Waituri To Nelspruit and Other Places in Between

Ye safar bahut hai kathin magar
Na udas ho mere ham safar

This journey is exceedingly hard, but
Don’t despair, my fellow traveller.

Ye sitam ki raat hai dhalne ko
Hai andhera gam ka pighalne ko

This night of tyranny will pass
These dark sorrows will melt away

Waituri. The name is unfamiliar to me. It is, in fact, an Indo-Fijian settlement in the flat, damp, water-logged Nausori hinterland a short distance from the local airport. From the late 19th to about the middle of the 20th century, it was a sugar cane growing area, one among several on the Rewa delta and among the first to be settled by Indian indentured workers. When cane production was abandoned due to the perennially wet weather and low sugar content, Waituri became a rice settlement in the late 1950s. But that phase too came to an end, in the 1980s and 1990s, when the economy collapsed after the 1987 coups and the local rice mill was closed down. For a decade or so, the place was abandoned and left to revert to bush, all the memories of the early days of toil and hope erased.

In the last five years or so, the place has again begun to come to life, from an unexpected source—Labasa. At first there were a few hastily erected tin shacks housing a few stray families. Then, as news spread of the opportunities the place offered, more people arrived, families and friends, escapees from Vanua Levu. The place now has the look of a new settlement in the making. Some homes have power, there is running water and the rudimentary roads are serviceable.
A massive internal dislocation is underway in Fiji, caused by the expiry of sugar cane leases under the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act. Whole areas of Vanua Levu have emptied: Daku, Wainikoro, Lagalaga, Nagigi, once the vibrant heartland of the cane country on the island, but now overgrown and desolate. Places like Waituri offer these desperate people the hope of a new beginning.

Among the new migrants in Waituri are my own extended family of nieces and nephews and distantly-related cousins. My older sister and her husband arrived there about six months ago to join their daughter and her family who had relocated a few years back. She died last week, after a long battle with debilitating diabetes and general undiagnosed ill-health so common in the neglected rural areas of Fiji.

I arrive from Australia in time to attend her funeral. It is a strange sensation. My sister got married when I was very young. We saw her infrequently over the years. Once married, Indo-Fijian women were seen as a permanent part of their husband’s family. Any lingering attachment to their natal family was discouraged as a sign of disloyalty to her new relations. We had no understanding of my sister’s married life, the difficulties she might have encountered in her new home about which there were a few quiet whispers, the ways in which she might have tried to adapt and change. For all practical purposes, she had become a stranger, her inner world unknown to us. The story of her journey is now lost forever.

It was this stranger’s passing that I had come to mourn. My brothers, who had also flown from Australia to attend the funeral, and I talked about our distant youthful days for the week we were in Suva together. We recalled stories and incidents from our childhood, the pranks we played on unsuspecting strangers, the things we did to amuse ourselves during the vacations, the furious soccer matches played with ball made of rolled up newspaper in dry paddy fields, the surreptitious activities which, when caught, could lead us into real trouble (such as pouring boiling water on pumpkin plants to kill them because we were so fed up of eating pumpkin curry day in and day out), but, sadly, our sister’s life was not, could not be, among our recollections.

Slowly over several days, the details emerged as long forgotten memories were revived around the grog bowl. Our sister had several girls, all married now, and two boys, the older of whom died tragically a few years ago, crushed by the cane tractor he was driving. My sister never fully recovered from that tragedy. She had become a lost soul, people said, forlorn, given to sudden emotional eruptions when old memories of happier days returned to haunt her, which they did frequently. There is something unnatural about children going before their parents. As if all this was not enough suffering, her favourite grandchild died when the car she
was in on her way to school plunged into the local river, drowning everyone in it. From then on, her grip on life began to weaken markedly, people said, her zest for life gone. She was just waiting to die.

My sister’s daughters, none of whom had gone beyond high school, were bright kids but economic circumstances and social traditions had circumscribed their opportunities. That was the way things were then. They were lucky in having good, caring husbands, who had cleared the bush in Waituri, leased several parcels of land, and were growing vegetables for the local market.

They were doing well by local standards, and had plans for future expansion. Their spirit and endurance commanded respect. They had gone through so much hardship, and yet they remained undaunted, their spirit unflagging. The transition from being cane growers to vegetable farmers could not have been easy. The rhythm and pace of life is different, there is no established and dependable community network to lean on for advice and assistance, but they are coping well, in fact, more than well.

Surprisingly, they don’t regret leaving Labasa. The constant uncertainty of temporary leases, the absence of ready cash income to meet the daily needs, the unending grind amid diminishing opportunities, had taken their toll. In Waituri, the cash income, although small, is regular. There is a new future to look forward to. And there are more openings for children in Viti Levu.

The future of children weighs heavily with most Indo-Fijian parents. It has always been so. I recall my own childhood in Tabia. We were told by our parents that there was no future on the farm for all the six boys, that we had to look for other alternatives. We did. All of us eventually left the farm for other professions. We all now live overseas.

One of my nieces has two boys. One is in form four and the other in form six, both at Vunimono High School a few kilometres away. They are shy and deferential, eyeing me respectfully from a distance, avoiding direct eye contact. I am a name to them, nothing more, a stranger who was a member of the family who had gone places, but whom they had never met except through images on the television and pictures in the newspapers. The older one tells me that he wants to become a doctor. That kind of ambition, in this kind of place, seems strangely incongruous. But, then, who would have thought that a boy from a primitive Tabia would one day become a professor in Australia. The boy is a straight A student in school, and I have no doubt that he will realize his ambition. He has that steely determination, that hunger.

He, and others like him, will leave Waituri one day, just as his parents left Labasa. This place where they are growing up will some day come to be seen as a stopover in a long journey of displacement. This is where they will start, but
not where they will end up. I wonder if these children, growing up with so much disruption and dislocation, will ever know the joys and satisfactions of growing up in a settled, cohesive community, ever experience the sustaining love that comes from belonging and attachment to a larger intimate group.

In the evenings, people gather at my niece’s place where my sister spent her last days. A Bhagvata katha is held every evening for thirteen days, the traditional mourning period for orthodox Hindu families. After the puja, people sing bhajans, devotional songs. They are poignant, cathartic and often heart-rending: about the purpose of our life on earth, its impermanence, about the futility of mourning for a soul which has escaped its earthly form to reunite with the universal, indestructible soul. We all join in, tears flowing freely, without embarrassment. Koi Thagwa Nagariya Lootal Ho: How some thief has ransacked our community (taken a beloved soul away).

People who come in the evenings are mostly from Labasa and a few from other parts of Fiji whom the family has befriended. They are all migrants, facing similar predicaments, seeking solace and support in each other’s company against the demands and disillusions of the outside world. A sense of community is evolving out of need and necessity, and from a shared sense of being unwanted, unwelcome strangers in this place.

The Nausori-Suva corridor is full of displaced Labasa people, I learn. They are contemptuously called ‘Labasians.’ Their rustic speech is derided, their willingness to work for a pittance scorned. They are seen as snatchers of other people’s jobs. It hurts, a man says to me, to be called names, to be looked down upon, but what can we do? We have to feed our families and send our children to school. The very spirit of enterprise and the ethos of hard work, which are and have long been the hallmark of our community, helped us escape poverty and destitution, are now being spat upon. We will put our head down and keep to ourselves, a man says. Yes, I say to myself: this too will pass. We all live in perpetual hope.

Talk turns to politics as people ask me about my views on what is happening in the country. But I am here to listen and deflect questions. I realize, as I listen, that the goings on in Suva have little relevance in Waituri. No one reads the newspapers here. Television news is watched, but people’s poor English prevents a full comprehension of current events. Television is valued especially for the entertainment it provides. Radio is more common as a vehicle for the news of community events than for hard news. Death notices and religious programs instructing on the proper way to conduct important rituals and ceremonies, are a special favourite.

Opinion about the coup is divided. Those who have more contact with the outside world are hoping for the best. The Qarase government’s racially motivated
policies are talked about. They didn’t care about us, a man says. Everything was done for the Fijians as if we did not matter. But what has Bainimarama done, a man asks? The price of everything is going up: fuel, food, bus fares. We have no say in this government. Things will get much worse before they get better, seems to be the consensus. I detect a tone of despair and helplessness in the conversation. These are innocent, helpless victims of other peoples’ ambitions and agendas, caught in circumstances not of their making and completely beyond their control.

So what’s the way out, I ask? Work hard, mind your own business, educate the children and hope they will migrate. That’s the only way out. There is no future for us here. It all sounds so depressingly familiar. I am reminded of an old Mohammed Rafi song: Chal chal re musafir chal, tu us dunyia men chal: Go traveller, go to that other world…

History has a strange way of repeating itself. More than a century ago, our forbearers left their homeland in unhappy circumstances to build a better life for themselves and their children. But somehow, somewhere, things went horribly wrong. A century later, fear and insecurity continue to stalk the life of the Indo-Fijian community. People are on the move again.

For many Indo-Fijians, Waituri, and places like it throughout Fiji, will be a temporary stopover in a long and unpredictable journey ahead. It is their temporary destination, but not their final destiny.

Labasa Lelo Lelo
The National Stadium is humming at over eight thousand strong as the Inter-District Soccer Competition gets underway. This is my first attendance at this milestone sporting event in almost thirty years. Everything has changed. I have changed. Nothing is familiar. I am seated in the second-to-last row of the pavilion in the company of soccer-crazy nephews from Labasa, who now live in various parts of Fiji and overseas. This is the main sporting event in their annual calendar. They have been following the build up over the season. They know the names of all the main players, their strengths and weaknesses.

Roy Krishna is the man to watch, I am advised. Roy is the present boy wonder of Labasa and Fiji soccer, a slip of a lad, just nineteen, grandson, I am told, of a proud Fijian grandmother (on his father’s side). On the field, he is agile, strategically positioning himself, opportunistic and most pleasing of all, unselfish. He has a fine soccer sense.

He reminds me of the Labasa soccer genius of my days, Anand Sami. The maestro played for Labasa and for Fiji in the seventies and eighties, his soccer skills universally admired and warmly recalled decades later. The Sami brothers
were the soccer princes of Fiji. Anand now lives in Brisbane, like so many of his generation, such a huge, irreplaceable loss for Fiji.

Radio personality Anirudh Diwakar is sitting next to me. I had run into him earlier in the day and was pleased to see him again. He is a soccer enthusiast, and recalls the names of great players of yesteryears, household names in their days but now lost to memory. He mentions Chandra Bhan Singh, the magical midfielder for Lautoka in the 1960s, the cunning field marshal who deployed his troops on the park with masterly precision. He is probably the greatest midfielder Fiji has ever had. And Mike Thoman, the charismatic fullback, who would nonchalantly swipe a bowl of grog on the sidelines when the ball was at the other end of the ground.

In Rewa, there was the volatile, explosive, hot-tempered Johnny Bakridi who was known for never completing a game because he would be sent off for punching or kicking an opposing player. The poor fellow did not know that riling him up was one of the tactics his opponents always employed! He invariably fell into the trap. And Satish Datta, the stylish, handsome mid-fielder. In Suva, there was the inimitable Chotka, the bow-legged midfield general who was the city’s backbone for nearly a decade, who later migrated to Sydney and became a taxi driver there, and the sleek striker Munlal, the younger brother of the legendary John Lal, a sometime Fiji coach, who had played professional soccer in Australia in the 1960s. And from the Friendly North came Brian Simmons, the left midfielder who went on to play for Fiji, Gordon Lee Wai, whose sister, Jenny, was in my class at Labasa Secondary, the Zoing and Sami brothers. Boys from Ba, a most fearsome, imperious lot dressed in black, were in a class of their own: Esala Masi, Josetaki, Bale Raniga, Farooq Janeman. They exemplified the indomitable, boisterous spirit of their big province.

All names from ancient memory, completely unfamiliar to the present generation. Soccer was our passion, the only game in town. There was no television then, so we followed the matches on radio, re-living its thrilling moments long after the matches had ended, wondering whether we would one day actually witness a real tournament ourselves. For us in Tabia, this was a glorious but distant dream.

Soccer was an ‘Indian’ game well into the early sixties, the game of choice for the children of the girmitiyas. It was inexpensive, easy to organize and involved the entire community. The Colonial Sugar Refining Company encouraged it, with the tacit support of the colonial government keen to keep things compartmentalised. From humble, haphazard beginnings, it gained institutional support in the post-war years as the population increased and demands for leisure activity gained momentum. The Lloyd Farebrother Trophy provided the impetus
for an annual get-together, and so started the inter-district competition. The teams are multiracial now. In some cases, the majority of the players in a team are Fijian although the majority of the supporters and team management are Indo-Fijian.

On the playing field, ethnicity does not matter. The district does. How wonderfully refreshing; this loyalty to a region that transcends ethnicity, religion, class and other man-made barriers. If we can achieve this common identity on the soccer field, I think to myself, why can’t we achieve a similar feat in the field of politics? Why do we insist on having ourselves represented in parliament by one of our own kind? We grow up going to school together, playing together, mixing socially on myriad occasions, yet are compelled to follow the ethnically exclusive furrows in matters of political representation.

The antics of a player from Tavua catches our attention and we all laugh uproariously. The No 2 Tavua fullback is full of wild passion, completely engrossed in the game, gesticulates to his players, argues with the referee, thumps his foot on the ground and throws his arms up in the air to indicate disapproval about something. Every time he touches the ball, we giggle loudly in anticipation of some fireworks, and explode if he does something funny. I think he is aware that he is playing up to a packed gallery. Yes, soccer is good theatre as well, the cause of much thigh-slapping laughter.

Murgi Chor,’ Poultry (Paltry!) Thief, someone says when the referee gives a decision he does not like. This is an old expression familiar to me, and so uniquely Fijian, so harmless and yet so vivid. I ask Anirudh about new additions to our soccer vocabulary. ‘Aawe, Aawe,’ he says, is one, ‘He’s coming, He’s coming.’ In other words, watch out, take quick evasive action. ‘Lelo, Lelo,’ is another, ‘Take it, Take it,’ ‘E Nahin Jaai,’ ‘This won’t go in.’ And so it goes.

I am served a bowl of grog while the match is in progress. This is new to me. In my day, you sauntered down to the basement of the stadium for a bilo. But now, people bring their own with them. My nephews have brought theirs in several large lemonade plastic bottles. They take yaqona wherever they go. They seem unable to function without it. This is common throughout Fiji. I recall with particular horror a sign I had seen at the Raralevu Crematorium just a few meters away from the pyre saying ‘Kava Sold Here,’ for the benefit of those waiting for the cremation ceremony to begin.

The Stadium becomes tense as the Labasa-Rewa game starts. Labasa is at the top of the ladder and expected to win easily over a lowly-ranked Rewa. But Rewa, in red, is no walkover, as the match ends in a draw. Throughout the match, the support for Labasa is intense and the cheers loud. I realize that the Stadium is packed with Labasa supporters. They are desperate for a Labasa win. I
wonder why when suddenly the reason dawns on me. The Suva-Nausori corridor is clogged with displaced Labasa people, especially the mushrooming squatter settlements. These simple people from rustic background are derided here, the butt of jokes. I recall a letter in the press from a Labasa girl pleading for sympathy from Viti Levu people, saying that for many from Labasa, coming to Suva was like going to New York or London. These simple, simple-hearted, people needed sympathy and tolerance, not condescension, she seemed to be saying.

There is a glue that binds us Labasans. Everyone thinks we are country bumpkins, inferior, lacking in social graces, but we know the truth, we say quietly to ourselves. Look at the number of doctorates Labasa has produced, someone had remarked to me, per capita the highest in Fiji; I don’t know if it is true, but it is good to hear it anyway. We are all proud of Roy Krishna, our golden boy whose boots carry the hopes and dreams of so many Labasans. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could show these Viti Levu fellas who is the champion on the soccer field? That is why we are all desperate for a Labasa win.

For sixty minutes or so, every Labasan in the audience is one, passionately cheering for their team. Differences dissolve. The person on my right is a very senior police officer. The fellow in front is a mechanic and on my left is a secondary school teacher, who now lives in Nasinu. We drink grog from the same bowl, slap each other on the shoulders excitedly as Labasa makes a good move, and sigh in disappointment when things don’t go right. We are a mob. For a few magical moments, we become boys again, oblivious to the troubles plaguing the country, recklessly heckling the supporters of our opponents on the field, uncaring about what happens to Suva or Tavua or Lautoka, or anyone else, united in our love for the team from the Friendly North.

I had gone to the National Stadium not to watch soccer but to spend some time with my nephews whom I have grown to love deeply, who are mischievously playful with me, for whom I am nothing more or less than simply an aging, slightly eccentric uncle, not a pandit of local politics or a professor of history whom they occasionally see on the local television news. That is the beauty of this deepening, unaffected human bond, a wonderful reminder of what, in the end, life is all about.

But there is something about the evening that has touched me in an indefinable way. It brought back distant, fading memories of youthful passions: soccer matches in dry paddy fields, the fierce inter-village competitions and the fistfights which often broke out afterwards as rivals challenged and taunted each other, the black magic which some ardent supporters used to boost the chances of their teams, the dissecting of the day’s developments deep into a kava-lubricated night. Many people of my childhood have either migrated or
moved on. I returned home a renewed Labasan from the Friendly North, or LA, as they proudly say these days.

Chuuk
'I am off to Chuuk,' I tell a colleague. 'Chuuk, eh!' he responded. 'Yes, Chuuk in the FSM.' 'FSM? Er, Fiji School of Medicine, perhaps?' 'No, the Federated States of Micronesia.' 'I see,' he said. He had no idea.

I had some idea of its geography, but not much, even though I had taught about Micronesia as a part of my larger Pacific History courses for decades. This was my first, much longed for, trip to this part of the world.

I am part of a 25-strong Election Observer Mission, co-ordinated by the East West Centre in Honolulu, on behalf of the Asia Pacific Democratic Partnership in Washington DC. There are representatives from various parts of the world: Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, India, Palau, Philippines, New Zealand Australia and the United States.

Chuuk is having two sets of elections, one National (President and Vice President of the FSM) and the other for the local House of Representatives. The role of the Observer Mission would be to observe, naturally, but not to intrude, to learn and to advise on any improvements to the electoral process.

Getting to Chuuk is quite an effort: from Sydney to Manila, from there to Guam and then, finally, an hour and half later, to the island itself. For some unknown reason, I had thought of Chuuk as a flat atoll, perhaps like the Marshall Islands.

But I am disabused of that notion as I look down from the window of my Continental’s Air Micronesia (Air Mike) to see a string of verdant islands protruding sharply from an endless, brilliantly blue ocean. There are many islands in the Chuuk Lagoon, all beguilingly beautiful in their own way.

Micronesia has had a long and tragic colonial history. First came the Spaniards from the time of Magellan in the 16th century onwards. From the middle of the 19th came the Germans. Their empire ended in 1914, to be usurped by the Japanese who ruled it until the Second World War. Then the Americans took over the islands as a ‘Strategic Trusteeship.’

What that meant was that the trusteeship partnership could not be terminated unilaterally by either party. And second, matters relating to the trusteeship would have to be discussed in the Security Council, where the United States of course had veto power.

This ‘double insurance’ gave the United States complete hold over the islands. The islands were important strategic assets. It was from Saipan and Tinian that the B52 Bombers took off for Vietnam in the 1960s. The Missile Range at the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands is still active and important.
When independence came in the 1980s, the different islands chose different routes. Marshalls and Palau became republics and the Northern Marianas became a commonwealth of the United States. The smaller islands of Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei and Kosrae formed the Federated States of Micronesia.

All formed a ‘Compact of Free Association’ with the United States which provided various packages of financial assistance in return for free, unhindered passage of the American military through the waters of Micronesia. Chuuk, like other smaller islands, survives on the American largesse. The Spaniards came for God, it is said, the Germans came for Gold and the Americans came for Good.

The tragic reminders of Chuuk’s colonial past are everywhere. Chuuk lagoon was the headquarters of the Japanese Imperial Navy in Micronesia. Most of the ships were sunk by the Americans during the Second World War, and the Lagoon, I am told, is full of about one hundred wrecks: a veritable marine graveyard of rusting hulks. It is divers’ haven, though, attracting enthusiasts from all over the world. Diving is an important source of the island’s economy.

On the other islands in the Lagoon, we see long abandoned jetties, bombed airfields now overgrown beyond recognition, air raid shelters covered with vine, rusting buildings. The region’s premier high school, the Jesuit-run Xavier College, is housed in a Japanese building built to withstand bombs. The building is still impressive in its concrete solidity. The Japanese obviously thought they would be in the islands forever. Things were built to last.

And people talk warmly of the Japanese period, our guide tells us. There was economic growth then, development, the building of infrastructure, and discipline. All that is gone now, and former productive rice farms and other food gardens have reverted to lush bush. The main road in the capital, Moen, is an endless series of potholes.

We get our briefings from election officials about voting procedures and polling stations. WE have our checklist of things to look for. There are no political parties in Chuuk. Clans and extended families play an important role in choosing candidates. But there are campaigns, everyone votes, and the ballot is secret.

It is difficult to get a sense of the campaigning that has gone on before the polling day. There is no newspaper in Chuuk, and the radio is in Chuukese, which does not help me. Television is of no use, full of American soap opera and the ubiquitous CNN updates. We talk to some candidates to get a sense of things, but our (or at least my) understanding of the dynamics of the local politics is rudimentary.

We are split into groups of two to tour the different far-flung islands. My partner is a young lady from Korea, Soonjung Yee. Early on the day of polling at
around 7am, we head off to our respective boats which have been hired for us and then across a slightly rough passage to our specific destination.

We visit six polling stations scattered across the island. Everywhere without exception, polling opened sharp at 7. The crowd is small in some places, large in others. We are talking here about small communities. The polling officials are organised, the booth hidden behind a cloth curtain in some places or placed at a discreet distance in a corner in others. The effort to preserve privacy is obvious.

We jot down notes of our conversation with election officials and of our own observations. Early next morning, we gather at our hotel for several hours and the various teams compare notes and prepare a preliminary report. The full report will come later. We are pleased with what we have observed but we also have suggestions for changes and improvements. Beyond that, I am unable to say much now.

Many things impress me. The first is how we are received in the different places. We had no idea about how people would see us. But everywhere, there is a warm welcome, a sense of gratitude that we had travelled such long distances to witness their polling. The world was watching, and people were impressed.

I observe with my Fijian experience. In Fiji, as we know, people expect to be transported to the polling booth, fed many bowls of grog and even food. We are all familiar with the ubiquitous tanoa and the pulau pot. In Chuuk there is none of that at all. People come to the booth of their own volition, vote, hang around for a while, and then leave. In Fiji we have compulsory voting; in Chuuk voting is non-obligatory.

And I am moved by the patience people show. They stand in the queues for their turn to vote. They do their sacred duty, and then move on. The way we used to do it in Fiji all those years ago. The tamasha, the sideshows, the bulla gulla, the hustle bustle, the majestic madness of democracy in action.

There is an expression in Chuuk, ‘Chuuk You.’ It means, so I am told, that you have been smitten by the haunting beauty of the islands, and that you will return one day. Yes, ‘Chuuk You’. I am already ‘Chuuked’.

**Bougainville**

September 11. The world is remembering a day of terror, and talking the language of revenge and retribution. A rumour of war is in the air. But not in Buka, now the unofficial capital of Bougainville. There, the Bougainville Constitutional Commission is meeting for the first time. I have been invited to participate in its proceedings. It is an honour and privilege to be here. It is also a poignant reminder of the intense anticipation as we ourselves began our new constitutional review journey more than seven years ago.

The meeting is an historic event for this strife-ridden island of 200,000 people some 1000 kilometres east of Port Moresby. The 24 member-Commission
consists of a wide cross-section of the community, representing church, women’s, trade union and community groups, representatives of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army and the Bougainville Resistance Force (both now called Ex-Combatants) and of the North, Central, South and Atoll regions of the province. Few of the commissioners have had previous political experience at the provincial level—or at any formal level. Most are ‘ordinary’ citizens called to perform an extraordinary task for their people.

The Commission is chaired by Joseph Kabui, a thickly-bearded, experienced politician of mild, thoughtful disposition and a distinguished presence. Around the table are men who were once sworn enemies. Ismael Toroama, a lightly built man with sharp, darting eyes, fierce-looking and sporting visible battlefield scars, was once the most feared field commander of the BRA, and on the most-wanted list of the Papua New Guinea Defence Forces. Opposite him is Hilary Masiria, the formidable leader of the BRF leading the fight against the BRA. And there is diminutive Damien Damen, the feisty representative of ‘indigenous’ political and religious groups, the founder of the 50-toea resistance movement, in the same room as Rev. Matthew Tagak of the Uniting Church.

It is as unlikely and as incongruous a gathering as you are ever likely to see under one roof. They represent divergent, sometimes diametrically opposed, agendas, and eye their colleagues with a certain understandable wariness. But as the talks proceed, suspicion dissolves. People talk of making a new beginning for a new, united Bougainville. Francis Ona, the legendary founder of the BRA, is not there, though his looming shadow is. He is not a part of the peace process but neither, people say, has he actively opposed it. That they see, hopefully, as a silver lining. There is also a sense that Ona is no longer the force he once was, and his absence, therefore, not as destabilizing as it could have been.

The Commission has been appointed to draft a new constitution for an autonomous Bougainville in six months, autonomous, for the time being, within the political framework of a united Papua New Guinea. It is a direct result of the Bougainville Peace Agreement signed at Arawa on 30 August 2001. That agreement provided for three related processes to achieve peace on the island. The first was Autonomy. Bougainville will have a ‘home-grown’ constitution which will enable its people to manage their own affairs with diminishing intervention from the national government in Moresby. The island will have its own court and administration personnel in time and make decisions about how to manage and harvest its resources. That was one of the demands of the separatists.

The second part of the Arawa accord was a ‘Weapons Disposal Plan.’ During the ten-year conflict from 1989 to 1999, an unknown number of weapons were smuggled into the country, through nefarious means, from the Solomon Islands.
and elsewhere. No one, including the United Nations Observer Mission on Bougainville, knows the number of illegal arms floating about in the countryside, but it is in the hundreds, they concede. The hope is that through a sustained effort of dialogue with the participants, the arms will be retrieved. But what incentive is there for people to return their arms, I ask? Peace is the answer, officials say. People want peace. They are fed up with war. One certainly hopes so.

The third step in the peace making process is a referendum on the future of the island. Independence from Papua New Guinea was the demand of the BRA and other separatist groups. But people agreed to delay the referendum on independence for ten to fifteen years, enough time, participants say, to allow for tempers to cool down, reconciliation to take place and for a considered decision about the island’s future to be made. The new constitution is optimistically expected to be completed by early next year, paving the way for elections to be held for an autonomous Bougainvillian government. The road ahead is long, but at least things are moving in the right direction. That is no mean achievement.

The conflict in Bougainville erupted into the open in 1988 when landowners, angry at the horrendous environmental damage the Panguna copper mines had caused, began destroying mine property. The mine, operated by an Australian company, had contributed mightily to the coffers of the national government, but local people felt cheated of what they considered a just share of the revenue. And so localised raids gained momentum, escalating into a broad-based ethnonationalist movement demanding independence from Papua New Guinea. Bougainvillians, who felt themselves different and distinct, had attempted to secede from PNG at the time of independence in 1975. Their secessionist efforts had been contained through constitutional guarantees of greater autonomy and through provincial decentralisation.

By the late 1980s, these were not enough to meet a growing, broad-based Bougainvillian demand for political autonomy. In 1990, Bougainville declared independence from PNG. State apparatus collapsed, law and order broke down, and violence was rampant. As Anthony Regan, now the constitutional advisor to various Bougainvillian parties puts it, ‘Most non-Bougainvillians left Bougainville during 1989 and early 1990, many fearing for their lives in a process that was in some respects a form of ethnic cleansing.’ But declaration of independence brought in its wake other problems, among them the escalation of intra-Bougainvillian tensions. Bougainville, like most of Melanesia, has enormous cultural, linguistic and social diversity—there are some 21 distinct languages and 39 dialects spoken on the island—and these came to the fore as various factions manoeuvred for political control.
The social and economic consequences of the conflict were appalling for the island. Estimates vary of how many people died during the decade-long conflict, but some people conservatively put the figure at ten thousand. Ismael Toroama puts it closer to twenty thousand. Ten or twenty, the figure is horrendously high, higher by far than in any other conflict in post-war Pacific. The economy, once flourishing, ground to a halt, the infrastructure collapsed, investment vanished, and people once in the vanguard of entrepreneurial activity left the island. The sad legacy of the past is visible today, in the aimless wandering of unemployed youth in the dusty, pot-holed main street of Buka, the erratic power supply, the bare shops.

As the conflict continued, so, too, did efforts to find peace, both among Bougainvillians themselves and between Bougainville and Papua New Guinea. These bore fruit. The conflict ended in 1997, and leaders returned to the negotiating table. The Arawa accord of August 2001 marked the culmination of that process. The road ahead is tough, but everyone assures me that they have turned the corner. There is no other alternative to peace. I certainly hope so. What remains with me more than anything else as I leave the island is the determination I saw in peoples’ eyes to leave behind a fraught and fractured past to create a new future for themselves. Few have any precise idea of what that future might look like and how they might get there, but they do know what they do not want.

The words of one of the Commissioners still rings in my ears: ‘The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.’

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

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

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

Among the million girmitiyas who crossed the kala pani was my own indentured grandfather. He was in fact recruited for Demerara, he told us, but when he reached the depot, he found his ship full. The next available vessel took him to Fiji. A century later, I am undertaking a journey my girmitiya grandfather was drafted to make. Trinidad is my first stop. It is hot little, feisty little island with an attitude, riding the boom of oil-fuelled prosperity. About two thousand square miles in size, it is crowded with over one million people, forty percent black and Indian each. It is easily the most prosperous of the Caribbean islands.

The contrast with Guyana is stark. After years of massive and frequently violent misrule, the country’s infrastructure is in tatters, its economy floundering, its people deeply divided and drifting. Guyana is a big country of eighty three thousand square miles, but with a population of only seven hundred thousand, living mostly in a thin strip along the Atlantic coast. Like Trinidad, Guyana is bi-racial, and locked in a deadly game of ethnic rivalry, visible and invisible.

Suriname lies across the Coryntine River from Guyana. Once a Dutch colony, its population is about a third each black and Indian, and the rest made up of Javanese, Creole and Ameri-Indians. Although Suriname shares with Trinidad and Guyana the history of Indian settlement, its soul is unmistakeably Dutch. The Netherlands is its spiritual home. The game of cricket, the passion of the British Caribbean, has no meaning here, nor does the English language. Suriname, like Guyana, is flat along the coast, and cris-crossed with canals, now stagnant, neglected and overgrown. The Dutch imprint is clearly visible. Its weather, like much of the Caribbean, is clammy. The low lying clouds are ever pregnant with rain. The countryside is lush green.

Each place has its own cultural peculiarity, but it is the similarities that startle me. In Guyana I was taken to meet the chairman of a local municipality. It was around mid-day Sunday, but by then he had already nearly gone through a bottle of cheap rum. The Caribbean generally is a place of hard drinking men. He shook my hand, looked at me quizzically, assessing, and said, ‘You are a coolie-maan from Fiji?’ The words took me by surprise at first, but I knew what he meant. It was a term of recognition, a reference to our shared history of indentured servitude. I was one of them. I was welcome.
There is something distinctive about us (old) diasporic Indians that binds us together: our essential egalitarianism, our openness and adaptability, our zest for living here and now, our impatience with ritual, protocol and hierarchy, and, importantly, our complex, problematic relationship with India. We do not regard ourselves as the children of a lesser god, banished into exile for some misdeed in previous life. We are not naqli, fake, Indians. We rejoice in the myriad influences which define our identity. Our shared prejudices cement friendships.

Everywhere, I am reminded of the contribution Indian people have made to the economic and social development of the countries where they live: in agriculture, commerce, the professions. People recite the story of success proudly, and with good reason. The statistical evidence of achievement is impressive. And the point is often made to underline the under-achievement of other communities, their dependent mentality.

Yet Indians in all three countries have a deep sense of ambivalence and alienation. Even after a century many do not feel fully accepted as part of the region. The situation varies from country to country, but it is a difference of degree, not of substance. The most obvious marker of uncertainty is the emigration of large numbers of Indians to North America and Europe. In Guyana and Suriname, most Indians would leave if that were possible, I was told. The same in Fiji. People talk about commitment and belonging. A t-shirt proclaims: ‘I live in another country but I am 100% Guyanese.’ This is tourist talk. The reality is different. As in Fiji, the wealthy and the well-connected are living well, their children and financial investment safely put away somewhere else.

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

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

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

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

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

To London

_Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat, Where have you been?
I have been to London to see the Queen_

I was walking towards Camden Market on a grey London afternoon in mid-May when I felt a tap on my shoulder. ‘Any pubs around here, sir?’ an old, bedraggled man asked me. ‘I am sorry, but I am new to this place,’ I responded. ‘Where you from?’ ‘Australia.’ ‘But you don’t look Australian.’ ‘What’s an Australian supposed to look like then?’ I confronted him directly. ‘No offence, guv,’ the old man replied somewhat apologetically. ‘I thought you was from India.’ Before I could recite my genealogy, he said, ‘Great country, India. My dad and uncle were in the Indian Army. I was born there. _Was pukka badmaash_, too, I was,’ a real rascal. The old fellow, lonely and wandering, was in a mood to offload, but I was in a hurry. ‘Good luck,’ I say as I walk on.
On my way back, I stop at a shop in Euston to pick up a bottle of Australian red, one of life’s minor weaknesses. The dark South Asian-looking man at the counter was pleasant enough. ‘Where you from?’ I couldn’t help asking that perennial question immigrants of colour automatically ask each other everywhere. ‘Sri Lanka,’ he replied. ‘Murali is a genius,’ I venture to start a conversation. Muralitharan, the ace Sri Lankan spinner. ‘I don’t like cricket. Englishman’s game,’ he replied sullenly. That peeved me. Cricket is the game God plays, and it is plain knowledge that God is not an Englishman. And, I thought, if English are so bad, what are you doing here in their country? But there was no point arguing. ‘You are hailing from where?’ he asks me as I begin to leave. ‘Fiji,’ I replied. He gave me a blank, unknowing look. ‘Fiji,’ I repeated. Still no reaction. ‘Fiji Islands,’ I said. ‘In the South Pacific.’ ‘In Gujarat?’ I gave up.

A few days later, I was on the tube — English for underground train — when a chubby young woman with shaved head and wobbly, jelly-like stomach, thrust a bottle of coke into my hands as she prepared to take her seat. I pretended not to notice her. The first rule of the tube is not to look strangers in the eye or strike up conversation with them. Who knows who you are talking to, and where that conversation might lead. The woman sneered at me. ‘You don’t speak English, do ya?’ She must have thought I was a refugee, or worse. ‘I do,’ I said somewhat defensively, ‘but I don’t get your accent.’ The noise from the moving train had made hearing worse. ‘I am from West Cardiff, that’s waaii.’ That’s why indeed. London is like that, full of people weird and wonderful. This mother of all cities is a haven now, as it has always been, for wannabee revolutionaries, renaissance seekers and, increasingly, refugees from eastern Europe and north Africa. This city, I remind myself as I pound its pavements, was the home of the Bloomsbury group. This is where Karl Marx wrote the Das Kapital and Charles Darwin his Origin of the Species. For years, I had avoided London. The colonial hang-up, I suppose. When colleagues sang praises of London, I swooned about Labasa. But the city has grown on me since my last visit there several years ago. This is my third extended visit and most certainly not the last. Let me admit it: this is where I would love to live, if I could afford it—and if the weather could be improved.

For a student of modern history, London is mecca. Relics and reminders of Britain’s vanished imperial glory abound. My flat is in Russell Square, named after the Secretary of State for India who reluctantly sanctioned indentured emigration in the 1840s, fearing it would become a new system of slavery. Whitehall, whose policies defined our destiny, is within walking distance, as is Marlborough House, the site of the penultimate conference on Fiji’s independence, and Downing Street, the Houses of Parliament. And there are other monuments that children of my generation, now reaching middle age, read about in primary school texts: Big...
Ben, the Tower of London, St Pauls’ Cathedral, the London Bridge, Buckingham Palace, Hyde Park, Piccadilly Circus. Old ditties from primary school come back: *Georgie Pogie Pudding and pie, Kissed the girls and made them cry. When the girls came out to play, Georgie Podgie ran away. And London Bridge is Falling down, falling down, falling down.* Reflecting on their cultural significance in our young lives revives vanishing memories of another era. We were once so innocently proud of belonging to an empire on which the sun never set, when Britannia ruled the waves, remembering those large patches in our atlases covered in red whose names we memorised for our entrance exam geography questions (the longest river in Africa, the highest mountain in Australia, the capital of Rhodesia).

What surprises me most about London is its cacophonous multiculturalism. It is open, upfront and defiantly visible. Its signs and signatures are everywhere, in sports (Nasser Hussain is the England cricket captain), in journalism (Black and Asian television reporters speak in distinct Oxbridge accent), in food (curry is now more popular than fish and chips), in public life (the House of Lords has Lords Desai and Patel and Parekh and other high and mighty). This is not to say by any means that London is friction-free. There are seething cultural and ethnic tensions in the more depressed areas of the city in the east end. There is complaint in the media about white Oxbridge bias. Supercilious affectations of pedigree and self-importance show in public affairs. Who you are rather than what you know matters hugely. And people still worship an old lady, born to fabulous, unearned wealth and privilege, whose only known passion is for horses and dogs.

But at least there is open public debate about these issues and, it seems to me, a genuine desire to get things right. England is an island but in the physical sense alone. The media leads and shapes public debate. For me, one of the glories of England is its newspapers: there can’t be many in the world which are better than *The Independent, The Guardian* and *The Times*. Reading and re-reading them consumes all my spare time during weekends, and even then there are bits and pieces left over for the following week. Such style and flair, such intrepid reporting.

I am in London to prepare a detailed documentary history of how Fiji became independent. As an editor of the ‘British Documents on the End of Empire’ series, I have been given full access to all the Fiji records at the Public Records Office at Kew Gardens. This is both a privilege and an honour, and a huge responsibility. Working at the PRO I am the happiest I have been in years, away from the drone of daily routine (the emails, the telephone, the blinking computer screen) to indulge my enduring passion for historical research. The book will be finished late next year.

The 1960s was Fiji’s decade of decolonisation. By the early 1960s, independence was firmly on the horizon. Harold Macmillan’s ‘Winds of Change’
were blowing upon our shores. It was not a question of if but when Fiji would become independent. Its timing became a matter of intense and passionate debate in the Legislative Council. The Fijian leaders, their people caught in a ferment of unprecedented social and economic change, preferred to retain the ‘special’ link with the British monarchy for a very long time. Frankly, they could not see why it needed to end. Indo-Fijian leaders wanted the cord severed quickly. They saw no virtue in continued colonial rule.

The most bitter debate throughout the 1960s focussed on the method of election. Fijian and European leaders preferred the communal roll; indeed, they were adamant about it. Indo-Fijians stuck firmly to their demand for the common roll. The same issue continues to haunt Fiji forty years later. Should Fijian interests be paramount? What did paramountcy mean in practical, political terms? Did it mean a few extra Fijian seats in the Legislative Council? How should the lease problem be resolved? Should merit and seniority or the principle of racial parity determine appointment and promotion in the civil service? Should Fiji become a Christian State? Should minority communities receive separate political representation? These issues are still with us today. The cast of characters has changed, but not the character of the problems.

It is fashionable these days to berate the British for practising the politics of divide and rule. But the blame game, so easy and so politically expedient, takes us only so far, and no further. The truth is that we were active participants in making our own history, not passive victims of it. The pace of change towards internal self-government was determined not in London, but in Fiji. London prodded us to move on; we procrastinated. The Colonial Office was acutely embarrassed by European over-representation in the Legislative Council and wanted it reduced drastically, but Fijian adamance won the day. London went along, reluctantly, so as to keep the Fijians on side.

There was intellectual sympathy for the position of political equality espoused by the Federation Party, but it was the plea of the Fijian leaders that London heeded—and needed to heed. Governor Derek Jakeway said it openly in Sydney that the United Kingdom government could not envisage a day when it would place independence in the hands of an ‘immigrant community’ over the objections of the indigenous people. And at the Colonial Office, people were open about devising a constitutional solution that would keep Fijians in power for a long time after independence. The introduction of cross-voting (called national seats after independence) was a means to that end.

The personalities who dominated the political debate stand out in the records. Ratu Mara, as he then was, was easily the Fijian leader of the moment, complex and conflicted, negotiating the competing claims of Fijian nationalism on the
one hand with the demands of a multiracial society on the other. The tension showed. AD Patel was recognised in Suva and London as a principled political leader of rare intellect, a Gandhian at heart, but whose relentless advocacy of a non-racial Fiji was doomed to fail at the altar of ethnically compartmentalised politics. There was Mr Apisai Tora, the charismatic firebrand of the 1960s, petitioning the Colonial Office about his various pet peeves of the moment: the chiefs, the Indians and the local sahibs. And then there was Sairusi Nabogibogi, jail bird, messiah, writer of fiction and hero of the Fijian underworld, about whom more elsewhere in this volume.

Visiting the past, talking about people long dead or gone from public life is my profession, my passion, my pastime. But I read shelves upon shelves of Fiji files with a deep sense of anguish. We seem as a nation to be moving round in circles, without resolving any of the deep-seated problems facing our people. We don't seem to have learnt from our past mistakes. Hobbled by a failed past, we are unable to grasp our beckoning future. The experience of reading the files is akin, I imagine, to seeing how sausage is actually made: it is enough to make one a vegetarian.

I leave you with the words of Gary Younge, a black columnist for The Guardian. In them, he describes what his ideal nation should be:

It is a nation where citizenship is not undermined by the happenstance of race or choice of faith but is understood as a common purpose and sense of belonging. A country that celebrates diversity because it understands the distinction between discriminating between people and discriminating against them. It is a place where people are not demonised collectively because of who they are but judged individually by what they have done. A land, like any other, where the poison of racism will always be present but where the antidote of anti-racism will be always available for those who wish to use it.

My sentiments exactly; I wish the words were mine too.

Nelspruit

Nelspruit. The name is unfamiliar to me. World geography was never my strength in school. It is, in fact, the name of the capital of Mpumalanga province of South Africa, a tree-lined, well stocked, formerly all-white city at the edge of the great Kruger National Park. As Padma and I travel across the length and breadth of South Africa over three weeks, other exotic places with alluring names we had once rote-learned in primary school come to life: Cape of Good Hope,
Pretoria, Durban, Johannesburg, the Phoenix Farm, Port Elizabeth, and many, many more. As did phrases we had picked up in books all those years ago: a pride of lions, a journey of giraffes, a dazzle of zebras.

As we gawked and clicked at the animals in the wild at close range from the safety of our safari vehicles, I realized for the first time how beautifully apt the descriptions were and, conversely, how utterly ill-equipped we were culturally to appreciate them. Africa was not a Dark Continent for people of my generation growing up in post-World War II Fiji. We were a part of the British Empire (how could we ever be allowed to forget it?) upon which, we proudly proclaimed, the sun never set. We looked at all the red patches on our much-thumbed Clarion Atlas and felt curiously proud to be connected to all those remote places around the globe. That knowledge somehow lessened our sense of isolation and nurtured our curiosity about distant places and pasts.

That passion to know about the world has persisted with me. I still get a special thrill when I can recite the name of the President of Botswana or the capital of Upper Volta, much to the puzzled amusement of my children. Our primary school curriculum emphasized our common colonial British heritage, captured most powerfully in the Senior (and Junior) Cambridge examinations which children across the Empire took. By the mid-sixties, Cambridge exams were on their way out, replaced by the New Zealand Certificate and University Entrance exams. Still, in our early primary school, we studied the *Oxford African Readers* and the University of London’s *Reading for Meaning* books. In them, we came across the fun-filled experiences of ‘our cousins,’ young African children, such as Luka and Rota, having a holiday, about Sokoloko Bengosay, a fat woman desperately trying various tricks to become thin and pretty (until her doctor told her that she was soon going to die, upon which she stopped being a glutton, which then reduced her weight and made her look thin and pretty again!), and parables and morality tales about the importance of prudence, caution, obedience to authority, honesty and the virtues of good citizenship. We learned our lessons well, too well I now realize, about being dutiful and diligent.

The occasional glossy magazines that found their way into our tiny library from the discarded collection of the British Council branch office in Labasa, introduced us to the pictures of people and animals in other parts of the Empire, especially Africa. It was such a thrill, on this trip, for me then to see the lion, the hippopotamus, the zebra, the giraffe, the elephant, the rhinoceros, the leopard, the cheetah and other animals in the wild. I thought of my unlettered father as we toured the Kruger because I had acquired much of my fascination about wild animals from the stories he told us (which he had picked up from his indentured
father). And to see with our own eyes the physical features of the countryside we had studied in school. We had learned about the savannah grasslands in our geography lessons, but had no idea what they were, what they looked like, until we drove through the former Transvaal region.

For me, the monuments and historic places had their own intrinsic fascination: the sites commemorating the Great Trek and the Boer War, Robben Island where Nelson Mandela and other anti-apartheid activists were incarcerated, the Phoenix Farm on the outskirts of Durban where Mahatma Gandhi had perfected his weapon of Satyagraha (Truth Force), the life of the Indian community in Natal, the Cape of Good Hope (so named by King John II of Portugal, we had learned in school and which the plaques now confirmed) which was first circumnavigated by Vasco da Gama in 1497 (circumcised some one had written in an exam paper: the ever mischievous Liaquat Ali perhaps?). Some facts we had learned in school were clearly wrong, I discovered. Cape Point (Kaarpunt in Afrikaan) was not the southern most point of the African continent, Point Aghalus was. And so it went.

These remote places of romance and adventure on the African continent turned into places of turmoil and violence in the sixties. We did not know it then, of course, (the topic was too dangerous and too close to home to be discussed at school) but Africa was in the throes of decolonization. In our General Knowledge class, we memorized the names of famous African nationalists such as Kwame Nkrurmah and Jomo Kenyata in preparation for such exam questions as ‘Who is the most famous leader of Ghana?’ or ‘So-and-so is the president of which country?’ We heard news on the radio about the terrible conflicts in Congo, about the never ending Biafaran civil war. I recall my father listening to the regular Hindi world news bulletin on our recently bought Telefunken radio set and wondering what or where these places were and why there was so much violence there.

In the 1970s, Africa was nothing but bad news. It was a place where nothing ever seemed to go right. Colonial rule had ended, but colonialism’s legacy had not. National boundaries drawn up by the colonial rulers were being aggressively transgressed by bellicose nationalists, and arrangements for power sharing among the different ethnic groups and notions of non-racial citizenship were being questioned and eroded. Nothing for us symbolized more the violence and treachery of the continent, of promises gone awry, than the expulsion of the Indian settlers of Uganda by its demonic (and in hindsight quite farcical) president-for-life, Field Marshall Idi Amin Dada, his megalomania brilliantly captured in the film The Last King of Scotland. With the expulsion of the enterprising Indian business community—there was no Indian indentured migration to East Africa—the country descended into chaos and poverty.
And so things remain there, although I heard in South Africa that some of the Indians were beginning to return, but their wealth and family safely ‘parked’ in Europe and North America.

The Ugandan experience aroused deep fears among our own people in Fiji at the time. If the long-settled Indians could be expelled from Uganda, just like that, couldn’t a similar thing happen here? We had achieved our independence without strife, but none of the deep-seated fears of the different communities about their place in the broader scheme of things had been addressed. These were postponed for a later generation, with what consequences we now know only too well. In 1975, Fijian nationalist firebrand, Sakeasi Butadroka, opened the floodgates with his motion in parliament to have the Fiji Indians repatriated to India. The motion was defeated after a bitter and acrimonious debate. For the Indo-Fijians, though, the writing was visible on the wall. Many began looking for greener pastures elsewhere. In time, what began as a tickle turned into torrent. Within the next decade or so, with emigration proceeding apace, there will be more Indo-Fijians living outside than in Fiji.

Within a short span for my generation, Africa has been transformed from a place of romance and exploration and adventure into a place of grinding poverty and mindless violence. Africa is in the news again, bad news, as we prepare for our journey. Drought and disease are creating havoc across the continent, as they have done for some time. Our television screens are full of pleas for assistance in cash and kind as emaciated babies with bloated stomachs and buzzed by flies look pleadingly into the camera. Tribal violence is tearing many countries apart. Tutsis and Tutsis have been at each other’s throats for some time. The President of Sudan is being cited for crimes against humanity. In Zimbabwe, the octogenarian dictator Robert Mugabe’s reluctance to respect the verdict of the ballot box and concede defeat to his rival Moran Tsvangirai, is arousing worldwide condemnation, though so far to little outward effect. Africa seems full of tin-pot dictators unwilling to relinquish power. Yesterday’s democrats have over-night become today’s dictators.

South Africa is in the news for another reason; for the so-called ‘xenophobic’ violence. This is black violence against fellow black Africans from neighbouring countries (principally Zimbabwe, but also Mozambique, Botswana, Namibia) fleeing their desperately poor, violence-ridden countries to seek a livelihood somewhere else. The television images are arresting, disturbing, of young men and women fleeing from their South African pursuers armed with sticks and stones into dusty hovels scattered across a desolate landscape. Be careful, friends urge us, stay away from the trouble spots, meaning black areas on the outskirts of major urban centres.
But television images are misleading. Without context and perspective, relying only on brief images and urgent sound bites, it is all too easy to assume that xenophobic violence is a pervasive feature of South African society. It is not. The violence is confined by and large to the so-called ‘informal settlements,’ a euphemism for wretched tin shacks on the outskirts of major towns and cities where the desperately poor working class black Africans live in hope and despair. But ‘xenophobic’ is a misleading description of the problem. Xenophobia in its strict sense of course means a ‘fear of strangers.’ Here, the fear is of ‘black’ Africans from neighbouring countries, not whites or coloureds. The violence is class-based and rampant in the most marginalized areas of the country. The distinguished South African psychologist Don Foster suggests that the fear has deeper roots and the present violence against black ‘aliens’ (as they are called) stems from it. It is the fear of invasion from the north where the aliens are blamed for all the ills afflicting African society: crime, disease, AIDS, poverty, when many black South Africans feel dispossessed, disconnected and deeply discontented with their lot. ‘Thwarted masculinity’ is the phrase Foster uses to describe the condition of the South African youth for whom vulnerable outsiders become easy targets, giving them the illusion of power and authority. Open borders and free trade and other benefits of globalization are fine on paper, he says, but their social and economic consequences on the coalface of life is another.

South Africa embarked on a new non-racial, post-apartheid journey with the release from prison of its most celebrated political prisoner, Nelson Mandela, after twenty odd years in incarceration, over dozen of them on the notorious Robben island (which we visit and which fills us with horror about the conditions the inmates had to endure there: backbreaking work in the quarries, solitary detention, institutional violence, naked racism). Mandela is a truly exceptional figure, one of the genuine giants of modern history, alongside Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, a man of immeasurable courage, personal dignity and grace. He became post-apartheid South Africa’s first president in 1994, forming a ‘Rainbow Coalition’ in his culturally, linguistically and geographically diverse and fragmented (and potentially explosive) nation. If providing a smooth transition from one fraught era to another at a time of great anxiety and tension when things could easily have gone awry were Mandela’s only legacy, that would be a momentous achievement in itself. But perhaps Mandela’s greatest achievement, certainly in the African context and in light of the experience of many developing countries, has been his voluntary relinquishment of power to the new generation when he could have, like so many other leaders on the continent, clung to it for as long as he wanted, such was his aura and authority.
‘Mandela is a man of history,’ Daan, our elderly Afrikaan tour guide and a retired teacher tells us. He echoes a widely held view. ‘The first five years of the post-apartheid era were golden years for our country,’ he says, even though he quietly rues the way in which aspects of his own Afrikaan past are being systematically erased from the public view: street names changed, public monuments neglected, heroes of the Afrikaan past uncelebrated. His past is vanishing before his eyes. Daan acknowledges that the euphoria of those early years is now largely a vanishing memory, the promise of hope and of rapid betterment postponed. ‘Far from being a society in the advanced stages of recovery from our terrible past,’ writes the commentator and author Heidi Holland, ‘South Africa is a gigantic psychiatric unit. With so many of us, whites as well as blacks, failing to acknowledge let alone wrestle with our wounded psyches, we are not so much a nation in decline following great expectations, but a traumatized people constantly hovering between depression and delusion.’

South Africa still is the most developed country in the continent, thanks in no small part ironically to the architects of its apartheid past, but the gulf between the early rhetoric and the current reality is stark. Blacks and Afrikaan speaking blacks and coloureds are still largely absent from the private sector. Few of them find places at leading institutions of learning.

To redress the balance, the Mbeki government has enacted the Black Economic Empowerment program to increase black presence in the economic sector through affirmative action and reserved quotas. There is some progress, but also much abuse. The well-to-do and the well-connected benefit, I am told, but that is the reality everywhere. Behind many successful black businessmen is some white or Indian person, people remark. Some coloured leaders are calling for an end to the racially oriented affirmative action programs. Alan Boesak, the anti-apartheid activist who fell from grace during the dying days of apartheid, is another one of them: Such programs are entrenching divisions and institutionalizing racism he says, and warns the country of the dangers of ‘flirting with ethnicity.’ ‘The ANC,’ he says, ‘has succumbed to the subtle but pernicious temptations of ethnic thinking, has brought back the language of ethnicity into the speech of the movement and has as government brought back the hated system of racial categorization.’

That may all be true, but the political reality (numbers alone) demands active engagement with black issues and concerns, however contentious these might be. Not to do so would be political suicide. The political mathematics is really as simple as that. The stark reality is that black poverty stares you squarely in the face in hundreds upon hundreds of informal black settlements throughout the country; rotting, overcrowded corrugated tin shacks often without running
water, electricity or other amenities. South Africa will have to pay penance for
the neglect and abuse of the past for a very long time, and minority communities
will have to sacrifice their share for national reconciliation and healing if they
are to live with honour and security in the emerging new order. Aspiring black
leaders are already demanding greater black empowerment.

The past has a palpable presence in South Africa’s present. Parts of the
country are pure first world where the supermarkets are well stocked with goods
and gadgets of all kinds, the kind available in western supermarkets anywhere
in the world. The roads are wide and clean, homes have swimming pools and
well manicured lawns maintained by black servants. Travelling through parts
of Pretoria or Cape Town, you could be excused for thinking you were in
Sydney or Melbourne. These are your former exclusively white areas. But other
areas, especially in the suburbs and outskirts of cities, would be replicas of the
most squalid areas of human habitation found in the poorest countries of the
developing world: roads narrow and pot-holed and strewn with rubbish, foul
smell from overgrown drains, houses of tin shacks.

The contrast between black and white in wealth and opportunity is deeply
confronting, but the disparity is no accident of history. It is, in fact, a deliberate
product of the apartheid regime which was born when South Africa declared
itself a republic in 1948. A cornerstone of the apartheid system was the Group
Areas Act which stipulated complete residential segregation of the different races,
purely on the grounds of race, nothing else. On paper, the proposal may have
looked only mildly offensive: people asked to live with their own kind in their
own designated areas; but in practice, the system was nothing but pernicious.
The whites got the best, most developed areas, with the best infrastructure,
schools, hospitals, public service and the like, and they fought for its complete
retention. The non-whites, especially blacks and Indians, were uprooted from
urban areas where they had lived for generations and sent to completely new
and often inhospitable places to start afresh. And they started with a huge
handicap. Their newly established schools and hospitals were under-staffed and
under-funded; employment opportunities were few and far between, and poverty
hovered around the edges. There has been some improvement in recent years, but
the markers of South Africa’s iniquitous past are still visible.

It may not be true now, but for a long time, South Africa had the largest
Indian population outside South Asia. At nearly a million strong, it is certainly the
world’s largest Indian community descended from Indian indentured migration.
About 160,000 Indian indentured labourers went to South Africa (Natal) between
1860 and 1911, a part of nearly one million who crossed the kala pani (the dark,
dreaded ocean) to work in the ‘King Sugar’ colonies across the globe. But unlike
other sugar colonies, the majority of South Africa’s indentured came from South India (which traditionally supplied labour to the neighbouring areas in Southeast Asia). Today, the South Indians constitute the majority of the Indian population. In Fiji, being late comers and a minority, the South Indians had to adjust themselves to the dominant north Indian culture, bearing the brunt of their cultural prejudices about colour and caste. Their darker skin, food habits and language all provoked derisive comment from the northerners who called them khatta pani, eaters of sour (inferior) food. In Natal, I am amused to learn, the Southern Indians have taken their revenge, referring to their northern compatriots derisively as roti, people not up to much good! The shoe was firmly on the other foot.

My introduction to the Indian community in Natal came during my first year at university through Hilda Kuper’s wonderful book, *Indians in Natal*. It was the first book on another overseas Indian community I had read, and it made a deep impression on me: black and white pictures of men and women wearing familiar dress and with familiar names (Chinsami, Gangamma), performing rituals and ceremonies which seemed vaguely similar to our own, men working on the sugar estates that resembled our own CSR farms. Kuper led me to other ethnographers of that golden age of overseas Indian anthropology: Arthur and Juanita Niehoff, Morton Klass, Burton Benedict, Chandra Jayawardena and Raymond Smith. The great Adrian Mayer, the author of the incomparable *Peasants in the Pacific* about our own community, I already knew but, after Kuper, in a renewed kind of a way.

The South African Indian community is at the back of my mind as we plan our African trip. It is, in fact, the principal reason for our visit to Durban where most of them still live. The contrast with Fiji is unmistakable. Sugar dominated our life and determined our patterns of occupation and residence for nearly a century. Large numbers of our people still variously depend on the industry and many families continue to live in the sugar belt. In South Africa, few renewed their indentures once these had expired. Most escaped to urban centres as soon as they could to secure sources of livelihood other than agriculture. They were replaced on the sugar estates by black Africans. And so it remains. Indenture for South African Indians, as for the Fiji Indians, was a limited detention and not a life sentence, although poverty and insecurity are still the constant companions for many.

Among the urban Indians, the vernacular languages are gone, especially Hindi; Tamil and Telugu and Gujarati are spoken by the older generation, but the language will go with them. English is for all practical purposes the main language of both public and private communication. I note the fluency and flair with which many on the radio and television speak it, the legacy no doubt of good English education at the country’s elite schools. There is a Radio
Mirchi, like the one in Fiji, but the announcers speak English and the songs are modern re-mixes which are completely unknown to me. Food has changed, but not recognizably so. Every town and city has its ‘Indian’ restaurants serving generic Indian food of the type available anywhere else in the world. There is some creative reckoning with the past through novels and poems, but nothing compared to the output in the Caribbean, or even Fiji. The apartheid regime crippled the creative spirit. But with the liberation has come a new confidence—which may yet translate into something. Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed have made a brilliant start with their *Inside Indenture*, a pioneering study of the lived indenture experience in South Africa, an original work of singular importance.

Amidst all the unfamiliarity of the surroundings, though, there are some pleasant discoveries. I am on the lookout for South African Indian music. In Holland a month earlier, I had picked up a dozen or so compact discs of Sarnami songs (*Baithak Gana*: rustic songs sung to the accompaniment of elementary musical instruments) which had reminded me of the music of my childhood. I wondered if I could make a similar discovery in Natal. I did indeed. In a rundown Indian shopping area in one of the outer suburbs of Durban, I came across a shop selling local music. I was particularly intrigued by the *Pachara* songs. At first, the words and the rhythmic tune seemed vaguely familiar; but then, suddenly, it all came to me. *Pacharas*, I remembered, were songs of trance sung by *ojhas* (spirit men) in the village to recall village or family deities (*gram* and *kul devtas*) to identify the cause of some misfortune in the family or to get some sense of impending events which might being harm. It was all very mysterious and fear-inducing: fear of what I cannot now say, but I recall with particular horror the most notorious spirit man of all, Sibda Badal from Wainikoro, a hunchback with the power, so people said, to bring whole families down, to cause the death of animals and people, just like that. Listening to the songs brought back memories of childhood which until then I had completely forgotten.

The Indian community in South Africa is as divided by class, culture and historical experience, as it is elsewhere. The descendants of Indian indentured labourers still live principally in the KwaZulu Natal region. Johannesburg has a large and moderately prosperous cluster of Gujaratis who came as artisans and traders later, as happened in Fiji. An overarching, and in truth an artificial, sense of ‘Indianness’ was imposed by the apartheid regime which treated all Indians as a homogenous group for administrative purposes. Under the Group Areas Act, they were all without exception banished segregated residential settlements on the outer fringes of white-dominated urban areas. I had assumed that such enforced relocation, a sudden rupture of communities and relationships established over long period, would be a traumatic experience for those affected by it.
That it was in many places, but I heard a different story in Johannesburg. There, the Indians were removed from the city precincts to a newly opened Indian settlement called Len Asia. In the city, Vivek, our elderly Gujarati guide, tells us, Indians ran their businesses on rented properties and the women folk stayed at home to look after the family. But in the new settlement, homes had to be built or bought, and everyone had to work to make ends meet. One result of the increased pressure was that more Gujarati girls completed school and more women joined the workforce, as they had to. In a curious and unpredictable way, segregation had led to the Gujarati women’s liberation! I was inclined to see the South African Gujarati experience through my Fijian lenses, but was soon disabused of my preconceptions. The Gujarati community in Fiji is still pretty self-contained and generally inward looking, though less now than before. People play at caste, and marriage within one’s caste is still considered desirable. In South Africa, caste plays little role in social affairs, and marriages outside the community are common, or at least not a topic of disapproving comment. This greater openness of the community came about in a curious and not altogether voluntary way. During the apartheid years, immigration from India was prohibited because of India’s position on the apartheid regime, so marriages perforce had to be arranged within the community in South Africa. And the marriage circle widened as the range of choices within the community diminished and as education and employment opportunities expanded, making caste a largely irrelevant factor. This is beginning to take place in Fiji, too, but so far in a small way.

In Durban, we saw the darker side of enforced racial segregation under the Group Areas Act. We were taken to Chatsworth, a forty-year old Indian settlement on the unlovely outer fringes of Durban by Ashwin and Goolam. With a population of over three hundred thousand, Chatsworth is still predominantly Indian, but now also with a sprinkling of blacks. Chatsworth would have to be one of the most depressing areas I have ever seen in my life: and I have seen a fair bit. In dreary blocks of low cost housing of the type we have in Fiji (Raiwaqa), entire families live together in single and double room flats with few amenities and very little privacy. How they manage to make do in such small, cramped space is beyond my comprehension. There is drug trafficking here, Ashwin tells us, sexual abuse, domestic violence and, as we can see, unimaginable poverty. We meet brave women, such as Girliie Arnod, who have struggled all their lives to keep their family life intact. But the struggle has taken its toll, and many have given up hope. A single issue of the Chatsworth tabloid carries headlines which capture the grim reality of this place: ‘Tragedy Hits New Trade School as Roof Collapses on Labourers,’ ‘Police Crack Down on Robbers in Chats,’ ‘Drug Addiction Grows Among Scholars,’ ‘Drive By Suspect Threatens Witness From Prison Court.’
Waituri To Nelspruit and Other Places in Between

Chatsworth is not a site of liberation as Len Asia marginally was. In Len Asia, the people have at least built a semblance of a community. In Chatsworth, the housing scheme allowed only for nuclear families with the result that extended families and communities built up over generations were sundered. Gone at a stroke of the pen were bonds ‘based on trust, friendship, sociability, obligation and mutual support overlaid with a framework of kinship and religious norms,’ writes Ashwin Desai. This site of abject desperation offers little hope. We are told that the younger generation of Chatsworth has no hope of finding employment. They will forever remain on the margins of society, living on the meagre charity provided by the state and the crumbs they pick from the table. As we leave the settlement, a young man sitting on a wooden crate and flipping through the pages of the local daily (advertising goods that will remain outside the reach of the people here) looks up at Padma and says forlornly: ‘Please find me a job, any job.’ That haunting image remains with her. It is not so much the poverty as the absence of opportunity, any opportunity, which is the real bane of life in Chatsworth.

Apartheid is gone, but the hope its end spawned has failed to materialize. The ‘multitude that brought down the apartheid regime,’ writes Ashwin, ‘had a millennial faith in the exiled and imprisoned leadership of the ANC. The multitude that brought the ANC to power with millions of acts of rebellion, from strikes to burning barricades to refusing to stay and pay and obey, became (just slightly fractious) people under the ANC. This may seem a harsh indictment, but this certainly seems to be the lot of the people of Chatsworth and the hundreds of informal black settlements mushrooming across the length and breadth of South Africa.

I am interested in how the Indians see their future in South Africa. There is no clear-cur answer. Among the older generation, there is some nostalgia for the peace and order that existed during the apartheid regime. Referring to the burgeoning crime rate in urban areas (Johannesburg is the crime capital of the world, I learn), a man says to me: ‘Then they were in and we were out. Now, they are out and we are in.’ He means the criminals are freely roaming the streets while ordinary law abiding citizens live barricaded behind bars. Nearly everyone talks about the rampant corruption being a pervasive feature of South African public life. ‘In the old days, they stole from the till,’ Vivek says to me, ‘but now they are stealing the till itself.’

Vivek is disillusioned, but not embittered. A retired primary school teacher in his seventies, he lived through the horrors of the darkest days of apartheid and does not mourn its passing. ‘At least we are free now,’ he says, ‘free to do whatever we want, including making mistakes.’ Jaya, a graceful old Gujarati lady who has travelled the world and who speaks beautiful English, says proudly,
‘This is my country, the best place in the world. I will live nowhere else.’ There is something deeply touching about this enduring fondness for one’s place of birth and childhood memories.

Vivek’s and Jaya’s attachment is understandable. They have been a part of South Africa’s history. Vivek lives in Mayfair, a formerly all-white area within a stone’s throw of the central business district of Johannesburg. He points out to us the infamous police stations and magistrates’ courts where generations of blacks and anti-apartheid activists were incarcerated. He talks wistfully about the contribution the Indians made to the anti-apartheid cause. The names of the most illustrious ones are legion: Mac Maharaj, Ahmed Kathrada, Dullah Omar, Fatima Meer, and many others. Mahatma Gandhi was, of course, the first Indian to challenge the racial order of the white colonial empire in South Africa. But all that seems to belong to another era now: maybe not obliterated, but overshadowed by the emphasis on black power, black struggle and black contribution. ‘Once we were not white enough,’ a man says to me, referring to the privileges denied to them because of their less than fair (brown) skin. ‘And now we are not black enough.’ These words powerfully underline the Indian ambivalence in contemporary South Africa.

It is reinforced by a report we read in Sunday Times of a former police cell in the northern KwaZulu town of Dundee where the Mahatma was detained in 1913 being converted into toilets and a storeroom, Superintendent Gail De Mork says she was not aware that ‘this was a site of such importance.’ Businessman Dharam Maharaj wants action, for his people to ‘take a stand against this arid come together as a community to restore this site,’ but nothing is likely to happen. Gandhi’s Phoenix Farm, the place where the Mahatma launched some of his great human experiments with Truth, us he put it, now lies in a slum of heart-breaking poverty and destitution, and looked after by a black caretaker. When I raise the issue with Vivek, he tells me what young people are saying: ‘What did Gandhi do for us?’ The younger generation of Indians in cities like Johannesburg and Durban are carving a niche for themselves in the professions and in the public sector. Politics is left alone. It is too corrupt, they say, too remote to their daily concerns which centre around their families’ welfare and future above everything else. They have little awareness of their past, of the sacrifices and struggles of their forebears. But the South African Indians are not alone in this. This ignorance and amnesia is global, and by no means confined to Indians alone.

As we leave South Africa, I have the distinct sense that for many young Indians, while South Africa will be the home of their parents and grandparents, it won’t be the home for their children. They are already talking of London and
Perth and Melbourne, and a dozen other Western cities, as the destinations of choice for the next generation. Many have made plans to move one day, as has happened in other places with substantial Indian populations, such as Fiji, Guyana and Surinam, South Africa, too, will empty of its Indian population. It appears inevitable that the Indian presence will gradually vanish from the collective consciousness into the margins of a distantly remembered past. ‘From Immigration to Emigration’ may in time also become the epitaph of the South Africa’s Indian community, as it has of so many countries of the girmit diaspora.