A Gap in the Hedge

We go back a long way, you and I,
through a gap in the hedge, across a field,
through a gate we forgot to close...

Hugo Williams

Ram, my best friend, is unwell. High blood pressure, failing kidneys and rampant diabetes, have all taken their toll on his health. ‘Not long to go, Bhai,’ he said to me the other day, managing a characteristically resigned smile. He is living by himself, alone, in a one bedroom rented apartment in Bureta Street, a working class suburb of Suva. I visit him most evenings, have a bowl of grog, and talk long into the night about the old days. Both he and I know that the end is near, which makes each visit all the more poignant. As Ram often says, repeating the lines of Surendra’s immortal fifties’ song, *Hum bhor ke diye hain, bhujte hi ja rahe hain*, we are the dawn’s candle, slowly going out (one by one).

Ram and I go back a long way. We were fellow students at Labasa Secondary in the late sixties. He was easily the best...
history and literature student in the school. He knew earlier than anyone of us what *Lord of the Flies* and *Lord Jim* were about, the two books we were studying for the exams. I often sought his assistance with my English assignments, and helped him with geography, at which he was curiously hopeless. I still have in my library the final year autograph book in which he had written these lines: *When they hear not thy call, but cower mutely against the wall, O man of evil luck, walk alone. 'Ekla Chalo,'* in Mahatma Gandhi's famous words, "Walk Alone".

We both went to university on scholarship to prepare for high school teaching in English and History. I went on to an academic life while Ram, by far the brighter, was content to become and remain a high school teacher. One day we talked about Malti. 'I wonder where she is now,' I asked. 'Married and migrated,' Ram said. 'No contact?' 'No. There was no point. It was all too late.' Ram and Malti were an 'item' at school. Their developing love for each other was a secret we guarded zealously. We knew that if they were caught, they would be expelled, just like that, no compassion, and no mercy. Labasa Secondary was not for romantics. It was a factory which prepared students for useful careers, its self esteem measured by the number of A graders it had in the external exams and where it ranked in the colonial educational hierarchy with other notable secondary schools: Marist Brothers, Suva Grammar and Natabua High.

Malti failed her university entrance exam, and her cane growing parents were too poor to support her at university. Jobs in Labasa were few, so Malti stayed at home. Ram was distraught, but there was little he could do but go to university. At the end of the first year, he received a sad letter from Malti telling him that she was getting married to an accountant at Morris Hedstrom. After all these years, Ram still had the
letter, quoting lines he had once recited to her. You will always be my light from heaven, a spark from an immortal fire. ‘Byron, did you know?’ I didn’t. ‘You are the poet, man. I am a mere garden variety academic.’ Then Ram recited Wordsworth’s Lucy poem: A violet on a mossy bank, Half hidden from the eye. Such aching pain, endured through the years.

After completing university, Ram married Geeta. Both were teaching at Laucala Bay Secondary. Geeta came from a well known Suva merchant family. She married Ram not out of love but convenience, I always thought, after her long love affair with a fellow teacher had come to an abrupt end. Ram was a good catch, a university graduate, well spoken, handsome, employed, and well regarded. Geeta was stylish, opinionated and ambitious. But Ram was in no hurry to get anywhere soon. He was happy as long as he had his books and his music. Whatever money he could spare, he would spend on books ordered from Whitcomb and Tombs in New Zealand and Angus Robertson in Sydney. He was probably the most deeply and widely read man in Fiji, a far better student of poetry than some of the post-modern pretenders at the local university.

In 1984, Ram was transferred to Lamolamo Secondary. Geeta tried hard to persuade him to reject the offer. Her father interceded on their behalf with the Chief Education Officer (Secondary), but without success. Even a bottle of Black Label failed to get the desired result: teachers were in short supply and, worse, the new fellow, too earnest for his own good, seemed strangely impervious to importunities of any kind, including the daru-murga variety (dinner-drinks). Ram feigned disappointment to Geeta, but was quietly pleased at the prospect of spending some time in the west, among country
people whom he liked so much, away from his intrusive in-laws, away from the soul-destroying, incestuous ‘socials’ on the Suva teachers’ cocktail circuit. He told Geeta that the transfer was just another step to better things and before they knew it, they would be back in Suva.

Lamolamo was a rural hinterland, smack in the middle of the cane belt of Western Viti Levu. The living quarters at the school were spartan, the water supply and electricity erratic, roads unpaved, food cooked on open fire, clothes washed by hand in the nearby river, drinking water fetched from the well. ‘Living hell,’ is how Geeta described her new home to her parents and friends in Suva. The slow rhythm of village life was well beyond her. The other teachers at the school were from western Viti Levu and spent their weekends with their relatives attending weddings and birthday parties, but Geeta had no close relations nearby, no one she could properly socialize with. ‘Rurals’ was how she contemptuously described the village people, rough, lacking in elementary social graces, plain. ‘Tan ko sahoor nahin haye.’ No manners whatsoever.

Ram revelled in the village environment, re-living the vanishing world of his rural childhood in Labasa. In no time, he had made friends in the village. He loved attending Ramayan recitals in the evenings and having a bowl of grog or two with the people at Sambhu’s store. People asked him for favours: filling forms, writing letters to families who had migrated, giving advice about education. Ram was a regular and much honoured speaker at weddings and funerals. ‘Masterji aye gaye haye,’ people would say, Master has arrived, sending shrieking school children into immediate respectful silence. ‘You should stand for election, Master,’ Kandasami suggested one day. ‘We will support you, no problem.’
A political career was furthest from Ram's mind, but he appreciated the invitation. 'Retirement ke baad men dekhe khot.' We'll see after I retire. The topic kept returning.

Geeta resented Ram's after-school life. He would often return late, usually with a few friends, for an evening of grog and bull session. She would be expected to cook dinner. 'I also work, in case you have not noticed,' she would tell Ram after his friends left. She would often retreat to her bedroom and Ram would heat up the food himself. The silences between the two were getting longer, more sustained, eye contact averted, conversation more and more strained. The physical intimacy of the early years was long gone.

'You have been stuck in this job all this time. Why don't you apply for promotion?' Geeta asked. She had in mind head of department, assistant principal, and then finally the top job at some decent suburban school near Suva. 'But I love what I am doing. I love being in the classroom,' Ram replied. 'Geeta, you should see the way the children's eyes light up when they finally get something. Today, we were reading 'The Snake.' Such a beautiful poem, don't you think: Lawrence gets the cadences, the nuances, the slithering subtleties.' Ram usually spoke about literature the way he wrote prose: complete sentences, words carefully chosen. Poetry was the last thing on Geeta's mind.

All the pressure, the nagging, finally did it. Ram gave in and accepted the headship of the Social Science Department. Soon afterwards, all his horrors of headship materialised. One of his teachers was having an affair with the head girl. This had been going on for sometime, but Ram being Ram, was the last one to know. Charan Singh, the principal, was adamant: the offending teacher would have to go. 'One rotten potato
can ruin the whole sack,’ was how he put it. ‘But where will he go? He will be finished for life. We can put a stop to all this. Just give me one chance.’ Ram remonstrated. ‘Too late for that, Ram,’ Charan Singh replied with a firm tap of the finger on the desk, signalling the meeting was over. ‘He should have thought about his future beforehand, kept his trousers zipped.’ ‘Come on, it hasn’t gone that far, Mr Singh’ Ram reminded him. ‘Could have! Then what?’

Reluctantly, Ram broke the news to Prem Kumar, who had just turned twenty two. The head girl was eighteen. He had to go, and he did. ‘I am sorry Prem,’ was all Ram could manage. Ram was troubled for a long time. ‘It’s so unfair,’ he thought aloud to himself. ‘One mistake, just one, and your life is over in the blink of an eye lid.’ He decided there and then that he would not apply for further promotion. ‘If I want power, I will become a bloody politician,’ he resolved to himself.

‘This is my kind of place, Geeta,’ Ram said when she asked him again to seek a transfer from this ‘rural hell hole,’ as she put it. There was a vacancy at Nadera High for a vice-principal. ‘I am at home here, at peace. Look at those mountains.’ He was referring to the craggy Nausori Highlands in the background splitting Viti Levu in half. ‘The play of light on them at dusk. It’s majestic. After this, who would want to be in Suva with all the rain and the dampness and the mosquitoes? ‘But I will be closer to my parents.’ ‘That’s what holidays are for, Geeta.’ ‘It is not good enough. You have your friends here. I have nobody.’

Before Ram and Geeta could resolve the deepening impasse between them, Sitiveni Rabuka struck with the first of Fiji’s four coups on May 14 1987. The school closed for a month. Ram and Geeta returned to Suva to be with Geeta’s
parents. There were unconfirmed reports of gangs of thugs terrorising Indo-Fijian areas of the city. In Geeta’s parents’ house, there was turmoil. Once the talk was of promotion and transfer, now it was migration. ‘Everyone is leaving. Just look at the long queues in front of the Australian and New Zealand Embassies,’ Geeta’s father said. Ram had seen the long lines, and been moved by the look on the faces of people in the scorching May sun. ‘This place is finished. Khalas sab kutch. We Indians have no future here,’ Geeta’s mother chimed in. ‘We have talked to Sudhir, and he has agreed to sponsor you. We will come later.’ Sudhir was Geeta’s older brother living in Auckland.

Ram was torn. He knew he could not leave Fiji, yet he also could not ignore Geeta’s wish. The closeness between the two had gone, but he still wanted to be with Geeta, more out of habit and obligation than anything else. But the faces of the villagers in Lamolamo also haunted him. ‘Where will they go?’ he kept asking himself: no means, no connections, unskilled, tethered to their farms all their lives, coping without help or hope. ‘I can’t leave them now when they need me most,’ he told Geeta one day.

Geeta was unmoved. ‘That’s the problem with you Ram. You always put others before me, before us. Sab ke pahile, aapan ke sab roj baad men. I don’t know what magic have the village people done to you.’ Time was of the essence. David Lange, the New Zealand prime minister, was quietly allowing Fijian people to enter New Zealand without the usual stringent visa requirements. ‘We have to do something now before it is too late. Who knows when the doors will be shut?’ ‘You go and I will follow later,’ Ram said unconvincingly. ‘If that is what you want,’ Geeta replied, knowing full well that Ram would be
the last person to leave Fiji. She knew in her heart that their married life was over.

Ram returned to Lamolamo as soon as the school reopened. He taught his share of classes, but he was far more troubled by what was happening to the country and to his community, being gradually wrapped in the descending veil of darkness and despair, as he put it. People in the village peppered him with questions when they met for their usual grog sessions at Sambhu’s store. A state of emergency was in force, the newspapers were censored, and radio news in Hindi bland amidst funereal music and sad songs. But in the countryside, Rumour Devi and Messers Fact and Fantasy were running wild. There were reports of people being picked up at night and interrogated at the military barracks, forced to walk bare feet on scorching tar sealed roads for miles, made to drink drain water, forced to crawl on rough pebbly ground, masturbate in front of others. Ram had heard the rumours, too, but did not know the truth.

Then, one day in town, quite by accident, he came across a copy of The Fiji Voice at Master Mohan’s place. Mohan, a retired head teacher, was in contact with the union people in Suva. The newspaper, the brainchild of Sydney journalist and trade unionist Dale Keeling, printed hard hitting news censured in Fiji, especially news about the rampant abuse of human rights. Ram became a regular and avid reader, and related its troubling contents to the villagers at the shop in the evenings, to the slow shaking of heads in utter disbelief that such atrocities were taking place in Fiji. Biswaas nahi hoye ki aisan cheez hiyan kabhi hoye sake, people said. Sometimes, he used the school photocopier to make copies for people in neighbouring villages. The more sensational
abuses reported in the newsletter were translated into Hindi. People were confused and bewildered and helpless, powerless witness to their own paralysis and guilty impotence.

'You are banging your head against a rock, Ram,' his colleague Satish had remarked. 'Don't get me wrong, bro. I know the coup is wrong and all, but sometimes we have to accept reality too.' 'Yes, that's what they all say,' Ram replied, slightly irritated. 'That is what they all want us to accept, commit political suicide voluntarily.' He continued 'Where would we be if we had accepted that the Britishers were going to be here forever? Where would the world be if they had accepted the 'reality' of Hitler's master plan?' Ram had thought about this and rehearsed his arguments carefully. 'No, the reality thing does not do it for me. It's a cop out, man, and you know it.'

'All that the Fijians want is to control the government, Ram,' Satish said calmly. 'That's all. You give them that and they will leave us alone. These are not a bad people, you know.' 'Not at the point of the barrel of a gun. No. Do you really think they will leave us alone? An inch today, a foot tomorrow. Today they take our government away, tomorrow it will be our homes and businesses. We have to stop this cancer now before it destroys us all.' 'You are an idealist, Ram,' Satish said. Unsudharable. Unchangeable. 'Better that than a neutral — or shall I say neutered — armchair 'realists' like you folks, Satish.' Ram remembered Gandhiji's words: A no muttered form the deepest conviction is better and greater than a yes muttered merely to please, or what is worse, to avoid trouble.

'Remember, all the guns are on the other side, and you know who will be killed first when the shooting starts, don't you?' Satish continued. 'Just look around, Ram, and tell me
how many of these chakka panji (hoi-polloi) will follow you into the battle: a handful, if that. Your problem, man, is that your head is always in the clouds, lost in lofty thoughts. Get real for once. *Ekum men panni nahi haye, bh'aiywa.*’ This well has no water, my friend. ‘It is easy sitting here in our cushy chairs with our monthly salaries and long holidays and pontificate, do nothing, accept things as they are,’ Ram said. Well that is not good enough for me.’ There were times when Ram felt like Sisyphus rolling his stone up the mountain, but there was nothing else he could do. The struggle had to go on. *Still we persist, plough the light sand, and sow/Seed after seed where none can ever grow.*

The people of Lamolamo were incensed at what had happened, ready to erupt like an overheated furnace. The village was a close knit community. It spoke as one on most things. It was known far and wide for its single-minded solidarity. This was also Labour heartland. For many Mahendra Chaudhry, the Labour leader, was their guardian angel. They had waited for so long to be in government, only to thrown out after a month. One day at Sambhu’s shop, they decided to form a small committee to map strategy. *Ek dam kuch kare ke padi.* We absolutely have to do something, all the villagers resolved. Ram Baran, the village *mukhia*, headman, was on it along with Shafiq Ali, the owner of several lorries, Buta Singh, a large cane grower, and Chinnappa Naidu, the leader of the South Indians. Every cultural group was represented. Ram was invited to join. In fact, he was the one who had mooted the idea.

In the months after the coup, things went from bad to worse. Rabuka’s belligerent Christian rhetoric compounded fears. His words on Radio Fiji sounded ominous. *I appeal to all Christian leaders to concentrate on evangelising Hindus and*
Muslims’ he thundered. That was the only way for permanent peace in Fiji, if everyone believed in the one God, Jehovah. Hindu and Muslin festivals might not be celebrated as national holidays. Fijians must do what the Christian missionaries had done: convert heathens to Christianity. 

I would be guilty in the face of God if I did not do that, if I did not use my office, my influence, to get the Church, those who believe in Lord Jesus Christ to teach his love and what he stands for.

Wild rumours spread in the village about forcible conversions, especially of children. Ram tried to calm fears. ‘It’s all talk, cheap talk,’ he told people at the shop one evening. ‘The white missionaries tried this before during girmit. No success. Think: if they did not succeed, will these fellows? Converting cannibals was one thing. Us? Never.’ People nodded amidst bowls of kava. ‘We are Sanatan Dharam, bhaiya. Koy khelwaar ke baat nahi haye,’ said Bhola. Eternal, without beginning or end, indestructible, nothing to trifle with. ‘What will Christians give us that we don’t already have?’ ‘Patthar, useless stones, rubble,’ Ram Jiwan piped up from the back.

Within a week, talk of conversion had turned sinister. One night, while people were meeting at the shop, the Shiv Mandir, the main village temple, was trashed and about $25 in donations stolen, the prayer book burned and idols smashed. The radio reported more desecrations in Tavua and Rakiraki, including the desecration of a mosque. ‘How low can these kuttas, dogs, Go, Master?’ Mahavir said to Ram, ‘What have our gods done to Fiji that they deserve this?’ He began sobbing. It had taken him and a few others a very long time to build the mandir from scratch, with hard-earned donations collected at Ramayan recitals. Now all gone.
Ram was ropeable. 'No use crying, bro. We have to do something.' People looked in his direction as he spat out the words in embittered anger. Like what? 'We should torch one of their bloody churches,' Piyare suggested. 'Jaraao saale ke. I will do it myself.' 'No,' Ram advised. 'No, we should guard the mandir and our homes with physical force. We should form a group and take turns every night.' A vigilante group is what Ram had in mind. 'They touch one finger, we chop off their hands. These people only understand violence. If they want to fight, we give them a fight.' Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once.

These were fighting words from a man of peace whose first love, preceding and leading to Malti, was English poetry. Something deep had stirred in Ram. Reports of daily humiliation, petty discrimination, the taunting and the threats, the steady drift of the community into the limbo between life and death, had had their effect. He was like a man possessed. 'How dare these bastards do this to us,' he said to Satish one day. 'Our forefathers built this place up with their bare hands. This is our home too. And they think they can take away our rights, just like that, and we would do nothing. Hell no. Over my dead body.' 'There will be many dead bodies before this evil saga is over, Bro,' Satish replied. 'This is Kalyug, after all, remember.' The cosmic Dark Age.

People were with Ram. Young men armed with polished mangrove sticks and sharpened cane knives patrolled the village. They protected the temple and would have beaten to pulp anyone caught attempting desecration. Some of the young men described themselves as members of the Bajrang Dal, soldiers of Lord Hanuman who had single-handedly rescued Sita from the clutches of Ravana. 'Dekha jaai ka hoya.'
‘We are prepared for whatever happens,’ the young men said. Nothing happened for months. The attacks had been condemned by leading church leaders, even by Rabuka himself. The thugs had made their point, their anger subsided. People relaxed and went back to their old routine.

But just as one crisis was over, another emerged. The Sunday Ban came into force, banning all sports and work on Sabbath. There was no public transport on Sunday. You couldn’t bury the dead, wash clothes in the open, organise weddings or social gatherings without official permission, or work in the fields. Opinion in the village was divided. For Ram, as always, it was a matter of principle. ‘No one has the right to tell me when to rest. This is a free country. And since when has Sunday become our day of rest?’ There was the farming angle to consider as well. ‘If we don’t harvest on Sunday, what happens when the wet weather starts? The mills won’t operate after December.’ Suruj Bali said. ‘Forget about harvesting yaar,’ Bhola chimed in ‘we won’t have taxis on the roads, no buses, nothing. What if we have to go to hospital?’ ‘Once again, we poor people get caught in the middle,’ someone added. Phir garib log ke upar sala museebat aaye. But some of the casual labourers who usually kept quiet, actually welcomed a rest on Sunday. They had nothing to lose. Is me hum log ke ka kharabi haye?

One day, Bansi organised a large Bhagvata Katha at his place to mark the first anniversary of his father’s death. The entire village was invited to the ten day affair. It was not an act of defiance, though Ram thought it was. It was thought that such a harmless religious activity would be of no interest to the authorities. They were wrong. Late on the second day, a truck load of soldiers arrived. After making enquiries, they
took Bansi and his eldest son Jamuna away. Both returned home late in the evening in a hired cab, their bodies bloodied and bruised, lips swollen from punches, pants soiled. ‘Next time we catch you,’ the soldiers had warned them, ‘you will find yourself in a morgue.’

How did the military find out what was happening at Bansi’s house in the middle of nowhere? Ram wondered. Obviously, there were spies among them. But who? Ram suspected Jumsa, an excessively deferential unemployed young man, who attended all the meetings, listened intently to everything that was spoken but never said a word. Often he volunteered for anything the village committee decided. But there was no proof. Only much later it was revealed that Ram Baran, whose spy Jumsa was, had quarrelled with Bansi over a land boundary and lost the court case. This was his opportunity to take revenge and gain favour with the military chief for western Viti Levu, Aisake Mualevu. Unknown to anyone, this respected leader of the village, the chairman of the village coup committee, in whom everyone reposed trust and confidence, was also the military’s eyes and ears in the settlement. A sheep without, a wolf within. Haraamzada. The labyrinths of betrayal and deceit ran deep in the roots of our community. Is there not some chosen curse, Some hidden thunder in the stores of Heav’n, Red with uncommon wrath, to blast the man, Who owes his greatness to his country’s ruin?

With no signs in Suva of the crisis resolving, talk increased of putting more pressure on the military regime. The leaders decided that there should be a boycott of the cane harvest. ‘We must bring this illegal regime to its knees,’ one of them said. ‘Why should we pay these bastards to put their boots into us?’ ‘When we ask for sanctions from overseas, we must be
prepared to pay a price ourselves.' ‘Sacrifice begins at home.’ ‘We broke the CSR’s back with our strikes,’ someone said ‘what is this?’ Saalan ke nas maar de khoi. Well shall teach the bastards a lesson, reduce them to impotence. Brave talk of defiance and determination began circulating in the village. Ram was quietly pleased at the way people were beginning to stiffen. His occasional doubt about their resolve began to dissolve.

A meeting of the village committee was convened to firm things up. The usual pro-harvest boycott arguments were rehearsed. Ram took the minutes. Buta Singh, the biggest cane farmer in the village, who had remained quiet throughout the meeting, spoke when everyone had finished and a vote was about to be taken. ‘Why is it that whenever there is any problem, the farmers are the first ones to be asked to make sacrifices? No one comes to help us when we are down, when there is a drought or a flood or hurricane or fire.’ All eyes were on him. ‘Will the trade union babus making so much noise now sacrifice a single cent from their salaries? Will the big businesses, which suck our blood, close their shops for even one day? Will they? Then why ask us to be the first ones to be in the frontline?’ Kahe khaali hum kisan log ke sab se aage pahile bheja jaaye haye?

‘Hum log ek chota kund ke megha haye, Sirdarji,’ We are frogs in a small pond, Ram Samujh responded after a long, stunned silence following Buta’s blunt words. ‘Our leaders will never ask us to make sacrifice unless there is no other way. They are one of us. Hamai log ke admi to haye. We have complete faith in them. Cent per cent.’ ‘Buta,’ Shiu Ram said sharply, ‘you are worried about saving your pennies when the whole country is going to the dogs. All these nice buildings, nice farms, tractors: what’s the use having them when we have
no rights in this country? Fighting this evil regime must be the first priority of every Indian in this country.' ‘Think back, front, right, left, before you decide.’ Aage, peeche, daayen, baayen, dekh ke bichaar aur faisala karna. Buta Singh said as he left the meeting. In the end, the meeting decided to boycott.

Buta Singh had made sense, Ram thought and said as much. ‘We must bring this illegal regime down,’ he told the meeting, ‘but everyone should shoulder his share of the burden.’ He himself was prepared to sacrifice part of his salary for the cause. ‘There should be a national strategy for a national boycott. Everyone should chip in. Traitors should know what will happen to them. We will boycott their shops. ‘Burn them down,’ someone said. ‘Yes, if we have to.’ ‘Talk is cheap, Master,’ Raghu said sharply. ‘We need action now.’ Then, ‘What have you got to lose? Here today, somewhere else tomorrow. Like a bird’ Aaj hiyan, kal huaan. Ek chirai ke rakam. That was a cruel cut: for Ram, for there was no other place he would rather be, but he did not say anything.

Ram was genuinely distraught to learn next morning that a large part of Buta Singh’s cane farm had been burnt down. It was a clear case of arson, punishment for speaking his mind. Ram was amazed at the technique the arsonists had used to avoid being detected. They had tied kerosene-soaked cloth around the tails of a dozen mongoose, lit them and set them lose in the cane field. The terrified mongoose ran for their lives in every which direction, leaving behind a trail of burning tinder-dry cane leaves, making it difficult to put the fires out. The village was split down the middle. Ram thought to himself, ‘Here we’re fighting for our democratic rights, and this is what we do to a man who had the courage to speak his mind? We must rid ourselves of what we condemn.’
A week or two after Buta Singh's farm was burnt down, a couple of government caterpillar bulldozers arrived to upgrade the village road. That surprised everyone: why their village, why now? Who had approached the government? That evening, all was revealed at the shop. Shafiq Ali, the owner of trucks, had asked the public works minister through a well-connected relative, to see if the badly pot-holed and at places eroded road could be repaired for a little something. What that 'little something' was no one knew, but 'gifts' up to five hundred dollars for these sorts of favours were not rare. No one could do much to Shafiq. They needed his lorry to carry cane. There was no point thinking of ostracizing him: Hindus and Muslims had always kept social interaction to the minimum any way. And Shafiq was more attuned to what leaders of the Fiji Muslim League were saying. 'Keep quiet and work with the Fijians. This is not our fight.'

Ram was saddened at the religious rift. Although Muslims and Hindus in the village were not socially close, relations were still cordial. But ever since a Muslim delegation had told the Great Council of Chiefs that they accepted the coup and would support Fijian aspirations in return for four separate Muslim seats, relations had soured. A local Muslim academic had even said that it was the Hindus who were opposing the Fijians, not Muslims. As far as he was concerned, Muslims and Christians were people of 'The Book,' Hindus were not. His own grandmother had been a Hindu converted to Islam. 'What has religion got to do with the price of aloo and piyaj?, potatoes and onions, Ram had asked. 'Do these arseholes know the damage they are doing to our people here? These bloody city slickers are lighting a fire they won't be able to put out.'
Once or twice, Ram thought of talking to Shafiq, but saw no point: the damage had been done. And Shafiq had said so many times before, *Jamaat ke baat kaatna haraam haye*. It is a sin to disobey your community. When Shafiq’s wife died a few months later, not a single Hindu attended the funeral. Except Ram. But Shafiq did not escape completely unscathed. For a long time, he was mystified why his cane-carrying lorries had so many punctured tyres. The reason, ingenious when you come to think of it, was that people hammered nails into dozens of stalks of cane and scattered them randomly on roads used by the lorries! They lay unnoticed among all the other cane stalks that had fallen from trucks and were being flattened into cane carpets on the cane belt roads.

Shafiq, though, was not the only one who was having second thoughts about joining the resistance. One day, Chinappa Naidu told a meeting at the shop that Fijians were very agitated, in a vengeful mood. ‘*Maango, maango, nahi maango, jao.*’ ‘Want, want, don’t want, go.’ If you want the lease on our terms fine, they were saying, if not, leave. Their demand was clear: One thousand dollar goodwill payment upfront, and no opposition to the coup. ‘*Fiji hum log ke jamin baitho. Hum hriyan ke raja hai.* Fiji is our land. We are the kings of this place. There was nowhere Chinappa and other evicted tenants could go. Fijians knew our vulnerability, knew our pressure points and they were determined to have their way.

‘*Vulagi Can’t Be Taukei. Sa sega sara.* Immigrants can’t be Natives, Never, was the common refrain. It was the same everywhere in Viti Levu, this talk of vengeance and retribution and expulsion. ‘Where will I take my family?’ he asked simply. Kahan laye jaaib sab ke? He had three children in high school, with a daughter about to be married. The ten
acre plot of leased land was all he had, the sole source of livelihood for the family. Everyone sympathised with Chinappa, because they knew that their turn would come one day, sooner rather than later. What Ram had feared most was taking place right before his eyes, his dream of uniting the village and stiffening its spine was dissolving almost even before it had begun. So bees with smoke and doves with noisome stench, *Are from their hives and houses driven away.*

The worst victims of the coup without doubt were the young people in the village. Those who had passed their exams with good marks — a handful — had gone on to form seven and some even to the university and the local technical institute, but many had failed to make the grade. Their fate was sealed. There were no jobs in the towns, none in the village, no prospect in sight. ‘My heart broke,’ Ram said to me, ‘to see these kids from simple homes, decent, well behaved, wanting to make something of their lives, but with nothing to do, no where to go, victims of blatant racism.’ ‘Our time was different,’ he continued. ‘You had a decent education, you got a job. But now, Form Seven is nothing. A university degree is what everyone is looking at.’ A lost generation, I thought to myself, promising young lives cut short so early. Ram had found a few of the brighter boys jobs as part-time tutors for the children of business people in town, while some eventually found employment as taxi and bus drivers. That was all he could do. Still, they remembered him with gratitude and affection, like a kind younger uncle, still calling him ‘sir’ whenever they ran into him. *I would never have thought I would be born here, So late in the stone, so long before morning.*

A few of the girls found employment in one of the tax-free textile factories that had sprung up after the coups.
Thirteen year tax holidays and other concessions had attracted a few foreign companies. The government wanted to kickstart the economy by whatever means it could. This seemed an easy and promising option. The government turned a blind eye to the working conditions in the factories. Most women working in them were single mothers from broken homes, widows, young unemployed girls just of school.

One day, Ram received a visit by one of his former students, Kiran. She was working at a garment factory in Lautoka. Ram already had a reputation as a champion of the underdog among the students, the teacher to whom students confided their problems, sought advice, knowing that their confidence would be respected. 'Sir, you must do something about this. How long will these atrocities go on?' Kuch karana padi, sir, kab tak aise atyachaar chalte rahi, she said handing him a blue manila folder full of loose handwritten sheets. He promised to read the file that night and get back to her.

What he read in the files enraged him, hand written evidence of example upon example of utter merciless exploitation of women. There was the case of Sheela Kumari, divorced, who worked for a garment manufacturer on probation for six weeks. All she got paid was her bus fares of two dollars, and no pay for the work she had done producing the garments. Then there was Uniasi Marama, in the packing department, who had worked in the factory for 14 years and she still earned only seventy two cents an hour. 'It takes this lady 14 years to earn seventy two cents an hour. She was fourteen years only when she started work,' Kiran said. Meresimani Tinai and Senata Tinai's pay was 50 and 55 cents respectively. Ameila Sukutai did ironing and packing but was paid only 50 cents an hour. 'You can see on this one, sir,' Kiran
said, 'that she is performing two jobs but is being paid only for one.' None of the workers got overtime even though many worked beyond their normal working hours.

Shobna Singh was brave enough to have her experience written down. Ram read the report aloud. 'Work starts on the dot at 8 am. After that, no one is allowed to even look around. The neck stiffens, eyes water and burn and a headache starts, nose gets blocked with cotton dust and back and legs begin to ache. The machines themselves are not in proper working condition yet any delays are blamed on the worker. Hard chairs and poor ventilation add to the discomfort. Few minutes late starting means a deduction in the wage. There is no such thing as sick leave pay. No overtime paid. No benefits for long term service. No insurance to cover any health hazard that may confront a worker while at work. No leave or leave pay. No emergency exits or drills to deal with emergencies. No fire extinguishers in sight. At break, nobody is allowed to leave a second early. Morning break from 10am–10:15: no one is allowed outside the premises. Lunch break is limited to 30 minutes, 12pm–12:30. And at 3 pm there is a 15 minute break where nobody is allowed out again. An hour's break in all that 8 hours of work. No calls are passed on or calls allowed to be made. No one is allowed visitors. In a caged atmosphere workers are urged to work faster and faster.'

Ram asked Kiran to arrange a meeting with one of the workers to get a better feel of the situation. Kiran fetched Anshu. They met at Ram's quarters late on Sunday. Anshu related an incident involving her at the factory the previous day. 'During lunch hour I had gone to the toilet when the alarm bell rang. As soon as I came out, the security guard came and said to me 'What are you doing inside the toilet?' I said,
'Don’t you know what a lady does in a toilet.’ He said ‘Don’t talk cheeky, you just go in.’ Anshu then went to her desk. As she was punching time off at the end of the day, the security guard came up to her and asked, ‘What is in the plastic bag?’ I said ‘Apples and milk.’ The guard grabbed the plastic bag and tore it to look inside. Then he threw the bag and its contents outside the gate. A hard-earned $6.59 cents worth of food destroyed. Then he swore at her. ‘Fuck off you bastard, take your plastic and go,’ he said, threatening to punch her. Anshu was saved from assault by a Fijian security guard who picked up the apples and milk and put it inside the plastic bag, apologetically.

‘You must do something about it, Sir.’ Kiran’s words kept reverberating in Ram’s head. But what? How? Ram began by compiling a list of abuses and transgressions as accurately as he could. With Kiran’s assistance, he would meet the garment workers late in the evenings, during weekends, taking care not to be seen in public with his informants. He tracked down Shobna Singh and talked to her at length. Over the next month, Ram compiled a detailed report on the working conditions in the garment factories in the Lautoka area.

Ram then travelled to Suva to give the report to Ema Fulavesi, the trade union activist. Ema was a rolly-polly woman with a passion for her cause. ‘This is dynamite, Bhaiya, ek dam julum’ she told him, very good indeed, brother. ‘We have the buggers by the balls. Magai Chinamu. Sorry, Bhaiya, don’t mind my language. Big catch, this one! Blerry bastards.’ Several months later, Ram received in the mail a small printed paper containing the news of a demonstration in Sydney against the garment industries in Fiji. The demonstration was against the Fijian Garments Exhibit Apparel Expo at Darling Harbour, outside Hall 5, Sydney Exhibition Centre.
It was organised by the Clothing Trades Union, at the request of the Fiji Trade Union Congress. The leaflet announcing the demonstration read: 'The garments being promoted are made in Tax Free Zones by workers earning as little as 50 cents an hour in sweat shop conditions. Many of the companies are Australia and New Zealand employers who have moved part or all of their operations to Fiji to avoid labour laws and trade unions.' A Garment Workers Union has just been registered in Fiji after a long struggle. But workers are still denied a living wage. And some workers caught organising for the Union have been victimised, dismissed, and even physically assaulted.'

The response was swift and effective (though in the long run ineffectual.) The government promised to establish a Garment Training Centre with a factory and a training division, for about 150 to 200 students, with the better students to be retained full-time with full pay to run the company's production factory. The Centre would be run by nominated representatives of the government and the garment industry. Ram was quietly satisfied at the result all the after-school sleuthing had produced. He was even more grateful to Kiran and Shabnam. They had so much to lose, but showed so much courage, more than the kava-sodden, scrotum-scratching men, meeting him at odd hours, providing detailed data on the working conditions, all the while keeping out of the public gaze, seeking no credit or glory for themselves. Truth is like a torch, Ram remembered from something he had read along time ago. The more you shake it, the more it shines.

The garment industry was furious. How had such damaging 'inside' information gone public? A hunt was on for
a mole in the factory, but no one suspected Kiran. She was always quiet and outwardly obedient and punctual, always calling her boss 'Sir,' averting his gaze, getting along with everyone. But again, it was Jumsa who spilled the beans. He had kept a close eye on where Ram went, who he talked to and reported it to Ram Baran, his uncle. It did not take Ram Baran long to put two and two together.

One day while Ram was teaching his class on 'Literature and Society,' the principal came around and told him that Ram Baran, the chairman of the School Management Committee, wanted to meet him urgently. 'I will complete the class for you,' he said. Judging by the urgency in his voice, Ram knew something was askew. He walked towards the Committee Room with words from an Auden poem ringing in his ears. *The sky is darkening like a stain, Something is going to fall like rain, And it won't be flowers.*

'Masterji, we should talk,' Ram Baran said, beginning the proceedings 'About what?' Ram enquired cautiously. 'Oh, small things, big things, about you and the School.' That all seemed mysterious to Ram. He waited for Ram Baran to continue. 'People have been talking, Master,' he said. Ram looked at him straight in the eye, waiting for him to continue. 'About you and the girl.' 'What girl? What are you talking about?' 'Master, you know the girl, the one who works at the garment factory.' 'You mean Kiran?' 'Yes.' 'What about her? She was my student once and she now works at the garment factory.' 'You two have been seen together at odd hours and strange places. *Jamin ke pas bhi kaan aur ankhi haye.*' Even the land has ears and eyes. 'So?' 'We have the reputation of the school to think of. When married teachers have affairs with their former students, it does not look good, Master.'
Ram was stumped for words. His marriage had been over a long time ago. Geeta was seeing someone else. It was an amicable separation. The two were not meant for each other, they both knew, and always deep in Ram's heart, there was Malti. But Ram had not seen any point in publicising his divorce. His close friends knew but made little of it. Marriage failures were common enough; Ram's was no exception. Ram had not been having affairs, certainly not when there had been so much else to do. To be accused of having an affair with Kiran, attractive though she was, was simply preposterous.

'Kaka [Uncle], let me say this once and once only. I am not having an affair with Kiran or anyone else. Kiran and I have been working on a research project.' He then described the data the two were collecting on the working conditions in the garment factories. 'So it was you, then,' Ram Baran said, 'who gave all that dirt to the trade unions.' 'Kaka,' Ram replied firmly, 'you should see things for yourself. It's worse than what you can imagine.' He went on to talk about women having to get permission to go to the toilet, male guards posted outside women's toilet, the musty, filthy conditions inside, the sexual advances, the threat of violence. 'And to think that this is our own people doing it! Here we are fighting this coup regime, and look at what these bastards are up to. Kitna gira jaat haye hum log.' What a low-down people we are. Ram Baran said nothing.

The following week, the Management Board convened. It had been a busy week for Ram Baran. Jason Garments had contributed to the refurbishing of the school library and he was keen to make sure that future funds did not dry up. What better way to ensure that than to ingratiate yourself with the factory owner. Ram Baran told Ravin Dhupelia, the owner,
what Ram had been up to, the damage he had done. ‘Get rid of him now, Ram Baran. Now. Get rid of that rotten egg. That arsehole of a bastard.’ Sala, Chutia, Gaandu. How dare he bite the hand that feeds him?’ ‘Leave that to me, Boss,’ Ram Baran said as he left Duphelia’s office. He then contacted all the members of the Management Board, one by one, and told them about Ram and how his immediate firing was necessary for further funding from Jason Garments and other business houses in town.

At the meeting attended by the full Management Board, Ram Baran spoke at length and on behalf of everyone. ‘Master, we are not satisfied with your performance. You seem to be more interested in politics than teaching these days.’ That was not true, Ram said. He hadn’t missed a single day of class. And wasn’t it true that the highest number of A Grade passes in Fiji Junior were from his class? Ram Baran ignored him and proceeded with his rehearsed speech, reminding Ram of everything he had done and said since the coup: organising the village committee, using the school printing machines to circulate newsletters, putting strange ideas about ‘dignity and self respect’ into the heads of children, and now this: rocking the garment industry. ‘You are risking the future of our children. Do you know how many girls from this school the garment factories employ?’ Many, Ram knew, but at what cost? ‘We don’t want to kill the goose that lays the golden egg,’ Ram Baran said. Some golden egg, Ram thought to himself. ‘We have reached the decision — and it is unanimous, if you must to know — that you should leave the school immediately. Baat aage tak pahunch gaye haye. We have already informed the Education Department. Your tongues are steeped in honey and milk, Your hearts in gall and biting despair.'
'I thought of many things to say,' Ram said to me 'but in the end chose not to. Their minds were already made up. There was no point confusing them with facts. I packed up and left.' Not a single person on the Board spoke up for him, no one in the village came to farewell him. This most idealistic of men with a brave heart and noble vision having to suffer this kind of petty humiliation saddened me immensely. All that selfless work, standing up against the coup, organising people, helping the victims of the garment industry, had in the end come to naught, undone by the duplicity and deviousness of his own people and by his high principles clashing with a rotten world gone strangely awry. Love, fame, ambition, avarice — 'tis the same, Each idle, all ill, and none the worst — For all are meteors with a different name, And death is the sable smoke where vanishes the flame.

Ram returned to Suva. His heart had gone out of teaching. He took up a job as a part-time sales representative at a hardware store in Samabula, and spent the rest of his time by himself, reading, alone, in his musty, dingy book-strewn rented flat in Bureta Street, a battered but unbroken man, living in flickering hope. Last night when I visited him, reminiscing as usual about our distant youthful days, he sang a Talat Mehmood song:

Phir wahi shaam, wahi gham, wahi tanhaai hai
Dil ko samjhaane teri yaad chali aayi hai

Once again that evening, that sadness, that anguish. Your memories have returned to soothe my heart.