

The Other Side of Midnight

To travel hopefully is better than to arrive.

R.L. Stevenson

14 May 1998. The date marks the 117th anniversary of the arrival of Indian indentured labourers in Fiji as well as the 11th anniversary of the coups there to depose a month-old government in which the Indo-Fijian community, for the first time, had more than token representation. But my thoughts are elsewhere as my American Airlines jet cruises high above the Atlantic. I am on my way to the Caribbean, to Trinidad, Guyana and Suriname, on a journey of diasporic exploration.

The Caribbean lies at the other end of the world. I am embarrassed, as I look at the maps in the in-flight magazine, at my ignorance about this part of the world. I have heard of Caracas, but Curacao? Antigua, yes, but Anguilla? Our ignorance is mutual. People in the Caribbean have heard of Fiji but don't know its location. Is it near Guam, someone asks. No. Then Mauritius, perhaps, or Java or the Andaman Islands? Tahiti is the best they can do. Ms Boodhea, a young desk attendant at the Park Hotel in Georgetown, is staggered to know the distance I have travelled to be in her part of the world. She herself is dreaming of leaving one day. 'But you are on the other side of midnight,' she says, amazed.

Our ignorance underlines the enormous geographical spread of the Indian indentured diaspora. It is remarkable, when you come to think of it, that so many immigrant sailing ships, loaded with human cargo and aided only by primitive navigational technology, travelled such great distances through so many islands and so much uncharted water and found their precise destination with such little casualty.

Among the million *girmitiyas* who crossed the *kala pani* was my own indentured grandfather. He was in fact recruited for Demerara, but when he reached the depot, he found his ship full. The next available vessel took him to Fiji. A century later, I am undertaking a journey my *girmitiya* grandfather was drafted to make.

Trinidad is my first stop. It is a hot, feisty little island with an attitude, riding the boom of oil-fuelled prosperity. About 2000 square miles in size, it is crowded with over one million people, 40 per cent black and Indian each. It is easily the most prosperous of the Caribbean islands.

The contrast with Guyana is stark. After years of massive misrule, the country's infrastructure is in tatters, its economy is floundering, its people deeply divided and drifting. Guyana is a big country of 83,000 square miles, but with a population of only 700,000, living mostly in a thin strip along the Atlantic coast. Like Trinidad, Guyana is bi-racial, and locked in a deadly game of ethnic rivalry.

Suriname lies across the Coryntine river from Guyana. Once a Dutch colony, its population is about a third each black and Indian, and the rest made up of Javanese, Creole and Ameri-Indians. Although Suriname shares with Trinidad and Guyana the history of Indian settlement, its soul is Dutch. The Netherlands is its spiritual home. The game of cricket, the passion of the British Caribbean, has no meaning here. Suriname, like Guyana, is flat along the coast, and criss-crossed with canals, now stagnant, neglected and overgrown. The Dutch imprint is clearly visible. Its weather, like much of the Caribbean, is clammy. The low-lying clouds are ever pregnant with rain. The countryside is lush green.

Each place has its own cultural peculiarity, but it is the similarities that startle me. In Guyana I was taken to meet the chairman of a local municipality. It was around midday Sunday, but he had already gone through a bottle of cheap rum. The Caribbean generally is a place of hard-drinking men. He shook my hand, looked at me quizzically, assessing, and said, 'You are a coolie-maan from Fiji?' The words took me by surprise at first, but I knew what he meant. It was a term of recognition, a reference to our shared history of indentured servitude. I was one of them. I was welcome.

There is something distinctive about us diasporic Indians that binds us together: our essential egalitarianism, our openness and adaptability, our zest for living here and now, our impatience with ritual, protocol and hierarchy. And our complex, problematic relationship with India. We do not regard ourselves as the children of a lesser god, banished into exile for some misdeed in previous life. We are not '*naqli*', fake, Indians. We rejoice in the myriad influences that define our identity. Our shared prejudices cement friendships.

Everywhere, I am reminded of the contribution Indian people have made to the economic and social development of the countries where they live: in agriculture, commerce, the professions. People recite the story of success proudly, and with good reason. The statistical evidence of achievement is impressive. And the point is often made to underline the under-achievement of other communities, their dependent mentality. Yet Indians in all three Caribbean countries have a deep sense of ambivalence and alienation. Even after a century many do not feel fully accepted as part of the region. The situation varies from country to country, but it is a difference of degree, not of substance. The most obvious marker of uncertainty is the emigration of large numbers of Indians to North America and Europe. In Guyana and Suriname, most Indians would leave if that were possible, I was told. The same in Fiji. People talk about commitment and belonging. A T-shirt proclaims: 'I live in another country but I am 100% Guyanese.' But it is tourist talk. The reality is different. As in Fiji, the wealthy and

the well-connected are living well, their children and financial investment safely away somewhere else.

Indian intellectuals are contesting the long-held view of Caribbean identity being essentially black, especially in Guyana and Trinidad. The defiant expression of Indian cultural and religious identity at the popular level is also striking. Temples and mosques dot the landscape. Some places have been re-named: Benares, Faizabad. Hindu homes fly multiple *jhandis* to proclaim their religious identity. Indian food is the fast food of the Caribbean, at least in these three places: bus-up shut (roti) and double (deep-fried roti stuffed with vegetables), aloo paratha, dhalpuri, delicious curries, popular among both Indians and blacks. The most popular restaurant in Paramaribo is Roopram's Roti Shop.

A hundred years of isolation from India have resulted in many changes. In Trinidad and Guyana, and to a lesser extent in Suriname, Hindustani or Bhojpuri has been lost, and there is deep regret about this. We miss Hindi bad-bad, a man says to me in Trinidad. He is culturally stranded, helpless. He sings melodious Hindi songs well. He has mastered the rhythm but does not understand the words he is singing. They are mostly sad, sentimental songs of love and loss. Rafi, Hemant Kumar, Mukesh. He is genuinely moved when I explain the meaning to him. So am I, at our shared diasporic loss.

In all three places, the ideology of cultural assimilation, of the melting pot, is being rejected in favour of cultural retention and pluralism. Religious texts are translated into English or Dutch, and recited. *Pujas* are done regularly. Hindu and Muslim festivals are celebrated. Indian music and Hindi films form a part of the Indo-Caribbean culture. There are inner tensions and conflicts among the different groups, between Arya Samajis and Sanatanis, and between Sunnis and Shias, but these are muted. The shared sense of deprivation and neglect during a long period of black rule has produced a degree of cultural and ethnic solidarity.

Indo-Caribbean people are returning to their primordial roots, a scholar tells me in Trinidad. I meet several people who are using the documents of indenture to trace their Indian roots. Creative writing is flourishing here as in few other Indian diasporas. Poems, novels and short stories deal with the violence and chaos of the post-indenture period. The drunken violence against women and women's central nurturing role in society, depicted in the literature, is especially striking. Understandably, much of this imaginative reconstruction, mostly by expatriate Indo-Caribbeans, is tinged with romance and full of anger at the outside world. Still the emotional and intellectual engagement with the past is impressive.

My month in the Caribbean is over quickly. It is an exhilarating, learning, enriching experience. I have struck friendships that will endure. I have memories of people, of places, sights and sounds, that will remain with me. I remind myself, as I travel in the region, that had the ship not been full, my grandfather would have gone to Demerara. And I wonder where I would have been. Perhaps somewhere in that part of the world, on the other side of midnight.