an indentured labourer, one of 60,000 who went to Fiji between 1879 and 1916. He was recruited upcountry; precisely where and in what circumstances is not known. But the rest of the details are clinical, precise and authoritative, brushed clean of the dusty, murky details of history. From his village, Chiriya was taken to Purulia Depot in late March and from there transported to Calcutta. A few days later, he appeared before Fiji’s Emigration Agent, A.C. Stewart, who certified that:

1 Originally appeared in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 16(2) (2013): 297–307.

2 V.S. Naipaul, ‘Two worlds’, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 2001.

the Man above described has appeared before me and has been engaged by me on behalf of the Government of Fiji and is willing to proceed to that country to work for hire; and that I have explained to him all matters concerning his engagement and duties.³

This, Stewart said confidently, was also ‘done at the time of registration by the Registering Officer appointed by the Indian Government’. All matters properly explained to an unlettered 17-year-old by an important *angrezi saheb* (white man) with a myriad other matters to attend to! On 4 May, the Depot Surgeon at Calcutta certified that ‘we have examined and passed the above-named Man as fit to emigrate; that he is free from all bodily and mental disease; and that he has been vaccinated since engaging to emigrate’. His superior officer, the Surgeon Superintendent, agreed. All the protocols and procedures of inspection and registration completed, the Protector of Emigrants on 18 May authorised his emigration: ‘Permitted to proceed as in a fit state of health to undertake the voyage to Fiji.’ A month later, Chiriya arrived in Fiji. And, then, promptly disappears from the record books forever, his name erased from the pages of history.

I began my journey in search of Fiji *girmitiyas* well over 30 years ago, in 1977, as part of my doctoral dissertation on the origins of Fiji’s north Indian migrants. During the course of my research, I read and coded each and every one of the 45,000 Emigration Passes and computer-analysed them. It was an unimaginably tedious, eyesight-destroying task, sitting by myself and reading reels upon reels of microfilm in the darkened basement of the Australian National Library in Canberra—month after month. Each important piece of information in the pass—caste of the migrant, his or her district of origin and district of registration, sex, next-of-kin—had to be coded and entered individually on a specially designed sheet of paper and analysed using the computer. It had to be done. Each pass considered individually. Perhaps in some subconscious sense I was paying homage to those who had crossed the *kala pani*, the dark, dreaded seas, to come to Fiji, to give us all a new beginning, and who were the foundational spring of our own lives.

It was during that exercise, with bits and pieces of information supplied by my father about his indentured father’s background in India, that I had discovered my paternal grandfather’s Emigration Pass. Using information

3 This, and subsequent references in this paragraph, are from Chiriya’s ‘Emigration Pass’, National Archives of Fiji, Suva.

in it, I had visited his village in Bahraich district during my year-long fieldwork in India in 1978, and reconnected with my ancestral family; much to my father's unbounded delight but to my very mixed emotions. Ganga water, which I had brought back in a Teachers whisky bottle, remained one of his most prized possessions till his last days. It was kept in a green tin box underneath his bed amidst important family documents; holy water from the holiest of rivers from his father's land, drops of which were ritually poured on the lips of dead relatives to wish the departed soul well on its next journey.

Now, 30 years later, I am embarking on another journey of discovery. Chiriya was my Nana, my mother's father. I never knew him in the way I knew Aja, my paternal grandfather, who died a grand old man when I was 10; a picture of him remains vivid in my mind. But Chiriya Nana died very young, when my mother was just a little child. She had only the dimmest memory of him, unable even to recall what he looked like. My mother and her youngest siblings, two sisters and a brother, were brought up in various parts of Labasa by some distant relations now gone and forgotten, in circumstances about which not a word was ever said but about which much was understood. Chiriya remained just a name to us, nothing more. There are no photographs, no mementoes. My mental archive of Nana was blank.

Until about two decades ago.

It all came about in an unexpected way. My reputation as the genealogist of the *girmitiyas* spread far and wide with the publication of my first book, which presented the fruits of my doctoral research, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (1983).⁴ Soon afterwards, I began receiving enquiries from people, at first few but then increasing rapidly in volume, about their ancestral connections to India and whether I could help them locate the Emigration Passes of their great-grandparents. Often the enquiry was futile because the information was vague and scanty. The name of the person was remembered and of the ship too, but there could be dozens of Gajadhars or Bisuns or Autars on the same ship. The name of the district of origin could make all the difference but the response often was, 'he came from somewhere around there', meaning the eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh (Basti, Faizabad, Gonda and the like). The need

4 Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, 1983).

to know, to reconnect, is genuine and in its own way deeply moving. There is a certain poignancy to the desperate search for roots, but what is lost is now lost forever.

These enquiries bring me back to Chiriya Nana and the need for me to 'do something' to fill the gap in that side of our family's history, if for nothing else than for my late mother. A child growing up without ever knowing her parents is a haunting thought. If I don't do it, no one else will. I had nothing to go on except conversations with old folk in the village and older members of our extended family, now all gone. Slowly, over the years, fragments of a picture emerge. Nana served his indenture as a train driver's helping hand in the Tua Tua Sector. He most certainly was not a 'train driver', as some people vaguely claimed. That was a white man's job. Aja had also served his indenture as a stable hand in the same sector, which leads me to wonder if the two men knew each other—probably not. After his indenture ended, Aja settled in Tabia on leased land as a small-time cultivator of rice, lentils, peanuts, maize and other such crops until sugar cane arrived in the 1930s.

Nana settled across the Laqere River in a place called Nuk Nuk. The place is now covered in thick bush with no sign of previous human habitation at all. As children, we knew of Nuk Nuk as Nana's place, but also as a place of bad memories, haunted, a place to be avoided by children. Nuk Nuk is completely cut off from the village of Laqere. Why Nana settled in this remotest of places, away from all his fellow Indians, remains a mystery. Nana's heart was not in farming, it was said. He spent all his time fishing in the sea nearby, a loner at peace only with himself, a recluse. That was a puzzle because interdependence and cooperation were the only way an Indian village functioned. People had to work together to plant, to harvest, to celebrate life and mourn its passing, but Nana seemed to relish living on the outer edges of society. He had some close family members living in the neighbouring settlements and that for him was enough.

After Nana's death sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s, the extended family fractured. Some went to Dreketi in southern Vanua Levu to work as copra cutters on Don Bull's coconut plantation. Others followed. From Dreketi they went to Savusavu to copra cutting jobs on the Vulagei Estate, and there they remained for the rest of their lives. Distant relatives are still scattered around the place. We had no contact with them at all. Savusavu might as well have been on a distant island somewhere far away in the Pacific. There were no roads linking Savusavu to Labasa, the local town,

and a boat journey was hazardous and taken only in the rarest or most desperate of circumstances. Rumour had it that some younger members of the family had gone 'astray'. One of them was said to have married a Fijian or a part-European, which was then simply unheard of in Tabia. But all that was distant news. Caught up in our own world, we forgot about our extended maternal family in other parts of the island.

In 2009, while researching at the National Archives in Fiji, I decided to look for Nana's Emigration Pass, but there was little to go by. All I had heard was that Nana had arrived 'a few years before' Aja did in 1908. Which ship, which district, which year: nothing was known. All I had was Nana's name. I began working back from the 1908 Emigration Passes of the *Sangola II* to the Emigration Passes of the *Ganges*, which had come to Fiji in 1900, some 22 ships earlier. Since the passes are organised alphabetically, the search was not so arduous. I looked at all Men's Emigration Passes beginning with the letter 'C'. If there was more than one Chiriya among the thousands who arrived in Fiji between 1900 and 1908, my quest would be dashed, for I would then have no means of knowing which one was Nana. Lady Luck smiled upon me. For all those years, there was only one Chiriya: my Nana, all of five feet and four inches tall, a labourer, with the distinguishing feature on his body being a scar on the left forearm. And he was only a lad of 17 when he enlisted for Fiji.

Armed with all this information about Nana, I knew I would one day attempt to visit his village, just as three decades earlier I had gone to Bahaich to visit Aja's place. It was a journey I would have to make in memory of my mother. But precisely when, I was not sure. Once again providence intervened. Siddharth Kak, the founder of the Surabhi Foundation in Mumbai, wanted to 'bring to life' *The Encyclopedia of the Indian Diaspora*, published in 2006, of which I was the general editor. That volume provides, so far, the most comprehensive treatment of the growth of the Indian diaspora from precolonial to modern times. Siddharth rang to enlist my (readily given) support to make 10 or so documentaries on Indian communities scattered around the globe, with the support of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs. I was a little concerned about the Indian Government's involvement; concerned that the series might be used as syrupy propaganda for the glorious achievements of the Indian diaspora, but Siddharth's reputation for integrity and probity is solid and

reassuring. I would act as an historical consultant to the project, help make contacts, suggest themes and lines of enquiry but would otherwise remain uninvolved.

After a series of long telephone conversations over several weeks, Siddharth suggested that the last documentary should be about the diaspora's search for its roots in India, and that I should be one of the subjects of the story. The prospect was intriguing but in view of my heavy commitments in Canberra, I doubted if I would be visiting India anytime soon. Fortuitously, an invitation came from the University of Hyderabad to give the keynote address to a conference on the Indian diaspora there. I could accomplish two things at once. Siddharth set filming arrangements in motion when I told him. Aditi Dave, the producer for this documentary, sent me a series of questions and suggestions she wanted me to consider, and asked for Nana's Emigration Pass so that she could make the travel arrangements, liaise with local officials and decide on shooting locations.

Aditi contacted the Resident Commissioner of Lohardaga to enquire about the location of Bandarchua. At first, there was great confusion. There is a place by that name in Lohardaga's Samdega district, she was told, but there is also one in Jaspur district in Chattisgarh. Which one was it? Lohardaga and Jaspur are neighbouring districts now in two different provinces. A series of hectic emails ensue. Luckily, a piece of information in the Emigration Pass saved the day. Bandarchua on the Emigration Pass was in the *tehsil* (subdistrict) of Khunkuri. There was only one *tehsil* by that name, and it was in Chattisgarh! We were all relieved.

The physical boundaries of this region had changed several times in recent decades. In preindependent India, Bihar was a large sprawling province covering several linguistic and geographic areas. After independence, as state boundaries were drawn up, certain places had been shifted from one province to another. Parts of Sirgooja, for instance, which was also known as Lohardaga, had been moved into Madhya Pradesh. In 2000, new language-based states were created. Among them was Jharkhand, the heartland of tribal India, with Ranchi as its capital and Lohardaga as one of its districts, and the other was Chattisgarh, with Raipur as its administrative centre. Bandarchua, I discovered, was one of 99 nondescript villages in the *tehsil* of Khunkuri.

From Hyderabad, I flew to Ranchi via Delhi, and met up with the Surabhi documentary team: Aditi, Sudiksha Dhooria, Kaushik, the camera man from Calcutta, camera attendant Shyamal, production person, Rupesh,

and the driver Binod. All of them looked so young, none over their mid-30s. Their purposefulness and professionalism impressed me. Their minds were fully on the work at hand and there was no time to waste. We drove around central Ranchi looking for batteries and other items, had lunch in a surprisingly pleasant air-conditioned restaurant, and then went to the Deputy Commissioner's office for consultation and direction. Kamal Kishore Soan, an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, was giving an audience to local leaders, both men and women, who had come to complain about matters of local importance, such as delays in the disbursement of allocated funds for rural projects. He despatched them with great speed and tactfulness while we waited and watched. The camera crew told me to look attentively at the proceedings. Seriousness was writ large on my face as they went about their business. It was close to six o'clock and the day's proceedings had still not finished. Soan postponed our meeting till 8.30 pm at his official residence. Long days and very late dinners were common fare in those parts, and in India generally, I quickly discovered. At the residence, there was more shooting, more staged conversation, more helpful advice about who to see in Jaspur Nagar—where we would be heading the following day. His obligation to us was completed around nine o'clock, and Soan rushed off to another engagement, a wedding reception.

We left for Jaspur Nagar soon after dawn on a five-hour drive. Some mirthful scenes from earlier Indian journeys returned. The roads were clogged with dangerously overloaded, gaudily painted trucks with 'Horn Please', and 'Awaz Do' written prominently at their backs. One which split my sides said, 'I am Horning, R U'. A constant feature of travelling on Indian roads was the incessant hooting and tooting when overtaking a vehicle or when alerting pedestrians or animals to the oncoming traffic. I was amazed at the nonchalance with which chickens and goats and cows crossed the road—as if they owned the damned thing. Live and let live was the principle there. What would happen if you hit a chicken, I ask. '*Poora barbaadi*, total loss,' someone says. Not only would the driver have to pay for the dead chicken but its owner would demand the income foregone. If the chicken had lived on for another five years, she would have produced so many scores of eggs and so many dozens of chooks and compensation would be demanded for these as well. Some owners would insist that even their roosters laid eggs, someone said to much mirth. 'This is India, *yaar*. *Sab chalta hai*, anything goes.' 'What if you hit a goat?' 'God help you,' Kaushik says, '*Double barbaadi*.' 'And what if you hit a person?' 'Don't stop, for God's sake, drive fastest to the nearest police

station, otherwise they will kill you and burn your vehicle.’ It sounds a bit overly dramatic but I got the picture. I had been similarly advised about driving in the highlands of New Guinea some years back.

I had always imagined this part of India, its geographical heartland, to be tropical green full of forested hills and large rivers and animals about which we had read in our primary school texts: *bhaloo* (bear), *sher* (lion), *bathi* (elephant), *bandar* (monkey). Forested hills were in the far distance on both sides of the road though not verdant, but the plains areas had been cleared for agriculture. The rivers were low and virtually stagnant. It was the dry season and there were only brown stalks of harvested rice in the hazy heat and swirling dust in the distance. Along the road in the shade of large mango trees people were idly standing around. I learned that there was no local employment in the hot season. Someone told me that about 60 per cent of the population was engaged in seasonal migration. It is history repeating itself. In the late nineteenth century, large numbers from this region were heading off to the Calcutta jute mills, Assam tea gardens, even to the Bombay textile mills, for employment. The districts that featured prominently in early colonial migration to Mauritius and the West Indies, in particular, were the Bihar districts of Arrah, Sahebgunj, Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Patna, Chapra and Ghazipur (in eastern Uttar Pradesh). As supplies in these areas dried up, recruitment moved up north-eastern Uttar Pradesh districts of Basti, Azamgarh, Gorakhpur, Faizabad, Gonda, Bahraich and others. It is difficult to imagine now but a region that seemed so desolate and diminished was the site of massive migration 100 years previously. People shook their heads in disbelief when I told them this.

We stopped at a *chai* shop on our way. The camera crew wanted to shoot me talking to local people as if asking for directions to Bandarchua. I approached the owner, a dark man in old, tattered clothes. He shook my hand and was eager to talk but balked when he saw the camera crew. Aditi told him the purpose of our conversation. The man looked at me quizzically and invited me inside for a private conversation. ‘*Aapas ke baat,*’ he said. ‘Are you from the government?’ he asks. ‘No,’ I say. ‘From the police?’ ‘No.’ ‘Will I get into trouble if I talk to you?’ I was perplexed by the man’s anxiety, his furtive glances to see who might be watching. By now, crowd of onlookers had gathered. I went out and talked to them in my surprisingly fluent Hindi and explained the purpose of my visit to their part of the world. They listened attentively and nodded their heads in appreciation but with absolutely no idea where Fiji was or if people from

this region had gone overseas (or anywhere else for that matter). That was an unthinkable thought. The *chai* shop owner was clearly pleased at the crowd's reaction and told me the direction in which I had to travel and the time it would take to reach there. All this was really for the camera. We took several shoots because instead of looking at me, the man kept smiling and giving side glances at the camera!

After the shoot, we had tea. The man brought my cup himself, a mark of respect for a visitor. I dreaded this. Indian tea is not tea but milky syrup, and I am diabetic. I was acutely conscious of my erratic observance of dietary restrictions on this trip, which would infuriate my family. The man looked at me with appreciation and anticipation. I closed my eyes and took a tiny sip—nothing more than making contact with the cup with my lips. When the man turned towards the kitchen, I quickly dumped the tea in a stagnant drain nearby. '*Theek tha?* Was it okay?' the man asks. '*Bahut badhiya!* Very good!' I say. By this time, I was practised at telling small lies to keep my sanity and my health intact. And by this time, too, I also knew the routine of road travel in India. Toilet paper is an essential item to be carried in your personal luggage at all times. I couldn't squat in the privy and I hadn't used water for toilet since I left my village in Labasa over 40 years ago! We carried several bottles of water with us, although I know that what is good for health is not necessarily good for road travel. A full bladder on a bumpy road is, well, not pleasant, to put it politely. I have difficulty 'taking a leak' in public, even in a secluded area. Where and how will I wash my hands? And 'doing the other business' in the open is simply impossible to imagine, with flies buzzing around and people looking in your direction. Indian public toilets are a dreadful mess and to be avoided at all times. Better to have an empty stomach and an empty bladder, I decided.

I was perplexed by the *chai* man's initial reluctance to speak with me and wondered why as we resumed our journey. Kaushik filled me in on the details of something I had heard in Ranchi. The country through which we were travelling was Naxalite country. The Naxalite or Naksalvadi movement began in West Bengal in the late 1960s inspired by the doctrines of Mao Zedong. A loose coalition of complementary interests, its initial aim was the redistribution of land to the landless through armed struggle. Prominent among its early leaders and supporters were people from the tribal heartlands of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, places such as Jharkhand and Chattisgarh. The movement attracted notoriety through the beheadings of landlords and other acts of terror and violence. A few days before we arrived in Ranchi,

newspapers had carried reports of three beheadings of police informers; people taken from their homes in the middle of the night, interrogated, found guilty, killed and their bodies returned to their families. Just like that: retribution and revenge were swift and brutal, which explained the *chai* man's hesitation to talk to me. 'Is this is a terrorist group?' I asked. 'No,' I was told, 'here everyone is either a Naxal or a Naxal sympathiser, even government ministers.' As I saw all the destitution and poverty around me, I could understand why. 'If I was living here, I would be a Naxal too,' someone piped up from the back of the car.

Kaushik, the camera man, was hawk-eyed for shoot sites. We stopped several times as he walked out briskly to survey the scene, the light, the shade. Then he would set up his camera and give the thumbs-up for me to perform. I walked purposefully looking into the distance with a solemn expression on my face, and said my piece in clear, authoritative tones. There is little room for ambiguity and nuance in television talk. 'Keep it simple, Sir,' Aditi advised me. But one take was never enough. Something invariably went wrong. There was someone in the background. I had used my hand to waive off an insect hovering about my face as I spoke. There was noise from a truck on the road. I looked too tense for the part. Could I please redo my bit one more time? One more time became several more times on virtually every shoot.

The routine was draining. Gradually, I became aware of the cultural difference between me as a scholar and the crew as film makers. They had their scripts and their questions. They did not seem overly interested in what I said but rather in how I said it, how it would all look on film, the scenes people would remember. 'How will this all fit into the overall picture,' I asked Aditi. 'Don't worry, Sir,' she said, 'leave it to me.' I did; she was the expert. They were so solicitous, so respectful, so innocent-looking. They listened to me politely, shook their heads respectfully in the quintessential Indian way, but I knew they would do exactly as they had decided.

Apart from some breezy banter, we didn't talk much on the drive. There was not much to share. The documentary team was about half my age. Their taste in contemporary culture and music was alien to me. They sometimes talked about the antics of this hero or that heroine, about a particular scene from a famous recent movie, but I was lost. I had resumed seeing Hindi movies after a lapse of two or three decades, but by then everything had changed, the characters, the concerns, the whole scene. At the Hyderabad

conference, I had chaired a session on Bollywood and the Indian diaspora. Farhad Khojratti, from the University of Mauritius, gave a deeply learned paper titled 'Choosing Bollywood: A phenomenological reading of the contemporary Indian diasporic adoption of the Bollywood text with focus on Mauritius', and a highly animated but very knowledgeable Jorge Diego Sanchez from the University of Salamanca in Spain spoke on 'What's after *Bend it Like Beckham?* Representations and challenges of the women of the Indian diaspora in British cinema'. They spoke enthusiastically about such films as *Hum Aap ke Hain Kaun?* (Who am I to you?), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (The big-hearted will take away the bride), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (Sometimes there's happiness, sometimes there's sorrow) and many more with similarly jaunty titles.

Sitting in the moderator's chair, I felt like a cultural Neanderthal. I knew nothing about contemporary Indian cinema, which was the subject of such learned discourse at the conference and in scholarly gatherings generally. There was a whole new world out there about which I was completely innocent. How had this come to pass, I wondered. What about movies that moved my generation: *Pakeeza* (Pure), *Waqt* (Time), *Guide*, *Sangam* (Confluence), *Madhumati*, *Ganga Jamuna*, *Mother India* and the greatest of them all, *Pyasaa* (Wistful)? Shah Rukh Khan, I learnt, was a major Bollywood star, but what about Dilip Kumar or even Rajesh Khanna? Kajol and Kareena Kapoor were the latest female heart throbs of the screen, but what about Waheeda Rehman and Zeenat *Dum Maro Dum* Aman, of my youthful years, the stuff of our romantic dreams and fantasies? I felt stranded in a rapidly vanishing past, a remnant in my own lifetime. I kept my thoughts to myself. The sense of being lost and being irrelevant to the world around me had been with me for some time, and the distance between the past the present increased daily.

'What do you like about India, Sir?' Aditi asked me, trying to start a conversation after a long silence. 'Your cricket team,' I said with a chuckle. It was a cruel joke, I know, because the much vaunted Indian cricket team had been a total wipe out in Australia, a cause for much national anguish. We laughed and compared notes about who should be in and who should be out of the Indian national team. But Aditi's question touched something deep in me, though I could not quite put my finger on it. I still cannot answer that question. Many Indians of the colonial Indian diaspora carry in their heads a rather fossilised, idealised image of India as a land of great myths and legends, of heroic figures and the great epics with which they grew up, especially the Ramayana. They would be

in for a rude shock as they passed through modern airports as good as any in the world, as they travelled along modern highways in Hyderabad and Bangalore, for instance, or shopped in swanky outlets in most metropolitan centres. You did not have to go to London to shop at Marks and Spencer—these prestigious names were now common in India. Craze for things *phoren* (foreign), once so common and so irritatingly insistent, is now firmly a thing of the past.

I detected in most people with whom I spoke a quiet sense of pride in being an Indian. They might want to visit other countries but India is where they would live. It is their home; they want no other. Aditi went to the United Kingdom to do a course in journalism and could easily have stayed on there, but she returned ‘to her own place’, where her friends and family were. This experience is not uncommon. There is even a major Bollywood movie about it, *Swades: We the People*, if I recall correctly, about a man returning to his native land to apply his foreign-learned skills to improve the life of his people. I don’t see the country through rose-tinted glasses; the newspapers are full of reports about corruption and violence, communal tensions are real, and poverty still stalks large parts of the country. But there is a genuine, unyielding commitment to resolving the nation’s myriad problems through the values and practices of democracy. And that, when you think about it, is no mean achievement in the developing world. That would be one answer to Aditi’s difficult question.

For the first time in my life, I was travelling fully equipped with an iPhone and an iPad, much to the puzzled bewilderment of my family who know me at home as a complete technological innocent. ‘From nineteenth century straight to the twenty-second, eh,’ my brother Kamla quipped. But these gadgets were a godsend on this journey. They enabled me to switch off and retreat into my inner world. This I did by listening to the music of those long gone days of my childhood. There was Mukesh’s *Ye Mera Diwanapan Hai*, sung on the screen by the inimitable Dilip Kumar in the film *Yahudi* (Jew). I realised quickly as I fiddled with my iPhone that other artists have also sung that song, and I spent hours comparing the various renditions. I similarly spent time with other favourites, such as *Aaj Jaane Ki Zid Na Karo* (Please don’t insist on leaving today), famously put to music by the immortal Farida Khanum and with Talat Mehmood’s songs of love and loss, *Aye dil mujhe aisi jagah le chal*. Hindi music of a certain vintage has the capacity to touch the deepest places in my heart, to reduce me to tears with its haunting melodies. I didn’t think Aditi or

any of the other youngsters would understand this, but this is also an integral part of my Indian heritage that has formed me and without which I would be incomplete and all the poorer.

As dry paddy fields flash by, old memories of childhood return: the dry rice fields on which we played fierce games of soccer with balls made from rolled up paper, of the backbreaking work during the planting and harvesting seasons, of the grizzled old *girmitiyas* congregating at our home once in a while, smoking *suluka*, rough, handmade cigarettes wrapped in pandanus leaves, or chewing tobacco, singing *bhajans*, devotional songs, and reminiscing about their past in a language none of us understood. What a journey they had undertaken; from this place in the middle of nowhere to sugar colonies thousands of miles away. What moved them? Why did they leave? I simply don't know. As an exile myself now, I can quite imagine their anguish at not being able to return to the place of their birth even for a visit, dying in a land they never fully embraced. I think of my mother, betrothed at 13, married at 16, bearing eight children, all except one at home, the trauma and taunts she endured because she did not conceive during the first three years of her marriage, but ending her life as a respected member, *kaki* (father's younger brother's wife), *mami* (mother's brother's wife), *mausi* (mother's sister), *phua* (father's sister), of the entire extended family scattered all around Vanua Levu, a renowned singer of wedding songs and a fount of knowledge about the proper rituals to follow for the different *pujas*. Above all, I think about Nana, 17 years old, no more, who took his fate in his hands, shouldered his small bundle of worldly possessions, and left for an unknown place called Fiji.

We arrived in Bandarchua mid-morning. We had decided to do two days of shooting here, but word had been received the previous evening that the Maoist Coordinating Committee had declared a strike the following day. That would mean that all public roads would be blocked by the Naxalites. Everyone knew that vehicles which breached the roadblocks would be fair game, blown up by improvised roadside devices. But I had to be in Ranchi to catch the plane back to Australia the day after so shooting would have to be sped up. As Kaushik set up his camera, a crowd gathered around us. We were an item of great curiosity; film crews are rare in this part of the world. Word quickly gets around about the purpose of my visit and people were curious about who my family might be. I met Mr Narayan Prasad Gupta, the Deputy Sarpanch (Chair) of the village council and Mr Ram Kishore Saipakra. When I explained why I was there, Mr Gupta asked for my *titol*. He means my caste name. Lal does not help; it is not a caste

name. I mention Nana's caste, Bhumihar. That, too, is of no use. I am not disappointed. I had not come to Bandarchua with any expectation of finding Nana's relatives here. After all, there had been no contact for well over a century. Merely to find the place he came from would be enough for me, more than enough.

I walked around. The land was flat and dry as far as the eye could see, dusty and shimmering in the heat. The village centre where we had stopped had several tattered shops selling soft drinks and cheap goods for the locals. Shop signs were painted in bright colours, in both English and Hindi. People were generally well dressed in shirts and long pants; the old familiar garb of *dhoti* (traditional men's garment) and *kurta* (traditional Indian shirt) were not much in evidence—a sign of modest prosperity perhaps? There was a television in one of the shops, and a teenager, knowing that I am from Australia, told me that Australia has just won the toss and could bat first in what would be the final Test. He knew many of the Australian players by name, and was full of praise for David Warner, Ricky Ponting and Michael Clarke. '*Phir se barbadi*, bad luck again,' I say light-heartedly. The boys laughed, knowing the barbed truth of my comment. Many people carried mobile phones, and music from the radio was everywhere. Bandarchua may be remote, but like the rest of India, it is not isolated. It is a part of V.S. Naipaul's *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, the title of one of his books about contemporary India.⁵

'What kind of ridiculous name is Bandarchua? Monkey-Rat,' I ask Mr Gupta, slightly puzzled. 'It is not Bandarchua, it is Bandarchuan.' 'And that means?' 'In olden days,' Mr Gupta continued, '*kuan* (well) was called *chuan*. There was a *chuan* in the village where monkeys from the forest would come for a drink every day. That is how the village got its name.' 'Does that *chuan* still exist?' I am curious. 'Oh, yes,' Mr Gupta said. 'It is very near my house.' We take the tar-sealed road for a few kilometres from the town and veer off on to the dry paddy fields. A kilometre or so later, we come to the *chuan*. It is still there after hundreds, perhaps thousands of years—a small round hole, a metre in diameter, no more, full of greenish water with a few, stray rice stems floating in it. I commented on its neglected state. It might just as well be another watery hole in the ground anywhere in India. Both Mr Gupta and Mr Saipaikra nodded their heads in sadness. 'There is no consciousness of history among our

5 V.S. Naipaul, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (London: Heinemann, 1990).

people anymore,' Mr Gupta said. '*Itihas se kutch parichay nahin*, it is all money, money, money.' 'It is the same everywhere,' I replied. *Sabhi jaghe aisa hi hai*.

I wanted to commemorate my visit to this historic place by planting a mango plant we had brought along with us, at Siddharth's suggestion. A colleague (anthropologist Chris Gregory) familiar with the region later told me that the mango tree was the right choice. It is associated with fecundity, fertility and auspiciousness. Tales abound of barren women falling pregnant after eating a mango. Having planted the tree, Chris informed me, I would have to go back and arrange an *aamaa bivah*, a special kind of ceremony related to the mango fruit, when the first fruits appear. I doubt if it will be anytime soon. Perhaps my children will complete the return journey for me, though I know in my heart of hearts that it is an idle thought; their interests and aspirations are different to mine. History, the search for ancestral roots so profoundly important to me emotionally, holds little interest for them. A spade materialised from a nearby home, we dug a hole by the roadside adjacent to the *chuan* and planted the tree in Nana's memory.

Then we left. Tears welled up as I walked back to our waiting vehicle, my journey complete. I came in search of my Nana's place, and I had found it in this desolate landscape. I felt my (late-middle) age, and the passage of time. Suddenly I became conscious that I am a Nana myself now, of 13-month-old Jayan. He is our pride and joy, taking his first tentative steps into the world as we move inexorably towards our twilight years. We likely won't be around when he comes of age. I wonder about the world in which he will grow up, the influences that will shape his life, whether he will remember *his* Nana, show curiosity about the old man's history and heritage, his journeys and transformations. I would not be surprised if he thinks his Nana's odyssey is beyond comprehension, a figment of someone's imagination; born on a farm to unlettered parents, growing up without electricity, piped water or paved roads, being taught in primary school in open thatched huts, reading at home by flickering kerosene wick lamp, passing strange external exams and managing mysteriously to escape the world of poverty and destitution to a life of learning in the West. My journey will appear as improbable to Jayan as my Nana's appears to me, and probably just as intrinsically fascinating.

Who precisely was Nana was still unresolved in my mind as we headed back to Ranchi in the gathering darkness. Was he a Bhumihar, as his Emigration Pass says, member of a powerful landowning caste that ruled the roost in these parts, people of high rank and powerful connections associated with violent attacks on Dalits and other lower-caste communities for demanding better wages and other rights, people who are regularly targeted by the Naxalites? And why would the son of a Bhumihar migrate? Had Nana escaped from the village for some crime he had committed? Had a girl from another caste been impregnated, inviting swift and severe retribution? Was there a drought in the region which forced young men to seek new prospects beyond the village? Was he at odds with the law? I can only ask these questions; I have no answers. And in the absence of hard evidence, the possibility that Nana was a Bhumihar must remain open.

But another possibility was inadvertently suggested by Mr Gupta. He did not know any Bhumihars in the district; perhaps he was reluctant to identify them for fear of an attack, but there used to be a group known as Bhuinhars in the area, all now gone or absorbed into the settled agricultural community. And who were these people? These were the aboriginal settlers of the land, subsequently displaced by Aryan migrants, and now scattered in small numbers throughout Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh—but once concentrated in the Chota Nagpur plateau, the tribal heartland of India. There were different types of Bhuinhars, differentiated from each other by rank, rituals and tradition. Some were patronised by the rulers while others were shunted to the periphery. Some assimilated with the new migrants from the north in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries while others lived at the edge of forests as hunters and gatherers or as shifting agriculturalists who regarded working for wages beneath them. Agriculture was not in their blood; they disdained the routine of settled life. Some went into gold panning in rivers and streams nearby, and moved on when prospects there dried up. There was something else about the Bhuinhars I read somewhere later that stuck in my mind; that they liked to live in isolation from the rest of the world, preferring the company of their own close kith and kin. Nothing mattered more to them than their independence and freedom of movement. *Pawan-bans* (the children of the wind) they sometimes called themselves, establishing indirect connections to Lord Hanuman, *Pawan-putra* (the son of the wind).

All this would explain Nana's otherwise peculiar behaviour perfectly: why he preferred to fish rather than work on the land, why he settled in remote Nuk Nuk, far from the civilised world of Tabia and Laqere. Perhaps as a young lad he was out and about, looking for work, met a recruiter who promised him milk and honey in the *tapus* (islands), perhaps not far away, fell into the recruiter's trap and left. Ethnographic literature on the castes and tribes of central India in the late nineteenth century suggest that the Bhuinhar are a dark-brown, well-proportioned race, with plentiful black, straight hair on the head, but with little hair on the face. Of middle height, they have compact, light-framed figures and are capable of very hard work. This will do me as a mental picture of the Nana I never knew.

The past is now truly past. Whether Nana was a Bhumihar of the settled dominant agricultural community of Bihar, or a restless Bhuinhar wanderer of the forested hills of central India matters little. His secrets, the fears and ambitions that drove him from this place to faraway Fiji, went with him. But I am glad I made the return journey for him, and especially for my mother. I desperately wish mother were alive to hear the news of my visit to her father's distant homeland. I would like to think that Nana would be pleased that his wanderlust and free spirit continue to flow in the veins of his grandchildren now scattered around the globe: like him, children of the wind. I leave Bandarchuan with '... memories vague of half-forgotten things / Not true nor false, but sweet to think upon'.⁶

6 William Morris, 'March', *The Earthly Paradise* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), lines 42 and 43.

This text is taken from *Levelling Wind: Remembering Fiji*, by Brij V. Lal,
published 2019 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.