Subhash was a boy we all admired. He was the first one from our village to complete high school. Short, immaculately dressed in starched white uniform and shining black shoes, he stood by the roadside for the school bus, a book in hand, concentration writ large on his face. We talked about him in hushed tones, keeping a respectful distance, as is appropriate between gods and mortals. He had achieved an A grade pass in the Fiji Junior Exams, and was equally successful in the Senior Cambridge. When the University of the South Pacific opened in 1968, he was in the first batch of students to attend. With that transition, Subhash moved from being a figure of awe to a figure of legend. And a legend he remained for me for many years. I continued to watch and admire him from a distance. He is now a senior figure in the Fiji Sugar Corporation. I followed Subhash's footsteps, becoming only the second boy from Tabia to complete university.

By the late 1960s, high school was not beyond the contemplation of most parents. It was somehow expected that those who passed the dreaded Entrance Exam would continue with higher
education, a dream made possible by government scholarship for children from poor backgrounds. We, and certainly our parents, had no idea of what career lay ahead or what future we would create for ourselves. But one thing was certain: there was no future on the ten-acre leased land for all the children, and that fact, perhaps more than anything else, forced us to consider other alternatives. With some secondary schooling at least, the chances of landing a cash-paying job would improve. That was the hope of a generation emerging from the shadows of indenture. Our parents’ lives had been damaged by poverty and the petty humiliations of rural, underprivileged life, and they wanted a better future for their children.

Tabia Sanatan Dharam School had a bumper year in 1966. Everyone who sat the Entrance exam passed, a record that remained unbroken for many years. But that success was no accident. Our headmaster, Mr Subramani Gounden, had driven us hard, giving extra tutorials during weekends, going over old exam papers, conducting a trial run. For several months before the exam, he asked us to camp in school so that we could study together at night, knowing that the moment we left the school compound, we would be doing household chores, fetching water for cooking, chopping firewood, feeding cattle, pounding yaqona, too tired, after all this, to concentrate on school work. We studied but we also engaged in extra-curricular activities that should, I think, remain classified information! Some secrets parents should not divulge to their children. Young boys, eating and sleeping together in a small room, can conjure up the most bizarre.

All six of us passed, but only three had marks good enough to qualify for a place at the Labasa Secondary. That school was the prize we all aimed for. Labasa Secondary was a government school, the only one in Vanua Levu, with a colony-wide reputation for academic excellence, often at par in external exam results with Suva Grammar, Marist Brothers and Natabua High. As a government school, Labasa Secondary enjoyed better qualified teachers and better facilities, with well-equipped laboratories and a well-stocked library. My other three
Tabia colleagues went to Sangam High, across the road from us. That school was a private initiative of the Then India Sanmargya Ikya Sangam, a South Indian cultural organisation founded in 1926. Struggling and underfunded, the school provided, like so many other such private schools started by Indian cultural and religious organisations, an opportunity that would otherwise have been denied many. Over time, I lost contact with my Sangam colleagues. And at Labasa Secondary, my two other Tabia colleagues eventually dropped out, leaving me as the sole survivor of that bumper crop.

Labasa was only nine miles from home, but it was for us village boys an alien place, full of shops stocked with alluring but mostly unaffordable goods, tall concrete buildings, running water, electricity, Chinese restaurants and buzzing (fly-infested) tea shops, picture theatres, the marketplace by the river. Nothing happened in Tabia; there was no money, no adventure, nothing, but our daily routine of homework and housework. In the village, our parents and older brothers watched our every movement like hawks. Visiting other folks in the neighbourhood or meeting up with friends for fun — raiding fruiting mango trees, swimming in the river, fishing: these activities were discouraged, punished even, for fear that we might pick up bad habits from other boys. Good boys stayed home. If lucky, we would be invited by father to accompany him to the market once every three or four months, but that was it. The memory of the visit would linger, the chaotic, garbage-strewn market scene and the friends and relatives we had met, replayed over and over in our minds, suitably enlarged and embroidered to impress my younger siblings about the strange, beckoning world that lay beyond the hills. We jostled among ourselves to secure the next trip to town.

Labasa Secondary was in town, but the daily bus ride, 20 cents each way, was expensive, and cash at home was always in short supply. So my brother Ben rented a small flat in Namara, the low-cost housing area at the edge of the town, and it was from there that I completed my high school education. It was a move that distressed
my mother who worried about her young child left alone to fend for himself away from the comforts of care, but she understood the reality of poverty that was our family’s lot. Namara was not all bad. Being away from home spared me those dreadful after-school household chores, for which I was grateful — cutting grass, feeding the cattle, weeding cane. Staying alone, I quickly learnt to become self-reliant and resourceful, doing my own cooking, washing and ironing my own clothes, learning to enjoy the pleasures of solitude, spending spare time reading books borrowed from the local municipal library, sneaking quietly into movie theatres when the attendants were not around or were secretly watching the movie themselves. But absence from home had its costs as well, which I did not fully realise at the time. It increased the gulf between me and by brothers. Each time I returned home a bit more of a stranger, a boy with serious things on his mind, self-absorbed, unable to participate in their antics as I had once done. The gulf increased with time and travel and the accompanying social and personal experiences. I feel the loss now when my brothers reminisce about their childhood days, about their youthful pranks, the things they did during festivals, weddings and school holidays, acting as monkeys in Hanuman’s army during Ram Lila, playing soccer matches in rough, dry paddy fields.

I have vivid recollections of my first day at Labasa Secondary. After a sleepless night, I was up early, had a bath and did the customary puja, seeking divine blessing for continued success in school work. Mother made special vegetable dishes, and packed my lunch of roti and curry. Father took me to school that day. Fees had to be paid, texts purchased, papers signed. Father was uneducated, without a word of English. I could sense that he was ill-at-ease in this surrounding, perspiring profusely, not engaging with other equally perplexed and uncomfortable fathers waiting their turn to register their children. He stood with me in the queue in the hot sun on the freshly tar-sealed courtyard as we waited our turn to visit the principal’s office. We did not exchange words. Indian fathers of my
generation were emotionally parsimonious, awkward in showing emotion to their children; and I was self-conscious about being too emotionally dependent in public as well. I wanted to show the other boys that I wasn't a 'sissy'. After completing the formalities and affixing his thumb print to some documents handed to him by the school clerk, Jamuna Prasad, father left, looking back only once. For the first time, I felt I was on my own. I felt frightened.

By the end of the first day, we had been sorted out into our different 'forms'. These academic streams were intended to be permanent. There was no career counselling, to use the modern terminology, and no one asked us about our choices and preferences for subjects. The teachers knew best and they decided our future for us. The only criterion of differentiation was the marks we had achieved in our entrance exam. It was as simple as that. Those with good marks were placed in the A stream, and the rest in B. The A graders were the cream of the crop, carrying the school's hope for success in external exams. We felt pampered and privileged and superior. We considered ourselves the proud flag bearers of the school. We looked at the others from a pedestal that the teachers had created for us — we carried their expectations. The A graders did science: Chemistry, Physics, Maths and English, and in the lower grades Geography and History as well. The B graders did Biology and some other sciences as well as metalwork and woodwork. We were training for an 'academic' career; they were marked for a vocational life.

I was probably the only student at Labasa Secondary who saw life from both sides of the academic divide. I began in Grade A, doing the science subjects as well as Geography and History. In the third year, I had to make a choice between History and Geography. I loved Geography and was good at it, good at names of distant cities, rivers, systems of agriculture, trading patterns. But History tugged at my heart. On the day I had to make a decision, Krishna Dan, our new history teacher, arrived in class with a well-worn, brown briefcase bulging with papers. 'Those of you not taking History, please leave the class,' he said brusquely. There
was something about his manner, confident, purposeful, authoritative, that caught me. Krishna seemed to promise excitement and adventure. I stayed behind; Geography lost, and I became hooked on History.

In the final year of high school, I had to make a further choice, between Physics and History. Again, I was reasonable at Physics, but History was where my heart lay. Mr Sarwan Singh, my Physics teacher who was also the principal of the school, urged me to stick with Physics. His arguments were compelling: there was a future in science; I would get better marks in science than in History and thus a better chance of getting a university scholarship; I could read History on the side. I was a bright boy. With History, all I could aspire to was a career as a high school teacher, but with science, my choices were unlimited. But I persisted, and in the end Mr Singh relented. He allowed me two weeks' leave to 'try' History out. He would have me back if I decided to change my mind. I made the switch. But to do History, I had to join the B stream, which I did. It was then that I experienced first-hand the feeling of being treated as stepchildren, second best, that B graders had lived with all these years.

We were the first generation of Indo-Fijians to attend — and complete — secondary school. We were pioneers although we were not conscious of this fact at the time. And A graders, we liked to feel, represented the best and the brightest of us. The brightest boy from my primary school, I was now a bright boy among numerous bright boys from all over Vanua Levu. We were all self-conscious of this fact, quietly assessing our place in the pecking order, determined by our academic performance. An informal hierarchy quickly established itself. We all acknowledged Vinod Chunilal as the undisputed star of our class and of the school. Vinod had joined us from Natabua. He was good at everything he did; he was untouchable. He is now an electrical engineer. After him, ranking fluctuated by subject, but there was a group of five or six boys who were known as the 'highbrows'. I belonged to that group. There was no jealousy or nasty competitiveness: we were there because we were the top students in the school.
The emphasis on excellence drove home an important lesson. Among our group were many boys from wealthy backgrounds: sons of shopkeepers, school teachers, senior public servants, bankers, prominent people in the community, some recognised by the Queen for their distinguished contribution to this cause or that. They came to school in neatly ironed clothes, wearing nice shoes, carrying their books and papers in stylish briefcases. I secretly envied them their comfort and wealth. There were times when I wondered about why we were fated to be so poor. But in the end all that mattered was our performance in the classroom. That classroom was a great leveller of social hierarchy and economic status, and a powerful encourager of individual effort. We realised that we could achieve whatever we wanted, provided we applied ourselves. We could create our own destiny. For a boy from a poor background, cooped up in a rented room at the outer edges of the town, deeply insecure about himself and his future, that realisation was immensely liberating. And empowering.

I suppose our indentured grandparents must have felt something similar upon arriving in Fiji. In India their lives had been defined by their caste and community, their place in society determined by past deeds and misdeeds. There was no possibility of change in their own lifetime. But crossing the kala pani (dark, dreaded waters) had disrupted the old strictures, and the rigours of daily plantation life had further destroyed the basis of the social hierarchy. The lowly leather tanners, skinners of dead animals, and the twice-born Brahmins were all equal in the eyes of colonial law. In these green islands, private enterprise and individual initiative rather than social status determined whether a person survived and prospered. The girmitiyas from the ancient land realised, possibly for the first time, that they could create their own destiny, rather than live one decided for them by the privileged pandits. They were all children of the same God, equal in their humanity and divine potential. Obvious to us now, it must have been a revolutionary realisation at the time, the taste of
freedom from the oppressive shackles of custom and tradition. Indenture, ironically, forged a new, more egalitarian world for an earlier generation. The modern school system did the same for ours.

Most of us were from the farm — Shambhu, Naresh, Liaquat, Shiu, Duruswami, Mahend, Satish, Puran, Emmanuel, Somaiya, Venket, Mal Khan, Bijay. And the girls, too: Sushila, Mumtaz, Sushma, Gyan, Maya, Firoza, Daya, Kamrul. Such beautiful, evocative names. We kept our distance from them. There was no mixed socialising at recess or lunch. We did know of some romantic interests and fluttering hearts, about letters being exchanged, flowers being placed in discreetly exchanged library books, surreptitious after-school meetings behind the municipal library by the river, but we kept the secrets to ourselves, making excuses for the love birds when someone enquired about their whereabouts. Outside school hours, when we met the girls at some function, especially at weddings, we behaved as if we were strangers. Even the most casual conversation or eye contact could be easily misinterpreted, to the girls' disadvantage, potentially threatening her school life. I have sometimes wondered where those girls, now middle-aged and married, are today.

The boys did well, and some girls, too. Our graduating class of 1970 was the most successful in the school's history, sending the largest contingent to the recently opened University of the South Pacific. There were some, though, who left school midstream to join the local bank, the field staff of the South Pacific Sugar Mills, or the public service. Some went to the Nasinu Training College. I lost contact with them. But those who went on to university did exceptionally well, becoming academics, lawyers, high school principals. Many now live in Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada, thanks to the political turbulence of the 1980s. We had crossed our own dark waters from Vanua Levu to come to Suva, uncertain and insecure, but determined to succeed, knowing that there was no going back. We carried on our shoulders the hope of so many we had left behind. We were making a journey not dissimilar to that made by our forebears a century ago.
The overwhelming majority of students at Labasa Secondary were Indo-Fijians. Most schools in Fiji are like that, monoracial. That was a reflection of both demography and geography as well as race. Labasa was a predominantly Indian sugar town. There were a few Part-European boys from the Simmons family and a few Chinese, the Lees and the Zoings, but that was about it. I can recall only one Fijian boy at school, Kalivati Bakani, the son of a medical doctor posted to the Labasa Hospital. That was the reason why he was with us. Most Fijian children went to their own racially exclusive schools in the districts. And from there, the successful ones went to the elite Queen Victoria School in the isolated but picturesque, sea-lapped retreat in rural Tailevu, or to the more vocational-oriented Ratu Kadavu Levu School, which, too, was for Fijian boys. Just as we spent the formative years of our lives in a predominantly Indo-Fijian environment, the Fijian children spent theirs in an exclusively Fijian setting. We remained ignorant of each other's culture and language, assessing the other community through the lens of prejudice and stereotype. And yet we, the cream of the post-independence generation, so poorly equipped with cross-cultural skills, would be called upon to play a vital role in nation building, as teachers, administrators, political leaders. No wonder Fiji has stumbled so often in its post-colonial history.

Labasa Secondary, being a government school, received the best qualified teachers, which meant mostly teachers trained in New Zealand and sometimes Australia. Educationally, we were a colony of New Zealand; Australia was remote for us, a racially exclusive white man's country. We were lucky in our teachers. They seemed to us totally dedicated to their calling, up to date, always well prepared, enthusiastic and keen for us to do well in exams. There was something about them that announced professionalism. Among the teachers were local boys who had done well. Krishna Datt and Subramani were from Labasa. We admired them and secretly wished to emulate their careers. Krishna went on to become a prominent trade unionist, a founding member of the Fiji Labour Party and a Member of
Parliament. Subramani, after further studies in Canada, became a professor of English and Literature at the University of the South Pacific. Vijay Mishra, from Nausori, went on to do higher degrees in English and Medieval Indian literature, and is presently a professor of comparative literature at Murdoch University in Western Australia. Our Chemistry teacher, Amraiya Naidu, from Labasa, later became Fiji’s permanent secretary for Education and, in the late 1990s, Fiji’s representative to the United Nations. The school principal, Mr Sarwan Singh, later became head of the Fiji Institute of Technology and a Labour Senator in Fiji’s 1999 Parliament. Others, such as our Mathematics teachers Venket Raylu and Gurdial Singh, joined the central secretariat of the Education Department.

Our teachers inspired us, both by what they did and who they were. Driven men themselves, they drove us hard, forcing us to the edge so that we too could realise our full potential. Their implicit belief that we could amount to something, despite the barriers of economics and geography, was an important reason for our success. They had spent their formative years in other countries, and they were acutely aware of the possibilities that could be exploited by us. That broadening experience of overseas education, with all that it entailed, informed their approach to teaching. Comparisons can be distorting and even odious, but I doubt that today’s teachers have the same degree of professionalism and commitment to excellence that drove the earlier generation. Teaching as a profession does not seem to be as highly regarded as it once was, frequently seen as a stepping stone for a career elsewhere in the public service. It no longer attracts the best and the brightest. Teachers in Fiji now are working in a deeply polarised culture where political patronage rather than merit influences decision making about appointment and promotions. Coups and the convulsions they have caused have not only demoralised many but have also sent people into other professions. Whatever the reasons, the students of Fiji are the losers.

We completed our secondary schooling in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The country was then moving inexorably towards
independence, after deeply contested constitutional conferences called to consider the form of Fiji’s future constitutional arrangements, racially charged by-elections, and the threat of racial violence by those opposed to independence. Race is always a charged issue in Fiji. The Colonial Sugar Refining Company, which had determined the shape of our communal and social life for nearly a century, was being hauled before an arbitration commission chaired by Lord Denning to give cane growers a better deal than they had received before. Independence came in 1970, and the CSR, unable to accept Denning’s decision, departed in 1973. But these historic developments meant little to us. Their significance was never explained. No one discussed politics in school, or the future of the country we were destined to shape in different ways. We were living the legacy of a colonial education whose main aim was to train ‘manpower’, teachers, doctors, accountants, administrators, cogs in the wheel for the new nation, not politically conscious thinkers asking disturbing, destabilising questions about nationalism and nation building. It was not until much later that I learnt of discreet discussions about party politics among teachers, but it is their public silence that remains with me, their unwillingness or inability to alert us to impending developments that would affect our lives so profoundly.

But our teachers did well the things they were trained to do. They opened our horizons in other ways. We were exposed to new sports, such as hockey, cricket and lawn tennis. Every term, the school was taken to one of the local theatres, the Elite and the Majestic, to see a movie our teachers judged worthy. So we saw, but did not understand, *El Cid* and *Ben Hur*, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, and *Ulysses*. Their subject, the language of the screen, their cultural and historical context — Michelangelo, the Sistine Chapel paintings — were beyond us. *Wuthering Heights*, with Lawrence Olivier as the raging Heathcliff, was discussed in class because it was one of the books set for that year, but not the Hindi classic *Ganga Jamuna*, played memorably by Dilip Kumar and Balraj Sahni, about a family feud between two brothers in
village India, whose theme resonated in our own experiences. But whether we understood them or not, we were grateful to get away from schoolwork into the darkened magic of the theatre. Krishna Datt, our History teacher, started the school’s first Student Council, opposed, we understood, by the principal. Vincent Naidu was its president and I was elected secretary. I cannot now recall precisely what we achieved, besides feeling important, being taken seriously by our teachers, and leading the occasional delegation to the principal’s office about some minor matter, such as the improvement of the tennis court, or more hockey sticks and balls for the players.

Vijay Mishra, our English teacher, organised a ‘Heretical Society’, of which I was elected president. We had no idea what the word meant, but that did not matter; the excitement of doing something new and adventurous and slightly subversive captivated us. Every month, we debated some topic that the teachers thought important. Once we took the negative side in the debate on whether ‘Alcoholics Should Have a Place in Society’. We lost, we consoled ourselves, because one of the judges was a History teacher, who later died prematurely from alcohol-related complications! Yet another time, we debated whether Science or Religion provided better insights into the human condition. I cannot recall which side we took. On yet another occasion, I led a team which won the debate that students should be allowed to wear flip flops, thongs, to school. We were allowed into the school compound either barefoot or in sandals and shoes, nothing else. We used such esoteric words as ‘elite’ and ‘working class’ to make our point. The principal, Mr John Sharan, was reportedly displeased but Vijay assured him that it was only a student debate! Less controversial than these debates were the events organised by the Music Group and the Biology Club. Listening to sweet, syrupy Hindi songs by Naresh and Babu Prasad, dissecting cane toads or inspecting the anatomy of insects were bound to be less contentious. Still, not all teachers approved of such extra-curricular activities. They felt that the time taken up with debates and field excursions was time
wasted. We should spend every minute of our time doing school work, completing homework, preparing for exams. Marks mattered most: we were at school to learn, not to debate issues not prescribed in the curriculum. Some students felt the same way, too. But I am glad theirs remained the minority view.

Each school day began with a morning period between 8:30 and 9am before classes began. What happened in that half-hour depended entirely on the class teacher. Our class teacher, Vijay Mishra, was creative. Freshly graduated from Victoria University in Wellington, he was a stylish man, always well dressed, sporting a tenderly nurtured goatee beard, handsome, awesomely fluent in English and westernised in his manners. I never heard him utter a Hindi word within our hearing, and we wondered among ourselves whether he knew the language at all. With a $2 contribution from each one of us in the class, Vijay started a class library of English and European classics. We were all assigned a book, and asked to talk about it during the morning period. The selection made no concession to our cultural or educational background or the level of our (in)competence in the English language. So we read books by Jane Austen, Emily and Charlotte Bronte, John Galsworthy, Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, James Joyce (The Dubliners), Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, William Golding, Patrick White, Randolph Stow, Joseph Conrad, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Balzac, Emile Zola and many, many more.

The list is daunting, I know, and many mysterious stomach aches were reported on the day of presentation. But for many of us, these books opened up new horizons beyond our joyless villages and fed our imagination, inculcating a love for the written word that has remained with me despite the bewildering changes brought about by modern technology. I retained a sense that all learning and knowledge come from the printed page. I went further than other students by ordering books from the Western Regional Library in Lautoka. Years later I met a man who remembered sending book parcels to me,
wondering about the boy, in Labasa, of all places, who was interested in books by Russian authors. One day, when Vijay found out I was reading *Anna Karenina*, he was genuinely surprised, and asked me to speak about it to his combined English class of two forms. To stand up before the class and talk about a book — in effect, do a book review — was itself an experience, a first rudimentary lesson in public speaking.

We did not know it then, but we were being given an education that was rare in Fiji. Just one comparison with the Mahatma Gandhi High in Suva underscores this point. There, a friend told me, girls were discouraged from doing the hard sciences. Biology was fine, but definitely not Physics. Her English teacher, a prominent national politician, was hardly ever at school. Even when she was, she was distracted and snobbish, as India-born teachers could be towards Fiji Indians, peddling the shibboleth that science students did not need to have good English, and blaming the students themselves for their poor performance. The principal, also India-born, was a middle-aged bachelor, narrow and pathologically conservative, who cut out pictures of models in the *Time* magazine before placing them in the school library, for fear that these pictures would corrupt the morality of the girls and boys under his charge. Moreover, he played up to the patrons of society, always pampering and favouring kids from wealthy homes. He was less an educator than an ageing enforcer of socially conservative morality. Girls, he felt, were at school to prepare for careers as good wives and mothers; the idea of a career for women was alien to him. A teacher such as Vijay Mishra, who caused a minor furore in our school for making available a copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to his brighter students, would have been lynched at Mahatma Gandhi High!

We finished high school the year Fiji became independent. We were thus the last generation to study the colonial curriculum, sitting papers set by educational authorities in New Zealand. Before us, students did papers set by the Cambridge Syndicate, designed for primary and secondary students in British colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. After us, students would sit papers with
more local content in the humanities and the social sciences. 'Relevance' gained greater currency than was the case in our time. The social sciences curricula for the junior students after us had a different aim. They emphasised such themes as learning to live in a multicultural state, resolving conflicts, and the history and geography of Fiji. The history section is interesting. There was a separate course on the history of Fiji. Students looked at Fiji at the time of contact with the outside world: the so-called voyages of discovery, the beginnings of European settlement, the introduction of trade and a new religion and the 'main effects of such contact on the political structure, tribal wars, health and the birth of new ideas'; political developments from contact to Cession in 1874, the causes and consequences of Cession and the problems and challenges facing the administration of the first governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, the development of a separate Fijian Administration for the indigenous community, the advent of the sugar industry and 'the main issues of the indenture system including recruiting procedures and work conditions, and the constitutional development of Fiji from Cession to independence'. The depth of detail is impressive.

Students in Geography were expected to 'know and understand the main geographical features of Fiji', and 'relate in personal terms to the geographical patterns and processes in their own country'. They learnt about such topics as location, population, land use (semi-subsistence, village agriculture, commercial agriculture, sugar cane, coconut planting, dairying, beef cattle raising, climate and soil), about such industries as fishing, forestry, mining and manufacturing, and about communication and transport, including major routes linking Fiji with the rest of the world by sea and air. A new focus on Social Science aimed to 'prepare the students to cope with modern life while at the same time retain much of their identity'. Tolerance, understanding and goodwill towards others, confidence, self-esteem and a sense of responsibility, respect for individual and human rights and a willingness to accept changes within the existing
system of law and order, were some of the values the curricula tried to foster in the students. And English curricula offered a 'South Pacific Option', which introduced works by local writers and others from the Third World (such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o *Petals of Blood*) as well as extracts from local newspapers for comprehension exercises.

All this — so local, so familiar — was alien to me as a school boy. My exposure to things Fijian and Pacific came at university, and much later. In high school, I learnt nothing that even remotely touched the world I grew up in. Fiji might as well have been Mars. Take the Geography curriculum, for instance. Students in the 1960s learnt about Burma, Central China, Malaya, Singapore, Manchuria, Southwest Asia, about East Anglia, the Midland Valley of Scotland, South Wales; about Brittany, Denmark, the Mediterranean coastlands of France, the North Italian Peninsula, the Ruhr; about California, the Canadian maritime provinces, the corn belt of the United States, about Florida and the St Lawrence Valley. There was a section on New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific Islands, and in 1962, students sitting for the School Certificate were expected to know about the variety of landscapes in Northland, scientific dairy farming in Auckland, a high country run, water races and irrigation in Canterbury, coal mining in Westland, the Snowy River Scheme, irrigation farming around Renmark, South Australia, and the transport problems of the Cook Islands. It was the same pattern year after year, with students memorising relief maps of Australia, New Zealand and Europe, the industrial strengths of Liverpool and Manchester, and the sheep industry in New Zealand and Australia.

History was similar. In the early grades, we studied the rise of the Liberal Party in New Zealand, the importance of the refrigeration industry to New Zealand agriculture, the economic policies of Sir Julius Vogel, the Wakefield Scheme, the Maori Wars, the life and achievements of Sir Apirana Ngata, about John Macarthur, merino sheep and squatters; the effects of the Victorian gold rushes and the rapidly expanding wool industry, topics like that. In higher grades we
left the Antipodes to focus on the grand themes of world (but mostly western) history. So we studied the unification of Germany and Italy and the contributions of Bismarck, Mazzini, Cavour and Garibaldi to the making of their countries' histories; the Crimean War, the First World War brought about by the shift in the Balance of Power in Europe and the disruption of the Armed Peace in the first decade of the 20th century, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the contribution to it of Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky; the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy, the emergence of the trade union movement in the United Kingdom and, briefly, the rise of new nations in Asia.

Krishna taught the subject with infectious enthusiasm. He opened up his own personal library to us, lending us books by Geoffrey Barraclough, Dennis Mack Smith, Percival Spear, L.C.B. Seaman, A.J.P. Taylor. I am not sure we understood the complex arguments and themes these historians espoused, but that was not the point. The books opened up a window to a past — even if that past was remote to all of us — that connected us to a wider world, other human experiences in history. The process of learning, I suppose, was more important than the content. Krishna also had a marvellous sense of theatre. I vividly recall him turning up to class one morning with a large placard around his neck with the opening words of the Communist Manifesto, ‘Workers of the world unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains.’ And he created a minor furore in the school by suggesting that Hitler’s birthday should be remembered because he was an important — evil but important — figure in 20th century history.

In our English classes we studied both literature and language. I did not take much to grammar. I could not get enthused about co-ordinate clauses, auxiliary, infinite and intransitive verbs, possessive adjectives and pronouns, predicate and prepositions and subordinate conjunctions. The knowledge was necessary but dry. Try teaching a farm boy, with a rudimentary knowledge of English, the difference between effected and affected, laudable and laudatory, ineffective and
coiffured elderly white ladies would appear in cars packed with sealed boxes containing the exam papers. While we waited anxiously outside, they would open the boxes and place the papers on the desks. Then we would be called in, our palms sweaty, our hearts racing. The supervisors would read the rules: no communicating with anyone, all notes to be handed over, no one to leave the exam room during the first hour. Then after the mandatory ten minutes reading time, we would begin.

The questions were not entirely unfamiliar as we had covered the topics in school. Still, in that tension-filled environment, even straightforward questions could appear curly, and facts at one's finger tips before the exam unable to be recalled. The longer essay questions in history, for example, calling for a discussion of the effects of the Maori wars on the Maori people, the causes of the 1929 Depression, the circumstances leading to the federation of Canada or Australia, the meaning of the 'Partition of Africa', or the contribution of Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin to the history of Soviet: these questions were manageable. But shorter ones, asking for a comparison of the policies of Gladstone and Disraeli regarding social reform, Ireland, parliamentary reform and foreign policy, or factual description of the Import Duties Act of 1931, the gold standard, the Abdication crisis, the 1928 Parliamentary Reform Act or the Irish Free State could flatten us, as they often did.

It was much the same in English. The literature section, covering prose, poetry and drama, was broadly familiar to us because we had studied the texts in class. From the list of prescribed novels — Jane Eyre, Silas Marner, Oliver Twist, Under the Greenwood Tree, Huckleberry Finn, Wuthering Heights, Lord Jim, Cry, the Beloved Country, Animal Farm, The Pearl, Man Alone, King Solomon's Mines, Pride and Prejudice, Typhoon, A Tale of Two Cities, The War of the Worlds, Vanity Fair, among many others — we could provide an outline of the main story and 'choose a very important episode, perhaps a climax, and in about half to three-quarters of a page give an ineffectual, precipitous and precipitate, continuously and continually, observance and observation, dominating and domineering!

Literature was something else, especially the way Vijay Mishra and Subramani taught the subject. With Vijay we explored John Steinbeck's The Pearl, William Golding's Lord of the Flies and Bronte's Wuthering Heights as well as William Wordsworth ('The Daffodils'), Lord Tennyson ('Ulysses'), Samuel Taylor Coleridge ('Ancient Mariner': Water, water, every where, nor any drop to drink), Edgar Alan Poe ('Raven'), D.H. Lawrence ('The Snake') and Shakespeare (Julius Caesar and The Merchant of Venice). Subramani introduced us to Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim, to T.S. Eliot ('Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and 'The Wasteland'), and to Hamlet, whose soliloquy we all memorised. I recall Subra playing in class a scratchy gramophone record of T.S. Eliot reading his Prufrock poem. Such was his dedication to his subject. Vijay was intellectually agile, cool and instinctive whereas Subra seemed more scholarly, brooding, withdrawn. Both were excellent teachers who taught us to cherish the pleasures of the imagination, to cultivate the habit of reading and reflection. From them I learned that a life of reading and writing was not a life wasted, that teaching was a noble profession. From them, too, I learned that books could be instruments for inner growth, constant, uncomplaining and accessible companions in the darkest hours. No wonder both went on to enjoy distinguished academic careers in their chosen fields.

All this good teaching, liberating and humanising, was geared to one end: to enable students to pass the external exams. Everything depended on that single event spread over a long fateful week. There was no concession to personal circumstance, such as death in the family or illness or some other misfortune, and no account was taken of the work done over the course of the year or years. We all hoped and prayed that nothing unexpected happened before the exams. A day or two before the exam, the classroom partitions would be removed to create a huge, impersonal hall, with wooden desks and chairs arranged in neat rows. On the appointed day, several neatly
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outline of the episode'. In drama we could select a play by William Shakespeare, Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Sheridan, George Bernard Shaw, J.B. Priestley, Thornton Wilder or Terence Rattigan, identify a prominent character and write his or her character sketch in an episode in which he or she was prominent. In poetry we knew enough — or were supposed to know enough — about rhythm, meter, free verse, iambic tetrameter and pentameter, heroic couplets, sonnet and ballad, and about symbol, allusion, allegory and metonymy, to get by. It was the section on 'composition' that got us. Try as we might, we found it hard to write a long meaningful paragraph on modern art, the astronauts, western films, the bottle drive or collecting for Corso, about the main stand at the flower show, the case for or against television in the home, a climbing adventure, babysitting or, of all things, a winter morning! In hot, humid Labasa. Come to think of it, it was a miracle that we passed our exams, and with good marks, too.

After the exams, we all went home to our villages, to spend the hot, humid summer months helping with field work, planting rice, weeding cane, working as hired hands for wealthier neighbours. For two months or so, we would be completely cut off from our friends and the rest of the world. It was a very lonely experience, after all our school work, to return to a place where nothing happened, where no one had any idea about what you did, and the new imaginative worlds you were exploring, the new friends you had made, the romantic flutter of the adolescent heart. To keep your sanity, you read whatever was available, and engaged in countless conversations with yourself or with the characters you encountered in the texts, memorising poetry and lines from the Ramayana. We could not wait for the school year to start again.

Our teachers continued to take an interest in our careers after we left school, in a protective, big-brotherly sort of a way. Some of them have become friends, but interaction is characterised by a certain respectful reserve. That is appropriate because the old teacher–pupil relationship never quite goes away. We treated our teachers with complete respect, bordering on reverence, never daring to talk back,
never using their first names, making ourselves scarce whenever we saw them at social functions. But I have lost touch with most of my fellow students. Whenever we meet in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane or Auckland — in the Fijian diaspora — we invariably talk about Labasa and the whereabouts of our school mates and teachers, swapping thigh-slapping stories, recalling moments that have remained with us. The other day, Suresh recalled how one teacher was fond of punching students who could not memorise the atomic weight of minerals in the Chemistry class. That reign of terror had scared him. As a teacher himself, he had vowed never to use violence in the classroom.

I recalled the day in grade twelve when a girl we all were in love with, walked out of the room at recess with a spot of red on the back of her dress, and did not return to class that or the following day. I knew it was blood, but how did she get hurt, I muttered to Emanuel sitting next to me. Emanuel shook his head in surprise and gave me an education in female biology. Such innocence, or ignorance, so late in life. Satish recalled a story about Liaquat, a squat fellow with an impish sense of humour. One day, just before morning recess, Liaquat had an erection. He could not do anything about it. As we got up to go outside, he remained seated, helplessly pointing to the bulge in his pants. We laughed uproariously which caught the attention of the teacher. He walked up to Liaquat to inquire what all the fuss was about. Liaquat, remaining seated, complained to him about a stiff foot and a massive headache!

I have few regrets about the kind of education I received in high school, partly because I was able to catch up on the things I had missed out on earlier, devoting my professional life to the study of the history and politics of Fiji. I do feel though for my contemporaries who chose other careers, never having learnt a word about their society and culture, going through life ignorant of the broader historical forces that had shaped their destinies. Labasa Secondary ended our cultural and intellectual isolation. It opened worlds beyond
the village horizon, joined us to the broader sweep of historical
developments, inculcated a commitment to the pursuit of excellence,
and reinforced a firm belief in individual initiative and self-reliance.
These values, acquired so long ago, have shaped my life and work. For
me, as for most of my contemporaries, western education did not
erase our own cultural landscape. At home, we continued to read the
Ramayana and the Hindi newspapers, perform our pujas, observe the
ritual calendar of Hinduism. After nearly twenty years of living away
from Fiji, I still speak, read and write Hindi — have even published a
book in it — enjoy Hindi music and Indian food. Western education
sharpened my consciousness of my particular multicultural identity.

Whenever I reflect on my childhood days, I always think of
Subhash, that short, serious boy by the roadside, waiting for the early
morning school bus. He left an indelible imprint on our youthful
memories. In white uniform, he was an inspiration and an example
we all wanted to follow. One of us, he was pursuing a path that
promised to lead him away from the mentally deadening routine of
village life. He was the first one of our generation from our village to
continue the journey of exploration and discovery begun by our
forebears. After Subhash, there was no going back. The past was past.