

## *Preface*

*This collection of essays* and stories represents my attempt, from the vantage point of an impending half-century, to revisit a time and a place I have taken for granted or ignored, to reflect on an experience not recorded in written texts but which was, at the time, profoundly important in shaping the life of the post-war generation of Indo-Fijian children: that is, the experience of growing up in a sugar cane village, poor, vulnerable and isolated; the expectations and hopes of a community struggling to escape the legacy of hopelessness and servitude following the end of indenture; the petty humiliations and deprivations they encountered along the way.

The world that formed me is alien to my children. They find it hard to believe, for instance, that I was born in a thatched hut on my father's farm, delivered by an illiterate Indo-Fijian village midwife; that I grew up without electricity, running water or paved roads; that for us village people, often the only window to the outside world was a week-old newspaper; that our generation's motto, a painful reminder of our

unpredictable and uncertain condition, was 'one step at a time'. This collection, then, is both a record and a reminder: a record of a world that has now almost vanished beyond recognition, and a reminder of the long journey we have travelled and the transformations we have undergone.

In recording my experiences, I have privileged truth over accuracy, attempting to catch the thoughts and emotions rather than dry facts about village life. For obvious reasons, some names have had to be changed and some conversations imagined. I have tried to recall the past creatively, imaginatively, rendering factual, lived experience through the prism of semi-fiction. I call this kind of exercise 'faction' writing. It is the most satisfactory way I know of remembering a past unrecorded in the written texts.

My journey may seem improbable to many: from the cane fields of Labasa to the capital of Australia, from peasant to professor just two generations after the end of indenture. It is improbable, I would agree, but not exceptional. Its routes and roots would be familiar to many of my generation, although we will all have different points of departure and different destinations. I hope that memories I have retrieved here will prompt others to recall and record their own experiences.

'One does not have to be solemn to be serious,' Oskar Spate used to tell his colleagues. Spate was the Foundation Professor of Geography at The Australian National University, and a distinguished humanist. Spate examined my doctoral thesis on the migration of Indian indentured labourers to Fiji, and continued to take a keen interest in my work and progress. Fiji, he said, was close to his heart. 'One must always wear one's learning lightly,' was Ken Gillion's advice to me. Gillion, a respected historian of the Indian indenture experience in Fiji, was one of my dissertation supervisors. The wise words of these two respected scholars have remained with me.

Both Spate and Gillion belonged to an earlier generation which was genuinely concerned to communicate research in the intelligent language of ordinary discourse to an audience beyond the halls of the

academy. Regrettably, their example runs counter to the currently fashionable trend in the academy for word games and jargon-laden, obscurantist prose, the converted talking to the converted, pandering to the educational establishment's demand for narrowly defined, peer-reviewed research, publishing to get ahead, or get funded, not necessarily read. Some of this specialisation is, of course, necessary; but it is dangerous and distorting when carried to extremes, especially in the humanities. This collection of my essays and stories is a small act of rebellion against the current orthodoxy. It celebrates life in all its diversity, entertains the possibility of hope and progress in a world of bewildering change, and searches for complete explanations and universal truths without apology.