From Labasa to Laucala Bay

The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;
The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world...
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.

Alfred Lord Tennyson, 'Ulysses'

Ben flung the Fiji Times across the verandah to me as he got out of the car. That was his daily routine. He would leave for work early in the morning with a roti parcel in his hand and return late in the evening with a rolled-up copy of the national daily. On this day, a wry smile on his face hinted at the news I had been expecting for more than a month, the results of the New Zealand University Entrance Examination. I had not done as well in the exam as I could have, and was therefore not sure if I had passed. My heart racing, I rustled through the paper to the page with the results. So many schools, so many names in such small print, all so confusing: it took me a while to find Labasa Secondary School. And then my name, in black and white. I punched the air with a joyful shout. I looked at my name again — and again — just to check that I was not dreaming.

Then, after the truth had sunk in, I looked at other names on the list. Most of my friends had also passed, but since they were scattered around Labasa, there was no way I could contact them until the following Saturday, a long, restless wait. We met in town at the
bus stand near the marketplace, all puffed up, shaking hands, playfully slapping each other on the shoulder, excited, happy, anxious about what lay ahead, while also feeling deeply for friends who had failed. And girls we knew we would never see again, girls like Gyan, meaning knowledge, a dark exquisitely sculptured beauty from Naqiqi, who, like so many of them, would soon be lost to marriage and maternity.

We had passed, but did we have marks good enough to secure a government scholarship? That was the next question. We headed to the school to meet with our teachers, who we knew would be expecting us. They were all there. We felt proud that we had somehow vindicated their faith in our ability, all their hard work over the years, and they were thrilled that we had got through. Labasa Secondary had, once again, topped the list of passes in the colony. No longer mere students, we saw ourselves, and our teachers saw us, as scholars in the making. Their smiling approval and handshakes made us feel important, special. Some of them, for the first time, spoke to us in Hindi. It was their way of expressing affection and intimacy.

At home, everyone was happy for me, especially my younger brothers who no doubt dreamed of following my path one day. But my future remained uncertain. A pass was good, but I knew that without a government scholarship I would not be able to continue. There was some vague talk of my finding a job — any job — straight away to contribute to the family’s meagre coffers, help my younger siblings still in primary school, and lessen Ben’s financial burden now that he was married and had a family of his own to look after. Father was advised to follow this path by some neighbouring village elders, our ill-wishers, who publicly professed admiration for my achievements but secretly hoped that I would remain marooned in Labasa so that our family would not get too big for its boots, upsetting the village’s long-reigning hierarchy. Both Ben and mother disagreed. I should go on, they said, but only if I managed to get a scholarship. I understood their predicament, but could not bear the thought of spending my life
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as a subaltern in the civil service or the local bank, while all my friends had gone. To my unexpressible relief a few weeks later, I won a government scholarship to go the University of the South Pacific to do a Bachelor of Arts degree in Education, majoring in History and English.

The choice of subjects and a career as a high school teacher caused much amused comment in the village. Why did I need to go to university to become a teacher, people asked, as they recalled names of teachers who had no tertiary qualifications at all? Why had I not chosen something big, like medicine or the law? My marks were not good enough, it was gleefully surmised, which was why I had to settle for History and English, the subjects for true no-hopers. My parents, both unlettered, with absolutely no idea what university education entailed beyond the prospect of a good salary and a white-collar job, were perplexed but said nothing. I assured them that my arts degree would be just a stepping stone to an eventual law career. I was serious about law. Lawyers were important people, they lived in huge, well-furnished houses in town with servants to attend to all their needs, they dressed well with tie and neatly pressed shirt, talked smoothly and knowledgeably about many things, gave long speeches on important public occasions, knew all the people who mattered, and were held in esteem by the village people. I wanted to be like them. The doubters were silenced.

Farewell preparations began as soon as the date of departure was settled. Clothes had to be bought or tailored. An obligatory puja had to be performed a week before I left to seek divine blessing for the next phase of my life. A Ramayana recital was organised and a bhandara, vegetarian feast, given. Then on the eve of my departure, extended family members from various parts of Labasa came home to say goodbye. A goat was slaughtered and the party went on till late at night. Female members of the family teased me about my marriage plans, whether I would bring a memia, a white lady, home, and about girls I was leaving behind whose parents had approached father about me as a future son-in-law. Others asked me to be wary of the wayward
ways of Suva, an unsafe place full of thugs and derelicts and wicked women. It was a night of fun and laughter that I still remember with great fondness, now made more poignant by the passing away of many who had made the night so memorable.

Next morning, a hired 'Jungi' bus took us to the Waiqele airport. It was an emotional farewell of a kind I had not experienced before. I was the first one from our family ever to leave Labasa for Viti Levu, our local overseas. I was going to a place where I knew nobody. Friends and family were genuinely concerned about my loneliness and vulnerability. People put money in my jingling pocket as their farewell gift. Tears flowed as we embraced each other. Mother was mother, her steel grey hair dishevelled in the wind, eyes red and puffed from the previous night's crying, but I had never seen father or Ben cry as they did on that day when I walked toward the tarmac. I did not know it then, but as I mounted the steps of the patch-scarred Heron bound for the Nausori airport, I was embarking on a journey of permanent alienation from the place of my childhood. Perhaps my family better appreciated the significance of my journey than I did.

The plane journey itself was not as dramatic as some people we knew had said it would be. We did not have to be strapped to our seats to preserve the balance of the plane's weight, and prevent it from tipping to one side or another. People could smoke without incinerating the aircraft. There was no problem holding our bladders for the 45-minute flight. Our ears were clogged, but our hearing was not impaired. The pilots made announcements about the estimated time of arrival, and from the aisle we could see them talking and laughing as they toyed with a frightening array of gadgets. And the aircraft sliced through the cotton balls of cloud without shaking and shuddering.

Nausori airport, a curious collection of colonial-era buildings, dark and damp, was not the bustling place I had imagined it to be. The tar-sealed road from the airport to the city, full of smoke-belching cars and buses, was new, as were the miserable lean-to huts in the
gulleys along the road. I saw no cows or horses or cane fields, but I got used to their absence in time. Suva from the bus as it meandered along Edinburgh Drive past Walu Bay was forbidding, its alienness accentuated by the miserable, overcast rainy weather. Too many people, too many tall buildings. The city, especially the area around the market, appeared like a poked beehive. In time, I came to accept that city people were businesslike, less open and welcoming than the folk back home. For the most part, though, Suva remained at the edge of our consciousness. Cooped up on the Laucala campus, with assignments to prepare and tests to sit, a future to think about, we hardly ventured out — often could not afford to — except on the very rare occasion to have a much cherished Chinese meal of egg fried rice at the Peking in Victoria Parade, or the occasional Sunday when we went to the neighbouring water-logged Burkhurst Park to watch local soccer matches.

For many of us, that was the extent of our outings in the early years. When we returned home during the long holidays, people pestered us with questions about life in the city. They were especially curious about people from the other Pacific islands, their mannerisms, the clothes they wore, the way they dressed, the food they ate, how they looked, the languages they spoke. Had we met any cannibals among them? Did they frighten us? We obliged, sometimes with tall tales of our own, about all the drinking we did, the nightclubs we patronised and the wicked women we had been warned about!

From the Fiji Airways office, I took a taxi to the Laucala campus. It was a short ride, but the complex maze of streets with strange names — McGregor Road, Knolley’s Street, Flagstaff — increased my apprehension. Labasa was a one-street town, and that had required some getting used to. The car deposited me at an old, white building where new students were being registered. Peter Beveridge, Dean of Preliminary Students, a plump man with red face, greeted us. His New Zealand accent took some time to understand. Ahead of me in the queue were two Suva girls, Tarun Lata and Champa Narsey.
Fashionably dressed and confident in manner, they were comparing their University Entrance marks. My heart sank when I overheard them saying they had marks in the 90s in Mathematics and Chemistry. Blame my rustic prejudices, if you will, but the idea of girls being academically brighter than boys was alien to me. I was slightly reassured, however, when they moaned of low marks in English, somewhere in the 30s. I knew the hard road that lay ahead.

Being a bright boy from Labasa was one thing; making a success of myself, to stand out here, would be another thing. I went to bed that night full of doubt and genuinely worried about the future.

The University of the South Pacific had been in existence for four years when we enrolled in 1971. It was a remarkable, and a remarkably successful, experiment in regional cooperation whose contribution to the Pacific islands has been outstanding. Historians are fond of talking about turning points in history. In Pacific islands history of the 20th century, there are two such turning points. One was the Second World War, which broke the isolation of the islands by opening up air, sea and modern cable links, increasing the mobility of its people and fostering a gradual consciousness of a new decolonising world on the horizon. After the war, the Pacific would not be the same. The other turning point was the opening of the University of the South Pacific. Before then, only a handful of students from Fiji attended university overseas, mostly on scholarship, to train for high school teaching careers in the sciences and social sciences. USP opened up opportunities for us on an unprecedented scale, especially to bright students from poor families and to girls whose parents would not have countenanced sending their daughters overseas. These graduates filled positions in the expanding bureaucracies of the newly independent island nations, and went on to become presidents and prime ministers, senior diplomats and regional and international civil servants.

The idea of a university had been around Fiji since the mid-1950s. In 1956, the visionary Indo-Fijian leader A.D. Patel had urged
the South Pacific Commission to establish a University College of the South Pacific to prepare a 'wise and competent indigenous leadership, essential for the solution of the problems facing the territories and [for] the general advancement of their own communities'. When his plea fell on deaf ears, he began talks with the Indian Government to start a senior college in Fiji to prepare students for universities in the United Kingdom, and a rudimentary start was made with a University Tutorial College in Tailevu in the early 1960s. Patel was persistent, continuing his push for a local university. A local university would produce local graduates who would be 'looking for local employment and fulfil local needs,' he argued. 'Our problem is that many students go abroad, receive higher education, receive qualifications and then settle down outside of Fiji because they get more remunerative employment.'

By the mid-1960s, a consensus developed for a local university. Sir Charles Morris led a Higher Education Mission in 1965 and his report laid the foundations of the new institution. The University of the South Pacific started in 1968 at the site of the Royal New Zealand Air Force base at Laucala Bay. The two hundred or so buildings at the 192-acre campus were converted into residential blocks, laboratories and classrooms. The massive hangar at the lower campus served for many years as the venue for graduation ceremonies and other public performances hosted by the university, the most memorable being the 1971 graduation ceremony when the massive, profusely perspiring King of Tonga had to be cooled by air pushed through an ice cooler. The wooden structures, now replaced by modern, technologically sophisticated buildings, served as lecture halls for the first decade. The present site, filled with landscaped gardens, road humps, a distinctive Pacific-style architecture, will be unrecognisable to students of my time for whom the campus was full of white weatherboard buildings with peeling paint, few trees, rough green gullies and close-cropped lawns.

Several early decisions shaped the future direction of the university. The first was the emphasis on its regional character, involving the English-speaking, former British, Australian and New Zealand
territories in the South Pacific. It was an important decision of far-reaching effect. For us, the new students, its most immediate, and at first quite terrifying, manifestation was the residential policy in the accommodation blocks. Each room in the barrack-like cement structures was divided by a curtain into four cubicles, each with its own wardrobe, chair, table and bed. The communal toilet and washing facilities were located at the end of the block. Each cubicle housed a student from a different ethnic and regional group. My companions were Edward Masika from the Solomon Islands, Sefarana Fatiaki from Rotuma, and Filip Koloi from Tonga.

We were all very awkward at first, complete strangers, completely unfamiliar with each other's habits. But fear and apprehension disappeared with time. As we got to know each other, we spent many a late night, doped with grog or, especially during weekends, with surreptitiously acquired beer from 'Faty's' across the road. We talked freely about ourselves, where we came from, what we wanted to do. We were all different in our own ways. Filip was the mysterious one, very bright but slightly sullen, hiding his perennially puffed, sleep-deprived eyes behind dark glasses. After the first year, he went to New Zealand to do engineering. I heard a few years ago that he had died. Sef left for Auckland to do accountancy, and Eddie completed his degree to return to the Solomon Islands to work for the radio station there. He is now working on his own.

By the end of the first year, we had become good friends, our friendship cemented by the shared innocence of being first year students. This was an important, broadening experience for me. It was the realisation of how much we had in common as human beings, despite all the differences of cultural background and historical experience, that has remained with me. As we left university after the first preparatory year, we wrote each other little notes. I have kept mine. Eddie remembered my 'dramatic logical reasonings' — without doubt very late at night after several beers had been drunk. 'The magic formula "To foresee is to Rule" is the one you have grasped,'
he wrote, 'and I wish you luck that it will germinate within you as you grow to maturity in this harsh world of ours.' Sef remembered me as a 'boozing partner and a keen supporter of the invincible Vanua Levu team'. 'The magic formula "Procrastination is the thief of time" has certainly taken root in your mind and thus you are very dedicated to your studies and to this extent the path to future academic success has truly been laid in this academic year of preparation.'

Filip wrote: 'Life is just like a flower. Early morning, it grows to form a bud and shines. Sunrise, it swings and delights. Afternoon comes, it is shrivelled and cries. Early evening... the young flower dies. A mermaid would have to lay and rise but the young flower would wait for the dawn to pass — virgin??' I still don't know what he meant, but was impressed by his poetic skills at the time. Morris Samuela, my next-door neighbour, a chubby, funny fellow with jelly-like stomach, always dressed in a wrap-around floral cloth, often shirtless, who wrote his address as 'Valley of Love, Raro', penned an intriguing farewell. Regretting that the 'paper is white, but you're a guy,' he wrote, 'I wish I was a golden apple, Hanging on your tree, And every time when you pass my room, I always think that you're the guy.' This, too, must have been written on a very late beer-soaked Saturday night! Joe Hewson, from Bua, remembered me as a 'person of extremes', one who 'at one extreme is very hard working, industrious and capable in terms of your school work, while at the other extreme, a very sociable character who is able to adapt and take part in any "mischief" that arises; especially when you, your room mates and I used to gossip over those cups of world-wide famous drink (HB: Home Brew) and then go crazy.' Meeting Sef, Eddie, Filip, Morris and Joe was certainly an important, culturally enriching part of the education at USP.

There were other boys from other parts of Fiji whom I got to know gradually. At first we were all self-conscious, assessing each other quietly. The Indo-Fijian boys from Ba, that big, boisterous province with an unbeatable soccer team, were a confident lot, cocky even, who stuck together in the early days, aloof from us. Being from Ba was
their badge of pride. To be from Labasa, for them, was to be someone who was earnest if a bit simple, socially unsophisticated. I found it easier to make friends with boys from Sigatoka and Nadi, rural sugar districts similar to our own. But distinctions of place and status did not last long as we plunged in to our studies. I recall fondly the wicked habit we continued from high school of nicknaming people. A boy with a toothbrush moustache we called ‘Hitler’. Another was named ‘Politics’ for his enthusiastic interest in contemporary affairs. One Indian boy we simply called ‘George’, and another ‘Proper’ because whenever we asked how things were, he always replied, ‘Sab proper hai’. Everything is alright. Those names come up whenever we meet, puzzling children and wives unaware of our past antics.

Strangely enough, we did not get to know the Fijian students as well as we should or might have. There was always an edge to our relationship, perhaps sharpened by the racially divided nature of our national politics. We assumed they supported the Alliance party, and they undoubtedly regarded us as Federation supporters. We thought in terms of stereotypes. Fijian students had won government scholarships with fewer marks than us, which rankled especially when we thought of our friends whom we had left behind. I suspect our total commitment to study, to achieving good grades and getting ahead, reinforced in their minds the stereotypes about hard-working Indians. Perhaps they were negotiating their own ways around their own internal social and cultural boundaries. There were some who managed to project a cross-cultural appeal, people like Jone Dakuvula, but they were few. And, to our great shame, we derided Indo-Fijian students such as Robin Singh who wore the sulu, spoke Fijian and preferred Fijian over Indian food, as social misfits not worthy of our affection and company. In retrospect, not getting to know Fijian students better, understanding their fears and hopes, I count as a sad missed opportunity.

We all belonged to the Student Association which organised concerts and dances and film evenings that introduced us village boys
to things western for the first time. Clubs for runners, chess players, cross-country hikers, field enthusiasts and biologists attracted students from all ethnic groups. We climbed Mount Korobaba and Joske's Thumb across the bay from Suva, went on a week-long trip to the historic islands of Bau and Ovalau (which, if truth be told, is where I met my future wife!). Hockey, cricket, rugby, badminton, table tennis, basketball, softball, lawn tennis, karate, pool and judo introduced us to new sports and new people, though most of the time I watched people play from the sidelines. The student newspaper, *Unispac*, provided a creative outlet for poems, short stories and the occasional, obligatory, diatribe against the university administration. I was its editor for a year. Occasionally, we participated in strikes about improving the quality of food or demanding greater accountability from the university administration about student matters. I am not sure we fully understood the issues, but it felt good and fashionable to rise up against the establishment.

We campaigned and voted for student leaders not of our own ethnic group: Paula Kunabuli, Setoki Cainituraga, Maika Toga, Robert Papa, Tip Sun Loo, Edward Kingmele, Joseph Hansell, Oberia Menke. They campaigned on the basis of a platform, a vision, a program, all neatly scrawled on a piece of paper slipped underneath our dormitory door at night, pledging to improve the quality of food in the dining hall, the laundry service, sports facilities, study rooms for day scholars. Important things like that. The fact that Setoki, an indigenous Fijian, could be elected president of the student association, when the majority of the students were Indo-Fijian, made a deep impression on me, my first exposure to non-racial politics. And this despite the fact that socially we kept away from the Fijians.

I also learned that, the ideology of a united sisterhood notwithstanding, women did not necessarily vote for women. Padma Narsey stood for vice-president. Most boys voted for her, and most women for the winning candidate, Vijay Naidu. We could be persuaded to rally behind a candidate who came from our part of the
attachment to place was important. Somehow, we Vanua Levu boys, Fijian and Indo-Fijian, stuck together on public occasions, supporting each other in social events and rugby and soccer matches, united by a lingering suspicion that boys and girls from Viti Levu thought us a rung or two below them in social sophistication, mocking our speech, our dress, our clumsiness with knife and fork at the dining table.

Still, for the most part, we moved within our own social and cultural orbit. Shared interests in music and food and faith, or common historical experience and cultural expectations, kept us together, strengthened the bonds of friendship. It was the same with everyone else. Perhaps the group with whom we found most in common was the Solomon Islanders. They played soccer as we did. And they were such a spontaneous lot, unconscious of hierarchy and rigid cultural protocol, independent-minded free thinkers. Samoans and Tongans appeared to us to be more reserved, more conscious of their status and place among us. After all, they came from deeply stratified, ranked societies about which we understood very little, and still don't. They also had perhaps an exaggerated reputation for heavy drinking during weekends and for fierce brawls that left the pavements littered with broken glass and dried blood. Students from Kiribati and Tuvalu, few in number, were friendly in a distant sort of a way, but I remember them, especially the frequently shirtless Tebororo Tito, later president of Kiribati, as great players of lawn tennis.

The dining hall, a huge rambling building in the centre of the campus, was also a novel experience. Rain or shine, we had to turn up for food at specified hours or miss our meals altogether. To have jam and buttered toast with scrambled eggs and bacon for breakfast was heavenly for kids from farms where the normal, boring, fare was roti and vegetable curry all year round. The kitchen was divided into two sections: Indian and islander. The Indian section consisted of roti, rice, meat and vegetable curry and dhal, while the island corner offered boiled root crops, beef, pork, tapioca. For the first few years,
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prisoners of our cultural and culinary habits, we kept to our respective streams, eating with our own group, but things changed gradually as we developed a taste for chop suey or sweet and sour dishes. In the last year, I regularly signed up for fish and lolo and lovo food served on the island counter. And non-Indians increasingly began to take the opportunity to sample curry and roti. Years later, I meet island students who still talk fondly about Indian food. When visiting Suva, they eat nothing else.

Within our group, girls stuck together, and we boys rarely shared a meal with them, even boys who had steady relationships. Most, however, carefully camouflaged their romantic interests until the relationship was secure enough for public display. Before then, the meetings were confined to weekends, after-library hours, under trees in the evenings, in the darkened corners of wooden buildings. Once formed, the relationships were expected to last for life. For all practical purposes, they lived as a married couple, without the knowledge of their parents, of course. Often things worked out, and many of those early love birds are still together. But there were occasions when relationships faltered because boys demanded the patriarchal privileges of having all their domestic chores taken care of — clothes washed and ironed, food cooked on weekends. When girls refused, for whatever reason, they were dumped immediately and sometimes beaten up. The tragedy was that no Indian boy hence would touch them because they were seen as ‘damaged’ goods, an already exploded firecracker — _phuta pataka _— as we used to say, displaying all the male prejudices we had acquired in the village. We envied the freedom with which island boys and girls mixed socially on the dance floor or in musicals and could form new relationships unencumbered by their past and without being ostracised.

Along with the dining hall, the university library, then located in the former RNZAF Officers’ Mess, now the site of the Institute of Pacific Studies, was another institution around which our lives revolved. It was popular for many reasons. Boys and girls falling in
love, or trying to, could spend a few precious hours together away from the public gaze, complete assignments, exchange notes. I, too, had my secret romantic interests and aspirations. It was in the library that I got to know my future wife! It was my good fortune that, like me, Padma, too, was a driven student. Padma was an important reason I spent most of my waking hours in the library.

But there was a deep intellectual attraction as well. The idea of a building full of books, on virtually every topic under the sun, was heavenly for someone from my reading-deprived background. For the first time, I could lose myself completely in books for hours on end, without guilt, undistracted, absorbed. That habit caused disapproving, dismissive comments about me being a ‘bookworm’, an ‘academic’, uninterested in the wider university scene. Some actually pitied me. If only they knew of the goings-on in our block, or talked to Sef or Eddie or Filip! I was simply indulging a passion I had acquired in high school. I read deeply around the subjects of my assignments, delved into encyclopaedias and reference works and historical and anthropological texts on Fiji.

Then there was reading for sheer pleasure: novels, poetry, mostly by Indian, Caribbean and African writers, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, V.S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, Alan Paton. Fortunately, it is a habit that has persisted, the pleasure increasing with the passage of time. I also remember reading magazines and newspapers from other regions. One that caught my attention was Tapia, a journal of creative expression and political commentary from the West Indies. Brinsley Samaroo, whom I met years later, was one of its regular contributors, writing about the struggle for political and social equality of the Indian community there. Those articles ignited my interest in our distant Indian cousins in the diaspora. But what struck me at the time, perhaps more than anything else, was the sight of familiar names, though written in a form that made them appear idiosyncratic — Samaroo, Ramharaksingh, Sahadeo, Mahabir — in print, writing fluently, with power and persuasion about culture, politics
and society, while I was still learning the alphabets of elementary composition. I wondered whether I would ever be able to follow their example.

At the university, some of our own fellow students — Raymond Pillay, Sashi Kant Nair, Anirudh Singh, Dhurup Chand — were writing poems and short stories with local themes which appeared in *Unispac*. Raymond was my favourite; he was everyone's favourite. His stories, such as 'Muni Deo Devil' and 'Brief Skirmish', were about romantic longings, hapless teachers and the frustrated search for marriage partners. They rang so true. We understood the names of the characters: Moti, Parvati, Bangaru Naidu, Brij Mohan. They could have been from our own village, even been our own relatives and friends. And his language was so precise and evocative. 'Black as a *baigan* [eggplant] required no interpretation to us village kids. Parmesh Chand used Hindi words which caused great amusement amongst us because we were unused to seeing our rough language in print. 'Bahut thanda lage ka yaar?' You feeling very cold or what? 'Bahut jor.' Very much. These writers alerted us to the creative possibilities of places and emotions we had not contemplated before. In her carefully crafted and entirely plausible short stories, Vanessa Griffen introduced us to the world of Fijians and Part-Europeans. Her word pictures were perfect: 'This Fijian woman, any Fijian woman, was a common sight on the sea wall, sitting crouched, with faded cotton skirt billowing in the wind, or standing tall against the sky. Beside her, in a basket plaited out of green coconut leaf, she kept her bait.' It could be Suva Point or Stinson's Parade or anywhere around the Suva harbour. And then there was Dhurup Chand, a diminutive boy from Lautoka, a dreamer at heart, troubled by unrequited love, whose haunting poems about love and loss left us with tears:

Sometimes I hear the wind talking.
Only a few lonely dreamers are seen
Out where they are walking
Amid the red and blue and green
The wind tells me things that happened
A long, lonely time ago.
About those people who lived and loved,
Whose names I do not know.

No more than 17 or 18 years old, Dhurup was studying science.

The university routine required readjustment. A few lectures and tutorials during the day left a lot of free time. At first, managing time was a problem because of so many distractions. Many students lost their way, content just to pass their courses. But for the more intellectually curious and ambitious, lectures were merely the starting point for further enquiry. It was so for me. I often sat through the lectures as a matter of habit, to have my presence in class registered. Attendance was mandatory. Real learning took place through individual reading, often beyond the prescribed texts, and in tutorials. Our interest also depended on the lecturers we had. They were all different in their own ways. Walter Johnson, the great American historian who taught us for a semester, paced the classroom, his white, shoulder-length hair neatly combed back, speaking without notes but with eloquent authority about recent events in American history. He knew or had met the characters he talked about: Adlai Stevenson, Senator William Fulbright, Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago. He talked about the Watergate affair with deep conviction and passion. Walter was a scholar in action, committed, engaged, inspiring. Ron Crocombe, Professor of Pacific Studies, was lean, restless, vital, passionate, a live wire. He, too, talked about people and places with intimate, anecdotally rich knowledge. Less intellectually disciplined, he wandered widely in his lectures. A lecture on prehistory could often end up with ruminations on contemporary developments. Ron had little time for disciplinary boundaries. History, for him, was a tool to understand the present and improve the future.

June Cook, a lecturer in history, was completely different in her approach. A chain-smoking, chubby English lady, she had come
to USP after a period at the United Nations. Fluent in French and Japanese, she taught us European and world history. She used to arrive for her lectures dead on time, place her carefully handwritten lecture notes on the lectern and read them word for word, one perfectly balanced sentence after another, never taking her eyes of the text. Her style took some getting used to, but once we got accustomed to it, her lectures were mesmerising. There was no concession to our background or to our facility with the English language. She might as well have been talking to American and English students. There was something encouraging, even inspiring, about that.

June took a personal interest in me, convinced that I had a flair for history. She would invite me to her flat, pour a stiff scotch for both of us and talk about history. She introduced me to the books of great English historians such as G.M. Trevelyan and A.J.P. Taylor and Christopher Hill, to the writings of the Indian diplomat-historian K.M. Pannikar and to the Cambridge historian of India, Percival Spear. She would assign me readings outside class and discuss them, one on one, after hours and during weekends. She wanted me to leave the Pacific and study European or Asian history. The Pacific was too small for me, she felt, and I was destined for bigger things. She often took me along to plays at the Fiji Arts Club and once or twice to art movies at Phoenix Mini in Suva. It was her way of broadening my cultural experience. Such interest, such concern was as touching as her belief in my ability in history was daunting. It is teachers like June who make a profound difference to one’s life. And they are so rare.

By the early 1970s, a handful of locals had joined the staff. Ahmed Ali, in history, was one of them. Over the years, I have had profound political and intellectual differences with him. But as a teacher of undergraduates, Ahmed was different. He was passionately anti-colonial and even anti-British. His course on the colonial Pacific, with Fiji as the centrepiece, provided a perspective we had not encountered. The colonial establishment came in for a scathing attack, and the British bore the brunt of his anger for their policies,
which had kept the Fijians and the Indo-Fijians apart. The British had made 'no effort to bring the two races together by the third party which posed as the guardian of both. Separation and isolation rather than integration was the aim.' 'It is crucial to recognise,' he continued, 'that colonialism was organised racism. It exalted the European purely on the basis of race. In the natural order of the colonial environment the Europeans, their gods and values, sat on a pedestal while others squatted on the floor.' Arresting imagery to our impressionable minds but the blame game was inadequate, I thought even then, as a framework of analysis and understanding of Fiji's complex history. He introduced us to Franz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, and encouraged us to do original research in newspapers and at the archives. And he once loaned me a copy of his doctoral dissertation on the history of constitution making in Fiji. I had had history teachers before, but here was Ahmed, one of us, actually *writing* history, our own history. Those neatly typed words on crisp white paper, bound together in a thick tome, made a huge impression on me. For the first time, I thought of one day *writing* history myself.

Besides teaching and writing history, Ahmed was also active in national politics. He had been secretary of the ruling Alliance Party before embarking on an academic career, and he continued to write and speak on political matters. That combination of scholarship and active engagement, too, has remained with me. In the early 1980s, Ahmed entered Parliament and became the Alliance government's controversial Minister for Education. He blazed a trail that others followed, including Satendra Nandan, Tupeni Baba, Meli Waqa, Ganesh Chand, Isimeli Cokanasiga, Wadan Narsey, Esira Rabuno, Jo Nacola. This list does not include others who were politically active in a variety of other ways, as advisers, speech writers and campaigners. The campus was alive with suitably concerned political talk, with a few invited presentations by prominent political leaders and occasional protests about this and that. *Unispac* also carried a few articles on Fiji politics. I particularly remember a piece by Imam Ali,
from Labasa, on the Fiji Senate which he labelled ‘a piece of sublime mysticism and nonsense’, ‘an artificial political machinery’, ‘sheer waste of time and money’ and ‘irrelevant at the same time’. Brave words in the context of the times when our national leaders were especially sensitive about criticism.

There was more serious discussion as well. A few students and some left-leaning Australian expatriates living in Suva, and tangentially associated with the university, produced a booklet titled Fiji: A Developing Australian Colony, which highlighted the dominance of Australian economic interests and institutions in the Fijian economy and indirectly implicated the Fijian Government in the dependent relationship. It predictably attracted wide publicity and a hostile reaction from expected quarters. The publication was mentioned in the Fiji Senate. In 1973, the university organised a large seminar on the nature and meaning of development for the newly decolonising region, and attended by distinguished academics (Raymond Firth being one), national planners, academics, lawyers, aspiring leaders, student activists. ‘What kind of life do we want for ourselves?’ asked Amelia Rokotuivuna, the perennial Fijian free-thinker and activist. Jone Dakuvula pleaded for ‘freedom to examine and criticise’, in Pacific societies marked by rigid rank and hierarchy. After all these years, Jone is still at it. Karam Ramrakha, the intellectually restless member of the National Federation Party, reminded us that ‘being dependent or dominated is very much a state of mind’, and asked us, the younger generation, to ‘free ourselves from a servile mentality’.

We felt that, by raising these questions, we could make a difference to the ongoing discourse of nation building. People would listen to us. We were so naively optimistic about humanising the development process, developing a social conscience, persuading national leaders to set aside their vested political interests in the cause of the greater good. Emerging Pacific leaders among us — Barak Sope of Vanuatu, the self-styled future Fidel Castro of the Pacific, clad in
Maoist garb complete with the cap, comes readily to mind — espoused appealing rhetoric about class struggle and people's welfare. The 'Pacific Way' of doing things was both eminently desirable as well as within reach, if only we would try. We, the young educated elite, imbued with the right values and a crusading zeal to set things right, could actually make history in our own lifetime. History had a role to play, a therapeutic role 'in promoting the rehabilitation of the Pacific peoples because it restores their confidence and self-respect, and enables them to take their place in a new changing world,' wrote Sister Mary Stella, Raymond Pillay and Asesela Ravuvu, our seniors. It would promote national unity and integrity. The future, we felt, was within our grasp. Such youthful idealism, sadly so short-lived.

In our classes we confronted texts that brought our own historical experiences and the dilemmas of development closer to home. Adrian Mayer's *Peasants of the Pacific*, about rural Indo-Fijian society, interpreted our own heritage for us, and the struggles of an immigrant community coming to terms with the social and cultural realities in a new homeland. Ken Gillion's *Fiji's Indian Migrants* provided a glimpse of the original Indian indentured migrants and their journeys and travails on the plantations. It was history close to home, as we read the names of places and events and festivals and rituals which our grandparents used to talk about. I had heard Aja use the word *jahajibhai*, the brotherhood of the crossing, and how important it was to him, but to read those words — and others such as *kala pani*, dark waters, *kulambar*, plantation overseers, *girmit*, indenture — in a book was a thrilling experience. As it turned out, Ken was later to become my thesis supervisor, glad, he said, that one of us, descendants of the *girmityas*, was writing our own history.

The geographers and anthropologists tackled the problems of development in a multi-ethnic society. Ray Watters' *Koro* dissected the distress, anxiety and bewilderment of the Fijian people facing the realities of the modern world, and the troubling conclusion that the 'stability and coherence of their social system will no longer persist in
the face of disintegrating tendencies'. Cyril Belshaw wrote similarly about the ‘storms of economic and political insecurity’ facing the Fijian people. The old shelter of the traditional bure was no longer viable. ‘The people have cradled new children and generated new enterprises, but they have no other shelter, and the products of their inventive still perish as they lean against the shaky posts, and the rains come through. They want to plant more useful trees than the ivi, and to build a shelter of more modern, less confining, design.’ Such accurate analysis in so evocative a prose, so relevant today, nearly half a century later. The makers of our nation heard these voices, but did not act. They did listen, though, to E.K. Fisk’s views about ‘three Fijis’, racially compartmentalised, and his narrow, race-based prescription for economic development.

Such engagement with real issues of change and development in our own country and in the region came naturally to us because the University of the South Pacific was required by its founding mission to train manpower to meet the anticipated needs of the rapidly decolonising region. Its charter provided that the ‘objects of the University shall be the maintenance, advancement and dissemination of knowledge by teaching consultancy and research and otherwise and the provision of appropriate levels of education and training responsive to the well-being and needs of the communities of the South Pacific’. For that purpose, the university adopted the structure of broad developmental schools rather than the conventional departmental or faculty structure. The three founding schools were the Schools of Natural Resources, Education, and Social and Economic Development.

The philosophy of social science teaching was essentially pragmatic and utilitarian, to prepare students for careers in the region’s public service as economists, sociologists, administrators, school teachers, to give them some understanding of the social and economic characteristics of the South Pacific region. Political awareness of the students was a part of the academic mission, to make them ‘more effective, balanced and understanding participants in what will inevitably
be the quickening pace of political development in the countries of the region'. Broad cultural development of the individual was recognised, along with the need for some specific disciplinary training 'to a level that would be acceptable for graduate courses elsewhere'. But these objectives were secondary, and graduate training intended for a select few. The emphasis on content, as opposed to the process of learning, was understandable in the context, but it also deprived us of a deeper introduction, a theoretical probing, of the disciplines we were studying. We 'did' history, acquired the relevant information and learnt the facts, but knew virtually nothing about the discipline's philosophy or methodology, the foundations of historiography. That kind of knowledge, so necessary at the postgraduate level, indeed taken for granted, had to be acquired privately, painfully, in a haphazard way. And gaps remain.

Public engagement with the important issues of the day was exciting and interesting and important, no doubt; but sometimes it took over to the point where scholarship became a diversion. It is a tension found in the universities of most developing countries in Africa and the Caribbean. It is hard to remain a neutral, detached observer of your own society caught in the ferment of change. There is an obligation and a responsibility to speak up, to show your hand when it matters. I understand that. Had I remained in Fiji, I have no doubt that I, too, would be a part-time academic dabbling full-time in politics. Yet, a certain regret gnaws at the heart about the missed opportunities to produce enduring, fundamental scholarship which the university was so centrally situated to produce, making it the premier centre of Pacific learning. And now, with the uncertainties and anxieties spawned by the coups and the exodus of staff and the best graduate students, the gap widens.

All this is a repudiation of the promise the university represented when it first started. There was a genuine commitment to excellence then, to seeing the experiment of higher learning succeed, just as there was a commitment among Fiji's leaders to seeing the fledgling
experiment of a newly independent multiracial democracy succeed. We had something to ‘prove’, that we could be just as good as our counterparts elsewhere. Periodic reviews and assessments by internationally distinguished academics lauded our performance. We, both the staff and the students, felt proud. But once our standards were vindicated, we slipped, became complacent, generally indifferent to outside perceptions, arrogant about our accomplishments. And the Fijian turmoil has traumatised the spirit that informed our idealism and our unbounded youthful optimism about the possibility of unlimited progressive change. So much potential, so little of it realised. The commitment has gone, at least for now. Erstwhile colleagues now ask me about jobs overseas. In many cases their families have already gone.

The University of the South Pacific was where I began my intellectual journey. For that reason, a certain deep and intense nostalgia about the place remains. I want my alma mater to flourish, to be the shining light on the hill. I want its students to take their rightful place in the international community of scholars. That is my private dream. But the overwhelming emotion is one of loss and betrayal of promise, sharpened by the passage of time and my own experience of other places. The absence of those who were there at the beginning of my hopeful journey 30 years ago magnifies those missed opportunities.