

Ni Sa Bula / Namaskar / G'Day

We are but creatures of our origins, and however stalwartly we march forward, paving new roads, seeking new worlds, the ghosts from our pasts stand not far behind and are not easily shaken off.

— M.G. Vassanji¹

[F]or the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place
knows it no more

— Psalm 103:16 (ESV)

Welcome, dear reader, aboard a journey of exploration. First, though, a word or two for the reader new to Fiji. It is an archipelago of some 300 islands in the south-west Pacific, between 15 and 22 degrees south latitude and between 175 degrees east and 177 degrees west longitude, astride the 180th meridian. Most of Fiji's 906,000 people live on the two main islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. Close to 60 per cent of the total population is indigenous Fijian, now called *iTaukei*; about 30 per cent (and declining) is Indo-Fijian and the remainder comprises Pacific Islanders, Europeans, part-Europeans, Chinese, Rotumans and others. Settled about 3,000 years ago by waves of seafarers from the Western Pacific, the islands came into intensive contact with the outside world in the early years of the nineteenth century—which fundamentally altered the course of Fijian history. Christian missionaries of the London Missionary Society arrived from Tahiti via Tonga in 1835, followed by Methodist and Roman Catholic missionaries. Their influence rapidly spread throughout the islands, with the conversion of the native Fijians nearly complete by the latter half of the nineteenth century. Today, Fiji's pre-Christian past is a dim, fading, disparaged memory.

1 M.G. Vassanji, *No New Land* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1991), p. 4.

Other changes followed the arrival of European traders, planters and speculators and random fortune seekers. None was more significant than the British acquisition of the islands in 1874 after previous attempts at cession had been rejected for strategic and financial reasons. Cession put in train a set of policies that shaped Fiji's destiny for over a century. In 1879, the first group of Indian indentured labourers arrived to work on sugarcane plantations to provide the necessary labour force for the economic development of the nascent colony. Sugar remained the major revenue earner for Fiji for almost a century. It is now in decline due, among other things, to bad managerial leadership, lack of foresight and planning, internal political manoeuvrings among various industry stakeholders, and intense competition on the international market. Tourism and remittance are now the principal revenue earners for Fiji. Many former canegrowers whose leases have not been renewed are finding shelter in the mushrooming squatter settlements surrounding urban areas where close to 20 per cent of the population now lives in conditions reeking of desperation and destitution. These squatter settlements are their temporary destination; they most assuredly will not be their destiny, but the first stepping stone on a much longer journey, possibly even beyond Fiji. 'From Immigration to Emigration' may in time become the most apt epitaph for Fiji's Indian community.

Indigenous Fijians, too, were on the move. For nearly a century, colonial policy and traditional customary practices had confined them to the subsistence sector, governed by protective legislation that impeded their mobility and, for the most part, kept them out of mainstream society. But from the mid-twentieth century onwards, forces of change began increasingly to affect their lives. These included the intrusion of a market economy, modern education, urbanisation and, from the 1960s, as the prospect of independence loomed on the horizon, the need for trained workers to staff the bureaucracy of an independent nation. The imperative to catch up with other groups in Fiji, especially Indo-Fijians, also played a part. The fear of being dominated that had clouded their lives since the end of World War II dissipated as their numbers grew to an outright majority of the population. Now, more than 50 per cent of Fijians live in urban or peri-urban areas. They have political power, are dominant in the public service and control the military, and their influence on the affairs of the nation will continue to increase.

Fiji became independent on 10 October 1970, after 96 years of British colonial rule, tethered to its nineteenth-century moorings and hobbled by a political culture divided about the structure of power sharing among the different communities. Fiji had all the paraphernalia of democratic governance: a parliament, political parties, regular elections, but underpinned by the unspoken, though unmistakable, assumption about which ethnic group should hold the reins of national power. When that was overturned in a democratic election in 1987, a military coup overturned the verdict of the ballot box at the behest of the ruling elite, who were unwilling or unable to relinquish power. Three other coups followed, varying in motive and *modus operandi*—the latest in 2006, which promised to end the country's culture of coups. A new constitution promulgated in 2013 promised to take the country away from its twentieth-century moorings mired in the politics of race and calculations about traditional Fijian power arrangements. Fiji now has a fragile democracy—or rather a semblance of democracy—in which the military, not the parliament, has the ultimate guardian role over the constitution. Whether the promised path to a new future full of opportunity and potential for everyone to live harmoniously in a 'race-blind' society eventuates, remains to be seen. It may be some time yet before Fiji crosses its Rubicon. For the moment, though, in the early years of the twenty-first century, Fiji can only be described as a land of the delayed dawn.

I have spent the better part of my career spanning nearly 40 years trying to understand the history and politics of Fiji, my native country, and the history and culture of the Indian indentured experience from which I have descended. These two together with my recent frequent excursions into the territory of 'faction' writing, at the intersection of history and memory, constitute the cornerstones of my research and writing career. This collection of my essays, which covers all these subjects, is primarily for readers and researchers in Fiji and in the Fijian diaspora more generally. Specialists will have seen them in journals and books, but not lay readers. Many want to know and to understand, and they frequently write to me for advice on where to find material relevant to their interests. Most commonly, it is to see if they can access historical records to trace their roots in India. More often than not, the search is futile because most people have only the vaguest idea about the history of their forebears: the date of their arrival in Fiji, district of origin, the name of the immigrant ship. But the need to know, to understand, to connect, is deep and moving in its own way, especially among children in the diaspora wanting

to get some sense of their journeys and destinations. They search websites and databases that whet their appetite for knowledge that provides them with some meaning and context. Many articles reproduced here (after some revision and updating) are available in online publications, but they are often accessible only to those already in the know. And hard copy is hard copy after all, tangible and permanent and real. Old habits die ever so slowly, especially among some of us; unreconstructed remnants of a prehistoric past. I should say that having left the academic treadmill behind, my main purpose here is to make my work accessible to the wider public, and not to improve my chances in the university promotion stakes. That past for me is now truly past.

For readers who might be interested, these essays could provide pointers to my more substantive research publications on the history and culture of the Indian diaspora and on politics and society in Fiji. A list of my major publications that are available online is listed at the end of this volume.

The essays included here are divided into three parts. The first deals with aspects of the indenture experience in Fiji through both factual narrative and creative nonfiction, or 'faction'. The longer narrative essays are followed by creative pieces that seek to explore the inner lived experience not documented in archival sources. Part 2 explores aspects of recent political developments in Fiji and seeks to understand the patterns and processes of change at work. Some of the pieces were written at the time the events described took place or soon afterwards. I have resisted the temptation to substantially alter the tone of the text to preserve its flavour at the time of writing; when the gun was still smoking, so to speak, and the future remained obscure. Part 3 has my reflections on and reaction to events and developments in which I was variously involved personally. It might be likened to an exercise in stocktaking after the end of a professional life.

I should add that the individual chapters in Part 2 of this book were written separately between 2000 and 2016, not only at different times but for different audiences. For these reasons, there is a degree of unavoidable repetition. Mostly it is in the nature of contextualising detail, so that readers will get their bearings and know the background necessary to an understanding of what follows. The other type of repetition is the same episode or discussion occurring in different chapters, although in different words. To simply cut out the repetition, apart from the first mention, could be a strained and artificial exercise. Such a course is not feasible; it would only serve to unbalance the individual chapters and, at worse,

to deprive readers of information they need to know in advance of the main discussion. Besides, this is not a book that will be read sequentially, as would a monograph. Readers will be more interested in some chapters than in others, and whatever chapter they choose to read first ought to be complete in and of itself.

I realise now, as I look back over the years, that for a long time, I have been swimming against the tide of passing intellectual fashions. I am a product of my time and place, a member of the mid-twentieth-century generation gradually passing into dotage. The world that formed me has vanished beyond recall. The pursuit of scholarship in the social sciences and the humanities, which was an integral part of my journey and that of my generation, is not the flavour of the month in Fiji (but sadly, not only in Fiji). Reading for pleasure for many is an alien habit. The two-decade-long culture of coups in the country has corroded the creative spirit, and the freedom of speech is severely curtailed in the name of maintaining 'stability'. Authoritarian regimes by their very nature regard the radicalism of free thought as anathematic, dangerous for their survival, to be crushed at the first opportunity. Universities in Fiji, traditionally the site of free thought and critical enquiry, cower in the face of threatened retribution from vengeful political hierarchs controlling the funding purse and demanding compliance. Silence, then, becomes a strategy for survival and, perhaps, even a tool of passive resistance. It might also, as the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu says, be a source of enduring strength.

The best and the brightest in Fiji, therefore, leave for other shores in search of better opportunities for themselves and their children. Understandably, they pursue those subjects—information technology, accounting, business administration, medicine, nursing and the like—which would improve their chances in the migration stakes. Once overseas, the realities of starting anew in a foreign land take their own toll. All this is perfectly understandable, if also sad. The postindependence Fiji generation has lived through an extraordinary time of triumphs and tragedies, dashed hopes and truncated aspirations, and they are not being chronicled or remembered. We must remember, always, and bear witness to our time and place, for ourselves and for those who will follow us; if we don't, no one else will. That is our obligation and responsibility. Memory must never be allowed to perish. In truth, memory is often all we have with which to contemplate the meaning of our lives and our purpose on Earth. There is no future without a past; the past, as common wisdom has it, is always present. And, as someone has said, remembering imparts possibility to the

past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was. But this may be a forlorn hope. I was distressed, as I was writing this, to learn that nearly half the graduates of the University of the South Pacific are likely to fail a basic English test. Nearly half. The rot starts with the early years of education. Distressing is the right word for this depressing state of affairs.

Still, with all the impediments, the struggle must go on. So, reflect, recreate, write. Winston Churchill was right all those years ago, ‘Words are the only things that last forever’²—although now, of course, knowledge is also increasingly preserved and disseminated through a variety of other means. Technology is transforming our world and our way of knowing about it rapidly. As a colleague once remarked to me, somewhat too triumphantly for comfort, the hegemony of the written word is finally under siege. That may well be true, though I earnestly hope not. I hasten to emphasise that my words—and I have lived all my life in and around words, that is all I have—belong to yesterday’s language. Tomorrow’s words, as T.S. Eliot says in the *Four Quartets*, will await another voice, hopefully better and more resonant than mine.

The reader may want to know how ‘objective’ I have been in selecting and presenting material in this volume. It is a fair question. Throughout my career, I have followed Oskar Spate’s advice about being honest with the reader. There is no use pretending impartiality, ‘which evades responsibility by saying nothing’, and partiality, ‘which masks bias by presenting slanted facts with an air of objectivity’. The best thing to do in this circumstance, says Spate, is to declare one’s hand so that those who disagree with the writer can see why he or she said this or that.

The important points are that inference must be based on evidence, as carefully verified as possible, and that the choice shall be made from the evidence, and not from preconceived ideas.³

This is eminently fair and sensible, but there are circumstances when neutrality will simply not do. Sides will have to be taken and one’s hand declared, as the reader will see from some of the essays in this volume, especially those dealing with the coups in Fiji and the culture of fear,

² Winston Churchill, cited in *PerryMarshall*, n.d., available from: www.perrymarshall.com/12011/winston-churchill-words/ (accessed 31 May 2019).

³ Cited in R.G. Ward and O.H.K. Spate, ‘Thirty years ago: A view of the Fijian political scene confidential report to the British Colonial Office, September 1959’, *The Journal of Pacific History* 25(1) (1990), 103–24, at p. 103, doi.org/10.1080/00223349008572628.

violence and uncertainty they have spawned. My opposition to coups in my native country, whatever their justification or rationale—and they are abundant and relentlessly repeated—is unalterable. There is nothing redeeming or noble about overthrowing the verdict of the ballot box through the power of guns. On this question, I have never been neutral or silent. ‘Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim,’ says Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Laureate and indefatigable chronicler of the horrors of the Holocaust: ‘Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.’⁴ As I have said before, I live within my history, not outside or above it, and accept all the challenges and opportunities that that brings. I will have it no other way.

A word about the title, which, as the reader will know by now, comes from William Butler Yeats’s great poem quoted at the beginning of this volume (‘Nineteen hundred and nineteen’). It is an apt description of one of the enduring themes of Fijian history of the twentieth century. It is apt for the experience of the Indo-Fijian community. The institutions, practices and protocols of village India that the Indian indentured labourers had brought with them were transformed—levelled, sometimes beyond recognition—on the plantations and in the lives of the people as they started afresh in dispersed villages across Fiji where they settled. Gradual exposure to the forces of modernity took its own toll, as did technology and travel.

It was no less so in the case of the indigenous Fijians, the *iTaukei*. Traditional institutions based on hierarchy and status came worse off in their protracted contest with the forces of change, including education, urbanisation, a modern cash economy and exposure to the forces of the modern world. The traditional gatekeepers of society lost their relevance and their role. The institutions of public life, the practice of politics and the pursuit of education, based on fraught but expedient assumptions of difference and separation, gave way to the acceptance of the values of a common humanity and a shared destiny. Everyone was slowly becoming a citizen of the Republic of Googlisthan. The world is getting more and more accessible to everyone, which is to be welcomed as the great egalitarian moment of our times, but on the other side of

4 Elie Wiesel, ‘Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech’, Oslo, 10 Dec. 1986.

the ledger, the forces of change are also levelling the terrain of excellence and merit, the desire to explore the world beyond the horizon, to explore the unexplored wilderness.

Finally, a word about the nomenclature used in this volume. The 2013 Fiji constitution stipulates the use of ‘Fijian’ as the common name for all citizens of Fiji, and the word *iTaukei* as the name for the indigenous community. This designation—at first resisted by some indigenous leaders—is now being widely accepted. But, until 2013, the usage of the word ‘Fijian’ was restricted to the indigenous community. Since nearly all the essays included here were written before the promulgation of the latest constitution, I have retained the old usage. I welcome the new terminology of common citizenship, although I am not as sanguine as some that a mere change in name on paper, enforced through a decree rather than through extensive public debate, will necessarily bring about national cohesion or reconciliation. But it is a move in the right direction—a change long overdue, being first mooted in August 1967 by the Indo-Fijian leader A.D. Patel. We will always turn to our past, even our failed, dispiriting past, to understand ourselves why we have become what we are; but our lives will have to be lived in the future, shaped by different forces of change to those to which we have been accustomed. Inclusion, acceptance, understanding and a certain collective unity of purpose, of minds and hearts, will be—will have to be—the way of that future.

In the standard Fijian orthography, ‘b’ is pronounced as ‘mb’, as in ‘number’; ‘c’ as ‘the’, as in ‘there’; ‘d’ as ‘nd’, as in ‘under’; ‘g’ as ‘ng’, as in ‘anger’; and ‘q’ as ‘ng’, as in ‘linger’. *Vinaka Vakalevu Sara, Dhanyabad*. Thank you to all those countless good men and women from around the globe whose advice and support have sustained me through all these years of ups and downs chronicled in this book. There is an end to every journey. This is the end of mine. So, dear reader, I take leave, with Graham Greene’s words in *The End of the Affair*: ‘A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead.’⁵

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5 Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (London: William Heinemann, 1951), p. 1.

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