



## Mr Tulsi's Store

It is gone now. The place looks deserted and forlorn. All that remains of Mr Tulsi's store, at the side of the Seaqaqa Highway facing a small, overgrown creek, are gray planks of burnt wood and twisted corrugated iron scattered about. Once, the store was the heart of Tabia's village life. *Tulsi Ram and Sons: General Merchants*, the dust-caked 'Craven A' billboard proclaimed proudly. The only wooden and iron structure in the settlement of thatched houses, the shop was the village's symbol of progress. People were very proud of the building.

The store also kept the past alive. Girmitiyas used to gather there in the evening, smoke the huqqa and reminisce about *mulk*, their motherland, and fading memories of early experiences of Fiji. In the evenings once a month or so, they used to sit on the verandah wearing dhoti, kurta and pagri, sporting a week-long growth of beard, and sing *bhajans* or play *bujhauni*, the Indian game of riddles. Much later, men met there to discuss village affairs. Mr Tulsi's store was more than a shop: it was the nerve centre of the entire settlement.

Mr Tulsi was one of the few men in the village who could read and write

Hindi. As a young man, he wrote letters for the illiterate girmitiyas to their relatives in India, and helped them send small postal cheques. When letters arrived from India, girmitiyas would hug each other and cry with excitement as Mr Tulsi read their contents aloud. Mr Tulsi was the chairman of the local school committee and president of the village Ramayan mandali. He often spoke at marriages, festivals, and funerals. He was knowledgeable about Indian culture, and could quote an appropriate line from the *Ramayan* or the *Puranas* to underline a point or close an argument.

People feared Mr Tulsi for his ability to use his position, and turn other people's misfortune to advance his own interests. He did this mostly as the chairman of the local panchayat, a five-man council of community elders which mediated in petty civil disputes. This institution was a relic of village India resuscitated by the government after indenture to address the everyday problems in widely scattered Indian settlements, which had emerged haphazardly wherever Indians could lease land from the Fijians or the Colonial Sugar Refining Company. To forestall an administrative nightmare, the authorities adopted a reliable mechanism to maintain peace in the community, about whose internal affairs they otherwise cared little.

How the men were chosen to serve was not always clear. During gimit, they were handpicked by CSR overseers for their authority and firmness in dealing with workers, and their effectiveness in implementing company policy. After gimit, the district colonial officials chose them on the basis of their social and economic status in the community. In Tabia, Mr Tulsi was a natural choice, educated, wealthy, well connected. Other members were Udho, one of the few Indians from Labasa who had served in the Labour Corps during World War II, Jwala, a prosperous cane grower who owned the village's only Bedford truck, and Bansi and Sukhraj, from the adjacent villages of Laqere and Soisoi.

Panchayats derived their power from the moral authority of their members and the force of tradition, reinforced by the absence of other viable alternatives. For most village folk, the rituals and paraphernalia of European courts were alien and forbidding. They much preferred resolving disputes in a familiar, culturally sanctioned way. Panchayats dealt mostly with minor civil cases involving land boundary disputes, compensation for damage to crops caused by stray animals, family squabbles. The panchayat's decisions were rarely contested: it was a brave man, indeed, who challenged the authority of the acknowledged, socially powerful community elders. As the people put it, it was foolish to pick a fight with crocodiles while in water.

Panchayats also enforced community standards and values, even if their decisions were sometimes unfair or costly to the individuals concerned. Once

a Hindu in Tabia village was accused of selling an old milch cow to a Muslim, causing huge outrage. Selling a cow to a Muslim, even if it was not for meat, was like sending your own mother to the gallows. The hapless man, Sumera, was hauled before the panchayat, found guilty, and fined. He was forced to shave his head in mourning, and give a *bhandhara*, a ceremonial feast, to the entire village in atonement. Sumera was penniless, saying that he had sold the cow to pay school fees for his five children. But the panchayat had spoken, and there was little Sumera or anyone else could do. Predictably, as so many had done before him, he turned to Mr Tulsi for money to give the feast.

On another occasion, people in the village were unhappy with the Education Department posting a Muslim teacher to the local Sanatani school. The school committee had not been consulted, and they were determined to reverse the decision at any cost. They approached the panchayat for advice. After a series of late night meetings, an insidious rumour spread that the Muslim teacher, Mr Jumessa, was making improper sexual advances on girls. He was accused of 'cutting', that is, winking at young girls in a sexually provocative, inviting way. Mr Jumessa denied the charge and protested his innocence before the panchayat. There was no proof and no witnesses, and in fact no truth to the allegations, but his reputation was ruined. He left the village at the end of the school term a humiliated man. It was said later that Mr Jumessa had left teaching altogether to become a truck driver.

Here is another story of a panchayat which sat in Tabia, at Mr Tulsi's store, thirty years ago. The panchayat was convened to resolve a dispute involving two brothers, Munna and Arjun. They were girmitiya Mangru's sons. Mangru had come to Fiji at the turn of the century, completed his term of five years working on the CSR plantation at Tuatua, on the outskirts of the mill town of Labasa, leased ten acres at Tabia sometime in the late 1920s and settled there. The land was registered in Arjun's name because the CSR gave cane contracts only on ten acre blocks owned by a single individual. But it was understood that seven acres belonged to Arjun and three to Munna. A few years later, Mangru had bought four acres across the river in Laqere and registered it in Munna's name, thus giving both his sons the same amount of land. The arrangement had worked well. The extended family lived on the main farm at Tabia, and ventured across the river whenever work was to be done there. Everything was done jointly. There was a single kitchen, work was shared, and grocery, clothes and other such necessities were purchased in bulk for the entire extended household. That was the way Mangru wanted things to be, the way he himself had grown up in India.

The joint family represented continuity with tradition, a source of solidarity and cohesion, and a bulwark against the outside world when the community

was still young, and uncertain about its future. The pattern was beginning to fracture in some places. Sometimes, expanding families could not be accommodated on a single farm. Family friction pushed some people out. Sometimes people were attracted by better opportunities elsewhere, such as better schools or more productive or bigger plots of land. Arjun was proud that his extended family was still intact. He knew that things would change one day, but that prospect was remote to him. Arjun was an uncomplicated man of simple habits. Often his heart ruled his head. He could be stubborn and uncompromising. His extended family meant everything to him. He wanted to keep it that way as long as he could.

But change was inevitable. Mangru died. When he was alive, Mangru had always insisted that his sons should live together under one roof. His presence, and all that it represented – history, culture, tradition – was holding the family together, the main force which dissipated at his death. Not long after, Munna's wife died during childbirth, leaving behind several young children. She had long suffered from tuberculosis and merciless beating by her husband. Munna's savage violence distressed people, but there was nothing anyone could say or do: it was his own wife, not someone else's, that he was thrashing, Munna would retort when reproached. So, to those who knew the family the death was a relief rather than a tragedy.

A year later, Munna married a divorcee from Batinikama. His new wife was a short, fair-complexioned woman of strong will and even stronger temper. Mrs Munna was a modern woman. There was something about her that announced independence and self-confidence. Unlike Arjun's wife, or other women in the village for that matter, she refused to cover her head with *orhni*, shawl, in the presence of older men. She was determined not to remain a part of the extended family for long. She had not divorced her first husband to find herself embroiled in the machinations of another extended family. Munna said nothing. He seemed a different person now, with a new spring in his steps, and people wondered what hold his new wife had on him.

The panchayat sat on the wooden *charpai* in the verandah of Mr Tulsi's store. Mr Tulsi began the proceedings, his ample stomach parked comfortably on his knees. 'It is a simple matter, Arjun', Mr Tulsi said. 'Munna wants to sell his share in the land here and move to Laqere'. Munna wanted to be independent. 'Things are no longer the way they used to be', Mr Tulsi continued, with a touch of regret in his voice. 'Everyone wants to be independent these days. It's happening everywhere. It's the way of the future'. The other members nodded in agreement. 'It is good to resolve these problems amicably. After all, we are like brothers to each other', said Madho. Munna had come to the right place.

Arjun listened intently, his forehead furrowed even more deeply than usual. He was perplexed: why had Munna not discussed this with him directly? In the past they had been able to talk freely about family matters. What had changed between them that Munna had to go to outsiders? He looked at Munna with questioning eyes; Munna kept his head down.

'What you say is true, kaka', Arjun said after a long silence. 'Things are changing'. He had some inkling that things were awry in the family. He was vaguely aware that his *chotki*, Munna's wife, seemed unhappy. But small misunderstandings, common in every family, would be resolved; it was all a matter of time.

'Arjun, the problem is more serious than you think', Udho said. 'Chotki wants to leave as soon as things can be arranged. And the sooner the better'. Munna had told the panchayat that his wife felt she was on trial, and somehow always found wanting. If it was not her cooking, it was the way she talked (loudly) or the way she swept the *aangan*, the compound, or the amount of time she took washing clothes at the *kuan*, well. She could never win. She had married Munna, not the extended family, she kept telling anyone who would listen. She wanted to be the mistress of her own household, not a domestic help in someone else's. And she resented her own stepchildren continuing to look to Arjun's wife, their *badki amma*, for emotional comfort (because none was forthcoming from her).

Mrs Munna was unhappy for another reason as well. It was said that Munna's house was haunted by the ghost of his deceased wife. Strange wailing noises were heard at night, the sound of bangles, the swish of a dress, soft knocks on the bedroom door at odd hours. Someone always put extra salt in the curry and sugar in the tea, for which Mrs Munna was blamed. She felt that someone wanted her out of the house. There would be no peace for anyone until she left.

These complaints surprised Arjun. Still, he did not question them, accepting that he had largely ignored this private side of his extended family life. 'There is nothing I can do to stop Munna', he said, to no one in particular. But he needed time to raise money to buy out Munna's share. He asked for six months. He explained his predicament. Mangru's funeral had been an expensive affair, involving donations of money, cloth and a milch cow to the family priest. Things had to be done in the proper Hindu way. Building fees for the new school had to be paid in full, at the beginning of the school year, otherwise his children, four boys, would be refused admission. And he had to think of the expenses for the marriage of his only daughter, Munnakki – sweet raisin – to whom he was devoted. Marriage talks had already started with a family in Daku.

Arjun spoke clearly, straight from the heart. 'Bat to sach hai', Mr Tulsi said, what you say is true, 'but your plans don't suit Munna'. Then, after a bowl of yaqona, Mr Tulsi looked at Arjun and said, 'Munna and I have talked about it, and although it is too much, I will pay \$1200 for the three acres. Of course, I will sell it back to you when you have the money. I don't need the land, as you well know, but I want to help out whenever I can. After all, we have always been like brothers, haven't we? There has always been trust between us'. Mr Tulsi's gesture drew approval from the panchayat: 'Sach hai, Sach hai'. 'It is true, it is true'. It was in fact true that the relationship between Mr Tulsi's and Arjun's families went a long way back. Mangru and Mr Tulsi's father Bhola were *jahajibhais*, ship mates, who had arrived in Fiji on the *SS Sangola* in 1908. They were indeed like blood brothers.

Every argument had been carefully rehearsed, every angle covered, Arjun realised slowly. How much *daru-murga*, eating and drinking, bribery, was involved, he wondered. He pleaded with the panchayat for a little more time. 'There you are, Arjun', Bansu responded with frowning eyes, 'thinking just of yourself and your own family. What about Munna and his plans for his own family? He, too, has young children to feed and educate and marry. He, too, wants a little bit of security and stability in his life. He is not asking for much, just what is his'. 'Arjun', Sukhraj said, 'as the older of the two, you should be more understanding'.

'No kaka', Arjun replied immediately, 'you people misunderstand me. Ask Munna if I have ever been unfair to him. He gets his share of rice from the farm. He always accompanies me to collect the cane money. Every purchase of everything, onions, potatoes, rice, flour, salt, everything, is accounted for. There is a docket for everything. He knows exactly how each penny in the house is spent. Isn't that true, Munna?'

Munna kept looking at the wooden floor of the verandah, his head bowed. There was nothing he could say, for Arjun had spoken the truth. Still, he wished he could tell his older brother the reason for the urgency, but there was no point; Arjun would not understand. Arjun was living in the past, hankering for a world whose time had passed. For Munna, the past was history. He wanted to be his own man on his own terms in his own house.

No one questioned Arjun's good intentions, Jwala reassured him even before Arjun had finished speaking, but Munna's wishes could not be ignored either. 'What can I do', Arjun said helplessly. 'I have no money. All I have is these obligations to meet'. 'Munna', Arjun said, looking straight at him, 'I give you my word. We'll sort something out, as we always have. Just give me some time to think things through'. Munna did not respond.

'Well, what about my suggestion?' Mr Tulsi asked again.

'Selling? That is out of the question'. Arjun was adamant, defiant. This was his father's land, and he would never let it pass into the hands of strangers. He would safeguard his father's bequest with his life. This was the land on which he was born; this was where he would be buried. 'You know what will happen to my cane contract if I part with the three acres, don't you?' They knew. CSR contracts were given out on ten acre blocks; anything less and the contract would be revoked. 'When that happens, what use will this land be? What crops will I grow? Peanuts and beans? Who will feed my children?'

'Well, how about a compromise', Mr Tulsi volunteered. He would pay Munna \$1200 in return for the assignment of cane payment on the three acres. Arjun would have his land back as soon as the debt was paid. 'That way, Munna gets his money, you keep the land, and everybody wins'. It wasn't the ideal situation from his point of view, Mr Tulsi reminded the panchayat, but in the interest of neighbourly relations, he would do all he could to resolve the situation peacefully.

There was a trap and counter-argument at every turn. Assignment sounded fine in theory but was ruinous in practice. There was something deeply degrading about being beholden to someone, to live on someone's charity, especially someone like Mr Tulsi. Arjun knew that with him, he would never win, entering a vicious circle of deepening debt and degradation. Many in the village were indebted to Mr Tulsi, and other members of the panchayat, one way or another, some for decades; few had ever managed to extricate themselves. Arjun wasn't going to be one of them.

'I can't do anything right now', Arjun said. 'I have to think about it'.

'What is there to think about?' Mr Tulsi asked, showing anger and irritation for the first time in the proceedings. He had done all the thinking there was to do.

'This is family land', Arjun said firmly and with a tone of finality that took everyone by surprise. 'It has been in the family since Dada moved here. I won't let any outsider lay claim to an inch of it, even for one minute. Never'. Mr Tulsi knew that Arjun couldn't be moved.

'Well, that's your problem now', Mr Tulsi said, getting up from the wooden *charpai*. 'I have done my best. If something happens, don't blame me'. Still, disappointed as he was, he allowed Arjun a fortnight to see what he could do. Arjun left the meeting devastated. He had never imagined that his cherished world of family loyalty would collapse around him like this. He had bought some time, but sooner or later, he would have to face reality.

The cane harvesting season was about to start. As in the past, the cane committee had decided the order of harvesting, which depended on such things as the sweetness of the cane, the location of the field, the grower's track

record. Shamsheer would go first, then Ram Dayal and then Arjun. The order pleased Arjun because it would mean early cane payment. The committee had estimated his cane crop at around 140 tons, about half of which would be harvested during the first round and the remainder in the second.

The first day of harvesting went well. Two truckloads of about six tons each were sent to the mill, filling the quota for the day. After lunch, the gang harvested another ten for the next day. The rest would be cut next morning before sunrise. But that plan was disrupted when Mr Thompson, the sector CSR overseer, arrived at the farm early, looking agitated. Mr Tom, as everyone called him, was a young man in his 30s, slim, of medium height, and hot tempered. People feared him as he barked out orders in broken CSR Hindustani. The overseers were no longer the *mai-baap*, parents of the growers, as they had been during *gimit*; but they were still powerful enough to make or break the farmers.

'Arjun kahan baitho?' Mr Tom asked, surveying the harvested cane on the ground. 'Where is Arjun?' When Arjun arrived from the edge of the field where he had been feeding the cattle *kantaap*, green cane top, Mr Tom took him aside and talked to him for about five minutes, pointing to the cane and throwing up his hand often enough to suggest that something was amiss. Then he walked towards the gang which was heading to a shady spot under the mango tree. 'Ghare jao sab koi', he said. Go home everybody. 'Ganna kato khalas'. No more cane cutting.

Arjun was shaking and perspiring profusely as he walked home without saying a word to anybody. The whole plot, the ambush, became blindingly clear as he reflected on the events of the past few days. As he later found out, Munna and Mr Tulsi had gone to the CSR office at Tuatua to inform it of Munna's intention to sell his share to Mr Tulsi. The sale would breach the terms of the contract, and Mr Thompson had no alternative but to stop further harvesting until the matter of the lease was cleared.

The fear of losing his contract would bring Arjun to his knees, begging forgiveness for his effrontery, Mr Tulsi thought, teaching him a lesson that he and the village would remember for ever. Half the cane was still on the ground, and several tons lay harvested and drying in the sun. After five days, the CSR would refuse to take the cane; in any case, its weight and value would have declined, fetching a fraction of the normal price. Arjun would then surrender. Mr Tulsi would either get the assignment or buy the land outright. It was a trick he had tried many times before.

There was no other person in the village, or in the neighbouring settlements for that matter, who could lend such a large sum at such short notice. Going to the local Bank of New Zealand, the only commercial bank in town, was out of

the question. Arjun was unlettered, and what he did not understand, he feared. He thought of friends and relatives whom he could approach, Ram Charan in Waiqele and Dulare in Naleba. They both offered to loan three hundred dollars each, without security and with minimal interest. Arjun was that kind of person: open and honest and dependable, inspiring trust. It was a touching gesture at a moment of great need, and Arjun wept with gratitude. Still, what they offered was not enough, and Arjun did not know others who could help.

Someone – perhaps it was Arjun's wife Dhanraji – suggested Sahadeo, across the river in Laqere. Arjun hadn't thought of him, for Sahadeo was not known as a money lender. He approached him without much hope, but miraculously, Sahadeo came through, offering to loan Arjun the entire \$1200 at 15 per cent interest. No one ever knew why Sahadeo had done this. Perhaps it was because Sahadeo had seen Mr Tulsi ruin the lives of so many others in the village. Perhaps he wanted to set himself up as a rival moneylender. Perhaps he wanted to break Mr Tulsi's hold on the flow of rural credit. Perhaps he had political ambitions. Whatever the reason, Arjun was elated. Within days, the storm clouds on the horizon had lifted, saving Arjun's most precious possession, his land.

When the panchayat convened two weeks later, everyone thought the outcome a foregone conclusion. Mr Tulsi was confident. He had planned to tell Arjun that he would loan money to pay the school building fee as well as the marriage expenses. Mr Tulsi invited Arjun to sit on the wooden *charpai* facing him. Arjun was unshaven and haggard. He looked at each member of the panchayat one by one for what seemed a very long time, assessing, questioning, condemning.

Then, turning to Munna, Arjun broke down. 'Here', he said, 'I hope you will be happy now', as he handed him a paper bag full of notes which he had carried in a jute *jhori*, bag. 'From now on, Munna is dead for me'. With that, he walked down the steps of the verandah and left. He was no longer angry, just sad, drained, broken. He had endured much pain and poverty in his life, but Munna's behaviour, an act of treachery by his own brother, broke his heart. He resolved, as he walked back slowly, that he would never ever speak to Munna again.

As time passed, Arjun's wife and children pleaded with him to break his vow. Munna had been misled, they said, and had recognised the error of his ways. In any case, nothing had happened. The farm had remained in the family, and the debt had been paid. Those who had wished them ill were either gone or forgotten, whereas they had not only survived but prospered. The boys had done well at school and it was a matter of time before they landed good jobs in town.

Munna himself had gone deaf and blind. They said he was haunted by the past and what he had done. It was rumoured that he was crying at night, sometimes sobbing uncontrollably like a child. He wanted to atone for his mistakes, and make amends while he was still alive. There was nothing Munna wanted more than to touch his elder brother's feet and ask for forgiveness. Arjun listened to these pleas but his heart remained of stone. For him, there was no forgiveness, not after such betrayal. The only time Arjun 'saw' Munna was at his funeral. Munna had hung himself.

Diwali came a few months after the panchayat had sat. This is the joyous festival of lights, a kind of Thanksgiving. People pray to Lakshmi, the goddess of good fortune. Firecrackers pierce the silence of the moonless *Ammavas* night. This year, there was no celebration in the Arjun household, just a small puja. But a greater tragedy struck Mr Tulsi. A wayward firecracker had landed in the cane field near the shop, starting a fire, a steady, dry southwest breeze fanning the flames into an unstoppable conflagration. In a matter of minutes, Mr Tulsi's shop, with all the records of credit and debt, was razed, as he ran about helpless and hysterical, crying for help. 'Bachao, bachao'. No one came. Punishment from the gods, people said later, or was it something less than divine intervention? It made no difference. People did not care.

Mr Tulsi never recovered. A few months later, unable to bear not only the loss but also the sudden strange indifference of people who had once looked up to him for help and advice, he moved to Seaqaqa, the new area over the mountain ranges being opened up for cane farming. The school committee bought Mr Tulsi's land to build additional classrooms to meet the villagers' increasing thirst for more and better education for their children. In time, the school buildings became the centre of village life in Tabia, its new symbol of progress and achievement.