Tabia

Tho’ much is taken, much abides; and tho’
We are not now the strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Alfred Lord Tennyson, ‘Ulysses’

_I was my grandfather’s favourite grandchild._ Two of my older siblings had died during childbirth. Aja suspected an evil hand at work. So relying on remembered knowledge, he instructed Maria, the village midwife, to purchase me as soon as I was born. She did, for three pennies. I survived, old ways had worked, the chain of evil had been broken, there were no more deaths. Aja was reportedly ecstatic. Six days later, when I was first introduced to the world, my mother bought me back for six pennies, but Maria continued to claim me as her own son. Years later, when I was about to leave for university, I had to perform a special _puja_ and give gifts to her to seek her permission to return formally to my own mother. It was an emotional ceremony performed, at mother’s insistence, in the presence of all my relatives and important village folk.

Aja took me over when I was still an infant. I slept in his bed, ate from his plate, listened to his stories of his own childhood, helped him to walk to the river to carry out his ablutions. He protected me from my siblings and my parents when they tried to punish me for
my errant ways, chasing them away with his walking stick. There was a special bond between the two of us, father used to say, the like of which he had not seen before. I suppose my interest in things past began with that association. I was beside Aja when he died in his sleep early one May morning in 1962. After his death, our relatives divided his remaining material possessions among themselves: bits and pieces of silver, wooden sandals, the stringed bed. My father chose for himself his father’s walking stick and some indenture coins. I have them now.

My grandfather was a *girmitiya* (indentured labourer) about whom I have written elsewhere in this collection. After he had completed his indenture as a stable hand in Batinikama, Vunivau and Tuatua, all sugar districts surrounding the Colonial Sugar Refining Mill on the banks of the Qawa river in Labasa, he moved to Tabia in 1929. His tattered marriage certificate, another of my father’s valuable possessions which he kept in a green metal box underneath his bed, records that Aja married on 23 September that year. Marriage is a complicated word in this context. The truth, which the family recalled in hushed, even embarrassed tones, was that he had eloped with the wife of his friend with whom he had shared his living quarters, during *girmit* (indenture). There was nothing unusual about that; the lack of women on the plantations produced multiple partnerships. The two men remained friends, however, visiting each other occasionally long after indenture had ended. Aji, a short, fair-complexioned woman of fine features, fiery temper and perpetual frown, remained aloof from these unions. Aja called her ‘Pagli’, the mad one.

In 1932, Aja obtained his native lease of ten acres. The European surveyor, no doubt with neat compactness of boundary lines in mind, offered to include several more acres of adjacent agricultural and hilly land, but Aja refused. It was a sin to have more than you needed, I remember him saying. The surveyor persisted but Aja remained unmoved. Where would other village folks graze their goats and cows, or gather wood for cooking? That decision was both
a curse and a blessing for us. Curse because the small block kept us in perpetual poverty, unable to support a joint family of two brothers and a dozen school-age children. And blessing because it forced us, and other families in the village, to look for alternatives. A larger block and, in all likelihood, we would still be on the farm. It was on that farm that we were all born and grew up. Tabia was the place of my childhood. Now it is a labyrinth of evanescent memories.

Tabia to which Aja came after girmit was a raw place. There was no sugar cane then; that came much later in the early 1950s, and therefore little income. Men travelled up to seven miles on foot each way to work for the CSR farms in Tuatua. There were no roads then, or bridges, no regular transport and thus little contact with the outside. People planted maize, lentils, rice and vegetables and carried the produce on their shoulders to the Nasca market nine miles away, a feat of physical fitness often recalled by an older generation, not as a reminder of their own hardship but as a rebuke to the perceived physical weakness of their children. Tabia has changed beyond recognition since the 1950s. A tar-sealed highway runs through it now; there is piped water and electricity, bustling modern primary and secondary schools; people have travelled widely and some have overseas connections; the thatched bures with matted bamboo walls have been replaced almost entirely by concrete structures; the old attire of lehanga, dhoti and pagri have disappeared; and the modern world touches life — through radio, television, video — unimaginable a generation ago. The once great landowning families, the Guddu Lals, the Ram Dayals, the Fiji Lals, owners of trucks and buses and taxis, too, have gone. They were once the envy of the entire village. Tabia now is like any other Indo-Fijian settlement anywhere in Fiji.

I describe Tabia as a village, but in truth it is a collection of separate settlements under an overarching administrative name. These included Vatudova, Vunivacea, Laqere, Soisoi, Movo and Tabia proper. To outsiders, these internal configurations were invisible and inconsequential: we were all peas in the same pod. But to us, these
distinctions and differences mattered greatly, flaring up around annual inter-village singing or soccer competitions, when tempers frayed and fists flew as people taunted rival teams. There was also a clear but unspoken hierarchy among the different settlements.

The people of Tabia proper, for instance, thought themselves superior. They had the village school, the mosque, the hot spring, ‘garam pani’, where devout Hindus conducted special ceremonies for Lord Shiva and celebrated Shiva Ratri. Many of the early leaders came from there. We in Vunivacea were, as I recall, ridiculed by others for our apparent lack of physical prowess and ability to put up a good fight. ‘Badhia’ is what unfriendly people called us, limp, like castrated bulls. We, in turn, saw ourselves as a rung or two above Laqere across the river, and definitely superior in every way to Soisoi, a quasi-feudal, self-contained village where a few large families, with a fearsome reputation as bullies, held sway unfettered, or Movo, a remote South Indian settlement near the mangroves by the sea, and virtually out of contact with the rest of the settlement.

The earlier boundaries of isolation and prejudice blurred with new developments, forging an overarching sense of a cohesive community. The new school for the entire settlement brought people together as they took turns keeping the compound clean, erecting new buildings, raising funds. The opening up of a central rice milling facility or a shop well stocked with the staples encouraged interaction between villages. So did the creation of a Rural Development Committee, which forced people to find the best person to represent them irrespective of where he lived. And the development of Nasea town also reinforced broader settlement-wide loyalties as Tabia fielded a single soccer team in Vanua Levu-wide competitions, and participated in such events as the Labasa Jaycees’ week, the Mosquito Campaign week, the Sangam festival and the Miss Labasa festivities. By the early 1960s, a disparate collection of isolated villages with different histories and levels of development, with their own prejudices, had gained a strong semblance of a single identity.
Tabia was a predominantly Indian settlement, largely self-sufficient and driven by the energy and initiative of its members rather than stimulus from outside. The older generation was suspicious of the government. Being illiterate, many were ignorant of the way the district administration worked, baffled by all the paperwork, and unable to communicate directly with the officers who made important decisions about their lives. The *girmit* experience cast a long shadow. For the most part, they preferred managing their own affairs, settling boundary disputes, assessing compensation for damages caused to crops by straying cattle, arbitrating petty disputes involving neighbours, disciplining young men on the prowl for promiscuous sex, keeping an eye out for thieves and rogues who threatened to ruin the village's reputation. People entrusted decision making to respected village elders who constituted the panchayat, a five-member committee, which met whenever the need arose. Often its decision was not contested; the price for asserting independence was heavy. The person could be ostracised. No one would attend the wedding ceremony or other social functions in his family. He would be shunned in village meetings. His cane would be cut last. The threats were endless. It was a brave man indeed who dared to stand up to the panchayat. Few did.

The panchayat not only adjudicated disputes, it also enforced community standards and morals. Once a family had given its word for some undertaking — a marriage proposal, for example — its members had to honour it. Religious groups had to be prudent in the public profession of their faith so as not to give offence to others. People were asked to slaughter cattle and pigs away from the public eye. Potential for conflict in matters of faith was closely monitored. By and large, things worked out well. But as the older *girmit* generation passed away and people became accustomed to the methods and machinery of government, as families expanded and wealth and education came to the settlement, the power of the panchayat declined. It is now a remote, vanishing memory.
Fijians were at the outer edges of our consciousness. There was a Fijian *koro* (village) by the Tabia river, but we had little to do with it. On the rare occasion that we saw it from a safe distance while on our way to some other place, we marvelled at its neat lawns, its well-maintained rows of brooding bures, cheerful children, its open environment. But that was it. Growing up, I can recall only two Fijians, one with a sense of fear and the other with great affection. Semesa struck fear in us. He was a middle-aged man, grey and hairy, who travelled shirtless from his koro across our settlement to the sea several miles away to fish. Armed with a knife and several spears, he would pass by our house very early in the morning and return at dusk with a string of fish slung around his shoulders. He never stopped by or talked to anyone. It is that figure, walking alone, slightly hunched, uncommunicative, perhaps even grumpy — never responding to our *Ni Sa Bula Turaga*, Greetings, Sir — that accentuated his mysteriousness to us. His name was used by our parents to strike terror into our hearts whenever we misbehaved. ‘Semesa will take you away’ was enough to ensure silence and compliance from us.

The figure I remember fondly is a Fijian woman, tall, dark, flat-nosed, who had adopted my father as her younger brother. We called her ‘*phua*’, father’s sister. Phua was playful with my mother — her ‘*bhauji*’ — and openly affectionate towards my father — her ‘*bhaiya*’ — often admonishing him about this or that, and always taking our side when we were threatened with punishment. She came home regularly, with a bundle of fish or crab, and went away with clothes, rice, sugar and spices and special gifts during festivals. We treated her as a regular member of our extended family. I am sure there was a Fijian *phua* in every Indo-Fijian family. I have often regretted not looking her up after I left Tabia. But that was the extent of my interaction with Fijians, which I now deeply regret. We had no opportunity as children to play together. We went to an Indian school, and Fijian children to their racially exclusive provincial schools. Regrettably, our paths never crossed.
Besides being an Indo-Fijian settlement, Tabia was a predominantly Hindu one as well, Sanatani, orthodox Hindu. I grew up in a fairly orthodox Hindu family. Our neighbour across the road, Mr Shamsher Ali, was a Muslim, though. We called him ‘phuffa’, father’s sister’s husband. Our relations with him were cordial, if not always close. The consumption of beef and pork divided us. The cow for us was sacred; the pig to them was the filthiest animal on earth. The children, of similar school-going age, were closer. We visited each other during Eid or Diwali and during marriages or birthdays. We played and swam together. The Shamsher family took much pride in our success at school and praised us publicly for our good manners. The old man always came home whenever I returned from overseas, curious, full of innocent questions, about life in the land of the sahibs, asking me when I was returning to live in Labasa. Still, for all that, the pragmatic closeness of a near neighbour, rather than the warm togetherness of a community, characterised our relations. Relations are still cordial today, but there is a greater consciousness of religious identity among the younger generation on both sides now than before. The paths have diverged.

Our religious calendar at home was cluttered with endless puja or ceremonies performed to mark an important or auspicious occasion — celebrating Lord Rama’s and Krishna’s birthdays, for instance — in fulfilment of some personal or family wish, or a rite of passage. Mother also performed the annual Shiva Ratri ceremony in honour of Lord Shiva at the hot springs down the road with a devotion that we could not fathom. She was especially devout when she was carrying one of us, believing that noble thoughts heard and contemplated during pregnancy improved the child’s character. Recent medical research has confirmed my mother’s rustic wisdom. Father was punctual with the Satyanarayan and Hanuman puja, performed by the family priest at a specially prepared mound under the mango tree, the spot marked by a red pennant proclaiming our religiosity. Our major festivals were Holi and Diwali. Holi, sometimes called Phagua, was a colourful spring festival.
celebrated over a fortnight. We burnt the effigy of the evil witch Holika, and sang specially composed songs (*chautal*) to the accompaniment of dholak, majira and dhandtal, going from house to house on the final day singing and spraying each other with coloured water.

Diwali, the thanksgiving festival of lights, less commercialised then, was our favourite. On that day, mother would be up at dawn and cook special sweets and vegetable dishes, especially for that occasion: gulab jamun, lakadki ke mithai, halwa, ghugri, puri, gulgula, bada, kadhi. The children were exhorted to display their best behaviour on the day, not to cry, fight or swear because, we were told, how we behaved on that day would determine our behaviour for the rest of the year! We dutifully obliged. In the evening, we lit *diya*, and prayed to Goddess Lakshmi for good fortune and good luck in schoolwork. And then, as the *diyas* brightened the moonless night, we exploded home-made firecrackers. To my great shame, I admit to placing firecrackers in toads' mouths and seeing them explode from a safe distance.

Ramayan recital was the most regular feature of village social and religious life, binding the community together. Each settlement had its own *mandal* association, sometimes several, to cover the more isolated homes. The text was popular not only with the people of our own village but with Hindus throughout Fiji. Part of the reason was its simple, morale-enhancing story-line of Rama, a noble prince, virtuous in every way, exiled for fourteen years for no fault of his own, who eventually returned triumphant after a hard-fought victory over the demon king Ravana.

Rama was what every son, brother, husband, ruler could ever hope to be. In Rama's story, the *girmitiyas* saw hope that their own exile, their ordeal on the plantations, would one day come to an end. Rama was the king of Ayodhya, in eastern Uttar Pradesh, from where the bulk of the migrants came, so there was social and cultural familiarity with Rama's region as well. The text, moreover, was written in accessible Avadhi, the language of the Indo-Gangetic plains, which
could be read by anyone who was literate, unlike the more esoteric Sanskrit texts comprehensible only to the learned few. And Ramayan recital was a social activity, the text recited rhythmically by a group of men to the accompaniment of harmonium and dholak. The occasion provided entertainment as well as spiritual enlightenment, enhancing social bonding.

Each mandali had its own set of rules. Our mandali required the household hosting the recital to keep it ‘clean’ for seven days. Clean meant no deliberate killing or injuring of animals, and no consumption of meat or alcohol during that period. The injunction was easily observed, for meat and alcohol were unaffordable, and offenders subject to strict penalty. They could be punished by the threat of boycotts and sanctions against the family, powerful instruments in a community whose members depended upon each other for social and economic survival. But rules changed with the times. They had to. As people found employment in town, and more money circulated in the settlement, the injunction against meat and alcohol became unsustainable. Some people, impatient with the rigidity of the old ways, broke away to form their own mandalis with less restrictive, more liberal rules. Predictably over time everywhere, the stipulated number of ‘clean’ days declined. Now, a day or two is enough.

Over time, the Brahminical form of Hinduism, celebrating vegetarianism and clean, ritual worship, took hold on the settlement, but even as late as the 1950s, many people continued to practise rituals and ceremonies associated with their particular caste groups. A neighbour, for example, annually sacrificed a pig to appease his caste (Chamar, low caste) deities, while others sacrificed goats and chickens. A week or two later, the same people also hosted Ramayan recitals and performed various pujas. They saw no contradiction in what they did. The practice of animal sacrifice died with the older generation. But superstition and the practice of magic and witchcraft — jadu tona — continued. People consulted a spirit man to cast a spell on enemies or secure a favourable personal outcome. To cure
headache, dog bite or jaundice, people went to the spirit man rather than to medical doctors. Everyone did it. Childless parents sought the assistance of a pir, a Muslim spirit man, who dispensed his services in return for a healthy rooster of specified colour (red, white, black). Ghosts and evil spirits — bhush pret — were an ever-present threat, and we were told not to walk alone at night, or whistle. Nocturnal whistling attracted evil spirits roaming the earth. These things do not exercise the same terror now as they once did.

The celebration of various rites of passage gave families great joy. The birth of a child, especially a boy as the first born, was an occasion for unrestrained celebration. Many rituals associated with childbirth have disappeared altogether or been modified beyond recognition. For instance, some families, professing to be of the higher castes, did the 'garbha sanskar' when pregnancy was confirmed. The family priest officiated, in the presence of family members and neighbours, and prayed for the health of the mother and safe delivery of the child, both important considerations as children of my generation were born at home without the benefit of proper medication or even adequate sanitation. That ritual has disappeared.

We all associated childbirth with 'chattl', the celebration which marked the sixth day of the child's birth. Until that day, both the child and the mother were confined to the house, perhaps because the first six days were considered most life-threatening for both of them. On 'chattl', the child was ceremoniously introduced to the world. Women and men sang, the child was given gifts — baby powder, soap, napkins, baby oil, clothes — while the mother received a sari and other ornaments, including a gold sovereign, or several, if the family was well-to-do, for her part in perpetuating the family line.

On that day, too, the family priest was called to consult the astrological chart to identify the child's 'rashi', astrological sign, and suggest a name. The way names have changed over the years tells a significant story about the social evolution of the community. The girmitiya names followed no discernible pattern. Often people were
named after objects (Tota, or an Indian bird) or something personal (Bipath, meaning hardship, Sukhai, happiness, Garib, poor) or after days of the week. A person born on Monday, Somvar, was named Somai, Samaru or Sumeria. A child born on Tuesday (Mangalwar) could be named Mangal, Mangru, Madho, on Wednesday (Budh), Budhai, Budhram, on Friday (Sukh), Sukhram, Sukh Deo.

_Girmitiyas_ continued the pattern of their childhood, but they also began to name their children after gods in what the sociologists would recognise as the process of ‘sanskritisation’ and upward mobility: Ram Avatar (Incarnation of Lord Ram), Ram Sharan (Taking shelter in Ram), Shiva Prasad (offering to Lord Shiva), Ram Lakhan (Ram and Lakshman) Arjun and Saha Deo (from the _Mahabharata_), Indra Deo (after Lord Indra, the God of Rain). One could not tell a person’s caste background from these names. A subtle, perhaps deliberate, levelling process was at work. Our parents went a step further, naming their sons after prominent personalities and film stars: Jawaharlal, Rajendra Prasad, Kamla, Ashok, Uma Datt, and so on. The next generation broke all conventions by choosing names not with cultural association or astrological calculation in mind, but which sounded modern, westernised, fashionable: Shalwendra, Avikeshni, Shayal. Westernisation was replacing sanskritisation.

Many children of my generation grew up in joint families. The _girmitiyas_ wanted to maintain the system they had themselves known. It was their way of reclaiming and remembering their past. A large social unit was also important for social and economic reasons. More men meant more hands weeding, hoeing, planting cane and rice, protecting the ripening mangoes and watermelon or root crops like dalo and cassava from thieves. A joint family moreover represented status and power. The bigger the social unit, the greater its cohesiveness, the greater its chance of dominating the cane-cutting gang or swaying some other important decision in its favour. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, however, the joint arrangement was beginning to crack. Most of the _girmitiyas_ had gone by then, and with
them the moral glue of tradition which had sustained the structure. New opportunities and domestic friction, caused by the desire for more independence and control over individual income, contributed their own share. Sometimes the parting was amicable, but some cases went to court over the appropriate sharing of the property, after village elders had failed to resolve the dispute. Now, the joint family survives only as a distant memory for people in the village.

For most of us, the village itself was our joint family. Everyone was an uncle or an aunt or an older brother, and they all assumed a collective responsibility of teaching children proper manners, including thrashing them for some transgression or breach of social norms. Our parents did not interfere or intervene. Older people were never called by their names. That habit has remained with me. Sometimes they were given nicknames which we could use without giving offence. Thus, Mr Bisun was called ‘Chillar’ for some unknown reason, and for us he became ‘Chillar kaka’. We called Shiu Prasad ‘Double Drive’ because he had two wives. Mr Ram Saran, a tall, thin man, was called ‘Lumpet’ and another, tall and dark-skinned, ‘Regna’, after a variety of cane. The village money lender, Mr Budh Ram, was called ‘Taang Toong’. Why, I have no idea. Mr Jai Narayan we all knew simply as Magellan for his insatiable curiosity about the world, and Mr Ram Dayal was dubbed Patel, after A.D. Patel, the great criminal lawyer and Indian leader, for his uncanny ability to dredge up an obscure fact to win an argument in his favour.

We never called our older siblings by their names either, and this habit has persisted in our family. Nor did wives address their husbands by their names. My mother never called my father by his name. When someone asked about his whereabouts, mother would reply ‘So-and-So’s father is in the field.’ When speaking directly to him, mother would say something like ‘Are suno’, ‘Oh, listen’. Whenever in the presence of others, my mother always covered her head with ‘orhnī’, a light shawl. Not to do so was seen as a sign of rudeness and defiance, reflecting badly on the family’s reputation.
Women talked to their neighbours through their children, never directly. An interesting situation developed when the bus came to Tabia. Younger married women travelling alone couldn't pay their fares directly to the driver; talking to him or making eye contact was unthinkable. They would cover their heads with a shawl or their sari, place their fares on a metal plate and sit down. The driver would send the change through another passenger, usually a child.

A woman's world was tightly regulated, her field of action narrow. Always a mother, a daughter or a daughter-in-law, she was never — nor was she allowed to be — an individual in her own right. Her family's welfare was her sole concern. In public she was always expected to be deferential; even a minor assertion of independence was disapproved by the village. In the domestic sphere, though, mothers and wives exercised far greater influence than outsiders would allow or recognise. They managed the household besides working in the fields planting rice or weeding cane fields.

Age brought women greater freedom from the customary restraints, especially for women from happy, established households. They were valued as teachers and custodians of culture. My own mother, for example, a fine singer of folk songs and deeply knowledgeable about important rituals and ceremonies, was always in demand in the extended family scattered throughout Vanua Levu. Marriage songs — sohar — were her speciality for which she is remembered even now. At home, she was the emotional centre of the family whose counsel and wisdom were always heeded — and needed — but which were never publicly paraded or acknowledged. Father was, as he had to be, our undisputed public face. And there was a level of understanding and tolerance between my father and mother that would surprise many even today. Father was a teetotaller and a lifelong vegetarian, for all practical purposes, a man of the cloth. Mother, on the other hand, smoked, drank the occasional bowl of yaqona or beer, and ate meat. Her habit was never a matter of dispute or disagreement in the family. I recall with great tenderness my non-smoking father gently lighting mother's 'suluka'.
home-made cigarettes, towards the end of her life when she was frail and disoriented.

The greatest cause of family gathering was marriage. Marriage today is a simple enough affair. The boy and girl find each other, inform their parents of their choice, seek their approval and have a civil marriage later solemnised by a religious ceremony. Parents readily go along, happy to pass on the heavy responsibility to their children. It reflects changing times and needs. Most married couples establish their own households soon after marriage, without attracting social opprobrium. The extended family is a thing of memory for them. Income and education, rather than the social standing or wealth of the family, play a larger part in the choice of partners than before. And social sanctions are no longer easy to deploy to enforce compliance and conformity.

Things were different a generation ago. Marriage then was regarded as too sacred an institution to be left to the whim of youthful love. Marriage joined families and much more, not just individuals. One’s spouse was chosen by the family or the community elders whose principal criterion was the reputation — the good name — of the family in the wider community. Girls had to go to good homes because, once married, there was no possibility of return, no matter what the circumstances. Children were informed, rather than consulted, about their marriage. For many years after indenture, child marriages were common, repeating a practice prevalent in rural India. My father’s older brother, I was told, was carried to his betrothal ceremony on his uncles’ shoulders. My own mother was betrothed at thirteen and married two years later. Girls were married early. A premarital misadventure would ruin the prospect for other marriages in the family besides damaging the reputation of the village. Moreover, a proper ‘kanya daan’, gift of a daughter, was decreed in the scriptures to be the noblest gift parents could ever give.

The social status of the family was important, but there were other considerations as well. A consciousness of caste status played
a part in the early years, although caste, as a system of social organisation, had collapsed in Fiji, unable to survive the levelling experience of migration and indenture. The higher castes intermarried, because they had to, but marriage between a low caste, such as Chamar, and a Brahmin, was unheard of. Lower castes themselves opposed the practice because they thought marrying above their caste was somehow wrong or sinful and likely to invite divine retribution. Old beliefs, inculcated through the centuries, persisted stubbornly in the new environment.

Marriages were also taboo between the families of jahajibhaís, girmiíyas who had come to Fiji on the same jahaj, ship. They practically regarded each other as blood brothers, with all the expectations and obligations that relationship entailed. The practice disappeared as girmiíyas died and as the community expanded. Inter-cultural marriages were also rare. North and South Indians did not intermarry. Colour played a part, the generally fairer-skinned North Indians regarding themselves as better than the darker-skinned Southerners. Sanatanís, orthodox Hindus, stayed away from Samajís, the reformists, and the distance, though diminishing, remains. Among South Indians, Malayalis, self-regarding, preferred their own to Tamils and Telugús. Hindu–Muslim marriages were — and still are — practically non-existent. Marrying Gujaratis and Punjabis, late-arriving free migrants, was also unheard of. The community was a series of concentric circles, each with its own separate identity, each keen to protect its sense of self. Fijians were on the outermost fringes, and inter-racial marriages simply beyond the imagination.

Marriage ceremonies were long drawn-out affairs, involving great cooperative effort and expense. The pattern has changed. Now most marriages are conducted during the day, and both men and women accompany the groom's party to the wedding. A gaudily printed card announces the event to close family and friends, seeking their blessing. Not all villagers are invited, unheard of during my time. A generation ago a father with marriageable children would first
approach family and community elders. Word would spread and, in
the course of time, several prospective names would appear. Discreet
enquiry and discussion would narrow the list over several months.
When a name was settled upon, a party of senior family members
would make the visit. Sometime during the course of the proceedings,
the girl would enter the gathering with a tray of tea and home-cooked
delicacies. An elder from her side would let it be known that this was
the girl they had come to see. The men might glance discreetly at her
half-covered face, but say nothing. Behind the curtain or perhaps in
the kitchen women would assess and scrutinise. The decision would
come a week or so later. The first public step towards a wedding took
place three weeks before the actual event in a ceremony called ‘tilak’,
akin to engagement. The symbolic act of union was captured in ‘lawa
bhujni’ during which unhusked rice brought by both sides is mixed
and thrown ritually into the fire, agni. Rice represents fertility. Once
the date was settled, a ‘nau’, a messenger, would be hired to take the
invitation personally to people in the village, the invitation taking the
form of turmeric-coloured rice. He would get rice, dhal, sugar, salt,
sometimes a piece of cloth in return. Often the ‘nau’ was a colourful
character, a joker, a clown, unthreatening, from a poor family, a dog’s
body, advising on protocols to be followed, acting as the groom’s
protector and servant.

The marriage ceremony proper took place over three days,
‘telwaan’, ‘bhatwaan’ and ‘shadi’. From myriad, whirlwind activities
amidst buckets full of yaqona and endless cups of syrupy tea, some
things stand out in my mind. Mysterious prayers at dusk led by
female members of the family seeking the blessing of secret family
deities one had not heard of. The groom, wearing a turmeric-stained
shirt, sleeping on a grass bed on the floor, marking the last day of his
hard bachelor life, or equally plausibly, preparing him for the hard life
ahead! The ceaseless ‘dhammak dhammak’ and women’s singing that
announced the festivities to the world, the midday meal on the second
day when the groom passed a partly eaten plate of food to his younger
brother, identifying the next one in line for marriage. A tearful mother sad at losing 'her baby' to another woman, being consoled by her brother during the 'imligothani' ceremony, promising to be her guardian always. The 'dhaag paat' ritual involving a respected male elder from the groom's side placing a garland around the bride's neck with the promise to protect her like her own father and swearing, there and then, not to speak to the woman till his dying day unless she was in dire straits and his intervention unavoidable. The 'dwār puja' with the bride's senior male relatives ritually washing the groom's feet before the female members did the 'arti', welcoming him to their extended family. And heart-rending cries of the bride's family as she took leave to start a new life among strangers from which, they all knew, there would be no returning. The severance of the umbilical cord was for good.

Some things about the wedding ceremony remained a mystery for me until much later. Among them was the ritual associated with the construction of the 'mandap', the place where the actual ceremony took place. It was a raised mound of earth leavened with fresh cow dung paste and four crepe paper-covered bamboo poles creating a square structure. In the centre of the raised portion was planted a banana stem surrounded by bamboo branches. Both the mother's and the father's sides of the family together planted the stem as a sign of family solidarity. The earthen mandap floor was liberally sprinkled with coloured rice. Why these things? The banana plant, virtually indestructible — suckers sprout freely — I learned, stood for the continuity of the family tree. Bamboo bends, it never breaks; so, it was hoped, would the new family. Rice symbolised fertility, and the coconut was considered the purest form of offering that could be given to the gods because its water was untouched by human hands. Cow dung was used because, coming from mother cow, it was considered clean by Hindus. Now, most weddings take place in hired halls during daytime, dispensing with items and rituals once central to the ceremony.
Some things, though, have not changed. The thirst for good education is one of them. Today, Tabia boasts a well-equipped secondary college as well as a flourishing primary school. Its students have become prominent members of the Labasa community. Some have even migrated to Australia, New Zealand and North America. It is an achievement of immense magnitude which is all the more remarkable considering how humbly and haphazardly it all began. From very early on, village people, themselves illiterate, realised the importance of schooling, but nothing happened because they had no money and few contacts, and the colonial government was indifferent, preferring Indians to remain on the farm. The village people had other ideas, however, knowing that the rented land held no future for their children. Self-help and keenness got them started. Sahadeo and Butru, literate girmitiyas, taught whatever they could, in return for help with domestic chores, chopping wood, feeding the cattle, fetching water from the well.

In 1943, a holy man from India, Sadhu Sharan Das, visited the village in the course of a year-long cultural tour of Fiji, and stressed the need for a proper school. His advice, one villager recalled, was: 'All men are equal, love them and serve them, be proud of your origins and maintain your identity.' Revolutionary words in the context of the times, when you come to think of it. The Sadhu inspired people. Funds were raised, a villager donated five acres and the Tabia Sanatan Dharam School got started. Yet, despite its name and the predominantly Hindu population of the village, the school was non-sectarian. Its head teachers included Muslims (Munshi, Ashik Hussein), a Punjabi (Mehar Singh), Christians (Simon Nagaiya, Austine Sita Ram), South Indians (Subramani Gounden, Gopal Pillay). Good character mattered more than the faith of the teacher. That aspect has not changed, though there is community expectation (and pressure) now that the head teacher of the school should be a Sanatani Hindu.

The school cemented the community, made the people immensely proud. Its sportsgrounds hosted inter-settlement competitions. Plays were performed as well as festivals celebrating the
birth of Lord Rama and Krishna. I recall enjoying the role of a minor monkey in Hanuman’s army planning to invade Sri Lanka! Visiting dignitaries and religious leaders from the subcontinent held week-long discourses. The Colonial Sugar Refining Company’s mobile film unit showed documentaries extolling its innumerable virtues to us children sitting on sack mats in the playground. I have happy memories of my time at Tabia Sanatan: arriving early for a game of ‘gulidanda’, soccer or rounders, the midday siestas, the vigorous and entirely tuneless inter-class singing competitions, camping at the school for several months and cramming prescribed texts for the dreaded entrance examination, the enormous pressure on me to perform to keep the school’s scholarly reputation up, terrorising tiny tots as the head boy, acting as a relief teacher for the lower grades.

Memories survive along with copies of books we read in primary school in the 1950s and the 1960s. We began, in grade one, with the ‘Caribbean Readers’, picture books written, the preface said, ‘for children of the West Indies, British Honduras and British Guiana’, about Mr Joe and his family of animals: Miss Tibbs the Cat, Mother Hen, Mr Dan the Dog, Mr Grumps the Goat, Master Willy the Pig, Cuddy the Cow and Percy the Chick. The book was designed to cultivate the idea that ‘learning to read is great fun’. That it certainly was, and those characters in the book have remained with me. For the next several years, we read the ‘Oxford English Readers for Africa’. The books were intended to extend our vocabulary of the English language, and to give ‘systematic training in the manipulation of those heavily-worked phrase forms and clause usage which are essential to fluent self-expression’. The content emphasised how the world worked, using examples that transcended geography.

So we read stories on lifestyles in towns and villages, on different types of plants and animals, on seas and their importance to humans, on communication (‘How messages are sent’), the major canals of the world and the purpose for which they were created, the role of the post office, different designs of buildings, bridges and
roads. And they introduced us to the history and literature of ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, to William the First, the Duke of Wellington and Napoleon, Columbus and Magellan (Men Who Made the World Larger), to Shakespeare (Merchant of Venice, Julius Caesar, especially Mark Antony's speech to the Romans, which I remember to this day, having memorised it in primary school).

The books also taught us our civic responsibilities. An essay on ‘Good Citizenship’ for grade six students is instructive. The State, we were told, was the natural order of civilised society: ‘Even the most uncivilised people find it necessary to organise themselves into some simple form of State, because human beings cannot live for long in safety and in health if they try to live alone. The necessities of life are water, food, shelter from the weather and safety from enemies. It is easier to obtain these things if men work together as friends. That is why even uncivilised people, in far-off times in the past, formed little communities which were simple States, with a leader or ruler to see that each member obtained his rights and performed his duties.’

The State was ‘working for the good of all of us’, and it was our duty to pay our taxes, help the police maintain the safety of life and property, to help the law courts to give justice, and to obey the laws. ‘The good citizen is he who is a good householder, a good villager, a good townsman, and a good subject of the King. A bad citizen is he who thinks too much of his own rights and nothing at all of the rights of his fellows, or of his duties to his neighbours.’ We were being trained to be doers, not thinkers, cogs in the wheels of the colonial bureaucracy. The ironic thing is the emphasis on obedience to authority, discipline and order, maintaining the status quo when colonialism was on its way out in Asia and Africa and eventually the Pacific.

Nonetheless, the same texts which exhorted us to obey the laws imposed upon us, also encouraged us to read books, to cherish the pleasures of the imagination. Nothing is more dangerous to an established order than an unfettered mind. ‘A book is a very wonderful thing,’ grade five students read:
Some kinds of books are worth more than gold and silver, because they bring to us the knowledge which was gained by clever men who died long ago. If there were no books, that knowledge might be lost. Other books enable us to explore lands beyond the sea, without ever leaving our homes. From books we can learn about mountains and plains, rivers, and streams, in places which probably we shall never see with our eyes. If we are in doubt about anything, we can get a book about it and find out the truth. If we wish to inquire about anything, and there is nobody in our town who knows the answers to our questions, we can buy books and they will give us all the information we want. A person who owns some good books can see more and travel farther than the richest man in the world, for the rich man who just travels about may forget much that he sees, but the person who has the books need never forget. Therefore, we should treat all books with great respect. We ought not to throw them on the ground, or make them dirty. We should not bend them back so that the leaves become loose and fall out. We ought not to tear their pages or cover them with dirty finger-marks. When we have read a book, we should keep it carefully, for our memory of what is in it may fail, and then we may want to read it again. Books are the storehouses of all the knowledge in the world. If we buy good books, we can have the greatest thinkers, the greatest engineers, the greatest scientists for our friends.

That advice, received so early in my life, influenced me greatly. The beautifully crafted sentences, evoking exotic images — of elephants, tigers, the moors, the palaces — worked magic for me. Even though we lived in a small, impoverished village, I could
imagine and inhabit other worlds. We felt part of a larger world, and were proud of all the red spots on the map which marked the British Empire, our one happy family of colonies.

I read wherever and whenever I could, while grazing cattle by the roadside or late at night by the light of the wick lamp — dhibri — engaging in endless imaginary conversations with characters I had encountered in the texts, thinking about the life of the Eskimos in the 'Arctic Wastes', the pyramid of Kephron, the pygmies of Central Africa who, we were told in grade five, were 'a backward race', the great stones of Brittany, majestic steamers and sleek fighter planes. A bookworm was how some people characterised me. Shakespeare, Tennyson and Matthew Arnold became — and remain — a part of my inner world, and part of my Tabia. They were joined later by Chinua Achebe, V.S. Naipaul, George Eliot, John Steinbeck and many others.

There was nothing much in the English texts about our own immediate cultural world. That came in the Hindi 'pothis', books written by Pandit Ami Chandra during World War II. These simply written texts introduced us to Hindi poetry, Indian fables, prayers (recited every morning before class) and to the heroes and heroines of Indian history and mythology: Sati Savitri, Lakshmi Bai, the story of Lord Rama, episodes from the Mahabharata, the Mughal emperors Akbar and Aurengzeb and their great deeds, the majestic beauty of the Taj Mahal. Sprinkled among them were a few accounts of the Indian presence in Fiji, but this subject was avoided partly because, I suspect, it was controversial and partly because it might not have been thought worth studying.

The books offered practical advice as well on how to keep our homes and gardens in order, the importance of physical exercise and good neighbourliness. Good citizenship required obedience to authority, respect for elders, sacrifice for the greater good and individual enterprise. The books also inculcated pride in our history and heritage. The texts were intended for school children. In fact, they educated the community as well, as illiterate parents asked their
children to read to them stories about their forebears’ past. My interest in Indian culture and history and language comes from these books. I am grateful to them for opening our horizon, for enriching our imagination, for making us feel part of a larger humanity. Whenever we meet now, people of my generation re-visit the texts and recite poems we had once learnt by heart, much to the amusement of our children, poems about alcohol and alcoholics (Pea kar madak madakchi ek, Chala kahin ko lathi tek), about bananas (Lamba phal hota hai kela, meetha phal hota hai kela, Is ko kha khush hote bacche, Ma se peni lete bacche) and about bicycles (Do pahiye ki cycle, Daur lagati khel, Dena padata hai nahi, Is me paani tel).

My contact with Tabia diminished over time as I moved to Suva for higher education, and then overseas. The death of my parents and my brother Ben weakened my emotional links. Each time, I returned as a stranger among people with whom I had grown up, re-formed and influenced by other experiences beyond their comprehension. I have often wondered how we were able to escape the place to forge the life we have. Fate, chance, accident? One step at a time: that could have been the motto of my generation. My journey may sound improbable, but it is not exceptional. The details will vary, and there will be many points of departure, but the broad contours of the transformation in our lives would be recognisable to many of my generation. We broke barriers our parents could not have contemplated. A career as a lowly paid civil servant, a bank clerk and, if lucky, a secondary school teacher, was all they could imagine. That one day we would cross our own kala pani to live in the land of kulambars, CSR plantation overseers, would never have entered their imagination.

The gulf between the world we inherited and the world we now inhabit could not have been greater for my generation. Tabia was where I began my journey. It shaped my destiny, but not my destination.