

19

Wailea¹

Brij V Lal

Kaali Raaton ke Aage Savera Bhi Haya.

There is always a dawn at the end of the darkest night.

Wailea, Veidogo, Nanuku, Komave, Namadai, Kalokolevu. Nakorova, Lovonilase. Lovely, evocative Fijian names but they are completely unknown to me. I drive past many of them every day in the air-conditioned comfort of my car, unaware of their existence and the lives lived within them. I am not alone. Many people I know can't place the names either. They are, of course, names of some of Fiji's mushrooming squatter settlements around the greater Suva area. Squatter settlements, also known euphemistically as informal settlements, are on the rise on Fiji's main island, Viti Levu, especially in capital city Suva's swampy state-owned land, from Nasēsē through Vatuwaqa onwards towards Nasinu and beyond. That is where between 15 and 20 per cent of Fiji's total population now lives, in the clogged Suva–Nausori corridor. Informal settlements are not new. The Jittu Estate in Samabula, for instance, has been around for decades and some others have acquired the semi-permanent character of an established settlement. But the numbers are now growing rapidly for a variety of reasons: housing shortage in urban areas, unemployment, shrinkage in job opportunities, rural–urban migration, the movement of displaced farmers from non-renewed leases. For the desperately poor

1 Originally published in *Road from Mr Tulsi's store* (Suva: University of the South Pacific Press, 2019) under the title 'Bula Dredre', 139–60. This essay is a 'faction piece', that is, an actual observed experience rendered in the fictional mode. The aim in this exercise is to capture the inner truth of an experience rather than its factual accuracy.

with nowhere to go, the informal settlements beckon as respite on what many hope will be a much longer journey, hopefully beyond Fiji's shores. So, these settlements are for most a temporary refuge for shattered hopes and truncated ambitions.

A kilometre from where I live on Beach Road in Suva Point are informal settlements hidden at the edge of mangrove swamps on either side of a major arterial road named after one of Fiji's less illustrious governors, Sir Murchison Fletcher. I know of squatter settlements in the abstract, as an idea, a construct for the purposes of academic research or lectures, but nothing beyond that. Occasionally there might be a snippet on the evening television news if there is flooding or some other outrage – a fire, a murder, rape, violent burglary – but that's about it, a minor tragedy among so many. After a brief moment, the camera moves on. The reality hit me one hot afternoon when I stopped at a roadside store not far from Vatuwaqa Bridge to buy a soft drink. In front of me was a little boy, dark, noticeably thin, about 10 or 12, counting coins to buy ice cream. He did not have enough and was turning around to go back. I tapped him gently on the shoulder and said, '*Beta*, let me buy you an ice cream'. He tensed up, looking straight at me as if to say, 'What do you want from me?' When I smiled, he simply said, 'Thank you Uncle', and left. His name was Yogesh.

I could not get Yogesh out of my mind even though our meeting was fleeting. There was something about him, his fine face, the sad, haunted, look in his eyes, the gentle expression of gratitude, or perhaps a mixture of all of these. Over the weeks and months, I saw many children Yogesh's age returning from school along the Fletcher Road and then turning into a narrow muddy path into the mangrove jungle. One day, I parked my car on the road and decided to take a walk on the muddy path myself to see where it led. It is narrow, wet, slippery, with household rubbish strewn on both sides, a few stray, dirt-covered mangy dogs idling about looking for food, grass overgrown. At the end, the evening tide is rising, the water black and thick with rotting leaves, raw sewerage and floating plastic. Above all is the overpowering stench of raw sewerage mixed with the aroma of spicy food being prepared for the evening meal. A few cheerful '*Bula*' shouts come from rusted corrugated structures on stilts as I hurry back to my car. I can still feel that gross smell in my nostrils years later.

The number of squatter settlements in Fiji comes as a huge surprise: over 200, varying in size from a dozen or so residents to well over a hundred. The largest numbers of squatter settlements, by far, are in the greater Suva

region. Suva offers the best chance for employment and education for children, and medical facilities are accessible. Some older ones have well-developed community structures for support and sustenance. The newer ones in the mangrove swamps have sprouted overnight while no one was watching, people say. They lack basic amenities of piped water supply and electricity and are wracked by water-borne diseases carried by mosquitoes. In some places there is resigned acceptance of the 'reality' while in others there is determination to make this a temporary stopover on a much longer journey. As a man says to me, 'Life will go on. *Inshallah*, the future will be better.' Another reminds me that there is always a dawn at the end of the darkest night. '*Kaali raat ke baad hamesha sabera aaway haye.*'

I spend most weekends hanging around squatter settlements as unobtrusively as possible. I park my car a discreet distance away and walk. Often I buy a couple of packets of kava to start a conversation with the locals, as much to get information as to establish my credentials. There is understandable suspicion of outsiders, and there is plenty about me. They know about me from my work on the Reeves Commission in the mid-1990s, they have seen me on television, heard me on radio, and some have read my columns in the newspapers. Often the talk begins with politics and my take on things before we get to my quest. 'You standing for elections or something, Doctor?' one person asks me. Was this a way of me introducing myself to the people? 'You doing this for the government?' 'How much they paying you to do this?' This might appear intrusive but it is often nothing more than honest curiosity, a conversation opener. They are jaded by previous encounters with researchers. I realise it will take a long time to establish my bona fides among people who are innocent about the purpose and protocols of academic work. Many have not gone beyond primary school. There is genuine cynicism about surveys. They have answered many intrusive questions about their lives and living conditions, about earnings and expenditure, about government assistance or the lack of it, over the years, with no result. There is also genuine puzzlement about my interest in squatters when I could do so many other things more 'uplifting'. They are nonplussed when I tell them that my next research project will be on female suicides in Fiji. 'Big problem, that one', people tell me.

Squatters come in all shapes and sizes. This realisation came to me slowly as I travelled and talked over several weeks. There is an internal hierarchy and shades of difference that all residents acknowledge but which are invisible to outsiders. Where you live places you in the eyes of the residents. There

are at least three different types of informal settlements: those that are on state land, those on private freehold land and those on traditional land. State land is favoured because evicting people from state land is time-consuming. Governments are reluctant to act harshly for fear of adverse public reaction. And there are prospective political costs as well. Squatters vote. 'The voter owns the vote', a man says, grinning. He is on to an increasingly powerful truth. Freehold land is slightly more problematic. Residents of Bhindi Estate do not know who Mr Bhindi is, where he is, whether he is in Fiji at all. There is greater uncertainty about the future. The fear of eviction at any moment haunts the residents. As one resident told me: 'We don't know when the notice (to vacate) will come.' The most vulnerable are the residents of traditional Fijian-owned land. Because it is private property, the courts cannot intervene and the government is reluctant to act. And landlords can do whatever they want, *manmaani*. They may be degrees of difference, but fear is constant everywhere. There can be no planning for the future. Still, there have been no large-scale evictions in recent years. Government is planning alternative sites away from the city which will provide some respite, but people are reluctant to uproot again, to move further away from the city, away from jobs and schools. The comforts of familiarity and certitude even in conditions of harsh adversity should not be underestimated.

One day, I drive to meet a distant niece in Cunningham Estate on the slopes of Khalsa Road. My niece asks me to park the car a safe distance away from their dwelling. Questions will be asked later about the car, its driver, the purpose of the visit, she tells me. The estate has been in the news recently for violent burglary so there is heightened concern and vigilance. The landlord's spies are everywhere. My niece's residence is a corrugated iron structure with a bed at one end and kitchen at the other. Her two boys sleep on the mattress in the middle. The family is from Labasa, so these folks endure the usual taunts against *Labasians*, as cheapskates. I ask my niece – let us call her Sashi – about life in the area. 'It is better here than it was in Labasa', Sashi says. Their 10-acre farm had been reserved and there was nothing left to live on. They had to move. Here at least there is regular income. Both boys are working. One is a hairdresser in a neighbouring settlement, the other is a mechanic, and the husband does odd labouring jobs around the place. Sashi makes Indian sweets – *gulab jamun*, *lakdi ke mithai*, *ghugri* – and sells them directly to market vendors and owners of roadside stalls. The money is not much, but they get by.

In settlements on state land, there is more stability and security and, as a result, a more cohesive sense of community. One settlement in Nasinu looks fairly well established from outside. The footpath leading to it is clean, and inside there are hibiscus, bougainvillea, marigold and other plants neatly planted as hedge. It is predominantly Indo-Fijian. When I enquire, I am asked to talk to the *mukhiya*, the community leader, Mr Ram Singh. He is the settlement's shopkeeper, perhaps in his forties, educated and well-spoken. *Bhai saheb, kaise yahaan aana hua?* How did you happen to end up here? It is the reason I would hear over and over again, especially among Indo-Fijian squatters. His cane lease in Tavua was not renewed, and so he had to leave. He had a contact in the settlement who invited him to come, and he did. The non-renewal had a story behind it as I discovered later when I got to know him better. His lease was expiring and the landlord was willing to extend it for a substantial goodwill payment. He agreed to offer a certain amount, but his neighbour, keen to add 10 acres of rich cane land to his own, offered more and got the land. Nothing in a village is ever as simple as it appears.

'This place is home now', the *mukhiya* says with some feeling, and he wants to make something of his time here. There are about 30 residents in the area, many with school-age children. Many work in Suva as shop attendants, municipal workers, house cleaners, grass cutters, general handymen. There is an active *Ramayana mandali* in the settlement, with each family hosting a recital every month or so. All the major ceremonial occasions and festivals are observed. Holi is a very popular festival with people from rural backgrounds. People organise themselves in groups and patrol the settlement to guard against burglaries and violence. Safety of women and children is paramount in everyone's mind. As we talk over the weeks, I realise that children's education is the top priority. The residents have suffered disruption and desperation and they are determined that their children will be spared their fate. All this is an integral part of our history and heritage. I am told of some students from the settlements doing high school, and one or two are at Fiji Institute of Technology. This brings back memories of our own predicaments more than a half century ago, the same desperation, the same yearning for a more secure, stable life. I suspect the way we escaped that life, children here will too. But the fact that children have to endure them in the early years of the twenty-first century is a severe indictment of us as a society.

Hidden partly in the mangroves of Vatuwaqa by the river, Wailea is another informal settlement that shows the same mixture of hope and despair I have seen elsewhere. It is a mixed settlement of Fijians and Indo-Fijians. That brings its own challenges caused by the inevitable collision of cultural norms and expectations though overall relations are cordial. 'Too much *kerekere vinaka, Bahini*', a woman says to me. Too much request for simple things such as sugar, salt, rice, kerosene. 'But they are such a generous people,' another says, 'always ready to share whatever little they have. And they look out for each other.' I recognise this is an old Fijian communal custom from the villages. 'No matter what religion or race, *Bhaiya*, we all in the same boat. *Sab jahajibhai baitho*.' It is an apt analogy from our distant past. Thrown together by fate, they struggle, bound by the same concerns: the future of their children. 'We swim together, we sink together', the man says.

Sakiusa, a resident, talks about some particular problems faced by the iTaukei. 'There are too many new denominations here, brother. Too much *katchkatch*', squabbling. 'Whatever the church says must be done, right or wrong. Whatever the *vanua* says must be done, right or wrong.' But the hold of tradition and custom is slowly diminishing due to the levelling pressures of urban living. Survival, not subservience to custom, is the order of the day here. This may be liberating to some but the absence of constraints and established leadership spawns its own problems. Sakiusa talks about wayward young men who have fallen into 'wrong company'. One or two are doing jail time. 'They give us bad name.' And there are murmurs about minor internal friction among the iTaukei from different provinces with their own ways of doing things and particular codes of acceptable conduct invisible to outsiders. I hear muted words about 'Lauans' in the settlement and about frictions in church leadership accused of 'not listening to us'. But for all that, *lotu*, religion, retains a firm hold on people. Everyone goes to church in their Sunday finest, clutching a well-thumbed Bible in their hands. The *talatala*, preacher, is still a figure of authority commanding respect in the community. But for how much longer?

There are idlers here, too, as they are everywhere, but also people with unexpected entrepreneurial skills and ambitions. I meet a man from Kadavu, Vili, who had moved to Viti Levu and eventually to Wailea for the sake of his children. For a while he worked as a casual labourer, but then began to retail kava from his island in Suva. Kadavu kava is considered top of the range, and he makes a living from it. Some mothers tell me

about the bulk of their partners' earnings going to kava, and I see many stunted men in the settlement with leathery skin cracked by excessive consumption, *kanikani*. This is a Fiji-wide plague in the Indo-Fijian community, particularly where kava is often consumed without decorum or dignity. But I am more tolerant of 'grog-swipers' now than I once was. There is only so much reality mankind can bear, says TS Eliot, and there is so much grim reality to endure here. But I also feel deeply for mothers who have to feed their families somehow or face abuse and violence.

I meet another man, Harry (Hari), who sells marijuana he is sent from the highlands of Rakiraki. He speaks with a slight hissing sound because of two front teeth missing from a fight some years ago. Does he realise he is in a dangerous business? If caught, he could end up in jail.

Babu, come here after dark and see all the cars parked on the street. They come to buy this stuff. Big business people, police, politicians, everyone. Police are in it up to here. They provide protection for a little freebie on the side.

When I ask a policeman at a *Ramayana* recital in Wailea one evening, he smiles: 'Doc, we have much bigger fish to catch. This is small, *chota mota rojgari*, business. We have to live and let live.' He was not the only man of flexible sense of duty or morality I have met. A young man says to me that 'morality we cannot afford. That is for you rich people, Boss'. *Koi hisaab se aapan kaam chalo*. We have to make ends meet somehow. I ask Harry about high school kids doing drugs. 'No, *Babuji*,' he says looking straight at me, 'I never give them this stuff. Never. That will end their life, *jindagi barbaad*.' I discover that each settlement has its Harry or bootlegger. Drug abuse, once unheard-of or very carefully hidden, is widespread and on the rise. A man who was a regular marijuana user defends his habit because 'I can afford it. I like it. Nothing wrong with that. Better than booze. It's those buggers who can't: that's the problem.' A coin always has two sides.

The policeman I had talked to is a resident of Wailea. In his early forties, he is from Rakiraki and moved to Wailea about 10 years ago for the same reason that so many others have: better opportunities for his family, and especially the education of his two daughters, both now in high school. But why the squatter settlement and not anywhere else? 'Shortage of affordable housing and very high rents,' he says. He is saving for the future of his daughters. So it is a temporary stopover? 'Definitely yes.' But then he hesitates. He has developed an affection for the place. It gives him a sense of community he has not had before. 'People look up to me and

I look after them,' he says. Some of his fellow officers know his address and visit him occasionally for a bowl of grog, but he keeps his life private. He risks derision and ridicule if people come to know where he lives. I meet others, a Suva City Council staff and a primary schoolteacher with similar experience and expectation. They are unaware or are reluctant to admit that it is people like them who give squatters a bad name as freeloaders and spongers who don't belong there.

I have the overall picture of informal settlements. People gravitate to them for a variety of reasons, but mostly for a better future for their families. The public face of the settlements is scarred by cruel comments about being havens for criminals and crooks and spongers on the public purse, places of filth and disease, altogether unfit for human habitation. There are grains of truth in these perceptions, heartless as they might be, but they are grains only. I see despair but also much determination and pride. The squatter settlement is their temporary destination, not their destiny. I see a glimmer of hope in some of the younger men working in town. There is anger building up. One man says over grog:

They laugh at us, they take us for granted, call us names. How would you feel being unable to send your children to school or buy medicine when they are sick? Who wants to feel humiliated, depressed, worthless? Why don't they do something about the lease problem. *Bolo kutch karo*. We are kicked out but no one wants to know where we will go.

'Give us lease on state land which is lying idle,' another man says. 'We will vote for a party which gives us ninety-nine year leases.' These angry words make me realise how uninformed outsiders are about people in squatter settlements. There is anger and frustration and a willingness to take action. It is only a matter of time before politics comes to this place. This, after all, is where very large numbers of poor, restless people live. The fate of future governments will be determined by the voters of squatter settlements.

My conversations have mostly been with adults but my interest has also been sparked in the experience and perceptions of the children of squatters, their hopes and ambitions, their perceptions of the world around them. I approach Dinesh, the headmaster of Vatuwaqa Primary, an old acquaintance, to seek his advice. He is eager to help and gives me contacts at other schools in Samabula, Nabua and Nasinu that children of squatters attend. At morning tea in his office, he sends for a boy who is from Wailea. It is Yogesh, the boy I had met at the local shop some

months before. He avoids eye contact as if to say we have never met. Dinesh asks him to gather some other children like him to meet me after school. I suddenly realise that this breaches the research guidelines of my university. Ethical questions and sensitivities are involved. I have not sought the consent of the students I am about to meet. But it is too late; the die has already been cast. Yogesh is quiet. Perhaps he might be wondering why someone like me would be interested in people like him. Do I have an ulterior motive? It is a reaction I have encountered elsewhere as well. He says nothing and leaves the office head bowed. 'Why him,' I ask Dinesh? 'I will let you find that out for yourself.'

Much later, as I am about to return to Australia, I ask Yogesh about his reaction on our meeting in the headmaster's office. 'Sir, you are only called to the headmaster's office if there is some problem.' 'Such as?' 'If you haven't paid your fees, haven't completed your homework, got into a fight or are to be told not to come back to school.' 'What happens then?' Seems a rather harsh punishment. 'Sir, then you look for work like cutting grass, collecting bottles, sweeping shops, cleaning toilets.' 'You hesitated taking money I was giving you. Why?' 'Sir, ten dollars is a lot of money. People will ask questions. Did I get the money for doing something bad?' This took a second to sink in. So sexual abuse of children is not such an uncommon thing, after all. 'Have you been given big money before?' Yogesh does not answer, his eyes fixed on the ground. Instinctively, I put my arms around him. There are few things more disturbing than seeing innocent children preyed upon.

Yogesh and a group of about seven children gather in a classroom after school. Looking at the students, you could not distinguish them in their dress and demeanour from children not from squatter settlements. They are so polite and respectful. 'How do people react when they find out where you live,' I ask. 'I don't volunteer that information,' a student says. Another: 'They think we are a dirty poor people to keep away from.' 'Some of my friends don't mind, but they sort of just stay away.' One boy sums up what I sense is a general feeling. 'I wish people will see us as normal human beings. It is not our fault that we live in a squatter settlement.' It is clear that this will be a temporary stopover in a very long journey. 'So, what would you like to become when you grow up?' I ask. The professions of choice are medicine, accountancy, engineering, nursing. Why? Invariably, the answer is: 'So we can help people.' A girl,

perhaps 13 or 14, who wants to become a nurse, says: 'I will always live here. I will never leave.' I look at her for elaboration. 'Because, there will always be people in need here. They are my people.'

I ask Yogesh about his plans. 'I don't know, Sir.' He hesitates, looking at the ground. 'I don't know whether I will complete school.' He is always late with fees and has been warned several times. Expulsion will come if there are further delays. 'I will take care of that,' I assure him. Suddenly, he looks up at me wondering why, why this stranger is being kind to me. I say nothing. There are other problems at home. There is no electricity and often homework does not get done. There is house flooding in the rainy season. Mosquitoes from the mangrove swamps plague the area. There is dysentery and diarrhea, smallpox and a variety of skin diseases. There is no privacy. Yogesh says his mother will need him. Unprompted, he says: 'She is the only person I have got. She is my everything. I will never leave her.' This is a story I have heard elsewhere as well, the protective feeling children have for their parents, especially single mothers.

I want to meet Yogesh's mother. I suddenly realise that something about Yogesh has touched me, opened my eyes. He is so polite, attentive, bright. He will go places if only he has the opportunity. I am troubled and angry that through no fault of their own, children like Yogesh have to endure this, facing a future that seems so bleak; and the world seems not to care. I have paid his fees and will contribute to his schooling expenses. This is instinctive. I think of the many helping hands I had along my own journey. Ours, too, was a precarious life more than a half century ago. I have thought of starting night and weekend classes for children from squatter settlements to help with their assignments and homework. It is still a dream I have.

I return to Yogesh's mother. 'Sir, my mother is not well,' Yogesh says. 'Anything serious?' 'Woman problem, Sir.' 'Next week or week after will be fine.' Yogesh hesitates. 'Sir?' Perhaps Yogesh does not want me to see his 'house,' the surroundings from where he comes, perhaps out of embarrassment. It is a reaction I have received before. Perhaps there is fear that I might be turned off and leave as so many other researchers have done in the past. 'Sir, I will ask my mother.' Some people I meet at the local shop have seen me with Yogesh. 'Nice boy. You after something, Boss? I can arrange, I know lots of good boys, and girls, too,' a man says to me, winking. 'Fuck you,' I feel like saying but hold my tongue. 'No, I am not looking for cheap sex. I am trying to understand the squatter

problem around here.’ The man smiles, unrelenting. ‘Yes, Boss, that’s what they all say. I know what they want.’ I explain that I would like to meet Yogesh’s parents. ‘The father dead long time,’ the man says. ‘Too much homebrew. Waste time *falla*.’ And the mother?’ The man gives a knowing smile. ‘Suzie? Very nice. Good for you. You want?’ I do not like the drift of this conversation. ‘Where, how, can I meet her?’ ‘I arrange for you. One packet of cigarette, *bas*.’ When I don’t reply, he says, ‘Go at six to the back of the Air Pacific building near the carpark and ask for Suzie.’

I hesitate. This is unfamiliar territory for me, and I am a little concerned about the public reaction to seeing me in strange places at night. I can visualise the newspaper headline: ‘Dr Lal on the Prowl?’ But there is something about all I have been told or heard that makes me determined to proceed. I park the car in the carpark behind Westpac and walk tentatively towards the Air Pacific building. I see the glow of cigarettes in the dim light. About four or five women in tight dresses and heavy makeup are loitering around. I ask for Suzie. ‘She is “on duty” right now. Back in half an hour’, a woman says. ‘Can I help, honey? I give you good time, sweetie. Yes?’ I thank her and drive back home. The following night, I return, and this time Suzie is around. A woman in her late thirties, perhaps early forties, shortish, heavily perfumed and powdered, cigarette in hand. ‘You want? Yes?’ I am taken aback by the business-like, transactional directness of her words. Before I can say anything, she says: ‘Forty dollars. Behind the Civic Centre. Yes?’ ‘Thanks, but no.’ I hand her \$20 along with my telephone number. ‘Please call me when you can,’ and then leave hurriedly, avoiding notice. Suddenly, I understand Yogesh’s hesitation in introducing me to his mother and the man’s remarks at the shop. Suzie is a sex worker.

Mid-afternoon a few days later the phone rings. Suzie is on the line. ‘You from the police, yes?’ ‘No, ma’am.’ ‘From Social Welfare?’ ‘No.’ ‘Why you come looking for me then?’ ‘To talk.’ ‘About what? I don’t talk to strangers.’ I suggest I pick her up discreetly at Vatuwaqa Bridge and go to Suva Point for an hour or so. Suzie hesitates, uncertain about me and my motives. Men don’t go to people like Suzie to talk, but she agrees for reasons I still cannot fathom. We meet midday Sunday, pick up a couple of cans of soft drinks at the local BP gas station and go to Suva Point. Suzie is in the back seat. It is an awkward drive. We avoid direct eye contact. Suzie looks ‘normal’ now without her makeup, cheap red lipstick and tight black dress. She is wearing a light blue T-shirt and floral knee-length dress. We sit on a park bench in the shade of an acacia tree facing Suva Point as I explain the purpose of my talking to her. Yogesh had told

her about a man who had been kind to him and she asked if it was me. When I say yes, she becomes less tense. *Hamaar jindagi kuchh nahi haye. Bas ek toota khilauna haye.* My life is nothing. I am just a broken toy. Her brutal candour shook me momentarily, as did the embittered hurt in Suzie's voice. 'I will think about it', Suzie says, meaning talking to me, as I drop her off.

Over the next few months, we meet several times at different places around Suva: Bulachino Cafe in Raiwaqa, Colo-i-Suva Coffee Shop, Laucala Bay Teahouse. Suzie will not have any conversation taped. I can only write down notes. I will not use her real name nor the place she lives or comes from. There will be no photos taken. I will pay a small something every time we meet. I will not mention anything she says to Yogesh. Protecting her son is her top priority. 'He is innocent,' she says emphatically, looking directly into my eyes, 'and he must remain that way. Forever, you understand?' And I will never again go to the back of the Air Pacific building either because her co-workers will disown her. 'They don't know what you want.' I agree with all her conditions, grateful for her willingness to cooperate.

Suzie (Sushila Devi) is from the region of Tavua, the second of five children. Her father, Gajadhar, was a prominent cane farmer and community leader in the Bulabula village. A bright student, Sushila dropped out of school after Form 5 (Grade 11). Why, I wondered. 'Because I became pregnant.' A neighbour's son was the culprit. Teenage pregnancy is rare in Indo-Fijian families (or carefully hidden) and the cause of great shame. The 'good name' of the family has to be protected at all cost, especially for her two younger sisters. Abortion was considered, but the news would leak out, causing irreparable damage to the family's reputation. Once or twice Gajadhar thought of dispatching Sushila to remove the stain on the family's name, but the consequences could be disastrous for everyone. A long jail sentence would ruin the family. The best option, the family agreed, would be to dispatch her to an uncle's place in remote village in Ba where she would be unknown. They would give the family food and money in compensation.

But it was an arrangement for the duration of the pregnancy only, and Sushila was expected to find her own way in the world after Yogesh was born. Once or twice Sushila's mother came to visit and wanted to adopt Yogesh without revealing his identity, but Sushila would have none of it. He was her flesh and blood and she would bring him up herself. Gajadhar

had vowed never to allow Sushila to set foot on the family property. For him she was as good as dead. Such unforgiving spirit is common among our people. Family *izzat*, honour, counts for a great deal. A way was found. Ram Jattan, a casual labourer from a neighbouring village, had gone to Suva and was living in a squatter settlement there. The uncle arranged for Sushila to live with him, more to get rid of her from his home. There was no paperwork, no documentation, not even a small *puja* to farewell her. It is a very brutal village way of dealing with women who breach patriarchal social boundaries. Men get away scot-free, as the man who impregnated Sushila did. Women bear the burden of abuse for the rest of their lives.

That was how Sushila came to Suva. They moved from one squatter settlement to another every two or three years. Ram Jattan was a casual labourer, cleaning drains, mowing other people's lawns, doing ordinary repair jobs here and there. Sushila took up domestic duties in Suva by turns cooking cleaning, ironing and minding children and doing any other odd job that she came by. As a single woman, young and attractive, she was vulnerable to sexual advances from men in the house and their friends in the neighbourhood. 'Practice sessions', younger men called it. It is a common enough occurrence often excused as 'what boys do'. Refusal to oblige could mean immediate termination. And, so, Sushila 'obliged', week after week, month after month, to forgettable men of nondescript backgrounds. It was part of her 'job', Suzie convinced herself. She never told anybody. Her private grief remained private.

Ram Jattan was no better than other men. Sex was not his thing, drink was. He began making small amounts of homebrew (rice whisky) at the back of his shack among mangrove trees. This after a while became his main preoccupation. All of Sushila's earnings went into buying the ingredients, leaving hardly anything for herself and Yogesh. Police officers demanded free booze for turning a blind eye to illegal activity. Bootlegging was very popular, which led to the emergence of many bootleggers. Each settlement had at least two. Ram Jattan himself drank heavily every night almost to the point of unconsciousness. He demanded hot meals at odd hours of the night. Enraged swear words would fly across the room if Sushila did not jump to her feet immediately: *kutia*, *chinaar*, *bajaaru*. More than the hurt the abuse caused Sushila, she was distressed beyond words to see the effect it was having on Yogesh. He would avoid Ram Jattan whenever he could. When he was wild and dangerous with booze, Yogesh would go to his Fijian neighbour's shack to do his homework or

just to have a momentary peace of mind. Ram Jattan's violent and abusive ways, now becoming more regular, were well known to the neighbours. One night, Sushila reached the end of her tether when Ram Jattan slapped Yogesh hard when he was late returning from the shop with a packet of cigarettes. '*Bajaaru ke baccha*', he called him, son of a prostitute. That, as the cliché has it, broke the camel's back. As Ram Jattan lay in drunken sleep, Sushila smothered him to death with a pillow. Word spread the next day that a very drunk Ram Jattan had died peacefully in his sleep. A few residents came to his cremation at the Vatuwaqa crematorium.

Ram Jattan's death opened a new chapter in Sushila's life. A few women from the settlement came to offer comfort to a fellow woman facing the world alone. Rambha told Sushila about women she called *Raat ke Rani*, Ladies of the Night, around Suva. There was good money to be made for a few hours' work, she said. Sushila hesitated. It was one thing to submit to her bosses and their friends but quite another to be on the open market to complete strangers from unknown backgrounds. One night she accompanied Rambha to observe the scene for herself. Rambha made close to a hundred dollars that night. A week or two later Suzie joined and has been a 'Lady of the Night' for several years now. The details of her nightly life remained private.

They call us names, think we are low-lives, *malicch*, *achoot*, dirty untouchables, *phuta pataka*, spent firecracker, useless. They call us prostitutes, but what do they call men who pay for our services?

A very fair question. I had no idea, still don't. I can still feel the disgust in Suzie's voice. 'You should see who the men are: rich people, leaders, business people, police officers. *Bada bada admi log*. They all the same, these men, married with families, *rakshas*.' She continues: 'Let people accept that this sort of thing happens right under their noses and make it legal. We will all be safer then.' There is some muted discussion about legalising prostitution, but it will not go anywhere. The moral police of society will make sure of that even as they themselves partake of this sordid trade in flesh.

'What would you say are some of the more difficult things about living in a squatter settlement?' I ask. (What a ponderous, academic way of asking a simple question, I now realise.) Suzie misses the freedom she had in the village to visit family and friends whenever she liked. Here she feels imprisoned. 'We are completely cut off from home. No one wants to know us. It is as if we are dead.' One of her sisters got married but she

was not invited, did not even know about it. 'I have lost all my family and friends.' No one has ever come to visit her, and she hasn't been back even for a visit for fear of the family's reaction, especially her father's. Of far greater sadness is her concern for Yogesh. 'He will never know his father. He will never know his grandparents. He will have no cousins to grow up with. I will never be able to give him one thing he deserves most, his *bachpana*,' an innocent, carefree childhood. She talks about the squalid living conditions in the settlement. 'Sometimes, you have to go outside to relieve yourself, and you don't know who is watching, lurking in the jungle', she says. Some videos have been circulating in the settlement. The worst for Suzie, though, is the complete lack of privacy at home.

You cook and sleep in the same tiny room covered with soot and smoke and dust, full of cockroaches and mosquitoes, unbearably damp in the rainy season.

Then: 'Can you imagine how a mother feels having a stranger on top of you while your son lies awake next to you?'

One Sunday at Suva Point, at my request Suzie introduces me to a group of her friends, all women but not all of them 'Ladies of the Night': Rosie, Jasmine, Jema, Rambha (Rambo) and a couple of others. The leader is a lady in her mid-30s who works at the local garment factory. 'We all speak as one', she says. I get the hint. 'United we stand, divided we fall', she says, repeating a trade union slogan pasted on the outside wall of the union office. She is politically engaged. 'We are Labour', she says with the conviction of a true believer. I ask about life on the factory floor. 'You have to seek permission to go to the toilet, your time at lunch is closely monitored. You are thoroughly checked, sometimes body-searched, before you clock-off.' All this is common knowledge around Suva apparently, but nothing ever happens because the lawmakers are in their pockets. 'But they don't always win', the lady says.

I am intrigued. One of them tells a story about a factory owner who was a sexual predator, asking a woman of his choice to stay back after work. When she told her friends what happened, they hatched up a plot. Next time, one of them will bring a camera along and hide in the back room while the man had his way in his office. She captured him in the act and shared the photos with the others. Instead of confronting the man with it, they decided to ask the office boy to take the photos to the owner's wife. 'Hand delivered', they chuckled. He just 'shrivelled up' after that, they said amid uproarious laughter. Another story does the rounds of a manager

who constantly made sexually suggestive remarks and stroked his crotch in full view of his female workers. A lesson had to be taught, the women agree. One day at closing time, they closed the door and waited for the man to come out. They jumped on him as soon as he did, pinned him to the floor and took turns urinating on him, using the choicest Hindi swear words they could think of: *bhonsra* (cunt), *maichod* (motherfucker), *gandu* (arsehole). How they came up with this idea I did not have the courage to ask, but I recalled some *girmitiya* women in Labasa punishing a predatory European overseer in this way. Another example I recall old timers recounting was of some *girmitiya* women splashing a bucketful of water on an offending overseer's face, then wrestling the shaken fellow to the ground in the middle of a cane field and roughly rubbing pounded raw hot chilli –*rockete* – on his penis and anus, *puddu* and *chuttar*, causing unimaginable pain and discomfort, not to say acute embarrassment. This apparently is an old, well-understood peasant Indian women's way of protesting and punishing sexual predators. Such moments of triumph are rare, but they are cherished and I applauded the women for their audacity and courage. The manager's humiliation was complete. The next day, he transferred to the company's Lautoka factory, and nothing further was heard from or about him.

These stories and others I hear complicate an otherwise simplistic picture we get of women as submissive, servile people, under the firm foot of their husbands. There is violence and abuse, to be sure, but what I also see are numerous cases of resilience and enterprise that are surprising to find in a place like this. My niece in Cunningham makes Indian sweets to sell. I meet another woman who sews and repairs dresses. In Nanuku a woman runs a small curry catering business for wealthy Suva homes while another makes fried peanuts and *ghugri* (spicy cooked green peas). In Wailea, I meet a woman who weaves baskets from pandanus leaves she collects from neighbouring mangrove swamps. They go about their business with quiet dignity. They are the pillars of their families, and many children I have spoken to over the months talk affectionately about their mothers. They remind me powerfully of mothers of my own generation in rural Vanua Levu, simple peasant women of enormous dignity and pride who understood the meaning of pain and suffering and wanted to spare their children of that fate. And you had Colonial Sugar Refining Company overseers and colonial officials accusing Indian indentured women of lacking the 'motherly instinct'. If only they could witness this – and their rustic wisdom. I recall my mother telling us when the chips were

really down, 'Remember, you cannot see stars without darkness'; that is, some hardship can stiffen your spine, nourish your soul. And cautioning against rushed judgments: 'No matter how thin I make it, a *roti* always has two sides.'

'Sir, you met my mother?' Yogesh asks when I see him after a week or so. 'Yes, and she's a very nice person, too. She wants to give you the best future any mother can.' Yogesh looked straight at me and said, 'So you know all about us now.' I couldn't quite read his mind. Was he relieved that I knew the truth without him having to tell me? Or did he think that now that I knew that I would leave. 'Nothing changes, Yogesh. I will still be your friend if you will have me.' Yogesh shook my hand firmly. 'Yes, Sir.' 'Remember, young man, don't dwell on things that went wrong,' I said, 'think about what to do next. You can't change the past, but you can do something about the future. You will never find your future in a rear view mirror.' Homilies like that. Yogesh sensed that the end was coming, that it was time for me to return to Australia. He turned away from me and looked vacantly into the distance. I will miss him too. I promised to keep in touch. And we did. Yogesh had completed his primary school and was preparing to go to Vatuwaqa High. Had he thought of a career, I wondered in one of my letters. 'I want to be a teacher, Sir. I want to help my people. I want to make a difference.' 'All your friends I have met want to make a fast buck. Good onya, son.' There is something deeply moving about such idealism in such fetid, wretched place. We wrote to each other for a while, but it did not last long, not out of fatigue or boredom but because of our, or rather my, pressing preoccupations, the call of duty.

A couple of years later I return to Fiji to cover the general elections of 1999, keen to assess the reaction of the angry squatters. I meet some of them again. They are energised, feel empowered that big politicians are visiting them and listening to their concerns. No one talks about principles here; that is empty talk; they all talk about *pet*, livelihood, issues: water, electricity, high cost of living, minimum wages, social security. 'Bread and butter issues', politicians call it. The Labour Party understands the mood of these people better than its rivals. There is another change that I suspect will be the sign of things to come. The people of the squatter settlements want the leaders to come to them in their settlements if they want their vote. Gone, I suspect, are the big, rousing rallies of the past. 'Pocket meetings' are the order of the day. 'Mohammed must come to the mountain, not the other way around', a man says to me with evident

satisfaction. 'We have been on television', a man grins, as if to say, who would have thought. 'Our time is coming.' The election results would bear that out.

I go to Vatuwaqa to look up Yogesh. I asked after him at the local shop. 'We haven't seen the boy for a long time', the shopkeeper says. 'These people don't stay in the same place for very long.' I go to Vatuwaqa High, but Yogesh has not been a student there, nor at other neighbouring schools, such as Muslim High. He has not been seen at the usual haunts around the area. And no one among the 'Ladies of the Night' seems to have heard of Suzie or did not want to speak about her to me. The wall of self-imposed silence is impenetrable. I later hear that a woman had been brutally bashed and died from injuries she suffered during one of the nights behind the Suva Civic Centre. Could it have been Suzie, I wonder? It is difficult to say. The hospital records are silent, and the police are no help. I felt cheated. Somewhere along the way, Suzie had begun to call me *bhaiya*, older brother, and I felt vaguely protective about her, angry at the fate visited upon her through no fault of her own by her own people. She paid the ultimate price, but what about men who abused her to their hearts' content? Suzie had opened for me a window onto a world that I had not previously known. I had in mind to engage her on my next project on female suicides in Fiji. That might never be. For now, there will be no closure, I fear, no final ending. I am more disturbed about Yogesh, this bright boy of promise who could have gone places and might still if he is not damaged beyond repair. Yogesh is somewhere in Suva, alive, I hope. It's a desperate hope, forlorn. I have placed a notice in the papers and mentioned him in an interview on the radio. I hope to hear from him one of these days soon.

This text is taken from *Suva Stories: A History of the Capital of Fiji*,
edited by Nicholas Halter, published 2022, The Australian National
University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/SS.2022.19