



## Return to Bahraich

*Our deeds travel with us from afar. What we have been makes us what we are.*

Indian saying

My grandfather was a girmitiya. I have vivid memories of him. He was a tall, handsomely built man, with a massive handlebar moustache and a perpetual week's growth of white beard, a thinning close-cropped head of hair, deep-set (almost) blind eyes fixed perpetually on something in the distance, clad in white flowing cotton kurta and dhoti, with a well rolled homemade *suluka* in one hand and a walking stick in the other. Over eighty, although he reckoned he was nearly a hundred before he died on 8 May 1962, he was a creature of habit. He would be up at the first light of dawn, just as he had done under indenture, do his ablutions in the fields by the river, rinse his toothless mouth with salt water, bathe at the well, offer a prayer and a ceremonial *lota* of water sprinkled with *tulsi* leaves to the sun, the eternal source of energy, have a *piala* of sweet red tea and retire to

his stringed bed under the huge mandarin tree behind the *belo*.

In the afternoon once a month or so, a few other girmitiyas, all grizzled, dhoti-clad men of similar age, would gather at our house, smoke huqqa—I am now certain it was ganja—and talk vaguely about their evanescent past in a strange language no one else understood. Once in a while on some ceremonial occasion when the entire village got together—for Satyanarayan Puja, Ramayan Recital, Bhagvada Katha, Ram Naumi, Shiva Ratri—people would plead with the girmitiyas to sing *bhajan* as only they knew how. On these occasions, Aja would take the lead; he was an accomplished *bhajan* as well as a *sarangi* and *khajhadi* player. We would be seated on the *paal* against the wall, mesmerised as Aja and his fellow *mulkis*, compatriots—Jwala, Madho, Butru, Dhanessar, Nanka—sang their haunting Kabir *bhajans* about love and loss and grief (*Koi thagwa nagariya lootal ho*), about the longing of the soul for freedom from the entanglements of *maya* (*Rehna nahin des virana hai*), about the ultimate pointlessness of life without faith (*Sumiran bina gota khao ge*), working themselves into a trance as the evening wore on.

There was something strange, something incongruous about these people. Now in their mellow twilight, they seemed to be shipwrecked by fate in a place they did not, perhaps could not, fully embrace, and they could not return to a place they so dearly loved. They were a people caught in-between the tensions of culture and history, resisting assimilation into the ways of their adopted homeland by re-enacting archaic customs from a remembered past. Aja, for instance, never shaved himself, but waited every Sunday for another girmitiya, a *hajam*, barber, (Chinnaiya by name) who lived across the river in the adjacent village of Laqere, to shave him and collect his customary remuneration in kind, usually some rice and mung dhal. Every year after the family Satyanarayan Puja, he would donate a calf to the family Brahman priest in the prayerful hope that his children and grandchildren would be able to cross the dreaded Baitarini river from this world into the next by holding on to the tail of the animal. On some particularly auspicious occasion, such as the birth of a grandchild, he would hold a huge *bhandara* to which all our far-flung relatives and immediate neighbours would be invited. And for thirteen days during the month of *Pitara Pakh*, when the graves gave up their dead and the souls of all the recently departed family members returned to roam the earth, he would fast and pray and make ritual offering of food on banana or taro leaves at a specially prepared prayer mound under the mango tree. These and other customs, with which I grew up, have now vanished almost beyond recall.

Aja had come to Fiji in 1908 as an indentured labourer on a five year agreement to work on CSR sugar cane plantations. He was entitled to return to India at his own expense at the end of five years or at government expense after a further ten years of 'industrial residence' in the colony. Aja had hoped to return, one day, never expecting or wanting to leave his homeland permanently. He continued to correspond with his relatives back in Bahraich until the 1950s, and occasionally sent whatever little money the family could save. But that day of decision never came. Our family was always in financial difficulty. Aja had married a woman from another caste, and knew the dishonour this would bring him and his people back in India. He had a family of his own to raise, rent to pay for the ten acre native lease. And so time passed and memories of home faded, and, in the course of time, an intended temporary sojourn was transformed into permanent displacement.

My grandfather was one of sixty thousand men, women and children, who had come to Fiji between 1879, when indentured migration to the colony began, and 1916 when all indentured emigration ceased. Fiji's migrants themselves were a part of one million Indian indentured migrants who had crossed the *kala pani*, the dark dreaded waters, to the 'king sugar' colonies in the Indian and Atlantic oceans. Some were enticed by the tall tales told by unscrupulous *arkatis* (recruiters) of easy fortune awaiting them in Mirich Dvip (Mauritius) or Chini Tapu (Trinidad) or Demerara (Guyana), or Fiji, sometimes called the Ramnik Dvip, the colourful islands or islands in paradise. But most were simple folk, down on their luck, seeking temporary respite from some personal difficulties. Perhaps the crops had failed or cattle had died in a drought, perhaps the zamindar was threatening them with eviction for arrears of rent or the village mahajan was demanding his dues. Perhaps some were members of the '*Huqqa Pani Band*' brigade, escaping social ostracism for some breach of caste protocol. No doubt some were in trouble with the law, and some were young unattached souls in search of adventure. They all knew that they were going to some place they had never heard of before, but they would be back one day, long before their absence was noticed in the village.

Aja came from Bahraich, a poor district in an impoverished region of northeastern India, the principal supplier of indentured labour to the colonies after the 1870s, taking over from Bihar. From then on, it was such districts as Basti, Gonda, Azamgarh, Sultanpur, Faizabad, names synonymous with destitution and despair even now, which supplied the bulk of the migrants. Today, people comment harshly on the extreme poverty and backwardness of the eastern districts, and on the lethargic,

perennially unenterprising attitude of its inhabitants, India's real 'wretched of the earth'. Given this widespread perception, it surprises most people to learn that hundreds of thousands of people from this region upped and left for the colonies last century, showing courage, enterprise and determination, which those remaining behind are alleged to be lacking. Within India itself, the region furnished millions of workers to the Calcutta jute mills, the Assam tea gardens, the Bihar coal mines, and the Bombay textile mills.

Bahraich was not a major contributor of indentured migrants to Fiji. Of the colony's forty five thousand North Indian indentured migrants, only seven hundred and fifty came from the district. But in many respects, it was a typical eastern UP district: predominantly Hindu, poor, illiterate, agricultural, its population dominated by such cultivating castes as Ahir, Kurmi, Kori, Kahar, Lodh, Murao as well as Brahman and Rajput peasants. Shaped like an isosceles triangle, with an area of 2647 square miles, almost exactly the size of Vanua Levu, Fiji's second largest island where Aja eventually settled, but with a population of over one million, Bahraich, like most of Oudh, was a *talugdari* (feudal) district; four landlords owned more than half the total area. Half of the land was cultivated by tenants at will, and half by those who paid their dues in kind. The district is littered with lakes and *jhils* (swamps) and thus vulnerable to malarial fever; cholera, officials often noted ruefully, was 'never absent from the district'. A lot of the district was under forest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but there were also large groves of mangoes—mahua, shisham. I knew from the stories that Aja used to tell that the district was full of animals—leopards, tigers, wolves, wild hogs, antelope. He described them lovingly as if they were members of his own extended family.

The Emigration Pass, that indentured visa card-cum-passport, lists Aja's age at the time of migration as 26 which was about the average age of the emigrating population. As a young unmarried man, he had been out and about, looking for a job. 1907-1908 was a particularly bad year even for a district no stranger to misfortune. Bahraich was stricken with a drought, its misery worsened by a succession of bad harvests. Aja had wondered off to the local thana looking for something to do, and there heard about wonderful opportunities in a *tapu*, an island. Would he like to go there just for a few years and see what it was like? Aja agreed, whereupon he was taken to Fyzabad for registration on 13 January 1908. Soon afterwards, along with other recruits, he did his *chalan* (journey) to Calcutta. At Daryaganj, the Depot Surgeon, a Lieutenant Colonel in the Indian Medical Services, certified that 'we have examined and passed the above-named

man as fit to emigrate; that he is free from all bodily and mental disease; and that he has been vaccinated since engaging'. On 25 January, Fiji's Emigration Agent in Calcutta, W. J. Bolton, certified that Aja 'has appeared before me and has been engaged by me on behalf of the Government of Fiji as willing to proceed to that country to work for hire; and that I have explained to him all matters concerning his engagement and duties'. That being so, Aja was certified to proceed 'as in a fit state of health to undertake the voyage to Fiji' on 18 February 1908.

Aja had been recruited for Demerara, I remember him telling us, which is not surprising. Often, one agent recruited for a number of colonies. But when he reached Calcutta, Aja was told that the Demerara quota had been filled. And so he was transferred to the Fiji Depot. I don't know whether he actually understood the terms and conditions of his engagement. Some of those who had accompanied him from upcountry balked when the reality of a long voyage to a distant place dawned on them, and some bolted from the barracks. But Aja stayed put. He had eaten the arkati's salt, he said, and he would honour his word. He was not a *namak haram*, an ingrate. Honour, *izzat*, weighed heavily with Aja. Five years would pass like five minutes. Didn't Lord Rama spend fourteen years in exile? He emphasised the point by quoting some disjointed lines from the *Ramayana*: '*Chaudah baras Ram ban basi...*' He boarded his ship with resolve but not without apprehension. *SS Sangola* was his ship's name. The immigrant ships have magical names, some derived from classical mythology, such as *Leonidas*, *Pericles*, *Syria*, while others were named after great rivers such as *Ganges*, *Indus*, *Sutlej*, *Elbe*, *Danube*, *Rhine*, *Clyde*, *Avon*, all of them especially fitted to carry human cargo over long distances. 'Floating caravan of barbarian tourists' someone called these ships, while some *girmitiyas* remembered them as floating funeral processions: *chalta firta*, *jeeta jagata janaza*.

The confined spaces of overcrowded cabins confounded a people who had never seen the sea before. Inevitably, the ship became the site of a massive social disruption. All the old rituals and ceremonial observances of village India began to crumble in that crucible. No one could be certain about the true caste of the *bhandaries* (cooks). They all ate together in a *pangat*, seated single file, drank water from the same container, shared and cleaned the same toilet, and took turns sweeping, hosing, cleaning the deck. The voyage was a great leveller of hierarchy and status: the immigrants were coolies all in the eyes of the sahibs. Some protested, and others tried to cheat their way through or bypass the normal channels, but to no avail. Aja used to tell a story about a man of high caste who stole some onions and potatoes to cook by himself to avoid pollution. He was caught. Making

an example of him, the Surgeon Superintendent paraded him on the deck in front of all the other passengers, his mouth stuffed with a raw potato. How Aja used to laugh telling this story. He also recalled another incident when people were having their evening meal on a particularly stormy night. Suddenly, the ship heaved and food spilled all over the place. That ended all the pretense of observing commensal restrictions.

But amidst all the disruption and dislocation, new relationships were being formed, none more important than the bond of *jahajibhai*, ship mates, a bond which neither time nor circumstance would be able to erase. It became the foundation of a new enduring and intimate familial relationship. It was for good reason that the colonial authorities dispersed the *jahajibhais* among plantations scattered around the country. But somehow, the *jahajis* kept in touch with each other long after indenture had ended, and walked long distances on foot for reunions and reminiscences. I recall these meetings as deeply emotional occasions. The *jahajis* treated each other like blood kin, with all the obligations and responsibilities that such a relationship entailed. The bonds disappeared with the *girimityas*.

Aja served his indenture at Tuatua in Labasa, opened to sugar cane plantations in the early 1890s by the CSR which erected a cane crushing mill there in 1894. Indenture was generally a hard, brutalising, disorienting experience, but indenture in Labasa was pure *narak*, hell. The *girimityas* there were more vulnerable because they were on another island, remote, isolated: out of sight, out of official mind. Government supervision and inspection of plantations, provided for in legislation, were ineffectual in practice; overtaking, violence and abuse broke many. Aja served the first few years of his *gimit* as a field labourer, but his plantation, he said, was lucky in its *kulambar*, overseer, an experienced and humane man, who took a paternalistic interest in those under his charge. Some of them were like that. When things went out of control, the *girimityas* went straight to the *burra sahib*, the chief manager, who could always be counted on to put things right. Aja was also lucky to come to Fiji when the worst days of indenture were over, days of death, disease, heartbreaking infant mortality rates, excessive overtaking. But fortunately for him, Aja did not remain a field labourer for long. He was good with horses, it was discovered; he had been a champion horse racer in his youth. And so he was transferred to the CSR stables, and served the rest of his *gimit* looking after draught as well as racing horses. On 18 May 1913, exactly five years after arriving in Fiji, he became a free man, master of his own destiny. He left the Tuatua plantation and leased a ten acre plot of land in Tabia just on the outskirts of the cane growing area. It was here that he settled, and raised his family. It was here

that he died in 1962.

A lot of history is concealed autobiography, the distinguished Australian historian KS Inglis has written, more so in my case than most. Growing up in a rural farming community in a remote part of Labasa, I saw the relics and legacies of indenture all around me. My parents, like so many of their generation, had grown up in the shadow of indenture and bore the mental and emotional scars of girit: the isolation, the poverty, the unending struggle to make ends meet, a sense of helplessness and vulnerability to forces beyond their control, the controlling power the Colonial Sugar Refining Company had over the lives of the cane growers. Being his ears and eyes, I was very close to Aja. (I was sleeping beside him in his bed when he died very early that May morning). From early on, I was intrigued by his stories and reminiscences, and by the sight of his compatriots, all funny old men wearing funny dress, speaking a funny language. Who were these people and how in the world did they end up in Fiji, thousands of miles away from India? Why had they come, and why had they stayed behind? There was no written history about them, just hazy memories, a collage of conflicting testimonies about a past that seemed remote and irrelevant. I wanted to re-visit that vanishing past.

That opportunity came when I embarked on my doctoral research at the Australian National University in 1977. A careful reading of the written records disproved the pervasive myths about the giritiyas. These were not the 'flotsam and jetsam' of humanity, 'riff raffs' picked up from the streets of Calcutta but a cross section of uprooted rural peasantry on the move in search of better opportunities somewhere, anywhere. Fortunately, post-graduate training in those days required field work, which for me meant a year in India visiting the regions from where the giritiyas had come, getting a sense of the place, collecting written and oral accounts of migration. I was excited about returning to Aja's homeland, a journey he himself had intended but was unable to make. I was determined to make the pilgrimage to Bahraich, for his sake as well as my own.

By the time I finally reached Bahraich late in 1978, I had been in India long enough to be acclimatised to its many idiosyncrasies that assault one's senses: the crowds, the noise, the stench in the alleys, the urban squalor, the rush of grotesquely deformed beggars, the taxi drivers driving at night without their headlights on to save the battery, the corrupt office wallahs used to having their palms greased, the craze for things 'phoren'. It is Naipaulian jitters, you might say, but for me, too, on first contact India is an area of darkness. Soon, though, one gets de-sensitised. I am amazed at my newly acquired ability to look past unpleasant reality. Beggars are

ignored, certain byways avoided, peons paid to do the basic chores, buying grocery or fetching cinema and rail tickets. I think nothing of eating greasy *dhaba*, roadside, food from sooty restaurants or drinking sweet syrupy tea in mud cups. To deal with the intrusive Indian obsession with status and hierarchy, to avoid irritating interrogation about my 'good name' and background, I simply assume different names and identities at different places. If all else fails, I say I am from the South. That, I quickly discovered much to my relief, was a real conversation stopper in the North.

But there is another side to India that grows gradually and imperceptively on you. Its influence is overwhelming and humbling as you begin to realise that behind all that heat and dust and noise, there is so much life and history, reflected in the ruins that litter the landscape. In the graveyards of Indian history lie buried the dreams and aspirations of once powerful empires. India has survived countless invasions over centuries and yet managed to keep its soul intact. There are times when, surrounded by so much history and the depth and richness of Indian culture, I experience a vague sense of loss, of being somehow incomplete. The sheer variety of sounds and colours of various festivals, the shape of the landscape, people at home in multiple (but to me incomprehensible) languages is astonishing to someone born on a tiny island in a shallow, uprooted immigrant culture.

I recognise the broad contours of Indian culture, its art, music, literature; I have grown up with the songs of Lata Mangeshkar, Mohammed Rafi, K L Saigal, CH Atma, Hemant Kumar, Mukesh, Manna Dey: their music still fills my house. And which Indo-Fijian boy of my generation did not secretly aspire to be like those popular screen heroes Dev Anand or Rajendra Kumar, Balraj Sahni or Dilip Kumar? I have read Premchand's *Godan*, Gift of a Cow, in Hindi and moved to tears by Hori's plight, and I know in my heart that Phaneshwar Singh Renu's unheralded *Maila Anchal*, Soiled Borders, will one day be recognised as one of this century's great novels. But I know that my India is the India of yesteryear, frozen at a particular moment in time (my childhood); I like the *idea*, not the *reality* of India. Contemporary India, with its politics of caste and communalism, the hijacking of Hinduism in the cause of fundamentalist political causes, the destruction of places of worship in the name of cultural renaissance, has no meaning for me. My grandfather's country is not mine. Curiously, it is in India that I discover the depth of my Fijian roots, the influence of an oceanic culture on my being: a deep commitment to egalitarianism, a certain impatience with protocol and ritual, a zest for living here and now, humility and tolerance, and compassionate concern for fellow human

beings as kindred travellers in the same canoe of life.

Bahraich is at the back of beyond. No one in Delhi has heard of it. When I tell people about it, they recognise it patronisingly as a backward part of the most backward region of the most backward state of India, and express puzzlement at my interest in the place. Even in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, Bahraich is a vague name associated with one of those wretched, caste-ridden places in the east that gives the state, and India, such a bad name. There are times when hearing all this, I am tempted to abandon my quest, but to have come this far and not go on would be a mistake. I pore over the maps and plan my journey. From Lucknow, I will head east, through Sultanpur, Fyzabad, Basti and Gonda before reaching Bahraich. I will pass through the heartland of the area that supplied the bulk of Fiji's indentured migrants.

I leave Lucknow on the 6th of March, 1978. The bus is scheduled to leave at 6 and I am advised to be at the depot at least half an hour early. Obviously, the ticket I have already purchased is a licence to hunt for a seat on the bus, nothing more. I leave my apartment at five. The depot is dark, more like an abandoned warehouse, without a soul in sight. Half an hour later a few people arrive, and I learn that in the colder months buses usually leave late. We depart at 7:30. But as soon as we are out of the depot, and out of sight of the police and the public transport authorities, the driver stops to have a leisurely breakfast, while we sit cramped inside. I would encounter this irritating habit over and over again in the next few weeks. I feel like shouting, but that won't help. '*Bas aise chalta hai*', an old man sitting next to me said, 'that's the way it is around here'.

The bus is crowded with dirty dishevelled passengers, dusty and sprayed with paan spit. The aisle is clogged with luggage, with little bundled-up children sitting on them. People cough, clear their throats and shoot well aimed missiles of spit through the open window, nudge you in the rib to make room for yet one more passenger in an already overflowing vehicle. Men don't hesitate to ask the driver to stop the bus to answer the call of nature. They get out, turn their back towards the passengers, open their fly or lift their dhoti and let go, in full view of women and children. There is no comment, no embarrassment; everyone does it, even I, after a while. Better that than the discomfort of a full bladder on a long, bumpy road. Women generally remain seated inside; perhaps they have stronger bladders. We pass through beautiful, rich country of sugar cane, millet, maize, wheat, barley, arhar and sarso fields yellow in season; vast, well watered alluvial plains, flat, the flatness broken by groves of mango trees, rivers, bodies bent weeding, the ubiquitous cows, and clusters of mud

houses hovering on the horizon. It's very much like travelling through the Canadian prairies, the same monotony and vastness of space, but without the ever present wheat silos. The road is tarsealed, but apart from that, I suspect, nothing much has changed in these parts since Aja's time.

We reach Bahraich late in the afternoon. The town is surprisingly modern, with up-to-date radio sets and cooking utensils neatly displayed in the shop windows, and much cleaner than any of the other eastern districts I have passed through. It exudes an unexpected air of prosperity. I am anxious to make preparations for my trip to Aja's village the next day. I know that Bahraich is divided into four *thanas*, police or administrative divisions, and Payagpur is one of them. That's reassuring but whether the village—Pahalwara—still exists, I do not know. Early in the evening, I venture out into the main street to find out. I could not believe my luck when I discovered that my rickshaw driver came from Pahalwara! I hired him on the spot as my guide, and arranged a taxi for an early expedition to the village next morning. That night, I slept fitfully, anxious about my impending visit to Aja's village.

We left town by taxi around ten the next day. Payagpur was about 30 kilometres away. The taxi sped along the narrow tarsealed road snaking through a vast plain of green-golden wheat fields, overtaking bullock carts full of mud bricks. It was a beautiful view, this place of Aja's childhood, but my mind was elsewhere. I felt all the anxiety of a nervous student about to sit a major examination. I got off at the junction of the thana of Payagpur and took a rickshaw to Pahalwara a kilometre away. The road led to a well maintained brick house. I mistook it for the village *mandir*, temple. It was in fact the village school teacher's house, who also happened to be the village pandit. A dozen or so people were having a lunch to celebrate a *moodan*, head shaving, ceremony for a new-born.

As I approached the compound, a man came out to meet me, and after brief conversation, asked me to wait while he went back into the house. I had given him a letter from the Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh outlining the purpose of my visit. Presently, I was joined by two men, one of them with a gun slung around his shoulder. They sat on each side of me on a stringed bed under a mango tree. I said nothing as they gave me hostile, fear-inducing sidelong glances. Later, I discovered the reason for their strange behaviour. A few weeks back, a landlord in a neighbouring village had been beheaded by some radicals of the Marxist revolutionary Naxalite movement, and it was thought that I—a young, educated person with horn-rimmed glasses and a well-tended goatee beard, looking the archetype of a Bengali student activist—might be a Naxalite agent, or a government

informer, a source of potential trouble.

A little while later, a man in his 30s came out and shook my hand. He apologised for the inconvenience caused by the delay, and invited me into the house for a meal. I opted for a glass of water instead and started walking with him towards the village, now accompanied by a dozen or so curious, cheerful, barely clad children running along the narrow, foul-smelling meandering path full of fresh cow dung and wheat straws. Word had gone ahead of a stranger coming to the village. By the time I arrived, the *maidan*, village centre, was packed, small children perched on their father's shoulders. They all looked the same to me, dressed alike in dhoti and cotton kurta, with close-cropped hair and dirty turbans, *pagri*, wrapped around their heads. A vanished world resurfaced, for the scene reminded me of Aja and his friends back in Labasa. But the *girmitiyas* had changed, adapted and moved on; people here seemed stranded in time. Deeply furrowed foreheads, cracked feet and calloused hands told the predictable story of hardship and struggle.

I felt deeply moved to be among them. Who knows, had fate not willed otherwise, I might have been there, standing in the crowd, a dhoti-clad, prematurely aged withered son of the soil. But that thought also filled me with horror. Later I was to learn that this village was far more prosperous than many others in these parts; it had a school of its own and good infrastructure; many of its residents worked in the town; some had made a big name for themselves in the state. But all that made little impression on me; my reference point, formed by other experiences, was different. All eyes were on me, and I was stumped for words, surrounded by people talking a strange language.

I spoke about my grandfather who had migrated and become a *tapuha* a long time ago, and never returned although he used to write home occasionally. One of the names my father had mentioned to me was that of Chotu, my grandfather's brother's son, and I wondered whether he or any of his children were still alive. Yes, there was a man by that name, people replied, but he and his eldest son, Halka, had gone on a *barat*, a marriage party, to another village and would return later in the day. There was commotion in the crowd after I finished speaking. Village elders came forward and embraced me, shook my hands with both of theirs as a mark of respect and affection and asked me to sit on the *charpai*, a wooden plank, under the tamarind tree in the centre of the maidan. I was given a piala of sarbat and the inevitable cup of syrupy tea as we talked about Fiji, where it was, how big, what it looked like, what it was like to fly in an aeroplane.

About half an hour later, there was another commotion in the crowd as

people made way for a very ancient woman heading towards me, a hunchback with dishevelled white-yellowing hair and deep set eyes, walking with the assistance of a stick. My story had been relayed to her after she had enquired about all the fuss in the maidan. She remembered hearing about Aja from the village folk, she told me and everyone present, and how the *Jajman*, the village head, had asked him to return to resume his rightful place in the community. He was needed back in the village; he would not have to pay any penalty for leaving without telling anyone. She pointed to a small mud-thatch hut in the distance which, she said, was on a small piece of land once reserved for Aja. She also told me about another member of the family who had gone to Bengal when she was very young, and returned after about twenty years. He had died a pauper. His two Bengali wives had returned to Calcutta, and nothing was heard from them again. Bengali women, I recalled, were feared (and avoided) in Fiji as mythical daughters of the sacrifice-demanding goddess Kali, who dabbled in magic and witchcraft, *jadu tona*.

I was offered lunch, which I initially refused because I had amoebic dysentery and had to be careful about food. People protested: it was customary to welcome a long lost family member with home cooked meal. I then realised that refusal could be interpreted as rejection, and a great personal embarrassment to 'my family'. A playful, sharp-witted woman, whom I assumed to be in a joking relationship with me, perhaps a 'sister-in-law', threatened to rob me of my watch if I refused to sample her cooking. '*Ka samjhat ho hamka*', she said, 'Don't underestimate me'. Thus pressured, I fiddle with the food—rice and soupy bean-and-potato curry—as the whole village watched.

Late in the afternoon, Chotu and Halka returned, but somehow, they had already been told about me. Chotu approached me with tears in his eyes, and began to sob uncontrollably as he embraced me. We held on to each other for what seemed a very long time. He introduced me to Halka. Like his father, he was a short man, brisk and agile; he gave me the impression of being the pillar of the family. It was Halka's wife who had joked about taking my watch earlier. I was taken around the maidan and introduced to all the members of the extended family, including my various aunts and nieces, and playful sisters-in-law with surprisingly well-formed features and flirtatious eyes, as well the various village elders.

Chotu kaka remembered receiving letters from Aja, telling the family how he was an old man now and spending his time with his grandchildren. He would not—perhaps could not—return, and asked his share in land to be distributed among the remaining brothers. But after the late 1950s, and

especially after Aja's death, all contact was lost. Until now. '*Tum ka dekh ke hamar dil gad gad hoi gawa*', he said through his emotion-charged voice, 'My heart is full to the brim to see you'. I enquired about his family. His granddaughter was getting married, or rather betrothed. She would have been no more than thirteen or fourteen years old. I contributed one hundred rupees towards the cost of the ceremony. The custom of child marriage surprised me, and when I raised the topic with a Bahraich professor later, he remarked on how things had actually improved in that regard in recent times. He could remember the time when children were married even before they were born. And not so long ago, they were betrothed at the age of two or three, carried to the ceremony on their father's shoulders.

Chotu kaka and other village elders asked me, and all our family, to return to India to live in Bahraich so that we could all be together again. Things were improving gradually and there would be room for all of us. I could easily find employment as a teacher at the village school. Such touching innocence. I promised to return before leaving India, but didn't have the heart to tell them that their India was an alien country to me, and that the break was for good. Chotu kaka and Halka and other family members walked me to the junction of the highway. They were such a spontaneously warm and affectionate people, happy and grateful that I had come all the way from such a faraway place to make contact. Chotu kaka embraced me, his voice cracking with emotion. Halka gave me a double hug on each shoulder, and then made the gesture of touching my feet as a mark of respect. A surge of emotion came over me and I lost my composure momentarily. Then it was time to leave.

I got into the waiting taxi, physically exhausted and emotionally drained, and headed towards the town in the galloping darkness. I was glad I had made the pilgrimage, not only for myself but also for my father and my grandfather as well. The trip solved many puzzles of my childhood and renewed my acquaintance with a vanished world. The strange cacophony of sounds I heard the girmitias speak as a child are still spoken in these parts today: the '*awa-gawa*' of Bahraich, the '*aiba-jaiba*' of Gonda, the '*aibo-jaibo*' of Basti, and the '*ailee-gailee*' of Ballia, Azamgargh and Ghazipur. The *lehang*a dance that men dressed up as women performed on some festive occasion, such as marriage, is still danced here. The ballads of *Allaha Khand*, about brothers fighting heroically for the hand of the women they want to marry, and sung to the accompaniment of *Nagara*, has disappeared in Fiji, though it was very popular with the girmitias; but it still is sung in parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh. The same with the game of

*kabaddi*, which I vaguely remember some folks playing in inter-village competitions.

As I travelled through the impoverished regions of Uttar Pradesh, I gained renewed respect for those hundreds of thousands of men and women, ordinary people from all walks of life, who took fate in their own hands, shouldered their little bundles and marched off to the far-flung corners of the globe in search of a better life for themselves and their children. The amazing resilience and fortitude and tenacity of these people to endure so much hardship and deprivation and yet keep their dignity and integrity intact. I understood better the spirit of the *girmitiyas* and why and how they were able to survive, indeed triumph over, the brutalising ordeals of indenture. Aja had lived life in the raw, at the edge, without the comforting safety net of an extended family and community in a remote country to which he had come accidentally. But he was not embittered by the rough hand fate had dealt him. Instead, he met the challenge of starting life afresh with courage and determination, laying a more secure foundation for his children and grandchildren. That is his greatest and most enduring legacy.

The *nouveau riche* of New Delhi and the nattering nabobs of Lucknow are quick to consign the *bhaiyas*, their poor country cousins from the east, to the unlovely fringes of civilised society as a people with no enterprise, no industry, nothing, an embarrassment and a national disgrace. How sadly and cruelly mistaken they are. These are the same people whose *girmitiya* cousins in the colonies were able to break the oppressive shackles of caste and communalism and through their sweat and blood lay the foundations of many a new nation in the Third World. Their children and grandchildren are ornaments to their chosen professions: Sir Seosagar Ramgoolam, Cheddi Jagan, Sridath Ramphal, Rohan Kanhai, VS Naipaul. There was nothing inherently defective about the *girmitiyas* just as there is nothing inherently wrong with the *bhaiyas* of eastern Uttar Pradesh. It is the system and the values they engendered which condemned the people to a life of permanent subservience, that were at fault. Unfortunately, both are still with us today.

## Glossary

<i>Suluka:</i>	a rough cigarette with tobacco wrapped in a pandanus strip.
<i>Lota:</i>	brass pot.
<i>Tulsi:</i>	basil leaves regarded as sacred by Hindus.
<i>Piala:</i>	enamel cup
<i>Belo:</i>	guest or reception house. The word is peculiar to Labasa.
<i>Sarangi:</i>	Indian violin.

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<i>Khajhadi:</i>	a small drum held in one hand and played with the other.
<i>Paal:</i>	rough mat of stitched jute sacks.
<i>Bhandara:</i>	large ceremonial feast.
<i>Huqqa Pani Band:</i>	signifies social ostracism when a man is not allowed to smoke the common pipe and draw water from the communal well.
<i>Girmit:</i>	from the Agreement that brought the indentured labourers to Fiji.
<i>Kulambar:</i>	overseer, from 'Call Number' which the overseers asked the girmitiyas to do every morning.
<i>Awa-gawa, aibo-jaibo, aiba-jaiba, ailee-gailee:</i>	all regional variations on the standard Hindi aya-gaya (come and gone).
<i>Lehanga:</i>	common dress worn by village women in India.
<i>Nagara:</i>	a large drum played with sticks.



Girmitiyas at work, carrying bunches of banana in Wainunu, Bua. Most, however, were employed on cane plantations. Overseers and Fijians watch the procession. Overseers were called 'Kulambar' by the girmitiyas, after the 'call your number' order barked by them at the crack of every dawn.