

The Tamarind Tree: Vignettes from a Plantation Frontier in Fiji

*Jala hai jism jahan dil bhi jal gaya hoga
Kuraidtey ho jo ab raakh justju kya hai*

If the body is burnt, so must have been the heart
Why rake the ashes now, what is the search for?

Ghalib

Brij V. Lal

May 1962. The Tamarind Tree was struck by lightning and razed. Father cried inconsolably. His indentured father had died a few weeks earlier, and now the Tree was gone. We children had no idea about the cause or the depth of his grief. It was not until many decades later that I discovered through a circuitous route of conjectures, assumptions and reflections that the Tamarind Tree ground was *terra sacra* for Father, a place of special memories linking him to another past and time. Father was not much of a talker, parsimonious with his emotions like most men of his generation, except when angry. Our conversations, if any, were perfunctory, more in the nature of brisk instructions from him about household chores to be completed before and after school. But that sight of a grown up man crying like a child remained with me through all the many long years of research and writing about our past. I can still recall Father's tattered wet khaki clothes clinging to his body as he stood in the drenching rain in the middle of the compound muttering words of loss and regret that I have now forgotten, having his head shaved and a well-tended luxuriant moustache reduced permanently to a stubble in bereavement, village old timers gathering at our place for a week-long period of *Ramayan* recital and devotional singing followed at the end by a communal vegetarian feast. The details welled up whenever the subject of indenture arose.

The Tamarind Tree was on the banks of the Wailevu River, about a mile down the hill from the headquarters of Labasa's Tua Tua Sector Office of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), the main employer

of Indian indentured labour in Fiji. My very vague memory is of a tall, gnarled tree, vine-wrapped, standing forlornly in over grown grass, abandoned. But I saw it when its glory days as the *adda*, the gathering place, of the girmitiyas had long been over. For Father, it was different. The Tree had been there for as long as he could remember. It took him back to his own childhood in the immediate post-indenture days of the 1920s. How the Tree came to Tua Tua no one really knew. People said it was brought by the early girmitiyas sometime in the mid-1890s when cane came to Labasa. Others thought it arrived with the South Indians much later. Tamarind is an essential ingredient in many South Indian dishes. But the question of origin was moot now. Who brought the tree, when, or how, did not really matter much to people of Father's generation. What mattered was that it was a *mulki* tree, a plant from the original homeland and, therefore, special.

Tua Tua was one of the CSR's earliest sectors in Labasa, and one of the largest and the most prosperous, so people said, full of sturdy thatched homes, solid all-weather roads and rich red soil. Aja, my grandfather, completed his indenture there as a stable hand for the Company's draught horses. When it ended in 1913, he moved to Tabia some five miles away. But since there was nothing in Tabia then, he continued to walk to Tua Tua to harvest cane and work as a general labourer on the CSR estates, keeping the connection alive to the place where it had all started for him, the first leg of his Fijian journey. The Tamarind Tree was his touchstone, his indispensable site of communion with his fellow girmitiyas living and dead alike.

I realise now, decades later, why the Tamarind Tree was so fondly remembered by the old timers, what it meant to them. The Tree connected people to the past and served as a visible reminder of ancestral roots and routes. It was the initial point of entry for the new girmitiyas to the Tua Tua Sector. Five or ten years later, it would be the final point of departure for those whose gimit had ended and who were now moving out to newer settlements opening up all around Labasa miles away from the sugar mill at the Qawa River. The Tree was the site of rest and respite from the relentless pace of plantation work. If the estate lines were decrepit and devoid of any sense of dignity and personal and social space, and full of the Company's spies, the Tamarind Tree was a beacon of hope offering fleeting glimpses of freedom and opportunity on the other side of gimit. It was symbolically a source of renewal, rejuvenation and reassurance amidst all the confusions of dislocation and rupture. I have no doubt there were hundreds of tamarind, or mango or banyan, trees wherever girmitiyas were found, in Fiji and other sugar colonies around the world,

witnesses to their special moments of triumphs and tragedies.

The departures provoked mixed emotion. Five years of working together in mills, in the cane fields, as domestic servants or as stable hands, and sharing the confined space in the lines, had bred a sense of companionship and camaraderie, a bond of friendship forged in circumstances of great adversity. That communal living, the security borne of collective servitude, was coming to an end. No one knew where they might find land to settle or when they might meet again. They would now be on their own, starting all over again, often without a helping hand. Virgin land would have to be broken and brought into cultivation. Dangers lurked around every corner: flood, fire, wild pigs, theft of property, coercion by fellow men, violence. New relationships would have to be established, often with complete strangers and in unanticipated circumstances. New rules of social engagement would have to be developed, innovative ways found to minimise the inevitable frictions and conflicts in the newly emerging communities as people struggled to establish themselves and find a place they could call their own.

There were good reasons for apprehension, but many also felt a palpable sense of relief that gimit was only a temporary detention, not a life sentence as they had feared. For them, the end could not have come sooner. The newly-freed were encouraged by stories of men who had farms of their own, grew their own crops, and built solid homes. Some were reported to have become big leaders, even moneylenders, in some settlements. Families would come, children married off, schools started and ways found to give the nascent community a semblance of coherence and structure. In time, a new world would emerge, built with fragments from a remembered past but always, in the early days, haunted by the fear of the unknown, and the unthinkable prospect of failure. As people said, with Tolstoyan wisdom, everyone shared in your prosperity, but if you failed, you failed alone. The comfort of a settled, supportive community was some way into the future.

It was under the Tamarind Tree that the newcomers were inducted into the culture and mores of the local estate, their home for the next five years or more. They would be told about the people to avoid, the overseers to be on the lookout for, the way to handle difficult tasks in the fields, tactics to employ to frustrate unfair demands made on them (tools could be damaged, sickness could be feigned, a long time taken to complete a task). They would learn where private pleasures in food and flesh could be safely indulged. For a little something on the side, anything was possible, anything could be arranged, cigarettes, alcohol, even women. Everyone knew who the best pimps and procurers in Tua Tua were. No wonder

some gimitiyas called the estate lines brothels, *kasbighars*. If some plot had to be hatched about giving a hiding to a sirdar or an overseer, if some particularly troublesome gimitiya had to be put in his place or brought into line, if some Company farm had to be torched in retaliation for violence against the labourers, the Tamarind Tree was the place to meet and plan. The plots hatched there and the secrets shared were safe.

Departures and arrivals, transactions and transitions: the Tamarind Tree was a silent witness to all these and much more. If only it could talk. From my scarce notes and fading memory, I now recall stories these men heard under the Tamarind Tree about the labyrinthine world of gimit. They are partial, private recollections of old men, but they are all I have (perhaps all they had too). Like life itself, there is no single pattern to them, no single theme or narrative. Together, though, they provide an insight into a complex and conflicted world that is now well beyond recall. Ayesha Jalal, the noted Pakistan-born historian of the Indian subcontinent, has written in the Preface to her book on *Saadat Hasan Manto*, the writer of the incomparable short story 'Toba Tek Singh' that 'It is possible to chalk out a new interdisciplinary way of reconnecting the histories of individuals, families, communities, and states in the throes of cataclysmic change' (2013: xii). She goes on to suggest that 'Microhistorical detail can illuminate the texture of macrohistorical change.' The cause of historical scholarship would be enriched, Jalal argues, if investigations of historical causation were put on a collision course with the reality of individual lived experience. This essay could be viewed as such a collision course.

As Father talked, memories came flooding back to him in a way that completely surprised him, releasing a floodgate of long-forgotten emotions. They were as vivid and clear to him as broad daylight. He remembered accompanying Aja to the Wailevu market at the Tamarind Tree on Saturdays to sell peanuts, maize, bean and baigan he grew on his ten acre farm. People from all around Wailevu came, men dressed in the traditional Indian garb of *dhoti* and *pagri* and long flowing *kurta*. Buying and selling was really an excuse for weekly or monthly reunions. After five years of living together in the labour lines during the age of indenture, people had dispersed to wherever they could find a piece of land to rent. There was no rhyme or reason to the way Indian settlements evolved. Contingency and circumstance determined outcomes. Meeting at the market under the Tamarind Tree kept the memories of old companionship alive. What father remembered from those distant conversations was the clear consensus among the gimitiyas that fruits back home in India were always sweeter, the best. Indeed, everything about *mulk*, homeland, was

golden, perfect: the nostalgia of a displaced people dealt a rough hand by fate. What strikes me now about the *girimitiyas* is how they were a people caught in-between, stranded in the cul-de-sac of a past vanishing before their eyes. They were living in a place they could not escape, making home in a land they could not fully embrace. Theirs was, I suppose, the quintessential dilemmas of belonging and attachment, of home and homeland that all migrant peoples face.

It was at gatherings under the Tamarind Tree that people played at the rituals and ceremonies they remembered from their childhood back in India. Higher caste men came to the market to have their weekly shave and regular haircut by their favourite *hajam*, traditional barbers. The *hajam* would in return get some lentils and rice as compensation. The ritual had to be observed even though everyone knew it to be just that, a ritual, Father said. It was their way of keeping a world alive even though they knew in their hearts that it was for all practical purposes dead. Aja was no exception. Priests dispensed advice about the most propitious days for this *puja* or that. Sometime in the 1920s, people built a small *kuti*, a small hut, near the Tamarind Tree, and priests took turns reading the scriptures and officiating at thanksgiving celebrations hosted by families for some piece of good fortune or in anticipation of a blessing – for the birth of a son, for example, for the cure of some mysterious ailment, or for lifting of a curse. Dates for festivals would be announced and taken to the settlements. Astrological charts would be drawn up for those who wanted it, names for babies suggested. People would make discreet enquiries about the availability of marriageable boys and girls. Marriages were still arranged by parents and community elders, preferably within a prescribed range of castes.

Caste rules were loosening and becoming unenforceable, but it was only a foolhardy man who would publicly breach community consensus about social mores and cultural practices. Father recalled the case of Hirwa who had unwittingly committed the heinous ‘crime’ of selling a cow to a Muslim. It was automatically assumed that the cow would be slaughtered for meat. Cow was mother incarnate for Hindus. When the news became public, Hirwa was hauled before the elders, asked to do penance, *prashchayat*, and give a feast, *bhandara*, to his fellow village Hindus as well as a calf each to the three Brahmin families in the immediate neighbourhood. Breaching important social values could lead to social ostracism: *Huqqa-Pani-Bund*. People would be reluctant to marry into the family. They would avoid attending their funeral and mourning ceremonies. No *mandali* would recite the *Ramayana* at their place. Cane fields might be torched, people beaten up, womenfolk interfered with. So

a feast had to be given, whatever the cost. This could financially cripple the feast giver, as happened with Hirwa. Broke and depressed, he left the village for some unknown place far away, leaving his past behind him. No one ever saw him again. The practice of punishing people using customary ways went with the old timers as the rule of tradition gradually gave way to the rule of law.

For Father as a young boy, accompanying Aja to the annual festivals held at the Wailevu grounds was the most exciting time of the year. It was the same for children of my generation growing up without radio, television and other inventions now so commonplace. *Ram Lila* and *Holi* or *Phagwa* were the main festivals for the largely Hindu community around Wailevu. *Ram Lila* enacted the story of the *Ramayana*. For seven days the text would be read by groups of men, from different settlements taking turns, to the accompaniment of rudimentary music (*dholak*, harmonium, *dandtaal*). These could sometimes morph into inter-village competitions to see who best ‘sang’ the *Ramayana*. The story of Rama, his childhood, exile and eventual triumphal return, would be acted out by men and boys with the right head gear and multi-coloured clothes. People would sit rapt on the sack-covered ground witnessing the gripping drama being acted out before them by their own children or siblings. As a child, I relished playing the role of a monkey in Lord Hanuman’s army (*baanar sena*) on its way to conquer Lanka, with my bouncy iron ‘tail’ wrapped in coloured crepe paper. Our performance would be the subject of much mirthful commentary at home and in school.

Phagwa was a more riotous affair, a festival of colours, celebrated at the end of the agricultural season on the last day of the lunar month. People played with coloured water and sprinkled powder on each other as they went from home to home singing specially composed songs, *chautals*. The climax came with the burning of the effigy of the evil king Hiranakashyap. A huge bonfire would light up the sky for all the neighbouring villages to see. One year, sparks from the bonfire set a nearby cane field alight, damaging several acres of the crop. The cause was disputed by some old timers who thought people from another Sector, jealous of the popularity of the Tamarind Tree celebrations, had torched the fields. Another theory had Muslims responsible because they resented the loud musical processions by the mosque especially during the Friday prayers. Some blamed a family of thieves who were publicly shamed for stealing poultry (*murgi chor*). In typical village fashion, the speculations could be unending. Whatever the cause, the CSR banned the celebrations at the Tamarind Tree for good. Thereafter, *Phagwa* became a local village-based celebration, and so it remains today.

Father's recollection of Phagwa reminded me of the Muslim festival of *Mohurram* (or *Tazia*) marking the martyrdom of Prophet Mohammed's grandsons Hasan and Hussain. It was a public holiday in all the colonies which had Indian indentured labour. In the Caribbean, it was invariably associated with drunkenness. On that one day, people were allowed to let their hair down, or, to change the metaphor, let off steam. Some latter day social theorists see the drunken behaviour 'as an act of resistance' against the planters, but it was probably little more than another excuse to have fun. Was there similar licence in Labasa, I asked Father. Alcohol was restricted to a few well known and well-connected Indians, and the restrictions were not removed until the 1960s. But other drugs were around, principally *ganja*, marijuana, which old times of comparable caste group, *biraadri*, smoked from a hookah in the *belo*, men's house. We children were not allowed near the building when the *girmitiyas* were talking about 'secret things': *aapas ke baat*. I still vividly remember plants with serrated leaves at our well which we were told not to touch because they were 'holy.' *Ganja* gradually disappeared with the *girmitiyas*, though now it is making a comeback in some of the more remote parts of the country. *Yaqona*, or kava, became the principal social drink of the community, and alcohol when drinking restrictions were removed.

Kava, *Piper methysticum*, was the first Fijian item the Indians truly appropriated. It is a mildly narcotic drink, muddy in colour, made from pounded root and stems of the plant. It was surreptitiously bartered with the Fijians who lived at the edge of the sugar estate. In exchange for salt, sugar, rice and spices, the Indians got fish, crab and prawns. These transactions were strictly illegal, for the government forbade contact between the two communities. The exchanges took place at the Tamarind Tree during late weekend afternoons or early evenings when chances of detection were slim. The old timers remembered one Fijian man, Sekope, who was a regular at the Tamarind Tree: roly-polly, frequently shirtless, hairy-chested and a very savvy negotiator. *Hum hiyan ke raja baitho*, he used to say, 'I am the king of this place.' He might have been, it is difficult to say. People remembered him as an open, friendly man but what they admired most was his fluency in the local variant of Hindustani, spiced with Fijian words and phrases and Hindi swear words (*sala chutia*, arsehole). The Tamarind Tree transactions crossed barriers and boundaries, but that was all the interaction between the two communities there was. For the most part, the Fijians and the Indians continued to view each other through the prism of prejudice and fear.

The demanding plantation routine left the *girmitiyas* little time for idleness or indulgence. But weekends were free and during the drier

months people gathered at the Wailevu grounds for fun and frivolity. *Gatka*, stick fighting, was popular but *Kushti*, wrestling, was the main sport on the estates. It was familiar and cheap and entertaining and, more important, encouraged by the CSR as a way to keep men fit. Sometimes, it was staged as an inter-Sector wrestling competition and sometimes a contest between the free and those still under indenture. Prize did not matter, Father said, what counted was pride, in oneself and in one's Sector. Rahiman, a recently freed labourer from Waiqele, was the champion wrestler widely known throughout Labasa. He was the man to beat. Once, a man named Jhagru challenged him to a contest. Everyone thought it would be a quick one-way contest, over in minutes if not seconds. But Jhagru had other ideas. He confided his plan to some close friends who decided to put up a large sum of prize money behind him. Confident as ever, Rahiman's followers backed him with a similarly large sum, feeling almost sorry for his opponent. A large crowd gathered at the Tamarind Tree on the advertised day. As the two men were about to enter the 'ring,' word spread that Jhagru had rubbed his body with pig fat. Rahiman, being a devout Muslim, refused even to shake hands with a pig-fat smeared man, let alone wrestle with him and so forfeited the match, and the prize money. There was consternation in the crowd. Nothing like this had ever happened before, this act of pure provocation. Some applauded Jhagru's cunning audacity ('how did he ever think of that!') while others condemned his cowardly, potentially peace-disrupting act.

The hornet's nest had been disturbed. Rahiman's Muslim supporters, especially those who had backed him, were outraged at Jhagru's treachery and the insulting jeers and taunts of his supporters. Resentment had been building up among some Muslims who felt that Hindus were using their numbers to push them around. They were not being consulted on important decisions affecting everyone, taken for granted. It was time to make a stand before they were reduced to nothing. The very next day, they slaughtered a calf in full view of some Hindu women washing clothes at the edge of the Wailevu River and were skinning the carcass strung from the branch of a mango tree. News of the slaughter spread like the proverbial wildfire in Wailevu and beyond. For Hindus, slaughtering cattle was bad enough, but doing it in such a brazen manner was provocative in the extreme. Frenzied meetings were held by both sides, and solemn oaths taken to teach a lesson that would not be forgotten for generations. Knives were sharpened and stones and sticks gathered for the inevitable bloody showdown. Someone even had a bucketful of pig's blood to throw down the wells of Muslims for whom the pig is the filthiest of all animals with which contact in any form is forbidden, *haram*. The whole

community was on tenterhooks. Nothing less than one's collective honour, *izzat*, was at stake and it had to be defended with blood, if it came to that. Lines in the sand could be so easily drawn and gauntlet thrown down without a second thought.

Someone had the presence of mind to report the matter to the Tua Tua Sector Office. Mr. Sebastian immediately drove to the Tamarind Tree and gathered leaders of both communities for an urgent meeting. Mr. Sebastian was trusted as few other overseers were. Unable to pronounce his name, people had dubbed him Mr. Subhas Chand. He had been at Tua Tua for several years. 'This is CSR land,' he told the leaders, and no disturbance would be tolerated on it. 'What will the other Sectors think? Have you thought of the reputation of this place, your reputations? Do you want to go to gaol for something stupid such as this?' '*Badmashi bund*,' he declared, stop this nonsense. 'No more Kushti from now on. Kushti *khatam*,' he said with an air of finality as he got up to leave. '*Tum sab ghare jao aur chuppe baiitho*,' now you all go home and do not disturb the peace. '*Ji Saheb*,' people said, yes, sir, feeling suitably chastised. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief that a certain bloody confrontation had been avoided. The leaders regretted the foolishness of their reckless hot-headedness and agreed not to allow things to develop to this stage in future.

A resolution of sorts was reached a week or so later when at a gathering of both communities under the Tamarind Tree, Jhagru apologised to Rahiman and shared with him half the prize money. Soon afterwards, for reasons unknown then, he left Wailevu for Wainikoro in northern Vanua Levu. People later said that this was Mr Sebastian's handiwork. As an experienced overseer and observer of the Indians, he realised that the truce was temporary, like a patch over the puncture of an overheating tyre. Sooner or later, it would erupt. Grief and grievance ran deep among the people Mr Sebastian had long supervised. It was one trait both the Company as well as colonial officials knew and feared: the unpredictable reaction of a people who on the surface appeared so docile. If Jhagru left Tua Tua voluntarily, Mr Sebastian reportedly said, there would be no black mark against his name. Nor against his own' for letting matters get out of hand in a place which he knew like the back of his palm. Jhagru agreed; he really had little choice. A few months later, Mr Sebastian was transferred on promotion to another estate.

Father was not alone in his almost mystical reverence for the Tamarind Tree. His recollections led me to other older men in the village, Nikka, Bihari, Mallu, Genda, Digambar, who had their own stories to tell

about the Tree. They, too, recalled the festivals, the food and the fun they had as children, making their weekly pilgrimages to the Wailevu market with their fathers. Nikka remembered Madho, an Ahir, a cow herd, who was very particular about caste scruples and practices. The Ahirs had a reputation as tough and independent-minded peasants, never shirking a fight in defence of personal or family honour or when avenging a real or imagined insult. Giriti had turned Madho's world upside down. The basic tenets of the old order of village India were gone or become irrelevant, but he was determined to preserve what he could of the old ways. He would work with men of all castes; in this he had no choice, but he cooked his own meals whenever he could. He would take food and drink only from men of his own caste or those above him. And he managed to create a small fraternity of *Ahirs* in Tua Tua, a *biradari*. Its main purpose was to maintain a semblance of Ahir cultural identity. They performed remembered rituals for their 'kul' or clan gods and goddesses (*devtas*), celebrated their ancient village festivals, helped each other whenever they could, and performed the *Ahirwa ke naatch*, a special kind of Ahir dance, when a man dressed in woman's clothes performed at festive occasions and at weddings. We in Tabia knew it as *Lehnga ke naatch*. Now it is gone, replaced by mindless Bollywood extravaganza and Michael Jackson-style jiggered dancing.

The most important role of the *biradari* was to arrange marriage for their children. Madho invariably took the lead in the negotiations. Marrying 'down' was out and so was marrying up into castes much higher than your own. It was '*adharmic*,' morally inappropriate, potentially inviting divine retribution. These caste arrangements were the work of the gods, not of men, Madho used to say. Old timers, Nikka said, kept a careful mental record of where eligible boys and girls were. Some even arranged marriages as soon as children were born. This was the practice among some castes in village India. Once given, one's word was cast in stone. Sometimes, things could go too far. Once Madho had a man caned under the Tamarind Tree in front of his fellow Ahirs for eloping with women of lower caste (Chamar). Caste pollution he had said, setting a bad example. When the senior Sector Manager, Mr Harriman, (Hari Ram to the *giriti*-yas) came to know of the incident, he told Madho, whom he otherwise respected for his leadership abilities, not to take matters into his own hands. '*Hiyan hum sarkar baiitho*,' he said, here we are the government. Madho remained Madho to the end, incorrigible and unreformed, but with progressively diminishing authority and influence, a relic of a forgotten past, as people dispersed and new influences came. In time, wealth and education, not caste, became the markers of identity and status.

Labasa sugar plantations had the reputation for excessive violence on girmitiyas. Files record men and women travelling long distances, from Nagigi and Wainikoro and Laga Laga, under the cover of darkness to report cases of abuse to the Stipendiary Magistrate in Nasea town, with no guarantee of redress after all the risks of discovery had been taken. Indian sirdars, foremen, oral tradition had it, were the lynchpin of the system, who played pimps and procurers for their masters. In return, they got small favours to make extra money on the side, such as running the estate store or doing minor moneylending. It was not all one-way traffic though as I learned. Sirdars and everyone else well knew the dangers as well, the limits beyond which it was not prudent to venture. The sharpened cane knife in the hands of an enraged man was the most feared weapon on the plantation, with the killers freely confessing their crimes before facing the gallows. This kind of violence was not uncommon in village India: *izzat ke sawal hai*, people said, it is the question of one's honour. Honour, their sense of self respect, was all they had. It was the way of the peasant world.

Bhukkan was the go-to man to teach someone a lesson. He was the peoples' enforcer in the Sector, as he liked to see himself. His caste had been in this *dhandha*, occupation, even in India, it was said. Perhaps he was from one of those 'criminal tribes' about whom Europeans had written a lot. Bhukkan looked the part too, people said: dark, tall, broad-chested, with a face full of week-long growth and stylishly twirled moustache. He would take care of the offender for a little something. The attack had to be carefully planned over weeks to avoid detection, especially as the lines were full of the eyes and ears of the CSR. And it had to be proportionate to the offence given or crime committed. There was an unwritten code of conduct observed even on remote Fijian plantations, perhaps a remnant of village India. Bhukkan had four or five henchmen who were like blood brothers to him. They would meet under the Tamarind Tree at night in complete secrecy. The nature of the offence would be ascertained and the appropriate punishment determined. Then, over the next few weeks, the movement of the offending man would be closely but unobtrusively monitored, the route he took to work, the time he returned to the barracks, who his close friends were. *Khabardari*, alertness, was the name of the game.

The man giving offence this time was Sukkha, the sirdar who liked to make 'cheek-pass' at the women who worked under him. He had an eye for Janakia, Jaggan's wife, making sexually suggestive remarks within her hearing, casually letting his hand roam over his crotch while giving her orders for the fieldwork for the day. Jaggan himself was help-

less to do anything. If he remonstrated, he would be isolated from the rest of his co-workers, given a heavier task and perhaps even whipped. He had seen that happen too many times to too many men to take the risk. He knew that no one would come to his assistance as they all feared Sukkha's whip-hand and, even more, the overseer's boots. Overseer-sirdar collusion was common enough on the plantations, and it was the deadliest of all the possible permutations and combinations of men. Jaggan pleaded with Bhukkan to save his *izzat*. 'I have no one here. You are my *mai-baap*, *Dada*,' he said, my benefactor, sir. He would do anything for him in return, even sacrifice his life for him. Bhukkan agreed, for a bottle of rum and two fat roosters for a relatively easy assignment such as this, and a plan of attack began to be hatched at the Tamarind Tree over several nights.

On the designated day, Bhukkan and his men agreed to go to the remotest part of the estate to clean the overgrown drains in preparation for the rainy season. Sukkha came to inspect the work at the end of the day as the sun was about to do down. It was then the men set upon him, dragging him deep into the cane field where no one could see or hear them. They pinned him to the rough ground and took turns urinating in his mouth and all over his body, using the choicest swear words they could think of. '*Sala maadharchod*, mother fucker, you are doing this to your own mothers and sisters? *Harami*, bastard, what kind of *Jaanwar* (animal) are you? *Bhonsriwala*, son of a whore. *Mutimilelie*: may you be mixed with earth.' 'Next time, we will shove this *lathi* up your arse,' they said menacingly. 'And then we will take good care of your wife while you watch.' For good measure, they stripped him of his pants and ordered him back to the barracks pant-less. The humiliation was as complete as it was brutal. The next day, Sukkha asked to be transferred to another estate. No one ever saw him in Tua Tua again.

From *sirdars* the talk moved seamlessly to *sahibs*, the overseers whom the girmitiyas called 'Kulambars,' reportedly coined from the order they barked, 'Call Your Number.' The names were often recalled formally: Mr Jones, Mr Taylor, Mr Davidson, the Burra Sahibs and the Chota Sahibs, the head and the junior overseers. Some were known only by their nick names such as 'Tamaatar,' for one overseer whose face was perennially red in the bright sun, while another was called 'Ullu' because he seemed clueless most of the time, and another 'Luccha' because of his crude habits (farting loudly in public) and penchant for using mispronounced Hindi swear words, especially about female genitalia. The overseers came in all shapes and sizes, people said, never fitting a single stereotype. If you did your work, completed your task, they left you

alone, people said, but if you tried to be a smart-arse, they would quickly find out and give you the hiding of your life, and you became a marked man. Then you were fair game; your fate was sealed.

Some overseers got very attached to the place where they worked and the people they supervised. Some would come to the Tamarind Tree usually on a Sunday to tell the people that they were being transferred to another Sector and asked them to be as good with their successor as they had been with him. Sometimes those who had served in the Sector for a long time would bring along a few loaves of bread and cans of jam or donate a goat as parting gift, and people would give them homemade sweets, such as satua or lakdi ke mithai, a particular favourite. Nothing was said, no promises made or extracted but much was understood by both sides. Such strategic exchanges, some anthropologists might say, had powerful symbolic meanings and internal logic of their own, deployed at critical points to achieve desired outcomes. Probably. The girmitiyas might have been simple people but they were certainly not simpletons.

Mr Underwood was not one of those *sharif*, honourable, overseers. He was a strange type, Digambar recalled, a man of few words but free and furious with whips and fist, punching and kicking people whenever the mood seized him, screaming at the top of his screechy voice so that others heard him clearly. But that was not the worst thing about him as there were many others around Labasa whose reputation for violence was just as bad. Underwood's real problem was that he had a taste for men. He would paw his prey in some isolated corner of the plantation and buggerize them, certain that his victims would never publicly confess the assault for fear of shame. With time, Underwood got bolder and more brazen, and word of his bizarre behaviour spread beyond Tua Tua.

Something had to be done. Even people from other Sectors were beginning to make inquiries, never a good sign. No one had much respect for a buggerized man, a *gandu*, who could not defend his own honour. There was nothing more shaming than being called a *gandus*. Bhukkan was approached. He convened a meeting under the Tamarind Tree at which several people admitted sexual assault, including Mangal, whom Bhukkan regarded as his own younger brother. They were *jahajibhais*, ship mates, from the *Sangola*. The assaults ascertained, the question was what the punishment should be? Bhukkan had no doubt that it had to be death, and a violent death at that. A lesson had to be taught that Indian manhood, *mardaananagi*, was not to be trifled with.

On the designated day, Bhukkan and his men lay in wait as Underwood made his way on horseback to his favourite spot on the estate be-

hind the mango tree. He fell to the ground as a huge stone hit him on the back of his head. The men dragged him to the middle of the cane field and in a murderous rage hacked him to pieces. They then stuffed dismembered parts of his body into a jute sack, tied it up and buried it in a grave in the overgrown grass at the far end of the field, covering it with shrubs to avoid detection. The gruesome murder shook the CSR. Underwood's depravity was known to his fellow overseers and he would have been transferred to another Sector sooner or later, or assigned a non-supervisory position in the Company's local office. That was a common enough practice to deal with the 'rotten potatoes,' as the phrase went, before the whole sack was lost.

But a lesson had to be taught to the labourers lest things get out of hand and the Company's authority undermined in the public eye. Strong resolve was called for, and the Company left no stone unturned to get to the bottom of the matter, with the support of the local Inspector of Police. The local Stipendiary Magistrate, Mr Foster, a former CSR overseer, agreed and urged swift action. People had to be put firmly in their place. For weeks, people were beaten or bribed for leads. Payment of wages was withheld and permission refused to the labourers to leave the estate even for brief social visits. Nor were visitors allowed to enter the estate premises. The estate dispensary was allowed to run out of medicine. All recreational activities were cancelled. The Tua Tua estate was in a complete lock-down mode. Many suspected who the deed doer was but no one said anything. Treachery and betrayal at a time like this would bring swift retribution, usually in the form of beheading. And Underwood was a bad man. Then, someone – Chotu, people found out much later, with whose wife Bhukkan was having a torrid affair -- fingered him as the most likely culprit. Bhukkan admitted leading the assault as an act of self defence against egregious provocation. 'First our women, then our men; who is next, our children?' he reportedly said at the trial, but to no avail. He was found guilty of first-degree murder and hanged and his co-conspirators sentenced for life.

The plantation clearly was a place of rough, rudimentary justice. The girmitiyas often did not get a fair day in the courts. The mysterious protocols of *Court-Kachehri* were beyond them, and cases were decided on the basis of hard evidence adduced, not on hearsay or uncorroborated assertion. Inevitably, the overseers came out on top. But the stories I heard suggested greater complexity. Excesses certainly occurred but they came at a price, everyone realised, and usually at the expense of life. Things could go only so far and no further. Tact was backed by force. It was people like the men who gathered under the Tamarind Tree who

maintained a semblance of order at a time of great chaos and confusion that kept the community intact. It was no mean achievement to transform a rag-tag group of people from hundreds of castes, speaking a host of tongues, from different parts of the subcontinent, subjected to servitude on the plantations, into a relatively smoothly functioning community bound by some essential values. It was not until much later that I realized why names of men like Bhukkan were taken with such awe and admiration by the old timers. They were their unsung heroes, *samaj rakshak*, guardians of the community.

On a fleeting visit to Labasa some years ago, I went to the site of the Tamarind Tree late one afternoon. There was nothing there except the rotten stump of the old Tree among tall, unruly grass. School children walked past the site everyday, unaware of what was there once. Not even the teachers at Wailevu Primary knew. It was the same with men cutting cane in adjacent fields and others on horseback or bicycle going about their daily business. The silence was surreal, almost haunting. The past had become past, just like that. It reminded me of so many other things I had seen or experienced but which were now gone. I remembered the graves of men and women who had died during the wreck of the *Syria* I had seen some years earlier, now lying unmarked and covered by shrub at the edge of the Nasilai village. I remembered the tall mango tree behind our thatched house in Tabia which had given us the fruit for our pickles but which had been destroyed after a fire lit to smoke the bees out from its hollowed base had been left to smoulder away for months. The land where we had grown up, where so many of our childhood memories were formed, has been reclaimed by its native owners and reverted to bush, obliterating all signs of life and laughter that had once filled the place. Signs of dereliction and neglect abound. That is typical of so many Indian settlements throughout Vanua Levu. There is little consciousness of the past and even less desire to know about it among our people. Everyone is trying to leave, hoping eventually to migrate overseas. My own links to Labasa have become tenuous over the years as members of our extended family left the island to settle in other parts of Fiji. Tabia, the village where I grew up, is now a place of evanescent memories. All the old markers of special moments have disappeared.

Father died nearly twenty years ago. We did not really know him when he was alive; we hardly ever talked about private matters. That was the way things were then. I understand the reason for his grief better now than I did before, the death of the world that formed him. I think I understand the man better, too, his fears and hopes and his sense of his place and purpose on earth. I understand all that, but I also understand why the

Tamarind Tree went, why it had to go. It had come to Tua Tua with the girmitiyas, and now, ever so faithfully it was going out with them, taking with it their secrets and stories of their hopes and aspirations. The Tree had given succour and security to men and women from the old world but it had little meaning or relevance to those who followed them. Its long journey had finally come to an end in May 1962 when it was hit by lightning and razed. *Finis coronat opus*. A reminder of another time and place, its demise lay to rest the ghosts of the past, of people like Bhukkan and Underwood and countless others like them. Befittingly, like so many girmitiyas, with its dignity intact, it died a sudden, uncomplicated death, not a long, lingering one. The Tamarind Tree was gone but not forgotten: its ashes would continue to nourish the soil – soul – of Father's generation, and mine.

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