

## Movie-ing Labasa

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*To the ordinary man*  
For-forord

*To a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets. In invoking here at the outset of my narratives the absent figure who provides both their beginning and their necessity, I inquire into the desire whose impossible object he represents. What are we asking this oracle whose voice is almost indistinguishable from the rumble of history to license us, to authorize us to say, when we dedicate to him the writing that one formerly offered in praise of the gods or the inspiring muses? (V) Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life.*

### Town Cartography and the Machine as Imagination

The town does not awaken in a flash. It sleeps and occupants wake in lots dictated by the clock in the body. I walk past the Anglican school with wooden buildings and the verdant promise of a girl's hostel. The clatter of rituals from the past, ghosts the buildings mixed with charivari chatter of changeling school girls. Once they came in blue and white dresses with a flame and cross as their school monogram tacked stiffly on their breasts. Coconut oiled hair plaited in two neat Gretal plaits, bussed in from far off settlements in rickety wooden coaches. In the sugary morning air of the town their transmigrasi, from continent and from village and *Vanua* are forced into colonial movements. Footsteps bounce from the hollow of small feet; echoes in the distance trapped within the generics of an imagined mall and a cinema megaplex. The oracle of this local history is god. And she walks this town conjuring muses and trampling on the heads of city fathers aspiring to be historians.

Some obscure itinerant and not from the town, checks into the surreal Hotel North Pole. Washes her sixties movie star face hurriedly and plugs

in the 3G data USB and clicks open Face Book. Faces into the pixels of videos and posed photographs in white cotton dressed in front of plasma TVs. An army of candid schoolgirls from the second shift diaspora in Surrey, Hayward, Papatoetoe and Liverpool, emerge all dressed in Sucker Punch erotica. Attired and ready with their trapdoor arsenal of white death weapons for a deadly assault on the voyeur auteur now posing as a walker in their streets. Nothing comes of these notes on the margins. Nothing is the enunciation.

The town awakens on its own accord. Pried open by the sun shooting rays from behind the mountains shadowing this quasi-urban spread on river banks. Colours this morning that are indeterminate to any one single eye even though the voyeur is on a pause button to try and capture it all. There is naivety in the/an attempt to capture a town, a place, a people and a river. The operative viewfinder instead finds only slippage between what is looked for and what is captured. Sun and water define the humming edges of the town. A frilled lizard of a town with a red painted mouth and kohl lined white eyes that mesmerizes as it steps leg over haunch into daylight.

A measured movement not without a centre nor able to escape the caprice of non-being so that it escapes and evaporates into ether. Green and untamed like the mist slipping over the waters through the insteps of rain trees on riverbanks. Each colour makes its own splash on a palette trained on the sun. Rains on each sleepy door that opens in the lanes, streets and back alleys of the town. This morning it changes from black to purple to indigo to a raw navy blue. Then the slightest shimmer of yellow burnt on blue that blazes as an epiphany of deathly orange red. Settling into the burnt saffron of a tropical morning.

There is no pretence of a map to capture the town, its suburbs and hinterlands. They have become part of historical agency. It is left to the walker to ponder about the efficacy of the map as a lab. The conceit is to lie out on a flat white sheet of surgical cloth the agencies at play as this map is dissected at the Sugar Research lab. To ponder history as science of knowledge and experience with its fine mahogany panelled drawers, clear glass chemical cupboards and a plethora of finely calibrated instruments. To draw into the equation the complex capriciousness of theoretical frameworks from Félix Guattari's chapter 'A Thousand Plateaus' from his solo seminal work - *The Machinic Unconscious*.

Maps themselves are like laboratories where experimentations on tracings are set in interactions. Thus, here the map is opposed to the structure; it can open itself in all its dimensions; it can also be ripped apart; it can be adapted to all kinds of assemblies. A pragmatic map can be started

by an isolated individual or a group, it can be painted on a wall, it can be conceived as a work of art, it can be conducted as a political action or as a mediation. For a type of performance, a particular assemblage of enunciation, or a redundant tracing being given, what is important is determining whether or not it modifies the unconscious map of a local pragmatic competence.

Drawn into a walking narrative it is clear that history is story and performance and the town is living proof of a custom-built agency of past, present and future. The map of the town is more than ink and paper like history and all stories and their innate conjecturing about truth, reality and representation. It is the walk. Not definite. Not Defining. Just a palimpsest of that ordinary blink... blink... blink of neutered street lights of the town to mark the unconscious map of its being. A reminder in the form of a military decree to all cartographers be they drawer of maps, public policy, historical and empirical veracity or literary voyaging, end up being, no matter what their original intent.

At the end of this customised long-winded rainbow of theorising on state, capitalism and the individual space, the town awakens. The majesty of the mountains is lost to the day as it traipses across valleys, the sugar mills, old wooden colonial colonnades, the sugar trade medical dispensary hanging on crab claws on a hillside, over the shiny new Japanese aid hospital, and multi-aid government buildings. Morning sun pauses over this vista in panting exasperation. With the eyes of a Balinese dancer it gauges the spread of dew over the endless stretch of a town park then spreads one long finger to signify the beginning of the dance. The stretched form lengthens and breathes fire into water, before the quick foxy dart over the oil and molasses slicked river. Yellow. Rich. Slightly rancid, the sun spreads itself generously, like butter on a long loaf from the Chinese bakery on the edge of the town. Breakfast by the river overlooking the town market is eighty cents for the bread and butter and sixty cents for the milky tea with local sugar and a Ceylon tea bag.

### **The Waking God and the Theory of Lust**

The town awakens each morning to this miracle. And it knows not, that it is the centrepiece of this phenomenon. It is no sycophant to fashion. Nor is it a Morning Prayer for some town crier to come and claim some obscure fiction of the dawn to address in the town square. That is not there. Nor is there a town crier, but the river and the market take the place of both. Both, river and market gurgle in the slow eggplant dawn. Awaiting footsteps shuffling night dust from pavements to signal another

invasion. The town in its naked early morning glow marks off the organic origins of its being. This origin is beyond the meta-theorising on the town and city and its being based on homage obfuscation to certain maggot fucking imaginations of French theorists.

This is understandable given their predilection for early morning walks after a night of rabble rousing in Paris cafes. That Eurocentric theorising is placed in an uncertain domain in this town. Not so the call to the ordinary man. The For-forord. It makes complete sense to the ordinary god. In this case of walking the joint, God is a woman. Walking a town at dawn with the nascent sun at the nape of your neck is a journey of signs. The popular among French theorists saw only signs and called for sycophants. The Walking God favours desire above all. This invokes in her the longing for the theorist of the city. The longing is red hot and at dawn, fucking lusty. She sates lust with a hand of ladyfinger bananas washed with river water and sanitized with fresh turmeric. Only then is she able to concentrate on the commonplace whose murmurings she can decipher and contextualize within her own longing for the ancient.

The town demands such a theory. She obliges. She is after all pre-text and a priori in her representations. These are increasingly abstract representations that are found in various local graffiti and on the stone walls of temples, mosques and churches. The lone local hip-hop artist secretly hopes to incorporate such representations in her unholy verses. These representations place the Walking God in a blinding light of epiphany. It empowers her with a proper noun and social blazons. As a walker of the town she loses all these powers. The powers are a ruse bundled into a soft cloth washed in cool river waters and beaten to death on polished washing stones embedded like a pantheon in the gently waving water. They are sun dried on a number 8 wire clotheslines. Finally, the Walking God who proffers her middle finger as assent for this bundle to be placed on a pulpit decorated with red and gold swastikas. Emblazoned by white and red waves set against the green moons resting their napes against the harvest sickle.

That is a long introduction to a small town. The town, Labasa, is not total badlands as it is backwaters, according to current prejudice and ancient theories. There is nascent familiarity with the badlands outside town. Of floating islands paddling along on inland lakes. The legendary Three Sisters Mountains. The must-see Temple of the Snake God, the *Naag Mandir*. Her walk is intended for the town only. The town itself remains a generic signifier of place and people and at odds with various definitions of places within this designated space. The signs hang from various store signs and ephemera like straggly neckties around the reluc-

tant churchgoer. The rusty creaking of signs hanging from chains chaffing against anchor bolts skewed into concrete and timber veranda ceilings.

There is a soft wind blowing down the main street. This is not a sign. Just the wind jousting easily with the street signs as part of the sea trades that flow over Oceania. A truck teeters over the bridge at the end of the town. That is where the market is. Light figures alight like scarecrows. In the early glint of day their dark blue overalls with the ever present fluorescent stripes are reminiscent of ants arriving at the workplace. The big deep turmeric yellow council truck is the queen bee with mulch for nectar. Her walk begins with street sweepers, slinging second hand backpacks. They complete the picture of ants and bees as they stoop low to push wide deck brooms on the bevel of the street edges. The Walking God sees it as a sublime prayer of shovelled rubbish and their supplication with rakes, shovels and a picking fork. Yesterday's news, food and dust are swept onto wheelbarrows. The grim faces of the underlings tell no stories from the trials of their daily sweeping of the town. It is masked in the concentration they show in flitting from each piece of filth in front of them as it is marked, swept and disposed off in a continuous act of veniality. The Walking God is pleased with their prayers and showers them with liquid rain.

### **Meeting of the Waking God with the Gods of History/Geography and the Taxi-Driver**

The paradox, of the centre, at the beginning, is easily explained at the end of the walk. In one reading of the town, that is. In every walk, there is a nascent cataloguing of the town. Each town has its badlands hotel that stays transfixed in history and sweaty mattresses. Hotel Takia, the laconic main street lodging with its icon of the traditional Fijian single masted canoe, awaits the straggling traveller with a dark eyed receptionist playing the siren. In the walking of Labasa is the scanning of shop signs. There in bold red is Brij Lal and Sons. A Kodak moment adorns the front door in the ivory tower catacomb of an exiled ex-Labasia. Nay let us be specific. He is from Tabia. A proud marker of origins and preferred badge of honour from the badlands. Veracity of place is important in defining history and historians. The photo among other ephemera prefaces Brij Lal, the historian domiciled among tramlines of books and documents at the Coombs Building at the Australian National University. It is a cheeky visual welcome to the academic abode of the usually sombre historian; a somewhat childlike indicator of origins.

The Walking God is cognizant of the colour red and its significance

to Labasa. Red with white stripes is the playing strip of the district soccer team. It does not signify the imperial origins of blood and bandage of corner shop surgeons doubling as barbers. The Walking God in her earlier avatar as the Watching God has seen them the night before in the humid crucible of the local municipal stadium. The mobile phone companies cash in on the red and white colours of the Lions as their viral advertising stuns the senses from neck twisting billboards and their flagship, an out of place steel and glass shop front. Mobile phone advertisements adorn shop doors and tills in necklaces and garlands of spirals and spirals of ephemera. The swirling flyers and stickers in red and white that sells and sells and sells and commands all to buy time and space again and again and again.

Contemporary capitalism can be defined as integrated world capitalism, because it tends toward a state where no human activity on the planet can escape it. It can be considered to have already colonized all the planet's surfaces, so that the essential aspect of its expression now concerns the new activities that it seeks to overcode and control.

The Walking God ponders as to what Guattari and his take on Contemporary Capitalism has got to do with football and the ephemera of a local league soccer match. She is stunned by the lesson of the moment. It is a scene stealing moment from an avant-garde South American movie. The whole third world moment of the vista escapes those around. This in reality means nothing to no-one! As she is walking alone in an empty space, Guattari is left unexplained to devotees and atheists alike. There is some metonymic muttering in the air above the town pavement. The signage across the town all clatter and twist about in a gust of monochromatic air as if agitating to say something about overcoding.

Instead of additional explication on signs and overcoding, the Walking God meets the obligatory town mongrels. They slink up in a posse. Looking hard done by their past karma as lying, cheating drunk fleas in other epic badlands towns. Their exposed lean ribs add jauntiness to their sliding walk. There is a rapacity to the walk that is more Lee Van Cleef and other ugly types from the sepia toned westerns. The dogs rock on back legs as they slither past on the pavement. The Walking God keeps hands loose. Limbs limbered. Just in case the posse turns on the walker and forces a main street gun draw. A boot hill finish or worse still retreat over the picket fences at the school.

The boot hill drama is interrupted. The historian, Brij Lal, is remembered by the taxi driver who arrives before all else and takes up post outside the Old Sweets Factory. The Walking God is surprised by this invocation of the gods of history. She does not remember any channelling of

thoughts in that direction. His Toyota Corolla is painted a garish navy green and etched with various signs, slogans and challenges. She sees the sign. A taped red and white signage that proclaims TAXI GOD and is affixed as a sun visor strip on the front windscreen of the car that now sneers at her. At the back is the call for the indomitable Labasa 'Babasiga' Lions – Shabaash Shera! 'Kudos – The Lion-Hearted', as applause made for a particularly gifted couple in the traditional challenge songs of the Qawali. There is a village link, that of Tabia, between the taxi drivers who stayed home and the historian who walked the world. The Taxi God is less graciously positioned. He quotes Salman Rushdie at length about belonging and not belonging. He is also less gracious about the irony of Rushdie being fodder for national popular magazines for his recent pop culture taste in women. The Walking God provides an oppositional force. A quote rather hurriedly acquired.

Geography and space are always gendered, always raced, always economical and always sexual. The textures that bind them together are daily re-written through a word, a gaze, a gesture. - Irit Rogoff, *Terra In-firma*

The Taxi God invokes the ideas of performance and the act of performing within history and geography as his critical platforms. He is dismissive of dualisms on readily agreed premises especially within the arts. He wants Taxi Art to be given its permissive role in negotiating and interrogating such easy dualisms and binaries. She notices that the art work on the taxi is now highlighted by LED spotlights. There are bumper stickers that are racist, sexist and class centred. She finds one that she is particularly disapproving of. It features a woman with a Serena Williams-like arse and tits, dressed in a tight mini like a designer tennis dress, and a court attendant adjusting the nets with his prick. The cartoon balloon is indecipherable to her. Remember, her powers are all safely elsewhere in a bundle, except that of pulling quotes out of the air. The Walking God is pleased that the quote served as a decoy from Rushdie, who she finds increasingly self-indulgent and repetitive. And why would a Taxi God from Tabia, resort to Rushdie. She hopes she is not on infirm territory as she invites the Taxi God to a visit to the Cinema Foyers. As a literary ruse it works. She remains disconcerted about the lack of inquiry about such a flashback, from the Taxi God. Particularly, as he had already displayed enough scepticism to make one wary of an extended companionship.

### **A Cinematic Flashback of Foyers, Voyeurs and Texts**

The Walking God now enlists cinematic tropes and technology. In the

morning that is still in half light as it straggles over the mesa like mountains that backdrop Labasa. Two objects are framed by giant cameras as monoliths among buildings that elicit more than passing academic interest. The buildings are gigantic and lit in the morning light it looks as if it was built yesterday. Fittingly the two cinemas, one turquoise and the other a sumptuous chocolate brown, are bathed in this early morning, as if under giant arc lights from a faraway studio. Bathed in the sun of their glory days no artificial light is needed to cinematically capture their size and status in the town.

The turquoise Elite Theatre and the chocolate cake Diamond Theatre stand greased and ready to show their painted wares. The owner of the Diamond is now sole proprietor. He was the unfortunate cinema baron aspirant, who bought out his partners just before the cinema crash of the early 1980s. He stands apart from the crowd. There is the attendant contrast between him and a suitably cinematic, not to mention pneumatic, younger wife. There is still the flinty glint of a Flynn and Connery in his eyes. The actor in him hallmarked by the swagger of slicked back hair that harks back to a Cary Grant or his Bombay imprimatur, Dev Anand.

The Walking God admires Grant-Anand's quixotic stubbornness that the Diamond will only be bulldozed down or converted into shops over his dead body. 'Or after he is dead', as the wife softly intones over the misty swirl from a cup of milky Nescafe. He speaks of lost battles over copyright. A faithful assistant shows the projector room with its arsenal of projectors and equipment. Cans of films reels are tightly stacked against walls many packed in hessian sacks with fading labels. A stack of old film posters are placed against the wide windows at the back of the room. Soft porn film posters of spread-eagled women and hard torsos of men indicate a last vain attempt at keeping the cinema in films. They sit atop the stack of posters flitting in the soft wind. There is sadness in the wide eyes of the blonde temptress as she spreads pink legs encased in frilly black stockings.

Waking God and Taxi God walk the empty foyers, peer into dusty restrooms, trace fingers over hard dry leather seats and have their breath taken from them as they step into the projector rooms. Hollywood is absent from the hoardings in the foyer. They have all transmigrated to the numerous Video Shops that now sells pirates DVDs in discounted piles. The old charm of cinema still haunts its generous lobby and foyer and the Dress and Circle prices are dirt cheap. It will now never be cheaper or more convenient than stacks of DVDs that one hauls and consumes like some rancid street food. The scale of the theatre and the screen and the whole larger than life consciousness lost in the race for film like other

media to be instant and in-house or in the palms. In another age this was the place to see and to be seen. Cinema was an event, an individual, sometimes familial and even communal partaking for the local communities. Walking God can hear Taxi God intone this homily with the practised ease of a lecture theatre circuit professor.

In the cloying mustiness of the two remaining theatres, Elite and Diamond, await an audience. Walking God checks her iPad for confirmation of a return of her powers from their resting place. It comes just in the nick of time. Like the town Marshalls and detectives to save the damsel in distress. It is providential too, for the Taxi God, has just stretched his neck and interlocked his long fingers, readying himself for a lecture on the female gaze. Walking God is quick to the chase. She invokes a whole agency of films and at once the screen lights up simultaneously at both cinemas. Walking God wants Taxi God to have a simultaneous screening experience with brief manipulated intercuts and voice-overs from her. She does not want the crafty Tabian to have a moment to think.

Foyers of celluloid dreams that for a moment provided escapist fare as intellectuals and politicians in waiting once brushed elbows or exchanged glances. Labasa as catchment from the mid sixties to the early seventies for young teachers like Raymond Pillai, Subramani, Vijay Mishra and Krishna Datt starting out in the classrooms of Labasa College and Labasa Sangam College on stumbling career paths. There is an aside. What happened to Krishna Datt? The articulate, blessed demagogue and teacher, was there a fall into the wayside of politics? The cinematic aside is amateurish film making but captures the intrigues of overcoding among sectarian politics. The Taxi God remains in good spirit and points out the narrative and technical gaffes.

Walking God makes the singular point about the veracity of the aside in explaining local sectarian politics and the fall from grace of the potential leader of the people into a mere political animal as a type among postcolonial types globally. She is quick to ward off further interrogations as Guattari and even Rogoff, might be brought back into the discourse. Instead, she intercuts brilliantly to neatly dressed boys and two girls, chaffing and licking their chops inside wooden lidded classrooms waiting their turn into later extrapolations into the stratosphere of towers, tomes and chambers. From narrow dusty paths and on rickety wooden buses, some of them still possibly on the same routes, another generation of young scholars emerged to take their place behind wooden desks in those classrooms. Walking God decides on the local and situational as the best means of placating the Taxi God. The dissolve solemnly emerges as cutting edge anime art to feature émigré historian Brij Lal and others who

straddled the generational slip and led another generation of scholars and leaders out of Labasa.

The foyer of an abandoned theatre carries its own whiff of sadness and cloying possibilities. Taxi God holds fire. There is recourse to a short cartoon of a garbage truck driver jousting with windmills as the cinema owner; wife cum manager and projectionist traipse around Three Sisters Mountains with the cinematic tropes of a Road Runner armoury master in tow. The bombardment from Walking God does not stop there. She then features a news reel from the Ministry of Information. It is trivial fare. An economist with an unapologetic mind spatters the voice over with institutional memory on trade figures and economic contributions of cinema operations. Thankfully, it is brief and crisply edited. Taxi God sees more of the juicy young reporter's thigh and lacy slip than the economist's gargoyle like head.

The cinema silence that follows is tangible. It is timed to the microsecond to whet the Taxi God's appetite. The slow drawn out establishing shot is lyrical and brings into shot, a foot stepping out of the straps of a shiny bicycle. It pans up a pair of plain gray trousers and plaid cotton shirt, and one sees the beatific smile of the young Raymond Pillai walking this foyer and up to the lobby where the patrons disperse into the stall and circle. The peeling paint and tired leather on the seats are now shiny and bright as the optimism of the students sitting in front of Pillai, the born teacher. The peek into a bio-pic delves into the cinema he was interested in. Did it temper the workings of the young writer of considerable influence over his peers even at this early stage? His writings and thoughts tempered by his stint in Australia and the beginnings of his unfinished novels while the short stories tumbled forth like processed sugar cane coming down the hatches of the mill. Distilled crystals of prose that speak about an accretion of cubes that stands alone or lumps together to make the family home on a farm. Did he see the social dramas of the sixties in all its Technicolor glory for its escapism or to filter thoughts on its social relevance or irrelevance? It was in a cinema foyer that he like most young men of a generation in the town made their preliminary inspections and decided on asses in goat skins. It was these and other insights that the snippets from the bio-pic provided for the Taxi Driver. He demonstrated his satisfaction with a thunderous applause that woke up the cleaners at the Hotel North Pole.

Walking God was running out of options and genres of films to keep Taxi Driver interested. He continued to tap his watch face and then began to swing his car keys around forefinger and thumb. She tried to avoid clichés, formulaic pot-boilers, re-makes and downright rip-offs for the next

cinematic spell-binder. Given the ponderous influence of Bollywood in the cinemas that she had morphed into one, this was not an easy task. She considered the lost at birth saga, but as quickly dismissed it. Getting Taxi Driver started on Rushdie and Saleem and Shiva was not part of the strategy. The theoretical considerations left to another Young Turk the goat-teed Vijay Mishra considering literary conceits and theoretical framing for Mother India. Mishra in the temporal space of the produce market fingering bunches of bhaji and tracing lines along the bitterness of the gourd in the karela. There is the spatial conceit of lines along a star apple and its kamarak infinitesimal possibilities of ideologies and consciousness. Walking God was taking all kinds of cinematic liberties and bullshit with her art. Taxi Driver, who saw the through the tropes and theories, was inspired to splash onto Walking God's morphed screen the following:

This anonymous hero is very ancient. He is the murmuring voice of societies. In all ages, he comes before texts. He does not expect representations. He squats now at the center of our scientific stages. The floodlights have moved away from the actors who possess proper names and social blazons, turning first toward the chorus of secondary characters, then settling on the mass of the audience. The increasingly sociological and anthropological perspective of inquiry privileges the anonymous and the everyday in which zoom lenses cut out metonymic details--parts taken for the whole. Slowly the representatives that formerly symbolized families, groups, and orders disappear from the stage they dominated during the epoch of the name. (5)

The quote from Michel de Certeau moved both gods into a frenzy of postures, postulating and ended in an exhausting and extended light saber fight. For a while the sound and fury threatened to bring the whole pastiche apart. As good Gods they ended the saber rattling and switched off their energy saver sabers in a timely fashion. Walking God pointed out and privileged the cinematic technology associated with the zoom lens, and made the mutually agreeable point about the metonymy of being. This truce allowed the cinematic gambol to continue with historical and literary ambits finding their tracings in ancient vegetable and fruits. Vijay Mishra now donned the hat of a popular local comedian, John Mohammed. He assumed the manner and dulcet tones of Richard Attenborough although he spoke in the Fiji-Hindi brogue. He pointed out that some of those ancient vegetables were now lost to the hybridism of agrarian reforms and the quest for more from less from the soil. The difference in colour, skin, tone and aroma from those grown in the Rewa delta and its hinterlands that were balanced against the kitchen sink on Saturday mornings in Dilkusha – haven home with a happy heart of his childhood.

A vegetable of that specific shift in tonality of appearance and partiality to an aroma is where one is from. One vegetable determines the temporal and spatial of belonging as no theory or work of art can as text, meta-text or in its inter-textuality. Just as miracles require causal potentiality as in a billiard ball ricocheting against other bald ivories until one or many tinkle into a corner or side pocket. The vegetable panorama as filmic and theoretical text was a hit with Taxi God. The background score of traditional percussions and mournful Solomon Island nose flutes was a master-stroke. There was one overtly sexual scene featuring a huge purple eggplant, an overripe pawpaw and for thematic continuity a tree-ripened lady finger banana. This was aesthetically done and no fruits were morally compromised in the threesome.

One can only postulate positions and other liberties that were now in vogue at the Diamond-Elite morph-cinema of the Walking God. In the tradition of cinematic liberties one or the other took or take it a step further and traced backwards from their later writings to what those thoughts may have been in the foyers of the Majestic and Elite of these writers and savants. What is certain is what they watched. Walking God was in her element in creating this montage. It was homage and duty on the big-screen. It encapsulated the fact that the Diamond erupted in the early 1970s cinema boom in Fiji. The boom burst as quickly as it began. The montage featured the inevitable anecdotes, often apocryphal of cane-cutters aping the angry young man jumping over a moving cane train. More likely they fantasized the life of the angry young man, living life with a vengeance, watching with a detached smirk the leggy dancer hip swivelling to a rock tune about the darkness of hearts and nights, as she vainly seeks revenge for a dead henchman brother. An Indo-Burmese nymphet featured in all these scenes. The tempo changed with the high kicks to the vertical phalanx of sugar cane a la Bruce Lee and his various avatars in Bollywood, imitating the iconic martial arts kingdom of Hong Kong cinema.

Walking God could not let down the urban cowboys and their sexually charged and violent Blaxploitation cinema of Hollywood studios that swiftly targeted the newly identified African American cinema demographic in the film trade. A demographic repeated in reggae music transportations and an export of Guevara, Fanon and Malcolm X across the postcolonial worlds of Africa, Asia, South America, the Caribbean and the Pacific. As a special...repeat...special tribute, Walking God featured tight edits from the enigma of Italian gangster, and Spaghetti Westerns, dubbed in English that attracted their own following in Fiji. The closing montage featured a wild fusion of disco and Bollywood pop of the sexy

seventies with men in hip hugging bell-bottoms and women in hot pants or cut-off denims. The hip wiggling Indo-Burmese star, Helen, as always stole the show with her smoky eyes and school girl pout.

### Filming Labasa

It was midmorning by then. And a huge crowd had now gathered outside the morphed cinema. Walking God decided to take the ultimate cinematic liberty. She opened the doubled cinemas to the hordes. They walked in and smelt the whiff of leather and singed airs of projection lights and were immediately at home. Taxi God took control of the crowd. They spoke as one in some transcendental communion about the feature film for the Saturday matinee. The order was a tall one. A full home grown feature film. About Labasa, from Labasa and written by someone from Labasa. This Labasa of the mind in a full feature film, one not mired or mirrored by politicians, academics and writers. The demand from the masses is for a cinematic wonder that emerges like a waking superstar from the dusty hinterlands of sugar cane and locomotives of the northern town.

Walking God does not bother with farfetched fantasy or magic realism. Cinematic liberties are allowed for as she hastily conjures the film in the long ten minutes it takes for the Cinema Ads to flash past of radio stations, chicken joints, mobile phones, hardware companies and one or two multinationals before the Coke ad signals the feature film. There is no time lost in ascertaining the source for the film. Subramani. The single name when it comes to crafting the Labasa film. There are short stories, a collection of essays and addresses, and the first major novel in Fiji-Hindi *Dauka Puraan*, that all tints his personal perceptions of the town. A town in its naming that stands for an island in the popular imagination.

Walking God assessed the crowd and then Taxi God. The answer is in the smell of the opinions of the masses that wafted as one and cut through the cheap insect spray that Walking God hurriedly invested in before inviting the masses. The choice boils down to his short stories. There is 'Sautu', the rather detached and modernist narrative, but one which is rather well-known because it found its way into the high school literature curriculum. Or (at this point Taxi God is party to the decision) the painstakingly crafted 'Where the Train Goes', with its multifarious perceptions of place and its truths. Both works feature places from Subramani's childhood and memory that would fill the bill for a Labasa feature film. Walking God works on the theory that a morphing of parallel stories will dovetail as cinematic vignettes that creates a flowing narrative by looking

closely at place and people. Taxi God abrogates the idea with a singular flourish. Sautu.

Walking God smiles and the screen pans and zooms over the Labasian panorama and dwells over the town river and finds Dhanpat and Tomasi in conversation. They are young, swashbuckling types with rippling shoulder muscles, shiny hair and virile moustaches. Dressed alike in fashion rip-offs from the standard khaki trousers and long white drill shirts of the overseers there is a slow cut to their arrival into town on the latest company thoroughbreds to arrive in Labasa. The duo are hunched over an early breaking of fast *tanoa* of kava in the market later that Saturday morning. The voyeurs smile is wary, cautious not to break the literary conceit of friendship. From their gestures and the general bent of their mouths it is evident that are questioning each other as they did in an earlier narrative.

Walking God plays with the audience and cuts off the audio and features only the atmosphere sounds of the river, town roads and the market. The audience strains like eavesdroppers to record the saintliness or devilishness of their engagement. Walking God relents and slowly lets in the audio in a banal mid-sentence. The audience moans in feigned disapproval of this process of showing and hiding. The initial dialogues are not without mystic intonation, although much of the early conversation was mundane. It was childish conjecture of the finances of one of the hosts, the quality of the kava, the cleanliness of the yellow enamel basin and cracked tin *piala* with grimy rusty edges that was shared around with the sparkling dankness of the drink splashing around in its little whirlpool.

What was startling was they said about the young bride and her misdeeds inside Tulsi's Store. The audience was shocked. Walking God looked prim. Taxi God reproached her with a solemn gaze. Tomasi reproached Dhanpat for this womanly interest in the dark interior of the village shop with its forecastle of musty stock in tins, plastic sheaths, coils, hessian bags, glass bottles, the most valuable installed as art inside the locked glass and mahogany cabinet behind the till. They said, and the time was not right to linger long enough for empirical veracity, that this titbit may be totally apocryphal. Given that market walls were made of chicken run netting and old hardwood they spoke in a whisper. The audience strained to listen. Dolby stereo was muted. There was a general fear of the gulag in every town and market. They were not an exception to that fear thus the whispering. Dhanpat said that in recently academic tomes in hardcover usually in dun colours with bright red and gold lettering was also held captive there.

Tomasi retorted, in chaste Hindi, a result of his year with a coterie of

wandering missionary types from India, Roman Catholics, which this was only to be expected. This was a longer than anticipated flashback. The lush verdant locations, the interiors of stately churches and the rigors of ritual kept the attention of the audience. They were spellbound to discover the learning of language. After all had not Dhanpat's lot placed their eggs in one basket? That was why the Roman Catholics kept on coming well after the children of the chiefs and the chiefs had been enlightened and fed slips of wafer and sips of wine. Did they not pursue education to its bony end sucking it all so that it was not a sylph nymph now, but a thin finger that pulsed purple blood in frail veins.

All roads led to books, certificates, passports, visas, air-tickets and addresses with postcodes. This was the general theme of the flashback. It established a credible back story and allowed the camera to wander and bring in more of the local locales to kindle the interest of the audience. The quality of Tomasi's digressions had not wavered much from the excellence of his early years. They were relevant, sustainable and of undeniable quality - a triumvirate of terms evocative of a desired university. Dhanpat thought that the trio of terms as voiced by Tomasi in justifying his digression, dear friend as he was, it reeked of the thuggery of the marketplace. He made this plain to Tomasi. The audience sniggered at the altercation between friends. Tomasi retorted that Dhanpat should smile more often. Jokingly he spurred on Dhanpat about his love interest, the dark, delicious Chinamma. The audience rolled with laughter as Tomasi mimicked the voice and manners of any angry South Indian father.

At this point, Walking God intervened and spun the film back into a back story. It began with Dhanpat attempting to sing a song in Tamil. His bad pronunciation and usage of Tamil led to a bawdy and risqué song rather than the intended love ballad. Pumping up the bass, the bad rendition was now a thumping pumping popular song with suitable subtitles with the lanky wiry dancing Dhanpat and the suitably voluptuous Chinamma in a revealing short bodice and skirt. The duo ended up in a crystal clear pond in a creek. And the audience blushed and sniggered like a heap of purple eggplants at the market. Walking God could not resist the temptation and slowed moed the final close ups of Chinamma emerging with the clingy off-white skirt and bodice. The eggplants whistled and hollered and some took to dancing in the aisles. Walking God slowly panned away and penned intermission on the rooftop of the market.

The dancing and whistles continued during intermission. Walking God chose a mythological lead in to the second half. A shot of Hanuman, the Monkey God, alighting on the market roof, hushed up the crowd. Anyone sniggering at the memory of Chinamma was quickly shushed by

those around them. Without dragging the intro scene, Walking God, gave Hanuman, a short pithy monologue about friendship and sacrifice, on the market roof top. The camera then panned to shoulder and head shots of Dhanpat and Tomasi finishing their *yagona* and walking about collecting their dues for their cassava and other market produce. They retire for a communal lunch at an outdoor stall and other characters are introduced. Stock farm workers and farmers make up a larger crowd that now gathers for more communal *yagona* drinking in the early afternoon.

One should not be at all surprised that in the marketplace, the duo engaged in a conversation about a recital from the *Ramayan* that took place during the week at the Wailevu *mandali*. The dholak player was being commended for his grace in pacing the beat during the sung recitals. It is a surreal moment. The camera transported all into the muted frail corridors of a now ancient time, when the sea transported labour to the islands and introduced strange people, voices, colours, smells, tastes, rituals and habits. Hanuman is given a central platform from which he gives his assent to the telling of the stories. He intervenes once in a while to correct the narratives in a good humoured if matronly manner. With a host of narrators and characters Walking God is in good form and brings about a montage of lost stories, poems, moments, and personalities. It a mythic and glorified past in the islands and among its diaspora that is undercut with tart riposte and retorts with Dhanpat and Tomasi leading the way. Walking God ends the scene with an entertaining, if slightly long folk song and dance theatre performance in which Dhanpat and Tomasi and their conceits are soon lost to the lyrics about the pantheons prancing around the early morning fragrance of rain, dew and riverbank soil.

Walking God decides to expand the role of Hanuman. The Dhanpat and Chinamma story remains unresolved. Tomasi encourages Dhanpat to make his intentions known to her parents and family. The rest of the crowd is not very encouraging, particularly a lay Hindu preacher Kanta Ram, who says caste and sectarian lines need to be maintained. Dhanpat gives a chest thumping monologue on how and why caste and sectarian lines were lost across the black waters from India to Fiji. Tomasi back his friend with some choice quotes from the *Ramayan* and Bible. At dawn, Dhanpat and Tomasi find their way to the small settlement where Chinamma lives with her parents. Hanuman is now given the role of the narrator. He follows their conversation flying over cane tops and warns the audience of the violence they are likely to meet from the Chinamma clans, who have been forewarned by Kanta Ram.

The audience is now warmed up for the classic climatic fight scene. The inter-cuts between cane-tops, treading feet, knives and hoes being

sharpened, and Hanuman's tail flying over the whole lot is brilliant. Walking God employs sharp table and *lali* music to good effect, underscored with atmosphere sounds of sharpening knives and swishing sugar cane leaves. The women in the settlement take charge of Chinamma. The men under the leadership of the family patriarch Kalliappa spread out into the canefields to entrap Dhanpat and Tomasi. The early morning light and natural camouflaging properties of the cane fields provides for an extended period of suspense as the duo are surrounded by Chinamma's clan. There is a bit of comic relief as Tomasi squeals in fright and distaste upon stepping on a very large wet cane frog. This creates a domino effect as two of the Chinamma clan also take flight at hearing his loud cries. Hanuman in his narration takes a neutral position and hints that he will only intervene if things get out of hand.

The fight scene is carefully choreographed with Hanuman intervening to take away deadly weapons leaving the men to engage in hand to hand combat. Tomasi provides muscle and the duo proves more than a match for the clan. They walk into the settlement and are confronted with Chinamma's mother who talks about the futility of a union based on force. Dhanpat talks about the fight as proof of his resolve to marry Chinamma and to look after and protect her for life. This placates the clan somewhat. Tomasi volunteers to act as mediator around a *tanoa* of *yagona*, just as Hanuman looks ready to intervene. He talks with Chinamma's father in Tamil and in the manner of the narrator of the Tirukutu, which brings everyone together in laughter. For good measure, Walking God cuts to the wedding scene where Tomasi is the best man for the wedding and leads the singing and dancing. Labasa has its own feature film. The morphed cinema and the masses disappear. Walking God switches off the light. Taxi God switches on his meter. Tomasi and Dhanpat want a ride to the airport. They have to see off Hanuman.

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